



SCHOOL OF
TYPEWRITING

ELIZABETH IRISH'S SCHOOL & SHORTHAND & TYPEWRITING.



OFFICE
ROOMS.
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Miss Elizabeth Irish's University Business College



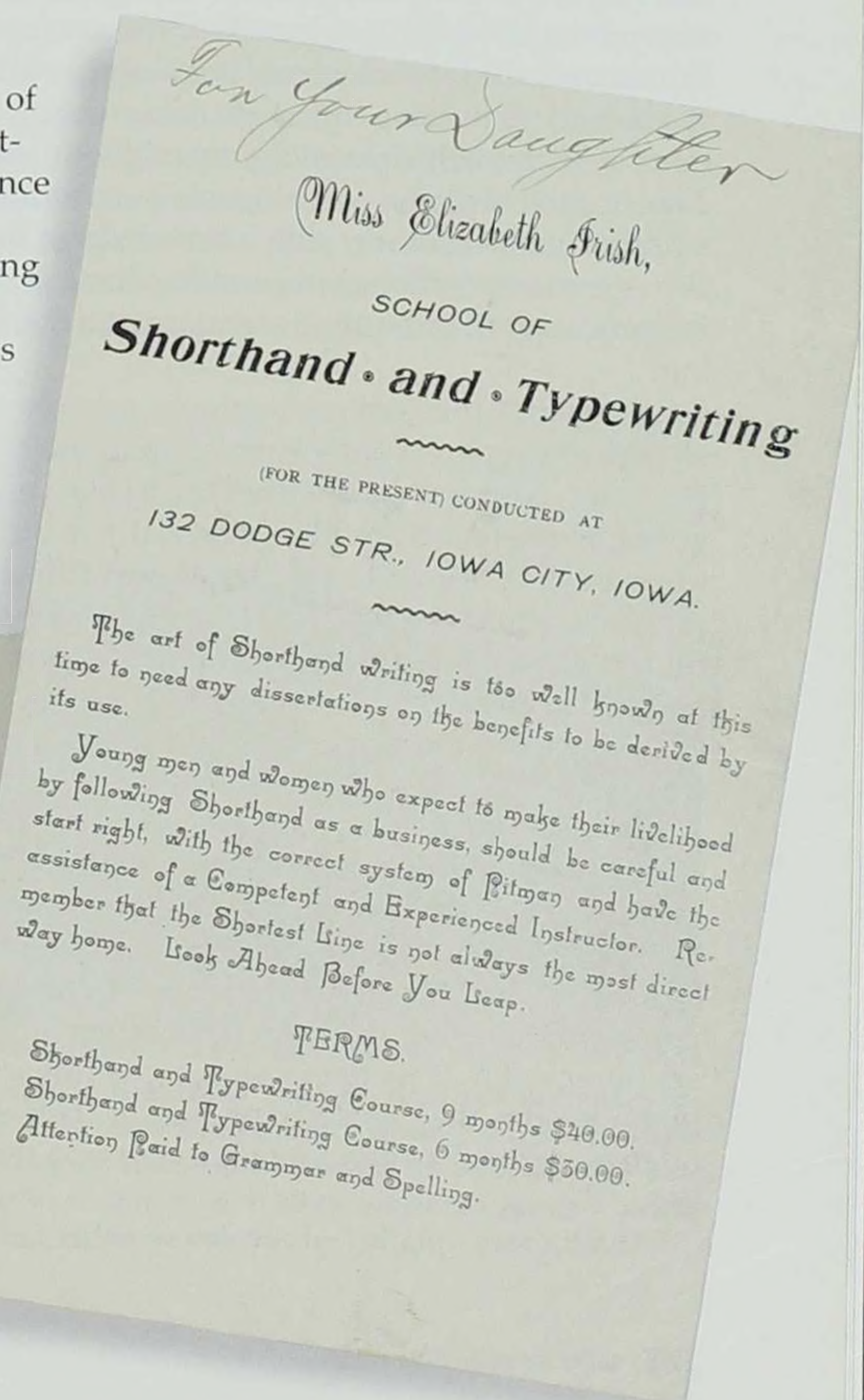
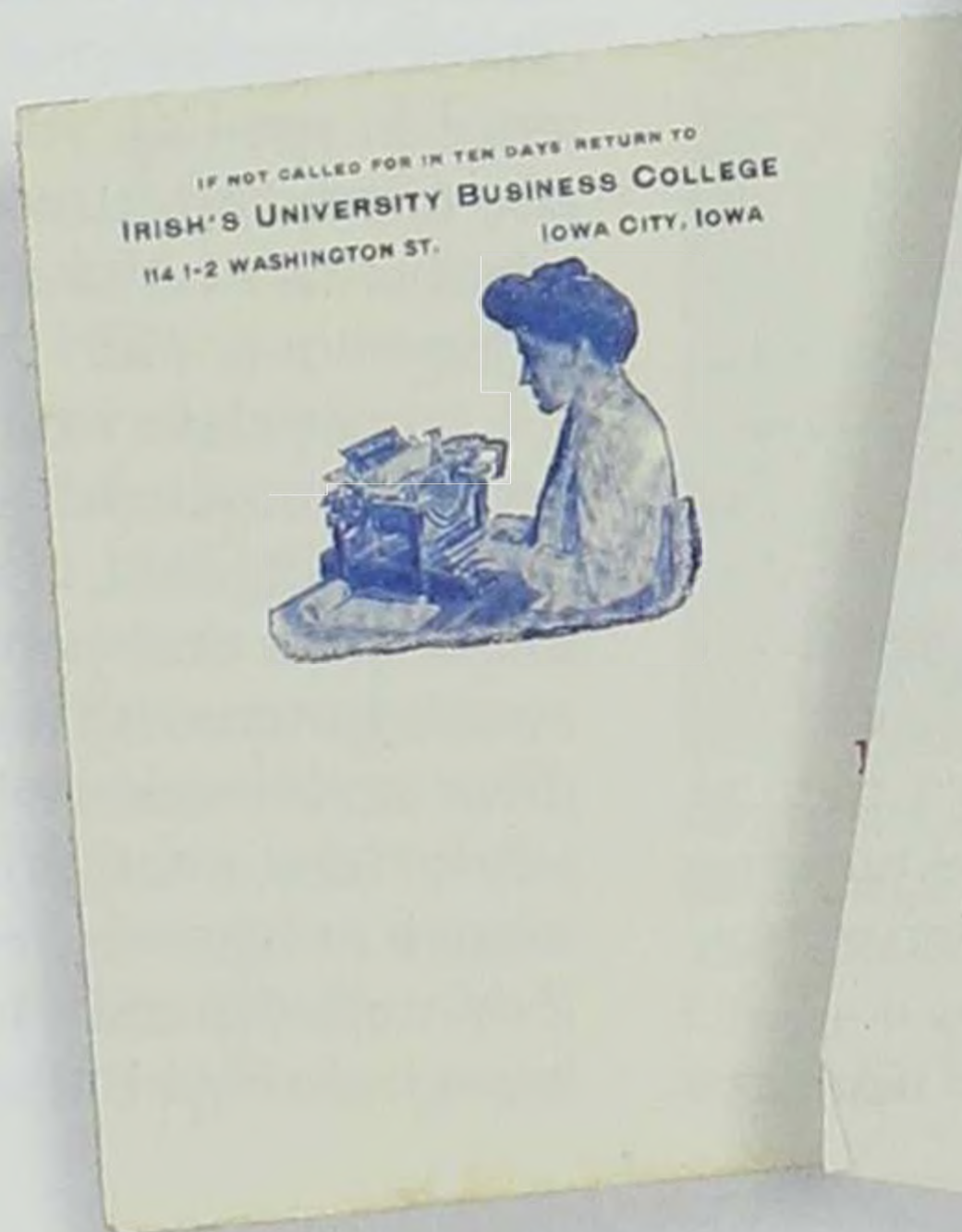
A Look at the History of Commercial Education in Iowa

by Anne Beiser Allen

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SHS (IOWA CITY); INSET, FLYER, AND ENVELOPE FROM IRISH-PRESTON COLLECTION

Miss Elizabeth Irish's University Business College

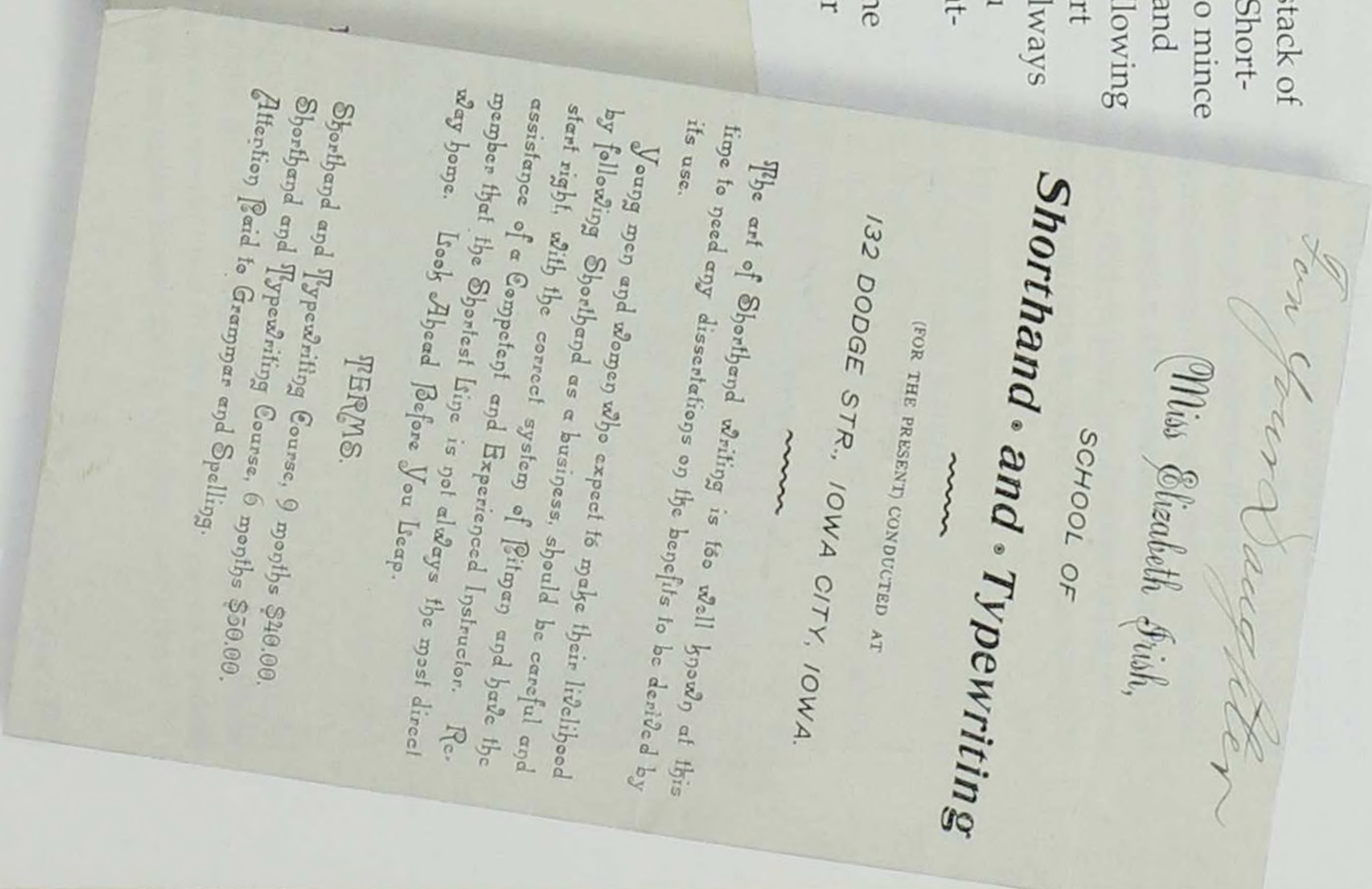
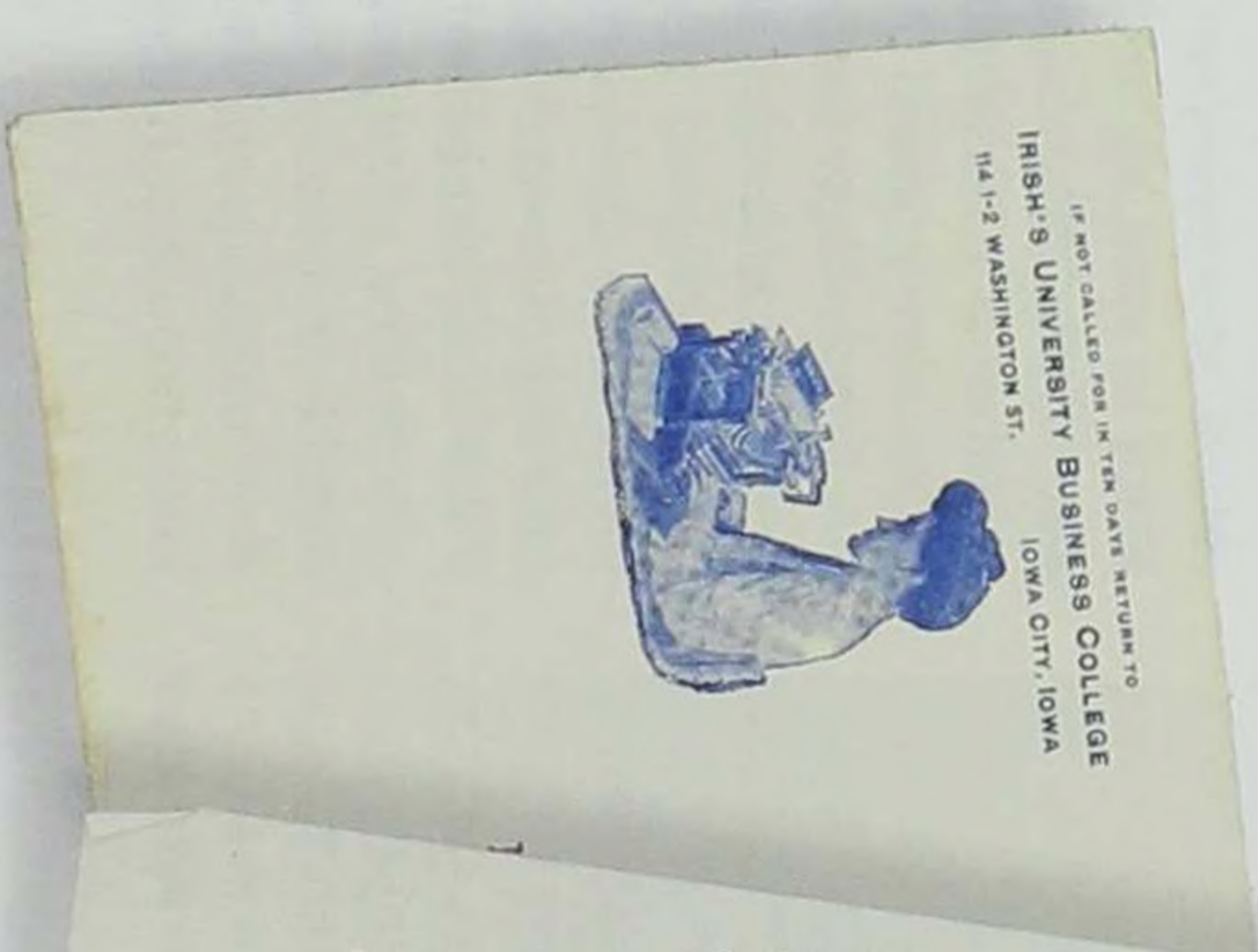
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ALL THREE: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

By 1895, some 20 business schools in Iowa trained young men and women for careers in business. Here, from left: Muscatine Business College; Capital City Commercial College and School of Shorthand (Des Moines); and Brown's Business College (Sioux City).

a particularly new one. Since 1830, when the first shorthand school opened in Philadelphia, private business schools had been established in growing numbers throughout the country as the development of large-scale corporations changed the way businesses operated. The old-fashioned office portrayed in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, occupied by the owner and his partner, with a clerk or two to copy letters neatly and run errands for the boss, was on its way out by the second half of the 19th century in Great Britain and the United States. Beginning with the railroads and spreading through other major corporations with branch operations throughout the nation, American companies were developing a multi-tiered management structure, with a broad range of middle-management positions, and standardized recordkeeping processes that required standardized clerical training.

Although the earliest business schools were designed to prepare young men to take their places in the new corporate structure, a certain number of young women also enrolled, especially in the years after the Civil War. The federal government, hard-pressed during the war to find young male clerks to fill positions in the Treasury, had hired young women, and had been amazed to find that the women were not only able to do the work, but did it quite as well as the men.

Private businesses soon began experimenting with hiring young women as copyists and as bookkeepers (a role that complemented their experience in keeping household accounts). The introduction of the typewriter in 1874 increased the opportunities for young middle-class women. Typewriter manufacturers observed that women's slim, agile fingers and the piano lessons they received as part of their education often gave them an advantage over young men in typing.

Businesses quickly discovered other advantages

in hiring young women for clerical positions (it was mostly young single women who applied for these jobs, rather than older, married women). For one thing, they could be paid less, as it was assumed that they were not likely to be supporting anyone but themselves—and might, indeed, have a father or other male relative who provided them with food and shelter. Second, they were less impatient to begin climbing a corporate ladder, whose upper reaches were seldom open to them anyway. And, reinforcing these two advantages, they were likely to marry within a few years and withdraw from the business world—allowing the business to hire again, at starting wages.

None of this distressed most young women, who looked on clerical work as a desirable option for an educated girl with no desire or opportunity to teach school, the other "genteel" occupation of the time. Because more girls than boys graduated from high school at that time (boys often left before graduation to take jobs), there was a surplus of well-educated young women. Teaching could only absorb so many of them. Middle-class women (who made up the vast majority of early clerical workers) found that clerical work gave them another opportunity to use their education, as employers required a high level of competence in spelling and grammar. For many women, it also offered an attractive alternative to domestic work, whether as a hired domestic worker or as a housewife in her own home.

Lower-class women, whose job options were limited to household service, factory work, or home-based piecework, also aspired to clerical jobs, to raise their status and perhaps to increase their chances of meeting men with more lucrative futures than their fathers and brothers had. If they could stay in high school long enough to graduate, and find the money to take at least six months of business school classes, they might qualify for clerical jobs. Often their families encouraged these aspirations, hoping that the

YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN
WANTED.

WE HAVE calls for stenographers almost continually that we cannot supply. Young people of both sexes with a fair English education will find shorthand and typewriting a most excellent profession. The salaries are better than those of the average teacher, and the labor is pleasanter and less exhaustive.

THE CAPITAL CITY COMMERCIAL COLLEGE

AND THE CAPITAL CITY SCHOOL OF SHORTHAND

Y. M. C. A. Building, Des Moines, Iowa, are the leading training schools of business in this country. Send for their catalogue to

MEHAN & McCAULEY,
DES MOINES, IOWA.



daughter's relatively high wages would benefit the whole family.

To meet the demand for such training, business schools like Elizabeth Irish's sprang up across the country. In Iowa, the first business school to open was Duff's College, established by L. H. Dalhoff in Burlington in 1854. Duff's didn't last long, but other more successful schools soon followed. In 1855 W. V. Barr opened Barr's Commercial College in Davenport, which continued under a series of proprietors to the end of the century. Bayless Business College in Dubuque, founded in 1858 by Aaron Bayless, was one of the most long-lived business schools, not closing its doors until 1969. By 1895, when Elizabeth Irish entered the field, there were more than 20 business schools operating in Iowa—at least one in every large city, as well as some in such relatively small communities as Nora Springs and Perry.

Before opening her school, Elizabeth Irish had pursued a career in the business world for 20 years. Born in Iowa City on February 22, 1856, she was named Hannah Elizabeth after her two grandmothers (though her family usually called her Lizzie). Her father, Charles Wood Irish, was the eldest son of Captain Frederick M. Irish, one of Iowa City's more colorful "Old Settlers." After careers in whaling and steel-implement manufacturing, Frederick Irish came to Iowa City in 1839, purchased a farm on the edge of town, and quickly became involved in local politics and land dealing. His son Charles, who was born in Indiana in 1834, trained as a civil engineer. Unable at first to find work in his field, Charles taught for a short time in 1854 at a rural school five miles north of Iowa City. One of his pupils was 17-year-old Susannah Abigail Yarbrough, whose extended family had come to Iowa by covered wagon from North Carolina eight years earlier. Charles Irish and Abbie Yarbrough were married in 1855, and soon

had two daughters, Elizabeth (1856) and Ruth (1859).

The family moved to Tama in 1857, when Elizabeth was a year old, but returned to Iowa City in 1866. For the next 20 years, Charles traveled with the railroads, building rail lines and roads in Iowa, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. Abbie visited him frequently, but maintained the family home with her two daughters in Iowa City.

Elizabeth attended St. Agatha's Seminary, a local girls' school run by St. Mary's Catholic Church but not restricted to Catholics. The curriculum included not only basic reading, writing, and arithmetic (including algebra and bookkeeping), but also music, painting, and needlework. Elizabeth was a lively girl, whom one of her relatives once described as resembling "a small hurricane." Although the Irishes were a respected family, money was tight, due to the expenses



Girls' schools in the 1870s (like St. Agatha's Seminary in Iowa City, above) considered music, painting, and needlework part of a female's education. Business schools, like the one Elizabeth Irish would open in 1895, prepared young women for jobs in the business world.

involved in operating two separate households. When Elizabeth left St. Agatha's, she decided to seek employment. Not interested in becoming a teacher, she enrolled in the Iowa City Commercial College (founded in 1865 by William McClain), where she studied bookkeeping.

In 1875, Elizabeth's uncle, John Powell Irish, then editor of the *Iowa City Daily Press* and a leading figure in the state Democratic Party, hired her as his bookkeeper. Elizabeth kept the books for the paper until 1882, when her uncle decided to sell it and move to Oakland, California, where he had purchased another newspaper, the *Oakland Times*. Elizabeth went with him, and after some delay while the offices were remodeled, she joined J. B. Wyman, the paper's business manager, as assistant bookkeeper and cashier.

Elizabeth wrote her sister, Ruth (who was then teaching at Iowa City's Third Ward School), exuberantly describing her new office: "We have a large counting room, the floor covered with oil cloth, back

SHSI (IOWA CITY)-IRISH-PRESTON COLLECTION



Ruth Irish Preston
(Elizabeth's sister).

of the counter, in the centre of the room is a great large desk with a platform all around it for us to stand on while justing our books (I wish you could see the immense Ledger and Journal I have it is no play bookkeep, but real double entry and I am getting along nicely) and a place cut in the platform for our stools, then under the desk is a case to keep our books, at my back is a stove, at my left a large safe and to my right Mr. Wyman's desk one or two chairs and some hooks to hang our things on. . . . back of the counting room is the composing and Job room (during the day only girls set type, under a man foreman, the girls all look up to me as a sort of Queen among them). . . . Upstairs is the Editorial and Reporters rooms, they are carpeted and contain desks and chairs."

Elizabeth Irish was by this time 27 years old. She lived with her uncle's family and kept up a busy social life during her free hours. She described for Ruth her visits with friends and trips to nearby places like San Francisco (where, she reported, she had seen Professor Theodore Parvin, one of Iowa City's leading Masons, at a Masonic parade). She was far too busy, she told Ruth, to do "fancy work" or her own sewing.

Her friends were both male and female, her letters reveal, but none of the men appealed to her romantically. Her standard for matrimony was quite high. "I for one will dig & work through this world, before I will marry a man because he preffesses [sic] he loves me & does not express it by making a home & getting into a paying business so we could have something to live on besides love," she wrote Ruth. She had rejected a proposal from "a young man at White River Wash Territory [who] said he contemplated settling on a nice farm in the mtns & wanted to know if I would lend him a helping hand, etc. I responded tis Leap Year, I stand a better opportunity. Ha! Ha!"

In 1884, she spent the summer at a resort in Sonoma County called Skagg's Hot Springs, supporting herself by working as the resort's bookkeeper, assistant postmistress, and Wells Fargo agent. When her uncle sold the *Oakland Times* in late 1885 and purchased the *Alta California*, headquartered in San Francisco and the oldest newspaper on the Pacific Coast, Elizabeth was made its bookkeeper and cashier. But she was eager to move on to a more independent post. In early 1886, she was hired by the US Mint in San Francisco.

Although her clerical skills were by now quite professional, it is possible that her uncle's political connections played a role in her acquisition of this job. The Democratic Party had just elected its first president since the Civil War, and John Irish was working hard to secure some of the benefits of the Cleveland administration's patronage for his family. He wrote to the Department of the Interior, soliciting a position for his brother Charles, and at last succeeded in getting him appointed Surveyor General for Nevada. Charles Irish took the post in April 1887 and sent for his daughter Elizabeth to be his chief clerk, stenographer, and bookkeeper. Abbie Irish closed the house in Iowa City and joined her husband and elder daughter in Reno.

Elizabeth remained in Reno for the next several years, acquiring additional skills and job experience. Around 1890, she took a course in shorthand (possibly by correspondence) from Eldon Moran of St. Louis, who taught an adaptation of the widely accepted Pitman system. She also learned to use the typewriter. In 1893, when Charles Irish was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Irrigation in the second Cleveland administration, Elizabeth once again served as his secretary, accompanying him on a tour of the Southwest to study irrigation needs. The following year she returned to Oakland (where her uncle John had become Customs Officer) and spent several months as receiv-



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Twenty-eight students from the Irish school's shorthand department pose for the 1902 catalog. Though recognizing that several systems of shorthand (or "phonography") existed, Elizabeth preferred Moran's method of the Pitman system, based on recognizing vocal sounds. As her catalog notes sternly: "Time spent in memorizing mere characters is worse than wasted."

ing and paying teller of the money order department of the Oakland Post Office.

Now in her 38th year, Elizabeth Irish began to consider a more independent career. She had begun to develop her own theories of business education, and was eager to put them into effect. As she later told a reporter, she had noticed that "many young people . . . failed through lack of thorough training in their line of work." She also believed that the proper training could give young people the "power of application and self-reliance and also that high moral standard which should obtain in business as in other relations of life." In 1894 she returned to Reno, where she attempted to start a business school. But the business climate in Nevada was not right for such a venture; in fact, no business school would become firmly established in that state until well into the next century.

So Elizabeth went back to Iowa City. Although the nation was still feeling the effects of the economic depression that began with the failure of several major banks in 1893 (the worst depression the country had yet suffered), Elizabeth had reason to believe that her new school would succeed in Iowa City. To begin with, the Irish name was still respected in the town. Although Frederick Irish had died in 1875, his son Gilbert still operated the family farm at Rose Hill and was a highly respected horti-

culturist. People still remembered John Irish as well, though he had been out of the state for twelve years. Elizabeth had no doubt of her ability to make useful contacts in the community.

More important, as a university town Iowa City had a large population of young people, some of whom might find the full university course too long or too expensive to complete. Certainly her old alma mater—and now her competitor—was attracting students. The Iowa City Commercial College's five instructors were currently teaching 94 students (21 of them women).

Elizabeth began by advertising her new school among her friends and acquaintances, and soon had ten students signed up for her classes. Instead of holding the school in her family's home as first planned, she rented rooms in Norwood Clark's commercial building in downtown Iowa City. A few months later, she moved her school to larger quarters (on the second floor of the Lovelace Building). With this move, she printed a new flyer, listing 35 references on the back page, ranging from university president Charles Schaeffer, to the rector of the Episcopal Church, to a number of local business leaders. Her curriculum now offered four options: shorthand and typing, 9 months for \$40; shorthand and typing, 6 months for \$30; typing alone, 3 months for \$10.50; and shorthand alone for \$5 per month. She taught Moran's version of the Pitman shorthand system, and sold Remington type-

writers and Moran's shorthand notebooks on the side.

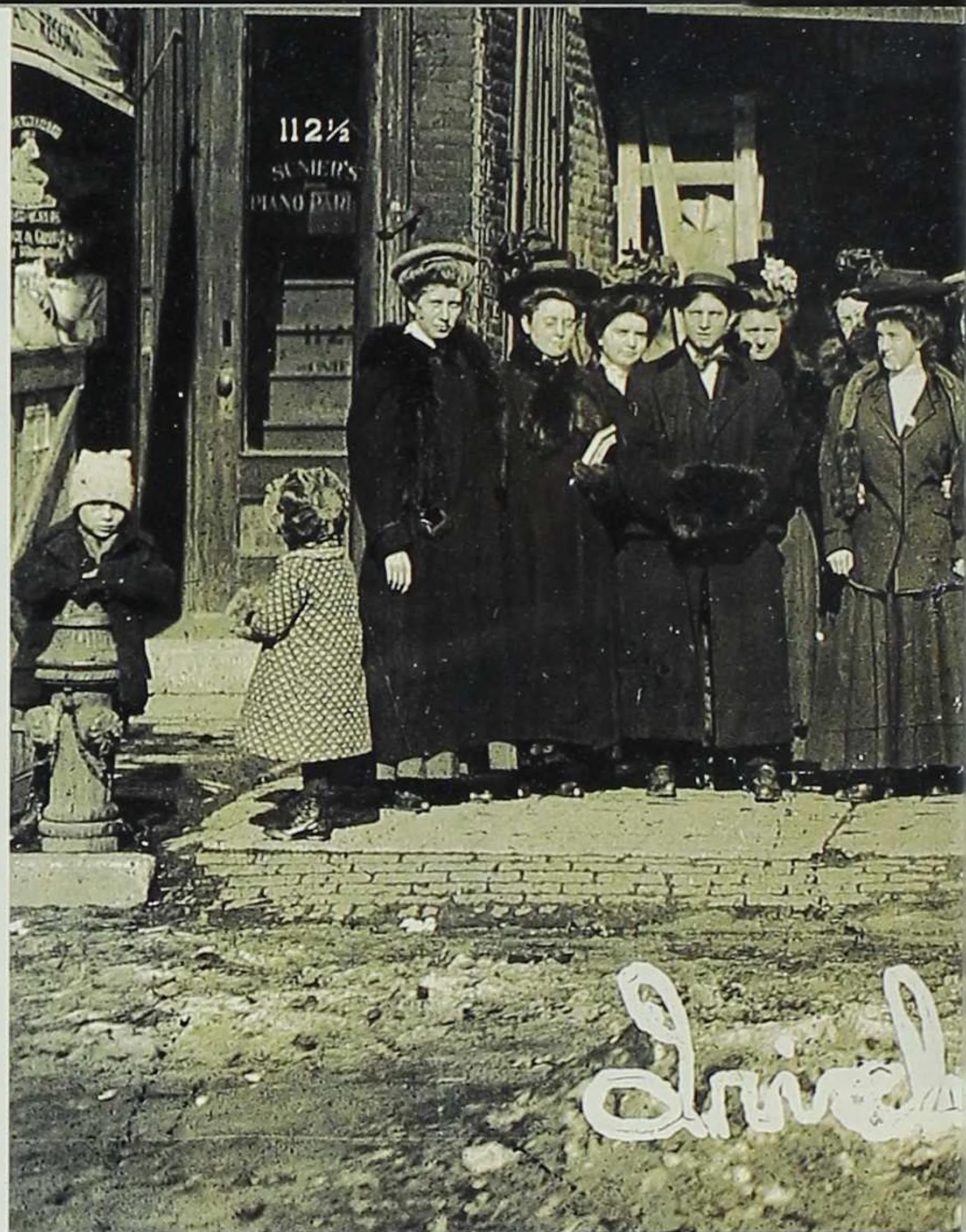
The new flyer also listed her niece, Jane T. Irish, daughter of her uncle Gilbert, as one of two assistants. Then still in her teens, Jane Irish was probably among Elizabeth's first students. Until 1915, when their relationship ended abruptly, for reasons still unclear, Jane would be Elizabeth's closest associate in the school.

Elizabeth appears to have seen much of herself in her young niece, and by the turn of the century, she entrusted the school's operation to Jane when she traveled. Jane's frequent letters to Elizabeth are warm and friendly, more like those between sisters than women 26 years apart in age. Jane teased Elizabeth about her love life, shared local gossip, and exhibited competence in the management of the business they shared until 1915.

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Elizabeth Irish owed her success, in part, to being a single woman. Although some women continued to work after marriage, being a successful businesswoman generally meant that a woman had to forgo domestic life. (Elizabeth's sister, Ruth, who had been first a teacher and then a principal in Iowa City, had left the teaching profession when she married Dr. Charles Preston in 1887 and thereafter de-



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Irish



SHSI (IOWA CITY): SHAMBAUGH COLLECTION

Jane Irish, Elizabeth's niece and assistant.

voted herself to raising their three children and keeping house in Davenport.) Although Elizabeth was devoted to her business school, she had no objection to marriage, could she have found the right man. Around 1902, when she was 46, she met one who might have become her husband, had he been so inclined.

Among the local businessmen she induced to teach at her school was the former county attorney, Vincent Zmunt. Zmunt, who taught penmanship and commercial law, was the son of a Bohemian immigrant, and eleven years younger than Elizabeth.

Handsome and witty, he became quite fond of Elizabeth, whom he called Betsy, or sometimes "the general." When she was out of town, he wrote her charming letters, often illus-

Elizabeth Irish saw to it that her school and students stayed in the public eye. Above, the student body, circa 1900. Below: Vincent Zmunt, Elizabeth's colleague and close friend, taught penmanship and commercial law.



Vincent Zmunt

SHSI (IOWA CITY): IRISH COLLEGE CATALOG, 1902



trated with humorous pen-and-ink sketches, and signed them "love and kisses." Elizabeth apparently reciprocated. But there was something elusive about Vincent, and their relationship never progressed beyond a delightful friendship. Her niece Jane composed a humorous poem to Elizabeth on the subject in 1902, saying in part:

*Elizabeth has been fishing for many a day
To catch one fishy and he always swims away
...And when she returns to the old business college
I hope she will have gained of fish sufficient knowledge
To enable her to land, in her large glass dish
The fish she most desires to catch, this large Zmunt fish.*

Vincent Zmunt left Iowa City around 1910, still unmarried.

For some years, Elizabeth had been sharing the family home on Dodge Street with her mother, Abbie Irish. (Charles Irish had died in 1904 in Gold Creek, Nevada, where he had been employed by a mining firm.) Abbie became more and more eccentric in her later years; once she burned all the mattresses in the house because she believed they were infested with bugs. Living with Abbie must have become a significant worry and responsibility for a busy professional woman like Elizabeth. In 1920, she offered a young cousin room and board at her home while at-

tending the business school, in return for her help in keeping an eye on Abbie. Abbie died in 1925, at the age of 88.

Meanwhile, the Irish school was thriving, and the local community frequently looked to the school for clerical workers. "Dr. Littig also wants a stenographer," Jane wrote to Elizabeth in 1904. "He says she must be neat and of nice plain appearance and must be at least 25 years old." And in another letter from Jane: "Dr. Albert of the University came down here for a stenographer who was quick and who had had two or three years experience and I recommended Gertie to him and he has hired her for as long as she will stay. His office will be in the new Medical Building and I guess it is a very nice position. Gertie is tickled to death."

That same year, Elizabeth's old competitor, John Williams, decided to sell his Iowa City Commercial College and move to Missouri. While Elizabeth was out of town that summer, Jane kept her updated. In one letter in June, Jane wrote: "There has been no notice of the other school in the papers as yet, only the little clipping which I sent you. . . . Zmunt says we had better save our shot and powder for the battle in the fall and not waste any now as long as they are quiet." The Commercial College continued to function until 1912 under the ownership of William Willis of the



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SPHS IOWA CITY, SHAWNAUGH COLLECTION

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SPHS IOWA CITY

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SPHS IOWA CITY, IREISH COLLECTION, CARLSON, 1902

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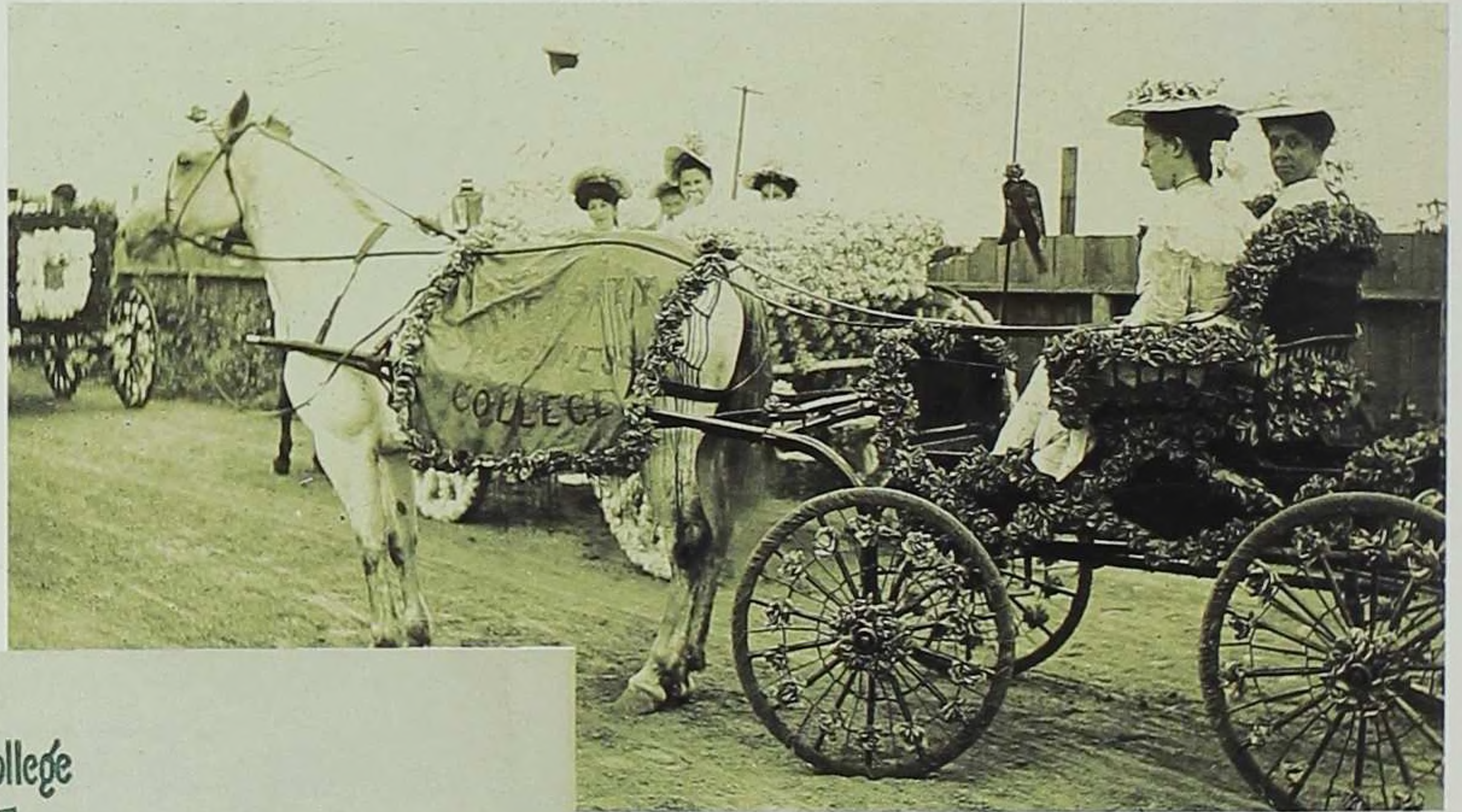
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**Irish's
University
Business
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in New
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Iowa City,
Iowa



SCHOOL SUPPLIES
FOR SALE AT
BUSINESS OFFICE

GREGG
SHORTHAND

PITMAN
SHORTHAND

KINAESTHETIC
TOUCH METHOD of
TYPEWRITING
LETTER PRESS and
MIMEOGRAPH
WORK

DICTAPHONE
COURSE

BURROUGHS
ADDING COURSE

COMMERCIAL
BRANCHES and
BOOKKEEPING

SPECIAL
COURSES in
BANKING
AUTOMOBILE and
RADIO
BOOKKEEPING

"Y & E"
FILING CABINETS
FOR GIVING
SPECIAL
FILING COURSE

SCHOOL PHONE
42

Employment Bureau
Free to Either Employer
or Employee

When in Need of a
Stenographer or
Bookkeeper Telephone 42
or Call at Office

Irish's Business College

IOWA
CITY,
IOWA



205 1/2 EAST WASHINGTON STREET
MORRISON BUILDING

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Does this circular find you in need of COMMERCIAL HELP? If so, it will interest you to know that not all of our best bookkeepers, stenographers and clerks have contracted for the coming year, we still have available, some excellent young men and women.

Personally, I hope that you have the success of the young people at heart, as the thoughtful pioneer business man had of you, when you launched your ABILITY on the waves of the busy world, so much so that you will help the boys and girls of today, who have prepared themselves to enter business offices to get a start in their chosen vocation, by employing them in your office.

If you are not in need of help at the present time perhaps during the summer vacation time you may need temporary office help. Call our FREE EMPLOYMENT BUREAU, as we have students finishing every week and they have had some business experience.

ADDRESS:
Irish's Business College Employment Bureau,
Third Floor Morrison Building,
205 1/2 Washington Street,
Iowa City, Iowa.

Elizabeth Irish was an aggressive and tireless promoter of her school. Clockwise, from top left: She placed ads in high school and college yearbooks. She rode in local parades (the horse's banner announces the "University Business College"). In her ads and catalogs, she announced new courses and training as business practices changed, while reassuring students (and probably their parents) that her school was "commodious, convenient and cheerful" and close to the streetcar system, four churches, and the State University of Iowa campus. On her letterhead, she advertised her "employment bureau," which provided temporary office help and typing services, and promoted "kinaesthetic" touch typing (dramatically demonstrated by typing with a paper bag over one's head).



Iowa City Academy, but it lost much of its direction, as Willis preferred to concentrate on his own field of college preparation. That left Irish's University Business College virtually without competition for the next two decades.

Throughout those years the demand for business school graduates steadily increased. The number of stenographers and typists in Iowa, for example, increased fivefold from 1900 to 1920, from about 2,000 to more than 10,000. In 1917/18, at least 21 private commercial and business schools met this increasing demand for clerical workers in Iowa. Elizabeth's school in Iowa City now had 6 instructors and 166 students on its rolls. There were 50 students (32 male and 18 female) in the commercial course, and 116 students (10 male and 106 female) in the stenographic course.

For a young woman, classes in a business school were especially attractive; they were cheaper than a college degree and more practical, in that they prepared her for the workplace. Businesses looking for

clerical workers often checked with the business schools first, so finding a job after graduation was often relatively easy. Irish was particularly successful in placing her graduates, and they were highly esteemed by those who employed them. They came to hold positions of responsibility both in the local business community and at the State University of Iowa. Long after they had retired from active work, these women retained their mastery of shorthand and typing. At 92, Della Grizel (a 1909 graduate of Irish's school) still typed her own letters.

But clouds were appearing on the horizon for private business schools. Already by the turn of the century, businesses had been looking to university graduates for their upper-level management positions, and universities were quick to respond. The University of Chicago established the first university-connected business school in 1897,

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Irish's Business College in 1937: Although the women students' clothing has changed remarkably since the turn of the century, their job training still centers around typing and dictation. In the back, two male students work adding machines.



I MUST HAVE THOUSANDS OF STENOGRAPHERS

to assist with the vast amount of clerical work necessitated by the war. Come and work for me. Help win the war. I will pay you a BEGINNING SALARY of from \$1,100 to \$1,200 a year. The War Department stenographers will be started at not less than \$1,100 and promoted to \$1,200 at the end of three months of satisfactory service. More appointments are made in the War Department than in any other single Department.

I will advance you on merit alone. If you are capable, you should soon be earning from \$1,200 to \$1,800. Many of my employees are paid from \$2,000 to \$5,000 a year. Some of my most valuable and highly paid assistants started as stenographers. One stenographer who entered my employ at \$900 advanced rapidly to an \$8,000 position. He got his start with me—my training paved the way and a big corporation is now paying him \$100,000 each year.

My office hours are from 9 a. m. to 4:30 p. m. I do not ask you to work on holidays. I will give you Saturday afternoons off from June 15th to September 15th. I will give you 30 days' vacation each year *with full pay*, and, when necessary, 30 days' sick leave *with full pay*.

Positions in my employ open up vast possibilities. You can visit my libraries and museums, come in contact with the big men of the day, hear the debates in Congress, etc. Then, too, my hours are so short that you can enter one of the universities and study law, dentistry, music, or any of the professions and at the same time earn a splendid salary.

If you do not care to come to Washington, I have a place for you near your home. I employ stenographers in every state in the Union. There are countless opportunities open to you. I NEED YOU!

UNCLE SAM

To Patriotic Men and Women:

Here is a most desirable field that offers exceptionally attractive opportunities.

There is a position on Uncle Sam's payroll for YOU—one that will pay you well—one that will give you steady work—one that will afford a chance to advance to highly paid positions of trust.

The war is necessitating thousands of clerical appointments. The United States Civil Service Commission is advising that a great number of persons start the study of shorthand and typewriting with the view of entering the Government Service. Men exempted from military service and women not otherwise aiding the Government in this hour of its trial will find here an opportunity to help in a practical way and at the same time gain a special training which will always be valuable.

We give a most thorough course of training in shorthand and typewriting and fortify this with special preparation for the Civil Service examinations which lead to good paying Government positions.

If you'd like to know more about Government Stenographic positions and how you can secure one of them, call at our office or write for further information.

PLEASE POST CONSPICUOUSLY.

Elizabeth Irish
Principal.

The 1940s brought more jobs and training opportunities. The circular (left) announces that Uncle Sam wants clerical works, especially "necessitated by the war," and advises "that a great number of persons start the study of shorthand and typing with the view of entering the Government Service." Right: Carol McClintic and Hazel Falk practice their typing skills at the Des Moines YWCA in 1949.



SHSI (DES MOINES). DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE, JUNE 28, 1949

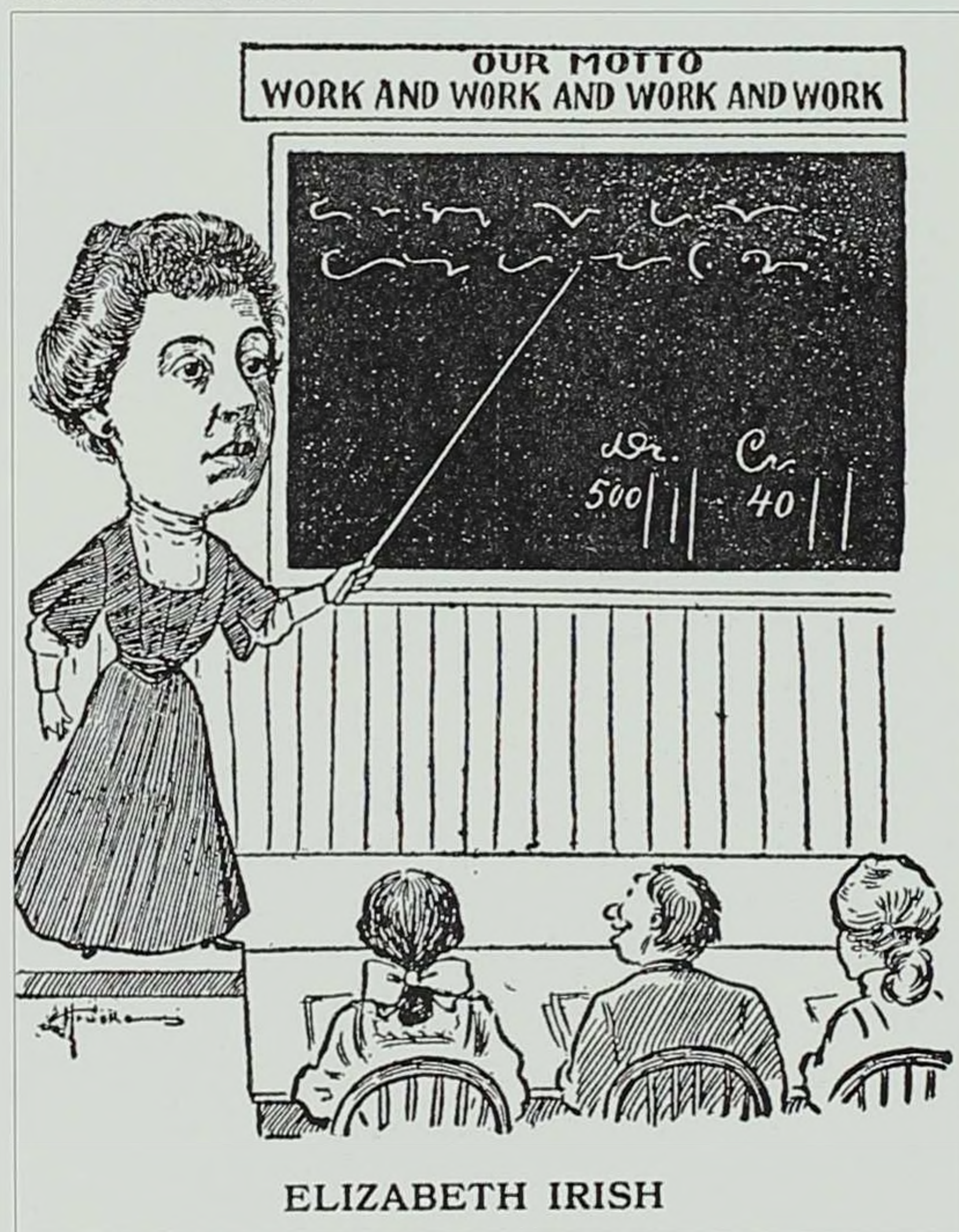
patterned after the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce. In 1914, the State University of Iowa opened its own School of Commerce. A large percentage of young men, who had previously outnumbered young women in the business schools, now took their business training at the universities.

At the other end of the business-training spectrum, the success of private business school courses had attracted the notice of public school educators. High schools began to add shorthand and typing to their curricula. By 1916/17 the public schools had captured much of the private business schools' trade in these areas of expertise; in that school year 5,142 students enrolled in business courses in public high schools in Iowa, compared to 6,100 in private business schools. The trend was nationwide. By 1924, almost four times as many American students took commercial courses from public high schools as from private business schools. Iowa City, which already had added bookkeeping to its high school mathematics curriculum around 1908, added shorthand and typing in 1921.

To counteract this competition, Elizabeth Irish developed an aggressive advertising program. She ad-

vertised regularly in local high school yearbooks. In the 1930s, her yearbook ads described her classes as "finishing courses" for those who had taken shorthand and typing in high school. She was also quick to adopt and promote the latest office practices and equipment. When the Gregg shorthand system came out, she added it to her curriculum. She had a 12-year-old girl demonstrate the simplicity and effectiveness of the "touch system" typing program in 1918. She maintained a booth at the annual county fair, where she entertained crowds with such gimmicks as a typist working with a paper bag over her head (to promote the touch system) and typists performing to music.

Elizabeth Irish also kept her social and professional networks intact. She was one of the early members of the Iowa City Commercial Club—and for many years was its only female member. She belonged to several professional associations, including the Central Commercial Teachers' Association (at its sixth annual convention in 1907 in Cedar Rapids



ELIZABETH IRISH

In 1907, the *Iowa City Daily Republican* published a series of caricatures of “men who made and are making Iowa City.” Among these 43 “bulwarks of Iowa City’s prosperity,” Elizabeth Irish was the only woman included. Her approach to teaching (hard work and no nonsense) appears frequently in the school’s promotional materials.

she presented a paper on “Requirements for Graduation in Shorthand”). She was also active in her church, the Iowa League of Women Voters, Carnation Rebekah Lodge, and the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Elizabeth’s school and students, however, remained her chief interest. A combination of “thorough, painstaking training” with an encouragement of individual initiative was the basis of her educational philosophy. “The good student,” she said “is the one who will without prodding search out facts and principles for himself.”

As the years passed, Elizabeth Irish, in her conservative long-skirted dresses, continued to be a familiar figure in downtown Iowa City. She was a small woman, with a trim figure, her long hair worn up in a bun. Her hairdresser recalled her as a very private person, not given to idle chatter. She had a rather abrupt

and always very businesslike manner. Her students remembered her as “nice, but also strict.” If her expectations were not met, one student recalled, “she could dress you down like nobody’s business.”

Despite the pressure of competition from public schools and universities, the continuing demand for well-trained secretarial staff was strong enough to keep private schools like Elizabeth’s afloat. Even the smallest business now felt the need for a secretary to handle its correspondence and files. When the Great Depression swept across the nation, making post-high school education a luxury most young people could not afford, business schools (with their shorter course requirements and emphasis on practical skills) again became a popular, low-cost alternative to college.

By the late 1930s, Elizabeth’s enrollment averaged between 25 and 30 students, most of them women, down from 166 in 1917/18. Most of the classes were now taught by Grace Hinrichs, who also served as the school secretary, although Elizabeth was always present and still taught some classes herself. Another woman taught business English and spelling, and Arthur Leff, a local attorney, taught commercial law. The school still maintained its high reputation in the community.

But by 1940, Elizabeth was 84. On December 31, she retired and closed her school, leaving the field to Brown’s Business Institute (which had opened in 1928 and was now owned by Nora Francis and Mabel McCabe). Eventually she moved in with her sister, Ruth, in Davenport. She spent the last months of her life with her twin nieces, Ella and Abigail Preston, in Davenport, where she died on March 11, 1952. She was 96 years old.

For three decades after the Irish school closed in 1940, private business schools continued to serve as a major gateway to employment, especially for young women, in the business world. Thousands of returning veterans attended business schools under the GI Bill. Business schools also offered training in new technologies, as the typewriter gave way to the computer, the adding machine to the calculator, and the steno pad to the tape recorder.

It was the advent of junior colleges that finally killed off most of the small private business schools in Iowa. With commercial courses available at a reduced cost in most of the state’s larger communities, private business schools found it hard to compete. The Iowa City Business College, successor to Brown’s Business Institute, closed its doors in 1969. The same year saw

the demise of Bayless Business College in Dubuque, which had long billed itself as the oldest business school west of the Mississippi. Capital City Commercial College in Des Moines ended an 80-year career in 1961. The Cedar Rapids Business College, founded in 1880, closed in 1974. Today, the state boasts only six private business schools—the American Institute of Business and the Business and Banking Institute in Des Moines, the American Institute of Commerce in Cedar Falls and Davenport, and Hamilton Business College in Cedar Rapids and Mason City. The vast majority of their students are women.

Elizabeth Irish was not the first woman to operate a business school in Iowa. Mrs. J. H. Wyckoff had opened a school of shorthand, stenography, and typewriting in Dubuque in 1890, and sold it in 1895 to Mrs. A. B. Wilson, who ran it for another seven years. Mrs. Ida Cutler owned the Cutler School in the same city during the early years of the century. And certainly many women were instructors in business schools; at least a dozen women attended the

1907 convention of the Central Commercial College Teachers' Association in Cedar Rapids. But clearly, Elizabeth Irish was the most successful woman in her field in Iowa. Her school operated for 45 years and trained more than 12,000 students in the rudiments of business practices. In her own words, Irish's University Business College had helped "young men and women to make an honorable start on life's rugged highways, by preparing them to become at once self-sustaining, through being intelligent and skillful business assistants." Although she trained a large number of young men in business practices through the years, it was women whom Elizabeth Irish had in mind when she opened her school. And for half a century, she made it possible for young people—especially young women—who could not afford a college degree to acquire the proper training for gainful employment and greater financial independence. ❖

The author is a freelance writer in Iowa City who enjoys writing about underappreciated historical figures. She has recently written a history of Coralville, Iowa.



NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources consulted in preparing this article include: Irish-Preston Collection, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City); US Bureau of Education Bulletins for various years; Reports of the US Commissioner of Education, 1870-1913; city directories for various Iowa communities, 1866-1975; US and Iowa censuses; Iowa City high school yearbooks, 1918-1949; Johnson County marriage records, 1848-1887; *Iowa City Press-Citizen* obituary (March 11, 1952); *College Blue Book*, Occupational Education (1993, 24th ed.); and interviews with former students and other local citizens who had known Elizabeth Irish.

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An annotated copy of this manuscript is held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files in Iowa City.

10 p.m.
 Early 10-11-89

My dear Father,
 I arrived here
 yesterday and found you
 awaiting me. So
 away

CHAS. D. STONE & CO.,
 113 ADAMS STREET,

CHAS. D. STONE. OSCAR F. KOSCHE.
 IMPORT AGENTS, INTER-STATE DESPATCH.
 AGENTS AT ALL PRINCIPAL PORTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE.

CABLE ADDRESS: "GRABSTONE."
 IN YOUR REPLY REFER TO _____
 CUSTOMS AND FORWARDING AGENTS.

Chicago, Aug. 11, 1890.

Oliver & Showalter,

JOHN MILTON OLIVER
 JOHN W. SHOWALTER

Law Offices

84 & 86 La Salle Street

(OPPOSITE CITY HALL)

Chicago, 9/21/92

Dear Mama:-

I have tried in vain to write you since receiving your letter, but have been terribly rushed through the days, and so tired evenings that with one or two exceptions I was only too glad to write you.

Stenographers and Type-writers.



gh, Iowa.

few minutes to spare now, and I think I can em-
 ter manner than to tell you what I am now doing.
 ing, while the regular stenographer is away on his
 work Saturday morning, and will stay here two weeks
 can either go back to the college again, or take a
 get one, and I don't think I will have much trouble.
 World's Fair Commissioner from Minn. says he will
 allwood and myself a position as secretary to some of
 oners. I think that will be very nice, and it will
 here where I can see her.

nk here, I write about 25 letters a day, and address
 and that is all. The office boy folds and seals the
 ey look them over, and they do their own copying, so
 y position. They only pay me \$6.00 this week, but say
 e more next week if I suit them. So far I have made
 e, and that was in a proper name.
 ness is all new to me, and one-half of the letters they
 e Greek to me, and I can't tell for the life of me if
 ght or not. Then I had some trouble finding out how to
 one of the men wants words abbreviated, and the other
 tten out in full. Saturday I had no work to understand
 as they would dictate with a cigar in their mouth, and
 I do a great deal better today. They always had a man
 aid they did not know whether a lady would do or not, but
 I do just as well. One thing, I am afraid I will lose al
 they only dictate about 75 words a minute, and then stop
 long while what to say next. They spell almost all of
 t for me, and have me write them in long hand, and it is
 plan, as no one ought to be expected to spell them correct
 ot acquainted with them. The names of the French towns and
 the steamers, especially, are hard. The office is very
 right by the window. We are opposite
 20 to 5:30, and

Chicago Oct. 27, 1892

Dear Mama and "folks":-

I have been trying to write to you ever since I received a letter from Logan, but never in all my experience of working life have I been so rushed as since that time. Positively, I have not had time to breathe, much less to write letters, except at night, and my eyes and brain and everything else would be too tired then to do more than fool around in the parlor a little while, or take a little walk, and then go to bed, so as to be ready for the next day. Then last week we had two days of "wild gaiety" and that has piled more work into this week. I have been working from eight until the last elevator trip at six, every day, instead of from nine until five, as is usual, and today is the first time I have caught up with my work. I haven't touched a letter - my assistant attends to all of that - but I have gone from one room to another taking dictation, and never getting an opportunity to write it out. It was positively amusing: every desk in his office is connected with electric bells and speaking tubes with every other desk, and I would be in one room, writing away for dear life, and would hear my bell going. Then would come an ominous silence, then a head would be poked into the room where I was going to keep Miss Jones long?" "Yes, been waiting all day for her, and now I am going to finish this." "Well, Miss Jones, you come in to my room as soon as you are through there." and before I would finish there, I would have a date or two made in some of the other rooms. Tonight I am going home at five - you can write that in your hat."

So you are at last away from the little Arcadia in Iowa county. I have not heard from papa but once - he wrote just as he was leaving, and told me to write to him at Escondido. I did so and gave him a little good advice. As he always seems to think I am yet an infant, I suppose he will take the advice (?) for what it is worth. Uncle John came in the city last week, looking very thin and not at all well. He has gone to Milwaukee this week, I think - I haven't seen any of them since Sunday. He seems to have no idea of what he is going to do.

I wish you could have been in Chicago last week, all of you, and you would have seen...