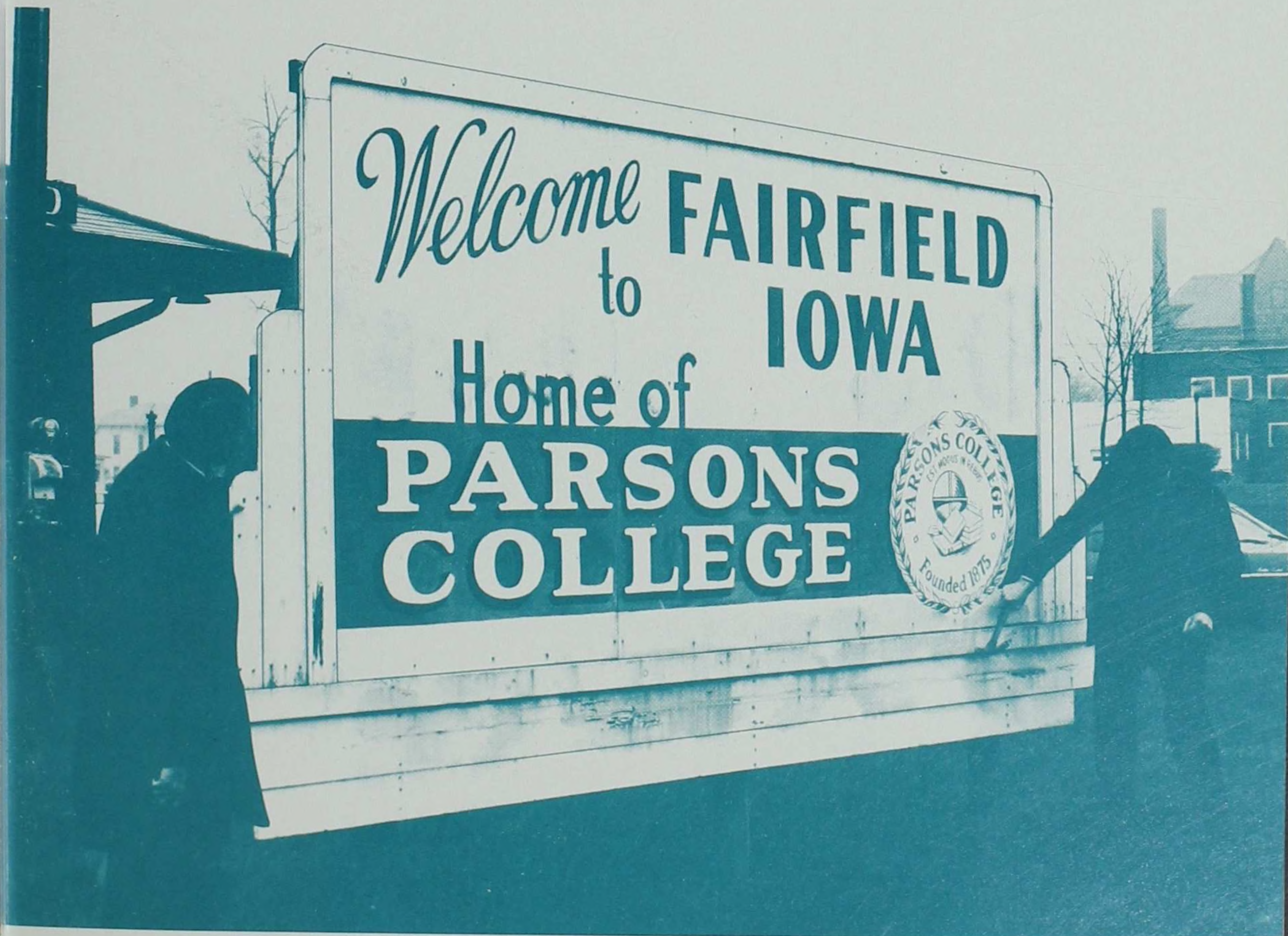


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Mary K. Fredericksen, Editor

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Cover: (front) Parsons College President Carl W. Kreisler, left, and Administrative Assistant Richard Wessler, right, attend to the college's timeworn welcome sign at the Fairfield railroad depot; (back) cardboard bankruptcy signs posted in the doorways of campus buildings in early June 1973 provided the grim evidence that a solution for Parsons College's financial woes had not been found. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)



*The Meaning of the Palimpsest*

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

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



# The Death of an American College: A Retrospective Look

by Dean Gabbert

Fairfield's darkest day came in an unlikely setting of bright sunshine and spring flowers. It was the day Parsons College died — June 1, 1973 — and it marked the final chapter in an incredible story that had begun nearly eighteen years earlier when the flamboyant Millard G. Roberts became president of Parsons College and set out to make it the most talked-about school in America.

The day started with a 9 o'clock committee meeting in Parsons Hall. Eight people, elected by their peers, huddled in the once-opulent office of Acting President Everett Hadley. Back in the Roberts heyday, they had called it the Cloud Room.

Those present included: Hadley; Robert Gamrath and M.K. Long from the board of trustees; John Amberg, finance officer; Dick Wessler, administrative assistant; Harry Cannon and John Wahrer from the faculty; and Larry Hinton, representing the student body. By 10:15 A.M. they knew what they had to do and how they were going to do it. In solemn procession they walked across Carter Drive and filed into Brown Learning Center, where the entire college community waited with feelings of both fear and hope.

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*This article is basically a reprint of Dean Gabbert's award-winning story about the tenth anniversary of the closing of Parsons College, published in the Fairfield Ledger on 1 June 1983. A copy of the newspaper article was routed to the Palimpsest editor by a member of the State Historical Society of Iowa with the suggestion that it be considered for publication in the magazine. It is with a great deal of pleasure that I am able to publish it in this issue of the Palimpsest. — Ed.*

The applause which erupted from the standing room only crowd quickly gave way to silence when Hadley moved to center stage. Reading from a prepared statement, he told his listeners what they didn't want to hear: The college would close its doors after Saturday's commencement exercises, less than twenty-four hours away.

"Insurmountable odds," he said, had forced upon them the decision to close the college after ninety-eight years. In a matter-of-fact fashion he said that students would be able to transfer to the University of Iowa or Dubuque University without loss of credit. Students in the aviation program could go to Park College in St. Louis. Someone in the audience sobbed softly. Others tried unsuccessfully to hold back their tears. Hadley kept emotion out of his voice, but when he started to express his thanks to all present, he hesitated, and then handed the paper to a student to read.

The meeting ended with an unexpected bit of drama when Dr. Charles Sloca, an English professor, seized the microphone and proposed a last-ditch scheme to keep the college alive by bringing back Millard Roberts.

"He has the resources to maintain this college, at least for a short period, and he is interested," Sloca declared. The students, however, hooted him down with a loud chorus of "no!"

Since that fateful day ten years ago, Parsons has been the subject of unending autopsies. Both participants and onlookers have offered their own theories and explanations of what happened. In one form or another they have





Flags flew at half-mast on the central campus to mark the closing of Parsons College. In the background is Ewing Hall, where the college had its beginnings in 1875. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

posed the same question: "Who killed the college?" Millard Roberts, it would seem, gets the lion's share of the blame, but there are many other popular culprits, including the North Central Association and even *Life* magazine.

But in the end, it was probably the college's monumental debt, exceeding \$16 million, that sent the patient to its grave.

When Roberts arrived on the Parsons scene in 1955, he brought with him a consuming personal ambition and a flair for making headlines. He had served on the staff of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City for three years when he was chosen for the presidency at the age of thirty-seven.

Attacking many educational "sacred cows," he attracted wide attention with his revolutionary ideas. Few men outside the ranks of politics and show business or inside the ranks of education ever received as much publicity. His supporters praised his practical, hardheaded approach while his critics accused him of being a promoter and a "con man" disguised as an educator.

David Boroff, in his book *Campus U.S.A.*, described him in these words: "Pudgy, flamboyant, tireless, Roberts has the glad-handing manner of a Chamber of Commerce president, the force of a bulldozer, and the guile . . . of a snake-oil salesman."

One of his first flamboyant acts was to lavish \$10,000 on his inauguration, an affair on October 29, 1955, which students jokingly termed "The Ascension." Roberts' initial objectives were to boost enrollment and expand the physical plant. He was eminently successful in both areas. For ten straight years Parsons topped all colleges in the state in percentage of enrollment gain. After the student body passed the 1,000-mark, new dormitories sprang up almost overnight and new construction continued at a frantic pace almost to the end of his tenure. His successes were reflected in his local popularity. In 1958 Roberts was chosen Fairfield's "Man of the Year." In 1960 he was presented with a new Cadillac as a gift from forty local business and professional people.

In a cascading series of reforms, Roberts

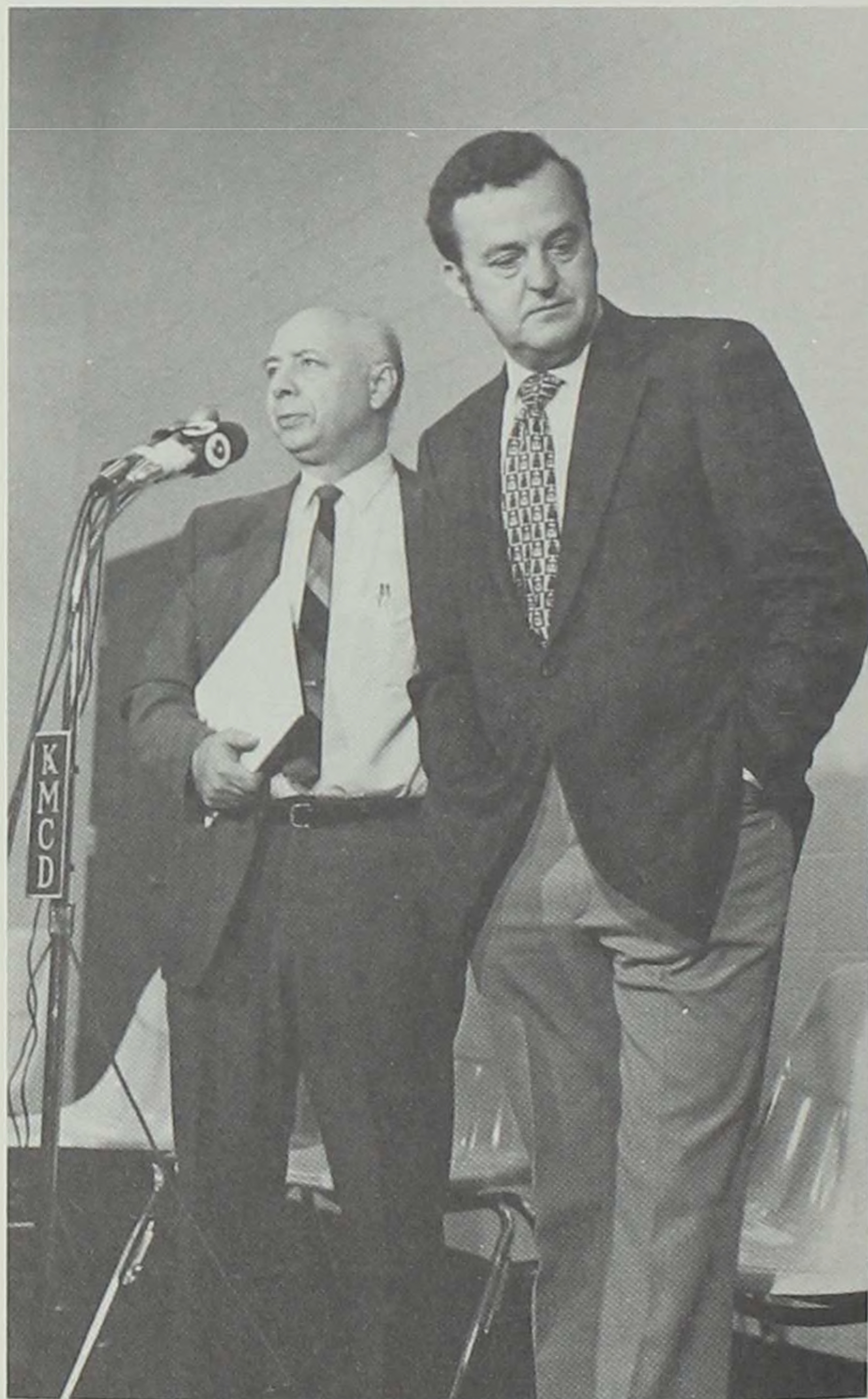


altered the educational landscape at Parsons. He established the trimester system, making it possible for students to reduce the time they would spend in college while enabling the college to make year-round use of its facilities. Scoffing at the idea that colleges should admit only those students who ranked near the top of their high school classes, Roberts won for Parsons a reputation as America's "second chance" school. He streamlined the curriculum, increased the student-teacher ratio, and dispatched an army of recruiters across the land to bring in students. At that time higher education was a "seller's market." Students turned away at other colleges began to see Parsons as a new hope and they flocked to Fairfield by the hundreds. By 1964 enrollment had reached 2,500 — nearly a ten-fold growth in nine years. By 1966 it had doubled in size again.

Roberts built a strong faculty by openly raiding other institutions with offers of fabulous salaries and fringe benefits. Cynics called it the "Gold Rush" but by 1966 the level of faculty salaries at Parsons was the third highest in the nation.

Roberts found supporters for most of his ideas, but he aroused the ire of the academic world when he contended that colleges could make a profit by borrowing management principles from the corporate world. In 1966 he was quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that he expected Parsons to show a profit of \$5.3 million that year. His profits were all to be on paper, however. In fact, the college's debt grew at an average rate of \$100,000 per month during Roberts' twelve-year tenure.

But Roberts' ability as a salesman caused other communities to clamor for a place on the Parsons "bandwagon." He once boasted that more than forty cities had asked him to set up new colleges. He did help organize five "satellite" colleges and he was well paid for such consulting services. By 1973, however, four of them had folded and the fifth was in its last throes.



*The death of Parsons had already been announced when Dr. Charles Sloca, left, proposed that the college seek the aid of former President Millard Roberts. Acting President Everett Hadley's expression told his feelings about the suggestion. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

Roberts' critics accused him of running a one-man show and of playing fast and loose with figures. In time, these and other charges brought him into conflict with both the Presbyterian Church and the North Central Association [NCA]. The first conflict was resolved when, at Roberts' urging, the board of trustees adopted new articles in 1963 severing Parsons' historic ties with the church.

His troubles with the North Central Association were not so easily handled. They began in



1962 when six professors, tagged as the "dissidents," issued a formal complaint against the administration of the college. All were to resign or be fired within a year. Their charges were never made public, but the NCA conducted an investigation and Parsons was placed on probation July 24, 1963. An NCA evaluation team visited the campus in 1964, and the probation was lifted in 1965 with the stipulation that another evaluation be made within two years. Roberts suffered a more damaging blow in June 1966 when *Life* magazine published a highly-critical article describing him as "The Wizard of Flunk-Out U."

A new NCA fact-finding team arrived early in 1967 and on April 6 the association announced that it had revoked Parsons'

accreditation, effective June 30. The quality of the college's academic program was never questioned, but the report cited administrative weaknesses and took Roberts to task for a "credibility gap" in the operation of the college. Roberts threatened legal action against the NCA and this sparked a faculty revolt. By a vote of 101 to 58, the faculty asked the board of trustees to relieve him of his duties. The board took formal action on June 5, 1967, and called for his resignation less than four months after they had granted him a new five-year contract. (Roberts is now retired and living in Oneonta, New York, in a large home which he purchased while at Parsons. His last academic position was that of dean of students at the State University of New York at Albany.)



*Parsons president from 1955 to 1967, Millard Roberts boasted that colleges could make a profit if operated like a business. But it didn't work that way at Parsons. During Roberts' tenure, college debt grew at an average rate of \$100,000 per month. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*



The post-Roberts era at Parsons was one of frustration and false hopes. Four men headed the administration during the six-year period and their defeats far outnumbered their victories. The first was Dr. William B. Munson, vice-president for academic affairs, who took ill-advised legal action against the North Central Association in federal court in Chicago. His administration lasted less than ninety days.

Next came Dr. Wayne Stamper, chairman of the biology department, who was named provost and later acting president. Stamper took a first step toward making peace with the NCA in 1968 when he won for Parsons the new status of "recognized candidate for accreditation."

When Stamper resigned for reasons of health, on May 10, 1968, the board turned to yet another faculty member, Dr. Carl W. Kreisler, head of the education department. Kreisler was sworn in as president on June 7, 1968, and two months later he announced a long-term refinancing agreement with most of the college's secured creditors, covering more than half the total debts. Kreisler then devoted most of his time to the task of regaining the college's accreditation. His primary goal was to close what the North Central Association had described as a "credibility gap" in the college operations. His work paid off and on April 8, 1970, the NCA voted to restore full accreditation to Parsons. Probably the high point of Kreisler's presidency came on his return from Chicago that night, when celebrating students met his plane at the Fairfield Airport and hoisted him to their shoulders like a triumphant football coach.

During the dark days of 1968 and 1969 the college community, and Fairfield too, had believed that the regaining of accreditation would be the cure for all the ills of the college. When it came, despair gave way to optimism and there was a general belief that enrollment would quickly climb again. But it didn't happen.

Accreditation did little more than put the college on even terms with its competitors. Rapid changes were occurring in higher education. Parsons found itself now with a new set of problems: soaring operating costs; fewer young people of college age; the emergence of community colleges; and a general de-emphasis on the need and importance of a liberal arts education.

If Parsons was slow to adjust to changing conditions, it was even slower to adjust to shrinking revenues. One faculty member characterized the situation as "the old story of a champagne appetite and a beer income."

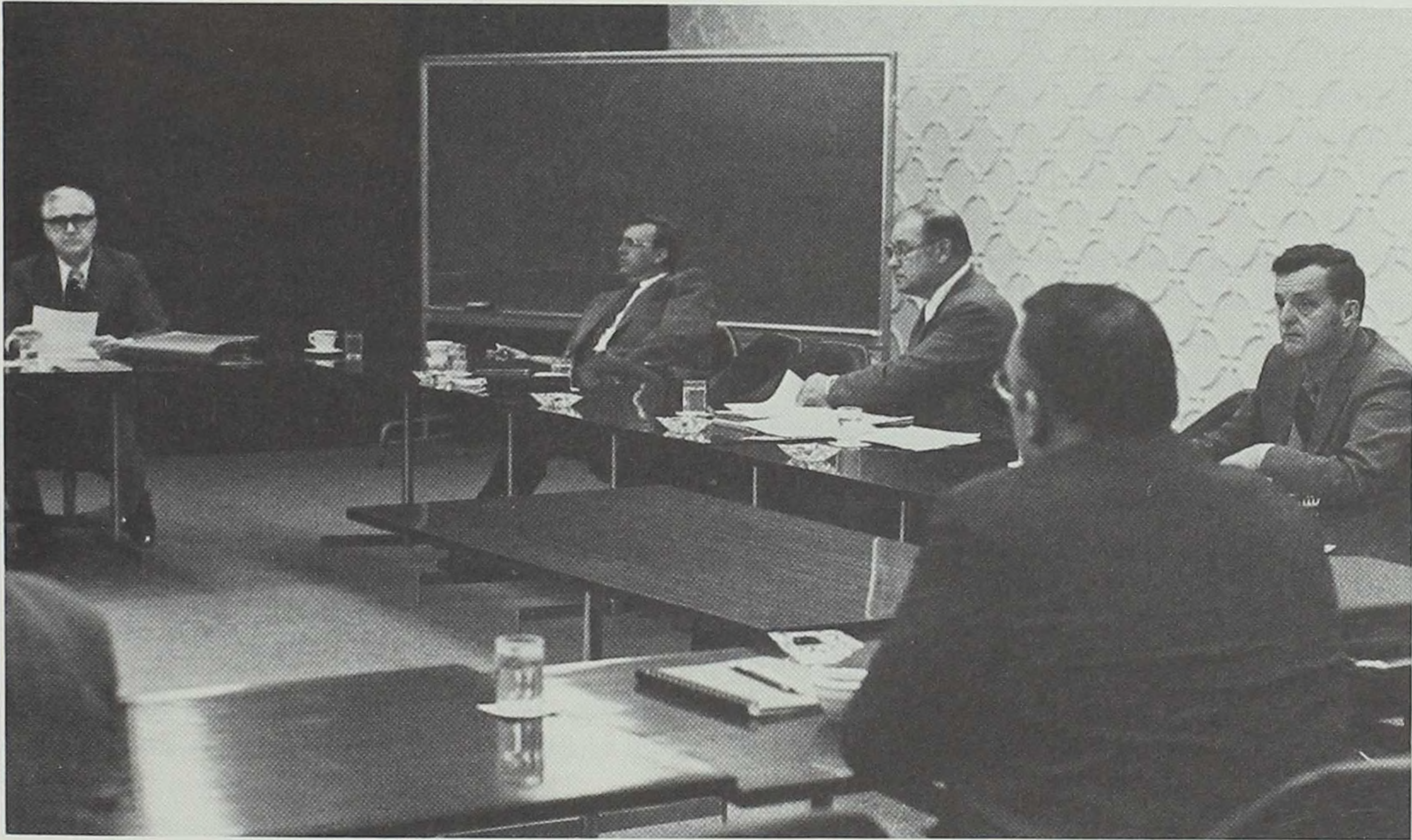
One of the biggest financial problems for the college was the sprawling physical plant which was out of all proportion to the size of the student body. Continuous construction during the boom years of the 1960s had provided dormitory facilities for 3,600 students, but by 1973 the number housed on campus had dwindled to 500.

Starting early in 1973 the college was beset by a succession of crises that resulted in unwanted publicity as well as campus unrest. On February 24, fifteen faculty members were notified that they would be released at the end of the school year. On March 12 Kreisler resigned as president and the board named Everett Hadley to succeed him as acting president. Hadley had joined the faculty in 1965 as an associate professor of education and psychology, and had later served as vice-president of student services and dean of college life.

By April the proverbial handwriting was on the wall for those who could see it. On April 26 the college confirmed that it could not meet its May 1 payroll. Those earning \$600 or more per month were to receive only half-pay and hourly workers would be placed on a half-time schedule starting May 1.

Early in May, Kranin, one of the fifteen faculty members scheduled for layoff, claimed the cutbacks were illegal and threatened legal





*At the May 1973 meeting of the board of trustees, board members opted to try and save Parsons College by seeking protection of the court under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code. Clockwise, from left to right, Robert Gamrath, T.J. McDonough, Roger Lund, Everett Hadley, and John Amberg. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

action. At the same time, Kranin (who used only one name) charged that Kreisler had drawn his presidential salary from Parsons College from December 15 to March 12 while serving as a full-time faculty member at Western Kentucky University.

Kreisler had been granted sabbatical leave without pay for the 1971 fall semester to serve as a visiting professor at the Kentucky school. After returning to Parsons in December, he had continued to commute between Fairfield and Bowling Green. Kreisler agreed to pay back the monies received during the three-month period, but the whole affair put a cloud over the services of the man who had worked for nearly two years to regain accreditation for Parsons.

A movement to close the college had strong support when the board of trustees convened for its spring meeting May 17, 1973. And

closure would have probably occurred at that time had it not been for T.J. McDonough, a Drake law professor and member of a Des Moines law firm, who appeared on the scene with what looked like a daring and last-ditch plan to save Parsons. By seeking protection of the court under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code, McDonough counseled, the college could continue to operate while being temporarily freed of its crushing debt.

The trustees voted to accept this plan, but on May 18 they faced a new problem. The four Iowa banks which held a \$556,000 mortgage on all books in the campus library instigated foreclosure proceedings and impounded the college's dwindling bank account. The loan had been the joint effort of the First National Bank and the Iowa State Bank and Trust Company, Fairfield, Union Bank and Trust Company, Ottumwa, and Merchants National Bank,



Cedar Rapids. The terms of the loan called for payments twice a year. The first payment of principal and interest had been made in October 1972, but only the interest had been paid in February 1973. The banks denied any intention of physically closing the college library, saying that they only wished to protect their interests.

At this time the board also voted to reinstate the fifteen faculty members, offering them new contracts in an effort to forestall any lawsuits that could further jeopardize the college's precarious position. In an interesting sidelight, the board also accepted the resignation of board chairman Roger Lund, Des Moines, and named a recently-appointed trustee, twenty-nine year old Arthur Grant of San Francisco, to succeed him. A 1967 graduate of Parsons, Grant was the youngest board chairman ever to serve. And his tenure as chairman was also the shortest — fifteen days, to be exact.

On May 26 Judge Richard F. Stageman conducted a day-long hearing in Des Moines on Parsons' request for protection under Chapter 11 of the bankruptcy act. Most members of the college community were braced for bad news, but few were prepared for the twelve-page death sentence which Judge Stageman handed down on May 29. Describing the college as "irretrievably insolvent," he ordered it to post \$250,000 in surety bonds within ten days in order to receive protection from its creditors. Candidly, he stated that he believed his order would in effect close the college unless it was reversed by a higher court.

He was right. The trustees who lived in Fairfield voted to close Parsons at an emergency meeting May 31. They then called the out-of-town trustees and asked them to concur in the action. There were no dissenters. The only remaining formality was a final meeting of the



*Board Chairman Roger Lund explained to students the financial predicament facing Parsons College administrators. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*





The last officers of Parsons College's board of trustees, these men were elected May 18, 1973, as the college struggled to stay alive. From left to right: Earl Larsen, vice-chairman; Arthur Grant, chairman; and M.K. Long, vice-chairman. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

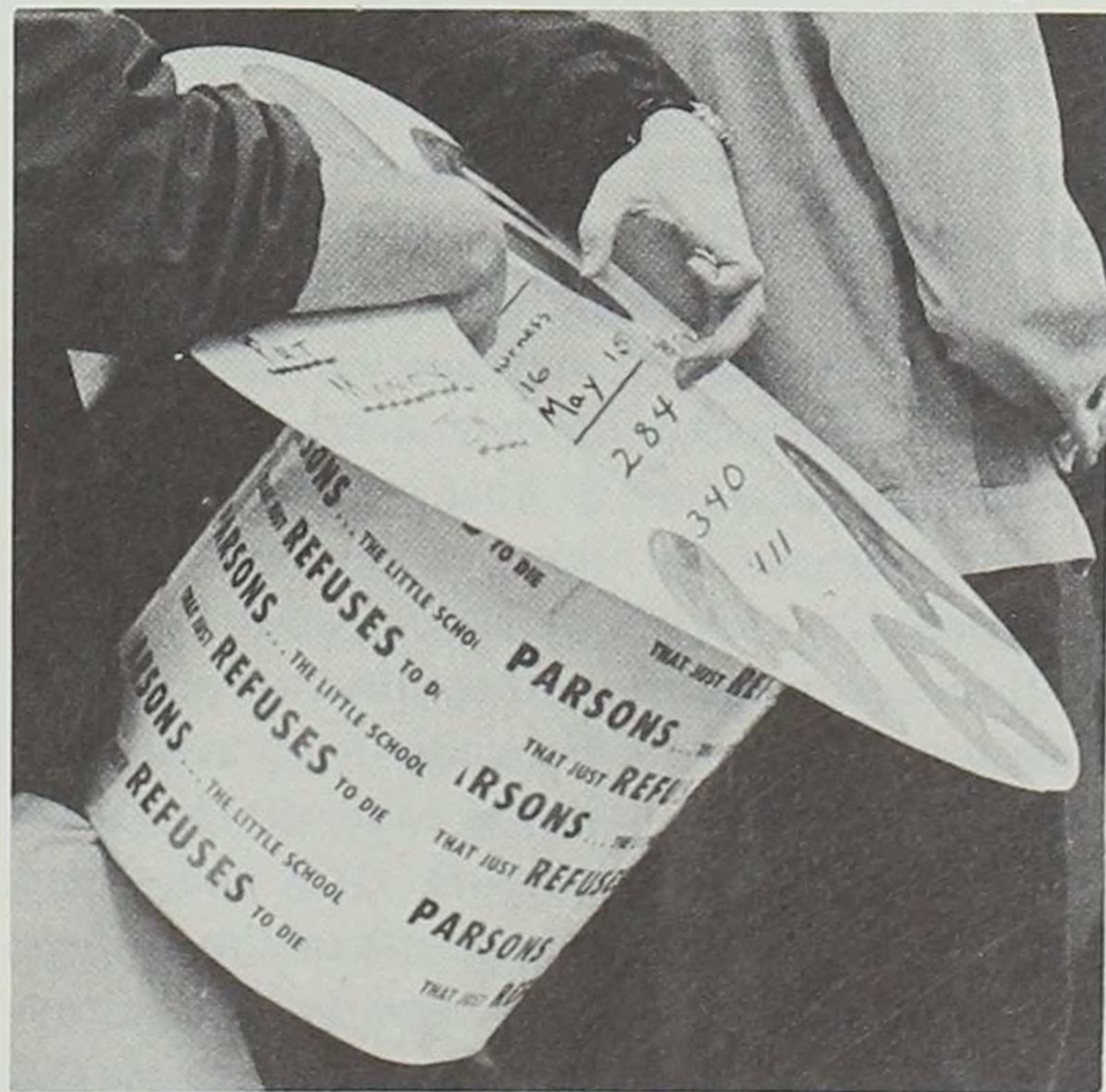
committee of administrators, faculty, and staff which had been created by the board to work with the bankruptcy court.

Voluntary bankruptcy proceedings were filed early in June and only then did the reality of the college's total debt become clear: it was a staggering \$16,241,119.49. That figure included secured debts of \$12,675,239.47, judgment creditors with claims totaling \$71,227.23, with an unsecured debt of \$3,494,652.79. The largest secured creditors were the Connecticut General and Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Companies which together held mortgage bonds totaling \$7,263,000.

Since the peak of 5,141 students in the fall of 1966, enrollment had fallen to below 800. A special United States census requested by the city in 1966 placed Fairfield's population at 11,587. At its peak Parsons employed 814 individuals, including 250 faculty members. By 1973 the college payroll had shrunk to 175, which included administrators, faculty, staff workers, and hourly employees.

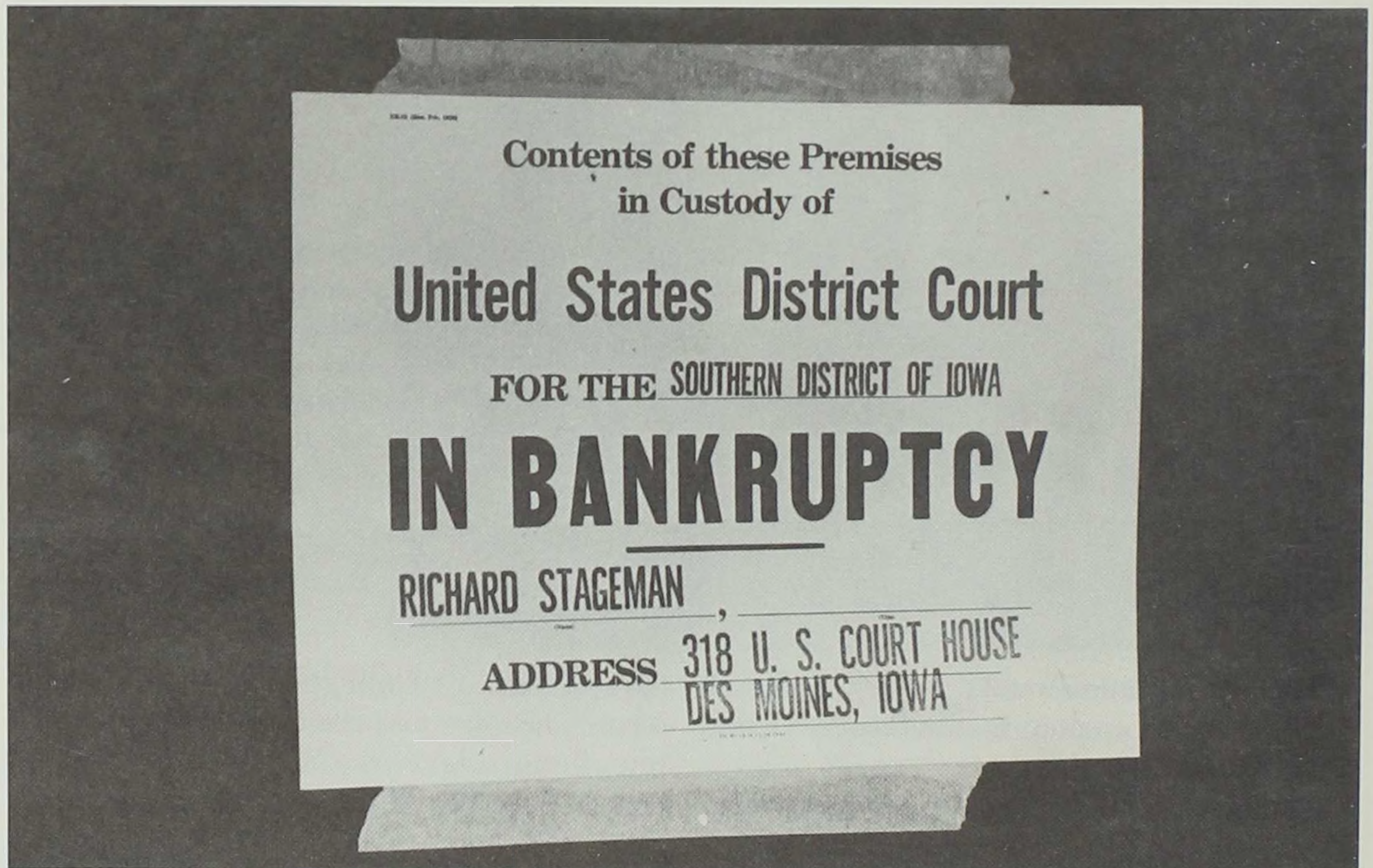
Acting President Hadley, who was to become director of admissions and associate professor of education at Ohio Northern University, had no misgivings about those final

days of Parsons College. "It was a difficult scene," he once told the *Fairfield Ledger* in a telephone interview, "but there was also hope." Basically an optimist, Hadley said he never lost hope that Parsons would survive until Judge Stageman called for the \$250,000 surety bond. "Then I knew we were dead," he said. Hadley also recalled the herculean job of contacting Parsons' creditors after the decision had been made to seek Chapter 11 court pro-



(courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)





Cardboard bankruptcy signs told a mute story when they were posted at various locations on the Parsons campus. The college's debt totaled more than \$16 million. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

tection. "We called 728 creditors and 726 of them acquiesced. That [had] to be a minor miracle," he said.

Fairfield Mayor Robert Rasmussen believed Parsons might have continued to exist if the college had been able to hold its enrollment to 2,500 or 3,000 students. "There seemed to be no way to stop the merry-go-round," he once said. "As enrollment increased, additional facilities were needed. That meant borrowing more money and bringing in more students to maintain the cash flow. On and on it went."

Rasmussen had served as director of public relations at Parsons between 1959 and early 1972. He had joined the staff of the Iowa League of Municipalities in 1973 and was a member of the city council when the college closed. In his mind there were two basic reasons for Parsons' phenomenal growth in the early 1960s. One was the sudden demand for

technology which caused Americans to look upon a college degree as a stepping-stone to all things. The other was the inability of most eastern colleges to meet the new enrollment demands. "These were the things that gave Parsons the impetus to take on the educational establishment," claimed Rasmussen. Acknowledging that the Parsons approach of spoonfeeding its students was a drastic change, Rasmussen remained convinced that the system worked very well. One measure he pointed to were the large numbers of Parsons students who went on to highly successful careers. Yet he contended that Parsons was doomed the day it lost its accreditation. "That meant the college [would lose] students and . . . the cash flow they provided."

Harry Cannon, who had come to Parsons in 1971 as chairman of business and accounting, had suffered through the closure of Lea Col-



lege, one of Roberts' satellite institutions in Albert Lea, Minnesota. He had been a member of that last committee at Parsons which had been forced to make the ultimate closure decision on June 1, 1973. In the aftermath, Cannon believed something might have been done to save the college in the early 1960s. "But in retrospect, I don't think what we did or didn't do made much difference." Cannon believed that mortgaging the library had been a major mistake, one which led directly to the demise



*Tasting the bitterness of defeat, Acting President Everett Hadley sat alone after informing students and faculty that Parsons College must close. In office only eighty-two days, he waged a valiant fight to keep the college alive. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

of the college. He was also critical of T.J. McDonough, the lawyer who had persuaded the board to move into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. "He led us to see that as the only alternative. If we had been a business, maybe Chapter 11 would have made it fly, but the college was not a business and we overlooked that. But I really can't blame that man, because in our desperation, we listened to him a little too eagerly."

Although Cannon's years at Parsons were difficult ones, he had glowing praise for the entire college community. "They hung in there and they did a good job against impossible odds," he said. "When it came time to close, we did it with order and dignity." He thought that the struggle to stay alive had brought people together, and he cited the cooperation among faculty members, the solidarity and maturity of students, and the support of the community.

Cannon remains as a prime source for what transpired at that last committee meeting held in Acting President Hadley's office. He has pointed out that while the trustees had voted the previous Thursday morning to close the college, they were prepared to hold off if the committee could arrive at a reasonable plan to keep things going.

"It was a free-wheeling discussion," he recalled. "We thought we could make it through the summer or even the fall, but there was no way we could do it without hurting the students and the community. Somebody asked Hadley to make a motion to close the college, but he wouldn't do it. So there never was a motion, but there was a consensus and the decision was made. I cried a little at that meeting."

Charles Barnett, executive vice-president of the Fairfield Area Chamber of Commerce, was once asked if there was much the community could have done to save Parsons during its last years. He replied, "When you're faced with unbearable fixed costs and an unbearable debt load, you don't have many choices."



Barnett was a 1953 graduate of Parsons and a longtime college staff member. He served as director of admissions until June 1, 1970, when he moved to Florida. Barnett believed that the departure of Millard Roberts was followed by a power struggle within the administration which tended to ignore other problems that should have had priority. "Roberts was a very powerful figure. By leaving, he created a vacuum and when that happens there's always a rush to fill it. Everybody wanted to know who was going to be boss. Instead, they should have been doing something about debt management, which was then the No. 1 problem."

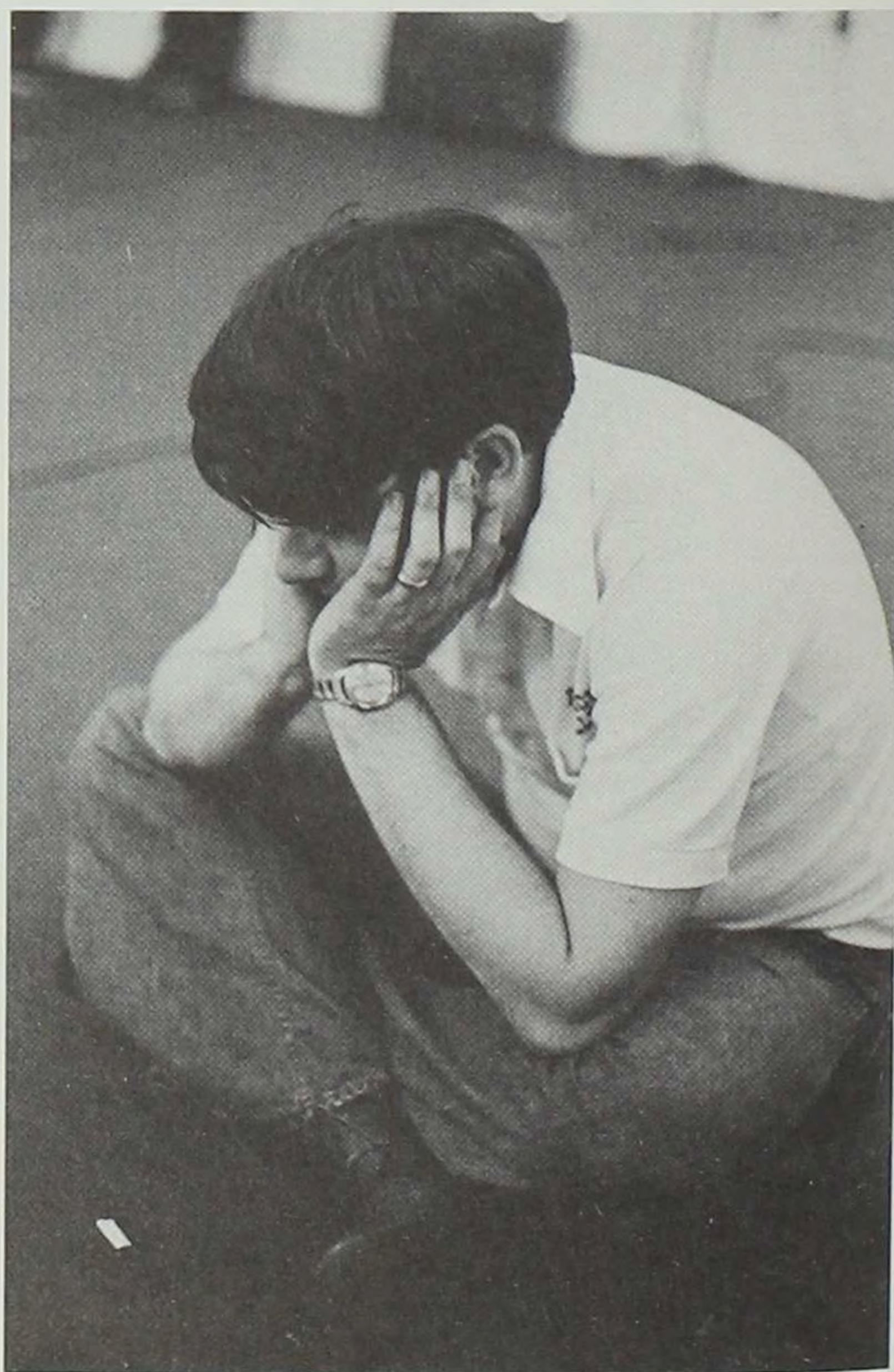
Robert L. Gamrath, veteran Fairfield businessman, has described the final months and weeks of Parsons College as a time when "it seemed like we were taking one step forward and two backward." Gamrath had been named to the board of trustees in 1967, only a month after Roberts' departure, and during the last years he had served as vice-chairman under Roger Lund. As the college's problems became more complex, increased responsibility fell on Gamrath and the other six Fairfield board members: Scott Jordan, John Hunt, Lee Goble, Robert Parkin, Ron Blough, and L.T. Evans. "It seemed like each semester we had to make a decision whether we were going to operate or not. We tried everything we could to keep things going."

In Gamrath's mind, hope began to fade in March 1973, when the trustees approached the two major creditors in Hartford, Connecticut, for an additional loan of \$500,000. They were assured by the insurance companies' counsels that they had done the job, but in the end the loan was turned down. "Our biggest problem was not the secured but the unsecured creditors," Gamrath said. "We were spending two-thirds of our time and money on the unsecured creditors."

Gamrath could take solace in the fact that the college was able to pay its bills during its last six years, or at least until shortly before the end.

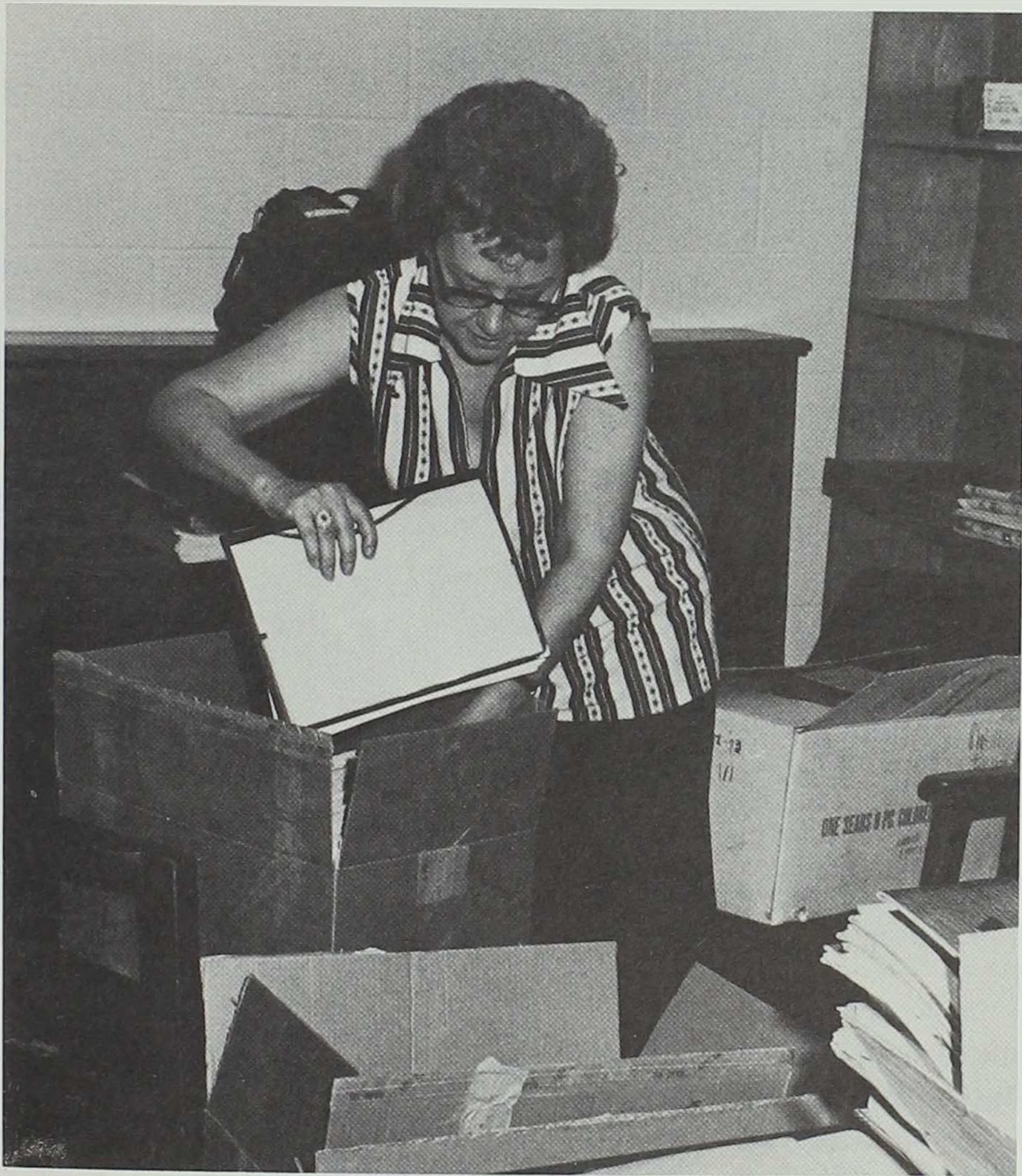
"Not one person went broke because of us," he said. Gamrath believed strongly that it was important to keep the college open as long as there was any hope of survival. It was painful to watch the size of the college operation diminish each year, but he was convinced that it was better than an abrupt closing which would have set off a rush to sell houses and otherwise damaged Fairfield's economy. "Where the community was concerned, I guess it was a case of being let down easy."

As the college's financial picture went from bad to worse in the spring of 1973, the board reached for whatever straws were available, including a possible merger with Ottumwa Heights College. "If we could have gotten



*Student Body President Eduard Carignan after he heard the news that Parsons College must close its doors. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*





*Faculty member Betty Schwengels packed up the contents of an office as the college closed down. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

through the summer, we might have been able to limp into fall," Gamrath said. "But we seemed to be devoting too much money and time [to] just putting out fires . . . It had reached the place where there was a question of the board's personal liability." Gamrath also made some observations on the mortgaging of the college library collection. "The banks knew that was a lousy loan in the first place. They did it to help us. The closing was inevitable and they weren't the ones who closed it."

A senior member of the Parsons faculty, Philip E. "Tib" Young, has contended that the college was closed not because of Millard Roberts but because of a series of mistakes made by the board of trustees and others. "You

understand I'm not defending Bob Roberts, he was a mistake himself, but the board didn't use good common sense after Roberts departed," Young said. "What they did was like hiring Walt Alston to coach the Chicago Bears. The men who followed Roberts were capable and good men when it came to academics, but you don't hire a good baseball man to coach football."

More than anything else, Young believed Parsons at that time needed a good, hard-nosed businessman to run things. "The problem then was not academics, it was business." As enrollment declined, Young, who had come to Parsons in 1945 as head football coach, athletic director, and dean of students, felt that the





*Parsons' last degree recipients preparing for the college's last commencement procession, June 2, 1973. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

college administration didn't face up to the need for faculty cutbacks. During its final year of operation, he claimed, the college had twenty-two more faculty members than it could use. "The head of the speech department left and we should have let attrition take care of it . . . but we hired a new speech head although we had only five speech majors at the time." Young thought that the college should have decided how many faculty it needed and then informed them that they would be paid only fifty percent of their salaries for the next year. "I'm sure there would have been enough people willing to do this to keep the college going."

High on his list of mistakes was the decision to mortgage the library books. "This just drove more nails in the coffin." He also believed that the four banks involved were too quick to initiate foreclosure action. "The big insurance com-

panies weren't pushing us. I think they had already written off their loans as bad debts and as long as the college was open, they had a chance to get a little back." He believed everyone would have been better off had the banks set up some kind of a collection plan with the college. "They could have moved somebody into the business office and taken one dollar of every four that came in, for example."

Young also agreed with the others about the decision to seek protection under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code. "Hadley and the administration were assured this was the way to go, but I think they were misled."

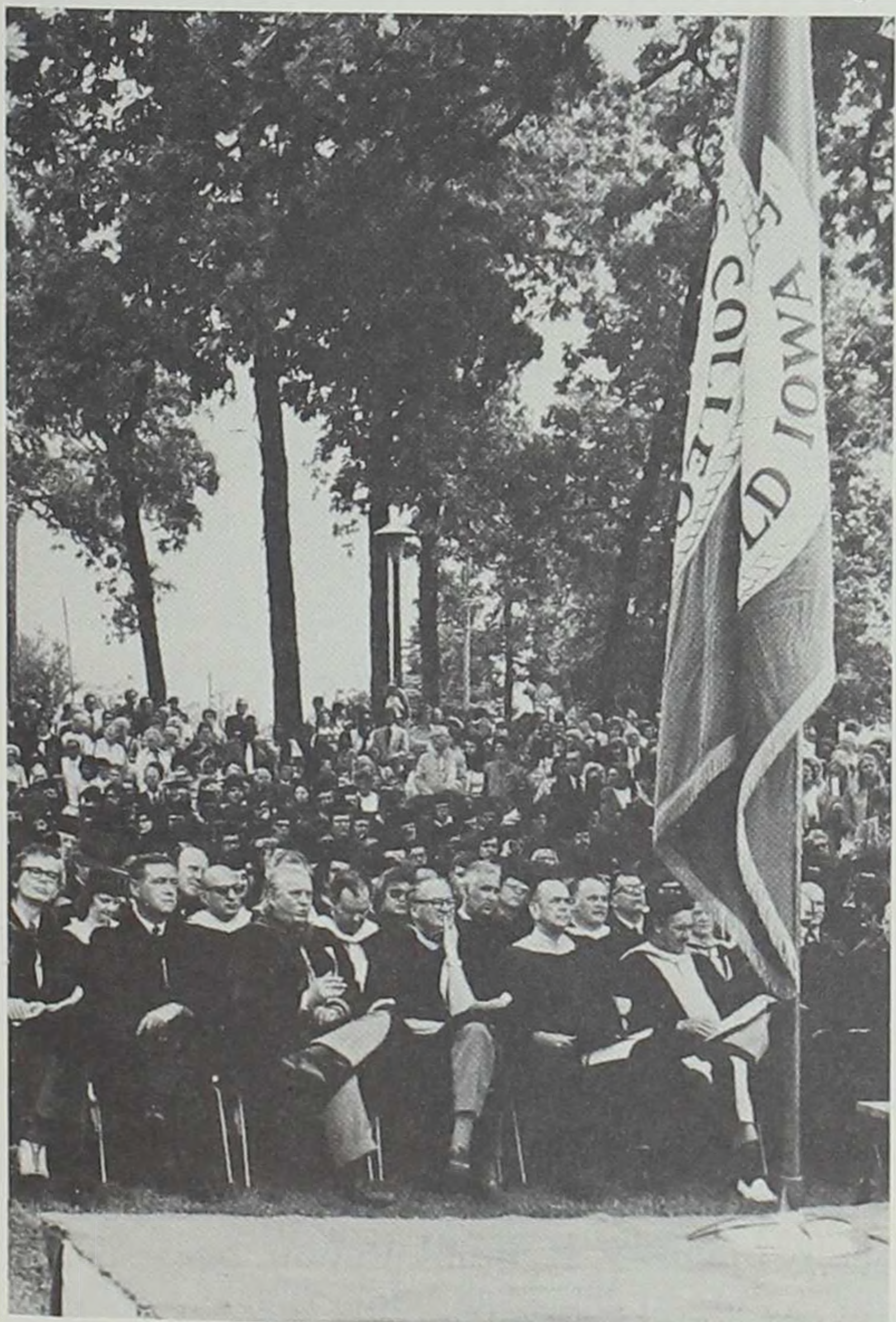
Lee Gobble, a Fairfield clothier, had strong Parsons ties, but he was not one to speculate on what did or did not cause the college to close. The college's downhill slide and eventual closing caused him pain, but he kept any feelings and opinions about the people involved to him-



self.

Gobble served two hitches on the board of trustees, the first from 1955 to 1967, at which time he resigned at Roberts' request. He was reappointed to the board in 1970 and served during the college's last three years. There's one area he has discussed and that was the quality of education at Parsons during the Roberts years and beyond. "It was a great thing to see a student come here after he had failed to make the grade in other places and then watch him bloom. And not just a few, but hundreds of them."

Probably more than anyone in Fairfield, Gobble kept track of former Parsons people — students, faculty, and staff. Gobble's store, in fact, became an unofficial clearinghouse for any Parsons people passing through Fairfield. Not only has Gobble maintained in his store a large



(courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)

guest book listing the name, address, class, and comments of visitors dating back to 1971, but he has also made it a point to call on Parsons people in his travels.

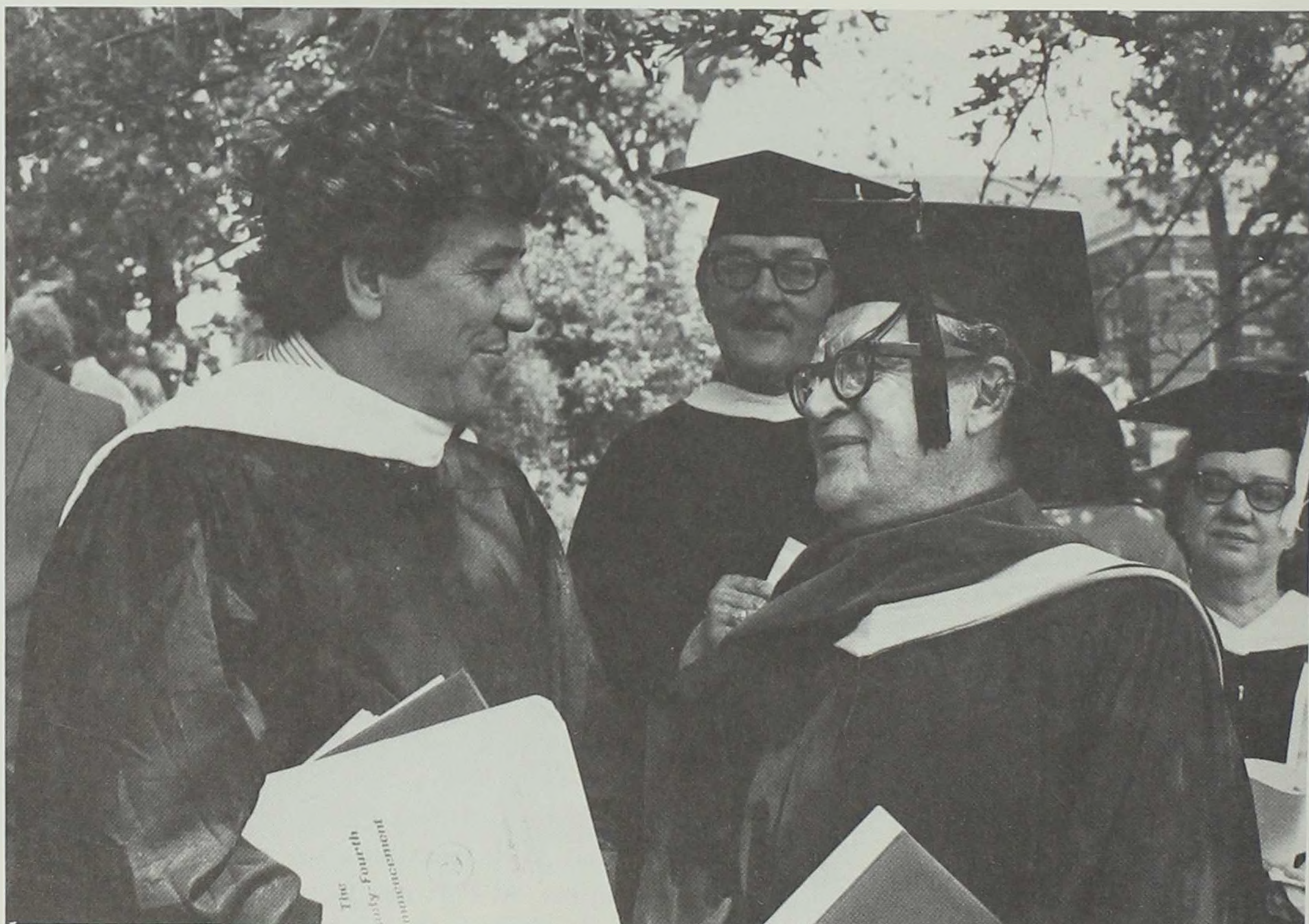
Gobble's store is perhaps the only place in the world where one can still buy Parsons T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other items. "People come in and think they are left over and I always have to explain that this is new merchandise." Parsons T-shirts remain in demand, including one or two old favorites that have recorded sales beyond the 1,000-mark. "I've got one more T shirt in mind," Gobble once said in a *Ledger* interview. "The inscription will read 'There'll always be a Parsons College.'"

Supporting Gobble's comments about educational quality, Barry Green, a member of the last graduating class at Parsons College, believed he received a better education at Parsons than he would have gotten at a larger university. Green, a former resident of Centerville, Iowa, came to Parsons after two years at Indian Hills Community College's Centerville campus. At Parsons, Green received his bachelor's degree in education, specializing in math. He later completed a master's degree in secondary school administration at the University of Iowa. "I think my work at Parsons gave me an advantage in graduate school." Green was impressed by the emphasis on scholarship and the concern for the student at Parsons. "I thought the faculty was just great."

Charles Sloca, the English professor who proposed bringing back Millard Roberts on that last fateful day of the college's existence, has suggested that Richard Stageman, the federal bankruptcy judge, should bear some of the blame for the death of Parsons College. "[Stageman] imagined himself an authority on education. He told me in Des Moines that 'Frankly there are too many colleges and some of them have to go under.'"

When Parsons asked the bankruptcy court for protection from its creditors, Stageman ordered the college to post surety bonds of





*United States Senator Dick Clark, left, and Sydney Spayde, retired head of the fine arts department, right, received the last two honorary degrees awarded by Parsons College. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

\$250,000 within ten days, something which Sloca described as “an enormous penalty.” Because of the adverse publicity which Parsons had received, Sloca thought that Stageman might have believed that education would be better off if the college were closed.

Sloca had been a controversial figure from the time he joined the Parsons faculty in 1957 as dean of the college and professor of English. Roberts had fired him as dean in 1964, blaming him for the actions of six professors who had made a critical report to the North Central Association. Sloca smiled when he recalled Roberts’ words: “They [the dissidents] were out to get me, Charlie, but they got you instead.”

A strong critic of the Hadley administration, Sloca believed the decision to place Parsons

under Chapter 11 bankruptcy scared the banks and caused them to foreclose on the college library collections. Sloca has contended that the library could have been saved for about \$80,000. “It breaks my heart that I didn’t see it until it was too late.”

Sloca had petitioned Judge Stageman to release the library books to the banks and he had appealed to the banks’ counsel, Ottumwa attorney Wilbur Dull, to support the plan. “We still had prospects for 700 students in the fall and we could have repaid the banks right off the top.” His proposal never got off the ground which caused Sloca to begin what he termed “my legal education.” Together with a fellow faculty member, R. Brank Fulton, Sloca filed a suit in federal court, charging that the college had been deprived of its library without due



process. Tenaciously, he pursued it all the way to the top and the college bankruptcy wheels ground to a halt until the justices of the United States Supreme Court voted 8-1 not to hear the case. Sloca's only support came from Justice William O. Douglas, a one-time Parsons commencement speaker. "It was an education in both law and futility," Sloca recalled.

Why did Professor Sloca propose bringing back former president Roberts on that Friday morning when the closing of the college was announced?

"I had thought about it, I had talked to him on the phone a few days before and he was interested," Sloca said later in an interview. "I forgave him his arrogance and his contempt for the faculty. I thought he might be able to do something." But Sloca wasn't prepared for the bitter reaction to his proposal. "I didn't realize the hatred for this man. It was like going to a

funeral and trying to lift up the corpse when everybody else [wanted] to bury it."

An individual who saw Parsons as both a student and staff member was Dave Neff. He had been an undergraduate during the boom years of the late 1960s. Having graduated in 1969, he had joined the athletic staff that fall as intramural director.

Dave valued his days at Parsons, both as a student and a member of the staff. But he has described the late 1960s as a period of uncontrolled growth. "It was a time of counting up how many students you had and then building whatever was needed."

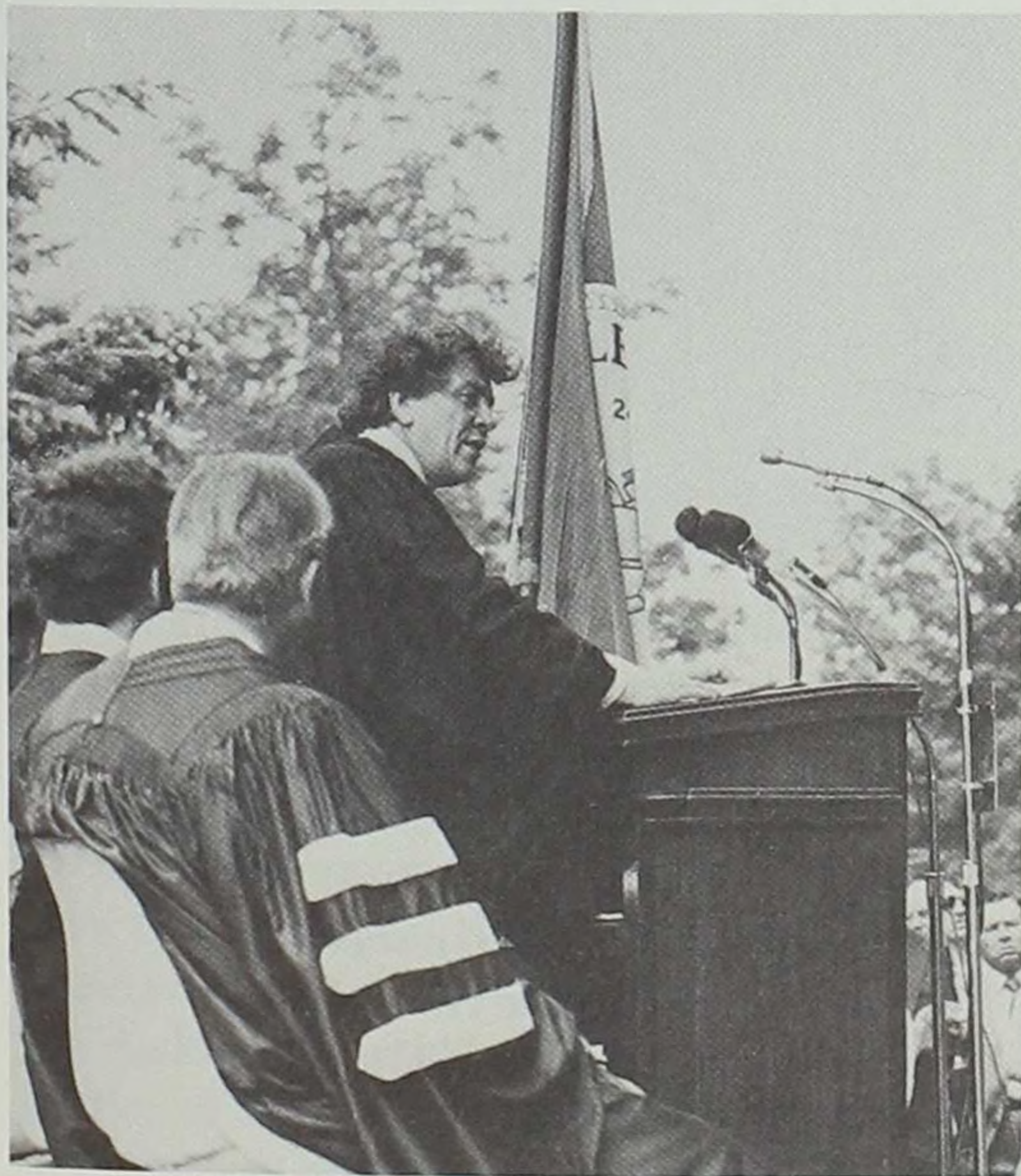
The college lacked financial stability and direction after losing its accreditation in 1967. Better communications with creditors and some kind of a financial plan might have softened the blow. "When enrollment declined there seemed to be panic and not much else." According to Neff, the time to regroup and look for programs that would have given the school greater stability was when Parsons regained its accreditation in 1970. "My hindsight, of course, is 20-20."

\* \* \*

A standing audience estimated at 500 gathered for Parsons' final commencement on Saturday morning, June 2, 1973. Exercises were held "on the green" between Foster and Ewing Halls.

The speaker, United States Senator Dick Clark, told graduates that "for the last few years, the administration, faculty and students have worked together to save the college. That you did not succeed . . . does not make the effort any less worthwhile. And, I think, in terms of your own achievement, it has been a success."

The college awarded its last honorary degrees to Senator Clark and Sydney Spayde, the retired head of the fine arts department. Then the gathering sang the alma mater and



*U.S. Senator Dick Clark served as Parsons College's last commencement speaker. On that occasion, he suggested that, "There is much that can be said about Parsons — the good and the bad — and much that can be learned from the experience." (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*





*Parsons College faculty and students gathered to sing the alma mater one last time. (courtesy the Fairfield Ledger)*

Parsons passed into history.

#### Note on Sources

The files of the *Fairfield Ledger* were the source for nearly all of the material used in the story. Other sources include the author's recollections and observations while gathering and writing news stories during the final days of Parsons College. Two volumes were also used: David Boroff, *Campus U.S.A.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961); and Willis Edwards Parsons, *Fifty Years of Parsons College 1875-1925* (Fairfield, Iowa: 1925).

The editor of the *Palimpsest* should like to thank Dean and Joyce Gabbert for the time, effort, and assistance they gave to this project.

*Where the wild rose tints  
the prairies  
With its summer sheen,  
Stands our noble Alma Mater,  
Of the Rose and Green.*

*Lift the chorus till it reaches  
Even heaven's blue,  
Singing to our Alma Mater,  
Parsons, hail to you.*





# Harvest Time

by Lenore Salvaneschi

The word harvest evokes a sense of fulfillment and completion. In that sense the so-called fruit cellar in the basement of St. Stephen's parsonage was not only a fitting symbol but also a promise of year-round sustenance and, unwittingly, with its rustic darkroom, a place of preservation which outlasted the lives of those who enjoyed the yearly harvest.

Within a small inner room, perhaps ten by fifteen feet, built against one stone and one concrete wall, the "fruit cellar" contained the apple bin, the carrot bin, the potato crib, the onion basket, the wine cellar of St. Stephen's church, Father's darkroom, and shelves of canned vegetables, fruits, jellies, and marmalades. Since one entered this room from the washroom and walked through it to the furnace room, the smells of suds and wood and coal were mixed with the smells of the damp cement floor, the must of the wine, the sand in which the carrots were kept, the earthiness of the potatoes, the fragrance of apples wrapped in newspaper, the salt-sour pungency of "working" sauerkraut and snipped beans, and the cloying odor of the "hypo" used in the photographic process.

In one corner of the room was a small tarpapered enclosure with a crude sink. This was the darkroom, with its interesting beakers and bottles of chemicals. Along the wall approaching it was an ancient table covered with newspapers on which Father had his printing and picture-trimming equipment. On a homemade table in the center of the room stood the enlarg-

ing equipment. At the far end stood another table with bottles of the very sweet Concord grape wine made by the elders for communion. Under the table were the bins for the potatoes and other root vegetables and the boxes of apples. Along the entire length of the stone wall stood homemade shelves containing corn, pickles, beets, beans and more beans, tomatoes, piccalilli, relish, jams, jellies, apple butter, and marmalades.

Suspended from the ceiling were more shelves. On these were ranged the rows of grape juice, both the ambrosial concentrate which stained the lips in Bacchus-style and the lighter ruby-colored favorite drink for company. Jars of applesauce, apples cut for pie, peaches, apricots, plums, endless quarts of pitted sour red cherries, provision for pies and sauce galore, with even a few containers of precious gooseberries gathered from the timber adding a touch of green to the richer hues of autumn, reflected on the shelves.

For the housewife living in St. Stephen's Lutheran parsonage at Atkins, Iowa, during the second quarter of the twentieth century, harvest time was not really a particular season, it was a year-round activity. Harvest time meant providing food throughout the year, and it meant gathering and preserving that food wherever and whenever possible.

If one were to deal with the subject seasonally, I suppose it would be accurate to say that the harvest began sometime in the spring, not the calendar spring but the farmer spring, February perhaps, with the "Spring Butchering." The term sounds ugly to those



accustomed to shopping in increasingly sanitized urban settings, but to those who took part in it the grim procedure was just one of the normal and necessary occupations of the year. Actually, the parsonage family participated secondhand, as it were, for we had no domesticated animals but had to live in the hope that the more generous farmers would share with us. There were always those who did, bringing nice roasts of beef or pork, spareribs, and a couple of glistening sausages wrapped in clean flour-sack dish towels. The flour sausages made by one family were especially prized for they were both highly seasoned and smoked, but sausages ordinarily were the least choice bit of the butchering, and it must be admitted that the parsonage kids established a mental thermometer of generosity based on the kind of sausage or "real" meat provided during the season.

During the years that I helped my sister on her farm, my most dreaded chore, next to cooking for threshers, was to help with the butchering in the spring and fall. Helping, for me, meant canning meat. The raw beef or pork would be brought in by the men who had done the cruder work of slaughtering and skinning the animal. We women, the hired girl and I, supervised by my sister, would first fry the meat, then place the chunks in jars, fill the jars with boiling water, place them in wash boilers on a rack, fire up the kitchen stove with coal, wood, or cobs, and process the jars in boiling water for the requisite number of hours. After the jars came out, we tightened the lids and turned them upside down until they were cold and could be stored in the cellar. Badly sealed jars had a nasty habit of squirting boiling hot juice onto one's face and hands, but the burns were accepted in the knowledge that one had anticipated the dreaded spoilage. Another way to preserve meat was to "fry down" the pork loins and roasts which were cut in small slices, placed in a stone crock, and covered with liquid lard which solidified as it cooled and preserved

the meat. This fried-down meat, together with salty snipped beans or sauerkraut formed our Monday washday dinner for years, and I shall always associate the smell of steamy soapsuds in the basement with the redolence of salt pork on the kitchen stove.

The mention of sauerkraut suggests a paragraph on that subject alone. I can never remember a time in my life when I appreciated that seemingly indispensable, and indisputably German, dish. Perhaps my dislike had something to do with Mother's impatience when she had to take time out to skim the scum off the sauerkraut as it was fermenting; the sour-salty smell as she lifted the big rock from the overturned plate on top of the fermenting mass in the crock was not the fragrance of pine forests. The harvesting of the cabbage was always done in the heat of the summer, probably on a scorching July or August day. Early in the morning Father cut all the best heads of cabbage in the garden, trimmed off the outer leaves, then brought the white, still sweet-smelling heads to the shade of the grape arbor behind the house. There the sharpened butcher knives were used to cut the heads in fourths. These were then sliced on a narrow wooden object known as the sauerkraut cutter. The shredded cabbage was placed in big stoneware crocks in layers — a layer of cabbage, a layer of salt, until three-fourths full. These crocks were hauled into the cellar, where they were first placed near the drain used for wash water. Here Mother could more easily dispose of the liquid as the sauerkraut fermented. Finally, when the fermentation had stopped, she would place the kraut in big glass Mason jars and seal them. I assume the jars went through a hot-process canning bath. I do remember the finished product with its yellow color and pungent odor as the acceptable combination with pork and potatoes for a complete dinner, and not only on washdays.

To resume the harvest of meat. Many of the farmers did not care for such organs as the





The author's younger brother, Robert, helping his grandmother, Gesche Rickels, cut apples in 1926. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

heart, tongue, or liver of the animals they butchered, but Mother gratefully received those items and made excellent entrees from them. Other less than choice cuts of meat she utilized in scrapple, which was fried down and then placed in stone crocks, to be sliced and fried for supper or occasionally for breakfast. Jars of mincemeat were canned from oddments of meat, and later-day store-bought products labeled mincemeat have absolutely no resemblance to the delectable fillings my mother prepared for the Thanksgiving and Christmas pies.

As the calendar spring approached, the real canning season began. Since this was before the day of the freezer, the first big crops of fruit were the strawberries and rhubarb. Sometimes we were lucky enough to harvest

berries from our own patch. It was not often that we had enough to make into strawberry sauce; usually our crop was carefully salvaged for strawberry jam, that deep garnet delight which filled the first small jelly (old pickle) jars, which we covered with melted paraffin and carried to the basement. Together with the strawberries we often harvested the rhubarb and combined it with strawberries in marmalade, or just canned as many jars of it as we could gather for "medicinal" sauce in the winter. We never attempted any *peistengel* (pieplant or rhubarb) wine; even the task of making grape wine was left to the elders of the parish.

After the strawberries and rhubarb came the cherries. How many sour cherries we pitted in the sultry June days, the cherries floating in the dishpans of cold water from the pump. The pitted cherries were placed in jars, together with sugar and water, and processed in laundry boilers, or sometimes cooked in the big bread kettle and ladled, boiling hot, into the scalded jars. Spoilage was always a problem; with food poisoning always a threat, there was great concern over having the jars carefully scalded just before any food was put into them.

Early apples, especially the Duchess, and later the harvest apples, came after the cherries. These were gathered in our orchard and cooked into crushed applesauce, or quartered applesauce, or made into jelly, the pulp boiled down and left to drain overnight in a flour bag attached to a pole supported on a pair of chairbacks. The next day, God and weather willing (too damp, no jelling), the combined liquid and sugar produced a beautiful clear apple jelly. Apple butter, after much cooking and stirring on the hot stove, with a bit of cinnamon added, provided still more variety on the jelly shelf. Then came the plums, which also produced a rich purple preserve and the most beautiful jelly of all, a deep ruby color. Peaches were next, usually bought at the store in bushel baskets. These had to be scalded and peeled



one by one, then placed as whole as possible in quart jars together with one peach pit for flavor. After sugar syrup was poured in to fill the jars, the three-hour process in the wash boiler completed this harvest.

About the middle of summer, with good luck, we might make a trip to the timber, the sand ditches along the Maquoketa timber. There, in Aunt Zene's Hollow, we picked gooseberries, sour tiny green marbles, to make a few jars of extremely acid, piquant sauce to provide a pie or two. We usually prepared a few jars of jam also, but the gooseberries were very small and the picking of stems and tails was a most "*kniblich*" task. Gooseberry harvest had its excitement, however, for coupled with the job of picking the berries from their prickly foliage was the fear of finding a rattlesnake coiled under the bushes; the warm slopes on which the berries grew were a favorite sunning place for rattlers. Aunt Zene always brought the "houn' dogs" with her when we went berrying and carried a hefty stick to get the jump on any snake we might encounter.

In the fall there were more apples to can and some pears, if we were lucky in getting some from the farmers. Then, whether fruit or vegetable — present-day supermarkets never seem to know how to shelve the canned product — there was pumpkin to preserve; Mother sliced up the huge globes, cut off the rind, cleaned out the seeds, cut up the meat, cooked it, mashed it, and then stuffed the jars with the golden pulp, carefully processed for harvest pies.

The richest fruit harvest of all came in September when our rows and rows of Concord grapes were ripe. Many of the clusters were used, as already mentioned, by the elders of the congregation to make the communion wine. I can remember the almost intoxicating fragrance of the juice and the buzzing of the bees over the skins and seeds deposited near the back gate after the elders had finished the press. Since there were so many rows of grapes in our yard, we still had plenty left for our own harvesting. Dozens of two-quart jars were one-third filled with carefully selected and washed



*The parsonage's lush vineyards provided enough Concord grapes each season to make not only the congregation's communion wine but substantial quantities of grape juice for the Rickels family's own use. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)*





Mrs. G. Rickels cooking at a new range in the parsonage, c. 1930s. The faucet at the left drew water from a tank attached to the stove. The tank, together with the stove's reservoir, provided the only hot water in the house. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

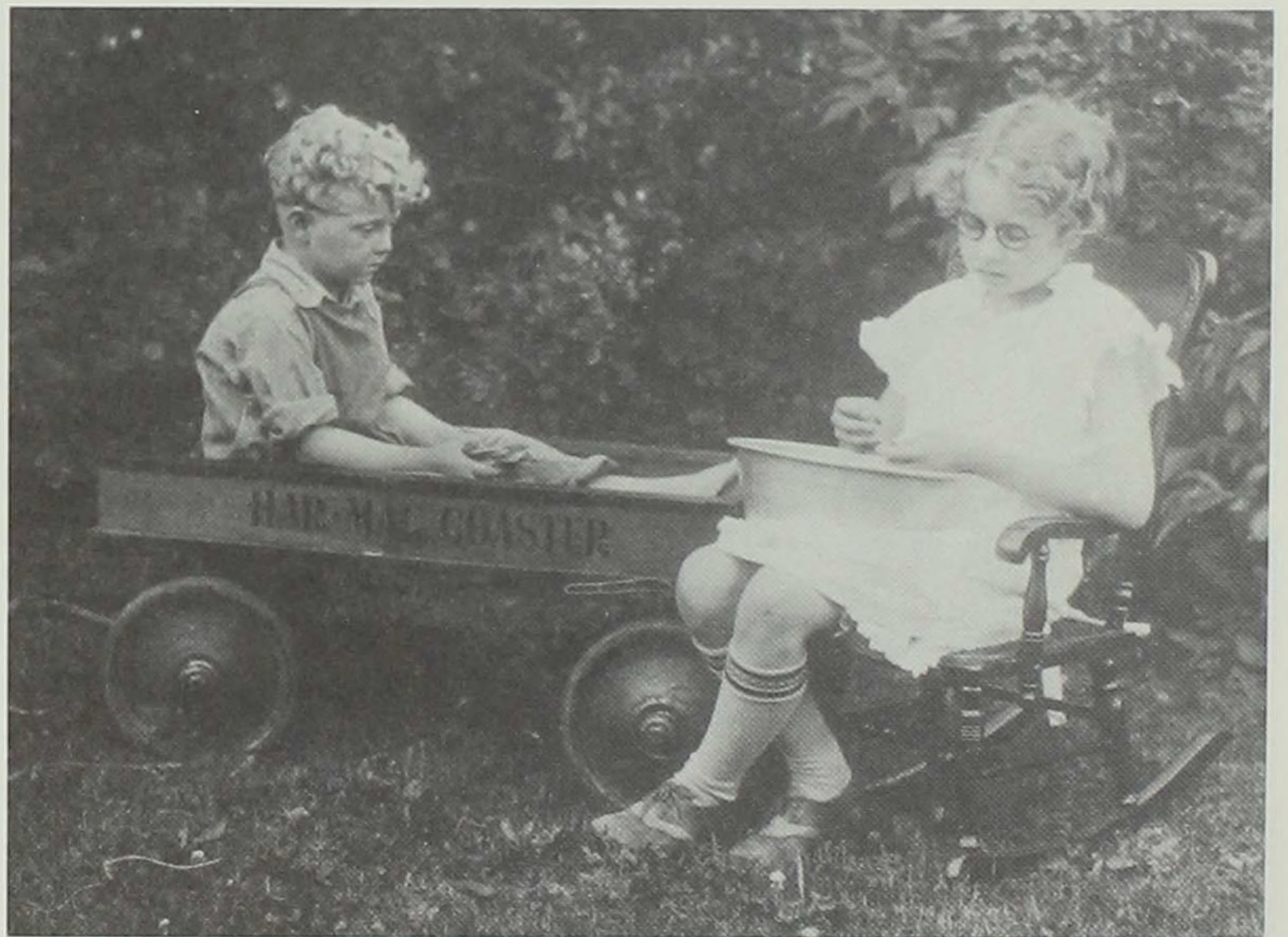
grapes. Water was added and the jars were placed in the basement. After a certain number of weeks a beautiful magenta liquid formed the grape juice which we served our guests the following summer. Sometimes we also served the concentrated kind, made from the juice of the boiled grapes, strained, combined with sugar, then cooked again and bottled in smaller wine bottles, producing the ultimate heady essence of autumn.

Vegetables — oh, there never seemed to be an end to the vegetables we canned, from the first bean of the season to the last

bread-and-butter pickles and the last ear of corn and goosenecked squash. Father planted one patch of beans after the other. *All* my summers were punctuated by a new patch coming into harvest. There was nothing my brother and I bemoaned more than this constant burden of sowing, weeding, and picking *beans*. Green snap and yellow wax, string and pole and limas — we had them all, and canned them, usually with salt and vinegar or snipped, in brine, a process similar to making sauerkraut, or dried for soup or for *more* bean patches the following summer. Rarely was there a week throughout the whole growing season when there were not some jars of beans cooling on the kitchen cabinet counter. Bean-canning seemed almost a daily accompaniment to the other household work. And then the cucumbers: sweet pickles, dill pickles, bread-and-butter, seven-day, sweet-sour, tiny sweets, watermelon rind, beet — you name them, we canned them. Housewives vied with each other for new pickle recipes and were famous for them. Then there were the relishes and piccalillis — I still don't know the technical difference — but I can remember the ingredients, the tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, green peppers, and corn that went into them: green and white, red, yellow, variegated, they were among the prettiest jars on the fruit cellar shelves.

Tomatoes were almost as much a bane as beans so far as my brother and I were concerned, but how my parents rejoiced in their abundance. There were dozens and dozens of quarts of stewed tomatoes, and many jars of tomato juice — no doubt but what this ascorbic acid contributed to our health in the winter-time. Every afternoon in September when I came rushing home from school, I seemed to encounter the salty-acid smell of tomatoes stewing in the big kettle, grape juice dripping from the twisted flour sack, or relish being brewed. There was a sense of gathering in, of well-being and fulfillment which I could not





*The author and her brother, Robert, shell peas on the rear lawn of the parsonage in July 1927. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)*

then have identified as being almost pagan in its "worship" of the gifts of the earth.

The most precious vegetable of all was sweet corn, especially Golden Bantam, so toothsome that we children begrudged any kernel which was enjoyed by guests or imprisoned in jars. Eagerly we waited for the first meal of sweet corn, usually ready by our sister's birthday, July 22. Thereafter we enjoyed ears of corn alone with butter and salt as a frequent dinner. In the fall, in late August or after school had started, I would be requested to help my sister can sweet corn. While I hated the task, my mother, who often joined us, rejoiced in this special harvest. Very early in the morning we were out in the wet cornfield, picking the milky ears. The blades of the corn cut into our hands, the corn silk tickled our necks and cheeks. Sometimes the men had time to do this part of the work for us. Then they would bring in bushel baskets of ears. We sat out in the shade and husked the corn. Once the ears were cleaned of husks and silk, we dipped them in kettles and wash boilers filled with hot water, slipped them quickly into cold water, then sliced the kernels from the cob, an endless

slippery task. The cut kernels were packed in sterilized jars, salt was added, hot water, and once again the boilers were used and the cookstoves fired up. Three hours of boiling I think it took until we could remove the jars from the racks and seal them. Mother loved to see the pints (used instead of quarts because spoilage was more frequent with corn and the loss would have been greater) lined up with their beautiful gold — Golden Bantam — and white — Country Gentleman — kernels. Only now can I appreciate her joy; then I thought only of the heat, dust, steam, sticky floors, flies, and dead-tiredness that represented corn-canning every year.

The root vegetables, onions, carrots, rutabagas, parsnips, turnips, and kohlrabi were usually dug before the first frosts, potatoes somewhat later, when the ground might already be cold and probably muddy from autumn rains. The potatoes were put in a big bin in the basement; onions were stored there in bushel baskets or boxes; carrots and the other root vegetables when we had them were buried in sand in boxes and buckets. Kale, early peas, dandelion greens, and



asparagus were enjoyed fresh in our household but not canned. It is a pity that we knew nothing about zucchini; it took an Italian husband to introduce me to that versatile vegetable. The flower heads of dill were gathered and hung upside down in bundles, but garlic and herbs such as rosemary, thyme, and basil which now seem indispensable were also unknown to us.

Included in the harvest which we garnered in the fall were the nuts: black walnuts, butternuts, hazelnuts, and hickory nuts. The walnut and butternut trees were either in our



Mrs. G. Rickels baking bread in the parsonage kitchen in March 1933. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

yard or in a grove nearby. In October the brown and green fruit fell from the trees. Then we gathered it, shelled off the outer wrinkled shell, inevitably dyeing our hands while doing so, and laid out the rough black fruit to dry. When dry, the nuts were cracked by Father in the basement on an old sadiron. All of us helped Mother pick out the kernels for cakes and cookies. Our favorite was the hickory nut, which we found in the Maquoketa timber or bought in pecks from the timber folks. The kernels were the most difficult of all to pick out, but we felt rewarded in the exquisite taste which we savored annually in one hickory nut cake, baked traditionally for Father's November birthday. During winter evenings Father would often crack the hazelnuts by the kitchen stove while Mother mended and we children studied around the kitchen table.

In our year-round harvest, probably nothing was more of the essence of the earth than the whole wheat we bought from one of our parishioners. We ground the wheat in a hand coffee mill, soaked it overnight, and then cooked it the next morning in a double boiler. Served with Jersey cream and milk brought fresh in a little pail each morning from our neighbor, it provided the most satisfying breakfasts I can recall. Whole wheat and rye-graham flour, bought at the Amana Colonies, furnished bread for us throughout the year, and in the wintertime cracked cornmeal, also from the same stores, appeared over and over again as cornbread served with bacon for a favorite evening meal.

Amidst all of the household activity centering in the "fruit cellar," it was surprising that Father was able to carry on his hobby of photography. But in the end, although the bins and bushel baskets have long stood empty, and the Mason jars have become a collector's item, the photographs produced in that small area still remain to illustrate the business of a parsonage household dependent upon a year-round country harvest. □



# An Early Industry in Mills County: Ballast Burning

by Allen Wortman

Malvern was originally one of the "railroad towns" platted by a subsidiary of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, which completed its line across southern Iowa in 1869. As was true of many such communities, its growth was characterized by an energetic boosterism. The young men, many of them bachelors, who settled in railroad towns, hoped to win brides and amass fortunes as people flocked to their locales. They were ambitious individuals. They dreamed of developing flourishing cities that would attract not only the farmers of the surrounding area but, more importantly, would attract the capital for industries that would provide new employment, more in-migration, and additional wealth for ambitious young men. In his *Brief History of Malvern*, John D. Paddock caught the booster spirit of the early 1880s when he wrote: "The Board of Trade members have worn the hair off the top of their heads, butting in for new business and big things for Malvern."

The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad [B & MR], later to be the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy [CB & Q], and, finally, the nation's largest railroad system, the Burlington Northern, came into existence well before the Civil War. A group of citizens in Burlington, Iowa, began the act of incorporation of the B & MR on January 15, 1852, but were unable to complete the organization of the railroad until November 22, 1853. Evidently, the surveying of the

route and the procuring of construction materials had proceeded during the interim for by March 22, 1854, the company had completed the first seventy-five miles of its road, from Burlington to Ottumwa.

As one of the railroads qualified to receive grants of public lands, the Burlington eventually obtained 390,072.23 acres of land in



*Indian Creek Township, Mills County, Iowa.*

Iowa, of which 40,613 acres were located in Mills County, its western terminus. The Civil War interrupted construction of the line, but at the end of the war work began anew. On November 18, 1869, construction crews working from both the west and east met near the Nishnabotna River between the new communities of Malvern and Hastings. There they laid the last rail and drove the last spike. Eight days later, on November 26, 1869, the first through passenger train, consisting of a mail and express car and three coaches loaded with pas-





*An early photograph of Malvern residents standing outside the printing office of the Malvern Leader, apparently just waiting for something to happen, c. 1870. (Allen Wortman Collection, SHSI)*

sengers, went over the new track. As described by John D. Paddock, who was also the town's first resident and merchant, the train "passed slowly through our little hamlet of one building without stopping. The entire population three in number were out and gave them the Chautauqua salute, which was returned in great number."

By the terms of the land grants the railroad company could not sell its land for less than \$2.50 per acre, which was twice the amount the government charged settlers who obtained land by direct patent from the United States Land Commissioner. But the new railroad's officials soon realized that more than \$2.50 per acre could be realized from the land it had



received. A town lot company had been formed which platted sites for towns along the new railroad; such towns were often only five miles or so apart. It was clear that town lots, in growing towns, would bring many times the \$2.50 per acre as the country filled with settlers. And since the completion of the line across the state meant low-cost passenger and freight services, there was a veritable explosion of new towns. In 1869, in Mills County alone, the towns of Emerson, Hastings, Hillsdale, Malvern, and Pacific Junction were all founded.

The citizens of the county seat, Glenwood, fearful that the new railroad might not run its tracks through their city, even called for an election to grant the B & MR tax advantages in Glenwood Township. That election, held on October 6, 1868, resulted in the approval of a proposal announced a year earlier by the Mills County Board of Supervisors:

*Resolved, That all the taxes now levied and standing against the clear list of lands in Mills county, Iowa, belonging to the Burlington and Missouri river railroad company, be and the same is hereby remitted, provided, that said company shall construct their road when extended west on the line of their road where it was definitely fixed and located by the board of directors in March, 1857.*

The settlement of the county by farmers had started even while the land was still considered part of the reservation of the Potawatomi Indians, who had been moved to western Iowa under the terms of a treaty signed in 1837. Less than a decade later, another treaty had been signed on June 5, 1846, which had given the Potawatomi a thirty-mile square tract in Kansas in addition to a money settlement. Thereupon the Potawatomi vacated western Iowa and headed into Kansas.

Shortly thereafter a number of Mormons had stopped off in the area of Mills County, clearing

land and planting crops which would be harvested later by others of the faith as the great Mormon trek to Utah got underway. Most of the Mormons had left the area for the West by 1853 and in the next few years sizable areas of Mills County land were taken up by more permanent settlers. With an insufficient transportation network to carry their crops and livestock to market and to bring in needed goods, however, these early settlers had to be virtually self-sufficient. Under such conditions it was economically important for them to encourage the building of railroads. Railroads meant better access to markets, an increase in the number of settlers in the area, and higher land values.

\* \* \*

The new towns which sprang up along the Burlington and Missouri River line did grow rapidly. By 1874, only five years after its three citizens had waved their handkerchiefs to passengers on the first through train, Malvern's population had grown to eight hundred. Other towns also flourished. As the countryside filled with farmers, merchants in the growing towns saw that the development of manufacturing plants or other industrial enterprises would make for an even more prosperous economy. Malvern's Board of Trade members were not atypical in their eager search for new businesses.

Inventions by clever tinkerers often provided the basis for new industries. Other times new businesses were based on new processes or innovations in procedures. The eastern promoters who devised the new enterprises and backed them were not always successful, and

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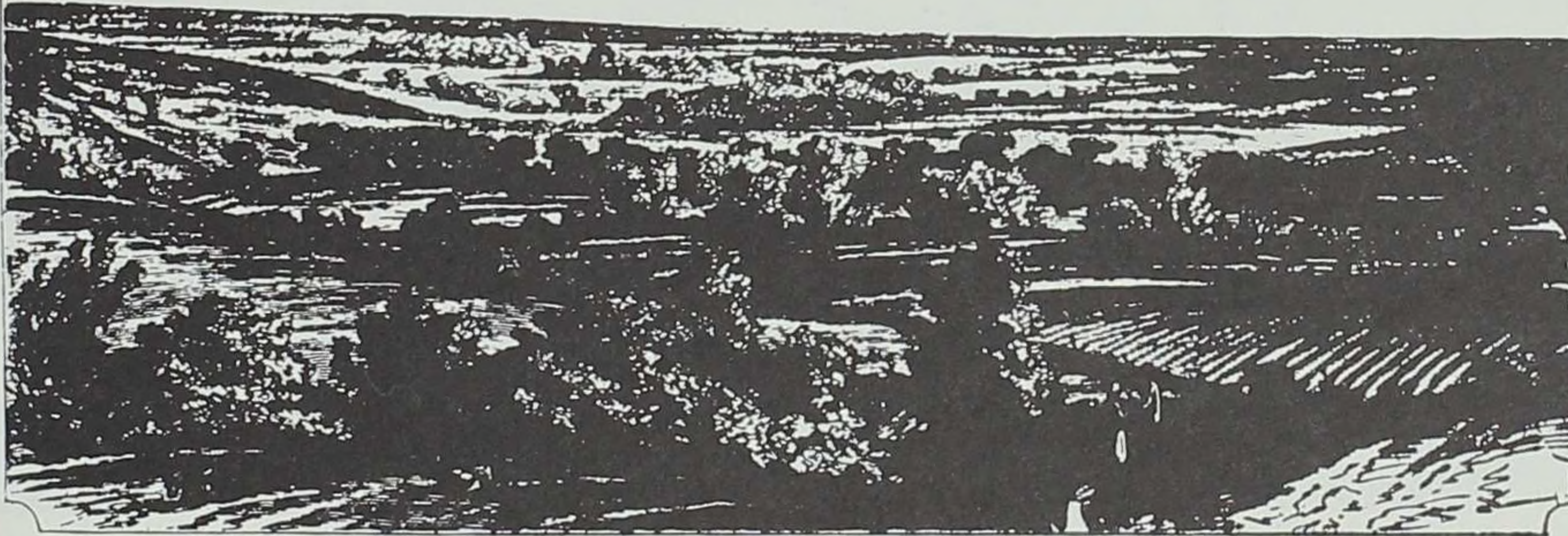
*Opposite: An 1873 land advertising circular for the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company. "Through such enticing broadsides thousands of prospective settlers bought land at an average of \$12.17 per acre and opened up their farms along the right-of-way of the Burlington Railroad." (SHSI)*



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View on the Big Blue, between Camden and Crete, representing Valley and Rolling Prairie Land in Nebraska.



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An 1884 view of the city of Malvern and its storefronts, taken from "just west of the mill." (Allen Wortman Collection, SHSI)

all of the new enterprises were not equally profitable. While merchants and boosters in the hinterland were always on the lookout for new industry, they were nevertheless wary of promoters. So it was when the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad [now the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy] sought to establish a ballast burning project just north of the town of Hastings in the spring of 1884. Businessmen in the area envisioned a wave of economic prosperity, although no one seemed to know just what would be involved in such an operation.

When the railroads were first built, a low earthen roadbed was pushed up by the contractors using slips and horsepower. The ties were laid directly on existing soil. Construction engineers soon learned that if some rock or other ballast was put under the ties, the roadbed would be firmer and the grade thus stabilized. The ties, too, would have longer life and the rails would stand up better under heavy traffic. Coarse gravel was an ideal sort of ballast but there was little of that to be found in southern or southwestern Iowa. One engineer

discovered that certain types of soil could be fired into a brick-like material and then broken up into small pieces to make an excellent ballast. The Burlington not only had a lot of soil suitable for making ballast on or near its Iowa properties, it also had access to almost unlimited supplies of timber which could be used for fueling such ballast burning.

In early 1884 the Burlington announced that it would soon establish a ballast burning project near Hastings. The ballast would be used on branch line roadbeds in the area, particularly the line from Hastings north to Carson and a second line from Hastings south to Sidney.

By mid-February Hastings was in an uproar as strangers arrived and searched for housing or business rooms in anticipation of the men who would soon be at work on the project. The first public mention of the project appeared in the February 7, 1884, issue of the *Malvern Leader*: "The Q will send 150 men to Hastings next spring to burn ballast for improving the



branch roads here." Within two weeks of the project's announcement, vacant housing in the Hastings area was becoming scarce:

*Several parties were here on Saturday hunting houses in which to live. Some were successful but more were not. The cause of all this rush is the coming of all the railroad men who are going to make Hastings headquarters during the summer, while they are burning ballast for the road bed. Inquiries are made every day for business rooms and the prospect is that several new business houses will open up ere long.*

A short time later, the *Leader* reported that "[Squire Purcell] informed us that every vacant

house in [Hastings] had been rented for the men who were coming in a few days to burn ballast north of town about a mile." Squire Purcell had gone on to discuss the upcoming election on the saloon question. The question was whether Hastings residents would vote in favor of temperance, as the citizens of both Glenwood and Malvern had done. (Suffice it to say that with the prospect of 150 hardfisted, and probably hard-drinking ballast burners headed for Hastings, it was only good business to allow the whiskey element to win out at election time — which they did.) In late March the *Leader* reported that "H. E. Perry recently sold ten acres of ground to the contractor of the ballast work here for \$50 per acre." The high price paid Perry for his land excited land-owners throughout the area. Perry's land evi-



Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad employees standing on a railroad bridge that crossed over a set of tracks near Malvern, c. 1870-1880. (Allen Wortman Collection, SHSI)



dently contained the type of soil needed for ballast burning. It was probably a heavy gumbo. The land also had plenty of mature trees for fuel supplies.

By early April 1884 the ballast workers were beginning to arrive in force. The contractor, William Davy and Company, ran the operation day and night, rain or shine, and the local newspaper noted that "The fires are never allowed to go out."

It was a complicated process to make ballast. Pits were dug laboriously by hand. They were then lined with firewood, which had also been chopped by hand. After the wood was fired, the soil was piled on the coals, more wood was added, and then more soil. In due time the soil changed into a red-brick aggregate which was later shoveled into railway cars and hauled wherever it was needed by the railroad. At first the work was all done by hand labor. Indeed, William Davy, the contractor, once complained to a Hastings resident that he found it difficult to find men for the project "who have acquired the knack of using a shovel to advantage." In the April 10, 1884, issue of the *Leader*, it was noted that "About fifty new men came in Saturday night and Sunday morning to work on the ballast making. The force now at work numbers over a hundred." There was a lot of turnover among workmen at the ballast pits, however.

Low-priced common labor tended to be rough, unpredictable, and generally troublesome for the contractor. In early May, Davy complained that "out of about 70 men secured in Chicago less than a month ago only four remain at work. The most of them were worthless to the extreme and soon received their walking papers." Yet he had no difficulty getting more men and two weeks later it was reported that fifty Italians had arrived to work on the project. Unfortunately, the Italians lasted only a week and a day. Something was said of its taking "three of them to do one man's

work."

Those who stayed were indeed a tough and hard-bitten crew. It didn't take long for the business elements in Hastings to realize that the wages of the ballast workers were spent mainly in the saloons. Moreover, drunkenness and fighting soon became a major part of life in and around Hastings. As the Hastings correspondent reported in the *Leader's* May 29, 1884, issue, "An even dozen drunks a day for the past week, with an occasional fight thrown in for seasoning. . . . The boys get filled up with too much 'personal liberty,' (sometimes known as beer) and then war begins." Rumors circulated among Mills County residents that a prizefight would be held on July 4th between two of the ballast burners. Most intriguing, however, was a December 4, 1884, news item from Hastings: "The east hill overlooking the quiet and peaceable town of Hastings was the scene of terrible bloodshed, hair-pulling and general disturbance on Saturday and Monday. Men and women engaged in a general knock-down. The boys have named it Bunker Hill."

The ballast burners were thus not much different from railway construction crews at any time or place in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. They were well within the wilder traditions of the British "navvies" or the riotous crews that built the great transcontinental rail lines in this country.

It was actually in the contractor's interest to attempt to isolate his workers from the more civilized areas nearby. Davy established a kind of temporary company town at the ballast works by putting up tents to serve as sleeping quarters and a mess hall, and, finally, by opening a general store at the works. The elimination of middlemen in providing services to the workers meant that wages could flow directly from the contractor to the workers and back again to the contractor in a most approved nineteenth-century capitalist fashion.

All did not go smoothly on the project, however. Accidents were common. Men were



occasionally thrown from handcars, the ballast train left the tracks at least once, a man was felled by sunstroke in mid-July, and the *Malvern Leader* of June 5, 1884, described a major (and unwanted) fire at the works:

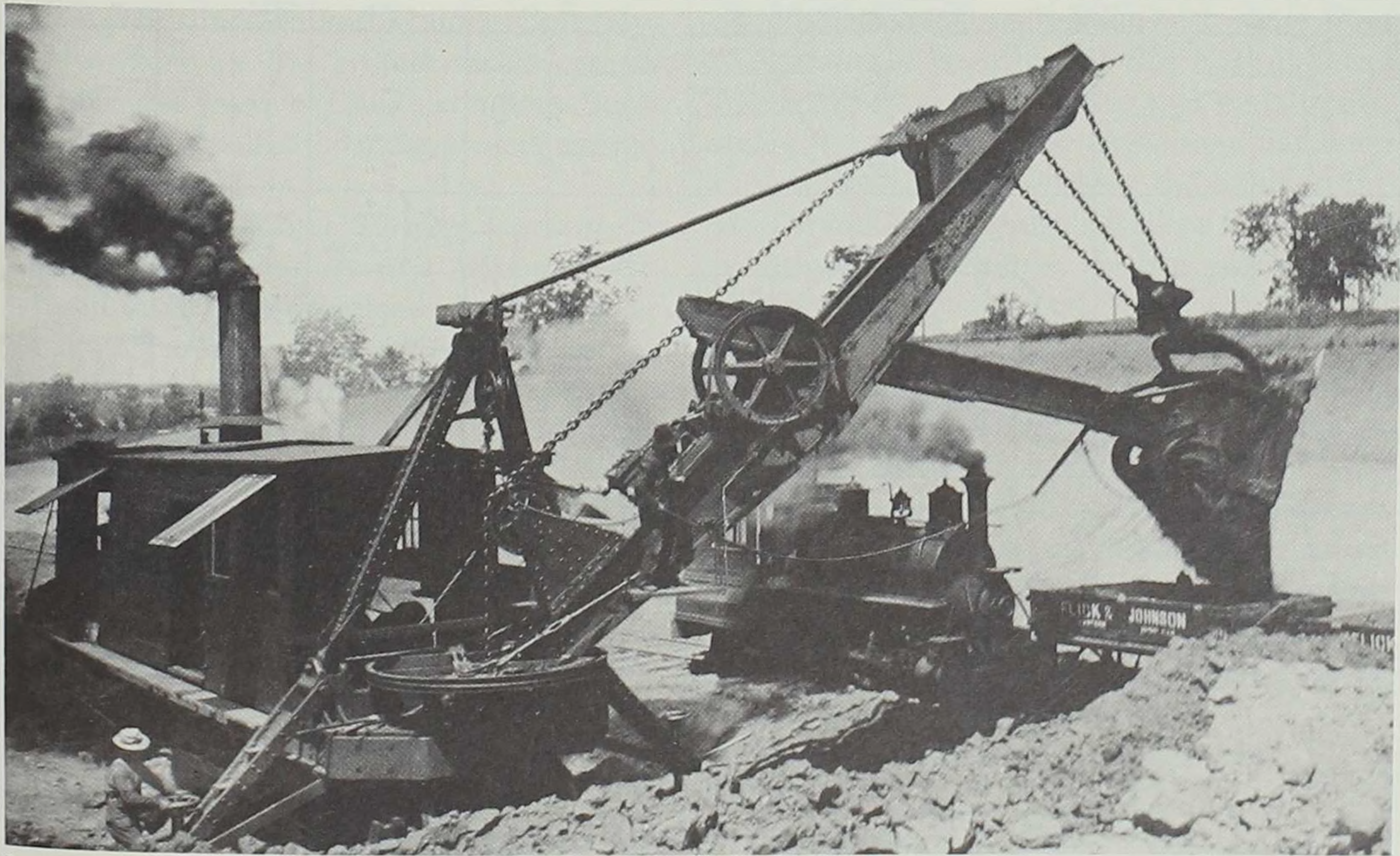
*The largest tent at the ballast works took fire and burned last Tuesday. It was used for sleeping purposes and there were about twenty beds destroyed together with a number of trunks, valises and the larger part of the clothes of the men. Quite a number of revolvers were hid away in trunks, valises and other places about the tent which when the fire reached them began to explode and for a few minutes the vicinity was very suggestive of a lively battle.*

At one point during the summer the workers

even went out on strike since Davy had gotten seriously in arrears in paying his workers' wages.

But ballast flowed steadily from the pits. With well over one hundred men working at the project, it was possible for one observer to write: "The ballast works, north of town look like a chain of burning volcanoes." A newsman reported: "A considerable amount of ballast has already been finished and the railroad company will commence loading it for use on their road bed this week." In late July the *Leader's* editor noted that the ballasters were headed toward Malvern from Hillsdale and their work had greatly improved the Q's roadbed.

With the ballast pits at full fire and a prosperous year in the offing for the farmers, the citizens of Hastings decided it would be a good time for a big Fourth of July celebration. Plans were started for the usual entertainment fea-



In 1903 the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad double-tracked the Red Oak, Iowa, line to improve the grade. The above photograph suggests ballast loading work similar to the work conducted in the Hastings area in 1884-1885. A large steam shovel loads dirt into railroad dump cars for transport to various points along the line. (Leonard A. Schwinn Collection, SHSI)



tures. Then there were rumors that more lively recreation might be available on the Fourth. The *Leader's* Hastings correspondent, quoting the *Council Bluffs Globe*, wrote:

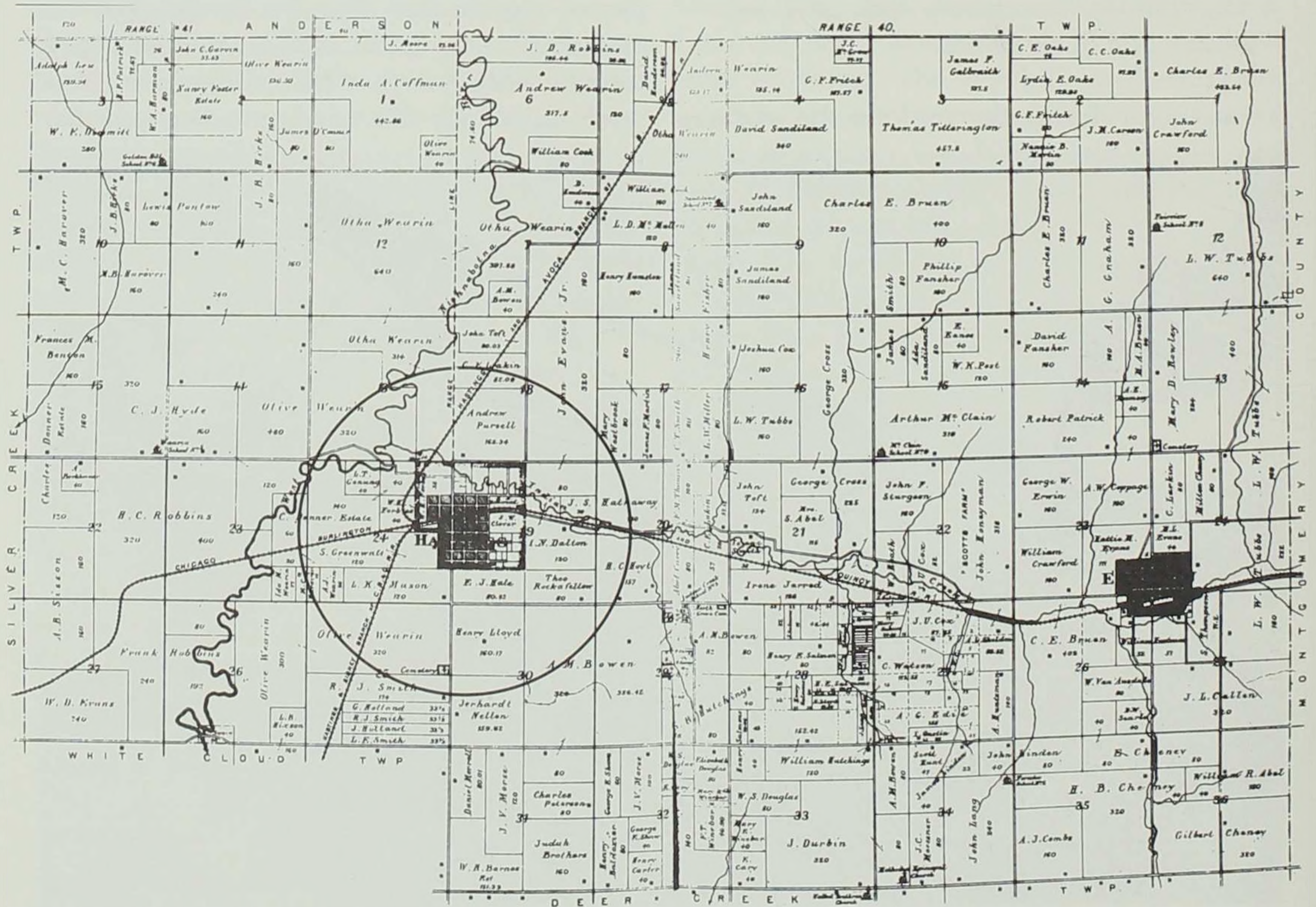
*It was given out sometime on Thursday, that two Englishmen engaged in the pits near Hastings, Mills county, in burning ballast for the C.B. & Q., intended having a prize fight yesterday, the Fourth. The Mills county officers were on the watch, and were extraordinarily vigilant.*

*Council Bluffs Globe's* account continued:

*Quite a number of sporting men from Council Bluffs were inveigled into the belief that such a fight was to come off, and went down on the train as far as Hastings and moved around in a mysterious way, and put on airs at the hotel, but when daylight came and the hour for the fight, the pitmen were all at work, laughing in their sleeves at the gullibility of the average American.*

Prizefighting was an illegal proposition in Iowa in 1884 and was definitely frowned upon. The

Nonetheless, the community's big celebration came off as planned. It was supported by farm-



Indian Creek Township, Mills County, Iowa, in 1891. A circle has been superimposed on the map around the general Hastings area as a point of reference for locating the ballast burning area described in the article. While it is not readily apparent where, exactly, the ballast pits were located, the map offers a valuable sense of the layout of Indian Creek Township a few years after the project ended.



ers and residents of neighboring towns and the railroad obligingly ran special trains to bring the celebrants to Hastings. The ballast pits didn't shut down for the holiday but no doubt many of the workers attended the celebration.

It can be seen that William Davy and Company let nothing interfere with the project's production. The ballast train moved ballast rapidly from the pits to various points along the line. For almost half a century afterwards the red ballast could still be seen under the ties and tracks of the Burlington in southwestern Iowa. On October 30, 1884, it was reported that William Davy and Company had completed their contract with the railroad. Two weeks later the *Leader's* Hastings correspondent reported that William Davy and Company had signed a second contract to burn an additional forty thousand yards of ballast for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Company. New workers for the project arrived in the Hastings area even as Davy's company began work on a new ballast burning project near St. Joseph, Missouri.

In May 1885 ballast burning work in the Hastings area was in full swing. In one week in that month 306 cars were loaded out, "an average of 51 cars per day." Those cars carried probably only thirty tons of ballast each, but that was still an astounding level of production on a job that was done primarily by hand. It should be noted, however, that Davy had purchased a steam derrick and shovel during the previous year for the loading of ballast. News reports never gave the number of men actually employed on the project but it is unlikely that the total ever exceeded two hundred workers at any one time. Somehow William Davy had found a sufficient number of men who had "acquired the knack of using a shovel to advantage."

In late summer 1885 there were indications that the ballast project at Hastings

would soon be finished. "We are [informed] that the ballast works will close [at] this point soon," noted the *Leader's* Hastings correspondent while indicating that William Davy and Company had obtained similar contracts for a project at Dallas City, Iowa. In the August 20, 1885, issue of the *Leader* appeared the news: "The ballast train at this place is a thing of the past, having finished up their work and departed for Creston," but on September 10, there was talk of new contracts. Yet the new contracts apparently never materialized. Finally the ballast works were shut down in the Hastings area and the work force was transported to Dallas City.

A short time later Otha Wearin, one of the pioneer landowners in the Hastings vicinity, bought the land on which the ballast pits were located. His grandson, Otha D. Wearin, once recalled that for many years there were some deep pits there, usually filled with water from the frequent flooding of the Nishnabotna River. He remembered also that metal bolts, spikes, braces, and other equipment had been turned up by plows working the fields in the area. Even after the pits had silted full and had become less noticeable, the low places could still be seen in wet years.

As the railroads developed heavier freight cars and started to use longer and faster trains, the original tracks were replaced with heavier rails. Engineers discovered that the old red ballast deteriorated under the new conditions and it was gradually replaced with crushed limestone. Today only rarely can one find roadbeds containing the red ballast. □

#### Note on Sources

The *Malvern Leader* for the period from early 1884 to late 1885 served as the best source of information about the ballast burning industry in Mills County. Information about the incorporation of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad and its land grants, and the early history of Mills County was obtained from the *History of Mills County, Iowa*, published in 1881 by the State Historical Company of Des Moines. John D. Paddock's book, *A Brief History of Malvern* (Malvern: The Malvern Leader, 1917), was also valuable.



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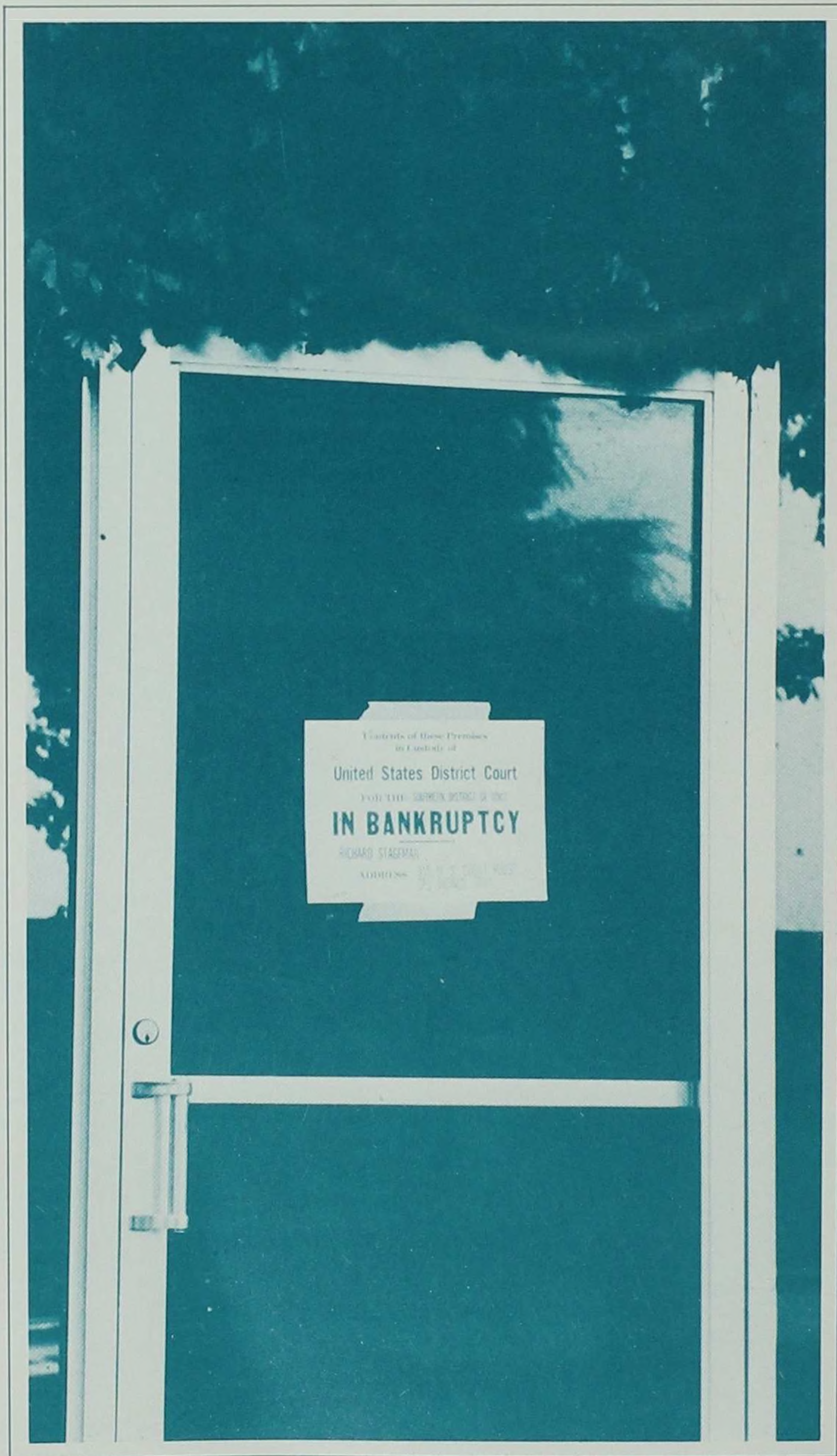
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