

Interior Life

An Iowa Farmhouse in the Late-1800's

text and illustration

by

Susan Thompson Good

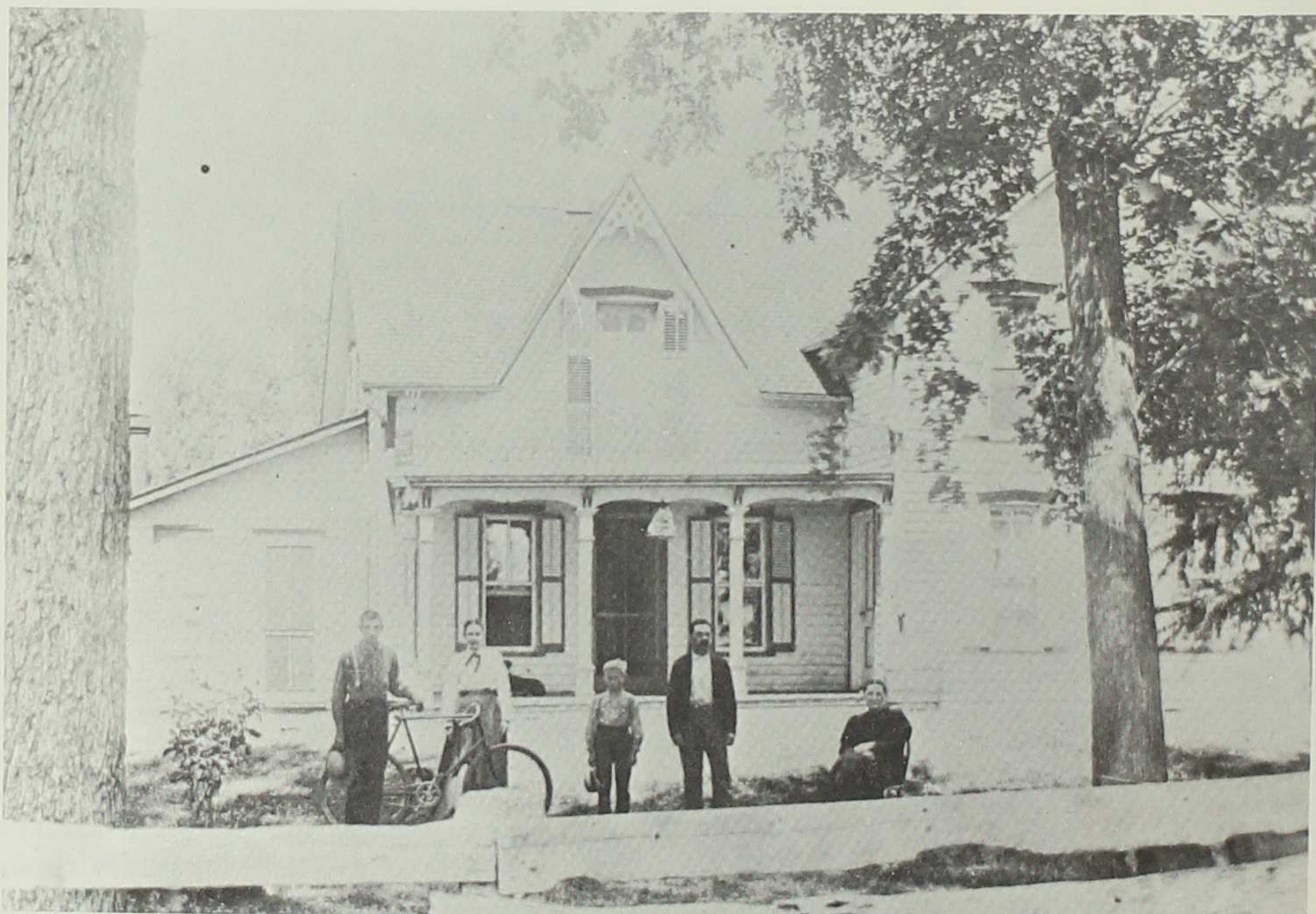
Reconstructing the history of an old Iowa farmhouse is like putting together a big jigsaw puzzle. And the first step is finding the pieces. You search through dusty county records, abstracts, and wills to find some of them. If you are lucky, you might be able to locate and talk to persons who lived in or visited the house. In magazines, builder's guides, and interior design books you find still more of the puzzle's pieces, and when these are added to the house as it stands today, the puzzle is finished. It is a picture of the house a typical Iowa farm family called home in the late 1800s.

The old farmhouse I moved into, in Pilot Mound Township, Boone County, was just such a puzzle. As I became familiar with the neighborhood, noting houses similar to mine, I began to look for the pieces and put them together. I found the first in the *History of Boone County — 1800*: Edward and Sarah Meyers built the house soon after the Civil War. In an 1898 photograph the Meyers family stands in front of their home. (Edward was nearly 70 then, and he died the next year.) Here I had my first glimpse of how the house looked almost a century ago. I interviewed Mrs. Grace Davis, great-granddaughter of Edward and Sarah

Meyers, who remembered and talked about the house and some of its furnishings. Former occupants Emma Lind and Herschel and Mildred Davis told me more. As the hours spent in libraries, the county courthouse, and neighboring post-Civil War homes accumulated, I began to feel close to Sarah and Edward Meyers, as if they were friends long absent. They had spent so many years of their lives in my house.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1828, Edward Meyers worked as a blacksmith and an ax-maker until he moved to Illinois. There he married Sarah Erdman and became a farmer and a father. He fought in the Civil War as an Illinois infantryman in 1865. After the war ended, Meyers traveled from Illinois to Iowa by covered wagon, where he selected the southeast corner of a good Iowa farm on which to build his house. About a mile north of the house-site was what the early settlers assumed to be an Indian burial mound; hence the name of the township — Pilot Mound — established in 1858.

Meyers probably started building his house when he arrived in Iowa, in 1866 or the following year. Although the land was not deeded to him until 1873, as a homesteader he was required to live on his claim and improve or build



An 1898 photograph of the Meyers family and farmhouse (courtesy of the author)

on it in order to obtain title. Sarah likely accompanied Edward to Iowa since she became pregnant with their fourth child near the end of 1866. If she and the three children did not come with him in the covered wagon, they probably arrived shortly thereafter, and thus the building of the first section of the old farmhouse was spurred on by the coming winter.

The original structure was probably quite small, but within ten to 15 years, two additions were made. Certain architectural details substantiate this speculation. Separate cellars are located under the addition and the original structure. The common wall between the two cellars still has a glass window, indicating that it was once an outside wall. Upstairs in the addition the floor level and the ceiling height are

different than in the original part. The kitchen wing probably started as a dirt-floor lean-to for firewood. Expanding over the years, the house changed symmetry and mass, responding to the family's needs and means.

The way the Meyers house grew was typical of post-Civil War house construction in Pilot Mound. The 1896 township plat marks 105 dwellings, of which 27 are still standing. Stylistic comparisons suggest that 21 of those standing were built during the Civil War or within ten years after. Families often built houses one-and-a-half stories high rather than two, because they retained heat better in the winter, and because the lower walls were less expensive. Such a house was well suited to a farmer's income, skills, and needs. It is difficult to find

the pure form of any one architectural style in these farmhouses. What you find are adaptations of a number of styles.

As builder's guide books such as Andrew Jackson Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* reached the rural population, the houses described sprang up across the Iowa countryside. The introduction of balloon-frame construction meant greater speed and economy and fewer demands on a set building form. Balloon-frame building used light-dimension lumber nailed together, as opposed to the mortise-and-tenon and pegged connections of earlier buildings. Builders took lumber for their clapboard homes from woods native to the homestead. The beams, joists, and studs of the Meyers house are walnut and hard elm, and one staircase is made of solid walnut. Small rocks, brick and mortar, and boulders as large as a yard in diameter comprise the foundation.

Popular revival styles spread rapidly — and were adapted to the means and needs of the population. The steeply-pitched gable intercepting the roof plane on the front facade, for example, shows the influence of the American Gothic Revival style on eight of the post-Civil War houses in the township, including the Meyers house. Gables on two other houses are less steeply-pitched, perhaps an indication that the style was fading out by the time they were built.

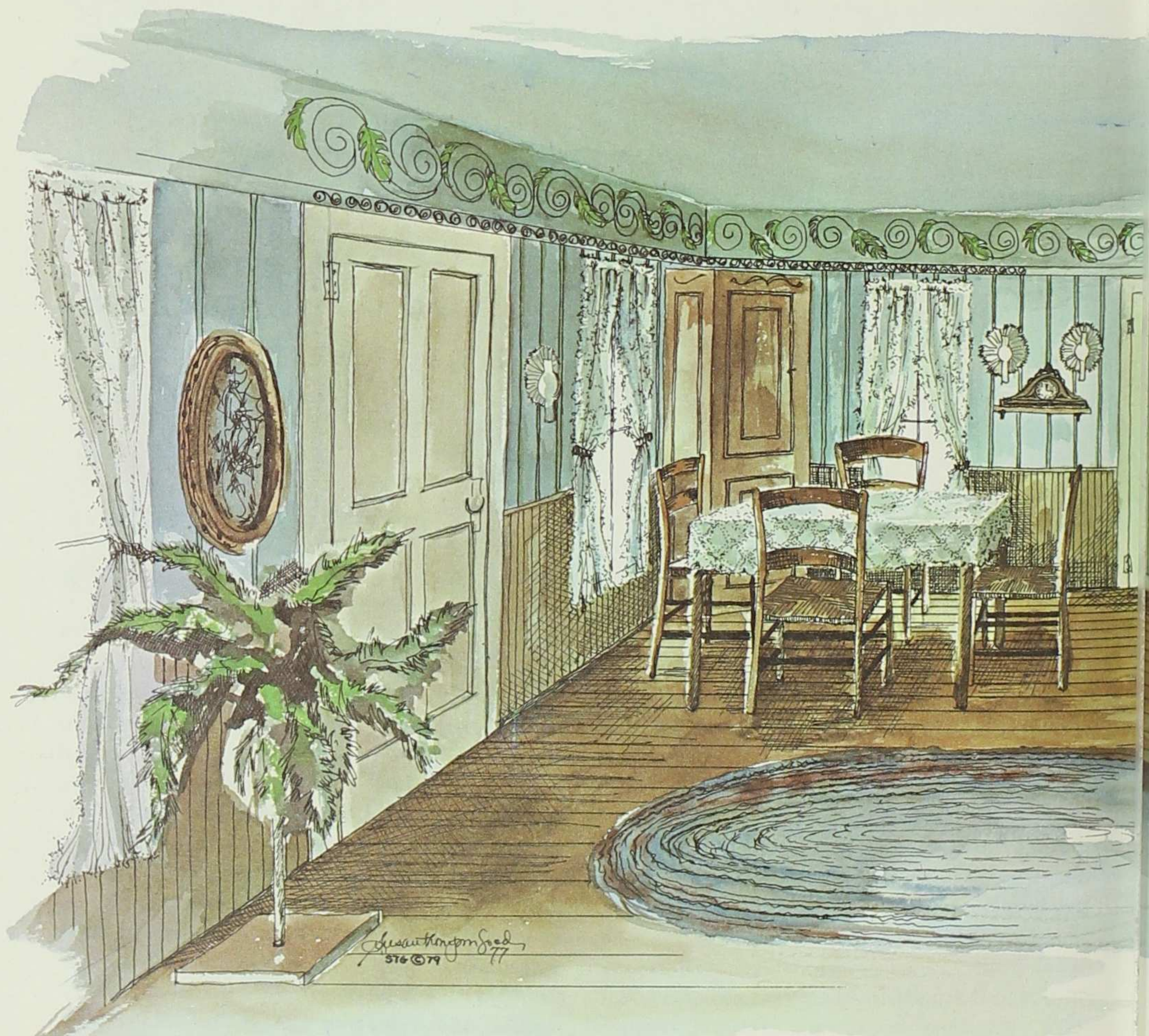
These steep gables accentuated a door, window, or set of windows. Window size and placement were similar in the Pilot Mound homes, with sash windows of four panes, like those in the Meyers house, the most common. But the earliest sections on some houses often had eight- or even 12-paned windows, probably because at the time smaller pieces of glass were cheaper and easier to get. Home builders disturbed the symmetrical placement of windows when they built a new wing or added more windows. The exterior shutters common

to 19th-century rural homes were both ornamental and functional.

The Iowa climate played a big role in determining how the builders oriented their houses. Informal or utility entrances always faced south or east. On the Meyers house, utility entrances off the kitchen wing opened to the south and the north, the south providing a warmer approach to the winter outside, but the north providing immediate access to farm buildings. The front of the house faced south, with two formal entrances leading into the dining room and the parlor.

Porches served important functional and social purposes for the post-Civil War dwellings. Most of the house plans followed an "L" or "T" shape, with the porch located at the leg of the "L" or "T." Several houses had two porches. As soon as the farmer met basic needs, the family sought to express its interest in "styles." Family members chose ornamental millwork or gingerbread from the catalogs, and added them — perhaps in several stages as time and money permitted. They generally added most of their ornamentation, like turnings and scrollwork, to the porch. The iron railings around the edge of a porch roof, like those on the Meyers home, may have served both functional and aesthetic purposes, since mattresses and other bedding were often aired on the porch roof. By the late 1800s the typical farmhouse, beginning as a one-and-a-half story, four-room home, had grown to include a one-story kitchen wing and another major addition of four or five new rooms. As the decades passed, the home builders added exterior ornamentation. The final result was a house that provided more space for a growing family and pleased the owner's aesthetic sense.

While the exterior of the house may tell us how the farm family adapted popular styles to its pocketbook, the interior of the house hints at the family's changing needs. A floor plan was never really planned at all. It just happened — as the family grew and as its way of life changed.



Downstairs, the original core of the house generally consisted of one large room and one or two small rooms serving as a pantry and a bedroom. Upstairs was a large sleeping room. All other activities — cooking, eating, visiting, relaxing, working — took place in the large room downstairs. As the family expanded, so did the house. A lean-to kitchen was added, new bedrooms and a new living area were built on, and

the original living room perhaps became a dining room. Such gradual, unplanned growth often sacrificed privacy, since access to one room meant walking through another. Hallways were rare.

A good eye for structural contrasts and different carpentry techniques can help date when and how the interior of the house changed. But to recreate the actual rooms — to



Dining room, 1883-98

sense the color, texture, warmth, light and space — demands more than observation. My watercolors grew out of interviews with former occupants, research in late 19th-century interior design, and my own attempts to imagine the probable interior settings in the Meyers home of 1883-98.

In the Meyers' original structure, Sarah cooked the meals and her family ate them in the same room — the only sizable downstairs room. The lean-to kitchen, added later, would not have been the bright, spacious hub of family activity we now think of as a typical farmhouse kitchen. As my watercolor shows, the Meyers kitchen was simple and utilitarian, measuring a long and narrow nine by 16 feet (see cover).

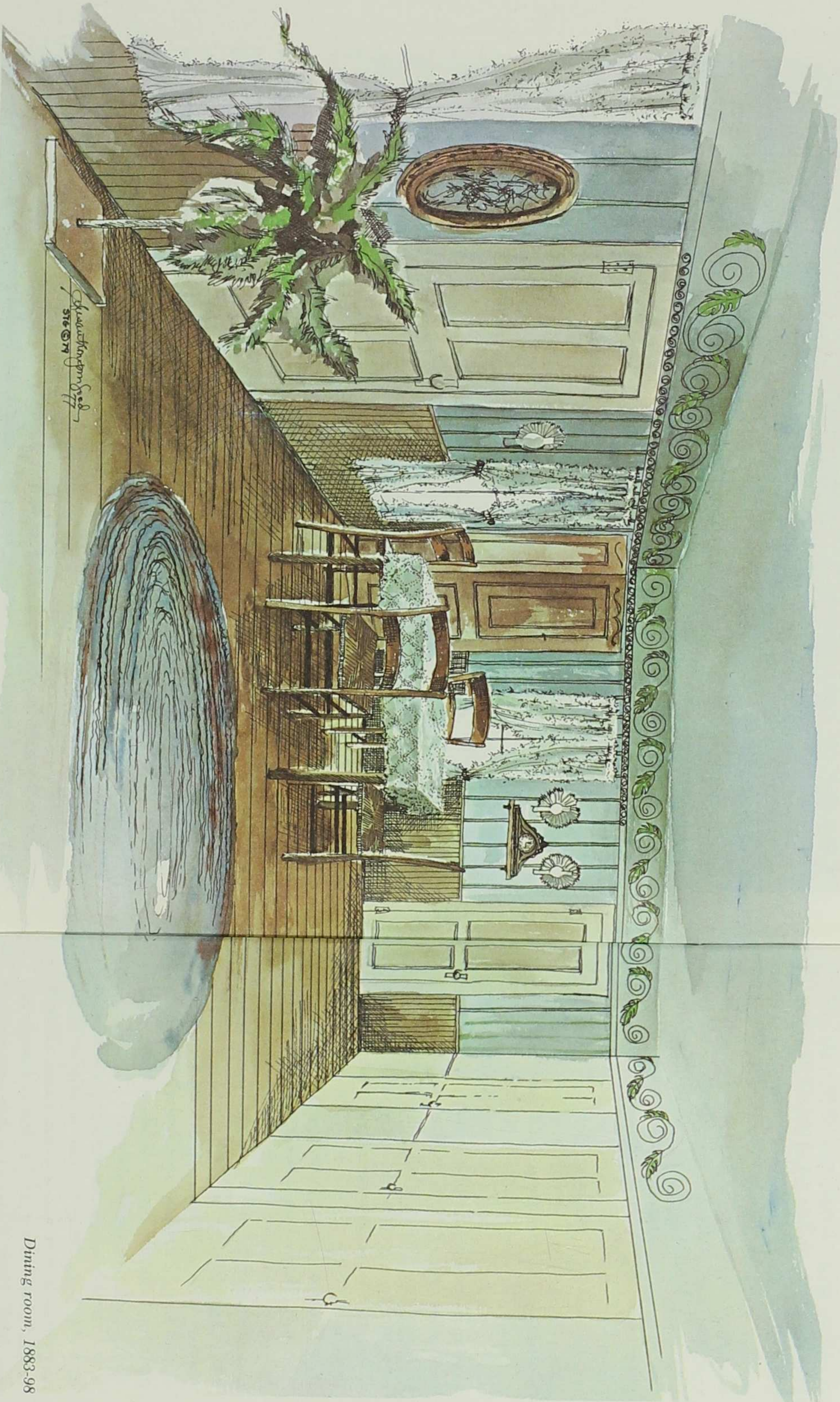
Although doors or windows on three sides of the kitchen provided more than adequate ventilation, lingering cooking odors were an ever-present problem. The walls were plastered and painted, so grease and soot could be scrubbed off easily. The kitchen floor was undoubtedly built of the same five-and-one-half inch hardwood boards found in the other rooms of the house. Upkeep involved periodic scrubbing, oiling, and waxing.

The only available source of heat was the cookstove, fueled by the woodbox nearby. During the winter months the cookstove was moved into the dining room to keep the water in the reservoir from freezing. The various occupants of the house continued this practice into the 1920s.

The pantry off the dining room was used for cold food storage and kitchen supplies. With its window on the north side and the door normally closed, the pantry must have been quite cool. If the late 19th-century homemaker had an icebox, it was generally not located in the kitchen but adjacent to it in a pantry. But if Sarah Meyers owned an icebox, it probably would not have fit into her small pantry.

The four-spindle chairs with stretchers, known as rodbacks or kitchen chairs, and the simple table might have been made by a local joiner from woods on the homestead. This type of chair — often of pine — was also manufactured in Des Moines, Iowa around 1875.

The pine dough tray in the far corner of the kitchen was typical of the dough boxes found in



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The pine dough tray in the far corner of the kitchen was typical of the dough boxes found in

farmhouses before the turn of the century. Dough was stored inside the box and kneaded on the outside. If the dough box had legs, they were often lathe-turned and angled out from the tray to provide firm support for the farm wife's vigorous kneading.

Kitchen furniture was made to be useful and, as the cabinet on the north wall of my painting shows, it often lacked distinguishing features. Cupboards, like the one here, rested on the floor, and were sometimes called jelly or jam cupboards or servers. Made from pine, maple, cherry, or other local woods, the surface was used for food preparation. Cooking utensils and other supplies might have been stored inside or in the corner cabinet in the dining room. Flour bins, dry sinks, and pie safes were also popular in farm kitchens, but the size of Sarah Meyers' kitchen probably limited her to only one or two of these.

The furnishings and treatment of the dining room (p. 38), a center of family meals and entertainment, were more sophisticated than those of the stark kitchen. By 20th-century standards, however, they would still be considered simplistic and utilitarian. If she had time, Sarah may well have gotten the idea of wallpaper friezes or borders from leafing through issues of the 1890s *House Beautiful*. The friezes were designed to accentuate high ceilings, rather than low ceilings like the Meyers', but they nevertheless used such a border in their home.

The wallpapers I chose to paint stylistically represent some motifs of the period. Stripes were popular in dining rooms, and borders often combined swirls or scrolls with leaf forms. Against the wallpaper, Sarah hung an oval-framed painting and a clock on a shelf. Edward Meyers later listed these two items in his will, so they were probably of value to the family.

Another common wall treatment in post-Civil War houses was wainscoting. Wainscoting was a wood paneling brought from the floor

to a height of two or three feet, often separated from the wallpaper or painted plaster by a light wood molding. If the paneling was of a fine wood, it may have been oiled or varnished, but often the wainscoting was painted to harmonize with the wall above it. Frequently used in kitchens and dining rooms, wainscoting was less monotonous than an entire room of floor-to-ceiling wallpaper. It protected the wall "from contact with chairs and careless fingers, which generally disfigure delicately tinted paper-hangings," according to Charles Eastlake in *Hints on Household Taste*, 1898.

The dining table and chairs might have been made by a local joiner, but more likely they were mass-produced and purchased through a mail order catalog. Meyers' black walnut table with four leaves had slightly turned or tapered legs, in keeping with the current style. The chairs shown, with tapered legs, may have been part of the walnut set. The Hitchcock style, a two-slat chair of maple and birch with a rush seat, dates from about 1840-60. Sarah Meyers or a relative probably made the linen tablecloth and rag rug. The simple corner cupboard was straight-lined and possibly built of pine or walnut. Constructed locally or purchased from a catalog, such pieces often had glass fronts for displaying dishes. Others were even simpler, with open shelves.

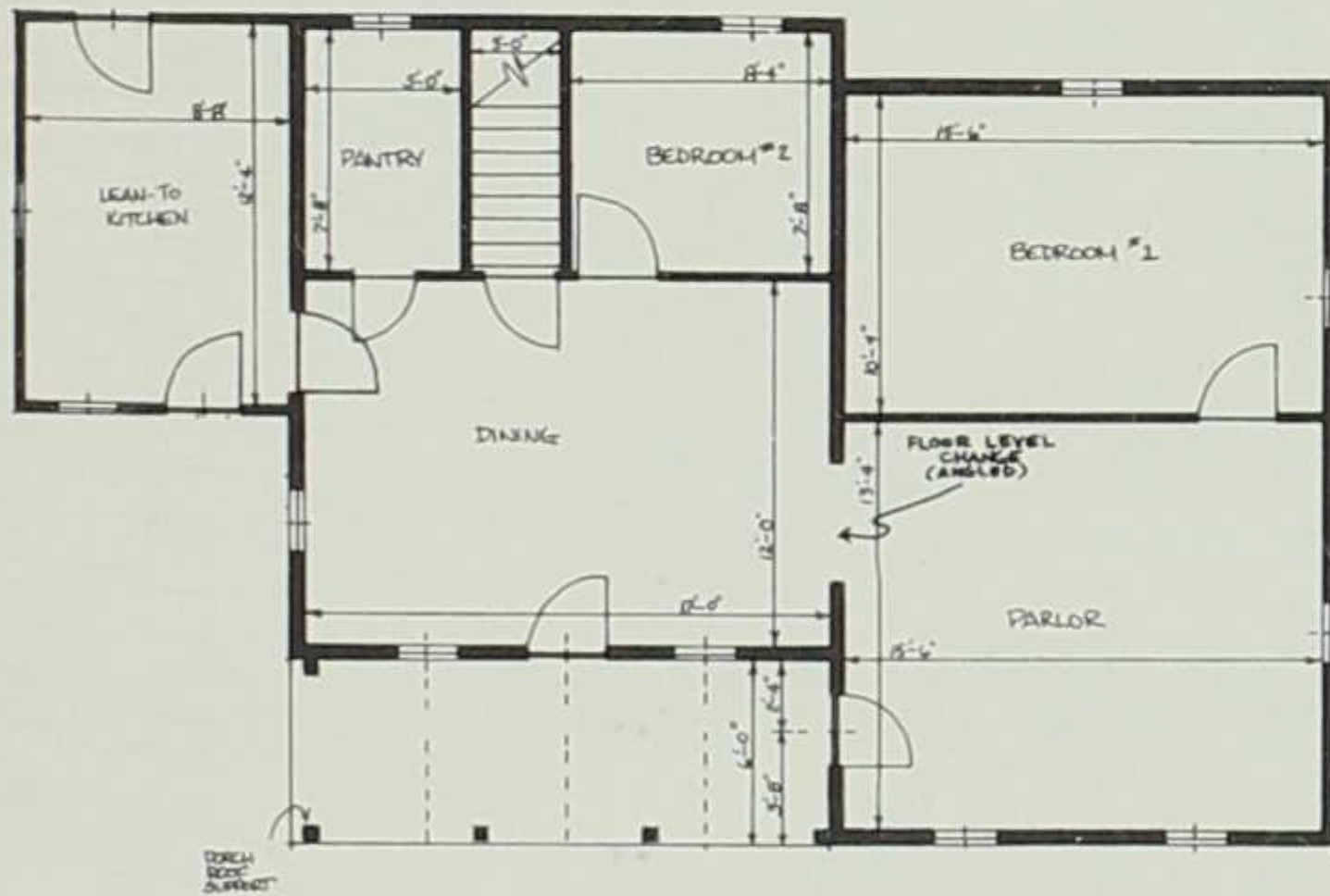
Oil lamps hung on the walls to provide light at night, but during the day muslin or Swiss lace curtains, common in every room, allowed much light to enter. In *The House Comfortable*, 1892, Agnes Bailey Ormsbee commented that, "Few rooms are well-lighted enough to bear dark heavy curtains, and the general use of these, except in rooms exposed to severe winds, gives a gloomy, morose effect to the home." Certainly the massive swags and valances of the Victorian drapes of the period that hung in the well-to-do urban homes were more energy-conserving in the winter. But the tall, narrow windows of a farmhouse demanded a window treatment less ponderous, and the

Swiss lace curtains, in which a few well-defined patterns were worked in a sturdy cotton thread, added the finished look these small, sparsely-furnished rooms needed.

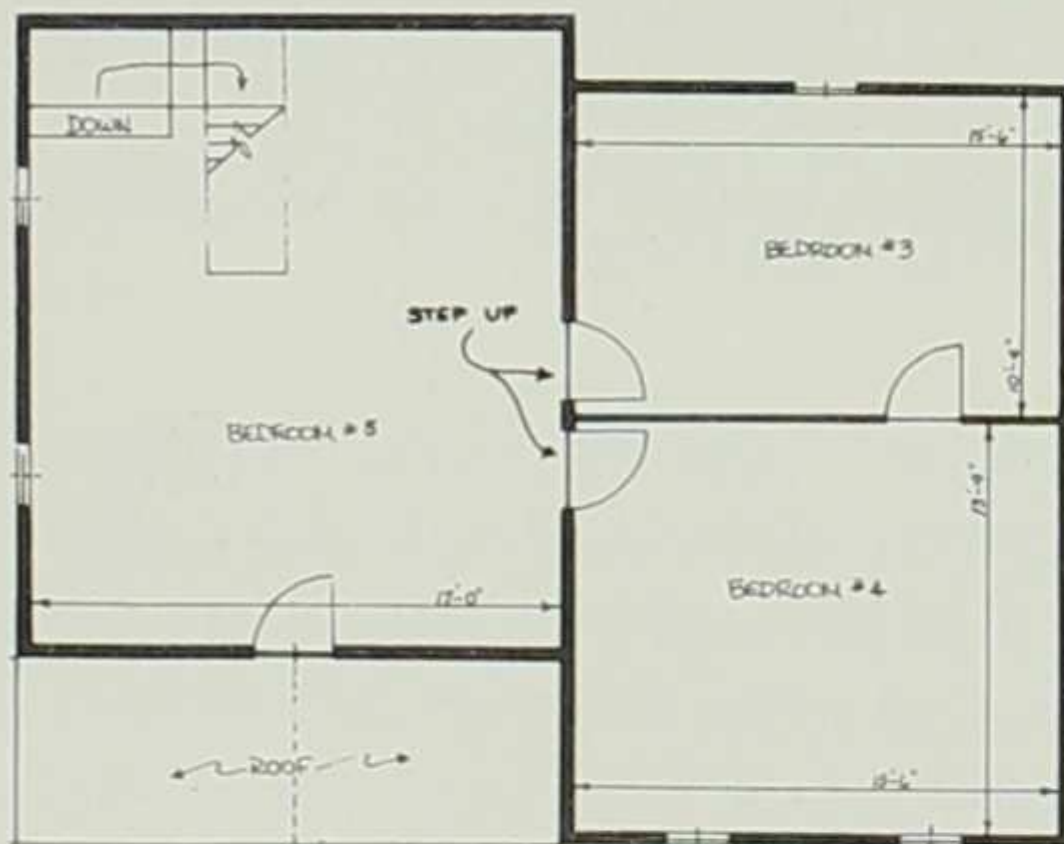
Adjacent to the dining room is an unusually small bedroom — approximately eight by seven feet (p. 47, top). If Edward Meyers ever hired a farm hand from time to time, this small bedroom may have served as his private quarters. Nineteenth-century farm families often provided room and board to hired hands. It is also possible that the room belonged to Daniel, the youngest child, born in 1878. The room I imagined and painted is the child's bedroom.

Because this room was visible from the dining room, Sarah Meyers probably took special care to make it attractive, perhaps by choosing a delicately printed blue-green wallpaper and a corresponding border. The crib was typical of many types of spool furniture made from 1815 to 1880. Spool turnings were used to make the legs and side spindles of the crib. Midwestern spool furniture was made from maple, walnut, cherry, cottonwood, poplar, and occasionally, mahogany. Sometimes these woods were given a natural finish, but the soft woods were usually painted. Kept under the crib for storage, the small chest was painted in feathered shell-like patterns of vivid green, brown, red, and yellow.

Lacking inside bathrooms, the homeowners had to contrive other acceptable facilities. Bedrooms were generally equipped with washstands for soap and water, and a large, covered chamber pot was kept there or under the bed. The towel-bar washstand shown here closely resembles stands made by formal cabinetmakers of the 18th century. Painted or unpainted, made of pine, poplar, or whatever was available, this one was probably made in the Midwest in 1874. Placed at each side of the stand, the towel-bar was both decorative and functional. The top of this stand was similar to the one-drawer variety, although the bottom resembled the Victorian chest-of-drawers in its hardware and the notched sides forming the legs.

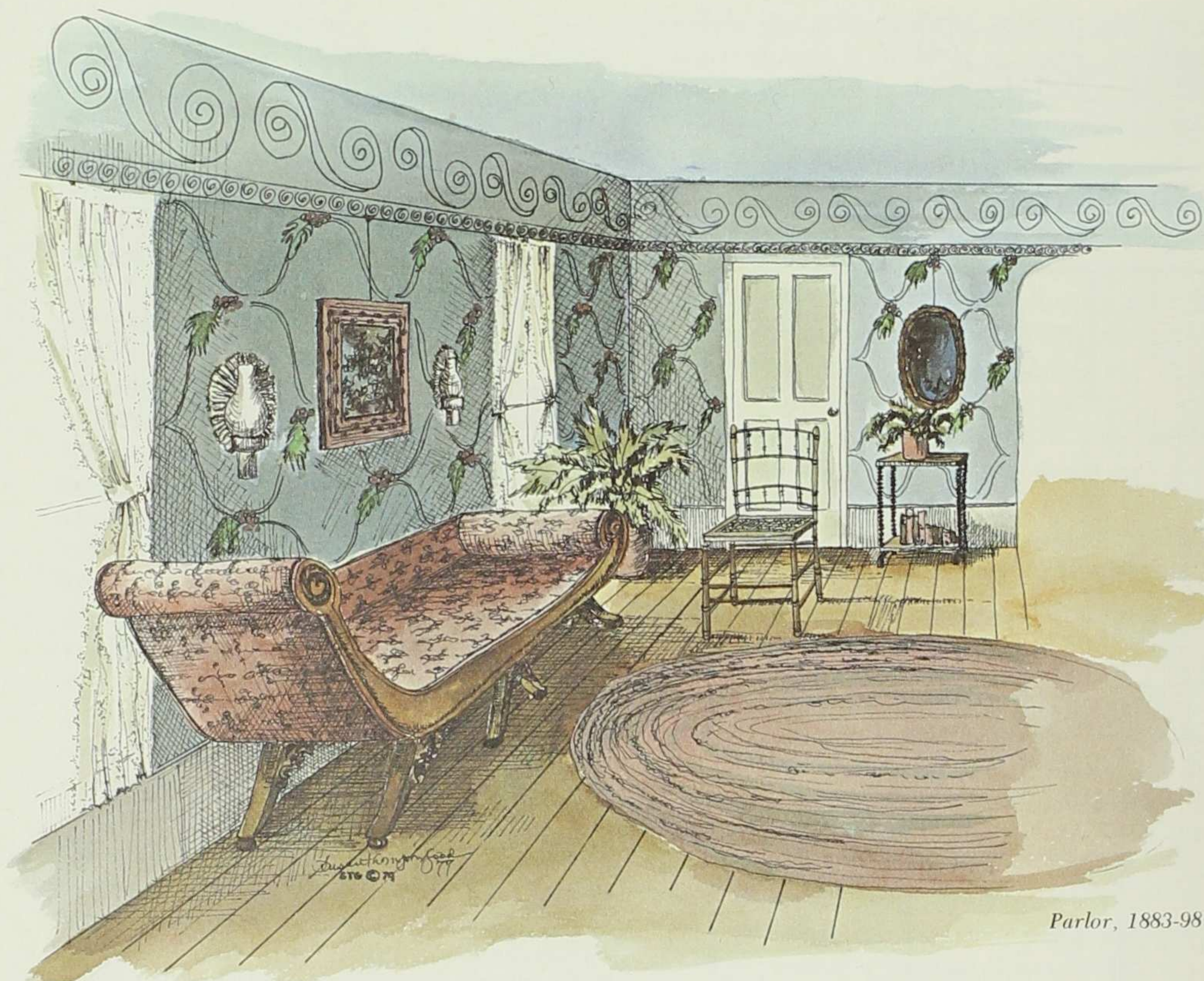


FIRST FLOOR.



SECOND FLOOR.

Meyers farmhouse floor plan (courtesy of the author)



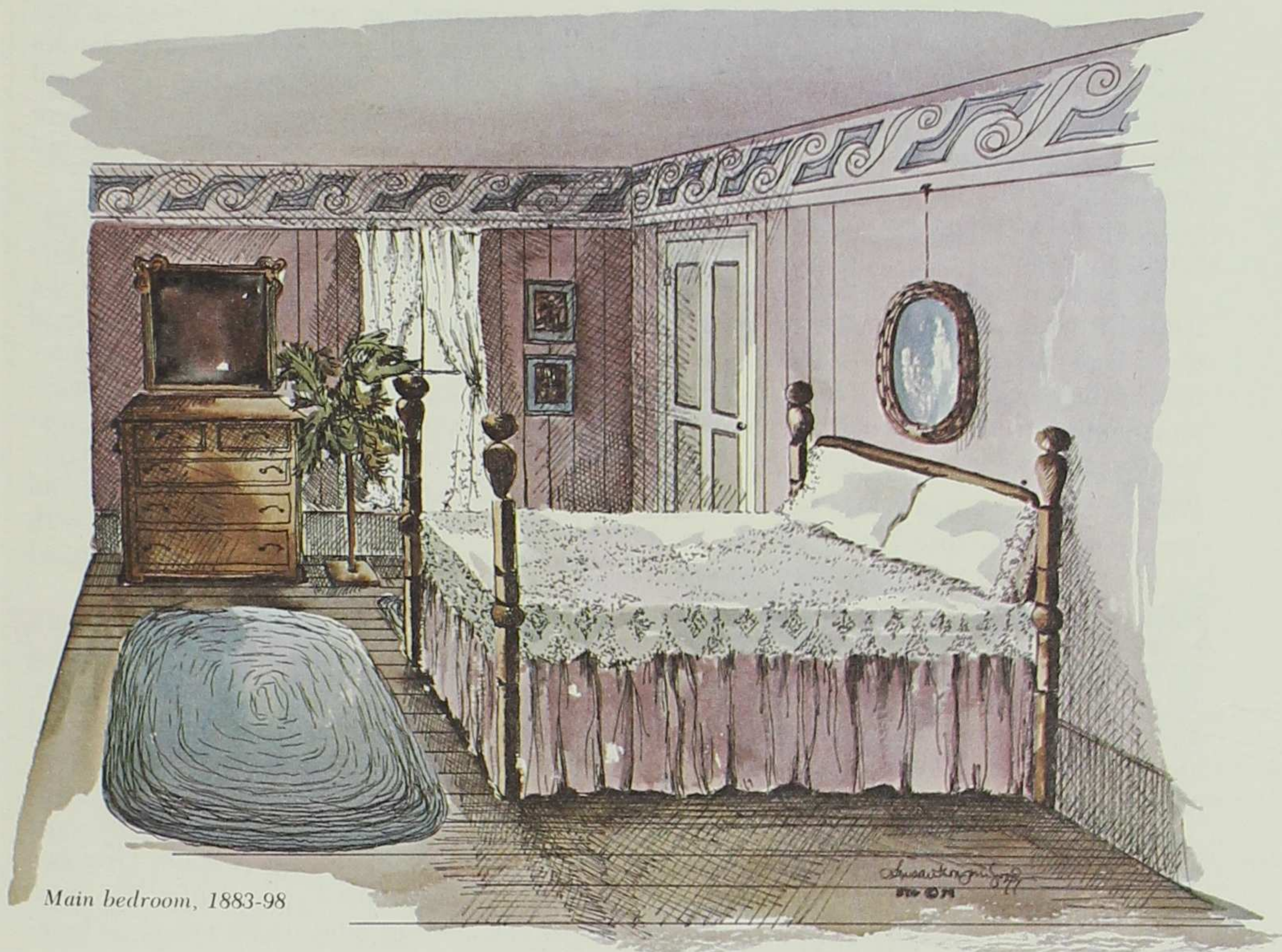
Parlor, 1883-98

When guests came to call at the Meyers farm, they were proudly ushered into the parlor (pp. 34 and 42). This room, reserved for visiting, featured the most sophisticated interior components the family could afford. Sunlight filtered in through the Swiss lace curtains in the south and east windows. The room needed ample lighting, since the popular Victorian wall colors were dark and tended to decrease the apparent size of the room. A typical parlor wallpaper is shown here — stylized leaves and grapes in the dark values of blue-green, green, and red-violet.

Wallpaper was the preferred wall treatment, although painted walls, often used in kitchens,

were easier to keep clean. Fashion dictated what patterns should be used in what rooms. Striped papers were appropriate for dining rooms, and possibly some bedrooms, but the bold patterns of leaves — “ivy, maple, crawfoot, oak, and fig leaves” — were intended for the parlor and bedrooms, according to Eastlake. Rooms with small-scale furnishings or much bric-a-brac required background wallpaper, rather than patterns distractingly decorative in themselves. Although common in the Victorian period, the tapestry and flocked papers were not likely found in the more utilitarian farmhouses.

If the Meyers owned any furniture bought in



Main bedroom, 1883-98

fancy Victorian furniture shops, the parlor would have been the place to display it. They did own a settee similar to the one shown here — an Empire settee of carved walnut, upholstered in a deep rose fabric, possibly brocade. Rocking chairs were common parlor furnishings. Popular styles of the period 1860-80 were the Gooseneck, Fiddleback, the platform, and the Victorian caned rocker. A Victorian fancy chair might also have been chosen (p. 42). Quite simple in line, it was painted black with gold leaf designs, bamboo turnings, a caned seat, and a birdcage back. A style popular between 1840-80, such a chair might have been brought from Illinois by the Meyers to

their new life in Iowa. A typical example of 19th-century spool furniture is the spool table in the west end of the room. Spool furniture evolved as factories stopped slicing and drilling holes in the turned lengths of wood for buttons and started using the uncut sections for furniture legs.

Another chair chosen for the parlor could have been the ladder-back (see p. 34). This double-stretched chair had legs with shaped feet, a feature typical of those made in the Midwest. The arms curved gently and the seat was made of rush. As the ladder-back style became characteristic of the country furniture maker, the back of the chair gradually lowered.

After the mid-19th century, most ladder-backs had only two slats and no turnings at all. The curly-maple slant-front desk was probably of rural origin, because of the turned legs and hardware. The 19th-century slant-front desk followed the same general style as 18th-century desks, except that the inside became plainer and the small drawers and dividers lacked decorative carpentry.

The parlor was the Meyers' best room. They lighted it with oil lamps and homemade candles. They heated it with a stove centered against the north wall. They played gay tunes on a pump organ they kept mostly for entertaining the guests for whom the room was furnished.

Sarah and Edward's bedroom was adjacent to the parlor (p. 43). Long and narrow, its atmosphere undoubtedly was the most cheerful of all the bedrooms because of windows on two sides. They probably spent considerable time choosing the furnishings and deciding on the treatments for this room because it was visible from the parlor. By comparison, they probably treated the children's bedrooms upstairs — separate from the living and entertainment areas of the home — much more simply.

The advent of mass production, with its standardized construction methods, changed the style of beds and all other furniture. Two standard, mass-produced beds were the high-post and the low-post. Most country home owners chose the low-post, because it was cheaper and would fit well in the one-and-a-half story home, whose ceilings were too low and slanted to accommodate the high-post bed. The bed shown here had shaped knobs on the posts of the headboard and footboard, representing a variation of the cannonball bed. A popular style in farmhouses after 1830, the bed might have been constructed of maple, butternut, or ash cut from the homestead, with dif-

ferent parts made of different woods. Slats may have supported the mattress, although lacings or ropes were still used as late as 1900. Sarah's touch possibly extended to a hand-crocheted bedspread and pillow sham. Dust ruffles were made of various fabrics, from a finer damask to a less expensive cotton.

Bedroom closets were absent from 19th-century farmhouses, so clothing and blankets were stored in trunks tucked away under the beds or in larger chests. Frequently made of pine, oak, or maple, these Victorian country chests usually had four drawers with the smallest at the top. Wooden knobs with cast iron keyholes were standard, although more decorative metal pulls were introduced near the end of the century. A wood-framed mirror with modest carving at the top and bottom topped the chest illustrated here.

The walls are papered in a delicate stripe of a high value mauve and a wide, stylized border of mauve and dusty blue. As in the other rooms, homemade area rag rugs covered the hardwood floor. Floor boards of the post-Civil War farmhouses were frequently five-and-one-half or six inches wide, although narrower boards show up in newer additions. Agnes Bailey Ormsbee advised in *The House Comfortable*: "The most healthful flooring is the hardwood, or its hum-

Note on Sources

The principal sources for this article are Andrew Jackson Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1866); Henry J. Kauffman's *The American Farmhouse* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1975); Ralph and Terry Kovel's *American Country Furniture 1780-1875* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965); and Marcus Whiffen's *American Architecture Since 1780* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1969). Much information about the Meyers house was gathered in interviews with Grace Davis, Herschel and Mildred Davis, Emma Lind, and Pauline Thorngren. In studying similar post-Civil War farmhouses in Pilot Mound Township, the author also interviewed Roy and Caroline Caldwell, Marvin and Mabel Crouch, Dale Fairchild, Gladys Johnson, Bert and Florence Lundberg, Lieuvern Pearson, and Bessie Zunkel. A fully annotated version of this article is on file at the Division of the State Historical Society in Iowa City.

bler relation the painted or stained floor. They do not get full of dust and moths, and are readily cleaned. They remove the heaviest load from the semi-annual housecleaning, while after contagious illness they do not need special fumigating."

The addition provided two new bedrooms upstairs for William, Lydia, Mary, and Henry, the four oldest children. However, they could reach neither without going through the original bedroom at the top of the stairs. The arrangement's lack of privacy resulted directly from the haphazard development of the house, from its being built in increments, according to necessity, rather than by plan.

With its only window facing north, the north bedroom (p. 46) received little light. The walls of this room were originally a low value green. They may have been painted this color, or, in keeping with a common practice, the plaster may have been saturated with the color and then applied to the walls. Dull green, gray, blue, and mauve were common. Due to the inexperienced application of the plaster, probably by the Meyers themselves, the wall surface was very rough and the plane unlevel.

Probably an heirloom, the pine chest located on the south wall of the room, used for blanket storage and sometimes called a dower chest, was typical of those made about 1830. Perhaps the Meyers brought it with them when they traveled to Iowa. The styling was reminiscent of earlier Chippendale chests. The lid, which overhung the top, was usually attached by a wrought-iron hinge. A single wide board made up each side, and the joints were dovetailed. The keyhole in the center of the chest required a metal inset. This type of chest had no drawers, but on the inside a till could be moved from side to side. The base was plain or simply scalloped. The earlier chests in this style had ball

feet; the later ones had the bracketed feet of the Chippendale style.

The one-drawer spool table against the north wall of the room was a piece often used in a bedroom or living room. Generally, the earlier spool-turned pieces of 1815-40 had glass pulls. The metal hardware on this one suggests that the pull was probably a replacement. The small day bed was another variation of the cannonball bed.

The south bedroom (p. 47, bottom) faced the front of the house, and its two windows on the south provided a satisfactory amount of light. The most prominent piece of furniture in the room was the bed, a version of the Jenny Lind style. Meyers' spool-turned bed had rounded corners at the headboard and footboard, dating it after 1850. This feature distinguished it from the true Jenny Lind, which had sharp corners.

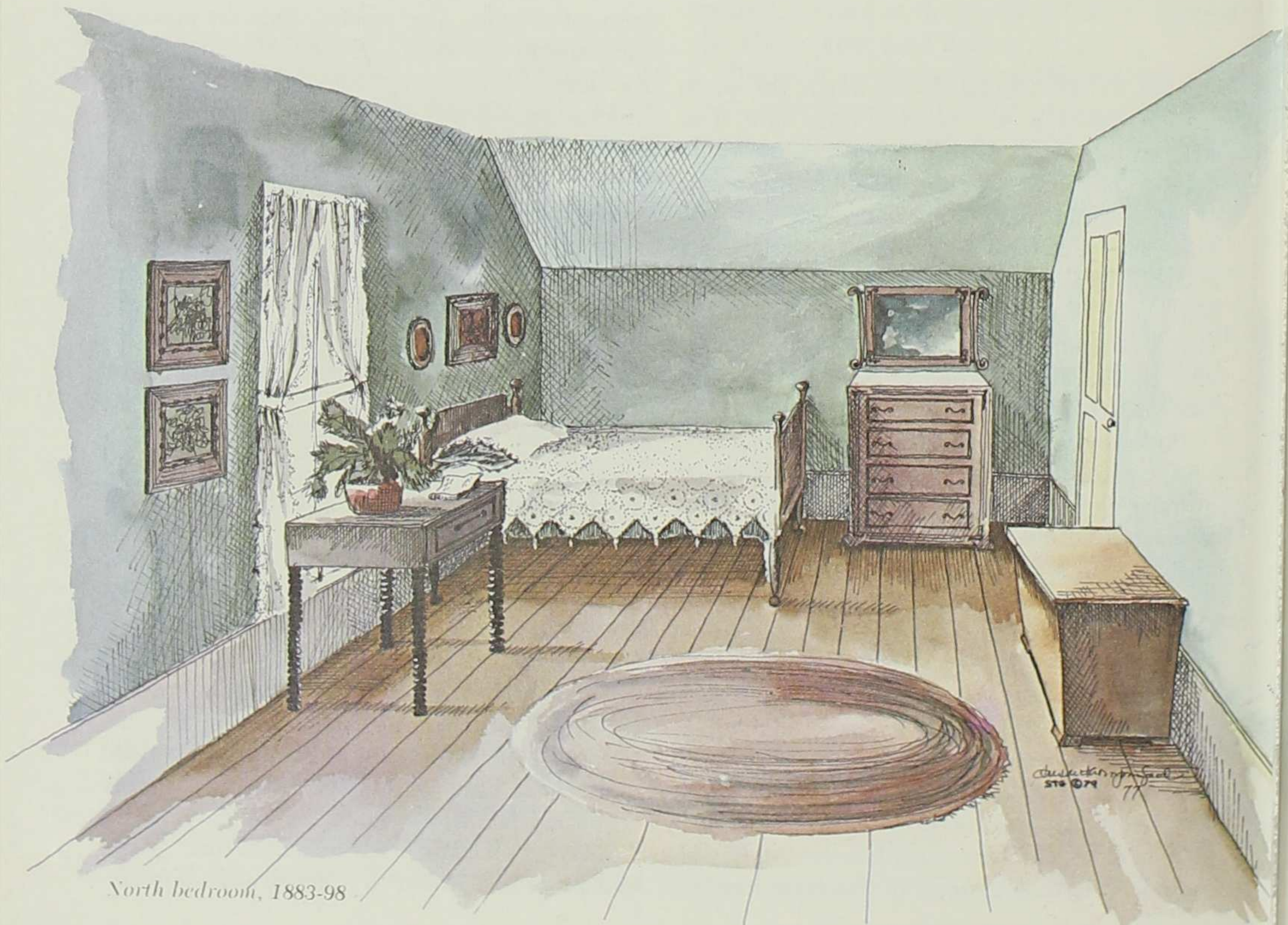
Immigrants on their ocean voyages to America often used trunks like the one at the foot of the bed, and then turned them into storage space in their new homes. The towel-bar washstand in this room was made after 1850. The shelf held the bowl and pitcher, and the drawer below held towels. The wooden knob on the bedside spool table dates this piece later than the nearly identical one in the north bedroom.

The plain wooden knobs, simple lines, elaborately cut apron, and local wood of the chest-of-drawers indicates it was made by a country furniture maker or joiner. Before the mail order catalogs offering low-priced, mass-produced pieces reached the farmer, his furnishings were often dependent on the skill and tools of the local joiner. The more elaborately equipped furniture maker might have had a foot-powered lathe with which to turn maple bed posts and walnut or cherry table legs.

The third bedroom upstairs was part of the original structure. By far the largest room in the house, it measures 17 by 21 feet. But the story-and-a-half construction and the gable over the front porch meant a ceiling interrupted by slopes and angles.

Sarah and Edward Meyers raised their five children, their crops, and their livestock a century ago on "180 acres of improved land, nicely fenced." A century of change in America immeasurably complicates our efforts to know this family whose modest prosperity was reflected in their clapboard house in Pilot Mound Township. But the heritage of Iowa centers around

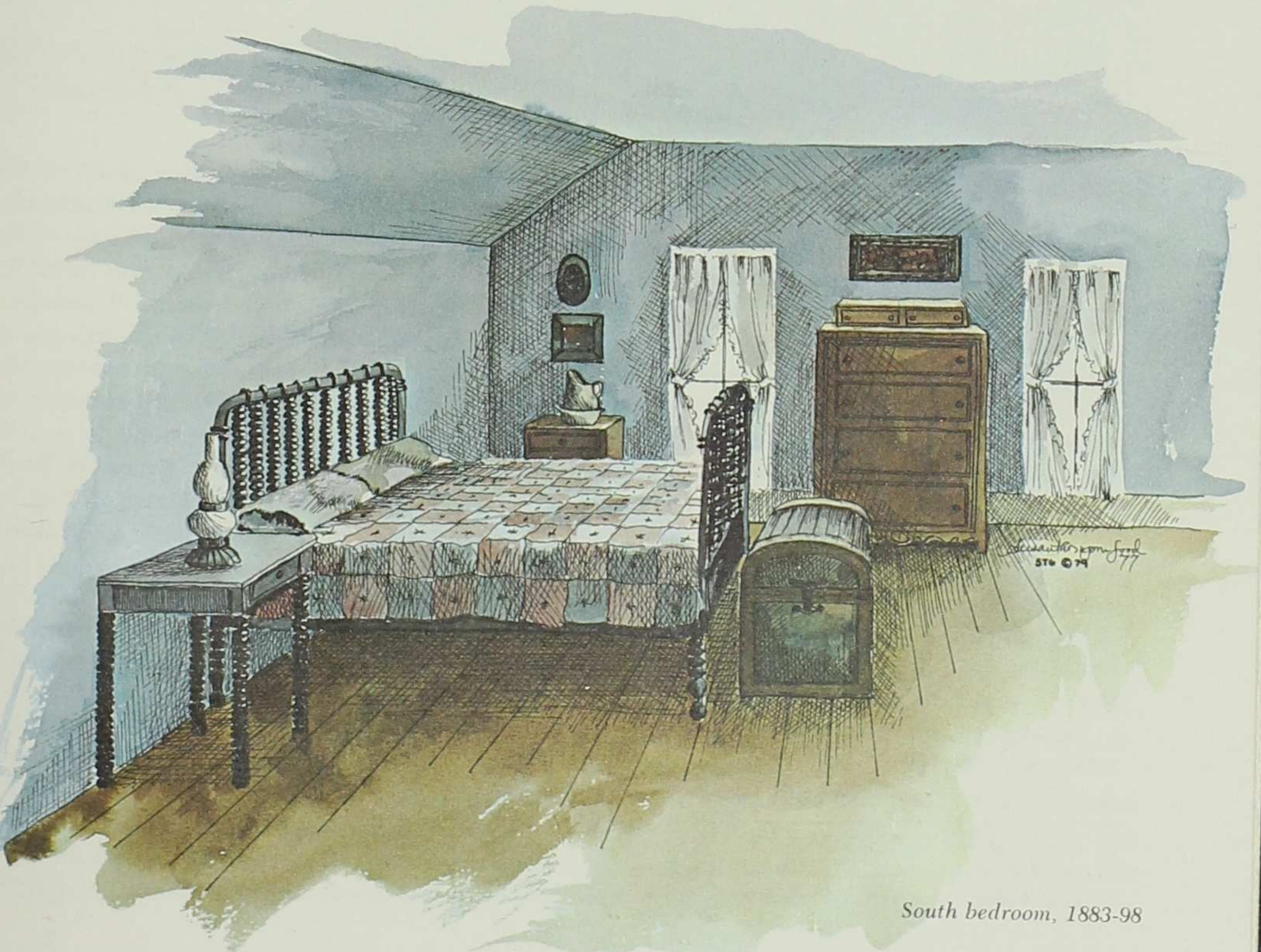
families like the Meyers. As more old homesteads are leveled to increase tilled land, more of our heritage is plowed under. The beauty and fascination of studying 19th-century farmhouses is that the architecture and design relate directly to the needs and means of the former inhabitants. The form taken by post-Civil War farmhouses in Pilot Mound Township was, in part, determined by climate, by the availability of materials, and by the level of technology. But more importantly, the form of these structures tells us much about the life these families led — their needs, their hopes, their visions. □



North bedroom, 1883-98



Child's bedroom, 1883-98



South bedroom, 1883-98