

# John C. Mabray:

## A Con Artist in the Corn Belt

by Raymond A. Smith, Jr.

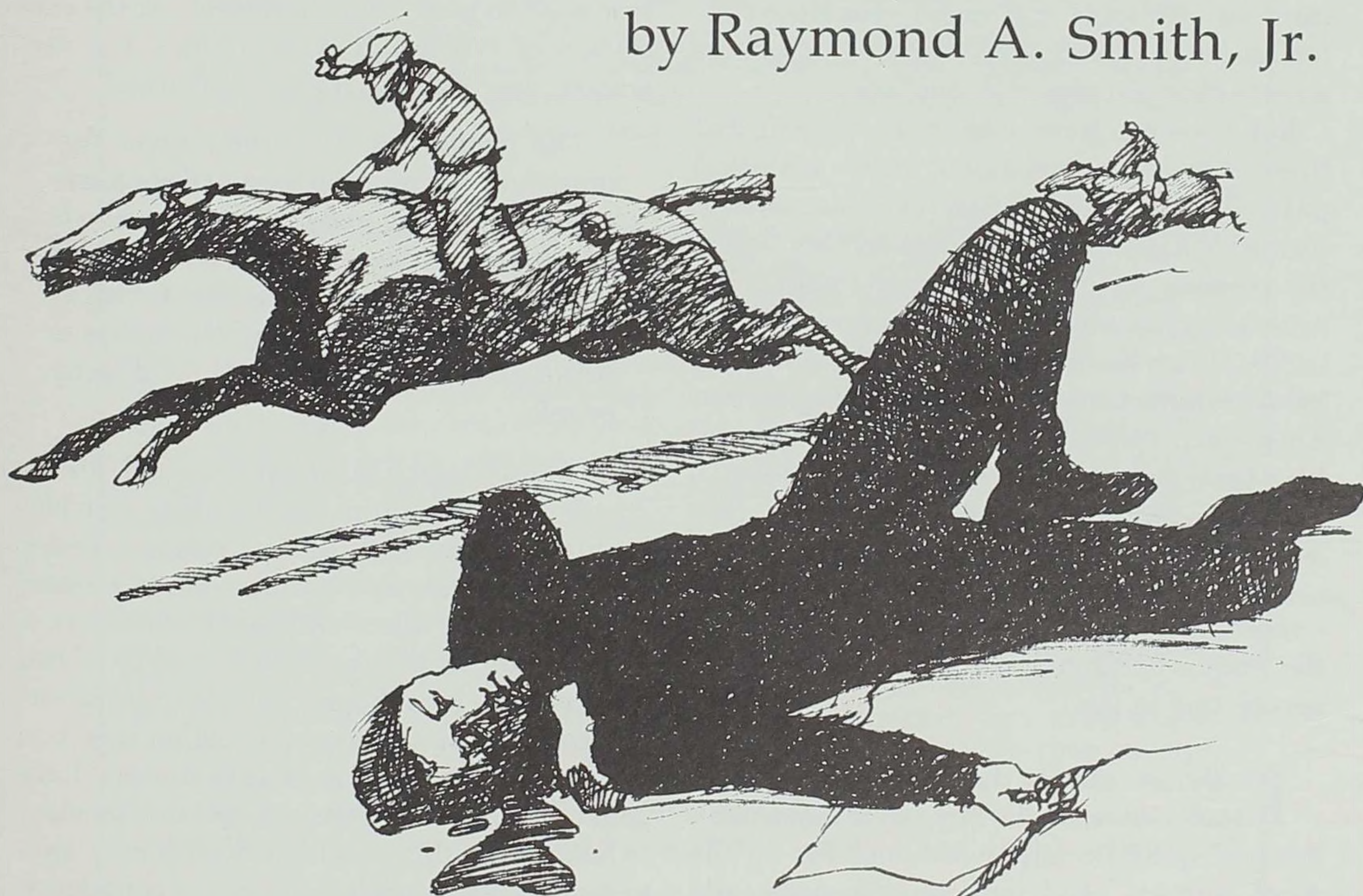


Illustration by Kirk M. Johnson

On Monday, March 21, 1910, John C. Mabray stood in a federal court at Council Bluffs, Iowa, before Judge Smith McPherson. The judge sentenced Mr. Mabray to two years in the federal penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth and a fine of \$10,000. It was the maximum sentence that he could give Mabray under the circumstances. Thus ended a swindling operation the size and scope of which were staggering. Operating largely out of

Council Bluffs, John C. Mabray's "Big Store" had, for almost a decade, been separating poor fools from their money with regularity on a scale perhaps never before or since seen in Iowa. And con men have never been absent from our scene for long. One might almost suggest that the con man and his victims are an inherent part of the American scene.

It is always with a certain measure of fear and trepidation that one raises questions of national character at any time or concerning any national group. It is easy to talk about the

German penchant for discipline, the phlegmatic qualities of the English temperament, the stinginess of the Scot, the anti-tax proclivities of the French, but then one recalls hearing statements about miserliness and Jews or rhythm and blacks and one becomes very, very cautious. National and racial characteristics tend to become badly mixed up and arguments about either are generally confusing.

But if one can leave aside race, it seems that there may have been times in the historical past when national characteristics seemed plainer or easier to discern than at other times. Is it possible that one might suggest traits of the American character which were more obvious eighty or one hundred years ago than they are today? I think many historians would agree that Americans, throughout most of their history, have been mobile types tending always to be in search of opportunities for betterment. One might add something to the effect that Americans tended to be forever searching for optimal opportunities, the kind associated with taming the frontier, searching for precious metals, or speculating in land.

It almost seems that one can say that Americans took the phrase "to make one's fortune" quite literally with emphasis on the word "fortune." And one can see from an early date two classes of individuals on the American scene, with both classes adding something to our evanescent notions of the American national character. One class was made up of con men, "steerers," bunco artists, or flim-flam men, and the other class consisted of victims, "mikes," or just plain fools. Consider a bit of the literature on the subject. Propositions that "could not be refused" were the stuff of many Americans' activities in Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Moreover, if the citizens of this country tended to take umbrage with the poor Englishman, they had to put up with the images drawn by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in that magnificently imper-

fect novel, *The Gilded Age*. Indeed, as the nineteenth century came to an end and the twentieth century began, an increasing number of literary pieces were being written on the theme that greed was abroad in the land and that nefarious men were constantly finding new ways to prey on the innocent. At the conclusion of William Hawley Smith's *The Promoters*, one of the characters remarked:

*The temptation to acquire great fortunes quickly, and the unguarded opportunities for doing so by the use of methods which were right under the old order of things, but which are altogether wrong as things are now, have put too severe a strain on the moral fiber of a good many people.*

How complicated it must have seemed, for the "temptation to acquire great fortune quickly" has always been a difficult temptation to resist. An extreme statement on American national character in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might well suggest that citizens of this country have been largely unable to resist just that temptation. Or, to put it another way, one might say that citizens of this country have generally exhibited desires to get rich quickly, to bet on sure things, and to cherish easy ways to wealth. The terrible successes of confidence men in this country have been due to their ability to play on those desires and the truth of such a statement can be seen by considering the Council Bluffs career of J.C. Mabray.

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John C. Mabray was a con artist of eminent skill. Schooled at Webb City, Missouri, in the workings of the fake footrace and other ploys, he arrived in Council Bluffs sometime around the turn of the century. Within a period of less than ten years, he set up a fairly complicated operation, plucked an unknown number of victims of perhaps as much as \$5,000,000, and had a very successful time of it until his arrest in Little Rock, Arkansas, on 23 February

Office of the State Historical Society

### Thank You

*We would like to thank the many Society members who voted in the recent Board of Trustees election and expressed their preference for the 1982 Palimpsest article most deserving of the Trustees' Award. Your active support of the State Historical Society is greatly appreciated. The election results will be announced in the September News for Members, as will the names of the recipients of awards to individuals and organizations for achievement in state and local history.*

### Elderhostel 1983

For a fifth consecutive summer, Dr. Loren N. Horton, historian and head of the State Historical Society's Educational and Community Services program area, will offer a course for the 1983 Iowa Elderhostel program. The highly successful Elderhostel program is designed to offer people sixty years of age or older the opportunity to take week-long classes in a college environment and to sample campus cultural events, recreation facilities, and dormitory life—all for a very minimal cost. The twenty-four member consortium of Iowa regent universities, private college and universities, and community colleges which comprise the Iowa Elderhostel program has this year gained additional support and funding from the Iowa Humanities Board and the Iowa Arts Council for special kinds of courses. Dr. Horton's course, "Methods in Historical Research," has proven to be an especially popular course in the five years that it has been offered, with many Elderhostel students finding it valuable enough to repeat—once or several times. In the course of the week, Dr. Horton examines the techniques of historical research and writing, and the variety of sources available to researchers. The Society library and manuscript collections offer a generous range of materials for researchers, from government census records and newspapers to private manuscript and photograph collections. One topic of particular interest to Dr. Horton is the way researchers interpret historical photographs. "You can tell all kinds of things by looking at a photograph; like the styles of dress, the event the photo may have been taken for, the geography of the area, the furniture, and so on. All these things can help tell you about the time frame the family lived in and possibly things like their income." For more information about the Iowa Elderhostel program, or Dr. Horton's July 17-23 course, contact: Peggy Houston, Director, Iowa Elderhostel, C108 Seashore Hall, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.

### CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS, 1983

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| June 25         | Annual Meeting and Banquet of the State Historical Society, Ames                                 |
| July 14-16      | National Genealogy Conference, Hartford, Connecticut   |
| July 17-29      | Institute for Historical Editing, Madison, Wisconsin   |
| July 23         | Iowa Chapter, Victorian Society in America, Des Moines   |
| August 10-13    | Inter-regional Conference on the Women's West, Sun Valley, Idaho                                 |
| September 27-30 | Midwest Museums Conference, Flint, Michigan  |
| Sept. 28-Oct. 2 | National Oral History Colloquium, Seattle, Washington  |
| October 4-7     | American Association for State and Local History, Victoria, British Columbia                     |
| October 5-8     | Society of American Archivists, Minneapolis, Minnesota   |
| October 12-15   | Western History Association, Salt Lake City, Utah  |
| October 16-17   | Iowa Museum Association, Fort Dodge  |
| October 21-23   | Midwest Archaeological Conference, Iowa City   |
| October 22      | Iowa Local Historical and Museum Association, Des Moines   |
| October 26-30   | National Trust for Historic Preservation, San Antonio, Texas                                     |
| November 4-5    | Iowa Genealogical Society, Ames  |
| November 9-11   | The 17th Conference on Archives and History, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Missouri |
| November 9-12   | Southern Historical Association, Charleston, South Carolina                                      |
| December 27-30  | American Historical Association, Washington, D.C.  |

## New Publication Available: Fire Insurance Maps Holdings

Peter H. Curtis, head of the State Historical Society's Library Collections program area, is pleased to announce the completion—and availability to the public—of a list of holdings of the three largest fire insurance map collections in the state: the Office of the State Historical Society, the University of Iowa, and the Iowa State Archives. *Fire Insurance Maps of Iowa Cities and Towns* also includes the Library of Congress' holdings of Sanborn Map Company Iowa maps.

Increasingly, fire insurance maps are receiving recognition as superb sources of historical information for researchers, whether historians, genealogists, geographers, or urban planners. Hundreds of Iowa communities have been mapped since the 1870s. These maps are characterized by both a large mapping scale, and a color coding system which distinguishes between building materials and types of structures.

The compilers of this list of holdings, Peter H. Curtis, Office of the State Historical Society, Richard S. Green, University of Iowa Library, and Edward N. McConnell, Iowa State Archives, believe this to be a complete list of all existing state fire maps. This publication is available for purchase from the State Historical Society for \$3.25, postpaid.

## Alsatia Mellecker, A Many-Talented Middle Person

Alsatia Mellecker considers herself a "middle person" at the State Historical Society. Her duties range from day-to-day typing and supervising payroll to doing various kinds of research and writing speeches.

As a Clerk-Typist III, Alsatia works in the Administrative Support Services area of the Society. She has worked at the Society since 1976, when she served as a part-time file clerk while attending the University of Iowa. She became a full-time employee in 1982, the same year she received her bachelor of arts degrees in American studies and history with an emphasis in women's studies. Alsatia says that part of her job in Administrative Support Services is to take care of the everyday operation of the Society in an efficient manner, so that everyone else can go about their work uninterrupted. Hers is a position that encompasses a wide variety of tasks and it is rarely routine. "New things come up every day," she suggests.

Alsatia is originally from Davenport, Iowa, but has lived in Iowa City since 1967. Before beginning her college career in 1967 she worked as a salesperson for a wholesale grocery company, as a secretary at the university, and also as a bartender.

Alsatia finds the dissemination of history interesting. She has a special interest in United States history during the 1930s. It is an era from which she also collects books and music.

Alsatia is co-authoring an article for an upcoming issue of the *Palimpsest* and she also hopes to have a paper published soon on the subject of divorce proceedings during Iowa's territorial period. During this nineteenth century period divorce proceedings were handled through a legislative rather than judicial procedure. Alsatia says that she is interested in continuing her education, not necessarily to obtain a better job, but in order to broaden her historical perspective.

In her spare time Alsatia enjoys photography, aerobic exercising, bicycling, and reading history.



**The following four pages of this issue of the newsletter (the middle four pages) are devoted to an extended discussion of the available resources of the Library Collections program area of the Iowa State Historical Department/Office of the State Historical Society. The Society staff, believing this to be useful information for Society members, and for researchers generally, decided to publish it in a brochure form inside the newsletter in order to insure that all members might receive a copy. The editor is interested in your reaction to this format. Will you let us know what you think about it? Address your comments to: Mary K. Fredericksen, Palimpsest Editor, Office of the State Historical Society, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.**



## Library Collections

The State Historical Society is an office of the Iowa State Historical Department, an agency of the state of Iowa. Founded in 1857, the Society consists of three program areas: Publications, Educational and Community Services, and Library Collections. The Library Collections are open to public use free of charge, during the hours listed below. Anyone interested in an Iowa topic—past or present—is likely to find useful information in the Society collections. Materials of particular interest to researchers include local, state, and national histories, biographies, government documents, and over 100 current historical periodicals. Genealogists will find county histories, city directories, census data, cemetery records, atlases, plat books, and numerous state and local genealogical publications.

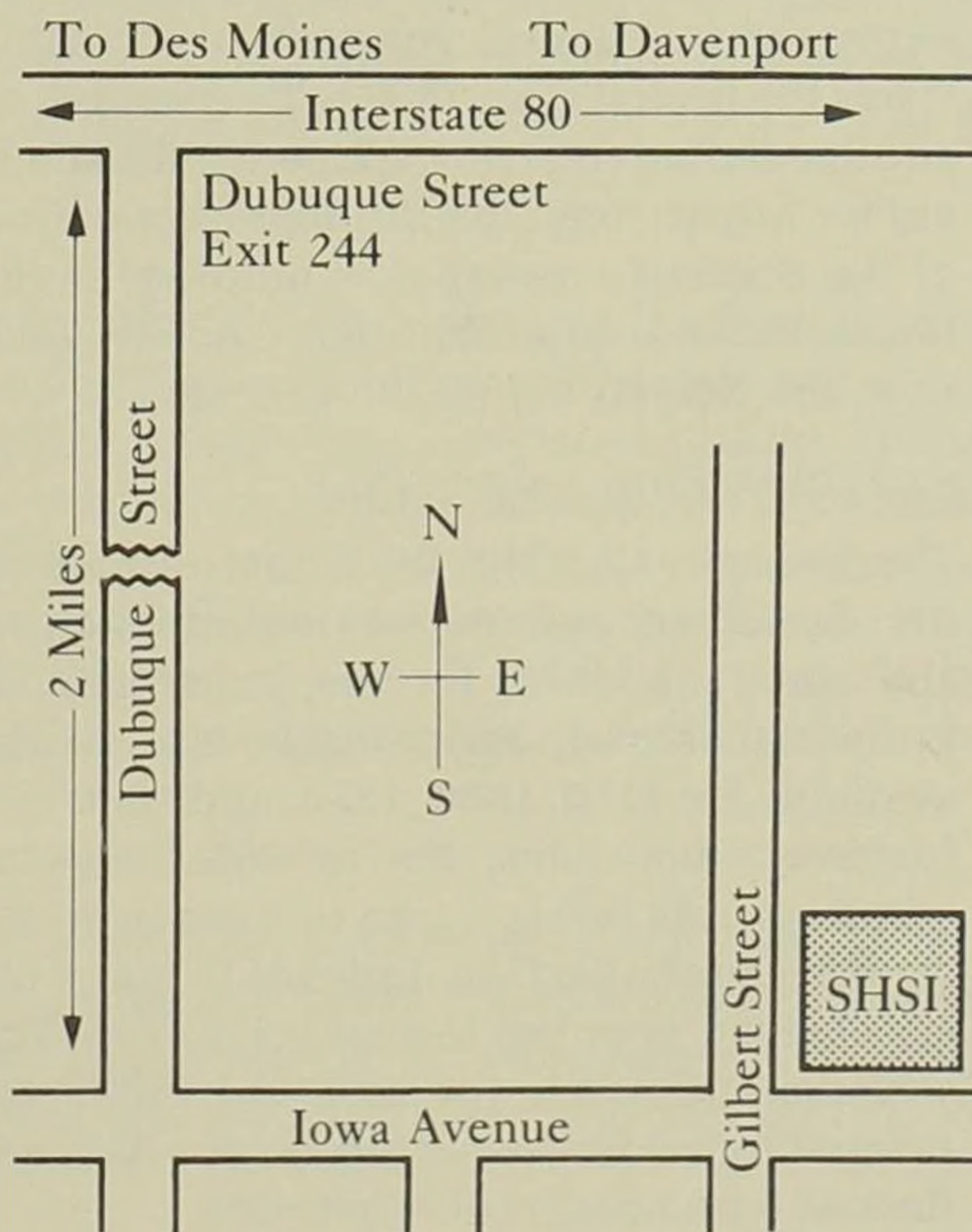
To aid all researchers, the library has a professional staff, two reading rooms, and ten microfilm readers. The Library Collections staff invites you to use the Society collections for serious research and personal enjoyment.

Books, microforms, newspapers, census material, and bound maps are located on the first floor of the Society's Centennial Building. Manuscripts, photographs, and unbound maps are kept on the second floor, in an area with

### HOURS

The library collections are open Monday through Saturday from 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., and from 6:00 to 9:00 P.M. on the last Tuesday of each month. During the summer months, June through August, the library maintains special Saturday hours, 8:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. The building is closed on all state holidays. Additionally, when a state holiday falls on a Friday or a Monday, the library is closed on Saturday.

The manuscript, photograph, and map collections are closed on Saturdays. However, if advance arrangements are made, materials from these collections may be used on Saturdays in the first floor reading room.



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its own reading room. Because the Society is an historical depository, none of the materials in the Library Collections circulate outside the building. Many items in the collection are both fragile and rare and patrons are encouraged to handle all materials with care. Also, in order to measure patron usage of the Library Collections, all researchers are requested to register each day in the reading room they are using.

### TOURS

The State Historical Society welcomes group tours of its library facilities, provided that arrangements for these tours are made in advance. Please contact the Library Collections staff for details about tours.

### BOOK COLLECTION

The library contains more than 120,000 books and bound periodicals. Many of these volumes are on open shelves, directly accessible to public use. These include histories for every county in Iowa, a large genealogy collection, many historical journals, and a general reference collection. The library collections also include some rare and fragile books on Iowa, Midwestern, and American history. These books are kept in closed stacks. Access to them is gained through the use of the library's card catalog and the assistance of the staff. Books are classified according to the Library of Congress system. Patrons wishing to examine closed stacks materials need only fill out a call slip (including the volume's author, title, and complete call number) and give it to a librarian. Specialized bibliographies of materials from the Society collections relating to immigrant groups, blacks, women, and other Iowa topics are also available. The staff welcomes questions about both the book collection and the cataloging system.

### NEWSPAPER COLLECTION

Communities from all over Iowa are represented in the newspaper collection of over 10,000 bound volumes and 12,000 rolls of microfilm. The collection spans the period from 1836 to the present, and includes some foreign language and special interest newspapers published in the state. A particularly helpful aid for researchers, the *Bibliography of Iowa Newspapers, 1836-1976*, lists all of the Society's newspaper holdings, and the newspaper holdings of other depositories around the state. The bibliography is also available for purchase from the Society for \$9.25, postpaid.

### CENSUS COLLECTION

There are over 2,300 rolls of microfilmed census records in the library collection. Iowa census materials include the 1840 through 1910 federal schedules, and state schedules for the years 1856, 1885, 1895, 1915, and 1925. Iowa industrial, social, agricultural, and mortality schedules and statistics are available for 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880. Federal schedules are also available for many other states, 1790 to 1860. States to the east of Iowa, particularly areas which people left to come to Iowa provide the focus for the Society's out of state census collection. Indexes to many of these schedules are available and are shelved near the census microfilm. The library also owns the microfilm soundex indexes to the 1880 and 1900 federal censuses of Iowa. Convenient printed forms for recording census data are available at the library reference desk at a nominal cost to patrons.

### MAP COLLECTION

The library collects any maps that deal with Iowa. Among the maps in the

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library collection are those showing land ownership, railroad routes, roads and highways, and bird's-eye views of various cities and towns. There is a large fire insurance map collection of over 700 Iowa cities and towns. These large-scale maps were drawn during the period from 1874 to 1970, and depict the commercial, industrial, and residential sections of each town. A recent State Historical Society publication, *Fire Insurance Maps of Iowa Cities and Towns: A List of Holdings*, records the Society's collection. This publication is available for purchase from the Society for \$3.25, postpaid.

### MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

The Society's manuscript collection is one of the main depositories in the state for preserving and making available to researchers the original source materials that provide the record of Iowa's history. The collection consists of more than 2,500 linear feet of personal papers and records of organizations such as schools, churches, clubs, businesses, and labor unions. Personal papers include diaries, account books, letters, reminiscences, and other unpublished materials from Iowa citizens. Manuscript collections vary in size from a single item to almost two hundred boxes, as in the case of the papers of turn of the century Iowa congressman Jonathan P. Dolliver. Collections of broadsides, unbound maps, sheet music, art work, advertisements, programs, and oral history recordings and transcripts are also located in the Society's manuscript collections.

### PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

The photograph collection includes over 100,000 images reflecting the history of the state of Iowa, as well as the experiences of Midwesterners generally. The photographs are arranged under standard subject headings, but can also be located by geographical designations. Portraits are filed alphabetically with a card catalog as an index. Reproductions or photocopies of photographs can be obtained by patrons. A price list is available. If a photograph is reproduced for commercial or profit-making use, the Society charges a use fee. This fee applies only to photographs actually published, displayed, or broadcast. This fee does not apply to photographs ordered for research or personal use.

### GIFTS

The State Historical Society is responsible for collecting and preserving materials relating to Iowa's heritage. The contributions of friends and members of the Society are very important for fulfilling this responsibility. Photographs, manuscripts, maps, newspapers, family histories, centennial publications, county and local histories, and other materials are welcome. The library may also be able to photograph, photocopy, or microfilm an item for its collections if the owner is willing to temporarily loan the original to the Society for this purpose. Please address correspondence regarding gifts to the Head Librarian.

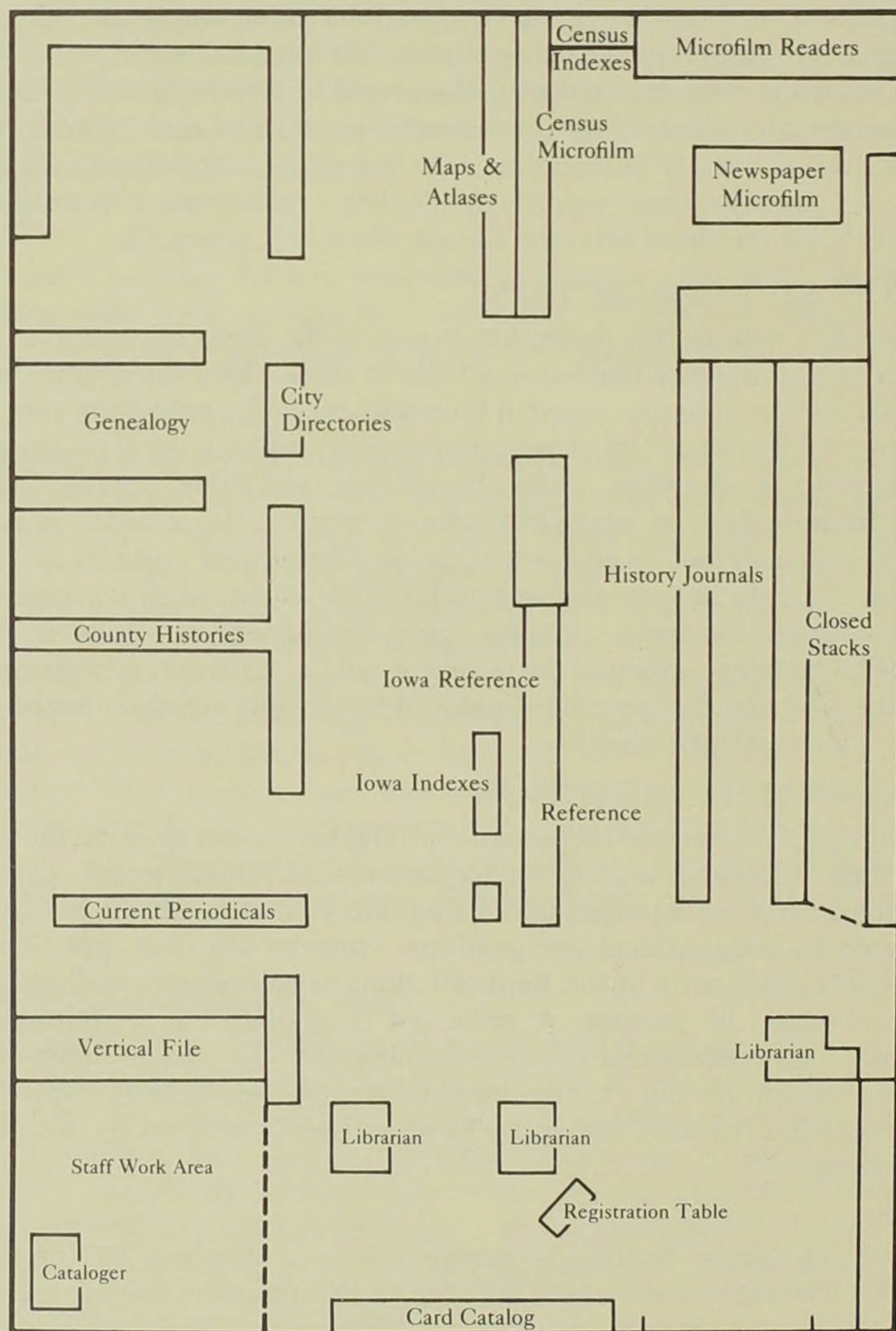
### COPY SERVICE

The Society provides photocopying services for all types of materials, unless the item requested is too fragile to photocopy safely. There is a service charge if a copy request takes over one half hour of staff time. Charges for photocopies and all other services are listed on a fees schedule sheet available on request from the Society.

### INTERLIBRARY LOAN

The library provides interlibrary loan service to and from other institutions. The Society library must hold two copies of an item before a loan of material to

## The State Historical Society's First Floor Library Plan



another institution can be negotiated. The exception to this rule is the Society's microfilmed newspaper collection, all of which is available for loan. There is a limit of two items per loan, and these may be kept by the borrowing institution for two weeks. If more time is needed to use the borrowed material it is usually possible to receive a renewal of the loan. All borrowed material must be used in the institution to which it is sent.

### OUT OF TOWN RESEARCHERS

The Office of the State Historical Society is located in Iowa City at 402 Iowa Avenue, near the campus of the University of Iowa. Metered parking is available near the Society building, and there are eating places within walking distance. Most motel accommodations are in the adjoining city of Coralville. The Iowa City and Coralville chambers of commerce can provide information about motel accommodations. The "Iowa House," at the University of Iowa's Memorial Union, is conveniently located for library users.



## The New Deal: Viewed From Fifty Years

On April 22 the Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States sponsored its fourth conference in Iowa City. This year's topic, "The New Deal: Viewed From Fifty Years," drew leading scholars of the New Deal period, teachers of American history in Iowa colleges and universities, and other people interested in the recent history of the United States together for a lively daylong discussion of the New Deal's impact on Iowa, the Midwest, and the United States generally. The program speakers included Bernard Sternsher, Professor of History, Bowling Green State University, "Assessing the New Deal: The Short Run and the Long Run"; Elliot A. Rosen, Professor of History, Rutgers University, "The Midwestern Opposition to the New Deal"; and Alan Jones, Professor of History, Grinnell College, "The New Deal Comes to Iowa." Richard S. Kirkendall, Henry A. Wallace Professor of History, Iowa State University, served as program commentator. The after-dinner speaker was Otis L. Graham, Jr., Kenan Professor of History, University of North Carolina, whose topic was "The Planning Idea from Roosevelt to Post-Reagan."

The Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States is a cooperative undertaking involving the Iowa State Historical Department/Office of the State Historical Society, the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, and the University of Iowa. The Center was organized in 1975, when it was recognized by representatives of the three constituent institutions that "their libraries together hold resources outstanding for the general field and unrivaled for the 1920-33 period, that Iowa City-West Branch stands at the geographical center of mid-America's other major collections in the field, and that joint action would allow them to undertake projects beyond the reach of any one of the three institutions." The Center has published the papers from its first three conferences, and plans to publish the papers from the recent conference as well. Information about the purchase of these volumes may be obtained from the Publications Order Department, Oakdale Campus, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242. Funding for the April 1983 conference was provided by the Procter & Gamble Fund, Cincinnati, Ohio; the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association; and the University of Iowa Foundation.

## Selected Recent Manuscript Acquisitions

Stone, William M. "History of the 22nd Iowa Volunteer Infantry." n.d. 73p. photocopy of holograph.

First person handwritten narrative history of the 22nd Iowa Volunteer Infantry by the man who served as colonel of the unit and from 1864 to 1868 as governor of Iowa. Includes maps and detailed accounts of formation of unit and campaigns and service at Rolla and southeastern Missouri, Vicksburg, Port Gibson, and Jackson, Mississippi, the Red River campaign in Louisiana, and the Shenandoah Valley campaign in Virginia. Also includes an undated speech by Governor Stone to the men of the 22nd Iowa. Donor: Dr. A.L. Sahs.

Streeter, Alonzo O. Letter. 11 December 1869. Delantia, Iowa. 1p. photocopy of typescript transcription. Letter from Alonzo Streeter at Delantia, Iowa, to his brother, Augustus Streeter, at Westfield, Pennsylvania. Includes a description of Delantia, its advantages and future prospects for growth. Good account of local business conditions. Donor: Mr. James C. Streeter.

Shelley, Eugene E. The Amana Society, Old and New, née The Ebenezer Society, née The Community of True Inspiration. 25p. photocopy of typescript. Speech delivered before the York Junto Club, York, Pennsylvania, 27 September 1982, by Eugene Shelley. Includes theological origins of the Amana Society; early leaders; migration from Europe to New York and on to Iowa; rules, characteristics, customs, growth, and changes; 1932 transition to corporate organization; and Amana today. Donor: Eugene Shelley.

Iowa Colony. Pamphlet. c. 1908. 16p. photocopy. Pamphlet entitled "Iowa Colony" published by the Emigration Land Company of Des Moines and Houston about 1908 to attract settlers to farm lands for sale near Houston, Texas. Donor: Mr. Mike Zahs.

Narber, Gregg Ross. New Deal Murals Projects in Iowa, by Gregg Ross Narber and Sandra Lea DeLong. Annotated lecture, 1982. 36p. photocopies of typescript, footnotes, appendices, and letter of donation. History of the government support of painting of murals in Iowa between 1934 and 1942. Lecture was accompanied by slide projection pictures of most of the fifty murals painted under New Deal programs in Iowa. Includes the artists and their ideas, the government programs involved, the role of Grant Wood and the concept of regionalist painting. Donor: Mr. Gregg Ross Narber.

- Tade, E.O. Memoir, 1894. 8p. photocopy of typescript. Memoir in form of a letter addressed to brother and sister recounts experiences of family pioneering in Black Hawk Purchase in 1835. Family settled near Augusta, Iowa. Includes encounters with Indians, planting and first crop, breaking prairie, horse racing. Donor: SHSI Publications Department.
- Lettow, Gary and Lucille. Memoirs from Eden. The Life and Times of Joseph Lawless, 1842-1924. 1 folder (20p. typescript plus photocopies of photographs). Biography of early Hardin County pioneer based primarily on his memoir written over the years 1889 to 1916. Lawless was born in Ireland in 1842 and emigrated to Wisconsin with his family in 1847. Includes accounts of travels in Iowa in 1864, inspections of lands, settlement in Hardin County in 1867, building a farm and raising a family. Donor: Gary and Lucille Lettow.
- Miller, Dorothy. Medicine and Medical Practices in Washington County, Iowa, 1930-1949: The Case of Dr. M.L. McCreedy. M.A. essay, Department of History, University of Iowa, 1982. 40p. photocopy of typescript. Study concentrates on attitudes, early medical practices and the development of modern hospitals and nursing attitudes in Washington County, Iowa, during the years 1930 to 1950. The focus is on the career of Dr. McCreedy of Brighton, Iowa. Includes a brief biography of Dr. McCreedy, general and local medical statistics, medical conditions in Brighton, Iowa, roles of druggist, osteopath, and chiropractor, folk remedies, efforts to improve public health, doctors' incomes, effects of economic depression and World War II, epidemics, acceptance of immunization. Includes footnotes and bibliography. Donor: SHSI Publications Department.
- Atwood, Roy. Newspapermen as Telephonemen: Interlocking Iowa Newspaper and Telephone Company Directorates, 1900-1917. 25p. photocopy of typescript. Research paper presented at West Coast Journalism History Conference, San Francisco, California, February 27-28, 1982. Study "traces some of the interlocking newspaper and telephone company directorates in Iowa, one of the leading states in independent telephony." Research focuses on degree to which newsmen were involved in the establishment, maintenance, and direction of independent telephone operations. Concentrates on Washington, Johnson, and Iowa counties. Donor: Mr. Roy Atwood.
- Thomas, Richard. A Brief History of Mount Vernon, Iowa. 1973. 31p. typescript. A short history of Mt. Vernon, Iowa, includes historiography, notes, and bibliography. Traces growth of community with emphasis on developments of 1920 to 1970. Local history is presented in context of state and national history. Donor: SHSI Publications Department.
- Ministerial Union of Iowa City. Constitution and minutes of meetings, 1889-1910. 1 vol. holograph. Donor: Mr. Robert O. Moninger.
- Johnson County Coroner's Record, 1896-1911. 217p. photocopy of 1 holograph volume. Includes names, dates, and causes of death and accounts of expenses and verdicts of inquisitions. Donor: Eileen Wharton.
- Venus, Christine. Letters. 1853-1866. 12p. holograph. Four letters in German to Christine Venus, wife of Joseph Venus, at the Communia Settlement in Clayton County, Iowa, from her hometown of St. Genevieve, Missouri. Donor: Miss Louise Leers.
- Ayers, Lieutenant Oliver C. Diary. 1862-1864. 32p. photocopy of typescript transcription. Journal of a soldier in the 39th Iowa Volunteer Infantry. Includes formation of unit, election of officers, service at Cairo, Illinois, Columbus, Kentucky, Jackson, Humbolt, Trenton, Lexington, Chattanooga and Huntingdon, Tennessee, Corinth, Mississippi, Athens, Huntsville, and Sarkinville, Alabama, and Snakes Gap, Georgia. Detailed account of battle of Parker's Cross Roads, December 31, 1863, and descriptions of travels, camp life, skirmishing, foraging, rations, hardships, and duties of a quartermaster. Donor: Mr. Dale S. Snair.
- Doolittle, Agnes. "Dig a Flea: A History of Early Education in Dickinson County, Iowa." 93p. typescript. 1956. Written by Agnes Doolittle and a committee of Chi Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma. Donor: Joanne Volpe Florino.
- Programs. 1876-1887. Sixty-eight printed programs for meetings of the Hamline, Ruthean, and Philomathean Literary Societies of Iowa Wesleyan University and Mt. Pleasant Public High School. Also miscellaneous functions and events connected with Iowa Wesleyan University, the Mt. Pleasant Public Schools, and the Henry County Normal Institutes. Donor: Mrs. Charles E. Hill.

1909.

Mabray operated what was known as a "Big Store." Toward the end of his career it was located on the third floor of the Merriam Building in Council Bluffs. From his "Big Store" Mabray controlled an army of "steerers," whose work consisted primarily of finding the "mikes," or victims. It has been estimated that Mabray had as many as 200 steerers working for him. The victims they sought were simply men with ready money. As Mabray pointed out in a letter to one of his steerers: "No matter who he is, or what he is, the only question that you need answer is: 'Has he got money?' We will take care of the rest."

Mabray's confidence in himself was borne out by his record. He separated from their money such disparate types as farmers, bank-

ers, lawyers, even gamblers and newspapermen. His procedure seldom varied. In his "Big Store" he had men or animals that one could wager on. They were, indeed, rather special men and animals that one could simply not afford not to wager on. For example, there was Red Leo, an unbeatable horse, which unfortunately never won a race. There was Harry Forbes, one-time bantamweight champion, whose art in the ring was clearly superior to that of any against whom he might be matched. Mabray had jockeys, sprinters, wrestlers, boxers, and perhaps even a sculler or two. All of them were highly skilled.

The con was relatively simple and worked time and time again. A steerer would find a mike who perhaps had never gambled on



*The Merriam Block was the location of J.C. Mabray's "Big Store." From there he corresponded with his steerers throughout the country.*

much of anything in his life. But he would have money and he would ultimately agree to do a small favor which seemingly did not involve any of his money at all. He would be told about a group of millionaires somewhere who had a disgruntled employee who was seeking to even matters with them. He would be told that the millionaires were all sports and that they had a racehorse which occasionally they put up against other horses. The disgruntled employee would then be described as having found a horse (Red Leo) which could easily take the millionaires' nag. What he needed was someone to go to Council Bluffs and bet the horse for him. That was the favor. The honest man was asked to do nothing more than pose as a substantial businessman. That was necessary because the millionaires would never deal with gamblers. It was then pointed out that the honest man should bring along a draft for several thousand dollars, just to let the millionaires feel very comfortable about their betting opponent.

Once in Council Bluffs, it was a fairly simple matter to let the mike have a look at the millionaires' horse in a workout and then let him have a more important look at Red Leo in a workout. In an age when men prided themselves on being judges of horseflesh, it might not take much more for the honest man to have cashed his draft and asked for a piece of the action. His first and perhaps even his second request for such a piece might be denied but ultimately he was begrudgingly given what he wanted. In short order the bets were placed with the millionaires, the date and place of the race were decided upon, after which the parties repaired to some spot, probably near Lake Manawa, where an illegal horse race was staged. The race would go off as expected, with Red Leo building up a sizable lead on the millionaires' horse until that key moment in the home stretch when Red Leo's jockey would rise in the stirrups, gurgle out some horrible noise, and fall to the track. While the horses

crossed the finish line (with Red Leo the loser since he crossed the line without his jockey) everyone would run to the fallen rider. He would be obviously dying, or already dead, with blood flowing from his mouth. Thus it was time for everyone to beat a hasty exit from the scene. No one and, most particularly, no honest man wanted to be involved in explaining an illegal race which had ended with the death of a jockey. Consequently, it didn't take any convincing to send the honest man on his way. Soothing words would be spoken to him to the effect that everything would be worked out and that the millionaires certainly wouldn't be sticklers. The poor mike was assured that if he went home he would soon be contacted, and his portion of the wager would be returned.

Sometimes he was contacted. In at least one case, a man was set up for a rematch which



*John C. Mabray often posed as a millionaire for the victims of his confidence schemes.*

went exactly like the first race. Sometimes the honest man wasn't contacted. But what could he do? Let us suppose that he was a banker. What sort of banker would publicize his financial acumen by admitting he had been taken in such a way? Some mikes worried about the law; some mikes even felt a sense of shame which was often infinitely increased by the suggestion that the pot had been short, that the disgruntled employee had held out on the mike when he made the bet with the millionaires, and that the discovery had made the millionaires very angry indeed. However it was, the mikes seldom felt like raising legal issues themselves and were most often prepared to swallow their losses and forget the whole thing.

The beauty of the "Big Store" was that one could accomplish the same thing using a wrestling match, a boxing match, a footrace, or whatever seemed to be most proper to the individual victim. The result was the same in any case. The gullible mike was let in on a mismatch or a fix or even a fixed mismatch. He was shown a sure thing. He was shown something that would prove irresistible to almost anyone. His money did become involved and then came the magic moment when, with victory within plucking distance, one's jockey, or one's boxer, or one's wrestler, or one's footracer, or whatever, simply bit down on a little sack of chicken blood which he carried in his mouth, and fell dead (of a hemorrhage) before the astonished principals. All of this was then followed by panic and flight with no time for reflection or clear thinking.

How lonely it was to be the victim of such a con. Practically no victim received any sympathy. In an editorial in the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* on 26 February 1909 the lack of sympathy was made abundantly clear:

*Who has the first speck of sympathy for their victims? Nobody. The essence of the plot is always the same, or nearly so — the*

*man eventually bumped is led to believe that he is to reap the benefit of bumping someone else, or, at least, is to be but an innocent lay figure. Avarice overreaches itself, cunning over-estimates itself, the man who would rob another is suddenly himself robbed. So, there is no sympathy for him.*

The writer of the editorial was quick to point out, however, that "this mitigates not at all the culpability of the swindlers."

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The con was relatively simple, the game was capable of being played almost endlessly, and J.C. Mabray enjoyed almost a decade of living off the fruits of other men's greed. But in early 1909 the whole fabric of his operation began to come apart. It began to waver when a steerer by the name of John R. Dobbins was indicted on a charge of larceny in connection with a fake horse race which led one T.W. Ballew of Princeton, Missouri, to lose some \$30,000 of his money.

Shortly after the indictment of Dobbins and his extradition from New York, Mabray and several of his confederates were arrested in Little Rock, Arkansas. Suddenly mikes began to emerge from various points with stories of how they had been bilked. There was the Denver saloonkeeper who had been taken for \$5,000, or the twelve gentlemen who were escorted to Little Rock to identify Mabray as the individual who had swindled them, or the gentleman from Cisco, Illinois, who also went to Little Rock. By mid-July numerous mikes began filing lawsuits in the hopes of recovering some of their losses through the courts. Mikes seemed to be materializing everywhere. There were mikes from Colorado, from Illinois, from Indiana and Missouri, and from as far away as Michigan and Pennsylvania.

But the major indictment was handed down by a federal grand jury against John C. Mabray

and some eighty of his confederates in September 1909. Mabray et al. were charged with using the mails to defraud. Postal Inspector J.S. Swenson had been working on the Mabray case for over two years and had done a remarkably thorough job.

The Post Office Department had been inundated in the first years of the twentieth century by a vast increase in crimes involving the mails. Cases involving fraud included "fake land schemes, commission-merchant swindles, the selling of worthless goods through misrepresentation, brokerage swindles, the obtaining of goods under false pretenses, the selling of unfair gambling devices, matrimonial schemes, the defrauding of insurance companies for alleged injuries, the green-goods swindle (counterfeiting), and the selling of diplomas and requiring of little or no study before granting them."

There were, according to one report, some seventy different fraudulent schemes for which people were convicted by the courts in but a single year. Inspector Swenson's work on the Mabray case was noteworthy, however, and got very favorable mention in the report of the chief inspector for the fiscal year ending 30 June 1910.

*A very important case recently handled by post-office inspectors covered the operations of the so-called Mabray gang. The first complaints were made to the department about two years ago, and investigation disclosed that the business of what was believed to have been the most gigantic scheme of this kind with which the postal inspectors have had to contend was operated on a large scale by an organization of confidence men by means of fake horse races, athletic contests, etc.*

*The swindle was perpetrated successfully in various parts of the United States,*

*and victims in all parts of the United States were robbed of sums varying from \$1,000 to \$30,000. It is estimated that the promoters secured approximately \$5,000,000.*

\* \* \*

Thus was the stage set for the trials in late 1909 and early 1910 which would effectively lead to the closure of John C. Mabray's "Big Store" and the incarceration in federal penitentiary of not only Mabray but the bulk of his associates as well. One of the first trials was that of John R. Dobbins. The Dobbins trial began on 15 November 1909 with the state charging that Dobbins had participated in a fake horse race swindle which had cost one T.W. Ballew some \$30,000. Dobbins retained a quartet of lawyers including Ed Mulick from Davenport and Charles Harl, Emmet Tinley, and George S. Wright from Council Bluffs. J.J. Hess, the county attorney, was flanked by State Attorney General H.W. Byers, and John P. Organ who represented Ballew, the state's prime witness.

Ballew's story was one that would be repeated over and over again in state and federal courts in the years 1909 and 1910. He had been swindled in a fake horse race which had taken place near Council Bluffs, Iowa. Ballew himself was described in one newspaper as a "millionaire banker, lumberman, and capitalist." He was a wealthy man from Princeton, Missouri, who had known the defendant, John R. Dobbins, for many years. As a matter of fact, it turned out that Dobbins owed Ballew a little money, something in the neighborhood of \$400. But Dobbins had moved to Kansas City where Ballew had run into him in the summer of 1908. Not too long afterwards, on 5 October 1908, Ballew had been presented with a letter of introduction from Dobbins by a man named Walter H. Martin who had a proposition for Ballew about a horse race. Ballew was a man who never followed the horses or gambled but

*A seasoned veteran of courtroom frays, Federal Judge Smith McPherson had acquired almost forty years of experience in the legal profession before the trial of John C. Mabray and his confederates in 1910.*



Martin persuaded him to have a talk with Dobbins before giving a final "no" to his proposition.

In Kansas City, on 7 October 1908, the usual little story had been spun out for Ballew. It was a story about some millionaires who traveled about with a horse and who liked to bet with gentlemen of means — not gamblers. It was a story about Dobbins' and Martin's need for a substantial person to represent them in Council Bluffs in a betting transaction on what was clearly a sure thing. It was a story which even included a disgruntled millionaires' secretary who was in with Martin on the race.

Ballew, however distinguished and conservative a gentleman he might have been, called some banks in St. Joseph and arranged to have drafts totaling \$30,000 forwarded to banks in Omaha. Ultimately, his money was bet on a horse which was obviously Red Leo. The race

came off with the usual results. Red Leo lost the race, a jockey supposedly lost his life, and T.W. Ballew certainly lost his money. John R. Dobbins had been a model steerer. He found a mike who knew him well enough to place a modicum of trust in him. He plied him with the dream of having a long overdue loan paid off, with receiving ten percent of everything that he (Dobbins) and Martin might win in a race, and he even threw in the pious possibility that Ballew's trust and aid would result in Dobbins giving up gambling forever. Steered to Council Bluffs, Ballew played it all out and the Mabray operation came away with \$30,000.

**D**obbins was found guilty of grand larceny and sentenced to the state penitentiary at Fort Madison. The Dobbins trial was but a beginning, however. Other steerers were tried in late 1909, but it was in early 1910 that the

major dramatic piece unfolded — the trial of J.C. Mabray and eighteen co-defendants on charges of using the mails to defraud. The trial took place in March 1910, with Federal Judge Smith McPherson presiding. Two of the defendants got continuances and three more pleaded *nolo contendere* but the trial eventually got underway in a courtroom that was well filled. It was Judge McPherson's courtroom from the beginning. He made that plain on the first day of the trial when he pointed out to his five bailiffs the seriousness of their duties.

*You are here to preserve order. It ought not to be necessary for me to repeatedly interrupt this trial to secure order. If you see anyone making a disturbance, caution them, and if they repeat the offense, call attention to the fact.*

The judge then went on to admonish them further:

*Another thing, when other judges or attorneys visit the court room they are entitled to places within the bar. I saw another judge enter the courtroom yesterday and you shoved him into one of the back seats. When ladies enter the court room they are to be escorted to seats inside the bar. That is a standing order of this court.*

But the judge reserved his finest comment for a witness who could not be heard by the jury. When the witness claimed that his weak voice was due to a headache, Judge McPherson simply replied: "Speak up. I usually talk loudest when I have a headache."

Witness after witness either told a story of how they had lost their money or how they had bilked people, since the state managed to put a few steerers on the stand. The parade of witnesses was an excessively long one. Approximately one hundred witnesses were originally scheduled to testify but their

testimony proved too repetitive for Judge McPherson. Finally, on 16 March 1910, the last witness for the state regaled the court with his notions of the operation of John C. Mabray's "Big Store." The defense put on but a minimal show and, on 19 March 1910, the case was given to the jury. The speed of justice at the time has to be noted. Judge McPherson gave the case to the jury on a Saturday, the verdict was returned on Sunday, and on the following Monday sentences were meted out to the fourteen individuals who had been found guilty by the jury. Two defendants had been granted continuances and two others had been acquitted in mid-trial when witnesses could not be brought from Canada to testify against them. On Tuesday the small contingent of twelve which was headed for Fort Leavenworth was marched to the railroad station and thus departed from the local scene. John C. Mabray and the majority of his co-defendants had all received sentences of two years imprisonment and a \$10,000 fine.

As Mabray and the others headed for Leavenworth, it was clear that the "Big Store" was effectively closed in Council Bluffs and its environs. During the remainder of 1910 former Mabray employees continued to be picked up, indicted, and tried throughout the Midwest. There were even some civil suits brought by victims against steerers and banks in the hopes of proving a conspiracy between the two which would allow the mikes to recoup their losses from the financial institutions which had cashed their drafts, issued them cashier's checks, and otherwise accommodated them in their mad desire to win on a sure thing. Judge McPherson had little patience with such attempts and the suits were thrown out. A few new witnesses enlivened the scene in the summer, however. Perhaps the most prominent was Thomas Cale, a one-time congressional delegate from Alaska who had been steered to Council Bluffs where he had lost \$8,000 on a wrestling match in July 1908. Cale had actually



been steered by a well-known wrestler, Jack Carkeek, whom Cale had known for years and with whose prowess Cale had long been familiar.

\* \* \*

John C. Mabray went to prison and did not seem particularly interested in appealing his conviction. He had evidently accepted his defeat in the courts almost philosophically.



*John C. Mabray probably took more than \$5,000,000 from his victims in the years before 1910.*

Perhaps Mabray more accurately than others spoke to the question of American national character when he made a few statements to the press, during and after his trial. Perhaps a few Mabray comments on human nature in general and American character in particular might strike a note well worth closing on.

*Let every man look into his own affairs and keep on the square with his fellow men and he will have little trouble. As soon as a man begins trying to do other people he is bound to be done.*

*Oh well, the mikes that convicted us were as guilty in intent as we.*

*There have been mikes since the world was born and there will be plenty of mikes in the end. Jacob was the first Biblical miker when he turned that little trick for getting the striped cattle. Jacob knew he wasn't exactly on the square. He would have made a good American.*

*Americans in business and baseball make all they can out of the rules. That was our game, too, but the court says it went too far.*

#### Note on Sources

It is difficult to find a satisfactory history of the flamboyant figures who worked the great confidence games of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jay Robert Nash offers an anecdotal introduction to the subject in his *Hustlers and Con Men* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1976). Wayne E. Fuller's *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) together with the Annual Reports of the Post Office Department for the years 1907 through 1911 provide a great deal of material on the United States Post Office Department's struggles to prevent the use of the mails for fraudulent purposes. The material on John C. Mabray and his "Big Store" was drawn largely from local newspapers, most importantly the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* and the *Omaha Bee*.