

"It was an ideal
night—for the birth
of a new century.
The crisp night air
acted like a tonic
upon the system, a
beautiful moon
lighted up the scene."

—Burlington Hawk-Eye,
January 1, 1901

"Adieu to thee, 19th century"

Iowans observe New Year's

by Ginalie Swaim and Tracy Cunning

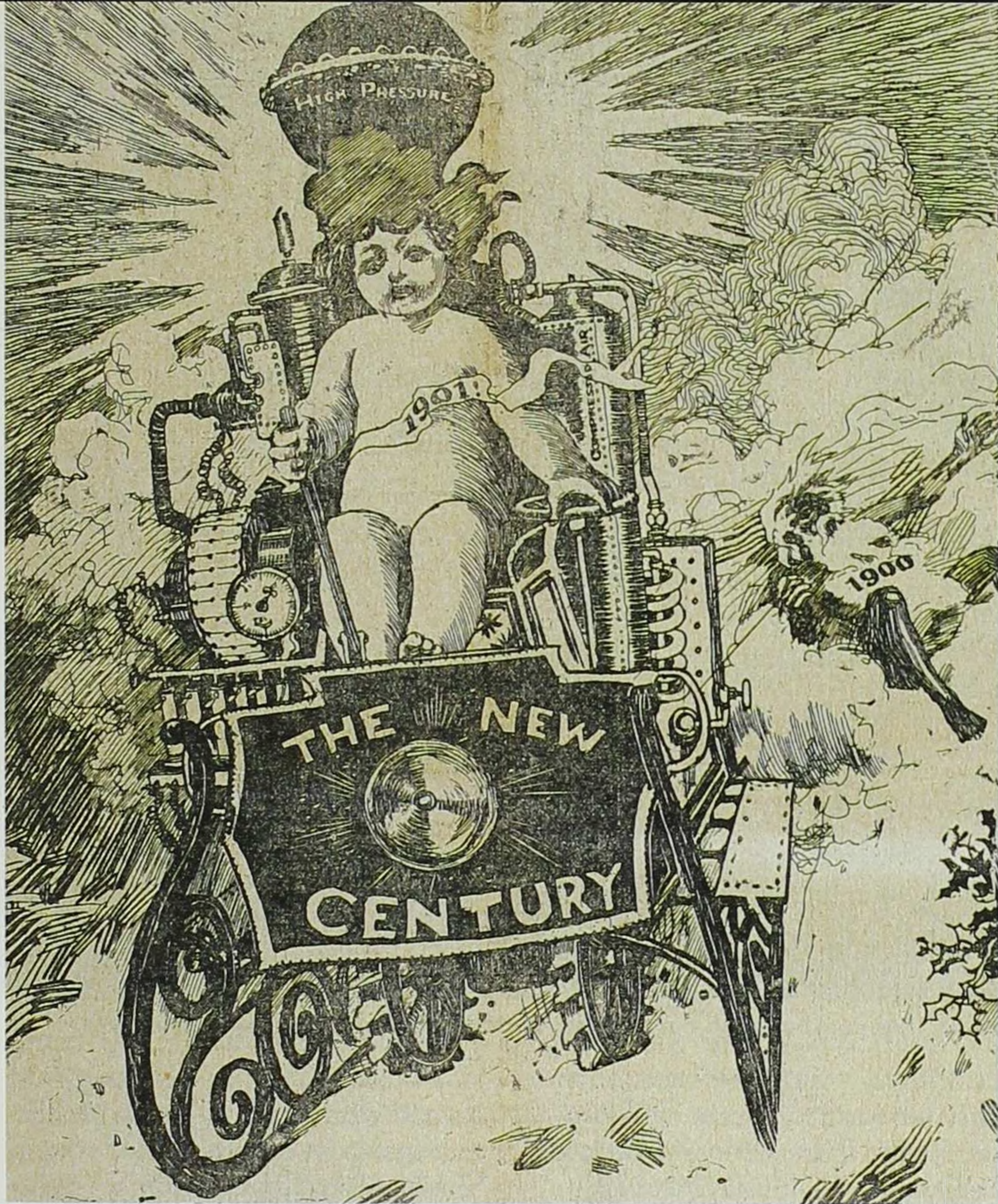
A cold, northwest wind raked the streets and alleys of Sioux City. Drivers tucked heavy furs around their laps. Townspeople walked briskly to work, bundled up against below-zero temperatures. Others, reluctant to leave their warm homes, poured another cup of steaming coffee and lingered over the morning *Journal*. As they turned to page five, they realized that the great event of the day would begin sooner than they thought.

It was December 31, 1900. Slowly, slowly, on its rusty, creaking, worn-out axis, the 19th century was preparing to turn.

"At about 5 o'clock this afternoon, according to the clocks of Sioux City," the *Journal* reported with great drama, "a new century

will begin on the Greenwich line and will sweep westward from London bearing its message of great import until at 12 o'clock, midnight, the whistle at the Sioux City Traction company's power house will bellow its signal of the hour, the day, the year and the century. Then the other whistles of the city will take up the chime and the church bells will join with a great, glad chorus and no one in the city will be permitted to overlook the birth of the twentieth century."

Was there indeed a "great, glad chorus" in Sioux City, and across Iowa, as the 19th century ceded to the 20th? How did Iowans celebrate and observe New Year's? Did they privately, as well as publicly, mark the turning of



The new "high pressure" century bowls over Father Time in this cartoon from the *Dubuque Daily Telegraph* (Dec. 30, 1900).

the century? And exactly when did the new century begin? That was the big question.

"There has been so much discussion in the papers of late as to when the present century will end that the question is preying upon our mind," puzzled the editor of the *Alton Democrat* on December 30, 1899. "Some say it will end tomorrow night at midnight and that the twentieth century will kick the cover off and begin to dawn as soon as the nineteenth has curled up its toes and died, and others affirm with equal warmth that the century will not close its books yet for another year—and that's what's worrying us. Night after night we've lain awake and tossed and tumbled and torn our hair in a vain effort

to decide whether we ought to wake up next Monday morning in this century or the next."

The editor in Alton wasn't alone in pondering the big question of 1899: Would New Year's Day 1900 usher in the new century—or merely the last year of the 19th century? "Everybody here has been arguing this question of late," confided Arcadia's correspondent to the *Carroll Sentinel*.

Even the nation's mighty metropolitan newspapers had wrestled with the question. "For more than a year the [Chicago] *Times-Herald* has been in receipt of letters discussing and settling when the twentieth century begins. Some theorists say January 1, 1901, while all practical people

and bicyclists know that it begins at midnight, December 31, 1899, where January 1, 1900, begins. As soon as we cease writing the '18' in our date lines we will be through with the 'nineteenth' century and in the 'twentieth.' How this is arrived at may be best illustrated in the following dialogue: . . . Q.—Then a century begins and ends at each '100' mark? A.—If you doubt it, ask any 'century [bicycle] rider' if he or she has to pass the one hundred and first mile post before he completes a century."

The editor in Orange City, Iowa, saw it differently, however, than "practical people" or faddish bicyclists, and presented this explanation to readers of the *Sioux County Herald*: "If Tony Kuyper or W. S. Short passed nineteen hundred dollars over the counter when the check called for eighteen hundred and ninety-nine, their accounts would be one dollar short. . . . Old Father Time is just as exact as these bankers of ours. He tolerates no short change racket. . . . We cannot have a twentieth and a nineteenth century at one and the same time. A century means 100 years. . . . Nuff said."

The Enright and Myers grocery store in Sioux City skirted the issue in its ad on New Year's Eve 1899: "While a good many people of the country are not satisfied that the Twentieth Century begins with the new year, we are satisfied that here is the right place to buy your groceries Saturday, the last business day of the old year, and you will be satisfied to continue through the year 1900."

The *Burlington Hawk-Eye* took a more abstract, ethereal approach: "At midnight, December 31, 1900, the world passed a purely imaginary line into a new period of time"—while the *Coun-*

Bluffs Daily Nonpareil took a historical perspective in its article titled "The Old Disputed Century Question."

"It was the same then as now," the newspaper explained. "When the Eighteenth century was about to die, as the Nineteenth century is now doing, all America prepared to usher in its successor—as we are doing even now. The good citizen of 1801 celebrated, as the more or less good citizen of 1901 is about to do. . . . They had the same old discussion one hundred years ago that has been racking the souls of the latter day public. All through the country discussion was rife for nearly a year as to when the new century began—just as we discussed the matter during the last twelve months. . . . Acrimonious debates ensued. Finally it was decided that the new century began January 1, 1801. Several well-intentioned though mistaken gentlemen had already celebrated the occasion on January 1, 1800, and one of them wrote a harsh letter to the papers announcing that he would take no part in any subsequent chronological jamboree whatever. However, the event passed off very nicely without his abetment."

In reporting an 1899 New Year's party in Forest City, the *Winnebago Summit* deliberately stumbled over the question: "A number of young folks gathered at the home of Mr. and Mrs. F. L. Wacholz and enjoyed their hospitality at a watch party New Year's eve, and watch the coming of the new Cent—er—New Year."

Perhaps for most Iowans, whether the new century began in 1900 or 1901 was a moot point. Diaries and newspaper reveal that



Sarah Jane Kimball with her brother and father in their home in late 1899.

most Iowans were less concerned with debating when the new century began than with confronting the brittle cold, tending to daily tasks, gathering together with friends and family, and taking stock of one's life.

On both New Years, 1899 and 1900, below-zero temperatures chilled Iowans to the bone. "Today is coldest of all," 62-year-old Sarah Jane Kimball, of Jones County, wrote in her diary on New Year's Eve 1899. "I have done my usual housework and the washing and ironing took care of the chickens and cats and sewed some. Yesterday Merrill put the stove in the cellar then I put up the pipe—It took me two hours as I had to do it alone. I then built a fire as the cellar is getting too cool [and foodstuffs will freeze]. I have to keep a fire in my room night and day when it's so cold to keep my plants from freezing. Father is not a bit well so he hugs the stove rather closely. Merrill has all of the out-doors

work to do. Last night father took a sack of hot coals to bed with him and today feels better. The wind is blowing hard and we all feel the cold in the house. Old eighteen hundred will have us today and tomorrow brings us the new century 1900."

Maria Kromminga, also in Jones County, was restless and bored as she shivered the day away: "Very very cold. The east windows are froze all day lone—some no callers and cant find anything that is interested to read."

To the south, in Van Buren County, farmer George Duffield braced himself against the biting west wind as he cared for his livestock on New Year's morning 1900. "Roy Morrison and I were busy all the a.m. watering and feeding stock," he wrote in his diary. "Water is scarce in the creeks and the River low and difficult to get the stock to go on the ice out to water."

Although New Year's Day a

century ago was considered a special day, it was not a "holiday" as we know it. Businesses, including banks, were open as usual, although some closed early, and mail was still delivered. January 1, 1900, was also a Monday, the traditional wash day, and the task appeared in many Iowans' diaries.

New Year's Day in 1901 did not differ substantially from New Year's Day 1900. As the *Emmet County Republican* reported: "New Years was not generally observed as a holiday in Estherville. Most of the stores and business places were open all day and all part of the day. Our people generally seemed indisposed to begin the year in idleness." Again it was cold, and again Iowans tended to their daily work—duly noting both in their diaries. Eli Mendenhall of Hardin County was "busy all the day long, on this the first day of 1901." In Wellman, Isaac Carr's wife and daughters spent the day sewing. All the members of the Rev. John Hamilton's household in Reinbeck did chores or worked at their routine tasks: Rev. Hamilton called on some parishioners, son Willie sold groceries, son John made pictures, son Tom chopped wood, daughter Belle ironed, and daughter Mary went to school. Paine Howard of Linn County helped "butcher two hogs & hauld two loads of wood." Adaline Kimball Jones "did my ironing" and then "thought I would go over to see Mrs. Crane but it was so cold I gave it up." Mary Eleanor Armstrong Peet of rural Jones County did mending and odd jobs, "caught 4 chickens," "tore carpet rags awhile," and finished the previous day's laundry. "Dried part of the clothes in the house, hung the rest out," she noted. "Very cold last night, 12° below zero this morning."

Very cold or not, some Iowans headed outdoors for recreation. After Lorin Rowe of Eddyville spent New Year's Day 1901 "tending to business matters," he went skating in the evening with his wife and daughter. Cold weather meant strong ice. "In Burlington, the river is the busiest place in the city just now," the *Hawk-Eye* reported. "With the ice crop in full blast, two skating rinks doing a good business, there is more life on Front Street than usual. The busy scene attracts and entertains not a few sight-seers."

In Carroll, youngsters took to the slopes. "The juvenile population of the north side take advantage of these fine moonlight evenings," the *Sentinel* reported, "and are out in large numbers with their sleds to coast down the hill from McLagan's east. The coasting is said to be fine."

Well, perhaps not so fine for Carroll citizen Ray Dunphy, who "indulged" in an afternoon sleighride down by the Middle Raccoon River south of town. "Now, friend Ray has not prospered in but one direction since engaging in the mining business," the *Sentinel* related, "but has taken on rosy health and flesh until he almost tips the beam at 200. The sleighing was excellent and as Ray flew down the icy kopje at the rate of a mile a minute at the least calculation it reminded him of youthful days on the hill by the creek. But all of a sudden was a terrific shock, the 'bob' and rider flew into the air like a feather in a gale, then dropped to earth with a deep, dull thud. For a few seconds all was darkness to Dunphy. The runners of the sled were found next day in the corn field across the river and the merchant tailor

*"There is solemnity
in the sounding of
the fateful hour.
The world looks
'before and after'; it
broods 'on things to
come.' And where
the imagination is
touched, there may
well be, in some
subtle way, an ef-
fect upon human
action."*

—*The Century* maga-
zine, January 1901

*"Life has never
been so complex as
it is to-day. If we
could instill one les-
son on this morn-
ing of the birth of
the new century it
would be the lesson
of simplicity."*

—*Iowa State Register*,
January 1, 1901

*"Despite the black
shadows of crime
and war. . . . even a
Faust must recog-
nize progress.
Surely in the 20th
century optimism
and not pessimism
will win."*

—University of Iowa
President George
MacLean's "Christmas
Sentiment" (quoted at
the end of Adaline
Kimball Jones's diary
for 1900)

on New Year's day got a rush order for a pair of trousers."

As dusk settled on New Year's Eve—in both 1899 and 1900—many Iowans gathered to visit, feast, party, and await midnight with friends, relatives, and neighbors. In Carroll, young people celebrated with "A Trip Around the World" progressive party, stopping at homes with food, decor, and costumes representing Madrid, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and Washington, D.C. At another young people's party in Carroll, "the early part of the evening was given over to cards and crokinole [a board game] after which courses of dainty refreshments were served," the local *Herald* remarked. "The remainder of the evening was occupied in games of various kinds which were laughable and entertaining in the extreme."

Newspapers frequently announced "watch parties" or "watch meetings," and diarists frequently mentioned "watching" for the arrival of the new year at midnight. Rev. Alexander Cooper (of Wyoming, Iowa) and his wife and son were invited to a watch meeting hosted by the United Presbyterians, but they spent the evening at home instead because the one-year-old was ill. In Allison, Irving M. and Mary Fisher and a friend stayed up to "watch the old year out & the new year in as well as the new Century." Others held their watch parties alone, like George Miller and his wife, in Hazleton. Miller wrote on December 31, 1900: "Mama and I sat up until 12:10 a.m. and are so happy."

Churches across Iowa held



A party watches for midnight in this *Harper's Weekly* illustration (January 1901).

special "watch night" services. The evening of prayer, sermons, addresses, and hymns began at eight or nine and ended at midnight. In the Page County village of Coin, for instance, "Watch night was observed at the Methodist church Sunday evening. The service commenced at nine o'clock with a song and prayer service; next came the sermon and then, a testimony meeting. Promptly at midnight the church bell was tolled, once for each century. Quite a number stayed to watch the old year out."

Many watch night services featured addresses between the opening religious service and the midnight prayer and consecration. In Creston, for instance, the congregation of the Methodist Episco-

pal Church heard speeches on the new century as well as assessments of the church's growth and the accomplishments of its benevolent societies and Epworth League.

For Catholics, observance of New Year's at the turn of the century was especially significant. The Pope had decreed that solemn high masses be held at midnight on both New Year's Eve 1899 and New Year's Eve 1900. As the *Carroll Sentinel* reported on January 4, 1900: "The unusual occurrence of the celebration of midnight mass at the Catholic churches in this city caused both edifices to be crowded with worshipers last Sunday night." The sermon at St. Peter and Paul's Church was given in both English

and German and focused on the importance of the good use of time. Both churches were illuminated by "a profusion of candles and electric lights."

The next year, on December 31, 1900, the *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil* described the drama of Catholics gathering around the world for midnight masses: "The earth will be belted with a procession of priests, bishops and cardinals, followed by the white robed boys swinging the censers to the music of innumerable choirs chanting the songs of the church. It will be the most important event in the history of the Catholic church for the past one hundred years."

With pews filled on New Year's Eve, ministers and priests addressed their listeners on closing a momentous century and "facing the future." "This is a boastful age," warned Rev. T. J. McCarty at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Sioux City. "The nineteenth century is the heir of all the centuries that have preceded it. Let it take all the credit that belongs to it, but let it not forget the blessings of inheritance that have come to it."

In Burlington, Congregational pastor William Salter pointed to astonishing progress. "The nineteenth century is especially distinguished by new inventions for the intercourse and commerce of mankind. The steamboat, the locomotive, the telegraph, the trolley, the telephone, have made all men neighbors and friends. Innumerable new tools have come into the industry of the world, for household work, for factory and shopwork, and for every art and trade. In no other equal portion of time have so many tools been invented

to save labor and help man in his work.

"Civilization has been extended to various parts of the globe that at the beginning of the century were in the night of barbarism," he continued. "Large portions of India and China have been opened to intercourse with the rest of the world, and Japan and Corea [*sic*] have come into the family of nations. The sources of the Nile, of the Niger, of the Mississippi, and of the Amazon have been reached. Daring adventurers have ascended almost every mountain peak, sailed the Arctic seas, and almost reached the northern pole."

But Pastor Salter preached caution and humility: "The nineteenth century has an enormous bulk of great events, as has every preceding century. Being ourselves in the nineteenth century, its events appear greater to us and of more importance than the events of any preceding century. Whether or no they were really so, a dispassionate and judicial future will decide. Invariably in the course of human affairs, the history of any century shrivels to smaller proportions as it recedes in distance."

Beyond the warm glow and contemplative atmosphere of Iowa churches, other Iowans celebrated the new year in more riotous surroundings. "The year 1900 was welcomed by Council Bluffs with the blowing of whistles, the ringing of bells, and the firing of pistols and other explosives in the streets," the *Daily Nonpareil* reported. "These were the outward and more boisterous manifestations of the greeting to the new born year."

The next year, young Will Bab-

"The great word of this nineteenth century has been production. The great word of the twentieth century will be—listen to me, you youngsters—markets."

—Character in *The Octopus* (1901) by American novelist Frank Norris

"Whatever else you may resolve, or do, in the new century, don't be a pessimist. . . . Unadulterated pessimism is a brake upon human progress."

—*Burlington Hawk-Eye*, January 1, 1901

"What 1999 will be, whether all these things are the same as now or worse, or better, depends of course . . . upon what we are doing now, or upon what we are not doing now."

—Florence Nightingale

bington tried to take advantage of the revelry. "Believing that the screaming whistles, ringing bells, tooting horns and other auricular demonstrations . . . would drown the noise of smashing glass and enable him to conduct a successful burglary, Will Babbington, a 22-year-old Council Bluffs boy made a serious miscalculation last night and was caught in the act," the *Daily Nonpareil* related.

Babbington had timed his entry through a skylight into a clothing store to coincide with midnight. "Just as the uproar began he placed his foot on the glass and sent it crashing down into the store. And just at that instant, too, Mrs. Breese, who occupies the front part, opened her window to hear the bells. She heard the crash of glass and saw the form of a man disappear through the skylight, and realizing that a burglary was being committed she rushed to the front windows and made the welkin ring with her cries for the police."

In Burlington that same evening, the midnight revelry was outdone by fire alarms. "Above all the din of bells and fireworks and noisy shouters, there roared forth the mighty voice of the water works whistle, to which the fire-bell tolled a harsh accompaniment. Many heard and heeded not. Until the rush of the carts from the stations, the reddening glare that lighted the whole city, startled them and ere long they crowded toward the scene of destruction in motley array." The fire destroyed two large commercial buildings.

The next day's newspaper also listed a few Burlington citizens on the police docket who had disturbed the peace or "miscalculated the amount of liquor that he could carry easily and gracefully."



Captioned "Dawn of the Twentieth Century as it Strikes Europe," this cartoon appeared in the *Detroit News-Tribune* and the *Literary Digest* (January 5, 1901).

The newspaper was surprised that the docket was "meager," given "that some people deem it necessary to observe New Year's if not uproariously, at least hilariously."

Apparently the *Coin Gazette's* reading of human nature was correct: "Some men claim that they see the old year out and the new one in by getting so drunk that they can't see anything."

Iowans hosting parties might have turned to Lida Ames Willis, author of *Booklet of Holiday Dinners*, for advice on the proper New Year's celebration: "Not being so essentially a family festival, but ruled almost entirely by the spirit of merriment, the day is given to less feasting, but more to amusements of various sorts," Willis remarked. "Christmas, spite of the spirit of good will, is more or less

conservative in its observances, while New Year is cosmopolitan. Everyone is young again, and expected to enjoy their share of frolic and fun. Many end up the day with an informal dance, introducing old-time figures and costumes, or appearing in masquerade. This occasion, of course, calls for midnight 'collation.'" Willis's advice, reprinted in the *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil*, recommended a less elaborate menu than for Christmas, assuming one's guests had "already surfeited on sweets and rich foods."

A new answer to "What shall we have for dessert?" appeared on the front page of the *Creston Gazette* right before New Year's. The answer? "Try Jell O, a delicious dessert. Prepared in two minutes. No baking. Flavors: Lemon, Orange, Raspberry and Strawberry. At your grocers 10 cts."

Other Iowans, however, relied

on serving old favorites. The Carr family in Wellman had oyster soup in 1900 and 1901 (except for Mag Carr, who didn't like oysters; her husband usually brought her "a nice piece of beef steak" instead). Maranda Cline went to "a goos roast" at her son's house in Hills. Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, in Manchester, listed in her diary the leftovers from New Year's dinner: "a lot of suet pudding, beans, pies, cakes, lamb roast, etc." Mary Eleanor Armstrong Peet, a new bride living outside Martelle in Jones County, "made chocolate cream for dinner" on New Year's Day 1901.

Some Iowans continued a formal Victorian social tradition particularly popular earlier in the 19th century. As the *Des Moines Leader* reported in its society column, "The old custom of calling on New Year's day will be revived to a certain extent on the ushering in of 1900." Receptions or open houses were held at several Des Moines residences, including Terrace Hill, "where Mrs. F. M. Hubbell, assisted by her sister . . . and a number of her lady friends will receive their lady and gentleman friends from 2 to 9 o'clock."

Likewise, in Burlington, Isiah and Willie McConnell hosted 200 guests at an elegant New Year's breakfast. "The host and hostess received unassisted, Mrs. McConnell wearing a simple morning house gown of lavender and white muslin, with pearl and amethyst ornaments. The house was tastefully decorated with heavy festoons of southern smilax, hung as a border around the rooms while large holly wreaths tied with bows of red ribbon hung as medallions upon the walls; palms and ferns filled the corners and the hall and there formed a screen behind which Fischer's or-

chestra played," the *Hawk-Eye* detailed. "The dining room table held a large cut-glass bowl filled with flaming poinsettia." The menu included coffee, chocolate, sandwiches, salad, croquettes, ices, cakes, confections, and eggnog ("served separately in the little north parlor").

While many Iowans gathered to celebrate the new year with parties, dinners, dances, and receptions, not so Ida "Belle" Bandfield Holden, a schoolteacher in the Waterloo area. Holden lost her mother in early December 1899 and buried her husband on Christmas Eve. She and her father were grieving deeply on New Year's Day. As she confided in her diary, "This is a very sad N.Y. for us both. No celebration today—no one felt like it. [Sister] Cora & family came to dinner to help me start up, that was all but we enjoyed their company very much."

Clearly, New Year's could not stave off tragedy. Witness the January 1, 1900, diary entry of Adaline Kimball Jones, of Iowa City: "I went in to see Mrs. Pratt and learned that one of the roomers a Mr. Marshall had shot himself last eve. Soon after I came home and heard the fire alarm & Steve Swishers house & barn & Dr. Hazards barn burned & injured the Dr's house considerable." On a different note, Jones ended with: "Mrs. Greer had another daughter born today."

For many Iowans, New Year's was the time to take stock of their lives. For some, this meant settling up financially. On the final day of 1900, George Merritt Miller of Hazleton did chores, chopped some wood, and "settled with the banks." Lorin A. Rowe, an Eddy-

"The twentieth century will be American. American thought will dominate it, American progress will give it color and direction; American deeds may make it illustrious. . . . The regeneration of the world, physical as well as moral, has begun, and the revolution will never move backward."

—U.S. Senator
Albert J. Beveridge,
December 31, 1900

"Vitality—that should be the watchword of twentieth century religion, morals, business and human progress."

—*Burlington Hawk-Eye*,
January 1, 1901

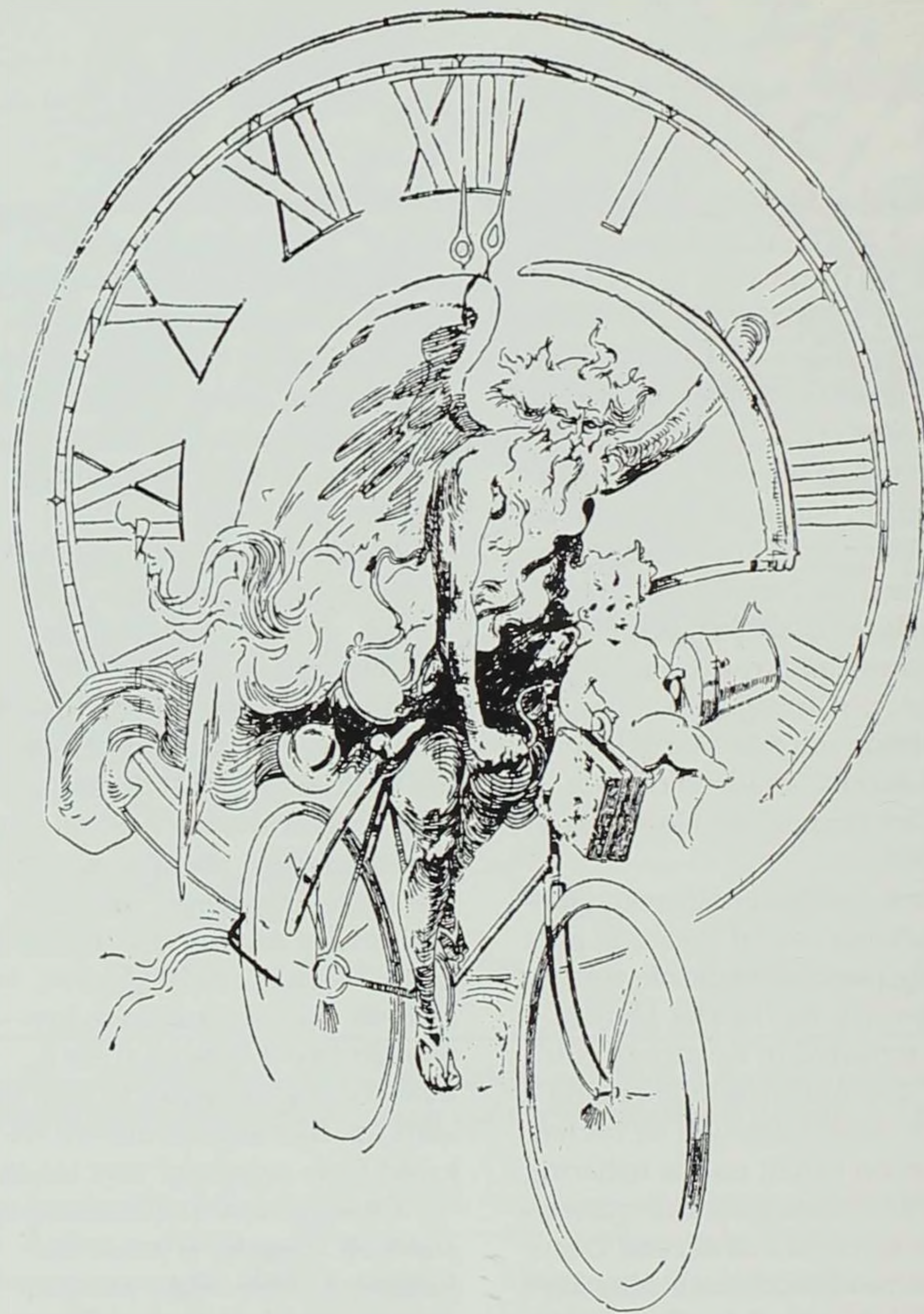
ville businessman, wrote in his diary on January 1, 1901: "I paid Manning and Epperson the last cent I was owing them. Paid Frank \$10.00."

These actions would not have surprised the *Sioux City Journal*, which predicted that "in business circles the interest in the change of the centuries will lie in the settling of many more unpaid bills than is common at the first of the year, which is the general settling time anyway. Many men have determined to pay off every cent they owe in order to start the new cycle with a clear slate. Whether this will be the general course of action the collectors, who will start out Wednesday morning, will soon be able to tell."

For others, taking stock meant tallying up the year's accomplishments. For instance, Alexander P. Cooper, a Presbyterian minister in Jones County, used his final diary entry in 1899 to record his sermon topic for that day, the temperature, and Sunday School attendance. Then he listed a running total of pastoral calls: "Total calls 2000 [and] 321 for 1899. Not as many as I started out to make. I have come far short in this as in many other things. Thank God for time when we are given inspiration for new beginnings & efforts." The next New Year's he continued the tally: "2 below zero. Fine winter weather. Good-bye dear old Century, the last & best of the world up to date. Welcome 20th century. . . . In 1900 I made 335 calls. Total 2335."

John McLane Hamilton, a Reinbeck minister, also used his final 1899 diary entry to record the total number of sermons written and preached, books read, "letters & postals" written and received, and pastoral calls made.

The E. A. Rea Company, in



Joining the 1890s bicycle fad, Father Time and Baby Time arrive at the stroke of midnight, in this cartoon from the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* (January 1, 1901).

Corydon, used a full-page ad in the *Wayne County Democrat* for a public tallying-up of its business accomplishments, set within the nation's accomplishments. The ad read in part: "The old year has closed and with its closing the Nineteenth Century has passed into history. It will be known as the most progressive century in the world's history. The material development in the United States has been greater than it will be possible for it to be in any future century unless a new continent should be discovered or upheaved. Of this development there has been no branch in which improvement has been more marked

or useful than in the agricultural department. Farmers have grown morally, physically and intellectually from 'the man with the hoe' to the 'lords of creation' with such rapid strides that if he were not familiar with the facts, it would read like a fairy tale."

A 25-year history of Wayne County followed, highlighted by the growth of the local hardware and implement business, and particularly the staggering sales totals in 1900 by the E. A. Rea Company itself: "We have sold over one thousand Wagons, Buggies, Carriages, Road Wagons and Spring Wagons. These were received in 36 car loads. If driven in a proces-

sion with a team to each one they would make a string eight miles long." The ad concluded, "What of 1901?" and boldly ventured, "We want to increase our business 50 per cent."

In taking stock of his life at New Year's, Isaac N. Carr was more detailed and introspective than most. Carr wrote long diary entries on January 1, 1900 and 1901, beginning with family and social activities and closing with an accounting of his financial status. He and his wife ("Mag") had moved to Wellman from their Washington County farm in 1899.

On January 1, 1900, Carr wrote: "New years day & Mag lay abed most of the day with a headache I chopped & sawed & split some pole wood all I had & the boys carried it down cellar I also sorted over some apples and took a dozen or 2 nice ones to our bank for new years gift I took Holden an orange & some apples he is no better . . . So far this has been a very fair winter very little snow & not Extra Cold no storms & the past year has been good for Crops."

Carr listed the quantity and quality of oats and corn harvested on his farm; amounts of rent paid and still owed to him; how much he spent on potatoes to supplement his own garden harvest; the total of his stocks and bank accounts; and the value of crops and livestock still owned. "I have enjoyed town life reasonably well the last year & my health has been fair we have all had very fair health. . . . I bought us a nice 2 seat carriage for \$85 & the boys & girls 2 bicycles for \$40 & I made a very poor investment they are always up for repairs and costly

ones too. . . . I have old corn enough in my Wellman crib to feed & 300 bu oats 2 cows a young calf my grey team Prince & Mollie not valuable & my pacer Alex Corning 3 not valuable an old sow & 6 pigs & at least 6000 bu of good corn in cribs waiting for better prices." He concluded: "Verily I have no reason to Complain."

The next year on New Year's Day, Carr again took stock of his life, comparing it to a year ago. He was concerned that his children were asking too much of their mother, Mag. "Tuesday Jan 1st 1901 Colder but Clear & Sunny," he began. "Bell Came Early to get mother to help her do Some Sowing & Maude has a lot of sowing to do I am opposed [to] these girl's finding so much sowing for Mother to do & if there is much more of it I will have to speak about it Mag works entirely too hard & the girls dont realize it as I do I feel better since I quit working so hard & I know she would feel better & enjoy better health to let the work go & take Care of it-self one year ago to day she lay abed all day with her head ache but lately her health has been better my health has been reasonably good the last year & real good so far this winter we all like town life real well & the boys have Each made Enough to by their Sunday Clothes & vic has now got a better chance in the Ottumwa Laundry. . . . We had Oyster Soup for Supper & got a nice piece of beef steak for Mother as she dont Eat Oysters & not very Cold the past year has been good for Crops."

Again, he detailed his crops, livestock, garden produce, rent paid and owed, bank accounts, and other assets. He seemed pleased to have his affairs in order. "Probably 6000 bu of good Corn in crib on the farm waiting

"Hail, glad new year! Bright and beautiful is thy advent.— And though we write thee one thousand nine hundred and nothing, we welcome thee just the same. Bring gladness and peace on thy minions. What thou hast in store for us we may know by thy unfolding days."

—Eli Mendenhall,
diary entry
for January 1, 1900

"The past has gone, all hail to the new! May 1900 be a better year to you all, bringing bigger crops, more barns to hold them and more boys to tend the crops that fill the barns."

—Sioux County Herald,
December 27, 1899

for better prices Much to be thankful for & little to Complain of good by to the old year & may I do as well in the next & may we all have as good health I made another will the 26 of dec & it is quite a relief to me to know I have things in shape so strangers or outsiders cant control my property when I am gone."

Although Iowa editors and pastors used their public forums of newspapers and sermons to assess the old century and predict the next, Iowans writing in their diaries were far less likely to depart from their personal, private spheres in which they wrote about the weather, work, social relations, and financial details—in essence, their own individual lives. Rarely did they comment in their diaries on the larger world around them—even at the close of a remarkable century.

Lorin A. Rowe was an exception. Rowe was involved in several enterprises in Eddyville, including several real estate properties, the municipal water system, and the opera house. He kept a neat and well-organized diary, writing in a careful hand in black ink. Occasionally he used red ink, for entries about political campaigns and other events apparently of special significance. In his mind, the turning of the century was such an event. On December 31, 1900, he dipped his pen in red ink and wrote, "This is the last day of the Nineteenth Century: What wonderful changes have been wrought in the century just now at its end; nothing now seems to amaze people in general; steam cars, steamboats, Electric lights & motors, Telegraphs, Telephones, Phonographs (Talking Machines), Life like moving pictures &c., &c."

Then he resumed his black ink

and added: "A heavy frost and 8° below zero this morning."

As Americans again experience the turning of a century—and this time a millennium—we might consider how we as individuals witness and document the event. Is it a cause for celebration or contemplation, for revelry or prayer? On New Year's, do we set aside our work? Stay close to the hearth? Enter the larger universe of our community, or of nature itself? Are we certain that January 1, 2000, is, in fact, the first day of the new century and millennium? As the world stands poised to enter a new time period, will we take a moment to jot a few lines, in a letter or an e-mail or a diary, to record our activities and our thoughts?

And will someone, a century from now, read those lines, reconstruct through fact and imagination the setting in which we put words to paper or computer screen, and momentarily connect with us, despite the great distance of yet another hundred years? What will have changed to jeopardize that connection, and what will have stayed the same?

A hundred years have passed since Edgar F. Miller, a farmer in Buchanan County, jotted down a few thoughts in his diary on December 31, 1900. Early that day, he had taken six young pigs to market in the bitter cold. The morning was "rough," he noted in his diary, "8 or 10° below."

Now it is night—New Year's Eve—and the day's work is over. Darkness surrounds Miller's farmhouse. He opens a Christmas present from his brother, Ez. He tidies his secretary and sits writing in his diary, waiting for midnight:

"Am some ready for 1901 which will be along in 1½ hrs." He records how much he is feeding his cattle, the value of his steers, hogs, horses, hay, and corn.

Then he takes a longer view on the passage of time: "This closing year of a closing century has been a prosperous year for me, our state, & our country. Time leaves me older in years but I don't much realize my oldness. Am holding my watch party alone in my den. 'Tis a still, cold, clear night with big moon."

The next day, Miller notes cheerfully that it is a "fine" day with "lovely S.E. wind enough" to pump his windmill. After a morning of work, he gathers with his family for dinner. "Nice night," he remarks. Before washing up and going to bed, he adds one more thought in his diary: "Don't see but this new century works all right." ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

Tracy Cunning conducted extensive research for this article in Iowa newspapers, periodicals, and nearly two dozen diaries. The diaries consulted are archived at the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI) in the Iowa City center except for the George Duffield diary (SHSI-Des Moines) and the Maria Kromminga and Ida "Belle" Bandfield Holden diaries (Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City). The title, "Adieu to thee, 19th century," is from Eli B. Mendenhall's diary entry for Dec. 31, 1900.

For a broader look at this topic over the last millennium, see Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1990s Through the 1990s* (NY: Doubleday, 1990).