

VANISHING IOWA

An Artist's Crusade

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS

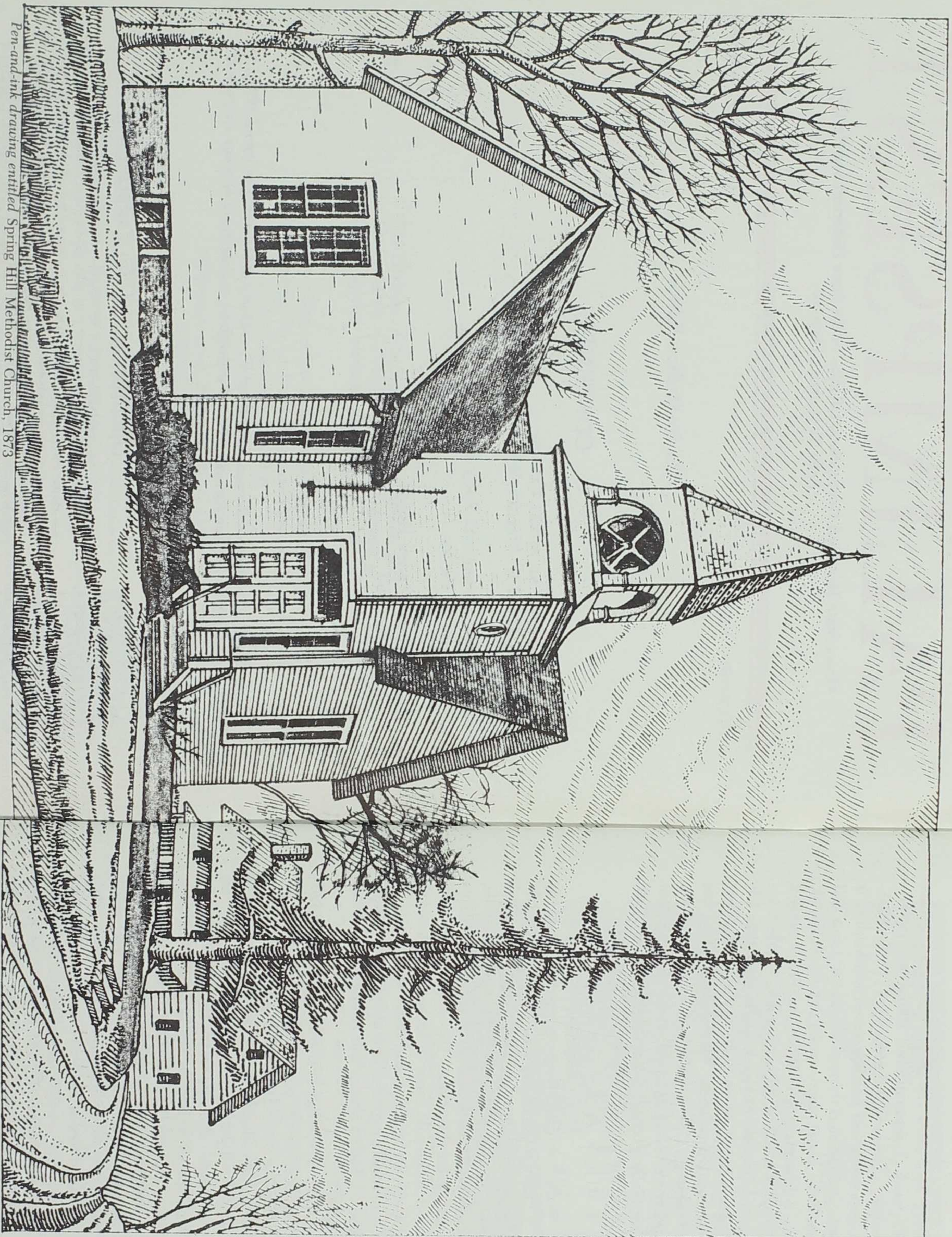
BY

Eric Lloyd D. Meyrick-Miller

In 1935, when I was 16, my father took me to see Owens Covered Bridge (1887) east of Carlisle, Iowa at its original site on North River. (It has since been relocated at Easter Lake in Des Moines.) As we drove home, we talked about the possible fate of the bridge, since it was little used. We also passed Palmyra Church (1867) just west of our home farm. We both realized that these historic structures, among the area's earliest buildings still standing, would soon be little more than memories if they were not preserved. I decided then to do my part by making an oil painting of each structure. I tried to record the architecture of each accurately. I also tried to capture the emotional mood of their settings.

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Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Spring Hill Methodist Church, 1873

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Towson State University and the Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, I returned to my ancestral farms east of Palmyra and south of Hartford, Iowa. My plans included some research, some sketching, and some farmwork. This was the land of my birth, and I have very fond memories of it. My great, great grandfather Elias Meyrick (1800-63), whose ancestors go back to the Meyricks of Bodorgan in Anglesey, Wales, came to Warren County, Palmyra Township, Iowa in 1845. He built a log cabin northeast of Palmyra, staked out land, and cleared and plowed it for the first time. His sons William Wilson and Eli—with their skills as carpenters, joiners, cabinetmakers—built many of the structures in Palmyra and Hartford including the Palmyra Church. I was on leave, but I had not left art, architecture, or history. These were all around me.

As I drove over the prairie hills from Palmyra to Indianola and Carlisle, I sensed again the boundless quality of these rolling plains. It was a rugged, honest land. The spaces were big; the sky was a huge dome. Each day as the seasons changed the cloud formations gave a new, far-away feeling to the hills, the trees, and the towns.

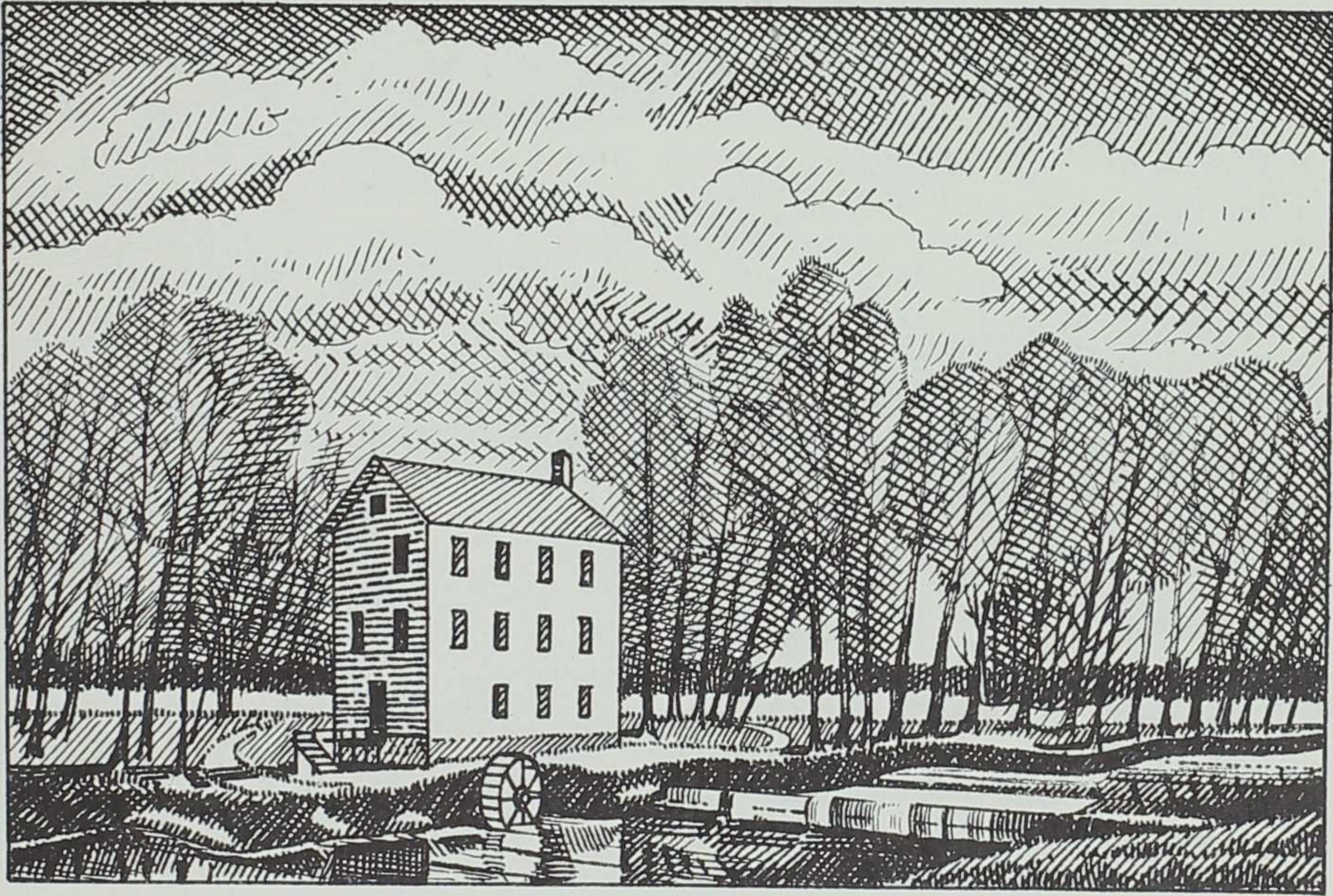
I tried to imagine these boundless plains as they must have looked when Elias Meyrick first saw them in 1845. In this part of central Iowa—12 miles southeast of Des Moines—the North, South, and Middle Rivers empty into the Des Moines River. That afternoon I drove through the area east of Carlisle and north of Hartford stopping several times to sketch and to breathe the air. That evening I made a pen-and-ink drawing of the *Land of the Three Rivers, 1842*, going back to the time of John D. Parmelee, the first pioneer settler of the region, who built the first saw mill in 1843.

I also made a couple of maps of the area to see where I had been and where I was going. The land, which had been part of my childhood and adolescence, now became part of my adult-

hood. As I drew the maps, earlier memories returned. I remembered filling my grandmother's lamps with kerosene. I recalled cutting wood for our heating stoves and hauling it on a wooden sled through the snow. I can still smell the sweet wood smoke drifting in the air on a cold winter night. When I was 13, I plowed ten acres with a walking plow and a mule team named Doc and Madge because my father felt it was very important. Now the big tractors command the fields. The walking plow has given way to air-conditioned cabs, big tires, and powerful lights for all-night plowing. But despite the change, my feeling for the land and the rolling plains remains constant.

I did not realize I was on a crusade until my former piano teacher, Louise (Richards) Pilmer, telephoned to tell me that Spring Hill Methodist Church (1873), west of Indianola, was being razed. I rushed over, taking my mother for directions. The church stood isolated in the cold snow. It looked toothless and ghostly. Its windows and doors were gone; its Centennial programs blew about in the wind. I knew I had to sketch this fading ghost immediately.

As I drove home, I reflected that these buildings, built by the pioneers, were disappearing before our eyes. My crusade began at that moment. I decided to sketch and make records of all old buildings in the immediate area—no small task—and also to try to reconstruct and draw those important landscapes, buildings, and sites that had already disappeared. My primary sources would be historical books, records, letters, pictures, photos, and newspapers as well as first-hand interviews tapping the memories of long-time residents. Just as I finished the pen-and-ink drawing of *Spring Hill Methodist Church, 1873* (pp. 2-3) Louise Pilmer called and said, "Spring Hill—it's gone." The heart of a whole community had



Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Parmelee Mill, Middle River, 1843-1880

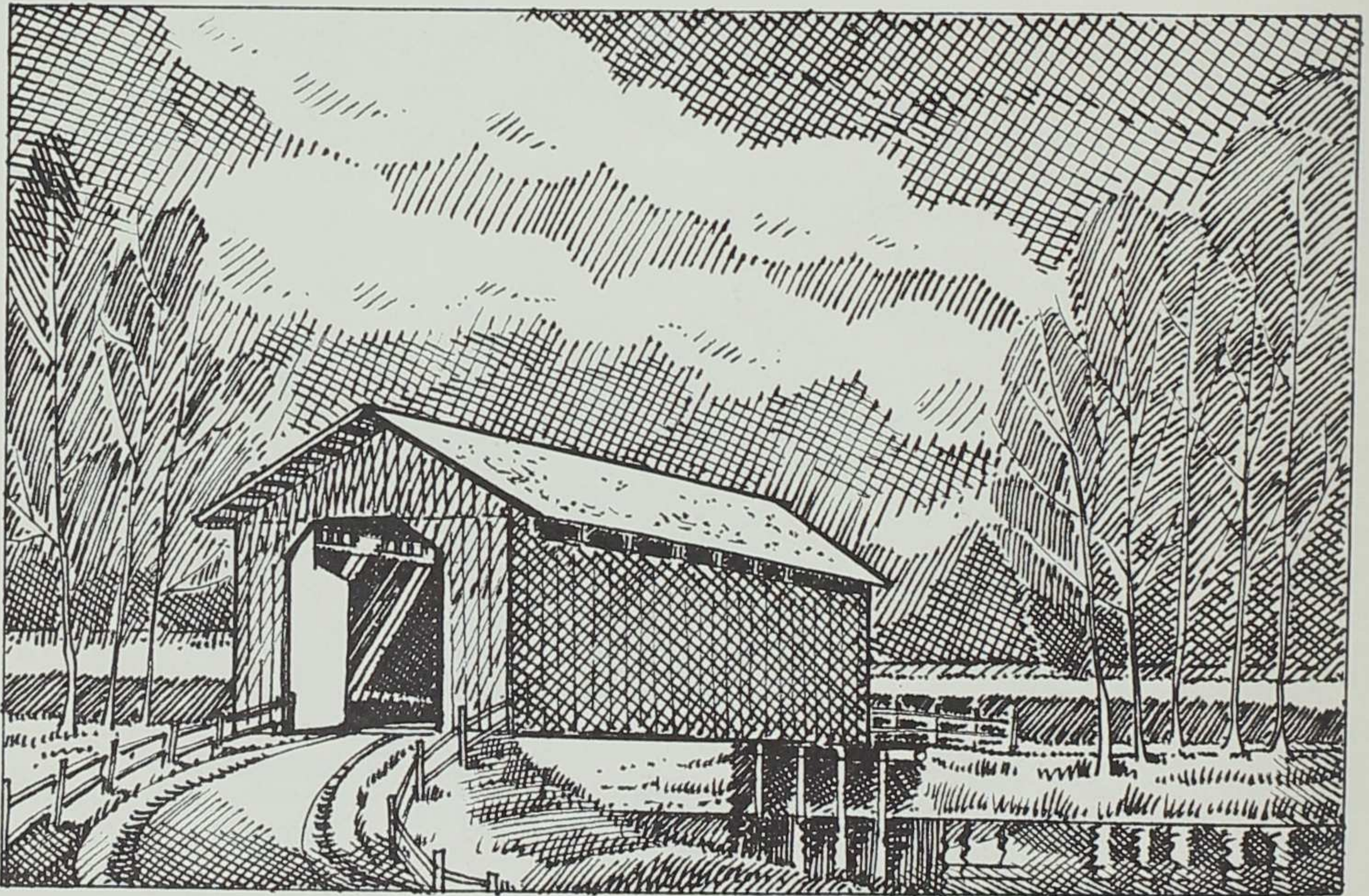
stopped, and only a few of us knew it.

The artist works with each moment as it appears. It seemed to me that this particular moment was most urgent and could not wait. I felt that black-and-white ink sketches were not only the fastest but the most direct medium to use—a clipboard with white typing paper could easily be whipped in and out of my car. I was off on a whole series of trips to find buildings, to sense the mood of various locations, to portray all of this in my sketches, and to talk to longtime residents about their vanishing heritage. I also tried to keep accurate notes on my findings. I soon discovered that, on rainy days, the Iowa State Historical Library in Des Moines was fast becoming my home.

It was about this time that I called my friend Burl Beam, a classmate and music major from Simpson College, and his brother Charles

Beam, now President of the Warren County Historical Society. I also stopped by to see Charles Ginter, librarian at the Indianola Public Library. I was beginning to seek out some friends who were able to converse in art-architectural-historical language and, at the same time, to share some of the knowledge as well as some of the frustrations and difficulties of my crusade.

My next drawing was *Parmelee Mill, Middle River, 1843-1880* (p. 5). The building is not standing. My research had begun. First, I read Jacob A. Swisher's *Iowa—Land of Many Mills*. Then I had several day-long sessions at the Iowa State Historical Library, looking at clippings and pictures of old mills. To date, no photo of the mill has surfaced; I hope one will. There may be one tucked away in an attic somewhere. My drawing is based upon



Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Owens Covered Bridge, 1887

sketches made at the site (trees, river, and landscape), written descriptions, verbal accounts, and photos of other old mills from this period.

John D. Parmelee built the mill in 1843 on Middle River, one and three-quarter miles east of Carlisle. Erected in a virgin forest of oak, maple, ash, walnut, hickory, and elm, the mill sawed lumber for the original buildings at Fort Des Moines, located at Raccoon Forks where the Raccoon River empties into the Des Moines. The mill played an important part in the settlement of Polk, Warren, Madison, and Boone counties. Parmelee added burrs for grinding grain in 1847 that saved settlers a 50-mile trip to Oskaloosa to have their grain made into flour and meal. The mill was later known as Watts' Mill after it was purchased by William and John Watts in 1860. The two men

operated it until it was torn down about 1880. A more modern mill replaced it, but the new one was struck by lightning in 1881 and burned to the ground.

Don Berry, well known for his photographs of Warren County, had tramped all over the Middle River region to see if he could establish historical sites. His article, "Where Warren County History Begins" (*Indianola Tribune*, July, 1952), gave me important dates as follows: 1843—Parmelee Mill built on Middle River; 1849—Town of Old Dudley founded by William C. Stumbo and Jerry Church; 1850—Pork House (for curing hams) built at mouth of North River, the first packing house in Polk County; 1851—Year of the Great Flood; 1880—Houses belonging to John Owens and W.W. Hartman were built. These houses were among the most unusual of the 1880s style and should have

been saved; 1887—Owens Covered Bridge built on North River.

The next day I drove to North River and made pencil sketches of the site of Owens Covered Bridge. In 1970, I had made a pastel of the bridge at its new location at Easter Lake. I combined these two ideas into my more recent pen-and-ink drawing set on the North River: *Owens Covered Bridge, 1887* (p. 6). This was the second bridge built on this site. The first one was swept away in one of the spring floods.

I began to think about architecture and its relationship to the people who had made it. I went to the little cemetery east of our farm to look at the tombstone of my great, great grandfather Elias Meyrick. I knew he had built his first house here. My next pen-and-ink drawing was the *Pioneer Home of Elias Meyrick and Lydia (Jackson) Meyrick, 1847* (pp. 10-11), northeast of Palmyra. A modern house now stands on the same spot. I made a drawing of the actual site, trying to capture the mood of the winter landscape and the sky. It was about 4:00 p.m. A half-dozen horned larks flew over the fields searching for seeds. I could look beyond the fields to the tall cedar trees that marked Hartford Cemetery. Before I left, stars began to appear as the sky darkened. I tried to capture it all. I thought Elias Meyrick must have felt the way I was feeling when he had looked at this same scene 130 years ago. Ignoring the modern house, I drew a log house, a log barn, and a rail fence in keeping with my research. I had the strangest feeling of moving backward in time. Both Elias Meyrick and his wife Lydia were reared in Maine, where they were married about 1821. His people had come from Wales; hers from England. From Maine, Elias and Lydia moved to Athens County, Ohio, and subsequently to Lake County, Indiana. Later they came to Iowa, settling first in Washington County, south of Iowa City, before moving to Palmyra. Lydia helped Elias build their pioneer home and raise their children in

the cabin shown in my drawing.

I had found an old tintype of Elias Meyrick taken when he was perhaps 40. I noted his likeness to my grandmother Fannie (Meyrick) Miller. He had the same wide cheek bones, the same firm brow, and the same strong chin of the Meyricks all the way back to Wales. Also, I had found a book belonging to Elias. It was D.P. Kidder's *The Class-Leaders Fireside: Or Home Conversations on Important Subjects*, which seemed to echo the motto of the Welsh Meyricks, "HEB DDUW HEB DDIM: DDUW A DIGON" ("Without God, nothing; God, and enough").

As I was standing in the south window of my grandmother's parlor, overlooking the hills and river beyond, I came to grips with the subject of my next drawing, *Overlooking South River from Meyrick Woods, 1845* (pp. 8-9). My great grandfather William Wilson Meyrick, son of Elias and father of Fannie, had viewed the river valley from this location in the 1840s when he arrived in Warren County with his father. I wanted to show the landscape as he had first seen it, without manmade objects or dwellings. My drawing shows the whole South River valley complex with its rolling prairie hills, its oak timber, its river willows, its lush, green vales with their meandering rivulets, and its sweet springs, for which our farms are famous. There was no question in my mind why William Wilson Meyrick had chosen Meyrick Woods as a home site.

This, then, was the subject of my next drawing—the *Pioneer Home of William Wilson Meyrick and Sarah (Leaming) Meyrick, 1849* (p. 13, bottom), east of Palmyra in Meyrick Woods. My father Elliott A. Meyrick-Miller had told me he remembered this cabin and that it was still standing about 1900. He said it was one of the few two-storied cabins in the area and that it had a lean-to on the back because the family was quite large. From my research, I



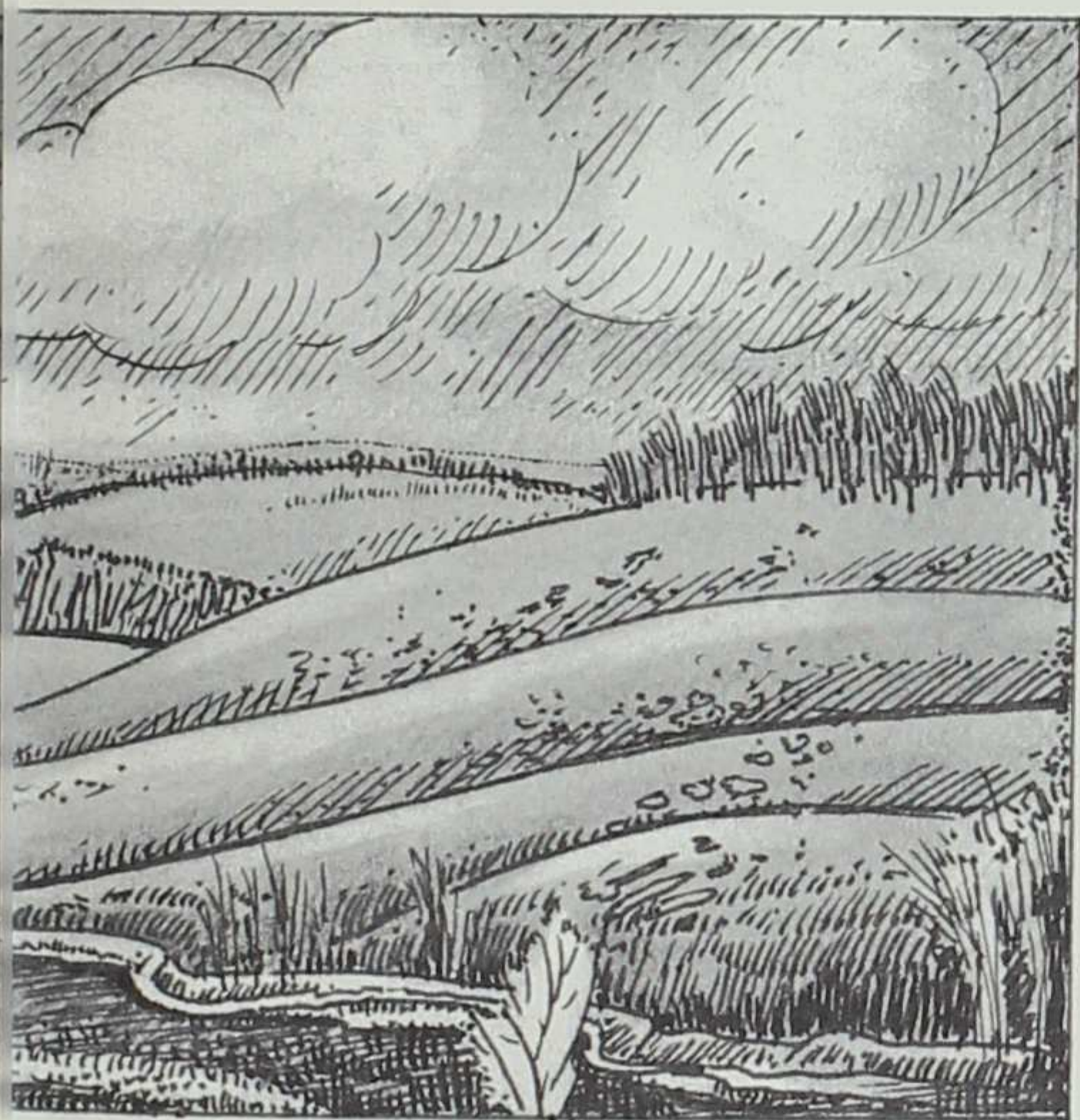
Pen-ink-and-wash rendering entitled Overlooking South River from Meyrick Woods, 1845

had discovered that the cabins of the 1840s were often built in such a fashion. There was a large stone chimney at one end. The upper story windows were high under the eaves. Born in Athens County, Ohio, William Wilson Meyrick (1823-82) had attended public schools in Ohio and trained as a cabinetmaker and carpenter. When he was about 23, he came to Palmyra and helped his father Elias build one of the first pioneer log cabins in the area in 1846. With the help of his brothers Alva, Andrew, Eli, and Perry, William built his own log cabin in 1849. That same year he married Sarah (Leaming) Meyrick (1820-90), a descendant of Roger Ludlow. Both William and Sarah Meyrick are buried in Palmyra Cemetery. Fannie (Meyrick) Miller (1868-1956), their daughter and my grandmother, was born in the pioneer home I was drawing.

My next subject, the *Goosehill School, 1850* (p. 13, top), was once located about a half mile east of Meyrick Woods. My grandmother attended school there from 1873 to 1884. Typical

of the country schools dotting the prairies of the late 19th century, it had three wooden steps leading up to its only door, a stone foundation, center chimney reaching through the roof, and two windows on either side of the building. Off to the east was the level sweep of the valley of South River, where in the springtime one can still hear the croakings of a thousand frogs. The schoolhouse, now moved to the Eugene Parson farm about one-half mile south of its original site, is used as a granary. It should be restored. One or two of the original chalkboards—wooden boards painted black—remain inside. The curriculum of the 1870s and 1880s consisted of reading, writing (fancy loops), arithmetic, physical geography (including time and weather), history, and botany (parts of flowers). My father also attended the school, later called the Parson's School, because it was near the Parson family homestead.

As I was growing up, I heard a great deal about the Palmyra School from my mother, Isa Mae (Fields) Meyrick-Miller, who was born in

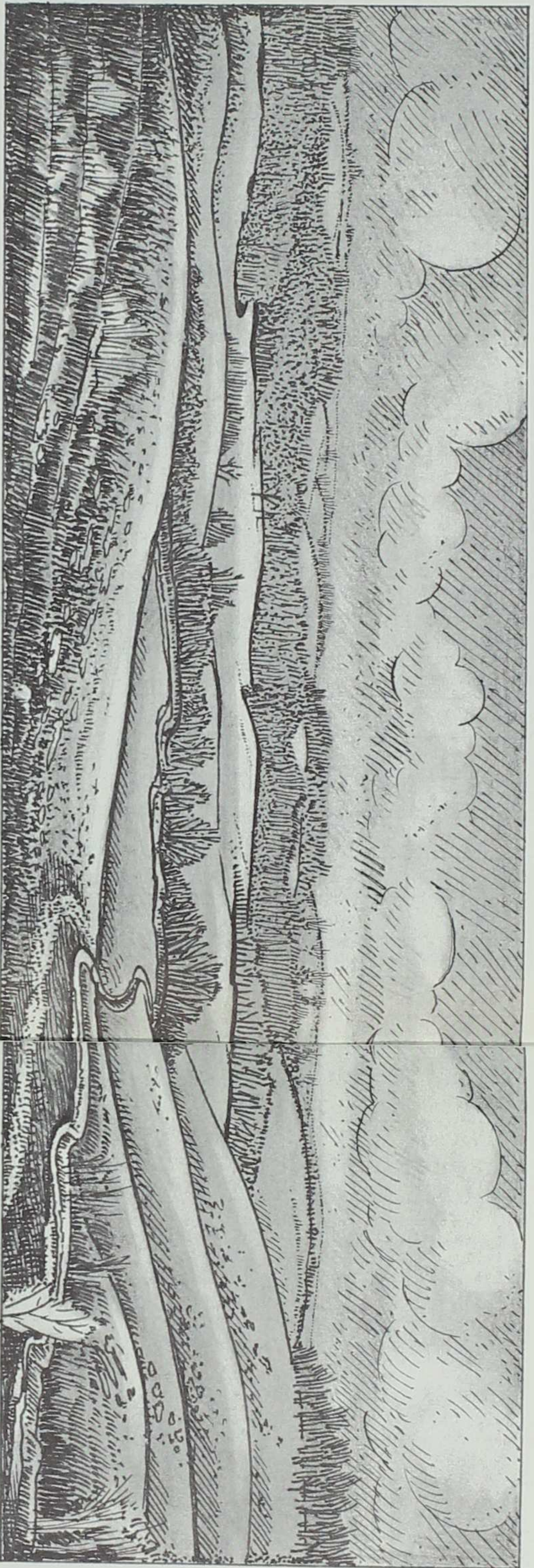


1889. After completing the course in primary education at Drake University, and after several years teaching in various schools (Sandridge, Ward, and Island Schools), she taught at the Palmyra School from 1910-12. Her 27 pupils—all in the first four grades—met in classes on the first floor of the building known as the Lower Room. The more advanced students met in the Upper Room on the second floor. This was the subject of my next drawing—*Palmyra School, 1856-1924* (p. 12)—built by my great grandfather and his brother Eli. This building was torn down in 1924. The proportions were beautiful, and it should have been saved, especially since the style was close to that of Palmyra Church. There was a single door above which were two second-floor windows and an attic window framed by indented cornices of a broken pediment. On each side of the building were four second-floor windows and three ground-floor windows. There was a cloak room on either side of the doorway as one entered the building. The frame building had

horizontal clapboards. A square bell tower with a slightly pointed roof perched in the center of a cedar-shingled roof. Beautiful maples and elms surrounded the school, and my mother spoke of the pleasant, open feeling of the space around the school. My drawing was made using a very poor newspaper photo. I added the trees and tried to achieve the open feeling Mother mentioned.

My final drawing in this series was *Palmyra Methodist Church, 1908, Frank Bean, pastor* (pp. 14-15). The drawing was made from an old photograph. It showed the church as it was originally built in 1867. I had first made an oil painting of this church in 1935; in 1940 I made a soft-ground etching; later I made many more sketches and pastels. Visually, the church meant a great deal to me. The bell tower rose high above the level fields surrounding it, giving me a distinctive emotional lift every time I saw it. It was partly that I had always known it; it was always there. I recalled the mellow tone of its English bell ringing out over the rolling fields near my home. I remembered the Christmas Eve programs, the funerals I had attended there, and the Fourth of July picnics on the lawn under the maples. Chains stretched between the trees for securing the horses. Each year I helped my grandmother prepare some 40 or 50 sprays of giant ferns, peonies, roses, and snowballs for decorating the graves of both relatives and close friends at the Palmyra and Hartford Cemeteries.

Palmyra Church is a unique but simple wooden structure with a square bell tower. Beyond a 12-foot square narthex under the bell tower one enters an open nave (38 by 58 feet) with a center aisle and a level floor. Light floods in from the east and west through five, 10-foot high arched windows on either side. Two cast iron stoves on either side of the nave near the altar originally heated the building. The master builders were William Wilson



Pen-and-wash rendering entitled *Overlooking South River from Meyrick Woods, 1845*

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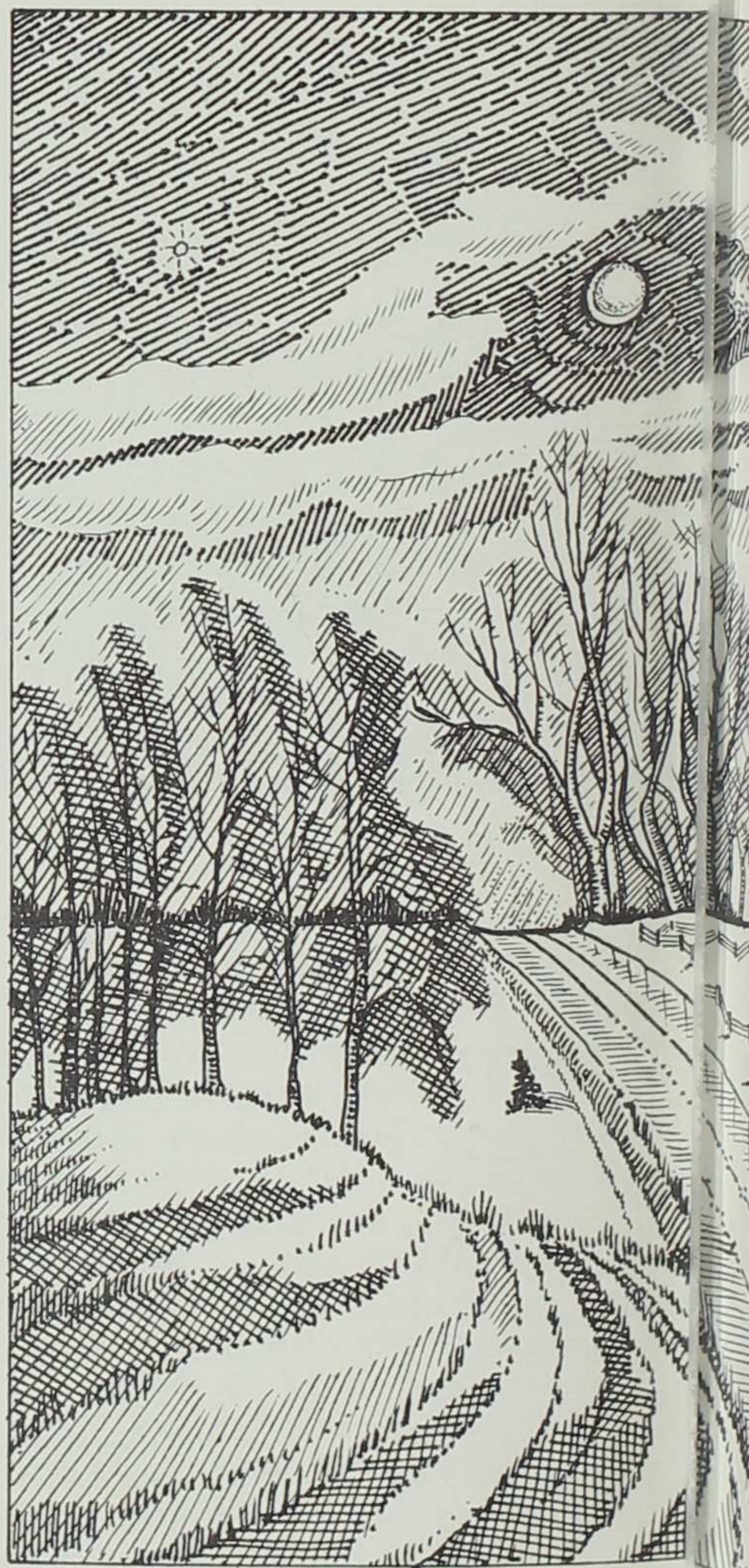
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Meyrick and Eli Meyrick. The detailing of the round-headed windows, the oculus in the steeple, the beautiful entrance, and the polished proportions of this structure all indicate that the church is more than carpenter vernacular. These details point to a builder well-versed not only in the architectural manuals of the contemporary vernacular Gothic styles, but also in the styles of the older Eastern United States, as well as English and Welsh traditions.

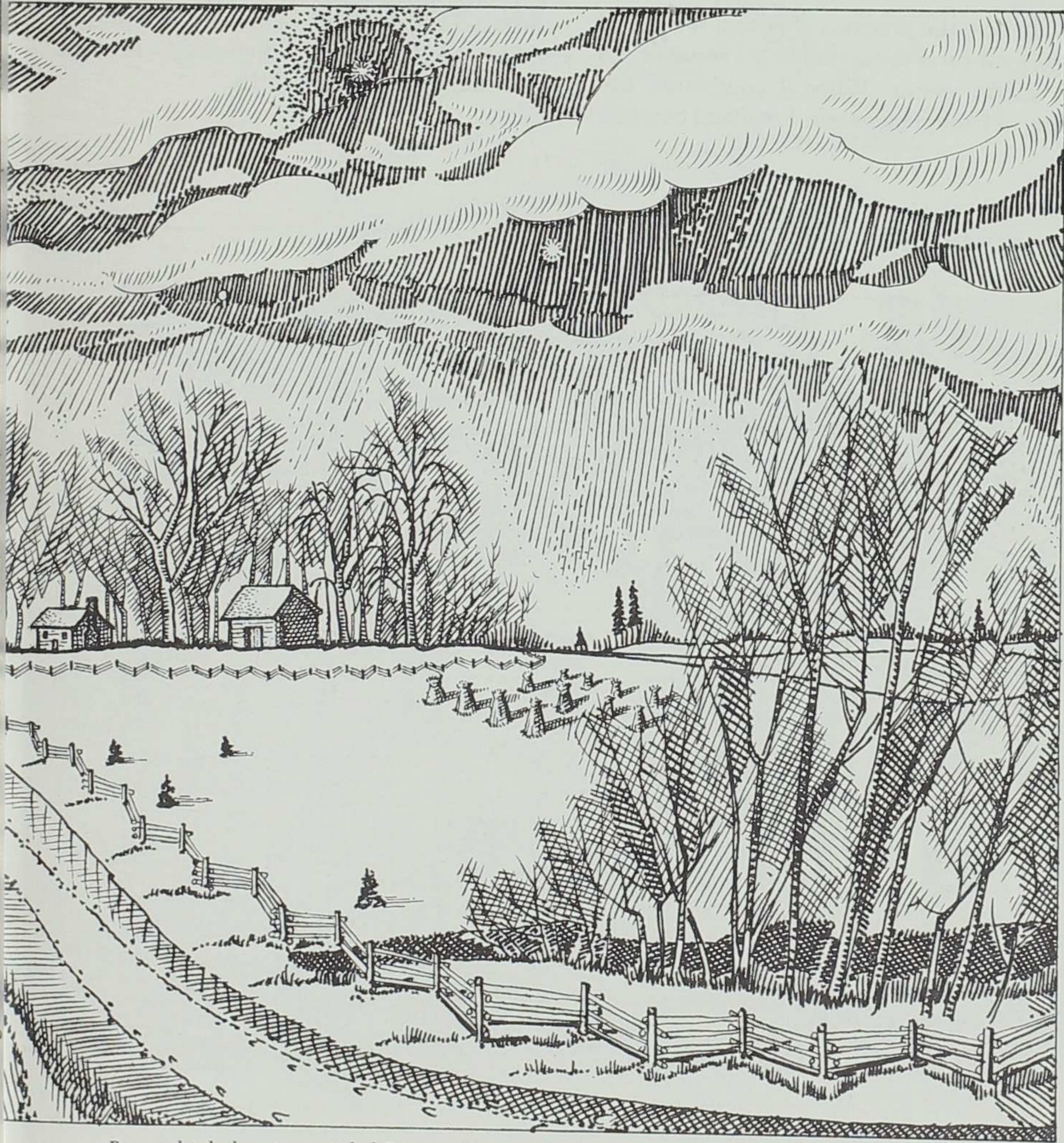
In addition, the church has a great deal of historical significance. The Palmyra Church congregation dates back to 1855. The present structure dates from 1867, making it one of the oldest religious structures in Warren County. It was the place of worship for nearly all the early settlers in the area. Somehow, I felt that their sense of freedom and equality had never been interrupted. Elias L. Biggs, who headed the Three Rivers Mission in 1852, was the first pastor. The Republicans held a huge Lincoln rally there in 1860. My paternal grandfather John H. Miller (1842-1912) was superintendent of the Sunday School from 1870 to 1884. Because of the huge Methodist revivals in the late 1860s the church was built to accommodate 500 people—the largest rural congregation in Warren County at the time. The church served as the social and cultural center, providing an important focal point not only for religious activities, but for educational and political activities as well, and it remained a major center for the isolated rural area until at least 1918.

Yes, Palmyra Church meant a great deal to me when I did the drawing. It was, and still is, a symbol of the hopes and dreams of a whole community, including my own. I was enthralled when I saw it, because it represented the closeness of our people and our relatives, as well as the joys and sorrows of their struggles.

The building is no longer used for worship services. It is the oldest remaining building in the area. All of a sudden came a disturbing



rumor that the building might be razed. One hundred or more citizens of Warren County organized into a group called the Friends of



Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Pioneer Home of Elias Meyrick and Lydia (Jackson) Meyrick, 1847

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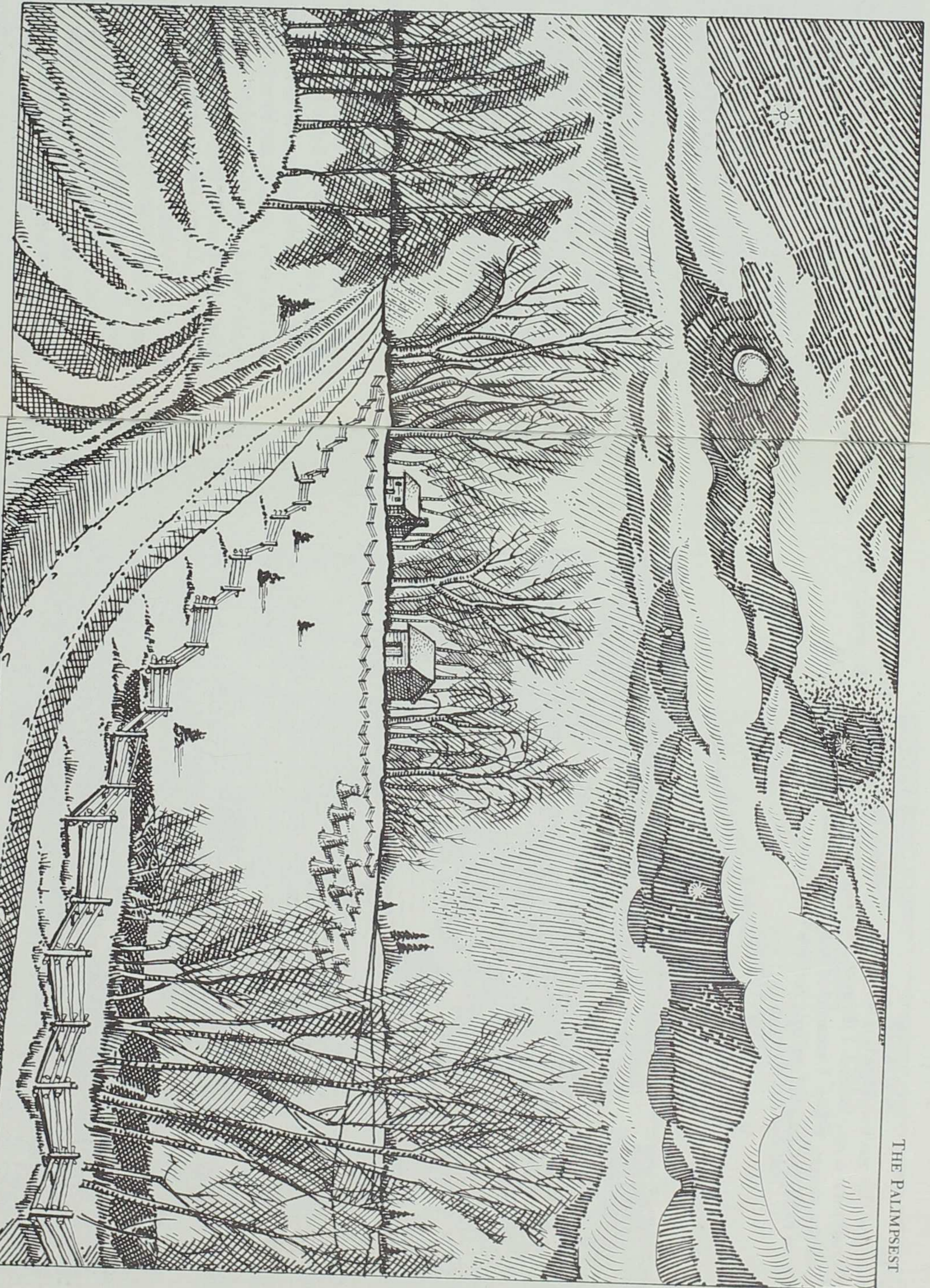
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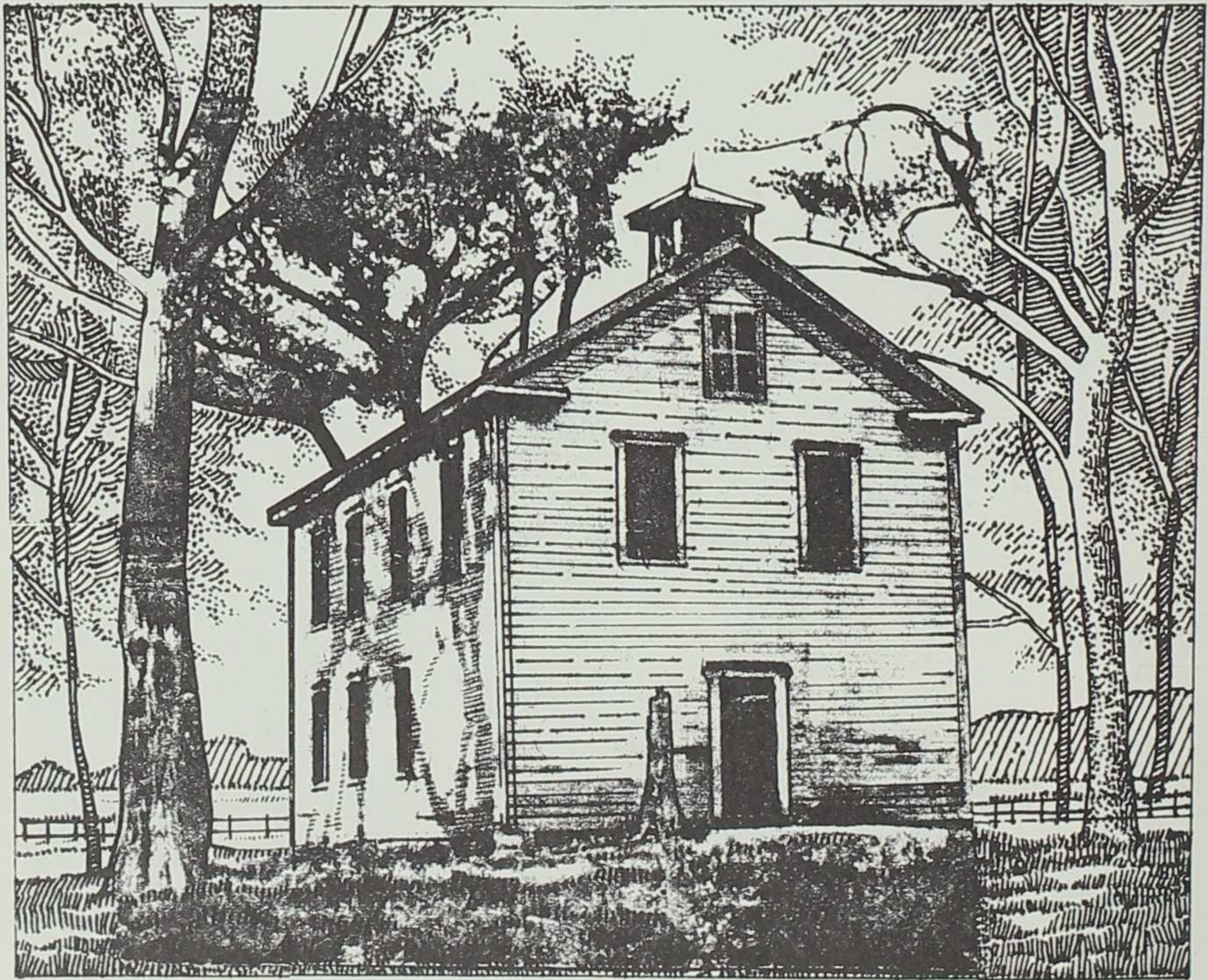
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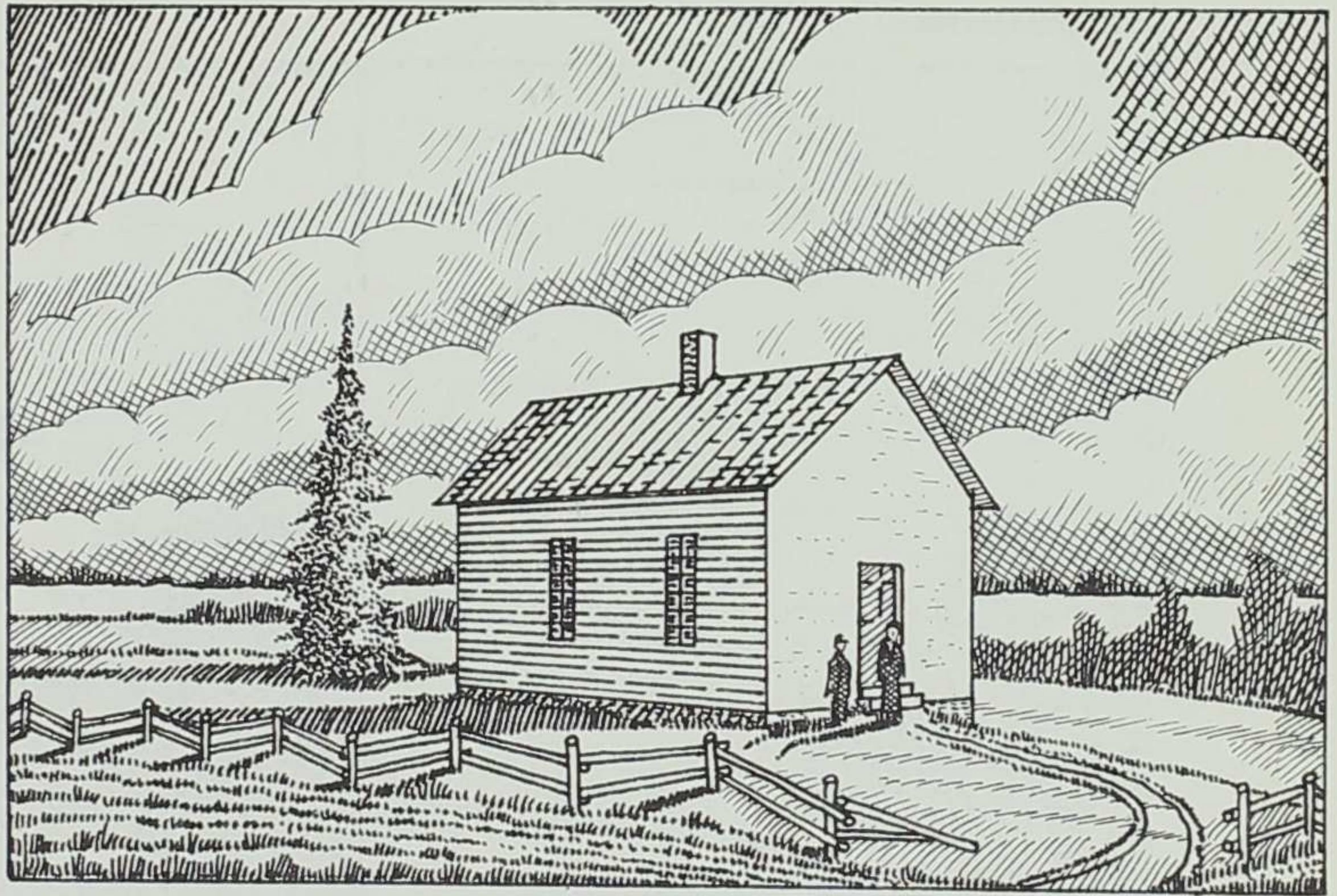
America in the making. For us, it is certainly worthy of historical distinction. This was a very important part of my cru-

sade—to save the precious little that was left of a very small rural town. Indeed, I thought it a most worthy cause. When I completed the drawing of Palmyra Church, I realized how few

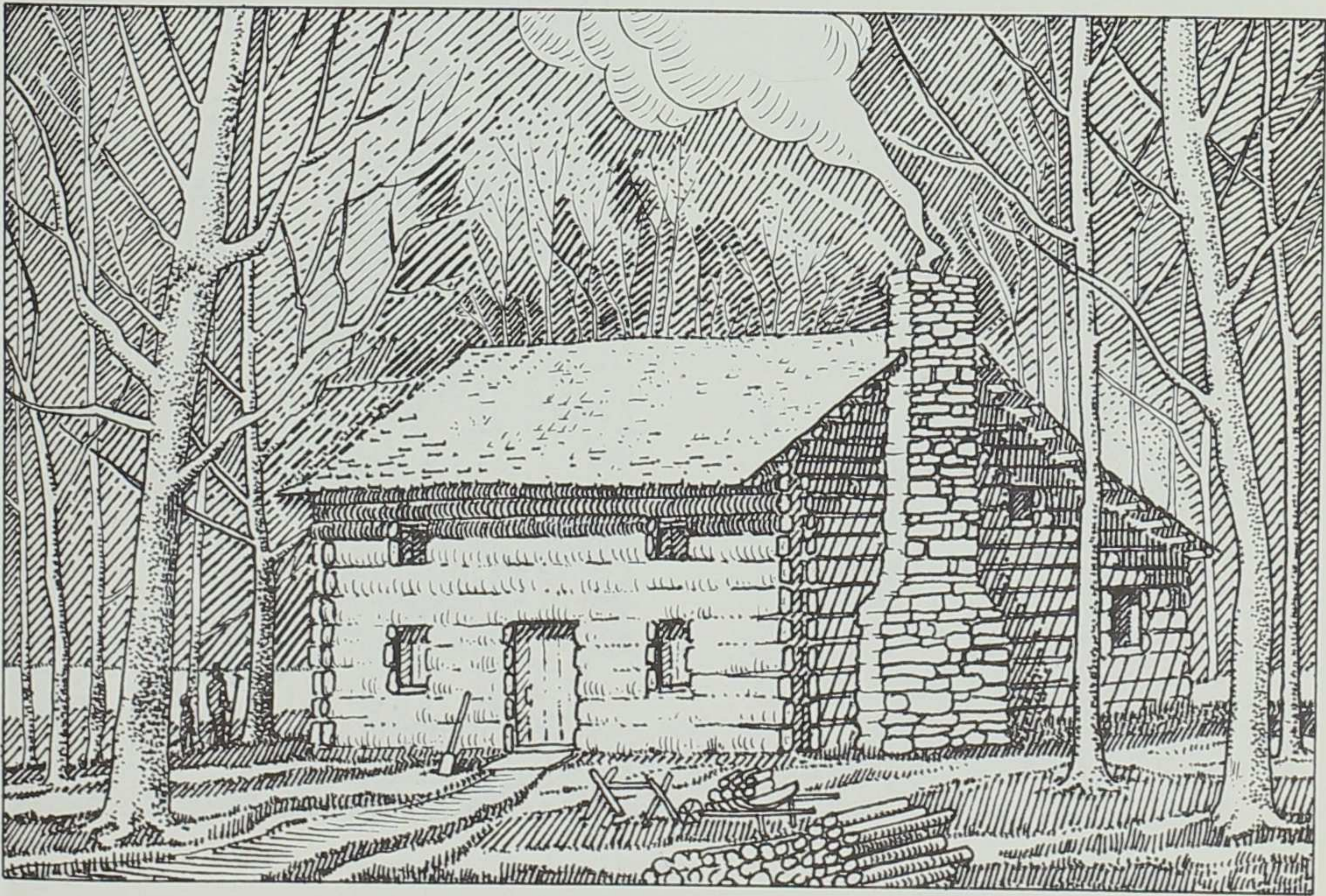
buildings I had covered. I knew then I had only begun a project I had unknowingly become committed to at the age of 16. □



Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Palmyra School, 1856-1924



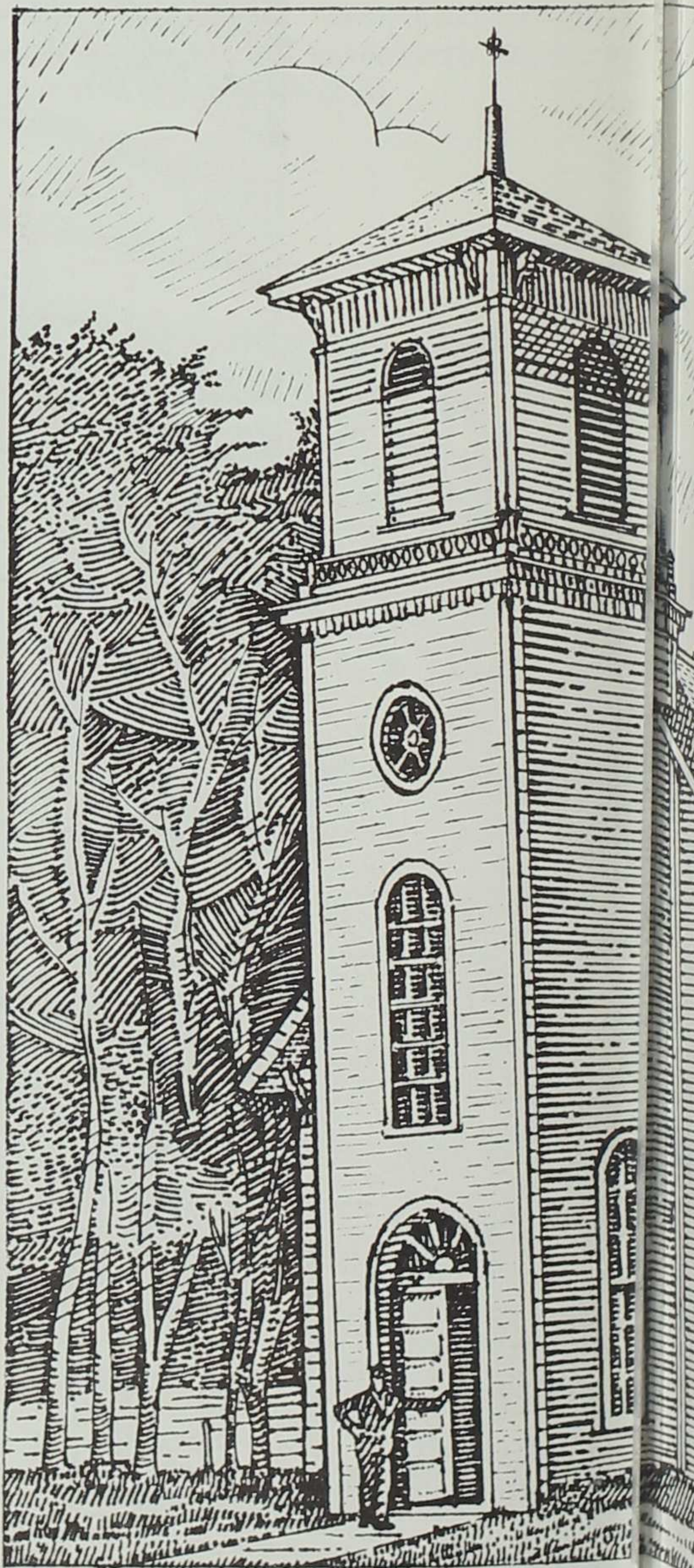
Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Goosehill School, 1850

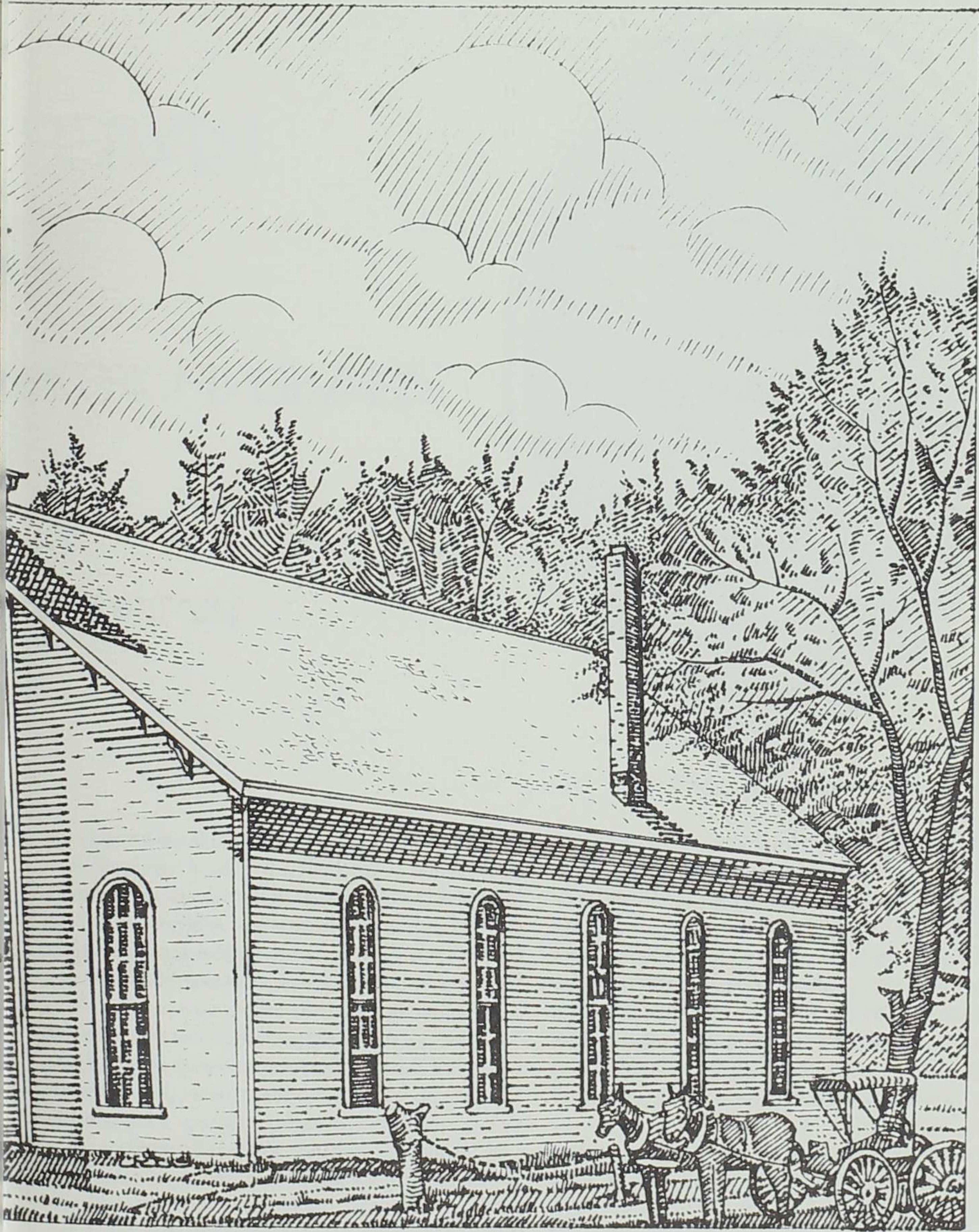


Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Pioneer Home of William Wilson Meyrick and Sarah (Leaming) Meyrick, 1849

Note on Sources

The principal sources for this article are *The History of Warren County, Iowa* (Des Moines: Union Historical Company, 1897) and Rev. W.C. Martin's *History of Warren County, Iowa* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1908). Also useful were Jacob A. Swisher's *Iowa—Land of Many Mills* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1940); Don Berry's article, "Where Warren County History Begins," *Indianola Tribune* (July, 1952); D.P. Kidder's *The Class-Leaders Fireside: Or Home Conversations on Important Subjects* (New York: Lane and Tippett, 1848); and Landon Schooler's unpublished manuscript *History of Palmyra* (1972). Conducted early in 1978, interviews with Delmar Coon, Bertine Davis, Isa Mae (Fields) Meyrick-Miller and William Schooler also provided helpful information.

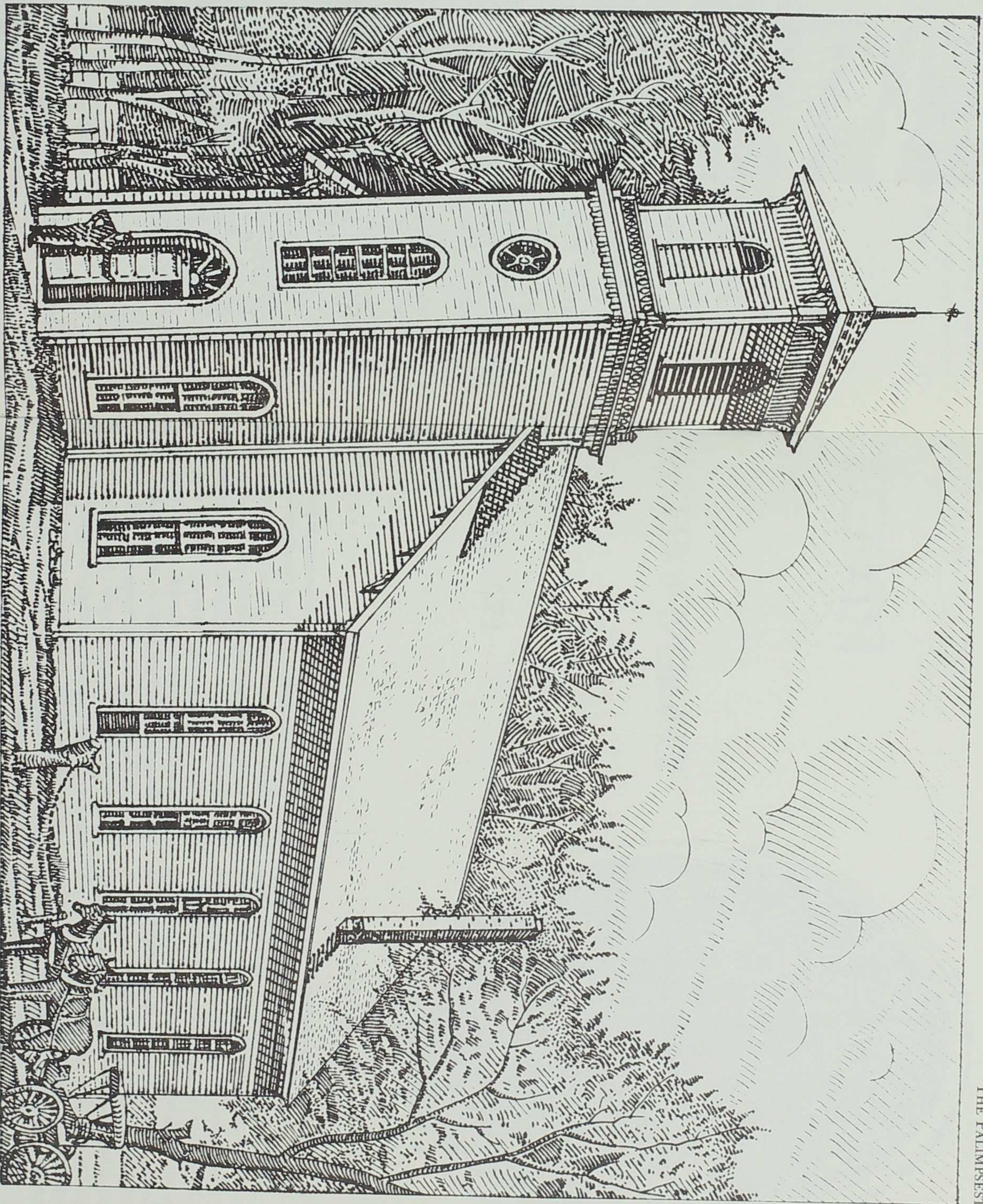




Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Palmyra Methodist Church, 1908, Frank Bean, pastor

Note on Sources

The principal sources for this article are *The History of Warren County, Iowa* (Des Moines: Union Historical Company, 1897) and Rev. W. C. Martin's *History of Warren County, Iowa* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1908). Also useful were Jacob A. Swisher's *Iowa—Land of Many Mills* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1940); Don Berry's article, "Where Warren County History Begins," *Indianola Tribune* (July, 1952); D. P. Kiddler's *The Class-Leaders Fireside: Or Home Conversations on Important Subjects* (New York: Lane and Tippet, 1848); and Landon Schooler's unpublished manuscript *History of Palmyra* (1972). Conducted early in 1978, interviews with Delmar Coon, Bertine Davis, Isa Mae (Fields) Meyrick-Miller and William Schooler also provided helpful information.



Pen-and-ink drawing entitled *Palmyra Methodist Church, 1908*, Frank Bean, pastor