

## The Fighting Clarksons

In 1872 a row broke out in the Clarkson family, owners of the *Iowa State Register*. "Father" Coker F. Clarkson and his two sons had bought the *Register* in 1870. The boys were James S. ("Ret") and Richard P. Clarkson.

"Father" was a great friend of Iowa Senator James Harlan. The sons favored William B. Allison who was opposing Harlan's bid for re-election to the United States Senate. Editorials favoring Allison had appeared in the *Register*. "Father" Clarkson thumped the desk and declared that the paper would be for Harlan as long as he owned any part of it. Ora Williams, former Iowa curator, tells what happened then:

"'Father' was asked to name his price for his one-third interest. Knowing his sons had no bank account, he said he would take \$30,000. Ret made a trip to Dubuque, and, after an interview with Jacob Rich, came back and laid \$30,000 on the table. After that the elder Clarkson was just the farm editor. The paper supported Allison and he was elected."

The Clarksons were exciting newspapermen. They were individuals of strong opinions and they did not hesitate to express them. They were so in-

tensely Republican that they regarded all Democrats as allies of the rebels of 1861-1865. They fervently believed that this country's prosperity depended upon protective tariffs. They were earnest prohibitionists. For thirty-two years the Clarkson family warmly espoused the cause of Iowa and Iowa's farmers. At the same time they produced a sparkling, well-edited paper. They built the *Register* into a full-fledged state paper.

Newspapers had come and gone in the sixteen years between the demise of the *Iowa Star* and the beginning of the Clarkson era. The Whig paper, the *Fort Des Moines Gazette*, discontinued in 1851, was revived in 1856 as a free-soil Republican paper named *The Iowa Citizen*. In 1860 Publisher John Teesdale changed the name of the *Citizen* to the *Iowa State Register*.

The Clarksons bought the *Register* from Frank M. Mills in 1870. Richard Clarkson had come to Des Moines in 1861 and had worked on the *Register* as a printer. The paper then was under the direction of able Frank W. Palmer, who changed the *Register* from a weekly to a daily in 1862. "Ret" came to Des Moines in 1866 and "Father" followed in 1870. They had been farming in Grundy County before that, although "Father" was an old-time printer and editor from Indiana.

Before that, the Democrats had taken the old equipment of the *Iowa Star* in 1855 and had pub-

lished the *Iowa Statesman*. The *Iowa State Journal* appeared and then the *Commonwealth*. After numerous starts and stops, the *Iowa State Leader* emerged as the strong Democratic paper in 1870 under the editorship of W. W. Witmer. Needless to say, the *Register* and the *Leader* did not see eye to eye. Their differences disappeared only when the two papers were combined in 1902 under the editorship of Harvey Ingham.

In politics, the Clarksons gave no quarter. In the hotly-contested election of 1876, Rutherford B. Hayes was the Republican candidate and Samuel Tilden the Democratic nominee. Several days after election the result was still undecided. The *Register* declared: "Our faith in the ultimate result [Hayes' election] is unshrinking. We have the ballots. We only need an honest count and that, please God, we're going to have. The whole situation depends on Louisiana. That state we are satisfied we have, and nothing but fraud can rob us of it." Hayes finally was declared winner by one electoral vote in that still-disputed election of 1876.

The day after the presidential election in 1884, preliminary figures indicated that Republican James G. Blaine had won. The outlook changed in the next few days, however. The *Register* said then: "Blaine elected by the ballots of New York but may be counted out by Democratic bulldozers

who control the canvassing board of New York, who have so far refused to grant an honest count or pay any attention to the positive charges made of fraud." Blaine, good friend of the Clarksons, finally was beaten in the New York count and lost the presidency.

Ora Williams says that the Blaine forces in the 1880's once wanted to strengthen their candidate's cause by buying the *Chicago Tribune* and placing "Ret" Clarkson at the head of it. Joseph S. Runnells, a former Iowan who had become head of the Pullman Company, personally offered Joseph Medill a million dollars for the *Tribune*. Medill said "no." Runnells raised the figure to a million and a half. Medill finally told him that the *Tribune* was not for sale at any price.

The tariff was a big issue in 1888 when Benjamin Harrison was elected president. The *Register* headline the next morning read: "Protection has won. The union forever, hurrah boys, hurrah!"

During these same years, the Clarksons were implacable foes of liquor. In 1882 the people of Iowa voted to adopt an amendment to the state constitution prohibiting the sale of liquor. In 1883 the state supreme court declared the amendment illegal on a technicality. The *Register* said: "There will be an awakening if the judicial insolence goes much farther. . . . The decision adds one more chapter to the growing doctrine that this

is not a government of the people but a government of courts and that judges stand supreme over all with power greater than emperor or czar."

"Ret" Clarkson had early become a national figure in the Republican party. He was chairman of the National Republican Executive Committee from 1890 to 1892, and in that same period he was named First Assistant Postmaster General. He sold his half interest in the *Register* in 1891 to his brother and moved to the East. "Father" Clarkson died in 1890.

The Clarksons' most important contributions to the journalism of Iowa were in the fields of state news and farm news. From the first, they sought to put out a paper of interest far beyond the immediate Des Moines area. In 1879 they reported prospecting for gold in northern Winnebago County. In 1873 they told of a Wayne County teacher being fined \$24 for whipping a pupil. In the same year the *Register* carried a story of the reduction of the Davenport police force to four men.

They covered such varied subjects as elections, church and school news, and crime news. In 1885 they announced: "From this time on, the *Register* will be made the daily as well as the weekly paper of the enterprising and intelligent citizens of every city, town and farm neighborhood in the state. We shall strive to be still more an Iowa paper,

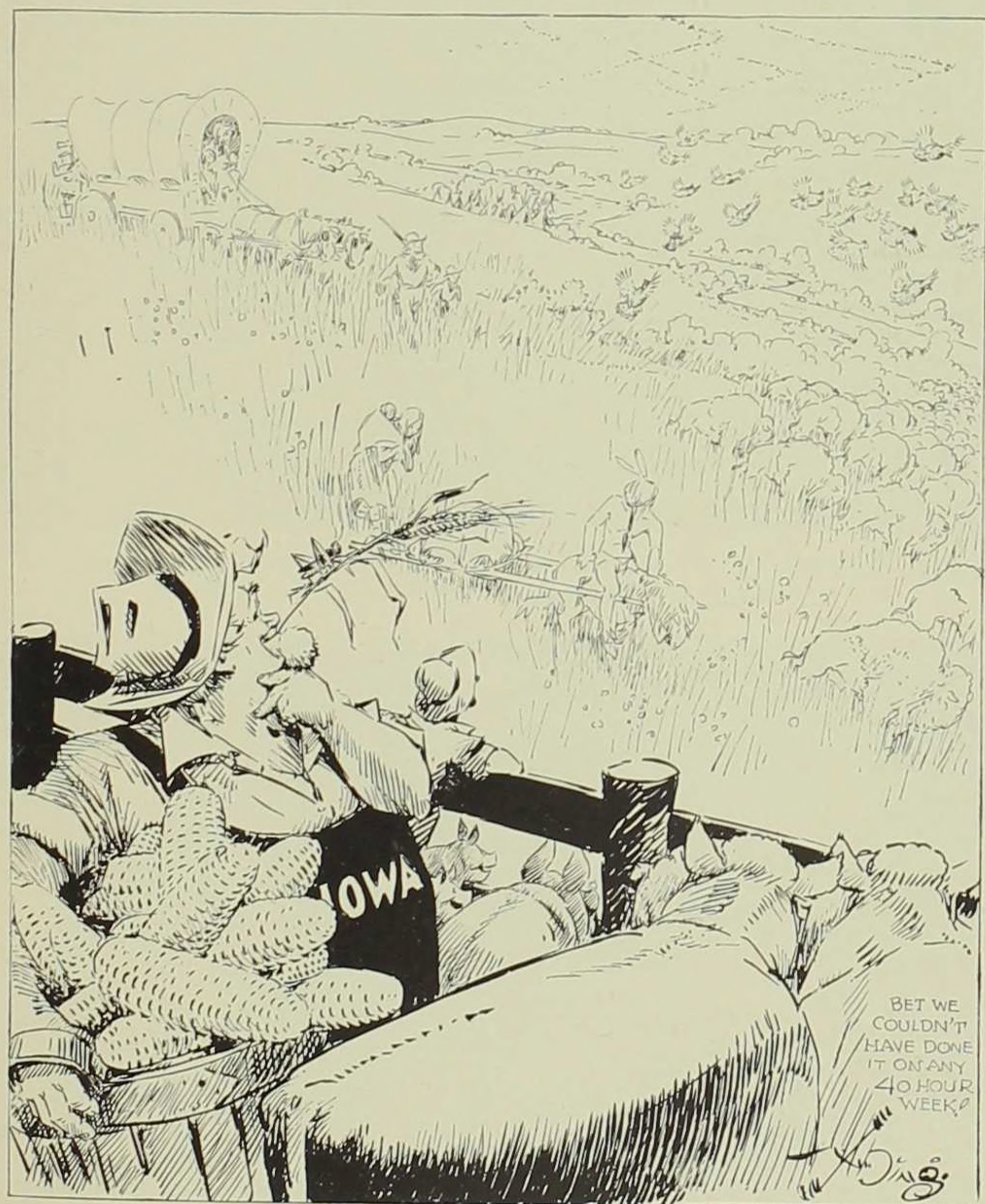
putting our own state first in all our efforts and bending our strength to service in every good way."

No small part of the credit for development of the *Register* into a major state paper belongs to "Father" Clarkson and his column, "Farm, Garden and Orchard." Thousands of farmers read it every week in the Wednesday morning paper. He scolded farmers for going into debt and for using bad farming practices. He gave the farmer advice on how to increase his yields and how to combat crop and animal diseases.

In 1888 "Father" wrote: "We delight to present in various ways arguments and illustrations against contracting debts and mortgaging farms so long as it possibly can be avoided." In 1890 he said that "Iowa has been shipping too much of her raw products to Chicago and other toll gate places. . . . If Iowa can raise the most hogs, it can slaughter them for the consumer. If it can raise the best corn, it can manufacture the corn into starch, glucose or the new soap products. If the state can produce, it can manufacture."

His most sustained attack was on the Washburn-Moen "barbed wire trust" which forced the farmer to pay high prices for his fence wire in the late 1870's and in the 1880's. Iowa was just coming into her own as a livestock state, and farmers everywhere were badly in need of fences.

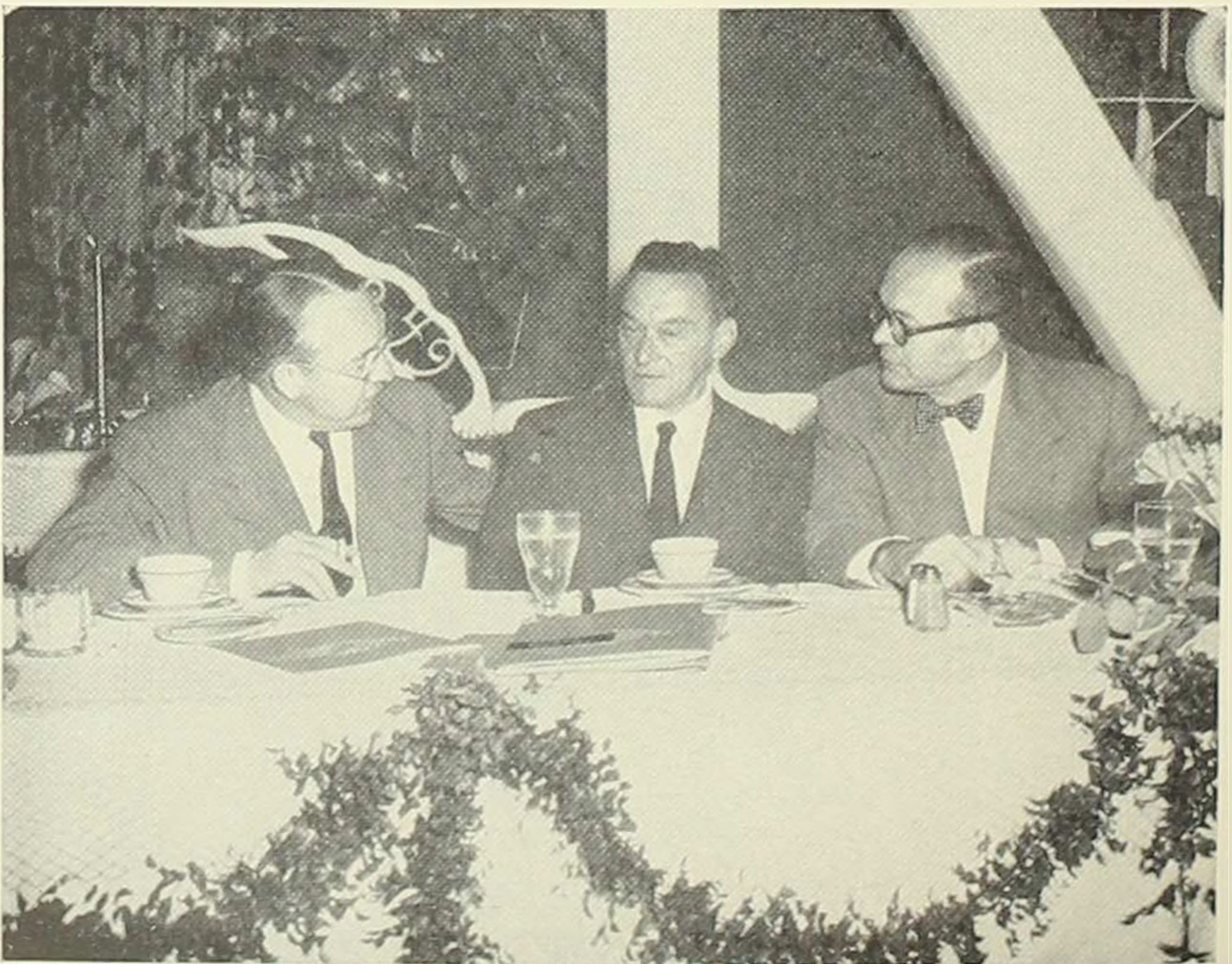
IOWA HAS COME A LONG WAY IN A HUNDRED YEARS



Cartoon by "Ding" Honoring Centennial of Iowa Statehood — 1946

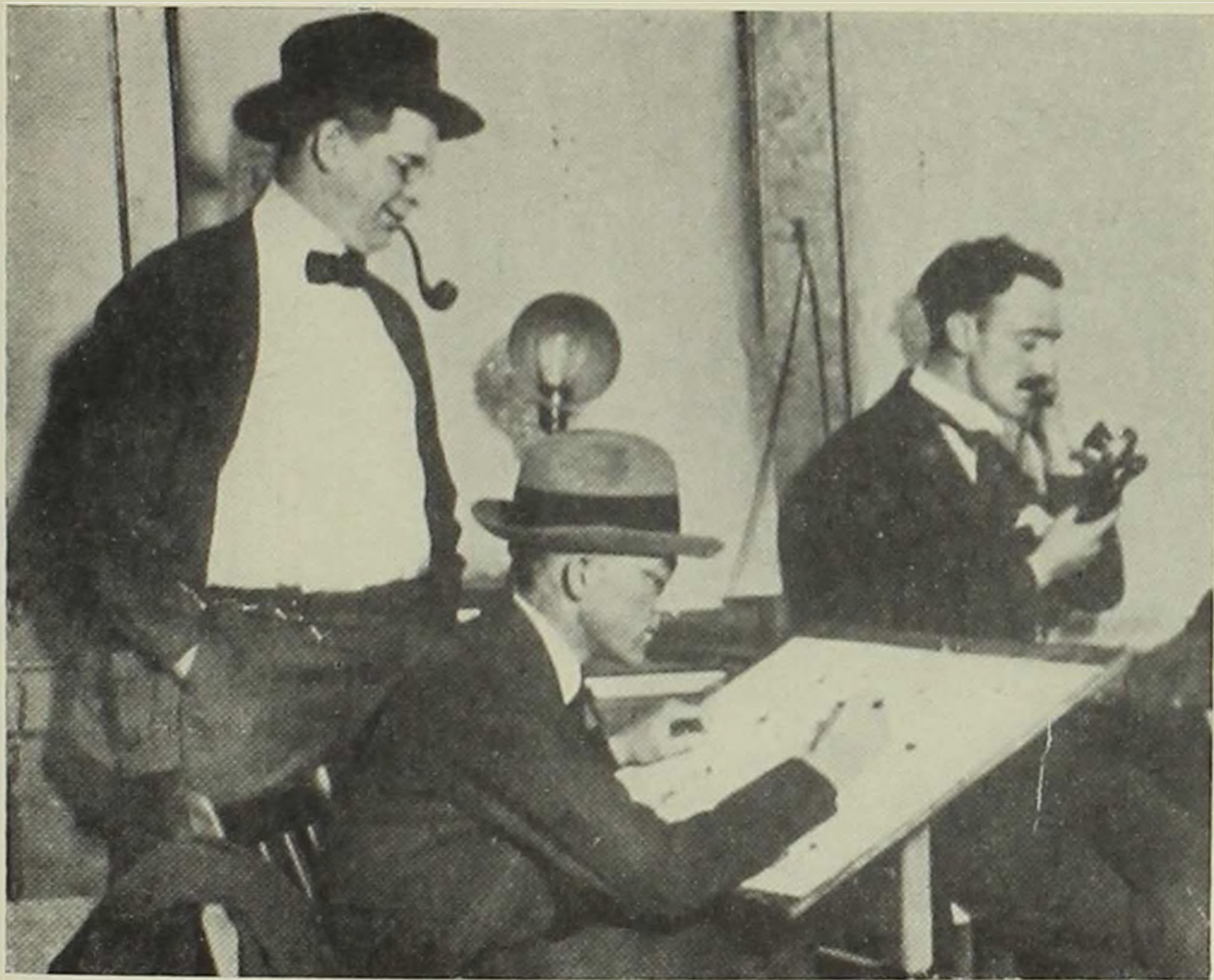


Harvey Ingham and Gardner Cowles, Sr. (1937) Celebrate  
Ingham's 35th Anniversary as *Register* Editor

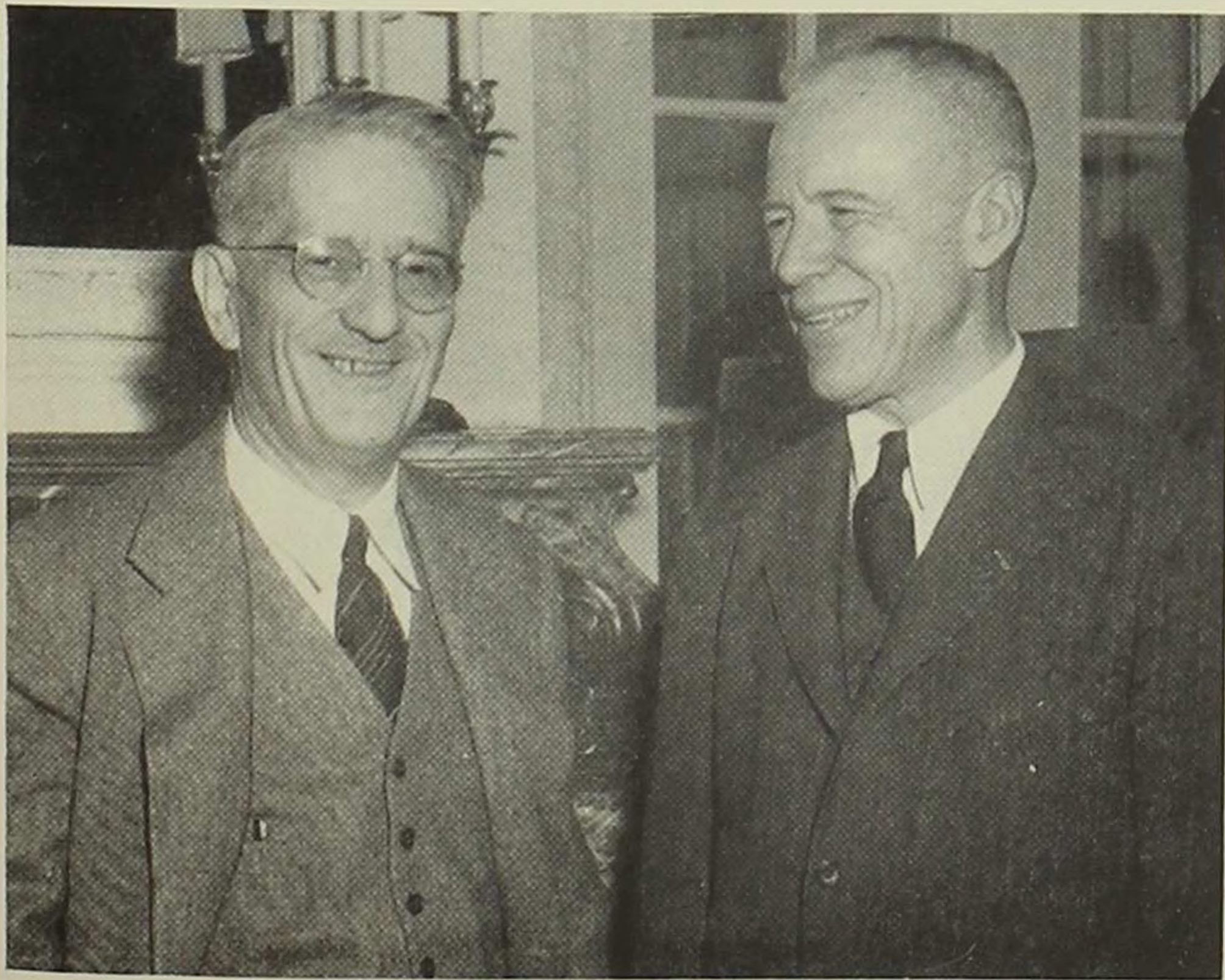


John Cowles, Walter Lippmann, and Gardner Cowles (1949)  
at the *Register* Centennial Celebration





"Ding" Darling, Russell Cole, and George Yates (1920)  
Cartoonist, Illustrator, and Photographer



W. W. Waymack and Robert P. Patterson, Former Secretary of  
War, at a Civil Rights Dinner in New York



HOMES OF THE REGISTER

B. F. Allen Bldg.  
Before 1918  
Fourth & Court

Present Home  
Since 1918  
Eighth & Locust

Clarkson wrote of the trust: "If this monstrous monopoly is allowed to collect these intolerable royalties, farmers will feel the grinding power as long as Washburn-Moen have their hands on the throats of the people." After a long battle in which Clarkson figured prominently, the trust was vanquished.

The Clarkson era waned as the end of the nineteenth century approached. With "Father" Clarkson dead and "Ret" out of the business and living in the East, the paper lost part of its punch.

Des Moines had four papers by that time, the *Capitol* and the *News* as well as the *Register* and the *Leader*. The *Leader* had struggled for years to keep alive. The situation called for a change. That change was to come through the efforts of two middle-aged men then living in Algona, Iowa. Little did Harvey Ingham in his weekly newspaper office and Gardner Cowles in his bank realize that in a few years they would uproot themselves and plunge into the hectic and dangerous business of rebuilding a metropolitan newspaper that supposedly had seen its best days.