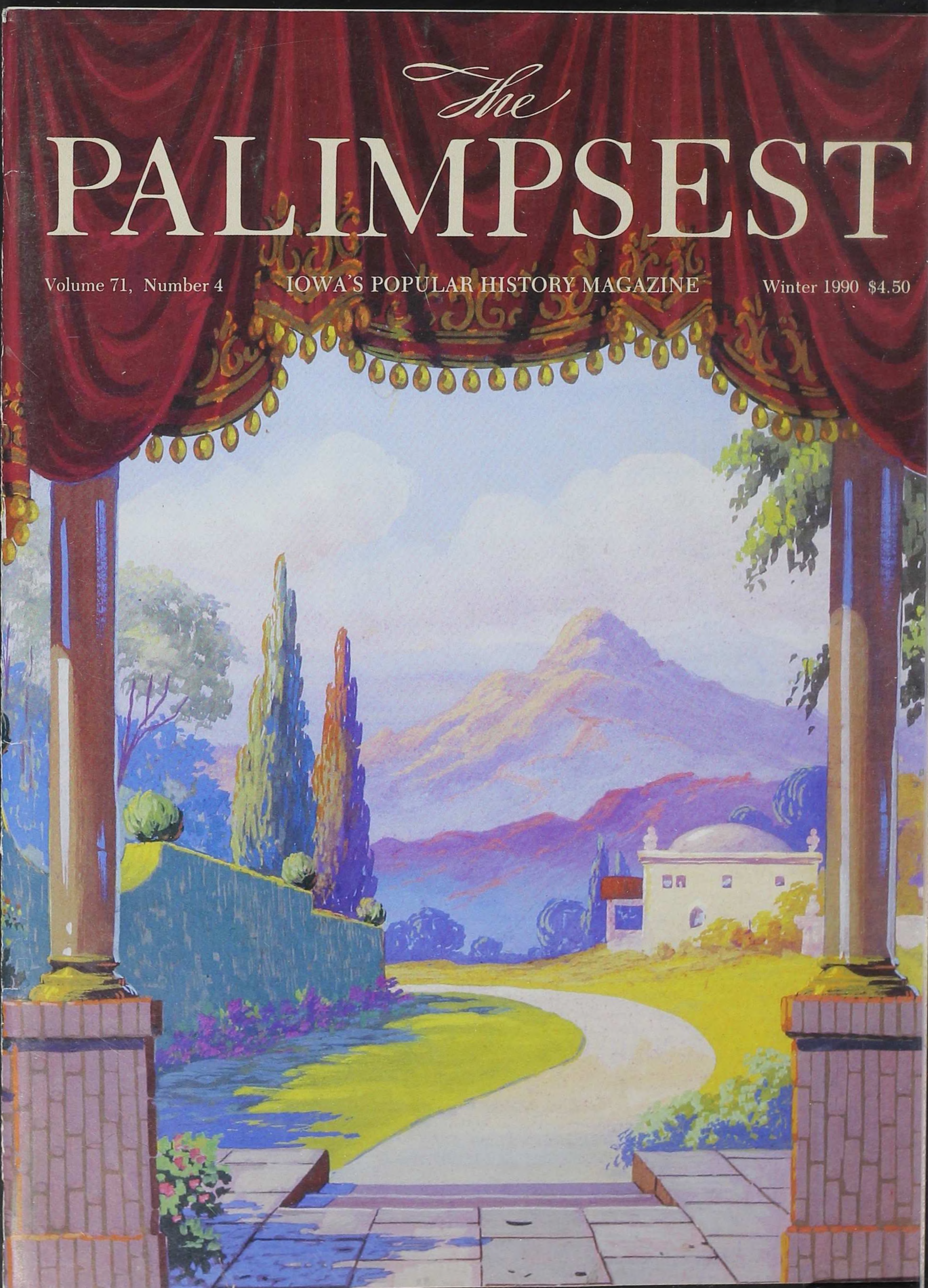


The
PALIMPSEST

Volume 71, Number 4

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Winter 1990 \$4.50



Inside —



“Local belles” at the Milton, Iowa, opera house. In this *Palimpsest*, author J. Leo Sullivan recalls the charm and magic of a small-town opera house, and Professor Michael Kramme acquaints us with Jesse Cox of Estherville and his accomplishments in the art of theatrical scenery. A colorful selection of opera house curtains, from the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, sets the stage. The show starts on page 154.



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest (*pāl'imp/sĕst*) 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.

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COVER: A painting of a theater curtain created at the Jesse Cox Scenic Studio in Estherville, Iowa, and the stencil on the back of another Cox curtain. (Photos by Chuck Greiner.) More on Jesse Cox and opera houses begins on page 154.

The PALIMPSEST

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Ginalie Swaim, Editor

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To Light Out for the Territories Ahead of the Rest

by Michael J. Bell

Editor's note: This text was initially presented by the author as the banquet address of the annual Congress of Historical Organizations in Des Moines, June 9, 1990.

THIS TITLE comes from the last paragraph of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck, you remember, has spent the last third of the book pretending to be Tom Sawyer, while Tom, pretending to be his older brother, Sid Sawyer, has had the two of them engaged in an absurd and fantastical scheme to free Jim, a runaway slave, whom Tom knows is already free. Angry that Tom has been playing games, disgusted with himself for becoming involved in the kind of civilization that Tom's game playing represents, Huck determines to run to the Indian Territory and be done with civilized ways forever. "So there ain't nothing more to write about and I am rotten glad of it," Huck says and continues, "because if I'd 'a' knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't 'a' tackled it. . . . But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

I chose this title not because I want to suggest that any of us ought to be done with civilized ways, but rather because I wanted to remind all of us of the true nature of the pioneer experience. Pioneers go places civilized people shun. And they tend to go there, wherever "there" is, because the one thing they can be sure of is that civilization is not there waiting to tell them how things ought to be done. I also wanted to remind everyone that the territories are where you find them. Every place, any place, at any time, can be civilization to one person and the territories to another. Certainly, the Indians knew they were civilized, even if Huck did not. Just as certainly

none of us has to be reminded that too much of America believes that Iowa's rich civilization is dull and bland, full of Jello molds, corn, and nothing else. Finally, I want to argue that the study of history can be a territory, too, and that, like Huck, those of us who stand poised "to dive into the decade" of the 1990s have the opportunity to tell an old story in a new and different way, to draw, if you will permit me to characterize Huck's tale, a new map of Iowa and use it to tell an uncivilized version of what it has meant to be an Iowan, a middle westerner, and in my own community's case, to be Jewish in the Hawkeye State.

To accomplish this I have to invite you out to the territories with me to see some of the sights I have seen in the past year and to tell you my uncivilized version of the story of their creation. My territory is Jewish life and heritage in Iowa from the state's beginnings to the present day. Since October of 1989, with generous support from the State Historical Society of Iowa and the Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines, other researchers and I have been exploring the what's, the how's, and especially the why's of Iowa's Jewish community. I have been answering those raised eyebrow questions that begin, "Jews in Iowa, really? How interesting?" and really mean "Jews came to Iowa? Where did they live? What kind of life did they have? You mean they're still there? Why?" I should warn you from the start, however, that the vistas I will be describing have all been observed before. Accordingly, what I will be offering you is not novel sights but different views. In particular, I want to challenge you to see three traditional historical maps — the map of settlement, the map of community, and the map of power — in somewhat different ways.

Traditionally, settlement charts a story of

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incremental growth. At its beginning there is only a vast, unoccupied, and hostile plain, then a few brave souls arrive and struggle out a foothold, to be followed by more and more settlers until their numbers reach a critical mass and, in our local case, Iowa is born and finally matures as a collection of farms and towns. In the Jewish community, this story is the story of intrepid peddlers, who became small-town shopkeepers, whose children in their turn became city merchants, and whose children in their turn became lawyers, doctors, teachers, and everything else under the sun that modern children become. Traditionally, settlement is also a story of famous names and famous places, of firsts and most important. In the case of the Jewish community of Iowa, it is a story of Alexander Levi, the first naturalized citizen; of Moses Bloom, who rose from humble clothier to be a power in the Democratic party of Iowa; of families such as Younkens, Davidson, Levitt, Rosenfield, Braverman, Buxbaum, and so many more; of Jewish cemeteries and Hebrew Aid Societies; of temples, synagogues, and finally of Jewish Welfare Federations working to link the many small towns of the state into a greater community.

Moreover, settlement, especially Midwest settlement, is a nineteenth-century story. Most of us cannot imagine settlement occurring in a land filled with people. For us, settlement is a process of creation, a making of something out of nothing. Our minds are used to conjuring up images of virgin land, of empty spaces and wide open prairies, of a past time when America was a blank slate ready to be written upon. And our sense of these places is that they are on the edge of society, out there away from the refinements of the city and the force of civilization. Accordingly, we cannot

imagine a narrative of settlement if a place is filled already with people. If there is no frontier to be conquered, then there can be no settlement. As a result, as it does for most of Iowa, the settlement tale of Iowa's Jewish community ceases with the emergence of dominant urban centers and, in particular, with the establishment of the large and prosperous communities in Des Moines, the Quad Cities, and Sioux City around 1900. Once these and the other major cities of the state are in place, then people may come and go but settlement must be finished.

Now, this conventional description is not wrong. It is what history generally means to most of us, and generally it is true. In the case of the Iowa Jewish community, it is a story easily told and one whose causes and consequences are easy to document. Eighty percent of the pioneer Jewish settlers were German. Most immigrated to the United States after the European revolutions of 1848 brought forth a rising anti-Semitism as Jews were incorrectly perceived as sympathetic to the revolutionaries' intentions. The Germany they left, though divided, was nonetheless emerging as an economic and social force on the continent, one that had been transformed by Enlightenment thinking and was well on its way toward becoming the center of both European and Jewish intellectual life. As well, most of these first settlers were prepared for the possibilities of the Iowa frontier. Their Germany was alive with a powerful spirit of capitalist expansion and individual opportunity. Many had come from the emerging middle class, had experience in business, the capital required to move themselves into the economic life of the state, and the drive needed to take advantage of the coming expansion of the Middle West.

Some five hundred to one thousand Jews were settled on Iowa farms between 1905 and 1920.

Moreover, most were reform Jews. This is not the place to go too deeply into a discussion of the distinctions between the various forms of Jewish religious practice. Suffice for our purposes to say that reform Judaism represents an attempt, not unlike that of the authors of the American Bill of Rights, to separate the practice of religion from the practice of politics, that is, to distinguish between an individual's religious beliefs and her or his political allegiance to the state. In Europe this distinction had arisen as a purely practical matter. In exchange for citizenship first in the Napoleonic Empire and later in many of the states created after its fall, large numbers of European Jews willingly surrendered their distinctive claim to be a nation within a nation and substituted in its place the claim that Jews were loyal subjects of the country in which they lived and practitioners of religion that bore no national claims.

This particular combination of religious belief and ethnicity gave this first generation great advantages. At its simplest, it allowed them to come to Iowa. Central to European reform Judaism was the notion of private choice. Individuals were free to move beyond the "rules" of traditional law if they believed that those rules were arbitrary and not divine. Likewise, their Germanness allowed them to mingle freely with the large Catholic and Protestant German migrations that were also filling up Iowa with settlers and to become full participants in the American economic dream. Not surprisingly, as the traditional narrative of settlement suggests it should, their numbers grew in proportion to the state's growth. By 1878 there were about one thousand Jews in Iowa, about 1 percent of the state's population. They were comfortable, integrated into their communities, respected by their fellow citizens, holders of public office. By 1900 their

number had risen to around three thousand, with most now settled in Des Moines, Sioux City, and Davenport as the older, powerful river cities gave way to the new economic realities of the state.

BUT FOR ALL the grandeur of their story, it is not complete. Its problems can be represented by some simple demographic facts. By 1907 Iowa's Jewish population had doubled in size to six thousand, and by the entry of America into the First World War it had nearly tripled. More important, the causes for this population leap were external to the state. By and large those new immigrants came to Iowa because they were literally sent here. The chief agents of this delivery were three: the Jewish Agricultural Society, the Industrial Removal Office, and the Galveston Project of the Baron de Hirsch Fund.

I will deal with the Jewish Agricultural Society first, since the idea of Jewish farmers may be a strange concept for many of you. The Iowa Jewish Heritage Project is still compiling its figures, but what the rough estimates show is that some five hundred to one thousand Jews were settled on Iowa farms in the period between 1905 and 1920. These people came as farmers and many stayed farmers until the depression drove them off the farms and either into the cities or out of the state entirely. Moreover, these Jewish farmers of Iowa were not alone. As the records of the various agricultural societies demonstrate, somewhere between fifty thousand and seventy-five thousand Jewish families and individuals were settled on farms in the United States and Canada during the life of the Jewish Agricultural Society.

The Industrial Removal Office (IRO), which

“In the tenement . . . my children would one after another fall victim to all the slum diseases. . . . Here my children will have air, light.”

began as a part of the agricultural society's mission and became its own separate agency, operated in a similar fashion. Its task was to find homes outside of the major eastern cities for those immigrants who could not find work and who were uninterested in attempting farming. In its case we know that in the period from 1905 until 1923 it settled approximately one thousand Jewish individuals in Iowa. Here, too, we have only begun to examine the complete correspondence produced between the IRO and its Iowa correspondents, but those letters tell a story of great courage on the part of those coming west and great fortitude on the part of those waiting to receive them.

Let me give you a few examples: “Gentlemen: Yours of the 20th on hand in reply will say I tank you very much for sending me hear as I worked my self up purty good. I am runing a shoe shop of my owne and keep employed two more men. I can youse one more. If you have a good shoemaker send him down here and I wil try my best for him. I wil try and pay him back what you al done for me. He can work for me as long as he likes and when he wil be tried in work he can open a shop for him self. Please send me a single man and send him on the name of A. Miller as I have changed my name. My old name was very hard to spel so I piked out a easier one.”

Industrial Removal Office, 10/16/08: “Send Coat maker at once.”

IRO response to shoemaker: “Have first class coatmaker will send if you telegraph satisfactory by noon today. Otherwise will send elsewhere.”

These letters also tell of the pride and joy of those who made the long journey: “I have ben in New York seventeen years and this will be the first time my wife will be able to look upon something she can call home. Oy yes, I made a

fair living in New York; that is worked six months and walked around another six, even saved a few hundred and then in the tenement where with the foul air and the germs of all diseases and the crowding and the absence of light my children would one after another fall victim to all the slum diseases and my few hundred dollars would go to the doctor. And at the end of my seventeen years what is my “tachlis” [finish]? I live in four rooms in Lewis St. on the fourth floor and pay \$13 a month. Here my children will have air, light. . . .”

Finally, Iowa's cities received hundreds of people as a result of what is known as the Galveston Project sponsored by the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Conceived again as another way to end the overcrowding of the eastern cities, this project negotiated with several shipping companies to land their immigrant cargoes not in New York, Philadelphia, or Boston, but instead in Galveston, Texas, where those individuals and communities could make their way through the heartland of America. Again, though the figures are incomplete, it appears that almost half of the Sioux City community who migrated to the United States in the period from 1904 to 1914 arrived in Iowa this way.

WITHOUT COMMENTING on this first uncivilized narrative yet, let me now compound it with another. Implicit in the narrative of settlement is a narrative of community. Traditionally, this story in Iowa and in much of the Midwest is one of isolated small towns turned inward upon themselves because they have no choice. It is a story of turning the smallness of the settlement, and then the town, and finally

Their inclusion into American life in places like Iowa was by no means guaranteed, . . . that it occurred as smoothly as it did is one of the great stories waiting to be told.

sometimes even the city, from a disadvantage to an advantage. In this traditional narrative, the key is independence. Communities survive and prosper because they are socially self-sufficient. Their schools, no matter how small, do the job as well or better than larger schools might. Their shopping, their services, the entirety of their social fabric work to make them good places to live and raise families, not because these towns have a lot to offer but because they offer more with less than larger social units might offer with twice the resources. Moreover, this story of the struggle to create community through the determined independence of a few remains very powerful today as Iowa's small towns struggle against the demographic tide that threatens to make them no longer viable. Today as Iowa continues to lose population, many small communities still struggle to go it alone whatever the cost.

However, here too, despite the eloquence of this tale, there is more story to be told. Let me back up to my narrative of Iowa's Jewish community. Unlike the previous generation, most of the newcomers who arrived after 1900 were Eastern European in origin and Orthodox in religious practice. Accordingly, they brought with them a whole new set of expectations and needs. Yiddish was their primary language; strict adherence to Talmudic law was their watchword; and *Kashrut* was their covenant. Their inclusion into American life in places like Iowa, therefore, was by no means guaranteed, and the fact that it occurred as smoothly as it did is one of the great stories waiting to be told. In a sense, these newcomers represented a challenge of enormous proportions. Their orthodoxy would not bend as easily as had that of their reform-minded German brethren and the combination of their language, customs,

and religious differences could have led easily to an open war between the two communities as each claimed to hold the truth of Judaism in opposition to the other.

What was needed was a way of overcoming the differences of religion and ethnicity. And that way was found through the creation of extra-religious societies that could sidestep the deep religious differences and work toward the common goal of accommodating both the older community and the newcomers to American life. What is truly remarkable is the sheer number of organizations that developed in this period to aid in the creation of a unified Jewish community. In Des Moines alone, over fifty distinct social organizations ranging from men's clubs to political organizations to youth groups to women's societies were created in the period from 1905 to 1925. Moreover, most of these were replicated in some form in the other larger cities and towns of the state with Jewish populations. What is equally remarkable is the concerted effort within these organizations to extend both their membership and their networks of responsibility well beyond the largest centers of population. Repeatedly, we have discovered in our researches a systematic and concerted attempt on the part of the leadership in cities like Sioux City, Des Moines, and then the Quad Cities to distribute power and responsibility across the state.

THIS PATTERN of statewide definition of community is matched by an equally interesting body of data that we have been developing about the nature of Jewish social life in small communities across the state. Again, let me outline

*The miles did not matter,
and community was not measured
by the boundaries of the hometown.*

two brief examples. The first is a recurring narrative of closing up the shop or the store and traveling to the larger cities for the High Holidays. In this story we have been told repeatedly of how at Rosh Hashanah or Passover, whole families would head for Waterloo or Cedar Rapids or Davenport or Sioux City or Des Moines where they would be put up with a family and stay until the observances were completed. The second narrative describes a visiting circuit in the small towns. In this story, the narrator describes how her family would spend the Sundays from April through October going on a small-town tour, gathering at the homes of the different Jewish families in each community in order that all the families might have a Jewish social life apart from the ordinary social life of each small town. "We would wait for the spring thaw and for the mud to dry," she said, "and then we could start going from town to town to see everyone again."

What is immediately suggested by these stories is that the miles did not matter, and that community was not measured by the boundaries of the hometown. There is a bad joke about an Iowa rural paper route. Perhaps you have heard it: the route is four houses and 175 miles long. Those who tell it say that the joke is in all that distance, but the real interest is elsewhere. The distance may be funny, but the better point for Iowans is that someone wanted the paper and someone else would ride 175 miles to give it to them. Admittedly this pattern of visits could be read as a small-town problem, as a solution that heightens the isolation of Jews in Iowa life. In the absence of a local community, the only choice for small-town Jews was to reach out to the neighboring towns in the hope of building what could not be found at home.

But imagine otherwise for a moment. Imagine, in fact, that this phenomenon is much more common than we have reported previously and that similar stories could be told about other religious communities, both Catholic and Protestant, throughout the state. I say imagine because it is not something we have ever looked for. Nonetheless, if it is the case, then it leads us to the conclusion that the social communities of small-town life were wider and broader than we have heretofore argued.

Further, let me suggest, by way of negative evidence, one reason we may have lost sight of this phenomenon. The baby boom of the 1950s skewed not only the real population of the United States but also our sense of its impact on social life. It suggested that local populations would grow large enough that they could cease to be connected to other communities and begin to function on their own. But the baby boom was an illusion and we need to return to the older model of cooperation. We need to recognize, as did those of earlier generations when Iowa's small towns were really small, that survival — whether of a small Jewish community or of any small community — cannot be a singular burden. Communities, we need to remember, are as much the people working together as they are the places where we live.

LET ME BRIEFLY ADDRESS the third traditional story, the narrative of power. Traditionally, history has been defined as *his*. Men do the work of culture building. They found, they order, and they control the passage from unstructured life to finished community. It is men, in this traditional version, who clear the land, who found the town, who are the first and do the first. In

*We have realized that
the story is much more
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the case of the Jewish community of Iowa, this map of history has meant that the story we have told has been of those males who "founded" congregations, who "built" buildings, and who "led" communities, rather than of those women who created social life. There have been exceptions to this history, especially when those exceptional women, Julia Bloom Mayer, for example, were charged with responsibility for social services, but even here our history has focused on these foremothers because of their work in institutionalizing giving and caring.

SINCE BEGINNING this study of Iowa's Jewish life and heritage, however, we have realized that the story is much more likely to be *hers* than *his*. Let me amplify. As the Iowa Jewish Heritage Project has visited communities around the state we have been struck by the wealth of materials relating to the work of women and the poverty of materials relating to the work of men. Almost everywhere, we have scanty records of men's activities — some board minutes, records of fundraising campaigns — filed side by side with much more detailed descriptions of parties, festivals, community celebrations, school plays, and other activities all organized by women. This observation is not intended to diminish the work of men, or to devalue the buildings they have built, or to dismiss their command of the practical. Rather it is to face you with an irony that we have had to face, and to suggest that this irony may well allow us a richer insight into the history of Jewish life and heritage than if we had found equally full records of men's and women's activities.

We think the disparity between men's and women's records has to do with two things, first, the traditional measures of accomplishment and, second, and more important, with the traditional measures of significance. Accomplishments are usually concrete. They have substance. We point to the new school, or the new courthouse, or the budget surplus, or the paid-off mortgage. Likewise, significance is usually apparent. Significant moments announce their importance. They say: Pay attention, something important is happening here; this date, this action will live in history. Yet, the very concreteness of the buildings and the visibility of the moment made the papers that traced their development into new courthouses and significant dates unimportant. Men did not save the paper because they could point to the new thing, and ordinary history was designed to call attention to the out-of-the-ordinary moments men made.

Women's work was traditionally seen as just social, as somehow concerned with the little things and the unnoticed, ordinary fabric of social life. Neither significant nor accomplished, this women's work merely defined the calendar of living, the everyday, day-to-day activities that moved the community from week to week, from festival to holiday, from Bar/Bat Mitzvah to wedding, from Harvest Dance to Spring Fling. And what better proof of this unimportance was there than the detailed, careful records that the women kept to mark their events and to serve as guides to the other women who would manage them next. If these events had the substance of history they would not need their paper trail. Because their paper trail was so lovingly kept, they were not history.

History, however, is built on pieces of

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paper, on pictures of events, on records of the occasion, and here is the irony doubled. Not only will the records of the women of the Jewish community make it possible for us to tell their story with more detail than that of the men, they will also require us to tell the entire story of Iowa's Jewish life and heritage in a different and perhaps better way. Our conclusion is that our history will have no choice. It will have to make the social hour as important as the building fund, and treat the work of the Sisterhood and the Hadassah with the same interest and seriousness as historians have heretofore given to that of the men's club and the temple board. It will also have the opportunity to explore the history of Iowa Jewish life from the other side, to describe how that life sustained itself from day to day in the ordinary and expected events, which most of us do not notice but without which there would be no anchors to our lives.

LET ME NOW conclude. My sense is that the territories of the 1990s are not where we have traditionally looked for them—in the nineteenth century, in the self-sufficiency of our towns, in the monuments and monumental actions of men — but rather are in the uncivilized history I have mapped out here. My sense is, further, that if we begin to explore these new territories and tell the stories they display, a new, much-needed and long-overdue portrait of Iowa will emerge. None of you needs me to tell you that Iowa does not always get the best press. Except for every four years when national politicians need us to start them on the way to the White House, we seem to disappear from view. We're

just bland, uniform Iowa, out there where everything is the same and everyone lives the same life.

Of course, that map of Iowa has never been real. The problem is not that Iowa is not diverse, but that history has not been diverse. Too often, we have allowed the conventional approach to the history of Iowa to civilize us to the point where we can no longer see who we are. We are not bland and uniform, not all Jello and white bread. We are African-American and German, Irish and Jewish, Polish, Italian, Asian, Arab. More important, we have learned if not to honor, at least to live with our diversity. Iowa is not perfect. It is not heaven, and it is not free of strife. But it is a place where many different ethnic, racial, and religious groups have fought out a consensus that allows each community to value itself without disparaging the other. By telling the story of Iowa's Jews, the Iowa Jewish Heritage Project makes a small step toward refiguring the map of Iowa. By challenging ourselves today to light out for new territories, we hold out the hope that, when we are finished with this decade, twenty-first-century Iowa will show us to ourselves as we really are and always have been: Ahead of the rest. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The following sources constitute a selected bibliography of Iowa Jewish history: Simon Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1904); Jack Wolfe, *A Century of Iowa Jewry* (Des Moines, 1941); Frank Rosenthal, *The Jews of Des Moines: The First Century* (Des Moines, 1957); Oscar Fleishaker, "The Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community on the Banks of the Mississippi River" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1957); Susan Marks Conner, ed., *I Remember When . . . : Personal Recollections and Vignettes of the Sioux City Jewish Community, 1869-1964* (Sioux City, 1985).

Opera House Illusions

Jesse Cox and Theatrical Scenery

Text by Michael Kramme

Photos by Chuck Greiner

JESSE COX put Estherville, Iowa, on the theatrical map during the turn of the century. Cox had worked as a repertoire actor early in his life, but his more significant achievements were as editor of *The Opera House Reporter* and, most important, as the inventor of a system of painting theatrical scenery that revolutionized the industry.

Cox lived in the golden age of the traveling theater in America. When the pioneers founded the thousands of towns and villages that constituted the American frontier, one of the first important structures to be erected in most of these communities was the town hall, opera house, or, in some cases, "grand" opera house. The term "opera house" was misleading as few of them ever actually housed an opera. Very few opera companies could afford to be on tour. But to many rural citizens, the word "theater" had a tarnished reputation and the phrase "opera house" provided a bit of class to the community.

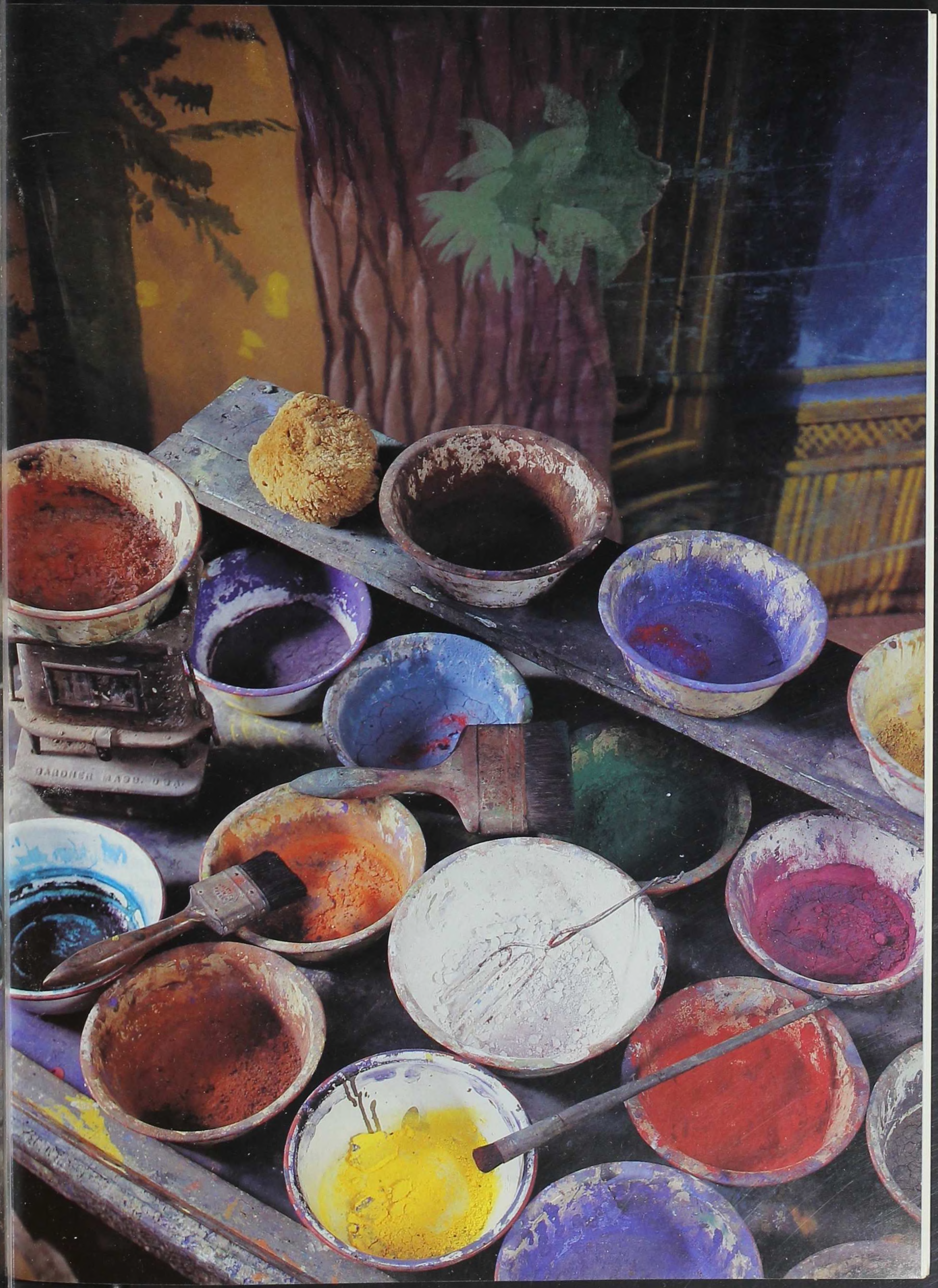
Many of the opera houses were simple, perhaps only a platform at one end of a large room on the second floor of a business building. Often the audience area was flat so the floor could double as a dance area. Other opera houses were elaborate structures that were the

pride of the community. A surge of opera-house construction occurred from the 1870s through the 1890s. By 1905, according to *Julius Cahn's Official Theatrical Guide*, Iowa listed 122 available opera houses (yet only 184 Iowa towns had populations over a thousand).

The opera house was the center of the community's cultural activities. It provided a place for public meetings, lodge meetings, home-talent productions, graduations, and also hosted the traveling theatrical companies that roamed the territory. Some of the traveling companies stayed in town for one performance only, especially the numerous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows. Other companies had a selection of different plays available so that they could stay in town for an entire week and present a different play nightly.

Between the 1880s and 1930s, hundreds of these traveling repertoire companies operated across the country, with a large concentration

Right: Jesse Cox's workbench, dye pigments, and special short-bristle brushes used in his revolutionary "Diamond Dye process" of painting canvas stage scenery. Apparently the process involved heating glue on the burner and mixing it with the pigment. His technique remained a trade secret. But the result, vivid color that would not peel, crack, or rub off, was shared nation-wide as owners of opera houses and managers of acting companies bought his lavish sets of scenery.





Jesse Cox (left). After working as a prop boy, actor, musician, and editor of *The Opera House Reporter*, Cox applied his experience to create portable, durable, and convincing scenery. "If you have a large production it will save you \$1.00 to \$3.00 on baggage transfers every day, or \$365 or more a year. . . . If you play a small house you can fold in the stuff to fit the stage and use the scenery every night in place of leaving it in the alley about one-half of the time," Cox wrote in his 1916 sales catalog. Satisfied customers, representing touring companies and opera houses across the nation, sent compliments and promised more orders.



One of Cox's working paintings. The next step was sketching the design in charcoal on the huge expanse of canvas. Then he and his staff artists would paint the design with the dyes, using special short-bristle brushes.

in the Midwest. Some of the more famous Iowa companies included The Schaffner Players, The Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company, The Hazel M. Cass Players, J. Doug Morgan, Augler Brothers, The Henderson Stock Company, George Sweet Players, The Hatcher Players, Angel's Comedians, and The Hila Morgan Show, for which Morgan advertised herself as "Iowa's sweetheart."

The arrival of a traveling company was quite an event, especially in the more remote villages. It was the custom for the players to make a grand entrance, emerging from the train depot and then parading in their best attire through the town to their hotel. Since many of the companies played the same community year after year, several of the performers became celebrities in the eyes of the local fans. The companies were also welcome because they brought excitement to entertainment-starved regions.

During the winter months the companies played in the opera houses. But in the summer

months before the advent of air conditioning, it was necessary to move into tents. Extra helpers were needed in the summer to erect the tents and set up the chairs and stage machinery, and many of the town's young people helped in exchange for passes to the shows.

Fascinated by the traveling theater companies, young Jesse Cox began his theatrical career as a prop boy at the Lough Opera House in Estherville. Born March 3, 1878, in Seneca, Illinois, he and his family had moved to Emmet County, Iowa, in 1891. At age sixteen he joined the Warren G. Noble Dramatic Shows of Chariton as an actor. He also worked with the Long Dramatic Company, the Ideal Tent Show, the Scoville-Caufman Repertoire Company, and King Brothers Circus. In addition to performing, he "doubled in brass" by playing the baritone or bass in the companies' bands. During these years on the road, Cox developed his talents painting scenery, talents that would later bring him great success.

Leaving his acting job, he returned to

Estherville, where, from 1898 to 1907, he and his older brother George, owned, edited, and published *The Opera House Reporter*, a weekly show-business newspaper. The *Reporter* contained advertising as well as box office reports from theaters. It aided the local theater owner in hiring traveling talent.

MEANWHILE, Cox developed a special process for painting scenery while working as a scenery painter in the local Lough Opera House. From his experience in traveling companies, Cox would have known that scenery was of major importance to the theater groups on tour. The larger and more prosperous companies brought their own scenery in railroad boxcars, but the smaller companies had to rely on scenery owned by the opera house. The number of locally available sets and the quality of the art work varied considerably. Some were painted by itinerant artists; others were painted by professional scene shops located in Minneapolis, Kansas City, Chicago, and — thanks to Jesse Cox — Estherville, Iowa.

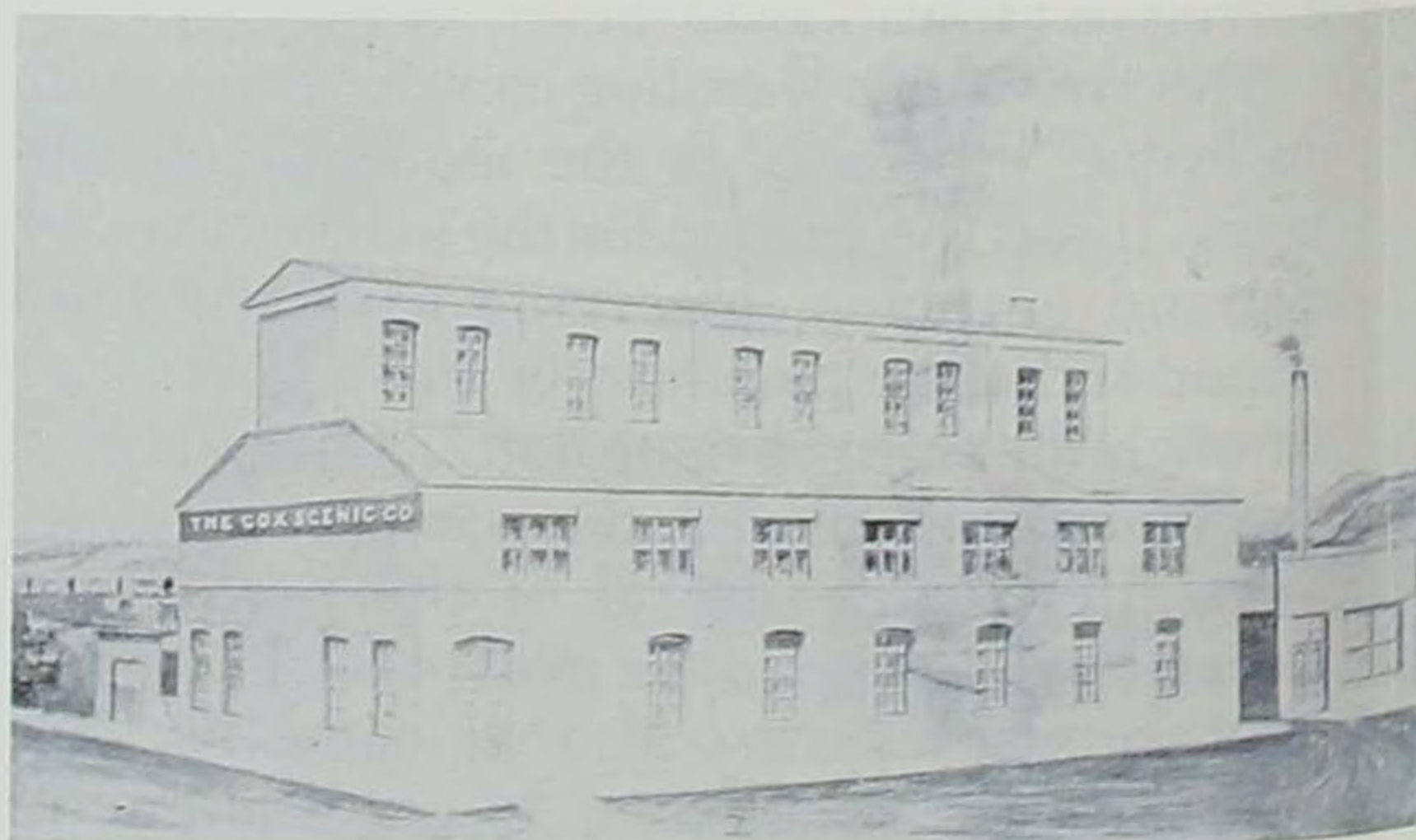
The scenery most widely used at the time was known as “wing and drop.” The sides of the stage were masked by a series of wings (or flats), wooden frames covered with canvas and then painted to represent the setting. The wings were lined up behind one another at intervals so they would mask the side of the off-stage area from the audience and provide entrance space for the performers. Actors would “wait in the wings” for their entrances. When a show had not been fully rehearsed, many actors would have their scripts in the wing area so they could consult the script between entrances. (From this practice we get the phrase “winging it.”)

The drop, a large unframed piece of canvas painted to match the wings, provided the back wall of the setting. Drops came in all sizes, but ten to twelve feet tall by twenty to twenty-five feet wide was most common. In the larger theaters the drops would be tied to a batten and then hoisted above the stage when they were not needed. Many of the smaller opera houses did not have adequate overhead space so the drop would be rolled up out of sight on a

wooden cylinder. To change the setting, the drop would be hoisted or rolled out of view and the drop for the next setting would be lowered into view; at the same time, the wings would be slid out of the audience’s view. Generally, grooves cut into the floors and a grooved support from the stage ceiling held the wings in place.

A well-equipped opera house would have a minimum of four standard sets, known in the profession as “front room, back room, timber and town.” The “front room” was an elaborately painted set to represent a fancy parlor. This would be used to represent rooms in mansions or palaces. Some of the front-room drops had an opening cut out in the center to provide the main entrance into the room. A drop with such an opening was called the “center door fancy.” The “back room” set represented a rustic or poorly appointed room, and was used for rustic interiors, homes of the poorer class, kitchens, or servants’ quarters in a well-to-do household. “Timber” sets usually represented a wooded scene, but would often double for any exterior setting. Many of them included a pool of water that could represent a lake, pond, or river. The “town” set was used for any street scenes. The town drop was usually hung downstage (closest to the audience). It was also often used as the background for specialty entertainments between acts of the play or while scenery was being changed behind the drop.

Many of the opera houses had beautiful velour main curtains; others had a special drop used in lieu of the main curtain. These



Cox's Estherville studio, from a 1916 scenery catalog. Over the years Cox worked in three different buildings. The first was destroyed by fire, the second by tornado.



Cox sits in the "working" window of a scenery wing.

would have a scene painted in the center of the drop. Surrounding the scene would be several blank spaces on which advertising of the area businesses could be painted in by local artists. This advertising provided additional income to the theater.

MOVING AND STORAGE of scenery were very difficult and expensive — especially for the traveling companies that transported their own. Although the wings were built so they would fit sideways into a standard boxcar and could be moved easily, the drops, however, were too large to move without folding them. If the drops were folded, the paint would crack and flake off. These problems were solved by Jesse Cox's "Diamond Dye process."

Cox developed and patented a process of painting scenery with heated dye rather than paint. The use of a dye process provided a full array of vivid colors that would not rub off or crack, as was the case with painted scenery. With this process, drops could be folded up, packed into trunks, and easily transported from theater to theater. With this innovation, the repertoire companies could carry a greater selection of scenery with them. They could

have scenery painted especially to fit the play rather than having to rely on the scenery provided by the opera house. This must have been a refreshing change for the local theater patrons who were weary of seeing the same old scenery again and again.

Scenery painters throughout the country followed Cox's lead in changing from paint to dye. Part of his secret included the use of special paint brushes, with softer, shorter hair. This allowed greater control of the dye during application. He also would leave areas of the drop unpainted, letting the light color of the canvas show through as highlighting rather than painting the highlights on the canvas. Although other artists tried, unsuccessfully, to duplicate his techniques, Cox's special process has remained a trade secret to this day.

Working in his studio, Cox would stand on a platform in front of a paint frame. Using a bamboo pole with a charcoal tip, he sketched the outline of the scene to be painted. Then he and his staff of artists would paint the scenery using his special process. A 1903 advertisement boasted that the Jesse Cox Scenic Studio had "space for several large paint frames, carpenter shop, mounting room, designing room, office, sewing room, storage room, rooms for the manufacture of electrical and mechanical effects etc."

Cox's studio was soon providing scenery to theaters across the nation as well as Canada, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. At the height of production, in the 1920s, he had a standing order for two thousand yards of cloth weekly.

As the theatrical business died out, Cox went into business with his son, Robert. Jesse did sign painting and Robert worked with neon signs. Jesse died May 25, 1961.

Through his work as editor of *The Opera House Reporter* and his scenery studio, Jesse Cox became an important figure in American theater history, and Estherville became an important theatrical center.

Turn the page for more opera house scenery by Jesse Cox and others, from the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant.



The main curtain was often an ad curtain, in which a picturesque scene was surrounded by local advertisements — a source of income for the theater, of pride for local merchants, and today, a rich source of local history for the community historian, particularly if the curtain is dated. The large curtain above hung in a Blakesburg opera house, in southeastern Iowa and displays a number of Ottumwa businesses. It is signed “HUGH LANNING, STAGE & SIDE SHOW PAINTER, OTTUMWA, IA.” and bears the date 1905. The theater museum loaned the curtain to the Kennedy Center in 1976 for the center’s year-long celebration of “Two Hundred Years of America on Stage.”



Below: The design of this ad curtain, from Eldon, Iowa, matches that of others found in Minnesota and South Dakota. Ad curtains could be purchased with blank ad spaces, which then would be lettered in by local artists for businesses that bought ad space.



The two bottom curtains represent a scenic main curtain, without advertisements. Left: From a music hall in Quogue, New York. Right: from a Grange hall in Mendon, Illinois.





“Front room, back room, timber and town” were the four basic scenery sets, standard provisions by opera houses for traveling companies.

Upper left: A front room drop from Blakesburg, Iowa. Often as lavish as this, front rooms seldom represented a middle-class setting. If the doorway can be parted for exits and entrances, the drop is called a “center door fancy.”

Lower left: Few back room drops are still in existence, probably because they were deliberately not very attractive. A back room drop could serve as a kitchen, a cabin, servants’ quarters, or the home of a poor family. This one, from a Blakesburg opera house, has a “working” window (note the flap).



The "timber" set suggested a wooded setting, but could be used for any exterior scene. Timber drops often included more water than this one from Beaman, Iowa. The water might represent a river, lake, or ocean.



Town drop from Westgate, Iowa. Painted in a Kansas City studio, the curtain sports a misspelling, "Hotel Minniapolis," on the right wall (directly above the three windows).



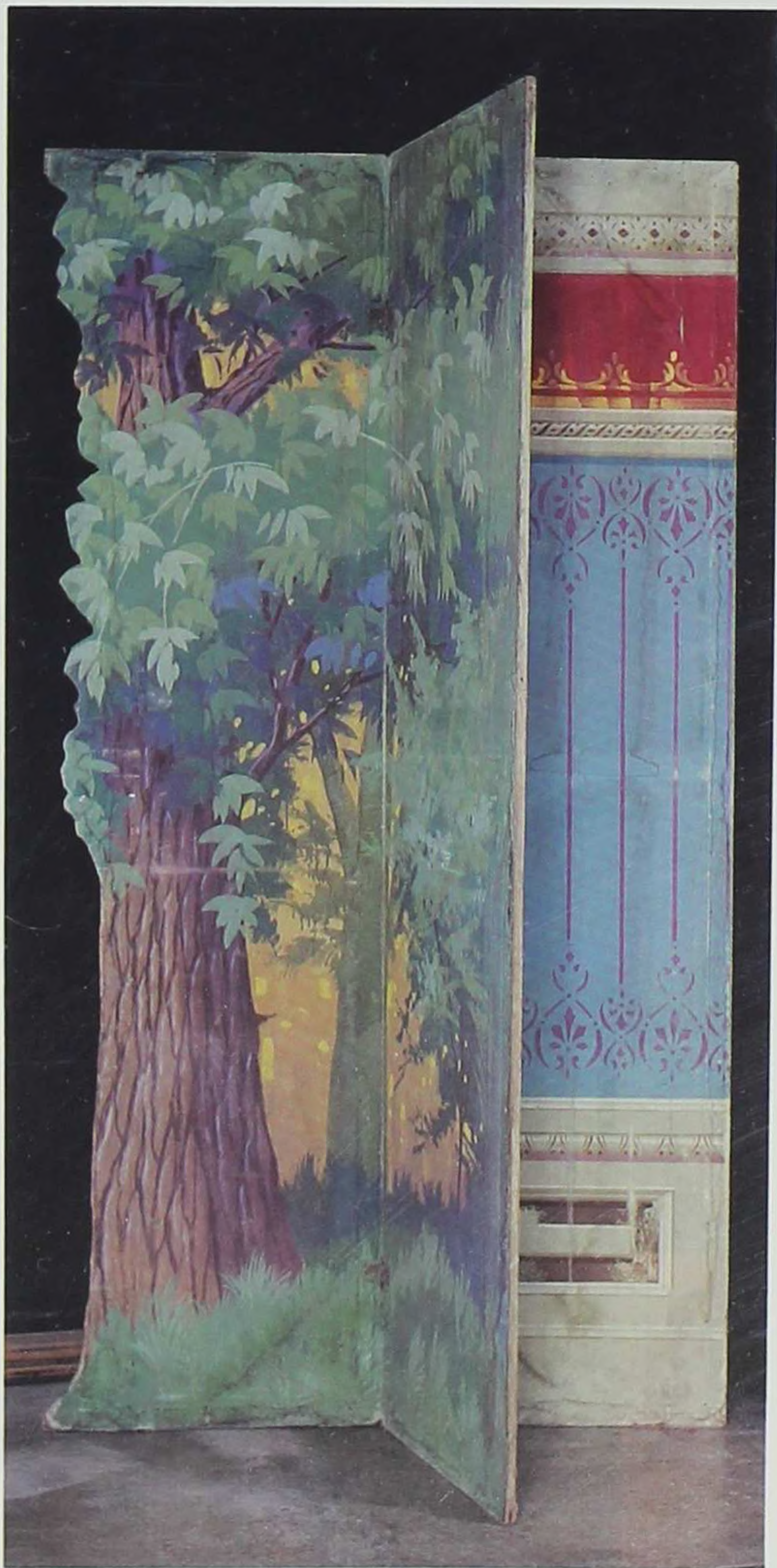
Quality of the scenic artists' talent varied greatly. Left: A town drop from a basement opera house in Leonard, Missouri. Painted by an itinerant artist, the drop was never finished. Apparently the artist moved on before finishing the brick work (building on left) or filling in the shop windows.



Above: A superb town drop from an Oxford Junction, Iowa, opera house, painted by Sosman and Landis, Co., Chicago. Note the blank sign and the clock without hands. This allowed each company to chalk in the time and place to suit the play. According to assistant curator Joseph Mauck, a good town drop could transport the audience to "any city that your imagination wants to take you to."

On some occasions, the street scene also served as the "oleo" curtain between acts. During costume and scenery changes, the touring company would stage an "oleo." The oleo was a specialty act, perhaps singing, dancing, juggling, tumbling, drawing pictures or performing magic. Larger companies or more well-equipped opera houses might have a separate oleo curtain, which hung three feet behind the main curtain and in front of the town scene.

Below: Tormentors were wings used on the side of the stage to mask activity from the audience. Painted by the Cox studio, this tormentor was probably used by a traveling company because of its portability and size (lower than what most opera houses would normally use). Free-standing and depending on the angle at which it's set, this tormentor could be used with a front room, timber, or (not visible here) back room.





This drop is part of a set that includes the duplicate scene in the spring time. The set was used by the Warren Noble Company of Chariton. The winter and spring drops would convey the passage of time on stage.

“Friend Jess, Received the scenery all o.k. and on time. And it was certainly the swellest bunch of scenery we have had in many a day. The set house matches the cut wood, and looks fine especially under the lights.”

*Fred Byers
Gladbrook Opera House
Gladbrook, Iowa*

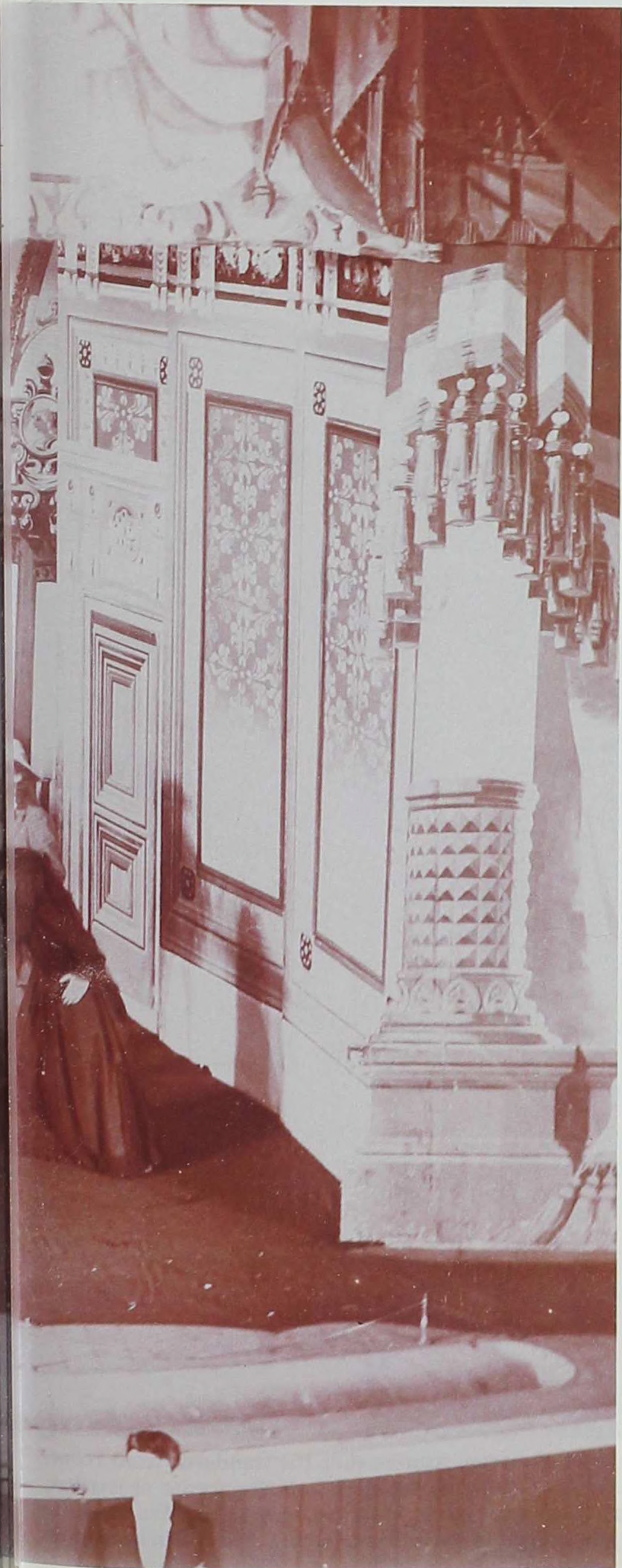


The working painting for a palace arch set, created by Jesse Cox's studio and advertised in his sales catalog. Note his signature in the left corner.



An early Jesse Cox scene, perhaps used by the Warren Noble Company of Chariton. The seascape may have been specially created for performances of *The Count of Monte Christo*, one of the classic plays of the opera-house era. A drop of a castle interior also exists.





Left: A palace arch set in use at the first Graham Opera House in Washington, Iowa, shortly before the building burned down in 1892. The convincing illusion of depth in the backdrop is aided by the wings. Here, the set is used by the Spooner Family of Centerville.

Note the musicians in the foreground. For opening night of the opera house, the local newspaper effused that "the scenery is ample. . . . There are 12 set pieces; the interior scenes represent a palace, a palace arch, center door parlor, prison, kitchen, plain chamber; the exterior scenes are a forest, garden, landscape, street, horizon, mountain pass. . . . No danger from fire amid the sceneries; but there is a water supply on the stage." (From a Washington County history.)

Below: This patriotic drop was used by the Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company of Sabula, Iowa. The company toured Wisconsin for over fifty years. The drop, with depth created by a recessed second curtain, was probably used behind an orchestra playing a patriotic overture on stage. Note the fallen soldier saluting in the foreground, and the troops following.





A working painting for Cox's scenery catalog. Cox created far more elaborate scenery than the standard "front room, back room, timber, and town" owned by every opera house. In his catalog he listed his exterior scenes as garden, landscape, light wood, dark wood, and so on. T. C. Perry, from a theater in Havre, Montana, wrote Cox: "We hung the garden drop you painted for us, yesterday. It is a neat and tasty job, a credit to you and your studio. You will hear from us again soon."



A somewhat frantic but satisfied customer writes Jesse Cox:

“We are enclosing you a check for \$270.00 for ‘THE WOLF’ and ‘THE VIRGINIAN’ scenery as per your statement and trust you will pardon the delay in making this remittance, and I know you would if you could realize the strenuous situation I have been up against the past two weeks — rehearsing three shows, getting their props, scenery and effects together, the inevitable disappointments and unreliable actors to contend with etc. ad-lib and ditto until now I have three of them out and our next show don’t open until the tenth of Sept. so at last I have a breathing spell — and first of all I want to say we are delighted with the new scenery — that rocky pass set is great and you spoke of ‘no attempt at detail’ on that interior set — well I think the detail work you accomplished is wonderful in fact the entire outfit is beyond our expectations and we will always be glad to extend [any] recommendation or assistance we can to the ‘JESS’ Studio.”

*From Jones and
Crane Attractions
August 21, 1913
Suite 30
Grand Opera House Building
Chicago, Illinois*



The auditoriums or halls of local ethnic groups and Granges, as well as opera houses, were used for performances by touring companies. This elegant main curtain hung in the Czechoslovakia Hall in Oxford Junction, Iowa. The words translate to "A beautiful view of Prague." The curtain was painted by Sosman and Landis, a Chicago studio.

The Museum of Repertoire Americana, a part of Midwest Old Threshers Association located in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, houses one of the nation's largest collections of theatrical scenery, including works by Jesse Cox. The collection includes several examples of drops from Oxford Junction, Blakesburg, Solon, Beaman, Westgate, Eldon, and Wyman, Iowa, as well as towns in Illinois, Missouri, and New York. Jesse Cox's workbench, equipment, and several of his working paintings are also housed in the theater museum. The museum's collection also includes thousands of posters, programs, scripts, and other memorabilia of the repertoire theater companies, tent shows, minstrel shows, Chautauqua, and showboats. The museum is open by appointment and during the annual Midwest Old Threshers reunion.

— *Michael Kramme*

The Palimpsest thanks Caroline Schaffner, Joseph Mauck, Lennis Moore, and Michael Kramme for helping photographer Chuck Greiner and the editor create this photo essay. Long before the theater museum was built in 1973, the core of the current collection was being amassed by Neil and Caroline Schaffner, whose company, "The Schaffner Players," toured the Midwest for decades. Neil had often emphasized to Caroline the importance of including a Jesse Cox display when the theater museum was finished. Schaffner considered Cox to be extremely important to the era of early show business. We agree.

— *The Editor*

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary-source material is from the Jesse Cox Collection, located in the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Additional information is from interviews with Iva Dell (Mrs. Robert) Cox of Estherville and Caroline Schaffner of Mount Pleasant.

A Small-Town Opera House

by J. Leo Sullivan

IT IS NOW just a memory for me, the opera house in that little northeastern Iowa town of my boyhood — a memory that goes back to the very early years of this century, and my days in knickers.

I have heard that it was considered an unsafe structure many years ago. But even in my days there in Lawler, Iowa, it was losing its hold on public interest because of the Princess, the new moving picture theater that introduced me to such pioneers of the silent screen as John Bunny, Flora Finch, Mary Fuller, Florence Labadie, Marguerite Snow, and Pearl White. Both places of entertainment, it may be said, shared in the general decline of small-town life that came about through the growing preference for the automobile, making it desirable to go to a town that could support a more pretentious theater.

The seating capacity of the Lawler opera house was sufficient to serve attendance by its small-town audience. The floor was level, not slanting toward the stage. There was no orchestra pit. Musicians taking part in a performance did so from the stage or from a floor space next to the stage. The walls were without paintings or photographs of interest. The interior seemed designed to center attention on the scene of action, the stage.

To enjoy what the opera house had to offer, one had to ascend to a second floor by way of an enclosed stairs between a barbershop below and, on the other side, an adjoining building, which housed the town's weekly newspaper. The ascent did much to explain the falling-off in attendance after the opening of the street-level Princess. But in my boyhood days, before the lure of the movies, it took a bad case of rheumatism indeed to discourage even the aged from making the ascent to witness what either traveling players or the town's thespians had to offer in the way of entertainment.

The local thespians were mainly students of the town's two schools, the public and the

Catholic. And except for my senior year in high school, my own trodding of the boards was done under the direction of one of the nuns at the Catholic school.

Nuns can display a thoroughness all their own. And in those days, when everyone was more thorough in tilling a smaller intellectual acreage, the nuns were thorough indeed. They had three cardinal rules about acting: you memorized your lines perfectly; you spoke in a distinct voice; and you positively never turned your back on the audience. If this did not always make for a professional performance, it got things done in no uncertain manner.

The big event of the school year at the opera house was, of course, the June graduation. And it was the greatest challenge to the nuns in the matter of casting. To leave out any member of the class was unheard of. So the problem was often solved by selecting something of spectacular proportions that not only called for a cast giving every graduate something to do or say, but also meant recruiting from other classes — though this in turn might invite the criticism of favoritism.

It was not always a drama that was selected. There was, for example, a production that remains in my recollection as typical of what was given in those years. On opening night, the opera house was touched with the fragrance of the late spring flowers that bordered the front of the stage. Early arrivals found two nuns giving last touches to things floral. They would later disappear to the temporary cloister of backstage. The other nuns would come presently and occupy seats in a front row. After our pastor and assistant priest had arrived and had taken places reserved for them opposite the nuns, things would begin.

When the curtain, bearing a garden scene broken by blocked advertisements of the town's merchants, rose that evening, there was a short but generously applauded display of the school's musical talent. After that, a descent of



Local productions in opera houses called upon the simple elements of color and costume, tissue paper and symmetry, to create the magic of theater. Here, nine dancers with balloons from a Cedar County production.

the curtain, and then a clearly audible preparation of the stage for the evening's *pièce de résistance*.

When the curtain rose again it was to reveal an impressive group of high school girls, dressed in pale blues and pinks that added soft contrast to the riot of color from the blooms at the front of the stage. They stood in ascending rows on a structure that had been moved onto the stage in sections. Each of them held a barrel hoop, the kind I sometimes rolled down hills and along the town's side streets. The girls in blue held hoops wound with pink tissue paper; those in pink, hoops wound with blue. And until the signal for action was given by a nun offstage, they stood with what I can remember only as a graceful rigidity.

From the upright piano on the floor near the stage came the sound of music to accompany the pantomime. Then there began a rhythmic movement on the stage, signalled by the tapping of a little bell held by the nun offstage. At each succeeding tap there was a uniform change in the position of the hoops — now framing the heads of the girls, now on the left, now on the right, now above the head.

ANOTHER MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE, a spectacular, was a play titled *The Daughter of Pontius Pilate*. (By some, that name was pronounced "Punchus Pilut" in the rehearsal, until the nun directing succeeded in communicating her intense dislike of the mispronunciation—as I well remember, being a Roman in the cast.)

The presentation was a memorable one because of a little drama connected with the fact of its being given at that particular time. It was during the influenza epidemic of 1918. The girl selected for the title role fell victim a day or so before the scheduled performance. I remember what an atmosphere of concern surrounded the school on the morning it became evident she would have to be replaced, and the hurried consultation to choose a girl who could "learn all those lines" in a very short time. The one selected came through successfully in the performance, borne up by the forgivable vanity of a girl who knows she is the heroine of the hour, and by the promptings of a nun who was so fearful that the girl might not remember and deliver every word that, ready to prompt, she

stood so near the scene of action that the audience on the opposite side sometimes saw the white of a hand or a bit of the black of a habit.

My senior year in high school was spent in the public, not the Catholic, school. Because it was felt that we Catholics could not support an accredited high school of our own, at the same time supporting the already accredited public school, it was decided to discontinue our own, and all would attend the public. So it was that as a senior at the public high school I had my chance at a role in the graduation play. I also had a chance to delight in the knowledge that I knew "the theater" better than any of my schoolmates, thanks to my experience as a stagehand. For during that year at the school I was employed as the janitor at a bank; and as the opera house was under the same ownership as the bank, my janitor duties included occasional employment at the opera house as well.

One thing in particular stands out in my memory of that graduation play. In my role I was called upon to impersonate at times a character wearing a beard. Since the beard had to be donned and removed repeatedly, I was provided with one that could be suspended from the ears. The play was given with such success before our own local audience in Lawler, that it was decided to give it again in two neighboring towns, Protivin and Waucoma. By the time of the Waucoma performance I had become too sure of myself. After one exit I quite thoughtlessly hung my beard on a convenient nail I had caught sight of on the back side of the set. When it came time for my next entrance I suddenly realized, to my consternation, that I had forgotten where I had left it.

When I recovered myself I was able to convey to an actor on the stage that I was not ready to enter on cue, that I had to be given time to find my beard. He was equal to the occasion. With a presence of mind that was unusual in one who was young and inexperienced in things theatrical, he took advantage of the action of the play at that point, which had to do with a disagreement between us, and he ad-libbed lines about our disagreement until I could recall where I had left my beard, and was able to make my entrance.

Another form of entertainment that dates



A company of typically well-dressed actors poses in their finery at a Cedar Falls depot, circa 1900.

the opera house of my boyhood was what was called a declamatory contest, in which the participating students of the public high school competed for first place in an oratorical, dramatic, or humorous recitation. That I, with something of a local reputation as a lad of almost serious mien, chose a humorous recitation as my bid for top honors, is due to the fact that I liked to imitate the accent of the Irish, which I heard all about me. And the additional fact that I won, I must attribute in great part to having chosen an impersonation of a fat Irish maidservant who had gone on a diet, and the presence of an equally rotund Irishwoman in the audience who good-naturedly found my efforts so much to her liking that her laughter infected the rest of the audience — and, presumably, the judges.

AS JANITOR and stagehand at the opera house, I experienced a particular pleasure in mingling with the traveling players and other entertainers who made appearances there. Plays given by traveling companies were usually confined to Saturday nights. And it was just too bad if I neglected to get a needed haircut at least by supper time (dinner time to city dwellers). For as soon as farmers got to town after their day's work, the barbershop began to fill so quickly



A "womanless wedding" stage production, by the Thimbles Society of the Congregational Church, Strawberry Point.

that I would not dare face the reasonable displeasure of a barber who had something better to do than give a haircut to a lad who could have come at a less busy time. At the grocery store and dry goods store, the drugstore and restaurant, clerks were hurrying about even more busily than they did for the regular Saturday night trade. There was excitement everywhere for the new show that was to be given over at the opera house.

One such production by traveling players, and one that most thoroughly acquainted me with the resources called upon to produce light and sound effects, was a melodramatic production titled *The Broken Rosary*. The title was taken from the climactic moment in the last act, the moment at which a marriage frowned upon by Heaven is interrupted by a sudden storm and a shaft of lightning that breaks the rosary held in the hand of the bride-to-be.

The thunder, lightning, and rain for the miraculous intervention were quite impressive. The thunder was easily obtained at the hardware store: a sheet of soft metal. When properly held and shaken, the metal gave out a roll that was near enough to the sound of an angry sky. The lightning was simulated by inserting a photographic slide, painted black except for a zig-zag figure in the center, into a

projection machine in the balcony, suddenly allowing a powerful light to penetrate for a moment and at convincing intervals, and casting the reflection onto the backdrop of a dimly lit stage. The falling rain was a triumph of achievement. It brought flattering exclamations when the actors took their curtain calls and there was no evidence of a wetting. A tin container had been placed on a shelf at the side of the stage, out of view of the audience and at a height to ensure pressure for a convincing downpour. Water from the bucket poured through a pipe, perforated on the underside, running across the stage at the front and high enough to be unseen by the audience. The wedding took place on a lawn, and the artificial "grass" at the front of the stage was sufficiently sponge-like to soak up the precipitation.

WHEN THE CULTURE of Chautauqua visited the opera house in the winter season (it visited us in a tent during the summer) there was little demand for my services as a stagehand. But I exercised my right to go backstage. And I was properly thrilled whenever a star of the evening engaged me in conversation during an interval when he was not appearing.

One such instance was the appearance of a

Belgian baritone who was also an accordionist, a giant of a man with a wealth of hair, who explained an intermission in his concert by telling his audience that he had to have time to comb his Belgian hares. Another was that of a Catholic priest who gave a lecture on (I remember the title exactly) "The Weeds and Flowers of Modern Literature," and who delighted his audience with his good-natured scorn for heroines with swan-like necks, marble brows, starry eyes, and pearly teeth.

And there was the time when the Edison phonograph manufacturers sought to convince us of the fidelity of their recordings by sending us one of their recording singers, having the stage darkened at times for a test of their phonograph, and letting the audience judge whether it was the singer continuing to sing, or whether it was her voice as recorded on the instrument placed on the stage with her and her piano accompanist. Remembering now the old phonographs, it is hard to believe that anyone could be deceived. But the point is of no consequence here. What is of consequence to me is that I was seated next to an Irish neighbor who had one protest to register against the lovely and capable soprano of the evening. It was this: she had been billed as an Irish soprano; yet she had sung not one "Irish" song!

THE AUTUMN following my high school graduation found me miles away, at a college that boasted things theatrical well beyond anything seen or heard in the opera house of my boyhood town. That college was Columbia College in Dubuque, now known as Loras College. Although college soloists in the field of music essayed classics that generally went far beyond the appreciation of my townspeople, there were no graduation plays on a stage with fragrant flowers in a riot of color.

The change was, unquestionably, an advancement for me. But on one of my visits to Lawler years later, I sought out the custodian of the building, secured the key, and ascended the enclosed stairs to the theater that once held much interest for me, but that now seemed quite deserted and of little interest to anyone.

I sat once again on one of those seats of hard wood, seats fastened together in groups of per-

haps half a dozen, so that they could be moved quickly and easily to a place near the walls, leaving the floor clear for dancing. I filled them again with familiar forms, and envisioned the ladies arising from them gingerly after a performance, in their fear of the consequences to summer dresses after long occupation on a very warm and humid evening.

An upright piano still stood near the stage. It was the electrically operated player piano that did service as musical accompaniment for the movies that had been introduced in competition with the Princess motion picture theater. The owner of the opera house had requested the owner of the Princess to remain closed on those infrequent occasions when the opera house was offering live entertainment. When the owner of the Princess refused to do so, the owner of the opera house began showing motion pictures as well. But not enough of the older citizens especially were willing to continue to ascend those stairs. After the competition had proved profitless, the opera house returned to live performances only, and the piano had been left there in eloquent silence.

It had been a long time since that player piano had poured out "On the Shores of Italy" or "Why Is the Ocean So Near the Shore?" or "He's a Devil in His Own Home Town" — often in conflict with the action or emotion being portrayed on the screen. But memory heard it doing so again. And in the same memory I could see the operator of the projection machine descend from the balcony in an attempt to correct the piano when it failed altogether, or when it went through several of those arbitrary selections on its roll at such headlong speed as to distract those in attendance and create at least a murmur of laughter.

My memorable visit included, of course, a wandering in and out of the dressing rooms. But it was the visit to the stage itself that evoked the most tender memories.

I raised the curtain, covered now with dust and out of date in its blocked advertisements of the town's merchants, and faced an audience I conjured out of those memories. For the moment, all were alive to me still, responding as of old to the unsophisticated representations of life's tragedies and comedies, offered from the stage on which I now stood. □

Interpreting the Image

How to Understand Historical Photographs

by *Loren N. Horton*

ALTHOUGH many historical photographs exist of people dressed up, far fewer photographs exist of people in their everyday clothes performing actual work tasks. Even when photographs were taken of work situations a century ago, many were not realistic. In many photographs, the work has stopped and all of the participants stand stiffly, facing the camera. The subjects might stand in rows in front of a work place, occasionally arranged symmetrically according to height, age, or gender. Sometimes we are hard pressed to decide exactly what tasks the people might have been performing prior to this "frozen moment of time." Because of these numerous stilted versions, we prize even more the few photographic examples that preserve the images of people actually performing an act of work.

One reason historians prize "work" photographs from the past is because they often document obsolete occupations. The photographs may be our only evidence of "how" something was done, or even "whether" something was done. Dramatic changes in agriculture, communication, transportation, construction, and more mundane and routine work have occurred since the invention of photography. Images of these changes are preserved in the photograph albums of families and in the collections of libraries, historical societies, and museums all over the country.



From them we learn how houses were built, how laundry was done and meals were prepared, how crops were planted, cultivated, and harvested, how food products were processed and stored, what sources of energy were available to run machinery, and a myriad of other understandings about the past. It is important in the history of any family, neighborhood, or community to trace such changes. In this way we can learn about how our ancestors and their friends made their livings.

Of equal importance are photographs that show us who did what sort of work, and when and where. We know that past generations had definite ideas about gender and age roles for



W.A. WARREN COLLECTION, SHS, NEAR WEST LIBERTY, IOWA, CA. 1905

certain chores. Children were assigned certain tasks at certain times in their growing up, and elderly men and women had entirely different and well-defined chores that they were expected to perform. Whether adult women milked cows, whether boys as young as ten rode on the cast-iron seats of gang plows behind teams of horses, whether the bangboard on the corn wagon accommodated one shucker or two, were all matters of ethnic, regional, and chronological differences. Women in one community might never milk cows, while it might have been very common in a second community. Women in the second community might never have put up hay, and

the men there may never have worked in the chicken house. Recording these subtle variations, photographs of work enrich our knowledge and heritage. The fabric of life in the past is made known, and it comes alive in the photographs.

The photograph here illustrates the task of constructing a barn or other large farm outbuilding. As with other photographs, the viewer needs to look at each individual element in the image, perhaps actually list or inventory them, and then try to make them fit together and make sense. Noting details of construction, size, shape, internal arrangement, and function can suggest insights about

the farm family who built the barn. Group the observations according to what you want to determine — dates, locations, social elements, or material culture. Comparing observations with histories of farm practices and architecture would help establish a possible range of dates and geographical area. From careful and painstaking examination of a photograph we can extract the greatest amount of valuable historical information.

Clues about the People _____

The erection of major farm buildings often required more labor than what the immediate family could provide. Friends, neighbors, relatives, and perhaps specialized craft workers might be called in for certain tasks. Until well into the twentieth century, men ordinarily did this work. In the past many farmers were at least semi-skilled in carpentry by necessity, as many farmers today must know the rudiments of engine mechanics. Simple economics dictated that certain construction and repair jobs on the farm could more quickly and cheaply be done by oneself. Specialists were expensive and might not be available when needed.

Four men are visible in the photograph. We cannot know for sure if they belong to the family who owns the farm. We surmise that they are involved in construction, but it is remotely possible that they were simply passing by when the traveling photographer was setting up equipment. Of the four, the man on the left seems the most occupied. The others look blatantly at the camera.

Since people rarely climbed up on the timbers of unfinished buildings wearing their best clothing, we assume they are wearing work clothing. All of the men are wearing hats, a useful item of social history. The rest of their clothing is not distinct enough here to tell us much historically.

Clues about the Surroundings _____

Few building materials lie about on the ground; there is a small heap of stones, a tongued beam, and some planks. Other flotsam and jetsam of a farmyard and a construction venture are visible. We see a couple of barrels, a couple of troughs, a bucket, a ladder, and the

partially exposed wooden tower for a windmill. Off to the left are two additional buildings, probably not used as dwellings because the size of the barn would indicate a relatively prosperous establishment.

Clues about the Building's Size _____

The size of this structure suggests it will be a barn. The shape indicates space for a hay mow, stables for draft horses, and stanchions for milk cows. Construction has not progressed far enough to indicate any tightly fitted compartments for storing shelled grain. (Use of barns as granaries was not uncommon in the Midwest.) Presumably there will be places for storing vehicles and equipment. Because we cannot see the entire farmstead, we cannot be sure of the exclusive or general uses of any one building.

Clues about Construction _____

In building barns, when certain methods of framing involve raising preassembled components into place, the process is called "raising" the barn. The method used here seems to be a combination of timber framing (requiring heavy timbers and mostly practiced before sawed lumber was available) and mill framing (in which the milled support members often have extensions that branch off into a Y). Balloon framing, more common in houses, was sometimes used in barn building. More often, after the turn of the century, barns were built from plans and pre-cut lumber purchased through catalogs or from lumberyards.

It appears that all the vertical walls have been framed. Components that seem to be resting at an angle may be framed portions completed on the ground, ready to be raised upright by pulleys, or they may be braces supporting the superstructure until additional framing timbers can be nailed or pegged into place.

Other than the framing techniques, little of the "how" of work is actually portrayed here. We know that the men probably used the ladder to reach their positions, the tripod and ropes to lift materials to higher levels of work.

The foundation has been laid very, very carefully, even though the construction site is on quite level ground. Note the even dressing

and careful fitting of the stone blocks and the running ashlar bond used in the laying of the masonry. We might assume that the troughs hold mortar and the barrels hold water. The stone has been partially dressed (cut to fit together smoothly) but left rusticated on the outer side. None of these factors suggests a rude outbuilding. In fact, barns with heavy timbers do not need such sophisticated foundations because the timbers will support the weight.

Clues about the Photographer

Why did a client want this photograph made? What was the photograph trying to show? Was it a successful effort?

Placement of the structure within the photograph is excellent. The building is framed by the windmill tower to the left and trees to the right, by the adequate amount of yard in the foreground and by plenty of sky to silhouette the dramatic view of the workers. Much care went into the correct placement of the camera to handle all of this.

But why was it important to show the unfinished building? We can easily understand why a farmer would be proud of a completed barn, the newest and perhaps the largest in the neighborhood. It is even reasonable that a craftsman might want to record steps in construction. But if this photograph is not one of a series, why was it taken? Did the building belong to a prominent person? Were the workers friends of the photographer? Was the photographer attempting to record historically important scenes, even at this early date? Perhaps the photographer was conscious of the attraction of "before and after" pictures, intending to photograph the completed barn. For this photograph, the only clues may be the questions we ask and the options they provide.

Conclusions

The photograph tells us that rope and galvanized buckets were available in the area, but that wooden-staved barrels were still common — thus showing a transition between periods or stages of technology. The building skills of working with heavy timbering and dressed stone were practiced here. Wooden windmill

towers instead of the metal towers were still in use.

Clearly the photographer did not intend to capture the entire spirit of the building process. The partially erected structure is the focus.

A color photograph would reveal the barn color, of course, but in reality barn paint was often simply the cheapest paint available. Red was very common in the Midwest.

Left to our imagination — or family records yet to be found — are the reasons behind choosing this method of framing and location, the specific uses of the structure, and the reason for laying such a sophisticated and finished foundation under a barn, as well as whether the farmer did the work or imported specialized craft workers. □

For More Information, Consult These Sources

Susan H. Rogers, *The Changing Farmstead: A Selective Biography* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1990). The best single resource on farm buildings in the Midwest. Contains fifty-one references to books and articles about barns and other buildings of the farmstead.

Information about barns predominates in the following sources, but they also contain material about other buildings of the farmstead.

Barnstorming (Iowa City: Friends of Historic Preservation and the Johnson County Historical Society, 1990).

Curtis J. Frymoyer, "Barns of Cedar County," *Cedar County Historical Review* (Cedar Falls: Cedar County Historical Society, 1980).

Charles Klamkin, *Barns: Their History, Preservation, and Restoration* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

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Eric Sloane, *The Age of Barns* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1966).



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Plush portrait albums, with leather or velvet covers, were common in the Victorian parlor. Now they need proper care and storage to survive the effects of adhesives, acidic paper, and photographic chemicals. Note the following tips.

Tips on Displaying Historical Photographs in Albums and Frames

by Mary Bennett

Photograph Albums

ALBUMS offer a window to the past, giving us insights about our family's heritage. In preserving vivid memories, the compilers unknowingly transmit cultural values as well. Those of us who have inherited these keepsakes need to explore ways of stabilizing and protecting the albums so future generations can enjoy the stories they tell.

Photo albums have been popular since the 1860s. Fancy velvet or leather portrait albums were showcased on tables in Victorian parlors. After the turn of the century, the snapshot album took the place of formal portrait albums. The compiler of a snapshot album no longer relied on professionally made portraits. As a new form of self-expression, the snapshot album

opened up vistas to settings and activities never photographed before.

Resist the impulse or pressure to dismantle an album and to distribute photographs to branches of the family. Albums record the significant moments in a family's life, from birth to high school graduation, through courtship, weddings, and anniversaries. By studying photos laid out progressively, the viewer can discover changes in styles of dress or home decorating. A narrative emerges as you leaf through pages, tracing a family's history or the photographer's life. Heed the following tips as you care for albums or framed photos.

1. Nineteenth-century portrait albums had

pre-cut slots or pockets to slide the photos into, surrounded by decorative borders. Even though the album pages and covers may be acidic and potentially damaging to the photos, the album itself is an artifact. Before dismantling or rearranging the album, consider whether it is worth destroying the original integrity of the album. Be aware that the brittle paper or cardboard will tear easily if you try to force the photos out of their slots or pockets.

2. By the turn of the century, most family photographers had adopted the snapshot album to store and display their keepsake images. The black or colored pages of snapshot albums are made of poor-quality paper that deteriorates images by releasing oxidant gases. Often, photos are adhered to both sides of the brittle paper. Removing one photo might ruin the photo on the reverse side. If the images are attached with black photo corners, try slipping the photos out of the corners. Then create a facsimile or replica album by duplicating the arrangement of the original photos (or reproductions) on archival-quality album pages.

3. Avoid modern albums that encase photos in cheap plastic. The plastic emits fumes that will attack the images. Though commonly used, the worst albums have so-called "magnetic" pages. The cover sheet picks up adhesive from the bottom page before the photos are added.



A startling example of why albums should be interleaved with sheets of non-acidic paper. Here, chemicals from the photo (left) interacted with acidic album paper opposite it and "copied" the image. Luckily the opposite pocket was empty, or the ghost image would have ruined another photo. Sheets of rag paper inserted between pages act as buffers and add no further damage.

Thus, adhesives will be transferred to both the front and the back of the photo. Today's polyvinyl chloride plastics cause irreversible damage to prints, and the adhesives can make it impossible to remove the images safely. The cheap cardboard backing gives off peroxides that cause yellow staining in both black and white and color prints.

4. Often the original photos simply cannot be rescued without risking further damage. Yet the acids and other chemicals from the paper or photographs can leave an imprint on the opposite page. To prevent the surface of the images from touching the opposite page when the album is closed, interleaf the pages with



In the 1860s people collected carte-de-visite portraits of relatives, friends, and celebrities, and displayed them in photograph albums (left). When cabinet cards were introduced in the 1880s, album size and format changed to accommodate the larger size (right). Today, the acidic pages, with pre-cut slots, may be brittle and tear easily.

archival-quality paper, which is acid-neutral or 100 percent rag.

5. When possible, substitute archival-quality pages (or sleeves) made of triacetate, polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene. Unfortunately, the material used is not always listed. Look for trade names such as "PRINT FILE" or "MYLAR," purchase from reputable dealers or catalogs, and expect archival-quality material to cost more than cheap plastics or acidic cardboards.

6. Never attach photos with tape, rubber cement, or other damaging adhesives that eat

away at the image and make later removal difficult. Use archival-quality photo corners, or slip the photos in the various sized pockets of archival-quality pages. Ideally, the entire album should be constructed of archival materials.

7. Store the album in a clean, safe environment. A temperature range of 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 40 to 50 percent is acceptable.

8. Family historians also preserved news clippings, locks of hair, scraps of fabric, pressed flowers, and documents in photo albums. Unfortunately, these materials can be detri-

Consider the snapshot albums as a form of autobiography as well as family or local history. People compiled such albums as accounts of their lives. Think carefully before dismantling and distributing such a collection.



PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER

mental to the photographs. Use some discretion, however, in removing these items. Record what you separate from the album, noting description and placement, and keep one copy of the record with the album and one with the removed items.

9. Wrap the album in paper to keep light and dust away. Special slipcovers or album cases can be made to store albums and support weak or broken spines.

Two sources for archival supplies: Light Impressions (439 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607) and Hollinger Corporation (PO Box 6185, Arlington, VA 22206).



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Custom-fit boxes of archival materials will safely house fragile albums. Store them in a cool, dry environment.

Framed Photographs

Another common concern for the family photo archivist is how to handle framed photographs. Except for occasional need, most photographs should be unframed for conservation and easy storage.

1. Frames can trap moisture, fungus, and other harmful contaminants. The wood backing of older frames can ruin and discolor the photo in a short time. The original frame, however, is an artifact that conveys certain information about popular tastes and the significance of the photo to the individual who displayed it. If you decide to use the original frame, use a window matte cut from museum board (100 percent rag or acid-free) to separate the surface of the print from the glass and frame edge. Seal the back of the frame with foam core instead of the original wood.

2. Select new frames with care. Wooden frames may have damaging solvents and glues; metal frames may have harmful lacquers.

3. Hang any original photographs in areas that do not receive direct sunlight, such as hallways.

4. To prolong the life of the photograph, frame

a reproduction and retire the original photo to a safer storage place away from light, which can cause fading.



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

The edge of this portrait was stained by the acidic materials surrounding it — an oval wood frame and cardboard. Acidic paper discolors and becomes brittle.

“Sure hope things go better tomorrow”

Letters from a Traveling Salesman, 1928–1935

by VaDonna Jean Leaf

*“I made \$9.20 and a jack rabbit today.
Will mail you the rabbit tomorrow.”*

IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION year of 1930, Arthur Leaf (the man who would, some twenty-four years later, become my father-in-law) lost his land, the new house he had built, nearly all of his worldly goods, and, with great shame, his church. Bankruptcy was considered such a disgrace that the church board met and voted to strike his name from the membership. What he did not lose was the spirit to survive hard times by taking on extra work away from his family.

Hard times were not new to Leaf and his family in north-central Iowa. In the mid-1920s he had farmed forty acres that he owned and 160 acres that he rented from his grandfather. When the lease ended unexpectedly in 1928, upon the death of his grandfather, he realized that he would need more income than what a forty-acre farm could provide. Looking around for extra work, he found a job that year as a traveling salesman, a job that helped Leaf provide for his family during eight years of finan-

cial strain, bankruptcy, and recovery.

In 1928, thirty-six-year-old Leaf went on the road, driving a second-hand Ford Model T car and selling subscriptions to the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, and other magazines. He also sold pots and pans, tools, groceries, and spices from a company called Hitchcock Hill, and gardening and nursery stock for Sherman Nursery of Northern Iowa, located in Hampton.

To care for the cows, horses, chickens, gardens, and fields, he left behind his wife, Johanna Marie, and four children: Paul, age seven; John, six; Florence, five; and red-haired baby Dale. Art would be gone during the week on pre-arranged and take-a-chance routes. He planned to come home on weekends to tend to the necessary farm work.

Art and Marie were anxious about this new venture. Would they make a living? Would they be able to make payments on their small



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR

A jaunty Art Leaf behind the wheel, sometime before he undertook the rigors of winter driving in his new job.

farm? Would the car hold together? How long would the tires last? And there would be expenses on the road for lodging and for meals ("eats" as Art called them).

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," Art had said.

Marie was frightened to face alone the hazards of wintertime: wood stoves, chimney-soot fires, frozen pumps, blizzards. And there was the care of four young children, especially Paul, who was sick a great deal. She made one firm stipulation about this separation: Art was to write home every day. Marie and the children wrote back, mostly on one-cent postcards (to save on the three-cent cost of a letter), and sent them to General Delivery in the towns where Art expected to be.

Found sixty years later in an attic, a sample of this correspondence survived. The existing letters are few. They are neither a day-to-day account nor a thorough record. For instance, no letters speak of the couple's grief when youngest son Dale dies of polio in August 1929, nor of their joy when Doris is born in 1932.

Nevertheless, the handful of letters and cards sketches out an Iowa family's life during troubling times. Often written from small-town hotels or from a rented room in a private

home, Art's letters home give glimpses of the life of a traveling salesman during the Great Depression.

Leaf's sales reflected the unsteady cash flow of Iowa farmers, and his letters note the rash of farm auctions. He dealt with customers who backed out on sales or who paid in goods rather than money. Prepared for such barter, he strapped a chicken coop onto his Model T. The chickens he received in trade were worth ten to fifteen cents each at the local grocery store. If he made a good bargain he would get enough cash to cover the subscription price plus a few cents profit. (The letters that follow have been edited slightly.)

*Belmond, Iowa
December 12, 1928*

Dear Marie and kids,

Well, another day is gone and I am back in my room again. I made \$9.20 and a jack rabbit today. Will mail you the rabbit tomorrow but it may be spoiled when it gets there if they keep it [too warm] in the mail [room]. If it is, it will be all right for the chickens.

Am going to try and get a couple more and bring Sat. if I can.

I met a boy on the road carrying two of them



Art Leaf (seated) and Marie Swanson (left). Photograph taken before their marriage.

and a rifle so stopped and asked if he would trade a rabbit for a year of the paper and he said he would so I took him up. The rabbit was still warm so could not mail him till tomorrow.

There are sales around here every day. One sale south of town yesterday, one east today and one north tomorrow so in the afternoons so many people are not home. But it seems to go fairly good anyway.

I took back another dish pan and wrench today, and took some checks dated ahead.

Have you heard from [the mortgage holder on our farm] yet?

There is no ten cent store here that is very good. Every thing is awful high here. They even had the nerve to ask 15 cents for a writing tablet.

My meals today cost me: breakfast 25, dinner 40, supper 15 and my room and car storage 75, and 60 cents for gas. Leaves me \$6.90 clear. Am sending the two checks dated ahead in this letter.

I ordered 3 more cookers and 3 blankets [premium gifts for subscription orders].

And asked for more territory so will know what plans to make for next week.

Am wondering how your cold is coming and how the kids are. Has the snow gone yet? I am

used to bare ground here now so it would seem funny to come back and drive on snow again. I was stuck in the mud today and had to back-up half a mile but most of the roads are gravel.

I don't seem to get any chickens in trade at all now so I guess I didn't need the coop very bad.

How is Ma [Art's mother] getting along? I am anxious to hear from you that you are all right down there. If you don't get a chance to mail anything have your Ma send me a card when she goes downtown [in Stratford] so I will know how you are getting along.

Tell the kids I will be glad to see them when I get back. It seems that it keeps me busy evenings more than I thought it would. I did not get in town till 5:30 and then went and made out the daily report and mailed it [to the home office], and went out and had supper and got the car put away and now it is 8:30 so I will go to bed soon and will mail this tomorrow. Will mail that rabbit at noon tomorrow as the mail going south leaves here at 1:30 in the afternoon so it should get there the next morning.

This is all for tonight. Wish I will get to hear from you in the morning.

Good night

Art

Belmond, Iowa

Dec. 13, 1928

Dear Marie and kids,

It sure has been a miserable day today. Started to rain when I was making my second call and rained all day. Kept on working till dark and made \$6.80 and a pair of Ford coils and my dinner and a tire chain.

Was lucky to have gravel roads all day. The dirt roads are awful now. So I don't know how I will travel tomorrow if it does not freeze up but I think it will do that.

I think I sold another cooker today. He said I should come back next week as he would get his cream check from the Creamery on Sat. and would have the money then. Well, there is not much that I can think of to write about so my letter will not be long tonight. The rainy weather is awful hard on my clothes and overcoat. I did not get wet but got so muddy. I have only one blanket left now and no wrenches and four cookers so will have to work on cookers tomorrow. I have taken in two dish pans and

two wrenches [in trade]. I mailed the rabbit today. Don't know if it will be very good when you get it or not.

I just counted up and have taken 17 orders so far; 7 of them are new and 10 renewals and it totals up to 51 years [of subscriptions].

Well it is after eight o'clock again so I guess I will quit and go to bed all by my lonesome again.

I will be glad to be back home again. Tell the kids I think about them every day and wonder how they are and wonder what they are doing. I suppose they are sleeping now or asking for a drink of water or something.

Wish you were here so I could give you a good hug and kiss but will have to wait till Sat. I guess.

Art

Jewell, Iowa
Monday Eve.
[Date unknown]

Dear Marie,

Well I am here and got a good room but had a poor day as far as business goes but hope it will be better tomorrow.

I stopped and got my check of Bill at Stanhope so if I spend all I got I will have the \$1.50 left when I get to Stratford, anyhow. But I hope I will have a good day tomorrow.

I am going to try and get an early start and make a real day of it and see what I can do. I worked till seven o'clock this eve so haven't had time to get lonesome yet. Just had supper and found a room and got the car in the garage. Well, the room is ready now so I will go out and mail this and come back and go to bed.

Wish I could give you a kiss before going to bed but can't tonight. Am wondering what the kids are doing now and what Paul said when it was bedtime and what sister said when she wants to hug her dad.

Will write you again tomorrow.

Art

BESIDES WORKING as a traveling salesman, Leaf tried to diversify his farm income. He grew and sold seed corn and garden vegetables and raised sweet potatoes for sale at the A. T. John-

son Grocery Store in Stratford. He hatched and sold baby chicks. For a summer of mowing a rural cemetery with a reel mower and cutting around the grave markers with scissors, he earned \$37.50. And he continued selling newspapers and magazines and nursery stock.

But despite Leaf's attempts to patch together an income, in 1930 bankruptcy struck. It was not a bank that held the lien of six thousand dollars on Leaf's small farm, but rather a wealthy man in the community. The lien holder foreclosed with reluctance and sorrow, family members recall, and they continued to speak of him with great respect.

A neighbor was chosen as referee, and it was his duty to tabulate and appraise all the livestock, farm equipment, and household goods. Any item valued under fifty dollars could be retained by the family; any item over fifty dollars in value went to the mortgage holder. Thus the land was taken, as was the house Leaf and his father-in-law had built with their own hands. Because there were children, one cow was left for the family. Two teams of horses and the harness, and the chickens and pigs were taken. An old Fordson tractor with steel wheels, a two-bottom plow, a corn planter, and a cultivator were each valued under fifty dollars and kept — perhaps so Leaf could farm again if he could find land to rent.

"They even came into my house and took the rug off the floor," Marie said later. "And they took my double-tub washing machine, my phonograph and all my Swedish records" (perhaps to compensate for leaving behind machinery).

After the bankruptcy, came dismissal from their church. With wounded hearts that never truly recovered, the Leaf family moved onto a twenty-eight-acre farm. In place of cash rent, the landowner received one-half of all income Art and Marie and their children made on the four acres of hayland and two acres of vegetable garden. (The rest of the farm was timber pasture.)

Leaf continued selling subscriptions and household, farm, and nursery items. And he worked for neighbors making hay or picking corn by hand, earning the usual wage of that time, one dollar a day.

The children did their share of work, too, as ten-year-old Paul reported to his father in a

letter sent to General Delivery, Algona, Iowa.

Aug. 10, 1931

Dear Daddy,

We have pulled the weeds in the squash, corn and beans patch. The pumpkin bugs are on squashes.

We got four tomatoes out of the garden. We are going to the mail box. Florence is going to write to you tomorrow.

Your son,
Paul

ART LEAF WAS BEDFAST most of the winter of 1931/32, suffering from exhaustion, depression, and worry. Paul later recalled that winter as a time "when Dad was in bed all day." Apparently both Marie and her mother, fearing the loss of Leaf's job, had written his employer to

explain that he was sick. In March 1932 Leaf's regional field manager, W. J. Payne, wrote back, expressing concern over Leaf's illness and adding that "Mr. Leaf is one of our good workers and we appreciate him."

Three months later Leaf again needed to take time off, but for a happier reason.

[June 18, 1932]

Dear Mr. Leaf,

I certainly want to congratulate you on the new baby daughter that arrived at your home a few days ago. I hope that both the mother and baby are getting along nicely.

We will excuse you for being off a few days under the circumstances but hope that the youngster will prove an additional incentive for you to work harder and get more business in the future.

E. P. Schwartz
[Register and Tribune
subscription manager]



Marie and the children handled the farm work when Art was on the road. Paul (far left, with his aunt Linnea's arm around him) is next to brother John. Marie, center, holds baby Dale.

LETTERS IN THE WINTER of 1934/35 reveal that Leaf was still selling subscriptions on the road, driving across north-central Iowa in an unheated car.

Lakota
Jan. 15, 1935

Dear Marie,

Well, I got here about 10 o'clock. Went out and got a two year [subscription,] all I got all day. Was very cold here, right close to zero so had a hard time to keep warm while working. Quite a little snow here [too] so that helped to make things disagreeable. They had a heavy sleet just before the snow so from [Humboldt] and up the paving was like a sheet of glass so had to drive very carefully.

I got a room in a little hotel here. I don't think I am going to like it very well but had to take it as it is the only place in town. Got my car in the garage for the night.

The room cost me \$2.00 for the week so thought I had better stay here than drive to another town.

I have not heard anything of the other men yet so don't know how things are.

Things don't look quite so prosperous as they did at [Ottosen?] but they had good crops here.

It was really [too] cold to go good to work today. Hope it warms up tomorrow.

Tell Paul if it stays awful cold down there he will have to see that the cows have enough to eat.

Am looking for a card tomorrow to hear how Paul was when he woke up.

Tell the kids hello and that [it] is rather lonesome here all by myself. Am going to make out my report now so will close.

Art

Lakota
Jan. 17, 1935

Dear Marie and kids,

I did not hear from you today but suppose it was so bad weather the kids did not go to school so you did not get a chance to mail anything.

I did not have a very good day today. Only sold a five [-year subscription] and took a note on that. It sure seems everything is against a person on this job. It was two below zero this morning and it is going to be colder tomorrow.



John, Paul, and Florence Leaf took on extra farm chores while their father was on the road.

I had planned to drive over to see Joe Larson [former neighbor and distant relative], but I did not feel like going out any more after I got in and got warmed up.

My foot has been hurting bad all day today and I wanted to get my shoe off and rest it.

I wish you would see what a different way of living this is to what we are used to. Here we are living together in this hotel, one horse buyer, one cattle buyer and his young wife, one veterinary, one mechanic and me. I sat downstairs and talked with them till eight o'clock and then came up here to make out reports and write this letter.

The horse buyer is an old man about 65 I guess, he was sore tonight, he got a truck to go out and get a truck load of horses for him and when they were coming back another truck crowded them off the road so they upset and he was pinned fast in the wreckage for about an hour. But he was not hurt more than bruised some.

I never got stuck today but pushed a lot of snow.

If you should have to call me by phone the name of this place I stay, it is Clara's Cafe.

I sure hope things go better tomorrow. I have not been able to send in totals yet.

I sure need business. I may work some on



Portion of 1931 newspaper photograph, in which Art Leaf (front row, left) takes his place with fifty-six other county managers at a Des Moines sales convention.

Sat. so may not get home til late unless I hear from you that you need me home early.

Tell the kids I wish I was going home tomorrow. It will take at least 5 hours to drive home the way things are now.

Art

*Thursday morning
[Undated]*

Dear Art,

The ground is covered with snow and it is still snowing. Paul got all the wood worked up and piled in nice round piles, one of split, one of chunks, one he can make either chunks or fine, and then he has a pile of chunks by the door and one of fine on the porch so we get along fine on wood. I slept good last night. The boys slept down stairs. I have an awful cold in my head. Doris counts on her fingers when Dad is coming home. Hope you bring me a few

hens. Paul is going to kill one hen today for his birthday today. Now I must dress baby. The children are all O.K. Doris slept good last night. We got your letter yesterday.

Love, Marie

THAT YEAR, 1935, Art and Marie and the children were able to rent a 218-acre farm with fifty acres of cropland, along the Boone River in Hamilton County. (In time they would buy the land.) The family branched into making sorghum syrup. Leaf named his product Bell's Mill Pure Cane Sorghum, after his new community. Paul, now fourteen, was put in charge of the cooking operations. Leaf and his son John handled the field operations. As the years passed and the demand for Bell's Mill Sorghum increased, they planted more acres of the sweet cane and hired ten to twelve workers each fall during the sorghum-cooking season.

The family joined a new church, which Art served as deacon for many years. Marie went back to teaching rural school. Paul was allowed to go to school only if there was no pressing farm work — often only one or two days a week. Nevertheless he was the salutatorian of his high school graduating class in 1940. Art and Marie's two daughters would be college graduates.

Art and Marie continued to live frugally. They feared debt and any purchase that was not essential, convinced that hard times were again just around the corner. They never bought a new car, new machinery, or carpet for the house — even though Marie often longed for a wool rug "like other folks have." Art did all the grocery buying, a task he had taken over during the hard years, when Marie had come home shamed and crying because she had been denied credit at the grocery store. They faithfully tithed to their church and often took great boxes of foodstuffs and clothes to families having difficulties.

In 1969 Marie died of cancer, and in 1976 Art died, at the age of eighty-three. For many years, he and Marie had owned their farm debt free. They had accumulated savings and enjoyed the respect of the community. Their story, told in Art's letters, is a tribute to one family's perseverance through hard times. □

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compiled by Mark Meacham and John Thompson

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SUBMISSIONS

The editor welcomes manuscripts and edited documents on the history of Iowa and the Midwest that may interest a general reading audience. Submissions that focus on visual material (photographs, maps, drawings) or on material culture are also invited. Originality and significance of the topic, as well as the quality of research and writing, will determine acceptance for publication. Manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced, and follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (13th edition). Please send two copies. Standard length is within ten to twenty manuscript pages, but shorter or longer submissions will

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LETTERS FROM READERS

Of threshers and bridges

Regarding the photo on the back cover of your Summer 1990 issue, showing the upside-down engine that has just crashed through the bridge: I think that the bridge was a light-weight metal truss bridge (the lower cord remains intact and visible above the engine) and not a wooden bridge. The "accident" was not so much the fault of the engine but of the bridge. While conducting bridge surveys in Minnesota and other midwestern states, I have found numerous similar photos.

This all became part of a push for stronger bridges using professional engineers as designers and was part of the larger Good Roads movement of the time. The early issues of most annual reports for state highway commissions show like photos of bridges collapsed by traction engines, as arguments for the new commission-supplied designs. Most of these structures were built in the 1880s and '90s for light wagons and could not support the new agricultural machinery. At the same time, many townships and counties were victimized by bridge companies offering cheap structures for low bids to county boards that had little expertise for selecting good design over low cost.

Thanks for running an interesting photo and story.

Robert M. Frame III, Editor, Society For Industrial Archeology Newsletter, Saint Paul, Minnesota

The *Palimpsest* welcomes letters from its readers. Please include your complete address and phone number. Letters that are published may be edited for clarity and brevity. Write: Editor, *Palimpsest*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

be considered. Although the *Palimpsest* presents brief bibliographies rather than footnoted articles, footnotes should appear in the original submission. When using newspaper sources, please cite page as well as date of issue. Include a brief biographical sketch. Because illustrative material is integral to the *Palimpsest*, the editor encourages authors to include photographs and illustrations (or suggestions). Please send submissions or queries to Ginalie Swaim, Editor, *The Palimpsest*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

JESSE COX
SCENIC STUDIO
ESTHERVILLE IA.



This *Palimpsest* focuses the spotlight on the magic of the opera house. To this turn-of-the-century cultural institution, Jesse Cox of Estherville, Iowa, brought his skills, as prop boy, actor, trade-paper editor, and finally as an astounding scenic artist. Front: a painting of one of Cox's opera house curtains. Above: stencil from the back of another Cox curtain.

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