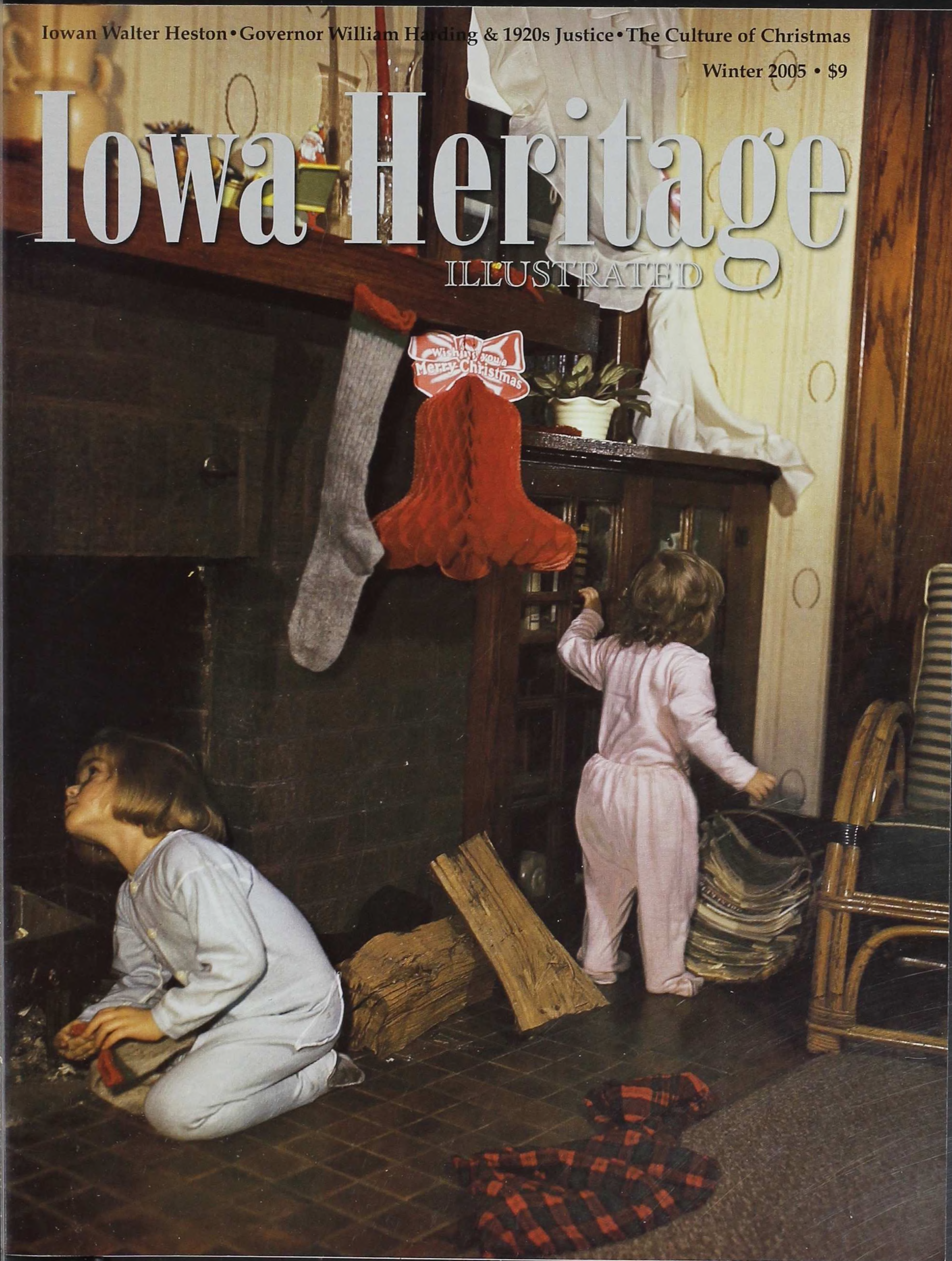


Iowan Walter Heston • Governor William Harding & 1920s Justice • The Culture of Christmas

Winter 2005 • \$9

Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED



Front Porch

Dear Readers,

I'm happy to share the "Front Porch" this issue with two readers who comment on recent issues and articles. I'm always delighted to hear from readers. Look in the column on the right for how to reach me.

This issue has an interesting mix: a personal profile of a great-uncle who built an international reputation; a fascinating tale of political power in the 1920s; and a dip into Christmas past. Illustrated with photos from our great collections, this last article looks at change and continuity in the culture of Christmas, from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th. The article affords us a timely opportunity to stop and think about our own family and community traditions and how they've changed or stayed the same. New immigrant groups in Iowa, blended families, greater mobility, even on-line shopping and e-mail—these kinds of changes are giving new twists to our customs and traditions.

In my own family, some of the Christmas traditions from my side of the family and some from my husband's merged when we married. Other ones he and I created in those first years. Our kids have added their own; my daughter insists that arguing over the size of the Christmas tree is by now a family tradition.

One tradition from my side of the family still hasn't caught on with my husband or our kids, but I'm still fighting for it—reusing wrapping paper. Some traditions are just too important to give up.

I wish you all the best in 2006. Thank you for your ongoing support of this magazine, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and the preservation of Iowa's past.

—Ginalie Swaim, Editor

Letters from Readers

I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* articles by Paul Juhl [Fall 2005]. I recalled many evenings looking through my grandma's stereoscope, viewing their farm and nearby farms in three-dimension. The rolling knolls and corn did "jump out" at me as the author described. All of his stereographs spurred visions of the past. Until this article, I had viewed stereographs as a fun pastime, but I now realize they were educational tools of the 1930s and 1940s.

I loved the "Front Porch" column. I remember the exact same words—"There goes so and so"—as we sat on our grandmother's front porch and watched the cars drive by. As children we slid down her rolling front hill on

cardboard boxes and would stop playing to see which direction the car turned as it sped past us.

While reading the Summer "Front Porch" [in the public health issue] I remembered the blue and white speckled water dipper attached to the well. The sharing-of-the-same dipper and sanitary conditions didn't enter our minds. We only knew that well water was the coldest water we ever drank and made the best lemonade in the whole wide world.

Thank you for publishing these articles. It was a fun trip back in time.

—Barb Neibauer, a former Iowan

The Summer 2005 issue with all of the health information brought back many memories. We don't really appreciate all of the many wonderful accomplishments medical people have brought upon us, at the risk of their own lives, daring to master these terrible diseases. Small pox and black pox hit Cedar Rapids very hard. We were vaccinated in Solon, and I always thought I was shorted because they didn't put that little plastic object on my arm! It festered, and I had a little fever, but that was all. Whooping cough saw us coughing until we lay prostrate on the lawn. Measles, mumps, yellow jaundice were our lot as many others. A Solon man died of tuberculosis. One could hear him coughing when you walked by his home. It wasn't a very pleasant world to be reared in because everyone was frightened by disease.

In the Fall 2005 issue, I couldn't put down the Lincoln Highway articles! [My early automobile excursions included an] incident on Wolf's hill near Mt. Vernon. We were making a run for the hill, and I noticed a tire running ahead of us. It was our tire, which had freed itself from the wheel, and it had more speed than we did. After a chase we mounted the tire back on the wheel and proceeded to Solon.

When I was courting a wonderful girl who had moved from Keosauqua to Boone, we became quite accustomed to driving that road that was on the cover of *Iowa Heritage*. In fact, it was a bit chilling, as the road was one of the steepest we had ever driven over. One moonlit evening I will never forget the almost daylight appearance of the scene when the *City of Denver* crossed the high bridge that Boone was famous for. We were married in Boone two years later.

—E. E. Jebousek, Bella Vista, Arkansas

Iowa Heritage Illustrated

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On the Cover

Christmas 1946: One stocking, two girls, and still no Santa. Photographer Donald L. Ultang captured on film an inquisitive moment as his daughters Linda and Ellen watch for a friendly intruder dressed all in fur from his head to his foot. This issue takes a look at the culture of Christmas, starting in the mid-19th century.

Walter Enoch Heston

Lucas County Farm Boy and World-Renowned Cancer Researcher



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

by Mark Smith

My great-grandparents' farmhouse (above) now sits empty. It was in this house in Lucas County, near the Clarke County line and the little town of Woodburn, that my great-uncle, Walter Enoch Heston, was born on August 23, 1909. Sixty-six years later, on December 31, 1975, he retired as Chief of the Laboratory of Biology of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. His contributions to the understanding of the onset, course, and interventions of cancerous diseases improved the lives of millions.

Although not the first geneticist to be part of cancer research, he was the mammalian geneticist who established a relationship between specific genes and the occurrences

of certain cancers. His long-term work with colonies of inbred mice vastly improved our knowledge of the genetic factors in cancer. Somewhere along the way, he had time to take an interest in me.

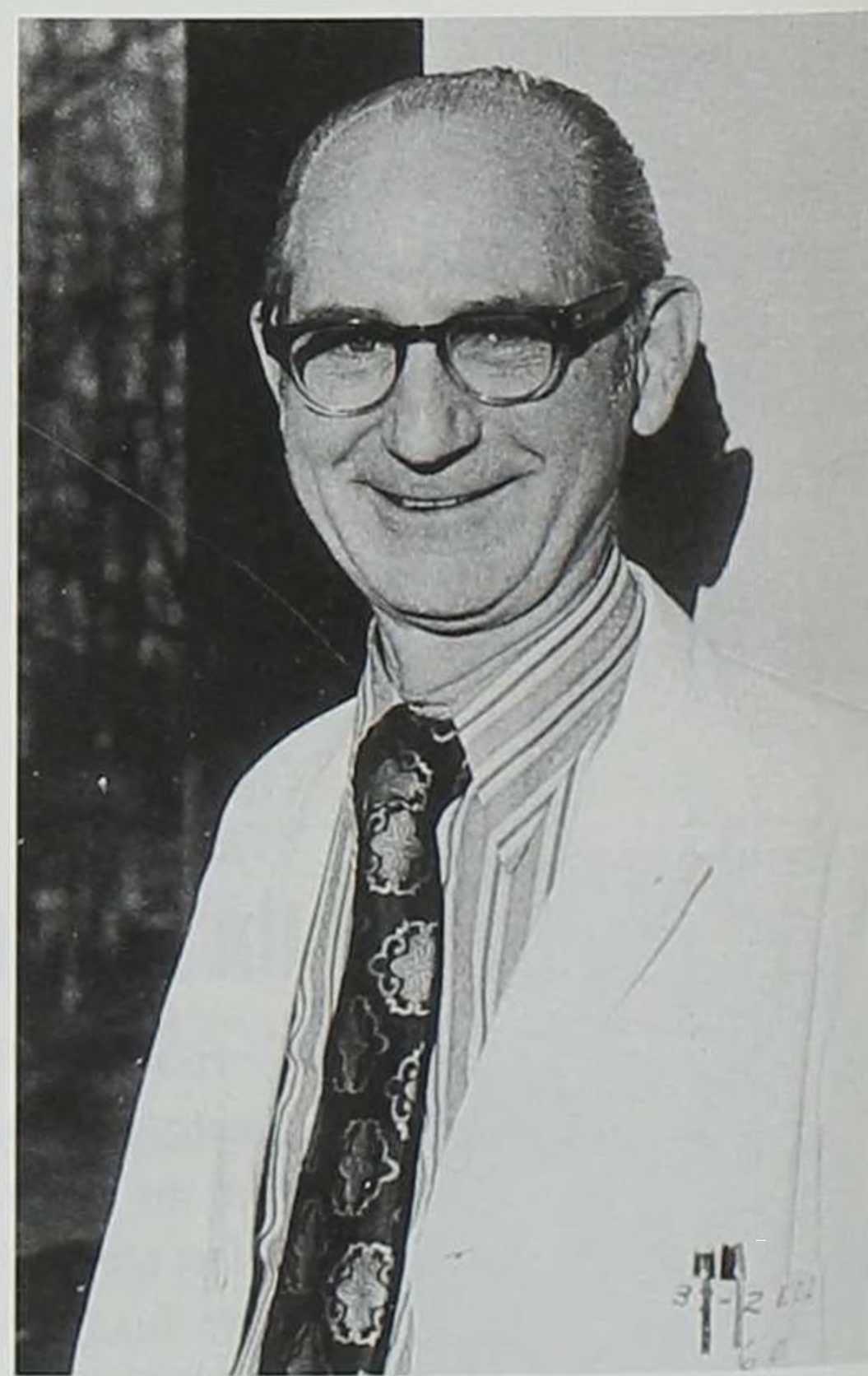
Walter was the ninth of eleven children born to Rosanna and G. L. Heston. As a young man, G. L. had run away from home in Ohio because his father had ordered that his sons become physicians and his daughter, a nurse. G. L., who wanted to farm, rebelled. He settled in Iowa near extended family and set about marrying, raising a family, and farming. Ironically, G. L. ordered that each of his six sons become farmers and that his five daughters become farm women.

Walter was 15 when G. L. died.

At the funeral, Walter's mother turned to him and said, "Now you will get the education you always wanted."

Early on, Walter Heston showed two innate qualities of a scientist—he was curious and observant. Once in his youth, he found a crow's nest and carefully removed the eggs, one by one, marveling at the anomalies of each. Then he diligently recorded how many times the bird returned to lay a replacement egg.

At age 16, a year after his father died, Heston was honored as the top student in Lucas County in 1925. He



Iowa scientist Walter Heston, in 1972.

obtained a teaching certificate but couldn't teach for two years because 18 was the minimum age. After working on his mother's farm for a year, he sought more education.

Because medical school was too expensive, he chose instead to study mathematics at Iowa State College. "Economics have driven many of the decisions of my life," he later said. To earn money, he taught in a rural school and lived on Iowa State's dairy farm, where he milked cows morning and night. He was often too tired to study; if he didn't take notes or take homework to class, he rationalized that "at least I could take my brains."

At Iowa State, Walter loved the lectures in embryology by Joseph E. Guthrie, who used modeling clay to illustrate the complexities of blood vessels. Another professor, W. V. Lambert, introduced Heston to genetics. Under Lambert's tutelage, he explored the phenomenon of webbed toes, a condition existing in Heston's family. In 1932 he published his first research, on the inheritance of webbed toes, and graduated with a degree in zoology.

His next stop was Michigan State College for graduate studies in genetics, supported by a teaching assistantship (again driven by economics). There he studied under Harrison R. Hunt, who had a reputation for training excellent medical researchers. He earned his master's degree in genetics in 1934 and in 1936 he was the first Ph.D. graduate in zoology from Michigan State.

Heston secured a position as professor of biology and head of the department at McMurry College in Abilene, Texas. Guthrie's modeling-clay illustrations at Iowa State soon became part of Heston's lectures at McMurry, and area science teachers flocked to his summer school in the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico, where stepping a dozen



Walter Enoch Heston, circa 1912, sits on his father's lap (far left). One of eleven children raised on the Heston family farm, he became a leading cancer researcher.

yards in any direction practically placed you in a different ecosystem.

Heston was fortunate to find a job during the Great Depression; McMurry College was one of the hundreds of small, denominational colleges beset by the hard economic times. It was difficult to maintain optimism as unemployment rose, crops failed, and commodity prices plummeted. Fortunately, one of the national problems that was being addressed during the Depression was cancer.

Through the centuries, cancer had been one of the ultimate fears in life. A diagnosis meant the loss of hope. It meant that a silent and deadly killer had moved into your body and was quietly taking away the healthy functioning of an organ. When you noticed the lump or the lesion that would not heal, or felt a mysterious pain, it was

usually too late. Treatments were painful, experimental, and often expensive and far from home. In most instances, you faced a slow, agonizing death. Mostly, you hoped and prayed that this disease would pass you by or, if it didn't, that you would die quickly. You hoped your spouse would remarry or that relatives could raise your children. After receiving a cancer diagnosis, many an Iowa farmer went hunting and was found dead from a gun accident, and many cancerous Iowa women accidentally had the gas on when they cleaned the oven.

It was in this context that the United States Congress passed an act establishing the National Cancer Institute on August 5, 1937. For the first time in American history, there was going to be a government-sponsored, coordinated, and systematic approach to cancer research and treatment. One of the six scientists appointed by the U.S. Surgeon General to lead the nation's research

on cancer was Clarence C. Little.

"C. C. Little was the biggest man I ever knew," Heston recalled. Harvard-trained, Little had co-founded the American Birth Control League, served as president of two universities, was the managing director of the Women's Field Army (later reorganized as the American Cancer Society), and built up the Roscoe B. Jackson Memorial Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine. The laboratory would receive one of the first grants from the National Cancer Institute and would become a leading supplier of inbred mice for research. Little believed in a genetic link to cancer, and through Harrison Hunt at Michigan State, he learned of a well-trained genetics researcher teaching biology in Texas—Walter Heston. Heston was selected as a research fellow.

Because there was not yet a home for the National Cancer Institute, research fellows were "farmed out" to various U.S. laboratories. Heston and his wife, Vivian, left Texas for Maine to work at the Jackson Laboratory, which Little directed. The Hestons' three sons, David, Donald, and Thomas, were born while they lived in Maine.

At the Jackson Laboratory, Heston and other scientists hypothesized about the relationship between genetics and cancer. "There I received a good foundation in cancer research and, above all, I was well indoctrinated in the value of inbred strains of experimental animals, particularly mice, in medical research and especially in cancer research," Heston explained years later. By forcing inbreeding, scientists were able to increase or decrease the occurrences of certain forms of cancer and other diseases. At the laboratory, Heston established a breeding colony of mice that was later transferred to the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland.

Throughout the years, various researchers requested Heston's mice. Descendants of these mice are the basis for much of the medical research in Japan; another group was exposed to atom bomb tests in the South Pacific.

When the doors of the National Cancer Institute opened in 1940, Heston was selected to be the mammalian geneticist. Given tremendous latitude, he set about researching, presenting seminars, training assistants, and publishing articles about cancer causation. Another Iowan, Bernie Bowen from Marshalltown, worked alongside Heston, drawing tumors and tissues to illustrate his articles. (She later married Heston's friend and fellow researcher, Lloyd Law, whose research on the flex-tail gene unraveled many of the mysteries of leukemia.) After years of drawing cancerous tumors for publications, including breast cancer tumors, Bowen died of complications of breast cancer.

The importance of Heston's work with mice lay in his organization and maintenance of the colony that was the basis for much of the genetic work at the National Cancer Institute. "Since I was the one on the staff . . . who specifically had received his degree in mammalian genetics," he explained, "I assumed a special responsibility for maintaining my colonies of inbred mice and fostering the use of inbred strains in the research of the institute." He once commented, "My wife was later to find out that my mice had become more widely known than I was."

Heston's mice were identified as "HE3." To this day, whenever I mention HE3 mice to researchers, they respond knowingly, "Yes, of course."

The origins of these mice were very rare brown mice from Tibet. After China fell to Communism in 1949, they were hard to obtain. They were sought after because they were so genetically similar to humans and thus perfect for research.

During World War II, genetic research ended, and the focus shifted to the effects of continuous, long-term exposure to low-dosage gamma irradiation. "Instead of being placed in the Armed Forces," Heston recounted, "I was instructed to remain at NCI and to work along with Drs. Lorenz, Deringer, and Eschenbrenner on the Manhattan Project." A well was dug in the basement of Building Six at the institute. Radium was lowered into the well and raised to the sub-basement at the end of every workday. A colony of mice was subjected to the radiation. Heston and his colleagues were not informed as to why this research was being carried out. They assumed it related to the building of atomic-powered ships and what effects low-level emissions might have on the crew.

Toward the end, it became clearer that the United States was making an atomic bomb. After the war, the radium was removed, the well filled in, and cancer research resumed. Heston predicted that among women who survived the atomic explosions in Japan, there would be high levels of ovarian cancer late in life.

In 1965, word traveled throughout our family that Great-Uncle Walter had been awarded Italy's University of Perugia Alessandro Pascoli Prize for his genetic research on lung tumors in laboratory mice and that he had given the opening lecture at the university's international conference. The next year, instead of lecturing in Italy, he traveled to Iowa to join us at the Heston family reunion. His attendance that

summer of 1966 meant that many of us would be meeting him for the first time. Starting with Aunt Elsie Heston Thrasher, the elders introduced their children and grandchildren to our famous relative. With my grandmother, I waited my turn. But it was not until two years later at the 1968 reunion when he and I shared a moment alone. We chatted—or at least I stumbled through a conversation with him. Later, in a letter to my grandmother, he wrote that my brother Lyle and I were nice youngsters and he invited us to Washington, D.C.

Lyle was working and could not go, but I could and did. I had never been east of the Mississippi River and marveled at the sights as my great-uncle and I drove eastward, stopping at Gettysburg en route. Every day in Washington I walked to the various monuments and museums, and I sat in the galleries through debates in Congress. It was a special honor to tour the National Cancer Institute, one of the world's most prestigious laboratories, and to spend days watching my great-uncle dissect tumors from mice. There he taught me the tenets of research and modeled the persistence of a scientist studying a disease that was not giving up its secrets easily.

Heston retired at the end of 1975 after a 37-year career. He and his second wife, Blanche, moved to Florida. Now he



Mammalian geneticist Walter Heston in 1995, years after his retirement from the National Cancer Institute.

dabbled in another kind of science. He raised mangoes and citrus fruit in his backyard and toured Thomas Edison's rare plant garden in Fort Myers and the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island. My daughter still has fond memories of visiting her great-great-uncle and their mutual love of egrets and other birds.

Our trips to Florida eventually ended. He died in January 1998 at age 88. He had selected "This Is My Father's World" to be sung at his memorial because that hymn had guided him through his years of research.

Already in the late 1960s I had recognized that Walter Heston was a great man—the type of person

who was great whether he was a factory laborer or a research scientist. From his country-school days to his doctoral work at Michigan State, he gained an immense respect for educators: "They're the most important people in the world. Any nation that is going to advance must have excellent teachers." He taught me humility, and he was frugal and doggedly persistent.

But it is only in reading about and pasting together his life's work that I became aware of his contributions in charting a new course for cancer research—though he did not think in terms of "breakthroughs," explaining that even Mendel's work on genetics was not understood until after his death. Asked about his philosophy of science, he answered, "I don't have one, except a simple desire to do something for mankind. When you work in cancer, you are doing something for mankind."

At a time when the average citizen had little hope of surviving cancer, when the study of genetics was still "on the crest of cancer research," Iowan Walter Heston had the scientist's ability to look cancer in the eye and not flinch. ♦

Mark Smith lives in Marshalltown, Iowa, and is serving his third term in the Iowa House of Representatives, representing Marshalltown, Green Mountain, Liscomb, Albion, and the surrounding rural areas. The great-nephew of cancer researcher Walter Heston, Smith is a survivor of prostate cancer.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Walter Heston's "Biography as Related to Inbred Strains of Experimental Animals," undated and apparently unpublished, was written by him during his retirement years in Fort Myers, Florida, and includes a wealth of information about his career. The biography is in the author's private collection. Other useful sources include Elizabeth Erickson et al., *Celebrating 75 Years of the Roscoe B. Jackson Laboratory 1929–2004* (Jackson Laboratory, 2004); Walter E. Heston (Chief, Laboratory of Biology, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland), interview by

Wyndam Miles, May 26, 1964 (tapes and transcripts available at the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health); Walter E. Heston, interview and videotape by Mark Smith, circa 1991 (author's private collection); author's correspondence, Oct. 26, 2004, with Michigan State Library regarding Harrison R. Hunt and Walter E. Heston; and Walter E. Heston, "Inheritance of 'webbed toes,'" *Journal of Heredity*, 23 (1932). The author's cousin Georgia Rae Johnson has maintained Walter Heston's birthplace in Lucas County.

Pardon Me, Governor

Ernest Rathbun, William Harding, and the Politics of Justice

by Tom Morain

Ernest Rathbun of Ida Grove stood five feet five, weighed 144 pounds, had brown hair and brown eyes, a "good education," and no religious affiliation. In 1920 he was 24 years old and "intemperate," according to the Anamosa Men's Reformatory admission record for Prisoner #11796. Three years earlier, the 16th Judicial District Court in Ida County had sentenced Rathbun to life in prison for the rape of a local 17-year-old girl. The facts were plain enough. Some may have felt that life imprisonment was too harsh for a young man, but Iowa law mandated the sentence.

Back in 1917 there had been little interest in the case outside Ida County, and even there, Rathbun's name after the trial commanded only a tepid notoriety. Nevertheless, from such an unremarkable beginning grew a scandal that would spark a catfight within the Republican Party, lead to calls for the impeachment of the state's top two elected officials, and threaten to reinterpret the separation of powers as defined in the state constitution. Ernest Rathbun became the issue the enemies of Governor William L. Harding used to corner and vanquish the political foe they loved to hate.

Ernest Rathbun was the youngest of ten children born to William, Sr., and Jane Rathbun, prosperous Ida County farmers and stock raisers. Ernest compiled a disappointing record during a short service in the U.S. Army patrolling the Mexican border. Fellow soldiers remembered him as lazy, willing even to burn holes in his tent and set fire to his own uniform to get out of work. His refusal to do a day of K.P. earned him a five-day stint in the brig and a demotion to the rank of private. Among fellow soldiers, Rathbun's "boastful disregard for women's virtue" drew notice. Called back to Fort Des Moines in the spring of 1917, he avoided being sent to France and left the army just when other men his age were being drafted. He returned home to the family farm in Ida County.

Living at home, Rathbun continued to get into trouble. By fall he was under investigation by local au-

thorities for a possible sexual assault on a girl in a nearby town, but no charges had been filed. That case, however, was soon eclipsed by a more dramatic episode.

On November 4, 1917, Rathbun and his friend Ray O'Meara were cruising for trouble. They persuaded two teenaged Ida Grove girls to get into their car for what they promised would be a short drive in the country. When the car kept stopping along a secluded road, the 15-year-old girl bolted and started running back to town. Rathbun and O'Meara grabbed the 17-year-old and sexually assaulted her.

Although O'Meara was not tried for nearly a year, Rathbun faced judge and jury within weeks after the assault. Convicted on December 22, 1917, Rathbun received the life sentence in the Anamosa Men's Reformatory that Iowa law mandated. Rathbun's attorney, George Clark, immediately appealed the conviction, and Rathbun remained free on bail while the Supreme Court had the appeal under consideration.

Though they would never meet, Ernest Rathbun and William Harding would soon figure dramatically in each other's lives. Like Rathbun, Harding was the son of northwest Iowa farmers. Born in 1875 in a dirt-floored farmhouse on the prairie in Osceola County, he completed rural school and one term at the normal school in Le Mars in nearby Plymouth County, enough education for a teaching certificate. He earned a law degree from the University of South Dakota and set up practice in Sioux City, where as an undergraduate student at Morningside, he dabbled in college journalism, worked for both daily newspapers in the city, and discovered his passion for politics. It was Sioux City that became the home and political base of William L. Harding, "Lloyd" to his family and "Bill" or "Big Bill" to friends and political associates. In 1906 he won the first of three terms in the Iowa House of Representatives. He was elected lieutenant governor in 1912 and re-elected in 1914.



William L. Harding (left) was governor when the case of Ernest Rathbun (right) came before the courts—again and again and again—setting off bitter political battles.

Two issues dominated William Harding's tenure as lieutenant governor. Harding was a leader of a coalition of rural and small-town legislators opposed to the creation of a state highway commission committed to building hard-surfaced highways. Farmers especially chafed at the threatened loss of control over the road system and resisted proposals that would increase their property tax bills. Urban legislators, supported by daily newspapers like the *Des Moines Register*, beat the drum to "get Iowa out of the mud" with highway construction.

The second issue was prohibition. The Republican Party was divided between those who favored stringent restrictions on the manufacture and sale of alcohol (the "drys") and those who advocated less control (the "wets"). Harding, the highest ranking "wet" Republican, was a prime target of attacks by prohibition advocates. Again, the *Register*, by now "dry" on the liquor question, found itself crossing swords with the Sioux City politician.

A personal incident further deepened the animosity between Harding and the *Des Moines Register*. Sati- rizing Harding's opposition to both highways and pro- hibition, the *Register's* popular political cartoonist J. N. "Ding" Darling drew a caricature of the hefty Harding as a fat bull-frog sitting in a puddle in a dirt road hap- pily croaking: "Jug-O-Rum, Jug-O-Rum, Jug-O-Rum." The cartoon hit a nerve. Harding and his colleagues in the Iowa Senate resented the personal attack. Two weeks later, Governor George W. Clarke nominated *Register* publisher Gardner Cowles to serve on the State Board of Education, but when Cowles's name was brought

before the Senate for approval, the body dismissed it. Cowles asked Harding for his support, but Harding re- fused. According to Harding biographer John Evert Visser, "from that time forward, the *Register* publicized [Harding's] every miscue and criticized his every act."

In 1916 Harding announced his candidacy for gov- ernor. Political supporters from Sioux City's "Harding for Governor" club developed an efficient political net- work throughout northwest Iowa. Ben Salinger, Sr., an Iowa Supreme Court justice and experienced politico in Woodbury County, and Ben, Jr., chair of the Woodbury County Republicans, headed the organiza- tion. Ida Grove attorney Thad Snell was Harding's chief lieutenant in neighboring Ida County, where George Clark, Ernest Rathbun's attorney, was Republican county chairman.

Harding, the only "wet" candidate in the Republi- can primary, won the gubernatorial nomination over three rivals who divided the "dry" vote. In a bitter and convoluted general election that saw major defections among both parties over prohibition and roads, "wet" Republican Harding defeated his "dry" Democratic ri- val, E. T. Meredith of Des Moines.

To the victor belonged the spoils. As the new gov- ernor, Harding wasted no time in rewarding his elec- tion machine—the "kitchen cabinet" as it came to be known in the capital—with appointments to office. Many administrators appointed by previous Republi- can governors were replaced with Harding men. Ac- cording to Visser, the group "became so brazen in their demands and their attempts to manipulate state affairs that the entire legislature soon erupted in open revolt." Antagonism against Harding, personal and political, ran deep. When an opportunity arose to embarrass, hu- miliate, or even impeach him, his opponents seized it with relish. The case of Ernest Rathbun became that opportunity.

Late in 1918, a year after his rape conviction, Ernest Rathbun was still at liberty in Ida Grove await- ing the outcome of his appeal to the Iowa Su- preme Court. It is doubtful that he was closely following events in the Iowa statehouse or the 1918 elec- tions. He was, however, very interested in conversations with local politically well-connected Republican attorneys.

According to later testimony by Ernest's father and brother Will, the family was approached by Thad Snell about the possibility of securing a commutation of the life sentence after Ernest had served a year in Anamosa. Rathbun's own attorney, George Clark, made a more aggressive offer. For \$5,000, Clark promised to get Ernest

off completely, with no jail time at all. The Rathbuns agreed to Clark's terms.

What made Snell and Clark think that they could get the sentence reduced, or even eliminated, for a rapist convicted in one incident and under suspicion for another, who had not yet spent one day in jail? The answer to that question reveals much about the political climate of Harding's administration and political machine.

Again according to the senior Rathbun's sworn account, Clark told him he needed the money in cash in advance—"for the governor." That governor was completing a tough but successful campaign for re-election.

On November 5, Harding won a second term, defeating the Democrats' Claude Porter by only 14,000 votes. Harding drew only 51 percent of the votes cast for the two major-party candidates. During his first term, his infamous proclamation during the anti-German hysteria of World War I had outlawed any language in Iowa but English. Now in the 1918 election, Iowans who spoke German, Danish, Norwegian, or Dutch—and who had generally supported Harding in 1916 for his "wet" leanings—bolted the Republican ticket. Nevertheless, a victory is a victory, and Harding would continue as governor for at least two more years, a prospect that dismayed his opponents.

On November 6, the day after the election, Clark traveled to Des Moines to meet with Harding about a pardon for his client Rathbun. The governor told Clark that he would do nothing without a recommendation from the presiding judge and prosecuting attorney. Clark returned to Ida Grove and discussed the case with those two officials. He asked for and received their recommendations to commute the sentence from life to a stated number of years to be determined by the governor. Clark never mentioned his plans to ask Harding for a full pardon. To the recommendations, he attached a carefully edited transcript of the district court proceedings. He also attached a statement from Rathbun himself, who declared that he was a citizen of good moral character and innocent of the rape charge, even though only a few weeks before, in the trial of his partner Ray O'Meara, he had testified to his guilt as a witness for the prosecution.

On November 11, the nation erupted in wild joy with news of the signing of the armistice that ended the fighting in Europe. The day after the celebrations, Clark returned to Des Moines to file the application for Rathbun's pardon. Harding was attending a governors' conference in Washington, D.C., so Clark left the papers with Charles Witt, the governor's private secretary.

On his first day back from Washington, never having seen Clark's materials before, Harding signed two

copies of a full pardon for Rathbun. The governor did not ask for a review of the case by the state board of parole, the usual procedure. Nor did he consult the attorney general's office or ask for any further advice from those who had prosecuted the case. (Ignoring Attorney General Horace Havner was no surprise. Havner and the governor were not even speaking to each other at the time because of their political animosities.) Harding sent two copies of the pardon to Clark, who gave one to Rathbun but told him to keep it secret for the time being. Clark showed the other to Ray O'Meara, Rathbun's partner in crime, and offered to get him a similar pardon for \$5,000.

Later investigations and circumstantial evidence painted a suspicious sequence of events surrounding the signing of the pardon. The *Des Moines Tribune* put together its own reading and laid it out succinctly.

Nov. 12.—[William] Rathbun secured \$2,000 from the bank in currency, four rolls of \$500 each. He swore he gave this money to Clark. On the evening of the same day Clark came to Des Moines.

Nov. 13.—Clark sees Charles Witt, the governor's private secretary, and returns to his home in the evening.

Nov. 14.—Telephone message from the governor's office to Snell at Ida Grove. On that evening Thad Snell left Ida Grove for Chicago.

Nov. 15.—Snell met the governor in Chicago. Governor left Chicago on that night for Des Moines.

Nov. 16.—Pardon of young Rathbun signed.

Nov. (blank date).—Clark tries to make up receipts for the \$2,000 given by Rathbun to show that the money was paid on Nov. 18 instead of Nov. 12, but his bank books show Nov. 12.



Horace Havner, Iowa's attorney general, became a major actor in the Rathbun drama.

Meanwhile, because news of the pardon had been kept secret, the legal machinery surrounding Rathbun's conviction continued to turn. On December 6, the Iowa Supreme Court dismissed Rathbun's year-old appeal, supposedly

clearing the way for him to be taken into custody. But the following day Clark filed the governor's pardon in Ida Grove, making Rathbun a free man.

News of the pardon exploded like a bombshell. Attorney General Havner secured a copy of Rathbun's statement of innocence and good character included in Clark's formal appeal to Harding. The letter stated that Havner had approved the request for a commutation of sentence. Havner had not. He had never even been consulted and knew nothing about the application until he received news of the pardon. Convinced of Rathbun's guilt on the rape charge and eager to distance himself from the governor's action, Havner seized the political initiative. He engaged Judge J. L. Kennedy of Sioux City as a special investigator to "bring proceedings against any persons found to have been guilty of wrongful acts" in connection with the granting of the pardon. Havner already appealed to the "dry" wing of the Republican Party for his vigorous enforcement of prohibition. With his eye on the 1920 gubernatorial primary, he lost no time in anointing himself a crusader for justice and putting together a coalition of anti-Harding forces. Rathbun was the issue, but Harding was the target.

The battle heated up. Republican Representative William Seth Finch of Ida County introduced a resolution in the Iowa House demanding an explanation of the pardon. He accompanied it with the signatures of 425 local citizens expressing their outrage. Harding's enemies in the press now smelled scandal. *Iowa Homestead* editor Jim Pierce, once Harding's friend but an avowed foe by 1918, called the pardon "Iowa's most flagrant miscarriage of justice." He contrasted the governor's pardon of Rathbun with the swift trials and public hangings of three African American soldiers at Camp Dodge found guilty of a similar crime. The *Des Moines Register* put a reporter on the story with orders to "get Harding" and provided front-page space to it almost daily for the next four months.

Havner joined forces with Ida county attorney Charles Macomber. Macomber had announced his intention to convene a grand jury

to throw out the pardon and send Rathbun to jail. The jury began hearings on February 17, and the *Des Moines Register* gave it front-page billing. Though the proceedings were secret, the list of witnesses called was public, and the *Register* spared no effort to inform its readers of what was going on. The victim of the assault was called to tell her story once again. So were Rathbun's father, attorney, and other local residents associated with the crime.

And so was William L. Harding himself, the author of the pardon. As governor, Harding could have claimed immunity from testifying, but he wanted the opportunity to defend himself against the attacks that Havner and the media were pouring down upon him. He could have claimed that he had been deceived by Clark's application for the pardon. Instead, he chose not to back down.

Announcing his intention to testify before the grand jury, Harding set out for Ida Grove, but his health was not up to the trip. He was seriously ill with an ear infection. When his train reached Carroll, he was admitted to the hospital where he remained in serious condition

for five days. Overweight, exhausted and under severe strain, he was also diagnosed with diabetes, a condition that would plague him for the rest of his life.

On February 20, with the governor still in the hospital, Havner made a bold move. "Havner Revokes Rathbun Pardon," the *Register's* front page screamed. With no directive from the chief executive who had issued the document, the attorney general declared the pardon void. He ordered the Ida County sheriff to take Rathbun into custody.

Harding was furious. "I am the governor; Havner is not," he growled to reporters from his hospital bed. "I grant pardons; he doesn't."

George Clark, Rathbun's attorney, responded immediately. To counter Havner's order for Rathbun's arrest, Clark filed a *habeas corpus* petition, demanding the judge to explain why his

GOVERNOR UNABLE TO TESTIFY BEFORE IDA COUNTY JURORS

"Has Serious Infection of
Parotid Gland of Left Ear,"
Says Doctor.

NURSE SAYS ITS MUMPS

State Agent Saunders Arrives
on Hand Car, Lou Salinger's
Partner Called by Executive.

pardoned client was in jail. Since both Havner's order and Clark's petition centered on the validity of Rathbun's pardon, the judge joined the two actions into one case.

On the morning of February 24, Harding rose from his hospital bed in Carroll and headed northwest to Ida Grove. There, he went directly to the courthouse, where he reviewed records of a previous assault charge against Rathbun that had been dismissed upon his 1917 conviction and life sentence. In the afternoon the governor testified to the grand jury for an hour under Havner's examination. Exhausted, he retired to a hotel and went to bed.

That evening, in a private session, Attorney General Havner put the squeeze on Rathbun. He informed Rathbun that the grand jury had voted six indictments, including bribery, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy against Rathbun, his father and brother, his friend Ray O'Meara, another friend involved in the previous assault charge, and Rathbun's attorney George Clark.

Here was Havner's deal: If Rathbun renounced his pardon and pled guilty to a perjury charge, Havner would arrange to drop all other indictments. If not, Havner would see that Rathbun's father and brother also went to prison. Rathbun conceded to Havner's terms.

At 8 p.m., after most of the press and spectators had left for the night, the judge called district court back into session. Rathbun was there with his father, brother Will, and attorney George Clark. There were no arguments before the judge; both sides had agreed to the

script. The judge ruled that the pardon was void on two counts. First, Rathbun had submitted false statements in his appeal to the governor, and the pardon obtained by fraud was void. Second, the governor had not followed the rules that directed the board of parole to review all requests for pardon.

Shocked, Rathbun's father jumped up. "Your honor, please, I object to

the proceedings. I don't want the pardon of my boy revoked. It is being done against my wishes." The judge silenced him and proceeded to interrogate Ernest.

Judge: "Do you understand that this proceeding cancels your pardon, or the pardon granted to you by the Governor, and that the proceeding takes it away from you and you get no rights under it?"

E. Rathbun: "Yes, sir."

Judge: "Is it satisfactory to you to have that done?"

E. Rathbun: "Yes, sir."

Rathbun also pleaded guilty to one count of perjury that brought him a ten-year sentence to be served concurrently with his life sentence for rape. He gave up his copy of the pardon. The document was duly marked "Canceled," and the defendant was taken into custody. To spare his father and brother prison sentences for their involvement on his behalf, Rathbun had consented to a life sentence in the Anamosa Reformatory, plus the concurrent ten years.

Harding heard the news as he lay sick in his hotel bed. He returned to Des Moines the following day. The grand jury continued its probe for a few more days. Ida County bankers were called in to help trace the money that the Rathbuns had paid to Clark. In the end, however, the grand jury returned only one indictment, Rathbun's perjury charge. Although they dropped criminal charges against Clark, they recommended that he be disbarred. The judge appointed a committee of attorneys, including county attorney Macomber, to oversee those proceedings.

Rathbun's pardon was gone and he was once again bound for jail. When he boarded the train for Anamosa in the custody of the sheriff, a huge crowd turned out to watch him depart. Very few were sorry to see him go.

As the controversy in Ida Grove died down, fireworks flared up within the walls of the state capitol. Havner's aggressiveness had infuriated Harding, who was left under suspicion of taking a bribe for the pardon. Judge Kennedy, as Havner's special investigator,

HAVNER COMES OUT IN EMPHATIC REPLY TO HARDING ATTACK

Governor Told Him to "Keep
His Nose Out" When He
Sought to Give Advice.

RAISES VERACITY ISSUE

Denounces Certain Statements
in Chief Executive's Speech
As False.

RATHBUN LEAVES TO ENTER PRISON

Crowd Turns Out at Ida Grove
Depot to Witness His
Departure.

JURY STILL IN SESSION

Financial Transactions in Con-
nection With Case Now Be-
ing Investigated.

RATHBUN SR. SWEARS HE GAVE
CLARK \$5,000 FOR GOVERNOR

was angry at Havner for quashing indictments against Clark and others. Harding's foes had tasted blood and were hungry for the kill. The *Register* immediately called the Ida Grove deal "a compromise by which the rapist takes the blame for everything, those who participated in his crooked effort to escape are relieved of worry, and the real question which all Iowa wants solved is left untouched."

The question, as the *Register* spelled it out, was "why Governor Harding, a lawyer, a politician always given to considering effects, a man with perhaps more legislative and executive experience than any other man doing business at the state house, broke the customs of the governor's office and the statutes of Iowa in order to keep Ernest Rathbun from serving a day in the penitentiary."

The other question was, of course, who ended up with the \$5,000.

Harding tried to take the offensive. Addressing the legislature, he offered his own version, which convinced no one, and used the occasion to open an attack against Havner's heavy-handed methods. Knowing that an investigation was certain, Harding demanded that the legislature either charge him with bribery or clear his name.

In three weeks of intensive testimony, the special investigative committee could find no evidence that Harding had accepted any money for the pardon. In the process, however, the proceedings treated the public to a rare glimpse of operating procedures within Harding's political organization and administration. George Clark could not account for what he did with the Rathbun money. In sworn testimony before a legislative panel, reported verbatim in the *Register*, Clark maintained that he used \$1,333 of Rathbun's money to pay off a debt to Thad Snell for previous legal work, not for Snell's trip to Chicago. In his testimony, Snell claimed the money was what Clark owed him for losses at the poker table. Harding's personal secretary Charles Witt, trying unsuccessfully to explain how large sums of money went in and out of his possession, revealed his connections with questionable professional wrestling promoters. Every day the newspapers disclosed the latest chapter in the political soap opera. As the hearings dragged on, the strain took its toll on Harding's fragile health. He lost 39 pounds during the spring of 1919.

In April, the House Judiciary Committee voted 17-14 to recommend that the House bring impeachment proceedings against the governor. A minority report recommended a censure, claiming that the governor was guilty of hasty action in granting the pardon.

Tired of the scandal and satisfied that Harding had

Waterloo Courier: In the end the present state house storm will leave in the minds of a great many Iowans a lack of real respect for both Mr. Harding and Mr. Havner, and a well grounded opinion that the state will be well rid of two liabilities when their terms of office expire.

Mount Ayr Journal: Mere "tut, tuts" from the governor will not satisfy folks who want the mystery of the Rathbun pardon cleared up.

Oelwein Iowan: Governor Harding can well wish he had never had anything to do with politics. He gained the governorship through misgivings of many that voted for him and he will leave Des Moines discredited in the public mind.

Marshalltown Times Republican: Practically every daily newspaper in the United States carried front page news display of the Rathbun affidavit suggesting bribery of Iowa's governor, such is the distinction to which Harding has brought the fair name of our state.

Davenport Democrat: But the state of Iowa has a right to know the truth about the Rathbun pardon, and to have the scandal cleared up. There is need of a housecleaning in Des Moines—one such as the Democrat was recommending last fall, when almost a majority of the people of Iowa agreed with it.

The *Des Moines Register* opposed William Harding and his political stances even before he became governor. Then, as the Rathbun case began to unfold, the *Register* relentlessly kept the story alive in its own editions (see headlines on previous pages), quoting lengthy testimony from the trials and editorial opinions from other Iowa newspapers (above).

no political future, the full House pulled back on the impeachment and accepted instead the minority report for censure on a 70–34 vote. Almost yielding to a “plague on both your houses” position, the legislature narrowly defeated by 53–49 a motion to censure Attorney General Havner as well, for his role with the Ida Grove grand jury.

With Rathbun in prison, the investigation completed, Harding disgraced, and Havner chastened, public interest in the case quickly subsided.

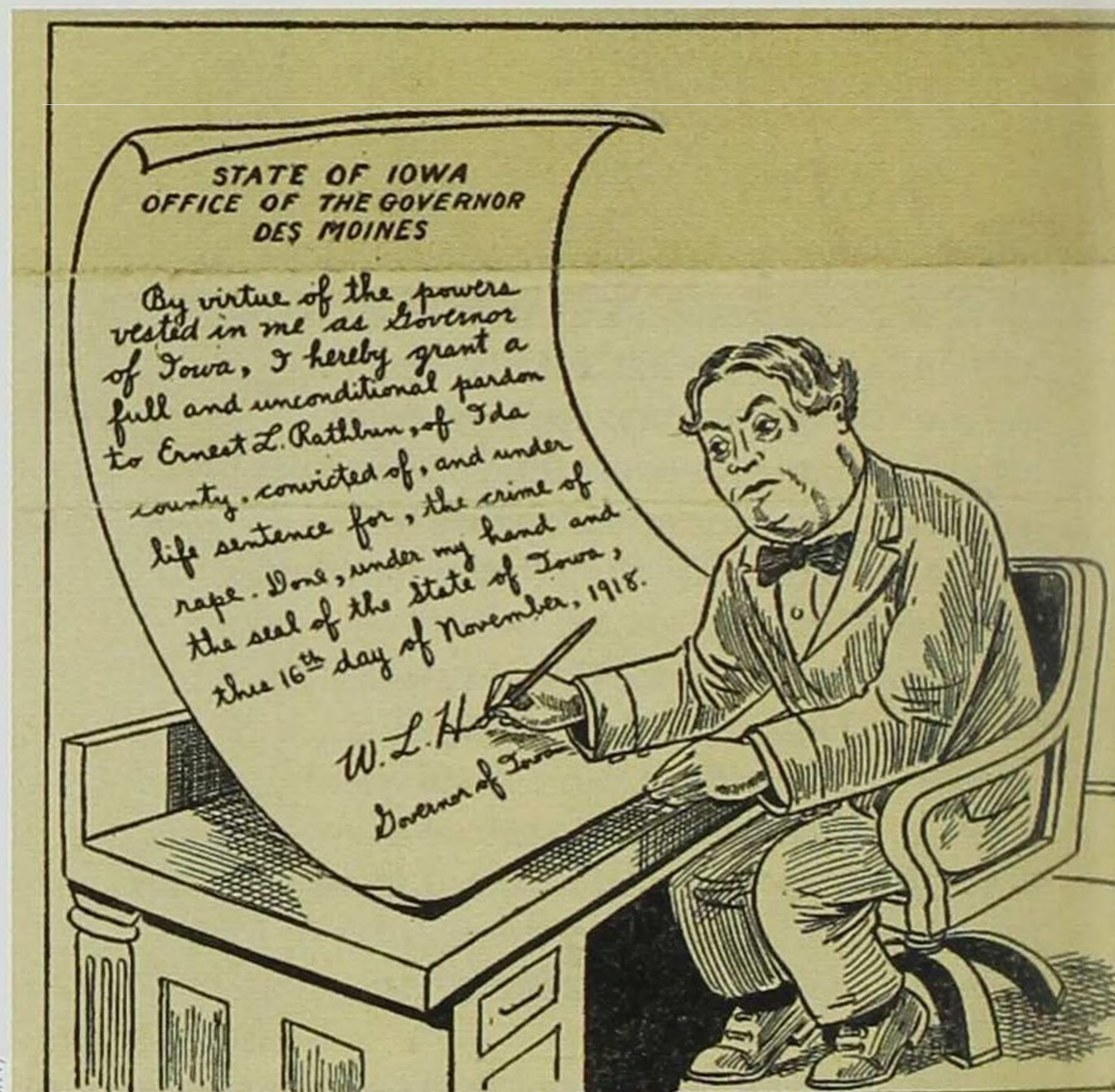
Not everyone, however, lost interest in the fate of Ernest Rathbun. Ernest Rathbun certainly did not. He was in prison and he wanted out. After a year in Anamosa, he filed a second writ of *habeas corpus*, this time in the 18th Judicial District Court in Linn County, once again claiming that he was being illegally detained on the rape charge for which he had been pardoned by the governor. His petition argued that the district court in Ida County that sentenced him lacked the “jurisdiction and authority . . . to set aside or cancel such pardon.”

This time the judge sided with Rathbun! Judge F. F. Dawley ruled that the judicial branch of government had no power to protect the governor against deceptive information and that the duty to scrutinize and evaluate the merits of the evidence rested solely with the executive. He sustained the *habeas corpus* petition and ordered the Anamosa warden to free Rathbun.

On his “release,” however, Rathbun was immediately re-arrested and taken to the State Penitentiary at Fort Madison to continue serving the ten-year sentence for perjury. Havner’s office announced that it would appeal Judge Dawley’s ruling. Once again the Iowa Supreme Court found itself reviewing Rathbun’s bizarre case.

In December 1922, almost two years after Judge Dawley had “reinstated” the pardon, the supreme court reversed Dawley’s decision. Following the path first articulated by Attorney General Havner and the district court judge in Ida County, the majority ruled that because Rathbun had committed fraud in his application for pardon, the district court was within its authority to declare that pardon void.

Furthermore, it declared that the district court in Linn County had no authority to review the earlier district court decision. Under *habeas corpus*, the law states that a prisoner can bring a petition only once. If he loses, he cannot file a similar petition with another court, “becoming a mendicant,” the majority wrote, “wandering from court to court, and judge to judge, over the state,



How a Self-Confessed Ida County Rapist Escaped Paying Any Penalty for the Same Crime.

Harding signs Rathbun’s pardon in this drawing from a broadside (circa 1920). The broadside contrasts Harding’s “pardon of the unpardonable crime [rape]” with the swift conviction and hanging of three African American soldiers charged with sexual assault at Camp Dodge in 1918.

until, perchance, he may obtain a favorable decision.” And finally, the majority declared, Rathbun had voluntarily given up his pardon in Ida Grove with full understanding of his action. He could not later ask to have it reinstated.

Writing the minority decision, Justice Truman S. Stevens dissented vigorously. The power to pardon belongs to the governor, Stevens asserted, just as do his powers to veto legislation, appoint officers, and command the militia. Stevens dismissed the claim that the governor needs to be protected by the courts. Of course, a petitioner for a pardon will do everything possible to marshal the evidence to make the best case. But the governor is capable of making the evaluation. Stevens wrote: “The reasons which influence him to a pardon may not be such as would command the approval of the court, or the prosecutor, or members of the public at large. It is sufficient that he is satisfied therewith. His is the prerogative and his the responsibility.”

But Stevens failed to persuade his fellow justices. The majority prevailed, and Rathbun was once again under a life sentence for rape and for the remainder of a ten-year sentence for perjury.

That should have been the last chapter in the saga of Ernest Rathbun. It was not. The supreme court’s decision raised a storm of controversy among Iowa lawyers, and the court agreed to rehear the case.

What happened between that decision and the rehearing the next December must have seemed miraculous to a miscreant like Rathbun. In October 1923, Rathbun completed serving his perjury sentence. His original ten years had been reduced for good behavior and "honor time." Thus, the only charge keeping Rathbun in prison was his life sentence for rape. However, when the supreme court agreed to rehear the attorney general's appeal, the Linn County court ruling declaring that Rathbun's pardon was valid was in effect once again, pending the supreme court's decision. That meant that the state had no grounds to hold Rathbun in prison, and he was released.

Thus, Rathbun found himself a free man while the supreme court debated the legal issues. The attorney general's office was understandably leery that Rathbun could be trusted to stick around to find out what the supreme court decided. The office filed an appeal to take Rathbun back into custody to prevent his disappearance. But it was already too late. Within a week, reports were circulating that Rathbun had left the state, possibly heading to Canada. In fact, because he was not under bond and had a "valid" pardon, there was some question whether he could be extradited even if he was located.

In December, history repeated itself: the supreme court once again heard the case and once again declared Rathbun's pardon void on the same grounds it had employed the year before. For the third time, Iowa courts ruled that judges have the power to invalidate a governor's pardon with or without the governor's consent. But this time there was one enormous difference: Ernest Rathbun was gone, and no one knew his whereabouts.

None of the principal players in the Rathbun saga emerged with enhanced public stature. Attorney General Horace Havner ran for governor the following spring but lost to Nathan Kendall in a four-way Republican primary. Lawyer George Clark faced a disbarment hearing for his role in the Rathbun proceedings, but the

presiding judge allowed him to continue to practice. (Years later, ironically, Clark landed a job with the state attorney general's office assigned to the State Highway Commission.) Ray O'Meara, Rathbun's partner in the assault, had his life sentence commuted in 1933 and was released from Fort Madison a few months later.

"Big Bill" Harding never ran for political office after his term as governor ended in 1921. The Republican National Committee used his impressive speaking talents to campaign for Republican presidential candidates in surrounding states, but not in Iowa. In the early 1930s, Harding considered running for the U.S. Senate but knew he could not win with the Rathbun cloud of scandal still hovering. He appealed to *Des Moines Register* editor Harvey Ingham to re-examine the charges that he had accepted a bribe in granting the pardon, but Ingham refused. Harding died in 1934.

And Ernest Rathbun, whose "boastful disregard for women's virtue" had started the whole affair? Ironically, the last known reference to Ernest Rathbun connects him once again with the office of the governor of Iowa. It was not William Harding this time, but Governor John Hammill, seven years after the 1923 supreme court ruling.

It is hard to imagine that William Harding ever wanted to see Rathbun again, but John Hammill did. On August 19, 1930, Hammill signed a proclamation offering "a reward of FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS for the apprehension of the said ERNEST RATHBUN and his arrest and delivery to the Warden of the Men's Reformatory at Anamosa, Iowa, to be dealt with in accordance with the law."

No one ever collected the reward money. ❖

Tom Morain directs community outreach and teaches history at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa. A former director of the State Historical Society of Iowa, he is the author of Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century.

NOTE ON SOURCES

I was first introduced to the Ernest Rathbun case by Jim Reagh, a Graceland University student and volunteer at the State Archives, who explored its legal but not political implications in a history paper at Graceland.

The archivists at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines), especially Sharon Avery and Jeffrey Dawson, tracked down prison records. David Harris, longtime friend and retired Iowa Supreme Court justice from Jefferson, provided some historical background on legal proceedings of the era. Another good friend, district court judge Timothy Finn of Ames, offered several suggestions and improved my legal terminology. Still another friend, Jerry Gorden from the Gold Star Museum at Camp

Dodge, researched Rathbun's army records. My son Michael Morain tightened both the prose and the logic.

The Rathbun and Harding saga was extensively covered in the *Des Moines Register*, *Des Moines Tribune*, and *Sioux City Tribune*. For more on Harding, see John Evert Visser's somewhat sympathetic study of Harding in "William Lloyd Harding and the Republican Party in Iowa, 1906-1920" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Iowa, 1957); and Nancy Derr, "The Babel Proclamation," *Palimpsest* (July/August 1979), reprinted in *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* (Summer and Fall 2004).

Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files hold the research behind this article.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



An Iowa Christmas Story Sampler

Christmas entertainment in 1869

One of the first Christmas entertainments within my recollection was held [in 1869 in Decatur County] in the old Methodist Episcopal Church, where the Carnegie Library now stands. The tree was not a graceful evergreen, but a wild crabapple from the backyard of Ira B. Ryan's home on West Commercial Street. The children covered its branches with bright-colored paper and strands of popcorn.

Aunt Patterson made tissue paper snowballs with which to adorn it.

The teachers made silver paper baskets, which were filled with nuts and candy for each scholar. Of the program I remember that Jennie Blodgett directed the music; I. P. Martin made a speech about the use of profane language. Uzz Tharp and Heck Sanford sang a comic song. Pretty little Alice Dilsaver recited in trumpet tones "Hang Up the Baby's Stocking." Dan Porter picked a fandangle (I think that was what he called it) on a guitar. Rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed Emma and Ollie Gillham, looking like big "chainy" dolls, sang a song about a lost kitten. Then J. L. Young representing Santa Claus distributed the presents. The most popular little girls received sugar apples and china dollheads (dolls had no bodies in those days).

The larger girls received bottles of choice perfumery, such as musk and bergamot. The big boys received bear-shaped bottles of hair oil and candy hearts bearing sentiments of affection, the latter creating much merriment, being read by Santa Claus before they reached their owners.

On the top of the tree was a huge turkey for Rev. G. P. Bennett.

But the crowning event of the holiday week was the annual "festible" held in the old brick schoolhouse. Every man, woman and child that could raise the necessary four bits attended. Long before dark the crowd began to arrive. The tables extended the entire length of the room and were filled with every product the village and countryside afforded. In those days we had no smothered or fricasseed chicken, but great platters of fried and roasted fowls; no veal loaf or jellied beef, but

stacks of old-fashioned roast beef, home-cured ham and plenty of crisp, juicy turkey. No salads, olives or celery, but pickles galore, cucumbers, beets, mango, pickled eggs, piccililli and cold slaw. No patties, but each plate was supplied with a little jelly tart.

For dessert we could boast no sherbet, ices or frappe, but oceans of preserves, pies and cakes. Stem glass dishes were passed back and forth containing crabapple, tomato, ground cherry, plum, wild strawberry, watermelon and citron preserves.

The pies were equally as varied, gooseberry, blackberry, elderberry, squash, pumpkin, grape and vinegar.

Beside each plate was a goblet filled with float, ornamented with a bit of currant jelly. Conspicuous among the viands were Mrs. Uriah Bobbit's and Mrs. S. C. Thompson's sugar-coated rusks, Mrs. J. B. Lunbeck's and Mrs. S. H. Gates' golden crulls, Mrs. S. W. Hurst's white mountain cake adorned with a bouquet of artificial flowers, Mrs. L. H. Sales' big fruit cake, Mrs. I. N. Clark's cake trimmed with red gum-drops, Mrs. Udell's pyramid cake formed of forty-two small cakes, Mrs. Craigo's fine marble cake, Mrs. Hildreth's white-frosted cake with the date, "1869," outlined in red sand.

In place of carnations and roses the center of each table was decked with baskets of Aunt Rhoda Hawkins' feather flowers of brilliant hues.

The baskets were made of crystallized alum and glittered and sparkled under the blinking candles, making a veritable Jack Frost scene. How merry everyone seemed as they marched around viewing the tables. There was no changing of plates; everything to eat in sight. How "smelly" the coffee and the baked beans and mashed potatoes when the lids were lifted from the big tureens!

Hettie Rogers, Ada Kirk, Anna Gardner, Ester Sanger, "Doc" Warner and Wesley Silvers poured the coffee—not in little china shells, but in big heavy cups that held nearly a pint, and that completed the serving. After supper we had some singing led by Jabez Dawson; then the young folks played "Needle's Eye," Billy Boone, Wade Wood,

Billy Smith and Cass Sales got "choosed" the oftenest. . . . Kittie Givens, Hattie Lindsey, Emma Vaughn and Hila Fishburn were the belles of the evening—perhaps on account of their beautiful curls, the kind that curled naturally—around a hot poker. Among the little misses that caused much envy by the prettiness of their dresses were Katie Finley, in bright Scotch plaid; Emma Elsworth, in flowered Marseillaise; Helen Dawson, in red alpaca, and Etta McClelland, in blue wool delaine trimmed with cloverleaf tetin. There were many little boys present, but none attracted more attention than little Harry and Orra Long, in velveteen sailor suits, with red sashes tied military fashion.

Next came Aunt Jane Miller's big cake containing a gold ring. The cake was cut in many pieces, each piece

selling at 10 cents. Sam Ellis drew the ring and gave it to Mollie Miles or Emma Schaffer—I have now forgotten which. Then a cane was voted to the laziest man, and a cake to the handsomest lady. Albert Hale carried off the cane, and Mrs. E. J. Close won the cake. The big "festible" netted over one hundred dollars for the schoolhouse organ, and thus closed the holiday season of 1869, which probably for good fellowship and real enjoyment is not far surpassed by the more elaborate festivities of the present day.

Popcorn and cranberries and lacelike festoons

We always had a tree [in our church], and everybody far and near came to some one of these Christmas programs, usually in sleds and sleighs. The decorations of all trees consisted of long strings of popcorn and cranberries and we knew how to cut red and white tissue paper into lacelike festoons. And these, together with some big red apples and the candies, constituted the trimmings.

The program was the ordinary Sunday school type—Christmas songs, readings and exercises by classes. It was the custom for many years at our church for the parents to bring a small gift to be placed under the tree for each child and any other gifts could be brought for distribution. Hence quite often, the young men would bring gifts for their especial girl friends. And when the program was over, it would conclude with the singing of one of the Christmas songs and during the singing the young men as a lighting committee would come forward with their long tapers and light the candles on the tree.

At the conclusion of this, there would be a lot of stamping and sleigh bell ringing outside the door and Santa would come bounding in.

He was always dressed in a bright red suit with white cotton trimmings and his medium circumference usually exceeded his altitude. When he had reached the platform and given his greetings to the children, the distribution of gifts began, and no child in the audience was omitted for if by any chance no gifts had been placed for one such, the Sunday School teachers and a committee had provided some little parcels as emergencies.

In connection with this part of our program, I have a story. I cannot vouch for its authenticity for it was told to me by another person. It seemed there was a certain young man who was engaged to be married and he wanted to give his betrothed something nice. In those days every house had a center table in the front room and on that table there was almost always one of those huge photograph albums. Some of them had elaborately decorated celluloid backs, some had plush, but all were highly ornamental and contained a collection of family portraits.

This young gentleman looked around and bought the nicest and most unique one he could find and he put it on the Christmas tree for his intended bride. She received the large package and could not restrain her curiosity, so she carefully removed

the outer wrappings. About that time the presents having all been distributed, the superintendent announced that "if everyone now would please be quiet, the minister would come forward and deliver the closing prayer."

The minister began his prayer. But the young lady lifted the lid of the enclosing box and in so doing also lifted the lid of the album, thereby releasing the spring to a little tinkly music box that was concealed in a compartment at the back of the hinge. The minister finished his prayer to the tune of "Ha-Ha-Ha, you and me, Little brown jug don't I love thee."

The first account originally appeared as "Christmas Fifty Years Ago," by an Old Timer, in History of Decatur County, Iowa, and its People, edited by J. M. Howell and Heman C. Smith, vol. 1 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Co., 1915; reprinted 1981), 222-24. The second account describes the 1890s, perhaps near Newton, Iowa; it is excerpted from "Christmas Echoes and Reminiscences" by Mrs. R. A. Poage, in Annals of Iowa, vol. 32 (1955), 496-506.

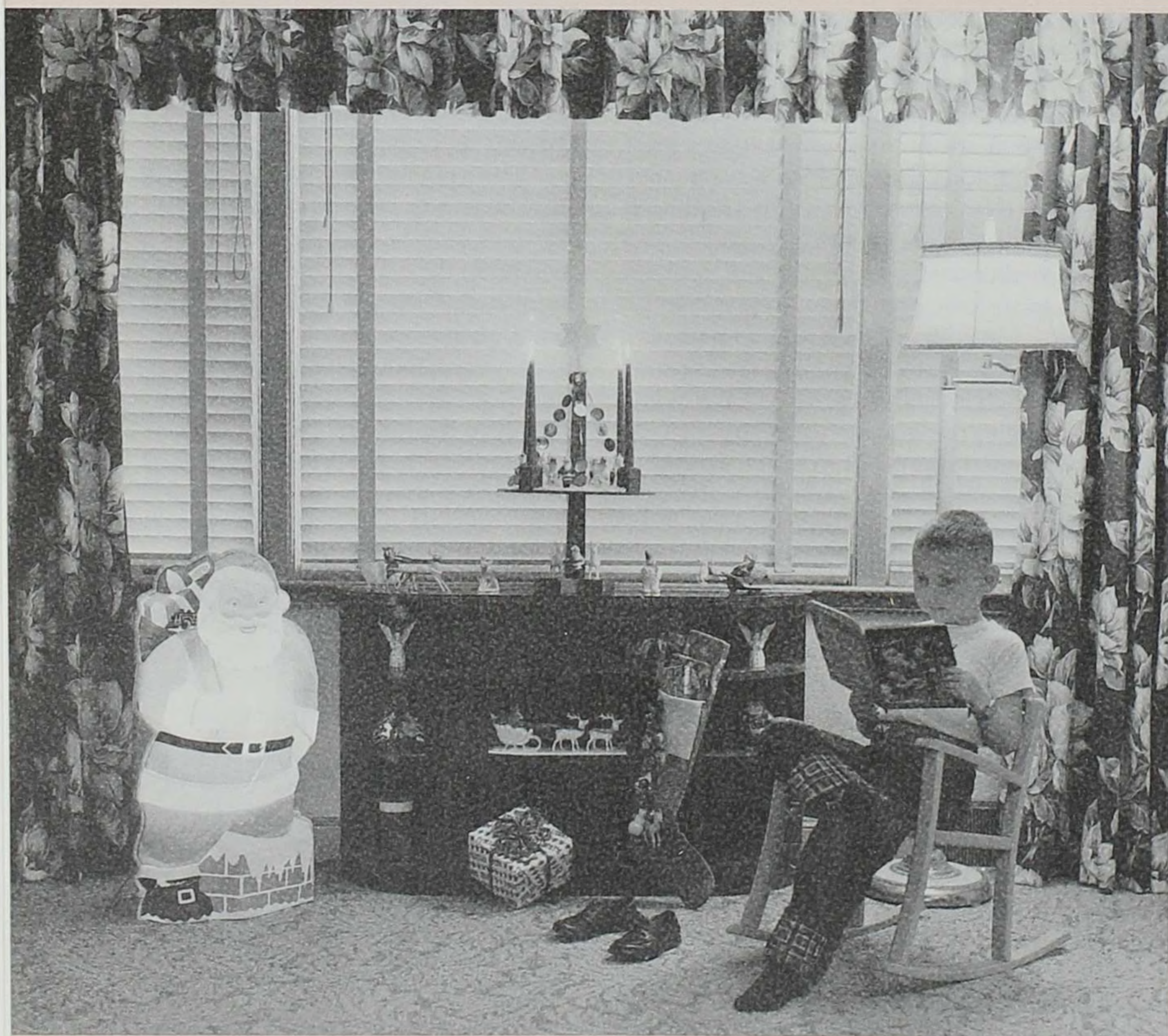
The Culture of Christmas

by Ginalie Swaim

"The things that are done at Christmas ... provide points of entry into a state of happiness and abundance that transcends the present and stretches back endlessly into the past." So writes Karal Ann Marling, one of several historians who have studied traditions and changes in America's most beloved holiday. The culture of Christmas engulfs most Americans, distinct from the Christian holiday's religious meaning and observance. Most of us expend our energies on our households and others closest to us, but the culture of Christmas also thrives in the public world of community and commerce.

Once soundly opposed by the Puritans, the Christmas holidays in the early 19th century were a time of rowdy, raucous, irreverent behavior in the streets that shocked and threatened more "respectable" Americans celebrating quietly in their homes. About the same time, author Washington Irving's descriptions of Christmas—or how he wished it were—entered and took hold of the American imagination. Irving's *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820) gave us the images that still appear on Christmas cards and in plays: shoppers dressed in fur-trimmed capes and top hats bustle along cobblestone streets; carolers under lamp posts lift their voices into the crisp air; a horse-drawn coach pulls up to a cozy country inn; inside, servants proudly carry the boar's head into a dining hall warmed by a blazing fire.

Irving drew upon his own "nostalgic longing for a



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

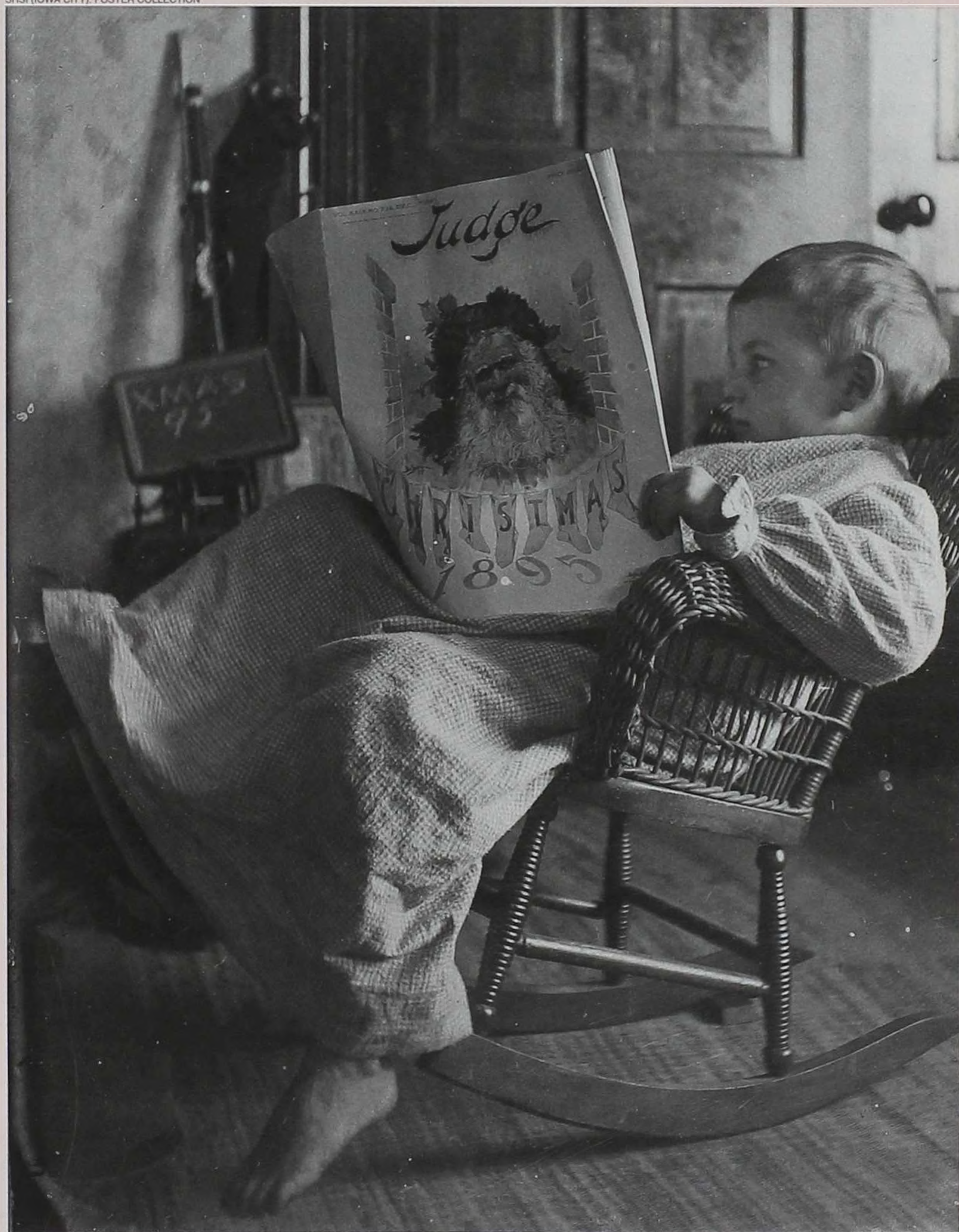
simpler, kindlier past, before the advent of industrialism, class strife, [and] unchecked competition," Marling tells us. Counter to the drunken revelry and the creeping commercialism, Irving's "Olde Christmas" played into a consolidated and nationalized Christmas, fueled by "trends and events . . . as benign as the expansion of national media, as relentless as the development of marketplace and industry, and as cataclysmic as the Civil War," according to historian Penne L. Restad.

"There never was a time when Christmas existed as an unsullied domestic idyll, immune to the taint of commercialism," historian Stephen Nissenbaum writes. "Perhaps the very speed and intensity with which those essentially new rituals [of Santa Claus and the Christmas tree] were claimed as timeless traditions shows how powerful was the need to keep the relationship between family life and a commercial economy hidden from view—to protect children (and adults, too) from understanding something troublesome about the world they were making."

Do we want to hear all this from historians? Do we want to learn that the commercialism we decry is as traditional as the Christmas trees we cherish? Do we want to know that already in 1850, author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe complained that "there are worlds of money wasted [at Christmas time] in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got."

The other important question is whether the historians' conclusions presented on the following pages reflect the traditions and changes in the culture of Christmas in your own families and communities. Most of their research reflects what middle-class Americans were advised or expected to do, and much of it stops at

SHSI (IOWA CITY): FOSTER COLLECTION



the mid-20th century. We invite you to send us your own accounts of the holidays in the last five decades.

How has Iowa fit into the big picture of the culture of Christmas? Turn the page and meet several Iowans of Christmases past.

Above: Santa smiles from the cover of the humor magazine *Judge* as a barefoot Fred Foster peruses the contents (Iowa Falls, 1895). Opposite: Another quiet Christmas moment for a lad in his rocking chair (Amana Colonies, circa 1950).



Holiday Cards

To send or not to send?

In the second half of the 19th century, few did. Christmas cards were lovely but costly. Having mastered lithography in multiple colors, the Louis Prang Company in Boston produced particularly beautiful double-sided cards, from the 1870s to 1890 (similar to the fringed card above). Flowers and birds were commonplace on Victorian Christmas cards. Other cards were actually small booklets of Christmas verse (see the the stocking above).

At the turn of the century, lower postal rates and improved mail delivery contributed to the popularity and

affordability of Christmas cards, particularly in the postcard format. Some of the finest—like the three below—were imported from Germany and Austria until World War I. In 1918, the newly formed U.S. Greeting Card Association suggested display and marketing tips to retailers and encouraged Americans to send cards to bolster wartime morale. During World War II, card manufacturers created cards specifically for soldiers, for mothers of soldiers, and for families who had lost loved ones.

By 1958, the average U.S. household sent about a hundred cards and proudly displayed those received as an

ALL CARDS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)





Top: Twigs spell out the year 1908, and a magic lantern projects a rosy-cheeked doll in a 1909 Christmas postcard printed in Germany. Right: A 1930s card echoes the nostalgic "Olde Christmas." Other cards on this page exemplify personalized photo cards sent by families and businesses, and cards from World War II and the more optimistic years after.



illustration of the family's broad social network. Although traditional cards with secular and religious scenes and symbols remained popular, consumers also chose new styles: humorous cards that poked fun at the holidays; customized cards with family or business photos; and the Christmas letter, updating recipients on family events that entire past year.



Temple of Economy

Here We Are Again With a Full Line
of Toys and Holiday Goods



For 8 years we have catered to the people of Marshalltown and vicinity in Fancy Goods for Holidays, but we think this year we have the best line we ever had. We can show you Celluloid Collar and Cuff Boxes, Work Boxes, Comb and Brush Sets, Smoking Sets, Manicure Sets, Shaving Sets, in endless variety. In China our Salad Sets, Sugar and Cream Sets, Spoon Trays, Celery Trays; Hair Receivers are of the most delicate tints and exquisite decorations. Our Cut Glass stock this year must be seen to be appreciated. We also have Dinner Sets, Water Sets, Chamber Sets by the hundreds and above all at prices you can afford to pay. Don't buy until you visit the

Temple of Economy

Shopping

Christmas brings "mingled hope and dread—hopefulness over dreams of what we may receive, and dread at the thought of what we shall have to give," warned *The Nation* magazine in 1883.

Thanks to increased manufacturing and improved transportation, consumers could now choose from a wealth of merchandise, and the custom of Christmas gift-giving now expanded from children to adults. To the Victorians, gifts represented social relationships; as one's social and business circles widened, the gift list lengthened. Many fulfilled this new social obligation by giving gimcracks and geegaws—cheap, poorly made, relatively useless items that had little value except as tokens of friendship and remembrance. But the custom also drew weary critics.

"The modern expansion of the custom of giving Christmas presents has done more than anything else to rob Christmas of its traditional joyousness," the *New York Tribune* sighed in 1894. "Most people nowadays are so fagged out, physically and mentally, by the time Christmas Day arrives that they are in no condition to enjoy it.... As soon as the Thanksgiving turkey is eaten, the great question of buying Christmas presents begins to take the terrifying shape it has come to assume in recent years." Simply put, "The season of Christmas needs to be dematerialized."

Sound familiar?

Social commentators called it the "Gift Question," declaring that excessive gift-giving to ever more acquaint-

1907 ad, *Marshalltown Times-Republican*.
Right: From 1941 Christmas wholesale
catalog of Des Moines Drug Co.

tances ought to be cut back for sanity's sake. Catalogs, merchandisers, and advertisers were only too happy to suggest the perfect gift for those who survived the cut. Card manufacturers pointed to Christmas cards as the way to show thoughtfulness but with little effort or cost. Shoppers focused on buying better-quality gifts but only for close friends and family.

To social reformers, the Gift Question was dwarfed by a more serious problem: the overworked, underpaid seasonal labor force (mostly women and children) in the poor working conditions of factories that geared up for the holidays. In stores, customers' last-minute shopping meant long, hectic hours for clerks (again, mostly women), leaving them little time for their own families. In 1912, the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving (SPUG) called for an end to the often obligatory practice of poorly paid store clerks giving gifts to their supervisors. Hoping to end clerks' long hours, the Consumers' League launched a "Shop Early Campaign." The league created a White List of stores reluctantly willing to limit store hours, and encouraged shoppers to frequent these "White List" businesses.

Attracting customers, of course, was retailers' goal. Christmas tableaux in department store windows were a common strategy. By the turn of the century, window dressers (including L. Frank Baum, of *Wizard of Oz* fame) advocated that the displays should appear alive by adding motion. Macy's had already modeled this idea in 1883; dolls seemed to be marching in its holiday window, via a steam-powered belt. Enchanted adults and children crowded up to department store windows to gaze upon twirling elves, dancing teddy bears, and softly falling snow, as toy trains circled endlessly.

Within a few decades, retailers

Fashion Vanities

Single Loose Powder Vanities

- 111 (200) Sunburst Vanity. In gold finish. Retail 1.50
666 (267) Square Vanity. In gold finish. Retail 2.00

Double Loose Powder Vanities

- 455 (200) Aztec Vanity. With Carmeen Rouge. Case in: Caribbean Blue, Frivolity Red, Jet. Retail 1.50
327 (400) Vogue Duovanity (not illustrated). Loose Powder, Full-sized Carmeen Lipstick. Retail 3.00
763 (267) Square Enamelled Vanity (not illustrated) with Carmeen Rouge. Case in: Black with White Border, White with Black Border. Retail 2.00
328 (467) New Vogue Duovanity. Loose Powder, Full-sized Carmeen Lipstick. Retail 3.50
382 (500) Tailored Twin Vanity. With Carmeen Rouge. Retail 3.75
381 (667) Baroque Vanity. Gold-plated. With Carmeen Rouge. Retail 5.00
380 (1000) Thunderbird Vanity. Gold and Platinum-plated. With Carmeen Rouge. Case in: Red, White, Blue. Retail 7.50
777 (667) Jewel Flower Vanity with Carmeen Rouge. Retail 5.00

Triple Loose Powder Vanities

- 653 (367) Persian Vanity with Carmeen Rouge and Lipstick. Case in: Black, Star Ruby, Skyway Blue, White. Retail 2.75
329 (500) New Vogue Trioovanity. With Carmeen Rouge and Full-sized Carmeen Lipstick. Case in: Gold and Silver Finish, Black and Silver Finish. Retail 3.75
651 (467) Forget-Me-Not Jewelled Vanity With Carmeen Rouge and Lipstick. Retail 3.50



1041B—contains 50¢ Brushless. Airplane cover by Clayton Knight.

1041M—contains 50¢ Menthol-iced Shave. Glamour Girl cover by Bischoff.

MENNEN

Famous Artists

GIFT BOXES FOR MEN

Last year, Mennen Gift Boxes were a sensational success. This year they are even more attractive. Never before have Gift Boxes for Men had such appeal—cover designs with brilliant color illustrations by artists who rank as the leaders in their respective fields.

1041P—contains 50¢ Lather Shave, Plain. Cover by Richard Taylor.

\$1.25 Boxes

1 Shave Cream	50
1 Skin Bracer	50
1 Talcum for Men	25
1 Shave Cream	10
Retail Value	\$ 1.35
Retail Price	1.25

*Boxes containing 50¢ Lather Shave contain 10¢ Brushless—and vice versa

Printed in U.S.A.

... and More Shopping



SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

further enticed shoppers by installing Toylands and Santa's Villages inside their stores, steering children and adults directly into the toy departments. In the 1940s, some 4,000 extra workers transformed Marshall Fields into a Christmas fairyland.

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Despite economic upswings, predicting holiday sales, and the sales force needed, challenged retailers in the years after the war. Would consumers shop in downtown department stores or specialty shops? Out in the suburbs, through catalogs, or at the new discount stores? Early in the season or on the final days? Store owners ordered smaller amounts of goods, wary of fads that ended too soon and even weather that was too nice. Studies had found that holiday sales rose when the weather was cold and clear—unlikely for shoppers in Florida or California, but a sure bet for those in Iowa.



Above: Sign-up booth for a Christmas savings club, National Bank, Des Moines, 1958. By the 1910s, banks offered such plans to increase business and add to their public image. **Below:** Animated window display in Younkers store (Des Moines). **Left:** A Des Moines department store (1935).



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SHI (DES MOINES) DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

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SHI (DES MOINES)

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SHI (DES MOINES) YOUNKERS COLLECTION

The Act of Giving

In the 1840s, historian Karal Ann Marling tells us, U.S. bookstores sold more copies of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* than of the Bible. His portrayal of the Bob Cratchit family enormously affected British and American attitudes toward Christmas and charity.

In many of his novels, Dickens wrote vividly of the urban poverty of rural and immigrant workers who flooded large cities in search of jobs during the Industrial Revolution. Although historian Stephen Nissenbaum contends that Ebenezer Scrooge's clerk Bob Cratchit wasn't exactly part of the oppressed lower classes, Marling says that *A Christmas Carol* put "unhappiness, misery, and human wretchedness on the Christmastime agenda, in a sharp and dynamic contrast to the remnants of [Washington] Irving's *Old Christmas*" descriptions of a warm, hearty holiday.

Beginning in the 1880s, charities sponsored huge mass dinners for the poor. The Salvation Army (founded in the London slums in 1865) fed thousands at turn-of-the-century dinners in New York's Madison Square Garden. Wealthy donors could purchase tickets to watch the poor eat.

Social reformers argued that help for the poor should be given to organized charities throughout the year,

Christmas dinner for four Iowa children in 1936, near Smithland. Farm Security Administration photographer Russell Lee photographed the "feast" of potatoes, cabbage, and pie.



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SHS (IOWA CITY): LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

PTA members gather at Creston radio station KSIB to prepare 1,400 gifts for Santa to distribute to needy youngsters (1955).

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Christmas seals began in 1907, thanks to the Red Cross and urban reformer Jacob Riis. Intended to raise money to fight lung disease, the seals also added color to holiday packages and mail.

not directly to homeless children and street beggars or at once-a-year Christmas dinners. "Dickens did more harm than anyone else," the *Saturday Evening Post* declared. "A great Christmas dinner, in the minds of many, cancels the charity obligations of the entire year."

To encourage holiday charity, mainstream magazines and newspapers in December had routinely published touching, sentimental stories of personal generosity to the poor. But this kind of story disappeared as the new century's progressive movement pushed hard and successfully for coordinated, year-round social relief through designated organizations. During the Great Depression, however, the sentimental stories reap-

peared, as Americans realized that no one was immune to hard times. Community Christmas projects increased during and after the world wars as Americans collaborated on shipments for overseas soldiers and war-torn and displaced Europeans.

Today, Americans continue Christmas charity projects through churches, social and service clubs, and relief organizations. And Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is reincarnated yearly on stage and screen, though the settings may be modern-day America rather than 19th-century England.



SHS (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

Bell in hand and bonnet on head, a Salvation Army worker smiles as a passerby drops coins into the collection kettle (Des Moines, 1933). In the late 19th century, the Salvation Army expanded its Christmas bell-ringing from England to this nation.

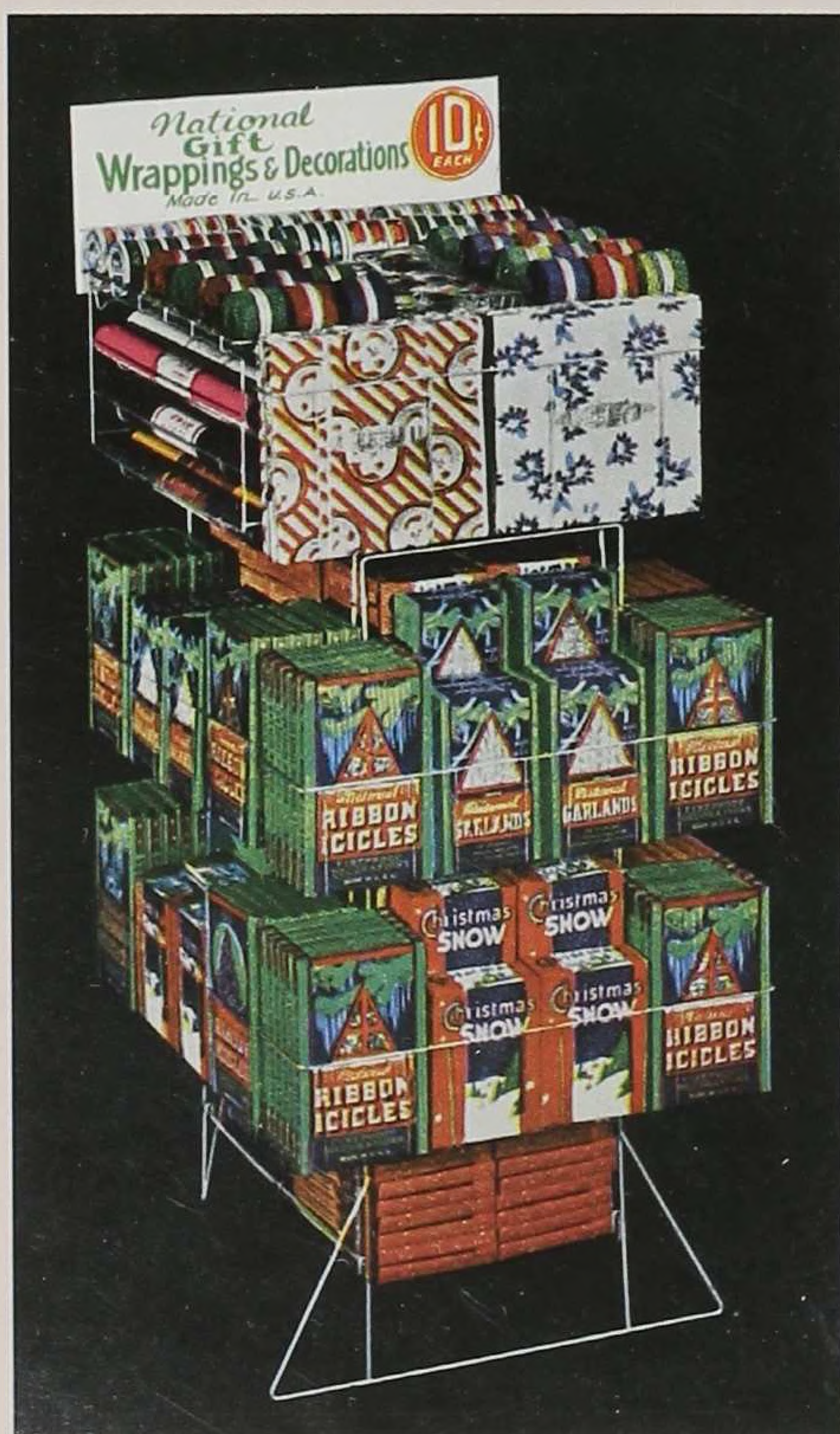
Adding a Little Mystery

As presents grew too large to be tied to the Christmas tree, wrapping the presents became another holiday custom. In the early years, the choices of wrapping material were few: white, red, and green tissue paper, secured with straight pins, metallic cord, and gummed seals. Wrapping was considered a woman's responsibility and pleasure, a way to add both her personal touch and a sense of mystery to the gift—though *Good Housekeeping* in 1910 warned its readers that men preferred cigars of high quality over cigars handsomely packaged. Several historians contend that wrapping paper made it momentarily less evident that the gift was store-bought. But Karal Ann Marling believes women wrapped gifts out of the “Victorian aesthetic of containment, enhancement, and disguise.”

By 1912, manufacturers often packaged holiday merchandise in “holly boxes,” cardboard boxes preprinted with

holly and other Christmas symbols. In their minds, this added further value to the gift; many customers agreed. About the same time, the choices of wrapping paper and decorations expanded. Even during the Great Depression, frugal gifts were often wrapped in fancy paper.

War rationing limited choices to thin gift-wrap paper that tore easily; many just used what was on hand, such as shelf paper and yarn. But in the 1950s consumers were awash in wrapping papers printed in dozens of patterns, shiny bows, and tiny snowmen or Santas to attach as the final touch. Each holiday, women's magazines offered sophisticated ideas for wrapping gifts, in the expectation that women had time for one more holiday task. A 1950s humorist joked that a woman “must choose between no less than fourteen approved methods of looping a piece of . . . ribbon around a box.”



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SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



SHS1 (DES MOINES)

Robert Goddard of Des Moines clutches a gift for his brother. Opposite: Olive L. Dyer, of Des Moines, wraps gifts at the Salvation Army for children whose parents are in prison (1960), and wrapping-paper display from a 1941 wholesale catalog.



Choosing the Perfect Tree



MULTIPLE XMAS TREE SETS FOR INDOOR USE

New Reflector (Multiple) Set



No. 55 (241) - A T LIGHT REFLECTOR INDOOR (MULTIPLE) SET with C-7% Manda 150 Volt assorted colored lamps. The Shining Reflectors bring out the beauty of the colored lights, and also ornaments the tree. The Metal Reflectors are Chromium Finish. This set is packaged as illustrated and may be used in form shown, or it can be strung on the tree in the same continuous manner as the regular set. An Adeo Connector on end of string for attaching additional sets.

Sol. Page 25. Wt. 25 lbs. Retail \$1.75 Ea.

Star-Light Metal Reflectors

*** CHROMIUM FINISH ***



No. 22 (201) - ACME STAR-LIGHT REFLECTOR can be used on Xmas Tree Sets having the C-6 or C-7% Manda Lamps. These Reflectors make a very attractive setting on the Xmas Tree. A variety of Designs (10 in box) in an Assortment of 100 Reflectors in the Display Carton.

Sol. Page 1900. Wt. 25 lbs. Retail \$3.95 Ea.



No. 57 (126) - T LIGHT INDOOR MULTIPLE SET with C-7% Manda 150 Volt Lamps assorted colors. A most practical and desirable set for indoor decorations; each lamp lights independently; the lamp or lamps that do not light are instantly located therefore, if one lamp burns out, it does not affect the light of the others. Connector on end of string for attaching additional sets. Case of wire for set in Tree Green blending in with color of Tree.

Sol. Page 58. Wt. 31 lbs. Retail \$1.75 Ea.



No. 57-M (126) - A T LIGHT INDOOR MULTIPLE SET same as No. 57 but with Tree Clips on Sockets that will hold lamps in place on Branch of Tree.

Sol. Page 58. Wt. 32 lbs. Retail \$1.50 Ea.

WHITE CORD ALL BLUE LAMPS

No. 57-Y (126) - T LIGHT INDOOR MULTIPLE SET with White Cord having White Sockets and C-7% All Blue Manda Lamps, 150 Volts. The Blue and White combination makes a very effective Tree Trim. With TREE CLIPS on Sockets to hold lamps in place on Branch of Tree.

Sol. Page 58. Wt. 32 lbs. Retail \$1.50 Ea.

Clockwise from top left: "Celesta Violet, Xmas 1911" with a stick tree festooned with popcorn. Lenore Salvaneschi makes a tree stand, circa 1920. Ad from 1941 wholesale catalog for tree lights. Herb Stamper shows Kay Louise Clark and her mother a tree from his Des Moines tree lot (1944). Opposite: Volunteer Mabel Cannon adorns an aluminum tree at Iowa Methodist Hospital (Des Moines, 1959).

As early as 1860, the Christmas tree was "women's work, trimmed under a veil of breathless secrecy," writes Karal Ann Marling. "The closed doors [to the parlor] were necessary because the presents, unwrapped except for candies in dangling containers, were openly exposed, as decorations on the tree." Lighted candles added to the tree's magic and drama—and risk. In 1908, many insurance companies no longer covered fires related to Christmas trees and candles. Although electric lights appeared on some trees as early as the 1880s, most people continued to use closely watched candles; rural Americans often lacked electricity until the 1930s.

American clergy eventually brought Christmas trees—and Santa—into their churches, using them to teach about the importance of giving and the rewards of good behavior.

Alarmed by dwindling natural resources, some conservationists protested holiday cutting of fresh trees in U.S. forests, but that didn't dampen Americans' ardor for trees.

It was style rather than a nature ethic that sold some consumers on new kinds of trees. The startling aluminum tree of the 1950s was illuminated by a spotlight and a rotating color wheel, since electric lights and metal trees don't mix. Fluffy flocked trees of the 1960s came in blue, pink, and lavender. So much for Christmas greenery.

As Marling writes, "Today's Christmas tree is one of the few purely aesthetic objects created by families and individuals. It is possible to buy a tree, pretrimmed and ready to go, but most households still rummage in the attic for the old decorations, add a few new ones, and create [a display of] symmetry, balance, and harmony," a statement "about taste [and] family traditions."



SHS (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

Celebrating Community

Although Christmas is an intensely home-centered holiday, U.S. communities early in the century staged outdoor festivals and decorated trees in public squares. Social reformer Jacob Riis argued for such “public” outdoor Christmas trees because they symbolized giving and provided a common ground for all social classes. Some historians tie public festivals to the progressive movement, in which citizens’ duties included coming together to build community, identity, and consensus.

Although such abstract goals may not have been met, the festivals and trees did provide

beauty and entertainment. As a poor woman in New York confided, “Those rich people who give so much money away on Christmas always get the idea that the poor need something to eat. They forget that we also like to look at nice things and hear lovely things.”

Only a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, Karal Ann Marling relates, President Franklin D. Roosevelt briefly lit up the Christmas tree outside the White House, ignoring the city-wide black-out and ban on holiday lights “because he understood the value of symbols.”

Outdoor lighting began to catch on in the late 1920s. General Electric and other companies sponsored neighborhood contests to promote sales. As private citizens strung lights along eaves and set holiday characters on front lawns, towns decked downtown streets to build holiday spirit and welcome customers.

Left: Downtown Mason City, 1940s. Below: Frank J. Iten house (Clinton, 1934). Right: Lights on the Jasper County Courthouse brighten the night over Newton (1952), a tradition since the mid-1930s. Pilots detoured over Newton for passengers’ enjoyment.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



SHSI (DES MOINES); WIDE WORLD PHOTO



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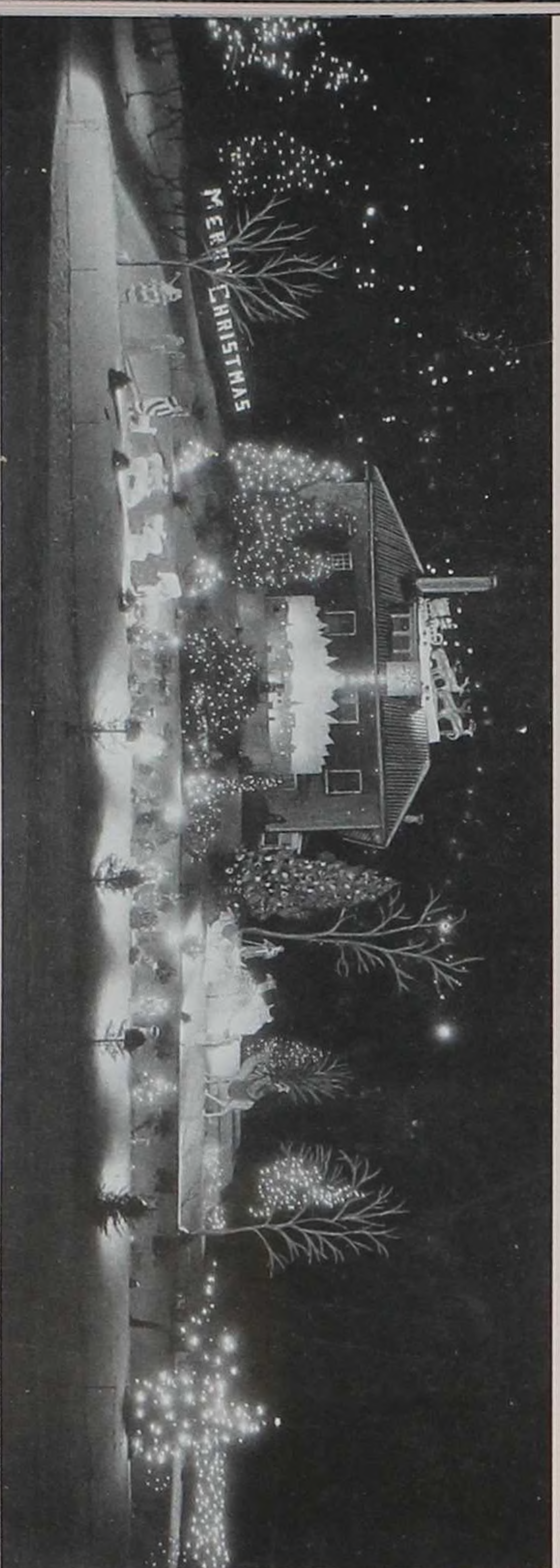
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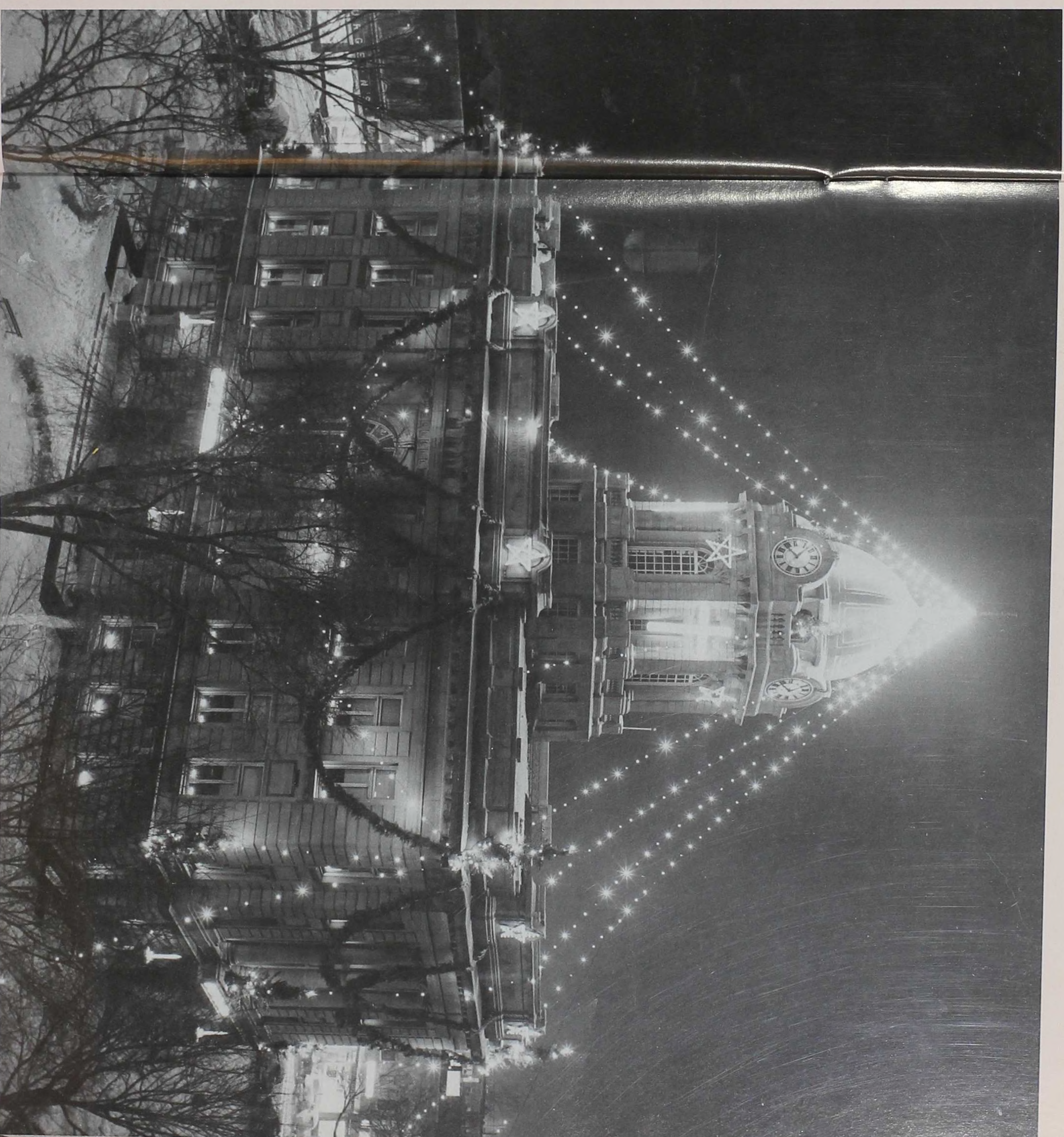
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SPS (OWA CITY)



SPS (DES MOINES), DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



SPS (DES MOINES), WIDE WORLD PHOTO

Coming Home

"At no other time of year is absence from home considered more poignantly tragic than at Christmas," writes scholar Patrick McGreevy. This, too, is part of the culture of Christmas.

One of Thomas Nast's illustrations during the Civil War depicts the reunion around the Christmas tree of a returning soldier and his family. As Victorian society grew increasingly urban and industrial, home and family became the ideal, a refuge from the harsh, competitive outside world of work. "By approximately 1870," McGreevy writes, "the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, intimate gift giving, and the emphasis on children were the collective focus of a celebration centered on the family home."

It was no different in the mid-20th century, when Bing Crosby crooned "I'll Be Home for Christmas" or "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays."

Nor is it any different in this century. Every year television dramas echo the theme of the holiday homecoming. Returning travelers overcome distant war and vile weather, demanding jobs and family dissension, to open the front door and shake off the snow, just as the carols begin or the Christmas dinner is served. In today's society of great mobility and blended families, Bing Crosby still makes his promise, and we still hold him to it: "Be sure and get home for Christmas."

A family celebrates Christmas Eve, 1954, in Shenandoah, as photographed by Donald L. Utang.



SHS (IOWA CITY) DONALD L. UTANG COLLECTION



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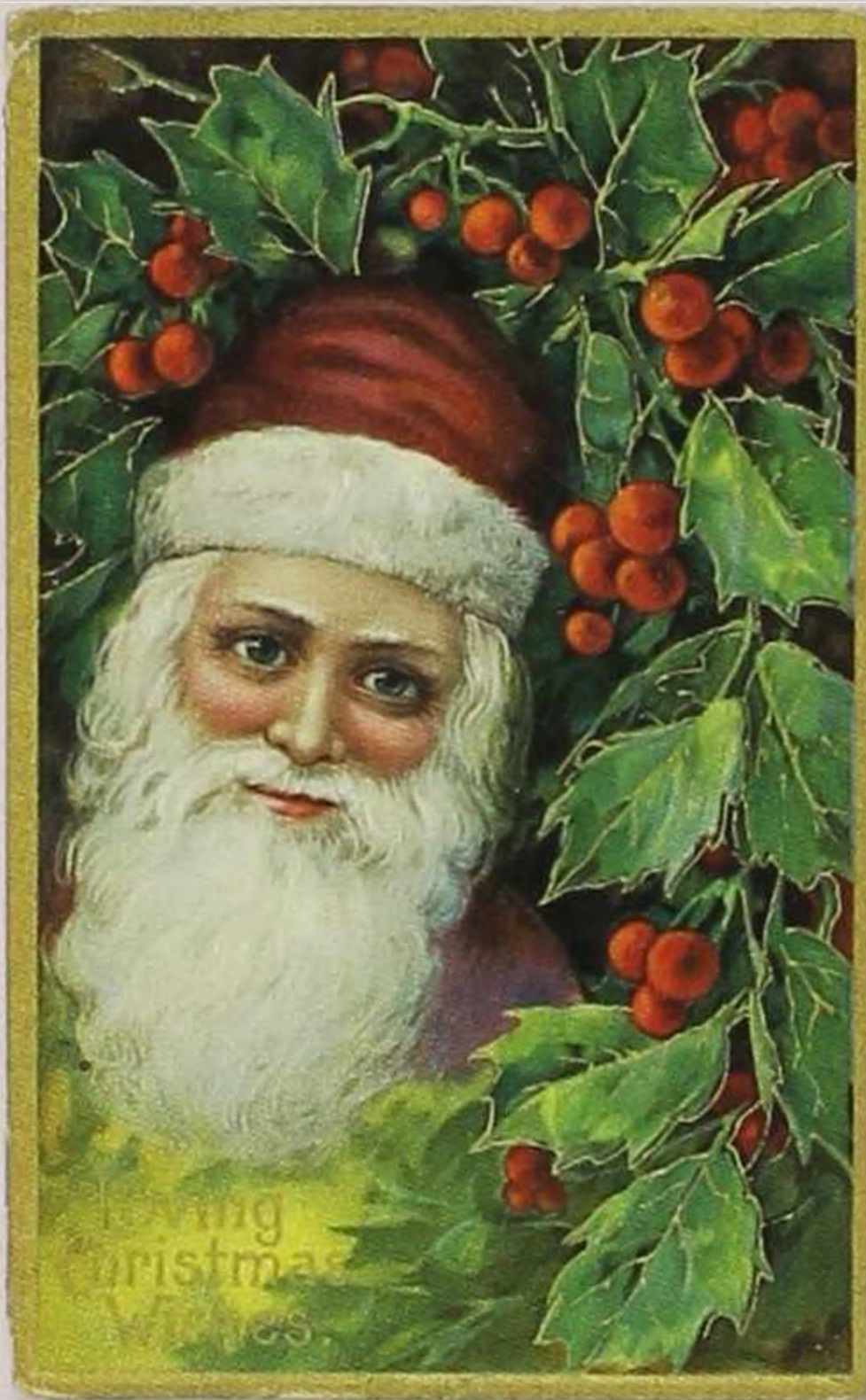
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A family celebrates Christmas Eve, 1954, in Shenandoah, as photographed by Donald L. Ultang.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



A Right Jolly Old Elf

As magical as Santa is, it should come as no surprise that in the early 19th century, Americans imagined and portrayed him in various sizes, costumes, and demeanors. His metamorphosis into the Santa we know today began with his elfin image in the poem " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," generally attributed to theologian Clement Clarke Moore in 1822.

Compared to European predecessors like Pelsnickel and Knecht Rupprecht, who punished naughty children by giving them switches or lumps of coal instead of gifts, the U.S. Santa let go of his ethnic costumes and customs and grew increasingly kind and forgiving—and commercial.

Illustrator Thomas Nast enlarged the right jolly old elf to adult size in his drawings for *Harper's Weekly* in the 1860s. Santa's home at the North Pole is also attributed to Nast, who may have been building off of the public's interest in an 1845 Arctic expedition that had vanished. By mid-century, historian Penne L. Restad writes, Santa had become "a full-fledged product of American humor and naive optimism.... No American folk character was more widely embraced and accepted as real."

And what about Mrs. Claus? Louisa May Alcott gave Santa a wife in one of her novels; so did poet Katherine Lee Bates. Fairies and elves played key roles in L. Frank Baum's fantasy novel, *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus* (1902).

The first Santa Claus school began in 1934; a week of classes instructed Santa wannabes in child psychiatry, toy industry economics, Santa history, showmanship, and salesmanship. Although some 20th-century child experts

SHSI (IOWA CITY): ILHOP

OPPOSITE PHOTO: SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Clutching gifts, children file past Santa at a family Christmas party of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, Local 3, Cedar Rapids, 1950s. Right: Bonne Grabenstein (of Knoxville) mails a letter to Santa (Des Moines, 1947).



warned that adults were deceiving their children regarding Santa and sowing distrust, Santa nevertheless remains the paramount figure in the U.S. culture of Christmas. Unabashedly used for commercial purposes, he is also unabashedly and affectionately eternalized by many of us.

Santa's trusty sidekick Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was created in 1939, when Montgomery Ward asked copywriter Robert May to create a gimmick to draw in customers. Building on the Ugly Duckling theme, May wrote a poem about a young outcast reindeer, and the store distributed 2.5 million copies of the booklet that year. After the war Johnny Marks used the verse as the basis of lyrics and Gene Autry recorded the song. Rudolph's popularity has led to hundreds of licensed products.

Although Rudolph helped guide Santa through the foggy sky, Colonel Harry Shoup kept him safe up there, according to writer Susan Waggoner. In 1955 a Colorado Springs department store ad included the "number of the special Santa line. The [telephone] number had a one-digit typo, and when children dialed it, they were connected with the Operations Hotline of the Continental Air Defense Command [later NORAD], the agency in charge of detecting incoming missiles." Shoup, who answered the phone, "quickly figured out what had happened and played

along. Claiming to be one of Santa's helpers, Shoup explained that his job was to keep the skies safe for Santa's journey, and told the excited children that he could see Santa's sleigh on the radar monitor in front of him."

Even today, an occasional television or radio broadcaster winks at journalism standards to help Santa Claus navigate the dark skies of Christmas Eve.

Overleaf: A horse-drawn sleigh and an automobile stop outside a small-town store, where Santa Claus is the center of attention.

Below: Saint Nicholas arrives by horse, accompanied on the left by Black Peter, for naughty children (Pella, 1936). Right: Photographer Donald L. Ultang captured this moment of a patient Santa and five-year-old Mary Rose McClavy keeping her distance (1953).



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



SHSI (IOWA CITY) DONALD L. ULTANG COLLECTION



SHSI (IOWA CITY): ROSENKILD COLLECTION





SHS (IOWA CITY) ROSENKILD COLLECTION



Abundance Revealed

Some of the best evidence for what middle- and upper-class children received for Christmas is in the relatively common historical photographs in which the children pose before the tree with their gifts, most of them toys. Photos of adults and their actual presents are less common, although period advertisements and catalogs tell us what merchandisers thought adults should be given.

Were many gifts homemade? Historian Karal Ann Marling thinks not: "The homemade gift is part of a

Christmas mythology of simpler, better times before capitalism corrupted the purity of a religious holiday. Although some parents did make gifts for their children, and ladies' handicrafts flourished throughout the Victorian era, it is clear that widespread celebration of the holiday and provision of manufactured presents went hand in hand."

Other historians are not so certain. Women's and children's magazines were filled with instructions for handcrafted gifts, particularly covers



ALL FOUR IMAGES: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Above: "Christmas dream," Keokuk. Right: A toddler ignores his gifts. Note that already Mickey Mouse competes with traditional tops, blocks, and teddy bears (see far right). Opposite: Marian Buchet stands amidst typical gifts for girls (1908).



When 1950s westerns reigned on television, cowboy hats and toy guns were typical gifts for boys (above, Jerry and Steve Husman, Monticello, 1958). Toy guns were also popular at the turn of the century to teach boys to be manly. Lead tinsel—as on this tree—added considerable sparkle, but it was banned in the late 1960s because of the environmental hazards of lead.

and containers for Victorian necessities and niceties—slippers, needles, glasses, sachet, buttons, brooches, hairpins. Some magazines advertised already assembled kits or partially completed projects, shortening the task but still qualifying as a homemade

gift. Today, women's magazines and craft books still offer dozens of homemade gift ideas, feeding the belief that a homemade gift conveys thoughtfulness, talent, thrift, and the personality of both the giver and the receiver.

In the Victorian world in which

males and females were expected to have separate roles, gifts matched those expectations. Girls received gifts that would prepare them for their future roles as homemakers and family nurturers: toy dishes and toy furniture, of course, and dolls, always

dolls. Boys, especially after the turn of the century, received gifts appropriate for society's image of the ideal boy, physically and morally strong. Chemistry and building sets furthered his education. By the 1920s, social arbiters considered that girls, too, were worthy of sports equipment as gifts.

Historian William B. Waits looked at hundreds and hundreds of advertisements, trade journals, and mass-circulation magazines from 1900 to 1940 to trace changes in Christmas gifts, as advised by the print media. What he also found were the changing images of males and females. In the century's first two decades,

women were not to assume that they could understand men's complex world of work. Although a fine pen set for a husband's desk was considered appropriate, the wife's best gifts should add to his comfort and appearance (cuff links, razors, cigars, ties, slippers, and so on).

What were husbands advised to buy? Ads showed active women using labor-saving appliances, like vacuums; with smaller homes and fewer domestics, women took on more of their own housework. By the 1920s, women were more independent of the house and wanting smart, stylish, and modern gifts. Men, too, wanted

the modern "Arrow shirt" look. During the Great Depression, ironically, some ads portrayed women as aloof and dignified, dressed in elegant gowns next to the fine furniture and silver sets they desired. Such ads played on Americans' fantasy for flush times, as did 1930s Hollywood movies. Nevertheless, most gifts of the Depression and war years were practical and durable. As the war ended, the need to maintain jobs and high levels of production flooded the market with an abundance of new consumer goods in a variety of styles and colors—all the more to advertise as the ideal gifts to open on Christmas.

SHSI (IOWA CITY): GRUMSTRUP COLLECTION



An electric train set delights a youngster in the 1950s. In 1904, the toy train manufacturer Lionel furnished major retailers with train sets to use in their holiday window displays. In homes, toy trains were often laid out to circle the Christmas tree.



December 26, 1944: Reaching for a bright tree light, Jimmy Corder suddenly finds out that Christmas is all over ... him. From above, the three-year-old's mother reaches down to rescue him.

Christmas Past

"Christmas rituals ... transfigure our ordinary behavior in an almost magical fashion, in ways that reveal something of what we would like to be, what we once were, or what we are becoming despite ourselves," says Stephen Nissenbaum.

Another Christmas ritual, though hardly magical, is the earnest wish to "cut back," to diminish holiday stress. This, too, has been a tradition in the U.S. culture of Christmas.

What good is it to realize that those before us also faced holiday stress and commercialism and longed for simpler times? Perhaps this is where knowing our history can help us

define the common ground of today and earlier times, and to recognize that external forces—social status, war, the marketplace, the mass media—have long influenced a holiday powered by tradition and celebrated in the heart. For many of us, the culture of Christmas is part of who we are. ❖

Other holidays and rites of passage in Iowa

Holidays are important traditions in Iowa history, and it is the mission of the State Historical Society of Iowa to preserve that history for the future. We are seeking donations of photographs, written accounts, printed material, decorations, or other things that reveal how Iowans have celebrated cultural, ethnic, and religious holidays and rites of passage.

If you have material you would like to donate, please first contact Becki Plunkett (Becki.Plunkett@iowa.gov, 515-281-8976) or Michael Smith (Michael.Smith@iowa.gov, 515-281-3859). Either can be reached by mail at SHSI, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319.

Share your accounts of Christmas in recent decades

The previous article traces the culture of Christmas up through the mid-20th century. Now we're curious about how you and your community have celebrated Christmas in the decades since World War II. We invite you to send written accounts of your holiday preparations and celebrations. Be as detailed or brief as you wish. If you address changes or new traditions, consider including the personal or social reasons behind those changes.

Be sure to tell us what years and location you are writing about. Include your name, address, phone, and age in 2005. Your signature will indicate that you grant permission for us to preserve your responses in the State Historical Society of Iowa collections for researchers and others to use. We hope to publish some of your accounts in the Winter 2006 issue of this magazine. That may seem like a long time from now—but we all know how quickly Christmas comes every year! Thanks for your interest in recording and preserving Iowa history.

Send your accounts to Editor, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240, or by e-mail to Ginalie-Swaim@uiowa.edu.

For additional reading

Several studies of Christmas make wonderful reading. Here are some that I found most useful for the preceding article and were the sources of many of the examples and quotations used.

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Kirkwood & Richard

LARGEST SECOND FLOOR CLOTHIERS IN IOWA
S. W. COR. 6TH & LOCUST—ENTRANCE. 316 6TH AVE.
DES MOINES, IOWA October 2, 1916.

J. H. Bud,
Waverly, Ia.

Dear Sir:-

Just a word of readiness and of welcome from Iowa's
Largest Second Floor Store for men.

New Fall Styles in Suits are in -- hundreds and
hundreds of them.

Tailored from lustrous All-Wool fabrics, with an
almost limitless variety of colorings and patternings.

Bearing our label as well as A.B. Kirschbaum Co's.,
as a guarantee and pledge of the highest
standards throughout.

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prices:
\$15.00, \$17.50, \$20.00 and \$25.00.



It costs some stores more to do business
than others -- just as it costs some people
more to live than others. For ourselves,
we've cut out all the unnecessary
extravagance, preferring to put the
large amount we save that way into
better fabrics, better tailoring,
better all-round fitting and service
qualities.

Come in -- you will find a cor-
dial welcome and a spirit of intel-
ligence, of courtesy and of willing-
ness to serve you.

Yours very truly,

KIRKWOOD & RICHARD.

One in a Million

Among the millions of items in the State Historical Society of Iowa collections is this 1916 letter from a Des Moines clothier announcing the arrival of men's wool suits.

The letter quotes "economical" prices ranging from \$15 to \$25. Putting those prices into perspective—which is always a tricky proposition—we might very roughly estimate that the figures translate

to \$275 and \$450 in today's dollars.

The color illustration of the thoughtful, well-dressed individual conveys the clothier's idea of what a businessman should wear. The personalized letter also reveals one of the store's strategies to reach and retain customers, and its promise to serve those customers with "a spirit of intelligence."

—The Editor

SHSI (IOWA CITY): MCFARLAND COLLECTION



Dr. Farley & Granddaughter Gladys

"Dr. Farley and Granddaughter Gladys." Hugging her new dolls and surrounded by other Christmas gifts, Gladys beams for the camera (circa 1908).

STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY of
IOWA