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The World of Ellison Orr

by Michael J. Perry



SHSI (IOWA CITY); ELLISON ORR COLLECTION

Born in 1857, Ellison James Orr wore many hats in his 93 years of life in Iowa. Farmer, teacher, surveyor, county clerk, telephone company manager, and archaeologist were professions that kept Orr busy. His avocational interests also filled up his time.

Early in the 20th century, Orr took up photography, a hobby that he turned to whenever he found a few spare moments or felt the need to capture on film the natural and cultural world of Iowa.

The photos here are a mere sample of a larger collection of nearly 350 photos that document his wide-ranging interests.

Left: Orr photographed two workers in Guttenberg, 1916. One man watches from below as another is suspended from a utility pole. At one time Orr was manager of a telephone company, so he may have had a particular interest in scenes like this one.



Orr stands with a walking stick on an island in the Mississippi River, near Waukon Junction, circa 1920s. Waukon Junction is about 23 miles southeast of Waukon, Orr's hometown. Exploring the natural world was one of Orr's consuming interests even as a child.



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By water clear enough to show reflections, a woman balances on a log as she fishes for sucker in Village Creek, which flows into the Mississippi.

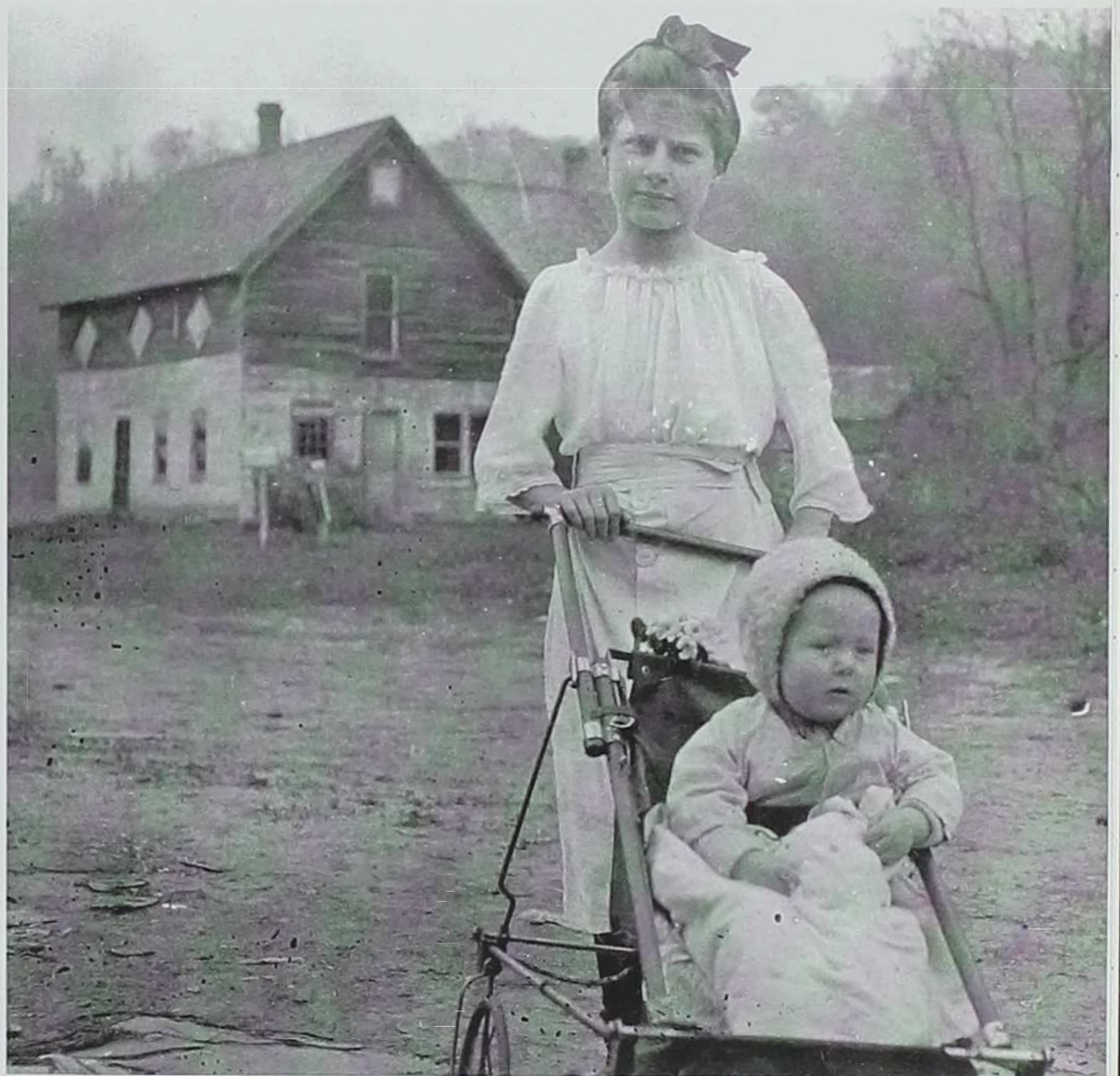
Northeast Iowa

Many of the scenes Orr photographed were of his native northeast Iowa, especially Allamakee County. Curious and observant, he was a self-trained naturalist, interested in botany, geology, and ornithology. His childhood memoir describes prairies and sloughs, birds and beaver dams, wildcats and rattlesnakes.



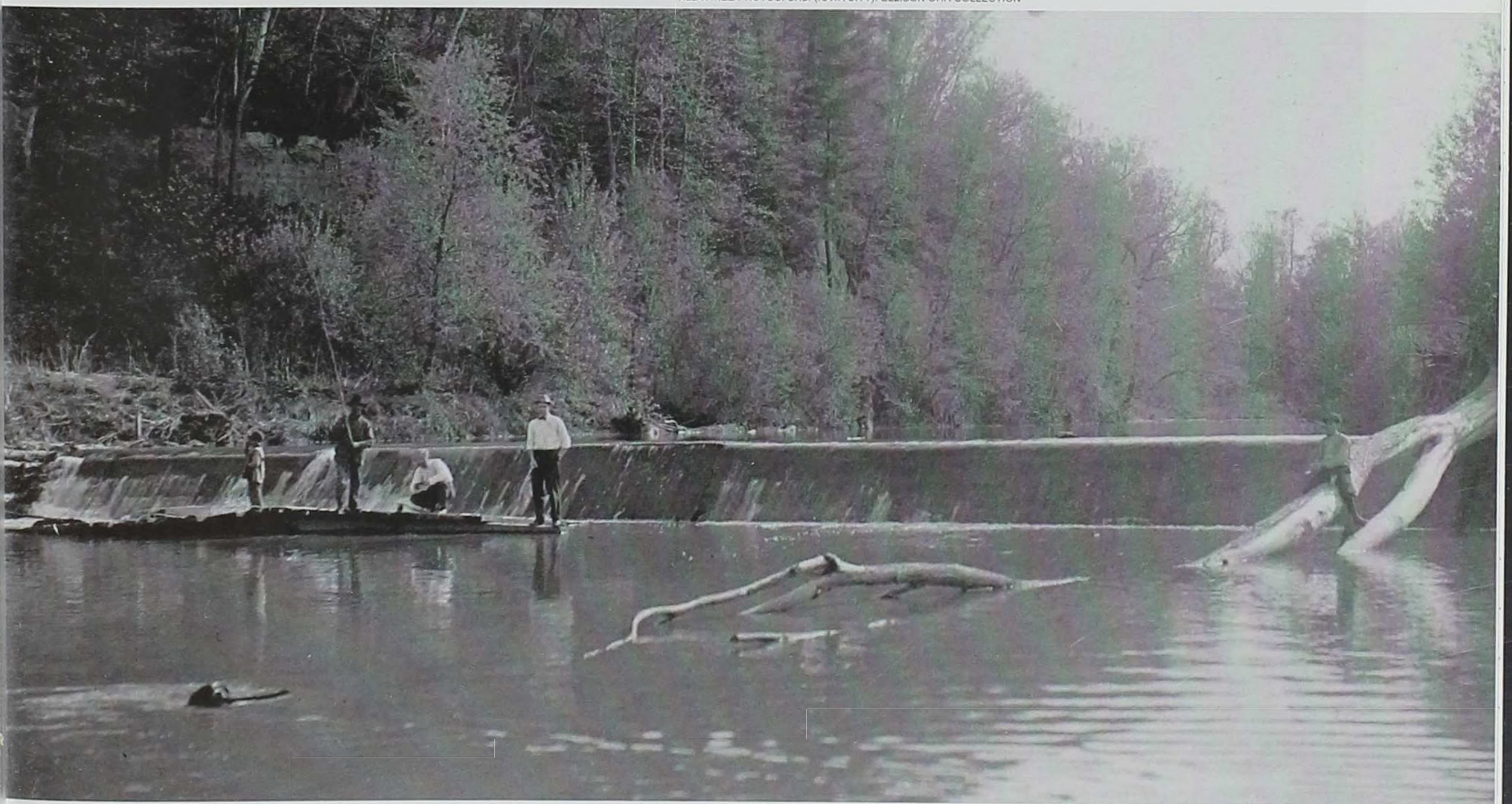
Mushrooms in soft maple woods on the Turkey River bottoms near Elkader, 1914. Orr often photographed close-ups of wildflowers as well.

Right: Two citizens of Ion, about 1915. Ion is now an Allamakee County ghost town, along the Yellow River and four miles west of the Mississippi.



Below: Fishing by the Yellow River dam at Forest Mills, 1914. In the foreground, a dog cools off in the river while fetching a stick.

ALL THREE PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY); ELLISON ORR COLLECTION





From his childhood, Orr recalled, "Though the meadow lark and the bobolink were very common, their nests were exceedingly hard to find." As an adult, Orr noted on the back of the photo the location of this meadowlark nest in a road-side ditch as NW¼, NW¼, Section 23, Union Prairie Township, Allamakee County, 1947.

BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY); ELLISON ORR COLLECTION



"In those [pioneer] days," Orr wrote, "the only fences were of rails ten feet long, split out of oak and elm logs. The slippery elm, *Ulmus fulva*, was supposed to make the most durable ones. Out of these was built a very substantial zig-zag fence. The bottom rails were laid on a small flat stone or block of wood. The pioneers believed that if the fence was built in the 'dark of the moon,' it would sink into the ground, but if it was built in the 'light of the moon' it would not." Orr added, "Only a few of the lanky, scrub, half-wild cattle of that day ever acquired the high art of jumping. [A rail fence] was said to be horse high, pig tight, and bull stout." Although this Allamakee County photo was taken in 1940, this old fence retains the typical eight to ten horizontal rails and remnants of the vertical stakes.



OFFICE OF THE STATE ARCHAEOLOGIST: CHARLES R. KEYES COLLECTION

Amidst tall prairie in Allamakee County, Orr (right) and Charles Reuben Keyes (next to him) search for evidence of a burial and village area associated with the Oneota culture, 1500–1600 A.D. As director of the new Iowa Archaeological Survey, Keyes hired Orr as field supervisor and then assistant director. Orr was 77 when he was hired. As a young man Orr had learned surveying skills from a Civil War topographical engineer.