

Threshing Day

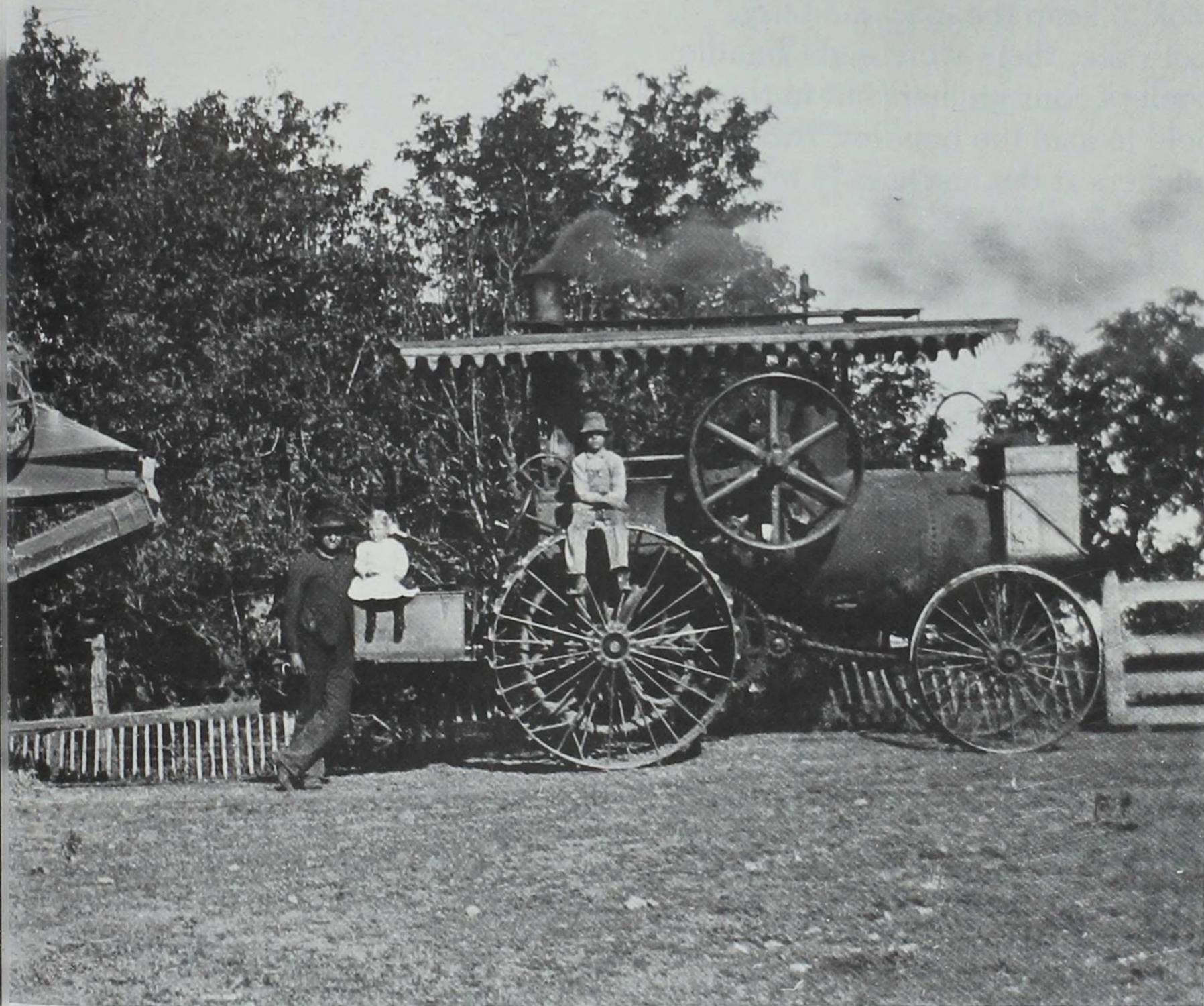
BY THE TIME I was born into a farming neighborhood in Blue Grass Township, Scott County, Iowa, we no longer threshed. But I remember my mother reminiscing about threshing, about the excitement and urgency.

Now, as an editor who has leafed through files of images, I can attest that threshing was certainly one of the most photographed events of farm life — and I wonder what I missed. The imposing machinery, the proud casts of charac-

ters, the grandeur of the setting all lent threshing the quality of a well-staged drama. The pace must have been fast and steady — working against the elements, to the rhythm of machines, amidst the humor of good neighbors.

The following images and words reveal the powerful place that threshing holds in the collective memory of rural Iowans.

— *The Editor*



Otto Nolte (center) balances proudly on threshing rig he owned with Ross Harris in the 1920s near Sheffield.

“It was all poetry for us
and we wished every day
were threshing day.”

Hamlin Garland
A Son of the Middle Border

“I counted the number of men it took to keep the machine busy. Let’s see, there were eight bundle haulers, four pitchers out in the field to load the bundles, two spike pitchers at the machine to help pitch off loads. . . .

Then there were two grain haulers with wagons, two men to help shovel off the grain at the granary, one or two men inside to pile the oats back, a couple of men stacking straw (and what a dirty job that was, behind the blower), and the engineer, separator man, and water boy. Twenty-six to twenty-eight men, all hungry, hot, and sweaty.”

James Hearst, *Time Like a Furrow*

“Pitching the bundles, guiding the blower, stacking the straw, and removing the threshed grain was accomplished in a working rhythm. In retrospect one is conscious of the underlying harmony of cooperation.”

Gladys S. Benz, “Furrows of Time”

Above: Eighteen threshers near Anamosa, about 1920.
Below: Threshing crew, August 1924.





ORIGINAL OWNED BY MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS



GABELMANN COLLECTION



Top: Hayracks lined up, late 1800s
Bottom: Threshing at the Axel Hammerstead farm with the Transcontinental Threshing Company, 1915.
Right: Smoke fills the sky around the Transcontinental Threshing Company, circa 1919.

“It was exciting to have the threshing still in progress when Edna and I came home from school, or on a Saturday when we could watch the work all day.”
Gladys Benz, “Furrows of Time”



“The interesting thing is how we all roughly estimated how much help we owed each other. A man with twenty acres of oats to thresh shouldn’t send as much help as a man with eighty acres. It all worked itself out, and no one felt cheated.”

James Hearst, *Time Like a Furrow*

“All through the autumn months, the ceaseless ringing hum and the *bow-ouw, ouw-woo, boo-oo-oom* of the great balance wheels on the separator and the deep bass purr of

its cylinder could be heard in every valley like the droning song of some sullen and gigantic autumnal insect.”

Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*



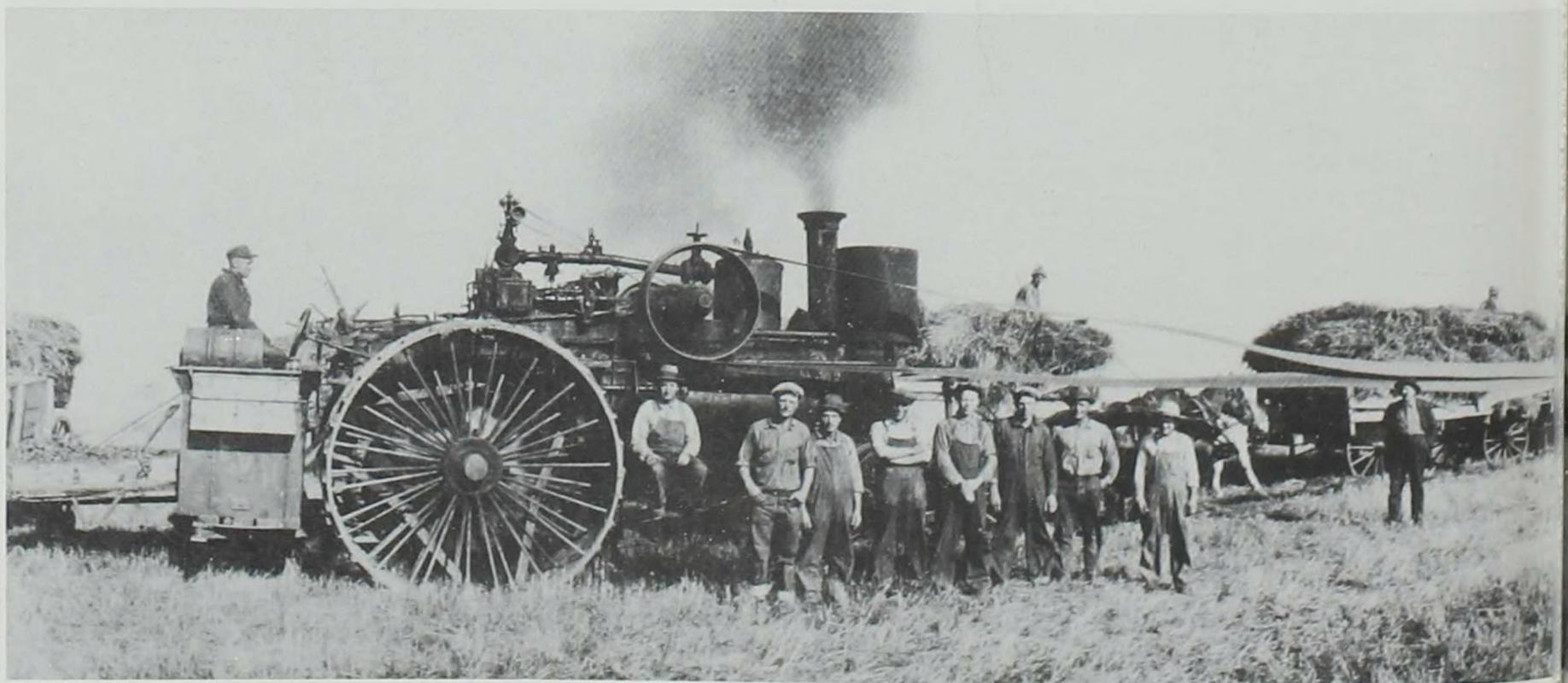


KOCK COLLECTION, SHSI

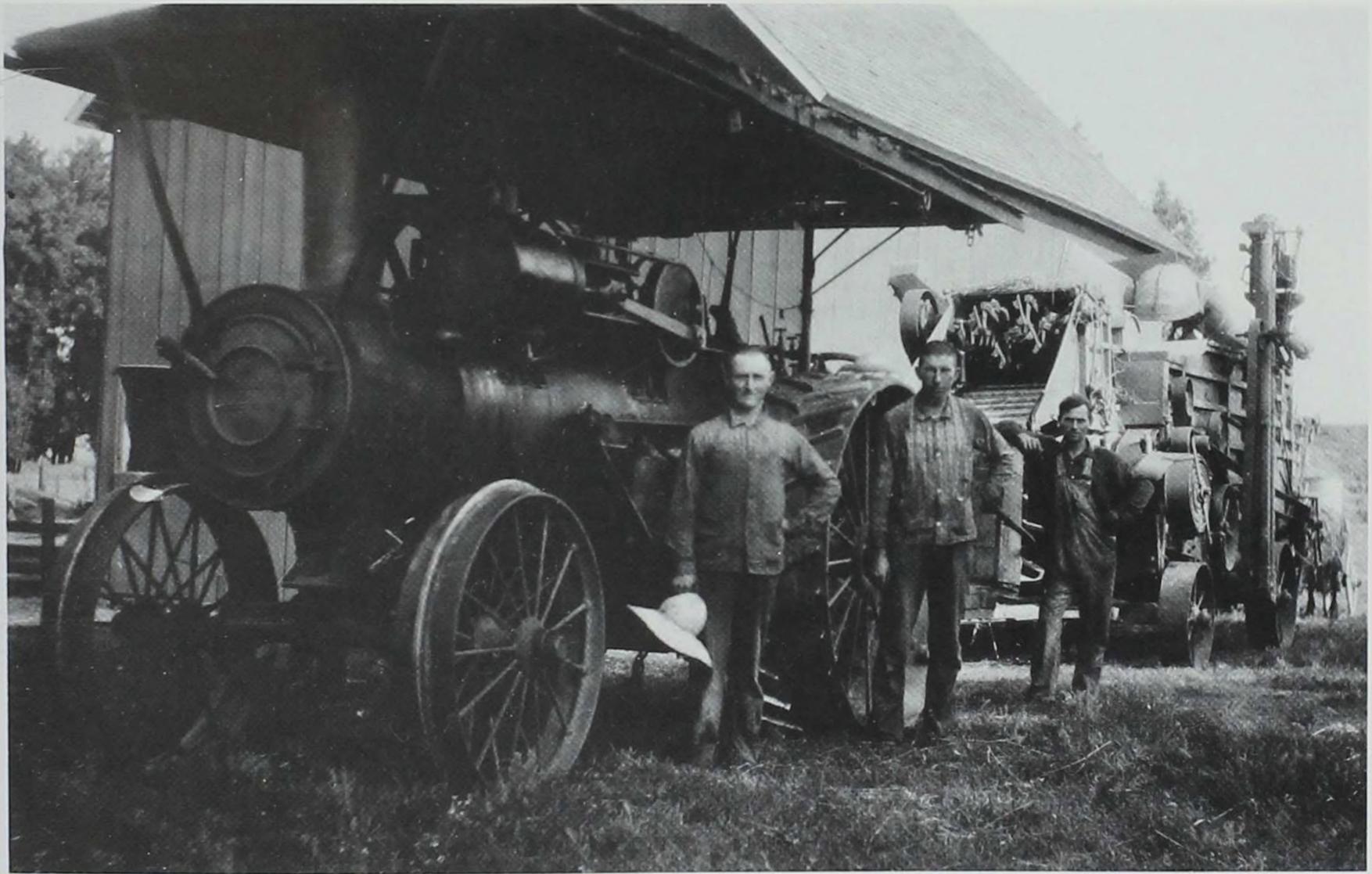
“The full blast from the blower hit the stack builder full force each time the blower came by. . . . There was nothing to do but shut his eyes, turn his back, and have the full blast of oats straw, chaff, dust, and dirt blown into every crack and crevice of his clothes

while he inhaled it with each breath. . . . Dad would cough and spit oats dust for days afterward and his eyes would be fiery red. Grant Wood never captured that part of threshing.”

Carl Hamilton, *In No Time At All*



ORIGINAL OWNED BY MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS



FAWCETT COLLECTION, SHS

“The machines we used could knock out four thousand bushels of oats a day. The big steam engine could pull the hind end off creation.”

James Hearst, *Time Like a Furrow*

“We were awakened at dawn by the ringing beat of the iron mauls as Frank and David drove the stakes to hold the ‘power’ to the ground. The rattle of trace chains, the clash of iron rods, the clang of steel bars, intermixed with the laughter of the men, came sharply through the frosty air, and the smell of sizzling sausage from the kitchen warned us that our busy mother was hurrying the breakfast forward. . . . I had a sense of being awakened into a romantic new world, a world of heroic action.”

Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*



Above: Threshers at George Hollingsworth farm, Sandyville, Iowa. Upper left: Stacking straw, Al Treliar (Trealiar?) farm, 1915 Left: Belts connecting the engine and separator were often a hundred feet or more. Date and location unknown.



Clockwise, from upper left: Farm women and children, 1924; boy on bicycle (date & location unknown); Meservey farms, circa 1928; threshing rig on road near Wellman, 1912.



“Many threshing rings are in operation. They average about five of them threshing and one moving on the road.”

Years of Struggle: The Farm Diary of Elmer G. Powers, 1931–1936
H. Roger Grant and L. Edward Purcell, eds.

“Tuesday 28
[Sept 1869]
finish threshing, 128
bu. wheat & 180 of
oats. I bake every
thing, have 3 men to
breakfast, 14 to dinner
& 13 to supper & Mrs.
Snell, she stays all
night. Henry is better.
I am also tired”

Diary entry
Emily Hawley Gillespie
“A Secret to Be Buried”
Judy Nolte Lensink, ed.



“There were some memorable times—the day I put a bouquet of nasturtiums on the table and the crew joker passed them around the table.”

Mrs. Raymond Sayre
 “Women’s Role in Threshing”

“It wouldn’t be a threshing job without a small boy or two around all the time.”

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KOCK COLLECTION, SHSI

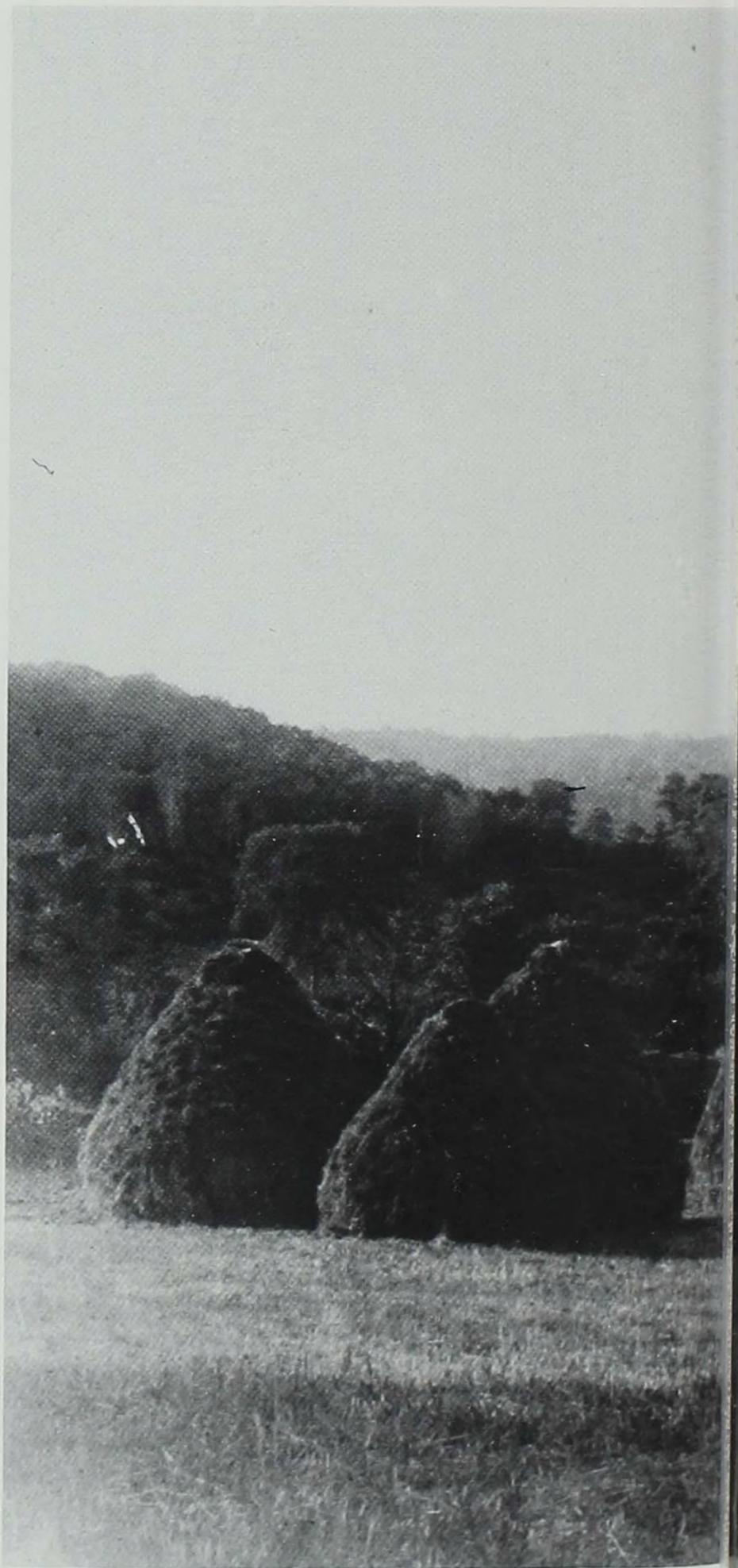


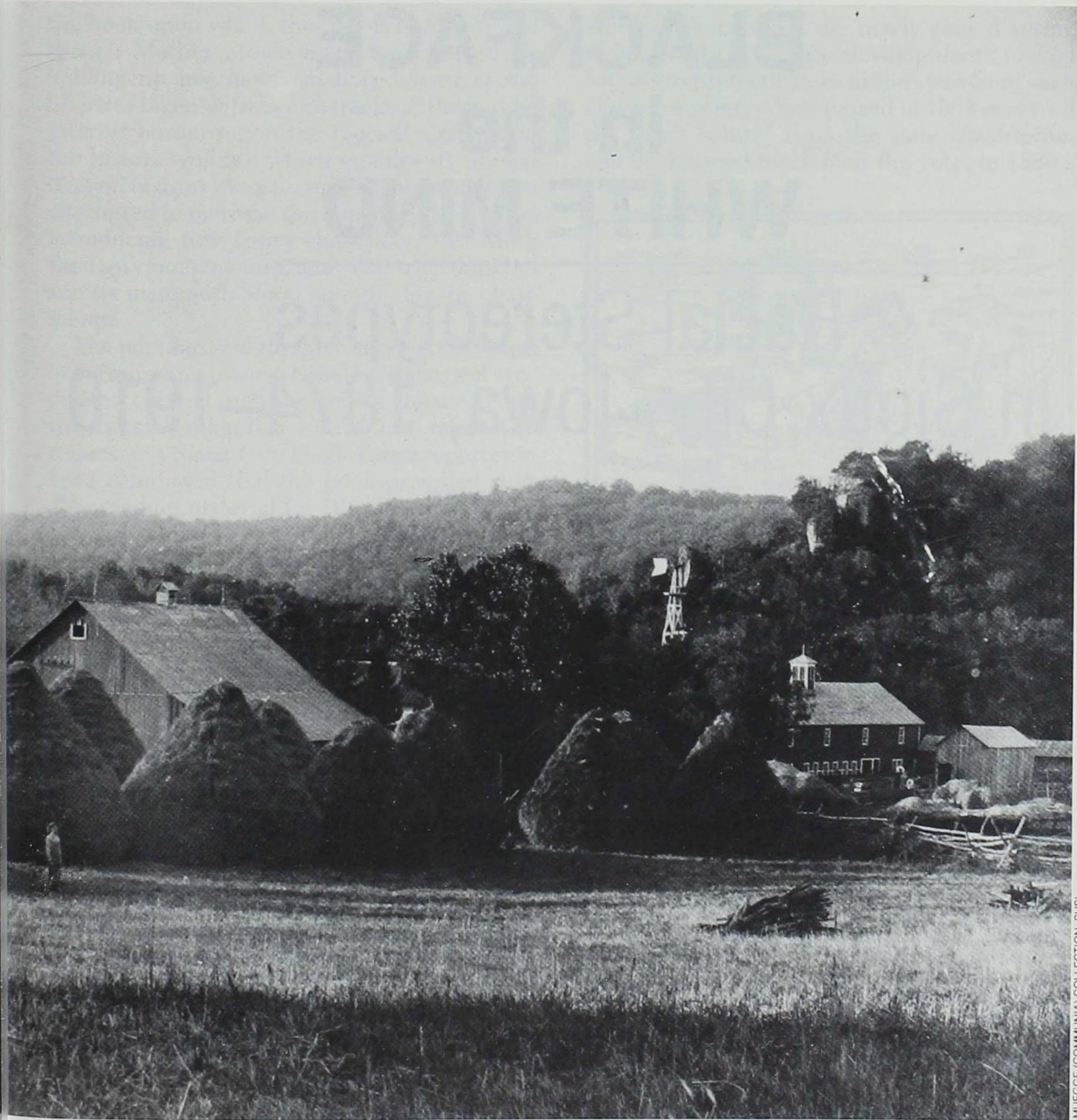
“Day after day, therefore, father or the hired man shouldered a fork, and went to help thresh.”

Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*

“Within the shelter
of the towering stack
I lie in shadow, blinking at the
light . . .
. . . It is so sweet
To lie here, taskless, dumb and rapt
With wordless weight of reminiscent
scenes and sounds,
Weight of unremembered millions
of autumns.”

Hamlin Garland
“In Stacking-Time”





MUEGGE (COMMUNIA) COLLECTION, SHS

Hand-built strawstacks in northeastern Iowa, 1895.