

The PALIMPSEST

Volume 71, Number 3

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Fall 1990 \$4.50



Inside —

COURTESY RON ROBERTS



"During the era when coal was loaded by hand, a miner set his own pace of work," writes *Palimpsest* author Merle Davis. "Yet, for all the freedom miners had—and they had a great deal, indeed—their lives and well-being were constantly in peril." This *Palimpsest* presents the story behind Iowa's worst mining accident, in the coal camp of Lost Creek in January 1902. For more on coal mining, see Harry Booth's oral history interview, beginning on page 118 of this issue. And visit the traveling museum exhibit "Badges of Pride: Symbols and Images of American Labor," opening October 2 at the State Historical Building in Des Moines.



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

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

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

THE PALIMPSEST (ISSN 0031-0360) is published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa. © 1990 State Historical Society of Iowa.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA (SHSI) is the historical division of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the State of Iowa. The Society operates in two locations, Des Moines and Iowa City. The museum, historic preservation, and a research library are located at Capitol Complex, Des Moines, Iowa 50319, phone (515) 281-5111. Publications, development, field services, and a research library are located at 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240, phone (319) 335-3916.

THE PALIMPSEST is received as a benefit of an active membership (\$30) or through subscription (\$15). Single copies, \$4.50 plus \$1 postage and handling. For prices of back issues, contact Publications.



SUBSCRIPTIONS/MEMBERSHIPS/ORDERS: Contact Publications, SHSI, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240, phone (319) 335-3916.

SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS: *The Palimpsest* (quarterly popular history magazine), *Iowa Historian* (bimonthly newsletter), *The Goldfinch* (Iowa history magazine for young people, 4 per school year), *The Annals of Iowa* (quarterly journal), books, research guides, technical leaflets. Catalogs available.

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COVER: Tools used in coal mining; see detailed description on page 116. Artifacts courtesy of SHSI Museum (Des Moines), Ron Roberts, and John Jacobs. Photo by Chuck Greiner, Front Porch Studio. Back cover: Children wander down the road in an Iowa coal mining camp, circa 1900.

The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

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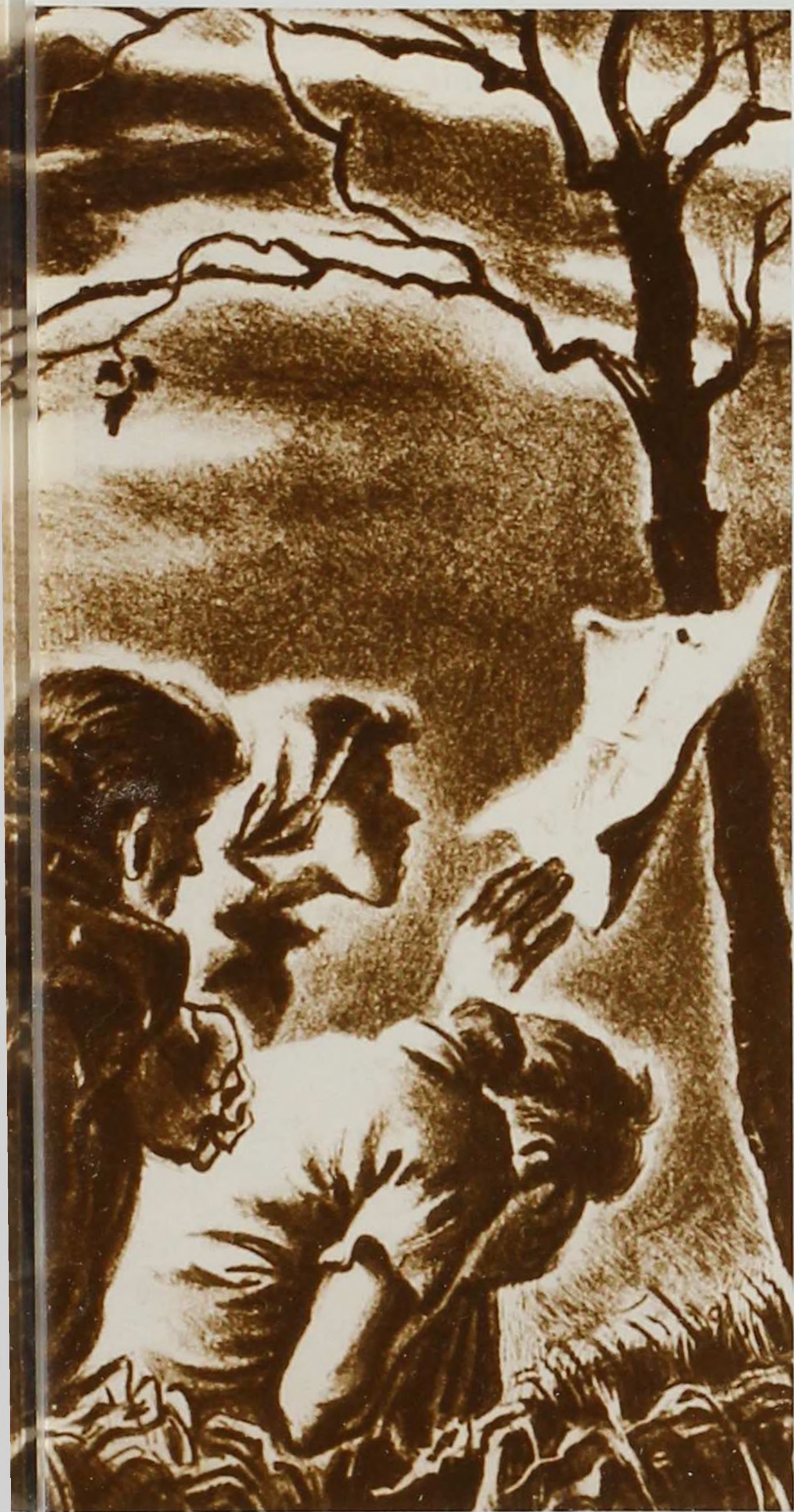
Horror at Lost Creek

A 1902 Coal Mine Disaster



"THE LIST" BY GEORGES SCHREIBER; LABOR'S NON-PARTISAN LEAGUE, TESTIMONY OF JOHN L. LEWIS (BEFORE U.S. CONGRESS, APRIL 1947)

by Merle Davis



Anna Booth was preparing a noon meal for her husband, William, and their nine-year-old son, Harry, on Friday, January 24, 1902, when a wailing mine whistle sounded a warning that something was wrong at Shaft No. 2. Wives and mothers, fathers and children, relations and neighbors began rushing toward the pit head as word spread that a terrible explosion had wrecked the works and trapped scores of men and boys below ground. Anna and William's fifteen-year-old son, William A., was working in the coal mine that day, along with a hundred or so others.

Anna and William knew well the dangers inherent in the mining of coal. They both had come to America from England, where their fathers and grandfathers, as far back as anyone could remember, had worked in the mines. Anna's own father had died in a mine explosion in England. For all she knew, her son William could now be among the dead or injured. Anna and William, along with

Miners' wives agonize over a list of casualties.

young Harry, hurried to Lost Creek Shaft No. 2, a half-mile southeast of their home in the village of Lost Creek, a mining town in Mahaska County about ten miles south of Oskaloosa.

Even as the Booth family and other residents of Lost Creek rushed toward Shaft No. 2, some of the men and boys who had been in the west side of the mine when the explosion occurred began groping their way through the smoke and blackness to the mine's escape shaft and up to the surface. A quick count showed that forty to fifty men and boys had reached the surface, leaving another fifty to sixty trapped below.

Among the gathering crowd, rumors abounded. It was believed that fires raged

below, consuming the oxygen and cremating men and boys pinned beneath shattered timbers and fallen slate. Underground doors, needed to direct the flow of air, were believed to be blown out or otherwise wrecked. The force of the blast was said to have torn up the rails on which pit cars moved and to have jammed cars against one of the hoisting cages.

Men working above ground told of flames and debris shooting two hundred feet into the air. Smoke was yet billowing from the mine shaft. Survivors reported that the explosion had blown out the flames in their lard-oil pit lamps, and that foul air and deadly afterdamp were filling the mine. A quick inspection





Left: Iowa law permitted boys as young as twelve to work in coal mines. Here, mine interior in Lucas, 1913. Above: Top works at Lost Creek, Mahaska County.

showed that the guides on the hoisting cages were knocked out of alignment. Even more important for the survival of the trapped miners was the condition of the ventilation fans, designed to push fresh air down the air shaft and into the mine, where it was circulated through a network of doors and passageways. Now it was discovered that the force of the explosion had gone up the air shaft and had at least partially wrecked the fans.

The heart-rending scene at the pit head was one of fear and anxiety. No one could be certain of what was happening below ground. Smoke and gases still forced back rescuers who tried to enter the mine through the escape shaft. Those gathered around the pit could do little else but stand in the January cold and watch and wait. The strain of the moment became too great for some. Some of the women and children reportedly became "frantic with grief" and others ran about "shrieking, moaning, praying." To lessen the chaos, the women and children were ordered to return to their homes and wait there for news.

MINE SUPERINTENDENT Jasper M. "Jap" Timbrell was at the company store, about three-quarters of a mile away, when the explosion ripped through Shaft No. 2. As soon as word reached him, he hurried to the shaft

and took charge of rescue operations. He immediately set men to work repairing the fans. Unless they were repaired quickly, chances were that anyone who had survived the explosion soon would die from breathing suffocating or noxious gases or "damps."

In Iowa coal mines, the most common of these gases were carbon monoxide (called "whitedamp" by miners), carbon dioxide ("chokedamp" or "blackdamp"), and hydrogen sulphide ("stinkdamp"). Miners recognized yet another dangerous gas, called "afterdamp," which oftentimes filled mines after explosions, leaving death in its wake. It was not a single compound, but a mixture chiefly consisting of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, and water vapor. Miners considered afterdamp highly explosive and fatal.

Although the ventilation fans were soon repaired and running again, the next obstacle was to enter the pit and clear the debris in the underground airways and repair the doors that regulated the air currents. The moment Timbrell believed the air in the pit was safe enough for men to descend the shaft, volunteers stepped forward, William Booth among them. Timbrell personally led the first rescue party down the escape shaft and into the mine. The damage they found was less severe than at first rumored. The mine had not caught fire. The damage to the guides in the hoisting shaft was repaired in about an hour, and the cages were set in motion, carrying fresh rescuers to the bottom.

The work was exhausting and slow. Rescue parties worked in the foul air until men would

fall from exhaustion or be overcome by damps. Fresh men would seize the tools from the fallen, and the frenzied work would continue without interruption. Repeatedly the gases forced the men back. Timbrell was himself overcome by damps and exhaustion and brought to the surface, where he collapsed. Once revived, he entered the pit again.

WHILE THE RESCUE operations were underway, news of the disaster reached nearby communities. Within minutes of the explosion, men had rushed to the company store and the single telephone in Lost Creek. Calls to Eddyville, Oskaloosa, and surrounding towns summoned physicians. Within a few hours, a train carrying ten physicians arrived from Oskaloosa. Undertakers followed. Mahaska County Coroner Charles F. Foehlinger arrived. County Sheriff William Cricket was on hand to maintain order.

As word of the disaster reached neighboring communities, people raced to Lost Creek in buggies and wagons, aboard trains, and on foot. Hundreds made their way to the village. Some joined the crowds of the curious near the shaft. Others, including miners from Oskaloosa, Beacon, Pekay, and elsewhere, offered their muscle and skills in the rescue efforts.

As Jap Timbrell and the rescue parties pressed deeper into the mine, they found the portions to the west largely unaffected by the explosion, which confirmed some survivors' accounts. In several instances, men working on the west side said they had been totally unaware of the explosion until told to get to the surface as rapidly as possible.

Conditions worsened as the rescue parties moved toward the east side. There they encountered fallen debris, wrecked airways, smashed doors — and damps. Near the hoisting cage they discovered a number of injured mine workers who had been waiting to go to the surface for their noon meal when the explosion struck. Many of them were young men and boys — drivers, cagers, and trappers — some badly burnt, but alive.

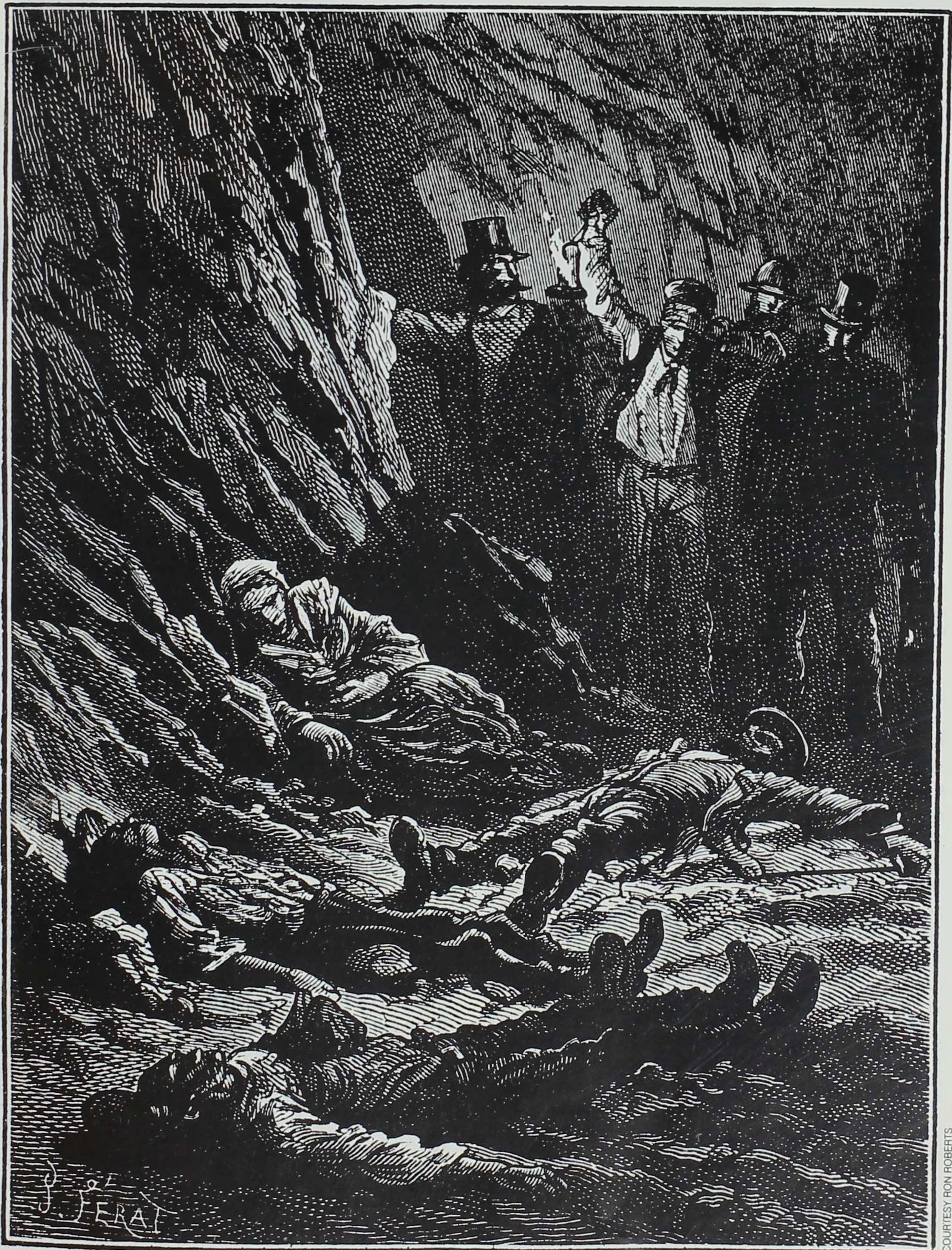
Not until nearly three in the afternoon were Timbrell and his men able to enter the east

section and push through the damps and devastation — and the worst effects of the blast. Near the origin of the explosion, they found bodies strewn about, some horribly mangled, others burnt nearly beyond recognition. One young miner was found with the top of his skull entirely blown off. Victims found in the northeast section suffered terrible burns to their faces and hands. Some of the dead showed no visible signs of injuries at all. They had fallen victim to afterdamp. In fact, rescue parties found more people dead from the effects of afterdamp than from the blast itself.

THE EXPLOSION at Lost Creek killed and injured men and boys, fathers and sons, black men and white men, foreign born and native born. Two brothers, Frank and Joseph Gasperi, were found dead in the same room, while another brother, James, who was working in a different part of the mine, survived. Michael Fox, president of the local union at Lost Creek, was found with his face, chest, and arms horribly burnt. In his agony, he had apparently tried to save his eighteen-year-old son, Michael, Jr., who was working alongside him. He had thrown his coat over his son's head and held his cap over the boy's mouth and nose, clasping him in his arms to save him from the flames. The father and son were both dead.

In all, the disaster claimed twenty lives. Fourteen others, including young William Booth, suffered severe injuries ranging from broken arms and legs, to burns, to lungs affected by afterdamp. Among the injured were a number of boys. William Fothergill, age twelve, was badly burned. As a trapper boy, his job was to open and close ventilation doors. Another trapper, thirteen-year-old Oliver Mabie, suffered a broken arm. His brother, Jonas, age sixteen and a mule driver, had a broken leg. The severity of the injuries affected even men who had witnessed much suffering in life. Bert Thompson, an army veteran recently returned from the brutal guerrilla war in the Philippines, described the carnage in the mine

Right: Rescuers reach victims of an underground disaster (artist's depiction in a turn-of-the-century novel).



J. de JÉRAI

COURTESY RON ROBERTS



ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Miners' families often faced the grim task of identifying severely burned bodies. Here, mourners await victims of a gas and dust explosion at Cherry, Illinois, in November 1909 that killed 266 mine workers. Iowa miner and senator John T. Clarkson cited the Cherry disaster in his 1911 push for workers' compensation laws in Iowa, won in 1913.

as worse than anything he had seen overseas.

The excitement on the surface, which had been intense all afternoon, grew alarmingly as the dead and injured were brought up. Sheriff Cricket stood at the mine entrance to maintain order. The injured were sent to the surface as soon as they could safely be moved, and from there they were taken to their homes and given medical care. The first of the dead were hoisted to the surface at about four o'clock. To prevent the dead from being exposed to public gaze, each body had first been carefully wrapped in a blanket. Not until six o'clock was the last body recovered.

Wagons carried the bodies to the company store, which was fitted out as a temporary morgue. There the blankets were removed, and the bodies were laid side-by-side in a long row on a hastily erected platform that stretched almost the entire length of the store. The undertakers and their assistants washed the coal dust and grime from the faces of the dead and prepared the bodies as best they could for identification. Some of the faces were so horri-

bly burnt and disfigured that they could be identified only with great difficulty. Following the identification, the undertakers cut the mine clothing from the victims' bodies, washed the remains, and dressed them in clean underclothing. The bodies were placed in coffins, and one by one the dead were taken to their former homes to be watched over by family and friends.

Funerals for the victims took place on Sunday and Monday following the disaster. As many as a thousand people gathered in Lost Creek on Sunday to follow in procession behind fifteen coffins on their two-mile journey from Lost Creek to Eddyville. Members of the United Mine Workers had traveled to Lost Creek in great numbers to pay their respects to their fallen union brothers. The various fraternal societies to which many of the dead belonged sent delegations of mourners. The weather was cold and disagreeable. Harry Booth would later recall that his breath froze to the window pane as he watched the procession.

Not enough hearses could be found to carry

the dead. Some of the bodies were carried in beer wagons or farmers' spring wagons to Eddyville that day. No church in Eddyville could hold the crowd of mourners. The funeral services were kept brief, as many of the mourners had to stand outside the churches and then accompany the remains to the cemeteries in the sub-zero temperatures.

The services for the five others took place in different towns or on the next day. With the funerals at an end, the time came for the inhabitants of Lost Creek to return to their homes to mourn the dead and wait to see what the future would hold.

IN MOST RESPECTS the village of Lost Creek differed little from scores of other coal camps that dotted the landscape of southern and central Iowa in the early twentieth century. It was a company town, owned and operated by the Lost Creek Fuel Company. In 1902 the company was operating two shafts at Lost Creek. The mining camp had been laid out in about 1894, when Shaft No. 1 was sunk. The company opened Shaft No. 2 in 1900. A big company store, situated on the crest of a hill, was the village's most prominent structure. In 1900 the town consisted of a company store, two large boarding houses, and a hundred or more company-owned miners' houses, each twenty-two by twenty-four feet, with four rooms. These houses were humble affairs of frame construction, roughly built, and scattered over the sides of the hills near the company store. The population consisted of a mixed lot of people, mostly born in the United States or Britain. A few blacks lived in the camp and worked the mines, along with a sprinkling of South Slavs, Hungarians, and Italians. The town was without a church or a burying ground of its own.

A large union hall, which the local union of the United Mine Workers owned outright, was the single large structure in Lost Creek not under the company's control. The union hall was a center of social life. In 1901, for instance, the local union sponsored an oyster supper at

A HORRIBLE FATE

Befalls Sixty Men in the Lost Creek Coal Mines this Afternoon.

A Terrific Dust Explosion

KILLS AND MAIMS MANY. HOISTING CAGE IS WRECKED SO THAT THE WORK OF RESCUE IS DELAYED.

A terrible explosion occurred in the mines at Lost Creek, ten miles south-east of this city, at noon today, and a fearful loss of life resulted. The explosion wrecked the hoisting cages so that it was nearly two o'clock before entrance to the mine could be made. From 50 to 60 men are entombed and it is feared many of them have perished. The catastrophe was caused by what is known as a dust explosion, following the firing of the blasting shots at the noon hour. Medical assistance was asked from this city and a number of Oskaloosa physicians hastened to the scene. Up to the time the cages were put in operation all was confusion at the top of the mine and the families and friends of the unfortunate men gathered in distracted groups. Even after the rescue parties were lowered it was nearly an hour before they could go into the entry, the deadly gas being so stifling.

THE KNOWN DEAD

The known dead thus far recovered are:

Boone Fish.
James Humphrey.
Jack Elder.
Rush Fish.
Chas. Crews.
Dave Walton.

THE INJURED

The injured are:

Frank Secress.
Ed. Swanson.
Jonas Mabie.
Olive Mabie.
John Jerkin.
Wm. Harvey.
Geo. Gogo.
Harry Derrock.

Portion of the front page of the *Oskaloosa Daily Herald*. Further on, the paper reports that the appeals of the families "nerved the living on to a duty . . . beyond the range of human endurance."

the hall that attracted seven hundred visitors to the little town, probably doubling its population that day. Lost Creek was solidly unionized and considered one of the strongest union camps in Iowa. No non-union men were employed in the Lost Creek mines in 1902, when the explosion occurred.

Witnesses on the scene that January day realized from the very first that an explosion of coal dust had caused the catastrophe. The explosive potential of coal dust was already widely recognized. Iowa recorded its first such explosion on November 8, 1892, when a dust explosion at Pekay, only two and a half miles from the future site of Lost Creek, claimed three lives and demolished the mine. The death toll would have been greater had the mine not been closed for election day. A few months later, on February 14, 1893, a dust explosion ripped through a mine near Albia and took eight lives.

Generally dust explosions were attributed to blown-out shots, sometimes called "windy" or "tight" shots. These occurred when the explosive charges that miners placed in holes bored in the coal face blew out their tampings instead of breaking down the coal into lumps. When this occurred, a tongue of flame would

Steps in shot firing: Drilling a hole (often four or five feet deep) in the coal face; tamping the explosive in place; firing the shot (a worker alerted others with a yell of "Fire in the hole!"); and a successful shot in which chunks of coal fall off the face (or solid).

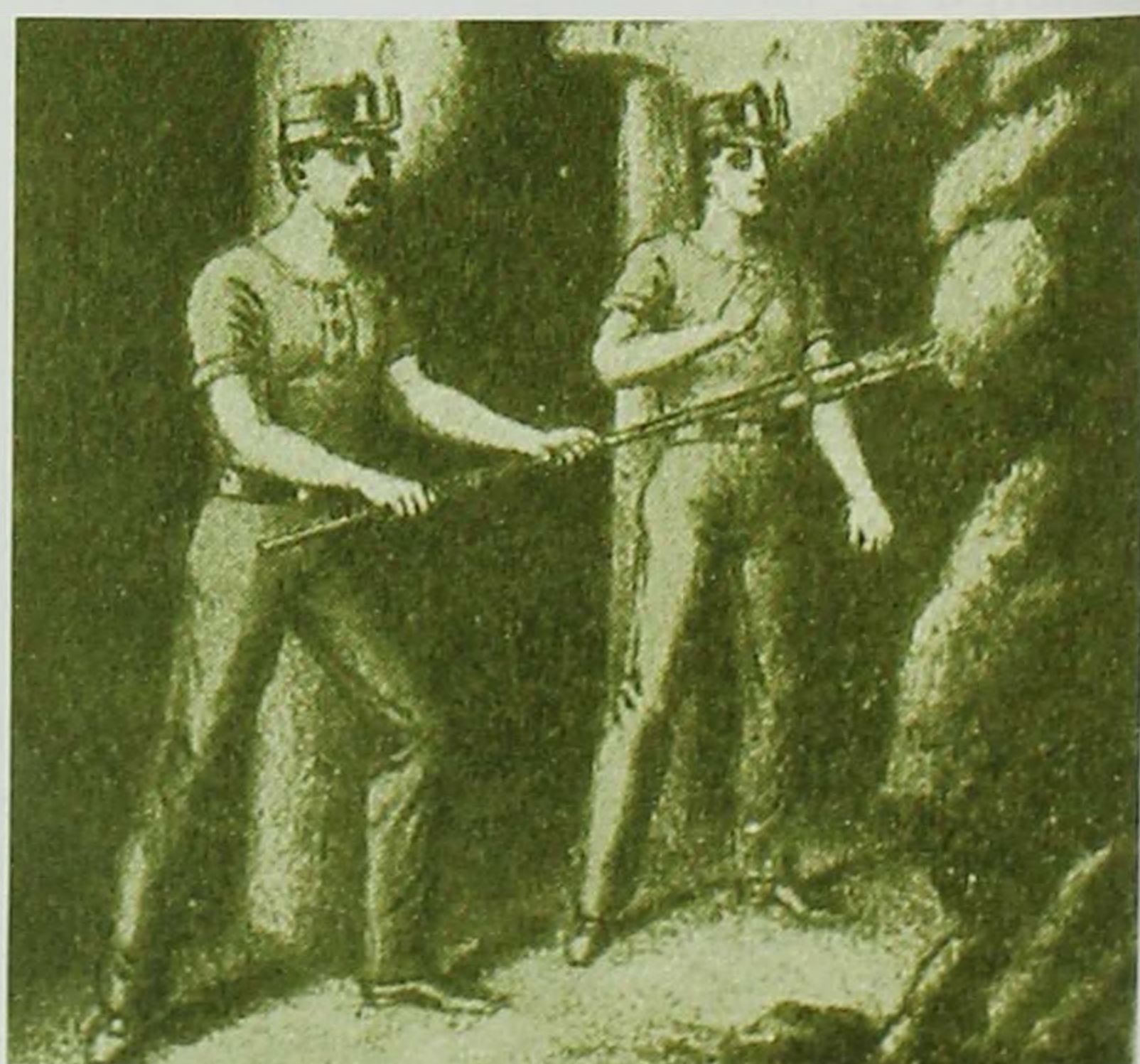


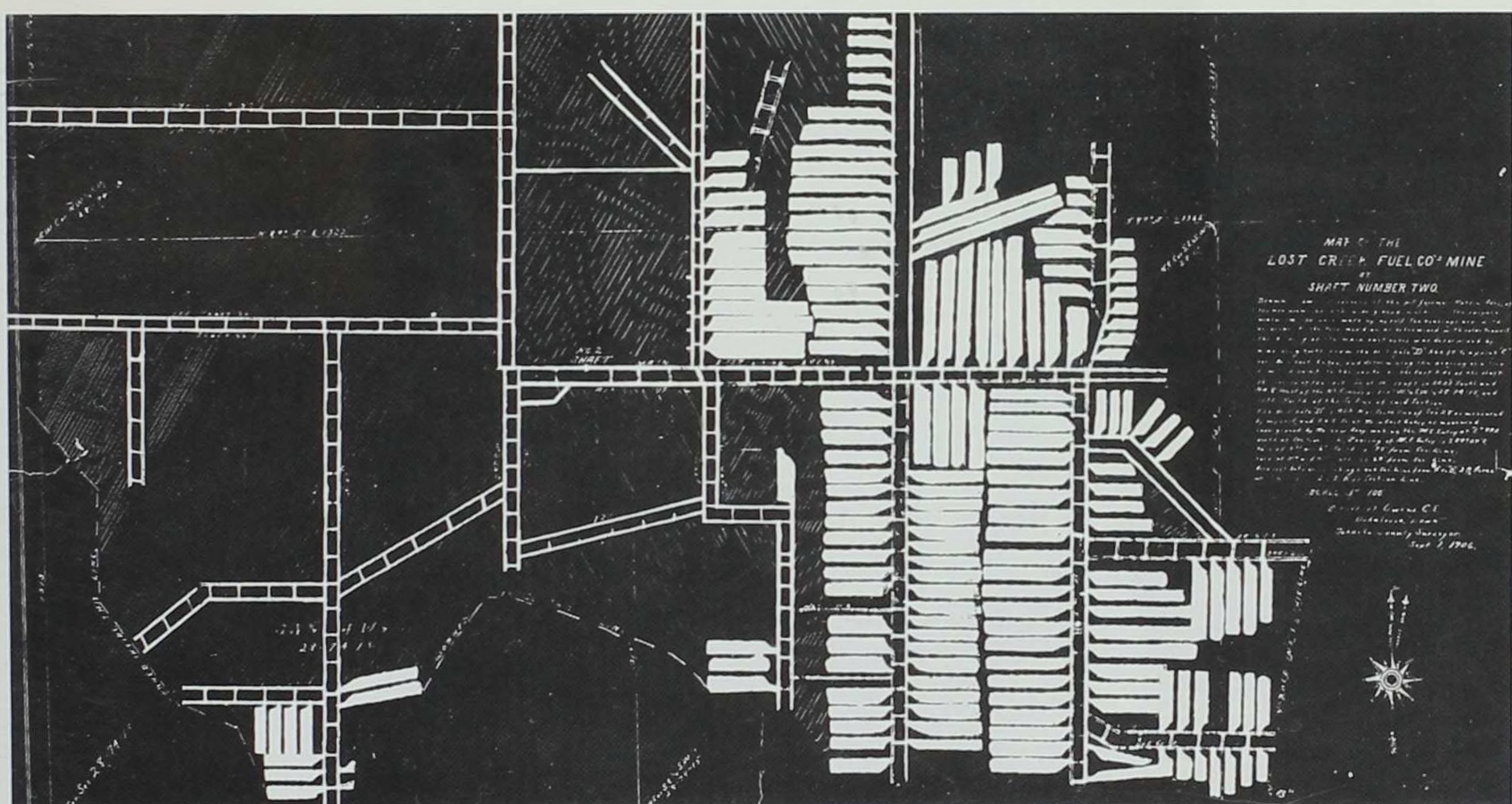
COURTESY RON ROBERTS

belch forth from the bored hole much like the discharge of a firearm. This would produce a commotion in the air and raise a cloud of fine coal dust, which would expand with explosive force. Sometimes the blown-out shot would do no further damage. But under certain circumstances, the action could become cumulative. A blown-out shot could spread throughout a working place, and from there travel down airways and haulageways, potentially leaving death and destruction in its wake.

The miners themselves were generally blamed for causing coal dust explosions. They were often accused of using inferior materials to tamp their holes and too much blasting powder to bring down the coal (five to ten pounds of the coarse black powder was not uncommon). They were told to use fireclay (a hard clay oftentimes found in thick bands below the coal) for tamping, not drilling dust, and to undermine the coal face, rather than blasting the coal from the solid.

Nevertheless, much of the coal mined in Iowa was shot off the solid. This mining technique had become commonplace in Iowa about the same time the first coal dust explosions were noted. Powder mining, as it was sometimes called, wasted powder, which the miners paid for out of their own earnings, and fractured the coal to such an extent that much of it was unmarketable. Yet despite the waste of coal and the risk of explosion, operators tended to encourage powder mining because it was



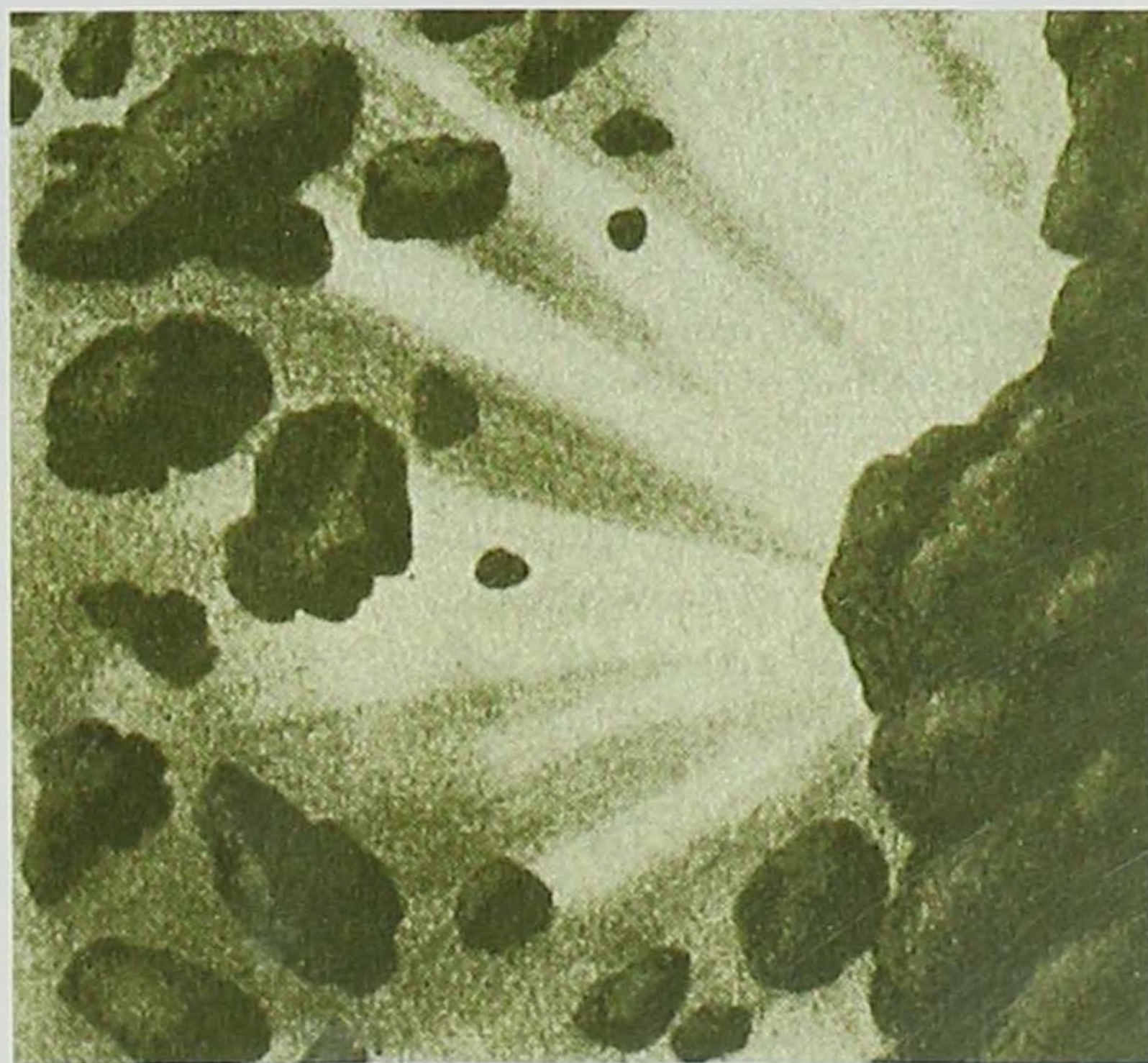
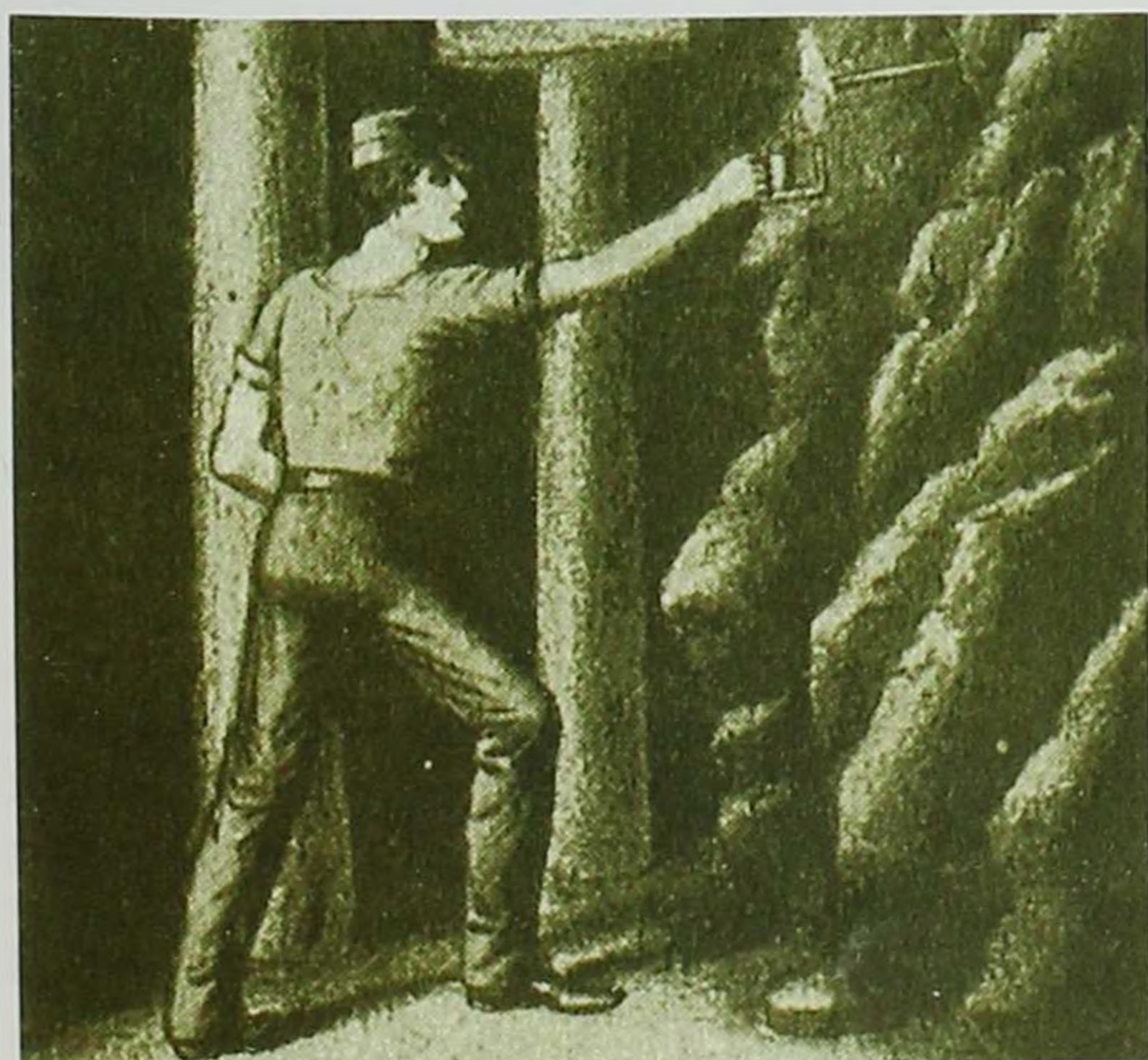


IOWA DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES, GEOLOGICAL SURVEY BUREAU

Blueprint of the Lost Creek Mine No. 2. Each white rectangle represents a "room" 24 to 30 feet wide, 120 to 150 feet long, and 4 to 6 feet high. Together, two "buddies" would mine out the coal in the room.

considered to be cost-effective. Deaths and injuries from shooting off the solid could simply be marked down as an added expense of mining coal. Likewise, custom placed the responsibility for a miner's safety on the miner himself. If a careless, inexperienced, or lazy miner chose to use too much powder or poor tamping materials, or if he placed his shots incorrectly, he had no one but himself to blame.

DESPITE THE DANGERS inherent in coal mining, most miners liked their occupation. Coal mining was a rough sort of craft work. To mine coal successfully, miners needed to master a multitude of tasks. These skills were handed down through generations of coal diggers. Fathers taught sons, older men guided younger, brothers instructed brothers. Miners took pride in





Mine workers commonly ate underground as the dust and smoke of the noon shots settled over them. The miners' union worked to abolish the noon firing. Here, Iowa miners with dinner buckets, Smoky Hollow Coal Mine, 1890s.

their skills. Their earnings, and their very lives, depended on their own skills and the skills of their fellow workers.

In Iowa, the room and pillar system of mining was the most commonly used. Two miners — called buddies — customarily worked together, separated by distance and darkness from the other miners. The two buddies got out the coal in their own manner. Assigned a section of the mine to work, they would begin

blasting and digging out the coal to form their "room." As they removed the coal from the face, this room would eventually become about 24 to 30 feet wide and 120 to 150 feet long. In the Lost Creek area, the height of the coal seam from floor to roof ranged from 4 to 6 feet. In other parts of Iowa, the seams of coal might be as low as 18 inches or as high as 12 feet. Rooms were separated by supporting walls of unmined coal 8 to 10 feet thick called "pillars," with



breakthroughs cut between adjoining rooms for air circulation. Miners' work involved much more than drilling the blasting holes, placing and firing shots, and loading coal into pit cars. They needed to test roofs, place timber props, and undertake a variety of other tasks in order to protect life and limb.

To a large extent, the miner was his own boss. The mine foreman — or "pit boss" — visited the miners' working places infrequently, once a day at the most. The boss might make suggestions about safety or other mat-

ters, but he would have been stepping beyond his customary authority if he ever tried to issue commands to a coal digger. During the era when coal was loaded by hand, a miner set his own pace of work. Coal mining was not like factory work. A miner's work was not regulated by a moving chain or speeding belt. Yet, for all the freedom miners had — and they had a great deal, indeed — their lives and well-being were constantly in peril.

Coal mining was and is a dangerous occupation. During 1901 in the United States, coal mining took the lives of 1,467 men and boys and another 3,643 suffered serious injuries. In Iowa during the same period, 29 mine workers were killed, and another 59 injured. Roof falls, in which loose coal, rock, or slate crushed the men and boys working below, normally accounted for the largest number of deaths and injuries in Iowa coal mines. Injuries and deaths also resulted from a multitude of other causes, from being run over by pit cars to falling down mine shafts. A list compiled by one of Iowa's three state mine inspectors for separate non-fatal mining accidents in his district during the first half of 1901 illustrates the range of injuries sustained: "hand crushed, leg broken, breast bruised, head cut, foot injured, left ankle fractured, three fingers crushed, arm broken, toes crushed, external injuries, arms fractured, two ribs broken." Casualty lists like this were commonplace. Not included in these lists were the long-term consequences of working in foul air and breathing coal dust — then called "miner's asthma" and now known as black lung disease.

Even the disaster at Lost Creek — the worst in Iowa's coal-mining history — paled in comparison with other coal-mining disasters that year. At Coal Creek, Tennessee, on May 19, 1902, a mine explosion claimed 184 lives. A mine explosion at Johnstown, Pennsylvania, on July 10, 1902, killed 112 mine workers.

THE DISASTER at Lost Creek created widespread consternation in Iowa coalfields. Within days of the tragedy, John P. White, secretary-treasurer of the state miners' union, let it be known that the union intended to demand changes in the manner in which shots were fired in Iowa coal

In America and Europe, laborers fought unfair or dangerous working conditions. "The Strike" by Robert Koehler depicts angry workers confronting the owner.

mines. Then, one week after the disaster, as many as fifteen hundred mine workers in Mahaska and Monroe counties left the pits in wildcat strikes, demanding that the mine operators allow them to hire special shot-examiners to examine all shots, and shot-firers to fire the shots at the end of the workday, after everyone else had left the mine. This would allow the smoke and coal dust to settle overnight before the workers returned and, in the event of an explosion, would limit the number of workers who would be killed or injured. At this time in most Iowa mines, the miners fired their shots twice a day. The first was at noon just before they would quit work to eat their noon meal, which they commonly ate underground while the smoke and dust settled. The second shot was in the afternoon at closing time.

After striking for a week, the miners gained a partial victory. As a stop-gap measure, they were allowed temporarily to hire shot-examiners and shot-firers, who would be paid by the miners themselves. But the system of shooting twice a day was to remain unchanged. The union and the operators agreed that the issue would be addressed again at the upcoming annual joint meeting of miners and operators in March.

Statewide joint meetings of miners and operators had become an annual event in Iowa only since 1900. At these meetings the state coal operators' association and the state miners' union endeavored to set wage scales and resolve other differences through the process of collective bargaining. By 1902 the state miners' union was the most militant, if not also the largest, trade union in Iowa. The Iowa miners were members of District 13, United Mine Workers of America. The U.M.W. of A. (as it was then designated) claimed a membership of more than 230,000 in 1902 and was widely recognized as the strongest labor organization in the country. District 13, which encompassed within its jurisdiction all the coal miners and mine laborers in Iowa and the northern tier of counties of Missouri, could boast of eighty-three local unions and 12,015 members in good standing. Young men led the



organization. John P. Reese, age twenty-five, was district president, having been elected to that post two years earlier. Reese had grown up in the mines and with the union. He entered the mines at age nine in his native Ohio and joined the U.M.W. of A. in 1890, at the time of its organization. John P. White, thirty-two,

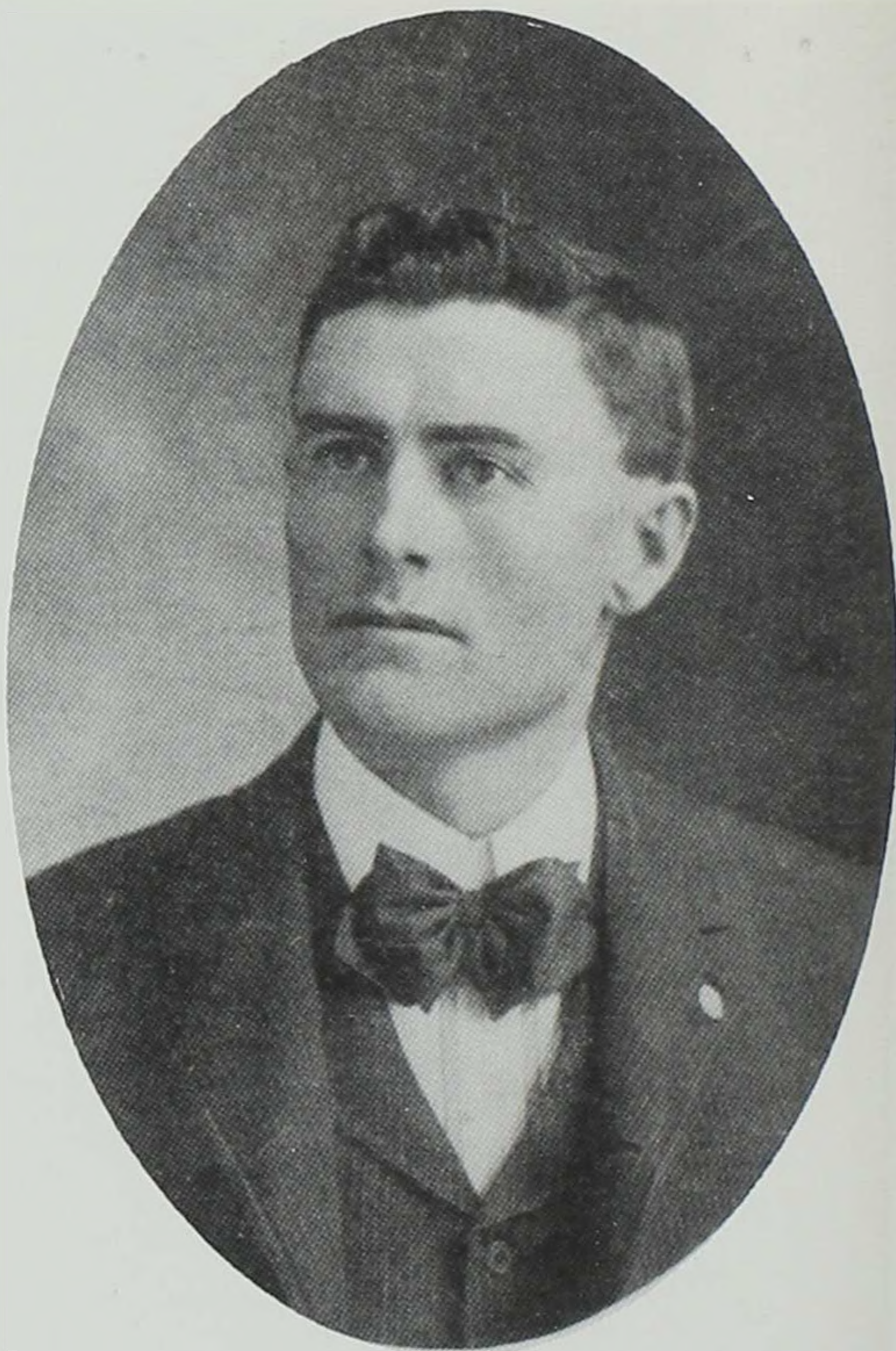
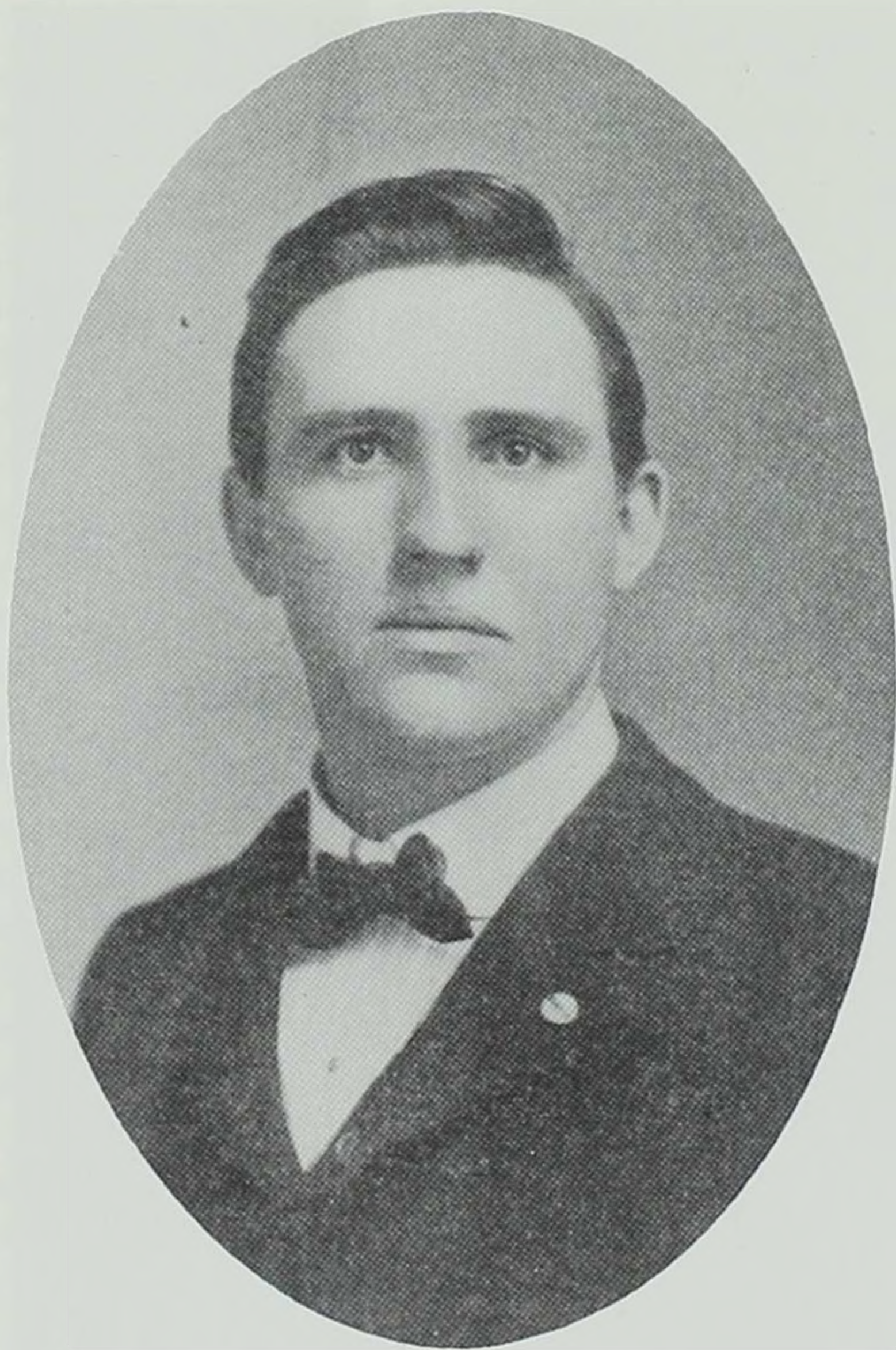


COURTESY RON ROBERTS

was district secretary-treasurer. Born in Coal Valley, Illinois, in 1870, he had worked continuously in the mines since age fifteen. In 1904 he would be elected district president and in 1912 international president of the U.M.W. of A. and serve in that position for the next five years. The Lost Creek mine disaster would

provide both White and Reese an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership abilities.

The Iowa General Assembly was in session in 1902 at the time of the disaster at Lost Creek. Within days of the tragedy, Representative Nate E. Kendall of Monroe County introduced a concurrent resolution calling on



Miners and union officers John P. Reese (left) and John P. White served on the Lost Creek investigative commission. They differed from other commission members in recommending that shot-firers, as well as shot-examiners, be hired.

the governor to create a special commission to investigate the causes of explosions in Iowa coal mines and recommend means for their prevention. In February, Governor Albert B. Cummins appointed such a commission, composed of two miners, the three state mine inspectors, and two coal operators. Reese and White were the two miners appointed.

The commission visited Lost Creek and issued its report within the required eight days. Evidence the commission uncovered at Lost Creek agreed with earlier speculation and pointed to the conclusion that miner Andrew Pash had fired the shot that brought on the explosion and led to the twenty deaths. Pash had been working in his room in the northeast portion of the mine when he fired a heavily charged shot. The shot ignited the coal dust stirred up in his room, which then sent a column of flame sweeping through the east por-

tion and up the hoisting and air shafts. Pash was himself killed by the force of the explosion. He left a young widow and a small daughter to mourn his fate.

The commission recommended changes in the state's mining laws, the principal one being that competent shot-examiners be employed in all coal mines in Iowa where coal was shot off the solid. These examiners would have the power to prohibit the charging and firing of any shot they judged to be unsafe. Reese and White accepted all the proposed changes and signed the report, but they thought it did not go far enough. The two miners filed a supplementary report recommending that all shots be fired by men hired for that purpose, and that shots be fired only when all other workers were out of the mine. The General Assembly considered several pieces of mining legislation during the 1902 session. Finally on April 11 they

adopted an act patterned after the commission's recommendations that compelled the operators to employ shot-examiners. All efforts to require coal operators to hire shot-firers were rejected.

Even before the General Assembly took final action, the miners had sought a remedy through collective bargaining. On March 11, the miners and operators met in Des Moines at their annual joint meeting to hammer out a joint agreement for 1902. As always the wage scale was the principal concern. But on this occasion, the miners made the hiring of examiners and firers one of their major demands. The Lost Creek disaster had so awed many of the miners that some of them — including union president Reese himself, who had previously argued that shot-firers were unnecessary — now insisted that they would never again fire a shot unless it was as a shot-firer and unless all other workers were out of the mine. The question of hiring and paying examiners

and firers became the central issue in the 1902 negotiations.

After more than two weeks of meetings, an agreement was reached on March 26. First, the operators agreed to hire and pay shot-examiners in mines where the coal was shot off the solid. Second, the miners could, if they so desired, hire and pay the shot-firers. When satisfactory arrangements could be made between the operators and miners, the same person could serve in both capacities and the operators and miners would each bear half the cost. With settlement of this issue through collective bargaining, the operators and miners soon resolved other differences with little difficulty. Eventually the practice of miners hiring and paying shot-firers and firing only once a day was established everywhere in Iowa where coal was shot off the solid. John P. White would later write that it had had "such a splendid effect upon the miners that under no circumstances would either operator or miner care to



COURTESY RON ROBERTS

The mules that pulled the pit cars lived in underground stables and seldom saw the light of day.

return to the old system that was marked by death, disease, and slaughter."

THE DEATHS of the twenty mine workers at Lost Creek left fourteen women widowed and at least thirty-nine children fatherless. Even before the dead were buried, funds began flowing into Lost Creek to aid the victims. John P. White gave the local union \$200 from District 13 funds and asked for authorization later. U.M.W. of A. Local Union No. 325 of Lost Creek quickly assumed responsibility for handling and distributing the monies on the local level. Labor organizations from across Iowa established subscription funds. The Ottumwa Trades and Labor Assembly handled the raising of funds in the Ottumwa area. Another fund was set up in Des Moines. Typographical Union No. 118 of Des Moines gave \$50, far surpassing the \$10 given by the *Iowa State Register*. Local miners' unions were the heaviest contributors. Within days of the disaster, the union at Hilton raised \$800, the one at Youngstown gave \$100, and a small local at Foster sent \$25 and offered to raise more as needed.

Contributions of this sort were not insignificant. In 1902 a mine laborer in Mahaska County received \$2.25 for working eight hours underground in the dark and dust of a coal mine. Owing largely to slack work, a coal miner working in Iowa during this same period aver-

aged only about \$450 per year for his labors. The women and children who depended upon the earnings of the men and boys killed and injured at Lost Creek had little recourse except to rely upon the charity of others. In 1902 workers in the United States were without the protection of workers' compensation laws. (Iowa did not adopt such a law until 1913.) Little more than a month after the disaster Secretary-Treasurer White could report that twelve widows and twenty-nine children were depending on the union for support. During the same period District 13 had received \$2,243 for the children and widows of Lost Creek.

Lost Creek Shaft No. 2 reopened within a few days of the explosion. It would continue in operation for a few more years. By 1907, the Lost Creek mines had been abandoned, the top works torn down, and the machinery shipped elsewhere. The miners and their families moved away. The houses in which they had lived were torn from their foundations and moved to new locations.

Coal still lay buried beneath the surface. Eventually strip miners would come into the area and rip open the surface of the earth in search of the riches buried below. This would obliterate the physical remains of the former town site. All that remained was a dual legacy—the horror of the Lost Creek disaster and the safer mining practices won by the mine workers. As Harry Booth would say many years later, "You got to go ahead and get killed before you get anything done." □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Material for the article was drawn primarily from newspaper sources. The most helpful newspapers were: *Oskaloosa Daily Herald*, *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, *Iowa State Register*, and *Eddyville Tribune*. The *United Mine Workers Journal* was of special value in tracing the history of District 13, providing biographical information about union leaders, and presenting the views of rank-and-file union members about dust explosions. Two especially useful books dealing extensively with mine explosions were: James T. Beard, *Mine Gasses and Explosions* (New York, 1908), and H. B. Humphrey, *Historical Summary of Coal-Mine Explosions in the United States, 1810-1958* (Washington, 1960). One of the more useful books dealing with coal mining and the miners' unions was: McAlister Coleman, *Men and Coal* (New York, 1943). The State Mine Inspectors' *Biennial Reports* (Des Moines,

1882-1917) were of particular value in providing statistical information about mines and mine accidents in Iowa. Harry Booth's oral history interview provided an eyewitness account of the Lost Creek disaster and of life in Iowa mining towns. I wish to offer my special thanks to Mark Smith, Secretary-Treasurer, Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, for giving me access to the interview and authorizing its use for the purposes of this article. Mary Bennett, Audio-Visual Archivist, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, first suggested this article and provided expert assistance in helping with its completion. John Jacobs of Oskaloosa and Rose Hill, Iowa, shared with me his knowledge of the burial sites of Lost Creek victims and gave me use of some of his extensive research notes dealing with coal mines and coal mining in the Oskaloosa and Eddyville areas.



Iowa mine workers' homes. The company-owned houses were often moved to new camps after a mine was closed.

Among the tragedies of the Lost Creek explosion were the number of adolescent boys who were injured, and the number of wives and children who were widowed and left fatherless.

LIST OF INJURED

Name	Age	Job	Injury
Matt Aday, Jr.	?	trapper	burned
William A. Booth	15	trapper	burned
Harry Darrock	?	driver	burned
George Fothergill, Jr.	49	trapper	burned
William Fothergill	12	trapper	burned
George Gogo	?	miner	lungs affected by afterdamp
William Harvey	29	miner	lungs affected by afterdamp
John Jerkins	?	cager	burned
Chas. Lannan	?	driver	burned
Jonas Mabie, Jr.	16	driver	leg broken, head hurt, burned
Oliver Mabie	13	trapper	arm broken, burned
Frank Secress	?	miner	arm broken
Asa Sullivan	20	dumper	burned
Ed Swanson	36	driver	back injured, bruised, burned

NOTES: Although not listed in the state mine inspectors' report, John Wignall, age 25, was listed in most newspapers as among the injured. William A. Booth was the brother of Harry Booth, who witnessed the event at age 9 and later recalled the incident in an oral history interview. George Fothergill, Jr., had eight children, including two sons who worked in the mines. William Harvey was a black miner, born in Missouri. He and his wife, Millie, had two children. Jonas Mabie, Jr., had been born in Wales, and his brother Oliver was born in Iowa. Ed Swanson had come from Sweden to the United States in 1885.

SOURCES FOR BOTH LISTS: Compiled from *Eleventh Biennial Report of the State Mine Inspectors* (1903), the 1900 federal census, and from accounts in the *Oskaloosa Herald*, *Des Moines Daily News*, *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, and other Iowa newspapers in January 1902. Spelling of names varies in each source.

Key to artifacts on cover (from left):

1. Powder can, galvanized steel. Used to carry and measure blasting powder. Ca. 1920. Loan.
2. Common miner's hat and lamp. Canvas hat with leather bill, and brass Autolite carbide lamp with homemade reflector. Ca. 1920. Museum #8642.
3. Falling wedge (a modified pick head). Used to wedge between the coal seam and the mine roof to encourage the seam to fall. Moingona, Iowa, ca. 1940. Museum #1989.57.2.

4. Miner's pick, hardwood handle and detachable steel pick head. Pick heads varied in length; this is a shorter version. Heads that became dull during the workday were replaced with spare heads and taken to the local blacksmith for sharpening or re-forming. Ca. 1920. Museum #i8468.

5. Candle spike, steel. Handmade candle holder that could be pushed into a timber or hooked on a support. Loan.

6. Oil lamp, steel. Provided open flame light. Normally affixed to a hat or hooked on a support. Ca. 1890. Loan.

7. Safety lamp, brass, glass, and steel. A variation on the Davy safety lamp developed in the early nineteenth century to monitor

LIST OF FATALITIES

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children
John Berto	?	single	4
Sylvester Crayton	28	single	
Charles B. Crews	31	wife Edna, age 20	1 (age 2½)
George Denechok	29	married	
John Elder	35	wife Alice, age 26	2
Dan "Boone" Fish	30	wife Nellie	2 (infant and 2 years)
Russell Fish	27	wife, age 23	2 (infant and 4 years)
Mike Fox, Jr.	18	single	
Mike Fox, Sr.	48	wife Sarah, age 40	7 (ages 7-22)
Frank Gasperi	40	wife Cattarena, age 34	2
Joe Gasperi	32	wife Orsola, age 36	4
Alexander Gray	24	single	
James Humphrey	34	married	
Sam Humphrey	34	wife Amanda, age 40	5 (ages 2½-14)
John Kovall	47	wife Elizabeth	4
John Martin	29	married	3
Jack McNeeley	20	single	
Andrew Pash	33	wife Elizabeth, age 22	3 (1?)
James Stovall	30	married	
David Walters	40	widowed	

NOTES: Andrew Pash, the miner who fired the shot that caused the explosion, had come from Hungary in 1888. Mike Fox, Sr., president of the local United Mine Workers of America union, was found next to his son. According to the newspaper accounts, he had a coat draped over his son's head to try to protect him from the dangerous fumes. The Gasperi brothers were also found in each other's arms. Sylvester Crayton and James Stovall were black miners. Stovall, born in Tennessee, was "living alone" in 1900. A special train carried the body of David Walters, who had been a weigh boss, to What Cheer for his funeral and burial.

—Lists compiled by Mary Bennett, guest curator of SHSI labor exhibit

the amount of blackdamp (or carbon dioxide) and provide a safe light source. Ca. 1900. Loan.

8. Wet and dry bulb psychrometer, brass, glass, and ivory. Made by John Davis and Son, Ltd., of England in the late nineteenth century. Used to calculate the relative humidity within a mine as an indication of the potential for explosive conditions. Museum #i8466.

—William M. Johnson, SHSI museum curator

Museum exhibits

The previous article and the following oral history interview are published here in conjunction with a new museum exhibit at the

State Historical Building in Des Moines. "Badges of Pride: Symbols and Images of American Labor" is a traveling exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution. The exhibit examines Americans' attitudes towards work and workers. Iowa materials have been selected to augment the exhibit, and a series of films and lectures has been scheduled. The exhibit will be open October 2, 1990 through January 6, 1991.

Additional exhibits related to Iowa coal mining and labor are on display at the John L. Lewis Memorial Museum of Mining and Labor, in Lucas, Iowa. Born near Lucas, Lewis was president of the United Mine Workers of America for forty years and helped found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.). The Lewis museum is open June through November.

“You Got to Go Ahead and Get Killed”

Lost Creek Remembered



BY HARRY BOOTH



Editor's note: As a child, Harry Booth lived at the Lost Creek coal camp, site of the 1902 disaster. He worked as a miner in various Iowa coal camps and later moved to Des Moines and was active in the union movement in the 1930s. In April 1978 he was interviewed by Paul Kelso as part of the Iowa Labor History Oral Project. These edited excerpts, prepared for publication by Merle Davis, are from a much longer interview. We thank Mark Smith, Secretary-Treasurer of the Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, for permission to publish this interview.

I was born in 1892. My first memories about anything would be about five years later. I remember us moving to Lost Creek. Then I remember that I didn't see my dad. He worked such long hours in the mine that he'd be gone before daylight and he'd come home after dark. I would look out the window at dark when they was quitting their jobs and see pit lamps coming from the mines like walking lights.

I remember one time when my dad had his leg broke. It was from a cave-in in the mine. There was no insurance like the people have today who work under unions, where they're covered, and the company is responsible for their safety. We didn't have nothing like that. No insurance at all. I know we got some help. I never noticed us ever being hungry. I don't recall where the doctor come from or who paid him. Later on I do know that the company doctors become the thing. The company checked a dollar a month out of your paycheck. The company doctor then took care of you. That was the medical service you had. He took care of you from his home. He lived in a little better place than the rest of us. Supervisors

Mule drivers at the Lockman Coal Camp in the late nineteenth century.

would live in pretty nice houses. They had three or four nice houses for the people who run the company store.

I recall when I got big enough to go to the company store for groceries for my mother. You took a check that was issued by the company. It worked like credit at the company store. It was a punch card. You could get a five dollar check or ones in different denominations, all issued by the company. They were really extending credit to you on what you would make. You was eating ahead of your paycheck. If young guys would come to the camp looking for work, they wouldn't have anything. There'd also be men who would come there and bring their wives and kids with them. They'd go to the company store, and they'd outfit them on credit. The company store furnished everything. They could sell you a suit of

They were really extending credit to you on what you would make. You was eating ahead of your paycheck.

clothes. They'd measure you and send away for it. They sold pit pants, tools, everything.

The normal thing would be for most of the miners to get their statements of their earnings at the end of a two-week period. It would tell how much coal you dug, what you got for it, how much stuff you bought from the company store, and how much was deducted. The whole thing would be deducted, including these checks for your food and other stuff. You'd get what they called a snake. You'd get a little wiggly worm down at the bottom where it says what you was to draw, because you didn't have anything. You was living without money, just the store check.

There was that struggle all the time to try to get ahead. You're living in a company house, and your rent was checked out of that too. They didn't have to do anything to these houses. Most of them were just barely four rooms.

Some of them were set on the hillsides, and they'd put a horse under the house, like a little barn. When we moved to Lost Creek, the house we moved into didn't have steps to the backyard. When we had to go to the bathroom, which would be out in the back end of the lot, I remember my parents letting me down by taking hold of my armpits. As we got more stove

I remember when our furniture, the cupboards and things like that, was made out of store boxes.

ashes, they built up so that you could walk out and step on the ashes and then go down. My dad built some steps after that. I remember that much. That to me was just normal. My folks made things comfortable. I remember when our furniture, the cupboards and things like that, was made out of store boxes. Everything was kind of a homemade deal. We didn't have furniture like we've had in later years. That was before the unions.

I remember very well when they put the calendar up, and it was 1900. It was around 1899 or 1900 that I think the union movement

Black lung disease was probably a minimal thing then, because it takes so long getting a guy. These guys would get sick right off the job, right there.

began to pick up in that area. The first I can remember of the union would be before 1899. That's when the miners used to have to sneak out to go to the union meetings. We moved over to Pekay, which was another coal mining camp.

Then, when a miner worked, he would shoot



Children in an Iowa coal mining camp, 1900-1910. Dangerous working conditions in the mines too often led to such children becoming fatherless. By age twelve, the boys would be allowed to work in the mines.



his own shots, and he'd shoot twice a day. Once in the evening before they went home, they'd light their shots. And then at noon the next day, they would light shots and shoot while all the men were in the mine. If you was digging coal there, you'd drill your hole and fire your shot at noon. Then you'd eat your lunch and get back to work. One of the biggest gripes of the guys at that time was that they had to work in

A miners' hall at Brazil, Iowa. Used for social and union gatherings, such halls were often the only buildings that were not company-owned in coal camps.

The companies didn't furnish you powder. They didn't furnish you dynamite. . . . They didn't furnish you light. You bought your wick.

this smoke. A lot of them would get sick. Black lung disease was probably a minimal thing then, because it takes so long getting a guy. These guys would get sick right off the job, right there. Guys would get worried about if their shots had produced enough coal or not, and they'd go back to take a look after they'd

had supper. That meant that they was half the time in the mine, or more than half. And they'd go back on Sunday. There was no extra pay for it, because you worked by the ton. That's what my dad was doing. When they started to get a union and got a contract, then they began to get things done.

IT WASN'T ALL a dreary situation. After they built the union hall, they'd have a dance, I'd say, at least once or twice a month. There'd be a drummer and a violinist or something for the music, and they'd have these square dances. Normally, you couldn't buy ice cream in that town. But when they had a dance, they would get a great big freezer full of ice cream from Eddyville or some of those smaller little country towns, and they would sell ice cream. They'd celebrate the holidays. We used to go to Oskaloosa for the circus. The mines sometimes would shut down, and everybody would go to the circus. I saw my first electric light when my dad took us to Oska-

loosa. It was in a drugstore. They had them fans in the ceiling. And that was great.

The camp had a baseball team. The company was real liberal. They bought the uniforms for the ball team. I was the mascot for the team. They'd get something like a bus pulled by horses, and we'd go. They'd have teams in Avery and Lockman and Coalfield. Pekay'd have a ball team. They'd have ball games on Sunday. They even had a band at Pekay.

We had a literary society where we'd have performances on the stage. They'd act things out. The school kids would have programs, and they'd go to the union hall and march and get up on the stage and recite poetry and all that kind of stuff. My mother and father sang at programs they had there. The community was pretty active.

I WAS SIXTEEN years old when I started in the mines. Even then the companies didn't furnish you powder. They didn't furnish you dynamite. They didn't furnish you fuse. You had to buy your own tools. You had to have crowbars and drilling machines. You had to pay a fee for the company blacksmith to sharpen your picks and stuff. They didn't furnish you light. You bought your wick. You bought your lard oil for your lamp, which was what the wick went down into. You bought your own clothes, and it took a tremendous

Sometimes you couldn't get your lamps to stay lit because there was no air in the mines.

amount of work clothes. Rough work. It was dirty work. What would a guy think of going in a factory today if he had to pay for the lights? Or if he had to pay for the heat? The company sold all this stuff and made a profit off it.

Sometimes you couldn't get your lamps to stay lit because there was no air in the mine. The union would call for the mine inspectors.

They would decide that we ought to have a mine inspector come out to find out what's going on. The company knew about it. The company'd start to work on the problem that night. They'd get everything worked out. They'd put some curtains up to the breakthroughs to bring the air closer to the face. When the mine inspector got there, he'd find better air there than they had anyplace else in the mine. The company'd never get caught. That's one of the things that still goes on, even where there are unions. Even after John L. Lewis got in, a lot of these things still never got handled. You had mine inspectors that was

The mine engineer blew the whistle that there was something wrong. He just kept blowing it.

pretty foxy with going to the boss's house when he'd come to the coal camp. It was quite a while before you got away from the company having all the favors. You'd have to take and pry slate off a guy's body in order to say that the place hadn't been timbered properly. If you'd notify the company, they'd say, "Yeah, we'll get that down on the list, and we'll get around to it." You got to go ahead and get killed before you get anything done.

I RECALL we were living in the last house we lived in in Lost Creek when the explosion happened. The mine engineer blew the whistle that there was something wrong. He just kept blowing it. The explosion was January 24, 1902. My brother was working there, and my dad was working there, and I was going to school. The mine was real close to the house.

A dust explosion caused it. People were coming over that didn't know how to dig coal. If you drill a hole on the solid and light it, instead of working and bringing the coal over, the shot

may blow out a place three or four inches wide. It wouldn't bring no coal out at all. They had a name for it. They call it a squealer. It would create a hot wind and would raise the dust in the mine. And then the dust exploded. This was the scientific way they figured out what caused the explosion. Everything was wrecked, the mine shaft and the wheels on the top. The mine cage couldn't go up and down. Of course, the fan was blown out and couldn't operate.

There was a phone between the company office and the mine, and that's what started people to going there. Miners from all the other places, they went over there. They just left home and came over there. Everybody was helping. It was all voluntary. They worked for nothing. They went in and helped them get this mine straightened out, and get the bodies out of there. As soon as the word spread, miners come from all over. Our house was full. Our barn was full. The yard was full during all this excitement. My dad went down, along with so many, many other guys, hunting these guys up after the explosion.

I remember standing on top watching them fix the thing on the cage to lay the bodies on and go down and get them. My dad found where a father had his arm around his son's neck and his coat around him, and all bundled up, both of

They found some of them sitting in the mine. They'd be sitting there with bread in their hands, and it was toasted.

them. They found some of them sitting in the mine. They'd be sitting there with bread in their hands, and it was toasted. They was eating their lunch. They was the ones that got the blaze part of it. There was other guys that wasn't burned at all. Most of the guys smothered. They died of what they called "afterdamp." A light couldn't even burn in it. There was no oxygen there.

My brother got burned, because he was on the bottom of the mine when it blowed up. The guys on the bottom of the shaft that my brother was with used to come up for their lunch. All the young mule drivers were at the bottom. They'd come up for lunch, and they'd eat on

There was women there helping us with [my brother] when they was notified that both their husband and their son was killed.

top, and go back down again. But they hadn't got up. They was waiting for the cage to bring them up. They all got burned. We didn't even know them. I didn't even know my neighbor when he stopped at the gate with my brother. Drivers wore a pad on their back like a blacksmith would wear a leather apron, only it was in reverse, because their back was against the coal cars. They had one of them over my brother's head. When they got my brother in the house, they was putting goose grease on his arms. Women come from all over. There was women there helping us with him when they was notified that both their husband and their son was killed.

COME HOME for lunch at noon that day, and my mother was cooking what would really be my dad's breakfast, because he was working nights driving entries. They would work four men in two shifts, a night shift and a day shift. The guys working together in the same entry or in the same places were called buddies. My dad had been working on the day shift. But the wife of one of the guys was expecting a baby. He come to my dad and said, "Would you change shifts with me, because we're expecting this week, and I want to be



COURTESY RON ROBERTS

The miner and his buddy were responsible for certain safety measures, including placing the timber props.

home." He didn't want to be away at night. So my dad said, "Okay." My dad's buddy was standing there with him, and he said, "Well, if you're going to switch with him, I'll just stay

They drew straws to see who got to be in the hearses and who didn't. They had to carry some of them on beer trucks.

with you. We'll just change, both of us." This is what saved my dad from getting killed. The two buddies that went on the day shift, the one that was expecting the child and his buddy, they were both killed.

They brought the guys out of the mine, and they set them in the company store on a plat-

form that had previously been set up for the winter with stoves and stuff that you could buy from the company. They took this stuff off, and they laid these bodies there so they could come and make identifications. It was like a mortuary. All these bodies were laid out in the company store, and then the wives were brought down to pick out their sons or fathers or brothers.

When they had the funeral, they couldn't get fifteen or twenty hearses. I think there was about two, maybe three, hearses. They drew straws to see who got to be in the hearses and who didn't. They had to carry some of them on beer trucks. Drays they called them. Horse drawn. I know there was one father and son who was buried in Oskaloosa. But most of them were buried in the cemetery at Eddyville. Their graves are marked. I remember watching the funeral go by. I didn't get to go to the funeral, but I remember standing and looking. It got so cold that your breath would freeze on the window. □

Part 3 in a series

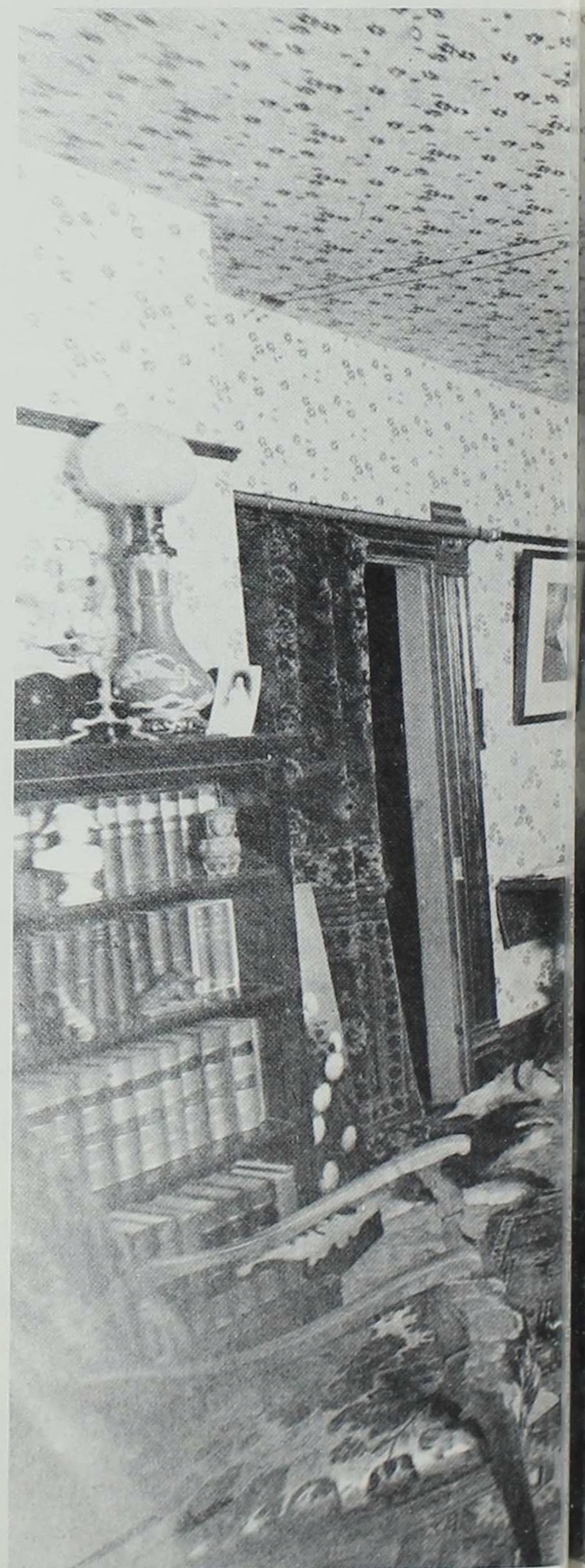
Interpreting the Image

How to Understand Historical Photographs

by Loren N. Horton

INTERPRETING A PHOTOGRAPH of an interior requires an eye for detail and often an understanding of the customs and attitudes of the time period. This image of a late Victorian (1880–1900) parlor of a middle-class family is a rich source of information about late Victorian furnishings. But perhaps more interesting are the anomalies — those elements of this image that do not seem to follow the customs and thereby suggest insights about the people in this unidentified photograph.

An understanding of the function of Victorian parlors will help us interpret the photograph. Certain elements are typical of such rooms; others present questions. To begin, one might list all the furnishings and features of the room. This method helps the viewer distinguish details and, in this case, demonstrates the abundance of objects in Victorian parlors. (From our 1990 point of view, Victorian parlors were over-furnished, but we must avoid allowing our own taste to interfere with judgments about what should and should not have been in the room.) The Victorian parlor was a special room that was not used often and probably only for formally receiving guests. It was not a room





COURTESY THE AUTHOR

in which to relax. Sitting rooms more often served the purpose of today's living room or family room.

Clues about the People

The woman seated in a chair beside a small table appears to be doing some sort of handwork, perhaps sewing. Women often sat in their parlors, doing handwork or expecting callers. Hence there is no real contradiction in this woman using the chair, the table, and the room for this apparent purpose.

The man seated at the elaborate piano on a bench or stool, however, raises questions. His pose is towards the camera, away from the piano. He is not even making a motion of playing the instrument. Women and children were supposed to demonstrate some proficiency in music and other artistic endeavors, but men were mostly supposed to make a living at some occupation that took them out of the house. If this were an artistic, musical, or literary household, we might suppose that other manifestations of such talent would be visible. No such artifacts appear that indicate creative production rather than decoration. The man is not really out of place in the photograph, but he does appear to be posing in a room that is not his usual habitat. He might more likely be in his smoking room.

Children were seldom allowed in Victorian parlors, unless they were brought in on special occasions to perform for guests or at holiday time to open presents. Here, however, one child is seated in a chair and another crawls on the rug. Perhaps a young girl would be seated in a small chair beside her mother's chair, to learn handwork skills from her role model. But even if we accept the notion that the older child might belong in the parlor on occasion for special purposes, it is much harder to accept the presence of the younger child in the room. Young children were usually confined to the nursery, where they were cared for by nursemaids (common to even middle-class families because of the availability of cheap immigrant labor). Note that the child's toys are scattered about on the rug. This is surely a condition that would have been unacceptable in any but the most casual Victorian household. We therefore

question the posing of this photograph, and why this room was chosen if the younger child and toys were to be included.

Even more unlikely is the presence of the dog. Although it provides a wonderful illustration of the difficulty of photographing animals in the days of long exposure time (we note that the dog moved and is blurred in the photograph), animals were not commonly allowed in parlors. No matter how fond the Victorians were of their pets, there were places and times for them, and the parlor was not one of these.

Clues about the Furnishings

Although the room furnishings are not solely functional, they are in accordance with the numerous etiquette guides and furnishing handbooks of the late Victorian period. The sculptures, framed photographs, prints, paintings, many pieces of furniture, vases, cushions, and shelves are all items expected in a middle-class home. The wallpaper is a bit unusual because the same pattern covers the walls, both below and above the picture rail, and the ceiling. Wallpaper was frequently used on these surfaces, but the same pattern was seldom repeated in all three places. Carpeting covered with additional rugs was common, though the mixture of these particular patterns was not recommended in most furnishing guides. This either indicates some individuality by the family or the availability of these rugs as convenient purchases.

In the right corner, the sofa, or arrangement of cushions, rugs, afghans, and animal skins, is of particular interest. Such arrangements were sometimes referred to as a "Turkish corners" or "cozy corners." Great dust catchers, they were not always created for people to actually sit upon. Sometimes they were used as a backdrop for *tableaux vivants*, in which Victorians would don costumes and strike classical or exotic poses for entertainment. The Turkish corner was basically a sort of artistic rendering that required yet more conspicuous consumption. A Victorian family with money spent it in ways that allowed the neighbors to know that they had money. Displaying an abundance of objects demonstrated to visitors that a family could afford such purchases. It is this charac-

teristic of the Victorian middle class that explains the period's flamboyant architectural extravaganzas, the enormous number of items used in furnishing rooms, and the elaborate fashions in clothing.

Assuming this room is indeed a parlor and intended for entertaining, there is a curious lack of chairs for visitors. Others may be behind the camera, but any ornate chairs would probably have been included in the photograph. Were straight chairs carried into the room when the lady of the house was "at home" (the term that meant she was receiving guests)? Most parlors had both comfortable chairs and uncomfortable chairs. Visitors were not necessarily expected to stay very long, and placement of uncomfortable straight chairs tended to hurry them along instead of allowing them to linger over tea. Etiquette books of the period, for instance, dictated that guests should not stay more than ten minutes during a "New Year's Day Call."

The woodwork on the two doors and two windows has the typical "bull's-eye" block at the top of each post, articulating the lintels. The posts and lintels appear to be fluted with machine planing, in a way that is very typical of the millwork readily available in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Portiere treatment of the door on the left is also typical, as are the curtains and drapes on the two windows. Picture rails were common, although this one is unusual in that it is level with the woodwork (rather than above) and continues across the chimney.

The bookcase on the left is an interesting feature. Many items are placed on the top, and the shelves serve double duty as "what not" shelves for small vases and busts. It must have been hard to get a book out, but perhaps the books were meant to be seen and not read. Because of the uniform book bindings, the books look suspiciously like the kind wealthy Victorians bought "by the yard" for decoration rather than for reading. Lighting in the room is not really ideal for reading or sewing. (Note the round-globe lamp on the bookcase. When lit, it would seem dangerously close to the wall-paper.)

The stovepipe hole in the chimney is covered with an elaborate feather or fern arrange-

ment and some sort of pendant. The covered hole suggests that the photograph was taken during the warm months of the year. If a stove was set up in the room in the colder seasons, then we might question the placement of the grand piano. The stovepipe would have passed directly over the lid of the grand piano. Grand pianos were costly. Would those who could have afforded one really have wanted the heat, soot, and danger of sparks and fire coming that close to such an expensive item?

Clues about the Lighting

The lighting fixture on the ceiling resembles a gas light, but there seem to be wires leading to it. Does this mean that the house was originally piped for gas and has since been converted to electricity? The type of fixture on the right wall appears in many catalogs of gas lighting fixtures in the latter nineteenth century. No wires are visible leading to it. Does this mean that both gas and electric lighting are used in the house at the same time? The two visible lamps could be of either variety, or use kerosene or other fuels.

Clues about the Photographer

Another curious aspect of this photograph is the angle at which the view is taken. How is this particular view and angle possible? And why? Why would a family want this view, which distorts the general impression and does not flatter either the furnishings or the people?

These thoughts lead us to wonder whether the intent (of the photographer or the subjects) was to have a photographic record of the people or to have a photographic record of the furnishings and decor. Photographs of furnished but unoccupied rooms are common in the late Victorian period, and reveal middle-class pride in conspicuous consumption. Including people somewhat lessens the importance of the furnishings, and this particular pose does not show off the people to their best advantage. The photographer's effort seems to have failed to do justice to either the room or the people.

But are we imposing our late-twentieth-century values and ideas on another time and

place? Would a formal parlor seem warmer and more homelike if people are in it? Perhaps the people are really the center of attention, with the furnishings of their home as mere background. One observation that supports this idea is the careful positioning of the people. They could not have been more clearly centered if they had been posed in a studio with props, and the adults seem placed to frame the children.

Conclusions

This photograph is a rich source of information about late Victorian furnishings and an artifact

that would be enormously useful in understanding one's own family or community. The dates and sources of most of the furnishings are clearly traceable through catalogs and identified photographs of Victorian parlors, of which there are hundreds. Yet it is the anomalies — the posing of the people, the inclusion of the children, the lack of chairs for visitors — that intrigue us. We might speculate that this photograph shows a family that has lately risen to middle-class status and still does not quite know what to do or how to act, but does realize that having lots of possessions, in the eyes of Victorian society, is indeed a “good” thing. □

Tips on Storing Negatives of Historical Photographs

by Mary Bennett

In many respects, protecting the original negative is the most important step in the preservation of your photographs. If the negative is properly cared for, multiple copies of an image can be created long after the original photograph has deteriorated. Since color dyes are not permanent, one way to save an image before it fades is to make black and white prints from color negatives.

1. Store negatives separate from prints in archival envelopes or interleaved with rag paper. The emulsion side, which is the dull and non-reflective side of the negative, can be easily damaged. Handle negatives by the edges only as fingerprints can harm the delicate chemical composition.

2. Glass plate negatives, in use from the 1850s to the 1920s, require special attention and care. Handling should be kept to a minimum due to the fragile nature of the glass and emulsion layer. Again, handle the glass plate negatives by the edges only and store vertically in a sturdy archival box or metal drawers — not in stacks. Give the glass plates adequate support as the weight of the glass itself may cause the plates to crack. If

the glass is cracked or broken, use glass of the same size to “sandwich” and support the negative, preventing further damage.

3. Nitrate-based film, introduced in the 1890s and manufactured as recently as 1951, is dangerous because it is sometimes capable of spontaneous combustion. Remove nitrate negatives from the collection immediately as their chemical decomposition will seriously affect other items stored nearby. Nitric acid is formed as the chemicals break down, so store nitrate negatives in paper envelopes. Do not use plastic, which will trap the dangerous gases.

4. In advanced stages of deterioration, the nitrate negatives become brittle or warped and the emulsion may tarnish or become iridescent. One can identify nitrate negatives by trimming a strip of film from the edge and testing it. A lighted match close to the film will ignite it at once with an orange flame. Due to the flammable nature of nitrate film, test any unmarked film before storing it near other negatives or photos. Make prints or duplicate negatives as soon as possible. Kodak Professional Direct

For more information, consult these sources

R. Barry Blackburn, ed., *Art, Society, and Accomplishments: A Treasury of Artistic Homes, Social Life and Culture* (Chicago: Blackburn Co., 1891). A collection of articles giving advice about room furnishings, table decorations, parlor games, and interior decoration.

William Seale, *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors through the Camera's Eye, 1860-1917*, 2nd edition (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1981). Dated photographs of Victorian rooms with descriptions and explanations of features and functions.

Henry T. Williams and Mrs. C. S. Jones, *Beautiful Homes, or Hints in House Furnishing*, Vol. 4 in Williams'

Household Series (New York: Henry T. Williams, 1878). One of hundreds of furnishing guides and etiquette books published in the Victorian era.

Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986). Photographs and illustrations with detailed text outlining styles, colors, and materials used for floors, windows, walls, and ceilings.

Additional useful sources for interpreting and caring for historical photographs appear in Parts 1 and 2 of this series, in the Spring and Summer *Palimpsests*.

Duplicating Film (SO-015) offers good results.

5. After 1935, film manufacturers began to mark or print "safety" on the border of the negative. This "safety" film is more stable than the flimsy nitrate-based films and can be stored without danger. Store these negatives in sleeves made of triacetate, polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene, and label each sleeve. These archivally safe negative files are available in a variety of sizes suitable for 35 mm, 2¼", or 4" × 5" negatives. Strips of negatives can be placed in these sleeves to prevent curling or damage. Slides can be stored in a similar fashion and then housed vertically in file drawers or arranged in binders.

6. Make contact prints or enlargements from glass and film negatives that do not have prints available for viewing. These can be labeled to match the negatives, to simplify the organizing or filing arrangement. Choose a printing paper with a medium contrast and a glossy surface.

7. If a negative is dirty, use professional film cleaner on the non-emulsion side. In the case of glass plate negatives, use distilled water and cotton balls on the glass surface but take care to protect the emulsion side. Proceed with extreme caution when attempting to clean photographic materials.

8. Any historical photo can be preserved if a copy negative is made. Archivists prefer to use 4" × 5" or large format sheet films, but good-quality negatives can also be made with Panatomic-X 35 mm film, which has a fine grain. Yellow and blue filters can be used when copying to enhance faded or spotted photographs. Glass can be carefully placed over the surface when copying if the photo is slightly rolled or curved.

9. As with all photographic materials, the storage environment is of primary importance. Constant temperature and humidity must be maintained in the storage area year round. Use a pencil, not ink or felt tip pens, for labeling materials. Avoid using rubber bands, paper clips, or adhesives on or near negatives. Do not store negatives in glassine sleeves or poor-quality plastics. Archival boxes or baked enamel filing cabinets are better than wooden or old cardboard boxes, which are acidic. You can prolong the life of these materials if you keep negatives and photographs away from ultraviolet light.

Archival storage materials are available from Light Impressions, 439 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607, or at local photo supply stores. Be sure that storage sleeves are made of the materials listed in Tip #5.

The next issue will offer tips on displaying photos in albums or frames.

Feeble-mindedness, Criminal Behavior, and Women

*A Turn-of-the-Century
Case Study*

by Tommy R. Thompson



TO BE FEMALE and confined in a prison or mental institution in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a depressing, shocking, and horrifying experience. Incarceration produced few, if any, positive benefits for a woman. Those confined were individuals with whom most of society preferred not to be associated; better to remove them from sight and contact with others by placing them in an institution, society said, even if there was little chance they would be reformed, trained for a new life, or "cured."

It was into this frightening world that a young woman born of immigrant parents in Council Bluffs, Iowa, stepped in the late 1890s. Bettie Libbecke, better known as "Fainting Bertha," would spend half of her life in prisons and mental institutions. In the end those facilities would devour her as they did many other women.

What we know about Bettie's adult life is constructed from institutional records and newspaper stories. These sources provide a biased filter through which any researcher or reader today must view Bettie Libbecke. Thus certain questions that might occur to us cannot be answered — questions that apparently also plagued authorities a century ago. What this saga does reveal, however, is how certain social institutions — the prison and mental health systems and the press — reacted to and coped with a woman who lived on the fringes of that society.

LITTLE IS KNOWN about Bettie's childhood years. Her parents, William and Mary Libbecke, came to the United States in 1869 from Germany and, perhaps, Switzerland. By the mid-seventies they were living in Council Bluffs along the Missouri River. William appeared in the Council Bluffs city directory for the first time in 1876 as a "Custom Boot and Shoemaker." Nine children were born to the Libbeckes by the late eighties; Bettie, born in 1880, was near the middle. William earned a satisfactory income in his business, located on Broadway, the major east-west arterial in the small city. The

children attended Hill Elementary School.

In 1895 tragedy struck the family when Bettie's father died of pneumonia. He left his wife with six children still living at home, although William and Elizabeth ("Lizzie") were in their early twenties. Both were employed, William as a bartender and Lizzie as an ironer at a laundry. Bettie, the next eldest at fifteen, now left school and found work as a domestic with a Council Bluffs family.

In 1896, a year after her father died, Bettie developed what was diagnosed as encephalitis, a condition that produced delirium and was characterized by "inflammatory and degenerative lesions of the brain and [spinal] cord." Then, in the fall of 1897, while riding home one Sunday evening on the streetcar, she was "seized with hysterical spasms and caused quite a commotion . . . before she was quieted."

Soon after, she entered the Iowa Institute for the Feeble-minded at Glenwood, Iowa, and apparently stayed there until mid-1898. Hospital authorities concluded she was "feeble-minded" and thus "could not be held morally or legally responsible for her conduct" — a conclusion that would reverberate throughout Bertha's life.

Doctors widely believed that at least some cases of "feeble-mindedness" were brought on by illness. "Brain fever," or spinal meningitis, for example, was regarded as one of the most common causes, and Bettie's earlier encephalitis bore similarities to this ailment. Followed by a decrease in mental powers, feeble-mindedness, by the prevalent definition, prohibited the individual from distinguishing between right and wrong. As a result, it was reasoned, such individuals could easily fall into a life of crime, alcoholism, and, in the case of females, prostitution.

Not everyone agreed with the idea that individuals, especially females, were likely to become criminals because they were feeble-minded. Katharine B. Davis, head of the New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, tested hundreds of the inmates and concluded that the condition produced some but not all criminals. The more standard view of society, however, was that female criminals were typically feeble-minded, and that feeble-minded

Left: Bettie "Fainting Bertha" Libbecke, 1904.



The Iowa Institute for the Feeble-minded, in Glenwood, diagnosed Libbecke as "feeble-minded" and hence incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. The label often assumed such women would turn to crime.

individuals were prime candidates to become criminals. Bettie Libbecke would soon fulfill this image — either by her own choice or by her limited ability to make appropriate moral decisions.

IN THE SUMMER of 1898, after her release from the Glenwood hospital, Bettie visited the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, across the river from her hometown of Council Bluffs. While thousands of tourists viewed the state and international exhibits in ivory Renaissance-style buildings, a pretty, well-dressed, and articulate Bettie Libbecke searched out gentlemen with diamond stickpins or studs.

Bettie was learning the art of the pickpocket. According to a later newspaper account, she apparently had met one Lou Gunther of Chicago at the exposition and had fallen in love with him. Then, she said, he led her into a life "calculated to destroy all respect for honor and morality." Gunther taught her to fall against men, pretending to faint, in order to steal any valuable possessions. According to one report,

Bettie took diamond studs from three men at the exposition, but they chose not to prosecute. After the exposition, Gunther took Bettie to St. Paul, Minnesota, where she ran afoul of the law again by committing a \$45 robbery. Abandoned by Gunther, she returned to Council Bluffs.

Tracing her through newspaper accounts and institutional records, we find her soon thereafter incarcerated in the Clarinda State Hospital in Clarinda, Iowa, as a nymphomaniac — and hence victim of another label besides feeble-minded. In following years Omaha police always listed her in arrest records as a prostitute, although there is no indication that she was ever arrested for prostitution.

Years later she said she had been induced into a sexual encounter by an "aged man" after her release from the Glenwood hospital in 1898. Such an incident may have turned Bettie toward prostitution as well as pickpocketing in her effort to support herself. According to Joanne Meyerowitz in her recent book, *Women Adrift*, young working-class females who supported themselves sometimes turned to prostitution full or part time to supplement their wages and thus alleviate the poverty that surrounded them. With apparently no legitimate

job skills, Bettie may have reacted to her poverty in a similar manner.

IN THE SUMMER of 1899 Bettie was arrested once again for "Larceny from the person," this time in Council Bluffs. A pattern of behavior was now emerging. Every time she was released from an institution, Bettie returned to her trade as pickpocket. If she was in fact "mentally deficient," as defined by the Iowa Institute for the Feeble-minded in 1897, she was also skillful enough to engage in her chosen field of crime — and gained notoriety for it. By the next year the nickname "Fainting Bertha" would begin to appear in print, identifying her pickpocketing style. The fifteen-year-old Bettie Libbecke in the 1895 state census would be replaced by the twenty-year-old Bertha Libbecke in the 1900 federal census. More important, the name "Fainting Bertha" would often appear in headlines as reporters followed her exploits.

In 1900 Bertha's career swung into full speed. She and her mother and the three sisters who lived with them were undoubtedly struggling financially. Bertha's mother and thirteen-year-old Minnie were not employed. Lizzie worked as a dressmaker, although she would soon return to her previous occupation as a laundress. Nothing is known about the other sister, Anna. One other sister, Emma, who did not share the same residence, would be arrested a year later as a "suspicious character" and "prostitute." Bertha's "earnings" may well have helped her family survive.

In February Bertha was arrested for taking items from an Omaha store, although charges were dismissed. A few months later she was arrested under an alias for shipping a rented bicycle from Hastings, Nebraska, to sister Lizzie in Omaha. She pleaded guilty and was fined \$50. Within a month Bertha was arrested in Omaha again, this time for picking the pockets of streetcar conductors. Supposedly, within a week she had "touched" half a dozen conductors and possibly some passengers by pretending to be thrown against them when the streetcar came to a halt. She had covered her actions by drawing back quickly from her target, blushing, and excusing herself.

During these episodes local newspapers

called Bertha a "notorious thief" and declared her well known to Omaha police. In fact, throughout her career the newspapers often gave Bertha front-page coverage. Because of her pickpocket antics and later bizarre behavior, along with reporters' own colorful writing, Bertha's stories probably helped draw readers.

A journalistic subjectivity is evident in various physical descriptions of Bertha that appeared in stories in the early 1900s. One Omaha newspaper described her as short and plump; two others labeled her petite and "stylishly dressed." Some reporters nicknamed her "Chemical Ann," referring to bleached hair; others called it "golden hair." One newspaper noted her "wicked little lips."

Scholar Kathy Peiss, in *Cheap Amusements*, considers such issues of physical attributes and adornment. She writes that many working-class women wore low necklines, "rats" and "puffs" in their hair, and gauze stockings to attract males who would then pay their way into dance halls and amusement parks. Bertha may also have capitalized on her attractiveness when pickpocketing. When Bertha "fainted" or fell against a victim, the individual reportedly tried to "help" the attractive young lady recover by holding her. This was especially true if the victim was a man.

WHEN BERTHA appeared in the Omaha police court in late May 1900, authorities and reporters were perplexed as to whether she was truly insane, and therefore not responsible for her actions, or simply a somewhat

**"FAINTING BERTHA"
BOUND TO BE MERRY**
**Has a Smile on Her Face When
Bound Over for Trial.**

"Fainting Bertha" Miller believes in
making the best of a bad situation.
"Do you know..."

successful con artist. Bertha may well have been mentally deficient but intelligent enough to be a fairly good crook. She seemed to exist between two worlds. Consequently, no one knew quite how to deal with her, and a constant skepticism appears in the detailed newspaper accounts. The *Omaha World-Herald* described her as an "artistic weeping beauty" and said she could make the tears roll down her cheeks from her "mild blue eyes." And the *Omaha Daily News* concluded Bertha was one of the "cleverest female crooks that ever nipped a diamond or touched a pocket."

Bertha seemed to agree. When arrested for the robbery of a streetcar conductor, she exclaimed in her defense: "I had been good for so long [a month since the last charge] that I just couldn't keep from doing it. . . I just wanted to see if I had lost any of my skill." Nevertheless, in court she pleaded insanity. The court accepted the plea but also ruled she was not sufficiently ill to enter an institution; her degree of feeble-mindedness was not so serious that she endangered society. She was free and back on the streets.

Bertha must have been destitute when released from jail because a few days later she was arrested for attempting to steal a basket of food from a local grocery dealer, not her typical crime. Bertha's mother immediately filed a complaint contending Bertha was insane. (A few years later Bertha stated that her mother often used this method to keep her out of prison.) Omaha authorities decided the best solution — for them — was to ship Bertha across the Missouri River to Council Bluffs and let the hometown officials rule on her sanity. Bertha did spend the next few months in St. Bernard's Hospital, a mental institution in Council Bluffs. However, she was released "as not being a proper charge for the state at that institution" because of her early diagnosis of feeble-mindedness.

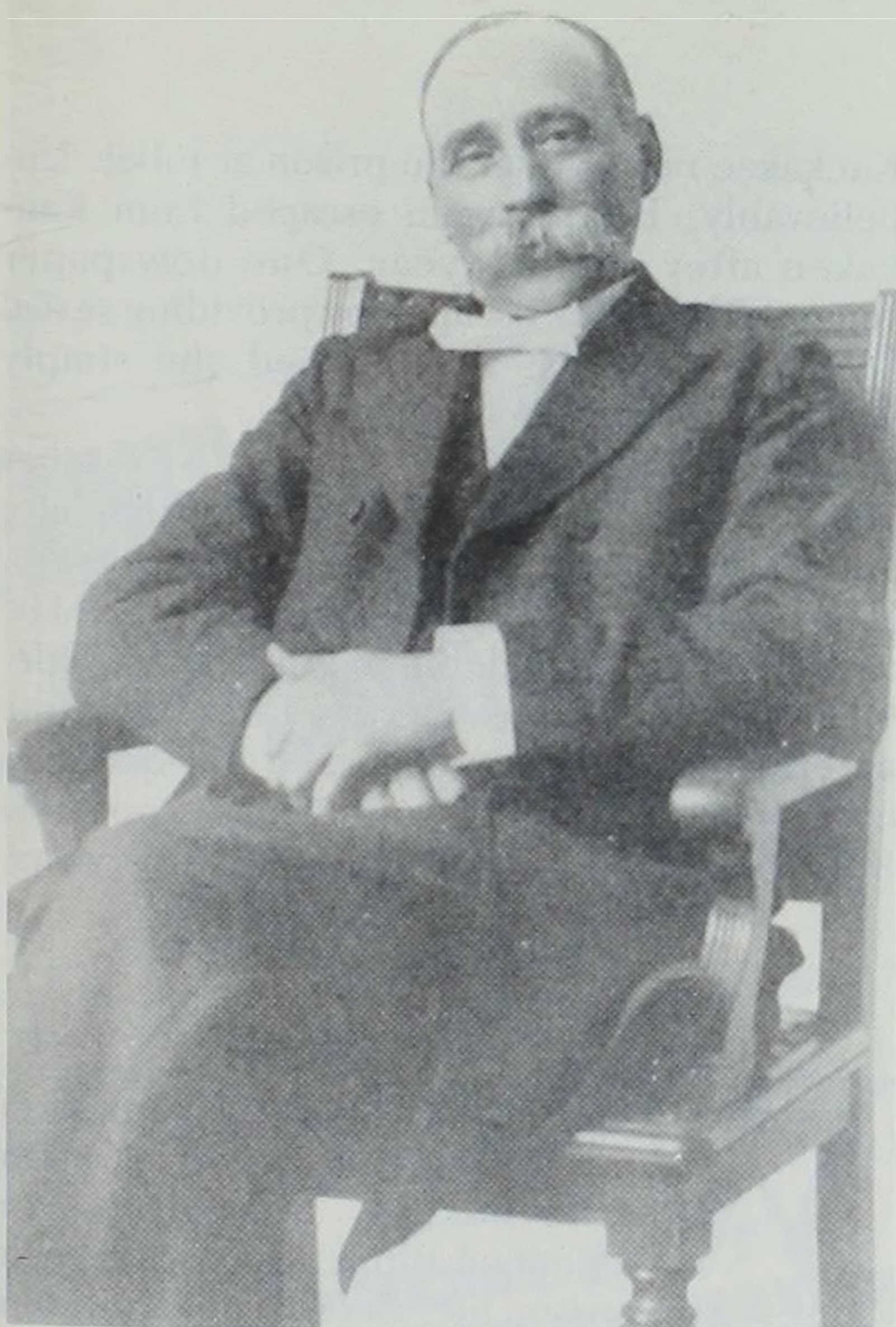
Bertha seems to have been smart enough to understand she had been labeled feeble-minded and could not be held accountable for her crimes. Wedged between a system of punishment that would not control her and a medical world that could not cure her, she apparently used the system, and eventually would be abused by the system.

BY LATE SEPTEMBER 1900, Bertha had headed to Des Moines. After registering at a hotel as B. Carlisle, she went to B.L. Chittenden's jewelry store. Dressed so stylishly she appeared to be "the daughter of some wealthy capitalist," she examined several diamond rings and in the process substituted a paste ring for a real diamond worth \$100. Arrested on the street soon after, she identified herself as Ida Scott and became hysterical, pleading for her release and pointing out that she had been in mental institutions. A few days later, on the advice of the head of the State Board of Control (which supervised the state's mental hospitals), Des Moines officials released her again because she could not be held responsible for her deeds and behavior.

From Des Moines Bertha continued her wanderings. In Joplin, Missouri, she was arrested in late September for the diamond substitution game and was sent to a mental hospital at Macon, Missouri. According to her sister Lizzie, several guards at the Macon institution assaulted Bertha. The men were held for trial, but when the case was ready for court in the spring of 1901, Bertha suddenly "escaped" from the hospital and thus could not testify against the guards.

In 1902 and early 1903 Bertha moved from city to city plying her trade. Sioux City police caught her in another diamond switch, and she confessed after a session in the "sweat Box." Charges were dropped, however, and authorities simply put her on a train to Omaha. Before Bertha left she sat in a rocking chair at the police station and sang soft lullabies, with an occasional "wild outburst of music." This type of behavior, typical whenever she was placed in custody, may have been her tactic to convince everyone of her "feeble-mindedness," or may have indicated an actual mental imbalance. (This behavior, one would guess, is also the sort of colorful material that reporters would be eager to include in their front-page stories and headlines.)

Within a few weeks she was caught stealing a diamond pin from a fellow train passenger en route to Chicago. Convicted and sentenced in early 1903 to the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet, she was later moved to the Hospital for



With confidence, the Reverend Charles W. Savidge of Omaha offered to reform Bertha and rid her of "devils."

the Insane at Kankakee, Illinois, from which she escaped.

By February 1904 Bertha was in a deplorable condition. Faint and wearing only a thin dress in the bitter weather, she was found lying on the Omaha streetcar tracks (a car had stopped just as it reached her). She was arrested as a suspicious character and for drunkenness. Other arrests for drunkenness soon followed — although Bertha may not have been actually intoxicated when apprehended. City officials had decided to arrest her every time she appeared in public unless accompanied by a member of her family, hoping the escort would keep Bertha out of trouble. Thus, yet another label had been applied to Bertha, possibly without any validity, in society's ambivalent effort to control her.

In police court she asked the judge whether she should join a church and remarked that it would be easy to do because "I got my Easter hat already." A reporter noted that her lavish lavender hat looked as if two or three pigeons had landed on it and "exploded." Since Bertha

typically told court officials she would behave if released, her suggestion regarding church membership may have been a similar ruse.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, a guardian angel appeared. Arrested for stealing \$40 from an Omaha candy store, Bertha again faced prison. Then the Reverend Charles W. Savidge, an Omaha minister for over twenty years, stepped in and offered to try and reform Bertha.

Like Bertha, Savidge himself was somewhat of an enigma. He was a fundamentalist who believed God spoke with him through visions. After serving as a Methodist minister for several years, he had left that church, contending that it ignored the poor and unwanted members of society. He had formed "The People's Church," and through it tried to reach the poor and some of Omaha's unwelcome residents such as prostitutes. Savidge also founded a home for the aged and destitute (an institution that exists today).

Savidge's projects all demanded funds, and he sought many avenues of support. He relied heavily on fees from performing marriages and united so many couples he became known as the "marrying parson." Analogous to some of today's evangelists, Savidge was known to call upon "sinners" to send money to him to finance various projects. Quite possibly, he saw Bertha as a money-making proposition as well as a soul he could lead to a moral life.

Savidge told the court that Bertha was "full of devils." "Nobody has ever made an honest effort to cast them out of her," he said. "Insane asylums and prisons have failed to reform this girl, and it is plain that nothing can lift her up but faith in God." The court accepted his offer. Savidge had seemingly assumed a tremendous task with little chance of success, as events soon showed.

In early August Bertha stole a watch from a pawnshop. Savidge shielded her from prosecution by persuading her to return it. She was not as lucky when she picked the pocket of another merchant who decided to press charges. Locked in her cell (she always asked for the same one), Bertha screamed, threw herself on the floor sobbing, pounded on the bars with

her shoe, and cried out "wild prayers."

In calmer moments she expressed her apparent repentance to a reporter: "After all my friends and Reverend Savidge have done for me to think that I should have done that. I did try hard not to make that touch, but I had to do it. There was such a good chance." Asking the reporter for a light for her cigarette, she declared, "After being religious so long, it does feel mighty good to smoke again. It's a terrific strain on a person to be religious."

Omaha authorities decided to follow standard procedure and sent Bertha to Council Bluffs and St. Bernard's Hospital. After a short stay she claimed she simply walked out the door to freedom. Resuming her wandering, she was arrested in St. Louis for pickpocketing, probably drawn there by the 1904 World's Fair. Released on bond, she fled to Chicago where she took a valuable coat from Marshall Field's and Company. Bertha moved on to Milwaukee, and more petty thefts. Still eluding authorities, Bertha registered at an Oshkosh, Wisconsin, hotel as Maude Harold of Chicago and then stole \$65 from a local proprietor while she was "jollyng him up." At the train station she attempted to steal from the register. Caught by the station agent, she fled on the train.

Back in Milwaukee she was arrested for attempting to rob a streetcar passenger. At the jail she apparently engaged in her typical bizarre behavior. She remarked that she enjoyed seeing her picture in the mug book because it made her feel as if someone in Milwaukee was thinking of her. She gave "frantic yells for someone to love her and . . . long-drawn wails of remorse expressed for her career of crime." She tore her clothing, smashed the furniture in her cell, and apparently attempted suicide by turning on the gas heater. In the opinion of one reporter, Bertha was pretending insanity in order that the court might send her to a mental institution rather than a prison.

Probably much to her surprise, though, the Milwaukee court decided to send Bertha to Chicago to be tried for the theft from Marshall Field's. Chicago authorities, however, dispensed with a trial and concluded Bertha was insane and that she belonged in the asylum at

Kankakee rather than the prison at Joliet. Unbelievably, Bertha again escaped from Kankakee after about a year. One newspaper suggested that she escaped by providing sexual favors for guards; she claimed she simply walked out the door.

Bertha returned to Omaha in November 1905. There, local officials arrested her at a sister's home and returned her to Chicago. There she was tried and convicted for the Marshall Field's theft and sent to Joliet for an "indeterminate" sentence. Bertha Libbecke, "the notorious shoplifter pickpocket and queen of confidence women," would not escape this time. She stayed in Joliet the next five years.

WHEN BERTHA was paroled in early 1911, she was released to the custody of relatives in Council Bluffs. Even with such a long taste of prison life, Bertha could not stop her old ways. Almost immediately she was arrested in Kansas City for stealing a watch. When caught, Bertha threatened to jump from her hotel window. She pleaded with authorities, "Electrocute or hang me, but don't send me to jail again."

Undoubtedly, her stay at Joliet had made its impression. Physical and sexual abuse of women in America's prisons had long been a problem, and Bertha had probably been subjected to her share of these types of mistreatment. Furthermore, if conditions at Joliet were anything like those at the Missouri state prison in Jefferson City fifteen years later, she could have found worms in the oatmeal, maggots in the hash, cockroaches on the dining table, and rats in the cells.

Bertha did not go to prison this time; authorities decided she would be sent to an asylum. She reacted with "great disorder," throwing her dishes through a window. Asylum conditions in general were miserable too, a situation Bertha no doubt understood after numerous incarcerations and an alleged rape in 1900 at the Macon, Missouri, mental hospital. Asylum patients often sat idle because of insufficient staff. Violent patients, such as Bertha,

Fainting Bertha Confesses to Big Series of Thefts

Stores Victimized Didn't Know
She Had Been Stealing
From Them.

ALL YESTERDAY SPENT IN PRAYER AND CONFESSION

Pastor Savidge Says Just One
Big, Gray Devil Left
in Her.

With hair wildly disheveled, face
wet with perspiration and body
wrenched with paroxysms of pain,
Fainting Bertha Liebke was on her
knees all yesterday and last evening
in a confession which covered her
whole past down to her latest feat
an enormous shoplifting escapade
which involves the Brandels
Hayden Brothers, other Omaha
and several in Council Bluffs.

This last feat of Fainting
is a complete surprise to the
the stores involved and
Charles W. Savidge to whom
consigned on being released from
penitentiary.

"Well, she's up to her
eyes in it," said a police detective
the Rev. Mr. Savidge.

The Rev. Mr. Savidge
must have stolen yesterday,
time she came to the
penitentiary and the
charge. He declined the
portunity to see the event.

Fainting Bertha Up To Her Old Tricks Again

Stole Jewelry From Guests at
the Rome Hotel and
Is Arrested.

Released From the Asylum a
Week Ago and Promised
to Be Good.

Bertha—Fainting Bertha—Liebke is in
jail again, and the chances are exceed-
ingly good that she will remain in custo-
dy for some time.

An attaché
identified Faint-
ing Bertha who last Sat-
urday claimed a large
quantity of jewelry
from several guests
at the Rome Hotel.
Bertha, it was
stated, she had
stolen the jewelry
from the guests
house. She was
later released from
the asylum.

HAS DRIVEN THE DEVILS FROM FAINTING BERTHA

Pastor Savidge Will Exhibit Her
in Churches All Over
Country.

Sings and Recites Poems and
Bible Verses at Peoples'
Church.

The devils have been driven from
Bertha Liebke, known to the police all
over the nation as "Fainting Bertha."
says the Rev. Charles W. Savidge, who
has taken her in charge. He intends to
take her to churches all over the country,
where she can tell her story in the hope
of doing good.

"This is not a vaudeville stunt," the
Rev. Mr. Savidge declared. "We are go-
ing to visit churches that invite us and
we will depend on the collection to pay
our expenses, but it is for good and not
for stage purposes that we are going out."
During her stay in the asylum and prison,
when he was not having fits or raising
Ned, she was memorizing fits or raising
poetry and much of the bible. With Mr.
and Mrs. D. Allen Davis, who are caring
for her, and my son Mark, I will go with
her over the country, where she can use
her talent to sing and recite.

"At the two services at my church
yesterday, when she took part, the
crowd was crowded. In the
cited a poem. The
and recited it
the event."

were often controlled with drugs such as morphine and opium. Hospitals also used strait-jackets and handcuffs and wrapped patients tightly in sheets to control them.

Bertha spent only a few weeks in the Missouri institution. In May 1911 she was arrested for a department store theft in Lincoln, Nebraska. In court she pleaded tearfully with the judge for mercy. She said she had been using cocaine at the time and was not responsible for her actions, the only reference to drug use ever associated with Bertha. The judge found Bertha guilty, however, and sentenced her to three years in the state penitentiary.

WHEN BERTHA entered the Nebraska Penitentiary in 1911 she was no longer the petite woman described at the start of her career. Before 1903 she had been described as 5 feet, 2½ inches and 120 pounds; now penitentiary records gave her weight at 155 pounds. Her prison photograph shows a tough woman of the world, and once again she found a tough world at the penitentiary in Lincoln. The close proximity of the few women prisoners to the male prisoners was a constant "source of trouble and danger." The women were idle much of the time since there was no occupational therapy for them. Old wooden bathing tubs spread infectious diseases. The kitchens and dining rooms were filthy, and rats, mice, and large cockroaches infested the prison. The warden considered the most demoralizing problem at the penitentiary to be the "dope and morphine habit."

Smashing panes of glass with her fists and terrorizing other inmates, Bertha was soon transferred from the Nebraska Penitentiary to the Ingleside Hospital for the Insane at Hastings. She remained there the next two years, despite two escapes. In some respects, Ingleside Hospital was a better institution than the state prison. Ingleside personnel encouraged more exercise and entertainment for patients and the physical plant was undergoing improvements. Yet Bertha claimed she was whipped and beaten by attendants. Overcrowding was a problem, and women were

kept in "poorly lighted and ill ventilated basements." Bertha gained a legal release from Ingleside in October 1913 (because of the overcrowded conditions) and returned to Omaha.

She quickly resumed her old ways. Bertha could not "be good if she really meant to," an Omaha police captain told a reporter after her arrest for intoxication and possible theft. "She is an habitual criminal. There apparently is no cure for her." Omaha authorities considered sending her to Iowa, but the officials there declared they did not want Bertha. Employees of the Nebraska mental hospitals threatened to quit if she returned.

THEN, FOR UNKNOWN REASONS, the Reverend Savidge decided to make another attempt to help her. Bertha told Savidge that many devils possessed her. Wisely, she signed a pledge stating that she would obey Savidge if released into his custody. Savidge and Bertha fasted and prayed together and immediately "she showed signs of a miracle having been performed." Bertha amazed many by reciting long quotations of Scripture and poetry, which she had probably learned in prison, where moral uplift was an accepted part of treatment. On the Sunday after Bertha's release Savidge took her to his church, The People's Church, to exhibit her miraculous improvement. He preached a sermon titled "Where Bertha Got Her Devils and from Whom and What Sort They Are." The next day he announced Bertha was free of all devils and that he intended to take her on a tour to show what had been accomplished.

The editor of the Blair, Nebraska, *Enterprise* suggested that Savidge was trying to profit personally by promoting Bertha, but the reverend denied that Bertha's appearances were "a vaudeville stunt." It seems likely, though, that Savidge recognized the opportunity of using Bertha to raise funds for his church and home for the elderly while showing his "miracle." Yet perhaps he seemed more

Opposite: Libbecke, in a 1911 penitentiary mug shot.



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

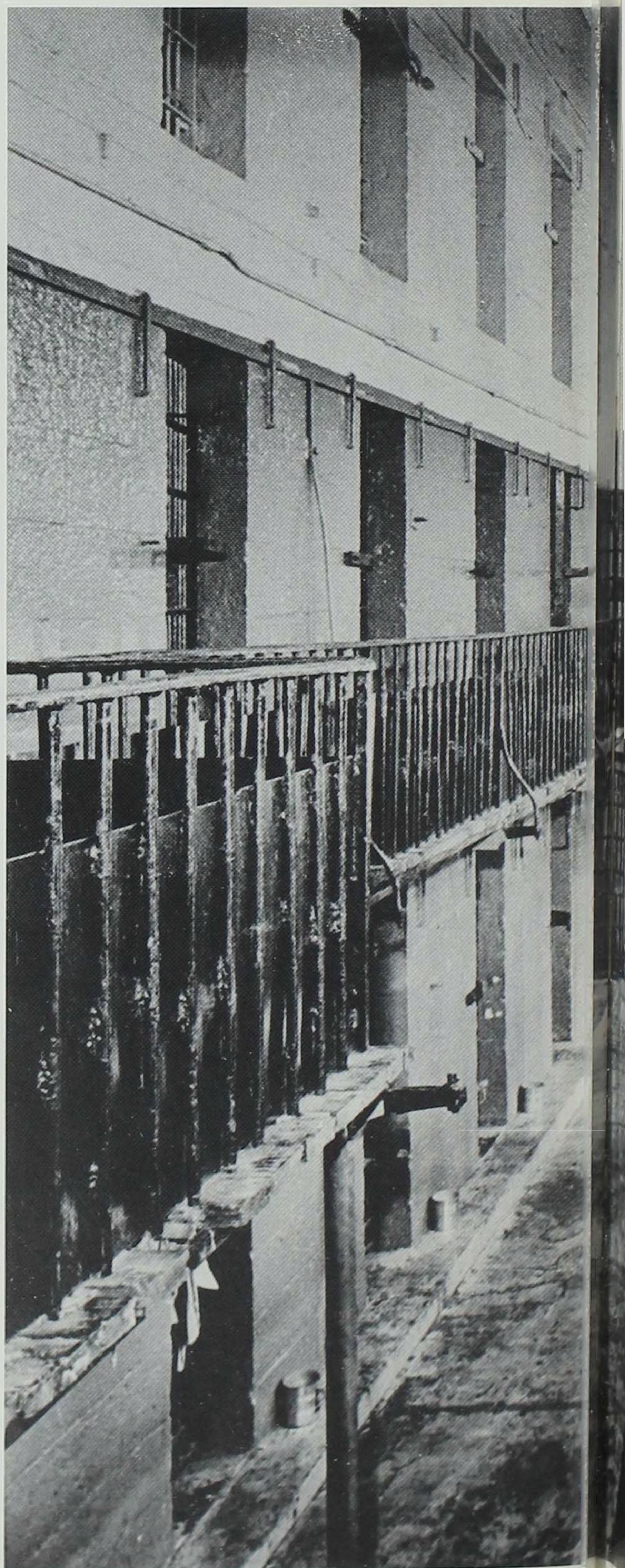
hopeful: "She works more now," he told reporters, "and is consequently much better to care for than in July 1904 when I took charge of her case and saved her for the time being."

Unfortunately, Bertha spent the next week engaged in a shoplifting spree at the major department stores in Omaha and Council Bluffs. Savidge blamed Bertha's problems on the presence of one last devil in her (apparently overlooked earlier), "a big, gray devil and he don't want to come out. But he'll have to," Savidge added. Savidge and Bertha returned all the stolen goods and he persuaded the merchants not to "jug her." Simultaneously Savidge announced that he was preparing a small booklet detailing Bertha's life of crime and her ongoing regeneration. Bertha needed additional prayer and redemption, according to Savidge, but she would begin preaching once the task was accomplished.

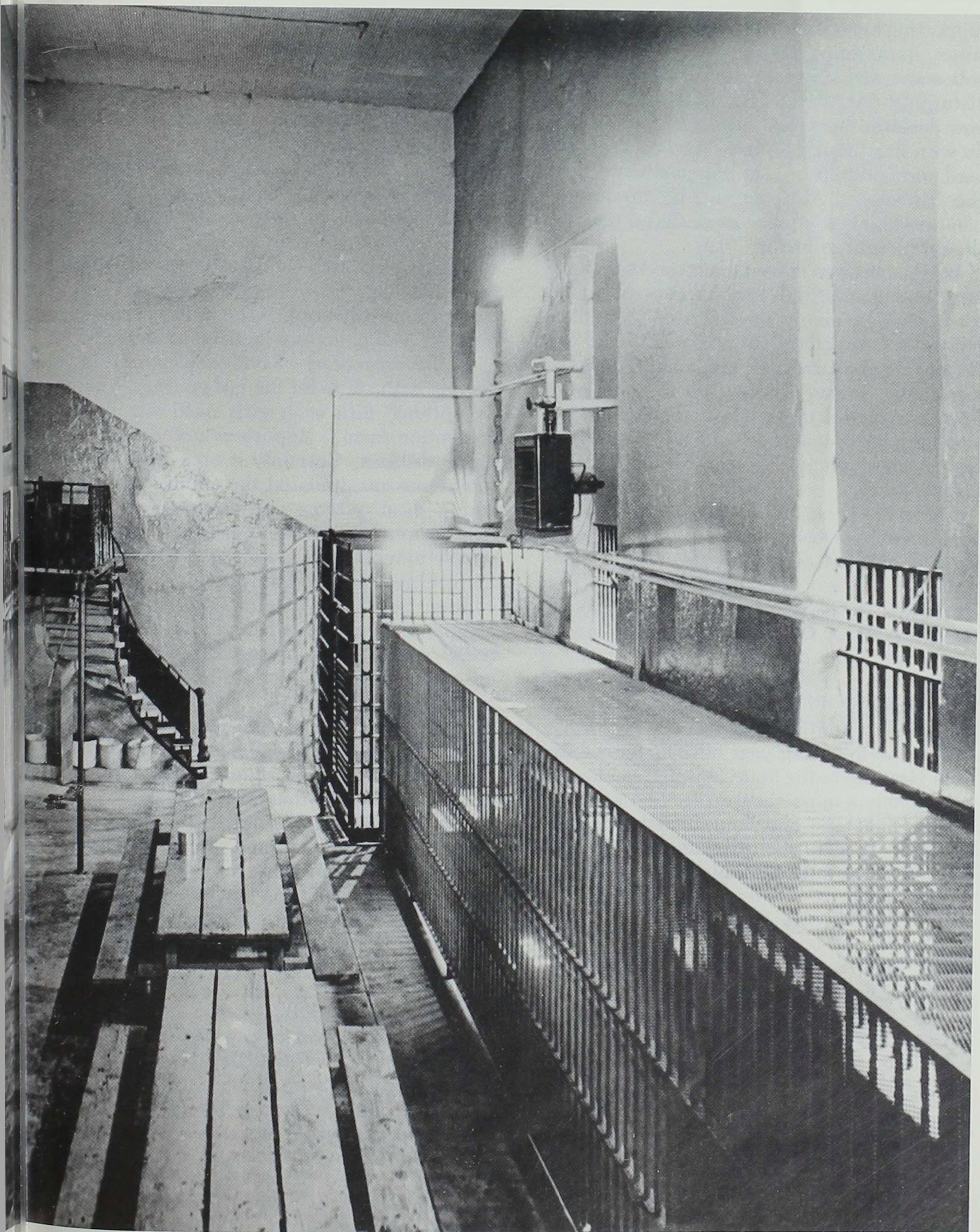
In December 1913 the story of Bertha's life appeared in print. The thirty-two page booklet had a scarlet cover and the appropriate title "Clothed in Scarlet." Bertha now traveled to nearby towns and cities over the next several months to speak at churches and sell her story. She was to receive half the proceeds, and Savidge the rest. This arrangement prompted a local citizen to comment in a letter to the *Omaha World-Herald* that Savidge was hardly following religious principles by using Bertha for financial gain. The headline announcing a January 1914 appearance suggests a similar skepticism: "STANDING ROOM ONLY FOR FAINTING BERTHA: Pastor Savidge Tells Blair [Nebraska] People to Shell Out or Lord Might Kill Them."

Nevertheless Bertha continued to sell her book. One of her stops in the spring of 1914 was Hastings, Nebraska, where she had been hospitalized. While there she sold seventy-eight copies at twenty-five cents to a dollar each. She told officials, "I have been good for five months now and have been making money all the time." Bertha appeared to be leading a more normal life.

By early May 1914 she was reported selling neckties and newspapers as well — apparently



Right: A setting all too familiar to Bertha. Half of her life was spent in prisons and mental institutions.



supporting herself honestly. Then she began to falter, haranguing people near her. Omaha police arrested her for disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. The Reverend Savidge now declared he would have nothing more to do with her though he had "never labored so hard and faithfully . . . to snatch a brand from the burning." Announcing he no longer believed she was insane, he declared that she should be sent to prison.

Bertha chose to leave Omaha and spent the next several months in various midwestern cities (including ninety days in the Milwaukee House of Correction). By early 1915 she was back in Omaha, arrested, and jailed. There she reportedly set her clothing on fire and swallowed strychnine tablets she had in her possession for a heart condition. She also sent a note to one of her sisters: "Ask my precious mama to forgive me."

The real shock for Bertha was the court's sentence of one to seven years at the penitentiary. At the prison only four days, Bertha screamed all night, broke window panes, and attempted to strangle herself. Transferred to the hospital at Hastings, she stayed there nearly two and a half years. Within a week of parole, however, she was arrested again and transferred, at the warden's request, to Hastings. Bertha continued her efforts to escape, and in the following year officials moved her from Hastings to the State Hospital at Lincoln, presumably a more secure site. She managed one brief escape and continued her violent behavior. In 1919 she threw formaldehyde in the eyes of a nurse, seriously damaging the nurse's sight.

THIS INCIDENT, apparently the only one where she injured anyone, may have persuaded hospital officials never to release Bertha. She would now spend the last twenty years of her life at the State Hospital at Lincoln, where she had little chance of being helped.

Long the subject of good newspaper copy, she faded out of the glare of press coverage. Bertha's episodes over the years had provided appealing elements: a colorful character, bizarre behavior, religious repentance. But

although these stories provide a record of Bertha's thefts and arrests, they don't tell us everything. For instance, though she was frequently arrested, we don't know how often she wasn't caught, and hence how successful she was in supporting herself through crime. We likewise don't know whether she deliberately chose the risks and consequences of a life of petty crime as one of the few alternatives open to her, or if she was truly mentally deficient — or "feble-minded" — and unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

Opinions differed. One newspaper reported, "The police are inclined to believe she is a trifle demented." Savidge declared, "It is playing with sin to let the girl go free. We can do nothing with such girls until we have a correction farm." Reporters noted her dramatic abilities. Certainly it appears that she sometimes manipulated the ambivalent court and medical systems, and that she sometimes fell victim to them. These institutions seemed unable to reach consensus regarding her mental faculties, and certainly seemed unable to contain her — given her apparent ease of escape. Her story is a compelling and admittedly confusing example of an individual up against an ambivalent and inadequate system of custody and care. The labels and charges applied to her (feble-mindedness, prostitute, pickpocket, drunkenness) had developed over the years into a saga of crime, confinement, and release — until Bertha threw formaldehyde in the nurse's eyes at the Lincoln hospital.

By the 1930s the hospital where Bertha continued to be confined was severely overcrowded. Treatment was inadequate and out of date. According to one visitor, the patients sat "grimly around the walls of the room in chairs without the appearance of any hope whatsoever."

The misery of Bertha's twenty-year confinement was not of primary importance to society. More important was that Bertha was a female who had long ago been labeled "feble-minded" and had become a criminal. She was the type of individual who early twentieth-century society had finally concluded could and probably should be locked up for life. She gained her freedom only in 1939 when she died of cancer at the Lincoln facility. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The major primary sources for this article are city and county directories; census records; police, court, and criminal records; and various newspapers in Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Also see Charles W. Savidge, *Have Faith in God: The Autobiography of Charles W. Savidge* (1914). Secondary sources include Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (1981); Henry H. Goddard, *Feeble-Mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences* (1926, orig. pub. 1914); Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Illness and American Society, 1875-1940* (1983), and *The State and the Mentally Ill: A History of Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts, 1830-1920* (1966); Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage*

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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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THE PALIMPSEST (ISSN 0031-0360) is published quarterly by the State Historical Society in Iowa City. Second class postage paid at Iowa City, Iowa. Postmaster: send address changes to State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.