David Rohrer Leeper
By H. S. K. Bartholomew

In that admirable little volume, *The Hoosiers*, Meredith Nicholson says: "Local History has not, unfortunately, attracted the literary fledgeling in Indiana so often as could have been desired, though the field is inviting and thorough work of this kind is far likelier to enjoy permanency than fair or indifferent fiction or mediocre verse." No county of Indiana has been more fortunate in its local historians than St. Joseph which has had several men of more than ordinary ability who devoted themselves to that branch of literature. Foremost among them was the Hon. David Rohrer Leeper, one of the most conspicuous figures in the city of South Bend for many years and who is still remembered by all of its older citizens.

David R. Leeper was born on January 12, 1832, in a log cabin some distance northwest of what was then the little village of South Bend. The place has been located a few rods north of the point where the Michigan road crosses McCartney Creek. That part of the Michigan road is now Michigan avenue and the city extends miles beyond the birthplace of Mr. Leeper, which is not a great distance from the business district. The cabin in which he was born was built of round logs, had a puncheon floor, stick chimney and greased paper windows. It had been hastily built by his father, Samuel Leeper, upon arriving in Indiana from Montgomery county, Ohio. In the year 1834, the family moved to a heavily wooded tract three miles southwest of the village, but now almost within the city limits. Then began the arduous work of clearing up a farm in which labor, as soon as he was old enough, the boy David had his share. The first schoolhouse in that section of the country was built on this farm and David Leeper attended that school during the short winter terms, working on the farm or in the woods the remainder of the year. When he had mastered the branches of learning taught in that school, he attended the county seminary several terms. Alternate school attendance and farming continued until he was seventeen years old. While he was attending the seminary, news came that gold had been discovered in California. In a very short time nearly everybody had the gold fever,
Bartholomew: David Rohrer Leeper

young Leeper being among those infected. His father finally consented to let him go to the new land of promise, and, along with several young men of the neighborhood, he started on February 22, 1849. The company had two ox teams with enough money and other necessaries to see them through the long, tedious and perilous journey.

The difficulties which the seventeen year old boy and his companions encountered were enough to discourage any but the stoutest hearts. The roads were wholly unimproved, those in the timbered regions merely cut through. There were few bridges over the streams. To add to their troubles there had been a February thaw causing the streams to be swollen and all the prairie roads to be deep with mud and slush. At LaSalle, Illinois, they were delayed a week by high waters. Half the town of Peru a few miles farther on was submerged by floods of the Illinois River. At Burlington, Iowa, the Mississippi River was so far out of its banks that the distance across was seven miles and they had to make the crossing on a rickety horse-ferry boat. From Burlington they traveled through sparsely settled territory to St. Joseph, Missouri. With the exception of small groups of huts at Fort Kearney and Fort Laramie, they did not see the home of a white man until they reached the Sacramento valley, a distance of two thousand miles by the route traversed. They reached their destination on October 11, seven months and nineteen days after they started from South Bend. Years afterwards Mr. Leeper described his travels and adventures in California in a fascinating book, *The Argonauta of '69*, which unfortunately is out of print.

The party stopped at Redding's Diggings, but they did not like the place and moved on. The rainy season had set in and by some means Mr. Leeper got separated from his companions on the way to Sacramento City and never saw them again. He went on alone, reaching the city after traveling thirty-six hours on foot without food or money. His first work there was the making of several coffins from rough boards for miners who had died and had been laid out in their red shirts and blue overalls on boards in the rear of the hotel. From Sacramento he wandered to Coloma where Marshall had made the discovery of gold. He mined until the following fall when he went to Humboldt where the lumbering industry
was just beginning to be developed. There he engaged in the logging business which he continued until 1854, when he started for home, coming by way of the Nicaragua route. At Greytown he sailed for New York on the steamer Star of the West, the vessel that seven years later was sent to relieve the garrison at Fort Sumter and was fired upon by Confederate troops.

After his return he finished his schooling at the Mishawaka Institute, but not his studying, for he was a student all his life. His reading covered a wide range and included history, science, political economy and questions relating to government. For years he was recognized as one of the most scholarly men in the circle with which he was associated. He taught several terms in the rural schools of his neighborhood and as a teacher displayed the energy and thoroughness which characterized him throughout his life.

In 1864 he went to Montana, where he remained four years. In 1866 he was nominated for a seat in the territorial legislature and, although he was not elected, he received the highest number of votes of any candidate on the ticket of his party. As his ancestors were Whigs, he early identified himself with that party. When the Republican party arose he became a member, and it was as a Republican that he made the race for representative in Montana. However, through an extensive study of history and governmental problems, he found himself out of harmony with the Republican party by 1872. Along with men like Lyman Trumbull, Gov. Andrew G. Curtin, George W. Julian and many other former Republican leaders, he became a Liberal Republican and then a Democrat. In 1872 a coalition of Democrats and Liberal Republicans nominated him for representative from St. Joseph county, but he declined. In 1876 he received the democratic nomination for the same office and accepted. He was elected and served acceptably in the legislative session of 1877. In the same legislature was a young member from Vermillion county who was destined in later years to have a conspicuous part in the state's activities. This was Claude Matthews, afterward Secretary of State and Governor of Indiana. Having much in common in the way of scholarship, literary tastes and political convictions, Leeper and Matthews became closely
associated and the friendship then formed continued until death laid its icy hands upon Gov. Matthews.

In 1878 Leeper was elected to the state senate from St. Joseph and Starke counties. He served the four year term and at each session was assigned to several of the most important committees. In 1882 he declined the Democratic nomination for congress in the old thirteenth district. While he was ready at all times to uphold the principles of his party, he had no taste for office holding. However, he did finally consent in 1882 to become a candidate for auditor of St. Joseph county, a position which he was admirably qualified to fill. He was defeated along with all the other Democratic candidates in the county, although he made a splendid race. His successful opponent in that campaign was Aaron Jones, a prominent member of the Grange and one of the most astute politicians of his day and generation. In 1892 Leeper received the unanimous nomination of his party for mayor of South Bend. The nomination came to him entirely unsolicited and was reluctantly accepted. The Democrats were anything but hopeful of winning in the city election that year but believed that if anybody could be elected it was Leeper. He was elected but most of the other candidates on the ticket were defeated. At the end of his term, he declined a renomination. In January, 1895, his friend, Gov. Matthews appointed him to the South Bend police commission upon which he served until March, 1897. The legislature of 1897 passed a law providing for the reorganization of the metropolitan police boards in the state. In January, 1899, Mr. Leeper was again appointed as a member of the board, this time by a Republican governor, James A. Mount, and served until his death. He was also vice president of the South Bend National Bank. In all of these positions his incumbency was marked by faithful, painstaking, conscientious service. In 1892 Mr. Leeper and the writer of this article were appointed as delegates to the Farmers' National Congress which met in Atlanta, Georgia. Fraternally, Mr. Leeper was a thirty-second degree Mason, an Odd Fellow and a Knight of Pythias.

David R. Leeper was best known during the last years of his life as a writer. In fact, it is as a writer that he is remembered by those still living who knew him, and as such his name will be handed down to future generations of South Bend citi-
zens. His writings were principally on local history and no man in St. Joseph county was better equipped for that line of work than he. Born and reared amid pioneer surroundings, he knew many of the early citizens of St. Joseph county. He saw South Bend grow from a small hamlet to a city with a population of over 75,000 at the time of his death. He was an eye witness of the changes that took place and the progress that was made by both city and surrounding country through more than three-score years. His wide circle of acquaintances enabled him to obtain information from many sources and he made the best use of his opportunities. Besides, he spent a great deal of time delving into the old musty records of both city and county digging up many items of importance which nobody but a painstaking man like him could have found. The old files of the South Bend Times, as well as of the Tribune, contain many contributions from his versatile pen. If they could be gathered together they would make a volume of no mean proportions and of almost priceless value.

As a writer, Mr. Leeper was careful almost to a fault. No matter what subject he chose to discuss he was not satisfied until he had examined it from every point of view. When writing local history, he consulted every available authority. When writing about men of South Bend, he was known to have spent days in the old South Bend cemetery in order to ascertain or verify a single date or the spelling of a name. He was careful also to have his diction as pure as he could make it. He wrote and re-wrote until every sentence was perfect. In fact, the same thoroughness was characteristic of everything he did. As a result every article that bore his signature could be accepted as absolutely correct.

When the Northern Indiana Historical Society was organized, he became one of the charter members and to the end of his life was one of its active promoters. He was a regular attendant at its meetings and prepared and read many papers at its sessions. These papers which cover nearly every phase of the pioneer history of South Bend and St. Joseph County are treasured in its archives and are counted among its valuable possessions.

He was fortunate in being associated in his mature years with many of the men and women who were among the early residents of St. Joseph county. He neglected no opportunity
to gather from them all of the information which they could give him and his long acquaintance with them enabled him to distinguish between those who were reliable and those who were not. He never was satisfied with interviewing one individual concerning any circumstance or fact, but consulted every one whom he thought might have information that he wanted. He also knew the value of old letters and old documents of every kind and availed himself of their use whenever they were obtainable.

Not only did he become thoroughly acquainted with pioneer life both through his own experience and that of others, but he also obtained a vast fund of information concerning the Indians. In his boyhood days Indians still roamed over St. Joseph County. Those individuals who were able to furnish him pioneer history and traditions were also versed in Indian lore. From them he learned to know the sites of the most important Indian villages as well as the trails over which they traveled. He also learned much concerning their habits, customs and manner of living. One of his papers read before the Historical Society bore the title, “Our Savage Predecessors—their ancient haunts about the great bend of the St. Joseph River.” In this paper he dealt with several topics under the sub-headings: “Indian Dress,” “Indian Burying Grounds” and “An Indian Funeral Cortege.” In the course of the paper he described and gave the locations of a number of Indian villages. Another of his papers was entitled, “The Notre Dame Lakes—Some Footprints of the Pioneers on their Picturesque Shores.” Both of these papers were published in the South Bend Times and future historians no doubt will make use of the valuable data which they contain.

In addition to his other accomplishments, Mr. Leeper was a fine musician. The first time the writer ever saw him he was playing in an orchestra at a farmers’ institute in the old Price Theater in South Bend.

Mr. Leeper died on December 27, 1900, and it may be said that the death of no citizen of South Bend was ever more sincerely mourned. Previous to the brief illness which terminated his life, he appeared to be the picture of health and gave promise of many years of life and usefulness. Quoting one of the city papers:

Like a bolt from a clear sky came the sad news this morning that
David R. Leeper had died at an early hour. None were prepared for such mournful tidings. On every side was entertained a sorrow akin to personal bereavement and on every hand were heard encomiums upon the dead and expressions of sincere sorrow over his demise.

In an editorial written on the day of his death his intimate friend, John B. Stoll, thus summed up the traits and qualities of his character:

David R. Leeper was a typical American gentleman. Singularly free of prejudice, thoroughly familiar with the history and traditions of nations, and slow but sure to formulate opinions regarding men and affairs, he was enabled to be just and impartial whenever he had occasion to pass judgment. Only those who for years had come in close contact with him could have a fair understanding of his wonderful store of information on almost every subject concerning the human race and the affairs of man. When talking on religious topics it was never a task for him to state with amazing accuracy the tenets of the various religious bodies that constitute the greater part of the civilized world. When the affairs of nations were under consideration the utmost familiarity with their origin, history and characteristics would be revealed. Of our own governmental institutions and their inception and development his delineations were masterpieces of research and completeness. If music chanced to be the subject of conversation, Mr. Leeper displayed as much familiarity with the productions of the masters as if he had made music the exclusive study of his life. It has been the good fortune of the writer to come in contact with many men of genius and rare ability, but among them all he has recollections of no one whose fund of general information covered so large a scope as that of David R. Leeper. As the writer on more than one occasion said to him: “Some up-to-date college ought to have secured your services to disseminate general intelligence among its students. You might have been of inestimable benefit to at least some of the young men of this country.”

As a citizen Mr. Leeper was public spirited and was always ready to give his aid to any worthy enterprise. He took a deep interest in all matters that tended to help his home city and to advance the best interests of its people. He did not look with favor on all the projects which were proposed, but did consider each one fairly and when convinced that it was meritorious gave it his hearty support. When a movement had his approval, its projectors usually had no difficulty in securing for it the support of the general public.

At its first meeting after the death of Mr. Leeper, the Northern Indiana Historical Society adopted a fitting testimonial in memory of the man which deserves a place here:

Death certainly loved a shining mark when its fateful arrow winged its way to the heart and home of South Bend’s distinguished citizen,
the Hon. David R. Leeper, an honored, highly esteemed and most useful member of the Northern Indiana Historical Society.

His was indeed a kindly nature. It attracted to him all who came within the subtle influence of his radiance. He was a gentleman of what is known as the old school—polished, refined, kind hearted and broad minded. He loved labor and its results for the comforts it brought humanity.

Few men have passed away from the circles of local social and industrial life who will be so sorely missed or so sincerely mourned as our departed associate and co-laborer. In his dealings with the world he made no distinction of caste or class. He practiced the golden rule in private and public as few men do. Those who knew him intimately were better for his acquaintance, and his friends will mourn for him as deeply as a beloved brother.

For his untiring efforts to obtain and place on record reliable local history reciting the stirring events of the early settlement and development of this part of Indiana, this society and the community at large owe him a lasting debt of gratitude. His was truly a labor of love. Without the hope or expectation of material reward he devoted much valuable time, in the latter part of his earthly career, to the gathering and compiling of authentic information that has been imperishably incorporated into history and that will be readily accepted as such by generations to come. History written by David Leeper bears the impress of truth and impartiality and will be prized accordingly by all who remember him as a companion of lovable qualities, as a man of inflexible integrity, as a citizen of exalted character and as an author of exceptional resources and scholarly attainments.

This tribute came from people who had been closely associated with Mr. Leeper for many years and it was well deserved. South Bend has produced few men who were his equals and none who were his superiors. A third of a century has passed since his death, but his name still has a conspicuous place in the city which was his birthplace and his home nearly all his life.