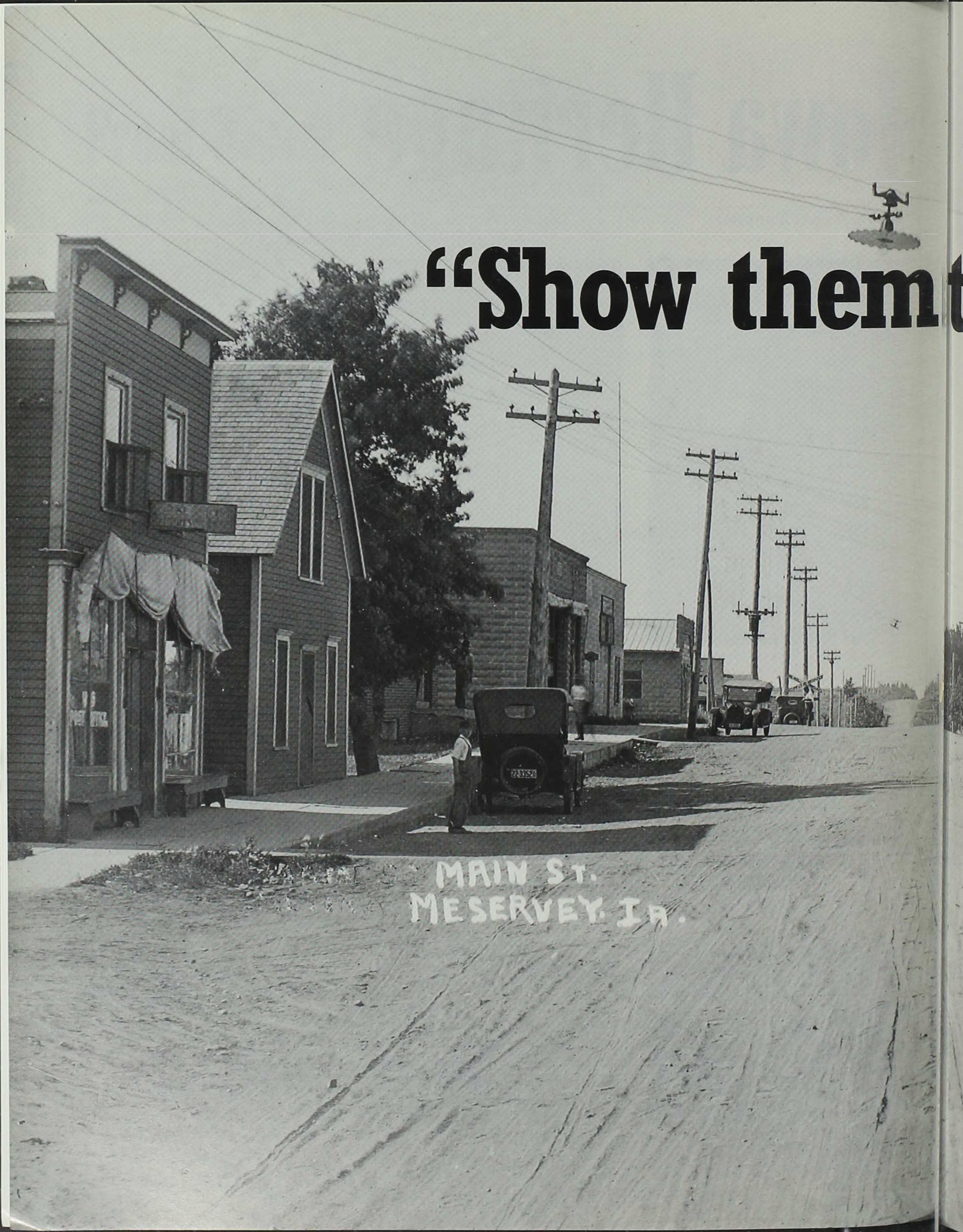
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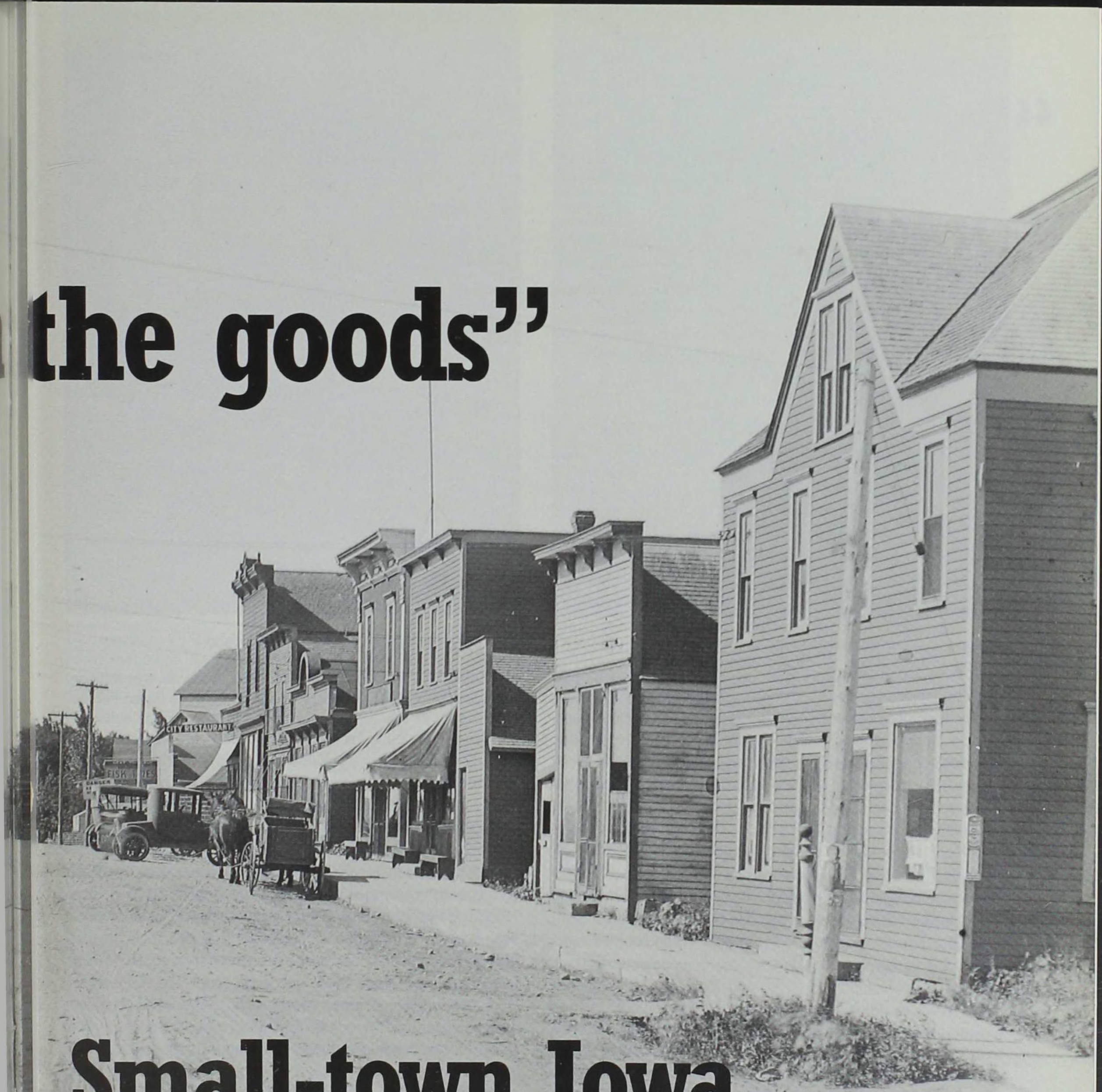
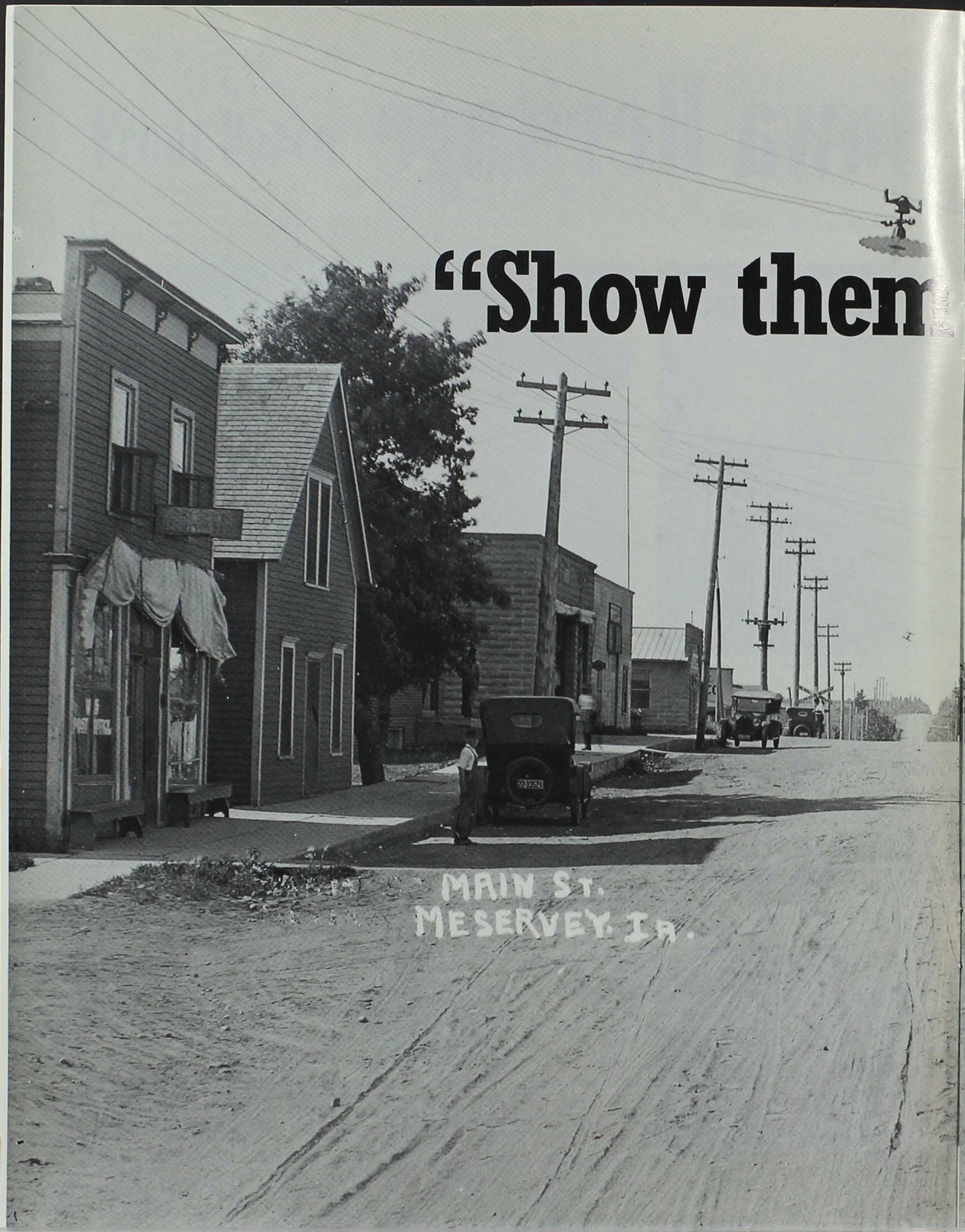


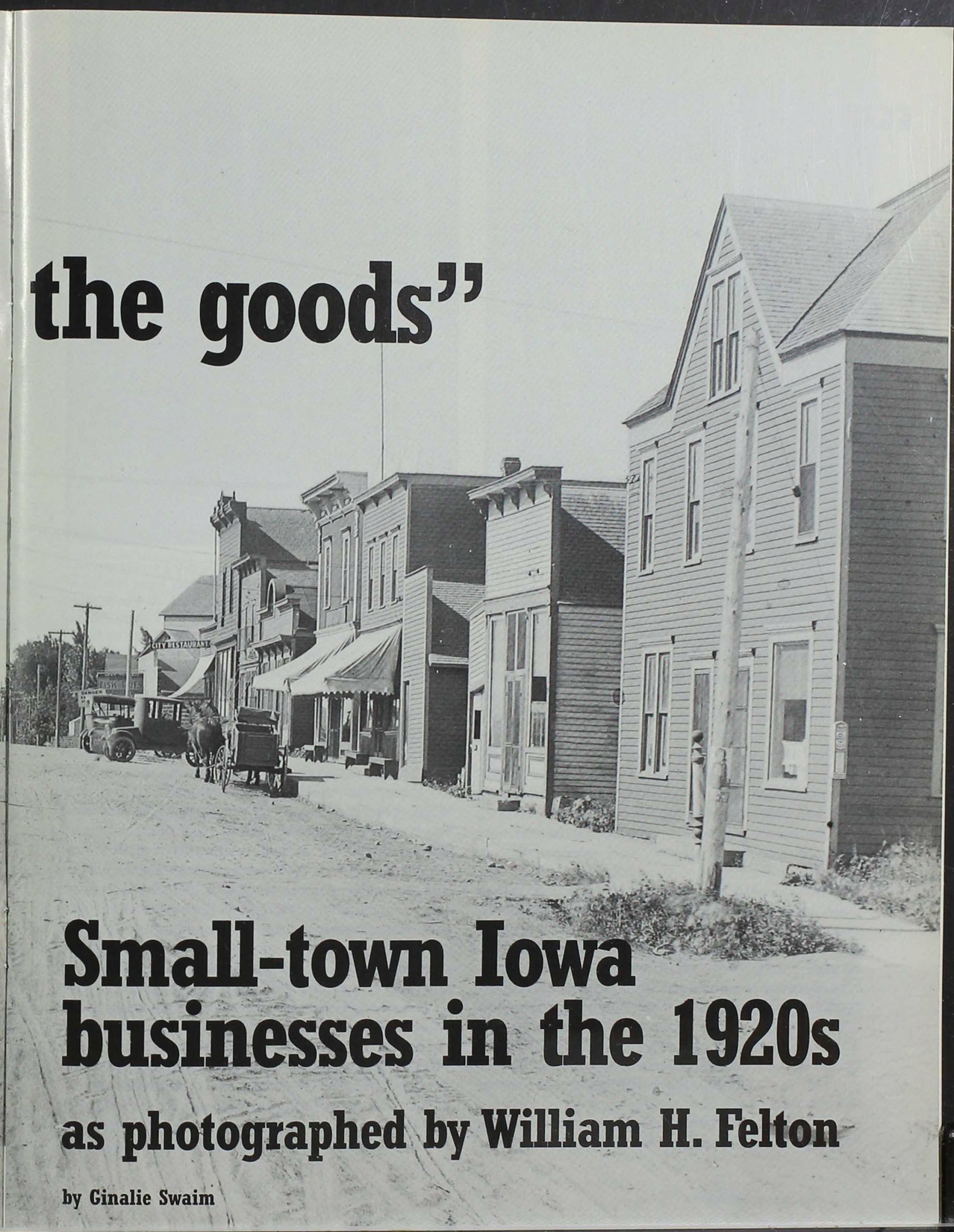
Small-town Iowa businesses in the 1920s

as photographed by William H. Felton

by Ginalie Swaim

"Show them the goods"





Small-town Iowa businesses in the 1920s

as photographed by William H. Felton

by Ginalie Swaim

"TO THE COUNTRY MERCHANT, the bugbear is the mail order house," the student of commerce lamented. "The goods on the merchant's shelves may rust away before some people would think of asking to see them, but they [the customers] receive an attractive catalog by mail, and spend long evenings looking at the goods by proxy." The key to winning modern consumers in the 1920s: "Show them the goods."

Iowa's "country merchants" who read this advice in the February 1922 *Journal of Business* surely nodded in agreement—and sighed with discouragement. Yes, mail order houses were stealing business from their stores, even though they kept their shelves stocked with goods. A customer need only ask for an item, and a clerk would scale a ladder or reach into a glass case to fetch it. Hadn't they always been showing their customers the goods? How else could they promote their businesses and recapture their customers?

It appears that William H. Felton, an Iowa native, had one idea. In the 1920s he photographed scores of Iowa retail and service establishments. Felton probably intended to make prints from his glass-plate negatives and sell them to the local businesses for their own promotional uses.

The images are now preserved at the State Historical Society of Iowa as the William H. Felton Collection. Nearly half of the 438 glass-plate negatives represent interior scenes of Iowa businesses. Although few have been fully identified, clues in the actual images link them to the early 1920s and to a dozen north-central Iowa towns. Ranging from the village pictured on the previous page—Meservey, population 300 in 1922—to Marshalltown (15,700), most of the communities Felton photographed—like Hampton, Sheffield, Clear Lake, and Belmond—averaged a few thousand.

"The use of ladders in stores is rapidly going out of use, and goods . . . should not be placed higher than eight feet from the floor," the 1922 *Journal of Business* lectured. But in long, narrow stores like this one photographed by William Felton, shelving up to the ceiling was one of the few space options.

THE VIVIDLY DETAILED IMAGES in the Felton Collection allow us to witness Iowa's past up close. By transporting us back 75 years ago, they grant us entry into small-town grocery stores and barbershops, cafés and hat shops, hardware stores and hotels. As our eyes adjust to the low light, we spot notices of local events and wall calendars, many dated 1922. Wooden floors creak under our feet, electric wires run up the walls, and light fixtures dangle from above. Tidy shelves of merchandise rise towards pressed-tin ceilings and stretch far into the dusty shadows in the rear of the store.

Cardboard promotional displays catch our attention, and names like Heinz, Eveready, and Goodrich strike familiar chords. We inhale the rich odors of coffee beans and furniture varnish, motor oil and ripe apples, shaving soap and crisp cottons. Storekeepers and clerks lean on the counter. Greeting us, they wonder what we'll trade our hard-earned dollars for today.

There was good reason to wonder that in the 1920s, given the enormous pressures on small-town businesses to adopt new strategies. When Bradley N. Davis (a graduate student in commerce at the State University of Iowa and the author of the *Journal of Business* article) roused merchants to "show them the goods," he had specific suggestions: Rearrange the store, target new customers, sweeten the advertising—in short, either adapt to modern marketing and consumer habits, or fall victim to mail order houses and other "bugbears" in a changing America.

The changes sweeping the nation had begun in the previous century, and each fueled the next. Expanded far beyond the basic processing of raw and agricultural resources, American industries had harnessed new technologies and speeded up production. Many of the manufacturing processes, and the dizzying array of new products that they yielded, would replace the custom work of artisans, craftsworkers, and other

skilled workers on the local level. This was further hastened by national communication and transportation networks already in place, conveying sales orders from coast to coast, and distributing goods by rail.

By the 1890s, Sears, Roebuck and Company had followed the earlier lead of Montgomery Ward & Co. in producing mail order catalogs. Selling everything from harnesses to chicken coops, pianos to boot laces, and furnaces to tonics, mail order was especially appealing and convenient for rural households. New postal legislation further boosted the thriving mail order houses and their ability to do business with American farmers; rural free delivery began to reach into rural areas in the mid-1890s, and parcel post in 1913.

Meanwhile, other innovations opened the way to mass production in the printing industry. Mechanized typesetting, improved printing of photos and illustrations, high-speed rotary presses capable of color, and falling paper prices now allowed much larger press runs and lower unit costs. As a result, illustrated monthly magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* began to build circulations in the millions, reaching national audiences—and offering national markets to enterprising advertisers. Increasingly sophisticated ads spilled onto more and more magazine pages. According to the research of Dorothy Schmidt, in the 1890s advertising revenue of U.S. magazines roughly equalled subscription and sales revenue. By 1929, ad revenue would be three times greater.

This deluge of advertising turned brand names into household words. In turn, shoppers asked local storekeepers to stock the brand-name products they had seen advertised. "Certainly the consumer of 1920 was offered a far wider array of branded, packaged, and nationally advertised goods than could have been bought a generation earlier," historian Daniel Pope writes. "Advertising men delighted in recounting the day of the gentleman who awoke to a Big Ben alarm clock, shaved with a Gillette razor, washed with Ivory Soap, breakfasted on Kellogg's Corn Flakes, and continued through his daily routines depending on advertised brands."

At the same time, the automobile was winning over America. Horse-drawn vehicles made room for automobiles on America's roads, and blacksmiths added automotive repairs to their services. With automobiles, Americans could expand their shopping radius beyond the closest town, seeking out stores with the largest selections and lowest prices. Chain stores were particularly capable of offering that mix, and they steadily gained strength, especially in the Midwest and the Northeast. In 1921, American chain stores earned 4 percent of all retail sales; by 1929, they would capture a daunting 22 percent.

ALL PHOTOS PAGES 1-48 PLUS OUTSIDE COVER: SHSI (IOWA CITY), WILLIAM H. FELTON COLLECTION

Felton's images deepen our understanding and balance colorful but skewed generalizations about the 1920s. The people he photographed were not East Coast tycoons, Hollywood starlets, gin-drinking flappers, or gun-toting mobsters; they were ordinary people engaged in everyday activities.

CULMINATING in the early 1920s, these developments—mail order houses, rural free delivery, parcel post, brand-name advertising, automobiles, and chain stores—had been slowly transforming America for the last few decades. Now they had evolved to the point that small-town businesses could no longer afford to ignore their combined effects. The postwar economy added another twist, especially in midwestern states like Iowa, where farm prices plummeted in 1920/21.

At the same time, the national population was casting off its rural character. For the first time in American history, the 1920 census reported, the majority of Americans lived in towns of 2,500 or more. Although Iowa would not reach that statistical milestone until 1950, Iowans in the 1920s did share the growing fear in rural and small-town America that individual communities were losing their local power, as large cities, national corporations, and East Coast powerbrokers gained political and economic clout.

How did small-town merchants choose to respond

to these developments in America? In some cases, with hostility. Scholar Evelyn Beck gives an example from Warsaw, Iowa: there, a candidate for mayor "threatened to fire any city employee caught buying through mail order." Merchants knew full well that mail order allowed a customer to shop, order, and receive goods without ever stepping into a local store. Many merchants joined forces and vigorously opposed any new postal legislation that would benefit mail order, and they bitterly fought the giant catalog houses—"cat houses," they called them sneeringly, or "Monkey Wards" and "Rears and Soreback."

Some of their loftier arguments against mail order houses appeared in the October 1915 *Merchants Trade Journal*, published in Des Moines: "The mail order firms argue that the farmer would be as well off if the small merchants were out of existence. They claim that the banks would do just as much business; the post office would do just as much business; the railroads would do just as much business; the only difference would be that . . . [the farmers keep the extra profit] instead of letting the merchant get it. This of course is not the truth. . . . Who is it that pays for the good roads in your community?. . . That is always at the head of any public improvement? Is it not the merchants? . . . Show them [the public] that their existence depends a great deal upon you. . . . That where the mail order firms are merely organized for making money, you are in business for other reasons beside making money. You are a public servant; you are a leader in social life and educational uplift."

This "civic" argument would be used again in their battle against chain stores. Speaking on behalf of independent merchants, Senator Hugo Black argued in 1930, "We are rapidly becoming a nation of a few business masters and many clerks and servants. The local man and merchant is passing and his community loses his contribution to local affairs as an independent thinker and executive. A few of these useful citizens . . . become clerks of the great chain machines, at inadequate salaries, while many enter the ranks of the unemployed." On both state and national levels, merchant associations lobbied for laws to regulate and tax chain stores and for investigations to ferret out supposed antitrust violations. John A. Cunningham, secretary of the Iowa Retail Merchants Association, prepared one such resolution on behalf of the National Association of Retail Grocers.

Introduced by Iowa senator Smith Wildman Brookhart, the resolution was approved in 1928, launching a lengthy inquiry into chain stores by the Federal Trade Commission. According to Brookhart

Felton's images are rich with details. In this restaurant, a sign on the wall brags: "ONLY PURE LARD USED IN OUR COOKING."

biographer George William McDaniel, the Iowa senator championed the small, independent business operator "as a co-heir of the Jeffersonian ideal." But Brookhart also urged merchants to organize buying cooperatives and thus match chain store's low prices.

In fact, throughout these battles, many progressively minded, small business operators urged their most resistant peers to "stop whining" about mail order houses and chain stores, and to "wake up" to a new century with new marketing opportunities.

NOT ALL OF THE CHANGES transforming America were viewed as threats to the small, local business. Some were welcomed and put to good use. In step with the times, many business owners now stocked automobile-related products, installed curbside gasoline pumps, and sold meals and lodging to automobile tourists. They lit their stores with electricity and demonstrated new electrical appliances on the market. In response to customer demands, they phased out cracker barrels, flour bins, and other bulk storage, and instead stocked airtight packages of Uneeda Biscuits, small bags of Pillsbury Flour, and scores of other prepackaged brand-name products that were advertised in mainstream magazines.

And local merchants rode on the coattails of national ad campaigns; they baited their own local ads with America's wondrous new products. Historian Don S. Kirschner monitored that development in rural Iowa newspapers. After World War I, Kirschner reports, local ads were mostly limited to patent medicines, dry goods, hardware, livestock, and farm equipment and supplies—with only an occasional ad for an Edison phonograph or a Dodge automobile. By mid-decade, ads appeared for railroad excursions, movies, typewriters, washing machines, and a half-dozen makes of automobiles. But by 1929, Kirschner writes, local ads featured "a wide choice of automobiles, refrigerators, washing machines, automatic toasters, waffle irons, and grill-griddles, radios, phonographs, and movies, hotel weekends in every city in the Midwest, resorts in Palm Beach, sleds for the kiddies, Camel cigarettes for the men, beauty parlors for the ladies, and Florsheim shoes for all the family."

THESE TRANSFORMATIONS in American business and culture form the backdrop for the remarkable photographs in the William H. Felton Collection. Donald Nielsen, nephew of William Felton, remembers his uncle as a "kind of a nomad." Born in 1879, Felton left Belmond, his hometown, when he was 19. He served a few stints in the army, worked on a ship, and traveled across the nation and to various countries. Yet he maintained his ties to Belmond, sending souvenirs and gifts to his sister and her children and occasionally visiting them. He died in 1930 and was buried there.

Apparently for a time in 1922, when Felton was 43, he confined his wanderlust to north-central Iowa, where he photographed dozens of businesses. "I suppose he took them to sell to those stores and the store owners," Nielsen surmised, "because there are quite a few towns in this area that were pretty well covered."

When Nielsen moved out of the family home in Belmond after 68 years, he found boxes of his uncle's glass-plate negatives tucked up into the basement floor joists. "They'd been there for years and years, dusty as could be. I just had no idea what to do with them."

Then Nielsen thought of Paul A. Rietz, a Belmond photographer and history enthusiast. Nielsen gave the heavy glass-plate negatives to Rietz, who printed some in his darkroom, realized their historical significance, and generously donated the entire collection to the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1994. The collection is housed in the Society's Iowa City center. This issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* showcases a representative tenth of the collection

Felton's images are outstanding visual documents. Using light-sensitive glass-plate negatives, he successfully photographed dimly lit interiors. Perhaps to add human interest, he included workers, customers, and sometimes children in his compositions. And he set his depth of field to capture both detail and distance.

More important, Felton's images on the following pages portray ordinary Iowans in everyday settings—bakeries and auto garages, variety stores and soda fountains. They show us how some Iowans earned a day's wages, and how others spent a day's wages. They show us how owners promoted their businesses, what their employees wore to work, and what their customers could buy for their farms and homes. And they reveal how the great transitions of the new century played out in small-town Iowa in the 1920s. →

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND NOTE ON SOURCES

Thanks must first go to Donald Nielsen (William Felton's nephew) and Paul Rietz for recognizing the importance of these images and donating them to the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI). Audio-visual archivist Mary Bennett and student assistants Vicki Schipul, Kerstin Kolbe, and Eric Lana processed and researched the collection. Thanks to Loren Horton and these SHSI staff for research help: Sharon Avery, Mary Bennett, Linda Brown-Link, Ralph Christian, Jodi Evans, Bill Johnson, Kevin Knoot, Nancy Kraft, Jack Lufkin, Judy McClure, Tom Morain, and Michael Smith. For 1920s Iowa, see: Don S. Kirschner, *City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s* (Westport, CT: 1970); George William McDaniel, *Smith Wildman Brookhart: Iowa's Renegade Republican* (Ames, 1995); Thomas J. Morain, *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ames, 1988); and Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames, 1996). Other Iowa sources used (all at SHSI-Iowa City): *The Book of Iowa, from Iowa's Industrial Survey* (Des Moines, 1932); Ruth L. Hoadley, "The Chain Store," *Iowa Studies in Business* (Aug. 1930); Paul S. Peirce, "Social Surveys of Three Rural Townships in Iowa," *State University of Iowa* [SUI] *Monographs, Studies in the Social Sciences* (Dec. 1917); Denny Rehder, *The Shampoo King: The Story of F. W. Fitch . . .* (Des Moines, 1981); C. H. Sandage, "The Motor Vehicle in Iowa," *Iowa Studies in Business* (Feb. 1928); *Survey of the Food Buying Habits Among Iowa Farm Families*, conducted by *Wallaces' Farmer* and *Iowa Homestead* (Des Moines, 1930); various articles in *Journal of Business* (SUI, 1921-24), Fred L. Spencer & Co., *Spencer Store News* (1905/06, 1921/22), Iowa Press Assn., *The Corn Belt Publisher* (1916-19), and *Merchants Trade Journal*, (1907, 1915, 1920); and censuses and catalogs referred to in text. Secondary sources with a national focus include: Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother* (NY, 1983) and *A Social History of American Technology* (NY, 1997); Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck . . .* (Chicago, 1950); Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds., *American Home Life, 1880-1930* (Knoxville, 1992); Barbara J. Howe et al., *Houses and Homes* (Nashville, 1987); Godfrey M. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America, 1859-1962* (NY, 1963); John F. Mariani, *America Eats Out* (NY, 1991); James M. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store* (Westport, CT, 1993); James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (NY, 1990); Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (NY, 1983); Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations . . .* (NY, 1991); Evelyn Beck, "Catalogs," and Dorothy S. Schmidt, "Magazines," in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Handbook of American Popular Culture*, 3 vols. (NY, 1989); and Time-Life Books, *This Fabulous Century*, vol. 3 (NY, 1969).

SURROUNDED by the smell of new leather, Emil Jacobsen (right) poses for William Felton in Thornton, Iowa. Tidy rows of fly nets, hames, and horse collars fill Jacobsen's well-equipped harness shop.

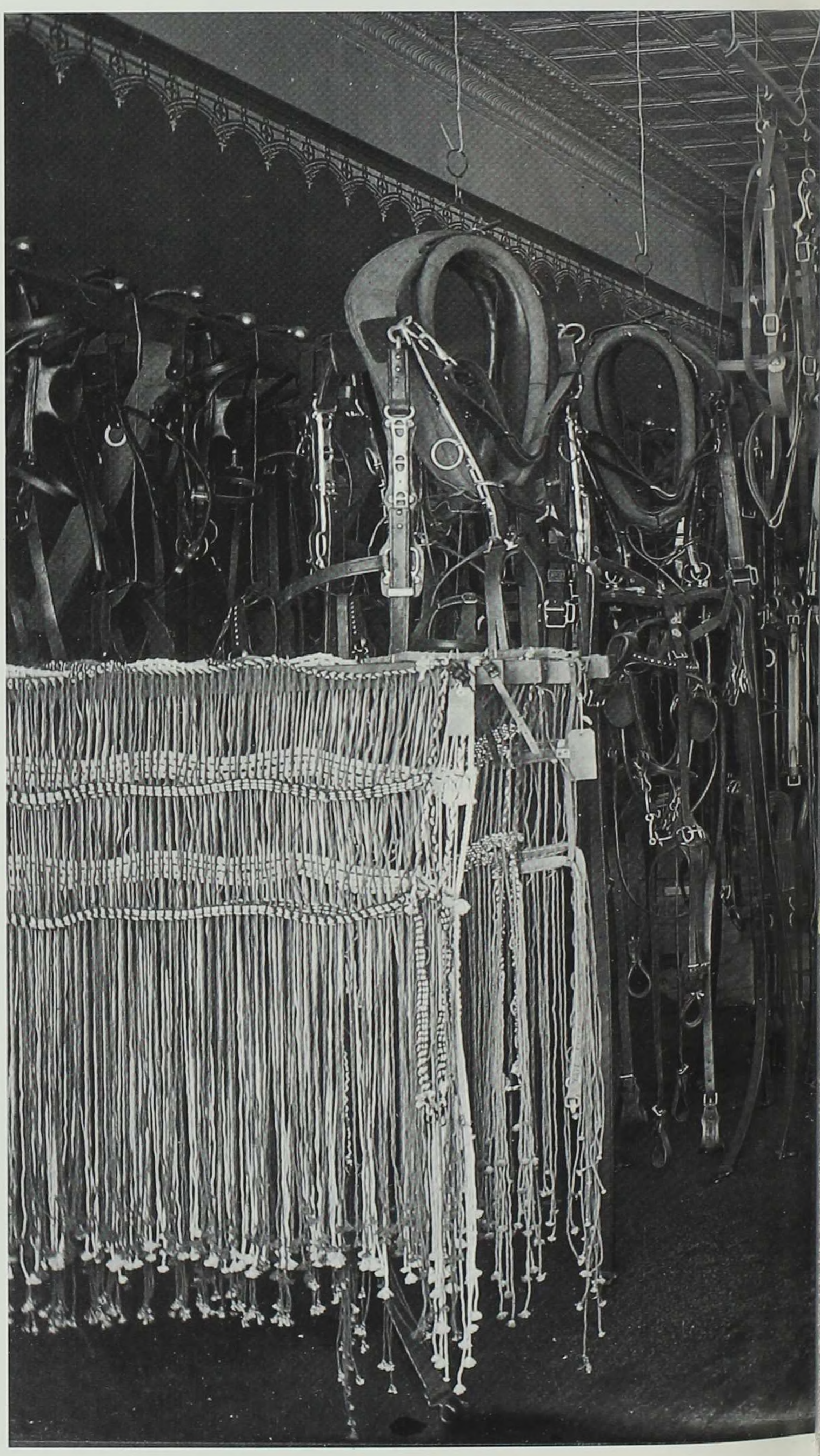
The shop bespeaks the essential role that horses continued to play in Iowa. Even though the number of horses on Iowa farms had fallen by two-thirds after the war, and even though Iowa farmers owned a third of all the automobiles in the state in 1925, they still needed their workhorses.

Merchants in Alden, Iowa, pushed for the transition to tractors. In its April 1922 customer newsletter, the Fred L. Spencer & Co. acknowledged, "We hardly think that the horse can be pushed from the farm as he has been from the road," but assured farmers that "one tractor can do the work of several horses."

The Warman Garage Co. in Alden apparently lost hope of any quick transition: the garage discontinued its tractor business in 1922. Promising good deals on the three tractors in stock, the sales copy likened tractors to horses. "Fordson tractors, like a high life colt are 'just rarin' to go' and will do spring plowing up in short order," the copy chortled. "The Twin City tractor, like a draft horse has a power for every big job."

Nevertheless, according to the 1925 census, Iowa's population of 2.4 million people shared the state with nearly 1.1 million horses and draft animals. Only 33,000 tractors were in use on Iowa's 209,000 farms.

Tractors would not usurp the role of draft horses until after World War II. Until then, harness shops like Emil Jacobsen's in Thornton would remain essential enterprises in Iowa towns.



GOODRICH
RUBBER FOOTWEAR
GOODRICH
RUBBERS

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A SIGN in Raecker's Garage (above) in Meservey, Iowa, posts distances to nearby towns. Most are a good half-day's travel by horse-drawn wagon, but much quicker by auto.

Right: Curly Watson and his crew pause in their work on two autos with disk wheels, at the South Garage in Kanawha. Below: Tires spill off the shelves of another automotive business photographed by Felton.

By 1925 there were 659,202 motor vehicles registered in Iowa—a phenomenal growth from the 799 in 1905. The automobile had an enormous impact on small-town businesses. Garages and service stations elbowed their way into the local mix of commerce, gradually displacing livery stables and farriers. Stores began to stock rubber tires, repair parts, and other auto supplies. By 1929, almost a quarter of Iowa's total net retail sales were from automotive-related businesses.

The automobile also changed shopping habits and, as historian Tom Morain has observed, "dealt a fatal blow to the ability of very small towns to retain the rural shopper." When road conditions permitted, Iowans could speed by the smaller towns and drive on to the larger towns, with their larger stores.

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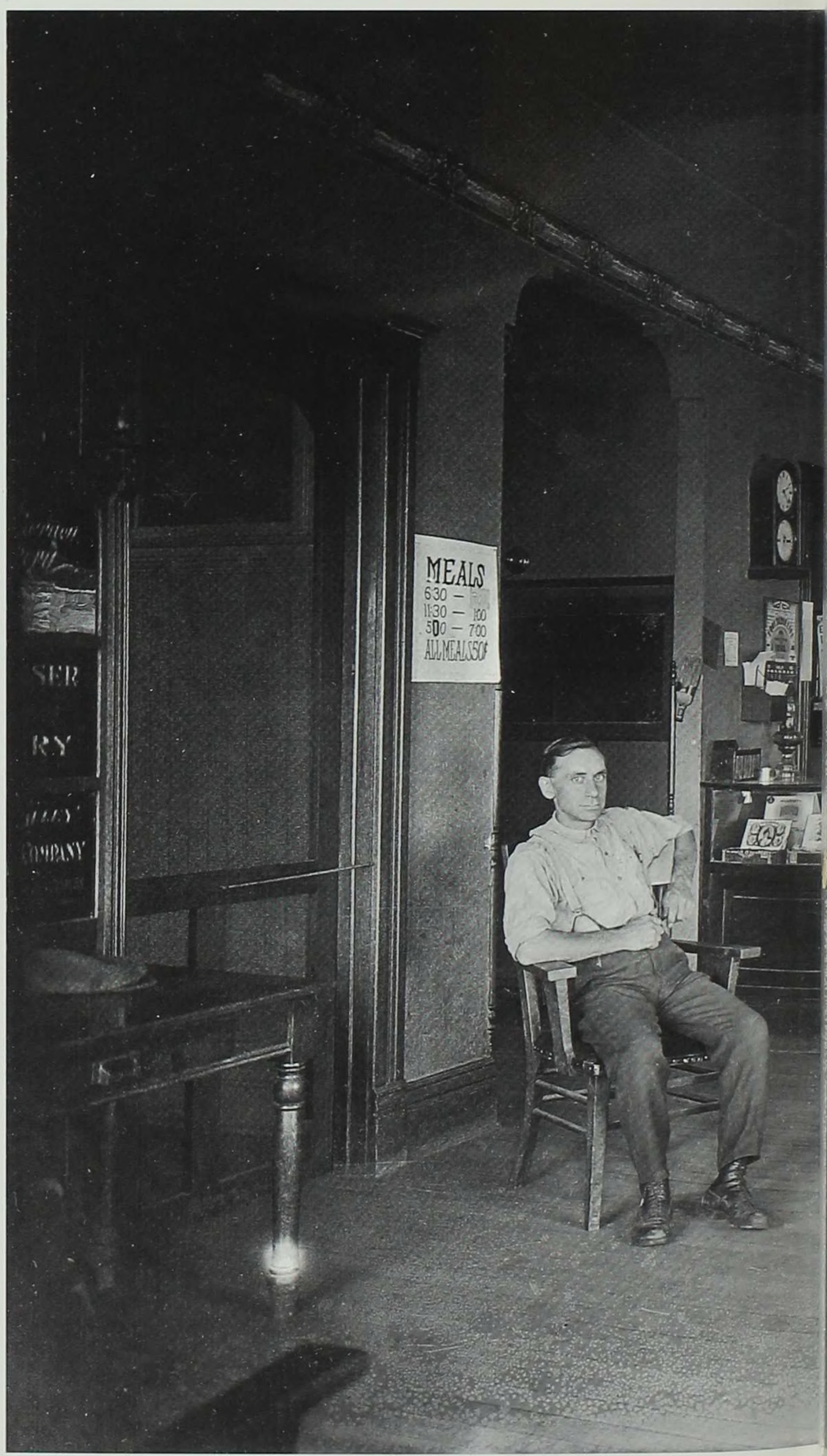
WITH A TRIP of the shutter, Felton captures a quiet day in a hotel lobby (possibly in Sheffield, Iowa). At the front desk, a young boy stands behind a display of cigars and gum balls. Near the wall, a kerosene lamp stands ready, in case the electric ceiling fixtures should fail.

For decades, small-town hotels had sheltered thousands of "commercial travelers" or "drummers," whose sales routes linked rural merchants with regional and national wholesalers. Traveling entertainers also stayed at small-town hotels, until they lost their audiences to movies and radio.

Of course, small-town hotels didn't suit everyone. Consider writer P. M. Fogg's complaints: "Stuffy little rooms, with torn window screens to let the mosquitos in. . . . One towel—always have to ring for the other five. Soap-cake, big as a minute. And the prices! Scandalous."

At this hotel, bored guests could consult various signs behind the front desk for suggestions for passing the time. A poster announces "CELEBRATE AT SHEFFIELD JULY 4." A time schedule promotes "Popular Excursions" to the Twin Cities. And calendar art features a roadster ready to take to the road.

But small hotels would lose out to new kinds of lodging: roadside camps, tourist cabins, and motels. As author Sinclair Lewis had predicted in the *Saturday Evening Post*, "Somewhere in these states there is a young man who is going to become rich. He is going to start a chain of small, clean, pleasant hotels, standardized and nationally advertised, along every important motor route in the country. . . . [with] agreeable clerks, good coffee, endurable mattresses and good lighting."



LADIES
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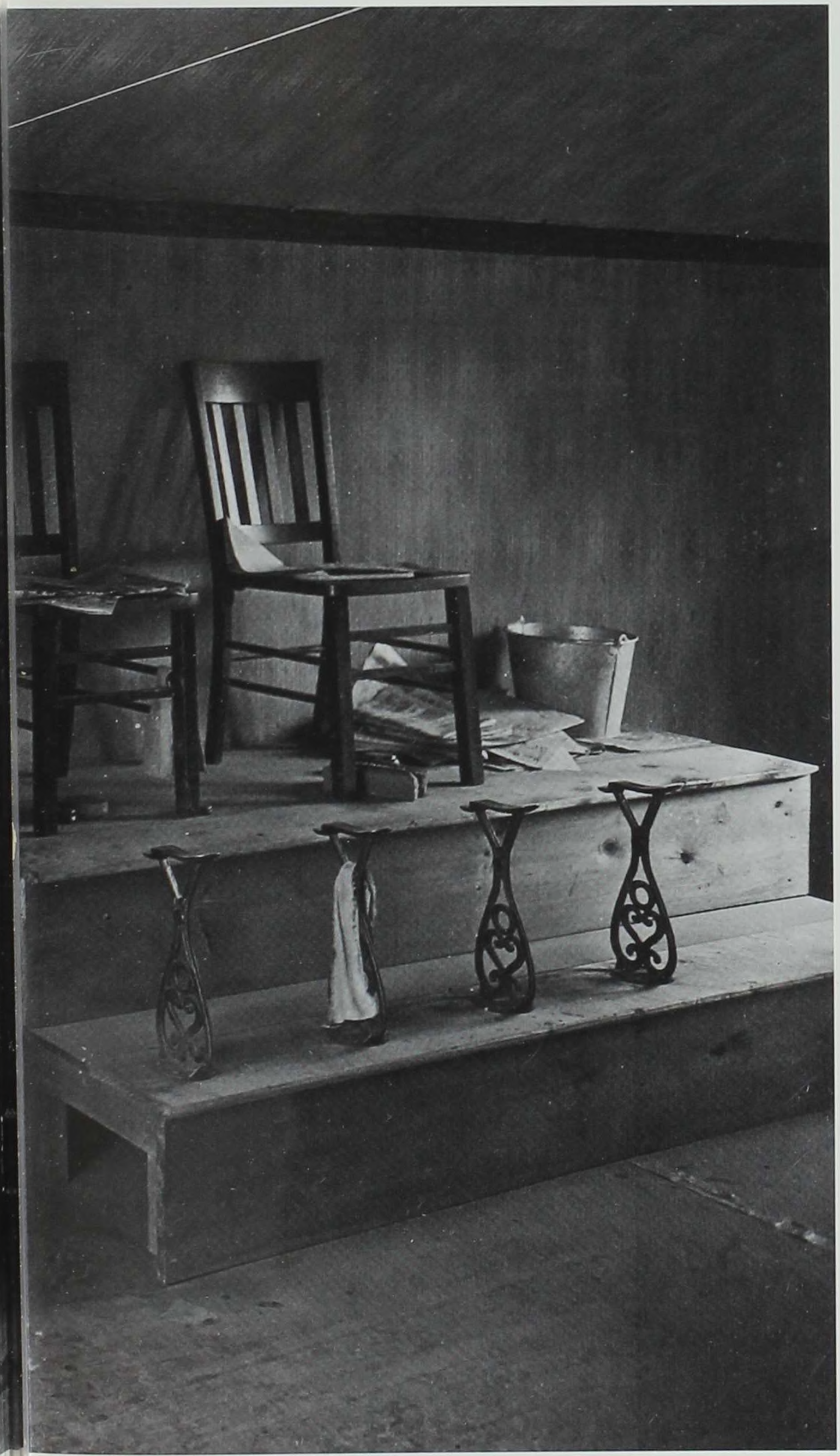
SHOESHINE STANDS, like the one photographed here by Felton, were often set up in hotels, railroad stations, or barbershops. Needing little equipment, Iowa bootblacks could order their Shinola brushes and daubers by mail from the Alexander & Sandberg Co. in Des Moines. The company also sold polishes and creams for leather shoes, cleaning liquids and powders for canvas shoes, and special brushes for suede and kid leather.

In big cities, children often worked as bootblacks, selling shoeshines on street corners and at far less elaborate stands than the one in this photo.

Like the jobs of delivering messages, tending market stands, peddling goods, and selling magazines and newspapers, bootblacking was classified as a "street trade" in the early 20th century. In line with Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories, newspaper publishers, who relied on newsboys to hawk their papers, argued that the young "street merchants" employed in street trades received valuable job training—albeit in the school of hard knocks.

Social reformers thought differently. Decrying the youngsters' exposure to the moral dangers that lurked in public places, they sought protective legislation. A section of Iowa's 1917 Child Labor Law, for example, specified that unless special permits had been secured, boys under eleven and girls under eighteen were forbidden from engaging in street trades in cities of 10,000 or more.



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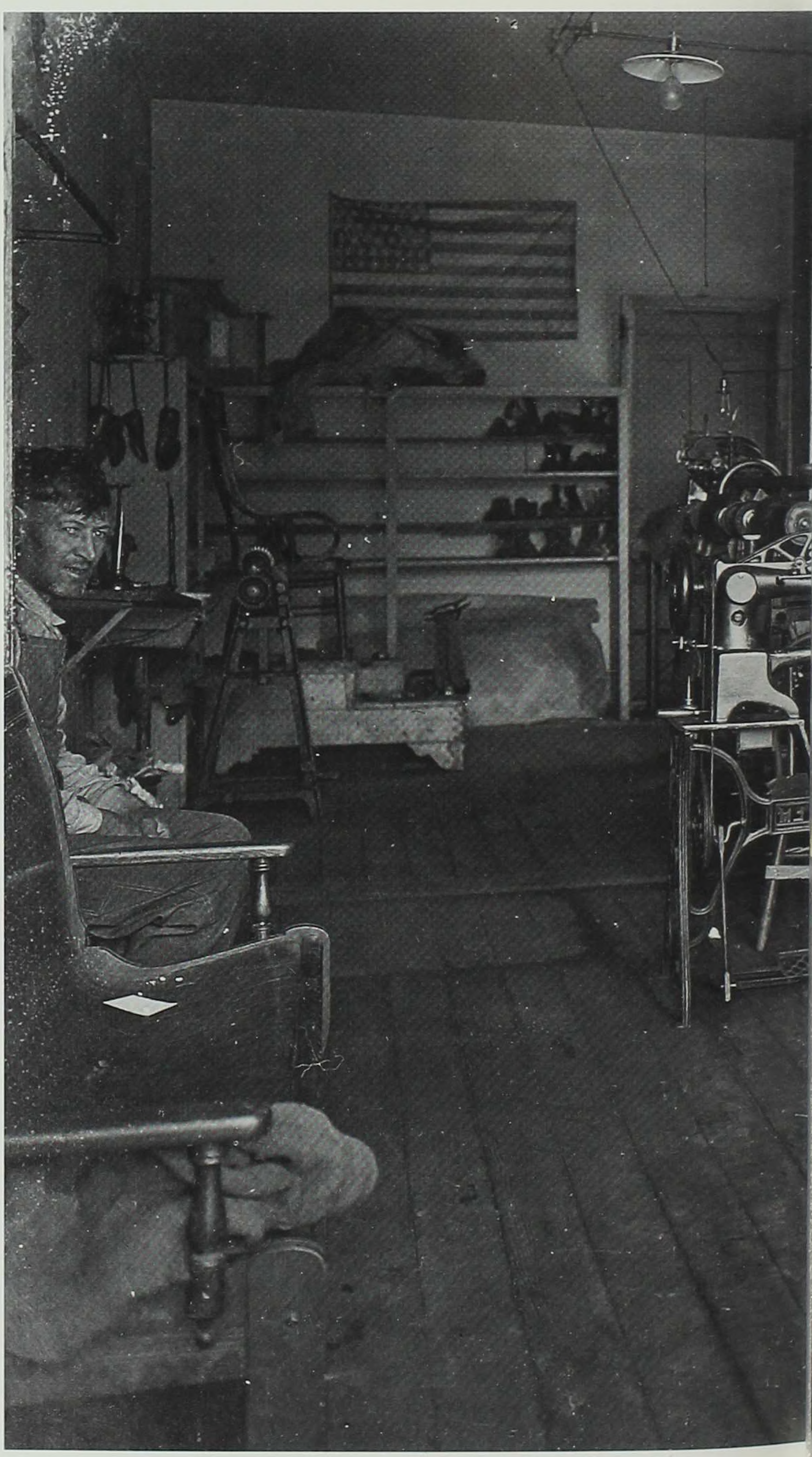
TWO BAREFOOT BOYS stand close to the proprietor as Felton photographs this shoe repair shop. On the far left, a man waits on a bench. In the back, a one-chair shoeshine stand occupies a corner and a 48-star flag brightens the wall.

Although shoemaking had been almost completely mechanized by the mid-19th century and became one of America's leading industries, shoe repair remained a local enterprise.

As with bootblacking, tools and supplies for shoe repair could be ordered from companies like Alexander & Sandberg in Des Moines. Their 1923 catalog featured basic equipment like the Singer shoe repairing machine (in the center of the shop) and shoe jacks (in front of the boys).

Ankle boots that laced up the front were still the predominant everyday footwear in the early 1920s. But the merchandise in the Alexander & Sandberg catalog hints at some variations. There were heels of different styles—Cuban, French, "Common Sense," or rubber; patches of various leathers—pig skin, calf, kangaroo, or cordovan; and laces by the gross—of leather, mercerized cotton, or silk.



TWO BAREFOOT BOYS stand close to the proprietor as Felton photographs this shoe repair shop. On the far left, a man waits on a bench. In the back, a one-chair shoeshine stand occupies a corner and a 48-star flag brightens the wall.

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STILL IN KNICKERS, a young customer (above) shops at a men's clothing store that sells dress shirts, Paris garters, Flexo arm bands, and Van Heusen collars. Right: Two gents pose amidst work overalls and boots, as well as brooms, baskets, and Ball canning supplies.

Felton's photographs reveal that men's clothing was sold in various stores, ranging from fine clothiers to hardware stores. Ready-made clothing for men dated back to the mid-19th century. "In 1861," historian Thomas Schlereth tells us, "the need to mass-produce Civil War uniforms resulted in guidelines for common sizes based on the examination of recruits. With some notion of what most men of a particular height should weigh and what their average measurements were, a new statistical science, anthropometry ('the measurement of body sizes'), developed along with a factory-made, ready-to-wear clothing industry. . . . By 1915 American men . . . had a wide choice of ready-made clothing designed for business, sports, and specialized occupations."

RYS SEEDS

READY-MADE CLOTHING for women lagged far behind men's, and businesses like these three photographed by Felton show that even in the 1920s, women were still buying fabric and notions and relying on their own sewing and that of local dressmakers and seamstresses. As early as the 1860s, Butterick's sized paper patterns had been available, and throughout the 19th century sewing machines steadily became more affordable. The Iowa dressmaker below has taken advantage of electricity to light her shop, heat her iron, and perhaps to power her sewing machine.

Although some factory-made women's clothing was marketed late in the century, it lacked quality and design and often required altering, especially to achieve the close-fitting bodices dictated by 19th-century fashion. But women's fashions would soon change, from the complicated construction of Victorian ensembles

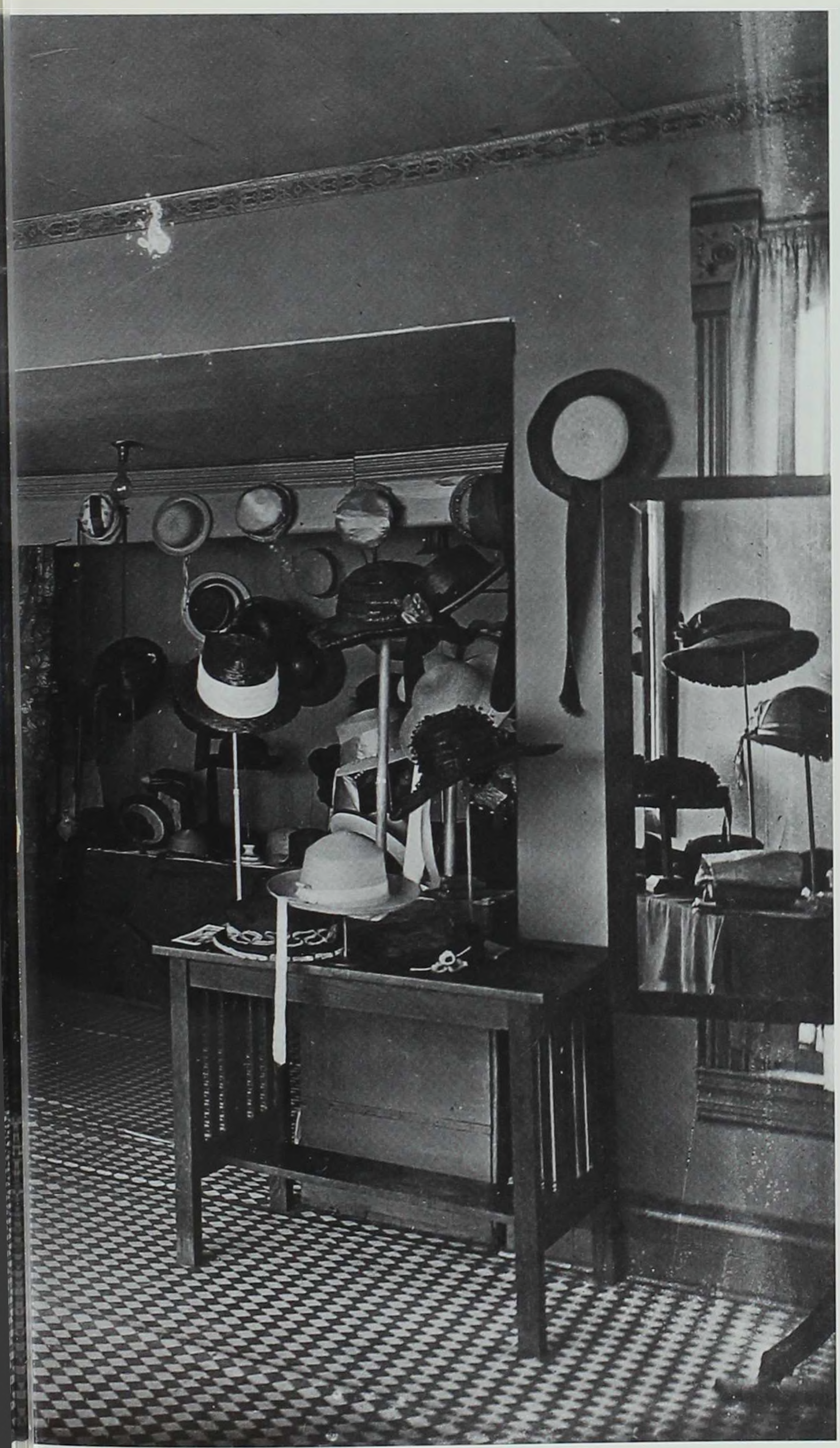
to simpler and looser styles with less critical fit. These styles were also far easier to mass produce.

As women realized the convenience of buying ready-made clothes, factory-made clothing lost its stigma. "One wonders, oftentimes," commented *Good Housekeeping* in 1911, "whether . . . the ready-made garment makers have not driven the home dressmaker and the sewing mother entirely from the field; for prices are so enticing . . . and the garments are so well made and attractive that it hardly seems worth while to take the time to shop, and cut, and fit, and manufacture, those little dresses or suits in the face of such competition."

Nevertheless, the 1920 census counted more than 5,500 Iowa women employed as dressmakers and seamstresses in non-factory settings—outnumbering male tailors five to one.

Yet even as stores added ready-made clothing for women, they continued to stock fabric and notions. And so did the ever-popular catalogs. To fight mail order, a *Merchants Trade Journal* article in 1915 advised, merchants needed to study the competition. The journal compared a local store's terse ad for fabric—"One lot of Percales at 9¢"—to a more descriptive and enticing ad in a Sears, Roebuck catalog—"Our Percale is a cloth of service and absolutely fast color. It is stout and fine, and the printed styles are as neat and pretty as one could wish for. . . . The ordinary Percale at this price is altogether different. This grade usually sells for 12½¢. It is a quality you can appreciate."

Right: Note the S&H Green Stamps pennants on the wall. Both independent and chain stores used trading stamps and premiums to retain customers.



SHEER CURTAINS and a hanging fern filter the light in this milliner's shop photographed by Felton. A diamond-pattern "linoleum rug" or floorcloth brightens the room.

The signature hat of the Jazz Age—the bell-shaped cloche that hugged a flapper's bobbed hair—has not yet reached this shop. Although the clothing of the two women reflects the shorter and looser styles of the 1920s, wider-brimmed hats still reign in this shop.

Women who shopped by mail order would find the same lag in hat styles. For instance, the 1922 Montgomery Ward catalog featured just a few flapper-type hats. By 1927, however, nearly every hat in the Sears, Roebuck catalog was a variation of the cloche style.

Milliners' shops were important community institutions for women. As historian Dorothy Schwieder points out, a milliner's shop provided a safe and respectable public place in which local women could gather and socialize. And the occupation of milliner, practiced by nearly 1,500 Iowa women in 1920, offered both single and married women the independence of owning and operating a business.

Another advantage a woman in millinery enjoyed was the opportunity to travel to large cities on wholesale buying trips. There, she might select "ready-to-wear" hats, already trimmed in the current fashion. Another option was to buy unadorned hat "bodies," which she might trim with ostrich feathers, silk berries, rhinestones, or celluloid ornaments for her individual customers back home.

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PERHAPS the irresistible smells of warm bread and cookies have enticed William Felton into these two bakeries. The bakery at the left might be the Buttertop Bakery in Clear Lake, Iowa. Note the dusting of flour under the wheeled tables, and the electric dough-mixer.

More and more Americans were buying commercial bread rather than baking their own. In 1850, only 10 percent of the bread consumed in America was baked commercially. In 1900 it had crept up to 25 percent. By 1930, it rose to 60 percent.

Iowans were part of that trend. In January 1930, *Wallaces' Farmer* conducted a survey for food manufacturers, distributors, and advertisers. Of the roughly 10,000 Iowa farm households surveyed, 73 percent purchased commercially baked bread. Slightly more than half of that commercial bread was baked locally rather than shipped in.

Many of the farm families surveyed also bought rolls, cookies, cakes, and doughnuts from bakeries, and they supplemented their commercial bread purchases with almost a dozen home-baked loaves each week.

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INTENDED TO ABSORB blood from fresh meat, sawdust covers the floor of two butcher shops photographed by Felton. Scales sit prominently on counters, rolls of paper and cones of string are at hand for packaging, and a meat hook and saw hang from the ornate cooler at left.

Iowa butchers such as these two might have ordered equipment from the G. H. Jenkinson Co. in Sioux City, which sold meat refrigerators and butchers' supplies, including lard presses, lamb cleavers, beef hoists, and sausage grinders. The description of one item in the Jenkinson catalog—its four-bladed "draw cut chopper No. 6"—hints at the role children might have played in family-run businesses. Capable of chopping "30 lbs. of meat in 12 minutes," the chopper "is easy and light for one man to run, or can be run by small boys."

The presence of sawdust and barefoot customers (above) belies earlier national victories for improved sanitation, food inspection, and meat and poultry certification.

Since the development in the 1880s of refrigerated railroad cars, butchers had been able to win customers with a greater variety of fresh meat and fish. But by the 1920s, butcher shops were beginning to lose customers who preferred the one-stop shopping convenience of the new "combination stores," which consolidated meat markets, green groceries, bakeries, and general groceries into one store.

A PYRAMID of canned goods and shelves of brand-name products testify to transitions in American shopping habits and their effects on grocery stores.

By the 1920s, prepackaged and brand-name foodstuffs had won over most of America. Food inspection laws had quieted earlier suspicions about adulterations in processed foods. Women's magazines had inspired housewives to cook with the new "convenience foods." National ad campaigns had drummed product names, slogans, and symbols into shoppers' minds. Hence, by the early 1920s, Americans were expecting their grocers to stock boxes of cold breakfast cereal and pancake mix, cans of apricots and pork and beans, and airtight packages of crackers and coffee.

Not all grocers approved. A storekeeper in Alden, Iowa, reminded customers: "We think it a waste to pay 45 or 50 cents per pound for coffee in fancy packages. The package alone costs a lot of money and only the coffee is used. Our 40 cent bulk coffee is freshly ground each morning by our electric mill and we are glad to have it compared with any at 5 or 10 cents higher."

Nevertheless, according to a *Wallaces' Farmer* study in 1930, only a third of the Iowa farm families surveyed still bought their coffee in bulk.

Gauging the effect of chain stores on Iowa's independent grocers, the survey also found that only one out of ten farm families were buying groceries at chain stores in 1930. The great majority of farm households continued to do business with independent grocers, whose stores were in small, nearby towns—no larger than 2,500 people and no farther away than five or six miles.

How many?
10¢ each

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STRATEGICALLY PLACED up front in glass cases, open boxes of cigars tempt customers entering these two Iowa eating places. The restaurant on the left could seat 40; the lunch counter above, perhaps a dozen.

But in America's big cities, eating places had to accommodate hordes of workers, especially at noon. As cities had expanded, so had the distance between work and home; it was no longer feasible for workers to go home for the noon meal. To provide convenient, inexpensive food near urban workers' jobs, new kinds of eating places arose—automats, lunch wagons, diners, luncheonettes, and chain cafeterias (like Bishop's Cafeteria, founded in Waterloo, Iowa, in 1920). New eating places meant more jobs; in the 1920s, the number of waitresses rose by 98 percent.

Small-town restaurants catered to local citizens, farmers in town for the day, commercial travelers on their sales routes, and automobile tourists lured west by mountain scenery (note the mural in the far upper left). But small-town restaurants would have to share the growing tourist business with other new kinds of eating places—roadside cafés, drive-ins, and hamburger chains. Observing that "people with cars are so lazy they don't want to get out of them to eat," Texan J. G. Kirby had launched his "Pig Stand" chain of drive-ins in 1921. White Castle, the first successful chain of hamburger stands, also began that year.

La Fendrich
Havana Cigars
WRIGLEY'S
5
DUTCH MASTERS
HUMO
MAY
FRESH

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MALTED
MILKS 15
FRESH
STRAW-
BERRIES
WHITE OWL
DUTCH MASTERS

HAILED BY TEMPERANCE WORKERS as safe and respectable alternatives to saloons and taverns, soda fountains had been popular in America since the 1870s. Often located in a drugstore, the soda fountain added a touch of elegance; here on the left, a marble counter and sparkling parfait glasses are set against the backdrop of a huge mirror framed in rich wood.

Right: O. E. Johnson ran this drugstore soda fountain in Kanawha. Perhaps he had ordered the round white tables from the G. H. Jenkinson Co. in Sioux City, which also sold syrup dispensers, cone fillers, and parfait glasses. Reflecting America's push for public health measures, the sales catalog recommended this type of table for "Cafeterias, Ice Cream Parlors, Drug Stores and such places where clean food and drink is served by clean healthy people, who welcome food inspectors. Appearance: Good looking, clean cut, cool and sanitary, sturdy and healthy."

Self-consciously posing for Felton, seven young boarders (below) await a meal sure to be more substantial than an ice cream soda. Operating a boarding house was considered an acceptable source of income for a married woman or widow. She provided meals, rooms, and laundry and cleaning services to those seeking affordable housing—often students, single wage-earners, new immigrants, and young couples.

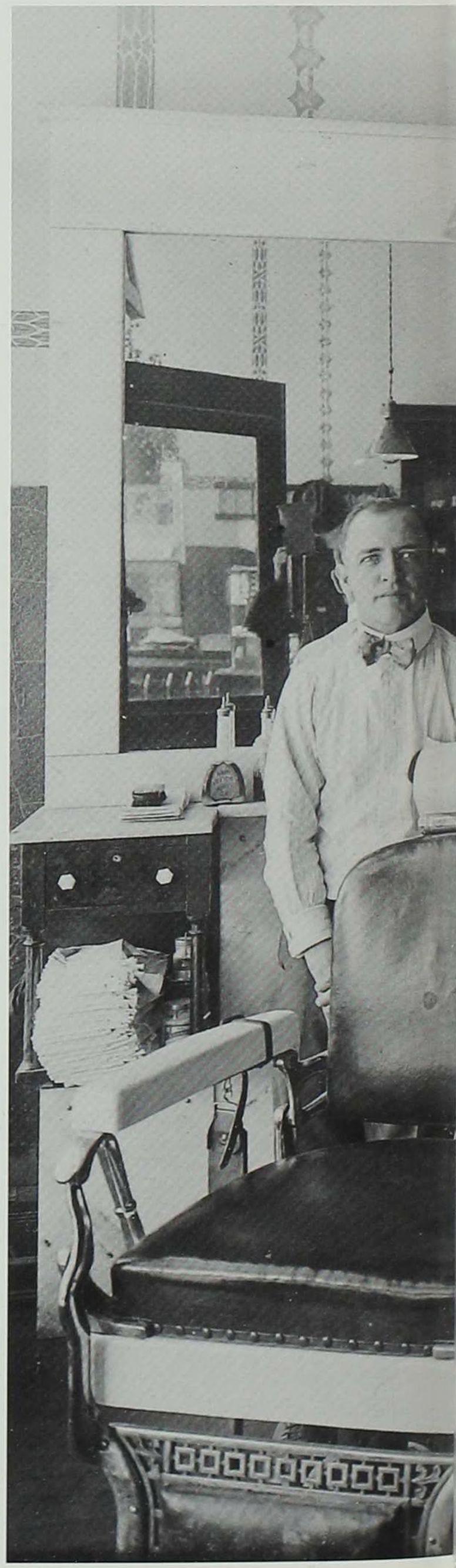
BUZZING with electricity and local politics, Brady's Barbershop (right) in Belmond, Iowa, awaits customers. Electric lights hang above both chairs and an electric cord drops from a ceiling outlet to power the clippers on a support pole. On the far right, customers are advised: "Vote—Yes for Wright County Fair. Vote— Yes for County Nurse."

A mirror reflection of Felton and his camera appears to the left of the barber with the bowtie. To the left of the other barber, the mirror reflects a pool cue rack. Pool tables were often set up in the rear of barbershops.

Commonplace to many 1920s barbershops were hair products manufactured by Iowa barber-entrepreneur Fred W. Fitch. When the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act outlawed wood alcohol, which most manufacturers had been using in hair products, Fitch was already selling his "Ideal Dandruff Remover" made with grain alcohol. Fitch's sales doubled in one year, and his success continued for decades. He developed several hair products (first in Boone and then in a Des Moines factory), marketing them to barbershops and drug and department stores.

Through the pages of his *Square Deal* magazine, published in Des Moines, Fitch also campaigned for state licensing laws for barbers and for sterilization of their equipment. He pushed barbers to adapt to change and to capitalize on it. "Don't fear competition from safety razors [even though men will use them to shave at home]," he advised, "sell them to your customer—or he'll buy them at another business." And he welcomed the fad of bobbed hair for women, noting that "every good barber shop today caters to the ladies trade. . . . They are bringing dollars into the barber shops where formerly the quarters straggled in."

Like the barbershop, the pool hall or billiard parlor (below) was a local gathering place for men. Reputed to erode community morals, pool halls weren't a source of local pride and therefore were rarely photographed. Felton, however, photographed at least four, including this one in Kanawha. Signs on the wall and railing firmly remind patrons that minors, gambling, profanity, and asking for credit are all forbidden.



If you are absent Monday
Vote before you leave
Vote - Yes for Wright County Fair -
Vote - Yes for County Nurse

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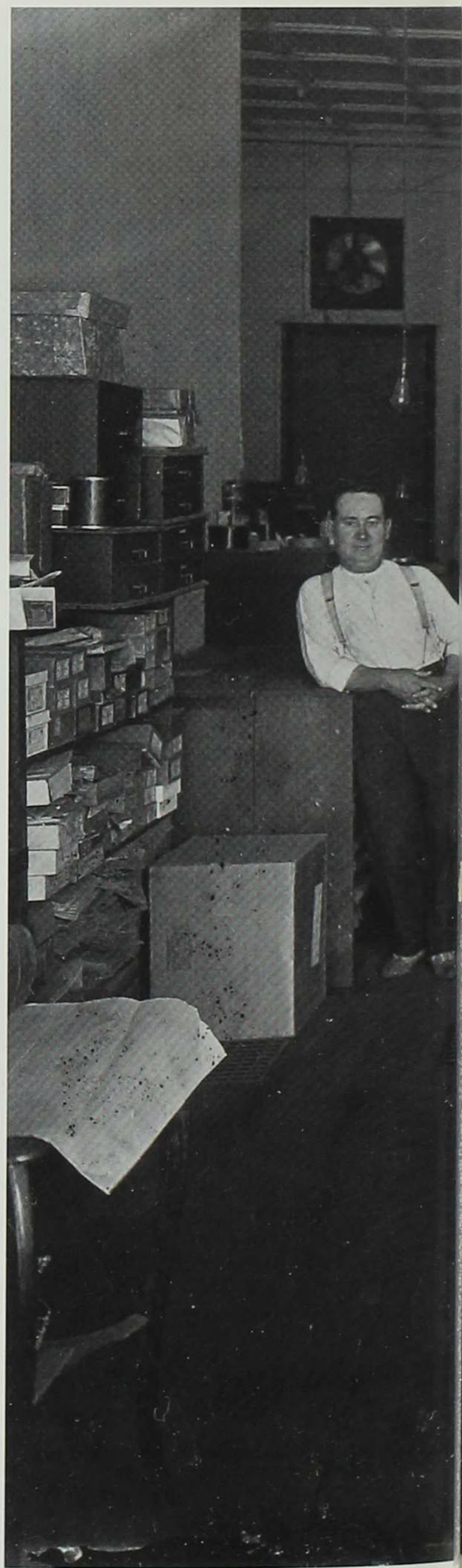

TELEPHONE OPERATORS, newspaper publishers, and printers kept communities informed and connected. In turn, local retail and service establishments were often the first to install telephones, and their weekly ads provided important revenue for the local paper.

Operating a switchboard (above) was traditionally women's work; it was assumed they would be more patient and courteous than male operators. (This operator may be Helen Stevenson Roeder in Rockwell, Iowa.) In small towns, the operator often lived in a house where the switchboard was set up (note the bedroom in the rear). Besides routine duties, operators tracked down doctors, rallied help in local emergencies, and linked isolated rural households with neighbors and townspeople. A leader in early telephony, Iowa was the first state to sponsor an operator's school (in 1915), and led the nation in the number of rural households with phones (86 percent in 1917).

A well-established tradition in Iowa, small-town newspapers also underwent technological change in the new century. The girl at the keyboard (right) commands the new typesetting marvel—the linotype machine. Big-city newspapers first began to switch from hand-set to machine-set type in the late 19th century. By the war years, ads for linotype machines were targeting small weekly newspaper publishers who still set type by hand. Such ads appeared often in the Iowa Press Association's *Corn Belt Publisher*. Promising savings in time and money, the ads urged: "Don't Envy the Progressives. Be One." (Felton may have taken this photo in Kanawha.)

The woman at the table is probably the bookkeeper. Clerical jobs were considered socially acceptable for women, and even the *Corn Belt Publisher* gave a qualified "yes" to hiring women in small-town newspaper offices: "A bright girl out of high school or an ever faithful maiden lady can be employed for a half day now and then to add up figures carefully placed in the right columns, and get out his [the publisher's] statements." But, the writer advised, "Always have a substitute in reserve in case of illness, marriage or a mistaken notion of the individual's importance to the paper."

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THIS DRUGSTORE (right) sells a little bit of everything: chocolate, cigars, hammocks, fabric dyes, postcards, magazines, diaries, batteries, ice cream sodas, and more. Eye-catching posters and displays, probably nationally distributed, promote major brands and companies like Eveready, Coca-Cola, McCall's, Edison, and Gillette.

Also eye-catching is the store's pressed-tin ceiling. Easy to install, such ceilings added elegance at a low cost; they appear in several of Felton's images. For floors, linoleum was introduced in the 1860s and was often preferred over tongue-and-groove flooring because it was easier to clean and, like the diamond-pattern linoleum here, more decorative.

Bedecked with flags and paper lanterns, the store below houses a post office in the back. Storekeepers appreciated in-store post offices, because people coming in to pick up their mail each day were also likely to do business with the storekeeper.

NEW EDISON
S C O
15¢
15¢
VALSPAR
ENAMEL

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NEW PRODUCTS gleam softly in this hardware store. Table lamps and wire wastepaper baskets line the shelf above a bank of small hardware drawers (far right). Razor strops and drying racks hang from the ceiling, and garden seeds, buckets, and pots and pans fill the center aisle. A Monarch cookstove hugs the left wall; above the stove, enamelware fills the shelves.

Chances are, there wasn't an item in this store that didn't also appear, in a wide range of variations, in mail order catalogs. For instance, the 1922 Montgomery Ward catalog sold a dozen models of cookstoves, and kitchen items made of enamelware, cast iron, aluminum, ovenglass, copper, retinned stamped steel, stoneware, and earthenware. Not only did the catalog sell wire wastepaper baskets, but also manila folders, oak file cabinets, rubber stamps, typewriters, and pencil sharpeners. Small stores simply couldn't afford to stock so many products or so many variations.

Felton's photographs of store interiors like this one (perhaps from Kanawha) reveal the space limitations faced by businesses. "The great leveler in design was the lot and building tradition," writes historian James M. Mayo. "All lots, whether commercial or residential, tended to be narrow and deep, allowing the maximum number of frontage lots on a block." This basic lot configuration, often 25 x 100 feet, resulted in dark canyons of merchandise. Some retail experts recommended that everyday items be displayed in the rear of the store, reasoning that customers would be tempted to select additional merchandise as they wended their way to the back.

QUICK-MEAL

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CLARK
JEWEL
Thor

AN ARBOR of ceiling fixtures dramatically displays America's dazzling new star of the 20th century—electricity. Between 1907 and 1920, as the cost of wiring fell, the percentage of American homes wired for electricity jumped from 8 to 35 percent.

Although gas would continue as an energy source for many homes, electricity spawned dozens of new household products. Many of them, like the table lamps, irons, mangles, fans, and washing machines in this photograph, were stocked and sold by local utility companies.

"More and more labor-saving equipment is being advertised in the stores and in the pages of our magazines," the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs told their members in late 1924. "Iowa State College has an unusual department of studying labor-saving equipment [in their Home Maker Unit Courses] . . . in the way of stoves, gas and electric washing machines, mangles, mixing machines, vacuum cleaners and smaller devices."

But there were trade-offs. "Modern labor-saving devices eliminated drudgery, not labor," historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan argues. "Some of the work was made easier, but its volume increased: sheets and underwear were changed more frequently, so there was more laundry to be done; diets became more varied, so cooking was more complex. . . . The proportion of servants to households in the nation dropped (1 servant to every 15 households in 1900; 1 to 42 in 1950) just when washing machines, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators were increasing just as markedly. Finally, some of the work that had previously been allocated to commercial agencies actually returned to the domain of the housewife."

Of course, electrically powered products had great appeal to farm families, who witnessed the wonders of electricity when they came to town. But because of the cost of running electric wires in rural areas and the uncertainty of who should pay for them, farms lagged far behind towns; in 1923, only 15 percent of Iowa farm homes were equipped with electricity or gas. Although the 1927 Sears, Roebuck catalog featured dozens of electrically powered products, it also continued to include kerosene lamps, hand-powered washing machines, sadirons, and treadle sewing machines. Most rural Americans would have to wait until the 1930s and 1940s for the dazzling powers of electricity.

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STACKED TO THE CEILING, furniture echoing the simple lines of the Arts and Crafts or Mission style appears amidst porch swings, sewing machine stands, traveling bags, wicker sewing tables, baby swings, coat hooks, carpets, dressing tables, and framed mirrors. Displayed beyond the upholstered rockers and davenports, a few metal headboards for beds reflect the early 20th-century concern for sanitation. Often billed as "modern and sanitary," metal beds were easier to clean and less likely to harbor bedbugs than wooden beds.

PIANOS AND PHONOGRAPHS promise customers the pleasure of musical evenings at home. By the 1890s, mass production had made pianos affordable for middle-class families, and between 1900 and 1909 the number of pianos manufactured in the U.S. more than doubled. Printed sheet music of parlor songs like "Alice Blue Gown," "Look for the Silver Lining," and "When Francis Dances with Me" flooded the market. According to surveys conducted in Iowa in the 1920s, the piano was the most common musical instrument in farm homes. It could be purchased locally or through mail order on installment plans. By 1925, more than half of the pianos manufactured in the U.S. were player pianos. Once the mark of an accomplished and cultured young woman, piano playing now could be automated; on a player piano one need only control the tone and volume.

Phonographs were equally popular. By 1919, more than 200 companies were building two million phonographs yearly. In one catalog, prices ranged from about $15 for a portable table model (about the cost of a serviceable oak veneer dresser or a double-barrel shotgun) to six times that for phonographs in elegant mahogany veneer cabinets.

Targeting all kinds of music lovers, recording companies sold records of everything from "Rebecca (came back from Mecca)" by Yerkes' Jazarimba Orchestra, to "Monastery Bells," by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Fox trotters could move to "Molly O," and exercise fanatics to "Walter Camp's Daily Dozen." For sweethearts, there was "Kiss Me Again," and for ukulele lovers, "Kalaluki's Medley of Hulas." Those seeking inspiration might order "My Mother's Rosary," while those seeking laughter might choose "When Father Papered the Parlor" or "Lonesome Alimony Blues."

As the decade proceeded, pianos and phonographs would lose out to radios as the provider of home entertainment for many Americans.

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DISPLAYED BEHIND GLASS, shiny pocket watches (left foreground) and silver serving dishes (right) entice customers into this jewelry store. Table and cabinet models of phonographs will draw them to the back of the store.

Many of the other stores that Felton photographed are packed with merchandise, but not this store. The items showcased here appear to be higher-priced "luxury items."

Above the cash register, the art glass lamp is a spin-off of the Art Nouveau style. On the opposite counter are several pieces of commercial art pottery; their simple designs are a departure from the previous century's excessiveness. Nevertheless, a Victorian favorite—the potted palm—commands the air space above the wall shelves.

Note the division of the space in the rear of the store. Businesses often used this area for clerical and office work, sometimes maximizing the space by building a mezzanine.

The screen around the counter (left foreground) suggests that this jeweler also repairs time pieces—perhaps the mantel clocks and pocket watches he displays so prominently. Wristwatches, which debuted before World War I, would gradually win over U.S. consumers—by 1930 outnumbering pocket watches 50 to 1.

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THE DUST has settled and the monument cutter has taken off his glasses. He pauses in his work as Felton photographs his small workshop. The equipment and grave markers surrounding him reveal that he has made the technological transition from carving limestone with a chisel and mallet, to sandblasting granite. His sandblaster is probably powered by gasoline, steam, or electricity, even though he appears to still heat his workshop with a stove.

Sandblasting was first used in the 1890s. Coupled with stencils, it allowed for more uniform lettering, and required more mechanical skills than handcrafting skills.

Felton might have taken this photograph in Hampton, Iowa. It was not uncommon for an even smaller community to have its own monument cutter. The polished stone "log" next to him was a particularly popular style of grave marker after World War I.

Historical images of workplaces like this are quite rare. A fitting end to this selection of photographs from the William H. Felton Collection, this image documents the production of one of the final purchases marking an individual's life.

EPILOGUE

With their astonishing detail and everyday settings, William Felton's photographs are frozen moments begging to be compared to their counterparts in the 1950s—or even our own 1990s.

Where do we go today to buy a baby swing or a pound of bacon, a watering can or a washing machine? Who bakes our bread or cuts our hair, prints our newspaper or carves our grave marker? What do we order through catalogs? Where do we buy shoes, or eat lunch, or bed down while traveling? What do we do for leisure, or buy for convenience? What mix of businesses lines our streets and highways? Who works as mechanics, clerks, and bookkeepers? Does anybody still polish shoes?

And here's the most important question: are we photographing and documenting these everyday situations today, so that in 75 years someone will know how ordinary Iowans lived in the 1990s? —*The Author/Editor*