The Palimpsest

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Iowa Dime Novels

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

THE MEANING OF 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 records 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.

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THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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Collecting Iowa Dime Novels

"HELP!" The thrilling cry for aid rang out over a wild scene. An almost trackless western prairie was on fire! . . . "Help!" Again that appeal arose high and clear above the roaring of the flames. This time it reached Charley's ears, and he gazed in the direction from which the cry came. . . . He beheld a white man in the grasp of a brawny redskin. The white man was on his knees; the Indian stood over him with uplifted tomahawk. . . . "Halt!" the command pealed from Charley's lips as his rifle flew to his shoulder. . . . "Crack!" The rifle pealed forth its shrill note, . . . and the redskin fell lifeless to the ground, shot through the body by the unerring aim of the Missouri marksman.

The afternoon sun was tipping the hills on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, causing soft shadows to fall in the valleys. Across the Father of Waters the city of Keokuk drowsed in July heat. A steamboat was coming slowly upstream, laying behind it a wedge of white foam — black smoke pouring from its two stacks.

Two boys lay stretched in the grass on a sunny hillside, reading, near the sleepy old village of

Hamilton. One of them was the writer, surreptitiously digesting his first half-dime novel, *Frank Reade and His Steam Man of the Plains,* the opening paragraphs of which are quoted above. Purchased for a nickel in Keokuk, where another boy and I had been sent to get supplies for a camp, it was probably my first investment in literature of any kind!

Even though this investment was made before the turn of the century, this was not the first of the dime novels. Nor was this particular classic published by the famous Erastus Beadle. But it whetted my appetite for a field that has continued to this day.

Erastus Beadle and his brother, Irwin P., appeared on the New York scene in 1858. As Beadle & Co., the brothers specialized in the printing of dime publications such as song books, joke books, almanacs, etc. Their first dime novel, *Malaeska, The Indian Wife of the White Hunter,* was published in June of 1860. Written by a woman, Ann S. Stephens, it has become the most famous and rarest of all published Beadles. Issued in a yellow pictorial wrapper, 4 by 6¼ inches, it can now be bought by collectors for around $50.00. A good copy is not readily found.

Now, what chance has today's collector in building a collection of dime novels — especially in building a collection which has Iowa as its

locale? Pretty good, I would say. Practically all early dime novels have their scenes laid west of the Missouri River. There are, however, a few which belong to the state of Missouri and a very few to Iowa. I was able to unearth ten Iowa titles — *Old Kyle, the Trailer; Antelope Abe; The Boy Spy; Hawkeye Harry; The Boy Chief; Old Bald Head; Thornpath, the Trailer; Silent Shot, the Slayer; The Dumb Spy;* and *The Man Hunter* — which I have presented to the State Historical Society of Iowa. All of these titles are scarce, selling at from $15 to $20 apiece, depending on condition, but they can be found.

I have no estimate on the number of titles which were published during the heyday of the dime novel. However, the number must be extremely large. For example, 591 titles in the Beadle series record the exploits of Buffalo Bill. Luis P. Senarens, who wrote under the pen name of "Noname," was the author of the *Frank Reade* series for the publisher, Frank Tousey. During his writing life, from 1873 to 1903, some 1,500 dime and half-dime thrillers flowed from his pen. And Senarens was just one author. There were hundreds of others, among them Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, Edward S. Ellis, Ned Buntline, Harlan P. Halsey, George W. Patten, Oll Coomes, Captain Mayne Reid, Ed Wheeler, and Major Sam Hall (Buckskin Sam). Even Mark Twain had his fling at the

field. Beadle's *Dime Book of Fun,* No. 3 (1866), is a genuine and rare Twain "first" in book form, by virtue of the inclusion of three of his stories.

From this you may see that the total can be a large one. In fact, it is large enough to lend interest to the chase as various titles are tracked down. My own collection of dime and half-dime thrillers consists of less than 200 numbers, original issues and reprints. But it is growing. You can make the same sort of collection.

I do not think it is sophistry to argue that dime novels are literature. A bulletin of the New York Public Library issued in 1930 reads: "The Beadle books present a more accurate and vivid picture of the appearance, manner, speech, habits and methods of the pioneer Western characters than do many formal historians." That this is true I have no doubt, but it is not a complete defense of the dime novel, because it touches only the periphery of the subject. Was the influence of the dime novel on boys of 50 to 70 years ago good or bad?

I assert that the influence of dime novels was usually for good, seldom for evil. Rereading these old thrillers today will convince any thoughtful reader that there was nothing baneful about them. They were harmless, indeed, when compared with the so-called "comic" books corrupting our youth of today.

T. Henry Foster

The Beadles and Their Novels

An enterprising printer named Erastus F. Beadle, who ran a shop in Buffalo, New York, issued a little paper-covered booklet of popular songs in 1856. He had picked up the words of the hits of the day, set them in type, and printed and bound them so cheaply that he could sell his little book for ten cents. This chance venture of Beadle's did so well that it gave the printer big ideas, and he decided to go to New York and devote himself to the publishing of dime books.

Born near Cooperstown, New York, on September 11, 1821, Erastus Beadle was thirty-seven years old when he made this move. He had hoed a hard row in boyhood and youth. He had to go to work on a farm when he should have been in school; later he found a job in a flour mill. One day he suggested to the miller the value of stamping his bags with the name of his product, and offered to cut some letters on wood and improvise a rude press for printing on cloth. The miller let him do this, in his spare time, of course, and was surprised and pleased at the result. Later he was surprised, but scarcely pleased, when his apprentice took to the road with his printing outfit and began marking bags for other millers.

In 1841 Erastus began working for Henry and Elihu Phinney, printers and publishers of Cooperstown. The Phinneys had discontinued their country newspaper and had gained some fame by operating traveling bookstores — forerunners of the modern bookmobiles — which they fitted out both in horse-drawn wagons and in canal-boats. For many years they conducted a chain of bookstores in Utica, Buffalo, Detroit, and other large towns. They taught Erastus Beadle not only diligence in the art of printing, but enterprise in the distribution of cheaply-produced literature.

By the time he was thirty, Beadle was ready to start out for himself. He went to Buffalo and set up a modest shop in this flourishing city of nearly 40,000, and did general printing and stereotyping. In 1852 he started his first periodical — a children's magazine called *The Youth's Casket,* edited by Mrs. H. E. G. Arey, a writer of verse and tales. The *Casket* must have been moderately successful, since four years later Beadle and Mrs. Arey added another magazine to their output, called *The Home.* This latter was devoted "to a much neglected form of education — that of the heart," and contained contributions from Alice and Phoebe Cary, Metta V. Fuller, William T. Coggeshall, and others.

When Beadle went to New York in 1858, he took this magazine with him, changing the name

to *Beadle's Home Monthly* and making Miss Fuller (now Mrs. Victor) editor; but the dime books soon took all of his attention, and the magazine was sold to S. H. Platt, who merged it in his *Household Magazine.* After a few years, Beadle took another flier in the periodical field with an ambitious competitor of the sensationally successful *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* but this later and more pretentious *Beadle's Monthly* lasted only eighteen months. Still later there were three story papers under the Beadle imprint.

Several able assistants had joined Erastus Beadle in his New York adventure. There was his brother, Irwin P. Beadle, who in Buffalo had displayed some talents as a publisher and a considerable taste for strong drink. There was Robert Adams, a young businessman with some money to invest. Also there were the Victors — Orville J. and Metta Victoria. Orville was a young journalist of thirty, who had been graduated from a theological seminary but who had decided to serve the larger congregation of the journalist. A frequent contributor to leading magazines, Orville married Metta V. Fuller, the "Singing Sibyl" of the Beadle group. He became a staff contributor to the Beadle magazines, and almost automatically a member of the company.

They found offices down on William Street, and went to work under the firm name of Irwin P.

Beadle & Company — which would seem to indicate that brother Irwin was the leading stockholder. They began with a *Dime Song Book* and a *Dime School Melodist*. There were a lot of these songsters, now all very rare. One series sold for one cent a copy. Perhaps the most interesting was the *Dime Union Song Book* of 1861, which contained the war songs of the North. There were also joke books, dialogues, speakers, etiquette books, letter-writers, cookbooks, and so on. There was a whole set of booklets by Metta Victoria Fuller Victor called "Beadle's Dime Family Series," designed for housekeepers.

In 1859 there appeared the first of a long series called *Beadle's Dime Base-Ball Player*. These booklets were illustrated by woodcuts and contained the proceedings of the "annual baseball convention," instructions for playing, and the "averages" and records of players and teams. In 1860 "Beadle's Dime Biographical Library" was begun under Orville J. Victor's editorship; it had lives of Daniel Boone, Tecumseh, and so on. A later series of similar nature furnished biographies of such heroes as Washington, Lincoln, Grant, Davy Crockett, Israel Putnam, Ethan Allen, and John Paul Jones. All these little books were bound in paper; they were not really "yellow-backs" — the color was a kind of orange or saffron.

But we are interested in these little dime man-

uals only as they are forerunners of the fiction books. The first of "Beadle's Dime Novels," as the original series was called, was issued in 1860. To initiate the new series, the publishers chose a story which had just appeared as a prize serial in *The Ladies' Companion,* Mrs. Ann S. Stephens' *Malaeska.* Mrs. Stephens was a magazinist of established reputation, and this story was in her best style of melodrama, inflated description, and noble emotion. The editor (it was probably Orville Victor) wrote in his introduction, that this story had been chosen for Number One of the "Dime Novels" for "The chaste character of its delineations, the interest which attaches to its fine pictures of border life and Indian adventure, and the real romance of its incidents." And he added this patriotic and moral note: "It is American in all its features, pure in its tone, elevating in its sentiments."

Malaeska was subtitled: *The Indian Wife of the White Hunter.* The heroine is an Indian princess, but in the denouement her son drowns himself when he learns that he is a half-breed. The Indians in this story, unlike those in most of the later dime novels, were Noble Savages in the tradition of Chateaubriand's *Atala.* In some respects, however, *Malaeska* set the pattern for the dime novels of the sixties and seventies: its setting was the American frontier, it brought in Indian

characters, it is melodramatic in plot, and it is "pure in tone and elevating in its sentiments."

The little book sold well, and Beadle issued a dozen more of the series in 1860. Two of the dime novels of that first year became, in the course of time, the best best sellers of all the thousands of such stories; these were *Malaeska* and Edward S. Ellis' *Seth Jones*. Both were repeatedly reissued, and each is supposed to have sold in the neighborhood of half a million copies.

Ellis was only twenty years old when he wrote *Seth Jones*; later he wrote about 150 other tales, as well as a considerable amount of serious history and biography, and received an honorary degree from Princeton. *Seth Jones* was less ladylike than *Malaeska,* being chock-full of adventure. This was what was needed to complete the pattern set by Mrs. Stephens' novel; most of the succeeding Beadles were crammed with exciting fights, thrilling pursuits, and hair-breadth escapes from all kinds of extraordinary predicaments. Young Ellis seems to have tried to get everything he could think of into his first novelette — a love affair, the humor of backwoods characters, miraculous woodcraft, repeated narrow escapes, all kinds of pursuits (by footrace, by boat, on horseback), a contest with a rattlesnake which "charms" its victim by its baleful eye, and two heroes, each of whom has the athletic prowess of Paul Bunyan, the skills

of Leatherstocking, and the cleverness of Davy Crockett.

One factor in the success of the early Beadle novels was the demand for them among the soldiers of the Union armies. They had just made a good start at the beginning of the Civil War, and in 1861 they poured from the Beadle presses in a heavy stream — little novels of fast action, melodrama, and homespun humor about border life, Indians, the Revolution, and Mexico. Beadle's Dime Novels performed somewhat the same function during the Civil War that the "Armed Services Editions" did for G.I.'s during World War II. The little saffron-covered books, measuring four by six and a half inches, and usually running a little over a hundred pages, their front covers adorned by a woodcut picture of a character or scene, were shipped to the boys in the field in bales and carloads, by trains, in wagons, in steamboats. When bundles of them arrived in camp, the men almost mobbed the sutler who distributed them. They were passed from hand to hand and read and reread.

In 1862 Irwin P. Beadle's share in the business was bought by Erastus F. Beadle and Robert Adams. Irwin's habits had made him undependable, but a few years later he went into the dime novel business in competition with his former partners, and published "Irwin's American Novels" in

1865–1867. Erastus and his remaining partner meanwhile had been going great guns under the name of Beadle & Company, publishing over four million dime novels by 1865, including about ninety titles for the regular series and some twenty-five for the American News Company.

Robert Adams died shortly after the war, and in the early seventies his two younger brothers, William and David, were taken into the firm, which then adopted the name, Beadle & Adams. A new series was begun in 1865 called "Beadle's New Dime Novels." Five of the books given by T. Henry Foster to the State Historical Society of Iowa belong to this series. Two numbers of the "New Dime Novels" were published each month for a time; later they were issued weekly. The distinction of this series was the cover picture, which was printed from a woodcut and hand-colored by the use of stencils.

A year or two later still another series, called "Beadle's Pocket Novels," very similar in format, was begun; its covers were colored by both tint-blocks and stencils. According to the publisher's announcement, the effect rivaled that of "the popular chromo," but the books were still "sold at the standard price — ten cents!" Four of the Foster gift books are "Pocket Novels"; indeed, Number One of the series was Oll Coomes' *Hawkeye Harry*.

"Beadle & Adams' 20-Cent Novels," which contained twice as many pages as the dime books, were published from 1871 to 1876, but were apparently less successful. When they gave them up, the publishers started a new series which, instead of raising the price, lowered it. "Beadle's Half-Dime Library," which continued for more than twenty-five years and comprised over a thousand titles, was one of the greatest successes of cheap printing and distribution in American publishing history. How many millions of these 24-page quarto novelettes, with slashing woodcuts on their first pages, were eagerly purchased and breathlessly read by how many millions of boys and men (yes, and girls, too) nobody can estimate with anything approaching accuracy. One of the earliest of this series, Number 13, is included in the Foster gift.

And so the Beadles went on multiplying series, trying new dodges in publishing and distribution, and adding new authors, until the mere bibliography of their issues becomes almost a jungle. To add to the confusion, other publishers got into this profitable game. Besides brother Irwin, there were two other competitors in the sixties — Elliott, Thomes & Talbot, of Boston, with the "10-Cent Novelettes," and R. M. DeWitt & Company, of New York, with "DeWitt's 10-Cent Romances."

There were more competitors in the seventies; but it was in the early eighties, when Norman L. Munro came in with his "Old Cap Collier" series, and his brother and rival George P. Munro entered the field with "Old Sleuth," that competition became really spectacular. George Munro had been a bookkeeper for Beadle & Adams; he later joined Irwin P. Beadle, but eventually set up for himself, not only as a leader in dime-novel production, but as an active publisher of magazines and cheap books. But the Munros, finding the market glutted and popular taste satiated with westerns, turned to the city streets and to stories of gangsterism, crime, and detection. Under this influence, the Beadles, too, tended to withdraw from the Wild West and to substitute the Bowery and the Battery for Dead Man's Gulch and the Lone Star State as settings for their thrillers. It was a part of the nation-wide swing to the city: urban dominance had affected not only industry, politics, society, and education, but the dime novels as well.

In 1886 David Adams died; and three years later Erastus F. Beadle, now sixty-eight and a millionaire, retired, turning the business of the house over to William Adams. Beadle had built a home called "Glimmerview" on Otsego Lake at Cooperstown. In 1892 he was an unsuccessful candidate for Congress, and in 1894 he died.

Orville J. Victor remained chief editor of the Beadle & Adams paper-backs until 1897, when he retired. The next year Beadle & Adams was sold to M. J. Ivers & Company, which continued the use of the Beadle name for some years, chiefly reprinting the most successful of the earlier Beadle novels.

It used to be the fashion to excoriate dime novels as idle and mischievous reading full of danger to the boyish imaginations which were excited by them in the seclusion of haymows and attics. It is now the fashion to praise them in a kind of nostalgic rapture over those golden days when pulses would still leap in sympathy with Dare-Devil Dan, the Prairie Ranger, as he escaped the scalping knife by a clever trick or a thrilling ride. The present writer believes dime novel literature represents an important incident in the history of popular reading in America. The following facts must be noted by anyone who sets about evaluating it.

First, the dime novels were definitely moral. Not only did they avoid any hints of sexual misbehavior, but they left sex pretty much alone. Girls were kidnapped, to be sure, so they could be rescued; but nothing "improper" took place on any Beadle page. Sentiments were elevated in tone, and nobility generally triumphed. This was especially true of the early Beadles.

Second, the stories did perform the educational

job of teaching some history painlessly. Probably part of that history was inaccurate; surely it was uncritical. Perhaps the inaccuracies were no greater than those to be found in full-length historical romances, though the history was certainly sketchier.

Third, the characters were generally "types." Though this is a great fault, from a literary point of view, it is not so for the youthful and naive reader, who has no wish for subtleties which get in the way of forthright and understandable action.

Fourth, the narrative is admirable. Despite language which today seems stiff, despite clichés and overdrawn descriptions of melodrama, these stories rush (as their writers would say) like a mountain torrent. The best of the dime novelists knew how to tell a story with proper conflict, suspense, heightened emotion, culmination. They were masters of the action plot.

Fifth, the plots are more or less stereotyped. In this respect, and in others, there is a certain kinship between dime novels and folk literature. There is a great variation in plots, of course; but in the Beadle novels of the 1870's, which are represented by the Foster gift, it would be possible to set up a few master plots of which all the hundreds of stories would be variants. For the avengement plot R. M. Bird has the archetype in *Nick of the*

Woods — the Indian fighter revenging himself for the massacre of his family. Another is based on the separation of the hero or heroine from his or her family, with a later reunion after multiple adventure. "Recognition" in the denouement is a common device. Take the advice of a seasoned reader of dime novels, and never believe anyone is dead until the last page; any drowned character, especially, is likely to turn up at last safe and sound in the arms of hero or heroine.

Sixth, the style is generally inferior. Clichés are of the essence: Indians "bite the dust" right and left — too often the gal with the "raven tresses" is "but a poor, bruised reed" — but the men — "Ah, it is our intrepid hero, Hawkeye Harry!" And when our author sits down to a paragraph of nature description, it is generally overdone.

Seventh, these stories are packed with material — incidents, stuff about the life of the place and the times, characters, action, action, action! If you will take the trouble to look over any group of best sellers throughout the whole history of American publishing, you will come to the conclusion that the great mass of readers like books that are filled chock-full. The leisurely, sparse, rarefied books are not for the masses. The people like their books crammed — with something! In this respect *Anthony Adverse,* for example, is good

dime fiction: it is a full book. But it is too bulky; Mr. Allen could have made about a hundred dime novels of it — "Beadle's Anthony Library."

Finally, dime novels are, of course, escapist literature. That was really what their critics had against them. Critics want us to face up to everyday life. But we won't do it. We know better than the critics what we need; we know we need, for the sake of our sanity, to escape once in a while and quit facing up. Boys need escape, too. They need to play hooky from life, and their teachers, and their parents, and go on a wild ride with Thunderbolt Tom, the Wolf-Herder of the Rockies.

So we are grateful to our liberators from reality, these dime novelists. Who were they? Captain Mayne Reid, the British adventurer and author, was one to whom the Beadles once paid no less than seven hundred dollars for a single story; usually, however, the publishers paid $75 to $100 for a 40,000-word tale. Another adventurer distinguished in the Beadle list was Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, who fought in at least half a dozen wars before devoting his energy to writing, turning out over six hundred novelettes. E. Z. C. Judson, who wrote under the name of "Ned Buntline," was another adventurer — midshipman, duellist, chief of scouts with the Indians during the Civil War, and so on. Judson is said to have given

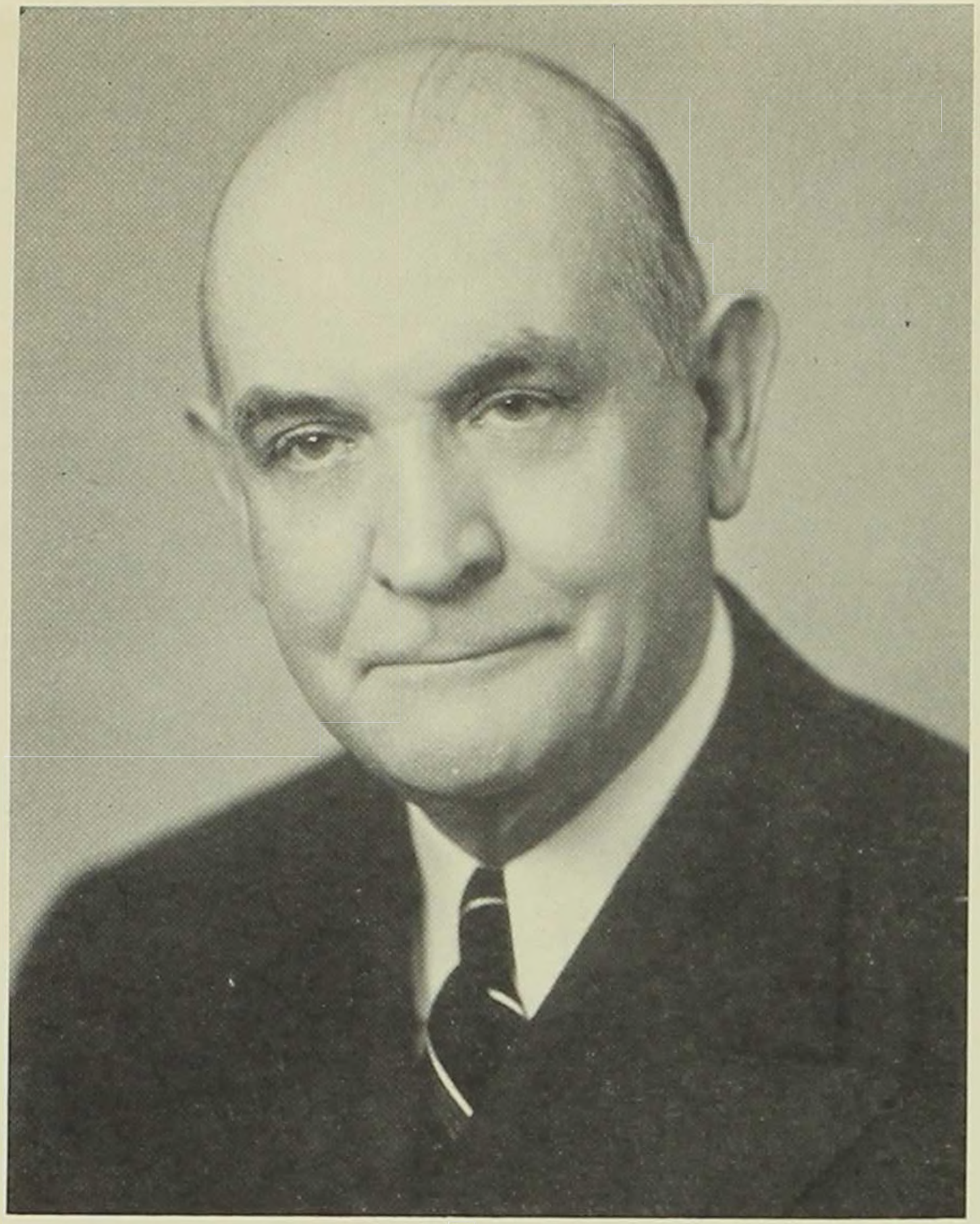
William F. Cody the nickname "Buffalo Bill." He wrote some four hundred dime novels, edited a magazine called *Ned Buntline's Own,* lectured on total abstinence, wrote a number of plays, and died at sixty-six after what might be called a full life. "Buffalo Bill," himself an Iowan, signed eight novels for the Beadles, but they are generally supposed to have been written by Ingraham or Judson.

Another of Beadle's authors who wore a military title was Major S. S. Hall, remembered for *Big-Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat; Wild Wolf, the Waco; Double Dan, the Dastard;* and many other alliterative heroes. A real frontiersman was Joseph E. Badger, Jr., author of the "Silver Blade" stories and more than a hundred others. Edward L. Wheeler, an Easterner, created the character of "Deadwood Dick," and also wrote of such famous sleuths as "High Hat Harry, the Baseball Detective," and "Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret." Albert W. Aiken, another Easterner, did successful westerns without much first-hand knowledge. He is said to have averaged a dime novel a week for years. Almost as prolific over a longer period was Thomas C. Harbaugh, who began writing at eighteen, turned out hundreds of thrillers, and died in the poorhouse at seventy-four.

Oliver "Oll" Coomes, author of eight of the ten

books in the Foster gift, was an Iowan. Born in Ohio in 1845, Coomes was a boy of eleven when his parents settled in Jasper County. He attended Iowa College at Grinnell for one year. When he was twenty-five, Coomes began farming in Cass County. He was named first postmaster at Wiota in 1872, served on the school board, and represented Cass County for two terms in the General Assembly. During half a century he wrote almost one hundred such thrillers as *Vagabond Joe, Delaware Dick, Minkskin Mike, Webfoot Mose, Blundering Basil,* and *Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror,* all under the pen name Oll Coomes. He refused to be lured from the farm, meanwhile selling most of his dime novels at from $50 to $100, although *Reckless Rollo* brought him $500 and *Omaha, Prince of the Prairie,* the fabulous sum of $1,000. At the time of his death in a car accident near Storm Lake in 1921, Coomes was financially well off. The prince of Iowa dime novelists was buried in the Wiota cemetery.

Historians of American literature and publishing have failed to note that the great era of publication of classics in cheap form (1875–1893) was motivated and instigated by the success of the dime novels. If thrillers could be published for ten or twenty cents in paper covers, why not Emerson and Macaulay and Dickens? Beadle & Adams were among the early entrepreneurs in

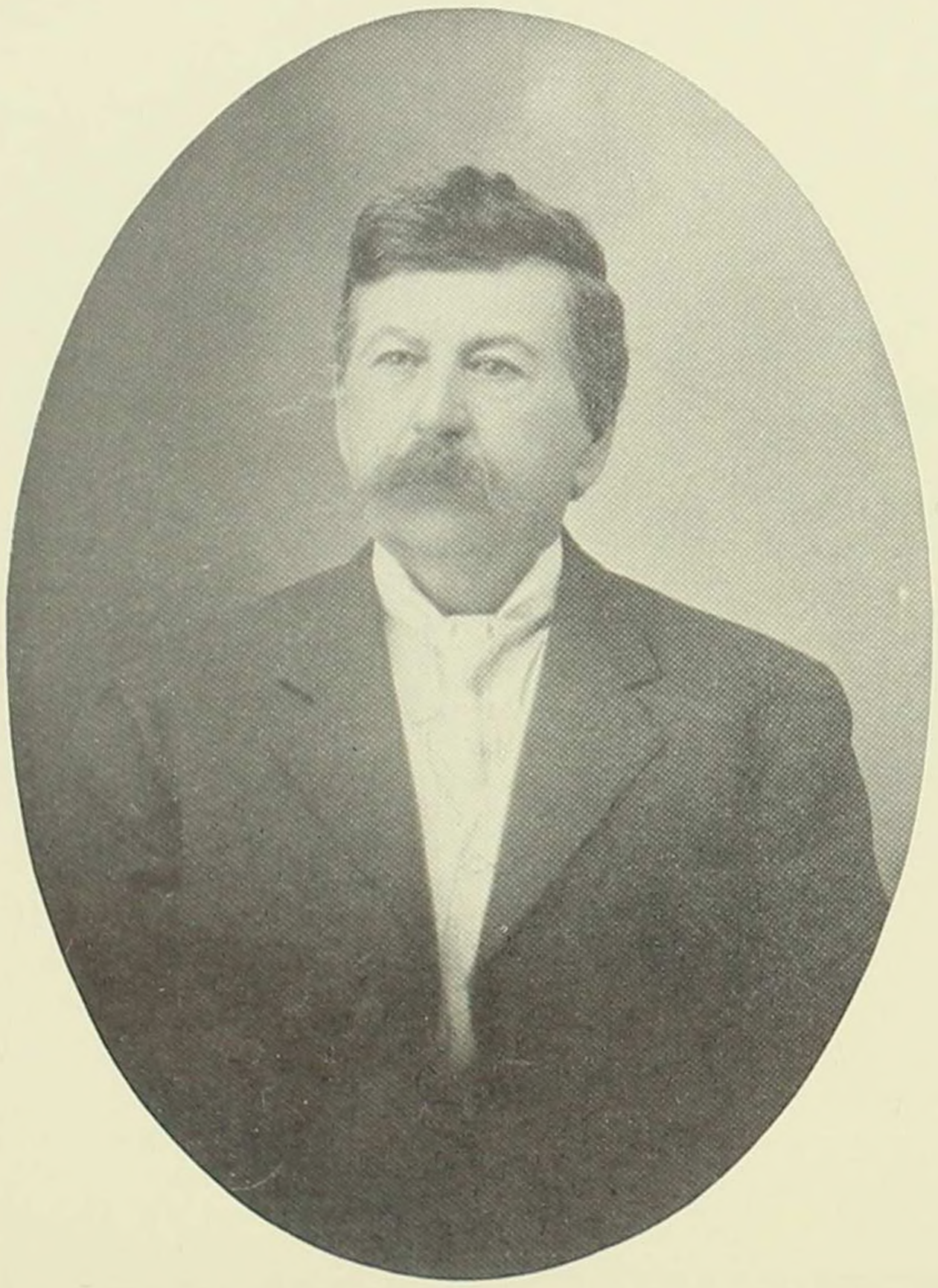


T. HENRY FOSTER
Collector of Dime Novels

Iowa Dime Novels Given to the State His


POCKET NOVELS
Antelope Abe.
POCKET NOVELS
The Boy Spy.
NEW DIME NOVELS
Old Bald Head.
NEW DIME NOVELS
Thornpath, the Trailer.

Iowa Dime Novels Given to the State Historical Society by T. Henry Foster



OLL COOMES
Iowa Dime Novelist

this field, with their "Fireside Library." By 1877 at least fourteen firms were issuing "libraries" of this kind; it was in that year that George Munro began his "Seaside Library," which, when it hit its stride, issued a new book in quarto every day. Not all of them were classics, by any means; but it was a wonderful exhibition of mass publication for the people. With various changes, this movement continued until, in the hard times of the early nineties, the cheap publishers went broke.

Dime novels continued to be printed and sold, however, along with the cheap classics in paper covers, by such publishers as Street & Smith, until the First World War. A little later they were superseded by the "Pocket Books"; and cheaply-priced books, begun by the trickle of Erastus and Irwin Beadle's dime songsters, are now a flood which there is no stopping.

FRANK LUTHER MOTT

Pioneer Iowa in Beadle Fiction

If you are going to enjoy dime novels, you have to get into a dime-novel frame of mind. For example, if you take up one of Oll Coomes' tales with a pioneer Iowa setting, you will do well to lay aside prosaic ideas of clearing and farming, and take the plunge into romantic adventure with Hawkeye Harry. Here is a little incident in this intrepid pioneer's life which may help you take that plunge.

To avoid a wide *detour* he resolved to cross a deep chasm known among the hunters and trappers as the Black Gorge. . . . In a moment he stood upon its brink. . . . His attention was arrested by what he had never noticed before. A tree had been uprooted and was lying across the abyss, spanning it from cliff to cliff. At this point the gorge was some fifty feet deep and about thirty in width. . . . Here seemed to Harry a streak of luck, for the rude bridge would enable him to cross without going further out of the way.

Arranging his rifle firmly at his back so that he could use both arms freely in maintaining an easy balance in crossing the log, he stepped upon it and began moving slowly across. The moon shone full on him and far down into the black mouth of the gorge. . . . With firm step he felt his way onward, and soon reached the foliage of the elm that hung down over the log. This he carefully pushed aside, and passed beyond.

But at that instant he came to a sudden halt. A low cry escaped his lips. There, before him, on the center of the log, over the fearful depths of the abyss, he found himself face to face with a powerful Indian warrior — a deadly foe!

Retreat was impossible for either of the two natural enemies. . . . They stood glaring at each other, motionless as statues — like maddened beasts preparing to leap. . . . Quick as a flash of lightning Harry permitted his feet to slip apart, and dropped himself astride of the log, locking his feet on the under side of the log. No sooner had he done this than the savage warrior followed his example and dropped himself astride of the log.

Without waiting to draw his knife, Hawkeye Harry drove his clenched fist into the red-skin's face with such force as to make him yell with pain and rage, as he drew his knife and made a desperate pass at his young adversary; but he had reckoned without his host. With great presence of mind, Harry caught the descending arm with his left hand, while with his right, he dealt the savage a blow in the stomach that caused him to drop his knife in the abyss; but, quick as lightning, he reached forward and they grasped each other in a deadly embrace.

The slender log swayed and creaked beneath their struggling forms. . . . To and fro they swayed — striking, struggling and writhing like serpents. Still they kept their legs clasped about the log like bands of steel, but at last they lost their equilibrium and turned completely over upon the log! Their situation was now indeed perilous. With their feet locking over the *top* of the log and their bodies dangling below, they struggled and fought on more desperately than before.

The savage succeeded in entwining his muscular arms around the form of our hero, and then made a desperate

effort to crush the life from the young body. But the youth had managed to seize the warrior by the scalp-lock, and was there-by enabled to thrust his head backward until the crown touched between the shoulders.

Half-strangled, the red-skin loosened his hold upon the youth's body, and becoming dizzy and faint, with a determined effort to drag the youth down into the abyss with him, he clutched the lad with both hands by the throat, as his feet slipped apart; but unable to maintain the hold upon the throat, with a wild despairing shriek, that echoed in prolonged wails through the gorge, the doomed wretch went whizzing down into the fearful abyss.

The young ranger had won the victory; he was free, but still hanging head downward over the black gulf. And now he realized his true peril, for he was far from being saved; his limbs were growing weak, and his head dizzy with the rush of blood to the brain.

Then he feels a vibrating shock of the log. Great heavens! It is produced by a footstep, and no doubt that of another Indian! He sees a dark form upon the log outlined against the sky; he fixed his glaring eyes upon it. Blessed sight! It was the form of Old Optic.

The next instant brave Harry was assisted from his awful position — saved!

"That war a ticklish place, Hawkeye," said the old trapper.

Eight of the ten Beadle novels with Iowa settings were written by Oll Coomes. Since Coomes spent his youth in Jasper County it is not remarkable that several of his stories involve the area between the Des Moines and the Chacauque or Skunk rivers.

In *The Boy Spy, or, The Young Avenger,* Fort Des Moines, at the fork of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers, was often the goal of wild rides ahead of pursuing Sioux demons. Keith's Tavern, supposedly fifteen miles east of the fort on the emigrant road, was the scene of the theft of an important map, and on the divide between the Des Moines and Chacauque rivers occurred the desperate encounters between Frank Bell, the Boy Spy, and the twelve Indians he had vowed to scalp alive in retaliation for the massacre of his parents. Coomes located the village of the Sioux chief, Inkpadutah, the perpetrator of the Spirit Lake Massacre, only thirty miles northeast of Fort Des Moines!

The Boy Spy has the usual quota of incidents of outwitting and outfighting the Indians. Frank Bell also rescued the sixteen-year-old Lillian Vaughan, "her sweet fair face blanched with fear and her dark-blue eyes turned upon her companion, half-despairing, half-hopeful," and unmasked and killed the arch-villain, Jubal Wolfgang. In numerous adventures he had the assistance of his white horse, Specter, which showed the same kind of devotion to his master that Silver exhibits toward the "resourceful and masked rider of the plains." Hi, Ho, Specter!

This novel has, also, complications of buried treasure, a mysterious raft-cabin in the middle of

Crystal Lake, and a magic canoe that plied between the cabin and the shore without an occupant.

The Boy Chief; or, The Doomed Twenty is a sequel to *The Boy Spy*. Frank Bell appears again as one of the two heroes. The other is Guy Meredith, who lived with his mother near Prairie Post. This settlement, says the author, was twenty-five miles east of Fort Des Moines and had been settled by St. Louisans, who had come up the Missouri to St. Joseph and then across country to Prairie Post.

When Guy Meredith returned home one evening to find twenty Indians howling around his burned cabin, he vowed to kill and scalp every one of the twenty. It took him the whole hundred pages of the novel to accomplish his vow, and it is a bloody business; but neither he nor the reader ever falters.

Frank Bell, accused of a murder he did not commit, disguised himself as the Indian Boy Chief of the Arapahoes. His courtship of the fair Lillian progressed satisfactorily despite the disguise. Guy Meredith, between scalpings, fell in love with an Indian maiden, Red Rose, who, the reader is relieved to learn in due time, is the long-lost sister of Frank Bell.

Thornpath the Trailer; or, The Perils of the Prairie states in its first sentence: "Our story

opens in the year 1820 at a point on the Des Moines River some thirty miles below the mouth of the Raccoon." Some of the action takes place in and near the Post, which the author describes as a small settlement some thirty miles east of Fort Des Moines. There is something wrong here, as Fort Des Moines was not established until 1843. But with dozens of Indians to be shot, drowned, or thrown out of trees into the clutches of bears, and always to be "sculped," with a maiden of some eighteen summers to be repeatedly rescued from the Sioux, with the burning of the Post to be avenged, with the Indian Red Hand to be exposed as the renegade Carl Oakley in disguise, there is little wonder that Mr. Coomes was not too meticulous about dates.

The fourth of the Iowa dime novels to deal with the part of Iowa just east of Fort Des Moines is *Antelope Abe; or, The Forest Bride,* by "Will Dexter," apparently a pen name used by Oll Coomes. The author tells an interesting tale in the pattern by this time familiar. His hero, Antelope Abe, is fearless and light-hearted. He enjoins the pursuing savages thus: "Come on, ye pack o' maw-mouthed imps! Come on, and I'll give ye all a free check to the brimstone-pit, bearin' the ginuwine stamp of Antelope Abe — jist so!"

And here is one of his methods of attack:

> Antelope Abe's head shot quickly downward toward

the earth, and scarcely touching his hands upon the ground, he turned a complete hand-spring with the quickness of a flash, and, as his heels whirled through the air, he planted them with all the force he could summon, directly in the face of the advancing outlaw, who was sent half-unconscious to the earth.

In *Hawkeye Harry, The Young Trapper Ranger,* Coomes set his stage in northwestern Iowa. Its hero, Harry Houston, with whom our reader is already familiar from the exciting episode which opens this sketch, lived with Old Optic "in a little valley on the banks of a purling stream that found its way into the crystal waters of Lake Boyer." The action of the story took place in the area between the Boyer and Raccoon rivers. Here Harry rescued Nora Gardette, a maiden "of exquisite loveliness," from Rat Rangle's gang of outlaws, and later had one thrilling encounter after another with Sioux Indians as he and Nora tried to escape in a canoe on the Boyer River. The denouement, a tremendous climax, occurs at the Sioux encampment near Okoboji. There Harry and Old Optic and the United States dragoons from Fort Des Moines overcome the Sioux warriors and restore the white prisoners to the arms of lovers and parents.

The date was sometime after the Spirit Lake Massacre, which occurred in 1857, for one character dates his hatred of Indians from that event.

The story of *Old Bald Head; or, Red Star, The Spirit of the Lake* opens with definite information as to time and place. "Time: a summer night in the year 1838. Place: the edge of a forest skirting Storm Lake, a body of water in the then territory of northwestern Iowa."

A few miles south of the lake, said Coomes, lay Pleasant Prairie, a settlement of six families; and a mile and a half north, the hostile Sioux Indians, under their aged chief, Sidomindotah, had their village. Indian Creek and Bear Creek joined to form Death Channel, so called from the depth and blackness of its waters and the dense growth of elms and vines that overhung it. It emptied into Storm Lake, and its dark channel offered wonderful opportunities for ambushing enemies.

Coomes used a whole bagful of mysteries in this story. From an island in the center of the lake there comes on some nights Red Star, the Spirit of the Lake. A hunter, standing guard, sees him in this fashion:

> He beheld the figure of a man with enormous feet walking upon the surface of the lake, with long shuffling strides. Great wings of fire reached out from each shoulder, casting a lurid glare over the waters and relieving the outlines of the flying form from the fog and the gloom. . . . In his hand he clutched a tomahawk, while at his back was hung a rifle by means of a strap passing over his shoulder.

The hunter awakened his two friends. One of them, Loamiah Henry Symbro, from Kentucky, upon hearing about the Spirit earlier, had remarked:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! That's just as tough a yarn as I've ever heard. The ridiculous idea of a man walking on the surface of the water ort to be laughed out of existence. Sich a thing has never been did since the time Christ walked on the sea and it's all bosh to say so."

But as he awoke and saw the flaming figure, he conceded in awe, "By the amphibious Jehokeys! If that isn't the Spirit of the Lake, I'll be shot!"

The reader eventually learns that Red Star was really Arthur Clenham, who, after his wife was killed by Indians, entered upon a career of revenge. He lived in a cave on a small island in Storm Lake, and had discovered in some caverns or vaults on the shore of the lake "relics of that prehistoric race, the ancient Mound-builders." Among the artifacts were "two peculiarly curious tiny cedar-wood canoes. These marine shoes — for such Clenham called them — were so constructed that, in moving one forward, the other could not recoil, and with much practice and at the risk of innumerable duckings, he finally became so skilled in their use, that he found no difficulty in navigating the waters at pleasure."

Unfortunately the construction of these marvelous water-shoes is not explained in greater detail.

What a wonderful sport water-walking could be if this secret of the Mound builders had been revealed!

The reader also learns (and if he is an experienced dime-novel reader, not to his surprise) that Arthur Clenham's beautiful wife had not really been killed by the Indians, but only stunned, and that he found her at last safe and sound at Pleasant Prairie. And here we leave her, "clasped to the breast of her husband."

Silent Shot, The Slayer differs from the other Oll Coomes stories in several respects. The hero used bow and arrow; hence his soubriquet. He was always accompanied by a large, sleek "greyhound," inappropriately named Harmony. The story opens on the cliffs overlooking the Missouri at Council Bluffs and the various incidents occur on the prairies east of the Missouri and in the timber lands bordering the Nishnabotna River.

But again there were the Sioux, with their treacherous ways; and again there was the band of border outlaws, with their leader pretending to be a friend of the settlers. The robbers lived at Hunters' Lodge, a few miles from Morris settlement, according to the author. A secret cavern behind the Lodge justifies the second title of the book.

The story of *Old Kyle, The Trailer, or, The Renegade of the Delawares,* by Henry J. Thomas,

begins with the hero standing on the banks of the Rattlesnake River. This Iowa river, Thomas says, had its "headwaters away up in the Rocky Mountains," and "finally debouched into the Mississippi." The reader begins there to doubt the author's knowledge of Iowa. And his Delawares were only remotely associated with Iowa; A. R. Fulton does, however, record the massacre of twenty-three Delawares by the Sioux on the banks of the Raccoon.

Thomas tells a good tale of adventure on the banks of the Rattlesnake. Old Kyle is a lusty and clever scout, and thanks to him the hunters who were lost are found; and Adrian Woodland, who had been kidnapped from her home in Illinois, is restored to her father's arms and the kidnapper meets his well-deserved fate.

And how Thomas could write! Old Kyle found Adrian asleep in a canoe.

> Never in all his wanderings had he encountered what seemed to him such form and features of marvelous beauty. As she lay with the side of her face upon her arm, the pink tint of the sea-shell was upon the well-rounded cheek, and the penciled eyebrows were as if drawn in ink. A mass of luxuriant dark hair rippled and rolled away in a negligent manner over the symmetrical shoulders, while the faint, regular breathing betokened not death, but rosy health.

And at the end of the book occur these moving

words. "We draw the veil over the meeting between Adrian Woodland and her parents. Our feeble pen cannot paint the touching picture, and we dismiss it with the simple tear of sympathy" — the only simple thing in the novel, the reader feels.

That the scene of *The Man-Hunter; or, The Counterfeiters of the Border* was in Iowa we know only because Maro O. Rolfe tells us so in the first sentences. "Iowa. Then a territory, A. D. 1835 — an epoch of border-crime and ruffianism."

This story has everything, except Indians. The only Indian was Lunita, an agent of the counterfeiters. These lawbreakers operated in a tavern a mile away from the Mississippi, and in one of the upstairs rooms of the same tavern a woman had been chained for sixteen years — chained, believe it or not.

Mori, the Man Hunter, had been set on the trail of the counterfeiters by the Vigilantes, and was threatening their safety. The worst of the villains, Keno Taine, threatened to expose the best of the gang, Jules De Kay, unless Jules would give him daughter Evie in marriage. Jules protested time and again, and Evie protested time and again, but at last Evie nobly decided to sacrifice herself. Said Evie to Papa Jules:

"I told you, last night, that to save your life, — to save you from the Vigilantes and from the rope — I would become the wife of Keno Taine. I loathe and abhor Keno

Taine — he is a fiend incarnate! I would rather go to my grave than make the promises that will bind me to such a creature for life; . . . but I will marry Keno Taine and you may live."

She stood up firmly — speaking evenly and calmly as though she were not talking of a step that would make her life a shade darker than the death of the most hopelessly depraved, sin-laden, unrepentant villain that ever trod the earth.

From that awful fate she was saved, thank goodness, by her long-lost mother, who gets unchained in the nick of time. With a conflict and a denouement of such dimensions, the reader never misses the Indians.

One of the most interesting novels in the collection is *The Dumb Spy,* a book of twenty-four pages in quarto size by Oll Coomes. The text begins under a large woodcut of a prairie hunter on page one.

The year of the story is 1842. It centers about a group of Kentuckians who had come up into Iowa to stake claims. They hoped to get land along the Des Moines River in the Black Hawk Reserve. Since that land would not be transferred from the Sac and Fox Indians until the next May, they had secured a private permit from Black Hawk (dead four years!) and had set up a camp and built a stockade on the bank of the Des Moines River. They had two guides, Noisy Nat and Wild Dick, and were later joined by a

celebrated scout and Indian fighter, Old Hurricane.

A few miles south of their camp was the section known as the "Dispute," that strip of country claimed by both the State of Missouri and the Territory of Iowa. It had become "one of the most central posts for outlaws, river pirates and robbers west of the Mississippi." The outlaws naturally resented any settlements of law-abiding men; and one gang, led by Reckless Ralph, tries to drive the Kentuckians out of the Territory.

The Indians, too, were particularly irascible in this area because of their resentment at Black Hawk's treaty with the government; and despite his plea for toleration and peace, they made repeated attacks on the Kentuckians. Old Hurricane's particular enemy was a big Indian, called Big Foot, and their desperate fights provide not only excitement but also amusement for the reader.

All these warring elements furnish plenty of combat, which culminates in a battle at the stockade, in which the robbers employ a cannon mounted on a large flatboat. But again, as always in the Beadle books, the villains are outwitted. And at the end the Kentuckians, with wives and sweethearts restored, sail in triumph on the enemy's flatboat down the Des Moines and the Mississippi to St. Louis.

Coomes does not miss any chances in this book. Besides the elements mentioned, it has a situation created by identical twins — one, Wild Dick, with the settlers, and the other, the Dumb Spy, ostensibly in the service of Reckless Ralph. It has, too, a mystery killer, the "Demon of the Des Moines." And it has a thrilling tribute to the United States flag, raised over the stockade at a time of attack by the Indians. The girls sing "Oh, say can you see" as Old Hurricane shouts, "By the gods of Olympus, yonder flag must not be disgraced, . . . whoop! whoop! hurrah, ye screechin' fiends, come on — right into the jaws of death —."

Since Coomes lived in Iowa, we might expect from him some good descriptions of what Old Optic called the "perairy." But instead of such rich and vivid descriptions as those in Plumbe's *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin,* Coomes offers in his Beadle novels only old clichés and conventional phrases.

Nor is there any great skill in characterization. The exact age, and the colors of eyes and hair are always given, and the heroes are "perfectly developed in all the attributes of manhood," or "possessed of muscular development and strength equaled by few men upon the border." But they remain types, without much real individuality.

Some attention is paid to costume. Nearly all the men wear buckskin suits and moccasins.

Hawkeye Harry wears a cap made of the skin of a hawk, and adorned with the wings of the bird. Old Hurricane wears a wolfskin cap. Silent Shot, the Slayer, wears a blue velveteen hunting shirt, which the artist makes red on the cover. The practical reader wonders how velveteen would wear on the prairies.

The heroines all have ringlets, even before the invention of permanents, and whether blond or brunette they all seem much alike. All are brave and loyal to parents and lovers. They have delicate feelings and are easily shocked. If it is necessary to kill or scalp an Indian in the presence of one of these girls, the scalper always apologizes. The feminine reader would like to know how these pioneer girls dressed, but she never learns.

There is another type of woman in some of these novels, one with more vigor and more personality. She is an older woman, a wronged wife or mother, who is on the prairie to rescue a daughter from the Indians, or to get revenge. She wears buckskin, often disguises herself as a man, lives in a cavern or on an island, and in one instance in a cave under a small stream with a trap door in the bed of the stream.

The conventional comedy characters of early American literature crop up in some of the novels. *Silent Shot, The Slayer* has Professor Fitz Henry Stebbins, from the University of Vermont. He

has written a book called *The American Aborigines: Their Place in Civilization*. His costume for travel in Iowa consists of white linen pants and vest, a swallow-tail coat of blue cloth with a double row of brass buttons upon each side in front, and a jaunty little lacquered straw hat. The "aborigines" have more fun from his sojourn in Iowa than does the professor.

In *The Man-Hunter* appears another character attired in the same kind of swallow-tail coat, "with pants very small as to the legs, checked in large black and brick-colored plaids." A small skull-cap sits on the head of this "real, genuine, down-east Yankee," Levi Eli Elnathan Gershman.

One of the best of the humorous characters is Toamiah Symbro in *Old Bald Head*. He brags of his prowess in Indian warfare; but in an actual encounter with a savage he always runs. In one episode, an Indian chases him all one day and a night and part of another day, both men falling down occasionally and resting. At last the Indian in a sudden rush catapults over Toamiah into the swamp and gets stuck in the mud. Another great victory for Toamiah.

The sophisticated reader may not find these artificial comic elements very funny, but he will get many chuckles out of the racy speech of the old hunters and the skillfully devised interplay of

incidents. And, of course, the melodramatic elements are always entertaining and amusing.

How the Beadle authors loved mysteries! And how clever their imaginations were in devising secret hiding places, strange visions, and unusual death-dealing devices! *The Boy Spy* and *Old Kyle* have chapters headed "Mysterious Disappearance." *Hawkeye Harry* has a chapter called "More Mysteries," and *Old Bald Head* reaches the ultimate in its chapter on "Mysterious Mysteries." How can an author be more mysteriously mysterious than that?

In all the novels except *The Man-Hunter* a struggle between the Indians and the whites provides the basic conflict. There is no doubt that scant justice is done to the Indian situation in Iowa. The number of Indians in the area is certainly exaggerated as are their treachery and hostility to the settlers. Most early Iowa settlers never were involved in Indian fights, although these books give us the impression that they were continually holding on to their scalp locks.

Coomes occasionally employs a friendly Indian, and in *The Dumb Spy* he gives what is probably an accurate portrayal of the sentiments of Black Hawk. But on the whole, the reader realizes that the author's whole-hearted delight is in the copper-skinned varmint on the warpath with tomahawk swinging.

Despite their limitations of style and their inaccuracies, these novels are an interesting and important part of Iowa literature. The reader comes to regard Oll Coomes with gratitude and affection because of his interest in local settings and his obvious love for the pioneer aspects of Iowa. Even after eighty years, the novels are good reading for anyone who likes a tale of swift action with a dash of melodrama.

VERA I. MOTT

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