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# The PALIMPSEST

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Peter T. Harstad, Director

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William Silag, Editor

## CONTENTS



Cover: *Two young women out for a drive around Tipton, Iowa at the turn of the century. Other pioneer motorists ventured farther. The story of Vera Teape's journey from the Great Lakes to the Rockies begins on page 2.*


## *The Meaning of the Palimpsest*

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

# The Road to Denver

by

Vera Marie Teape

*Some time ago, Jesse H. Day of Athens, Ohio sent us a copy of a pamphlet published privately in 1907 by his grandmother, Vera Marie Teape MacKelvie. The pamphlet, reprinted here in its entirety, describes the adventures of Vera and her mother, Nancy Minerva Teape, as they motored their way across the Hawkeye State in the early days of automotive transport. Readers will note not only the travelers' amusing descriptions of the midwestern landscape at the turn of the century, but also their impressive mechanical abilities. Mrs. Teape and her daughter appear to have handled all but the most difficult repair work during the course of their 1,000-mile journey.*

*Nancy Minerva Teape was born in Marble Rock, Iowa in 1859 and was a well-known botanist and water colorist. She moved to Idaho in 1904 and remained there until her death in 1933. Her daughter Vera was born in 1885 in Rockford, Iowa, where Mrs. Teape's husband had a jewelry store. A prominent vaudevillian in the 1920s and '30s, Vera Marie Teape MacKelvie died in Glendale, California in 1967.*

*– Ed.*

Do stop the machine quick, for I do believe that man has—yes, he *has* several crates of ginger ale. We must have some." I jumped out and hailed the man and bought one bottle. We were hilarious. It was such fun to drink out of a bottle when we were going 15 miles an hour over the loveliest roads! The sensation of riding was a new delight, for we hadn't been in an automobile for months.

We were all alone, just mamma and myself, and were headed for Denver. As yet we were only five miles from Chicago, our starting point. We had a good deal of trouble through the traffic, but now we were out of that horrible busy city, so we would not experience such trouble again. One chain was loose and had come off while riding over the bumpy pavement on State Street. My, the teams and cars are enough to unnerve a professional chauffeur, let alone two nervous women! We were right on the car line when the machine stopped. I jumped out and tried my best to push the auto off the track. A crowd appeared as if by magic. A man quickly located our trouble and replaced the chain. We still felt a little shaky, but the ginger ale was good, the morning air fine and the prospect of a successful trip glorious. "We must christen our machine. She shall be our Baby Bullet. The name was used before on a very poor machine, but the name is good. I will guide while you drink, mamma." "Oh, won't it ——?" The machine had seemed to go straight up into the air. It landed with an awful jar and stopped. I couldn't tell at all what had happened. All I knew was that somehow my head was nearly jounced off my body and that something *had* happened. We were terribly frightened. It seems I had run over a large stump nearly hidden by the weeds and grass by the roadside. We were sure the machine would refuse to go, for it had stopped of its own accord. I cranked the engine, and, surprise of all surprises, it started working away as hard and as regularly as if nothing had happened; also when mamma pressed the foot pedal it bounded forward, evidently none the worse for the jar.

The scenery was a treat to our western eyes. In the heat of the day we would stop in the shade of the immense groves and lie on the wild bluegrass, watch the few white clouds above us in the clear blue sky and idly plan and map our way. Each time that we started on again it was with a new delight. The sensation of traveling swiftly and yourself controlling the machine, whose every sound you understand, is something only those who have experienced can at all conceive. We grew to love our Baby Bullet as if it were a living thing. Certainly there is something very human in machinery. A machine can take this as a compliment or not just as it likes. Sometimes when traveling under very adverse circumstances our machine would

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go ahead so nobly and do so well we could not but praise it, and then again — but, of course, there was always a reason, although sometimes we *never* found out that reason. I think there is a good deal of English blood in Baby Bullet, anyway.

Just before entering Bristol we found that the nut on the sprocket wheel holding the chain was gone. What to do was a question. At last I conceived the idea of using heavy copper wire which we had with us, by fastening the wire through the cotter pin hole, and twisting it firmly around in place of the nut. We wasted lots of time and I was horribly dirty, but I rather think most men would have had the machine hauled to a repair shop. The wire held so well that we found it unnecessary to stop at Bristol.

When we stopped in the different towns, as we did to obtain gasoline, mail letters, get our meals, etc., a large crowd would always gather and stand and look at us and the Baby Bullet as if we were a curiosity. At first we found it very embarrassing, but later became accustomed to it. It was prompted by friendly curiosity and a desire to help, if help was needed. Men would ask us where we were from and where we were "bound for;" "how we had made certain hills or sandy stretches; how fast we could go; what we thought of the 'Orient Buckboard' and how many miles we made a day." In reply we told them we were traveling from Chicago to Denver. So far we hadn't found it necessary to be helped up any hills or through any stretch of sand. We could make only 20 miles an hour since we had had the low gear sprocket wheel put on. Of course, we thought our Baby Bullet was all to the good. That last question we preferred to avoid, for 99 miles was our best day, and somehow people expected us to make at least 250 easily. The conversation always ended something like this, "And you two ladies are all alone? Well! You certainly have got lots of nerve." We didn't see why they thought it took nerve, but everyone did think so, and everyone predicted failure.

*Nancy Minerva Teape (courtesy Jesse H. Day)*

Illinois is a lovely country. The roads were all good except for a few newly worked ones. For many miles the route follows the river. The country about Yorkville is by far the most beautiful place we passed through.

When we left Geneseo we were not very sure we were on the right road, in fact I'm not sure that we took the right road yet. We had not heard of the ferry at Colona, in fact did not know there was a river to be crossed at this point. We were enjoying the winding road, shaded on either side by the thick growth of trees, and were very much surprised when we rounded a corner and saw before us, not ten feet away, a large river. We were going on high speed, and it was all mamma could do to turn away toward a swamp and throw in the reverse levers and put on the brakes in time. We considered that a very narrow escape. The ferryman had seen the performance and came hurrying down to where we stood. On inquiry he told us that the river was so high that we would have to drive full 30 feet in water 20 inches deep to get on that ferry, because the river was so unusually high. He told us not to think of trying it, but to go ten miles out of our way to

*Vera Marie Teape (courtesy Jesse H. Day)*

the bridge. He said that the day before a large machine had driven to the ferry successfully, and that decided us. We certainly could if they could. The man shook his head and insisted that the other machine was a *very* large one. We insisted on trying, although we had never driven in water before. A team had driven up meanwhile and was waiting to cross the river. They drove on the ferry first and then we backed as far as possible and started the engine and made the plunge. Our hearts were in our mouths, but we put on a brave front. We hit the water full speed and splashed right through without apparently retarding the speed. We were really quite surprised and very proud of Baby Bullet. The men on the ferry had stood ready to help pull us up, and when we dashed up they had to jump to get out of our way. We all had a good laugh over it except one man, who didn't seem to see anything funny to laugh at. Perhaps it was because we had come so near running over him.

Before we reached Moline we spent fully two hours cleaning the plug, screw, and blade, refilling the gasoline tank from the supply we carried with us, and trying to locate some trouble, for we had very little power and were making such poor time. We even found it difficult to pass teams that were going in our direction. We stopped at an empty schoolhouse and washed from the pump and fixed our hair the best we could, and tried to make ourselves think we looked presentable. We did get *so* dirty! The roads were dusty and the engine was black, and we came in such close contact with both.

We passed through Harlan [perhaps Milan], thinking it was Rock Island, and inquired the road to Davenport. We were directed over the Arsenal Bridge. We started over the bridge, but were hailed by a policeman, so we stopped and waited for him. After asking where we were from, he explained that everyone was required to have a permit, but if we called "Chicago" to the other gatekeeper he would know we were tourists and let us pass. We thanked him and were very glad we had been directed as we had, for it saved us driving through Rock Island with a "sick" machine, and we so enjoyed the beautiful drive through the Arsenal Grounds. This is one of the finest drives in the United States, I imagine. We passed the Arsenal buildings, all duplicates of each other and very fine and imposing. We saw all sorts of war paraphernalia and picturesque rows of cannonballs piled in triangular forms.

In Davenport we stopped at an auto-bicycle store for repairs. They found nothing wrong but one weak battery, which they threw out and replaced. We stayed here all night.

The roads here are good with the exception of a few steep hills. There is a great quantity of luxurious vegetation. We had made a very late start from Davenport, but wished to make Marion before dark. When we passed through Mechanicsville we knew that if all went well we could get there nicely. On the outskirts we inquired the way of two elderly men who were driving past. One of them was very much alarmed lest we should lose the way, and looking in the back of the buggy drew forth a county map. He came up to us and with his pencil


*An Iowa auto repair shop, ca. 1910*

showed us which road we should follow. He explained that it was a very poor map and started in correcting it. He placed several white schoolhouses on the other side of the road; also removed bridges, placed principal farmhouses, etc. He gave us the map, but he had kept us so long that it was beginning to get quite dusky. It seemed a strange, hilly country with winding roads. We were so afraid something might happen, that we would have to stay out all night. As far as keeping on the right road was concerned, we could have taken no other, unless we jumped a barbed wire fence to follow an old disused road. When we arrived in Marion it was quite dark.

The next day was the most discouraging day we had. Leaving Marion we went through Cedar Rapids, Vining, and stayed all night in Toledo. We took the wrong road and wandered about on all but the right road, retracing our way often, going up hill and down, through heavy sand.

In this part of Iowa horses are very easily frightened. The drivers frantically waved for us to stop, which we did till they turned down some lane or led their horses by. I cranked the engine that day till I thought my shoulder was forever displaced. This part of the country is not so prosperous-looking. There are a great many foreigners.

Sometimes it was very funny to see how frightened the drivers were when the horses didn't seem to care at all. I remember once in particular. We were coming down a long hill and saw far ahead a team coming toward us. The occupants must have seen us a long way off, too, but just as we were within a few rods of them the woman started screaming and grabbed the white lap-robe and waved it frantically for us to stop. She snatched the lines from the man with the other hand, but the poor horse stood with bowed head, not knowing anything was going on. We did our best to stop, but didn't succeed till we were directly opposite the rig and then how the engine popped!

The road from Toledo winds this way and that through the timber near the Indian Reservation. There were Indians in plenty. They looked very picturesque with their bright clothing and seemed to fit that country. The roads are good, but were up hill and down.

We stayed that night and most of Sunday in Denison, Iowa. That evening we were traveling from Dow City to Honey Creek, and as the sun set and the shadows lengthened among the trees we became terribly frightened. Everything looked so weird and awful! We were driving by the side of the bluffs that looked like mountains in the dusk. I reached back of the seat and opened the valise and got out the revolver and held it in my lap. We could hardly see the winding road enshadowed among the trees, and found it necessary to toot the horn continually for fear of running into someone. Oh, *what* a voice that horn has! It is so nerve-racking. We were glad to see the lights of the hamlet. Even the *feather bed* was welcome.

In the morning we awoke early, having spent a wretched night. We worked about an hour as usual cleaning and fixing the machine for the day's trip. When all was ready we cranked and cranked, but the engine refused to start. We must have worked another hour before we located our trouble. The engine was full of the oil we had put in just before stopping. We had an awful time working the oil out. We squirted lots of gasoline into the relief valve and opened something underneath the engine and cranked and cranked. At last we got it started. We never oiled the engine just before stopping a second time, I'll tell you!

We spent the rest of the day in Omaha. We went to a garage and had the machine thoroughly overhauled. The proprietor was perfectly lovely to us and allowed us to go back in the workrooms and watch them fix Baby Bullet. The workman was fine and explained everything he thought we could comprehend and possibly a little more that we *did* comprehend. They ground the valves, readjusted the carburetter, cleaned the gasoline tank, changed our batteries, took off the wheels and greased them, and I guess that was all. They said we had kept the machine in fine condition. We felt quite proud. We had made the states of Illinois and Iowa in one week.

We made splendid time out of Omaha. Baby Bullet was certainly at her best and the roads were fine.

We stopped in Columbus and got gasoline and mailed some letters. When we returned there was the usual crowd of men and boys standing looking at the machine. I tried to crank up, but absolutely to no avail. The crowd grew larger and larger. People wondered what was the matter and offered help, but we knew they couldn't *help*, not understanding anything about it. However, I let a man try cranking it just because he insisted. Once we got it started and succeeded in driving slowly around the block and onto a side street, leaving behind us the crowd. We put in a fresh supply of gasoline (although the tank was not empty), changed the batteries, cleaned the plug and screw and blade, took apart the engine and examined the valves and springs, opened the carburetter and worked over three hours. Still the engine seemed absolutely dead. We were very tired and climbed up in the seat and read the little book of instructions till we nearly knew it word for word. I said I thought since we *couldn't* fix it we had better waste no more time, but telegraph to Omaha for a professional. Mamma said, "Well, but wait a minute. I'm going to readjust the carburetter." I felt sure that that would do no good, for it had been going fine, until we stopped, the way it was adjusted. Mamma cranked only once and the engine actually went. Some one must have turned the pin under the carburetter. We were mighty glad to find out that was all that was wrong and wasted no time starting, for it looked very much like rain and we thought that we might ride out of it.

We were 20 minutes' ride from town when we discovered that we had left our umbrella top, and since the sky was so black we turned back and spent about 30 minutes looking for it, thinking that it was near where we had been repairing the machine, as we had laid it on the ground with other things that were in our way. We couldn't find the umbrella, and no one we asked had seen it. We started again and in 25 minutes more were riding through a drenching rain. I was afraid it would put out the engine, but it did not hurt it at all. As for us, we were simply soaked. Our coats were in the valise back of the seat and we ran in the rain so suddenly that by the time I had succeeded in opening the valise and getting the coats we were drenched. However, we soon dried, but for awhile our teeth simply chattered with the cold. We stayed at Silver Creek all night. The next morning we drove through water up to the hubs to Clark's, where we left the machine and took the train to Mason City [Nebraska], where we spent a week visiting relatives. At the end of that time we were ready and anxious to resume our journey. We left Clark's at 1:20, and how we did enjoy the auto after riding on the cars! The drive that day was delightful. The roads were good and the country looked very prosperous with the large cornfields and alfalfa. We took supper and stayed all night at Wood River. We stopped two hours in Kearney and had Baby Bullet looked over. After leaving some miles—and we were driving in a deeply cut road out of which it was impossible to turn—we met a van filled with furniture and people. We tooted and the wagon turned out, but their big dog stood directly across the road. We tooted and tooted the horn, but the animal didn't seem to hear, and not being able to turn out, we actually ran over it. I don't know how badly it hurt the dog, as we didn't dare to stop and see, but I heard the poor thing howling when I turned and listened.

The next night we stayed at Gothenburg. We got up at 5:30, intending to get an early start, having cleaned and generally overhauled the machine before going to bed. Now from Gothenburg to North Platte is 61 miles, and we were too low on gasoline to start such a distance without more; consequently we waited until a drug store opened and left that city at 7:30. We crossed the long and narrow bridge over the sandy Platte River and found the roads fairly good. We were delighted in recognizing certain parts of the road that we had driven over a few months before when going from Denver to Brokenbow. Among the familiar places was the home of an elderly farmer. He was the dearest old man with a snow-white beard. When we had stopped before, he had greeted us rifle in hand. He had been killing English sparrows, and took us back to the large barns and sheds and showed us hundreds of barn swallows flying in and out of their nests. He had protected them 20 years. Every spring they came and built their nests under the eaves. The air was fairly black with birds at that time. Their old friend delighted in their presence and seemed as proud of them as most men are of their children.

We soon came to the place where night had overtaken us before. We could well laugh at the remembrance of our past fear, for by daylight the country was beautiful. How we had sat and trembled that dark night, straining our eyes to penetrate the darkness, shaking at every sound out of the night's stillness, waiting for some unknown horror till sleep overtook us. We had not been prepared for camping and had no light for night driving. We had left North Platte late in the afternoon, hoping to make the next small town, but when twilight fell we decided to seek shelter at a farmhouse.

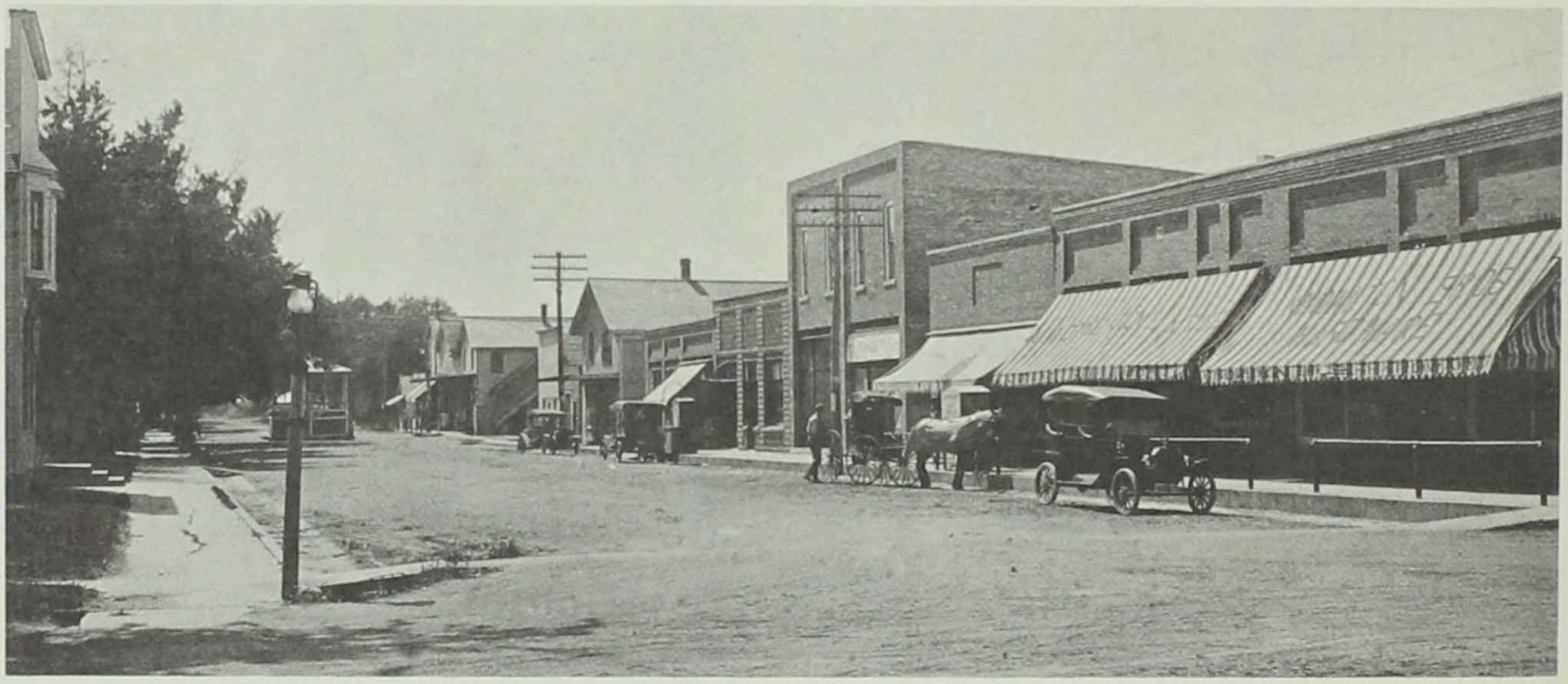
We drew up at a small sod house. I went in and asked if we might stay for the night, before I even looked at the woman who had opened the door for me. She was plainly a foreigner. When I went back and told mamma that we could stay, but they were foreigners, she said

we would *not* stay. She was even afraid for our lives when she saw the man of the house. He was an Italian and coming toward us. At mamma's command I grabbed the crank and was trying vainly to start the machine, while the man seemed to be quickening his pace at the signs of our departure. Several children were at his heels. The man was calling, but I couldn't understand him, for the engine had started. The man was still calling, but we sped away unheeding.

We went miles, and it had grown quite dark. Before us we saw what we took to be a house, around which was a high brick fence. There was a great abundance of trees. We felt very thankful, for we thought surely the tenants would be Americans. We decided the house faced the other road when we saw no gate; so with glad hearts we turned the corner and swung up in front of the gate, not to a house, but to a cemetery. The large white headstones sent a chill of terror through us. Again we sped on, a thousand times more frightened than before. In turning to find the gate we had left the main road, but our one thought was to leave quickly that awful city of the dead.

Soon we came to a small house. Again I went and asked for shelter. The man at the door started to say he thought they could make room, but here his wife reminded him of her poor health and declared they could not keep us. I said we would not bother; we could sleep any place and would be away long before breakfast, and I suggested we were willing to pay as well. I was desperate. Still her poor health prevented. She would *not* keep us. I asked then of the man where he thought we could find accommodations. He did not know; said we were off the main road and would have to retrace our steps around that awful cemetery. I wanted to scream, and did cry a little. I wanted mamma to stay by their house in the road where we were all night, and not go on till morning. She would *not* stay near the house of such unhospitable people. She was indignant. She started the machine and we were off again at full speed, hitting many bumps in the darkness. As we passed the dreaded spot the white


*Mesquakie Indians weaving in the summer shade*



*Buggies and automobiles compete for parking places in Floyd, Iowa at the turn of the century.*

stones stared out and seemed to mock us. We drove on in the darkness three or four miles and at last stopped by the side of the road where we spent the rest of that long, long night. Later we found out that the cemetery was Fort McPherson.

About here one finds mostly prairie. There is very little land under cultivation. A small amount of corn and alfalfa is raised, and we saw some beet fields here but more farther west. The houses are mostly small and some are sod. The roads farther on are very uneven with deep-cut ruts covered with heavy grass. We knocked the chains off several times, partly because they were rather loose and we were not strong enough to tighten them. At last one chain broke when we were riding through stiff, heavy sunflowers which were very abundant in patches. The sun was scorching hot, it being almost noon and there was no shade. We were 18 miles from town and had no extra chain with us, so we knew we must some way manage to mend the broken one. We had only about four inches of strong copper wire, so we wrapped lots of fine wire around the broken link in hopes it would take us a little of the way. I wrapped it very carefully and it looked quite secure. We screwed the chain on again, put on lots of graphite, and started the engine. That was as far as we got, for the minute the foot pedal was pressed the chain snapped. We knew there was no use trying the fine wire again, so we used the copper wire, carefully bending it the shape of the link. It went around just once with ends left to twist together. That might *help* hold, but we knew it couldn't hold alone, so we tried to bend a hairpin, but it was far too stiff. Mamma then straightened out two safety pins and we found that these bent a great deal easier. We wrapped these around the broken link and twisted the ends together as we had the copper wire. Again we tried the chain, but again it broke. Now perfectly desperate, we took small rope twine and bound the broken link with that, but with the same futile result. We worked three hours in the hot sun, then I remembered someone had once told us that if we broke a chain we could bind the small sprocket wheel with the broken chain and fasten it stationary to some part of the machine and go on one chain. I had suggested this to mamma, but she said we had

better not risk breaking the other chain; but at last when we saw one broken chain was as bad as no chain at all, we were ready to try anything. We bound the sprocket wheel, and the machine went as well as ever.

We went on the north side of the river to Paxon, at which point we were directed across the river to avoid hills. We followed their directions, and regretted it bitterly when we saw the condition of the road. It was a typical prairie country road and several times we came to great mud holes which it was impossible to avoid. When there was a hard or sandy bottom the machine plowed right through regardless of the depth of water, but in several cases the mud was so soft that the front wheels of the machine would sink in nearly a foot, while the back wheels spun around in the mud. Once I saw we were making no headway, but rather were sinking deeper and deeper in the mud, so I jumped out to lighten it of my weight and gave the machine a push. That was all it needed. Mamma stopped and waited for me on the other side while I waded out. We had to wait till mamma got through laughing. Someway she thought it terribly funny, and I suppose I did look queer, but seriously I very much preferred jumping to staying where we were and waiting for a team to haul us out. The water I jumped in was so thick with mud that even when my dress skirt did dry I was in a deplorable condition. The rest I will copy from my diary: Scared horse, which backed, knocking out lady. Front wheel backed over her. No damage done. Arrived in Ogallala at 4:30, where we spent the night. Terrible rain all night. Close lightning and thunder like artillery.

In the morning, with the help of our kind host, we mended the chain, making a rivet from a nail. Started about 9:45. Stopped near Crook and mended valve-spring, which had broken, by wiring carefully with fine wire. Held well. Machine *very* slow. Changed batteries, shortened pedal rod and worked all morning. Helped man get horse's leg out of broken bridge. Passed through Sterling [Colorado] at 3. Dinner. Arrived at Hillrose 8:30 by moonlight. Splendid roads.

Woke up at 3; still bright moonlight. Thinking it was morning we got up and dressed. Started at 4. Passed large picturesque beet factory, all lighted up. Breakfasted at Fort Morgan. Met two autoists going in our direction. They were in a Maxwell in good condition. We told them of our broken valve-spring, which left us but little power, the compression being weak. They had no spring, but offered to go slow and assist us up bad hills and sand. We did not wish to detain them, so refused their kind offer. Made very poor time, over rolling, hilly country. Bought watermelons on road. Passed sheep and cattle herds. After passing town ten miles from Fort Morgan, machine stopped in sand. Wouldn't start. Sun *awful* hot. Valve-spring broken in new place; wired it. Went again, but not good. Got in Orchard 11:30. Best dinner on trip. Owner of hardware substituted spring. Machine barely went with the heavy new spring. Crossed to south side of river. Road rather sandy. Went through ranches to avoid sand, opening and closing five gates. Machine picked up right along. Guess the spring was getting limbered up. Went through *terrible long* stretch of sand O.K. We are told most autoists are hauled here. Passed gangs of ditch builders. Went up hilly, winding road by river. Roads here better. Arrived in Kersey 6:30. Arrived in Denver next forenoon. Roads fine near Denver.

We made the entire trip from Chicago to Denver without having been hauled out of sand, up hills, through water or even mud. The trip took us a little over two weeks. We were not out making time but to improve mamma's health. We had a thoroughly enjoyable trip, and another time would know better how to equip ourselves for a similar outing. □

# UTOPIA AT COMMUNIA

## BY
## H. ROGER GRANT

While Iowa's most important utopian colonists—the sectarian Inspirationists of Amana and the secular French Icarians—are known generally to scholars and the public alike, one small group of mid-19th century communitarians is barely remembered. In 1847, a band of German- and Swiss-American veterans of the Mexican War, several of whom had participated earlier in the ill-fated Christian communist experiment at New Helvetia, Missouri, organized a utopian settlement in the hilly area between the Turkey and Volga rivers in the northeastern part of the Hawkeye State. These visionaries and their families acquired more than a thousand acres in Volga Township in Clayton County, six miles south of Elkader and approximately 50 miles northwest of Dubuque. These people of good hope named their colony Communia City or Munzerstadt, but they soon called it simply "Communia."

During Communia's formative period, residents practiced the agrarian communism of their late mentor, Andreas Dietsch, the founder of New Helvetia. In *Das Tausendjährige Reich (The Millenium)*, published in Switzerland in 1843, Dietsch depicted the ideal society as one based economically on agriculture and spiritually on the "Golden Rule." All property was to be held in common, thus preventing man's greed from destroying the good life.

The over-all complexion of Communia changed drastically in 1850 when Andreas Dietsch's old friend, Wilhelm Weitling (1808-71) became associated with the Iowa utopia. This poor, self-educated native of Magdeburg, Prussia was a tailor by trade. By the 1840s, however, he was a passionate champion of the laboring class. Weitling came to the United States, a refugee of the Revolution of 1848, and organized German-American workers in several Eastern cities into a "Workingmen's League." He also launched the League's official organ, *Die Republik der Arbeiter*. A convert to utopian socialism, Weitling, like so many communitarian thinkers of the antebellum era, dreamed of founding a series of model communities that would initially offer the artisan a haven from the vicissitudes of industrial capitalism and eventually provide a blueprint for the greater society to copy.

In October 1851, Wilhelm Weitling made his first visit to Communia. Immediately the original colonists agreed officially to join his Workingmen's League; the charismatic Weitling had an instant "utopia." Not only did funds and new members come to Communia after the union, but in 1853 the final revised constitution of the "Communia Working Men's League" appeared. No longer a purely communal agricultural experiment, the colony's objective became that of a workers' cooperative: "The association is to carry on every kind of agricultural, industrial, commercial, and other business and to conform and distribute it amongst themselves, according to the proportionate equal interest of all the Members and Shareholders thereof for becoming thereby enabled to promote these interests and to the comfort and well-being of all the Members and Shareholders, to give them benefits in sickness and infirmity and old age." As one historian of Communia correctly observed, "Of the rather

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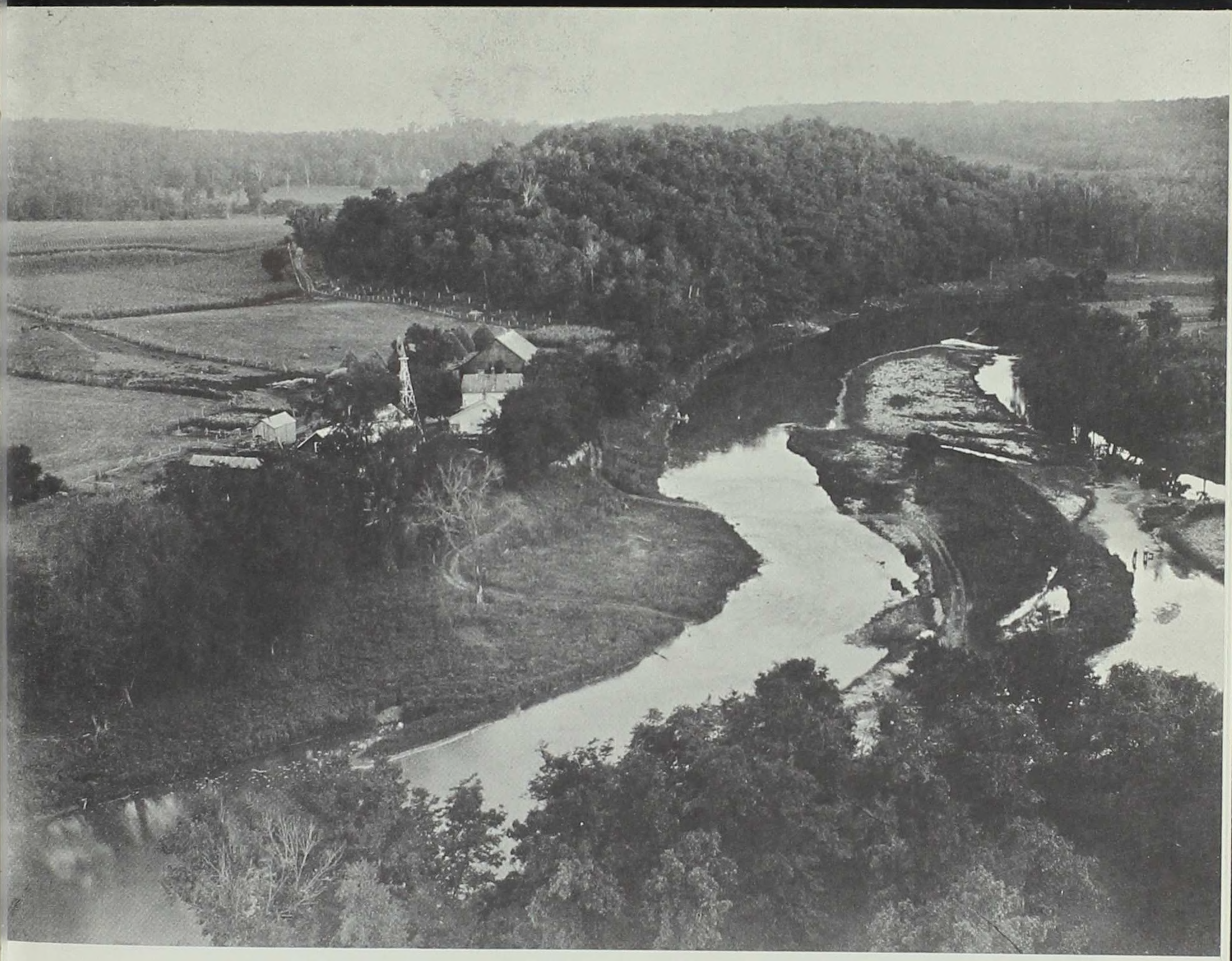


*The Turkey River in 1895 near the colony site*

simple agrarian communism of the Swiss Utopians, not much was left."

By the end of 1853, numerous problems confronted the 61 Communia colonists. Those of particular importance included personality squabbles, especially among female members, urbanites unable (or unwilling) to adapt to pioneer life, inadequate financial resources, unhappiness among some with the new constitution, and Weitling's repeated absences and general lack of administrative skills. In fact, similar factors often led to the demise of utopian experiments elsewhere.

Conditions at Communia failed to improve. In 1854, the experiment began to drift toward final liquidation. Weitling himself became disillusioned, and few sincerely cared to maintain the colony. Following lengthy and expensive litigation, a Clayton County court finally dissolved Communia in 1864.

After the Civil War Communia was officially dead, but most of the former communitarians were not. They continued to live either in the colony buildings or on farmsteads in the immediate vicinity. Moreover, there remained a strong sense of community; collapse of utopia failed to kill this spirit totally. The group affinity is perhaps best seen in the formation of the Turnverein Society, an organization dedicated to the cause of physical culture and conviviality.

No known photographs of Communia during its days as a communal society exist; the art of

photography was then in its infancy. Fortunately, cameras later captured some of the structures and individuals once associated with the colony.

In the 1880s and 1890s August H. Muegge (1848-1911), a St. Louis, Missouri teacher and gymnast and accomplished amateur photographer, recorded the Communia area on film. Muegge's father, George Muegge, Sr., a native of Bavaria, had likely been a colonist, for his name appears in the 1860 manuscript census of Communia.

In 1969, the granddaughter of August Muegge donated a collection of Communia-area scenes to the State Historical Society of Iowa. The most historically significant photographs have been selected, ones that provide the best glimpse of this one-time Iowa utopia. □

### Note on Sources

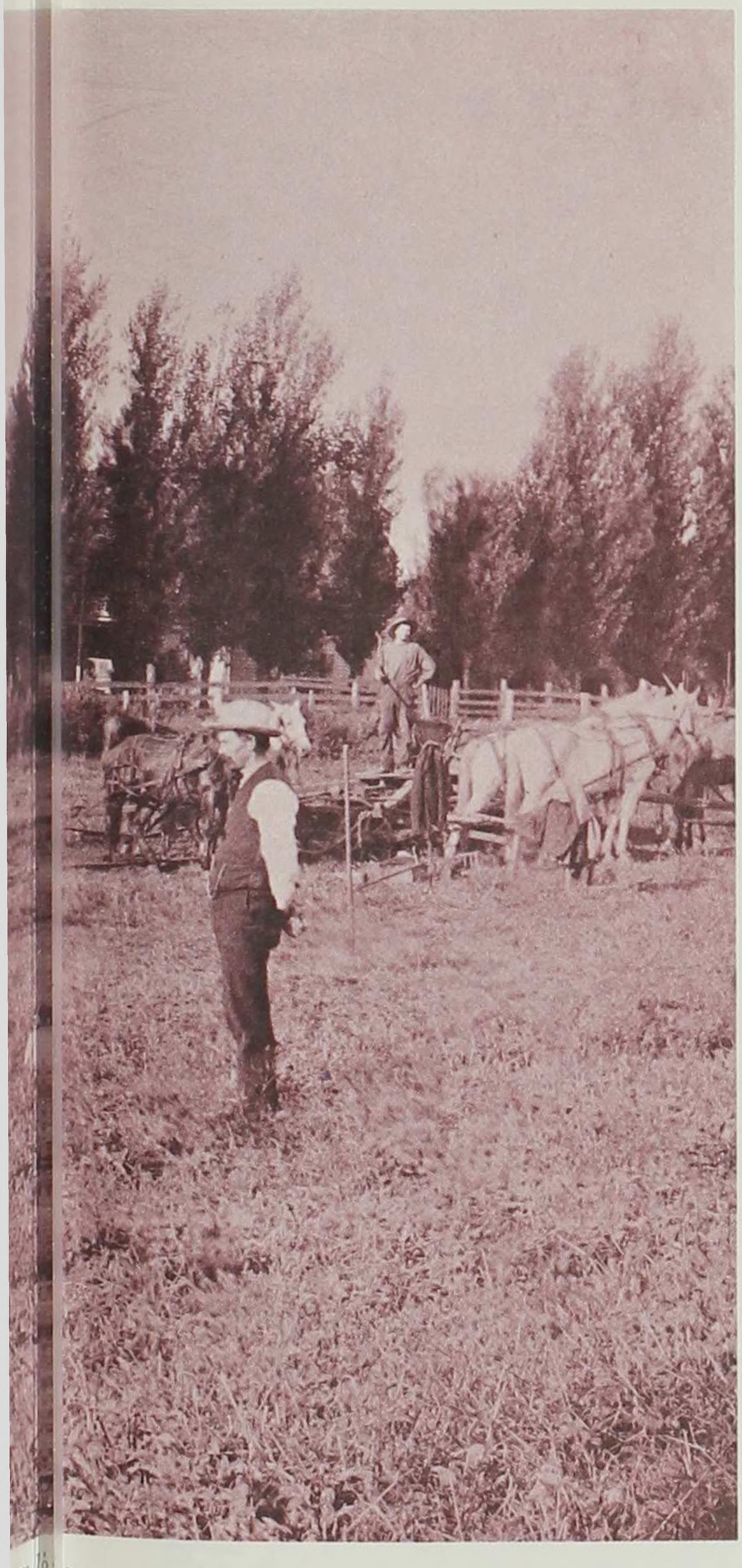
The best sources on the Communia colony are Carl Wittke, *The Utopian Communist: A Biography of Wilhelm Weitling, Nineteenth-Century Reformer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), and George Schultz-Behrend, "Communia, Iowa: A Nineteenth-Century German-American Utopia," *Iowa Journal of History*, 48 (January 1950), 27-54. Also used for this study were the Communia documents in the A.J. Macdonald Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; manuscripts of the United States Censuses of 1860, 1870, and 1880, for Clayton County, Iowa; *Gould's St. Louis Directory, 1880-1910;* and a letter to the State Historical Society of Iowa from Dorothea Seibel, St. Louis, Missouri, May 5, 1969.

*The residence of George Kopp was the principal building at Communia. The house, which dates from about 1850, contained the communal dining hall and kitchen as well as five separate family apartments. Two cellars and an attic provided additional sleeping space for single members and visitors. This photograph, taken in 1889, probably shows the George Kopp family; Mr. Kopp's father was a pioneer colonist.*

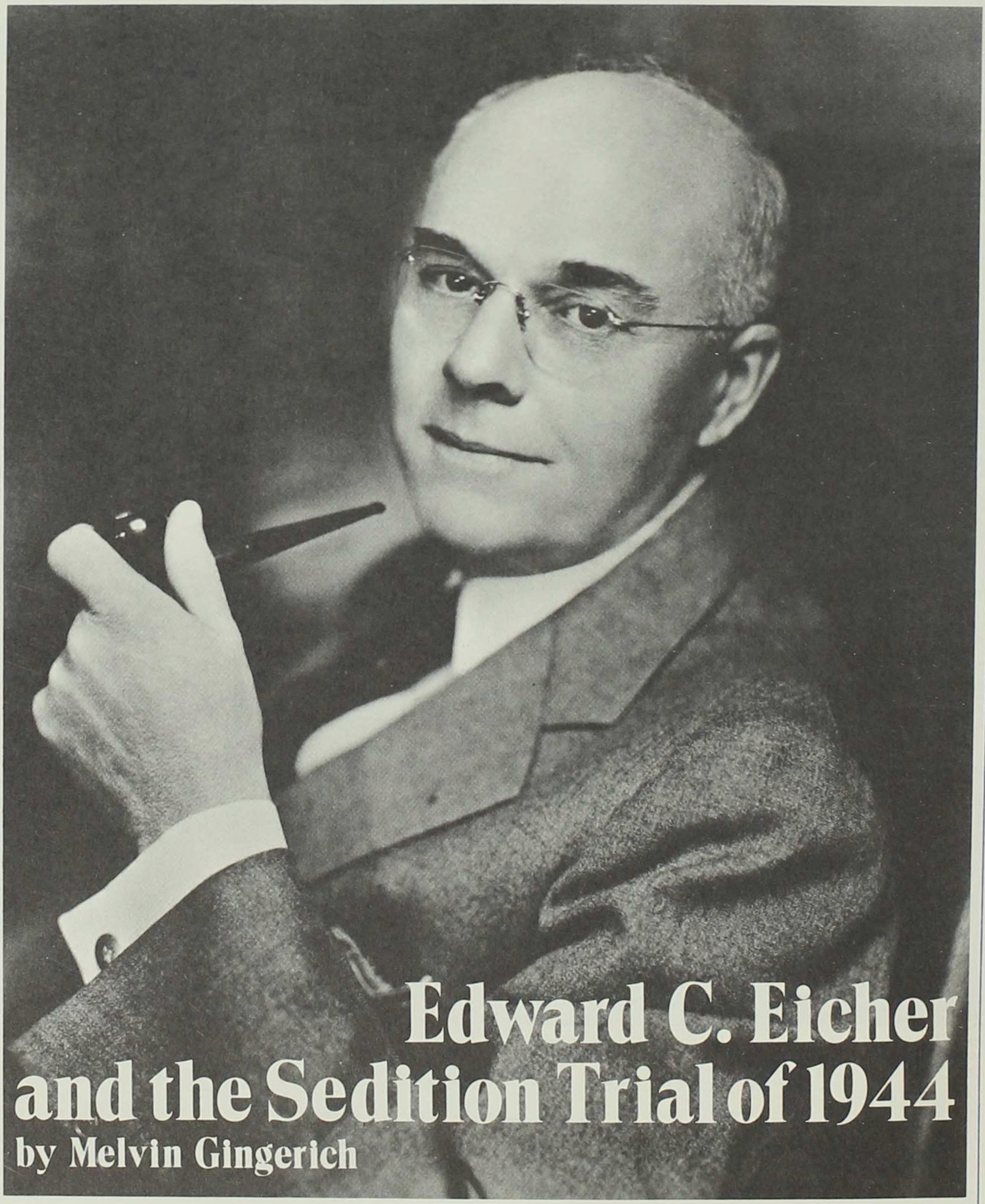
*The older men and women attending this "Fish Picnic" in 1895 were undoubtedly ex-communitarians.*

*A group of "Active Turners" gathers at the former colony hall in 1895.*

*Threshing was an important community activity, during and after the colony days. This scene dates from*




*From A.T. Andreas,* Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa, 1875.



# Edward C. Eicher and the Sedition Trial of 1944

by Melvin Gingerich

*Melvin Gingerich was born near Kalona, Iowa in 1902 and received his doctorate in American Social and Cultural History from the University of Iowa in 1938. For many years before his death in 1975, Mr. Gingerich was Archivist of the Mennonite Church and Managing Editor of both* The Mennonite Encyclopedia *and* The Mennonite Quarterly Review. *His publications include a history of the Mennonites in Iowa and numerous articles on both historical and philosophical topics. His first article for THE PALIMPSEST appeared in 1941.*

*During his active career as scholar and teacher, Mr. Gingerich pursued a special interest in the life of Judge Edward C. Eicher, a family friend from Washington, Iowa. The following synopsis of his full-length biography of Eicher was prepared by the staff of THE PALIMPSEST. Copies of Mr. Gingerich's original manuscript are on file at the State Historical Society in Iowa City and at the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. – Ed.*

It was the largest courtroom available in Washington, D.C.'s Federal District Court Building, and it was jammed. In addition to those seated, more than 200 persons wedged themselves into spaces in the corridors and around the doorways. The subject of their fascination was the largest sedition trial in American history, with 30 defendants and their 22 lawyers. On the bench sat Edward Clayton Eicher, 65, of Washington County, Iowa. He had been a federal judge, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, for just over two years.

Facing him, and attempting to face him down, was an assortment of American fascist sympathizers. Most of these people had risen with the tide of American conservatism that peaked just before Pearl Harbor. They had spent the war years, according to the Justice Department indictment, conspiring "to interfere with, and influence the loyalty, morale, and discipline of the military and naval forces of the United States" by circulating literature and personally urging insubordination, disloyalty, and mutiny. They were rabidly anti-Communist and anti-Semitic. Gerald Winrod, a fundamentalist evangelist, believed that international communism was under the control of "the international Jew," and that President Roosevelt was himself Jewish. Lawrence Dennis had written *The Coming of American Fascism;* another book, *The Red Network,* had been written by defendant Elizabeth Dilling of Chicago. Prosecutor O. John Rogge, Special Assistant to the Attorney General, hoped to prove that the defendants formed a conspiratorial network, whose activities depended upon the exchange of mailing lists and published materials, especially anti-Semitic materials, that had recently come into wide circulation around the country.

By April 17, 1944, the date of the trial, the federal government had devoted at least six years to the case, beginning in 1938 with the infiltration of the German-American Bund by John Carlson, posing as a Columbia University student. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, two men were arrested in Los Angeles for defending Japan's right to Hawaii and declaring that they would rather have America fight on the side of the Axis powers. Attorney General Nicholas Biddle, fearing a repeat of the witch hunts that followed World War I, ordered the men released, but shortly thereafter 28 persons were arrested, a grand jury was convened, and the first indictment was filed on July 24, 1942. Sufficient evidence could not be gathered before the jury's time ran out, but another indictment was filed the following January. When preliminary court proceedings were then held, the judge declared that the government once again had not produced sufficient evidence. A third indictment was served on January 4, 1944.

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Public opinion was greatly divided over the issue of these American fascists. Few actually supported such groups as the Silver Shirts, the Bund, and the Knights of the White Camelia, but the Depression, the New Deal, the war, and the international conflicts between communism and fascism had agitated and polarized the American people. Many Americans looked to Judge Eicher's courtroom for a judicial answer to what was in fact a serious social and political question.

Edward Clayton Eicher, born December 16, 1878, came of Mennonite stock, and of a family that for generations had been rural folk. Eicher Anabaptists were among those families of Canton Bern, in Switzerland, who escaped to Alsace and to the Palatinate in the years between 1671 and 1711. Although various Eichers came with the European Mennonites who settled in America as early as 1754, direct ancestors of Edward Eicher did not arrive until 1848 and 1849. Each came alone and unmarried. Benjamin C. Eicher, Edward's father, was the last to come over. Like most immigrants, he lived in a number of places, including Ohio, before finding the spot where he wanted to settle down. It was not until 1853, at the age of 21, that Benjamin settled in Marion Township in Washington County, Iowa. In 1854, he bought 40 acres of unimproved land in Section 26. Not long afterwards, he married Lydia Sommer, of Holmes County, Ohio, and soon their first son, Henry, was born.

By the time Edward was born, 22 years later, Benjamin Eicher was a prosperous farmer, whose 150 acres and herd of dairy cattle produced, among much else, around 100,000 pounds of butter a year. A public-minded man who taught in Washington County Schools, Eicher ran several times on the Democratic ticket for the Iowa state legislature. He became both a minister and an elder of his church in Marion Township, and during the years of his ministry, the Amish-Mennonite congregation grew from 50 souls to 120. Eicher's church was located only a mile from the Henry County border, and his farm less than a mile from the church.

Little Edward grew up among friends and relatives from the same Swiss and Alsatian ethnic, cultural, and religious background as his own. The Conrads, Roths, Klopfensteins, Grabers, and Wengers spoke German among themselves and in church. From the age of seven until 14, he attended a rural grade school, and in later life he strongly defended the quality of the education he had received. At 14, he went on to the Washington Academy in Iowa, then at 19 to the Morgan Park Academy in Illinois. His widening circle eventually brought him to the University of Chicago, where he felt both his intellect and his ambition greatly stimulated. In a short story he penned while there—he retained a lifelong interest in amateur literary efforts—the main character, Eli, feels he must choose between the rustic life and the woman he loves, on the one hand, and the "higher and better things," on the other. Eicher writes, "Eli was dissatisfied with what he looked upon as a humdrum existence, a life of unvaried monotony, without promise of achievement in the future or pride in the glories of the past." Later, Eicher suggests that Eli's childhood sweetheart Matilda is not sophisticated enough to be the companion Eli will need as he attempts to attain "the heights of distinction and glory." Perhaps Edward Eicher felt similarly as he surveyed his choices. Oddly, through an accident, Eli and Matilda end up reunited. Eli agrees to take over the farm belonging to Matilda's family, giving up at the same time—and not without palpable regret—his yearnings.

During his college career, Eicher wrote over 60 essays or short stories. Several express his utopian dreams of a perfect society, and many touch on ethics and character traits, such as ego, avarice, habit, and humility. Titles such as "Daniel Webster" and "The Boer War" illus-

trate his interest in history. The Nebraska proposition to amend the constitution, and the political thinking of British economist John Atkinson Hobson captured his attention. Eicher's essays explored the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Tennyson, and other authors. His professors often praised his work. One paper carries the note: "Individual and breezy. You *will not* be dull—a good resolve."

While still studying for his Ph.B. at Chicago, Eicher took law courses, and after completing them, in the summer of 1905, he returned to Washington and spent a year as a student in the law office of his older brother, Henry. He was admitted to the Iowa Bar in 1906. On August 19, 1908, aged 29, he married Hazel Mount, of Washington, Iowa, whom he had met while singing in the University of Chicago Glee Club. Miss Mount had asked Eicher to autograph her program, and he thereupon invited her to call him when she came to Chicago for a few weeks of music lessons so that he could arrange to take her to the theater. Over a half-century later, Mrs. Eicher remembered, "He was very kind and very humble. He was also a very talented man but he did not know it."

The young couple originally decided to settle in Mount Pleasant, where Henry advised his brother to open a law office, but at the last moment an offer came from the Burlington Railroad, and Eicher agreed to become the assistant attorney of the Iowa District of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad Company. The Eichers lived in Burlington from 1908 until 1918, when they moved back to Washington and Edward joined his brother's law firm as a junior partner. Less than a year later, on July 28, 1919, Henry died. The law firm was subsequently known as Livingston and Eicher, until 1933 when Eicher was elected to the United States House of Representatives from the First District of Iowa.

In Congress, Eicher introduced a number of bills, one to fund scientific research, one to amend anti-trust laws, one to allow the construction of a bridge across the Des Moines River at Keosauqua, and one to allow the federal government to promote interstate transportation by underwriting truck insurance. He became not only President Franklin D. Roosevelt's supporter but his friend as well, and could be depended upon to help executive plans through the House. Over the years his identification with Roosevelt grew, and no wonder. When named by Roosevelt to head the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in 1941, Eicher was reported to have promised, "I'll do what I'm told." *Business Week* termed him a "a full-fledged New Dealer . . . a rubber stamp on all Administration policies."

Eicher had sought and gained a seat on the SEC three years earlier, when he wisely anticipated the Republican backlash against the New Deal policies that hit the nation in 1938. The First District Democrat knew he could be guaranteed nothing in the Republican Hawkeye State, no matter how good his relationship with President Roosevelt. The SEC provided refuge from such political uncertainties and the former Congressman served it well. Roosevelt rewarded his diligence again in 1942, this time with a promotion to a federal judgeship. For Edward Eicher, it was a dream come true.

Eicher's reaction to the appointment was typically candid. In his first memo to Roosevelt after donning the "black nightshirt," he admitted that "these judicial robes do make an Andy Jackson 'Dimmycrat' feel sort of silly, at first. But very likely they help some in maintaining essential respect — by the Public for the courts and by the Judges for themselves. You will not begrudge, I am sure, just a minute of reading time to be assured of my satisfaction in this new work and of my earnest endeavor to make the District Bench click harmoniously and efficiently."

Judge Eicher had scheduled the sedition trial to begin in January 1944, but motions

by defense attorneys delayed jury selection for more than a month. A succession of lawyers attacked the indictment in a variety of ways. Some claimed that the defendants had been arrested for engaging in activities that were not illegal at the time of their arrest in 1942. Other attorneys argued that the indictment failed to specify the time and place of each of the alleged conspiracies. Judge Eicher listened to the defense motions carefully and with a great deal of patience. A five-page memorandum from the bench on February 28 answered the attacks on the indictment. On March 7, prosecutor O. John Rogge submitted a bill of particulars that included dates, places, and events.

Still the delays continued. Defendant Joseph McWilliams filed for a change of venue, charging that Judge Eicher was "socialistic, communistic, and New Dealish." A barrage of similar requests and motions ensued, but a preliminary meeting in Eicher's chambers on Friday, April 14 cleared away further impediments, and arrangements for the trial were made.

On Monday, April 17, 22 defendants pleaded not guilty. Seven others refused to plead either way, and one failed to appear. Eicher ordered the pleas of the seven entered as not guilty and revoked the $1,000 bond of the absent party. On the following day, defendant Gerald Winrod filed a challenge against all 142 prospective jurors, which was signed by all of the defense lawyers. Eventually, 12 persons were seated in the jury box, but then James Laughlin, attorney for Bund leader Edward James Smythe, stopped the proceedings with a motion signed by 16 defense lawyers, demanding that Judge Eicher disqualify himself. In Laughlin's words, "the records in this case clearly show that the conduct of Chief Justice Eicher has specifically shown bias and prejudice against the defense and in favor of the prosecution." This and subsequent attacks accusing Eicher and President Roosevelt of bias and "conspiracy" to railroad the defendants resulted in a contempt trial for attorney Laughlin. On May 10 Laughlin was found guilty and fined $150. The sedition trial resumed.

On May 17, 1944, a month after the trial had begun, prosecutor Rogge (whose name the defendants insisted on pronouncing "rogue") was permitted to present the government's case to the jury. "Defendants leaped up and down; defense lawyers jumped to their feet in loud protest," reads one account of the incident. "Judge Eicher was forced to call in United States marshals guarding the hallway to restore order." The defense agreed to interrupt no further, but as soon as Rogge began again, disorder broke out, and Rogge had to shout his speech to its conclusion.

The following day, the defense combined the attacks on Rogge's case with personal charges against him. Each defendant was allowed 30 minutes for an opening statement, but when the lawyer for defendant Eugene Nelson Sanctuary went overtime and Eicher asked him to be silent, the lawyer objected. In the ensuing exchange, the lawyer was fined $50, and as he continued his objection, the fine was raised twice to a total of $200.

On May 23, Eicher received a note from Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and Roosevelt's intimate adviser. It read, "My dear Ed, Of course I would not comment upon the merits of a case that is on trial in any court, but I hope that I am not exceeding the proprieties as a member of the bar in commending your vigorous action in putting in their place men who are apparently determined to make a farce of American justice." Eicher wrote back, "My 'head may be bloodied, but it's still unbowed.' "

After eight weeks, the U.S. case seemed weak. Although plenty of evidence had been presented that showed the belief of the defendants in a Hitlerite regime, American propagandists had in no way been linked to foreign fascists, or even to one another. Rogge could

prove only similarity of thought, and the lawyers for the defense were eager to show that their clients had acted out of their personal beliefs as guaranteed by the Constitution.

On June 13, in the midst of the trial, the United States Supreme Court reversed the conviction of another American fascist charged with fomenting insubordination in the armed forces. Judge Eicher agreed to listen to new defense arguments that contended the cases were similar. Prosecutor Rogge, however, offered additional evidence intended to show that at least three defendants had conspired to take over the government of the United States. This evidence made it impossible to drop the charges, Eicher declared. "When the court will know what the whole picture is, then it will know for the first time whether the government has made out a case." He instructed the prosecution to continue, but defense attorneys interrupted Rogge with another series of outbursts and objections. When Eicher gaveled for order, lawyer Laughlin shouted, "I also want an objection to Your Honor's gavel." He was fined $200.

The attorneys who had been fined by the judge for contempt, now numbering seven, formed an Eicher Contempt Club, and began wearing white ribbons under their neckties or coat lapels. The ribbons carried one or more stars, depending on the number of times each had been fined by the court. Eicher commented, "The court is not disposed to make an issue of the matter, which after all is in substance inconsequential," and so ignored the club.

Nearly a month had passed since his last citation for contempt when, on July 5, defense attorney James Laughlin filed with the House of Representatives an impeachment petition against the judge. The next morning, Laughlin addressed the court to explain his action. At the end of the lawyer's statement, Eicher asked Laughlin if he had said all that he wanted to say. The lawyer nodded. Eicher thereupon dismissed him from the case and ordered him out of the courtroom. Laughlin filed a protest with the Circuit Court of Appeals, but was refused a hearing. Returning to the Eicher courtroom the following day, he was again denied entry. His client Robert Noble then created such commotion in protest against the court's attempt to appoint a new lawyer to his case that he, too, was removed. Eicher had Noble severed from the case and returned him to a California prison to complete a five-year sentence for sedition. Noble's last-minute efforts to convince the judge that he had merely tried to protect his constitutional rights drew from Eicher the calm observation that "your whole effort has been to flaunt the reasonable and orderly process of this court."

Near the end of July, after 14 weeks of chaos interspersed with the prosecutor's presentation of documents purporting to show fascist tendencies among the accused, the trial shifted to Rogge's attempt to describe how some of the defendants had conspired to undermine the morale of the American armed forces. As the summer wore on, a semblance of order came to the proceedings in the Eicher court, at least in part the result of the fines—amounting to $1,350—levied by the judge against seven defense attorneys for contempt of court. Laughlin's dismissal seemed to have had some effect in this regard. The defendants themselves had settled down, too, though laughter and shouts were still frequent in the court.

But there were troublesome stirrings outside the courtroom. September brought notice of the trial to the floor of the United States Senate, where Republican Senator William Langer declared that "the government by nature of its fantastic prosecution theory has made the cause of these defendants the cause of free speech and political freedom." Democrat Burton Wheeler of Montana called it "the most disgraceful proceedings that have ever been

brought in the United States of America." On October 5, even Franklin D. Roosevelt was brought into the fray, attacking the defendants' arguments that "the Roosevelt Administration is part of a gigantic plot to sell our government to the Communists." Over a nationwide radio hook-up, he declared that the "sound and democratic instincts of the American people" protest the use of propaganda against the government. The defendants reacted to these statements immediately, presenting Judge Eicher with two motions for a mistrial and one for a postponement. The trial proceeded in spite of these new defense tactics.

At the end of November, the court's attention focused on the case of evangelist Gerald Winrod. Winrod's lawyer cross-examined government witness Henry D. Allen, once a friend of Winrod, in order to show that Winrod and Allen had only discussed religious matters at their meetings. Prosecutor Rogge counteracted with contradictory testimony from Allen himself, who had earlier described the same meetings as "purely anti-communist and anti-Jewish talk." Several days later the prosecution called Nicholas J. Roccoforte, who had been head of Winrod's Defender's Tract Club and also Winrod's assistant in the evangelist's bid for Republican nomination to the United States Senate from Kansas in 1938. Roccoforte testified that on hearing of an attempted assassination of Roosevelt in Miami, Winrod had declared, "It's too bad that somebody else couldn't come along and complete the job." The witness could not recall any of Winrod's exact statements about the United States government or about totalitarian governments. After a brief cross-examination, Eicher thanked Roccoforte and adjourned the trial until 1 PM the following afternoon.

During the day's proceedings, a few in the courtroom noticed that Judge Eicher was not feeling well. Occasionally he turned his back to the court and sometimes gasped for breath. To his law clerk, Mrs. L.M. Hood, he mentioned indigestion, and a remedy was provided. He did not adjourn the court until the usual time, however, in spite of Mrs. Hood's pleas that he call a recess and take a rest. "He would not do it," she remembered. "And he presided until 6 PM as usual. The trial had been an awful strain." Eicher left the courthouse around 6:30 PM and joined his wife for the journey to their home in nearby Alexandria, Virginia. Eicher was tired; after supper and the evening news, he retired for the night. Mrs. Eicher was awakened at 2 AM by wind and blowing curtains and so quietly closed the window. She did not learn of her husband's death until she awoke at about six that morning.

The announcement of Eicher's death stunned the entire courtroom. Defendant Edward James Smythe, one of the most vocal of the original 30 defendants, jumped to his feet at once. "Your Honor," he inquired of Associate Justice James M. Proctor, now presiding, "may I ask that this court stand in silence for one minute in respect of Judge Eicher?"

"I thank you for this suggestion," Proctor replied, "but I do not think that this is the occasion for any formal ceremonies." As the defendants, their lawyers, and the spectators filed out of the courtroom, Symthe turned to one reporter and remarked, "It's a hell of a thing. The poor old ——."

The funeral of Justice Edward Clayton Eicher was held at 10 AM, Saturday, December 2, 1944, at the St. John Episcopal Church. Among the honorary pallbearers were Supreme Court Justices William O. Douglas and Wiley Rutledge, Chief Justice D. Lawrence Grover of the United States Court of Appeals, four Appellate Court associate justices, Acting Chief Justice Jennings Bailey of the District Court, and the nine District Court associate justices. The Washington *Star* of December 3 reported that most of those in daily contact with Justice Eicher during the seven and one-half months he presided at the sedition trial came to

the funeral and "sat before his bier . . . in bowed respect to his memory with many faces familiar to the trial looking from crowded pews toward the flower banked altar. It was as if the courtroom had been reconstructed amid the hushed dignity of a church at its most solemn rite." In the church were a number of defendants, the jurors, the prosecutors, and nearly all of the defense attorneys. Forgotten for the moment were the bitter clashes between the prosecutors and the defendants as they felt regret at his passing and "respect for the honor and dignity of a conscientious man." The casket was borne out of the church by the marshals who had been in daily attendance at the trial. Curate John G. Magee's text from Paul's letter to Timothy was, "I have fought the good fight . . . and now my work is done." The body was then taken to Washington, Iowa for burial on the following Tuesday.

Richard Wilson of *The Des Moines Register* wrote that Judge Eicher "had distinguished himself by his studied fairness and his ability to restrain his temper in extremely trying circumstances. If anything, it is agreed, Eicher has leaned over backwards in his determination that the defendants shall receive the full measure of the legal right that they be considered innocent until proven guilty." Most reporters who covered the trial agreed with Wilson. And Senator Langer of North Dakota, a critic of the trial, declared that "Solomon himself could scarcely have survived such an ordeal." Transcripts of testimony and other business of the court had run to nearly 18,000 pages, including the 500 defense motions for mistrial. Material prepared for the trial by the Justice Department filled 16 cubic feet. Perhaps the most cogent tribute to the judge came from defendant Smythe: "I consider Justice Eicher a great American. He was doing his duty, and in my many conversations with him, when I held conferences with him in his chambers at his suggestion, he felt deeply grieved at times that some of the defendants' attorneys believed that he considered this a personal matter instead of a matter of public interest in which he was trying to do his duty and administer justice in a very trying case."

When the court reconvened on December 7, Judge Proctor asked whether the trial should proceed under a new judge, or whether a new mass trial should start at the beginning, or, finally, whether the cases should be presented individually to new juries. The defense attorneys quickly objected to the trial's continuation under a new judge. After a brief deliberation, Judge Proctor announced, "In view of the death of Chief Justice Eicher in the midst of the trial of this case, and the circumstances which have developed here this morning, the court feels compelled to discontinue the trial and to formally declare a mistrial of the case. An order to that effect will be made." Thanking the jurors and the attorneys, Proctor then adjourned the court.

The Justice Department's charges that led to the sedition trial were still in effect, of course, although defense lawyers moved quickly to strike the indictment and bring the case to an end. Two years of legal wrangling ensued, until in November 1946 Chief Justice Bolitha Laws, Edward Eicher's successor on the federal bench, threw the prosecutor's case out of court. A Federal Court of Appeals upheld Laws' decision and dismissed all charges against the defendants on June 30, 1947. After six fruitless years, the sedition trial had finally come to an end. □

### Note on Sources

Mr. Gingerich's biography of Edward C. Eicher draws from a variety of sources. Of special importance were the Edward C. Eicher Papers at the Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Library in Iowa City; transcripts and other documents pertaining to the sedition trial of 1944 housed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.; and an unpublished essay by John D. Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the Washington, D.C. Mass Sedition Trial of 1944," written in 1968 while Mr. Waltner was a member of the History Department at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. A variety of newspapers and magazines published during the period of the trial supplied additional information.

# *Pilgrims of the Impossible*

*by Lorelei F. Eckey*

It was 1929, the last summer of prosperity the country was to enjoy for almost a decade. A hundred talented, excited young people had converged on Fairfield, Iowa for two days of meetings, instruction, and conferences at the headquarters of the Universal Producing Company. They were in the business of organizing amateur theatricals for civic and church groups throughout the United States and Canada. About 80 of the hundred were young women, the company's top "coaches" or play directors, who traveled on assignment across the nation. A banquet scheduled for that evening was to be the culmination of the events at Fairfield.

But all had not gone well earlier in the day. The owners of the company—the four Stewart brothers—were exhausted by the seemingly endless round of meetings and conferences. Worse, a number of the civic groups that had hired the company's services suddenly backed out, canceling their shows, and to top things off, a delegation of coaches had beleaguered the bosses with a host of complaints. The bosses were not in a good mood. So it was no wonder that Wilson Stewart told Franceswayne Allen that she could not present a skit she had written especially for the evening's performance.

Fran was one of the company's veteran coaches, having answered a want ad she found

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in the *Kansas City Star* back in 1928. Her skit was certainly harmless enough, and Fran was not among the "dissident" coaches. But in the unpleasant atmosphere of the previous two days, Wilson Stewart felt that anything might offend anyone. One faction would take the skit as a disrespectful dig at the management, while the other would see it as so much propaganda. It was safer all-round to cancel it. But because Wilson did not get word to his brother Raymond, who acted as master of ceremonies for the evening, Fran's skit was announced after speeches by the local postmistress and by Fairfield's mayor—both of whom praised the company's services to the community. Wilson had to let her go ahead.

Following a "dumb little step" (burlesquing the opening chorus routine all the coaches were only too familiar with), a crashing piano chord, and a little curtsy, Fran with a dozen of her colleagues "swung into 'Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam,' played with a nautical swing." Fran and the other coaches were tense.

So were their four bosses.

They must have recognized the old Sunday school tune. The Stewart brothers were the sons of a Methodist minister who had raised a large family in Fairfield. There was little money, and all of the children had had to work. Raymond ("R.R."), Wilson, Merle, and Weston ("Pete") had started their company with no capital other than uncommon business sense, ability, and imagination. Raymond, the oldest, had been yearbook editor, letterman, champion debater, and valedictorian at Fairfield High School. He worked his way through almost four years at Grinnell by selling candy and a candy cookbook he had written. Fran characterized Raymond as a "deep thinker with a razor-edged brain," a methodical young man with an uncanny knack for organization.

His younger brother Wilson also had been a lettered athlete as well as valedictorian in high school, but he had more "dynamite" than Raymond, Fran recalled. He was "the original human dynamo, a composite jumping jack, diplomat, slave-driver, matinee idol, top sergeant." And although the four brothers were equal partners in the business, making few decisions about anything, official or personal, without consulting one another, the younger two, Merle and Weston, inherited their father's gentleness and patience and held Raymond and Wilson in "almost unbelievable awe."

They started the Universal Producing Company in Cedar Rapids around 1926, but they soon returned home to Fairfield, the small town that was to be their headquarters for more than 20 years. The company prospered through the worst years of the Depression, continuing to send out troops of young women, eventually expanding into the production of simulated radio amateur hours and motion picture exhibitions.



*Three Universal coaches (courtesy of the author)*

Fran and her chorus line of 12 swayed "like a bunch of Bali Bali girls" to the tune of "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam." "I took myself out to Fairfield," Fran sang to the assembly, "Way out in Iowaaaay"

Spent all my papa's money
Learning how to coach a play;
For there are four Stewarts in Iowa
Out where the tall corn grows,
They are making a million bucks yearly
Because I stage their shows.

They are looking for Pilgrims
Of the Impossible it seems . . .

Two days of pent-up tension dissolved into laughter and applause. The audience, bosses and coaches, had been won over.

Perhaps they just needed reminding: they had all been trained to be what the Stewarts called "Pilgrims of the Impossible." Each of the young women had learned how to go into a strange town and, in the space of two weeks, put on a money-making show using anywhere from 100 to 500 and more very amateur actors, singers, dancers—whatever the community could supply. Universal's coaches not only directed the local performance but also organized the massive publicity and ticket-selling campaigns necessary for a profitable show. Then it was straight to another town to do the same thing all over again. At the height of the company's prosperity in the early '30s there were over 200 coaches on the road at any given time. Between 1927 and 1935 there were probably a

*The Conference of Universal Coaches, August 1929 at the studios in Fairfield, Iowa (courtesy of the author)*

## Note on Sources

Interviews and correspondence with former coaches and others who remember the home talent shows yielded an abundance of source material for this article. For over three years the author has collaborated on a book with Mr. and Mrs. William Schoyer of Pittsburgh, Pa. The book's central character is Mrs. Schoyer's sister, Franceswayne Allen, who was working on her own reminiscence of her life in the home talent industry when she died in 1965. The Schoyer Collection includes Franceswayne's manuscript, diaries, letters, and other material. Also helpful were interviews and correspondence with Wretha Seaton Gann, Mrs. Richard Miller, Georgia Seabury Gould, Billie Cook Roth, Pauline Fossler Wilkinson, Ethel Jean Gardner Powell, Marie Bonally Jewett, Ila Claussen Rix, Merle Stewart, Mrs. Weston Stewart, Mr. and Mrs. Orville Prill, Ethel Garretson, Bill Munsey II, and members of the Fairfield High School Class of 1922 at their 55th reunion in 1977.

Universal Producing Company published several coaching, booking, and staging manuals, and these — along with newspaper clippings and bulletins — were available through the Stewart Collection. Other sources used include the *Fairfield Ledger;* the *Burlington Hawk-Eye;* William Corbin's "Everybody Wants to be an Actor," in *American Magazine*, November, 1934; "Corporal Eagan," a Universal script from the Museum of Americana Repertoire Theater, Midwest Old Threshers and Settlers Association, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa; and material from the Rogers Company, Fostoria, Ohio.

thousand Universal coaches, some who worked with the company only a short time and others who stayed for years. Many distinguished themselves later in a variety of fields. As Wilson Stewart once told a girl he was interviewing, "If you can do this, you can do anything," and he was probably right.

The "Pilgrims" faced problems that must have seemed impossible indeed, not the least of which was the Great Depression itself. The experience of one coach, Emily Stuart Neville, indicates that Universal's young women brought more than just theatrical skills to their work. The first thing a coach was supposed to do when she got into a town was to contact the president of the sponsoring organization in order to arrange an immediate committee meeting. But when Emily telephoned Mrs. Smith, the president of the Ladies Aid Society, "someone answered the phone and said she was down at the church and I couldn't see her, goodbye." This didn't stop Emily, who called on her at the church.

"What in the world are you doing here?" Mrs. Smith demanded when Emily introduced herself. "We canceled the show way last week. It's impossible to have it."

Impossible? Emily's legs went weak. Later, in her report to the Stewarts, she wrote that she had felt her heart sinking right through her shoes.

But she was able to think fast. And talk fast. The Ladies Aid was having its weekly lunch, and Emily saw the ladies, the local preacher,

his wife, and a visiting preacher's wife eating and talking. Emily asked if there were any plates left, telling Mrs. Smith that she hadn't eaten lunch yet.

She ate and talked, praising the food, the people, the church, the town, and the hills. Then she brought the conversation back to the show. Why not put it on for charity?

"Will you tell me just how much your company gives for charity?" the visiting preacher's wife piped in. The firemen had put on a Universal show in her town and they hadn't seen fit to give her husband's church any of the proceeds. Besides, she thought the show was silly.

Emily wanted to murder the woman. She explained that the Stewarts were splendid Christian gentlemen who gave generously to all kinds of charities—a statement Emily supposed was true enough.

But the ladies weren't convinced. So when Emily finished her lunch, she walked with them into the kitchen to wash dishes. She washed, talked, cussed, and prayed with the ladies until five o'clock, by which time she had sold them on the show. And during the two weeks the show was in production, Mrs. Smith treated Emily like one of the family.

A sponsor's backing out was not the only problem a coach faced. The young women had to fight blizzards, blocked roads, and below-zero temperatures. Sometimes they courted arrest for pasting their advertising stickers on parked cars and slapping posters up against every available wall. Once when the police told Billie Cook that she had to remove the stickers she had placed on local autos, she capitalized on the penalty by announcing in the newspaper that all motorists who wanted their windshields scraped clean should show up at a certain gas station. There Billie's chorus girls, in full cos-


*Universal Producing Company relied on townspeople for actors as well as audience. (courtesy of the author)*

*Prominent businessmen as hillbillies in one of the Stewart brothers' plays (courtesy of the author)*

tume, did the job and dispensed more publicity for the show. When on another occasion a coach from a competing production company told Universal's Isabel Jane Fry that putting up posters on lampposts was illegal and that she would be arrested, Isabel rebuffed him with the boast that "Universal coaches were the original 'Pilgrims of the Impossible,' " and up went the posters. When coaches were actually arrested, they knew how to talk their way out of jail. A few even managed to get local police chiefs to join their shows.

The Universal Producing Company was by no means the first organization of its kind. Such companies had been around at least as early as 1903 when John Rogers started his operation at Fostoria, Ohio. But the Stewarts pioneered a number of important innovations, introducing to the industry an unusual attention to detail, original scripts by their own writers, authentic costumes from their own shops, and, of course, a highly professional staff of coaches. The Stewarts planned every aspect of costuming, scenery, lighting, and office and warehouse procedure, and provided thick manuals of instruction to guide their coaches in the field. A "Daily Procedure," dozens of pages long, was to be memorized by all who worked for Universal.

Most of the company's coaches were college graduates and of impeccable moral character, which the Stewarts sought to maintain by imposing a stiff code of behavior. The young ladies were strictly cautioned against "playing around"—a term that covered everything from tippling and unauthorized vacations to dating during production. In fact, the "Daily Procedure" left little time for playing around of any kind.

Universal's whole training regimen was rigorous. When Fran answered that want ad in the *Kansas City Star* she found herself one among 30 applicants who had been accepted. After a half-dozen days of training, six had dropped by the wayside, and five more were asked to leave—probably because of their ob-

jectionable "late dating" habits. Of the 14 girls who weathered the three weeks of training, all but one were sent out on shows.

Georgia Langkop, Class of July 1930, remembers how Wilson taught them a sailor dance in a room above a bakery where the thermometer often hit 115. "Langkop," Wilson would shout, "learn to kick!" Georgia wrote later: "I've learned to kick and I've learned a lot of other things." She had been taught salesmanship and publicity, business management, dancing, singing, and makeup, as well as the current script, the whole of which had to be committed to memory. And all of this in the space of two or three weeks. They worked every day, night and day, except for Sunday morning. "Because," as Fran sang to the Fairfield banquet in 1929,

. . . it takes a fast walkin', talkin' gal
To put a show across in any town,
It takes a sticker-licken', flapper picking gal
They can't turn down.
Now, she's not tough, and she's not proud.
But she ropes in a great big crowd.
It takes a smart baby, I don't mean maybe,
To put a show across in any town. You heard me.
I said in any town.

The Universal Producing Company continued to stage plays through the late 1930s. Its owners put on a number of comedies with music and dancing and "flapper choruses" of prominent businessmen dressed up as vamps and movie stars. They did a biblical pageant. They designed shows and promotions using broadcasting techniques. They filmed and merchandised a passion film. And then suddenly in 1940 the Stewart brothers left the entertainment business. The sewing machines in the company's costume shop were retooled for the production of oilcloth liners for laundry baskets and Universal entered the closet accessory trade.

In the depths of the Great Depression, however, Universal had been synonymous with amateur theatricals. The Stewarts' company had flourished in hard times because its employees refused to admit the odds against success. Like coach Martha L. Haas, the thousand young women who directed Universal's plays had learned "that the word 'can't' doesn't mean a thing." They had become Pilgrims of the Impossible. □

## CONTRIBUTORS

H. ROGER GRANT, a native of Albia, Iowa, did his undergraduate work at Simpson College, Indianola, and earned his graduate degrees at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His most recent book, *Insurance Reform: Consumer Action in the Progressive Era*, was published by the Iowa State University Press in September. Grant is Associate Professor of History at the University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.

LORELEI F. ECKEY has her Ph. D. in theater from the University of Iowa. She has taught theater, speech, and English composition in various Iowa colleges, and today lives with her husband on a farm in Mt. Union, Iowa. There he raises corn, soybeans, cattle, and goats, and she raises sheep and chickens.

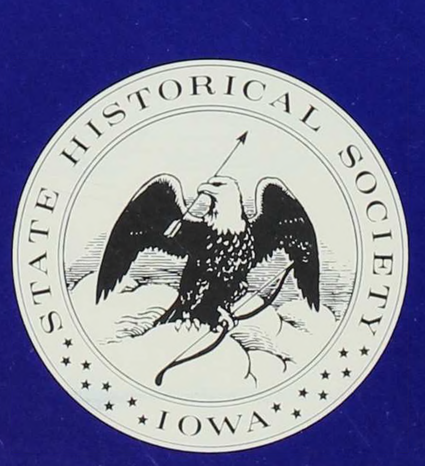
## ERRATA

An unfortunate editorial error resulted in a serious distortion of the facts concerning certain legal actions involving Charles C. Townsend in the article "The Orphan's Friend: Charles Collins Townsend and the Orphans' Home of Industry," published in the November-December 1979 issue of THE PALIMPSEST. The first full paragraph of page 194 confuses two court cases and reports incorrectly a verdict against Mr. Townsend. As author Marcelia C. Fisher notes,

The essential facts are presented accurately in the preceeding paragraph. The first is that ". . . in October of 1865 a suit was filed against Townsend by the father of one of the children, accusing him of 'enticing a child under 12 years of age.' " The second is that ". . . Johnson County district court records for May 19, 1866 show that the indictment against Townsend was dismissed, the defendant discharged, and his bail exonerated." That court action ended the case.

There is no historical evidence to support the editorial assertion that "The father appealed the decision, getting the law suit reintroduced in 1868, and seeing it through to its final hearing on January 15, 1869. The judge found for the plaintiff, awarding the father $851.80 with interest." The record shows that the amount of $851.80 with interest were the damages awarded to George J. Boal on January 15, 1869 in a suit between George J. Boal and the Orphans' Home of Industry—not Townsend per se. George J. Boal, a respected Iowa City attorney of the firm of Fairall & Boal, and also in real estate, may have been one of the many creditors of the Orphans' Home of Industry but certainly was not the father of the child whom Townsend was earlier accused of enticing.

The staff of THE PALIMPSEST regrets its error and apologizes to Ms. Fisher and to readers of her article. — Ed.




*The State Historical Society of Iowa is a Division of the Iowa State Historical Department, a state agency created by the Sixty-fifth General Assembly. Along with the Society the Department includes a Division of Historical Museum and Archives (formerly Iowa Department of History and Archives) and a Division of Historic Preservation.*