

The
Palimpsest

VOLUME 56 NUMBER 4

JULY / AUGUST 1975



Stained glass from M. A. Disbrow & Co.

IOWA STATE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT
DIVISION OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Division of the State Historical Society

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Cover: A stained-glass window that could be purchased by mail-order from M. A. Disbrow & Company of Lyons, Iowa. The window—priced at \$6 per square foot—was offered in the 1909 Disbrow catalogue. Arthur Hart explores the story of this Iowa milling company, beginning on p. 98.



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.

M. A. DISBROW & COMPANY: CATALOGUE ARCHITECTURE

by Arthur A. Hart

Some of Iowa's most impressive monuments of a bygone era are the elaborate Victorian mansions, covered with "gingerbread" ornamentation, which may be found in almost every Iowa town, standing in marked contrast to today's houses of standardized plainness. What skill and imagination, we say, must have gone into the decorative trim which gives these beautiful houses their characteristic charm. But what we fail to realize as we look at what seem to be examples of individuality and romantic expression in architecture is that they actually represent the beginning of mass-production and standardization in building. Rather than the products of skilled and imaginative local craftsmen, the ornaments were more likely fashioned on machines in the many woodworking factories in the Middle West. These businesses mass produced standardized building components such as doors, windows, fireplaces, staircases, porch pillars, and mouldings. Lumberyards, building contractors, and carpenters from coast to coast ordered such items by number from elaborate illustrated catalogues.

M. A. Disbrow & Company, established at Lyons, Iowa (now part of Clinton), in 1856 was one such woodworking firm which played a significant and far-reaching role in the national standardization of

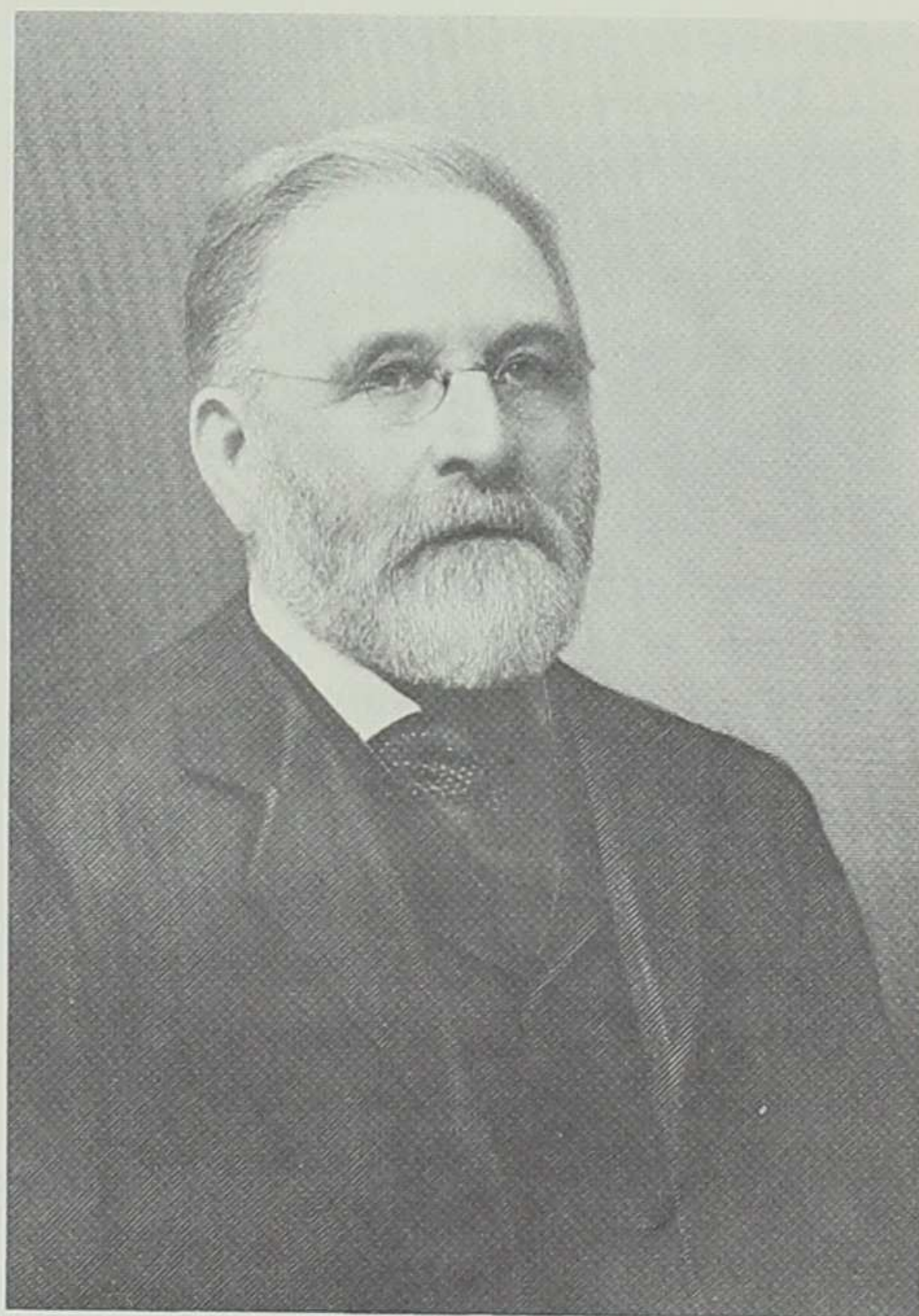
building components. The company was incorporated in 1884 and opened another factory in Omaha two years later. By 1912, there was a branch called Disbrow Sash & Door Co. in Cedar Rapids. Later in the century the company opened a factory in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The firm remains in existence today, carrying on operations at the Omaha site.

Martin Disbrow, the founder of the company, was a hard-working American businessman in the Horatio Alger tradition. Born in Connecticut in 1832, he was orphaned at the age of three. His grandparents raised him, and from them—they were strict disciplinarians—he learned the virtue of hard work and the folly of idleness. These principles stayed with him throughout his life and his business career. According to a biographical sketch published in 1901, he believed emphatically that "work was the salvation of the individual and of the world, it being the lever that raises people to the position of usefulness."

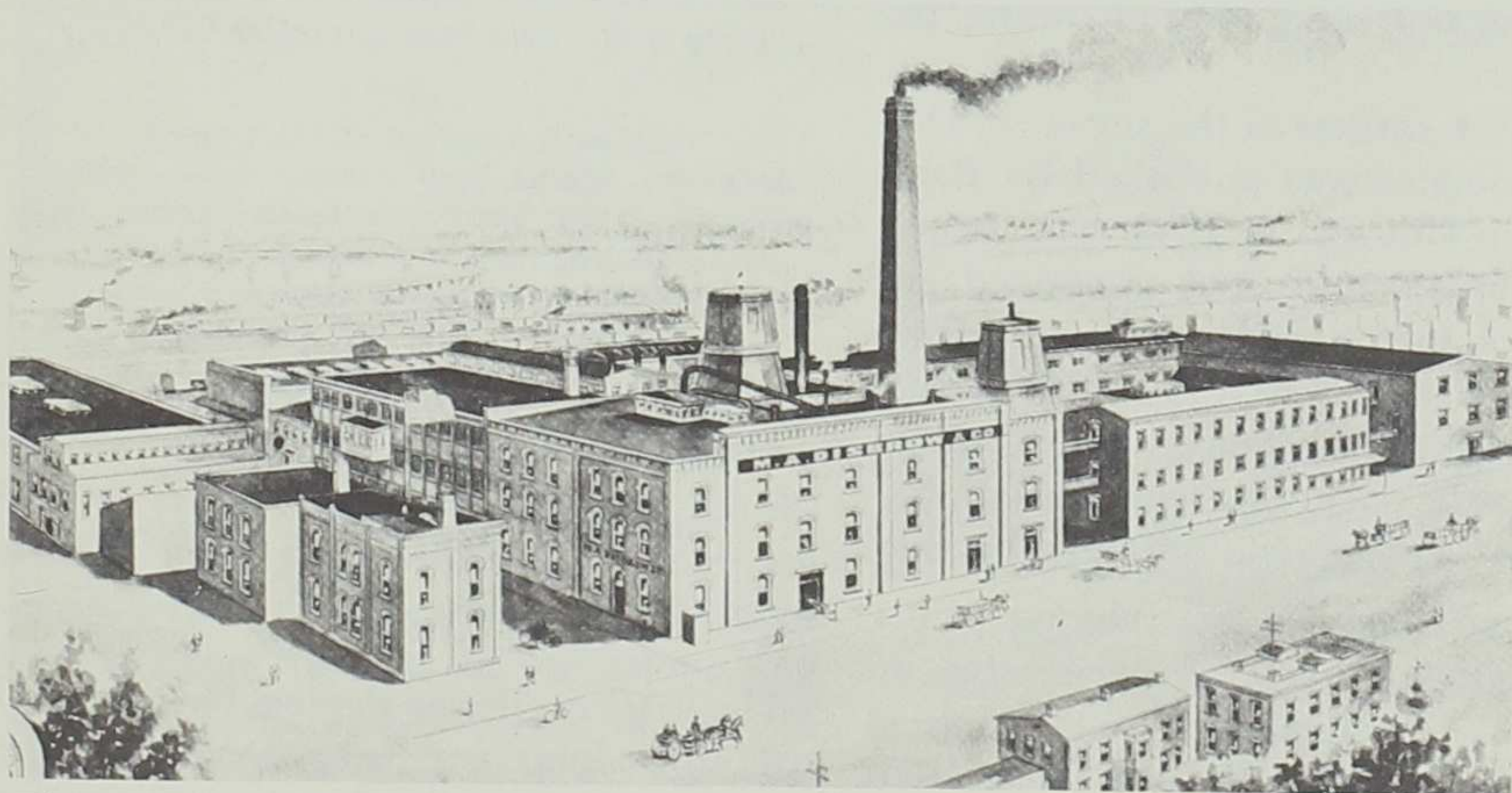
At age nineteen Disbrow set out for New York to earn his fortune. He became involved in a fight between the city's milk suppliers. Dealers on Long Island were selling milk from cows fed on garbage and the left-over hops mash from breweries. Rural dairymen were trying to substitute

their own milk products from grass or grain-fed cattle. This was a major struggle in New York at the time, and Disbrow evidently threw a great deal of youthful energy into the fray. He finally collapsed under the strain and took his stake of \$1600 in search of a healthful and promising location in the West. Following a journey by rail, he settled in Lyons, Iowa.

In 1856 at the age of 24, Disbrow began to invest his money and drew on the financial aid of his family—principally his sister Sarah. He purchased several lots in the town and began plans for a millwork factory. Lyons had been a major part of the lumber industry ever since loggers had first boomed huge rafts of timber down the sloughs of Wisconsin and onto the Mississippi. Several big mills sprang up along the banks of the river and began



Martin A. Disbrow



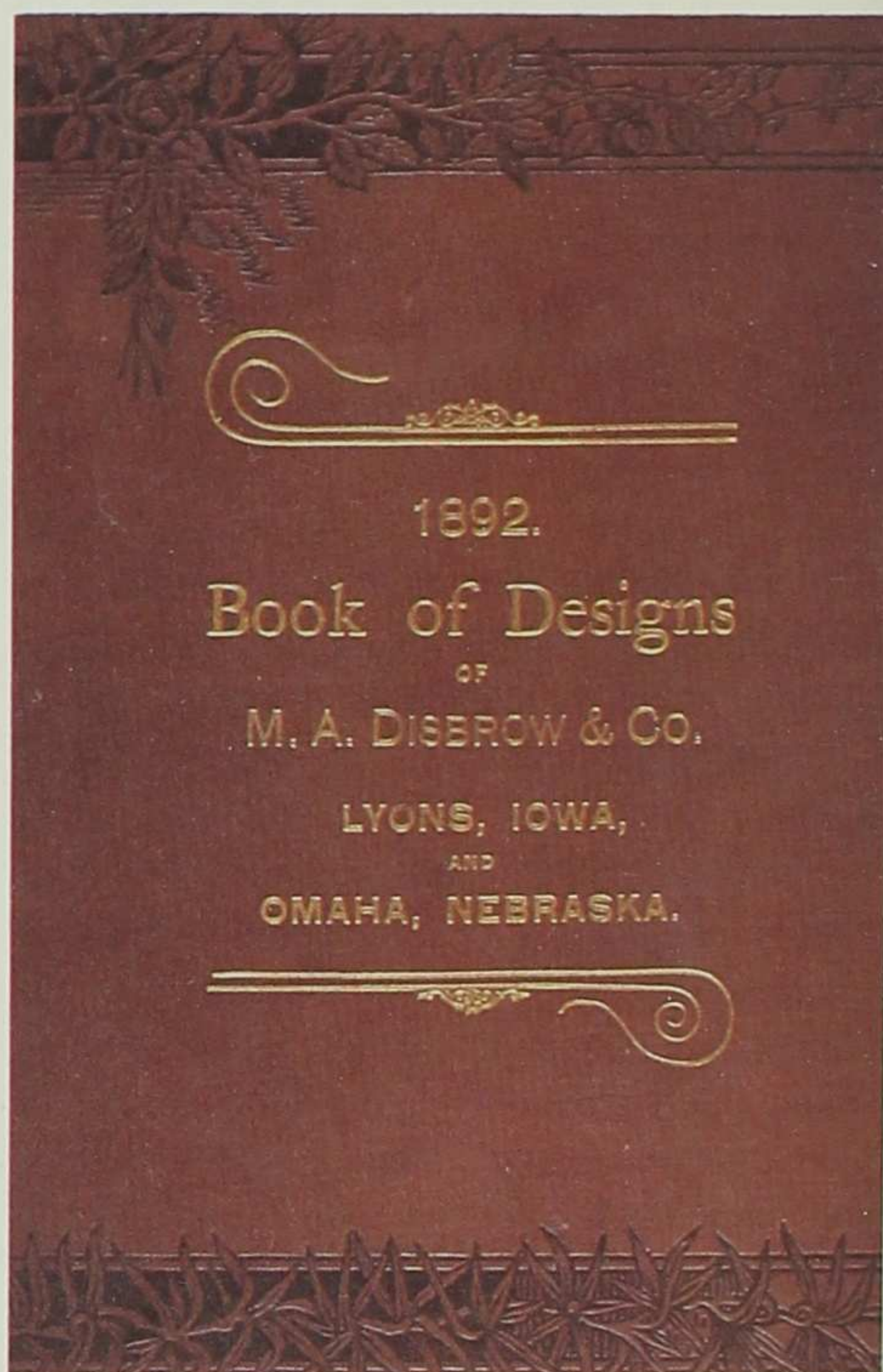
The Lyons, Iowa plant of Disbrow & Company, about 1904. The buildings look impressive, but M. A. Disbrow liked to have his factory idealized in drawings. The small building at the left (flying the American flag) still stands at 2301 McKinley Street in Clinton. It served as an office building for Disbrow & Company and is now a Knights of Columbus hall (from Atlas of the State of Iowa, 1904).

to process the raw logs into useful materials. Disbrow's first shop was a modest 24 by 48 foot building. He had only a small 30 horsepower engine to drive the milling machinery. Soon, however, the business grew, and the physical plant was expanded to keep pace.

The taste of American builders during the later years of the nineteenth century called for much ornamental elaboration of the basic house designs. A parade of styles—Gothic, Queen Anne, Art Nouveau—demanded intricate detailing on both the exterior and interior of buildings. Disbrow's factory turned out such frills and fancies in profusion. As the business grew, Disbrow & Company began to issue catalogues, illustrating the variety of products available. Eventually, the catalogues incorporated items manufactured by other firms, but distributed, at least in part, by the Lyons company. A reading of the catalogues gives a clear idea of the standardization of building components and the wide variety of designs used during the period.

One of the earliest of the surviving Disbrow catalogues was published by Rand McNally in Chicago in 1892. The attractive and well-bound book contained engravings of many ornamental and structural details which have since been discovered in Victorian houses across America. The title page gave an idea of the variety of components offered by the firm:

COMBINED BOOK
OF
SASH, DOORS, BLINDS
MOULDINGS, STAIR WORK, MANTELS,
AND ALL KINDS OF INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR FINISH.
GLASS LISTS,
LATEST STYLES, ELEVATIONS, DESIGNS, ETC.,

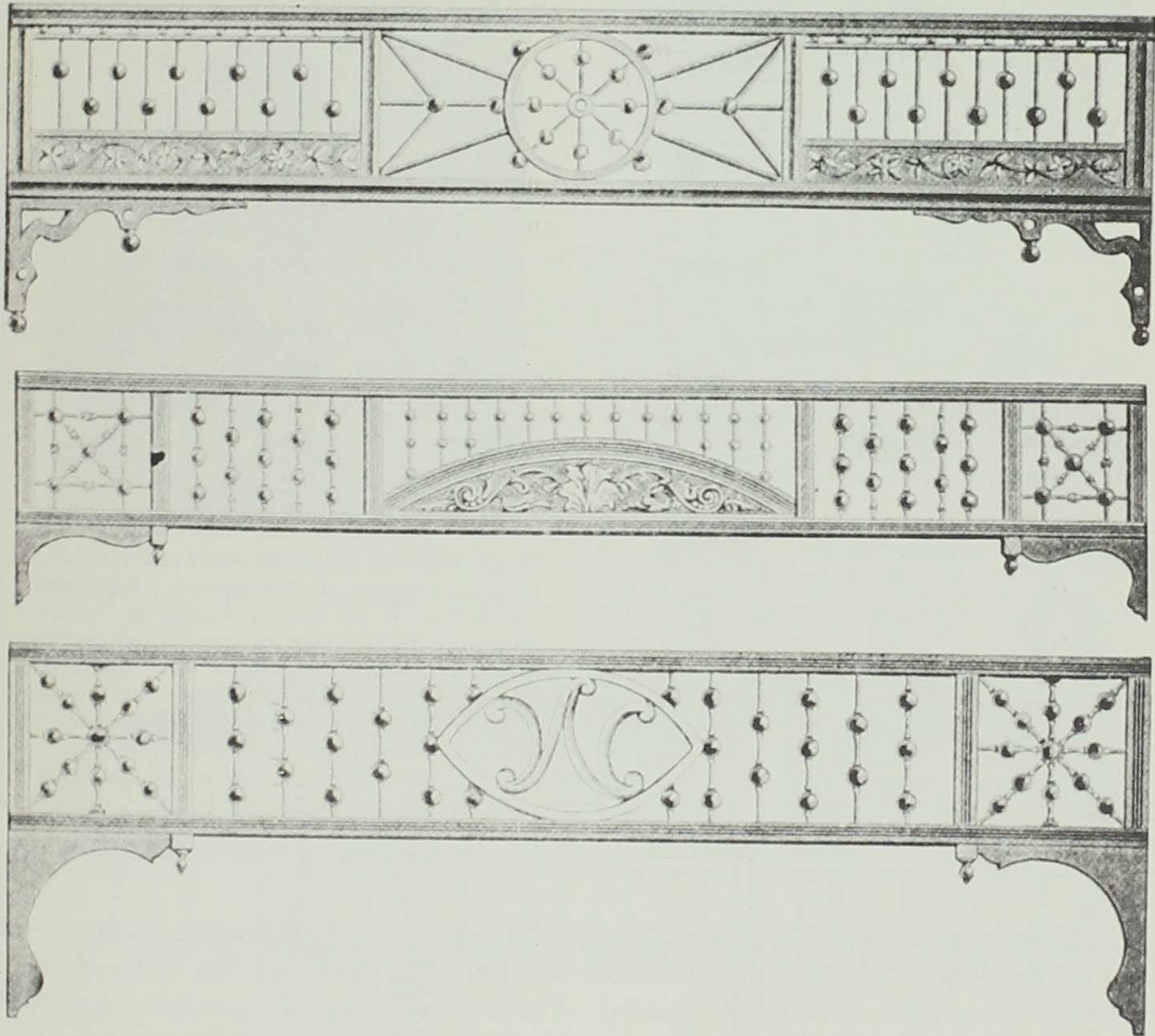


(Courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society)

OF
EMBOSSSED, GROUND, AND CUT GLASS
BRACKETS, SCROLL AND TURNED WORK, WOOD
DRAPERY, STORE FRONTS, CORNER BLOCKS AND
BEADS, PLINTH BLOCKS, SAWED
AND TURNED BALUSTRADES, DOOR AND WINDOW
FRAMES, PULPITS, PEW ENDS, ETC.
ALSO REVISED EDITION
NEW UNIVERSAL MOULDING BOOK
GIVING FULL SIZE OF MOULDINGS, AND
THEIR EXACT MEASURE-
MENT IN INCHES ON EACH MOULDING.

The 1892 catalogue depicted a large selection of doors and windows with their accompanying frames, baseboards, wainscoting, and picture rails—a fine exposition of Queen Anne taste in interiors. “Portière Work,” the elaborate spool and

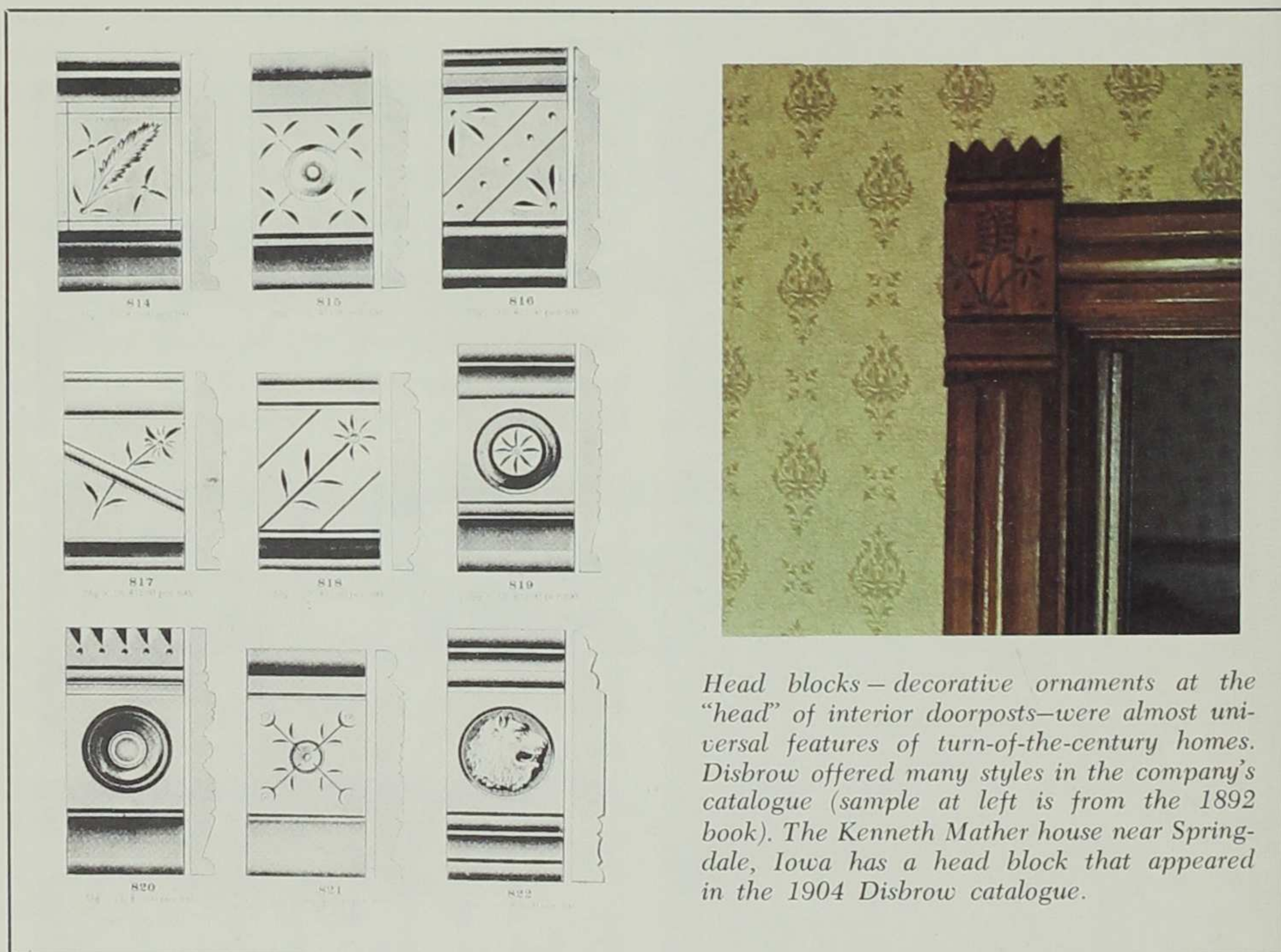
The fancy portière work used to decorate large doorways between rooms. These styles were offered in the 1892 catalogue (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).



spindle decorations for arches between rooms and for front hallways, was also shown. Head blocks, especially of the familiar "bullseye" pattern that once sat atop the corners of nearly all interior door frames, were offered in an astonishing variety. In all, 132 different designs of head blocks were made and sold by Disbrow & Company in 1892. The most ornate went for only \$60 per hundred, while the common "bullseye" went for only \$5 per hundred. Although this price

was for blocks in white or yellow pine, the same designs were available in red oak or birch for 50 per cent more, or in walnut at double the price.

The popular Queen Anne taste called for natural woods, and it was the custom to do each of the principal rooms of a fine house in a different wood. Cherry was popular, as were curly maple and mahogany. For those who could not afford the real thing, imitation hand-grained doors were available in pine. Hand-grain-



Head blocks—decorative ornaments at the “head” of interior doorposts—were almost universal features of turn-of-the-century homes. Disbrow offered many styles in the company’s catalogue (sample at left is from the 1892 book). The Kenneth Mather house near Springdale, Iowa has a head block that appeared in the 1904 Disbrow catalogue.

ing had been practiced for centuries, and the 1904 catalogue described the Disbrow method: “[The pine doors] are painted two coats, best lead and oil paint, and are carefully grained.” The grain effect was achieved with a variety of comb-like tools and occasionally with turkey feathers. The catalogue claimed that these hand-grained doors “have all the appearance of genuine oak, at much lower cost.”

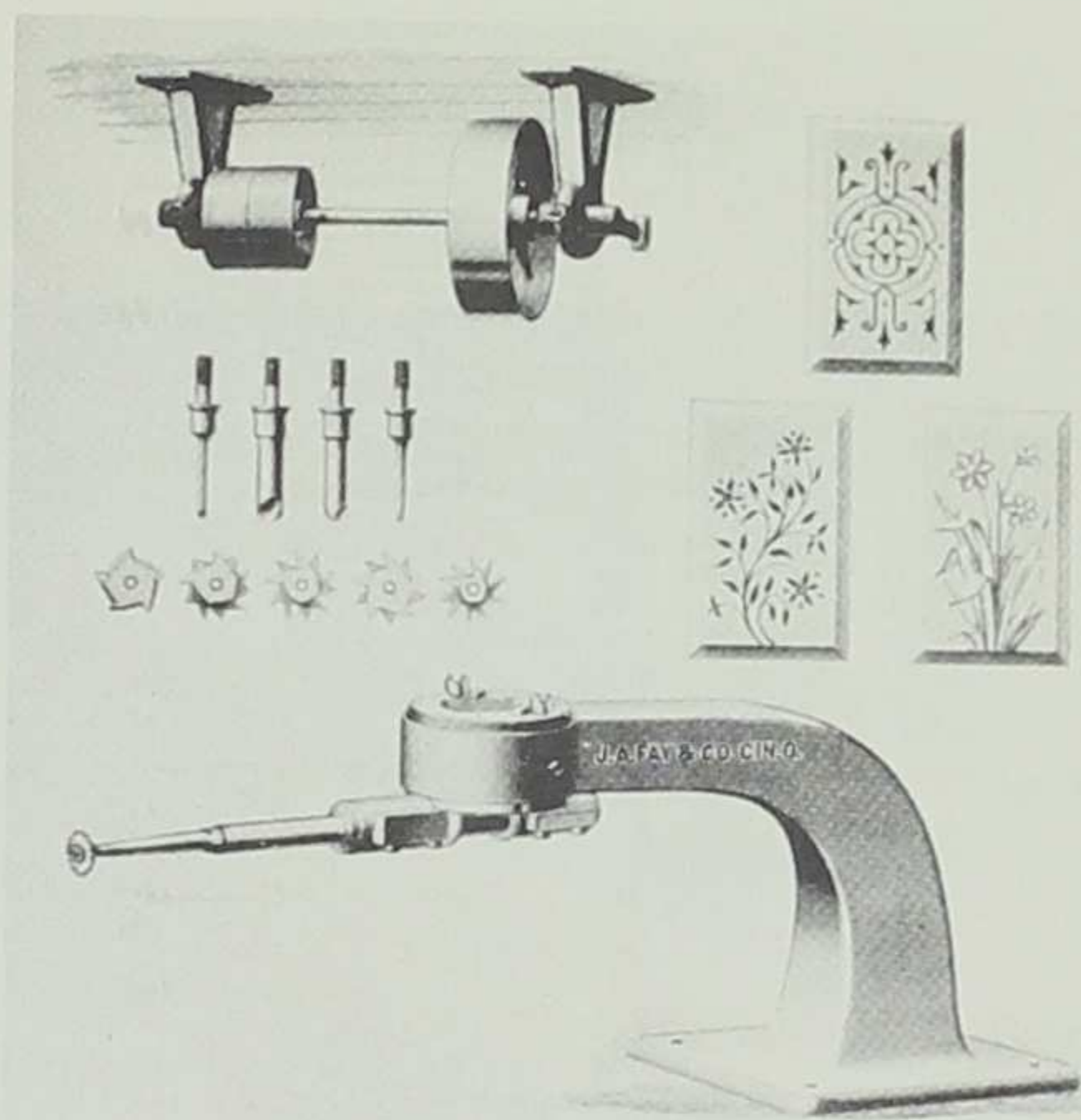
Entire porches in the Queen Anne style were available from the Lyons firm. Builders could choose a complete design or mix and match individual elements to suit themselves. Disbrow offered seven pine newel posts for porches and eleven “veranda posts.” There were 34 outside balusters

available, about half of these turned (on a lathe) and half cut (on a band-saw). Fourteen drawings of porches suggested how the elements could be combined to achieve stylish Queen Anne results. The somewhat fantastic effects achieved will be familiar to observers of houses of the period.

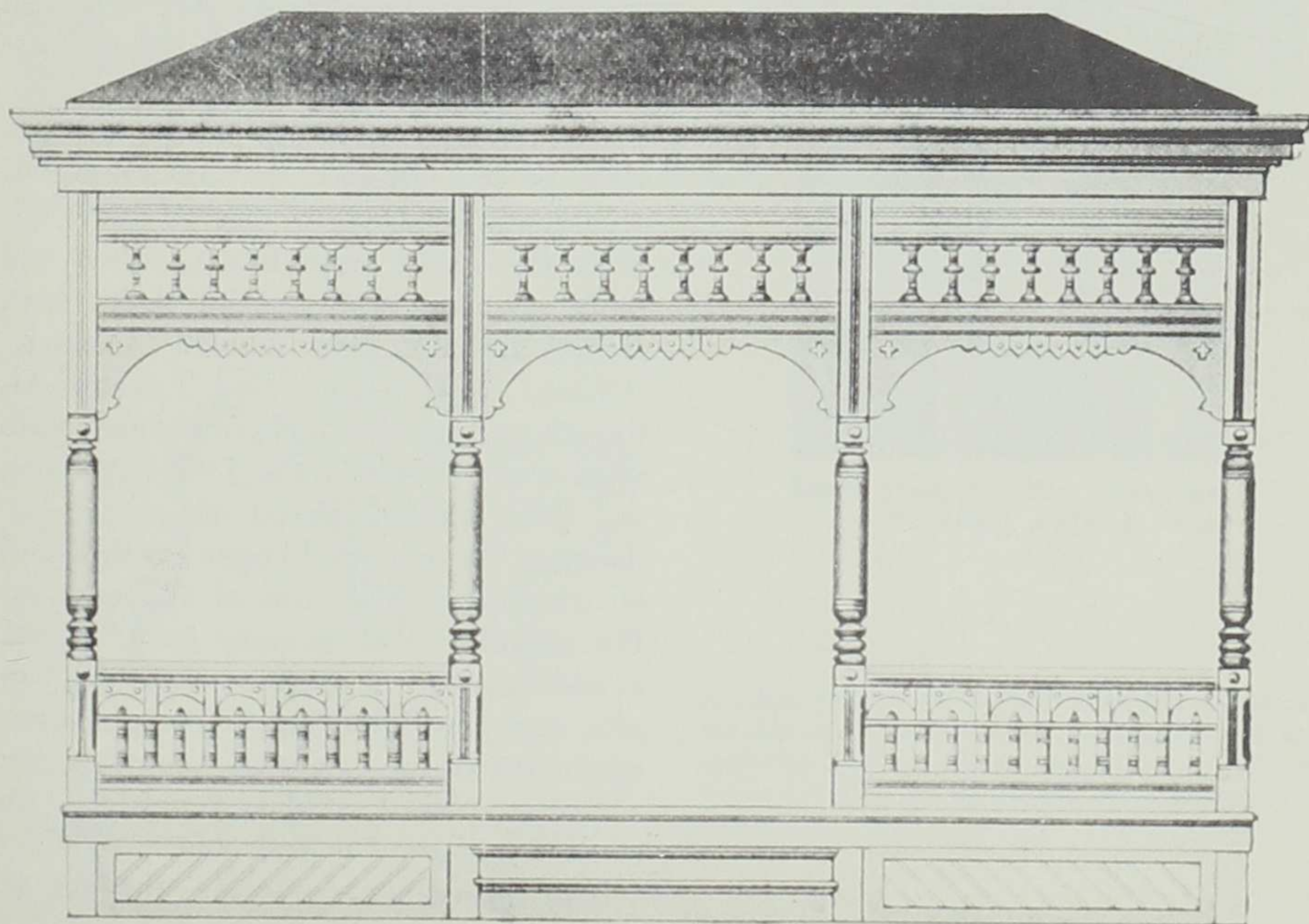
Bay window designs, made up of elements from the Disbrow factory, were also shown complete. They suggest that the reliance on factory-produced architectural elements helped make a gradual transition from the Italianate style of mid-century through the mansard of the 1870s and '80s to the Queen Anne of the late '80s and '90s. Components in the 1892

Disbrow catalogue could be used to achieve any one of the styles popular after the Civil War.

Nine pages of brackets emphasized the role of woodworking machines in achieving complicated "hand carved" effects. By putting together as many as seven one-inch boards, band-sawed in differing conformations, a sculptured effect was achieved. Linear patterns were incised with a special tool called a Surface Ornamenting Machine. Such machines, belt driven from a line shaft, were standard in woodworking factories in the late nineteenth century. A variety of carving spindles, turning at 800 revolutions per minute, could be manipulated by the operator to produce any decoration desired.



The Surface Ornamenting Machine (as pictured in the Fay Company Catalogue). This belt-driven device cut the designs on head blocks, brackets, and other architectural details.



Complete porches, often with intricate details, were available from Disbrow & Company. This one is from the 1892 catalogue (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).



An ornate millwork porch detail from Blackfoot, Idaho.

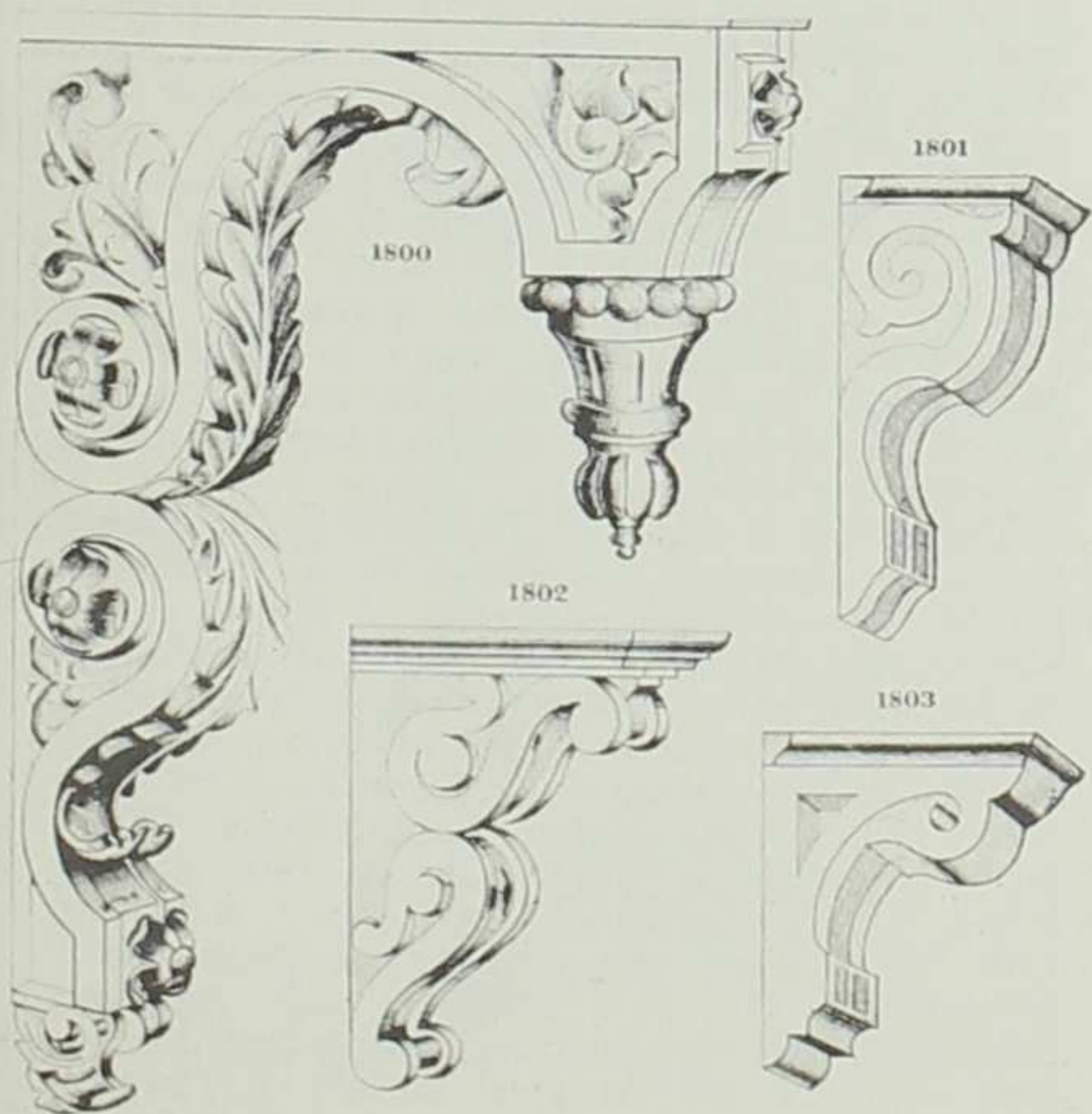
The company also manufactured many styles of ornamental gable decoration and vergeboards, the fancy designs which drip from the eaves of Victorian houses. The catalogues of 1892, 1904, 1908, 1913, and 1916 all show a wide choice of designs. Since the 1892 catalogue offered these gable ornaments in "any size or pitch" and asked customers to write for prices, it seems likely they were custom made. Later editions featured a practical innovation that made the sale of gable ornaments a lot simpler. The "adjustable" ornament could be fitted to roofs of any pitch, since it was made up of three pieces, one on each side of the peak connected with a center ornament positioned like the cross arm of a letter "A."

Commercial buildings and churches were no less affected by the ubiquitous ornamentation. Disbrow offered the woodwork for whole store fronts, office and bank counters, and special doors with etched and cut glass labeled "Cashier," "Office," "Bookkeeper," and "Private." Although only two examples of beveled plate glass were shown in the 1892 catalogue, the 1904 edition offered 49—ample evidence of the increased vogue for this kind of window by the turn of the century. For churches, the company could supply a wide variety of Gothic windows, pulpits, and pews. Starting in 1904, a regular feature of the catalogues was a section of leaded colored art glass, reproduced by stone lithography in full color.

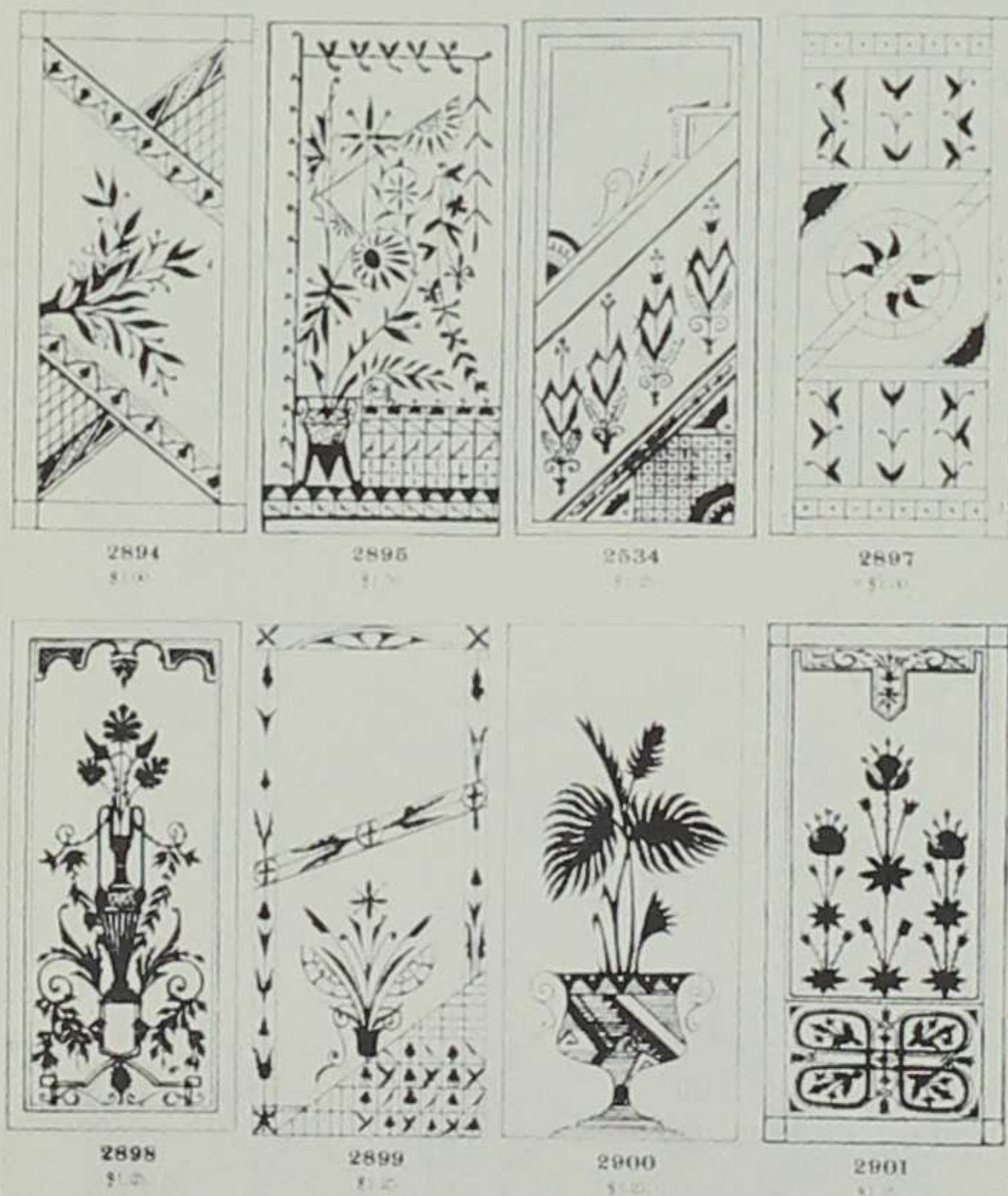
The catalogues show the changes in taste of American builders as the Queen Anne style which dominated the earlier



Painted to accentuate their rich design, these brackets from the 1892 catalogue grace a set of doorways in Springfield, Massachusetts.



Brackets (one of the favorite ornamental devices of the late nineteenth century) were offered in many styles by Disbrow. These are from the 1892 catalogue (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).



Designs for window glass, 1892 (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).

Disbrow offerings slowly gave way to Art Nouveau (influenced by the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley and the art glass of Louis Tiffany), and in later catalogues to Classic Revival. In 1908, the catalogue pictured a style known today as Craftsman, which is generally supposed by historians not to have been introduced until later.

Technological changes were reflected in the catalogues too, usually in the substitution of machine methods for handicraft. A good illustration was the appearance of "art sand blast glass" in the 1904 book. A stencil was applied mechanically to the glass before blasting, which produced, almost instantly, designs of incredible complexity. Cut or ground glass

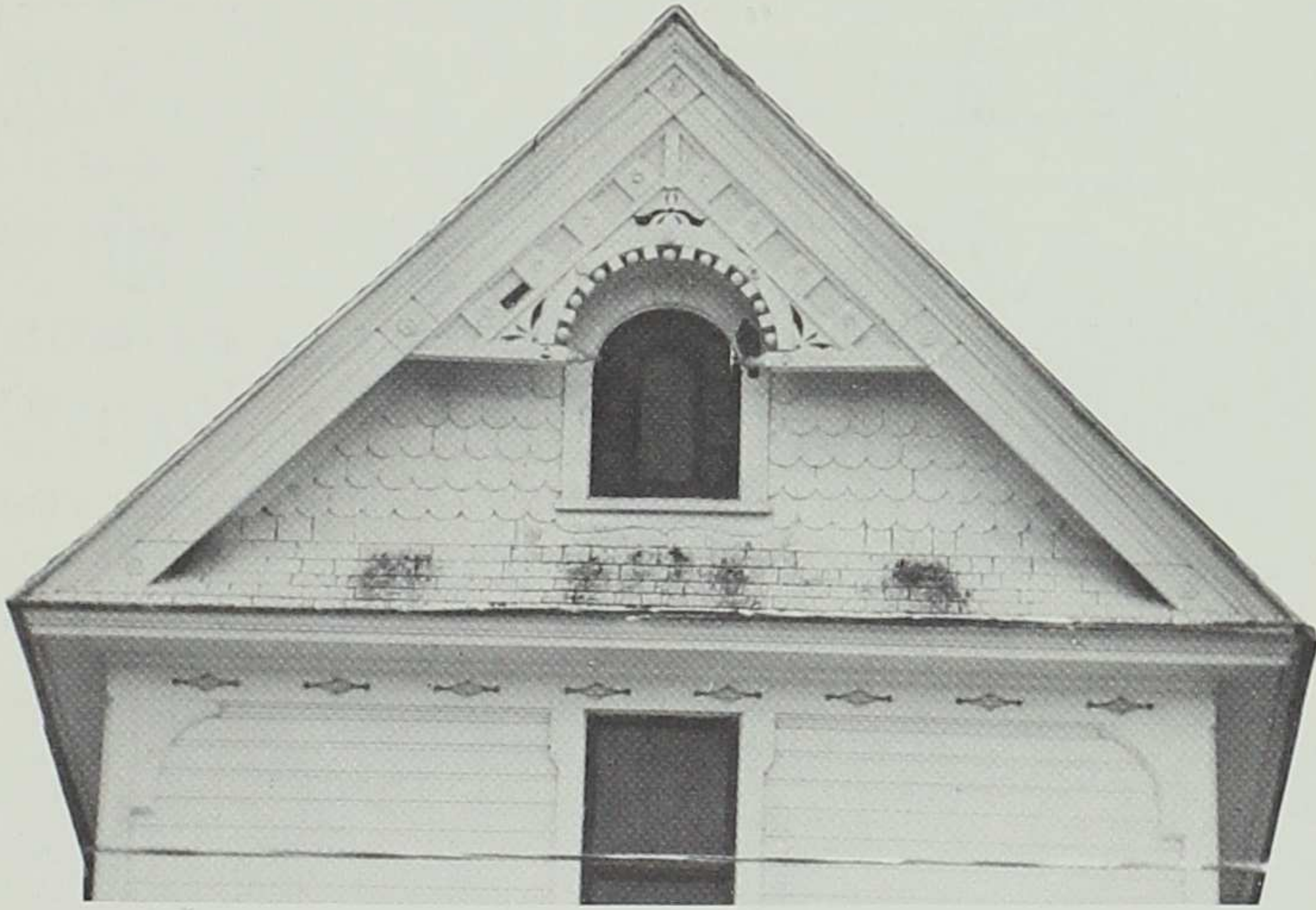
designs, most prevalent in the 1892 catalogue, were done either manually or through acid etching over a resist—both slower and more painstaking processes.

The complexity and scope of the Disbrow & Company catalogues reflected the growth and success of Martin Disbrow's enterprise. The stern virtues of hard work and determination which the young entrepreneur had carried West served him well as he oversaw a rapidly developing firm. He passed on much of his business philosophy to a young nephew, Maynard B. Copeland, who eventually became Disbrow's successor in managing the firm. Many of Disbrow's letters to Copeland have survived and shed light on the company and the personal style of

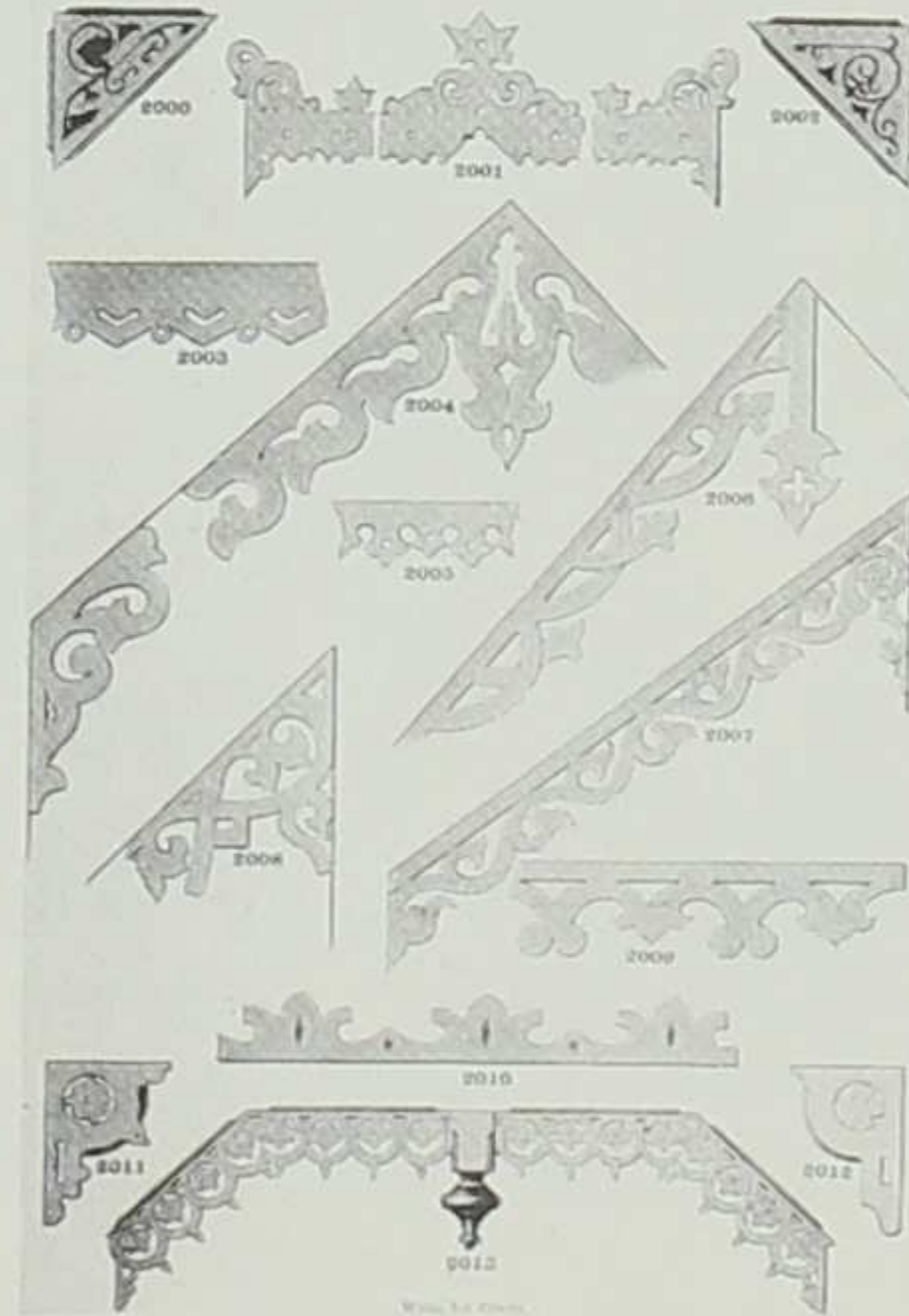
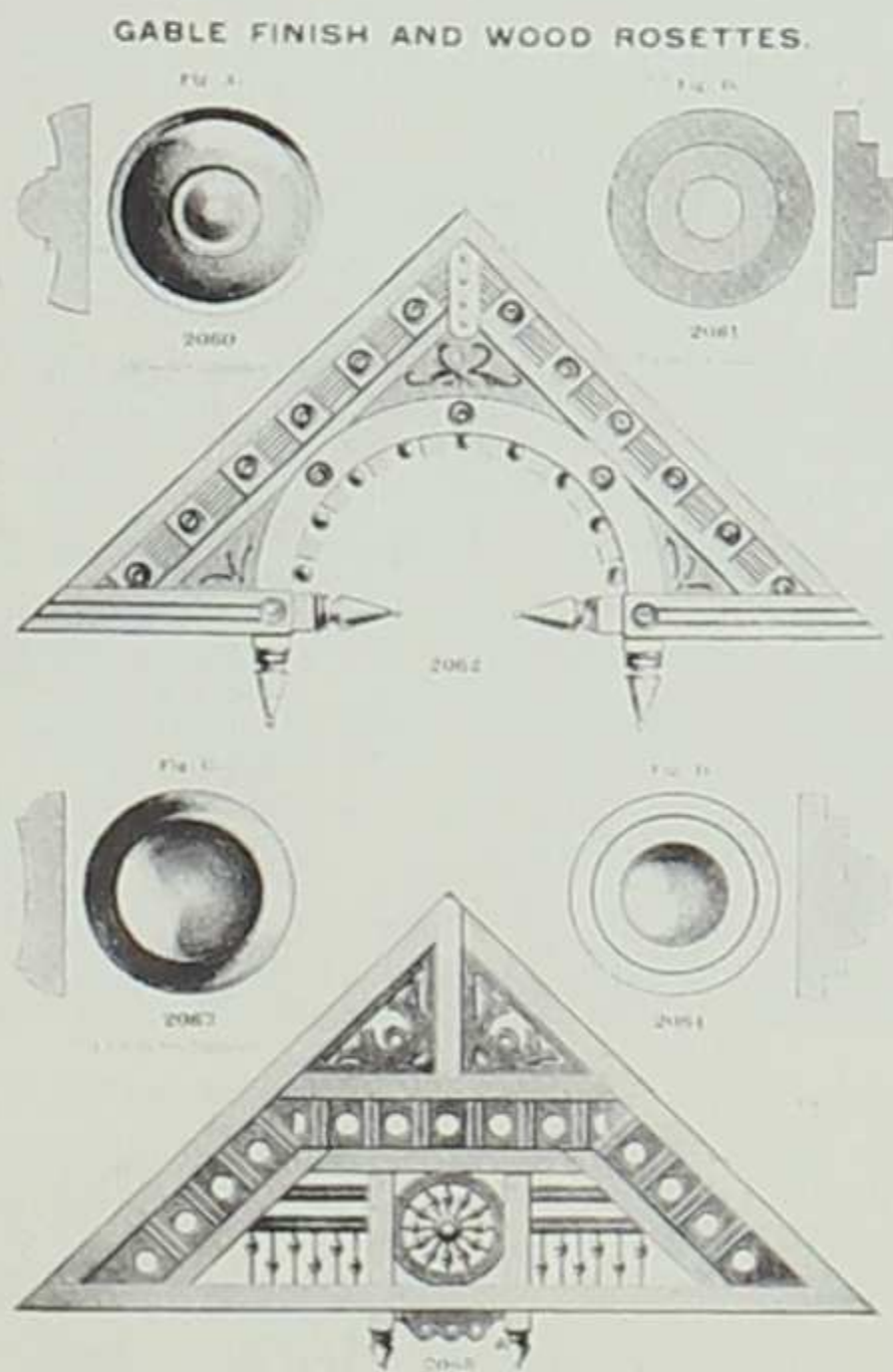
Note on Sources

Two primary sources came together quite by accident to inspire this study. First the 1879 Moore-Delmar mansion in Boise, Idaho, about to be demolished by an Urban Renewal project, was thoroughly researched and documented. Then William G. Dougall of the Idaho Historical Museum staff discovered the 1892 Disbrow catalogue in the reference collection and found that many of the architectural elements pictured in it had been used in the Boise house. Further discoveries of "Disbrow" items throughout Idaho and other Western states began to suggest the tremendous importance of woodworking plants and their catalogues in standardizing decoration in American building.

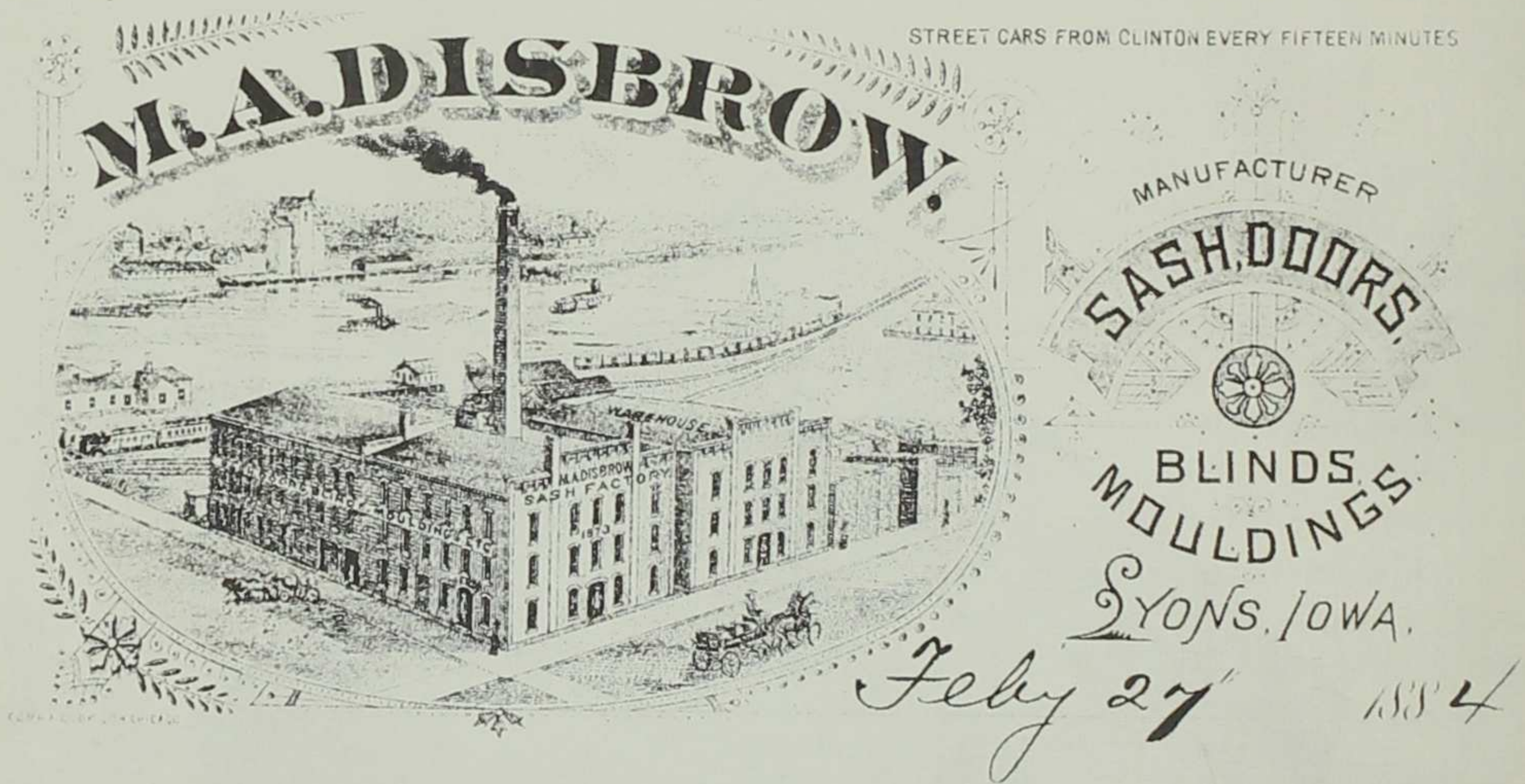
The author is especially indebted to Mr. Joseph C. Glover, president of Disbrow & Co. in Omaha, for his generous extended use of the historical files of the company. These included the Martin A. Disbrow letters quoted in the article, and a number of key documents in the firm's corporate history. Other assistance was rendered by Miss Mary Disbrow of Clinton; Robert Seger, Director of the Clinton Public Library; Mrs. Bernice Johns, Omaha Public Library, and Ms. Lida Lisle Green, Iowa State Historical Department/Division of Historical Museum and Archives. Additional pertinent material was added by the staff of the State Historical Society of Iowa.



A gable finish at 2131 North Second St. in Clinton. This house stands in what was once Lyons, Iowa and is only a few blocks from the former site of the Disbrow works. The millwork shown is identical (except for two small missing pieces, evidently lost through time and neglect) to gable finish number 2062 shown below in the 1892 Disbrow catalogue.



Vergeboards and cornice drapery from the 1892 catalogue (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).



The letterhead of Disbrow & Company, showing the building in 1873 (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).

its founder. The younger man was teaching school in Massachusetts when he first inquired about moving to Lyons and taking a job with the company. Disbrow's answer to the inquiry showed his non-sense approach to life, even when a family member was concerned:

In answer to yours of the 24th inst (which was delayed by blockade of snows etc.) In regard to compensation for your services the amount of compensation is determined by the quality of service rendered. Ability-integrity-perseverance and experience is always in demand in a country like ours. And the law of supply and demand regulates the compensation. So far as my trying to persuade you to come West please do not think of it in that light. I have a vacancy to fill. I wrote mother to that effect as she had spoken of you when here. I thought you might like to come West and try it.—But I don't want you to pull up stakes and come West on my account you are a young man with the world before you it is for you to choose your vocation and location.

Young men come West sometimes and profit by pulling up stakes. If you are satisfactorily located a change would not be desirable.

Copeland came, and before the year was out he was actively engaged in learning the business and undertaking important responsibilities for his uncle. One of his first assignments was to go back to Massachusetts to secure engravings to be used in a Company New Year's card. Disbrow's attitude toward advertising and quality printing, so important to the company's future catalogue operation, was revealed in his letters, dispatched almost daily. On December 8, 1881, he gave Copeland detailed instructions on how the new engraving of the factory at Lyons was to look. Disbrow was not satisfied with the first artist's drawings and told Copeland exactly how to idealize the company's plant: "Carry up the east end of the shop three stories. Also move the lumber piles south a little and put in the

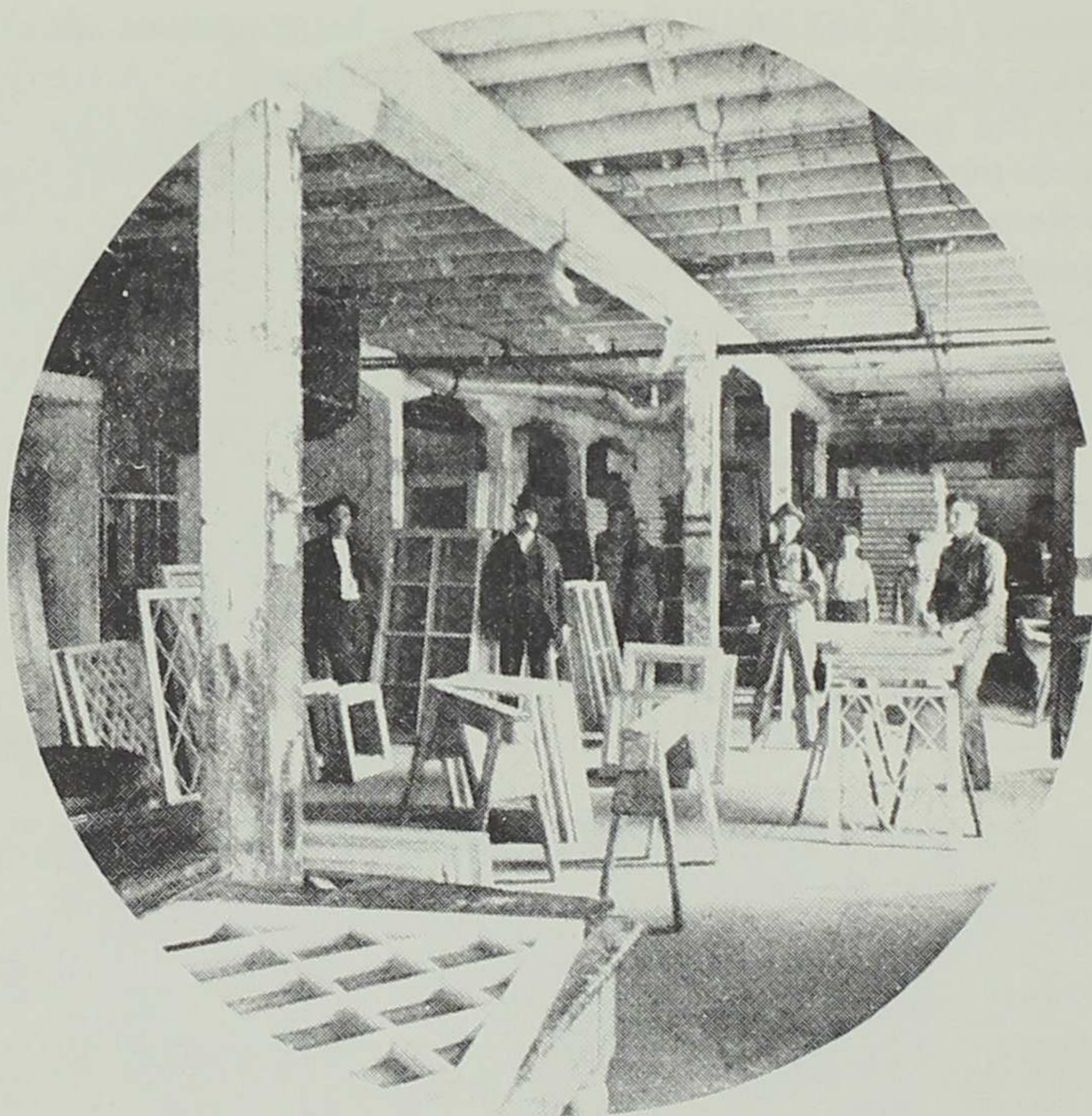
warehouse, 3 stories high and about two-thirds the width of the shop without chimneys and finish the front and what will show of the side the same as the brick. Remember to leave a space between the buildings. You may leave out the two trees. Make house same height as front of Brick in the center. Make any other change you think is necessary, but have the work *well done*. Have a neat note printed thanking them for their patronage and desiring a continuance. . . ." The following day Disbrow sent off further suggestions: "Any designs I think had better be suggestive of our biz in some manner, say either a fine forest or a fine house with

carpenters hanging doors, blinds, and putting on moldings . . ." A further admonition revealed Disbrow's idea of advertising: "Don't be afraid of a little money spent that way. We hope it will be like bread cast upon the water. My idea is to get up something that our customers will keep and not throw in the waste as quick as they get it. . . ."

The incorporation of M. A. Disbrow & Company came in 1884 with Disbrow taking about \$50,000 of the approximately \$69,000 in capital stock. Copeland put in about \$9,000, nearly half of which was apparently owed him for his past three years of work for the company. (During



An office scene from about 1911. Ansel O. Cole, superintendent of the Disbrow Lyons plant and president of the company's Cedar Rapids branch is seated at the left, discussing business with his son, Maynard O. Cole. At the right is Jens Juhl, a former factory foreman who was promoted to clerk. Juhl has before him on the desk a copy of the Disbrow catalogue, apparently the 1909 version (courtesy of Grace and Mary Disbrow, Clinton, Iowa).



Disbrow factory hands with window sashes, inside the Lyons plant.

this time he had lived with Mr. and Mrs. Disbrow in their own home.) In 1886, the corporation opened a warehouse and office at Omaha, and Copeland assumed full charge of the business and was elected president in 1912. (Disbrow's wife, Mary L. Disbrow, served as president of the company between her husband's death in 1906 and Copeland's election.) Ansel O. Cole, a long-time employee and one of the original shareholders, assumed management of the Lyons plant and the Cedar Rapids business.

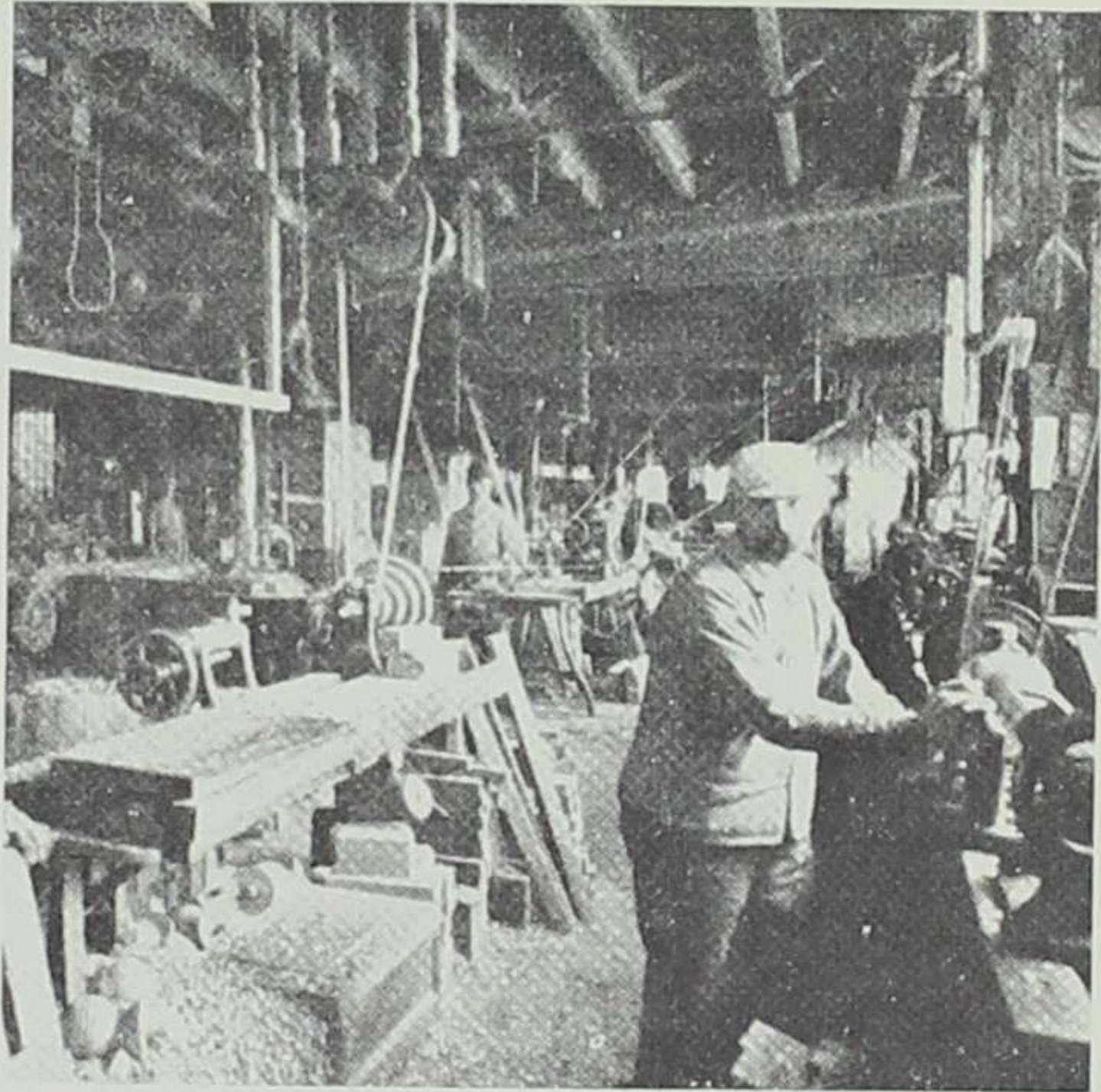
From the time Copeland moved to Omaha in 1886, Disbrow wrote to him almost daily. Three years of this corres-

pondence, happily, has survived almost intact. Although it dealt principally with day to day business concerns, it also was liberally sprinkled with advice from the older man to the younger, revealing the mind of an Iowa manufacturer of that day in an interesting, and occasionally amusing, way.

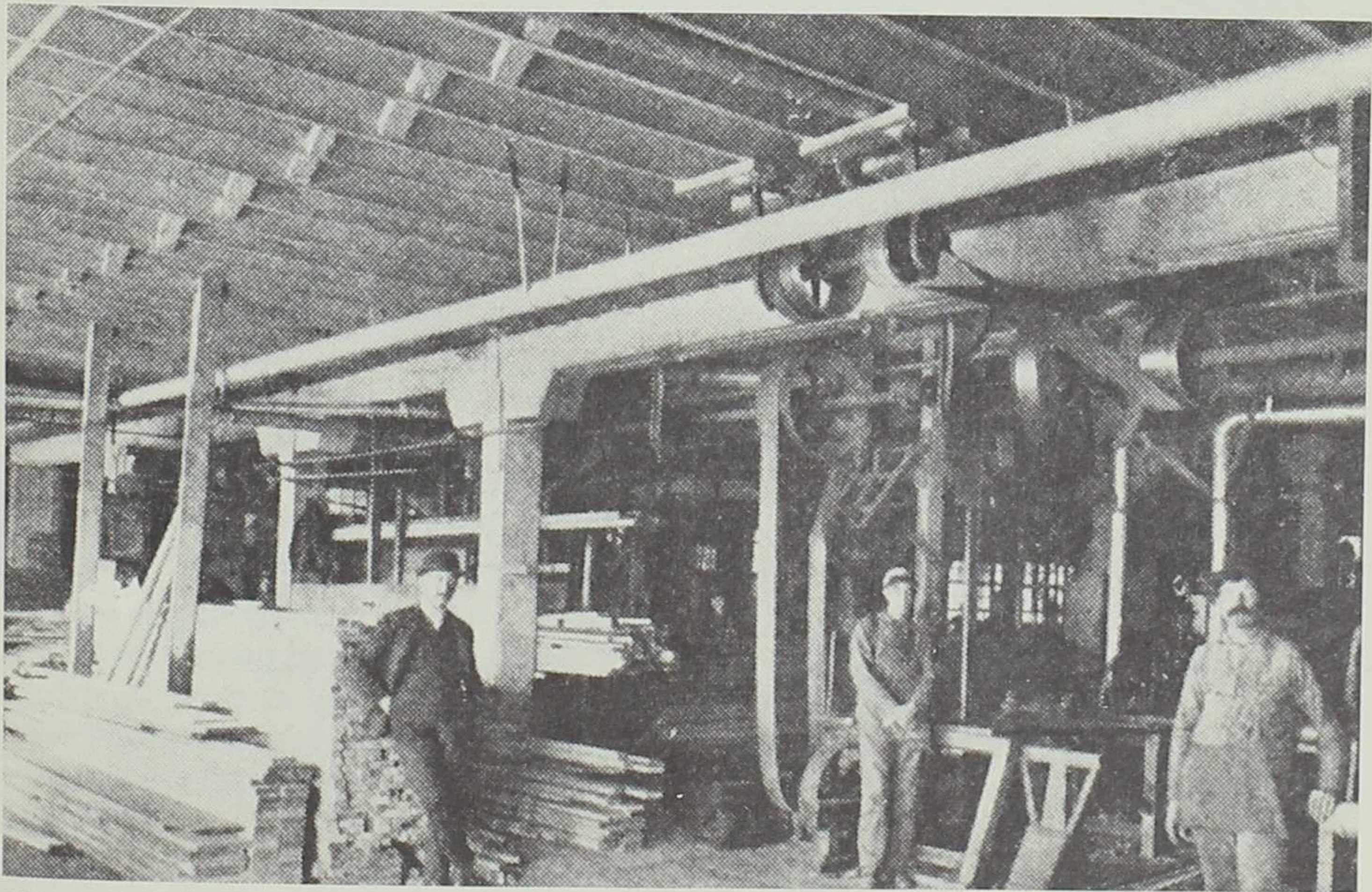
Disbrow did not try to conceal his own frailties and prejudices, but expressed them with humor and candor. When Copeland had apparently requested shipment of several different orders simultaneously, all of which were being made in the Lyons plant, Disbrow replied, "We cannot jump around much without serious loss. You

know German help is easily confused. They will take up a job and push it through and then take up another and so on, but if they are changed around much they get confused and don't accomplish much."

Faced with the classic American problem of "meeting a payroll," Disbrow often made reference in his letters to the urgent necessity of collecting outstanding accounts in time for a deadline. He frequently praised Copeland for getting the money to Lyons in time, and told him not to get discouraged when things were rough. During the economic recessions which plagued businesses in the 1880s, Disbrow displayed considerable poise and optimism in letters to his young Omaha manager. He told him not to be too con-



Workers at power-driven lathes. These machines were the staples of the millwork business and used to turn a variety of decorative products. Note the turned spindles suspended from the ceiling.



The Disbrow Lyons plant.



A formal portrait of factory workers, showing a wide range of age. Jens Juhl, former factory foreman, is the man with the bowler (courtesy of Grace and Mary Disbrow).

cerned when a valued employee was hired away by another manufacturer or to worry about those who threatened to quit if their salaries were not raised. Let them better themselves if they could, he said, and remember, there would be one less pay check to worry about. Occasionally, Disbrow mentioned employees who he wished would quit and discussed with Copeland potential replacements for people he had decided to fire.

"Some folks think an average of 6 hours labor per day is all that is required of them and even less, with a plenty of vacations of from one to five days at a time and large salaries. I don't like to see anyone overworked but I do like to see them busy 10 hours a day when they have good

pay. I feel sometimes like kicking somebody." This was about as irritated as Disbrow allowed himself to get in a letter, except when his rheumatism troubled him, and even then he could temper impatience with humor: "We are getting some heavy showers this A.M. It is warm and close—good weather for the rheumatics. I have it in my right arm so it bothers to write, besides it is not conducive to my *good temper*, however I must grin and bear it—but, I feel as if a good quarrel wouldn't come amiss."

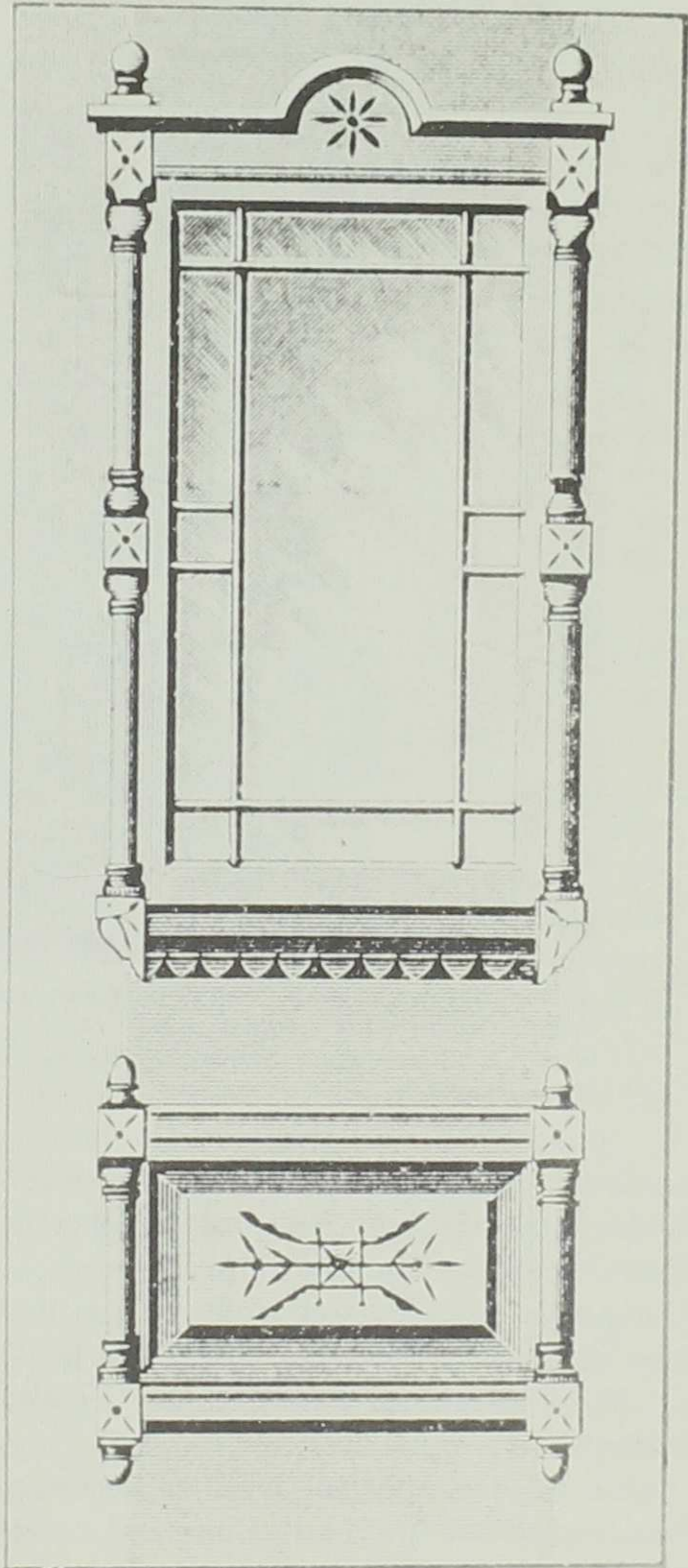
Keeping ahead of the competition was naturally another area of concern. Disbrow was a steadying influence on young Copeland. He frequently said of a salesman or a mill which had undercut the company

that this kind of competition would take care of itself in time by going broke. When Copeland complained that some members of a trade association (designed to regulate standard prices in the sash and door industry) were engaging in unethical price-cutting, Disbrow warned that it was better to let them play that game by themselves and predicted the early failure of those who fell too low. His usual advice in bad times was to reduce expenses and sell only to good credit risks, noting that those who placed large orders at such times were the least likely to pay.

A Chicago trade journal, in typical turn-of-the-century prose, described the businessman in terms he would no doubt have approved:

The excellent factory methods and the resultant excellent product are known far and wide, but on this occasion it is not the factory, the methods or the business, but the man himself. In every business it is the man who is of the greatest importance. He is the creator, the main-spring, the reorganizer, if fire or other disaster comes. He is the life, while the business is only the material result. Mr. Disbrow was the sole manager of his business, although past three score and ten years, handling his large affairs with ease, being regular at his desk. At first sight the visitor would say that the stout, stockily built man, with grizzly hair and beard, was a German and to judge from his makeup would expect him to speak brusquely, but he would have been mistaken and in regard to his manner of speaking would have been most agreeably surprised. Mr. Disbrow was a Connecticut Yankee and in speech was as quiet and as gentle as a woman. While he built up a large business, he thought of other things than his factory. The ripeness of old age meant the ripeness of a well spent life

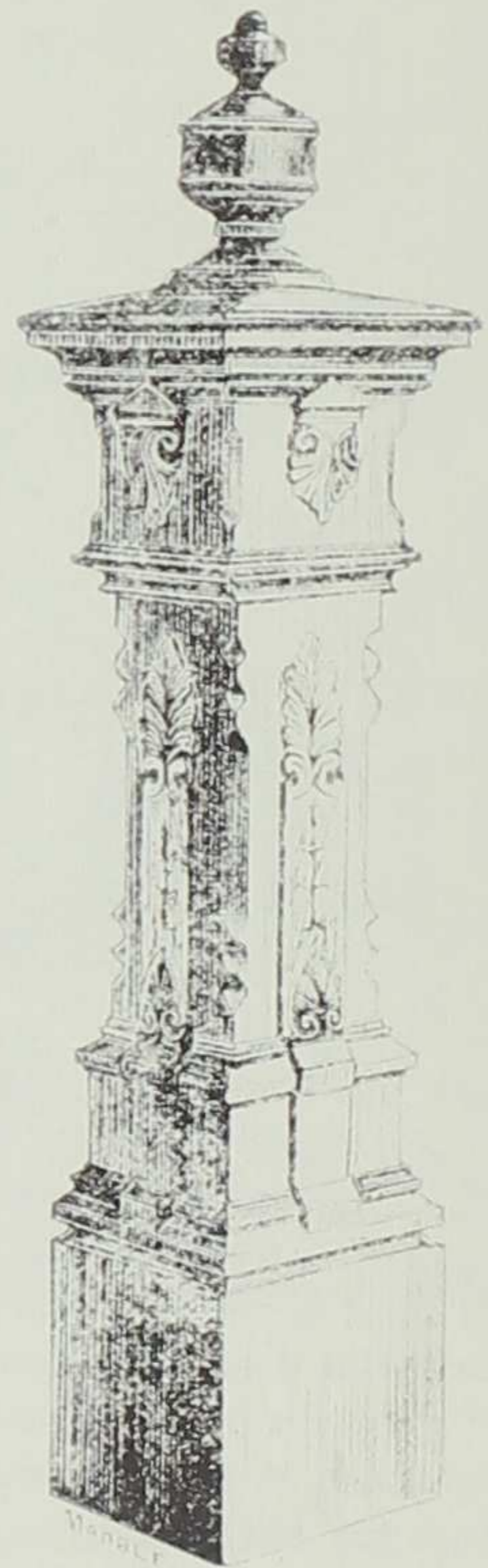
When Martin Disbrow died in 1906 his company had come a long way from the



A Queen Anne door (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).



A beautiful newel post from the Moore-Delamar house in Boise, Idaho. It is identical to post number 1309 (right) in the 1892 catalogue (courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Society).



modest beginnings a half century before. Instead of the cramped, underpowered building erected in 1856, the Disbrow & Company Lyons branch occupied a large, two-story structure that contained hundreds of machines powered by a 450 horsepower engine.

One of the important legacies Disbrow bequeathed to Maynard Copeland, who six years later took over at the helm of the family business, was the concern for attractive marketing of products through

the firm's catalogues. Disbrow & Company attempted to reach a large number of consumers and gave decorative motifs and components names designed to capture the imagination of the buyer. The 1904 catalogue, for example, offered etched glass window panels for front doors featuring the battleship "Maine," a patriotic motif still in vogue after the Spanish-American War. Models of doors in the 1892 catalogue carried names such as: Garfield and Lincoln, both martyred

presidents; Grant and Lee, military heroes on their respective sides; Cleveland, Harrison, and Morton, all political figures; for a dash of foreign glamour, Bismarck, Jenny Lind, Crown Prince, Oxford and Cambridge, Mikado, and Imperial; and Illinois, Indian, Winnebago, Chicago, and Oshkosh, for a native American touch. The 1908 catalogue displayed a whole set of names. In honor, no doubt, of the company's second location, there were doors called Omaha and Ak-Sar-Ben ("Nebraska" spelled backwards). There was also a Clinton, in honor of the original location. Names with a classical flavor were Athens and Euclid. Other cities and towns throughout the middle states were also honored: Hastings, Arlington, Elburn, Ellwood, Garland, Fremont, and Dayton.

The company apparently accomplished its objective of reaching a great number of consumers across the country, for houses with Disbrow components have been located as far away as Idaho. The Moore-Delamar house in Boise, for example, a Mansard-roofed mansion built by a local banker in 1879, had sashes, doors, roof brackets, newel posts, balusters, railings, and stair decorations exactly like some pictured in the 1892 catalogue. The clear implication is that these items were available nationally as early as 1879, even though earlier catalogues have not yet been found. Some of the same components were still pictured in Disbrow's 1916 catalogue.

Disbrow & Company did not, of course, manufacture all of the building components listed in its catalogues. Many of the ornaments offered were made by specialty companies and simply marketed by Disbrow. For clues to some of the other companies which supplied building elements

to the Disbrow catalogues we must look to later issues. In the company files in Omaha is a specially bound copy of the 1916 Catalogue No. 17 which contains interleaves opposite each section upon which handwritten notes list names of suppliers, dates, and current prices. Thirty-five different companies are listed.

By 1916, most glass in the Disbrow catalogue was being supplied by three companies: Omaha Mirror Co., Walsh Coffey Mirror & Beveling Co. of St. Louis, and another identified simply as "Midland." A further clue to the spread of standardization is the notation "Designs copyrighted by the National Ornamental Glass Manufacturing Association of the United States and Canada." Although Disbrow & Company still made doors in 1916, four other suppliers of specialty doors are listed, including Farley & Loetscher Manufacturing Co. of Dubuque. Sash weights came from a St. Louis foundry, but sash cord came from two sources, one in New York and the other in Alabama. Veneer paneling came from St. Louis and Kansas City. Kitchen cabinets were supplied by Kompass & Stoll in Niles, Michigan.

The Disbrow catalogues featured ornamental ceramic tile in the editions of 1904 through 1916. In the annotated issue of the last named year, the supplier is identified as "The Ceramic Tile Co. of Chicago" with reference to a factory in Ohio. Iron work came from several places: grilles from Chicago; grates from Freeport, Illinois, Newark, New Jersey, and another Chicago manufacturer. Hardwood flooring was supplied by Tennessee and Arkansas companies, but parquet floors originated with three companies in Indiana, two in Indianapolis and one in



Gable finish from a house in Boulder, Montana, similar to an adjustable gable ornament shown in the 1909 Disbrow catalogue. Many of the Disbrow & Company's products were shipped to western states.

New Albany. The 1916 catalogue showed that porch swings came from Grand Rapids, furniture capital of America. Billed as "the handiwork of Holland Dutch artists and craftsmen," the swings were supplied by Limberts Arts & Crafts Furniture Co.

The Disbrow catalogues give further evidence of cooperation with other companies in offering a standard line of products to the consumer. Starting with the 1904 edition, the catalogues carry the following notation on the title page: "Official price list adopted by the Wholesale Sash, Door and Blind Manufacturers As-

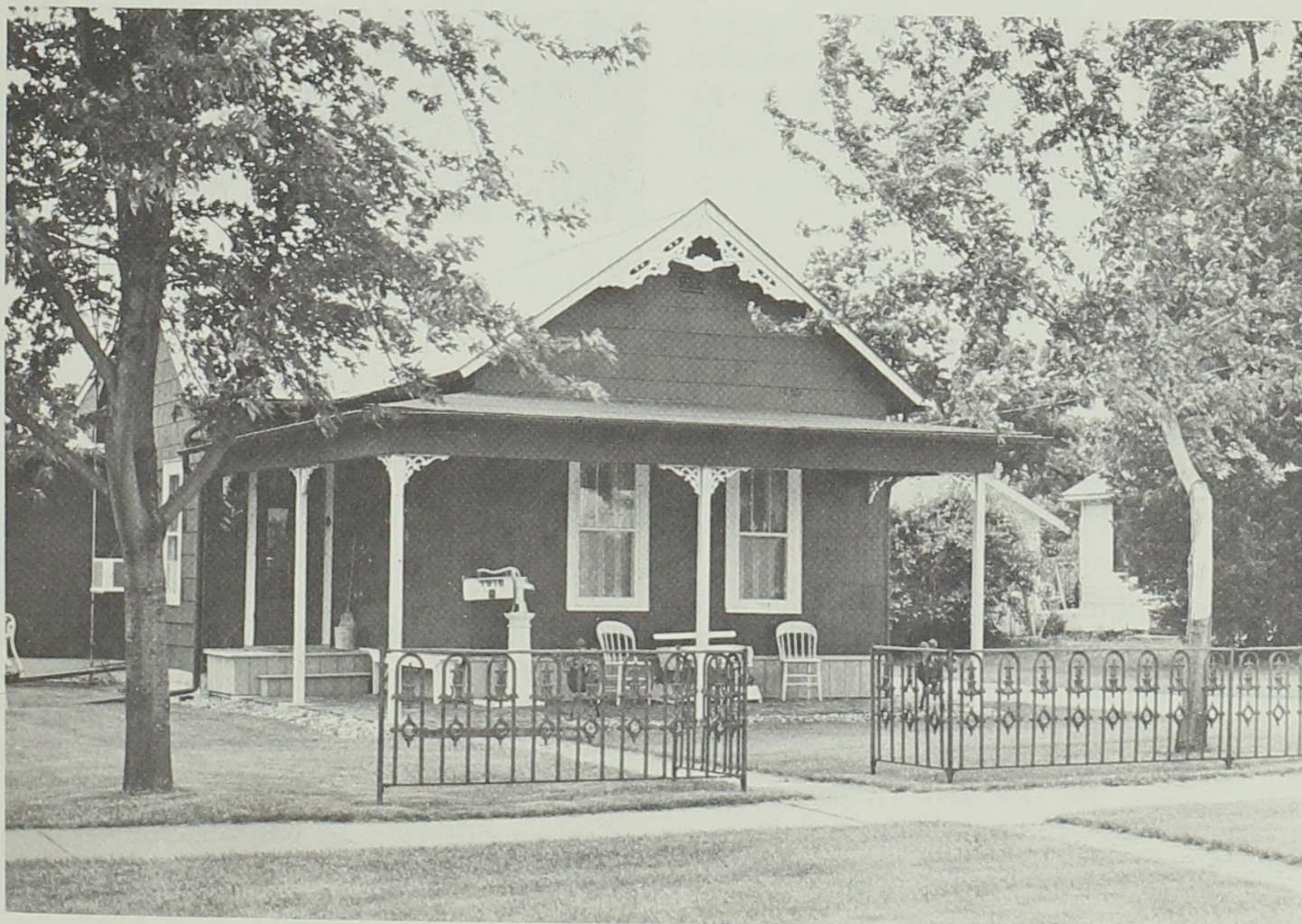


Decorative trim on a home in Virginia City, Nevada.

sociation of the Northwest." Other evidence of standardization occurs in the 1904 glass section, where "official list prices, October 1, 1903," and "official list, July, 1895" appear. And in the back of the 1904 catalogue is a section labeled "Official Moulding Book (Illustrated) Showing Full Finished Size of Mouldings with Exact Size and List Price Per One Hundred Lineal Feet Marked on Each." This is copyrighted 1897-1901 by the Chicago Millwork and Moulding Company. In the earliest catalogue available, that of 1892,

there is a similar moulding section labeled "Revised Edition of the New Universal Moulding Book." The price list accompanying this notes that it was adopted January 1, 1891, by the Wholesale Sash, Door and Blind Manufacturers Association of the Northwest, an organization which helped to control price-cutting by fining guilty members.

A 1927 catalogue entitled *Universal Design Book No. 25 on Builder's Woodwork* shows close cooperation between Disbrow & Company and other Iowa



A modest house at 1921 North Fifth St. in Clinton shows that fancy ornaments were not restricted to large and expensive homes. The gable finish and porch brackets came from the 1913 and 1916 catalogues. The beautiful little gable ornament cost \$2.00.

woodworking firms in offering building components to dealers, architects, contractors, and builders throughout the country. The title page stated that the catalogue was distributed by M. A. Disbrow & Co. of Clinton, Disbrow Sash & Door Co. of Cedar Rapids, and five other manufacturers located in Dubuque, Muscatine, Des Moines, and Cedar Rapids. So by the 1920s, and perhaps earlier, these firms had standardized their products enough to jointly offer them in a single design book.

M. A. Disbrow himself was probably unaware of the great value his catalogues would one day have for historians, but he knew very well the importance of producing a book that would have lasting value to his customers—one which they would “not throw in the waste as quick as they get it.” To this end he included a great deal of practical information for carpenters and builders. The 1892 catalogue, for example, gave detailed instructions for computing the number of shingles required in a roof, a chart showing how to figure the number of bricks required for walls of various thicknesses, a table called a “ready reckoner” for figuring board feet in lumber of all dimensions, and charts showing how to compute shipping weights of various building components.

The introduction to the catalogue published in 1913 illustrated the company’s intention of meeting the needs of its customers:

We present this, our 1912 Catalogue, believing that Architects, Builders and others, interested in designing and furnishing Millwork of the highest quality and most modern designs, will find it most practical and helpful in suggestions for carrying out their ideas.



Located on an old post road (now a modern highway) near Springdale, Iowa, the Kenneth Mather house contains a beautiful millwork newel post and stair decoration. The scrollwork on the side of the stairs (called “stair brackets”) may be found in both the 1892 and 1904 Disbrow & Company catalogues.

For the Lumber Dealer who handles our goods, this Catalogue will be found to contain many aids indicating such stock goods as are regularly carried for prompt shipment, which will be found to embrace a wide range of sizes, styles and kinds of woods, allowing for the selection of a complete line of stock work for all ordinary requirements.

Thus, in addition to helping standardize building materials, the Disbrow catalogues served as practical handbooks for carpenters and lumber dealers across the nation.

Building on the firm foundation provided by the astute methods of Martin Disbrow, Maynard Copeland continued the success of the company, serving the business for an incredible 71 years. At his death in 1953 at age 97, he had been president and treasurer of the company for 34 years and chairman of the board for six. In keeping with the tradition of the firm, Disbrow & Company has remained a family business. Copeland's successor as president was his son-in-law Ernest L. Glover. The succession continues to this day. Joseph C.

Glover, the grandson of M. B. Copeland, is now president of the company and his father, Ernest, is chairman of the board.

Whether Martin A. Disbrow envisioned a dynasty in the millwork business which would be thriving six score years later, we do not know. However, thanks to the Disbrow correspondence and company catalogues that survive, we know something about the determined young man who arrived in Lyons in the 1850s, raised the capital for his own small business, and built it into a major enterprise. □

GLOSSARY OF STYLES

Architectural and decorative styles in Iowa which featured factory produced woodwork included:

ITALIANATE. This "bracket style" was notable for ornate wooden brackets under wide eaves. The roofs of Italianate houses were rather flat, the forms boxlike. Cube-shaped houses often had cubical cupolas, also with bracketed eaves. Occasionally a tall square tower was part of what was often called an Italian or "Tuscan Villa." Circa 1850-80.

MANSARD. Although the wooden brackets and other details of these "French Second Empire" houses were identical to the Italianate ones made at the same time, the mansard roof with its steep pitch and flat top was distinctive. Cast iron "cresting" usually decorated the roof-line of mansards. Circa 1860-1885.

QUEEN ANNE. Castle-like wooden houses textured with fancy cut shingles and ornamented with much hand-saw "gingerbread" are usually

called Queen Anne, although the style has nothing to do with the English monarch. Corner towers and encircling verandahs were other hallmarks of these richly decorated houses of the late 80s and 90s. Windows were often bordered with small square panes of colored glass.

ART NOUVEAU. A decorative rather than an architectural style in America, Art Nouveau was characterized by flowing curved lines suggestive of growing plants. Portière work, used to divide rooms in turn-of-the-century houses, often had the organic Art Nouveau flavor, as did stained glass. Circa 1895-1910.

CRAFTSMAN. Massive angularity marked the woodwork and furniture of this style. Bungalow houses of the early 20th century usually had the simplified and heavy forms of Craftsman on the interior. "Spanish Mission" furniture and woodwork were similar in form, having a "home made" or primitive look far removed from the elegance of Art Nouveau and Queen Anne.

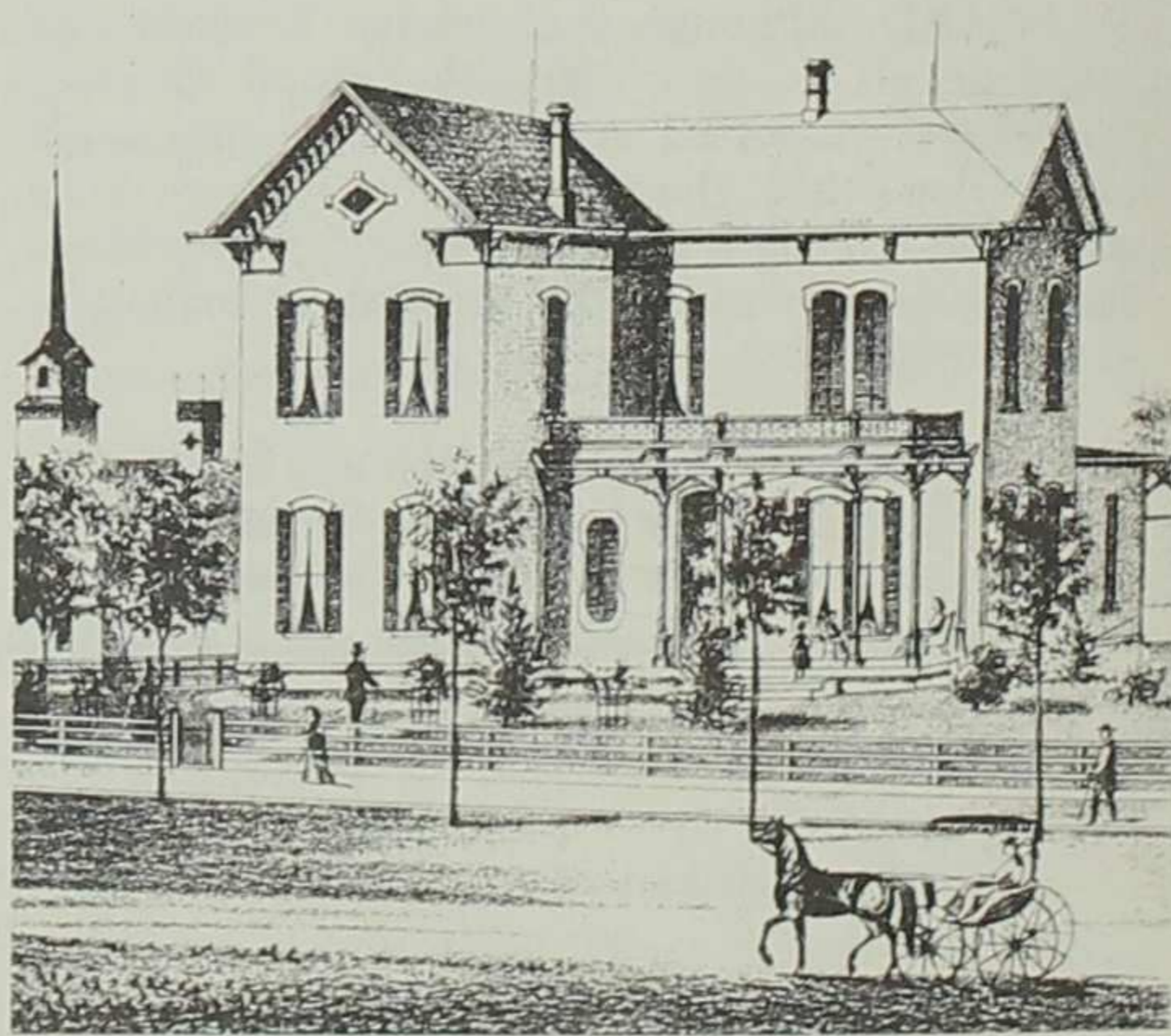
FROM PORCH TO PATIO

by Richard H. Thomas

Two assumptions are basic to understanding the role of architecture in our lives: first, domestic dwellings in their construction and design reflect the prevailing cultural notions of what a *home* should be (the reflection of what the owner sees as being essential to his style of life); second, a house is not only a shelter, but it may be viewed also as a statement of the way personal and social life is organized.

The century between 1860 and 1960 saw many changes in technology, values, population, land use, and the structure of social and political institutions. These changes were often rather rapid and accompanied by new tensions between the desire for privacy and the need to be public enough to enjoy the benefits of community life. The home architecture of what can be termed the "gentry" (the social and economic upper class who were the architectural style leaders as well as the business and often the intellectual elite) demonstrated some of these changing notions of privacy and community. There is no question that the other socio-economic classes attempted to imitate the lead of the gentry and designed their homes with features that resembled the houses of their "betters" (to use the nineteenth-century term).

It is enlightening to look at one particular feature of architectural design: the porch. The gradual movement of the porch from the front of the house to the back (where it became the modern patio) illustrates the importance of new technology in home building and tells us a great deal about the social meaning of homes. Focusing just on the porch leaves out many important elements of the home, such as the arrangement of rooms within the structure or the evolution of the nineteenth-century parlor into the modern den. However, a concentrated look at the porch enables us to see how the use of new materials and an increasing desire for privacy modified not only the artistic design of the house, but suggested new forms of social relations with one's



The porch of the M. Heisey residence in Anamosa, Iowa was relatively small, but clearly the center of much social activity (from *Andreas Atlas*, 1875).



Bruce Moor, an elegant gentry house, now owned by Mrs. Howard Hall of Cedar Rapids.

neighbors. This in turn may illustrate shifting ideas about what is meant by a sense of community or belonging to a particular place.

A central social development during the century between 1860 and 1960 was the compression of time and distance, accelerating the tempo of life. In the late nineteenth century, most of the gentry class built homes on large lots, usually facing the street. The homes were designed to be viewed from a horse-drawn buggy as it approached and passed at a slow pace, thus letting the viewer see

and appreciate the entire home including its many points of interest and intricate designs. Many of these homes today are crowded by other structures, and when the passerby travels at an average speed of 25 miles per hour, viewing time is reduced to approximately six to ten seconds. We often fail to appreciate some of the grandeur of these homes because of the speed at which we are accustomed to traveling and the congestion of other structures. The porch is especially important in this context of speed. In an earlier day the viewer riding in a carriage



A marvelous porch, which extended across the entire front of the house, and which could accommodate the entire family, plus visitors. Note the low fence between sidewalk and yard.

or the citizen walking past the house saw the building for a long time and was well aware of the presence or absence of the residents on the porch.

The city or country porch presented opportunities for social intercourse at several levels. When a family member was on the porch it was possible to exchange a wave or a trivial greeting with those passing by. On the other hand, it was also possible to invite the passerby to stop and come up onto the porch for extended conversation. The person on the porch was very much in control of this interaction, as the porch was seen as an extension of the living quarters of the family. Often, a hedge or fence separated the porch from the street or board sidewalk, providing a physical barrier for privacy, yet low enough to permit conversa-

tion. The porch served many important social functions in addition to advertising the availability of its inhabitants. A well-shaded porch provided a cool place in the heat of the day for the women to enjoy a rest from household chores. They could exchange gossip or share problems without having to arrange a "neighborhood coffee" or a "bridge party." The porch also provided a courting place within earshot of protective parents. A boy and a girl could be close on a porch swing, yet still observed, and many a proposal of marriage was made on a porch swing. Older persons derived great pleasure from sitting on the porch, watching the world go by, or seeing the neighborhood children at play. The gentry homes were intentionally designed to provide a place for entertainment, and a summer porch

was often the location of such gatherings.

The humblest of homes could not do without some form of a porch. It was a pervasive architectural form which disappeared slowly. Part of the resistance toward abandoning the porch as an essential part of the home can be attributed to the primary group relationships that permeated both the large and small communities. It was important to know one's neighbors and be known by them. The porch was a platform from which to observe the activities of others. It also facilitated and symbolized a set of social relationships and the strong bond of community feeling which people during the nineteenth century supposed was the way God intended life to be lived.

Slowly, technology and changes both

in taste and social structure began to alter the form and the meaning of the porch. By the turn of the century a well established sash and door industry, new building materials, and innovative construction techniques granted home builders an even greater variety of porch styles from which to select. Labor was still cheaper than material. The gentry maintained their social and economic position, constructing homes much along the lines of the previous 30 years. Those with power and wealth seemed unafraid to let others know their status by constructing large and elaborate homes, but taste had begun to change. A few years before the dawn of the century Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others were searching for a new architecture which would



The women of the household relax on the porch of the Baptist parsonage in Vinton, Iowa. The spacious lawn and upper porch give an air of relaxed elegance to this example of the "porch" society.



A porch extending around two sides of the house at the C. E. Gillette home in Mt. Vernon, Iowa.

become distinctly American. Both men found patrons among the Iowa gentry for commercial as well as domestic buildings. The influence of Wright's Prairie School of design is most evident in a series of structures in the Mason City area. Most of Iowa's gentry, however, preferred to modify the styles of the late nineteenth century rather than adopt the avant-garde notions of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Most Iowans were not of the gentry class and could not afford the opulent displays of wealth prevalent among the social aristocracy. Many, however, began to build bungalows or single-story dwellings which were made economically feasible by the increasing mechanization of the millwork industry. Yet, a large proportion of these

modest structures continued the tradition of some form of the porch.

By the 1920s, signs of a new architectural style were evident. The slow breakdown of many of the values of the late nineteenth century continued, and the gentry classes lost power. This was accompanied by massive technological changes symbolized by electricity and the internal combustion engine. The two decades of social and economic change which followed World War I created markets for small, single-family dwellings. Population in rural areas continued to shift toward the cities, and with the coming of the industrial expansion of World War II, pressing needs for low-cost housing brought the techniques of mass produc-



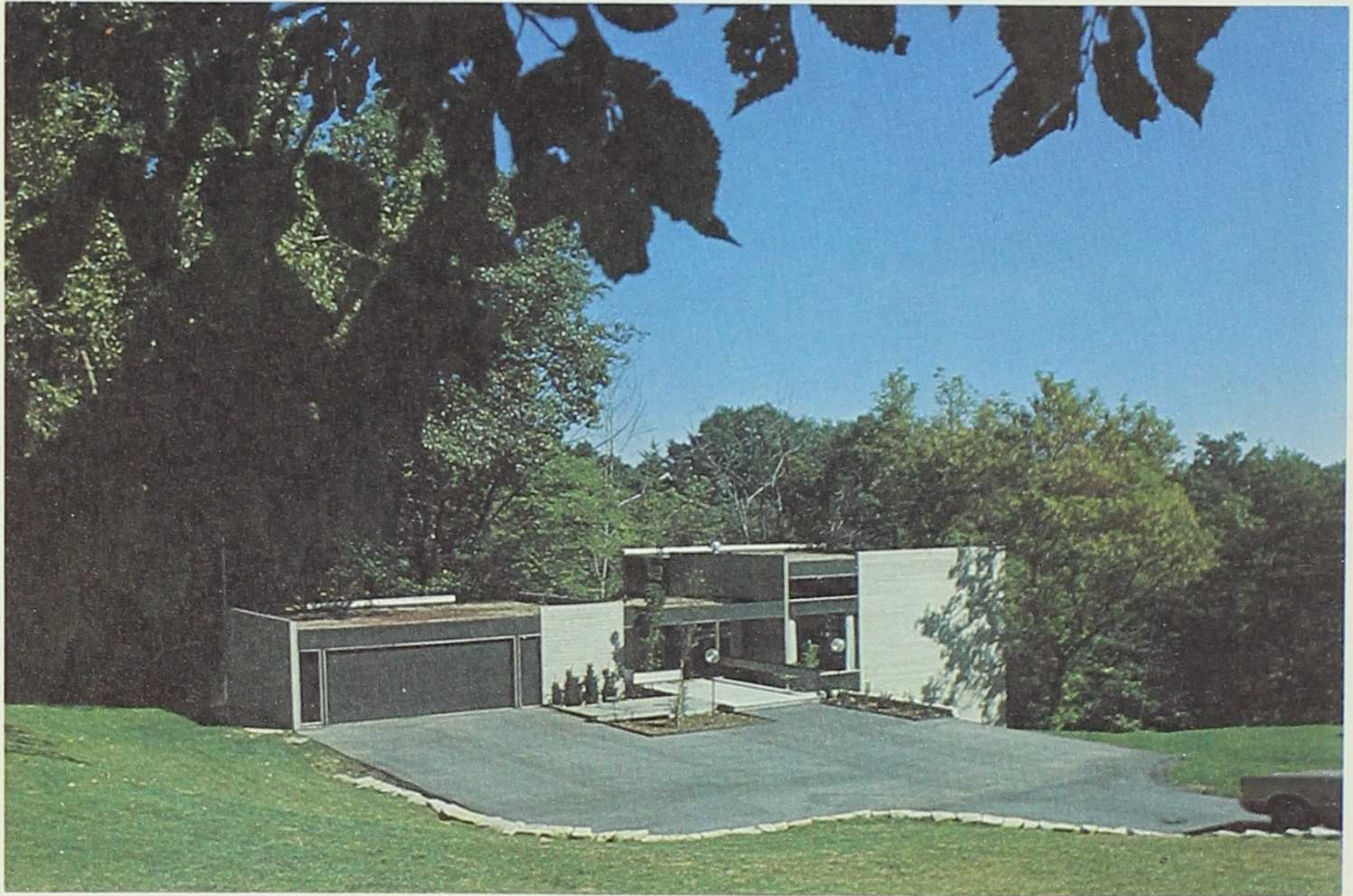
Backyard patios near Cedar Rapids.

tion into the housing industry as never before. Federal subsidies for housing further stimulated the building boom. The population explosion following World War II and a spiraling economic cycle gave added thrust to home construction. At the edge of cities, planned and unplanned communities sprang up without the homes or the influence of the once powerful and respected gentry class who in an earlier day had set the example of the most desirable homes and fixed the patterns of social relations.

The demand for new housing, the presence of a large number of trained architects, and vast subsidies for middle-class housing, together with new financial resources all contributed to a massive build-

ing boom. In the new suburbia land was costly, labor more expensive than any of the new materials available to contractors, and architects were often the hirelings of large development corporations whose profits rested heavily on standardized construction and prefabrication. These new communities were frequently "bedroom cities" which lacked established social structures and the ingredients of community building prevalent in the older towns and villages. Many suburbanites were refugees from the city, seeking a style of single-family dwelling which would maintain the privacy afforded by the anonymity of urban culture.

Mass production, however, left little room for innovation or creation. Young



The modern style is exemplified by the Len Walworth residence in Burlington (courtesy of McConnell, Steveley, & Anderson Architects, Cedar Rapids, Iowa).

persons in the planned communities wanted to make their homes distinguishable from the same models down the street, and they wanted also to make their homes private. Perhaps the most frequently used device in the search for uniqueness and privacy was the backyard patio. In communities with a high rate of mobility, one did not often want to know his neighbor. The constant turn-over of neighbors worked against the long-term relationships which are essential to a sense of belonging. The patio, walled on one, two, or three sides, was a barrier for privacy and a means of self-expression.

The patio was an extension of the house, but far less public than the porch. It was easy to greet a stranger from the porch

but exceedingly difficult to do so from the backyard patio. While the porch was designed in an era of slow movement, the patio is part of a world which places a premium on speed and ease of access. The father of a nineteenth-century family might stop on the porch on his way into the house, but the suburban man wishes to enter the house as rapidly as possible to accept the shelter that the house provides from the mass of people he may deal with all day.

In this transition from porch to patio there is an irony. Nineteenth-century families were expected to be public and fought to achieve their privacy. Part of the sense of community that often characterized the nineteenth-century village re-

sulted from the forms of social interaction that the porch facilitated. Twentieth-century man has achieved the sense of privacy in his patio, but in doing so he has lost part of his public nature which is essential to strong attachments and a deep sense of belonging or feelings of community. Whether the patio is surrounded by walls or left open, it usually remains in the rear of the house, providing privacy but creating a barrier to informal social contacts once provided by the porch. In the hurried flight from commuter vehicle to the sanctuary of the home there is no time or real desire for informal contacts without which a sense of belonging is difficult to establish and maintain. Today social forms revolve around the car and the ability to maintain friendships over a wide geographic area. The modern home has moved the "car-barn" into the house itself. Today's home embraces the car, providing it almost as much shelter as the family. The carriage house of the past century was usually on the back of the lot, and while the horse was in some sense a part of the family, it did not occupy the living space as does the car and the garage of today. Another irony here is that the car has both freed us and enslaved us.

The preoccupation of the commuter as he speeds through suburbia is how to pick out of the hundreds of similar models the single dwelling that is indeed *his* home. He lives in a world that gives only a three

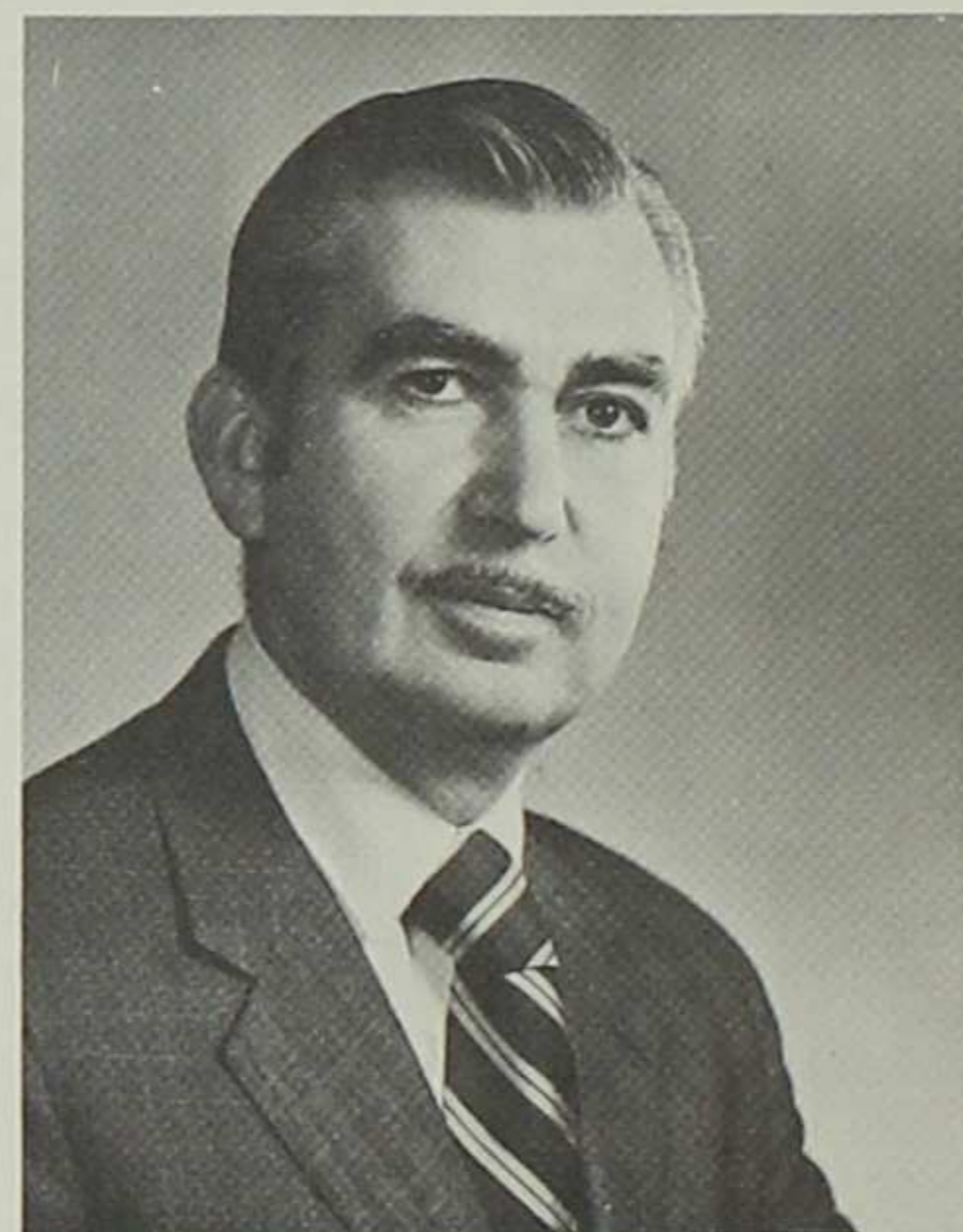
second view of houses as he looks from his car window. He finds himself in a sterile environment where domestic architectural creativity is restricted by very high building costs. Thus he takes to the "do-it-yourself" skills involving a small saw, paint, and wallpaper.

It should be noted that now as in the past many architects continue to find patrons among the new upper-middle class who are anxious to separate themselves from the masses and want homes that reflect their status and taste. Doctors, lawyers, and rising business executives provide the capital for innovative structures. This new gentry seems committed to the privacy of the patio, and many of their homes reflect backyard areas open on three sides because the owners have purchased enough land to protect their privacy or view of the landscape.

The old cliché says, "A man's home is his castle." If this be true, the nineteenth-century porch was a drawbridge across which many passed in their daily lives. The modern patio is in many ways a closed courtyard that suggests that the king and his family are tired of the world and seek only the companionship of their immediate family or intimate peers. The tension between the need for privacy and the desire to belong to a community is still with us. The resolution of this seemingly ever-present conflict in needs and values is, and will be, mirrored in the design of whatever is called a house. □

CONTRIBUTORS:

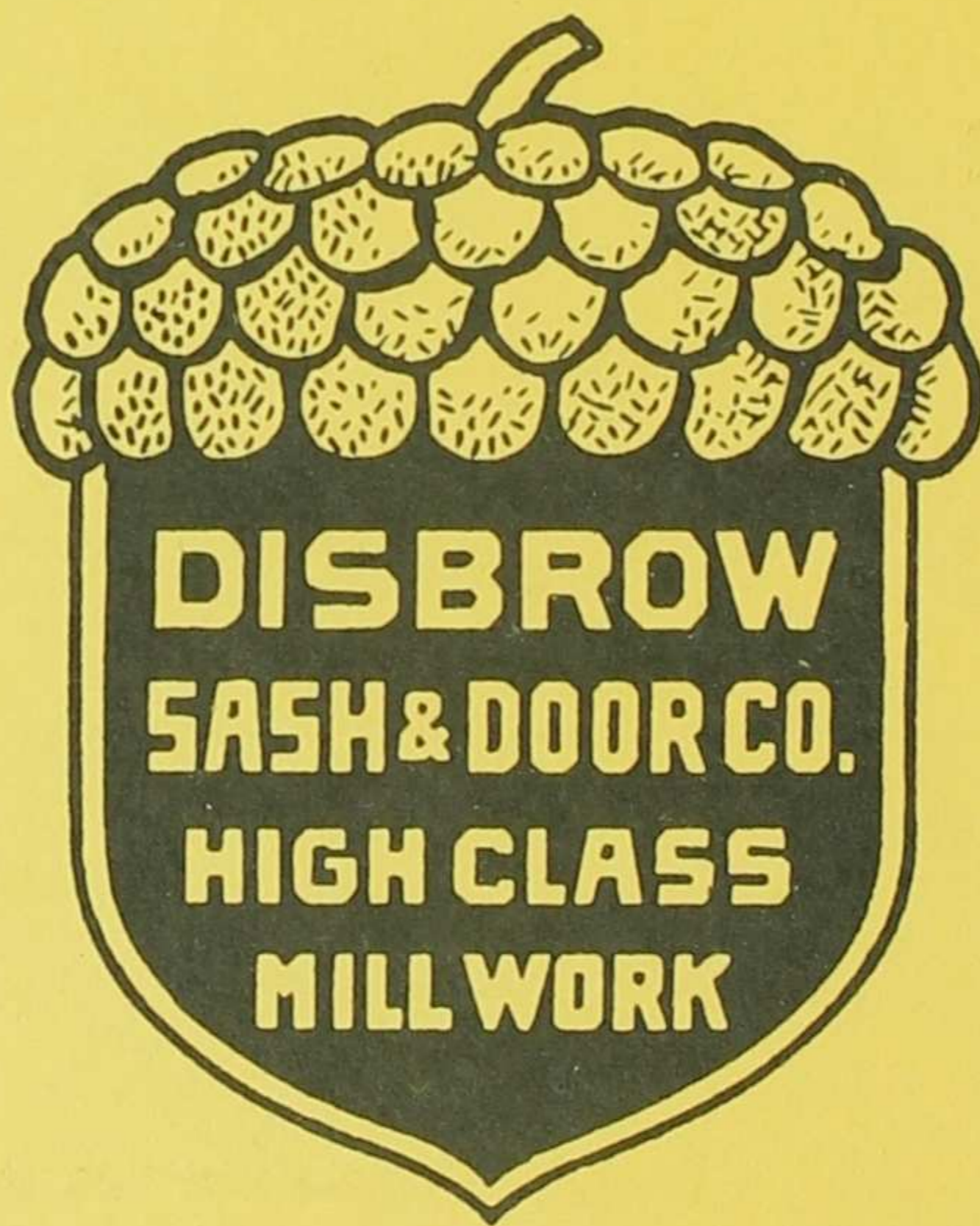
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