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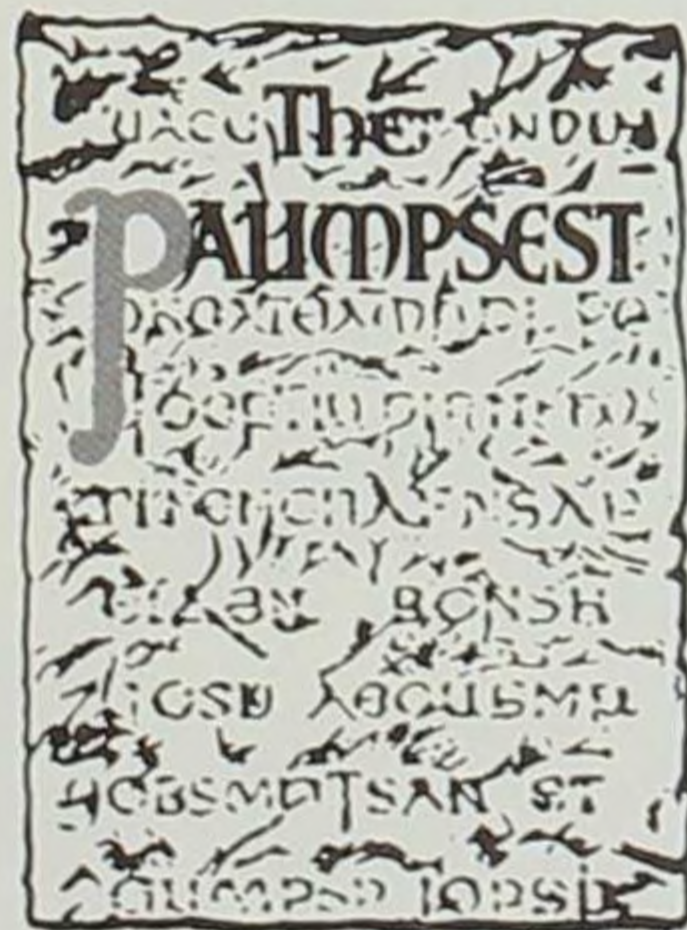
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Mary K. Fredericksen, Editor

## CONTENTS

- Lowell Houser and the Genesis of a Mural  
by Mary L. Meixner ..... 2
- The Ames Corn Mural  
by Mary L. Meixner ..... 14
- The Boonesboro Connection: Richard A. Ballinger and Ray Lyman Wilbur  
by Thomas Tanner ..... 30

Cover: Two views of Lowell Houser's "The Development of Corn" mural (the top view has been reproduced backwards in order to allow readers to compare the mural's panels easily). In her two articles in this issue of the Palimpsest, Mary L. Meixner examines Lowell Houser's artistic development and his work as an artist, and offers an excellent thematic interpretation of the remarkable mural that Houser created for the Ames post office in the late 1930s. (courtesy the author)



## 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.



# Lowell Houser and the Genesis of a Mural

by Mary L. Meixner

The story of the artist, Lowell Houser, is relatively unknown. His low-key attitude and the limited access to his paintings, prints, and illustrations have not allowed for the development of much public and professional interest. In the 1920s and 1930s the nation was only slowly becoming conscious of art and the artists in its midst. Coming of artistic age in the Depression, Houser was an early recipient of the new dignity awarded artists as useful members of the state. A young artist, he had turned eagerly to Mexico in the 1920s when the Mexican mural revolution was underway, and thus, he was partially prepared when artists were sought for government projects in the 1930s.

More attention should be paid to his fine Iowa corn mural. That mural, in the lobby of the main post office at Fifth and Kellogg in Ames, is a significant and serious work conceived and created in the course of a new involvement on the part of government in the arts. The more famous series of nine murals supervised by Grant Wood at Iowa State University has long overshadowed this singular piece although Houser was one of the painters on the Wood team.

His theme, "The Development of Corn," had special appeal in the Midwest for it was about the crop which feeds almost half of the world in the twentieth century. In the mural, ancient Mayan Indian maize cultivation is contrasted with the practices of modern American corn producers. The mural is in an excellent state of preservation. It reveals Houser as a superb colorist, a careful craftsman, and an artist of great intelligence.

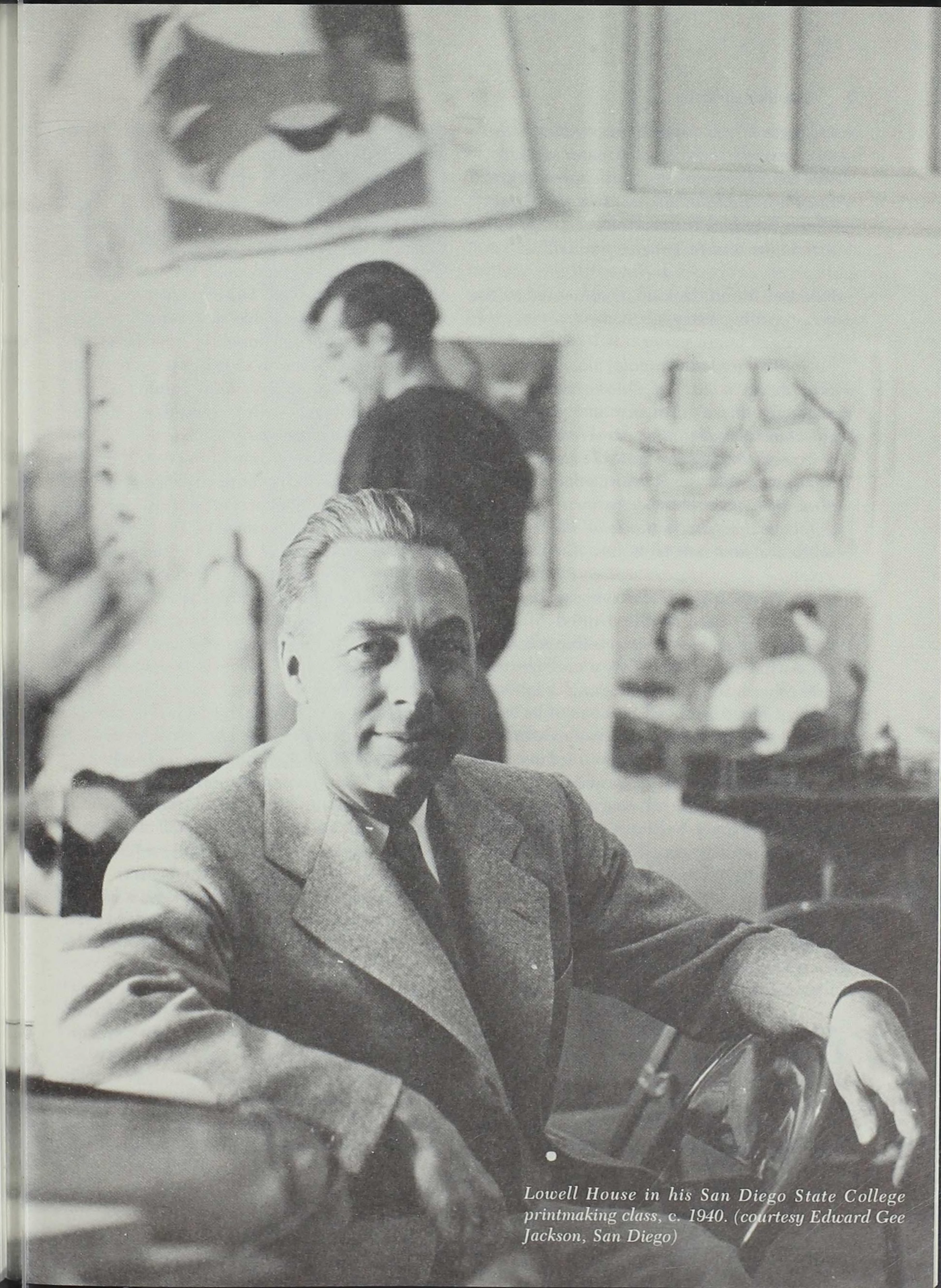
Born in Chicago in 1902, Houser became an

Iowan at the age of seven when his family moved to Ames. He graduated from Ames High School in 1921. That same year he enrolled at Iowa State College for one quarter. In January 1922, Houser left Iowa State College for the Chicago Art Institute where he met his longtime friend, Everett Gee Jackson, with whom most of his formative artistic years were spent. After a three-year course of study in drawing and painting, the pair went into the mountains of the Mexican state of Coahuila to live and paint near a Kickapoo Indian reservation. They returned to the United States to paint in East Texas. The next year, however, they were back in Mexico at Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, where they settled in the village of Chapala on Lake Chapala.

By this time Houser had changed shoes for sandals. Anita Brenner compared him to Paul Higgins, a popular American artist who had taken up life and art in Mexico. She wrote:

*Several other Americans and Europeans have "gone Mexican" not so successfully, because not so completely. Higgins' only approximate emulator is Lowell Houser, who went for the day to Lake Chapala while vacationing in Guadalajara, and stayed three years. Subsequently he was engaged by the Carnegie Institution to assist Charlot in Chichen-Itza. Houser's fine talent for design and original bent in colour had been expended on intricate magazine covers and illustrations. The difference between this work and that done after his stay in Mexico is great, but no doubt, because of his youth, his style though already formalized, would have changed*





*Lowell House in his San Diego State College  
printmaking class, c. 1940. (courtesy Edward Gee  
Jackson, San Diego)*



*anyhow. The richness of his colour feeds on Mexican scene and popular design, and the new simplicity and charm of his lines are qualities inherent in the scene which inspired them. However only an artist wise and responsive finds them.*

Houser's friend, Jackson, commented on the years preceding Yucatan:

*In 1925, we left Chapala, moving to the old Mexican city of Guanajuato. We remained there, drawing and painting, for about three months. Mr. Houser then returned to Chapala, while I returned to Texas. Late that same year I rejoined Mr. Houser, who had by then taken a house at Ajijic farther down the lake shore. We were the first artists to live in the "art colony."*

Jackson returned to the United States in 1926 but returned soon after with his bride to Mexico where he rented a "very large house on the lakeshore called 'El Manglar'," a house so large that Houser moved into one of its apartments. By winter, when the lake threatened to inundate the house, the three moved to Coypacan, a suburb of Mexico City.

While Houser was painting at Coypacan in February 1927, Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley of the Carnegie Institution, Washington, D.C., invited him to join an archaeological expedition at the ruins of Chichen-Itza in Yucatan. Houser accepted the offer and stayed on for three years as "artist-in-residence," making drawings of the architecture and sculpture of the Mayan-Toltec ruins.

Early in the century, Dr. John Merriam of the Carnegie Institution had sent Dr. Morley to Central America to investigate the ruined cities of the Mayas, hidden in the jungles of Yucatan. Dr. Morley could read the Maya hieroglyphic writing found on the stones.

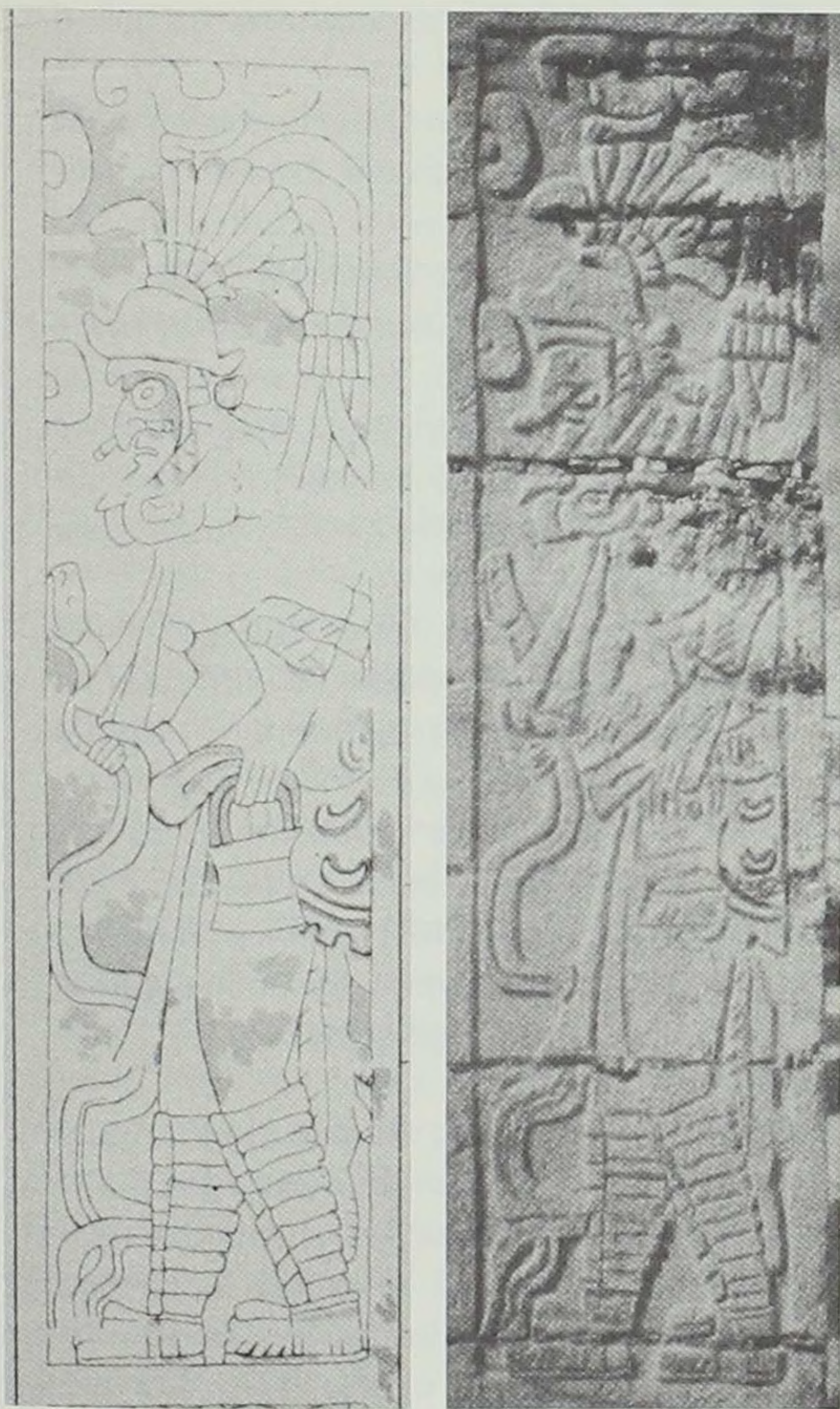
He was to spend many seasons in the southern Mexican jungles working on the dating of sites. With Dr. Merriam's approval, Morley had decided to dig at Chichen-Itza in 1914. The Indian words for the site meant, "the mouth of the wells of the Itzas," the family name of the people who had ruled over a branch of the Mayas for centuries. The cenote were large wells, lakes of remarkable size, a quality which encouraged the development of a large city around them. The site represented a moment of high cultural achievement coming around 450 A.D. although written records on the peninsula date from as early as 68 A.D.

The Mexican government delayed the project for some period of time, not only because it had strict laws concerning antiquities, but because of Mexico's numerous revolutions. In 1923 the government then in power finally granted a concession for the Carnegie group to explore Chichen-Itza. The expedition asked only to study the ruins and to describe them because Yucatan architecture was then a little-worked field. Earl Morris was named director of excavations just before another chaotic revolution broke out. This delayed any departure to the site until April 1924. The initial excavation began at the Court of the Thousand Columns. There followed an exploration of building after building, mound after mound, in a search for essential relationships. A large staff of directors and specialists worked on the project with Mexican Indians employed as laborers.

In the first season, the court, with a carved stone altar at its center, was excavated. In 1925 the season began with the arrival of doubled carloads of food, furniture, cars, and machinery. The dig began at an enormous tree-crested mound of earth at the northeast corner of the court and soon brought to light a gleaming white structure, the Temple of the Warriors, and at its base, a huge pyramid.

Ann Axtell Morris, hired to assist her husband in the project, discerned fresco traces in the ruins. Some were found on fallen walls, but





On the right is a bas-relief of one side of a four-sided column found at the Temple of the Warriors. On the left is Houser's line drawing of the same figure. (courtesy the author)

seeping water and tree roots had peeled away much of the plastered painted surface. A mass of stones, from one to two feet square in size, showed line and color fragments, difficult to decipher. Fortunately, they had fallen inward, directly below the point where they originated, making sequential ordering possible. Some revealed large-scale work. Edges had suffered most in the breakage and fall of walls.

This work consumed four years. The stones were carried to an abandoned Spanish church, which was soon filled with them. In addition,

an old swimming pool was roofed over and tiers of shelves were put up to hold the stones. Joseph Lindon Smith, an archaeological artist, studied the works and taught Mrs. Morris about value relationships in identifying the pieces. While copying the seventy-eight stones, she discovered a curious stylization unique to the Maya. She wrote, "At bottom the Maya painters were cartoonists with a peculiar quality of line that is never found in any other place."

Dr. Morley brought the late artist, Jean Charlot, to document the art at the Temple of the Warriors. In the early twenties, Charlot had begun an alliance with the Mexican mural movement when the Vasconcelos ministry had awarded government commissions for the decoration of the Preparatory School. Charlot had a reputation for *buon fresco*, true fresco done in wet plaster.

Mrs. Morris described Charlot's arrival:

*At this point I was blessed with a volunteer helper without whose timely aid I believe I never could have brought the deal to its successful conclusion. Jean Charlot had been brought to Chichen Itza to copy the multitudinous sculptured columns with which the Temple of the Warriors was adorned. He is a French painter who had just completed some mammoth murals for the Mexican government, and perhaps his experience with art on such a great scale made him intrepid . . .*

*. . . When Jean, in his study of the sculptured columns which invariably carried formal human figure representations, and I, in my frescos, began to detect certain fairly constant repetitions of costume and equipment we realized that, in cross checking the two mediums of expression against each other, we could very probably factor out certain common features which would correspond to various occupations and social classes.*



In the second year of the work, some carved stones were found entangled in tree roots. The stones were cemented to a seven-foot pillar leading down to a red floor. This unexpected find was the Temple of Chac Mool (the "red tiger," a name given to the figure-type found at this temple). This discovery added two more years to the work of documentation. The artists quickly moved to copy the brilliant column patterns before they should dry and fade.

It was at this time that Dr. Morley brought Lowell Houser into the expedition. Mrs. Morris recorded:

*This new work of ours proved to be more than we could handle together, so Jean sent for a painter he had known in Mexico to come and assist us. Lowell Hauser [sic] came in time to be a valuable find. He not only possessed the painstaking accuracy necessary for that kind of copying, but he succeeded in maintaining the most remarkable poise in the very midst of the constant dog fight that went on between Jean and myself. Lowell's work, which is very successful, completely shears the artistic temperament myth of its sharp teeth.*

This portrayal of a quiet, contained, and sensitive temperament was later reaffirmed by Bertrand Adams of Ames, a painter who was to work with Grant Wood and watch Houser at work on the Ames corn mural.

In Earl Morris' book, *The Temple of the Warriors*, he described the discovery of the frescoes at Chac Mool, and the artists' reactions to the discovery:

*[The masons uncovered] a cube about one foot square, and on two sides . . . there was painting unbelievably brilliant. . .*

*. . . The workmanship upon it seemed finer than any we had previously exhumed. The finished surfaces were intact.*

*The plaster was as smooth as good chinaware . . .*

*. . . by the middle of the next afternoon Ann, Jean Charlot, and Lowell Houser . . . were perched on the brink of the old pyramid, and so excited that I expected them to come tumbling down upon those of us at work below. There seemed to be painted stones everywhere, and both the artistry upon them, and their preservation excelled anything we had previously seen. . . .*

*We loosened the stones and had them carried up into the roofed chamber as fast as we could, but no matter how rapidly they were overturned, the artists clamored for more. Their avid interest in this new horde of pictorial treasure made them forget the months of labor that they would be called upon to spend in copying the magnificent fragments.*

Early in the project, the use of photography to record the art was abandoned since the defects caused by weathering and the modeling obscurities would have led to confusing images. It was equally impossible to reproduce the true polychromy of the bas-relief works which were painted in complex tones. The method chosen to replicate the drawings involved reproducing the design in uniform-width ink lines. The design was first traced with pencil on transparent paper, catching whatever pattern remained. It was then transferred to heavy watercolor paper by means of carbon sheets. For color work, the artists sat beside the stones, filling in the design outlines with colors which they limited to five representative tones. Afterward, the replicas were placed in an ordered sequence.

Two large volumes document the work done at Chichen-Itza, and contain a complete set of the drawings and watercolors produced there. The consistent contribution of Houser was noted in the introductory chapter by Charlot:



*I am much indebted to Lowell Houser for the skilful and careful assistance which made the conclusion of the work possible within the appointed time.*

Mrs. Morris clarified the enormity of Houser's work in a chapter that introduced her research:

*In the years that have passed since the first of the stones were found, it would have been impossible for one person, unaided, to have subjected so vast a bulk of material to the various processes . . . in tracing and transferring the patterns, Lowell Houser worked with me months on end, and Jean Charlot devoted fruitful moments to this same task when his other duties would permit.*

*Great as was their contribution in lessening the mechanical drudgery, I am more deeply indebted to them for their vivid interest in the subject, and ready suggestions in interpretation and technique which made possible the completion of the work which without them would have been curtailed in volume and quality.*

Here was the key to Houser's immersion in the imagery of Mayan figurative forms, decorative costume, folklore, and architecture, all of which had an indelible impact on his painting style. Besides gaining technical understanding of the fresco mode, he was exposed to composition on a large scale, using simple rhythms and formal arrangement. He was disciplined by studious analysis and observation.

When the Carnegie expedition was over, Houser and the late Gustav Strömsvik, the archaeologist on the team, planned to sail to South America. They camped at Biloxi, near the mouth of the Mississippi River, in order to build a 27-foot yawl. Strömsvik made a precise model with a large cabin. Jackson recalled that

they used their tents to make the sails. Elizabeth Powell, Houser's niece, recalled the dramatic experience:

*The boat was launched with the mayor of New Orleans in attendance. He gave them a barrel of flour. Houser's parents, the Theodore Housers, gave them a barrel of molasses. In the cabin, one kerosene lantern hung over a sturdy table. Once at sea, the goal to reach South America had to be abandoned. A boiling storm attacked their boat. It split the flour barrel first, then the molasses barrel, and then extinguished the lantern. In the darkness and the turmoil, the pair lashed themselves to the mast and were tossed about in the sea.*

*When they regained consciousness on the shores of Haiti, the natives carried them to their huts and responded to their needs so generously that they stayed in Haiti for many months. [A Coast Guard cutter had pulled the two men out of the sea.]*

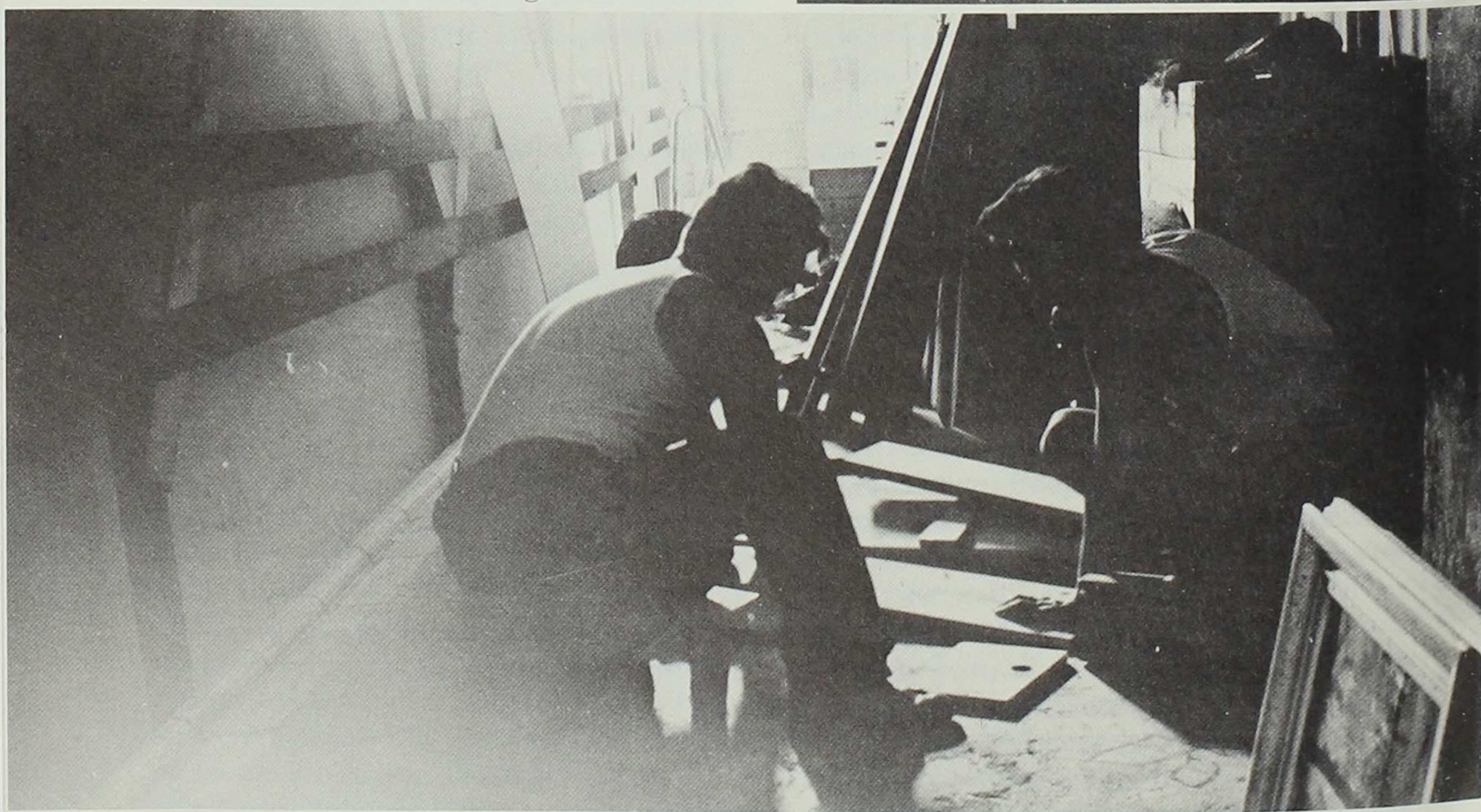
This was a productive period for Houser. He sketched, painted, and made many linoleum prints. Some of his watercolors later were developed as oils. *Barber Shops in Haiti* from his Haitian Series is reproduced in *Iowa Artists of the First 100 Years*, and *Village Fountain, Haiti*, a watercolor, is in the Fine Arts Collection of Iowa State University.

Houser's return to Iowa came at the beginning of a decade of unexpected opportunities for professional artists. It was the era of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and a time when a native of Sioux City, Iowa, Harry Hopkins, would play a very prominent role in the administration of various government agencies. Hopkins had left Grinnell College and Iowa in 1912 to plunge into a career in social work, eventually becoming director of

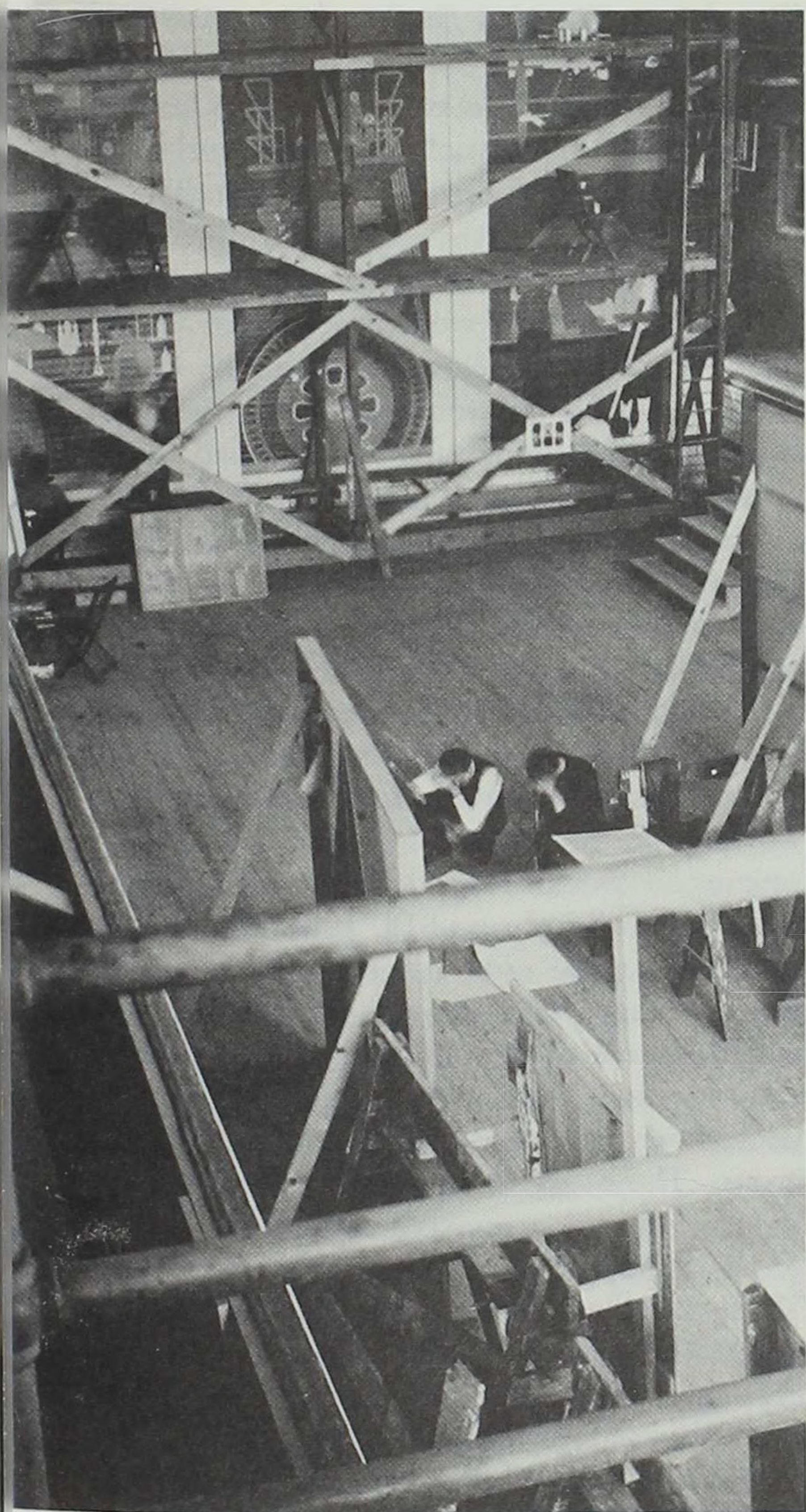


New York's State Aid for the Unemployed. He was appointed to that position by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the governor of New York. In 1933, immediately upon taking office as president, Roosevelt surrounded himself with advisers from many sources, none more important than those in the social work area. President Roosevelt's notion that government should take some social and economic responsibility for its citizens in time of crisis was a new one. When Hopkins became director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration [FERA], with responsibility for some four hundred million dollars in outright grants for the states, he headed an innovative federal grant-in-aid system second in importance only to the Morrill Act of 1862.

Hopkins came to his new position with the philosophy of a social worker. He was committed to a belief that financial aid, by itself, should be discouraged. He said, "Work relief costs more than direct relief but the cost is justified. First, in the saving of morale. Sec-







*These photographs date from the 1934 Public Works of Art Project, when Grant Wood's team of artists worked in a converted swimming pool to produce what was later hailed as the most successful cooperative mural in the country. Lowell Houser is shown at work on the Home Economics segment of the stairwell murals in each of the three photographs. He is the gentleman on the far left in the photograph to the left. (courtesy Charlotte Petersen, Ames)*

ond, in the preservation of human skills and talents. Third, in the material enrichment which the unemployed add to our national wealth through their labors."

His program was quickly implemented when he became administrator of the Civil Works Administration [CWA], which was created by executive order in November 1933. At once, classifications were assigned for nearly one hundred professional and white-collar jobs. For the first time, there was a classification for artists, of whom Hopkins said, "they have to eat like other people."

Jacob Baker was Hopkins' most trusted assistant. He was named director of Work Relief and Special Projects. He was responsible for the elaboration and operation of the program with a goal of embracing four million workers. A pay scale set wages for the unskilled at \$.40 to \$.50 an hour, and \$1.10 to \$1.20 an hour for skilled workers. White-collar laborers were paid weekly wages, ranging from fifteen to thirty-five dollars.

Work relief for artists was a tentative proposal and certainly a controversial one. The first art project was given a three-month trial. It was called the Public Works of Art Project [PWAP]. Its genesis can be traced to another impassioned believer, who was also an artist. Early in 1933, George Biddle wrote to the president, urging him to initiate direct government patronage for the arts, similar to the support the Mexican mural movement had secured in the 1920s. He believed that the president's social reforms were unique and should be given national expression in permanent art form on walls of public buildings. He wrote, "The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance." He was, of course, referring to such individuals as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco.

Somewhat intrigued, but dubious about the possible political impact of such a proposal,



Roosevelt asked for a formal proposal. He was aware of the Diego Rivera mural at Rockefeller Center which was under fire because it included a portrait of Lenin. The fate of that portrait was to be "whitewashed out," a procedure used on some American government murals at a later time.

Biddle proved tenacious. He soon enlisted the aid of another artist, Edward Bruce, who was acting secretary of the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Art. Bruce was destined to spend the rest of his life as an advocate of federal aid to artists.

Historically, art for facilities such as government post offices, courthouses, and hospitals, was handled in the Treasury Department by the supervising architect. When Biddle made his appeal for mural art, Roosevelt logically referred the proposal to the secretary of the treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., who was also a patron of arts. Bruce's advisory committee soon held a propitious meeting, attended by the president's Uncle Delano, by Eleanor Roosevelt, and by Harry Hopkins, the president's trusted adviser, who, without delay, committed \$1,039,000 from the CWA to bring artists into sixteen regional groups. Their project was PWAP, headed by Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson. Bruce and Watson were aided by museum directors and art authorities across the country in their search for sixteen regional art directors. One of the regional art directors selected was Grant Wood. He, in turn, worked with a volunteer committee which appointed subcommittees for each state in the region. An estimated 3,300 artists went to work through this program, although turnovers raised the final tally to 3,749. The artists set out to decorate, beautify, and embellish public buildings with sculpture, murals, oils, mosaics, Navajo rugs, and portraits. Their labors resulted in 15,663 works of art, produced at a cost to the government of \$1,312,000. More than ninety percent of the money went to the artists. Francis V. O'Connor, in *Federal Support for the*

*Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*, assessed the mixed success of the PWAP project: "only about 25 percent of the country's artists in need of employment were actually given work, and of these, about 50 percent were non-relief."

In the public mind, government art meant murals as they were much more visible than other work in terms of size alone. Moreover, they had greater appeal because they stressed social themes. It was decided that a number of cooperative murals would be created in Cleveland, San Francisco, New Haven, Dallas, and Iowa City. Grant Wood's Iowa City cooperative mural was hailed as the most successful in the country. Wood became an assistant professor at the University of Iowa, and his twenty-one assistants received university credit for their work. Fourteen artists worked on the mural. They worked in a revamped swimming pool under the initial mandate until February 14, 1934, when allotted funds were cut. Yet the group was so cohesive that, when it appeared unlikely they would secure additional funds with which to continue their work, they developed a plan to pool their income rather than dissolve the group. They agreed to live in tents, to have their wives cook army-style, and to send some of the group members to work elsewhere. These sacrifices were rendered unnecessary when the State Works Division of Iowa brought them under the FERA, which allocated them funds through April 1934.

Grant Wood's ability to weld the diverse artistic opinions of his artists and their different styles into a community expression brought *Fortune* magazine photographers to the then new library at Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts at Ames. Only one of the three mural units was complete in January 1935, but *Fortune's* editorial commentary read in part:

*The point is that the work of Mr. Grant*



*Wood . . . is the work of an American who knows his America, and of a workman who knows his work, and of assistants whose cooperation with Mr. Wood was complete and remarkable: and that it therefore pretty clearly epitomizes the spirit of the whole PWAP.*

Any consideration of the PWAP led to the conclusion that its primary aim had not been clearly thought out. Was its aim to furnish work for artists who were unemployed? Then it could be accused of rewarding "drones," or mere technicians, or indulging in "vaudeville stunts." *Fortune's* glowing assessment was countered by criticisms of the regionalism and social realism which were the two major characteristics of the mural movement. A "wooden simplification," a product of "the corn belt academy," characterized by "a certain dry and hard rigidity," produced by "mediocre artists that run in packs," and comprised of "putrefying particulars" were among the epithets directed at the group and its work.

Concerned that the program would be cheapened, Bruce said, "I think that we ought all remember that we are putting artists to work and not trying to make artists out of bums." He then added a secondary aim to the first. The artist had to be highly qualified and the art work specified had to genuinely embellish the public property. He emphasized that it was "a public works program which employed artists to beautify public buildings in America." He issued directives for standards of quality to be used in selecting the artists. In all, 706 murals and mural sketches were created, four hundred of them completed during the pilot effort of PWAP. The original employment quota of artists was 2,500 in the sixteen regions.

After the PWAP, two separate art programs were projected. Bruce's zealous devotion to the arts was fulfilled in the creation of the Section of Painting and Sculpture (in 1938 it

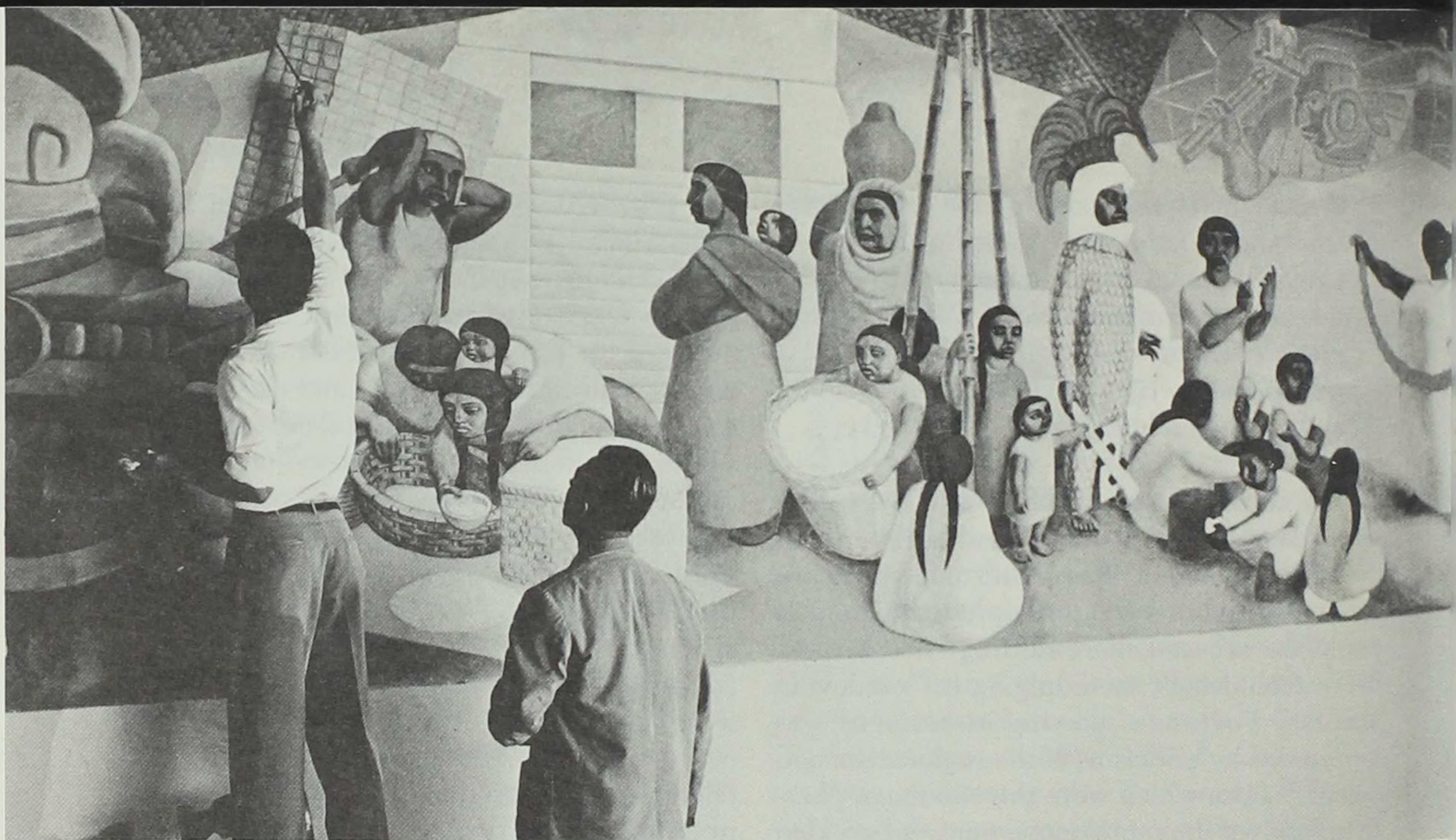
was renamed the Treasury Section of Fine Arts). The Section expanded into other areas of art beyond the visual arts. The second program was the Works Progress Administration [WPA], a federal art project for art relief. These programs, known as the Section and the Project, were terminated by presidential order in 1943.

The first murals for the Section of Painting and Sculpture were projects for the new Justice Department and Post Office buildings in Washington, D.C. Again, Grant Wood was in the national limelight as one of the first eleven artists chosen by the twenty-one member advisory committee. When six more artists were chosen, eighty-two remained on the recommended list. The eighty-two artists were eligible for work on murals in small post offices in other parts of the country. Lowell Houser was part of this group.

When Edward Rowan, superintendent of the Section and former director of the Little Gallery in Cedar Rapids, announced that the commission for the Ames post office mural would be awarded through a competition sponsored by the Section, Houser entered the competition. Carl Weeks of Des Moines chaired the competition's coordinating committee. Artists were invited to submit design sketches for the Ames post office mural. The sketches were to be submitted unsigned, the artists' names to accompany their work in sealed envelopes. The coordinating committee acted as the preliminary jury and narrowed the twenty-seven submitted sketches to five. Houser's work was not among the five finalists. Nevertheless, Houser received the mural commission, for reasons that Section Superintendent Rowan explained in a letter to Weeks:

*We thought [Houser's] work better suited to the mural problem of the Ames post office and admired the unusually intelligent conception tying together the American and Mayan corn agriculture. It seemed to us the only design in the com-*





Lowell Houser supervising a student's work on a mural on canvas at San Diego State College, c. 1940. (courtesy Edward Gee Jackson, San Diego)

*petition with a really significant theme.*

In 1935 Wood wrote an essay predicting that government support of art would create a "by-product [in the] form of public art education which, when extended over a long period of time would make us a great art-loving nation." The excitement generated by the programs for art which President Roosevelt approved in the 1930s was rekindled in September 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed a bill establishing the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. Embracing all art forms, it tends to support Wood's modest prediction.

In the same 1935 essay, Wood referred to a "regional competition for the murals and sculpture in three new Iowa postoffices — at Dubuque, Ames, and Independence." The Ames award went to Lowell Houser in 1936. He was paid \$1,320 for the project, from which he had to pay any assistants and complete the mural's installation. At this time he was teaching life drawing classes in the Art Student's Workshop in downtown Des Moines, and freehand drawing as an instructor in architectural engineer-

ing at Iowa State College. In 1937-38 he again taught at the college.

Houser executed the Ames post office mural much as he had worked in Iowa City on the Wood murals, making a paper cartoon and transferring it to canvas. The medium was Shiva oil paint with an admixture of turpentine to keep the surface matte. The mural is approximately eighteen feet, wall to wall, and nine feet in height, and fixed to the wall with white lead and varnish. It fills the upper north wall of the main lobby. The mural was installed by Younker Brothers of Des Moines.

Houser's engagement in government art began with the short-lived PWAP and ended with the Section grant in 1936, a project he completed in 1937 and installed in April 1938. His life was not unlike that of other depression artists. For several years he designed pennants for the Collegiate Manufacturing Company in Ames, where he had returned to live with his parents. He left Ames in 1932 to accompany Earl Morris' archaeological expedition to Canyon Del Muerto in Arizona. He was continuously engaged in illustrating books and



creating magazine covers both in Ames and New York City. He also had a one-man show at the Weyhe Gallery in New York. Houser achieved what until then had been rarely attainable outside an academic context, the ability to practice his craft on a full-time basis. Government support of art allowed him a new sense of professionalism.

In 1938 he joined the art department at San Diego State College in southern California to work for Everett Gee Jackson, the department head, who wrote of him:

*Mr. Houser was a very valuable and most popular art instructor, a sensitive and intelligent artist. He specialized in printmaking and taught that subject, as well as drawing and painting.*

After service in the armed forces in World War II, he returned to San Diego State. He was an associate professor in 1958 when a heart ailment forced his retirement. He joined his brother, Theodore, at Moss Neck Manor in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he designed a studio home. He died there in 1971.

In the 1920s Grant Wood traveled to Europe for a year of study at the Académie Julian in Paris. By 1928 he had been strongly influenced by Flemish and German primitives he had seen in Munich. *Woman with Plants* would be the first evidence of a new stylistic direction, followed by *Stone City* and *American Gothic*. The style would be continued in the Iowa murals.

Although Houser is identified with Wood's "American scene," he already had a precisionist eye when he joined the PWAP group. His education in the 1920s had been gained in Mexico, where he had absorbed the mural mode and learned much from the wells of Mayan-Toltec arts. He was unmistakably inspired by the frescoes he had copied for the expedition at Chichen-Itza. His Ames corn

mural is a summation of these formal and monumental influences. Its artistic quality wears well. The color remains luminous. It was part of the Whitney Show "Mural Designs" held in New York in 1936, followed by the Corcoran Gallery show in Washington, D.C. When Charlot wrote "Murals for To-Morrow" in 1945, he included illustrations of those he considered the best in the country. They included the work of Ben Shahn, Alice Tenney, Franklin Watkins, Stefan Hirsch, and Lowell Houser. □

#### Note on Sources

Material was drawn from several good sources for the preparation of this article. Correspondence between the author and Edward Gee Jackson and between the author and the Houser family proved especially valuable. The National Archives Trust, Washington, D.C., kindly provided the author with over 200 pages of material about Houser.

In addition to the sources specifically cited in the text of the article, works consulted for the manuscript's preparation included Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars* (New York: Payson and Clarke, Ltd., 1929), William F. McDonald's *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), Richard D. McKenzie's *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), Ann Axtell Morris' *Digging in Yucatan* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1931), and Earl H. Morris, Jean Charlot, and Ann Axtell Morris' *The Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itzá, Yucatan*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1931).

The author should like to thank Dean Louis Thompson of the College of Agriculture, and Distinguished Professor Harvey Diehl of the Chemistry Department, both at Iowa State University, for their review of her interpretive information about specific details in the modern agriculture panel of Houser's corn mural. The author should also like to thank Ames Postmaster Don L. Miller for his interested cooperation with this project and the staff of Iowa State University's Photoservice for their assistance.

The cooperative mural in place at Iowa State University bears the names of the artists involved in its preparation. The inscription reads: "PAINTED UNDER THE PUBLIC WORKS OF ART PROJECT — 1934 — BY BERTRAND ADAMS — LEE ALLEN — JOHN BLOOM — DAN FINCH — ELWYN GILES — GREGORY HULL — HARRY JONES — LOWELL HOUSER — HOWARD JOHNSON — ARTHUR MUNCH — FRANCIS MCCRAY — ARNOLD PYLE — THOMAS SAVAGE AND JACK VAN DYKE — DIRECTED BY GRANT WOOD." Other artists who worked with Wood at Iowa City were primarily engaged in making sculpture. The ninth mural, completed in 1937 for the lobby of the original library building, was done by seven students at the University of Iowa under WPA and NYA under Wood. The original cost of these murals was \$1,200. In 1974 Conservator Margaret Randall Ash and assistants restored the murals at a cost of \$10,000. The restoration effort was funded by the Iowa State University Class of 1959, with matching funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.





Daniel Webster's quotation, "When tillage begins, other arts follow," was inscribed on the Grant Wood murals at Iowa State. The second sentence of Webster's theme read, "The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilization." Houser's Ames corn mural reflects this agricultural theme. In it, ancient Indian agricultural practices are contrasted with modern American corn crop harvesting.

Two farmers, in symmetry of design, bend inward toward a monumental ear of common feed corn. Each collar, or leaf attachment, is clearly detailed. The seed embryo is enlarged at its base. A rich, red color behind the ear of corn suggests Mayan fresco backgrounds in which an Indian-red color was often so dense and vivid that it implied the application of many layers of paint. Warm copper and ochre

tones prevail in the painting of the left half of the mural which depicts maize cultivation.

In folklore, the Aztec word "teocentli" meant "God's ear of corn." In parts of Mexico the phrase used is "madre de maiz," or "mother of maize." The "milpa cycle" prevailed in the tropical farming system. A milpa was a cornfield wrested from the forest. It was productive for only three or four years after which it was abandoned for twenty years in order to restore its vigor. The process of "slash and burn" was accompanied by the belief that gods attended the milpa ceremonies. The theme of continuing life was closely bound with the crops and the renewed flowering after the death of the season. In the dry season of February and March the farmers cut down the trees which they left until the rains came. Then was the time to call upon the Chacs, the four gods of wind, to bring the great flames which would



burn the trees and forests to a black turf. A custom of whistling for the winds began the ritual. The weed-filled fields of the following year would be burned again to bring the charred trunks down to earth, allowing the corn to be planted. The moon was goddess of the soil, birth, and fertility. The Chacs were also rain gods and were associated with the four world directions.

In interpreting maize cultivation, Houser used images derived from these sources, showing the young Corn God, the Sun God, and a

Chac as rain god. With the Mayan farmer's dependence upon the weather, the gods became his intermediaries.

At Chichen-Itza, Houser worked closely with the local population whom he observed as diligently as the linear images he copied from the polychromed frescoes. Thus his Indian figure displays the flat shoulders, incurving waist, superb legs, and the Mayan visage — high nose, cheeks flattened down from eye to chin triangularly, and forehead forced back, a custom cosmetically achieved at babyhood.







The upward high sculptural effect hints at the aloofness and reasonableness associated with these intelligent Indians.

The Indian farmer wears a white loincloth wrapped around his body, the ends crossing diagonally in front upon a second piece, the maxtli, which hangs loosely between the legs in a triangular flap. The sandal has a sole and an upper part which covers the heel and is held onto the leg by a diagonal band. Strings pass between the toes to secure the sole. A white cloth thrown over the head and falling onto the shoulders cuts across the forehead at the hairline, then divides into strips hanging loosely over the shoulders. The farmer's implement is a hoe made of obsidian lashed to a stick.

Instead of the great Corn Mother, an effigy figure at the left border of the mural is the young Corn God seated cross-legged, with the suggestion of jungle foliage around him. He holds a votive pot of stylized maize leaves with the hieroglyph for maize inscribed below. The flattened forehead, or Hachas, is prominent. He wears a conventional boat-shaped, high-crowned headdress from which two broad bands fall sideward, over his shoulders. The plumes of the quetzal, a prized tropical bird, are typical of priestly headgear. Prominent ear disks, a heavy collar of beads, and an indication of a backcrest are all part of the decorative attire found in the temple frescoes. The torso is bare, but suggests that a loincloth may be concealed by a heavily decorated belt. The god wears wrist ornaments and ornamented leg-

gings.

Perspective was achieved by overlapping forms. In Mayan frescoes, any receding background was expressed by ascending vertical planes, the scene at the top being at a greater distance. The modern mural shows a gleaming white pyramid rising behind the Corn God, its steep staircase flanked by stylized and humanized heads of the serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. Smoke wafting across the face of the pyramid may be from sacrificial blood burned with copal in pots.

The deities who aided the growth of corn fill two overlapping spheres at the top of the mural. (A similar device is used in the modern farm scene where the sphere is the sun.)

In Mayan folklore the Sun God descends from a series of concentric circles decorated by patterns of hachures and large triangular sun rays. Houser made use of these symbols. Hachures are short lines used for shading and denoting surfaces in relief drawn in the direction of the stroke. These lines may be seen around the Sun God's head. A type of god mask is worn with a conspicuous "elephant" proboscis surmounted by nose plugs and eye plaques beneath and over the eyes. A threefold ear plug with a round center and upper and lower embellishments adorns the ear. A nose plug shows beads which might have been of prized turquoise. The mouth has jagged, sharpened teeth and a lolling tongue. The scarification around the mouth was a common mode of body decoration. The squared face



Office of the State Historical Society

## Call for SHSI Board of Trustees Nominations

All members of the State Historical Society of Iowa are encouraged to participate in the annual election process for the State Historical Society's Board of Trustees. Nominations are now being accepted for four positions on the board. The terms of Lennis Moore (First Congressional District), Roger B. Natte (Sixth Congressional District), Margaret N. Keyes (At Large), and Carol A. Newton (At Large) will expire on 1 July 1985.

The Board of Trustees works to further understanding of Iowa history and to promote activities that help Iowans better understand their heritage.

Trustees serve three-year terms and must be members of the Society. Any Society member may make a nomination for an At Large position on the board. Any Society member from a Congressional District whose representative's term will expire (the First or Sixth Districts) may nominate a Society member from the respective Congressional District to represent the district. If you wish to make a nomination, send a one-page letter including the name, address, and biographical sketch of the nominee to:

BOARD OF TRUSTEES NOMINATIONS  
Iowa State Historical Department  
402 Iowa Avenue  
Iowa City, Iowa 52240

Your nomination *must* be received by 29 March 1985.

## Nominations Now Open for 1985 Achievement Awards

The Board of Trustees of the State Historical Society of Iowa is accepting nominations for its 1985 annual awards for achievement in state and local history.

Historical organizations may be nominated by Society members for awards in the following categories:

1. Youth Programs
2. Special Exhibits
3. Special Programs
4. Newsletters
5. Publications
6. Historic Preservation
7. Overall Achievement

Individuals may be nominated by Society members for a specific activity or for overall achievement. Nominations will not be accepted for individuals in the overall achievement category who have previously received that award, but they may be nominated for a specific activity.

There will again be two levels of awards. Certificates of Recognition will be awarded for important contributions to state and local history. Certificates of Achievement will be reserved for activities that the Board's Committee on Awards judges to be most outstanding. The nomination should not specify the level of award. That will be determined by the committee.

Society members who wish to make nominations should write to the following address to request nomination forms:

ANNUAL AWARDS  
Iowa State Historical Department  
402 Iowa Avenue  
Iowa City, Iowa 52240

Nominations will be accepted *only* until 15 May 1985.

January 1985



## CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS, 1985

- March 7-9 Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebraska  
March 30 Iowa Chapter, Victorian Society in America, Des Moines  
April 3-7 American Cultural Association, Louisville, Kentucky  
April 12-13 Dakota History Conference, Madison, South Dakota  
**April 13 State Historical Society of Iowa's Board of Trustees Meeting, Iowa City**  
April 18-21 Organization of American Historians, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
April 20 Iowa Local Historical and Museum Association, Des Moines  
April 20 Quad Cities Genealogical Conference, Moline, Illinois

### Introducing the Iowa Newspaper Project Staff . . .

*During the course of the 1985 issues of News for Members, we'd like to introduce State Historical Society of Iowa members to the staff of the Iowa Newspaper Project. In this first newsletter of the year, we'd like to have you meet Nancy Kraft, project director, Renée Atcherson, cataloging intern, and Brenda Todaro, public relations intern:*

#### . . . Nancy Kraft, Project Director

We're sure you already know Nancy Kraft as cataloger for the Iowa State Historical Department's library facilities in Iowa City, but we'd like to introduce her again as project director of the Iowa Newspaper Project. [Nancy has also just been named head librarian for the ISHD's Iowa City library and research collections. See the March issue of *News for Members* for an interview with Nancy about her new responsibilities and plans for the Iowa City library.] A good share of Nancy's energy has been directed toward the project for almost two years. She has been closely involved with all aspects of the newspaper project, from the early stages of planning and grant-writing to the current phase of training catalogers to locate newspapers in Iowa. Nancy says there are three main reasons for the success of the Iowa Newspaper Project thus far. Firstly, Nancy has stayed in close contact with the project's advisory committee and has received constant input from them. Secondly,



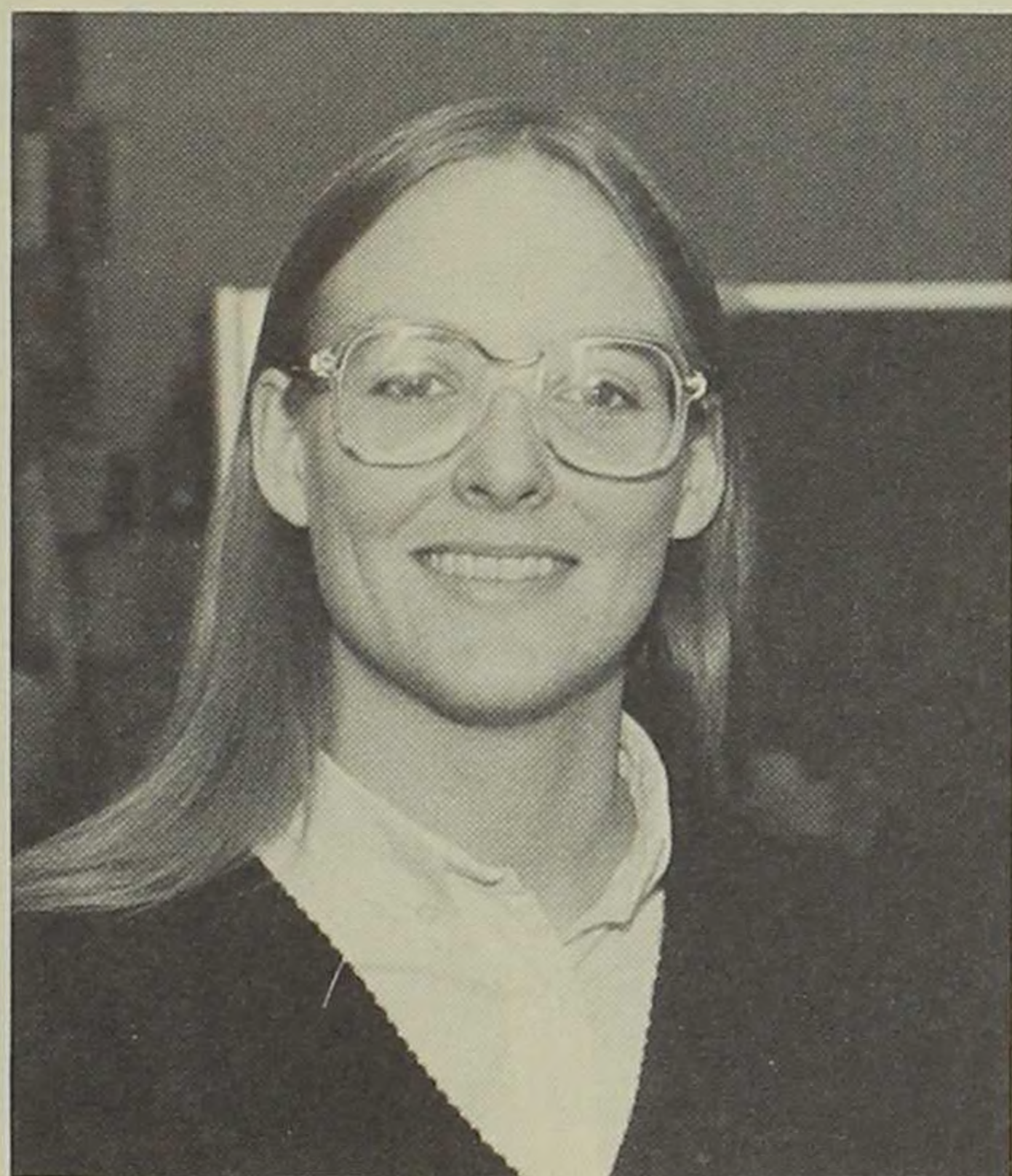
the project staff has worked closely with the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), the Library of Congress, and the National Endowment for the Humanities on policies for cataloging newspapers (because of Nancy's cooperation, these three agencies are using the Iowa Newspaper Project as a model for newspaper projects in other states). Thirdly, the project has received extensive statewide support. Iowa State University's library will be the cataloging center for the western half of the state, while the ISHD library in Iowa City will handle cataloging for the eastern half. The ISHD office in Des Moines, a major repository for Iowa newspapers, will provide support staff for the project. University of Iowa students will serve as cataloging and public relations interns.

Nancy is now in the process of training catalogers for the newspaper project. They will record the location at which each newspaper is found, the form in which it is found (bound issues, microfilm, microfiche, or other), and the dates for which it is available. The catalogers will also serve as project ambassadors in their extensive travel to libraries, newspaper offices, courthouses, and museums (over seven hundred sites) throughout the state.

Nancy says that it has been an especially fun project so far, with good response from people who have heard about it. Many people have called Nancy or written to her with questions about the project or with information about "missing" newspapers (newspapers that are known to have been published in Iowa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but for which no copies have ever been located). Missing newspapers have turned up in interesting and unexpected places, including The Galley bar in Bondurant, Iowa. Other missing newspapers have been discovered to be in the hands (or attics) of private individuals. Overall, the project has a certain treasure-hunt quality to it that makes it continually exciting to be a part of it. — Brenda Todaro, Public Relations Intern, Iowa Newspaper Project



### . . . Renée Atcherson, Cataloging Intern



Renée Atcherson started working for the Iowa Newspaper Project last fall as a cataloging intern. The internship is sponsored by the University of Iowa. To date, Renée has assisted the ISHD's Iowa City cataloger in working through a general cataloging backlog in preparation for the massive cataloging phase of the newspaper project. Renée has worked closely with Project Director Nancy Kraft to establish newspaper cataloging procedures. She is also responsible for keeping the interlibrary loan policies for newspapers up-to-date for the forty-six Iowa libraries on OCLC (a bibliographic computer and telecommunications system to support resource sharing among libraries). Cataloging newspapers involves checking newly acquired or newly located issues or runs of newspapers against already existing regional computer databases for newspaper holdings to determine whether a regional database entry should be updated or whether an entirely new catalog entry should be

created. The double-checking and the detail of information required for each newspaper title is quite laborious. Yet Renée says she loves cataloging.

Renée received a bachelor of music degree in music theory from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and a master of arts degree in music theory at the University of Iowa. She is currently working toward a master of arts degree in library and information science at the University of Iowa.

### . . . Brenda Todaro, Public Relations Intern

Brenda Todaro began working in September 1984 as the public relations intern for the Iowa Newspaper Project. The internship is sponsored by the University of Iowa. Her responsibilities include developing a general publicity plan and calendar for the project, writing general news releases for local media, and identifying new contacts among the media and special interest groups. She also organizes office publicity procedures and assists with daily correspondence and displays for the project. Brenda says, "To get the word out on a statewide basis in Iowa means getting our message across to hundreds of small towns in ninety-nine counties. We'll make the most use of the local weekly newspapers."

Brenda received her bachelor of arts degree from Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. She is a graduate student in the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. She writes poetry.



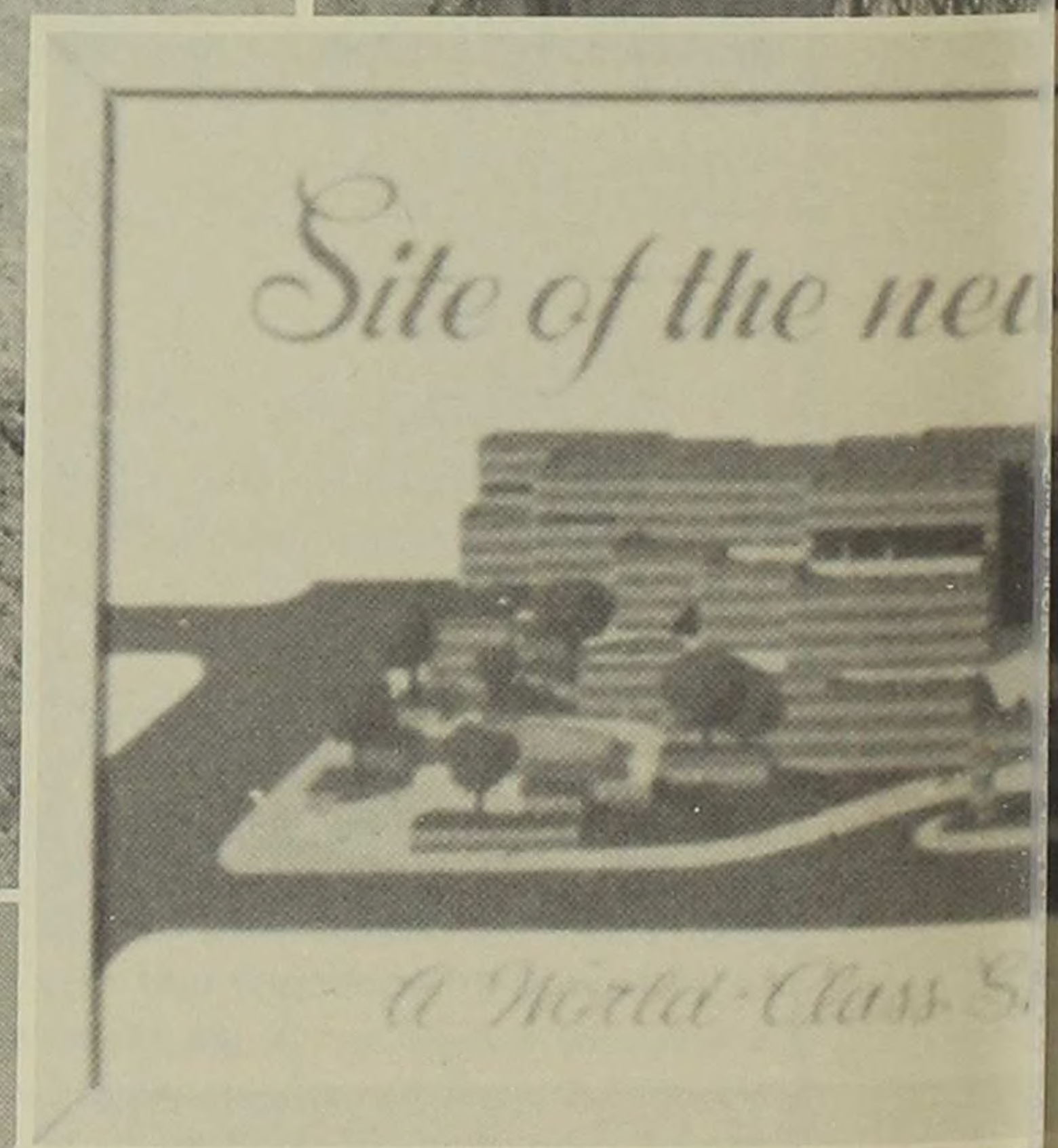
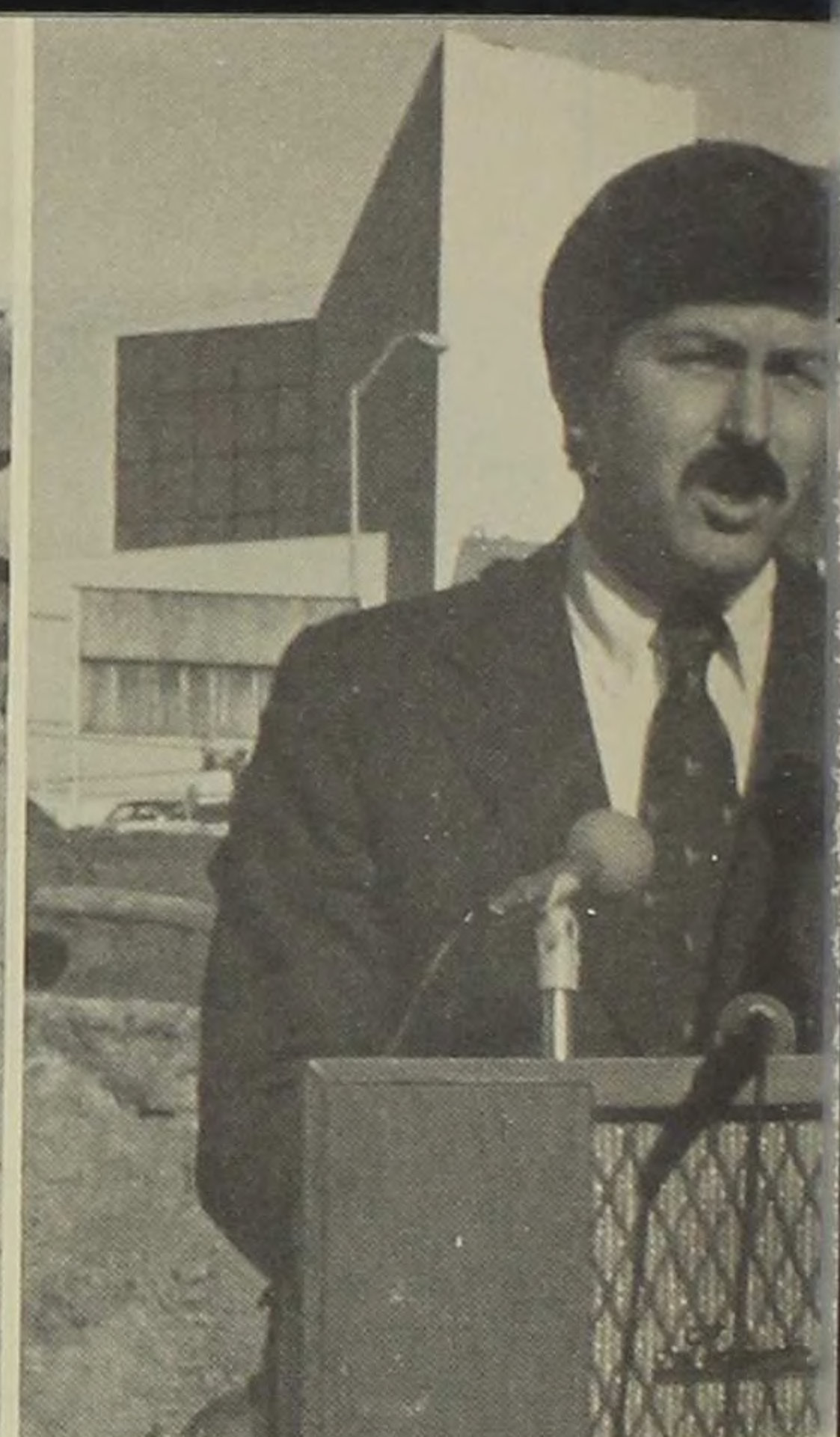
### Telephone Survey of Members to be Conducted

*A telephone survey of five hundred randomly-selected members of the State Historical Society of Iowa will be conducted in late March. The survey is part of an overall evaluation of our services and programs that is currently going on. We estimate that our survey questions will take no more than fifteen minutes of your time to respond to, and we hope that, if you are contacted by one of our surveyors, we can count on your support and participation in this project.*

At its 27 October 1984 meeting, the members of the State Historical Society of Iowa's Board of Trustees elected George McDaniel to serve as its president and Norman Erbe to serve as its vice-president.

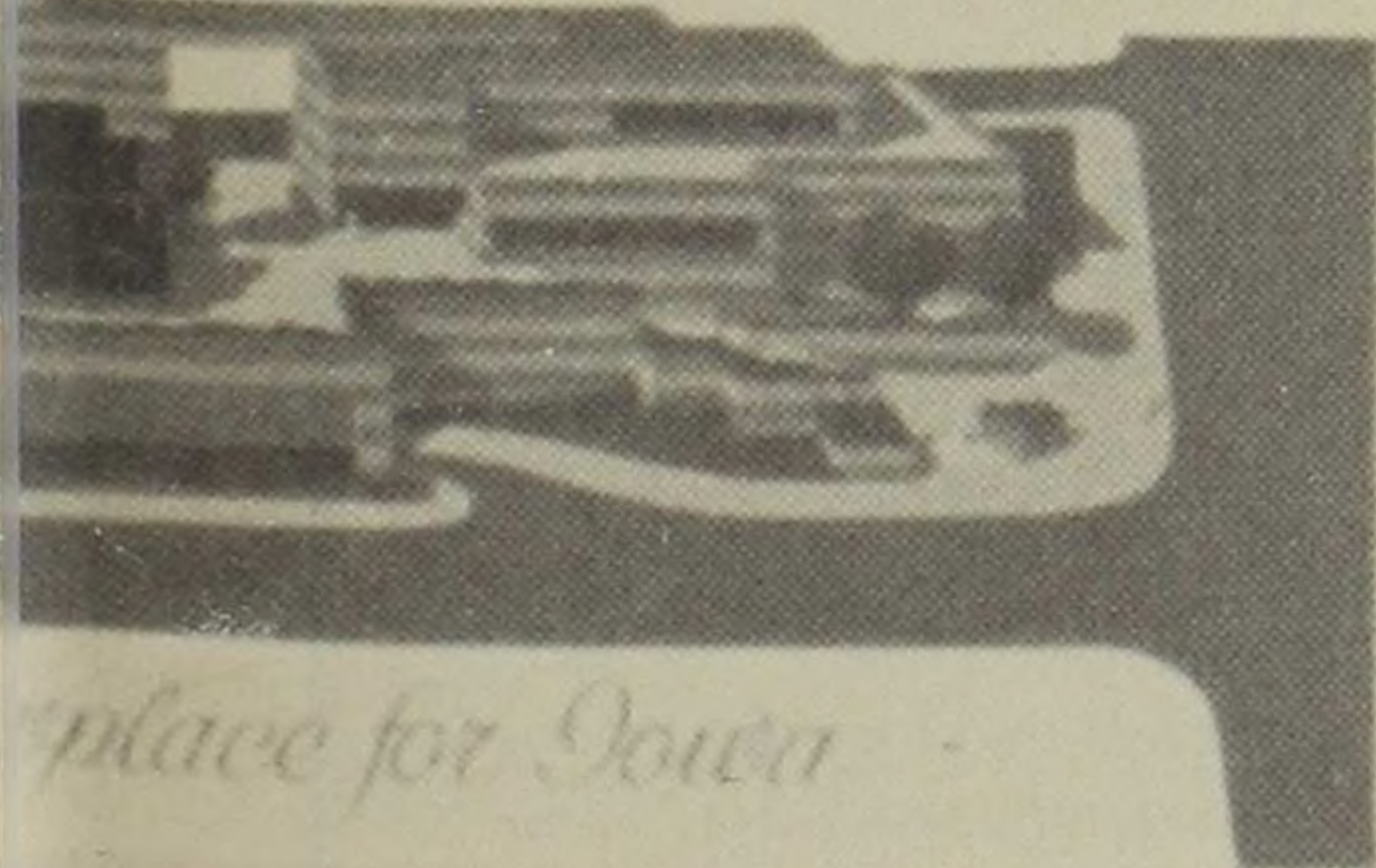
January 1985







# IOWA HISTORICAL MUSEUM

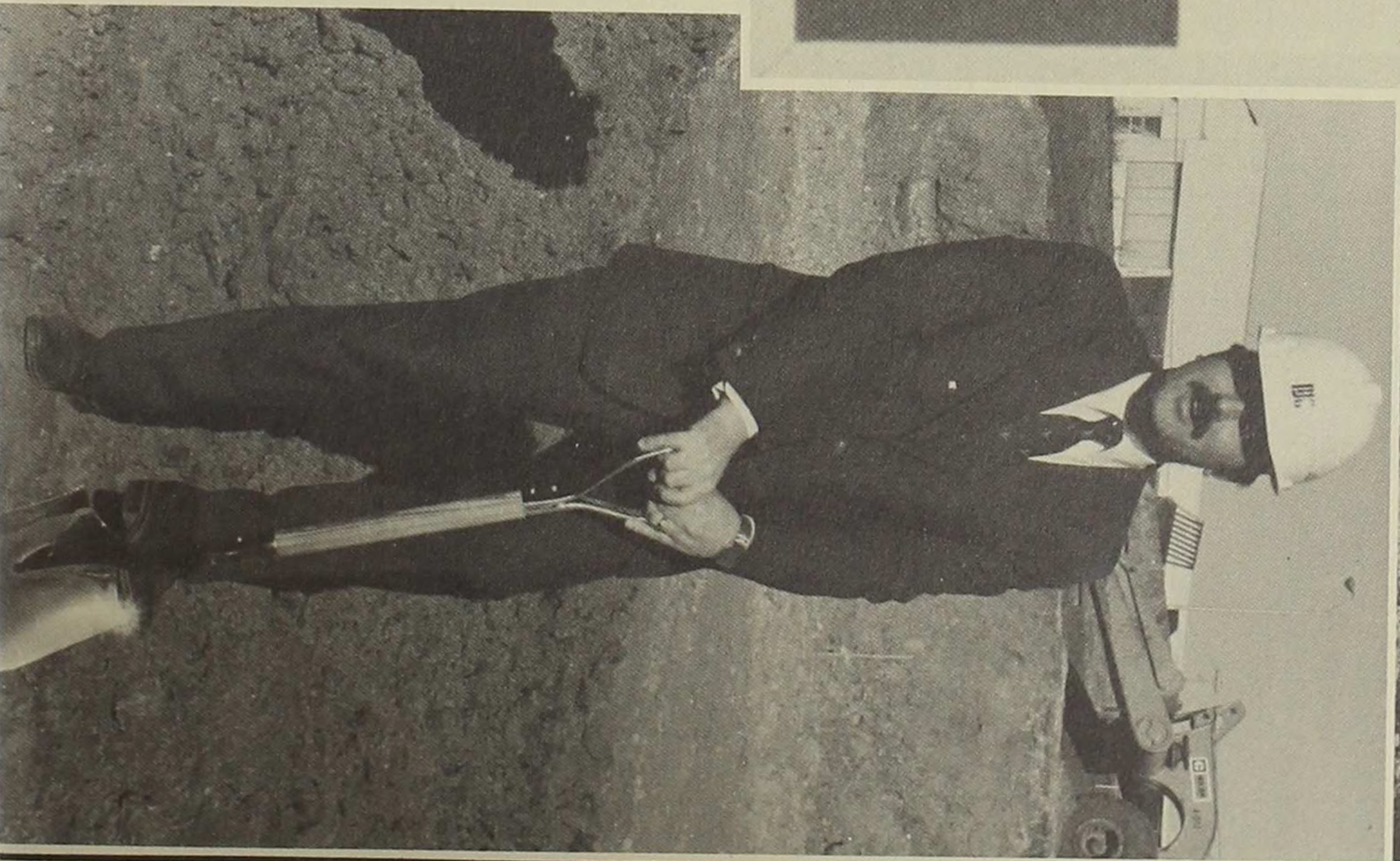
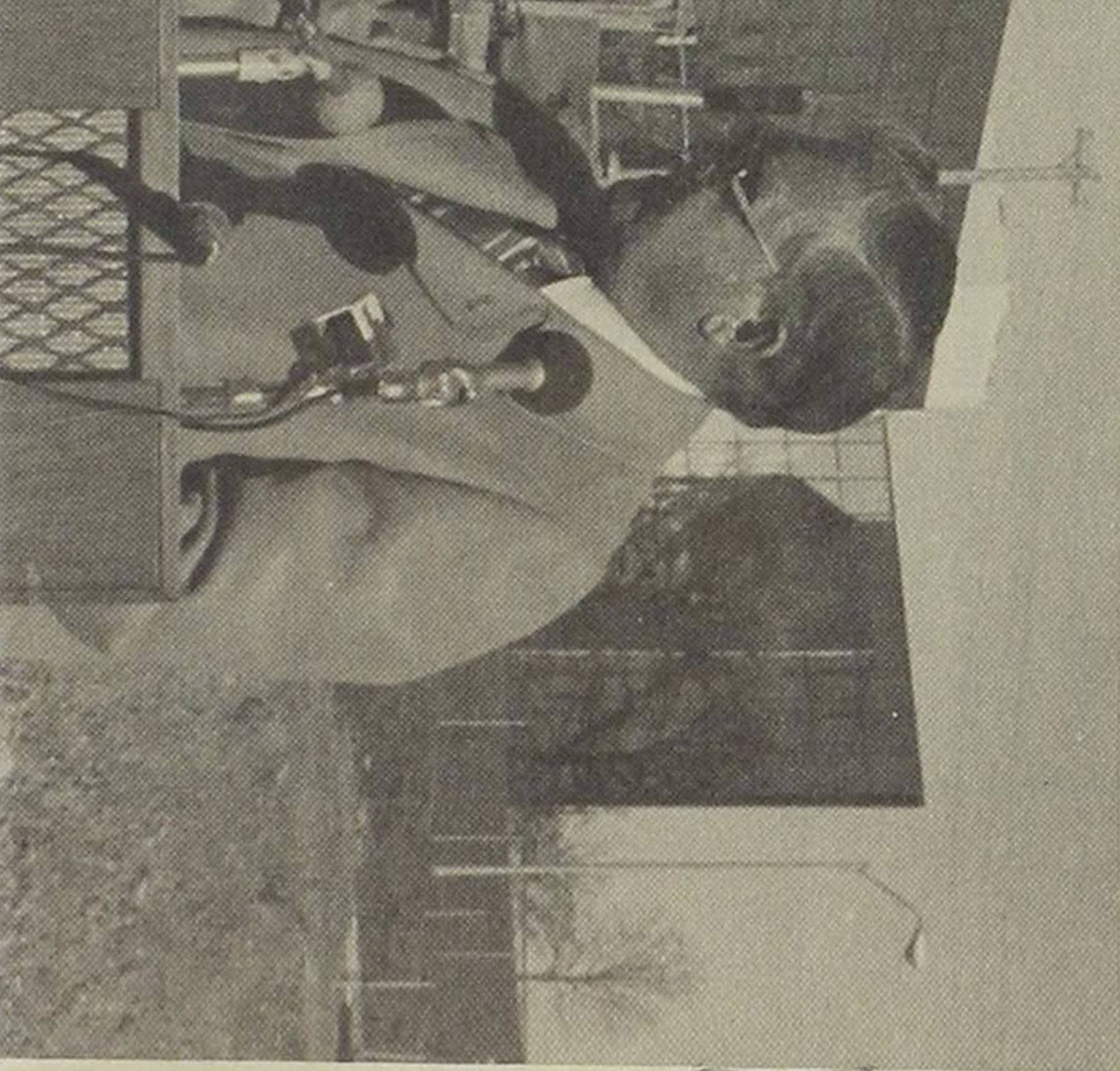
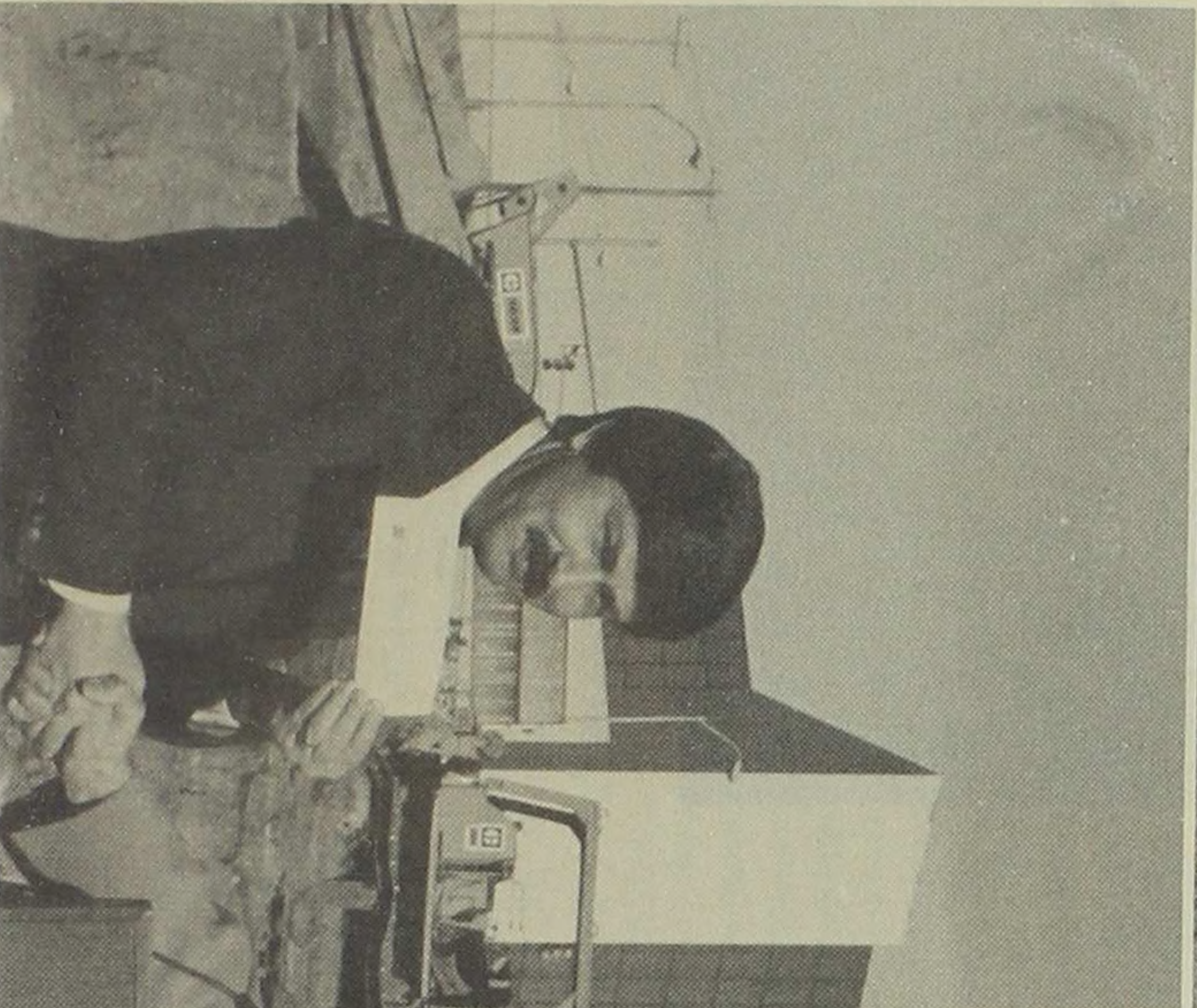
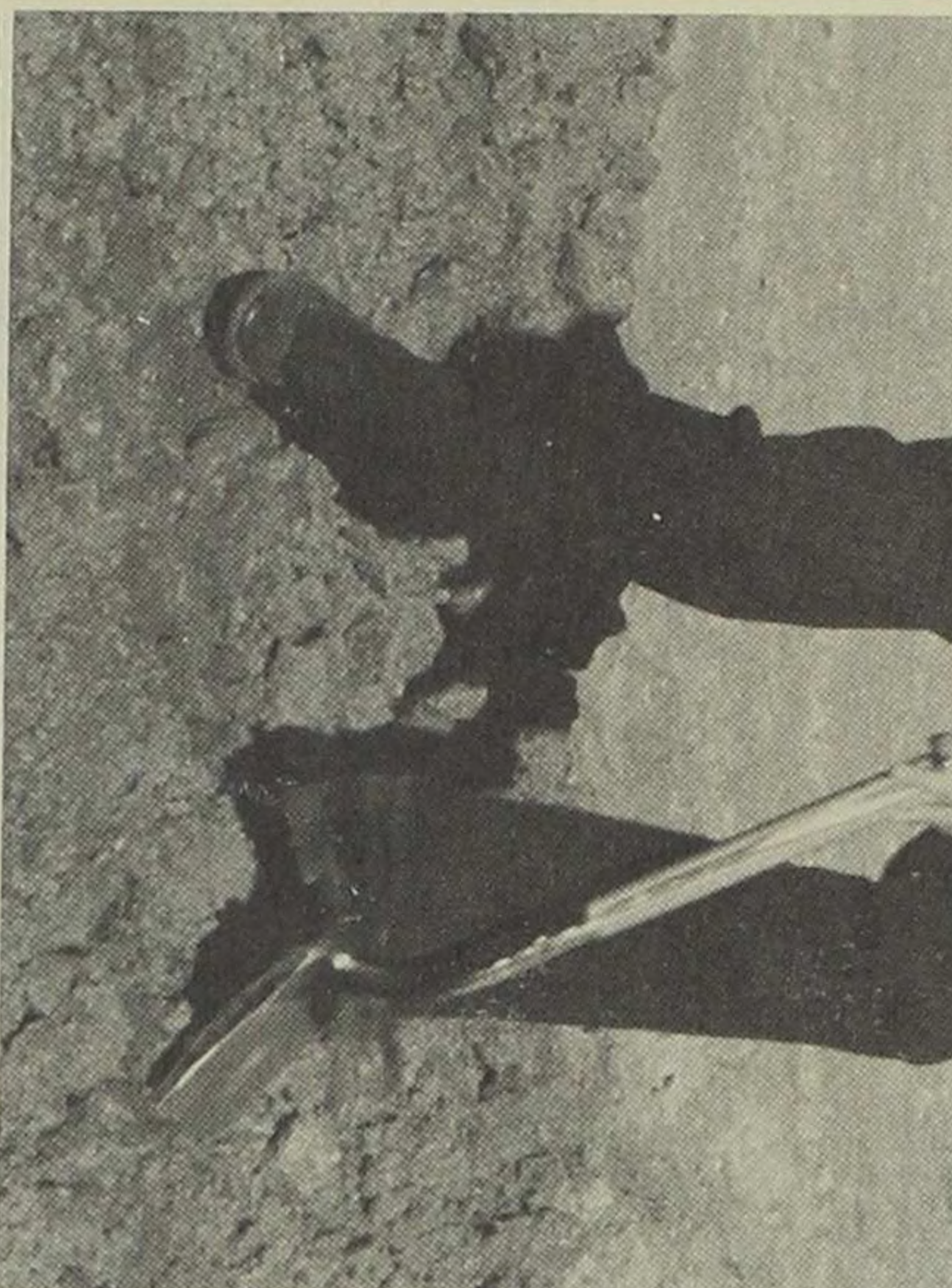
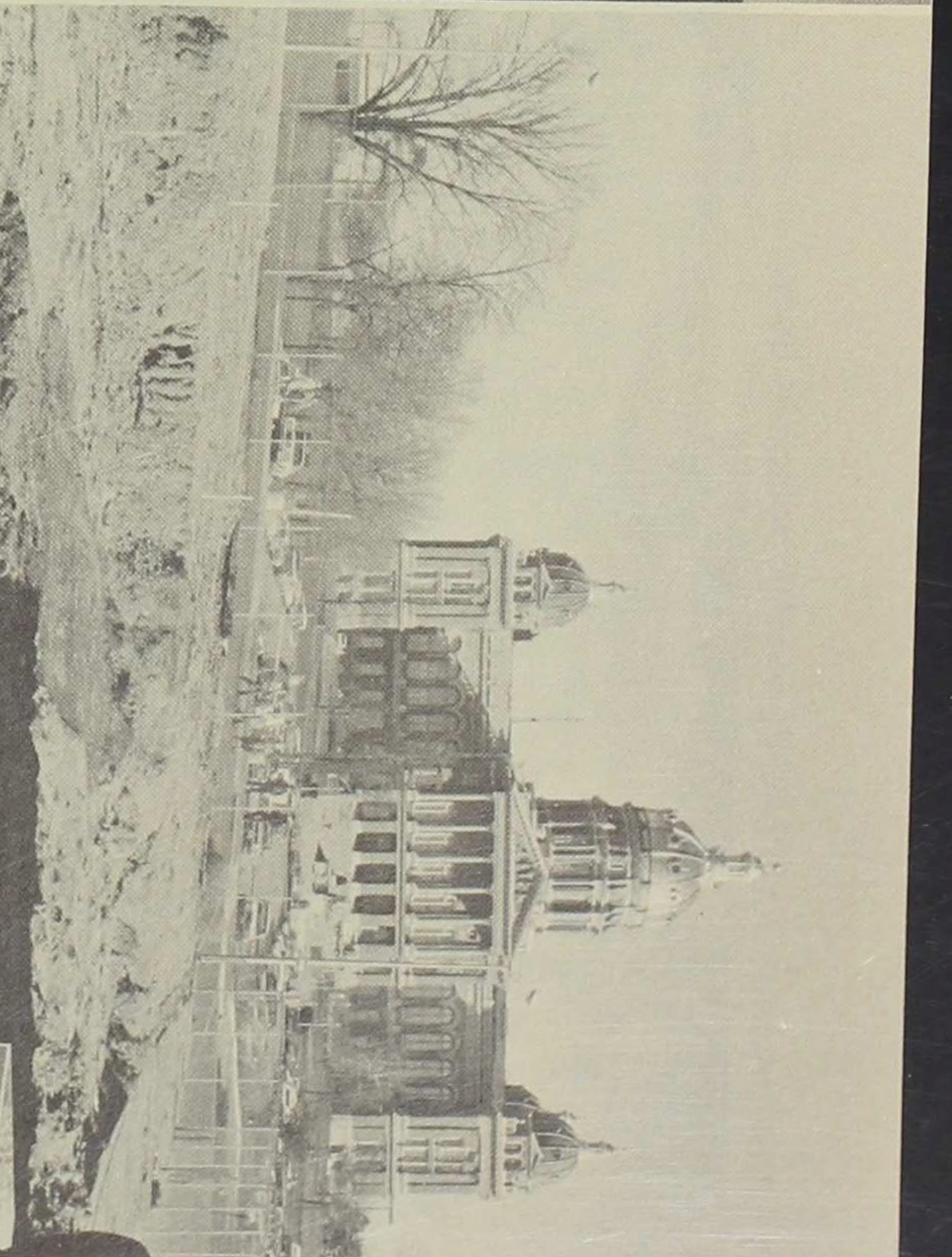
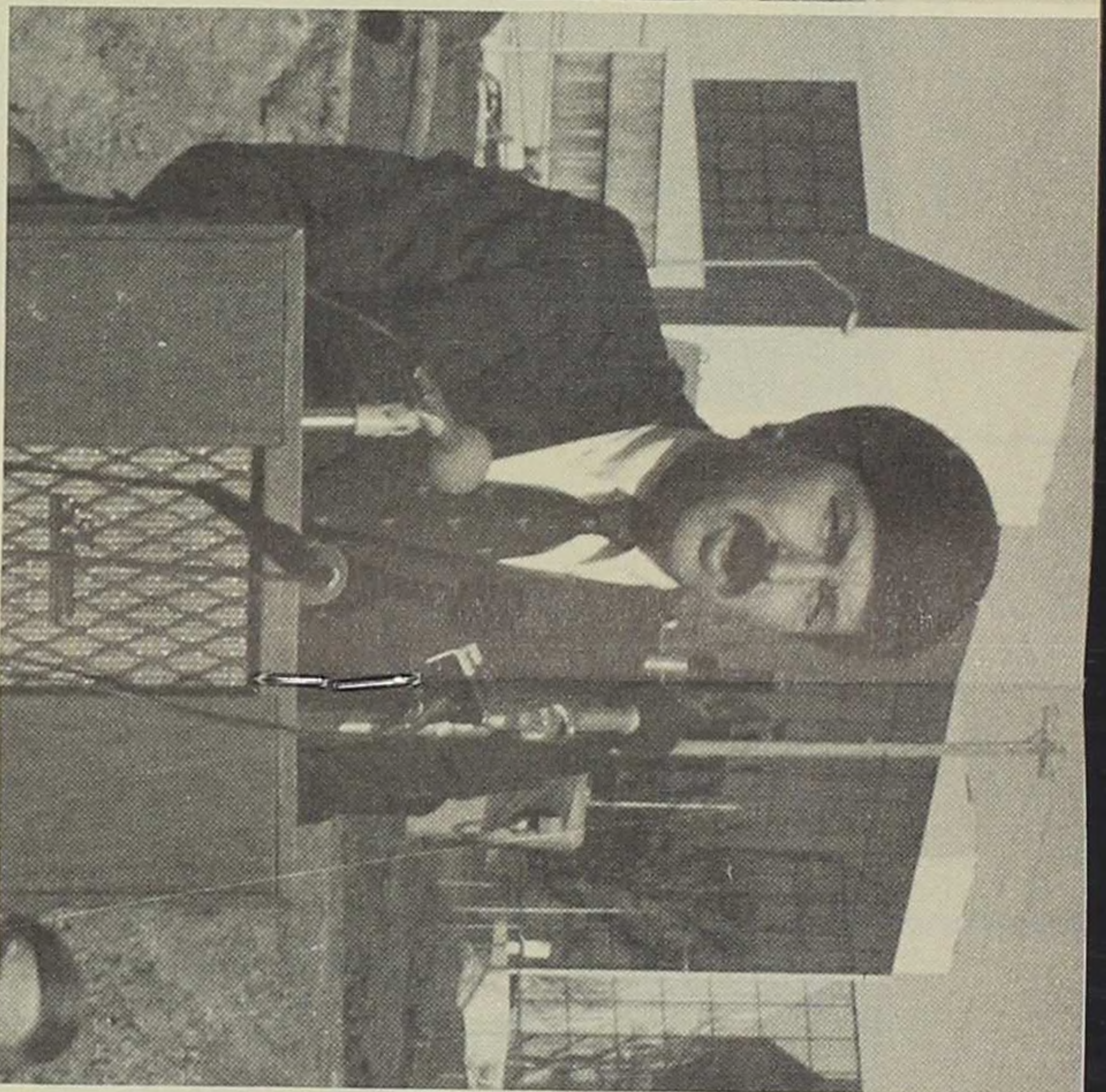
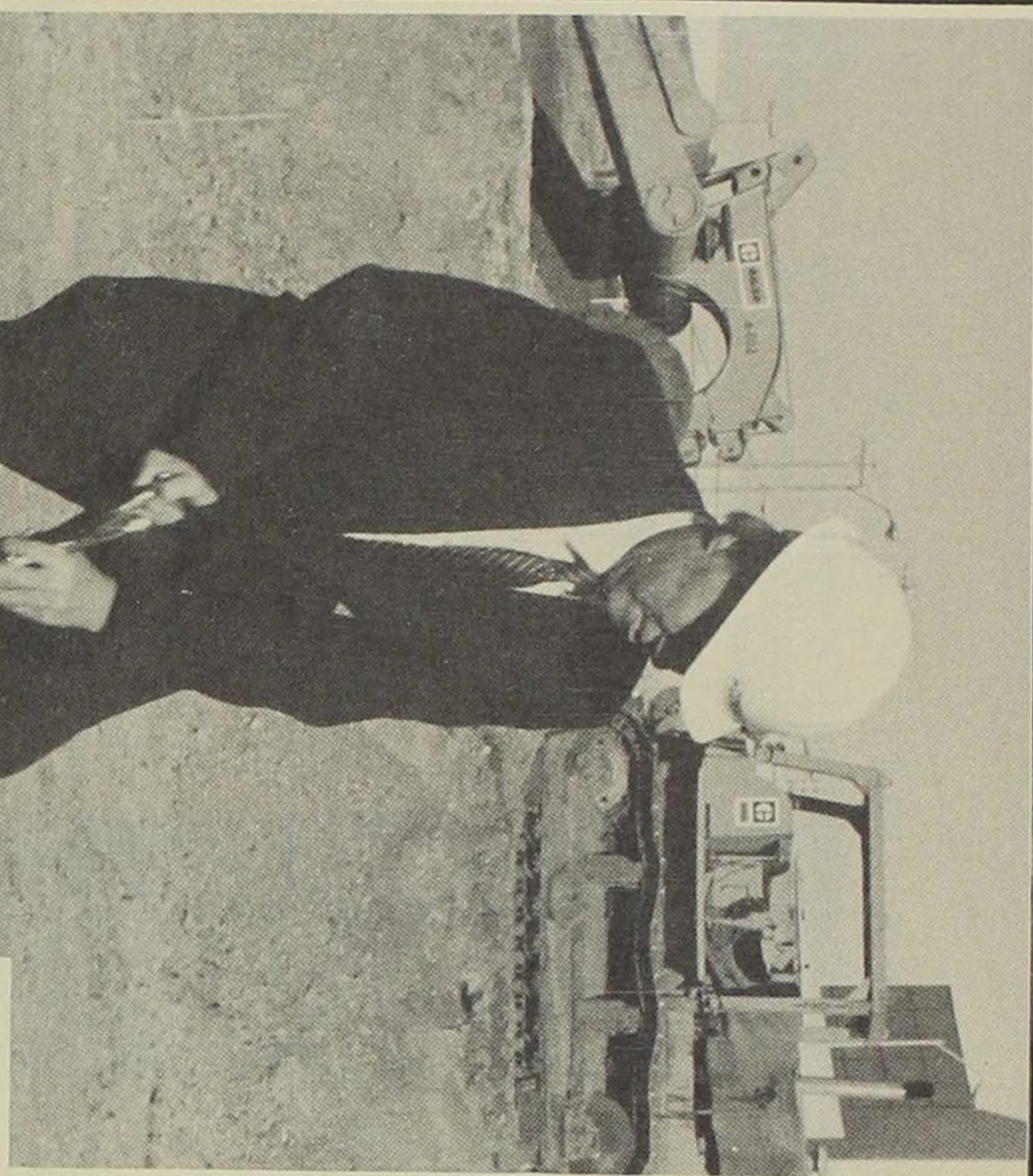


*place for Iowa*

On 7 December 1984 a ground breaking ceremony was held for the new Iowa Historical Museum. Participants in the ceremony included: Governor Terry Branstad (top center and bottom right); Des Moines Mayor Pete Crivaro, who presented the governor with a check for one million dollars (bottom left); and Joseph Walt, chairman of the Iowa State Historical Department's State Historical Board (top left).







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## Visit the Mamie Doud Eisenhower Birthplace in Boone, Iowa



Mamie Doud Eisenhower, the wife of Dwight D. Eisenhower, thirty-fourth president of the United States, was born in Boone, Iowa, on November 14, 1896. Her birthplace has been restored and is now open to the public for tours.

The home in which Mamie was born was originally located at 718 Carroll Street in Boone. The First Baptist Church owned the building from 1962 until 1975. Needing the land for expansion, the church, in 1974, offered the house to a local birthplace committee provided they move it to a new location. In the fall of 1975 the house was moved to its present site at 709 Carroll Street, almost directly across the street, on land donated by local businessman Warren J. Kruck.

Restoration of the home took five years. Architect William J. Wagner of Des Moines, well known for his work with historic projects, did the research that enabled the house to be restored to its original 1890s structural form, complete with summer kitchen. Early photographs of the house were studied to determine the original structure. Then period carpets, wallpapers, and drapes were added to the interior. Furniture of the 1890s was used to complete the restoration.

Mamie's family in Boone dated back to 1868, when her maternal grandparents, Carl and Maria Carlson, arrived from Sweden in that year. Carl Carlson worked on a farm, and later in a flour mill, purchasing the mill in 1890. He built a new mill in 1892. Their daughter, Elivera, married John Sheldon Doud, a meatpacker, in Boone on August 10, 1894. The Douds had four daughters. The second was Mamie Geneva, who was born in November 1896, while the family resided at 718 Carroll Street.

The Doud family moved from Boone in 1897, and Mamie grew up in Cedar Rapids and Denver. In 1915, while Mamie was vacationing with her parents in San Antonio, Texas, she met 2nd Lt. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was stationed at Fort Sam Houston. They were married in Denver on July 1, 1916.

Throughout Ike's long and illustrious military career, his brief stint as a university president, and his eight years in the White House, Mamie Doud Eisenhower remained ever gracious and popular. Upon completion of his second term they retired to their Gettysburg home, the only home they ever owned. Dwight David Eisenhower died eight years later in 1969.

During the 1970s Mamie continued to reside at the Gettysburg farm, returning often to Boone, Iowa, to visit her Uncle Joel Carlson, then in his nineties, a retired banker. When the birthplace restoration project finally began in 1975, Mamie was apprised of the project, and showed great interest in it, donating many personal items to the committee and arranging for the loan of original master bedroom furniture from the Colorado Historical Society Museum. Family furniture and other items were made available to the birthplace foundation from her Uncle Joel Carlson's home after his death.

When the house was moved in 1975, a full basement was added, making room for a museum and library. The museum includes a chronology of Mamie's life in pictures, clippings, and memorabilia. There are many items of Eisenhower memorabilia in the museum: family items, photographs, campaign and inaugural materials, commemorative plates, letters, medals, awards, and philatelic covers. There is also a reference library of several hundred volumes on Mamie Doud and Dwight D.



Eisenhower, their families, and the history of the Eisenhower years.

The dedication of the home was held on June 22, 1980, before a crowd of more than five thousand, with longtime family friend Bob Hope on hand to deliver the featured address. Iowa Governor Robert D. Ray also spoke. It was a memorable occasion, with members of Mamie's family present, including her sister, Mrs. G. Gordon Moore, several nieces and nephews, and Mrs. John S.D. Eisenhower, Mamie's daughter-in-law.

The birthplace museum and library is interested in acquiring additional campaign and inaugural items, as well as books, letters, photographs, and other memorabilia of the Eisenhower era. Free brochures about the birthplace and other places of interest in the Boone area are available from the Mamie Doud Eisenhower Birthplace, P.O. Box 55, Boone, Iowa 50036. Or phone (515)432-1896.

The birthplace is located at 709 Carroll Street in Boone, four blocks west of the downtown business district. Visitors may tour the birthplace between 1:00 and 5:00 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday, and by special arrangement, April through December. The home is closed on Mondays, and between January and March, except by appointment. — *Larry Adams, Curator, Mamie Doud Eisenhower Birthplace Museum and Library*

### The Iowa Newspaper Project Needs Your Help

The Iowa Newspaper Project is the most ambitious project ever undertaken to locate, catalog, and preserve the state's newspapers, past and present. And it needs *your* help.

Part of a nationwide program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to catalog, inventory, and preserve United States newspapers, the Iowa Newspaper Project has received \$350,000 in funding from the NEH, the Iowa State Historical Department, Iowa State University, the University of Iowa, the Iowa Newspaper Association, and the Iowa Library Association. Yet the project needs your help and financial support. An additional \$25,000 must be raised to cover the expenses of specially-trained catalogers as they travel to each one of the ninety-nine counties in the state to locate and inventory Iowa's newspapers. The \$25,000, when raised, will be matched with funds from the NEH. Only \$251 must be raised in each county to meet the \$25,000 fund-raising goal. Only \$25 from ten individuals or organizations in each county. (Surprising, perhaps, is the fact that the largest contributions to the project thus far have come from people living outside of Iowa — from Hawaii and New York, specifically — and from local Iowa groups).

Newspapers are a very rich source of information about local people and events. Often they provide the *only* clues about how Iowa towns, cities, and counties developed — socially, economically, and politically. Yet newspapers are perhaps the most fragile resource available to genealogists, librarians, and historical researchers. Your support of the Iowa Newspaper Project will help preserve the heritage of Iowans, through this remarkable historical resource, for generations to come.

We are printing below a project contribution form for the convenience of any individual or organization that might be interested in contributing to this most worthy cause. — *Brenda Todaro, Public Relations Intern, Iowa Newspaper Project*



IOWA NEWSPAPER PROJECT  
Iowa State Historical Department  
402 Iowa Avenue  
Iowa City, Iowa 52240  
Telephone (319) 338-5471

I want to help preserve Iowa's heritage.

Here is my donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to support the Iowa Newspaper Project.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zipcode \_\_\_\_\_

County \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Please send me more information about the Iowa Newspaper Project

Contributors of \$20.00 or more will receive a free copy of *The Pageant of the Press: A Survey of 125 Years of Iowa Journalism, 1836-1961*, by William J. Petersen, published by the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1962.



## Society Publications Donated to Terrace Hill



At its 27 October 1984 meeting, the members of the State Historical Society of Iowa's Board of Trustees voted to donate one copy of each available Society publication to the Terrace Hill Authority for display at Terrace Hill. In a 16 November 1984 ceremony, Governor Terry Branstad and his wife, Chris, accepted the Society's donation of over one hundred books from George McDaniel, president of the Board of Trustees (far right), and Margaret Keyes, member of the Board of Trustees and member of the Terrace Hill Authority (far left).

## New Hours Announced for ISHD's Des Moines Library Facilities

The Iowa State Historical Department announces new service hours for its library facilities in the State Historical Building, East 12th and Grand, Des Moines. Effective October 1, 1984, the historical library, newspaper library, and state census library shall maintain service hours from 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. The museum will continue to be open as usual, 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., seven days a week.

## Thank You for Your Support and Donations

The Iowa Newspaper Project staff would like to extend their special thanks to the following fine people and organizations:

Extra-special, enthusiastic assistance has been received from:

*LaVern Velau*, who has been a speaker for the Iowa Newspaper Project at several local genealogical society meetings. He also helped us staff our information booth at the annual Iowa Genealogical Society Conference in October 1984.

*Ruth M. Umbarger*, who sent us background information on the *Rockwell Phonograph*, including holdings information, a county history, and background information on the dog-powered treadmill once used to power the presses.

*Allen Wortman*, who wrote a lengthy article about the newspapers missing in Mills County and had it published in a local paper.

Generous donations have been received from:

Scott County Iowa Genealogical Society

Mary A. Fullbright Memorial Fund

Iowa City Genealogical Society

Crawford County Historical Society

Mills County Genealogical Society

Hancock County Historical Society

Poweshiek County, Iowa, Historical and Genealogical Society

Sigma Delta Chi — ISU Chapter, Society of Professional Journalists

Monona County Historical Society



reflects the shape of stele, the earliest square monuments of Guatemala, but the round sun shield behind it is Aztec.

Mayan priestly ceremonies, prayers, and symbols attended the mysterious and important process which kept life going, made the rain come, the sun rise, and the maize grow. The second depiction in a sphere is a Chac, or god-impersonator, often called a long-nosed god. The mask is surmounted by a serpent. The suborbital and over-eye plaque decorate the face, and the nose piece shows bones which

were likely to be human. The lolling tongue and jagged teeth are more pronounced, indicating great age as does the steeply sloping peaked skull even when covered by the elephant mask. The gods were called upon as needed to aid the priest in celebrations and took on impersonator guises of both animal and human types.

Above the patch of gray rainfall a lightning lizard darts from the heavy clouds to invoke the jungle rain. That a god could appear as a reptile, as water, as the south wind, as a teacher,







priest, king, or wise person, was all possible for Quetzalcoatl, the serpent god. The lord of the mountain could appear on his mountain's shoulder as a great serpent or as the lightning riding the storm to bring the rain.

The color throughout the panel was modified to give a frieze-like monochromatic appearance in ochre and coppery tones. In the frescoes of Chichen-Itza, a copper-tan color was used for preliminary outlining. Houser used it in outlining the white pyramid. However, the Mayan palette is not yet well understood. Earl Morris, in *The Temple of the Warriors*, described what chemical analysis of the colors found at Chichen-Itza had revealed:

*samples of every color found in the frescoes in the Warriors complex have been examined . . . and found without exception to be of mineral origin. Red clay, composed principally of iron oxide, is plentiful . . . in the limestone everywhere about Chichen, but most of the greens, blues and yellows must have been drawn from far sources.*

*Of the medium . . . in which the pigments are mixed nothing of a positive nature can be said. Commonly the wall paintings have the flat surface and clear transparency of water colors, but in some cases . . . the different pigments, when applied, had a viscosity as of oil paint. Indubitably the medium used there was of syrupy consistence. Presumably it was some sap or other organic liquid, the*

*dried residue of which has been so broken down by time that it is not recognizable to the chemists.*

\* \* \*

The right section of the mural is more easily read for it depicts a twentieth century mid-western farmer harvesting feed corn. The farmer of the 1930s is husking the corn without the aid of modern sophisticated machinery. He wears a work shirt and denim overalls, perhaps by Oshkosh B'Gosh. He picks the corn while wearing white cotton canvas work gloves. In his pocket is a red bandana handkerchief. He wears an engineer's visored cap. On his feet are a stout pair of work shoes.

In the triangular shape of the right border which parallels the seated Corn God of the Mayan section, there is a large microscope. It is the type used by biologists of the time. The contrast of ancient folklore to modern science was thus dramatized. Houser explained:

*The idea of this panel, of course, is to make a sort of modern hieroglyph of the present explanation of the sun and rain, and I would try to do it with as much quality of design and dignity as the Maya panel on the left side. In style it would repeat the same Maya forms.*

Ticker tape cascades the vertical length of the panel with symbols from the grain markets of 1935. The letter B indicates a bid on CK,



May corn. The last trade on the tape for the day is numbered 109, July wheat, WN, selling at 122, or three dollars a bushel. Corn held a good price in 1935 when 80,479 workers were on relief in Iowa.

In the depression years, Houser often would have seen railway boxcars with men "riding the rails," a common practice of the unemployed. The small figure on the boxcar is a counterpart to the two small seated forms at the base of the pyramid who may well have been Indian workers at rest. Behind the railway cars is a grain elevator. One stood along the tracks in downtown Ames. Two Iowa State College landmarks are shown — the water tower which stood behind Marston Hall, and the central campus campanile with its lancet windows in the bell tower. A ribbon holds the signature, LHOUSER, 1937, and two sets of initials: JEJ, for Ellsworth Jones of Ames; and SDP, for Professor Dale Phillips, a colleague in the Department of Architecture (then in the College of Engineering) at Iowa State. At the base of the large microscope are the initials FJL, for Frank Linn of Shelby, who was captain of the Iowa State College wrestling team in 1937-38.

In shapes roughly similar in size to the Mayan gods in the sky, the right portion holds a whirling sun superimposed upon a series of concentric rings of metal representing a telescope. The sun is crossed by a band of black lines varying in width and colors which represent the Fraunhofer absorption spectrum. To the left of the sun, in contrast to the lightning lizard of the Maya, is a hygrometer, a gauge with a wet bulb and a dry bulb used to measure humidity.

To the right of the sun, a series of fat arrows curve upward. Within each the symbol  $H_2O$  is formed. These arrows signify water moving upward to form clouds by transpiration. One arrow then turns downward as the return of rainfall into a gray patch of sky.

The metal rings symbolize measurement. The inmost ring at 9.07 is radiant flux at the

sun's surface, a temperature near 6,000 degrees, the number inscribed on the third ring. The second ring marks elements concerned with photosynthesis, essential to plant growth. These are Ni, nitrogen; Fe, iron; Mg, magnesium; Ca, calcium; C, carbon; and O, oxygen.

The palette of this section reverses from warm to cool contrasts. Here the warm ochre tones illustrate the corn harvest, opposite the cool green growing corn of the Maya. The ticker tape and the microscope echo these tones. The Mayan Indian was copper-toned against the green corn, but the American farmer appears in gray costume against the tawny stalks. The sun, in soft yellow to grays, is surrounded by the silver gray arrows and the deeper-toned metallic gray rings. A play of gray to white flows across the entire mural's surface as seen in the white garments of the Mayan and the white pyramid. Yet these neutrals magnify the colorfulness of the mural, bringing out the richness of more primary colors into vibrancy when fully lighted.

This distinguished mural, which the Treasury applauded as excellent, was carefully composed in depth by the artist. In an October 1937 letter to Edward Rowan, superintendent of the Section, Houser carefully described his plan for depth:

*I am working out the values and forms by an underpainting in transparent color in five fundamental earth colors [Houser used umber, ochre, Venetian red, earth green, and black]. Then, in the overpainting in body color, I will introduce more color variety and changes. . . . I wanted to arrange the colors and values so that the design would have depth, but so control the depth that while the wall plane was definitely modified, it would in no way be lost. I would like to explain the plan for depth . . .*

*Beginning at the center panel, I wanted the ear of corn to be on the picture plane*





*in front, and to be a bulging form set in an alcove or concave space. Then on either side of the alcove the first corn stalks are to be brought out to the picture plane and are very light. They interlace with the rest of the corn stalks, which are set back far enough to allow each figure to swing from*

*its back foot, set a little ahead of the corn stalks, to its shoulders and arms which are on the picture plane.*

*At each end of the panel, the corn god and its leaf background and the microscope and its tickertape [sic] background will also be on the picture plane, while the*





buildings on either side and the buildings in the sky will be set on receding planes. These sky forms and distant objects would be arranged in an order somewhat like the inside of a bandshell [sic]. Thus the figures arch forward from a wide flat concave curve and the hollows bounded by

the chests and front of legs of the figures would repeat the bandshell [sic] idea in a smaller and more broken way.

I have made careful studies from nature for the figures and the objects, plants, etc. in the picture.





# The Boonesboro Connection: Richard A. Ballinger and Ray Lyman Wilbur

by Thomas Tanner

While nearly everyone in central Iowa seems to know about Mamie Doud Eisenhower, I daresay few would recognize the names of Richard Achilles Ballinger or Ray Lyman Wilbur. Yet it is worth one's while to learn something of this interesting pair. Both were self-made men who devoted much of their lives to public service. Neither seems to have been without high principle, yet one left Washington, D.C., with honor, the other in disgrace.

The department over which they presided was created in 1849 to manage vast federal landholdings, mostly in the West. At the present time the secretary of the interior is the overseer of twenty-four percent of the American land: a little over two percent is set aside as Indian reservations, and administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs; the National Park Service administers more than three percent as national parks and monuments; four percent make up wildlife refuges under the Fish and Wildlife Service; and the Bureau of Land Management controls over fourteen percent, land which is often referred to as the public domain and put to multiple uses, with grazing perhaps the most conspicuous. Among the other agencies reporting to the secretary are the Geological Survey, producer of topographic maps, and the Bureau of Reclamation, a major builder of dams and related water projects. In Ballinger and Wilbur's day there was also the Bureau of Education, which has undergone many changes since then, finally attaining cabinet-level status as the Department of Educa-

tion.

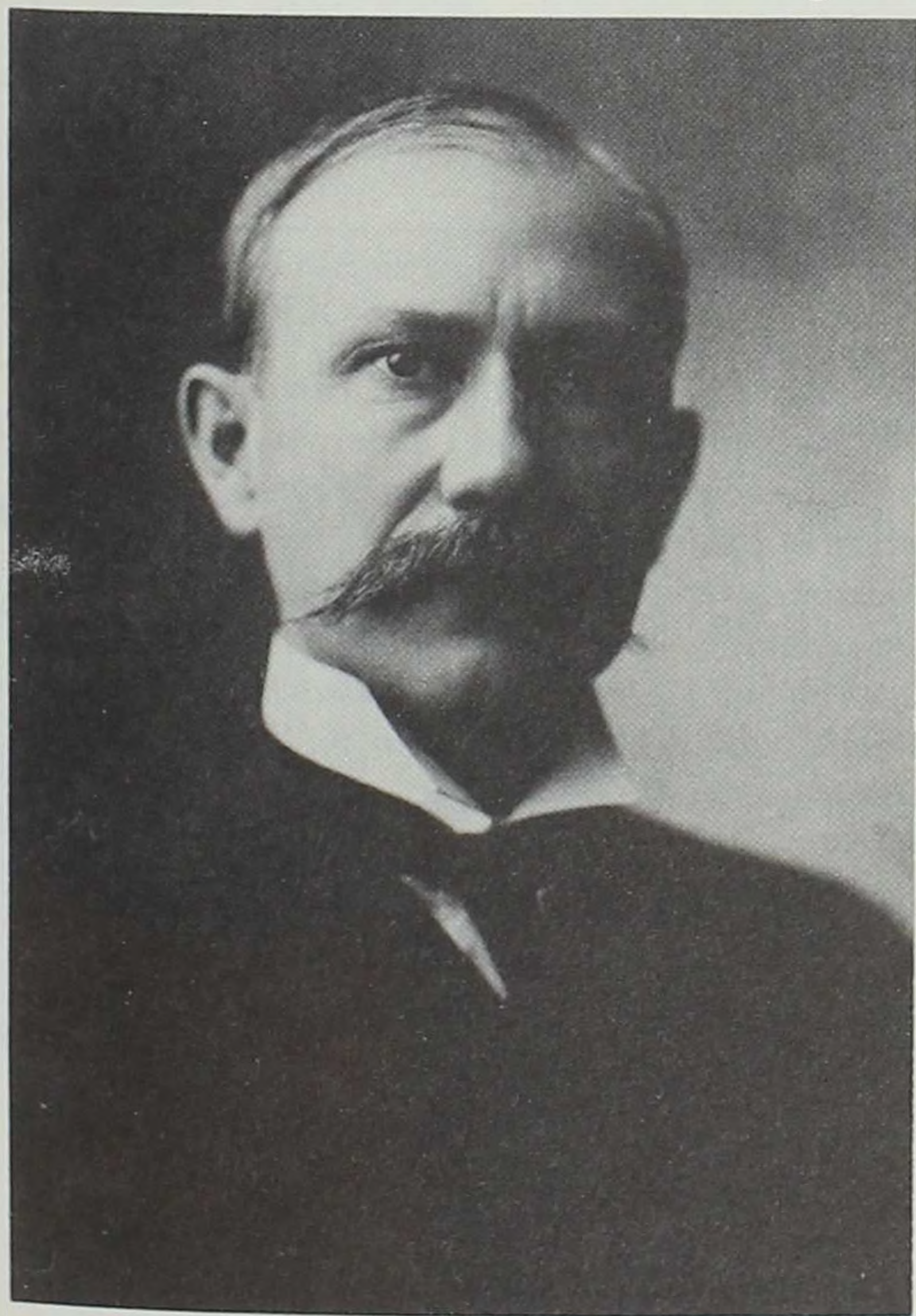
There have been forty-four secretaries of the interior in the 135 years during which the department has been in existence. Only one city has produced two of them. (Actually, both Ballinger and Wilbur were born in Boonesboro, which was later annexed to the younger town of Boone in 1887. Mamie Doud was born in Boone proper, in 1896.)

Richard Ballinger, born in 1858, was a staunchly upright person of puritan temperament who was reported to have seen evil not in "struggling social classes and decaying societies," but in the vices of gambling, drunkenness, prostitution, and corruption of public servants. James Penick, Jr., in his *Progressive Politics and Conservation*, stated that, "This sense of righteousness . . . occasionally propelled Ballinger into public life. Such forays were not to his liking and he rarely stayed longer than it took to chastise the rascals." Perhaps he had acquired some of this spirit from his lawyer father, a writer of abolitionist tracts who had put his convictions to the test as an infantry commander in the Union army.

The younger Ballinger worked his way through Williams College, graduating at age twenty-six. He practiced law in Alabama and Illinois briefly before moving to Port Townsend, Washington, in 1889. There, while maintaining his private practice, he served as a United States court commissioner and county judge, and published two law books, *Ballinger on Community Property* and *Annotated Codes and Statutes of Washington*. In 1897 he moved his practice across Puget Sound to Seattle. At



the turn of the century, that city was the jumping-off spot for gold-seekers enroute to Alaska and the Klondike. As such, it was filled with those activities Ballinger most despised. With the support of other concerned Seattle businessmen, he was elected mayor in 1904, and quickly succeeded in suppressing organized vice, eliminating the most obvious forms of bribery and corruption, and reorganizing city government along "sound business principles." Though urged by many citizens to seek reelection in 1906, he returned to private practice instead. But he could not avoid public service for long. James Garfield, son of the former president and a college acquaintance of Ballinger, was Theodore Roosevelt's secretary of the interior. Acting on Garfield's recommendation, President Roosevelt called Ballinger to



*Richard A. Ballinger. (courtesy Historical Photography Collection, University of Washington Libraries)*

Washington, D.C., in 1907 to clean up the corrupt and inefficient General Land Office. At the Land Office, Ballinger began by dismissing many employees whose effectiveness or integrity was found wanting. He then introduced typewriters in divisions where work was still being done in longhand, brought all the mineral laws together into a single systematic code, and drastically reduced the paperwork required of those applying for homesteads. He carried out his reforms quickly and was only too happy to return to private life after a year in the capital where the social scene had greatly displeased him. But he later chaired the Washington delegation to the Republican convention of 1908, and when William Howard Taft was elected president in that year, Ballinger was asked to serve as secretary of the interior. Ballinger was evidently reluctant to return to the capital, but felt obliged to attempt to modify the role of the Interior Department. As a western businessman, he believed that a larger share of the public lands should be opened to private development, and with less red tape.

Unfortunately for Ballinger, these notions were soon to make him the central figure in a major national scandal. Some of Ballinger's Seattle business associates had filed claims on Alaska coal lands, and he wished to expedite the awards. But a Land Office investigator named Glavis found evidence of illegalities in the claims, and was doggedly persistent in his investigations. Each time Ballinger and his assistants thought of a new way to bypass Glavis, the investigator would counter with some new intervention that would allow his investigations to continue. Finally, frustrated by this constant parrying, Glavis took his case directly to the president. Taft spoke with Ballinger and, in September 1909, he fired Glavis for insubordination.

Taft's political enemies, particularly U.S. Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot, now made the most of the situation. Through Pinchot's influ-



ence, Glavis was able to publish an article in *Collier's* magazine detailing his charges. Taft's adversaries advanced the thesis that the administration was betraying the conservation policies established by Roosevelt by selling valuable public resources to monied interests at cut-rate prices. They thus forced a reluctant Republican majority to conduct a congressional investigation of Glavis' dismissal and the events that led to it.

The hearing lasted for four months in early 1910, and received copious press coverage. Glavis was represented by the brilliant attorney Louis Brandeis, who would become a justice of the Supreme Court six years later. Brandeis prevailed against the unfriendly rulings of the Republican committee chairman and the hostility of the 8-4 Republican majority. His thoroughness in preparing his case, and his persistence in pursuing various lines of questioning, eventually discredited Secretary Ballinger, his top aides, the attorney general, and the president himself.

First, the irregularities in the coal claims were held up to public scrutiny, as were Ballinger's repeated failures to have had them thoroughly investigated despite Glavis' evidence and protestations. In this phase of the hearing, Glavis proved an excellent witness, with a calm, unflappable demeanor and an extraordinary command of the facts. Ballinger behaved less well. For instance, he denied that he had once acted as attorney for the coal claimants, but then Brandeis produced documents which rendered that claim incredible. The next and perhaps more significant phase of the hearing dealt with the manner in which Taft had dismissed Glavis and exonerated Ballinger. The crucial developments had to do, first, with the form in which Taft had received the information upon which he had based his decision to dismiss Glavis and, second, how he had prepared the letter of dismissal. The administration maintained that Taft's action was based on



SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CONSERVATION POLICY

J.N. "Ding" Darling, editorial cartoonist for the *Des Moines Register and Leader*, repeatedly captured the spirit of the controversy surrounding Secretary of the Interior Ballinger, President Taft and his administration, Chief Forester Pinchot, and Louis Glavis in a series of cartoons published between late 1909 (when the controversy first came to light) and early 1911 (when Ballinger resigned his cabinet position).

his careful review of a 74-page report prepared by the attorney general, which had summarized a record of nearly half a million words. Brandeis wanted to know how the attorney general and president had accomplished all the necessary study and writing in one week, as they claimed, especially since their business and social calendars had been crowded at the time. In the final days of the hearing, after Brandeis had utterly destroyed the credibility of the administration's account, Taft (who had



not testified at the hearing) finally issued an admission that the attorney general's report had, in fact, been prepared after the dismissal, and predated.

The administration's account of how Taft had prepared the dismissal letter also proved embarrassing. At the hearing, Brandeis eventually dragged from Ballinger a reluctant admission that his office had supplied the president with "a sort of resume of the facts" about the Glavis case just before the dismissal. But a young Interior Department clerk then revealed that the "resume" was, in fact, the dismissal letter itself. It had been dictated to him by Ballinger's department counsel, who had conferred with the secretary and other top department officials throughout its preparation. The clerk had then helped them burn the rough drafts of the letter while the final version was being delivered to the president for his

signature.

In the wake of this testimony, *faux pas* followed *faux pas*. The attorney general immediately delivered to the committee a copy of the letter described by the clerk, stating that it had just come to light in a new search of Justice Department files. The next day, obviously unaware of this development, the White House issued a press release claiming that Taft had written the letter personally, without reference to any document such as that described by the clerk. But since numerous sections of Taft's dismissal letter were identical to the version given to the committee by the attorney general, the president was forced to make an immediate retraction of his statement, admitting that he had indeed asked the Interior Department counsel to draft for his signature a letter dismissing Glavis and exonerating Ballinger.

In his analysis of the case, Alpheus T. Mason, a noted constitutional historian, argued that Taft could either have fired Glavis, relying solely upon his confidence in Ballinger, or he could have conducted an impartial review of the case before making a decision. Unfortunately, he chose to do the former while allowing Ballinger and others to swear that he had done the latter. This ethical failure by Taft, Ballinger, and others in the administration proved to be their undoing. Mason strongly suggested that Ballinger and other department witnesses became trapped in a series of evasions, falsehoods, and retractions which finally degenerated into blustering outbursts that even included threats against "disloyal underlings." Likewise, the president, the attorney general, and the secretary of the interior had been requested to release to the committee all documents relevant to the dismissal of Glavis. The events summarized above make it clear that none of the three had complied with the request. One might add that the attorney general's claim of executive immunity from doing so did little to encourage public confidence in



HUNTING UNDER DIFFICULTIES



the administration.

The committee's vote on Ballinger followed the same partisan pattern of so many other ballots during the four-month hearing. They upheld Ballinger's action and honor by a tally of 7 to 5, with one Republican joining the four Democrats. The committee, however, endorsed Glavis' position on the Alaska coal claims, and the minority signed reports stating that Ballinger's conduct, associations, and character made him unfit to continue as secretary. Perhaps more significantly for Ballinger, much of the press corps agreed with the minority. Newspaper coverage during and after the hearing was most unfavorable to the secretary, who became almost as tempting a subject for political cartoonists as Secretary James Watt seven decades later. All this left him with even less fondness for the capital than he had had in his first stint there. Pleading ill health and a depleted bank account, and recognizing himself as a political liability to Taft, he begged to be relieved of his responsibilities. Standing by his man, Taft was reluctant to accept Ballinger's resignation, but finally did so in March 1911, two years and a day after his appointment. James Penick, Jr., in his *Progressive Politics and Conservation*, pointed out that after his final return to Seattle, Ballinger was unable to put his life back together, and spent his final years quietly and somewhat despondently. He died in 1922, at the age of sixty-three.

The affair had its larger political consequences. It contributed to a loss of public trust in Taft, a split in the Republican party between the Taft and Roosevelt forces, Roosevelt's founding of the Bull Moose party, and the 1912 victory of Woodrow Wilson over his badly divided opponents.

In this case as in many others, revisionist historians have been kinder to a tragic figure than were the reporters of his own day. Histo-

rians have noted that Ballinger's desire to expedite Alaska coal claims was not limited to the claims of his Seattle friends, and was perfectly consistent with his proven record of increasing government efficiency by reducing bureaucratic paperwork. This attitude also probably represented a progressive westerner's moral conviction about what was best for the country and the general welfare at that time. It has been argued that Ballinger was a better preservationist than were Chief Forester Pinchot and other adversaries who portrayed Ballinger as an enemy of conservation. For instance, he was opposed to the damming of the spectacular Hetch Hetchy Valley in California. Moreover, as commissioner of the Land Office he had fought to exempt the national parks from easements, while as secretary he had supported a strong Bureau of National Parks. He has been portrayed as the almost innocent victim of Pinchot, an old rival whose machinations were known for their ruthlessness and their success. Even A.T. Mason, the historian most critical of Ballinger, concluded that he "was not altogether dishonest," but simply yielded too easily to the pressures of interest groups, be they the selfless or the self-seeking. Overall, there seems to be agreement that Ballinger was not a corrupt politician on the take, that he was not a diehard enemy of conservation, and that he took seriously the concept of public service throughout his career. For all this, a certain flaw in character seemed to have betrayed him in the Glavis affair.

Boonesboro's second secretary of the interior, Ray Lyman Wilbur, was born in 1875, just seventeen years after the birth of Richard Ballinger. There are some interesting parallels between the lives of the two secretaries. Both were the sons of lawyers who had served in combat with the Union army. Both were from families that tended to live at the western edge of settled territory, with Boonesboro among their temporary residences. Both





*Congressman Philip D. Swing of California (left) and Commissioner of Reclamation Elwood Mead (right) watch as Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur signs the contract for the construction of Hoover Dam on 11 March 1931. (courtesy Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)*

were deeply imbued with the value of hard work, family, and the civilizing influence of church and school. Each man worked his way through college. Both were Republicans who put their faith in self-reliance and the private sector. Each was a public servant who was happier at home than in Washington, D.C. Both excelled at reorganizing governmental departments, reducing paperwork, and expediting decision making. Each was suspicious of the federal government's possession of too much land and too much power.

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the two men lay in the manner in which they left governmental service since Wilbur left Washington, D.C., honored and esteemed and able to continue a useful and

productive life.

Ray Lyman Wilbur's parents moved to Boonesboro from Ohio in 1866, and they remained there for seventeen years. Finding the law practice a bit slow, Wilbur's restless father founded the state's first title insurance company and tried to develop some of the local coal mines, but made little or no profit in either venture. In his autobiography, Wilbur described his memories of Iowa as "sketchy." They probably were, since he left there at the age of eight. He was nevertheless able to recount a number of Iowa anecdotes in his later years. His Sunday School teacher, a cobbler, once threatened his pupils with such vivid descriptions of Hell that little Ray, already an independent thinker, simply refused to



believe in such a place. He wrote, "I said to myself, 'to hell with Hell,' and I have never been in favor of it since!" He also recalled the bestial condition of the town drunk, the sight of whom gave him "an early antipathy toward drunkenness." He described the maternal behavior of a pet pigeon who adopted some kittens and wouldn't let their real mother near them. He remembered catching sunfish in a brook near his Uncle Charlie's farm outside Boonesboro and his futile efforts to direct the team of draft horses that pulled Charlie's hay wagon.

Disappointed in his business ventures in Boone, Ray's father moved the family to Dakota Territory for four years, before a final journey to Riverside, California, where irrigation was just beginning to make the desert bloom. There, the family achieved success as growers of oranges. Wilbur's memories of his adolescence in California are sharp, and it is clear from them that his youthful hours as a farm worker, hunter, angler, and naturalist laid solid foundations for his later work as the nation's chief conservationist.

The Riverside High School graduating class of 1892 numbered five, three of whom enrolled that fall in Leland Stanford's new university several hundred miles to the north. There, Ray met another remarkable young man from Iowa, Herbert Hoover. Although they were not close at this time, each assessed the other as a good man who would make his mark. Hoover graduated with Stanford's first class in 1895, and soon began amassing a fortune as a mining engineer. Only many years later would Wilbur learn that the selfless young Quaker had immediately begun channeling much of his money back to Stanford in anonymous grants for needy students, and that he, Wilbur, had been specified by Hoover as one of the recipients.

Wilbur worked while at Stanford as a laboratory assistant in physiology. Because he was a naturalist and an excellent student, he was also offered summer employment as a cook, roust-

about, and trapper on a university expedition to the Arizona Territory, where expedition members gathered plant and animal specimens for the university. He graduated with Stanford's second class in 1896.

Wilbur had long wished to study medicine though his reason was a rather odd one. As a boy, he had noticed that many of his nature books were written by doctors, often serving "in new countries, perhaps in the Army." Therefore, the path to becoming a naturalist might well lead through medicine. He received his medical degree in 1899, established a successful private practice, and in 1911 became the dean of Stanford's new medical school. Five years later, at the age of forty, he became president of Leland Stanford Junior University, a post he was to retain for twenty-three years, not including his four-year leave of absence as secretary of the interior. During Wilbur's tenure as president, Stanford became one of the world's great universities.

As secretary of the interior, Wilbur was able to make some interesting contributions. He designed the bison logo which replaced the eagle on the department's seal and stationery. He believed that the new logo gave his employees an *esprit de corps* and a special pride in their unique mission as guardians of the public domain.

More importantly, however, he completed the delicate negotiations which cleared the way for construction of the Boulder Canyon Project, a project which included a truly gigantic dam on the Colorado River. At the ceremony marking the beginning of construction, he surprised everyone by taking it upon himself to name the dam for his old friend, Herbert Hoover.

Wilbur supervised the first three years of the dam's construction, which was no mean task, since, at 726 feet, it was to be higher than any dam yet "conceived or attempted." Before building the dam, he literally had to create a



new city in the desert for the workers and their families — a real city with schools, churches, stores, medical facilities, and other services. Named Boulder City, its population at the height of dam construction was six thousand. He was genuinely enthused about Hoover Dam and other projects along the Colorado River, for they brought irrigation to dry lands. Recalling his Riverside days, he wrote, "The marvel of the irrigation ditch with an orchard on one side of it and sagebrush on the other has never left me."

Wilbur had a special love for national parks and monuments, viewing them not as recreation sites but as places "to furnish inspiration and increased knowledge." According to his memoirs, he insisted that this principle determine their development. During his term of office, such southwestern national monuments as Canyon de Chelly, Petrified Forest, Arches, and Great Sand Dunes were established. He enlarged many national parks, either by pur-

chase, gift, or the incorporation of adjacent federal land. He set aside research preserves within the parks, inaccessible to casual tourists. In cooperation with the government of Canada, he established the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. He continued the work begun in the previous decade of creating national parks in the eastern portion of the nation. These parks were largely the result of private gifts, since there was little federal land available in the East. The program was perfectly consistent with a faith in volunteerism and the good will of affluent citizens, such as John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

He devised strict new conservation rules governing the drilling for oil on federal lands. These proved beneficial to both the oil industry and the cause of conservation.

But Wilbur was basically opposed to centralization as he made clear on a number of issues. In his day the Bureau of Education



Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur with other Hoover Dam Project officials in front of a partially completed bypass tunnel on 22 September 1932. (courtesy Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)





*Ray Lyman Wilbur, president of Stanford University, and Herbert Hoover at a Yale-Penn game at Franklin Field on 12 October 1935. (courtesy AP-Wide World Photos)*

was still lodged in the Interior Department where it had been located since its creation in 1869. He allowed it to continue the gathering and disseminating of information about the nation's schools, but he opposed all suggestions for a cabinet-level education department or, indeed, any expansion of the federal role in education.

Long interested in the status of native Americans, he detested the reservation system of which he became the overseer. He knew that it made the majority of American Indians dependent to the point of helplessness. He hoped instead for improvements in education and training that would better integrate the Indians into the larger society, while preserving some elements of their culture. He proposed that

reservation lands be improved by irrigation where feasible, with each family eventually taking title to its own portion of land to cultivate, sell, or otherwise use as it wished.

Appalled by the overgrazing which had denuded so much of the public domain, Wilbur proposed that this land revert to the states, believing that the states could care for it at least as well as could the federal government.

On the issues of the federal role in education, the status of native Americans, and the proper use of the public domain, Wilbur's hopes were not to be realized in his lifetime or even thereafter. The federal government plays a very large role in education through a cabinet-level department even though most funding and control remain generally local. We still



As a student of environmental policy, I have naturally focused on Boonesboro's two secretaries of the interior. But the town produced a third cabinet member as well. Until 1947, the secretary of the navy was a cabinet-level post, and it was held from 1924 to 1929 by Ray Lyman Wilbur's brother, Curtis. Eldest of the six Wilbur children, Curtis was born in 1867, eight years before Ray, and was a high school student when the family left Boonesboro. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1888 but did not enter the service. This was accepted practice at the time, since the number of academy graduates exceeded the number of available commissions. He then moved to Riverside,



Curtis Wilbur. (courtesy Boone County Historical Society, Boone, Iowa)

where his parents resided, and taught school for two years while studying law at night. Admitted to the California bar in 1890, he became a deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County in 1899. In later years he became county superior court judge, associate judge of the California Supreme Court and, in 1922, chief justice. During his judicial career, he worked diligently for the establishment of adult probation programs and separate juvenile courts.

Oddly, Curtis Wilbur's opportunity to serve as secretary of the navy came as a result of a series of scandals involving the Interior Department. When the Teapot Dome and Elk Hills oil-leasing arrangements forced the resignation of Interior Secretary Albert B. Fall from Warren Harding's cabinet, Navy Secretary Edwin Denby was also implicated. With the death of Harding, there was no place for Denby in Calvin Coolidge's cabinet. The reputation of the Harding administration was such that Coolidge needed a man of high qualifications and unimpeachable character as his first cabinet appointee. He thus turned to Curtis Wilbur as a replacement for Denby.

As secretary of the navy, Wilbur was aware of the threat posed by Japan in the Pacific area but any countering moves he might have devised were hampered by popular sentiment for disarmament and reduced federal spending. He did achieve moderate success in enlarging and modernizing the United States fleet, however, and he established a naval air force which he hoped would grow into a potent fighting machine — as indeed it would. (It had been only a few years before that General Billy Mitchell had first demonstrated what airplanes could do against warships.)

When Herbert Hoover became president in 1929, he appointed Curtis Wilbur to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, while he selected Ray Lyman Wilbur to be his secretary of the interior. Curtis became presiding judge of the court in 1931. He retired in 1945 at the age of seventy-eight, and died in 1954 at Palo Alto.

have Indian reservations complete with many of the old problems and a few relatively new ones. Finally, department lands have not reverted to the states, despite the urging of some western interests, as voiced in the Sage-

brush Rebellion of the 1970s.

The premises of stewardship have changed since Wilbur's day, and some of the attitudes of this true conservationist now seem



strangely archaic. At the ground breaking ceremony for Hoover Dam, he said, "This is one of man's greatest victories over Nature. We are to re-make geography, compel Nature to serve us in our own way." On national radio that evening, he declared that if we were to stop destroying our natural resources, we had now to be guided by the expert: "The engineer, the geologist, the botanist, the agriculturist, will tell us what must be done . . . [he is] the expert who knows his business and who is the only safe guide of democracy in its ever-present fight with the forces of Nature."

Were he speaking today, there is little doubt that such a thoughtful person would be loathe to portray Nature as our adversary, and events of the past fifty years might blunt his enthusiasm about the role of technocrats in a democracy. Indeed, the subsequent history of the Colorado River itself would surely have caused him to qualify his optimism about dams, irrigation projects, and the politics which create them.

In 1933 Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president, and Wilbur returned to his beloved Stanford to serve as its president for another ten years. He continued to render public service, as he had done throughout his adult life. Among his volunteer interests, at various times, were international peace, forest preservation, youth organizations, housing, nutrition, health care, and literacy for the poor. He founded a major private health care plan, the California Physicians Service, and was also the second secretary of the interior to have served previously as president of the American Medical Association. He died in 1949, at the age of seventy-four.

\* \* \*

The pages of history have been nearly silent on this little coincidence of two men's birthplaces. Wilbur's autobiography makes no reference to Ballinger. There has

been no biography of the latter, and the books about the coal claims imbroglio would hardly mention a Ballinger-Wilbur connection. One book on the secretaries of the interior does note that Wilbur was born "in Boonesboro, Iowa — the birthplace of Richard Ballinger." In Iowa, historians have yet to pay these men much attention. The *Annals of Iowa*, the *Iowa Journal of History*, the *Palimpsest*, and the *Iowan* have referred to one or the other eight different times, but never to the two men together. Only three of these references cite the town of their birth, and three do not identify them as Iowans. The longest reference is one page, on Ballinger. Likewise, an examination of early Iowa histories confirms that the two families were not prominent in state affairs during their brief sojourns here. This silence underscores the dynamism of frontier life, as those with pioneering spirit came, ventured, and — in some cases — moved on to make their names elsewhere. □

#### Note on Sources

Sources materials for both Richard A. Ballinger and Ray Lyman Wilbur included the annual reports of the secretary of the interior, newspapers published during their respective terms of office, and Eugene P. Trani's book, *The Secretaries of the Department of the Interior, 1849-1969* (National Anthropological Archives, 1975). Useful analyses of Ballinger's incumbency and the Ballinger-Glavis hearing include: A.T. Mason, *Bureaucracy Convicts Itself* (Viking Press, 1941); James Penick, Jr., *Progressive Politics and Conservation* (University of Chicago Press, 1968); Harold L. Ickes, "Not Guilty," *Saturday Evening Post* (May 25, 1940); and Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Harvard University Press, 1959). The major source for Wilbur was *The Memoirs of Ray Lyman Wilbur* (Stanford University Press, 1960). The search for Ballingers and Wilburs of early Iowa exhausted all issues of the four Iowa periodicals named in the text, plus such standard and monumental works as Stiles' *Notable Lawyers and Early Public Men of Iowa* (1916), Brigham's *Iowa, Its History and Its Foremost Citizens* (1916), Gue's *History of Iowa* (1903), and Goldthwait's *History of Boone County* (1914). *Who Was Who in America* and other reference works were used to determine that only one city has produced two interior secretaries.

The Ballinger/Wilbur connection was discovered when my students were writing an unpublished book, *The Secretaries of the Interior and the Press*. The authors of the Ballinger and Wilbur chapters were Laura Kunau and Gary Marty, respectively.





WHY SO BEASTLY SUDDEN, MR. BALLINGER!

## CONTRIBUTORS

MARY L. MEIXNER's ties to Iowa began in graduate school at the University of Iowa where she studied art history and painting. She is an emerita professor and was distinguished professor at Iowa State University until 1983, where she taught in both the College of Home Economics and the College of Design. She has written about art for *Leonardo*, the *Iowa State Journal of Research*, and the *Wisconsin Academy Review* and has had poetry in *Lyrical Iowa* for a decade. While in a painting class with Jean Charlot in Minnesota she was urged to note the fine mural

in the post office upon her return to Ames. Thus began the search for the artist of the corn mural.

THOMAS TANNER is Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and Secondary Education at Iowa State University. As his article suggests, he enjoys discovering connections. His own connection with Ballinger is that he is a native of the Pacific Northwest, while that with Wilbur is that he received his Ph.D. from Stanford. Unlike his two subjects, his own migration was *from the Pacific Coast to Boone*.





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