

Images of Victorian Iowa

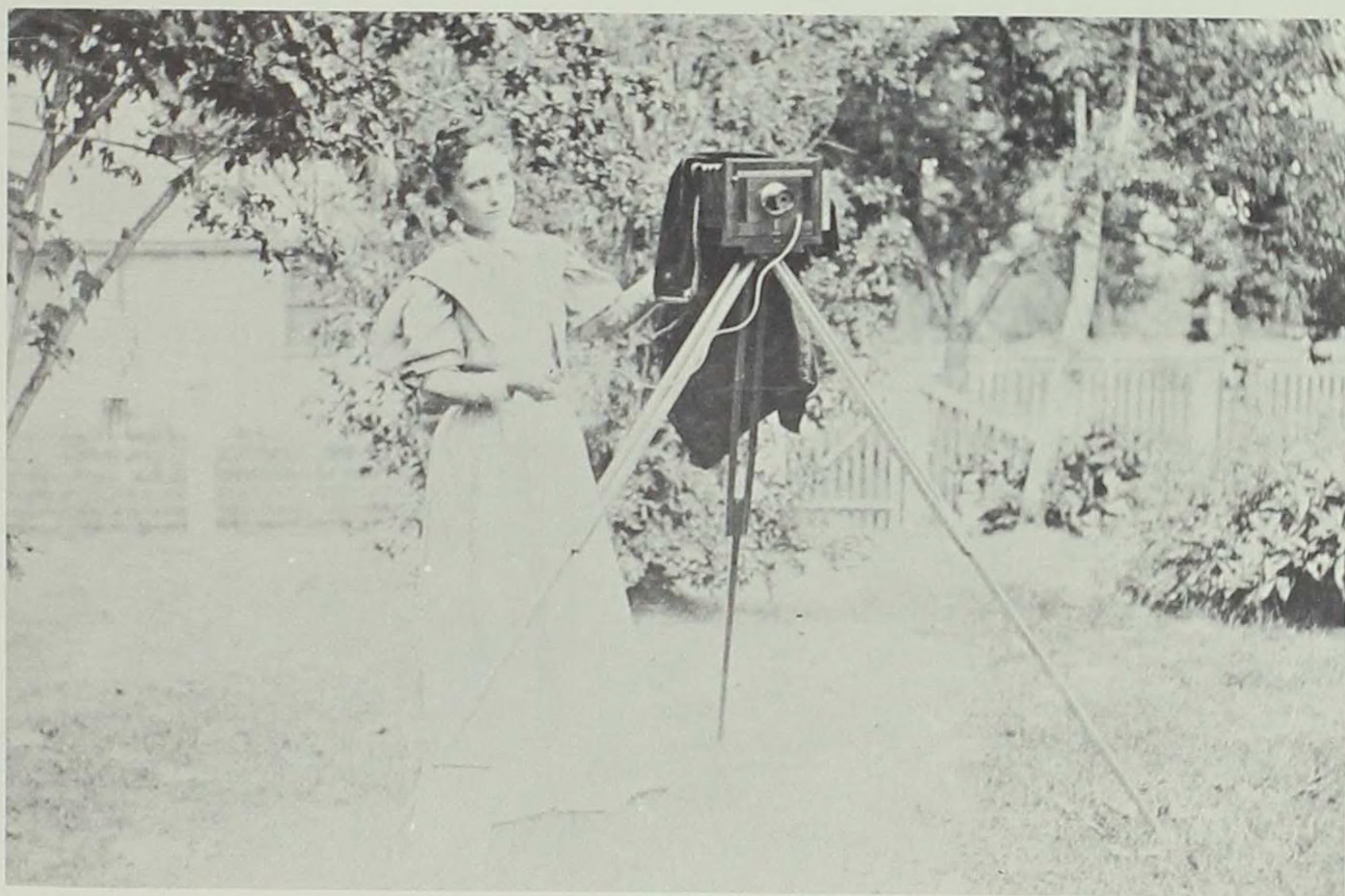
by
Mary Bennett

Photographs offer unique opportunities to interpret history. In their choice of subjects and in their artistic styles, photographers of the past tell us what mattered most to them and to the society in which they lived. Iowa's Bertha M. Horack Shambaugh (1871-1953) was one such photographer who understood the documentary value of her medium when it was still in its childhood. Much of her camera work of the 1880s and 1890s has survived, and in it she provides fascinating glimpses of life in the Hawkeye State during the Victorian Age.

Young Bertha Horack discovered the camera at a time of enormous change in photographic technology. Previously, picture-taking was limited to a few skilled artisans, to adventurous frontier photographers, and to those who prac-

ticed in the local portrait studios. Equipment was cumbersome and required a good deal of preparation. It included a large camera, a tripod to hold it steady, and heavy (yet fragile) glass plate negatives. Before each snap of the shutter, a glass plate was coated with a thin layer of emulsion. This "wet plate" served as the negative for the upcoming photo. Glass negatives required long exposure times and carried high risks of failure, for the slightest movement could destroy the image.

The development of a "dry plate" process in the 1880s eliminated much of the inconvenience in taking pictures. Photographers could now buy prepackaged glass plate negatives, which allowed a faster shutter speed. The "snap shot" made possible by dry plate processes set off a boom in amateur photography in the United States, particularly among the country's middle-income families.



Bertha M. Horack Shambaugh poses with her 5-by-8 tripod camera (courtesy University of Iowa Archives)

Bertha Horack shared this enthusiasm. In 1888, while still in high school, she was given a tripod camera with a single Waterbury lens. She proudly claimed it was "one of the first amateur cameras in Iowa City." It required considerable technical skill and plenty of patience to operate. Long exposure times were necessary to assure good images on the 5-by-8 inch glass negatives she used. Later Bertha replaced this tripod camera equipment with a more convenient hand-held camera, a "folding Eastman Kodak" that used 4-by-5 inch glass plates.

Like most amateur photographers, Bertha Horack recorded significant events and memorable occasions in her life and over the years collected scores of images of her family and friends. Domestic scenes appear often among her photographs. Typical are scenes of her father mowing the lawn, her mother knit-

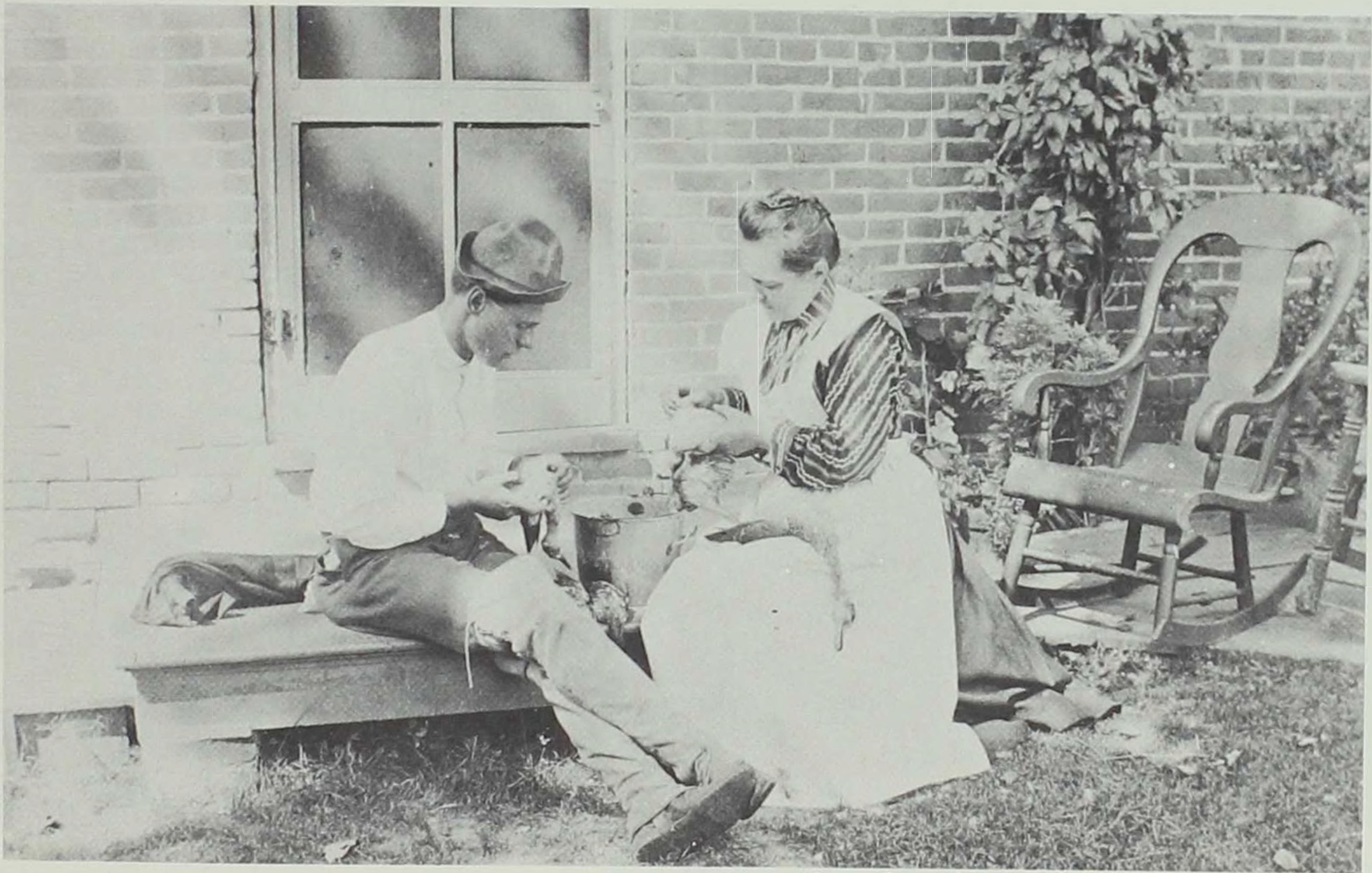
ting, and her brothers showing off a catch of quail. More illuminating are her pictures of the interior of the Horack home in Iowa City. The contrasting designs of the furnishings and the opulent clutter seen in the rooms say much about Victorian ideas of comfort. The Horack family's affluence is apparent at once, as is their eclectic taste. To the modern viewer, these photographs are valuable representations of middle-class styles in late nineteenth-century Iowa.

Aside from their documentary interest, the interior views provide clues to the photographer's artistic values. Candid shots are rare in Bertha's work, but these compositions are particularly formal. She photographed each room from several different angles, often with glimpses into the room beyond. She appears to have spent time arranging the elements of each composition in order to highlight specific ob-



Bertha's brothers, H. Claude and Frank Horack, return from the hunt (above); (below) brother Frank displays his taxidermy specimens, ca. 1893.





Mrs. Horack and one of her sons clean ducks.

jects, as an artist would design a still life. Always attentive to the lighting, Bertha was especially successful in catching the sun as it filtered through lacy parlor curtains. Thus many of her interiors have a warmth that their formality would otherwise deny them.

Beginning in the 1890s, Bertha's photographs documented activities around her community as well as those within the Horack family. Buildings, landmarks, and prominent people became subjects of her camera's roving eye. A picture series completed in 1893 recorded interiors and exteriors of many Iowa City schools. Such local scenes as the Johnson County Fair, the Firemen's Parade, Terrell's Mill, and University of Iowa campus life also appear in work done during this period.

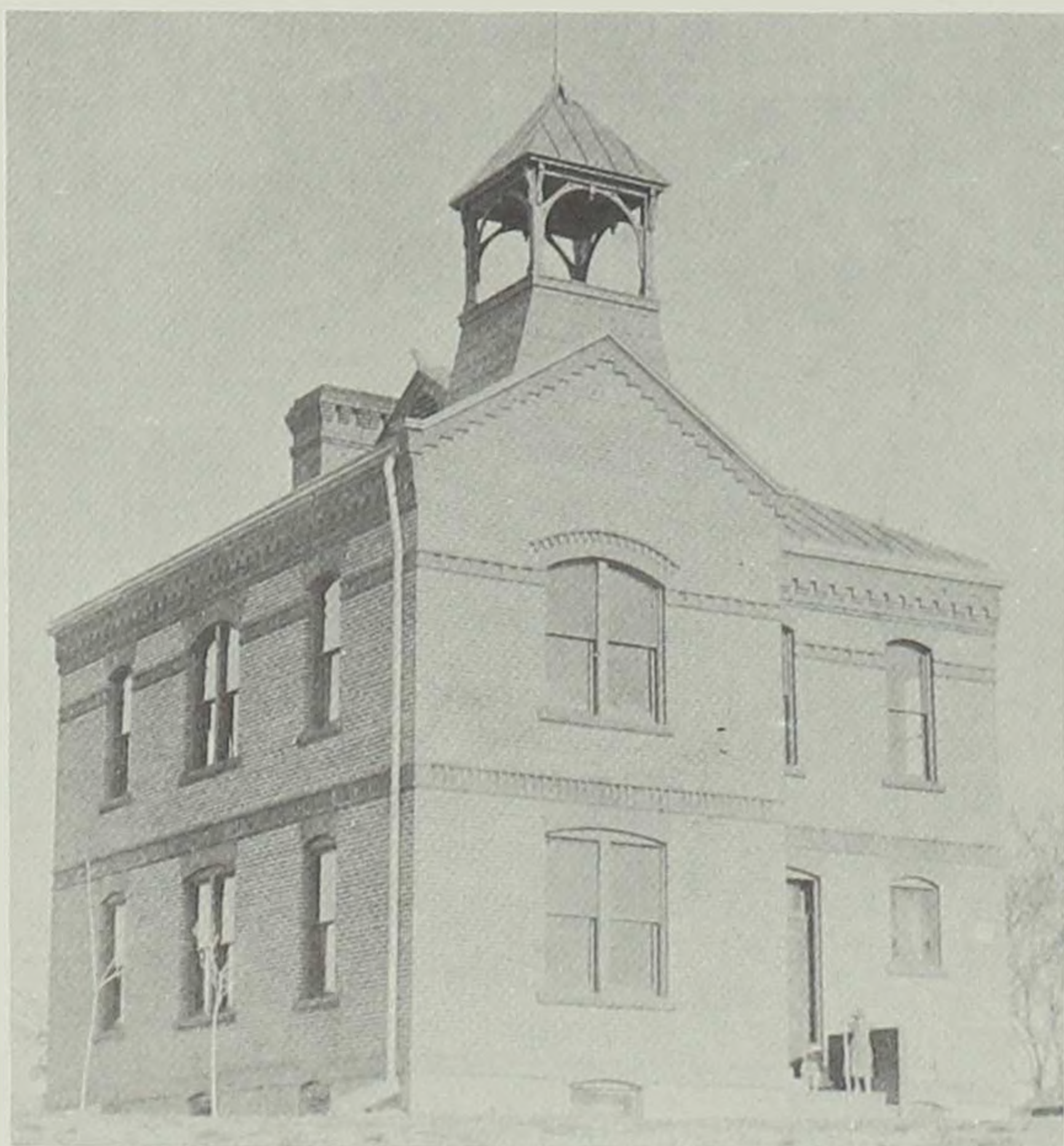
Perhaps the best known photographs are those she took in the Amana Colonies in 1890 and 1891 (see *The Palimpsest*, March/April 1977); they include images of people, meeting

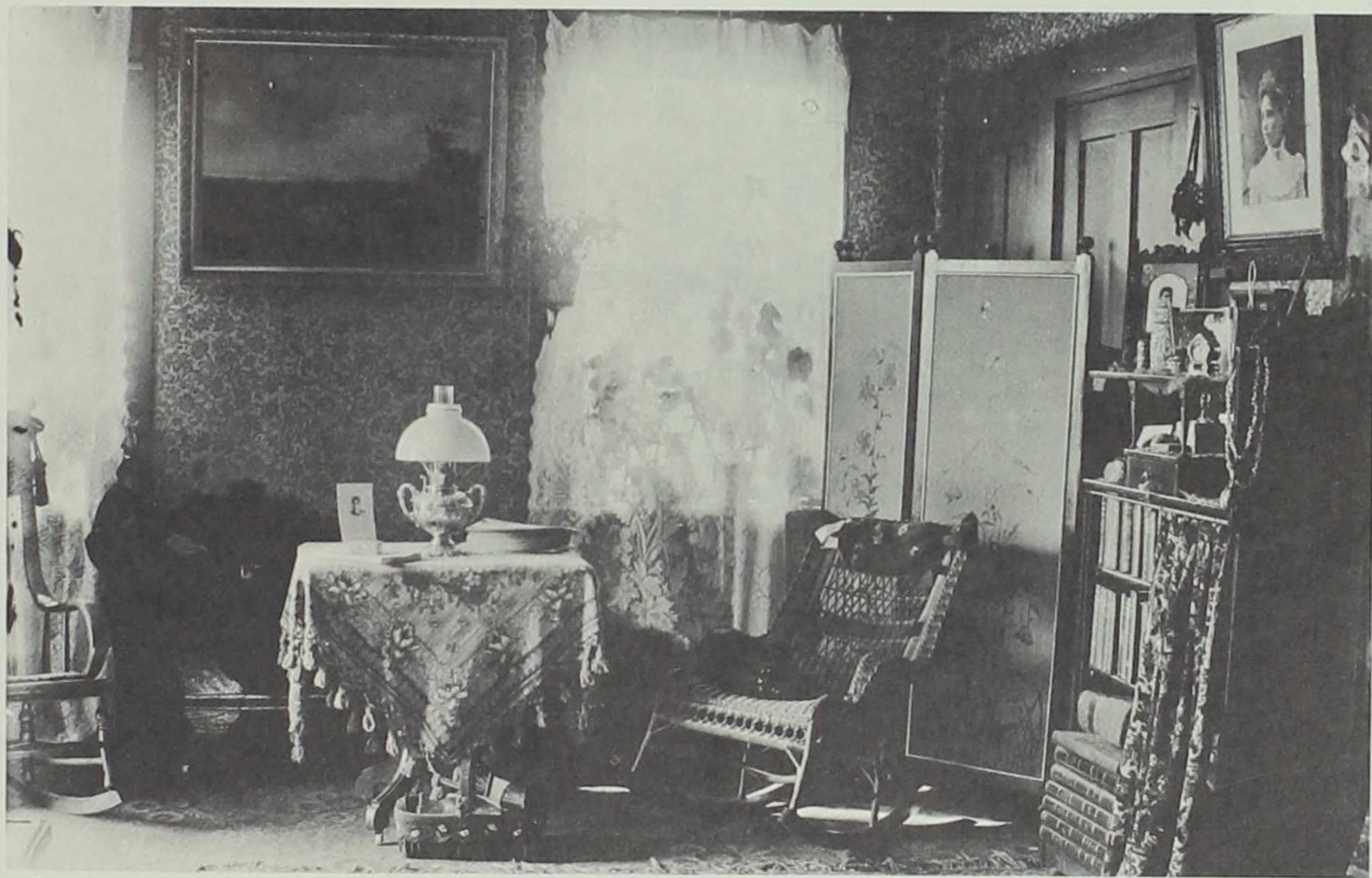
houses, and other community buildings. The photo collection is an important source of information for historians of the Amanas, as are Bertha's books, *Amana: The Community of True Inspiration* (1908) and *Amana That Was and Amana That Is* (1932). She admitted that while "some of the Amana pictures are good, some [are] indifferent." What was more important to her as a documentary photographer was that "they are all glimpses of the Old Amana that is fast disappearing."

Photography was still a new artistic form when Bertha took it up, but the appearance of flexible roll film in the 1890s encouraged even more amateurs to try their hand with the medium. As the number of photographers increased and more photos were processed at local drugstores, the uniqueness of Bertha's early camera was lost. After her marriage to Benjamin Shambaugh in 1897, she set aside



(Above) Bertha's sorority sisters boating on the Iowa River, ca. 1891; (below, left) Iowa City's Shimek School, 1892; (below, right) sixth-grade classroom at the Second Ward School near Iowa City, 1892.





The sitting room at the Horack house, ca. 1889.

The Horacks' parlor, ca. 1888.





(Above) Bertha's husband, Benjamin Shambaugh, ca. 1892; (below) Bertha posing elegantly in her new home, November 1904, photographer unknown.



her equipment and hired others to do her photographic work. From then on, most of her artistic energy found expression in pen-and-ink sketches and paintings in watercolor and oil. Old photos, particularly those depicting historical landmarks, often served as models for her paintings and drawings, many of which appeared in local and state publications.

Bertha M. Horack Shambaugh's decision to abandon serious photography is unfortunate. Her photos of the 1880s and 1890s are marked by a high quality unusual in amateur work done during the nineteenth century. Most of the pictures are properly exposed to give good contrast and almost all of the images are in sharp focus. Certainly she was among the first amateur photographers to appreciate the historical and artistic importance of the medium. Bertha revealed her thoughtful attitude toward photography in her special care in handling prints: each was matted, stamped with her name, and dated. Those reproduced on these pages represent a small sample of her achievement as one of Iowa's pioneer historical photographers. □

Note on Sources

The major sources for this article are the Shambaugh Family Papers at the University of Iowa Archives and the Shambaugh Papers at the State Historical Society of Iowa. The two collections contain a total of more than 200 photographs and glass negatives. The author wishes to thank Bertha Shambaugh's niece, Mrs. Katherine Horack Dixon, for her valuable assistance. A more detailed biographical sketch of Mrs. Shambaugh is on file in the Society's Manuscript Department. Unless otherwise noted, all photos are from the Society's collection.



Bertha's photograph of Old Capitol (above) served as the model for her painting of the building (below).

