

# The USS *Iowa* Silver Service Comes Home



by William M. Johnson

**A** GLEAMING, heavily ornamented silver service now on display at the State Historical Building can be seen as a symbol of Iowa's stature in the late 1890s. Just as Iowa motifs were woven into the designs on the silver, the midwestern state of Iowa played a continuing and important role in national events.

In 1896 Iowa could look back with pride on fifty years of statehood. Prairies and wetlands were now family farms and thriving cities. Iowa's soldiers and officers had fought during a trying civil war, and Iowan Annie Wittenmyer's relief work for soldiers and orphans had been a national example of compassion. Iowans had stirred the nation's conscience through their leadership in the suffrage and temperance movements. Iowa had provided two secretaries of war, two secretaries of the interior, as well as a postmaster general — and would provide the secretary of agriculture in 1897 and the Speaker of the House in 1899. Senator William Boyd Allison from Dubuque held substantial power in Congress. And now, the name of the nation's first seagoing battleship would be the USS *Iowa*.

In the decades following the Civil War, naval confrontations with the British in the Hawaiian Islands and the Bering Sea, and with Germany over the Samoan Islands and in Chilean ports, had underscored the need for a stronger U.S.

fleet. By 1896 the navy had commissioned several battleships — the USS *Texas*, *Maine*, *Indiana*, *Massachusetts*, and *Oregon*. Although these floating fortresses protected our shores, the USS *Iowa*, commissioned in 1896, would be the first seagoing battleship because of an additional forward deck. This deck provided more coal storage (which meant the ship could travel farther without refueling), and raised the forward set of twelve-inch guns above storm waves. The deck also added space to the crew quarters.

The 26th Iowa General Assembly responded to the naming of the ship by authorizing the Executive Council to "provide a proper recognition of the battleship Iowa" and appropriating \$5,000 for that purpose. The Philadelphia firm J. E. Caldwell & Co. was contracted to provide a service of silver.

The custom of presenting silver to officers and ships stretched back to the American Revolution, when the city of Boston gave a tea service to the builder of the USS *Boston* and USS *Constitution*. By the 1890s the tradition included the navy's new armored cruisers and battleships. States and cities that were honored by battleships and cruisers bearing their names responded with gifts ranging from an individual decorative tray to a massive dinner service of more than two hundred pieces. Iowa's approach — to give an elaborate silver service

— was similar to those of Pennsylvania, Nebraska, and Minneapolis.

The design of Iowa's silver service combines traditional images of the sea — dolphins, waves, seashells, and the seal of the Navy Department — with symbols of Iowa — ears of corn, the wild rose, and the Great Seal of the State of Iowa. (In fact, use of the wild rose in the design led to a joint resolution by the Iowa General Assembly in 1897 to designate the wild rose as the state flower.) Fashioned out of 2,100 ounces of sterling silver, the service comprises forty pieces.

When the USS *Iowa* was commissioned in

July 1897, the silver service was ceremoniously presented to the Navy Department, which holds title to it. It is used for official dinners and presentations, but is not kept on board during combat. The silver has "served" on four different ships. Whenever its ship has been decommissioned, the service has returned to the state of Iowa on loan.

Today, the USS *Iowa* silver service commands visitors' attention in the atrium of the State Historical Building in Des Moines. On these pages, enjoy a close-up look at some of the pieces of the silver service — an elegant and official portrayal of Iowa in the 1890s.



On the punch bowl, the national symbol of the bald eagle spreads its wings among ears of corn and over the Great Seal of the State of Iowa. Below the large scallop shell is the punch bowl's base, edged by tinier seashells. The two pieces weigh 16¾ pounds.



Three figures from territorial Iowa are etched on the water pitcher. A man in buckskin, his son, and a Native American replicate the pioneer statuary erected about the same time on the west end of the capitol grounds in Des Moines. (The pitcher's handle is not visible here.)

*Handwritten signature*



A graceful coffee server also bears the Great Seal of Iowa. The complete silver service has forty pieces, including the punch bowl and base; the centerpiece; soup tureen and ladle; a fish dish and carvers; dishes for meat, entrées, salad, and vegetables; gravy boats; salad servers; salver; bread trays; butter dishes; compotes; water pitcher; coffee pots; sugar bowls; creamers; and bon bon dishes.



A wild rose blossom, buds, and leaves grace the ends of each serving utensil, and ears of corn form the stem. On the reverse side (see fork), the back of the wild rose, and the cornstalk and tassels are visible. Roots trail down to the tines of the fork and the blade of the fish knife.

The most ornate component of the silver service is the centerpiece. As these close-up photographs show, four etchings on the centerpiece's shallow fruit bowl depict (clockwise from top right) the USS *Iowa* battleship; the Iowa capitol in Des Moines; a covered wagon pulled by oxen; and Fort Madison, 1808–1812. Note the surrounding motifs in relief: a wild rose above the fort, an eagle on the end, and a pair of dolphins forming the legs of the shallow bowl. For a complete view of the centerpiece, turn the page.



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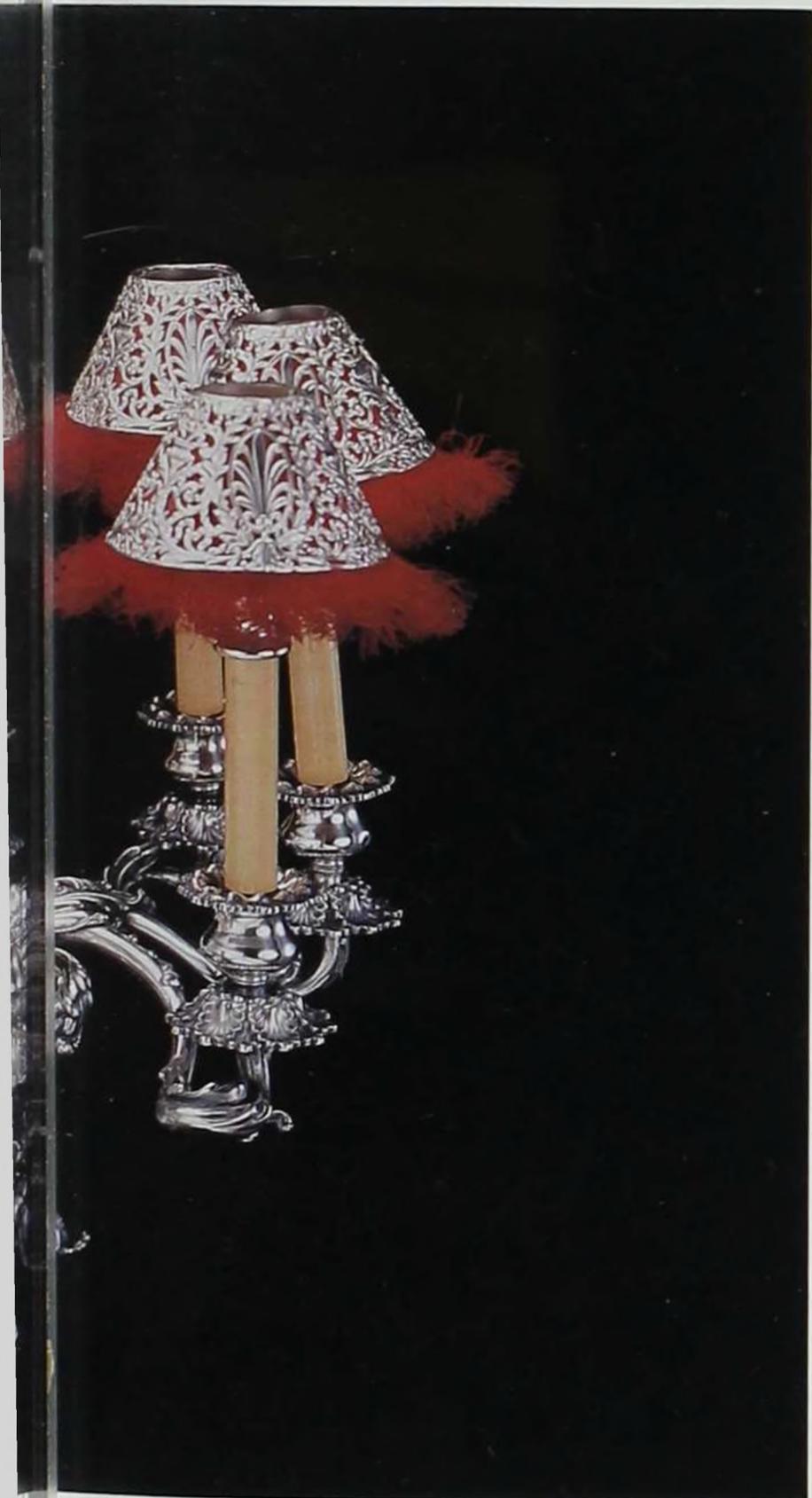


#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The author acknowledges the special assistance of J. E. Caldwell and Company (Philadelphia, PA); Gorham Manufacturing Company (Providence, RI); and Gwendalynn Kelso of The Rampart Lion (Washington, DC). For more on the USS *Iowa*, see the *Iowa Historical Record* (nos. 3, 4, 1898); *The Annals of Iowa* (no. 9, 1901; no. 2, 1926); *The Palimpsest* (April 1923, March 1952, May/June 1983); and *The Iowan* (no. 1, 1947). A complete bibliography is available from the *Palimpsest* office.



The massive centerpiece dominates the silver service in size and design. Weighing 40 pounds, it measures 31 inches wide and 18 inches high, and comprises three parts: a flower vase, a shallow fruit bowl, and candelabra. On the flower vase, the engraved words "Presented to the Battle-Ship Iowa by the State of Iowa July 19th 1897" are bordered by ears of corn. (See close-up on front cover). Details of the fruit bowl appear on the previous page. Side candelabra are topped with silver filigree shades over red frilled cloth. Liners of isinglass (mica) protect the cloth from the flames. The ivory-colored celluloid candle holders are replacements (about 1902). The holders are "self-feeding": a spring device inside the cylinder pushes the candle upward as it burns away.



Photos by Chuck Greiner

## A Brief History of the USS *Iowa*

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**1897:** The USS *Iowa* is commissioned as the nation's first seagoing battleship. The contractor wins a \$200,000 prize because the ship's speed is seventeen knots, a full knot above specifications. During the Spanish-American War the *Iowa* helps destroy the Spanish fleet at Santiago de Cuba and rescue Spanish sailors and officers.

**World War I:** The USS *Iowa* is overshadowed by larger and more powerful ships, and is relegated to training and coastal defense.

**1922:** Construction begins on a modern replacement, but under the 1923 Washington Conference for Limitation of Naval Armament, construction is halted and the completed keel is sold for scrap.

**1923:** The original USS *Iowa* sinks after being used as a target ship.

**1938:** Congress approves construction of a fast class of battleships known as the "Iowa Class."

**1943:** Begun in 1940, the new USS *Iowa* is commissioned. Maneuverability and speed (over thirty knots) are its strong points. It holds 3,000 sailors and officers. It transports President Roosevelt to North Africa to Allied meetings, and supports shore bombardments and anti-aircraft gunnery in the Pacific Theater.

**1953:** Decommissioned in 1949, the ship is recalled to support United Nations troops in Korea and remains in service until 1958, when it is mothballed.

**1984:** The USS *Iowa* is reactivated.

**1990:** After an explosion in 1989, the USS *Iowa* is decommissioned.



ORIGINAL FROM ALGONA NATIVITY SCENE