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Steamboat Bill : William J. Peterson: Iowa's river historian

Nathan J. Gruber
University of Northern Iowa

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Steamboat Bill

William J. Petersen: Iowa's River Historian

Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program
University of Northern Iowa
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Dr. Gregory Bruess, Associate Professor, History

Nathan J. Gruber
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Introduction

Stories of the Mississippi River have an aura of romance about them, which recalls a simpler time in America's history. Some of the most vivid writing to shape this romantic vision sprang from the pens of authors whose lives were inseparable from the ebbs and flows of the Mississippi. The best known among these authors is Mark Twain, whose stories about life on the Mississippi reinforced that idyllic quality and have woven themselves into the cultural fabric of America. Many who grew up on or around the river admit that there is something about *this* river that affects one's soul.

Counted among these Mississippi River storytellers was Dubuque, Iowa native William J. Petersen, more commonly known as "Steamboat Bill" by many who knew him. Petersen worked four decades at the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI) and served nearly twenty-six of those years as the Society's Superintendent. A historian by trade, Petersen was a master storyteller and writer, and might be considered a controversial figure for his role in the preservation and interpretation of Iowa history. On one hand, Petersen had an eye and a talent for showmanship and publicity, which when combined with his folksy nature, helped to tell the story of Iowa's history; his work also actively and aggressively cultivated and increased interest in Iowa history among Iowans who had not expressed much prior interest in the subject. Through State Historical Society programs and the force of his own personality, Petersen not only made history accessible for nearly everyone, but he turned Iowa history into something Iowans could and should view with pride.

On the other hand, Petersen's "history for the people" approach resulted in a less scholarly and less academically rigorous publication program for the State Historical Society throughout his superintendency. This was a stark departure from the publication policies of

former State Historical Society Superintendent Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, and this change did not go unnoticed by academic historians in the state. Much to the chagrin of those historians, Petersen's editorial control over State Historical Society publications was largely influenced by his own conceptions of what was significant or relevant in Iowa history, and as a result, he was not afraid to be a little loose with the facts. As Dubuque County Historical Society archivist Robert Wiederanders noted, "Petersen never let the facts get in the way of a good story."¹ In short, Petersen was driven to succeed and was extremely ambitious and determined from a young age. He could be as ruthless and insensitive towards his detractors as he was good-humored and gracious to those he admired.

Early Life

William John Henry Petersen was born in Dubuque, Iowa on January 30, 1901, the youngest of six children to Charles Lewis Petersen, a German-born immigrant and Bertha Theresa Helm-Petersen, a second-generation Dubuque resident of German/Prussian descent. Not a lot is known about Bertha Petersen except that, born in 1864, she lived in Dubuque all of her life, married Charles on her twentieth birthday, and had six children; she died in 1929 at the age 65 from a stroke that had possibly been brought on or complicated by an unspecified extended illness.² Charles Petersen, born in 1848 in Hamburg, Germany, was already well-travelled by the time he arrived in Dubuque in 1873 at age 24, after spending nearly ten years at sea. Son William would write of his father decades later, "Father went to sea at the age of fourteen and sailed around the world three times. He was present at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and

¹ (Weideranders 2010)

² (W. J. Petersen, Eulogy for Bertha Petersen 1929)

fought in the German navy during the Franco-Prussian War.”³ Once in Dubuque, Charles found a low-level position as a roustabout⁴ on the Diamond Jo Line steamer *Arkansas* but his experience with deep-ocean sailing quickly led to a promotion as a sailorman. While Petersen was often introduced as the “son of an old-time steamboat captain,” “son of a deep sea sailor” might have been more accurate. The steamboat captain line may have originated from the headline of a 1937 *Dubuque Telegraph Herald* article.⁵ By the time the Diamond Jo Line was sold in 1911, Charles Petersen was the manager of Diamond Jo’s main offices in Dubuque. After the Diamond Jo Line shut down, Charles worked for another ten years until he retired in 1923 and passed away in 1933 at the age of 85.

Charles Petersen’s close association with the steamboat industry and the Mississippi River instilled in his son William a love for steamboats, towboats, and the river that would ultimately prove to be a lifelong academic and personal interest. Later in life, the younger Petersen fondly recalled the days when he would visit his father’s office on the Dubuque levee, explore the Diamond Jo Line’s city-block long warehouse and listen to the river tales told by famous old river captains and pilots. Throughout his life, Petersen would write dozens of short autobiographical sketches as introductions for speeches, talks or for the back of a book cover. Nearly every one of these pieces opened with a variation on these words: “I was born and raised in Dubuque on the banks of the Mississippi River and I get my love for the Mississippi from my father who spent his entire adult life on or near the river.”⁶ Even though he acquired his father’s love for boats and river life, Petersen was born too late to follow his father and pursue a career

³ (W. J. Petersen, Background of the Lecture N.D.)

⁴ “1. U.S. A wharf labourer or deck hand. 1891 C. Roberts *Adrift Amer.* 216 On all these river boats most of the men employed are what is termed roustabouts, and are just ordinary labourers who are picked up anywhere” (Simpson and Weiner 1989).

⁵ (Author's Dad River Captain 1937)

⁶ (W. J. Petersen, WJP Autobiographical Sketch 1962)

working on the river. He watched the demise of his father's company as the Diamond Jo Line was bought and eventually shut down by the time he was 11 years old. By the time Petersen began to think about his own career, advancements in alternative transportation technology had fundamentally changed the nature of river transport and rendered a career on the river impractical. Instead, Petersen decided to do the next best thing and built a career on studying the stories and histories of the steamboat industry, the Mississippi River, and Iowa.

Early Education

William J. Petersen graduated from Dubuque High School (now Dubuque Senior High School) in 1920. By the time he graduated, he already displayed a recognized talent for public speaking and politics, two skills that would serve him well during his career at the State Historical Society of Iowa. Among his many accolades, on his senior class ballot, Petersen was voted "Best Speaker," "Class Politician," and "Optimist." In addition, perhaps contributing to, but more likely resulting from a well-developed sense of confidence and self-esteem, Petersen was chosen by the Dubuque High School class of 1920 as the "Most Popular Boy," the "Best All-'round Man," as well as "Man of the Hour."⁷ These high school class honors appear to somewhat foreshadow the things he would emphasize as Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa, such as increasing the organization's influence through membership growth, the popularization of history through public speaking events, and an greater emphasis on the social aspects of the organization.

After graduating from Dubuque High School, Petersen worked for a few years as a postal worker and eventually enrolled at the University of Dubuque, graduating in 1926 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and English and a minor in political science. While at the

⁷ (Dubuque High School Yearbook 1920)

University of Dubuque, Petersen was involved with school organizations and activities such as the Glee Club (serving as president in 1925), Debate Team, Drama League, and the YMCA. A perfect example of Petersen's tendency not to let fact distract from a good story, Michael Gibson, archivist at the Center for Dubuque History at Loras College, relayed a tale that Petersen had told about how he ended up at the University of Dubuque rather than Loras College. In his youth, Petersen had delivered newspapers for the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald* up through his high school years. According to Petersen's tale, one day while he was hauling papers up Loras Boulevard to deliver to the homes on top of the steep hill, he stopped to rest near the 15-foot tall statue of Bishop Mathias Loras that graces the southwest corner of Loras College's campus near Keane Hall. As he was sitting there resting, Petersen said, the statue of Bishop Loras looked down at the young paper carrier and said to him, "Go west young man...go west to the University of Dubuque!"⁸

Now, it is possible to believe that Petersen might have been delirious enough to see a talking statue after hiking up the massive hill that is Dubuque's Loras Boulevard (anyone who has seen the hill in question can attest to that). It is also possible that the statue of Loras College's namesake told Petersen to attend one a rival of Loras College's, although the reasons for such advice remain between Bishop Loras and Petersen. However, even these well-established "facts" cannot overlook the fact that this statue of Bishop Loras was not erected on the campus of Loras College until 1939 in celebration of school's centennial,⁹ almost twenty years after Petersen made the decision to attend the University of Dubuque. Gibson later

⁸ (Gibson, Interview/Discussion about William J. Petersen 2010)

⁹ (Dubuque Telegraph Herald 1995)

remarked that Petersen was not a Catholic and he suspects that this probably was a bigger factor in his decision to attend the University of Dubuque than was the advice of a talking statue.¹⁰

Steamboat Bill's Great River Adventure: Researching *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*

Regardless of how Bill Petersen came to attend the University of Dubuque, he graduated in 1926, then enrolled as a graduate student at the State University of Iowa (now the University of Iowa) in Iowa City with the intent of pursuing a career in teaching and coaching at the high school level. Writing his thesis about George Canning and the Oregon Boundary under the guidance of Dr. Harry G. Plum, Petersen graduated in 1927 with a Master of Arts degree in English History. Although Petersen had planned on a career in teaching and coaching, a chance conversation with University of Iowa history professor Dr. Louis Pelzer inspired Petersen to concentrate on the steamboat industry on the upper Mississippi River. Petersen tells about this life-changing conversation in his final issue as editor of *The Palimpsest*, published in September 1972:

I had just passed my oral examination for the M.A. degree and Professor Pelzer and I were walking slowly down the steps of the Old Capitol discussing my thesis ...I had been telling Professor Pelzer about my boyhood on the banks of the Mississippi in Dubuque. Suddenly he stopped short, as we were about to enter the Liberal Arts building, grabbed me by the arm, gazed intently into my eyes, and said: "Petersen, do you mean to tell me that your father was associated with the Diamond Jo Line Steamers and that a considerable amount of manuscript material is available on the subject?" Somewhat startled by his abrupt inquiry, I answered in the affirmative. In deadly earnestness Professor Pelzer declared: "**Petersen, I personally will pull the rope that hangs you to yonder tree if you don't start working on the history of steamboating on the Upper Mississippi for your Doctorate.**"¹¹ Needless to say, I gulped in amazement at this invitation to continue graduate work as a student under the most successful director of theses in the University of Iowa history department. Before we entered the Liberal Arts building I had accepted his invitation, one that was destined to completely change my future.¹²

¹⁰ (Gibson, Email to Nathan J. Gruber 2010)

¹¹ Author emphasis

¹² (W. J. Petersen, How It All Came About 1972)

From this conversation, one could speculate that Professor Pelzer *might* have been satisfied with a dissertation that was researched from the Diamond Jo Line manuscript material.¹³ Regardless if Dr. Pelzer intended it or not, Petersen accepted the larger task of writing an exhaustive history of steamboating on the upper Mississippi River. In order to write such a comprehensive history, Petersen decided that it was in his best interest to travel to the communities that were intimately involved with the steamboating industry during its prime. Petersen's stories about conducting this research became the source of personal legend and he never hesitated to share them later in life. In all, Petersen spent nearly three full years, from 1927 to 1930, traveling up and down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to St. Paul, stopping at every river town along the way.

If Petersen were a graduate student today, he could easily apply for any number of graduate research grants, assistantships, and stipends to help with the financial burden conducting this type of research. However, as he was often quick to point out, back in the late 1920s when he was working on his doctorate, he had to depend on his own resources to get himself to these vast stores of steamboating knowledge. While Petersen had saved up a little bit of money, it was not going to be enough for him to travel commercially along the Mississippi. Having committed to writing the dissertation, having few travel options, and determined not to ask his father for assistance,¹⁴ Petersen decided to take a chance and hitchhike his way along the banks of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to the places he desired to visit. While perhaps it was easier and safer to hitchhike in the 1920s than it is presently, Petersen's means of travel appeared to still be a unique undertaking for the era. His hitchhiking journey was reported on by several local papers including the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and the University

¹³ Although it can also be noted in Petersen's recollection that Pelzer's "threat" did include a very specific-sounding directive to "work on the history of steamboating on the Upper Mississippi for your Doctorate."

¹⁴ (W. J. Petersen, *How It All Came About* 1972)

of Iowa's paper, *The Daily Iowan*¹⁵ as a novelty story. That said, it is not entirely clear whether the local press coverage was driven by the uniqueness of Petersen's travel methods or the lure of Petersen being a local interest story. In any case, Petersen attributed his success with hitchhiking to a handful of rules that he firmly followed:

First, I was always neatly dressed, well-shaved, with my hair neatly combed. Second, I never tried to thumb a ride in a car carrying one or more passengers to the driver. And I never thumbed a lady driver, although I was picked up by a few. Thirdly, I always stood on the outskirts of town at a point where the car would have to slow down – or even stop. This would give the driver an opportunity to look me over – armed as I was with a brief case and what I hoped would be an engaging smile.¹⁶

The numbers from his travels illustrate the magnitude of what he accomplished during these years. Between 1927 and 1930, Petersen traveled some 20,000 miles, which included 3,000 by river (steamboat, barge line, excursion boats) and 17,000 miles on the road through hitchhiking. In all, Petersen claims to have spent a mere \$1.03 on transportation,¹⁷ a figure he enjoyed boasting about later in life. Including food and lodging, Petersen claims to have spent a mere \$84 over the course of three years.

Of course, a 20,000-mile hitchhiking trip up and down the Mississippi would not be complete without an interesting experience or two and of course, Petersen being a master storyteller, was always happy to share them. On one trip, Petersen found himself thankful to be at the end of a ride from Burlington, Iowa to Gladstone, Illinois that had been taken with two men named Kelley and Jaeger whom he described as “drunk but happy men.”¹⁸ In another story, Petersen relayed his most frightening experience from a bitterly cold November morning:

I was trying to catch a ride from Prescott, Wisconsin to Hastings, Minnesota. Like most college men of that day, I did not wear a cap. A car came along with two men in the front seat. It had been in an

¹⁵ (W. J. Petersen, Ph.D. Dissertation Research Autobiographical Sketch N.D.)

¹⁶ (W. J. Petersen, Ph.D. Dissertation Research Autobiographical Sketch N.D.)

¹⁷ The figure of \$1.03 Petersen liked to share is a little bit of an accounting trick. In one of his autobiographical sketches, Petersen reveals that he actually spent a total of \$4.71 on transportation but at one point during his travels he had secured a minor job as a deck hand on a barge which had earned him \$3.68. He subtracted that income from \$4.71 he spent to arrive at his \$1.03 figure. (W. J. Petersen, Background of the Lecture N.D.)

¹⁸ (W. J. Petersen, Ph.D. Dissertation Research Autobiographical Sketch N.D.)

accident and the front windshield was broken out. They stopped to pick me up and I clambered into the back seat. It was cold, oh so cold, but I was no worse off than my companions in the front seat.

When we reached Hastings, we drove into a warm heated garage. While warming myself, one of the men walked over to me, stuck a pistol into my ribs, and demanded my money. Not wanting to have my career abruptly terminated in Hastings, I quickly handed him my wallet. The man opened it, and after noting that I had well over \$20 in it, he handed my wallet back with the money intact. “Here,” he said, “I wanted to see if you could afford a cap. Otherwise I was going to buy you a warm one!”¹⁹

Not all of Petersen’s hitchhiking tales involved seemingly life-threatening situations. Another one of Petersen’s favorite road tales from his research days was of the time when he found a ride from Minneapolis to Winona, Minnesota in an unusual vehicle, a brand new hearse straight from the factory en route to its final destination. When telling this story to Irving Weber of the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, Petersen remarked, “I was the first human to be transported in that brand new hearse, and I am happy to report I was very much alive at the time. And [I] still am.”²⁰

While the number of miles Petersen traveled as a graduate student for his research is impressive, arguably just as staggering is the amount of source material he consulted over the course of his research. Petersen consulted countless travel books, government documents, contemporary periodicals, and other miscellaneous records all in the name of conducting the most thorough search possible. Out of all the materials he consulted, Petersen felt that old newspaper files provided him the richest amount of research material; he culled through several hundred years’ worth of newspapers in local libraries in cities ranging from St. Paul to St. Louis. In his three years on the road and river, Petersen also dug through hundreds of files and records in the offices of the Collector of Customs and U.S. Steamboat Inspectors in river cities such as Galena, Dubuque, Louisville, and Pittsburgh.²¹ Petersen became especially interested in the “bills of lading” from river shipping companies, which were the official records of what was being transported on board any given steamboat. A typical bill of lading included the following

¹⁹ (W. J. Petersen, Ph.D. Dissertation Research Autobiographical Sketch N.D.)

²⁰ (Weber 1979)

²¹ (Arpy 1973)

information: the names of the ship, captain, and cargo owner, as well as a description of the cargo, the rate charged, and the date. Over the course of his research, Petersen collected and analyzed an estimated 5,000 bills of lading. Petersen also amassed a collection of several thousand photographs of the steamboats that used to travel the upper Mississippi River.

In addition to spending thousands of hours in libraries and old offices, Petersen traveled several thousand miles on the Mississippi River itself, catching rides on barge lines and excursion boats. During these trips, Petersen spent hours in the pilothouses of these ships “studying the river and writing his own descriptions of the topography, scenery, towns and historic spots.”²² In addition to making his own observations about life on the river, Petersen “interviewed every possible source on both sides of the river”²³ which ranged from steamboat captains to “old timers” who had known or worked the river in their younger days. Petersen readily admits that while these interviews were interesting to listen to, “only a half dozen proved really fruitful”²⁴ out of more than an estimated five hundred interviews.

²² (W. J. Petersen, Background of the Lecture N.D.)

²³ (W. J. Petersen, Author Questionnaire for unknown publisher N.D.)

²⁴ (W. J. Petersen, Background of the Lecture N.D.)

Early Fame: *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, Mark Twain and Lake Itasca

After three years of work, regularly putting in ten- and twelve-hour days seven days a week, Petersen completed his dissertation titled, “Early History of Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi River 1823-1861” under the direction of Louis Pelzer; he was awarded his Doctorate by the University of Iowa in 1930. In 1937, after several more years of research and nearly ten years after Petersen’s initial research, the State Historical Society of Iowa published *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi: The Water Way to Iowa* (The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1937), a revised and greatly expanded version of Petersen’s doctoral dissertation.²⁵

Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi became arguably the best-known book out of the dozen or so Petersen wrote or edited throughout his career. Like his dissertation, the book is so well-researched and comprehensive in scope that according to Roger Osborne, the former curator of the Woodward Riverboat Museum in Dubuque, *Steamboating* is still considered one of “the seminal works written about the history of steamboating and the Upper Mississippi River Valley in the United States.”²⁶ In fact, *Steamboating* is still regularly referenced, appearing in a number of recently published books about the Mississippi River or the steamboat industry. For example, John Anfinson’s 2003 book *The River We Have Wrought: A History of the Upper Mississippi* (University of Minnesota Press), Calvin Fremling’s *Immortal River: The Upper Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Times* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), and William Lass’ *Navigating the Missouri: Steamboating on Nature’s Highway, 1819-1935* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2007) are all books written in after the turn of the century which list *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* in their bibliographies or reference lists. Even Petersen’s

²⁵ An expansion of 150% by Petersen’s estimate (W. J. Petersen, *How It All Came About* 1972)

²⁶ (Wiley 1988)

contemporaries seemed aware of *Steamboating*'s potential. In a 1937 review of *Steamboating* for *The Minneapolis Journal*, Merle Potter wrote Petersen's "book is authoritative, probably the most comprehensive one that has yet appeared dealing with the upper Mississippi. Yet it is most engrossing reading, even to one who may have the most casual interest in water transportation."²⁷ The 1937 publication of *Steamboating* ran through its initial print run of several thousand copies within its first nine months, which made *Steamboating* somewhat rare until the State Historical Society reprinted the book in 1968. The success of *Steamboating* established Petersen as an authority figure on steamboat and Mississippi River history.

Recognition also came to Petersen early in his career thanks to a number of early publication opportunities as well as two notable discoveries uncovered in the course of his extensive research for his dissertation and eventual book. Even before he had received his doctorate, Petersen had written several articles that were published in a number of historical publications. His first article, published by the Minnesota Historical Society in their publication *Minnesota History*, was a section out of *Steamboating* titled "Voyage of the *Virginia* – the Clermont of the Upper Mississippi." Petersen also had articles published in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, and the State Historical Society of Iowa's own *Palimpsest* and *Iowa Journal of History*.²⁸

Petersen's first significant discovery occurred in 1928 and is associated with the man who many consider to be the father of Mississippi River legend and lore, author Samuel Clemens, better known by his pseudonym "Mark Twain." Before Petersen's discovery, a debate had raged for decades among scholars of American history and literature: "Did Mark Twain really have experience as a river pilot, or were his tales about life on the Mississippi merely a

²⁷ (Potter 1937)

²⁸ (W. J. Petersen, William J. Petersen N.D.)

figment of his imagination?”²⁹ In 1928, Petersen had stopped at a steamboat inspector’s office in St. Louis and was looking for names of steamboat pilots who had navigated the stretch of the Mississippi between St. Paul and St. Louis. While looking through the records in that office, Petersen came across a steamboat pilot’s license with a familiar name. It was license number 596, dated April 9, 1859 and issued to a “Samuel Clemens.” Petersen found himself holding the steamboat inspector’s copy of Mark Twain’s riverboat pilot’s license, which had allowed the author to navigate steamboats between St. Louis and New Orleans.

While Petersen is generally credited with the discovery of the Mark Twain riverboat pilot’s license, his role might be better described as the man who revealed the license’s existence to the public. In truth, the license had been uncovered a few years earlier by Major William J. McDonald, the supervising inspector at the St. Louis office. Major McDonald had discovered the license while going through old files but for reasons not clear, McDonald decided to keep its discovery quiet, only presenting a photostatic copy to the Missouri Historical Society³⁰ (Petersen also claimed to have given a copy to the society^{31,32}). While Major McDonald was less than thrilled that the young Petersen uncovered the license in 1928, he did let the young graduate student make copies of the document. Regardless of who “discovered” the license, its existence is evidence that Twain’s stories were not merely creations of his imagination, but were at least embellished, if not developed from, his short career as a riverboat pilot. Twain’s unedited autobiography, the first of three volumes published for the first time in the fall of 2010,³³ might

²⁹ (Willard 1978)

³⁰ (Willard 1978)

³¹ (Rice n.d.)

³² (Find License of Mark Twain 1928)

³³ Twain who died in 1910 left behind 5,000 unedited pages of memoirs with handwritten notes which indicated that this manuscript was to remain unpublished until a century after his death. This manuscript has sat in a vault at the University of California-Berkley. (Adams 2010)

provide further insight into the extent of his riverboat piloting experience and further strengthen the credibility of Petersen's discovery.

According to an article published in the *Quad-City Times* celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his find, Petersen made a number of copies of the license, and distributed these to various libraries and historical societies. Petersen also gave a number of interviews describing his find to local newspapers. Some of these interviews were picked up by the Associated Press and the news of Petersen's discovery was soon known around the world. Petersen received a number of congratulatory responses for his find, including letters from a distant relative of Twain's, Cyril Clemens, as well as correspondence from Elmira, New York,³⁴ the city where Mark Twain is buried.

Soon after knowledge of the Mark Twain license became public, the original license disappeared for several years. Then in January 1940, the *Twainian*, the publication of the Mark Twain Society of Chicago, noted that the license was now located in the archives of the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Virginia. The widow of Major John McDonald, the inspector who had allowed Petersen to make a copy, had bequeathed the license to the museum in 1932. Brochures and other materials from the museum found in his papers indicate that Dr. Petersen himself made at least one visit to the Mariner's Museum, possibly to visit the license he had found years earlier.

The second of Petersen's early discoveries, though not as widely publicized as the discovery of the Twain license, is arguably more impressive. It occurred while he was conducting additional research for the book *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*. In 1936, Petersen, while examining old newspapers in Galena, Illinois, came across an 1832 letter, written

³⁴ (Willard 1978)

by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, the man credited with the European discovery of Lake Itasca, the source of the Mississippi River.

The fact that Schoolcraft located and named Lake Itasca has never been in doubt. However, what had remained a mystery in the century since his discovery were the origins of the word “itasca,” and how Schoolcraft had settled on that word as a name. At the time, there were a number of theories among historians regarding the word’s origins. One speculated that “Itasca” was the name of the daughter of the Chippewa spirit god Nanabozho. Another theory, which emerged in 1872, strengthened by comments made by Reverend William T. Boutwell, a companion of Schoolcraft’s on that expedition, speculated that the word “itasca” was the result of combining parts of the Latin words *veritas* (truth) *caput* (head) or combined, “true head.” Other theories believed the word originated from either the Chippewa or Dakota Indian languages.

All theories save one were put to rest by Petersen’s discovery in November 1936. The letter Petersen discovered was published in *The Galenian* on August 22, 1832 and described Schoolcraft’s discovery of Mississippi headwaters. In this letter, Schoolcraft writes, “...we ascended the latter [sic], through a number of lakes to its source in a small creek. From thence we made a portage of 6 miles, with our canoes, into La Biche or Itasca Lake (**from a derivation of the expression *veritas caput*³⁵**) which is the true source of this celebrated stream, being at the same time its most western and northern head.”³⁶ Petersen went on to publish his Lake Itasca finding in *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, and according to the book editor’s sheet, this discovery became part of *Steamboating*’s marketing campaign. With this find, Petersen secured a

³⁵ Author emphasis added

³⁶ (W. J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* 1968)

place in Mississippi River history, as he solved a century-old mystery using words straight from the pen of the man who found the river's source.

Petersen's Early Career

After completing his Ph.D. in 1930, Petersen was hired as a lecturer in the History Department at the University of Iowa. It is not known if Petersen continued to harbor the same aspirations for teaching he had held at the time he finished his Master's degree. If he did, one could conclude that he only marginally accomplished those goals. In his paper "The Career of Ethyl Martin," Robert Burchfield quotes Dr. Jack Johnson, a former professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Iowa, as saying, "[Petersen] may have thought he was a possible successor to Professor Pelzer in Western history."³⁷ For unknown reasons, Petersen was never able to secure a tenure-track position at the University of Iowa and his only teaching positions at the University were non-tenure track positions and therefore never a long-term career option. In fact, while employed by the University of Iowa from 1930 to 1969, Petersen received only one promotion, from lecturer to Associate Professor of History in 1947, which occurred at the same time he was named Superintendent at the State Historical Society. In addition to his positions with the State Historical Society and the University of Iowa, Petersen occasionally held temporary, short-term teaching positions (typically during summer sessions) at schools like Washington University in St. Louis, Drake University in Des Moines, and Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant, teaching courses in Iowa, American, and western history. In effect, while Petersen was associated with the University of Iowa for a significant part of his life, perhaps he saw from an early age that his future did not lie at the University.³⁸ As a result,

³⁷ (Burchfield 1983, 45, footnote 171)

³⁸ (Burchfield 1983, 30)

he shifted his career goal to advancing through the State Historical Society and thus his teaching career became ancillary to his career at the Society.

Petersen's career at the State Historical Society of Iowa began in 1930 when he was hired by Superintendent Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, as a research associate. Petersen had already authored several articles which had been printed in the Society's two publications, *The Palimpsest* and the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* and it is reasonable to assume that Petersen was brought on to continue to research and write articles for these publications. Throughout his forty-year career at the State Historical Society, Petersen authored nearly 400 articles for *The Palimpsest* and edited countless others.³⁹ It was during these early years at the State Historical Society when the nickname "Steamboat Bill" was bestowed upon Petersen. As Petersen told the story, Dr. Louis Pelzer had begun to call him "Steamboat Petersen" in order to differentiate him from another Petersen in a history class he was teaching. It was Dr. Shambaugh who ultimately dubbed Petersen "Steamboat Bill" after Petersen started working at the Historical Society because, "there is no man who has made as large a collection of material and knows as much about Mississippi steamboats as this man Petersen."⁴⁰

During his years as a research assistant, Petersen started to take on more and more of the Society's public relations responsibilities. This public speaking workload reached the point where Petersen, as he describes it, was giving "nine-tenths of the Society's speeches around the state [as well as] a weekly radio broadcast."⁴¹ In his self-study of State Historical Society of Iowa, Alan Schroder described the evolution of Petersen's status and duties within the organization:

³⁹ (Wiley 1988)

⁴⁰ (Schroder 1981, 128-129)

⁴¹ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to unknown recipient N.D.)

By the 1930s, Benjamin Shambaugh was in his sixties and had never really enjoyed the responsibility of traveling around the state on speaking tours to local groups. Petersen, on the other hand, thrived on public speaking. He developed a series of illustrated lectures on Iowa and Upper Mississippi Valley History (particularly steamboating history) that he delivered scores of times to local historical societies and service clubs throughout the state. As a result, he became the mainstay of the Society's public speaking programs. Along the way, Petersen increasingly focused his concerns on the need to expand the Society's publicity campaigns as a means of both increasing the Society's own visibility and of stimulating a wide-spread public interest in Iowa history.⁴²

As one could imagine, these public speaking tours helped to not only established Petersen as a "mainstay of the public speaking program," but also as the face of the State Historical Society for many Iowans. If Petersen had decided his future lie with the State Historical Society, it would not be difficult to assume that he began to use these public appearances as a way to better position himself for a promotion.

Succeeding a Legend: The State Historical Society of Iowa after Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh

Background

On April 7, 1940, Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh passed away after serving nearly forty years as the first Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa.⁴³ His death left a significant void in the power structure of the organization. Within weeks of his death, the Board of Curators, the governing body of the State Historical Society, appointed Ethyl Martin as Acting Superintendent until the position could be filled permanently. Martin had been Shambaugh's long time clerk, secretary and, at the time of his death, Martin was serving as Assistant Superintendent, a position to which she had been promoted in 1930. As Martin performed it, the

⁴² (Schroder 1981)

⁴³ Citing a lack of strong administrative leadership to run the Society from day to day, the newly formed Executive Committee of the Board of Curators modernized the administrative structure of the State Historical Society in 1907 with the creation of Superintendent and editor positions. Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, a member of the Executive Committee, became the first individual to hold both of these positions. (Schroder 1981)

Assistant Superintendent position appears to have mostly consisted of running the business end of the State Historical Society in order to allow Dr. Shambaugh to concentrate on his research and writing. In June 1940, the Board of Curators appointed Martin to the Superintendent position permanently, but from the beginning, Martin's tenure appeared destined to be a short one for a number of reasons.

First, although Martin was very competent and knowledgeable of the Society's programs and operations, the fact that she was not a historian by training was held against her by a faction opposed to her appointment to the job. Second, Martin's gender also appeared to be a problem for individuals both within and outside of the Society including one individual so unhappy with the Board's choice that he called it "a grotesque travesty on scholarly leadership and responsibility."⁴⁴ Finally, Martin herself saw her own appointment as Superintendent as a short-term solution to the Society's larger leadership problem. As Martin wrote shortly after being appointed, "we hope to steer a steady course until such time as a young man with creative ability and vision can take over and carry the Society forward into its second hundred years."⁴⁵

On the surface, the State Historical Society did not change much under Ethyl Martin's leadership. The Society continued with Shambaugh's emphasis on research and publication programs,⁴⁶ a guiding principle that became much more difficult to adhere to once World War II erupted and staff assistance and materials became harder to obtain. To an outsider, an examination of the Society's policies and priorities during this period would easily lead one to conclude that Dr. Shambaugh was still the leader of the State Historical Society in spirit even if

⁴⁴ (Burchfield 1983, 10)

⁴⁵ (Schroder 1981, 109)

⁴⁶ Shambaugh himself wrote that "the State Historical Society of Iowa has come to make historical research its chief function ... It is true that heretofore in most states the principal function of the state historical society seems to have been that of collection, preservation, and exhibition ... but with the State Historical Society of Iowa, on the other hand, historical research and publication have become the dominant activity." (Burchfield 1983, 2)

he was no longer a physical presence. It is for this reason that some people have completely glossed over or omitted Martin's tenure as Superintendent and depicted Petersen as Shambaugh's immediate successor.⁴⁷ Of course, given the close relationship Shambaugh had with Ethyl Martin and the Board of Curators, the decision to pursue a "hold the course" style of leadership was not only logical but intentional. While finding an appropriate successor became one of Martin's primary objectives as Superintendent, she did not take the other responsibilities of leading the State Historical Society of Iowa lightly. During her tenure, Martin successfully led the Society through the World War II years despite the problems the war caused for the Society's research and publication programs. Martin secured regular increases in state budget appropriations to the Society (as well as some significant unsolicited increases) and she successfully fought off an attempt by the Iowa Legislature in 1947 to reorganize and combine the Society with the Department of Archives in Des Moines.

Where is future Superintendent Petersen?

At that point, Dr. Petersen had been conspicuously absent from the discussion. While we know Petersen was eventually appointed as Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1947, what happened in 1940 when the chance to be Shambaugh's immediate successor presented itself? While it is possible that Petersen did not want the Superintendency position at this time, there is strong evidence to support that this was probably not the case. As mentioned earlier, Petersen had been in a non-tenure track teaching position at the University of Iowa since receiving his doctorate in 1930 and it is again reasonable to speculate that he did not see much opportunity for advancement in the University's History Department. In fact, Robert Burchfield,

⁴⁷ Burchfield specifically cites Walter M. Whitehall's section about the State Historical Society of Iowa in his book *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston: Athenum, 1962) as a blatant offender in this leadership oversight (Burchfield 1983, 11)

in regards to the young Petersen's career ambitions, briefly quoted Dr. Jack Johnson as saying, "Bill Petersen...always had an ambition to be Superintendent."^{48, 49} By 1940, enough time had passed for Petersen to fully adjust his career goals and focus towards his work at the State Historical Society. Whether by accident or by design, Petersen had already been positioning himself as the de facto public face of the State Historical Society for years through his numerous public speaking engagements.

In his 1981 self-study of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Alan Schroder made no mention of Petersen in the section discussing the 1940 leadership transition from Shambaugh to Martin. In fact, Schroder's first mention of William J. Petersen first appeared near the end of his narrative about Ethyl Martin when he discusses Martin's resignation and Petersen's appointment as Superintendent, giving little detail regarding why Martin resigned. On the other hand, in the section of his paper about the Shambaugh/Martin transition, Robert Burchfield noted that while it appeared Petersen had hoped to succeed Shambaugh and though his name had been recommended to the Board, Burchfield found little evidence Petersen had actively sought support for his nomination. As Burchfield told it, "one week after Martin was named Acting Superintendent, Edwin Lindsay of Davenport, Iowa, wrote the Board of Curators suggesting that William J. Petersen be considered for the position of Superintendent and Editor."⁵⁰ Burchfield later remarked that while he was unable to find evidence that Petersen had a role in Lindsay's

⁴⁸ In the same passage, Burchfield also quoted Johnson as saying: "The staff (both Society and Political Science) believed that Petersen conducted a campaign to be named Superintendent in 1940." (Burchfield 1983, 31)

⁴⁹ Burchfield also included a quote in the footnotes of his Ethyl Martin paper from a letter he received from former Iowa state legislator and Davenport native Fred Schwengel in which he stated, "I think that Dr. Petersen was interested in becoming Superintendent before 1947 and he cannot be faulted for that." This quote was included as a footnote and not in the paper because Schwengel wrote in the same letter that he believed that Iowa Governor Bill Beardsley had been involved in Martin's appointment as Superintendent in 1940. In reality, Beardsley had not been elected governor until 1949. (Burchfield 1983, 45)

⁵⁰ (Burchfield 1983, 9)

letter to the Board of Curators, he found it suspicious that Petersen's main base of support came from Davenport when he was nominated for Superintendent seven years later.⁵¹ Regardless, when the Board of Curators voted on a permanent Superintendent in June 1940, despite Lindsay's letter, no one on the Board presented Petersen's name as a candidate for Superintendent.

The first days without Benjamin F. Shambaugh

The William J. Petersen Collection housed in the Special Collections of the Charles C. Myers Library at the University of Dubuque contains an assortment of personal papers and correspondence that were donated to the University on Petersen's request after his death. Among these papers and correspondence is evidence which appears to support the idea that not only did Petersen feel he was the ideal candidate to succeed Shambaugh in 1940, but that he was probably much more active in trying to become Superintendent than previously believed. Some of these documents reinforce Petersen's comments during an interview with Robert Burchfield regarding his opinion of Ethyl Martin's qualifications and the appropriateness of her appointment as Superintendent. The William J. Petersen Collection also includes a set of meeting minutes from the staff of the State Historical Society, as well as a meeting between Petersen and Ethyl Martin. Handwritten by Petersen, these minutes shine a light into the State Historical Society in the days following Shambaugh's death and reveal the tension that existed among certain staff members as they attempt to move forward without Benjamin Shambaugh.

Three days after Shambaugh's death, April 10, 1940, the staff of the State Historical Society appears to have met as a group for the first time. Ethyl Martin, because she held the title of Assistant Superintendent, chaired this first meeting and she began the meeting by explaining

⁵¹ (Burchfield 1983, 31)

how she believed things should proceed. First, she explained that she believed in the interim, “the duties of the Superintendent had fallen to her ...because of her office as Assistant Superintendent.”⁵² She then very quickly emphasized this was “a responsibility which she [had] never wanted.”⁵³ Next, Martin explained, “she believed that the staff should continue to work on as if Dr. Shambaugh were merely on a vacation.” While this could be identified as the beginning of the “hold the course” style of leadership Martin utilized as Superintendent, more likely this was a way for Martin as well as the rest of the staff to cope with the loss of Shambaugh, given how soon this meeting occurred after his death.

Several interesting things emerge from this apparent first meeting of the Society’s staff after Shambaugh’s death. First, Martin indicated that she did not know how the Board of Curators would approach replacing Shambaugh, though she suspected that her position might be made official in the short term until the Board could make an appropriate long-term hire. Later in this meeting, Martin again emphasized that she did not want to be Superintendent and the position would be better filled by a man. Second, Martin noted that she would not discuss issue of the Superintendent vacancy with any of the Board members nor would she discuss it if she were approached about it. Arguably, the most interesting item to emerge from this meeting occurred when Martin “strongly intimated that members of the staff should not express any opinions concerning the filling of the vacancy and that loyalty to the Society meant loyalty to her.”⁵⁴ The minutes of this meeting then end with Martin informing the group that “she would not serve if a single member of the staff opposed her appointment.”⁵⁵

⁵² (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 10, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁵³ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 10, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁵⁴ (W. J. Petersen, Undated summary of April 10, 1940 Meeting n.d.)

⁵⁵ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 10, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

These two statements appear to conflict with each other, although the context, is not clear from the minutes themselves; one cannot be sure whether these two statements were made in the sequence presented in the minutes. On one hand, Martin appears to be acting in a way that supports her earlier assertions that she does not want to be Superintendent. By stating that she would not serve if even one person opposes her appointment, she appears to be trying to establish a possible rationale for not accepting the Superintendency, even on a temporary basis. On the other hand, the statement about how she defines loyalty indicates that she may have anticipated her appointment and that she would serve regardless of staff sentiment. Not surprisingly, at least one staff member at the State Historical Society opposed her appointment from the beginning, which does throw into question the sincerity of her statement about not serving. In addition, the issue of loyalty appears to have become a more contentious matter as the issue of filling Shambaugh progressed.

Petersen's revelation to Martin

On April 15, 1940, a meeting between Petersen and Martin occurred. While it appears the original purpose of the meeting was to discuss Petersen's upcoming leave of absence to teach in St. Louis, the meeting not surprisingly moved to the topic of replacing Shambaugh. Initially, Petersen expressed appreciation to Martin for her "frankness in stating she did not wish to be Superintendent."⁵⁶ Interestingly, particularly in light of Martin's statements at the April 10th meeting, Petersen then began to discuss how "every full time member of the staff (Dr. [Ruth] Gallaher, Dr. [Jacob] Swisher, and Dr. Petersen) should have friends in Iowa City and around the State who believed they possessed the qualification necessary for the position."⁵⁷ Petersen went on to inform Martin that he himself had "received long distance phone calls and letters

⁵⁶ (W. J. Petersen, Meeting between Miss Martin and Dr. Petersen 1940)

⁵⁷ (W. J. Petersen, Meeting between Miss Martin and Dr. Petersen 1940)

expressing a desire to nominate him for the position.”⁵⁸ Petersen then informed Martin that while he appreciated the gesture of support, he had advised these supporters that the decision lay solely in the hands of the Board of Curators. Finally, the minutes end with a note that “Miss Martin declared I had acted perfectly correct in this matter.”⁵⁹

What is interesting about this meeting is that despite her request and warning to the staff not “express an opinion” about the Superintendent position, Martin was now aware of at least one active campaign by or on behalf of a Society staff member to succeed Shambaugh. Now whether other staff members were also organizing, or were the benefactors of, similar campaigns as Petersen claims is not known, but it seems clear that even in 1940, Petersen had his eyes set on the top job.

The Board names a “temporary” Superintendent

On April 24, 1940, the Board of Curators met regarding the Superintendent vacancy and the result of that meeting was Ethyl Martin’s appointment as Acting Superintendent. Unfortunately, the official minutes of this meeting in the State Historical Society’s archives were only a brief summary of the business conducted and just mentioned in passing that Ethyl Martin was appointed as Acting Superintendent at the meeting. While this appointment did take place, it appears that the Board struggled with deciding what course of action to take.

Fortunately, the minutes from the April 25, 1940 meeting of the Society’s staff help to piece together the events of this particular Board of Curators meeting. This meeting occurred the day after the Board of Curators meeting where Ethyl Martin was appointed Acting

⁵⁸ (W. J. Petersen, Meeting between Miss Martin and Dr. Petersen 1940)

⁵⁹ (W. J. Petersen, Meeting between Miss Martin and Dr. Petersen 1940)

Superintendent; during this meeting, she relayed the events of the previous night's meeting to the staff.⁶⁰

According to Petersen's notes, during this meeting, Martin informed the staff that she believed she kept her promise not to discuss the vacancy with the Board of Curators from the meeting on April 10 and in fact had excused herself from room when the meeting turned to matters of the superintendency. When the Board called her back in , she was informed of the following:⁶¹

- A majority of the Board of Curators favored her appointment as Superintendent⁶²
- Three Curators urged postponement of action.
- One Curator was in favor of *having* a committee appointed to "scour the country" in search of a suitable successor for Dr. Shambaugh.

The Board then offered Martin the position of Acting Superintendent, which Martin refused because she felt the title was "meaningless, inane, empty and unworthy of consideration."⁶³ An unidentified Curator then asked Martin if she had anyone specific in mind to succeed Shambaugh and she had a curious answer to this question. First, she stated that she "very definitely had one person in mind with whom she would not serve (threatening to resign first)" and then she informed the Board "that there was one person with whom she was willing to work."⁶⁴ When the curator pressed for names, Martin refused to answer unless Board President Marvin Day personally asked her to reveal her names. It is unknown whether Martin revealed

⁶⁰ It is important to point out that the following is taken from Petersen's observations of this meeting. It is not known whether these were written as the meeting progressed or if Petersen later sat and wrote down his own recollections of the meeting. Therefore, while they could be a very accurate account of what occurred during this meeting, they should be viewed with some caution, since it is possible that the information is incomplete and potentially biased from Petersen's point of view.

⁶¹ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁶² (*it was also noted "that she would not accept unless it was unanimous," but it is not clear whether Martin said this during the Board meeting or if it was as commentary during the staff meeting*)

⁶³ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁶⁴ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

any names; Petersen's meeting minutes indicate that she refused to disclose to the Society's staff whether President Day had given her his permission to reveal her names to the Board. Martin then told the staff that she had informed the Board "that one staff member had been actively enlisting support locally and around the state," to which she adds "to the complete disapproval of the local Board of Curators."⁶⁵ Again, Martin does not provide any names to Society staff, but based on the meeting that occurred between Petersen and Martin on April 15, one can reasonably assume that she is referring to Petersen with this statement. This may also be evidence of the true nature of the feelings between Petersen and Martin.

Ultimately, the Board decided to keep Ethyl Martin in her position as Assistant Superintendent but the full power to act and the final executive authority would remain with the Board of Curators. Interestingly, according to Martin's account to the staff, she reminded the Board that "the Curators had unanimously agreed to give thirty days' notice⁶⁶ to any staff member who continued to manifest an interest in the Superintendency, or whose friends continued to advance his or her cause. The failure of any staff member to cooperate with Miss Martin would also be met with summary dismissal."⁶⁷ At that point, Petersen's minutes recorded a number of things before the meeting ends. First, Dr. Jacob Swisher asked Martin if anyone present at this meeting would be able to talk openly among each other about choosing a successor to Dr. Shambaugh to which Martin "replied in the negative." Next Dr. John E. Briggs suggested that the State Historical Society's staff "take action to suggest that her power be made permanent." According to Petersen's minutes, "no one else favored this and Miss Martin

⁶⁵ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁶⁶ Petersen's emphasis (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁶⁷ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

answered this also in the negative.” Finally, Petersen himself asked Martin “if the local Board of Curators might not be inclined to solicit the advice and counsel of the other members of the staff of the State Historical Society of Iowa.”⁶⁸ Again, “Martin replied in the negative” and the meeting ended.

It is worth noting that a second document exists which appears to be a shorter summary written by Petersen of his minutes from the April 25, 1940 meeting. This summary takes note of several items that were in his other minutes, namely Martin’s “thirty days’ notice” threat to those who continued to pursue the Superintendency, her summary dismissal of Dr. Swisher’s suggestion that the staff choose Shambaugh’s successor as well as the assertion that the Board did not care about the input of the Society’s staff on Shambaugh’s successor. There were two things of note in this document. First, the summary opened with an observation by Petersen of Ethyl Martin’s mood that day. “Her failure to secure the office of Superintendent on April 24th has made Miss Martin bitterly resentful. She promptly called in the staff member on April 25th and informed them of her displeasure.”⁶⁹ Second, Petersen documented that Martin “insists that either she will be Superintendent or that she personally will reserve the right to name the successor of Dr. Shambaugh, under threat of resigning.”⁷⁰

While it is clear that Petersen linked Martin’s bitter mood with the fact that she was unable to secure the Superintendency the night before, the accuracy of this association cannot be verified. Another explanation for Martin’s mood might be her frustration with being named Superintendent even though she had expressed her desire not to be named. It is also worth noting that this was potentially the first instance of Martin expressing a *strong desire* to be

⁶⁸ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 25, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁶⁹ (W. J. Petersen, Summary of April 25th SHSI Staff Meeting Minutes 1947)

⁷⁰ (W. J. Petersen, Summary of April 25th SHSI Staff Meeting Minutes 1947)

Shambaugh's successor or at least have the ability to name his successor if she could not have the job. If true, it is inconsistent with Martin's behavior up to that time in which she had shown reluctance in taking the position. However, if Petersen also coveted the job, it is difficult to accept any account by Petersen as objective.

At that point, it appeared that while Martin may not have wanted the job of Superintendent, even turning down the title of "Acting Superintendent" in favor of her previous "Assistant Superintendent" title with expanded responsibilities, once she was appointed, she appeared determined not to allow any staff member undermine her authority as Superintendent. From Petersen's minutes, it is unclear with whom the "thirty days' notice" authority lies. From how Petersen recorded this part of the meeting, it appears that the authority might rest with the Board but the fact that Martin brought it up in the staff meeting makes it appear as if she had the authority to act and was firing another warning shot. It is also unclear how this "thirty days' notice" threat comes up in the April 24 Board of Curators meeting. Was this something that Martin requested the Board take action on or was this the Board's response to Martin's news that a staff member had been actively organizing support to become Superintendent? If Martin happened to mention this information in the staff meeting, it is missed or not recorded accurately by Petersen.

In the end, what occurred at the April 25 staff meeting, particularly with the "thirty days' notice" threat, was a clever calling out of Petersen by Martin. When Petersen divulged during their April 15 meeting that he had been receiving support, solicited or not, for nomination as Superintendent, Martin saw Petersen as blatantly disregarding her request to the staff on April 10 and as a challenge to her authority, however permanent, as Superintendent. To prevent Petersen from further undermining her position, she brought this information to the attention of the Board

and received the promise of action against Petersen if he continued to “manifest an interest in the Superintendency.”

Petersen’s Letter to Halleck W. Seaman

For Petersen, Martin’s appointment as Superintendent bordered on unacceptable, inappropriate, and offensive. Although he was presumably cordial in his interactions with her, personally, Petersen could not stand Martin, a fact he revealed in an interview with Robert Burchfield. Five minutes into the interview, Petersen states about Martin, “I viewed her with contempt. She never did a damn thing. She had the sex appeal of a cow.”⁷¹ Petersen further expressed his displeasure with Martin in a letter to Halleck W. Seaman⁷² of Clinton, Iowa.⁷³ This letter was written sometime after the April 24, 1940 meeting of the Board during which Martin had been appointed Acting Superintendent. This letter offers revelations regarding Petersen’s opinion of Martin’s qualifications for the Superintendency as well as his level of involvement in the 1940 campaign to have himself nominated for the Superintendency. In several places throughout these drafts of this letter, Petersen mentioned “Miss Martin” which he would then immediately follow with “the secretary” or “the executive secretary” as if to emphasize Petersen’s perception of her role within the Historical Society⁷⁴ to Mr. Seaman.

⁷¹ (Burchfield 1983, 45, footnote 174)

This instance of Petersen making a highly inappropriate comment that is also irrelevant to Martin’s ability to perform the duties of Superintendent should not surprise anyone who has looked through the boxes or folders marked “humor” among his papers.

⁷² The Halleck W. Seaman letter in the author’s possession consists of two documents which appear to be two heavily edited drafts of a letter sent by Petersen to Seaman. A copy of the final letter is not in the author’s possession. The letters will be referred to as a single letter even though each document contains some variations on Petersen’s thoughts as well as several separate items not contained in the other drafts.

⁷³ In his article, “How it All Came About,” Petersen calls Seaman a source of “constant revelation and inspiration” throughout his career. A lifelong friend, Petersen described Seaman, a member of the Board of the Inland Waterways Corporation, as having a “brilliant grasp of all phases of transportation, both rail and waterways” and was a great source of “first hand information about both the steamboat and towboat eras” (W. J. Petersen, *How It All Came About* 1972).

⁷⁴ This “just a secretary” status more than likely applies to just her personal standing with Petersen than it does with Martin’s actual standing within the State Historical Society.

The purpose of Petersen's letter was to inform Seaman of the Board of Curators' recent actions regarding the Superintendency. Some of the things Petersen mentioned included the Board's "thirty days' notice" threat and Martin's apparent determination to be Superintendent or at least be able to name Shambaugh's replacement. Interestingly, Petersen at that point appeared to be of the opinion that Martin's appointment as Superintendent was part of a plan by Board President Marvin Day and Dr. Shambaugh's wife, Bertha Shambaugh to exploit the leadership situation at the State Historical Society to further enrich Dr. Shambaugh legacy.⁷⁵ In his letter to Halleck Seaman, Petersen wrote, "Marvin Day and Mrs. Shambaugh would like to see Miss Martin (the executive secretary⁷⁶ who holds the title of Assistant Superintendent given her by Dr. Shambaugh) elevated from her position of secretary to that of Superintendent."⁷⁷ Petersen later informed Seaman that Day's and Mrs. Shambaugh's wishes were acted on in spite of opposition from at least six other Curators who were either opposed to Martin's appointment or wished to postpone action on the decision, complaining that "it is most unfortunate that the Curators did not first of all, come to a definite decision in regard to the qualifications to a successor before discussing individuals." Petersen mentioned one curator opposed to Martin who had called her appointment "fatal to the future of the Society."⁷⁸

Petersen wrote several other revealing things in this letter to Halleck Seaman. First, Petersen opened the letter by thanking Seaman for some of his actions behind the scenes. Seaman had apparently conducted his own "personal Gallup poll" of Iowans, sending out feelers

⁷⁵ Serving as insight into Petersen's view of this alleged maneuvering by Day and Bertha Shambaugh, an untitled document in Petersen's handwriting outlines his opinion of the duties and responsibilities of the State Historical Society. In this document Petersen writes, "the State Historical Society of Iowa is a State institution . . . designed to be a vehicle for all the peoples of Iowa. **It is not a vehicle to glorify a single family** [author emphasis]."

(W. J. Petersen, Duties and Responsibilities of the State Historical Society of Iowa N.D.)

⁷⁶ Petersen's emphasis

⁷⁷ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

⁷⁸ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

about an “important matter.” While the “important matter” was only alluded to and the results were not specifically discussed, one can assume that the issue at hand is the Superintendent vacancy and the results were welcome to Petersen. Petersen then noted that he was “flattered that you [Seaman] should send out nine letters and get nine favorable replies.”⁷⁹ Again, while not specified, it can be assumed that Seaman had sent out letters to individuals and received a positive response regarding Petersen being nominated for Superintendent. This indicates that Petersen was at least aware of this campaign in support of him for the position.

Secondly, Petersen’s letter reveals that the issue of loyalty once again surfaced in the contest to succeed Shambaugh. Recall that Ethyl Martin made the comment to the staff that “loyalty to the Society meant loyalty to her”⁸⁰ in the first staff meeting following Dr. Shambaugh’s passing. In his letter to Seaman, Petersen discussed how the issue of loyalty had returned as the three power players in this issue, Bertha Shambaugh, Marvin Day and Ethyl Martin, in his perception, had been engaged in a campaign to undermine him by insinuating that he had not always been loyal to Dr. Shambaugh. Petersen naturally denied that he has been disloyal and “would be the first to welcome specific charges to that effect.”⁸¹ It is not known whether any specific examples of Petersen’s disloyalty to Shambaugh were ever revealed or if there was actually any truth to Petersen’s claims about Day, Shambaugh, and Martin.

While Petersen did appear to be acting a bit paranoid, Robert Burchfield’s paper on Ethyl Martin offered some evidence that Petersen’s claims may not have been entirely without merit. Dr. Shambaugh himself appeared not to see Petersen as a natural choice for Superintendent. In a letter to Burchfield, Dr. Jack Johnson wrote that Shambaugh thought of Petersen as “a

⁷⁹ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

⁸⁰ (W. J. Petersen, Minutes from April 10, 1940 Meeting of the State Historical Society Staff Members 1940)

⁸¹ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

competent, but narrow specialist” but continued “Shambaugh always had a preference for generalists.”⁸² Further evidence of Shambaugh’s possible indifference towards Petersen comes in his response to a letter he received from Fred Bill of St. Paul, Minnesota who praised Petersen, his *Palimpsest* article “Steamboats *Dubuque*,” and his apparent deep knowledge of river history. Shambaugh responded simply to Fred Bill with, “I am pleased to be told by you that Mr. Petersen is making himself an authority on steamboat history of the Upper Mississippi.”⁸³ This cool reply may be an indication of his opinion of Petersen, demonstrating that he may have seen Petersen as exceedingly ambitious with an over-developed sense of self-importance. It is not difficult to assume that both Bertha Shambaugh and Ethyl Martin knew of Dr. Shambaugh’s opinion of Petersen. If that is the case, it offers a basis and possible explanation for Petersen’s complaints about charges of disloyalty against him, possibly fabricated by Mrs. Shambaugh, Martin, and perhaps Marvin Day to prevent Petersen from succeeding Shambaugh as Superintendent in 1940.⁸⁴

In his letter to Seaman, Petersen began to build the argument that he was not the only staff member who was disgruntled with Ethyl Martin. Petersen specifically named Dr. Ruth Gallaher and Dr. Jacob Swisher as two staff members who, in addition to himself, felt their standing within the State Historical Society was vulnerable because of Martin. Petersen was under the opinion that either Gallaher would be fired or would resign rather than work under Martin and her “arbitrary and dictatorial attitude.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, Petersen believed that Dr.

⁸² Johnson also stated that the Society’s staff appeared to share Shambaugh’s assessment of Petersen’s abilities and concluded, “I doubt that any saw Petersen as a logical choice for Superintendent.” (Burchfield 1983, 45, footnote 174)

⁸³ (Shambaugh, BFS’s reply to Fred Bill’s letter of November 15, 1929 1929)

⁸⁴ Petersen’s theory of a succession plan among Mrs. Shambaugh, Mr. Day, and Ms. Martin becomes more interesting if one considers Dr. Shambaugh’s apathetic opinion of Petersen before he started at the Historical Society in 1929 (see the reply to Fred Bill) and the fact that Ethyl Martin’s promotion to Assistant Superintendent occurred in 1930, the same year Petersen started at the State Historical Society.

⁸⁵ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

Swisher would speak out more against Martin, but did not because he had “a large family to support and is naturally not anxious to lose his position.”⁸⁶ Petersen then made a statement that was in direct conflict with Dr. Johnson’s recollections of the situation. Petersen asserted that “with the possible exception of Miss Martin, Dr. Petersen would receive the loyal support and cooperation of the other staff members.”⁸⁷ This is contrary to Johnson’s recollection of the events of 1940 when he stated, “I do not believe [Petersen] had the active support of a single staff member.”⁸⁸

Unfortunately, unless additional documentation is uncovered, it is virtually impossible to verify who is actually correct here. Given Petersen’s propensity to stretch the truth when it was convenient, it is entirely possible that he either intentionally overstated the support he had among his colleagues or he perceived a level of support among his coworkers that did not actually exist. Dr. Johnson, who was simultaneously employed by the State Historical Society and the University of Iowa, worked at the Society on various book projects as a research assistant, fact checker, copy editor, and proof reader. In addition, Johnson had only been working at his primary job at the University of Iowa for only a year or so at the time of Shambaugh’s death, so it is possible his recollection of Petersen’s support among the Society’s staff may not be entirely accurate. In reality, it is reasonable to conclude that the actual truth lies between these two statements. While Petersen probably did not have universal support among the Society’s staff as he believed, he probably had at least tepid support among some of his colleagues for the top job.

In a final revealing statement in his letter to Seaman, Petersen compared his qualifications to Ethyl Martin’s for the job and provided evidence that he had a role in the 1940 effort to name him Superintendent. In the letter, Petersen wrote, “*Naturally, there can be no*

⁸⁶ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

⁸⁷ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

⁸⁸ (Burchfield 1983, 31)

common ground between Miss Martin and myself in regard to training, historical research and actual accomplishment in the field of history.”⁸⁹ How Petersen worded this sentence is instructive but first, let us look at the qualifications Petersen believed are important for the position.⁹⁰

1. That the Superintendent be a man, a trained historian, and Iowan steeped in Iowa history whose reputation as a historian is well-established not only in Iowa but...⁹¹
2. That the superintendency demands a full-time man, not one holding a full-time connection with the University of Iowa and drawing a salary from that institution.
3. That the Superintendent be a man capable of reviving the many local historical societies that have either died or languished. That he be a good speaker and that he make himself available to a reasonable...
4. That the Superintendent be progressive enough to adopt the better features of similar historical societies in the United States.

If Petersen agreed with the Curator who had earlier stated that Ethyl Martin’s appointment as Superintendent was “fatal to the future of the Society,” it is reasonable to assume that he might have been satisfied with any alternative to Martin who met the above criteria. This does not appear to be the case as Petersen directly compared his qualifications with Martin’s in his letter to Seaman. Petersen had encountered moderate fame and distinction early in his career because of the Mark Twain and Lake Itasca discoveries, and he appears to have referred to both of these discoveries in this letter to Seaman. As important as these discoveries are, they also seem to have contributed to Petersen’s development of an oversized ego and sense of self-importance. For instance, in 1940, Petersen appeared to be among the shortest tenured staff members at the State Historical Society out of those qualified to succeed Shambaugh. Ethyl Martin, who served as Dr. Shambaugh’s assistant for a number of years and wrote several articles for the Society’s publications early in her career, had worked at the Society for 25 years.

⁸⁹ (W. J. Petersen, Letter to Halleck W. Seaman 1947)

⁹⁰ (W. J. Petersen, Memo to Ralph Cram 1947)

⁹¹ Sentence was not finished by Petersen

In addition, Dr. Ruth Gallaher and Dr. Jacob Swisher had been with the State Historical Society since 1914 and 1922 respectively. Finally, Dr. John Briggs, also considered by the Board in addition to Martin to replace Shambaugh in 1940 but appointed as Editor instead, was a long time colleague of the late Superintendent and retired from the Society a few years later in 1945. In contrast, while Petersen had only been with the Society for a little more than ten years, he already believed that his accomplishments and experience made him as qualified for Superintendent, if not more so, than his other more-tenured colleagues.

It can be argued that Petersen's statement indicates that there are only two individuals seeking the Superintendency, Ethyl Martin and himself. Additionally, this seems to be in contrast with Petersen's prior claims that other staff members had also been receiving or gathering support from their friends for the job. While it could be argued that Petersen was not really saying anything, one way or the other, about competitors, neither Burchfield nor Schroder,⁹² nor has this author, found any evidence that would lead one to believe that other staff members were actively seeking to replace Benjamin Shambaugh. Is it reasonable to believe that Petersen, while stressing his own qualifications, mentioned the names of others wanting to replace Shambaugh? Maybe not, but Seaman was an obvious friend and supporter of Petersen's and would not have necessarily needed convincing that he was qualified for the job. If there had been other staff members actively pursuing this job that Petersen desired, information about potential competitors might be a detail worth noting. The absence of such information either indicates an absence of those competitors or an omission on Petersen's part.

In reality, it is possible that no other long-term staff member aside from Petersen wanted to be the one to replace Shambaugh, a man who by all accounts had been well-loved and

⁹² Both are authors of two comprehensive and thorough pieces of research about aspects of the State Historical Society of Iowa

respected by those who he worked with. Ethyl Martin, a woman who seemingly neither sought nor wanted the Superintendent's job, reluctantly accepted the duty of replacing Shambaugh, in part because of the assistant title bestowed up on her by Dr. Shambaugh. Petersen, although he respected Shambaugh, was ambitious and saw himself as a logical if not obvious choice to replace him. Unfortunately for him, this was not a sentiment shared by those charged with replacing Shambaugh, and Ethyl Martin was appointed as permanent Superintendent in June of 1940. When the Board of Curators voted on the permanent Superintendent, no one nominated Petersen for the position and the Board ultimately chose between Martin and long time Shambaugh colleague Dr. John E. Briggs.

Petersen's Rise to Superintendent

In the years between 1940 and 1947, Petersen never lost his desire to become Superintendent. Although not much is known about the state of Martin and Petersen's relationship during these years, one can assume they were wary of each other. By 1947, Petersen appears to have had enough and he began to actively work to have Martin removed as Superintendent. An in-depth account of the events of 1947 that led to Ethyl Martin's resignation and Petersen's appointment as Superintendent is contained in Robert Burchfield's "The Career of Ethyl Martin: Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa 1940-1947".

In his 1947 inaugural address, Governor Robert Blue proposed the idea of consolidating the Department of Archives with the State Historical Society of Iowa into a single organization. Because any changes to the Society required legislative action, Ethyl Martin quickly rallied support among Society members, Board members, and legislators to defeat the proposal and keep the Society a separate organization. While no proposal to combine the two organizations

was ever introduced, a few months later, Fred Schwengel, a state legislator from Davenport, later introduced H.F. 463, a bill which echoed some of Governor Blue's calls for change at the Society and would have significantly modified the structure of the Board of Curators, removed the Society's control of its research and publication programs and allow the new Board to appoint a Superintendent. Petersen, who had close ties to both Governor Blue and Fred Schwengel, was an active supporter of H.F. 463 and acted as an informant within the State Historical Society for Governor Blue, reporting on Martin's efforts to defeat the bill.⁹³ Despite their efforts, Martin was successful in defeating H.F. 463; however, Petersen suggested a different course of action to Governor Blue.

A short discussion of how the State Historical Society of Iowa's Board of Curators was structured is required in order to understand how Petersen's plan worked. In addition, this information about the Board's structure is vital to understanding how Petersen eventually used the structure of the Board of Curators to his advantage in order to be named Superintendent. The Board of Curators, the governing body of the Society, consisted of eighteen members. Nine members, known as "non-resident curators," were appointed by the governor, lived all throughout the state, and rarely, if ever, travelled to the monthly Board meetings in Iowa City. The remaining nine members were known as "resident curators" and were elected to two-year terms by the members of the Society. In order to be a resident curator, one was required to live "within the vicinity of the University [of Iowa]"⁹⁴ and as a result, those elected as resident curators attended the monthly Board meetings more frequently than non-resident curators and thus had a much stronger influence on the Society's day-to-day matters. Petersen's plan would have eliminated the Board's resident curators and allowed the governor to name all curators. In

⁹³ Burchfield's research indicates that Ethyl Martin was well aware of Petersen's actions. (Burchfield 1983, 45, footnote 179)

⁹⁴ Iowa Code of 1946:304.6 as quoted by (Burchfield 1983, 34)

addition, the Society's executive power would then be held by a newly formed Board of Trustees, a three-member Board appointed by and responsible to the governor. Unfortunately for Petersen, as with Governor Blue's and Fred Schwengel's proposals, his proposal required legislative action and, if prior inaction was any indication, Iowa's state legislature was firmly behind Martin.

It is clear that Petersen would have been the main beneficiary of any change in structure to the Society or the Board of Curators. Had the Legislature approved any of the proposed changes that year, Petersen, because of his relationship with Governor Blue, would have likely been in line to be named as Superintendent by any governor-appointed Board. Even if the State Historical Society and Department of Archives were consolidated, he would have been named head of whatever institution emerged. While no evidence has been found to indicate that Petersen had lobbied either Governor Blue or Fred Schwengel to act on his behalf, given their close relationship as well as Petersen's frustration with Ethyl Martin, it is not terribly difficult to imagine that Petersen had a principle role in the formulation of both proposals.

Burchfield noted that after failing to push the changes he wanted through the legislature, Petersen considered leaving the Society even asking Governor Blue for a letter of recommendation to aid in his search. Since Petersen's attempt to use his political connections to remove Martin by changing the structure of the State Historical Society failed, Petersen then focused on using the structures of the Society to his advantage. Recall that the Board of Curators consisted of resident and non-resident curators. Non-resident curators were appointed and rarely attended meetings while the Board's resident curators lived in and around Iowa City, elected by society members.

On June 23, 1947, the biennial meeting was held to elect the Board's resident curators and "Petersen took advantage of the fact that few of the Society's members attended the meetings to elect curators and packed the meeting with his allies."⁹⁵ The result of Petersen's efforts that night was that seven of the Board's nine resident curators were replaced with individuals loyal to him. A key part of his plan was a recent reinterpretation of the "within the vicinity of the University" requirement for a resident curator; five of the seven new curators came from communities beyond what would have previously been considered the "vicinity" of Iowa City.⁹⁶ On July 7, 1947, the newly elected Board held a special meeting at which they demanded Ethyl Martin's resignation as Superintendent. Although she had not attended the meeting, Martin, weary and despondent from the ordeal Petersen put her through,⁹⁷ agreed to the demand and formally submitted her resignation on July 18, 1947. At the July 30, 1947, Board of Curators meeting, Davenport Board member Charles Snyder nominated William J. Petersen for Superintendent and Editor, a motion the Board unanimously approved. Reflecting on the events that brought Petersen to power in 1947, Fred Schwengel later described Petersen's appointment as Superintendent as "a little revolution at the Historical Society."⁹⁸

The State Historical Society of Iowa under Dr. William J. Petersen

With Dr. Petersen having finally achieved his long-held goal of becoming Superintendent, how did the State Historical Society of Iowa change under his leadership? Overall, Petersen began to

⁹⁵ (Burchfield 1983, 34)

⁹⁶ Petersen advised Burchfield in an interview that the Attorney General, at his request, looked at the requirement and "decided that given developments in transportation, 'within the vicinity of the University' could include areas as far away as Davenport." Burchfield was unable to find any official Attorney General's Opinion to support Petersen's claim. (Burchfield 1983, 46, footnote 191)

⁹⁷ Shortly after the membership meeting which brought the Petersen controlled Board to power, Ethyl Martin was hospitalized for exhaustion, admitted to the psychiatric hospital at the University of Iowa. (Burchfield 1983, 35)

⁹⁸ (Burchfield 1983, 31)

mold the Superintendency as well as the State Historical Society in his image. He did this in large part by demoting the importance of the research and publication functions of the Society, instead concentrating his efforts on publicizing the Society. By focusing on publicity more than either Shambaugh or Martin had, Petersen hoped to increase the influence the Society had through an aggressive expansion of the Society's membership base. He did this in part through greatly incentivizing membership and providing even more extravagant benefits for members including free books--colorful, illustrated, entertaining publications--and plenty of opportunities to participate in a number of Society sponsored social events. These benefits, particularly the social events, helped to bring about the perception by some that the State Historical Society was nothing more than a social club. Alan Schroder characterized the State Historical Society during Petersen's years as Superintendent as the years the society operated as a "visual medium." Schroder noted that television's rise to prominence corresponded with the State Historical Society also taking more entertainment-focused approach to its programming during the same years.

Center for Dubuque History Archivist Michael Gibson called Petersen's vision for the State Historical Society "Chamber of Commerce History" because of the emphasis that is placed on attracting tourism dollars. Gibson points out that Petersen may have been on the leading edge of this approach; many institutions across the country, such libraries, museums, zoos, and aquariums, might have been criticized as being too conventional or old-fashioned are now taking this "Chamber" approach when planning construction or renovation projects. This "Chamber of Commerce History" approach to planning is evident in some of the most recent museum attractions to be constructed including Springfield, Illinois' Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (2006) and the Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium (2001/2010)

located in Dubuque, Petersen's hometown. One could argue that the downside to this approach is that it typically results in an abridged, easy-to-consume form of history where the emphasis is placed on a showy, eye-catching display or production rather than the information itself.

To clarify, it would be inaccurate to say that Dr. Shambaugh completely ignored public aspects of the State Historical Society of Iowa functions throughout his tenure. From 1909 to 1919, Shambaugh also experienced several attempts by the Iowa Legislature to combine the State Historical Society with another organization or eliminate the Society entirely. These attempts to eliminate or demote the Historical Society helped Shambaugh to realize the importance of public support if the Society was to survive persistent legislative criticism, and he set out to develop and expand the Society's public programs. In fact, Shambaugh himself began the process of transforming *The Palimpsest* into the Society's main vehicle for general Iowa history that was more accessible to Iowans. In other efforts to expand the State Historical Society's public outreach, the Society produced programs and events designed to promote Iowa history including the Iowa History Week series⁹⁹ and a weekly radio show on WSUI, the University of Iowa's radio station.

Shambaugh also began the practice of sending State Historical Society staff around the state to give talks and lectures on history to a variety of local groups. Petersen eventually took on the responsibility for most of these talks and he came to personify the Society for those who heard him speak. Overall, Benjamin Shambaugh saw the work of the State Historical Society fall into three divisions, only one of which was "the transmutation of state and local history into a literature for all the people -- as witness, *The Palimpsest*."¹⁰⁰ That said, even during this period

⁹⁹ Sponsored with the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, Iowa History Week was held every April from 1926-1938. Each week highlighted a topic in Iowa history and programs, essay contests and other activities were held across the state to celebrate that topic's contribution to Iowa history.

¹⁰⁰ (Schroder 1981, 80)

of expansion into public services and popularization of Iowa history, Shambaugh continued to emphasize the importance of printing carefully researched and well-written articles and stories whether they were for scholarly or popular purposes. For Shambaugh, the “concept of the Society as a provider of services to a general public”¹⁰¹ was always meant to be a *component* of the Society’s core function, and not the core function itself as it would become under Petersen.

One of the earliest but longest-lasting effects of Petersen’s appointment as Superintendent was his approach to staffing the State Historical Society. Within Petersen’s first year, Dr. Ruth Gallaher, a thirty-year member of the Society staff, resigned. According to Burchfield, Gallaher was opposed to Petersen’s appointment and was upset with his role in organizing the events that led to Ethyl Martin’s resignation, calling it a “seizure of local government by a foreign (Davenport) Governor-directed gang.”¹⁰² Gallaher had edited *The Palimpsest* while at the State Historical Society and her resignation in 1948 became the catalyst for another change when Petersen recombined the Superintendent and Editor positions into a single position as it had been structured under Benjamin Shambaugh.¹⁰³ As Superintendent/Editor, Petersen took on a much larger role in researching and writing for the Society’s publications than Shambaugh had. While *The Palimpsest* was Petersen’s only editing responsibility, the magazine’s monthly publishing cycle resulted in him spending a disproportionate amount of his time editing the publication. The fact that Petersen spent so much of his time editing *The Palimpsest* becomes even more astounding when years later *The Palimpsest* became identified as a publication with serious quality problems stemming from editorial decisions.

¹⁰¹ (Schroder 1981, 80)

¹⁰² (Burchfield 1983, 34)

¹⁰³ When Ethyl Martin was appointed in 1940, it was recognized that she did not have the necessary expertise needed for the duties of editor so the Board jointly appointed Martin as Superintendent and Dr. John Briggs as editor

Throughout his administration, Petersen constantly used staffing problems at the Society as a way to leverage increases in the Society's state appropriations. The Society's organizational structure had, at one point, allowed for approximately half a dozen full-time research positions. Unfortunately, as resignations and deaths started occurring among the Society's research staff, for one reason or another, vacancies in these positions were never filled. This trend, which began in the latter half of Shambaugh's administration, continued throughout Martin's tenure as Superintendent and resulted in the decline of the Society's research staff. By the time Petersen took over as Superintendent in 1947, the State Historical Society was down to one full-time research associate and this remained the case throughout most of Petersen's tenure.

Petersen often cited his lack of staff as a reason the legislature should increase the Society's biennial appropriation, arguing that it was impossible to hire competent, qualified researchers at the state salary schedule he had to follow. While it is possible Petersen found it difficult to fill research these positions at low salary levels, it should be noted that Petersen was still usually successful in securing some kind of increase in state funding for the Society. Over his twenty-five year tenure as Superintendent, Petersen was able to secure a total increase of approximately \$100,000 per year in state appropriations to the State Historical Society.¹⁰⁴ While several significant increases in the state's appropriation to the Society were tied to increased expenses from specific projects,¹⁰⁵ Petersen was still able to secure gradual but constant budget increases that averaged at least \$5,000 per year during each biennial appropriation.

Despite these regular budget increases and his constant refrain of "I need more money to hire more people," Petersen *never* hired any additional research associates during his tenure as

¹⁰⁴ Naturally, due to inflation, in terms of buying power, this does not represent an actual increase of \$100,000 to the State Historical Society.

¹⁰⁵ (building of the Centennial Building (1959-61, +\$24,000/year), expansion of the historical sites programs (1967-69, +\$21,000/year)

Superintendent. As mentioned earlier, there was only one research assistant position at the State Historical Society during Petersen's tenure and that position was held for a few years by Dr. Jacob Swisher. Between Swisher's retirement in 1950 and 1957 when Dr. Petersen's wife Bessie was tapped to fill the position, the single research assistant position was filled "by a succession of individuals who remained at the Society for fairly brief periods."¹⁰⁶ The hiring of Bessie Petersen in 1957 as the Society's only research assistant is curious in light of the stated qualifications for the position: Petersen said he was looking for an individual with a "Ph.D. in American History with a good deal of work on the West and Regional History."¹⁰⁷ Center for Dubuque History Archivist Michael Gibson, who came to work at the State Historical Society for Petersen's successor Peter Harstad, suspects that Petersen was actually concerned about being ousted as Superintendent in the same way he overthrew Ethyl Martin. Gibson's theory is supported by the fact that during his tenure, Petersen hired few historians for any position and when the Society was in dire need to help, Petersen appointed his wife to a position meant for a professional historian rather than hire someone who could potentially be an adversary.

Membership

Because membership growth is such an important aspect of Petersen's tenure as Superintendent, a discussion of the trends in the State Historical Society's membership numbers is appropriate because it gives perspective to what Petersen was able to accomplish. For most of its history, paid membership in the State Historical Society played a fairly insignificant role. The revenue from membership dues was negligible because membership numbers were low and

¹⁰⁶ (Burchfield 1983, 144)

¹⁰⁷ (Burchfield 1983, 144)

nearly all of the Society's revenue came from biennial appropriations from the State.¹⁰⁸ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Society membership, which measured approximately sixty in 1903, prompted the Board of Curators to sweeten benefits for a paid Society membership by offering free copies of all Society publications to members.

A membership option that would later play a role throughout Petersen's tenure as Superintendent was introduction of life memberships in the State Historical Society. With a life membership, an individual could pay a significantly higher amount (approximately seventeen times the amount paid for annual dues) and they would receive the benefits of a Society membership for the rest of their life. A few years later, the Board began allowing the amount paid for an annual membership to be applied towards the amount for a life membership, allowing members to work towards a life membership. Unfortunately, this policy created an ever-growing contingent of members who continued to receive Society publications at a time when annual membership revenue failed to cover the entirety of the Society's publication and shipping expenses.

The new publication policies developed in the early twentieth century were successful in driving up membership, which increased from the aforementioned sixty in 1903 to 1,405 in 1926.¹⁰⁹ Membership then declined throughout the early to mid 1930s, possibly dipping below 1,000 for several years, but membership campaigns in the late 1930s increased membership numbers to over 1,500 by the time of Shambaugh's death in 1940.¹¹⁰ Throughout Ethyl Martin's tenure as Superintendent, the growth in the Society's membership numbers stagnated and again

¹⁰⁸ State funds to the Society were determined by the Iowa Legislature on a biennial basis but issued to the Society annually.

¹⁰⁹ (Schroder 1981, 64)

¹¹⁰ Schroder notes that the State Historical Society was no longer required to submit biennial reports to the governor starting in 1932. Membership figures after 1932 in his report are estimates using the Society's revenue numbers. (Schroder 1981, 85)

started to decline, with World War II a driving force behind this decrease. First, as discussed earlier, World War II adversely affected the Society's book publication programs due to a lack of both materials and research labor. What this meant is that a major membership benefit, free books, disappeared because the Society was no longer able to publish them, and membership figures began to erode accordingly. Second, the State Historical Society stopped holding membership campaigns during the war years so there were no new members joining the Society to help offset membership loss from other reasons. By the time Petersen became Superintendent in 1947, the State Historical Society's membership had shrunk from the aforementioned 1,500 in 1940 to 1,121.¹¹¹

Recall that throughout the 1930s, Petersen took upon himself most of the Historical Society's public speaking responsibilities, traveling throughout the State speaking to various groups about history and Iowa. According to Alan Schroder, these speaking engagements helped convince Petersen of the importance of expanding the society's publicity programs. When he became Superintendent, Petersen placed much of his energies into promoting and publicizing the Society and he paid particular attention to increasing the number of paid memberships. After he became Superintendent, Petersen set the goal of growing Society membership so that there was one member of the State Historical Society for every thousand people in Iowa, which would have been about 3,100 members in 1947.¹¹²

Schroder's self-study of the State Historical Society of Iowa contains a thorough discussion of the means and methods Petersen used to grow membership. The results from Petersen's efforts to increase Society membership over his twenty-five year career as Superintendent did yield impressive results. Throughout his tenure, membership in the Society

¹¹¹ (W. J. Petersen, Monthly Election of New Members - State Historical Society of Iowa 1971)

¹¹² (Schroder 1981, 134)

grew from 1,121 members when he became Superintendent in 1947, to over 10,000 members in the early 1970s.¹¹³ This made the State Historical Society of Iowa, by some accounts, the second largest state historical society in the country at the time."¹¹⁴

While the Society remained largely dependent on state appropriations throughout Petersen's administration, this impressive growth in membership meant that the income the Society received from paid annual memberships was no longer an inconsequential amount. In order to see at how important revenue from membership dues became to the State Historical Society's operations, let us look at membership revenue as a percentage of the amount appropriated by the state, the Society's primary source of funding. In 1967-68, the last fiscal year dues were set at \$3 per year, revenue earned from membership dues was just over \$27,000 and represented approximately 20% to 25% of that year's appropriation from the state. When the dues increased the following year to \$5 annually, over the next five years the Society averaged approximately \$51,000 per year from membership dues which then represented between 35% and 38% of the state appropriation. In short, while the Society was not self-sustaining, revenue from membership dues was becoming a larger and larger part of the Society's budget. The income from annual memberships was combined with income from the Society's publication sales into a "Publications and Membership Fund."¹¹⁵ This fund was then used to support the Society's book publication program, helping to offset the costs of publishing and distributing books.

¹¹³ (W. J. Petersen, Monthly Election of New Members - State Historical Society of Iowa 1971)

¹¹⁴ (Fryxell 1983)

¹¹⁵ (Schroder 1981, 133)

Petersen's legacy at the State Historical Society of Iowa

As discussed, Petersen aggressively increased membership in the State Historical Society, rarely leaving the building “without a packet of membership applications in his pocket.”¹¹⁶ As a part of his efforts to grow Society memberships, Petersen also increased interest in Iowa history among Iowa through an ambitious expansion of the Society's public programs. Petersen continued the Society's public speaking program, established under Shambaugh, and frequently used these public speaking engagements as a membership recruitment tool. While he was always happy to tell his stories to any group that would have him speak, Petersen often requested that the sponsoring organization provide him new memberships in the State Historical Society in return for his services.¹¹⁷

In addition to the public speaking programs, Petersen began a series of historical tours of various locations around the state. The first tour was a riverboat tour on the Mississippi River in 1948 where guests were treated to a leisurely trip on the river complete with lunch and a running historic narrative provided Petersen. The success of this tour led Petersen to organize a similar tour on the Missouri River as well as tours of historic sites throughout Iowa such as the Amana Colonies. These tours proved to be very popular among members of the State Historical Society and their experiences on these tours remain “one of the few direct contacts with the Society that many of its members recall.”¹¹⁸

Petersen was instrumental in expanding the Society's field services into establishing and maintaining historical sites and historical markers. The one of the first historical sites acquired by the State Historical Society during Petersen's tenure was the Gardner Log Cabin in Spirit Lake, Iowa, the site of the 1857 Spirit Lake Massacre, a massacre of European settlers by a rouge

¹¹⁶ (Schroder 1981, 136)

¹¹⁷ Groups were typically asked to provide ten to fifteen new memberships for Petersen.

¹¹⁸ (Schroder 1981, 137)

Indian and his followers. Under the State Historical Society management, the Gardner Cabin was restored to reflect its appearance on the morning of the massacre and a small museum was constructed nearby. Another one of Petersen's field projects was his attempt to establish a series of informative historical markers around the state to commemorate notable events in Iowa's history. Not only was the Society responsible for developing the text for these markers, but they would have also been responsible for the maintenance of the markers. While Petersen was able to get a few markers erected, the ambitious project proved to be too much for an organization already stretched too thin.

Petersen's emphasis on increasing the Society's membership and influence allowed the Society to move forward with the construction of its present home in Iowa City, the Centennial Building. Before the Centennial Building was constructed, the State Historical Society was housed in the Hall of Liberal Arts (later renamed Schaeffer Hall) on the campus of the University of Iowa. The Board of Curators recognized as early as 1903, a mere two years after the Society moved into Schaeffer Hall, that the current space arrangements would be insignificant for future growth. Even though the Society's space problems were identified early, a permanent solution to the problem eluded both Superintendent Shambaugh and Superintendent Martin and the Society spent nearly sixty years in Schaeffer Hall. Petersen began to explore solutions to the space problem in the mid-1950s eventually deciding that the best option would be to construct a new building. Planning and fundraising took several years and construction of the building began in mid-1958. The Society began moving into the building in late 1959 with the building's dedication being held in August 1960. Petersen's role in getting the Centennial Building constructed is significant as the building was financed with a combination of public and private dollars. As Alan Schroder writes, the task of raising the \$100,000 the Society was responsible for

was “essentially a personal public relations effort on the part of the Superintendent.” It is possible that the building might not have been built when at this time had another individual been appointed Superintendent. In addition, it should be noted that neither Shambaugh nor Martin were able to solve the Society’s space problem even though the problem had been known about for decades. Perhaps Petersen’s natural gift for public relations combined with his ambition and determination allowed him to succeed where another other had failed.

The 1970 management controversy at the State Historical Society of Iowa

By 1970, William Petersen was sixty-nine years old and his tenure as Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa had spanned nearly a quarter century. A few years past retirement age, it is not know how seriously he was contemplating retirement at this time. Unfortunately, a speech given by an academic historian in late 1970 would put events in motion events that would ultimately culminate in significant changes in the daily operations of State Historical Society, changes in the structure of Board of Curators, and Petersen’s “retirement” as Superintendent. Taking into account the controversial coup Petersen organized against Ethyl Martin to be appointed Superintendent in 1947, it seems in some ways aptly appropriate that controversy would again appear and play a part in ending Petersen’s tenure as Superintendent. It would seem that what goes around eventually comes around.

In late 1970, a scathing attack was launched at the State Historical Society of Iowa and Dr. Petersen by Dr. Walter Rundell, Jr., chair of the History Department at Iowa State University. In an address given to the Burlington Rotary Club in November 1970, Rundell charged that Petersen had turned the State Historical Society into a “private club” which had

“neglected the serious study of history”¹¹⁹ and was a “source of embarrassment to professional historians.”¹²⁰ Rundell criticized the State Historical Society’s publication programs lamenting the fact that the history journal for academic articles, *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* had been allowed to fade from existence and that the quality of the society’s only publication, *The Palimpsest*, had declined so much that it was now considered “the laughing stock of the historical profession.”¹²¹ Rundell viewed the illustration-filled *Palimpsest* as nothing but entertainment that was both “poor quality and represent[ed] the scholarly bankruptcy of the society.”¹²² In addition to the high priority the Society gave to illustrations, the central problem Rundell had with the *Palimpsest* was the fact that it contained a disturbingly large percentage of “reprints from years-ago issues and material written by Petersen.”¹²³ Because of these perceived shortcomings in the Society and its publication programs, Rundell called for Petersen to retire or resign and for his position to be replaced by “an advisory Board to oversee the Historical Society and the State Archives.”¹²⁴ Rundell’s criticisms of the society went beyond the arguably petty comments he made that night. Rundell’s comments became the catalyst for subsequent criticism, and charges were broad, deep, and an indictment of not only the State Historical Society, but of Petersen’s leadership of the institution. In addition, the criticism was not merely limited to State Historical Society but spread to the organization’s governing body, the Board of Curators, casting them as Petersen’s personal “rubber stamp” who granted his every request without question. Rundell claimed that under Petersen’s leadership, the Society had abandoned their once high standards and the organization was now held in low regard among historians.

¹¹⁹ (Rakes Iowa History Unit and Director 1970)

¹²⁰ (Blows Whistle on 'Steamboat Bill' 1970)

¹²¹ (Clark, Charges Against Iowa Historical Society Inaccurate -- Dr. Petersen 1970)

¹²² (Maffitt, Historical society superintendent hit 1970)

¹²³ (Maffitt, Historical society superintendent hit 1970)

¹²⁴ (Rakes Iowa History Unit and Director 1970)

While some of Rundell's initial grievances such as the organization's lack of photocopying facilities for visiting researchers, limited hours of operation (no evening or weekend hours) and policies governing access to manuscripts and other materials, were reported as issues with the State Historical Society, some of the policies in question were actually complaints about the State Department of History and Archives in Des Moines. They were mistakenly attributed to the State Historical Society by the reporter who had covered Rundell's speech. That said, not all of Rundell's criticisms about the State Historical Society under Petersen were entirely without merit. In particular, Rundell's complaint about the Society's policies regarding who could access materials found at the Society. Some of these policies, Rundell claimed, either hindered or altogether prevented the use of the Society's materials by legitimate researchers. According to Rundell, the State Historical Society had "effectively eliminated out-of-towners from serious research and very systematically discouraged any close relationship with the graduate students and staff of the University of Iowa or other state schools."¹²⁵ In addition, Rundell noted that the Society "had no scholarly reciprocity with historians outside the state"¹²⁶ which essentially prevented historians from other states from acquiring copies of important historical documents or accessing the Society's microfilm collections.

In response, Petersen called most of Rundell's charges inaccurate, stating that "the society was not set up 'to gratify historical scholars' but 'to disseminate knowledge of Iowa to the people.'"¹²⁷ In defending the charges, Petersen often pointed to growing membership figures (from 1,100 to over 10,000 in 23 years) as evidence of how successful his tenure as Superintendent has been. While Petersen acknowledged that the Society had some shortcomings,

¹²⁵ (Blows Whistle on 'Steamboat Bill' 1970)

¹²⁶ (Rakes Iowa History Unit and Director 1970)

¹²⁷ (Maffitt, Historical society investigation slated 1970)

he asserted that these problems were due to inadequate funding by the state, not his leadership. Petersen stated that the charges regarding a lack of reciprocity and relationships with schools were also inaccurate, noting that State Historical Society had more than 500 schools with memberships with the society¹²⁸ and that the Society “engages in reciprocity to the extent that its limited staff permits.”¹²⁹ Petersen admitted that a substantial number of articles printed in *The Palimpsest* over the years had been authored by him, but he denied the accusation that the magazine printed only reprints. He pointed out that a number of significant historians had contributed articles to the publication and that Rundell’s attacks were rooted in the fact that “he and other such professors would like to get control of it and use it as an outlet for their historical theses.”¹³⁰

Rundell’s criticisms of the State Historical Society of Iowa set in motion a number of controversies. First, the role and the purpose of State Historical Society were thrown into question. To whom was the Society ultimately responsible? To its dues-paying members who partially funded the operation and therefore the society’s expenditures and research requests from members were the highest priority? To non-member, professional and amateur historians whose main concern was with the study and preservation of Iowa history? Or to the State of Iowa and its citizens who provided through taxpayer dollars a significant portion of the funds the organization needed to provide these services? The answers to these questions were not clear and varied greatly depending upon one’s perspective. At the time, an editorial from the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* went to an obvious source for an answer, the Iowa Code from 1966, and quoted the following passage:

¹²⁸ (Blows Whistle on 'Steamboat Bill' 1970)

¹²⁹ (Maffitt, Historical society investigation slated 1970)

¹³⁰ (Blows Whistle on 'Steamboat Bill' 1970)

The state historical society shall be maintained in connection with and under the auspices of the State University of Iowa, for carrying out the work of collecting and preserving materials relating to the history of Iowa and illustrative of the progress and development of the state; for maintain a library and collections, and conducting historical studies and researches; for issuing publications, and for providing public lectures of historical character, and otherwise disseminating a knowledge of the history of Iowa among the people of the state.¹³¹ (Section. 304.1, 1966 Iowa Code)

Under this definition, one could argue that Petersen had been running State Historical Society as it should have been run. Under Petersen's leadership, the Society focused on making Iowa history accessible for anyone. In fact, Petersen himself quoted the latter part of that section in his initial responses to Rundell's criticisms. What was less clear was whether the role for the Society as defined by that Iowa law actually satisfied a need in the state at the time. Was the State Historical Society, as some critics claimed, showering expensive, frivolous benefits on its members while neglecting activities that concerned non-members?¹³² If that was the case, maybe Rundell's assessment was correct; the Society needed to be redefined and in turn, Iowa's law needed to be changed. While the State Historical Society's role and purpose remained vague, it is clear that Rundell's comments opened a Pandora's box of issues for Petersen and the Society. Problems would play themselves out over the next several years.

Predictably, some of the members on the State Historical Society's Board of Curators took offense to being called a "rubber stamp." Shortly after Rundell criticized the Society, the Board voted to investigate his charges as well as extend an invitation to him so he could present his case in person. While both Rundell and the Board agreed to a tentative meeting, the two parties ultimately never met because of scheduling conflicts on Rundell's part. Regardless, Rundell's comments also had the effect of opening a rift between Petersen and certain members on the Board. Whether this division emerged with Rundell's comments or had been simmering under the surface in the months or years before, the wound was now out in the open and fairly

¹³¹ (Historical Society Fuss 1970)

¹³² (Degroot 1971)

raw. What followed was a year of allegations, heated discussions, insults, name-calling and colorful rhetoric. For example, Board members compared one another to birds and felines, and one member jokingly challenged another to “pistols at dawn.”¹³³

Of those who had called for an investigation when the controversy broke, the most vocal Board member among them was Dr. Lawrence E. Gelfand, a history professor at the University of Iowa. Initially willing to give Petersen the benefit of the doubt, Gelfand would eventually become the Board member who spoke out the most against him. By mid-1971, Rundell had left Iowa State University for the University of Maryland, and Gelfand stepped into Rundell’s role of chief critic. In fact, many of Gelfand’s subsequent criticisms were variations of, if not exact copies of, Rundell’s criticisms. For example, Gelfand picked up and ran with Rundell’s *Palimpsest* attack line, citing the high percentage of reprints within the magazine and calling the practice “an intellectual felony” and the magazine itself the “personal organ of its editor.”¹³⁴ Gelfand also began to attack Petersen personally, accusing him of squandering taxpayer dollars received from the state, calling him unethical, and eventually demanding his resignation or retirement as Superintendent.

Early in the summer of 1971, two reports were released that were not beneficial for either Petersen or State Historical Society given the press they had been receiving in preceding months. The first was an independent report issued by Dr. Rundell. It reinforced Rundell’s original criticisms and contained letters, anecdotes, and testimonies of professional and amateur researchers from around the state who had problems conducting research at the Society. In

¹³³ (Eckholt, Historical Board Hears Challenge to Pistol Duel 1970)

¹³⁴ (Study of Historical Unit Board's Activities Urged 1971)

addition, Rundell's report contained a list of suggestions of what he believed should be done in order "to improve the programs and services of the society."¹³⁵

The second of these reports was the State Auditor's annual audit of the State Historical Society's operations for the 1970 fiscal year, which contained criticisms of protocols and procedures practiced by the Society. The more significant problems in the report were in regards to how the Society handled cash. For example, State Auditor Lloyd Smith was concerned with the Society's practice of placing revenue generated from books published with state funds into a Society-owned private bank account instead of into the State Treasury. The other significant concern dealt with the legality of a trust fund set up by the State Historical Society using monies received from estate gifts left to the organization. As with the publication revenue, Auditor Smith felt that monies from these gifts should have been deposited into the State Treasury as the law specifies. In addition, the salaries of eight Society employees were found to be higher than allowed by the Iowa Merit System for public employees. Smaller transgressions Smith found ranged from issues with copy machine revenue to outdated physical inventory logs and incomplete Board meeting minutes.¹³⁶

Being in charge of the State Historical Society's day-to-day operations, Petersen was able to correct many of the small offenses that Smith noted without much trouble. However, there were still serious disagreements on how to move forward on the larger issues Smith had highlighted. It took a joint meeting among Petersen, the Board of Curators, and State Auditor Smith to work out a satisfactory resolution regarding the book revenue and trust fund issues. Once Petersen and the Board resolved many of the issues highlighted in both the Rundell and State Auditor reports, the Society seemed set to return to a state of normalcy. However, later in

¹³⁵ (Report Criticizes Historical Unit 1971)

¹³⁶ (Eckholt, Audit Criticizes Historical Society's Use of Tax Funds 1971)

that year, another controversy involving Petersen would emerge, signaling the beginning of the end of Petersen's era at the State Historical Society of Iowa.

In January 1972, the Board of Curators met with Joyce Giaquinta, the office manager of the State Historical Society. Petersen had suffered a heart attack in the latter half of 1971, and Mrs. Giaquinta had been appointed as office manager to run the Society in his absence. Once Petersen returned, the Board decided to keep all day-to-day office management of the Society under Mrs. Giaquinta's control. Giaquinta and the Board met to discuss the Society's shrinking memberships roll and an audit of membership rolls that she completed at the request of the State Auditor. In her report, Giaquinta informed the Board that "her figures showed a present membership of about 10,000, as contrasted with earlier reports of approximately 12,000."¹³⁷ This information was significant in light of a printing request by Petersen. Petersen had requested that 16,000 copies each of various State Historical Society publications and materials be produced for free distribution to members. The Board approved the request but reduced the number of approved copies to 12,000 until "further evidence to the contrary (concerning membership) is forthcoming from Dr. Petersen."¹³⁸ Responding shortly afterwards, Petersen denied he had inflated the Society's membership lists in order to make the organization appear more popular or in better shape than it may have been.

Also during the January 1972 meeting, the Board asked Giaquinta about her working relationship with Petersen. In reply, Giaquinta stated "I would say there is a great deal of friction, if by that you mean having your superior going around behind your back, telling people that you are incompetent."¹³⁹ Petersen was not at the meeting between Giaquinta and the Board but

¹³⁷ (Clark, *New Conflict Surfaces at Historical Society* 1972)

¹³⁸ (Clark, *New Conflict Surfaces at Historical Society* 1972)

¹³⁹ (Clark, *New Conflict Surfaces at Historical Society* 1972)

denied the charges, stating, “I have never said anything against her to the staff.”¹⁴⁰ Most of the conflict between Petersen and Giaquinta arose from changes in the daily operations of the Society that had occurred during Giaquinta’s tenure. Petersen was not happy about a number of these changes including Giaquinta’s increased control over the membership rolls. The tension between them would again surface in subsequent Board meetings, when Giaquinta would ask the Board for a clearer definition of her duties as office manager.

Friction between Petersen and the Board of Curators again emerged a few months later regarding a reprint request from Dorothy Schwieder, a history instructor at Iowa State University. Schwieder, who was working on a history anthology for publication, submitted a request to the Board for permission to reprint five articles from the *Iowa Journal of History*, one of the Society’s defunct publications. The Board reviewed the request at their March 1972 meeting and Petersen submitted his opinion of the request to the Board in writing. In his letter, Petersen asked the Board to deny Schwieder’s request; he saw Schwieder’s request as asking “for reprint rights in any possible translations of the anthology and in possible subsequent editions,”¹⁴¹ in effect asking the State Historical Society to give up their copyright to the Iowa State University Press. Petersen then went after Schwieder personally, stating that the ISU instructor “has no standing as a professional historian...her selections are horrible and she doesn’t know what she’s doing.”¹⁴² Petersen also went on to connect Schwieder to Walter Rundell, the former ISU professor whose comments had set off the controversy surrounding Petersen and the State Historical Society in 1970.

Board member and Petersen critic Lawrence Gelfand came to Schwieder’s defense, saying that Schwieder’s request was a standard one that had been conducted through the proper

¹⁴⁰ (Clark, New Conflict Surfaces at Historical Society 1972)

¹⁴¹ (Depew, Mud Slinging Hampers State Curators Meeting 1972)

¹⁴² (Eckholt, Delay Debate on Report to History Unit 1972)

channels. Gelfand went on to call Petersen's remarks "vindictive, irrelevant and a demonstration showing how out of touch with reality his mind has reached"¹⁴³ and "alleged that Ms. Schwieder had [also] been denied access to the society's library,"¹⁴⁴ a charge which echoed Walter Rundell's original criticisms. The Board ultimately approved Schwieder's request, but in order to appease Petersen, the approval was limited to a single edition of the anthology.

By April 1972, the string of controversies started by Rundell's comments and extended by Petersen's criticisms of Dorothy Schwieder had lasted nearly a year and a half. The Board was scheduled to meet in early April 1972 and at the top of the meeting's agenda was the consideration and adoption of a list of recommended reforms from the Board's own internal investigation of Rundell's accusations. Among these recommendations was the creation of a number of standing committees which would "enable the society's curators to divide the society's program efficiently into logical units which in turn [would] allow the full Board to make policy intelligently when governing the society."¹⁴⁵ While the Board did approve the creation of these committees, the news out of this particular meeting was that Petersen, after resisting calls from Rundell and Gelfand to resign throughout 1971, submitted his resignation as Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

When explaining his decision, Petersen informed the Board that "he want[ed] time to write a book on steamboating on American Rivers."¹⁴⁶ Petersen went out of his way to say that the criticisms that had emerged over the past year regarding him and how he ran the Society were not a factor in his retirement decision. Whatever the reason, it seems clear that Petersen wanted to distance himself from the State Historical Society as quickly as possible, as he initially

¹⁴³ (Eckholt, Delay Debate on Report to History Unit 1972)

¹⁴⁴ (Depew, Mud Slinging Hampers State Curators Meeting 1972)

¹⁴⁵ (Eckholt, Will 'Wait' on State History Unit 1972)

¹⁴⁶ (Petersen to Leave Historical Society Superintendency 1972)

requested that his resignation be effective July 1, 1972. However, in order to ease the transition, the Board requested and Petersen agreed to stay on until January 30, 1973.

It is probably true, as Petersen maintained, that the criticisms aimed at him throughout 1971 were not *the* deciding factors in his retirement. After running State Historical Society for nearly a quarter century, Petersen knew how things worked best for him and he was not going to change just because someone did not agree with him. However, the reforms that emerged as a result of the controversies would fundamentally change how the State Historical Society would operate, so Petersen would not be able to run the organization as he had the previous 23 years. At the time of his resignation, the Board of Curators was about to approve a massive reorganization of Society's power structure and much the decision-making power would now reside with the newly-formed standing committees, not with the Superintendent. If one reads between the lines, especially in regards to the timing of his resignation, Petersen saw what was coming and felt his best option was to get out. If the Board had not approved the changes, Petersen would have likely stayed in the position for several more years.

After retiring from the University of Iowa in 1971 and the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1973, Petersen continued to write, lecture and travel the Mississippi. In 1974, a year or so after he retired from the Society, Petersen became a licensed riverboat pilot, earning his license at the urging of a Coast Guard official who was impressed by his knowledge of the river. In 1979, Petersen wrote his last book, *Towboating on the Mississippi* (A.S. Barnes and Co. Inc., 1979), which was a look at commercial barge transportation on the Mississippi River and based on the large collection of logbooks and other notes kept during his many journeys on the Mississippi during his career. In July 1988, Petersen was honored by the State Historical Society of Iowa as the first recipient of the Society's Petersen-Harlan Award, named after him and

longtime Iowa Historical Department curator, Edgar R. Harlan.¹⁴⁷ On February 2, 1989, Petersen passed away at the age of 88.

Throughout his career, William “Steamboat Bill” Petersen made significant contributions to the study of Mississippi River history as well as to the study of Iowa history. With his discoveries of the Mark Twain riverboat pilot’s license and the origins of the word “Itasca,” Petersen solved a pair of mysteries that had eluded historians for decades. Petersen’s book, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, has become a must-read title for researchers to consult when researching Mississippi River or steamboat history. Outside of his academic interests, Petersen’s tenure at the State Historical Society of Iowa was instrumental in increasing popular awareness and interest in Iowa history throughout the state. Although his tenure as Superintendent of the State Historical Society both began and ended in controversy, Petersen was still very successful in growing this state institution from a small group of citizens into one of the largest historical societies in the country at the time he retired. As one of Iowa’s premier historians, Petersen’s talent for uncovering historical treasures and promoting history among the people has proven to be an asset to the history and the people of state of Iowa.

¹⁴⁷ (Samuels 1992)

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