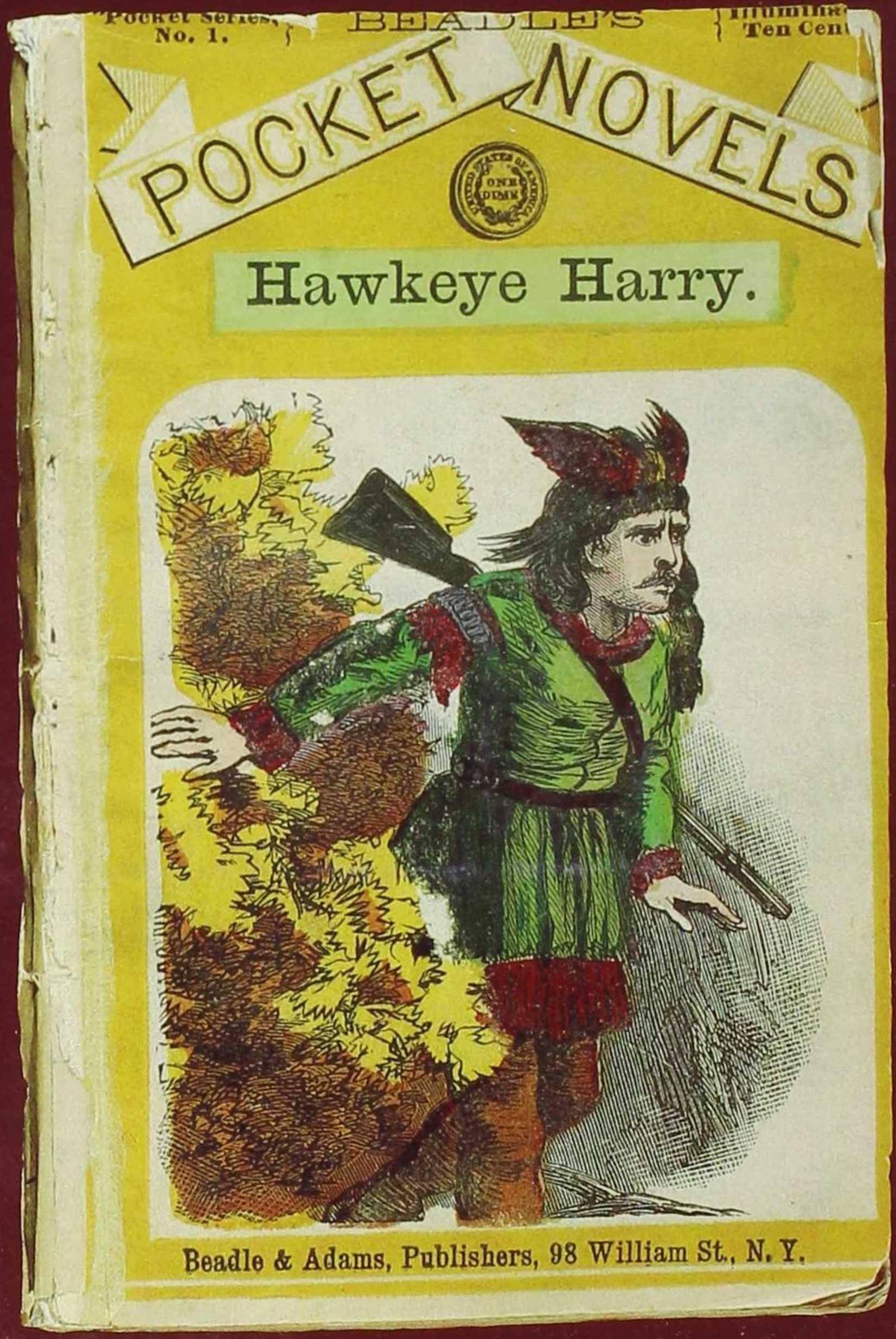
The PALIMPSEST

Volume 73, Number 3 IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE Fall 1992 $4.50



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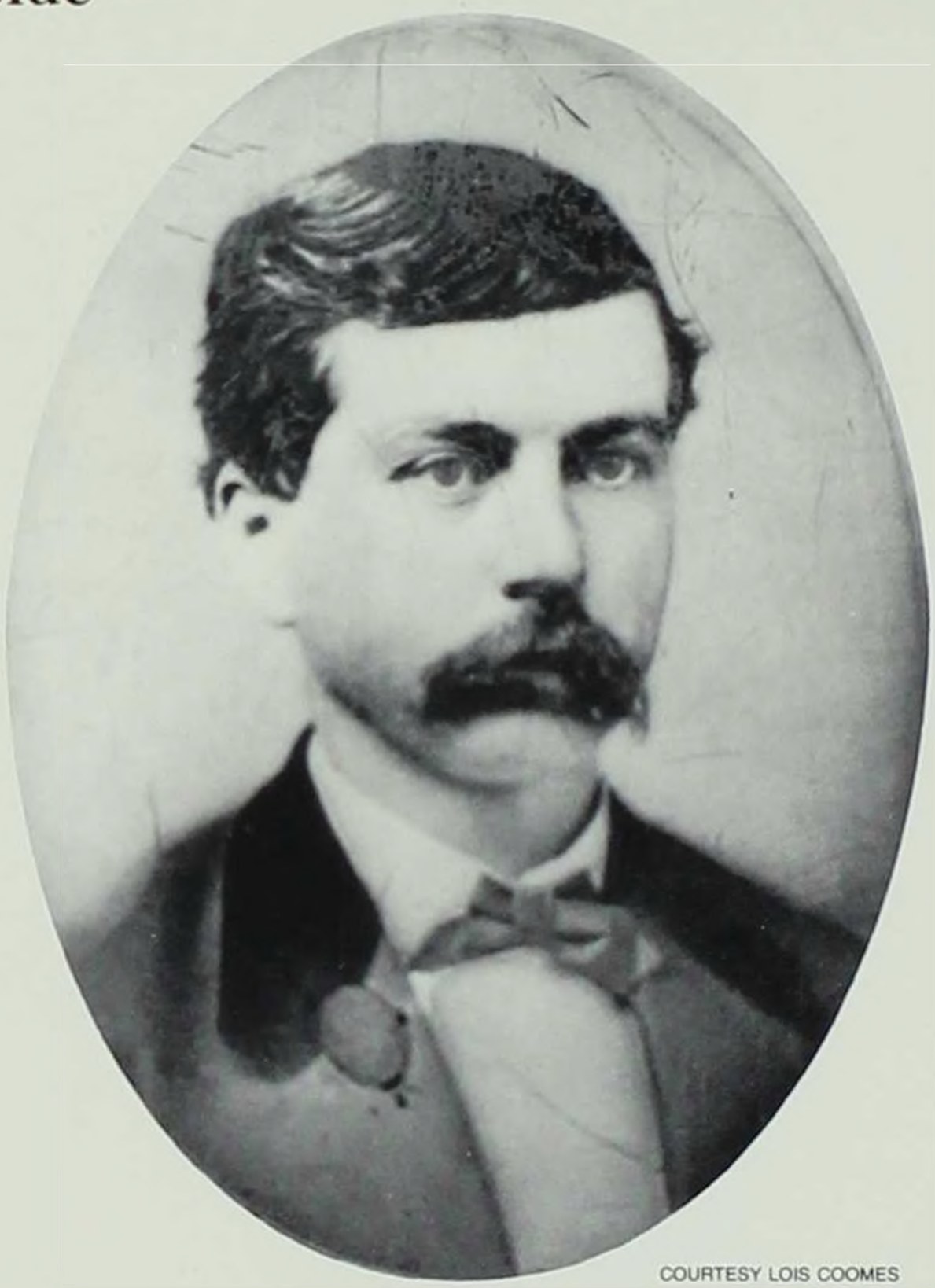

COURTESY LOIS COOMES

"Yet at no season," wrote Iowan Oliver "Oll" Coomes, "is there more romantic beauty, tranquil repose and inspiring grandeur than in autumn, when Indian summer has thrown her misty vail [*sic*] over the landscape — when the air is delicious with balmy fragrance and the plain seems to melt away in the distance like the visions of a dream." Coomes's description of autumn is from his dime novel *Hawkeye Harry*, pictured on the front cover. Coomes (above) was a Cass County farmer who also achieved considerable success writing dime novels about Iowa and other equally evocative American landscapes. Read about him in this *Palimpsest*.

The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest (*pal'/imp/sest*) 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.

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The State Historical Society of Iowa and the editor are not responsible for statements of opinion made by contributors.

Vote getters 133

Fin Rainsbarger and family 112

COVERS: The front cover of *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger*, a dime novel set in Iowa and written by Iowan Oll Coomes. On the back of this *Palimpsest*, see the back cover of *Hawkeye Harry*, listing more dime novel titles to entice nineteenth-century readers. Oll Coomes is featured in this *Palimpsest*.

The

PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

VOLUME 73, NUMBER 3 FALL 1992

Politics, Dime Novels, and Unraveling the Rainsbargers

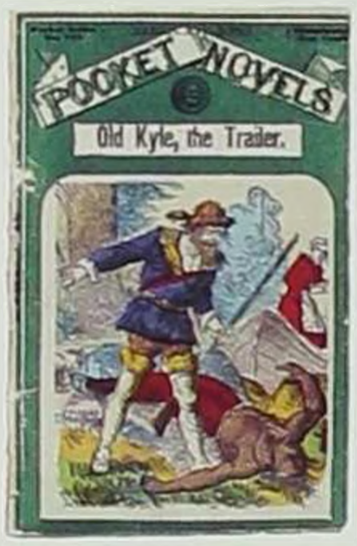
WHILE WATCHING THE two political party conventions this summer, I tried to conjure up — from other campaigns decades ago — the candidates' stirring speeches, delegates' sustained cheers, and factions' assorted passions. Most of a campaign is ephemeral (including a fair number of promises), and what remains afterwards are the objects that, with interpretation, hint at what motivated voters. Although the simplicity of political slogans and gimmicks belies the complexity of political issues, our photo essay, "Campaign Collections: Reminders of Iowa's Political Past," presents the issues and objects that may have made Iowans' political blood boil as far back as the 1840s.

This *Palimpsest* also presents the success story of Oliver "Oll" Coomes, a Cass County farmer who wrote seventy-seven dime novels, several of them set in Iowa. Author Becky Wilson Hawbaker shows several ways in which Coomes used Iowa — and Iowans — for his stories. Like all successful dime novelists, Coomes tended towards hyperbole, colorful writing, and stereotypes. And he made sure that "the good guys always won."

Our third article throws that axiom up in the air. Some of our readers have probably heard about the Rainsbargers, a Hardin County family who became embroiled in a series of dangerous and puzzling events in the 1880s. The family name was etched into Iowa history thanks to Eldora editor James S. Ross's overzealous efforts in his often-quoted "pamphlet history." This little booklet reads much like a dime novel, with hyperbole and stereotyping — all to the detriment of the Rainsbarger family. As author Raymond M. Tinnian comments, Ross "created an enduring myth," linking the Rainsbargers to "long-extinct criminal gangs." This is not a new story to Iowa history, but Tinnian shares new information and deftly unravels the complex events.

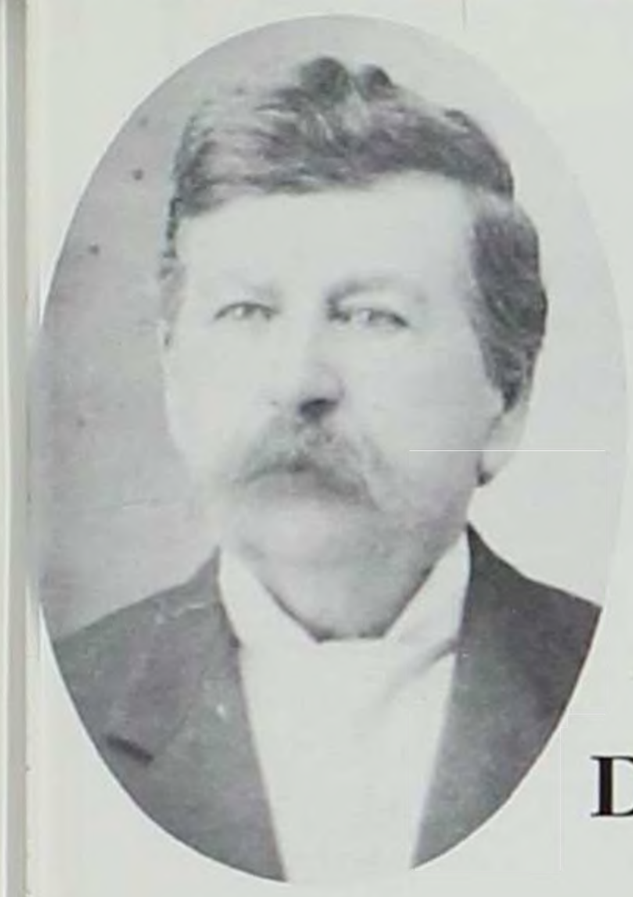
Why tell the Rainsbarger story again? First, it's an intriguing story, well-researched and well-written. Second, our view of the past is broadened and balanced by new information and perspectives. Perhaps we also need to continually reexamine long-standing historical accounts for the hidden "myths." And new information may alter our judgment of who's the "good guy" and who's the "bad guy" — as if it's ever that clear-cut.

As even Ross wrote in his introduction to his little booklet in 1885, "In every community there exists hope, hate, love, malice, ambition, grandeur — every sentiment that can ennoble; every passion that can degrade." Iowa's past is not just a success story — but it is a fascinating one. — *The Editor*



COURTESY OF IOWA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Dime novels capitalized on color and suspense.



Iowa's "Oll" Coomes;

or,

Desperado of the Dime Novel Industry

by Becky Wilson Hawbaker

"The clear report of a rifle rang out on the still summer air, and rolled, in sharp reverberations, back through the forest hills, followed by a wild wail, whose intonations announced the unmistakable presence of death."

SO BEGAN Beadle's Pocket Novel #236, first published in 1872, now part of the State Historical Society of Iowa's small collection of dime novels. This heart-pounding adventure story is filled — true to nineteenth-century stereotypes — with treacherous villains, a bold and brave young hero, a pure and beautiful heroine, and a formulaic plot of deceptions, chases, revenge, and true love, all set in the exotic location of . . . Silver Basin, Iowa.

Both the setting and the author of this story are interesting exceptions to the popular image of dime novels as Wild West tales written by colorful cowboys like Buffalo Bill. This particular dime novel, *Antelope Abe, the Boy Guide; or, The Forest Bride. A Tale of the North-west*, was not only set in Iowa, but was written by an

The cover illustration of *Antelope Abe* is remarkably serene compared to Oll Coomes's story inside. The cover was a dime novel's major selling point, designed to entice readers with colorful, exciting action. More covers of Coomes's novels follow.

TOP PHOTO: COURTESY LOIS COOMES

BEADLE'S HALF DIME Library

Entered at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., at Second Class Mail Rates.

August 25, 1885.

Vol. XVII. $2.50 a Year. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK. Price, 5 Cents. No. 422.

Baby Sam,

The Boy Giant of the Yellowstone;

OR,

Old Spokane Joe's Trust.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "HERCULES, THE DUMB DESTROYER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLEASURE PARTY.

FAR up on the borders of the Yellowstone Park, on the rugged breast of the grim old mountains, Mary's Lake lay sparkling like a jewel under a bright September sun—mirroring in its crystal depths the environing peaks that rose thousands of feet above it on all sides. Dotted with several little islands and indented with narrow tongues of land covered with the richest of foliage that was now all aglow with the soft autumnal tints, the lakelet and its surroundings presented as grand and romantic a picture as ever enraptured the human heart or filled the mind and soul with the majesty and power of the Creator.

A party of four persons, drawing rein on an eminence overlooking this lake, gazed in speechless wonder and admiration on the scene outspread before them. Two men and two women composed the party—all in the very prime of young man and womanhood.

The eldest of the four must have been about five-and-twenty years of age. He was a man a little above medium hight, with a well-developed *physique*, a handsome, intelligent face, dark-blue eyes and heavy brown mustache. He sat his horse like a young cavalier, and no one looking upon Frank Rodman could have regarded him as aught else than a gallant and manly young man. He was well-dressed and well-mounted, and carried a rifle and a pair of revolvers hung at his saddle-bow.

At Frank Rodman's side rode Miss Sarah Marshall, a blue-eyed, fair-faced girl of eighteen, whose ladylike bearing and vivacious spirit made her in every respect worthy of the attention of her gallant cavalier.

The third person, Frederick Sears, was a young man of two-and-twenty, strong and robust, with an intelligent face and pleasant address. Like Rodman, he was well-mounted and armed with rifle and revolvers.

At Sears's side rode Wilma Rodman, Frank's sister, who would have attracted more attention than any one of the four. She was, perhaps, seventeen years of age, with a form, while rather *petite*, possessed of all the graces of perfect womanhood, and a face of rare beauty made radiant in its loveliness by its intellectual brightness and the peerless bearing of its possessor. Her eyes, shaded with long dark lashes, were of a dark brown, large and lustrous. Her rosy cheeks and dimpled chin had been touched with brown by exposure to sun and wind, but this served rather to highten her beauty than to mar it.

These four young people were residents of the Gallatin valley, and were on their way for a trip through the Yellowstone Park, of whose wonders they had heard so much. Wilma Rodman had been the leading spirit in getting up the party. She so dearly loved the wild, romantic and rugged scenery of the mountains that she would give her brother Frank no rest nor peace until he had not only promised to take her to the Park, but had actually started on the trip.

They were well equipped for the journey, being provided with tents, cooking utensils and food, all of which were loaded upon the backs of four pack horses.

They had come in by the old Bozeman trail, and before leaving home it had been arranged that they go into camp at Mary's Lake for a day or two, or until they were joined there by a fifth person who was to be their guide during their stay in the Park. This person was none other than the noted Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone; and when they came in sight of the lake, its presence sent a thrill through Wilma's breast that perhaps none of the others experienced—not that they were less enthusiastic or less capable of appreciating the scene—but because it was the appointed place of meeting with her big-hearted boy-lover.

Besides the young mountaineer their number was to be further increased by a party of three men, on their arrival at the Yellowstone Lake. One of these was Wilma and Frank's father, who, with an old hunter named Spokane Joe, was assisting one Professor Drood, of the Government service, in making some geological researches in the wonderful val-

"ME? WELL, I'M PLAIN KA-RISTOPHER KO LUMBUS BANDY, AND—" "NOT OLD KIT BANDY, THE MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE?" EXCLAIMED SAM. I SHOULD LAUGH TO SMILE THAT I AM THAT MAN."

Beadle's Half-Dime Library was written chiefly for young boys, and was one of Beadle & Adams's longest running series. Eighteen original Coomes stories appear in this format, as well as fifty reprints of his older stories.

Iowan. Oliver "Oll" Coomes, a Cass County farmer and two-term Iowa legislator, had a successful third career writing dime novels from 1870 to 1895. He became amazingly successful, writing seventy-seven separate stories, almost all of which were reprinted at least once. His most popular stories were reprinted five times. At least sixteen of these seventy-seven stories were set in Iowa.

The term "dime novels" is often used loosely, to include all nineteenth-century commercial, mass-produced, sensational cheap fiction. Yet dime novels actually appeared in three distinct formats. The earliest format was the story paper, which first appeared in the 1830s. A story paper was usually a nationally distributed, eight-page weekly that included installments of at least five stories, as well as letters from readers, fashion advice, and perhaps even a reprinted sermon. Two of the most successful story papers were Richard Bonner's *New York Ledger* (established in 1855) and Street & Smith's *New York Weekly* (established in 1859).

The second format, the pamphlet novel, appeared sporadically in the 1840s, but was first made successful by the publishing house of Irwin P. Beadle & Co., which published its first dime novel in 1860. (Although Beadle's company went through several name changes over the years, the firm will be referred to as Beadle & Adams throughout this article.) Each pamphlet was a pocket-sized 4 by 6 inches and usually had about a hundred pages. Beadle's innovation was not the fiction itself, which was modeled on other story-paper fiction and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Rather, the innovation was issuing complete novels on a regular schedule (monthly at first, later far more often), at a cheap price (a nickel or a dime), with uniform packaging and distinct, recognizable logos.

The third format of dime novels to appear was the cheap library, which was a nickel or dime pamphlet of a larger size — 8 by 11 inches with sixteen or thirty-two pages of two- or three-column print. Beadle & Adams published Oll Coomes's work in all three formats. For example, *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper-Ranger* was first serialized in the Beadle & Adams story paper *Saturday Journal* (from June 1 to July 6, 1872). It was reprinted in pamphlet novel form (in the "Pocket Novel" series in 1874 and the "New Dime Novel" series in 1883), and in cheap library form (as part of the "Half-Dime Library" in 1878 and again in 1904).

Dime novels quickly became quite a phenomenon. An *Atlantic Monthly* journalist later claimed, "Many Americans who were old enough to read at that time remember 1860 better from [Beadle's first dime novel] than they do because it was the year of Lincoln's election and the secession of South Carolina." Iowans shared in the general enthusiasm for dime novels, but a native novelist could generate a more specific interest. One Iowan reminisced that "the announcement of a new story by Oll Coomes . . . was sufficient to cause [one's] pulse to beat with wildest excitement."

IOWA'S illustrious dime novelist Oll Coomes was born in Licking County, Ohio, on August 26, 1845. He moved to a farm near Colfax in Jasper County, Iowa, with his family when he was eleven. His father was a potter, and though Oll learned his father's trade during school vacations, his true love was writing, and he had several poems published in a Newton paper in his youth. He attended Iowa College (now Grinnell) for one year — 1866 — but left for financial reasons. In 1867 he married Adelia A. Kellogg, and in 1870 they bought a 280-acre Cass County farm.

It was on this farm that Coomes began writing dime novels. Coomes once explained to a friend that a copy of Street & Smith's *New York Weekly* story paper inspired his launch into the fiction industry. The friend recalled that Coomes had read the thrilling Western and simply "decided he could write as good a yarn." Coomes's first novel, *Wild Raven, the Scout; or, The Mississippi Guide*, set along Nebraska's South Platte River, was published by Beadle & Adams on June 14, 1870. They paid Coomes $25 for complete rights to the story.

This first novel proved to be one of Coomes's most popular and eventually was reprinted five times. Coomes had immediate success selling

his next stories. In his first year of writing dime novels, he sold three to Beadle & Adams and five to Street & Smith.

Coomes entered the world of publishing at a time when competition between the publishing houses had reached fever pitch, and he seems to have used the publishing war to his own advantage, as publishers scrambled to secure the services of the best writers. At first, Beadle & Adams paid Coomes average rates for his work ($50-$100 per story) but Street & Smith lured him to the *New York Weekly* in 1870, in their attempt to corner the fiction market by paying top dollar for almost any story, regardless of quality. That year, Coomes sold five stories to Street & Smith for $500 each; in 1874, Street & Smith paid Coomes the fantastic amount of $1000 for *Omaha, Prince of the Prairie*. (Ironically, this story was never even published.)

Despite the higher pay offered by Street & Smith, Coomes soon returned to Beadle & Adams. He became one of their best paid and most loyal authors. (The price paid for his novels steadily increased to $500 by the late 1870s and early 1880s and decreased thereafter.) He was published numerous times a year.

In 1872, Beadle & Adams published three of Coomes's stories under the pseudonym Will Dexter. This strategy was sometimes employed when writers became so prolific that the frequent appearance of their own byline might lead readers to suspect that the novels were hastily written. However, pseudonyms were also used by publishing houses to maintain ownership of the fame and profits the pseudonym might attract. Nineteenth-century court cases regarding common-law trademarks established that a pseudonym was owned by the publisher alone, not by any of the hack writers who penned the stories.

COOMES USED the standard dime novel formula for successful writing. Suspense, surprise, mystery, clever disguises, and constant action were necessary elements in any dime novel, whether the story was a Western, a detective story, or a romance. Each 100-page novel was divided into at least twenty chapters. Without fail, each chapter began and ended with a cliff-hanging mystery, an ambush with impossible odds, or a deadly trap that had

BEADLE & ADAMS RULES FOR PUBLICATION

Beadle & Adams publishers frequently reprinted these rules for dime novel authors in their story papers:

"Our Literature

So much is said, and justly said against a considerable number of papers and libraries now on the market, that we beg leave to call the attention of the public to the following circular, which we send to all who propose to write for any of our publications:

Authors who write for our consideration will bear in mind that

We prohibit all things offensive to good taste, in expression or incident —

We prohibit subjects or characters that carry an immoral taint —

We prohibit the repetition of any occurrence, which, though true, is yet better untold —

We prohibit what cannot be read with satisfaction by every right-minded person — old and young alike —

We require your best work —

We require unquestioned originality —

We require pronounced strength of plot and high dramatic interest of story —

We require grace and precision of narrative style, and correctness in composition.

Authors must be familiar with the characters and places which they introduce, nor attempt to write in fields of which they have no intimate knowledge.

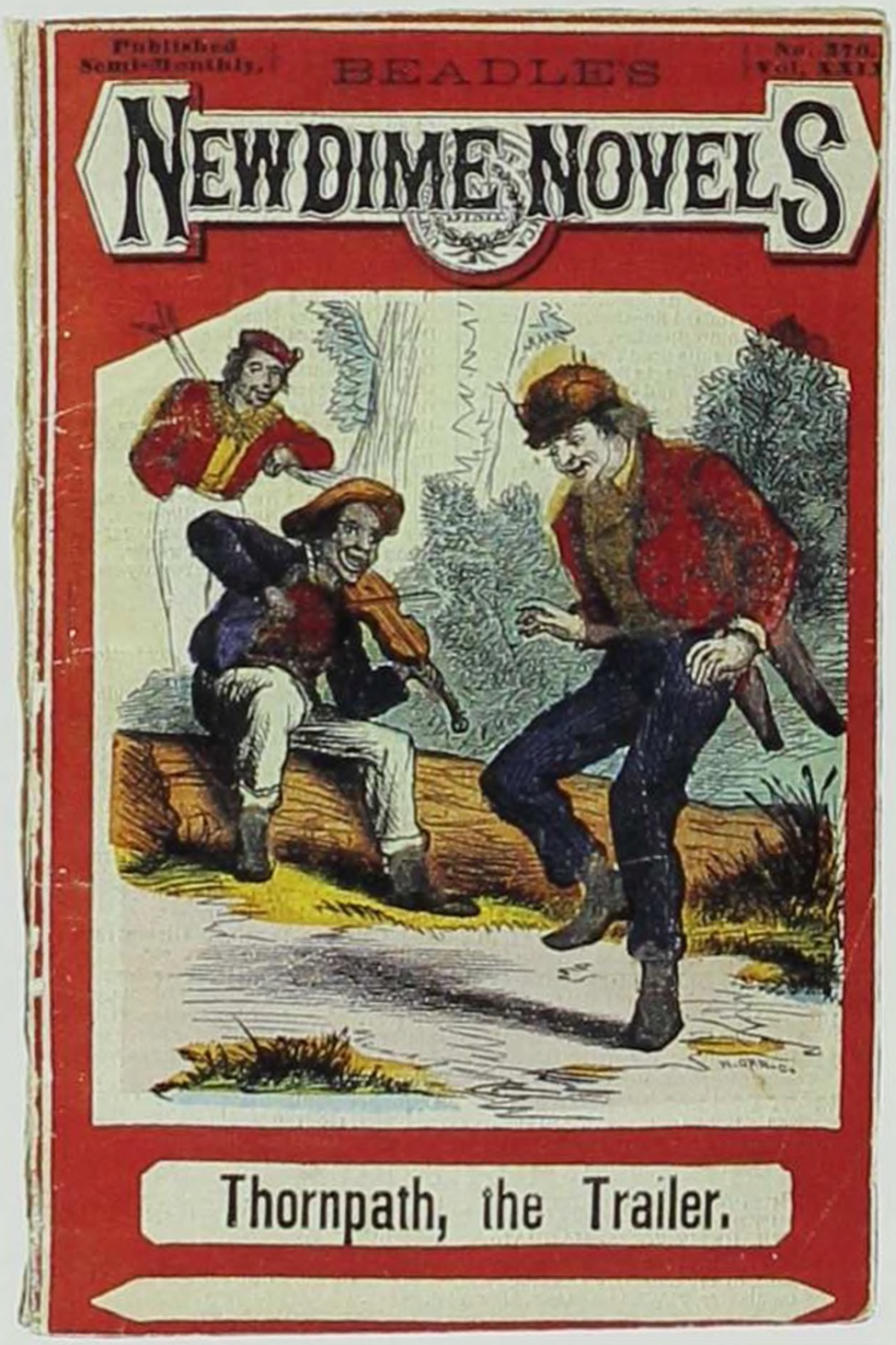
Those who fail to reach the standard here indicated cannot write acceptably for our several Libraries, or for any of our publications."

From Edmund Pearson, *Dime Novels; or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* (1929).

(Note: This last rule was regularly abused. Coomes, despite his sixteen Iowa stories, was no exception. He got the information for his other sixty-one stories from atlases and newspapers.)

ensnared the hero and/or heroine. The novel's ending was almost always happy—outlaws brought to justice, revenge and détente with Indians, ghostly mysteries solved, true identities revealed, and at least one wedding. (Coomes's *Antelope Abe* and *The Boy Chief* each closed with three weddings.)

An Iowa setting was certainly not a specific part of the formula for Westerns, but Beadle & Adams allowed their authors more freedom in the story specifics than other publishers, as long as authors stayed within the moral guidelines of the company [see box]. Beadle & Adams also encouraged their authors to write only in fields in which they had "intimate knowledge." In Coomes's case this naturally meant including stories about Iowa and Iowans. He began *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger* with this explanation: "The geographical formation of that portion of our country lying between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, and south of the forty-third degree of north latitude, now comprising the state of Iowa, furnishes a vast field for the pen of the romancer. Though devoid of bold scenery and wild mountainous ruggedness, it presents a romantic picturesqueness which the hand of the Creator has modified to a degree well-calculated to awaken enthusiastic admiration."



As this cover illustrates, African-American characters in most dime novels were sentimentalized but always portrayed as inferior. Despite the cover stereotype, Coomes depicts ex-slave Egypt as brave, strong, kind, and a major hero in the novel.

IOWA INDEED furnished a vast field for Coomes's pen. Stretches of "undulating prairie" became the scene of exciting chases, tracking, and ambushes. Its tall grasses were perfect for hiding the fearless hero when outnumbered by bloodthirsty Indian braves or sinister outlaws (usually both). Muddy ponds were used to hide chests of gold, and clear lakes were always good for revealing the reflection of a kidnapper as the heroine peered at her own beauty, or for Red Star, spirit of the lake, to walk upon and haunt. Tiny Iowa settlements were home to organized bands of counterfeiters, road agents, thieves, and kidnappers, with appropriately menacing names like "Rat Rougle's gang" or "Jubal Wolfgang's den."

In Coomes's plots — as in many dime novels — the settlers were constantly in danger of being massacred by Indians. As historian Merle Curti explained, the typical dime novel portrayed Native Americans "neither as a noble savage nor as a merely backward racial type but as an innately primitive, stubborn, treacherous and vindictive barbarian." This racist image, indicative of nineteenth-century conventions, is certainly present in Coomes's writing. An often recycled description of any Coomes Indian character included eyes "full of that evil cunning light peculiar to his race." Native Americans were dehumanized; as Hawkeye Harry explained to his true love, "I hope, Nora, you will not think hard of me for taking human life, or rather, the life of a savage,

The harrowing cliffs on the cover of Coomes's *Silent Shot, the Slayer* may not look much like Iowa, although the story was set near Council Bluffs.

which is but a grade higher than the wild panther of the woods." Indians were killed with impunity throughout his tales, although the real "bad guy" often turned out to be a white outlaw disguised as an Indian, who was usually permitted to live at the end. Almost every "good" or intelligent Indian later turned out to be a white captive raised by Indians, although there were a few exceptions.

AS DIME NOVELS grew in popularity, they were accused of a decline in quality. "By the close of the seventies," commented the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1907, "the dime novel — a term applied to all the cheap fiction indiscriminately — became an atrocity." The traditional interpretation is that the intense competition in the dime industry during the 1870s forced publishers to issue novels that were more sensationalized and more violent. Even Beadle editor Orville Victor acknowledged, "Oh, we had to kill a few more Indians than we used to; we held our own against [our competitors]." Nevertheless, Beadle & Adams's early novels were generally considered of a high quality and high morals, and an 1880s literary critic, Brander Matthews, would later champion the "ultra-Puritan purity of Beadle dime novels."

Reformer Anthony Comstock, however, who was instrumental in the passage and enforcement of the federal anti-obscenity law of 1873, drew no distinctions between publishers. In his crusading 1883 book *Traps for the Young*, he summarized his judgment of dime novels: "these stories breed vulgarity, profanity, loose ideas of life, impurity of thought and deed. They render the imagination unclean, destroy domestic peace, desolate homes, cheapen women's virtue and make foul mouths, bullies, cheats, vagabonds, thieves, desperadoes and libertines."

Comstock was most concerned about dime novels' influence on juvenile readers. Although several dime novel series were targeted at a young audience, such as Beadle & Adams's Half-Dime Library, dime novels in general were not intended as children's literature. Evidence on readership is sketchy. Historian Michael Denning has argued that the audience was predominantly working-class young men and women, as well as boys and girls. Beadle & Adams bibliographer Albert Johannsen claimed that "almost everyone except schoolma'ams, pedants, and the illiterate" read Beadle & Adams dime novels. The popular image of readership, however, was "uncounted armies of boys . . . [who] were taken to the woodsheds by their fathers, and there subjected to severe physical and mental anguish as a result of the parental discovery that they were reading such 'impossible trash.'"

One wonders whether Coomes entertained his own boys — Royston (born in 1870), Arthur (born in 1873), and Isaiah (born in 1878) — with his dime novel tales. Perhaps Royston St. Claire, one of the heroes of *Old Bald Head* (first

COURTESY LOIS COOMES

Coomes relaxes with the *Iowa State Register*, son Arthur (left), wife Adelia, and son Isaiah. One wonders if Coomes entertained his family with the dime-novel tales that social reformer Anthony Comstock called "devil traps."

published in 1871) was so named with Coomes's first-born in mind. If the sons were allowed to read their father's stories, it does not seem to have affected them adversely — Arthur, for instance, became a successful farmer and mayor of the city of Atlantic.

Coomes's dime novels were apparently never directly attacked as being immoral. Gilbert Patten, who also wrote for Beadle & Adams and penned the highly successful "Frank Merriwell" stories for Street & Smith, remembered the high quality of Coomes's stories that he had read as a youth: "I quickly became a Beadle fan with a list of favorite authors headed by Oll Coomes, whose Indian stories were replete with thrilling situations, clever stratagems, surprising twists and extravagant but clean and inoffensive humor. No story by Coomes that I can recall depended for interest upon shocking effects or gory details and he had considerable skill in character delineation." Patten continued, "This kind of reading spurred my imagination to such a degree that soon I was writing stories more feverishly than ever."

RELATED TO public condemnation of the dime novel was a stereotype regarding the men and women who wrote them. Patten best enunciated this image in a *Saturday Evening Post* article he wrote in 1931: "Somehow, it seems that practically all of Beadle's authors, with the exception of Oll Coomes, who stuck to the old house to the end, were destined to poverty and disaster. In their desperation . . . some of them committed suicide."

Coomes, however, completely defied this stereotype (as did a number of other dime novelists). Coomes was not only a respected farmer, but also a school director, a bank president, a postmaster, and a two-term Iowa legislator, as well as a successful dime novelist.

Writing dime novels never seems to have

COURTESY LOIS COOMES

Coomes and his wife Adelia moved into this house, on a farm southeast of Wiota, in 1870. Here he wrote his seventy-seven blood-and-thunder tales.

tarnished Coomes's reputation; locally, it bolstered it. The Cass County history of 1884 refers to him not as a lowly "dime novelist" but as a "well known literateur and writer." In 1877, just as dime novels were allegedly beginning to sink in public estimation, Cass County Republican voters demonstrated their respect for Coomes by nominating him for state representative. The July 18, 1877, *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph* described candidate Coomes as "young, intelligent, honest . . . a most worthy man." It also stated, "He will bring to the consideration of his legislative duties rare common sense, sharpened by business experience and thorough education, and refined by literary pursuits." The editorial spoke of his success as a writer and the "strong and active friendship of his neighbors . . . who very largely aided in conferring the nomination upon him." He won the election easily.

In Coomes's first term, his most notable action also became his most controversial. He introduced the first bill of the 1878 session to repeal the so-called "Granger law" (which had established a schedule of maximum freight and passenger rates for the railroads) and replace it with a commissioner system, a more laissez-faire approach. Coomes's bill was combined with other similar bills and was signed into law on March 23, 1878. Although Coomes claimed that his constituents had asked for such a change to jump-start the "stagnant condition of railroad building," many apparently had changed their minds.

The new railroad law and Coomes's involvement in its legislation served as the basis for what was later remembered locally as "one of the most spectacular political fights in the history of Cass County," when Coomes sought reelection in 1879. Letters and editorials flew back and forth in the *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*. Close to election day, the campaign began to turn negative, with Coomes insinuating that his opponent, an Atlantic lawyer, collected extortionate attorney's fees. If ever there was an opportunity for Coomes's opponents to exploit negative attitudes about dime novels and novelists, it was here. Yet, the closest the opponent's supporters got was a letter that asked, "What has Mr. Coomes been doing in the interval between writing railroad commission bills and dime novels while he has been representing Cass county? Has he ever proposed to abolish attorney fees? What bill did he introduce on that subject?" A few days after the letter appeared, Coomes was reelected by a comfortable margin.

Coomes declined to run for a third term. He instead served a brief term as editor of a New York story paper, but very quickly returned to Iowa and to writing, publishing five dime novels with Beadle & Adams in 1881, four each year in 1882 and 1883, three in 1884 and 1885, and averaging less than two a year from 1886 to 1895.

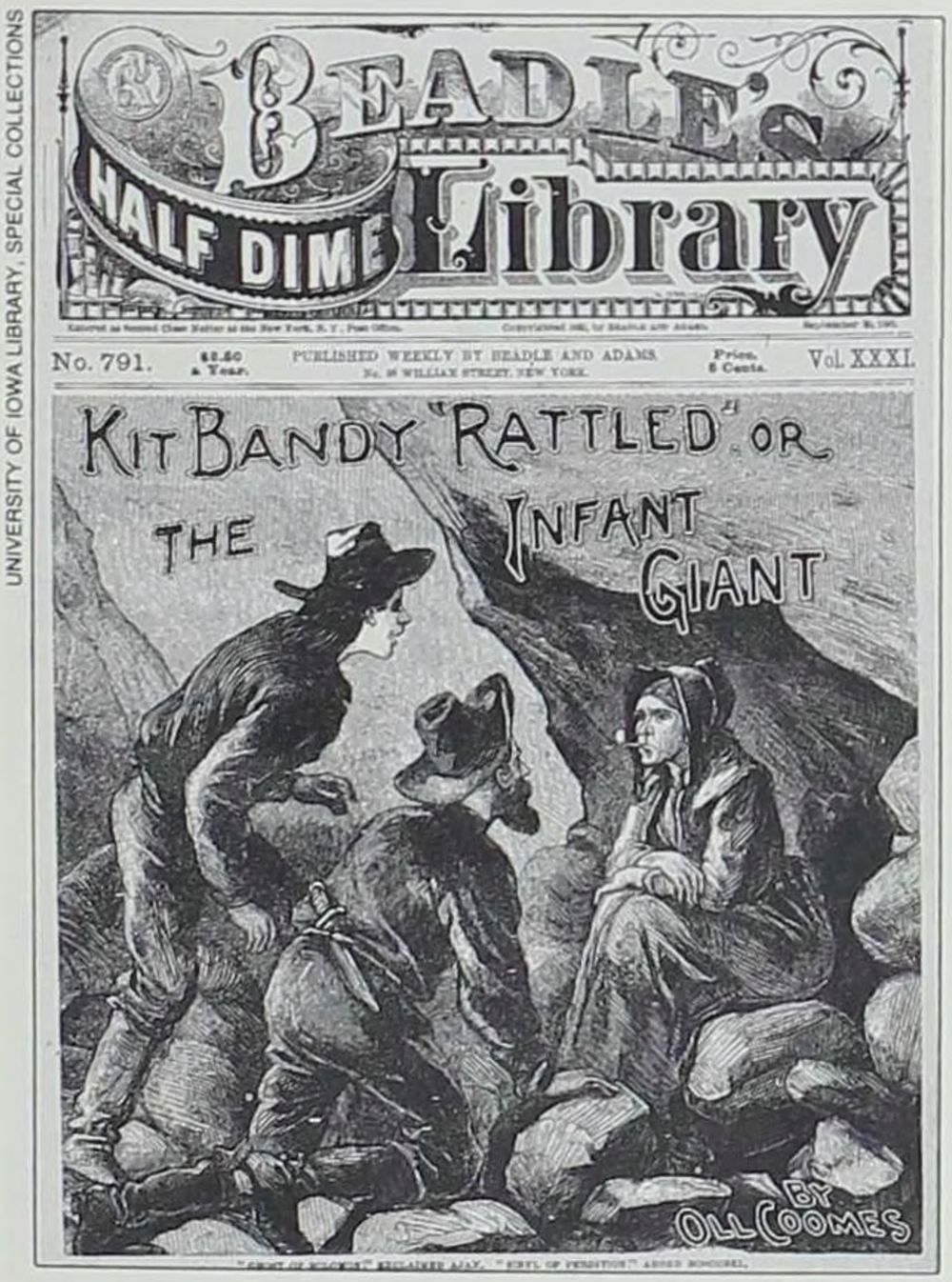
THE PRINCIPLES of mass production, uniformity, and systematization adhered to by the dime novel industry eventually impaired the authors' independence and control over their fiction. Street & Smith went so far as to dictate specific plot lines, characters, and settings to prospective authors. According to historian Michael Denning, the "tendency of the industry was to shift from selling an 'author' who was a free laborer, to selling a character, a trademark whose stories could be written by a host of anonymous hack writers and whose celebrity

[that is, pseudonym] could be protected in court."

In Coomes's case, this generalization is only partially accurate. Coomes's later stories were a series of twelve "Old Kit Bandy, Mountain Detective" stories. Using the same character in several books implies that character recognition had become as important as author recognition to sell these novels. However, Coomes was always the sole author of the Bandy tales, used no pseudonym at this time, and his name appeared etched into the cover illustration, another main selling point for dime novels.

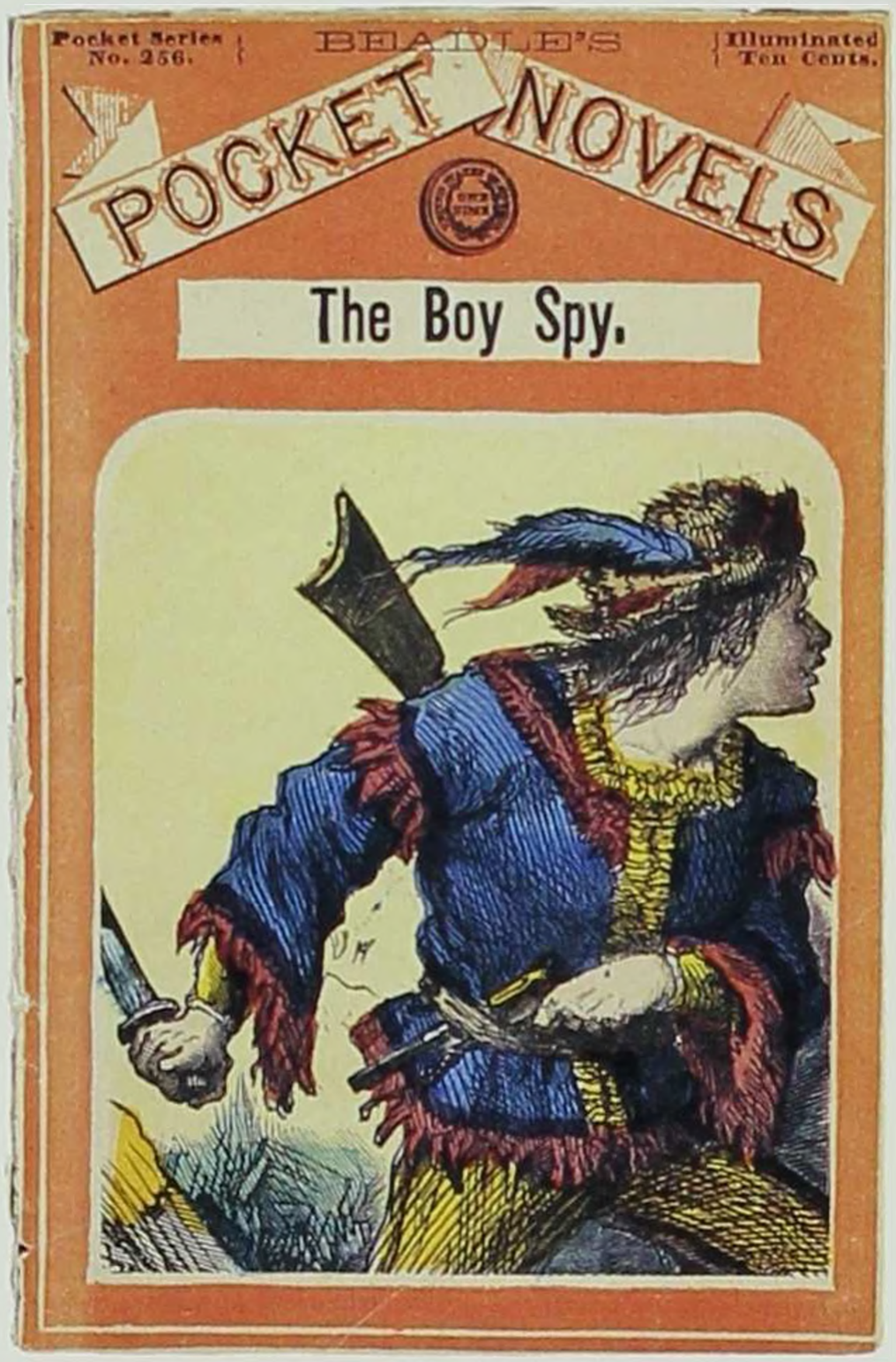
Writing in Iowa, Coomes was physically removed from some of the demands of the publishing industry. As librarian and dime novel scholar Edmund Pearson phrased it, Coomes and other long-distant writers were not "in a little upper room at Number 98 William Street," (Beadle & Adams's factory) with Beadle's fiction hacks, "driving their pens across paper with antlike persistence and clocklike punctuality." However, Pearson continued, such authors as Coomes were only "less visibly shackled and tied to the Beadle presses." To survive as a dime novelist, Coomes had to respond to the demands of the market.

The end product — the novels themselves — provide testimony on the increasing standardization demands that handicapped an author's control over his or her fiction. Scholar Christine Bold has written that the "story telling voice" in dime novels serves as a "running commentary by the individual author on his place in the production line." A sampling of Coomes's dime novels throughout his career does seem to suggest a possible decline in control demonstrated by a deterioration of the authorial voice. His early novels contained short interjections sprinkled throughout the story in which Coomes, clearly in control as narrator, explained where the plot was moving next and then led the reader to it. In *Thornpath the Trailer* he interjects, ". . . but that we may fully understand the origin of the strange music, we will cross over to the island whence it emanates." And in *Old Bald Head* he explains: "Again, I change the scene of my story in order to introduce a new character." In most of Coomes's later novels, such as his "Old Kit Bandy, Mountain Detective" series, this voice all but disappears. The author merely describes the action rather than explaining it or leading it, as if the story line and the characters had become more important than the author/narrator.



The prominence of Coomes's byline in the black and white cover woodcut implies that his name still had drawing power in 1892. Hero Kit Bandy's wife, Sabina, defied Coomes's stock damsel-in-distress model. By novel's end, however, it is revealed that "she" is really Kit Bandy's assistant, Ichabod, in disguise. The caption says, "'GHOST OF SOLOMON!' EXCLAIMED AJAX. 'SIBYL OF PERDITION!' ADDED BOSCOBEL."

ALTHOUGH THE DOMINANT PLOT formula and the setting of dime novels shifted during the late nineteenth century, there was little clear change in the plots of Coomes's stories. While the rest of the industry was shifting to urban detective stories and train robber tales and away from the old frontier Indian stories,



Frank Bell, the Boy Spy, was "trained from infancy, almost, to the trail of the red-man, whom he hunted with the vindictive spirit of an avenger." Beadle & Adams first experimented with color covers like this one in 1874. The colors were printed from rough wood blocks or stencils. A color cover was typically used to dress up a dime-novel series for reprinting.

In this sequel to *The Boy Spy*, our hero, Frank Bell, is falsely accused of murder, escapes from jail, is made chief of an Arapaho tribe, breaks up a gang of robbers, negotiates a peace treaty between the Indians and settlers, and marries his sweetheart, Lillian. Frank Bell was also the name of one of Coomes's neighbors in Cass County, Iowa, and appeared in a local news column.

Coomes stuck to his tried and true formula. Kit Bandy may have been called a "detective" but that was all window dressing. The story itself was the same Indian-fighting, outlaw-hunting, heroine-rescuing tale Coomes had always written, with none of the detective conventions of the time.

One of the few noticeable changes in Coomes's later stories was the setting. While Coomes's early tales were set in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and other midwestern states, his later novels took place further west. As the setting moved to the Black Hills, the Dakotas, Colorado, and other places Coomes did not visit until long after he had written about them, Coomes had less chance to customize his stories with personal details and personal knowledge from his life in Iowa.

Even his tales set in the Wild West, however, were not completely removed from Coomes's Cass County experience, and actual events in Iowa certainly could have provided materials for dime novels. Local reports in the county seat newspaper, the *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*, were often racier than Coomes's dime novels. Articles in the *Telegraph* in 1877 and 1878, for example, included accounts of a murder in "an Atlantic Bawdy House," the sentencing of an Ottumwa lawyer for seduction, and the suicide of a mother who jumped

into a well with her baby, and many other incidents to remind Iowans that truth is stranger than fiction. The *Telegraph* sometimes found Iowa connections in its sundry articles from the West, and reported on groups of Iowans leaving Wiota, Atlantic, and the surrounding area for points west. "Black Hills fever is raging," it announced on February 14, 1877. On April 11, 1877, it reported that Charles Bennett of Atlantic was riding in a stagecoach that was robbed by masked outlaws near Whitewood Gulch, South Dakota. Other dime novelists, such as William Wallace Cook, kept newspaper clipping files for possible story ideas. If Coomes used such a strategy, he surely found ample material in the *Telegraph*.

IN HIS EARLY NOVELS, Coomes sometimes named his heroes after his neighbors and friends, or even Iowa public figures like Cyrus C. Carpenter (governor from 1872 to 1876). Carpenter appeared as one of the young heroes in *Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew*, set in Fort Dodge and published in 1877 (the year of Coomes's election to the General Assembly). The story opened in the village school with Carpenter behind the desk, presiding "with that calm, manly dignity which in after years distinguished him in the gubernatorial chair of the State."

Coomes's characterizations of Iowans were not confined to the pages of his dime novels. In a series of columns titled "Wiota News and Gossip" in the *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*, the usual neighborhood news of the nearby village was enlivened with humorous vignettes. There is no byline on the columns, but the vocabulary and the writing style suggest that Coomes was the author, and his farm and Wiota were in the same township.

One column told of "Hawk-eye Harry" Houseman, who spots three wolves and recruits four young men to surround the field and close in on them. The suspense builds until one of the "wolves" oinks and the youths realize that it is Bill McClure's pet pigs they have been

This bearded hunter was called Old Bald Head because he "survived the tortures of the Indian scalping knife." In the process of avenging his wife's death, he invents two aliases and kills five Sioux braves. To ensure a happy ending, however, his wife is eventually found alive.

stalking. The names of the four young men and Bill McClure can all be traced in Cass County history sources. The name of Hawk-eye Harry Houseman is not traceable, but it bears a striking resemblance to "Hawkeye Harry Houston," the main character of a Coomes dime novel. Another column was about "Frank Bell, the Boy Spy," who attempts to rescue sauerkraut from overturned boxcars in Turkey Creek after a train wreck. This column was answered in the next edition of the *Telegraph* with a letter from "the Boy Spy" himself, reporting that he had sold the recovered sauerkraut to "Mr. Oll Coomes of this township." Frank Bell was an actual person living in nearby Turkey Grove, and also the name of the main character in Coomes's dime novels *The*

Preserving Dime Novels

ON APRIL 23, 1948, T. Henry Foster, a rare book collector and chairman of the board at the John Morrell Company in Ottumwa, wrote a letter to the State Historical Society offering to donate ten Beadle & Adams dime novels — all of which were set in Iowa. (Seven of these were authored by Iowan Oll Coomes.) Foster wrote, "I do not want to keep these here in my library because most of them are so fragile that they require library treatment which I cannot give them, and I have in mind presenting them to the State Historical Society where I think they belong. . . . They, of course, are not suitable for lending and should be preserved more as curiosities than anything else."

The Society librarians agree with Foster's assessment of the dime novels. As with all special collections, the dime novels require some restrictions on their use. Because of their extremely fragile nature, and in the interest of preserving them for posterity, the original copies are not available for general public use.

As Society conservator Jane Meggers explains, the paper the dime novels were printed on was simply not meant to last. Like newspapers, they were printed on highly acidic wood pulp paper that deteriorates quickly — designed to be read once and then thrown away. The most vulnerable parts of the dime novels are the cover and outer leaves, which are most threatened by readers. There is no known technique to restore the strength or flexibility of the dime novels. "Ironically," remarked Meggers, "the only way to save them is to not handle them."

Many of the Society's special collections are made available to the public using microfilm or photographic reproduction. Unfortunately, in the case of the Foster collection, the Society does not own facsimile copies. However, all ten of the titles in the Foster collection are available for purchase through University Microfilm International (Ann Arbor, Michigan), or for loan through interlibrary loan sources such as the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago.

The accompanying article and front and back covers of this *Palimpsest* showcase seven of the colorful cover illustrations from Oll Coomes's dime novels.

—Becky Wilson Hawbaker

Boy Spy; or, The Young Avenger and *The Boy Chief; or, The Doomed Twenty.*

Regardless of who wrote the Wiota columns, Coomes's use of actual or slightly modifed names in his dime novels suggests a borrowing of Iowa material for plot and character, and a local following of readers who would be familiar with both his newspaper columns and his dime novels.

Local readers would have had more difficulty recognizing friends and neighbors in Coomes's later novels. Kit Bandy, for example, was probably so named in an attempt to capitalize on the success of Frank Tousey's New York Detective Library's popular "Old King Brady" detective character, albeit in a western setting.

THE END of Coomes's writing career was marked by a slow decline in output that paralleled the dime novel industry as a whole, to the extent that journalist Firmin Dredd commented, "The close of the century is witnessing the extinction of what has been popularly known as the Dime Novel." In the case of Beadle & Adams, Dredd was on the money. With the death of Erastus Beadle in 1894 and William Adams in 1896, the firm was sold to M. J. Ivers & Co. in 1898. Ivers & Co. issued reprints until 1905, when they, too, quit, threatened by increased postage rates and slick Western pulp magazines.

Coomes wrote his last story, *Kit Bandy's Big Six; or, the Rustlers of Jackson Basin* in 1895. His novels lived on in M. J. Ivers reprints until 1905. Coomes himself lived on quietly on his Iowa farm, retiring to Atlantic in 1905. When he was killed in a car crash near Storm Lake in 1921, obituaries remembered him not so much for his blood-and-thunder tales, but for his loyalty to the Republican party, and for more important but ordinary things like, "It was never beneath his dignity to give kind attention and consideration to the 'kids' of the town and community, no matter whose 'kid' [it] happened to be."

Oll Coomes not only succeeded in making very good money from writing dime novels and

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Oliver "Oll" Coomes: dime novelist, farmer, legislator, bank president, school director, and postmaster.

investing it fruitfully in improving his Cass County farm; he was also successful in securing a place for Iowa's landscapes and local color in what historian Merle Curti has called "the nearest thing we have in this country to a true 'proletarian' literature, that is, a literature written for the great masses of people and actually read by them." The usual print order for a Beadle dime novel was 60,000. Counting all the reprints, Coomes shared descriptions of Iowa with millions of readers. Granted, his novels were not always historically accurate, most especially in his portrayal of Native Americans, but Coomes's novels must be judged by the standards of his time and by those of the dime novel industry.

Coomes's love for his native state was evident in descriptions of the Iowa setting, and in the fact that he made Iowa his lifelong home despite several job offers in the cheap-fiction business in New York City. Perhaps one of his characters was speaking for her author when she wrote to the main character, Frank Bell, in *The Boy Spy*: "Dear Frank . . . we arrived safely [in St. Louis], but, oh, what a prison we found living in a great city to be! We longed for the wild beauty and freedom of the prairie." She returned to Iowa in time for the book's sequel, *The Boy Chief*. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The State Historical Society collection includes these seven Oll Coomes dime novels (dates refer to publication date of the edition held): *Antelope Abe, the Boy Guide; or, The Forest Bride* (July 10, 1883); *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger* (July 7, 1874); *Thornpath the Trailer; or, The Perils of the Prairie* (Oct. 3, 1876); *Silent Shot, the Slayer; or, The Secret Chamber of the Hunter's Lodge* (Jan. 23, 1877); *The Boy Spy; or, The Young Avenger* (April 15, 1884); *The Boy Chief; or, The Doomed Twenty* (July 27, 1875); and *Old Bald Head; or, Red Star, the Serpent of the Lake* (Feb. 22, 1876).

The University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, holds others by Coomes: *Baby Sam, The Boy Giant of Yellowstone* (Aug. 25, 1885); *Web-Foot Mose, the Tramp Detective; or, The Boy Bear Slayer of the Sierras* (July 21, 1885); *Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper; or, The Bad Man from Wapsipinnicon* (May 1, 1888); *Kit Bandy and Co., the Border Detectives; or, The Big Wipe Out at the Hermit Dome* (Sept. 1905); and *Kit Bandy 'Rattled'; or, The Infant Giant* (Sept. 20, 1892).

Biographical sources include Cass County histories; the *Des Moines Register* (May 31, 1931; Nov. 27, 1938); Albert Johannsen, *The House of Beadle and Adams*, vol. 2 (1950); the *Atlantic Telegraph* (1876–1879); and clippings provided by Lois Coomes. Sources on dime novels and novelists include Albert Johannsen's mammoth index of Beadle titles, biographical dictionary of authors, and history of the firm, *The House of Beadle and Adams* (3 vols., 1950); Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860–1960* (1987); Anthony Comstock, *Traps For the Young* (1883, 1967); William Wallace Cook, *The Fiction Factory* (1912); Michael Denning, *Mechanic's Accent: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture* (1987); Edmund Pearson, *Dime Novels; or Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* (1929); "Story Paper Literature," *Atlantic Monthly* 44 (Sept. 1879), 383–93; George Jencks, "Dime Novel Makers," *The Bookman* 20 (Oct. 1904), 108–14, Gilbert Patten, "Dime Novel Days," *Saturday Evening Post* (Feb. 28, March 7, 1931); Charles Harvey, "The Dime Novel in American Life," *Atlantic Monthly* 100 (July 1907); and Merle Curti, "Dime Novels and the American Tradition," *Yale Review* 26 (Summer 1937).

Iowa

Hobart

Cleaves

IOWA

JACKSON

CLAY

Berlin

Steamboat Rock

ELDORA

Xenia.

Hill

New Providence.

Gilford

T. 88 N. R. 20 W.

T. 88 N. R. 19 W.

The Rainsbargers Revisited

County Crisis and Historical Mystery

by Raymond M. Tinnian

ON JUNE 5, 1885, Manse and Finley Rainsbarger were taken from the jail at Eldora, Iowa, and shot by a mob of about a hundred men, "much as an infuriated animal would destroy its enemy," according to one historian. Although lynchings (broadly defined as any mob violence and killings) were not particularly rare in nineteenth-century Iowa, there was probably never one perpetrated more cynically.

Many people in the Hardin County area today still consider the Rainsbargers a family of criminals who didn't do everything they were accused of. The truth is more complex and more interesting: with one exception, the Rainsbargers didn't do anything they were accused of. Yet before the affair was finished, two Rainsbargers had been killed by a mob, and two others would be imprisoned for thirty years. The story surrounding these events was misunderstood and misrepresented for so many years that it became a gloomy labyrinth, defying all honest attention.

In 1944, nearly sixty years after the lynching, an Iowa Falls journalist wrote: "It is too tangled a web for us to untangle and it has never been quite safe to try to untangle it, as I long ago learned from personal experience. . . . All along the way from Eldora to Iowa Falls, the two towns included, there are persons whose parents or grandparents were mixed up in the troubles of the 1880s. . . . Where life, death, and imprisonment are involved in so many lives, it is not safe to delve too deeply. The truth will never be known except by those who played the cards and their lips have been sealed by fear and death."

About two years ago, while conducting routine historical research for the U.S. Highway 20 project in Hardin County, I came across this violent story that seemed to have no bottom. All available accounts were contradictory or ambivalent. After months of searching, I located Norma Poland of Marshalltown, great-granddaughter of William Rainsbarger. In her attic were hundreds of pages of previously unknown information that two of the Rainsbarger brothers had spent their lives accumulating: 256 newspaper clippings from 38 different Iowa newspapers; hundreds of pages of Nate Rainsbarger's writings; and 75 sworn statements and letters from guilt-ridden participants who had come forward years after the fact to tell their stories. The conclusions indicated by these documents were disturbing and inescapable. It's easy to see why journalist Ira Nichols in 1944 ran into a stone wall trying to investigate the Rainsbarger story, for as Nichols had observed, all along the way, from Eldora to Iowa Falls, there were persons

Opposite: 1883 map of Hardin County showing (from top) towns of Abbott, Cleves, Steamboat Rock, Eldora, and Gifford. Top inset: Site of ambush of Henry Johns, south of Abbott. Lower inset: Area of Enoch Johnson's murder, north of Gifford. (Map and 1991 photos, courtesy the author.)

whose parents or grandparents had been deceived and manipulated into acts that they came to view with shame and sorrow.

THE RAINSBARGER family came from Ohio in 1853 and settled in a tiny log cabin near the Iowa River, a few miles northeast of what later became the town of Steamboat Rock. The Rainsbarger farm was situated on the flat prairie uplands overlooking the Iowa River greenbelt, with its steep slopes, dense woods, and inaccessible ravines. George and Catharine Rainsbarger raised a family of five sons and five daughters. The oldest son, William, eventually bought a farm nearby and raised a large family of his own. He was a good neighbor, a respected citizen, and a member of the school board. The second youngest of the Rainsbarger brothers, Emanuel (or "Manse"), became a blacksmith and ran a shop in Steamboat Rock where he let the local boys make sleds. At the time of his death in 1885, he had a young wife and a newborn son.

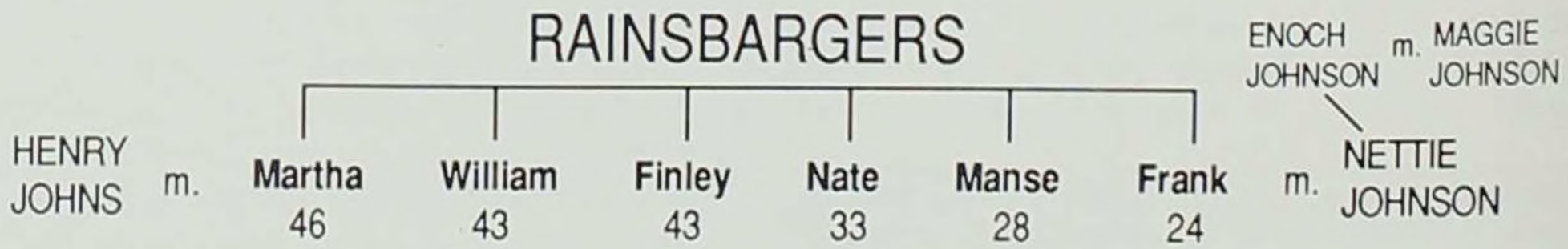
Frank, the youngest of the brothers, and Nathan (or "Nate"), who was nine years older, worked the family's original forty-acre farm after George and Catharine died. They also ran a threshing crew in the fall. They were known to drink, associate with riff-raff, and were described by their greatest defender as "no Sunday school boys," but there is no evidence that Frank or Nate Rainsbarger ever committed a crime.

The second oldest brother, Finley, was considered a dangerous character because in 1866 he had killed a man with a knife during a drugstore scuffle. Finley Rainsbarger retained his ill reputation for the rest of his life, and may have been associated with a low order of Hardin County criminals.

In December of 1882, the youngest of the Rainsbarger brothers, Frank, eloped with Nettie Johnson, daughter of the well-known Enoch "Horsethief" Johnson. The couple set up housekeeping on Frank and Nate's forty-acre farm.

The following summer federal authorities at Goldfield, Iowa, arrested Nettie's father, Enoch Johnson, with a box of counterfeit coins in his possession. Johnson was a key member of an extensive criminal ring centered in Steamboat Rock, two and a half miles from Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm. A few years previous, this crime ring had shifted from simple stock and equipment theft into the riskier field of producing counterfeit money, and they had met with initial success. Counterfeit money was passed and accepted without question at several places, including the Farmer's Exchange Bank in Steamboat Rock. Some of the coins were made at William P. Hiserodt's

Rainsbarger siblings (ages in 1885) and relatives through marriage



The six Rainsbarger siblings most involved in the dramatic events in Hardin County. Martha was married to Henry Johns. Frank was married to Nettie Johnson, daughter of Enoch Johnson and his wife, Maggie. (There were also four other Rainsbargers: Charity, Delia, Levina, and Elizabeth.)

From left: Frank and Nate Rainsbarger

Frank and Nate Rainsbarger were described by their greatest defender as "no Sunday school boys," but there is no evidence that either ever committed a crime.

hotel in Steamboat Rock; others were shipped in from Dubuque or Sioux City. Several sources confirm that the Hardin County counterfeit ring was connected to other criminal operations throughout the Midwest, but little is known about these confederates. An elaborate exchange network may have prevented federal agents from tracing the counterfeit coins to the casting dies, and it also served to distribute the guilt in such a way that each counterfeiter felt himself protected from arrest — except for Enoch Johnson.

Spending the winter months in federal prison, Johnson felt greatly betrayed as none of his criminal friends tried to help him. In Steamboat Rock the counterfeit ring was terrified of what Johnson might tell federal authorities, and dared not step forward to help him. As for the Rainsbarger family, they didn't much care about Enoch Johnson's troubles until the spring of 1884, when Nettie Rainsbarger begged her husband, Frank, to bail her father out of prison, and Frank mortgaged the farm to do so. This does not seem to have been a problem for Frank's brother Nate, since they thought they would get their money back when Enoch Johnson appeared for trial.

In April 1884, Johnson was released from prison, pending a trial. He returned to his home in Gifford, but immediately quarreled with his wife, Margaret, and she threw him out. Margaret Johnson, a trusted member of the counterfeit ring, was furious with her husband for having gotten caught. With nowhere else to go, Enoch Johnson moved in with his daughter Nettie, at Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm.

During the summer of 1884, Enoch Johnson received visitors at the farm. One of these visitors was Henry Johns, husband of Martha Rainsbarger and a good friend to the Rainsbarger brothers. Henry Johns was a wealthy farmer who had been losing money through phony coins and bills and was determined to rid the county of counterfeit money. He had given some of the coins to federal agents and was now foreman of a grand jury to indict counterfeiters. During their meetings, Enoch Johnson told Johns the names of those in the counterfeit ring, where they met, and where the money was made. Henry Johns passed the information along to United States marshals. In return for the information, Enoch Johnson expected leniency when his trial came up.

ANOTHER VISITOR to Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm that summer was William P. Hiserodt, leader of the counterfeit ring. Hiserodt was a well-liked and perhaps even charismatic fellow. Born in Columbia County, New York, in 1840, he had been a Grange leader in Hardin County in the 1870s, then a blacksmith in Steamboat

DRAWINGS OF RAINSBARGERS AND JOHNSON FROM FRONT PAGE OF *CHICAGO TRIBUNE* (11/18/1887) OR ROSS'S PAMPHLET HISTORY. DRAWINGS OF OTHERS FROM COUNTY HISTORIES. ALL COURTESY THE AUTHOR.

Counterfeit coin and Enoch Johnson

The counterfeit ring clearly did not intend to let Enoch "Horsethief" Johnson's trial take place.

Rock. During the 1880s Hiserodt ran a hotel and saloon in Steamboat Rock called the Western House. Hiserodt was "not of more than medium height" and "broad and stocky with an unusually dark complexion," according to Nate Rainsbarger. "His eyes were black as were his hair and beard. 'Black Hiserodt' he was called, or 'Black Bill'. Too, his voice had a peculiar and gruff quality, making it recognizable anywhere."

Hiserodt told Enoch Johnson that "if he peached there wouldn't be enough left of him to feed to the crows." Johnson took the threat seriously. He tried to keep in public places and he stayed close to the Rainsbargers, much to their eventual misfortune. Henry Johns had for years warned Frank and Nate to stay away from Enoch Johnson, but Frank's marriage to Nettie had drawn them all in. Now Henry Johns's crusade against local crime propelled events in Hardin County. Nevertheless, Enoch Johnson's trial date was postponed for several months, until January 1885.

The counterfeit ring clearly did not intend to let Johnson's trial take place. Johnson's wife, Margaret (or "Maggie"), was a central figure in the plot; she and stepdaughter Nettie had Johnson's life insured for $16,000. Although Nettie was angry and ashamed of her father, she was torn. According to testimony of Johnson's hired boy, at one meeting down in Gifford with the counterfeit ring, Nettie "got up and walked across the room several times and stood in front of Mag and said 'For God's sake are you going to kill my father?' and Mag said, in substance, 'shut up you damned little fool.'"

On November 16, Margaret Johnson sent a note to her husband: "Come down and get me teusday night. Tell Net to send my shall." Enoch Johnson took the bait. On Tuesday, November 18, he started on the thirteen-mile buggy ride from Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm down to Gifford to see his wife.

It happened to be one of the liveliest nights in Hardin County history. Grover Cleveland had just been elected the first Democratic president since the Civil War. To many the ascent of the Democrats meant repeal of the recent state prohibition law — and free-flowing liquor again. There were huge bonfires at Steamboat Rock and Eldora where victorious Democrats whooped it up.

Given all the activity that night, Johnson probably felt it safe to venture out alone. He stopped at the bonfire in Eldora and drank a beer with four of his horsethief buddies. One of them asked him what he was planning to do when his trial came up, and he told them he was going to plead guilty and hope for a light sentence. Two of them saw Johnson get in his buggy and head south for Gifford sometime after ten o'clock.

Meanwhile at Gifford, Margaret Johnson got on a train with an acquaintance, Joshua West, and rode eighteen miles north to the Revere House at Ackley. She wanted to be far away from Gifford, and with a witness to prove it. Josh West thought they were going to "occupy the same room and bed," but in this he was to be disappointed. He later said, "The purpose

we went for was not accomplished on account of her nervous condition."

In the morning Enoch Johnson's body was found lying in the road a quarter mile north of the Gifford Bridge. His horse was caught in a barbed wire fence nearby, and his broken buggy was at the top of the hill. The lines of the harness were wrapped around one of his boots, his face was cut up, and his skull was fractured. It looked as though his buggy had broken down and he had tried to ride his horse the rest of the way to Gifford, but had been thrown from it and dragged, the victim of a common accident. In Gifford there was talk of having another bonfire to celebrate the occasion.

That evening the *Eldora Herald* printed details about Johnson's "accident" and eulogized him as a "successful harness maker at Steamboat Rock years ago, but since the death of his [first] wife in 1868 or 69 has led a checkered life. Peace to his ashes."

A FEW DAYS LATER, Margaret Johnson and her stepdaughter Nettie came forward to collect $16,000 insurance on Johnson's life from four separate policies.

Someone in authority decided that $16,000 was too much life insurance for a penniless horsethief. Enoch Johnson's body was exhumed. After an autopsy, the coroner ruled his death a murder and empaneled a jury to investigate. Margaret Johnson was summoned before the coroner's jury. She brought her alibi, Josh West, along with her.

Did she have any idea who killed her husband, she was asked.

Why no, she said, she didn't have any idea who would want to kill her husband, then added, "He had bitter enemies at Goldfield. George Shinwood, William Eggleston, and Ed Whitney threatened to kill him."

Nettie Rainsbarger was also summoned. Two domestics swore that she had been home the night of the murder. When asked about Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's whereabouts, Nettie's answer was pivotal: they had gone to the town of Cleves for groceries at six and gotten back before midnight. Nettie and Margaret were released until further notice.

In Gifford the word 'murder' was on everyone's lips, and Margaret Johnson was an obvious suspect. Fearing a mob, she packed her things and moved to the Ellsworth Hotel in Eldora. From that time on, she lived entirely in the service of the counterfeit ring.

Here began a period of white knuckles at the Ellsworth Hotel, for now the counterfeit ring had Enoch Johnson's murder as another reason to fear exposure and arrest, and this time the charges would be more serious than counterfeiting. According to one eyewitness, William P. Hiserodt "could see the doors of the penitentiary yawning for him." Sometime in late December 1884, over whiskey and cigars at the Ellsworth, the counterfeit ring hit upon another elaborate plan. Always too complex, their schemes had consequences that they did not foresee.

Nettie Rainsbarger

Nettie Rainsbarger charged Frank and Nate Rainsbarger with her father's murder. She sat at dinner but didn't eat much. Then she went into a closet to hide.

During January 1885, Margaret Johnson rode out from Eldora several times to visit with her stepdaughter Nettie. The two women had long talks while Frank and Nate Rainsbarger were out doing farm work. On January 15, 1885, Nettie Rainsbarger grabbed a set of lead knuckles from Frank's dresser drawer and returned with Margaret to the Ellsworth Hotel. Once there, she handed over the lead knuckles to local attorneys Henry Huff and John Stevens, and signed an affidavit that had been written up in advance, charging Frank and Nate Rainsbarger with her father's

murder. She sat at dinner but didn't eat much. Then she went into a closet to hide. According to a cook at the hotel, she would not come out until Margaret assured her that Frank and Nate had been arrested.

According to the *Eldora Herald* — which now announced that the murderers had been caught — Margaret's and Nettie's affidavits "for thrilling interest are more sensational than the tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves." Nettie's affidavit stated that Frank and Nate had come home on the night of the murder at 11:30 P.M. with blood on their coats. Their suspicious words and actions during the ensuing month had thoroughly convinced her that they had murdered her father.

A review of the circumstances suggests, however, that her tale was impossible. If Enoch Johnson and his broken buggy had been left in the main road from Eldora to Gifford before 11:30 P.M. that night, the people coming back from the election bonfires would have found him. His body was not found until the morning after. This seemingly obvious fact got lost in the drama of a young wife accusing her husband of murder.

A FEW DAYS after his arrest, Frank Rainsbarger wrote his wife a brief letter: "Well, Nettie, I used to call you my dear friend but I suppose I can't call you that anymore. I did not think you would do this way. . . ."

Her answer was a long, detailed accusation: ". . . What a sin would have rested on me for concealing the murder of my own father. . . . I suppose the louder he screamed the harder you beat him. You did not kill him decent. . . . Oh, I did not think I had such a man as that, till I had to know it. . . . My little sister comes crying around me like her little heart would break and says, 'Nettie, if you had not married Frank, you and I would have a papa.' How do you think I feel to hear talk such as that? . . . My Bible says the time shall come when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. If you don't confess here on earth, the time will come when you will have to confess before God and all His Holy angels. Frank, you know how I have often talked, begged, and cried of you to take my advice and do different, and you would not. . . ."

Further on, the four-page letter implicates the whole Rainsbarger family in the murder. The letter was printed and handed out publicly. The *Des Moines Daily News* printed it and called it "damning correspondence."

From one day to the next, Nettie went from being an ordinary farm woman and the

Editor Ross fed off the news he got from the vigilance meetings, and the vigilantes in turn fed off news they read in the *Eldora Herald*. All were neatly in the pocket of William P. Hiserodt.

daughter of a horsethief, to being comfortably settled at the Ellsworth, escorted from place to place under armed guard, clothed and protected by the eminent men of the community, flattered by the local press, and showered with dramatic attention. (According to an *Eldora Herald* pamphlet history, "The dashing and defiant Frank had captivated the innocent-minded maiden.") A few people in Eldora thought something fishy was going on, but they were afraid to speak up. Most people who read Nettie's letter believed it.

Still hot on the trial of the counterfeiters, the wealthy farmer Henry Johns believed otherwise. To him it was obvious who was behind the murder of Enoch Johnson — and it wasn't the Rainsbargers. Johns (as husband of Martha Rainsbarger and a good friend to his Rainsbarger brothers-in-law) felt a deep sense of personal responsibility for what was happening to Frank and Nate, since he had gotten Enoch Johnson to name the counterfeiters and had initiated the grand jury investigation. Now he saw to it that Frank and Nate were moved to the Marshalltown jail where they would be safe from mobs. He told them to "be of good cheer," that he would "clear them if it cost $50,000 dollars." But the only way to clear

Frank and Nate of Johnson's murder was to expose the counterfeit ring, and this proved to be more dangerous than he realized.

William P. Hiserodt, the leader of the counterfeit ring, now drew a bead on Henry Johns. He formed a "vigilance committee" in Steamboat Rock. Anyone who would take the oath and become a 'deputy' received free whiskey at Hiserodt's hotel and saloon. Although an inner circle of ten or twenty men probably targeted the Rainsbargers early on, the one or two hundred men who attended the general meetings, according to one later remorseful man, had "joined said 'vigilant society' in good faith for what we then believed to be for the best interests of and the preservation of life and property."

Over the next several weeks, James S. Ross, editor of the *Eldora Herald,* seems to have slipped onto the growing payroll of the counterfeit ring. His newspaper became the mouthpiece of the Hardin County criminals. Whether he actually believed any of what he wrote is hard to tell. At first his paper spoke of an amorphous 'gang' up around Steamboat Rock. Then his rhetoric accelerated steadily throughout February. Finally he focused on specific individuals. On March 11 he wrote: "The Rainsbarger crowd are seeking a new location. . . . The people, with the co-operation of the county press, have them on the run and there should be no let up till all are in the penitentiary." Editor Ross fed off the news he got from the vigilance meetings, and the vigilantes in turn fed off news they read in the *Eldora Herald.* All were neatly in the pocket of William P. Hiserodt.

ON APRIL FOOL'S DAY someone shot Finley Rainsbarger's horse out from under him. On April 6 someone took a few shots at William Rainsbarger, the oldest Rainsbarger brother and a respected member of the school board. On April 8 they did the same to Henry Johns. Like William Rainsbarger, Henry Johns had never been suspected of any criminal activity. Now, all of a sudden, he was identified as part of the "gang." That week the *Eldora Herald* sneered, "The Rainsbargers, who have been running everything with a high hand and terrorizing everyone, find themselves confronted with a little of the same kind of sauce. We hope they enjoy it."

William Rainsbarger

On April 6 someone took a few shots at William Rainsbarger, the oldest Rainsbarger brother and a respected member of the school board.

Henry Johns warned that the county was on the verge of a guerilla war "which might not end for twenty or thirty years." He bought rifles for his sons and hired men. Johns and the Rainsbarger brothers seem to have expected a long, ugly feud but they didn't know exactly who had thrown in their lot with the vigilantes, nor did they understand the connection between the counterfeit ring and the vigilantes. Henry Johns tried to find out what was going on at these vigilance meetings in Steamboat Rock, but the meetings were surrounded by armed guards. One of his detectives was "treated to the toe of a boot," according to the *Eldora Herald.*

By now, Hiserodt and others had somehow convinced the vigilantes that Henry Johns was not only part of the Rainsbarger gang but the actual leader. Hadn't he promised to spend $50,000 to free two killers? Wasn't he buying guns for his boys? Sometime in early April, the men who met in secret at Hiserodt's saloon made a rash decision.

On the night of April 16, Henry Johns was returning by train from Eldora, where he had hired lawyers to defend Frank and Nate. He met his son and hired man at the Abbott Station. While they were in the depot someone

From left: Henry Huff and Ash Noyes

Lawyer Huff told Steamboat Rock banker Ash Noyes that he could not get a copy of Johnson's statement. Noyes replied, "Dam the statement we can break down all statements."

unhitched their horses, delaying Johns long enough for an ambush to be set up a quarter mile south of town. While the two men and the boy were riding home from Abbott, one of their horses was suddenly shot dead in front of them. The three jumped from the buggy and Henry Johns's son and hired man ran away into the cornfield. A bullet from the rear came through the buggy and struck Henry Johns in the side, and he took a load of buckshot in the left arm. He fell into the mud and lay motionless. Then he recognized Amos Bannigan and William P. Hiserodt standing over him with guns, and several other men skulking in the background. They decided they had killed him and left. Later, Johns managed to crawl to a nearby farmhouse for help. The next day he was brought home to his farm.

There must have been a small rift between editor Ross and the vigilantes. The following Wednesday Ross wrote in the paper, "Shooting at Abbott. A Cowardly Assault on Henry Johns. . . . Let the shooting stop, or some parties will find themselves in a tighter box than Frank and Nate Rainsbarger are in."

Members of the Johns and Rainsbarger families and their friends moved to the farm where Henry Johns lay wounded. Banding together for mutual protection, many of them camped in the woods. Tension grew. At the end of April the *Eldora Herald* wrote: "There are several hundred vigilantes thirsting for Rainsbarger blood."

About this same time, Frank and Nate Rainsbarger were brought back to Eldora from Marshalltown to be indicted and tried for the murder of Enoch Johnson. Henry Johns, still suffering from his wounds, hired four detectives to ride along and protect Frank and Nate from the vigilantes, and requested Justice L. P. Harrington of Marshalltown to come along with them to take Johns's sworn statement on who had shot him.

MEANWHILE a federal agent crept into town. Henry Martin was a specialist with the United States Treasury Department's Secret Service. A federal officer in Marshalltown had ordered him to go to Eldora during the April-May term of court, check in at the Ellsworth Hotel, and "report on all events and occurrences that might take place there." Martin had a list of names provided by the late Enoch Johnson, who, after his release from prison, had given Henry Johns and the U.S. marshals names and locations. Martin checked into the Ellsworth Hotel on April 21 under the name F. P. Suydam. He told people he was an insurance solicitor, curious about the circumstances of Johnson's death.

Unconcerned with what appeared to be a local blood feud, Martin was there to gather evidence to arrest and convict counterfeiters. He recorded what he heard in the hallways and

through doors, what he saw through holes in the wall, and what he picked up of local gossip. On April 25 Martin jotted in his notebook: "*Deyo Wilcox Swane Hisroudt Rittenour in a conference in a room known as the den. Lathrop and Palmer to be on the grand jury; cigars and whiskey in quantities; conversation low; the names of Johns and Rainsbargers often repeated.*"

During his first few days at the hotel, Martin was handed a copy of Nettie's letter. He heard that the county was being terrorized by the Rainsbargers, a gang of killers up around Steamboat Rock. He was given details about recent events — with the Rainsbargers blamed for it all. He also heard that the Rainsbargers had murdered Enoch Johnson to prevent him from exposing their counterfeit ring. And he was told that the Rainsbargers had shot Henry Johns for his money. Martin dutifully recorded all this in his notes, and seems to have believed it at first.

Then on April 27 he heard something strange. Lawyer Huff told Steamboat Rock banker Ash Noyes (also a leader of the counterfeit ring) that he could not get a copy of the statement that Enoch Johnson had made to federal officers. According to Martin's notes, Noyes replied, "*Dam the statement we can break down all statements.*"

Martin also recorded great consternation among the men at the Ellsworth upon the arrival of Justice Harrington and S. T. Waterman, one of the detectives. They and two other detectives checked in at the City Hotel, six doors down from the Ellsworth. About the same time, Finley Rainsbarger walked into town, heavily armed, to meet with them and attend his brothers' court proceedings.

Hiserodt threatened the owner of the City Hotel, demanding that he throw the detectives and the Rainsbargers out of his place if he wanted to stay in town and do business. Martin recorded Hiserodt's warning: "*If not, he would go down with them.*" The hotel owner protested that he had already agreed to board them; he did not see how he could get out of it now.

On the one hand, the counterfeit ring was afraid the detectives might expose them. On the other, they were afraid that Finley Rainsbarger might kill them. He had already threatened to kill Margaret and Nettie Johnson. One of Hiserodt's cronies was posted at the hotel door with orders to "shoot any strangers seen prowling around the Ellsworth at night."

On April 29, the *Eldora Herald* made light of the growing drama in town: "Eldora is just now being honored by the presence of two detectives. They are stopping at the City Hotel and register as Nos 1 and 2." He added, "You fellows who shot the horse which Fin Rainsbarger was riding better fess up and ask the leniency of the court. You who scared poor Bill [Rainsbarger] out of his boots better do like Judas and go hang yourselves; and you followers of Jesse James who filled poor Henry Johns' cuticle full of buckshot better deliver yourselves up at once, for there are two detectives on your track."

Editor Ross advised, "The boys about town will please not do any shooting near town or along the roads over which the gang may pass, for their nerves are not very strong."

On the same page, Ross advised, "The boys about town will please not do any shooting near town or along the roads over which the gang may pass, for their nerves are not very strong."

AGENT MARTIN'S DIARY tells the story for the next few days: "*April 28th . . . Hiserodt said to Wisner while passing through the hall — we have got to get the god damned sons of bitches one way or another. Wisner said, We can't let this go on this way; money is no object if that will do it. If not we will take the law into our own hands.*"

On April 29, Martin carved a hole in his

Fin Rainsbarger

The *Herald* warned, "Early Monday morning Fin Rainsbarger was seen [carrying] a long-barreled revolver, while a huge dirk glistened at his side."

bedroom wall and saw Judge Henderson having sex with Margaret Johnson.

April 30: "*The gang had a rousing time in the rooms of Net and Mag.*"

May 1: "*Mrs. Deyo* [hotel proprietor] *said, 'My God Eva what will happen next, they have made this a den of murder and now they have turned it into a whore house. God deliver me from this,' and went crying to her room.*

"*May 1st, Miss Alice Finley the cook made the following statement. . . . 'I know Mag Johnson. I went to school with Net. She was an awful liar. She is the one that was in bed with Stevens last night. Mag was in the room with the Judge last night and broke down the bed. I and Eve has seen some awful things in this house in the past few months. I would not stay here an hour but for Mrs. Deyo, I am sorry for her; she can't help her self. I and Eve had lots of fun watching the Den. When the bunch would be there night after night drinking and smoking; see them tip toe in and out of Mag's room. All big bugs of the town.'*"

Somewhere in the town square, federal agent Martin ran into Nate Thompson, one of the late Enoch Johnson's horsethief buddies, who told Martin what *he* thought was going on in Eldora: "*The vigilant gang is now trying to stick the Rainsbarger boys for murder,*" Thompson said. "*We don't hear any more about Johnson turning states evidence and accusing of the leading businessmen here and Steamboat Rock of being in with him in that counterfeit deal at Goldfield.*" Martin made no comment in his notes about whether he believed Thompson or not, but merely recorded the statement.

If ever there was a time and place for federal intervention, this was it. Federal agent Henry Martin left town with a notebook full of confusing information, wrote his report for the Secret Service, and then disappeared from the scene for twenty-nine years.

IF EVER THERE WAS a time and place for federal intervention, this was it. Henry Martin left town with a notebook full of confusing information, wrote his report for the Secret Service, and then disappeared from the scene for twenty-nine years. Maybe the U.S. marshal's office couldn't make sense of the situation from Martin's notes, or surmised correctly that no more counterfeit money was being made. For whatever reason, the Johns and Rainsbarger families were now entirely at the mercy of Hiserodt, his lawyers, his sheriff, his newspaper, and his vigilantes.

Frank and Nate's legal team saw that this was neither the time nor the place for a trial. They arranged for Frank and Nate to be sent back to Marshalltown to await a change of venue.

On May 8 Henry Johns fell into a coma and died.

The *Eldora Herald* commented, "It is well known that he lived in constant fear of his life from his supposed friends." One week later the *Eldora Herald* was openly accusing the Rainsbargers of having shot Henry Johns. On May 13, the *Eldora Herald* warned, "Early Monday morning Fin Rainsbarger was seen coming south — cross lots — through Jackson Township. He carried a long-barreled revolver, while a huge dirk glistened at his side."

People in the Steamboat Rock area divided into two armed camps, with the minority on the side of the Rainsbargers. As Henry Johns had predicted, Hardin County was on the

brink of open warfare. One of the Rainsbarger detectives had an ear inside the counterfeit ring and he warned the county militia of a plot to murder some or all of the Rainsbarger brothers. On May 20 the *Eldora Herald* joked, "The Eldora Militia have been commanded to hold themselves in readiness in case an assault should be made upon the jail. The vigilantes will please take notice and not come during a rainstorm. Our militia is for dry weather." Significantly, there were no Rainsbargers in the Eldora jail; Frank and Nate were still in Marshalltown.

MEANWHILE an odd series of events continued. The men of Hiserodt's saloon stole their own horses, shot their own cows, burned their own haystacks — and made it appear as if the Rainsbarger brothers were the culprits. Irvine Liesure, of Abbott, had already cleared his store of stock, burned it down, collected insurance for his loss, and blamed the Rainsbargers. One fellow went so far as to shoot *himself* and blame it on the Rainsbargers.

On May 20 the *Eldora Herald* seethed, "The Rainsbargers are old offenders, and they have been a terrible curse to this county. They have lived almost exclusively by dishonesty, and when any attempt has been made to bring them to punishment, they would send out their

The men of Hiserodt's saloon stole their own horses, shot their own cows, burned their own haystacks — and made it appear as if the Rainsbarger brothers were the culprits.

incendiaries and thieves and intimidate persons into silence."

On page four, nestled among wedding notices and shoe advertisements, Ross printed a unique piece of lynch poetry: "The other night while some young fellows were returning with their girls late at night, they met a seining party, near the coal bank. When the girls saw the ropes they exclaimed:

O, the Rainsbargers they'll suspend
Until they are dead;
Oh, boys! us you'll defend,
And a girl you shall wed!"

Myron Underwood

With a buggy full of bullet holes in tow, the men said they had been ambushed. Underwood thought he was creating a pretext merely to run the Rainsbargers out of the county — not to kill them.

Why didn't the Rainsbargers flee the county? The family had no public voice at this time, so we don't know for sure. They may have been stunned into disbelief by recent events. Perhaps they felt that running away would be a patent admission of guilt. Further, they would be sure to lose everything they had worked for all their lives. One local paper wrote: "It is the opinion of [those] who know them that they will never leave that section at command. Their blood is up and they are not cowards." It is certain that, like Hiserodt's other victims, the Rainsbargers underestimated the danger they were in.

The evening of June 3, Dr. Myron Underwood, Dr. Ben Rittenour, and William P. Hiserodt drove into Steamboat Rock with a buggy full of bullet holes in tow. They said they had been ambushed and narrowly escaped with their lives. They also said they had recognized their attackers.

The next day their bullet-ridden buggy was

COURTESY NORMA POLAND AND SHIRLEY ISRIG

William Rainsbarger in 1908: "When Fin, Manse, and I were arrested . . . we did not think of any mob violence, although there was a great deal of talk against our family."

Manse (?) Rainsbarger and wife, ca. 1884

paraded around the town square at Eldora. Someone noticed that all the bullets seemed to have been fired from the inside. Then the buggy was taken to Dr. Underwood's yard and burned. Like many others, Underwood thought he was creating a pretext merely to run the Rainsbargers out of the county — not to kill them.

Sheriff William Vance Wilcox arrested Finley, Manse, and William Rainsbarger for attempted murder. Assuring them that it was all a big mistake and would soon blow over, he herded them down to Eldora. According to William Rainsbarger in 1908, "When Fin, Manse, and I were arrested by Wilcox we did not think of any mob violence, although there was a great deal of talk against our family. We relied wholly upon the protection of the sheriff who expressed regrets about arresting us."

William Rainsbarger was allowed to post bail, but Manse and Finley were bound over at the jail. As the sun went down on June 4, the county militia, tipped off that a lynching was to occur, was mustered at the local skating rink. Sheriff Wilcox rode out and laughed at them, laughed at the idea of a lynching. He then ordered them to disperse, which they did with some muttering. At 10 P.M. Sheriff Wilcox got on a train with his deputy and left town. According to sources later revealed, the vigilantes had asked him to leave the cell doors open, but this he would not do.

HISERODT and his mob rode into Eldora quietly, from the north, at 1:25 A.M., carrying a twenty-foot oak tree trunk to batter down the jailhouse door. The original plan to hang the two brothers went awry once the mob had knocked down the door. The few who could squeeze inside the narrow passageway could not get the cell door open. Manse and Finley, their backs to the wall, were bracing the iron door shut with their legs. Amos Bannigan stood on the shoulders of Dan Turner, the mayor of Steamboat Rock, and fired random bullets through an outside window or transom into the cell, killing Finley. Manse, although wounded, burst out the cell door and fought his way through the mob, yelling for Finley to follow him. No one could get a clear shot at Manse while he was struggling inside the jail, but once he had fought his way out onto the wooden sidewalk

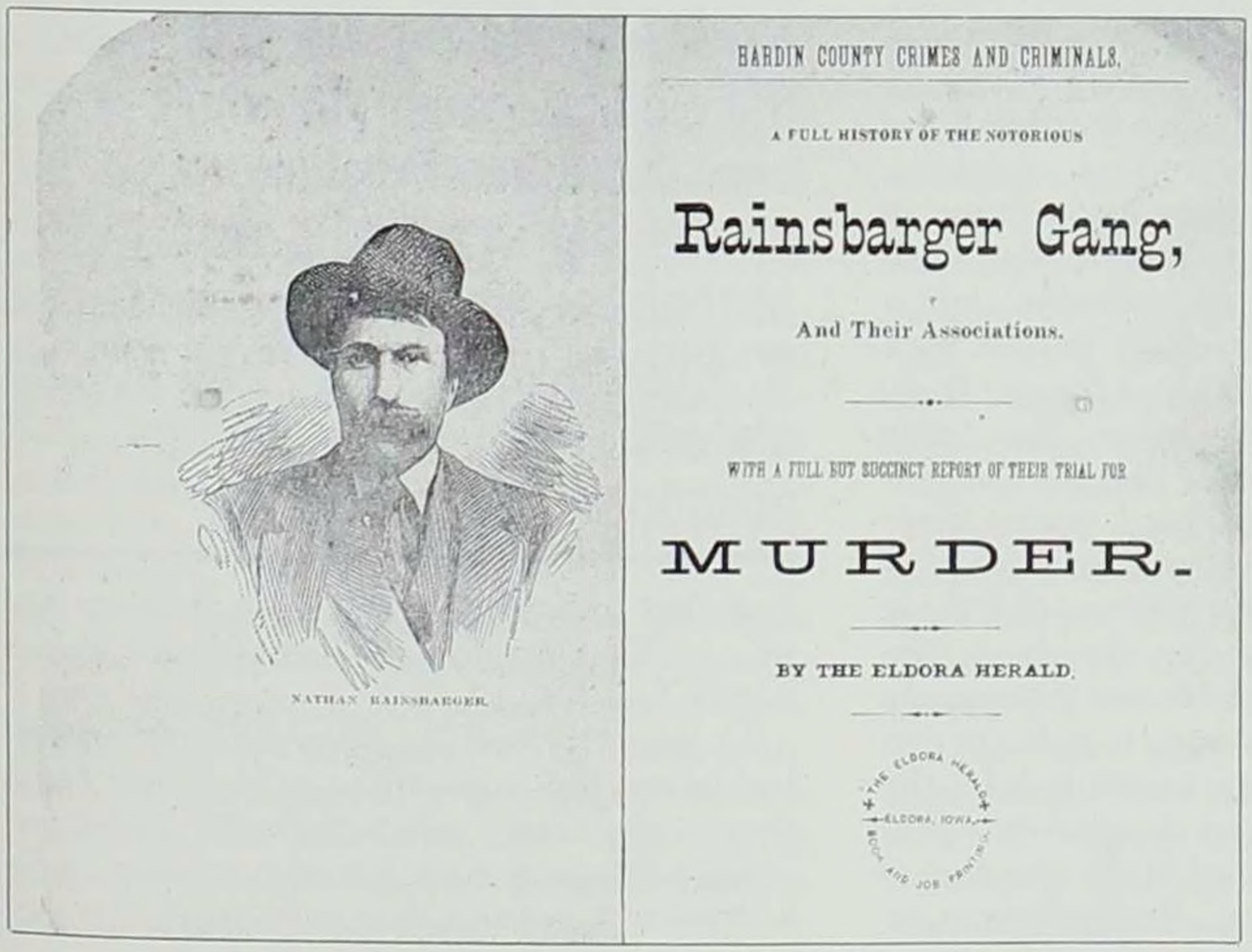
he was grabbed, screaming for mercy, held up, and riddled with bullets.

Finley's body was dragged out of the cell and laid in the road in front of the jail. One of the men lifted Finley's head by the hair, examined it, and let it drop. He shot two more bullets into the brain. Many people witnessed the scene from windows and rooftops. One woman claimed that Hiserodt blew a whistle to assemble the vigilantes. They gathered at the local wagon factory and rode out of town quietly, heading north.

The bodies lay in front of the jail for about half an hour, as hundreds of people gathered around to look at them in the light of the street lamp. Then the bodies were removed to the mayor's office.

IN THE MORNING, the *Eldora Herald* rushed to print an extra, titled "Swift Justice. . . . Long Series of Crimes and Misdeeds Avenged." Ross wrote, "The wild shrieks of the doomed prisoners was heart-rending in the extreme. They knew too well the meaning of that gathering of earnest and determined men without, and the first blow upon the door sounded their death-knell. As the prospect of immediate death loomed up before them and their miserable, crime-stained lives were to pay the penalty for years of lawlessness, they gave expression to their terror in wild, despairing cries for help. . . . When the hammering was going on the prisoners realized what it was to die, and in their frenzy called upon the sheriff, the marshall, and the people of Eldora for protection."

On this one crowded page, and in a long pamphlet history published several months later, editor James S. Ross created an enduring myth about what had happened in Eldora. In addition to repeating the worst of what the paper had printed in the preceding months, he created a long history of crimes stretching all the way back to the 1850s, connecting the Rainsbarger family to long-extinct criminal gangs. "They came from the South and were what was known as 'poor white trash'," he wrote. "They built a small cabin on the edge of the timber. . . . It is asserted that while there they lived principally by petty stealing. Many of the early settlers will attest to losing stock, farming utensils and small articles. . . . The



NATHAN RAINSBARGER.

HARDIN COUNTY CRIMES AND CRIMINALS.

A FULL HISTORY OF THE NOTORIOUS

Rainsbarger Gang,

And Their Associations.

WITH A FULL BUT SUCCINCT REPORT OF THEIR TRIAL FOR

MURDER.

BY THE ELDORA HERALD.

THE ELDORA HERALD
ELDORA, IOWA
BOOK AND JOB PRINTING

In a long pamphlet history, editor James S. Ross created an enduring myth about what had happened in Eldora, connecting the Rainsbarger family to long-extinct criminal gangs.

Ross's pamphlet history

COURTESY NORMA POLAND AND SHIRLEY ISRIG

Delia Rainsbarger Estabrook: "Little did we think . . . that some of us would have to be murdered to conceal other people's crimes."

Rainsbarger sisters: Delia Estabrook (standing) and Martha Johns, ca. 1890

mother . . . was known as a perfect Tartar. . . . Fin Rainsbarger. . . . was known by his companions as a tough nut and a sneak thief. . . . Manse Rainsbarger is next to the youngest and has only been identified with the gang since 1870. During the years 1873-74-75 he operated largely in stolen horses under the lead of the notorious Jack Reed."

THE TELEGRAPH office for the *Eldora Herald* must have worked round the clock because the story was sent out to nearly every newspaper in the Midwest. Most of them printed, verbatim, James S. Ross's version of "two crime stained lives finally called to account." The *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed an article titled "The Law's Delay Defied." The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* wrote a tough-minded editorial saying there ought to be no objections concerning the "dignity of the law," since it was obvious that these two men had gotten what they deserved. The *Iowa State Register* at Des Moines expressed a slight skepticism, which seems to indicate that they consulted some other source besides the *Eldora Herald*. "Very queer stories were circulated this morning in regard to the shooting at Underwood and Rittenour," the *Register* commented. "It was stated by one authority that after the doctors had observed the bullets flying through their carriage Rittenour jumped out, pursued them into the brush and recognized them. This seemed a little too gauzy, however, for general belief."

On June 9 Delia Estabrook, distraught with grief for her brothers Finley and Manse, wrote an open letter to the *Eldora Herald*: "As I saw the piece in the Grundy County Republican taken from your wire June 5th, I was struck with horror and it seemed as though it would wrench my very heart from its resting place. . . . I will inform you that we did not come from the south and was not called poor white trash. . . . We came from the state of Ohio and was among the first settlers of Hardin co. But little did we think when we was battling through frontier life and years of sickness . . . that some of us would have to be murdered to conceal other people's crimes and our mother who was a christian hearted woman but must now be called a tartar.

"When them men was on their road that night to stain their hands with innocent blood," she continued, "if they would have been told [that] the first righteous man [should] fire the first shot who would have been there to fire it? . . . They would have turned and sneaked home."

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In August, when the *Eldora Herald* printed her letter, the paper titled it "A Letter From One of the Gang" and included a disclaimer: "While the gang think it is so terrible to make widows and orphans, they must remember that

other people are just as averse to having their families made widows and orphans as they are. The families of the three doctors the Rainsbargers fired on from ambush . . . are also averse to being deprived of husbands and fathers."

After the lynching, the detectives from Marshalltown stopped coming to Hardin County, probably because of the *Eldora Herald*'s threat: "The next time one of the Marshalltown detectives visits Hardin county, we hope our citizens will provide him a coat of tar and feathers and ride him out on a rail."

People in other parts of Hardin County and other midwestern cities seem to have looked with awe and disbelief at the news coming out of Eldora.

People in other parts of Hardin County and other midwestern cities seem to have looked with awe and disbelief at the news coming out of Eldora. The *Minneapolis Tribune* asked: "What Is The Matter With Hardin County?. . . . Nature has done fairly by Hardin County, Iowa. The soil is rich and productive, the lay of the land is advantageous, and it is well watered. . . . And yet Hardin County is not flourishing. . . . The lynching of last week is not the first instance of the sort in Hardin County. That region has acquired an unpleasant notoriety for such affairs. It is the demoralized condition of society, as manifested in the barbaric outrages like the shooting affray of Wednesday and still more barbaric outrages like the lynching of Thursday, that makes land cheap in Hardin County and renders the region forlorn and thriftless and repelling."

Lynchings were bad for business, and there was never another one in Hardin County. Later, when a mob descended on the Eldora jail to kill Nate Thompson (one of Enoch Johnson's fellow horsethieves), Sheriff Wilcox stayed at the jail, and after some tense moments the vigilantes were persuaded to turn around and go home.

THROUGHOUT the furor surrounding the lynching of Manse and Fin, their brothers Frank and Nate awaited trial in Marshalltown for the murder of Enoch Johnson. On December 28, 1885, nearly a year after his arrest, the celebrated trial of Nathan "Nate" Rainsbarger began. (Since Nettie would not be able to testify against her husband Frank, he would be tried separately.) The courtroom was packed with people from Eldora who rode in on the daily "Rainsbarger Train." Nathan's defense attorneys — Charles Albrook of Eldora, S. M. Weaver of Iowa Falls, and P. M. Sutton of Marshalltown — relied entirely on an alibi that had been systematically broken down during the summer by state prosecutors (and local attorneys) Huff and Stevens.

The state presented a plausible scenario, with the carefully groomed testimony of Nettie Rainsbarger as their centerpiece. As defense, however, Nate Rainsbarger's attorneys squandered his trial and his life reacting to irrelevant points in the state's case. They hinted that Enoch Johnson's wife, Maggie, was the real culprit but could not explain why or how. The lawyers could not find witnesses and did not know who had actually killed Johhson.

Certain points in defense attorney Sutton's closing testimony seemed off the mark. "Now, there must be an unbroken chain, one end fastening itself upon the defendant and the other upon the dead body of Enoch Johnson," Sutton proposed. "And then the chain will only be as strong as its weakest link. It is an awful easy thing, up in Hardin County, to raise a whoop and a hurrah and hang men; yes, awful easy. But down here in Marshall County we don't hang men with a whoop and a hurrah, but we try men, and give them a chance to show their innocence."

The jury's verdict was guilty. Eight voted for life imprisonment and four for hanging. "Nate's head dropped when the verdict was read," the *Eldora Herald* reported, "and his face colored perceptibly."

Two years later, in March 1887, Frank Rainsbarger was tried. The trial had been delayed because his defense attorneys had repeatedly filed motions for continuance while they searched for witnesses willing to testify on

Frank's behalf. Perhaps to no one's surprise, he was found guilty. (Because of a technicality, Nate was retried in 1887 and reconvicted.)

In April 1887, Nathan Rainsbarger wrote an editorial that was printed in the Marshalltown *Times-Republican*. He criticized the legal system, referring to the Declaration of Independence and bitterly denouncing the "murdering mob in Hardin County." The *Ackley Enterprise* called his letter "disrespectful" and criticized his spelling.

Nathan Morse

Morse had been entirely fooled by the counterfeit ring. By 1906 he had a good idea of what had actually happened in 1885 in Eldora, and he was outraged.

DURING THE 1890s a whole different story began to emerge in Steamboat Rock and Eldora, through rumor and gossip. Lingering doubts, particularly about the 'attack' on Underwood and Rittenour, began to grow with time. When Underwood died in 1894, and William P. Hiserodt died a few weeks afterward, the *Ackley World* gave voice to the general uneasiness: "It is more noticeable that the death of William P. Hiserodt should follow so close upon that of Dr. Myron Underwood as they were the most prominent characters in the lynching of the Rainsbargers. Dr. Underwood as the party who was supposed to have been assaulted by the Rainsbargers and Mr. Hiserodt as the principle leader of the lynching party. There is no doubt that Dr. Underwood believed he had been shot at while returning from Steamboat Rock through the timber. But the curious part was the fact that there was no harm done to the doctor — not the least — although there was nothing to prevent the assaulting parties from carrying out whatever design they may have had."

In the 1890s, some of the minor players in the vigilance committee broke down and made confessions [about] inciting people against the Rainsbargers.

In the same decade, some of the minor players in the vigilance committee broke down and made confessions. For example, George Rush stated: "I was present when John Bunger confessed with tears and sobs that he had killed his horse, which was an old one, and shot himself in the leg as planned by parties in Steamboat Rock to incite people against members of the Rainsbarger family."

By 1897, when James S. Ross sold the *Eldora Herald* and moved to Missouri, he knew from a wide variety of sources that Nettie's letter had been a sham, and the attack on Underwood and Rittenour had been a fraud. He also knew that Enoch Johnson had been murdered by John and Milton Biggs (counterfeiters from Gifford), that the counterfeit ring had arranged it, and that he and the vigilantes had been used as a tool. Ross did not share this information, however, until Dr. Nathan Morse caught up with him ten years later.

SOON AFTER the turn of the century, Morse, of Eldora, began to fit together pieces of the puzzle from things that he kept hearing around town. Morse had been one of the coroners that examined Enoch Johnson's body. He had also been one of those who had been entirely fooled by the counterfeit ring. By 1906 he had a good idea of what had actually happened in 1885 in Eldora, and

he was outraged. In a long letter to Governor Albert Baird Cummins he outlined what he knew about Maggie Johnson and the counterfeit ring, and he asked that the Iowa State Board of Parole reopen Frank and Nate's case.

In 1907 Morse somehow secured two sheepish affidavits from James S. Ross, then living in Larussel, Missouri. One affidavit read: "I, James S. Ross, of Jasper County Missouri, having been assured that this Statement will not be made public property, it not being intended for publicity, or to be used in the prosecution of any person or persons . . . am fully satisfied that there was an inside circle to the vigilance committee that I was never able to penetrate . . . for that reason they were able to keep myself and the great body of the community in complete ignorance of many unlawful and unjustifiable acts of said organization until after they occurred."

In the second affidavit Ross went further: "[They] took advantage of the death of one Enoch Johnson . . . to inflame the people to such a fury that they were easily led to believe that the whole Rainsbarger family should be made a sacrifice . . . which hue and cry I am free to admit I joined in through the columns of the Eldora, Iowa, Herald . . . believing that I was rendering the community a good service."

After securing affidavits from Ross, Morse worked with singular zeal to try to free Frank and Nate Rainsbarger from prison.

From that point on, Morse worked with singular zeal to try to free Frank and Nate Rainsbarger from prison. Many people came to him in private and made their confessions but would not sign an affidavit. Some people volunteered affidavits from far-off places, having heard the matter was being revived. Some were brought down to lawyers' offices with Morse leading them by the ear. In December 1908, just before the Iowa State Board of Parole was scheduled to reopen the case, there was a flood of voluntary affidavits. Many had the flavor of stricken conscience, but none bore an outright tone of personal responsibility: "I was acting simply and solely as deputy or assistant to Sheriff Wilcox" or "Bill Hysroot [sic] was the captain of that vigilant committee." With most of the individuals who signed affidavits, their only real sin had been not telling what they knew back when it mattered most. All of them had been afraid to step forward.

"There are some things connected with this case that you do not understand," wrote a member of the parole board, "and I am not at liberty to tell you at this time. . . ."

After a twenty-year sleep, the Rainsbarger affair was again front-page news. The Marshalltown *Times-Republican* ran a headline saying there was "Strong Proof of Innocence."

Former Sheriff Wilcox was still around, and was bitterly opposed to a pardon. He tried to get several people from Hardin County to recant their testimonies. Former prosecutor John Stevens, by then a judge in Boone County, managed to get hold of a newspaper reporter and a story was printed in the *Des Moines Register and Leader* making Morse appear a fool. Wilcox, Stevens, Nettie Rainsbarger, and others set up a meeting place at 840 North Sixth Street in Des Moines, and this became the center of a growing but mostly secret opposition to the Rainsbarger pardon. They succeeded in sowing some doubt among those who knew nothing of the evidence.

Yet, one member of the Iowa State Board of Parole wrote Morse on March 2, 1909: "I do not think those brothers killed Johnson and personally I would have been glad to have seen them given their liberty. There are some things connected with this case that you do not understand and I am not at liberty to tell you at this time. . . . There may not be a great number but there is a mighty influence just

G. W. Clarke

Governor Clarke's curiosity was piqued. Six months later he was busy re-examining those "great bundles of affidavits" and beginning to understand them.

now working against the Rainsbargers. How gladly would I let the burden rest where it belongs did I have the power. . . . Dr. Morse you are disappointed."

UNFORTUNATELY for Frank and Nathan Rainsbarger, that "mighty influence" was a stupendously wealthy land developer whom they did not even know and who wanted them to remain in prison. He had already been to the parole board in secret. In January 1909 the *Waterloo Times Tribune* put his picture on the front page next to the headline "Magnificent New Quarters — W. P. Soash Land Co. Ready For Business in New Location on East Fourth."

"The W. P. Soash Land Company," the article announced, was "a colossal concern, whose business lines cover, like a network, the states of the Mississippi Valley, extend to the furthermost points of the eastern states and whose representatives cover the Coast and Mountain region and are active in all the commonwealth of the Southwest and the Gulf country."

In a letter of introduction dated July 30, 1909, to Governor B. F. Carroll, the editor of the *Waterloo Reporter* begins, "My dear Governor, this will introduce you to Mr. W. P. Soash, one of Waterloo's most prominent and respected citizens. He wishes to lay before you some facts as to the Rainsbarger parole or pardon case with which he is familiar."

What W. P. Soash told Governor Carroll is not known. Even though the parole board voted to free Frank and Nate, the pardon was blocked for six years. Soash was the nephew of William P. Hiserodt. Soash's mother was William P. Hiserodt's sister, and Soash's father had served with William P. Hiserodt in the 32nd Iowa Infantry.

In 1910 Nathan Morse gathered a thousand signatures on a petition from the people of Steamboat Rock and Eldora. He sent the petition to free the Rainsbargers to Governor Carroll along with a letter. "Could the matter receive your personal attention," he asked "and if familiar with the facts, you would no longer hesitate in granting executive clemency to these men."

In 1911 Governor Carroll announced publicly, "I do not believe that the case against the Rainsbargers as now presented to me is any more favorable to them [and] it is decidedly less favorable. It is true that there has been some shifting of attitude . . . and affidavits of a few persons . . . but neither the board nor myself, after the most careful investigation, believe them worthy of much credence."

"I shall always retain a vivid memory of what occurred there in those few days," wrote federal agent Martin, "of that whoring and conspiring gang."

The same year Morse located detective S. T. Waterman, who had worked for the Rainsbargers before the mob's attack at the jail. For several months Morse and Waterman worked as a team, gathering evidence. After 1911 Morse left the case in Waterman's hands. In 1913, Waterman located federal agent Henry Martin who sent his notes from spying at the Ellsworth Hotel in Eldora, along with a letter saying, "I shall always retain a vivid memory of what occurred there in those few days, of that whoring and conspiring gang." With Martin's notes Waterman was able to locate hotel maid Eva Danforth and others who made affidavits

about the Ellsworth Hotel and what had transpired there in 1885. Many Iowa newspapers began to come out in favor of the Rainsbargers.

In October 1913, the mayor of Eldora wrote a letter to the editor of the *Des Moines Register and Leader*: "Almost nine out of every ten men at all acquainted with the facts insist the Rainsbarger brothers should be released. . . . It looks mightily like in the Rainsbarger case there was something more than a desire to punish these men for the alleged crime. If money has not passed hands and been used to persecute these men then a great many of the good citizens of this county don't know things when they see them."

It was not enough. The governor and the board of parole bounced the case back and forth, neither willing to touch it. By April 1914, the Johns and Rainsbarger families were losing all faith in detective Waterman. He had one more chance to try and explain his case to the governor (this time G. W. Clarke, Governor Carroll's successor).

"The last effort for the Rainsbarger brothers will soon be made before the Govenor [sic]," Waterman wrote to Ed Johns. "To remove the stain of murder from your family name and your children in the future generations. It is a duty that you owe to me for what I have done, that no other man living could have done for you, in this long and bitter struggle for these mens libertyes [sic] and your family character. You should stand by me and be loyal to the end."

But Waterman's efforts failed. In a letter to a friend in Marshalltown, dated April 30, 1914, Governor Clarke recounted his meeting with Waterman: "I may say to you confidentially that I do not think that Mr. Waterman has the remotest idea as to the materiality or competency of any matters that he has presented or may be desired to present in the future. He came in with great bundles of affidavits, nearly every one of which had no part in relevancy to the matter. I do not know if you are acquainted with him or not, but I think that a few minutes conversation with him will convince you that his mind is thoroughly confused about the whole matter, that his thought with reference to it is incoherent and disjointed and has little bearing on the real questions for consideration."

COURTESY NORMA POLAND AND SHIRLEY ISRIG

Frank Rainsbarger, ca. 1910

Around June 1915, Nettie went to the governor and begged him not to release Frank from prison.

NEVERTHELESS, Governor Clarke's curiosity was piqued. Six months later he was busy re-examining those "great bundles of affidavits" and beginning to understand them. He went to Hardin County and drove by automobile the route that Frank and Nate Rainsbarger would have had to travel to have killed Enoch Johnson.

Around June 1915, Nettie Rainsbarger (now Nettie Haley) went to the governor and begged him not to release Frank from prison. Clarke paid her no attention.

Governor Clarke was not able to figure out everything that had happened, and in fact was rather mystified by the role of the counterfeit ring. "I can not, on the whole, possibly divest myself of the feeling that there was an organized effort . . . to get rid of these men and others as well as Johnson," he wrote. But he went far enough into the case to become convinced that Frank and Nate Rainsbarger did not kill Enoch Johnson.

On August 24, 1915, he granted a parole to Frank and Nathan Rainsbarger that would become a pardon in three years conditioned on good behavior. Frank jumped at the offer. Nate did not. He said that he had killed no one, he

COURTESY NORMA POLAND AND SHIRLEY ISRIG

Norma Poland still remembers her great-uncle Nate Rainsbarger as a gentle old man who made up nicknames for everyone.

Nate Rainsbarger, ca. 1906

had done nothing wrong, and he would walk out of prison a completely free man or not at all. The night before Frank's release, the warden sat up with Nate for hours, finally persuading him to take the parole and go.

THE TWO MEN — Frank was fifty-four and Nate sixty-three — lingered around Steamboat Rock for a few months. No one was afraid of them anymore, but everyone was curious. Frank eventually moved to Ackley and worked a few years at day labor. Nate went to Marshalltown and ran an elevator at a wholesale grocery store. For many years they declined to discuss their case publicly.

In 1923 an Iowa author, Herbert Quick, used the lynching of Manse and Finley Rainsbarger as the climax of his novel *The Hawkeye*. He called them the "Bushyagers" and painted them as a family of outlaws at last overtaken by civilization, and depicted Hiserodt as a crooked county commissioner who was nonetheless likeable.

When Frank died in 1926 the *Des Moines Register and Leader Sunday Magazine* printed "The Last of the Famous Rainsbarger Gang Tells Their Story." The reporter took the trouble to visit Nate and ask him what had happened. The reporter's story was, on the whole, sympathetic to the Rainsbargers, although it was delivered as an impenetrable mystery. The last newspaper article Nate ever saw about the Rainsbargers was printed in the *Des Moines Sunday Register* in 1939, titled "Outlaws Iowa Can't Forget: The 'White Trash' of Steamboat Rock."

Nate spent his final years in Marshalltown, living near some of his nieces and nephews and their children. For years he struggled to write a book. At 397 pages, it was unfinished at his death. His belongings ended up in the attic of his brother's niece, Perle Poland. Perle's daughter Norma still remembers her great-uncle Nate Rainsbarger from the 1930s as a gentle old man who made up nicknames for everyone. "He always called my mother 'Doc'," she remembered. "He called me 'John L.,' from John L. Sullivan, the boxer, and he called Aunt Grace 'The Judge' which was about right for her."

When asked if she minded someone writing the Rainsbarger story again, Norma Poland said, "Go ahead, just don't tell any of them lies."

It seems strange to us now that something like this could have happened in Iowa, which appeared to be entirely 'settled' by 1885. At that time no county history was complete without several pages of "look how far we've come in thirty years." Victorian Iowans looked to the East for what they perceived as the model of order and progress, but they were geographically closer to the fear and uncertainty of the American West. The state of Iowa was brought to heel perhaps more quickly and more completely than many other states, yet in 1885 the whole system of law and order was more fragile than it appeared. In this one instance, in Steamboat Rock and Eldora, it was shattered by the shrill pitch of a county press, and the misdirected bullets of a terrified citizenry. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based on a variety of sources, including 75 sworn statementsand letters; 344 newspaper articles (82 of which are from the State Historical Society's microfilm collection); 123 pages from an unfinished manuscript by Nate Rainsbarger; Governors Records in the State Archives; and standard local and state histories. The more distracting of spelling and typographical errors in many of the primary sources quoted have been corrected by the author for ease of reading. An annotated copy of the manuscript is in the *Palimpsest* production files.

Campaign Collections

Reminders of Iowa's Political Past

EVERY FOUR YEARS, the political passions of Americans rise to a fever pitch between summer conventions and the fall election. By the time the president-elect is inaugurated in January, the speeches have ended, the buttons and signs have disappeared, and television has resumed advertising for consumers, not voters.

As Iowans approach Election Day 1992, a relevant exhibit at the State Historical Building infuses campaign fervor back into political issues and objects of the last century and a half. On the following pages, you'll find a sampling from this exhibit, "Winnowing the Field: Candidates, Caucuses, and Presidential Campaigns in Iowa."

These objects symbolize the messages, and the materials that conveyed those messages, through five periods in American politics. Exhibit curators Jack Lufkin and Michael O. Smith define the dominant issues and the methods of promoting candidates.

Obviously, the political message has changed — from abolition to prohibition to the Cold War. But so has the medium: from torchlight parades to celluloid buttons to television. As historian Michael McGerr points out in his *The Decline of Popular Politics* (1986), strategies have evolved from spectacles (building party loyalty through local rallies and parades), to education (informing voters of the issues), to advertising (focusing on the candidate).

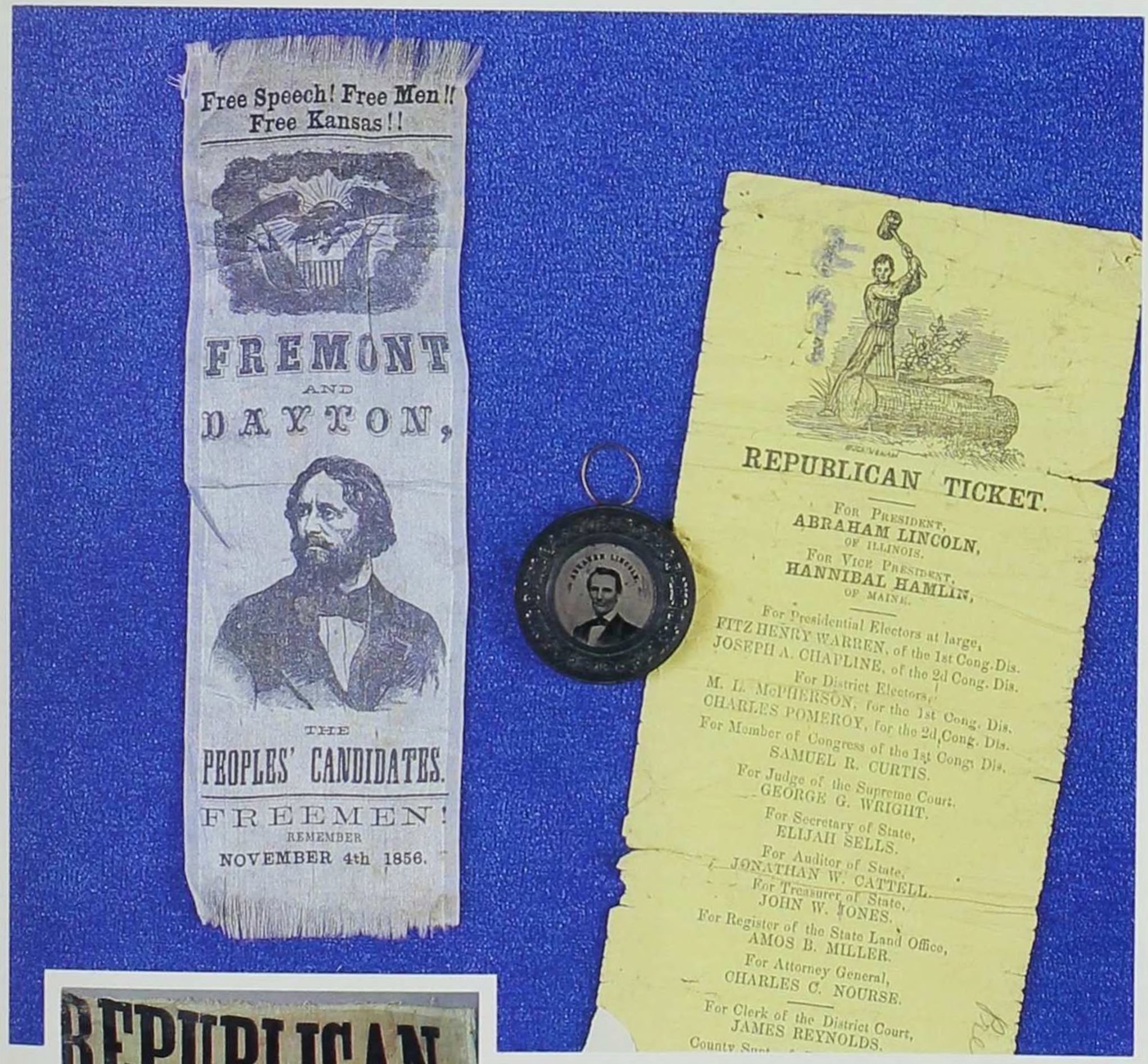
Despite the ephemeral nature of campaign items, the State Historical Society collections include hundreds of these reminders of Iowa's political past, which we're pleased to share with you in this election year. —*The Editor*

Photos by Chuck Greiner

Campaign badge for Iowan William B. Allison, a contender for the 1888 GOP presidential nomination.

1848–1872: The Messages

Militant abolitionist John Brown (in portrait) epitomized searing political issues of the mid-nineteenth century — slavery and sectional differences between the North and South. The 1856 broadside notifies Iowans of the May 21 sacking of Lawrence, Kansas, by "border ruffians" and proslavery forces. Brown's terrorist tactics — in a Kansas massacre May 24 and later at Harpers Ferry, Virginia — are symbolized by the brass tube cannon, purportedly used in training his Iowa followers. Sectionalism and slavery issues contributed to the development of the Republican party in the 1850s. Its crusade to end slavery carried the party to power, sustained it through the Civil War, and kept Republicans in office long after the war.



The Medium

Campaign tactics in the mid-nineteenth century focused on appeals to the common man and party loyalty. The blue ribbon calls the first Republican candidate John C. Frémont "THE PEOPLES' CANDIDATE" in the 1856 campaign; and the yellow straight-party ballot, listing the entire 1860 Republican ticket, reminds voters of Abraham Lincoln's log-cabin and rail-splitter background. The small tintype (or ferrotype) of Lincoln features running mate Hannibal Hamlin on the back. Tintype images of candidates were first used in 1860. INSET: Mass meetings and rallies, parades and marches, drew enthusiastic crowds for two-hour "stump" speeches.

1876–1896: The Messages

A street lantern for the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) symbolizes the ongoing issue of the Civil War in post-war politics. The GAR, an association of Union war veterans, was closely aligned to the Republican message of victory, patriotism, and Union; veterans successfully ran for office in many elections. Also in this period, Iowa farmers shifted from wheat to corn as the dominant crop and would win wide recognition, here symbolized by a 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition trophy. Nevertheless, populist leaders advised, "What you farmers need to do is raise less corn and more hell!" INSET: Granger banner from Clarke County, Iowa. Primarily a cooperative rural social and educational movement, the Grange favored railroad regulation to protect farmers from high shipping costs.

The Medium

Against a Benjamin Harrison bandanna with party platform slogans, an array of campaign items shows a trend beginning in 1876 — both parties relying on more party-created materials. Upper left: An 1887 woven silk picture (called a Stevengraph after inventor Thomas Stevens) of Grover Cleveland. Beside it, 1892 campaign badge made of mother-of-pearl, and (far right) 1888 badges of silk ribbon and metallic fringe. INSET: Celluloid-covered buttons, first used in the 1896 campaign, soon became commonplace. Clockwise from top: William McKinley, 1896; McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, 1900; Roosevelt and Charles W. Fairbanks, 1904; William Taft, 1908; and William Jennings Bryan, 1896. Along with mass-marketed trinkets came more printed material to educate the electorate: editorials, newspaper articles, and campaign handbooks (with platforms, candidate biographies, speeches, and song lyrics).

1900–1928: The Messages

Handkerchiefs and bandannas (1912) sporting Theodore Roosevelt and his "Rough Rider" image (from the Spanish-American War) form a backdrop for political issues in the first two decades of the new century — woman suffrage (fan) and prohibition (sticker). By 1916 woman suffrage had won support from both presidential candidates; in 1920 it became law. INSET: Prohibition of alcohol resurfaced periodically as a political issue. Until national prohibition was adopted in 1920, the Republican party — and many Iowans — vacillated between strong and weak measures and between "wet" and "dry" stances. (The slogan "NO BLIND PIGS WANTED" refers to after-hours, illegal saloons.)

The Medium

A German-language campaign brochure pushes William H. Taft for president (as does the large celluloid button). Political pamphlets were written in foreign languages to appeal to various ethnic groups. By 1900 phonograph records also carried campaign messages (here, William Jennings Bryan's speech on "The Railroad Question"). Political postcards were also a campaign innovation, after the 1898 repeal of the federal monopoly on penny postcards (bottom left, 1908 postcard for Taft; right, for Bryan and 1908 running mate John W. Kern.) INSET: From 1928 campaigns, GOP needle packet urges women to "STICK to the Republican Party," and a thimble promises "Home, Happiness, Hoover." After the 1920 passage of woman suffrage, both parties geared up their appeals to women.

1932–1948: The Messages

INSET: Three campaign buttons propose economic remedies. Francis E. Townsend wanted pensions for Americans over sixty; Louisiana senator Huey Long would divide up the nation's wealth and guarantee families a $2500 annual wage; the National Recovery Administration (NRA) was a New Deal program. As the blue poster suggests, in 1928 Al Smith's campaign had tried to woo Iowa farmers away from GOP candidate Herbert Hoover. By 1932, discontent fueled the resurgence of the Democrats and election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt over Hoover. A 1940 pro-Wendell Willkie leaflet ("THINK!") likens FDR's unprecedented bid for a third term to European dictatorships. A well-formed ear of corn speaks for Roosevelt's supporters; a [Henry A.] **W**allace **A**nd **R**oosevelt button — spelling WAR downward — speaks for his detractors.

The Medium

The radio became a campaign tool, especially for Roosevelt (shown on pamphlet), whose conversational style on the air replaced the strong oratory of whistle-stops and stump speeches. Battery-powered radios (like this Tatro radio made in Decorah) brought political speeches to farm families before rural electrification. Bumper stickers on automobiles were visual support for Republicans like Hoover and Democrats like Alf Landon of Kansas.

1952–1972: The Messages

Symbols of the Cold War and civil unrest loom over those of peace and prosperity. Beginning in the 1950s, Civil Defense signs posted on public buildings directed people to fallout shelters in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack. (This sign is from the old Historical Building in Des Moines.) In the 1960s and '70s, the protest symbol of a clenched fist called for student strikes and anti-war protests on U.S. campuses (as did this one in May 1970 at the University of Iowa). INSET: 1950s slogans of peace and prosperity appear on Dwight David "Ike" Eisenhower campaign sunglasses. A 1960s "Farmers for Kennedy" brochure links farm prosperity and world peace; Iowa governor Herschel Loveless is pictured on it with candidate John F. Kennedy.

SUNGLASSES COURTESY OF MAMIE DOUD EISENHOWER BIRTHPLACE, BOONE, IOWA

The Medium

Yard signs and television are campaign tools of recent decades. As Election Day approaches, homeowners tout their candidates by sticking cardboard signs in front yards; campaign organizers who supply the signs know that the busier the street, the more effective the sign. Far more sophisticated, television brings speeches, debates, and advertisements to millions. The first televised presidential campaign ad (in 1952 for Eisenhower) may have been viewed on this 1949 Emerson table model. His campaign used the slogan "I Like Ike" on countless campaign buttons — and even on women's hosiery. This button with candidates' spouses Mamie Eisenhower and Pat Nixon was probably aimed at women voters. INSETS: Candidate Adlai Stevenson smiles from a star-studded cigarette pack (1956?), and a caricature of Lyndon Baines Johnson promotes the 1964 candidate from Texas.

Today: The Museum Exhibit

SPIRITED nineteenth- and twentieth-century campaign music will welcome you as you enter "Winnowing the Field: Candidates, Caucuses, and Presidential Campaigns in Iowa," the museum exhibit on which this photo essay is based. The State Historical Society of Iowa exhibit features hundreds more of the political and campaign artifacts from Iowa's campaigns since the mid-nineteenth century.

The history of Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses is also explored, with a look at each caucus from 1972 to 1988 and an explanation of the caucus process. The exhibit also tells the stories of seven Iowans who sought the presidency, and highlights changes in campaign techniques and technology — from badges and buttons to sound bites of the television age.

"Winnowing the Field" will be at the State of Iowa Historical Building, 600 E. Locust, in Des Moines until June 6, 1993. Museum hours: 9-4:30 Tuesday-Saturday; 12-4:30 Sunday. Schedule group tours by calling (515) 242-5193.

For a free informative and illustrated brochure about the exhibit, contact the Iowa History Resource Center, State Historical Society of Iowa, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. □

LETTERS FROM READERS

On Iowa colleges and universities

Anne Beiser Allen's article about Silas Totten [early University of Iowa president] looks very good. I am not an expert on Totten or his period but her research appears to be thorough and her judgments are reasonable. Also I am glad to learn what happened to Richard Totten, his son. I would like to see more published on our sister or rival colleges and universities.

Mrs. Allen mentions Griswold College in Davenport. I spent most of my life in or near the Quad Cities without having heard of Griswold or its buildings. Were they inherited from Grinnell College after it moved to central Iowa and bequeathed to the Episcopal cathedral or to Palmer?

Another interesting defunct college is Lenox in Hopkinton, with some important alumni. Live institutions include Catholic schools, such as St. Ambrose University, which may have "modernized" later or faster than some of their Protestant counterparts because of the impact of Vatican II. Other liberal arts colleges in Iowa, Drake, Iowa State, University of Northern Iowa, and the older and newer community colleges all deserve attention. . . . Research on narrow topics or comparative treatments, whether popular or scholarly, could well be the right length for historical magazines.

Earl M. Rogers
University of Iowa Archives

Reply

Griswold College did use the Iowa College facility after Iowa College moved to Grinnell and became Grinnell College. Griswold closed permanently in the 1880s. The main building stood on the current site of Davenport Central High.

Thank you for your suggestions on future *Palimpsest* articles. We welcome manuscript submissions on any college or university in Iowa's past. See our guidelines on this page. Query letters are recommended.

—The Editor

On the summer **Pal**

Please enter my subscription to *Palimpsest*. Congratulations on the outstanding articles on J.P. Doremus and stereoscopes [in the Summer 1992 issue].

Raymond H. Bohman
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

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Becky Wilson Hawbaker is an editorial assistant at the State Historical Society of Iowa. She received a bachelor's degree in history and education from the University of Northern Iowa. She began a master's degree in history at the University of Iowa and is now working towards a master's in special education.

Jack Lufkin is a historical curator at the State Historical Society of Iowa. He co-curated the museum exhibit "Winnowing the Field: Candidates, Caucuses, and Presidential Campaigns in Iowa." The exhibit is at the State Historical Building in Des Moines through June 1993.

Michael O. Smith is chief curator at the State Historical Society of Iowa. He and Jack Lufkin curated the museum exhibit "Winnowing the Field: Candidates, Caucuses, and Presidential Campaigns in Iowa."

Raymond M. Tinnian is a research assistant at the Office of the State Archaeologist in Iowa City. The *Palimpsest* article is based on his initial presentation at the 103rd annual meeting of the Iowa Academy of Sciences (Dubuque, 1991) and subsequent research.

SUBMISSIONS

The editor welcomes manuscripts and edited documents on the history of Iowa and the Midwest that may interest a general reading audience. Submissions that focus on visual material (photographs, maps, drawings) or on material culture are also invited. Originality and significance of the topic, as well as the quality of research and writing, will determine acceptance for publication. Manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced, and follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (13th edition). Please send two copies. Standard length is within ten to twenty manuscript pages, but shorter or longer submissions will be considered. Although the *Palimpsest* presents brief bibliographies rather than footnoted articles, footnotes should appear in the original submission. When using newspaper sources, please cite page as well as date of issue. Include a brief biographical sketch. Because illustrative material is integral to the *Palimpsest*, the editor encourages authors to include photographs and illustrations (or suggestions). Please send submissions or queries to Ginalie Swaim, Editor, *The Palimpsest*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

The back cover of *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger* advertises other dime novels available to eager readers in the nineteenth century. New York publishers Beadle and Adams boasted that their dime novels comprised "the best works only of the most popular living writers in the field of American Romance." Among those writers was Iowan "Oll" Coomes, whose dime novels — set in Iowa and points farther west — are explored in this *Palimpsest*.

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