

Track & Field in Iowa, 1880s–1960s

by Leah D. Rogers & Clare L. Kernek

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Between the 1880s and 1960s—the focus of this story—track and field evolved as larger meets were organized and stadiums improved, and as athletes and coaches achieved successes that advanced the sport and built spectatorship.

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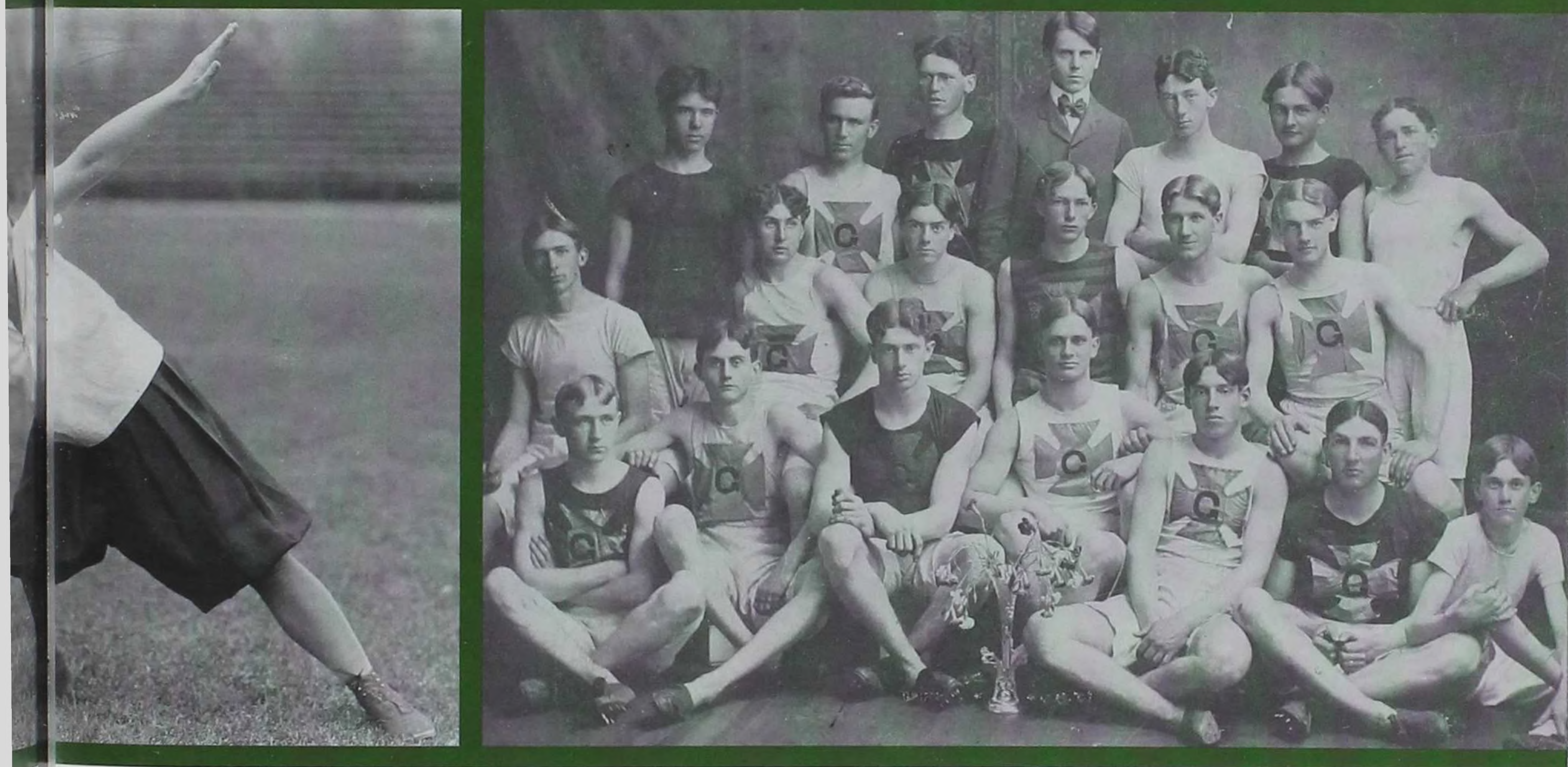
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In those years Grinnell had several talented trackmen—including Clyde Ward, whom Grinnell's Ward Field is named after. Grinnell also had the advantage of having several talented bicyclists on its team; bicycle racing was an important part of track and field competition in the early 1890s.

In 1894 and 1895, one of the fastest sprinters in the country (and the University of Iowa's first nationally known sports figure) was John Van Fleet Crum from Bedford, Iowa. Crum's awkward gait did not seem that of a future track star.

However, under the coaching of E. W. Moulton, his performance increased dramatically in the 1894 season. Crum took firsts in two dashes at the state meet but lost the 440 to Grinnell's R. L. Whitley (whose time of 49 seconds remained a state record for 31 years).

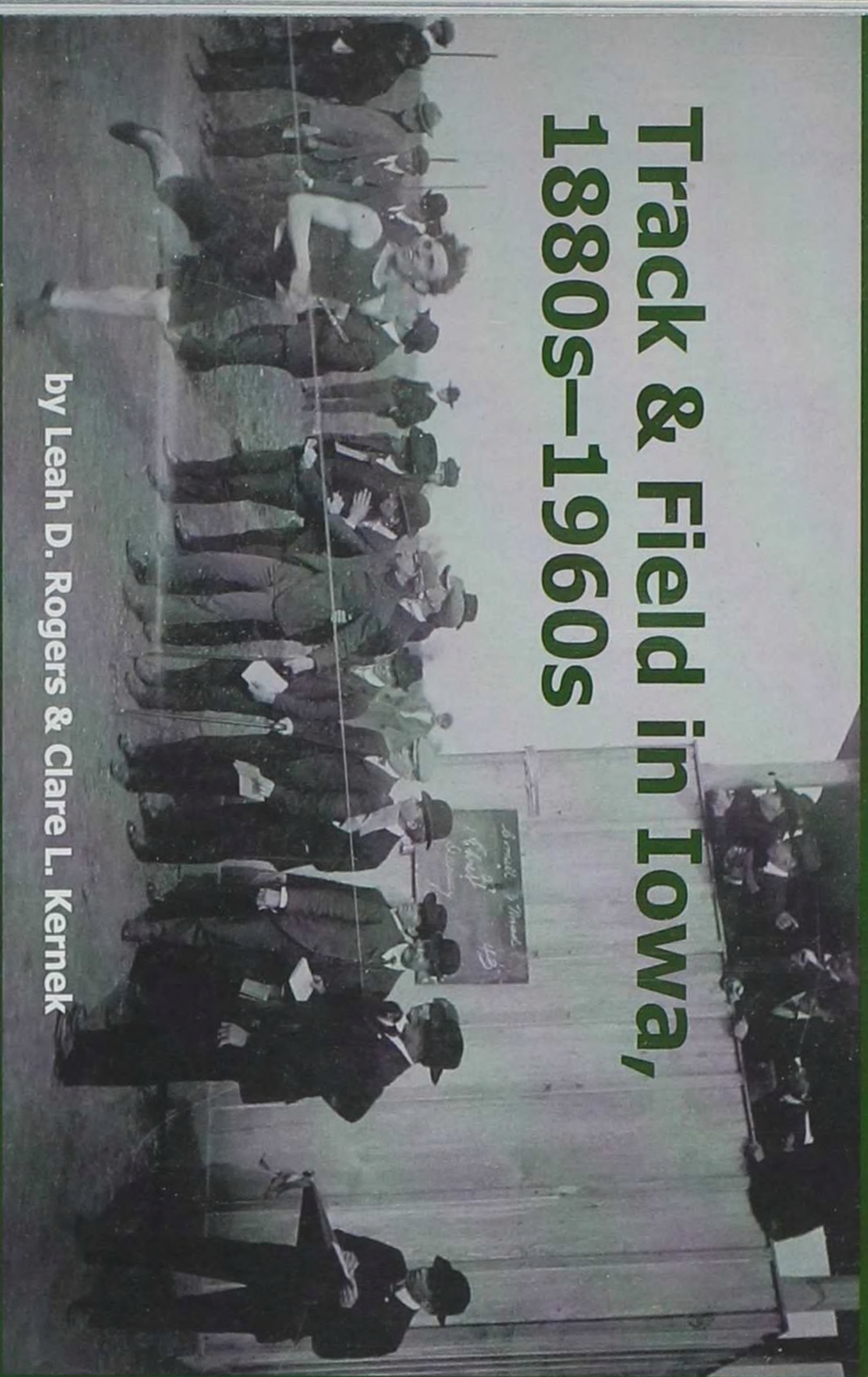
The next day Crum won two first-place medals at the first Western Intercollegiate Association meet in Chicago (forerunner to the Big Ten). During the 1895 season, Crum established himself as one of the nation's premier sprinters. After a string of 25 races without a single loss (including a dual meet with Grinnell), Crum traveled to the Inter-Collegiate 4-A meet in New York. There, he incited the ire of the eastern schools by taking firsts in the 100-yard and 220-yard dashes. In fact, the delegations from Yale and Pennsylvania were so dubious that an amateur collegian from Iowa could beat out the elite of the Ivy League that they protested on the grounds that he must be a professional.

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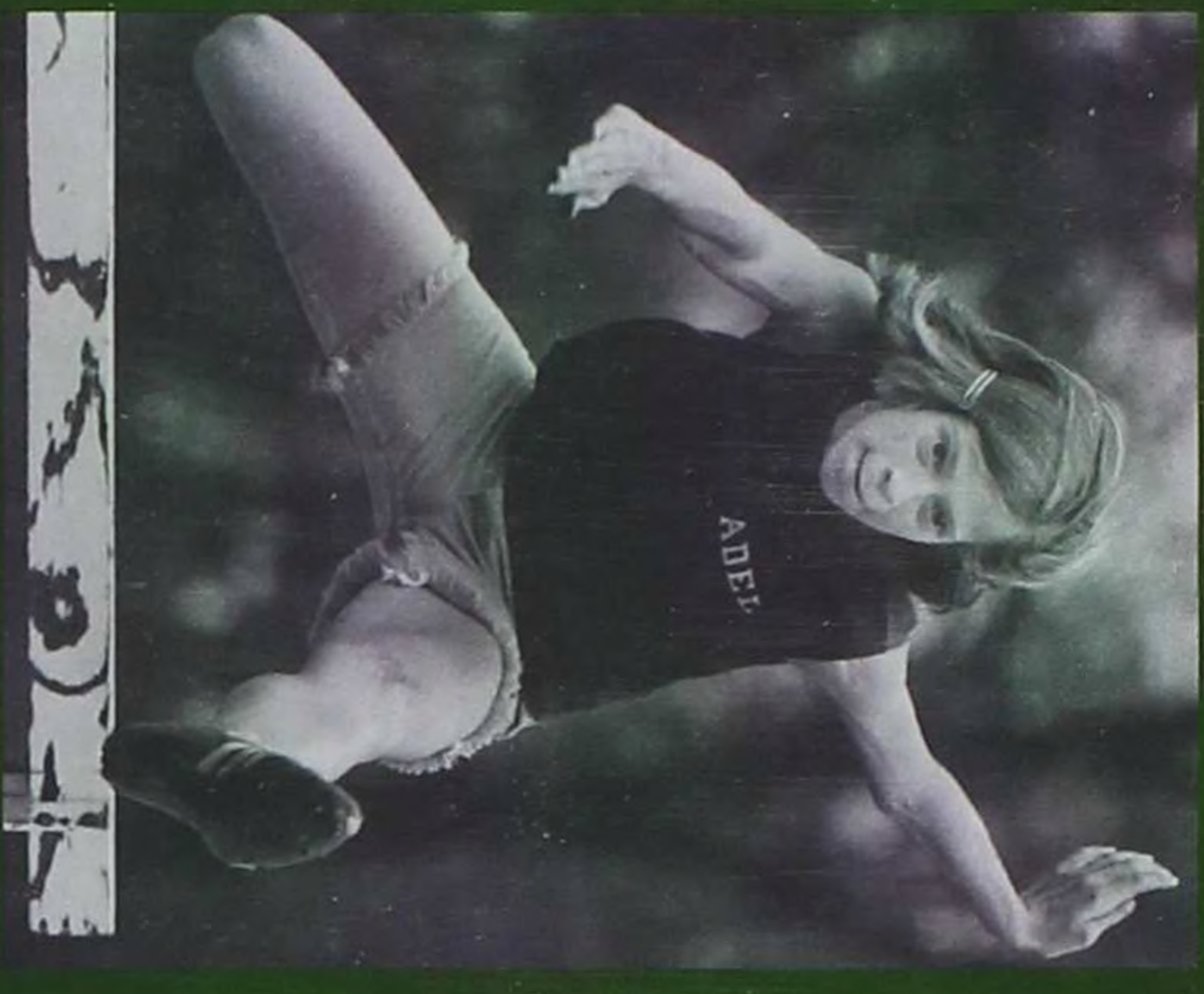
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In 1895 Grinnell's track team also benefited from the hiring of a trainer. By 1909, at the 20th annual state meet, Grinnell had won nine titles and been runner-up eight times. (In comparison, the University of Iowa had won six; Drake, four; and Iowa State, one.)

The state meet had been in Grinnell, Iowa City, Des Moines, and Marshalltown until 1897, when Des Moines became the host, often at the state fairgrounds. After more seating and improved drainage were added to the stadium field at Drake University, the event finally could be held on a proper field. And there it would stay—as the Drake Relays.

Athletic director and coach John Griffith, who came to Drake in 1908 from Morningside College in Sioux City, organized Drake's first relay meet in 1910. He decided to host a "carnival" of track and field events on April 23, 1910, with teams from Simpson, Des Moines and Highland Park colleges; Drake University; Earlham Academy; and West and North Des Moines high schools.

Despite a surprise blizzard, the event was de-

clared a success, and ambitious plans were laid for the next year's relay meet. Invitations were extended to every Iowa college, high schools throughout the state, and all the Missouri Valley institutions. Over 70 teams from 16 colleges and universities and 23 high schools competed in what a local newspaper called "the biggest meet ever staged in the Midwest." Held on April 22, 1911, a beautiful spring day, the meet established the Drake Relays as a major regional track and field event.

The crowds grew rapidly. From 500 spectators at the 1911 meet, attendance shot to 1,500 two years later, and to 5,000 by 1917. This was partly due to aggressive promotion by Griffith, who, for example, encouraged area merchants to buy blocks of tickets in advance and in 1912 sent personal invitations to 500 alumni. Local civic organizations underwrote publicity. With more schools in the meet (including the universities of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan), press coverage increased. Reporters from Chicago, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Detroit covered it. In 1915 the Associated Press declared the Drake Relays to be one of the three most important meets in the country.

More high schools began to enter the Relays. Participation at this level had been limited—despite Iowa's well-established interscholastic track program that dated back to 1906 and America's first association-sponsored state meet.

One of the decade's most well-known athletes was an Iowa prep star, Chuck Hoyt of Greenfield High School.

Recognized for his sprinting talent while in grade school, Hoyt began racing competitively in the eighth grade, and never lost a dash in high school, including in national competition. In 1912, while a high school sophomore, he won the 100-yard and 220-yard dashes at the Stagg Interscholastic Meet in Chicago, a feat that so impressed Olympic officials that he was invited to join the 1912 U.S. team. (Hoyt turned down the offer, figuring he would have another chance in college, but the 1916 games were canceled due to the war.)

Hoyt's high school had no track coach, so Grinnell's H. J. "Doc" Huff stepped in. Hoyt gave standout performances in 1913 and 1914, helping his high school teams win third and second place respectively. In 1916, running for Grinnell, Hoyt was the star of the meet after his time in the 220 set a new world record.

Of all the Iowa colleges with first-place finishes in the Relays' first decade, Coe in Cedar Rapids claimed the most, with eight, and Morningside College in Sioux City with six.

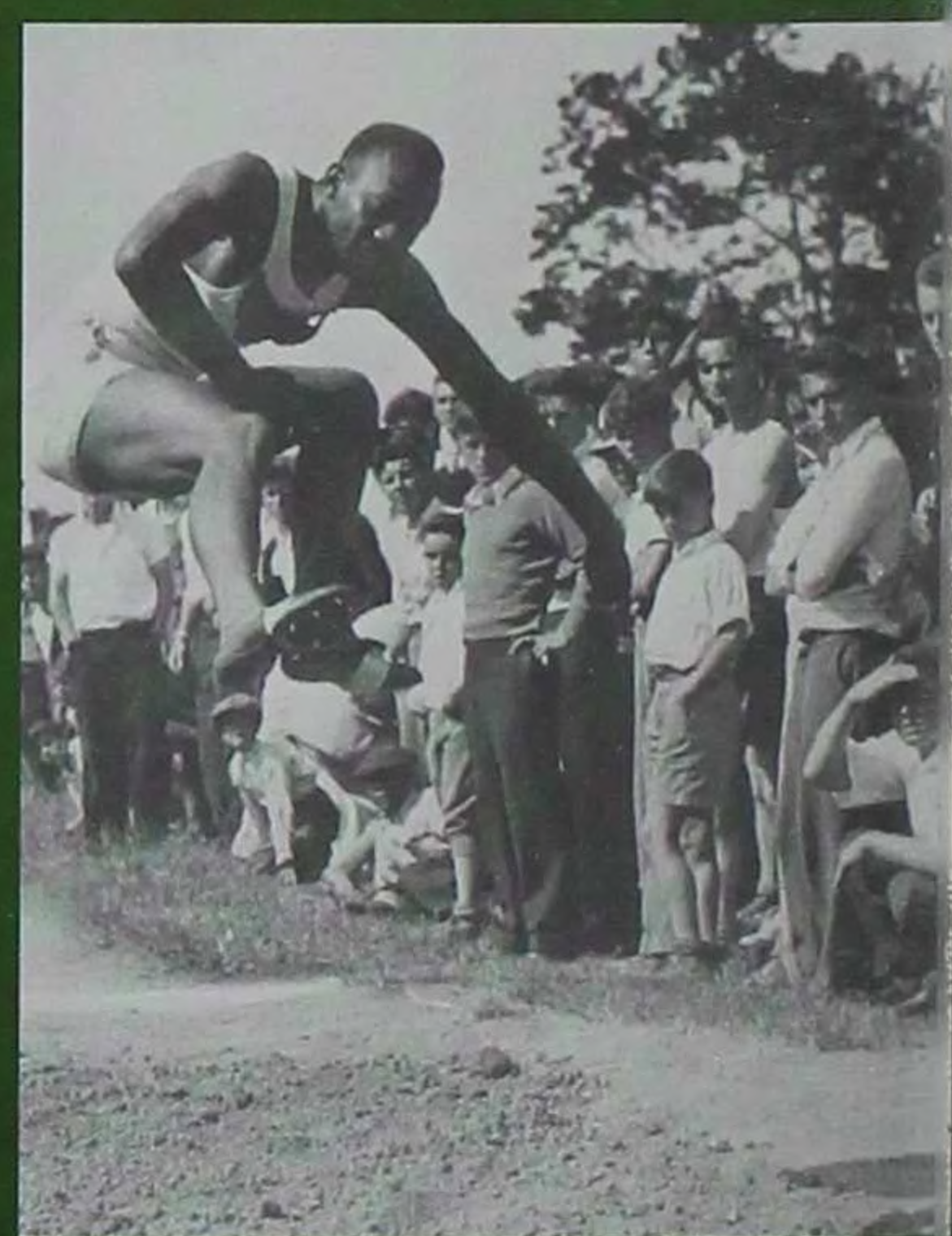
Sol Butler, one of the first African American competitors in the Drake Relays, anchored the 1919 winning 880-yard relay team from the University of Dubuque, where he had established records in six school events. He was twice elected to the All-American team as the greatest collegiate long jumper in the country. In 1919 he won the 100-yard dash and the broad jump at the Penn Relays, and represented the U.S. Army in the Inter-Allied Games in Paris, an international competition held in lieu of the Olympics

and in which 18 countries participated. His winning jump in Paris was just 2 inches shy of the Olympic record, and Butler was expected to win his event easily when he went with the U.S. team to the 1920 Games in Antwerp. But he pulled a muscle during competition and could not finish. That same year he won the AAU championship with a record-setting jump.

In the 1920s the Drake Relays came of age as a major track and field competition of national and international importance. The field of entrants widened to include athletes from the U.S. Army and colleges on both coasts, and even a pole-vaulter from Norway. The program expanded as well. By 1922, it comprised 34 events over the course of two days. Newspapers started comparing the number of new records set at Drake with those at the Penn Classic, the nation's other major relay event. In 1923, ten records had been bettered at Drake but only three at Penn. By the end of the decade, the Drake event had

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- **Hurdles**, Julie Goodrich, 1971, Adel High School.
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produced six new world records and nine national ones.

In terms of both records broken and number of overall wins for the 1920s, the University of Illinois led the field. However, several athletes from Iowa schools also triumphed in that decade and the early 1930s. Iowa State University's 2-mile relay squad in the 1920s, led by Arthur E. "Deac" Wolters and Ray Conger, set national and world records. (Conger broke the 1,500-meter record in the 1928 Olympic trials.) And under the coaching of George Bresnahan, the University of Iowa team flourished. Eric Wilson and Charles Brookins were two of the school's seven track and field athletes who competed in the Olympics in the 1920s, and long jumper Ed Gordon won a gold medal in the 1932 Games.

Other champions included future Olympian George Bretnall (Cornell College); high-jump winners Summerfield Brunk and Bob Carle (Drake); pole vault champion Xavier Boyles and discus thrower Robert Mitchell (University of Iowa); and L. D. Weldon in the javelin (Graceland). Three-time Olympic medallist

Morgan Taylor of Grinnell ran his first Drake Relays race in the 1920s. Known for his versatility, he excelled in the broad jump and hurdles. An Iowa high school also set a new U.S. record: Washington of Cedar Rapids won 14 races in the 1920s.

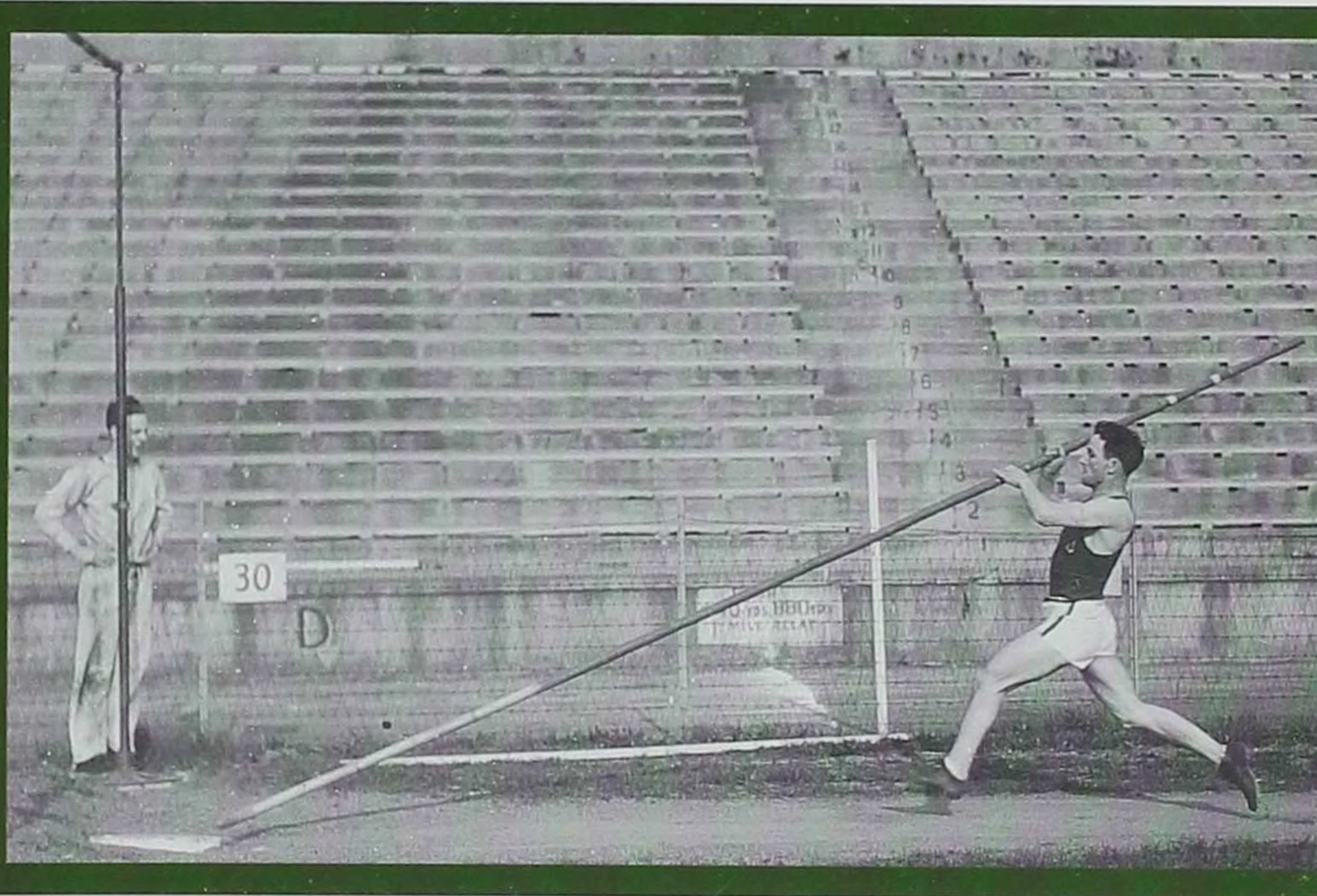
In the years leading up to World War II, the Drake Relays grew even more in size and prestige. Three thousand athletes poured into Des Moines to compete in 1931. In a fierce rivalry, the Drake Relays and Penn Classic competed to attract the premier athletes of the day. For example, in 1935, in a bid to get Ohio State's Jesse Owens, who had become famous as a prep star, the Relays director convinced Owens's team to switch its entry to Drake. Owens tied the Relays record in the broad jump, even though he injured an ankle warming up.

The event attracted the best track and field athletes in the world, as well as greater notice from the national media. In 1931 African American sports journalist Frank Young of the *Kansas City Call* began providing coverage for black newspapers in New York, Philadelphia, and several other cities. By 1937, NBC, CBS, and Mutual Radio were all broadcasting from the Relays. Despite the Depression, the decade produced larger crowds than ever.

The Relays continued uninterrupted throughout the war years, but not without change. Relay events were cut and more individual events were included instead.

From left:

- High jump, University of Iowa student, 1923.
- High jump, 1903, Cornell College vs. Iowa State Normal School (now the University of Northern Iowa).
- Relay, Julie Goodrich (front), 1973, Adel High School.
- Pole vault, Henry Canby, 1929, University of Iowa.



The number of collegiate athletes decreased from 624 in 1943, to 424 the next year. This affected the number of records produced at Drake in the 1940s. Only three world records were set and no national records until after the war.

The number of Relays participants increased after the war as ex-GIs enrolled in college and competed; in 1946, half the title-winners were ex-soldiers. The following year, 141 schools from 18 states entered into competition, the highest number ever in the Relays' history. The event was again big news, and in 1949, CBS radio resumed its coverage after a nine-year hiatus. In 1953 the meet was broadcast on national television for the first time.

The 1950s saw the Drake Relays established as truly a world-class event, with many Olympic champions and world record holders competing. In one year alone the field of athletes drew from Finland, Australia, Ireland, Sweden, South Africa, Canada, Jamaica, and Hawaii. Due to the extraordinary level of talent, more records were shattered. Times were reduced in the 440 and 880. The discus record gained over 15 feet. In the pole vault the 15-foot mark was reached for the first time. And in the 120-yard high hurdles, times fell below 14 seconds.

Throughout the 1960s, the Drake Relays built on these successes, with more athletes and stronger performances attracting crowds of 18,000 spectators. This was also the decade when women first ran in the Relays. In 1961, Wilma Rudolph, three-time gold medallist

at the Rome Olympics, helped debut women's competition at the Drake Relays and won the 100-yard dash. Another advance was the track itself; an all-weather surface was installed in 1969.

The history of track and field in Iowa does not end in 1969. Followers of the sport in the last four decades have had plenty of victories to applaud. For one example, consider Natasha Kaiser, who attended Roosevelt High School in Des Moines and ran in the Drake Relays in the 1980s. She won four Drake championships and nine state medals for Roosevelt High School and went on to win Olympic and World Championship medals. Today, Kaiser-Brown is the women's track coach at Drake University.

For more than a century, the Drake Relays have symbolized the dedication of coaches, the devotion of fans, and the stamina of Iowa athletes who advance from individual high schools and colleges to this world arena. Enriched by its history, the Relays have become one of Iowa's most anticipated spring rituals. ♦

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is excerpted from the track and field chapter of "Survey of Buildings, Sites, Structures, Objects, and Districts Related to the Development of Team Sports in Iowa, 1850-1960." Submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office in 2003, the statewide survey was conducted by Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kernek, Tallgrass Historians L.C., with contributions by Lisa Randolph, Prairiesong Research.