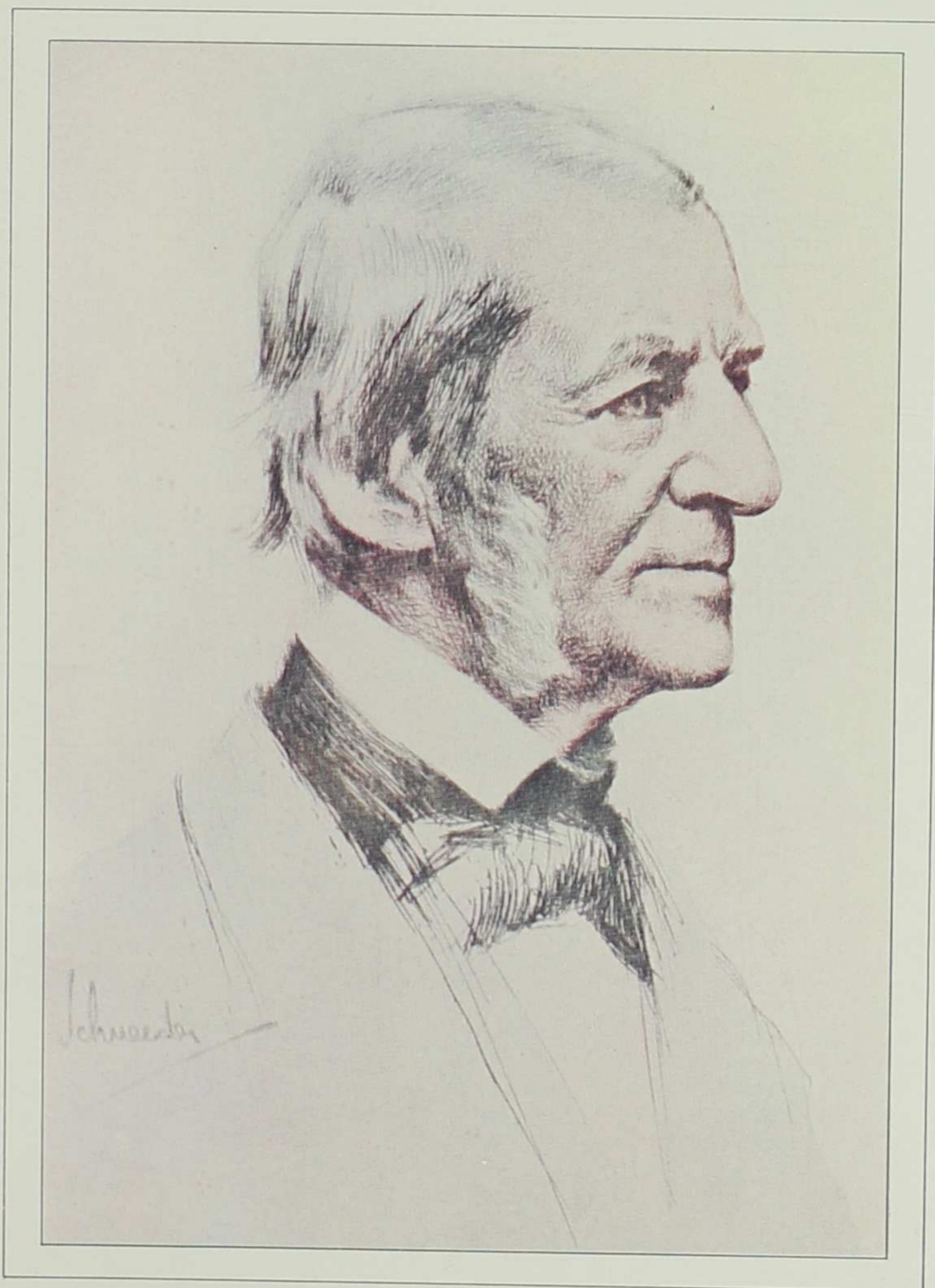


The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 59 NUMBER 2

MARCH/APRIL 1978



Ralph Waldo Emerson

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The PALIMPSEST

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Peter T. Harstad, Director

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Charles Phillips, Editor

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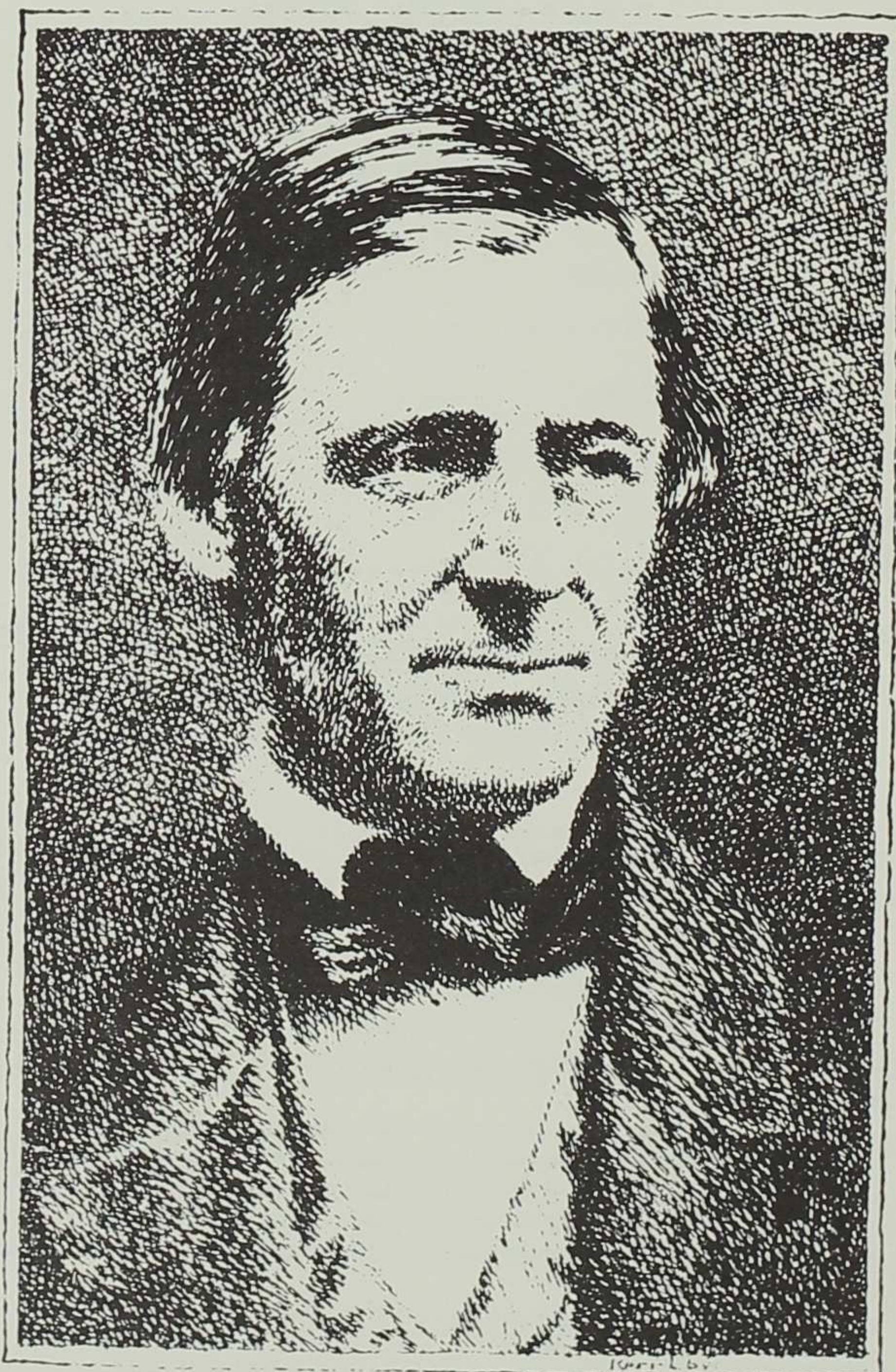
The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

EMERSON IN THE MIDDLE BORDER

by
Anthony Bukoski



An 1854 pen and ink drawing of Emerson by Kerr Eby (courtesy of Harvard University Archives).

In 1850, Ralph Waldo Emerson, at age forty-seven, when Margaret Fuller and other friends had finally despaired of his ever making such a trip, came West. He left behind him in Concord his wife Lidian and his children, Edward, Edith, and Ellen. To Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist, he wrote about his tour that the prairies and forests of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri were magnificent. Never had he witnessed the likes of them. Emerson found that Margaret Fuller and his other friends who had been there, even as far as the Red River Valley in the case of Louis Agassiz, had not exaggerated their claims. And if they had, they certainly could not be blamed--the open spaces, the great, wide sweep of the rivers lending themselves as they did to hyperbole.

Emerson was hardly the first public figure to have his imagination captured by the immensity of the West. Nor did he wear the buckskins of the more adventurous, or roam so far afield. Washington Irving undertook one often-discomforting excursion into the "vaunted regions...several hundred miles beyond the Mississippi," which he recounted in *A Tour on the Prairies*. This was a full 15 years before Emerson left Concord for the "Far West." Francis Parkman, who, before finishing at Harvard had already contracted, as he called it, "Injuns on the brain," also set out for this new land. He recorded his impressions of the plains, the buffaloes, the

Indians, and the westward movement of the white man in 1849 in *The California and Oregon Trail*.

But Emerson contributed far more to the cultural development of the West than these earlier visitors. Though "the Sage of Concord" did not lecture on the 1850 trip, he saw what the frontier promised, and two years later returned to St. Louis, travelling west almost every year after that. Each time he came he took a more active interest in the region. Inspired no doubt at least partly by lucrative speaking fees, he brought what many settlers so dearly longed for: the culture of the East. To many of the "rough, grisly Esaus" of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, Emerson with his New England values represented a link with the past.

He had, moreover, a quality of provocativeness. According to David Mead in *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West*, the principal responsibility of speakers in the Western lyceum, men such as Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, Frederick Douglass, and Edward Eggleston, was to stimulate their listeners to "individual effort, to induce thought and discussion." This Emerson did better than many as his long list of speaking engagements would confirm. Whatever else their complaints, the Concord transcendentalist rarely failed to pique the curiosity of his audience. If his listeners were not always appreciably better for having heard him, they were at least wiser, more introspective.

Competition on such lecture tours was stiff. Nor was it infrequent that Emerson



An 1839 drawing by J. W. Barber of the central part of Concord, Massachusetts (from the Concord edition of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. III, 200).

found himself earning less in an evening than someone like John Gough, the Temperance leader, or Charles Sumner, who may have spoken in the same town only a week or two before. Even though Emerson's reputation was soon to stretch from Bangor, Maine to Davenport, some speakers were still more successful. Part of the reason may have been that as an orator, he was not particularly gifted. While one listener in Keokuk said "Emerson was like a glass of cold water," another, in the same audience, responded that she "might acknowledge the coldness" but for her "the clearness of water was greatly wanting." Sometimes, too, as in a Beloit, Wisconsin, *Journal* editorial of January 10, 1856, Emerson and several other imported lecturers were criticized for their seeming lack of respect of their audience. "With the same compensation now paid to eastern lecturers," wrote the *Journal* editor, "there are plenty of men in our principal towns who could origin-

ate as much thought, wit, poetry, or logic as we have heard from any who have addressed us this season."

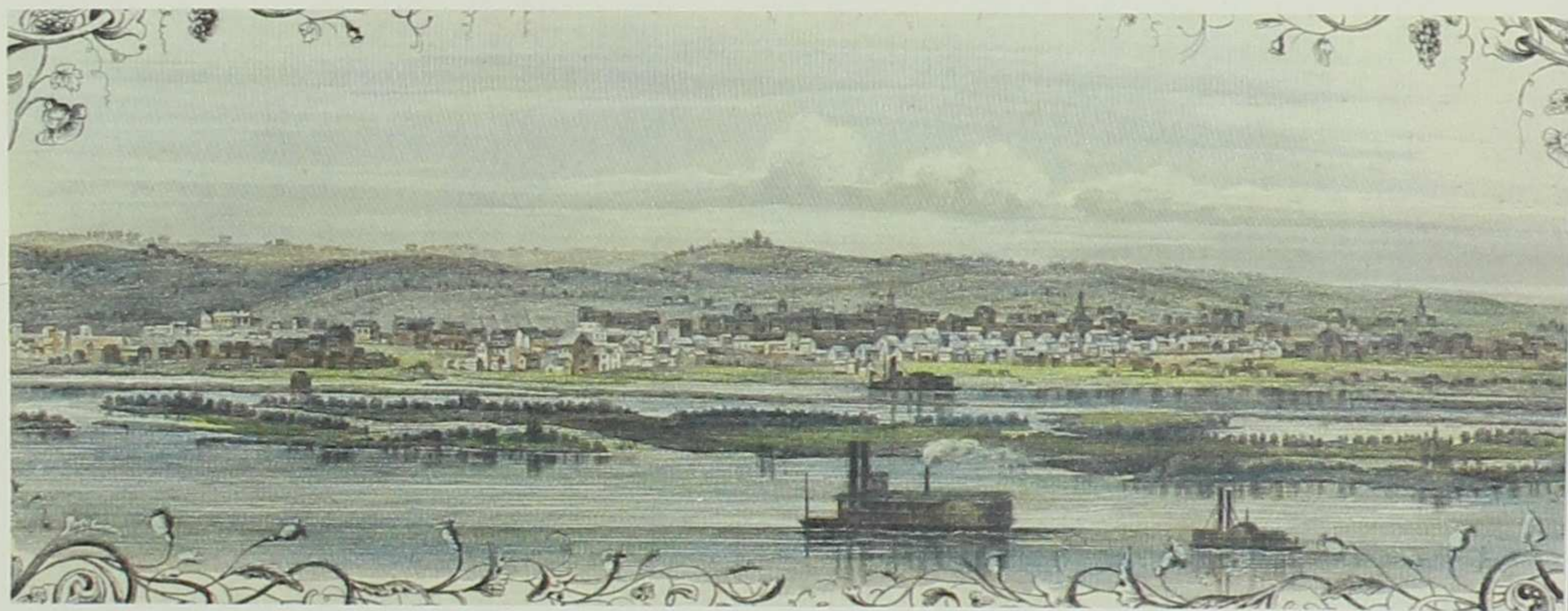
In spite of numerous reservations in the papers about his ability as an orator, and in spite of the occasional critical review, such as the one in the *DeWitt* (Iowa) *Observer* of January 26, 1866, telling of his treating "his audience in a most... insulting manner..." by thumbing "over at least one half of his manuscript unread," Emerson, undaunted, always self-reliant, returned again and again to the West. In fact, after his first visit, he travelled within a 16-year period five different times to the state of Iowa. During those years he lectured in such places as Davenport, where more than once he crossed the frozen Mississippi on foot, in Dubuque, Lyons, DeWitt, Washington, Independence, Cedar Falls, Keokuk, and Des Moines, visiting such other cities as Burlington, Mason City, and Iowa City.

Even more numerous were his Wisconsin appearances. He journeyed there seven times between 1854 and 1867, speaking on 23 different occasions in cities as far apart as LaCrosse and Milwaukee. Sight unseen, he purchased 120 acres of land in the northwest part of the state on Bass Lake in Burnett County, an area that at the time was still wild and virtually uninhabited. He was, it would appear, putting his faith in the West by buying stock in its future.

He came to Minnesota only once, perhaps because of the difficulty in making anything but east-west railroad connections from Concord. (Once in Iowa however, steamboat travel was excellent except in winter.) He was, nevertheless, quite fond of the state. One of his last times west, he spoke in Winona, Fribault, St. Paul and twice in Minneapolis, finding this last city especially attractive. From there he wrote his daughter Ellen on February 3, 1867 that "if Edward wishes to come out West, let him come here." And three days later in a letter from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, he told his friend Benjamin Wiley that "such a

citizen of the world as you are should look once at these northern towns which I have seen under the perhaps too smiling face of the mildest, best winter weather, which may be exceptional, though the people almost to a man extol their climate. Minneapolis would strongly attract me if I were a young man..."

Clearly, Emerson had found the West a place to celebrate. "This rough country," he called it in his Journals. Writing to Carlyle after his first visit to Wisconsin, he proclaimed: "Younger and better, I had no doubt been tormented to read and speak their sense for them. Now I only gazed at them and their boundless land." The same was true of what he saw in other states. If, at first, he considered the people here "culturally starved primitives..." who were concerned only with "prices and sections and quarter sections of swamp lands," his attitudes changed. Several times, as in the *DeWitt Observer* editorial, the essayist's disrespect earned him nothing but the sharpest criticism. Such difficulties occurred with less and less frequency, however. For Emerson was quick to sense the growth of an inde-



A hand-colored lithograph of Dubuque circa the mid-1850s around the time Emerson spoke there.



A hand-colored lithograph of Davenport circa the mid-1850s.

pendent western spirit, one which would not countenance "Atlantic dandies" who had nothing positive to offer. Once, after a "stout Illinoian" had stomped out of a lecture, Emerson reflected that "the people are always right (in a sense), and . . . the man of letters is to say, These are the new conditions to which I must conform."

To a lesser person such conforming might not have come so easily. As one writer says, the change in Emerson's attitude may be taken as testimony "to the flexibility and the sincerity of the man, and to the influence of the frontier upon American letters." Having met too many dynamic and keen-witted individuals in the West, Emerson no longer saw the people here as "ten years old . . . in all that is called cultivation." From early in 1856 what had sometimes been a less-than-

ideal relationship with his audience and the press began to change so that he could write to Lidian at the end of his tour that year, "I have seen some very good people, and have had some experiences useful if I were younger."

No more at odds with "these sinewy farmers of the north," as he once called them, Emerson began singing the praises of the new land and of the "rough, yeomanly . . . Giants" inhabiting it. A place where "the trees were so large, and so many of them, that a man could not walk in the forest, and it was necessary to wade up the streams" could only be spoken of in superlatives. Here "the prairie grass . . . was over the tops of carriages . . ." A man unaccustomed to the prairie "could easily get lost in the grass." To hear Emerson speak of it, the West was a veritable garden of delights. In the spring

after the snow had melted, the maple trees ran so fast with sugar that a person often could not "get tubs fast enough." Setting a healthy table posed little problem either when "the hunter on the prairie at the right season has no need of choosing his ground" so plentiful the game.

But in such a rude country, there were difficulties and inconveniences. In many places the amenities of the East did not exist. From Washington, Iowa Emerson wrote of the mud and melting snow that made roads and paths "bottomless universal quagmires." To compound the problem, the lyceum was a winter activity. "I went out northwest to great countries..." Emerson wrote to Carlyle in 1854, "rode one day in a sleigh; sixty-five miles through the snow (seeing how prairies and oak openings look in winter)." The 65-mile sleigh ride was only one of many discomforts. In 1866, during a walk through the melting of a heavy snow, he told a young Washington (Iowa) editor, "you are prisoners of your sidewalks."

In the minds of many people midway through the last century, "the Sage of Concord" was nowhere so easily conjured as in the New England lecture hall. Few other names summoned up images of the genteel world of the Boston Brahmin as did Emerson's. In his essay, "Self-Reliance," after all, he had written that "the soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home." Yet January on the second westward journey found him suffering "the cold raw country...and plenty of night travelling and arriving at four in the morning to take the last and worst bed in the tavern...Mercury 15 degrees below zero." From Beloit a few days later, he would add, "mercury varying from 20 degrees to 30 degrees below zero for the last week." Another time

after a week of sub-zero temperatures, he heard a landlord remark, "We had no cold weather, only now and then Indian summer and cool nights."

According to Emerson's son, the "inactive" Mr. Emerson found the "exposure and discomfort" anything but debilitating, bearing up under these hardships "as a philosopher should." "Almost invariably," Edward wrote of his father, he "returned refreshed and stimulated by his winter's experience in the advancing West." Faced with the unpleasant prospect of a sleigh ride in the fierce cold, as was too often the case, the elder Emerson may have found strength in this poem from the Journals:

When the wind bloweth strong, hoist thy
sail to the top.

'Tis joyous in storm not to flinch.

Keep her full! keep her full! none but cow-
ards strike sail.

Sooner founder than take in an inch.

To return as often as he did in the face of these difficulties, the future of such western states as Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota must have been to him of paramount importance. In his "Anglo-American" essay, he praised the practical democracy of the West. He spoke with pride of the country people whose "sense of freedom and equality was never interrupted," adding that such was "the condition of all the states fifty or a hundred years earlier." Wisconsin, where only months after Emerson's first tour a runaway slave named Joshua Glover was freed and the Fugitive Slave Law declared unconstitutional, must have offered hope to one whose disaffection with Massachusetts over the issue of slavery led him to criticize its public officials and its idealist faction, "who

might have taken Boston long ago" had they "the pluck of a louse."

News of the development of the land out West intrigued him too. One night in a Washington, Iowa hotel room, he listened intently to plans for bringing the railroad through that town. And a few years earlier in 1855, he had fallen prey to the popular dream that the railroad already extended to the Pacific, when in fact it had barely reached Iowa City. His enthusiasm was matched by the people here. Settlers in Iowa and Illinois, after raising a shanty, clamored for the railroad as "the breath of life." For with it, the crops could find their way east. But one railroad, Emerson found, was only a start for these indomitable farmers of the middle border. Until they should have a second and third to underbid the shipping costs of the others, he said, they were dissatisfied.

He also heard with interest plans for a railroad connecting Lake Superior and the Puget Sound. While in Wisconsin, he addressed the state legislature in Madison, toured the high schools and colleges, and made the acquaintance of such powerful men as C. C. Washburn, the future governor. In such cities as Delavan and Ripon, he delivered his lectures, often riding from one place to another by sleigh. One can only guess how he would have enjoyed the state seen in the more favorable dress of springtime. To Emerson it was the "heroic age."

In late January 1867, he arrived for the first time in Minnesota. A few days before he came to Winona, a heavy snowstorm had buried much of the southeastern part of the state. Then the temperatures plunged well below zero. He arrived under these most unpleasant conditions,

driving in an open sleigh. From there, railroad connections existed to St. Paul, where, just as he had in Wisconsin, he toured the state capitol. Minnesota's Governor Marshall accompanied the Concord Essayist on the morning after he had spoken to one of the largest audiences ever assembled in St. Paul's Ingersoll's Hall. The 1867 journey marked his one and only time in Minnesota, though as was often the case in cities where he spoke, requests were made for his return.

By this time there were probably few places left in the West where Emerson's reputation did not extend. If not so dramatic as Walt Whitman's, Emerson's celebration of the West was nonetheless effective, even profound. There was in Emerson that fascination with the new man, with his places, his nicknames, which had so entranced Whitman. The West was a rugged and honest land, and Emerson sang its praise in his letters and journals. He relished its names, in the hope they brought. "You know a Michigan man is a wolverine; a Wisconsiner a badger; Illinoisian a sucker; an Indianian a hoosier; a Missourian a pike; Iowan a hawkeye; and Ohioan a buckeye. The people are rough grisly Esaus," he wrote Edith in 1860.

In addition to the Yankees, who comprised much of the western population, here were "hundreds of Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, and Dutch." Long before, Margaret Fuller had told him about the women, who were "brought up to work in the open air." If the life was not always soft, then the people were to Emerson all the more admirable. What he found out here was the material of legends. And he had a hand in the shaping of them. "I had travelled all the day before through Wisconsin, with horses,"



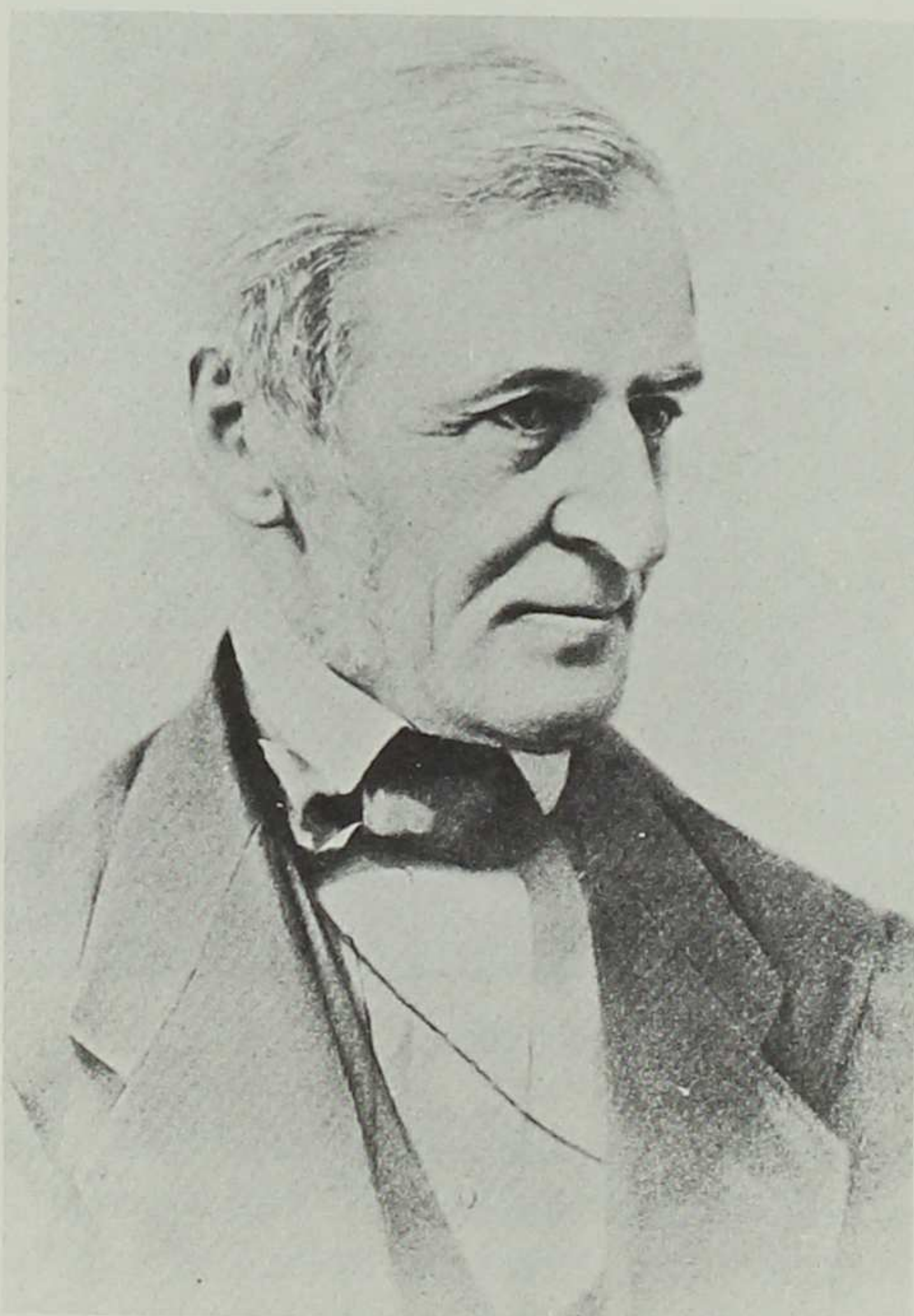
A hand-colored lithograph of Burlington circa the mid-1850s.

wrote Emerson on February 13, 1860, "and we could not for long distances find water for them: the wells were dry and the people said, they had no water but snow for the house. The cattle were driven a mile or more to the lake." Speaking before such ruggedly independent people was, as he confided in his journals, "a new test for the wares of a man of letters."

There was a vitality about this new land. The people were as irrepressible as the man who came out here winter after winter. If, toward the end of his western tours, Emerson came to "speak their sense for them," there were very few middle borderers complaining about it. "Ralph Waldo Emerson," wrote the Davenport *Democrat* on December 12, 1867, "occupies to-day the highest

place in American literature; honored, admired, and studied..." And the Washington (Iowa) *Press* one and a half months later said, "Let those go to hear him who can relish fresh and new thoughts.... All such will hear something worth hearing, and have the satisfaction of seeing the man who, more than any other, has enabled us...to claim for America a literature which we may admire...." Similar sentiments were offered throughout the West.

By the 1860s, an enduring respect had grown up for the essayist. On February 7, 1860 the Madison, Wisconsin *State Journal* called Emerson "the most original and subtle thinker which America has yet produced." And on the last day of 1865, the Milwaukee *Daily Sentinel* carried these words: "If any man has pene-



An early photograph of Emerson in his old age (courtesy of Harvard University Archives).

trated to the very heart of American life it is Emerson." Little more than a year later, *The Cedar Falls Gazette* wrote of Emerson that although "the first impressions of the man . . . were disappointing; . . . the lecturer had to speak but a short while and his audience became aware that, though he was 'a plain, unaffected gentleman . . . and looked like an educated well-to-do farmer,' he was no common character." Accolades like this followed wherever he travelled. One newspaper editor in Independence, Iowa wondered if there were any more pro-

found thinker in America than Emerson. And the day after he had spoken in Des Moines, *The Daily State Register* of March 2, 1867 wrote that, "The lecture last evening fully sustained the scholarly reputation of the speaker. It was one of the rare treats of a lifetime to be permitted to listen to such a pleasing, instructive, and solid entertainment, and our citizens will always welcome Mr. Emerson to our city with delight."

Having travelled for almost 17 years under the most adverse circumstances to be here, Emerson, the Concord transcendentalist, had become something of a fixture in these western states. He was alive to the cultural significance of the lecture system. After speaking in Janesville, Wisconsin one night in the winter of 1866, he wrote his daughter Ellen that, "The institution of these Lyceums is a stroke of heroism in each town,--desperate if it snows or blows on the appointed evening." But, after stepping from the podium in Dubuque on December 8, 1871, he did not speak in the West again. He was approaching 70 years of age, and, according to a Dubuque newspaper report, lecturing had become "a visible strain" on him. Yet when he returned to Concord, his sympathies remained with these "yeomanly . . . Giants" who had so impressed him over the years.

What Emerson said of one Wisconsin town, describing it as "a wonderful growth that shines like a dream . . . from the top of Amory Hill," could just as well have been true of any place he visited

here. For all of Emerson's West was seen, as it were, from the top of a high hill. This region was his hope, and he witnessed first-hand the people to whom its destiny was entrusted. When he found them equal to the great task set before them, there was every cause for joy. To

Emerson, the West "was a good new country with plenty of robust people." Here was "America in the making, America in the raw...." With encouragement and support, Emerson had aided in the growth of the country. □

Notes on Sources

The most important sources for this article are *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Edward W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes, 10 Vols. (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1909-14); *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 Vols. (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1939); and *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-72*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton, 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883).

Excellent studies of Emerson's lectures in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota and the contemporary newspaper accounts of those lectures can be found in Hubert Hoeltje, "Ralph Waldo Emerson in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXV (April 1927), 236-76; Hubert Hoeltje, "Emerson in Minnesota," *Minnesota History*, II (June 1930), 145-50; and C. E. Schorer, "Emerson and the Wisconsin Lyceum," *American Literature*, XXIV (May 1953), 462-75. A note on Emerson's purchasing land in Wisconsin is in Hubert Hoeltje, "Emerson's Venture in Western Land," *American Literature*, II (January 1931), 439.

A discussion of the origin of the lyceum system as well as its impact on the Middle West and on Ohio in particular occurs in David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West* (Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1961). Those interested in the role of the orator in American literary history may find a helpful chapter in Robert Spiller *et. al.*, *Literary History of the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 541-62.

THE IOWA CITY WRITERS' CLUBS

by
Steve Wilbers

In Iowa City on the Fourth of July, 1840 a crowd gathered in City Park to celebrate the completion of Iowa's first Capitol building. The day witnessed many toasts and toasters among whom one--an E. Bliss, Jr.--declaimed: "Iowa City; the splendor of her location, the rapidity of her growth, the enterprise of her citizens is unequalled by any town in the west; one year ago a naked spot of earth, now containing one hundred and twenty-five houses, and six hundred and four inhabitants. May her increase in literature and religion far exceed her increase of population." Iowa City did not remain a capital of government for long, but a century later the determined efforts of men like Norman Forester and Paul Engle helped to make it a recognized capital of a different sort. They established the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the subsequent growth of its reputation indeed made Iowa City known for "literature" far in excess of its population.

But between E. Bliss, Jr.'s hyperbolic toast and the beginning of the Writers' Workshop, Iowa City went through a

literary experience at once typical of America as a whole and of unusual interest in itself. Neither the writers' *clubs* of the '90s and later, or their predecessors in the literary societies of the 1860s, '70s, and '80s were unique to Iowa City. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, at a time when Larzar Ziff has said this country was trying to decide where to place literature in the American scheme of life, such literary organizations were common on college campuses. But perhaps due to a general movement toward a nationalist literature and to the peculiar talents of men like C. F. Ansley, John T. Frederick, and Frank Luther Mott, the clubs in Iowa City, unlike those in many other areas, took root, to flower in the 1920s and '30s as the Regionalism led by the *Midland* magazine. Such a growth makes the tradition of the writers' clubs one of the most exciting and colorful developments in Iowa City's literary history.

The later, more important writers' clubs evolved from the wide-spread literary societies, societies such as the Zetagathian Society, founded in Iowa City in April, 1861. One of the first long-lived



The meeting-room of the Zetagathian Society.

organizations of its kind west of the Mississippi, the Zetagathian Society remained active for some 70 years. Within three years, several more sprung up around it--the Erodelpian (October, 1862) and the Hesperian Society (Spring, 1863), for women, and the Irving Institute (February, 1864), for men. These societies came to dominate literary and social life on the Iowa campus.

The societies' stated purpose was to fill a gap in the University's curriculum. According to the University yearbook of 1894 (the *Hawkeye*), the founders knew "an important and necessary element in [the student's] education was lacking--that of literary culture," an element "the University did not furnish and indeed could not, owing to its limited resources." Literary culture, however, meant rhetorical and oratorical skills. Instead of concentrating on the creation of literature, for example, the Zetagathian

staged public debates, organized literary programs, discussed literature at weekly meetings, promoted a lecture bureau, maintained its own library and newspaper, and later--with the Hesperians--sponsored annual entertainments or "exhibitions," as well as annual plays, Memorial Day programs, and special presentations, like "The Old Fashioned Deestric School," a farce performed June 12, 1888 in the Grand Opera House at Clinton and College streets.

At a time when the Classics were central to course work, when the humanities were held in high esteem, when students generally aspired to literary culture as evidence of their "cultivation," it is easy to understand how the societies became so influential. There were no social fraternities, and nearly every student longed for the "society" of the literary organizations. "By the spring of 1869," Theodore Wanerus reports in his *History of the*



The "Coldren" Opera House on the S.E. corner of Clinton and College Streets in Iowa City where the Zetagathian Society staged its farce June 12, 1888 (after a photograph by Dr. Samuel Calvin).

Zetagathian Society, "the Zetagathian Society and its contemporary, Irving Institute, occupied positions of so much influence...that the choice of a commencement speaker was left to them."

When the Zetagathian Society first met, Iowa City still had the flavor of a frontier settlement. The Society grew to prominence in a town where Theodore Waner reports, "tree stumps and piles of brush obstructed the streets; and pigs and cows ran unmolested about the town." Indians, he says, "decked in gorgeous paint and blankets," were a common sight. The 13 original members held their first meetings in the northwest corner of Central Building (now Old Capitol), where the absence of light fixtures forced "the boys" to take turns bringing in three lamps that "without

chimneys, flickered and sputtered from their little sockets in the moldings around the wall, casting only a feeble glimmer on the proceedings." The only known earlier society was a loosely-structured, short-lived, fun-loving student group. John P. Irish, in the Zetagathian newspaper--*The Vidette*--of November, 1879, said this group "adjourned discussions to burn professors in effigy, carry wagons in pieces to the roof and put them up astride the ridge, and in other ways make life a burden to the Faculty."

By the turn of the century, the four original organizations began to lose their influence on student life. Competition from the newly founded fraternal orders, increased faculty control of student affairs, and a broader curriculum all took their toll, and where the Zetagathian

Society had once attracted as many as 200 visitors to its programs, by 1911 it could muster only its own members after the first week or two of school. Despite their declining popularity, all four societies managed to last through the 1920s, when a brief resurgence of like-minded groups took place with the Hamlin Garland, Whitby, and Athena Societies for women.

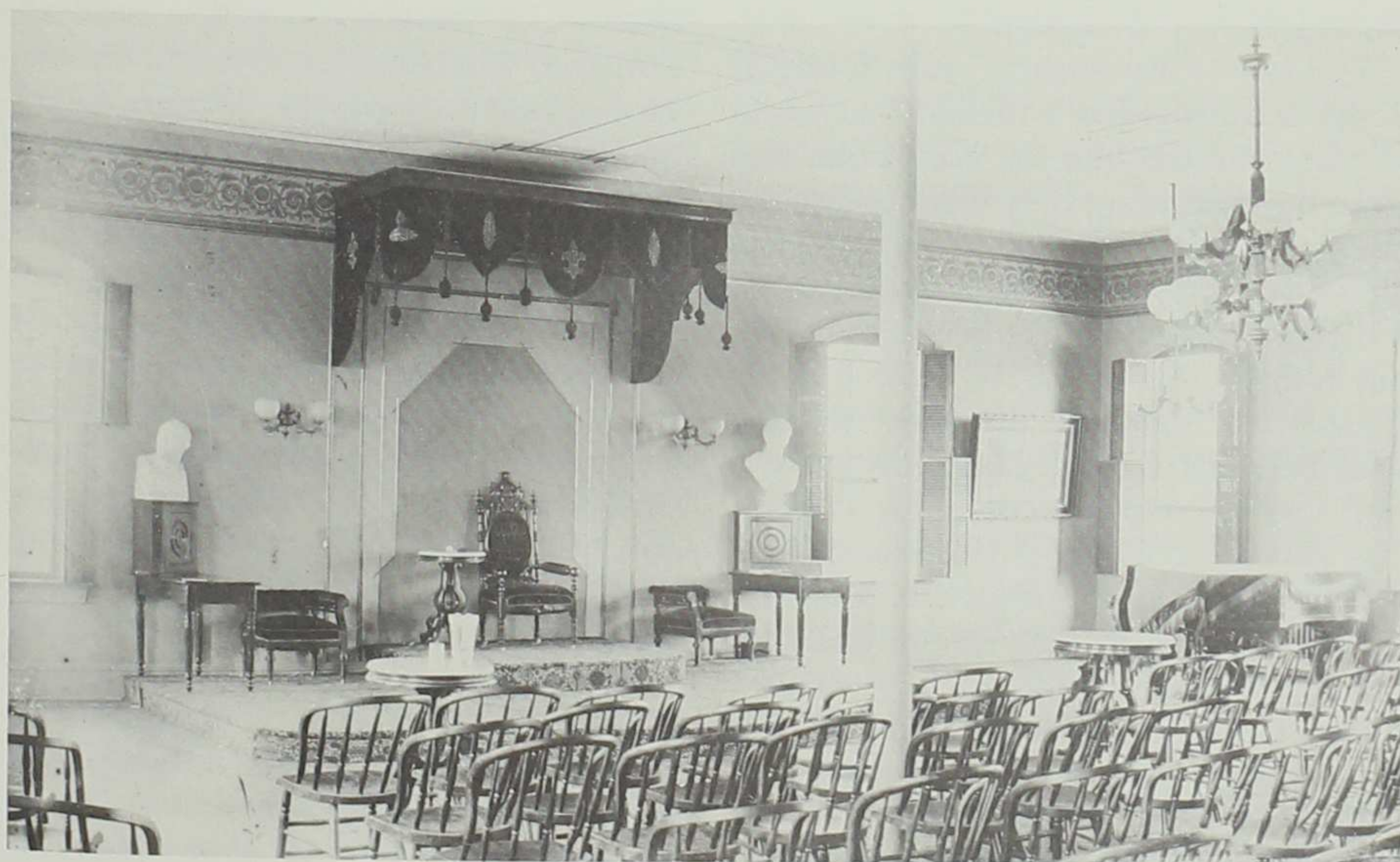
In the early 1890s, when the literary societies still maintained some influence on campus life, a new type of literary association became popular in Iowa City. These were the writers' clubs. As individual organizations they were shorter-lived than the literary societies. The Tabard, founded on "Allhalloween," 1891, lasted for only five years. The Polygon first met in the spring of 1893 and lasted two decades. Ivy Lane, organized

in April 1894, managed to remain active until the early 1920s. But instead of single, long-lasting associations, the writers' clubs appeared in waves of unbroken succession over the next half-century, and by the time each of these three had ceased to function, other clubs just like them had sprung up to take their place.

Socially, they resembled the fraternities then becoming popular. Members of both sexes "rushed" at dinners and parties. The clubs had special pins, emblems, mottoes, colors, and even yells. Ivy Lane's colors were ivy-green and pearl-gray. The Polygon's yell went:

Wa Hoo! Wa Hoo!
On! On! On!
We are, We are!
Poly, Polygon!

Despite the frivolity, the clubs emphasized one serious activity that set them apart from both the fraternities and the



The meeting-room of the Irving Institute.

older literary societies. They were tailored for young men and women who wanted to learn--and who wanted to practice--the craft of writing.

In keeping with the spirit of the "Progressive" education that was soon to transform the entire nature of college curricula in this country, the clubs used a practical method to improve their members' practical skills in writing--participants took turns reading original works and responded to those works as a group with suggestions and criticism. There was nothing particularly unique about this approach. Writers have always asked friends and colleagues to read and respond to their material. And similar clubs were appearing at college campuses all over the country. But the notion that writing skills could be developed through actual practice clearly indicates the shift away from the earlier tendency to treat literature as an "ornament."

The Iowa City writers' clubs founded in the '90s provided a format that could be incorporated into the classroom, and from the beginning they were tied to the University's Department of English. The University adopted their method when it offered its first course in creative writing in the spring of 1897--"Verse-Making Class." An honorary member of Polygon, Edward Everett Hale was head of the English department from 1892-95. His successor George Armstrong Wauchope was closely involved with the Tabard. Many student members went on to join the English faculty: George Cram Cook took part in founding the Tabard and later taught the first course offered by the University in poetry-writing; John Gabbert Bowman participated in both the Tabard and Ivy Lane, then went on to teach in the English depart-

ment and to become President of the University from 1911-14; Percival Hunt, active in Polygon as a student, became a central figure among instructors of creative writing while he taught the course in short-story writing between 1903 and 1921.

At the turn of the century a second generation of writers' clubs emerged. It was during this period that the clubs' members began to work toward the creation of a literary culture with roots in its immediate environment. Clarke Fisher Ansley joined the University faculty as head of the English department in 1899. Probably the first man to devote himself to making Iowa City a literary center, Ansley arrived from the University of Nebraska in Omaha, where he had started an advanced writing seminar for students with literary ambitions. Immediately he became involved with the Polygon, but soon he created his own group, called simply the "Writers' Club," and set about his personal struggle for creative writing. In his 19 years at Iowa, he managed to get several additional writing courses added to the curriculum, helped to establish more clubs, and offered invaluable advice and moral encouragement to young writers. Ansley became the guiding force in the creation of *The Midland*, the magazine that put Iowa City on the literary map.

Other second-generation clubs began to appear. Ansley established the Readers' Club as an adjunct to the Writers' Club in 1905. Notice of an apparently short-lived Early English Club appeared in the 1908 *Hawkeye*. But a more important club appeared in 1911. The Athelney Club--devoted to the study and practice of poetry--was conceived on

May 7, 1911 when, according to the preface of the *Athelney Book* (1918), four young men took a walk in the country to discuss "plans for forming a poets' club." They had a general purpose, but no definite plans, and they met again on May 20 to spend most of the evening reading their "own productions." A year later, they elected Ansley an honorary member, and he suggested the name "Athelney," after the tiny island where King Aldred's band took refuge from invading Danes.

The Athelney club was replaced in 1921 by the last important second-generation group. This group was to become known in the 1930s as the Poetry Society, but it began with outside-of-class sessions for students interested in writing poetry. They met in Edwin Ford Piper's office, amidst the friendly clutter of books and papers. Piper taught Chaucer and contemporary poetry at Iowa from 1905 until his death in 1939. He had joined Clarke Ansley's Writers' Club early, and he served as president of the Readers' Club in 1909 and 1910. By the time he and his students began meeting to fill the void left by the Athelney, he was a well-known literary figure in Iowa City. After four years of meetings, the group around Piper decided to follow its predecessor's publication of the *Athelney Book* with its own collection of poems for local distribution. The first four annual volumes of *Kinnikinnick* appeared in 1925. In the 1930s, Piper's group came to be known as the Poetry Society. Piper, who lived well into a third generation of clubs, was responsible for a series of "conferences for verse writers," with a more official status, special guests, and prior publicity. He was scheduled to participate in the

"round table discussions" called "writers' workshops" held in the summer of 1939, but he died of a heart attack that spring.

Just as the first writing clubs had differed from the literary societies by their emphasis on practical experience, this second generation--Ansley's Writers' Club, the Athelney Club, and Piper's Poetry Society--differed from the first by its interest in publication and its emphasis on localism or regional culture. These clubs functioned at a time when Midwestern writers like Hamlin Garland and Theodore Dreiser were challenging the predominant genteel tradition of the east by turning to their immediate environment. This new emphasis on the Emersonian tradition William Carlos Williams was later to describe as a "culture of immediate references," a distinctly American culture whose literature was based on native themes and native material.

The growing preoccupation with locale had a special impact on Iowa City's literary atmosphere. On June 10, 1902 visiting Harvard professor Josiah Royce delivered an address calling for a "higher provincialism" to the University's Phi Beta Kappa Society. He argued for a "wholesome" pride in locale that could save America from the "harassed mediocrity" produced by a mass culture. Royce's cogent arguments, the activities of the writers' clubs, and men like Ansley, Piper, and Frederick, helped set the tone for Iowa City's becoming a Midwestern center of literary Regionalism.

The third generation of writers' clubs in Iowa City was a culmination of the tradition of practical experience and of the interest in locale begun in the

IVY CLYBERTSON

1920



first and second generations. Regionalism became the banner of a Midwestern literature with the publication of *The Midland* (1915-33). The first issue offered a broad definition of Regionalism and something of a manifesto by its founder John Towner Frederick:

The magazine is merely a modest attempt to encourage the making of literature in the Middle West. The region is already renowned for certain material products and for financial prosperity; but the market of its literary and other artists has commonly been beyond the mountains, and the producers have commonly gone to their market. Possibly the region between the mountains would gain in variety at least if it retained more of its makers of literature, music, pictures, and other expressions of civilization. And possibly civilization itself might be with us a somewhat swifter process if expression of its spirit were more frequent. Scotland is none the worse for Burns and Scott, none the worse that they did not move to London and interpret London themes for London publishers.

Frederick had been a younger member of the second-generation Athelney Club, and along with Edwin Ford Piper, he became a leading Regionalist in Iowa City and a long-time creative writing instructor at the University. In fact, he got the idea of establishing his regional literary magazine from his participation in Athelney when it began publishing annual volumes of poetry, distributed locally, in 1914.

The new clubs popularized the practice of inviting out-of-town writers to give public readings of their works. With these clubs--the Saturday Luncheon Club, the Times Club, and the S.P.C.S. (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers)--there was, too, a marked

change in tone from the "high-seriousness" of the earlier period. The credit for establishing the first club to devote itself to bringing well-known writers to speak in Iowa City must go to John Towner Frederick and Frank Luther Mott.

In 1921 Frederick returned from a one-year teaching stint at the University of Pittsburgh to organize, with Mott's help, the Saturday Luncheon Club. Together they set up an arrangement for members to pay one dollar each semester for each of five meetings--50 cents to go for lunch, 50 cents for a guest speaker. The group held its meetings in the dining room of Youde's Inn, a huge privately-owned boarding house, then standing north of Old Capitol on Capitol Street.

In its time, the Saturday Luncheon Club managed to engage Carl Sandburg, Clarence Darrow, and Robert Frost, and before long, it began to outdraw the officially sponsored University lecture series. In the March 1962 issue of *The Palimpsest*, Frank Luther Mott recalled:

...how easy it was to get the men we most wanted, and for small fees. Frederick was a persuasive fellow, and many of our notables were interested in the *Midland*. We were never able to get Henry Mencken; but we did get Sherwood Anderson and Joseph Weaver and Leonard Cline and Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg and others...

We spent unforgettable hours with these visitors of ours. Fixed in my memory is a picture of Frost sitting on the small of his back in an easy chair after his talk and his readings, holding a glass of milk in his hand, and regaling us between sips with amusing Amherst legends about such diverse characters as Emily Dickinson and Calvin Coolidge--wonderful stories! And Sandburg intoning folk songs to the accompaniment of his guitar. And Anderson gathered with students before a fireplace, chatting, his face in the firelight looking for all the world

like that of a nice comfortable old lady. His talk, too, was mild and easy, but his ideas explosive.

The Saturday Luncheon Club soon became the subject of two heated controversies. In 1925, John Frederick extended an invitation to Sherwood Anderson. When certain townspeople saw Anderson's books in the local bookstores and learned he was coming to lecture, they demanded the lecture be cancelled to prevent Sherwood Anderson from "planting seeds of sexual revolution in Iowa City." Walter Jessup, President of the University, was pressured to fire Frederick if he continued his plan to bring Anderson to town. Frederick refused to cancel the lecture. He was backed by Hardin Craig, the Head of the Department of English.



Frank Luther Mott (courtesy Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries).

Anderson came, and he spoke as scheduled, but after all the trouble the mildness of his remarks was anticlimactic.

The second incident occurred four years later when John V. A. Weaver, born in North Carolina and best known for his poetry--though also known as a New York critic, Hollywood screen writer, novelist, and playwright--criticized Prohibition during his lecture at Iowa City. He angered a group of citizens from Oelwein, Iowa, and they sent protest letters to *The Des Moines Register* and to the University's Office of the President. The brouhaha gradually died down, but not before Frank Luther Mott felt compelled to send a letter defending the club to President Jessup. At the end of the letter, Mott said the Saturday Luncheon Club would probably suspend activities in May (of 1929) because it had not been financially successful in the last year or so. After the demise of the Saturday Luncheon Club, Frank Luther Mott helped to establish a new club, the Journalism Dinner Club, and the practice of inviting writers to lecture continued.

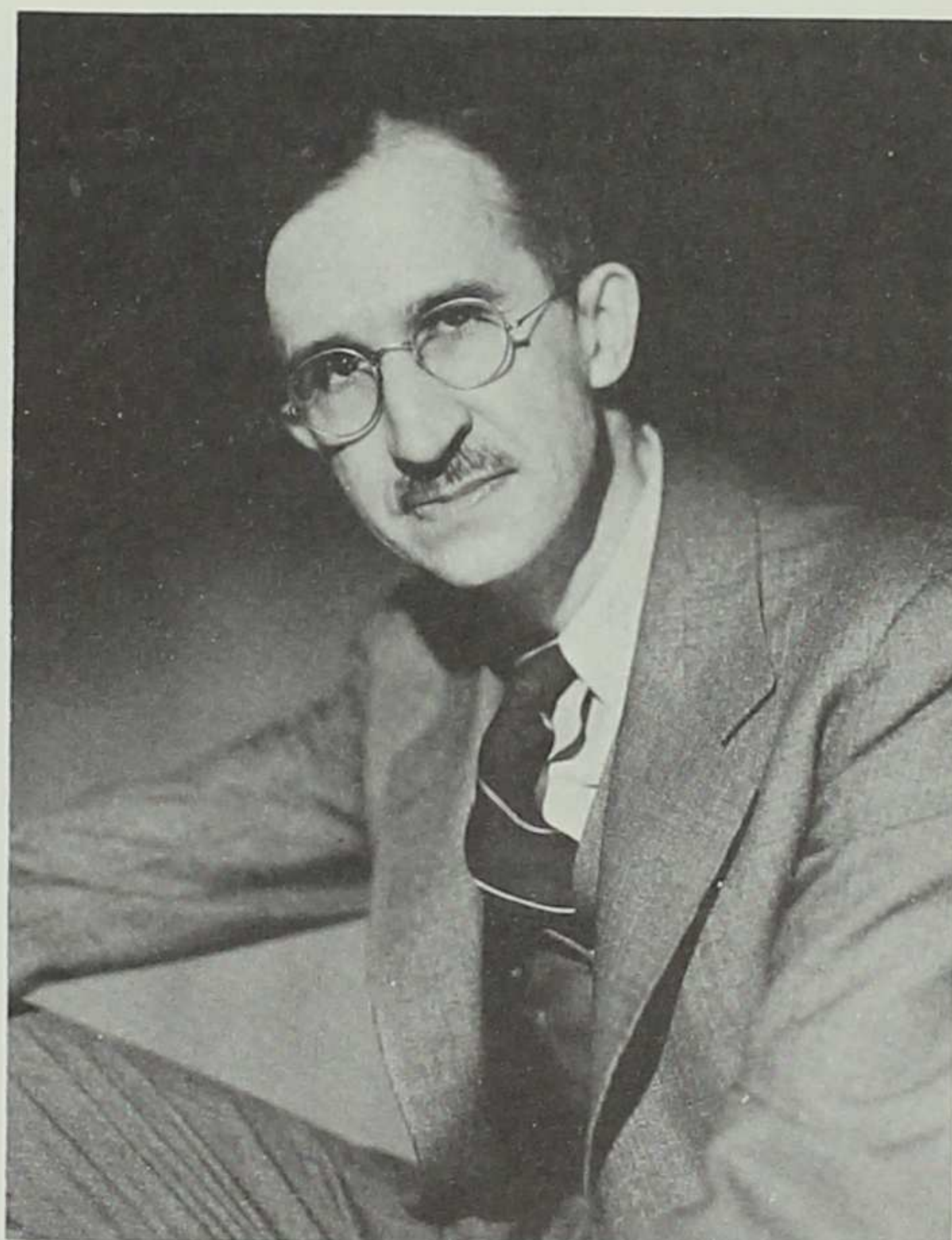
Mott's next venture gained even greater fame and notoriety. He and Harry Hartwick--one of *The Midland* writers--founded the Times Club in 1933. Following what was by this time a well-established precedent, the club sold tickets in advance of the lectures. As a way to insure small audiences, it limited its membership to 300 people. Years later, Mott marvelled at how the organizing committee "hypnotized three hundred Iowa Citians in those 'depression' years to invest two dollars apiece in a hypothetical course of this character..." In fact, when the club sold the

tickets, it did not even promise any specific program. But "the ticket sale always went over easily." Mott later explained:

We told them we thought we could get five or six interesting persons to visit us--not orators or professional platform men, but persons who had done things, and had ideas, and were willing to talk informally to a small audience of intelligent and sympathetic listeners. Watch the papers, we said, and you will see who they are and when they are to be here; that will be your sole notification of the meetings.

Mott said the club managed to get writers to speak for two reasons: Iowa City's proximity to Chicago, which made it possible for well-known writers visiting there to make a side-trip to Iowa City, and the Times Club's growing reputation, which made writers curious about its members and eager to visit them. Among the club's guests were the novelist O. E. Rolvagg, Henry A. Wallace, Donald R. Murphy (editor of *Wallace's Farmer*), Lincoln Steffens, and Christopher Morley. And once again the Times Club brought Frost and Sandburg to Iowa City.

The Times Club later gave birth to one of the more spirited and fun-loving groups in Iowa City's literary history. The executive committee of the Times Club was enlarged to 16 members and became a kind of club-within-a-club. Mott called this inner-group "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers" (or the "S.P.C.S." for short). Grant Wood, who was commuting from Cedar Rapids twice a week to lecture at the University and to lunch with Mott at "Smitty's" cafe, joined the group. Though the first president was Evans A. Worthley and the first vice-president Jeanne Doran, the "three wheel-horses of the organization," according to Mott, were Grant Wood,



John T. Frederick

Clyde Hart, and himself, the "eager beaver" secretary-treasurer. The membership remained close to 16, always divided among faculty, students, and townspeople.

The Society thought its main function was to spare guests of the Times Club undue harassment from overly zealous civic groups and individuals. The members wanted to do this by entertaining the guest writers at after-lecture parties given in their honor. The group decided that they needed a place with the right atmosphere. They looked over an abandoned country schoolhouse, a barn, and an old flour mill, but they could not agree on any of them. Finally, Roland Smith (known as "Smitty") offered them, rent free, the entire floor above his cafe. Smitty gave them *carte blanche*, and they outdid themselves. They furnished and decorated the space as two rooms--



The "dining room" of the S.P.C.S. above Smitty's Cafe.

a dining room and a parlor--in what Grant Wood "affectionately" called "the worst style of the late Victorian period." Mott described the scene:

We put an ingrain carpet on the floor and a flowered paper on the walls. We decorated with Currier and Ives prints; a fine chromo of that old favorite, "Rock of Ages," in which a lady clings to the foot of a cross on a great rock lashed by foam-tipped waves from the sea; embroidered mottoes, "God Bless Our Home," "Peace Be With You," and so on; and certain designs under glass formed from the hair of some dear departed. In the dining-room section a big table was covered with a red-and-white checked cloth, and a bulging sideboard stood in one corner. In the parlor was much red plush and walnut furniture--Boston rockers, and love-seats on either side of the marble fireplace. One big chair was made of steers' horns, with seat, back, and tassels

of green plush. A cottage organ, with elaborately carved walnut case and music rack, was ornamental, and proved highly useful at our parties. Upon a marble-topped stand stood a red-plush album, which, in the course of time, came to be filled with specially posed pictures of our guests and our own members.

The group sang old songs from the '90s, accompanied by an organ. They and their visitors dressed in false beards and moustaches and assumed melodramatic stances for the "specially posed pictures" they included in the red-plush album. Mott continued: "Almost always, conversation began with our guests' exclamations about the furnishings of our rooms. 'Oh, my aunt had a decoration piece of peacock feathers just like that in her front parlor! And it was set on just such a marble-topped stand!'"



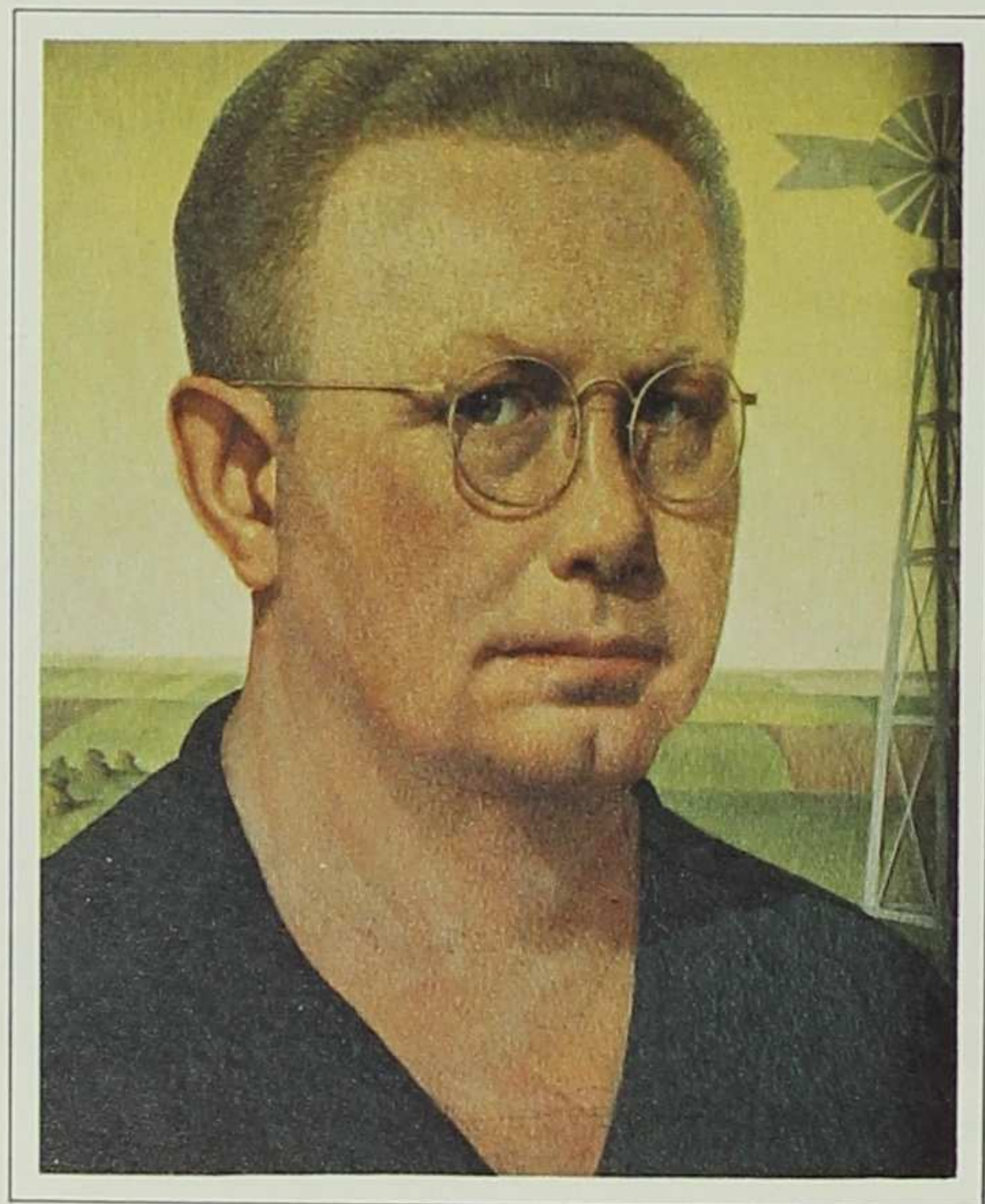
The "parlor" of the S.P.C.S. above Smitty's Cafe.

Each member of the group could invite two guests, and the rooms were always filled. Mott himself occasionally provided the evening's entertainment with a passionately melodramatic reading of "The Face on the Bar Room Floor." Sometimes Sigmund Spaeth played the organ, and "Steamboat Bill" Petersen led the group in singing old comic German songs. MacKinlay Kantor, at a party given in his honor, fervently recited "The Rebel's Prayer."

Many other famous guests came. Thomas Hart Benton, Stephen Vincent Benet, John Erskine, Gilbert Seldes, Nicholas Roosevelt, Edward J. O'Brien, Thomas A. Craven, Frederick Essary, Bruce Bairnsfather, Sterling North, John G. Neihardt, Thomas W. Duncan, Elmer Peterson, Lewis Worthington Smith, and

Alfred M. Bailey, all appeared, derisively posed, in the red-plush album (along with members Wilbur Schramm and Paul Engle--respectively, first and second Directors of the Writers' Workshop). The society also invited and entertained a number of blacks, including W. C. Handy, composer of "The St. Louis Blues"; Rosamund Johnson, a musician who accompanied and aided the near blind Handy; Rosamund's brother, James Weldon Johnson, then known as the "dean" of Negro poets; as well as poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

But the guest who generated the most publicity never came. The incident, known as "the Stein fiasco," occurred on December 10, 1934 when an enthusiastic audience assembled and eagerly awaited the arrival of Gertrude Stein.



Grant Wood's oil-on-masonite "Self Portrait" (courtesy of the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery).

When the S.P.C.S. learned that Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas had planned a visit to the United States and that Stein planned to lecture at Columbia and the University of Chicago, it immediately set about trying to coax her down to Iowa City. Rousseau Voorhies, an acquaintance of both Mott's and Stein's, gave the club a number of helpful suggestions and it tried a variety of approaches. In one ruse, it "organized" a "Rose Is A Rose Club." Members wore white roses to a special dinner (the organization's one and only meeting), had their photographs taken and sent the pictures Gertrude Stein. Mott later wrote:

She yielded to our blandishments and consented to come to us, for a very reasonable fee. . . . But by the time she had reached New York she had quarreled violently with Rousseau, and wired me to know if we had any connection with him. When I reassured her on that point, she wired me again to know if we were keeping the audience small. When I told her we always kept our audiences small, she sent me another telegram to find out how small. Between us, we kept Western Union busy for a day or two; but she finally said all right, she was coming, and she would speak on "The Making of *The Making of Americans*."

The Daily Iowan's front-page headline for September 14 read, "GERTRUDE STEIN TO LECTURE HERE," and requests for tickets poured into the Times Club. Despite carefully laid plans, a sudden winter storm spoiled the club's moment of greatest glory. Mott reported:

Came the tenth of December, and one of those great sleet storms which Iowa sometimes suffers. But our audience braved it all, some driving more than a hundred miles over icy roads. The audience was there, all of it, with perhaps a few more than the stipulated number; but the Misses Stein and Toklas, who had been scheduled to arrive by special plane in the early evening, were not there. About eight-thirty a Western Union boy arrived at our crowded lecture hall with the last of the series of telegrams from Miss Stein. It read: "PLANE GROUNDED WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN, GERTRUDE STEIN."

The Times Club and its auxiliary, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers, disbanded because, in a sense, they were too successful. According to Mott, the University Lecture Committee resented the way the unofficial clubs



Gertrude Stein (Culver Pictures)

always got the headlines. Mott was called into a conference with the President of the University and the Chairman of the Lecture Committee, and he agreed to suspend operations of the Times Club after a year's moratorium. Some of its members thought that he had given in too easily, and later Mott came to agree with them.

From the days of the Zetagathian Society to those of the Tabard in the 1890s and the Times Club in the 1930s, a certain excitement and spirit-of-place took shape and came to fruition in Iowa City. Each generation of clubs renewed and revitalized that spirit. And each renewal contributed to Iowa City's literary heritage, a legacy that made Iowa City fertile ground for the country's first full-fledged program in creative writing.



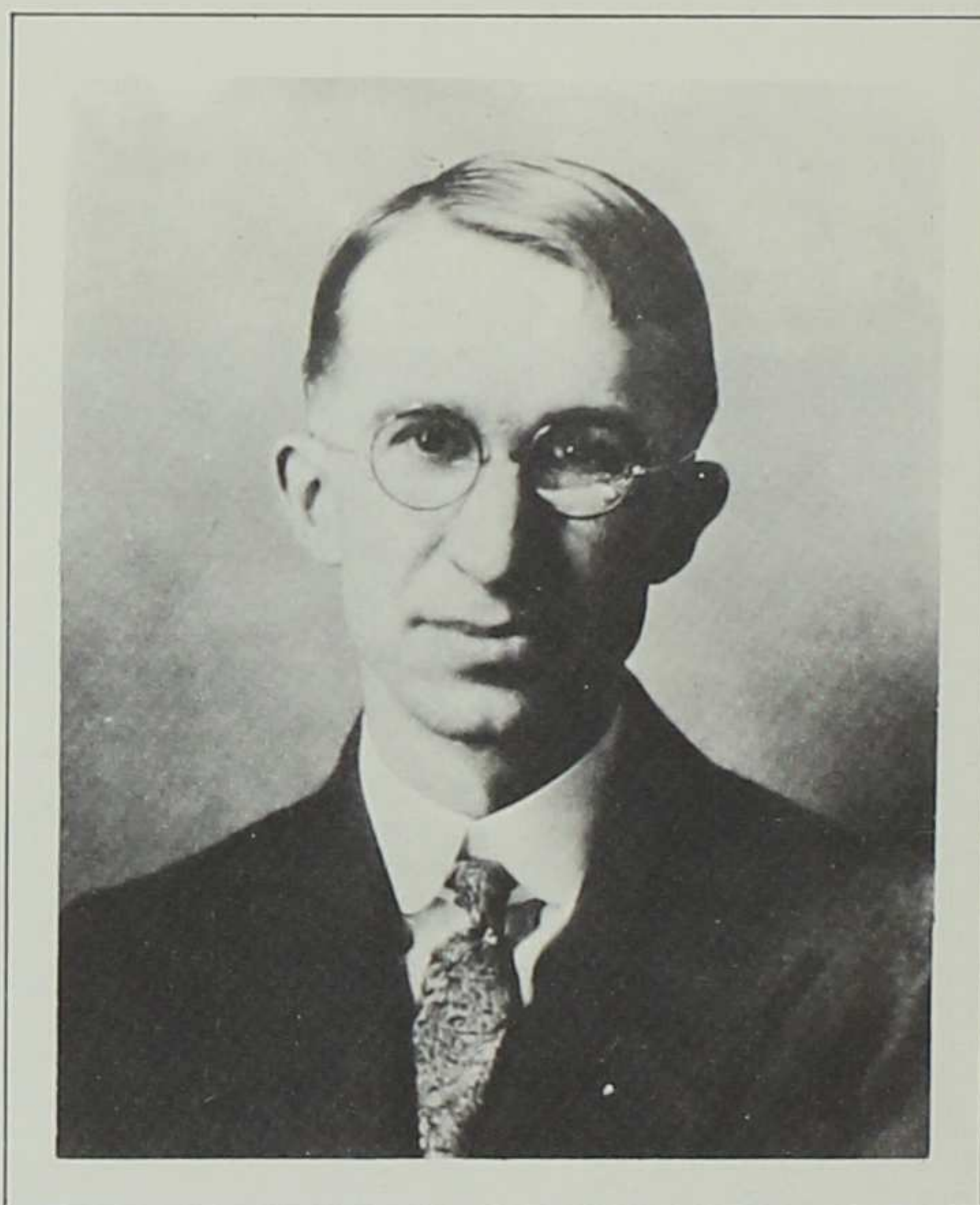
Note on Sources

Information pertaining to the 19th-century literary societies was taken largely from Theodore Waner's *History of the Zetagathian Society* (Iowa City: the Zetagathian Society, 1911), while the major sources for information on the later writers' clubs were: various issues of the University of Iowa yearbook, *The Hawkeye*; Milton Riegelman's *The Midland: a Venture in Literary Regionalism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975); and Frank Luther Mott's article, "The S.P.C.S.," which appeared in *The Palimpsest*, 43 (March 1962). Copies of *The Athelney Book* and *Kinnikinnick* can be found in Special Collections, the University of Iowa Archives. E. Bliss, Jr.'s Fourth of July toast in honor of Iowa City appeared in *The Palimpsest*, 57 (July/August 1976), and the reference to Larzar Ziff is to his *The American 1890s* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

John T. Frederick

by

Milton M. Reigelman



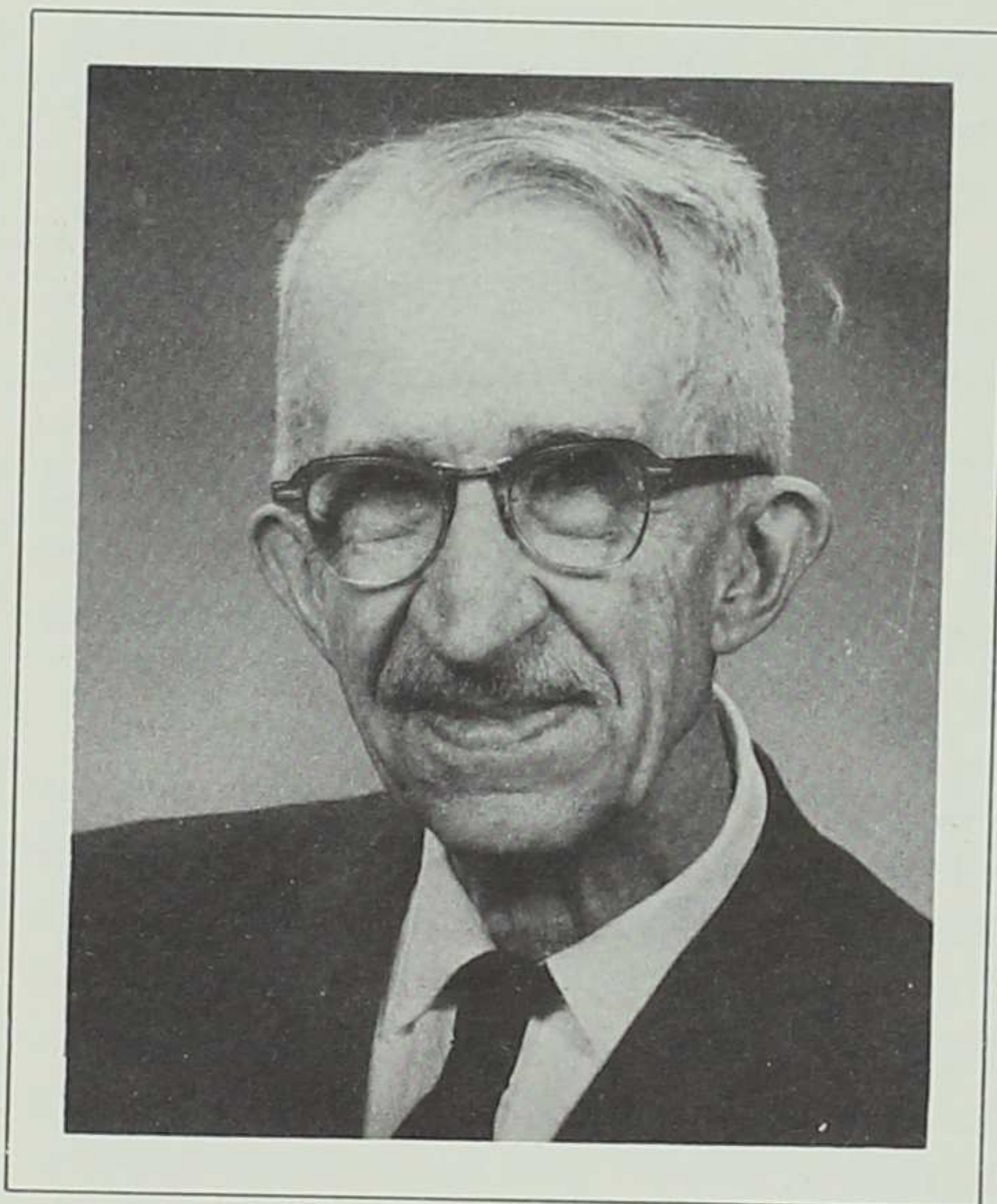
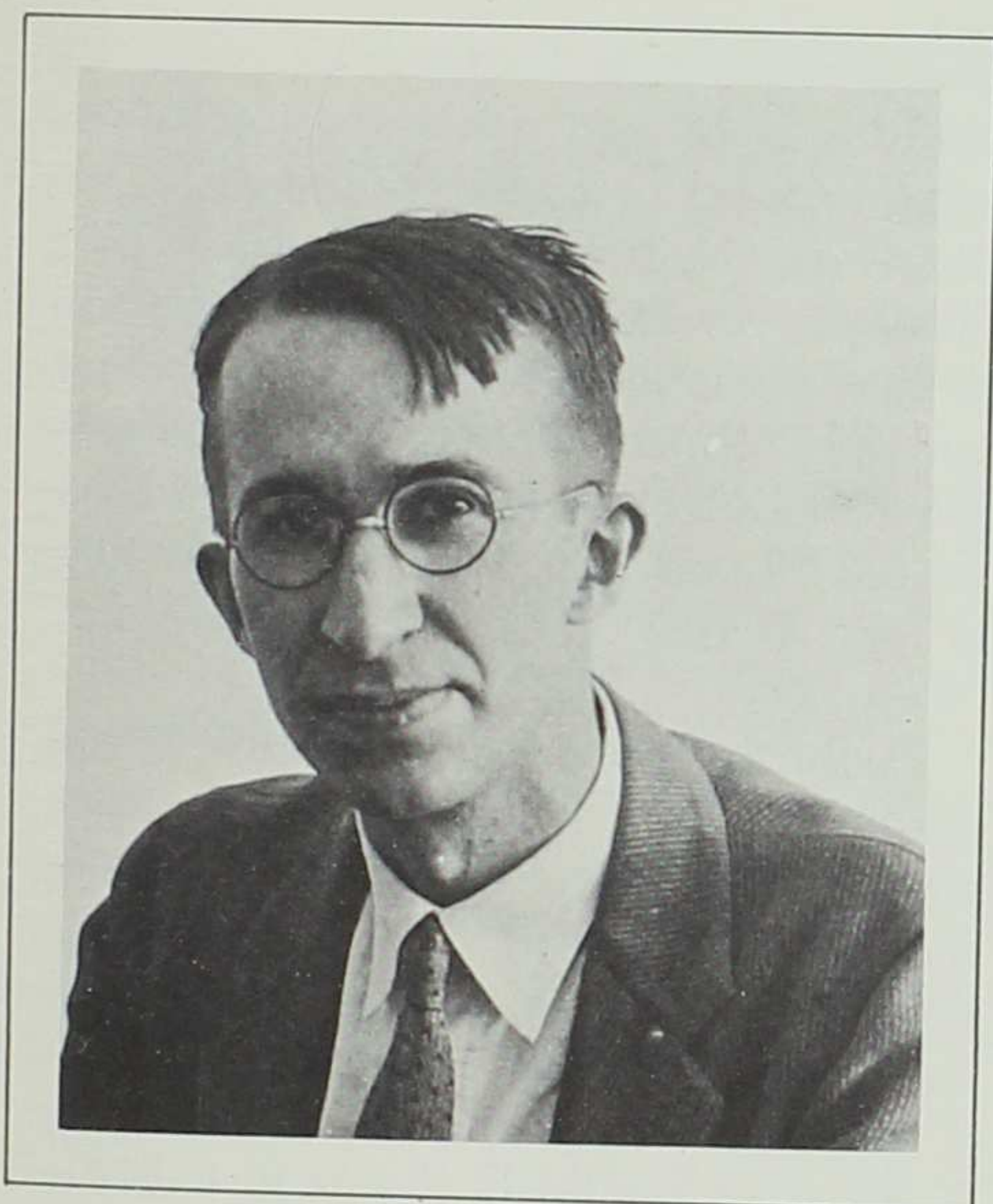
John T. Frederick

When John T. Frederick died in Iowa City on January 31, 1975, the day before his 82nd birthday, one could find the various "facts" of his life in the newspaper obituaries: he was born in Adams County, Iowa in 1893; he founded and edited from 1915-33 *The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West*; he was a distinguished novelist and critic; he conducted the popular CBS radio program "Of Books and Men" during the 1930s and '40s; he set what is probably a record for lengthy and diverse teaching career; etc. These bits of information help to define John T. Frederick, but they do not indicate probably the most important thing about him: for many people, he came to symbolize what is best about the Iowa (and, by extension, the Midwestern) character.

Frederick himself always warned beginning fiction writers to develop their

"settings" fully since, as he said, characters are related to their environment; personality is influenced by landscape. In 1925 when he was trying to define what it was that made the Southwest Iowa countryside where he grew up so distinctive, he quoted his friend, the Iowa writer Ruth Suckow: "Iowa's beauty does not stick out ostentatiously. It is fused...it is not ornament but an inherent element. It does not impose itself, but forms a background and foundation." As with this landscape, so with Frederick himself. In spite of his formidable accomplishments stretching back to the early years of the century, he was never ostentatious, never "ornamental." Yet for three generations his soft-spoken, unpretentious "grandness"--again, like the countryside--came to inspire.

Few Iowans have been so fruitful over such a long period of time. In 1962, at the age of 69, Frederick "retired" as head



of the English department at the University of Notre Dame and returned to his second wife's family farm in Iowa, the state where he had spent most of his life. (In 1960, two years after his first wife, Esther Paulus Frederick, died, he had married his sister-in-law, Lucy Paulus.) When he came back to Iowa, he did not settle into a life of retired ease, but soon had three new jobs. He helped to oversee the farm; he worked on several books and a dozen articles; and he found himself a job as Visiting Professor of English at the nearby University of Iowa where, in 1922, he had taught what was probably the first college course ever in contemporary American fiction. I first met him in 1969 when he entered a lecture room filled with 200 students. He was 76 years old and very thin. (He had always been thin.) Someone whispered, "He'll never make it to the platform." No one whispered, however, after he began to talk, without the aid of a microphone or notes,

about the falsity of seeing the experiences of David Copperfield or Anna Karenina as less "real" than our own. It was an old-fashioned, stirring lecture, partly because it depended as much on Frederick's personal experiences as it did on three-fourths of a century of wide reading and study.

Before long, the class had built up a whole mythology around Frederick, as other classes had done and would continue to do. According to one story, Frederick was actually a 23-year-old man in disguise who needed only 15-minutes sleep each night. This story gained credence after he returned 200 papers carefully graded and annotated in two-days' time. Another story had it that Frederick represented a secret, experimental breakthrough by a group of university scientists against the processes of aging. The most fascinating legend was that Frederick was a mechanical construct, a kind of early version of tele-

vision's six-million-dollar man. This legend was dismissed by most, however, because his approach to teaching was so non-mechanical and personal. He could talk warmly and personally about many of the 20th-century American short story writers the class was studying because he had actually known them, and in some cases--as I later found out--he had been partly responsible for their becoming writers in the first place.

Frederick had encouraged countless young writers through *The Midland*, the regional "little magazine" he founded in 1915, when he was a senior at the University of Iowa. At the time, publishing was becoming more and more commercialized and centralized in New York. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, wrote his friend Edmund Wilson that he had "worked hard as hell last winter writing eleven stories to pay off \$17,000 in debts, but it was all trash and it nearly broke my heart as well as my iron constitution." Frederick, encouraged by his teachers C. F. Ansley and Edwin Ford Piper, and supported by University President Walter A. Jessup, saw the need for a journal where young writers could write realistically and honestly about their experiences without an eye toward what New York called "salability."

In a *Midland* editorial, Frederick spelled out the dilemma:

Any young writer who takes it as his aim to write sincerely and competently of American life as he knows it is met by the editorial demand that he distort characters, exaggerate situations, and develop a glib and blatant style. Otherwise, there is no place for his work. (XVI, p. 369)

It was not only young writers who were being harmed by the state of affairs, Frederick thought. Because New Yorkers

chose what would appear in print, the Middle West and other regions of the country were being short-changed in our literature: "A result has seemed to be a tendency to false emphasis, distortion, in literary interpretations.... New England or California or Scotland might have been less adequately and helpfully interpreted if London had selected all writings in English that were to appear in print." (VI, p. 1)

Partly by sheer perseverance Frederick helped to keep the Middle West, and particularly Iowa, from being short-changed. For 18 years, almost single-handedly at times, he kept his non-commercial journal alive. He edited it, published it, wrote for it, defended it, lectured endlessly about it, solicited funds for it, used it in his college classes, mailed out its copies, and often paid its debts out of his own modest earnings as a teacher and farmer. And his efforts bore rich fruit. By the 1920s any Iowan who thought he might be a writer sent Frederick his material and waited expectantly for the always blunt, but always understanding criticism. (Frederick signed his replies "Cordially yours.") The magazine was receiving ten manuscripts or more each day, and attracting material not only from the Midwest, but from other regions as well. By 1923, H. L. Mencken, the "scourge of Baltimore," could write in the *Smart Set*: "*Midland* is probably the most influential literary periodical ever set up in America, though its actual circulation has always been small." (July, 1923, p. 141) And in 1930 Edward J. O'Brien, the influential critic who each year published a collection called *Best Short Stories*, wrote that Frederick and *Midland* might even lead Iowa City to eclipse

New York as the publishing center of the country:

Two generations ago Boston was the geographical centre of American literary life, one generation ago New York could claim pride of place, and I trust that the idea will not seem too unfamiliar if I suggest that the geographical centre today is Iowa City.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of Frederick's efforts. He encouraged a whole generation of Iowa and Midwestern writers. Paul Engle, longtime head of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, has recalled that when he first saw a copy of *Midland* as a schoolboy in Cedar Rapids, he was immediately struck by the fact that it was unlike any magazine he had ever seen before, unlike the ones his mother read or the ones he could buy in the local drugstore. He had discovered, he said, a journal that took good fiction seriously, and a place to send his own beginning work for consideration and sensitive criticism.

James Hearst, the Cedar Falls poet, recalls an even larger debt:

I doubt if I could emphasize too strongly the influence John T. Frederick has had on my writing--and on my life too. Like most beginning writers, I was shy, self-conscious about my work and I tended to imitate the older poets. But Mr. Frederick took me in hand, so to speak, and taught me by example and precept that genuine poems grow like corn in the fields of our own experiences. I learned that a poem did not need to be about Truth, Beauty and God but could see the meaning and pattern in farm life and the inner life of the farmer. THE MIDLAND opened doors for me that I never suspected would open.

Before his recent death, Marquis Childs, the distinguished journalist, wrote, "There was a time when I thought that I would stay at the University of Iowa and try to be a more serious writer rather than a journalist, and the reason was

largely Frederick and the inspiration that he offered."

Throughout most of the journal's history, almost every poem, story, or article received was carefully read and returned with a handwritten note or individually typed letter by Frederick or Frank Luther Mott, his co-editor from 1925-30. This took hours each day for Frederick, who then had a growing family, a full-time teaching job, and was working on his own novels. But as one editor wrote in 1927, "Frederick is patient as Griselda ... The cataract of manuscript never wearies him. He is tolerant of letter writers and advice seekers. He will read the most unattractive looking stuff, I am told, thinking himself well repaid if he finds one grain of good in a ton of chaff."

Frederick discovered more than a few grains of good. He published the work of many important regional writers and the beginning work of others who were to become prominent critics, playwrights, journalists, and naturalists: James T. Farrell, Mark Van Doren, Ruth Suckow, William March, Cleanth Brooks, John B. Neihardt, Howard Mumford Jones, Maxwell Anderson, MacKinlay Kantor, August Derleth, Loren Eiseley, etc.

Those whose material actually appeared in *Midland* represented only the tip of the iceberg. The Iowa-born novelist Wallace Stegner never gained publication, but benefited from Frederick's criticism of his stories when he was young enough for that criticism to be helpful. Later, he wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature*:

In effect, John T. Frederick and his friends on *The Midland* did for fiction, through the little magazine what Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook of the Provincetown Players had done for drama through the

The Midland

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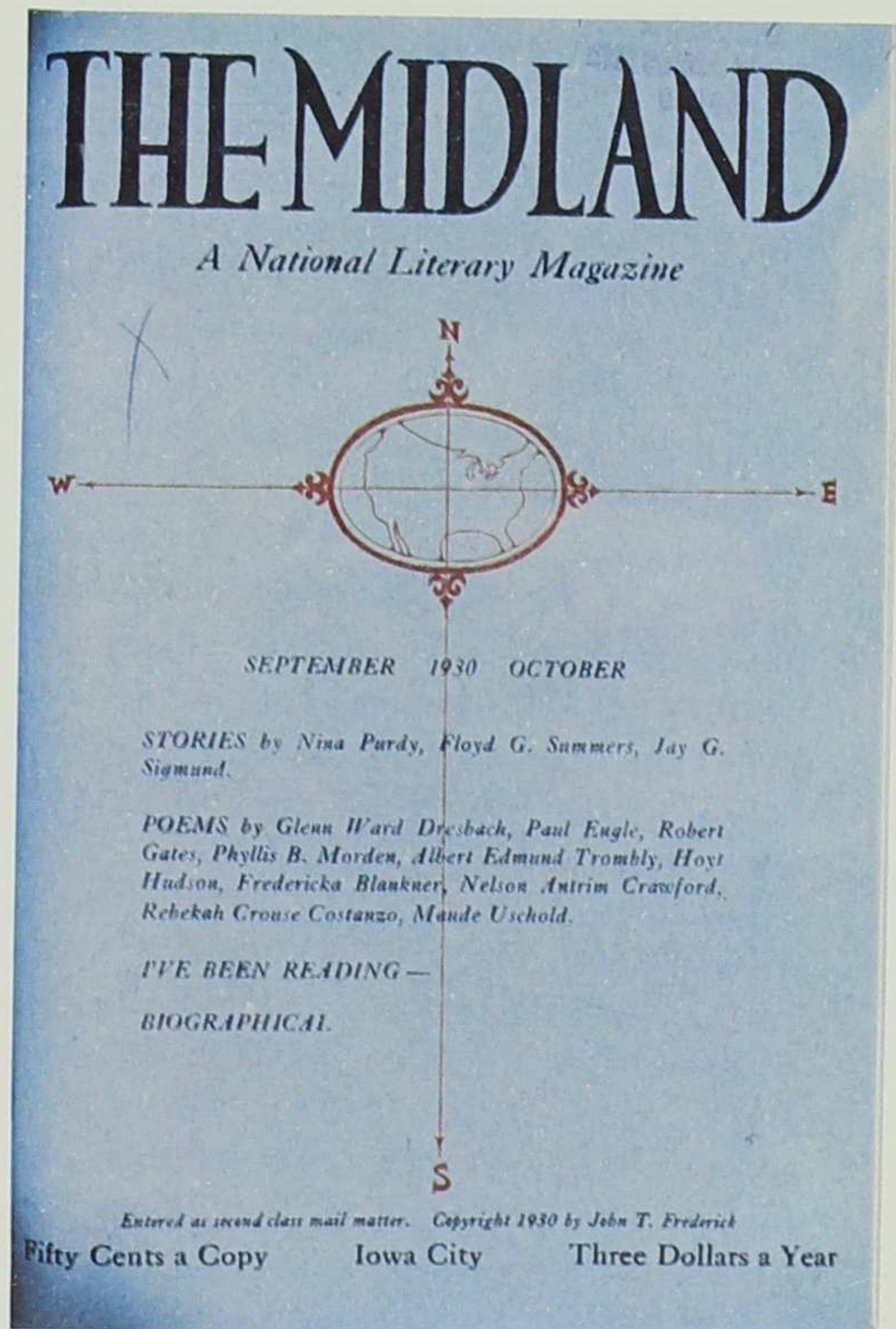
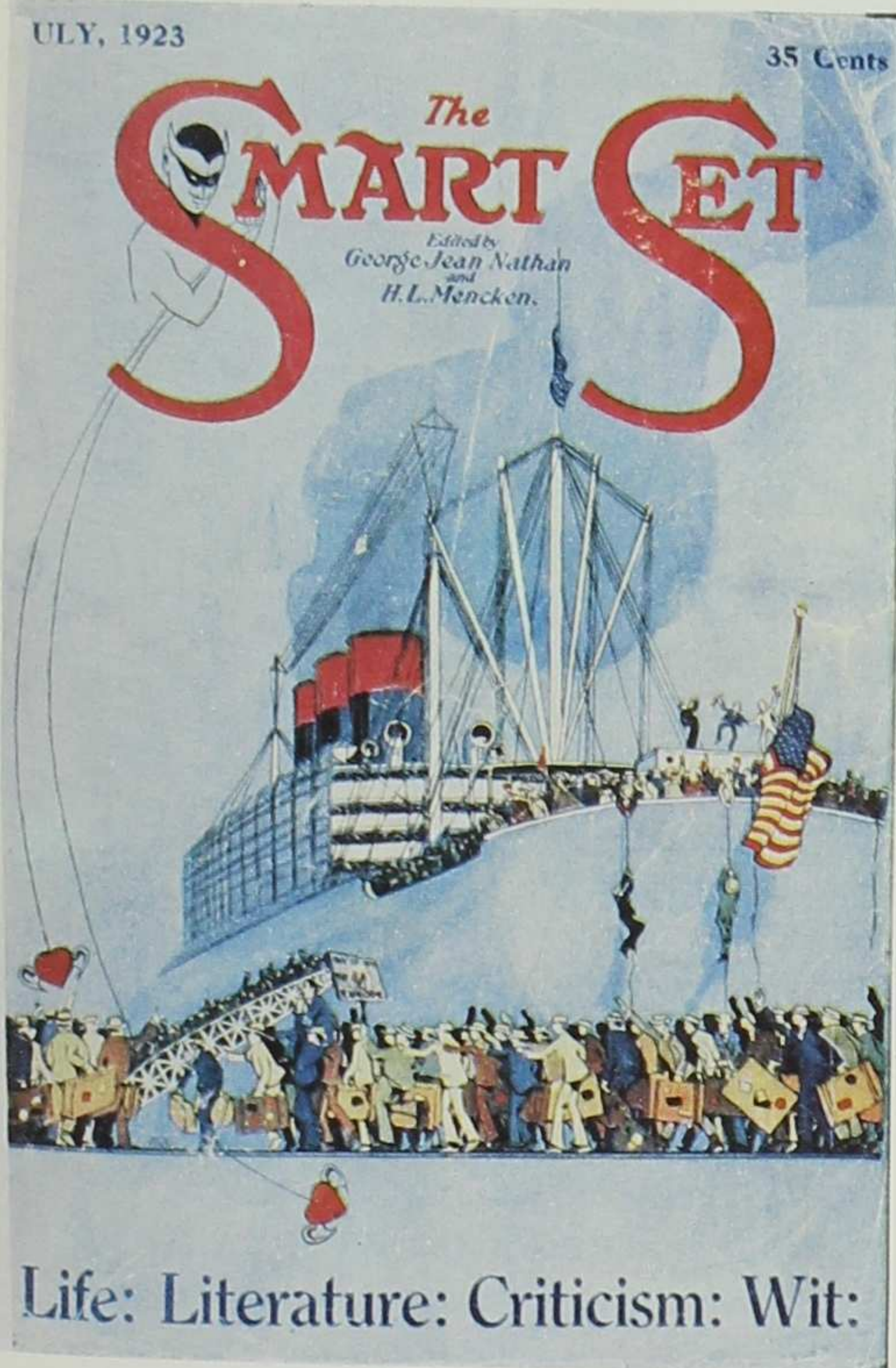


Covers from two of the most important literary journals of the 1920s and '30s, H. L. Mencken's irreverent *Smart*

little theatre. But the regional flavor...of Frederick's magazine...and the fact that his work had been done in and for Iowa and the Middle West, have made this unselfish and helpful critic and editor the greatest single force in Iowa letters in the past twenty-five years. (July 30, 1938)

Midland finally succumbed to the Depression in 1933. Frederick had run up a personal debt of several thousand dollars in the struggle to keep it alive. To help pay off the debt, he turned to part-time teaching jobs at both Northwestern University and Notre Dame, and he began to devote more time to book reviewing. He wrote a weekly book column in

the Sunday magazine of the *Chicago Sun* during its existence from 1942-47 and later a regular book column for *The Rotarian*, the magazine of Rotary International. During the '30s and '40s, he conducted an immensely popular CBS radio program "Of Books and Men," aired by more than 50 stations across the nation. Each month the listening public responded to the program with a thousand letters or so, and when Frederick recommended 50 books before Christmas of 1940, people immediately sent in 2,000 requests for copies. The 1941 entry on Frederick in *Current Biography* suggests the reason for the program's success:



Set (courtesy of Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries) and John T. Frederick's regionalist The Midland.

OF MEN AND BOOKS owes its increasing popularity in large part to the fact that Professor Frederick is a remarkably good speaker who talks of books simply and informally from a warmly sympathetic viewpoint, with both understanding and humor. His manner of quiet sincerity and convincing enthusiasm for what is good in the current output makes listeners want to read the books themselves.

One reason Frederick's teaching career was so diversified, successful, and long was that he made students, as well as radio listeners, want to read good books. Along with everything else, he was—for exactly 60 years—a

teacher. He had begun his teaching career at the age of 18, in 1911, as the sole high school teacher, athletic coach, and superintendent of schools in the village of Prescott, Iowa. He roomed and boarded with parents, and after two years, he had earned enough to return to the University of Iowa, where he had earlier dropped out due to lack of funds. Once back at the University, he debated, he was elected President of his senior class, and he was initiated into Phi Beta Kappa. He stayed on at Iowa as a student teaching assistant and published *Midland* until 1917, when he earned his Master's. He taught next at Moorhead State

Normal College in Minnesota, where he found in a poll he took that 80% of his students had grown up speaking German or a Scandinavian language in their homes.

In 1919 Frederick momentarily gave up teaching to try "pioneering" in the frontier area at the top of Michigan's lower peninsula. He talked his father into selling his Adams County farm and, together, they bought 1,400 acres of land (paying \$1 an acre for some of it), which included two small lakes, woodland, pasture, and 200 acres of farm land. Soon they cleared more woodland, raised cattle, sheep, and alfalfa, and built a large stone house with their own hands. A half-day's drive to the nearest store, "Glen-nie," as Frederick called his Michigan farm, remained a summer retreat for the Fredericks even after he went back to full-time teaching in 1921 at the University of Iowa. For the next 41 years he taught creative writing and American literature at Iowa, Pittsburgh, Northwestern and Notre Dame. On his "retirement" in 1962 Notre Dame awarded him a Doctor of Letters.

Few Doctorates have been more worthily earned. Sargent Bush, Jr. has written that Frederick's scholarly articles "strongly resist any attempt to cast them into a general type or category":

They include essays in literary history, deeply researched source-studies such as his authoritative article on Cooper's sources of information on Indians, essays involving wide familiarity with very recent fiction, explications of individual works of fiction, and essays on pedagogy and the philosophy of teaching.

Also Frederick had published several textbooks for high school and college, including: the popular *Handbook of Short Story Writing* (used at Harvard

for many years); plays; short stories; poetry (including poems published in the prestigious *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in both 1919 and 1967); non-literary articles (published in such diverse magazines as *The New Republic* and *The Review of Politics*); and three novels. *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* claims that the case Frederick makes in his novels for the superiority of the rural, Midwestern life is "the strongest case that has been or can be made for it."

If anyone ever believed--heart and mind--in the superiority of the farm over the city, it was John T. Frederick. Almost everything he did in his 82 years bore the stamp of his rural Iowa origins. On a very hot August day in 1971 this writer visited him at his farm four miles southwest of Iowa City. He received me in overalls on the back porch he shared with a rooster his granddaughter had hatched in her biology class. We went up a narrow, turning staircase to his "study," an unused bedroom strewn with books, manuscripts and papers. He directed me to sit in the only chair; he sat on an old iron bed. He talked of two novels he hoped to publish and of a critical study of Charles Dickens' works he thought he might begin in the winter. (I had just spent a month trying to finish Dickens' *Bleak House* and this 78-year-old man was blithely talking about rereading all of Dickens' 30,000 pages!)

From time to time that afternoon Frederick looked out of the window and talked with pride of the farm below. He thought it might be the only farm in Iowa to have remained in the same family since its founding in the 1850s. The great-great-grandson of the founder worked a field in the middle distance.

Often when Frederick couldn't remember something he called to his wife Lucy, who was in the next room working on a scrapbook for a grandchild. Their exchanges through the wall were warm and affectionate--the exchanges of two people used to and satisfied with each other. Although Frederick's recall was not as sharp as it had been two years before, he was so sympathetic to the project I had come to him with, and he was so helpful, that I got first hand a feeling for what it must have been like when

young authors, badly in need of encouragement and inspiration, came to him through the *Midland*.

I left the farm eager to finish my project, and I did, even ahead of schedule. I realized then that Frederick had done for me what he had been doing constantly for 60 years, and I knew why he had been able to exert such influence on so many 20th-century writers and students. Despite his age, despite his low-keyed unpretentiousness, it seemed clear to me that, very simply, he was a great man. □

COMMENTARY

In the last issue of *The Palimpsest* (January/February 1978), we incorrectly identified the Swedish Methodist church in Jefferson Township as the Swedish Baptist church. The error, for which I offer my sincerest apologies to the Reverend Charles Sloca and his congregation, occurred in the caption on page 13 of Ardith K. Melloh's article, "New Sweden."

We ask our readers to forgive this oversight.

Those many people who have expressed interest in the article will be pleased to know that the Swedish Lutheran church, built in 1860, and appearing both on the cover and on page 10, has recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

I wish you good reading.

Charles Phillips

CONTRIBUTORS

A native of Superior, Wisconsin, ANTHONY BUKOSKI earned his B.A. there from Wisconsin State University. He received an M.A. from Brown University, and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and is now completing his Ph.D. in English at the University of Iowa. His short stories have appeared in several literary quarterlies, and he has published critical articles on Jack London, and on Southern literature.

STEVE WILBERS was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He took his B.A. at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and spent a year at Vanderbilt-in-France. He received his M.A. in English from the University of Iowa, and he is now completing his Ph.D. at Iowa. Wilbers' article on the Iowa City writers' clubs is part of a longer study on the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His interest in the study was a result of his commitment to the Iowa City community, as evidenced in his service on the Iowa City-Johnson County Arts Council, his originating of the Iowa Creative Reading Series,

and his work as founding editor of *prairie grass*, a monthly newsletter funded by grants from the Iowa Arts Council and NEA. Wilbers has published articles on the Workshop in the *North American Review* and several other publications.

Born in Washington D.C., MILTON M. REIGELMAN received an A.B. in philosophy from the College of William and Mary and worked for *The Washington Post* before taking his Masters of Communication from the University of Pennsylvania. While teaching at the University of Iowa, he earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English. In 1976 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for summer study at Yale University. Presently, Reigelman teaches English and American literature at Centre College of Kentucky in Danville. Reigelman's interest in John T. Frederick is evident in his seminal study of Frederick's magazine in *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism* (published by the University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1975).



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