

The Journals of George Henry Yewell

ONEITA FISHER

George H. Yewell was born January 20, 1830, in Havre de Grace, Maryland. When he was very small, his widowed mother moved to Cincinnati¹ where they lived with the boy's uncle. Some time before 1843 they settled in Iowa City where there were other relatives. This was during the state's formative period. Yewell was an artist and he is remembered for his portraits of important men who helped shape Iowa's history.²

But George Yewell painted and sketched other things: views along the Iowa River, imposing residences, Terrill's Mill, the Capitol. He lived and painted in Europe for about twenty years. And, using words, he sketched vivid pictures of life abroad and as it was in Iowa City around 1850. Segments of journals kept by Yewell from 1847 to 1875 are in the Special Collections Department of The University of Iowa Library.³ Of particular interest are those entries dealing with the local scene.

The first entries, written when Yewell was about 18, reflect a happy time:

Early on the morning of October 12, 1847, Will Lowe, of Iowa City, seated on a pile of blankets, pots and kettles, in a light wagon to which his father's faithful old roan horse was attached, gathered in seven young fel-

¹ During the years he lived in Cincinnati, one of his teachers in the public schools was Theodore S. Parvin (1817-1901), who was later to become one of Iowa's best-known educators.

² Many of his most important portraits went to the Capitol in Des Moines. Among them are portraits of Governors Kirkwood, Lowe, and Chambers, of General Grenville M. Dodge, and of Judges Mason, Wright, and Dillon. A reproduction of his portrait of Judge Charles Mason, first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Iowa, faces page 199 in Volume One of Benjamin F. Gue's *History of Iowa*.

³ Selections are here published with the permission of Louise Coast Perry of Columbus Junction, Iowa, grandniece of Mrs. Yewell.

lows who had planned a few days previously, a camping expedition. Their names were William W. Lowe,⁴ William S. Cooke, Abraham C. Price, Wesley Redhead,⁵ Peter Snyder, Anthony Cole, and George Yewell. The spot selected was on the banks of the Iowa river some 10 miles distant in a forest of sugar maples. It was discovered after starting, that we had forgotten two things; a coffee pot and my dog, Don Pedro. Tone [Anthony Cole] started back for both, reappearing in about 20 minutes, mounted on his nag, the coffee pot hung over his arm, and my dog trailing after at the end of a rope. We ransacked a deserted log cabin and found an iron skillet. An axe, which we had also forgotten, was procured of a dutch woman living on the road.

On arriving, we put up our tent, got a hasty dinner and started out to shoot something, without success. Will Lowe, full of mischief, kept us awake nearly all night with his fiddle, which he would take down as soon as we were dozing off and dash wildly into "Rosy O'More" or "Dan Tucker."

The next morning was rainy and the young men stayed under the tent "and kicked their heels," but the sky cleared and they shot enough game for supper,

. . . after which we built up a roaring fire, lit our pipes and listened to the yarns of the inimitable Tone. The group was a picturesque one; one lying at full length warming his feet, another leaning against the tent pole regarding Tone playing the tambourine on a tin plate, accompanying an air played by myself on the violin and sung by Wesley Redhead. On the opposite side of the fire, seated upon an inverted sugar-trough, Will Lowe and Will Cooke played "old sledge" with a worn and greasy pack of cards.

Such hunting expeditions were annual events. Game was less plentiful some years, although squirrels, ducks, turkeys, quail and ruffed grouse usually were on the menu. The boys once shot a "last year's fawn" and helped with a cabin-raising in exchange for a horse to haul their venison to camp. Others who joined in the hunts were Finley Thompson, Thomas Hess, Michenor Patterson, Milton Seydell, Jacob Stover⁶ (and his dog, Ponto), Morgan Reno, Thomas M. Banbury, Dewitt Berryhill, and farmers who "dropped in."

In May, 1848, Yewell and a friend, Samuel D. Hayward,⁷ took passage on the *Empire* for New Orleans. They landed in the strange city

⁴ Will Lowe was appointed to West Point, class of 1853, and breveted Brigadier General.

⁵ Wesley Redhead moved to Des Moines, where he was a successful businessman with several interests, including mining. The University of Iowa Library has a small collection of his papers, including documents relating to the Black Diamond Coal Company, which he organized with Samuel J. Kirkwood.

⁶ Stover was president of a mill at the site of Coralville.

⁷ For a few months in 1847 Yewell had worked in partnership with Samuel

nearly penniless, knowing no one. It was hot and dusty; drays were being driven furiously in all directions. To add to the confusion, the French were firing cannon in jubilee at hearing of the dethronement of Louis Phillipe. Yewell wrote, "Suddenly, I heard, 'George Yewell! What are you doing here?' It was Charley Swan, my old friend from Iowa City, spending a few weeks in New Orleans on business." So Yewell's stay in New Orleans became a delightful interlude. Charley Swan, proprietor of Swan's Hotel in Iowa City, helped the young men find lodging and light employment which left them time for sight-seeing. Yewell sketched street scenes, and recorded them in his notebooks:

We strolled wherever fancy led, finding amusement in an itinerant Highland piper, an organ grinder and his monkey, or little Negro boys watering the street with a hose. We often fell in with the razor-strop man who entertained us with quotations from Shakespeare. In the dusk of evening, it was amusing to hear the Negroes crying ice cream as they traversed the city with the freezers on their heads. The prelude was a bit of an old song, such as

"Take your time, Miss Lucy,
Miss Lucy, Lucy Long,"

and then with a prolonged roll would come the cry, "ICE CRRrrrrrreeeam!" loud enough to startle the neighborhood.

Late in 1848 Yewell and Hayward returned to Iowa City. He wrote, "Upon reflection, every man ought to be able to earn a living by the labor of his hands and should know one of the handicrafts. I therefore apprenticed myself, on October 30, 1848, to Byron Stilwell, a merchant tailor in Iowa City, who afterwards married my cousin, Elizabeth Snyder."

In 1849, several of Yewell's friends left for the new gold fields. He mentions Sam Hayward, Davy Sessions and Peter Snyder. On July 17, he wrote, "I read today, an account of the death of Thomas B. Waring, of cholera, enroute to California. His comrades buried him at the foot of a large oak tree by the roadside. He was a noble fellow and a student at the Snethen Seminary⁸ in Iowa City at the same time with me. He was a printer and had charge of publishing the *Iowa Colporteur*, a small journal devoted to interests of the seminary."

Yewell records four arrivals of the steamboat *Herald* in 1849: on

Hayward as a traveling book salesman. Among their wares were books entitled *The Family Companion—a Collection of Recipes and Useful Hints* and *The Science of Etiquette, or the Laws of Good Breeding*.

⁸Snethen Seminary, a Methodist Protestant school, functioned from 1843 to 1845.

March 24, April 11, April 22, and May 10. On April 22, he and several others rode down to Clark's farm, hailed the *Herald* and got a ride up to the landing at the foot of Capitol Square. There was "a pleasure party on board from Hannibal."

A Fourth of July picnic on the banks of the Iowa River was a gala affair with "a great dinner of roasted turkeys, chickens and pigs, with hams and all kinds of meat, cakes, etc." There was music and oratory; "Dr. Ballard delivered a 'Kaintuck' oration." Then there were rowing parties on the river, music and lovemaking under the shade of the trees. On other summer afternoons, there were outings to pick blackberries, and wild plums—"eastward toward Coles'." Once, on their way home from a melon patch, Yewell and Wesley Redhead met a poor woman who was lamenting the loss of her bucket in a well, "which, by the aid of a ladder, we extricated."

The journals are mainly from earlier diaries which Yewell copied into notebooks. In a flashback, he tells how he came to the attention of Judge Charles Mason of Burlington whose interest and financial assistance enabled Yewell to study in New York and in Europe. He wrote:

Notwithstanding my determination to master a handicraft, I never gave up my feeling for the Fine Arts. I think it was during the session of the Iowa Legislature in 1846 that attempts were made to move the seat of government from Iowa City to Fort Des Moines. At the height of the excitement, I drew a large caricature, representing the Capitol building on wheels, and oxen pulling one way, upon whose shoulders were placed heads of members who voted for removal. On the other end of the building were those members who voted against the bill, represented by oxen whose feeble chain had broken and tumbled them in a heap. Principal leaders of the movement were represented as drivers; bodies of different animals, suited to their different characters, being in place of their own. The likenesses were easily recognized and the caricature created a sensation. It went from town to town over the state and made me widely known.

Among other persons, it caught the attention of Charles Mason, one of the Supreme Court Judges of the state, and later U.S. Commissioner of Patents. He took some of Yewell's work to Washington, showed it to other artists, and arranged for Yewell to go to New York in 1851. Of the journey, Yewell wrote, "There was no railroad out of Chicago farther than Aurora. We went there in stage coaches, traveling day and night, taking our meals often at rude, log-built taverns, where, in early morning, we would awaken sleeping inmates and gather, ourselves, the chips and bark from the woodpile, with which to boil our coffee, whilst the females were dressing the children."

In New York, Charles A. Dana of the *Tribune* gave Yewell a note of introduction to Thomas Hicks, who helped him, without pay, to qualify for the Academy of Design. He describes his first evening at the Academy:

My first evening was a severe trial to my nerves. Many of the 30 students had been there several winters and it was the custom to look at each others drawings, with the utmost good feelings. I placed a bust of Vitellino on a pedestal and seated myself in a corner where no one could get behind me. I still have this drawing which shows painful labor and timidity, and recalls my feelings whilst drawing it.

The next few years were filled with study, but an entry for January 12, 1853, tells of a supper Thomas Hicks gave for William Makepeace Thackeray, who was delivering lectures on "Wits and Satirists of England":

In two minutes, Thackeray placed me so completely at ease that I was able to enjoy the evening. Thackeray sang "Little Bill" and other serio-comic ballads with infinite humor. During the uproarious applause, a table was overturned and a valuable punch bowl was about to be broken, but was caught by Staigg, the miniature painter, who was at once carried around the room in triumph.

Yewell had wanted to visit the Catskills "ever since reading Rip Van Winkle." In July, 1853, he went there with "Shepherd, a pupil of Cropsey's." They saw the grave of Thomas Cole, one of the founders of the Hudson River School, whose work Yewell admired. The young artists sketched and painted and had an icy bath in the river at 4:30 in the morning. With two other artists they went to Kanterskill Clove on July 7:

We had a charming walk down the glen, along a forest path which wound around rocks and over old mossy logs. Where the glen entered the Clove, we halted by an old mill-dam and had a bath. By standing on the rocks, we impersonated Neptune, the Colossus of Rhodes, and other classic celebrities. The morning was bright and warm, the water sparkled in the sunshine, glossy leaves quivered in the breeze and the movements of little fish in the brook amused us like children.

In 1854, Yewell returned to Iowa City to visit his family and friends. He set up a studio in his home and painted portraits, "principally babies and young children." He painted a sign for a jeweler, showing a child holding a large, antique watch. He says, "My first commission was to make a series of vignette drawings of buildings, residences and street views of the town, to grace the margin of a new map of Iowa City. After they were published, I made a good thing by coloring

and varnishing them at \$2 each." In 1855, Yewell met Mary E. Coast, whose father, Craft Coast, had removed to Iowa City from Michigan in the Spring. The two young people were constant companions and "eight years later, she became my partner for life."

Yewell returned to New York in 1856 in time for an Academy exhibit but was disappointed to find his "Country Boy in a Studio" hidden away in a small room, and his "Watching the Woodpecker" in a dark corner out of sight. "The catalogue," he wrote, "as usual, is full of mistakes." He was able to enroll for more work by almost literally pinching pennies. One evening, he had no money with which to buy dinner: "I found 5 pennies Jack Arnold gave me in sport last night and bought soda crackers at Howe's bakery, the greatest bulk for the money." There was no oil for his lamp, so Yewell ate the crackers in the dark and went to bed.

In March of 1856 Yewell began a painting for "a friend of Dr. Clark's." "I picked up a boy in the street to sit as my model; intelligent head, black eyes, nicely out at the knees and elbows and toes. Hope to make something good out of him." The next morning, "My boy came punctually at ten, but alas! His face and hands were washed clean and shining with soap; his old boots had been replaced by his Sunday best, a clean white collar was pinned to his jacket and holes in knees and elbows had been neatly patched. The boy was completely destroyed for my purposes. Upon closer inspection, I found they had put oil upon his hair."

Later in 1856 Yewell went to Europe, with financial assistance from Charles Mason and other friends. In Paris he studied at the Atelier of Thomas Couture,⁹ "a small fat man in a brown woolen jacket," sometimes getting "a blowing up" when a drawing didn't please the master. "So I took a fresh canvas and began another." The next day, "Couture said my new head of the trooper is better," and a later entry: "Finished my study, which is my best head. Painted sky in my Trooper 5 or 6 times and scraped it out."

Henry A. Loop and Thomas Satterwhite Noble were studying in Paris at the same time and the three explored the city. "In the theater district, the fruit stands are innumerable, with piles of oranges lit up by red-paper lanterns to improve their appearance and tempt the thirsty ouvriers and grisettes coming out of the heated theaters. The shopmen know well how to make the most of their wares in Paris. We

⁹ Thomas Couture (1815-1879) was a French genre painter and a popular teacher, among whose other pupils were Edouard Manet and John LaFarge. Yewell studied in Couture's atelier in Paris from 1856 to 1861.

have admired the way the poultrymen make a lean fowl look fat by tying a string tightly around its middle.”

With artist friends or, later, with his wife, Yewell traveled in England, Scotland, Belgium, Holland, the Rhineland, France, Italy and Egypt. In 1859, Yewell and two friends started on a walking tour in France, “following their noses” with only their sketchbooks and whatever they had on their backs. They reached Lieusant late in the afternoon just as rain began to fall, confining them to their inn, to face an evening of boredom. And then, they heard “the squeaking of a fiddle coming from the porte-cochere where an Italian boy was torturing a battered instrument to entertain the neighborhood children. Here was material for amusement.” Baker took the violin, tuned it, and played a jig for the children. People came running at the sound of a tune played completely through without hesitancy. An old Italian with a jolly face and white hair had his barbershop and shoemaking establishment over the inn. “He came down precipitatedly [sic] without taking off his apron.” He rounded up a guitar, and Yewell, “by patching and splicing, soon had the antediluvian instrument in running order.” Word spread like wildfire; so many visitors came that the company and the orchestra moved to the dining room. The musicians took turns dancing. Yewell chose “a quiet little girl with a classic profile” and Baker danced with “an immense plump girl with rosy cheeks who never tired.” In a shadowy corner, Greene flirted with the landlady’s comely daughter, Adele. Yewell wrote, “It was a charming picture and one of the pleasantest evenings I ever passed. I thought continually of David Wilkie.¹⁰ Such charming groups! such effects of light and shadow!”

On another trip, Yewell and Franklin R. Grist found “a jewel of a cottage and barnyard, with strawpile, chickens, bee hives and fruit trees.” He and Grist sketched there on several mornings, facing a little country church.

It was during the days of first communion and processions of brown cheeked girls and ruddy cheeked boys passed across the square. Once, in passing, a fruitseller’s stand was overturned and the longing eyes of every child followed the rolling oranges, and every head turned to look back.

¹⁰ Sir David Wilkie (1785-1841) was an English painter, noted for his portraits. He was a friend of Leigh Hunt and did two illustrations for Hunt’s *Classic Tales* in 1807. The University Library has recently acquired, for its Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, a four-page letter from Benjamin R. Haydon to John Hunt, dated 10 June 1814, written while Haydon was visiting Paris with David Wilkie (MsL/H41hu).

Lips repeated the choruses mechanically, but eyes, and watering mouths, and thoughts, dwelt longingly upon the spilled treasures.

In June, 1869, Yewell and another artist, probably Sanford R. Gifford, took passage in a little steamer for the fishing town of Chioggia, in Italy:

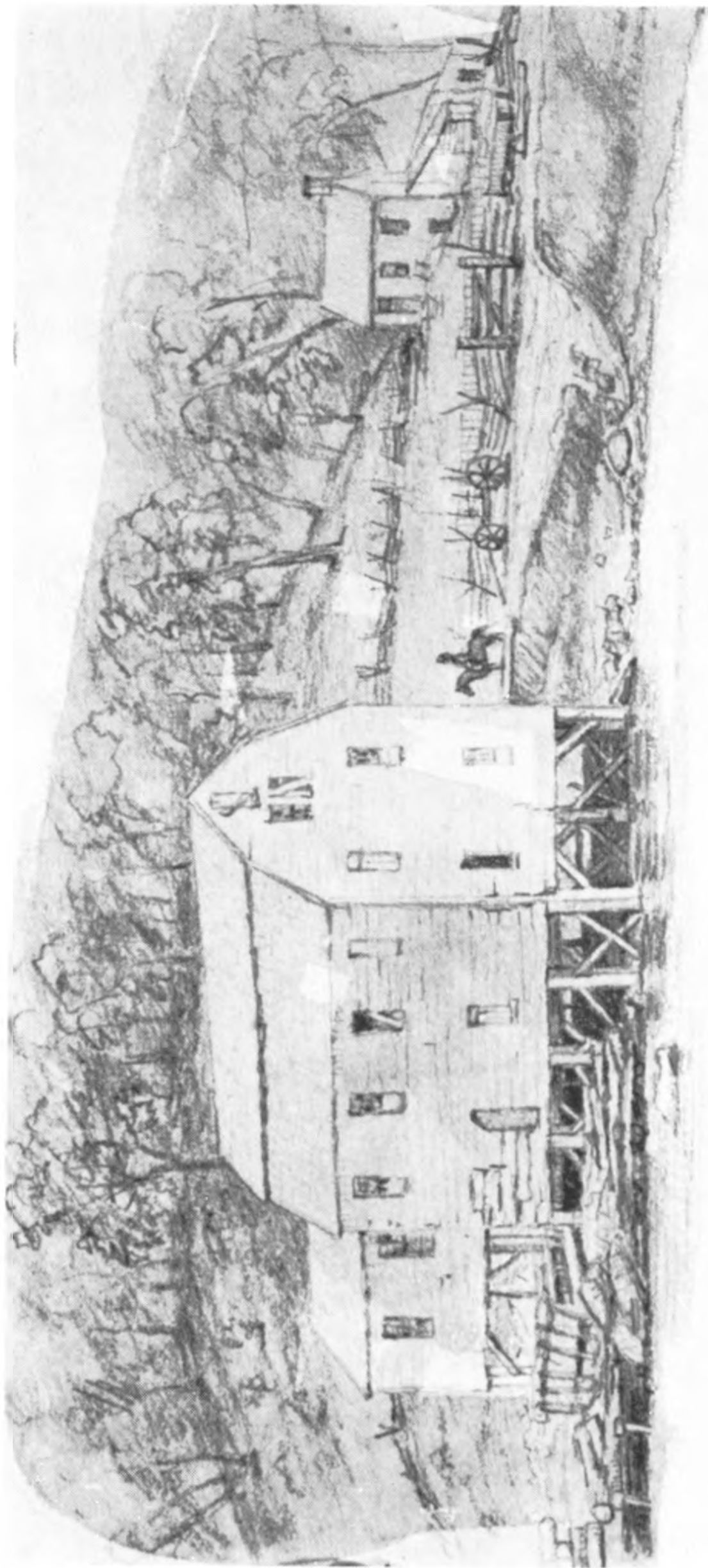
The late afternoon effects over the lagoon, with picturesque boats and sailing vessels, interested us greatly. Chioggia is old, and the boats and fishermen very picturesque. It is the home especially of those richly colored sails, with figures and patterns of various devices that are so well known in Venetian pictures. White, red and yellow are the prevailing colors with sometimes a bit of blue or gray. These are stained upon the cloth with colored earths and dyes, after the sail is made. Rain, sun and sea-water fade and blend and modify the crude tints to such an extent that an old sail seen close at hand in the sunlight will often give an effect of old faded velvet. From early morning until ten and eleven o'clock, groups of boats with these sails lie along the walls of the Public Garden, looking like giant butterflies.

. . . Chioggia has always been famous for the beauty of its women, and we saw many faces with regular features and fine dark eyes. A curious feature of the female costume is, I believe, peculiar to Chioggia. They wear a very full white apron, which, contrary to the usual custom, is tied in front. It is then brought up over the head and held together under the chin. When walking against the wind the wearer becomes a half-inflated balloon. As night began to fall, the women seemed like sheeted ghosts flitting through the streets. . . .

For eleven years, from 1867 to 1878, with the exception of a trip to Egypt, George Yewell lived in Italy, where he had a studio in Rome; his summer months were sometimes spent in Perugia or Venice.¹¹ In 1878 he returned to New York, where for many years he maintained a studio and spent his summers at Lake George. These later years were principally devoted to portrait painting. He died at Lake George on September 26, 1923, at the age of ninety-two.¹²

¹¹ Among the paintings from this period of his career are "Santa Maria della Salute, Venice," owned by the Louisville Art Gallery, and "Interior of St. Mark's Church, Venice," in the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Another of his interior views of St. Mark's is owned by the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

¹² Through the efforts of his brother-in-law, Oscar Coast, who was an artist living in California, nearly 50 paintings by George Yewell were presented to The University of Iowa in 1925 and exhibited in the Memorial Union in 1926. Among these paintings were "Children on the Seashore," "A Street in Cairo," "Old Capitol Grounds About 1850," "House of the Bell-Ringer of Rouen Cathedral," "Church at Moret, France," and "Canal in Venice."



Walter Terrill's Mill near Iowa City. Iowa

G. H. Y. April 14, 1855.

Sketch of Terrill's Mill, near Iowa City, drawn by George Yewell in 1855. From a sketchbook owned by Mr. Fred Kent.



“Distant view of Iowa City, Iowa,” sketched by George Yewell in 1855. From a sketchbook owned by Mr. Fred Kent.

