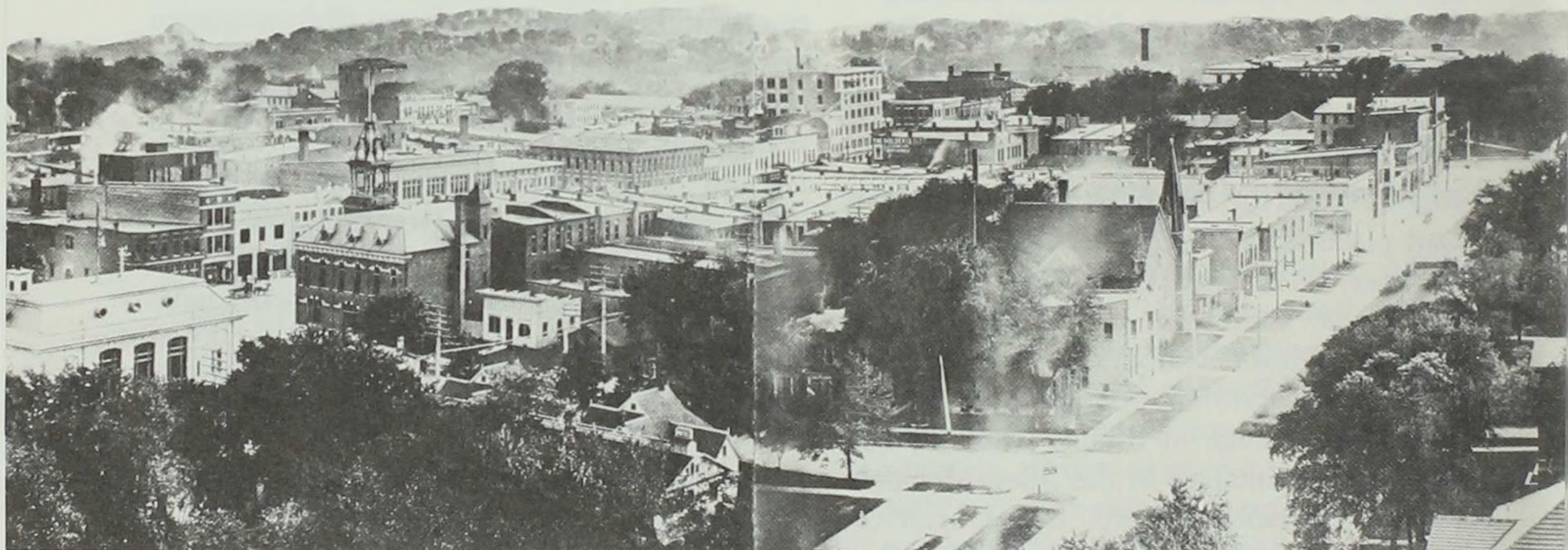


## GROWING UP IN IOWA CITY:

### Recollections of an Historian



*Iowa City as seen from the top of the East Hall, c. 1905. The thoroughfare on the right is Iowa Avenue. (The University of Iowa AVC Photo Service)*

by Carl B. Cone

When the time for retirement neared, we seriously considered only two alternatives. We could stay where we were, or we could return to Iowa City forty years after we had said good-bye. We decided finally to remain in Lexington, Kentucky, our home for the past thirty-five years.

That decision did not forbid us from wondering occasionally whether we could have gone home again. We have always thought we could and not be sorry. We visited Iowa City often enough after 1942 to know that we still knew it. Though it was more than twice as large and new but not strange neighborhoods had sprung up, the business district, though much rebuilt, was still across the street from what we called the campus. (Or perhaps I should use the fancy name "Pentacrest.") Many of our friends from school and college days had never left home. We could have easily resumed life in Iowa City.

The reasons that persuaded us to stay in Lexington were practical ones. If the sentimental ones weighed more heavily, they'd have directed us up I-75 to I-74 to its terminus at I-80 in the city of my birth, then off I-80 at what we knew as the Solon road, entering Iowa City from the northeast through my boyhood neighborhood of Goosetown, and on a little farther to Mary Louise's neighborhood in the south end, in the parish of St. Patrick's. We'd have been home again.

Of the sentimental nostalgic reasons that argued for return, there were two in particular and they merge into one. Though we had spent only the first third of our lives in Iowa City and had since put down roots in Lexington, we were still Iowans. The song "My Old Kentucky Home," even at the Derby, doesn't move us as the Iowa Corn Song does. No childhood

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memories attached to it. In Iowa City we spent our growing up years, the ones that leave indelible impressions. We had enjoyed living in Louisiana, but we were ready to leave when the opportunity came to move to Kentucky. From the perspective of Baton Rouge, Lexington seemed to be almost the Middle West. Once settled in Lexington, we never felt a strong urge to leave. I did not negotiate over any of the four subsequent invitations to go elsewhere, even though I knew that in coming to Kentucky we had not returned to the Middle West. (Kentucky is not Iowa, and Lexington is not Iowa City.)

When we look back to the times when we were young in Iowa City we are grateful that we grew up there. As the twenties ended we were in high school. The thirties saw us finish high school and graduate from the University of Iowa and we were still in Iowa City when the war came. Ours was Iowa City between the wars. I did not then know the girl I eventually married. We lived across town from one another, went to different schools, and did not meet during our university years. The Iowa City I speak of is the one I knew, and though it was for the most part hers also, I saw it from a somewhat different perspective and amidst different associations.

The essential character of the town was the same for both of us. Iowa City was thoroughly a university town. People either worked for the university or in businesses dependent on it or on the farmers of Johnson County. It was just out of the small town stage but, because of the university, it had considerably more to offer a young person, child or teen-ager, than many larger cities. It takes an effort to realize that, just a few years before we were born, Oskaloosa was bigger than Iowa City.

Because the university gave the town its character, it strongly influenced the lives of children who grew up there. Dominated would perhaps be a better word. Some of my earliest memories are of university professors I knew as

a small child. They impressed me favorably and profoundly; they awed me. Playing with my wagon on the front sidewalk of our home on Iowa Avenue, I learned to know dapper little Professor Rockwood as he walked jauntily by on his way to the Chemistry building, or kindly Professor "Bugs" Wyckham, the zoologist. He died when I was taking a course from him in my sophomore year at the university. Professor Gilbert Houser was another zoologist neighbor. From his course which I took as a freshman I remember one solemn pronouncement. Pausing in his lecture, looking at the ceiling at the rear of the room with his long nose above the horizontal, he asked rhetorically, dramatically, and with profound gravity, apropos of nothing I can recall, "Who ever heard of a constipated bird?"

Those gentlemen, and a few others like them, persuaded me that a professor was a very special person living an enviable life. From outward appearances they seemed to be at peace with themselves and the world. They were unhurried, benign, regular men who lived lives that today would be considered routine. In my boyish eyes they were great men. I never learned anything about them in later years that diminished their stature. I think they, and some others on the university faculty I came to know in those years, were by my personal definition, great men. My opinion of professors did not change even when I caddied for some of them and saw them in other positions. I was able to separate the professor from the duffer with the bizarre golf swing whom we caddies delighted in imitating derisively.

I can say with some confidence that acquaintance with them influenced my ultimate decision to dwell always in academe. Today we call such men role models. The term grates on me but it describes a reality I experienced long before I entered graduate school and came under their tutelage.

At the age of four and one-half my neighborhood horizons widened. I entered kindergar-





*Fire station in the City Hall, c. 1920. The author can be seen beneath the horse's head. The two gentlemen on the fire wagon are Mayor Jack Carroll and the author's father. (courtesy Carl B. Cone)*

ten at Horace Mann School and began a happy period of twelve years in the Iowa City public schools. If it were possible to live that time again, I do not think I would want anything about my schooling to be different. Today we use a bit of jargon — “quality education.” If the term means what I think it ought to mean, we enjoyed quality education under circumstances as congenial as any that I can imagine. Our teachers were true professionals; teaching took first place in their lives. Partly that was because the females among them, the majority of my teachers, were almost without exception spinsters. Teaching for them was a full-time vocation, not, as so often today, simply a source of supplemental family income, one among the activities competing for time and attention and often coming out third or fourth best.

The school bus did not set the school schedule and tyrannize over the lives of the pupils. We always had an hour and a half at noon. Most of us, all the way through high school, went home for lunch. In elementary school that

meant we could pass a football or play catch with a baseball on our way to lunch and back to school, or in season play marbles in the automobile ruts of unpaved Dodge Street. Basketball was not yet important in our lives; today under similar circumstances we would probably dribble a basketball to and from school. I feel sorry for pupils today who don't know the fun and joy of walking to school or meandering home after school. Poor things, they wolf school “lunches” and return to their classrooms all within the half an hour the school bus schedule permits them.

On one occasion our third grade walked to MacBride Hall at the university to see a performance of *Peter Pan*. It was the month of May; a rain shower had ended but the streets were damp and buds from the trees were thick on the sidewalk. It was one of those deliciously moist spring days, full of promise of summer. Even since then *Peter Pan* has been associated in my mind with a rainy warm spring day. Walking along Bayswater Road in London on



just such a day about twenty years ago I passed a house with a blue plaque on the wall near the front door. It had been the home of J.M. Barrie. The association was reinforced — *Peter Pan*, Barrie, and a showery spring day. Similarly, because I read *The Brothers Karamazov* as a university student on winter nights so cold that the snow squeaked under the feet of passers-by, I want to make it a winter's tale.

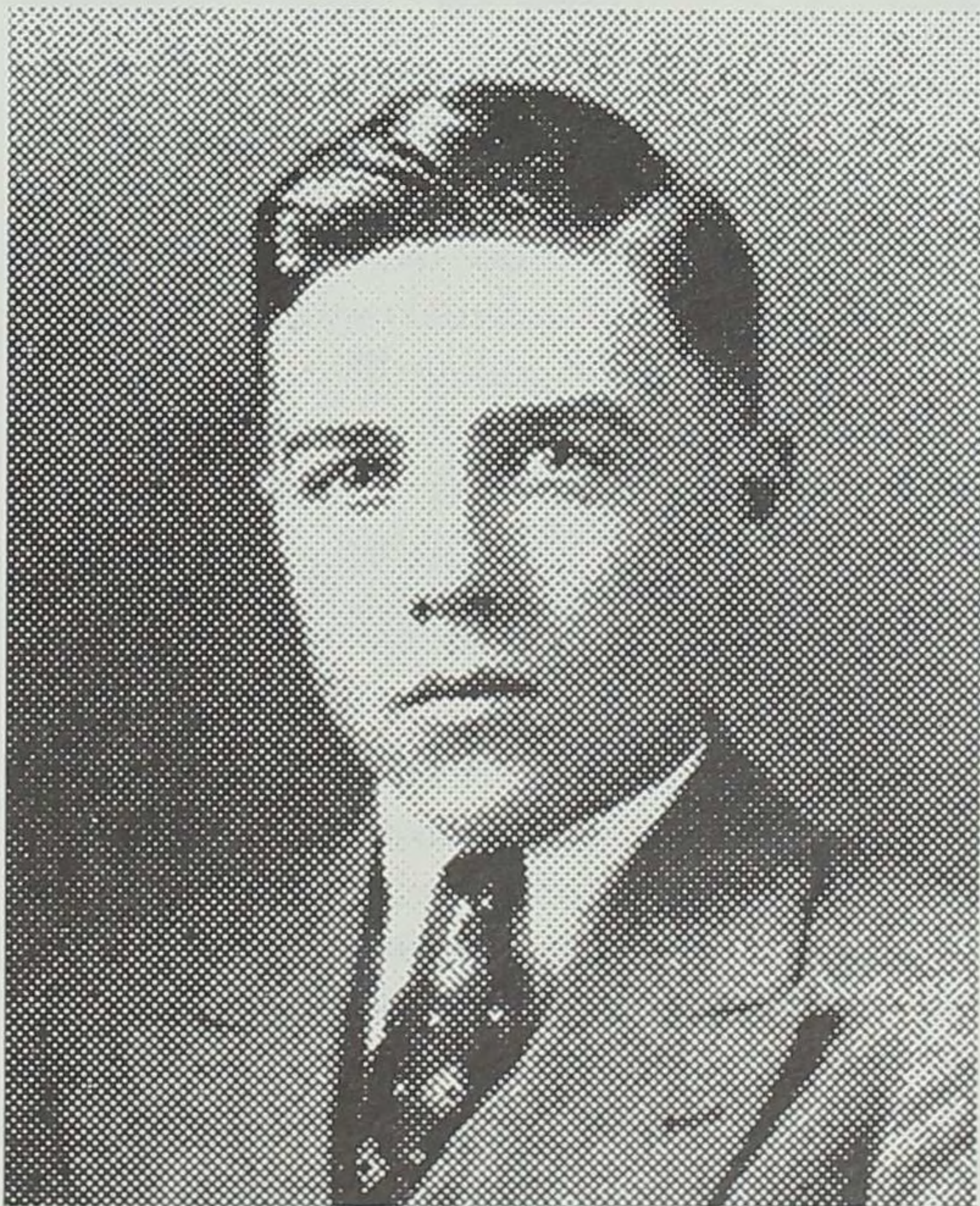
Through twelve grades the university impinged upon our lives. A graduate student in speech, Loren Reid, came regularly from the university to judge our high school debates. Later, at one stage of my career professing history, I was closely associated with some people in the field of speech, and Loren Reid was one of them. I encountered him when I taught summer school at the University of Missouri in Columbia. In his biography of Charles James Fox he cited one of my books, a book written by one whom Loren had judged twenty-five years earlier as a high school debater in Iowa City.

The Iowa City public schools embarked seriously upon an instrumental music program about the time I entered junior high school. In my senior year of high school the band director was Gerald Roscoe Prescott, well known for his success at Mason City. He was a graduate student in music at the university. Later I saw him at the University of Minnesota where he was director of bands and nationally prominent in band circles.

Speakers from the university faculty came regularly to speak to our high school assemblies. Always well received and long remembered was, for example, Homer Dill. He conducted the university program in museum methods and told about expeditions to collect zoological specimens for the museum. He taught the late Jack Musgrove, one of my boyhood pals. Jack was one of those unusually fortunate persons who spent his life following out interests that took hold of him during boyhood. Some may remember him for his book on the wild fowl of Iowa, or as director of the state

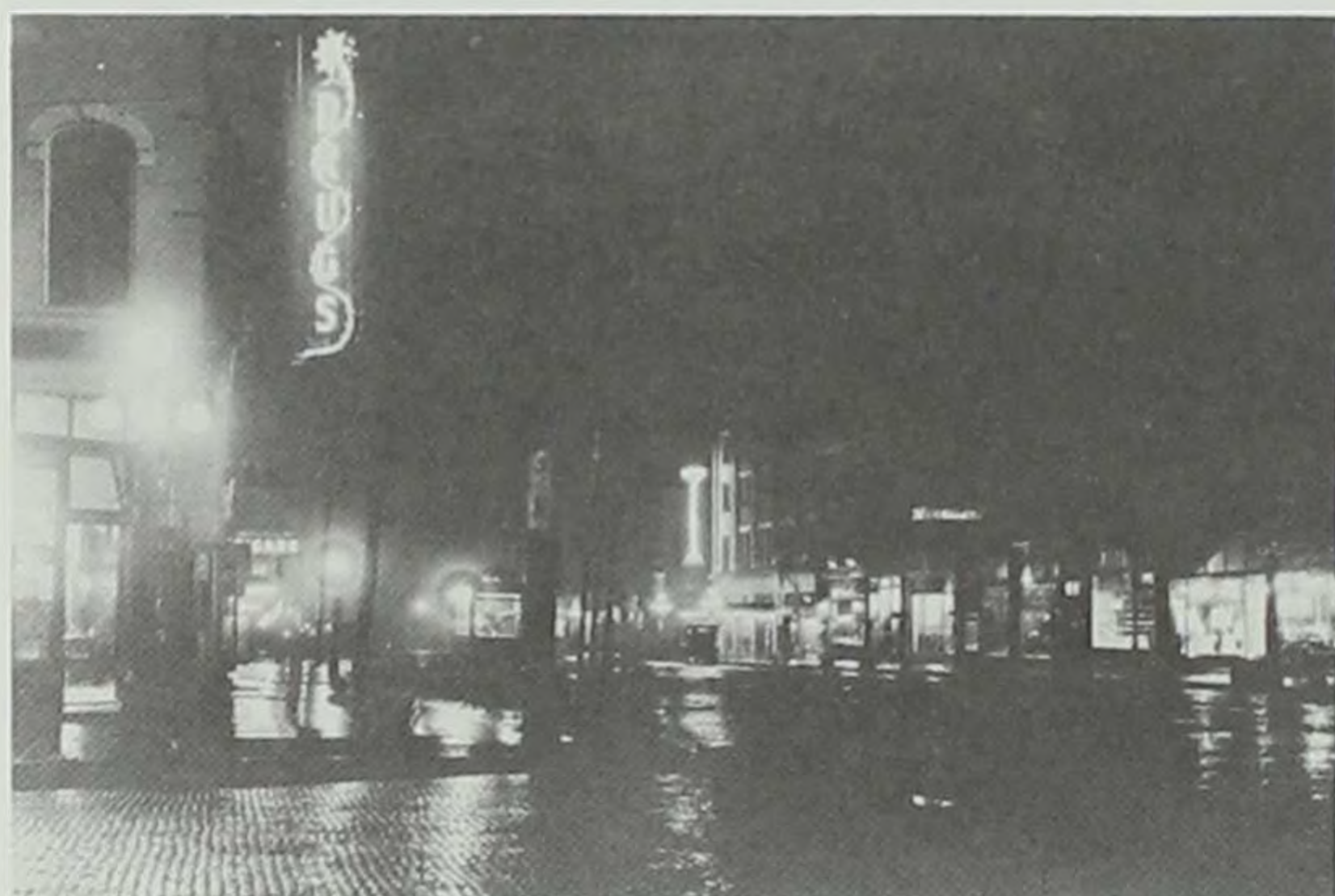
museum in Des Moines. Another popular speaker from the university was Professor Ed Lauer, who later went to the University of Washington. Still later, after the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* published one of my articles, he wrote to ask whether I was the son of the Carl Cone he had known in Rotary in Iowa City.

The relations between town and gown in Iowa City in those years were good. A young person growing up there could take advantage of the opportunities the university offered, notably the university lecture series. There, even before I was in the university, I was able to see and admire the polished performances of Benjamin F. Shambaugh who always introduced the speakers. His introductions were gems of composition and delivery. One memorable speaker was Hamlin Garland. He appeared at the time when we were reading *A Son of the Middle Border* in seventh grade English. Though I cannot remember the contents of his



Carl B. Cone as a high school student, c. 1930.  
(City High School, Iowa City)





*Whetstone's Drug Store on the corner of Clinton and Washington streets. (SHSI)*

lecture, I cannot forget his appearance or the impression it made upon me. He was tall with white hair, and altogether he was someone to be remembered.

There were other kinds of university related interests in Iowa City that I would have encountered in few other places. We lived next door to the Phi Gamma Delta house. One day, after students had left for the summer vacation, I found a book in a pile of trash the students had thrown out. So it came about that I read Percy Marks, *The Plastic Age*, at an earlier age (before eight) than would usually be recommended. Because I already knew, I think I can say, something about college life, I had enough background to appreciate this book as a college novel. The background was all around me and in the air of Iowa City. It was not long after this, with the remarkable freedom for children in Iowa City at that time, that we accustomed ourselves to read magazines at Whetstone's drugstore. We paid our rental fee, so to speak, with a nickel for a wonderful pink fountain drink called Persian Sherbert, with a scoop of ice cream in it for another nickel. We smirked and chuckled knowingly over *Frivol*, the campus humor magazine, and *College Humor*; the illustrations by John Held, Jr., and his imitators, exaggerated only a bit the sheiks and flappers we saw on the streets of Iowa City in raccoon coats and bell-bottom trousers, short

skirts, high heels, and silk stockings. One coed from Des Moines drove a yellow Stutz Bearcat; tin lizzies were all over town.

Professors and lecturers and "intellectual" phenomena had to compete for young people's interests with university athletes and sports heroes. If at the age of five I knew "Bugs" Wyckham, I also knew George Thompson who had the good fortune or bad luck, depending on how one looked at it, to be the "other tackle" on that great 1921 Iowa football team. He was a Phi Gam. Now and then I was an honored guest for dinner there. Seeing me at play outside, the fraternity men would take me in, wash my face and hands, and then to my great pride and glory, they'd plaster down my hair with Stacombe, a pink pomade much favored at that time. We would assemble in the living room to await the call to dinner. To pass the time, the men tossed me around like a football and of course big George with his ruddy face and his "I" sweater was among those who tossed and caught me. In the meantime, Mrs. Walsh, the fraternity cook, had told my mother why I wouldn't be home for dinner. Mother could see me at dinner because our kitchen window was opposite the dining room windows of the fraternity. The men sang at the table after dinner. When I returned home it was important to peel off my sweater without mussing my sleeked down hair.

George Thompson was a better tackle than common fame allowed. Because the other tackle was the incomparable Duke Slater, people tended to overlook George. When opposing teams stayed away from Duke's side of the Iowa line, George received the assault against his. At the end of the season in those days, the athletic department sold off old practice footballs. My father brought one home to me. He told me a scratch on the cover was the mark of Duke's thumbnail. I was the envy of my pals. My father never changed his story; I doubt on reflection that it was true; but it was a glorious story at the time.



The first university football game I saw was on a beautiful October day in 1925. Dad telephoned during the morning to say that the telephone people from Des Moines for whom he bought tickets would be unable to come. If I would come to his office downtown after lunch, we would go to the game. With a shiny red Jonathan in my pocket, we took our seats in the stands. Illinois was the opponent. The first play of my first college game had Red Grange receiving the kickoff in the southeast corner of the old Iowa field and returning it untouched on the diagonal for a touchdown. But Iowa had Nick (Cowboy) Kutsch. The headline next morning in the *Des Moines Register's* sports section — green, not peach then — read “Grange great, Kutsch greater.” He was, so to speak, by two points — 12-10.

There were other lasting memories. When Iowa beat Yale in 1922, the town went wild, first on Saturday when the news arrived and later on Monday when the team arrived at the Rock Island depot. I had to be in school on Monday, of course, but I was downtown on Saturday and after school on Monday and saw the festivities. I was six years old. Then, and it remained true later, I and most other kids in Iowa City enjoyed freedom of movement. We walked or rode our bikes wherever we went and we went wherever we chose to go. About the only limitation on my freedom was the rule that I had to be home at mealtime.

We knew how to sneak under the wall along the interurban tracks bordering old Iowa field. Until I became a Boy Scout and ushered at football games, that was the means of access to see such as Herb Joesting shred the Iowa line in the dismal days when Coach Burt Ingwersen was under attack. That was the period when the bitter saying was heard in the land, Minnesota 40, Iowa fights. We heard it again in the middle thirties when Pug Lund and Stan Kostka ran up the Minnesota scores against Iowa.

But in between, Iowa did beat Minnesota. I

was a Boy Scout usher when I saw Nanny Pape break loose for a touchdown and Irving Nelson drop kick the point after to beat Minnesota 7-6. The next year, 1929, the Minnesota game was played in the new stadium across the river, and history repeated itself. Bronko Nagurski broke through the Iowa line. Like a wounded buffalo he galloped on, with tacklers bouncing off him, and he went about forty yards for the touchdown. But hold, here's Pape again. Late in the game he scored Iowa's only touchdown to beat Minnesota 9-7.



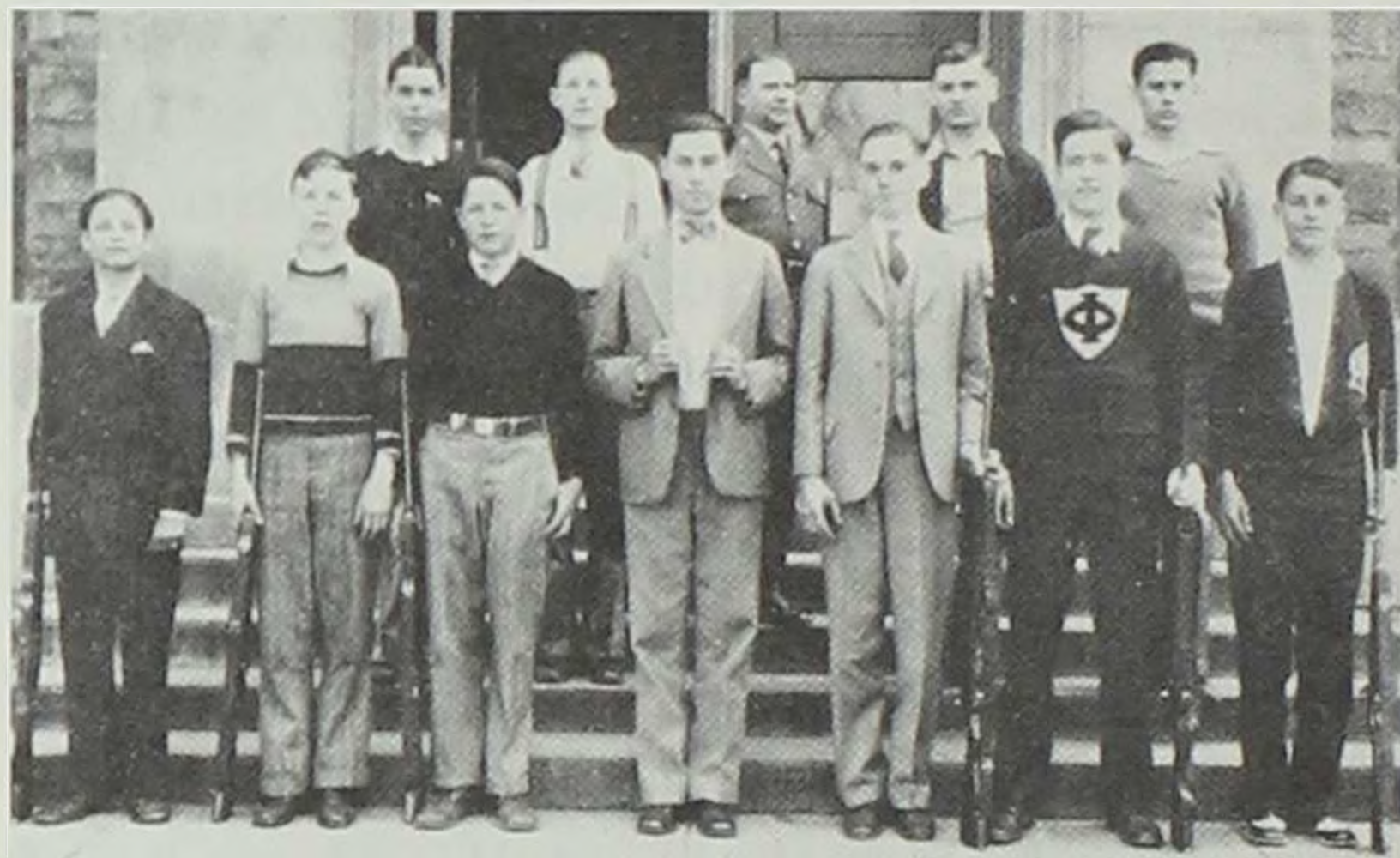
*The Homecoming Monument created for the 1928 Iowa-Minnesota football game. (SHSI)*

Childhood events remain vivid, especially when they were so spectacular, or seemed so to me. Some great athletes played for or against Iowa in the days of my childhood, and it was my good fortune, growing up in Iowa City, to see many of them. I learned to think of the Big Ten as the premier collegiate athletic conference. When teaching at LSU and then the University of Kentucky, prudence told me my attitude



toward the Southeastern Conference was best left unspoken. My youth in Iowa City continues until now to influence my views of intercollegiate athletics. For one thing, at an early age I learned something about the seamy side of intercollegiate athletics. Because of Iowa's suspension from the Big Ten in 1930, I was disabused of thinking that college athletics were all purity, sweetness and light.

Later personal experience taught me about callousness in athletics and gave me a reason for thinking I understood why Iowa athletic fortunes were at their nadir in the 1930s. In the fall of 1935 I received a letter from the registrar informing me of a university rule by which, because of my superior grades, I had accumulated more than enough bonus credits to make me eligible to graduate at the end of my seventh semester. I went to the athletic department to inquire of the effect of graduation on my eligibility to continue on the varsity rifle team during the following spring semester. I remembered the man I talked with from my childhood days on Iowa Avenue, not as a kindly Bugs Wyckham but as an arrogant coach of gymnastics and fencing. He had not changed. He was rude and could not have been less interested. With his feet on his desk while I stood in front of it, his hands clasped across his fat belly, he simply said that under Big Ten rules I would be ineligible to compete, even if I chose not to take my degree, because I had enough credits to graduate. I said that it was strange to be ruled ineligible because of superior grades. He shrugged his shoulders to signal that he was done with me. He did not know that the spring before at the Big Ten matches at the University of Illinois, my performance earned me the national intercollegiate, and thus the Big Ten individual rifle championship. But the coach of Minnesota remembered and, alone among Big Ten rifle coaches, he refused to ignore the so-called rule and permit me to compete. The others simply would not accept that the intent of the rule governed my case. I did not fuss



*The City High Rifle Team, 1930. The author is second from the left in the first row. (City High School, Iowa City)*

about the matter and went on into graduate work. If Nile Kinnick in his senior year had played a spring sport, would he have been ruled ineligible because of superior grades? That would have been a cause célèbre. Or was the rule repealed by that time? Or was the athletic director's representative wrong in the first place? I suspect he was because he only half listened when I explained my situation. I wonder whether I hold a unique distinction — ineligibility for Big Ten varsity competition because of grades that were too high!

Maybe, to take the worst view of it, that was delayed retribution for sharing in a sin. Our high school rifle team, coached by an R.O.T.C. sergeant from the university, sometimes went on team trips with the university rifle team. We went to the big annual midwestern match at Kemper Military Academy in Boonville, Missouri, or to the University of Minnesota where matches were arranged with Twin City high schools. I'm sure that the professor of military science and tactics, the R.O.T.C. colonel, was acting out of kindness, in part. It never occurred to us to wonder whether Colonel Lewis had something else in mind. In those depression days he could reasonably expect us to attend the University of Iowa and he was right. In my first year at the university, four of the five members of the freshman rifle team were from Iowa City High School. We

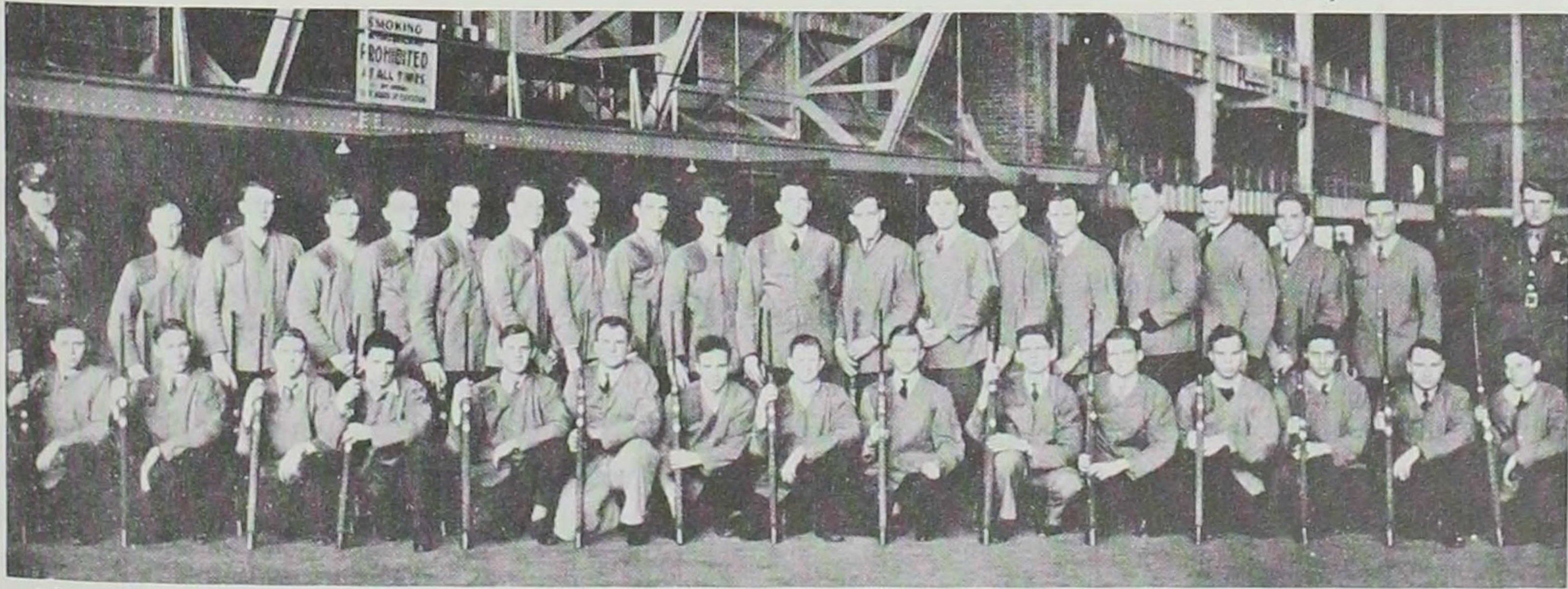


already had experienced the tensions of shoulder-to-shoulder competition in the difficult sport of rifle shooting. It was difficult because it was about nine-tenths nerves and mind.

A later, less innocent and more cynical age, which has seen more recruiting irregularities in intercollegiate sports than we ever dreamed of, would say that the colonel was recruiting likely prospects for his university rifle team. I have no doubt he was, but he did it openly and above board; he simply took us along because there was room for us. Because the rifle team did not interest the people who controlled university athletics, even though it was a varsity sport, they simply ignored it. We had encountered that attitude in high school, even though we noticed with malicious pleasure the jealousy of members of the high school's notoriously poor football and basketball teams. Those "athletes" showed their dislike when we wore our high school letters. So we asked them where they'd been lately. They could only answer Cedar Rapids, perhaps, where Grant High had clobbered them, or Davenport where they were smeared while we had come home victorious over the Davenport High rifle team. If the colonel's beneficence was the kind that would provoke recruiting investigations today, so be it. We were the objects of it only because we lived in the shadow of the university.

There is another sequel to this story, involving a further bit of retribution. By my junior year in the university a new P.M.S. and T. had taken over. His love of Scottie dogs might have been taken, looking backwards, as an omen. He conceived of a bagpipe unit, but he needed money to get it started. So he economized at the expense of the rifle team. Henceforth, for example, we traveled in an old army ambulance, which we suspected was of World War I vintage. It was open at the rear and on a trip to Fort Des Moines one winter day we froze up so stiff that we weren't unthawed by the time of our match with the 14th Cavalry. We lost. Our love for that particular colonel was not fulsome. Some years later I was teaching at Louisiana State University. In that old "War Skule" the R.O.T.C. tradition was very strong, and it turned out that this colonel, complete with his Scottie dogs, was P.M.S. and T. When I met him at a reception he invited me to assist in coaching the rifle team. It was a pleasure to say "No," though I would have liked to have refused in more colorful words.

All of this, by the way, tells something of the origins of the later, famous Iowa Highlanders. If people might wonder why a Scottish outfit was at the University of Iowa, considering that there was no strong Scottish tradition at the university or in the state, the answer is at hand. There was once at the university a P.M.S. and



*The University of Iowa Rifle Team, 1935-36. (Hawkeye Yearbook, 1936)*

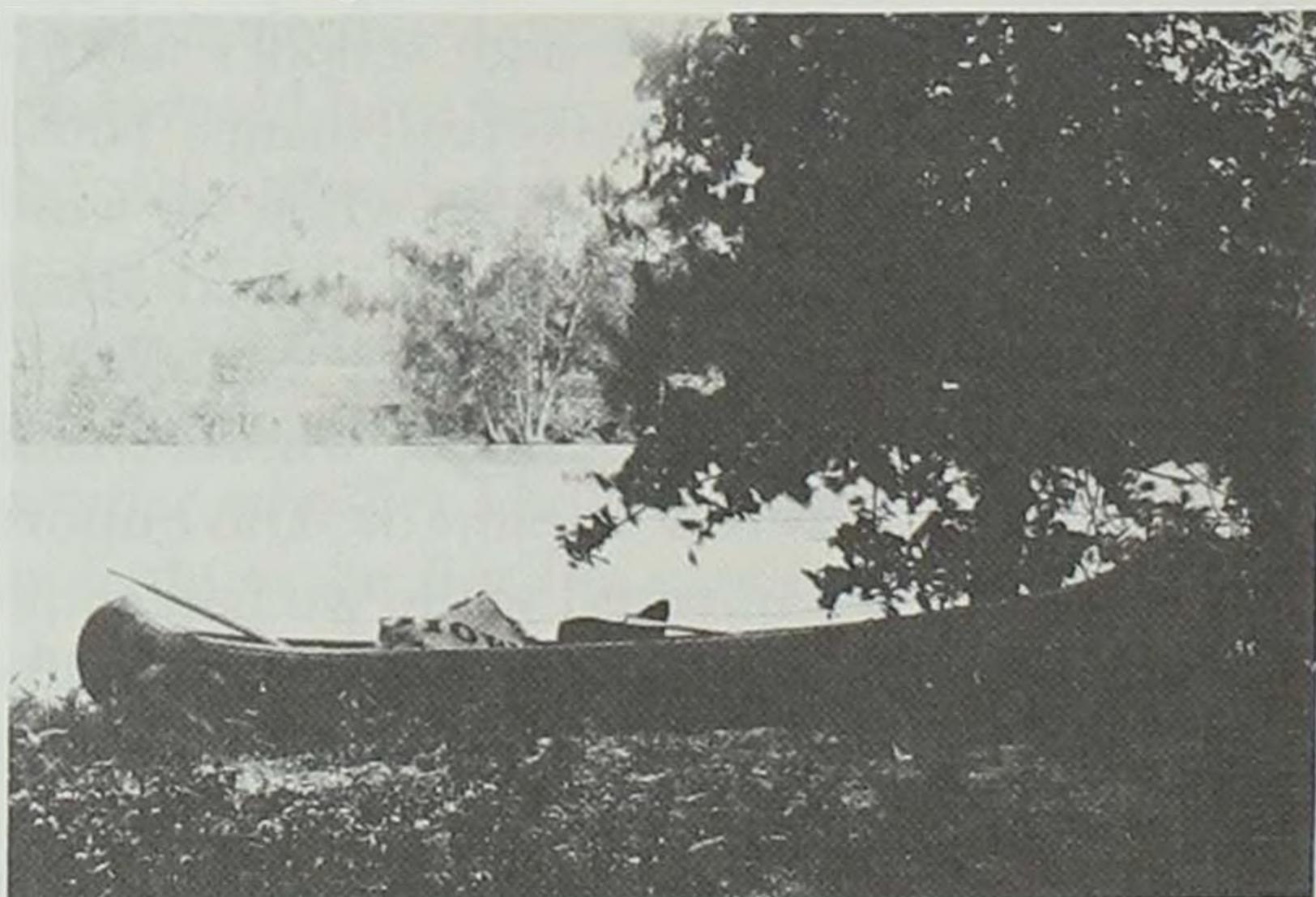


T. whose background and affections were predominantly Celtic, and over the years one of his dreams became reality. I hope admirers of the late Highlanders will pardon me for acknowledging a lack of enthusiasm for their pipes and drums and sword dances. It is only that I know how it all got started and the memory recalls to me among other things an unpleasant trip to Fort Des Moines.

Sometimes I think growing up in Iowa City in the 1920s and 1930s enabled me to learn more about the university than I needed to know. I seemed to be more interested in university matters than my friends and I know I read more about them. Consequently, I developed a certain skepticism about some things. But second thoughts make me reconsider. By the time I enrolled in the university I had already shed some of the awe and naiveté that other first year enrollees had to grow out of. Fortunately I had things in proper focus and knew quite early in my undergraduate experience that I wanted to go into academic life. I never had to agonize over a career choice. Looking back, I think that my early childhood experience pointed me toward the academic life and for that I am grateful.

I still have difficulty in separating the city from the university. The interaction between the two was continual and changed with the seasons. In the winter, as Boy Scouts, we had access to the big swimming pool in the new field house on Saturday mornings. In the summer we swam in the Iowa River at the old City Park bridge. In the winter I used the university library when I could not find what I wanted in the public library and the desk attendants never raised any questions. On summer evenings when we did not have scheduled games in the city league, we practiced on the baseball diamond at the old Iowa field, never expecting some watchman to run us off. Life was free and easy then, it seemed, so long as we did not abuse privileges that we mostly took for granted.

We enjoyed one unusual spring sport, if I may use that word. In that season, the Dean of Men and the Dean of Women at the university began to look more worried than usual because the pattern of student activities changed. As town kids we accommodated to it easily. University students were beginning to think of final exams while rushing to complete course requirements. The university calendar of special events, such as lectures, became less crowded. Generally there seemed to be less going on. But after dark on warm May evenings, some students of the 1920s, perhaps those who did not have cars, enjoyed one of the attractions of the Iowa campus, the Iowa River. When we were junior high and high school freshman age, some of us shared in it. Where



(R.J. Vigars Collection, SHSI)

now is a parking lot just north of the Memorial Union there was then Fitzgerald's boathouse on the riverbank to provide rental canoes. The scene upriver from the Union on a spring evening was a pretty one, canoes dotting the water up to the island opposite the City Park and around the bend to the country club. There was no barrier until the Coralville dam, but few men and their dates intended to paddle that far. They had other business in mind, and the island, or at farthest the country club, was a distant enough destination at which to beach their canoes and recline in the moonlight on the riverbank. Being curious, or inspired to educate ourselves in the behavior of humans



stimulated by Eros, a group of us would also be on the river. We'd chip in a nickel or dime apiece, two of us would engage a canoe and, once out of sight of the boathouse, we would pick up the other three or four. The ensuing education in college life took me a bit beyond *The Plastic Age* and *College Humor*. It was not bookish learning, but we were introducing ourselves to what is now called, to strain a term, experiential education. I doubt that kind of education was as readily available in other Iowa cities.

But there was life in Iowa City apart from the university, especially during the summers. My side of town was the north end, that is, tank town, so called because of the water tower on North Dodge Street, or Goosetown, because it was the Bohemian (Czech) part of town. It was on the edge of Oakland Cemetery, and beyond the cemetery was open country. When I was nine we moved from Iowa Avenue to North Governor Street, as close (as I learned later) to the heart of the precisely defined historic Goosetown as it was possible to live, given the street pattern. It happened that the kids in the neighborhood enjoyed hunting and fishing and skating and skiing or merely tramping in the open spaces beyond the cemetery.

There was nothing unusual in small town (Iowa City was only 15,000 in the 1920s) boys in Iowa having ready access to the countryside. That was one of the advantages of growing up in Iowa. But Iowa City was not merely a rural Iowa town. There was in it, open to any young person who desired to benefit from it, the stimulating presence of the university.

Doubtless there were other great universities in middle-sized towns or small ones where a growing boy could have had the best of two worlds. I can't attest to that because I only had time to grow up in one small town. That was a full-time vocation. I can not think of any important thing I would change if I could live that period of my life again. That is because there was no better place to grow up in than the

Iowa City of the twenties and thirties.

By leaving Iowa City to live in Louisiana and then Kentucky for the rest of my life, I have been able to understand better what growing up in Iowa meant for me. To see Iowa from a distance is to see it more clearly and with an understanding improved by comparative perspectives. Life in Iowa is freer and safer than I have known it elsewhere, and I say that realizing that life has changed everywhere. The comparative freedom from crime in Iowa is only one part of the freedom and security I am thinking of. Physical and social movement are easier, if I may speak of them in the same breath. They are functions of geography, of the absence of great urban concentrations, of a rural society which makes the ethos of the state rural. Small towns and middle-sized cities are not far removed from the country. The urban population, because of proximity to the country and community of interests, participates in the rural ethos and shares a similarity of outlook. In the end there is a total community of spirit. That spirit is equalitarian, not doctrinaire egalitarianism. It is an equalitarian society in which deference to social and economic superiors is only the politeness accorded to equals. Frankness and openness in relations with others presupposes that pretenders to superiority must merit it by superior achievements that do not confer special privileges. Ancestors did not earn a claim to superiority for their descendants for all time to come. It makes no difference who were the grandparents. There are no old family names to whose current bearers deference must be shown and special consideration or prior place yielded because they happened to inherit a name. Perhaps a frontier spirit lives on in Iowa. "If I passing, should speak to you, why should I not speak to you, and why should you not speak to me?" Walt Whitman lives in Iowa. □