

Stand Up and Be Counted!

Iowa and the 1940 Federal Census

by Timothy Walch

"Don't be surprised to find a man at the door, asking 'Do you have a telephone, an automobile, a radio, a bathtub, running water?'" Thus were newspaper readers in Cedar Rapids alerted to the inevitable arrival of "the government's quiz doctor"—the enumerator for the 1940 census.

This wasn't a surprising or unexpected endeavor. In fact, conducting a federal census had been written into the U.S. Constitution. Every decade since 1790, a federal census had recorded specific information about the nation. Iowa first participated in 1840, six years before statehood. In April 1940, amidst economic and political uncertainty at home, and predictions of war in Europe, thousands of workers hired by the U.S. government would engage the American people in this decennial responsibility.

The changes in one decade would certainly make a difference in the future of Iowa. Because seats in the U.S. House of Representatives could be reapportioned based on population changes revealed in the census, there was a real possibility that many states, including Iowa, would lose a member of their congressional delegations.

Besides population, how else had Iowa and the nation changed—especially after several years of economic depression and New Deal legislation? To ferret out these answers, the 1940 census form was expanded with several new questions, but some just seemed too

intrusive and personal, provoking controversy and diatribes.

Put another way, was the U.S. Bureau of the Census just counting noses—or poking its nose into the private lives of U.S. citizens?

It was likely that more than a few Americans would balk at answering some census questions when

an enumerator came knocking at the door. Anticipating criticism and objections, the census bureau knew that it had to set the proper tone and educate Americans about the value of the census. Beginning in January and continuing into April, the bureau's Division of Public Relations sent out press releases and speakers. The topic was a frequent one in Iowa's newspapers. Some stories were attributed to the census bureau or wire services like the Associated Press. Locally written articles often quoted census officials and community leaders who urged the public to participate.

The first of these articles began in early January, when the federal Manufacturing and Business Census was launched (three months ahead of the population, housing, and agricultural censuses). The *LeMars*

Globe Post took the opportunity to introduce Joe Duster, the fellow who was traveling across Plymouth County with manufacturing and business census forms. "He is paid 60¢ for each report, but so far he has only been able to complete 5 or 6 reports a day," the paper stated.



"All the privacy of a gold fish." *Des Moines Register* cartoonist Ding Darling comments on the intrusive nature of certain questions in the 1940 census.

Why was it taking Duster so long to complete these reports? "According to reports from all parts of the country, the public is more suspicious than usual of census takers, due to the increased government snooping in all private affairs, and many a citizen is likely to put off, or try to mislead the census taker, hoping thereby to evade some New Deal tax or governmental meddling." None of the information, according to the story, "would be used for the purpose of taxing, suppressing, or destroying any private individual or business." Apparently some Americans were wary that census data could also lead to military or jury duty, school attendance monitoring, or immigration regulations.

O. J. Ditto, the census district supervisor for the Cherokee area, stressed that the information given to enumerators was completely private. "The individual census return is the most confidential document in the archives of the United States Government," he boasted. "Not even the President of the United States is privileged to examine these reports and they are absolutely immune from inspections by courts or other agencies of government."

Community spokespersons and census officials were not above reminding Americans of the penalty for giving false information or failing to cooperate. In mid-January, for example, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* ran a story headlined "Friendly Hand of Census Man Can Turn to Iron Fist: Cooperation Usual Here, Says Supervisor, But Penalties Exist." The supervisor in question was Stanley Comfort.

Comfort was not making an idle threat; penalties for non-compliance by a U.S. resident were nothing new. They ranged from a fine of \$100 or 60 days in jail for refusing to answer the questions to a \$500 fine or a year in prison for providing false information. The penalties for a census worker giving false information were twice those of a resident. Do your duty, obey the law—that was the advice of Stanley Comfort.

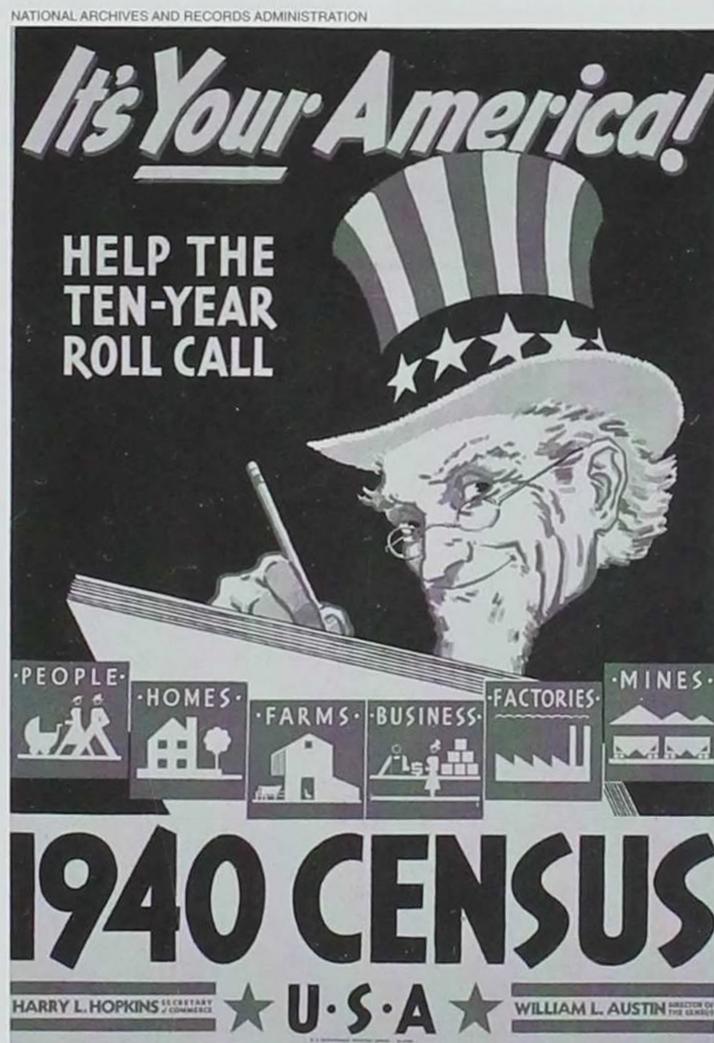
On KGLO Radio and in the *Globe-Gazette*, Comfort noted that the quality and quantity of information to be gathered on income, payroll, and inventory were directly linked to community improvement. He was passionate in his pitch: "People who make or sell all kinds of merchandise are pleading all the time for better and more detailed information about markets; and markets

are people." The census was good for business and therefore good for the American people.

Garfield E. Breese, the director of the Mason City Chamber of Commerce, echoed Comfort's message in an article headlined "Cooperation in Census is Asked: Manufacturers Serve Own and Community's Interests by Helping." Breese said, "Every manufacturer in Mason City is a component part of this great national production organization. If he fails to make his information available to the great pool of essential facts on manufacturing which the census is about to put together for the guidance of the manufacturers themselves, he is standing in his own light." Newspapers across the state repeated the rallying cry: stand up and be counted.

Most Iowa manufacturers and businesses owners apparently were willing if not enthusiastic to provide the information requested. The biggest concern was confidentiality. Once convinced that information would appear only in the aggregate by industry or activity, they generally complied.

With the manufacturing and business enumeration completed, attention shifted to the population, housing, and agricultural censuses, set to begin on April 2. In the months leading up to April, Iowa newspapers pushed the message that these counts were vital. After a tumultuous decade, both the private and public sectors were eager to harvest a bumper crop of socioeconomic information about the American people, believing that more facts would lead to better solutions.



Several of the new census questions focused on housing. Some were fairly general: Did you own or rent your "dwelling unit"? What was its value or rent? What was its condition? Other questions were far more specific and inquired about the number of rooms, water supply, toilet and bathing facilities, radio, lighting, refrigeration, heating, and fuel for heating and cooking.

BOTH PHOTOS: NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION



An enumerator goes about his job, counting U.S. residents. According to a wire-service story from Washington, the mantra of census workers was to be: "Get the answers . . . and get the right ones, but don't hold your foot in the door or make threats—be courteous, be clever, be persuasive."



Although an article in the *Oelwein Register* stated that the "moguls of the census bureau have overstepped the bounds of propriety and common sense," William Austin, director of the federal census, argued from Washington that if private industry and the government believed that home construction would revive the economy, then the nature of current housing needed to be assessed. And as Stanley Comfort had reasoned earlier, "It is American business above all, which wants to know . . . what kind of home or farm you occupy, whether it is modern or obsolete and how many conveniences it has. For each obsolete home means the possible buyer of a new one."

Several new questions focused on the employment status of individuals 14 years and older during the week of March 24–30, 1940. Were you employed? Was it in "Emergency Work" (the New Deal work relief programs)? Were you seeking work, engaged in "home housework" or school, or unable to work? The hope here was to measure the "twilight zone," as Austin called it, between unemployment and employment.

A random 5 percent of the population would be asked 15 supplemental questions pertaining to parents' birthplace, mother tongue, "usual" occupation, veteran's status, and social security. Each woman in this sample was also asked her number of marriages, age at first marriage, and number of children born alive. Using the relatively new concept of "systematic sampling," these sample questions could be tabulated and released sooner than the full census.

There seemed to be a general curiosity about all the information to be compiled in Washington. In response, William Bruckart, a nationally syndicated columnist whose work appeared in many Iowa weeklies, remarked that the census was nothing short of "a complete self-examination of Uncle Sam by Uncle Sam" and an important exercise in civic engagement. "There was and is a certain number of people who think the whole thing is silly," he wrote. "It is not silly. . . . The census deals in facts, and surely we cannot have too many facts about ourselves.

"It seems to me, then," added Bruckart, "that we can look forward to the results of the census. . . . It will show that many theories of what the government can do or has done have failed or have succeeded by revealing just how much human nature can be influenced by man-made rules."

In an effort to find a bit of humor in all of the hubbub, Louis Wirth, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, remarked on a radio show that as far back as 1850, "citizens were required to tell the census takers whether they were idiots, . . . prisoners or paupers and

the value of all their real estate and property." Wirth said that one of his favorite questions had appeared on a 1907 census: "How many petticoats do you wear?" Since 1907 was not a census year for the nation or most states, the columnist may have been joking.

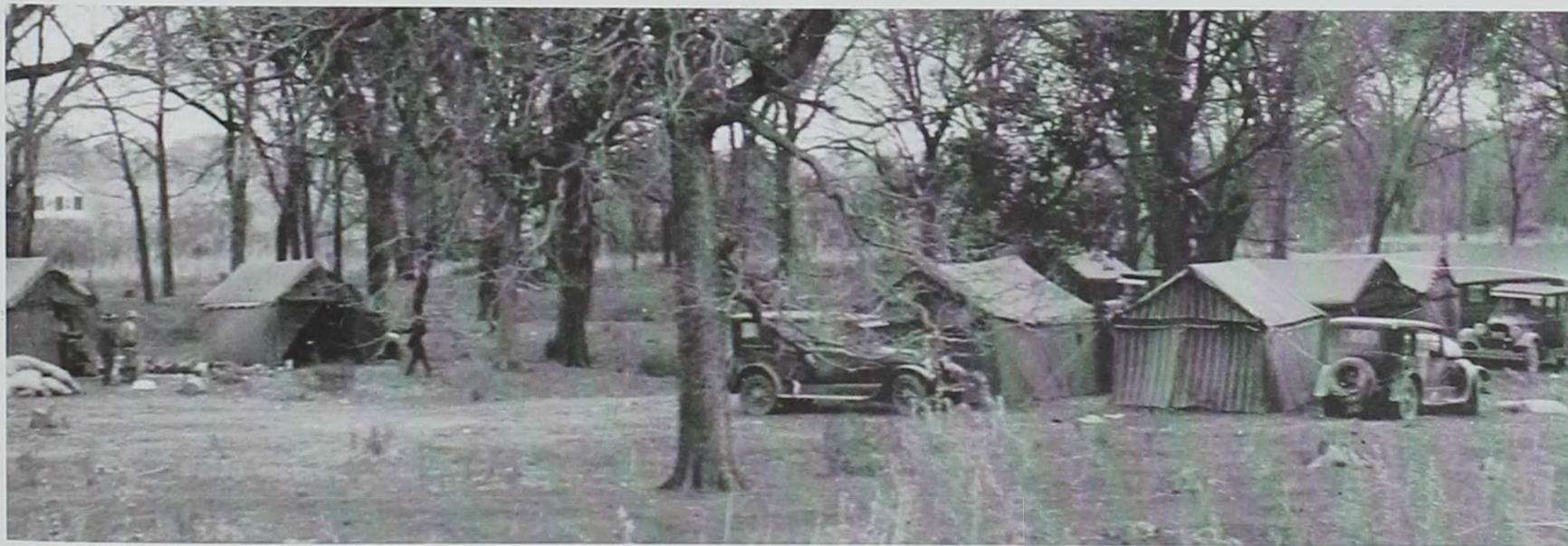
What wasn't a joke was that U.S. farmers were required to respond to a whopping 232 questions for the agricultural census. The *Bremer County Independent* advised farmers to pick up a sample form at a bank or Farm Bureau office: "If you start figuring now, you'll be sure to get finished in time to cultivate corn."

Once again, the official word was that agricultural changes in the 1930s needed to be tracked. How extensively had tractors replaced workhorses and mules? How had mechanization affected the need for hired men? And, as one Iowa paper put it, "How many farmers [had] abandoned their homes in the 'dust bowl' and where did they go?"

David J. Murphy, an Iowa census district supervisor, stressed the value of the answers to the gov-

ernment—and to farmers themselves. "No group has a greater degree of self interest in the success of the decennial census of 1940 than has the farmer," he noted in the *Marion Sentinel*. "Agriculture as an industry has been in bad health for a number of years. Just as a prudent person goes to his doctor for a complete check-up, the farmers will, in the 1940 census, get the most complete study of their symptoms that has ever been made." It would "tell the farmer which way he is going."

Not everyone was pleased with the census. Certain questions, for example, drew the ire of one Republican senator, Charles W. Tobey of New Hampshire. In the weeks leading up to the start of census-taking, he mounted a campaign to remove questions on personal income. He advised Americans to refuse to answer them and to tell the enumerators that "it was none of their damned business." For a small



ALL THREE PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES), DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Culturally nomadic, a group of Romani, or "gypsies," set up camp in the 1930s in the Des Moines area. Census workers in 1940 were reminded not to overlook people who might be living in lumber and convict camps, boats, missions, warehouses, tents, factories, and huts. Determined to count every U.S. resi-

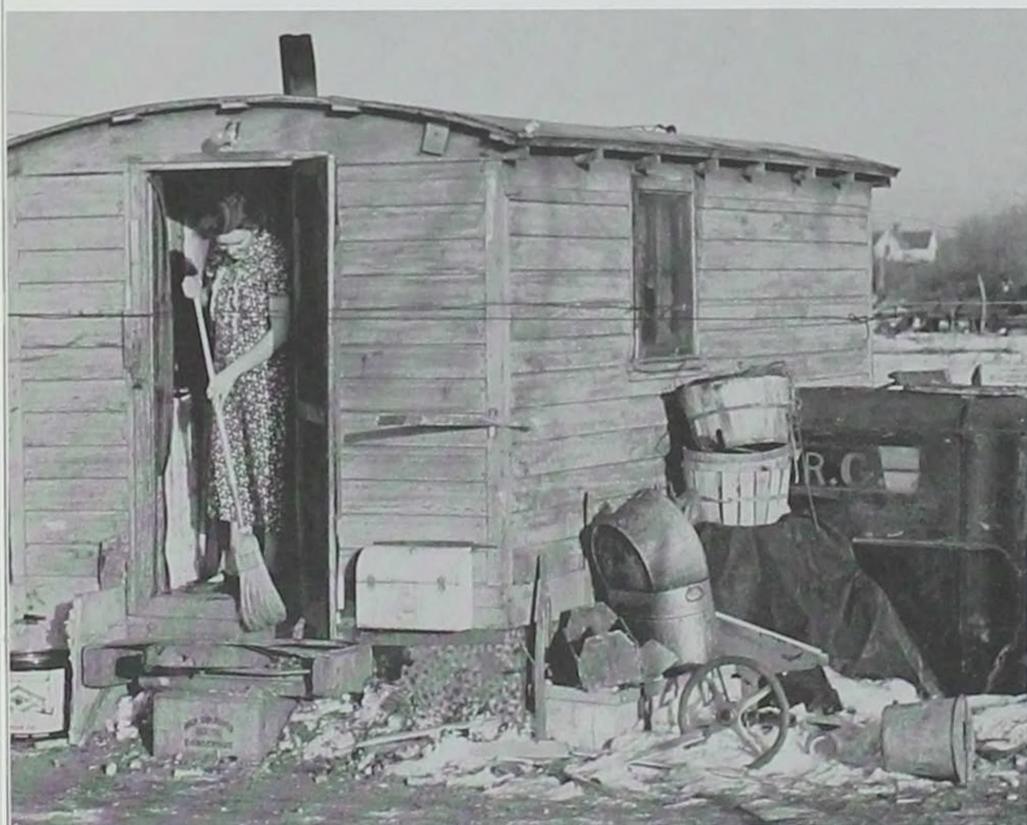
dent, the census bureau designated the evening of April 8, 1940, for enumerators to visit tourist camps, flophouses, and hotels.





ALL FIVE PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The 1930s had reduced many Americans to dwellings like these in northwest Iowa, as documented in 1936 by photographer Russell Lee for the Farm Security Administration. Some politicians criticized the U.S. Census Bureau for invading the privacy of residents by asking about condition of housing, indoor plumbing, and income levels. On the other hand, according to reporter Morgan Beatty, "some of them are curious to know, too, whether the president was right—or talking through his hat—when he said one-third of the nation is ill-clad, ill-housed, and ill-fed."



cluster of Republicans led by Tobey, income questions "flaunted" the Bill of Rights and "represent[ed] snooping in its most insidious form."

"To put the issue in context," writes historian Margo Anderson, "one should remember that until World War II, relatively few Americans reported any financial information to the federal government. Few, for example, filed federal income tax returns." Now the government was requiring all residents 14 and over to report their income to a stranger who appeared at the door.

Associated Press reporter Morgan Beatty believed that the income questions had bearing in the political arena. "Many politicians and statesmen want the income data for speeches, programs, bills, and what-have-you, dealing with unemployment and relief," he wrote in late March. And a census bureau press release likened "the flow of wages and salaries" to the "economic blood pressure of the nation."

To mollify Tobey and other critics, the census bureau added an option for high-income earners, who were most likely to object. The option was spelled out in the enumeration manual. Those who earned \$5,000 or less (roughly \$82,000 today) were required to report the exact amount. However, "for amounts above \$5,000, enter '5,000+.' This means that you are not to report the actual amount of money wages and salary for persons who have received more than \$5,000. Keep this in mind in enumerating any household which seems likely to have an income above this amount. Some persons who might otherwise be reluctant to report wages or salary would be quite willing to do so if they learn that the amount above \$5,000 need not be specified."

Any individual who earned above \$5,000 was expected to write down the actual amount on the confidential Form P-16 (name, address, and signature were not required), seal it in an envelope and give it to the enumerator to mail.

But Senator Tobey's anger did not abate in the weeks leading up to April 1. He fumed that the American people were "incensed" at the prospect of answering income questions, and he introduced a Senate resolution to remove them. President Roosevelt called Tobey's resolution a "political move and nothing else."

Tobey did achieve a victory of sorts when the Senate Commerce Committee narrowly approved his resolution calling to eliminate the income questions. But the bill floundered. "The bureau of the census possesses the confidence of the American people," said Milo J. Sedlacek, one of Iowa's area supervisors. "The questions to be asked in the 1940 census contain nothing that will shake that confidence."

Tobey would not give up. In a national radio address on the night of April 1, as enumerators gathered up their supplies for the next morning, the senator claimed that there was no statutory authority for the census bureau to require citizens to answer specific questions. He, for one, would not respond to the questions about income.

There was no indication in the Iowa press that anyone in the state joined Tobey in his protest. And in the end, only 2 percent of the U.S. population did not answer the income questions.

On April 2, versed in 87 pages of instructions, census workers headed out to count America. Thirty-three questions would be asked at every dwelling unit (and many more at farms). "If every family would devote the conversation at one single dinner hour to a discussion of [the census]," district supervisor Murphy advised, "it would be a great convenience to the family and an aid to the community and the government." Murphy went so far as to encourage every family to appoint a "spokesman" to respond when the census taker arrived.

All individuals alive at 12:01 a.m. on April 1 would be counted; those born after that exact moment would not be included. "Census experts said that the 1940 census should show that the United States is nearing maturity in population growth," the *Oelwein Register* reported. "They predict that a maximum population of about 145,000,000 will be reached between 1965 and 1975." (The "experts" underestimated; the 1970 population would be 203 million.)

After the initial sweep by census workers, several communities double-checked the pulse of their population to identify individuals who might have been missed. It was a matter of civic pride for Iowans to boast that their towns were growing, but the proof would be in the census. "For years there has been talk that the small town is on its way out," noted the *Lenox Time Table*. "If we continue to make our town a better place in which to live," it added, "people will come here."

In Iowa City, the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a large newspaper ad asking, "Did the Census Taker Miss You?" "Scores of Iowa City persons were missed by the census taker because of families being away at the time of his call, because of oversights, because of residents being busy, and because of the limited time provided by law. . . . It is most important that Iowa City receive full credit for its full population—the final figure reported will stand

officially for the next 10 years. . . . With other cities in Iowa assured of substantial population gains we simply cannot afford to fall back."

Community stakeholders in Mason City understood that population gains could increase state and federal appropriations and economic development, so an army of 500 "re-checkers" went block by block looking for residents who were still unrecorded. As the local paper reported, "One man telephoned to say that he had a large family and none of them had been counted." The man asked the enumerator to come by again, explaining that "I remember you being here . . . but I thought you were the assessor."

When the final figures were released months later, it was clear that the 1940 census reflected the consequences of a decade of depression. "The predictions that the Depression had had a dramatic effect on the character and trajectory of the population proved correct," Margo Anderson comments. "Population growth between 1930 and 1940 dropped to the historically low rate of 7.2 percent. Cities stopped growing."

The aggregate totals for Iowa were also disappointing. Granted, its population had grown since 1930, but by less than 3 percent. With 2,538,268 residents, Iowa was the 20th most populous state. Unfortunately, its growth was eclipsed by that of other states, especially in the South and the West. Iowa's number of congressional delegates dropped from nine to eight. Eight other states lost seats as well.

But the *Globe-Gazette* found a bit of a silver lining. "Mason City [is] Iowa's Bright Spot" was the front-page headline on October 1. Based on a preliminary report, the community was the "fastest growing" of Iowa's 16 largest cities, and Cerro Gordo County had moved up to become its ninth most populous county.

A companion story noted economic growth in a cross-section of local industries, forecasting a major shift in the local economy. "Not yet has Mason City felt the stimulus of the defense program," noted the editor, alluding to the growing tension in Europe. "That lies still in the future."

Many of the young Iowans who were dutifully counted in April 1940 would not live to be recorded in the next census, the results of a nation at war.

Unexpected uses of the 1940 census also reflected a nation at war. Four months after Pearl Harbor, Congress signed the Second War Powers Act of 1942. This act authorized Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins (who oversaw the census bureau) to make available

any census information "to any branch or agency of the Government." To help mobilize the nation for war, "the bureau provided tabulations for projecting draft quotas [and] population data for the location of military installations and the impact of defense industries," writes Anderson. "On a more sinister note, the population census also identified alien populations who might post a security threat to the nation," she continues. "The Japanese were readily identified in the 1940 population census because they were a small, highly concentrated ethnic minority. . . . Detailed counts of the Japanese for small geographic areas [provided] the parameters for finding and interning the population."

Today, seven decades after the cantankerous Senator Charles Tobey railed against what he called "census snooping," the U.S. Census Bureau has officially released individual census returns for 1940, and genealogists and historians are trolling the internet for information. Little did Americans in April 1940 realize just how curious we would be today about where they lived and worked and what they owned and earned. ❖

Timothy Walch is a volunteer at the State Historical of Iowa and a frequent contributor to this magazine.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Although the census has been an ongoing constitutional responsibility of the federal government since 1790, there has been only modest interest in the social history of how it has been conducted. The most useful secondary source is Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). This excellent overview is the place to begin. In addition to Anderson, historians Jennifer L. Hochschild and Brenna M. Powell have written on the subject of "race or color" categories; see their "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census 1850-1930: Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, Mixed Parentage, Hindoos, and the Mexican Race," in *Studies in American Political Development* (Spring 2008).

For the 1940 census, one should begin with Robert M. Jenkins, *Procedural History of the 1940 Census of Population and Housing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Although this is a highly scholarly work of greatest value to demographers and other social scientists, the patient researcher will be rewarded by a careful review of the text.

For genealogists and family historians, the best source of information on the 1940 census is available online from the National Archives and Records Administration. See: <http://1940census.archives.gov> for more on the documentary legacy of the census as manifested in the enumeration sheets compiled in spring 1940. See also these articles in *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives*: Constance Potter, "New Questions in the 1940 Census," 42 (Winter 2010); and Diane Petro, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime? The 1940 Census: Employment and Income," 44 (Spring 2012). Both can be found online.

This article was based on a careful review of Iowa newspapers published in 1940. Copies of the stories used and quoted in this article are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, SHSI (Iowa City center).

Census question #10 asked for "color or race." According to historians Jennifer Hochschild and Brenna Powell, "after the 1930 census, the Census Bureau perceived only three races (white, Negro, Indian) and five Asian nationalities"—namely, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and "Hindu." The 1940 census manual dictated that "a person of mixed white and Negro blood should be [recorded] as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood." Specifying European nationalities was no longer relevant, since immigration quotas were a fraction of what they had been before 1924 and limited mostly to northern Europeans.

Right: Japanese American farmers from relocation camps in Colorado and Arkansas visit Sam Kennedy's potato fields near Clear Lake, as guests of the Iowa State Vegetable Growers Association (July 1943).

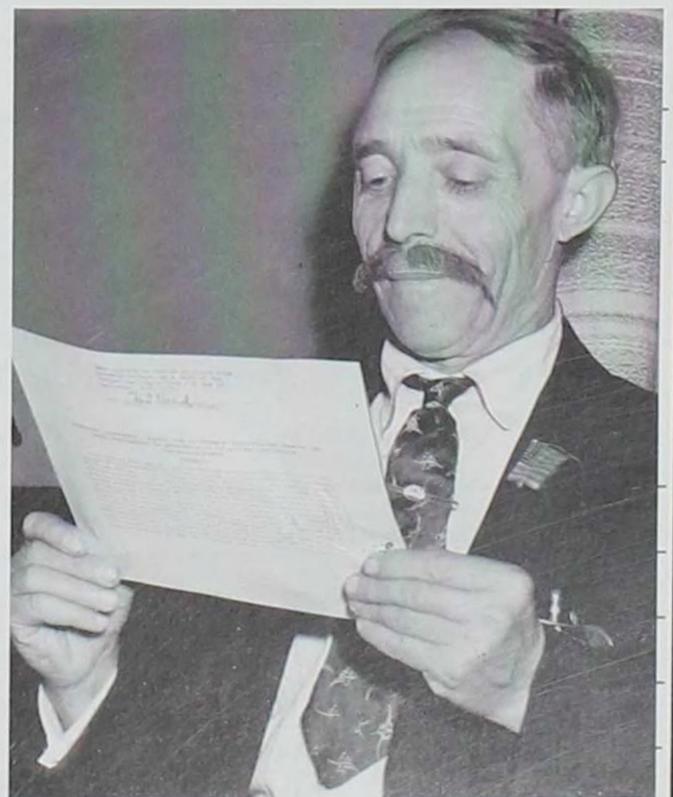


SHSI (DES MOINES)



Left: A home in the Des Moines Center Street neighborhood, which largely comprised African American homes and businesses.

Below: Italian immigrant Jim Fargo holds his final citizenship certificate, in Des Moines, 1939.



LEFT: SHSI (DES MOINES); RIGHT: SHSI (DES MOINES), PATTEN COLLECTION

PHOTO BY FRY DES MOINES