

Sure Signs of Spring

It's never been hard to spot spring in Iowa—not a hundred years ago or thirty years ago or today.

And we expect that some signs of spring aren't going to change anytime soon.

At least we hope not.

—The Editor



One sign of spring in Iowa is its dramatic and unpredictable weather. It was May 28, 1903, when the woman above directed a child's gaze to lightning fracturing the sky near Albert City.

Melting snows and blue skies give hope to Iowans hungry for spring—until a sudden blizzard or hailstorm crushes our spirits, or torrential rains drive us to worry. And then a string of warm, sunny days arrive, calling forth the midwestern work ethic in some, and a laziness bordering on sin in others.

Spring weather in Iowa ranges from dramatic and sublime to breezy and balmy. Watching the weather—fickle though it may be—is a fine excuse to get outside and sample the new season.

Another sure sign of spring? Festivals, celebrations, and commemorations, all ripe with tradition.

This scene from Maquoketa—girls in white dresses and enormous hair bows weaving their way around a May pole—was not uncommon in schoolyards and parks a century ago, though it is rare today.

But springtime parades still abound. Irish Americans and Irish wannabees parade on St. Patrick's Day, Iowa State University students during VEISHEA, and military veterans on Memorial Day.

Weddings and graduation parties are staged outdoors, with hopes for sunshine. Mexican Americans dance in colorful skirts and sashes on Cinco de Mayo. Some Iowans still decorate the graves of family members with irises and peonies on the last Monday in May.

And in a few Iowa communities, tulips are reason enough to sweep the streets and celebrate.





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SPRINGFIELD CITY, GAMMILL COLLECTION

SHSI (IOWA CITY); ULTANG COLLECTION



Iowans test themselves against the power of nature in the spring, sometimes in inconsequential ways. Photographer Don Ultang caught two such moments, of the agony and ecstasy of kite flying.

But Iowans also test themselves against nature's power in far more serious ways. Can a farmer beat the odds of foul weather during planting season? Can a legion of volunteers with a mountain of sandbags outwit rising rivers and creeks? Can a community resurrect itself after a devastating tornado? Winter tests our resilience. So does spring.





Playing outdoors—may it always be a sign of spring!

Perhaps shooting marbles in a dirt street seemed iconically American to photographer John Vachon as he traveled through Woodbine, Iowa, in 1940, on assignment for the Farm Security Administration.

Though marbles have given way to other toys, the siren call of spring still draws children to outdoor play. Skateboards rumble down the sidewalk, chalk drawings adorn the driveway, kickballs land in the flower bed, and jump ropes slap the pavement.

For proof that winter has truly ended and spring has truly arrived in Iowa, watch for flashes of a particularly exuberant liberty released in a child's spirit.

And, for that matter, in ours.