

Fort Des Moines • Warren County Farm Photos • Telephone Operators

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Ginalie Swaim, Editor

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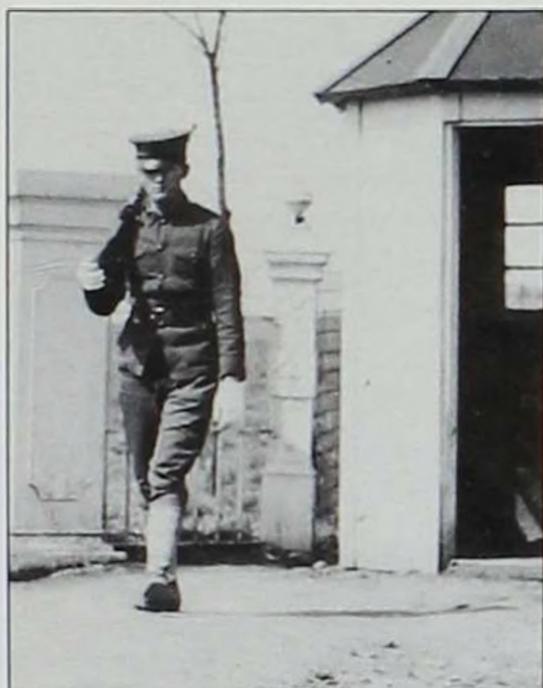
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**FRONT COVER:** Murrel Garbison (right) strides toward the camera as sister Rhea (left) and her friend Opal escort a reluctant family pet between them. This photograph was taken by John Garbison (Murrel and Rhea's father) on August 6, 1909. A Warren County farmer at the turn-of-the-century, Garbison found time to photograph everyday scenes of rural life. Several of his images appear in this issue.

# 'A kind of human machine'

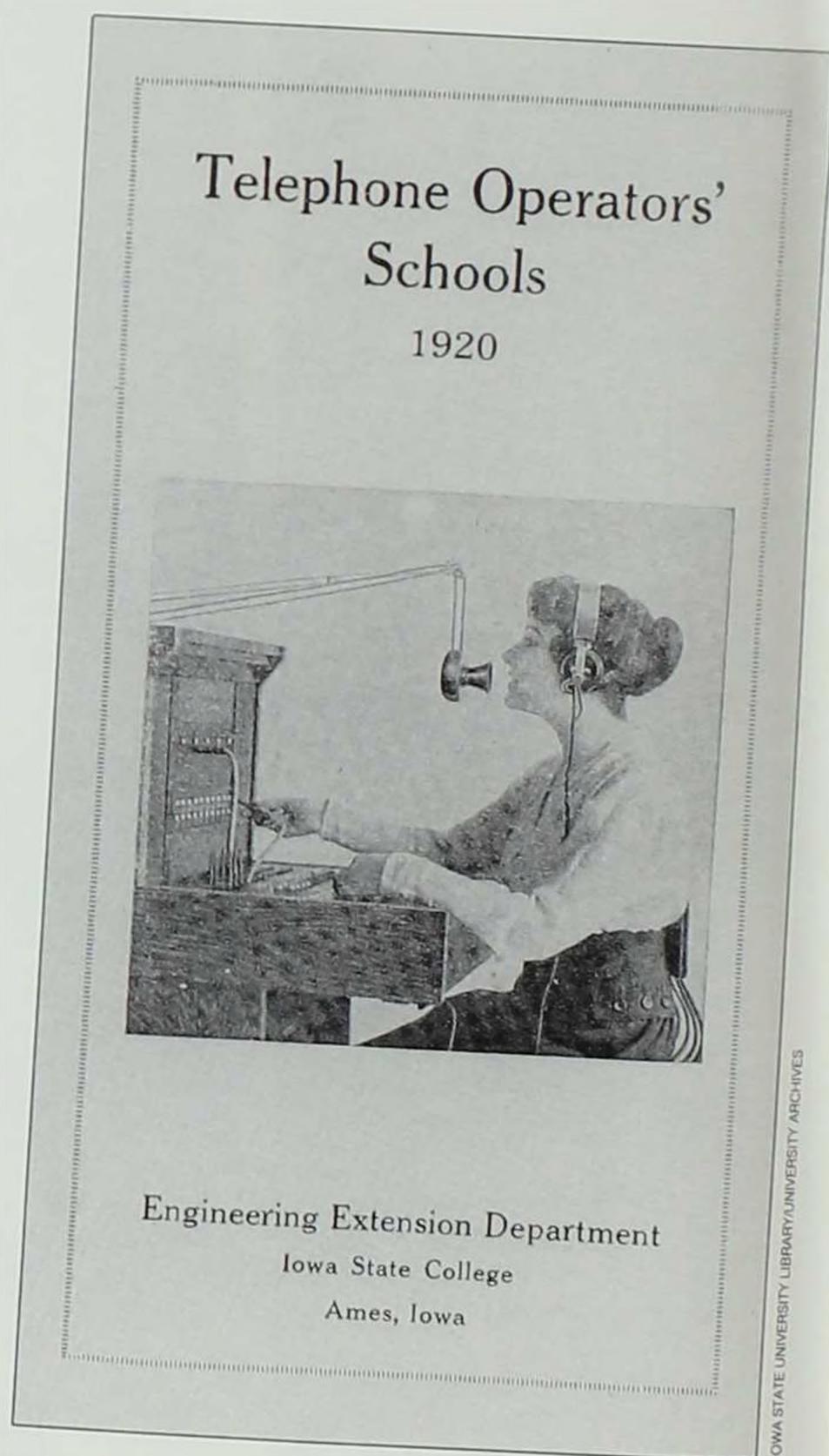
## Women's Work at the Switchboard

by Marjorie Levine

**I**N 1915, the Engineering Extension Department of Iowa State College in Ames proclaimed the need for more skilled telephone operators throughout the state, "to save the time and temper of telephone patrons." With the expansion of telephone usage across the United States, punctuated by the first transcontinental line passing through Iowa in 1910, Iowa telephone companies had a high demand for properly trained switchboard operators. The first state-sponsored operators' school in the nation, which functioned through various short-courses throughout the state, was established in Iowa in 1915. The goal of these courses was the production of faster and more effective operating practices, but politeness was considered the "keynote of the codes" for the switchboard operator.

Today, most people in Iowa and the United States take telephones and telephone operators for granted. For many, the completion of everyday tasks without the use of the telephone seems close to impossible, and operator assistance seems like just one more part of a great communication machine. From its invention in the 1870s through the early years of the twentieth century, however, the telephone's dependability was rather questionable. Until automated switching and direct dialing replaced manual operators around the middle of the twentieth century, good service relied much more heavily on people than on technology, and especially important in this role was the switchboard operator.

The persona of the telephone operator is part



1920 Iowa State College training manual

of our cultural mythology in the United States. Images of friendly "hello girls," promoted by telephone companies, were prominent in magazines, songs, and movies until the ascendancy of the dial phone in the 1940s, when more efficient technology displaced the need for a romantic image of the operator. Telephone

companies advertised the importance of personal service, depicting the "Voice with a Smile" — a "neat, proper young woman, blandly pretty," an image which appealed to public sentiment.

Alongside these cultural representations, however, are the real people who staffed the switchboards in extremely diverse circumstances and situations. Female labor has been the driving force behind the operation of the telephone industry for over a century, and the reality of the majority of operators' lives, especially in the early years of telephone history, has been one of hard work and little glamour.

Perhaps the only unqualified generalization that can be made concerning telephone operating in the United States is that it has been a historically female job. Differences in geographical regions, urban and rural areas, and size of telephone exchanges make other generalizations difficult to support. From the late nineteenth century to the present day, the role of the operator has varied considerably, but has always played a significant part in the communications networks of telephone exchanges, and produced job opportunities for women. By World War I, forty years after the telephone's invention, 99 percent of the nation's operators were women. It was not until 1973, when American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) signed a consent decree with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, that men were fully integrated into telephone operating — almost a century after the initial sex segregation of the operating workforce in the 1880s.

**T**HE TELEPHONE came into being with the first transmission of the human voice over electric wire in 1876 in the workshop of Alexander Graham Bell. The first public telephone exchange was set up in New Haven, Connecticut in 1878. Initial reactions to the invention of the telephone were understandably skeptical; many people were suspicious of a voice seemingly floating through the air, and felt that the telephone

must be either fraudulent or dangerous. Quickly, however, the curiosity about the machine passed, and most people began to realize the telephone's potential benefits for both their professional and personal lives.

In the late nineteenth century, telephone technology spread rapidly across the United States, catching on to varying degrees in different localities. The first switchboard in Iowa was set up in Keokuk in 1878. By the middle of the following year, switchboard exchanges were also in operation in Burlington and Dubuque, while in other Iowa locations, some people desiring service even strung wires between housetops to connect telephones. The number of phones grew rapidly, and by 1902, Iowa was one of the national leaders in telephony.

**A**CCORDING to a federal census report, Iowa had about 138,000 "stations or telephones" in 1902, with the number climbing to around 333,000 in 1907. By contrast, the number in Wisconsin, another rural midwestern state, was less than half: 63,000 in 1902, and 159,000 in 1907. The general growth in the industry evidenced in these two states was mirrored throughout the nation, and as more and more switchboard exchanges opened, increasing numbers of women were hired to staff them. The Bell telephone system of the early twentieth century, in fact, became the largest employer of women in the United States.

Women entered the world of switchboard operating rather early in telephone history. In the initial years, teenage boys were hired to run the switchboards, carrying over from their work as transmitters and messengers in the telegraph industry. By the 1880s, however, girls and young women had almost universally replaced boy operators, who were thought to be too rowdy, rude, and inattentive to be able to deal satisfactorily with the customers on the other end of the line. The stereotypical "feminine" temperament, on the other hand, was regarded by telephone officials as ideally suited for the task of the operator: patience and courtesy were held to be universal female attributes



By 1902, when this photo in Davenport was taken, girls and young women predominated as switchboard operators. Boys had held these jobs in the early years, but the jobs soon fell to females, stereotyped as steady, courteous, and patient.

within Victorian society (or at least universal among the type of women who would be found suitable for the operator's job). In a centennial history of Northwestern Bell, a telephone official in Cleveland is cited as saying that "the service [of women] is very much superior to that of boys and men. They are steadier, do not drink beer and are always on hand."

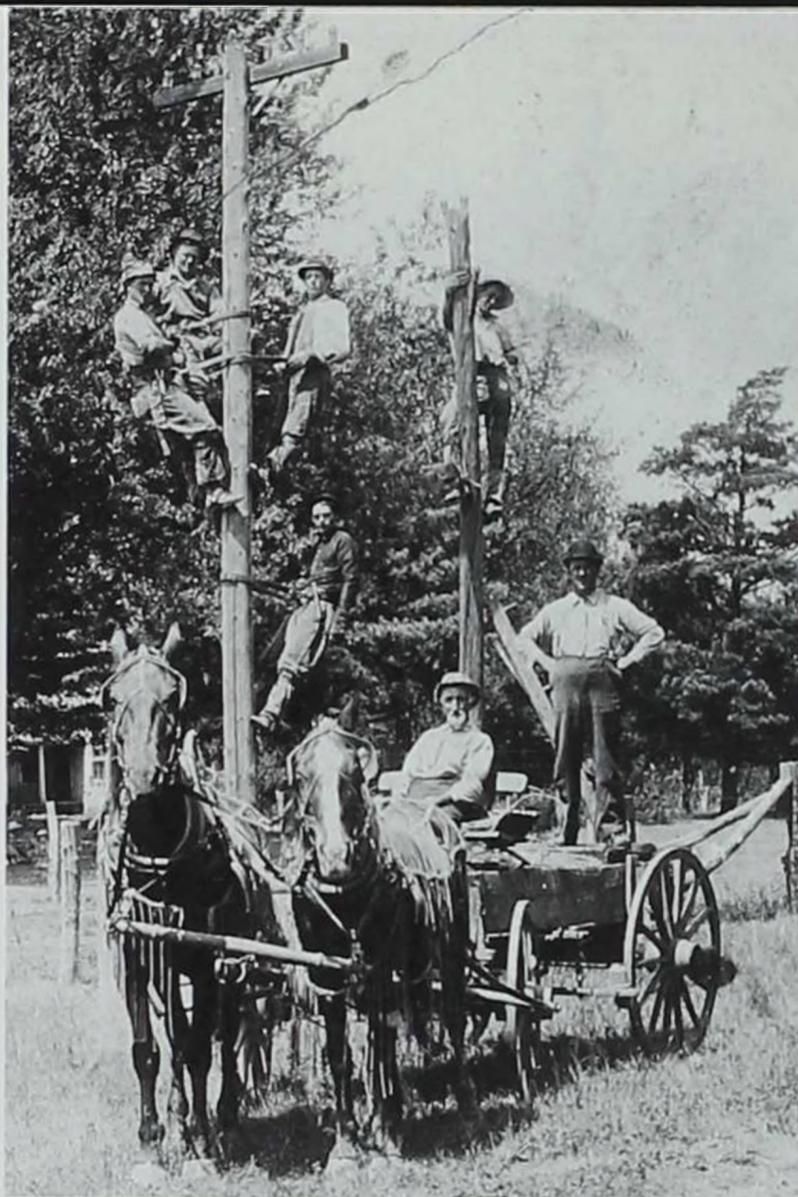
According to Stephen Norwood in his study of telephone operators' unionism, *Labor's Flaming Youth*, the idea of women operators initially met with resistance from managerial personnel in larger exchanges "who feared that [women] would prove inefficient because of an alleged tendency to engage in prolonged conversations and that male supervisory personnel, who predominated in the telephone exchanges until at least 1890, would 'form pref-

erences' on the basis of sexual attraction rather than merit." Additionally, there was some question about women's ability to operate mechanical instruments like switchboards, but in the end, the ideal of female politeness and gentleness won out over perceptions of female flightiness and incompetence.

An important factor in this decision was that management in larger urban telephone companies (which predominated in the early years) assumed that women, eager to enter the expanding white-collar workforce in the late nineteenth century, would be more likely to tolerate the poor working conditions and low wages that went along with the operator's job. By the late 1880s, women covered almost all daytime operating shifts within the Bell telephone exchanges, while men and boys

remained on night shifts — which were regarded as inappropriate hours for women to work. Nevertheless, by the early 1900s, women began to take over night work also, presumably willing to sacrifice Victorian notions of “respectability” for the higher wages. Despite this moral questionability of female night work, switchboard operating was emerging as a field of “proper” work for young Victorian middle-class women, as they were generally shielded from the public gaze and under the paternalistic eye of the telephone companies.

Telephones were mainly an urban phenomenon until the Bell patents expired in 1894. At this point, people outside the Bell system began to organize independent and mutual telephone companies or cooperatives. Many of these companies provided service for small-town and rural regions, which were less lucrative territory for the Bell system and consequently had not been targeted for earlier phone service.



A Jackson County crew of troubleshooters checks telephone lines near Maquoketa. Rural lines were often fragile and needed frequent repair.

IOWA, a predominantly rural state, became the national leader in independent telephony in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Providing telephone service for farms became a priority for Iowans, as the electrification of Iowa towns in the 1890s exacerbated the differences between rural and town life. By 1917, over 86 percent of rural Iowa households had at least one phone, which was a national high, but reflected general mid-western trends. Much of this success was due to farmers who would form a group to establish a cooperative telephone company, buying the telephones and setting up lines to a local exchange. Rural telephone lines were often very fragile, easily damaged in storms, and frequently in need of repairs. Operators on these lines had to be especially careful at the switchboard, as lightning could easily carry over the damaged wires.

In the late nineteenth century, most switchboards were not set up in buildings designed specifically to be telephone exchanges. Rather, operators would be housed in the back rooms

or attics of homes or offices. The most basic telephone service came from family-owned systems, in which the women were responsible for running the switchboard, usually from the kitchen, and the men took care of installation and repairs. Only gradually did switchboard exchanges come to be accommodated in buildings of their own.

Most late-nineteenth-century exchanges — Bell and independent — employed between one and four operators, and customer service was very personal. Early operators generally possessed a good deal of autonomy in the way they handled their jobs. There were often no standard procedures for talking with subscribers, and frequently operators would converse freely with their customers. This was especially the case on party lines, where ten to twenty subscribers were connected on the same line. “Listening in” to a neighbor’s calls was a common pastime for both subscribers and operators. As one Iowa party-line subscriber put it, “Despite the many jokes about ‘Central’ knowing the business of everyone in the community,



Model of attentiveness: an operator at Iowa Light and Power in Iowa City.

**A Telephone Saves Time and Money**

It's easy! With a first-class telephone line from home to town you and your neighbors can talk direct to crop buyers every day without driving over those long miles. You can watch the market for top prices—ask the railroad station if your freight has come—order supplies from the store—find out what's doing at the stock yards—set a time with the grist mill for grinding your grain—get the doctor *quick* when you need him. Besides all this, you can talk business or pleasure without leaving your own doors.

**Western Electric  
Rural Telephones**

are standard for use on the farm. Thousands are in daily use by progressive farmers everywhere. If you are still without telephone service, write us for information on how it can be secured. Write the nearest house below, and mention this paper.

**WESTERN ELECTRIC COMPANY**  
Manufacturers of the 8,000,000 "Bell" Telephones

New York	Atlanta	Chicago	Kansas City	Salt Lake City
Buffalo	Savannah	Cleveland	Oklahoma City	Los Angeles
Philadelphia	Pittsburgh	St. Louis	Dallas	San Francisco
Boston	Cincinnati	Indianapolis	Houston	Oakland
New Orleans	Detroit	Minneapolis	Denver	Seattle
Richmond	Milwaukee	St. Paul	Omaha	Portland

**EQUIPMENT FOR EVERY ELECTRICAL NEED**

Although this 1914 *Successful Farming* ad promises that a farmer with a telephone can "talk direct" with crop buyers or "get the doctor *quick*," it fails to acknowledge the role of the local switchboard operator in connecting parties, handling emergencies, and sometimes even tracking down the town physician.

she was the one upon whom we all depended when an emergency arose."

In fact, the role of the operator in the context of the early small-town or rural exchange was central to the information network of the community. The operator's social position gave her a certain amount of status and power, as she provided news of local interest, informing neighbors of such events as the birth of a baby or the need for help in putting up an outbuilding. A Cedar County, Iowa, man recalled that operators in the early twentieth century gave daily weather and market reports to any who asked. Additionally, the operator was essential in emergencies, such as calling the community to fires, doctors to sickbeds, and notifying people of dangerous road or weather conditions.

In most cases, "Central" — as many switchboard operators were known, for their central

position in connecting telephones — knew all her subscribers by name. In many small-town communities, subscribers often requested connections by the name of the party they wanted to reach rather than by number. In these cases, it was the operator's responsibility to know her entire community by the names of its members. In areas that were slower to receive technological advances in telephony, this personal service lasted well into the twentieth century.

The contact with people that the job provided, as well as the relative autonomy in the work environment, was of prime importance in attracting and keeping women in the early years of switchboard operation, for there were significant drawbacks to the job. For one thing, early headsets weighed as much as six pounds, and the operator's day often lasted as long as

eleven hours. In states such as Iowa — where there were no limits to the number of hours women could work, no restrictions on women's night work, and no minimum-wage legislation — the operator's life could be potentially exhausting and unrewarding. Early operators were also in physical danger from potentially faulty electrical lines and thunderstorms until telephone technology advanced to the point where wiring was dependable. Additionally, unpleasant subscribers were a constant source of anxiety, especially in larger exchanges.

**T**HE MOVE toward standardized operating procedures in the early twentieth century took away many of the aspects of the job that had been attractive to young women: freedom to converse, lack of rigid supervision, and the personal relationship with subscribers that often resulted in gifts at holiday time. As telephones became more and more popular throughout America, and as demand for telephone service increased, rules of telephone operating became increasingly strict — first in larger urban exchanges, then spreading to small-town and rural systems. The goal of telephone companies in the early twentieth century — whether rural or urban, Bell or independent — was the standardization of operating procedures to provide better, more efficient service. This emphasis on standardization had different effects on large and small exchanges: whereas small-town operators retained some measure of freedom in their jobs, the expectations for young city women seeking positions as operators became increasingly rigid.

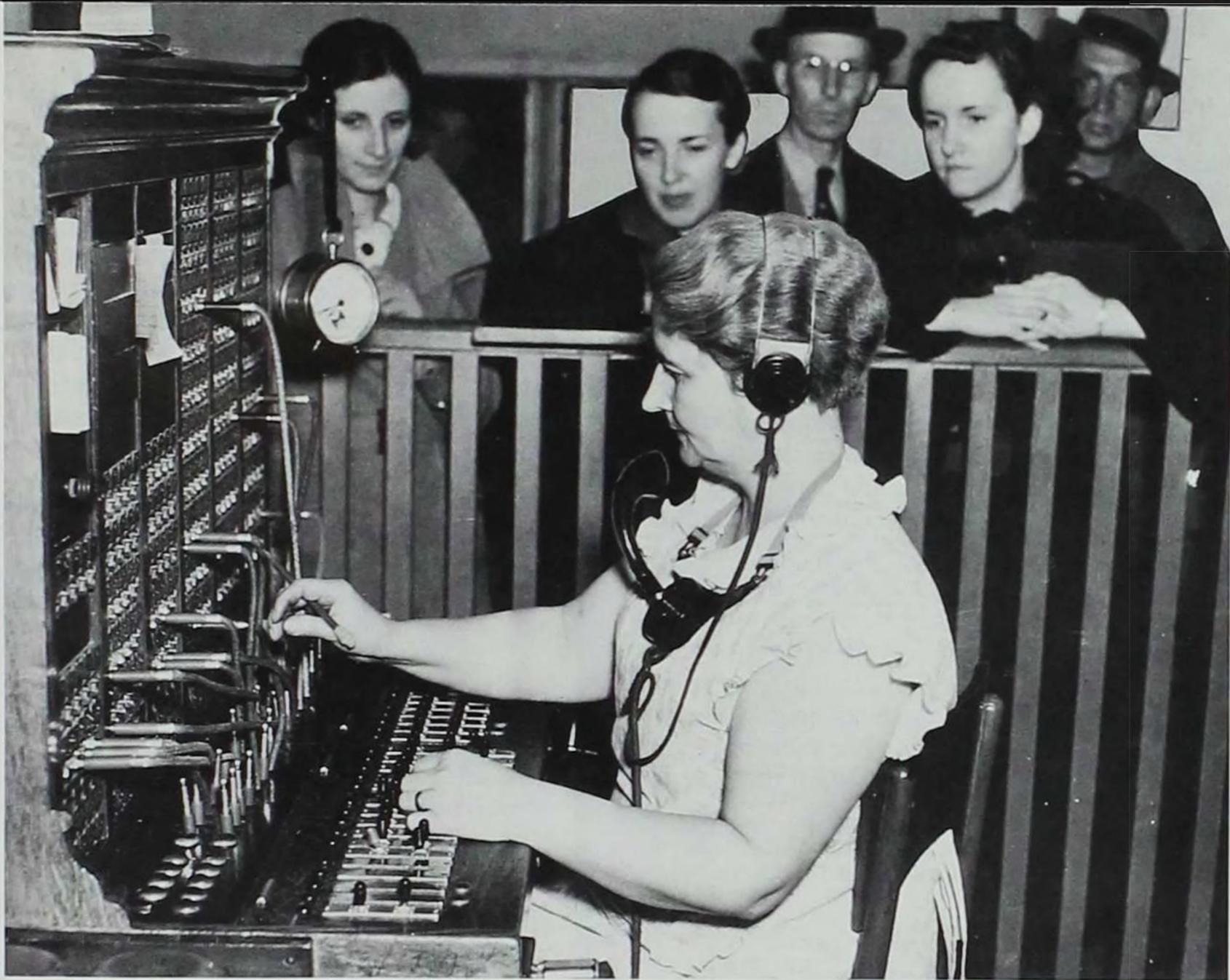
From the first decade of the twentieth century, with the exception of small and rural exchanges, standards came to include definite age qualifications, as well as very exacting expectations for the physical and educational suitability of women applying for operating positions. Most operators were young (a 1916 study found that 65 percent of operators in Iowa were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one) and unmarried. Telephone management expected young women to leave their jobs if they did marry, which was considered

the natural thing for a woman to do: women were generally regarded as a temporary workforce — their time on the job simply occupying them until they married.

In many places, young women interested in switchboard jobs had to undergo physical examinations, which included specific attention paid to arm reach and height in relation to the size of the switchboard. Schools began to be set up around 1900, and once a woman was accepted as a potential operator, she had to go through a training period — sometimes paid, sometimes not — where she was drilled in the rules of operating. These rules included special vocal training for diction and inflection, instruction in the rote responses she was allowed to use with subscribers, and lectures concerning the proper morality that she was expected to exhibit as a member of the telephone family. For example, the 1916 Bureau of Labor Statistics report in Iowa noted that “in many exchanges after an application for work is made, an experienced woman is sent into the home of the applicant to make an investigation of cleanliness, to trace infectious or contagious diseases and to find general living conditions. The assumption is that where living conditions of the home are good and cleanly the girl from that home is cleanly in habits and person.” Clearly, a woman's technical ability at the switchboard was not sufficient evidence of her acceptability for the job.

**T**ELEPHONE COMPANIES expected a lot from their young operators. As the first female supervisor in the national Bell system explained at the end of her career in 1930, the ideal operator of the twentieth century “must now be made as nearly as possible a paragon of perfection, a kind of human machine.” Officials at large, often urban exchanges sought to demonstrate to the public the proper life of their female operators, as well as their machine-like efficiency. The dehumanization that accompanied this exhibition of propriety and productivity was thus experienced more intensely by the numerous women employed at the larger exchanges.

In addition to the rigorous training period,



A Renwick, Iowa, switchboard operator handles calls as onlookers wait for news about a Mason City collision involving a bus and train. During emergencies, a local operator was a vital link in the community.

which usually lasted three to four weeks, operators had to undergo strict supervision once they officially started work at the switchboard. Mistakes were carefully recorded by a supervisor, who paced behind the operators, and a monitor, who could listen in on operators' lines undetected. This expectation of maintaining a constant level of perfection put extreme pressure on the operators, many of them young women ages sixteen to eighteen. A 1910 United States Senate investigation into the telephone industry declared switchboard operating "unsuitable" for the "nervous woman." Six years later, the Iowa Bureau of Labor Statistics report described operating as "a severely nervous strain occupation" because of the "strict surveillance and rigid adherence to rules laid down by the company, together with the impatience and fault-finding of unreasonable subscribers."

In larger exchanges, operators were not allowed to say a word outside of the scripted

responses. If a customer insisted on conversation, he or she was referred to the special information operator created for that purpose, further depriving the regular operator of personal contact. Moreover, women could not expect to advance beyond chief operator or operator supervisor in telephone companies, as all the higher-level, well-paying jobs were reserved for men. It is not surprising that turnover rates in bigger exchanges were quite high. Although operators went out on strike in Des Moines in 1902 asking for higher wages, it was not until the later 1910s that women operators were well enough organized throughout the United States to successfully achieve their demands.

Small-town and rural operating underwent a different sort of standardization procedure than larger, urban exchanges, partially because many more small exchanges were part of independent or mutual companies. Despite the honorable goals of management, supervision

and training in these markets were fairly sporadic. Although emphasis on proper standards became a growing concern in small as well as large exchanges, operators in small-town and rural areas maintained much more freedom on the job than did their counterparts in large cities. Companies were more flexible in their smaller exchanges and many of these exchanges were independently owned, so there was very little regional training or standard practice in the early years. As a result of the prevalence of independent exchanges in states such as Iowa, and the many and various ways in which operators approached their jobs, the need for general standards to improve efficiency regionally and statewide became increasingly pressing. Large training schools with prolonged training periods were impractical in areas where exchanges were not concentrated, so other methods were devised to standardize operating procedures.

**T**HROUGH THE extension service at Ames, the state of Iowa supported operator short-courses and district meetings that met for two or three days in a variety of places throughout the state, and which were the first of their kind in the nation. Anne Barnes, who was appointed traveling chief operator by the State Association of Independent Telephone Companies in 1915, served as instructor in many of these courses. Her job as traveling chief operator was to routinize the procedures of both Bell and Independent Association operators, and to create a statewide operating method for all telephone systems. Barnes was assigned to assemble a manual for operating practices directed at small- and medium-sized offices. She was also responsible for traveling throughout the state of Iowa in order to oversee the training sessions of regional groups of operators. Barnes worked in this position for nearly thirty years, until her retirement in 1942.

In her manual *The Opportunity at the Switchboard*, Barnes advocated submissiveness and "forgetfulness of self" as excellent qualities in an operator. She advised her students: "Girls, use the voice with the smile,"

stressing the importance of an operator's cheerfulness. Barnes emphasized the operator's heroic sacrifice in the performance of her duties, and explained how the lack of appreciation operators received was simply to be expected due to the generally impersonal nature of the job.

It is clear from Barnes's manuals that there was a definite connection drawn between the morals and behavior of a woman and the quality

A 1915 training manual emphasizes service in its text, despite the title's focus on "opportunity."

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**The Opportunity at the  
Switchboard**



**The Vocation of Telephone  
Operating**

BY

**MISS T. ANNE BARNES**

Instructor In Telephone Operating  
Engineering Extension Department.

**BULLETIN NO. 18**

Published tri-monthly. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Ames, Iowa, under the act of Congress of August 24, 1912.

of the service she provided. As Barnes explained, "Courtesy is very essential as impressions over the telephone are often formed more from our manner of speaking than what we say. We should therefore, convey alertness and interest in our voices as well as in what we say." Throughout the early twentieth century, women were still held much more accountable by society for a display of proper morals and manners than men were.

**A**LTHOUGH THERE were certain expectations for small-town and rural exchanges, the striking anonymity of the operator's job in twentieth-century big cities did not exist for the majority of women; they still maintained a degree of control over their positions, especially in rural areas. Personal service and dedication to the community were qualities admired in small exchanges. As Brenda Maddox explains in her

vice daily more pleasant and accommodating.

An operator in speaking of her vocation said she was so tired of the work and wished she were fitted for work of an entirely different nature. She said it seemed so hard to feel that your service was not appreciated—and it surely was not appreciated as people generally spoke in such cold, hard tones. They also were so quick to censure you for any little failure in service.

Girls, you see this operator judged the patron's lack of sympathy because of his impersonality, just as he could not feel her interest over the telephone. Remember, every lamp signal represents a home or place of business. Few of them are free from care, vexations, troubles, or sadness. As the patron looks toward you for help in case of fire, sickness, or emergency, as well as the ordinary affairs of life, let him look to you as something dependable, cheerful, and always ready to serve. Then it will not matter to you, how impersonal you may seem to him as a being. It is not the material that counts, but the spirit embodied within. And our greatest happiness consists in what we contribute to others, not in gifts, but service.

There comes to me the memory of a small office which I visited recently, in which I met the dearest girl. She had served faithfully for years, and she said in her little corner of the world there seemed no chance to grow. But I could see how changing could not better her particular case, and what a big loss her leaving would make, and so I advised her to stay, telling her how well she was fitting her position. Whenever I think of her, I think of this little poem:

Oh, the little red bush, it was brave,  
it was gay,  
On the hilltop so dreary and bare!  
When summer was over and skies were  
dull gray,  
And the cold winds were fighting for  
victory there,  
In the midst of the stone  
And the stubble alone,  
Flamed the little red bush.

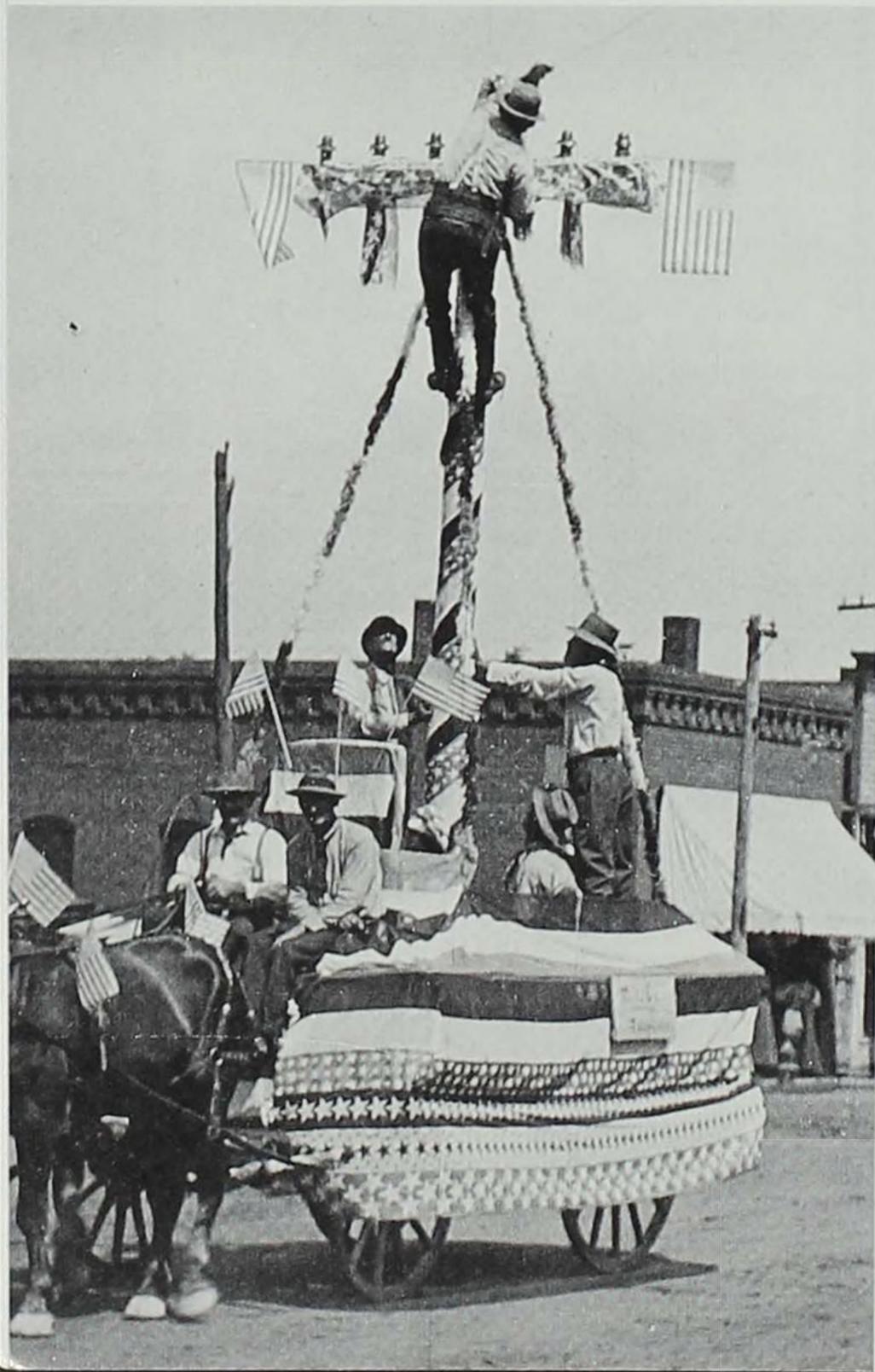
Thought the little red bush, "Down below where it's green  
May be easier living than here:  
'Twould be pleasant to grow there  
where one must be seen  
And not have to make every bit of  
good cheer  
For yourself all alone  
In the midst of rough stone  
Just one little red bush.

"But it's here I've been set by the planter,  
who knew  
Where a little red bush ought to be;  
So instead of complaining, the best thing  
to do  
Is to flame, oh so brightly! that some  
one may see,  
And be glad that alone  
With the stubble and stone  
Grows one little red bush."

article "Women and the Switchboard," these qualities were not the ones most sought out in urban areas. In fact, in the 1930s "the Bell system, in large cities, rejected two out of three applicants because they did not meet the qualifications for health, intelligence, eyesight, and temperament."

Much more attention from both public consumers and telephone company management was focused on the efficiency of large telephone exchanges and their employees than on small-town and rural exchanges. Although this scrutiny resulted in the stricter standards described above, it also brought improved technology to cities, while town and especially rural exchanges lagged behind. Telephone technology was constantly undergoing changes in order to improve service. More advanced

A Malvern, Iowa, parade float decked in bunting pays tribute to the telephone's role in small-town Iowa.



switchboards and headsets replaced older models in an effort to increase automation and thus reduce "human" error. The most significant change in the history of operating was probably the development of the dial telephone, which allowed a subscriber to connect directly to another line without the mediation of the operator; the first all-automatic exchange was opened in 1921.

As the implementation of dial telephones and automatic exchanges increased, the role of the operator underwent further depersonalization. Even though the Bell system stressed its "personalized service" to its customers, this promise increasingly became empty rhetoric: operators' interaction with the public steadily decreased, reduced today to brief contact in person-to-person or collect calls. By the mid-twentieth century, with the predominance of automated switching systems, the old operator era of personal service had ended. Some rural and small-town exchanges, however, retained manual service into the 1960s and '70s, such as in Bennett, Iowa, where direct dial service was not in operation until 1972.

**T**ODAY, with the advanced state of telephone technology, it is hard for younger generations to imagine the important role operators played for both the telephone companies and the communities they served. The idea of personal telephone service grows ever more distant as a call for assistance is answered as often by a machine as by a human being. Even with all the assets of computerized communications, memoirs and local histories often mention the feeling that something vital to a community was lost with the end of manual operating.

As dial systems were implemented, the women who had worked as operators also lost something important: an integral role in community relations, and control over and pride in one's work. The strict training requirements and the proper moral standards expected of operators are evidence that switchboard operating was looked upon as significant, skilled work, requiring a certain type of person. It was



Equipment for the dial phone system in Strawberry Point in 1956 is checked over by Leland Carpenter and Robert Homewood. As dial systems were implemented, switchboard operators were phased out.

also one of the few occupations considered acceptable for middle-class women.

The experiences of switchboard operators in Iowa — an early national leader in telephone usage — are representative of the occupation as it developed and changed. Although standards and working conditions varied nationally, the job became increasingly impersonal while the emphasis on the service dimension remained universal. As Anne Barnes put it in one of her Iowa State College training manuals for operators, “As the patron looks toward you for help in case of fire, sickness, or emergency, as well as the ordinary affairs of life, let him look to you as something dependable, cheerful, and always ready to serve. Then it will not matter to you, how impersonal you may seem to him as a being. It is not the material that counts, but the spirit embodied within.” Perhaps women’s work at the switchboard was neither the genteel nor glamorous job that it was marketed to be, but manual switchboard operators have an important place in the history of telephone communications. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The primary sources consulted include census materials and newspapers; Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census Special Reports, *Telephones: 1907* (Washington, D. C., 1910); State of Iowa, *Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1916* (Des Moines, 1916); U.S. Department of Labor Bulletin of the Women’s Bureau #19, *Iowa Women in Industry* (Washington, D. C., 1922); 61st Congress, 2nd session, *Senate Investigation of Telephone Companies*, Doc. 380, 1910; and reminiscences in the 1973 *Cedar County Historical Review*. I am especially grateful to Becky S. Jordan of the Iowa State University Special Collections/Archives for uncovering and sending me Anne Barnes’s manuals: *The Opportunity at the Switchboard*, Bulletin #18 (Ames, Iowa, 1915); and *Local and Long Distance Operating Instructions for Small Telephone Exchanges* (Ames, Iowa, 1920). Other sources include Don F. Hadwiger and Clay Cochran, “Rural Telephones in the United States,” *Agricultural History* 58 (1984): 221-38; Roy Alden Atwood, “Interlocking Newspaper and Telephone Directorates in Southeastern Iowa, 1900-1917,” *Annals of Iowa* 47:3 (Winter 1984): 255-69; *The Telephone in Iowa: The Story of the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company in Iowa* (no author, no date); “History of Independent Telephone Companies in Iowa” (manuscript, State Historical Society of Iowa archives; no author, no date); Brenda Maddox, “Women and the Switchboard,” in Ithiel de Sola Pool, ed., *The Social Impact of the Telephone* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); Stephen Norwood, *Labor’s Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923* (Chicago, 1990); Arthur W. Page, *The Bell Telephone System* (New York, 1941); James Crockett Rippey, *Good-Bye, Central; Hello, World — A Centennial History of Northwestern Bell* (1975); and the entry on “Telephone Operators” by Lana F. Rakow in Angela Howard Zophy with Francis M. Kavenik, *Handbook of American Women’s History* (Vol. 696, 1990).

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*A first-hand account of the  
impact of an operator's job on  
a family in Fayette County.*

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# *Making the Connection*

The story of a  
small-town telephone operator

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by Vern Carpenter

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I LIVE IN Indianola, Iowa, fourteen miles south of Des Moines. Recently, I wanted to telephone a man living in a small town southeast of Indianola who trims trees, but I could not recall his name. Obtaining his name years ago would have been easy. I would have stepped to the telephone hanging on the wall, rung the telephone operator in the town, and asked her the name of the tree trimmer. She would have known. Before dial systems were installed, telephone operators in small towns were a fountainhead of information.

How do I know this? Because my mother, Nellie Knight Carpenter, operated and managed the telephone office at Randalia, in Fayette County, Iowa, from 1920 to 1942.

My father died in the flu epidemic of 1919/20, leaving my mother with four children and no means of support. To make matters more difficult, during the period of high inflation following World War I, the cost of living nearly doubled. My maternal grandparents encouraged my mother to place her two youngest children — my sister Frances and me — in an orphans' home. Although this was a common practice of the day, my mother could not bear the thought.

About this time the job of telephone oper-

ator-manager became available in nearby Randalia, where my maternal grandparents lived. The switchboard was installed in a small house that the telephone company rented to the operator. The company had been experiencing difficulty keeping an operator for any length of time because the pay was low and the job too confining to suit most families. My mother took the job.

The hours of work were twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with neither paid vacation nor sick leave. The pay was \$40 a month, but \$5 had to be paid back to the telephone company for house rent plus \$1 for electricity. This left \$34 a month for the family to live on. Out of this \$34 our family of five bought coal for the two potbellied heating stoves. As I recall, the telephone company at first paid a small amount towards the coal bill, but in later years it discontinued the practice, to my mother's dismay.

My mother took the job, she told me, because she had no other means to support her four children. (Although my brother, Irvin, could work as a hired man on farms when not in high school, Mildred was just starting high school, Frances was five, and I was just under three.) Mother also told me that getting



Nellie Carpenter operated the Randalia switchboard for over two decades from the home she rented from the telephone company. The job involved her four children as well, who learned to handle calls, collect telephone rent, and to deliver messages to citizens without phones. The photo was taken in 1939.

approved for a widow's pension from the county at that time was extremely difficult. My mother was not trained in any vocation. In the 1890s her father had not believed that women needed to be educated, and he had not allowed my mother and her sisters to complete high school.

**O**UR FAMILY MOVED to Randalia from Maynard, a distance of six miles. My mother began work on March 11, 1920, amidst boxes packed full of household goods piled high in the small room used for the telephone office. The switchboard stood in one corner, with a wall-type telephone nearby for customers to use. A coal heating stove stood in the center of the room.

The one-story, five-room frame house, which was both home and office for Mother, still stands. Although small by today's standards, it was adequate for us. In addition to the room used as the telephone office, there were two small bedrooms, a combined kitchen-dining room, and a parlor. (During winter months we kept two rooms closed off to save on heat.) Our family was permitted to use the garden space at no cost. One of us kids carried water from a neighbor's well for drinking and cooking, and for baths and laundry when our cistern was empty. Nevertheless, the job of telephone operator turned out to be a good one for our family for years to come, and we appreciated it. It provided the security we needed. Randalia was a good place to live even if you were poor.

My sister Mildred was first in our family to learn to operate the switchboard. Beulah Brown, the former operator, showed her how



*Fayette County Mutual Telephone Company*      *Vern Carpenter 1/16/1989*  
*ca. 1920.*

Author's drawing of his childhood home in Randalia, where the local switchboard was located.

to process incoming calls while my mother was learning the necessary bookkeeping. There was no formal training, nor was any training material provided.

After Mildred learned, she taught my mother and my brother. My sister Frances answered local calls at age five but not long-distance toll calls, which required slightly more skill. By the time I was five, I, too, was able to answer local calls. Within a year or two my mother would send me to businesses around town to collect monthly telephone rent.

From that day in March 1920, when my mother started the job, until September 6, 1942, when she resigned, there was never one minute when the house was unoccupied. For twenty-four hours a day someone was on duty, awake or asleep. Although telephone hours were from 6:00 A.M. to 9:30 P.M., emergency calls were answered at all hours. Occasional incoming calls after 9:30 that were not emergency calls were put through without any comment on the part of the operator.

Someone was always in the house tending

the switchboard. We seldom left the house as a family group, but on those rare occasions when we did, we always felt we needed to hurry home because we were paying a substitute we could not afford. My sister Mildred had computed our family's net income at five cents an hour, so this is the amount my mother offered to women who would substitute. Several substituted at this rate and were glad to get the opportunity to do so.

**T**HE TELEPHONE had been introduced into Fayette County in 1878. According to a 1910 county history, "The Bell Company was the first to invade the county, but soon local organizations of a rival nature were organized, and for a time there was hardly a town in the county that did not have a telephone company. There are now fourteen of these companies in existence whose

lines reach every town and hamlet, besides fully one-half of the farm homes occupied by their owners." The county history acknowledged that "this modern convenience has become almost a necessity."

By early 1908 the independent Farmers' Telephone Company had incorporated as the Fayette County Mutual Telephone Company. It operated out of three towns situated geographically in a triangle: Randalia, Fayette (five miles east of Randalia), and Maynard (six miles south). Because it was a mutual company, each "subscriber" (a household with a telephone) could own one share of stock. Telephone rent was one dollar a month for renters, but only fifty cents a month for stockholders. Part of my mother's job was to collect rent payments and income from toll calls and file monthly reports to the telephone company secretary.

The Randalia telephone service covered an area three or four miles beyond town in all directions. In 1920 there were 131 telephone subscribers; 101 of these lived on farms. At that time, rural subscribers often had to maintain their own telephone poles, wire, and glass insulators (if they were lucky enough to have them). Subscribers living on farmsteads well off the few main mud roads often needed to string their own wire for the half-mile or so between their farmhouse and the trunk line. Number 9 wire was the best size; it is sturdy but workable with a pair of lineman pliers. In time, however, it rusts and becomes brittle. Heavy, wet snow and sleet made it belly down between poles and break during high winds — often when isolated farmers in emergencies most needed telephone service.

Thirty of our subscribers lived in Randalia. For the ten town families and two businesses that felt they could not afford telephones, messenger service was available — one of us kids would walk to the home of the person being called and have the person go to a nearby telephone. The messenger fee was usually only ten cents, because in our small town we didn't have to walk very far to reach the most distant house. Occasionally, in an emergency in the middle of the night when a household did not answer, the caller asked my mother to send me to the party's home in town to awaken them, which I did. For this service there was no charge.

More than fifty years have passed and it is difficult for me to estimate the number of calls processed each day. Nevertheless, I still recall several of the individual telephone numbers, perhaps because in our "family business" we realized it was necessary to know the names of every person living in the home of every subscriber. Callers counted on this. Most often a caller would not say "Would you ring 0111, please?" but rather "Give me the Rob Claxton farm, please." The operator was expected to know the Claxton's number. Or a caller might tell the operator that he or she wanted to talk to Howard Hoepfner, for example, and did the operator know Howard — or if Howard was the son of Herman Hoepfner. (There was no charge for information, as there is nowadays.)

In case of emergencies or special announcements, the operator would alert all subscribers with a "general ring," consisting of ten to fifteen short rings. After most of the subscribers had picked up their receivers, the operator might report that a barn was on fire and the farm family needed help. Neighbors were good about dropping their work and responding to a fire call. Not all general rings were so urgent. For example, on another day my mother might announce that Chubb Bronn's truck farm at the west edge of town had strawberries for sale at five cents a quart if you picked your own.

**A**LTHOUGH several local businesses had private lines, most households were on party lines. The number of subscribers on a party line varied with the length of the line in miles. If too many telephones were on one line, people could not hear well, so linemen took care to not overload any one line.

Another complication arose from the tendency of people on party lines to listen in on others' phone calls. When several subscribers picked up their receivers, the extra drain on the electrical current made it difficult for the two original parties to hear. In these instances, the operator would come in on the line to interrupt the conversation and ask the others listening in to get off the line. Those listening in



Telephones connected Iowa's rural and often isolated households to businesses and services in town.

usually responded favorably and hung up.

Nevertheless, it's probably safe to say that many conversations were heard on party lines, overloaded or not. Sometimes this served a purpose. After trying several times unsuccessfully to call a party, the caller might ask the operator whether the party was at home or not. If the operator did not know, a "helpful" neighbor might break in on the line to report that "they're not home — they're over at her mother's in Fayette." Other times the operator asked whether anyone listening in knew where the party being called was at the time.

With limited social contact because of poor roads (especially in the country), subscribers

sometimes used their telephones for very personal conversations, even on party lines. They did this even though they were almost certain others would be listening in and would repeat the information as common gossip, some of which was vicious and unfounded.

I might eventually have heard most of this gossip anyway through the local gossip mill. But because of my mother's job, I became aware of aberrant behavior within the community perhaps earlier than most children did. As one would expect in any community, there was venereal disease, extra-marital affairs, and bad-check writing. During the early years of the Great Depression there were a number of

thefts. I was aware that someone bootlegged in town, but I never knew who it was. Two married couples traded partners. There was an instance of wife-beating, another of mother-beating. Nevertheless, my mother drilled into us four children time and again that we were not to repeat any information outside the office that we had heard on the telephone lines or in the office.

**S**WITCHBOARD operators played a key role in the public and private events of a community. When a baby was due, our family kept a close ear to the phone after bedtime in case a doctor was needed during the night. When a death occurred in the community, the operator was sometimes asked to make a number of calls to notify relatives. If the relative did not have a phone, we were the messengers. I remember at least two occasions when my sister Mildred or I walked to a household to inform the family about a fatal car accident involving the loss of a loved one. And I remember — during the Great Depression — my mother putting through a call to a doctor from a distraught farm woman whose husband had just hanged himself in an outbuilding.

One night after my mother had closed the telephone office to the public at 9:30, an upset young farmer knocked on the door. Apologetically he said he knew it was after business hours, but he needed to call the county sheriff at West Union, eleven miles away. Apparently, he and his sweetheart were attending the local dance when another fellow stole his girlfriend from him, in a manner of speaking. I never knew the details, but I suppose some young man danced with her and asked her to sit with him and then asked her to go home with him. I do not remember the outcome that night — except that the sheriff could not help him — but the farmer eventually married the young woman.

Sometimes the operator was an active third party in a conversation by repeating words if noise interfered, or if one party had a hearing problem or a phobia about not wanting to talk over a telephone. Then there were times when

the operator provided compassion and understanding for the needs of her customers. I remember an elderly woman who would call my mother. "Hello, Nell," she would say to my mother. "Is Paul there?" (Paul was the woman's deceased husband. Although he had been dead for several years, she would often leave home alone at night on foot to go looking for him.)

My mother would reply, "He hasn't been here today, so far."

"Well, he left here after breakfast and said he might stop in to pay the telephone rent."

"I see," my mother would say. "Well, he hasn't been here yet. He may have been delayed uptown on some business."

"I'm so lonesome for him," the caller would say thoughtfully.

**M**Y SIBLINGS and I continued to help my mother tend the switchboard and answer incoming calls with the customary word "Randalia." When my voice began changing, I practiced saying "Randalia" in as guttural a tone as possible. I tried to lower the pitch of my voice each time. (I had read that this was an excellent method for developing deep timbre in one's voice, and that it was also an excellent exercise before going on radio. Who knew what my future would bring?)

I was twenty-five when my mother resigned her job and went to live with my sister Mildred for health reasons. (My mother suffered from a serious heart condition most of her life.) For two decades she had played a vital part in the communication network of Fayette County. Telephone service in a rural Iowa community was extremely important to the subscribers. Besides the mail, the telephone was their main connection with the outside world. Telephone operators like my mother provided the technological link of plugging in the right jacks and handling toll calls. But they also provided a working knowledge of the community. Their skill, compassion, and personal touch facilitated communication between Iowans in the early decades of telephone use. □

# A Farmer-Photographer's Harvest of Rural Images

by Becki Peterson



Farmer-photographer John Garbison stepped from behind his camera to join this group, but slightly miscalculated his positioning. He appears in the foreground at the far right. He photographed this Sunday gathering on July 3, 1910, at the J. W. Bowles farm, a mile or so from his farm (and 5½ miles east of Milo). Garbison's photographs are historically significant because they depict rural, everyday life through the perspective of a farmer.

**T**HE 1915 census for Iowa tells us that a man named John Garbison, age 45, earned his living as a farmer on a piece of land near Lacona, Iowa, in Warren County. With him were wife Maud, 38, and children Murrel, 17, Rhea, 12, and Jacob (or "Jake"), 4. The Garbisons' farm, which was assessed at a value of \$4,800, included a livestock inventory of 2 milking cows, 4 horses, 52 sheep, 25 swine, 3 goats, and 150 fowl.

It's a sketchy picture at best that can be conjured from this census information. The family's way of life — their work routines, leisure activities, traditions — is hidden somewhere behind the statistics. However, within this particular household, a more revealing record was being created at the turn of the century — this one by farmer John Garbison himself, who found time amidst the demands of farm and family to document everyday experiences through photography. Now, through a combination of good fortune and generosity, these recently recovered images by John Garbison are available to help us flesh out the picture of a rural Iowa family that lived some eighty years ago. But without a fortuitous series of events, the photographs would not be accessible to Iowans today.

As it happened, a set of eighty-nine glass plate negatives created by Garbison, roughly between 1895 and 1915, was passed down to his daughter, Rhea, who settled with her husband in Silva, Missouri. The negatives were later purchased from her estate by a local antique dealer.

Sometime later, in 1989, James Wallace and his mother, of Osceola, Arkansas, were visiting relatives in Piedmont, Missouri. They stopped at an antique shop, and in the course of their visit, a set of glass plate negatives was retrieved from a barn next to the store. Being history enthusiasts themselves (both were members of their county historical society back home in Arkansas), the Wallaces were impressed enough by the quality and content of the glass plates to purchase them. Further investigation brought the Wallaces in contact with Garbison relatives residing near Silva and Piedmont, Missouri. They verified that the photographer was indeed their great-grandfather, John Garbison of Warren County, Iowa.

James Wallace and his mother recognized that the glass plates, being mostly images of the rural Iowa community where Garbison lived, would be of special significance to Iowans. They contacted the State Historical Society of Iowa and offered to donate the collection. Rare in its scope, continuity, physical condition, and wealth of documentation, the glass plate collection was enthusiastically accepted into the archives of the State Historical Society's Des Moines facility.

As remarkable as the collection's survival and serendipitous return to Iowa, is the photography itself. What Garbison recorded — in his images and in the technical steps of producing those images — tells us much about both rural life and photography in turn-of-the-century Iowa. Although the Society holds over fifty collections of glass plate negatives, only a half-dozen represent the work of farmer-photographers. Garbison's work is historically important because it presents the rare perspective of a farmer documenting his livelihood and community through photography.

**J**OHAN Garbison took up photography at a time when new technology had opened the craft to scores of amateurs. Previously, the complicated wet-plate process had required a photographer to have both technical expertise and immediate access to a darkroom. In the brief time before the chemicals dried (usually five to fifteen minutes), the photographer had to coat the plate, shoot the image, and develop the negative. The dry-plate (or gelatin) negative, which became available for purchase in the 1880s, was much easier to process because the plates were pre-coated by the manufacturer. The photographer needed only to insert a glass plate into the camera and shoot the image. Since the plate could be processed at any time after the photo was taken, an amateur without a darkroom could take the glass plate negatives to a local drugstore or commercial photographer for processing.

For Garbison though, involvement with photography did not stop after the shutter closed. Working in his own darkroom, he printed from his own plates using a process that

is seldom used today; no enlargers or pans of developing solutions were needed. First, he would place the glass plate negative directly onto a sheet of chemically pretreated printing-out paper. (He used a brand named "Darko.") Next, he would expose the negative to lamplight or sunlight and wait as an image slowly appeared on the paper. The finished "contact print" was the same size as the negative. Garbison then stored each negative in a paper sleeve.

As a hobbyist with a desire to learn from his experience and improve his skill, John Garbison carefully recorded notes relating to his darkroom work on the paper sleeves. In addition to exposure times, which he measured in

"counts," he also noted any special makeshift darkroom techniques used to compensate for overexposed negatives or other problems. For example, the note on one sleeve reads: "90 counts and shade people & cattle with teaspoon handle from 50 on." This tells us that Garbison exposed the entire negative for ninety counts. But during the last forty counts, he used a spoon to block the light over portions of the image that otherwise would have been obscured on the print.

Photography was not an exact science at this time; amateurs could only estimate proper camera settings based on judgment of weather conditions and available light. Some of Garbison's storage sleeve notations describe the dif-



A display of camaraderie from Rhea Garbison (left) and Ruth Burham, the apparent guardians of the flock behind them. (July 1, 1914). John Garbison's glass plate negatives were later passed to his daughter, Rhea Garbison Luke, who settled in Missouri. An antique dealer purchased them at Rhea's estate sale, and in turn sold them to Jim Wallace of Osceola, Arkansas, who donated them to the State Historical Society of Iowa.

difficulties or unusual situations he encountered — for instance, “flies so bad one horse moved its head,” or “Perl’s hair blurring by blowing in front of eyes,” or “15 sec. after sundown.” For a posed family group he noted, “5:30 P.M. Cloudy & cold. 10 sec . . . babie moved slightly, all the rest good.” The uncontrollable variables of outdoor photography, the slower shutter speeds of early cameras, and the longer time required to capture an image on a glass plate challenged amateur and professional photographers alike during this period. Yet it is rare to find a photographer’s direct references to these obstacles. Photography was a time-consuming and relatively expensive hobby. Garbison may well have recorded this information to avoid wasting costly supplies through repetition of earlier mistakes and to remind himself of previous pitfalls.

Garbison also identified his subjects in detail on the negative sleeves. Names of persons, locations of farms, occasions, dates, and in some instances, even the time of day were documented. In an unusual convention, a few of the photos are identified “internally”: he occasionally posed his subject next to a large placard with a handwritten caption on it.

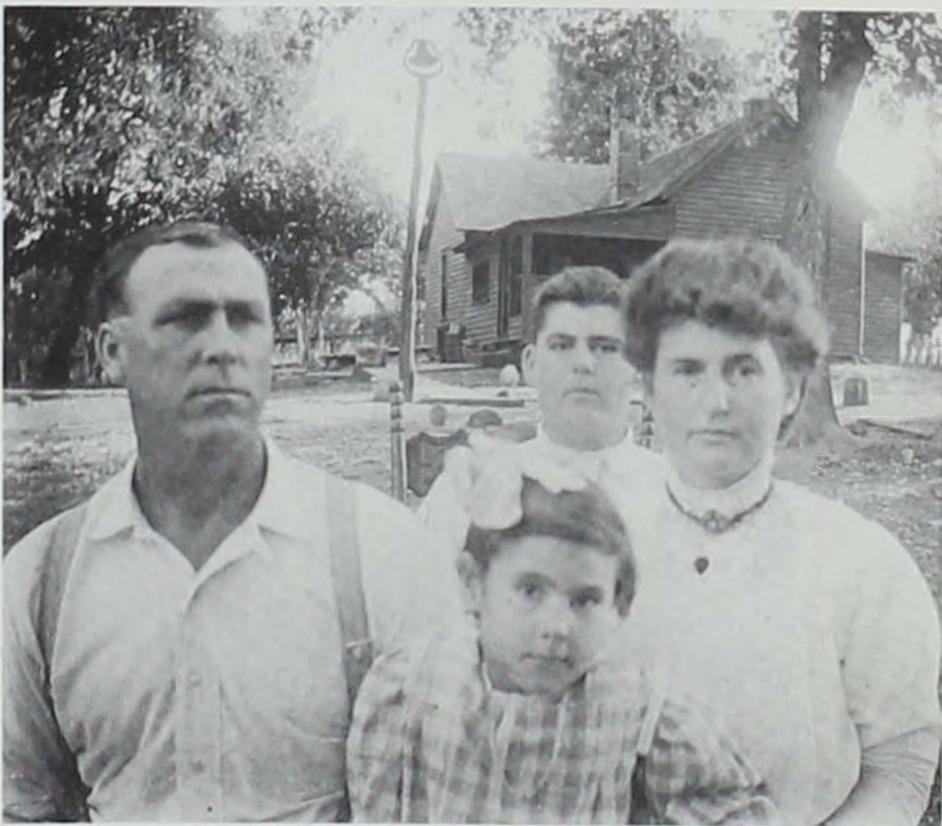
**E**QUALLY revealing as John Garbison’s documentation, is his choice of subject matter. While he often took “Sunday best” photos (posed groups of relatives and friends, typical in family albums of the period), many of his images offer more candid views. Family members and neighbors are depicted at their labors (harvesting ice, operating a home sawmill, or laying drainage tile in the fields) as well as at their leisure (enjoying a dish of ice cream, hunting rabbits, or taking a dip in the farm pond). In general, historical photographs of everyday life in rural Iowa are scarce. Because Garbison was a farmer, his images offer an insider’s perspective of activities seldom seen. Many of his compositions are marked by an honesty and directness that convey a simple dignity to the subject matter.

One of the most stirring and unusual images shows an elderly man, identified as “Grandpa Ramzey,” bedridden with cancer. While many

photographers would have shunned such sobering subject matter, Garbison chose to treat his subject with the same intimacy and frankness he used in photographing his newborn son Jake. He also apparently understood that photography was a way of creating a historical record or keepsake of once-in-a-lifetime events.

While most of the images were photographed on and around Garbison’s 81-acre farm and the small, Warren County communities of Milo, Liberty Center, and Lakota, a series of steamboat images and flood scenes was taken in Hannibal, Missouri. The photographer’s daughter-in-law, Bessie (“Peggy”) Garbison of Indianola, recalls that Hannibal held a special fascination for the photographer and was a favorite place to visit on family trips.

In a recent interview, Bessie Garbison recalled her father-in-law as a proud man. She was quick to clarify, though, that she did not mean proud “in a bad way.” Rather, John Garbison was a man who greatly valued his family, friends, and farm and did not hesitate to project this to others. Perhaps this pride is what ultimately inspired the farmer-photographer to create an extraordinary collection of rural Iowa images.



From left: John, Rhea, Murrel, and Maud Garbison at their home. (Dated September 19, 1909). A closer look at John Garbison’s world, as seen through his camera, begins on the next page.

This unusual composition, with a small group in the background, was obviously intended to feature Elva McNeer, possibly in recognition of the child's birthday. The photograph was taken on her family's farm 3¼ miles east of Milo, Iowa, on January 23, 1910. No one is wearing a coat — perhaps because it's a special occasion or an unseasonably mild day in January.

## *Preserving the Garbison Collection for Public Use*

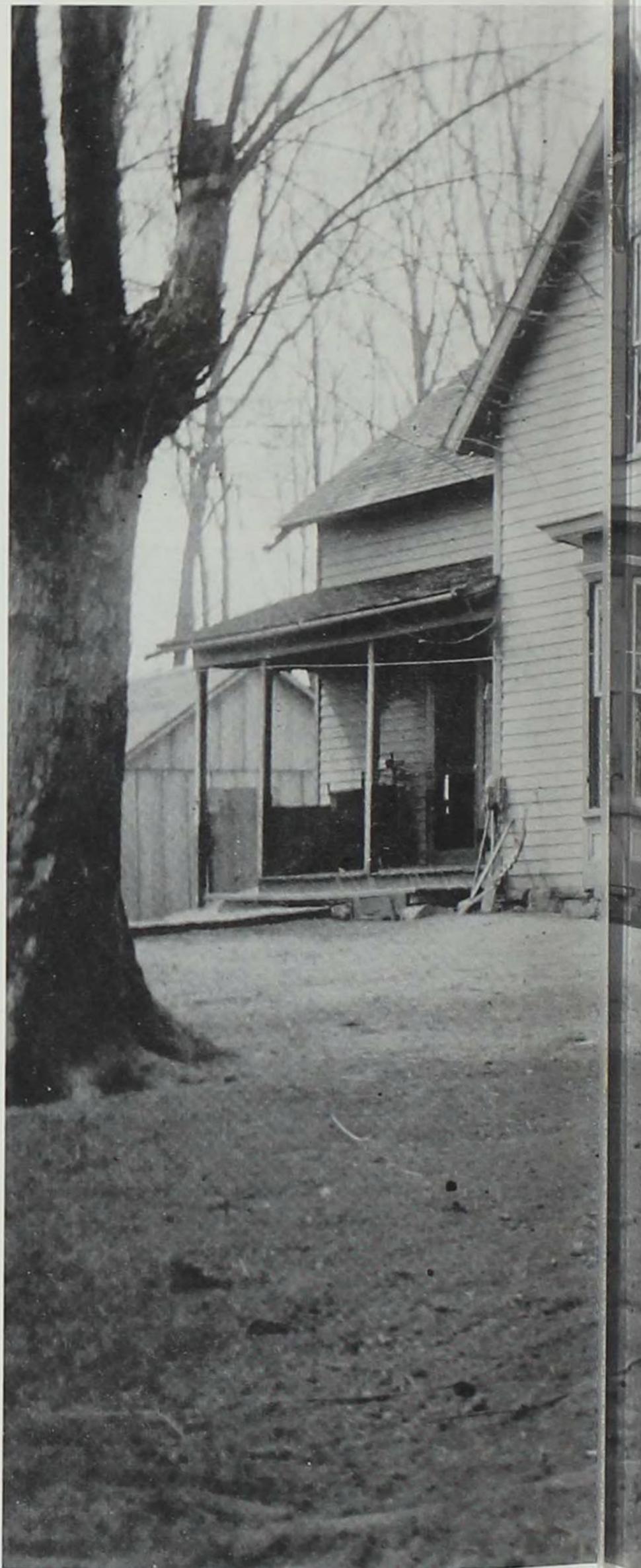
AFTER the glass plate negatives were added to the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa in its Des Moines location, photo archivist Becki Peterson took several steps to help stabilize and preserve them.

Glass plate negatives are covered with a thin layer of film emulsion, just as plastic-based film is today. The image can be easily destroyed if the emulsion layer starts to flake or lift from the edges. The original paper sleeves that John Garbison used to protect his glass plate negatives were made of highly acidic paper. This rapidly decomposing paper can actually stain the image or accelerate the deterioration of the emulsion layer. Therefore, the photo archivist removed the plates to archival paper sleeves and stored them in non-acidic boxes with rigid supports.

The original paper sleeves are being kept for both their informational and artifactual value, but eventually the acidic paper will become too brittle to handle. Therefore, to preserve Garbison's notes, the sleeves have been photocopied onto acid-free paper.

To make the images accessible to the public, a set of prints has been made for viewing. The fragile glass plates are only 1/16" inch thick and therefore should be handled minimally. Eventually, the Society will have copy negatives made on plastic-based film, so that reproductions can be ordered without handling the original glass plate negatives.

The Garbison Collection comprises nearly a hundred images and is housed in the archives section of the State Historical Society of Iowa. To request to see the photographic prints, visit the Library/Archives reading room at the State Historical Building, 600 East Locust, in Des Moines, Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Requests for a Saturday viewing must be made in advance (515-281-6200).







Paul Smith and Murrel Garbison (right) mug with guns near Murrel's home. (Dated August 11, 1914)



Visiting teacher Hazel Stanger poses with the Garbison family in a snowy field. Murrel and Rhea Garbison (center) attended the McNair (or McNeer) School in Belmont Township, Warren County. (Circa 1910)

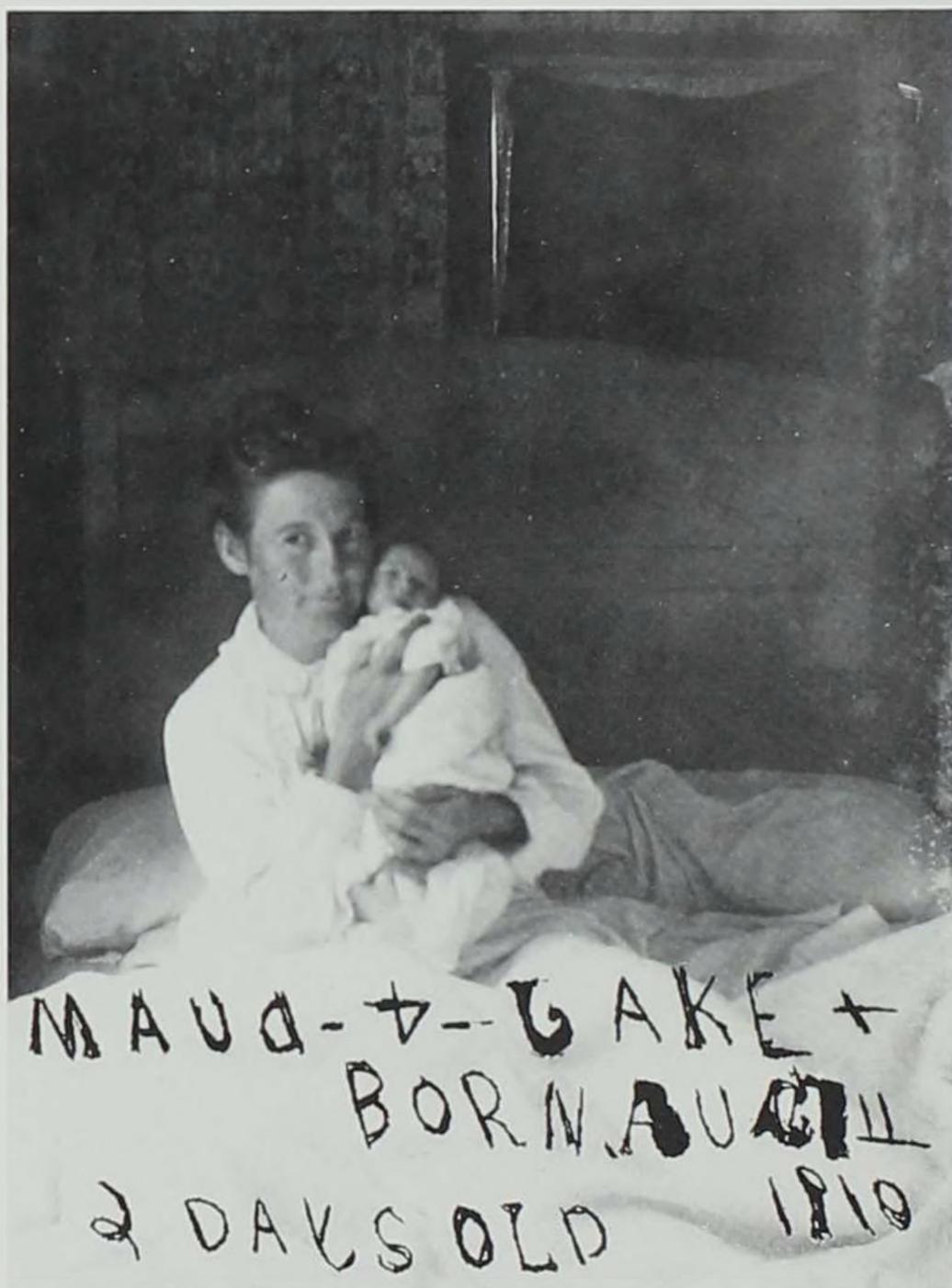


Donald, George, and Seth Smith and Charles McDonald pause from work, as one of the men holds a sign that reads, "General Manager Smith Ranch." Garbison's notes explain that the men are hauling "ashes in manure spreader from burnt straw stack in wheatfield that made 43 bu pr acre." (August 16, 1912)



John Garbison labeled this photograph "Comic Garbisons." His son Murrel (see detail) finds himself in the middle of a ticklish situation in the family peach orchard. (June 23, 1916)

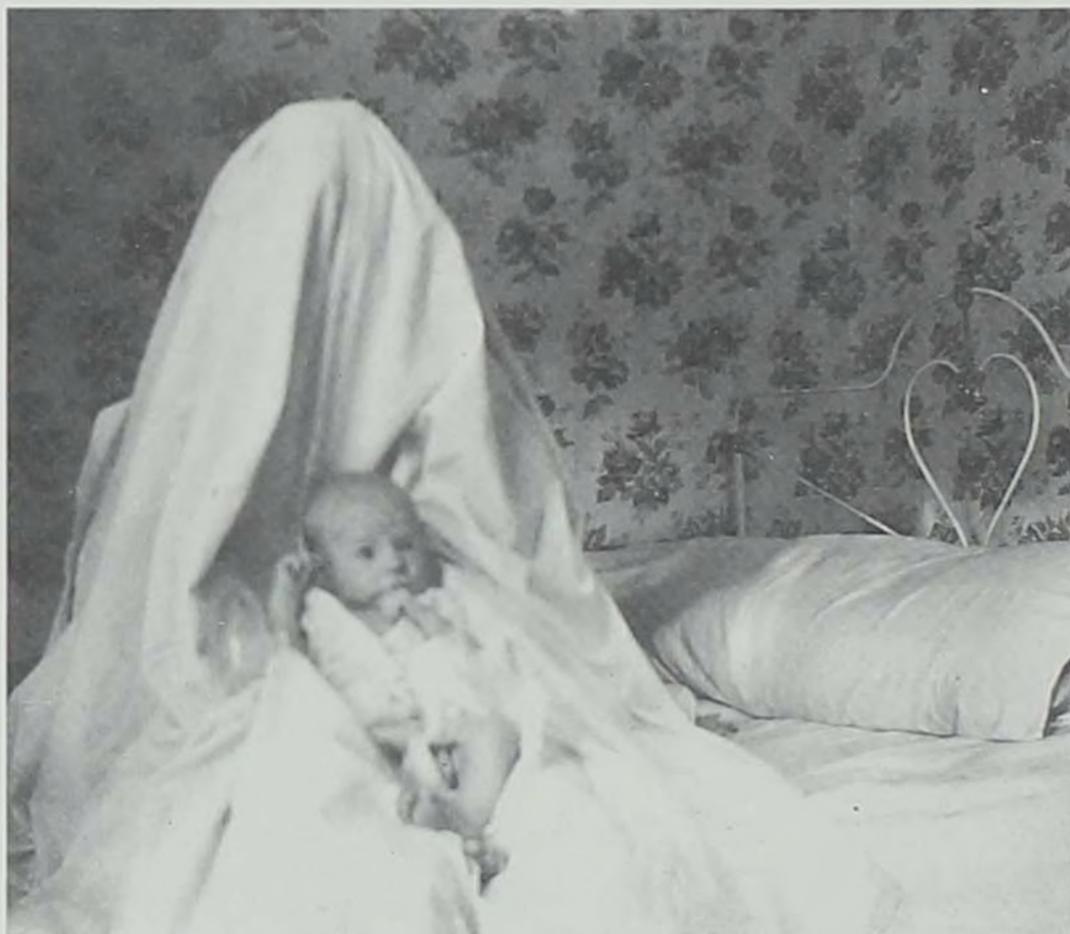




Garbison labeled the paper sleeve of this image of his newborn son, Jacob: "Maud & Baby Jake born Aug. 11th at 3:10 A.M. Dr. Stumbaugh & Mrs. Ed Graham & Columbia Hain in attendance." (Garbison scratched a similar caption on the glass plate negative, succeeding fairly well in writing backwards on the emulsion side.) The child was named after his grandfather, Jacob Garbison, a Civil War veteran and long-time Methodist minister. Like his grandfather, Jake became a minister in adult life, serving the congregation of the Milo Christian Union Church from 1940 to 1944. (August 17, 1910)



Garbison labeled this image, "Sep 1910. Elmer Lizzie Olive and Marion Parks." Census records reveal that the Parks [or Park] family lived near the Garbisons' 81-acre farm in Belmont Township. The names of other families whom Garbison photographed appear on the township map in the 1915 Warren County farm atlas.



To ensure that two-month-old Jake is the star of this photo, Garbison had his wife Maud assume the role of backdrop in the parlor bedroom. (October 11, 1910)



Siblings Rhea, Jake (in foreground), and Murrel Garbison sample watermelons. (August 12, 1911)



A successful rabbit-hunting expedition is documented as Murrel Garbison (right) and friend recreate their prowess for the camera. (Circa 1915)



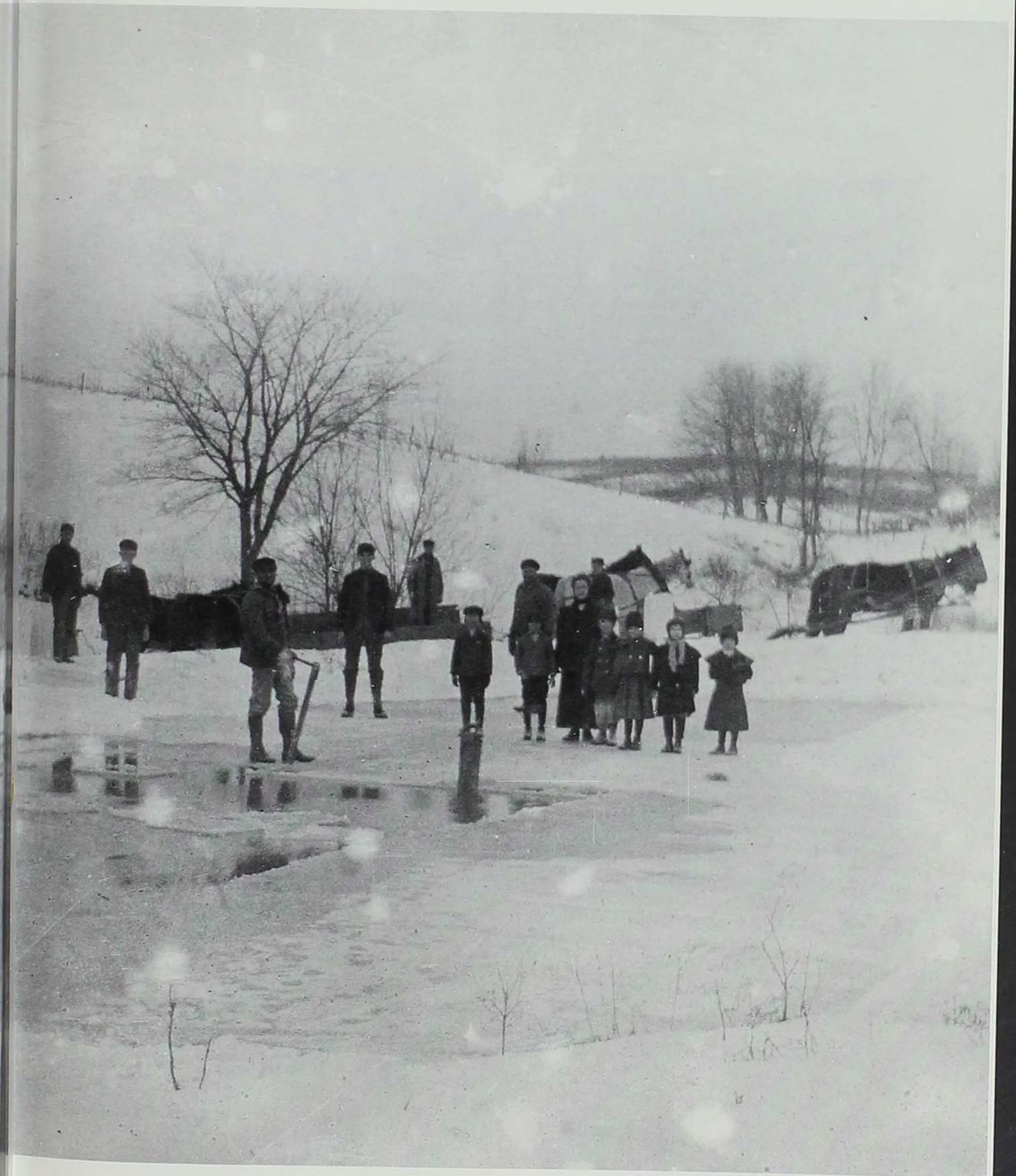
This photo captures two subjects in which the photographer took great pride — his son Jake and his apple orchard. The caption on the sign says: "May 11th 1911 Jake among the Apple Blossoms." In a recent interview, Jake's widow, Bessie Garbison, shared family accounts of how relatives enjoyed home-grown fruit when visiting John Garbison's farm.

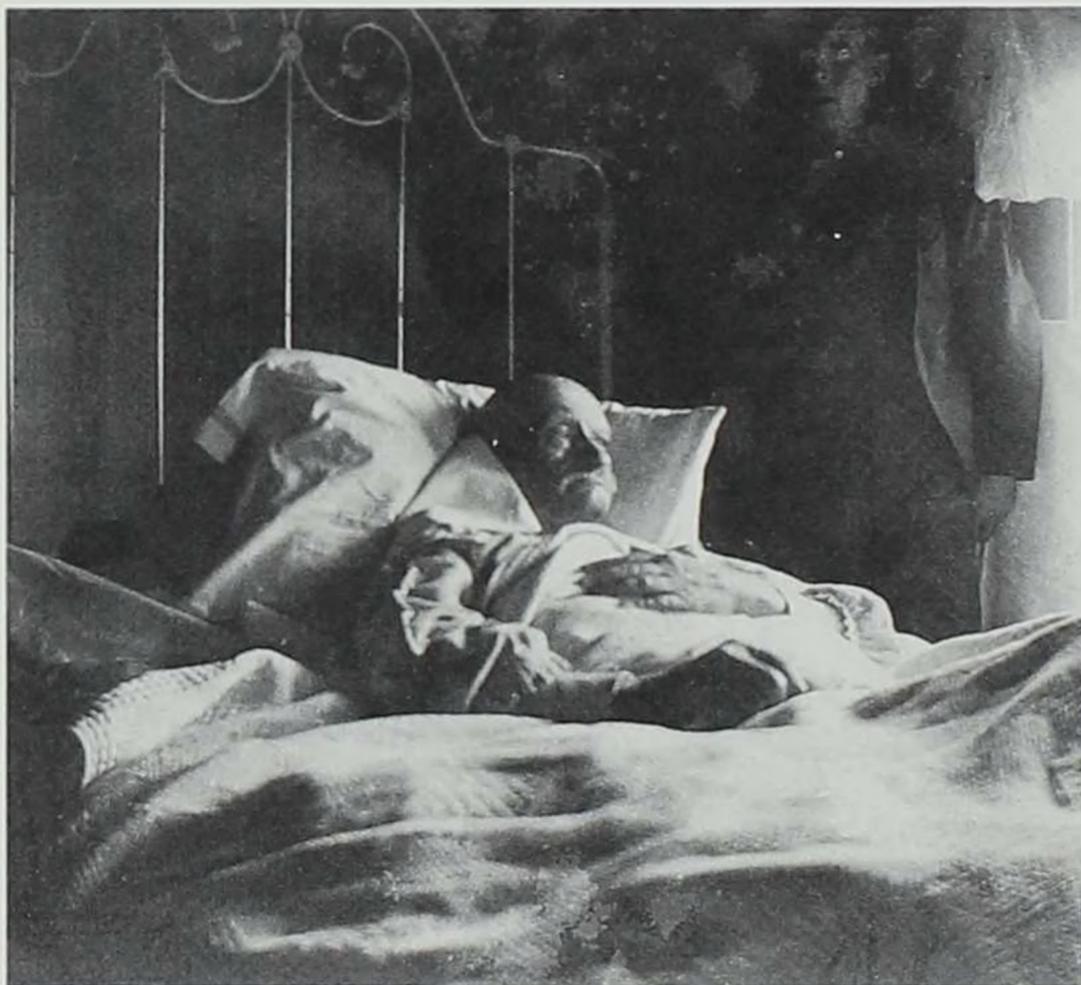


Murrel Garbison (left), known locally as a skillful sheep shearer, appears to be practicing his stockman's grip here, with siblings Jake and Rhea. (Circa 1914)

Right: Two days before Christmas, friends and neighbors help John and Murrel Garbison harvest ice from a family pond. The *Indianola Herald* reported a bumper crop of ice for Warren County in the winter of 1909. Garbison noted on the photo sleeve "cloudy about 12-40 P.M." and identified the group on the right as "School teacher & schollars." The image is unusual in that it shows a small-scale ice harvest from a farm pond, rather than a larger, commercial operation. (December 23, 1909)







"Grandpa Ramzey who is verry sick with canser on right side of neck and face," John Garbison labeled this image, taken on December 15, 1912, just weeks before John Van Dyke Ramsey died. The man in the background is identified as "Jack." Although Garbison would have had to travel eleven miles (perhaps half a day's journey by buggy) to reach the Ramsey home, this may have been the last opportunity to create an image of Ramsey before he died.



A week after hauling ashes (see page 28) young Donald Smith enjoys some leisure time. Here he rests his stilts momentarily for a photo beside the pond on his family's farm. (August 24, 1912)



"Thur 4 May 1911 Alva Riche & Russell Wallace tiling on my place. Darko 60 counts." Note the clay drainage tiles and tools lying above the ditch. The phrase "Darko 60 counts" suggests that Garbison exposed the glass plate negative to sixty counts of light when he printed the image on "Darko" brand printing-out paper.

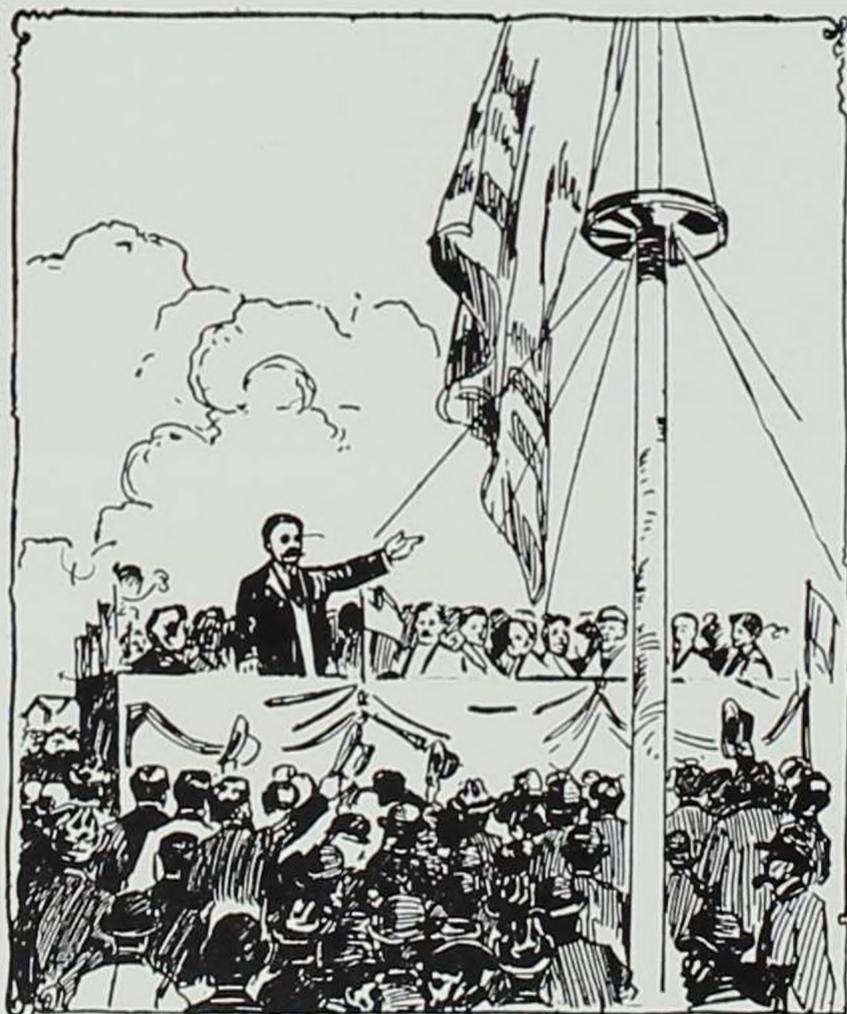


Maud, Murrel, and Rhea Garbison and guests escape the heat of a summer afternoon by enjoying ice cream in a cool patch of buffalo moss. (July 7, 1910)

# Fort Des Moines and its African-American Troops in 1903/04

*by Douglas Kachel*

DES MOINES REGISTER AND LEADER (11/14/1903)



"DEDICATING THE FLAG AT THE NEW FORT DES MOINES." November 1903 opening ceremonies completed local efforts to locate a cavalry post in Des Moines.

**A**LTHOUGH MANY IOWANS are aware that Fort Des Moines in Des Moines was the site of the Colored Officers Training Camp during the first world war, most do not know that African-American soldiers were actually stationed there much earlier — within the first months of its opening in 1903. Although this early chapter in the history of Fort Des Moines is a short one, it adds to our understanding of turn-of-the-century attitudes about the military and about race relations.

Fort Des Moines was the third fort in Iowa to bear that name. The other two were built in 1835 near Montrose in Lee County, and in 1843 at the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. Fort Des Moines No. 3 opened in mid-November 1903 five miles south of downtown Des Moines. The occasion was marked with parades, ceremonies, barbecues, reduced railroad rates, and considerable attention from the press. The *Des Moines Register and Leader* explained the hoopla this way: "The opening of an army post in Iowa is an event that calls for more than a local celebra-



The romance and excitement of the cavalry in Americans' minds were fueled by memories of the Civil War and the Indian Wars. Here, a practice charge by the Fourteenth Cavalry at Fort Des Moines (ca. 1930).

tion. The first fort of regular soldiers within the confines of Iowa is to be dedicated and opened this week. Heretofore, Iowans have been forced to go to St. Louis, Omaha, Chicago, or St. Paul to see regular soldiers and regular army encampments and forts."

John A. T. Hull — Civil War hero, editor, two-term lieutenant governor, five-term congressman, and chair of the important Committee on Military Affairs in the House of Representatives — is often credited with the idea for locating the fort in Des Moines. Hull may have actually received the idea from others — including S. B. Keffer, the city's park commissioner, and Major J. G. Galbraith, who was in charge of the army's recruiting station in Des Moines. Covering the dedication, the Des Moines *Register and Leader* reported that when Keffer "wrote to Congressman Hull about the fort, he had in mind the help to local labor, the benefit to the business interest of the city and the addition of a park to Des Moines." Another article noted that "Major Galbraith is generally known among military men and in official circles with having been the first to

suggest the desirability of an army post located in Des Moines."

Regardless of who suggested the idea, it was Congressman Hull who first introduced legislation in 1894 and worked for its eventual passage in 1900. A *Register and Leader* editorial commented that "the task was a hard one, for it became necessary not only to convince the federal authorities that the post was needed here but the local people that it was wanted here." Apparently the "opposition, indifference, and ridicule" from "certain elements of Des Moines society" were overcome. Following the accustomed procedure, a citizen committee headed by F. M. Hubbell raised forty thousand dollars, purchased four hundred acres, and turned the property over to the War Department.

Fort Des Moines was to be a cavalry post, which embodied all the romance and dash that the cavalry still represented to Americans. Although construction began July 12, 1901, the *Iowa State Bystander* newspaper that month called for citizens to be patient: "No one should anticipate the actual location of a squadron of



Construction began in July 1901 for Fort Des Moines, after a citizens committee raised funds, bought four hundred acres, and turned the land over to the federal government.

cavalry at the post short of 1903. When completed Des Moines will have the model cavalry post of the army.”

Most Americans revered the cavalry as the “true army,” recalling gallant images of cavalry in the Civil War, in the series of wars with Native American tribes, and, most recently, in Cuba and the Philippines. In 1908 *The Midwestern*, a Des Moines booster magazine, articulated this cavalry mystique in an article about the U.S. Second Cavalry, whose history had been “an integral part of the military history of the country” and “in the storm center of every war.” *The Midwestern* continued, “For it is the horse that makes the cavalry the most picturesque branch of the service. The infantry has been called the backbone of the army, and the cavalry its eyes and ears. It is the flying squadron, alert, mobile, here today and there tomorrow. It is the incarnation of the spirit of battle, and the cavalry unit is the irresistible combination of horse and man; the modern Centaur of the old fable.”

**W**HEN FORT DES MOINES officially opened on November 13, 1903, pomp and patriotic fervor embraced the citizens of Des Moines at the dedication of what the press billed the “the largest and only exclusive cavalry post in the United States.” *The Register and Leader* commented that the fort “means almost as much as the location here of the state capitol; its dedication is one of the most important events in Des Moines for half a century.”

In the days preceding the event, thousands had taken advantage of reduced railroad rates to arrive in Des Moines for the festivities. Free trolley rides took car after car of passengers to the new fort. The *Des Moines Register and Leader* noted that the crowd of 25,000 was “but a portion of the throng that would have been present had there been adequate transportation facilities.” (Adding extra trolley cars for the occasion had overloaded the system and slowed the cars down.)

Crowds lined downtown Des Moines and

applauded a parade of dignitaries, many in the new curiosity — automobiles. The autos and more than a hundred carriages, each lavishly decorated with American flags, bunting, and flowers, proceeded to the fort. The first carriage held General John Bates, Governor A. B. Cummins, Congressman Hull, and J. B. Olmsted, chairman of the citizens' dedication committee.

There at the fort was Troop E of the Eighth Cavalry, splendidly dressed in blue, high-collared tunics with brass buttons and wearing tall, black boots. With capes flowing and sabers at their sides, the mounted detachment must have matched the public's expectations of what a cavalry should be.

However, the splendid cavalry troop stayed less than a month after the opening ceremonies. Then the two dozen soldiers under Sergeant Thomas Sozensky returned to their regiment at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. Once again Des Moines would have to wait for the cavalry to arrive.

**A**PPARENTLY General Bates had been so impressed with the new fort's "magnitude . . . and the excellence of the site," according to the Des Moines *Register and Leader*, that he issued orders for infantry to immediately occupy the new fort. Three weeks later — much to the surprise of many citizens — two infantry companies did indeed arrive, composed of 127 African-American soldiers.

The press reported that as Companies C and L of the black 25th Infantry "tumbled off the train" on the morning of December 3, 1903, "the advent of troops created a sensation and large crowds gathered to watch the sturdy colored veterans as they swung along with the regulation marching step." The *Register and Leader* noted "these colored troops would be in [the] charge of five white officers" commanded by Captain J. D. Leitch and Captain R. L. Bush. (In 1903 there were four African-

American regiments — the 24th and 25th infantries and the 9th and 10th cavalries. These were the maximum number of black units as established by Congress in 1869.)

Much to the disappointment of many Des Moines citizens, not only were infantry troops occupying the long sought and highly romanticized cavalry post, but the troops' sole responsibility was to guard forty military convicts sent from overcrowded Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. Infantry guarding military convicts — where was the gallant cavalry practicing their drills on horseback, which the citizens of Des Moines had expected? The *Register and Leader* reassured its readers that "Fort Des Moines will be a cavalry post but until the horsemen can arrive it will be occupied by infantry." According to General Bates, the black troops would be at the fort until the cavalry returned from Manila the next spring.

Nevertheless, some Des Moines citizens must have been vocal about the arrival of African-American troops, given the response two weeks later in the *Iowa State Bystander*, a black-owned and -operated newspaper based in Des Moines. In an article titled "Wrong Idea," the *Bystander* editor challenged the rumor "that because a garrison of Afro American troops has been sent to the new \$1,000,000 army post in Des Moines the voters are enraged and threaten to defeat Captain Hull for renomination." The editor argued, "It has been proven to be a fact that the Afro American soldiers are the best in the United States so far as sobriety and good behavior are concerned as well as in many other essentials in the makeup of good soldiers and it is a shame that they receive such outrageous treatment by the people whom they serve so faithfully and well." The editor added, "No real man or set of gentlemen to our knowledge are enraged at our Congressmen on this account."

Then another concern was addressed — this time by Congressman Hull. Apparently organized labor feared that the military convicts (whom the black soldiers were guarding) would be used as a labor battalion for the remaining construction work at the fort, thereby "taking wages from their pockets." Hull tried to mollify these fears through a story in the *Register and Leader*: "Convicts will not be engaged in work



Editor John L. Thompson and his *Iowa State Bystander* covered social events at Fort Des Moines and argued that "Afro American soldiers are the best in the United States so far as sobriety and good behavior . . . [and] in many other essentials in the makeup of good soldiers."

at the Fort Des Moines Army Post," he said. "It is not the intention of the war department to utilize these prisoners in the work of construction at Fort Des Moines in any way that would interfere with the employment of laborers."

**A**FTER THIS initial controversy, it appears that at least the African-American citizens of Des Moines and the black soldiers at the fort enjoyed amicable relations. Over the months the soldiers had several parties that black citizens of Des Moines attended. For example, the *Bystander* reported that Company C gave a social reception on December 23, 1903. Dancing, conversation, and games were the amusements. Music was furnished by a "mandolin

club" and at 10 o'clock the party entered a spacious dining hall for a five-course supper "all cooked and served by the members of the Company."

If the reception had been held a week later, conversation may well have centered on the attempted lynching of two black males in Council Bluffs, some hundred miles west of Des Moines. The December 28 *Register and Leader* reported that "Mob Cries for Lives of Negroes" and described how "a thousand men surged the county jail," and broke down the door to get at the "cringing negroes" charged with robbing and assaulting two women. At the last minute, the mob was pacified.

On March 18, 1904, soldiers of Company L gave an elaborate reception at the fort. After the dancing program the sixty guests proceeded to the dining area in a "grand march" led by *Bystander* editor J. L. Thompson. The halls were all decorated with flags and Japanese lanterns and an elegant, five-course meal was served. The affair was written up in the *Bystander*.

In an adjacent column in the *Bystander*, however, an editorial had a less festive tone. Titled "Is Mob Spirit Growing," the article asserted that "race hatred is constantly growing stronger, and the breach between the two races seems to be widening." This article was in reaction to several lynchings of African-American men elsewhere in the nation. The *Bystander* asked boldly, "Can America long exist with such unfair treatment of one-tenth of her population, or will the righteous conscience of the broad minded Americans arouse itself to the true responsibility of righting those wrongs, destroying race hatred and ceasing the organization of those lawless mob murderers?"

The *Iowa State Bystander* often covered more events involving blacks or interpreted them differently than the Des Moines *Register and Leader* and the *Evening Tribune*. A decisively Republican paper, especially in its formative years, the *Bystander* expressed its goal as "bettering the relationship between the colored and white citizens." Although its journalists regularly reported national stories about lynchings, discrimination, and other racial problems, the *Bystander* was more accommodational than confrontational or militant. In



A guard paces across the entrance of Fort Des Moines, 1908. Few images of the fort in 1903 exist.

comparison, the white-oriented *Register and Leader* and *Evening Tribune* were characteristic of most newspapers in this period, in that their news coverage of African-Americans was sparse and often negative. Yet in fairness, these two papers occasionally lauded blacks, questioned prejudice, and often lambasted racism in the American South.

**W**HILE THE African-American soldiers were stationed in Des Moines, there is no evidence that they attended social functions off post. Historians know little about what Des Moines social opportunities were available to its black citizens at the beginning of the twentieth century. Writing about Des Moines of 1918, historian Leola Nelson Bergmann noted in 1948 that "except for a public dance hall, described as more or less of a dive, and a Masonic Hall there were no public recreational centers for negroes." In general, black troops stationed near American cities seemed to be carefully monitored by their white officers, granted fewer passes than white soldiers, and were often virtually cut off from the existing social life of the city. According to Charles

Williams's *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers* (1923), "Sometimes the negroes were denied the privilege of visiting the cantonment cities for fear that trouble might arise. One very effective means of restriction was the establishment of a state of quarantine." While conditions may not have been so restrictive in Des Moines, it would appear that the soldiers in Companies C and L had very limited opportunity to leave the post for any length of time.

On April 22, 1904, a farewell reception for the two Companies C and L was held before they departed for their regular station (which appears to have been Fort Niobrara, Nebraska). By early May, the white troops of the Eleventh Cavalry returned from the Philippines under the command of Colonel Earl D. Thomas and were stationed at Fort Des Moines. Here was the much-heralded cavalry for which the citizens of Des Moines had long waited.

Yet on May 13 the *Bystander* reported that Colonel Thomas had ordered his troops to turn in at 8 P.M. due to the "results of criticism on the part of certain individuals regarding the behavior of the soldiers." The *Bystander* noted that "the privates are a bit sore at the parties who brought about the condition of affairs. They argue that they have just returned from the Philippines where they seldom saw white people and ought to be allowed a free rein for a



"No frowning, grim looking fort is this, but a place to delight the eye and the spirit of him who approaches." Photo and quotation from May 1908 *The Midwestern*, a Des Moines booster magazine.

little while until they got back in touch with humanity."

The *Bystander* added, "And they are white soldiers. Company L and C of the Twenty-fifth Infantry was here for several months, and their commanding officers never had to issue any such orders, and just to think, the white boys have not been here two weeks yet and have made themselves very obnoxious."

Not until June 1917 would African-American soldiers again be stationed at Fort Des Moines. This time the fort would be a training camp for black officers, the first such camp in America. During World War II, the fort would be the first training center for the Women's Army Corps. Because of these programs during the two world wars, Fort Des Moines has played an important role in Iowa's military history. Nevertheless, the fort's first months, in which it barracked black infantry soldiers, represents an intriguing episode also worthy of note. Likewise, the press coverage of the fort during this period begins to reveal mainstream expectations and attitudes about the military and about race in turn-of-the-century Iowa. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Major primary sources for this article are the *Iowa State Bystander* and the *Des Moines Register and Leader*. Other sources include Johnson Brigham, *History of Des Moines and Polk County, Iowa*, vol. 1, (1911); and Charles H. Williams, *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers* (1923).

Other sources are well recognized for their coverage of the fort's later history. For example, see Emmett J. Scott's *The American Negro in World War I* (1969), written shortly after Scott's unprecedented position as Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, probably the highest ranking black in the Woodrow Wilson administration. Charles Kellogg's *A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, vol. 1, 1909-1920 (1967), offers a detailed analysis of the NAACP and others in calling for the establishment of the first black officers training camp, eventually located in Des Moines in 1917. See also Leola Nelson Bergmann, "The Negro in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 46 (1948); Charles Garvin, "The Negro in the Special Service of the U.S. Army," *Journal of Negro History* (Summer 1943); Ruth A. Gallaher, "Fort Des Moines in Iowa History," *Iowa and War* (April 1919); several articles in *The Midwestern* (May 1908, Sept. 1909, July 1910); and Gerald W. Patton's *War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-1941* (1981). Yet these sources lack information on the fort's earliest years.

The archives at the U.S. Army Reserve Center on the grounds of the old Fort Des Moines also hold historical information.

The original, annotated manuscript of this article is in *The Palimpsest* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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Vern Carpenter was employed for twenty-three years in the Iowa Department of Public Instruction, first as a consultant and auditor, and then as the state director of the school lunch program and other child nutrition programs. Earlier he was a teacher and administrator. He now lives in Indianola. His story here about his mother's job as a switchboard operator developed from his book *Randalia, My Home Town*. Portions of it first appeared in the *Indianola Reminder* and *The Record-Herald and Indianola Tribune*.

Douglas Kachel is chair of the Sociology Department at Grand View College in Des Moines. His specialty is minority groups, and he has published extensively on Native Americans, Amish, Shakers, Hutterite Brethrens, and others. The research for his article here was in response to a *Des Moines Register* article a few years ago, which stated that "little is known about blacks in the early history of Fort Des Moines." Neglected topics about minority groups are a major interest and an impetus to his research.

Marjorie Levine, of Westport, Connecticut, is a second-year graduate student in history at the University of Iowa. Her historical studies center on the relationships between gender, medicine, and the state in nineteenth-century Britain. She developed an interest in Iowa history as an editorial assistant for *The Palimpsest*, and admits that she now knows far more about Iowa's past than that of her home state.

Becki Peterson is a native Iowan who has been a staff member of the State Historical Society of Iowa since 1983. As the photo archivist in the Society's Des Moines facility, she processed the Garbison collection of glass plate negatives. Her earlier projects include serving as project archivist and compiler of the *Iowa County Records Manual*, published by the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1987.

## CORRECTION

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I've not done well by Kansas politician Alf Landon in recent issues. On page 141 of the Fall 1992 *Palimpsest*, Alf Landon was misidentified in a caption as a Democrat. In the winter *Pal* I ran a correction but again misidentified him as a Democrat. Now, thanks to a few sharp-eyed readers, I think I've got it right: Alf Landon was a Republican.

Two slices of humble pie, please.

—The editor

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



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