



This photo was taken during the Geographic Society of Chicago's first tour to Yellowstone National Park, in which 43 members

TV, travel advances make Geographic Society a relic

Once one of Chicago's highest-profile organizations, the 101-year-old society now

houses its treasures in a single cabinet drawer.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the world and get around it.

Even the pre-eminent National Geo-

graphic Society in Washington, D.C.,

is taking membership, is taking

measures to stanch the resulting finan-

cial bleeding, including selling its maga-

zine at newsstands for the first time in

its history.

"New York's geographic society shut

down," said Carl Sholen, president of

the Chicago society, "and so has San

Francisco's. Philadelphia's is still going

but is a lot smaller than it used to be."

While not exactly moribund, the Geo-

graphic Society of Chicago, with fewer

than 700 members, is but a shadow of

what it was in 1926. That's when one of

its wealthy members—who then num-

bered in the thousands—came home

from a trip to Iraq and presented the

tablets to the society's archives as a

memorandum of his adventure.

In those earlier days, the society had

the power to regularly hail the century's

greatest explorers and adventurers to

Chicago to bestow honors on

them—truly heroic trailblazers such as

Amundsen, Byrd, Robert Peary, Amelia

Earhart and Jacques Cousteau.

Like the Michael Jordan era was for

the Bulls, the society's travel lecture and

film series was for decades one of the

hardest wintertime tickets to come by in

the city.

The society would schedule four ses-

sions for each program in the series in

Orchestra Hall's 2,500-seat auditorium,

two on Saturday and one each on Sun-

day and Monday, and sell out every one.

Those glory days began to fade about

30 years ago, and the society's member-

ship has dwindled. Ten years ago, mov-

ing to smaller quarters to save on rent,

the society gave away its well-stocked

library of maps, atlases, globes and hun-

dreds of geography-related books to

DePaul University.

When its paid executive director

decided to retire a little more than a

year ago, the society chose not to

replace him and closed its office, hiring

a management firm to handle its organi-

zational affairs. That's when the ques-

tion of what to do with the Babylonian

clay tablets arose.

Henry Patten, a turn-of-the-century

globe-trotting lifestyle, bought the tab-

lets in Iraq in 1926, when such trade in

antiquities was still legal. A member of

the society, he presented the tablets,

each about the size of a present-day belt

pager, to the organization in a custom-

made, black-leather-covered, glass-

fronted box, each tablet given a nest of

its own in crushed red velvet.

Covered with wedge-shaped cuneiform

markings pushed into the clay by

ancient scribes, the tablets are of value

primarily to scholars. The writings,

mostly records of commercial transac-

tions, are a sort of brief attestation of

daily life in Babylonia, one of human-

ity's earliest civilizations.

From the start, when Chicago educa-

tor and women's rights advocate Zonia

Baber founded the society in 1898, it

attracted many of the city's intellectual,

social and business elites as members.

It pushed actively and effectively for

some of the world's first efforts to pre-

serve ecological treasures, helping to

establish the Chicago region's unparal-

leled system of forest preserves and

fighting to protect the Indiana Dunes

and Starved Rock areas from destruc-

tion by developers.

Its main appeal to most rank-and-file

members, however, was as a respite

from everyday ennui during the long,

television, pre-economy jet travel days.

Major national celebrities in their day,

Thomas—still are well-remembered today.



Women wash clothes during their 18-day travel shows grew more popular, such tou

But Chicagoan Burton Holmes was the

legendary standard by which all other

travel speakers were measured.

From 1893 to the early 1950s, the ele-

gant, goateed Burton strode across sold-

out lecture hall stages in a tux and white

tie. The lights would dim and the film