

A. M. Wettach Photographs Farm Children • Radio's Toby & Susie • Robert Tabor Paints Iowa

SPRING 2000 • \$6

Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED



Front Porch

Dear Readers,

I'm sorry to say that I missed out on workhorses.

My parents, who farmed in Scott County, had sold them by the time I was born in 1951. During my childhood on the farm, Case and Allis-Chalmers tractors provided the needed horsepower, but for many years before that, through many cycles of planting and harvesting, four workhorses had been the real sources of power for our 160 acres. Even after they were gone they still held a certain power, because they became part of our family's collective memory and, for me, a way of knowing my father.

After my dad died in 1956, two of the stories my mom told about him involved Bob and Birdie (the grayish horses) and Dick and Beauty (the dark ones). They were brief stories my mom told, only a sentence or two, but to me they spoke volumes.

One was about the time when some kind of equine "sleeping sickness" was sweeping the area. My dad was terrified that the workhorses would come down with it, but it was the Depression, and he and Mom couldn't afford to vaccinate them. He sweated it out. They didn't catch it.

The other story, equally brief, was about Dad finally, reluctantly, selling the horses, sometime in the Forties. Mom described how Dad watched Bob and Birdie and Dick and Beauty as they were hauled away down our long lane, and how he cried.

If my dad was still alive today, this is what I would do for Father's Day—I would drive him to Des Moines and take him through *Hay Days: The Horse in Iowa History*, one of the museum exhibits in the Iowa Historical Building. He could refresh his memories of working with horses while sharing those memories with me.

The other thing I would do is give



My dad, Lawrence Bein, posed with Bob and Birdie, two of his four horses.

him a copy of this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, because it's filled with images of rural life in the middle decades of the 20th century.

- Art professor Roy Behrens brings us the paintings of Iowan Robert Tabor, which range from small-town and rural scenes to a historical moment in modern science.

- Theater historian Michael Kramme reignites memories of Neil and Caroline Schaffner, whose characters "Toby & Susie" brought chuckles and good cheer to radio and tent-theater audiences in the dark days of the Thirties and Forties.

- And Leslie Loveless, of the Institute for Rural and Environmental Health, introduces us to the agricultural photography of A. M. "Pete" Wettach in a photo essay about farm children. Readers with memories of mid-century farm life will find plenty to identify with in Wettach's photos.

Unfortunately, Pete Wettach didn't always identify all of the people or places represented in his photos. Perhaps you can help us out. Please contact us if you recognize any of the people in the farm photos.

Speaking of farm children, the Spring 2000 issue of *The Annals of Iowa*, also published here at the State Historical Society, features another article on the subject. In "Helping Ma and Helping Pa: Iowa's Turn-of-the-Century Farm Children," historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg explores the experiences of Iowa's farm

children from about 1870 to 1920. "The resources available to historians reveal a diversity of experience among Iowa's turn-of-the-century farm children," she writes. "As urban middle-class ideals about childhood infiltrated the countryside, farm families expressed ambivalence about the proper balance among their children's work, recreational, and educational activities. In Iowa, however, even reformers tended to agree that farm life, and its attendant labors, built character among those children who experienced it." It's a fascinating, in-depth article and a useful companion to the photo essay in this issue. If you'd like to order a copy of Riney-Kehrberg's article, send \$7 to Publications, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52240 (319-335-3916). Be sure to specify "Spring 2000 *Annals of Iowa*."

And now, a few letters from readers.

Before Y2K

Just wanted to drop a line and let you know how much I enjoyed "Adieu to thee, 19th century" [in the Winter 1999 issue]. As an Information Technology type, it was interesting to read recollections of folks who lived in a simpler time, which I suppose is easy for me to say, as my life was dominated by Y2K issues for the last half of 1999. Nice work!

Nick Pitsch
Manassas, Virginia

Total Strangers

The Winter 1999 *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* looks really good. I spent a lot of time looking at the photos of the Bechtel family. Funny how old photos of total strangers can be fascinating.

Jane Tegeler
St. Paul, Minnesota

Come and converse on our front porch!

Share your thoughts with other readers here on the Front Porch page. Send letters to Ginalie Swaim, editor, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240. By e-mail at: gswaim@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

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In 1920, the State Historical Society of Iowa founded one of the nation's first popular history magazines—*The Palimpsest*. The magazine was renamed *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* in 1996, the year of Iowa's 150th anniversary of statehood.

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Formerly The Palimpsest

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**Children on the Farm:
Through the Lens
of Photographer A. M. Wettach**
Farm children in the mid-20th century
worked, played, and posed for
agricultural photographer "Pete"
Wettach. A sampling of a remarkable
new collection preserved for Iowans.
by Leslie A. Loveless

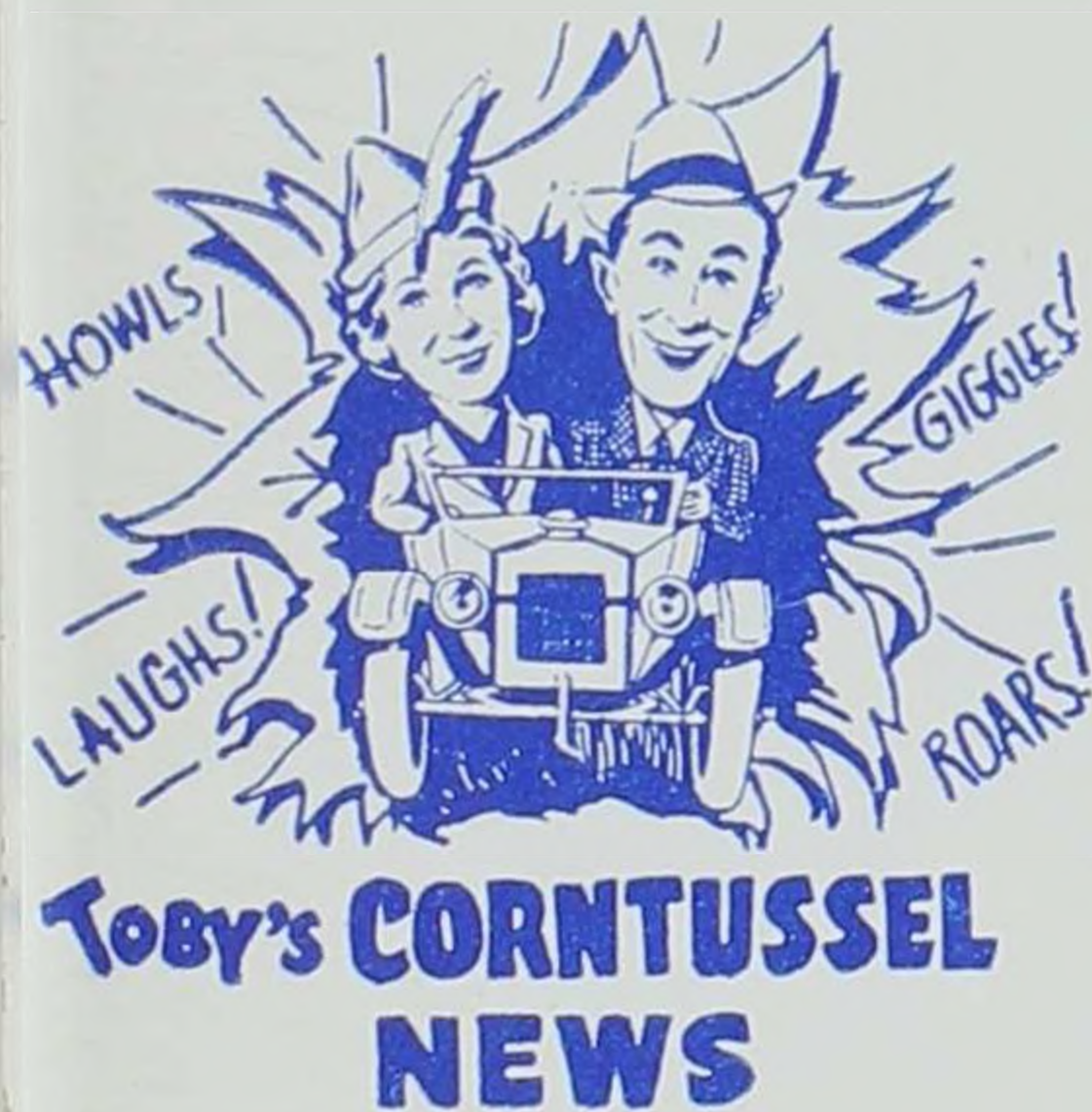
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**Toby's Corntussel News: The Schaffners Take
their Show on the Radio**

"Here comes Toby, here comes Suz"—a look back at a popular
Thirties and Forties radio show.
by Michael Kramme

27



**Four Seasons on an Iowa Farm:
The Paintings of Robert Tabor**

Artist Robert Tabor of Independence, Iowa,
set out "to catch the spirit of the farm."
by Roy R. Behrens

36



On the Cover

Agricultural photographer A. M. "Pete" Wettach had an eye for what made a good picture, and he found one in this happy quartet of farm children. From the 1930s into the 1960s, Wettach set up his camera on midwestern farms, documenting change during these pivotal decades while capturing on film the everyday activities and accomplishments of farm families. The Wettach photographs are now an important collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa. This issue showcases Wettach's images of farm children.





Children on the Farm

Through the Lens
of Photographer A. M. Wettach

■
by Leslie A. Loveless

BURIED TREASURE can be anywhere. ■ That is probably the lesson to be learned from the rediscovery of the photographs of A. M. "Pete" Wettach, a well-known photographer of his day who had been all but forgotten until a few of his pictures resurfaced in an unexpected place. ■ During an office move, staff at the University of Iowa's Institute for Rural and Environmental Health found the remnants of an academic slide show, which included some unusually beautiful pictures of farmers from what appeared to be the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. The images were so striking that the institute staff began asking questions about where the pictures came from. The pho-

Robert Wettach works in a garden in the 1930s. The son of A. M. Wettach and Ruth (Grimes) Wettach, Robert and his family recently donated an enormous collection of photographs taken by his father from the 1930s through the 1960s. The images, now housed at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center), provide a detailed and informative look at the everyday life of midwestern farm families in the mid-20th century. The selection here focuses on children.

UNLESS INDICATED, ALL PHOTOS PAGES 2-23 FROM A. M. WETTACH COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

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UNLESS INDICATED, ALL PHOTOS PAGES 5-21 FROM A. M. WETTACH COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

tos were eventually traced to A. M. "Pete" Wettach of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, a prolific and talented photographer who captured the details of the daily lives of midwestern farmers and their families during the mid-20th century.

Early in his career, Wettach held an administrative job with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) making agricultural loans to farmers in several Iowa counties during the 1930s and '40s. He was an enthusiastic, self-taught shutter-bug, however, and brought his 5x7 Graflex camera along during his visits to farms. He stayed with the FSA, through its conversion to the Farmers Home Administration, until 1949, when he quit his job to take pictures as a freelancer full-time.

"The idea was to take photographs of subjects that I liked and then try to find a buyer," wrote Wettach in a short autobiographical sketch composed a few years before his death in 1976. In the mid-1930s he began selling his pictures to farm magazines such as *Wallaces' Farmer* and *Iowa Homestead*. Wettach took pictures of his neighbors, his family members, his FSA clients, and others, focusing on their earnest resilience through the Depression, World War II, and postwar years. The result is an incomparably rich picture of the everyday lives of farmers in Iowa and other midwestern states emphasizing their small joys and incremental successes, rather than the devastating setbacks that are often part of farm life.

Among Wettach's most captivating images are those of farm children. By the 1930s, child labor laws and changing social attitudes had largely removed children from most workplace settings. But the farm remained, as it

does today, both a work-site and a home, where children grow up and contribute to the success of the family business.

Wettach's pictures of farm children capture them in their everyday environments, going about their work or their playtime as they might regardless of whether a photographer was present. Many of these photos were clearly posed, if only for a moment, but few are unnaturally stiff or have the out-of-context aura of a family portrait.

It is hard to know what Wettach's motives were in taking some of these pictures. His main source of income from his photographs was from what he called "Handy Ideas," pictures of innovative solutions and gadgets developed by farmers. Many of the publications that would buy his gadget photos also ran attractive shots or theme montages of children, and Wettach may have had that market in mind when he took these pictures. He may have also, as he wrote in his autobiography, simply taken photographs of subjects he liked, and then tried to sell what he had on hand.

It is likely that he simply stumbled across many of his child subjects while looking for other material to shoot. Thelma Coon, whose son's picture with his homemade race car appears in the following photo essay, remembers that Wettach frequently visited their farm to take photographs of her husband's gadgets. The picture of Kenneth White on his pony was taken while Wettach shot images of White's father hauling clover. That photo ran in *Wallaces' Farmer* as a part of a photo essay on boys and their ponies, as did a picture of White's father at work. The picture of Marie Swenson Johnson shocking oats was taken while

Wettach was photographing her father at work in the field. In fact, Johnson, who was about eight years old at the time, remembers the day Wettach came to take pictures, but she never knew until recently—nearly 60 years later—that he had photographed her as well. That photo, one of his most beautiful images, may have never been published until now (Wettach often informed his subjects when their pictures were in print).

The life of the Iowa farm child from the mid-1930s to the 1950s, as captured by Wettach's camera, was a blend of work, play, and exploration in a changing home and farm environment. From before the turn of the century through the 1950s and later, farms were modernized with the introduction of utilities, such as telephone, electricity, and running water; the replacement of work animals and some of the manual labor with mechanized farm implements and tractors; and the increase in leisure time and availability of recreational consumer goods, such as radio and, later, television.

Despite the increasing conveniences, most farms remained demanding work environments, where the children's participation in "helping out" was necessary to the farm's success. Subjects interviewed for this article recall an impressive list of regular chores done matter-of-factly, even at a young age. Marie Swenson Johnson does not remember being asked to do chores; she remembers simply pitching in wherever she was needed. Kenneth White describes working alone herding cattle at a relatively young age. Nevertheless, farm work apparently did not interfere with school for any of the individuals interviewed. Only White remembers staying home "once or twice"



Photographer A. M. "Pete" Wettach in his office and darkroom, after 1960.

to help out; the others don't remember ever being asked to skip school.

Although fascinated by farm life, Wettach was not a farmer, nor was he a native Iowan. For a few years he raised turkeys, but his primary occupations were his work with the FSA and his photography. Born in 1901 and raised in New Jersey, he wrote that he was inspired to come to Iowa, after reading about it in high school in *Country Gentleman* magazine. With a degree in animal husbandry from Iowa State College, he taught at Ames High School and in North Hampton before working for the FSA.

Upon his death, Wettach left some tens of thousands of photos and negatives in the care of his son, Robert Wettach. Recently, the Wettach family generously donated a portion of these images to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Nearly 5,000 prints and negatives are now being processed at the Society's Iowa City center. On the following pages, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* offers a small sampling of this extensive collection.

Although the images in this essay portray farm children, the entire A. M. Wettach Collection vividly documents many significant subjects in the history of farming and rural life, including changes in technology, crops and livestock, domestic routines, home decoration, rural architecture, family life, and popular culture. Thanks to the thousands of images that Wettach captured on film, Iowans for generations to come will have a far richer view of farm life during the mid-20th century.

Leslie A. Loveless, MPH, is an associate editor at the Institute for Rural and Environmental Health, based at the University of Iowa's College of Public Health. She lives in Iowa City.





Helping to sow oats, a young boy guides the horses in a slow walk while George Triska, of Henry County, keeps the end-gate seeder filled. Wettach's photographs from the mid-20th century show children involved in farm work during all cycles of field work, from planting through harvest.



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Wettach labeled this photograph "Baling hay on the George Swedenburg farm, Danville, Des Moines Co., Iowa" and added, "The boys think this is a lark." Odd nowadays to think that boys would find this job to be fun, but this automatic baler was their salvation from one of the most hated jobs on the farm: tying bales. Hand-tying was dirty, dusty work. This baler, an International Harvester 50-T, manufactured from 1944 to 1952, tied the bales automatically and delivered them directly onto the hayrack.



This girl is most likely using the mule and the long rope behind it to lift loose hay or bales up into the barn, via a hay fork and a system of pulleys. Young children, both boys and girls, were generally tapped to do this chore. (Date unknown.)

Tractors eventually replaced mules and horses for pulling the hay rope, but children were still often the ones called upon for this job. Here, another youngster watches from behind while the girl at the wheel backs up the tractor to pull the hay rope. (Date unknown.)



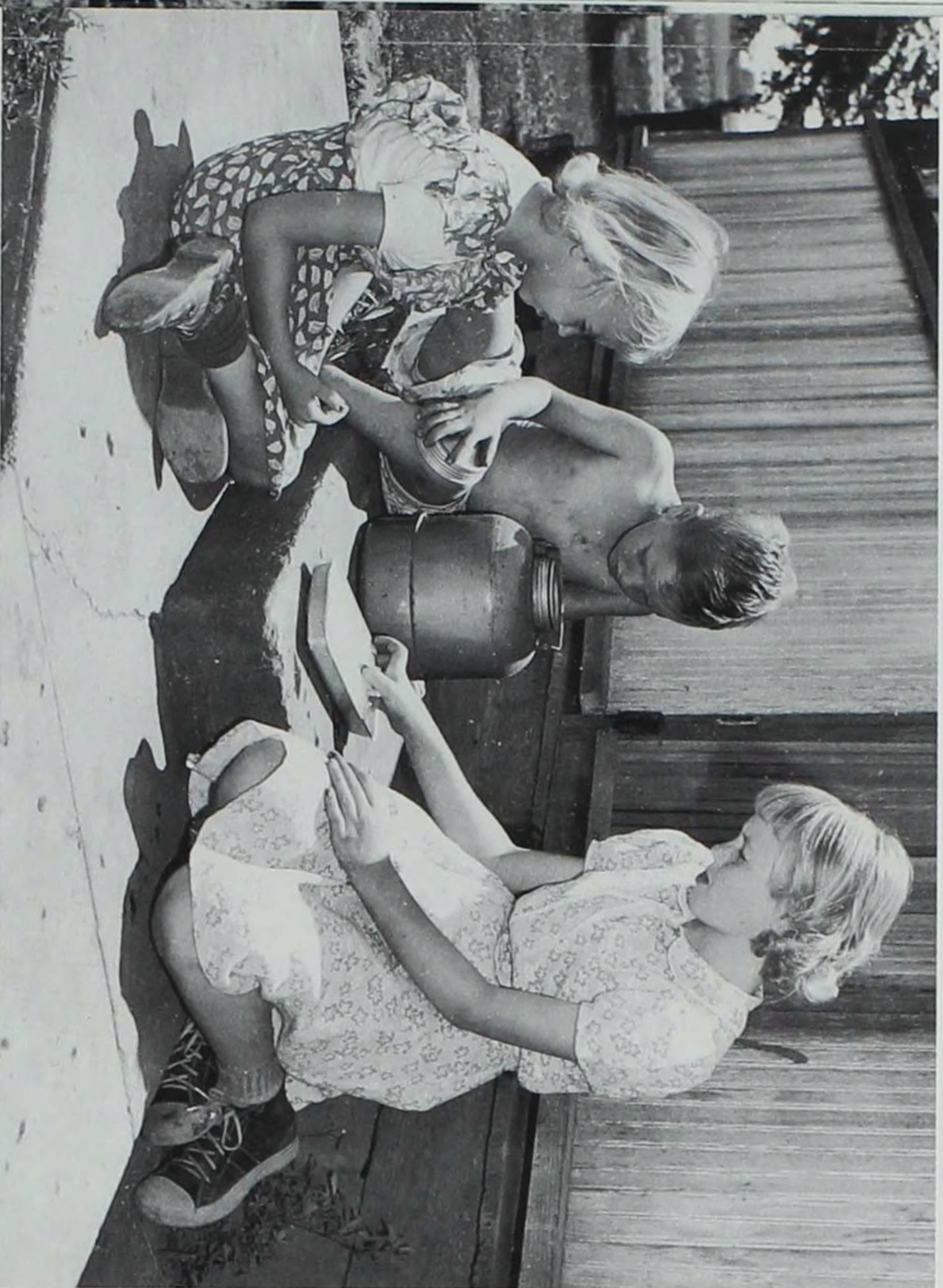


A girl adds ice cubes to a jug of lemonade made for a picnic. Rural electrification brought many modern conveniences to the farm, such as washing machines and refrigeration, which provided the ice these children are using here. Some children from this generation, however, remember the transition to indoor plumbing more vividly than electrification. The arrival of an indoor toilet and bathtub marked a big change in the everyday lives of the whole family.

Wettach captured this wary standoff between hen and dog, as five farm children pose for his camera. Wettach's photos show a variety of animals on midwestern farms—from livestock, to sources of transportation and power, to family pets.







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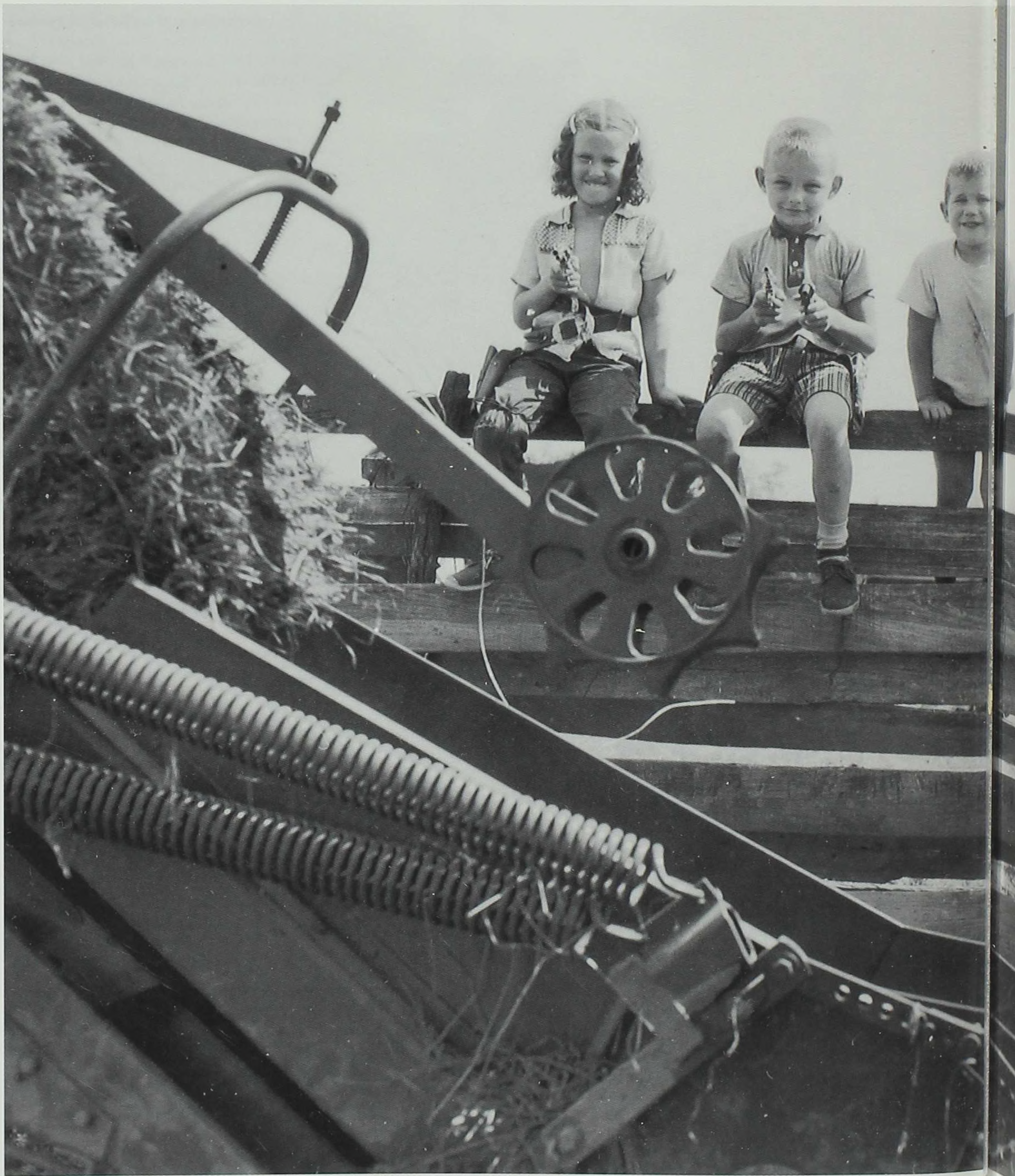




Kenneth White (above) remembers his pony, Dolly, as a regular companion and assistant in his chores, which included herding stock cows each day. "It was all work on the farm," according to White, who recalls a heavy load of chores as a child. He eventually used money he earned from raising capons to buy a bicycle, despite his father's protests that "a kid riding a bicycle is no good for work." Wettach took this photo in 1939 when White was about eleven years old, as the boy was carrying drinking water to a clover hauling operation. The photo appeared in the October 21, 1939, issue of *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead* as part of a montage on boys and their ponies.

In cowgirl hat and curls, Linda Hudach smiles for Wettach's camera, April 1955. This is a classic pose of a mid-1950s farm child, on a toy pedal tractor that today would be a collector's item. John Deere dealerships sold these toys alongside full-sized implements. While younger farm children may have enjoyed playing on miniature tractors like this one, older boys and girls often drove full-sized tractors to help with field work and chores.



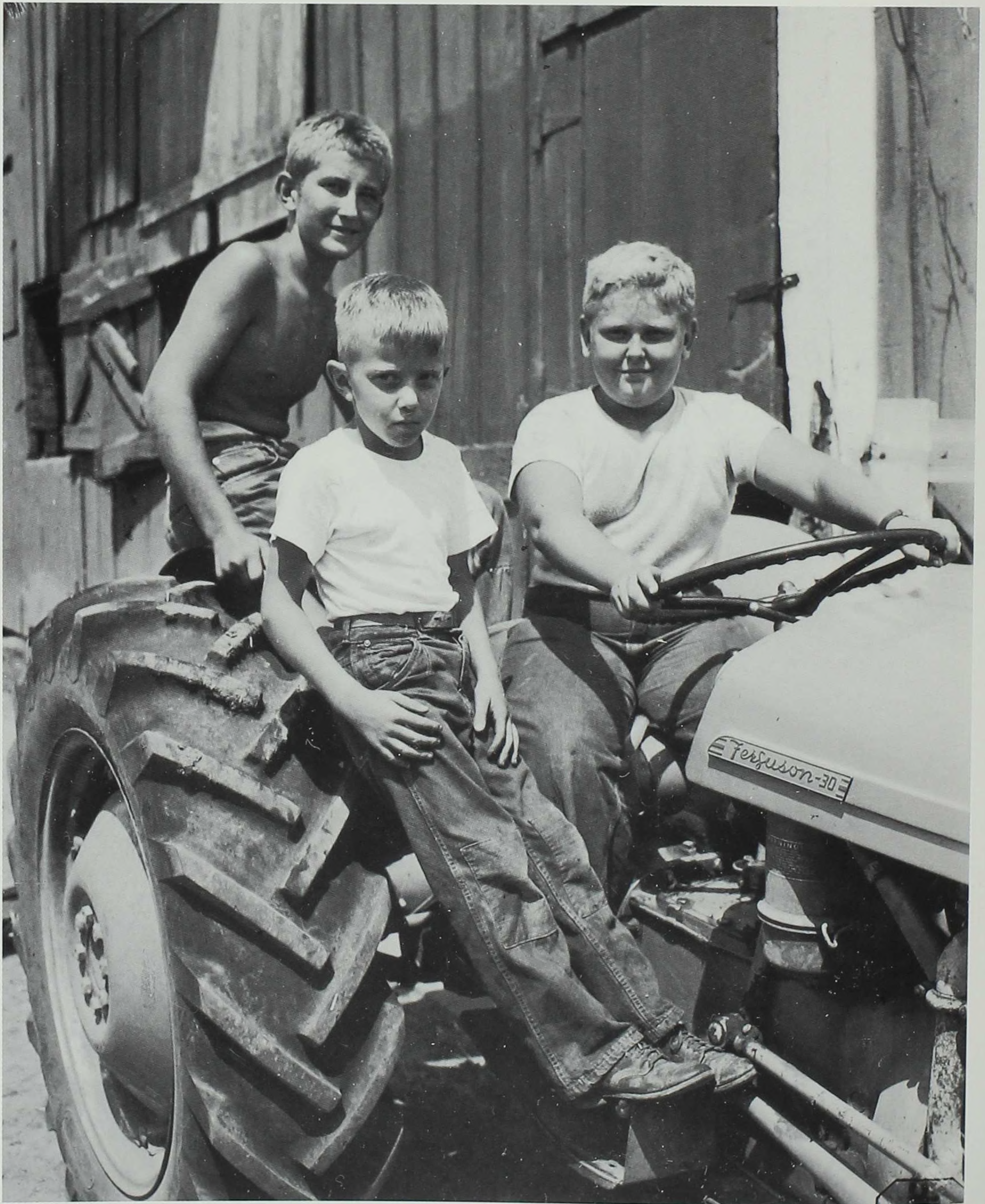




Wettach's eye for composition is especially evident in candid portraits such as this one. His four smiling subjects (two armed with toy pistols) appear at ease amidst a typical rural setting of fences and machinery.



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Although not all of Wettach's photographs are identified (these two are not), his images of farm children nevertheless reveal details about their rural experiences a half-century ago, such as their everyday work clothes. Above, a rare photo of an African-American farm boy. Left: these boys' comfortable poses on this tractor indicate an overall familiarity with farm equipment.

Unaware that she is being photographed, Marie Swenson helps her father shock oats on the family farm eight miles north of Mt. Pleasant in the early 1940s. Interviewed recently, Marie Swenson Johnson remembers helping on the farm "without being asked" and preferred staying outdoors to play and to join in with the farm work. "I always spent all my time outside . . . so [in this picture] I was over there in the field, undoubtedly barefooted, because I always remember walking in oat stubble with my bare feet. Normally that would hurt people's feet, but my feet were tough then. I was out there because Dad was out there."



COURTESY OF MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS, MT. PLEASANT, IOWA



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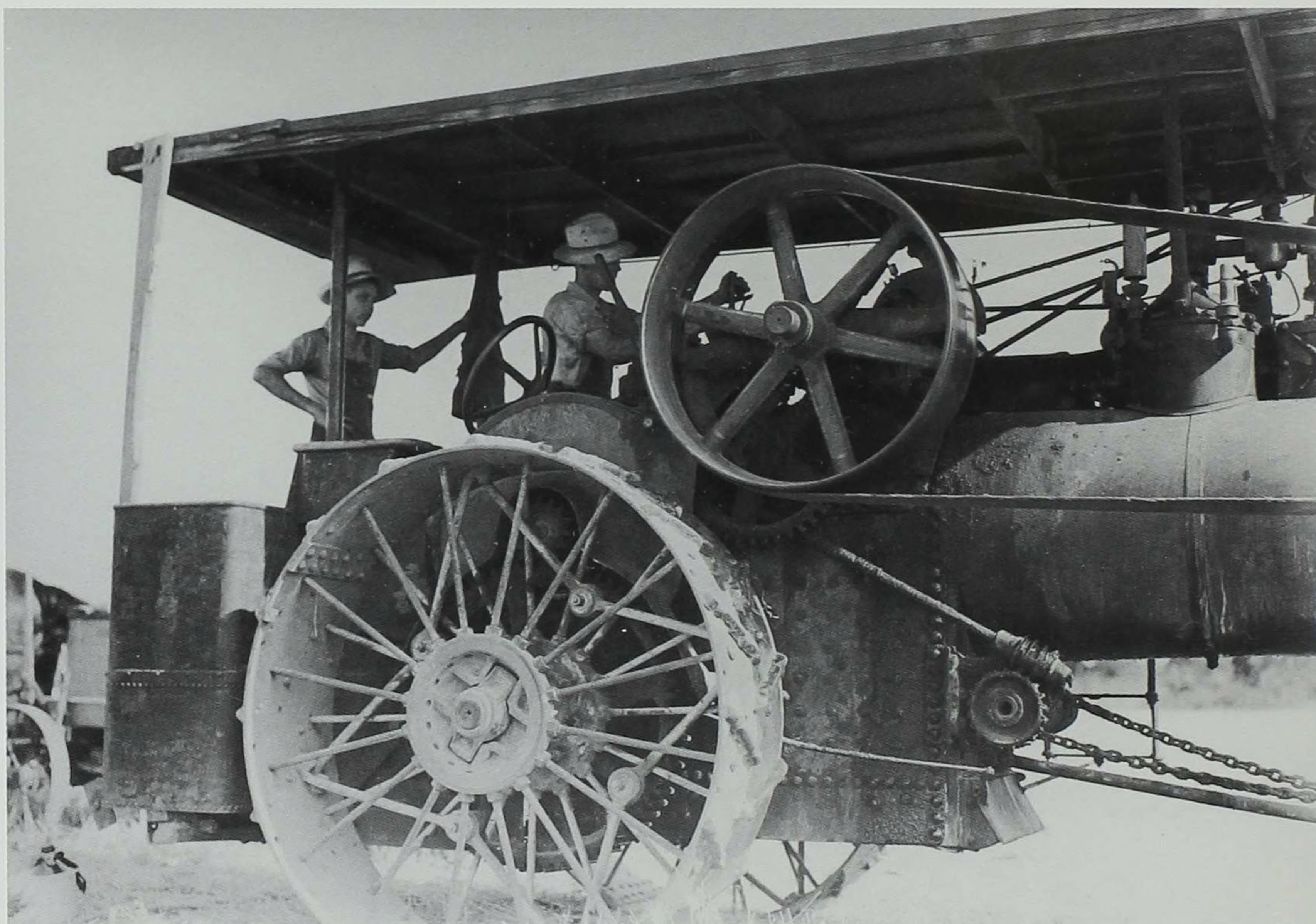
COURTESY OF MIDWEST OAT THRESHERS, MT. PLEASANT, IOWA



Wettach labeled this mid-1950s photo: "Donny Coon, son of Mr. & Mrs. Junior Coon, #2 Morning Sun, Ia. starts his 'racer'—built by his dad." Like many farmers, Alfred ("Junior") Coon enjoyed building gadgets inspired by thrift, creativity, and a need to solve everyday problems. In this case, Coon's young son Donny is the beneficiary of his father's tinkering. Wettach's interest in photographing what he called "handy ideas" made him a frequent visitor to the Coon farm, and he may have sold a number of pictures of Coon's more utilitarian creations. This photo, however, was probably never published.



Wettach wrote in 1956 or 1957: "This 4-day old Mexican burro colt is apt to have some busy days ahead of him with these three youngsters as companions. Albert Nau children, Mt. Pleasant, Henry County, Iowa." According to the youngsters' mother, Mary Nau, the burro was purchased as a pet by their grandfather. On occasion, he hitched the grown burro to a buggy to take the children to school.



A boy stands watch on a Case engine—new in the early 20th century, and perhaps some 40 years old at the time Wettach shot this photo. A board holding up the back of the canopy hints that this machine may have seen better days. Despite the advent of newer machines and combines, many farmers kept these older threshers as long as they would still run. Although newer machines were more efficient and required fewer hands to operate, many farmers had more labor (including farm children) than cash on hand to buy new implements.

The November 1, 1947, issue of *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead* captioned this photograph: "Helper in Harry Bryant's bean field in Henry County, Iowa, is Harry's daughter, Patty." This kind of image may make some farmers cringe, as modern gravity-flow wagons and grain bins have caused the deaths by suffocation of a number of children and youth. Although this picture most likely was intended only as a cheerful image associated with the fall soybean harvest, Wettach did sell photos with safety messages to *Wallaces' Farmer* and possibly other publications, using his son and others to pose in potentially unsafe activities. Ironically, few of these pictures addressed hazards of implements and tractors on family farms—now a major source of injury and death to children and adults—and focused instead on safety with hand tools, wiring, and livestock.

Next page: The final load of wheat shocks is headed for the thresher on a farm near Hawarden, in northwestern Iowa. For a close-up, see page 26.

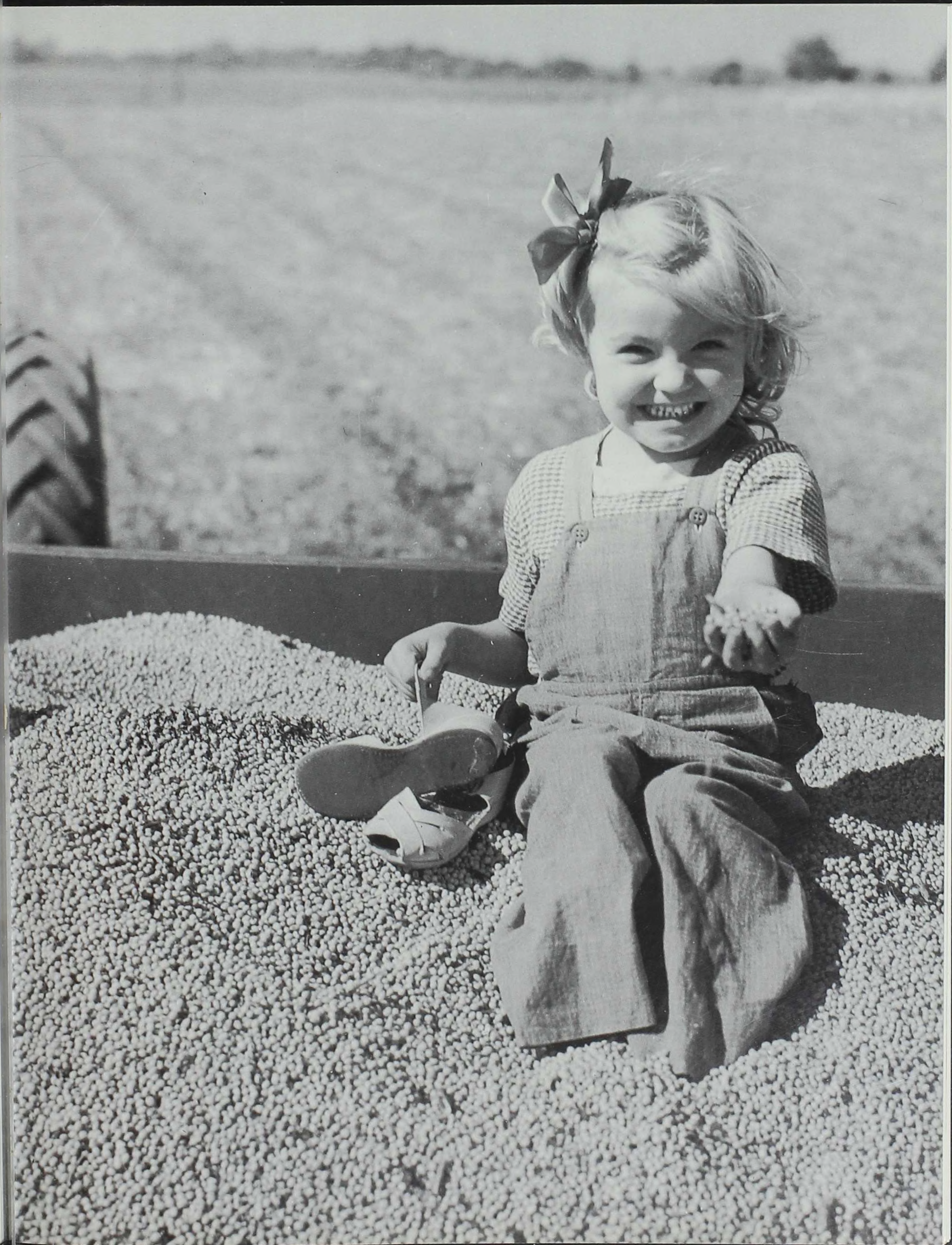








PHOTO ON PAGE 24 & 26: COURTESY OF MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS, MT. PLEASANT, IOWA



Four youngsters who have probably helped to load these wagons hitch a ride to the thresher, where the work may continue until dark. Farm families often combined efforts with “threshing rings,” bringing the heavy equipment—and all family members old enough to work—from farm to farm within a neighborhood, until everyone’s crop was in. This is a detail from the photo on the previous page, taken near Hawarden. Although Wettach operated his freelance photography business from his home in Mt. Pleasant, he also traveled throughout Iowa and in other midwestern states—always with camera close at hand. ❖

NOTE ON SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The names of many of the individuals in the pictures shown here are not yet known to the author or to the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI). Information from readers about these photos, or about A. M. Wettach generally, is welcomed. Please contact the author or the editor of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*.

The author would like to thank Robert Wettach, M.D., of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, for generously sharing his father’s collection, and for many hours of interviews and great stories; Lennis Moore and other staff and volunteers at the Midwest Old Threshers Museum (Mt. Pleasant) for sharing their collection of Wettach photos and for providing invaluable information about farm life and history; Craig Zwerling, director of the University of Iowa’s Institute for Rural and Environmental Health, for his enthusiasm for and encouragement of this project; Kelley Donham, director, and Michael Rosmann, consultant, of Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH), for their insights; and the members of the boards of the Des Moines, Henry, Jefferson, and Lee County Farm Bureaus for helping identify and establish contacts with people photographed by Wettach. In addition to those mentioned above, original sources for this article included interviews with Thelma Coon, Marie Swenson Johnson, Kenneth White, Pat Bryant Doak, and Mary Nau, who were very generous in sharing their memories.

The author also thanks SHSI staff in Special Collections (Iowa City center): Mary Bennett for her enormous effort to bring this collection to the people of Iowa; Matt Schaefer for help with reference questions; and Eric Lana, assisted by

work-study students Jessica Brickey and Sarah Burk, for processing the collection.

Written sources consulted include: *An Iowa Album: A Photographic History, 1860-1920* by Mary Bennett (University of Iowa Press, 1990), for a look at photography prior to Wettach’s era; *Six Generations Here: A Farm Family Remembers* by Marjorie L. McLellan (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997), for a photographic history of a single family; *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* by Mary Neth (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), for insights on the political, social, and economic forces on farm families during this era; *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, edited by Elliott West and Paula Petrick (University Press of Kansas, 1992) and the Library of Congress collection of Farm Security Administration photos, viewable on the Internet at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>, for a comparative look at images of farm children by other photographers.

Readers interested in this subject matter may enjoy Gary Paulsen’s memoir, *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992); Carl Hamilton’s memoir, *In No Time At All* (Iowa State University Press, 1974); or *Tarpleywick: A Century of Iowa Farming*, by Henry C. Taylor (Iowa State University Press, 1970), tracing his own family’s history. Readers who wish to develop a history of a particular family farm may find *American Farms: Exploring Their History* by Douglas Hurt (Krieger Publishing Company, 1996) very helpful.

Toby's Corntussel News

The Schaffners Take their Show on the Radio



by Michael Kramme

*"Here comes Toby, here comes Suz,
with their fun to chase your blues."*

This announcement alerted radio listeners that for the next 15 minutes, Neil and Caroline Schaffner would bring them the latest comical happenings from the fictional village of Bugtussel, Iowa. Thousands of midwesterners weary of the Great Depression and World War II tuned in to *Toby's Corntussel News* for a daily dose of humor.

The show's stars, Neil and Caroline Schaffner, were already familiar to midwestern audiences through their traveling theatrical company, which had been touring Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri since 1925. Their company was similar to hundreds of traveling entertainment enterprises in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Typically, a company of actors and musicians arrived in a community, performed a mix of dramas, comedies, and specialty acts for several days, and then moved on to the next town. In the early years, the companies performed in opera houses, theaters, and town halls for most of the year. During summers, when buildings were too warm for the audience's comfort, the companies moved their shows into tents. As the popularity of motion pictures increased, fewer opera houses remained available to the traveling companies, and many of the companies became summer-only operations. By the early 1930s, as

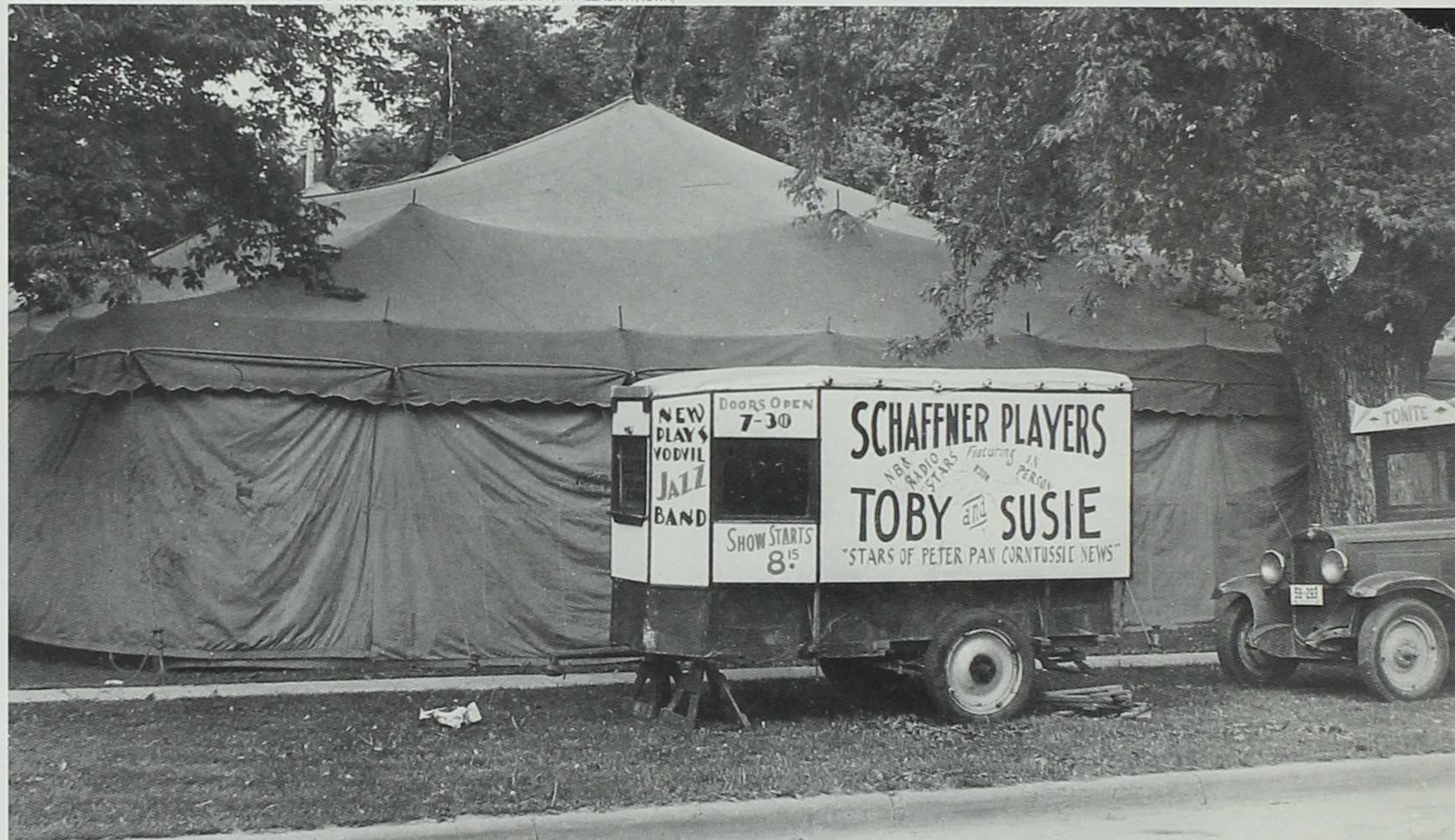
hard times set in, traveling companies had begun to falter. But not the Schaffners. They were willing to take their show on the radio, as well as on the road.

Adaptability, resourcefulness, and risk-taking had long been hallmarks of Neil Schaffner, who had first fallen in love with the theater as a boy in Fort Dodge, Iowa, at the turn of the century. Progressing from audience, to backstage, to on stage, Schaffner held a variety of jobs in local and traveling productions. In 1924 Schaffner was visiting his hometown of Fort Dodge, when he first saw southern-born Caroline Hannah in the chorus line of a show named "Al Russell and His Sizzling Cuties." She caught his eye, and a few months later, he hired her to join Angell's Comedians; he was the company's manager as well as a performer. They became engaged while on tour and were married in Sac City on July 24, 1925.

Neil and Caroline soon left the Angell show and organized their own company, "The Neil E. Schaffner Players." During the Schaffner Players' first season (1925/26), they performed nine months in the opera houses and, to escape the heat, three months under canvas. Neil wrote many of their plays and played a variety of roles ranging from leading man to a comic character named "Toby." Caroline played the young, beautiful ingenue and occasionally leading lady roles.

The Schaffner Players were appearing in West Burlington in September 1935, when Johnny Palmer,

ALL IMAGES IN THIS ARTICLE COURTESY OF THE THEATRE MUSEUM OF REPertoire AMERICANA (MT. PLEASANT, IOWA)



During nine months of the year, the Schaffners, like many touring performers, set up their stage and scenery, bleachers and chairs under huge canvas tents. As their radio show flourished, they capitalized on their "Toby and Susie" fame to draw even larger audiences. Here, the Schaffners set up their show in Lewiston, Missouri, in the 1940s.

business manager for 250-watt WCAZ in Carthage, Illinois, arrived to sell advertising. Palmer and Neil visited at length about the radio business, now in its second decade. Eventually they agreed on a proposition. The Schaffners would do a 15-minute comedy radio show, five days a week, without pay. In exchange, the station would give the Schaffners some air time each day to promote their traveling company.

After trying out a variety of material for the new radio program, the Schaffners remembered a successful routine they had used as a specialty act on the road. The routine was set in a small-town newspaper office. Toby (played by Neil) was the editor. He was in love with Susie (played by Caroline), the paper's secretary, proofreader, and society columnist. Events in the newspaper office would become plots for the radio show. Caroline remembered a sign she had seen in Texas for the town of "Bugtussel," which sounded like a good name for the show's fictitious setting. They named the newspaper *The Cockeyed Nooz*; later, they changed it to *The Bugtussel Nooz* (and then *News*).

It was a small start, broadcasting on WCAZ to central and western Illinois, but that autumn of 1935 saw Neil and Caroline Schaffner join the ranks of such

comedy and variety radio performers as Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Burns & Allen, and, of course, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, veterans of *Amos & Andy* since 1929.

The Schaffners first realized the impact of their new radio show when they arrived at the Columbia Theater in Fort Madison, Iowa, where they had been hired to do a 15-minute vaudeville routine between movies. As they approached the theater, they saw a large sign on the marquee announcing: "IN PERSON, TOBY & SUSIE, STARS OF TOBY'S BUGTUSSEL NEWS." Neil Schaffner's gamble had paid off. The publicity from the radio show added to their visibility and boosted ticket sales and bookings for their traveling shows.

In May 1936, the Schaffners suspended the radio program—the tent show season was approaching, and that would always remain their first love—but they used the tag line "Toby & Susie Direct from Radio" in their advertising for their traveling company. The notoriety helped business—attendance for the 1936 tent season jumped by 50 percent. Even more changes were in store. The popularity of the "Susie" character changed the structure of the Schaffner company. Caroline gave up ingenue rolls and played the comic

"Susie" for most of the plays. The traveling company was now more often known as the "Toby and Susie Show" than as the "Neil E. Schaffner Players."

Pleased with their exposure on radio, and its effect on ticket sales, the Schaffners decided to try for work on a larger station. In Chicago, they auditioned for the Wade Advertising Agency. (At that time, many radio programs were still supplied by sponsors, who relied on advertising firms to produce the programs and used the air time to sell their products.) Walter Wade offered the Schaffners a three-minute spot on the weekly radio show *National Barn Dance*, starting in November 1936. *Barn Dance* played before live audiences on Saturday nights and was broadcast over the NBC network of 550 stations. Toby and Susie shared the microphone with headliners Joe Kelly, Lula Belle & Scotty, The Maple City Four, and other regulars. Toby was even given license to poke fun at the show's sponsor, Alka-Seltzer. One evening, Joe Kelly and Toby added these lines to the live commercial:

KELLY: Do you take Alka-Seltzer?

TOBY: I certainly do. I follow the directions.

KELLY: What do you mean?

TOBY: I keep the bottle tightly closed.

The Schaffners were soon gaining notice in the radio world. As a reviewer for NBC News Services commented, "Uncle Ezra's Rosedale, famous home of the mythical five-watter, Radio Station E-Z-R-A, has a rival on the Alka-Seltzer National Barn Dance broadcasts now that Tobias Tolliver and Susie Sharp are putting Bugtussel, Iowa on the map with their "Cockeyed News" now a regular feature of the Saturday night program." The reviewer continued: "Tobias and Susie, who in private life are Mr. and Mrs. Neil Schaffner, made their rollicking comedy popular . . . last winter, during a lull in their tent show business. . . . Their radio comedy features the publisher of a small town tabloid and his gossip minded girl-friend."

After nine months on *National Barn Dance*, the Schaffners chose to return to the tent for the summer of 1937, eager to perform again for audiences face-to-face. But they recognized that they had also become radio personalities. To maintain their presence on the radio, they appeared on *Barn Dance* once a month through the summer or had letters from "Toby and Susie" read on the air during the program. And with an agreement from the show's sponsor, they now

Billed here as "radio's comedy sensation," the Schaffners first broadcast on WCAZ. According to a script description, the "Toby" character was "a country boy, blustering, headstrong, lovable and a keen wit." Susie was "a level headed small town girl [who is] very much in love with Toby for the qualities she alone knows he possesses."





At the center microphone, Caroline and Neil Schaffner perform as "Toby and Susie" in the WMT studio in Cedar Rapids. Opposite: To gauge the show's popularity, a few issues of the fictional *Corntussel News* were printed and offered free to fans.

advertised themselves as "Direct from the Alka-Seltzer Barn Dance."

The next winter season, when the Schaffners lost their *Barn Dance* spot to a New York comedian, they turned to other stations, first to WMT in Cedar Rapids, and then to WOW in Omaha, where they successfully auditioned in early 1938 for the Peterson Baking Company, bakers of Peter Pan Bread. Their new show's format would be much the same as their previous 15-minute program. However, the sponsor insisted on one change. Because bakers would not want their products associated with bugs, *Toby's Bugtussel News* became *Toby's Corntussel News*.

The program originated live from the WMT studios from 11:30 to 11:45 a.m., Monday through Friday. The broadcast went out over a network of five stations: WOW in Omaha; in Iowa, WMT (Cedar Rapids) and KMA (Shenandoah); and in Illinois, WHBF (Rock

Island) and WCAZ (Carthage). The Schaffners were again responsible for writing the 15-minute programs and performing them live, five days a week, throughout the winter season (they suspended the radio show when the summer tent season started up).

The format of *Toby's Corntussel News* remained basically the same over the next few years. The first thing the listeners heard was a jingle composed and played by WMT's Frank Voelker, billed as "radio's blind organist":

*Here comes Toby, here comes Suz
With their fun to chase your blues.
Buy the freshest bread you can
Complete your meals with Peter Pan.*

Next, announcer Bennie Alter warmed up the listening audience with: "It's all in fun. Just to brighten

Toby's CORNTUSSEL NEWS

PUBLISHED WEEKLY NOW AND THEN

IF YOU SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEWS IT WILL SERVE YOU RIGHT

VOL. ONCET

CORNTUSSEL, U. S. A.

NUM. TWICET

TOBY SEZ

A government expert visited Corn Tussel last week and made a talk on fertilizers. He says he has perfected a new fertilizer that he has condensed so enough for one acre can be carried in your vest pocket. His talk was very good but the Editor wants to add that the crop can probably be carried in the other vest pocket.

TOBY'S EDITOREEL

Things is getting much better in Corn Kounty and Corn Tussel. Business is picking up. Extra help is being put on everywhere. We note with pride that the Red Front store has taken in a receiver. Business is so good around the Public Square that one boss was able to marry off his daughter to an employee.

The farmers report improved conditions. Sy Smithers says his new Scared-Crow is working so well that the crows is bringing back the corn they stole last year.

Get Married Young Man.

Then you will know what real happiness is. Of course it will be too late but you will know.

Before a man marries he is a dude. After marriage he is a subduer. Before marriage he seldom has a button on his shirt. After marriage he seldom has a shirt. Before marriage he says loud and lonk, "I would n't marry the best woman in the world." After marriage he finds out he was a true profit. A single man always says, "I will be boss in my home or know the reason why." After marriage he knows the reason. Most husbands, however, do have the last word. When their wife gets through talking they say "alright." Yet, seriously, this Editor dedicates these few words to that happy institution "Marriage."

MARRIAGE that happy relationship that is just like a pair of shears. One part is no good without the other. Joined together so they can't be separated each part moves in an opposite direction and play the dickens with any one that comes between them.

All things change—even love. In the old days a swain would dress himself up in his Sunday-go-to-meetin' full peg top and get himself a nice bouquet of flowers. Then in a dignified manner as befitted the occasion he would go to the home of his lady fair. Upon reaching the porch he would clang sharply three times upon the old knocker, then for several minutes would wiggle from foot to foot. His courage again coming up he would clang once more upon the knocker. Finally the door would open and the young lady with an astonished tone would say, "Oh! is that you?" just as if she hadn't been sittin' upstairs lookin' out the window for the last half hour. Then she would say "Want to come in?" He would mumble, "That's what I come for." She would then escort him into the parlor. That parlor with its horse hair sofa and the boards nailed across the bottom where the springs had begun to come out. There also stood that chair in the corner, the one with the weak leg. In

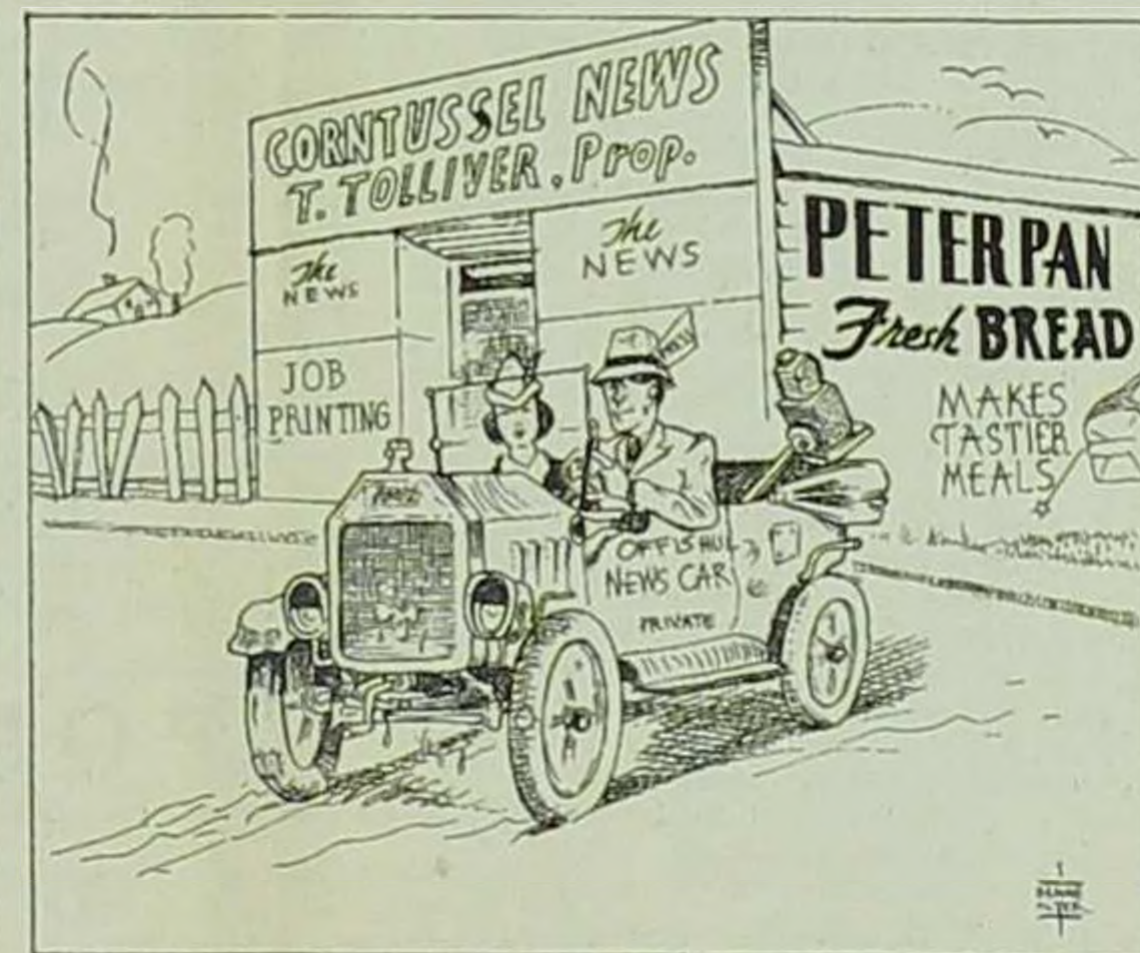
Local Autonear Improves After Bein' Hit By Truck

Singin' Practice Held Last Night

(Lem Coldchissel's used car ad got mixed up in this some way) A practicin' for Community Singin' Operetta was held last night on my used car lat by several local ladies, all good bargains. Sally Annie Waddles was lovely in floured georgette, well upholstered with mileage in large figures. Vera DeVere sang beautifully and deserves her popularity because of one extra good clutch and startling pick up. Miz Asterblit Morgan made a striking appearance as an old model but completely repainted, only minus one bumper. Her song was "I'm Yours, All Yours with 24 months to pay." (You can unscramble this for yourself?)

the center of the parlor was that old fashioned heating coal base burner. There was not use turning out the lights. The young lady would sit in the rocking chair on one side of the room and the lover would perch on the edge of the horse hair sofa. In the corner an old grandfather clock would seem to say, "Take your time! Take your time!"

But, now days, when a young shiek goes to call on his femme he dresses up in a jelly bean suit and sails down to her house. He kicks in the front door and yells, "Oh, Nellie, are you here?" She comes rushing down the stairs throwing her arms around his neck and drags him into the front room where there is a great big over-stuffed squattee and on the mantel a \$1.98 alarm clock which seems to say "Get going! Get going!"



Windy Bragg who jist came back from a extended trip to the city had the unfortunate to be hit by a loaded truck yesterday. Windy says that the main thing he noticed in the city was that folks got expert in weaving in and out of traffik so he was trying out some of the expert foot work he had picked up while in the city. Some of these steps was a kind of zig-zag and he zigged when he should have zagged once and was knocked down by Clem Spraggins' loaded truck. Clem's defense will probably be that he didn't know it was loaded. Doc Croker announces that Windy was struck in the Junction of the Clavicle and Scapula. Constable, Zeb Proudly, is trying to locate this corner. Full details will be printed in the News.

There Goes Tobe! There Goes Suse! There They Go For the Corntussel News!

ODD FAX

Dug up by T. Tolliver

The best cure for sea-sickness is to sit under a tree for an hour.

Statistics prove that over a period of many years there are the same number of women married as men.

People are funny things. They build cities in crowded districts when it would be much better to build them out in the country where there is lots of room.

It is better to have loved a short man than never to have loved a tall.

Lokal Congressman Promises Big Resultz

Caleb Plunkett, lokal business man who was recently elected to Congress, promises his first turn will be one of big results. He has promised to cut down government expenses in a big way. He says he has discovered that barnacles on the ships cost the United States Navy over \$3,000,000 a year. He is going to introduce a bill demanding that they use cheaper barnacles or fewer of them.

Elmer Switchel Gets Fine Job

We are glad to see Corn Tussel's young men getting ahead. Elmer Switchel, son of Elmer Switchel has a fine new job. He is in business selling coffee and spices to the farms and not taking orders from nobody.

Bill Paxton Arrested

Bill Paxton was arrested today for speeding. He was taking his mother-in-law home from her visit with them.

BIG ROBBERY NEAR TOWN

Sy Smithers's hog pen was visited by thieves last night and two of his best pigs was stole. Something has got to be done about this or none of us will be safe.

We wish to announce that them as saw Clem Spraggins being chased down the street by his wife with a broom in her hand not to think nothin' of it. She was tryin' to brush some lint off'n his coat and if he hadn't tried to get the broom away from her he wouldn't got the black eye he got. (That was the way it was told to us.)

Zeb Proudly has his old model T fixed up for a patrol wagon. It isn't much of a car but will do in a pinch.

Tuck & Stitch Club Met At Home of Lucinda Sniggins

The following notes was chewed up by Susie's pup together with Mr. Pan's ad for breda. This is all we could get out)

The ladies of the Tuck & Stitch Club met at all grocers. Lu Cinde Sniggins was in charge with thin and tender crusts warning a tailored suit with an yeatsy flavor. Her hair dress was the very latest and looked like Honey Cracked Wheat. She sang in a clear voice "Coming Thru the Bavarian Rye."

Skating Season Not Yet Open

Staking is not allowed on the mill pond yet. Sheriff Hodge tested the ice by sending his wife out on it. Mrs. Hodge weighs a little over 200 and broke through easily. Some is hintin' if she would diet a little skating would be earlier in Corn Tussel.

CORRECTION

We are very sorry we made a mistake in yesterday's paper concerning the wedding os Hep-saba Grant and Ezekial Twitt-lefoot. Where we printed the roses was punk we should have printed the noses was pink. We are verry sorry.

EDITORIAL ADVISE

—by T. Tolliver

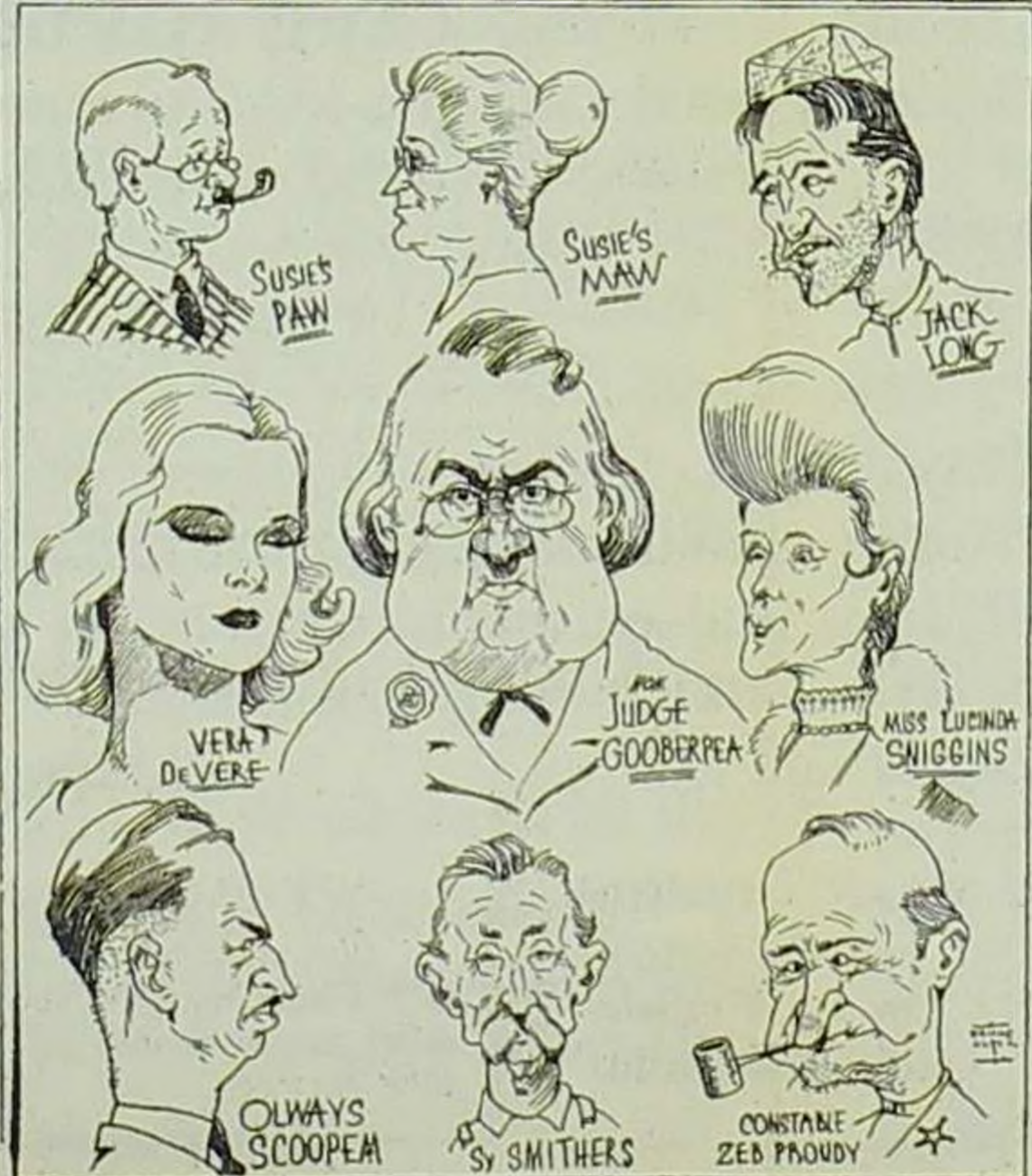
Don't worry if your wife speaks often of her first husband. You have nothing to worry about until she starts talking about her next one.

To keep stamps from sticking together, buy them one at a time.

He can who thinks he can. He is canned who thinks he can't.

Corn Tussel will have a new dentist, Elmer Whipple. We understand he has had wide experience. Before taking dentistry he was a riveter until he got too nervous to work with that. Corn Tussel welcomes the new dentist.

FAMILIAR FACES in CORNTUSSEL!



your daytime hours the foolishness of Toby and Susie sent to you with the best wishes of the Peter Pan Bakers." In case anyone had missed an episode, Alter reviewed the story line of the last few episodes. Just before the day's episode began, a commercial for Peter Pan Bread was broadcast live, always ending with the phrase, "Will you listen?"

The Schaffners would stretch a story line over a dozen episodes. Each plot involved some silly scheme devised by Toby. In one story line, for instance, Toby is trying to please Susie's disapproving mother. To get in her good graces, he promises her some canaries he expects to win in a contest. But all he wins is an offer of one canary for every 24 packages of perfumed laundry bluing he sells. Quickly failing as a salesman, too, Toby instead uses the bluing to dye some sparrows, which he passes off as singing bluebirds.

Just as Toby is about to ask Susie's parents for permission to marry their daughter, a telegram announces the arrival in Bugtussel of Professor Ebenezer Schnozzle, here to examine the unusual birds. During the examination, the professor accidentally puts on Toby's blue sunglasses instead of his own glasses and declares the birds to be genuine and, indeed, quite rare. A victory for Toby! The wedding will go on, or so it seems. Busy with plans, Susie's mother now decides that the bluebirds must sing at the ceremony. And if they do not, she warns Toby, the marriage will not take place.

But now a commercial interrupts the drama for the day, followed by the announcer's teasing wrap-up: "What will Toby do now? Will Susie's mother figure out what really happened? What will Susie think when the beautiful blonde comes into town?"

As the show concluded, listeners heard the theme song again, then the promise that "Toby and Susie will return at this same time tomorrow and it will all be in fun," and finally the reminder that "Toby and Susie, presented by the Peter Pan Bakers, have reached you by a special midwest network." Neil Schaffner signed off each day with: "This is Toby Tolliver saying, 'Keep 'em smiling.'"

Toby and Susie appeared in every episode. Other regulars included Susie's parents and her Aunt Mehitable, the town constable Zeb Proudly, and the printer Shorty Snaggelby. The episodes, built on simple humor and familiar characters, used several running gags. Every time Zeb Proudly came into the office his dog fell asleep and Zeb had to awaken it as he left. Toby always answered the phone by saying "Commence," and ended each phone call with "This end is through." Although the Toby character would

evolve over Neil's career, essentially Toby Tolliver was a bumbling rube whose good heart and good intentions generally won out over more savvy, sophisticated characters. Susie became the foil or "straight man" for Toby. Whenever he had one of his crazy ideas, she was always the voice of reason and common sense, even though she would always go along with him.

More than 330,000 listeners tuned in daily to Toby and Susie, according to Milton Peterson, vice-president of Peter Pan Bakers. He understood the program's appeal: "The character of the program was a simple humorous comedy of the audience sympathy type, very high in emotional appeal," he expounded. "It combines laughter, suspense and pathos, tears or near tears, and keen sympathy for the character in their frustrated aims. They are constantly trying to do something, trying to accomplish something, frequently failing, but always bouncing back with optimism, ready to undertake it anew, making all of the mistakes and meeting all of the problems that are met by simple country folks in the smaller towns."

Toby and Susie's following continued to grow. In 1939, they received some 7,800 Christmas cards. Neil recounted how a shopkeeper had refused to wait on customers until the show was over. In 1941, the Schaffners persuaded the sponsor to run a promotion. They created an actual issue of the *Corntussel News*, printed 10,000 copies, and offered it free to anyone who requested it. In just 15 days, more than 33,000 requests poured in, often with praise for the program and for Peter Pan Bread. Some of the letters attested to the role the show played in listeners' daily routine:

"Your story is twice told nearly every day you're on the air. You tell it to me and then it's my turn when Friend Husband comes from work. Just as often as not his greeting will be, 'What did Toby get into today?'"

—Mrs. Lou Loveland, Oelwein, Iowa

"We want to thank you and Peter Pan Bread for a lot of enjoyment. We always need laughable nonsensical entertainment and of course we all need it very much in times like these."

—Louis Poorman, Shell Rock, Iowa

"Please send me your newspaper. I enjoy your program very much. I just want to see if it is as dumb as you are Toby."

—Mrs. Elmer Kantz, Rock Island, Illinois



TOBY & SUSIE

*WEDDING PICTURE

(Left to right)

Zeb Proud	Constable
Mrs. Sharp	Bride's Mother
Susie	The Bride
Alonzo Sharp	Bride's Father
Toby Tolliver (seated)	The Groom
Shorty Snagelby	Printer
Aunt Mehitable	Susie's Aunt

*Photo taken in Sharp's parlor
Feb. 22, 1946.

COMPLIMENTS OF

WAIT'S
GREEN MOUNTAIN
COUGH SYRUP

and

G-M LINIMENT

SPONSORS OF

"CORNTUSSEL NEWS"

with

TOBY & SUSIE

1:00 p. m.

MONDAY THRU FRIDAY

WMT  **600**
ON YOUR
DIAL

Thousands of fans of *Corntussel News* requested this "wedding photo" of Toby, Susie, and the cast.

"Please send me a free copy of the *Corntussel News*. I am a steady listener for I think you are very funny. I would hate to be Toby. Sincerely, Age 13, 1941 Yours"

—Jimmie Mixer, Beverly, Illinois

"I am one of your listeners and I sure do enjoy your program. It really is worth my time to just stop my work and listen as it [is] just so good that I can't miss a bit of it. It takes one's mind off of war news and bad luck just around the corner."

—Dorothy Brenizer, Shenandoah, Iowa

Some letters contained more personal messages:

"I know my daughter Betty 12 yr. old will be listening too at Iowa City Hospital Inf. Paralysis victim of over a year ago. She never misses your program."

—Mrs. Mary Foley, Marion, Iowa

"Please send me the *Corntussel News*, and if you

care to send one to the Sunny Slope Sanitarium, Ottumwa, Iowa, to Lorraine Junkman it would be something for pastime for all patients on the porch she is on."

—Mrs. Walter Junkman, Manson, Iowa

The Schaffners eventually published three issues of the newspaper, emblazoned with the slogans "Published weakly now and then" and "If you subscribe to the *News* it will serve you right." Like the radio show, the newspaper was filled with invented news stories and advertisements, its humor relying on misinformed spellings and double entendres, as in these want ads:

WANTED: To rent, room by middle-aged man with large bay window.

BON TON CAFE—Eat hear onct' and youl never et anywhere else.

FOR SALE: Dining room table, by young lady with mahogany legs.

NOTISE: Anyone found around my chicken coop at night will be found there the next morning.

WANTED—Laundry and sich. Latest methods used. We do not tear your clothes with machinery. We do it carefully by hand.

FOR SALE—Large bed by old maid that folds up and looks like a piano.

The Schaffners had found a niche among the soap operas and serialized dramas rampant on radio. As a promotional brochure described it, "these two former NBC laugh riots" were a welcome break, "coming at the time of day when the air is choked with sob-sister, three-cornered love affair programs." Buoyed by their success, the Schaffners, with the assistance of the Peterson Baking Company, decided to sell the program to other stations. Depending on their size, stations paid them between \$5 and \$40 as weekly royalties. Stations from coast to coast purchased the series. An industry advertisement in 1940 listed 76 subscribers, including WOR in New York and KFY in Los Angeles. Eventually, 172 stations in 24 states car-

ried the series, as did 25 Canadian stations. (With their sense of humor, Toby and Susie no doubt appreciated the fact that they were reaching towns with names like Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.)

After Pearl Harbor, the various stations' interest in the Schaffners' show dropped away, but Peterson Baking Company continued to sponsor *Toby's Corntussel News* on the regional network until 1943. Then in 1945, the Wade Advertising Agency in Chicago again approached the Schaffners with an offer: 26 weeks on WMT in Cedar Rapids, sponsored by Green Mountain Cough Syrup and G-M Liniment. The Schaffners accepted the offer, and Toby and Susie delighted their radio listeners again. After 13 weeks, the station conducted another test of the show's popularity. This time they offered a free wedding photo of Toby and Susie. Almost overnight, the station received 10,000 requests.

In spite of the show's success, the Wade Agency did not renew the contract but bought rights to *Lum & Abner* instead. Frustrated, Neil and Caroline Schaffner said goodbye to their radio careers. From then on, they focused fully on their traveling theater opera-

As sponsor, Peter Pan Bread advertised the Schaffners' show as "a radio 'sit-down strike' in hundreds of thousands of midwest homes."

"TOBY and SUSIE" ARE TOPS!

Toby's "CORNTUSSEL NEWS"

Hit Radio Show of the Day!

It's a radio "sit-down strike" in hundreds of thousands of midwest homes every morning from 11:00 to 11:15! How do we know? When 33,091 people write in asking for a copy of Toby's "Corntussel News", it's pretty certain they listen to this hilarious program . . . and hear the story of Peter Pan Fresh Bread. Coming at the time of day when the air is choked with sob-sister, three-cornered love affair programs, these two former NBC laugh riots not only astound their listeners, but recently amazed ourselves and five radio stations! After 15 announcements offering copies of their comical newspaper, we had to call a halt! 33,091 requests not only exceeded our fondest expectations, but forced us to a big reprint order. And even though we did not require bread wrappers or labels . . . nearly every one of those letters made some mention of Peter Pan Fresh Bread. Toby and Susie are two of the best bread salesmen you ever had — Tell your customers about them.

If You Have a Radio in YOUR STORE Tune in

OVER THESE STATIONS

WOW OMAHA
KMA SHENANDOAH
WMT CEDAR RAPIDS
WHBF ROCK ISLAND
WCAZ CARTRIDGE, ILL.

11 A.M.

MONDAY THRU FRIDAY

Peter Pan fresh RADIANT BAKED SLICED BREAD

MAKES Peter Pan

WIDEWORLD NEWSPAPER RADIO



tions. The war had not lessened their success on the road, despite tire rationing and limited men available for male roles. Audiences still wanted diversion from daily cares and world calamities, and they still wanted something to laugh about.

Long after most traveling companies and repertoire troupes had taken down their last tents, the Schaffner Players continued to perform for midwestern audiences. They became a living tradition, attracting urban audiences curious to see what some now called "folk theater," and maintaining their rural audiences who held them in loyal affection. For 46 years, in fact, until 1962, their traveling show entertained midwestern audiences eager to watch their antics and dramatics on stage. Besides their longevity, the Schaffners had accomplished something else—for a decade in the midst of their career on the road, Toby and Susie reached new audiences on the airwaves, during the Golden Age of Radio. ♦

Michael Kramme is professor of theater and chair of the Division of Fine Arts at Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Missouri. His earlier theater-history articles for this magazine focused on Hazel Cass and Jesse Cox.

Long after Toby and Susie left the air, the Schaffner Players continued their tent shows, into the 1960s, in fact. Above, Neil and Caroline Schaffner (on porch) perform in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* with other actors in a production during the 1948/49 season.

NOTE ON SOURCES

All materials used for this article are in the collections of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, including *The Fabulous Toby and Me*, written by Neil E. Schaffner with Vance Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968); audio tapes of the broadcasts; and various publicity materials for the program. The cartoon of Toby and Susie on page 27 is from a WTMJ advertisement, dated 1939, for their *Cornhusker News* radio show.

The Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, houses a unique collection of memorabilia from early American popular entertainment. The museum displays stage scenery, costumes, props, photographs, and other items from the touring companies that played in hundreds of opera houses, town halls, and tent theaters from the 1850s through the 1950s. The collections also include items from Chautauqua, showboats, and minstrel shows. In the museum's research library, the collections comprise more than 1,000 play manuscripts (most were written especially for the traveling companies), 5,000 photographs, 2,000 programs, 700 posters, and other advertising items. The museum sponsors an annual seminar in April, at which scholars and troupers give presentations on various aspects of popular entertainment. The museum, located on the grounds of the Midwest Old Threshers Organization in Mt. Pleasant, is open Tuesday through Friday from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. and other times by appointment.

Four Seasons on an Iowa Farm

The Paintings of Robert Tabor

by Roy R. Behrens

The Great Depression began in the United States with a devastating stock market crash on October 24, 1929, the infamous day known as "Black Thursday." Thousands of people lost everything, and in the aftermath, homes and farms were repossessed, banks failed, and as companies cut back or went out of business altogether, millions of Americans became unemployed.

As poverty increased, the homeless resorted to living in shacks (in shantytowns called "Hoovervilles") and were fed in soup lines. Advised that capitalism was self-correcting, President Herbert Hoover intervened slowly and reluctantly, with the result that he lost by a landslide in the 1932 presidential election to Franklin Delano Roose-

velt, the exuberant New York governor, who promised a "new deal" for the American people. "The only thing we have to fear," said FDR at his first inauguration, "is fear itself."

Within the first few months of Roosevelt's administration, he ended the prohibition of alcohol, shifted responsibility for aiding the poor from the states to the federal government, and set the stage for what would become eventually a cluster of regulatory and public works programs, among them the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). He also set up agencies through which jobless artists were hired by the federal government

to work on public art projects, including the Public Works of Art Project, the Treasury Relief Art Project, and later, the Works Progress Administration's federal art, music, theater, and writers' projects.

In 1933, just as some of these programs were being established, in the small midwestern community of Independence, Iowa, Robert Byron Tabor (1882-1972) lost his job as a traveling salesman for a Cedar Rapids paint company. Married with three children, the 51-year-old Tabor had worked in his earlier years in a local drugstore that was owned by his family. He had also dabbled in photography, and later claimed in a newspaper interview in the *Oelwein Daily Register* that he had invented



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This portrait of Robert B. Tabor (c. 1935) was photographed by Dwight Schneider, one of Tabor's friends and a studio photographer in Oelwein, Iowa.

"the first three-dimensional slides," and, prior to World War I, a "system of visual education" for which he had "exclusive rights from big publishing houses and endorsements of state boards of education" but "then the war blew it all up!"

Tabor had never studied art, but he had once visited the Art Institute of Chicago and had occasionally looked at portfolios at the Independence Public Library, where his sister, Neva Tabor, was the

librarian. He may have visited the Art Institute in 1930, the year in which a painting by a fellow Iowan, *American Gothic* by Cedar Rapids artist Grant Wood, was awarded a prestigious bronze medal at that museum and eventually became one of its most popular attractions.

Perhaps it was during that same visit that Tabor purchased a reproduction of another work in the Art Institute's collection, a seascape by Winslow Homer titled

The Herring Net (1885). It was that framed reproduction that was damaged beyond repair when it fell off a nail in the living room wall of Tabor's home in 1933, while he was out job searching. Disturbed by the vacant, conspicuous spot that remained on the wallpaper, Tabor decided that, regardless of his complete lack of artistic training, he should replace the Homer reproduction with a painting of his own, a proposal his family responded to (as Tabor recalled) with "zero enthusiasm."

A few days later, when he ran across some old oil paints and a scrap of canvas, he took up painting for the first time. "That canvas was never hung," he recalled later, "nor were the ones that followed. One by one they all met the same



fate, the trash can." But the distraction of painting was a therapeutic godsend for Tabor, as his family realized, and he remembered that "they would encourage me by telling me how good I was getting."

In December of that year, Tabor's wife Ruth saw a newspaper article announcing the formation of the Public Works of Art Project. A nationwide assistance plan, the PWAP was a six-month program that provided jobs for nearly 4,000 unemployed American artists, who were paid from \$26.50 to \$42.50 per week in the decoration of public buildings and parks. In addition to financial need, applicants had to prove their artistic ability when applying to each state's program director. The PWAP director in Iowa was Grant Wood.

At his wife's urging, Tabor reluctantly applied to the program,

but when he showed Wood his paintings, he was promptly rejected. Nevertheless, their conversation continued, and, as Tabor recounted the story, Wood eventually gave in: "Mr. Tabor, it's against my better judgment," he said, "but I will try you on one easel piece [during an employment period of one month]. If it is not up to standard however, we will be forced to drop you. I simply can't turn anyone down in times like these."

A month later, Tabor delivered a finished painting titled *Vendue*, which depicted the sale of an Iowa farm. Admired as much for its timely subject matter as for its formal qualities, the painting (the original of which has since been lost) not only qualified Tabor to participate in the arts assistance program, it also brought him national recognition.

Entered in a government-

Robert Tabor, *Postman in Snow* (1938, oil on board)

As part of the Works Progress Administration, Tabor was commissioned to paint this mural for the U.S. Post Office in Independence, Iowa, where it still hangs.

sponsored competition with 15,000 other artworks, his painting was one of 600 that were chosen for an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in May 1934. The exhibition was viewed by President and Mrs. Roosevelt, who selected a number of works for display in the White House. Tabor's painting was among those chosen, and, although it was never listed as White House property, it may have remained there until the late 1940s or early 1950s.

As Tabor realized, the provocative theme of the painting

was one of the chief reasons for its popularity. Years later, in the October 1956 issue of *Coronet* magazine, in an article titled "The Vendue Story," he credited Joseph McGrady, a blind physician and farm manager from Independence, with advising him to use a bank's foreclosure on a farm as the subject and with providing the enigmatic French title, a term that alludes to both traitors and sales. "You are going to tell our government," McGrady urged him, as Tabor recalled, "from the President down, the tragic condition of the Midwest. You are going to paint a farm sale. That epitomizes it all. Iowa today is just one big farm sale."

A year after the exhibition, according to Tabor, he received a letter from someone in the Roosevelt administration, telling him that the painting had "played its part in crystallizing government policy during a great national crisis." Even more notable for the aspiring middle-aged artist, his painting was rated "by eastern critics" as among the top 25 pieces in the Corcoran exhibition, by the *New York Times* as one of the top three, and by the director of the Museum of Modern Art (where it was also apparently shown) as "among the finest and most sensitive in the show."

Propelled by such sudden dramatic success, Robert Tabor continued to paint for the remaining four decades of his life. Soon after the completion of *Vendue*, he was commissioned by the government (as part of the Works Progress Administration) to paint a mural for the new U.S. Post Office in Independence, where it still hangs. Titled *Postman in Snow*, it portrays the torturous wintry trek of a local mail carrier named Warren Sackett as he delivers the mail in an Iowa blizzard.

In 1934, inspired perhaps by the vivid detail of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* (1920), a best-selling exposé of small-town midwestern life, and in advance of Grant Wood's illustrations for a new edition of that book (1937), Tabor created his own interpretation of the same subject, in which he recorded the characters at "the bank corner" at the intersection of Main Street and Highway 150 in Independence (looking west, toward the Farmer's State Bank). His painting, also titled *Main Street*, was reproduced by the *New York Times* as an illustration in its Sunday magazine section, and is now on permanent display at the Independence Public Library.

In the years following World War II, Tabor supported himself by working at the Iowa State Liquor Store in Independence. It was not until the early 1950s that he received his only major art commission, aside from his earlier government work. Clark Swan, the owner of a local furniture store, offered Tabor \$1,200 to create a series of paintings about aspects of life on an Iowa farm. Titled *The Four Seasons*, these paintings (which are large when compared to his earlier work) were exhibited for several years in the banquet room of the Hotel Pinicon in Independence. A few years later they were acquired by Lane Insurance Company for its office on Main Street, where they could be easily viewed from the street through the storefront windows for many years. Owned

by Edna Lane Shain of Vinton, Iowa, these four paintings by Tabor (which may be his finest, most genuine works), along with five preparatory watercolor sketches, are on extended loan and can be seen at the Senior Citizens' Center in Independence.

In 1962, nearly 30 years after the earth's gravity had pulled his Winslow Homer down and launched Tabor's artistic career, he offered to commemorate the discoveries of another Iowa-born adventurer, University of Iowa astrophysicist James Van Allen. He met with the celebrated scientist and his three associates, and, working from photographs (as he characteristically did), he tried to reconstruct the "moment of discovery" in 1958 when they found that the earth is surrounded, out-

(Text continues on page 48)

IMAGES ON PAGES 39-47 COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

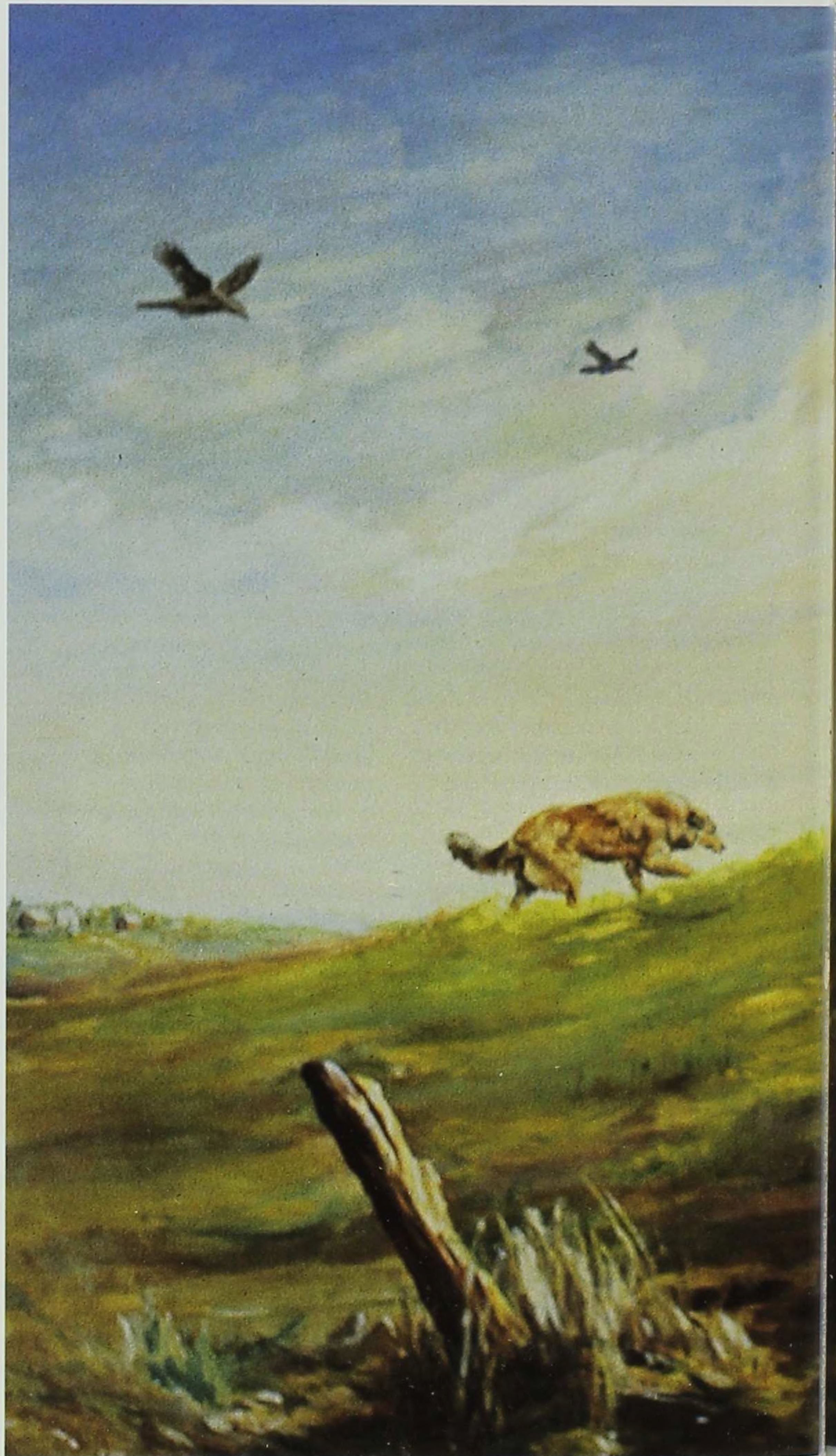


Robert Tabor, *Untitled [study for Spring]* (c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 14 1/2" x 19", collection of Edna Lane Shain)

Long before he took up painting, Tabor had been a photographer, and many of his paintings were composed by recombining features of several photographs, the glass negatives for some of which still exist in the collection of the Buchanan County Historical Society. Before starting on the final oil painting (next page), he prepared small watercolor studies such as this one.

Robert Tabor, *Spring*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 32"x47",
collection of Edna Lane Shain)

Tabor's paintings of the four seasons on an Iowa farm, as he explained in exhibition notes in 1958, "were two years in the painting and I traveled about 1500 to 2000 miles in getting the material. The idea was not merely to catch farm scenes, but more to catch the spirit of the farm in the different seasons of the year." The model for this painting, Tabor remembered, "was an old guy I hired at Galena, Kansas, to take the old corn planter to drive around hour after hour over a little knoll until I caught the feeling."





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Robert Tabor, *Summer*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 32" x 47", collection
of Edna Lane Shain)

While planning this painting, wrote Tabor, "I went to Galena, Kansas, where I found a fellow to model for the figure of the man with the jug, and I got a girl at Kiowa, Kansas, to model [for] the girl. The second man I sketched just as he was coming out of the harvest field in Kansas."



Robert Tabor, *Untitled [study for Summer]*
(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 18" x 23 1/2", collection
of Edna Lane Shain)



Robert Tabor, *Untitled [study for Summer]*
(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 14 1/2" x 19", collection
of Edna Lane Shain)





Robert Tabor, *Summer*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 32" x 47", collection of Edna Lane Shain)

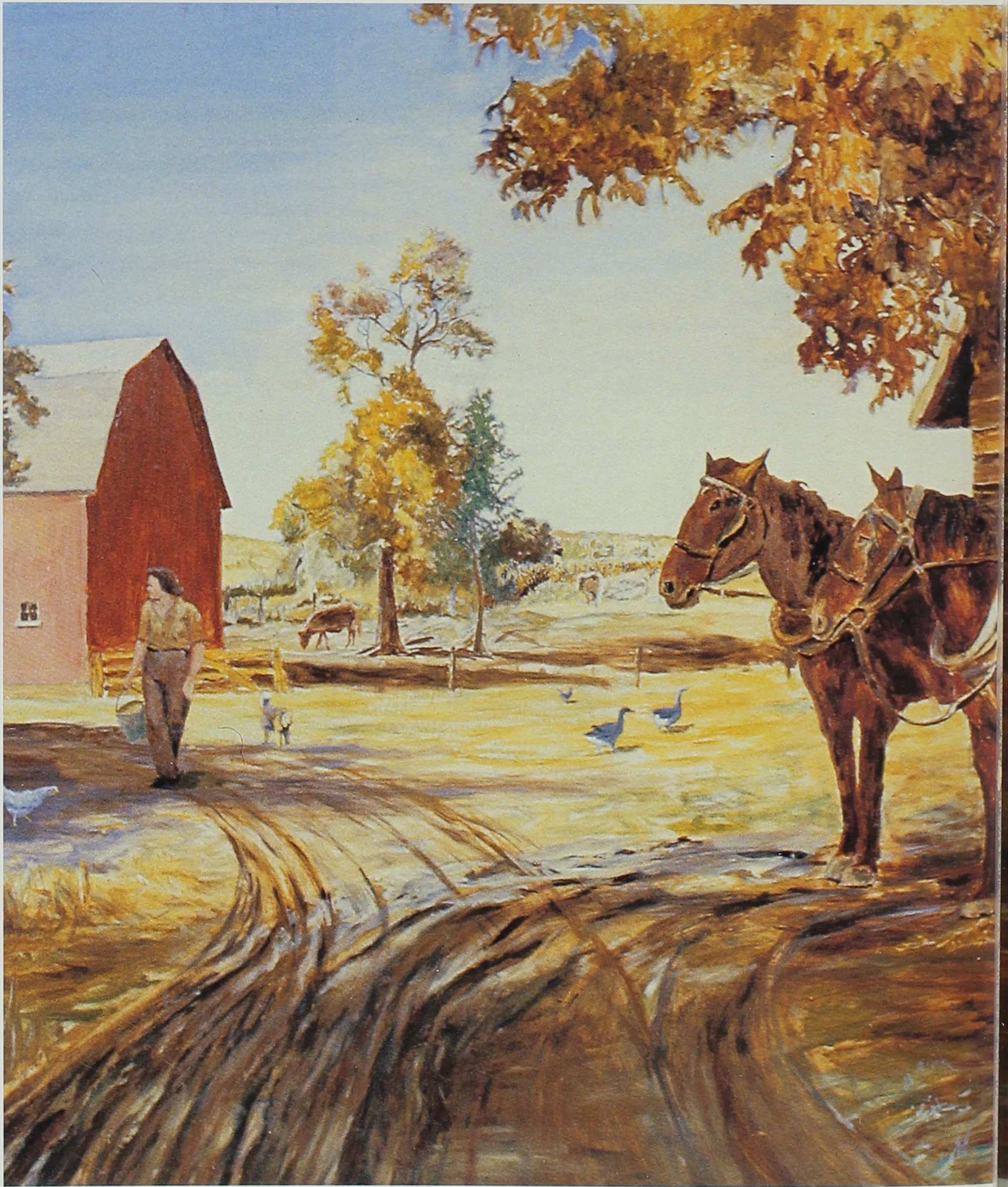
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(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 18"x 23½", collection of Edna Lane Shain)



Robert Tabor, *Untitled [study for Summer]*
(c. 1951-1953, watercolor, 14½"x19", collection of Edna Lane Shain)





Robert Tabor, *Autumn*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 36" x 48",
collection of Edna Lane Shain)

"The idea for this picture," recalled Tabor, "originated on a farm in the western part of the state [of Iowa]—the Roy Swain farm. I stayed there for a couple of weeks in order to absorb the atmosphere. Swain posed with his team as the principle subject of the picture. The other parts of the picture were taken from the Buchanan County scenery."



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Robert Tabor, *Winter*
(c. 1951-1953, oil on board, 32"x47",
collection of Edna Lane Shain)

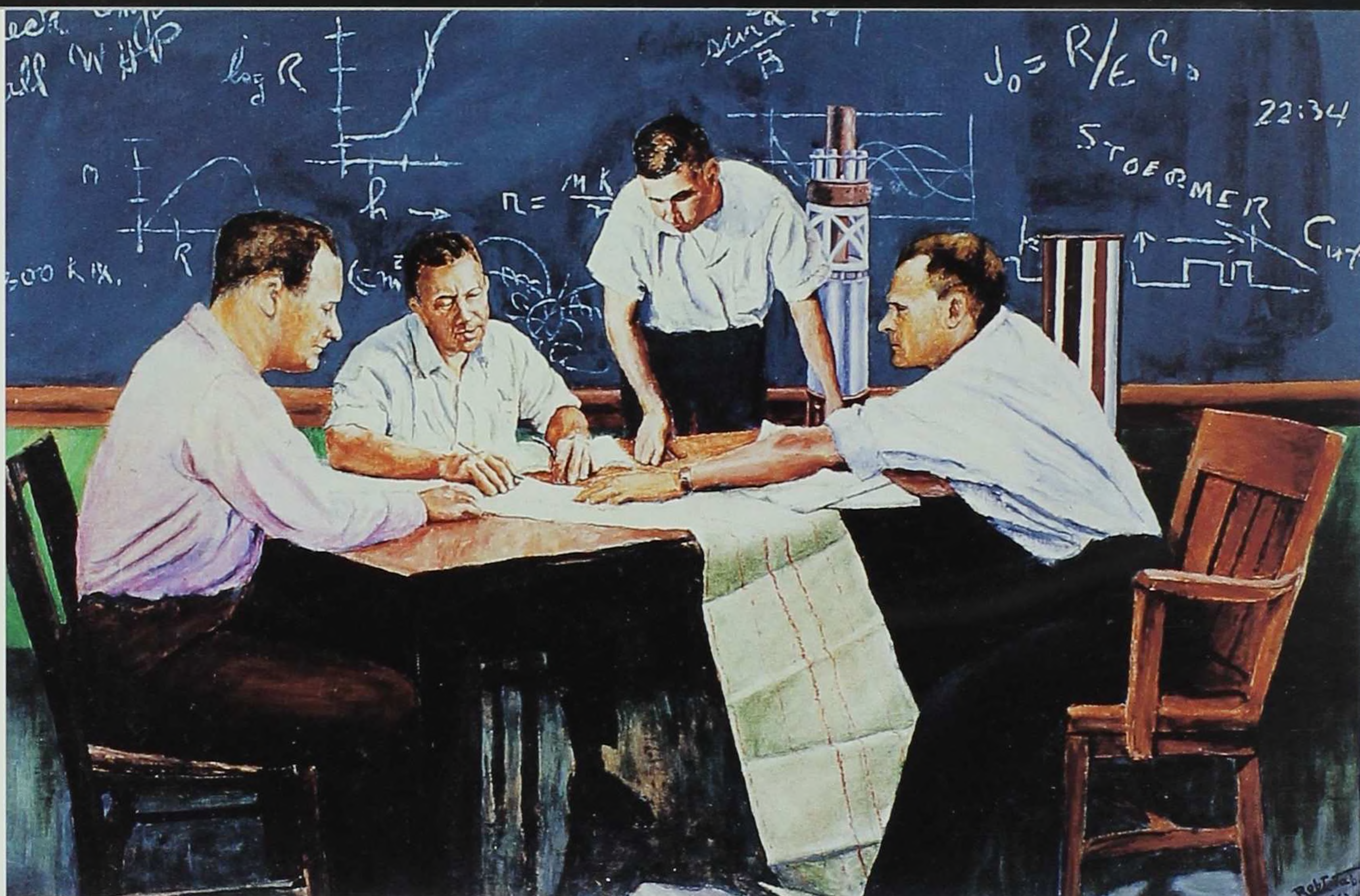
Glen Hamlin, a Tabor relative, posed for the figure in this painting, which "was pieced together from several Iowa barns," Tabor recounted, "but the endeavor on that was trying to catch the cold and bleakness in mid winter just as in the harvest trying to catch the heat and sweat feeling."





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COURTESY JAMES VAN ALLEN

Robert Tabor, *Discovery* (1962, oil on board)

In Tabor's last significant painting, the Iowa-born astrophysicist James A. Van Allen and three of his co-workers (left to right, Carl E. Mcllwain, Van Allen, George H. Ludwig, and Ernest C. Ray) at the University of Iowa are shown at the moment they realized in 1958 that the earth is surrounded by zones of radiation, called Van Allen radiation belts. Tabor's painting now hangs in the Physics Library of Van Allen Hall at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City.

side its atmosphere, by what came to be known as the Van Allen radiation belts. Van Allen remembers that Tabor was "a low-key and very modest individual but had a nice sense of composition in arranging his subjects. He took many photographs [as he planned the painting] but did no actual sketching on the scene."

Ten years later, Tabor died at age 90. Throughout his life, there was never a shortage of local acclaim for his artistic abilities, in Independence and Oelwein, Iowa, and in Olathe and Kiowa, Kansas, where he lived out his final years with his two daughters.

Looking back, it is a sad irony that while *Vendue* was one of

Tabor's earliest efforts, it may also have been his crowning achievement. Swept along on the coattails of the American Regionalists, his best work was never the equal of that of Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, and as the interest in Regionalism faded among art critics and collectors, so did Robert Tabor's dream of national prominence. ♦

Roy R. Behrens is a professor of art (graphic design and design history) at the University of Northern Iowa. He has also written about World War I camouflage artists with Iowa connections for this magazine.

NOTE ON SOURCES

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by or about Tabor are from a lengthy two-part article and interview by L. A. Warren in the *Oelwein [Iowa] Daily Register*: "Robt. Tabor Painting Depicts Van Allen, Associates Discovering Radiation Belt" (Sept. 26, 1962), pp. 1-2; and "'Vendue' Skyrocketed Tabor to National Fame" (Sept. 27, 1962), pp. 1, 6. Tabor's descriptions of his *Four Seasons* paintings (quoted in the illustration captions) are from mimeographed notes he prepared for a display of his drawings and paintings at the Lane Insurance Company in Independence on September 13, 1958. For additional information, see John Reynolds, "Tabor Puts Home Town on Canvas," *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Nov. 29, 1953), pp. 1-2; and Dave Rasdal, "Ramblin'" column, "'30s Artist Finds Audience," *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Feb. 7, 1999), pp. 13A and 24A.

Tabor's original paintings are on public display at the following locations in Independence: *The Four Seasons* (four oil paintings and five watercolor studies) at the Independence Senior Center, 400 5th Avenue NE (319-334-7011); *Main Street* at the Independence Public Library, 210 2nd Street NE (319-334-2470); and *Postman in Snow* at the Independence Post Office, 200 2nd Avenue NE (319-334-2495).

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ILLUSTRATED



One in a Million

Among the millions of items in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa is this miniature locomotive. An unusually early example of model locomotives, and made mostly of metal rather than wood, this model is particularly remarkable because it can run on live steam. Burning wood in the firebox will boil water in the boiler, and create enough steam to power the locomotive.

The model was built by Henry W. Harrison, of Clinton, Iowa, in 1882. Born in 1842, Harrison was a longtime employee of the Chicago & North Western Railway. Starting with the railroad in 1863, he worked in various capacities, from machinist to master mechanic.

Harrison used his skills as a machinist to create this model. Made of nickel-plated brass and wood, the

model is based on a Chicago & North Western locomotive, with a 4-4-0 (or "American style") wheel arrangement. It weighs 49 pounds and measures 41 inches long (from the tip of the cowcatcher to the end of the tender car), and 12½ inches high. It was designed to run on 5-inch gauge track and uses a "Stevenson link" valve gearing.

The steam dome was made from a fragment of a locomotive that blew up in Malta, Illinois, in 1876. The cab is constructed of sections of wood cigar boxes. The State Historical Society's chief curator, Michael O. Smith, speculates that the cab's decoration may have been painted by a railroad coach decorator or painter.

The model was donated to the Society by the maker's grandson, Claude Harrison Jr.

—The Editor

COURTESY OF THE THEATRE MUSEUM OF REPERTOIRE AMERICANA (MT. PLEASANT, IOWA)



Performers Neil and Caroline Schaffner perfected the comic characters of “Toby and Susie” on stage and on the radio. As one listener wrote in, their radio show *Toby’s Corntussel News* was just what was needed in the Thirties and the Forties—“laughable nonsensical entertainment . . . in times like these.”