

Manuscript Collections

The Henry Field Collection

at the State Historical Society of Iowa

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TALK TO PEOPLE who have their roots in the rural communities of Iowa or who have returned to their "rural heritage" after an interlude in urban America, and one will hear convincing arguments concerning the many virtues of farm life. These people speak of the richness of Iowa's soil, and the quality of life earned by "living off the land." What they speak of is not new, for these virtues have been espoused since the first days of the state's settlement. As one generation has been followed by another and an ever-increasing level of technology has been achieved, these virtues have remained constant. It is with just cause that Iowans value the "rural experience" and the families it has nurtured. Respected and admired by their contemporaries, and "living memories" to their descendants, the Solomon Elijah Field family of Shenandoah is one such family.

The Field name is well known throughout the Midwest. Of pioneer stock, the Fields arrived in southwest Iowa at a time when the town of Shenandoah consisted of only two or three railroad boxcars. The story of their journey to Iowa, the settlement and growth of the open prairie, and life at a time never to return can be gleaned from the family records contained in the Henry Field collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City.

At first glance, the Henry Field collection appears to be limited to the business records and publications of the Henry Field Seed Company, 1899 to 1954, which at one time was the largest seed catalog business in the United States, and KFNF (established in 1924), one of the earliest radio broadcasting companies in North America. Closer scrutiny of the collection reveals much more.

The collection is a compilation of more than a century of Field family correspondence, photographs, mementos, and memoirs. Henry's appreciation of his family's past is evident in his typed transcripts of the fragile and fading century-old letters and journals. With eleven children of his own, the transcripts were duplicated and given to each. The original documents, as well as these transcripts, are contained in the collection's files. The collection also provides insight into the impact of national events and trends on the lives of rural Americans, the political sentiments of rural people during both economic prosperity and deprivation, and the struggle of an agriculturally dependent business to remain solvent during the Great Depression. Its records describe the exciting development of commercial radio, and illustrate the advertising gimmicks and promotional activities of an expanding catalog business and later its retail stores. The collection also provides information on the changing methods of cultivation and breeding, and describes the joys and tribulations of a family growing up in Iowa. The entire Field collection can best be described by categorizing its contents into four groupings: the Solomon E. Field family, the Henry A. Field family, the Henry Field Seed Business, and early radio and KFNF.

SOLOMON ELIJAH FIELD was the first of the family in Iowa. Born in 1834 and educated in Massachusetts, he taught in that state and later in Illinois. He was principal of an academy in Knoxville, Illinois, when he enlisted for service in the Civil War. Five letters that Solomon received from friends and family members during the war describe hometown activities and northern sentiments.

After the Civil War, Solomon returned to Knoxville, Illinois; while he was on the road selling yarn he met his future wife, Celestia (Lettie) Josephine Eastman. Items from Lettie's family add a rich flavor to the Field collection. Lettie's birth in 1846 occurred during a time of movement—a movement of people across a continent. On August 11, 1846, Lettie's mother, Susan Gill Eastman, wrote to her sisters in Rochester, Wisconsin: "Oregon fever is prevailing to an alarming degree. Mr. Ware's family has it bad and will go next spring if they can sell their property." Five Eastman and Gill family letters date from 1845 to 1850.

The collection also includes the "Journal of the '49'ers" written by Lettie's father Stephen Eastman, and his brother-in-law, Nelson H. Gill. Dated April 2 to October 10, 1849, the journal describes their overland trip to California and the hard labor that awaited them in the gold fields. As one reads through the journal, the makers of our past become "real people." For instance, the vote on California's constitution and its admittance to the Union as a free state reflected the morals and economic considerations of not just one writer, but those of scores of other miners. "There is a great excitement on slavery and we might as well have it out now as ever. Slavery can't exist in California, Oregon and New Mexico. California is northern in sentiment and feeling" (Stephen Eastman to his brother, Calvin Eastman, April 1, 1850). The journal ends abruptly on October 10, 1849, while they were still digging for gold. The adventures of their 1851 return trip by ship to the Isthmus of Panama, across the Isthmus by pack train, then by ship to New York, by rail to Chicago, and finally by stagecoach to Toulon, Illinois, are left to the imagination.

Like so many others, Solomon Field became a part of the massive movement of people westward. In 1869, he headed west from Illinois and Lettie promised to wait for him. His arduous journey to southwest Iowa, the beauty of the countryside, and the expectations and ambitions of generations that went westward to settle a land are described in five letters to Lettie dated 1869 to 1870.

Solomon established an eighty-acre homestead in Manti (outside of present-day Shenandoah) in Page County, Iowa. Solomon's November 7, 1870, letter informs his father in Massachusetts of his marriage to Lettie the day before. Early artifacts include a tintype of Lettie Eastman (c. 1869); a photograph of Fred Eastman (c. 1869); and the *The Whittier Birthday Book* (copyright 1881) used by Lettie to record the births and deaths of Gill, Eastman, and Field family members.

Solomon and Lettie had eight children: in order of birth, Henry, Stephen (who died in infancy), Helen, Martha, Jessie, Solomon Jr., Leanna, and Susan. Their eldest, Henry, would later establish, own, and operate what was in its day the largest seed business in the country; he would also become one of the pioneers in radio broadcasting.

Solomon and Lettie both taught in their neighboring country schools. Lettie, the first school teacher in Shenandoah, taught until shortly after the birth of their first child (Henry) in 1871. Once the farmstead was established, Solomon quit teaching to farm full time. Solomon was elected to the Twenty-second and Twenty-third General Assemblies of Iowa, 1888 to 1892. Ten letters (1887–1890) discuss the elections and Solomon's role as a state senator. Lettie died in February 1918, followed by Solomon in March 1923.

The remaining materials related to the Solomon E. Field family include the Field family tree, which traces their ancestry to 1596; *The Memory Book*, recollections of the seven Field children about their parents; the Field family Bible; and eleven family letters and postcards written by Solomon and four written by Lettie, dated 1870 to 1892.

HENRY A. FIELD'S contribution to this collection is substantial. Even the artifacts and materials from his childhood and adolescence reflect his drive and ambition. He began selling seeds and vegetables door-to-door at only eight years of age. By age ten, he had a small thriving trade in seed potatoes, strawberry plants, and pansies; at fifteen, he spent the winter working at the Livingston Seed Company in Des Moines to learn the seed business. His childhood scrapbook (1881–1900) contains news articles and clippings about family members and his early seed business.

In 1888, Henry worked as a page in the Iowa legislature while his father was serving as a state senator. He graduated from the Shenandoah High School in 1889, and attended the Western Normal College from 1890 to 1891.

Materials related to Henry's education include an 1881 school essay entitled "My Room"; an 1884 report card; the 1889 Shenandoah High School commencement program; an 1891 autobiography; news articles on his college commencement (1891); two newspaper articles on the destruction of Western Normal College by fire (December 3 and 5, 1891); correspondence of the Western Normal College Alumni Association (1891–1893); and speeches given at the fiftieth and sixtieth reunions of the 1889 Shenandoah High School graduation class. There are also nineteen letters from his friends while they were

serving in the military during the Spanish-American War from August 1898 to October 1899.

In 1891, Henry formed a partnership with Silas Wilson: Field and Wilson Engineers and Surveyors. He engaged in county surveying part time for about a year and taught in country schools for three winters, 1891 to 1893. The collection includes his surveying calling cards and stationery. Documentation of his country school teaching consists of sixteen letters and his 1891, 1892, and 1893 teacher contracts and examination scores.

Henry's primary interests were in hybrid seed development and sales. His handwritten crop records and tests (1894, 1897, 1898, 1901-1904), and copies of the 1899, four-page catalog which established Henry Field as a seedsman are contained in the collection. In 1902, Henry built a new seedhouse in Shenandoah; in 1907, the Henry Field Seed Company was incorporated and another large seedhouse built. By the 1920s, the Field Seed Company ranked among the largest seed businesses in the nation. During peak seasons, hundreds of the town's residents were on his payroll, and two-thirds of the local postal business was made up of Henry Field shipments.

At home, Henry's family also grew. In 1892, Henry married Annie Hawxby of Nemaha, Iowa; their son, Frank, was born in 1895. In 1899 Annie died from complications of scarlet fever. He married Edna Thompson, also from Nemaha, in 1900, and had eight daughters and two sons. Edna died in 1925 and, until his marriage to Bertha McCullen in 1929, Henry was both mother and father to his children. Family concerns and affairs can be gleaned from Henry's personal file containing eleven letters from Henry to Edna Thompson Field, 1898-1909; the 1900 wedding announcement to Edna Thompson; family letters to and from Edna during her 1925 hospitalization; the 1929 wedding announcement to Bertha McCullen; 195 letters from relatives, friends, customers, and business associates congratulating Bertha and Henry on their marriage; and sixty-seven letters between Henry and Bertha, 1933 to 1948.

In 1923, WOW, a station owned by the Omaha Grain Exchange, invited Henry to bring some of his "Seedhouse Folks" to their studio to provide an evening's broadcast. Henry and two dozen of his employees drove to Omaha and put on three hours

of old-fashioned music. The collection contains many of the more than five thousand letters of congratulations Henry received regarding the radio broadcast.

Henry knew that he was onto a good thing. A true businessman and innovator, Henry would have radio serve both his company (through its increased "visibility" to the public via the airwaves) and his public (through the delivery of programs suited to farmers). Thus, in 1924, Henry and local radio buffs built a 500-watt station in Shenandoah, and he immediately began broadcasting on his own station, KFNF.

Henry's plain, friendly voice was warmly welcomed into the home of the prairie farmer. It made the world a smaller place to live, and brought city and country folk together. KFNF also transformed the Henry Field Seed Company from a comfortable business to a booming enterprise. In 1925, total sales were \$912,211; by 1927, sales had risen to \$2,571,526, and almost 1.6 million names were on the Henry Field Seed Catalog mailing list.

The depression and its impact on the farmer enticed Henry to accept the Republican nomination for the United States Senate in 1932. Henry won the primary election over six Republican candidates, including incumbent Senator Smith W. Brookhart; however, he was defeated in the Democratic landslide that swept Hoover from office. His campaign for the Senate is documented by the letters of regret from friends and associates regarding his defeat. An excellent resource detailing this campaign is the scrapbook maintained by Henry's son, John Henry Field of Denver, Colorado.

Henry as well as his principal competitor, Earl May, used advertising promotions and gimmicks to increase seed company sales and revenues. Despite their efforts, in 1933, the Henry Field Company was lost to foreclosure. Ownership of the company passed from Henry Field to the bondholders. The Henry Field Stores, Inc., was a separate corporation and was not involved in these proceedings.

After the election of 1932, the ownership and operation of KFNF had also been separated from Henry Field Company and incorporated on its own. Henry maintained control over KFNF until 1948, when it was sold to Capital Broadcasting Company of Lincoln, Nebraska. Though ownership of his seed company

had passed onto others, Henry continued to play a vital role in its growth and expansion. He continued as editor of *Seed Sense*, and answered letters from customers and friends until a month before his death.

Meanwhile, the large Field family had grown up, and there were numerous nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. To keep up with them, Henry edited, printed, and mailed the "Yellow Letter" to interested relatives. A complete set of the Yellow Letters is contained in the collection. Printed from 1943 through 1949, the "Yellow Letter" included the news received from across the country from Field family members. These letters were often read over the radio during the "Letter Basket" program. Henry's son, Philip, had started this tradition with the publication of the *Field Family Circle*, 1933 to 1937. Sixteen issues of this publication are available in the collection. This magazine was "an attempt of cementing family ties" and was "devoted to news and interest of the Conway, Massachusetts branches of the Field family, descendants and their relatives of Elijah Field, 1791-1871, and of the Arms family's descendants of Captain Consider Arms, 1769-1848." Henry's grandson, John Field, also published the *Field Family Magazine* from November 1951 to May 1952 with the same intent. Seven issues of this magazine are available.

Henry Field died on October 17, 1949, after a two-year battle against prostatitis. Information related to Henry's illness and death include correspondence with the Mayo Clinic, 1947 to 1949 (twenty-one letters); hospital bills; insurance claims and correspondence; transcripts of eleven radio tributes to Henry; and the names and addresses of the 1,126 people who sent sympathy cards.

THE HENRY FIELD SEED COMPANY began with the 1899, four-page seed catalog Henry printed on a hand press. The Henry Field Seed Company annual catalogs, 1899 to 1954 (with the exception of the 1900, 1904, and 1907 issues), are contained in the collection.

Henry printed his first issue of *Seed Sense*, "A Little Book of Uncommon Seed and Common Sense," in 1912. A combination almanac and seed catalog "For the Man Behind the Hoe," *Seed Sense* contained articles on improved farming techniques and

conservation methods, information on hybrid seed and livestock development, letters from customers, editorials espousing Henry's own philosophy, photographs and accounts about the latest Field family additions and their excursions, and his wife's favorite recipes. In the February 1913 issue, Henry wrote, "I do believe that you will find this postscript more interesting than the catalog itself and lots easier to read." Henry was right, for today's reader can relive through this photo diary such events as the 1913 Field family auto trip to California and back; their 1914 and 1915 Iowa State Fair trips; watermelon growing contests; the growth of Henry's eleven children and later his grandchildren; and the beginnings and operation of KFNF. Published intermittently from 1912 to 1952, *Seed Sense* advertised the Henry Field products, but its thrust was to personalize the business for the farmer. As a result, customers expected to see "Henry Himself" and at least a few of his children when they went to his seedhouse in Shenandoah. A complete set of the *Seed Sense*, 1912 to 1952, is contained in the collection.

The collection also contains a variety of other catalogs and circulars of the Henry Field seed business. These include farm seed information circulars (1903-1942); condensed price lists (1913, 1914, and 1915); hog catalogs (1921-1923); hog listings for auction (1920-1924); merchandise catalogs (1920-1936) for harnesses, clothing, paint, wallpaper, tools, and farm implements; pocket catalogs (1927-1929); merchandise circulars (1928-1932) for the wide variety of products offered through the catalog business and Henry Field stores; direct mailing advertising (1927-1932) of special offers and sale items; fish and bird catalogs (1929-1932); *Trapping Guide and State Laws* (1927-1931, 1936); 1929 fur price list; and the 1931 *Fur Market Report*. The catalogs and *Seed Sense* are rich in information regarding cultivation methods, hybrid seed and livestock, and the application of new technology to agriculture. A "cut art" book used in illustrating the catalogs is also included.

The rapid growth of the seed business and the impact of radio on this growth is evident by the annual catalog and *Seed Sense* mailing lists by zones maintained from 1915 through 1928. Also included are the 1922 postal laws and regulations on the shipment of nursery stock, plants, and plant products. A sampling of picture puzzles and other contests sponsored by the

seed business in 1922 and 1923 is given, as well as correspondence from the postmaster (1923) regarding the regulation of such picture puzzle schemes. A complete set of *The Junior Seedsman* (1916–1933), a Henry Field publication for youngsters selling his seed, is available. In 1909, the Henry Field Seed Company printed another children's publication, *Farm Arithmetic*, by Jessie Field. This book was distributed free to school children and is available in the collection.

The collection contains materials related to the organization, management, and operation of the company: the Henry Field Seed Company annual reports and balance sheets (1900, 1923–1928); Henry's memos to employees on such topics as appointments, wages, housekeeping, punctuality, and letter writing (1918–1939); company stationery and postcards; Henry's favorite poems and quotations; 1930 and 1934 Henry Field Seed Company stock certificates; standard replies to customer correspondence (1927–1932); and Henry's letters to Seed House employees during his California trip (1937). The files are void of records pertaining to the foreclosure proceedings of Henry Field Seed Company, and the transition of leadership from Henry Field to Albert Reed and the bondholders.

RADIO STATION KFNF was a marvelous marketing tool for the Henry Field Seed Company and its stores. Henry's down-to-earth attitude and broadcasts gained him the trust and respect of his listening audience. In 1925, "Henry Himself," as he was known to his listeners, placed second in a national poll conducted by *Radio Digest* to determine the "World's Most Popular Announcer." In 1926, he was referred to as the Corn Belt's "guide, philosopher, counselor and friend" by one midwestern newspaper. In 1930, *Radio Digest* readers voted KFNF the "Most Popular Station in the Midwest."

Listeners wrote letters by the thousands and bought Henry's products sight unseen. Selected letters were read over the air and questions from listeners were answered during Henry's noontime "Letter Basket" program. The collection contains 694 transcripts of the "Letter Basket" program written and taped by Henry Field for broadcast while he was off location (1933–1942). The "Letter Basket" transcripts contain the itinerary and daily adventures of Bertha and Henry during their

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road trips to Oklahoma (1929), California (1937), Wisconsin (1939), Mexico (1940), and Florida (1941).

Publications of KFNF regarding James Pearson, the radio pastor, include *Radio Gems: The Best of Reverend Pearson* (1928); *Our Fundamentals* (1930); *Ether Echoes* (1931); and, "Chips"—*Highlights of James Pearson, KFNF Newsboy and Pastor* (1935). Additional KFNF materials include programming schedules (1924–1955); postcards and photographs of radio personalities (1925–1927); and the KFNF publications: the 1927 *Studio Broadcasting Book*; 1929 *Souvenir Book of Radio Artists*; *Selections from the Grab Bag* (1934); and *Poet's Corner*, by Cap Mally (1939).

The Henry Field collection can provide historical data for the serious researcher, and a nostalgic flavor of a time past for the historical "browser." It is rare that a collection can satisfy the demands of one as well as the interests of the other.

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