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PALIMPSEST

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1980



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The
PALIMPSEST

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Peter T. Harstad, Director

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William Silag, Editor

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Cover: A.F. Tait's painting titled "Wild Duck Shooting," issued as a lithograph by Currier and Ives in 1854. In this issue of The Palimpsest, William M. Furnish introduces us to W.B. Leffingwell, whose books on hunting have become standard guides for Iowa sportsmen since their publication in the late nineteenth century.



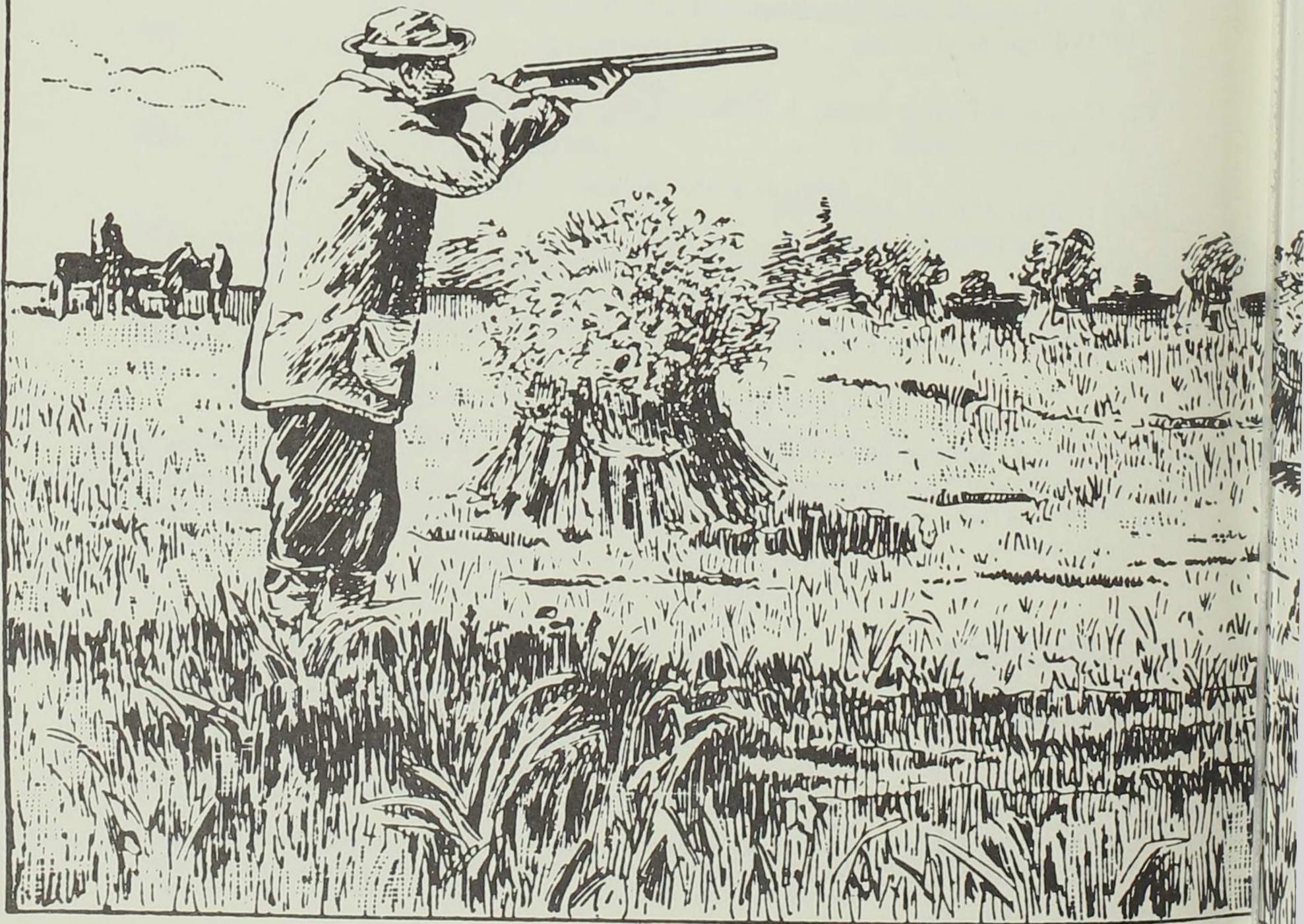
The Meaning of the Palimpsest

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.

W. B. LEFFINGWELL, IOWA SPORTSMAN

by William M. Furnish



Iowa author William Bruce Leffingwell set standards of hunting practice that have been followed by generations of prairie sportsmen. But Leffingwell was not only an able hunter—his writings convey an appreciation of American wildlife on a par with those of the nation's finest naturalists.



"Prairie Chicken Shooting," an illustration from Leffingwell's *The Art of Wing Shooting*, published in 1889 (SHSI)

Outside his office window, attorney Leffingwell could see the busy pavements of urban Chicago, but on this November day in 1887, his thoughts were on the Mississippi River near Clinton, Iowa, where he had grown up and first enjoyed the pleasures of his lifelong love, wild fowl hunting.

"Such a sight!" he recalled. "The pond covered about four acres, and to this time, the ducks were in complete possession and control of it. They were scattered in bunches, ranging in numbers from three to fifty, all mallards. Some with head hidden underneath their wings were floating serenely, and dreaming idly of what ducks usually dream; others were preening themselves, now rising on their feet and fluttering their wings, while great drops of water were shaken from their shining bodies; still others were swimming to and fro, advancing and receding as if to form a better acquaintance with their neighbors. On the banks, some sat idly, half asleep, basking in the warm sun, while near them their companions were tipping up in the shallow water, performing acrobatic feats. First their glossy green heads with their plump bodies would be on the surface, then presto! their heads would disappear and their white and purple tails would point upward, while their bills were hidden under water and mud, searching for the ever welcome acorn."

A year later, Leffingwell completed *Wild Fowl Shooting*, which was considered the authoritative treatment of the subject in its time, both in the United States and in England. The book is still referred to with respect and affection nearly a hundred years after its publication by Rand McNally in 1888. Indeed, all of Leffingwell's seven books on hunting remain significant, for their author's hunting life spanned perhaps the most important fifty years in the history of the sport. It was a time when weapons technology was transforming firearms and

when populations of ducks, geese, and other wild fowl were declining from the limitless numbers of the early nineteenth century to the moderate numbers of our own era.

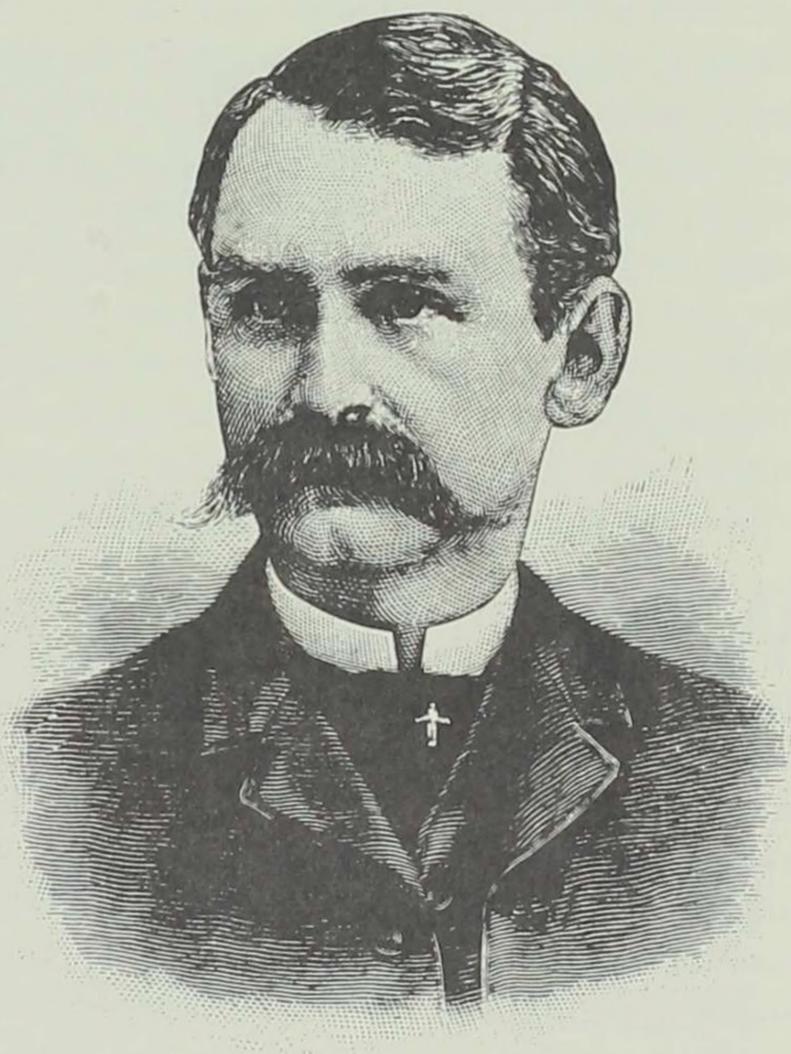
Born on April 6, 1850, Leffingwell, like most boys of his time, grew up with a gun in his hands. His ancestors had come from England to Norwich, Connecticut in 1637, and his father, William Edward Leffingwell, migrated to Iowa in 1839, at the age of seventeen. On the eastern fringe of the territory, the elder Leffingwell studied law and became an eminent member of his profession. Active in the affairs of the territory and the state, he eventually served as presidential elector, district judge, and president of the State Senate. With his wife, Celinda Walrod Leffingwell, he had twelve children, seven of whom survived. In spite of the press of business and domestic duties, he made time for hunting expeditions to surrounding rivers, and his third child—William Bruce Leffingwell—was an enthusiastic participant.

After local grammar schools and the University of Iowa, young Leffingwell followed his father into law. But his first love was always hunting. Hunters of 1980 can hardly imagine the millions of birds that Leffingwell was accustomed to seeing on the ponds and rivers of eastern Iowa and western Illinois. In *Wild Fowl Shooting*, he describes a trip on the Mississippi: "Our game is counted—sixty-five mallards, five redheads, six bluebills, one canvas back, and one goose—a splendid lot, but not unusual."

One of his favored spots was just south of Clinton, where he lived for a number of years after his marriage in 1874 to Ann Eliza Wallace, and where he served as county clerk for four or five years. The "Dosia (or Meredosia) Bottoms" lay in an abandoned valley leading from the Mississippi to the Rock River at Erie, Illinois. They are now traversed by a large drainage ditch. Here Leffingwell, like many of his con-

temporaries, hunted from a "small boat" which he describes in some detail in *Wild Fowl Shooting*. Such a boat is actually a moveable blind; it was designed for use on the river, to approach ducks within effective shotgun range before they became alarmed. It had a low deck, just a few inches off the water, to support camouflage blending with the background. (See the illustration on page 167.) The hunters lay on the bottom while operating a single oar at the rear. Leffingwell wrote that "an expert sculler will drive the boat along with such steadiness that were one to shut his eyes and sit in the boat, he would hear no noise, feel no motion, although the boat is going quite fast. . . . I have used all kinds of duckboats, and I never yet found a man who, after using one of these boats, would use any other. . . . I have crossed the Mississippi in one, when the south wind had lashed the broad river into a sea of seething, hissing foam, as it rolled and flew into spray from the crest of the big 'whitecaps.' I would often court an accident in one of them . . . with a companion equally as reckless, we would go out in the roughest part of the Mississippi in the highest winds, to the terror of kindly disposed old ladies, who watched us from the shores."

The Upper Mississippi type of scull boat perfected by early market hunters is unique. These craft were handmade by local boat builders to their favorite patterns or on special order. Such builders as Jenks, Oaks, Brown, Dribbleby, and others were well known in Clinton. Some boats were built as light one-man shells about ten feet long, and could be picked up easily. Larger boats—over twenty feet in length—could accommodate as many as three hunters. All such boats had keels to aid in the thrust of the sculling oar. Oars varied with personal preference, too. Those over ten feet long and with a narrow blade served best in the open river, where scullers used a brisk rolling figure-eight stroke to propel the craft. Both oar and "bung-hole" in the stern were covered with oil-soaked leather to reduce noise and to



William Bruce Leffingwell in 1890 (SHSI)

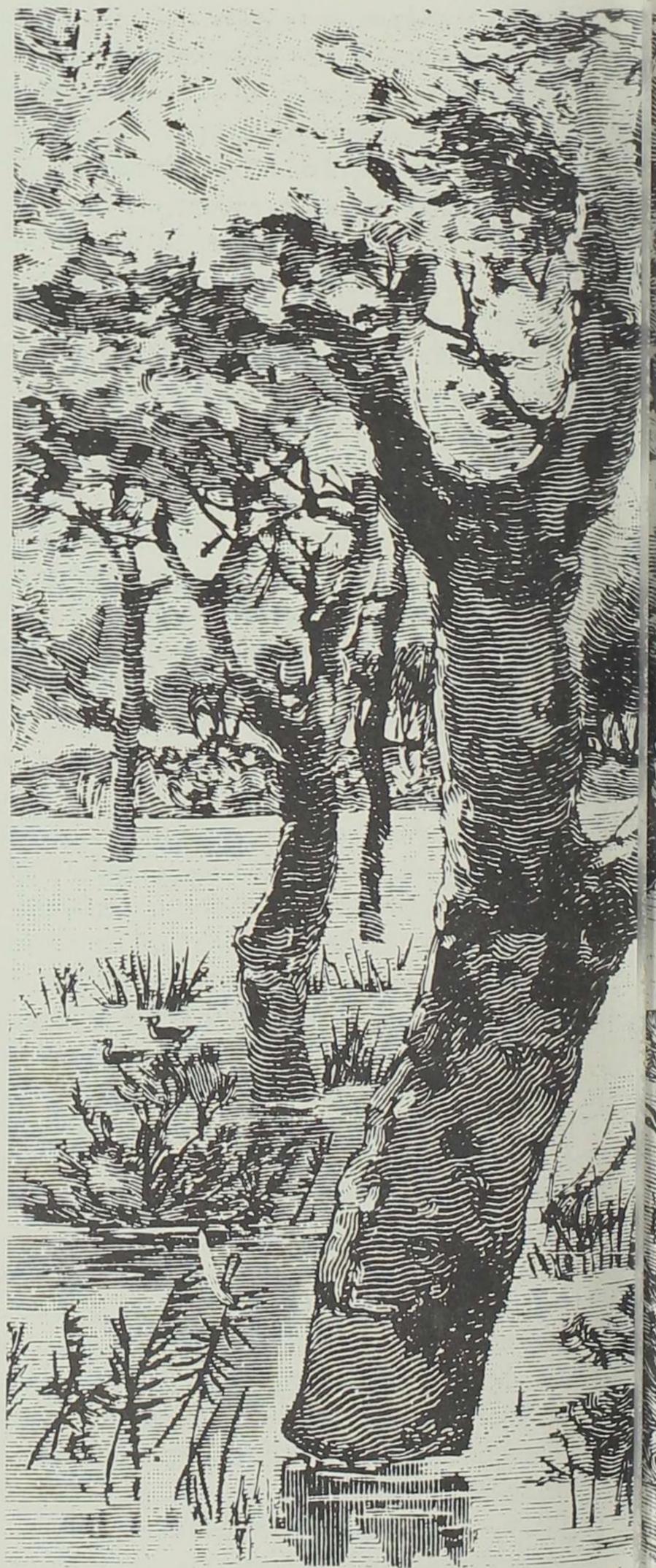
prevent water entry.

Leffingwell described the manner of approach: "where the eye can see the water in an unbroken line for a half-mile, perhaps a full mile; where the ducks are feeding, preening and sitting on the bank, basking in the sunshine. . . . On such an occasion, note the sculler coming down, half reclining in his boat, the bow and sides trimmed with willow twigs and grass, to correspond with the shores he is passing. The ducks see nothing alarming about it [and] feed on in quiet contentment until the hunter is close enough to fire both barrels effectively. A few years ago, in running ice, three of us bagged in one day 112 mallards and six geese. These were killed in the middle of the day, right in the channel of the Mississippi. At this time, hunters in the islands were getting no shooting at all."

As a boy, Leffingwell learned to shoot a percussion lock muzzle loader which had to be

reloaded with a ramrod after each shot. In the hands of an expert who had practiced on thousands, even tens of thousands of birds, these arms were remarkably effective. Years of experience and a couple of hundred reloadings a day made such operations routinely simple: powder and shot dispensers were set for just the desired amount, and the hunter could fire off two shots per minute. Still, sportsmen found it exasperating to be in the act of reloading while cripples swam away or a new flock approached.

While Leffingwell was growing up, marrying, fathering six children, and beginning his distinguished career as a jurist, the nature of his favorite sport was changing, largely because of the introduction of the reasonably priced breech-loading shotgun. There were inconveniences involved in the change. Carrying ready-loaded brass shells added many pounds to the duck hunter's gear, for he would need perhaps several hundred shots for a day's sport. It was nearly as much trouble to reload the shells as it was to recharge barrels in an older percussion gun, but the task could be done at night in preparation for the next morning's hunt, while less ambitious companions slept. Brass shells were costly and many accounts tell of running out of ammunition or stopping to reload a new supply. Although the shooter could anticipate a few "duds" or misfires, an even more common difficulty for owners of double-barrelled guns was for shot pellets to drop out of the case in the second barrel after being loosened by shock of discharge in the first. Early paper shells could be crimped to hold the loads more securely, but they softened and swelled from the moisture and so were even less trustworthy. In spite of all difficulties, hunters became amazingly proficient with these hammer-model double guns. After firing at game, they could break the action, extract and replace shells, close the breech, recock the hammers, and shoot again, all in a matter of only two or three seconds. Expert trap shoot-



"Shooting Mallards from a Scull Boat on the Missis" *oi," at*



" an illustration from Leffingwell's Wild Fowl Shooting

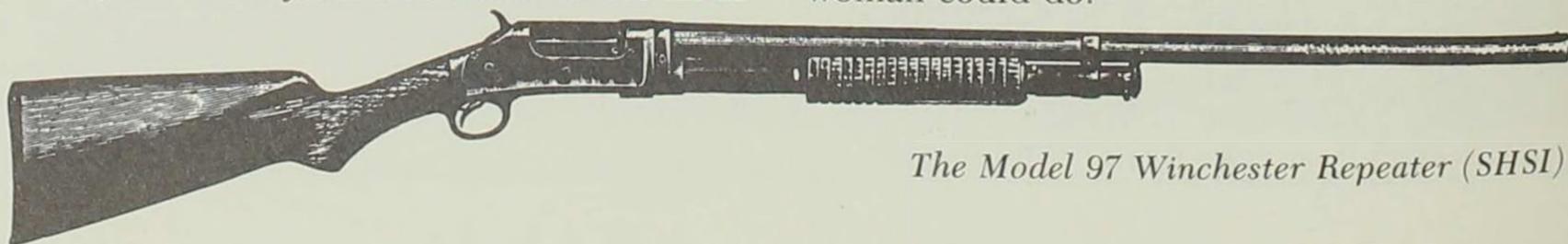
ers, loading their own guns, fired for extended periods at a rate greater than fifteen rounds per minute. Under similar circumstances, only two shots per minute could be fired with a muzzle loader.

Another change in the nature of hunting arms was apparent by the late 1880s, when hammerless model shotguns further simplified operations. Although the danger of this innovation could be recognized, the enclosed hammers proved a convenience. The next big step in fowling pieces was the development of a good multi-shot repeater. Magazine carbines had long been used as hunting rifles but the side-by-side double remained a standard in scatterguns until the appearance of the 1897 model Winchester pump. This Browning-action gun could be fired quite rapidly, as could the semi-automatic models that became available at about the same time. Serious duck hunters, such as those hunting for the market, soon discovered that the "97" would deliver six killing shots into a single flock. It is likely that more wild fowl fell to this gun than any ever made. It is certain that the appearance of the "97" accelerated the need for legislation on hunting migratory birds. Over a million of these arms—affectionately called "corn-shell-ers" or "trombones"—were manufactured in fifty years of production, and they are still being used.

Having established himself in the legal profession, Leffingwell had by his late thirties achieved prosperity and leisure sufficient to begin his literary career. In all, he wrote or edited at least seven books and penned numerous articles on the sport of hunting. *Wild Fowl Shooting* remained the most popular of these, perhaps because of its freshness and the novelty of its subject. The book covers all as-

pects of duck hunting on the Upper Mississippi: equipment and techniques, the identity and habits of the game, human and canine companionship, and many actual experiences. In addition to its 373 pages, the book contained twenty-two additional sheets of advertisements on guns, boats, decoys, ammunition, railroads offering trips to hunting areas, and other items of interest to the sportsman. The author himself prepared numerous pen and ink sketches of hunting scenes and details of water fowl, which added to the reliability of the volume. He portrays himself as the ordinary hunter, neither shooting hundreds of birds every day for market, nor needing a local guide to cater to his needs. Leffingwell was aware of all of the implications of his sport, and practiced it with the highest respect for traditional hunting etiquette.

In 1890, Leffingwell published *Shooting on Upland, Marsh, and Stream*, a volume of articles on hunting by a number of authors. He himself contributed the introduction and three chapters concerned with the shooting of passenger pigeons (now extinct), prairie chickens, and canvasback ducks (both now greatly diminished in numbers). Rand McNally printed two editions; a third was printed in London. *The Art of Wing Shooting*, published in 1894 and 1895 (two editions) was intended to be an instructional manual, covering basic principles for the beginner and details of interest to the experienced shooter. Leffingwell placed greatest emphasis on learning to become a competent wild fowl gunner. One chapter—entitled "Women as Shooters"—contains unqualified advice that women be encouraged to participate in the sport. Annie Oakley, who performed before huge crowds all over the world, is cited as the ultimate example of what a woman could do.



The Model 97 Winchester Repeater (SHSI)

Unusual among Leffingwell's works is a novel, *Manulito*, which appeared in 1892. A fictional account of the Iowa frontier, the story is based to some degree on the exploits of his father, Judge William Edward Leffingwell, who was recognized as a capable woodsman and hunter during the 1840s and 1850s. The book is a dramatic account of the exploits of a hardy pioneer leader named Attorney Wellington, and focuses on his close friendship with the equally intrepid Indian, Manulito. The original Thomas Leffingwell of Connecticut was known to have been a friend and associate of the real Uncas, Chief of the Mohicans. He may have served as the inspiration for Natty Bumppo, James Fenimore Cooper's dauntless hero.

Unfortunately, a list of all of Leffingwell's writing is not available; some publications are so rare that no copies can be located. He contributed shorter articles to sporting magazines of his day, and later wrote books on shooting and hunting in the South and in Texas. Both of the latter books were distributed *gratis* by the Southern Railway Company and by the Frisco Lines to prospective travelers, but unlike his earlier productions, they offered little more than descriptions of areas attractive to sportmen.

Circumstances for hunters changed rapidly during Leffingwell's lifetime. With new weapons and an increasing population of consumers to serve, market hunters began to alter the character of wildlife systems in Iowa. Even if conservation-minded, a couple of hunters could dispatch a hundred birds in a day. At least by the early 1900s, the vast number of birds Leffingwell had known as a boy declined so considerably that seasons and limits had to be imposed. Although a hunter in Illinois could still legally take thirty-five ducks and thirty-five

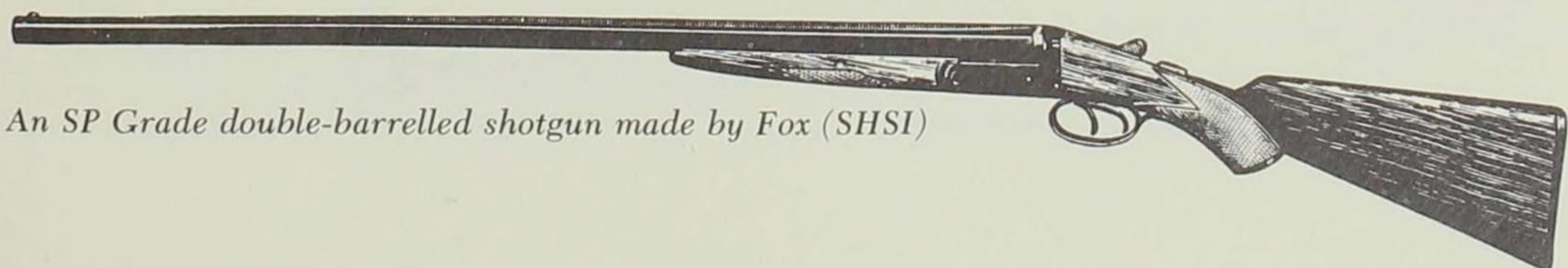
geese in a single day, an age of scarcity loomed ahead.

The activity of the hunter himself also changed in the course of Leffingwell's career. Firearms were always dangerous, despite the safety features incorporated into well-made double shotguns. Risk was always present, especially during the excitement of firing at game. Almost everyone could recall near misses and the shock of imbedded number-six pellets, with a chance for infections resulting from even minor gunshot wounds. In some respects, the dangers increased, as when hammerless and repeater model guns introduced additional odds for accidental discharge, for they were ready to fire when loaded. Most hunters tolerated only experienced companions who could be trusted to use proper caution.

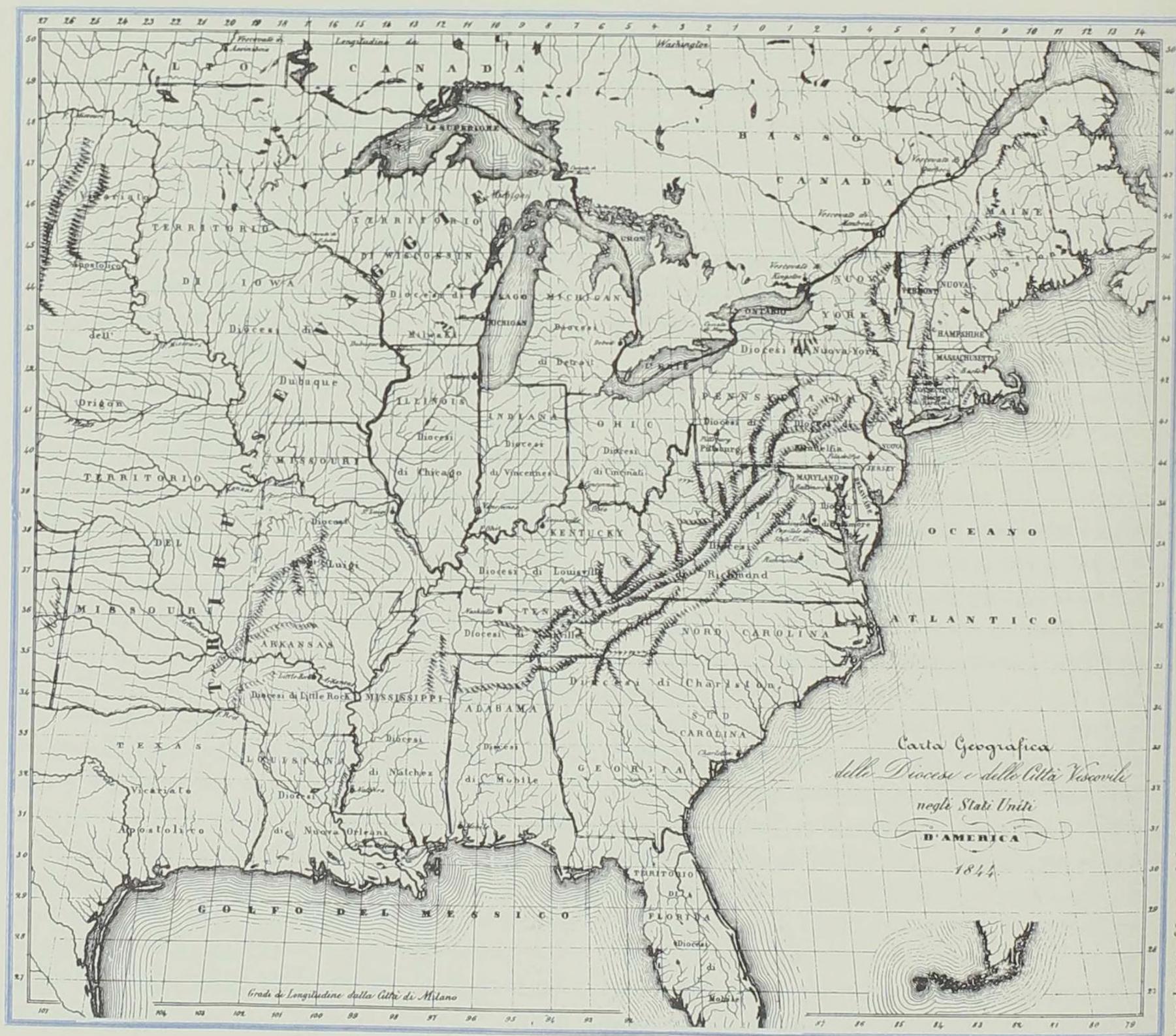
Hunting had always been a family affair with the Leffingwells. Small boys routinely accompanied their fathers to the duck blind; young Leffingwell went out by himself at age twelve. Precaution was instilled in him at an early age, but nothing could have anticipated the tragic accident that befell him later. At the beginning of an expedition, a large dog used as a retriever scrambled into the skiff and bumped against a loaded gun lying there, causing it to discharge. By chance, William Bruce Leffingwell caught the full load of shot in the midriff, at deadly close range. He died soon after, not yet sixty years old. □

Note on Sources

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An SP Grade double-barrelled shotgun made by Fox (SHSI)



An early map of Iowa and the United States, from the Memoirs of Samuel Mazzuchelli (courtesy Thomas E. Auge)

The Dream of Bishop Loras

A CATHOLIC IOWA

by
 Thomas E. Auge

The people gathered at the river front in the early dusk of an April evening. The year was 1839 and the residents of the frontier town of Dubuque were awaiting the arrival of the new Catholic bishop of the region. When the steamboat reached the landing, a short, stout, middle-aged man accompanied by two priests and a servant boy descended to the wharf. Mathias Loras, the first bishop of the new diocese of Dubuque, had come to assume his duties.

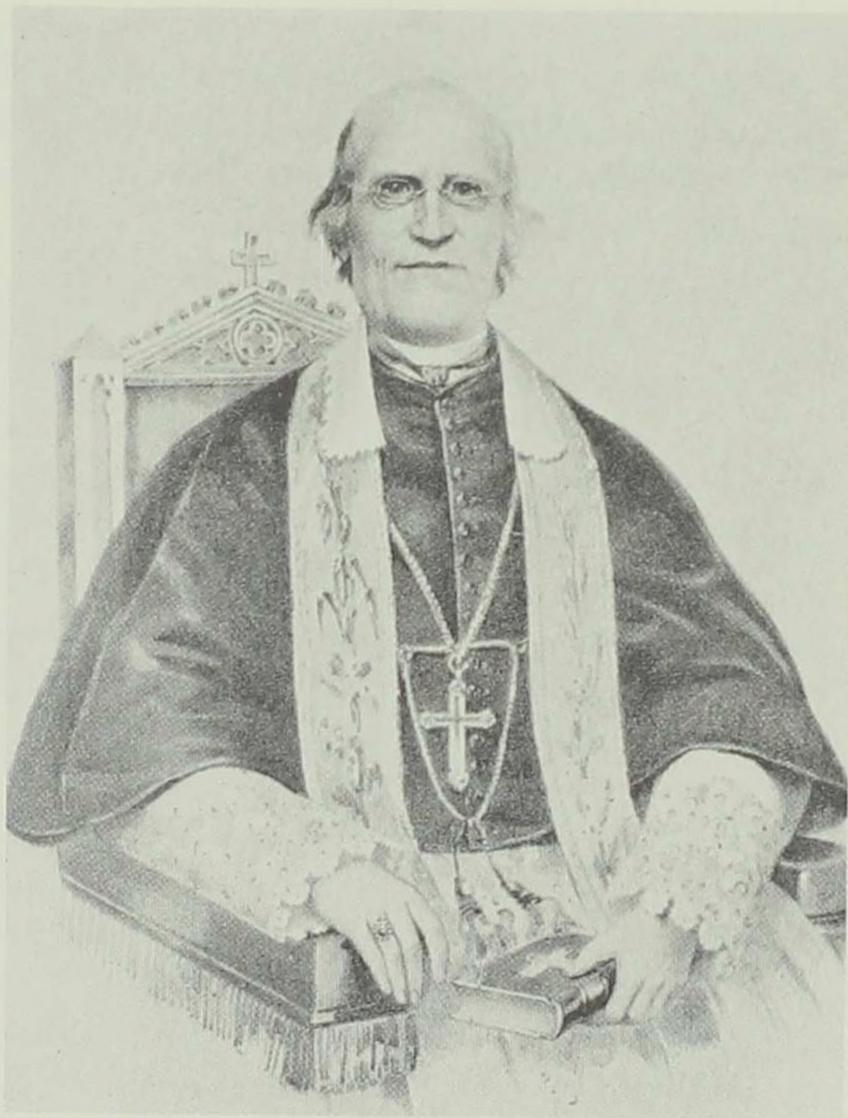
The new bishop, so eagerly welcomed by his people, was in many ways unusually well-prepared for his responsibilities. A native of Lyons, France, he was the product of a prominent—and well-to-do—bourgeois family. While he was an infant, his father fell victim to the Jacobin reign of terror during the French Revolution. The fatherless child, the tenth of eleven children, had the benefit of a strong, pious mother who reestablished the family fortune and provided a stable, secure environment for her many children. While still a boy, Mathias Loras decided upon the vocation of the priesthood, for which he prepared himself in the seminaries of his native city. His piety and industry were such that even before his ordination he served as a teacher in a minor seminary. Later, he became the superior of two such institutions in the Archdiocese of Lyons.

His achievements in his native city notwithstanding, Loras, like so many of the French clergy of that day, felt the pull of the foreign missions. In 1829 he joined Bishop Michael Portier in the diocese of Mobile, Alabama where he worked for eight years, again with evident success. He helped to found and was the first president of Springhill College; he was the pastor of the see parish [the diocesan center] in Mobile and was the vicar-general of the diocese. He came to Dubuque, then, a mature priest, experienced in pastoral, administrative, and educational work.

But the Dubuque diocese posed some problems. A frontier region, the diocese embraced an area that had been open to white settlement for less than six years when Bishop Loras arrived. The territory for which he was responsible was vast, stretching from the northern boundary of Missouri to Canada and from the Mississippi to the Missouri River. There were, however, few Catholics, indeed few whites in the new diocese. Most of it was Indian country inhabited by various tribes with a few white soldiers and fur traders stationed there. The only American settlements were some towns located along the west bank of the Mississippi River from Dubuque to Keokuk. With the closing of the Mississippi River each winter, these rustic towns had to depend upon their own meager economic and cultural resources, since their isolation left the inhabitants suspended in frozen animation till the coming of spring. And in good weather, the bishop's responsibilities required almost constant travel over the trackless prairie of the enormous diocese. Almost fifty years of age in 1839, Loras was not entirely suited either physically or culturally for life in the rough and sometimes brutal environment of an American frontier.

Moreover, his background hardly fit the expectations and needs of the Catholics he was to serve. They, too, were frontier settlers: independent, self-reliant, and impatient with authority. Most were immigrants—German and Irish—who had brought with them to this distant land their ethnic identities and cultures. Loras and his few priests, all French with the exception of the Italian Dominican, Samuel Mazzuchelli, were ill-prepared to serve these parishioners. Aside from Mazzuchelli, who had been in the Dubuque area since 1835 and was gifted in languages, none of these clergymen spoke English well. Even Loras, despite his years in Mobile where he had ministered principally to Catholics of French ancestry, was deficient in this language.

Loras was also dismayed by the scant re-



Mathias Loras, first bishop of Dubuque (SHSI)

sources of the Catholics in his diocese. The town of Dubuque—with a population of around 1,200—contained the largest congregation, a hundred or so families, mostly Irish. Through the efforts of the capable and energetic Mazzuchelli, a small stone church—St. Raphael's Cathedral—stood ready for use. Some twenty miles southwest of Dubuque, a group of Irish farmers had settled in Maquoketa (today called Garryowen) in northern Jackson County. Here in 1840 the indefatigable Mazzuchelli would supervise the construction of St. Patrick's Church. In the southeastern corner of Iowa, in Lee County, a group of German Catholics had built a small wooden church at Sugar Creek (St. Paul). And in Davenport, the Italian priest built St. Anthony's—this enterprise aided by the huge half-breed, Antoine LeClaire. Unfortunately, there were few Catholics to use the church.

Such were the meager resources greeting Loras when he first arrived in his diocese that one wonders whether the decision to form a Dubuque diocese was premature. Normally, one could reasonably expect that a new diocese would have sufficient means to support its bishop and clergy. This was not the case in Iowa in 1839 or for many years to come. But there were attractions to building a diocese on a newly opened frontier where cheap land was readily available. Here one could lay foundations for the future. The new bishop recognized this from the start.

Advised by the experienced Mazzuchelli, Loras conceived of a grand design: he would fill the fertile, vacant prairies of Iowa with Catholics. Undeterred by the shortage of money and priests, the bishop set out to accomplish this goal. Relying upon the financial assistance of European missionary societies, Loras purchased land at every opportunity. In his first four years in the diocese, he spent over \$20,000, a substantial sum when an acre of government land was only \$1.25. If some of these acquisitions met the needs of Catholics already living along the Mississippi, in other parts of the state his purpose was to encourage future settlement. His dream was that Catholics would come to Iowa to people this land, and that parishes, churches, and schools would fill these empty spaces. To realize this vision, Loras had to turn to the Catholics of Europe and the eastern cities of America. Consequently, he made great efforts to attract people from these areas to his diocese. Throughout his tenure as Bishop of Dubuque, Loras had letters published in Catholic newspapers and magazines in the United States and Europe informing Catholics of the advantage of settlement in Iowa. Less than a year after he arrived in Dubuque, the following notice appeared in American newspapers:

A Catholic Church will be erected next summer in Burlington, Iowa Territory with a clergyman. Editors of Catholic pe-

riodicals will please insert this notice in their columns for the information of Catholic immigrants to the far west.

S. Mazzuchelli
January 29, 1840

And in 1849 Loras sent the following request to the editor of the *Boston Catholic Observer*:

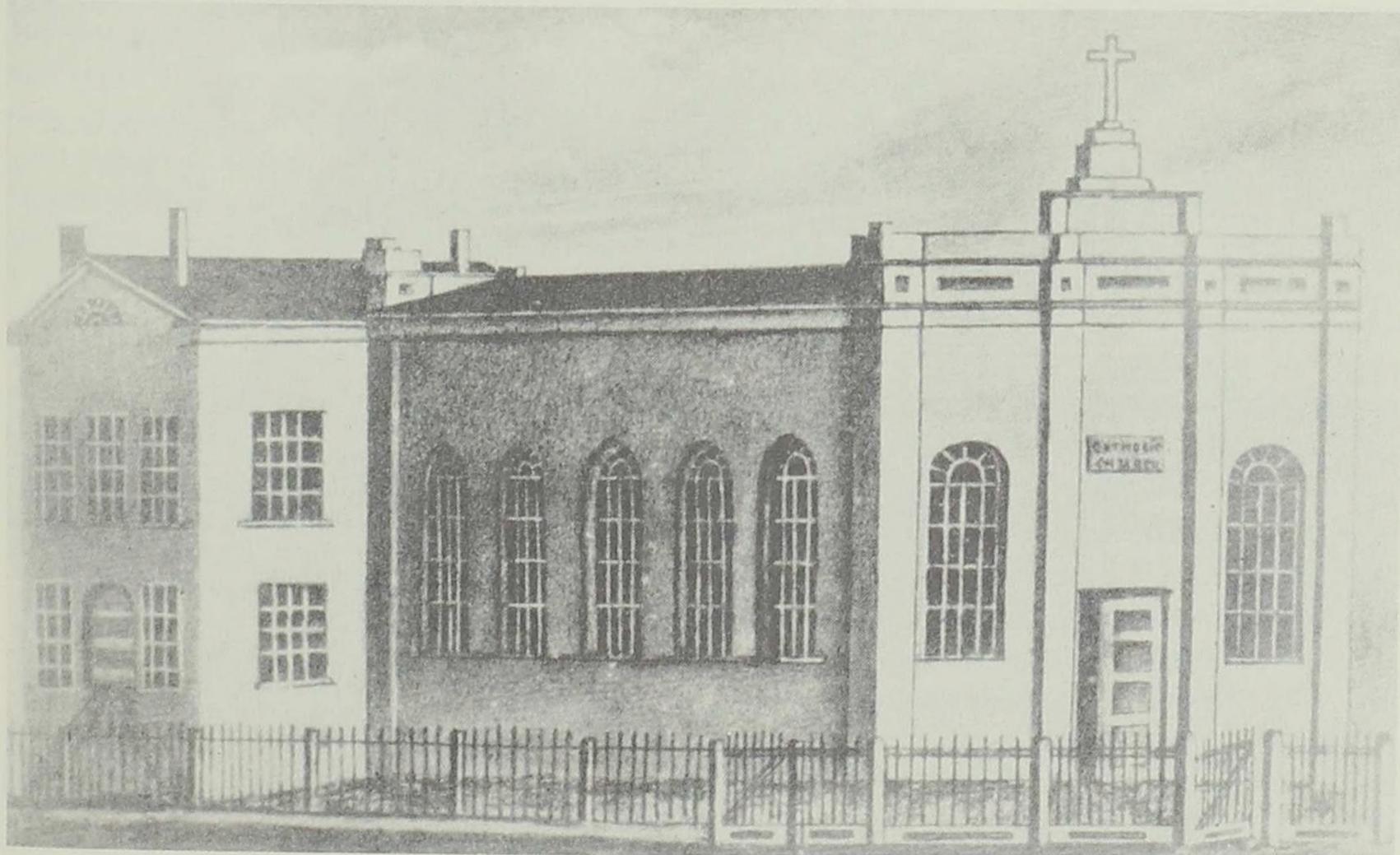
Would you recommend in your journal the southern part of my diocese as a truly desirable country for Catholic emigrants, either Irish or German?

In early 1855, Loras reported to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith that he was in correspondence with the *Boston Pilot*. This newspaper, he added, had a wide circulation in America and Ireland. He also informed the Society that he was writing to German newspapers. His hope, as he expressed it in this letter, was to persuade Catholics that now was the time to settle in this country, when government land was reasonably priced. If Catholics failed to take advantage of this oppor-

tunity, he warned, then Protestants would do so.

In other letters published in the eastern Catholic press, Loras took a somewhat different line. Aware of the challenges of frontier life, he included in his invitation to Catholic immigrants advice as to what problems they might face if they decided to settle in Iowa. He cautioned that sufficient financial resources were necessary. A new settler had to have enough money to purchase land, to provide the means of cultivation, and to subsist for two years, since he would earn little income during that period. Finally, Loras stated that he could not promise to provide a church and a priest for every group of Catholics that moved into his diocese.

Loras made a special effort to encourage Irish immigrants to come to his diocese, particularly after a visit to Ireland in 1850 revealed to him the poverty of that unfortunate land. As early as 1841, he appointed a committee of laymen to correspond with the newly founded



St. Raphael's Cathedral and Bishop's House, Dubuque, 1835-1839 (SHSI)

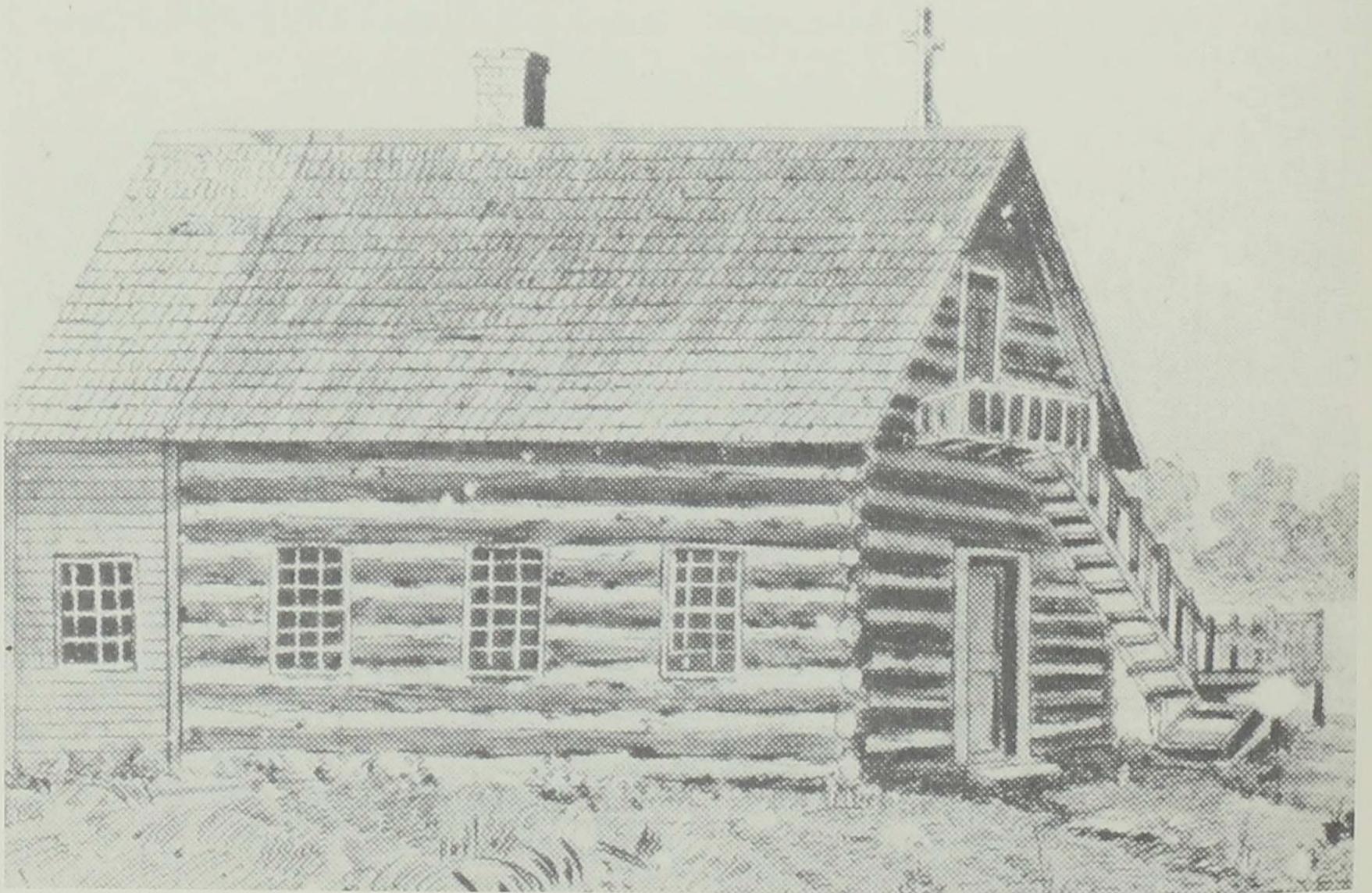
Irish Emigrant Society of New York. President of the group, Charles Corkery, in responding to queries from New York, modestly described Iowa as "the garden of America, the Eldorado of the West."

In 1856, Loras sent representatives to the Buffalo Convention on Irish Emigration, held under the leadership of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, who had visited Dubuque a few years earlier. About the same time, the bishop sponsored the Catholic Settlement Society of Iowa. Organized in Dubuque, this society sought to found branches throughout the state and to impose a membership of three dollars to provide funds for settlement. In 1857, Loras sent Father Jeremiah Treacy to New York to lecture on the opportunities for Irish Catholics in Iowa. Father Treacy aroused the ire of Archbishop Hughes of that city, who disapproved of these efforts to convince the Irish to leave their

ethnic communities in eastern cities.

Although specific evidence of the success of these efforts by Loras is scanty, he did influence many Irish and German Catholics to settle in Iowa. There were occasions when the bishop played a direct role, providing personal advice and assistance to immigrants. In 1843, some German Catholics living in Ohio decided to move farther west. Having heard of the interest of Bishop Loras in Catholic immigrants, they decided to consult with him. When they arrived in the Dubuque area, they sent two men to meet with the bishop. Together they chose a site in western Dubuque County, where these settlers established the German Catholic community of New Vienna.

In late 1849, an Irish priest, Thomas Hore, visited Dubuque. Hore had led a group of Irish immigrants to America, first stopping in Arkansas where they found conditions unsuitable.



First St. Boniface Church, New Vienna (SHSI)

Leaving his party in St. Louis, Hore came up the river to consult with Loras. The result of this meeting was the establishment of the Irish parish of St. Lawrence, Wexford in Allamakee County in northeastern Iowa.

Perhaps the most interesting ethnic community brought to Iowa by Loras was a group of Irish Trappist monks. Living in destitution in famine-ridden Ireland, these Trappists decided to found a monastery in America. Learning of their intention, Loras wrote to them offering as a location an extensive acreage some twelve miles west of the city of Dubuque. So generous was the gift of Loras that the monks accepted his invitation, and in 1850 established the monastery of New Melleray.

Despite his continuous and deep commitment to bringing Catholic immigrants to Iowa, Loras occasionally had difficulties serving these communicants. Nothing shows better the zeal and determination of this priest than his dogged pursuit of the German and Irish Catholics of Europe, while at the same time he was engaged in disputes with their counterparts in Iowa. The problems that Loras experienced with such immigrants arose in part from circumstance and in part from the personalities involved.

Loras understood the special needs of these people, although he was not always ready or able to meet those needs. He recognized, for example, that these newcomers to America, isolated on the frontier, needed to be served by clergy of their own nationality. The lack of Irish and German priests, although a serious deficiency, was not the fault of the bishop. Throughout his years as head of the Diocese of Dubuque, Loras made strenuous efforts to obtain ethnic priests. In 1838, while in Europe seeking money and clergy for his new diocese, he wrote both to the Archbishop of Dublin and to the Bishop of Strasbourg to determine if they could provide priests. In 1846, Father Joseph

Cretin, the vicar-general of the Dubuque diocese, returned to France for a visit with instructions from Loras to recruit German and Irish clergy. In 1850, Loras himself visited All Hallows Seminary in Dublin to arrange for Irish seminarians to come to his diocese. In 1856, two years before his death, Loras learned of the settlement of Bohemian Catholics in northeastern Iowa. In order to meet their needs he arranged for a priest of that nationality, Francis Kruxtil, to visit with the immigrants. Father Kruxtil concluded that two Bohemian priests were needed and promised to write to bishops in Europe to obtain them.

Despite the desire of Loras to staff his churches with ethnic priests, it was years before he was able to assemble a diocesan clergy that was not predominantly French. So dire was his need that in the early years he accepted priests who had proven to be failures in other American dioceses. One of these men, Father George Alleman, an Alsatian, turned out to be a most successful pastor of the Germans of southeastern Iowa. The other, an Irish priest named John Healy, simply added to the heavy burden that Loras carried.

Some of the Dubuque clergy who were neither German nor Irish did well in serving these ethnic Catholics. Father Mazzuchelli was so popular with the Irish of the Dubuque lead mine region that many of them decided he was really of their nationality and began to call him Matthew Kelly. The Garryowen Irish parish had as its first pastor a scholarly young French priest, Father J.C. Perrodin, who had few difficulties with his parishioners. Father Anthony Palemourges, the first pastor of Davenport, admirably served a mixed congregation of Germans and Irishmen.

Loras also realized that ethnic pastors presumed ethnic parishes. He understood fully that these immigrants would find life in a strange land much easier if their worship and religious experiences continued within the national traditions to which they were accus-

tomed. Unfortunately, circumstances—especially lack of funds—made it impossible to provide German and Irish parishes wherever they were desired. The poverty of these Catholics, many of whom were hardly able to support themselves, as well as the determination of Loras to purchase land for future development, precluded the building of churches for every ethnic community. Unhappily, these new Americans had little in common other than their religion, so that there were often deep divisions in such congregations. The rural parish of St. Catherine's, some ten miles south

of Dubuque, was a case in point. Controversy arose, even before the church was built, over the question of its name. The Irish opted for St. Bridget while the Germans preferred a saint of their nationality. Bishop Loras, as an impartial Frenchman, chose St. Catherine. Suspicion of each other led to the regulation that there had to be three trustees from each nationality. Separation continued during religious services, for the Germans sat on one side of the church and the Irish on the other. Indeed, segregation extended even to the grave, for the cemetery was divided into German and Irish sections.

Several of the larger cities of the diocese, including Dubuque, had both German and Irish communities. Once again, segregation was the rule. In Dubuque, for example, each had its ethnic ghetto: the Irish in the south of the city, the Germans in the north. When money became available to build a second church in these cities, Loras chose to form German parishes, evidently because of the language problem. Thus, in Dubuque, Davenport, and Burlington, German churches were built. The Irish had to be satisfied with the older, smaller churches whose congregations included American and other non-Irish members, a situation which hardly suited these immigrants.

If the lack of ethnic clergymen and parishes resulted from circumstances beyond the control of Loras, his background and personality also contributed to his troubles with the ethnic Catholics of his diocese. He was the son of a wealthy bourgeois French family, and thus had little in common with these poorly educated, crude, and sometimes violent frontier Catholics. Furthermore, the theology he had learned in the French seminaries stressed a severe, ascetic spirituality with more than a touch of Jansenism [rigorous moralism]. The lives of the German and Irish Catholics for

Catholic Total Abstinence Society
 IN IOWA, ILLINOIS AND WISCONSIN
 "IN THIS SIGN THOU SHALT CONQUER"

It is good not to eat flesh and not to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother is offended, or scandalized or made weak. (Rom. XIV, 21.)

Look not upon the wine when it shineth in the glass: it goeth in pleasantly. But in the end, it will bite like a snake and will spread abroad poison like a basilisk. (Prov. XXIII, 31, 32.)

Be not in the feasts of great drinkers who club together for feasting, for these, sleepers as they are, shall be reduced to rags. (Prov. XXIII, 20, 21.)

Woe to you that are mighty to drink wine, and stout men at drunkenness. (Isaias V, 22.)

Woe to him that giveth drink to his friend, and maketh him drunk. Thou art filled with shame instead of glory. (Hab. II, 15, 16.)

PROMISE

I, N. N.,

promise to abstain

from any intoxicating drink,

unless used medicinally

and by

order

of a

physi-

cian

+

The Fruits of Temperance

The Holy Fear of God,
 Plenty in Households,
 Peace,
 Health of Body,
 Good Name,
 The Grace of God,
 Eternal Life.

Effects of Intemperance

The Loss of God,
 Poverty and Shame,
 Discord in Families,
 Sickness,
 Disgrace,
 Final Impenitence,
 Eternal Death.

Mr. N. N. has taken the Pledge for..... years, on the day of the month of in the year 18.....

REVEREND N. N.
 No. President of the Society in the city of

A nineteenth-century abstinence pledge, from the Memoirs of Samuel Mazzuchelli (courtesy Thomas E. Auge)



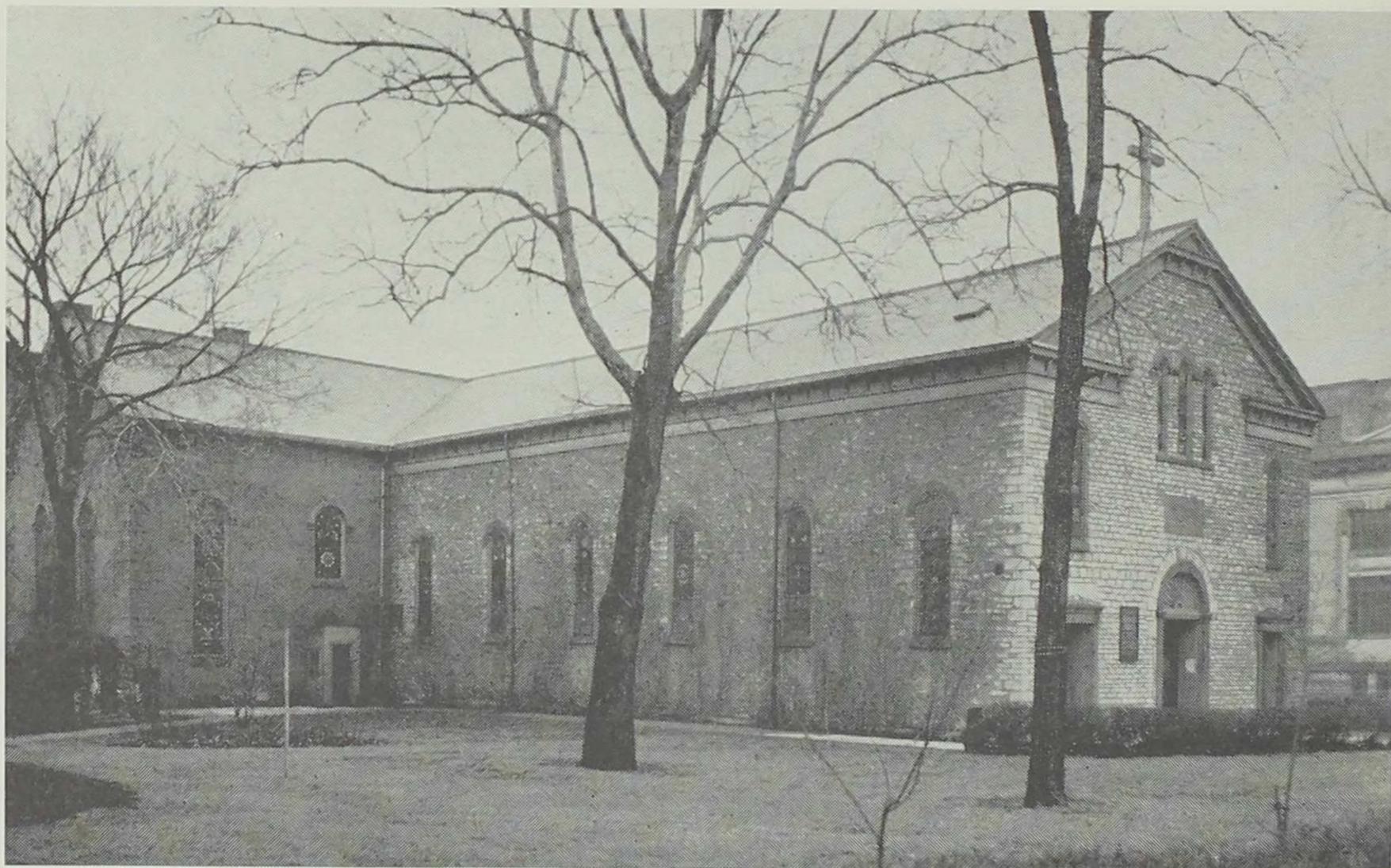
Samuel Mazzuchelli (SHSI)

whom Loras was responsible did not always measure up to the stern code of conduct that he conceived as proper. Drinking liquor was the particular *bête noir* of Loras. Certainly he had good reason to fear the abuse of liquor among the Catholics of his diocese. The American frontier was notorious for its liberality towards drinking and the consequent widespread drunkenness. Nor was there anything in the background of either Germans or Irishmen which would mitigate their use of liquor. That Loras organized and encouraged temperance movements in his diocese is surely to his credit. Still, this French priest, in his legitimate desire to curb the evils of drink, sometimes failed to recognize the cultural element in the use of spirits. In 1856, for example, Loras was in cor-

respondence with a German monastery in Latrobe, Pennsylvania in the hope of persuading several priests from this community to join him in Dubuque. The plan miscarried, apparently because Loras refused to permit these German priests to brew and drink beer, a practice in which their order had engaged for centuries. The reaction of Abbot Boniface of the Latrobe monastery illustrates the failure of Loras to comprehend ethnic issues. The abbot indignantly pointed out that not only had the Pope approved of their brewing beer but at his last audience with him, Pius IX had joked about it. The abbot closed with this parting shot: "Temperance men are either fools or hypocrites."

His concern over liquor led him into conflict with the Germans of New Vienna, a parish he had helped establish. The problem was a grocery which dispensed liquor across from the church. These German Catholics had the custom of stopping at the grocery before and after Sunday Mass, a practice which Loras deplored. Indeed, he considered it so pernicious that he placed the grocery and anyone who frequented it under an interdict.

His most serious and long-standing dispute was with the Irish of Dubuque. Although the bishop was partly to blame, it must be admitted that these Irish Catholics were an obstreperous and troublesome group. Many of them had been among the first settlers on the rough lead-mining frontier. Isolated from their fellow countrymen, in the midst of a Protestant American society, these Irishmen sought to preserve their national identity through social and religious activities and organizations. A few were well-to-do, but most were poor, with little money to contribute to their church. The desperate poverty of those left behind in Ireland further diminished their ability to support their priests, for many were sending money back home so that their relatives could join them in America. Father Perrodin of Garryowen conveyed the tragedy of Ireland in this paragraph in a letter to Bishop Loras:



St. Anthony's Catholic Church of Davenport, built in 1837 (SHSI)

A young man in my congregation is expecting a letter with money from Ireland. His name is Fitzpatrick, an excellent young man who doesn't drink WHISKEY. Would you watch out for his letter? This is the first time someone is getting money from Ireland.

Even under the best of circumstances and with much good will, it would have been difficult to serve these poor, rough immigrants. Even Samuel Mazzuchelli, a most adaptable and effective priest, found the Irish of the lead mines intractable. In 1837 he wrote of this to Bishop Rosati of St. Louis:

Disinterestedness, patience and humility are indispensable with the people I have here. You know well the great faults of the nation with whom I have to live.

Loras would certainly have agreed with Mazzuchelli, for he had many problems with these people. In 1844, the friction between the

bishop and his congregation led to an open break. Unhappy because the clergy of St. Raphael's Cathedral were not of their nationality, the Irish parishioners refused to pay pew rent or contribute adequately to the support of the priests. Hostility grew so great that Loras deserted his see city and took up residence in the southern Iowa town of Burlington. So angry was he with the Dubuque congregation that he wrote to Rome that he might remove his residence permanently to Burlington. As a part of this proposed change, Father Healy became pastor in Dubuque. Healy was a weak, unstable personality who only added to the problem. Instead of pacifying the dissidents, Healy became their leader, forcing Loras to return to Dubuque and remove him from the diocese.

In 1847, trouble broke out again when an Irish school teacher had a dispute with the Order of Hibernians, a Dubuque Irish society. Daniel Brodie, the embattled teacher, iden-

tified the cause when he told Loras that these argumentative Irish were "north county," with a touch of Orangeism. Still another open break occurred in 1854 over the issue of the formation of an Irish parish. A German one had been established when Holy Trinity Church was completed several years earlier, so that when a third church was built in Dubuque the Irish naturally expected that it would serve as their parish. Loras, however, had not planned on this; he insisted that the new church—St. Patrick's—be a mission of St. Raphael's Cathedral. He feared that if St. Patrick's became an independent parish, there would be few parishioners and even less money for the cathedral. Since he was in the process of building a larger cathedral, this was especially serious. Once again, the Irish used the weapon of non-contribution, and again Loras fled Dubuque, threatening to withdraw all of the clergy from that city if the Catholics there did not cooperate. Eventually, through the good offices of several Irish community leaders, the problems were resolved.

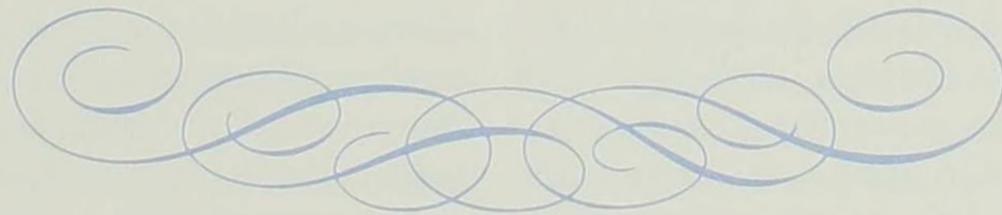
Despite these difficulties, Loras did not do badly in building the diocese. As he had anticipated, Iowa was rapidly settled, but fewer Catholics had come than he had hoped. Instead the majority of new settlers were Protestants born in the United States. Still, the efforts of Bishop Loras to attract Irish and German immigrants to his diocese left its mark

on the state. Ethnic Catholic communities appeared, particularly in eastern Iowa. Dubuque County, the area where Loras made his most intensive efforts, did indeed fulfill the dream of the bishop, for at the time of his death the majority of the population of the county was German and Irish Catholics.

Furthermore, during his tenure as Bishop of Dubuque, Loras laid the foundation for the future growth of the Catholic Church in Iowa. When he arrived in Dubuque, he found a diocese with a few hundred Catholics, four priests, and three churches. Encouraged by his prudent use of limited funds and guided by the energetic dedication of himself and his clergy, the diocese grew steadily larger, eventually reaching across the state. In 1857, shortly before Loras died, there were 49,000 Catholics living in the Dubuque diocese with 37 priests, 52 churches, and 47 mission stations. And all of this had been accomplished without destroying the fragile culture of these ethnic Catholics. □

Note on Sources

Most of the information presented in this article came from unpublished papers located in the archives of various Catholic institutions and organizations. The archives of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, which contain much of the extensive correspondence of Loras, was by far the most useful. Materials in the Loras College Library were also used. These consist of parish histories, copies of the annual *Catholic Almanac*, miscellaneous letters, and scattered newspaper and magazine articles. The only published biography of Bishop Loras of any value is M. M. Hoffmann, *Church Founders of the Northwest* (Bruce, 1937), which is somewhat dated and ignores important issues.



Letters from Algona 1856-1865



Edited by Doris Faulkner

From a bundle of letters long forgotten in a New England attic, and from a group of diaries carefully preserved in a home in Algona, Iowa, much of the story of a family of early settlers of Algona can be reconstructed. The letters tell of the migration of the family of Luther Rist from Uxbridge, Massachusetts, first to Anoka, Minnesota and later to Algona where the Rists established a homestead in that raw frontier town in July 1856.

The 1856 diary of Lewis H. Smith—a young surveyor from Cambridge, Massachusetts—tells of his courtship of Abbie Rist; a later diary reveals his grief at her untimely death in 1866 after nine years of marriage, with their fifth child stillborn. The letters and diaries describe, first-hand, the hope and despair, the joy and the sorrow of these early settlers. From them one can almost visualize what life was like in Algona so many years ago.

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The town was founded by two young explorers, Ambrose A. Call and his brother Asa C. Call, when Ambrose blazed his name on a walnut tree in a grove on the east fork of the Des Moines River and wrote, "Ambrose A. Call claims this grove July 10, 1854." The federal government had offered the land to any homesteader who would establish a bona fide residence on a quarter-section in Kossuth County. The railroad from Chicago and points east extended only as far as the Mississippi River. From Dubuque, one had to travel west by horseback, covered wagon, or stagecoach. Streams had to be forded, for there were no bridges. Wagons and coaches often got bogged down in the low-lying sloughs, and mosquitoes were a source of constant torment.

In spite of these difficulties, news soon spread of land open to government claim in "Call's Grove," and by early spring in 1855, there were fifteen or twenty cabins along the river bank. In August of that year, after a

turbulent political battle with Irvington Township, Algona became the county seat. Its name derived from an Indian word meaning "Algonquin Waters."

The county court, which consisted of a judge, a clerk, and a sheriff, was the only form of government at that time. The county judge held all executive authority. Elected as the first judge was Asa C. Call; nineteen-year-old Lewis H. Smith, who had arrived from Cambridge, Massachusetts only a month before, was named surveyor.

A sawmill arose in the summer of 1855 but did not begin operation until the following year. Ten yokes of oxen hauled the heavy machinery through the sloughs and across the streams westward from Illinois; many times the wagon became mired in the mud. After many delays the mill finally went into production in the spring of 1856. The first building to be erected using sawed lumber was the town hall, which served as a meeting house for church services, singing school, political events, lectures, funerals, and dances.

Early settlers from the East were so enthusiastic about the opportunities available in Kossuth County that they wrote glowing letters back to relatives telling of the untapped resources to be found in this promised land. Among these adventurous Yankees was Frank Rist, aged twenty-six, who had left Uxbridge, Massachusetts during an industrial depression when the mill where he was employed closed down. Frank joined a group called the Whitinsville Wagon Train, which arrived in Algona late in the summer of 1855. He established a claim southeast of the townsite and wrote to his wife—Eugenia—and to his parents, urging them to come as soon as possible.

Late in April 1856, the Rist family—including Luther, 48 years old, his wife Betsey, 53, his daughter-in-law Eugenia, 21, his son Sylvester, 23, and his daughter Abbie, 16—set out by train on the first stage of their journey to begin a new life "out west." All except Eugenia

planned to visit Betsey's sister, Maria Woodbury, in Anoka, Minnesota before making a final decision as to where they would establish their home. Frank had expected to meet the family in Dubuque and to take Eugenia back to Algona with him, but he was taken ill and was not there to meet them. Instead, Sylvester was designated to accompany Eugenia by stage to Algona while Luther, Betsey, and Abbie, with all of their household goods, traveled by riverboat and overland stage to Anoka. The first letter picks up the story from there. (Original spelling and punctuation have been retained throughout.)



Abbie Rist to Mrs. Margaret (Sibley) Cory,
Pawtucket, Rhode Island

Anoka, Minn., May 13, 1856

Dear Aunt:

I take this opportunity to write a few lines to you, to inform you that we have arrived safe at Aunt Maria's. We found her well with plenty of work to do. We started from Whitinsville Wednesday the 30th of April, arrived at Chicago Friday morning and had to wait till 8 o'clock in the evening. We got to Dunleith Saturday morning at 10 o'clock. We left Sylvester and Eugenia there. Frank was not there and the family that were going with her did not conclude to start when we did, so Sylvester went with her. We did not think it safe for her to go alone so far. I don't know how long he will stay but I hope not long, for we miss him very much. We got to St. Paul about noon Monday, then we hired a man to carry us and our trunks to St. Anthony. We arrived there at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, and went on a boat but it did not start till 8 the next morning. Then it went half a mile, and broke the pump, and had to wait till the next morning, being just one week from the time we started. I was sick one day on the boat, but we were well the rest of the time.



*Abbie Rist, daughter of Betsey and Luther Rist
(courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)*

There were plenty of pick pockets on the boat; two men were robbed while we were there. There was a great deal of card playing on both boats.

I don't know where we shall settle, or what we shall do, we can't decide till we see or hear from Sylvester, if he likes Iowa very much, perhaps we may go there. Mother wants to go there. She is homesick and we are rather disappointed in the looks. I suppose it is because it is so different from home, having no trees near the house and no fruit.

Mother sends her love and says she don't know as she shall ever write any more, but I guess she will feel better before a great while. I feel quite well contented now, but I suppose I shall be homesick when all the rest have got over it.

The mail goes Saturday and comes Monday, but they have chances to send letters to St. Paul

quite often, the first of the week, and that helps them along a little.

Ever yours,
Abbie M. Rist

*Betsey (Sibley) Rist to Margaret (Sibley) Cory
Anoka, Minnesota June 8, 1856*

Dear Sister:

I suppose you think that I have forgotten to write to you. I have had so much to think of since I left my pleasant home in the East and come to the far West that I could not compose my mind to write. It is Sunday and most all the folks are at meeting. We are all here at Maria's. My health is about the same as common but my heart is sick. I feel so homesick some times I think I cannot stay, but they say I shall like it better some time, but I do not think that I shall ever feel at home.

Luther's health is better except his foot that is very lame. He cannot wear nothing but an old shoe he likes. He says things are not as he expected. Land is very high here. If we buy land here we shall have to go back ten miles and I do not want to do that. I suppose that Abbie wrote you that we had to part with Sylvester when we took the boat. It was a very solemn time. I have shed many tears. He has not come yet and when he will, I do not know, but we look for him every day.

Sometimes I think it would have been better for us to go to Iowa and if Sylvester likes, I think we shall.

I have a great many lonely hours when I think of home and my brothers and you, my sister, and all the friends that I have left that I never expect to see again in this world, but I hope to meet them in that Spirit Land where there is no separation. Pray for me, sister, that my faith may not fail in days of trial.

I hope you are well and comfortable. You are better off there than you would be here in this strange land. I almost wish that I was there with you. Tomorrow the mail will come and I hope I shall have a letter. I have not heard from any of



Betsey Sibley Rist, wife of Luther Rist (courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)

you since I left. I will finish this when we hear from the children. It is a long time to wait a week for the mail but this is one of the beauties of the West.

June 9th. I have just had a letter from Sylvester. He got to Frank's the 19th of May. He was twenty days agoin'. He walked 125 miles through muddy country. He left Frank's wife to come by stage. He blistered his feet very bad. Frank was disappointed because we did not come. I do not know what we shall do. Luther wants we should go right off, but I don't know what to do. I do not know what to write so I will let Abbie finish this. We don't have to cultivate flowers here, there are enough without. The phlox and spider lillies grow wild here and look right pretty, like ours at home. This from your sister,

Betsey Rist.

Dear Aunt Margaret:

Mother says I must finish this and will do the best I can. I did not have time to finish this last night as they were reading the letters so I could not write. We had four yesterday but we had not had only one before. We prize letters here. Father says the next thing you hear of us perhaps we shall be in Iowa, knee deep in mud. If so I expect you will say, "Joy be with us," but I expect the mud is dried up some by this time, if the sun has been as hot there as it has been here. The 23rd of May it was 99 degrees and I thought it was very hot. We have a great many thunderstorms but the thunder don't seem so heavy as it used to at home. Sylvester said the stage got stuck in a slew, as the western folks say, and they had to walk seven miles in the mud and rain. There were three men besides Eugenia in the coach. I think she must have had a fine time of it. The next day they went about fifteen miles, and the next morning Sylvester left Eugenia with some women who had started nine days before they did. Their men had gone on, on foot, and they were waiting for the next stage. Frank and Sylvester expected Genie the next week. Aunt Maria says she will write when we are gone.

I must close now and to go work.

A. Rist

After much indecision Luther and Betsey chose to make their home in Algona. They traveled with Abbie by ox-cart from Anoka to Algona where Frank, Eugenia, and Sylvester already were living in a tiny log cabin on Frank's claim, southeast of Algona. During that first summer they built a one and one-half story log cabin on Luther's claim.

Abbie Rist to John Sibley, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Sibley was Editor of the Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle.

Algona, Iowa December 14, 1856

Dear Uncle:

At Mother's request I seat myself to answer



Frank Rist, oldest son of Luther and Betsey Rist
(courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)

yours of August 31st which reached our humble cabin in September. . . . In consequence of Father's not being able to work for so long, and a great many hindrances we did not move into our house until the last of October. Then, it was not fit to live in, but we have got along so far very comfortably. We have not got lumber to finish it yet so it is all in one room. It reminds me of a barn, most of anything, but there is nothing like getting used to it. We have to carry logs to the mill to have them sawed before we get any lumber. We intend to have some this week, if nothing happens to prevent. There is so much to do, and nothing to do with, that it makes it hard to do anything. However, "Patience and Perseverance will accomplish all things," . . . so if we keep doing, I think we shall be comfortable in time.

It is so cold, and such bad walking we cannot attend meeting. It is a mile and a half from here

and we have to walk. Before the snow came they had meeting every Sabbath. The Congregational minister preached one Sabbath and the Presbyterian the next. We miss the meetings. Having to stay at home all day Sunday makes us lonesome, but we hope it will be better sometime.

I like the people here very much, what few I have become acquainted with. I think this is a very pleasant country in summer but I can tell more about the winter when it is past, than I know now. Everything is new here, and things are very high. Provisions, and everything else. . . .

Yours with much respect,
Abbie M. Rist

One cannot help comparing the attitudes of the mother, daughter, and son to the same events. Betsey's letters reveal a homesick, melancholy woman with many doubts and fears concerning their decision to face the uncertainties of life on the harsh frontier. The unsettled prairie offered golden opportunity for young people, but Betsey was too old (in those days, fifty-three was long past middle-age) to be uprooted from her comfortable home in a large New England town. She felt very keenly her separation from her brothers and sister and from friends of her own generation; she grieved for the four children who lay buried back in Uxbridge. Her only solace seemed to be in her strict Calvinist religious faith.

On the other hand, sixteen-year-old Abbie was eager for adventure. Though she endured with Betsey and the other settlers the same hardships—isolation, severe winters, drought, flood, and threat of Indian raids—her bouyant spirit enabled her to meet each new trial with "patience and perseverance," as she seemed so fond of saying. Similarly, Sylvester's letter reflects his disappointment with conditions as he found them, but he tempers his disillusionment with a rather wry humor.



Wood-frame home of the Rist family (courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)

Sylvester Rist to Darius Sibley, Putnam, Connecticut

Algona, April 8, 1857

Dear Uncle:

I have been thinking for some weeks past that I would write you a few lines, as we have not heard from any of your family for some time, hoping you would return favor. Father, as I suppose you have heard, cut his knee last Fall and has been lame ever since, and what has made matters worse, he has been troubled all winter with the rheumatism, so he has not been able to do anything this winter.

Mother has been homesick ever since we left Whitins. She thinks of all places, the West is *Most Miserable*. I am sorry she ever came here for I don't think she ever will like. Today and yesterday she has been down to the lowest notch. I tell her it is natural to the family, when they are down, to be *clear* down. She says tell you never to think of leaving old Connecticut for the sake of coming out West where there is nothing but land. And she thinks it rather hard to sacrifice everything for a little land.

April 7. Two days have elapsed since I begun

to write this. I should have finished it last night, but was away from home. However it will reach you just as quick for our mail goes but once a week.

We are sitting around the fire tonight as usual. Abbie is knitting. Father is sitting on the sofa. Mother occupies the only rocking chair the house affords. I wish you could look into our log cabin and see us as we are. The room we live in is about 13 × 15 feet. For a partition to separate us from Father's bedroom, Mother has hung up the carpet that was used in the sitting room back home. Frank and Wife have been living with us this winter. They live upstairs.

Frank has just come in with a prairie chicken which he caught in a trap. He says tell Uncle that we dine on fowls most every day, but that is not so. You must make allowance for him because he is a Western man and it is impossible for them to tell the truth. 'Tis true there is plenty of wild fowls about, of most all kinds, but the trouble seems to be in getting near enough to shoot them, especially for such a military man as I be.

As for stock, we are not very well supplied. Father has one yoke of oxen, one cow, six hens and a rooster. We have just erected a privy. Through this long cold winter, we have followed the Western fashion, using the woods and corners of fences for the pleasant purpose, but we are heartily sick of it. I think it would do you good to see how the regular Western men live. I mean them that come right from the Indians. They live like pigs, to say the least.

Yesterday I went to town meeting, and without any joking was chosen Town Clerk! *What an honor!* We came West partly to live cheap. Thought things was getting too high there, but as the saying is, we barked up the wrong tree.

There is a rumor afloat that the Indians have been killing off the white people in some small settlements about 60 miles northwest of us in the vicinity of Spirit Lake, near the Minnesota line.

A great many different stories are told about it, the largest I have heard is that about 50 have been killed. Whether any of them are true or not, I do not know. A number of young men started out from here this afternoon to go up there to see if there is any truth in these reports.

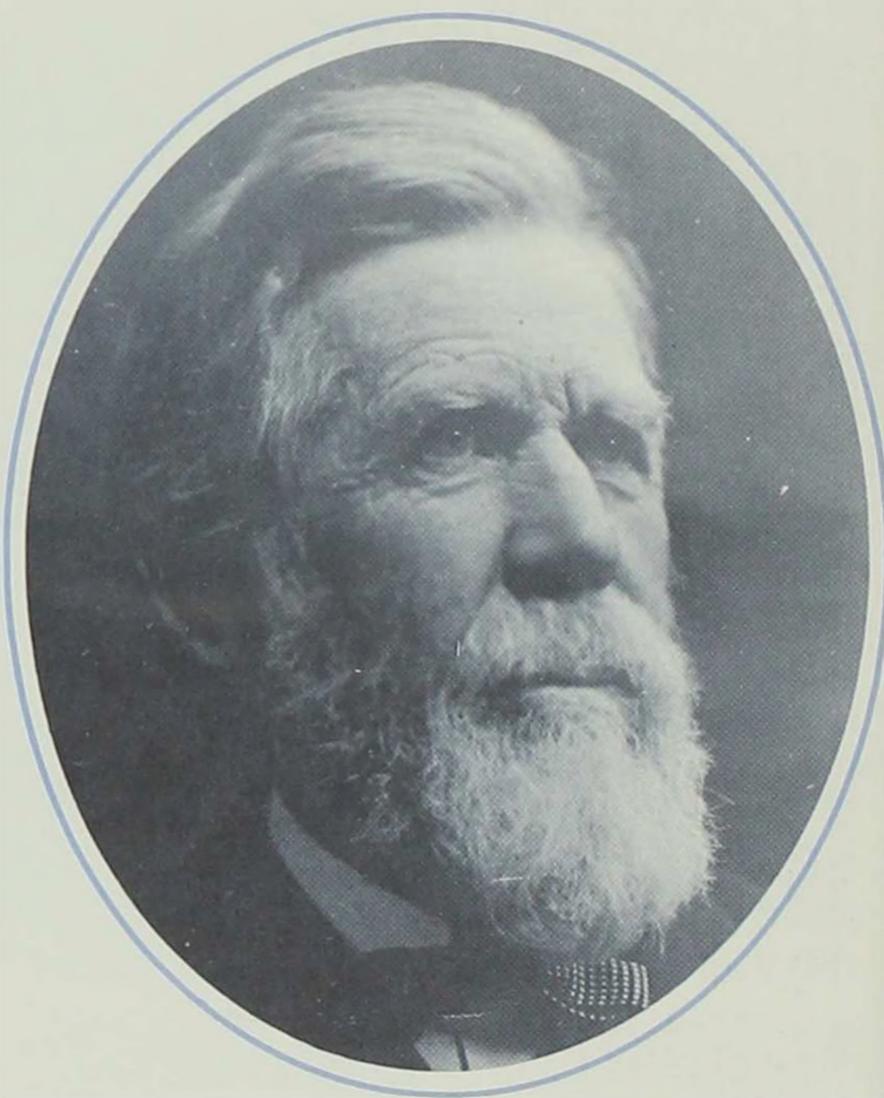
Spring seems to be coming on rather slow. The snow is not all gone yet. We have not begun to plow, but hope to soon. I expect I shall have to work farming this year. I would rather be excused, but do not think I can. . . . *This letter is incomplete as half the page, written on both sides, is missing.*

Betsey Rist to Darius and Almira Sibley, Putnam, Connecticut

Algona, April 29, 1857

Dear Brother and Sister:

With a trembling hand and a sad heart, I take my pen to write you a few lines. We received a paper from you and a letter from Brother John with the sad news that Darius A. was dead. We sympathise with you in your affliction. We know from experience what it is to part with



Luther Rist, husband of Betsey (courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)

dear and beloved children. I wish, my brother and sister, that I could see you and comfort you in your sorrow. I pray the blessed Saviour, in whom he trusted in the trying hour of death, when no earthly arm could save him, may be your support. . . . He was kind to all, but he has been called in his youthful days. He has passed through what we all must, soon. May we all be ready when the summons comes. O Brother, give your heart to God. Seek Him. Put your trust in Him. There is no true happiness in the things of this world.

We feel that we are liable to have our lives taken at any time. I suppose you have seen by the papers, the Indians are close by. They have killed 32 up to Spirit Lake, sixty miles from here. They say they will kill all the whites from Terril to Fort Dodge. The men are at work up town making a fort for the safety of the folks here. Frank and Sylvester are there. There are

one hundred men to work. Some have left for below. We could not leave since Frank's wife expects to be confined any day. The excitement is great here. The women are frightened very much. I have been, but I feel calmer today. All the neighbors come here to stay. Nights there is three men besides our folks. The women sleep upstairs, the men on the floor. They have six guns all ready loaded.

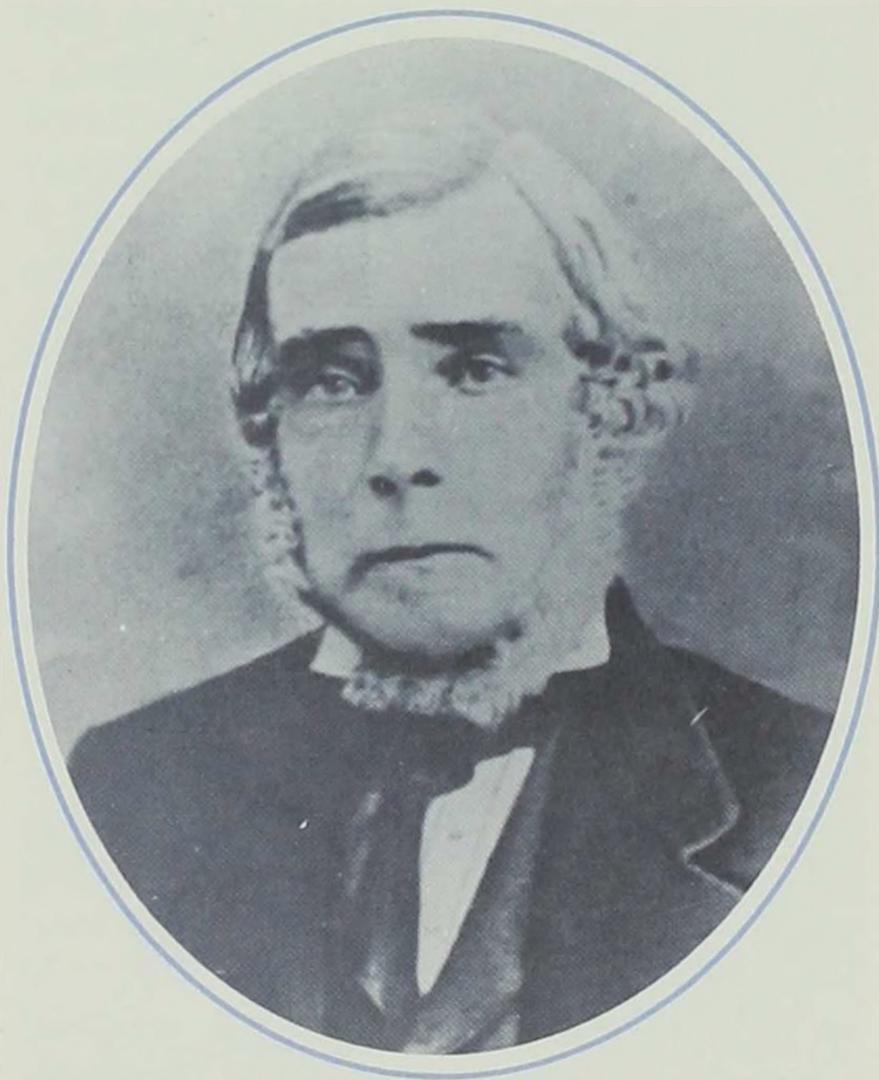
The doctor's wife came here yesterday almost frightened to death. She thought they was a comin', but she has gone home today. We shall stay here as long as we can. When they get the fields done, if there is great danger, we shall try to go up to the fort. Luther is very lame yet. He works a little. He says he don't think the Indians will come unless they mean to have a war. They have sent to the Governor for men to protect the settlement, but if the Indians should come in a large number, we should fair hard.

Saturday afternoon, the 25th. The report is there are Indians about 20 miles below. There is so many stories told that we don't know what to believe. The boys went up to work on the fort today. They think they shall finish tonight.

Luther has gone up to mend a pipe in the sawmill. He keeps pretty good courage. We heard yesterday that the Governor had ordered out two thousand men. I hope they will come soon. Some of the men think there will be a war. . . .

Sunday, the 26th. The boys have gone to work at the fort today. They did not finish yesterday. The folks moved from the other side of the river last night. The minister says we can come there, but it is hard for us to leave. We are all as well as common except Abbie. I think she has got the ague but I hope it will not last.

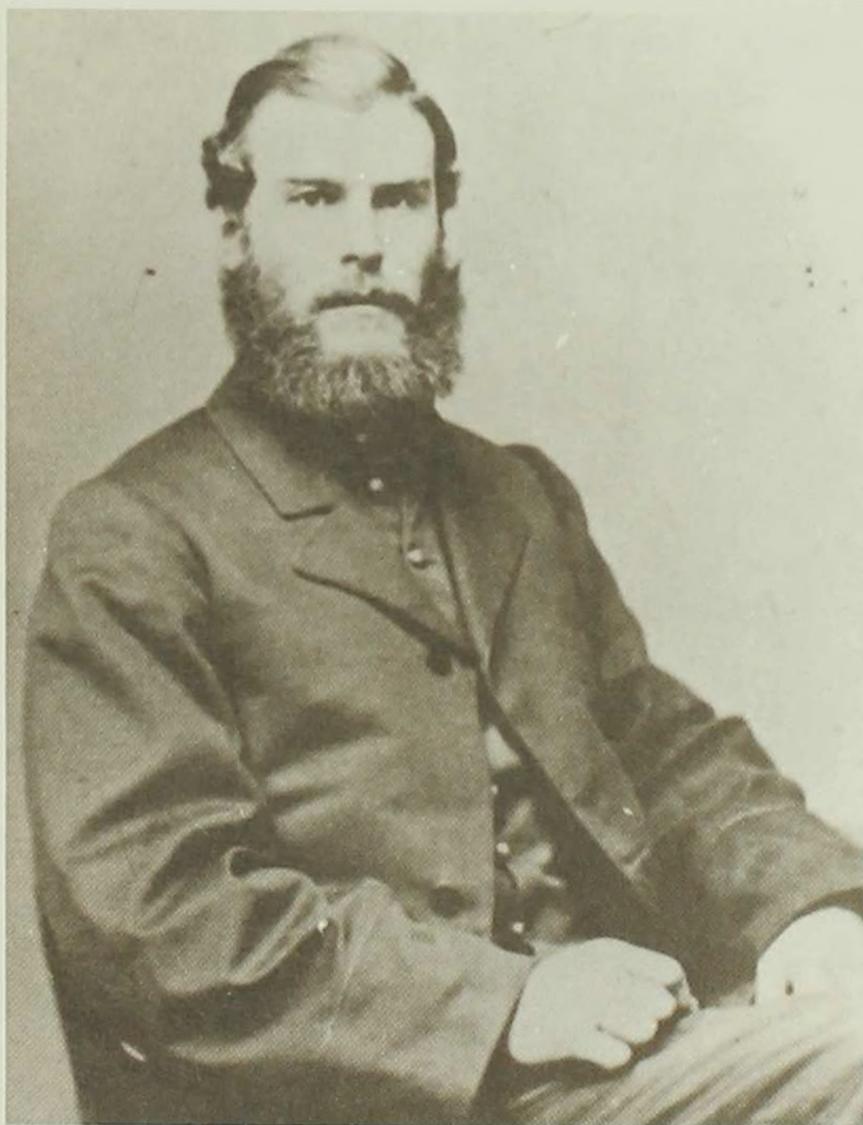
Tuesday, the 28th. We feel quite calm today. There is no news. They have about finished the Fort. They have formed a company, chosen their officers. If there is any trouble they will have to go. Abbie is some better. Her mouth has been very sore. The Spring has been very



Sylvester Rist, youngest son of Luther and Betsey Rist (courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)

cold and backward. The men folks have begun to plough. Luther drives the oxen. Frank holds the plough. They have a long whip, some like a fish pole. If the Indians will let us alone I hope we shall raise something this year, but they may come when we least expect them. They are so sly and ugly that we cannot feel safe any time until they can drive them back and keep them there. They say they haven't had their pay for the land.

It is one year today since we left our New England home to find a home in this Western World. I have had a great many sad hours and shed many tears. It never has seemed like home to me yet, but I hope it will be better for my family. I should be glad to see you come, but it is a hard country for new beginners. When we get something raised I hope we shall feel better. There is no more news about the Indians. I went up to the Fort yesterday. It



Lewis H. Smith, husband of Abbie Rist (courtesy Mrs. Howard M. Long)

looks like a prison. It is built around the Town Hall. We have milk and eggs and potatoes, our living is good enough. Luther's hand is so lame that he can't write much. . . .

This from your Sister,
Betsey Rist

Abbie Rist to a cousin in Uxbridge

Algona, Iowa May 3, 1857

Dear Cousin:

We received your letter in due time with much pleasure. . . . Though we have had a late Spring, for the past three days it has been very warm and pleasant. The Indians have put them back in their work. I suppose you have heard something about it. It seems a small party of a Sioux tribe north of here have been going around doing mischief. Their intention was to kill all the settlers on both forks of the river as far as Fort Dodge. The first we heard of

them was about the middle of March. They had attacked the settlement at Spirit Lake, about 60 miles from here, and murdered 32 persons, which was all there was there at the time. . . . About a week afterward they attacked Springfield, a small settlement in Minnesota, about 60 or 70 miles from here. They did not kill them all there, part of them got away. It is thought there were as many Indians killed as white people, but we do not know, for they took their dead back with them. They who went to bury the dead at Spirit Lake said it seemed they died fighting to save themselves and families, their rifles and revolvers in their hands.

About a week or 10 days ago we heard they were gathering their forces to clear the forks of the river of all settlers. Our people were frightened and deemed it advisable to build a fort to try to protect ourselves as well as we could, so they went to work and built it. A great many of the settlers outside moved into town. We did not go as we thought we [should not go until] we heard something very alarming. It is not at all convenient for us to leave home. We expected we should have to go to save our lives, but we have not. The excitement is almost over with now. We hear the Indians have gone to their lands in Minnesota. I hope we may not be troubled with them, but we may be yet, if the government of the United States does not do something with them. Thirty-nine persons is a large number to be killed by Indians, without making some noise about it. There have been several families gone to Spirit Lake since the massacre. I believe there are as many as there were before. Some of the people moved away while there was so much excitement, but some of them are back again and I presume if we have no more trouble with Indians, more will come. Some of the people were below a hundred miles and they heard Algona had been taken and all killed, so you can see the stories are large, only so far off. If they all increase in proportion, I don't know that they would be when they get to you. However, we are all safe

now. I hope we may not see an Indian for ten years. I don't think you will want to hear more about it; it is not very pleasant to be in fear of them all the time. For a week we had six persons beside our own family here nights, and six guns well loaded, but we did not use them. . . .

It is very pleasant here now. Flowers are springing up all around the house and in the woods, and the prairies will soon be covered with them. There are a great many pleasant things in the west, and a great many very unpleasant things, but Patience and Perseverance will help one along a great deal, in any place, and certainly they need a full supply here, but every situation in life has its trials and troubles. I think the best way is to take it easy and don't let it worry you, and you know there is nothing like getting used to it, but enough of this.

New settlers keep coming in every few days. Father takes his gun with him ploughing and shoots prairie squirrels. He has shot over forty within a few days. He seems quite smart. In the Spring and Fall prairie chickens are very plenty. We caught thirty in April. They were

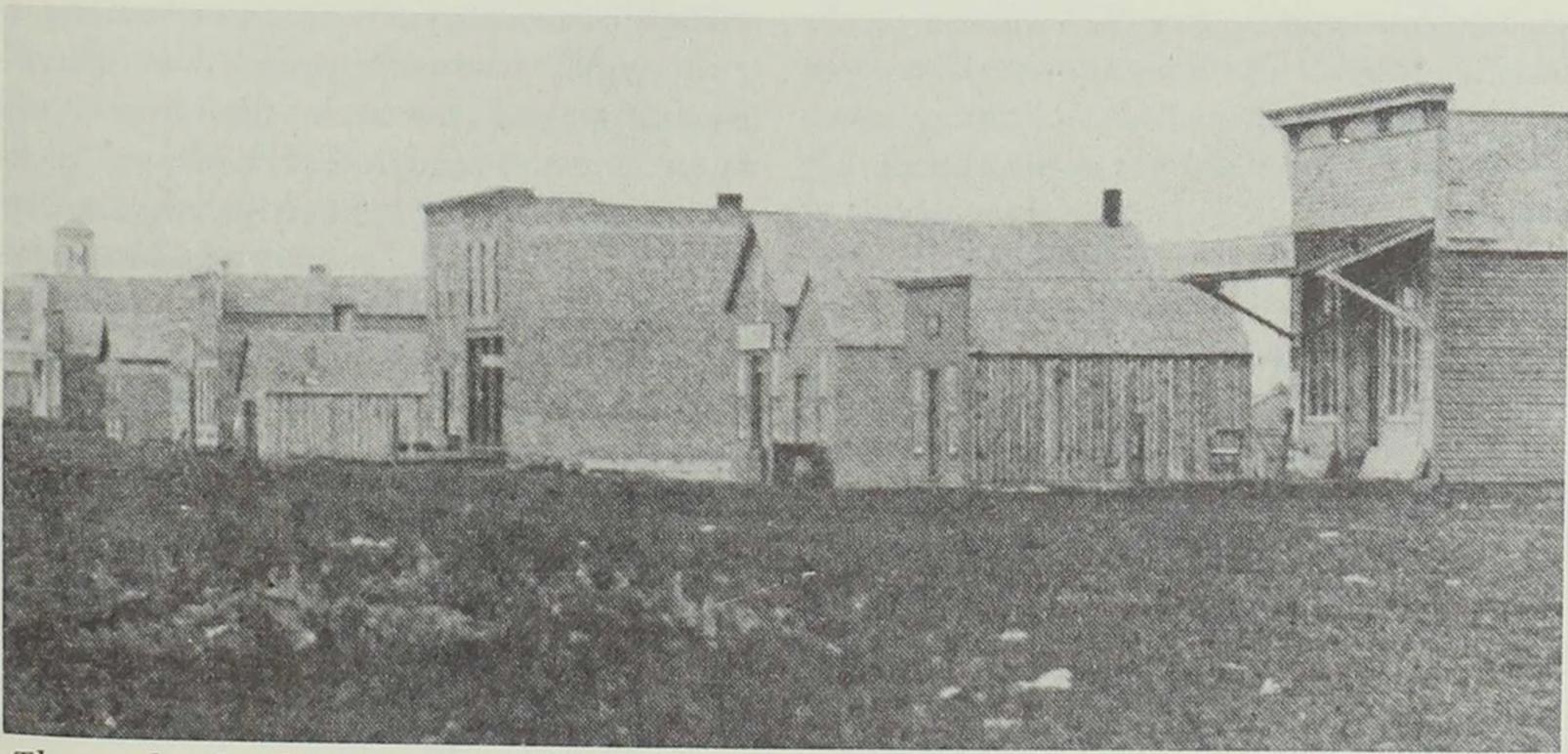
very good. We catch them in traps.

Lewis is out surveying this week with a friend of his. They carry their provisions and camp out; a fine way of living, but he is used to it. His home was in Cambridge. But I must say good-bye.

Write soon,
Abbie

"Lewis is out surveying this week. . . ." is the first mention Abbie makes in her letters of an acquaintanceship with a young man. In September 1856, Lewis Smith wrote in his diary that he had asked Miss Abbie Rist to go with him to a party at the home of Judge Asa C. Call and "she consented to go." A few days later, he makes another entry: "Took the team back this morning. Party last night. We got there quite late but had a good time. After the party, young Rist [Sylvester] and myself took our ladies to ride around the Grove and got home about half past two."

According to the Rist genealogy, Lewis H. Smith and Abbie M. Rist were married in Algona on October 25, 1857. Abbie was just eighteen; Lewis was twenty-two. Lewis and Abbie



The south side of State Street in Algona in the late 1860s (SHSI)



Eugenia Smith (SHSI)

took an active role in the social life of the town. The early settlers were determined that although they were far removed from the educational centers which they had known in the East, they would not abandon the cultural aspects of life. A reading circle, a literary band, and a singing school all were organized during the winter of 1857-1858. Lewis was president of the literary band.

Although he was involved in numerous business enterprises, Lewis maintained his surveying activities. The last letter we have from Abbie reveals a happy young mother looking forward to her husband's return from a surveying trip and to the completion of a frame house in town which Lewis was having built for his family.

Abbie (Rist) Smith to John Sibley, Pawtucket, Rhode Island

Algona, Iowa, July 2, 1865

Dear Uncle John:

Mother tells me she has not heard from you for some time and as I have plenty of time, and want something to busy me when I am not tending baby, I thought I would write to you. . . .

Lewis was well the last I heard from him on the 18th of June. He has gone to Idaho as Surveyor of the Government Road, the Niobrarah and Virginia City Wagon Road. He started from here June 2nd, reached Sioux City the 6th at 10 o'clock A.M. The train had gone on to the mouth of the Niobrarah River except the cavalry and saddle horses and Col. Sawyer, the Commander. They started from Sioux City the 8th at 4 o'clock A.M., stopped at Yanktown the 11th, Sunday. Went up to the camp Monday and started on their long journey Tuesday, the 13th at 1 P.M. He got 32 miles by Sunday, the 18th. They do not travel on Sundays. A part of the way it was very rough travelling and creeks to cross every two or three miles, and their wagons were heavily loaded. The country through which they were going, he says, was very sandy, with large patches of cactus in full bloom in nearly every color, in all directions, sometimes half an acre in a patch.

At night, when they camp they drive the wagons around in a circle, the fore end of one lapping on the hind end of another. The cattle and everything has to be driven inside the circle and guarded. A Howitzer and some cavalry and infantry go in front, then half a company, then about 25 wagons, then half a company of infantry, a Howitzer and cavalry for rear guard. They have 150 mules and 350 cattle and 40 or 50 horses and about 300 men. Only 6 or 7 wagons of emigrants are going along. He takes courses with pocket compass and general course at night with solar compass. The distance is measured with an odometer on a wagon wheel. He has a good saddle horse to ride and says it is not hard work. His pay is \$5.00 a day

and found. I do not expect to hear from him again very soon. They expect to go through in 65 or 75 days. I have written this particularly as I thought it might be of interest to you.

After this summer I hope to have my husband at home, if we live. I expect he will be gone now till the first of November or December. I am housekeeping, have a girl to stay with me and get along very well only get lonesome. Our house is not done yet, but expect to have it finished this summer, most of it.

I believe I have written you quite a long letter. You will excuse mistakes there is only four children running around here and playing while I am writing. Please write as soon as convenient.

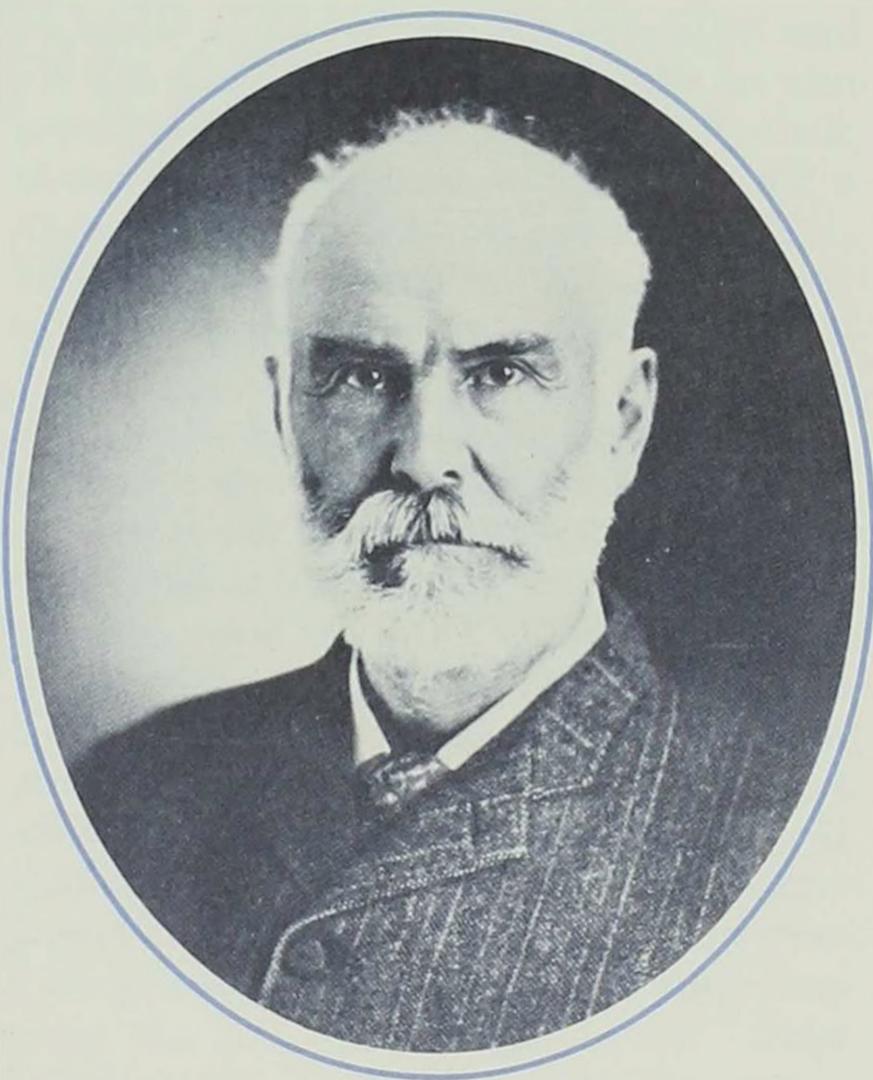
Yours with love,
Abbie M. Smith

EPILOGUE

Upon Lewis's return from the surveying expedition, he and Abbie moved into their new house. With his brother John, Lewis soon opened a general store in Algona. This was only one of his many business enterprises. He built the first office building in Algona in the autumn of 1856. He was a government surveyor, but he also studied law and became county judge while still in his early twenties. Always very active in politics, Lewis was later sent as a delegate by the House of Representatives to Spirit Lake, where he served as enrolling clerk.

Apparently Lewis and Abbie and their four children were very happy until tragedy struck in September 1866, when Abbie—who was pregnant—became ill with "congestion of the lungs," a malady which had afflicted several other members of the Rist family. She died on September third, her fifth child stillborn.

At the time of Abbie's death her children were eight, six, four, and two years of age. Lewis kept the little family together with the help of a hired girl, and continued on as a partner in the Smith Brothers' Store.



Lewis H. Smith (SHSI)

In May 1863, Luther Rist died of pneumonia after a very brief illness. Betsey went to live with Sylvester and his family. For a number of years, Frank's chief occupation was driving the mail stage from Algona to Fort Dodge. The mail was regarded as the most important link with the outside world. Indeed, the first newspaper in the town often held up its last column of type until Frank brought the latest news by mail from Fort Dodge. In February 1872, while driving the stage in a winter storm, Frank "frosted his lungs" and died soon afterward.

The death of Frank left Eugenia with three fatherless boys. Lewis Smith had been trying for six years following Abbie's death to raise his four children. He and Eugenia were married December 8, 1872, thus uniting seven of Betsey's grandchildren under one roof.

In addition to his other activities, Lewis operated the Kossuth County Bank with Mr. Wil-

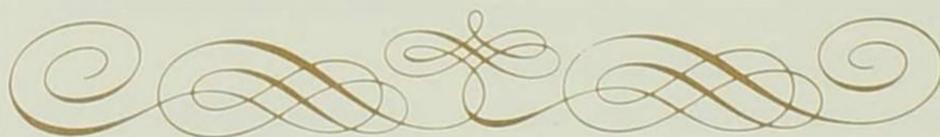
liam H. Ingham, its founder, and retained an interest there for the rest of his long life. He died in January 1928, a few days after suffering a fall at the age of ninety-two. A Christmas card which he designed and sent in 1927, just a few weeks before his death, gives a pictorial story of his life as one of the first settlers of Algona.

After Abbie, Luther, and Frank all preceded her in death, Betsey retreated into a world of memories. Although she never felt at home in this "strange land" she outlived all but Sylvester, with whom she made her home until her own death in 1882 at the age of seventy-eight. Her great-granddaughter describes her in a letter written in 1930: "After Frank's death, Grandmother Betsey just sat in her chair by the kitchen stove, winter and summer. She always wore a cap and carried a bag with her knitting and peppermints. . . . She hardly ever spoke a word."

Perhaps lying unnoticed in some attic are more letters and diaries such as these which tell a similar story of the pioneers. Some settlers found their good fortune. Others, like Betsey, found disillusionment, loneliness, and tragedy. But because of the daring and courage of these adventurous ancestors, a very important chapter of our history was in the making. Their descendants have reason to be proud of their heritage. □

Note on Sources

Florence Call Cowles' colorful local history, *Early Algona* (Des Moines: Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, 1929), contains the story of the founding of Algona as recounted by her grandfather, Ambrose C. Call. Letters written in the years 1856-1882 by members of the Rist family to New England relatives provided important information. Also helpful were letters written by their descendants to the author. Mrs. Howard Long of Algona, Betsey's Rist's great, great-granddaughter, supplied further information as well as photographs of Rist family members.



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DORIS FAULKNER, who lives in Tucson, Arizona, is a great-granddaughter of Betsey Rist's sister. Mrs. Faulkner's mother first showed her Betsey's letters from Algona several years ago after finding them among family possessions in New England. Today in Tucson, Mrs. Faulkner participates in church activities and is a member of a creative writing workshop conducted by Phyllis Heald. Mrs. Faulkner has published religious articles and poems, but this is her first historical article. She and her husband, Harvey Faulkner, have eight grandchildren.

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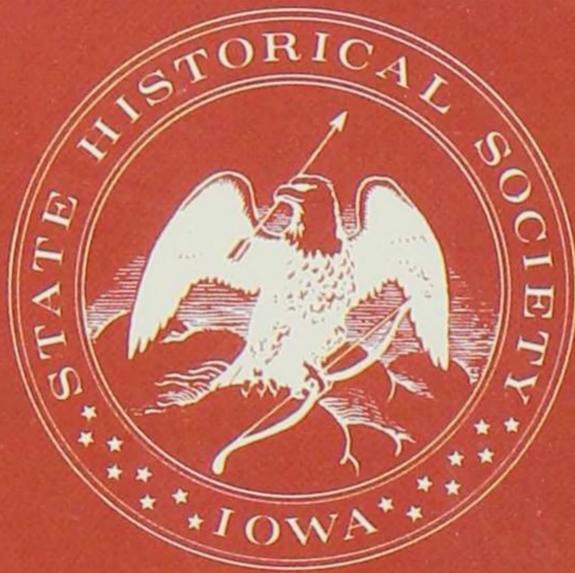
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