

*The*  
**PALIMPSEST**

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IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

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## Inside —



A Victorian woman hosts a flock of gentlemen callers at a New Year's Day open house in this 1858 illustration, titled "NEW-YEAR'S VISITING IN NEW YORK." How did nineteenth-century Iowans celebrate the new year? Find out in Loren Horton's article, "The Victorian Holiday Season."



### *The Meaning of the Palimpsest*

In early times a palimpsest (*pāl'imp/sēst*) 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.

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**COVER:** Four nisses, gnome-like creatures from Scandinavian folklore, were created out of basswood by Des Moines woodcarver William Warrick. Supported in part by a grant from the Iowa Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, Warrick learned the Scandinavian folk art of flat-plane figure carving from Decorah master carver Harley Refsal. More on ethnic folk traditions begins on page 176.

# *The* PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

VOLUME 72, NUMBER 4

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## Historical Haves and Have Nots

In a sense, this *Palimpsest* considers Iowa history in terms of the haves and have nots. Starting on page 192, historian Loren Horton looks at holiday celebrations during the Victorian era. For many Americans, an ethic of conspicuous consumption fueled an extravagance of holiday decorating among the upper class and those aspiring to it. Local Iowa newspapers listed extensive menus of holiday meals hosted by the prominent; abundance and excess seemed to be the guiding principle. Our popular conception of Christmas today is often based on the richness and color of the Victorian holidays as documented in historical materials.

Yet, as Horton points out, not everyone in the Victorian era had cause to celebrate. "Poorer people would have had a hard time keeping warm and fed," he writes, "without extra money to spend on luxuries such as holiday decorations and special food and drink."

In nineteenth-century American magazines, the voice of the "have nots" is occasionally heard amidst the more frequent reports of elegant Victorian social events. The above illustration, for instance, accompanies a nine-stanza poem on the front page of the January 1, 1859, *Harper's Weekly*. One stanza reads:

" . . . It is gay and glorious wine you drink,  
I can see it sparkle from here,  
As I stand on the pavement, cold and wet,  
And wish you a Happy New Year. . . ."

As students of the past, do we base our view of the nineteenth century on the Victorians who celebrated the holidays with wine and fine food, or on the Victorians who stood hungry in the snow? Smithsonian curator Spencer R. Crew reminds us on the next page that all parts of the American experience are essential—not just those of the rich and politically powerful. According to Crew, certain cultural and community groups have felt left out of American history because their past has been overlooked by history. As keepers of the past, historical societies must be sure to collect and interpret the common, everyday objects, used by the "unsung heroes of American history, the construction workers, sailors, servants, miners, and farmworkers."

Yet, we can only exhibit and publish what we collect, and we can only collect what is available to us. Consider this: is your own history available to historical organizations? Try Crew's exercise of imagining a museum exhibit on your family's history. What artifacts and documents are needed to tell your story? Will those objects be passed on to historical organizations, so they can be shared with the public? We wish that this *Palimpsest* could have included accounts of multicultural winter celebrations of the past, but such accounts are rare. If your holidays include the African-American celebration of Kwanzaa, or the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, for instance, how can you help assure that future generations will know about these social customs in Iowa of the 1990s? Will historical institutions possess the artifacts and documents to depict the range of American holidays of the twentieth century? A lot depends on the Americans who currently own those materials.

To celebrate the diversity of ethnic customs still in place in Iowa, we offer folklorist David Brose's colorful photo essay on ethnic traditions. For your own celebrating we've included three Victorian holiday recipes on page 204. And as we approach 1992, the *Palimpsest* wishes our readers an abundant and peaceful new year. As a final note, we direct you to an important question boxed on the inside back cover.

—The Editor

# People, Places, Perspectives

## *Another Look at the Founding Fathers*



SHSI (IOWA CITY) MATHER COLLECTION

by Spencer R. Crew

**T**HE WORLD of museums, historical societies, historic homes, and other institutions devoted to public history has changed dramatically. In the last two decades, creating historical presentations has become a much more challenging and demanding endeavor. Standard interpreta-

tions of American history that primarily highlight the contributions of the rich and famous are no longer enough. Questions are now being raised over what issues to highlight, what events to focus upon, and whose history to accentuate. These queries are forcing a re-examination of the types of presentations

offered by historical institutions, and of the public's role as contributor and visitor.

Much of the push to include new ideas, perspectives, and groups, in fact, has come from cultural and community groups too long overlooked by historians, such as African-Americans, women, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, the disabled, and Native Americans. These groups felt left out of American history. In museums and historic sites, they did not find material that spoke to their experiences or perspectives. Their history was largely ignored by institutions, and by scholars whose research often guided the work presented there. But these overlooked groups are now insisting upon acknowledgement of their own significant contributions to the building of the nation. They are pushing to restructure the histories presented in museums and historic sites to include their stories as well.

As pressure from these cultural communities becomes more assertive, however, countervailing pressures are revealed. Resistance comes from individuals who are more comfortable with traditional methods of presenting history that emphasize military and political events. (These individuals can be formidable roadblocks to change, particularly if they are members of boards of trustees, foundations, or governmental funding committees.) They are not sure there is truly a need or substantial demand to warrant heading in new directions. They correctly point out that these new commitments will cost money, demand more staff or staff energies, and change established ways of doing things.

However, if organizations are committed to presenting historically accurate material that reflects current scholarship, they must break away from the old patterns. Most of the new

work done by historians demands that we revise previous visions of American history and culture. It is not enough to focus primarily on the upper strata of society, the Thomas Jeffersons and the Sam Houstons. They are not the only crucial individuals in the history of this country. To focus on them leaves out people like "Aunt" Clara Brown of Denver or Pio Pico of Los Angeles.

Thirty years ago we did not know very much about people such as Brown, an early Denver settler who worked as a laundress and loaned money to community members, or Pico, the last Mexican governor of California. Since then, the movement to social history has revealed these overlooked individuals and groups in greater number and detail. Historians' innovative research techniques are also telling us a great deal about how different communities functioned, how their self-help networks operated, and what roles their residents played in the settlement, development, and success of our modern world. These revelations suggest we need to reassess how we present the past and who and what we define as historically significant.

**N**EW PERSPECTIVES are needed particularly for collections development — the process of locating, acquiring, documenting, and preserving artifacts and archival documents. Present historical collections tend to reflect old biases. Many collections have come into existence through fortuitous circumstances. They may be the result of a benefactor's massive donation, or a major expedition, or the accumulation of individual objects brought in

#### *About this article and the images*

The photographs in this article portray some of the "unsung heroes of America," as described here by Smithsonian curator Spencer Crew. As guest speaker, Crew presented these remarks at the June 1991 Congress of Historical Organizations (COHO) in Des Moines.

The images represent some of the events, individuals, and groups too long overlooked by historical

organizations and which are now appreciated as rich documentation of everyday life and recent American history. The photographs are from the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City and Des Moines).

Photo on preceding page: woman and child on porch steps, circa 1881-1910. On opposite page: coal miner.



SHISI (DES MOINES)

by museum staff members. Dealers, relatives of notable individuals, or private individuals themselves have traditionally offered institutions such material through donation or purchase.

This form of collections development is largely passive in nature. Material is brought to the institution more often than it is actively sought out by curators and archivists, who are frequently limited by funding and staffing. Collection acquisition is relatively easy this way because the staff has simple choices — to accept, reject, or select from the items offered. The shortcoming is that heavy reliance upon this approach can impact the character of the collections. The collections easily can become a holding of material tightly bound to the lives of the movers and shakers in society, because prominent people are most likely to have a sense of the importance of their own history, the wherewithal to preserve it over the years, and the confidence to offer it to a historical institution.

Long-established collections also tend to focus on illustrating the “best” in society, such as fine furnishings, exquisite clothing, and pathbreaking technological innovations. They are, undoubtedly, an important part of the material culture history of the United States, but they do not tell the complete story by any means. Our population comprises groups of differing ethnic and racial origins, cultural foci, economic levels, age, disability challenges, gender issues, and geographic orientations. Historical collections and exhibitions should reflect these diverse characteristics as well as the more traditional representations of the American experience.

To accomplish this breadth in historical collections, more attention must be paid to common, everyday materials. We must collect, preserve, research, and exhibit that which belongs to the unsung heroes of America, the construction workers, sailors, servants, miners, and farmworkers who toil each day, raise families, influence trends, and decide in the voting booth who will hold public office. This material culture may lack monetary value, but it is historically rich because it provides insights into the lives of people previously undocumented.

**F**OR MANY INSTITUTIONS, diversifying collections will call for new mission statements and collection policies that broaden staff responsibilities to locate a wider range of objects. Diversification also will mean building bridges into previously neglected communities and seeking artifacts representative of the residents’ lives. Creating these connections will not always be an easy task. Diverse groups must be identified, and new relationships developed. Anger and mistrust among these groups due to past neglect must be addressed. Even if the oversight was unintentional, it still may have bred resentments that must be overcome.

Successfully bridging this gap requires institutions to actively demonstrate their commitment to the history of different cultural groups. Staff members need to learn about the group on site, by meeting the people and attending neighborhood functions. Back in their museums and historic sites, they should sponsor activities, programs, and receptions that specifically attract these new audiences and explain the organization’s goals. Staff should invite community members to participate in exhibition research, collections development planning, public programming, and educational activities. As partners in these activities, the representatives of diverse groups must know that their ideas and suggestions will be taken seriously, and that they are an important and honored part of these institutions.

This is often a difficult step for institutions that treasure independence and have labored to be objective. Relinquishing some of this control, however, can result in creative and fruitful liaisons. Historical organizations will surely gain insight about the internal history and priorities of diverse cultural groups as they begin to see the past through the eyes of those groups, rather than through traditional historical accounts accepted for decades. Significant events and leaders may be defined differently, because of different cultural values or experiences.

In articulating a particular view of the past, a

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Right: Young couples, unidentified, pre-1920.





SHSI (IOWA CITY)

once-overlooked group may suggest sensitive but important issues for a historical institution to grapple with in exhibitions or programming. Further, the group can voice its perception of the institution and suggest ways to develop a more positive public image.

Confronting this issue, W. Richard West, Jr., the new director of the American Indian Museum at the Smithsonian Institution argues that traditional museums do not serve the interests or the needs of Native Americans. West feels that the museum's exhibitions and programming are counter to the way Native Americans use their objects and live their culture. He is now actively discussing with constituents across the country alternative ways of operating what we call museums. He is convinced that other approaches to presenting historical and cultural information are more appropriate for Native Americans, and perhaps for all museum visitors.

His point is well taken. Historical institutions need to explore methods of effectively presenting the perspectives of the community or cultural group they are highlighting. This can challenge and sometimes disrupt traditional methods of formulating ideas and activities. On the other hand, this process can be quite freeing and uplifting. Fresh ideas may surface and inspire innovative exhibitions and programs. Remaining open to change can allow breakthroughs in how institutions communicate with and attract diverse audiences.

**I**NSTITUTIONS ARE NOT ALONE in their need to be open to change. Their success depends upon the materials available to them, and therefore upon the donors of artifacts and archival materials. Far too many people tend to regard history as events that occurred many, many years ago and that involved only prominent individuals. We all need to think more broadly about how we

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Right: Picnic at Sunset Park, Storm Lake, after the oats harvest, 1945.







Sheep shearer, Iowa Falls, circa 1892-1910.

define history, and therefore what objects and documents are historically significant.

A useful example is the northward migration of African-Americans during and after World War I. This movement had tremendous impact upon the economic, social, and political development of the United States. It affected the growth patterns of northern cities and twentieth-century attitudes on race. Yet participants in this exodus did not think about its ramifications. They focused on individual motivations and concerns — how to escape the suppression they faced in the South, and where to find better opportunities for themselves and their families. They certainly were aware that others like themselves were moving northward, but they did not think extensively about the enormity of the movement. They did not consider that the relocation of hundreds of thousands of African-Americans into northern cities would alter the course of American history.

This failure to see how we fit into the larger picture is a normal perspective, and many of us follow it when looking at our own lives. Yet this viewpoint illustrates the challenges of collecting material culture from Americans previously ignored or misrepresented by historical institutions. These historical “actors” do not place enough value on themselves or on the material records of their lives. Items such as report cards, old photographs, certificates, clothing, and work implements, for example, frequently are discarded. Only rarely is there a conscious effort to preserve them. Instead, in the course of moving, cleaning house, or at the death of a relative, many of these icons of individual lives disappear in the trash pile or in the back of an antique dealer’s vehicle. They are abandoned because they pose a space problem, because they are associated with an unpleasant event or period of time, because they are out of style, or for a myriad of other reasons.

My own experiences with a couple who migrated to Washington, D.C., are illustrative. The couple came separately to the city early in the African-American migration to the North and married not long after arriving in the district. Following several moves they settled in a house in the northwest section of the city, in which they remained for more than fifty

years. I was very excited to learn about them because their experiences as migrants and longtime Washington residents made them excellent candidates for an oral interview and potential sources of objects for the exhibition I was developing on migration. While the interview went quite well, I was extremely disappointed in my search to identify artifacts. Neither of them had saved very much from their earlier years in the house because the couple had been more interested in throwing the “old-fashioned” things away as rapidly as they could replace them with modern conveniences.

This story is not unique. Many people do not consider their lives historically significant, or see themselves in the same category as the “founding fathers.” They believe that objects need to be seventy-five years old or older — antiques — to have any possible monetary or historical value. Yet when museum staff and researchers focus on the social history of the twentieth century for exhibitions and publications interpreting the lives of everyday people, common artifacts from this century are vitally needed.

**T**O ENCOURAGE cultural groups and individuals to see their own special story within the larger one, and thereby value their role in history, historical institutions should serve as catalysts. Some of the historical organizations I have worked with have found workshops, public forums, or exhibitions to be effective vehicles for launching this dialogue. The workshops, for example, often take the form of “save your artifact” days. Local residents are encouraged to bring in photographs, clothing, paper objects, and other items they wish to preserve. The host institution then provides simple tips for housing and conserving these objects, such as removing corrosive metal paperclips from documents, or storing photographs in non-acidic, archival-quality materials, or prevent-

ing harsh light from falling on quilts and other fabric items.

The workshops can heighten awareness about the importance of preserving and conserving everyday items, not only as family keepsakes but as artifacts and documents that will convey American history to future generations of the public. Without material culture from a variety of groups, museums are hamstrung. They depend upon individuals to donate artifacts and documents that convey the diversity of the American experience.

It can be a challenge for private individuals to believe that the things they use or wear or create have any real historical value. One way an individual can overcome this is to try to list the artifacts needed to tell one's personal story in an exhibit. For example, what objects or images or written accounts would tell your history? Ponder the events that shaped your life, and try to name the objects that reflect your daily actions. What would accurately convey that story to your descendants? Listing significant personal items illustrates the importance of preserving common, everyday things like toys, tools, or pots and pans. These materials also provide tangible links to past generations, giving us a sense of the kinds of lives individuals have lived. For example, what objects representative of the lives of your parents or grandparents do you wish you possessed?

Considering these questions puts the process used by curators on a very personal and tangible level. As the answers begin to form, the needs of historical organizations to build broadly representative collections become clearer.

The exercise also allows individuals to define more clearly the important historical currents in their lives and communities, and places them squarely in the middle of historical events. With new perspectives come new definitions of the "founding fathers" — that is, who were the most influential men and women in a personal or community history.

In turn, museum exhibits and programs reflecting alternative perspectives will tend to push all visitors to re-evaluate old views of our



Jessup Lasley (or La be ge de wa, "Gray Eagle") and daughters, at the Mesquakie Settlement, 1948.



SHSI (IOWA CITY) KILLY COLLECTION

past. (This goal should be a significant part of the mission of historical organizations.) Historical interpretation is just that, interpretation — not the presentation of unchallengeable facts. Visitors need to understand that exhibits and other interpretations evolve through choices of available information and perspective.

As we begin to value the objects and documentation of our everyday lives, crucial questions emerge about what should be collected from the present for the future. What pictures of today's American communities will need to be created for audiences of the next century? Who are the people who constitute those communities? What are the objects that will help tell their stories properly? And how does one present a balanced image of the complexity of today's communities?

**T**HOSE WHO INTERPRET history for the public can no longer just reinforce traditional historical canon and expect to remain in the forefront of their field. Too much new material by our colleagues in the academy is revealing important, new visions of American history. Looking around the world in which we live reminds us that it, too, is changing rapidly, as is our role within it. Our destiny is tightly intertwined with people of many different cultures and world views. As educators, historical organizations should remind visitors of the interdepen-

Right: Student Walt French at a 1971 protest demonstration in Washington, D.C.

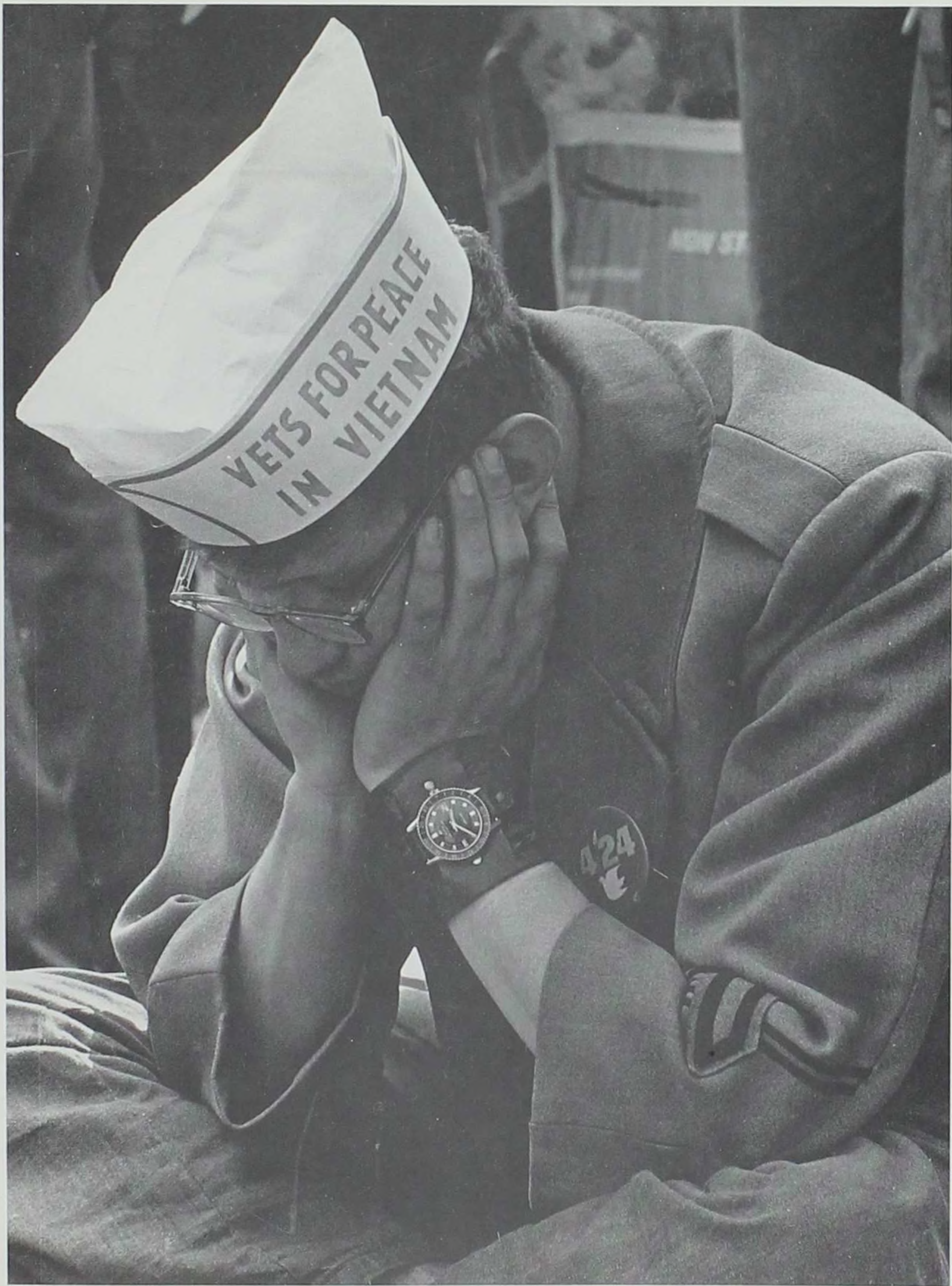
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dent nature of people's lives — a century ago and today. Exhibits should introduce their audiences to the struggles and the triumphs of other groups with whom they live. Visitors should be offered alternative ways of looking at historical events or cultural experiences.

The American story is not one of just glory and success. It also includes violence, deceit, and tragedy. Presenting the full spectrum of that experience is not unpatriotic. It can be humbling, but that is not bad either. In depicting the American experience, various viewpoints of different cultural groups are essential. It gives our visitors new perspectives and ideas to ponder. While agreement and acceptance are not guaranteed, we might hope for thoughtful reconsideration and increased respect and understanding of the contributions and struggles of others.

A primary role of public historians and educators is to educate the public to think critically and broadly. We all need to know about George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, but also about people such as Black Hawk, Barclay Coppoc, Jessie Field Shambaugh, and Alexander Clark, all important figures in Iowa's history, and therefore America's history. George and Ben will not suffer from lost attention if other figures grow in importance as their stories are revealed in new exhibits. And in such broadly based historical presentations, visitors will receive a rich and diverse educational experience. In the end, this is what should be acquired when one walks through the doors of institutions dedicated to public history and education. □





SHSI (IOWA CITY)

# Ethnographic Crossroads

by David A. Brose

**D**URING the past century America has often been called a melting pot — a place where peoples from throughout the world have come together and assimilated into one, mainstream culture called “American.” I have resisted this concept with great fervor over the past two decades — the period of time that I’ve worked in university, state, and federal contexts as an ethnomusicologist, folklorist, and community cultural developer.

Instead, I perceive American culture as many disparate and distinct peoples who have chosen to come together and form one national

community. This national family, punctuated by many subcultures, geographic regions, and occupational groups, offers a continual array of richness and diversity to our daily experiences. The diversity would not be realized if, indeed, we were all simply “mainstreamed” into one homogeneous mass, as the so-called melting-pot theory prescribes.

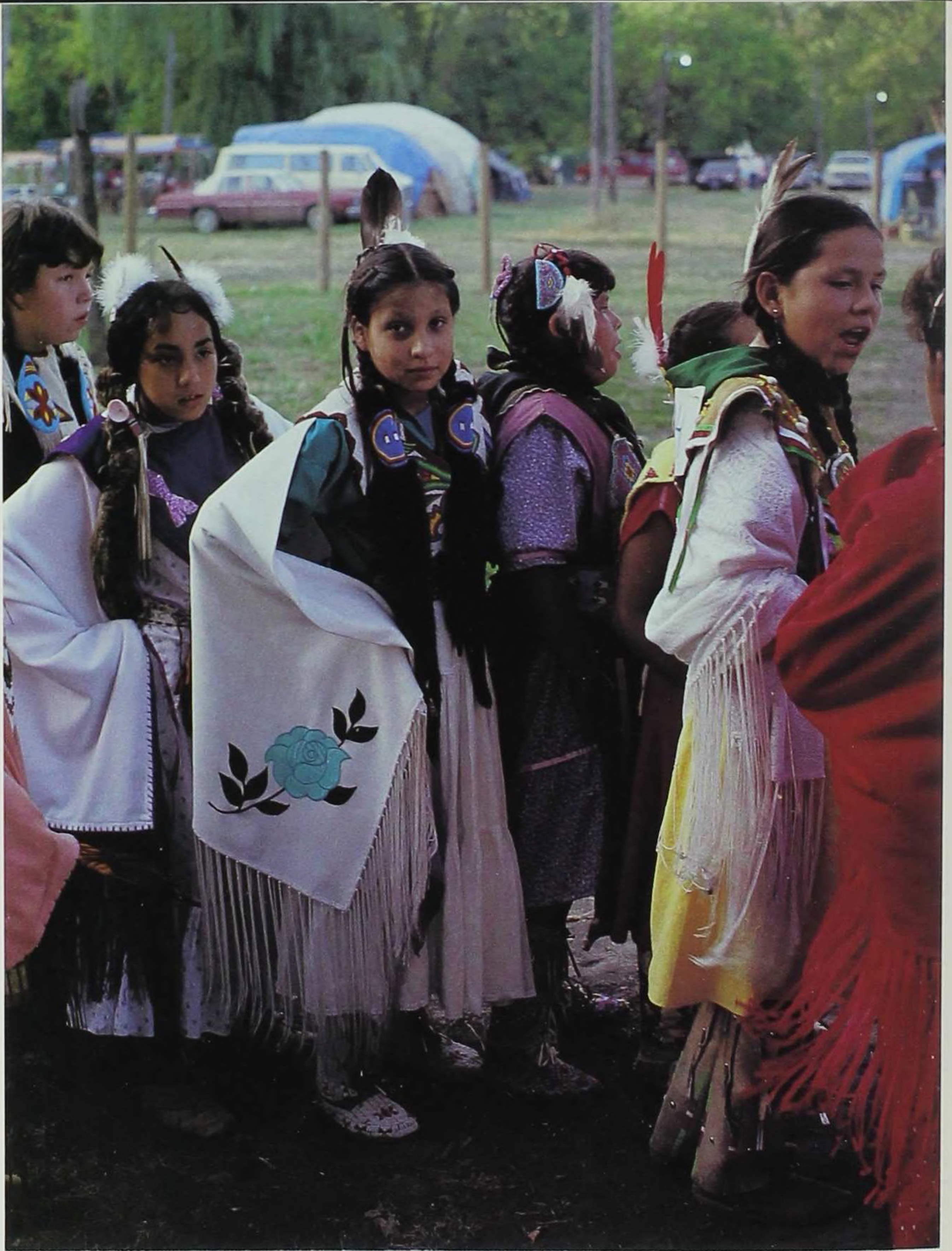
Iowa continues to strike me as a cultural crossroads, where ethnic groups influence each other and yet remain close to their traditions. On the next pages, I’d like to share with you the richness of some of these groups. Consider this a colorful sampler of our cultural diversity.

## Iowa as a Cultural Conduit

COURTESY STEVEN OHRN (SHSI)



Iowa's ethnic richness spans the experiences and expressions of diverse groups, from the Mesquakie, who arrived over two hundred years ago, to the Hmong and Tai Dam, who emigrated from southeast Asia in the last two decades. Above, Stella Young Bear created this bandolier bag using traditional beadwork techniques of her people, the Mesquakie. The design is her own.



## Mesquakie

The dynamics of cultural transmission are revealed at the annual Mesquakie powwow open to the public at the Mesquakie Settlement near Tama. Children wait to demonstrate some of the ceremonial dances they have learned from their elders.

COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE



## German

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Above: A traditional Amana basket. The Amana Colonies were founded by a separatist sect, the True Inspirationists, who had originally emigrated from what is now Germany. Ethnic traditions flourish in the Amanas, reflecting German culture and communal and religious traditions of the colonies. Below: German musical traditions fill the streets at the annual polkafest in Durant.



COURTESY SHERRY PARDEE



COURTESY DARLENE C. WALLINGA

## Dutch

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This Orange City streetcar is adorned in hindeloopen, a style of Dutch folk art practiced by Darlene C. Wallinga of that community. Hindeloopen is similar to Norwegian rosemaling.

## Norwegian

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Opposite: Public performances breathe life into ethnic traditions. Here, Norwegian-American singer Judith Mahlberg of Dubuque performs in the State Historical Building at the 1988 Cultural Heritage Celebration.



COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE



COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE





## Czechoslovakian \_\_\_\_\_

Above: A sampler of hardanger embroidery, created by Mary Hudecek of the Czechoslovakian-American community of Pro-tivin in northeast Iowa. Opposite: Marjorie Kopecek Nejd, of Cedar Rapids, decorates eggs in a Czechoslovakian technique called *Kraslice*.



COURTESY STEVEN OHRN (SHSI)

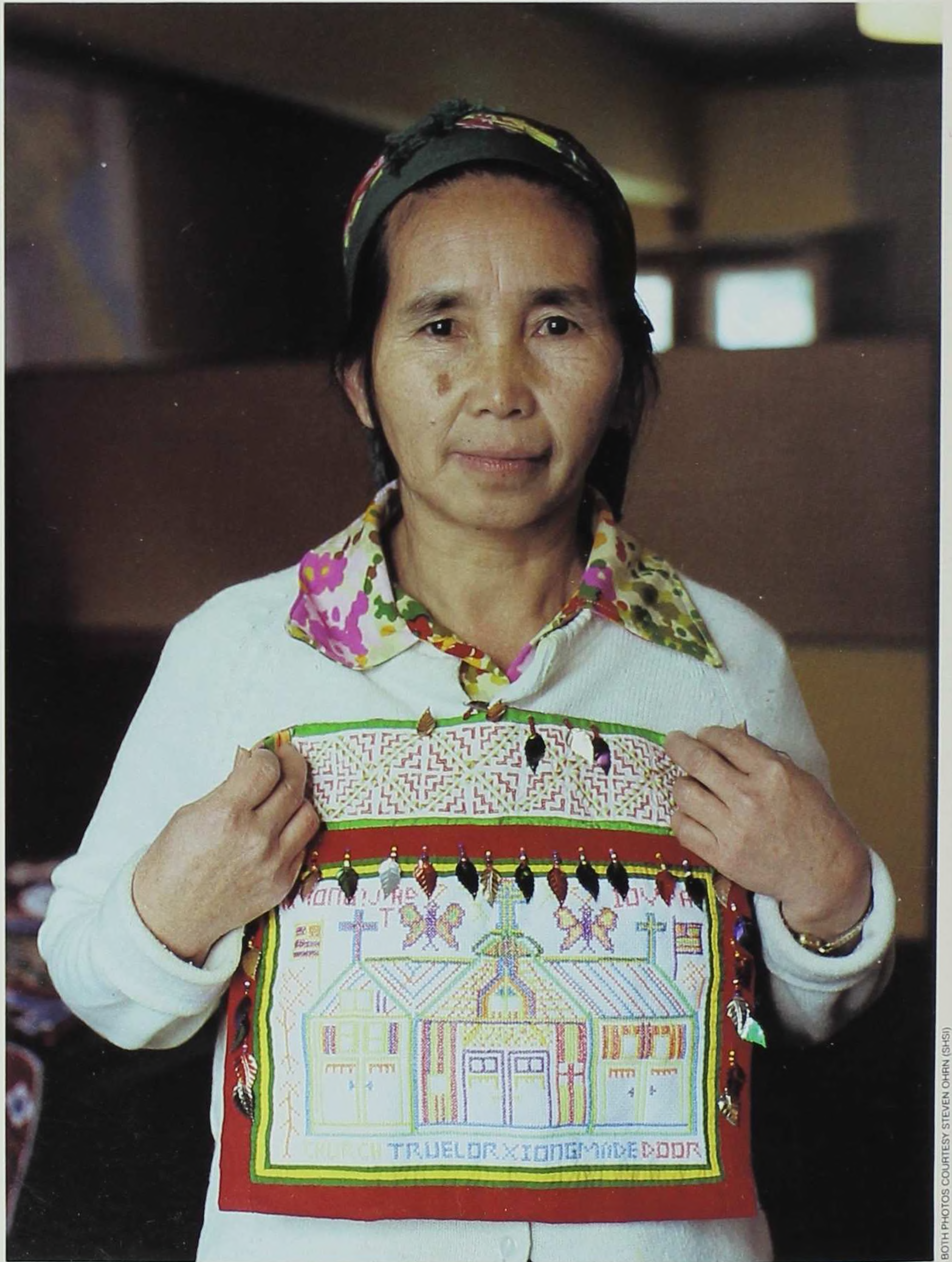


## Mexican

Left: A Mexican-American folklorico dance troupe performs at the Des Moines Mexican-American Cultural Center in 1986. Below: Maria Elizondo of West Liberty created this doll for a *quinciera*, a Mexican-American celebration that marks the passage of a fifteen-year-old girl into womanhood. The doll's crocheted skirt is an example of a traditional Mexican needlework called *tejida*.



COURTESY SHERRY PARDEE



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY STEVEN OHRN (SHSI)



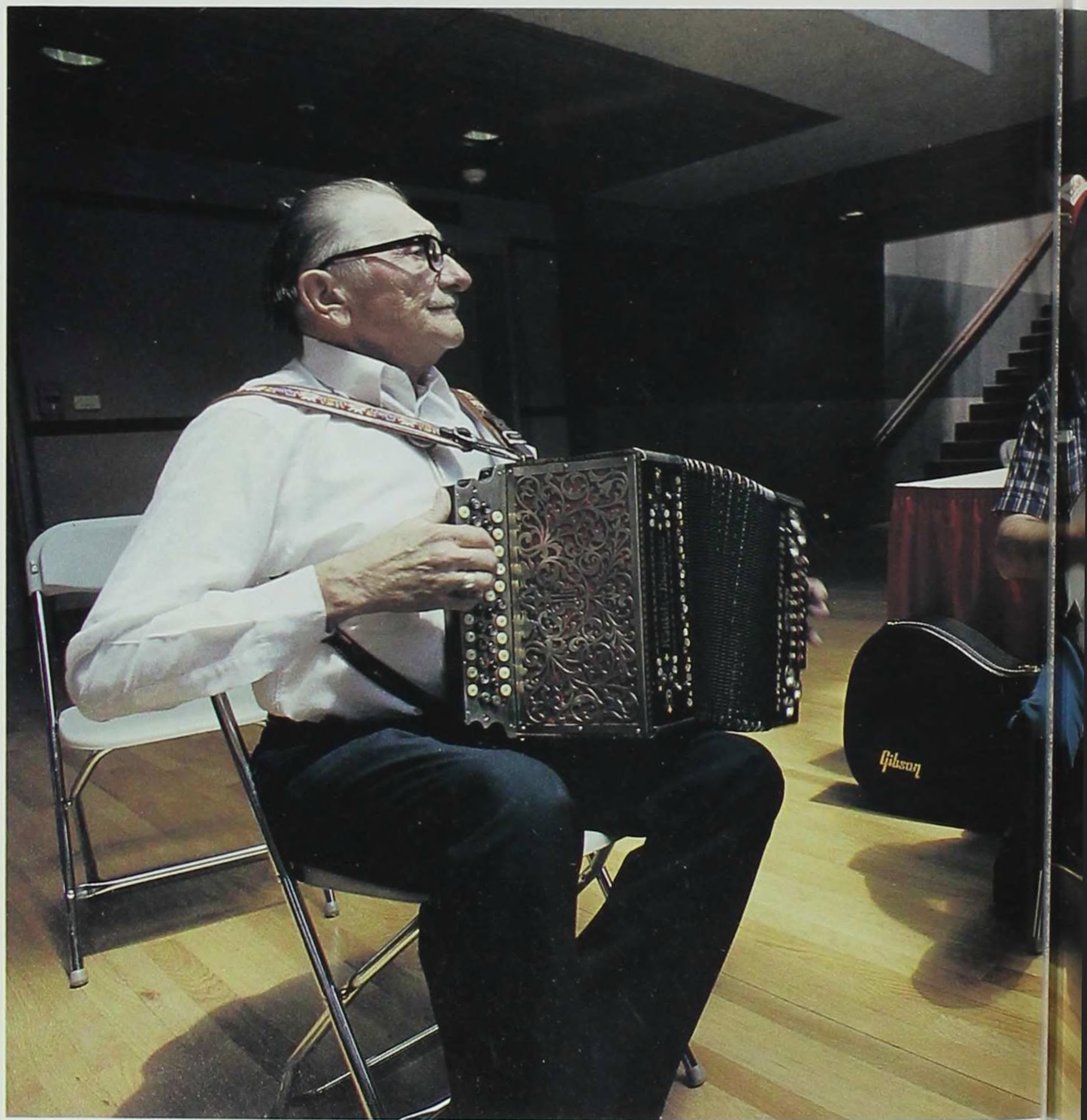
## Southeast Asian

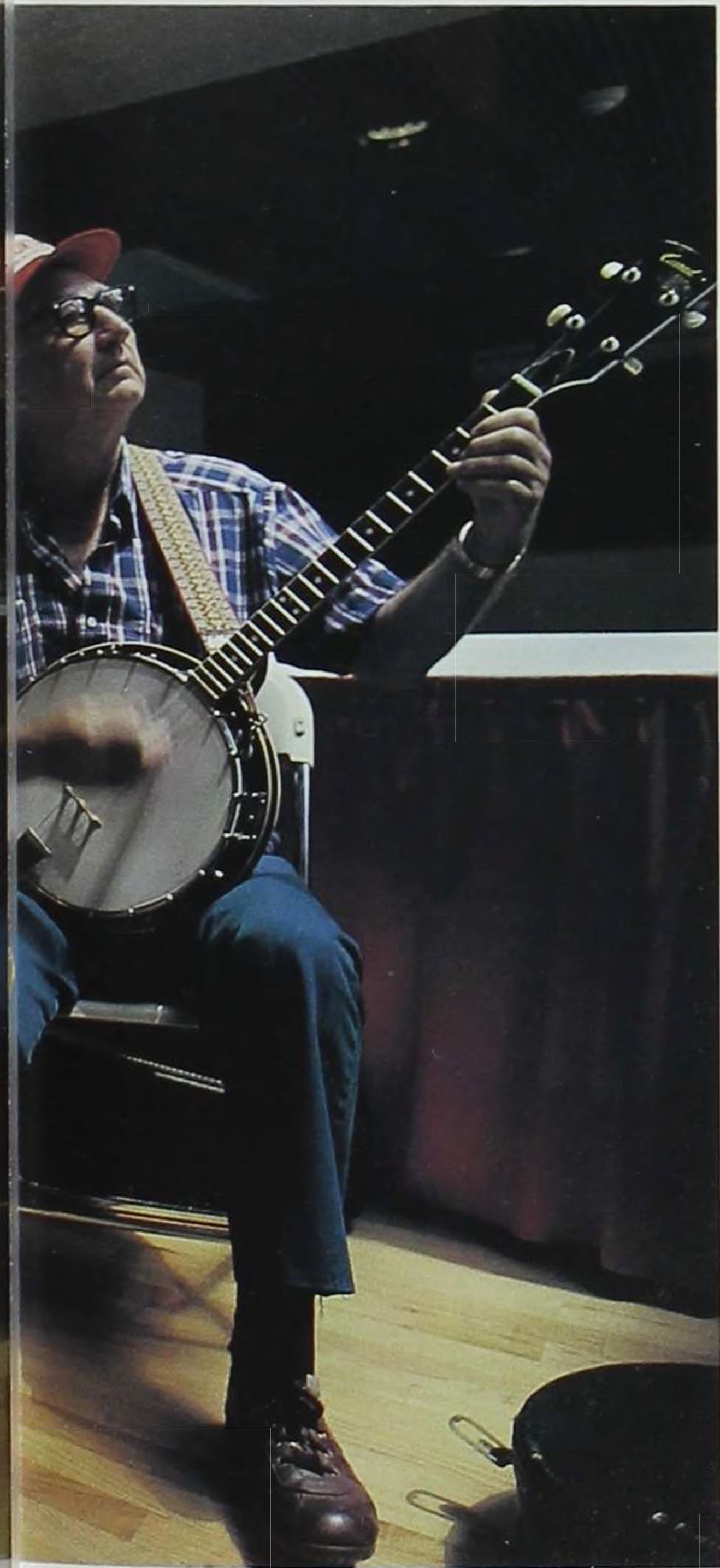
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Above: A cotton-and-silk baby carrier made by Sao Thao Lee of Des Moines is ornamented with traditional Hmong needlework. Left: This cotton-and-silk sampler created by True Lor Xiong of Decorah features Hmong cross-stitch and reverse and cutwork appliqué. Made for an English-language class, the sampler depicts a Christian church and American flags and is labeled with the artist's name and the words "church door." The shiny plastic leaves, often used in American crafts today, suggest cultural exchanges of methods and materials.

## At the Crossroads

Cultural crossroads occur when ethnic traditions meet and perhaps merge, exchange elements, or complement each other. At the 1988 Cultural Heritage Celebration in Des Moines, accordionist Arthur Simanek of Walker, and banjo player Eddie Bengé of Winterset performed together for the first time. Simanek plays from a Czechoslovakian heritage; Bengé from an Anglo-American Appalachian tradition.





COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE

Below: The Scandinavian technique of flat-plane figure carving manifests itself in this Iowa farmer carved of basswood by William Warrick of Des Moines. Warrick apprenticed under master carver Harley Refsal of Decorah, who has resurrected the technique. Through large, bold cuts and exaggerated features (such as the boots) a caricature develops. Some of Warrick's carvings reflect Scandinavian subjects (see front cover). Although Warrick's wife, Doris, who now paints many of his carvings, is "100 percent Swedish," Warrick is of English and German ancestry.



COURTESY WILLIAM WARRICK

COURTESY MICHAEL JAMES; PHOTO BY DAVID CARAS



## Beyond the Crossroads

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Some folk arts, such as quilting, transcend ethnic associations. In turn, some artists transcend the original context of their medium. Although artist Michael James first made quilts in traditional designs and techniques, his work now resembles paintings. This cotton-and-silk wallhanging, "Cascade: Double Diagonal," explores the idea of currents as movements of water and as undercurrents of emotion. Working from Massachusetts, James frequently teaches workshops on color and design in Fairfield to Iowa quilt enthusiasts.



**W**HETHER we are archivists or curators, local historians or family genealogists, scholars or consumers of public history, we make decisions daily that influence how we view ourselves as a people. We may work from the perspective of the past or as contemporary beings who create and share tangible and intangible forms of culture.

The folk artists featured on these pages invent and fabricate things unique for themselves and their communities. Most often, they do not consider themselves artists. They create fantastic and beautiful objects to make personal their homes, or fantastic and beautiful sounds and movements to make personal their time on earth. As students, keepers, watchers, and interpreters of culture, we can take the same approach to making personal a future generation's understanding of the past and present.

In times of tight budgets, our society talks of tourism and economic impact. We award and receive funds based on sound fiscal management and institutional long-range plans. We congratulate ourselves in terms of numbers, black ink, growth. Perhaps we should also speak of human beings, belief, creation, and love. I hope that we have not allowed ourselves to be dominated by our structures more than by our passions — the reasons we are attracted to history and cultural behavior in the first place. Yet, in another sense our organizations are themselves works of art, beautiful things fashioned out of love and creative, playful thinking by board and staff, and tempered by public need and response.

We speak of quality, and should remember that the path to quality is synergistic — drawing from many cultures. Perhaps a useful description of quality is respect for human beings, and therefore respect for the things

human beings have left behind that now fill our archival boxes and shelves, and the things they create today that form our children's legacy.

I am also realizing that restrictive cultural definitions and boundaries need not be reinforced. In my mind, for instance, fine art and folk art are not diametrically opposed, but are complementary and supportive ends of a single spectrum of human creation. This same paradigm can work for a building, an artifact, for any creation that has sprung from the human and natural environments.

Through our work we can vigorously combat the perception that cultural aspects of our communities are generic or homogenized. Iowa is an ethnographic crossroads, a cultural conduit. This can be seen, felt, heard, tasted — experienced by all of the senses. In southern Iowa, Ozark mountain fiddle tunes and vaudeville skits persist along the Iowa-Missouri border. Near the Iowa-Minnesota border, we hear Norwegian fiddle tunes and ballads. As we travel west, we see the bibbed overalls and work boots of eastern Iowans give way to the stetson hats of the cowboy who has just competed in the annual rodeo at Sidney. We taste Thai and Vietnamese food in Des Moines and East Indian dishes in Fairfield — to name but a few foods.

Let us not succumb completely to the long-range plan, the balance sheet, or worst of all, the gloppy, melting-potted cultural construct, which, like that awful green molded jello that we've all eaten at Sunday Iowa picnics, would render Iowa culture — its historic artifacts, documents, and records — an indiscernible mass of homogenized sameness. Rather, it is the distinct pleasure of our vocations and avocations, then, to ensure that all the fine spices of our culture are collected, interpreted, catalogued, and celebrated. □



# The Victorian Holiday Season

by Loren N. Horton

**F**OR THOSE IOWANS who celebrate Christmas and New Year's, many of today's holiday customs are still colored by the richness and elegance of the Victorian era. Historical accounts of how many nineteenth-century Iowans celebrated these holidays reflect customs first practiced in Victorian England and then dictated by books

of etiquette and household hints widely available in America.

Just as many of today's holiday customs are derived from Victorian customs, the customs of the Victorian era were derived from earlier practices dating back to pagan and early Christian celebrations. Mid-winter and the solstice were common times to celebrate the anticipa-

In Victorian fashion, greenery bedecks the parlor of Farm House Museum at Iowa State University in Ames. Each December the house is decorated for the public (open Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, noon to four).

COURTESY IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS (ISU PHOTO SERVICE)

tion of springtime, the return of light, and the renewal of life. Common elements of these pagan celebrations include feasting, drinking, singing, giving gifts, decorating with greenery such as evergreens, mistletoe, and holly, and using candles and torches. As Christianity spread throughout Europe in the first centuries A.D., the Church, in trying to gain converts, deliberately tried to join its holidays with pagan holidays by adopting many of these symbols and customs. These practices evolved through the centuries, despite abolition of certain customs by the Puritans in seventeenth-century England.

The common need for people to hearken back to simpler, more secure times during periods of change may help explain why the Victorians themselves seemed to dwell on Christmas, holding on to old customs. When Queen Victoria began her reign in 1837, England was undergoing a great transition. It was changing from a rural to a predominantly urban society, with different work patterns brought on by technological advances of the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, the English middle class was also drawn to imitate the behavior of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, charismatic symbols of English family life. Thus, family-centered events were popular.

**C**HRISTMAS during the Victorian era (circa 1840 to 1905) was a popular and greatly publicized event, in America as in England. (Therefore, a wealth of historical evidence is available for study.) The Victorians placed great importance on displaying what one owned; this conspicuous consumption contributed to the sense of excess and abundance in holiday decor and activities. Christmas was also a common focus of literary and artistic expression. Nineteenth-century Iowans would have seen Christmas celebrations as the subject of Currier and Ives lithographs, and in calendar art produced by the Thomas D. Murphy Company in Red Oak,

Iowa. They would have read long, descriptive passages about family-centered Christmases in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Charles Dickens's novels and serials, Washington Irving's short stories, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poems.

Victorian customs were most common in America among people of English heritage and those who aspired to the behavior dictated in etiquette books. In turn, these customs were reprinted in mainstream magazines and publications, and thus were dispersed among various ethnic groups. Iowans would have read variations of this etiquette in the many books of household hints then published, such as *Collier's Cyclopaedia of Practical Knowledge*, which dispensed etiquette along with household hints, recipes, and medicinal advice. As manuals of proper Victorian behavior, etiquette books were tradition-bearers, not trend-setters. Because of this, we see in such books descriptions of seventeenth-century customs, such as the Yule Log, which was probably practiced only by the more old-fashioned or tradition-bound Victorian families, not by all nineteenth-century families. The sense of doing what's socially proper, of following tradition, of feeling secure in one's family probably helped establish Victorian customs as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century concept of Christmas.

**F**ORMALITY and ceremony attended many Victorian holiday activities. Etiquette prescribed that in the late afternoon of December 24, the season was opened with the ceremonial lighting of the Yule Log, often from a piece remaining from last year's Yule Log. A symbol of hospitality and warmth, the Yule Log was to be kept burning on the hearth until midnight on January 6 to mark the friendliness of the household to visitors.

According to etiquette, the church bells would next be rung, and then either the head of the household or the youngest female would light the Yule Candle from the now-flaming log, and place the candle in the middle of the dining table. Then everyone drank a festive beverage, perhaps frumenty, posset, lambswool, wassail, whipcoll, mead, syllabub,



“Christmas without its evergreens,” claimed an 1866 *American Agriculturist*, “would lose half its holiday charms.” Above: Evergreen market, as sketched in that magazine. Opposite: diagrams from another issue.

mulled wine, or mulled cider. A whole cheese was placed on the table, a cross scraped on the top of it, and good wishes exchanged. The Christmas Supper, the first major food feast of the holiday season, could now begin.

Victorians celebrated the holidays with much feasting, and the unusual names and excessive amounts may seem strange to us now. Many Victorians often consumed large quantities of alcoholic beverages, especially during ceremonial times. In fact, drunkenness was a serious social and health problem among all classes in nineteenth-century England. Liquor was also common on the American frontier during settlement of Iowa. (Accounts of Fourth of July celebrations during pioneer times include many, many toasts. The toasts were not offered in water.)

In studying the Victorian era, we must understand that Christmas and New Year's customs were common to the middle classes, many of the upper classes, and some of the lower classes. But poorer people would have had a hard time keeping warm and fed, without extra money to spend on luxuries such as holiday decorations and special food and drink.

**D**ECORATING HOUSES was widely practiced during the Victorian holiday season. As a public display of personal wealth, a family would hang wreaths and garlands in windows facing the road or street. Ropes and boughs of evergreens were draped over windows, door frames, picture frames, chandeliers, newel posts, balusters, and other interior woodwork. Over the dining rooms of the more affluent, a ball or bell of evergreens was suspended, with ropes of greenery or red satin ribbons draped to the corners of the room and hanging down to the table itself. The *American Agriculturist* in 1878 noted that "the chandelier forms a central point for decoration which should be treated with special care. But every farm-house can have some cheerful natural ornament, even if it be but branches of evergreens."

Magazines printed instructions and diagrams for making decorations on a "frame work of lath or twigs, and covered with some kind of green. These are formed into crosses, stars,



Fig. 1.—DESIGN FOR TRIMMING A ROOM.



Fig. 2.—TO DECORATE A CORNICE OR DOORWAY.

and other devices," one article explained in 1866. "Some of the wreaths, etc., are prettily decorated with bright berries, while others, to meet a cruder taste, are made gaudy with flowers cut from brightly colored paper." Victorians also used ferns, ivy, holly, mistletoe, moss, sumac, bittersweet, dried flowers and leaves, cattails, grain, cockscomb, strawflowers, gourds, and pine cones in their decorations.

To take advantage of the decorations and other preparations in private homes, the Victorians often scheduled other social activities, such as weddings, christenings, dinners, balls, and reunions, during the holiday season. For instance, in 1879 in Sioux City, Iowa, Bert F. Winslow and Victoria C. Cole were married at home on Christmas evening. In Burlington in 1872, six hundred attended a ball for the Burlington Division of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in a hall "tastefully decorated with evergreens and pictures; and festooned with flags and ribbons."

Greenery also appeared in the churches, in time for the Christmas Eve services. "The ancient custom of decorating churches is becoming more general yearly," observed an 1878 *American Agriculturist*. The *Sioux City Daily Journal* in 1880 prefaced a list of Christmas Eve church services with this: "So soon as the twilight comes to-day, Christmas is going to be inaugurated for children. Christmas trees have been planted in many places, and their growth and . . . abundance in beauty, light and gifts will be shown to-night." For a German Lutheran church in Sioux City, in 1881, "no



good-sized Christmas tree could be found in the market [so] the two largest that could be procured had been spliced together so neatly that few noticed. . . . On this the little presents for 100 little Sunday-school kinder were placed." Other Sioux City churches featured a boat "heavily freighted with gifts," or a "Jacob's ladder" wrapped in white cotton with evergreens and tapers. Santa often appeared during the services to distribute gifts to the children.

**C**HRISTMAS TREES had become common symbols of the holidays by the end of the century. Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, has often been credited for introducing the Christmas tree to England, but actually the custom had been brought from German areas of Europe by King George I of the Hanover family in the early eighteenth century. The English did not admire their Hanoverian kings, however, so they did not then imitate the custom.

The idea of Christmas trees became popular in the public mind after the *Illustrated London News* in 1848 published an engraving of the Royal Family gathered around a Christmas tree at Windsor Castle. Because Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had created such a popular image of the Royal Family, the Christmas tree became an accepted symbol of family life and solidarity. The same illustration was reprinted in American magazines (with adaptations, as shown here), and the custom became common.

It is quite likely that Christmas trees were used in the United States before 1850, but probably only by Germanic and Scandinavian families (whose ethnic traditions had derived from pre-Christian use of evergreens in mid-winter celebrations). No etiquette books include advice about Christmas trees until after this popularization in about 1850. Apparently the use of Christmas trees by the Royal Family in England lent a stamp of respectability upon the matter for the hopefully upwardly mobile American nouveau riche.

In 1879 a writer for the *American Agriculturist* commented that "within the last twenty years [the Christmas tree] has grown from very small beginnings, and spread itself wonderfully in this country, until of late its



(Opposite) The Royal Family around the Christmas tree, depicted in the *Illustrated London News*, 1848. (Above) American magazines adapted the engraving: Albert became a bewhiskered American, without royal sash. American portraits hung on the walls, and flags on the tree.

popularity appears to be somewhat on the wane. . . . In some families, the same decorations and ornaments are kept and used from year to year, and very pretty effects are produced by the arrangement of the dolls, soldiers, horses, and other animals about the grounds underneath the tree, where bits of looking-glass simulate water and where flowers seem to grow among the moss."

Victorian Christmas trees stood on a table, not on the floor. They were decorated with candles, small baskets filled with candy and nuts, gingerbread cookies, egg-shaped containers filled with candy, and paper ornaments in the shape of snowflakes, flowers, and hearts. Beneath the tree there might be a white cloth, with a crèche or a miniature farm scene. Later in the century, cornucopias, paper chains, and strings of cranberries became common tree decorations.

Victorians set up and decorated their Christmas trees at the start of the holiday season, December 24, and took them down after January 6, or Epiphany (also called Twelfth Night or Little Christmas). The tree was in the parlor, and this room was closed off from the rest of the

house until Christmas morning. A grand ceremony of opening the parlor door on Christmas morning showed off the decorated and lighted tree for the first time.

**G**IFTS were ordinarily given on Christmas morning after breakfast, although some might be saved until afternoon tea. The gifts were often placed on a separate table in the parlor, not under the tree. Historians of the Victorian era have imperfect records about whether everyone opened their gifts at the same time, in turn, or in what particular order. The major documentation available is of what happened in Queen Victoria's household, and she apparently always got to open her gifts first.

Gifts were less a part of the Victorian Christmas than they are today. Early gifts tended to fit into three categories: needlework; items made of silver; and foods, such as preserves, candy, fruits, nuts, and cakes. Fashion magazines such as *Godey's* or *Ballou's* recommended appropriate gifts for Christmas, such as handmade doilies, picture frames, fans, tea balls and strainers, vases, ornamental boxes, sachets, plush photograph albums, pin cushions, watch cases, and annuals (special publications sold only at Christmas time). Those attending an 1872 Montgomery County, Iowa, community festival exchanged gifts of tea pots, dolls, clothing, hand-made toys, lace-trimmed handkerchiefs, pin cushions, and jack knives.

Although toys for children were always acceptable gifts, they were not emphasized. The tradition of a gift-bearing man existed among various ethnic groups, but was not rooted in Victorian customs. Gradually these ethnic variations (Sinter-Klaas, Kris Kringle, St. Nicholas, and so on) were Americanized into a fat, jolly "Santa Claus" with reindeer.

**C**HRISTMAS DAY MENUS surely satisfied the appetite of the hungriest person. A typical menu might include such items as roast beef, roast goose, ham, oysters, potatoes, turnips, parsnips, beets, stuffing (made of celery, oysters, chestnuts, or sage and onions), fresh fruit, nuts, pickles, plum pudding and sauce, minced

meat pies, lemon tarts, meringues, jams and jellies, bread, butter, and beverages. Accounts of Christmas meals in Iowa reflect a similar abundance. James Lonsdale Broderick, a Yorkshireman who visited Dubuque in 1876 and 1877 noted on Christmas Eve, 1876: "We dined with Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Woodward, off pork, potatoes, pies, peaches preserved from Ohio, pickles, butter, green tea, &c." On Christmas Day that year he fared as well, and observed this about American dining habits: "We dined off roast turkey and oyster sauce, pie, &c. It is surprising where all the turkeys are raised that are eaten here, and the chickens. The beef about Dubuque is very inferior with scarcely any fat upon it. The people here won't buy fat meat, and when they do, they make the butcher take it off. . . . When one dines with the Americans they give one all kinds of eatables and nearly all at once, filling the plate as long as it will hold anything. At the Hotels a man orders everything that he imagines he can eat, and they are all placed before him at once. He is then compelled to eat very quickly or some of his dainties would get cold. Is it not better to have things served up in succession, just as required, and to take a little more time? Of course the Americans live well, on three meals a day, with butcher's meat to every meal, in other words, they live upon three dinners a day."

An account survives of an 1869 Christmas in Decatur County, Iowa. It was a community "festible" held in a schoolhouse. Among the food served was roast beef, ham, turkey, cucumbers, beets, and pickled eggs, piccalilli, "cold" slaw, jelly tarts, preserves (made of crabapple, tomato, ground cherry, plum, wild strawberry, watermelon, and citron), seven varieties of pie (including vinegar pie), sugar-coated rusks, golden crulls, and several kinds of cake.

Baskets of feather flowers in bright hues decorated the tables at the Decatur County event. At an earlier Christmas program at the school, the Christmas tree was not an evergreen, but a crabapple tree, trimmed with colored paper and tissue-paper snowballs. Students received a silver-paper basket filled with nuts and candy from their teachers. Other gifts exchanged that day included sugar apples, china doll heads,





By Victorian practice, the Christmas tree sat on a parlor table and was first seen on Christmas morning.



A rush of callers welcomes the new year in this illustration from *Harper's Weekly* (January 1, 1859).

perfume, bottles of hair oil, and candy hearts.

Chauncey C. Horton, a school teacher in Highland Grove, Jones County, Iowa, boarded with a local family. He reported for Christmas Day, 1861: "Have fared exceeding well to day, as the folks have *killed* and *cooked a Turkey*, it being Christmas." In general, though, his board was much less than satisfactory: "It would be strange, if we did not meet one good streak in the course of two weeks or more. Yet we anxiously wait the time when we shall take our departure from this inhospitable place; and may the Furies seize E. F. if he ever get us into another place like this illbegotten hole." Christmas Day was celebrated sparingly in the neighborhood; Horton held classes at two schoolhouses that day. He also reported that on the day after Christmas, "we are paying for the good time yesterday, for we have made a dinner out of chunks and scraps which were thrown overboard from the Ark."

As a contrast to Horton's ill luck at the dinner table, we might read in wonder a Victorian recipe for Christmas Pie. Ingredients include a goose, a fowl, a partridge, a pigeon, a hare, woodcocks, and other game and available wild fowl. The smallest fowl is tucked inside the next largest, and so on, and all this is enclosed in a good standing crust with a thick wall and bottom. The recipe calls for four pounds of butter and a bushel of flour.

(For more on holiday eating and recipes, see page 204.)

**B**ECAUSE NEW YEAR'S was more of a social event than the family-centered Christmas celebrations, New Year's customs are more likely to have been reported in local newspapers, and descriptions of Victorian customs appear often. Dinner parties and balls were often held on New Year's Eve, with elaborate menus featuring desserts.

On the afternoon and evening of New Year's Day, it was the custom to call on friends, or to be home so friends could call on you. This was either by invitation or as an open house. Light food was usually served, sometimes there were entertainments and dancing, and often there were special decorations. Each person apparently tried to call on as many others as possible.

The more you called on the better, and the more who called on you the better.

There was a great use of calling cards. On December 26, 1882, the *Daily Iowa State Leader* announced an "unlimited" assortment of New Year's calling cards. "No other printing concern in town will be able to make any such showing," the paper boasted. "Our styles run the scale from the costliest to the plain white card, and we guarantee to suit the most fastidious blood as well as the bashful student."

Actually the person calling might only leave a card at the front door, and never see the hostess at all. Both men and women called and were called on, but ordinarily it was men who called on women in their homes.

One could go calling as an individual or in groups. James Lonsdale Broderick, in Dubuque in 1877 noted: "The Gentlemen in parties of from 3 to 6 went round as is customary here on New Years' day to make calls upon the ladies who gathered themselves in companies of from 3 to 6. On calling, they, each party, exchanged cards on which are printed their names and 'A Happy New Year'. . . . We had some music, reading, and riddles."

As early as 1833, Captain Thomas Hamilton in his book *Men and Manners in America* stated: "It is the custom in New York, on the first day of the year, for the gentlemen to visit all their acquaintances; and the omission of this observance in regard to any particular family, would be considered as a decided slight. . . . For my own part, I confess, I found the custom rather inconvenient, there being about thirty families, whose attentions rendered such an acknowledgment indispensable. . . . In the course of about four hours [I] had the satisfaction of believing that I had discharged my duty. . . . You enter, shake hands, are seated, talk for a minute or two on the topics of the day, then hurry off as fast as you can. Wine and cake are on the table, of which each visitor is invited to partake." According to Captain Hamilton, the first day of the New Year was considered a day of kindness and reconciliation. All petty differences were to be forgotten and trifling injuries forgiven.

An 1870 etiquette book gives precise instructions for New Year's Day: calls are made exclusively by men, formal wear is required, a

stay should be very short, cards are to be used, and refreshments are served. "The politest of receivers of a visit, if of the female sex, are not expected to do more than bow the head, say a gracious word or two of farewell, and ring the bell for the servant to open the street-door on the departure of a male guest." Furthermore, "discreet visitors, ever mindful of the suggestive line—'Welcome the coming, and haste the departing guest' will linger as little as possible *in transitu* from door to door."

In spite of these somewhat inhospitable instructions, people seemed to have enjoyed this sort of activity. The *Iowa State Register* on January 1, 1885, listed the location of seventeen "open houses" that day in Des Moines, some with as many as thirty-three ladies as co-hostesses. "Colored Society open houses" are also listed. In the fashion of the time, ladies are not identified by their own names, but rather by their husbands', thereby creating such interesting names as Mrs. Judge C.C. Cole, Mrs. Captain Russell, Mrs. Dr. Cruttenden, Mrs. Major Conger, Mrs. General Alexander, Mrs. Rev. Van Antwerp, and Mrs. Lieutenant Governor Manning.

On January 2, 1885, the Des Moines newspaper reported that the previous day had been perfect weather for calling and that the decorations were beautiful. One "new and beautiful home was most handsomely decorated with evergreen and other material. Over the large plate-glass mirror in the entrance to the house was the word 'Welcome' and the year '1885'. . . . Each caller was presented with pretty souvenirs made by the ladies who received with Mrs. Harding. They were cards on which was printed the full names of all the ladies. To them was fastened fine ribbons on which were original paintings by the ladies. The reception here as in most of the other places was by gas light, the house being closed so as to exclude the sunlight. The callers were delighted with music by the Northwestern Band. The lunch was bountiful."

Another home was decorated like a "fairy land" with garlands of cotton, covered with "diamond dust" (probably white or clear glitter), and fastened with Christmas tree moss. Another home had "elaborate" evergreen decorations. "In the archway between the two



A nineteenth-century artist pokes fun at the custom of New Year's Day social calls. One strove to call on as many homes as possible and to stay but a moment. Here, the gentleman arriving presents his checklist of homes to visit, rather than his calling card. Meanwhile, the rushed host has his own calls to make.

parlors a bell was swinging, which rang out the old year and rang in the new. On one side of the bell was '1884' and on the other '1885'. 'Welcome' and 'A Happy New Year' in evergreen, also greeted the callers as they entered the parlors."

The special feature at yet another home was a grab bag filled with trinkets. The newspaper noted that "there was a great deal of fun in making the 'grabs'. There was but one trouble and that was, there were more callers than there were articles and the bag was emptied before the last calls were made."

The Hotel Morgan in Des Moines presented a New Year's game dinner for guests. The menu included clams, salmon, ham, mountain sheep, tongue, turkey, black tail deer, canvasback duck, oysters, rabbit pot pie, ruffed grouse, and fillet of buffalo tenderloin. A variety of sauces, broths, salads, vegetables, cakes, pies, and nuts rounded out the menu — and, no doubt, the diners.

Contrary to the dictates of some etiquette books, gentlemen acted as hosts for New Year's Day open houses in Iowa. On January 1, 1884, in Winterset, four different open houses were hosted by men, in one case by fifty-six gentlemen. The *Winterset Madisonian* reported that one menu would include prunes, hominy, flitch (or bacon), bologna, gingerbread, plum butter, and something called "b. h. hash." The paper announced that "Married ladies [are] especially invited, and the young ladies are earnestly requested not to stay away. Children under the age of twelve months not desired. Husbands and lovers may bring their wives and sweethearts as far as the front gate, but [the men] are strictly forbidden entering."

As early as 1879 the *Osceola Sentinel* reported New Year's open houses. In 1884, the ladies who had been received later described the festivities: "Leap Year Calling. — New Year calling has been one of the pleasantest institutions of Osceola society for many years, and when it was announced that 'Barkis was willin' this year to receive the ladies, the anticipation of a good time was universal. . . . Flags and mottoes were the chief decorations, the motto over the parlor entrance in the hall attracting particular notice from its symbolical character. Here the ladies flocked earliest, may be because the rumor quickly ran around town that every lady here went to the dining room accompanied by a gentleman. The tables were provided with every delicacy possible to provide."

At another open house in Osceola the decorations were even more elaborate. "One piece in particular attracted much notice. A gilt frame enclosing a black velvet background, with gilt figures 188 on its surface. Then two hands extended from a white cloud at one end, one of which held a figure 3 just taken from the date and the other had a 4 almost put in its place. On the cloud a wavy line of gilt letters told the legend 'Time is Fleeting'. Birds and flowers had been brought to add to the beauty of these rooms, and in a lace curtained recess a band was constantly discoursing soft music. Their fare was dainty indeed, and the table with its pyramids of fruit and flowers was like a charmed feast. The bill of fare was dainty and fanciful and witty as ever was devised — a

medly of conceits of various sorts. This club gave each lady a packet of 'bonbons' to take away."

**A**S THESE EXAMPLES show, New Year's Day calling was a well-established Iowa custom among the middle and upper classes during the decades after the Civil War. Food and decorations seem to have played as major a role in the success of the open houses as they did in Christmas celebrations. Certainly then, like now, some people practiced certain customs without knowing why or understanding their meaning. Apparently Victorian customs, or derivations of them, seemed fitting to those who celebrated Christmas and New Year's in the nineteenth century.

And just as the Victorians had their customs of observing the holiday season, so do the people in Iowa at the end of the twentieth century. Today, outdoor displays of colored lights are quite common before Christmas. Santa Clauses arrive simultaneously at shopping malls. We sing about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Frosty the Snowman. We give gifts of video games and kitchen gadgets. The time for the celebration has changed a bit. We now begin to buy decorations in late October, and extend the holiday through "after-Christmas sales." New Year's celebrations might take the form of an RV trip to the Rose Bowl, or a day with other fans in front of a televised football game. But the holidays remain, as they were in the Victorian era, a time of family gatherings, parties with friends and neighbors, gift giving, decorating, and dining. As the reporter for a Hopeville, Iowa, paper observed about holiday celebrations, "Life needs such hours to lighten it — to remember always — to anticipate." □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources include nineteenth-century national magazines, etiquette and household-hint books, and Iowa newspapers. Also see Phil Stong's "Christmas in Iowa," *Palimpsest* (Dec. 1957). For Montgomery County, Iowa, see leaflet by the Montgomery Historical Society, "Christmas in a Country Church" (1989).

# Victorian Victuals



by Loren N. Horton

**A** BEWILDERING abundance of food marks many historical accounts of Christmas and New Year's celebrations. For instance, a New Year's menu at a Des Moines hotel in 1885 listed no less than fifty-nine items.

More modest celebrations also were marked by abundance. Looking back to when he was a boy of nine, Iowa author Phil Stong recalled a Christmas dinner in 1908 in Keosauqua, Iowa. "For a person of about my years and swallowing ability," he explained in a 1957 *Palimpsest* article, Christmas dinner included an entire leg of a large turkey, with some white meat; a half-pint of sage and onion dressing; a pint of mashed potatoes and giblet gravy; a half-pint mashed turnips; one-third of a loaf of bread, spread with butter and varied jams; a pint of cranberries and pickles; a pint of vegetables such as onions, beets, peas, and lima beans; a quarter of a mince pie, "oranges, celery, olives, and candy to fill," and a pint each of milk and cider. (Stong added that the cider and milk didn't count because they would "soak" in.)

"This is far beyond the capacity of the human (a vague term) stomach, of course," Stong commented "but it is well within the capacity of the entire boy."

He continued, "About halfway through the meal Great-Aunt Beatie would tell us again of a little boy of her acquaintance who ate so much he busted his stummick and died in prolonged and horrible agonies. We never did learn whether he busted inside only or whether he spilled. But we felt nothing but contempt for the feeble wretch."

In the tradition, then, of Victorian dining excess, the *Palimpsest* offers here a few Victorian holiday recipes, just as they appeared in turn-of-the-century cookbooks.

*Victorian etiquette and cookbooks abound with recipes for plum pudding, a ceremonial dish brought blazing to the table. The following pudding and sauce recipes are from Woman's Favorite Cook Book, by Annie R. Gregory, published in 1907.*

## CHRISTMAS PLUM PUDDING

Chop one cupful of beef suet, two cupfuls of bread and one-half cupful of citron. Mix the citron, one cupful of seeded raisins and one cupful of currants, well washed, with part of a pint of flour. Put four well-beaten eggs, one heaping cupful of sugar, one teaspoonful of salt in one cupful of milk, one teaspoonful of cloves, two of cinnamon, one-half of a nutmeg in a bowl. Stir in the fruit, bread-crumbs and suet, putting in last a level teaspoonful of soda dissolved in warm water and adding the rest of the flour. Mix thoroughly and boil for four hours. Turn bottom-side up on platter, pour over it some good brandy and touch a match to it. Bring on the table while blazing. Serve with brandy sauce.

## RICH BRANDY SAUCE

Stir a small teaspoonful of corn-starch in a little cold water to a smooth paste; add to it a cupful of boiling water, one cupful of sugar, a small piece of butter; boil all together five minutes. Remove from the fire and when cool, stir into it one-half cupful of brandy.

*In 1891, the Ladies of Plymouth Church in Des Moines, Iowa, edited "76": A Cook Book. Mrs. Henry Scribner contributed this recipe:*

## NEW YEAR'S COOKIES

Beat three-fourths of a pound of butter and one pound of sugar to a cream and add three eggs, one teacup of sour milk, one teaspoon of soda, a half cup of caraway seeds and flour enough to roll nicely.

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compiled by Mary Flanagan, Marjorie Levine, and Mark Meacham

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## LETTERS FROM READERS

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### *Enjoyed the Kelsey letters*

I especially enjoyed reading "The Kelsey Letters" in the Fall 1991 *Palimpsest*. The historical scope, snatches of pioneer Iowa, committed Christian faith and living, and the privilege of being invited into a 19th-century Iowa family all appealed to me. Please pass this note of thanks on to Susan Kuecker, the letters editor.

Raymond V. Banner, Des Moines, Iowa

### *More on the 1903 Cadillac*

It was with pleasure and surprise that we saw my grandfather's old green 1903 Cadillac featured on the cover of the Fall *Palimpsest*. The enclosed check is for ten copies. My brothers and cousins will be most pleased to have copies also. My father, the Ralph mentioned in the article, is still driving. His current driver's license is good for two more years — till he's 100! Can you believe it?

Jacqueline Silver Flowers, Lamoni, Iowa

### *If you change it, they will come*

*The Palimpsest* has turned into a decent magazine and you can be proud of the [Fall 1991] issue. However, the time has come to change the name. Can't it simply be called Iowa Popular History, or Iowa History — anything other than the unspellable, unpronounceable, arcane *Palimpsest*? Iowans should have a popular history magazine and when you change the name, your membership list will increase.

Steve Marquardt, Des Moines, Iowa

### **Dear Readers:**

What do you think?

We agree with the above reader, Mr. Marquardt, that it is difficult to promote our magazine to new audiences when the title is such an unusual word. And although for the last three years a pronunciation has appeared with the definition on the inside front cover, we have not observed any more comfort or ease among readers or the public regarding the word "palimpsest."

While we respect the name's tradition, appropriateness, and uniqueness, our greater goal is to disseminate Iowa history to as many readers as possible. Is the name a help or a hindrance in attracting new readers?

Tell us what you think. Should the title be changed? If so, to what? Send your opinions and ideas. If you like, use the subscription envelope tucked inside this issue. (Or use the envelope to order new subscriptions to any of our publications — for yourself or as gifts.)

We look forward to hearing from you.

Write to: Ginalie Swaim, *Palimpsest* Editor  
State Historical Society of Iowa  
402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## SUBMISSIONS

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The editor welcomes manuscripts and edited documents on the history of Iowa and the Midwest that may interest a general reading audience. Submissions that focus on visual material (photographs, maps, drawings) or on material culture are also invited. Originality and significance of the topic, as well as the quality of research and writing, will determine acceptance for publication. Manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced, and follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (13th edition). Please send two copies. Standard length is within ten to twenty manuscript pages, but shorter or longer submissions will be considered. Although the *Palimpsest* presents brief bibliographies rather than footnoted articles, footnotes should appear in the original submission. When using newspaper sources, please cite page as well as date of issue. Include a brief biographical sketch. Because illustrative material is integral to the *Palimpsest*, the editor encourages authors to include photographs and illustrations (or suggestions). Please send submissions or queries to Ginalie Swaim, Editor, *The Palimpsest*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.



COURTESY STEVEN OHRN (SHSI)

The colors and patterns of Mexican dancing swirl through the Mexican-American Cultural Center in Des Moines. This *Palimpsest* celebrates Iowa's cultural diversity, reflects on "everyday history," and elaborates on Victorian holiday extravagance.

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