





Pleasures *of the* Victorian Parlor

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A few Iowa photographers captured several facets of the Victorian parlor. Their images, now a century old, remind us that the parlor was a place of various pleasures—quiet, solitary moments with a good book, or evening parties of silly costumes and spirited games.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor

Perched on the piano—a mainstay of middle-class parlors after the 1890s—a young woman sings "Whistling Rufus" with friends. Thanks to an explosion of printed sheet music by the turn of the century, "parlor songs" filled many an evening. (Photograph possibly taken in Tipton.)



Victorian Parlor

of Fine Pleasures

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SHSI (IOWA CITY)

SHSI (IOWA CITY), FOSTER COLLECTION



With cupids watching over her, a woman dressed in satin flounces scrutinizes her hand, while her companion lays down his card. (Photo taken in Iowa Falls.) Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood wrote in her 1881 book, *Home Amusements*: "That is a poorly-furnished parlor . . . which has not a chess-table in one corner, a whist-table in the middle, and a little solitaire-table at the other end near the fire, for grandma. People who are fond of games stock their table drawers with cribbage boards and backgammon, cards of every variety, bezique counters and packs, and the red and white champions of the hard-fought battlefield of chess."



Some wear short pants and ruffled shirts; others, baby bonnets and nightgowns. Victorian costume parties gave permission to masquerade as someone else, or even to try out a baby's pacifier (woman left of center).



The parlor was a place for music (as well as potted houseplants, decorative screens, and layers of curtains). In *Home Amusements*, Sherwood recommended music as a part of the family circle. "The only deep shadow to the musical picture is the necessity of practicing, which is not a Home Amusement; it is a home torture. If only a person could learn to play or sing without those dreadful first noises and those hideous shrieks!"

SHSI (IOWA CITY), FOSTER COLLECTION



Frank E. Foster relaxes and reads in his Iowa Falls parlor. Technological advances in printing late in the century engulfed the middle class with mass-circulation magazines, filled with serialized fiction and advertisements. Low-priced periodicals and novels accompanied Americans' increased leisure time.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

While his family reads, the boy on the right looks through a stereoscope at the three-dimensional image within. Edwin E. Neal (back right) produced stereographs in his hometown of Keota, as well as photographs. The diagonal cracks indicate that this image was produced from a glass-plate negative

SHSI (IOWA CITY), FOSTER COLLECTION



Fred H. Foster takes on his father, Frank E. Foster, in a game of checkers (Iowa Falls). Certainly not a new game, checkers was joined by dozens of new board games created in the 1890s and manufactured in the hundreds of thousands. Competing manufacturers Milton Bradley, Selchow & Righter, and Parker Brothers introduced new games focused on sports, transportation, and industry, unlike the morally instructive games of earlier decades.

SHSI (IOWA CITY), FOSTER COLLECTION



Although the Victorian parlor served as a space for social rituals—weddings, funerals, social calls, and celebrations—it was also a private space, in which the woman of the house nurtured her children, instructing them in social morals and family values. Here, a mother shares a book with her daughter (Iowa Falls).



SHSI (IOWA CITY), FELTON COLLECTION

Her everyday dress suggests that this pensive musician may be ready to practice rather than perform. According to historian Katherine Grier, parlors “embodied the ideal family circle, the character of genteel social life, and . . . the cosmopolitan world of learning and high culture to which Victorian families aspired.”





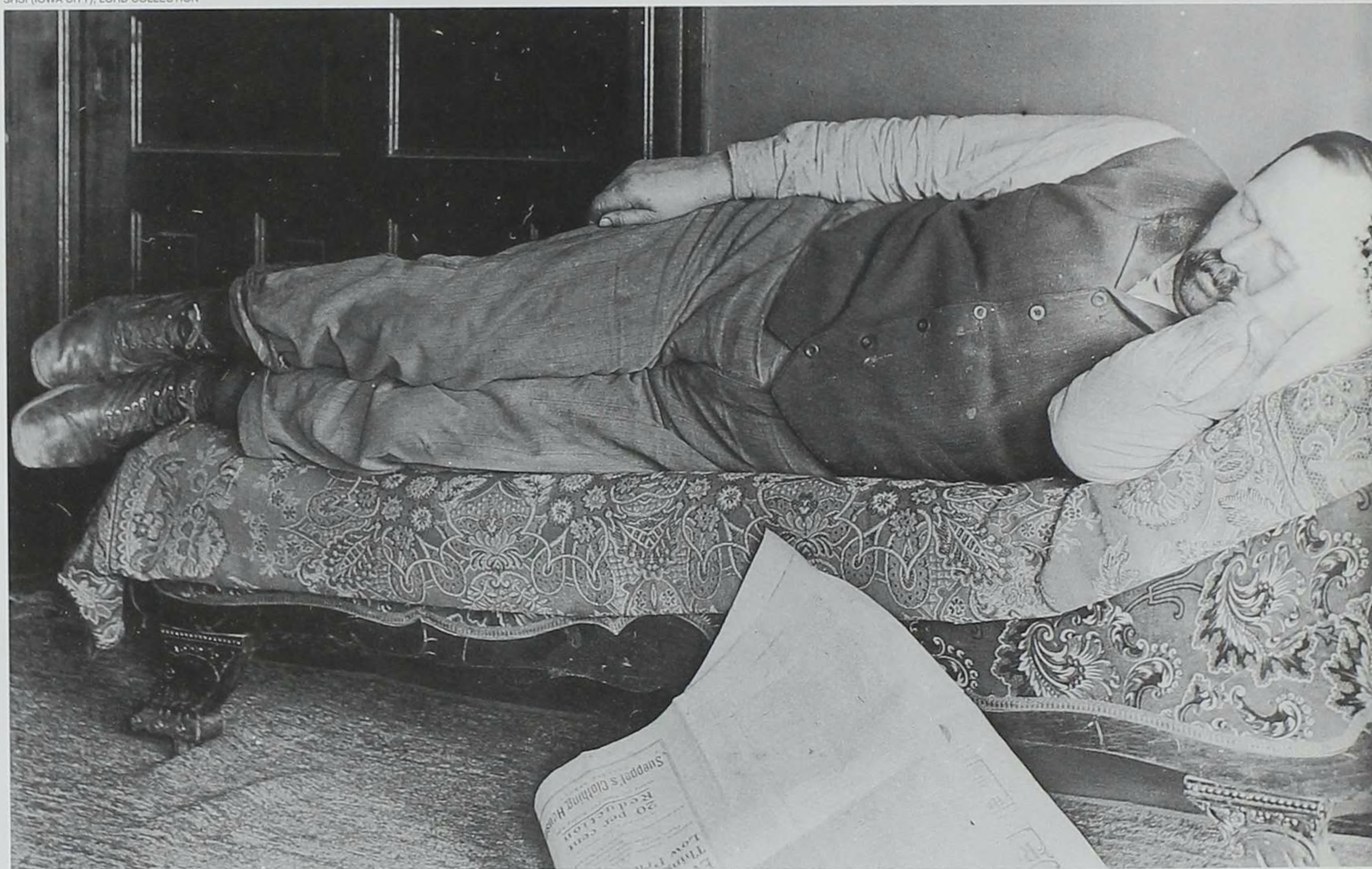
SHS (IOWA CITY), MOFFITT COLLECTION

Laughing behind their fans, two women take a break from cards to watch their friends play blind man's buff (or "bluff," as we know it today). Charades, another Victorian game, would have been a far safer game to play in a parlor filled with furniture and bric-a-brac.



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Games, parties, reading, music—few of these surpass the pleasure of a good catnap, as Iowan Frank Lord demonstrates. Some uses of leisure time just never change.

Discover Victorian Iowa

You and your family are invited to experience the Victorian era in a new exhibit, "Discover Victorian Iowa," opening October 1 at the State Historical Society of Iowa, in Des Moines. The exhibit will feature paintings by Iowa artist Mary Kline-Misol, inspired by *Alice in Wonderland* and 19th-century author Lewis Carroll. During our special Victorian Family Days, join in on Victorian parlor and yard games, explore Iowa stereographs, return to the Victorian era with storytellers, create a Victorian hat, learn proper Victorian etiquette and customs, and attend a fancy lady's tea. A Victorian parlor will serve as backdrop and an interactive space. Victorian Family Days are October 1 and November 12, and are free. On November 19, join us for a Lady's Tea Party for moth-

ers, grandmothers, and daughters (call for reservations). Exhibit dates: October 1–November 27. For more information, check our Web site, www.iowaHistory.org, or contact Heather King, 515-281-8754, Heather.King@iowa.gov.

Read about the Victorians

Parlors are just one aspect of the Victorian era. For many more, read *American Home Life, 1880–1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (1992). The book was a useful source for this photo essay. You'll find more books about Victorian life in our historical libraries in Iowa City and Des Moines.