

Cedar Rapids



by Clarence A. Andrews



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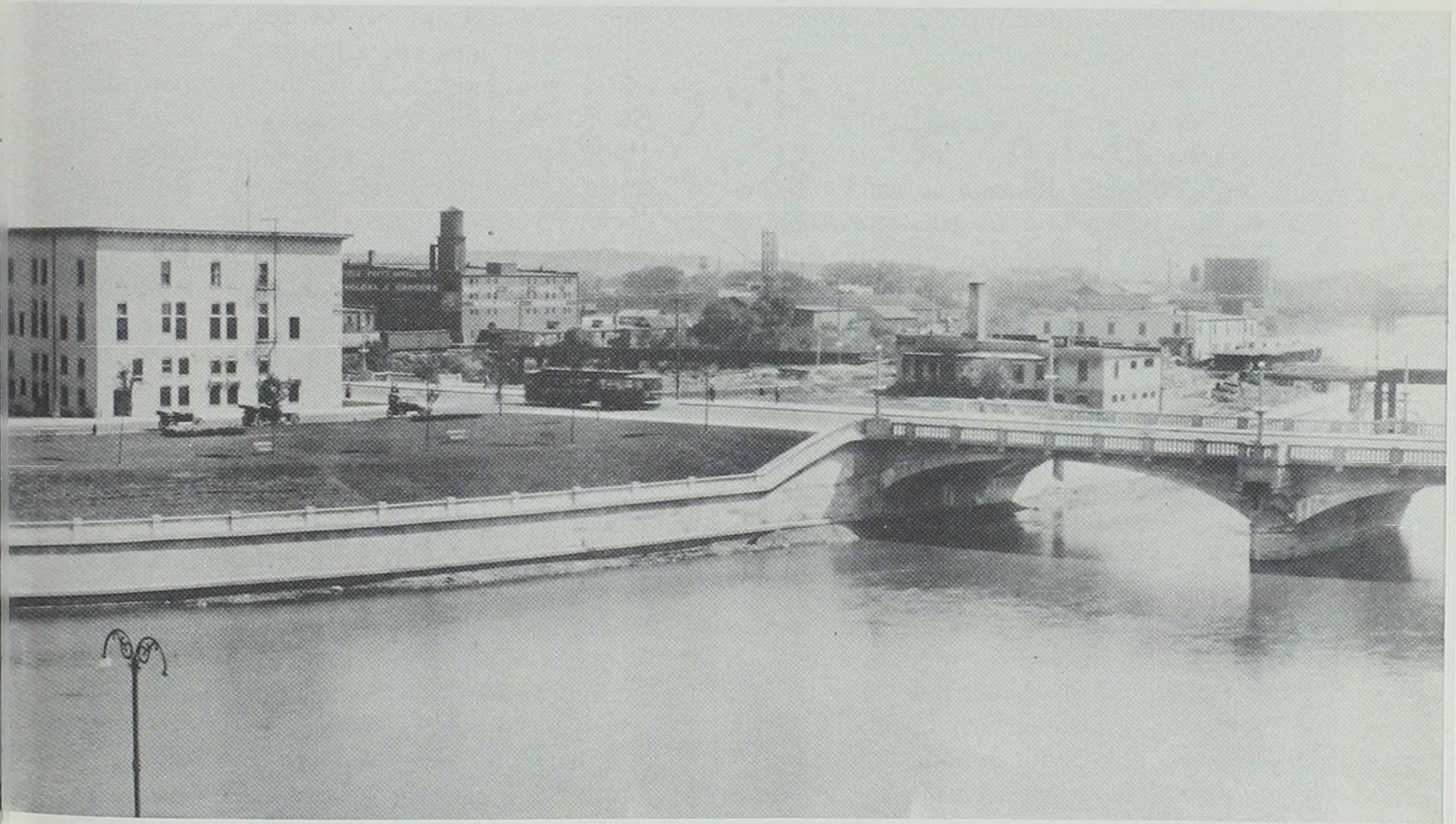
the river, because they were surrounded by some of the world's most fertile farmland, because of good railroad transportation, and because of a surplus rural population which produced a pool of workers looking for means to support themselves in the cities. Their factories were agriculturally oriented, producing implements and tools for farmers and converting farm surpluses into food for the nation and the world.

The 1920s were to be boom years for the two cities as well as for the nation. But the Parlor City (as Cedar Rapids called itself, imitating such civic sobriquets as Chicago's "Windy City," Cincinnati's "Queen City," and Philadelphia's "Quaker City") was to embark on a period of growth which eventually would make it Iowa's second largest urban area.

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Above: A Cedar Rapids panorama shows May's Island, stretching under three bridges, before the new construction of the 1920s. Boxed line drawings inset throughout article are from the 1928 *Acorn* yearbook, courtesy of Coe College.

in the Roaring Twenties



than a working-class image, was well chosen. Cedar Rapids was a city of many fine homes, including Brucemore (the three-story mansion of the Douglas family, set on eighteen acres of landscaped ground) and the Robert Armstrong home, designed by artist Grant Wood. (Armstrong was to be a driving force in Cedar Rapids for the next seven decades.) When an English visitor was being shown Cedar Rapids, he asked at last to be shown the city's slums. He was told by his guide that the working-class homes he was looking at came as close to a slum area as the city had.

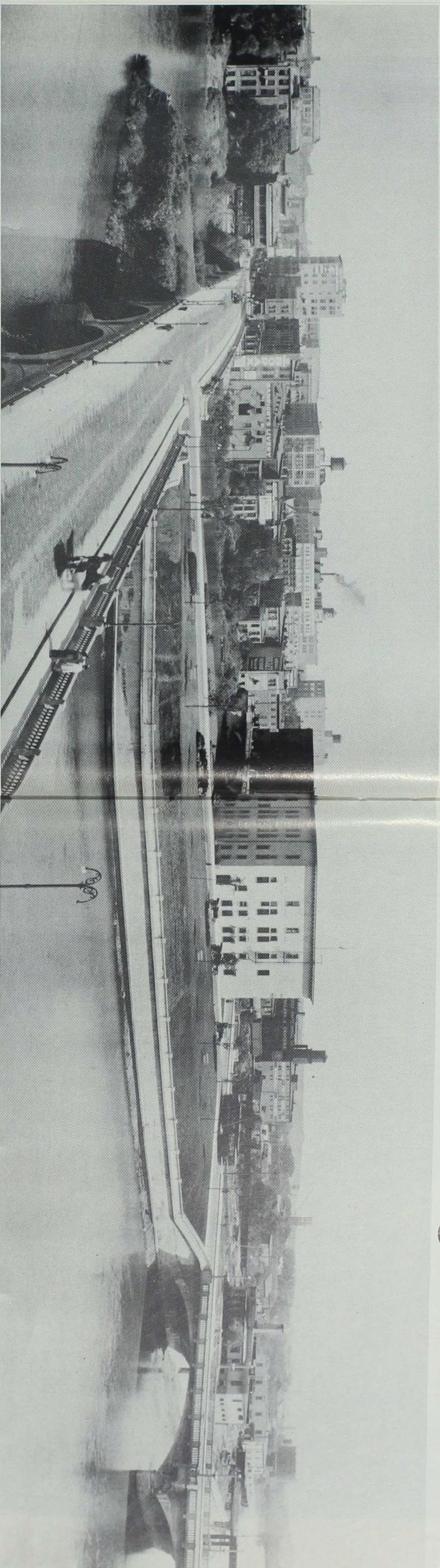
Each quarter of the city had its own park, including one adjacent to the downtown business district, another with a zoo, and another which stretched for almost a mile along the river. It had an outstanding four-year college, an auditorium, a nationally famous opera house, the "world's largest cereal mill," and

the nation's largest Masonic library.

Like the rest of the United States after the end of "the war to end all wars," Cedar Rapids was in an expansionist mood. Of 363 business leaders interviewed by the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* for a daily column in 1926 and 1927, two-thirds were Republicans but were not standpat Republicans. Although most admired President "Silent Cal" Coolidge, they were not marching in place. One of those hard-headed Republicans, David Turner, son of a Cedar Rapids pioneer, became the patron for Grant Wood, subsidizing him with a home, studio, and funds so that Wood might have the time and a place to work. When Frances Prescott, a principal at both Adams and McKinley junior high schools, hired the uncertified Wood to teach art classes, the school board backed her.

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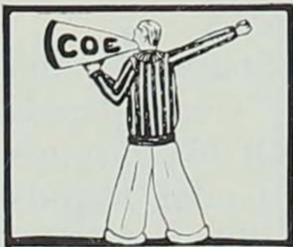
Like the rest of the United States after the end of "the war to end all wars," Cedar Rapids was in an expansionist mood. Of 363 business leaders interviewed by the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* for a daily column in 1926 and 1927, two-thirds were Republicans but were not standpat Republicans. Although most admired President "Silent Cal" Coolidge, they were not marching in place. One of those hard-headed Republicans, David Turner, son of a Cedar Rapids pioneer, became the patron for Grant Wood, subsidizing him with a home, studio, and funds so that Wood might have the time and a place to work. When Frances Prescott, a principal at both Adams and McKinley junior high schools, hired the uncertified Wood to teach art classes, the school board backed her. Jay Sigmund, an insurance company vice-president, was as much respected for his

poems (the *Gazette* printed them on its editorial page) as for his business acumen. This same Jay Sigmund inspired a young Paul Engle to become a poet also, and eventually head of the world-famous Iowa Writers' Workshop at the nearby University of Iowa.

Luther Brewer, a newspaper and book publisher, was attracting national attention for the books he published and for his astuteness in building a unique collection of rare books and manuscripts focused on the great poets of England's Romantic Period. Brewer had installed a huge bed in an upstairs bedroom to accommodate occasional visits from his oversized friend, former president William Howard Taft.

In March of 1929, the Carnegie Corporation chose Cedar Rapids as the midwestern city in which it would subsidize a "Little Gallery" of art and pay the salary of Edward Rowan, the gallery's first professional director.

I arrived in Cedar Rapids just in time to hear the roar of the explosion which blew the Douglas Starch Works sky high on the night of May 22, 1919, killing forty-three men, among them the workman who had just taken my father's place fifteen minutes earlier. That fall I started school at the old Taylor School; before I completed schooling in January of 1930, I attended almost every west-side school. My family moved often.



THE CEDAR RAPIDS schools in 1920 included Washington High School, a three-story Gothic stone structure across the railroad tracks from the Union Depot. The *Gazette* usually referred to it as the Cedar Rapids High School, even though there was a newer high school on the west side. That was the Grant Vocational High School, intended to train west-side students in the manual arts which led to factory jobs. To west-siders the implication was clear — the east side was cultured, upper class; its students would go to college and become the city's leaders.

So in the early 1920s, west-side citizens, egged on by their children, rebelled against this discrimination. They demanded and got the same liberal arts program that the east-side school had. The first liberal arts class at Grant

was a class in dramatic art.

The city had fourteen grade schools in 1920, ten of which were nineteenth-century two- and three-story red brick buildings, three of which were new and modern in design, and one of which was a wooden building (in "Stumptown," south of the city on the west bank of the river). Several of these schools offered eight grades of instruction plus kindergarten; the others offered only six grades and kindergarten. The fourteen schools were named for deceased United States presidents, beginning with Washington; the school in Stumptown was Pierce School. Each school had a "principal teacher," often simply called the "principal." These persons, all women in the 1920s, were also the school disciplinarians. In addition there were four Catholic schools, two on each side of the river, a Lutheran primary school, and a Catholic academy.

The public schools were fortunate in having an able, progressive superintendent, Arthur Deamer, and progressive-minded school board members. In 1920, Deamer and his board proposed that Cedar Rapids mortgage its future and build one or two new grade schools to replace obsolete buildings, and several new junior high schools. The new junior highs would change the school system from an 8-4 basis of grades to a 6-3-3 basis, a relatively new concept at that time. One hope was that with this system, students who might otherwise drop out at the end of eighth grade might be encouraged to complete ninth grade. For a time in the 1920s, Madison School on the west side was the site of classes for fourteen- to nineteen-year-olds who had dropped out and then returned.

Bolstered by support from women voters, who had just won the right to vote in August, the proposal carried by a landslide. Work on McKinley Junior High School and Buchanan grade school got under way at once. Roosevelt, Franklin, and Wilson junior highs followed in turn. Wilson opened in September of 1925.

In 1923 the school board ordered a program of "accelerated classes" which would allow some students to complete seventh and eighth grades in a year and a half. Students were to be selected for the program on the basis of test scores and their grade point averages for fifth



Known as the "White Bank," American Trust and Savings Bank was where Cedar Rapids schoolchildren deposited pennies on Bank Days. As students practiced thrift, new multistory buildings downtown reflected prosperity.

and sixth grades. In the fall of 1924, I was one of six southwest-siders selected, three girls and three boys.

But Jennie Post, principal at Van Buren and later at Wilson, a woman with a mind of her own, would have none of this newfangled nonsense and refused to admit us. So for two weeks we trudged across the river to McKinley (with the exception of the Douglas girls, who were chauffeured, all students walked to school then). There Frances Prescott, the principal who had hired Grant Wood, welcomed us. But two weeks later Jennie Post relented and we were back in Van Buren.

Five mornings a week all the grade schools and junior high schools performed mandated opening exercises — the pledge to the flag (minus the words “under God”), the “American’s Creed,” the first verse of “My country ’tis of thee,” the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm. Never mind that some of our names were Kozberg or Leibsohn or Kacere or Haddad, we all recited in unison. It was the melting pot principle at work.

Something else afoot then in the school system was THRIFT. Ben Franklin’s axiom that “a penny saved is a penny earned” had become a solid rock in America’s foundation. (Of course, in the 1920s a penny bought a stick of forbidden chewing gum, or a lead pencil, or an all-day sucker, or a stamped postal card which could be used to send a message to a distant relative.) Every Tuesday, as part of the opening exercises, we also had Bank Day, the brainchild of Thrift, Incorporated, a Chicago firm. We were all encouraged — almost ordered — to make a deposit every Tuesday even if it was only a penny. If every one of our class made a deposit, we were allowed to parade through the school singing the “Thrift Song,” and we received a banner to display beside the American flag all week. The class with the highest percentage of deposits at the end of a school year was awarded a painting by Thrift, Inc.

To ensure high educational standards, the school system had subject supervisors who regularly came to our classrooms. Emma Beenk made sure that we were all learning the Palmer Method of Penmanship, invented by Austin N. Palmer of Cedar Rapids. Unhappily for left-handers such as I, the Palmer Method was de-

signed for right-handed students, and I invariably got a failing grade in penmanship because of my messy papers.

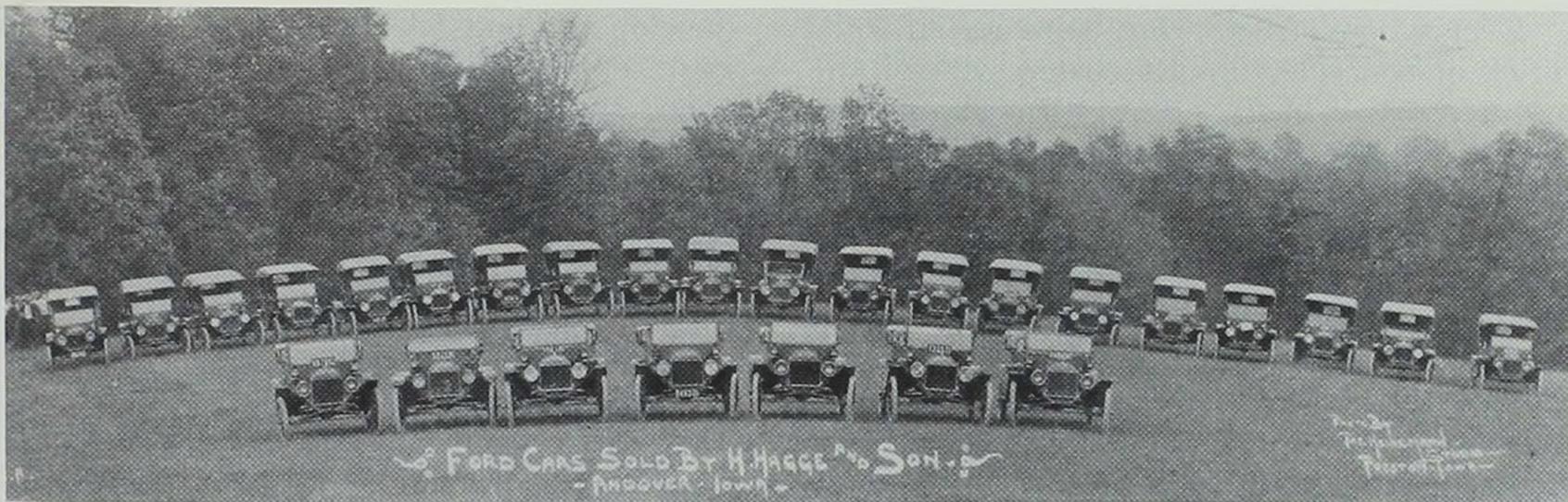
Because the system intended that we would receive a broader education than the Three R’s alone permitted, the system also had supervisors for art, Emma Grattan, and music, Alice Inskip. We loved Miss Inskip and we wouldn’t let her end her periodic visits without a performance of the “Rooster Song,” each stanza of which ended with a rousing “Cock-a-doodle-do!”

And every spring we were visited by Effie Burton, Grant High School librarian, who handed out free packets of vegetable seeds obtained from the federal government, and encouraged us to plant our own gardens in plots furnished by the school district.

To ensure that our tastes in music would range beyond the then-popular “Barney Google with his Goo-goo-goo-gly Eyes,” the ungrammatical “It Ain’t Gonna Rain No More,” and “Show Me the Way To Go Home,” we had music memory classes. Once a week we listened to phonograph records of such classics as the “Turkish March” or Haydn’s *Surprise* Symphony, and we clipped stories about these compositions, printed weekly in the *Gazette* as part of the program. Those of us who assembled neat scrapbooks of the clippings (mine were messy), or who could remember all of the record titles when portions of the music were played back at the end of the semester, were awarded free tickets to concerts by the visiting St. Louis Symphony or Minneapolis Symphony. My lifelong affection for classical music began in music memory classes conducted by Dorothy Stoflet at Taylor School and Ruth Larson at Wilson. Miss Larson even dug into her slender schoolteacher’s purse to pay for carfare for those of us southwest-siders who lived a long way from Coe College’s Sinclair Memorial Chapel, where the concerts were.



MEANWHILE, outside our classrooms Cedar Rapids was bursting at the seams as a growing population required new housing far beyond the trolley-car lines



ORIGINAL OWNED BY ED ZASTROW, SR.

Small-town car dealer H. Hagge and Son (Andover, Iowa) lines up new Fords. In larger towns like Cedar Rapids, "automobile rows" of service stations, dealerships, and repair shops lined major streets.

which had been built in the 1890s. In 1926, by ordinance, the city added thirty-one square miles to its previous fourteen square miles.

In addition to the city's growth into former cornfields and pastures — which now bore the persuasive sobriquets of Rompot Acres, Worthing Acres, Casper Schaefer Heights, Fruitland Heights, Belmont, East Highland, Northwood, and Ridgewood — new commercial buildings were springing up all over the city. The nineteenth-century mansions immediately east of the downtown business district, which had once been occupied by the Douglasses, the Sinclairs, the Bevers, the Van Vechtens, and the Brewers, were replaced by or remodeled into industrial and commercial buildings.

In 1920 the Penick and Ford Company of Louisiana bought the debris-covered site of the former Douglas Starch Works and began building a new and larger starch works — one that stank up the town even more than the former plant had. Veterans just home from World War I and veterans of the Civil and Spanish-American wars were petitioning the city to erect a building memorializing the Cedar Rapiidians who had given their all in those conflicts. In 1919, Linn County residents (most of whom lived in Cedar Rapids) had voted to move the county seat from Marion, where it had always been, to Cedar Rapids, so plans were under way to demolish the police station, the city hall (which had once been Smulekoff's furniture store), a storage building, and a bathhouse above the city's bathing beach — all on May's Island in the Cedar River. The island had also

had a large vacant area where traveling carnivals and itinerant medicine shows had set up shop in the heart of the city. But the new courthouse and county jail would take up all that space.

Construction of the courthouse and jail was followed on the north end of the island by the Memorial Building, with its eight-story south tower supporting a concrete replica of a soldier's bier, and its controversial Grant Wood window of stained glass — controversial because it had been fabricated in Germany, where so many Allied soldiers had died in the recent war.

Other 1920s buildings were the Merchants National Bank, at that time the city's tallest "skyscraper"; the Dows office building; the Iowa and the Capitol (later Paramount) combination theater and office buildings finished within ninety days of each other; major additions to the Quaker Oats and National Oats plants; an eight-story Churchill Drug warehouse; the Harper-McIntyre warehouse (announced by the fattest edition of the *Gazette* ever published); the Colonial Bakery; the Consistory and El Kahir Shrine Temple buildings (the Shrine Temple immediately replaced the aging Auditorium as the major Cedar Rapids entertainment center); the Roosevelt Hotel; the Ausadie and Commonwealth apartment buildings; and several new churches. At the end of the decade, plans were made for a new downtown post office and federal building on the riverbank, where the Sunshine Mission and the *Gazette* office had been. The *Gazette* also erected a new building.

Everywhere streets were being paved with brick or concrete, or else coated with oil or covered with asphalt to answer the complaints of citizens who had bought new black Fords, Buicks, "Chevies," Hupmobiles, Velies, air-cooled Franklins, or, like some well-to-do matriarchs, Milburn Electrics, and whose cars were now bogging down in the mud. The iron-and-wood First Avenue bridge over the Cedar had burned in 1919 and was rebuilt as a six-lane concrete bridge to handle the expected increase in traffic.

Up until the 1920s, the trolley cars with their tracks radiating out from the loop to all corners of the city, the interurbans running at regular intervals to Waterloo, Iowa City, and Mount Vernon, and points between, and the railroads were the only practical ways to travel. Cedar Rapids had direct connections with all the major midwestern cities. When Cedar Rapids booster groups, promoting local business or the local rodeo, toured through eastern Iowa, interurbans and trains took them to every town worth visiting.



THE AUTOMOBILE would change all that. Proving fatal to businesses in small towns, the automobile brought farmers and small-town residents to the city for shopping and entertainment. In 1920 a Cedar Rapidian could buy any one of over fifty makes of automobiles from any one of 250 dealers within a thirty-mile radius. Ninety percent of these were black "touring cars" with cloth tops and side curtains to attach in case of rain. Seven years later there were fewer makes and fewer dealers, but Americans owned three times as many automobiles as they had in 1920, most of them "closed" (with hard tops and glass windows), and a few even in bright colors. The automobile had come of age — in the words of a popular song, "Henry [Ford] had made a lady out of Lizzie."

A significant part of the 1920s business boom in Cedar Rapids (we called it "prosperity") came from the sale or service of automobiles. One Ford salesman sold a car a day in 1923. "Automobile rows," consisting of side-by-side car dealers, service stations, and repair shops,

developed along Second and Third Avenues East, replacing the mansions of an older generation, and along First Street West. Service stations also sprang up at major intersections, especially along the Lincoln Highway, a national road which ran from east to west through the city, and along the Red Ball Road, which ran from south to north.

With the automobile, Cedar Rapids policemen no longer walked eleven-hour beats six days a week, but patrolled in radio-equipped cars, following an innovation first tried in Detroit — which had become "the Motor City." Virgil Powell, the first black policeman in Cedar Rapids, rode a motorcycle through the business district doling out tickets to cars parked too long in one place.

Many of the calls police now got had to do with stolen cars — or even car parts. One Cedar Rapidian stole a car, then used it to haul stolen merchandise to his house. But the car bogged down in a muddy street, and the man was arrested by police responding to neighbors' calls about a car blocking traffic. Whereas in the nineteenth century Jesse James and his kind had ridden into small towns to stick up banks, bank robbers now used automobiles — more often than not cars which had been stolen, so the robbers would be more difficult to trace.

Automobile accidents became a major cause of human death and injury. The gory statistics — "five killed in weekend crashes" — replaced newspaper stories about runaway teams of horses. A police car smashed into one of the newfangled traffic lights which had unwisely been installed in the center of the intersection at First Avenue and First Street East. A prominent Cedar Rapids woman and her three children died from exhaust fumes filtering into the family's closed car.



AUTOS BEGAN producing significant changes in our social patterns. Young lovers who had once conducted their courtships under the watchful eyes of parents or grandparents now retired to side-curtained cars in dark streets. Young ladies who had once written to advice columnists asking when it was



With tongue in cheek, the 1929 Coe College yearbook staff began the "Women's Athletics" section with a cartoon suggesting a new sport.

proper to kiss a young man for the first time were now climbing willingly into backseats to smoke forbidden cigarettes, sip illicit "hooch," and to "pet" or "neck," whatever those words meant.

I was witness to all of this social change because of the *Gazette*. Cedar Rapids also had another good newspaper, the *Republican*, published by Luther Brewer, but although for a time it had a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, MacKinlay Kantor, I rarely read it. I didn't read the *Tribune* either — it was a union labor paper — or the *Listy* — which was printed in Bohemian (we rarely used the term "Czech," and I knew only two words of that south-side idiom — "kolaches" and the word for belly-button).

I began reading the *Gazette* when I was six years old, spreading it out on the floor because my arms were too short to hold it. I had dis-

covered that the newspaper was using the same words that I was learning in school and, with the coming of Prohibition in 1920, words such as "white mule," "hooch," and "alky runner" ("alky" and the other two terms being slang for prohibited alcohol).

Moreover, in the summer of 1920, I went into business on my own — I became a "newsie" for Cedar Rapids's best-known citizen, Alex Fidler, who in addition to being the *Gazette's* street sales supervisor was also an automobile salesman, a promoter and referee of boxing and wrestling matches at the Auditorium, and concessionaire at the baseball park on E Avenue West. Every evening I sold *Gazettes* on a downtown street corner.

It was a good business. I bought the papers for one cent each and sold them for two cents — one hundred percent profit and no overhead! (The *Gazette's* circulation was 16,000 and how it stayed in business on the 160 dollars that was its daily share was beyond me.)

My chief competitors were the three adult Kiebel brothers, who sold newspapers and magazines from early morning until late at night on the post office corner at Second Avenue and Third Street East, and Johnny Kinrade, the crippled newsie who was working his way through Grant High School selling papers on the corner of Third Street and Third Avenue East.

On Sunday mornings, I sold the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Herald and Examiner* on the corner of Third Avenue and Second Street East. I'd sell as many as a hundred of each and I kept a nickel for each one sold. Die-hard Republicans bought the *Tribune*; Democrats and sensation-mongers bought the *Herald and Examiner* with its lurid cartoons of businessmen in silk hats taking advantage of common people.

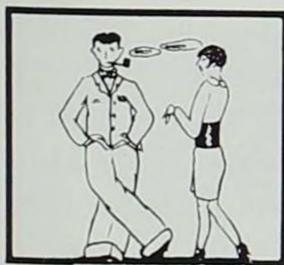
In 1922 the *Des Moines Register* began circulating its Sunday edition in Cedar Rapids, and after I had sold all my Chicago papers my brother and I delivered papers from E Avenue West all the way out to Ed Sheftic's Boathouse at the beginning of Ellis Park. There we dug the corks out of Coca-Cola bottle caps, looking for the magic word *Free* printed on the inside of some caps that entitled us to a bottle of Coca-Cola at no charge.



A big news story in 1928 was the kick-off of Herbert Hoover's campaign in his hometown, West Branch. Andrews and his brother tried to sell newspapers to the crowd as they left the huge tent after the speech. "Why buy a paper?" spectators asked. "We just heard the speech." Below: A crowd waits at the West Branch depot.



My enterprise led to my first brush with the law. By city ordinance, children had to be fourteen years of age to work at any job, including selling papers. Newsies had to buy a badge for six cents from A. L. Bailey, the truant officer for the public schools, but he wouldn't sell me one because I was only half that age. So one morning I found myself with Alex Fidler in the municipal courtroom of Judge Thomas B. Powell, looking up into the face of a man accustomed to dealing with hardened criminals such as alky runners and underage newsies. He lectured Alex and me on our errant ways, then turned us loose with a final word to Alex — "Keep that kid off the streets." We went out the door and as we parted, Alex looked down at me with his infectious smile. "See you tonight, kid. And keep hustling, will you?" ("Hustling" was a respectable word to be applied to young entrepreneurs in the 1920s; it hadn't yet moved to the world of the demimonde.)



AS A NEWSIE I looked every night for great stories that would sell newspapers to businessmen on their way from offices and stores to the yellow trolley cars that circled the loop and then rattled off to various sections of the city. The biggest story of the 1920s was the nonstop flight of Charles A. "Lucky" Lindbergh from New York to Paris in May 1927. Other stories that sold papers were the daily reports in 1925 of Floyd Collins trapped in the Kentucky cave where he died; the Scopes "monkey trial" in Tennessee; any of several notorious murder cases, such as the Hall-Mills case with its "Pig Woman" testifying from a stretcher; the disappearance in the southwestern desert of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson; any World Series baseball game (Ring Lardner, one of the better sports-writers, called it "the Worlds Serious"); or any Jack Dempsey boxing match.

Some spectacular stories, such as "the strange death" of President Harding in San Francisco in the early morning of August 2, 1923, were reported in "EXTRA!" editions of the *Gazette* which sold for five cents. (The last *Gazette* extra was issued May 28, 1949. By then, most people got news of fast-breaking,

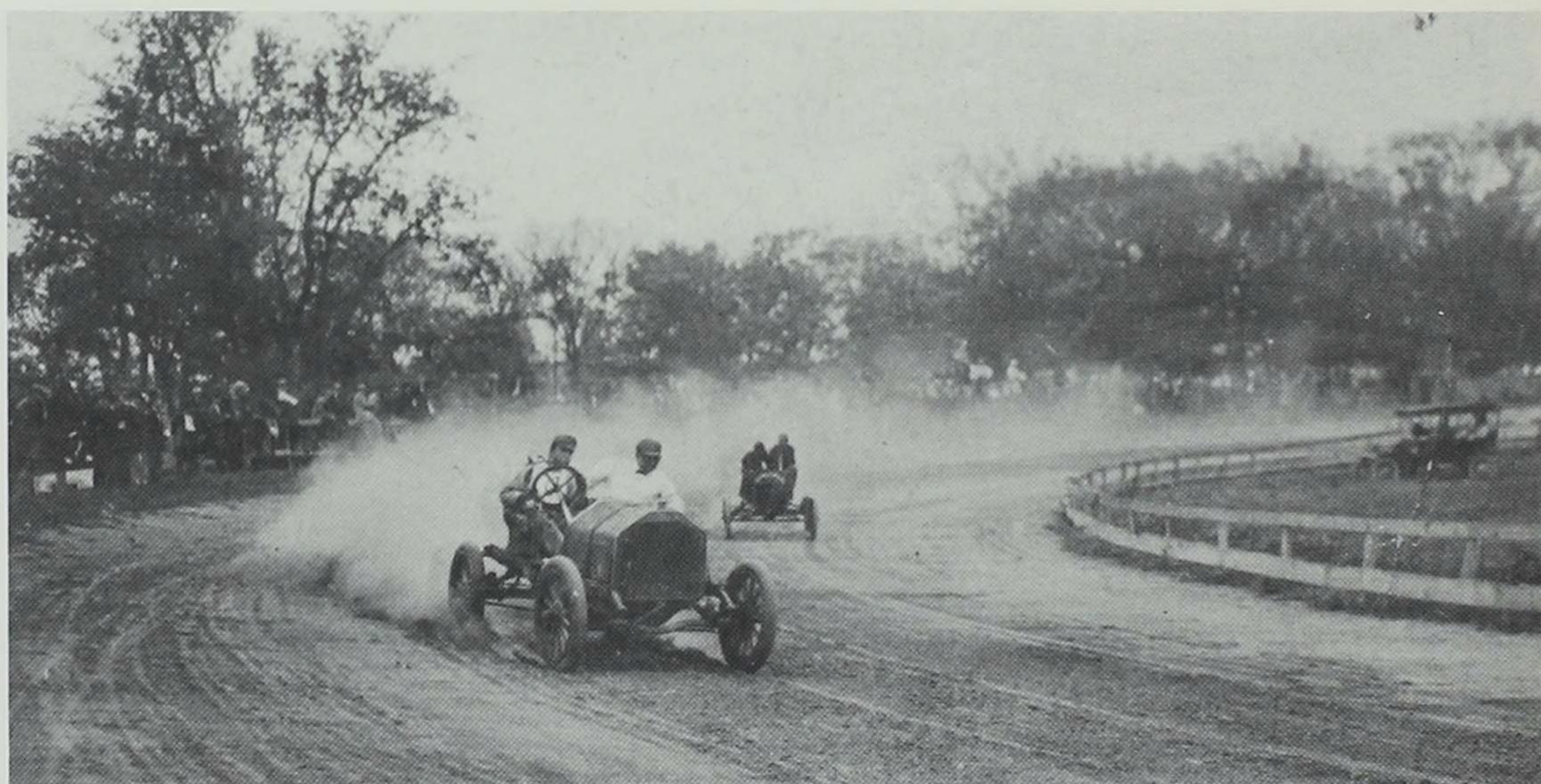
spectacular stories on radio.)

Locally the big stories were the murder of Patrolman Francis Wilson in the Carnegie Public Library in July 1921; the arrival of the Harding funeral train on August 7, 1923; the murder of six-year-old Kathleen Forrest by a neighbor boy in September 1927; and the beginning of the Herbert Hoover "front porch" presidential campaign in Cedar Rapids and West Branch in August 1928. (On that occasion the *Gazette* sent my brother and me to West Branch by train to sell papers there.)

But drawing more attention than all of these together was the death in late 1929 of Hoover's secretary of war, James Good, a Cedar Rapids native who had been instrumental in persuading Hoover to begin his campaign in the area. For almost ten days, beginning with Good's fatal illness in Washington, D.C. and ending a day or two after his burial in the Oak Hill cemetery on the east side of Cedar Rapids, the *Gazette* carried multiple pages about Good in every issue.

A continuing news story each fall in the early 1920s reported the football successes of the Washington High School Tigers under the coaching of Leo Novak with the ubiquitous Alex Fidler as trainer. Modern Cedar Rapidians, accustomed to intracity rivalry and the crowning of a city champion, may find it hard to believe that the school district officials would not allow Grant and Washington to play each other, while at the same time permitting Washington to schedule games with high schools as far west as Sioux Falls and Lincoln, and as far east as Chicago, Toledo, and Harrisburg, and to allow scheduling of postseason games (two in one year) for the so-called national championship. (Grant High won the 1929 Iowa state championship by beating a hitherto unbeaten Sioux City Central High School team on the old Coe College athletic field in a blinding Thanksgiving Day snowstorm. I was a cheerleader there — but no one was in the stands.)

For World Series games and major football games, the *Gazette* erected "playographs" and "gridgraphs" outside its old building on the riverbank, later outside its new building at Third Avenue and Fifth Street Southeast. While action was simulated on the big green



and white scoreboards, an announcer would megaphone the details to crowds which overflowed into the streets, blocking traffic. Jack Dempsey boxing matches would simply be megaphoned to the crowd.



SHORTER WORKDAYS and five-day workweeks gave us more time for recreation in the 1920s. We motored (that was a new word) to Iowa City to watch the airmail planes land or to watch Iowa play football in the university's new west-side stadium. On summer Sundays we trolleyed out to Ellis Park to gaze at the ducks in the duck pond or, after 1924, to swim at the new beach; or we trolleyed out to Bever Park to picnic near the zoo or the new water reservoir which stored our drinking water. Both the Cedar Rapids Country Club on the east side and the Cedar View Country Club on the west side had new clubhouses, and the east-side club had a dandy new outdoor pool as well. One memorable day at the east-side club I caddied for Congressman Cyrenus Cole, whose weekly letters to the *Gazette* appeared on the same editorial page as Jay Sigmund's verses, and who wrote an Iowa history titled *I Remember I Remember*. That day, though, he drove the other members of his foursome batty because he was wearing a just-purchased sun

visor, and its oversized price tag, still attached, kept fluttering and snapping in the breeze.

On summer nights at the old circus grounds on Fourth Street and Twelfth Avenue Southwest, we watched touring tent shows such as those owned by J. Doug Morgan or Hila Morgan, two of Cedar Rapids's own. These road companies presented a different play each night of the week, but the star attraction was always a red-haired, freckle-faced, gap-toothed "Toby" character. Despite his ungainliness, he always managed to triumph over the city slicker (usually a banker's son) by the end of the play.

Or in the early 1920s, we might watch Ethel Barrymore or George Arliss in stage plays at Greene's Opera House, or topflight vaudeville at the Majestic, or first-run movies at the Lyric, the Crystal, the Palace, the Isis, the Strand, the Rialto — theaters whose names and marquee promises carried us far from our workday world into the illusory world of such films as Iowa's own Emerson Hough's *The Covered Wagon* or Douglas Fairbanks's *The Thief of Bagdad*. We went to movies in those years to see ourselves as we might be, not to see ourselves as we were.

The Olympic on the southeast side and the Colonial (we called it "the Clink" — don't ask me why) on Third Avenue West showed second-run movies and westerns at lower prices.

Left: The lead in a Cedar Rapids-Marion auto race leaves a competitor in a cloud of dust. Below: Mechanics rode with drivers for on-the-spot tire changes and repairs. Popular in the 1920s, auto racing nevertheless preceded the decade; the first Indianapolis 500 was held in 1911.

Theaters showed two or three new films a week. No manager showed the same film on both Saturday and Sunday because on those two days we all went to the movies. Really big films — *Broken Blossoms* with Lillian Gish and Richard Barthelmess, or *The Kid* or *The Gold Rush* with Charlie Chaplin, or *Safety Last* with Harold Lloyd — might be kept for a solid week, but no longer. We didn't want to see the same film over and over; we wanted to see the same actors in new films. Hollywood in the 1920s

produced more films in a month than are produced nowadays in a year or more, and there were "more stars than there are in Heaven" — from Fatty Arbuckle to Zasu Pitts.

Until early 1928, the films were silent (dialogue was printed on the screen) although there was anything from a player piano using paper rolls to a full-blown orchestra in the pit beneath the screen. Then, on March 7, Al Jolson came to the Strand in *The Jazz Singer*, and suddenly out of the accustomed stillness came the marvelous voice of "the world's greatest entertainer." The movies' long silence had ended.

When we wanted more action, those of us who didn't belong to a country club danced at the Auditorium, the Green Parrot, Frank



PETE C. PETERSON COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Brookhiser's Dreamland (later Danceland, in a new location) and, in the late 1920s, at the Memorial Building or the Shrine Temple. In summer we danced at Cedar Park or Chain Lakes, or else we canoed from Sheftic's Boat-house upriver to Brookhiser's Manhattan on an island in the river. Later, we floated back downriver to a mandolin playing "Whispering" or "Just a Song at Twilight" or "Juanita."

When we stayed at home there was the victrola or grafonola, or the player piano, and other songs: "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows," "There's a Long, Long Trail," or "Smiles." In the 1920s, everyone could have music in their homes. Pianos or victrolas could be bought for five dollars down and a dollar a week.

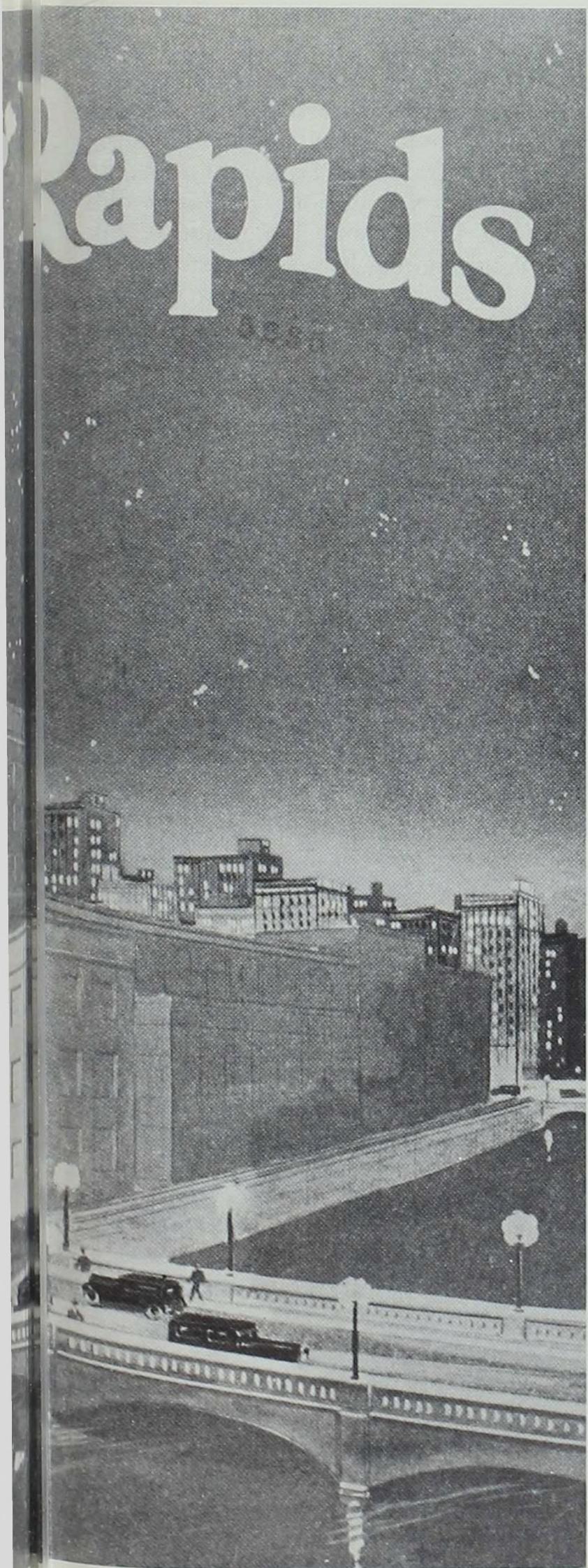
In 1925, Frontier Park (now Hawkeye Downs, south of Cedar Rapids) opened with a full-scale rodeo: boy and girl bull riders, calf ropers, bronc busters, steer wrestlers, and the Roman Races, with riders of both sexes, each standing on a pair of horses galloping side by side around the half-mile track.

On Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day, the track was taken over by auto racers, chief among them our own local favorite, Gus Schrader, who on weekdays repaired autos at his garage on Ellis Boulevard and who had once bought Sunday *Registers* from me.

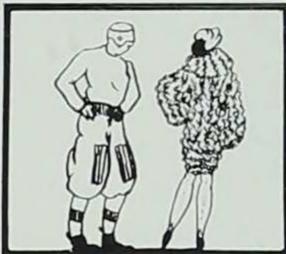
And there were the Bunnies of the old Mississippi Valley minor baseball league. The postwar decade was a great sporting era, and watching or talking or reading about sports became a national craze — whether it was golf, tennis, the Kentucky Derby, football, marathon dancing, or baseball. The names of Bobby Jones, Helen Wills ("Little Poker Face"), Zev, "Red" Grange, and Babe Ruth slipped trippingly from our tongues. When the Bunnies were in town and playing Davenport or Waterloo teams at Belden Hill Park, we went out there on sunny afternoons (no night games) — the adults to sit in the grandstand shade to watch the likes of Bill Speas, fleet-footed Cletus Dixon, or ex-Coe College athlete Midge Makeever, the kids to get in free in the unshaded bleachers by shagging baseballs fouled

Memorial Building, set in a sleek, starlit metropolis — as pictured in this Chamber of Commerce promotional book from the end of the 1920s.





out of the park. Sitting in those bleachers, many of us got our first taste of another 1920s innovation — an Eskimo Pie.



ALTHOUGH ALL of these events and many more were reported by the *Gazette*, none were reported on radio until later in the decade. In 1920, radio was primarily a device by which ships at sea could warn each other of derelict icebergs or floating mines left over from World War I. But early in the decade, kids in Cedar Rapids and other towns began making crystal sets out of empty Quaker Oats boxes, a few strands of copper wire wrapped around the box, and a crystal and earphones bought from D. M. "Tex" Perham's electrical shop at 322 Third Avenue West.

Coe College had a small broadcasting station in 1920, and in 1921 a Cedar Rapids radio club was organized. In 1922, Perham cleaned out his electrical goods and set up his own broadcasting station, WJAM. He fabricated his own transmitter (later called a microphone) and covered the walls with heavy drapes to eliminate echoes.

WJAM was a one-man station. Tex would look up local talent — perhaps soprano Helen Kacena Stark or violinist George Cervenka — and invite them in to sing or play for a time. When the performance was over, he would shut down and go looking for more program material. I was one of a group of schoolchildren invited to sing one afternoon. Tex couldn't crowd us all into his studio so we crowded around the door where Tex stood holding his transmitter.

On August 4, 1923, Tex rigged up a telephone hookup to the Strand Theater's orchestra pit and began broadcasting "live" music three times a week. The following year he rigged a hookup to Frank Brookhiser's new Danceland and broadcast three hours of dance music twice a week.

On March 3, 1925, Cedar Rapids schoolchildren assembled in their buildings heard President Coolidge promise us less government and greater prosperity. For the first time, millions of Americans heard the voice of a president.

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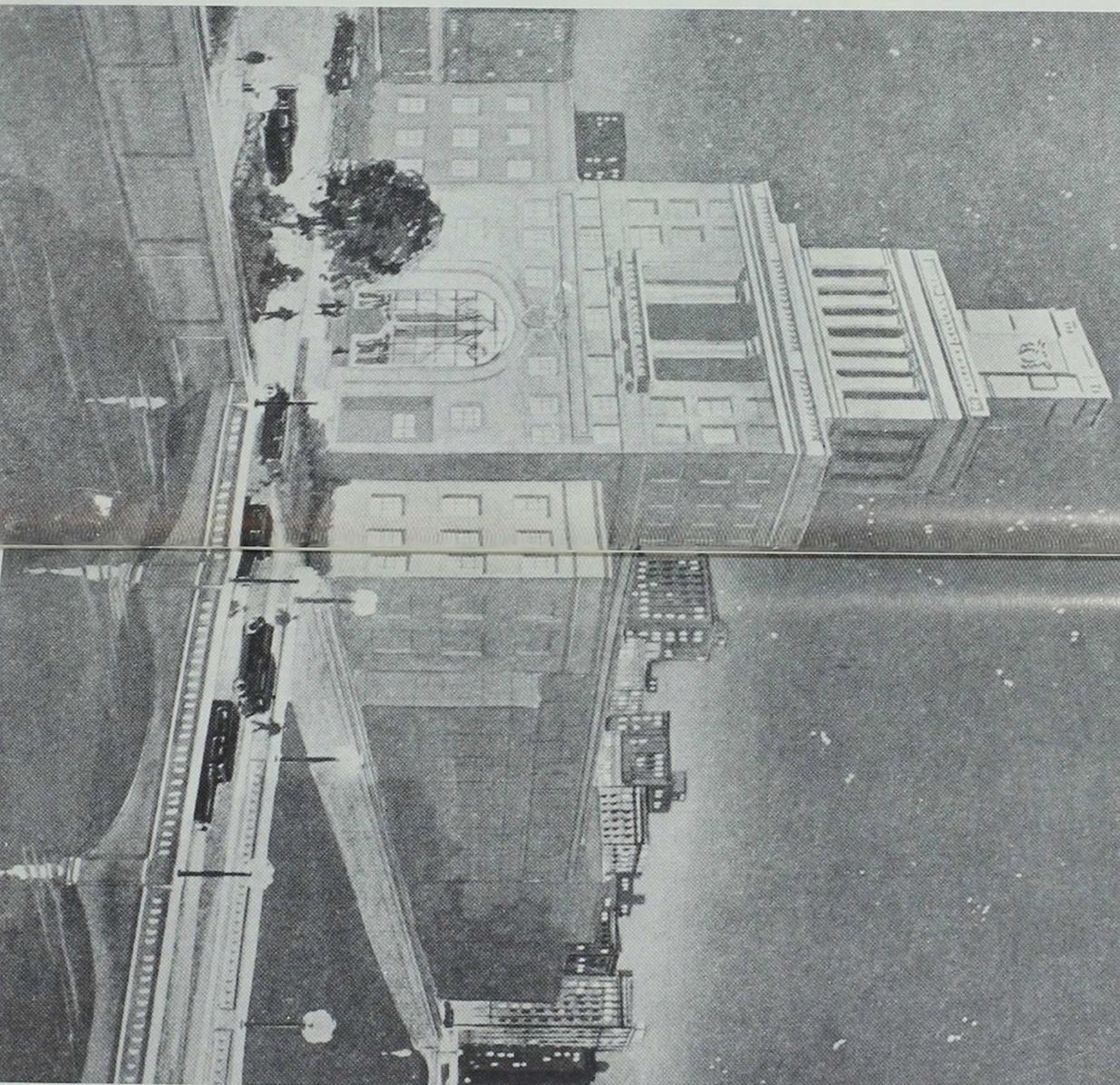
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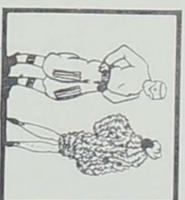
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column with listings of national broadcasts, and some were wondering how soon "radio movies" (television) would follow. Two years later, we had the first national hookups, the predecessors of today's networks. Commercials soon followed.

Meanwhile, Harry Parr had begun KWCR in his home at 1444 Second Avenue Southeast. Late he moved the station to the former Greene's Opera House building (most of the building was being used for storing autos of overnight guests of the Roosevelt Hotel across the street). In his new location, Parr began inviting vaudeville entertainers at the Capitol and Iowa theaters to do broadcasts advertising their shows. I was fascinated by the opportunity for closeup views of nationally famous performers, among them Bert Wheeler and Bob Woolsey, Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, and the blonde child star, Jean Darling. But I was even more fascinated by the two rattlesnakes in the terrarium on the table next to Parr's microphone. On occasion, KWCR lis-

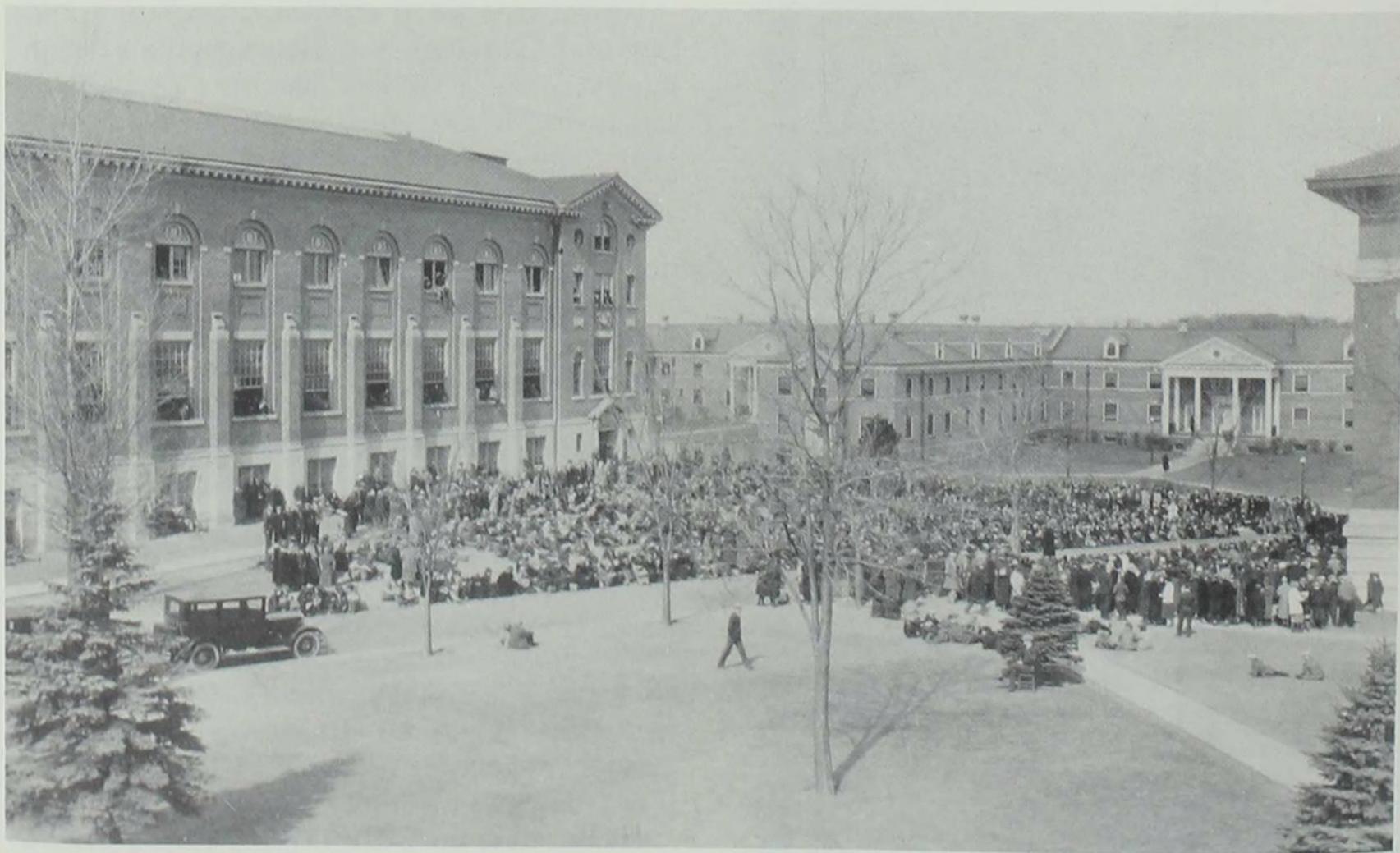
teners heard some unusual sound effects.

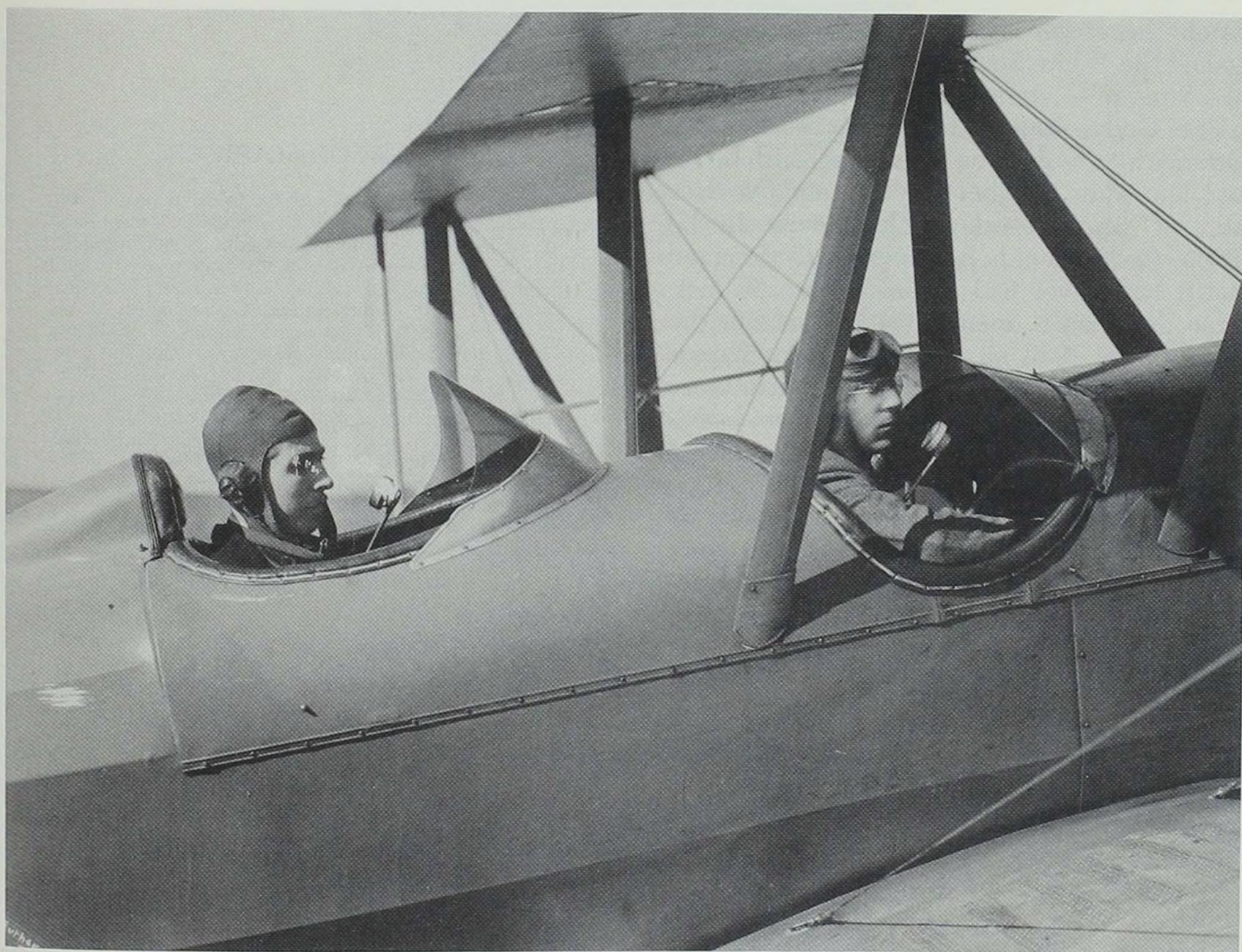
Cedar Rapids's best-known radio figure was Arthur Collins, son of Merle H. Collins, whose farms with their all-white buildings and rail fences circled Cedar Rapids. Arthur Collins began with a crystal set he fashioned from auto parts in 1919, when he was only nine years old. At fifteen, in 1925, using homemade equipment he had designed, he was almost the only radio operator in the United States to communicate daily with the MacMillan-Byrd expedition to the North Pole — the first such expedition to use airplanes. Collins was at the dock in New York when the expedition embarked; he had been invited by John Reinartz, the expedition's radio operator who knew of Collins's abilities. The *Gazette* of August 11, 1925, reported that Collins was receiving messages every day and forwarding them to Washington, D.C.

News of Collins's achievements spread among amateur radio operators, and soon people were writing to Collins asking where they could buy equipment like his. In May 1926, *Radio Age* published an article he had written about his equipment.

Collins began building sets in the attic of his parents' home. Later he took over the base-

Three thousand listen to Coolidge's inaugural address brought to an Iowa campus by radio. Cedar Rapids youngsters heard the radio speech in school assemblies.





ment. In 1932 he moved into his first small facility on First Avenue East. I sold him some second-hand office furniture, which he paid for with a postdated check. My employer was furious, but the check was good. A decade later, in 1944 and 1945, I flew on C-47s, B-17s, B-24s, and B-29s, all of which had Art Collins's equipment on board. By then he was Iowa's largest manufacturer.

Cedar Rapids was slow to catch on to the potential of the airplane. Our aviation equivalents of Tex Perham were Dan Hunter and Paul Shaw who, after World War I, began flying war surplus planes. Hunter established his first airport in 1920 south of Cedar Rapids. But four miles was too far out for people to come on Sundays to take a three-minute ride for five dollars so he moved to Simpson's pasture at the top of the Third Avenue West hill opposite the Chandler home.

Commenting on this move, Verne Marshall,

Barnstormer on weekends, Cedar Rapids car salesman on weekdays, pilot Paul Shaw (right) was instructing students in his Eagle Rock by 1930. Pilots like Shaw gradually showed Americans that planes were useful commercially, beyond air circus stunts.

the influential editor of the *Gazette*, commented that "the horse will be with us for a long time." Cedar Rapidians were still agreeing with him nine years later: they voted down a proposal for expanding the airport to permit passenger and mail service. So Iowa City got the eastern Iowa airmail and passenger plane stops, and on dark nights Cedar Rapidians could look to the south and see the reflection of the Iowa City beacon in the sky.

Nevertheless, in 1921, the *Gazette* paid the airmail fare of 24 cents an ounce to "airmail" a 150-pound *Gazette* reporter from New York to San Francisco — 2,356 miles, 14 days elapsed time, 33 hours actual flying time. But Cedar Rapidians who could take the train to Chicago,

watch the city's own Earl Whitehill pitch against the White Sox, and return home — all on a Sunday — were not impressed.

The Cedar Rapids boom years (and the nation's) hit the skids on my seventeenth birthday, Thursday, October 24, 1929, and five days later on "Black Tuesday," October 29. In the 1920s, Cedar Rapids had repeatedly bragged that it had never had a bank failure (in fact, three new banks opened for business in the decade). By 1933 all but two Cedar Rapids banks had closed, Merle Collins's farm company, which owned all those white farm buildings and fences, was bankrupt, and even all of us who had thriftily deposited our pennies each Tuesday throughout our school years lost all our savings.

But the Roaring Twenties, for all their problems and scandals, were great years to be alive in America. There has never been a decade to compare with it since. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Examination of daily issues of the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* from January 1920 through December 1929 augmented the author's own experiences in Cedar Rapids during that decade. Three Cedar Rapids histories proved useful: Ralph Clements, *Tales of the Town: Little-known Anecdotes of Life in Cedar Rapids* (Cedar Rapids, 1967); Janette Stevenson Murray and Frederick Gray Murray, *The Story of Cedar Rapids* (New York, 1950); and Ernie Danek's *Cedar Rapids* (Woodland Hills, Calif., 1980). The author also referred to considerable miscellaneous material collected personally, including material given to him by Grace Walsh Van Winkel, a Cedar Rapids classmate who now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The author interviewed Paul Shaw concerning his own aviation experiences in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City (where he now lives). A similar paper was read at the Cedar Rapids Public Library in 1985.

