

# Modern life nearly pushes Geographic Society off map

## 101-year-old group now just a shadow of its glorious past

**By William Mullen**  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

A small treasure found in the back of a downtown office closet—six ancient clay tablets from Babylonia covered with cuneiform writing—was never really lost, just benignly ignored by its owner, the Geographic Society of Chicago.

Now, the tablets have been “rediscovered” and soon will be on their way to become bona fide museum artifacts at the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute.

The story of the tablets—the last artifacts from the society’s heyday—in a way mirrors the fate of the Geographic Society itself, at 101 years old something

of a relic of a way of life.

The society once was one of the city’s highest-profile cultural organizations, with offices, a library and a large paid staff; now all that it owns is in a single file cabinet drawer in a management company that runs its affairs.

Hence, the need to find a home for the six tablets, ranging from 2,500 to 4,000 years old, once part of a trove of treasures the society had collected and archived.

“By the time we closed our last office,” said Vincent Michael, a present-day society board member, “we didn’t have much stuff left—just a drawerful of old photos and some signed correspondence with famous people like Charles Lindbergh, [Roald] Amundsen and [Richard] Byrd.

“The [Babylonian tablet] case was just stored in the back of a closet, the last item the Geographic Society had from . . . the 1920s, when the society was



Tribune photo by David Klobucar

The Geographic Society is giving this ancient clay tablet and five others to the Oriental Institute.

very, very active.”

Most big American cities once had similar societies, offering extremely popular travel lectures by globe-trotting celebrities such as Lowell Thomas, who could pack the biggest auditoriums in town. But now only a few such societies are left, and most are struggling.

The combination of television travel documentaries, Internet access and cheap air travel has transformed the way people see

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