# The Main Street | Remember Corydon, Iowa

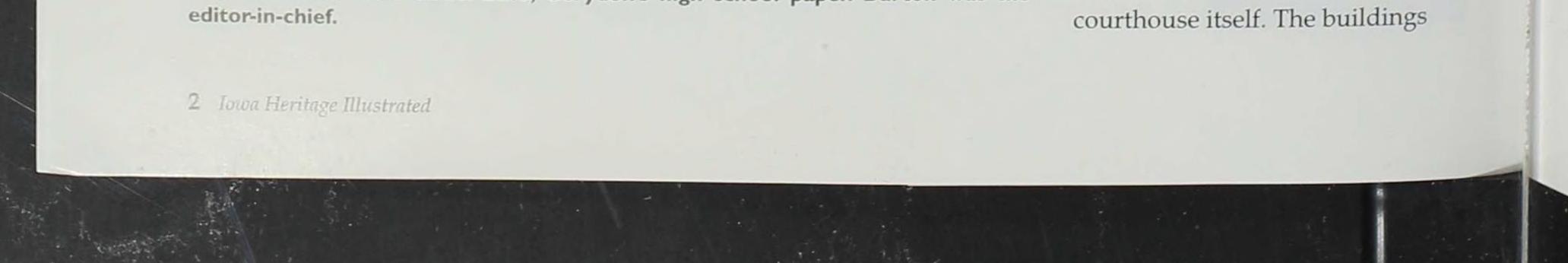


by William Lee Burton

n many of the smaller county seat towns in Iowa, such as the one where I grew up, "Main Street" was actually a square, with the major business establishments around the four sides of the little park in which stood the county courthouse. The courthouse in our town was a red brick structure of ornate design, with a clock tower. Inside, its ceilings were high, its windows tall and narrow. Stair banisters were of dark oak, as were the judge's bench and the railing in the courtroom. A distinctive odor always lingered about the place, a mingling of sweeping compound, stale cigar smoke, and human sweat. In this building the inexorable facts of life were centered: here births and deaths were registered, ownership of land recorded, marriages licensed or dissolved, taxes paid, criminals tried and sentenced. Even the clock regulated our lives. One of my earliest memories is of waking in the night and hearing its measured, booming strokes—a comforting, reassuring sound.

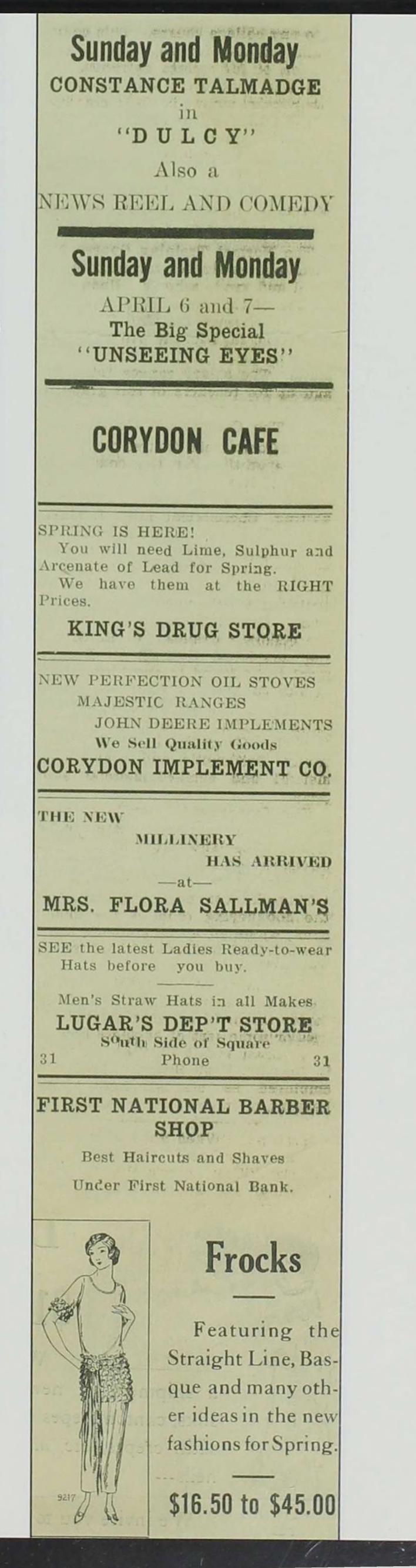
William Lee Burton (back left) and friends at Senior Flunk Day, April 1924. The ads ran in the 1924 C.H.S. Echo, Corydon's high school paper. Burton was the

The architecture of the business houses fronting the square was as elaborate as that of the



were mostly of brick, solidly built but with corbeling and other fancy brickwork which indicated the artistic proficiency of the builders. All were two stories in height, the ground floor occupied by stores, the second by the offices of doctors and lawyers, and by a few (very few) apartments. I considered these downtown living quarters a very superior kind of home. My parents lived in a house, as did almost everybody else in the town, and houses always had, in summer, lawns to mow and gardens to weed, and, in winter, sidewalks to shovel, wood or coal to carry in for cookstoves and base burners. How fortunate those people who could look from their windows upon the town's activities—people going by in buggies and wagons, or perhaps in a new Ford, Reo, Hupmobile, or Pierce-Arrow! Sometimes there would be a fire, with the siren wailing like a banshee and everybody running; the butcher tossing aside his apron and cleaver, the drayman tying his horses to the nearest lamp-post, the grocery clerk dropping cans and boxes in his haste to join the other volunteers on the chugging truck. And always small boys like myself, running along behind, panting and breathless with excitement.

ners of the square, their windows exhibiting the fashions of the day: men's suits in sober blacks and browns, ladies' dresses of silk moire and dainty cotton, decorated with yards of lace, braid, and flounces. The interiors of the stores were rather dark, and they always smelled of mothballs. The young lady clerks, all trying to look like Gibson girls in their high-necked white blouses, their hair done in elaborate puffs, moved discreetly behind the long counters, measuring out cloth, suggesting patterns and colors. At the conclusion of each sale, one's money traveled in a little basket over humming wires to a dim aerie at the back, where a high priestess of finance sent one's change zipping back with admirable promptness. The town had one bookstore, run by a Mr. Bowers, whom I remember as a tall, formally dressed man, very grave and reserved, as befitted his calling. The books which he sold (or which perhaps remained on his shelves unsold) were of high moral character: no dime novels or penny-dreadfuls here! Mr. Bowers was superintendent of the Sunday School, and from Saturday night until Monday morning his business remained adamantly closed; he even pulled down the shades of the front window, lest he be accused of exhibiting his wares on the Sabbath. To my childish eyes, the most attractive places on the square were the movie theatre and the confectionery and ice cream store. The latter I remember rather dimly. It was apparently a bakery, and I



ntil the 1930s depression, the town had three banks, impressive-looking structures with much iron grillwork and walls of polished marble—the very picture of stability and strength. Two large clothing stores (we called them "dry goods stores" then) occupied cor-

was impressed by the fact that the proprietor made his own cones,

Let us tell you about Hess & Cloak's Poultry Panacea and Stock Tonic and Dip. All guaranteed or your money back if not satisfied.

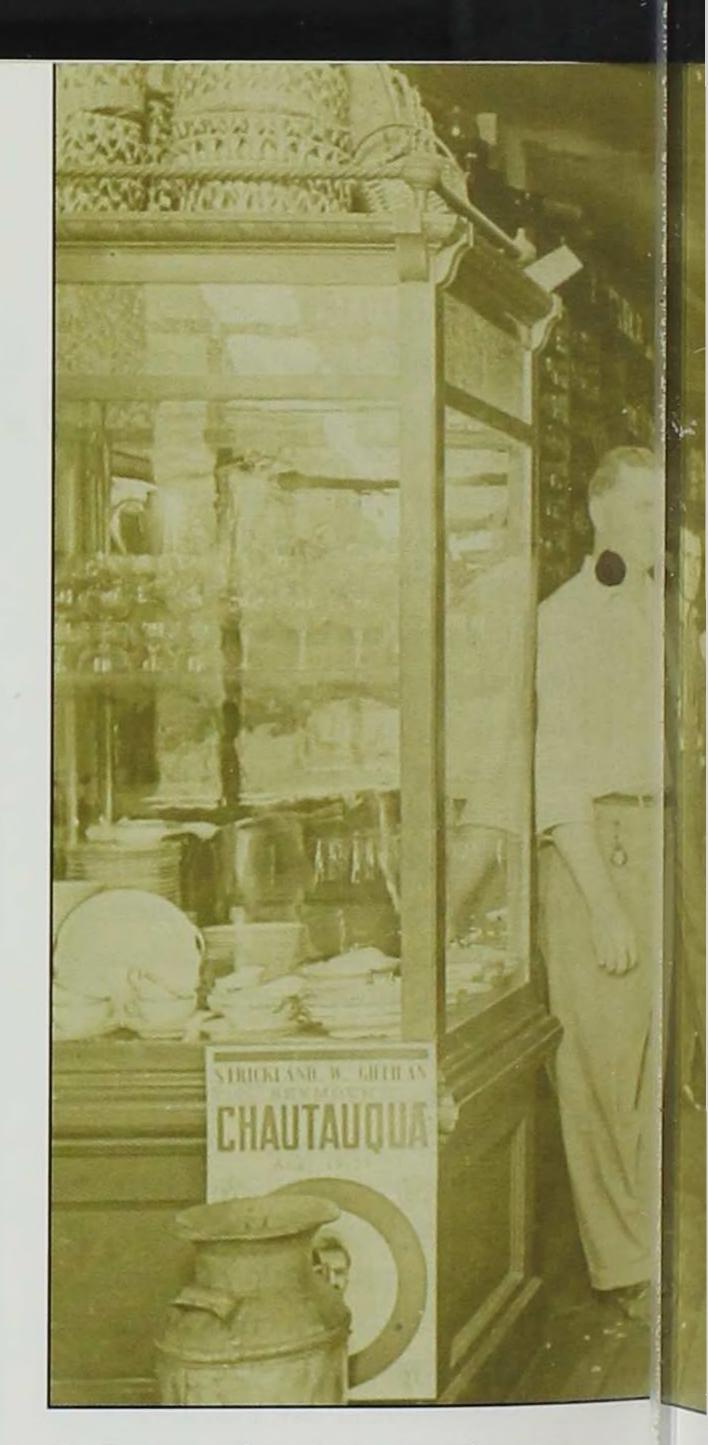
T. F. KING Drug Store Start Your Baby Chicks on MOR KIK For Sale At LUGAR'S DEP'T STORE SCOTT & VAN BENTHUSEN First in FRESH and CURED MEATS.

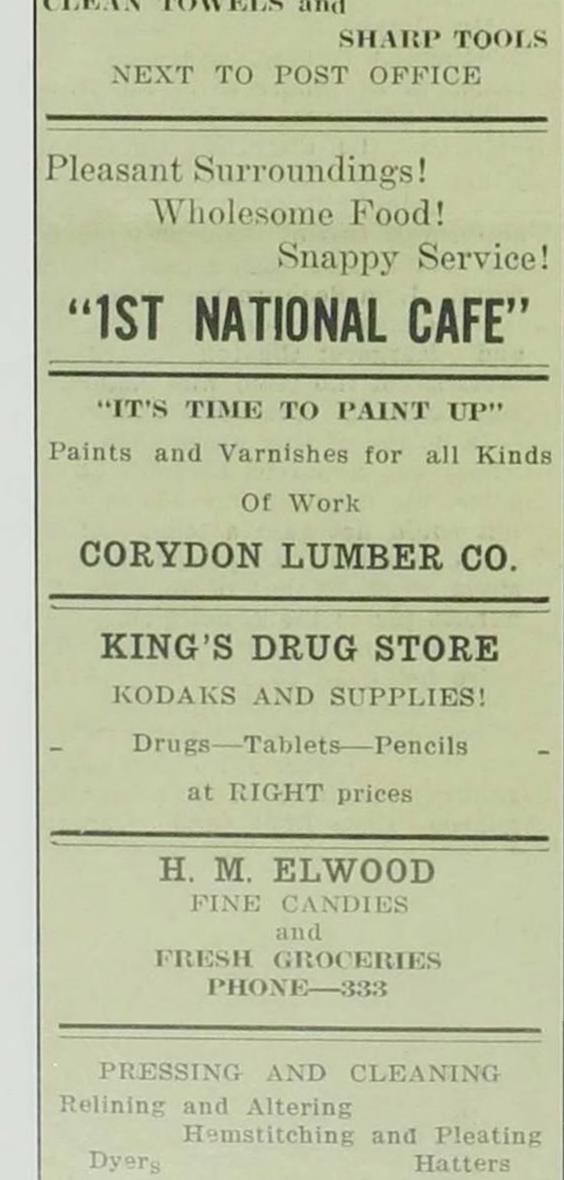
C. L. CLARK

ABSTRACTS

"JEFF WEST" uses CLEAN TOWELS and using a thin, sweetened dough which was baked and then rolled into a conical shape. Cooled and filled with homemade vanilla ice cream (there was no other flavor in those days), the result was like food for the gods; no other gustatory experience in my life has ever quite equaled that one.

ut it was the Gem Theatre (a converted store building) to which I was most attracted. The Opera House, built in the 1890s at considerable expense, usually stood empty except for "home talent" productions or an occasional road company: East Lynne, Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Ten Nights in a Barroom. The movies were a novelty then; makeshift theatres, called Nickelodeons because the admission was five cents, had sprung up all over the country, and people were flocking to them, enthralled by those jerky little shadows that actually moved. What if the folding chairs were uncomfortable, the long waits between reels boring and tiresome? What if the pictures that were shown had unconvincing plots and exaggerated acting? I went to the movies as often as my parents would let me, and if I didn't have the price of admission I peddled handbills, or swept the theatre after school, to pay for my ticket. A whole galaxy of new "stars" passed in review before my fascinated and uncritical eyes: Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Mabel Normand, Hazel Dawn, Fatty Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart, Lillian and Dorothy Gish. I spent





*Pauline,* merely existing in a fever of cliff-hung suspense, from one Tuesday night to the next.

The Gem was managed during one season by a Mr. Reizenstein, a fuzzy-haired little man who had come to Iowa from somewhere in the East, and who, a year later, drifted away as unobtrusively as he had come. He took tickets at the door before the show began, then scampered down the aisle to play the tinkly old piano, furnishing a musical accompaniment to the silent film. Though Mr. Reizenstein was always polite and deferential toward everybody, there was a certain reserve in his manner, as if he found the rest of us a bit crude and naive-no doubt we were. I wonder who he was, and how he

STROMSTEN'S The Corydon Cleaners and Repairers SEABURN'S SHOP The place to get a good Hair Cut, and Shave. Ladies' Hair bob 11 Styles

### one whole winter with The Perils of c

### came to choose our town?





Brooms hang from the ceiling, doughnuts and dishes fill the glass cases, and canned goods line the shelves in Corydon's grocery story, April 1924. Note the Chautauqua poster on the far left and the barefoot girl in the back.

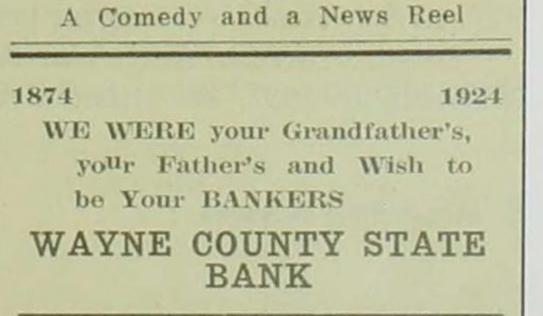
I wasn't much aware of ethnic backgrounds at that time. There were several families in town whose ancestry was Scandinavian, and one or two households of Irish Catholics, who were regarded with a certain amount of curiosity. Germans outnumbered all other racial groups; they were without exception industrious, hard-working people and good citizens—though later, during World War I, some of the schoolboys (myself included) joined in shouting taunts at the old German blacksmith, whose shop, we were convinced, harbored

has long since vanished. Television has killed the small theatres; supermarkets have replaced most neighborhood grocery stores. Only the statue of the Civil War soldier, leaning on his musket atop his marble column in the courthouse park, remains the same—perhaps dreaming, as I do, of the past that is no more. �

This sketch of Corydon, Iowa, was first submitted by William Lee Burton to a 1976 writing competition sponsored by the Iowa Council on Aging and later revised slightly and self-published. The original essay is in Special Collections, State Historical Society (Iowa City).

## some deep and devious mischief.

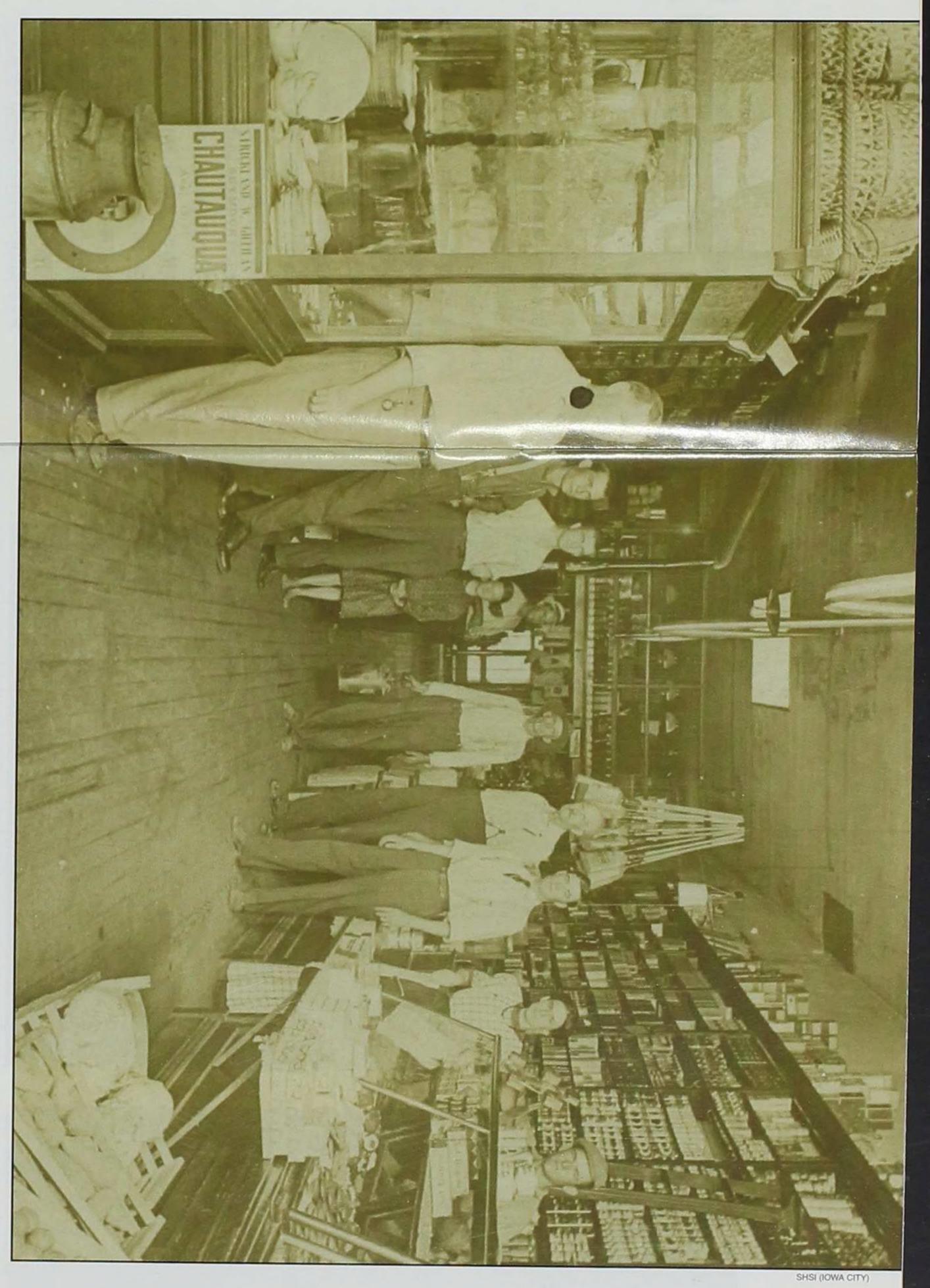
# The Main Street of my youth



CLEAN TOWELS and Paints and Varnishes for all Kinds Pleasant Surroundings! Relining MEATS. Let us tell you about Hess Cloak's Poultry Panacea and St Tonic and Dip. All guaranteed your money back if not satisfied. SCOTT & VAN BENTHUSEN The The Corydon Cleaners and Repairers "IST NATIONAL CORYDON LUMBER CO. First Dyers LUGAR'S DEP'T STORE PRESSING "IT'S TIME TO PAINT UP" KING'S DRUG STORE KODAKS AND SUPPLIES! place NEXT TO POST OFFICE "JEFF Drugs-SEABURN'S SHOP SSING AND CLEANING g and Altering Hemstitching and Pleatin Hatters FRESH H. Wholesome Food! in FINE Start at RIGHT prices T. 0 STROMSTEN'S MOR KIK For Sale At to M. Free Delivery! PHONE-333 FRESH ABSTRACTS Drug Store F -Tablets-Pencils Chicks Of Work get ELWOOD Your and Snappy Service! CLARK WEST" 23 ANDIES KING good Hair SHARP TOOLS on Baby and CAFE" Pleating Hess & Id Stock CURED Cut, Or

galaxy of new "stars" or swept the theatre after school, of admission I peddled handbills, me, and if I didn't have the price if the folding chairs were uncom-Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart, mand, Hazel Dawn, Fatty Arbuckle, review before my fascinated and as often as my parents would let ated acting? I went the pictures that were shown had fortable, the long waits between shadows that actually moved. What had sprung up all over the country, one whole winter with The Perils of Lillian and Dorothy Gish. I spent Douglas Fairbanks, Mabel Noruncritical eyes: Mary Pickford and to pay for my ticket. A whole unconvincing plots and exaggerreels boring and tiresome? What if enthralled by those jerky little and people were flocking to them, cause the admission was five cents, occasional road company: East usually stood empty except for theatres, called Nickelodeons bewere a novelty then; makeshift Nights in a Barroom Lynne, Uncle Tom's the 1890s at considerable expense, quite equaled that "home talent" tory experience in food for the gods; in those days), the The Opera House, built in which I was most attracted. converted store building) to ut it was the Gem Theatre (a productions or an one. no other gustamy life has ever . The movies Cabin, or Ten result was like to the movies passed in

into a conical shape. Cooled and cream (there was no other flavor which was baked and then rolled using a thin, sweetened dough filled with homemade vanilla ice



of cliff-hung suspense, from one Tuesday night to the next. Pauline, merely existing in a fever

silent film. Though Mr. Reizenstein a musical accompaniment to the came to choose our town? and naivehe found the rest of us a bit crude toward everybody, there was a was always polite and deferential the tinkly old piano, furnishing scampered down the aisle to play in the East, and who, a year later, fuzzy-haired little man who had one season by a Mr. Reizenstein, a wonder who he was, and how he certain reserve in his manner, as if door before the show began, then he had come. He took tickets at the drifted away as unobtrusively as come to Iowa from somewhere The Gem was managed during -no doubt we were. I

> groups; Catholi

goods line the shelves in Corydon's grocery story, April 19 qua poster on the far left and the barefoot girl in the back. goods line Brooms hang from the ceiling, doughnuts and dishes fill the glass cases, and canned he the shelves in Corydon's grocery story, April 1924. Note the Chautau-

Office

joined in shouting taunts at the old some deep and devious mischief. German blacksmith, whose shop, we were convinced, harbored the schoolboys (myself included) later, during World War I, some of people and good citizenstion industrious, hard-working mans outnumbered all other racial and one or two households of Irish a certain amount of curiosity. Gerwhose ancestry was Scandinavian, were several families in town backgrounds at that time. The Main Street of my youth I wasn't much aware of ethnic they were without excepcs, who were regarded with There -though

> is no more. 🛠 dreaming, as I do, of the past that park, remains the samemarble column in the courthouse neighborhood grocery stores. Only leaning on his musket atop his the statue of the Civil War soldier, supermarkets have replaced most sion has killed the small theatres; has long since vanished. Televi--perhaps

> > :--AT

This sketch of Corydon, Iow submitted by William Lee B 1976 writing competition sp the Iowa Council on Aging the Iowa Council on Aging and later revised slightly and self-published. The original essay is in Special Collections, State Historical Society (Iowa City). , Iowa, was first Lee Burton to a e Burton to a sponsored by later The

LIO

Z

1874

be

Z EW

MRS.

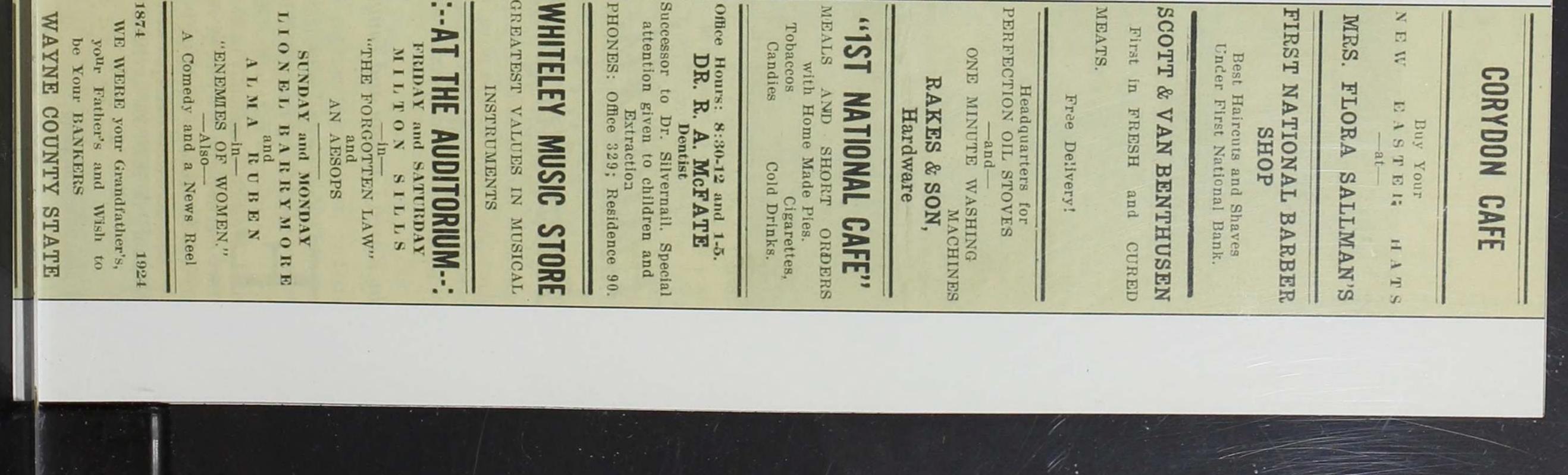
FIRST

Best

First

SCOTT

MEATS.



MEALS

11

**IST**