

COMMENTARY

Will the real Ding please stand up?



—FROM IOWA AND PROUD OF IT—

Ding's farmer.

Iconography (defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “pictorial illustration of a given subject”) is an endlessly fascinating and sometimes imprecise form of study. Historians for generations have relied on the written and printed word for most of their insights, however some have studied visual images from the past to see what they may reveal about our forebears. *The Palimpsest*, being an illustrated magazine of popular Iowa history, often presents the raw materials of the iconographer, and we usually attempt to say something about our illustrations (for example on pages 3 and 4 of this issue).

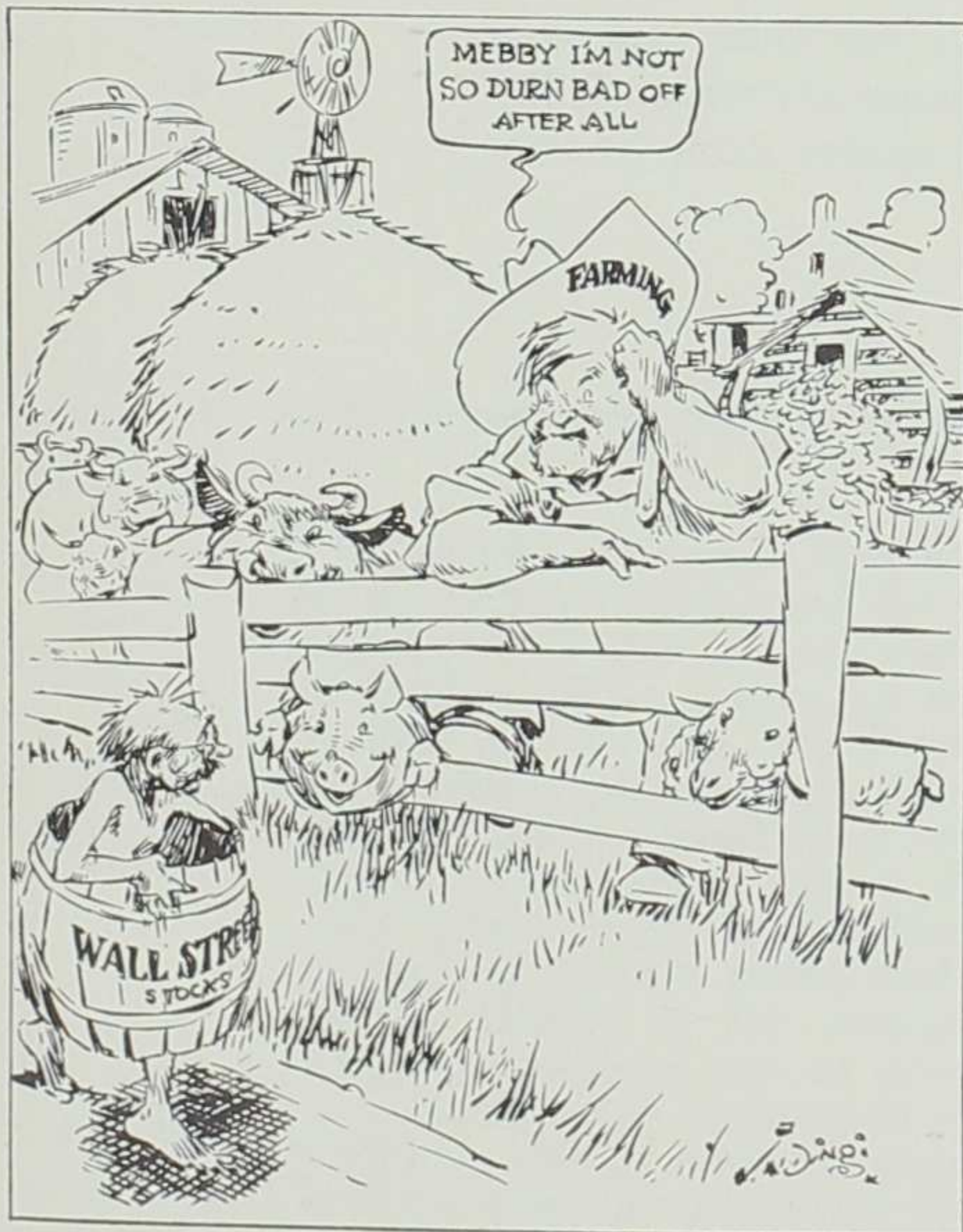
We said something about the cover illustration of the November/December 1975 issue which proved to have been foolhardy or, at the least, incautious. While preparing his article on “Political Paraphernalia,” Michael Gibson found an attractive sticker from the 1936 campaign. The image (reproduced above in black and white)

was a familiar one—the well-fed farmer with bib overalls, rolled up sleeves, a floppy hat, and white-whiskered chin was one of the most powerful symbols of Iowa’s great political cartoonist, J. N. “Ding” Darling. The drawing was unsigned and the sentiments did not square with what we knew of Ding’s political views, but we hedged slightly in a caption that said the Democrats “used the talents of” Ding to promote their cause. This stopped a hair’s breadth short of saying outright that Ding drew it, but left a pretty strong impression that such was the case. Some of our readers were not long in setting the record straight.

John Henry, now of West Branch, Iowa, a close friend and editor of Ding, let us know that he had been looking at Ding’s cartoons for half a century and that our cover was not the genuine article. Other readers, including Ding’s daughter, offered the same opinion. Their rea-

son for doubting the authenticity of the campaign sticker was Ding's fervent Republicanism. As anyone who has looked over his cartoons from the 1930s knows, Ding was no friend of the New Deal; in fact, he was as staunch a Republican as the party could boast. He was a friend of Herbert Hoover, for example, and had a warm personal and political relationship with the President. Even more telling was the fact that Republican leaders urged Ding himself to run for the U.S. Senate from Iowa in 1936 on the G.O.P. ticket, feeling that he would be a shoo-in on the strength of his popularity as a cartoonist (they were undoubtedly correct). Ding declined the honor, but it seems unlikely that he would have provided campaign material for the opposition.

Chastened by these expert opinions, we hurried to re-study the iconography. A close comparison with verifiable Ding cartoons shows that the New Deal drawing is very much like Ding's work, but it probably is from another pen. The two genuine Ding farmers reproduced here, both drawn in the late 1920s, show subtle differences



Genuine Ding from October 1929, the day of the Great Stock Market Crash (drawings courtesy of J. N. ("Ding") Darling Foundation).



from the Democratic version. The concept and symbolism are the same, but the Democratic version is slightly "off." The hat is okay and the lettering is a good copy of Ding's style, but the details of eyes, nose, and beard are not quite right. As Mr. Henry points out, Ding's style was very clean, relying on light strokes of the pen to suggest the figures. The Democratic version is too heavily lined and shaded with cross-hatching. In addition, the donkey is not a Ding donkey—comparison with a genuine Darling symbol (drawn in 1936) shows that Ding was less literal in his rendition of animal anatomy and much lighter with the pen. And, as Mr. Henry says, the Democratic version has too many back teeth.

Whether or not the Democratic Party really employed Ding himself, the campaign promoters recognized an extremely effective symbol when they saw it. Ding used the chubby farmer as a proto-Iowan and made him so familiar to readers of the *Des Moines Register* that no other symbol has ever quite replaced him. Our hunch is that Ding consciously or unconsciously transformed "Uncle Sam"—the traditional image of national unity—into a specific symbol for prosperous Iowa. Ding maintained that he did not model the figure on any living person, although some have claimed to have inspired him. Whatever the derivation of the symbol, it was a stroke of genius.

L. E. P.