

Four Iowans & the Nazi Olympics

by Jack Lufkin

Three years before World War II began, Berlin, the capital of Nazi Germany, hosted the 1936 Summer Olympics. The controversial Games are legendary: Adolf Hitler showcased a revitalized Germany to a world suspicious of mounting publicity concerning Nazi brutalization of Jews, while African American Jesse Owens thrilled the world with his four gold medals. Less well known is that four Iowans participated in the 1936 Games in Berlin. Two of them played on a U.S. baseball team in front of the sport's largest crowd in history.

The choice of Berlin as the 1936 host site had been made by the International Olympic Committee in 1931. Two years later, Hitler assumed power. The Führer had already written and spoken in severe terms against Jews, declaring them un-German. Now, he began to unleash an onslaught of repressive laws, forbidding Jews to ride German horses, taking away Jewish rights to citizenship, outlawing intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. The Nazis hounded, beat, and murdered thousands of Jews, drove them from public office, ruined their businesses, and allowed some to flee Germany only after stripping them of all possessions. A system of concentration camps, foreshadowing the Holocaust, was put into place to detain Jews and political dissidents (primarily Communists). At the same time, German rearmament and ambitious public construction projects, such as the autobahn, had lifted the nation out of economic depression and turned it into a growing war machine. In giant demonstrations, crowds roared approval to the Führer's exhortation, "Today Germany, tomorrow the whole world."

By the time of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, internal foes in Germany had been killed or silenced. Hitler very

much wanted the large American contingent—who had overwhelmingly won the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles—to compete in Berlin and thus legitimize these Olympics as a truly international event. He also wanted to demonstrate the athletic prowess of what he considered the superior "Aryan" race.

As in many nations, debates had raged in the United States over whether to boycott the 1936 Games to protest anti-Semitic activities contradicting the Olympic spirit of fair play and equal opportunity for athletes, or whether to participate, on the grounds that politics should not interfere with sports. Boycott arguments appeared in the press and occurred within the American Jewish community. Opposing a boycott, Avery Brundage, president of the the American Olympic Committee, skillfully maneuvered a close vote by the Amateur Athletic Union: The U.S. would send its athletes.

One American determined to go to Berlin was baseball promoter and former major leaguer Les Mann, who believed that baseball should become an Olympic sport. A demonstration game between a U.S. team and a Swedish amateur baseball club at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm had done little to advance the game across the Atlantic, and most Europeans still had little exposure to or understanding of baseball. Mann was determined to change that, and he saw the 1936 Olympics as the opportunity. A tireless champion of America's favorite pastime, Mann was remembered by one Olympic organizer as "a hot dog. With the mustard."

Mann ran a baseball academy in Florida, and one of his students was shortstop Dow Wilson. Wilson was

born and had lived his first 14 years in the town founded by his grandfather, Dow City in Crawford County, Iowa. His father, Arthur Wilson, was a semi-professional spitball pitcher who had barnstormed with teams in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. Mann invited the 19-year-old Wilson to try out for the U.S. Olympic trials in Baltimore. Wilson batted over .500 at the three tryout games and earned a berth. "Making the team was indeed quite an accomplishment for young Wilson," the local *Denison Review* reported back in Iowa, "and Dow City and Crawford county can well be proud of the success of his efforts."

Another Iowan to make the U.S. team hailed from Rockford in Floyd County. Grover Galvin, Jr., played center field for amateur Iowa teams, including the Charles City Lions ball club, and played basketball and football at Coe College in Cedar Rapids. Unlike Wilson, who knew Mann and the other organizers, Galvin went to the Baltimore tryouts on his own initiative.

Once the baseball team was picked, the players joined the other U.S. Olympians in New York and embarked on July 15. For Galvin, boarding the ocean liner *Manhattan* with 470 other American athletes and officials was his first great thrill. "I had to pinch myself to believe that I was really there," he recalled.

Both Galvin and Wilson have warm memories of meeting the already famous world-record sprinter Jesse Owens. Wilson got to know the soft-spoken Owens better as one of a foursome playing bridge on the ship. During the eight-day voyage, the U.S. athletes worked out as best they could aboard ship. The baseball players, Wilson remembers, practiced hitting off the deck.

In preparation for the Berlin Games, the Nazi minister for food and agriculture had ordered the removal of "all signs posted in the fight against Jewry . . . for the period in question." Instead, international visitors saw swastikas at every turn. In obedience to the Führer's instructions, Berliners extended a warm welcome to the athletes as they arrived on a train from Hamburg and boarded 300 buses for the Olympic Village.

Onlookers cheering for the Americans was Galvin's second great memory of the Games. "Occasionally somebody in the crowd would shout they were from some American state and we would stick our heads out the window of the bus and yell with all our might." Dispatching notes to his hometown *Rockford Register*, Galvin related how nice the Germans were and how eagerly they requested the athletes' autographs. He mentioned, too, the omnipresence of Nazi flags. "Everybody gives that salute, and you can't imagine

how many army people there are—thousands everywhere—and even little kids would salute you in Hitler's salute."

By all accounts, Olympic Village was a lavishly planned, beautiful wooded complex of white stucco houses with red tile roofs. One player likened it to a "fairyland." According to Dow Wilson and other sources, Hitler and his companion, Eva Braun, had taken a liking to baseball, and Braun visited the players a number of times. "I should have smacked Hitler," Wilson recalled in a recent interview.

In one of the buildings, a few players discovered a back stairway leading to a cavernous, empty basement with an enormous garage-type door. The Olympic Village was ultimately part of a larger Nazi design and would become a military training facility. Through that huge garage door, the Panzer Corps would drive tanks.

German hospitality and exuberant pageantry left most international visitors genuinely impressed. They could find little to corroborate rumors and reports of anti-Semitic activities in Germany because the Nazis cloaked their dark activities or took a short break from persecuting Jews and other "undesirables" in and around Berlin.

Hitler opened the Games on August 1 with a new ritual: a single runner with a lighted torch, relayed from Olympia, Greece. As a token of Olympic fairness, the Germans had placed a part-Jewish athlete, Helene Mayer, on their team; she won the silver medal in fencing. However, Gretel Bergmann, a Jew and a world-class high jumper, was banned from competing.

Iowans were among the 300 million radio listeners worldwide who thrilled to the victories of the U.S. team, which finished second overall to Germany. Two native sons of Iowa made their mark and contributed to U.S. glory. Lamoni's Jack Parker earned a bronze medal in the ten-event decathlon, completing the American sweep of the grueling, two-day competition. Parker had first captured Iowans' attention in 1933 when Lamoni's track team lost the state title to Clinton by only two points; Parker had scored all of Lamoni's 19 points. The youngest member of the U.S. decathlon team, Parker was already primed to be the premier athlete for the 1940 Olympic Games.

Iowa's second native son was Des Moines-born Frank Wykoff, Jesse Owens's teammate on the sprint relay team. Wykoff had moved to California as a child. He had already won Olympic gold medals in 1928 and 1932 as anchor to the 400-meter relay team. Now at the Berlin Games, Wykoff won his third.

The demonstration baseball game, in which Iowa's two other Olympic participants would appear, would cap the Games. To build enthusiasm, Les Mann had organized local baseball clinics, and a German newspaper had printed a week-long series of articles attempting to explain the game, which seemed to both delight and mystify Europeans. Position names were translated in German for all but the shortstop, whose responsibilities seemed unfathomable. "Pitcher" translated into *der werfen* or "thrower-in." The diamond was called the German word for "rhombus," and the bases were "points of refuge." For the demonstration game, the American team split into two squads: the "U.S.A. Olympics" versus the "World Champions."

The game began on the final evening at nine, before a crowd estimated as large as 125,000. The huge stadium was darkened. Spotlights followed the players as they trotted onto the field from opposite ends. As the shortest player, Iowa's Grover Galvin came first. The American national anthem was played in the chilly night air, and the players made a gesture of respect. Misinterpreting it as a Nazi salute, the Germans applauded wildly.

According to player Bill Sayles, box seats for Hitler were on the right. "Before the game started a whole gaggle of German generals came down—I later recognized Göring as one of them. We were told that under no circumstances were we to hit a ball into right or right-center field. Well, being Americans, you never saw so many line drives hit to right in warmups."

Despite lengthy translations and explanations by announcers over a sophisticated sound system, the spectators often seemed befuddled and confused about what they should cheer for. Iowan Dow Wilson was the first batter, the first to get a hit, and the first to steal a base. The Germans laughed at his slide, thinking he was clowning around. The American umpire was perhaps the most unintentionally entertaining. His loud calls and showy gestures for "strike" and "ball" drew more laughter. The runners' safe sign of extended arms seemed to resemble a Nazi salute, and the spectators voiced approval. Infield pop-ups drove the crowd mad, one player recalled, but an extra-base hit brought no reaction, nor did the only home run. At the sixth inning,

Mann and the other organizers noticed that the spectators were beginning to leave. They decided to end the game early. When it was announced that the seventh inning would be the last, the crowd cheered. For the record, the World Champions beat the U.S.A. Olympics, 6–5.

Thus ended Mann's demonstration game, and his hopes of convincing the International Olympic Committee to add baseball to the 1940 Olympics, scheduled for Tokyo. World War II cancelled those Games, and although there were demonstration ball games in later years, baseball did not become an official Olympic sport until 1992.

The two Iowans who had played baseball for a record-setting crowd in the Berlin stadium in 1936 both served in World War II, Grover Galvin as an army captain and Dow Wilson in the coastal artillery. Galvin later ended up in Rockford, Iowa, to run the family brick and tile business. He died in 1995.

Wilson worked at various jobs in New York City and elsewhere. Now in his eighties, Wilson lives in Florida. He can still fit into the baseball uniform worn some seven decades ago in Berlin, as the clouds of world war began to darken the horizon. ❖

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Learn more of the gripping story of the "The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936" at the State Historical Building in Des Moines, 600 E. Locust. Loaned by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the exhibit uses photographs, documents, film footage, and athlete testimonies to chronicle the Nazi rise to power, the Nazification of German sports, the boycott controversy, and the Games themselves. The exhibit runs through September 30.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The author's phone interview with Dow Wilson (3/30/2004) added details to contemporary accounts of the 1936 Olympics baseball team in the following: *Des Moines Register*, 8/1/1936, story by Sec Taylor, p. 1, sports section; *Rockford Register*, 8/23, 8/13, 8/20, 9/3, all in 1936, all on page 1; *Charles City Daily Press*, 6/26/1936, p. 6; *Denison Review*, 7/13/1936, p. 2; and *Denison Bulletin*, 7/23/1936, p. 2. Tom Shieber (curator of New Media, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York) and Connie Birmingham (Alumni Records, Coe College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa) were also helpful. Secondary sources include: Susan D. Bachrach, *The Nazi Olympics* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000); Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Arnd Kruger and William Murray, ed., *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1971); M. E. Travaglini, "Olympic Baseball 1936," *The National Pastime: A Review of Baseball History* (Winter 1985); and United States Holocaust Museum, "The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936" (exhibit brochure).



World War II Comes to Iowa

Opposite: Four days after Pearl Harbor, and half a world away, snow gently falls on Christmas shoppers in downtown Des Moines. Sheltered in the doorway, a man sells newspapers headlined "WAR."

December 10, 1941: Sitting in a booth built by the WPA, a corporal interviews an enlistee at Fort Des Moines.

February 2, 1942: New soldiers are sworn in at the induction center at Fort Des Moines.



SHSI (IOWA CITY): WPA COLLECTION

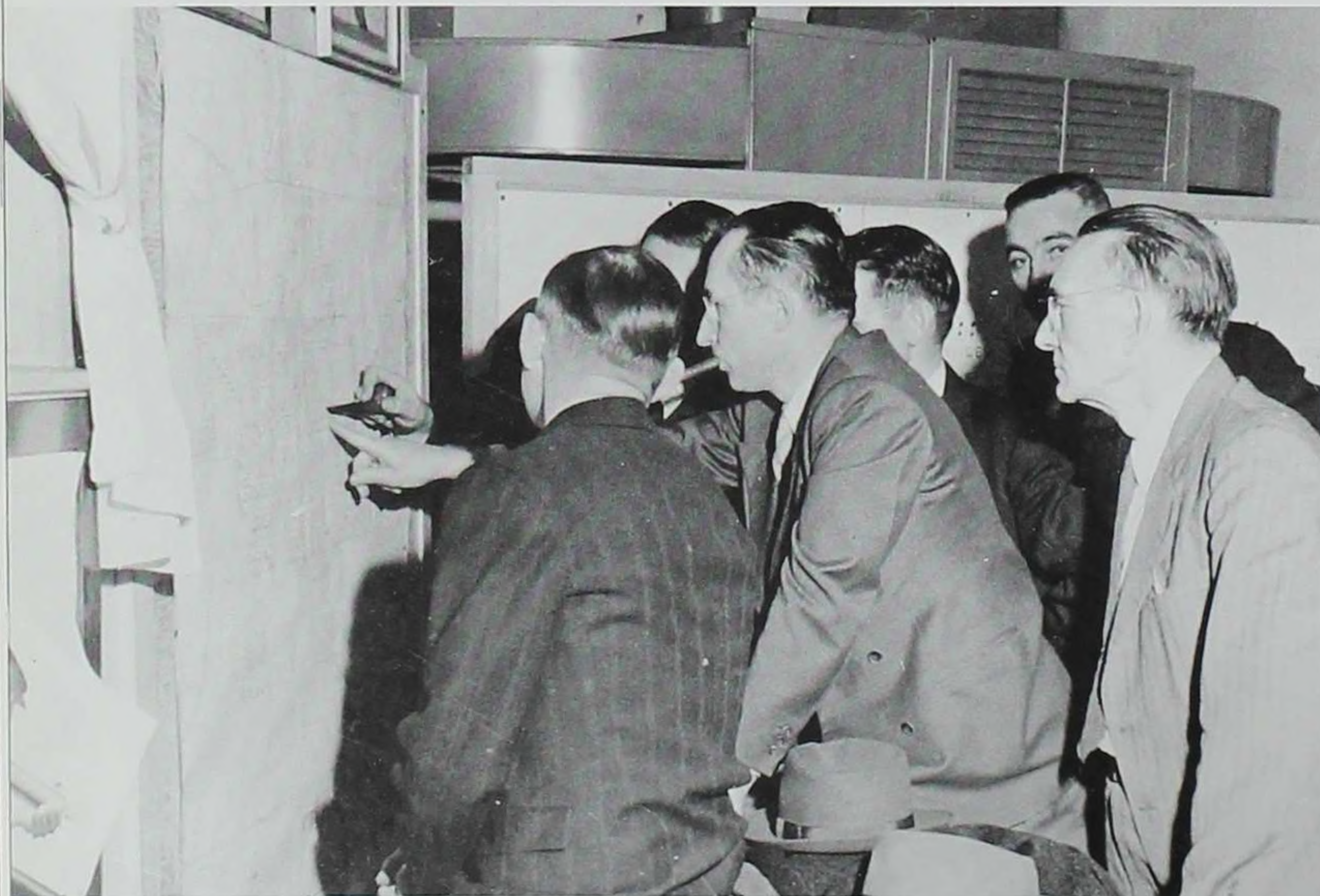
SHSI (IOWA CITY): WPA COLLECTION





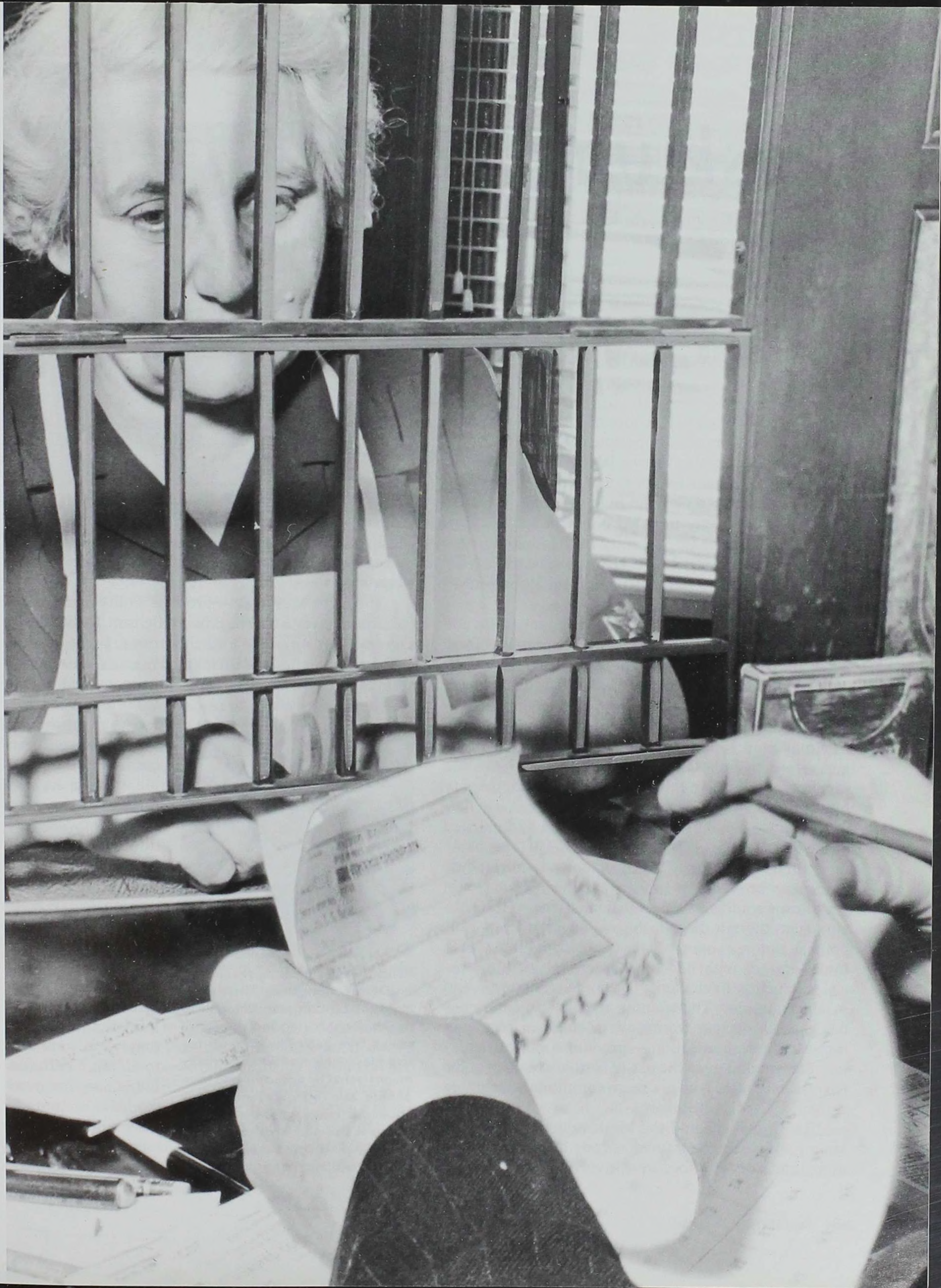
First aid classes were part of the civil defense program in Hampton, Iowa. Instructor Harold D. Baldwin demonstrates on Harold C. Argent, as Henry A. Farnham and a Mr. Storch look on (October 1942).

BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES); L. H. DAVIS COLLECTION



Preparing for a blackout drill in Hampton, mayor J. M. Boots (center) studies a map of the community with other watchers (December 1942).

Opposite: Ruby Haggin makes a ration stamp deposit in March 1943 at the Union-Whitten State Savings Bank, in Union, Iowa. "War time," the *Des Moines Register* commented, "with its increased farm production, its higher income taxes, its war bond drives and rationing activities, finds these rural banks the nerve center of this greatly accelerated activity."



SHS (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE