

“It’s an Ultang Photo”

by Jamie Beranek

For the past 22 years, it has been my great pleasure to volunteer at the State Historical Society of Iowa. I use those words intentionally because not only have I been able to work under Mary Bennett, head of Special Collections at the Iowa City center, but I have also had the opportunity to view and, in many cases, help process the collections of some of Iowa’s best photographers from the past and present. Fred Kent, A. M. “Pete” Wettach, and Joan Liffing-Zug Bourret come to mind especially.

However, the photographer whose work I have come to admire the most is Don Ultang, staff photographer and later pilot-photographer for the *Des Moines Register* from 1940 to 1958. I had first seen his images years ago when I bought *Holding the Moment: Mid-America at Mid-Century*, a collection of his black-and-white work published in 1991. Immediately, I was drawn to the photos. They reminded me of other photographers whose work I admire: Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, Max Yavno, Andreas Feininger, all of whom possessed the technical ability and the artistic sense to capture and communicate the detail, texture, and atmosphere of a scene in a graphically interest-

ing way. For me, Don Ultang did that, too—with the added distinction that his photos covered Iowa and the Midwest.

Years after I had finished *Holding the Moment* and filed the images away in my mind, Ultang donated much of his work to the State Historical Society. This was when I first met him. Much to my pleasure, I was given the opportunity to process part of the donation. As I labeled and classified his photos, the excitement of his work struck me anew.

There was also an unexpected bonus. Along with some 10,000 black-and-white photos and negatives (not surprising for a press photographer at mid-century), there existed a sizable body of his color work. These were primarily taken to illustrate feature and some spot (or breaking) news stories in the *Des Moines Register* on Sundays—the only day the paper ran color—in either the rotogravure section or, later, the paper’s *Picture* magazine.

The transparencies are a variety of medium and 4” x 5” formats. Some color tones had shifted because of age, but otherwise the transparencies are in excellent condition. Most came with only the barest identification as to dates and locations—something I remedied by

extensively researching in various sources and years of bound volumes of the *Register* available at the State Historical Society.

The vibrant color images added an exciting new dimension to Ultang's otherwise black-and-white coverage of Iowa. They were shot at a time when color was new to photojournalism, and editors were still defining when a color photo would have more impact than black-and-white. What is more, to the best of my knowledge, Ultang's color photos have not been published since they, or similar shots from the same assignment, originally ran in the *Register*.

Donald Theodore Ultang was born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, on March 23, 1917. Raised in Cedar Rapids, where his father worked for Quaker Oats, he enrolled at the University of Iowa in 1935. He was to graduate with an economics major in 1939, but an art appreciation course, classes at the journalism school, and a job at the *Daily Iowan* showed him that a newspaper career—as a photographer, not a writer—was what he wanted. “I liked the whole business of doing something and then getting your name and your product in the paper,” he wrote years later.

Ultang entered professional photography during his junior year at Iowa by working as a stringer, covering area news for such dailies as the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, *Davenport Times*, *Omaha World-Herald*, and the *Des Moines Register's* sports pages, for a dollar per photo. His resulting stringbooks—scrapbooks of his published work—were his ticket to the big time. In 1940 he started working as a staff photographer at the *Des Moines Register*. The *Register* was, indeed, big time. “In those days,” Ultang recollected, “. . . we covered the whole state. Our Sunday circulation was 500,000 with our daily about 375,000.”

On March 19, 1941, a year after he started at the paper, Ultang took the step that would define him and his photographic career—he signed up for Civilian Pilot Training, a government-funded program designed to ensure a ready supply of pilots if the nation went to war. Three months before Pearl Harbor, Ultang received his limited commercial license. He spent World War II serving as a navy flight instructor at various bases around the United States, including the naval air station in Ottumwa.

After five years of almost total immersion in flying, Ultang returned to civilian life and his photographer's job at the *Register* in January 1946. Al-

though the newspaper had always owned a plane since 1928—actually a series of planes all named *Good News*—it had donated its latest model, a five-person Spartan, to the war effort and decided not to replace it. Ultang later recounted that it took him eight months to convince the *Register's* executives to reconsider. The result of his efforts was that in late 1946 the paper purchased a two-passenger Globe Swift (which it dubbed *Good News VIII*), and Ultang became a pilot-photographer.

Ultang soon excelled in this role and created a new style of aerials for news and features. For example, whereas standard practice had been to take photos from high altitudes to minimize air turbulence and camera shake, Ultang's approach was the opposite. His background as a navy aviator made him comfortable with low-altitude flight. Flying “low and fast,” as he called it, he could take the photos and still retain full control of the aircraft. “To get the composition the way I wanted it, I would roll the plane on one wing. I would have about two seconds when the plane was going by itself.” His large-format camera and low altitude allowed for dramatic images with fine detail. “I wanted to get your eyes into the picture,” he explained years later.

With this approach to news aerials and his strong sense of composition, design, and light, awards and recognition rolled in. His first photo to appear in *Life*, the photojournalist's nirvana, ran in September 1947. The magazine was to publish many more in the future. Two of his aerials appeared in Edward Steichen's 1949 exhibit, *The Exact Instant*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, presenting, in Steichen's words, some 300 examples of “vivid, meaningful and penetrating reportorial photography of recent decades.” In 1952, he and fellow *Register* photographer John Robinson won the Pulitzer Prize for their photos of a white player on the Oklahoma A&M football team attacking a Drake University halfback, Johnny Bright, who was African American. Ultang minimized the Pulitzer; he was just “in the right place at the right time.” In his mind, the ultimate recognition was the inclusion of his work in the *U.S. Camera 1954* annual along with that of Ansel Adams, Brett Weston, and Eugene Smith.

By 1952, Ultang believed he had “reached [his] photographic peak here at the *Register* and *Tribune*” (its evening counterpart). “A year ago I might not have made the statement, but I know now that I can compete on equal terms with the best in the photo journalist field,” he wrote to *Life* editor Irene Saint.

As other correspondence reveals, he was also

increasingly dissatisfied with his situation at the *Register*. The paper had promoted him to assistant chief photographer, but he saw this as a barrier to exercising his creativity in the field. The *Register* was also cracking down on freelancing by its staff—which threatened Ultang's strong desire to continue contributing to *Life*.

He chafed under what he felt was the resistance of the *Register's* editors to move beyond traditional newspaper photography: "No one here recognizes anything but the mechanical production of the same old picture from stock situations." Ultang believed strongly that photos for breaking news and features could hold their own with the best from all branches of photography. News photos didn't have to be posed, brightly lit, unimaginative "record" shots—"three guys at a convention," as he called it. A photographer aware of lighting and design and sensitive to what was happening in front of the camera—especially the versatile, unobtrusive 35mm camera—could produce work that communicated in a visually arresting way and whose value could survive well past the next edition.

Feeling that the *Register* wasn't moving in this direction, he took a serious look at leaving the paper to work for *Life*—"the ultimate goal of any thinking photo-journalist," as Ultang phrased it—and which had published several of his photos in the past. "My hope at this point is to probe your thinking and find out how I might fare if I chose to leave the *Register* and make myself available for whatever assignments that might come my way," he wrote to Hugh Moffett, assistant managing editor at *Life*, in October 1953.

The competition to work for *Life* was fierce. Despite Ultang's awards and honors, his unquestioned ability, drive, and artistic sense, and his proven record as a working photographer, Moffett's response implied that the magazine would continue to use some of his work, but that he shouldn't "lean exclusively on *Life* as the only outlet for [his] talent at this stage." For this and other reasons, Ultang stayed at the *Register* for another five years.

He remained in charge of the photo department and still took photos on the ground and in the air. Even so, he continued to submit his work to *Life*, sometimes under the pseudonym "Ted Madson" to avoid the *Register's* policy against freelancing. And always, he advocated for his vision that photojournalism could be a creative as well as a reportorial medium: "There is no more fertile field for the person who wants to deal directly with reality and at the same time apply whatever degree of artistry he can bring

to bear on the situation," he wrote in the journalism magazine *The Quill* in September 1954.

Ultang left the *Register* in 1958 at age 41. "After many years of doing a lot of this, I thought I was beginning to run out of steam," he commented years later. He entirely abandoned photography and went to work for an insurance company until his retirement.

Thirty years after leaving the *Register*, however, time and opportunity led Ultang to renew his photographic activities, this time on his own terms. He taught photojournalism at Drake University between 1981 and 1985, and a 70-photograph retrospective show of his work was mounted by Grand View College in Des Moines in 1988. Following that came his book, *Holding the Moment*, in 1991; statewide exhibitions of his photographs; and numerous interviews in newspapers and magazines. Through the 1990s he lived half of each year in New Mexico; he invested in a set of new cameras and lenses with which he produced a large body of color work focused on southwestern landscapes. In his last years, he donated his *Register*-era photos to the State Historical Society of Iowa and his later work to Simpson College in Indianola.

Don Ultang died on September 18, 2008, at age 91.

The images on the following pages date from the years 1939–1952 and are a representative sample of his aerial and ground-level color work from that period. Each is a rich addition to the visual history of Iowa, presented in a format—color—not usually seen from that time. I hope you enjoy this presentation of the work of a great photojournalist and a great artist, two phrases that Ultang believed fervently could be linked together. ❖

Jamie Beranek is a former architectural photographer and has volunteered in Special Collections at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center) since 1988.

Rich in detail and atmosphere, this photo is a splendid time capsule of what could be a Sunday family or church picnic anywhere in mid-century rural America. Note the adults attired in their best clothes, the only bow to informality being the men's removal of their jackets. At the right, a timid child peeks at the photographer. At the far left, a man is already stretched out in a shady spot for a post-picnic nap.

Ultang may have happened upon this scene while on assignment on June 11, 1948. He and reporter George Shane flew to Mount Pleasant, in southeastern Iowa, and then drove 16 miles to the small, wood-frame Lutheran church in New Sweden. That day, over 2,000 people, in a convoy of buses and cars, had descended on the church, which was being dedicated by the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod as a shrine, "the first church in the first Swedish settlement in Iowa."

Treating the dedication as significant news, the *Register* ran the story on the next day's front page. According to Ultang's label, this photo (though not published) was shot near New Sweden in 1948.



ALL PHOTOS, PAGES 146-182: DON ULTANG COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Rich in detail and atmosphere, this photo is a splendid time capsule of what could be a Sunday family or church picnic anywhere in mid-century rural America. Note the adults attired in their best clothes; the only bow to informality being the men's removal of their jackets. At the right, a timid child peeks at the photographer. At the far left, a man is already stretched out in a shady spot for a post-picnic nap.

Uhtang may have happened upon this scene while on assignment on June 11, 1948. He and reporter George Shane flew to Mount Pleasant, in southeastern Iowa, and then drove 16 miles to the small, wood-frame Lutheran church in New Sweden. That day, over 2,000 people, in a convoy of buses and cars, had descended on the church, which was being dedicated by the Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod as a shrine, "the first church in the first Swedish settlement in Iowa."

Treating the dedication as significant news, the Register ran the story on the next day's front page. According to Uhtang's label, this photo (though not published) was shot near New Sweden in 1948.



ALL PHOTOS, PAGES 146-182: DON UHTANG COLLECTION, SHS (IOWA CITY)

On August 8, 1950, two thousand Iowa American Legion members assembled in Sioux City for their annual convention. According to Register reporter Louis Cook Jr., the serious part of the program was devoted to "get tough with Russia" talks: a demand from the Legion's national chaplain for "immediate compulsory military training"; and reports on the Legion's activities in local communities.

After that came the convention's traditional parade. Despite the chaplain's injunction that the public not regard the conventioners as "playboys, funsters and elbow-benders," clearly the Legionnaires—and the spectators—had a good time.

The parade featured traditional floats and marching bands, including an all-girl drum and bugle corps from Yankton, South Dakota, playing music "a little on the hepcat side," according to reporter Cook. Even more in the spirit of fun, there was also a "legionnaire under a green parasol cavorting through the parade in an electric wheelchair [as well as] the customary collection of souped-up Model T's and miniature cannon which went off at unexpected intervals."

Two more of Ullang's photos of the parade appear on the next page.



On August 8, 1950, two thousand Iowa American Legion members assembled in Sioux City for their annual convention. According to *Register* reporter Louis Cook Jr., the serious part of the program was devoted to "get tough with Russia" talks; a demand from the Legion's national chaplain for "immediate compulsory military training"; and reports on the Legion's activities in local communities.

After that came the convention's traditional parade. Despite the chaplain's injunction that the public not regard the conventioners as "playboys, funsters and elbow-benders," clearly the Legionnaires—and the spectators—had a good time.

The parade featured traditional floats and marching bands, including an all-girl drum and bugle corps from Yankton, South Dakota, playing music "a little on the hepcat side," according to reporter Cook. Even more in the spirit of fun, there was also a "legionnaire under a green parasol cavorting through the parade in an electric wheelchair [as well as] the customary collection of souped-up Model T's and miniature cannon which went off at unexpected intervals."

Two more of Ultang's photos of the parade appear on the next page.

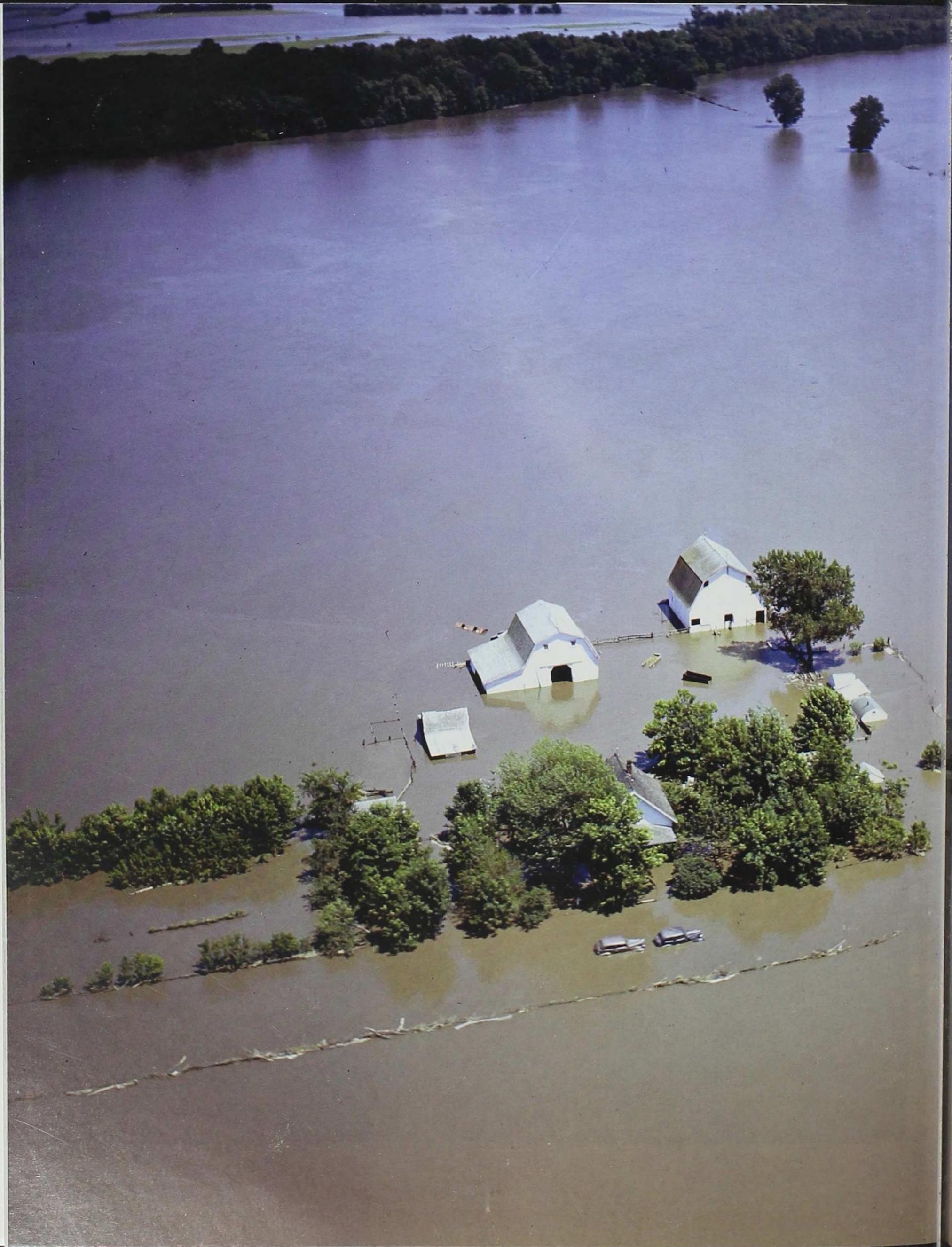


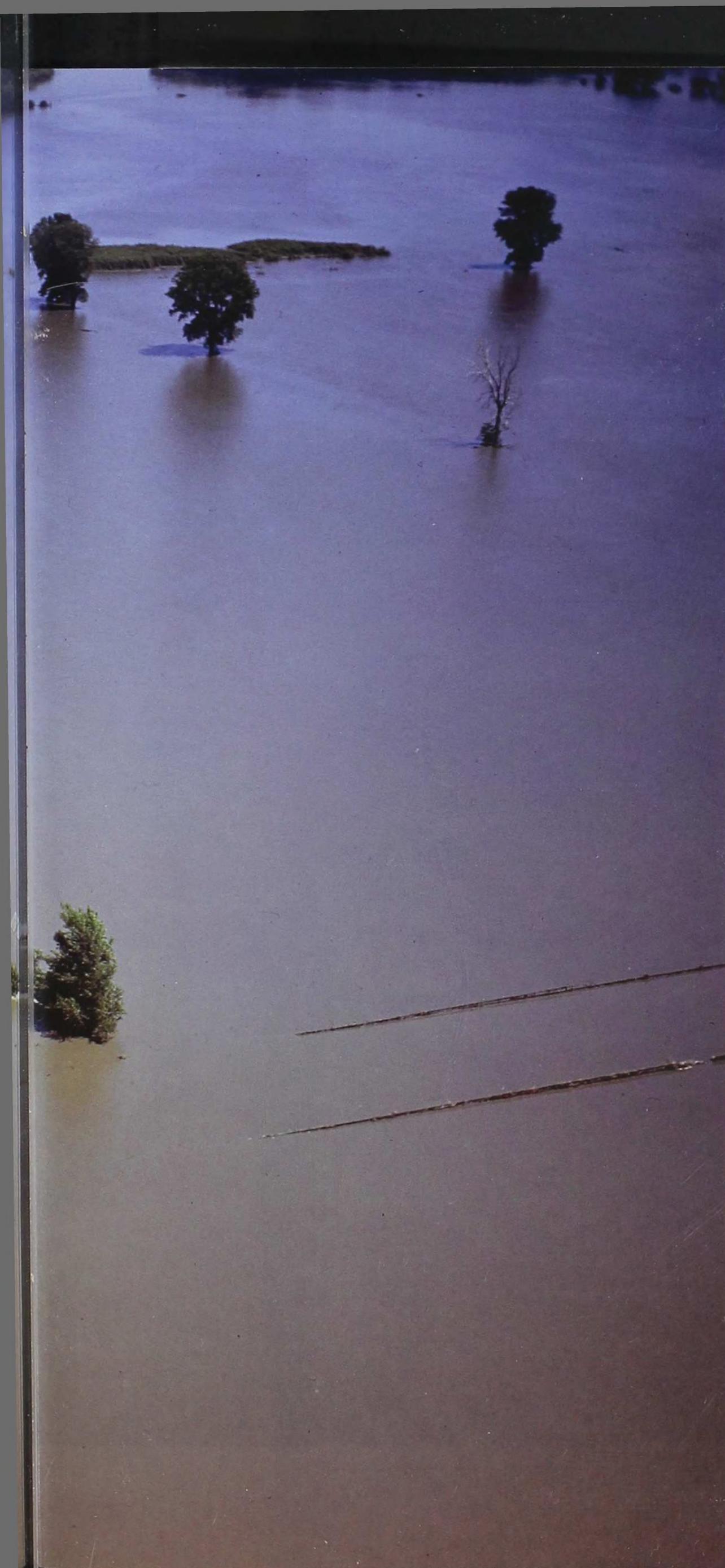




Young spectators—a few less excited than the others—watch as the Iowa American Legion parade proceeds west on Fourth Street in Sioux City, August 8, 1950. Opposite: a woman leans out the window for a better view.







Disasters are tailor-made for aerial photography, and the *Register's* pages from the 1940s and '50s are replete with Ultang's news aerials of floods, tornados, snow storms, fires, explosions, and train wrecks.

Because of the sheer magnitude of their devastation, floods are particularly dramatic visual events. Ultang shot some of his most famous aerials of the Des Moines and Missouri rivers (and, less frequently, the Mississippi) on their spring rampages.

This shot is one of a series of flood photos, all taken on the same day and which Ultang labeled only as "Des Moines River, 1946." Unfortunately, its exact location is unknown.

Disaster aerials were, of course, breaking news intended for immediate publication and the overwhelming majority were in black-and-white. Ultang did take some in color, however, and a few of these were published in the *Register's* Sunday rotogravure section.

As Iowa's flood experiences in 1993 and 2008 have shown vividly, scenes like this are not quaint relics from the past.



Disasters are tailor-made for aerial photography, and the Register's pages from the 1940s and '50s are replete with Utlang's news aerials of floods, tornados, snow storms, fires, explosions, and train wrecks.

Because of the sheer magnitude of their devastation, floods are particularly dramatic visual events. Utlang shot some of his most famous aerials of the Des Moines and Missouri rivers (and, less frequently, the Mississippi) on their spring rampages.

This shot is one of a series of flood photos, all taken on the same day and which Utlang labeled only as "Des Moines River, 1946." Unfortunately, its exact location is unknown.

Disaster aerials were, of course, breaking news intended for immediate publication and the overwhelming majority were in black-and-white. Utlang did take some in color, however, and a few of these were published in the Register's Sunday rotogravure section.

As Iowa's flood experiences in 1993 and 2008 have shown vividly, scenes like this are not quaint relics from the past.



Cornell College freshman James Crider clearly has a happy customer as he styles a fellow student's hair during the 1940-1941 school year. Published in *The American Magazine*, the accompanying story explains that Crider, a Cedar Rapids native, had studied and practiced hair dressing for two years prior to entering Cornell in Mount Vernon.

Crider acknowledged receiving "plenty of ribbing" from the "professional he-men on the campus" about his vocation. His comeback was that styling hair was "much pleasanter and more profitable than stoking a furnace"—a common job for young men working their way through college.

According to Crider, this "casual campus bob" was far easier to create than the more formal "exaggerated pompadour" favored for college dances.

Crider graduated from Cornell in 1945 and later taught in the drama department at the University of Washington in Seattle.





Cornell College freshman James Crider clearly has a happy customer as he styles a fellow student's hair during the 1940–1941 school year. Published in *The American Magazine*, the accompanying story explains that Crider, a Cedar Rapids native, had studied and practiced hair dressing for two years prior to entering Cornell in Mount Vernon.

Crider acknowledged receiving “plenty of ribbing” from the “professional he-men on the campus” about his vocation. His comeback was that styling hair was “much pleasanter and more profitable than stoking a furnace”—a common job for young men working their way through college.

According to Crider, this “casual campus bob” was far easier to create than the more formal “exaggerated pompadour” favored for college dances.

Crider graduated from Cornell in 1945 and later taught in the drama department at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Not surprisingly, Ultang photographed many farmers over the years, from the air or at ground level, as they tended to routine chores or did battle with snow, fire, or flood. Close-ups of farmers, such as this one of Harold "Pete" Palmer, are rare.

Palmer farmed 320 acres near Keota in southeastern Iowa. Taken on October 17, 1939, the photo had news value because a few weeks earlier he had won the corn-yield contest for the six surrounding townships. Palmer beat 157 other farmers in his area with a near-statewide record yield of 157.61 bushels per acre on his ten-acre test plot.

The Keota contest was one of many across Iowa, but the *Register* was focusing on Keota because the highest yields had come from this area in 1938 and equally high numbers were expected again.

What makes this Ultang close-up different from his other photos of farmers is its unposed quality—the off-center composition, the shallow depth of field that throws the machinery and the red corn crib in the background out of focus, and Palmer's obviously genuine smile.







In this striking aerial of downtown Cedar Rapids, May's Island resembles a ship headed down the Cedar River, with City Hall (far left) as the wheelhouse and the Linn County jail (far right) as the "brig," as one nautically minded wag called it. The Linn County Courthouse is in the center of the island. The Quaker Oats complex is the cluster of white buildings in the upper left.

Although this photo was not dated, the shadows and the arrangement of the railroad freight cars around downtown match a higher-altitude, black-and-white view published on Sunday, October 23, 1949.

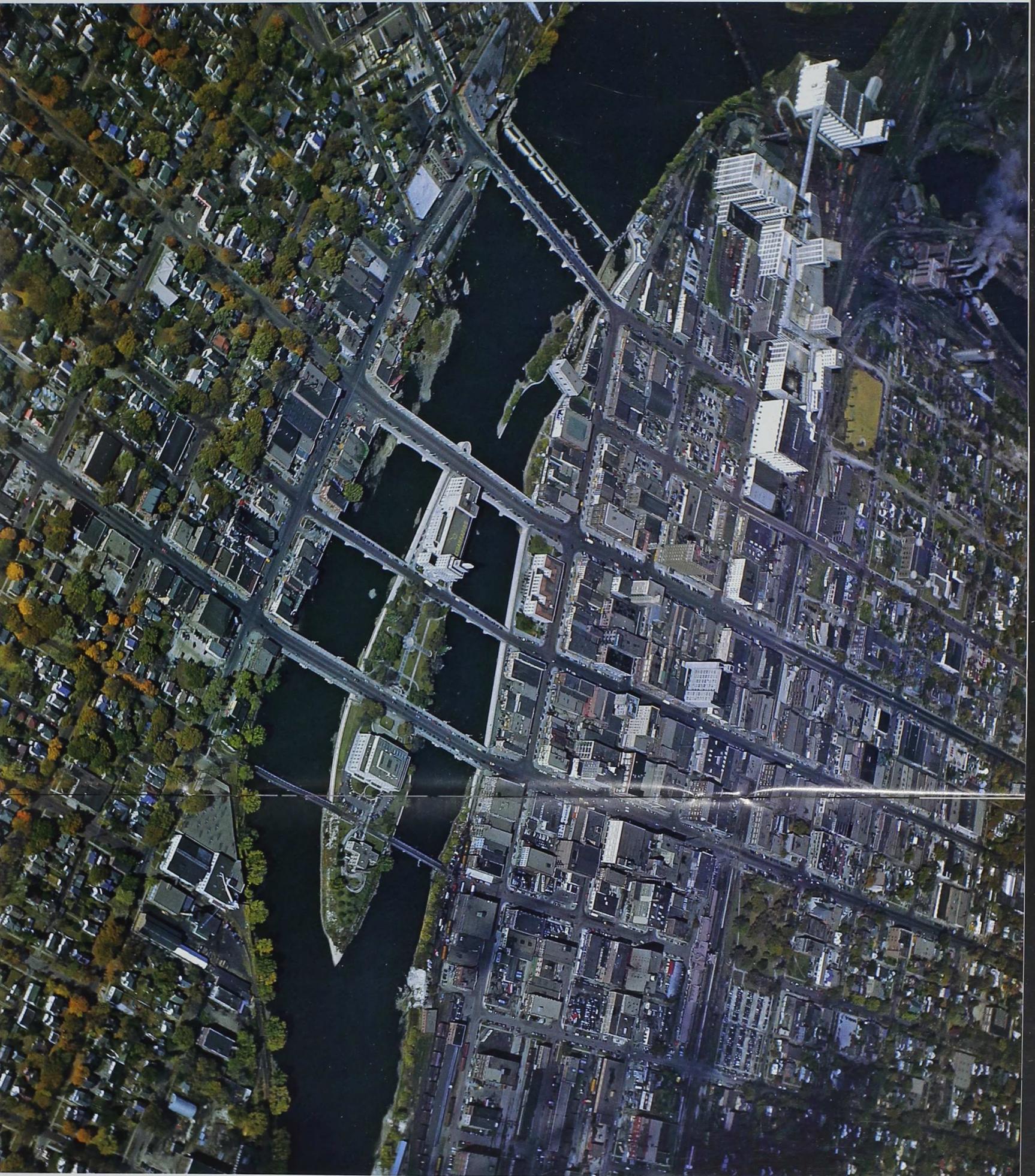
Apart from its particularly steep angle-of-view, this photo is particularly compelling in that it shows downtown Cedar Rapids at its postwar peak. In subsequent decades, transportation changes, the decline in retail, urban renewal, and flooding would radically change the city's skyline and layout.

Cedar Rapids was served by four major railroads and two electric lines at the time of this photo. Four freight houses were located downtown, as well as railroad roundhouses and two major passenger stations. Of the many downtown railroad buildings visible here, only the former headquarters of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway remains today.

Residential areas also changed greatly. The neighborhoods west of the river (lower part of the photo) were particularly hard hit. Construction of Interstate 380 in the late 1970s demolished whole blocks and cut a six-lane swath through others.

What survived—including such unique Cedar Rapids neighborhoods as Time Check and Czech Village—was devastated three decades later by the June 2008 flood. While there is hope that these historic areas can be revitalized, their future remains clouded at this writing.

On this sunny afternoon in 1949, however, the only clouds over vibrant downtown Cedar Rapids are the actual ones casting the shadows that appear in the upper right.



In this striking aerial of downtown Cedar Rapids, May's Island resembles a ship headed down the Cedar River with City Hall (far left) as the wheelhouse and the Linn County jail (far right) as the "brig," as one nautically minded wag called it. The Linn County Courthouse is in the center of the island. The Quaker Oats complex is the cluster of white buildings in the upper left.

Although this photo was not dated, the shadows and the arrangement of the railroad freight cars around downtown match a higher-altitude, black-and-white view published on Sunday, October 23, 1949.

Apart from its particularly steep angle-of-view, this photo is particularly compelling in that it shows downtown Cedar Rapids at its postwar peak. In subsequent decades, transportation changes, the decline in retail, urban renewal, and flooding would radically change the city's skyline and layout.

Cedar Rapids was served by four major railroads and two electric lines at the time of this photo. Four freight houses were located downtown, as well as railroad roundhouses and two major passenger stations. Of the many downtown railroad buildings visible here, only the former headquarters of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway remains today.

Residential areas also changed greatly. The neighborhoods west of the river (lower part of the photo) were particularly hard hit. Construction of Interstate 380 in the late 1970s demolished whole blocks and cut a six-lane swath through others.

What survived—including such unique Cedar Rapids neighborhoods as Time Check and Czech Village—was devastated three decades later by the June 2008 flood. While there is hope that these historic areas can be revitalized, their future remains clouded at this writing.

On this sunny afternoon in 1949, however, the only clouds over vibrant downtown Cedar Rapids are the actual ones casting the shadows that appear in the upper right.



Nineteen fifty-two was the peak year for new cases of polio in the United States. Western Iowa, especially the Sioux City area, was one of the hardest-hit parts of the country. Ulltang put a human, yet hopeful, face on this terrifying and grimly relentless disease by illustrating a story for the November 29, 1952, issue of *Collier's* magazine on the 16-member Joe and Clara Thiel family, who farmed 280 rented acres near Mapleton in western Iowa.

Their story was shocking: between July 22 and August 8, 1952, 11 of the Thiels' 14 children came down with polio—3 on a single day. The unstoppable nature of the epidemic, the sheer number of the children involved, and the rapidity with which they fell ill made a riveting national story.

Of the 11 Thiels who were stricken, 9 recovered. Two sons, however, suffered paralysis; then thought to be permanent—Lawrence lost use of both legs; Bob, the use of his left arm.

Ulltang's photo shows 12 of the Thiel children in their home (Donald was in the army and Lawrence was still in the hospital). It captures the exuberance of this obviously close-knit family and their affection for Dr. Arthur McGill (center) of nearby Danbury, who cared for the family with the limited medical tools then available. Only 20-year-old Bob, with his left arm in a brace (upper right), gives a hint of the suffering that the Thiels had just gone through.





Nineteen fifty-two was the peak year for new cases of polio in the United States. Western Iowa, especially the Sioux City area, was one of the hardest-hit parts of the country. Ultang put a human, yet hopeful, face on this terrifying and grimly relentless disease by illustrating a story for the November 29, 1952, issue of *Collier's* magazine on the 16-member Joe and Clara Thiel family, who farmed 280 rented acres near Mapleton in western Iowa.

Their story was shocking: between July 22 and August 8, 1952, 11 of the Thiels' 14 children came down with polio—3 on a single day. The unstoppable nature of the epidemic, the sheer number of the children involved, and the rapidity with which they fell ill made a riveting national story.

Of the 11 Thiels who were stricken, 9 recovered. Two sons, however, suffered paralysis, then thought to be permanent—Lawrence lost use of both legs; Bob, the use of his left arm.

Ultang's photo shows 12 of the Thiel children in their home (Donald was in the army and Lawrence was still in the hospital). It captures the exuberance of this obviously close-knit family and their affection for Dr. Arthur McGill (center) of nearby Danbury, who cared for the family with the limited medical tools then available. Only 20-year-old Bob, with his left arm in a brace (upper right), gives a hint of the suffering that the Thiels had just gone through.



Whether this photo was intended as straight news or tongue-in-cheek is unknown—although the irony of a woman picking corn while wearing lipstick, nail polish, and a nice sweater would not have been lost on a cynical photo editor:

The woman on the right looks more comfortable with the task at hand, having donned heavy gloves, overalls, and a formidable hat. And though the woman on the left is wearing a dress, she looks at ease holding the reins of the horse-drawn wagon.

Ultang's labels on this and a similar image tell us only that the photos related to a women's club, photographed on October 4, 1939. Neither was published in the *Register*.

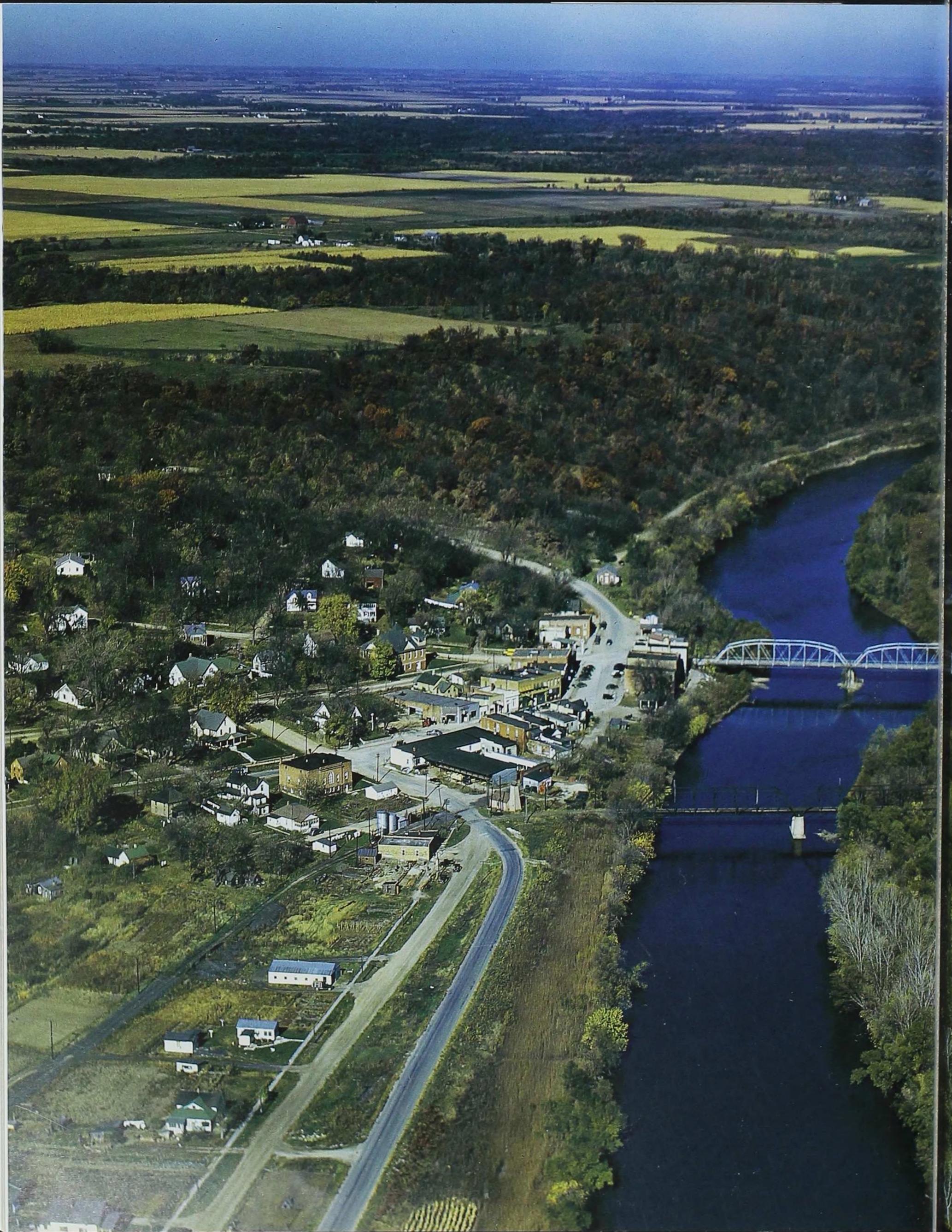
In 1946, Des Moines native Cloris Leachman's career was just taking off. Already known in community theater and on local radio (and to the *Register* for her brief employment there during the war as a typist), she had previously won a scholarship to Northwestern University's drama department. During a memorable 1946, she was named in quick succession Miss WGN, Miss Chicago, and third runner-up for Miss America.

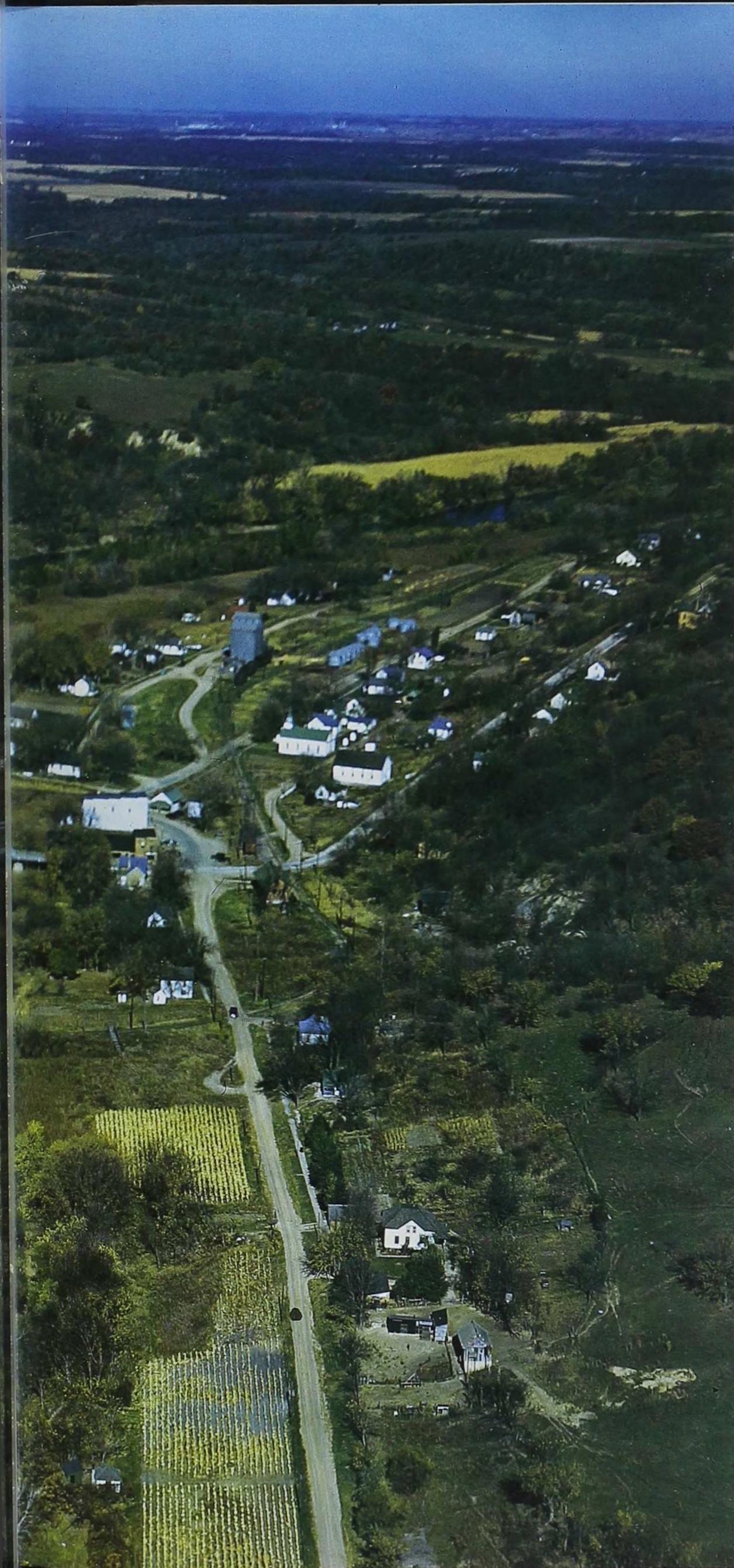
Shortly after Leachman's return to Des Moines from Atlantic City, the *Register* assigned Ultang to photograph the 20-year-old beauty queen and aspiring actress at her family's home. Most of the color shoot consisted of fine, if conventional, photos of her in both domestic and glamour poses.

As he would explain later, however, Ultang was posing Leachman and her younger sisters, Claiborne and Mary, on the sofa when the three suddenly dissolved in laughter over some private joke about him. Always the news photographer, he was ready and captured this spontaneous photo of sisterly mirth.

The *Register* chose not to run it in its October 6 half-page spread on Leachman, picking instead two more conventional views. Ultang liked the photo so much, however, that he included a black-and-white version in his book, *Holding the Moment*.







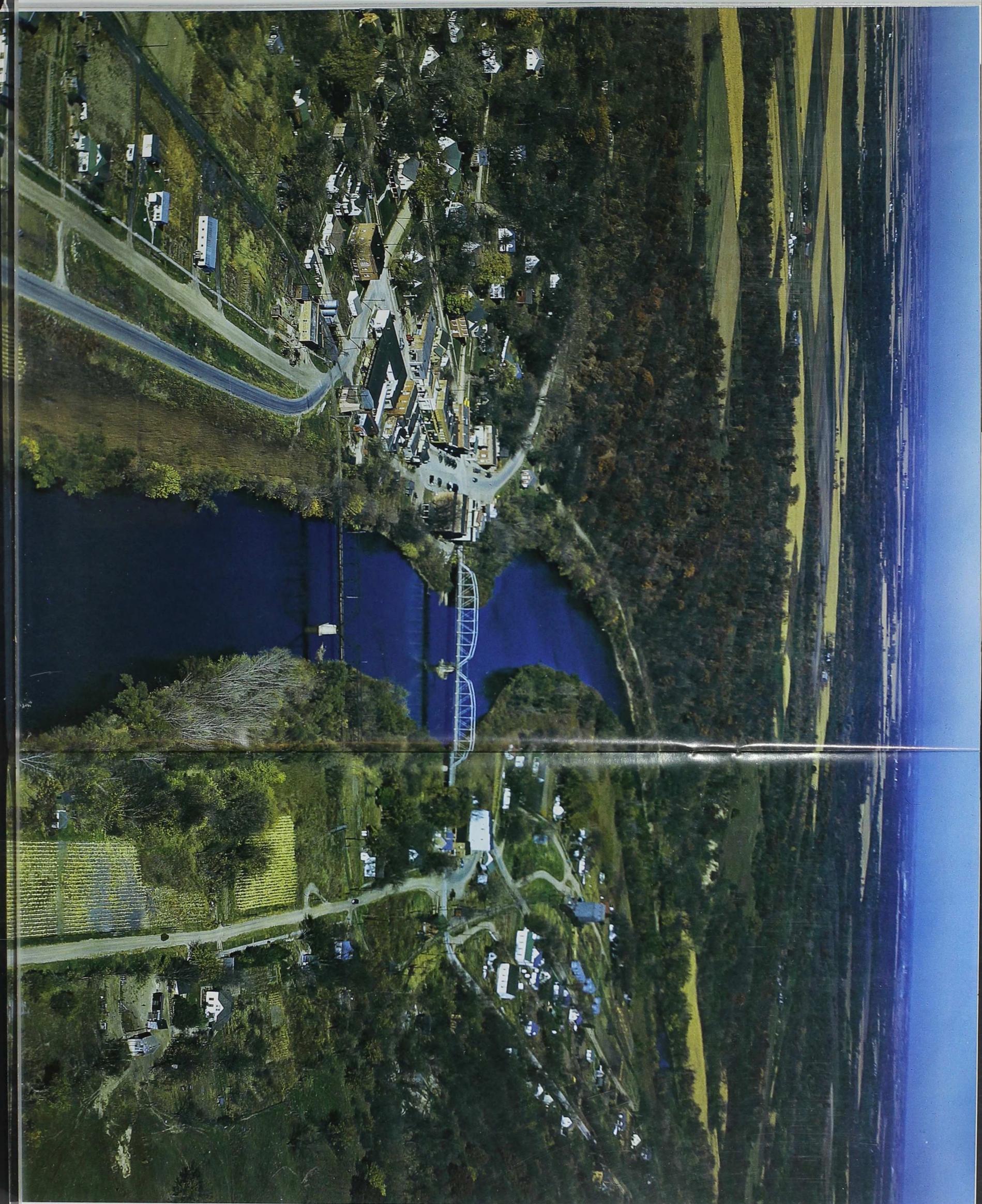
"An art colony, looking for a spot of quaint beauty . . . should settle here," wrote *Des Moines Register* reporter Herb Owens about the Webster County town of Lehigh. Indeed, Ultang's combination of composition, angle of sunlight, and time of year illustrates that Lehigh was, according to the photo caption, "one of the loveliest spots on the Des Moines River."

Lehigh's past included grittiness as well as beauty. The town was known for its extensive coal fields, sand and clay pits, and brick-and-tile factories, the products of which were shipped out on two railroads, the Chicago Great Western (abandoned into Lehigh in 1932) and the electric interurban Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern, which was still operating under wire at the time of this photo in 1946.

The interurban arrived from the north (top) from Fort Dodge. It carried passengers until 1928, and dropped them off at the brick depot on the east side of the river, just opposite the center of town. Freight trains did whatever switching was necessary near the depot and then crossed the bridge in the foreground and headed south to serve the various mines and brick-and-tile plants on Crooked Creek.

In the early 1960s the depot was torn down to make way for a new highway bridge and the tracks were removed.

This is an out-take from a series of photos shot by Ultang on October 22, 1946, for a story that appeared on December 8.



"An art colony looking for a spot of quaint beauty . . . should settle here," wrote *Des Moines Register* reporter Herb Owens about the Webster County town of Lehigh. Indeed, Utlang's combination of composition, angle of sunlight, and time of year illustrates that Lehigh was, according to the photo caption, "one of the loveliest spots on the Des Moines River."

Lehigh's past included grittiness as well as beauty. The town was known for its extensive coal fields, sand and clay pits, and brick-and-tile factories; the products of which were shipped out on two railroads; the Chicago Great Western (abandoned into Lehigh in 1932) and the electric interurban Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern, which was still operating under wire at the time of this photo in 1946.

The interurban arrived from the north (top) from Fort Dodge. It carried passengers until 1928, and dropped them off at the brick depot on the east side of the river, just opposite the center of town. Freight trains did whatever switching was necessary near the depot and then crossed the bridge in the foreground and headed south to serve the various mines and brick-and-tile plants on Crooked Creek.

In the early 1960s the depot was torn down to make way for a new highway bridge and the tracks were removed.

This is an out-take from a series of photos shot by Utlang on October 22, 1946, for a story that appeared on December 8.

The Sunday Register used a variation of this image as part of a photo essay that ran on August 18, 1946, about a music program for five-year-olds at Iowa State Teachers College (now the University of Northern Iowa) in Cedar Falls.

Described in the story as taking "kindergarteners fresh from the sandpile and turn[ing] them loose on violins, violas and cellos," the program was run by Melvin Schneider, the school's music director, and his wife. The Schneiders believed in playing as a group rather than individually as a way of making music an early "experiment in democracy." Indeed, the other two of Utlang's color photos in the story show children playing in a string quartet or singing together accompanied on the piano by Mrs. Schneider.

Young Robert Rockwood, shown here with his cello, was one of 51 students, of whom Director Schneider found "32 with an aptitude for strings." Those whose musical interests lay elsewhere would be exposed to woodwinds and percussion instruments in subsequent years.



Ending their tour of the American Freedom Train (shown in the background), youngsters sign the Pledge of Rededication, recommitting themselves to the nation's ideals. The Freedom Train was a joint public and private project that brought some of the nation's most valuable documents directly to over 300 cities. Between September 1947 and January 1949, the train exhibited such historical treasures as the Mayflower Compact, an original copy of the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights,

and George Washington's Farewell Address, along with significant artifacts from World War II.

This photo is a good example of the lengths to which the Register went for a story. To have a color feature ready to run before the Freedom Train actually arrived in Iowa, Utlang flew the Good News VIII to Fargo, North Dakota, and photographed the train there, seven weeks ahead of time. The photos, of which this is an outtake, ran in the Sunday Register on June

13, just prior to the train's visit to five Iowa cities—Burlington, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, and Davenport (the train had stopped in Sioux City a month earlier). As it turned out, the weather in Des Moines during the train's stop at the Rock Island Railroad station on June 20 was cold and rainy, in contrast to the sunny skies here in Fargo back in April.

The *Sunday Register* used a variation of this image as part of a photo essay that ran on August 18, 1946, about a music program for five-year-olds at Iowa State Teachers College (now the University of Northern Iowa) in Cedar Falls.

Described in the story as taking "kindergarteners fresh from the sandpile and tum[ing] them loose on violins, violas and cellos," the program was run by Melvin Schneider, the school's music director, and his wife. The Schneiders believed in playing as a group rather than individually as a way of making music an early "experiment in democracy." Indeed, the other two of Ultang's color photos in the story show children playing in a string quartet or singing together accompanied on the piano by Mrs. Schneider.

Young Robert Rockwood, shown here with his cello, was one of 51 students, of whom Director Schneider found "32 with an aptitude for strings." Those whose musical interests lay elsewhere would be exposed to woodwinds and percussion instruments in subsequent years.





Ending their tour of the American Freedom Train (shown in the background), youngsters sign the Pledge of Rededication, recommitting themselves to the nation's ideals. The Freedom Train was a joint public and private project that brought some of the nation's most valuable documents directly to over 300 cities. Between September 1947 and January 1949, the train exhibited such historical treasures as the Mayflower Compact, an original copy of the U. S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights,

and George Washington's Farewell Address, along with significant artifacts from World War II.

This photo is a good example of the lengths to which the *Register* went for a story. To have a color feature ready to run before the Freedom Train actually arrived in Iowa, Ultang flew the *Good News VIII* to Fargo, North Dakota, and photographed the train there, seven weeks ahead of time. The photos, of which this is an outtake, ran in the *Sunday Register* on June

13, just prior to the train's visit to five Iowa cities—Burlington, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, and Davenport (the train had stopped in Sioux City a month earlier). As it turned out, the weather in Des Moines during the train's stop at the Rock Island Railroad station on June 20 was cold and rainy, in contrast to the sunny skies here in Fargo back in April.



Although not as well known as Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, Cole Brothers ranked as one of the two largest circuses touring the United States in the 1940s.

When Ultang photographed the Cole Brothers show on July 18, 1940, he chose less conventional subjects and settings than those of the standard circus shot. Here, a barker hawks cotton candy, and a young performer prepares for her act, while another steals a look. Perhaps they were two of the "100 Beautiful Dancing Girls" in the opening spectacular, "La Habana," or among the "beautiful girl riders" astride "fifty dancing horses" later in the show.

Traveling by rail, Cole Brothers played two-performance stands ("Every Matinee Precisely the Same as the Night Performance") in four Iowa cities—Iowa City, Des Moines, Atlantic, and Council Bluffs.

Another scene from the Cole Brothers show in 1940 appears on the next page.





Opposite: Ultang catches two fellows counting the house on July 18, 1940.

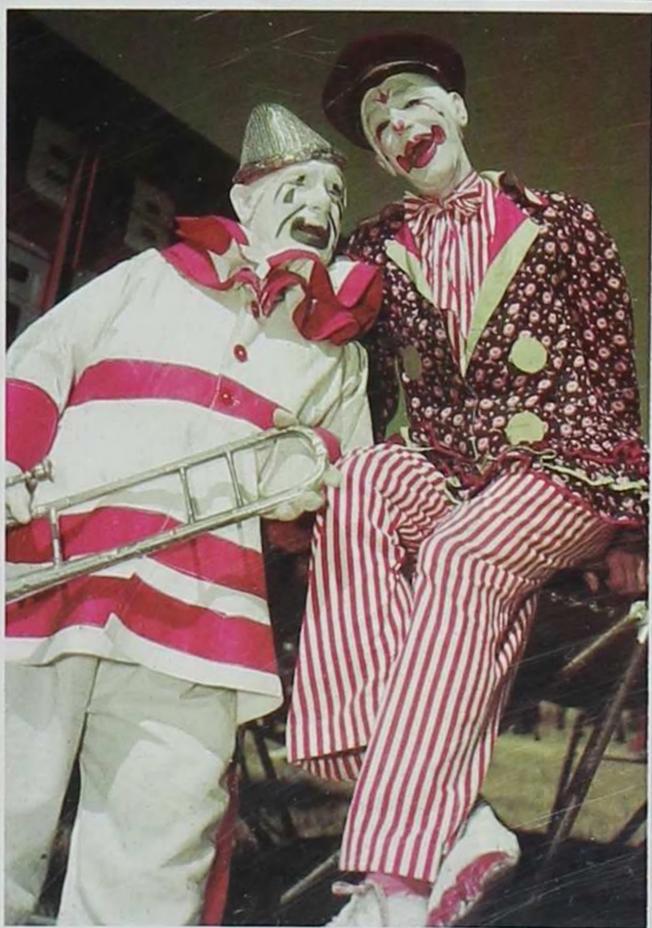
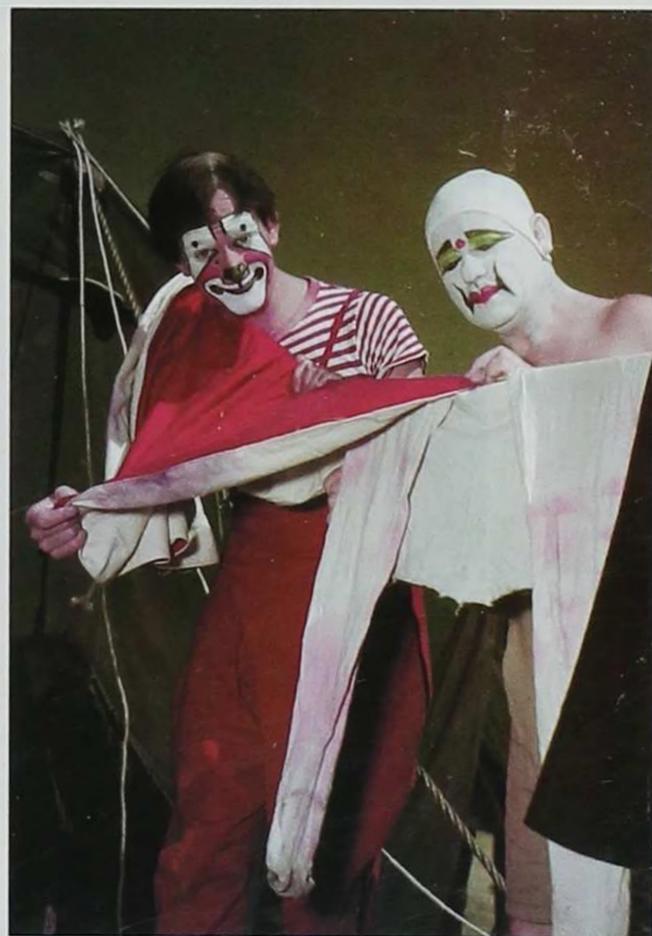
Right: Seven years later, when Cole Brothers played four performances at the Iowa State Fairgrounds on July 18–19, 1947, Ultang was there again with his camera. The Des Moines stop proved to be a singular success for the circus; the trade paper *Billboard* called it the “Top Two-Day Stand of [the] Year” thus far.

Surely the clowns were a big part of that success, and Ultang photographed several of them. Top left: Freddie Freeman and Otto Griebling were partners in the 1940s and were known for their boxing skit for the “Championship of Clown Alley.” Griebling (seated) was Cole Brothers’ longtime “producing clown,” the one who assembled and choreographed the show’s various clown skits.

Along with his friend and Ringling Brothers star Emmett Kelly, Griebling developed the “Weary Willie” hobo character shown here. Kelly’s clown persona was that of a resigned down-and-outer, while Griebling’s hobo displayed more of an attitude, with sharper responses to the embarrassments and indignities of his created world.

The clowns in the bottom row are Billie Burke (left), and Horace Laird and Lee Virtue (right). The two clowns at the clothesline are unidentified. The *Register* ran the photos on September 7 to illustrate a feature on the types of clowns.

Two years after these photos, Cole Brothers went bankrupt and closed in July 1949. As in all circus stories, however, there is a happy ending. The show was revived in the 1950s and continues to tour the United States today, albeit by truck but still under canvas.







As if he had isolated this fierce competitor with a spotlight, Ultang dramatically conveyed the intensity and physicality of the 1940 national cornhusking championship. Competitive cornhusking was a grueling test of speed and endurance—80 non-stop minutes to determine not only who could husk the most ears, but who could do so with both the cleanest ears and the fewest left on the ground.

The 1940 national competition was held on October 30 on the Henry Keppy farm near Davenport. *Register* farm editor J. S. Russell, estimated that between 125,000 and 150,000 people watched the 21 contestants, with spectators so crammed into the corn rows "that it was almost impossible to move about in the field during the contest" (in the photo, onlookers appear in silhouette in the background).

NBC and CBS radio carried live accounts while overhead the Goodyear blimp "and at least a half dozen airplanes ... flitted about over the field." With weather "a bit too warm for the comfort of the huskers," some "stripped down to the waist as the midday sun struck the field."

The identity of this competitor is unknown, but he obviously attracted Ultang's attention.

The winner that year was Illinois farmer Irvin Bauman, who "husked his way into agriculture's hall of fame" with a record-breaking 46.7 bushels (or 3,261 pounds) from roughly a half-acre.

The runner-up and, not surprisingly, the crowd's favorite, was the Iowa champion, Marion Link of Ames, who finished a mere one-third of a bushel behind the leader.

The *Register* did not run this photo even as a black-and-white, opting for more conventional views.



As if he had isolated this fierce competitor with a spotlight, Ultag dramatically conveyed the intensity and physicality of the 1940 national cornhusking championship. Competitive cornhusking was a grueling test of speed and endurance—80 non-stop minutes to determine not only who could husk the most ears, but who could do so with both the cleanest ears and the fewest left on the ground.

The 1940 national competition was held on October 30 on the Henry Keppy farm near Davenport. Register farm editor J. S. Russell, estimated that between 125,000 and 150,000 people watched the 21 contestants, with spectators so crammed into the corn rows "that it was almost impossible to move about in the field during the contest" (in the photo, onlookers appear in silhouette in the background).

NBC and CBS radio carried live accounts while overhead the Goodyear blimp "and at least a half dozen airplanes... fitted about over the field." With weather "a bit too warm for the comfort of the huskers," some "stripped down to the waist as the midday sun struck the field." The identity of this competitor is unknown, but he obviously attracted Ultag's attention.

The winner that year was Illinois farmer Irvin Bauman, who "husked his way into agriculture's hall of fame" with a record-breaking 46.7 bushels (or 3,261 pounds) from roughly a half-acre.

The runner-up and, not surprisingly, the crowd's favorite, was the Iowa champion, Marion Link of Ames, who finished a mere one-third of a bushel behind the leader.

The Register did not run this photo even as a black-and-white, opting for more conventional views.





Left: Nineteen-year-old Ruth Anderson strikes a spirited pose as Miss Iowa 1947. Anderson graduated in 1946 from high school in Oelwein and then worked there as an accounting machine operator for the Chicago Great Western Railroad. She won the Miss Fayette County contest and then on July 4 the Miss Iowa competition at the Paramount Theater in Des Moines.

The *Register* noted that "Miss Anderson brought down the house each of the three times that she came upon the stage, in the 'grace, poise and charm' phases of the contest." Although she had played the drums for six years, she chose to sing "All By Myself" for her talent and "the audience almost brought her back for an encore."

In September, with a big send-off from her home town, Anderson went to

Atlantic City to compete for Miss America. Her winning ways ended there, however. She didn't make the 15 finalists.

Back in Iowa, Anderson worked again for the railroad and later attended Cornell College. She married Gordon Erickson, raised a family, and eventually moved to Solvang, California, where she lives today.

Above: Four of Miss Iowa's competitors from July pose with her on the same diving board at the Wakonda Club in Des Moines as part of Hawkeye Holidays. From left: Betty Fredregill (Des Moines); Betty Kuehl (Spencer); Miss Iowa; Lorraine Thompson (Storm Lake); and Pat Owens (Traer).

The above photo ran in a full-page photo essay by Ultang in the *Sunday Register's* rotogravure section on August 3, 1947. The photo opposite is an outtake.





Black angus cattle are scattered across a nearby field as a five-car freight train heads towards a curve. A dusting of snow covers the rails ahead of the steam locomotive.

This was the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy train #118, which ran daily except Sunday between Humeston and Mount Ayr in south-central Iowa. If the train was on time (a big assumption for a branch-line way freight), Ultang would have shot this photo between 10:00 and 10:30 a.m., the departure and arrival times at Lamoni and Kellerton, respectively.

Titled "Winter's White Patterns on the Iowa Countryside," a variation of this photo appeared in the *Sunday Register* on February 5, 1950.



Black angus cattle are scattered across a nearby field as a five-car freight train heads towards a curve. A dusting of snow covers the rails ahead of the steam locomotive.

This was the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy train #118, which ran daily except Sunday between Hurleston and Mount Ayr in south-central Iowa. If the train was on time (a big assumption for a branch-line way freight), Uthang would have shot this photo between 10:00 and 10:30 a.m., the departure and arrival times at Lamoni and Kellerton, respectively.

Titled "Winter's White Patterns on the Iowa Countryside," a variation of this photo appeared in the Sunday Register on February 5, 1950.



Left: Of the more than 1,000 people who worked for the *Des Moines Register & Tribune* in 1950, one of the least visible employees was W. A. Bedgood, shown here in a photo that dates from the late 1940s. Known inside the paper as *The Mole*, Bedgood was in charge of the *Register's* darkroom and got his nickname, according to longtime *Register* reporter Walt Shotwell, because he was rarely seen even by his fellow employees.

Bedgood kneels alongside a huge drum of sodium sulfite, a component of both developing and hypo-clearing solutions. The number and size of the containers illustrate the amount of chemicals needed to process the 4" x 5" black-and-white negatives, which were still the standard in photojournalism, and the volume of prints required to illustrate the *Register* and its evening sister, the *Tribune*. Bedgood's job entailed mixing chemicals, developing negatives, and making prints, although Shotwell says that sometimes the photographers did their own darkroom work if they were covering a breaking news story.

The photo below, from the same period, is of an unidentified *Register* staff artist.



Special Acknowledgments

The author particularly wishes to thank Mary Bennett (special collections coordinator, State Historical Society of Iowa in the Iowa City center) for her invaluable encouragement, enthusiasm, advice, and myriad factual contributions to this article. More than anyone outside of Don Ultang's family, Mary has been the most tireless advocate of Ultang's photographic legacy.

Thanks also to Charles Scott (library resource technician, SHSI-Iowa City) for his expert work overcoming the age-related color shifts in many of the transparencies used in this article and for his unfailing good cheer in all matters.

Ordering images from the State Historical Society of Iowa

The State Historical Society of Iowa can provide reproductions or electronic scans of photographs in our collections for a fee. If you wish to use an image for commercial purposes, there will be an additional charge. For details, visit: www.IowaHistory.org/libraries. Click on "services and fees," and then on "photo reproduction and use fees."

Color images that appear in this photo essay are also available to the public for a fee. Due to color shifts caused by aging of the film, however, some of the other color images in the Ultang Collection cannot be reproduced with fidelity. For more information regarding these particular images, contact Mary Bennett, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240; phone 319-335-3911; mary-bennett@uiowa.edu.

NOTE ON SOURCES

In addition to thousands of negatives and prints, the Don Ultang Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City) includes other items. For this article, tear sheets, flight logs, correspondence, and articles by and about Ultang were especially helpful. Major sources include bound volumes of the *Des Moines Register*, 1939–1956; and Don Ultang, *Holding the Moment: Mid-America at Mid-Century* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991).

General sources on the *Des Moines Register* include William B. Friedrichs, *Covering Iowa: The History of the Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, 1849–1985* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000); and W. W. Waymack, "Good News," *Palimpsest* (Sept. 1930).

For specific photos, the following sources provided useful context beyond what was found in the *Register*. **Cedar Rapids aerial:** Harold F. Ewoldt, *Cedar Rapids: The Magnificent Century* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1988); Phyllis Fleming, *Snapshots of History: Cedar Rapids 1849–1999* (Marceline, MO: Heritage House Publishing, 1999); Angie Kramer and Phyllis Fleming, *Cedar Rapids: Our People, Our Story*, Vol. 1 (Cedar Rapids: The Gazette, 2004); *The [Cedar Rapids] Gazette*, Nov. 18, 1990, Section E, p. 1: block-by-block re-creation of downtown businesses, ca. mid-1960s; and Sanborn fire insurance maps. **Thiel family:** "Iowans Remember the Polio Scare," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* (Winter 2006); www.iowacenterforthebook.org/ips-home/stories-sent (this is a collection of moving personal stories sent to the Iowa Polio Stories Web Site); and Karl Schriftgiesser, "When 11 of 14 Children Were Hit with

Polio," *Collier's*, Nov. 29, 1952. **Cloris Leachman:** Cloris Leachman, *Cloris, My Autobiography* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2009). **Lehigh aerial:** A. P. Butts, *Walter Willson and his Crooked Creek Railroad* (Webster City, IA: Crooked Creek Publishing, 1976); Norman Carlson, ed., *Iowa Trolleys* (Chicago: Central Electric Railfans' Association, 1975); Charles and Marie Dayton, *Historical Sketches of Lehigh, Iowa: A Bi-Centennial Tribute* ([Lehigh?]: Charles and Marie Dayton, 1976); Wikipedia under "Lehigh Iowa"; and D. L. "Ching" Williams, "Webster County History" (1969), www.genealogytrails.com/iowa/webster (click on "history"). **Freedom Train:** Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City), photo collection; "The Freedom Train," *Palimpsest* (Sept. 1948), entire issue; and www.freedomtrain.org. **Miss Iowa:** phone conversation, 2010, with Ruth Erickson. **CB&Q steam train in snow:** Charles W. Bohi's invaluable map in *Trains* (April 1986) shows dates of rail line abandonments in Iowa, 1911–1985. **Circuses and clowns:** Kreig A. Adkins, *Peru: Circus Capital of the World* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing Co., 2009); *Billboard* (online), April 26, 1947, p. 75; John Culhane, *The American Circus: An Illustrated History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1990); Wendell C. and John B. Tombaugh, *Fulton County Indiana Handbook*, *Cole Bros. Clyde Beatty Circus* (online; Rochester, IN: Tombaugh House, 2001); www.circopedia.org; and www.clownalley.net. **Des Moines Register employee W. A. Bedgood, and information on Don Ultang and his work:** e-mail correspondence, 2010, with Walt Shotwell, retired *Register* reporter.