

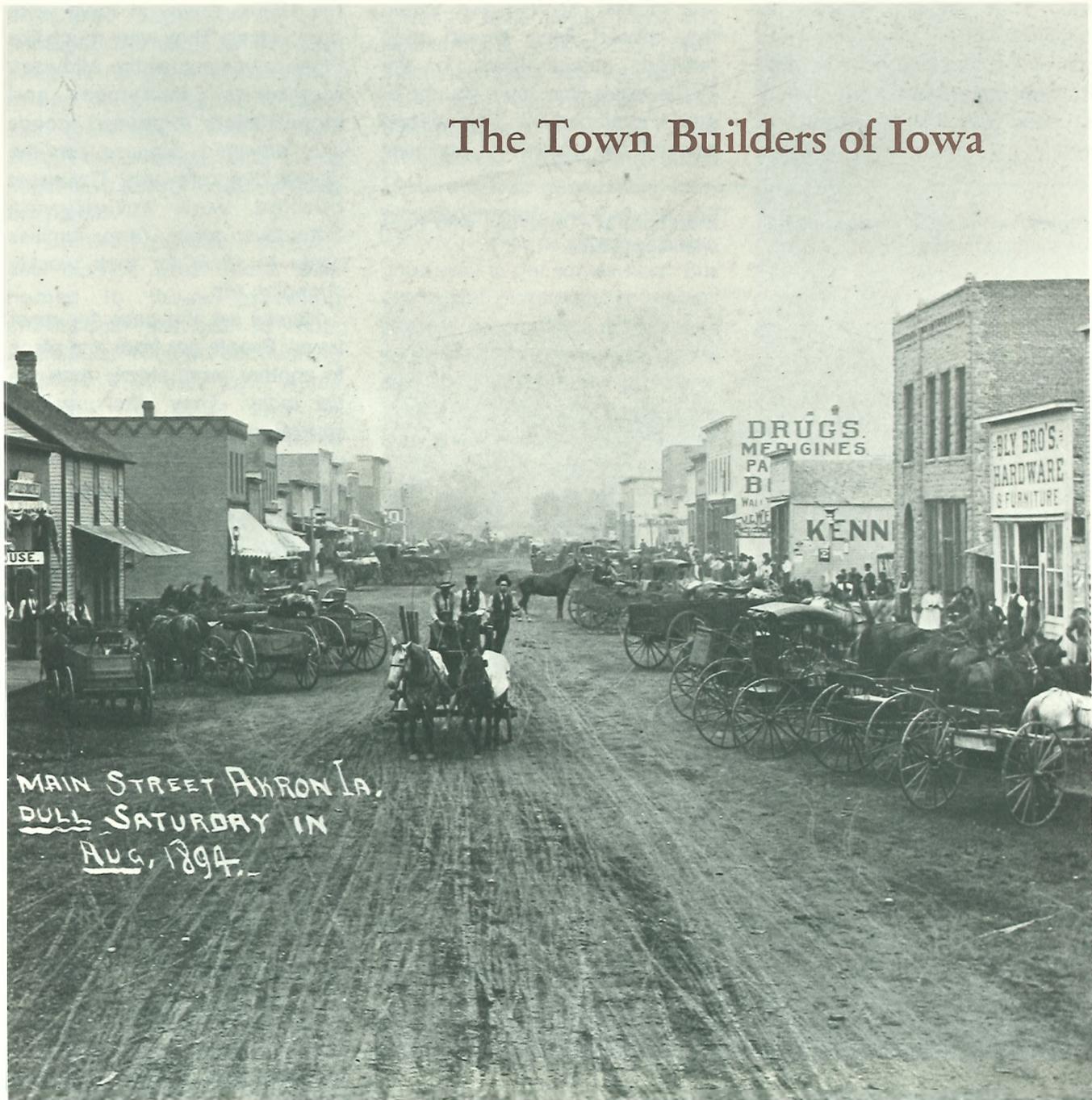
# THE Goldfinch

Vol. 3, No. 3

Margaret Atherton Bonney, Editor

February 1982

## The Town Builders of Iowa



# What Was on Main Street?

Along with the pioneer farmers who streamed westward to the rich lands of Iowa came the "town builders." They knew farming people would need a place to sell their grain and animals. There would also be things they would need to buy — plows, **kerosene**, nails, sugar, and coffee. They might need help too, with shoeing horses or repairing farm machinery and plows. So, just as soon as an area in Iowa was settled, a town grew up too, with a main street that served as a market and business

center for local farm people.

Some towns lasted only a few years. For a town to grow and survive, it needed to be on a good transportation route. **Merchants** needed to have a way to ship the farm produce they bought to larger cities where it would be sold. The first towns relied on rivers and wagon roads to send and receive merchandise. When the railroad lines spread their network across Iowa in the 1870s, each little town fought to attract a railroad line. The railroad assured the growth of business

and trade on which the success of the town was based.

When a town kept growing, its citizens worked to improve the shopping district. Longer-lasting brick buildings replaced the older wooden structures. Cement sidewalks replaced old wooden ones, and sometimes the main street was paved with brick. By the 1890s, towns in Iowa were busy places. They were much like other towns across the Midwest. **Merchants**, **craftsmen**, and **industrialists** produced goods and provided services for the surrounding rural area. The street bustled with activity on Saturdays, when farm families came to town for their weekly shopping trip.

Horses set the pace for most travel. People got from one place to another more slowly than we do today. They often walked several miles into town. There were many small towns dotting Iowa's countryside, spaced about twenty miles apart. This way, farm dwellers could easily make a one-day round trip by horse-drawn wagon or carriage.

Reminders of horse transportation were everywhere. Pedestrians picked their way carefully when crossing a street, to avoid horse droppings. Streets were usually unpaved and were often rutted from wagon and buggy wheels. A water pump and trough for the horses generally stood near the center of town. People tied their horses and wagons to hitching posts next to the high wooden sidewalks and

**kerosene** *n.* – a thin oil used as fuel for a lamp or stove.

**merchant** *n.* – a person who buys and sells goods.



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MAIN STREET OF MANCHESTER, 1888.

**industrialist** *n.* – a person who owns or manages a manufacturing business.

then went about their shopping or business.

Of course, the number of stores depended on the number of people who lived in and around town, but nearly every town had a general store, a blacksmith shop, and a hotel. As a town prospered, artisans with special talents set up their businesses. Silversmiths, coopers, shoemakers, and photographers came to earn their living. A hardware store, saloon, barbershop, pharmacy, millinery, and dressmaker's shop might occupy the buildings. Larger towns might have several of each of these businesses.

Teachers, doctors, dentists, and lawyers often made their homes in town, providing professional services to both townspeople and the surrounding dwellers. That their town would continue to grow and be successful was the hope of all who lived and worked in the community.

The same railroad transportation that helped many small towns grow, eventually helped cause their decline. Rural lowans began to travel to larger cities, where they bought great supplies of goods to last until another big shopping trip. Or they bought from mail-order businesses that sold everything a rural family needed through a catalog. The order arrived by train at the nearest railroad station and travelled to the farm in the postal

**prosper** *v.* – to be successful.

**artisan** *n.* – a person specially trained to work with his or her hands.

**cooper** *n.* – a person who makes or repairs barrels.

**millinery** *n.* – a store where women's hats are sold.

service wagon.

When people bought from an outside manufacturer, the need for certain Iowa-made products dwindled. Small industries closed down and business people without customers had to shut their doors. Some stayed in town but changed their form of work. Silversmiths became jewelers, tinsmiths became plumbers, and blacksmiths turned to farm machinery sales and repairs.

But the major reason for the disappearance of many small Iowa towns came along about 1910. At first, this noisy, four-wheeled, motor-powered carriage was more a toy or a gadget than a good way to get somewhere. But eventually more reliable, easier-to-drive automobiles and trucks were built for passenger travel and for hauling farm products. When the rutted dirt roads were smoothed and graveled, people chose to drive to a larger city or town to do business. By that time, electric street lights had taken the place of kerosene lamps or gaslights on Main Street, and people often talked to one another by telephone instead of at the livery stable or general store. Life was changing fast.

Over the years, many small towns finally died. Some were even removed from the official state map. All that remains are empty buildings with boarded windows, a silent reminder of the bustling days at the turn of the century when horses brought eager families into town to shop on Saturday.

**White Star, No. 1.**



55985 A first class all around Bicycle: up to date in every detail. This wheel will compare in workmanship and quality with other wheels retailing at \$75.00 to \$85.00. Weight, 27 pounds. Price.....\$45.00

SPECIFICATIONS.

**Frame**—1895 pattern, deep frame, with long head and wheel base, narrow tread, made from cold drawn seamless steel tubing and steel forgings.

**Wheels**—28-inch, with wood rims, fitted with 1 1/4-inch M. & W. pneumatic tires, steel rims furnished, if desired.

**Steering Fork**—Cold drawn steel tubing, with steel drop forged crown, adjustable nickeled coasters.

**Handle Bar**—Made of cold drawn seamless steel tubing, drop or upturned pattern, fitted with cork handles, with German silver ferrules.

**Bearings**—Ball bearings to every part, made from high grade steel, carefully hardened, all dust proof.

**Cranks**—Round, 6 1/2-inch throw.

**Pedals**—Dust proof, fitted with large moulded rubbers, rat-trap pedals furnished when so ordered.

**Chain**—Humber pattern, 3/8-inch block chain, hardened, rear adjustment.

**Gear**—Sprocket wheels, detachable, geared to 63 inches.

**Saddle**—Garford, model M. 2.

**Finish**—All bright parts finely nickeled, japanned with our own special enamel, which produces the best finish that can be obtained.

**Tool Bag**—Fitted with wrench, oil can and pump. This wheel will be furnished with an entirely detachable brake, when so ordered.

**White Star, No. 2.**



55990 A Light Medium Grade Ladies' Wheel. Weight, 31 pounds. Price...\$45.00

The specifications are identical with White Star No. 1, except that the frame is a double dropped tube, as shown. The cranks are 6 inch and the gear 60 inch. Others ask \$75.00 or \$85.00 for identical machines.

**White Star, No. 3.**  
FOR BOYS.  
Weight, 24 pounds.



Price. \$ 38.50

55992

SPECIFICATIONS.

**Frame**—Improved 1895 pattern, deep frame; made of steel tubing, with important parts of steel drop forgings.

**Wheels**—26-inch with wood rims, with nickeled tangent spokes, fitted with 1 1/4 inch Morgan & Wright pneumatic tires.

**Steering Fork**—Made of steel tubing, with steel drop forged crown. Adjustable nickeled coasters.

**Handle Bar**—Made of steel tubing, properly curved; cork handles with nickeled ferrules.

**Bearings**—Ball Bearings to every part, made from high grade steel, carefully hardened; all dust proof.

**Cranks**—Round, detachable, 5 1/4 inch throw.

**Pedals**—Dust proof; made of steel and hardened; fitted with moulded rubbers.

**Chain**—Humber pattern, 3/8 inch block chain true to gauge. Rear adjustment.

**Gear**—Sprocket wheels detachable, geared to 56-inch.

**Saddle**—Garford.

**Finish**—All bright parts finely nickeled; japanned with our own special enamel, which produces the best finish that can be obtained.

**Tool Bag**—Wrench, oil can and pump.

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# The Livery Stable and Blacksmith Shop

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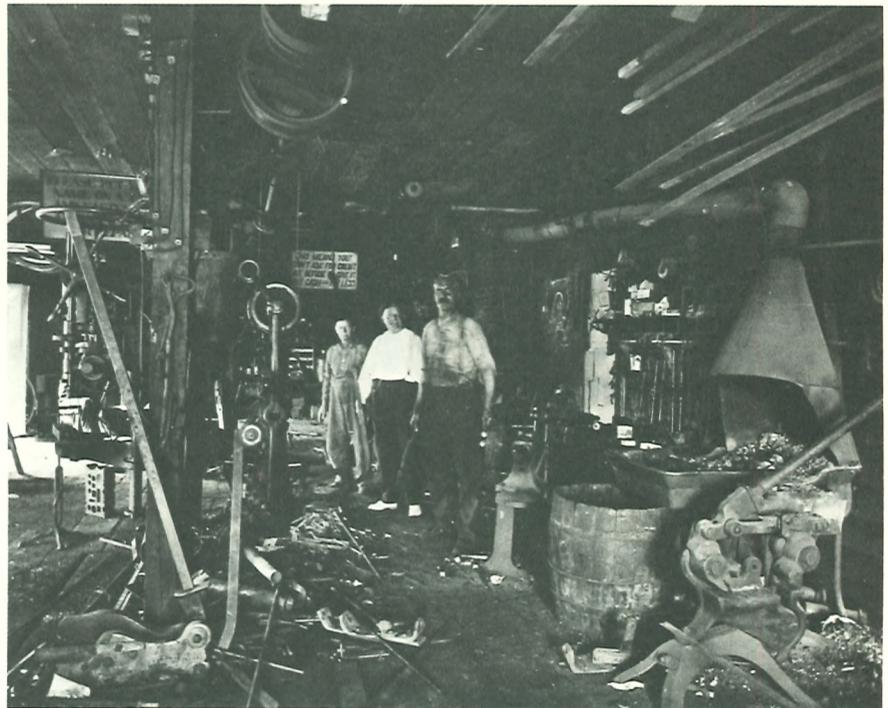
CENTRAL BLACKSMITH, WAGON, & REPAIR SHOP, DES MOINES, ABOUT 1875.

At the livery stable, people who did not own a horse could rent one. Buggies, wagons, and sleighs could be rented, too. Visitors could leave their horses at the livery stable while staying in town. It was a hotel for horses where the animals were fed, watered, and provided with a stall.

Men often gathered at the livery stable to talk. It was a place where they relaxed, told stories, or exchanged information and ideas in a time when there were few, if any, telephones and no radios.

A person of great skill worked in the blacksmith shop. Blacksmiths had studied metalcraft and could shape iron into tools, horseshoes, and wagon-wheel rims. The ring of the blacksmith's hammer striking the anvil and the clop, clop of horses' shod hoofs were part of the familiar everyday sounds of a town.

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COLLETT SITLER'S BLACKSMITH SHOP, WELLMAN, 1905.

# The Hotel

The cheerfully painted hack rumbled to a stop at the nearby train **depot**. It had come to take railway passengers visiting the town to the local hotel. Most towns, large or small, had at least one hotel. It was a place where farm people in town on business would stay. It was a public meeting place. Out-of-town travelers — theatrical groups, visiting baseball teams, and

salesmen — shared jokes and stories of their travels with townspeople. In the summer they sat comfortably on the long hotel porch and in winter they gathered at a wood-burning stove in the large dining room. Sometimes a local or visiting musician might entertain at the piano. The traveling salesmen, who did business directly from the hotel, would lay out their trunks of goods for the local storekeepers to look over, and afterward they would play cards.

Hotel rooms were furnished with a bed, chairs, water pitcher and basin, and a chamber pot. The newer hotels had running water in the rooms, but in most small towns, water was pumped from a well by hand and then heated for washing. An overnight stay was about 50 cents. Meals, too, cost about 50 cents each. The townspeople could get a Sunday dinner for 25 cents because business was slow on weekends.

by Nena Smiddy

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**depot** *n.* — a railroad station.



courtesy of Betty White Stephens

MIDLAND HOTEL, BRIGHTON, ABOUT 1900.

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# The General Store

Do you need a new pair of shoes? Would you like to buy some penny candy? If you had lived at the turn of the century you would have gone to a general store to get these things. Every town had a general store and they all were much alike. In 1898, Bedford, Iowa had eight, each with something special like a glassware department, a supply of prime country butter, a large assortment of fruits and vegetables, or a bakery.

Racks of brooms and bushelbaskets of seasonal fruits and vegetables sat outside on wooden platforms in front of the store. The mingled smells of molasses, vinegar, fish, cheese, freshly-ground coffee, kerosene, and oranges greeted customers at the door. As one walked toward the back of the store, where a big, black pot-bellied

stove sat, the shelves and counters full of groceries and dry goods caught the buyer's eye.

There seemed to be no unfilled spaces. Bins of tea, coffee, dried fruits and vegetables, beans, rice, and oatmeal stood behind the counters. Kegs of butter, pickles, fish, and chewing tobacco sat in front. Hardware items in the back of the store crowded among barrels of crackers, vinegar, kerosene, and molasses, and stacks of flour sacks. Inside glass canisters, peppermint sticks, corn candy, jelly beans, and licorice strings tempted those with a sweet tooth. Stocking caps, writing slates, milk pails, pots, and pans dangled from overhead wires strung across the store. General stores did not sell meat, except maybe ham and bacon. Nor did they sell milk.

Families at the turn of the century did not buy everything they ate or used. Nearly everyone, whether in town or country, had a

garden for summer vegetables, a cellar full of home-grown potatoes, onions, turnips, and home-canned fruits and vegetables. Townspeople still might keep a cow for milk and chickens for eggs. There were some things, however, that were not produced at home. The general store answered these needs.

The store opened at sunrise and closed at night when most people had gone to bed. Sunday was a day off for the storekeeper and his clerks, but Saturday kept them waiting on the steady stream of customers. The door bell jangled as people came and went, stopping to talk with friends about local news.

Modern supermarkets and department stores provide many more types of merchandise because people of today provide very few things for themselves. Most depend on food and clothing manufactured by someone else and sold in a store.

by Lisa K. Abel

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SANGSTER GROCERY, IOWA CITY, ABOUT 1910. *If a town grew, several specialized stores would replace the general store. Dry goods stores sold clothes and yard goods. A grocery store like this one sold food. Notice the coffee bean grinder next to the radiator at the left.*

# The Opera House

If you had 75 cents and could travel back in time to the turn of the century, you could buy a ticket to a show at the opera house in your hometown. An opera is a drama set to music. There were only a few operas presented. The term "opera house" was used because the word "theatre" had a bad reputation with some citizens.

With your ticket, you would climb the wide flight of stairs, enter, and choose a seat, perhaps near the kerosene footlights of the stage. The red and gold velvet curtain would soon rise and the evening begin.

Entertainment at the opera house included many plays, either by local talent or touring professional companies. Comedians, **minstrels**, **vaudeville** acts, lecture programs, acrobats, and magic shows also provided a pleasant evening for those who attended.

Opera houses were used for other activities as well. Women's rights groups, farmers' organizations, and church clubs held public meetings there. The large space was just right for dances, concerts, and school graduation exercises.

If you had only a nickel for your travel back in time, you still would not have to be disappointed. By waiting just a few years, you could see a dream on a silver screen, but you might not see it at the opera house. Motion pictures put the opera houses out of business. Some of them were remodeled into movie houses.

**minstrel** *n.* – a person belonging to a troupe of musical performers.

**vaudeville** *n.* – a variety show.

But fire laws said movie houses had to be on the ground floor, so some opera houses were torn down or converted into business offices. Many still exist. You can check in your town to see if the opera house is still there.

by Nena Smiddy



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TRAER OPERA HOUSE, ABOUT 1905. *This opera house replaced the one that burned. People sat on the main floor (sloped for better viewing), in the balcony, or in one of the four boxes.*



courtesy of Rick Hegwood

LISTER'S OPERA HOUSE, NEWTON, ABOUT 1880. *It was torn down in 1935.*



# Getting the News

"The time to advertise is all the time, people never cease wanting something. The *World* enters the homes of people who trade at Ackley." Thus proclaimed the banner of the *Ackley World* in 1901.

United States newspapers have always served two purposes — as a community service that provided "a free marketplace of opinion," and as a profit-making business. Editors wanted to educate their readers, but at the same time they wanted to make money from advertising.

A good way to find out what is important to a community is to look at its newspapers, especially

at what is printed on the front page. The weekly issue of a small-town newspaper was often half-filled with advertising. The rest was local news, which might mention who the new schoolteacher was or who had out-of-town guests. Newspaper stories often focused on the town's progressiveness.

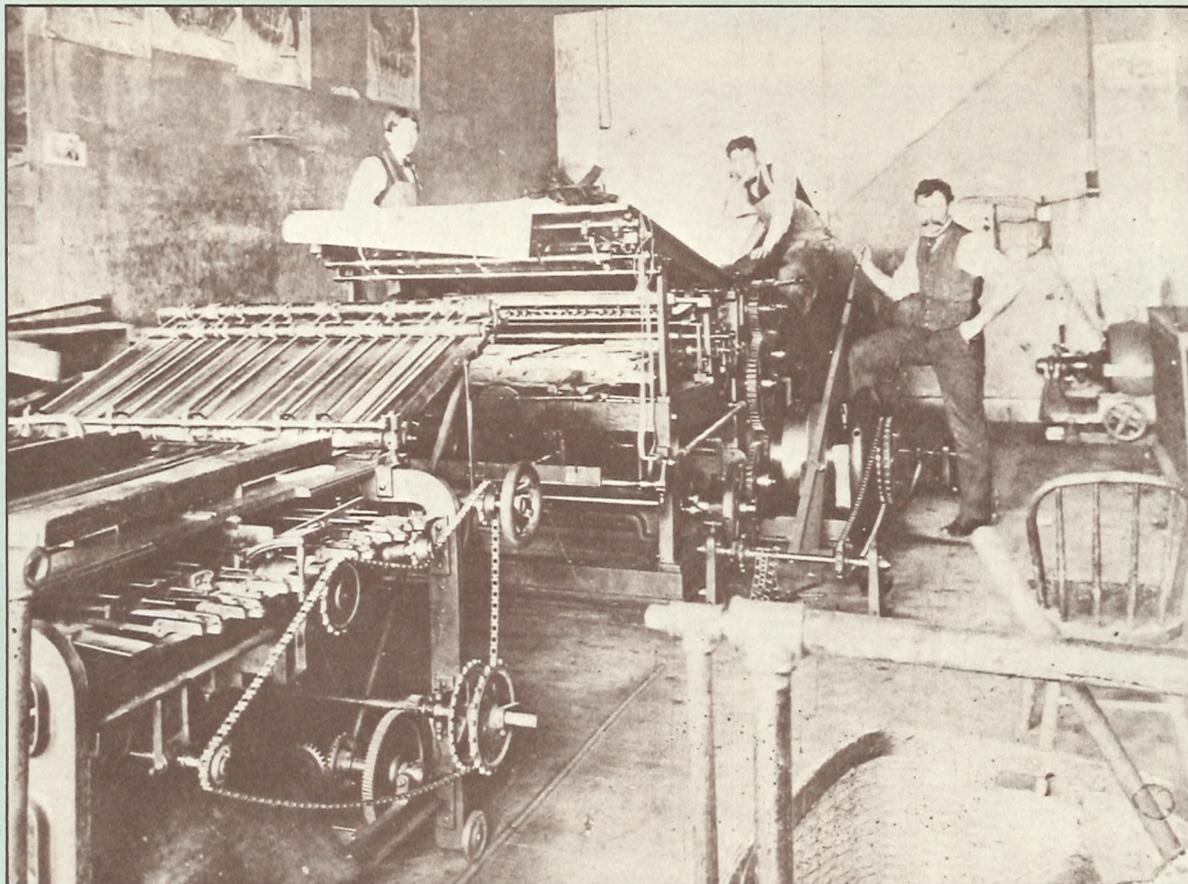
Newspapers were often used as entertainment. Most papers published poems or short stories. Sometimes novels were published — one chapter each week. These were called serials.

Today we get our information from many different sources, including radio and television. But

at the turn of the century, the newspaper was often the only source. The editor of a small-town paper could have a great deal of influence over his readers.

Editors tried to express ideas that would be popular with their readers. It was important to give what they believed was the "right" point of view. When there were two newspapers, they often represented opposite points of view. Today's readers expect reporters to present both sides of an issue fairly, but early local newspapers often reported in a biased and one-sided way.

by Jane Mitchell



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THE PRESS ROOM OF THE BURLINGTON HAWK-EYE, ABOUT 1900.

## The Ladies' Hatmaker

Feathers, satin ribbons, bits of lace, and artificial flowers greeted the entering customer's eye at the millinery shop. It was one of the most important stores for women in a turn of the century town. Women usually wore a hat or bonnet when going out of the house. Headgear could be purchased at general stores or through mail-order catalogues, but only a few styles were available from these sources. Most women preferred to wear individually designed hats from the local milliner.

Usually a woman owned and managed the shop, while designing and making hats to sell. The milliner used her creative

talent to mix different colored feathers, flowers, and ribbons in artistic combinations, while carefully matching the shape and style of a bonnet to its wearer.

There were few chances for women to earn a living in business. Millinery provided women a chance to do this. It was part of their female world, where women could easily manage their own shops, while men owned and operated most other stores.

Millinery shops were also important because they linked Iowa women with the more stylish eastern cities. Rural Iowa villages might be isolated, but milliners kept current dress

patterns and fashion magazines available, so customers could keep up with the latest styles. Sometimes milliners traveled to the East to buy new merchandise for their shops. When they returned they could share tales of their travels with their customers and help the rural women keep in touch with a larger world.

Millinery shops became social gathering spots. There were only a few places in a rural village where women might get together to enjoy conversation, such as church functions or while making formal afternoon calls. At the millinery shop they could drop in anytime and talk with others who might be there.

by Christie Dailey

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THE ADAMS SISTERS MILLINERY SHOP, IOWA CITY, 1913.

## Down at the Station



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THE CENTRAL CITY RAILROAD DEPOT, ABOUT 1901. *This photograph was taken from the top of a railroad car stopped at the depot.*

The long wail of the steam-engine whistle in the distance was an everyday sound to a youngster growing up in Iowa at the turn of the century. Yet, this sound meant a great deal to the way of life of people everywhere in the state. Even the smallest town had a link with the outside world if it had a railroad station.

The telegraph office at the depot was the center for sending and receiving information. News stories came to the town newspaper reporters over the telegraph wires. The mail, too, came and went by rail in soft canvas pouches. Guest speakers, politicians, and entertainers all traveled from town to town in railway passenger cars.

Before the railroads came, it

took a very long time for people and things to get anywhere. By the turn of the century, train speeds ranged from 10 to 20 miles per hour, and they could travel in almost any kind of weather. Railroads brought manufactured goods to towns in Iowa, and they hauled away the farm produce to the cities. No longer did people have to rely on horses and wagons hauling goods over rutted dirt roads for long distances.

Railroad transportation even changed what people ate. In wintertime, rail cars brought fresh fruits and vegetables from warmer places to Iowans who before had eaten only canned and preserved foods in winter months.

## The Artisans

There were always some creative people doing business in those buildings along Main Street. Silversmiths ran jewelry stores and repaired watches. Stonecutters crafted monuments for the cemetery. Shoemakers made a few shoes, but mainly sold and repaired factory-made footwear. Artists, not always busy at portraits or landscapes, decorated woodwork in homes with **graining**, hung wallpaper, or became photographers. Their photographs became the pictorial history for future generations. Every photograph in this issue is an historical record that shows something about how people dressed and lived.

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**graining** *n.* – a painted imitation of the grain in wood or marble.

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A GRINNELL PHOTOGRAPHER WITH HIS CAMERA, 1895.

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*Portrait photographs were often made at a studio, where the photographer used props and background scenes.*

# The Pharmacy

We know that the red and white striped pole outside a building means that the place is a barbershop. But did you know that glass globes or large bottles filled with colored water shimmering in the front windows were the trademark of turn of the century drugstore?

The drugstores or pharmacies of that time were usually owned and operated by doctors or pharmacists. They prepared the prescriptions in a separate room in the back of the store. Scales and weights, mortars and pestles (used for grinding), measuring glasses, a bottle capper, and a pill

rolling machine were the equipment used to make the medications from the raw materials, such as plants and mineral salts. Then the medicines were packaged in glass bottles and pillboxes with the druggist's name on the label in gold letters.

At the front of the store, display cases contained a variety of articles — brushes, fancy bottles of perfume, soap, pens, razors, scissors, and boxed candy. Often there was a cigar case, with a tip cutter and a match dispenser. Purchases were wrapped in brown paper from a long roll and tied with twine wound around a beehive-

shaped spool.

But you can't wrap up an ice-cream soda or a sundae. Many drugstores had ice-cream parlors or soda fountains with little, round-topped, spindly-legged tables and delicate, curving, iron-back chairs. Or, maybe the cherry sodas and hot fudge sundaes were served at a long, shiny, varnished counter with tall stools. Quite a few drugstores today still have soda fountains, although chances are you can't get your favorite goody for 10 cents anymore.

by Lisa K. Abel



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A DRUGSTORE SODA FOUNTAIN, ABOUT 1900.

# Factories

Division of Historical Museums and Archives



A CIGAR MANUFACTURING PLANT AT ALBIA, ABOUT 1900. *Some local industries needed only a small space for workers.*

The pickle works, the glass and pottery factory, the brick and tile works — small factories like these produced their goods in towns all across the state at the turn of the century. They sold their products to people in the region surrounding their location. The factories provided jobs for some of the townspeople. Farmington, with a population of 1332, had a canning factory, a vinegar and pickle company, a broom manufacturer, and a carriage and wagon works.

Eventually, the growing industries in Eastern cities caused

smaller manufacturers to go out of business. Cities had large populations that provided a good supply of workers. Large manufacturers could produce great quantities of a product for a lower price than could small local factories. Even with the shipping and national advertising costs, the products made in Chicago, New York, or Pittsburgh could undersell those made in Iowa. Advertising influenced a product's success, too. Buyers began to insist on well-known, nationally advertised brands.

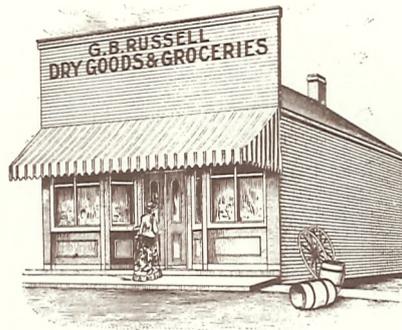
by Jane Mitchell



THE JACOBS, LANDIS, AND FOOTE POTTERY, COLESBURG, ABOUT 1900. Brick and tile manufacturers supplied farmers with tile to drain low-lying, wet fields. When townspeople decided to improve their business district, they paved the main street with brick and replaced old wooden business buildings with solid brick ones.

## One Step Further...

1. If you live in a small town or an older part of a city, try to find evidence of the time when horses were the main source of energy for transportation. Look for houses with a stable, hitching post, or large stone block at the edge of the street.
2. Compare the front page of your local newspaper with the one on page 8. What differences can you find? What seems to be the most important information on each of the front pages?
3. Look at the Carroll newspaper on page 8. What businesses are advertised there? Which ones might be in business today? Why?
4. Today, almost everyone has a chance to record history with a camera. What kinds of photographs can you think of that might show people of the future what your town or city was like in the 1980s? Perhaps your class can have a photographic project to make a record for the future.
5. Make a map of your county and locate all the towns that existed about 1900. Make another map that shows the towns that exist today. How many towns are missing? Try to find out why the remaining towns survived. (Ask for help at the library.)
6. Try to find out the location of businesses on your town's main street at the turn of the century. Draw a map or a picture of the main street. (If your town or county has an historical society, its members may be able to help.)



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