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Mary K. Fredericksen, Editor

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Cover: *The members of the Atkins girls' choir, with Director Albrecht to the far right, ready for their 1929 Fourth of July performance. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)*



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 Fourth of July

by Lenore Salvaneschi

When I was a child, it was almost impossible to decide which was better, Christmas or the Fourth of July. True, Christmas usually provided a "new" dress made over from one of my mother's or sister's old dresses, the holiday lasted a little longer with Second Christmas Day, and it afforded a good week's vacation in which to read the books which were found under the Christmas tree. But the Fourth of July was shiveringly exciting, with people from all the neighboring towns, even from as far away as Cedar Rapids, gathering on the St. Stephen's church grounds, to enjoy a full afternoon and evening of entertainment. Moreover, the day after the Fourth had its attractions also. Then the clean-up committee was at work, and we venal little souls helped with the scouring of the church grounds, with an eye to finding a dime or nickel around the pop stand or bowling alley. One could be almost certain of finding some discarded Cracker Jack prize or, if nothing else, shreds of a burst balloon which could be stretched out and blown up into miniature balloons the size of one's fingertip. And there were always heaps of pop caps which we took apart and attached to the skirts of our dresses (little girls didn't wear slacks in those days) or in the case of the boys, to our overall bibs. Not until I was an adult did I learn that the word "overhaul" was really and more logically overall.

Preparation for the biggest day of the summer started at the end of the school year, about

the middle of June in the case of our parochial school. The teacher drenched and drilled his pupils in three- and four-part songs, "speeches," plays with a country flavor (usually a take-off on a classroom situation with some smart-alecky kid revealing things that happened at home) and the inevitable flag drill, which later would be performed to the music of the congregation's volunteer band. The same teacher would have been drilling his girls' choir in such songs as "Glowworm," and the participants would have been preparing their patriotic costumes of red, white, and blue crepe paper, which in those flapper days showed clearly the healthy quality of our village beauties. A day or two before the Fourth, the children came once more to the church grounds to practice the entire program and especially to review the flag drill. That exercise was a torture, standing in the hot July sun, raising the flags above the head, crossing them, and marching from one end of the baseball field to the other. The sun always took its toll, especially in that year when the whole school had just been vaccinated for smallpox. More than one youngster, white-faced as the catalpa blossoms expiring in the Iowa heat, finished the drill prone under the trees.

The part of the preparation that we parsonage kids liked best was the setting up of the stage and the building of the benches and refreshment stand. The smell of fresh pine lumber, mixed with the fragrance of catalpa blossoms, was heady enough to make all the neighborhood youngsters show their skill at



St. Stephen's school students practicing the flag drill for the 1926 Fourth of July picnic. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

leaping the benches straight in a row. By the Fourth, most of us usually exhibited honorably skinned shins and elbows.

How we prayed for sunshine on the Fourth of July. Usually we were lucky, but one year, the year of the terrible drought, we were luckily unlucky. The Fourth was the day the rains finally came and spoiled the picnic entirely. But everyone rejoiced in the miracle of moisture. For weeks my father had been gloomy; when a thunderstorm arose, it always followed the path of either the Cedar or Iowa River, and missed those of us who were situ-

ated between. Hope rose and fell with every cloud that summer. When on the morning of the Fourth the clouds actually gathered above Atkins and produced a wicked storm, we dashed out at the first drops of rain, literally let the drops fall into our mouths, and perked up as quickly as the parched young plants of corn. Gleefully we went barefoot, tried out all the best — muddiest and deepest — puddles, and ended the day in an orgy of ice cream which the sodden picnic committee had sold to my father at half-price. For once — but only for once — we didn't mind that the Fourth had been

rained out.

Ordinarily on the day of the big celebration we would have awakened to the sound of firecrackers exploding in the neighborhood. We were never permitted any of our own, our joys being limited to the more decorous display of sparklers and an occasional daring firewheel which always fizzled miserably. (I sometimes suspect this was my father's secret revenge, since he considered fireworks, together with most everything else which we considered exciting, as being extremely dangerous.) The refreshment stand committee arrived early and prepared its tempting displays. There were huge washtubs filled with ice and a most con-

fusing display of pop. It was almost impossible to decide among the flavors, each one representing a special form of nectar to youngsters whose tastes had not yet been jaded by all the television-advertised colas. The strawberry was always such a beautiful color, and frizzed so prettily when blown up with a straw; the grape was heavy, intoxicating; the orange — my brother's favorite — was all right; but my final choice was always cream soda, a flavor of no particular identity, but one which seemed to include all delicious flavors at once.

There were big cardboard boxes filled with boxes of Cracker Jack, baskets filled with nickel bags of peanuts, and in later years, even boxes of candy bars which got deliciously soft and



The Atkins girls' choir in patriotic dress for the Fourth of July celebration in 1929. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

sticky in the heat of the day. And who could ever forget the ice cream cones — vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry — which dripped down our fingers, attracted flies and bees, and gave almost every child a “schnurrbart” at least once during the day. We knew that later there would be hot dog sandwiches — the ketchup and mustard were already staining the fresh boards of the stand — and hamburgers, mixed in big dishpans in the parsonage kitchen. “You don’t mind if we just work over here on your table. The flies are a nuisance over there.” No matter what our parents thought about the invasion of privacy, we kids loved the running in and out and the pungency of the chopped onions and pepper which were added to the ground meat.

Near the old schoolhouse, which served as parsonage garage, cob- and woodshed, the *Vorsteher* had set up a bowling alley and soon the scent of cigars, the hearty laughter, and the crash of pins indicated that the older men had started their day of fun.

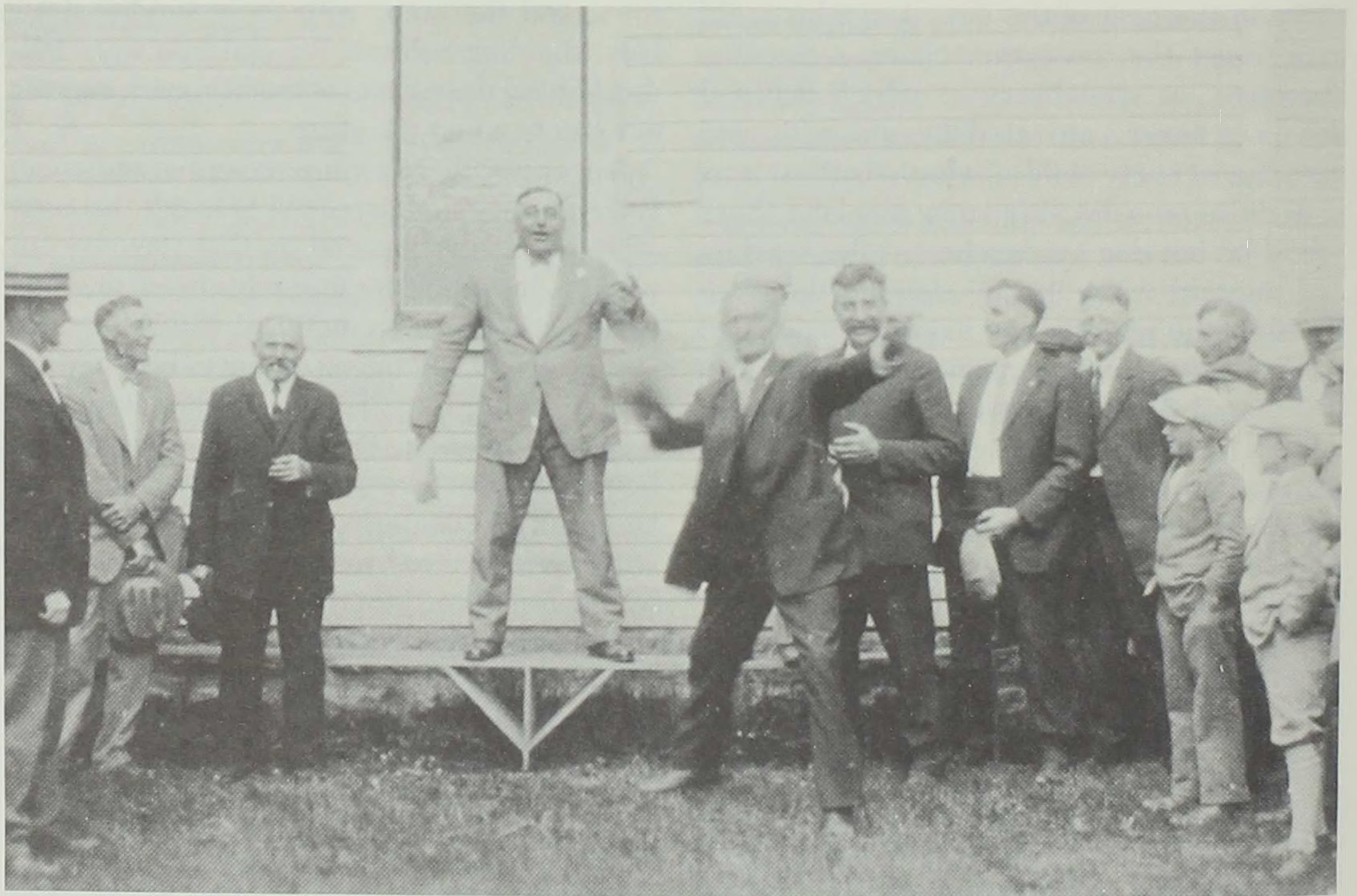
By one o’clock the church and school grounds were full of Model A’s and Chevies, and friends and relatives from neighboring towns were greeting each other, wandering over the cemetery, and waiting for the program to begin. In the meantime, the committee had attached a tarpaulin across one angle of the church, from outdoor stage to church entrance, and here was the fishpond, a place of eternal hope and almost certain disappointment, at least for me. Why was it that the person before and after me always found some substantial prize, like a celluloid doll, attached to her hook, while I never got more than a box of Cracker Jack, which I could have bought anyhow with one of my five tickets (each school child received five tickets, worth five cents, imprinted with the church seal, in recompense for performing that day). By this time the front seats were all lined with the older ladies of the congregation, the middle-aged ones in the next

rows, and the men, with their Sunday straw hats, standing behind. We children were hidden behind the curtain of the fishpond, waiting our cue to go on the stage.

Never was there a more receptive audience. Everyone seemed prepared to laugh. No tragedies were ever enacted on that stage except when some youngster forgot his lines, or when some exceptionally emotional child dissolved in stage fright and ran off crying to his mother’s lap. The latter humiliation occurred at my first stage presentation. The situation was not at all helped by the teacher’s apology that I had known my piece perfectly the day before. The attendant disgrace brought on a sick headache, which took considerable amounts of cream soda to cure.

At the conclusion of the children’s program, the band took the stage and the pupils stepped briskly to the tune of “Stars and Stripes Forever,” and other Sousa marches, in our flag drill. The audience applauded, and the smaller children ran in and out, confusing our formations but adding to the fun. Once the flag drill was over, we were free to run. There was a ball game on the school grounds, youngsters were tumbling about the school pump after their trips to the ice cream stand, the bowling alley was lively, and the potato, sack, and egg races began on the south side of the church. The noisiest part of the day came when the hog-calling contest was announced. To anyone not raised on a farm, or at least within hailing distance of one, the sight and sound of a portly, sun-dyed farmer standing on a bench and delivering himself of a mighty “Poo-ee, Pooee, Pooee, POOee” would have seemed absurd, but the crowd understood and loved it when the stentorian performance of Henry Schminke won the prize.

In the evening, lights were strung around the bandstand and the refreshment stand. Still more cars arrived, many of them with the younger adults who had brought their dates. In



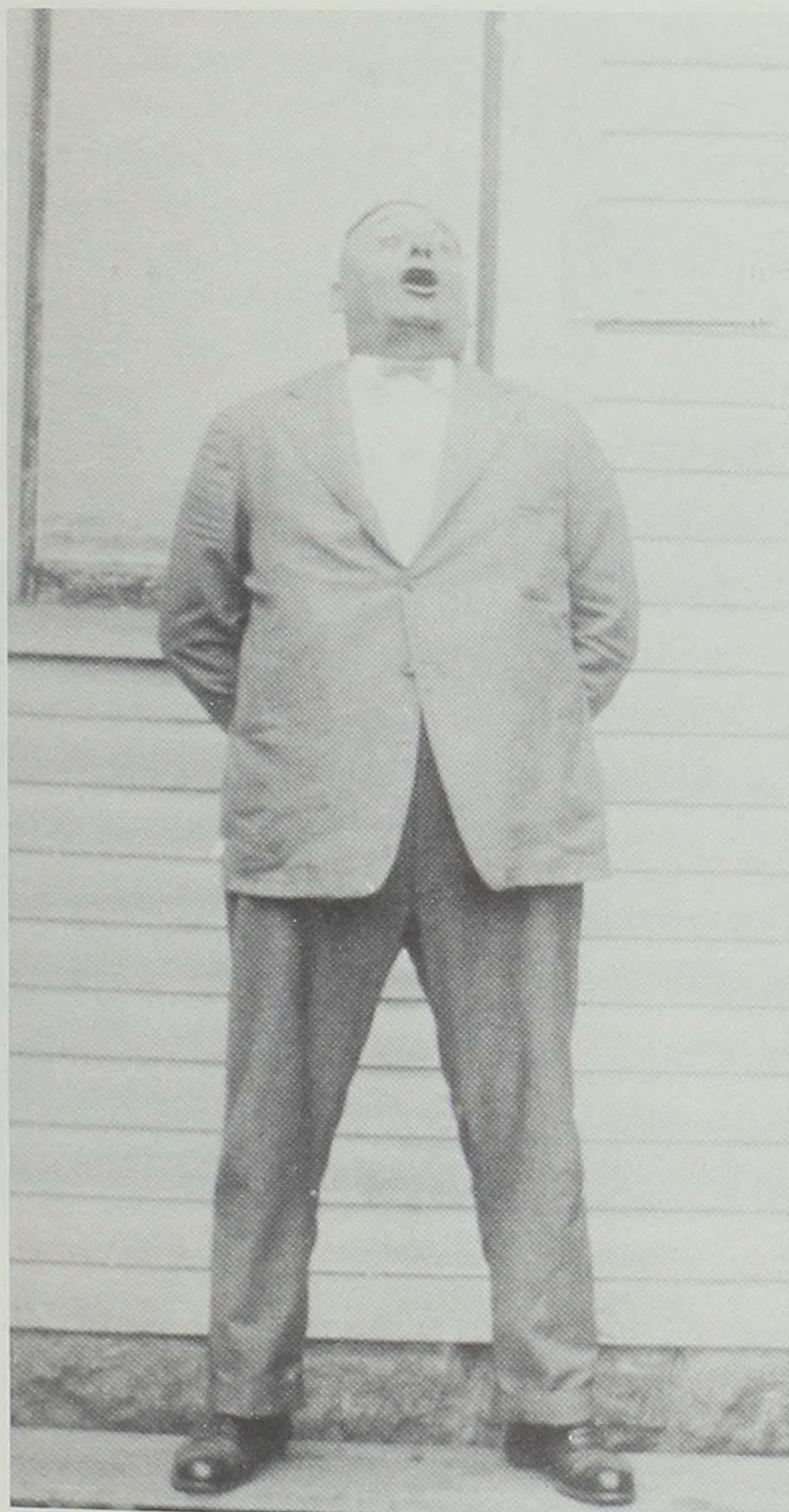
One of the highlights of Fourth of July celebrations in Atkins was the hog-calling contest. In the above photograph Henry Haerther urged the celebrants to "come one, come all" to enjoy Henry Schminke's hog-calling style. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

those seemingly innocent and moral days, a girl would hardly dare to hold her boy friend's hand in public; if the young man leaned his arm across the girl's shoulder, he was considered extremely "fast" — and so was she! We children had no idea what the word meant, but we knew that it gave us the right to peek askance at such worldly characters.

The evening program was usually given over to performances by the girls' choir, in their patriotic dress, and by the Walther League, the youth organization of the church. The Walther Leaguers were even more tongue-tied than the youngsters, and performed in such a safe fashion that they often succeeded in obscuring any plot the play might have boasted. Occasionally some luckless person would be chosen to read the Declaration of

Independence, and the eloquence of his reading diminished in proportion to the squirming of the audience. By this time the parents with cranky, squealing babies were driving away, the older men had begun to drone out some German songs, and the younger adults were playing "party games" (one didn't dare call them square *dances*) on the area that had served as a ball diamond during the afternoon.

By this time, Father had shepherded his family home through our own gate, warned us to pull the shades ("For goodness sake, there are still people about!"), and insisted that we use the indoor facilities that one night. During the summer we made frequent use of old "Tant' Meyers," the wooden structure down the south sidewalk, but since there had been a continuous stream of visitors to our privy all



(G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

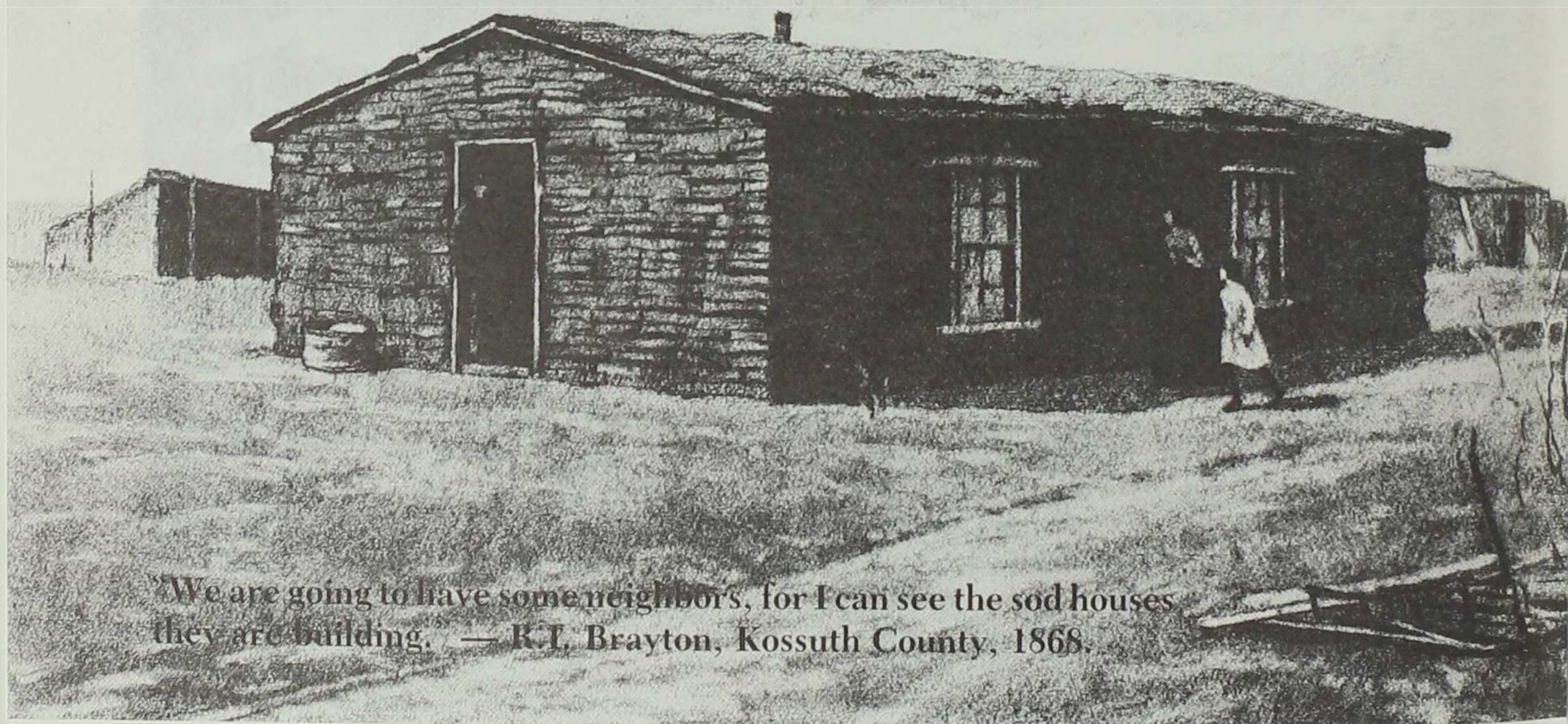
day, we had to wait until it had been sanitized the next morning by a proper scrubbing with broom and boiling lyewater suds.

It was difficult to settle down with the *Männerchor* still exercising on the stage outside our window, and with all the once-in-a-year indulgence exercising itself in our stomachs. No wonder that we woke up with our parents at five the next morning, they to restore their house and yard to its usual order, and we to join our friends in "helping" the committee clean

up the church yards. Our help consisted not so much in disposing of any trash left over, but in hoarding it in our rooms, where it quickly incurred the wrath of our older sister, who didn't appreciate dead butterflies, broken pencils, cigar bands, and bottle caps littering her dresser or the top of her cedar hope chest. Even the night after the Fourth it was hard to relax and to realize that for the "grand and glorious" we would have to wait another whole year. Our dear mother usually put on the finishing touch by saying, "There, you can hear the locusts again, right after the Fourth; that means that summer is almost over and fall is on its way!" □

Sod Dwellings in Iowa

by Rita Goranson



"We are going to have some neighbors, for I can see the sod houses they are building." — R.T. Brayton, Kossuth County, 1868.

(charcoal sketch by Edith Bell; SHSI)

Early in Iowa's history many sod dwellings could be seen on its western prairies. These homes were often dirty and crude and presented the pioneers with many problems. Yet the use of sod dwellings showed the adaptability and determination needed to settle Iowa soil.

Though Pottawattamie County had a dugout as early as 1845, the sod era in Iowa generally began during the 1850s with the settlement of the western part of the state. As settlers expanded to the prairie lands of north central and northwestern Iowa, the need for shelters to protect them from the environment became an immediate concern, and sod dwellings

seemed to answer this need. The period of sod dwellings ended in the 1880s when frame houses replaced the last sod homes.

There were a variety of reasons for using sod dwellings in Iowa. Not only did the government encourage such construction with the Homestead Act, but these dwellings were relatively inexpensive for the settlers to build. They provided a quick means of gaining protection from the elements in places where lumber was scarce, and they provided comfort and warmth on the plains, especially in the winter.

Congress enacted the Homestead Act in May 1862. It required that settlers live on and improve their land for five years. When the Civil War ended people looked westward at available land opportunities and Iowa received

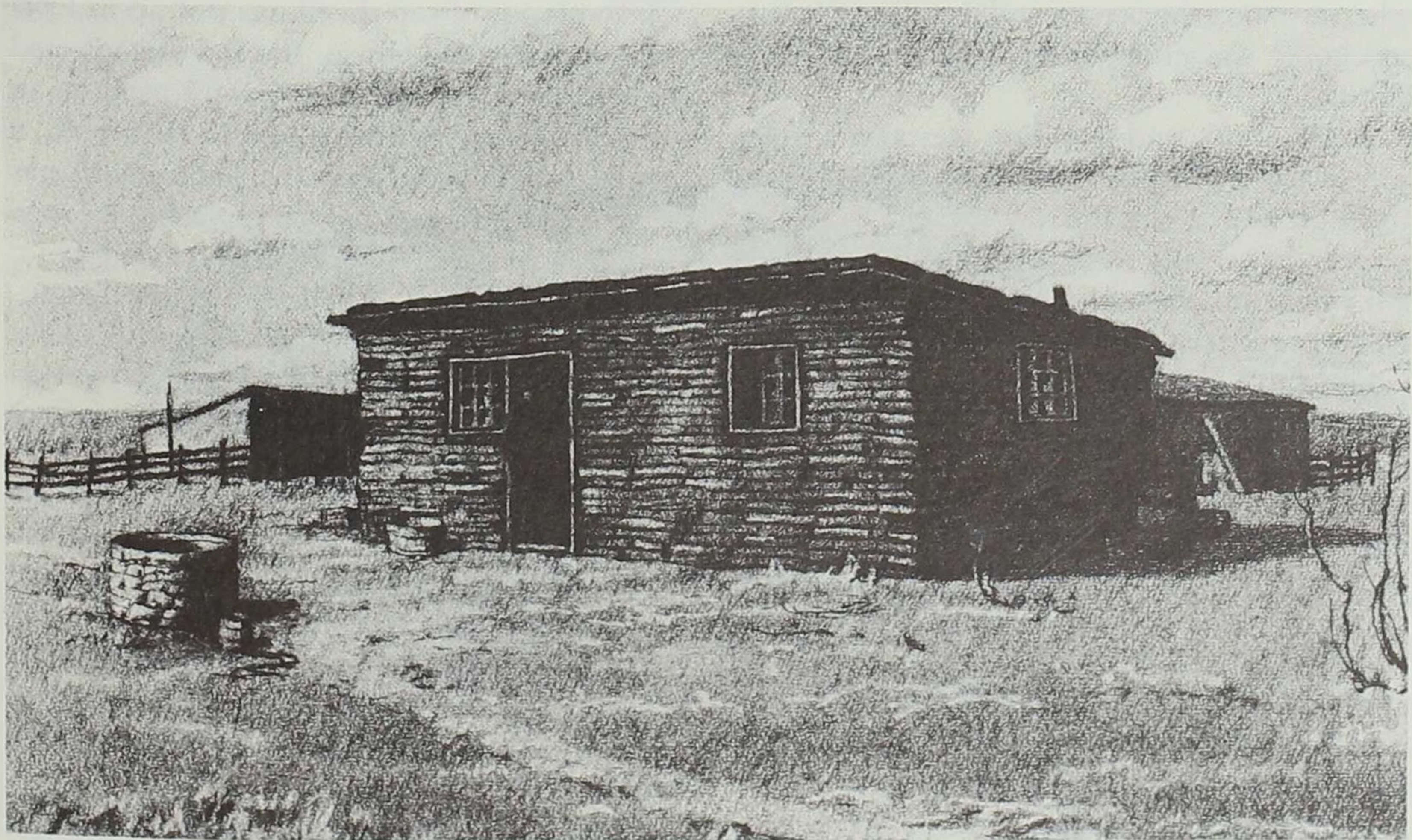
a significant increase in settlers during the late 1860s. Many of these settlers put up sod dwellings as soon as possible in order to immediately improve their land. The land office required building improvements that included the construction of a roof, door, floor, and window. A sod dwelling served this purpose as well as any more elegant home with gabled roof or bay window. For example, Mr. Perkins and Mr. Butterfield, in O'Brien County, built a six-by-eight-foot sod house, with a few boards on top for a roof. They spread a used horse blanket on the floor, put in a window frame (though the frame had no glass), and leaned a piece of lumber against the building to serve as a door. Simple homes could be left while the homesteaders went to file their claims with little fear that the homes would be disturbed while they were away.

Most of the pioneers that came to western Iowa in the 1860s and early 1870s were poor people who looked to the land for their

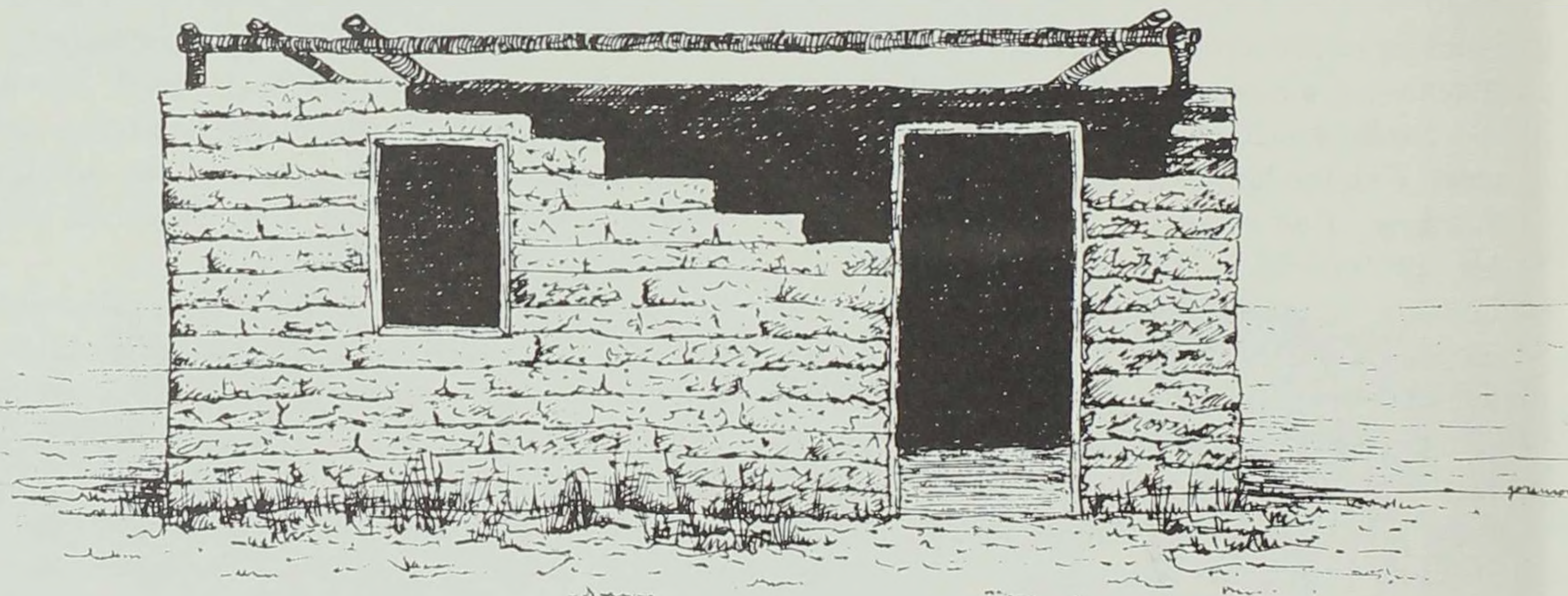
sustenance as well as their livelihood. Sod dwellings were economically built. Lumber became costly during and after the Civil War. Depending on the kind of wood purchased, lumber could cost from twenty-eight to forty-five dollars per thousand board feet. If oak trees were close by for the inside trimming and cottonwood or elm for framing, the settler needed only to purchase the clapboards and roof boards for a frame house.

If all the lumber had to be purchased from a mill, however, the cost of a home could be quite high. For instance, in Monona County in 1865 the lumber for William Cook's frame house, twenty-four-foot square, cost about \$600. Another home built in Cherokee County in this same period cost \$800. These purchases did not include the homesteader's time or costs in traveling to the nearest mill with a wagon and team to get lumber. Such a trip might involve considerable distance, difficult travel conditions, and several days' time.

In contrast, a sod home cost between fifteen



(charcoal sketch by Edith Bell; SHSI)



(drawing by the author)

and thirty dollars. The dugout belonging to the Seine Menning family in Sioux County cost \$26.50, for example. The Mennings had lost all their money and possessions in a boat accident when crossing the ocean, and thus the price of a sod home was about the only one they could afford.

Putting up a sod dwelling was also a quick way to build a home. That was important when there was a need for shelter on the open prairie, especially in the early spring and late fall when the chances of a sudden snowstorm were present. Clement Osgood of Osceola County put the finishing touches on his sod house October 9, 1873, as the snow began to fall. The three-day blizzard that followed would have been disastrous for his family without the warmth and shelter of their humble abode. These homes were warm, with walls up to twenty-four inches thick. With generally small areas to heat, they were quite comfortable during the worst of storms.

Building a sod house was not complicated, but did take time and much hard work. In Kossuth County, Elijah Hurburt piled up sod for a home while breaking up the prairie. In

Pocahontas County in 1871, Betsey Nelson, the only adult in the family, worked hard to build her sod house.

The types of sod dwellings put up in Iowa were the sod house, the sod dugout, and the sod shanty. Such homes were used on an average of one to three years. However, a pioneer might need to use a sod home for as long as sixteen years before replacing it, as in George Swenson's case in Monona County.

Before building a sod house the homesteader would generally look around his land for a spot that was level and dry, but as close to water as possible. The outside dimensions of these structures varied from six-by-eight feet to sixteen-by-thirty feet. Most common was the twelve-by-fourteen-foot or the sixteen-by-twenty-four-foot size home. Once the builder decided on a site and the dimensions of the house, he would cut the prairie grass down to where a plow could be used on the sod. (The cut grass would then be bundled and used later on the roof.)

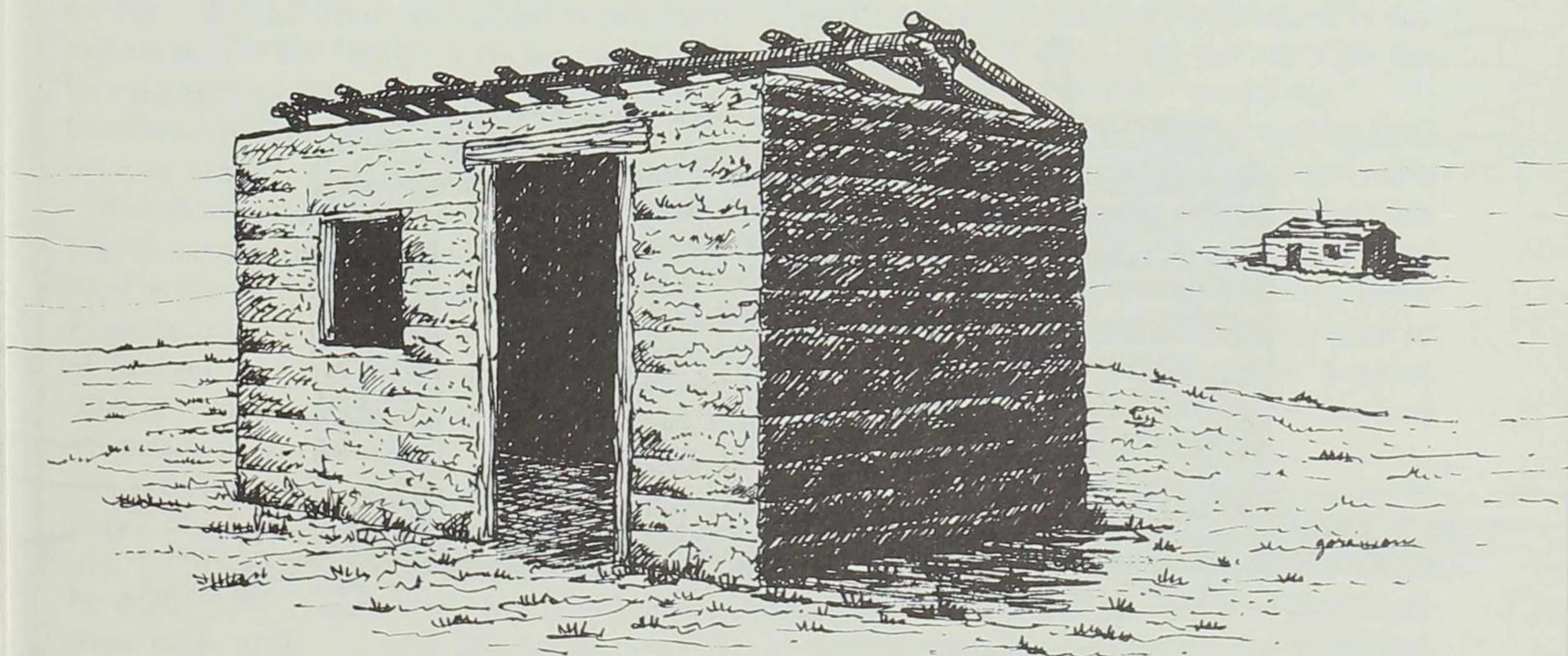
Next, with a yoke or more of oxen the builder would use a breaking plow to cut long lengths

of sod in widths of eighteen to twenty-four inches. The sod was about six inches thick. These strips of sod were then cut into two-foot lengths with an ax or spade. Finally, the sod strips were laid as bricks with dirt as filler in the cracks between the strips.

The roofs of these homes would either be sloped or low-gabled. For a sloped roof, one side of the sod structure was built up several rows of sod higher than the other side. Corner posts for the higher side were made of saplings with crotches at the top to hold the pole used to support the roof. From this pole additional poles were stacked for the rafters. If the roof was low-gabled, center posts with crotches were used, sometimes with corner poles, to support a ridge pole from which additional poles were then used for rafters. When ridge poles had to be joined to span greater lengths, posts were used inside the structure to help support the weight of the roof.

Corner posts were not a necessity in construction. However, if a homesteader did not use a ridge pole to support the weight of the roof he needed to use a roof plate — a series of poles around the top edge of the building. Without a ridge pole or roof plate the weight of the roof would push on the walls and could cause them to collapse outwards, as J.K. McAndrew of O'Brien County learned. In building his sod house McAndrew did not take the time to make a wood frame. The home fell down almost immediately and had to be rebuilt with a frame.

On top of the rafters, settlers placed the bundles of tied prairie grass or some willow brush, and then more sod, this time dirt side up to keep water from running down inside. When new, the roofs shed water well. Sometimes the homesteader had enough boards to use for the roof, which made the house even more waterproof. Usually frames were pur-



(drawing by the author)

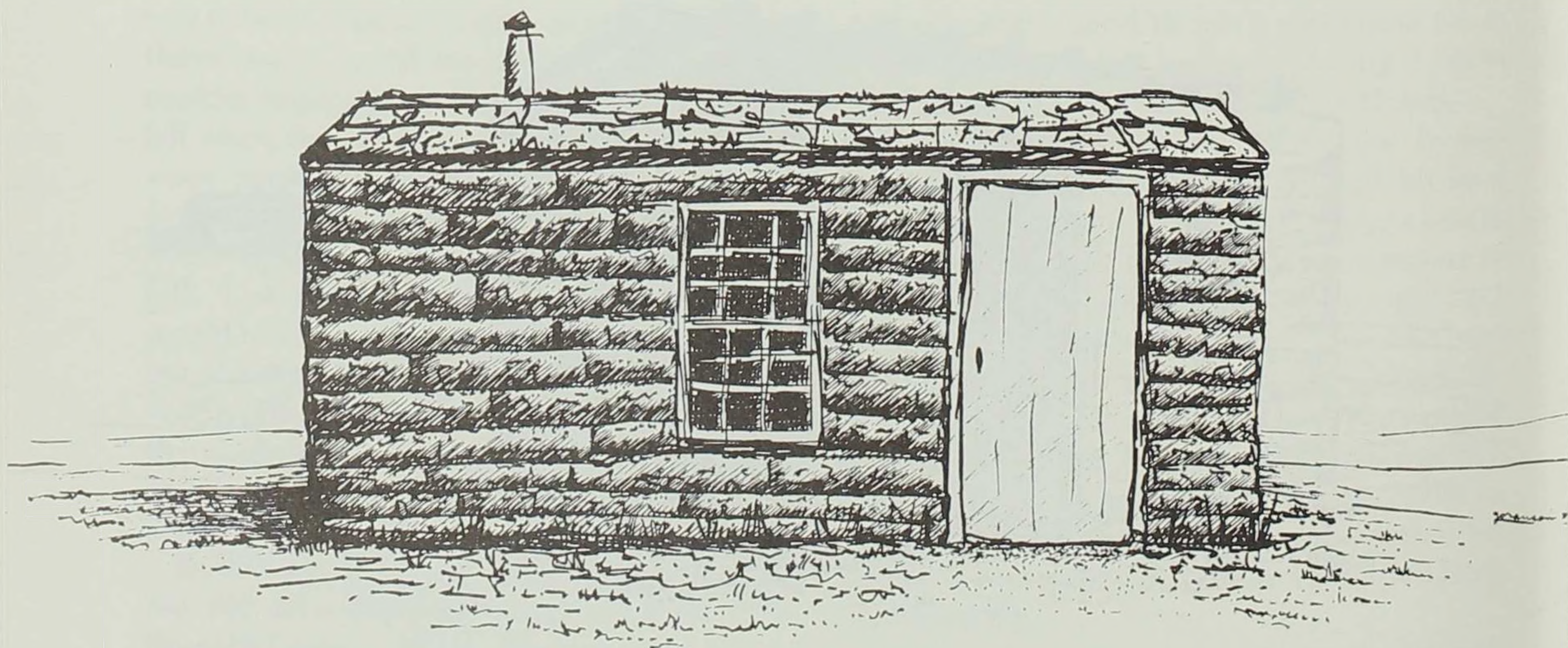
chased for the door and window, with the door then made of lumber and one- or two-sashed windows installed. If a trip to town wasn't anticipated in the near future animal skins, rag carpet, or an old quilt might cover the window openings until such time as glass could be purchased. Windows were usually placed on the south side of the sod dwelling, and high in the wall, to allow as much light as possible.

The dugout, referred to occasionally as an "oversized gopher mound," was built in several ways. One way was by digging a hole in the ground, perhaps five feet deep. Poles were then put in the center ends to support a center ridge pole. Then, from the center ridge to the ground sides, more poles were put on for the rafters. Upon this was laid prairie grass or willow bundles. Sod slabs were then added. A shingled roof was put on if any boards could be found. Sod was laid-up for both gable ends, with a door and window, preferably on the

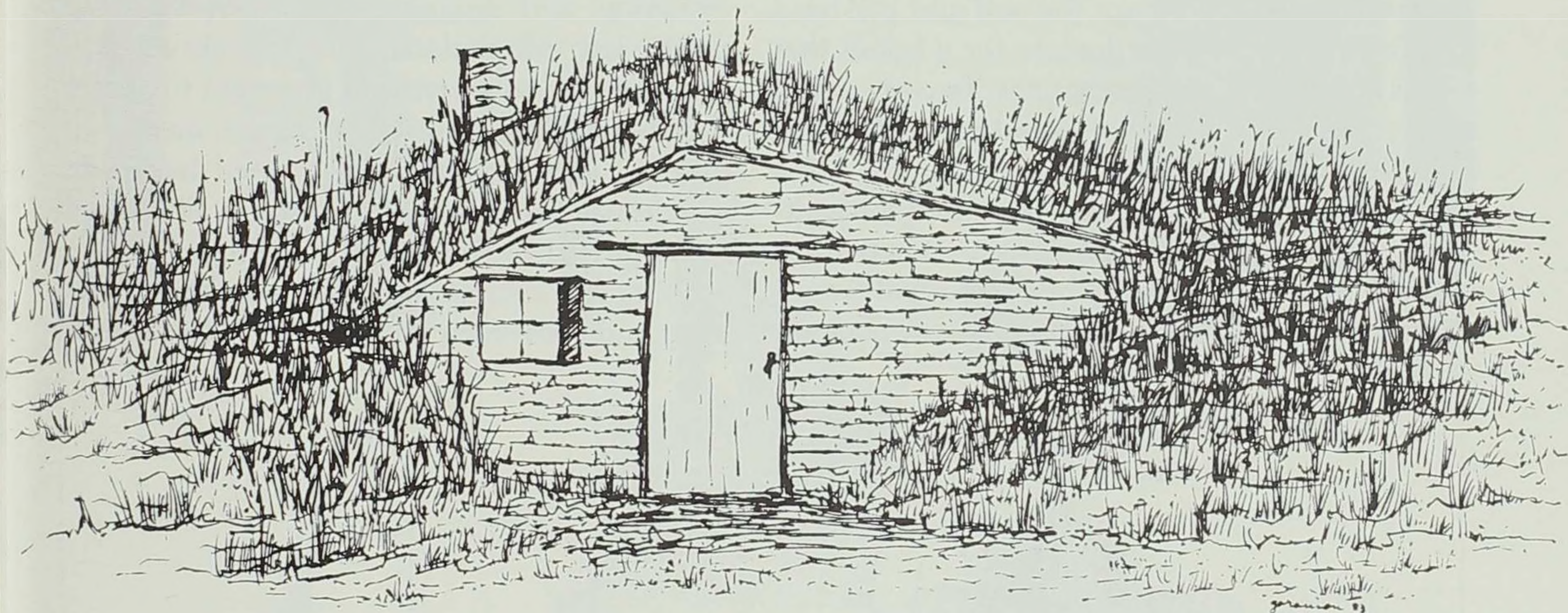
south end. Another window could be added at the other end, if desired. Finally, steps were cut into the ground to reach the floor level. When the steps wore out, board were put down for reinforcement.

Niels Hanson used a variation of this style in his home in Pocahontas County. He dug down two feet, laid three-foot high sod walls on the sides for a total interior height of five feet, and then roofed the structure. To make a more comfortable home, he plastered the interior walls. G.A. Slocum of Pottawattamie County built a dugout, similar to Mr. Hanson's, which measured sixteen-by-thirty feet. The house was the largest one known of the type in the state.

Dugouts were also built into the side of a hill so that three sides were closed and only one end was laid-up with sod. The walls of these houses were often shored up with boards to make "warm, cozy and strong, though perhaps not beautiful" homes, as Ephraim Strauss'



(drawing by the author)



(drawing by the author)

"prairie palace" in Harrison County was described.

Many dugout owners added to the front of their structures after a good season, using sod for the walls and front. The addition provided two rooms for the family. A visitor might well be surprised to enter these dwellings and find furniture brought from back East, and perhaps even an organ.

Sod shanties, a frame construction of rough boards surrounded with sod, were frequently used by the settlers. Shanties were better than dugouts or sod houses because they were freer of dust and dirt and kept out snakes and such. Also, the walls could be decorated with paper or pictures more easily. These abodes were also referred to as slab houses, or "clapboard huts." The roof was made either of boards or sod. If the roof was made of boards they would be eight- to ten-inch wide boards, running from peak to eaves, with the joints covered with small boards. Finishing touches included a wood plank floor and plastered walls.

As with all homes, the inside reflected the nature of the owner. Some homes were cheery and bright with wall hangings, pictures, and maybe even a mantel clock. One was always welcome in the sod dwelling, as in any pioneer home, if one could put up with the inconveniences of the little "mud dens."

The interior walls of sod houses and dugouts could be smoothed with a broadax and then plastered with clay. Clay would be mixed with water and troweled on the walls in a thin layer or several layers. This proved especially helpful in keeping fine dirt from sifting through to clothes, furniture, and inhabitants. Besides plastering, some energetic housewives papered the walls with newspapers.

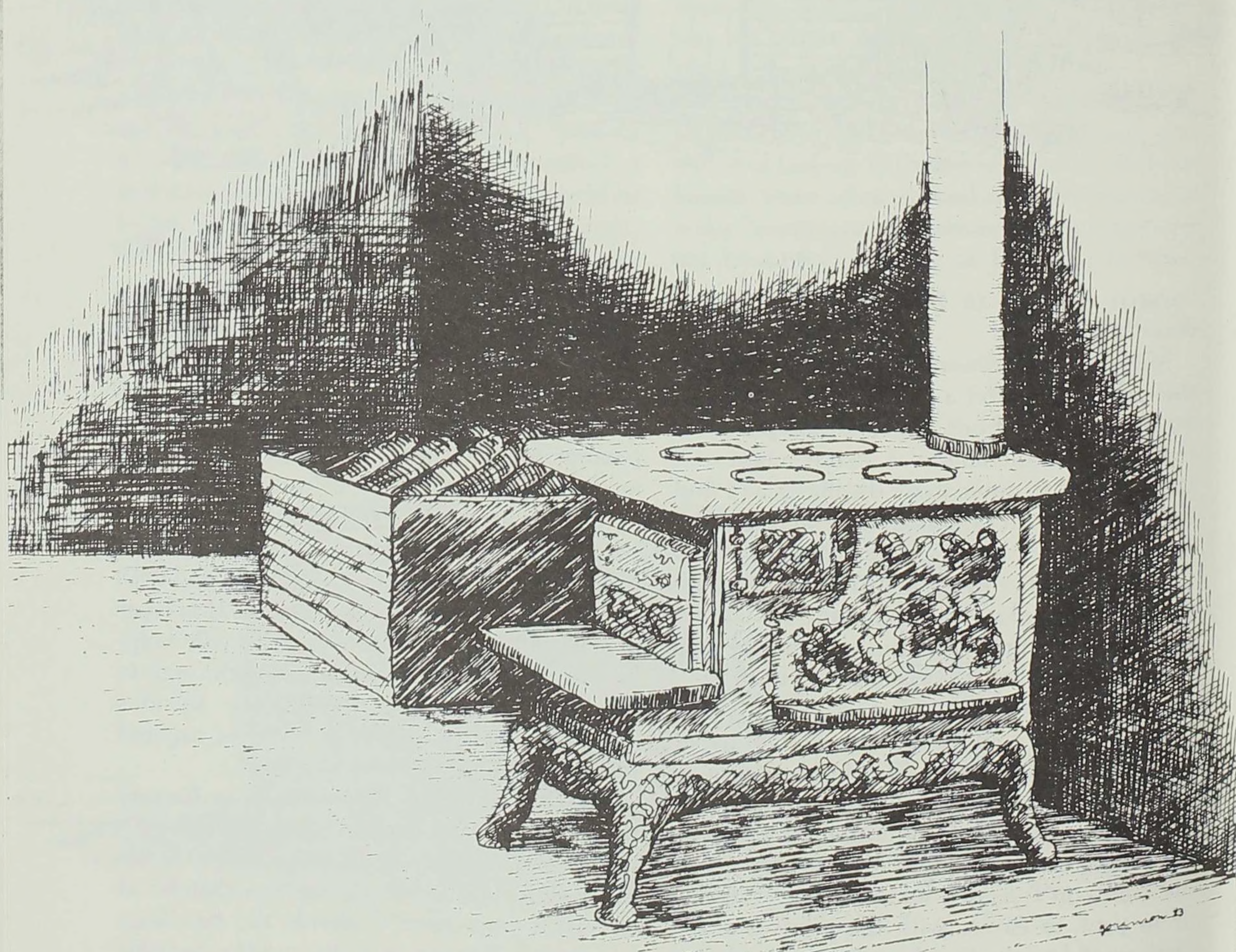
The dugout of Peter Schut in Sioux County had a ledge around the walls, covered with store box boards a half-inch thick. The ledge was used for additional seating. Sometimes sod or boards were used to divide the dwellings into rooms. Blankets or quilts could be hung for privacy at night.

Inside, heating and cooking facilities were most commonly one and the same. Very few settlers built fireplaces of sod because the extra time required to lay up the sod and plaster a chimney was not worthwhile for a home that was not meant to be permanent. Occasionally a clay oven was used for cooking, as George Dailey used in his sod home. Generally, however, cast iron cookstoves were used for heating as well as cooking. They took up little space, could comfortably heat the small area of the home, and were much easier to cook on

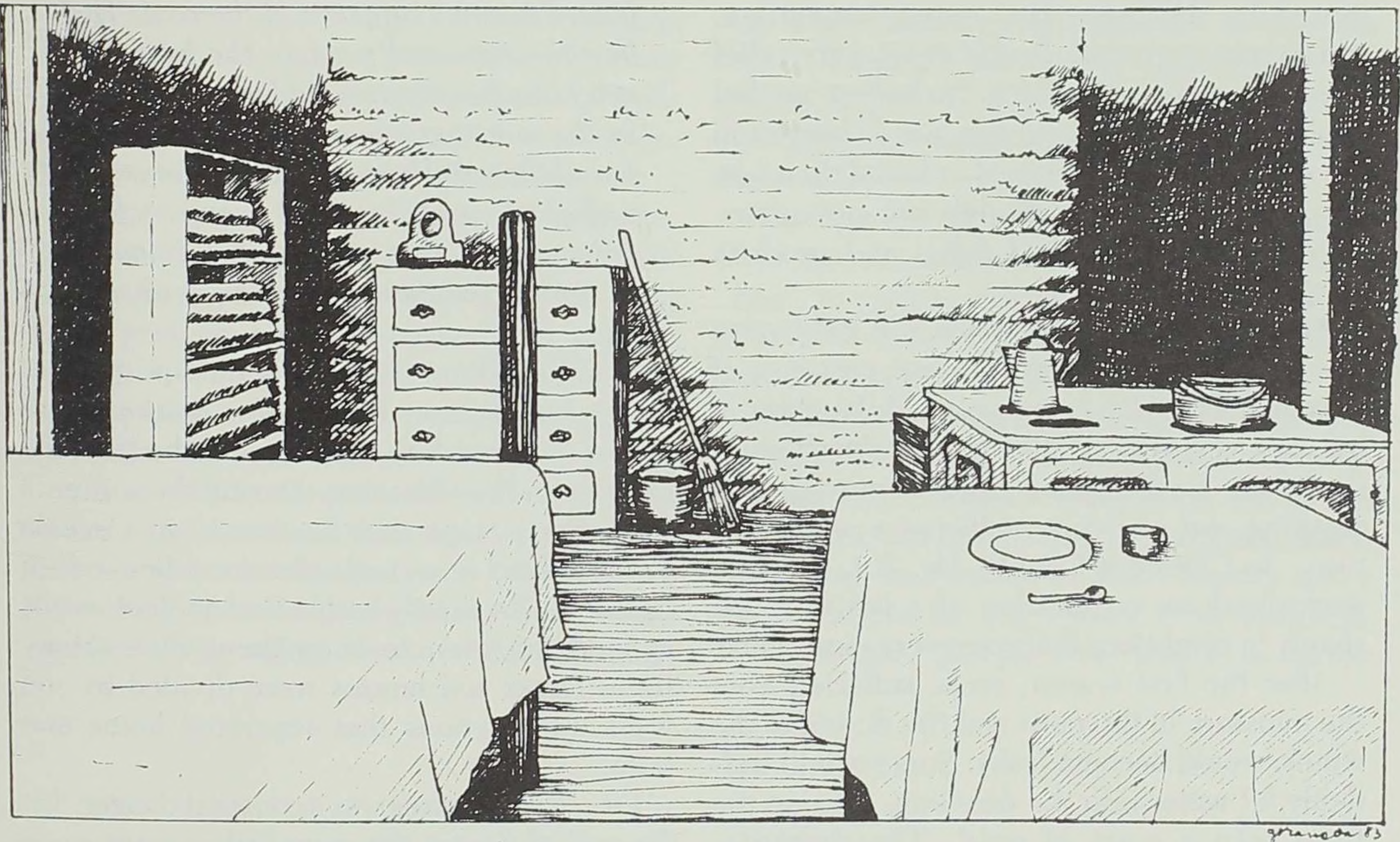
than fireplaces.

Finding wood on the open plains was difficult, so many homesteaders spent time in the evenings and during the winters twisting prairie hay into fuel. The six- to eight-foot tall grass needed to be twisted just right to hold it together tightly. Prairie hay burned nicely but quickly, and mountains of twisted hay were required to heat the abode. Stacks of twisted hay crowded the one-room dwellings.

Other fuel sources included cow chips, corn-cobs, and even corn on the cob. Corn burned



(drawing by the author)



well when dry. And because of the prevailing low prices for corn during the sod era in Iowa, burning corn as fuel was usually more economical than buying coal or wood.

Along with stoves, other furniture in the sod dwellings included homemade beds. Most often, beds were constructed of poles with rope woven between the poles for springs, and blankets and quilts on top. If the home had corner posts they could be used for a bed frame, with two additional freestanding poles. Under the beds many homes had smaller, framed, trundle beds that were pulled out and used at night. When the roof had a higher peak the top portion of the house might be floored for a small sleeping attic. The small sod home of the Van Deek family, in Sioux County, had such an attic where their five boys slept.

Many times homes were shared and families took turns sleeping in shifts. This arrangement kept beds in continual use, except when it was necessary to wash the bedding. In Kossuth

County, W.A. Waterhouse had a large sod house that was shingled and proudly described as "one of the best in county." At one time three families lived in Waterhouse's sod dwelling, owing to its large size.

Boxes were often used for both storage and as chairs or benches. The most common containers were store boxes that had been used to pack the settler's belongings for the trip to Iowa. Larger boxes might be used to display "fancy dishes" and heirlooms. The table might be a dry goods box, with dishes and cutlery stored inside.

Within sod dwellings, life was a series of problems. There were also some hazards to contend with. These included pests and rodents, sickness complicated by the dirt and mud, water contamination, problems arising from sharing quarters with animals, and fires.

Bedbugs were a constant nuisance. Many children suffered the discomfort of large welts

caused by the bugs. Hot water, turpentine, and kerosene provided only temporary relief from the pests. Rodents, including pocket gophers and striped squirrels, would burrow in the sod walls. Even bull snakes found their way into sod homes and, though not poisonous, they could put up good fights and produce deep wounds.

Any sickness in the dugouts and sod homes was complicated by the constant presence of dust and dirt. The seven year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Revo Williams, Kossuth County, died from "hardships incidental to moving, and camping and of living in the new sod structure." In Cherokee County, Dr. R.L. Cleaver performed an amputation of a leg in a sod shanty in conditions that were very unsanitary.

After the first season, roofs, suffering from the moisture of the rains and the drying of the winds, would become leaky. Some would suddenly let water into the dwelling, turning the floor into a mass of mud. The dugouts, especially, were a problem when rainwater ran down the sides of hills onto the sod roofs. When well saturated, entire roofs could collapse, covering the inhabitants and all their possessions.

Settlers faced a variety of roof problems. The J.C. Emery family had to tie their roof down in storms. To keep the roof from blowing off and the rain from drenching them, they tied the rafters to the bed and then piled all their possessions on the bed when it looked like rain outside. Or consider the case of Diederick Beneke in Pocahontas County, whose house had a shingled roof with some open spaces. After a blizzard he woke to find himself and the entire interior of his house covered with two inches of snow.

Another problem was frost in the winter and dampness in the spring which caused the walls to crumble, rot, and sag, and endangered the lives of all inside:

A family in Palo Alto county was aroused from sleep by a crackling sound that came

from the inner supports of the roof. They hastily arose and went to the home of a neighbor for the remainder of the night. In the morning when they returned they found their sod house a mass of ruins. The walls had spread and the heavy roof had fallen to the ground; had they remained the entire family might have perished.

Many sod homes served a dual purpose as house and barn in the winter. Settlers were forced to bring their animals into the house to keep them from freezing. During the winter of 1871 Fred Nagg and his family in Osceola County lived in a single-room sod house with his oxen. The family had to find and cut weeds to feed the oxen to keep them alive. Many times larger sod houses were divided by sod walls into sections that separated home and barn.

Fire in sod houses was a constant danger. By the end of winter the snug little homes were thoroughly dried out by the heat, and in the summer natural heat dried out the home. Storing hay inside could also create a fire hazard. In January 1870 the sod house of Stephen Harris, which had a thatched roof, caught fire. The woodwork inside caught fire first from the stovepipe. With little water available, the fire couldn't be contained. The inside was completely gutted, including Mr. Harris' best suit of clothes, his books, and all the furniture he possessed.

In an 1871 prairie fire A. Himan and Gus Peterson lost their sod houses, hay sheds, grain, and all their possessions. So did Joseph Brinker who, when he saw the fire, hauled his possessions out of the house and placed them 330 feet away. A burning tumbleweed caught his belongings on fire, however, and he lost nearly everything. Twice prairie fires burned the sod roofs of John and Frederick Johnson, who lost everything they had. These people all lived in Pocahontas County, but fires occurred in all parts of the prairies.

There were many uses for sod buildings besides as homes. Commonly they were used as barns, stables, and granaries. "Sod-dies" were sometimes used for schools, churches, and for community buildings.

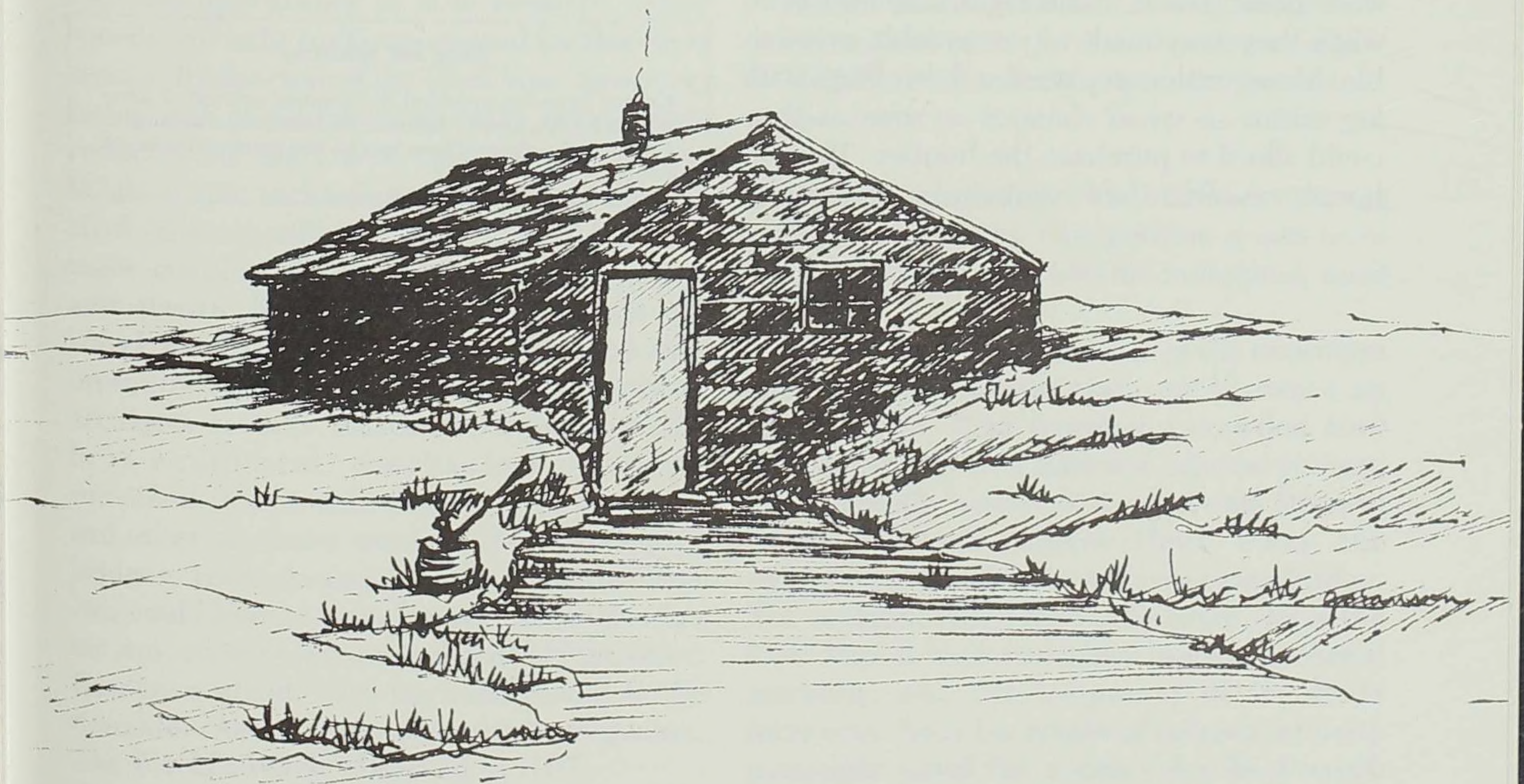
A sod barn was built similar to a sod house, though with a larger door. The animals could then be kept from wandering too far at night and be protected in foul weather. As a granary the sod building was only three-sided so that hay and grain could be stored easily, yet protected from the elements.

In Kossuth County several families used sod stables as homes until better conditions could be had. Sod schoolhouses were also used in Iowa. Built like sod houses, they held either patented desks or large wooden slabs for writ-

ing, as in Clay County's schools. In the late 1850s Kossuth County had what was fondly called "Gopher College." This was a dugout in the hillside, roofed with boards, brush, and slabs of sod.

The first church in O'Brien County, built in 1871, was constructed of sod. The settlers had a "bee" to gather and cut up the sod for the church. It didn't take long to put up the structure. In Kossuth County near Wesley, the sod homes of Mr. Michelson and John Smith were used for Lutheran and Methodist services, respectively. No doubt many other sod homes served as churches during the sod era in Iowa.

The first courthouse in Sioux County was a dugout where for one winter F.M. Hubbell, W.H. Frame, Joseph Bell, and E.L. Stone



(drawing by the author)

signed county warrants and conducted other transactions.

Both Portland Township and Lott's Creek Township in Kossuth County had a section known as "Sod town." These areas had a large cluster of sod houses, which included a school, and the name provided a way of directing people to the communities.

Norman Collar's sod house in Kossuth County was known as the "Old Sod Tavern." A variety of travelers, land speculators, and prospective settlers found food, drink, and lodging there.

A blacksmith shop, with walls of sod, was used for four years and then replaced with a frame shop by August Prange in Pocahontas County.

And finally, at least one child's sod playhouse was large enough to crawl in. With pieces of broken crockery and dishes for housekeeping, the child was quite content.

Sod buildings, with different styles and uses, were humble and unsatisfactory abodes even when they were made as presentable as possible. Many settlers replaced sod dwellings with log cabins or wood shanties as soon as they could afford to purchase the lumber. The sod house was often then converted into a stable,

granary, or toolshed. When the railroads penetrated most of Iowa in the 1880s, lumber became more readily available at a more reasonable cost. Consequently many fine farm homes were built, some of which can be seen in Iowa today.

Thus ended the sod era in Iowa, a loss not generally mourned. Yet these sod dwellings were an important aspect of Iowa's history because they showed the early pioneers' ability to adapt to the environment and to draw on the environment for their needs. The pioneers took their environment and used it to provide themselves with food, clothing, and shelter. Sod dwellings enabled them to survive, especially through harsh Iowa winters. The decision to use the land for their housing needs (although the shelters were inconvenient and undesirable) indicates not only a strength of character in Iowa's pioneers but also the presence of a necessary determination to persist among the first residents on Iowa's prairies. □

Note on Sources

County histories provided the greatest amount of information for this article. Information about sod dwellings in Iowa was also gleaned from special commemorative issues of newspapers.

The Green Mountain Train Wreck:

An Iowa Railroad Tragedy

by H. Roger Grant

Death and disaster have always been part of American railroading. The South Carolina Railroad, the country's first carrier to operate a steam locomotive, experienced an industry first, a fatal accident. On June 17, 1831, not long after this 137-mile road opened for service between Charleston, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia, its sturdy little engine, *The Best Friend of Charleston*, exploded and killed its black fireman.

Accidents continued, yet few major disasters occurred during the first several decades of railroad operations in this country. Slow speeds and light traffic accounted for this good record. By the time of the Civil War, however, faster and more frequent train movements reduced the margin of safety considerably. While major technological improvements — steel rails, wheels and axles, airbrakes, automatic couplers, block signals, steam heating, and electric lighting — gradually made rail travel speedier, more comfortable, and theoretically safer, the number and severity of accidents actually increased. Even with the best equipment, mechanical problems remained. There were more boiler explosions, and other accidents were caused by defective bridges, track, brakes, signals, and the like. Nor could human error be overcome; this factor proved to be a principal cause of fatalities. Excessive speed, likewise, contributed to the slaughter. As the editor of a popular magazine, *The World's Work*, observed in 1907:

Our railroads kill their thousands every month in wreck or trespass. . . . In more than half the cases, the real truth underlying the tragedy is the fact that the train was running at forty or fifty or sixty miles an hour over tracks that were built for trains that never ran but thirty miles an hour. The people demand it. The railroads must obey. Each year, the manufacturers of locomotives are called upon by the big lines to produce and deliver more and more engines that can haul a ten-car passenger train at sixty miles an hour. Even in the far South and in steady old New England, the cry is ever for more speed.

The editor concluded: "The railroads take big risks. They have to. Competition grows terrible, and the railroad, like the individual, must live."

The public got its first taste of the enormous carnage a passenger train could cause on May 6, 1853. That morning a crowded New York & New Haven Railroad express plunged into the chilly waters of the Norwalk River at South Norwalk, Connecticut, when the engineer failed to notice an open swing bridge. The accident killed forty-six people. After the Civil War at least one major tragedy occurred annually, and the frequency of accidents increased. Near the zenith of railroad intercity passenger travel the nation's deadliest wreck took place. On July 9, 1918, two Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis passenger trains, run-

ning at approximately fifty miles per hour each, smashed head-on near the Tennessee capital. One hundred and one passengers and crew members died. With the reduction of passenger service after the 1950s, multiple-death accidents became less common. Still, as recently as November 12, 1983, four Amtrak passengers died in an accident near Marshall, Texas.

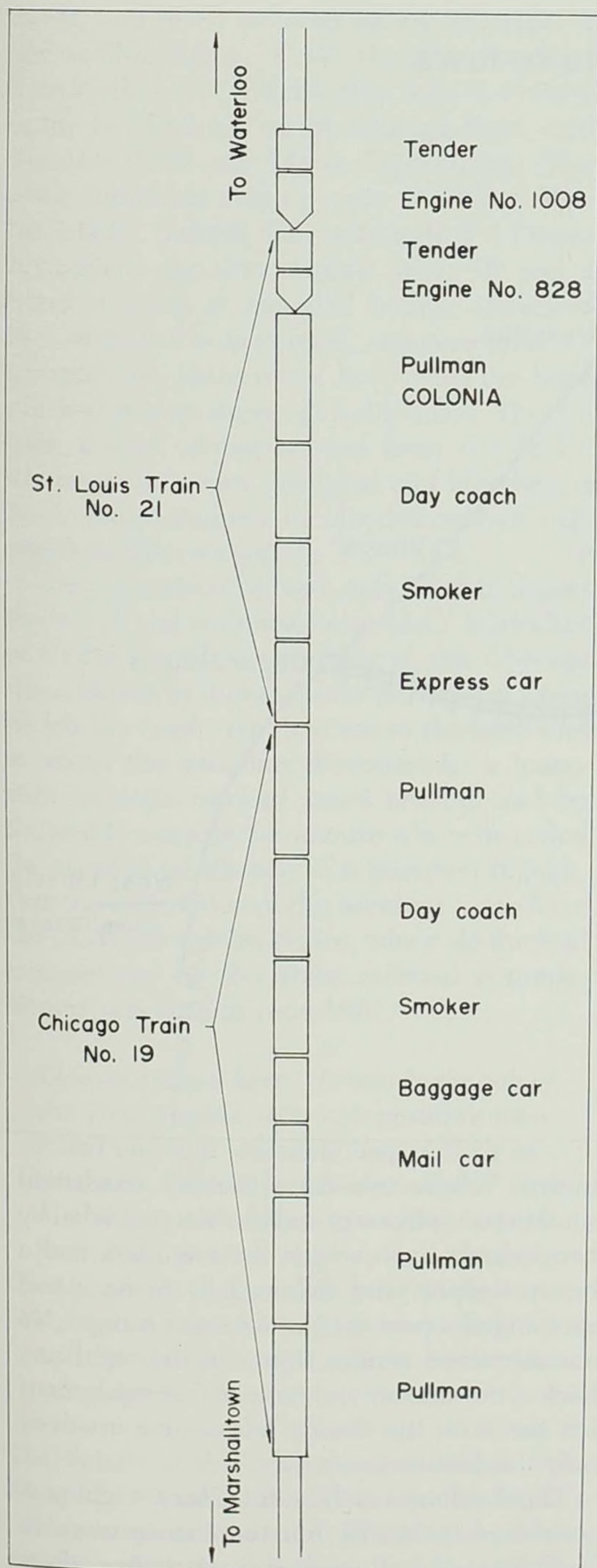
Iowa has had its share of railroad disasters. This is not surprising: by 1920 the state boasted the country's fourth largest track network (9,808 miles); several east-west lines hauled heavy volumes of freight and passenger traffic; and thousands of miles of single track lacked sophisticated signaling devices, relying instead on the timetable and train-order approach.

The Hawkeye State's first railroad catastrophe came on May 7, 1856, only a year after the iron horse arrived. A Mississippi & Missouri Railroad (later Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific or Rock Island) express train derailed near Davenport and killed twelve people. On August 29, 1877, seventeen people perished near Des Moines when a track washout on the Rock Island ditched a circus train. Eleven years later a Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (Milwaukee) passenger train left the track near New Hampton as a result of another washout and nine passengers died. A railroad calamity that shocked Iowans and others nationwide occurred on July 11, 1896, when a Chicago & North Western fast freight rammed a fifteen-car excursion train on the outskirts of Logan. Thirty-one people, mostly members of the Union Pacific Railroad's Pioneers' Association of Omaha, lost their lives in that accident. But Iowa's worst railroad disaster occurred on March 21, 1910, between Green Mountain and Gladbrook, near the Tama-Marshall County line. Fifty-five passengers and trainmen died, thus making it the country's fourteenth deadliest rail accident.

The events that led to what came to be called the "Green Mountain Train Wreck" began the previous day, Sunday, March 20. A derailment on the Rock Island's Cedar Rapids-Waterloo line between Vinton and Shellsburg in Benton County forced the company to reroute its traffic temporarily (see map). The Rock Island got approval from the Chicago & North Western (C&NW) to run its Twin Cities-bound passenger trains from Cedar Rapids west to Marshalltown, a distance of seventy miles, and it then received permission from the Chicago Great Western (CGW) to use its forty-eight mile route between Marshalltown and Waterloo. The detour was not only sixty-five miles longer than the regular route but it was exceedingly time-consuming. In the case of train No. 19-21, however, this would also be a trip of tragic proportions.

The Rock Island train that derailed near Green Mountain consisted of two separate units. Train No. 19 had left Chicago for the Twin Cities on Sunday, March 20, at 4:14 P.M. and arrived in Cedar Rapids at 10:15 P.M. It was scheduled to terminate in Minneapolis at 8:05 the next morning. The other unit was train No. 21 that had departed from St. Louis at 2:15 P.M. on Sunday and had steamed into the Cedar Rapids terminal at 12:30 A.M. on Monday, the 21st. It was supposed to reach Minneapolis at 9:10 A.M. Since these two trains came into Cedar Rapids not far apart, however, the division superintendent logically ordered their consolidation.

In the wee hours of the morning of March 21, No. 19-21, which consisted of two locomotives and eleven cars, headed west over the C&NW rails from Cedar Rapids toward Marshalltown and the CGW connection. When the train arrived there about 6:00 A.M., the question arose as to whether the engines should be turned for the final lap into Waterloo. Because of the track configuration at the interchange, a locomotive could not move



directly forward from the C&NW onto CGW rails without the use of a "Y" or turntable. The former was thought inadequate and the latter was unavailable. The CGW, as was the custom, assigned a pilot familiar with the track to take charge of No. 19-21. The man was John White, a veteran conductor from Des Moines. White concluded that the two engines, a 2-6-0 "Mogul," and a 4-4-0 "American Standard," were too long and heavy to be turned easily. While both the CGW dispatcher in Des Moines and the two Rock Island conductors questioned his reasoning, White, as pilot, had the final word. He realized that the train was already exceedingly late and believed the turning process would cause considerable delay. Moreover, he knew that running engines backwards was considered a safe operating practice, provided the speed was not excessive. Finally, if Pilot White had any qualms about his decision, he was supported in his decision by the fact that twenty minutes before No. 19-21 left Marshalltown a southbound Rock Island passenger train steamed into the yards with its engine working in reverse.

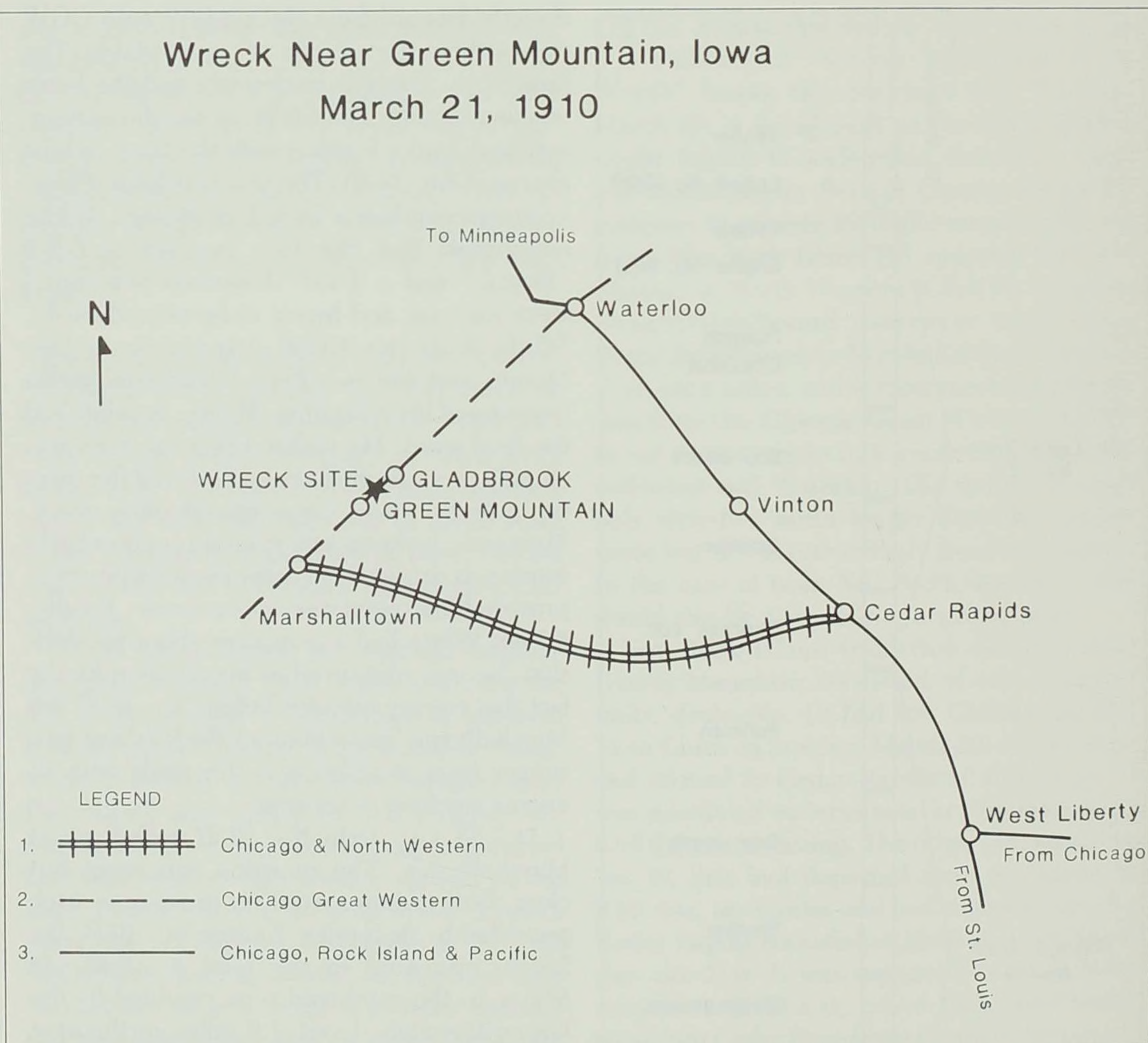
At 7:35 A.M. train No. 19-21 rolled out of Marshalltown. The morning was crisp but clear. Both engines were set in reverse, each preceded by its tender. Engine No. 1008, the 2-6-0, operated in the lead position. At 8:05 A.M. the combined train rumbled by the Green Mountain depot, 7.9 miles northeast of Marshalltown. It traveled at the leisurely and presumably safe speed of between twenty and twenty-five miles per hour. The CGW operator, who watched the train pass, saw nothing that would indicate impending trouble.

Then at approximately 8:20 A.M. disaster struck. On a straight piece of track in a cut about 1,500 feet long the tender of No. 1008

(Left) The composition of the ill-fated train No. 19-21 as it headed out of Marshalltown, bound for Waterloo. (drawing courtesy the author)

Wreck Near Green Mountain, Iowa

March 21, 1910



jumped the rails, plunging it and the locomotive and the second tender and locomotive into the mud along the embankment. The stop was sudden and total. The greatest loss of life occurred in the two wooden coaches that followed the Pullman car *Colonia*, which was attached to engine No. 828 (see diagram). The day coach literally disintegrated, and every person riding in it was either killed or seriously injured. The smoker, which followed the day coach, was completely smashed at both ends and few of its occupants escaped death or major

injury. "These two cars [the day coach and smoker] were like egg shells when preceded by two heavy engines with their tenders and a heavy sleeper, and followed by heavy, steel cars and sleepers [of the Chicago train]." No one sustained serious injury in the eight cars back of the smoker and none of that equipment left the rails; the deadly telescoping involved only the first three cars.

The accident was dreadful. Thirty-eight persons died instantly, fourteen more were so badly hurt that they died a short time after-

wards, and thirty suffered serious injuries. "I saw terrible things," C.W. Maier, a passenger from Walla Walla, Washington, who was riding in the last Pullman of the Chicago train, told the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*. The place reminded some people of a Civil War battlefield. Indeed, the comments of a *Times-Republican* reporter explain why: "It was a horrible scene of mangled bodies, detached legs, arms and human parts, and gore splashed everywhere. Here was a body with the head crushed into an unrecognizable mass. There a pair of legs, dismembered from the body. There another torn, mangled and bleeding, a mere pulp wrapped in blood-drenched rags which had been clothing."

Crew members immediately tried to report the wreck and summon help. M.C. Einwalter of Cedar Rapids, conductor of the Chicago train, hurriedly jumped from the rear car when he felt the crash. He then ran to the head-end to assess the situation. Fortunately, a buggy with its team hitched stood nearby, and he drove it to a nearby farmhouse where he called the agent at Gladbrook. It is possible, though, that the first notice of the accident came from the CGW pilot, John White, who rode the lead locomotive. As the state railroad commissioners reported in June 1910,

This man was a hero. He was in the cab of the first engine. His companions were killed outright. In some way, which can never be known, bruised, maimed and horribly scalded, he extricated himself from the wrecked engine, and thinking only of his duty, while practically in a dying condition himself, by sheer force of will, made his way to a farm house and telephoned.

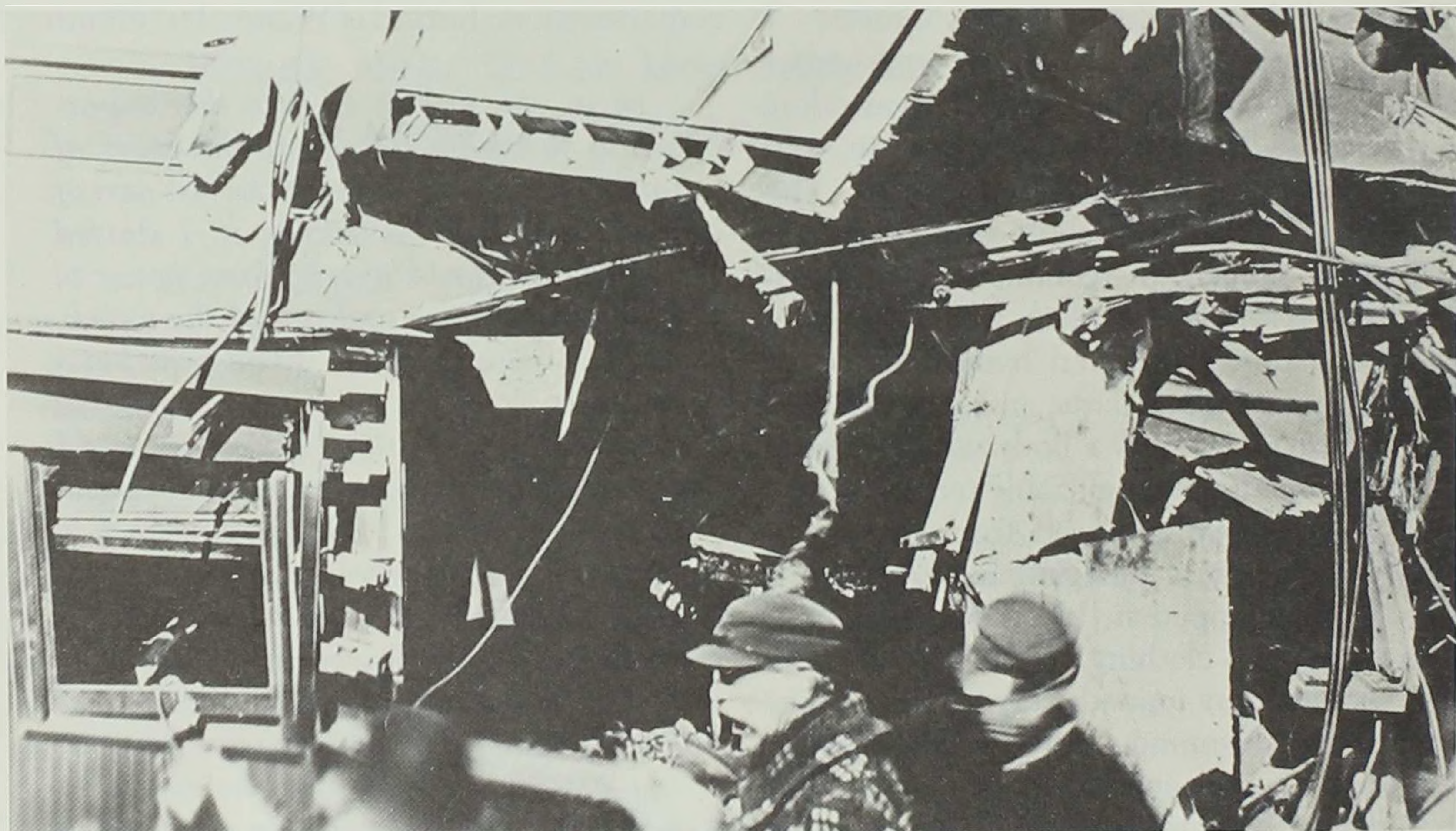
The details of White's valor came from E.A. Murphy of Vinton. In a letter to the CGW's division superintendent in Des Moines, subsequently given to the press and the railroad

commissioners, he told of White's last minutes:

DEAR SIR: I wish to take this opportunity to commend the faithfulness of John White, . . . I was in the last part of that train, and on leaving it, I started immediately for a nearby farm house to telephone to town and report the wreck, and to secure surgeons. I had gone but a little way down the road when something attracted my attention back of me, and I found White hurrying down the road and motioning to me to stop. I rushed back to him and found that he was a mass of water and dirt from head to foot. I asked him if he thought he was hurt internally, and he replied that he was not, but that he was badly scalded, and told me what his position was on the train; that he was [the] pilot and that he wanted to get word to Gladbrook or Marshalltown and notify the company of the disaster and secure surgeons for the injured. He seemed to be giving no thought whatever to himself, but his mind seemed to be wholly upon his duty to the company. I took White to the farm house and reported the affair to the agent at Gladbrook, under his direction, and then did what I could to relieve his suffering and stayed with him until I could get a surgeon to look after him. . . .

Help arrived quickly when word of the wreck reached Gladbrook, Green Mountain, and Marshalltown. Physicians rushed to the scene by automobile. The well-intentioned and the curious also appeared. Almost immediately, the CGW ordered a relief train to the site. In the meantime, able-bodied passengers and those who arrived to assist carried the injured to the rear Pullmans. Others gave what aid they could:

One woman would be nursing an unknown man here, another would be



The Pullman car Colonia telescoped into the day coach of the St. Louis section of train No. 19-21. (courtesy the author)

tearing open garments to get at the seat of the wound, while others hurried thru the aisles rushing water to cool parching lips and fevered brows.

For the nearly forty who were already dead, a handful of stout-hearted souls laid their bodies in an adjoining pasture. These naked, torn, and crushed corpses were covered with whatever was available — sheets, blankets, cushions, or clothing.

When the relief train arrived from Marshalltown, about 10:30 A.M., volunteers speedily loaded the injured and the dead into it. Once the train was on its way back to Marshalltown, persons who required hospitalization were given numbers to designate the seriousness of their condition. Those who needed immediate attention received the lowest numbers. The *Times-Republican* described the next series of events on that black Monday:

At the station a multitude gathered white-

faced and horrified waiting the coming of the special train. Pallid officers of the [CGW] mingled among the crowds nearly or quite as anxious for definite news as the crowd that surged and questioned. The streets and the platforms were filled when the death train drew in. The full extent of the calamity had not been realized. The cars were crowded with dead and dying and wounded. The hurry calls for wagons and conveyances brought teams on the full run thru the streets. One by one the bloodstained victims were taken thru the windows and tenderly as might be sent away to the hospitals and the temporary morgue.

As expected, the wreck upset tranquil Marshalltown. For one thing, it taxed the town's medical resources to the limit. All available doctors and nurses were called and additional personnel came from Des Moines by train. Similarly, area morticians faced an enormous



Volunteers at the scene covered the victims' bodies. The undamaged Chicago section stands in the background. (courtesy the author)

task. For thirty-six continuous hours they worked in a makeshift morgue on South Center Street to prepare the bodies for their final destinations. Several journalists, who came to cover this national news story, labored at identifying the victims. Volunteers earlier had collected the dead's personal effects, and they continued to help by answering the ever-ringing telephone.

The uninjured survivors of the wreck of No. 19-21 received attention, too. Those who did not board the relief train rode back to Marshalltown in the undamaged cars of No. 19-21. Rock Island passenger department employees arrived to counsel the shocked and weary travelers. The railroad offered free tickets to any place that these survivors wished to go.

Once the initial horror of the Green Mountain wreck wore off, individuals, especially members of the press, clamored to learn why it had happened, and how similar disasters might be avoided in the future. Early

reports said merely that No. 19-21 "jumped the tracks." Some speculated that perhaps a broken rail or wheel or perhaps a defective brake beam had caused the derailment. Later, when the railroad commissioners carefully studied the matter, they admitted that the cause would "never be known with absolute certainty." The rails and rolling stock were so badly twisted and distorted that investigators could not positively rule out any of the earlier suppositions.

But the commissioners blasted the Chicago Great Western for the generally poor condition of its roadbed. Never financially robust, the CGW had fallen into the hands of receivers in the wake of the Panic of 1907. By March 1910, however, a better day had dawned for this 1500-mile midwestern carrier. The administration of Samuel M. Felton, that had assumed power in 1909, had already started a massive program of rehabilitation. Indeed, the fall of 1909 witnessed some work on the Marshalltown to Waterloo line. Laborers began to

replace defective, worn-out ties and rails, correct track alignment, and add fresh ballast. Yet all of the planned improvements had not been completed. In the vicinity of the derailment new ties had only been strung along the right-of-way, awaiting installation when weather conditions allowed. The commissioners also noted that "From the fact of standing water in the ditches on each side of the track in the cut where the accident occurred, it was clearly apparent that the facilities for drainage were very imperfect, although with proper ditches and proper attention, there would be no difficulty in draining the water from the railroad track."

The commissioners not only suggested that the track conditions contributed to the disaster ("If there be a primary cause of this wreck, in our judgment it was the soft track resulting from the season and lack of proper drainage.") but they strongly urged carriers not to operate any engine backwards. "It is dangerous for a

train to be led by the tender of an engine. To some extent, it obscures the vision of the engineer. In any event, it is topheavy and easily thrown out of balance." And these regulators criticized the Rock Island for placing light, wooden coaches between heavy steel cars. The procedure bothered more than the commissioners. The editor of the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*, for one, in a widely reprinted editorial, entitled "The Lesson of the Wreck," caught popular thinking on the matter: "The make up of that wrecked train is the main reason for the terrible death rate. It was careless, morally at least it was criminal. If no statute covers it then the code of Iowa needs amplification."

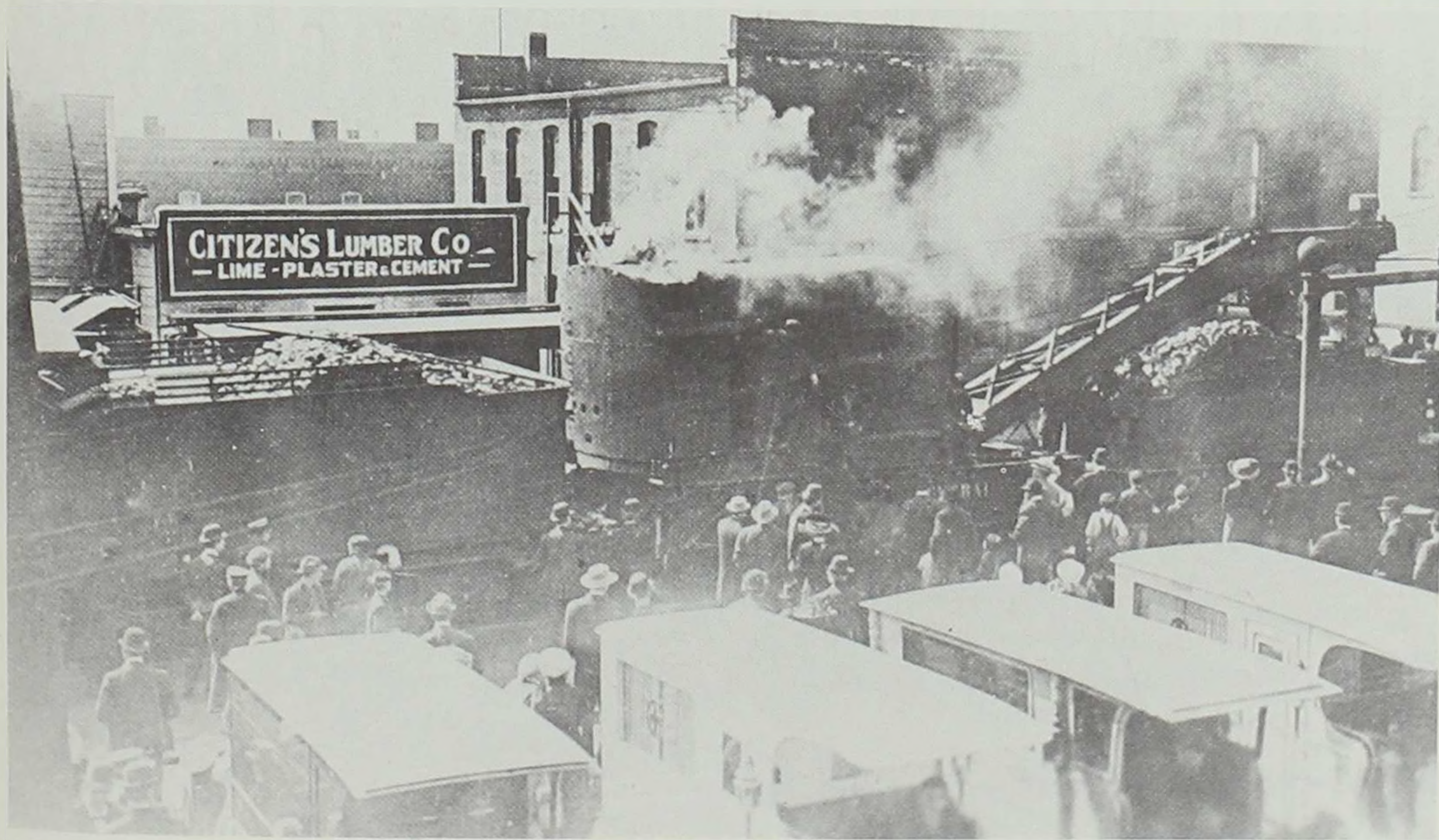
The train wreck near Green Mountain did bring about changes. While public outrage did not prompt Iowa lawmakers to alter immediately the railroad statutes, the federal government moved swiftly to force companies



A large crowd gathered to view the Rock Island wreck near Green Mountain. (courtesy the author)

to report to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) all accidents that involved injury or property damage. The ICC, too, gained the power to make its own investigations of serious railroad mishaps. And there was the force of "moral suasion" created by that black Monday near Green Mountain, Iowa, which led companies to show greater concern about the arrangement of rolling stock in passenger service. In July 1910, for example, when a derailment blocked the C&NW's main line near Belle Plaine and forced the rerouting of varnish over the Milwaukee between Cedar Rapids and Tama, officials discovered as one train was about to leave the terminal that several wooden cars were sandwiched between heavy steel ones. "[The superintendent] decided to change the arrangement . . . and for over an hour a switch engine was busy getting the cars into their proper position, the steel coaches in the front of the train and the wooden coaches in the rear."

Passenger train wrecks, like the one at Green Mountain, contributed to consumer pressure for greater safety measures. Just as rates and service had once been the principal bones of contention between the public and the carriers, passenger well-being emerged as a burning issue early in the century. Patrons wanted "peace of mind" when they traveled. Some reform came in 1907 when Congress passed the Railway Hours Act. This measure, spearheaded by Wisconsin's progressive senator, Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., prohibited railroad operating personnel from working more than sixteen consecutive hours. While difficult to gauge, the March 21, 1910, tragedy likely caused pressure for greater railroad safety at both the state and federal levels. Indeed, it was this type of event that led, in part, to passage of the Adamson Act of 1916, which gave railroad men an eight-hour day. As with the 1907 law, legislators believed that alert workers would be safety-conscious work-



The relief train arrived at the CGW station in Marshalltown at 4 P.M. on Monday, March 21. Volunteers then transferred the dead to ambulances for removal to the morgue. (courtesy the author)



Workers checking the Pullman car Colonia (left) and the remains of the wooden day coach. (courtesy the author)



The remains of the two locomotives of the Rock Island's ill-fated train No. 19-21 attracted both spectators and repair workers. (courtesy the author)

ers.

Unlike most railroad disaster sites, the one near Green Mountain is marked. During the nation's bicentennial a local group placed a bronze marker on a large boulder near the track. Unfortunately, though, the narrative is flawed: a derailment, not a "flood," forced the Rock Island to reroute No. 19-21; the death toll reached fifty-five, not "54"; and the wreck occurred on the Chicago Great Western, not the "Chicago & Great Western." Likely, this memorial will soon stand alone. The Chicago & North Western Transportation Company, which acquired the CGW in 1968, plans to

abandon this historic piece of line and then little will be left to recall the horrors of that March morning in 1910. □

Note on Sources

The general subject of railroad mishaps in the United States is covered in Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *Notes on Railroad Accidents* (New York, 1879) and Robert B. Shaw, *A History of Railroad Accidents, Safety Precautions and Operating Practices* (Potsdam, N.Y., 1978). Of more limited value is Robert C. Reed, *Train Wrecks: A Pictorial History of Accidents on the Main Line* (Seattle, 1968).

Details of the wreck near Green Mountain appeared in area newspapers, with the *Marshalltown Times-Republican* providing the best coverage. *The Thirty-third Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners for the Year Ending December 4, 1910* (Des Moines, 1910) likewise contained valuable information.

Palimpsests

by John C. Parish

The editor of "Iowa's Popular History Magazine" is often reminded by members of the State Historical Society of Iowa, by colleagues in the history profession, and even by friends and relatives that there is something unique about the Palimpsest. The reminders most often come in the form of questions. "How do you pronounce the name of your magazine?" (The editor sometimes says, "The Pal.") "Why is it called whatever it's called? Sometimes the questions have an ominous ring: "Don't you think it would be nice to change its name?"

I would like to state my agreement with the notion that the pronunciation of "palimpsest" will always be a problem, but I disagree with suggestions that the name of the magazine should be changed. It's a robust and still moderately young journal. As a matter of fact, it is celebrating its sixty-fourth birthday this July. Its name remains meaningful. This fact can be made most clear, perhaps, by reprinting an article which appeared in the first issue of the Palimpsest. The article, entitled simply "Palimpsests," was written by John C. Parish, the first editor of the magazine. In it, he clearly answered all the questions which are but barely covered in that little note which appeared on the inside front cover of that first issue and has appeared in every succeeding issue.

(What better way could there be to wish a happy birthday to a proud journal than to reprint a piece by its first editor?)

—Ed.

Palimpsests of a thousand and two thousand years ago were parchments or other manuscript material from which one writing had been erased to give room for another. The existence of these double texts was due chiefly to the scarcity of materials. Waxen tablets,

John C. Parish's article originally appeared in the July 1920 issue of the *Palimpsest*, volume 1, number 1.

papyrus rolls, parchment sheets, and vellum books each served the need of the scribe. But they were not so easily procured as to invite extravagance in their use or even to meet the demand of the early writers and medieval copyists for a place to set down their epics, their philosophies, and their hero tales.

And so parchments that were covered with the writings of Homer or Caesar or Saint Matthew were dragged forth by the eager scribes, and the accounts of Troy or Gaul or Calvary erased to make a clean sheet for the recording of newer matters. Sometimes this second record would in turn be removed and a third deposit made upon the parchment.

The papyrus rolls and the parchments of the early period of palimpsests were merely sponged off — the ink of that time being easily removable, though the erasure was not always permanent. The later parchments were usually scraped with a knife or rubbed with pumice after the surface had been softened by some such compound as milk and meal. This method was apt to result in a more complete obliteration of the text.

But there came men whose curiosity led them to try to restore the original writing. Atmospheric action in the course of time often caused the sponged record to reappear; chemicals were used to intensify the faint lines of the old text; and by one means or another many palimpsest manuscripts were deciphered and their half-hidden stories rescued and revived.

On a greater scale time itself is year by year making palimpsests. The earth is the medium. A civilization writes its record upon the broad surface of the land: dwellings, cultivated fields, and roads are the characters. Then time

sponges out or scrapes off the writing and allows another story to be told. Huge glaciers change the surface of the earth; a river is turned aside; or a flood descends and washes out the marks of a valley people. More often the ephemeral work of man is merely brushed away or overlain and forgotten. Foundations of old dwellings are covered with drifting sand or fast growing weeds. Auto roads hide the Indian trail and the old buffalo trace. The caveman's rock is quarried away to make a state capitol.

But the process is not always complete, nor does it defy restoration. The frozen sub-soil of the plains of northern Siberia has preserved for us not only the skeletons of mammoths, but practically complete remains, with hair, skin, and flesh in place — mummies, as it were, of the animals of prehistoric times. In the layers of sediment deposited by the devastating water lie imbedded the relics of ancient civilizations. The grass-grown earth of the Mississippi Valley covers with but a thin layer the work of the mound builders and the bones of the workmen themselves.

With the increasing civilization of humanity, the earth-dwellers have consciously and with growing intelligence tried to leave a record that will defy erasure. Their buildings are more enduring, their roads do not so easily become grass-grown, the evidences of their life are more abundant, and their writings are too numerous to be entirely obliterated.

Yet they are only partially successful. The tooth of time is not the only destroyer. Mankind itself is careless. Letters, diaries, and even official documents go into the furnace, the dump heap, or the pulp mill. The memory of man is almost as evanescent as his breath; the work of his hand disintegrates when the hand is withdrawn. Only fragments remain — a line or two here and there plainly visible on the palimpsest of the centuries — the rest is dim if it is not entirely gone. Nevertheless with diligent effort much can be restored, and there glows upon the page the fresh, vivid chronicles of

long forgotten days. Out of the ashes of Mount Vesuvius emerges the city of Pompeii. The clearing away of a jungle from the top of a mountain in Peru reveals the wonderful stonework of the city of Machu Picchu, the cradle of the Inca civilization. The piecing together of letters, journals and reports, newspaper items, and old paintings enables us to see once more the figures of the pioneers moving in their accustomed ways through the scenes of long ago.

The palimpsests of Iowa are full of fascination. Into the land between the rivers there came, when time was young, a race of red men. Their record was slight and long has been overlain by that of the whites. Yet out of the dusk of that far off time come wild, strange, moving tales, for even their slender writings were not all sponged from the face of the land. Under the mounds of nearly two score counties and in the wikiups of a few surviving descendants, are the uneffaced letters of the ancient text.

And the white scribes who wrote the later record of settlement and growth, read the earlier tale as it was disappearing and told it again in part in the new account. These new comers in turn became the old, their homes and forts fell into decay, their records faded, and their ways were crowded aside and forgotten.

But they were not all erased. Here and there have survived an ancient building, a faded map, a time-eaten diary, the occasional clear memory of a pioneer not yet gathered to his fathers. And into the glass show cases of museums drift the countless fragments of the story of other days. Yet with all these survivals, how little effort is made to piece together the scattered fragments into a connected whole.

Here is an old log cabin, unheeded because it did not house a Lincoln. But call its former occupant John Doe and try to restore the life of two or three generations ago. It requires no diligent search to find a plow like the one he

used in the field and a spinning wheel which his wife might have mistaken for her own. Over the fireplace of a descendant hang the sword and epaulets he wore when he went into the Black Hawk War, or the old muzzle-loading gun that stood ready to hand beside the cabin door. And perhaps in an attic trunk will be found a daguerreotype of John Doe himself, dignified and grave in the unwonted confinement of high collar and cravat, or a miniature of Mrs. Doe with pink cheeks, demure eyes, and fascinating corkscrew curls.

Out of the family Bible drops a ticket of admission to an old time entertainment. Yonder is the violin that squeaked out the measure at many a pioneer ball. Here is the square foot warmer that lay in the bottom of his cutter on the way home and there the candlestick that held the home-made tallow dip by the light of which he betook himself to bed.

In the files of some library is the yellowed newspaper with which — if he were a Whig — he sat down to revel in the eulogies of "Old Tippecanoe" in the log cabin and hard cider campaign of 1840, or applaud the editorial which, with pioneer vigor and unrefined vocabulary, castigated the "low scoundrel" who edited the "rag" of the opposing party.

But most illuminating of all are the letters that he wrote and received, and the journal that tells the little intimate chronicles of his day to day life. Hidden away in the folds of the letters, with the grains of black sand that once blotted the fresh ink, are the hopes and joys

and fears and hates of a real man. And out of the journal pages rise the incidents which constituted his life — the sickness and death of a daughter, the stealing of his horses, his struggles with poverty and poor crops, his election to the legislature, a wonderful trip to Chicago, the building of a new barn, and the barn warming that followed.

Occasionally he drops in a stirring tale of the neighborhood: a border war, an Indian alarm, a street fight, or a hanging, and recounts his little part in it. John Doe and his family and neighbors are resurrected. And so other scenes loom up from the dimness of past years, tales that stir the blood or the imagination, that bring laughter and tears in quick succession, that, like a carpet of Bagdad, transport one into the midst of other places and forgotten days.

Time is an inexorable reaper but he leaves gleanings, and mankind is learning to prize these gifts. Careful research among fast disappearing documents has rescued from the edge of oblivion many a precious bit of the narrative of the past.

It is the plan of this publication to restore some of those scenes and events that lie half-hidden upon the palimpsests of Iowa, to show the meaning of those faint tantalizing lines underlying the more recent markings — lines that the pumice of time has not quite rubbed away and which may be made to reveal with color and life and fidelity the enthralling realities of departed generations. □

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