

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.

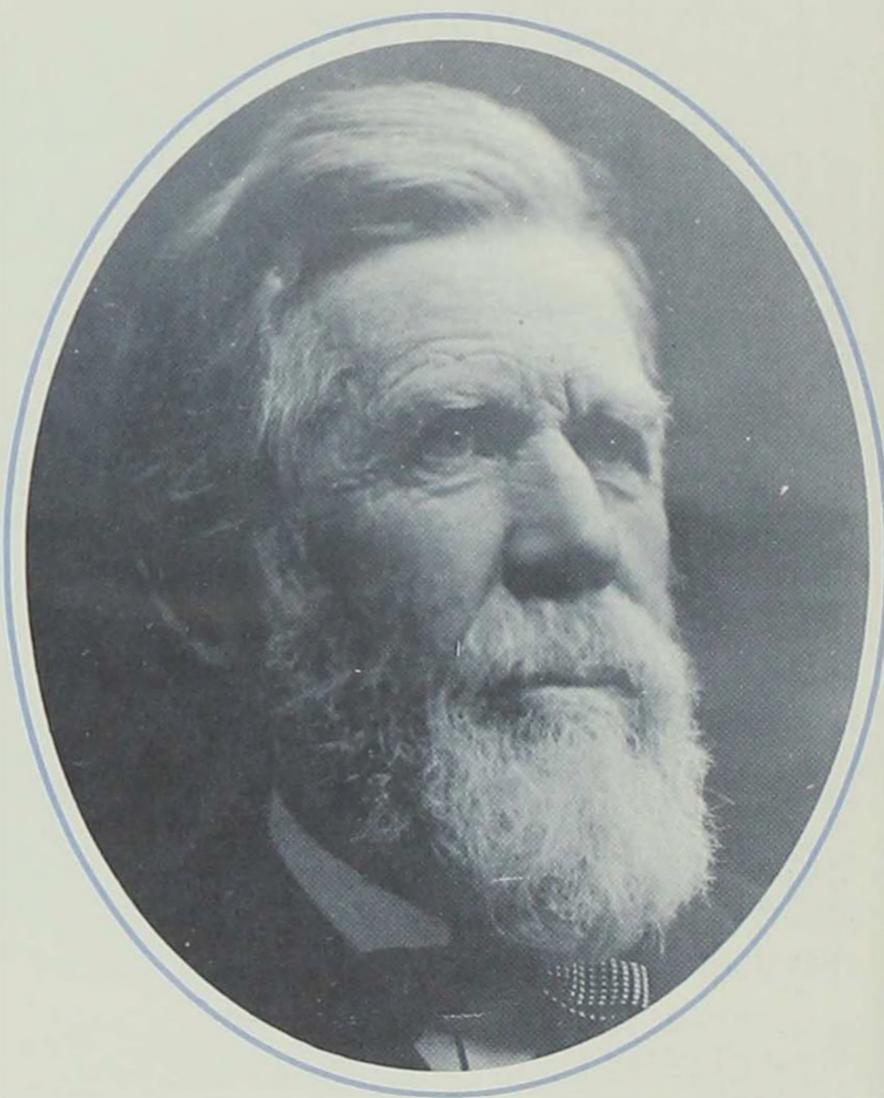
Spring seems to be coming on rather slow. The snow is not all gone yet. We have not begun to plow, but hope to soon. I expect I shall have to work farming this year. I would rather be excused, but do not think I can. . . . *This letter is incomplete as half the page, written on both sides, is missing.*

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.

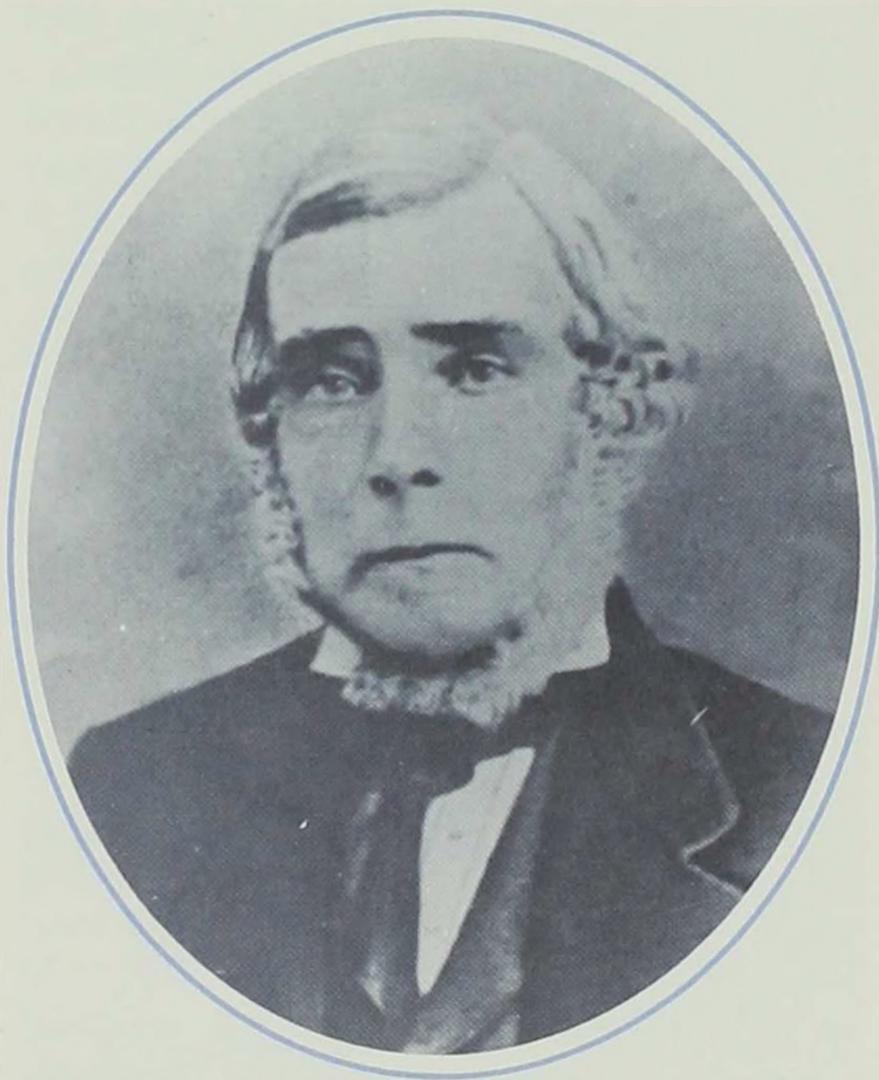
The doctor's wife came here yesterday almost frightened to death. She thought they was a comin', but she has gone home today. We shall stay here as long as we can. When they get the fields done, if there is great danger, we shall try to go up to the fort. Luther is very lame yet. He works a little. He 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.

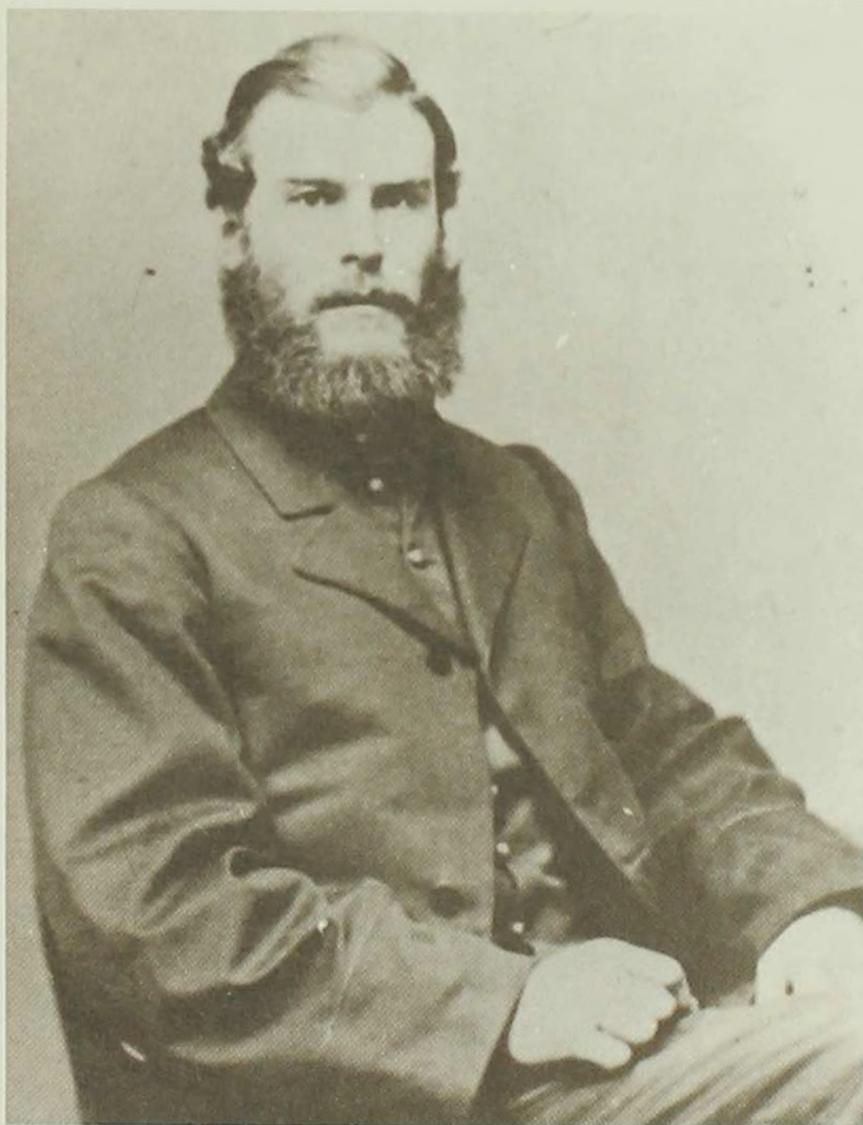
Tuesday, the 28th. We feel quite calm today. There is no news. They have about finished the Fort. They have formed a company, chosen their officers. If there is any trouble they will have to go. Abbie is some better. Her mouth has been very sore. The Spring has been very



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

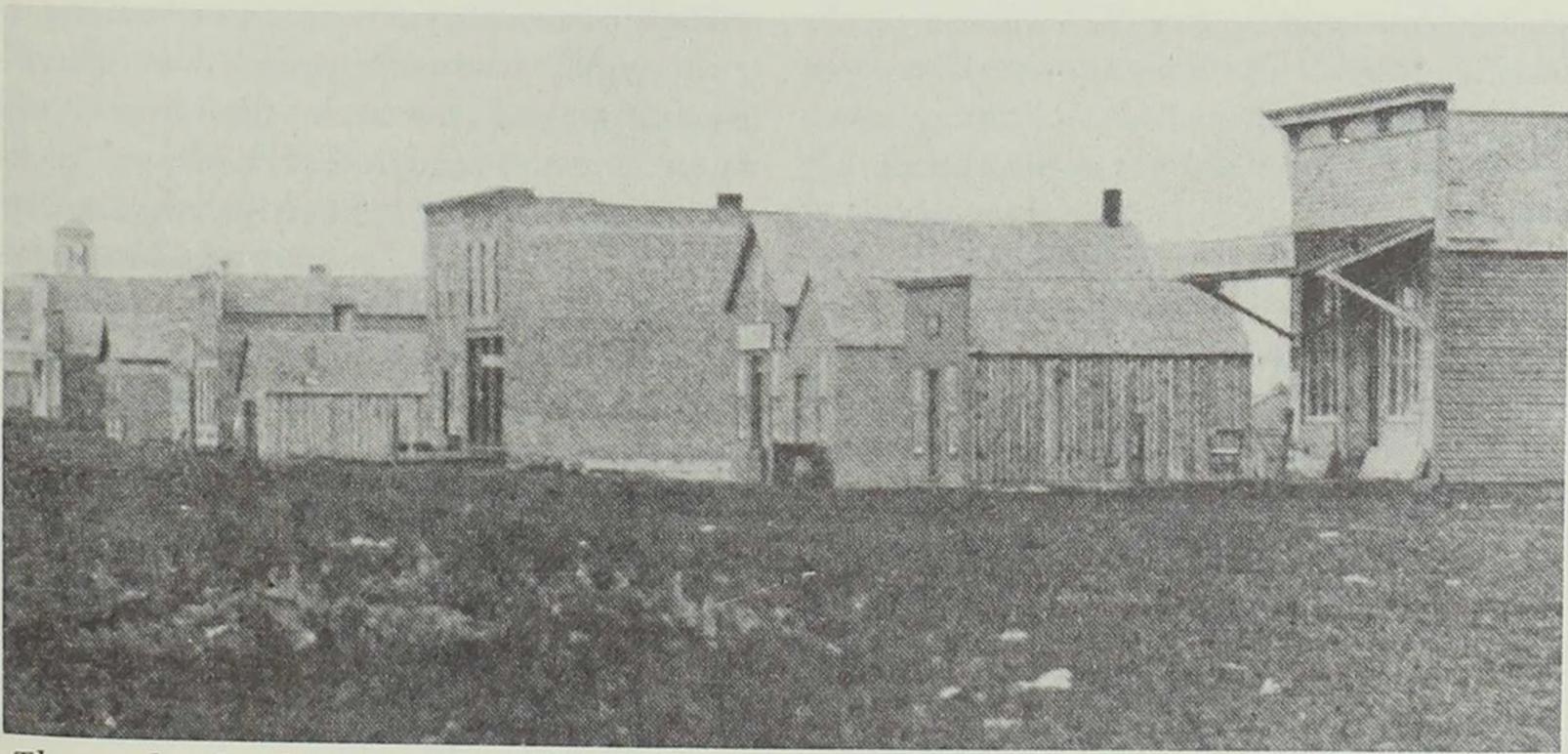
very good. We catch them in traps.

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.

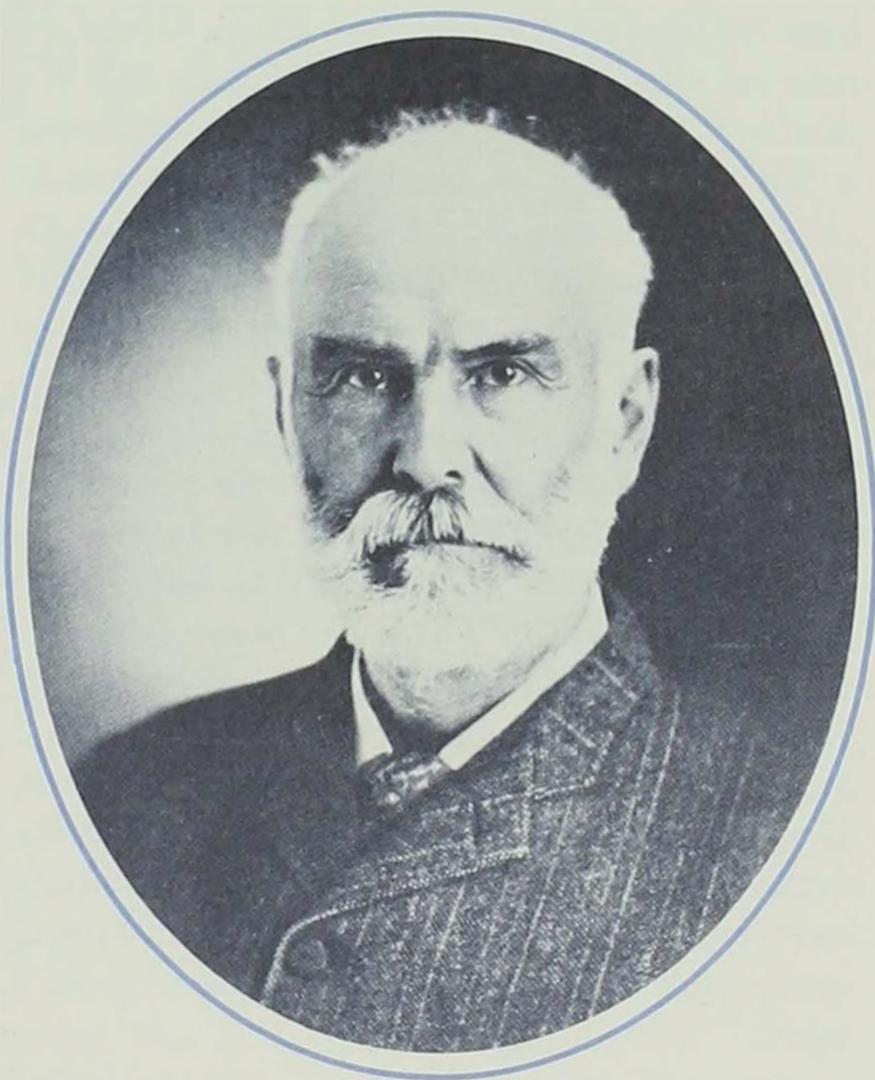
Yours with love,
Abbie M. Smith

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-

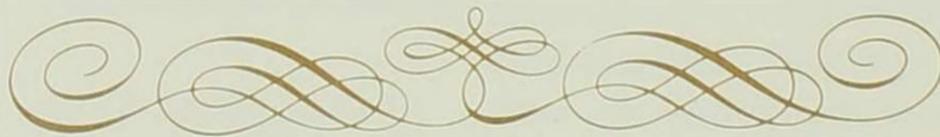
liam H. Ingham, its founder, and retained an interest there for the rest of his long life. He died in January 1928, a few days after suffering a fall at the age of ninety-two. A Christmas card which he designed and sent in 1927, just a few weeks before his death, gives a pictorial story of his life as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



CONTRIBUTORS

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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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