

# Car Culture, Iowa Style

by Ginalie Swaim, editor

Cars figure big in our lives. They are the safe place for quiet confessions of young love, the reason our bank account suddenly plummets, the companion on a life-changing road trip.

For Americans, learning to drive is a rite of passage into adulthood. Relinquishing our license humbles us. Trading in the old family car brings on a few sentimental tears.

First invented to transport us, cars now serve as a base of operations for our crowded lives. From the driver's seat, we tap into current world news via the car radio, or check in with our colleagues and family via cell phones. If we're hungry, we drive up to a drive-up. If we're bored, we slide in a new CD. If we're lost, we poke at that little GPS box in the front.

Cars have not always played such essential roles. The earliest motorized vehicles, over a century ago, were experimental, expensive, and unreliable. Even by 1910, there were still fewer than a half million registered vehicles in the entire nation. But within two decades, that had exploded to one auto for every five Americans. Historian David Kyvig paints the scene: "By 1929 almost 27 million cars were on the road, in the driveway or parking lot, at the gas station or repair shop, or, increasingly, stuck in traffic. . . . Motor vehicle ownership had gone from being unusual to being commonplace, and American daily life was thereby transformed."

Iowans experienced the same adjustments as the rest of the nation as cars entered our culture. Here begins a glimpse of Iowa during that transformation.

**Setting out on a brisk drive on a road near Dougherty.**





SHSI (DES MOINES)

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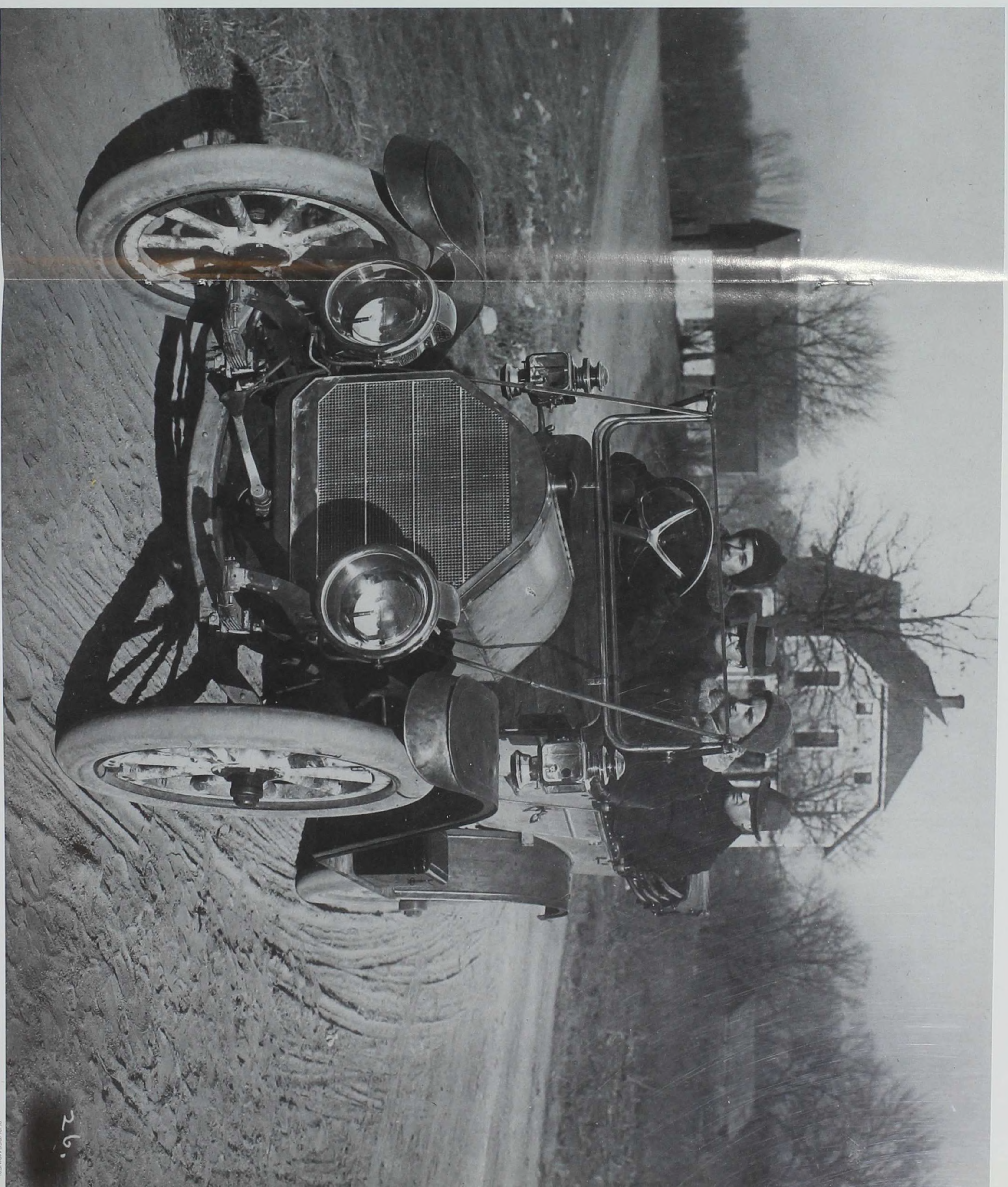
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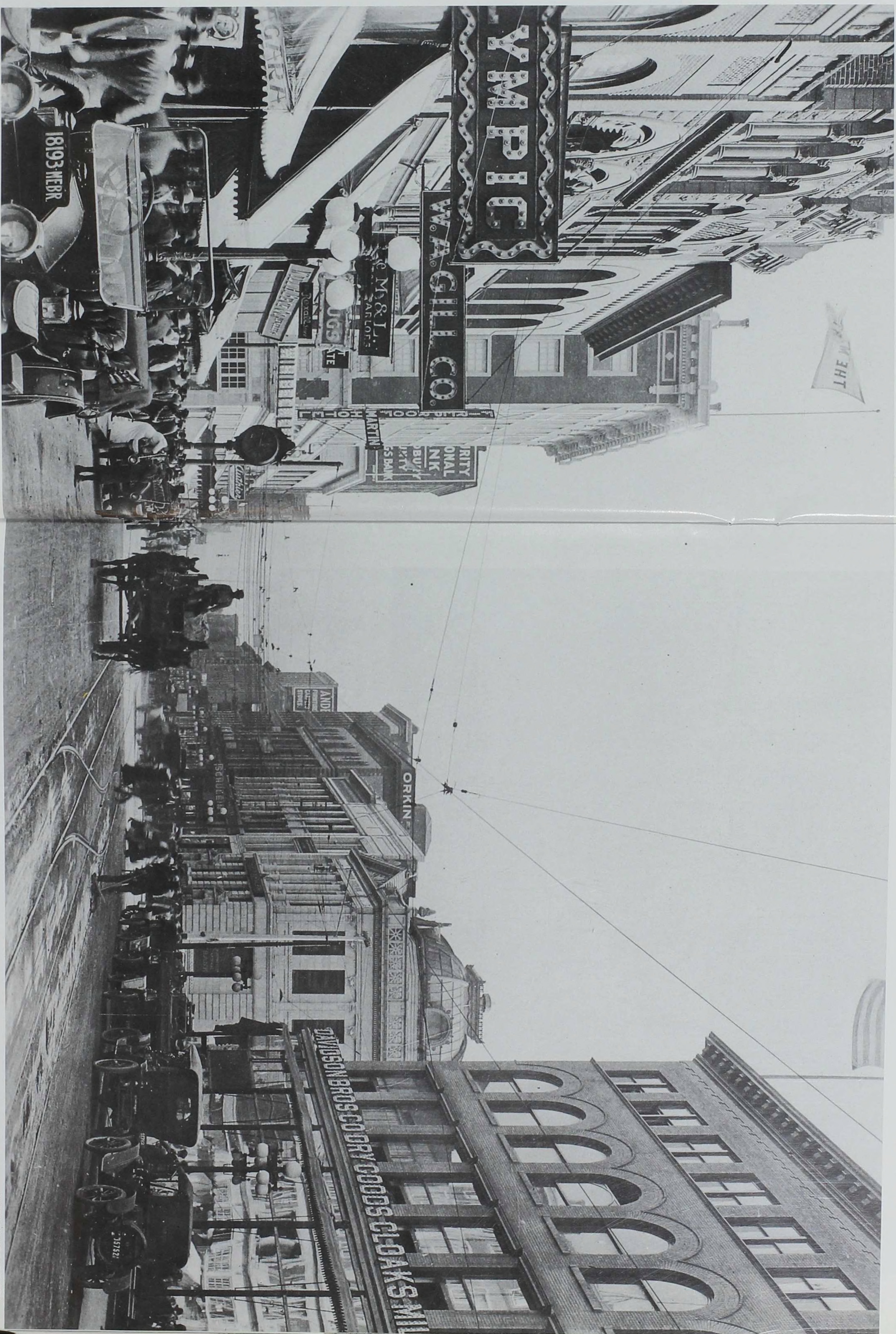
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**F**ourth Street in Sioux City: Autos line the curb, a horse-drawn wagon rumbles under streetcar wires, and, to the right of the tracks, a street sweeper cleans up horse manure. Horses, autos, and streetcars coexisting in American cities produced a chaos of sound, motion, and odor. In New York City in 1900, historian David Kyvig gasps, horses left behind "2.5 million pounds of manure and 60,000 gallons of urine" each day. And as autos replaced horses, the trade-off was the noxious fumes of the combustion engine.

Just as streetcars had allowed cities to expand into the suburbs by linking workers' new, outlying homes to their workplaces in commercial districts, so too did automobiles. According to historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The automobile would make it possible to develop suburban property that had previously been inaccessible—to fill in, as it were, the spaces between the spokes of the streetcar lines."

Of course, autos also filled downtown thoroughfares. Cowan relates that a "traffic expert calculated that automobiles required twenty times as much street space per passenger as the streetcar: . . . as if our ladies, and our men, also, wore a hooped skirt arrangement ten or twelve feet in diameter and went through the sidewalks."

Sioux City's Fourth Street, looking east from Pierce Street, circa 1910. Note the car in the left foreground: steering wheels were often on the right side of early autos, so the driver could step in from the curb, rather than from the muddy street. The woman in white (in the next car) shows us how it's done.



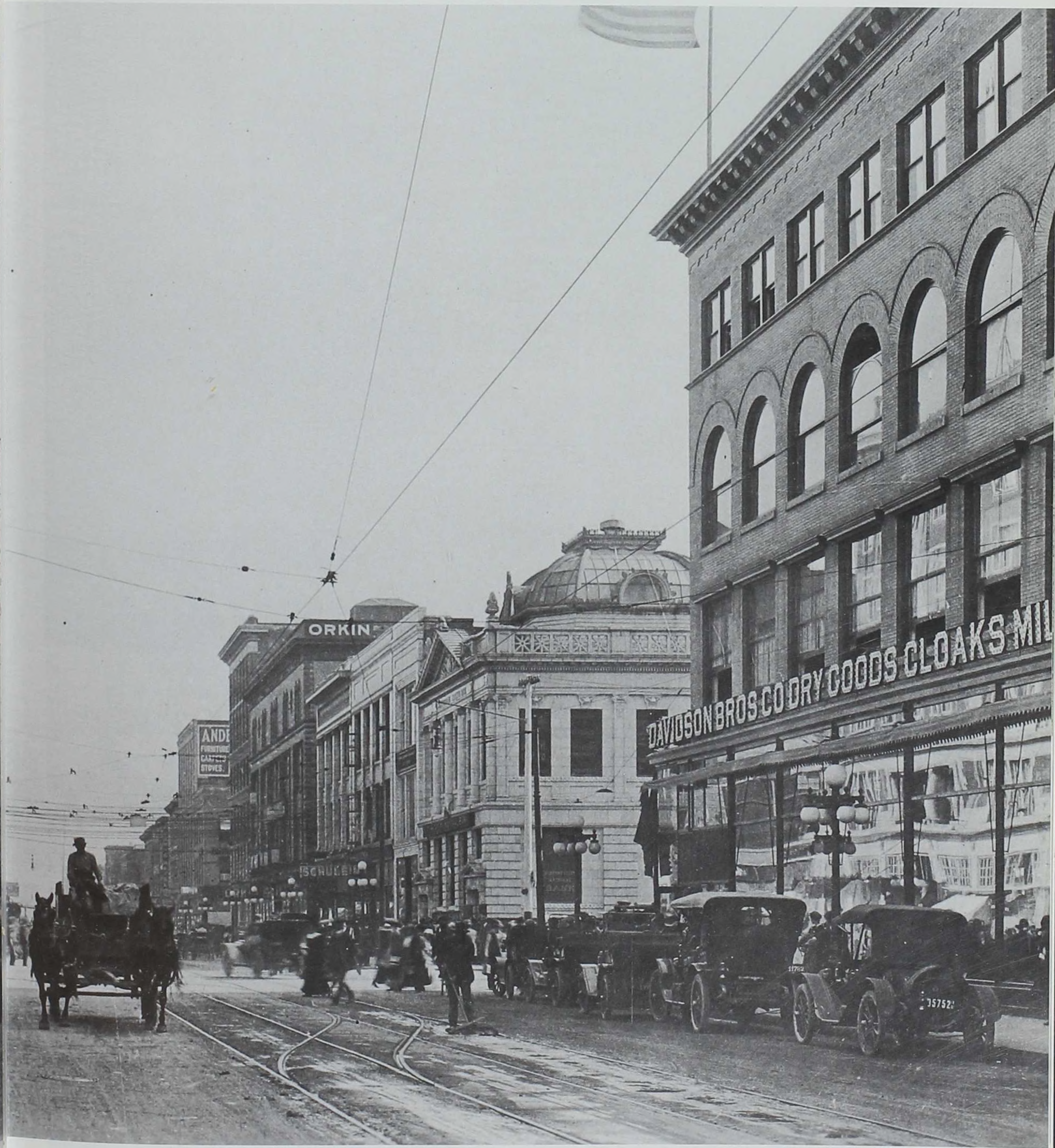
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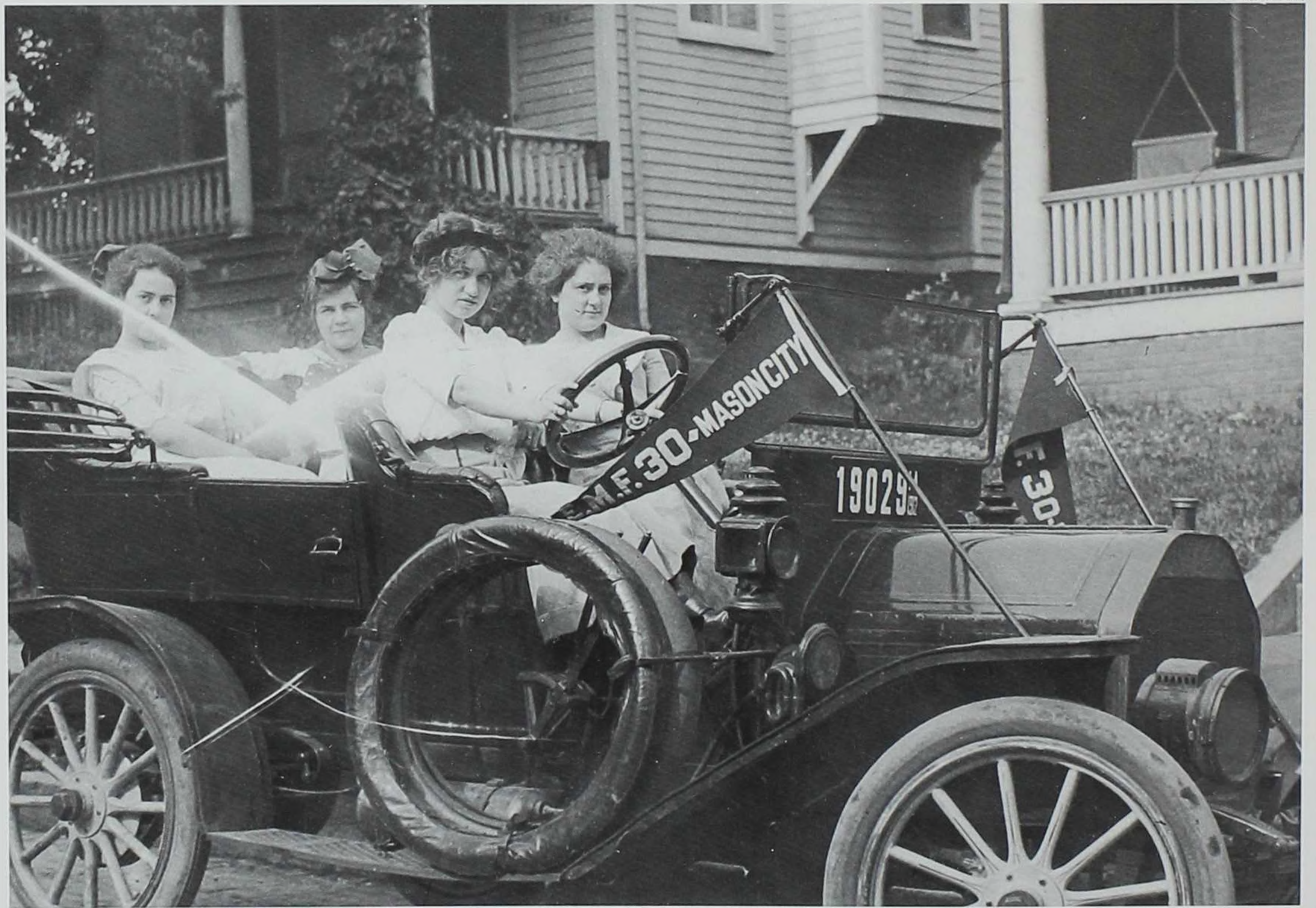
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SHSI (IOWA CITY), LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



There were squabbles over the family Ford, fears that the young folk were driving to distant roadside dance halls beyond the watchful eyes of the local community, worries that lust would combust in the backseat of the Model T.

A couple alone in an auto had privacy, mobility, and independence. So did a couple courting in a buggy—but one could seek adventure a lot farther away in a car than in a buggy. “With the aid of an automobile and the device of leaving the dance an hour or so early, a girl can ‘pulla wild party’ and still return home at a time which does not arouse the suspicion of her parents,” observed one sociologist studying the volatile combination of cars and youth.

Historians still disagree on whether autos spelled trouble for young people—or just exposure to mainstream culture. Introduced to new places and ideas, youth began to mix with, and sometimes marry, people from different geographic areas. Rural teenagers in particular “were able to visit movie theatres and other places of amusement in towns,” Michael Berger writes, “and as a result all youth moved towards a more standard national set of manners, styles, and diction. . . . The social forces set in motion by the motor car could not be controlled by the dictates of a single family or community.”

**Above: Marie Lepper and her Mason City friends in Des Moines, about 1912. Opposite: Viola Radden, Sabula, Iowa.**



SHS (IOWA CITY); HENRICKSEN COLLECTION







SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Horses weren't fond of automobiles, farmers claimed. Autos were foul creatures, spewing exhaust and stirring up dust. They were noisy (one was likened to "a roadroller loaded with scrap-iron crossing a cobblestone bridge when in motion; and when at rest . . . like fire-crackers under a dish-pan." And they were fast: 20 miles per hour in the country, if the driver obeyed the 1904 speed limit. But what auto owner wouldn't like to push that a bit, to test her new car out on the open road?

"The potential for mishaps caused by terrified horses was so great that the rural-dominated Iowa legislature passed a law requiring the traveling motorist to 'telephone ahead to the next town of his coming, so that the owners of nervous horses may be warned in advance,'" writes historian Tom Morain. "In Denison, seventy-five farmers met in 1906 to discuss their irritations with the automobile. One speaker . . . claimed that farmers could no longer send their wives and children to town on errands since autos had made buggy travel hazardous. Another advocated a farmer boycott of all merchants who owned automobiles. He favored giving those who owned cars a reasonable time to sell them before the boycott went into effect." But within a decade, as farm incomes rose and Henry Ford perfected his reliable, affordable Model T, farmers embraced what they had at first scorned.

Automobiles were a sea change in rural America. Although some blamed them for destroying community values and unraveling family life, they were also credited with reducing the isolation and inequities of rural life. Farm kids could be bussed to town high schools. Visiting nurses and extension agents could reach more farm households. Ailing farmers could drive to a better skilled doctor in the county seat, rather than the doctor in the closest town. On Sunday (considered a day of deserved rest for farm horses), a rural family might now drive to the denominational church in town, rather than attend the country church just up the road. Farmers were now even known to park their Iowa work ethic and take a trip. One rural sociologist found that Monona County farmers with autos "took from six to twelve longer trips each year, which carried them beyond the confines of their community into other counties."

**Horse-drawn vehicles and automobiles collided, literally and figuratively, in rural America. Here, an early accident, possibly in Franklin or Iowa County.**



SPRIGL/OWEN/OWEN

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Taxi driver Jess Reel strikes a pose for a family photographer.

Leaf through any family album and you'll spot photos of the babies, the aunts and uncles, the family pets—and probably the family car.

Scholar James E. Paster has studied such "automobile snapshots" and finds that they fit into five categories. In each category, the car conveys a slightly different meaning. Taken together, these meanings articulate the role of cars in daily life. As Paster describes the categories, it's not hard to visualize these images, because we've all posed for similar ones ourselves.

Paster's first category includes photos focused simply and solely on the car—especially a newly acquired one. Here, Paster says, the car symbolizes "a trophy [and] proof of achievement." He calls his second category the "go-stand-by-the-car portrait," in which the status "associated with the automobile . . . is transferred to the people who pose with it. . . . The car is still a trophy, but now the photograph includes the winning team."

Then there are the photos in which the car symbol-



The running board makes a perfect spot for a photo op, but maybe it depends on who wants to sit by whom. These snapshots are in a family photo album created by Alice Mary Gifford, one of several albums in the State Historical Society collections.



izes mobility—"families leaving on vacation, a bride and groom leaving their wedding reception, a mother arriving home with her new baby."

Paster's fourth group comprises "snapshots taken from inside automobiles [including] points of interest along the roadside and pictures of the driver or passengers taken by others in the car." "Sometimes their presence is only implied, but the people in these snapshots are on the move. They are going somewhere."

The fifth group "only incidentally" includes cars. Paster comments that cars in the background remind us "how ubiquitous [they] have become [and] how the landscape has been altered to accommodate the automobile; they show how much we have given up for the freedom that the automobile has delivered."

**Children overflow the auto driven by W. D. Cannon from Iowa City. The photo was taken outside the general store in Middle Amana, about 25 miles west of Iowa City.**



SHS (IOWA CITY); RICKELS' COLLECTION

Automobiles were not without their problems. You had to keep the tires filled, for one thing. And then there was the question of where to store the vehicle.

Garage was a new word to Americans. The word was derived from the French verb *garer*, "to shelter." The *Jefferson Bee* instructed its readers that the "official name for an automobile livery is a Garage, pronounced Garazj, with an accent on the first syllable."

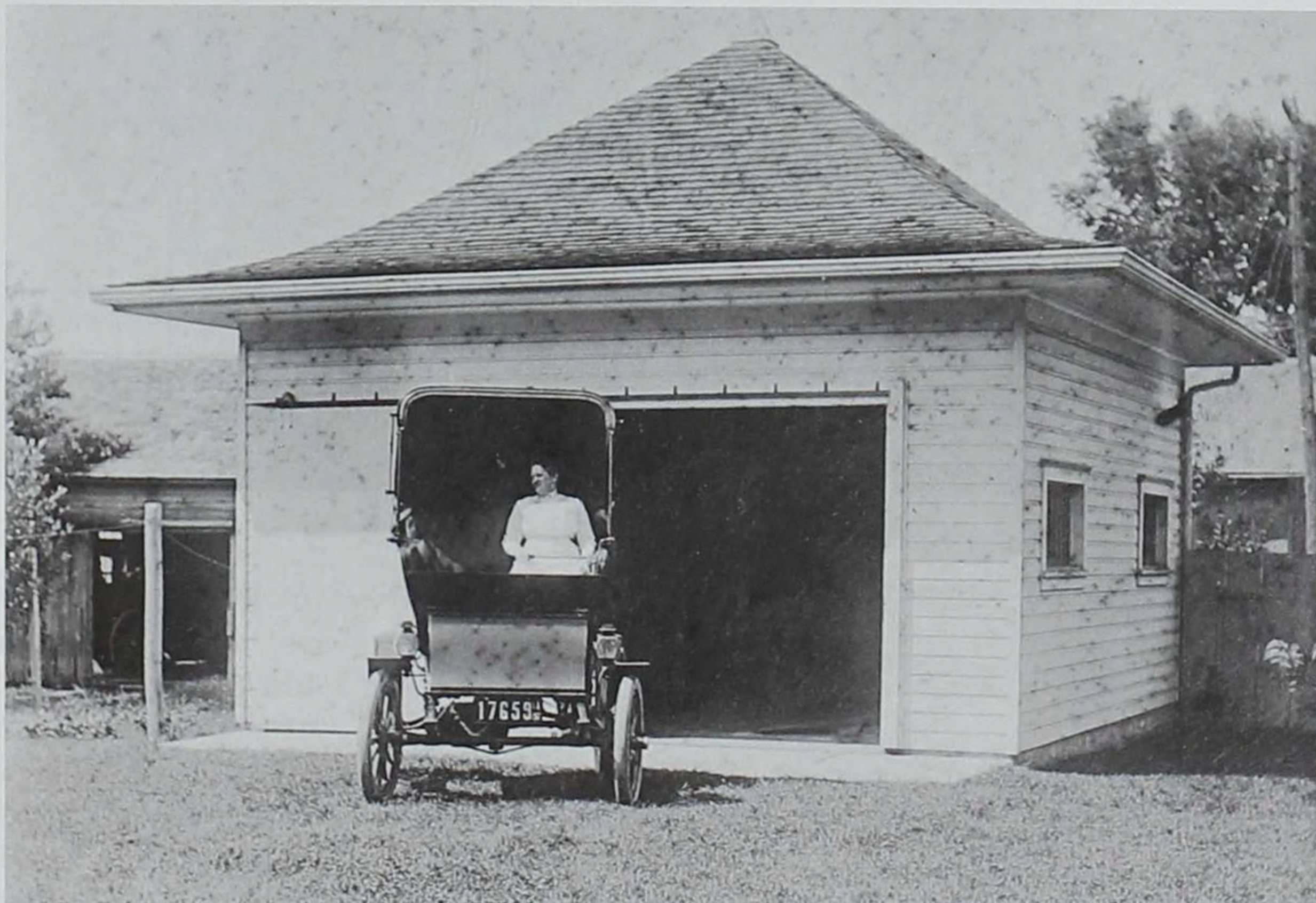
The word also defined the small, simple structures being built for home owners.

Garages now took the place of barns and carriage houses; in fact, builders and architects first called them "automobile houses." Because gasoline engines presented fire hazards, garages were built away from the house, and often of brick, concrete blocks, or hollow tile. In 1917, the Permanent Building Society in Des Moines advertised that a hollow-tile garage would "last like the pyramids." The American home owner made room for the American auto, sacrificing part of the backyard vegetable garden for a small garage.

More changes were in store. The leisurely custom of relaxing on the front porch, hailing neighbors who walked by, was disappearing, and so was the traditional front porch itself. Garages next moved up to the front of the lot, conveniently linked to the house by a breezeway, or directly attached to the kitchen.



SPHS (IOWA CITY); BENTLER COLLECTION



SPHS (IOWA CITY); LORD COLLECTION

Above: A Lee County barn and an Iowa City garage. Left: Robbie Rickels in Atkins, 1925.



Cars wielded enormous influence on the habits of consumers, the business of retailers, and the streetscapes of commercial districts.

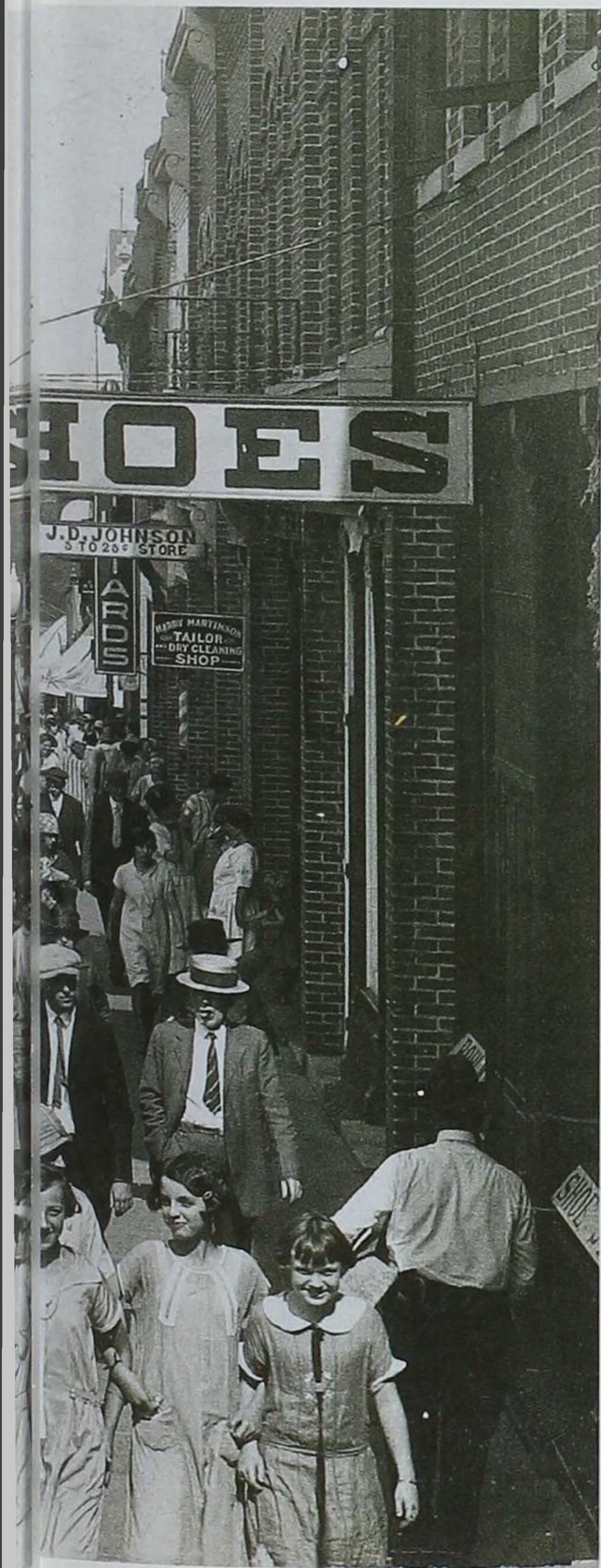
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less often ordered by phone and delivered to the home; more likely, the customer drove to the grocery store and counted on finding a parking place nearby.

Both rural and urban consumers who owned cars now shopped more often and farther away from their homes. They were willing

to drive to larger towns and cities, where selections were better and prices lower. Historian Lewis Atherton described a farmer in Irwin, Iowa, for whom "it had once taken all day with horse and buggy to shop in Harlan, fourteen miles away, but he could now visit Omaha or Council Bluffs in his au-





THREE PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

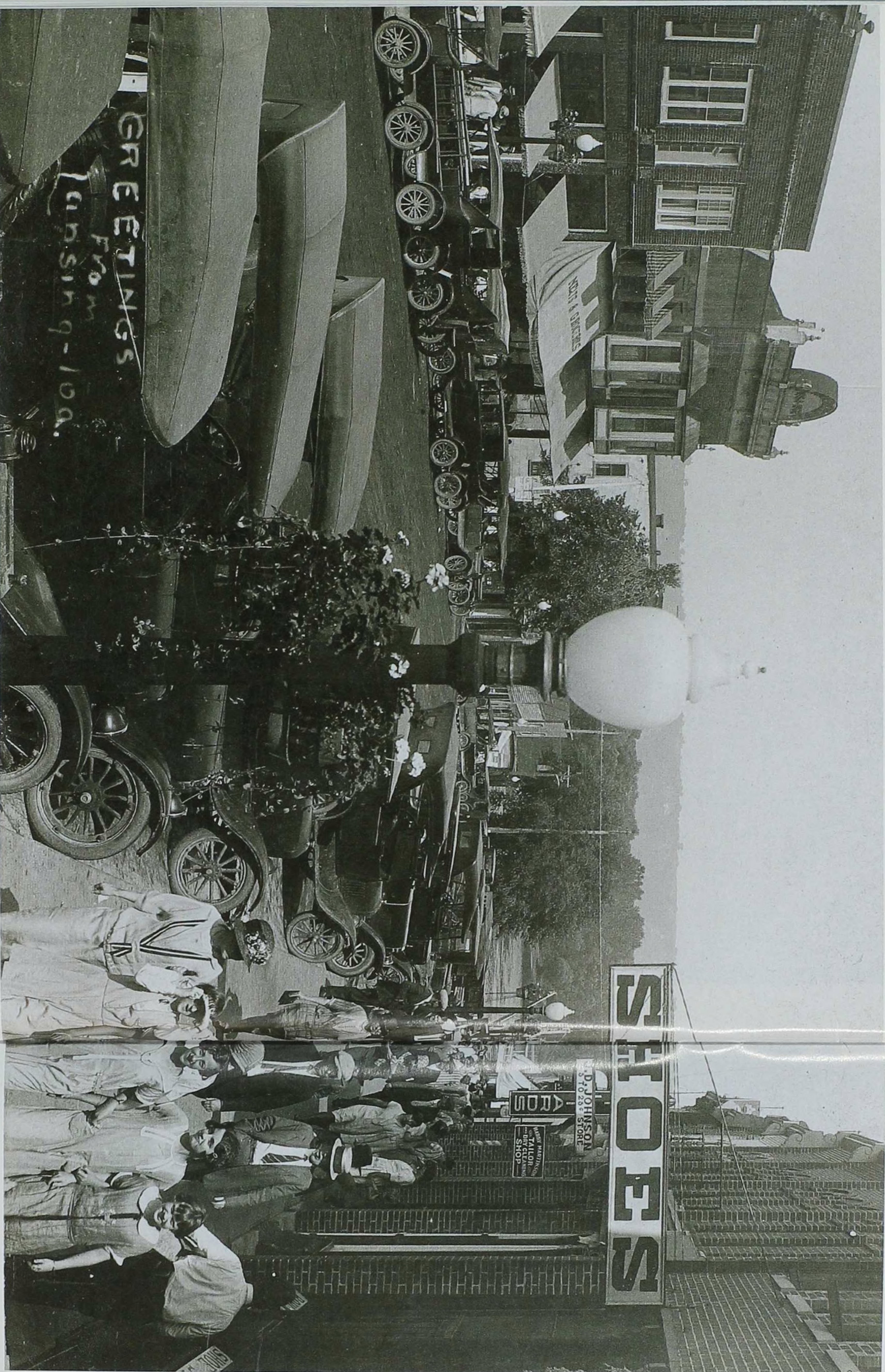


Autos contributed to shifts in shopping districts. Small towns suffered the most, losing business and community vitality to larger towns. Clockwise, from left: Lansing in the 1920s; Sioux City's Sunset Shopping Center, 1960s; and Le Mars, 1950s .



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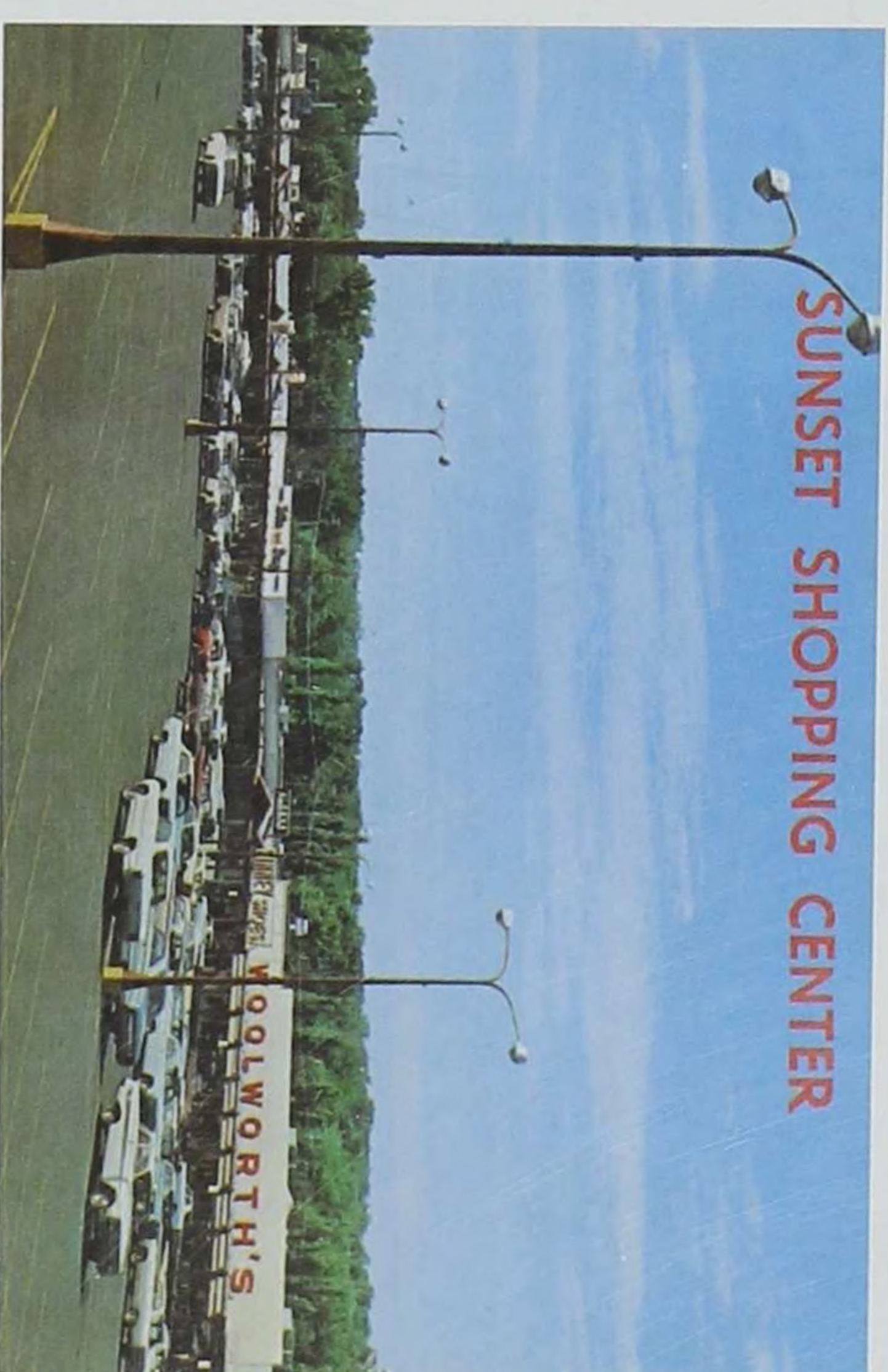
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BOTH PHOTOS: SPSI (OWA CITY)

No doubt about it, the cost of having a car was a drain on the bank account—maintaining it, insuring it, repairing it and, of course, buying it in the first place.

“Before the 1910s, purchasing an automobile required immediate cash payments. . . . No wonder that at first only people with considerable reserves of cash on hand could afford automobiles,” historian David Kyvig writes. “In the 1910s a few banks, finance companies, and independent auto dealers experimented with time purchase plans. But not until General Motors and Dupont, awash in World War I profits, established the General Motors Acceptance Corporation in 1919 did a manufacturer itself finance credit buying of automobiles. Within two years, half of all automobile buyers were entering into credit purchase agreements; by 1926 the figure reached three-fourths.” Buying on credit “dramatically enlarged the population that could afford the initial cost of an automobile” and “made it much easier for a car buyer to get behind the wheel of a more expensive car with conveniences.”

Kyvig notes that “since new technology did not emerge every year to provide a fresh incentive for purchasing a new car, other means had to be found to entice customers.” Ad campaigns pushed stylistic changes—a different dashboard or fender design—to persuade automobile owners that to be up to date they should trade in and trade up.” A new marketing concept was born—planned obsolescence.

Even with routine maintenance (upper left), cars eventually meet their doom, in salvage and scrap yards. Left: A side profile of a smashed car, photographed for insurance documentation.



SPSI (OWA CITY) PHOTO BY JOAN LITVIN; ZALO BOUAFREI



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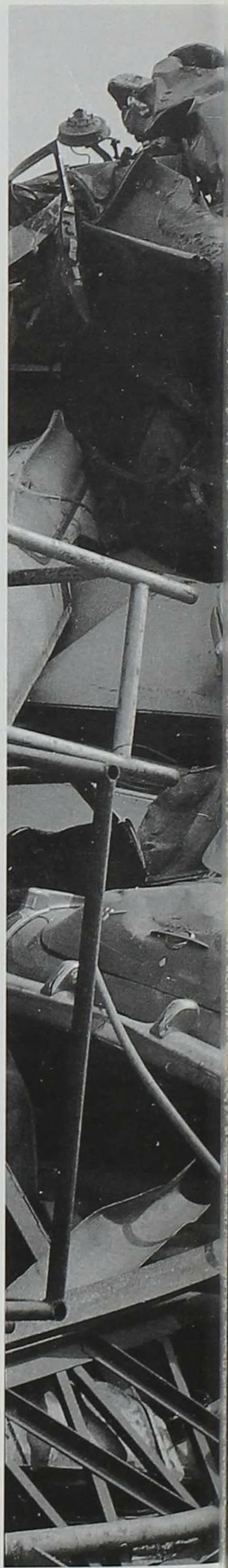


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SHSI (IOWA CITY): PHOTO BY JOAN LIFFRING-ZUG BOURRET

**A**s this nation's postwar consumer society barged into the second half of the century, the size and power of cars expanded. Interstates cut broad swaths across the nation, freeways sliced through old urban neighborhoods, beltways looped around entire cities. Scientists pointed skyward to something called smog, while manufacturers, citizens, and lawmakers wrangled over safety standards. Foreign compact cars

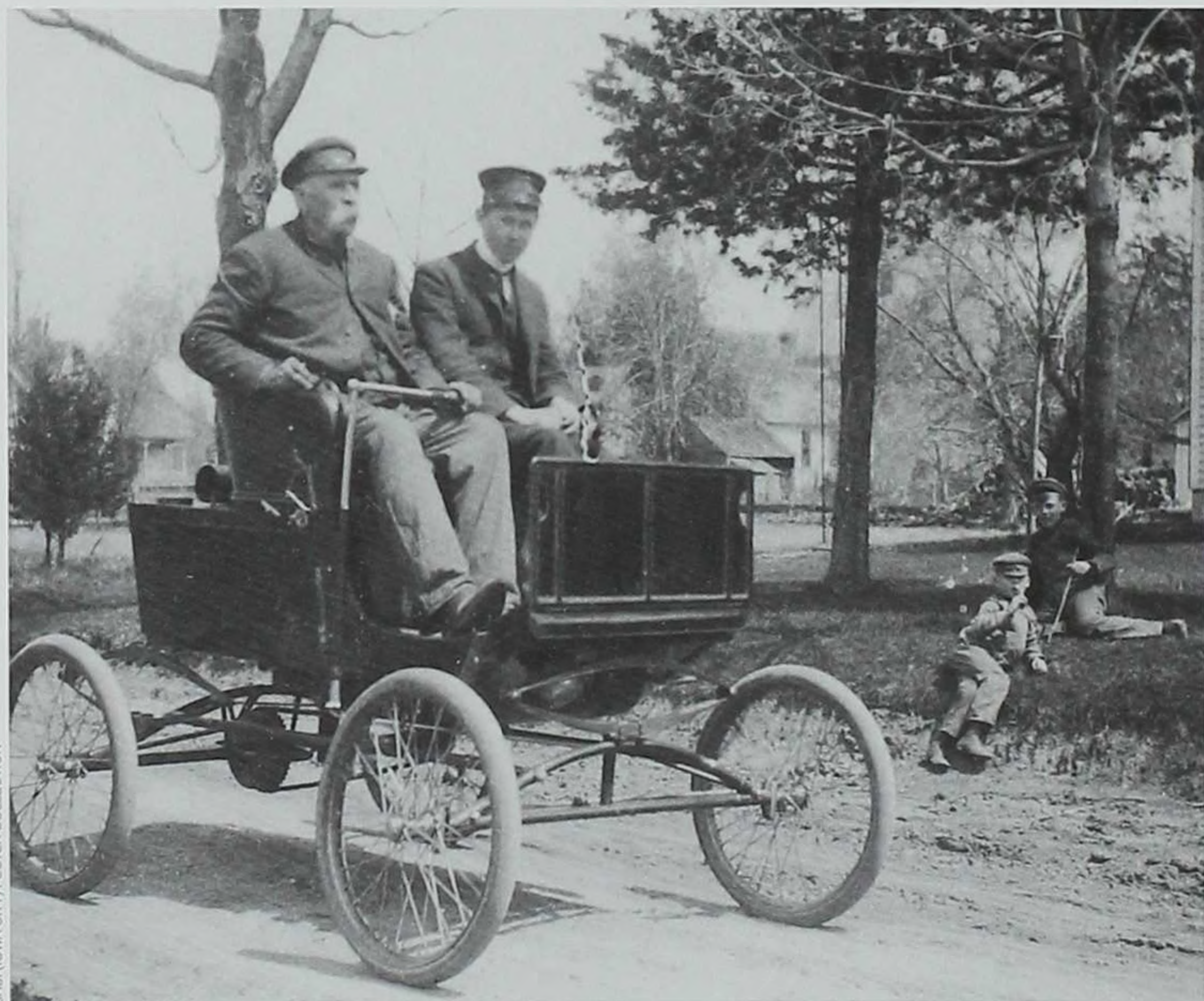
squeezed into dealerships. Gas prices rose. The size of U.S. cars contracted, then expanded.

Today scientists point not to the smog over our cities but to the melting ice that caps our planet. As both Americans and world citizens, we are asked to ponder our dependence on cars, to examine our driving habits. Now and then we meet someone who hasn't owned a car for years, and we ask ourselves: "Could we do

that? Would our lives be better or worse? Or just different?"

"The technological system that some people call 'automobility' was originally built out of inventors' hopes and entrepreneurs' dreams," Ruth Schwartz Cowan writes, "but it has now been set in the concrete of several thousand miles of highway and several million suburban subdivisions and in habits that Americans have been developing for several generations."

One hundred years ago, many Americans dismissed the peculiar vehicles that terrified horses and floundered in the mud. Then the technology of the automobile took hold of us and, as history reveals, changed our lives and our culture. Leave it to humorist Will Rogers to have said it just right: "Mr. Ford, it will take a hundred years to tell whether you have helped us or hurt us, but you certainly didn't leave us like you found us." ❖



SHS (IOWA CITY) FOSTER COLLECTION

**A Locomobile on a dirt street in Iowa Falls catches the eye of boys on the grass. Right: Fifty years later, parked cars are just part of the night scene in Manchester.**



SHSI (IOWA CITY) LEWIS COLLECTION

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Tom Morain offers a useful and entertaining look at Iowa during the automobile age in his *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988). The following also examine cars and American culture: Michael L. Berger, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893-1929* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979); Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jan Jennings, ed., *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990); David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived Through the 'Roaring Twenties' and the Great Depression* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004); and Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929). Annotations to this article are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).