

A CHRONICLE OF FAMILY CAMARADERIE

by Nancy S. Martin and Anne Bechtel Bakke

The family chronicle that young Billy Bechtel (*left*) unwittingly began in 1912 with his new camera was not completed until 1973, when his sister Adeline put pen to paper.

In 1912, William Henry Bechtel bought a camera with a few weeks' wages earned as a tinsmith in his hometown of Lansing, in northeast Iowa. Over the next five years, Billy set about sharpening his skills by photographing his family.

With two parents and twelve siblings (six older and six younger), Billy Bechtel had plenty of willing subjects to pose before his camera, plenty of opportunities to train his eye for good shots, and plenty of hours in his makeshift darkroom to develop and print his images as 3¹/₂" x 5¹/₂" postcards.

Gradually Bechtel developed a sense of composition as he photographed his family, friends, and neighbors in a variety of groupings and settings. He composed landscape shots with trees framing the foreground for perspective. He lined up his siblings and

friends on a ladder or positioned them on a hilltop. He experimented with backdrops from his everyday surroundings—a woodpile or a haystack. He photographed his subjects at work, in ripped overalls and rolled-up sleeves, and at play, in jaunty caps and hair ribbons. Between 1912 and 1917, as Bechtel chronicled his large family, he often captured on film a vivid sense of family camaraderie.

On Christmas Eve 1917, Billy Bechtel's promise as an amateur photographer ended when he died of complications from an appendectomy. The 23-year-old was survived by his parents and siblings, and dozens of photographs.

More than half a century later, Billy Bechtel's youngest sister, Adeline, wrote a family history and titled it "The Tree and Thee." Its 60 pages are framed by genealogical facts but are fleshed out with descriptive details and characteristic anecdotes about her parents and her dozen siblings. The

same sense of tight family bonds and togetherness captured in her brother's photographs echo throughout her written chronicle.

The following pages give a sampling of how Adeline Bechtel Kerndt's words, written in 1973, add color and richness to her brother's sepia-toned photographs, taken between 1912 and 1917. Together they weave a family history that both documents and delights.

As a new century and millennium inspire us to chronicle our own family histories, we would do well to follow Billy and Adeline's example. For just as names and dates and places are essential to a family history, so too are photographs and stories, the energizing forces that allow the spirit of one individual family to speak to the rest of us. →

Nancy S. Martin teaches English at Waldorf College in Forest City. Anne Bechtel Bakke is a teacher in Forest City and niece of Billy Bechtel and his sister Adeline.



This detail from a large group photo by Billy Bechtel shows his mother, Mary Christoph Bechtel, flanked by Marie and Matt (two of her 13 children).

"Mamma was an early riser, getting up at sunrise to cut grass for her cows when she thought they weren't getting enough from the pasture. The two cows were named Daisy and Rosy. Mamma always did the milking, the boys helping out in an emergency. Dad never went anywhere near them, as far as milking was concerned.

. . . Mother's life centered much around this church, as she was the janitor for so many years. . . . Asking her to give up this work was almost like asking her to quit breathing. She was at least 75 years old when she did finally agree. The walking was getting to be difficult. I don't remember her ever missing a Sunday to make the fire in the winter, only when she was ill; and Mother, never professing anything but good health, never let sickness keep her from this work. On cold mornings, she'd leave as early as five o'clock so the church would be warm for Sunday School. . . . She said that in building the fires and sitting in the quietness of this church all her problems could be met. (I'd say she had many in the raising of her thirteen.)"

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



The Bechtels attended the German Presbyterian Church in Lansing.

"I remember my Father as a painter and a paper hanger. How fascinated I was in watching him papering a ceiling. Often humming, he would get up on the scaffold, paper folded, hanging over his shoulder, and with a quick swish of the brush it was on. If not straight or a little wrinkled, off it would come. . . .

. . . Father spent much time away from home, especially in the summer months. He'd work for farmers repairing and painting buildings. . . . [My brother Ted remembered that] they'd work from Monday through Saturday until 6 o'clock. Rather than wait for the farmers to take them home after chores, Dad would say, 'These people will be too tired after working all day, we'll walk home.' This was possibly a distance of four or five miles. In the painting of a school house—if they didn't complete the job—the floor of the school was their bed.

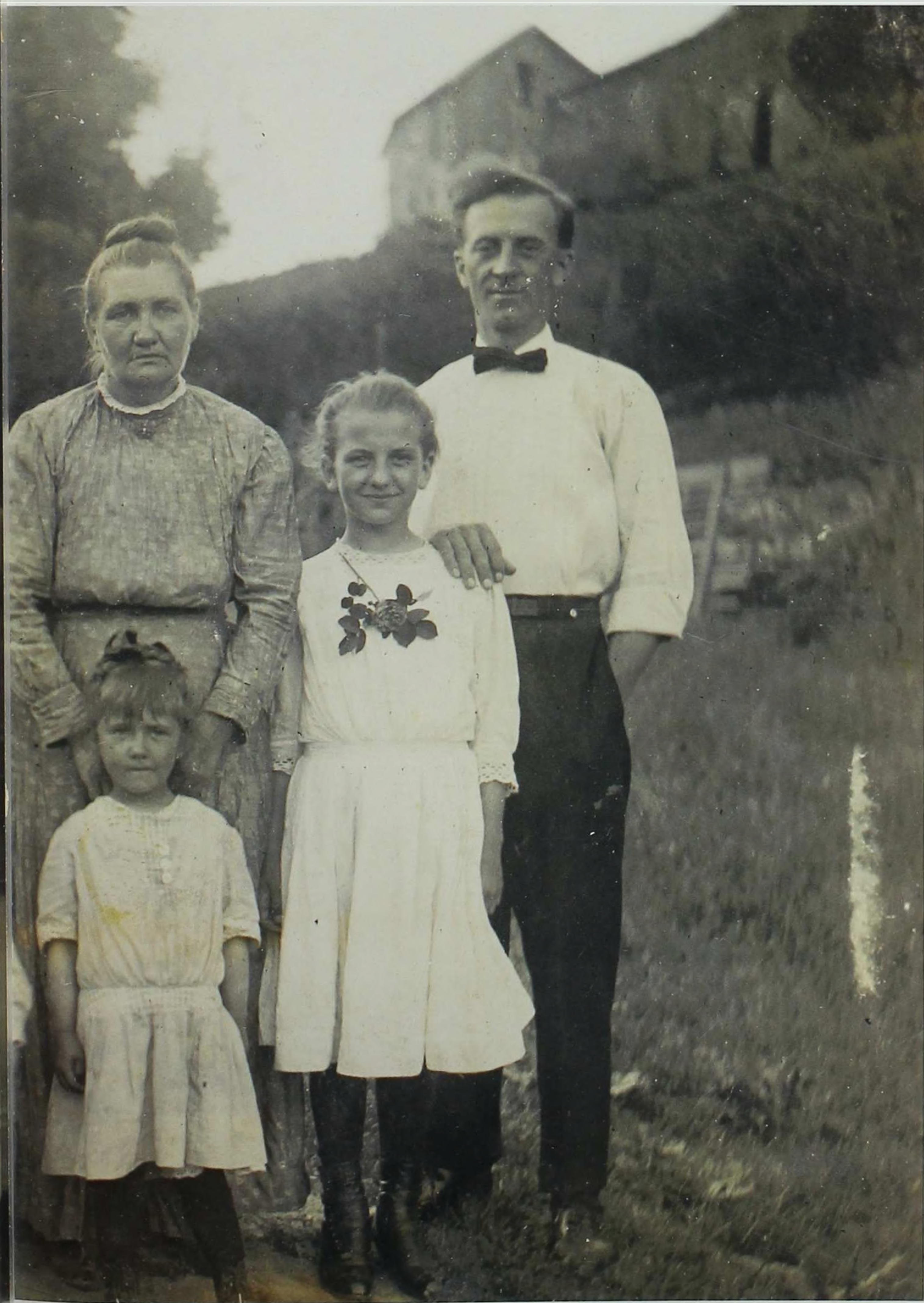
. . . Dad had a little black book in which he kept the painting and paper hanging hours he worked. . . . He would call up different members of the family to add up the figures, charging 25¢ or 35¢ an hour. He asked what amount they got. He, figuring in German or his own way, would say, 'Yes, that's what I got. But I can't charge that man that much; I'll have to throw some off.' "

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



Matthew Bechtel poses with tools of his trade—ladder and brush.





With flowers in hatband and pipe in hand, Billy's father, Matthew Bechtel, stands next to his wife and amidst eight of their 13 children. From left: Carl ("Brownie"), Ted, Esther, parents Matthew and Mary, Dorothy, Jack. Front row: Marie, Matt, and Adeline. Years later, Adeline wrote a lengthy family history, excerpted on these pages.



With flowers in hatband and pipe in hand, Billy's father, Matthew Bechtel, stands next to his wife and amidst eight of their 13 children. From left: Carl ("Brownie"), Ted, Esther, parents Mary, Dorothy, Jack. Front row: Marie, Matt, and Adeline. Years later, Adeline wrote a lengthy family history, excerpted on these pages.



The ages of the Bechtel siblings spanned 27 years. The eldest, Sam (left, on boulder), was born in 1884; the youngest, Matt (above in knickers), in 1911. Lydia's son, Roy Frankhouser (in overalls), was the first grandchild, born in 1913. Below: Edward George ("Butch") Bechtel, born in 1890.



"Butch [see left] as a youth was a loner, always restless. . . . [He and a friend] planned many different adventures. Once they decided to build a raft to go down the Mississippi and see the world. . . .

[Years later, as a world traveler] Butch wasn't the best letter writer; but as for remembering the family with gifts, he was great. . . . elephants from India, carved from teakwood; silk from Japan for a dress for Dorothy; fans; shells; wooden shoes; coins; an accordion from Germany, which Dad played while he was sitting in his lawn swing; and a clock from the Black Forest in Germany that had the Westminster chimes.

Much of this brother's life is remembered in bits and pieces as he stayed only a short time on his visits home."

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



Billy created this double exposure of his brother Carl ("Brownie") to fool the eye. Often a dapper dresser, Brownie was the first child of Mary and Matthew Bechtel to graduate from high school, in 1914.

"The Bechtels . . . were great for putting on shows, Brownie in particular. Brownie had a way of advertising the coming event, and the charge for admission was common pins. A common pin in those days wasn't 'common,' and to take them from your mother's pincushion wasn't the best idea. So with advance notice of the coming shows, all the kids would go up to the Catholic church and dig in the church sweepings thrown out by the Sisters. Brownie was the writer and producer, the kids were the puppets. He also was the best reader, stopping at an exciting part, telling the kids it would be continued the next day. . . . The ticket taker's mother was the only one who never complained about not having enough pins."

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



For this "stairstep" photo, Billy posed his four youngest sisters and two older friends from tallest to smallest. From left: Margaret and Mimi Warren, Esther, Dorothy, Marie, and Adeline Bechtel.

"I wonder how many pairs of mittens and stockings Mother knitted in her lifetime. There was always a new pair of each for Christmas, and maybe some one of us would get a new pair of shoes. Again I look back and wonder how something so limited and frugal could have been such a tense, thrilling, happy time.

. . . The parlor was off-bounds for about two weeks before Christmas. . . . There was a front door which opened directly onto the street, and it was through this door that the tree and all the secrets were brought. The floor was carpeted with long strips of rag carpeting sewn together and stretched tightly over the clean straw (changed every fall). It rustled when you walked over it."

Dorothy Bechtel Harvey,
quoted by Adeline Bechtel Kerndt

"How Dorothy ever put up with two giggly girls, I'll never know. At night when going to bed (there were the two beds in the one room) Dorothy tried to read and Marie and I had other crazy ideas like repeating the alphabet and books of the Bible forward and backward. I never could come up to any of her performances."

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt

"Matt and I fought, argued, and teased each other very much in growing up. We always shared, even if it meant Matt getting the short end. Our favorite sliding place was Nopper Hill, which was the main highway. Those years we only had to watch for sleighs, and as it was in the evening we never saw many. School nights were out, but Friday nights we were allowed to stay until the curfew bell rang at nine o'clock. Going down the hill, the one that got down first would holler, 'All clear.' Pete Moeller had a team and cutter, and we didn't realize he was coming that fast, so Matt wasn't warned soon enough. Seeing the team, Matt went off at an angle to avoid the team, but went right through and under the sleigh, kitty corner over a bank. Matt wasn't hurt but the sled was flat. It happened so fast, but I still can hear Pete hollering about the blankety-blank kids, but never stopping to see if he had run over anybody. We really lived charmed lives."

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



The two youngest, Adeline and Matt, pose in a woodpile on a wintry day.



From top, seated in hay: Mary Bechtel and Lydia Bechtel Frankhouser. Standing with pitchfork: cousin Frank Bechtel. Front row: young Roy Frankhouser (Lydia and Ed's son) and Ed, holding dog. (The woman standing at the top and the man in the dark hat are unknown.)

"Lydia, . . . the first daughter, was born in the family on January 17, 1892. . . . At 16, she went to work at the 'Capoli,' an old stone building in South Lansing, which was a button factory. This was a good two-mile walk from the west part of town. She worked from 7 in the morning until 6 at night for a dollar a day. Her pay check was given to Mother, who allowed her to buy an ice cream cone on Sunday.

At the age of 15, Lyd had a bout with inflammatory rheumatism, which was very painful and kept her bedridden for months. Touching the bed made her scream with pain, and Mother had to feed her. She had to learn how to walk again by pushing a chair ahead of her to get from place to place. This illness came just before Christmas, and Adeline (me) was born the following March. Lydia, never knowing at the time that Mother was expecting another baby, remarked, 'What a winter that must have been for you!'"

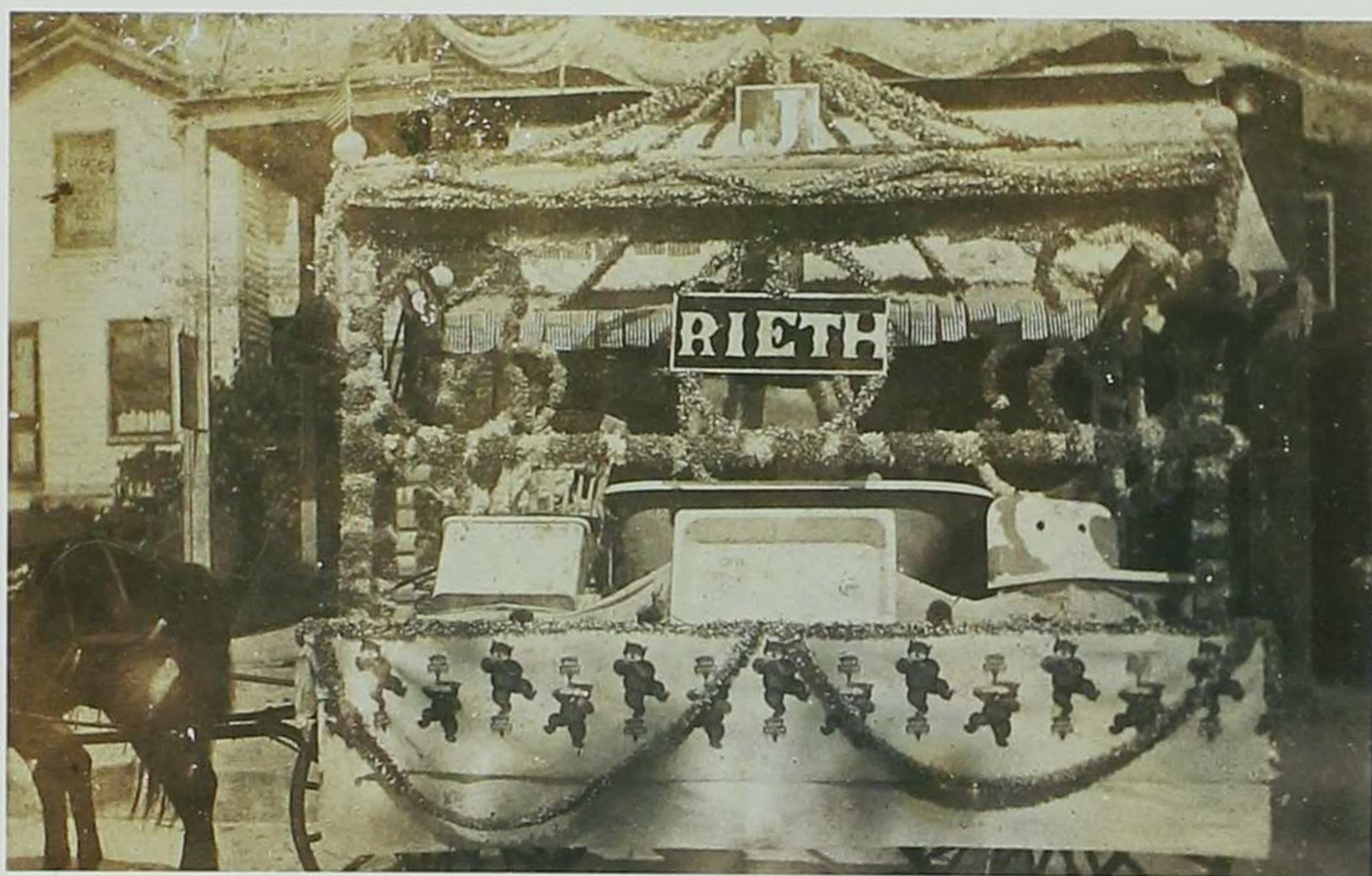
Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



Using a ladder propped against a woodpile, Billy playfully posed his subjects on each rung. From the top: Friends Margaret and Mimi Warren, Billy's siblings Esther, Dorothy, Ted; cousin Willy Schmidt; and the three youngest Bechtels, Marie, Adeline, and Matt.



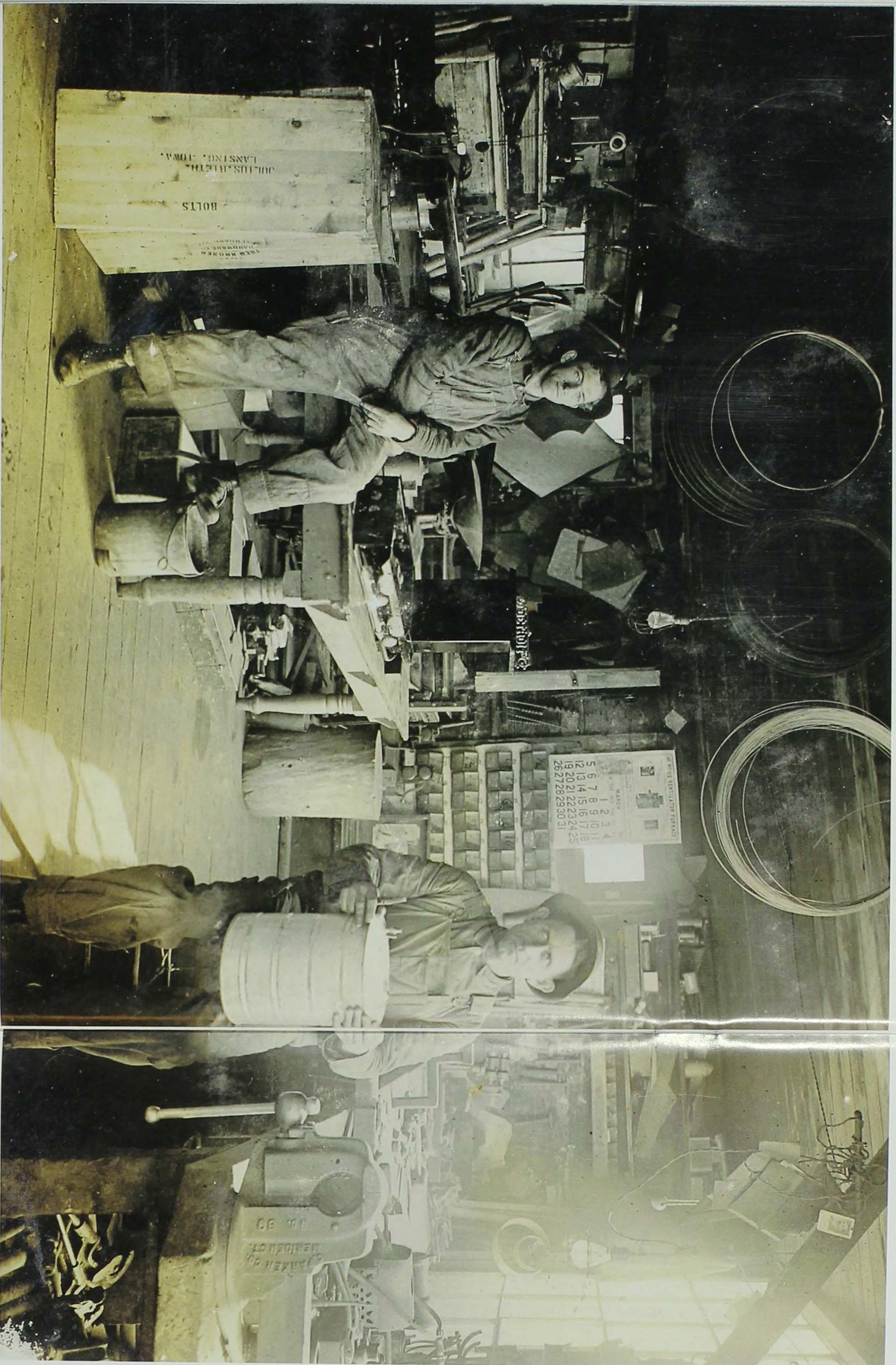
Billy Bechtel (left) learned tinsmithing and plumbing from Julius Rieth, in his shop in Lansing. Although such shops were commonplace in small-town Iowa, interior photographs like this one (dated March 1916), showing the everyday clutter of tools and workbenches, are relatively rare today.



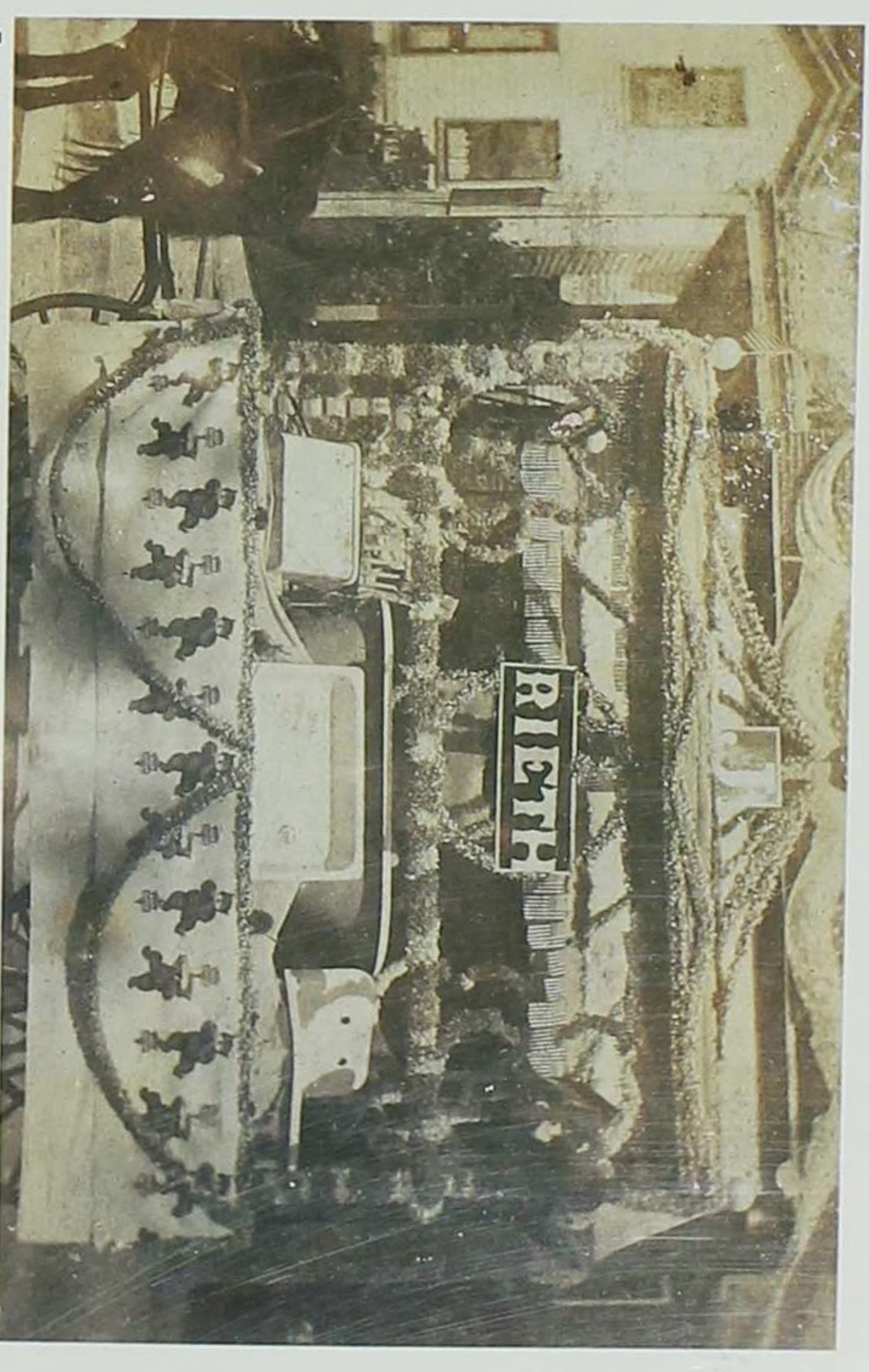
A float decorated with bunting, sinks, and signs advertises Julius Rieth's plumbing business.



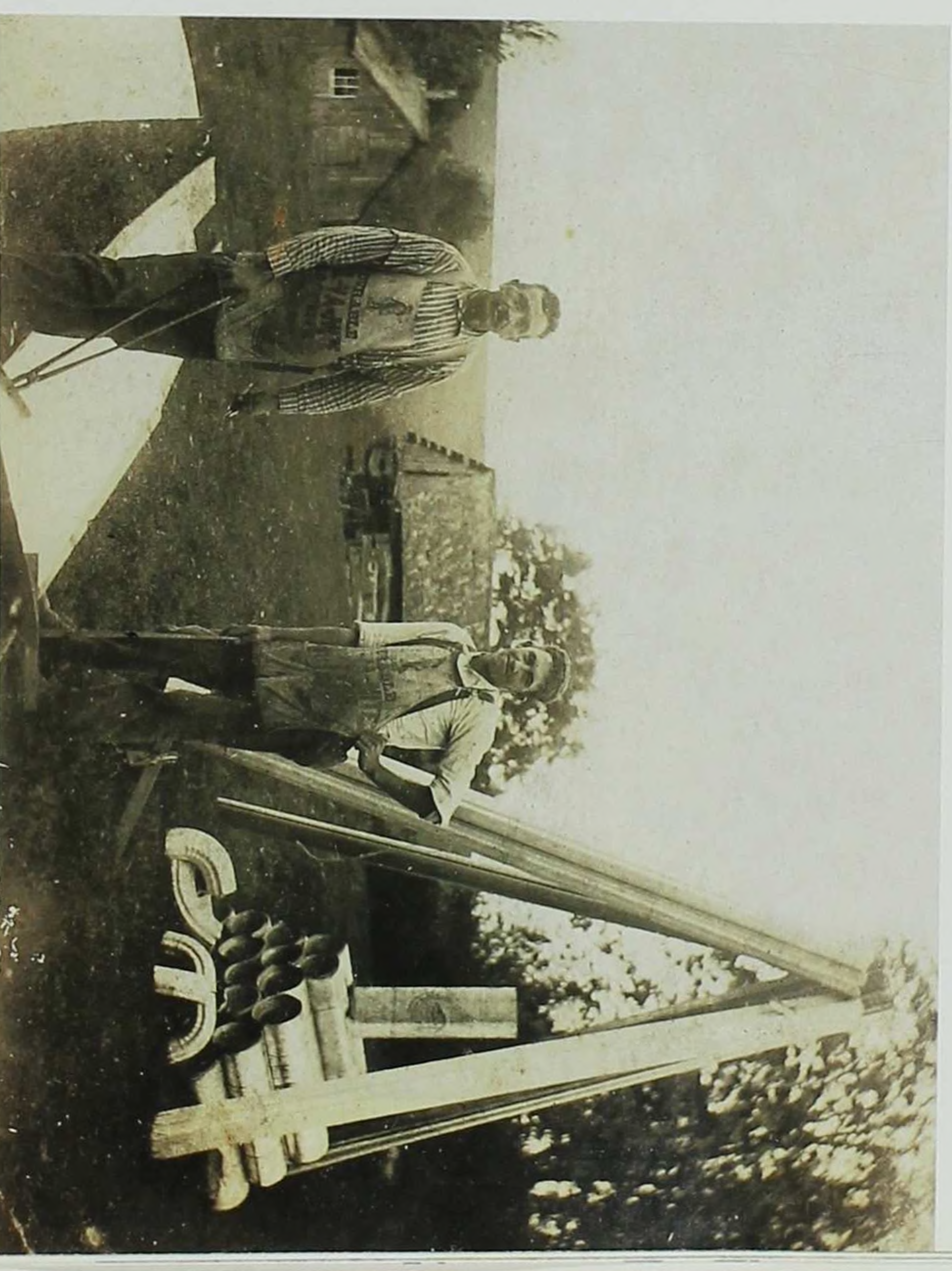
With hand on hip, Billy Bechtel stands beside a pyramid of gutters and downspouts. On the ground, sheets of tin await cutting and crimping.



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Left: Billy (hatless) and another worker take a break, surrounded by lumber and scaffolding at the building site of a new barn.

Above: From atop an old barn, Bill Wilkinson and Joe Wihopper pause in their work of reroofing with shiny new sheets of tin.

Right: A crew poses willingly for Billy's camera.





Presiding from a farm wagon, **Matthew Bechtel** (upper right) receives refreshment. Note the bouquets of flowers held by the boy (**Ted Bechtel**) and man resting on two wagon wheels caked with mud.

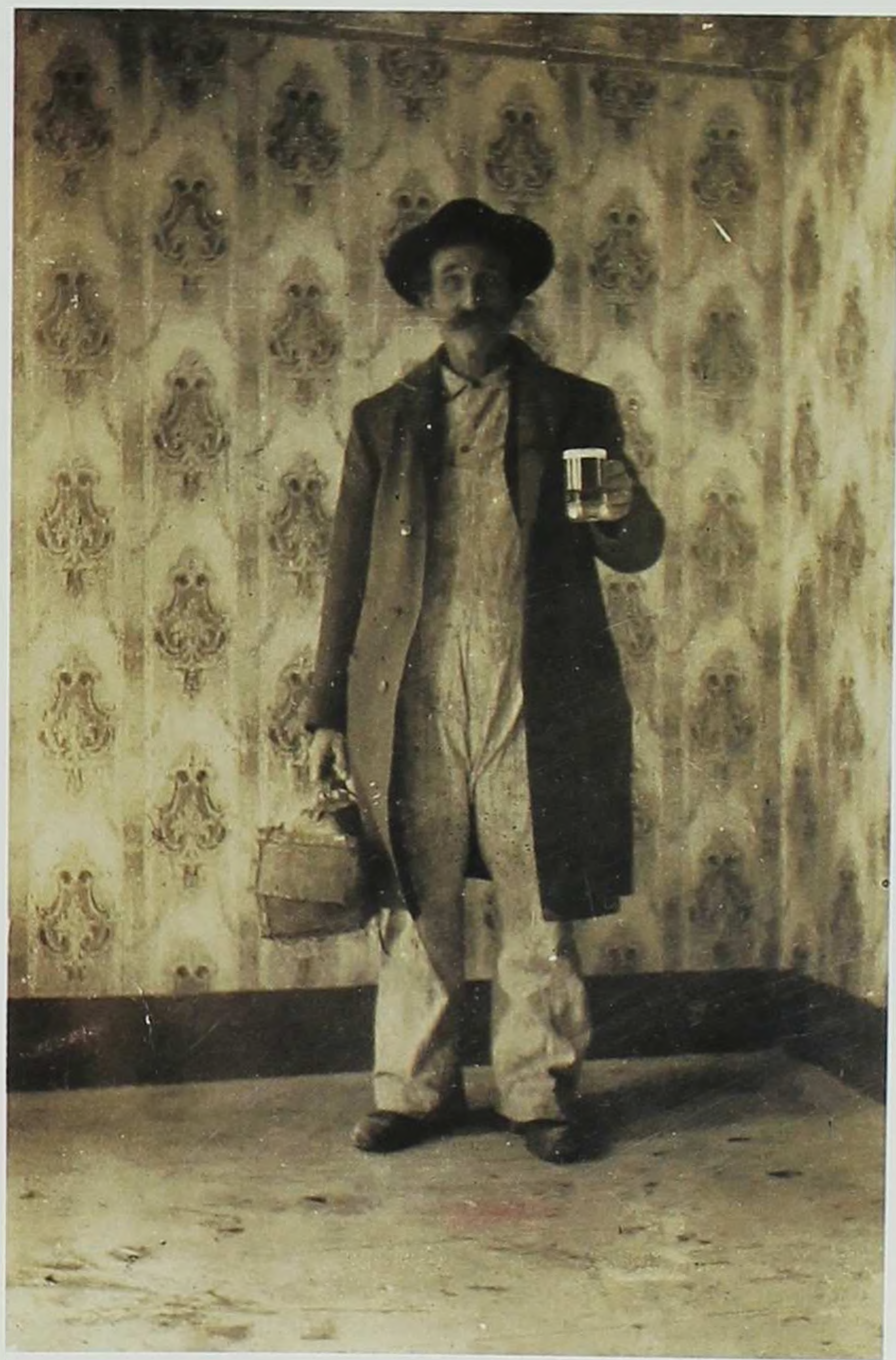


Probably using a shutter release cable, **Billy** (holding plate) included himself in this photo of a special family occasion. Surrounded by family portraits, the **Bechtels** prepare for a toast. From left: **Lydia**, **Esther**, **Carl** ("Brownie"), **Mary**, and **Billy Bechtel**. **Aunt Hannah Boettcher** holds baby **Arthur**.



"Dad would get thirsty for more than water and would send the boys to Lansing for a 10¢ bucket of beer. Dad had the pail marked to keep the boys honest in not drinking any of it. They finally figured out a method to at least get a taste. The walk to Lansing was a good two miles, and they would get plenty dry. This was the scheme they decided on: By putting a nail hole below what they considered would be the foam line and sealing it with gum, they at least could have a sip. Dad's thirst was quenched and, he no more the wiser, everyone was happy."

Ben Bechtel,
quoted by Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



Against a wallpaper backdrop and with toolbag in hand, painter and paper hanger Matthew Bechtel hoists a beer.



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Esther, Dorothy and their friend Lizzie Gee stand behind birch saplings, while on the grass, Ted pretends to take aim and a companion remains hidden behind the tree trunk. The hills surrounding Lansing and overlooking the Mississippi River figured frequently in Billy's photos and in the family's leisure time. The Bechtels often climbed Mt. Hasmer, Mt. Ida, and other nearby hills, to pick wildflowers, enjoy picnics, and play in the woods.



Billy used a hill as a vantage point for this bird's-eye view of a portion of Lansing and the woods and fields beyond the town.

"The older brothers' fun on Sunday afternoons was climbing the hills. Mother went along to pick flowers or just watch them running off their energy. Their swing was small hickory trees because of their elasticity in bending and not breaking. They would climb to the top, go to the end of a branch, and come down. If a child's weight would leave him in mid-air, an older brother would climb up; and they came down together. Never an arm or leg was broken in this sport."

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"Ted's going into the woods to pick wildflowers in the spring was another thing enjoyed by the sisters and brothers that tagged along. Many different hills were climbed, depending on the wildflowers desired. Kersteins' hill for the Crowfoot Violet and Crocus, Schafers' Hollow for the Lady Slipper, Hale's Garden (a wooded area near the railroad tracks) where wildflowers of many varieties grew profusely. Ted sensed when the Spring Beauty, Squirrel Corn, Dutchman Breeches and Dogtooth Violet were in bloom. The Shooting Star was a beautiful flower but was found growing on cliffs that were rather steep. Reaching them was done in this manner. The boys formed a human chain—the top one, holding to the tree trunk or wrapping his leg around it, would take a younger one holding on to his legs, while the smaller child would pick the flower. I remember doing this, but only once!

For Decoration Day Ted would sell wildflowers for people to put on graves, getting 25¢ for a big bunch. Lady Slippers were in bloom around this time so off he'd go with Marie to see how many they could pick, finding a wash tub full."

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt



Esther Bechtel dangles a basket of wildflowers and holds the hand of her friend Mimi Warren.



Billy (left, perhaps holding a shutter release cord under his hat), and his sister **Esther** (dark dress) pose with friends **Alice Marley** and **Wallace Cooper**, on the hills beyond the Mississippi.

NOTE ON SOURCES

This photo essay developed from a photo exhibit, "Portrait of an Iowa Family," coordinated by Anne Bechtel Bakke. Funded by Humanities Iowa and Lansing Stone School Corp./Kerndt Brothers Savings Bank (Lansing, Iowa), the exhibit traveled to Forest City, Lansing, and Sheffield, Iowa, in the summer of 1999.

Background sources include Adeline Bechtel Kerndt's "The Tree and Thee" and "The Tree and Thee, Book 3" (Lansing, 1973). Marie Bechtel Bieber (age 95) of Portland, Oregon, verified information and identified people in the photographs. Esther Snitker Bechtel (Sheffield) and Mary Kay Kerndt Winke (Waukon), daughter of Adeline (age 93), were interviewed. All photos courtesy of the Matt Bechtel family (Sheffield). Special thanks to Gus Kerndt for archiving the photographs at the Lansing Museum. Copies of some of the photos have been donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City). Thanks to archivist Mary Bennett (SHSI) for advice on preservation of the photographs. For presentation on these pages, some images have been altered electronically to remove smudges or rips accumulated on the photos over the decades.

"Billy took ill on a Saturday. He went to the Doctor, and he told him he should have surgery as soon as possible. Since the passenger train [to La Crosse] didn't run on the weekend, he had to wait until Monday. By this time his appendix had ruptured. Billy came through the operation fine and was recovering very well. He was planning to come home, when he took a turn for the worse, and a second operation was performed. He knew he was going to die. He was young and planning to be married when he came back from the war. He had his induction papers, and the day he went to the hospital, he was supposed to leave for the Army. These things made his dying so much harder for one to accept. . . ."

Adeline Bechtel Kerndt ❖