The Palimpsest

VOLUME 56 NUMBER 2 MARCH / APRIL 1975

Sheet Music Pictorial

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VOLUME 56 NUMBER 2 MARCH / APRIL 1975

Peter T. Harstad, Director

L. Edward Purcell, Editor

CONTENTS

Cover: *The beautiful cover of "Girl of Mine," a song published in 1917 by the A. J. Stasny Co. of New York, words and music by Harold Freeman. For pictures and story see p. 46.*

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 SALUBRIA STORY

by Margaret Atherton Bonney

In the beautiful Des Moines River Valley in the year 1839, Abner Kneeland, a free-thinking eastern intellectual, founded a colony of settlers devoted to the principle of freedom to not believe. The colony, although ultimately unsuccessful, was one of the earliest religious experiments in Iowa. Known in nineteenth century Iowa as "infidels," Kneeland and his fellow colonists came to the prairies of the new Territory to find freedom to express their unorthodox religious philosophy. The cause of their failure was not local religious intolerance, but their own inability to understand the economic and political necessities of frontier life.

Well-known in the East both in intellectual circles and by the public, Kneeland had been born in Vermont and educated at a common school. As an adult, he was fiercely devoted to self-education, and taught himself Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and French. He became proficient enough to translate several works from these languages. In 1827, he published a small book which set forth a new system of spelling. Possessed of a restless and inquiring mind, he came to question many of the dogmas of the Protestant Christian faith. Like many of his contemporaries, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Kneeland moved through a series of religious experiences, becoming increasingly more alienated from orthodox beliefs.

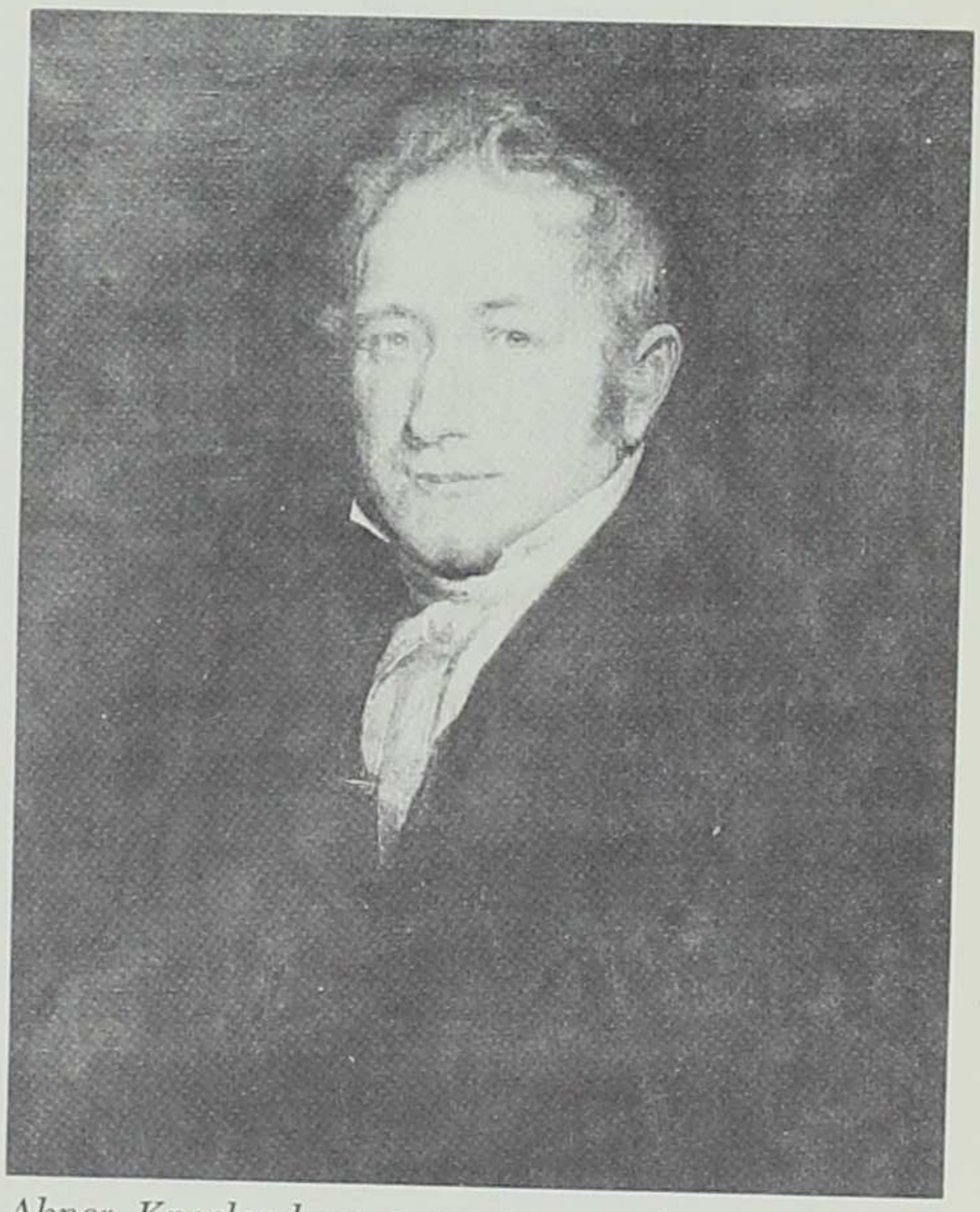
He began as a Baptist convert but gravitated toward the Universalists, and at age 31 he left his trade of carpentry to become a Universalist minister. He served congregations in New York and Philadelphia despite periods of internal doubt and withdrawal. He published his theological views widely in Universalist newspapers and journals, frequently acting as editor for these publications. By 1829, his doubts had become too great to ignore, and he left the ministry and moved to Boston. There he founded a group of "free-thinkers" called the First Society of Free Enquirers and became publisher of a weekly newspaper, the *Investigator*. Kneeland was not unusual in his beliefs; Massachusetts was a hot-bed of so-called free religion during these years. Many other local philosophical and religious groups decried the

One of the delightful animal illustrations from Abner Kneeland's A Key to the New System of Orthography (1827).

traditional beliefs of Christianity. Kneeland, however, was more outspoken than most in his beliefs and was certainly less cautious about offending those in power.

In 1834, Kneeland was arrested and placed on trial for blasphemy. A series of articles he published in the *Investigator*, specifically denying belief in the traditional Christian God, prompted the local Boston authorities to bring charges against him. The ensuing trials stretched over four years, and he was eventually convicted and served a 60-day jail sentence. Kneeland, in fact, disclaimed that he was an atheist; he declared himself instead a pantheist. Whatever the points of theology involved, his case gained publicity as an issue of free speech.

The nation-wide protest which emerged claimed Kneeland had been deprived of his constitutional rights. Prominent citizens of Boston including William Ellery Channing, George Ripley, A. Bronson Alcott, W. L. Garrison, and Ralph Waldo Emerson signed a petition asking his release. Even as far west as Iowa editorial opinion ran in favor of Kneeland. The editor of the Dubuque *Iowa News* was incensed at the threat to the freedom of the press and wrote in his July 14, 1838 issue: "Abner Kneeland editor of the Boston *Investigator* on the anniversary of the battle of Bunker Hill, was lodged in jail, there doomed to sixty days confinement, for the exercise of that privilege to gain which the heroes of the revolution shed their blood, sixty-three years before, on the hill



Abner Kneeland as a young man (courtesy of the Division of Historical Museum and Archives).

in plain view from the window of his prison cell."

During his trial and imprisonment Kneeland decided that he could freely express his beliefs only in a more tolerant or more isolated environment. He devised a plan of migration to the West, following the example, perhaps, of his friends Robert Owen and Frances Wright who earlier had founded the social experiment colonies at New Harmony and Nashaba. Kneeland's new colony, called Salubria, was to be co-operative and based on the precepts of free thought.

Kneeland had carefully worked out a plan while in prison. He wrote in his day-

book that the colony was to be located,

> Wherever a plat can be found untaken up that will answer the purpose. [There were to be] nine sections, half prairie and half timber, to be leased to seventy-two proprietors on condition that each of them would board four scholars, two of them shall attend school alternately i.e. two at home and two at school shifting every other day or week as should be thought best. The proprietors must also agree to bind their heirs, successors or assigns to fulfill and comply with the same. The land was to be divided into twenty-eight lots of ten acres each for use of mechanics, traders, etc., except one of these which was to be for the Academy and the principal teacher; six lots of twenty acres each were to be allotted to professional men, fourteen lots of forty acres each to gentlemen farmers and twenty-four lots of eighty acres each exclusively for farmers.

Selecting the new Territory of Iowa as the site of Salubria, Abner dispatched an agent to choose land, and Silas Smith, a friend of Kneeland, made the long journey to assure that the land remained unclaimed until the arrival of the colonists. The *Investigator* carried an advertisement on May 11, 1838 which described the new Salubria Village in glowing terms and requested that purchasers be actual settlers rather than absentee landlords or speculators. Another friend, Tyler Parsons, drew up a town plat which was lithographed in Boston (unfortunately, all copies of this plat have disappeared).

In 1839, at age 60, with six grown children, a fourth wife, and a two-year old daughter, Kneeland transported himself and later his household to Iowa, then a frontier region. He responded enthusiastically to the Des Moines River Valley where Salubria was to take shape. In a letter published in the *Investigator* he wrote of, "this wonderful country which is destined to outvie everything which can be imagined in the east." As usual with recent emigrants, especially those who wished to attract fresh money, his letters back East rang with promotional fervor.

Unfortunately, Kneeland encountered

Note on Sources

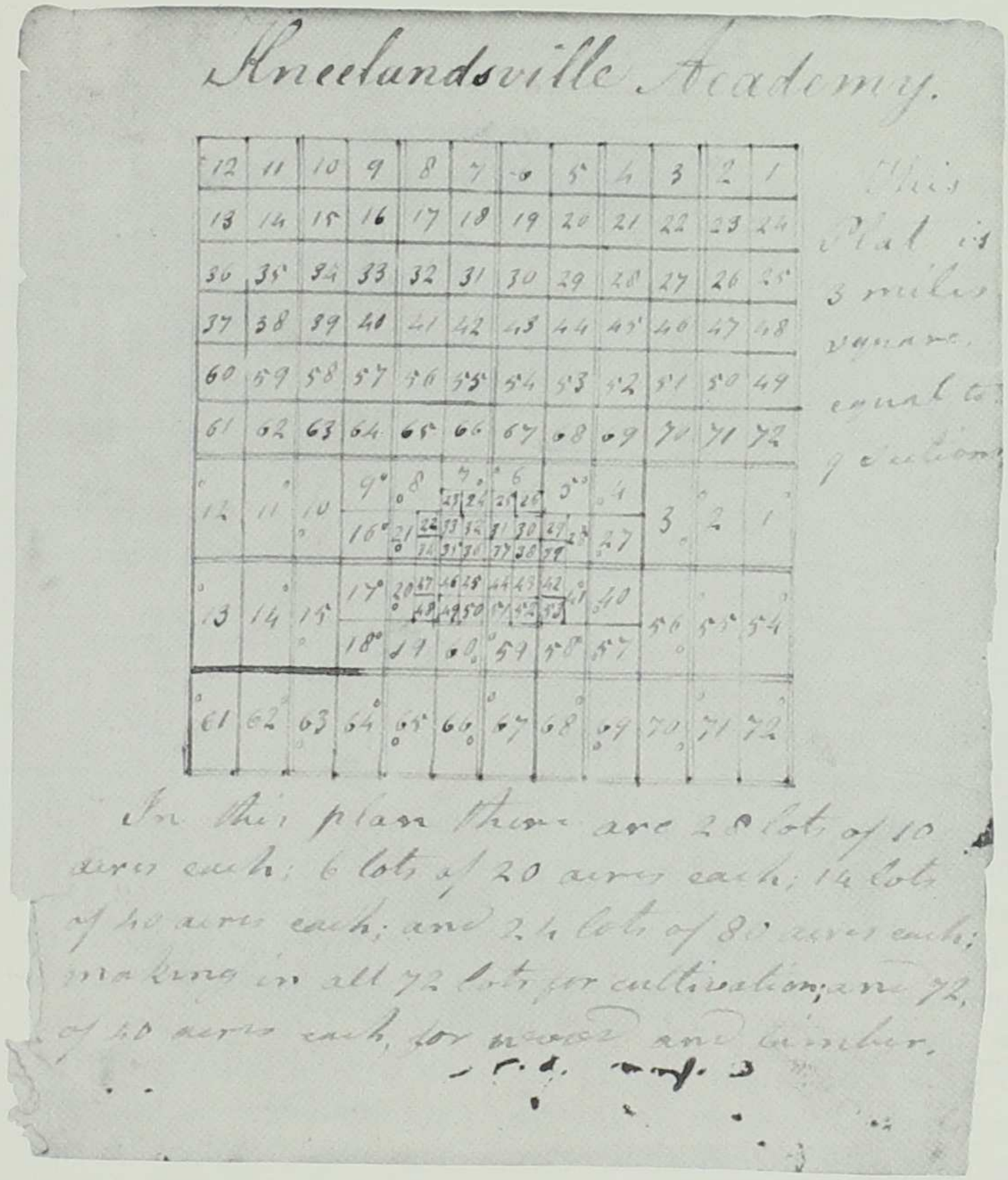
Biographical sources for Abner Kneeland include: Stillman F. Kneeland, *Seven Centuries in the Kneeland Family* (New York, 1897), 215-16, 224; Mary P. Whitcomb, "Abner Kneeland," *Annals of Iowa* (third series), 6, 5 (April 1904), 340-63; and Ruth Augusta Gallaher, "Abner Kneeland—Pantheist," *The Palimpsest,* 10, 7 (July 1939), 209-225.

Historical background is based on standard Iowa and Van Buren County histories, and John B. Newhall, *Sketches of Iowa or the Emigrant's Guide* (New York, 1841).

Contemporary news comment was taken from *The Boston Investigator,* "Letters from Salubria" written by Abner Kneeland June 19, 1839-March 25, 1840; *Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot* (Burlington, Iowa) October 15, 1840; and *The Iowa City Standard,* Iowa City, Iowa) July 16, 1842. Information concerning members of the colony appeared in *The Keosauqua Republican Eightieth Anniversary Edition, 1855-1935,* August 15, 1935, and in Voltaire Paine Twombley's address on Abner Kneeland in the *State Line Democrat* (Keosauqua, Iowa) August 17, 1903.

The author is grateful for the use of a private collection of letters, newsclippings, memoirs, and books in the possession of a descendant of Mr. Kneeland, Mrs. Robert Rohdy of Farmington, Iowa. This collection provided both biographical and historical information concerning the Salubria settlement. Other family members provided insight into the character of Mr. Kneeland. The author is grateful also to Shirley Seip of the Van Buren County Recorder's Office who was especially helpful in locating the land records needed to determine the extent and location of the Salubria settlement.

Other articles including useful information are: Ruth Augusta Gallaher, "This Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics,* 39, 1 (January 1941), 3-51; Rev. James L. Hall, "Dr. William Salter," *Annals of Iowa,* 9, 8 (January 1911), 561-644; Charles Arthur Hawley, "Asa Turner and the Welsh," *The Palimpsest,* 18, 2 (January 1937), 10-19; Walter Houf (ed.), "American Home Missionary Society Letters from Iowa," *Annals of Iowa,* 37, 1 (Summer 1963), 95-120; "Notable Deaths, Voltaire P. Twombley," *Annals of Iowa,* 12, 6 (October 1920), 474; Professor Leonard F. Parker, "The Founders of Iowa College," *Iowa Historical Record,* 14, 4 (October 1898), 360-75; and William Randall Waterman, "Frances Wright," *Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law,* 115 (New York: Columbia University, 1924).



Kneeland's plat for his colony as he drew it in his daybook. The plan was never realized. (courtesy of Mrs. Ralph O. Mott, Ft. Smith, Arkansas)

difficulty from the beginning. Land was much scarcer than he had imagined. The area where he wished to establish his colony was on the Des Moines River, above the Half Breed Tract. Made available for settlement under the Black Hawk Purchase of 1832, it had filled rapidly thereafter with settlers. By the time Kneeland arrived, settlement and local government were well under way. Van Buren County had been established in 1836, and by 1838 there were already 3174 people in the area.

The crowded conditions and lack of "untaken up" land caused Kneeland to alter his plan for Salubria. Instead of a town he decided to promote a voluntary settlement of like-minded religious liberals, to be attracted to his enterprise by ads in the *Investigator*. Kneeland himself bought

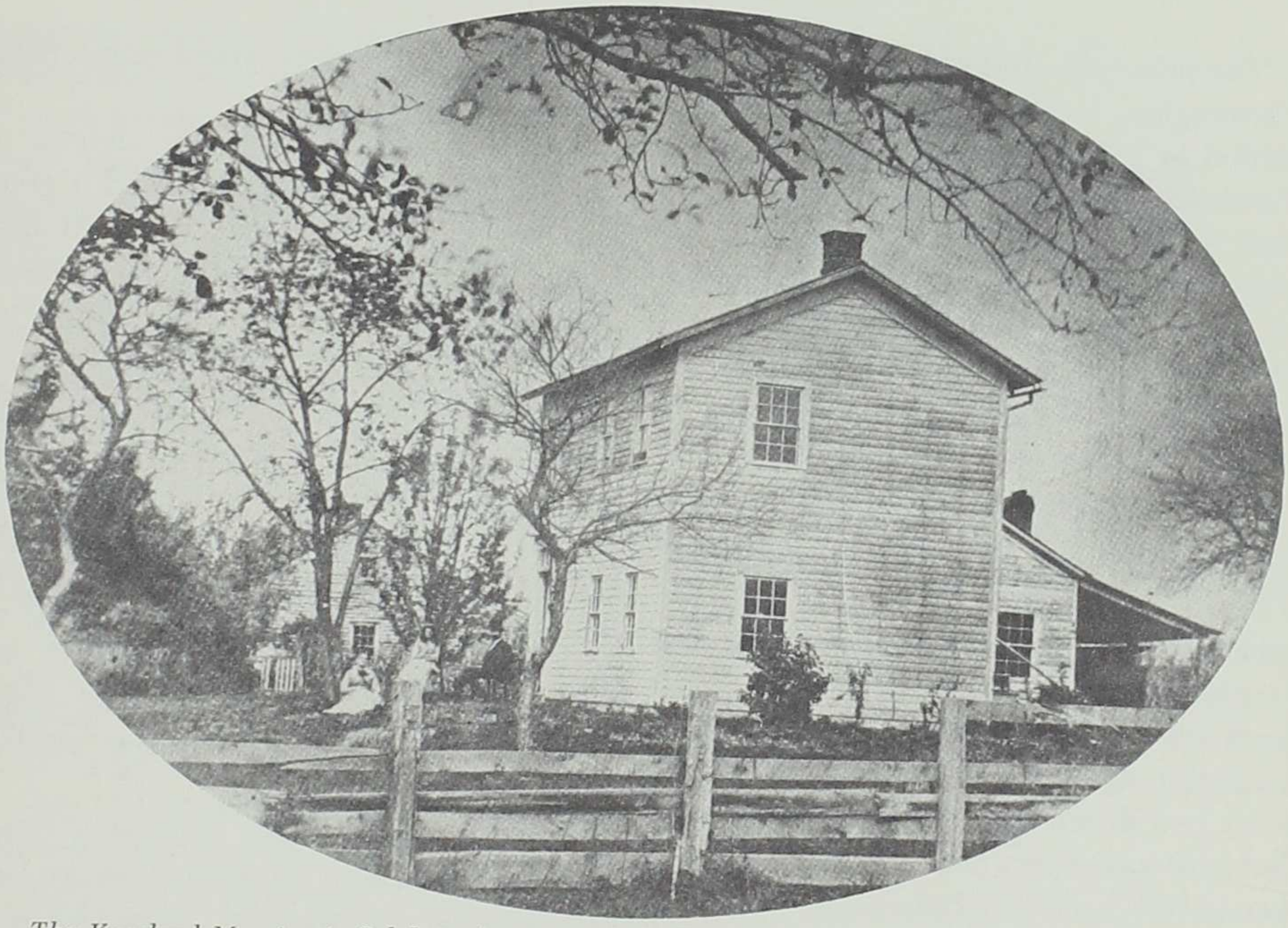
230 acres, and purchases by others brought the total to 530 acres available for colonization. Kneeland set aside 80 acres for his own use; the rest would be sold as families emigrated to the colony. Within a few months, nine or ten families were settled in Salubria, "united in desire to free enquiry."

Unfortunately, vision and philosophic fervor were not enough to assure the establishment of a co-operative colony on the frontier. Economic hard times frustrated Kneeland's enterprise from the beginning. A national panic had struck the East in 1837, and while most frontier communities did not feel its effects for several years, Salubria suffered immediately, since the financial support for the colony was in Boston. The panic forestalled potential investors, and as a contemporary said, "men in Boston that were supposed to have money to spare did not pay up." In August 1839, Kneeland wrote to the *Investigator* emphasizing that those who wished to purchase land should send money, since cash was needed to secure land at the government sale scheduled for the following October. There was evidently little response to his appeal; only one new name appeared on land records for Salubria.

Funds were scarce in Iowa. Kneeland had left Boston strong of purpose but short of cash. As he wrote, "I found by remaining longer that I should not only consume what little I had, but should be under the necessity of consuming that which properly belongs to others." There was not much chance of raising cash on the frontier, since the area was chronically short of sound currency. Most commerce was conducted by barter—goods and services being traded for necessities. Kneeland brought with him his stepchildren's inheritance of $1400, but the purchase of land consumed most of the small fund. Unable to find a way to replenish his cash reserves, he was soon forced into debt.

Apparently, much of his ready money went into building his house. The lumber for this "mansion," for so it seemed in comparison to other houses in the area, came from St. Louis. Kneeland journeyed downriver to the Missouri city and brought back not only pine boards, but also doors, sashes, and other building materials. The house measured 15 by 21 feet, large for its time and place. A paneled pine door opened onto a hallway which was six feet wide. A stairway off the hall led into the second story. A lean-to kitchen and a "big room" completed the downstairs. Kneeland, the former carpenter, built the house himself with the aid of his stepson, James Rice.

Kneeland's greatest economic problems centered on his land purchases. The 80 acres he bought for his personal use cost $105. An additional 152 acres were purchased as the Salubria Village site, but within ten months he was forced to mortgage 90 acres of this land to Silas Smith for $1000. This income was evidently not sufficient since he remortgaged the same land a month later to another associate,



The Kneeland Mansion in Salubria. (courtesy of the Division of Historical Museum and Archives).

Tyler Parsons, for an additional $1500. His financial fortunes continued to go downhill—probably as a result of the depression in the East. He was forced to sell his livestock and many of his personal possessions including his 200-volume personal library. The blow to Abner must have been great. He was an avid reader, frequently loaning and discussing books with friends.

Few buyers appeared for the Salubria lands and only a trickle of new adherents to the free-thought cause joined the westward flow of migration. A son by an earlier marriage, John Kneeland, joined his father in 1841 and purchased 54 acres, but this was far from the prosperity Abner had envisioned back in Boston.

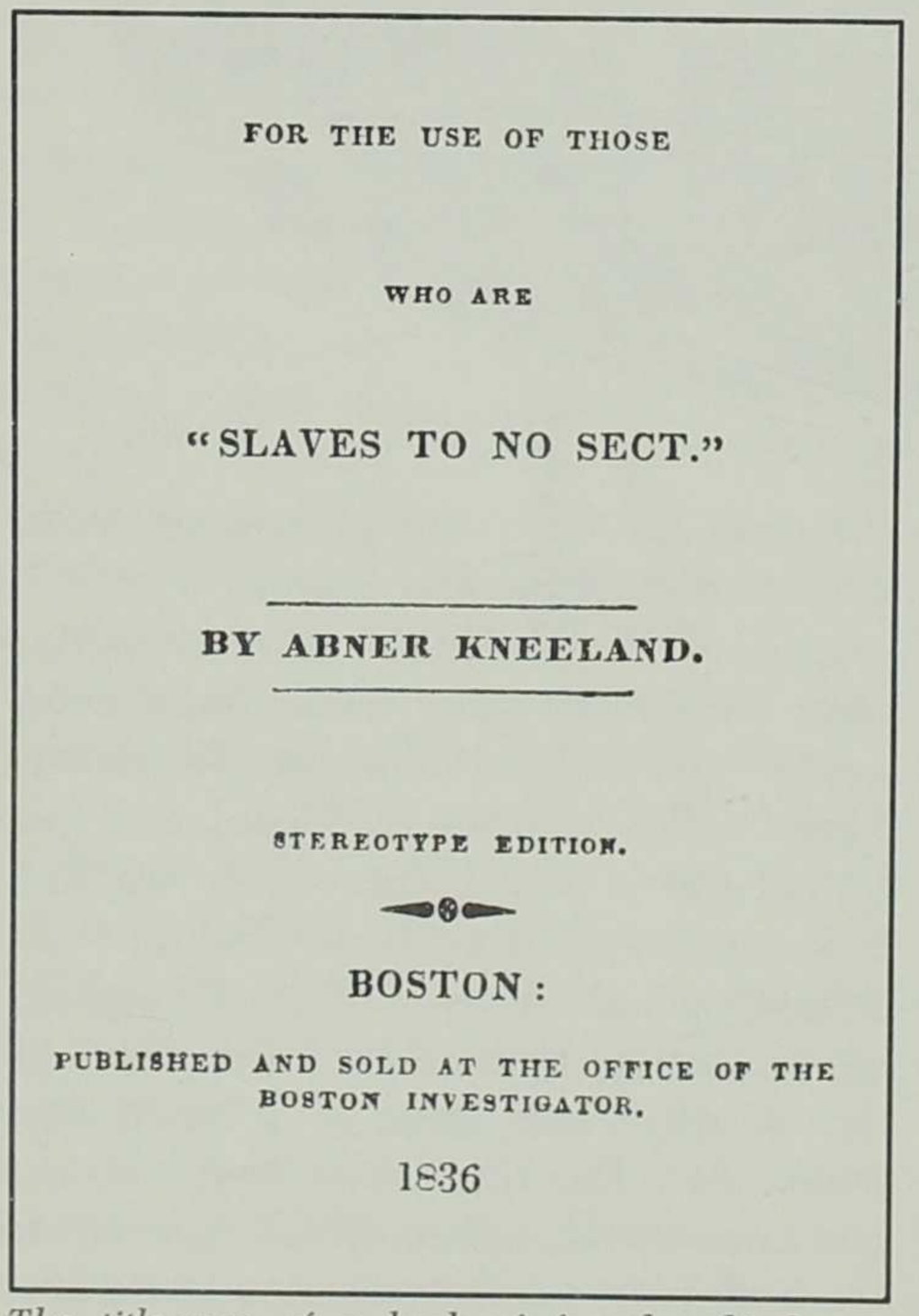
One of the problems was competing town sites in the same area. Almost every farmer who had settled in the Des Moines River Valley saw his own land as a potential town. Nearly every farm was initially promoted as a city of the future. As John Newhall wrote in 1841: "every delighted settler fancied his farm possessed the peculiar attributes of a town site; hence literally, the farms were, at the commencement, staked off into towns." In the end, only a few town sites could survive, and Abner's was not one of them.

The principal—and successful—rival was Farmington, located nearby. It had been settled in 1833 following the Black Hawk Purchase and briefly served as the county seat. By the time Kneeland reached the area, Farmington already had a tavern and an important ferry across the Des Moines River. With such a head start it is not surprising that Farmington continued to eclipse Salubria as a commercial center. Despite Farmington's obvious advantages, Abner continued to insist that his town site was better situated, and that if only a few more supporters would settle, Salubria would thrive.

Kneeland was blind to the defects of his chosen place: Salubria lacked a good landing on the river front, and a 50-foot high bluff ran parallel to the river, about 100 feet from the water's edge. Thus, despite Abner's plan of a mainstreet running along the top of the bluff, the place had little practical chance of becoming a center of commerce without ready access to the river traffic. Abner, typical of many frontier town-planners, neglected to account realistically for the topography of his site. He continued to dream of his town—hoping it would become part of the route of migration westward—but nothing came of his fantasies.

Many historians have attributed Salubria's failure not to economic reasons, but rather to the controversial nature of Kneeland's religious beliefs. However, there seems to have been very little local concern about religious issues at the time, at least during the first years of the colony. Other settlers in the Des Moines River Valley expressed few adverse opinions on the presence of free-thinkers in their midst. It is difficult to say if this was due to tolerance or simple indifference, but it seems likely that small notice would ever have been taken of Salubria had it not been for the influence of eastern religious groups.

In 1843, Reverend Thomas Dutton arrived in Farmington. Dutton was a missionary, dispatched to the frontier by the



FOR THE USE OF THOSE

WHO ARE

"SLAVES TO NO SECT."

BY ABNER KNEELAND.

STEREOTYPE EDITION.

BOSTON:

PUBLISHED AND SOLD AT THE OFFICE OF THE BOSTON INVESTIGATOR.

1836

The title-page of a book of free-thought hymns which Kneeland published in 1836.

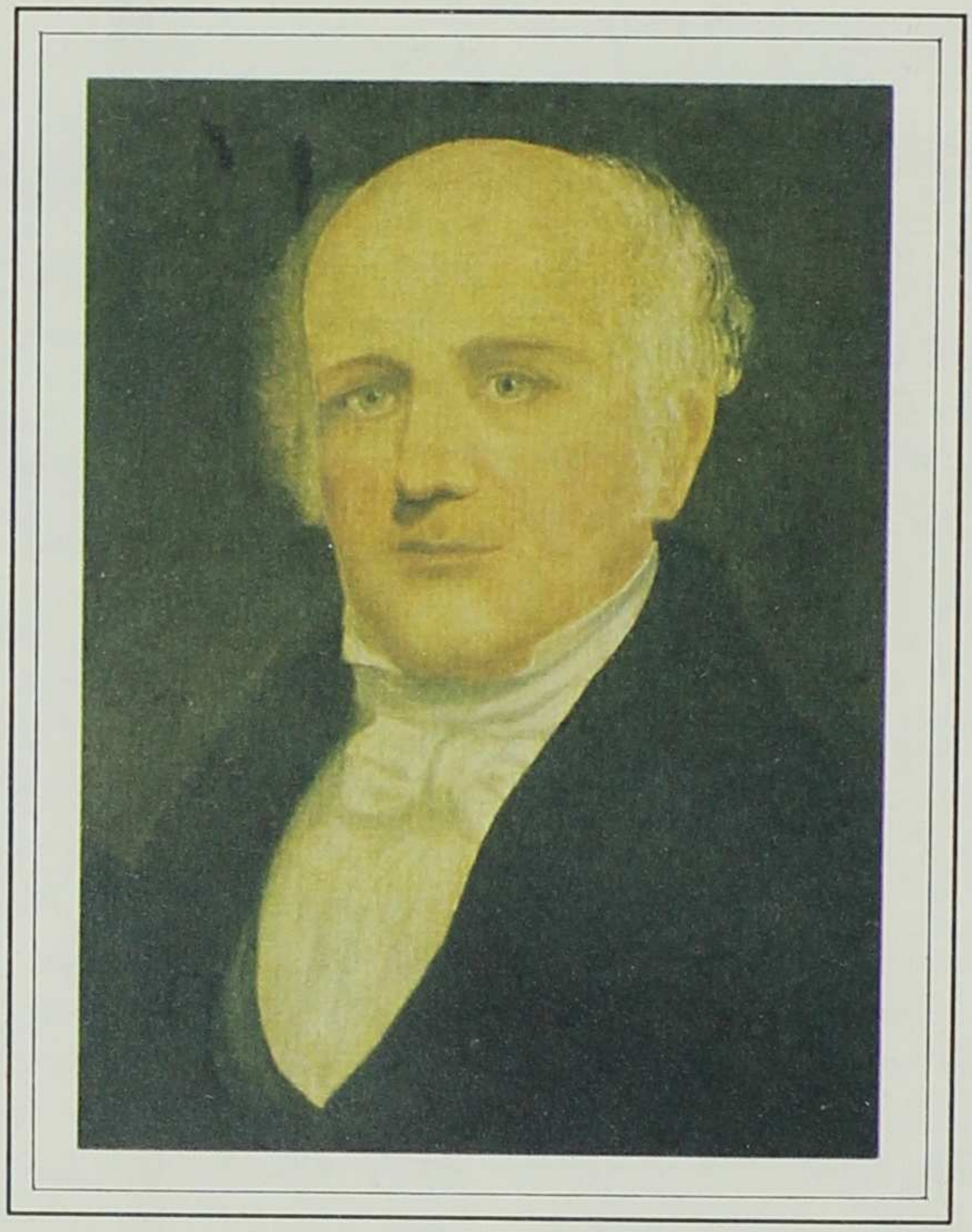
American Home Missionary Society, a joint enterprise of the Congregational and United Presbyterian Churches, based in New England. As in other matters, the East took a posture of guardianship toward the frontier when religion was involved. Dutton's task was to "provide religious sustenance to the spiritually destitute and guidance to the religious deviates on the frontier." A considerable challenge faced him. In his first report to the Society he noted that the local congregation of believers had been "so long away from regular and well ordered means of grace and living in a loose community, they have declined into a very low and back slidden state and it seems exceedingly hard to get them out of it."

One of Dutton's chief concerns was the presence of unbelievers—the colonists at Salubria. As he reported: "There is a considerable body of men here . . . who are in various degrees infected with infidelity." Abner Kneeland, well-known in the East for unorthodox views, was, of course, the object of Dutton's anxiety. The missionary attributed a vast and powerful influence to Kneeland, believing that Abner's lectures and circulation of literature were partially the cause of "infidelity" in the region.

In fact, until the American Home Missionary Society had sent their representative into the valley, little attention had been paid to the colony. Most settlers were too occupied in establishing themselves in the new country, and a fair level of tolerance

for dissenting views had been common. The editor of *The Iowa City Standard* for example, in 1841 had defended Iowa as a haven for diverse religions, pointing with pride to Iowa's acceptance of both Kneeland and the many Mormons who lived and worked in Iowa—although tolerance of the disciples of Joseph Smith may have been based on simple greed since the Mormons were easy marks for local land speculators. Kneeland, unlike the Mormon Prophet across the Mississippi in Nauvoo, had chosen to advance his views cautiously, speaking out only when it would not appear to be intrusive, a lesson learned from his Boston experience. He was apparently well-liked and respected enough to receive invitations to lecture and debate from several communities. Aaron Harlan, who was a pioneer settler in the valley, recalled Kneeland in a 1904 interview:

> I saw Abner Kneeland many times. Sometimes he was working in his garden with a hoe. He always looked cleaner than the average citizen. I heard him give one lecture and only one, and that was accidental, at the house of old Isaac Gray, just below



Abner Kneeland (courtesy of Mrs. Wilbert H. Bonney).

Athens. He was there by special invitation of most of the citizens of the vicinity. He did not take a text from the Bible or any other book, but his talk was truly interesting to me. He did not at any time manifest a disposition to make proselytes, but any man who wanted to hear something new on religious subjects could wake him up and was apt to wish that he had not done so. He was a medium sized man, about 5 feet 9 and one half inches in height, and must have weighed nearly one hundred and seventy pounds. He was of light complexion and healthy appearance. He was considerably bald, what hair remained being perfectly white. I passed his house many times the first three years he lived in Salubria and called on him in a friendly way some three or four times. He called at my house once when a candidate for member of the territorial council. I went with him to Cassiday's where the speaking was to be. He had no magnetic or hypnotic influence, yet there was about him something that commanded respect.

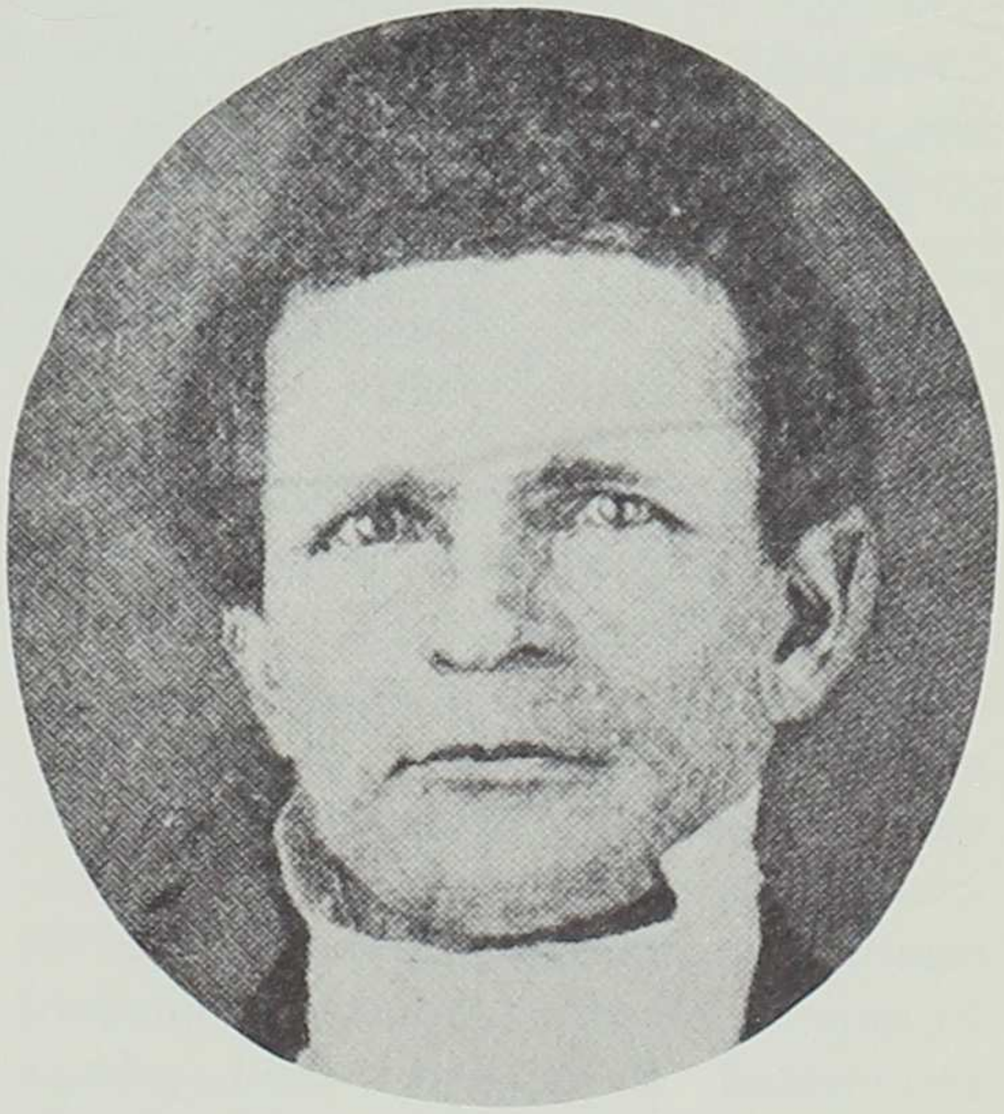
Thomas Dutton's anti-Salubria campaign was joined in November 1843 by members of the famous "Iowa Band," a

group of young, idealistic Congregational missionaries. These Protestant crusaders came west from Andover, Massachusetts and were well acquainted with Kneeland's Boston trial. They were ready to combat the infidel influence with zeal. Harvey Adams, a member of the band, joined Dutton in denouncing the Salubria colony. Indeed, the persecution of Kneeland continued well after his death. When Charles Aldrich, the curator of the then Department of History, Memorial, and Art, planned to acquire a portrait of Kneeland during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the move was blocked by a strong protest from the respected historian and preacher William Salter, a member of the Iowa Band in his younger days.

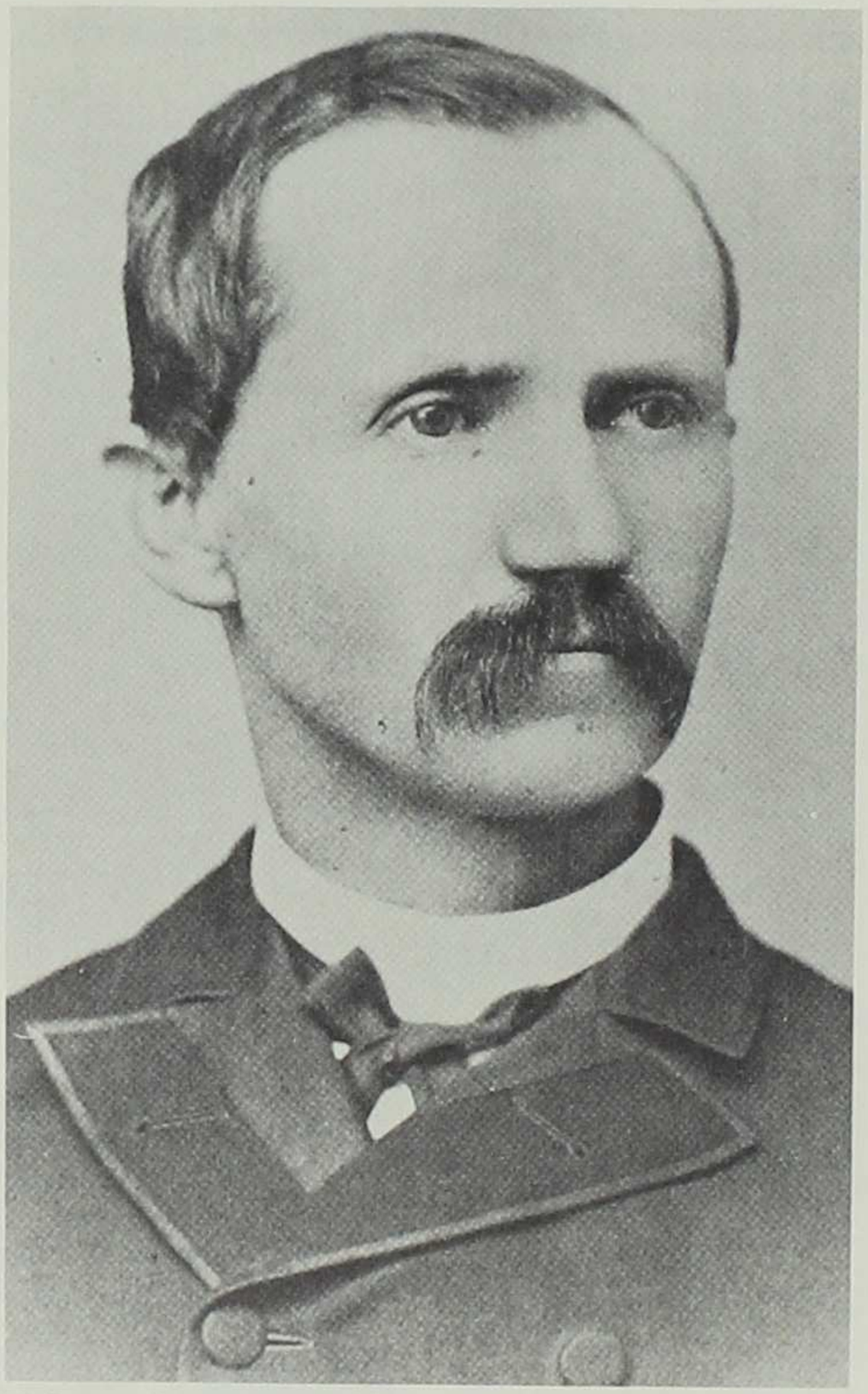
Despite the opposition of eastern missionaries, Kneeland's real troubles in connection with his religion arose only after he entered politics. Local partisan politics were important during the years of Salubria's existence, and Kneeland along with other colonists took an active interest in political affairs.

As with his economic decisions, Kneeland's political attachments placed him on the wrong side of success. He allied himself to the Democratic party of the Territory of Iowa. The Democrats were to fall on hard times following 1840 when they lost the national election. Locally, Democratic Territorial Governor Robert Lucas had quarrelled with the Territorial Legislature. With interest in party politics running high, county conventions met to nominate candidates for Territorial representative.

Abner and several other Salubrians attended the Van Buren County Democratic convention, and Kneeland won a nomination for the Council, part of the Territorial Legislative Assembly. Even though parties were becoming more important, much of the local election was still conducted along personal lines. Kneeland's religious creed made him an easy target for the opposition Whigs. Described as an atheistic and dangerous candidate, Abner lost the election—one of two Democrats defeated from a slate of five. The Burlington *Hawkeye* (a Whig paper) proudly proclaimed after the election: "Our old friend



Harvey Adams, of the Iowa Band.



Voltaire Paine Twombley

Captain Hall beat the notorious Abner Kneeland for Council in Van Buren County by a handsome majority."

Despite the set-back, Abner again involved himself in politics in 1842. The county convention unanimously elected him chairman, and his "infidelity" became a campaign issue, although he was not a candidate. The Whig *Iowa City Standard* commented: "In Van Buren the Locofocos [Democrats] nominated Dr. [Gideon] Bailey and J. Whitaker for Council and Joseph Wright, Samuel Parker and William Handy for Representatives. These nominations don't take. They were made under the Abner Kneeland influence and are said to be in the main very bad selections." The *Lee County Democrat* countered: "We hope sincerely that the good people of Van Buren County are not so far gone in bigotry as to attempt a conjunction of church and state—religion and politics."

Despite this plea, the Whigs hung the label of "infidel ticket" on the Democratic candidates. Appeals to "church Democrats" finally split the party strength, and the whole Democratic slate was defeated. Failure as a political manager sounded the death knell for Abner's political influence. He withdrew from politics entirely following the defeats of 1842.

It seems clear that the political failures of Kneeland, coupled with continuing economic difficulties, spelled defeat for Abner's plan of a free-thought colony. Few colonists had appeared, none of the plans for a town materialized, and despite reasonable tolerance, Kneeland's religious views did little to make him popular with his fellow settlers, especially since his theology may have resulted in political defeat.

On August 27, 1844 Abner Kneeland died of a stroke. With no leader, Salubria dissolved.

Kneeland's descendants remained in the area and slowly assimilated into the Farmington community. James Rice, Kneeland's stepson, married the daughter of Silas Smith and eventually became mayor of Farmington and Justice of the Peace. Rice was active in state politics for many years as an abolitionist, a philosophy which Kneeland had also supported. Other Salubrians or their children reached positions of considerable influence, including Voltaire Paine Twombley, a son of a devoted Kneeland admirer, who became Treasurer of the State of Iowa.

Today, almost nothing remains to declare that Salubria once existed. Abner's mansion and the other homes are gone. The stillborn town site has been consumed by a modern gravel pit. Like hundreds of other ill-fated social experiments in the West, Salubria quietly disappeared, and Kneeland's goal of a free-thought society went with it. □

SONGS FOR THE PARLOR

by L. Edward Purcell

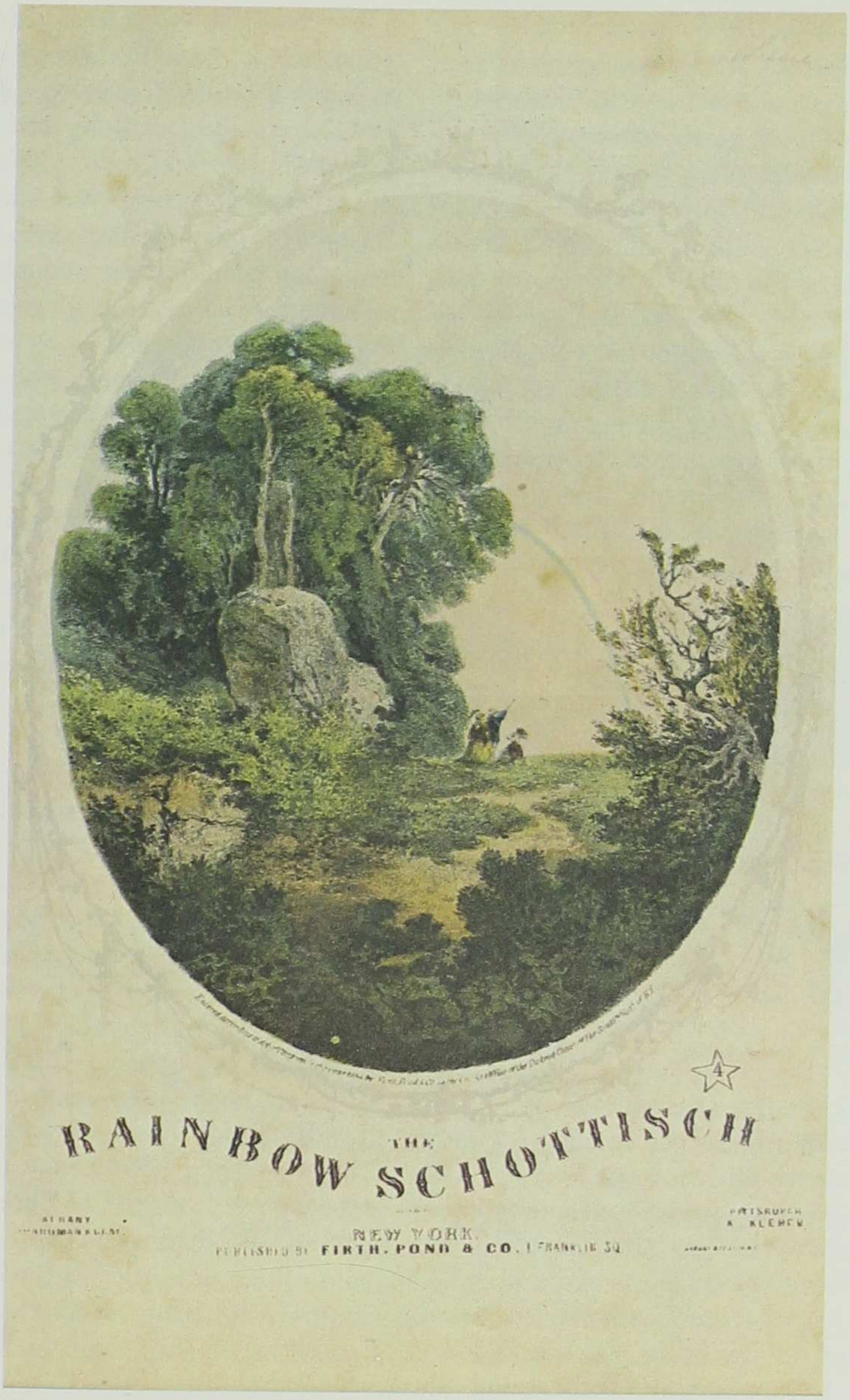
At the turn of the century, in the days before radio, television, and the movies, when the automobile had yet to shorten distances for the average family, the mainstay of home entertainment and social life was music. The family gathered around the parlor piano (or pump organ) and filled the night with strains of popular songs. Young women, trained by a local pedagogue or crammed with musical knowledge from a correspondence course, displayed their musical accomplishments to polite society and perhaps set a snare for possible beaux. Sheet music, that humble form of culture, was grist for the social mill. A complete history of national moods and mores might be devised from the evidence of a collection of sheet music.

The first sheet music publications in America were broadside ballads—patriotic songs of the American Revolution. Folktunes were adapted to fit revolutionary lyrics and distributed as one-page sheets. (The combination of folkways and social issues continued to be a feature of sheet music throughout history.) By the 1830s there was a large demand for popular music, and there were profits to be made by fulfilling that demand. Publishers in cities along the eastern seaboard began to issue sheet music in large quantities.

Music publishing began slowly in the interior of the continent. However, as a region passed through the roughest frontier stages (or sometimes before) the public sought music which could be enjoyed at home. The Middle Western states at first had to rely on eastern sources for their music. Most sheet music was originally printed from engraved plates, rather than the "flat" printing methods of letterpress or stone lithography. The engraving of music was a difficult and highly skilled business. Until the middle of the 1800s when such engravers appeared in the Middle West, publishers had been forced to use plates engraved in the East.

The technical problem was tricky. Music had to be engraved in the reverse on heavy metal plates. Not only were craftsmen who could do this scarce, but the tools required to produce treble and bass clefs, black and white notes, sharps and flats, and the special letters indicating tempo had to be imported from England or Germany. Ordinary engravers who specialized in copperplate wedding announcements or jewelry could not make plates to print music. Since the original metal plates were prone to crack with prolonged use, second or third editions of a popular tune were usually printed by lithography.

The covers of sheet music soon became a focus of attention for music publishers. Middle Western publishers could manage only a simple title page or heading, but eastern houses early discovered that an attractive cover boosted sales. Ordinary polkas, waltzes, or quadrilles could be sold briskly if the music had a colorful "front." Publishers, especially in the East, engaged the best lithographers of the day, including Nathaniel Currier, Sarony of New York, and J. H. Bufford of Boston, to provide decorative scenes for sheet music



The "front" of "The Rainbow Schottisch" published by the well-known Firth, Pond & Company in 1854. Sarony of New York provided the lithograph which adorned the cover.

covers. Such music sheets have since become collectors' items, not so much because of the musical interest, but because of the excellence of the cover art.

In the Middle West, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, and Louisville became the major centers of sheet music publishing. Firms such as Root and Cady of Chicago or Balmer and Weber of St. Louis issued thousands of pieces of music. The eastern publishers such as Oliver Ditson of Boston continued to market their wares nationwide. By 1867, the Ditson company advertised several thousand separate pieces of sheet music for sale, much of it aimed at the family in the parlor.

One cartoonist's vision of home music, from Harper's Monthly, *July 1853.*

It was the family center—the front parlor—that absorbed much of the sheet music of the nineteenth century. As one editor put it, the music was "well adapted to the family circle . . . tender, eloquent, and chaste." Sentimental music of romance and far-away places, along with patriotic songs, continued to dominate the home music market. Giving support to the trend was the increased sale of home music instruments.

The piano was the foremost symbol of home culture, usually occupying a place of importance in a family's "best" room. Sales of pianos grew by fantastic rates during the last half of the 1800s. A technical innovation by Edward Chickering in 1823—the use of a cast iron frame—had made the piano cheap enough and light enough for home use. Salesmen traveled the back roads of America, vending pianos to patrons eager to obtain the advantages of a combined entertainment center and social symbol. In 1860, there was a piano for every 1500 people in the nation, and 22,000 new pianos were being sold annually. Between 1890 and 1900, pianos in homes increased at a rate five times as great as the population, and it is estimated that more than a million pianos were played in American homes by the turn of the century.

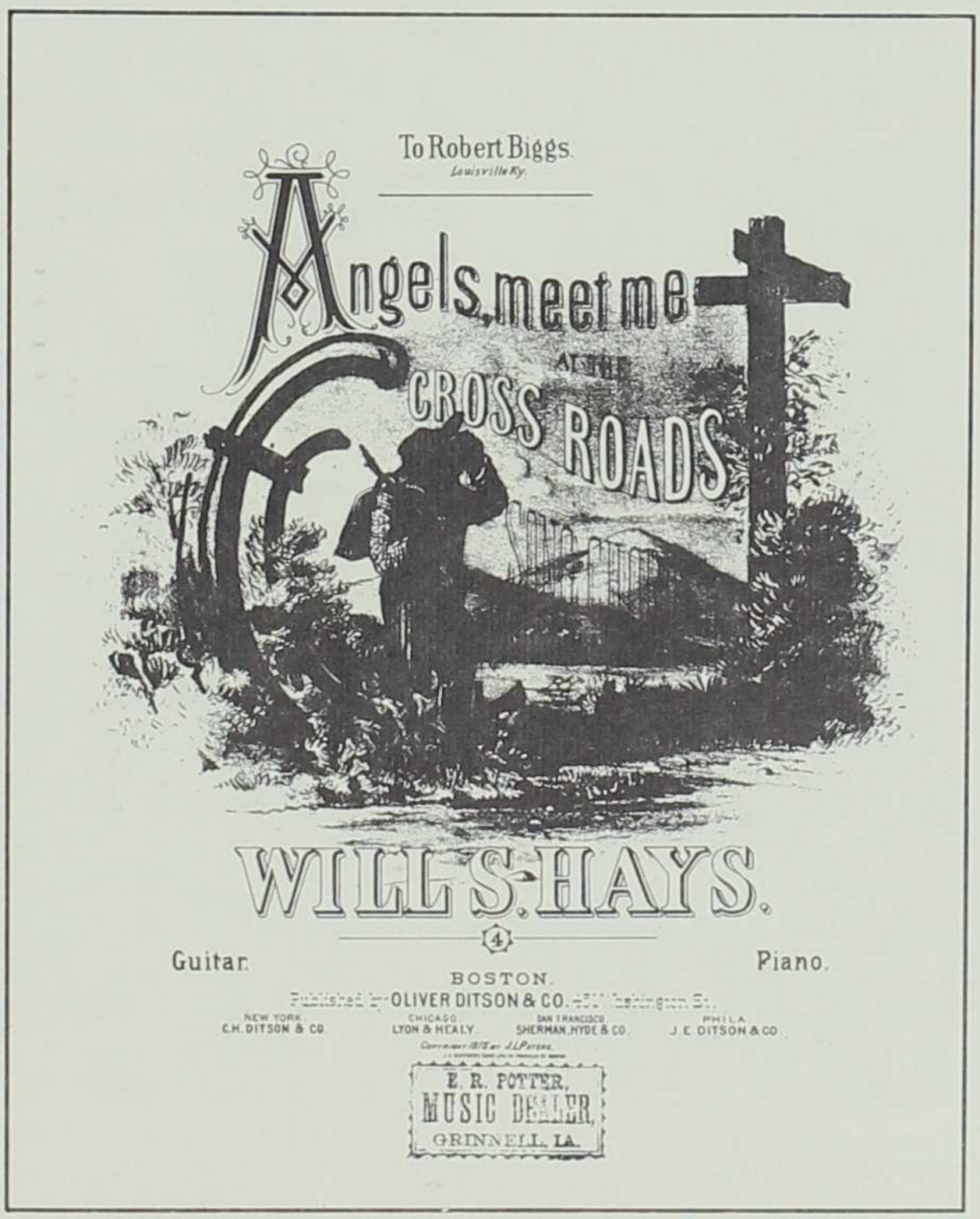
Each village had its piano or singing teacher who conducted classes or gave private instruction—usually to young ladies. Failing to find a local instructor, an eager music-maker could avail herself of one of many correspondence courses in piano offered by such firms as the Siegel-Myers Correspondence School of Music or the Sears, Roebuck catalog. The United States School of Music originated a famous line in advertising its home course: "They Laughed When I Sat Down to the Piano —But When I Started to Play . . ."

Even though sheet music had been the main source of music for the home singer or pianist for many years the Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago and attended by more than 12 million visitors, gave a new impetus to the sale of individual songs. Itinerant piano players enter-

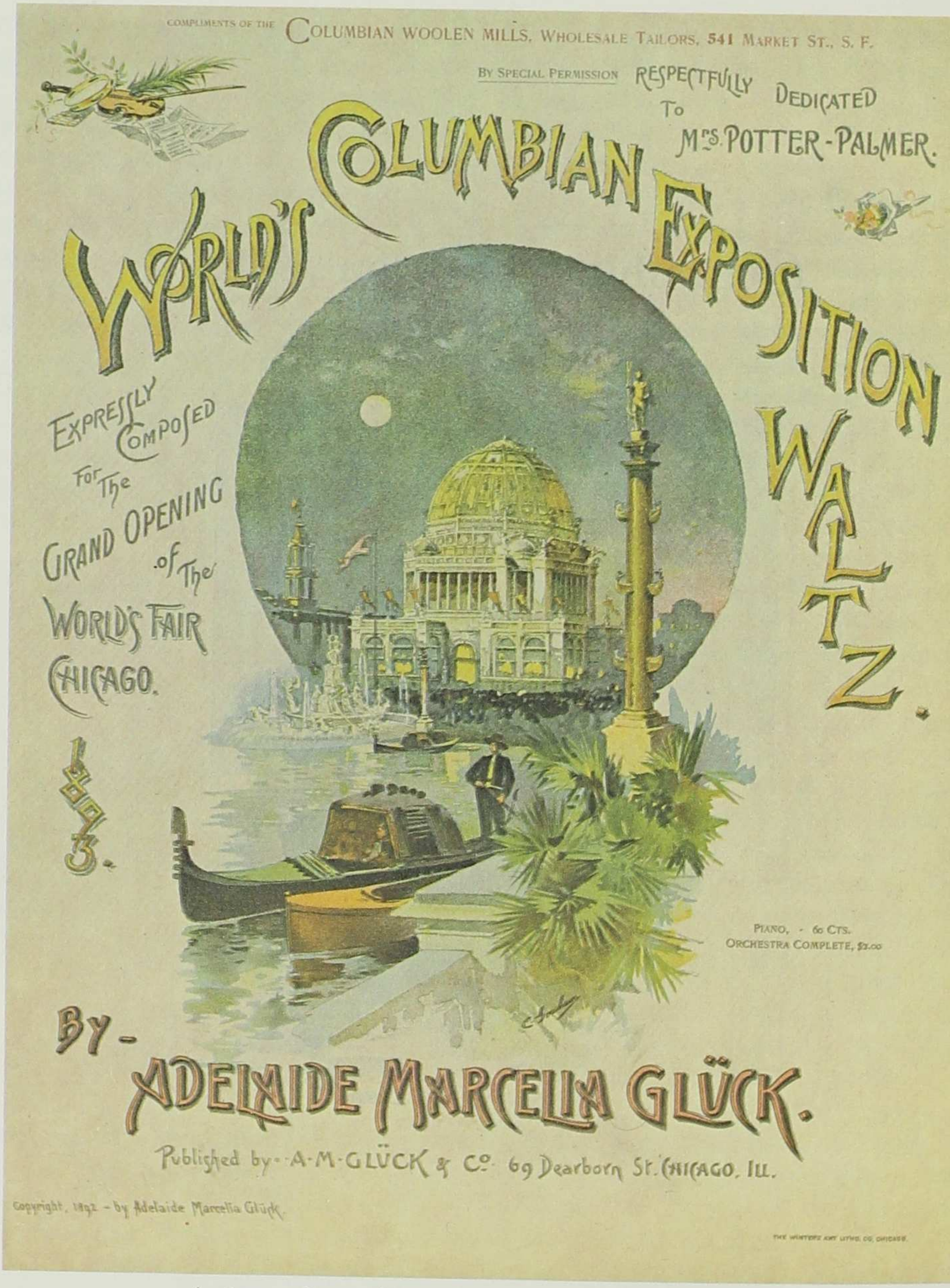
tained at the Exposition and introduced a new type of music—freer, less formal, usually syncopated ragtime. The sale of sheet music leapt following the Exposition, and huge quantities were sold in the first decades of the new century.

As had been true since the first broadside ballads, the influence of war was great on sheet music. During World War I, patriotic fervor, the sale of bonds, and anti-German propaganda were all given a boost through sheet music songs. After the War, sheet music buffs were asked the musical question: "How 'Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm?"

Throughout the life of the nation sheet music has been a part of the American scene. It is interesting today as an indication of the changing styles of music, as a part of printing history, and as a crude sort of social barometer. Illustrations for this article are from the music collection of the State Historical Society. □

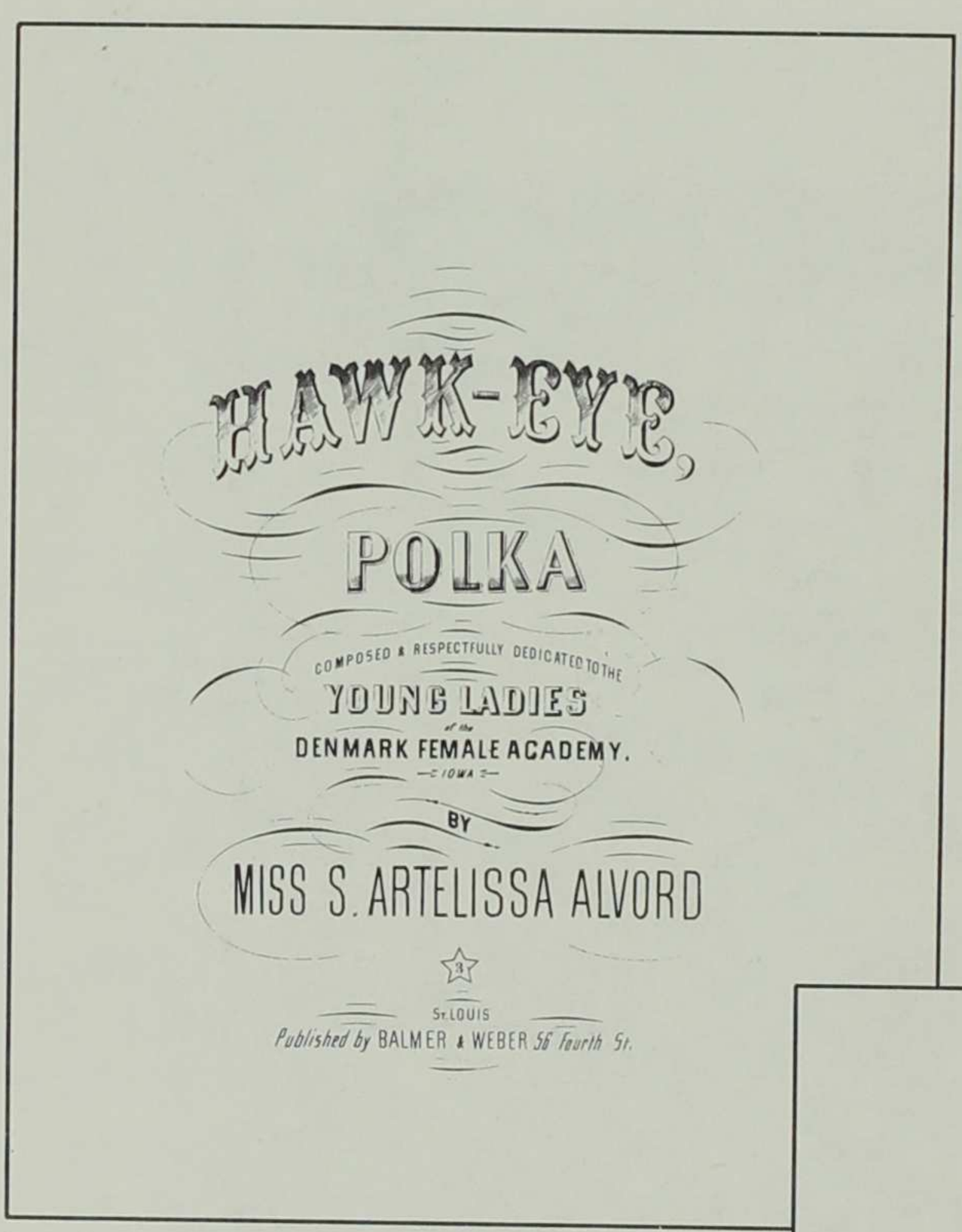


A famous tune published by the Ditson Company in 1875. The black and white litho is by J. H. Bufford Sons of Boston. As can be seen by the stamp, this specimen was sold in Grinnell, Iowa.



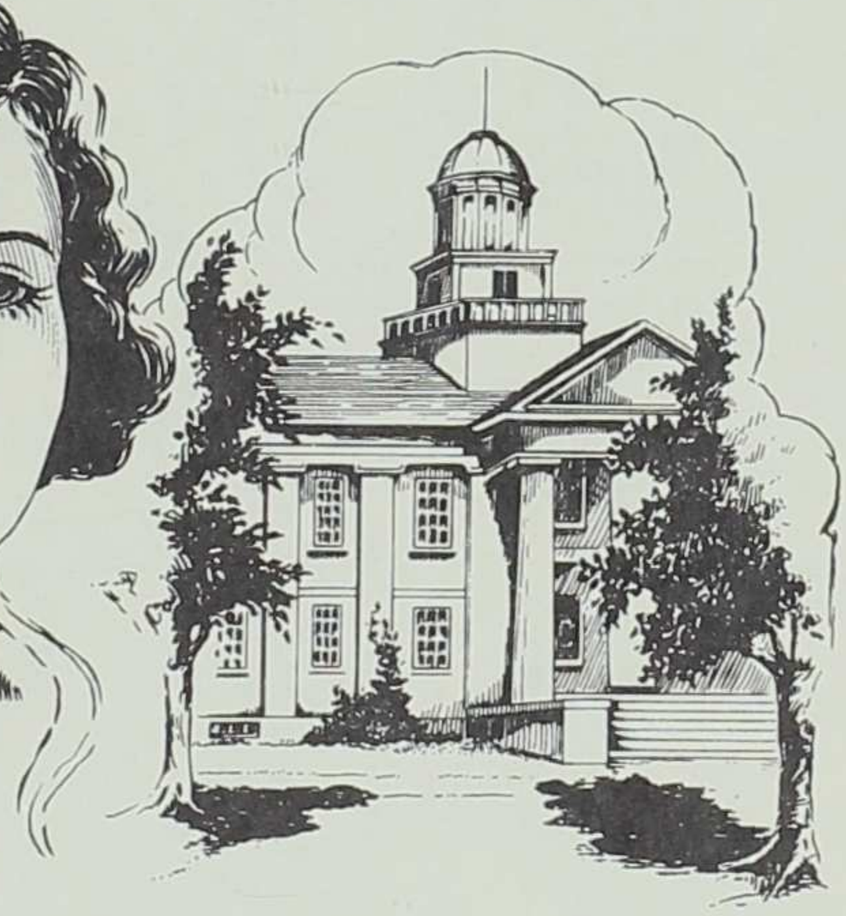
A piano waltz on the occasion of the Columbian Exposition.

A colorful but complex cover, celebrating the turn of the century, with many modern conveniences shown in the background. The publisher, with rather charming ignorance, failed to use the correct roman numerals for "1900." Instead of "MCM" this sheet music carries the inscription "MDCCCC."



Two examples of Iowa-related sheet music. "The Hawkeye Polka" for piano, published by Balmer & Weber (a pioneer firm in St. Louis), was dedicated to students at the Denmark Academy in Lee County. The date was 1867, and this music was engraved. To the right is an 1858 song from a Burlington composer, whose lyrics read in part: "And when sly hints of love went round, You glanced at me with pouting scorn, Yet smiled, tho you would fain have frown'd At the Husking of the Corn."

Memories of "My Iowa Girl"



Introduced by
The Hawkeye String Strummers
of
The University of Iowa

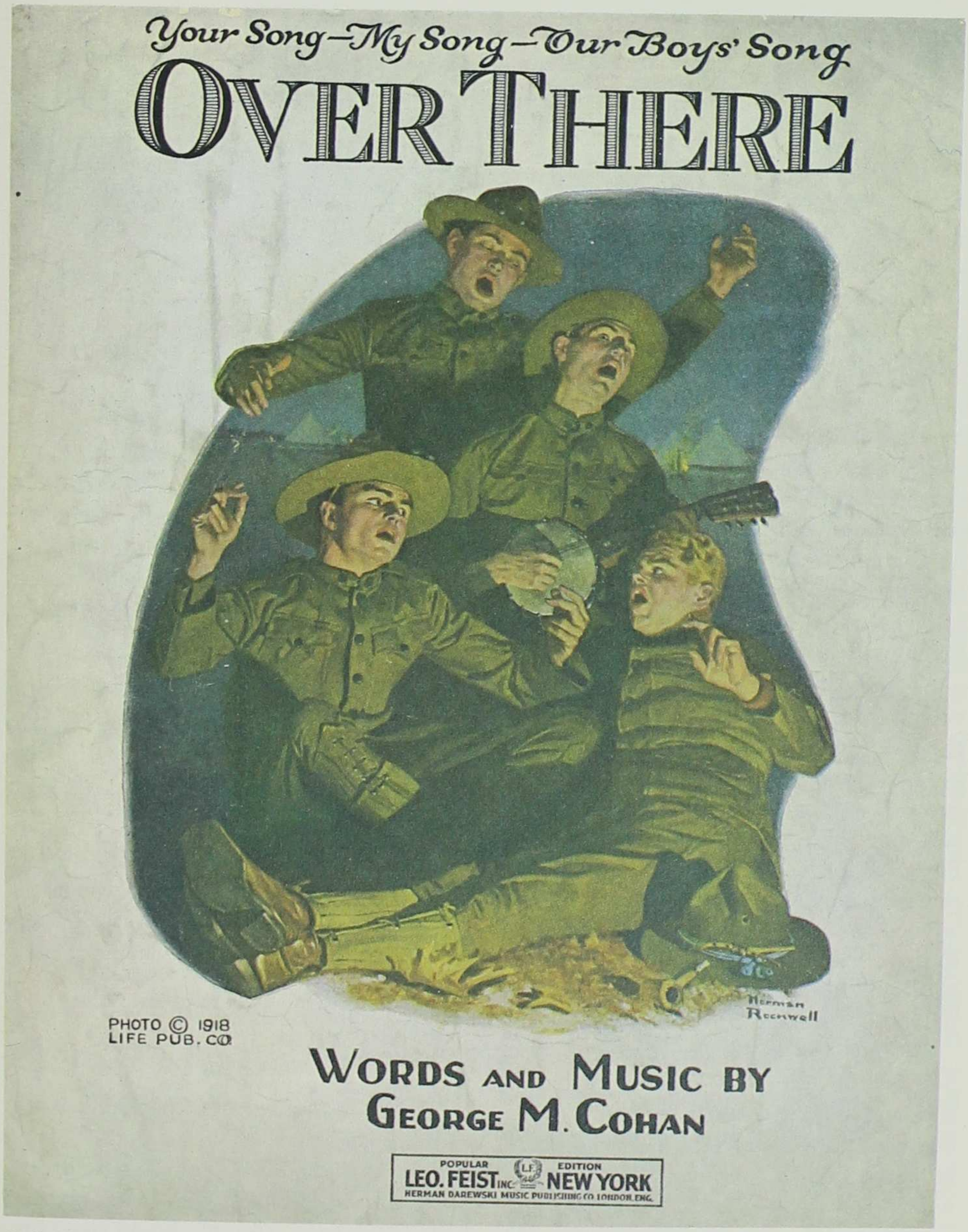
LYRIC AND VERSE
J. Russell Stanton
& Robert V. Cooper

ARRANGED BY
"Doc" LAWSON

PUBLISHED BY
STANTON & COOPER
IOWA CITY, IOWA.

An undated song from The University of Iowa.

In 1918, the Kaiser took his lumps: "When Uncle Sam goes after you the whole wide world knows you are thru So good-by Germany."



Probably the most famous song of World War I, in the sheet music version it combined the talents of two very famous artists, George M. Cohan and Norman Rockwell.

A NEW LIFE: THE IOWA COAL MINES

by Cynthia Jean Johnson

In 1914, a 16-year old boy arrived in New York harbor. He was not unique among the passengers who debarked in New York that year. An emigrant, he had left behind his parents (silk growers in Italy), six brothers and sisters, and a history of nearly futile attempts to earn some sort of living for himself in Europe.

As he boarded a train in New York he was bound for his uncle's home, out in the flat interior of the country with which he was becoming acquainted. Hocking, Iowa—it was an unlikely destination. Yet his uncle had written when sending the boy $100 for his trip across the ocean that the coal mines there were running, and anyone could find a job if he were willing to learn the trade. So, with high hopes he had left Italy, and now found himself boarding a train for Iowa.

He felt very much the foreigner. Near him on the train was a group of blacks, laughing—telling jokes it seemed. But the boy could not appreciate it. For although he spoke French, German, and Italian, he understood not a word of English.

John Corso, now 76, recalled recently those first experiences in the United States. He maintains even today that he does not speak English well and apologizes for the fact he has never had any formal schooling. He still lives in the vicinity of Hocking, where he did indeed become a coal miner, working at nearly every job in a coal mine during a period of about 30 years.

Although Hocking no longer exists as a community (it was formerly located several miles south of Albia), its memory is very much a part of John Corso, who supported a wife, three sons, and a daughter on income earned in mines in the vicinity. The memories are not entirely pleasant, but neither the hard life from which they are drawn nor his age seem to have daunted this animated man.

Settling around a table by his large kitchen window, Corso and his guests watched as a late fall snow slowly collected, swirled, and regrouped outside. Both the topic of conversation and the weather succeeded in creating an atmosphere very much isolated from the present as Mr. Corso reflected on the events which brought him to the United States 60 years ago.

"In Europe it was pretty poor, and if you could get a meal by workin', that's it . . .

"I went to France, and I had some work in France when I was a kid canin' chairs and I was makin' two cent a day and two meal. This fella and I, we use to put fish bone in the cane. The cats would smell the fish and tear up the chair to get it. So,

John Corso

they had to bring the chair back. You couldn't do it much, but it helped.

"Then I come back from there and went to Austria, and I climb up inside a chimney to be a chimney sweeper. What you call it here? That's what I was doin'. I done that for a while but I had to quit because I was gettin' sick . . . that dust . . . didn't have no mask or anything.

"Whenever you climb up one or two story was not so bad, but when you climb a chimney two, three, or four story, and you go inside that—we didn't have no rope or nothin', you had to climb, just put your feet up against the wall. If you slide, you try to keep from fallin' all the way down.

"I was a young kid then. I had to do somethin', so finally I wrote to my uncle in Hockin' here, and he send me a hundred dollar, so I bought the ticket.

"All the way across, from the time I left the house until I got here, that cost me seventy-three dollar. That's what it cost me exactly . . .

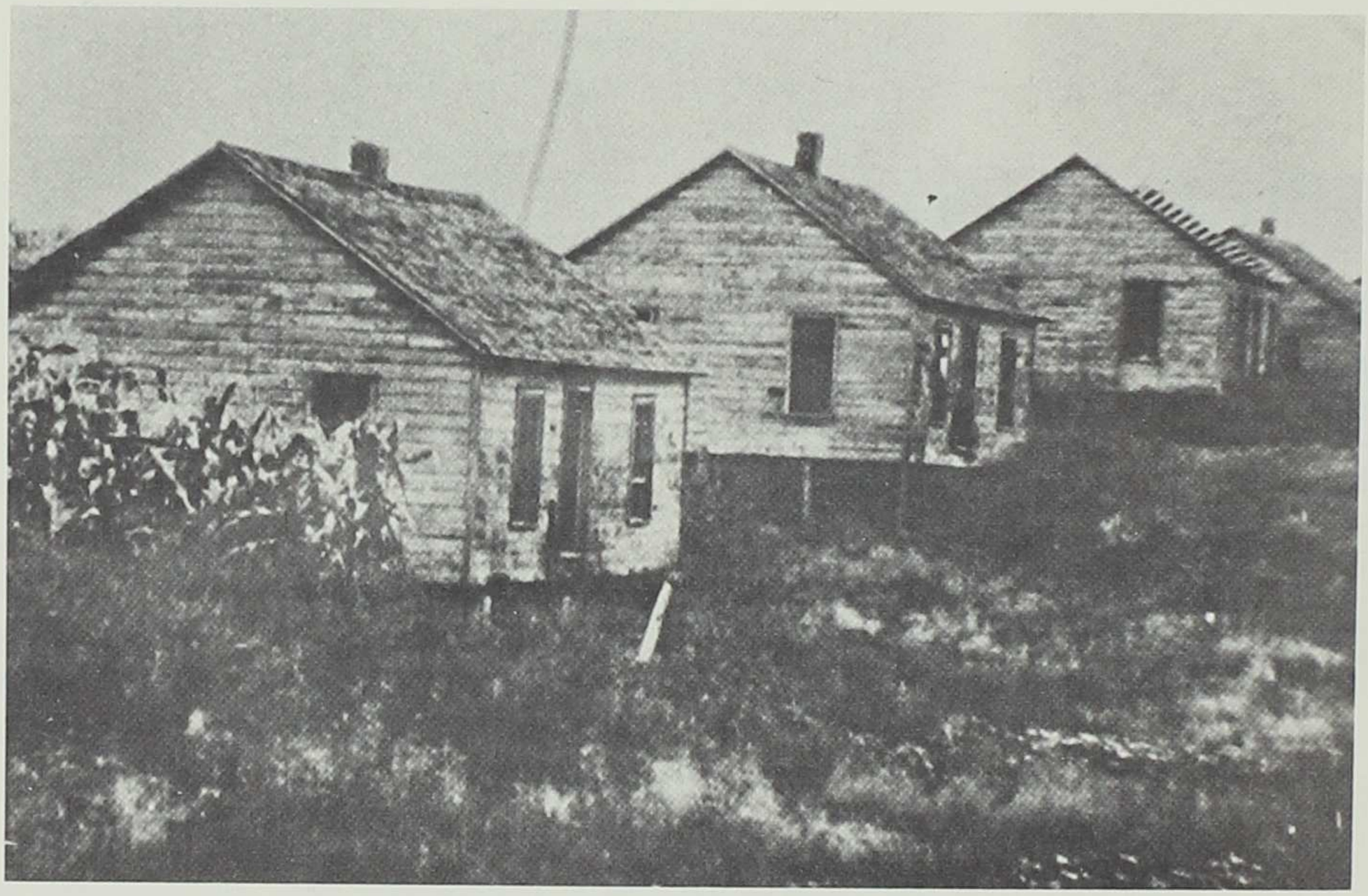
"I'll tell you one thing, I come by boat, and when I got here there were a lot of people I know—well I used to know them over there. They asked me if I had a good trip, and I said yes. They said, 'How long you in the water?'

"'Oh,' I said, 'about 15 day in the water.'

"'Oh my goodness,' they said, 'You had an awful good ship.' I said I didn't know nothin'. One guy said he was better'n three weeks; one was over a month in the water alone." He chuckled softly remembering that trip.

"If I thought at that time that somebody would tell me, 'In your lifetime, John, you can eat breakfast in the United States, eat dinner in Europe, and be back for supper in the United States again,' I would'a looked at that person and taked off runnin', because I knowed he would'a been crazy, I believe I would. You see there ain't nothin' to it now. Now a fella can go back and forth pretty easy."

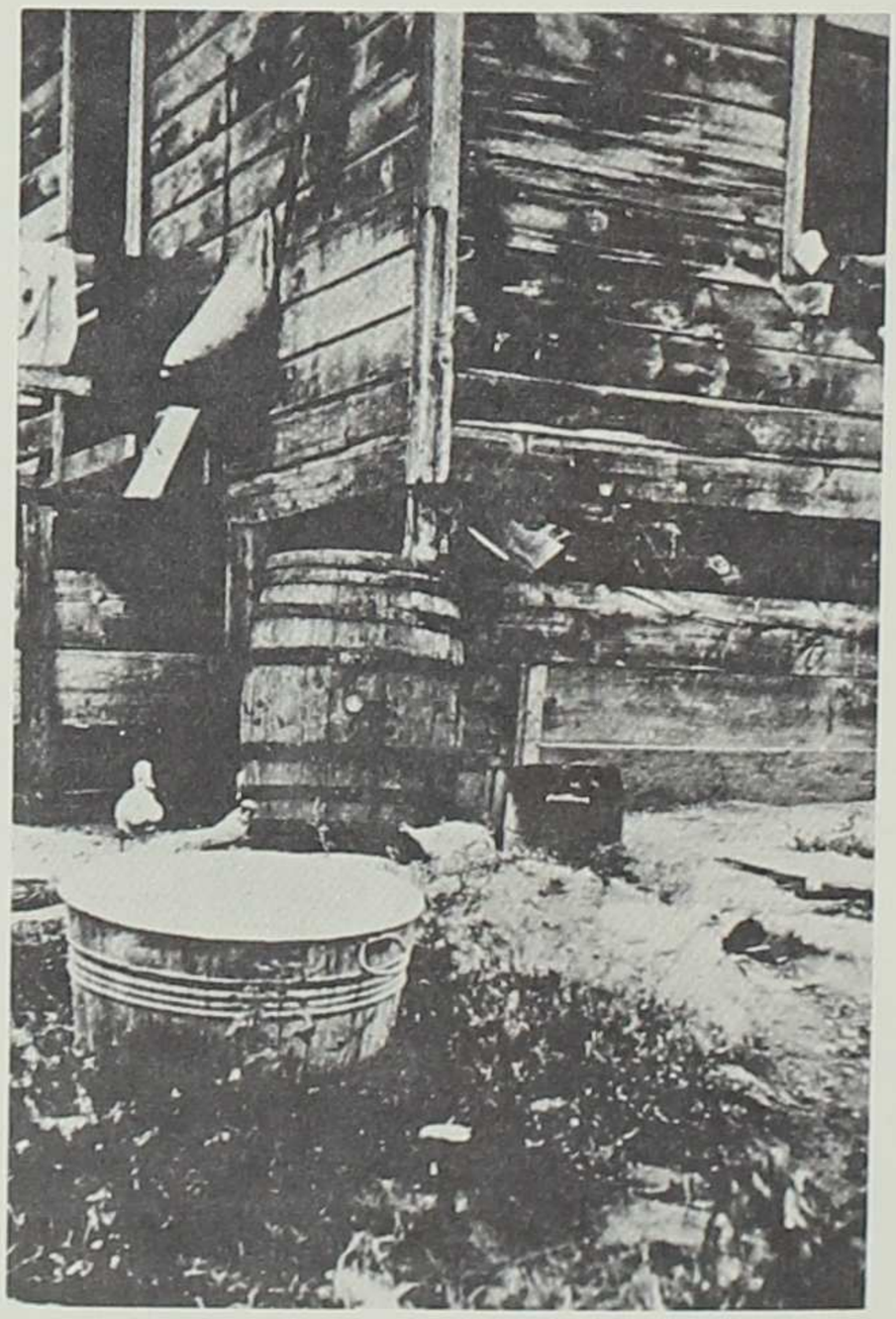
When Corso came to Hocking, he found that coal camps were filled with emigrants: French, Germans, Belgians, Croatians, many of whom, like himself, had heard of the opportunities in the Iowa coal fields from friends and relatives. He also found that coal camps were really small communities built almost entirely by the coal company. The company provided houses and a store, and, while other businesses could move in, in most cases the company store tended to dominate the business picture. The houses provided by



Company houses in Hocking, Iowa, home for the miners. Lower right, detail of a miner's home near Hocking, showing a home-made kitchen drain.

the company were logically dubbed "company houses," and their square, squat forms and truncated roofs were readily identifiable in any coal camp. Usually containing four to six rooms, they rented for between $6 and $10 per month, which was "checked off" the miner's pay, that is, the money was taken from the miner's pay automatically each pay period.

While the rent was inexpensive, the construction of the houses matched the sum. As Mr. Corso put it, "They sound cheap, but then you know . . . Many times when I rented, we had to take the oil cloth on the table, I never see them any more, no place at all, but we used to have a place on top, over the baby, that I made, it



kinda looked like a covered wagon. We used to take it, the oil cloth off the table, and put it over so the kid don't get wet, 'cause it was leakin' through. So you know it sounds cheap at six dollar but it wasn't.

"It was many times that . . . you know the kid, they get wet, and many time I would hold up the blanket and the woman, she would change the diaper, right in the blanket between me and her."

Corso had married an 18-year old girl, the daughter of recent Italian immigrants, and they had soon had children.

"I tell you what happened when we got married. We had a linoleum, course whenever you bought a linoleum you was well off because they didn't put very many out at that time. Anyway, when the wind was blowin' we had to put all the chairs and everything out on the linoleum. Oh, I saw that linoleum come a foot off the floor. So you know, all them houses was air conditioned."

Aside from houses, other "check off" items included merchandise purchased at the company store and coal which was used for cooking and heating.

"It cost us three dollar a ton for the coal; we had to buy it at cost, there wasn't any profit in it. But for coal, we'd just go along the railroad track and pick up a lotta coal . . . you know, that would fall off. If it didn't, the brakeman, they know about everybody that work around there and if he would see you, the brakeman, they were sly buggers, they would push a couple chunks of coal off and a fella'd go behind and pick it up. He would help the family out that way."

Memories of the company store were not usually kind. "I'll tell you the truth about it," confided Corso. "You ever hear that song by Tennessee Ernie Ford? 'I got 16 ton and what you get? Another day older and deeper in debt?' That's just the way that was. Now he told the truth when he sang that because I was in on them deal.

"If you go in there they give you chips, say a dollar's worth of chips for credit. Say you spend 50¢, then they give you 50¢ in chips. Then you had to spend them there because that's the only place they'd take them in.

"But if you trade off another store, they had a way to fire you. They use some kind of excuse . . . they don't want you around here. Yeh, they fired a lot of people that way. They had it just about figured how much money you were makin', see, and they was gonna take just about all. Say if you make forty dollar, then they was gonna take thirty-five, thirty-four, somethin' like that. They'll give you four or five dollar . . . well you earned it. You weren't goin' no place. You know they hold everybody down just about so they had to stay."

These things—the company store, the company houses—were the ways in which coal mining permeated the private life of the miner. But, depending on the job, Corso could spend up to eight hours a day, six or seven days a week, working in the mine.

When he was working in Hocking, Corso caught a train to ride out to the mines, which were about two miles outside of town, in order to be at the mine and start work at 7 A.M. If he worked the night shift, however, no train ran, and he was forced to walk.

A night shift ready to ride to the surface in a mine in Monroe County, circa 1905.

"In the summertime it was all right," Corso recalled. "But in the winter," he shook his head remembering, "boy, was it cold.

"You know whenever you come out of the coal mine, your clothes is all damp from sweat. Then when you come out in 10 or 15 degree, it's a long walk. I tell you many times I took off my pit pants and it would stand up. They was froze."

Going and coming from work was not the only time conditions were not the most comfortable. The same could be true in the mine for a variety of reasons. One big problem was poor ventilation. Carbon dioxide, which the miners called "black damp," and carbon monoxide, which they termed "white damp," were continually troublesome and often caused the miners discomfort as Corso was quick to point out.

"Now black damp . . . you go in there and get tired . . . your arms feel like they awful heavy to lift up, and you get a

headache and it sound like it go 'boom . . . boom . . . boom . . .' You know you don't feel good, so you have to get out.

"Now with white damp then, it would work different. White damp, it would get you sleepy. 'Oh,' you say, 'if I only sleep two minute I feel better.' But if you sit down and close your eyes you're done. That's what white damp is. It'll kill you quick.

"I had my brother come from Europe. I took him below. One day we got in a place, I told him 'Angelo, we'd better get out of here. There's a lot of black damp.'

"'Oh,' he said, 'there's plenty of air.'

"'All right,' I said, 'stay then.' I figured that's the only way you get educated. So I went out in the air. There's a lot of people out there.

"One fella said, 'Where's your brother?' I told him, and I told him we'd get him pretty soon.

"We waited about 15-20 minutes and we went in, and he was kneeled down, leaned up against a prop, and boy we had a heck of a time get him up and walkin'. From then on, you didn't have to tell him there weren't no air in there. He could smell it right now, I mean, he didn't want any more.

"He said, 'You know you left me in there?'

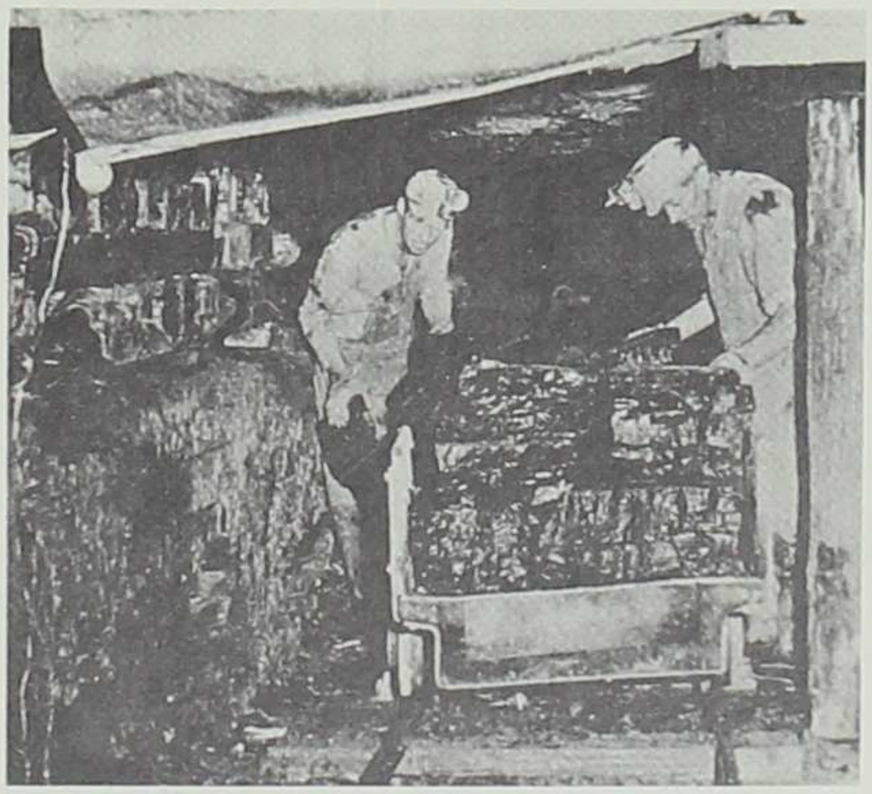
"I said, 'I told you there ain't no air, and you looked at me like I didn't know what I was talkin' about, and I thought you had to learn, even if it was the hard way, then you'd never forget.'"

Apparently detecting lack of good air was not the only thing learned the hard way.

"I done everything in the coal mine but foreman, boss, I never was that, but I done everything else, an' as you go on you learn by yourself, you know what I mean, you just judge today what you done and see what gonna happen and tomorrow you change it if you need to."

When asked what his favorite job in the mines was, Corso shifted uneasily in his chair and replied "firing shot."

As mining machines were used only sporadically in Iowa, coal was generally shaken from the seam by blasting, and subsequently removed by hand to mule or pony drawn cars in the main entries, or directly to a hoist for removal to the surface. The "shot firing," or blasting, included many steps: determining the place-



The Pearson Mine in 1945, little changed from the early days of the century.

Firing shot in a Monroe County mine near Albia in 1905.

ment of the shot in the coal seam, drilling the holes, insertion of the powder and fuse, and finally, firing the shot. This entire process was originally carried out by the individual miners in the numerous working rooms off the major entries.

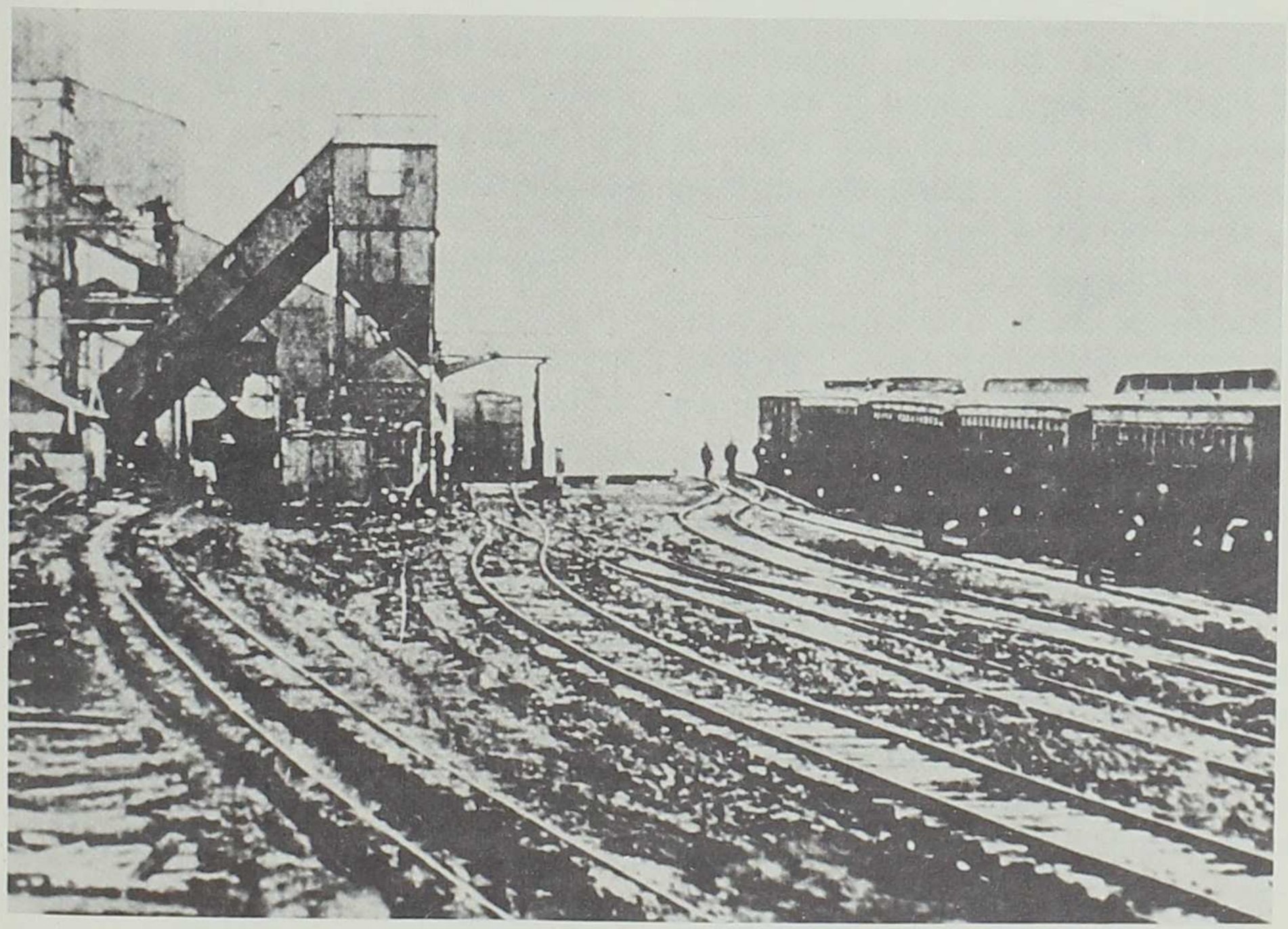
Blasting carried with it the potential for disaster. The chance for accident was increased, as Corso pointed out, by the fact that new miners were often turned loose in a room with minimal instructions and were then expected to remove coal by trial and error.

The death and damage occurring in "shooting" related accidents eventually resulted in mine operators hiring "shot firers," men like Corso, whose experience qualified them for certification by the mine inspector, to inspect and fire shots for the entire mine. The chance for acci-

dent was great, however, and Corso is still amazed he came out of that work alive.

"There were shot firers in them days. All the rest of the miners go in, start work say 7 o'clock. I'll go in about 1 o'clock, after dinner. Then you go around and examine all them holes. Course you have to have a miner paper. You have to pass inspection to do them kind of job. The mine inspector, he gave the tests. Once you passed they gave you the paper. Once you got that paper, you could go in an' condemn that shot. Nobody else could say, 'Well, this and that,' 'cause you got the right to do it. Course you got to know how they made them shots; there's a whole lot to that, your height of the coal and thickness . . . and the length too. There's a whole lot of things to go through." As Corso continued, it became evident that even knowing these things was no absolute insurance against accidents.

"Them days I would like to shoot shot, be a shot firer. But now I get a little older, and I realize what I was doin'. Any human that would do that kind of job, or any



Consolidation Coal Company Mine No. 19, near Bucknell, Iowa, early in the century.

coal miner that would do that kind of job, ain't got no respect for his own life. You might as well walk in front of a bunch of kids that got shotguns with the trigger pulled back. It'd be the same thing.

"That's one of the most dangerous things there is. Everybody's gone, and you're in there by yourself, and you have to go around and shoot all them holes. Sometimes you come out all right; sometimes . . . there's a lot of times I didn't." And those times make one agree with his earlier reservations about shot firing.

"A lot of times . . . they call it an explosion. I don't know if you've heard of it or not, an explosion in the mine? Sometimes it's just a wind, but it could take an iron rail and twist it around, or push a car—it'll move anything. Many time I had a hold of a rail, you know, on the track, and I put my hand around it and hang onto it. It throwed me around. That was a bad thing to do, because when it blow like that, the wind push a car, and it'd smash your fingers.

"Sometimes there's a fire from the coal dust. That's what they call a 'bad shot.' I been in two different times—in the hot place . . . that is an explosion and then in the hot place. It singed the hair all around my cap. You know I had a cap on, and it singed my hair all around. It's just like you take a match and work around your arm. You know your hair singe? It'd be the same thing."

Some miners feel a kind of kinship to the coal mines, but Corso has no sentimental illusions about his former work.

"If I know what I know today, when I was young, I would never gone back in a coal mine. My kid, my oldest boy, after he graduated from high school he said, 'Dad, why don't you ask the boss for a double place?' "

"I said, 'What for?'

"He said, 'Well, I can come in and help you.' Well I thought that was all right, but I told him, 'I appreciate what you said, but I tell you something,' I said, 'just because I was a mule all my life, that doesn't mean I want to raise a bunch of mules.' I said, 'Just forget about it. If you want to go down in the mine, go down on your own. But,' I said, 'I'll never show you nothin'.' "

And, none of his sons ever did work in the mines, which was just as well, as the future for miners in Iowa was dimming. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, most mines in the state had closed. Today there are few men like John Corso who started working in the coal mines during the boom period of Iowa mining and recall the conditions they had to contend with.

Corso has one philosophy that runs as an undercurrent through much of his conversation, and a miner would have to be a proponent of that philosophy to overcome much of what he had overcome, and with such good humor. That philosophy surfaced in a discussion of the dangers and deaths resulting from coal mining.

"Everything . . . well, it's just like the old man said," he explains, "you have to take the sour with the sweet and the sweet with the sour. That's it." □

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The map of Ft. Atkinson in the January/February issue which appeared on page 18 was printed incorrectly. The top of the map should be south.

Neither Division of the State Historical Society nor the editor assumes any responsibility for statements of fact or opinion made by contributors.

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