

ART AND ADVERTISING:

The Thos. D. Murphy Co. Of Red Oak

BY
L. EDWARD PURCELL

Red Oak, Iowa, a small town in the southwestern part of the Hawkeye State, was as unlikely a spot as could be imagined for the birthplace of a modern advertising industry. But so it was. In the last decade of the last century two young entrepreneurs, fresh from college and struggling to keep solvent a newspaper, decided to print a modest calendar for local sale. The venture met indifferent success, but the pair was encouraged to continue with the idea. Within ten years the Thos. D. Murphy Co. was one of the nation's largest manufacturers of art calendars and one of the first to be commercially successful. The company produced thousands of beautifully printed, full-color calendars to grace the walls of American homes.

Thomas D. Murphy, born on a farm near Monroe, Iowa, met Edmund B. Osborne at Simpson College. Murphy was a serious student (valedictorian of the class of 1888) and Osborne a carefree promoter who financed his education by a series of sales schemes. They were close friends. As Murphy later wrote, they shared, "the same fraternity, the same literary society, stayed at the same boarding house for a time, and were con-

federates in an endless variety of college deviltry. . . ."

Shortly before graduation from Simpson, Osborne was called to Red Oak, where his father-in-law had died leaving an unprosperous newspaper, *The Independent*. More or less by default Osborne took over the paper. He badgered his old chum Murphy to join him in Red Oak, a proposition about which Murphy grew skeptical following an unimpressive inspection of the newspaper's plant and assets. Murphy's only alternative, however, was a return to his father's farm, and he "knew too much about farm work to view it with enthusiasm." Preferring journalism to crops and livestock, young Murphy borrowed a small stake from his father and became half owner of *The Independent*.

Struggle as they might, Murphy and Osborne could not make the paper a paying venture. Writing and printing the paper, chasing down deadbeat accounts, and juggling loans were full-time occupations. And by Murphy's account the free-spending Osborne made the finances tight. "The fact that I was single," wrote Murphy, "and lived cheaply was all that kept us afloat."

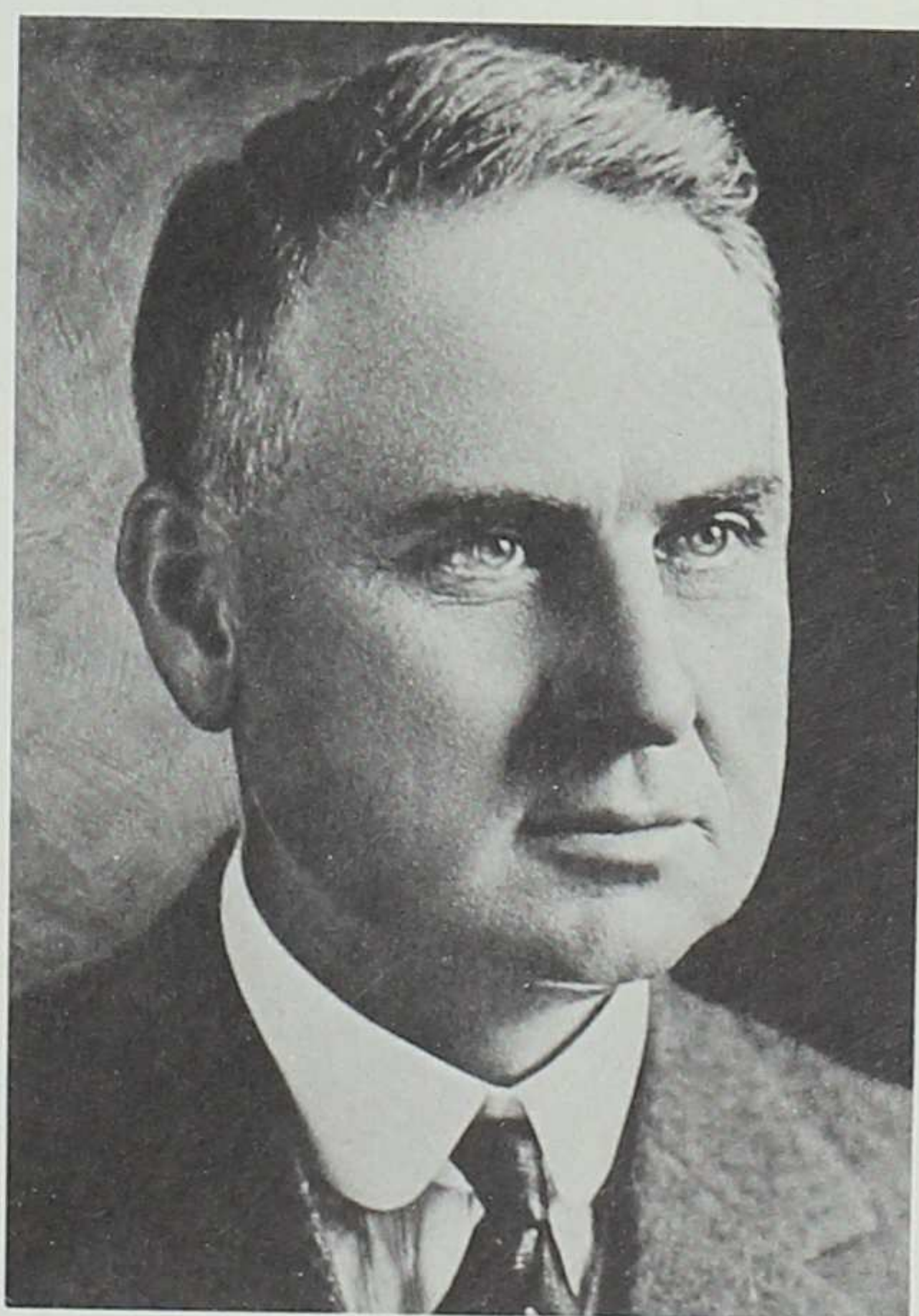
When the new Montgomery County



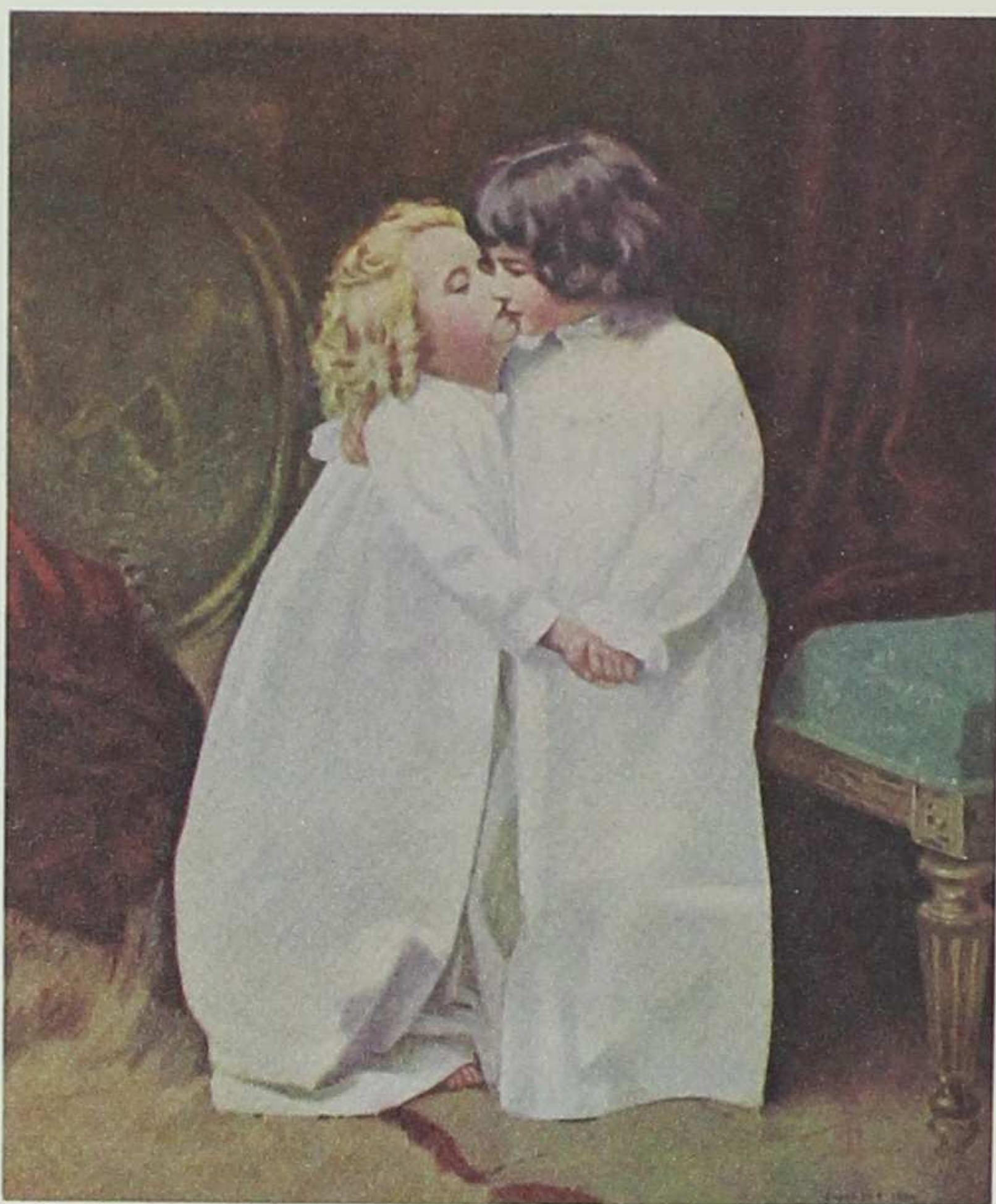
The Murphy Co. plant in 1906.

courthouse was built in Red Oak, Murphy and Osborne wanted an illustration for their paper, but the price of a wood-cut was too high to justify its purchase for the paper alone (Murphy calculated it would cost them a week's revenue). Osborne thought of a way to get the illustration. They would print up a number of the cuts, and then use them as centerpieces on wall calendars. The idea was a success. The sale of the calendars to local people netted \$300 — a vast sum for the skinny finances of the company — and the pair began to think of bigger and better fields of commerce. They planned to capitalize on other new courthouses in the West and Midwest by repeating their local success. Unfortunately, their next attempt, in Gage County, Nebraska met little response.

In the midst of the concern and confusion over what next to do, the serendipitous arrival in their office of two packages set Murphy and Osborne on course. From the Robinson Engraving Company of Boston came a set of sample



Thomas D. Murphy (courtesy of Thos. D. Murphy Co.)



"Good Night," a favorite seller from both the 1905 and 1906 catalogs. The original was a photograph by the Tonnese sisters, hand colored, and then printed. A black and white version was also offered by Murphy.

art calendars. These were "beautiful goods" — photogravures of famous paintings printed on heavy, cream-colored stock and carrying "elegant" silk-sewn calendar pads. In the same mail was a book of sample halftones from a printers' supply house. The halftone was a relatively new process for reproducing pictures on a printing press. Cheaper than wood engravings or gravures, the halftone could give a wonderful visual effect if printed properly.

Taking the idea for art calendars from the Robinson Company, Murphy and Osborne ordered a supply of halftones and planned to make their own calendars. (The Robinson Company was not a commercial success and apparently ceased business soon thereafter).

There were still technical problems, however. The equipment of the newspaper plant was antique and not designed for calendar printing. Murphy later wrote of how the first obstacles were surmounted:

We had a good deal of difficulty in making the samples. Our jobber was so rheumatic that the halftone prints were little better than smudges and gloom settled over the shop again. "Old Jim" the tramp printer who was earning the price of a meal on the [type] case, had worked in city shops and declared he could print "them things" on our newspaper press. This had been equipped with a kerosene engine a few months after I went on the job and we had been relieved of the task of hunting up a loafer to act as motive power to the press. I laughed at Jim and

pointed out that the press couldn't possibly deliver cardboards. "I'll show you," he said, and removing the "fly" from the press he seated himself on the delivery table and picked off the sheets by hand as the cylinder came round. I may say here that Old Jim, contrary to all my experience with tramp printers, stayed several months until all the work was done and helped us out of more than one dilemma. I can see him yet with the light gleaming on his bald head and the smoke rising from his corn-cob pipe as he dexterously grabbed the cards from the slowly moving cylinder.

Within a year Murphy and Osborne expanded their operation with new equipment and new capital. They were in the calendar business full-swing, but kept *The Independent* going on the side. They christened their new business the Hawkeye Art Printing Company. In 1891, the name was changed to Osborne

& Murphy. On the whole the enterprise prospered, although growth was slow. By 1895, they reached a crisis. Osborne — true to his nature — wanted to expand the business as rapidly as possible. Murphy, on the other hand, was more cautious (he called himself an "ultra-conservative") and was reluctant to incur more debt. The result of the disagreement was a split-up of the partnership. Osborne continued in the calendar business, and Murphy returned to running the newspaper fulltime, eventually consolidating *The Independent* with another local paper. Furthermore, Murphy agreed to stay out of the calendar business.

Within three years, Osborne — apparently restless — decided that the limits of the local market in Red Oak had been reached. He announced he was



Thos. Murphy seated in his office. Note the original paintings hanging on the wall. (courtesy of Thos. D. Murphy Co.)

moving his company to New York where a better supply of skilled labor and a larger selling area waited.

One suspects that the better part of the Murphy-Osborne team stayed behind in Red Oak. In 1900, the Thos. D. Murphy Co. was born, marking Murphy's return to the calendar industry. He built a new plant to house both the calendar business and his newspapers and began a remarkable series of technical and business moves that expanded his company at a fantastic rate. The first big success was with a line of mounted calendars, an innovation for the time. He also took the first steps to establish a traveling sales force. Murphy began to use the most advanced techniques of printing in making beautiful full-color (and black and white) calendars. He did not really invent any new processes, but he made the best possible use of new techniques.

At the same time, the products — advertising art calendars — were something of a new medium of advertising.

By the next year, Murphy was forced to build a second plant, this one a three-story building. Even the new plant was insufficient and additional space was rented. The third year saw a 100 per cent increase in business. A serious fire in Red Oak in 1903 gave Murphy pause, and he built yet a third plant for \$100,000 (“a round sum in those days”) which the firm occupied in the fall of 1905. A British sales branch of Thos. D. Murphy Co. was opened in 1904 and did booming business until World War I cut off shipping across the Atlantic.

For a man who was afraid of expansion, Murphy built a huge and thriving business in the space of half a decade. In 1920, the company built its own power plant and leased a local hotel



"Sunset in Venice" by Thomas Moran, one of Murphy's most popular sea and landscape artists.



"Isabelle" by Albert Lynch, an American painter who lived in France. Lynch specialized in head portraits of serene and lovely women.

to serve as a dormitory for the hundreds of women workers imported from the surrounding countryside and towns.

The company's specialty was the art calendar. This did not mean slightly risqué pictures of scantily clad women. Murphy was adamantly against any hint of even the softest pornography; although for their day some of the calendars were undoubtedly stimulating. Murphy recruited a stable of artists (some in foreign lands) to create special art each year for the new line of calendars. Favorite pictures, of course, ap-

peared year after year. In general, an art critic would classify most of the painting as middle-brow or even hack work; yet the charm of the art was in its unpretentiousness. It did not seek to challenge the aesthetics of the viewer, but rather hoped to satisfy relatively unsophisticated needs. This was popular culture at its pre-electronic prime.

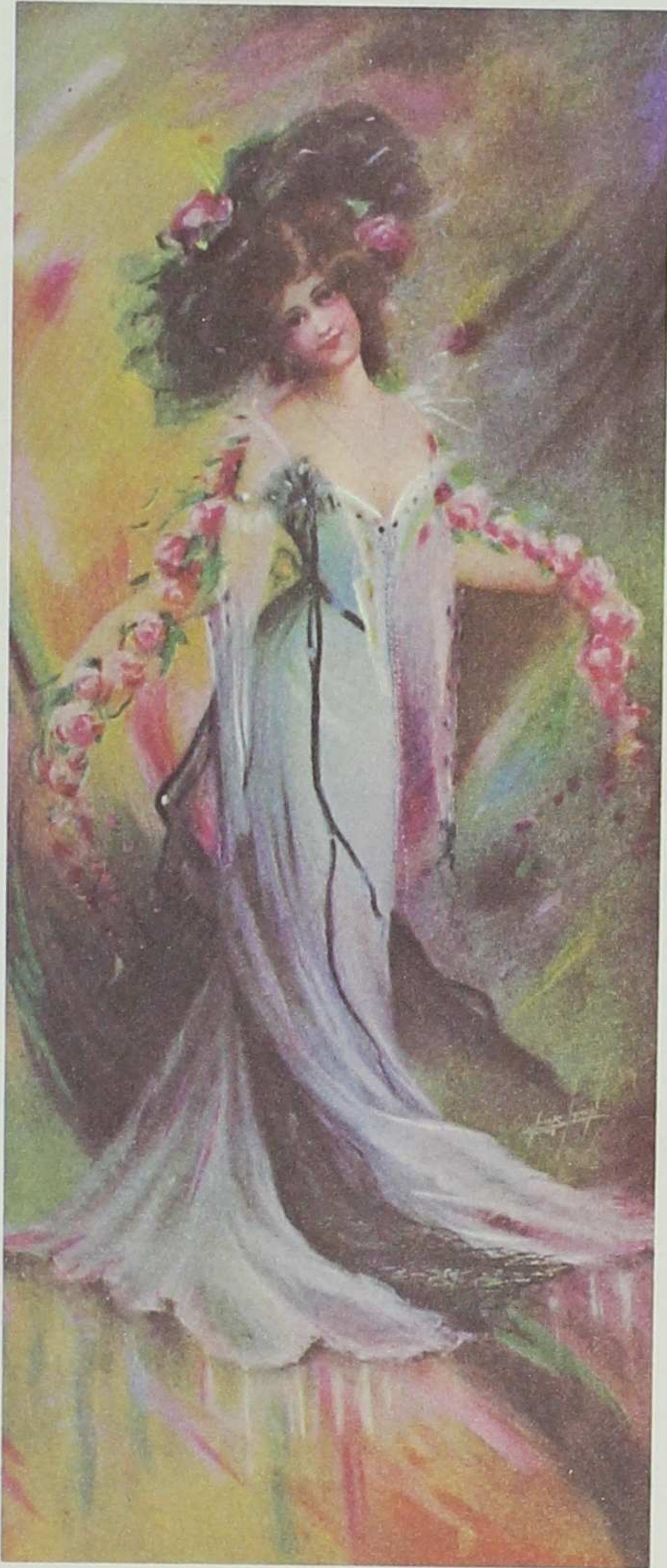
Murphy used the original paintings to decorate the office and reception rooms of his plant. Whatever the artistic quality of the paintings, the reproduction of the pictures by means of the printing



"The Hoss Trade" by Frank French shows direct descent from the era of Currier & Ives. The quaint rural scene, romanticised and nostalgic, echoed dozens of similar mood pieces from the previous decades.



Apparently many of Murphy's customers liked animal scenes. "Bringing Home the Flock" by Francis Wheaton was typical.



In contrast to Lynch's poised beauties, the pastel sketches of J. R. Bryson were the raciest examples in the Murphy line. The 1905 catalog labeled his works "Exceedingly Catchy Subjects." The catalog noted, "His pictures in some cases may not represent the highest art, but they are always something that can be appreciated by everyone."

press was superb. The Murphy company used color process photography and full-color printing in a day when such things were new. In fact, it is difficult today to duplicate the best of the Murphy work, even with several generations of refinement in the technology. Though the aim of the art calendars was commercial — they were window dressing on direct advertising as far as the merchant customers were concerned — the Murphy company fulfilled the same role as lithographers such as Currier & Ives had a generation or two before. The chromolithograph of the mid-nineteenth century, reproduced from stone in black and hand colored, had given way to the less expensive but equally satisfying color art of the calendar. The fact that art and advertising were combined seems particularly appropriate for a company founded at the dawn of the twentieth century — a period when art, commerce, and persuasion would often intermingle.

Murphy was as energetic in sales as he was in finding popular art. He organized a sales force which scoured the small towns of Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, the Dakotas, and other states, selling small lots (usually only 200 or 300) of calendars to merchants. The customer would select a style and have his own advertising printed, or even embossed, around the outside of the art. Small businessmen such as grocers and butchers were the best and steadiest customers. Often the salesmen, who began their campaigns in January, were on the road (or the rails) for weeks at a time. One thoughtful salesman used his spare moments in the hinterland of Nebraska to collect Indian artifacts for his son at home (a collection today worth a considerable sum). After the selling season

ended, all the salesmen were brought to Red Oak for an annual meeting where the winners of sales contests were rewarded for their efforts.

Murphy provided a wonderful sales tool to his men in the field. He printed up large sample books showing in full color all of the year's line of art and the various sizes and styles of calendars available. The color illustrations for this article come from two such sample books, those of 1905 and 1906. Preserved today in the collections of the Division of the State Historical Society, the sample books are tangible reminders of the early glory of the Thos. D. Murphy Co. □

Note on Sources

The basic sources of inspiration and illustration for this short article were two catalog sample books published by the Murphy Co. in 1905 and 1906 and now in the collections of the Division of the State Historical Society. Although there are short references to the history of the company in the Society's vertical files and in W. W. Merritt, *History of Montgomery County* (Red Oak: Express Publications, 1906), 298-300, the principal source was Thomas D. Murphy's small book *The Art Calendar Industry* (Red Oak: Thos. D. Murphy Co., 1921), a printed version of a speech given by Murphy. I am grateful to Mr. Walter K. Schwinn of West Hartford, Connecticut for a personal interview. Mr. Schwinn, whose father was treasurer for the Murphy Co., served as an office boy at the plant in the early decades of this century.

One of the more spectacular designs for 1905 was "Good Evening" by Bryson. The advertising and calendar were superimposed on a full-page illustration.

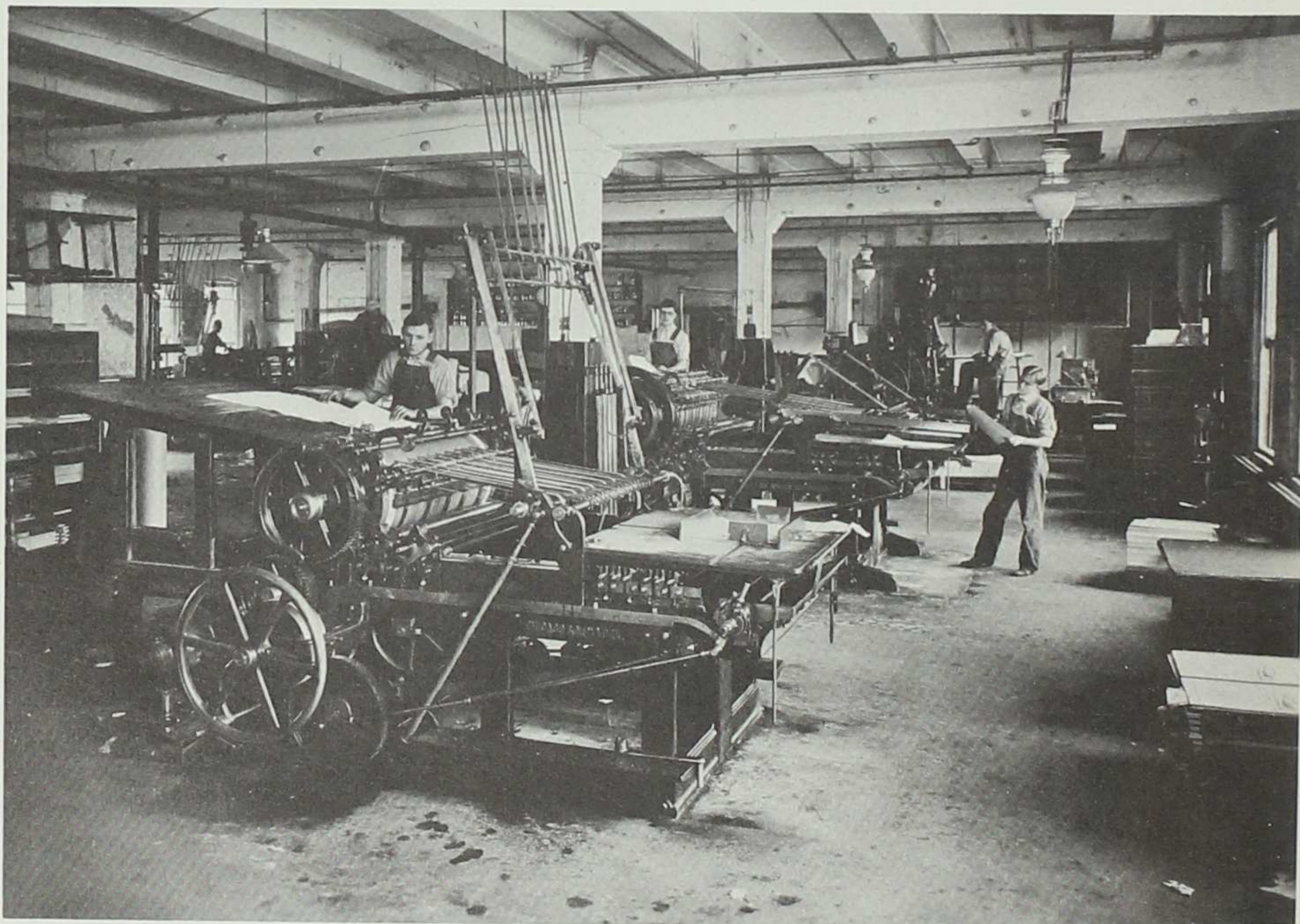
JOHN H. POGGE
MERCHANT TAILOR
RED OAK, IOWA

MADE WITH SILK LACE FOR HANDS



EVENING

1905		OCTOBER						1905
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
8	9	10	11	12	13	14		
15	16	17	18	19	20	21		
22	23	24	25	26	27	28		
29	30	31						



These exceptionally fine photographs of the Murphy Co. plant were taken in 1912 and reflect the atmosphere of the production lines. Above is the press room with rows of Miehle presses. At the top right are job presses, on which calendar illustrations were printed in the smaller sizes. At the bottom of the page opposite are some of the many women employed by Murphy to paste the printed illustrations onto calendar pads, stitch pads to backing, fold, trim, and a host of other steps. (photos courtesy of the Thos. D. Murphy Co.)

