

# Reaping the Bounty

In the 1890s, Iowa boasted of its agricultural productivity by constructing elaborate though ephemeral exposition palaces and exhibits, ornamented with festoons of grasses, mosaics of grain, and pyramids of produce. As one exhibit proclaimed, “The prayer [of] ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ is answered best in Iowa.”

Although these exuberant celebrations of the state’s fertility fell out of style after a few years, Iowa’s productivity continued, ever dependent on the workers who planted, cultivated, and gathered in Iowa’s annual harvest.

Here, then, are a few of the ordinary people who year after year reaped Iowa’s bounty.

—The Editor

SHSI (IOWA CITY): FOSTER COLLECTION



Above: Glen Foster carries John Foster (c. 1900) amidst a garden in Iowa Falls. Right: Mrs. Ralph Mann of Jefferson County poses by shelves of canning and a bin of potatoes (c. 1940s).





SHS (IOWA CITY): WETTACH COLLECTION



Drivers of seven wagons await the loading of cabbages into refrigerated boxcars in August 1916 in Nichols, Iowa. J. W. Rummells first grew cabbage in 1912 on five acres near Nichols. Within a few years he was shipping 10,000 tons of cabbage from southeastern Iowa and supplying the Midwest's major produce markets. Fellow horticulturists dubbed him the "Cabbage King."

Every February, workers hired by Rummells unloaded tons of railroad cars of manure and topsoil to prepare seedbeds in hothouses and cold frames. Thousands of seedlings were set out when the weather warmed. Heads were harvested and shipped from June through October. An ice plant, crate factory, and railroad siding, all constructed to accommodate the heavy yields, provided additional jobs in the Nichols area.







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SPS (IOWA QTV) WETZEL COLLECTION



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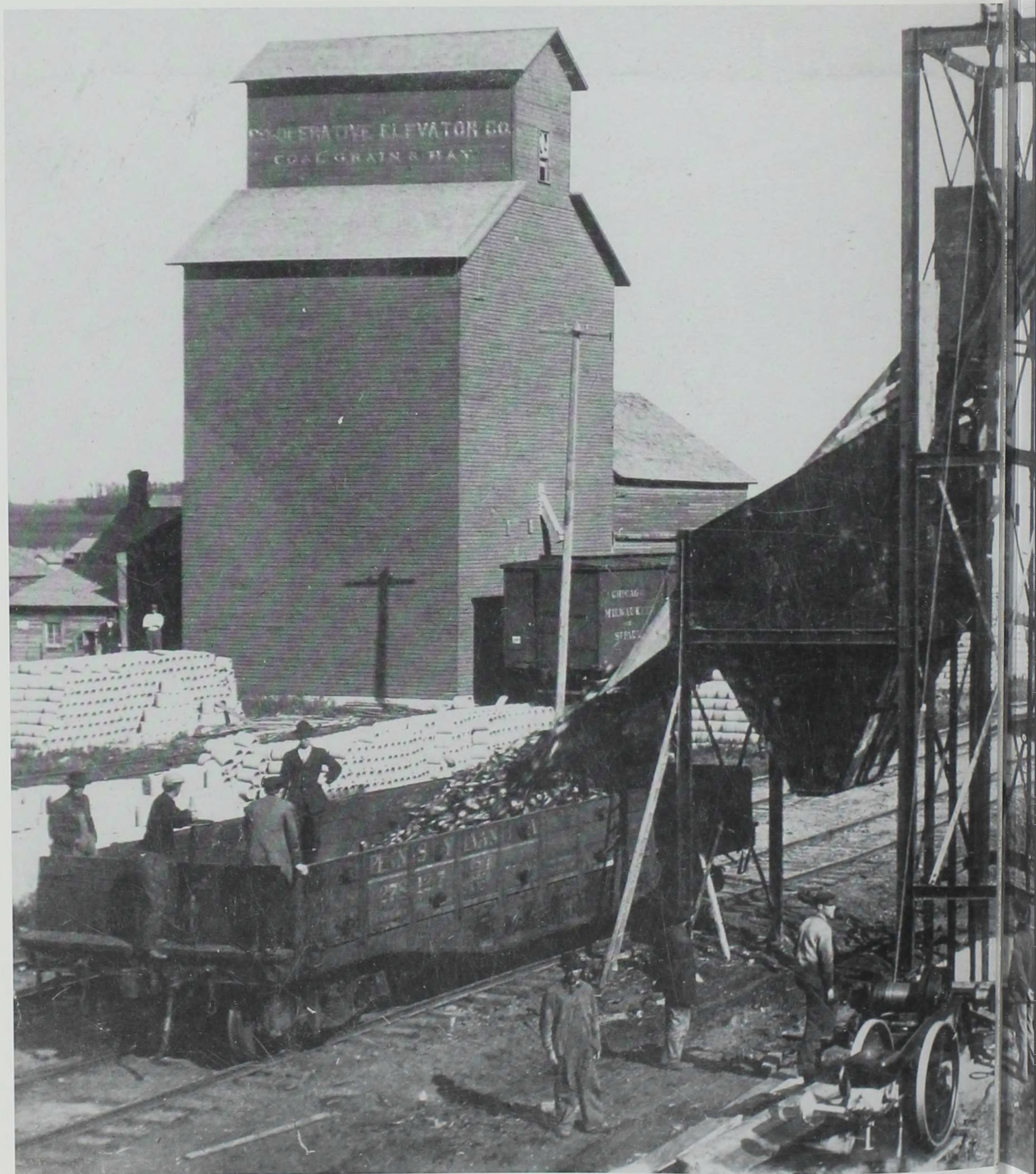






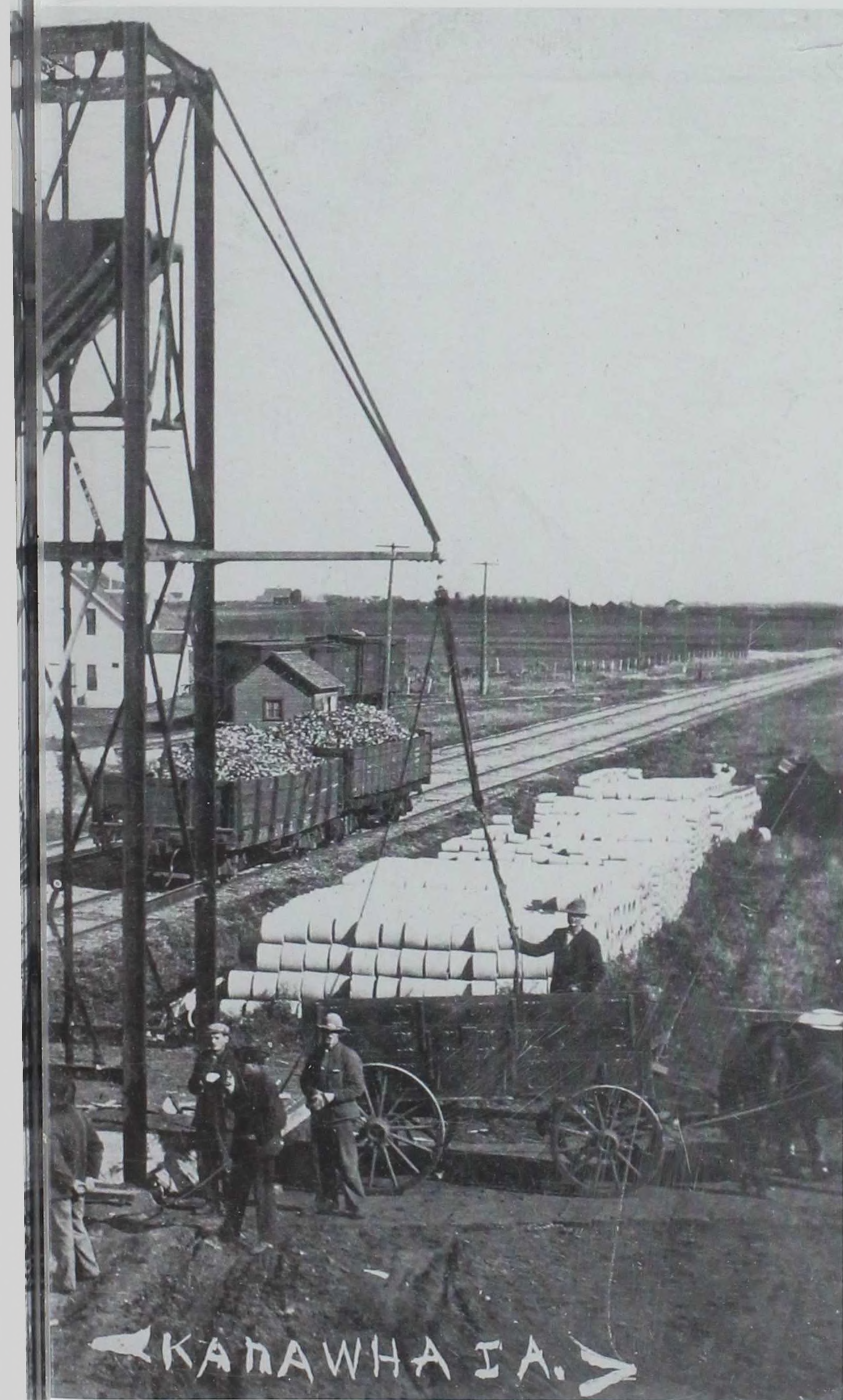
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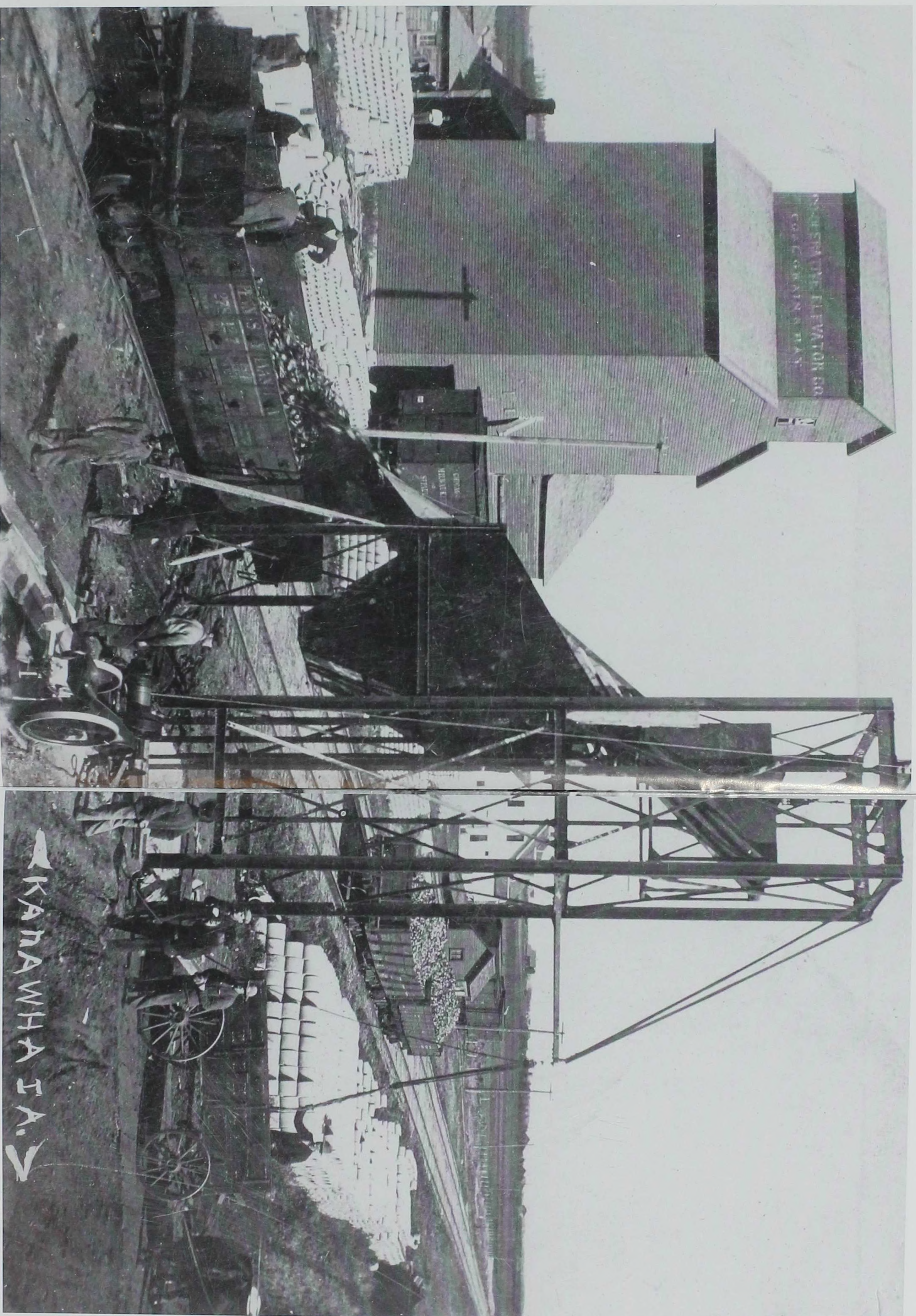


Dwarfed by a grain elevator and stacks of clay tile, a handful of men oversee the loading of sugar beets into railroad cars at Kanawha, c. 1910–1915.

Processing sugar beets was a new industry in northern Iowa early in the century. At harvest time, farmers transported the beets by wagon to a nearby “sugar dump” like this one in Kanawha. From there they were shipped to processing plants in Iowa, where the beets were refined into sugar.

While plant owners provided the capital, and farmers the land, Mexicans and Mexican Americans provided the stoop labor. In 1926, for instance, over 2,000 Mexican nationals labored in the state’s sugar beet fields.





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SHS (IOWA CITY) WERTACH COLLECTION

A good crop of apples meant a good supply of cider for those with a cider press, muscle power, and spare jugs and jars. Here, the McCabes demonstrate how it was done.

In 1910, three out of four Iowa farm families had apple orchards, and the state ranked sixth nationally in apple production. But severe winters frequently jeopardized orchards. On Armistice Day in 1940, daytime temperatures plunged 50 degrees, dropping to below zero. Orchards in southern Iowa were especially hard hit.

Fortunately, Iowa State pomologist T. J. Maney's experiments with grafting desirable varieties onto hardier, winterproof stocks soon met the challenge of brutal winters.





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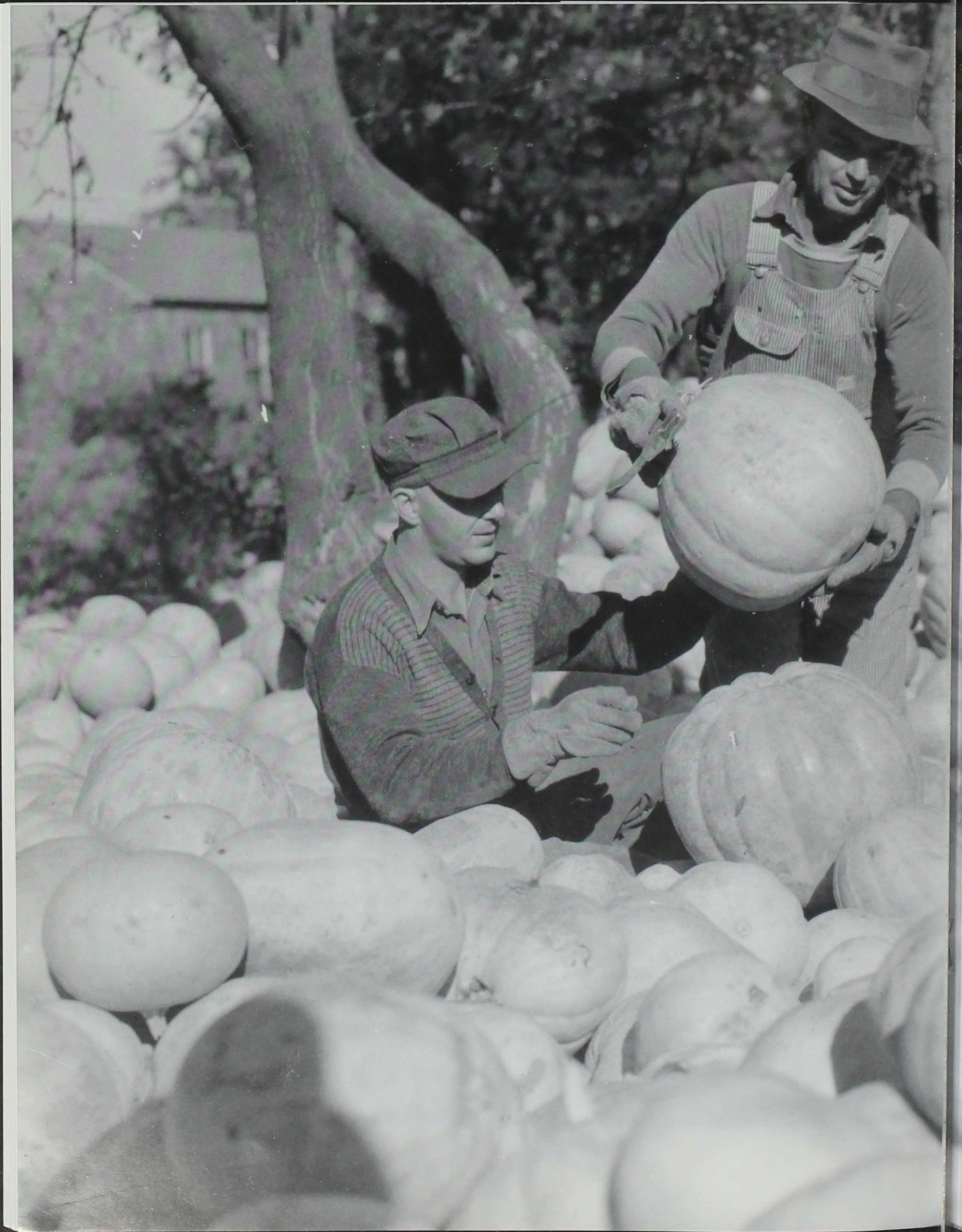


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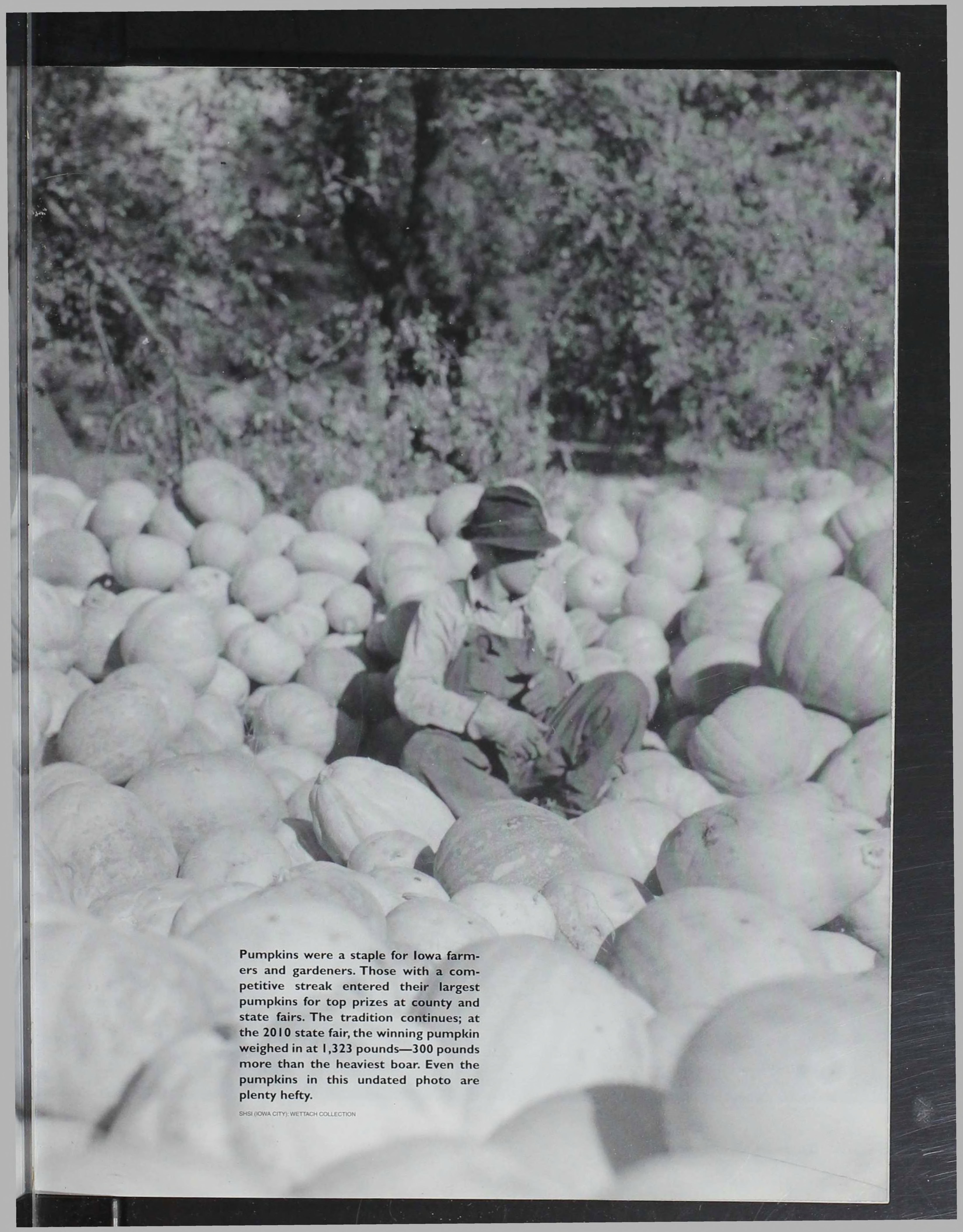
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Pumpkins were a staple for Iowa farmers and gardeners. Those with a competitive streak entered their largest pumpkins for top prizes at county and state fairs. The tradition continues; at the 2010 state fair, the winning pumpkin weighed in at 1,323 pounds—300 pounds more than the heaviest boar. Even the pumpkins in this undated photo are plenty hefty.

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5861 (OWA CITY) WETZEL COLLECTION





Burlap sacks bulge with black walnuts. Perhaps the driver is calculating whether the sacks and the children will all fit in the auto.

At the time of settlement, black walnut trees thrived in Iowa's rich river bottoms. Used for barn timbers in the 19th century, and still used for fine furniture, the wood has long been valued for its strength and beauty.

The actual walnuts, however, are a bonus for those willing to hull, crack, and tediously pick out the nutmeat—chores that result in stained hands and precious little reward for walnut lovers.



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SHSI (IOWA CITY): KENT COLLECTION





Farmers deliver shelled corn to Corwith on a frigid day in January 1913. With the help of hired men, farm families started picking corn in October, hoping to finish by the end of December if the weather cooperated.

An auto repair business sits across from the Corwith grain elevator. Although Iowa farmers adopted automobiles fairly early, tractors did not replace workhorses until the 1940s, when the war drew farm laborers into the armed services and defense jobs. ❖





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