

Core Sample of Iowa

The Mather-Bush

by Carol Bird

During the stormy, wet spring of 1851

Lydia and Samuel Mather, with their six children, walked from Ohio to Iowa to establish a new home in southwestern Cedar County, near West Branch. They brought with them all that could be carried in an oxcart, as well as some cows, driven for the most part by five-year-old Samuel Jr. Their daughter, Hannah, recorded the journey in her journal, day by day estimating distance covered and route taken. The year before, Samuel Sr., a Quaker of English descent, had purchased their new land because the soil was rich and an ice-cold spring constantly flowed there. In 1852 Samuel Sr. and Jr. planted a large grove of pines to shelter the new family home from winds. From these trees the Mather farmstead later derived its name, "The Evergreens."

The story of the Mather family is almost archetypal in Iowa history. Yet they were unique in that they seemed to have a strong sense of their place and role in history. Today their story is preserved in Special Collections in the State Historical Society of Iowa. Titled the "Mather-Bush Collection," the forty archival storage boxes



A turn-of-the-century picnic.

cover 109 years of family history through photographs, correspondence, business and farm records, manuscripts, and even house plans, scraps of fabric, and inventories of furnishings. The boxes cover nearly twenty feet of metal shelving, yet one can more accurately measure the significance of the collection by noting in this brief synopsis the many ways their family history

touches upon common themes in Iowa history.

After farming Evergreens for several years, Samuel Sr. and Lydia divorced in the 1870s and Samuel joined the military. Lydia, whose dowry had originally purchased the Mather land, began to rely primarily on Samuel Jr., by now a young man. Samuel Jr. seems to have been the only son interested in farming. Noted in his community for devotion to his mother and

History

Collection



his ability to perform feats of strenuous labor, Samuel took up the responsibilities of Evergreens. Through his industry, he paid for the education and business ventures of his brothers, who wanted to escape farm life. Because of this financial strain, the house and buildings at Evergreens dropped into a state of decay. The walls of the house had to be propped up and great streams of water ran in through the roof during storms.

Meanwhile on an Illinois farm, young Ellen

Knudson reached adulthood. Ellen's background was one of modest wealth, culture, and a streak of unconventionality. Ellen's father encouraged intellectual curiosity in his daughters and provided them

with a greater range of experiences than that of most young women of the late nineteenth century. Ellen herself was a passionate, curious person of great natural ability. Though burdened with the charge of younger brothers and sisters at a young age, she read widely, propping her book above her dishpan so that she might read as she washed dishes. At fourteen she had been asked to teach at a local school attended by both children and young men, and she was singularly successful at this and continued to teach into her twenties.

Sometime during 1875, Ellen Knudson traveled to Iowa to visit her friend Ellen Tow, who knew the Mathers. It was at this time that Ellen and Samuel Jr. met. Their courtship was a long one and the affectionate nature of it is only hinted at in their letters. In August 1878 they were married. This wedding marked a renaissance for Evergreens. With money saved from her teaching jobs and inheritance, Ellen purchased an adjacent 160 acres from two of Samuel's brothers.

Ellen's money also built the large, new house at Evergreens in which their six children would be reared. Ellen decorated this house with Brussels carpet, lace curtains, walnut furniture, the best paintings she could find, her music and books and Norwegian china, and, later, two pianos. Ellen's entrance into her husband's sober Quaker community was a stirring one. Ellen Knudson Mather was a phenomenon in the lives of



many, and for those interested in biography, this collection contains several good sketches of both Samuel and Ellen Mather, along with their personal sketches and diaries.

Daily and social life at Evergreens is

well documented in the collection in a series of memoirs

written by the entire Mather family. Most of these are childhood memories detailing fascination with the land and water and animals of the farm. In one memoir, for instance, Jeannette Mather Lord writes, "This description fits so exactly the Cedar County whose beauty father and mother loved . . . gently rolling country from hill to valley. There are many wild grapes, oats and much rye. Along the water courses there was wild rice in great abundance, and stately cane and pampas grass.

At Evergreens, sisters Rachel, Jeannette, and Edith Mather pose on a shaded porch. Interior photos reveal details of Victorian furnishings. Rachel (above) plays the piano. Four sisters (below) in a quiet moment.

From spring until frost, the eye of the pioneer drank in the beauty of a natural flower garden in every direction to the horizon."

The Mather-Bush Collection also includes over one thousand photographs. These provide additional documentation of life at Evergreens. An invaluable contribution to the collection, the photographs reveal intimate detail the memoirs might have overlooked.

The Mathers were known for their hospitality. Ellen often brought luminaries from nearby State University of Iowa in Iowa City to stay at Evergreens. One memoir mentions that guests could be found at Evergreens at almost any time; on one occasion, during the yearly Quaker meeting, thirty-six people slept under the Mather roof.

Because Ellen Mather's interests reached beyond Evergreens, the collection also holds documents from the Women's Christian Temperance Union, in which she was active for many years. She also served on the Board of Directors of the Benedict Home in Des Moines and was Superintendent of Sabbath Schools for Johnson County.

Samuel Mather's reputation as a farmer also grew. A gentle man, he trained his horses and oxen to respond to the sound of his voice rather than to the whip. And to the amazement of his incredulous neighbors, his oxen team won the pulling contest at Iowa State Fair urged on only by words. Samuel's explanation was





that because he had never asked the oxen to pull anything beyond their limit, they knew of nothing they could not draw.

In 1901 eldest child Rachel Mather, now

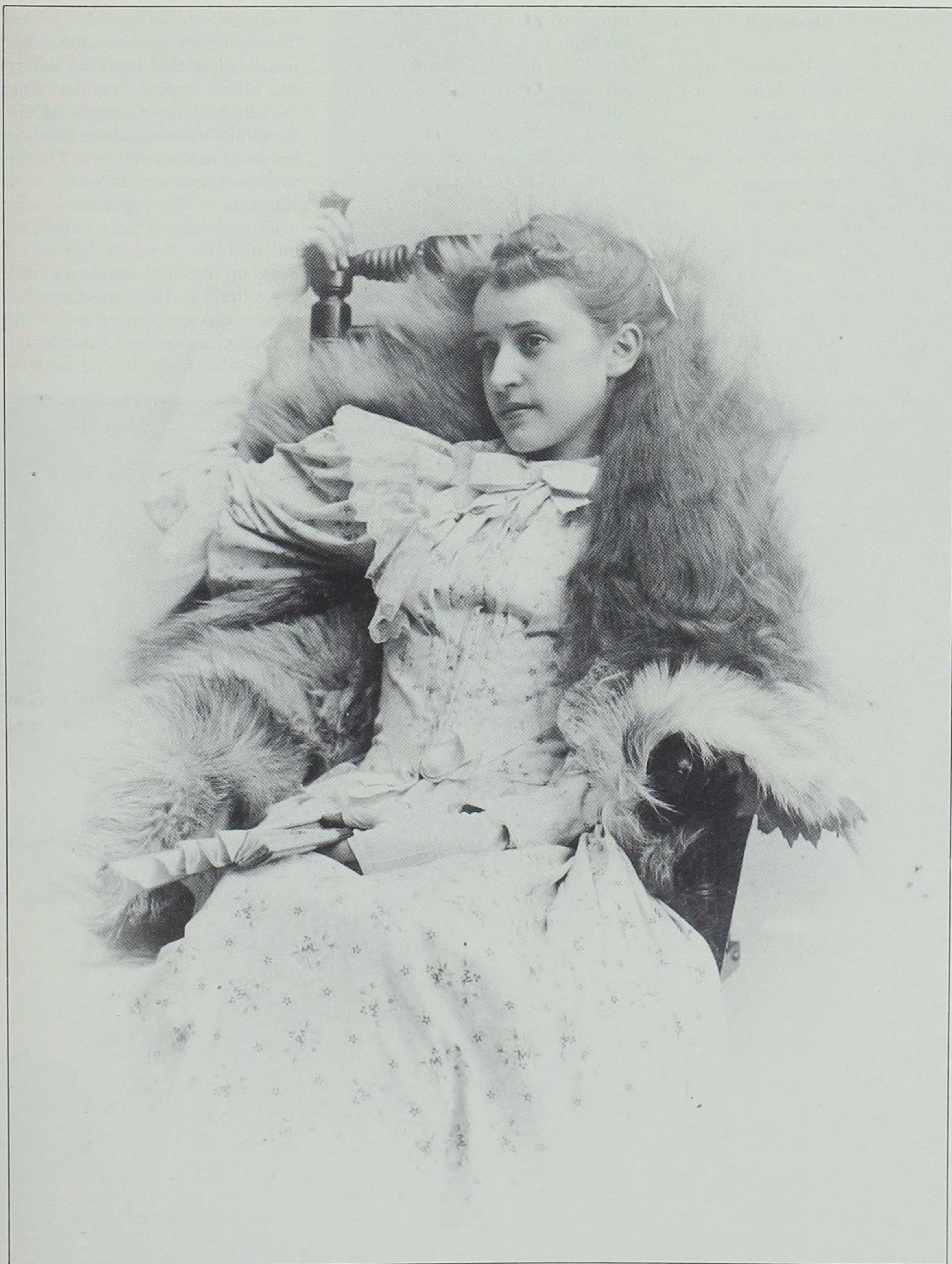
twenty-two, enrolled in a university class in romance languages. Her professor, Stephen Hayes Bush, was a recent Harvard graduate teaching at Iowa because he liked the vitality and growth he saw there. One spring Sunday afternoon Rachel invited her

professor to Evergreens, and they fell in love that day, he quoting poetry to her during the carriage ride back to Iowa City. Bush writes about this day and their early married life in Iowa City in his diaries. (The entries, however, are in French and need translation.)

Next to the Mather papers and photographs, the Stephen Hayes Bush papers make up the second largest part of the Mather-Bush Collection. Bush was a prolific diarist, letter writer, and essayist for over fifty years and his papers reveal much about the expanding university, political and scientific issues of the day, and, of course, Bush himself. Chair of the Department of Romance

Paul Mather (left) takes in the cool shade of the pump house at Evergreens. Right: Rachel Mather (1894?)

Languages for forty years, Bush also spent much time in Europe forming friendships and academic ties. Because of these connections and his own beliefs, he was deeply troubled by the plight of Europe at the onset of World War I. In 1918, at the age of forty, Bush took sabbatical leave from the university and joined the Moroccan division as a YMCA representative. His diaries include detailed descriptions of the war across the whole of France. At home, Rachel also kept a diary and from it we see some of the American



women's contribution to the war effort.

After the war Bush returned to teach and to expand the Department of Romance Languages. Known for his personal involvement with his students, Bush, even as department chair, always insisted on teaching one class of incoming freshmen in order to keep his hand on the pulse of the times. During his fifties Bush was struck with a severe heart ailment. He recovered and returned to teach classes but was

forced to spend the remainder of his time in bed. Also increasingly blind, he nevertheless continued his massive correspondence until his death in 1960. These letters present Stephen Bush more clearly than perhaps any other individual in the collection.

In its entirety the Mather-Bush Collection

reaches much further than the three generations presented here. Jeannette Mather Lord (Samuel and Ellen's second daughter) was the self-designated genealogist of the family. She was also a good historical writer and worked in the suffrage movement in New Hampshire. Her papers and manuscripts (with those of her husband, Dr. Frederic P. Lord) make up the third largest part of the collection. Her genealogical research encompasses the migration across the United States and reaches back into the family's



Norwegian roots. She and her husband located and visited the original village of her mother's family in Norway. From this research she developed a well written manuscript detailing life in Norway in which one can see some of the reasons immigrants came to America. Her extensive work helps place the Mather family within American and European history.

Though the Mather family was extraordinary in many ways, it is the similarity of their experience with the larger American story



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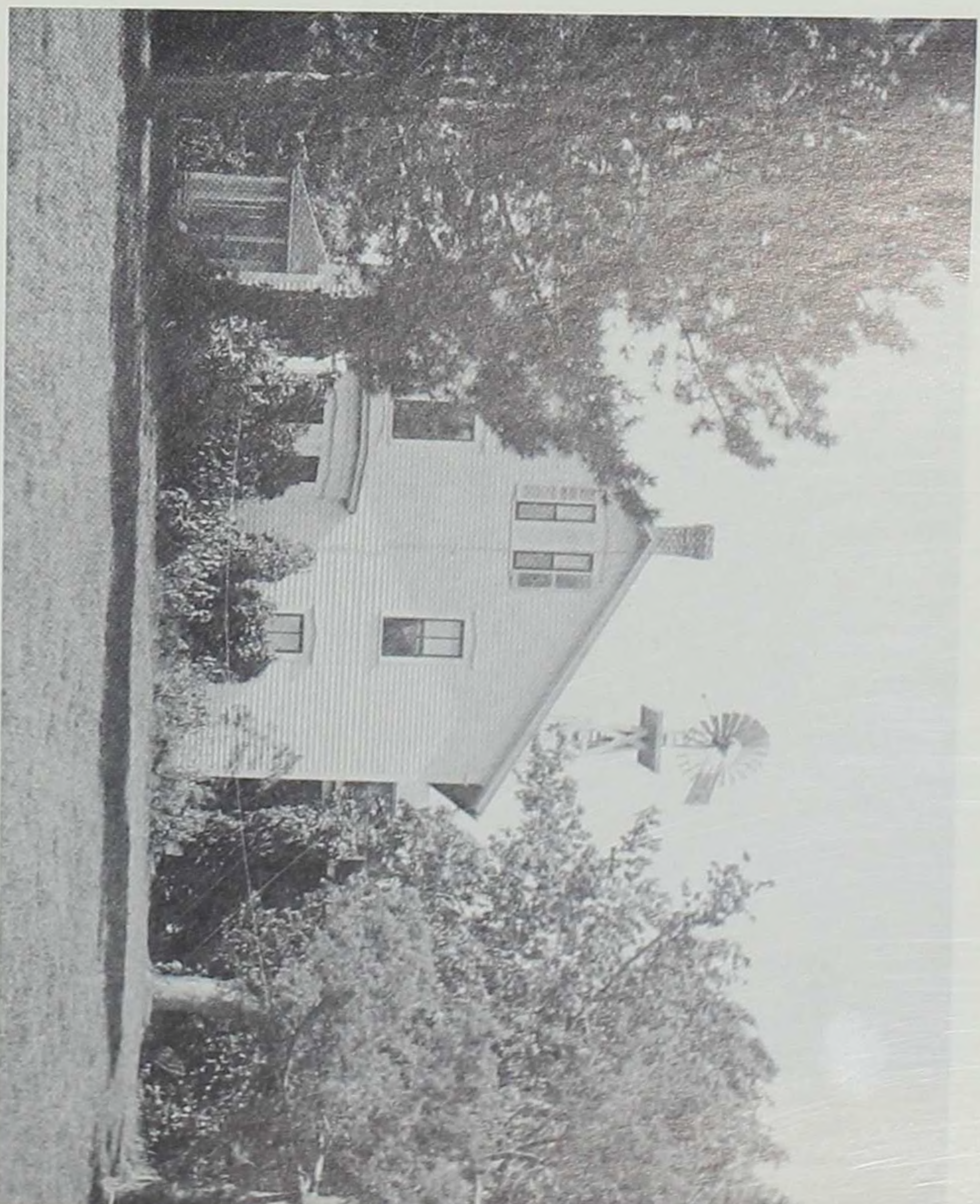
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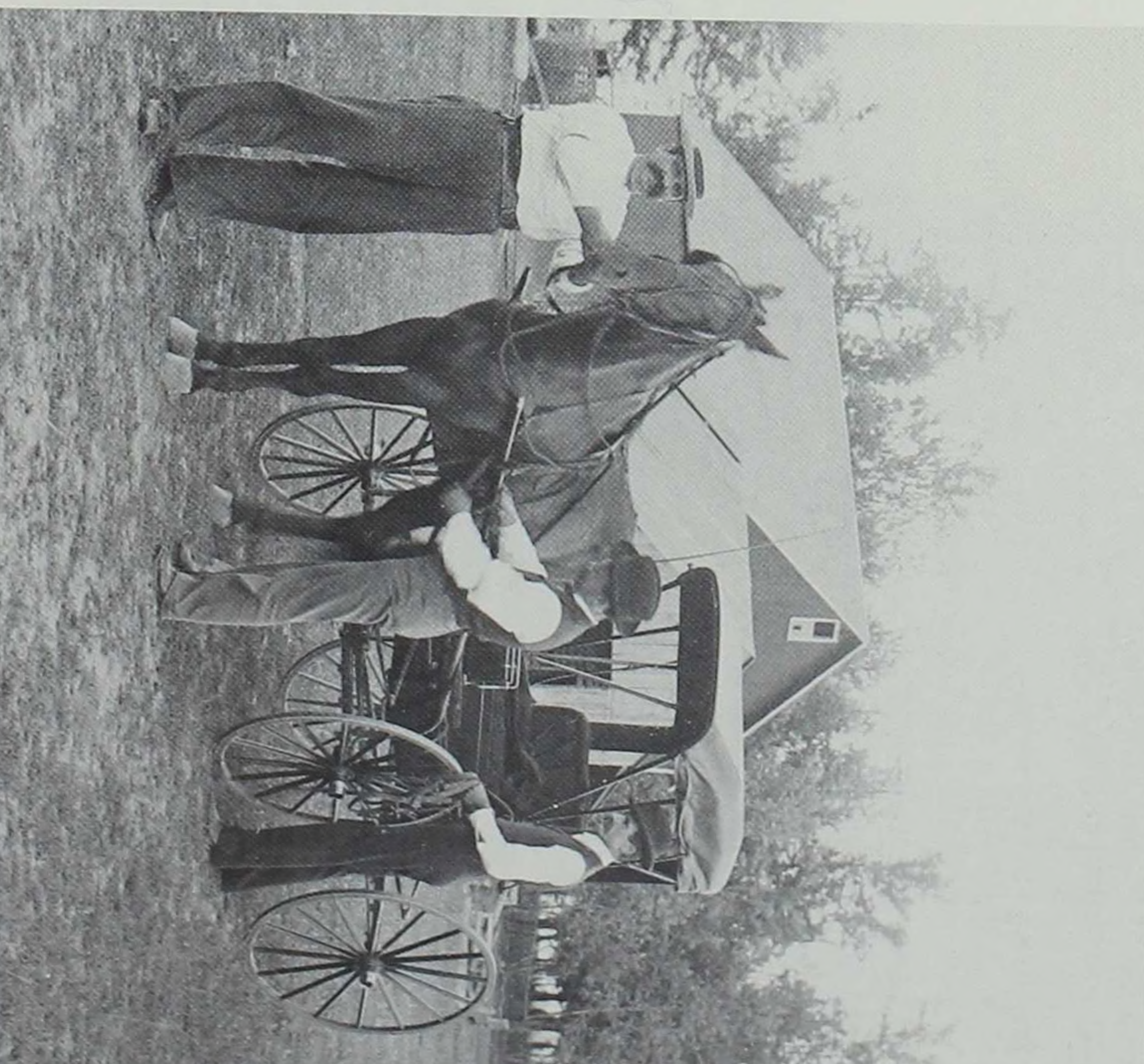
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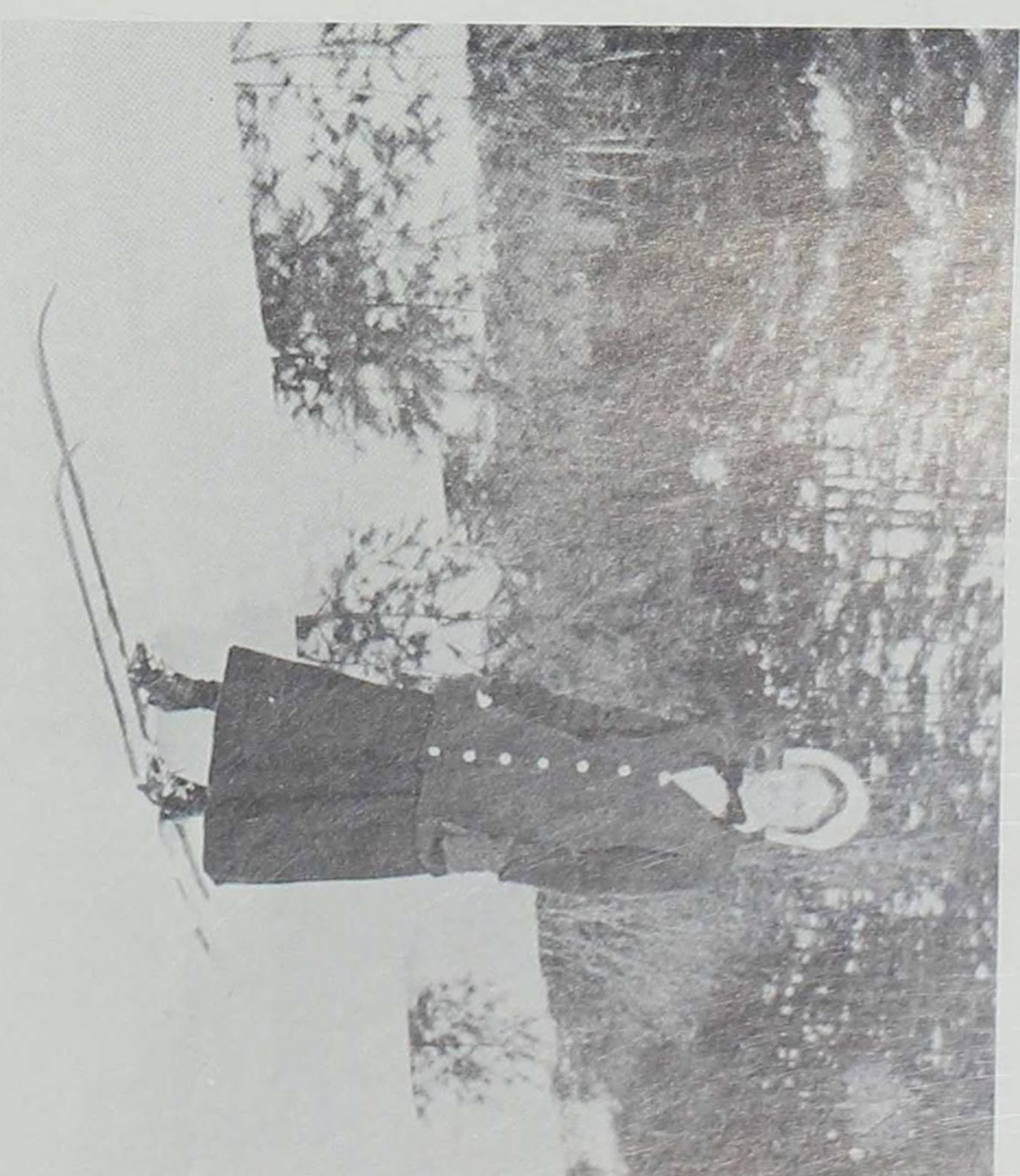
Upper left: "Discovery of a turtle dove's nest" at Beth's wedding, 1912. Samuel Mather Jr. (far left) and Stephen Bush (far right) flank Edith, Beth, Rachel, and Millicent (Rachel and Stephen's child).

Upper right: Jeannette Mather Lord, who initiated the family history.

that makes this collection a valuable source for researchers. From Samuel Sr. and Lydia we know of the motivations, struggles, and rewards of pioneering. Samuel Sr. and Jr. labored to develop the land from wilderness and to integrate the new technologies available to the farmers in the early nineteenth hundreds. And the later economic struggles of Samuel Jr.'s son Anders to keep Evergreens in the family in 1938 presage things to come. Although Ellen Knudson Mather was of Lutheran/Norwegian descent, she and Samuel followed the Quaker faith and reared their children in this church. Ellen Mather can perhaps be said to have added

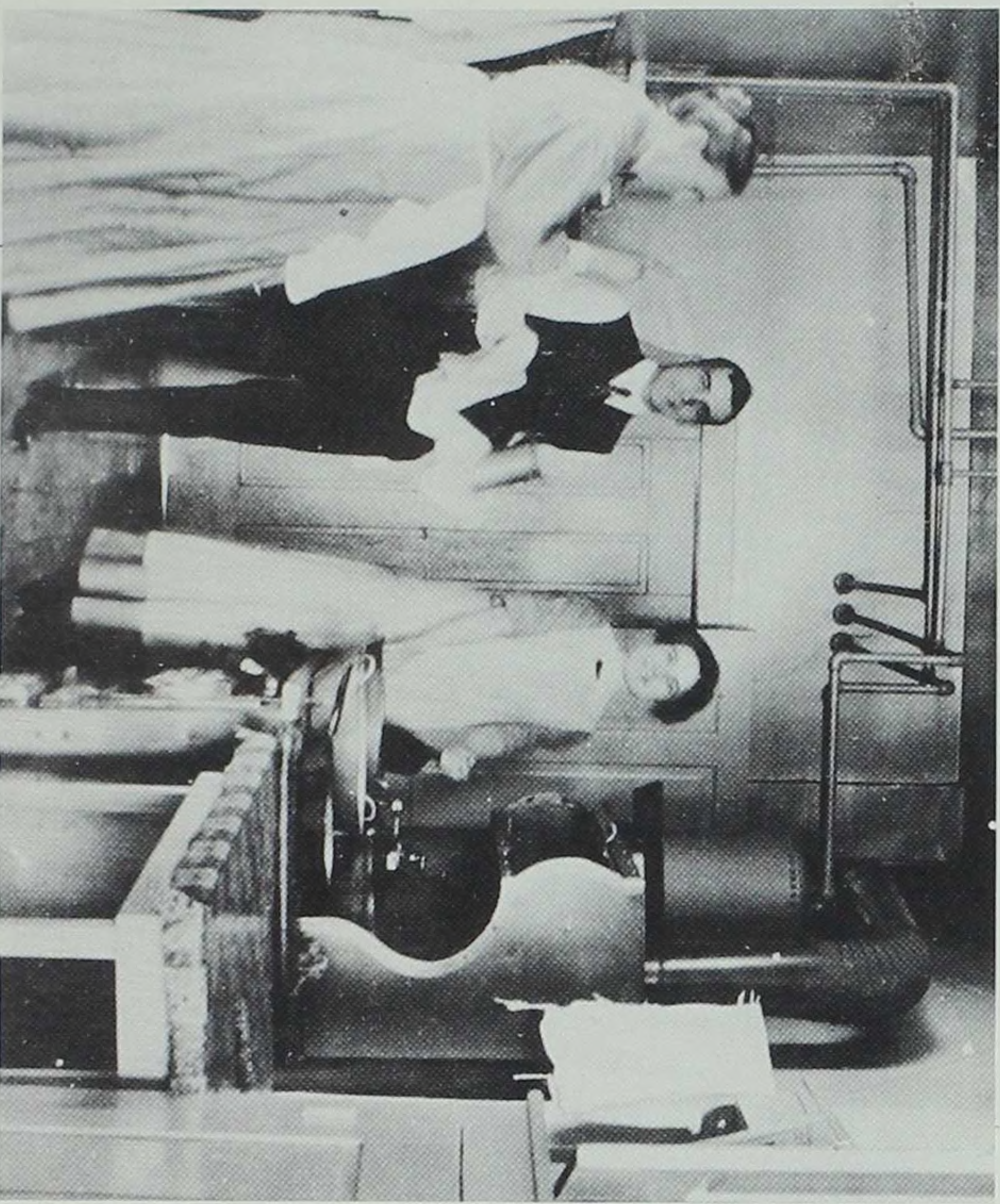
the culture to this agricultural family. It was she who integrated literature and art into her home and West Branch society, who encouraged dancing and the pursuit of musical training. With the marriage of Rachel to Professor Stephen Bush, the family history enters an academic and international arena through Bush's war experiences and university accomplishments.

From staunch Quaker pioneers to agricultural and intellectual leaders, the Mather story exists as a core sample of Iowa history. The Mathers and Bushes and Lords seemed aware that they played a part in shaping an era and a state and so documented their lives as if with Iowa posterity in mind.



Lower left: In the Evergreens kitchen, Ellen Knudson Mather (left) instructs two laughing helpers.

Lower right: Boating on the Cedar River.



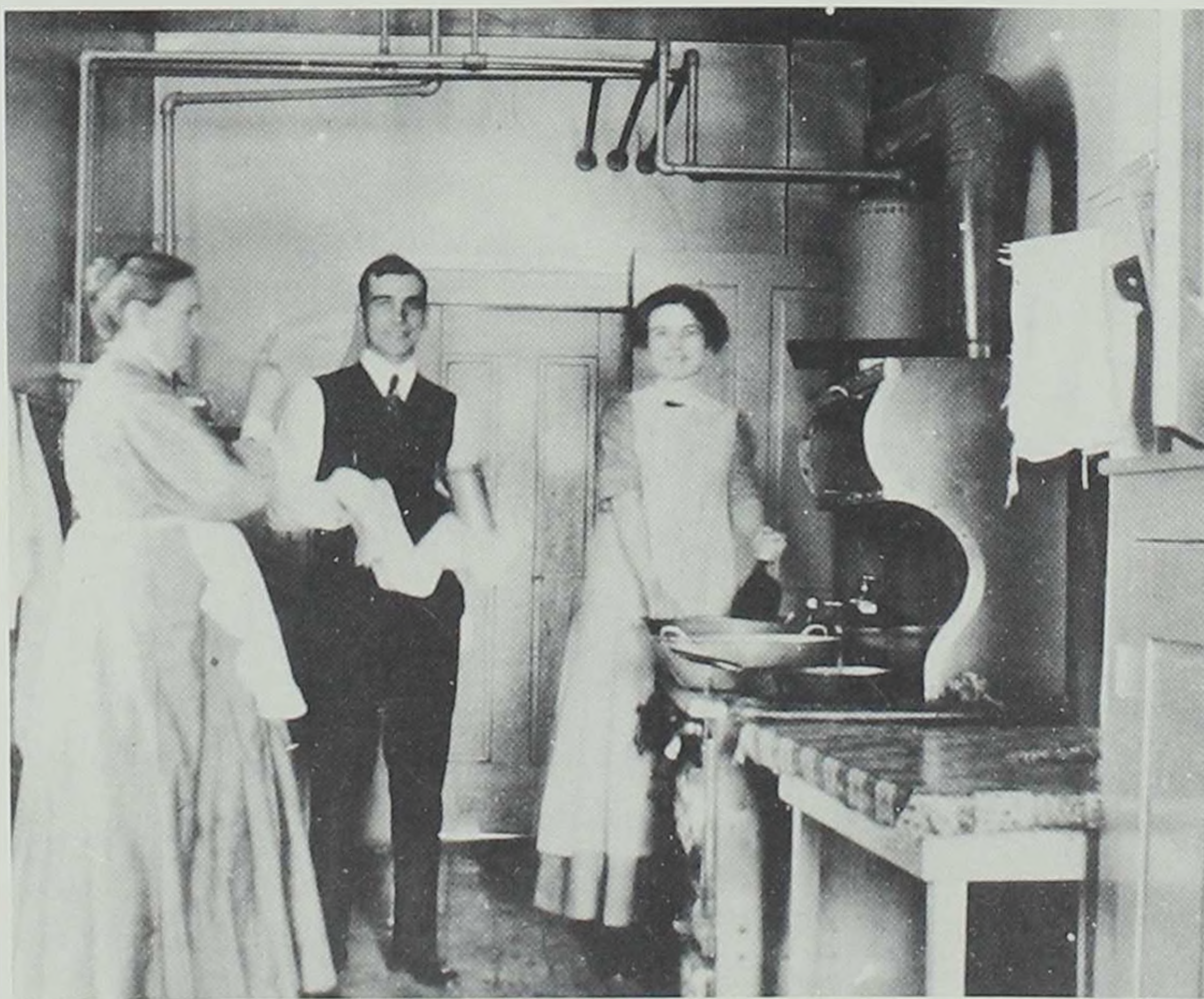


Upper left: "Discovery of a turtle dove's nest" at Beth's wedding, 1912. Samuel Mather Jr. (far left) and Stephen Bush (far right) flank Edith, Beth, Rachel, and Millicent (Rachel and Stephen's child).

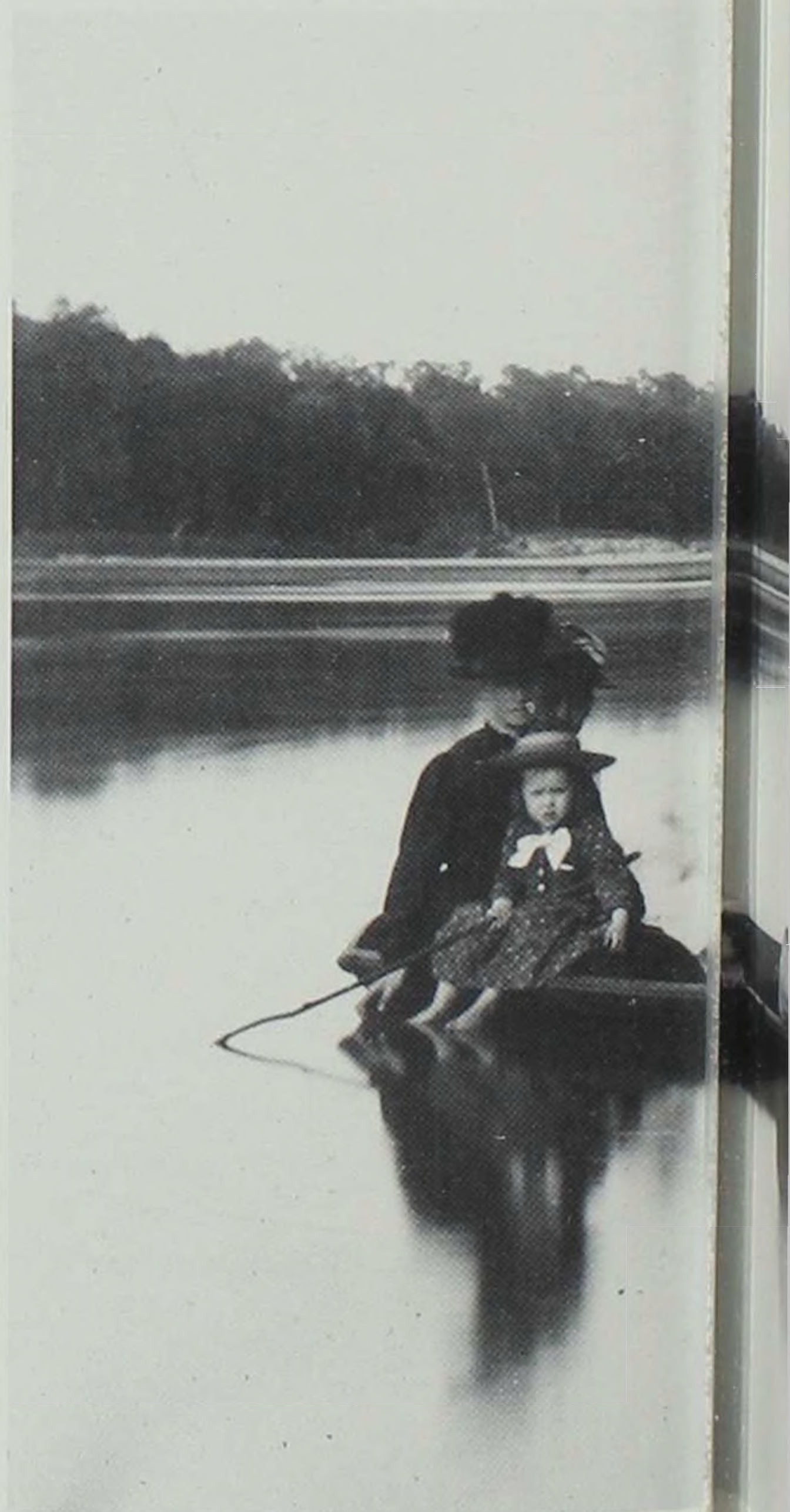
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