



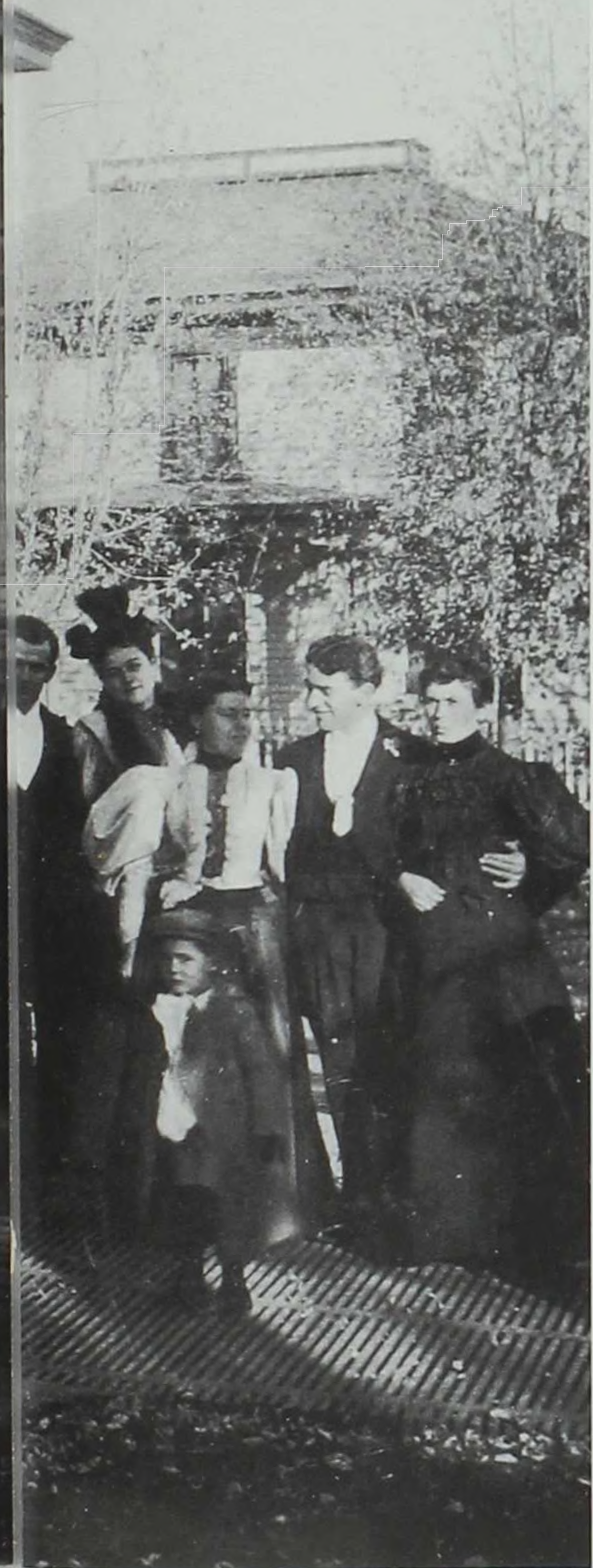
A Salute to Porches

OF THE DOZEN HOUSES in which I've lived, three of them had fine front porches. On my family's farm in Scott County, the white, foursquare house had an

elegant front porch with massive pillars. On its broad railings I practiced tightrope walking, and under its roof on hot summer days, when boredom struck, I

dressed reluctant farm kittens in ridiculous doll clothes.

In the first house my husband and I owned here in Iowa City, the 1890s house had a simple porch



across the front. From our hammock on that porch, I rocked our babies, hushed our dogs, and watched the world rush by.

Our current house, an 1880s Victorian, once had a wraparound front porch. I've only seen pictures of that porch, because a previous owner tore it off in the late 1930s. Although he reused some of the original millwork on it, the

"new" porch is much smaller. There's sufficient space for a cheerful basket of geraniums and a short, stand-up conversation with callers, but that's about all.

To me, a front porch manifests the concept of "welcome." That's why a year ago the opening page of this magazine, right inside the cover, was named "Front Porch." I see it as a welcoming entry point and a place to converse. This is where you'll meet other readers (through their letters to the editor) and where I'll introduce authors and their work. It's a place to begin our story and build our "readership community."

Naturally, my ears perked up when Patrick Overton started talking about front porches in his keynote speech at the annual Iowa Heritage Expo at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Des Moines this June. Overton is associate professor of communication and cultural studies at Columbia College in Missouri. He has a long history of working with rural and small communities. And he eloquently uses the metaphor of a front porch to help nudge America back to the concept of "community."

"The people who lived in [small, rural] communities relied on themselves for education, entertainment, and enjoyment. They spent time together," Overton writes in his *Re-Building the Front Porch of America: Essays on the Art of Community Making* (Columbia, Missouri: Columbia College, 1997). "Everyone knew each other's name. Neighbors were considered extended family, and shared in the rites, rituals, and responsibilities of raising children. The communities had their own traditions, history, and stories, but they didn't have names for all of this. The terms culture, values,

and art, didn't have names because they were considered part of the everyday lives of the people in these communities."

Overton reminds us that the contributions of "the people who have gone before us . . . help us understand the values that drive our work today. It is a story of self-improvement and self-education. It is a story of self-determination and rural genius. It is a story of porches and parlors, where people gathered together to share, to learn, to create community."

He continues, "Historically, our elders have been the storytellers. With ageism the way it is in our current society, we pay little attention to our elders. In the process, we have lost contact not only with our story, but our storytellers as well. They not only know the stories, they are the ones who grew up with the tradition of storytelling. They grew up on the front porch, listening to their older relatives tell the family and community stories."

As summer drifts into fall and the landscape we see from our own porches shifts from green to gold, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* offers this salute to porches, inspired by Overton's metaphor of rebuilding the front porch of America. On the next page, Richard Thomas of Mount Vernon, Iowa, ponders the disappearance of porches. Photos from collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa hint at the variety of porches that have graced Iowa's houses, and Thomas's own photos showcase some fine, old porches still standing. The final selection in this salute offers tips on literally rebuilding a front porch.

—The Editor



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