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The
PALIMPSEST

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William Silag, Editor

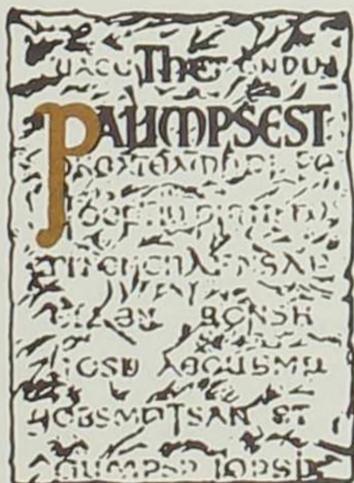
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Cover: *Threshing in the age of steam, the subject of Merrill R. Pierson's reminiscence, which begins on page 140 (courtesy Midwest Old Threshers/Loren Anderson)*



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

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

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

The Woman's World

Carrie Lane Chapman in the Mason City Republican

Edited by Teresa Opheim

Carrie Lane Chapman Catt, who directed the successful campaign to win voting rights for women in the early twentieth century, began her career as a political feminist while working as a journalist in her native Iowa in the mid-1880s. When Carrie Lane graduated from Iowa State College in Ames in 1880, she returned home to Charles City and soon took a job as high school principal in nearby Mason City. Three years later she became superintendent of the Mason City schools, one of the first women in the United States to hold such a position. Lane retired from the school system in 1885 and married Leo Chapman, editor of the Mason City Republican. Four weeks after their marriage, her name appeared on the masthead as co-editor of the weekly newspaper. One of her first actions as co-editor was to begin "Woman's World," a column devoted to a discussion of the place of women in American society.

Carrie Chapman's active suffrage work began at about the same time, in early 1885. A bill granting municipal suffrage to women had been introduced in the Iowa legislature, but had received little local publicity. Carrie prompted Mason City residents to circulate a petition in support of the suffrage bill. (All but a handful of the women in Mason City signed the petition.) In 1887, after her husband's death, Carrie became more deeply involved in the suffrage movement, serving as recording secretary of the Iowa Suffrage Association. By 1900, Carrie Chapman had

earned a national reputation as a driving and efficient strategist. Susan B. Anthony chose her as her successor in the National Suffrage Association, where she served as president for four years before resigning to concentrate on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. In 1915, when the National American Women's Suffrage Association organized its national office, she took charge of the nationwide campaign to win voting rights for women. Carrie, who had married George Catt in 1905, viewed herself as a field commander. Her "Winning Plan," a strategy that stressed both federal and state efforts, helped achieve ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919.

In the early years of her career, her "Woman's World" column demonstrated young Carrie Chapman's potential as a suffrage leader. In discussions of topics ranging from the frivolity of the fashion world to the economics of women's labor, Carrie voiced her outrage at the condition of women in the United States. The "Woman's World" expressed views that later made Carrie Chapman Catt a major spokeswoman for the generation of feminists who won the right to vote.

The first "Woman's World" column introduced Carrie to her readers and then launched into a discussion of a woman's need for self-sufficiency, a theme that she would return to in subsequent columns. As a career woman, Carrie knew the advantages of self-support. She also knew about the wasted potential of daughters taught only to be "pampered and petted belles of society."

March 1, 1885

SELF-SUPPORT

The "Woman's World" will be devoted to the discussion of such questions as purport to the welfare, the social, political and intellectual position of women. It will contain news of interest and reports of woman's work throughout the world. It will welcome communications from its readers and will hope to win many friends. Let those who are interested in the advancement of women speak their sentiments through the "Woman's World."

There is a rapidly growing sentiment among women to endeavor to make themselves self-supporting. The example of lives made miserable by dependence is seen on every side and girls are profiting thereby. In New York City, within the lifetime of one observer, the number of employments open to women has increased from twenty-six to fifteen hundred. The benefits of this change can scarcely be estimated. Girls are no longer forced to marry to secure homes, and wives need no more bear the abuse of unkind husbands because of their own incapacity for self-support. Women are everywhere more intelligent and more respected. Society has been elevated and purified. Let the good work continue. Let every mother see that her daughter is prepared with a trade, profession, or work to enable her to meet any fate the future may have in store for her. . . . [It] is truer womanhood to make and hold a position where she can earn a livelihood than to be the pampered and petted belle of society. Teach her that she is refusing life's grandest offering when she dawdles away her time with novel dress and foolish pleasures. If she has talents, teach her to develop them; if she has none, teach her to make talent by energy. At all hazards teach her to be a woman and not a mere doll-baby.

It is a mistaken idea that girls are to be cared for and supported in idleness. Your daughter may marry well, as the saying is;

she may never know want, nor even have a desire ungratified; but quite as likely she may be obliged to walk in poverty all her life, she may be left a widow with children to support, or she may be left with a debt to pay. How is she to keep her family from starving, herself from wearing out, and her home bright and cheerful? You have taught her nothing. She may play the piano, sing sweetly, paint pictures and thus be called accomplished, but in none of these is she expert enough to earn a livelihood. She perhaps can sew, but she can make only starvation wages at that. What then? Ah, what indeed! Would it not be wiser, O, ye mothers, if you would insist that your daughters know one thing thoroughly, the knowledge of which would make them independent? Has your own helplessness made you miserable? Then do not let your daughter repeat your experience. Ah, but your foolish pride tells you people will think it strange that your daughter works for a living, your friends will talk about it and perhaps laugh over it. Perhaps some of them may, but more probably you will make converts to your plan, and your example prove a boon to many a girl. Try it.

Carrie Chapman saw women's place in society rapidly expanding in the late nineteenth century. With more opportunities for women outside the home, she speculated that the division of labor in the home would have to change. The Scott County settlement of Amity suggested one direction that change might take.

March 26, 1885

AMITY KITCHENS

There is an important problem which is presented to the women of our land for solution. By whom or how is the labor of our future homes to be performed? With the care of a house, preparation of meals, and watching over a family, to the ordinary woman help is a sheer necessity. Housework has

grown into such disrepute among girls that it has driven them into other lines of work, more "respectable," if not more remunerative. The number who are willing to become house servants is constantly diminishing. So few are left in the field that even now a mistress is left wholly at the mercy of her servants. They domineer over her in a most humiliating manner, but she is compelled to submit or accept the only alternative of doing her own work. It is probable circumstances will force new fashions and customs into prevalence which will be in accordance with this state of affairs. However, it may do well to speculate as to the results.

In the settlement of Amity, in Scott County, where all property is held in common and profits are equally divided, a custom exists which may be of value in determining this question. In this town are several large kitchens and dining rooms. Here the whole community gathers at mealtime. The work is performed by a few women, who are detailed for a day at a time. This plan has several advantages. It leaves the homes free from smoke and smells of the kitchen; it gives to each woman several days in the week which she is at liberty to employ at other work; it is an economy of strength, time, utensils, materials, and fuel. While this plan is not feasible in all its details, it is quite likely [communal] dining rooms would be highly practicable. . . . It could be so managed [that] the expense of board would be no greater than the cost of living at home and would also leave the women of the family at liberty to seek employment for which they could receive pay, if they so desired. Moreover, it would be a welcomed reform which could so dispose of housework that mothers might have opportunity to devote more time to the training of the mental and moral natures of their children.

Carrie was known for her caustic wit, which was often directed at the specious and ridicu-

lous in her opponents' arguments. One victim of Carrie's barbed pen was one Reverend Dr. Dexter.

April 23, 1885

DR. DEXTER'S ARGUMENTS

Rev. Dr. Dexter, editor of the *Congregationalist*, has been publishing a series of letters upon the subject of woman's suffrage. The articles themselves are not particularly different from most others, written by a wholly conservative man, but he should have credit for having introduced two entirely new arguments. [So] powerful and reasonable are these that a sense of fairness will not allow them to be concealed from the public. His farseeing mind pictures the time when both mistress and servants shall go to the polls, and then propounds the overwhelming question, with an air of triumph, "Who, when the lady of the house and all her servants have gone out to vote, who I say, shall answer the door bell?" It is strange that during the many years in which this question has been agitated no one has thought of this impregnable barrier to woman's suffrage. To the great mind of Dr. Dexter belongs the honor of its discovery and perchance he will have the satisfaction of seeing all the work of the past years utterly demolished by his little question and the intelligent women of the land accept without a murmur this new "sphere" of "answering the door bell."

But the logical mind of this extraordinary man is capable of more than one original idea, and what is most astonishing, the second is quite as profound as the first. He says he is confident that in case of woman's suffrage many a man would repeat his vote under the disguise of a woman's bonnet and veil. Ah, great mind! could you only have spoken a quarter of a century ago, what amounts of money, time and talent might have been saved for some nobler cause.

Although feminists of Carrie Chapman's

generation were interested primarily in obtaining the vote, other cultural issues also received their attention. In this column on women's fashions, Mrs. Chapman describes the relationship between styles of dress and the emancipation of women.

May 14, 1885

FASHION

The modistes of Paris create the fashions of dress and the civilized world makes haste to follow. These authorities, ignorant of hygienic laws and caring only to perpetuate their own business, add new complications every season. So absolutely do they control the manner of dress that if one woman who sees the evil of their system desires to don more comfortable garments, she is ostracized from society, hooted at in the streets and dubbed a "crank." The modistes crowd the form into a stiff corset, preventing a natural breathing even when not worn so tight as to cause greater injury; they hang heavy skirts by close bands around the waist, pressing out of position the internal organs; they put thin shoes upon the feet and a tiny bonnet upon the head, which serves as no protection from wind or cold; they will not allow a coat in winter sufficiently warm to keep one comfortable, lest she present a bungling appearance; in fact, they clothe a woman in as uncomfortable and unhygienic a manner as possible. But what is to be done?

A few years ago a number of New York women banded themselves into an organization called the "Reform Dress Society." It was their object to establish new and comfortable styles of dress, with the expectation that sensible women would follow them, but the public refused to recognize them as authorities, and but little was accomplished. The time had not yet come for the change.

Of late there has been a similar awakening among women. They have arisen in answer to a universal demand for more laborers. Thousands of them have launched out into



Carrie Lane Chapman (Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

new trades and professions. To these business women the inconvenience of the present fashion is apparent, and from them comes a cry for a reform. As yet their demand has been unheeded. The modistes are still the authorities. But is it possible the silly belles of society, with no thought further than their wardrobe, are to establish the forms of dress for intelligent, thinking women to follow? It cannot be. The number of working women is being daily increased, and with every addition their power is strengthened. Soon the right to dictate the dress suitable to their labors will be recognized and the mass of women follow the advice of the pioneer women of New York.

Carrie urged women to pursue careers other than the traditional roles of wife and mother. This, she believed, would help to build women's sense of self-worth and alleviate the tendency to label any woman who remained unmarried past her early twenties an "old maid."

May 21, 1885

OLD MAID

One great cause of early marriages is the pernicious habit of calling a girl who remains [unmarried] until twenty-five an "old maid." This is done by many well-meaning but thoughtless persons who would be sorry if any act or expression of theirs had ever caused one an hour of misery; yet this very dread of being called an "old maid" has driven more women into marriage and life-long misery than any other thing excepting perhaps poverty. A girl, young, sensitive, unused to the rough ways of the world, shrinks from having any stigma cast upon her. When she first hears herself called an "old maid" it is a revelation, and she falls under it as if it were a blow. She feels as if it were an imputation upon her character in some way; and though she may try to laugh it off, the wound is there, and festers and corrodes till the life that was once happy as a bird's has now a skeleton, which she thinks can only be removed by marriage. It is a mistake to think that single life is any less noble than marriage, especially if the spirit of discord is permitted to inflict its horrors upon a whole household.

Let mothers treasure their daughters more; seek to know their inmost feelings in a kind and sympathetic way; win their love and confidence by showing that they have hearts and were once girls and often made mistakes. A girl who has her mother for a confidant is not so anxious to leave the shelter of her home to take "the leap in the dark." For what is it but a leap in the dark? — a species of slavery to one-half the women who marry.

A very mischievous writer once said: "An offer of marriage is the highest compliment a man can pay a woman." It is in some few cases. A great many women have learned to their sorrow that it would have been nearer the truth if it had been written "injustice" instead of compliment. Here is an instance: A young man decides he has reached an age when it would be well for him to take a wife and settle down. He has just started in life, and has enough to furnish a house plainly and comfortably. He and all his friends think the best thing he can do is to marry. He looks around for a wife. Does he look for one in the same station with himself, for one who is earning her own living, who has had experience in the school of economy, who has had a hard struggle and come off conqueror, and would be a true helpmate to him, and who wants a helpmate for herself? No. He goes into society and looks around for the best and most attractive girl he can find. He meets a beautiful young lady, fashionably educated, amiable, confiding, and helpless. He is charmed and decides she is the one he would like to marry. There his reason stops. He "makes love," of course, and "compliments" her with the offer of his hand.

But if he would look on the other side for a moment and ask himself why he wants that beautiful girl, graceful, intelligent and lovely, he would be forced to reply, "I want her to cook, make my beds, clean my house, darn my hose, watch longingly for my return, put up with my ill-humors, economize in every particular for my benefit, be the mother of my children, and bring them up properly, and in return for this I will support her, allow her to bear my name, and when she dies I'll give her a Christian burial." Now, if he looked squarely at this side of the question, he would not be likely to feel that he was doing such a complimentary thing, nor go about it so complacently. And if the young lady saw the realistic side, without the

gloss and roseate hue of poetry, she would not consider that she had been so very highly complimented by the offer.

In the same issue of the Republican, Mrs. Chapman listed several non-traditional careers pursued by the state's women.

Mrs. Scott, the commissioner of the Women's Department at the New Orleans Exposition from Iowa, has supplemented the Iowa exhibit with the following valuable statistics, which will be published in her official report: Number of Iowa farms owned and directed by women, 965; number managed by women, 18; stock farms owned and directed by women, 6; dairy farms, 80; green houses, 8; market gardens, 9; number of women serving at present as County School Superintendents, 13; number managing institutions of learning, 37; number of women physicians, 125; dentists, 3; attorneys at law, 6; ministers, 10; professional nurses, 110; civil engineer, 1.

Carrie Chapman believed that women must ignore the frivolities heaped upon them in American society, including the well-meaning but ultimately degrading "women's pages" in magazines and newspapers.

June 18, 1885

WOMEN'S PAGES

One of the greatest insults paid to modern womanhood, although probably its authors are innocent enough of any wrong intention, are the numerous columns in newspapers "devoted to women," as the head-lines announce, and which contain all sorts of slush and nonsense. They are composed of quibs upon ridiculous subjects that ordinary people would not consider worth reading. Poodle dogs, hair-pins, ice-cream eaters, and "mashes" are specimens of the subjects treated. No true woman can read the headings and then peruse the matter without a feeling of honest indignation. And if any

woman, however weak-minded, could read them with enjoyment, she is so rare an individual as not often to be seen within the pale of common society. Strange as it may seem, some of the largest and most influential newspapers are among the class which publish these columns. If it is necessary to publish such stuff at all, it should at least be placed under a proper head and not cast a stigma upon all womankind by the insinuation that it is mainly intended for her reading. Whatever may be the cause for the appearance of these columns in newspapers, it is certain they do much harm by leading the thoughtless reader unconsciously to a belief that women are only interested in such reading and the natural conclusion to such a belief, that they, as a class, are foolish and nonsensical.

Women's supposed unfamiliarity with politics was a common argument against women's suffrage, and it was one that Carrie strongly objected to. It disgusted her that intelligent, college-educated women were denied the vote while recent and often illiterate immigrants were welcomed to the polling places with open arms. While modern readers may find Carrie's position on immigration and naturalization callous, it must be viewed in the light of the frustration bred of many defeats in the battle for women's suffrage.

August 3, 1885

INTELLIGENT VOTING

One objection to women's suffrage is that "women do not know enough, and would increase the number of ignorant votes."

Upon one occasion, a famous woman's suffragist, who was a college graduate, an author, and a distinguished public speaker, was present at a polling place, using her influence with voters as they came up to accomplish some purpose in which she was interested. She handed a ballot to one man whom she saw standing a little aloof from the others. He could not read it and did not

know which ticket it was. He told her how he wanted to vote and asked her to scratch the ticket for him. After it was prepared, she asked him if he was not in favor of allowing women to vote. He drew himself up with all the dignity he could muster and pronounced a contemptuous "No." She begged him to give his reason and received the comforting reply, as he proudly walked away with his doctored ballot, "they don't know enough."

This objection is generally presented by this class of people, those who are themselves ignorant and have been associated with ignorant women. For this reason, their opinion is scarcely worthy of consideration. Now and then, however, a man or woman of intelligence will use this argument upon the ground that women have but little knowl-

edge of politics.

It is ridiculous to assert that women are more ignorant than men, for statistics give us the fact that there are no more illiterate women than men. The privilege of suffrage given to women could not consequently give an increase of ignorant votes.

It is quite probable that the majority of women are not so familiar with the details of politics as are the majority of men. This fact is, however, no proof of incapacity for such knowledge. There has been no incentive for her to inform herself in this direction. It has been a kind of information she could not use, therefore she made no effort to gain it. . . . The records of schools and colleges have proven beyond a doubt that the mental calibre of the average woman is fully equal to



The Iowa Woman Suffrage Association meeting in Oskaloosa, 1889. Carrie Lane Chapman, wearing a cape, is seated in the first row. (Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

that of the average man. Give her a use for political knowledge and she will possess it. It is not supposed all women would have a love for political knowledge even if the incentive were given them to gain it. All men have not. It will be remembered that Gen. Grant had never voted for President but once before the war, simply from lack of interest. It is possible no longer for opponents of suffrage to cling to this argument of ignorance. Hundreds of women are yearly graduated from our best colleges with the honors of their classes. They are entering every business and profession, and amid protest are rapidly proving their ability and success. They are energetically elbowing their way through all obstacles to that equality of rights which justice declares should be theirs. No one who observes her persevering progress can longer say the mind of woman is unfit to grasp this or that, for there is no field in which she has not manifested her ability to work.

When the negroes were granted the privilege of suffrage, few could read, and they knew nothing of the nature of government. After twenty years of citizenship, even under the most adverse circumstances, they are able as a whole to cast a moderately intelligent vote, while from among them there have developed political thinkers whose opinions have won consideration from the wisest men. Will anyone with fair mind suppose that American women would not achieve as great a success in the field of politics?

It is with much injustice this argument of ignorance is advanced at all. Under present arrangements, the illiterate foreigner, with no comprehension of the broad meaning of our government and with ideas shaped by the environments of his home government, has an influence, through his ballot, in the formation of our political policy, while the American-born woman, patriotic, broad-minded, intelligent, is ruled out. What man is there [who,] as he walks to the polls, a

tramp on one side, a loafer on the other, a drunkard behind, can fail to see the injustice of saying "women do not know enough to vote." It is not alone an injustice to intelligent womanhood, but to the government robbed of the influence of her vote.

That suffrage was already Carrie Chapman's primary concern in 1885 is suggested by the number of columns she devoted to it. Explaining that "it is not our desire to conceal any fact or to underscore any argument," Carrie devoted a number of successive columns to popular objections to the suffrage amendment. Here she refutes one of the arguments.

August 13, 1885

HUSBANDS & WIVES

[One objection to suffrage] is "that the privilege of suffrage granted to women would be a cause of family feuds." It is supposed that whenever the husband and wife cast their votes for different ends a political quarrel and family jar would be sure to ensue as the direct result of a difference of opinion, but, without the ballot, women have opinions — and sometimes very emphatic ones — upon political questions. Subjects frequently arise at the polls which touch very closely woman's special domain — the home. It may be a question of moral example of a candidate, it may be some matter connected with the public schools, it may be a law of the city — hundreds of questions may arise in which the woman who has a care for the welfare of her children must feel intensely. Deprived of all right to express her opinion at the polls, she is forced to plead with her husband that his vote may represent her sentiments. Too many times these husbands, echoing the contempt the government has shown for woman's political judgment, only find amusement in the plea. They are not to be blamed for this. Custom, the sternest of all law-makers, has said for centuries back that a woman's reason was deficient and her

judgment valueless. It is not strange [that] men hold some of this prejudice still, but who is there can tell the bitter tears wives have shed or the heartaches they have endured because husbands gave no consideration to their entreaties? Ah! here is cause for family feuds. Had these women an equal voice with their husbands at the polls, all this would be removed.

That husbands and wives would sometimes quarrel over politics, even did wives have the ballot, is without doubt true. Were it not for politics, they would find some other question upon which to take issue. So long as there have been husbands and wives, there have been causes for differences of opinion between them. In all the world's history there has never been any theme over which excitement has raged so high as religion. Yet we find numerous husbands and wives, believing in different creeds and belonging to different churches, who live in perfect harmony. But, even if this were a prolific cause of "family feuds" there is not an individual in the United States who would say that for this reason women should be allowed no opinions upon religious matters, or that the privilege of church membership be withdrawn from them.

Carrie Chapman and other feminists of her time envisioned vast changes when women achieved suffrage. In this final column, Mrs. Chapman discusses social improvements that would result once women won the right to vote.

September 1, 1885

EXAMPLE AND FATE

Much has been said concerning the probable effects of woman's suffrage. Heretofore, theories only could be advanced. But now, if the experience of Washington and Wyoming territories is any criterion, facts can put an end to discussion. All unbiased observers agree in their testimony that woman's suffrage in those territories has been signally successful. It is said a woman's vote there is

decided by the character of the candidate, rather than by party. No caucus or convention dares to place in nomination men who are not morally clean. This fact alone is sufficient evidence that good order and good government must result. But the effect is even deeper than this. If a spotless character is to be one of the qualifications of officers, a strong stimulus is given men to lead upright lives. At present, go-easy good-fellowism, which governs modern political campaigns, is attended by any amount of evil. The question too many times asked is whether a man will buy votes with a glass of beer or a cigar, rather than if he possesses the proper qualifications for the office. Even in Iowa, one of the foremost states in the Union, there are men filling her highest offices whose private records are black enough to make any woman shudder. With such men lifted into the highest seats of honor, what criterion of character can be held before boys to inspire an ambition to live honorable lives? The facts are that the men who take a social glass, smoke a cigar and generously "treat," who have a fund of low-lived stories at their command and possess enough ability to fulfill some of the requirements of business are the men who secure our best offices. Yet mothers are unable to raise a voice against such a standard of manhood and are obliged to see their sons go to a ruin which their vote might have prevented. The greatest and best reforms of our Nation must come through the enfranchisement of woman. □

Note on Sources

These columns were selected from issues of the *Mason City Republican* on file at the Mason City Public Library. The editor of *The Palimpsest* has corrected errors of spelling and punctuation that appeared in the original newspaper columns.



Carrie Chapman Catt in 1910 (S1151)



THRASHING IN THE AGE OF STEAM

A Reminiscence by Merrill R. Pierson

A great farm country institution, once common in America's Midwest grain belt, has passed away. While it lasted, it was an annual event that combined the best and biggest application of power to farm work with a great and true spirit of co-operative neighborly assistance, and in doing so provided one of the community's best social affairs. The institution was the threshing ring, and the power was steam power.

In our part of the country, grain was harvested with a binder and the bundles were set up in rows of shocks. Usually there was a cap sheaf (a bundle) to help the shocks shed the rain. The shocked grain required a "curing" or drying-out process that took about two weeks. When the shocks had cured suffi-

ciently, it was threshing time.

Arrival of the threshing season meant it was time to lay in a supply of coal. I was usually the one who hauled home about a ton of the best grade of lump coal available. We didn't want to incur the risk of insufficient steam pressure in the engine boiler on account of slow-burning or low-heat coal. The coal wagon was left loaded and parked near the steam engine after the engine was belted to the separator.

Care was taken, too, to have the several stock tanks filled with water to be hauled to the engine in a special tank wagon. The machine crew always included one man or older boy to run the tank wagon. It required pumping water from the stock tank by means of a hand-operated pump. The pump had a rather large cylinder, so it did not require a long time to fill the tank wagon. While the wagon was away from the threshing site, the engine

depended on a reservoir mounted on its platform. If the reserve began to run low, the engineer could warn the water tank operator with three blasts on the whistle, telling him that he must hurry back to avoid a shutdown or a blowup.

As soon as the grain was cured, every farmer wanted to get it threshed right away. There were only three or four threshing outfits in the entire township, and they were all very much in demand at the same time. One of the aggravations was that threshermen would promise to start at a certain farm at a certain time and go in some logical sequence from farm to farm. Unfortunately, some of them were not dependable; they would start elsewhere or go in an unexpected direction. Thus it happened that some farmers were at the end of the run year after year, with more rain damage than the average. I can recall that one neighbor lost his entire crop of wheat on account of a rainy season, even though his closest neighbor was a thresherman.

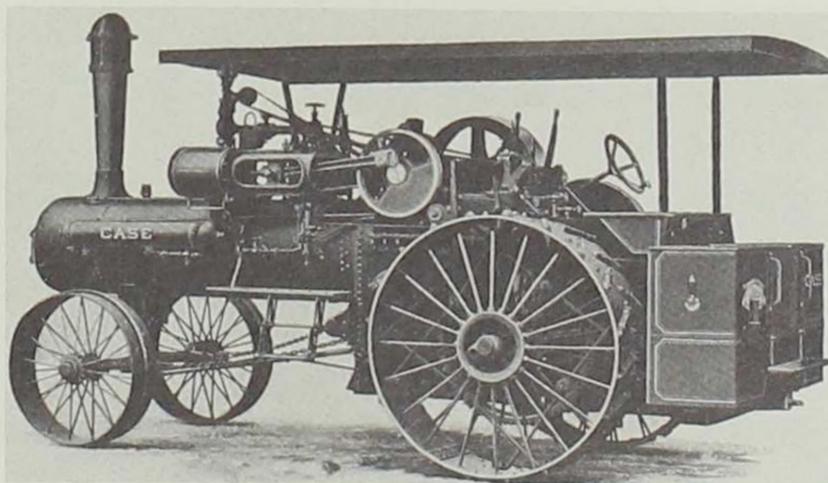
This uncertainty and delay led to the formation of threshing co-operatives, in which about a dozen farmers formed a loose partnership, contributed funds in equal amounts, and purchased an engine and grain separator, as the threshing unit was usually called. My father was a member of such a partnership arrangement. It was very informally organized and carried no insurance of any kind. A fire loss or a serious injury attributable to the machine's operation could have caused a great financial hardship to the partners, but in the pioneer spirit of those times the risk was calmly accepted. In our area there were no "company" catastrophes. A privately-owned rig broke through a wooden bridge on the road and killed the engineer-owner, but there was no question of personal liability under such circumstances.

The first step in threshing was to bring the shocks in on bundle racks. The typical threshing operation in the steam-power era

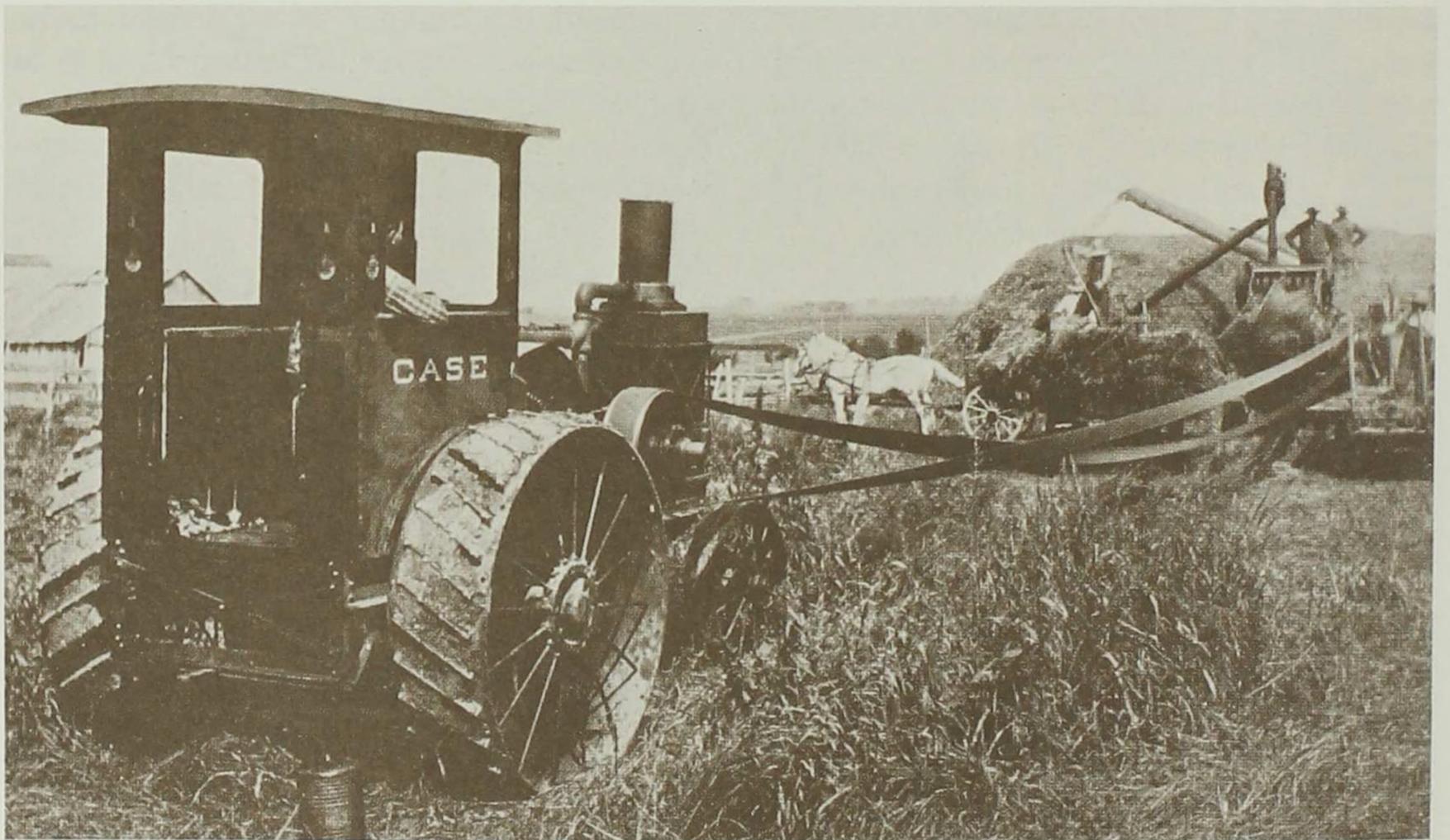
required from ten to fourteen bundle racks, depending on how far the bundles had to be hauled. Four men were needed to pitch the bundles up on the bundle rack. The loader soon displayed his experience, or lack of it, in the way he shaped his load. There was a real skill involved in placing every bundle on the perimeter with the butt end out and the head end overlaid by another inside bundle, like shingles on a roof, to keep the outside bundles from slipping off. Any novice who lacked the basic knowledge, and consequently suffered a slip-off of part of his load of bundles, was the butt of much derisive laughter and ridicule.

Sometimes the threshing was done out in the field, but on our farm it was more often done in one of the farm lots so that the straw stack would act as a wind shelter in winter for livestock. In the case of oat straw, it was also useful as winter feed for cattle; they ate it directly from the stack.

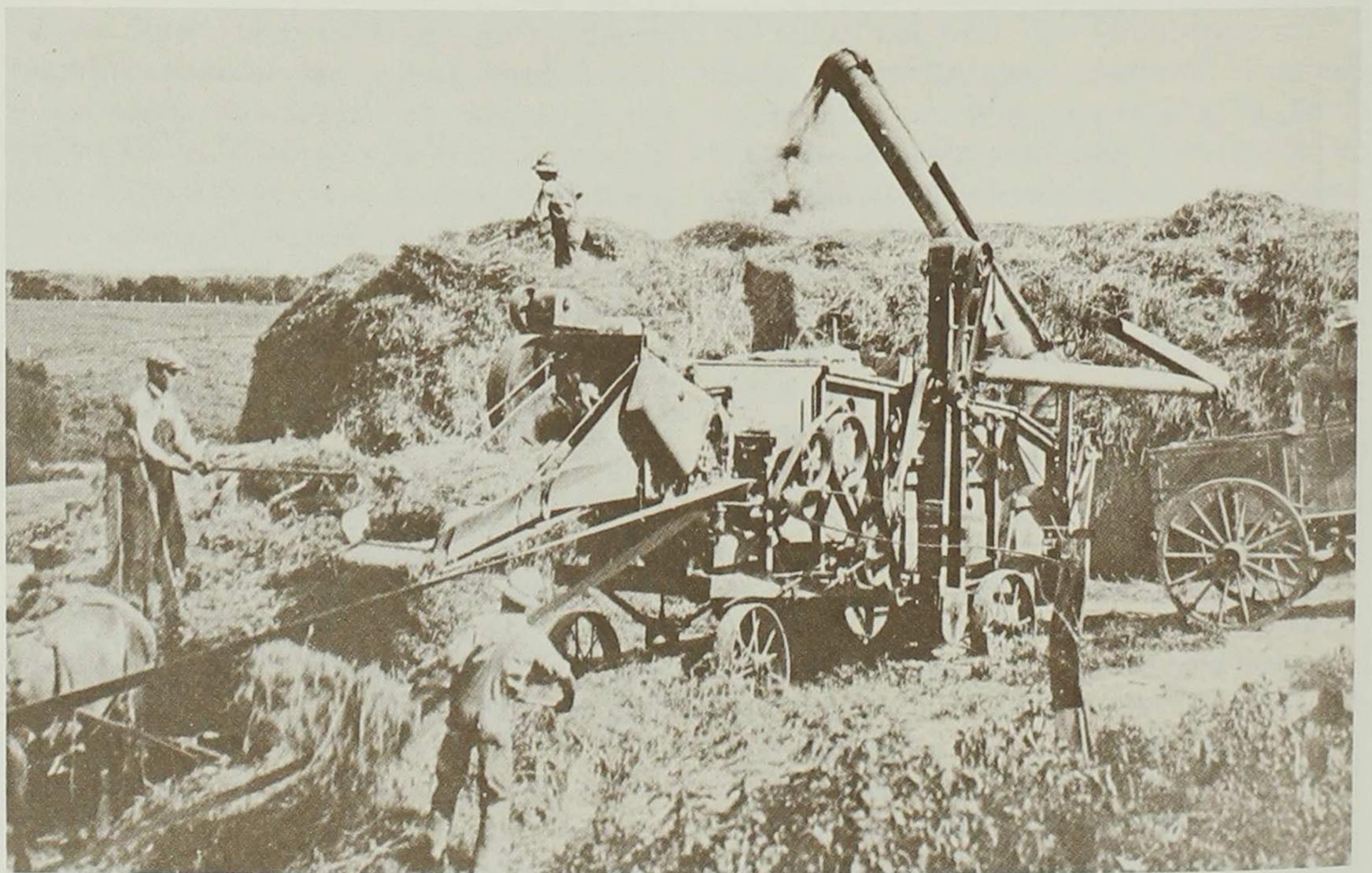
The exact location of the stack was determined by the direction of the wind on the day of threshing. It was necessary to locate the rig so that the dust and chaff from the blower would drift away and not fall on the threshing operators and grain wagons. The location was also influenced by the arrangement of the farm lot. The steam engine and grain separator had to be set up in a location



A 65-horsepower traction engine manufactured by J. I. Case in 1917. This model sold for \$2,190. (courtesy J. I. Case)



(above) A Case-powered threshing operation (courtesy J. I. Case); (below) a thresher in operation: two men feed in the bundles while another worker tends the stack (A. M. Wettach photo)



that permitted the movement of bundle racks and grain wagons to their proper positions.

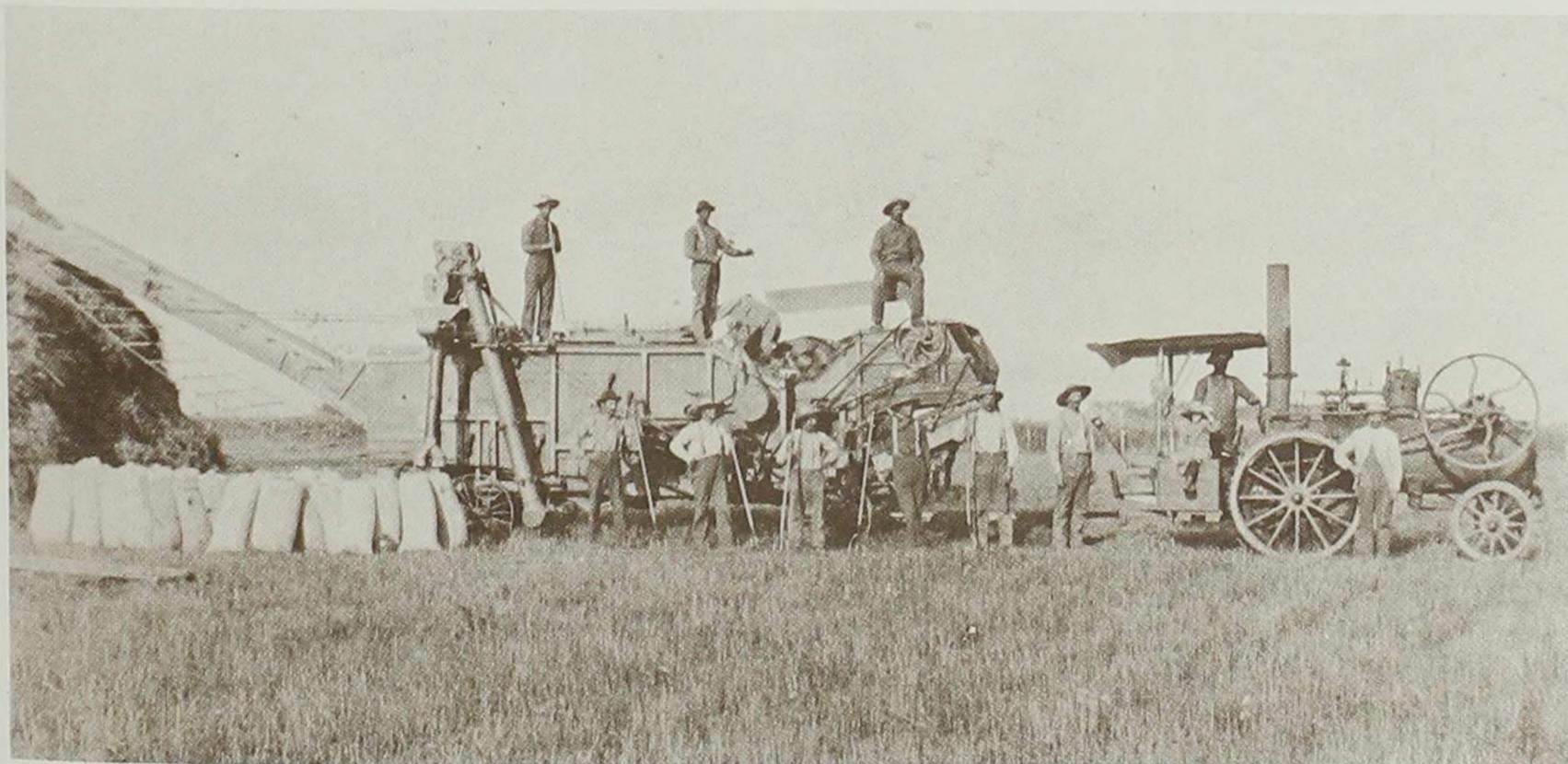
My personal recollections of threshing machines span a period dating from the first decade of this century. At that time there were still a few threshing machines powered by horses harnessed to "sweeps." The sweeps turned cog wheels that were geared to "tumbling rods" (really drive shafts), and the rods were connected to the separator to transmit the power for all its moving parts. But the conventional threshing rig during my childhood and teen years was powered by steam.

Although the actual operation of a steam engine was no job for a novice, the engine itself was basically simple. Fuel was burned under a boiler to generate steam from an abundant water supply to produce cheap, dependable power. There was no such thing as a battery, generator, starter, distributor, carburetor, transmission, or brake to get out of order. One cylinder, with steam applied to a piston in each direction of travel on every complete turn of the flywheel, was equal to a four-cylinder internal combustion engine in the number of power impulses it

generated. And there was a tremendous reserve of power when the steam pressure was maintained. But it would be a mistake to conclude from the foregoing that the operation was correspondingly simple.

The engineer had to think and plan far ahead. He had to have reserves of both fuel and water. He had to regulate the amount of water in the boiler and have enough fire, neither too little nor too much, to produce steam as required. Sometimes the water injector did not work properly and had to be cooled before it would cause fresh water to enter the boiler. If it still refused to work, there was usually a hand pump. Merely opening the steam valve did not assure that the flywheel would start in the right direction. If the first power thrust was in the wrong direction, the engineer reversed the steam flow with a lever so that the flywheel would rotate in the opposite direction. This reversal had to be sharply limited by quickly closing the throttle. Otherwise, many of the belts on the separator would be thrown off their pulleys. Usually a brief reversal, espe-

continued page 146



A threshing ring with part of a day's labor (SHSI)

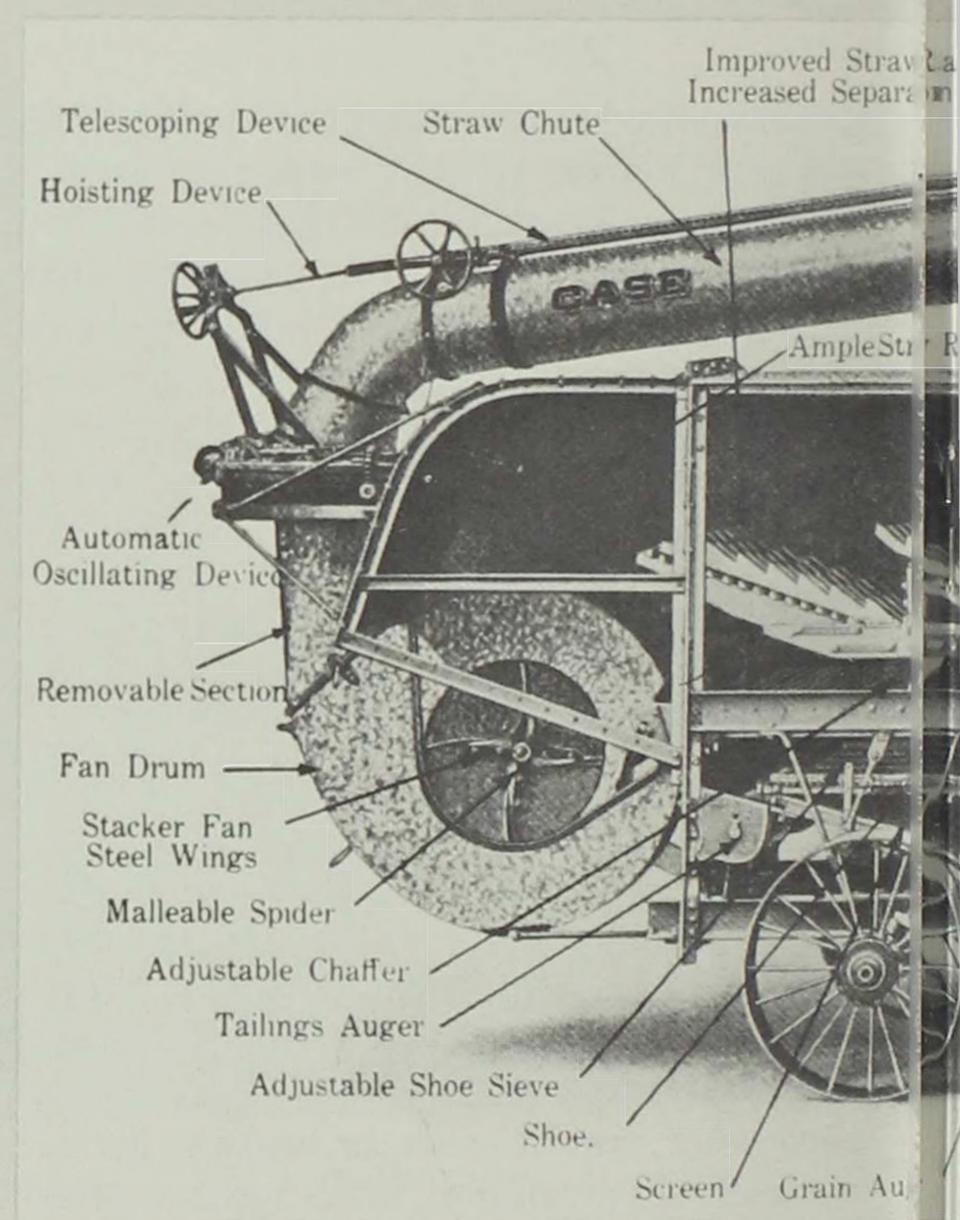
The many models of steam-powered threshing machines in use in the Midwest at the turn of the twentieth century had all evolved from designs patented as early as 1788. The older machines passed grain through beater-cylinders, which loosened the grain from the straw and deposited it — along with the chaff — on the ground. Such machines were a vast improvement over hand methods, but they had one major flaw: they were stationary.

In 1837, Hiram and John Pitts patented a portable machine employing a fanning mill, a device that blew the chaff away from the grain. The Pitts' machine was called a "separator" because it separated the grain from the straw and chaff. Separation took place when bundles of wheat passed over a perforated apron; the smaller, heavier grain fell through the holes, while an elevator at the rear of the machine expelled the straw. Inventors later developed an alternative method of separation in which the grain was shaken loose from the straw by means of an agitator. After a brief but intense rivalry, proponents of the agitator principle prevailed. By the early twentieth century, they had improved efficiency and productivity to a point where their machines could thresh from three to four thousand bushels of grain per day.

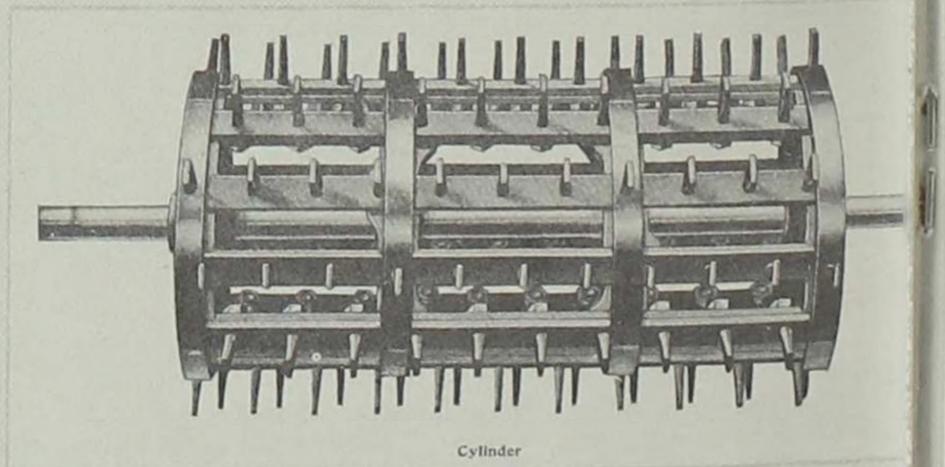
In spite of their apparent diversity, most of the threshing machines were similar in structure to the one shown in the accompanying diagram, a J. I. Case Steel Threshing Machine introduced in 1904. The threshing process followed in the various machines was essentially the same.

First, the threshing crew fed wheat bundles into the feeder, which carried them to the cutter bars, where the bundles were cut open. Then the wheat was carried to a retarder mechanism, which regulated the movement of the wheat into the machine. Most of the grain was then separated from the straw by passing the wheat through a cylinder and concave device that allowed the grain to fall through and passed the straw along to a series of racks.

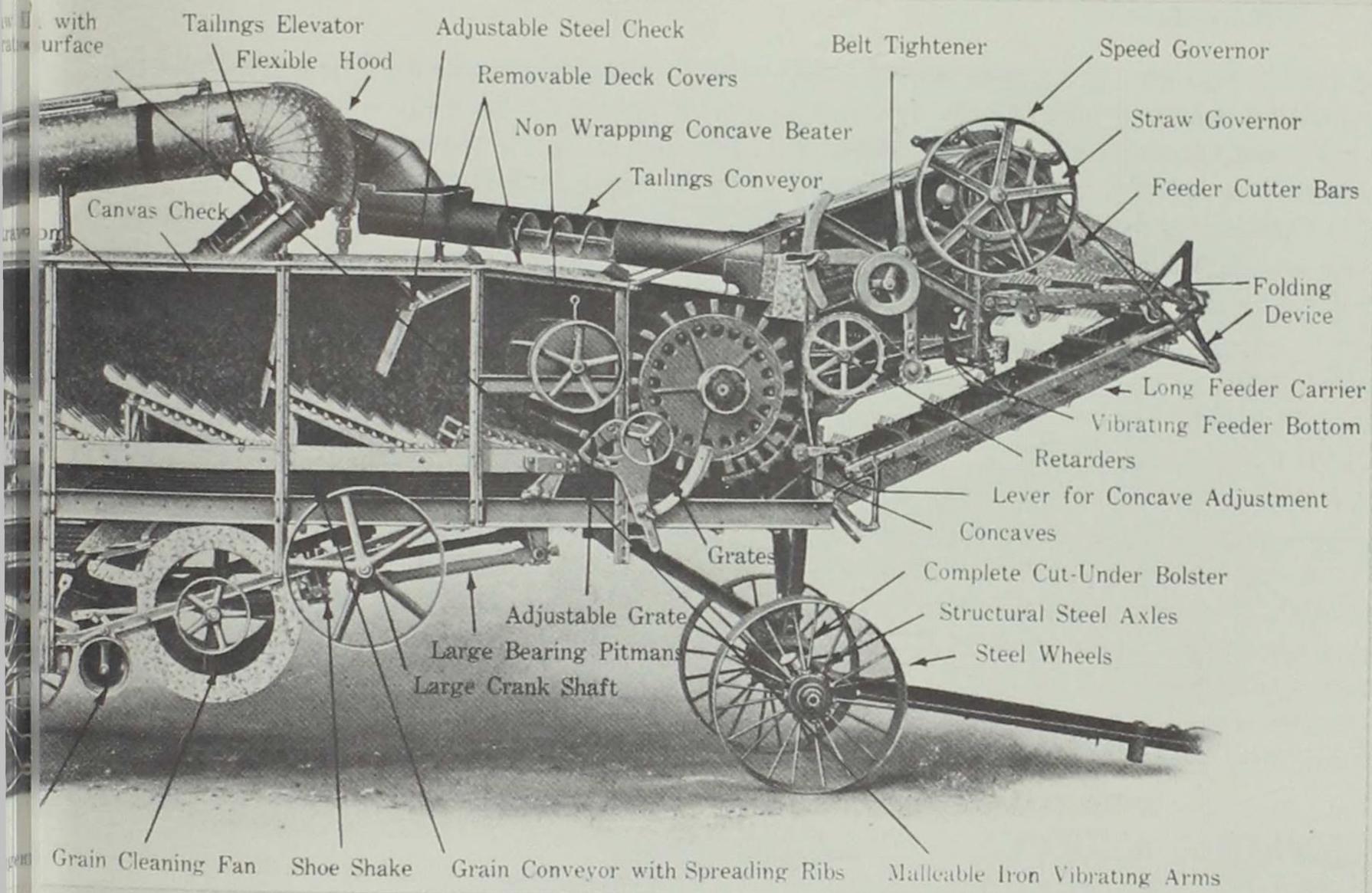
The racks shook loose any grain still attached to the straw, and this grain was combined with that from the cylinder and con-



cave. Then the grain fell through two screens called a "chaffer" and a "sieve." Any remaining chaff was then blown away from the grain by a grain cleaning fan, and the grain was finally fed out of the threshing machine by a grain auger. Meanwhile, the straw was carried back along the racks to the "stacker fan," which propelled it into the "wind stacker" (labelled the "straw chute" in the accompanying diagram). Finally the straw shot out the end of the stacker and onto the growing straw stack.

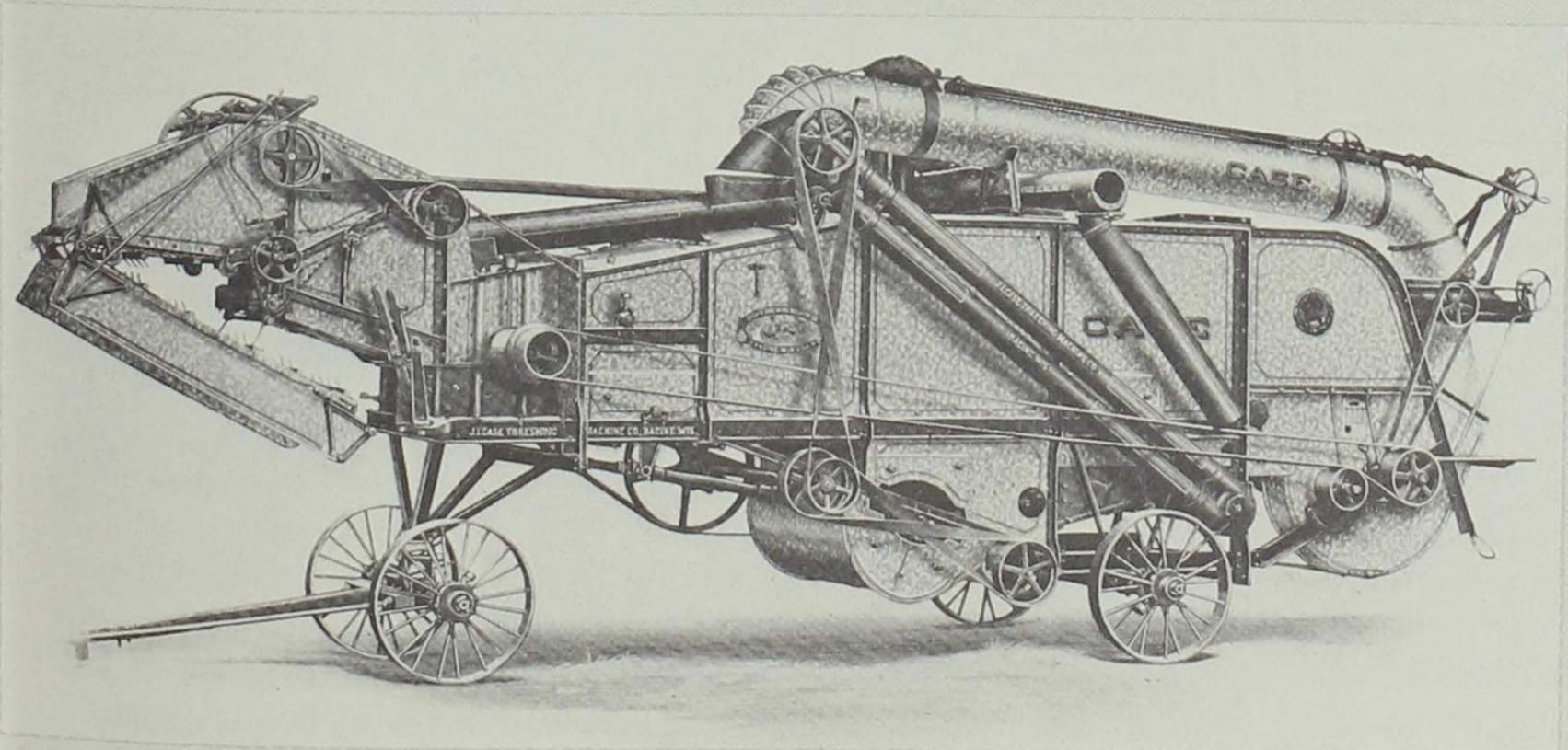


How the Steam Threshers Worked



Grain Cleaning Fan Shoe Shake Grain Conveyor with Spreading Ribs Malleable Iron Vibrating Arms

A Case threshing machine manufactured in 1915 (below); the same machine in a cross-sectional view (above). The cylinder pictured below left was manufactured in 1889 by the Advance Threshing Company of Battle Creek, Michigan. (Thresher photos courtesy J. I. Case; cylinder photo reprinted from the Advance Company's 1909 catalog)



cially under the hand of an experienced engineer, would make it possible to re-reverse and start the flywheel off in the desired direction. Occasionally, however, the crankshaft and flywheel would stop on dead center, in which case the flywheel had to be turned by hand a few degrees to position the piston to receive a steam-power impulse.

The engine's whistle was used to send a variety of messages. The engineer was usually the first man up and around in the morning, kindling a fire under the boiler. When he thought the appropriate time had arrived, he gave a long blast on the whistle to let the neighbors know that operations were starting. At noon, and again at the end of the afternoon operation, it was customary to announce the closedown by a long whistle blast that could be heard for two miles or more. A

single short blast was used to warn the separator feeders (the men who were pitching bundles onto the traveling feeder) that they were overloading the machine. This situation was usually accompanied by a groaning noise from the separator concaves and cylinder, and it could happen easily when the grain was a trifle damp, as it sometimes was in early morning. Some of the younger men in the threshing crew thought it a "smart" trick to overload the machine, with the result that the drive belt might be thrown off, the cylinder clogged up, and considerable time lost by the shutdown.

When the grain had completed its trip through the thresher, it was hauled to the storage bin in two wagons. One was filled from the grain spout of the accumulator box that measured and dumped the grain into the



A typical threshing team, or "ring," consisted of about twenty men and thirty horses, usually drawn from five or six neighboring families. This team poses at the J. F. Duncan Farm in Oakville. (courtesy Midwest Old Threshers)



The traction engine pictured in this threshing scene has an upright boiler — odd in appearance, but a common sight around the turn of the century. The engine appears to have chain drive. (SHSI)

wagon in half-bushel lots while the other wagon was being unloaded. In order to keep up with the thresher, two men were needed to scoop the grain into the storage bin. Because of the limited length of the wagon box, the men faced each other and one scooped right-handed and the other left-handed, with alternating and synchronized thrusts of the scoop into the grain and shots upward over the side of the bin. Occasionally, the scoops would bump in mid-air in the rush to get the wagon unloaded and back to the thresher by the time the other wagon was loaded.

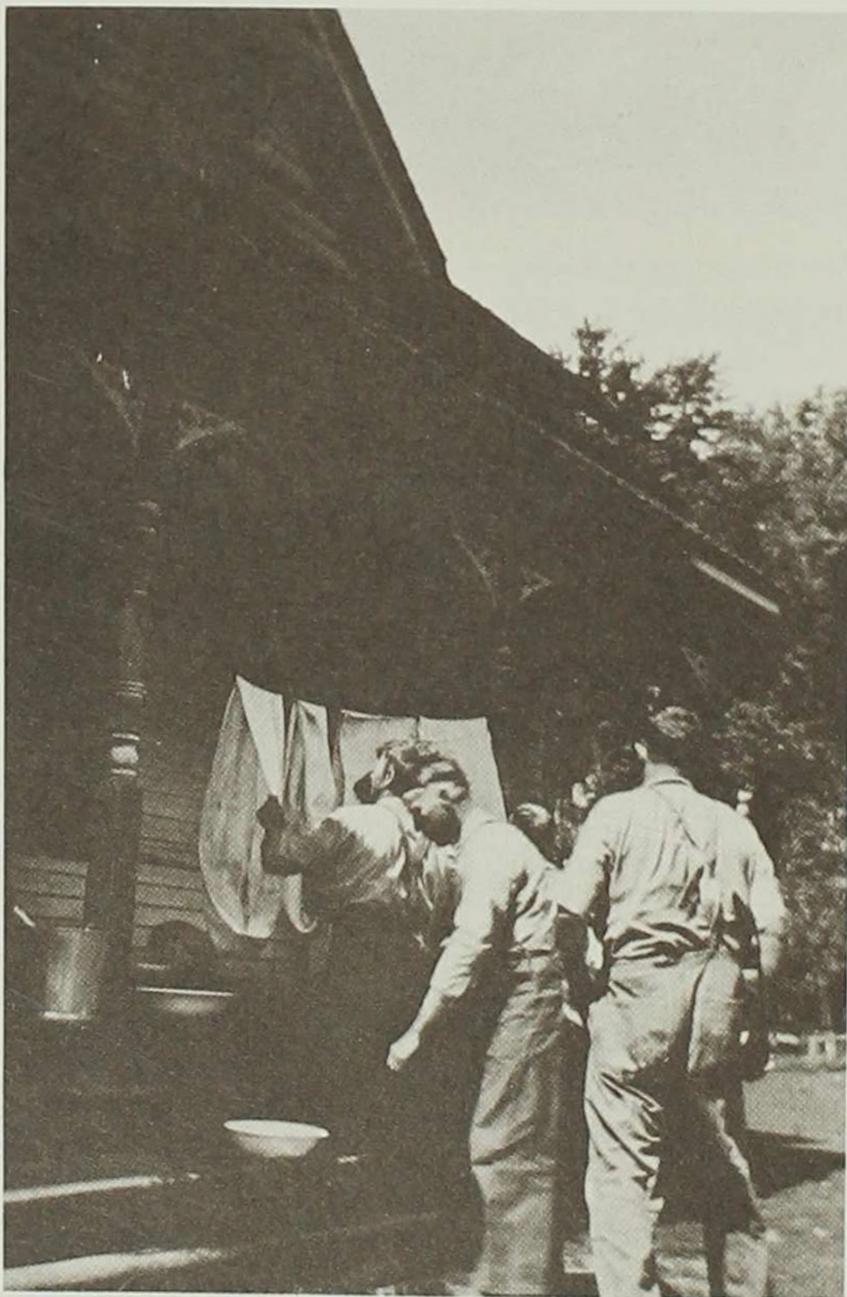
All of these operations had to proceed in unison, and an interruption in one stopped all. All of the men in the threshing crew were working in complete harmony to get the work done.

As a boy, my job was to supply fresh, cool drinking water to all the men, not only around the threshing machine but out in the grainfield as well. This I did by making the

rounds on my pony, Nell, with a fresh jug of water hung by a strap from the saddle horn. I often picked up interesting bits of news and gossip, and sometimes relayed messages, too.

A more substantial means of keeping the human side of the power supply in operation was the massive threshing dinner. Those dinners were really something for the men to look forward to at noon. Farm women had an annual opportunity to demonstrate their culinary accomplishments as they vied with each other to set out the most abundant, attractive, and tasty meals. Their reputations as cooks were on the line, or so they seemed to think. The threshing crews were worthy, prodigious, and appreciative consumers of these feasts. Their capacity for gorging themselves was notable. The end of the threshing season brought welcome relief to the women, who tried to provide ever new and tastier dishes to add to their reputations as cooks.

What was the glamour of operating an old steam thresher? For me, it was a combination of many things. There was the smell of coal smoke, mixed with steam and the engine oil, and the smell of the newly-threshed straw and the newly-separated grain. There was the sound of the puffing engine, responsive to the control of the governor, which caused the engine to snort harder when the load increased and to taper off almost to silence when under no load at all. Then there was the sound of the whistle, with each engine's whistle having its own distinctive pitch and tone. I remember the sound of the whir-



Threshing was a hot, dirty job. This threshing crew is probably preparing for one of the legendary feasts prepared by the wives and daughters of the men on the threshing crew. (SHSI)

ring belts and pulleys and the chomping of the knives that cut the bundle twine as the bundles entered the cylinder. And there was the groan of the cylinder as heavy loads of damp grain were attacked, the rattle of the straw shakers, and the blast of the straw blower as it sent the straw streaming out its open, hooded end, to be deposited on the growing straw stack.

There was also an overall rhythm to the whole process: the speed of the engine and the thresher; the steady, regular pitching of grain bundles from the bundle wagons into the extended threshing-machine feeder; the incessant reaching out of the bundle knives to slice the twine, distribute the bulk of the bundles, and thrust them into the threshing-cylinder; the periodic dumping of the grain-measuring device, and the delivery of the threshed grain into the grain wagon.

After 1920 there were very few steam threshers left. The gasoline- and fuel-oil-powered tractor engines that replaced steam engines were designed for smaller separators that required, in turn, fewer men in the threshing crew. By 1940 combines had made great inroads into the threshing operation. Originally, combining (in which harvesting and threshing were completed in one operation) had been considered useful only in dry, level country, but changes in design of the machinery and dates of harvesting made it not only possible but practical to combine grain under nearly all circumstances.

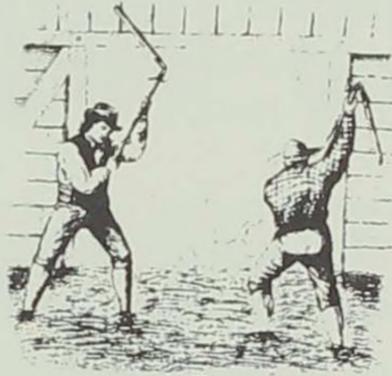
When the steam engines were replaced by internal combustion engines, the glamour of threshing, for me at least, was lost. The old puffing, snorting steam thresher engines had seemed almost animate beings, with their automatic responses to the need for a quick increase in power output under the control of their flyball governors. The combines had nothing to compare to the sense of living power in the steam engines at threshing time. □



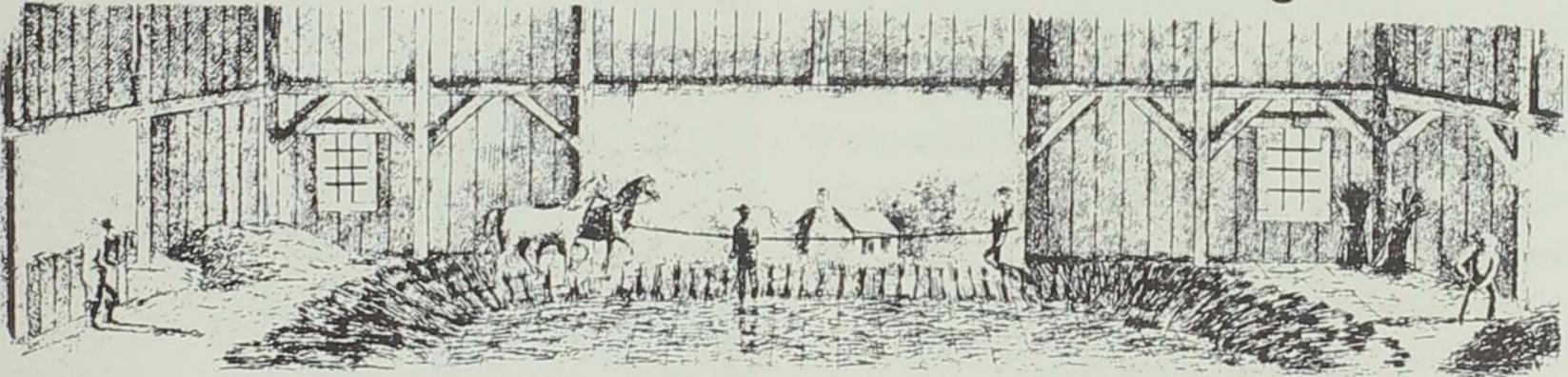
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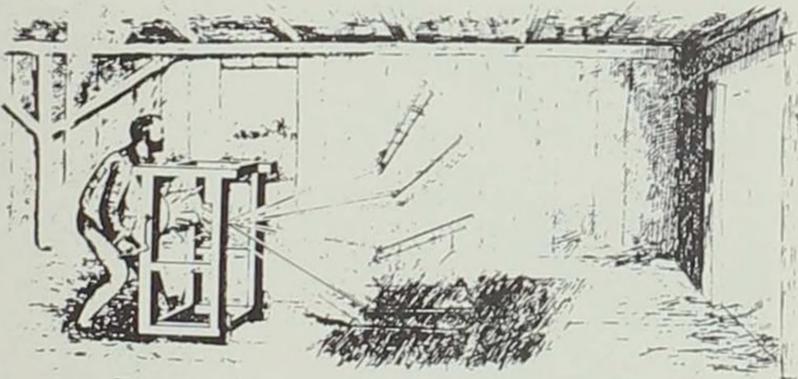
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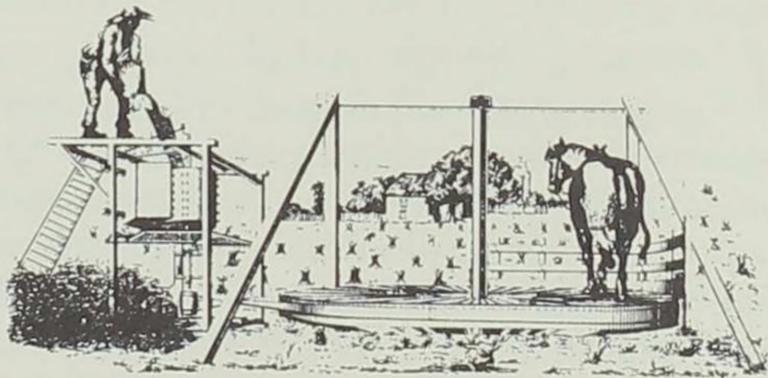
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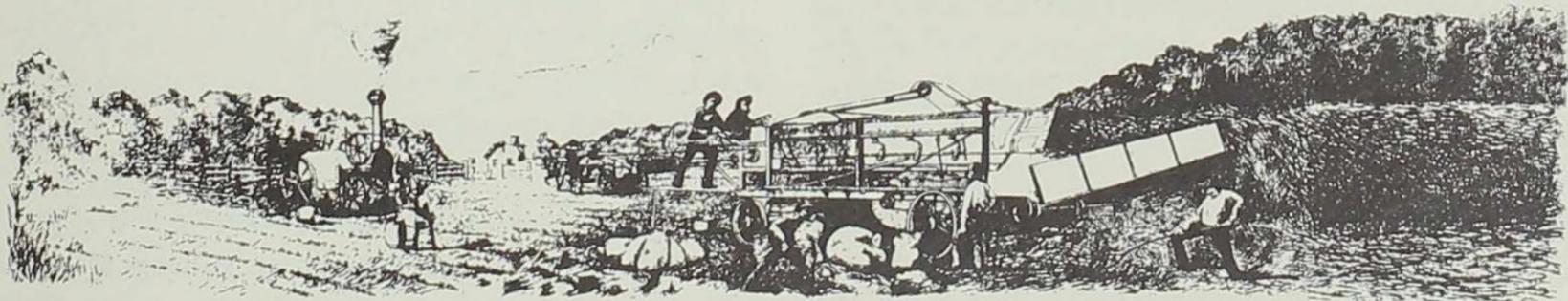
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Changes in techniques of threshing and cleaning grain are depicted in this illustration, which appeared originally in Benjamin Butterworth's *The Growth of Industrial Art*, published in 1892. The sequence includes: 1) the Egyptians, 1500 B.C.; 2) Roman tribulum, 100 B.C.; 3) Hand flail; 4) Horse thrashing; 5) Flail thrashing machine; 6) Horse power, circa 1834; and 7) steam power, circa 1883. Butterfield noted that there were nearly twenty thousand threshing machines manufactured in the United States in 1880 alone, and that in 1883 American farmers threshed 1.5 billion bushels of grain. (SHSI)

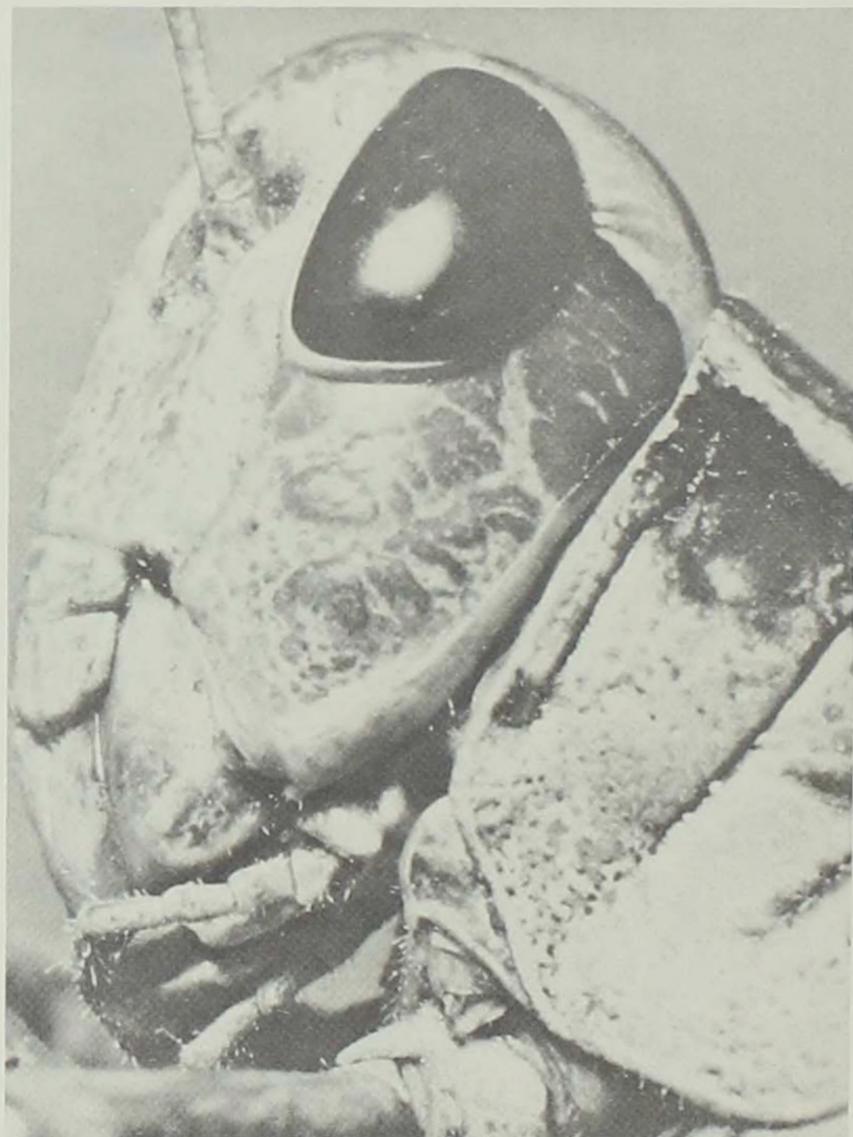
THE GRASSHOPPER WARS

“At first we thought a cyclone was upon us it looked like a heavy storm of black flakes, the dark particles singling out and becoming more defined in shape as they descended. We heard the buzzing; we saw the shining wings, the long bodies, the legs”

by Mary K. Fredericksen

In May 1873, dense swarms of grasshoppers blackened the sky over northwestern Iowa, blotting out the sun like a solar eclipse. When the insects swooped down on the land, pioneer homesteaders in the northwestern counties watched helplessly as dreams of bountiful harvests disappeared before their eyes. So widespread was the destruction that for several years — until the late 1870s — recurring grasshopper invasions curtailed immigration into the area and reduced many of the region's once-hardy pioneers to bewildered beggars. Understandably, perhaps, image-conscious local editors and publicists refused at first to admit the seriousness of the problem, fearing that news of the grasshoppers would ruin prospects for economic development in the northwest. In the end, however, the catastrophe stimulated an important discussion of the extent of government responsibility in such catastrophes and encouraged self-reliant Iowa homesteaders to accept the principle of emergency relief in times of natural disaster.

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©Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers/Harry F. Brevoort photo

In time, too, farmers in Iowa's northwestern counties learned to adapt to the natural balance between animal and plant ecologies in the central grasslands.

Their flights sometimes darkened the sky and gave the settler an ominous feeling of disaster. One afternoon I was coming from Primghar in company with some neighbors when the largest and darkest cloud of hoppers we had ever seen passed between us and the sun. The landscape grew hazy and things seemed so unreal we could hardly believe our senses. Daylight vanished, the air lost its warmth, and stars were visible. But after a while the cloud, carrying a tail like a comet, passed on. Sunlight and warmth returned, but it was

several hours before we could shake off the terror that had seized us.

The grasshoppers, technically known as Rocky Mountain Locusts, hailed from the foothills of the western mountains. When forced to migrate, the insects invaded nearby areas in swarms. Climatic conditions — seasonal extremes of heat or dryness that favored multiplication of the insects — triggered migrations of grasshoppers in search of food. Grasshopper migrations took a southeasterly route away from the home area during summer months, the rate of travel varying with the wind. Known to move only fifteen or twenty miles on a windless day, the insects travelled ten times as fast on windy days.

They had voracious appetites. Professor Charles V. Riley, State Entomologist for Missouri and the foremost grasshopper expert of the 1870s, wrote that

The Rocky Mountain Locust may be said to be almost omnivorous. . . . They will feed upon the dry bark of trees or the dry lint of seasoned fence planks; upon dry leaves, paper, cotton and woolen fabrics. They have been seen literally covering the backs of sheep, eating the wool; and wherever one of their kind is weak or disabled, from cause whatsoever, they go for him or her with cannibalistic ferocity. . . . [But] vegetables and cereals are their mainstay.

As horrified homesteaders testified, the insects could strip away vegetation in a matter of hours. The length of their stay in an area depended on the seasons. Early in the summer season the bugs stayed only a few days, but as the first swarm left and new ones moved in, each successive stay proved longer than the last.

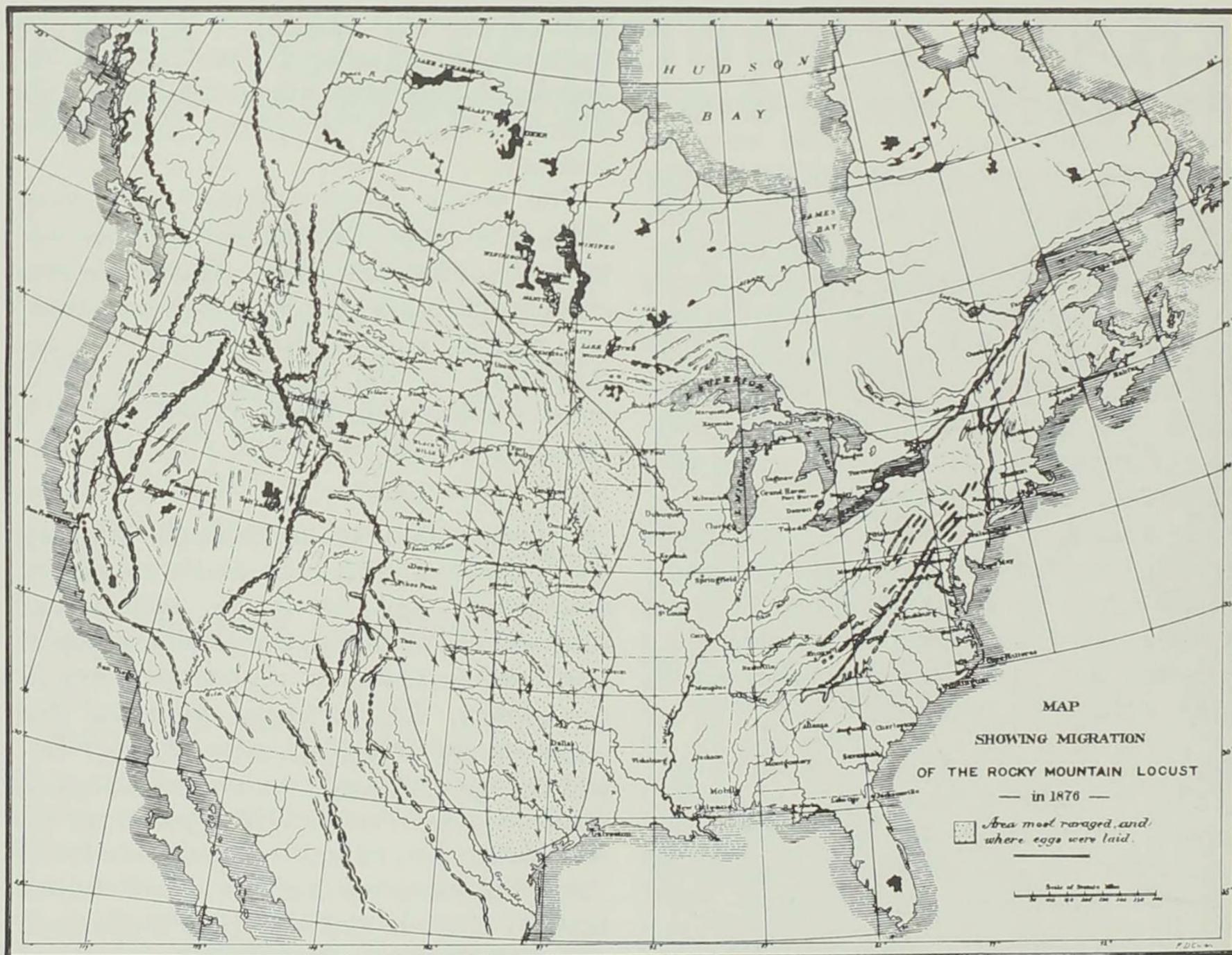
Autumn egg-laying followed the summer-long feast. Egg pods containing twenty-five to fifty eggs were deposited about an inch below

the surface of the soil in such numbers that the black topsoil assumed a mottled gray appearance. The following spring, as the soil warmed, millions of young grasshoppers hatched.

The young insects inflicted even more damage to crops than did mature grasshoppers. Upon hatching, their destruction proceeded systematically. The young matured and molted, gaining their wings. They ate everything in one vicinity, staying six or eight weeks; then they moved on in a destructive mass.

During the years immediately following the Civil War, enthusiastic promoters, speculators, and newspaper editors had worked hard to change the popular image of northwest Iowa as part of some great American desert. Entrepreneurs promoted the region as the future "Garden of the West" and encouraged people to take advantage of the Homestead Act and the expanding railroad network to settle in northwestern Iowa. Early homesteaders had weathered Indian hostility and adapted bravely to prairie conditions, but scarcity of fuel and building supplies, a lack of transportation facilities, and other circumstances slowed the region's growth.

In 1870 northwest Iowa was still only sparsely settled. To stimulate development, legislators in Des Moines created a Board of Immigration. Such organized promotions had earlier attracted settlers to Nebraska, Minnesota, and Kansas, and supporters of the Board hoped to divert to the northwestern counties at least a portion of the flow passing westward through Iowa. The Board designed a promotional pamphlet to publicize the agricultural resources of Iowa, and it distributed twenty thousand copies throughout the Middle Atlantic and New England states, and in Europe as well. Board representatives toured the East, lecturing on Iowa



and extolling its virtues. Their publicity elicited tangible results almost immediately, as reported by the *Cherokee Times* in 1871: "There are ten counties in the northwestern corner of Iowa whose gain from immigration alone this season will average not less than 500 inhabitants each, making an aggregate of 5,000 inhabitants." And, as the Iowa State Agricultural Society reported, "Only a few thousand acres remain free of a claim of some sort; and it is predicted that before the close of 1872 the free lands of Iowa will be a thing of the past."

The people who settled northwestern Iowa typically arrived with little more than a few personal possessions, work animals, and enough seed to get them through one

season. Such homesteaders needed good results from their initial planting if they were to survive on the prairie frontier. At first, nature obliged. The autumn harvest of 1872 got first-year families through the winter and offered encouraging prospects for the following year. Looking forward to bountiful harvests, expanded railroad service, and new markets in the future, these homesteaders invested heavily in agricultural implements. True, they overextended their financial resources, but most assumed that their 1873 crops would pay for all the implements and more. Merchants readily extended them credit, for they too expected bumper crops in the years ahead.

Falling upon a promising field (their instinct seemed to direct them unerringly toward the cultivated places) it was but the work of a few hours to reduce it to a barren area of leafless stalks. Insignificant individually but mighty collectively, it is said these contemptible insects could "sweep clean a field quicker than would a whole herd of hungry steers."

Catastrophe struck in 1873. Drought conditions, reversing a five-year period of good growing weather in Dakota, probably triggered the grasshopper migration. Locust raids had been recorded in Iowa as early as 1833 and as recently as 1872, but serious damage had been rare, as in 1864 and 1865, when crops in the Sioux City area suffered extensive damage. Generally, previous insect invasions had come too late in the season to harm crops. In the spring, the young had hatched and migrated immediately, and because so little land had been settled or cultivated in these early years, the insects did not create a major problem.

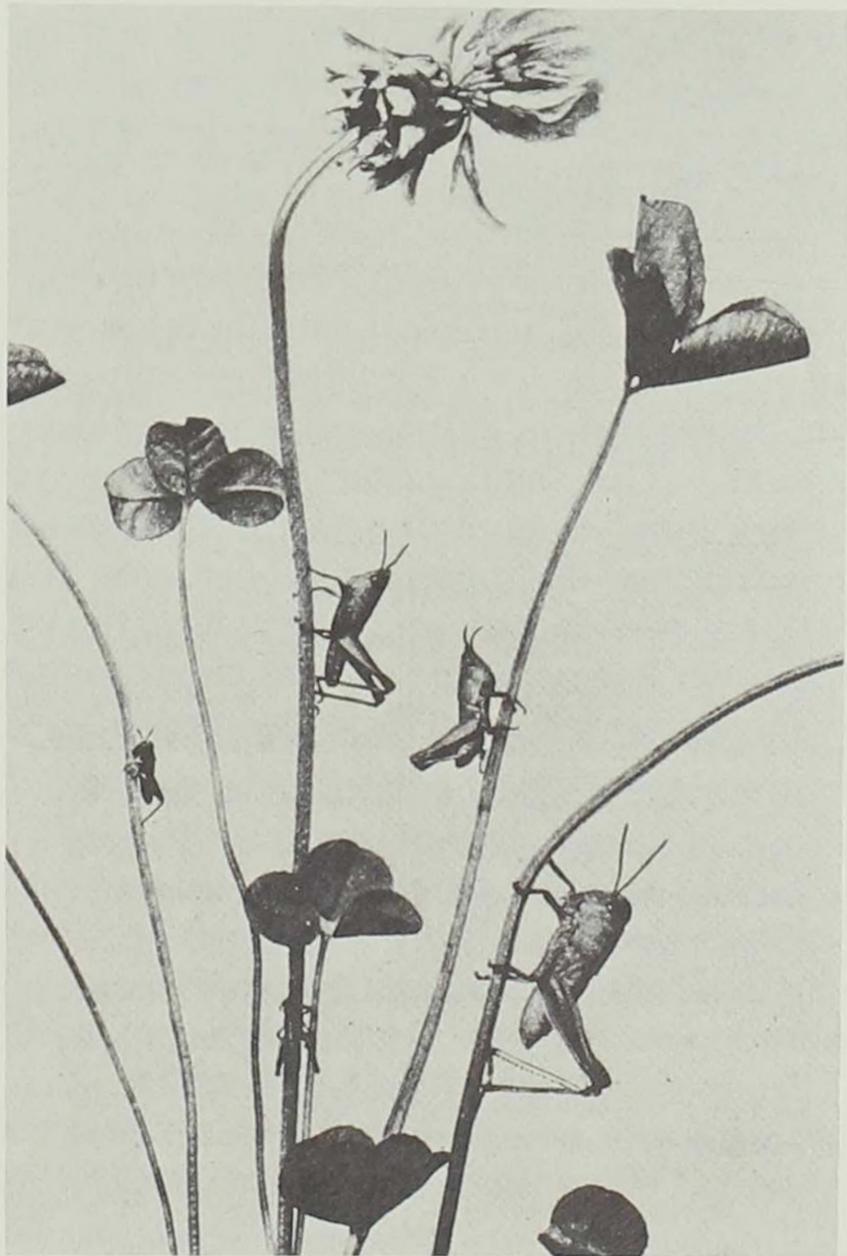
But in 1873 grasshoppers arrived in northwestern Iowa in the first week of June. They hit hardest in the counties settled most recently — Lyon, Osceola, O'Brien, and Sioux. Other counties suffering some crop damage included Dickinson, Emmet, Kosuth, Palo Alto, Clay, Plymouth, Cherokee, Buena Vista, Pocahontas, Humboldt, Webster, Sac, Calhoun, Ida, and Woodbury. From early June through the summer the grasshoppers ravaged the corn and wheat fields along their migration route.

Newspapers played down news of crop destruction, denying the damage or blaming it on other circumstances, such as the weather. Settlers were reluctant to report their predicament or to appeal for help beyond local boundaries, for they had always taken care of themselves and each other. Yet here they had a problem too big to handle themselves and no one knew quite what to do. Initially,

at least, the grasshopper invasion frightened most people into confusion and silence.

This silence was reinforced by the land promoters' (and newspaper editors') fear that much-needed immigration would be halted if the damage were made known to people outside the area. In mid-June the *Sioux City Daily Journal* reported:

The prospects in the Northwest at present are favorable for an abundant wheat crop. From all directions we hear that small grain, and wheat is generally particularized, never looked better at this season of the year than it does at the present time. The fact that farmers generally anticipate a large crop is shown by their disposition to dispose of the remaining portion of their old crop.



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At the same time, Buena Vista County's Storm Lake *Pilot* stated that the wheat crop there looked more promising than average. A few weeks later, the *Daily Journal* denied rumors of serious crop damage by insects and remained optimistic about farm production in the northwestern counties. But by the end of July the newspaper finally began to acknowledge the grasshopper ravages in the corn, oat and potato crops. Even so, several months passed before settlers appealed for relief and before the full extent of the damage was made public. The counties hardest hit were still so newly settled that they desperately needed more immigration, local officials felt, and this provided the most influential argument against appealing for aid outside of the local area. News of widespread destitution in the northwestern counties, they argued, would surely doom immigration. Furthermore, for the settlers, the idea that they could not take care of their own seemed alien to their concept of pioneer living.

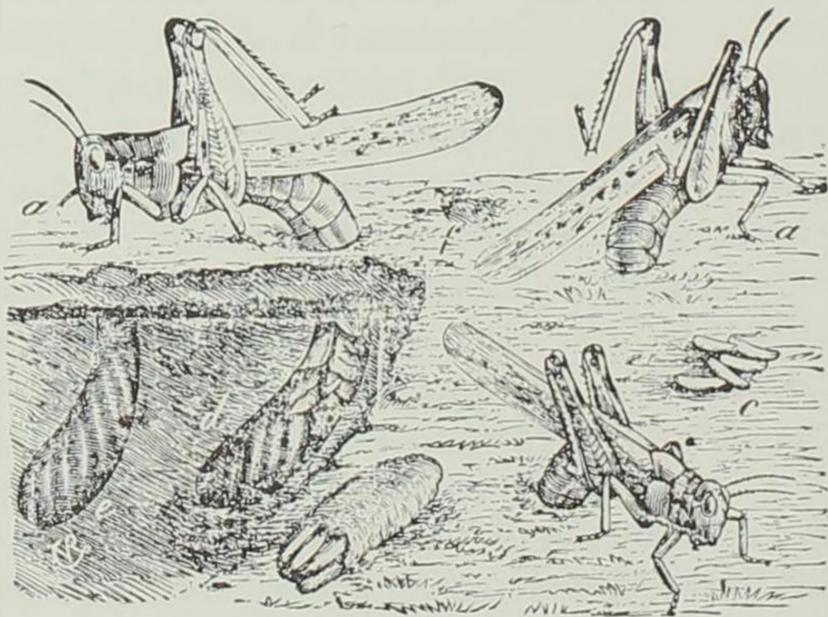
In late October 1873, the Sioux Association of Congregational Churches sent an appeal to the Iowa General Assembly urging the legislature to vote aid to the destitute settlers. The Association's admission of almost total crop failure in northwestern Iowa drove an important wedge into the farmers' stoic facade, and it may have forced the *Daily Journal's* editor to comment on the ambivalence felt by afflicted residents:

It has been reported to us from time to time since harvest that there was likely to be suffering this winter in some of our northwestern counties . . . local newspapers of these counties for some reason have not referred to the unfortunate condition of things said to exist. It is, perhaps, a sensitive matter with them and the citizens and therefore it may be they refrain from 'making talk' for fear the real state of the case will be

misunderstood and the future prospects of the county injured.

The *Daily Journal* exalted the industriousness of the northwestern Iowans. They had proved themselves to be hard workers, the editor declared, and they should not suffer for the necessities of life in order to serve the false pride of a county. He reminded readers that the suffering resulted from circumstances entirely beyond the control of the settlers, and he urged prompt and immediate action by county groups so that the extent of suffering might be known. Finally, the editor observed that if a similar disaster had befallen older counties in Iowa there would be no cause for concern, as the residents' reserve resources would be sufficient to carry them through the disaster. In northwest Iowa, however, settlers had no reserves; they had invested all their resources in their 1873 crops. Outside help might be necessary.

Still, some local newspapers expressed only begrudging acknowledgment of the problem. The Storm Lake *Pilot*, for example, advised farmers to "take care of your own" and demanded to know just who were the few suffering families in their area. The *Clay County News* of Spencer said that any aid should come solely from individual counties, not from the State.



Grasshoppers laying eggs (SHSI)

In November, General Nathaniel B. Baker, Adjutant General for the State of Iowa, offered to deliver to the afflicted homesteaders all contributions of money, clothing, blankets, fuel, staple goods, or anything else provided by private or public donors. He made arrangements with two shipping companies for free shipment of relief supplies to the needy and secured agreements from the railroads to carry coal and other supplies free of charge to the sufferers — for a short time, at least. Baker's individual efforts represented the main relief effort in the state until the meeting of the State Legislature in 1874. Meanwhile, settlers who could afford to leave for the winter did so, looking for work in towns to see them through the effects of the crop failure.

Publically, Governor Cyrus Clay Carpenter continued to ignore the destitution in the northwestern counties. His silence confused possible contributors in eastern Iowa and beyond Iowa's borders, who did not know how to gauge the veracity of the horror stories they were hearing. A letter to Governor Carpenter from R. M. A. Hawk, the clerk of the county court at Mt. Carroll, Illinois, described their hesitancy:

There is a person in this county . . . soliciting aid for northwestern sufferers and exhibiting a letter from your Excellency — we would be very glad to assist any of our suffering fellows but are fearful that this may be a put up job by one or more parties who have become very philanthropic for a purpose — We have seen no proclamation from your Excellency; and knowing the jealous care [with] which you watch over and care for the people of Iowa we do not feel sure that all is right.

Eastern Iowa had been plagued by locusts in mid-1871, but losses there had not been extensive. Without an official statement on the situation in the northwestern part of the



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state, residents wondered how seriously they should take stories of destitution in the winter of 1873-1874.

The governor finally addressed the problem in his biennial message of January 1874. After receiving General Baker's account of his December visit to northwestern Iowa, Carpenter appointed a five-person committee to investigate conditions further and to devise, if necessary, some method of providing state aid. In its report, the committee attested to the character of the people requesting aid, describing them as "men not likely to depend upon charity . . . when by any means they could work out their own deliverance." Asserting that "the facts . . . demonstrate with the utmost clarity the total inability of the local authorities to meet the demands of the existing situation," the committee recom-

mended an appropriation of \$100,000 for loans to farmers to purchase seed for spring crops in 1874 and an additional \$5,000 appropriation to defray the expenses involved in transporting and distributing the seed. Further, the committee called for a \$15,000 appropriation to purchase grain for the homesteaders' teams. The committee took pains to distinguish such aid from charity:

The recommendations are made not simply as a matter of humanity, not simply as a matter of duty to a suffering people; but as a matter of justice to all men who are engaged in the work of rescuing one of the fairest portions of Iowa from the wilderness — as a matter of profit to the State at large.

Although the legislature pared down the size of the appropriations request by slightly more than fifty percent, a \$50,000 donation to the destitute settlers furnished seed grain and vegetables to more than 1,700 families in the northwestern counties. Added to this were the contributions gathered by General Baker and by the Grange, including four hundred tons of coal, fourteen thousand pounds of pork, and one hundred twenty-five tons of grain.

The United States Congress also acted in 1874 to ease the predicament for homesteaders confronted by agricultural disaster. In July, Congress provided that settlers who were still affected by the 1873 losses and who were again faced with grasshopper raids in 1874 could leave their land for up to one year's time without losing it by default.

As if by instinct, their first movements were toward the fields where tender shoots of grain were making their modest appearance. Sometimes the first intimation a farmer would have of what was going on would be from noticing along one side of his grain field a narrow strip where the grain was missing. At first, perhaps he would attribute it to a balk in sowing, but each day it grew wider



A swarm of hungry grasshoppers devours a field (courtesy Iowa State University Press)

and a closer examination would reveal the presence of young grasshoppers.

In May 1874, the grasshopper eggs laid in the previous fall began to hatch. The same counties that had been ravaged the year before were struck again. The young reached flying age in mid-June and left, but new swarms arrived from the north in July and again in August. Dickinson, Emmet, Kossuth, and Palo Alto counties suffered extensive damage as the maturing insects stripped the countryside of vegetation.

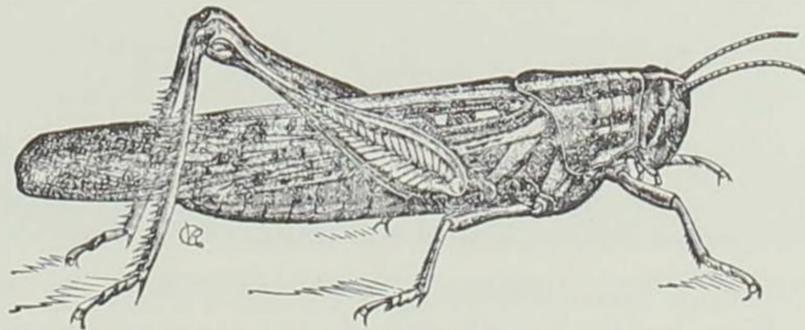
In August 1874, Governor Carpenter sent General Baker and Thomas Sargent on a fact-finding trip to the northwest. Local relief committees were scrambling to keep up with requests for relief, but the demand was too great for their limited resources; outside help was the only answer. Baker and Sargent reorganized the county relief efforts, relying on old associates within the local or-

ganizations. Baker urged distribution of food, clothing, fuel, and seed grain, rather than cash grants; he feared that direct distribution of cash left too much discretion in the hands of individual homesteaders, who might spend the money to move out of the area. Eventually — later in 1874 and in 1875 — solicitors would travel to other parts of Iowa and beyond the state's borders to bolster relief efforts. General Baker recommended to the governor reliable individuals to do this work, and this helped ease homesteaders' fears that the solicitors would be people out for profit alone. Of course, the Iowa governor's endorsement of the soliciting agents did not guarantee them a welcome reception. As Dr. Henry C. McCoy, representing Kossuth County, discovered on a visit to Milwaukee in the spring of 1875, people took a rather dim view of solicitors from Iowa. "They are full of the idea," he reported, "that Iowa should take care of these few counties." Moreover, competition was stiff among the various Iowa county solicitors, and even stiffer with solicitors from other afflicted states who were working in eastern Iowa at the same time. Their territories often overlapped, and the destitute Iowa counties suffered because of Iowa's reputation as a fairly wealthy state.

Settlers in northwestern Iowa also received direct aid from the federal government in 1874. Congress appropriated \$30,000 to provide seed grain to the grasshopper-ravaged areas of the country, although most of this aid went to Nebraska, Kansas, Dakota, and Minnesota. In addition, Congress appropriated \$150,000 to pay the expenses of a general distribution of clothing by the Army "to any and all destitute persons living on the western frontier, who have been rendered so destitute and helpless by ravages of grasshoppers during the summer just past."

By May 1875, Iowans had contributed over one million dollars to the relief of the grasshopper sufferers. In his biennial message of January 1876, Governor Carpenter stated his belief that five thousand persons had been influenced to remain in northwestern Iowa by relief contributions. Nevertheless, the reputation of the region had suffered badly, and a massive publicity campaign was mounted to rehabilitate the image of northwestern Iowa. The editor of the *Spirit Lake Beacon* chafed at an Ohio newspaper's characterization of the countryside as "a vast, treeless prairie unfit for man to inhabit and subject every year to devastation by grasshopper." Between 1872 and 1875 the population of the nineteen northwestern counties had remained static. In a few counties, depopulation had occurred. Land values, which had soared between 1871 and 1873, declined markedly between 1873 and 1875. Northwestern Iowans distracted attention away from these figures by publicizing the economic potential of the area and by challenging doubters and disbelievers to come and see for themselves.

The 1875 crop season provided reassurance. The grasshoppers struck the Midwest again, but they clustered in Kansas and Missouri. Insects invading Iowa affected only the southwestern part of the state, an area of older settlements better able to weather their ravages than the counties of the northwest had been in recent years. By this time, too, scientists had begun to suggest ways to fight the grasshoppers and to offer ideas for pro-



ductive use of the insect as fertilizer and food. Missouri State Entomologist Charles V. Riley, in particular, gave farmers new weapons to use against the insects; his writings provided settlers with information needed to respond effectively to future invasions. Riley's efforts prompted an increased willingness on the part of the independent settlers of the prairie to turn to science to help rid the region of the grasshopper scourge.

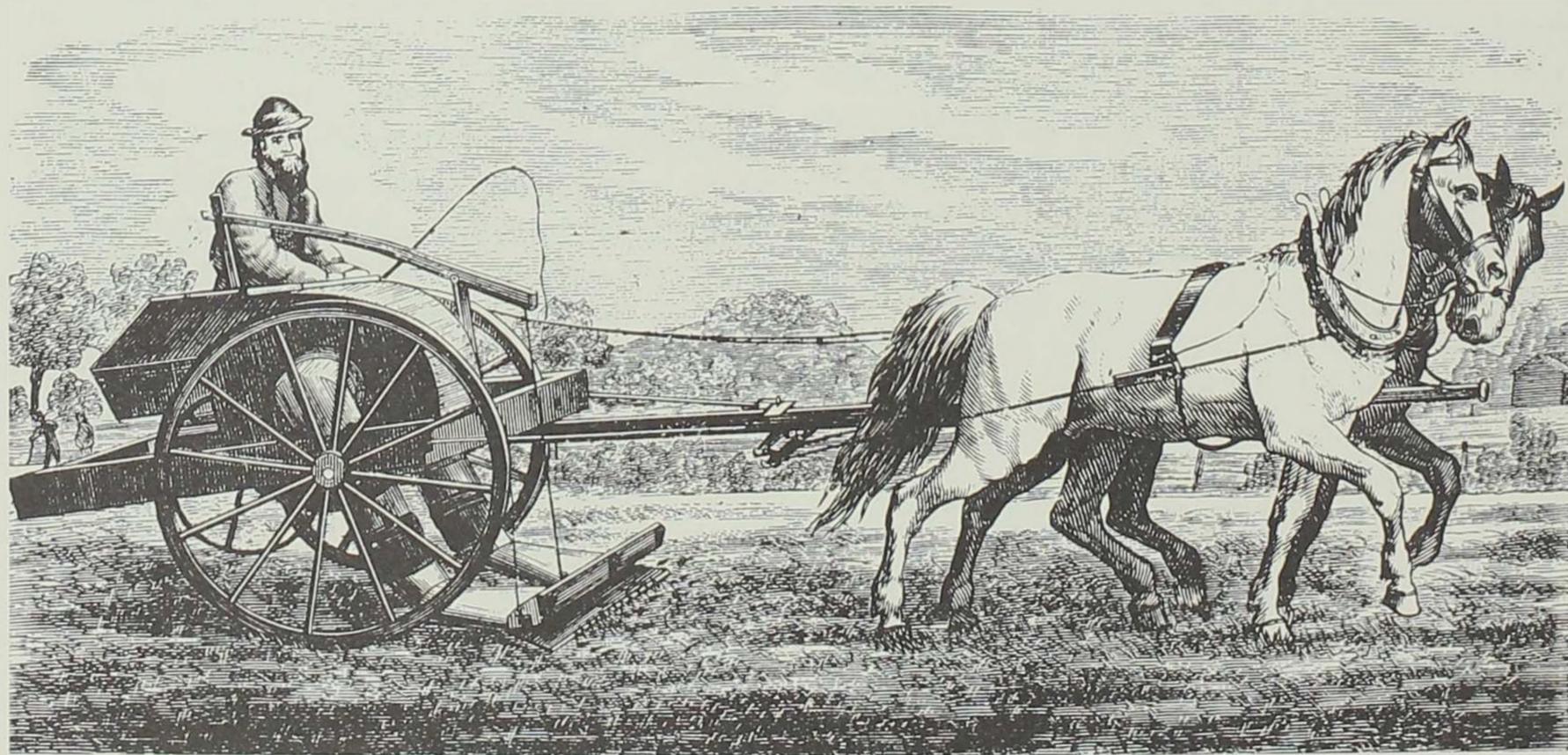
Armed with this new knowledge, when another onslaught of insects blanketed the western half of Iowa in August 1876, settlers demanded more than emergency, short-term relief. They wanted state officials to assure an end to the grasshopper problem. Under considerable public pressure, the new governor, Samuel Kirkwood, joined a conference of midwestern governors and scientists called to explore the problem. Held in Omaha in October 1876, the conference drew governors from Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Dakota, Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho. The governors and scientists hoped to design a comprehensive

plan for fighting the grasshopper and appealed to the federal government to give its immediate attention to the problem:

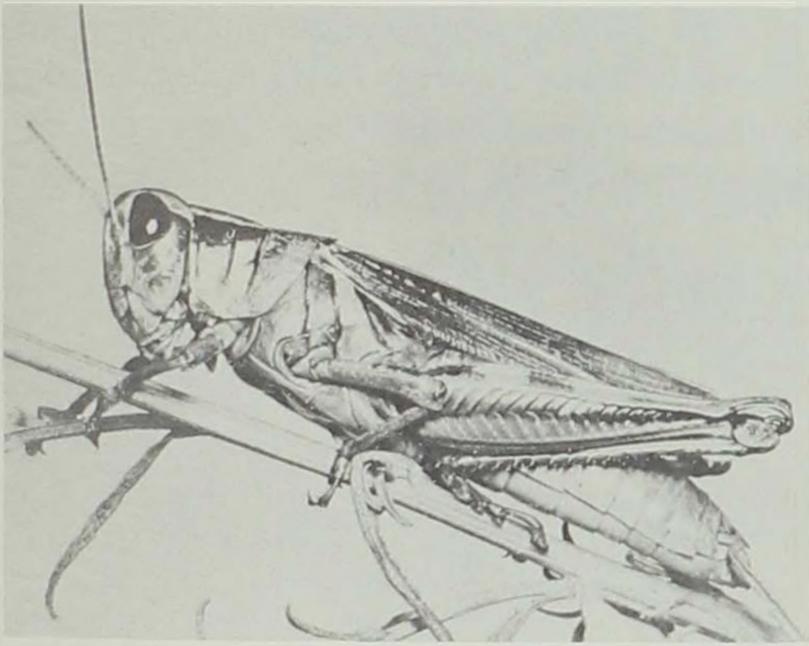
Considering the sudden and fitful movements of the locusts, the limitless field of their operations and the mysterious and predatory nature of their inroads, they constitute a formidable enemy with which no State or community can expect to cope successfully. . . .

If it be within the legitimate province of the federal government to improve our rivers and harbors in order to facilitate the movement of crops, surely the rescue of those crops from destruction is no less an object of its rightful care.

In a memorial to Congress and a letter to President Ulysses S. Grant, the governors asked that an entomological commission be appointed to examine the life cycle and habits of the grasshoppers and investigate ways to protect against damage by them. The delegates also had ten thousand copies of the proceedings of the conference printed, and they distributed them as widely as possible to the



One of dozens of 'hopper catchers' designed during the invasions of the 1870s. Few such inventions reached the production stage. (SHSI)



©Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers/Harry F. Brevoort photo

farmers of the affected states and territories.

Scientific experts, including Charles V. Riley, devised plans to destroy the grasshoppers in all stages of their annual development. They recommended protection for animals, especially birds, that acted as natural agents against the grasshoppers. They also suggested several ways to destroy the eggs, including plowing the ground in autumn to bury the eggs deeply, irrigating the ground in order to rot the eggs, and even collecting the eggs for a bounty payment. Unfledged locusts were to be burned, trapped, or crushed into the earth. The scientists urged legislation at the state level to force all able-bodied men to spend time in the fall destroying the eggs or time in the spring collecting them. They also recommended education through the state Grange organizations and systematic application of suggested methods of extermination throughout the multi-state region. Finally, Riley and others stressed the importance of crop diversification so that the destruction of any single crop would not ruin the farmer.

Persons who are not conversant with this invasion can hardly realize with what anxiety the people scanned the heavens, for several years after, at each return of the season when they had put in an appearance on the occa-

sion of their previous visit. The great body of the invaders were generally preceded a day or two by scattering grasshoppers. On a clear day, by looking far away towards the sun, you would see every now and then a white-winged forerunner of the swarm which was to follow. Years after they had gone there was a lurking fear that they would return. And if there were any indications of their appearance, especially when during two or three days the prevailing winds had been from the southwest, people would be seen on a clear day standing with their hands above their eyes to protect them from the vertical rays of the sun, peering into the heavens, almost trembling lest they should discover the forerunners of the white-winged messengers of destruction.

Ironically, perhaps, the major grasshopper invasions had already passed by the time the governors' conference met in Omaha in 1876. Although the insects returned the following year, they did not cause widespread destruction. A cold, wet season in late 1877 and early 1878 caused a large percentage of the grasshoppers' eggs to rot, and many of the insects that survived the weather ultimately succumbed to parasitic diseases that spread through the swarms in the late 1870s. Such natural causes eliminated much of the nuisance before scientists and public officials had time to develop preventive techniques.

Nevertheless, as a consequence of the grasshopper invasions, science gained a foothold among farmers concerned that their crops might be consumed again by the ravenous swarms. This new respect for science boosted public support for numerous studies of grasshoppers and other pests, studies that produced a body of useful information for farmers faced with such problems in the future. On the national level, the uproar surrounding the insect invasions led to the creation of the

Entomological Commission of the United States Department of the Interior. In addition, the crisis led to important changes in agricultural practices in northwestern Iowa, where stockraising and dairy farming replaced the grain-growing cycle in many parts of the region. Farmers also began to rely more heavily on corn than on other grains, for they could vary its planting time according to the presence or absence of the grasshopper eggs.

Finally, the grasshopper invasions taught the settlers of northwestern Iowa an important lesson about the limits of self-help on the prairie frontier. The stigma attached to appeals for relief made their struggle through the winters of 1873 and after more difficult than it might have been. Eventually, boosterism and local pride gave way to realism as settlers saw that individual and community action might not be enough to deal with a calamity whose effects were statewide or regional. If nothing

else, the grasshopper experience of the 1870s proved to many pioneer farmers that in some cases government assistance offered the only hope for economic survival. □

Note on Sources

Sources consulted for this article include: Charles V. Riley, *The Locust Plague in the United States* (Chicago, 1877); U.S. Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, *First Annual Report of the United States Entomological Commission* (Washington, 1878); John E. Briggs, "The Grasshopper Plagues in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 13 (July 1915): 349-391; Cyrus Clay Carpenter, "The Grasshopper Invasion," *Annals of Iowa*, 3rd series, 4 (July 1900): 437-447; Iowa State College Staff, *A Century of Farming In Iowa* (Ames, 1946); Josephine Barry Donovan, "Grasshopper Times," *The Palimpsest*, 4 (June 1923): 193-202; John T. Schlebecker, "Grasshoppers in American Agricultural History," *Agricultural History*, 27 (July 1957): 85-93.

A fully annotated version of this article is on file at the State Historical Society in Iowa City. The editor wishes to thank William Maddix for his help with preliminary research on the grasshopper invasions and Maria Schlatter for attending to pre-publication details.

Italicized accounts of the grasshopper invasions appearing throughout the text of this article are taken from first-hand reports by contemporary observers.

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