

The Man Behind the Camera

Fred W. Kent

by Mary Bennett

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De Witt, Iowa.

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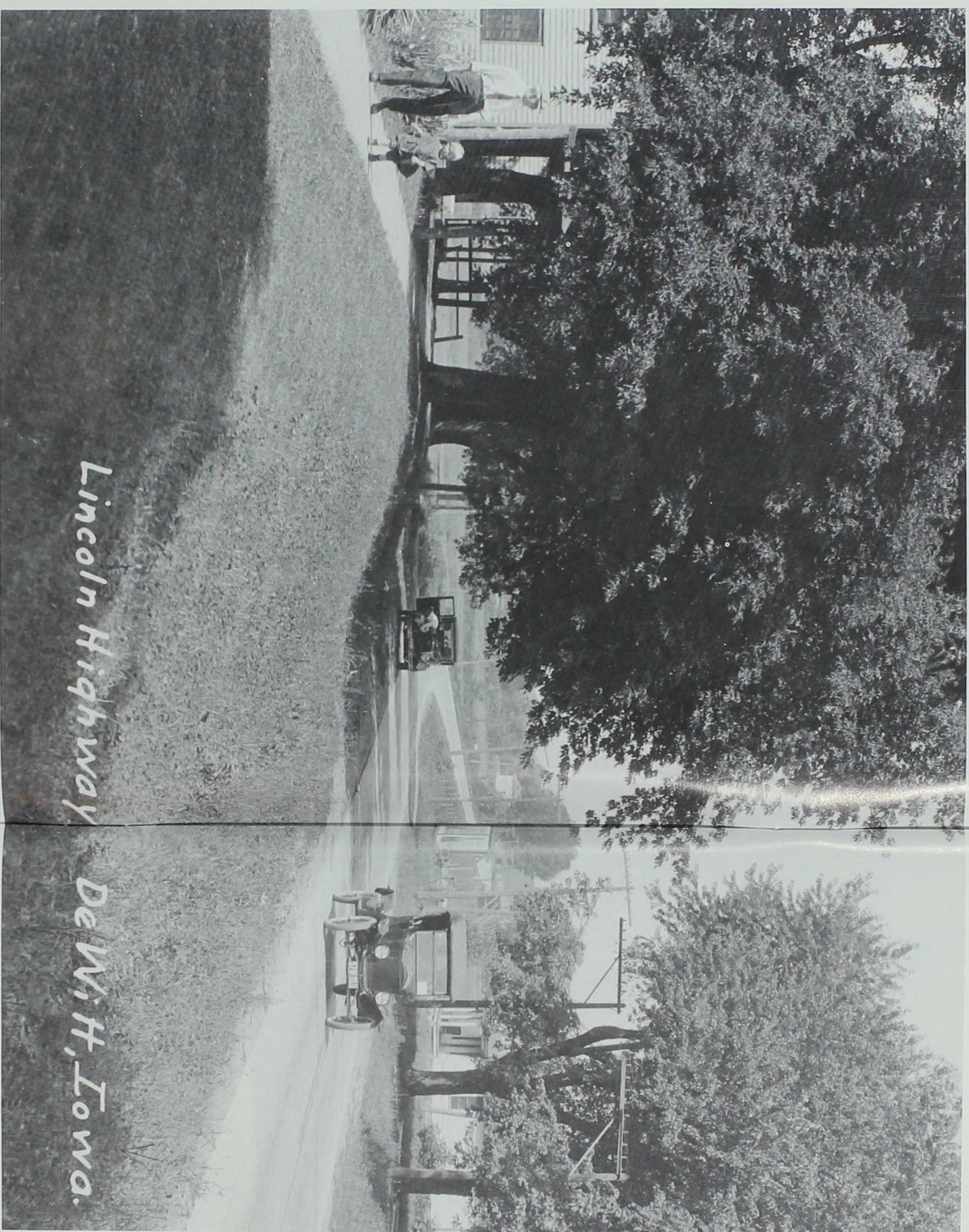
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Kent's photographs are valuable documents of life at the beginning of the modern era, for he portrays every aspect of family and community life in transition. Here, a man and child stroll along the Lincoln Highway in Kent's hometown of DeWitt in Clinton County, about 1915.



By rigging up an undetected shutter release with a long cable, Kent (left) was able to pose with his friends while eating watermelon during a September 1915 canoe trip to Hills. After his marriage in June 1917 to Clara Hartman (the taller woman), the Kents went on a double honeymoon with the other two pictured here, their best friends Al and Muriel (Eggenberg) Bailey. The couples traveled by canoe from Iowa City to Burlington.

it with a larger camera. "I fixed a darkroom in the drug store, another one in the basement at home, and another one upstairs," Kent recalled in a 1979 interview. "I kept enlarging it all the time." While in high school, he apprenticed to a local photographer and "made up postcards of the local towns to sell as souvenirs."

In the fall of 1911, Fred Kent traveled by rail to Iowa City to enroll at the University of

Iowa. He brought along a big locker of clothes, an old 5 x 7 camera, a tripod, and \$160. "I had to make a go of it," he remembered. "So I started taking pictures." In the boarding house where he rented a room, he rigged up a sink for developing pictures.

Kent soon found other quarters. "There was a chap, a photographer, who worked his way through school taking photographs—he was a senior—he had a job at the old Townsend

Studio on Clinton Street," he recalled. "Before he left, he traded me out of my good camera for another one which was a piece of junk, but I got the job there where he was in the studio. I got a room there taking care of the place, firing the furnace, cleaning and sweeping. Down in the basement, there was a temporary darkroom. Very primitive, but it worked and I used it, and was there until I was, maybe, a senior."

Kent's enterprising spirit led him to take pictures of campus life and, in particular, of football games. In 1912, the university athletic director designated the hard-working sophomore as the official photographer for all athletic events. Kent's college years were profitable during the summers as well; he journeyed to Iowa's Great Lakes, where he set up a "pantatorium" for cleaning and pressing tourists' clothes, and shot and sold photographs. (See the Summer 1987 *Palimpsest* for Debby J. Zieglofsky's photo essay about Kent at Lake Okoboji.)

After graduation in 1915, Kent became the official photographer for all University of Iowa events. An office and photo lab were provided in MacLean Hall. "I made all my money by the job; I wasn't salaried, and I didn't have a boss." Always "on call," he was a fixture on campus throughout the 1920s, lugging his camera equipment around on a bicycle.

Although often celebrated for his work as a local historian documenting Iowa City and the University of Iowa, Kent deserves serious consideration as one of a handful of "fine art" photographers, carving out a niche in Iowa's photographic history. He used his technical and artistic skills to make valuable contributions to researchers in medicine, engineering, biology, and ornithology.

In post-World War II America, Kent served as a catalyst in merging photography and science. His articles illustrated the technical aspects of color photography and his methods of obtaining correct lighting. An expert problem solver, Kent was skilled with all types of lighting, including regular, electronic, and flash; he had come a long way from the early days of using explosive flash powder in the Townsend portrait studio. Researchers were grateful for his photomicrographs, which

offered accurate and precise renderings of specimen slides of tissue or microorganisms. In his other medical photography, his rapport with patients and his ability to work quickly and efficiently endeared him to the doctors for whom he worked. Ignacio Ponseti, professor emeritus in the Department of Orthopaedics at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, recalls, "When he came to the hospital to take a picture of a patient there was never a flaw. He knew exactly what you wanted. He was an acting biologist, really, as far as we were concerned, because he was interested in the disease, the disorder. He was a great technician, of course, but he transcended it. He was an artist."

Because of Kent's technical superiority, Eastman Kodak would send samples of color film so he could test quality and potential applications. In 1947, Kodak commissioned him to create a manual on how photography could be used as a teaching aid in medicine. Researchers at medical schools all over the country wanted to follow Kent's lead and asked him for advice on cameras and film. Other doctors wrote to comment on his "beautiful work in the medical journals." After his *Medical Radiology and Photography* book appeared in 1947, an assistant manager of a Kodak store in Chicago wrote to Kent in Iowa City: "I knew that you were doing this kind of work there but I had no idea how extensive your operations were."

Shortly thereafter, the University of Iowa responded to his national reputation by financing more sophisticated equipment and putting Kent on salary for the first time. "I have recently become institutionalized and become an official department of the University," Kent wrote, "and perhaps with a rigid cost accounting and more careful planning, I can arrive at the real cost of this kind of work." Nevertheless, Kent was more interested in achieving the desired photographic effect than in worrying about the costs involved. Although he was asked to surrender his spacious quarters in MacLean Hall, the university renovated another building for University Photo Service. There Kent worked alongside his brother Gordon for many years, and his son Jim now joined the staff as a photographer. Jim Kent



Above: Enthusiasts for outdoor recreation, Kent and his siblings marked off a tennis court on the front lawn of their home in DeWitt. Kent photographed this scene on a glass plate negative.

assumed his father's duties as head of Photo Service when Fred retired from the university in 1962.

In retirement, Kent remained dedicated to photography and history, and he continued to document Iowa with his camera. In 1978, a journalist asked Kent to estimate the number of pictures he had taken. Kent shook his head and replied, "I have absolutely no idea; not even a 'ball park' figure. The number is not important. It's the subject matter that counts."

Certainly the subject matter—and the quality—of Kent's photography is what makes it useful and fascinating to researchers and the public. Yet, equally impressive is the sheer size of this collection, donated by the Kent family to

the State Historical Society. For instance, Kent's legacy begins with twenty thick photo albums that record family history (the first album alone contains over two thousand photos). There are ten travel albums, including one of an exquisitely documented trip to visit Navaho Indians in New Mexico in 1923. The collection also includes hundreds of glass plate negatives from his youth in DeWitt and thousands of negatives from the rest of his career. About two hundred stereographs of family life and nature scenes date from 1920 to 1935. The meticulous labeling of photos and negative sleeves will benefit researchers, as will the ten audio recordings and one videotape of Kent. The collection is richly supplemented with correspondence and

writings, a few boyhood diaries, and a sizable collection of Kent's own cameras. (See "Description of Collection," page 131.)

Friends and family alike remember Kent's inquisitive mind and engaging personality. Besides photography and ornithology, he tinkered with wireless radio, stamp collecting, and gardening. But it appears family life was paramount. In fact, Iowans' favorite and most informative Kent photos will probably be found in the family albums, where he captures the spirit of midwestern life.

His delight in shooting farm and rural scenes was not limited to Johnson County; he was attracted to the Mississippi, Turkey, and Volga rivers as well as to Lake Okoboji. He created incomparable images of Iowa sunsets, trees, wildflowers, barns, winter scenes, clouds, shadows, moonlight, and fog. A lifetime of ramblings in the countryside and his many canoe trips fueled a passion for preservation and study of the natural environment. Kent "knew Johnson County inch by inch," Ponseti recalls. For more than twenty-five years, he maintained a thorough, methodical record of the birds he observed on nearly 3,500 bird-watching trips. He shared his interest in birds with his son Tom, and together they compiled the notes and bird photos into *Birding in*

Eastern Iowa, published in 1975. When Johnson County's conservation board solicited Kent's advice in locating a suitable tract of land to be developed into a park, he did not realize that 980 acres of rolling timber would be named "Kent Park" in honor of his work in resource preservation. In 1984, when Kent was ninety, he was recognized by the Iowa City Historic Preservation Commission for his work in preserving local history. He died that year.

Kent's success depended on his innate storytelling ability and his affinity for people. "I never had any formal training," he recalled. "I just started taking pictures and never stopped." In many respects, he was photographing ordinary subjects on routine assignments, but his images transcend the ordinary. He knew a photo could tell a story, provoke a debate, convey an emotion, or tickle one's fancy. His talent for composition, attention to detail, and total control of the camera and film were matched with an incisive mind and a clear sense of history. Like a great musician, Kent had years of practice with his "instruments" and could execute the most complicated task with the greatest of technical ease and artistic sensibility. As you'll see on the following pages, his photographs have universal appeal while helping recreate the past for today's viewers.

Kent's warmth and his talent for conveying personalities are revealed in this lovely portrait of Muriel Eggenberg and Clara Hartman in May 1915.





Above: Kent sold souvenir postcards of his hometown under the imprint "Kent & Co." Uninhibited by social conventions, he even ventured into a local DeWitt pool hall to show us the pastimes of young men in 1910.

Opposite: Kent honed his skills at nature photography as a young man exploring the woods near his native DeWitt.





Opposite: Among Kent's favorite photos is this charming shot of his future wife, Clara Hartman of Davenport, in July 1912. Kent was especially adept at capturing the rapid movement of the waterfall as Clara stood in the spill of Crystal Lake near DeWitt.

Right: The arrival of the first grandchild in the family was a special event. Shortly after her January 1916 birth, Jean Kent Warner (Kent's niece) lies nestled next to her mother, Maud.

Below: Lighting would always intrigue Kent. He photographed this campfire when he was sixteen, two years after he had purchased his first camera. An avid naturalist and canoeist, Kent photographed countless hours outdoors. Scenes of picnics, canoe trips, river valleys, and forests fill several photo albums.





Donald Kent, Fred's younger brother, cools off in tub. Kent probably shot this photograph while home from college. Nearly a decade later he would photograph Donald and the rest of the Kent family in a more formal arrangement (opposite).



Christmas 1918 brought the Kents together for a family portrait. Back row, from left: Fred, Gordon, Donald, and their brother-in-law, Ward Warner. Middle row: Fred's wife, Clara Hartman Kent (pregnant with their first child), his parents, Charles F. Kent and Elizabeth Kent (holding her grandson, John Warner), and Maud Kent Warner. Front: Marjorie, Jean Warner, and Helen.





After Fred and Clara Kent set up housekeeping in Iowa City, Fred continued to document the ordinary, providing us glimpses of their everyday life. Opposite: Their kitchen, October 1917, reveals the informal, "behind-the-scenes" details of domestic life that seldom appear in photographs. Notice, for instance, that the sink has both a hand pump (on right end) and a faucet and plumbing pipes, on left. Above: When his children Barbara and Jim came down with measles in December 1924, Kent rigged up headphones to the wireless radio to entertain them during their illness.



Top: Kent captured classic interactions like this playful moment between Grandfather Hartman and his grandson Charles, and then printed them on stereograph cards, which added dimension to the image when viewed through a stereoscope. Bottom: Fresh innocence of childhood is preserved in this stereo portrait of Kent's daughter, Barbara, close to her sixth birthday in September 1926.



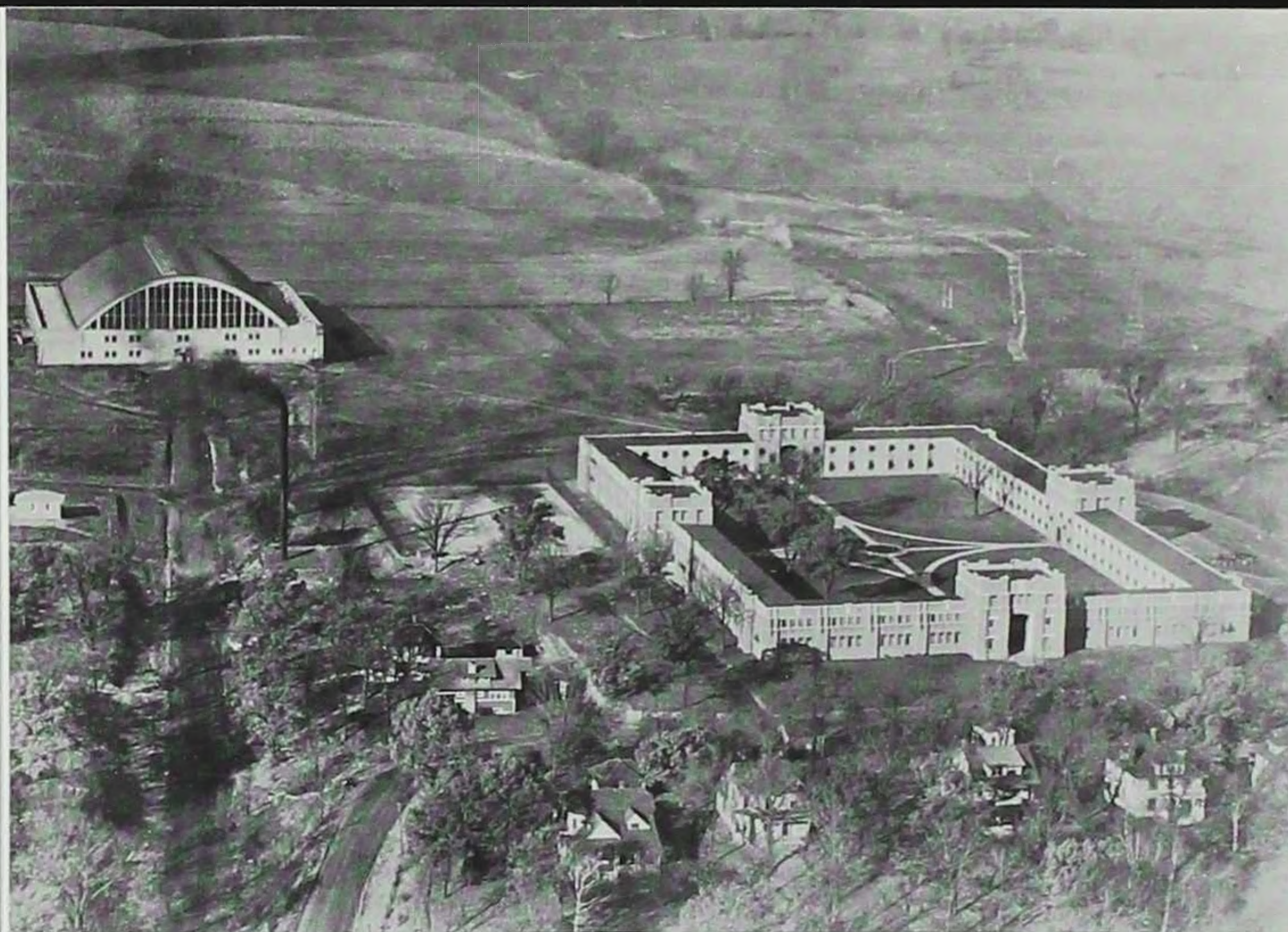
Shooting in the filtered light of the University of Iowa greenhouse, Kent captures the curiosity of his son's classmates. Jim Kent was a kindergartner at the university's Experimental School in 1925.



Running fast enough to blur on the photograph, two children chase around a circle of playmates at Jim Kent's school in 1925. The children's movement is even more apparent when the image is viewed in the original stereograph format in which Fred Kent shot it.



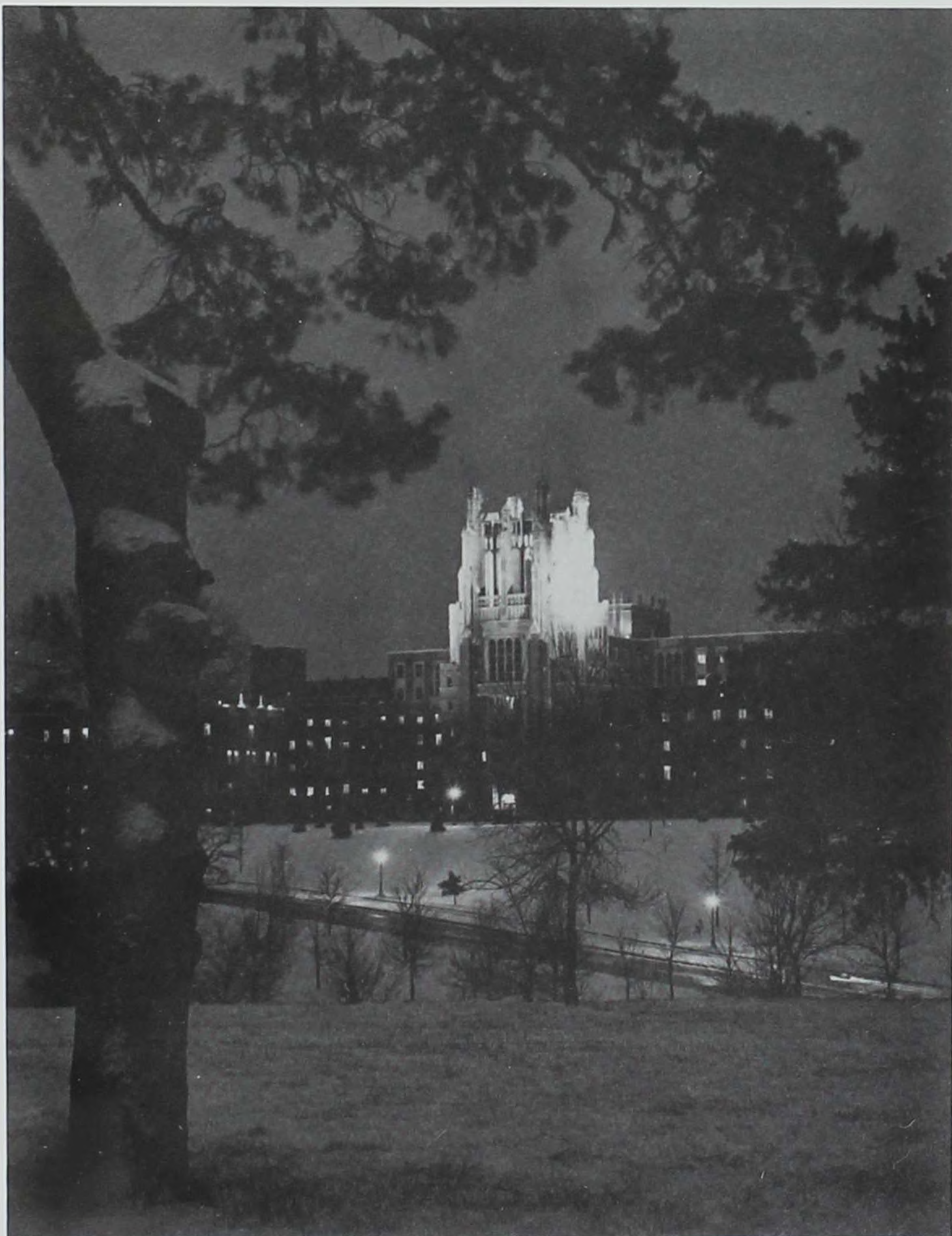
By March 16, 1924, an early spring thaw had melted all but the heaviest snow in the bottom of this Johnson County ravine. The perfect perspective of this shot creates the illusion of depth when viewed through a stereoscope.



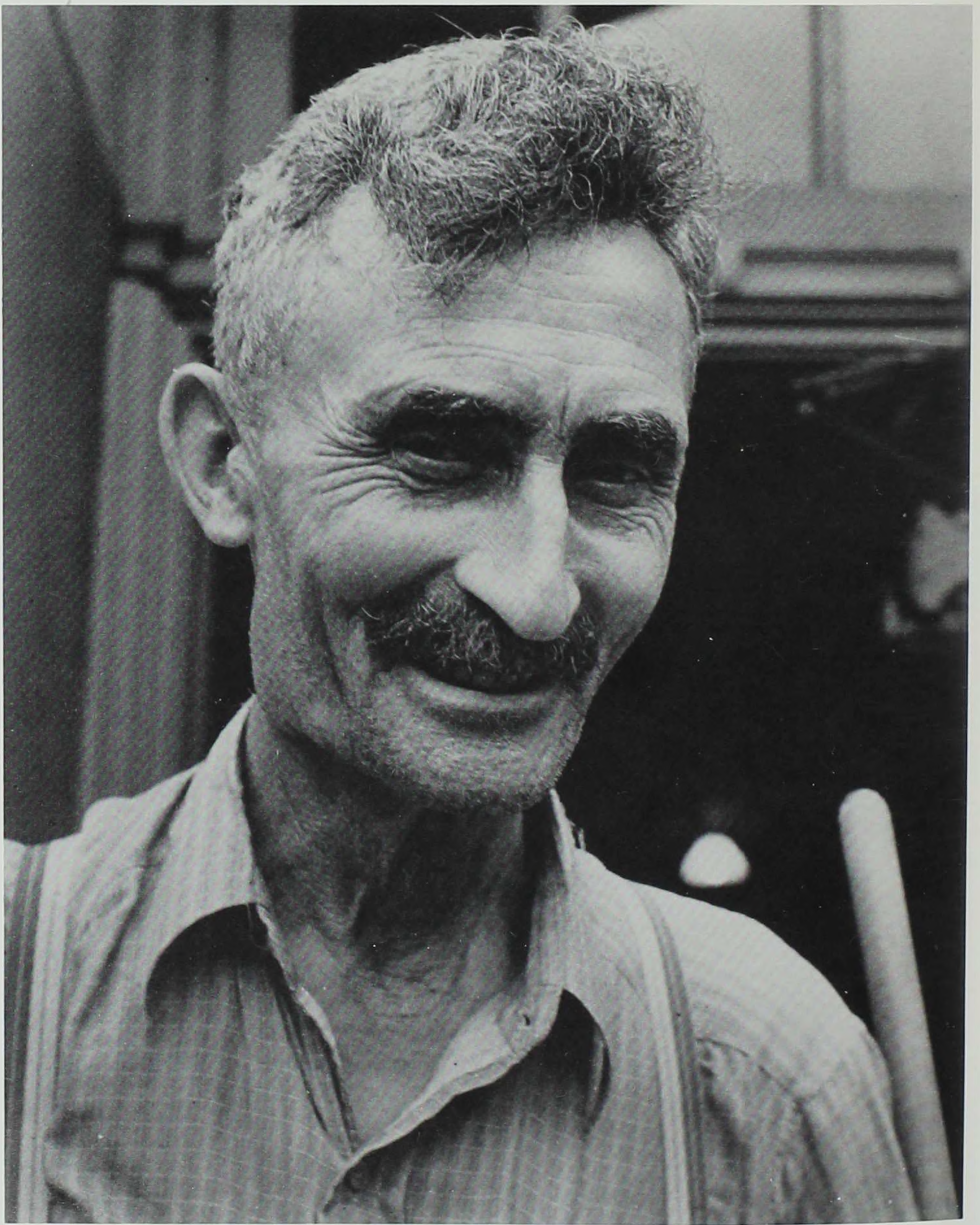
Left: Witness to the expanding University of Iowa campus, Kent chronicled each new building, beginning with the first buildings west of the river—Quadrangle dormitory in 1920 and the Armory in 1921. Kent gained aerial photography skills during his stint at the USA School of Aerial Photography in Rochester, New York, during World War I.

Below: Enthralled Hawkeye fans watch a University of Iowa football game against Denver, October 29, 1927.

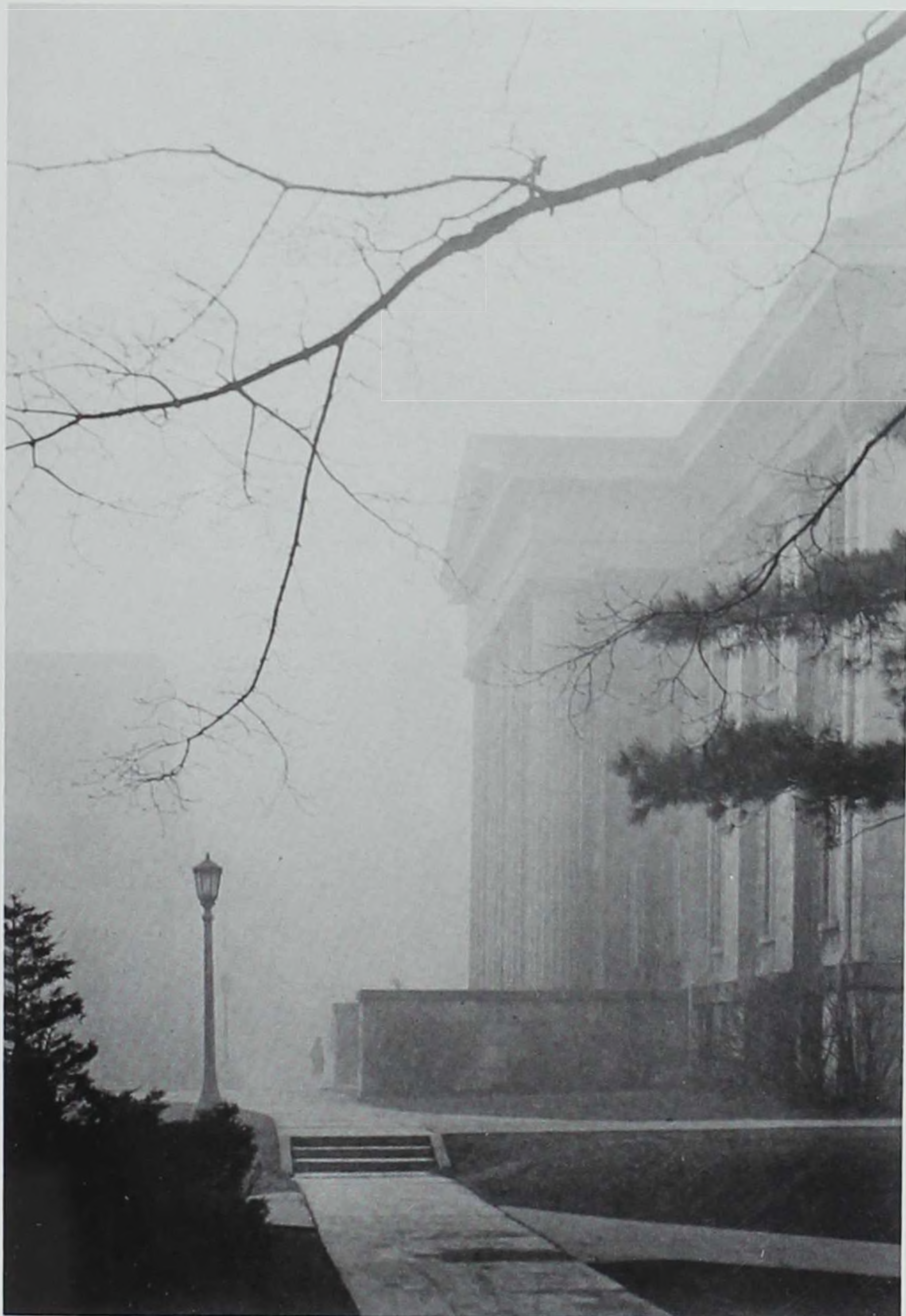




The Gothic tower of the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics has been a local landmark since its construction in 1928. Kent stayed up half of one wintry night to achieve this artistic time exposure.

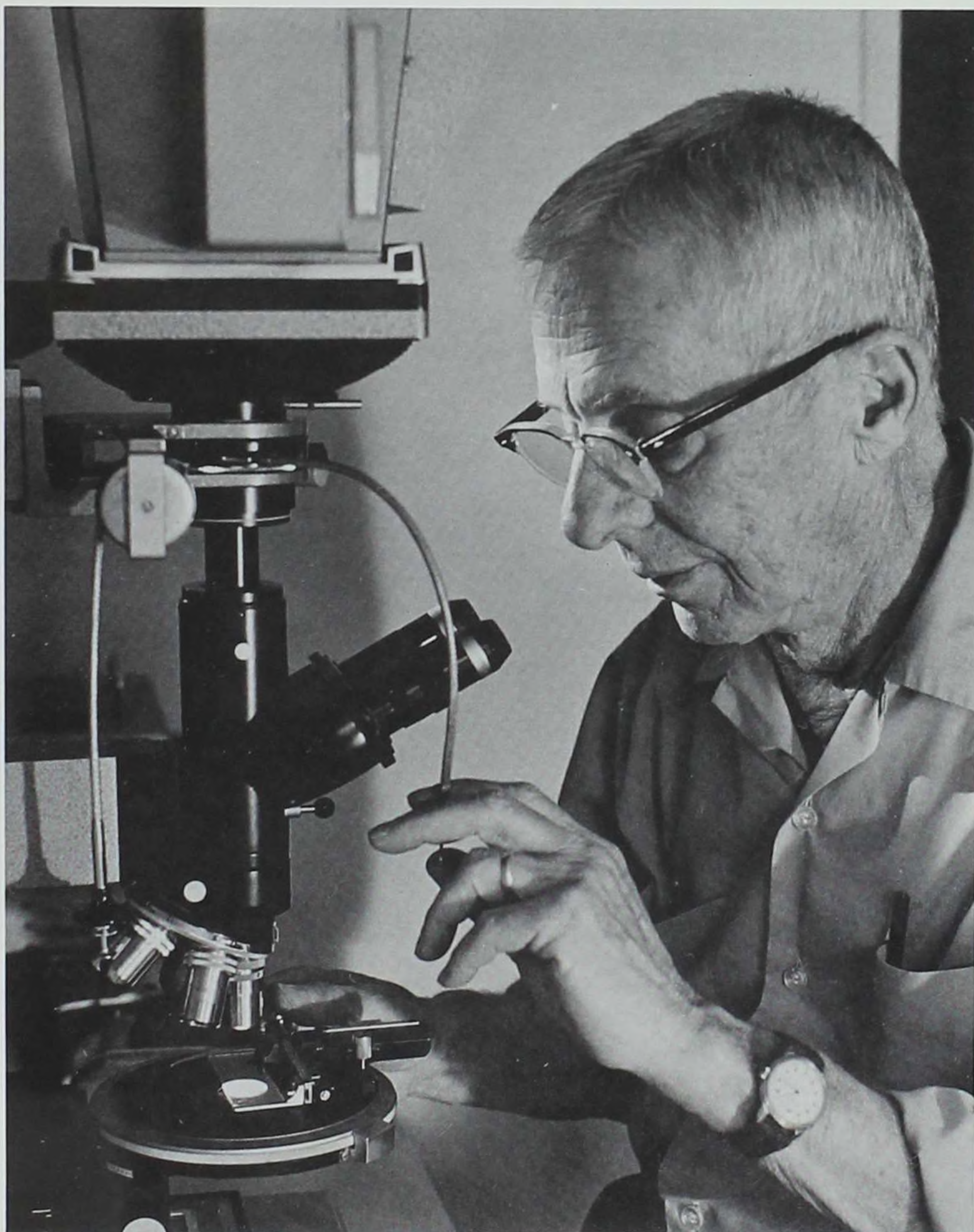


Well-worn face of a University of Iowa janitor smiles at us in this photograph, revealing the power of Kent and his camera to seize upon the familiar and convey its special meaning.

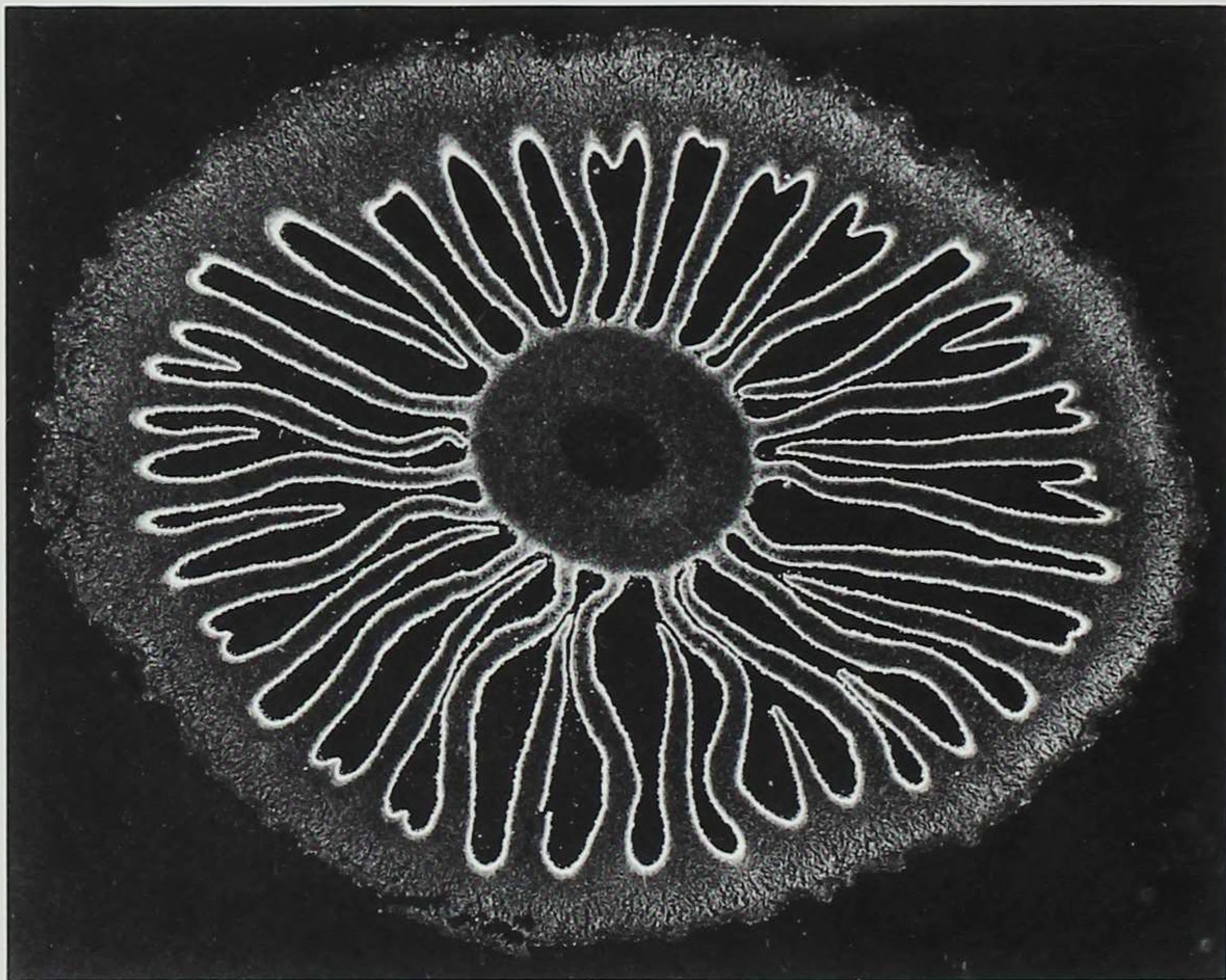


Kent artfully captured the dreamy atmosphere of Old Capitol cloaked in mist.





Photomicrography was a specialty for Fred Kent (above). He delighted in fooling viewers, who had difficulty identifying the source of an image—for instance, a mosquito antenna (opposite). Photographed under the microscope, it opens our mind's eye to the power and mystery of nature. In the 1940s, Kent entered some of his photomicrographs in a national art exhibit, "Art in Science," which eventually traveled around the country under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution.



Above: "Plant Stem #3," also entered in the "Art in Science" exhibit, reveals the uneven growth pattern of the stem. Responding to Kent's expertise in medical and scientific photography, a colleague wrote: "The suggestions you have given us should eliminate a lot of experimenting and save us a great deal of time."

Opposite: Photomicrograph of a leaf vein allows our eyes to re-examine the obvious and study more closely the intricate patterns found in an ordinary leaf.

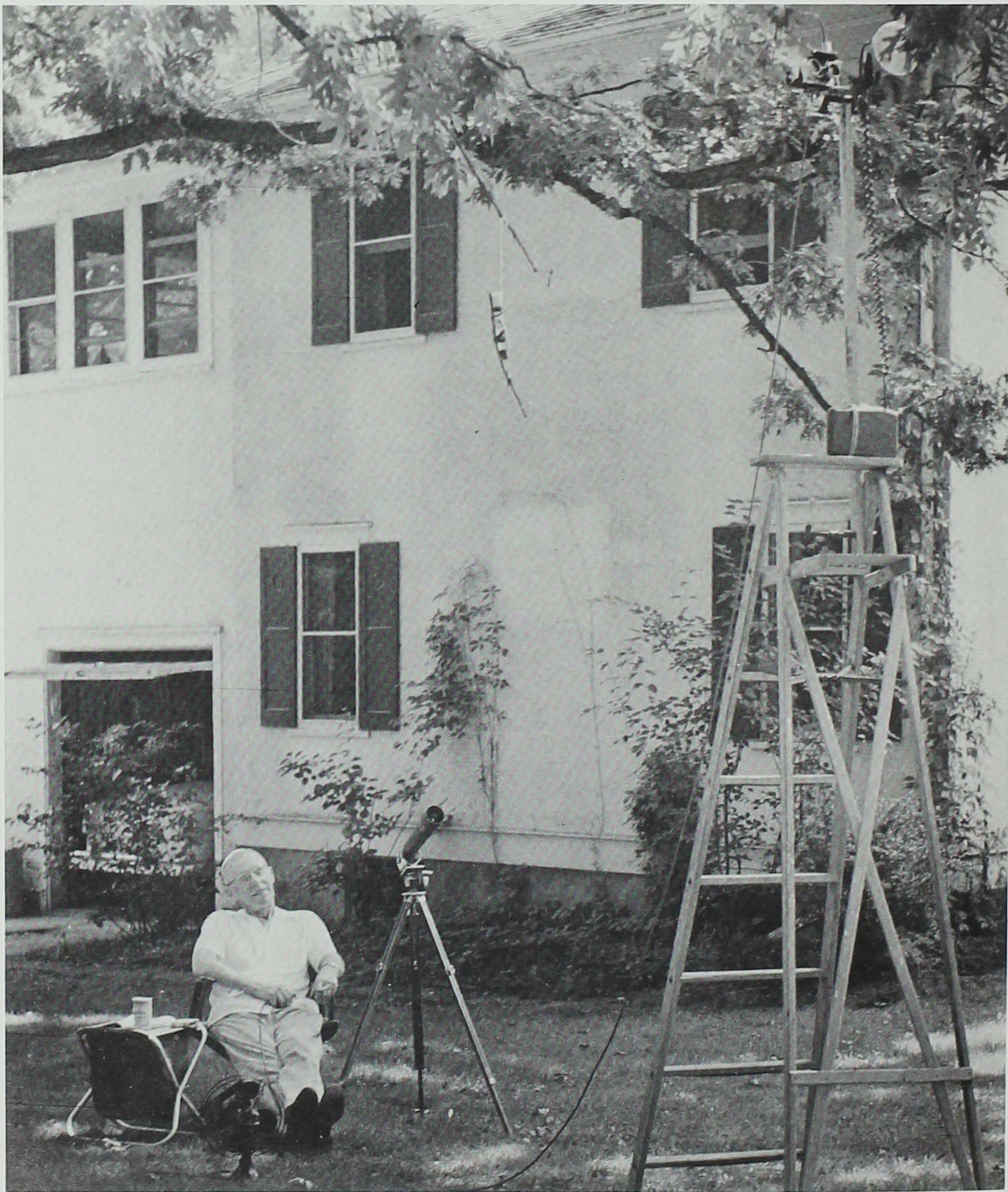




Few photographers have the technical and artistic skills required to record the illusive lighting of clouds in the sky. Kent stands among elite photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams, who spent lifetimes trying to achieve stunning results with clouds. Here, clouds dwarf the Gothic tower of the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics.



It became a Kent tradition to come up with a gimmick for the family Christmas card. Top: This trick photograph from 1938 shows Tom, Clara, Barb, Chuck, Fred, and Jim Kent preparing their yearly greeting. Bottom: Using photos of a snowdrift and of Fred and Clara in their car, Kent created this composite photo for the 1964 card, showing his beloved Volkswagen Beetle engulfed in snow, with no apparent escape route. For another example of a Kent family Christmas card, see the previous *Palimpsest* (Summer 1994), page 60; on that Christmas card, Kent customized the household radio to look like a television screen showing "Station Kent."



With shutter release in hand and telescope nearby, Kent relaxes in his yard. Expecting a hummingbird to return to its nest in the branches overhead, Kent had rigged his camera and flash on a ladder positioned several inches from the nest. Always determined to get just the right angle and exposure, he was known for ingenious—and playful—methods of setting up his equipment. He occasionally used a shutter release with a cable up to thirty feet long so he could include himself in a photograph.



Northern saw-whet owl peering through the branches symbolizes Kent's love of nature and birdwatching, life-long passions rivaled only by his pursuit of photography.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Fred Kent's daughter, Barbara Buckley, has kept her father's collection neatly organized and ready for preservation and use. This article would not have been possible without her generous assistance and enthusiastic support. As author, I wish to thank Irving B. Weber, Ignacio and Helena Ponseti, and Ruth Nelson McCuskey for participating in oral history interviews regarding Kent. Besides the holdings now at the State Historical Society of Iowa, thousands of bird photos are held by Kent's son Tom, and campus-related shots can be seen at the Fred W. Kent Photographic Archives at the University of Iowa.

—Mary Bennett, SHSI audiovisual librarian

DESCRIPTION OF COLLECTION

Besides countless photographs, the Fred W. Kent Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City facility) consists of documents, diaries, and letters from 1858 to 1978. Pre-1907 documents relate to Fred's grandparents or parents and consist of legal records, maps, and letters (including an 1858 agreement between Fred's grandfather and Antoine LeClaire). Charles F. Kent correspondence

(1885-1939) relates to Fred's father's DeWitt drugstore and gives insight into the character of father and son.

The earliest letter to Fred Kent is dated July 2, 1907, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Biological Survey, thanking eleven-year-old Kent for his notes on the arrival of the birds in the spring. Birding remained a life-long interest. His 1909/10 diary conveys his love of nature and a poetic bent.

Letters to Kent as a University of Iowa student are from relatives and friends, and, of course, Clara Hartman. Her letters reveal their developing relationship and, eventually, plans for their wedding in 1917.

Correspondence to Kent over the years covers many topics (photography, birding, music, stamp collecting) and reflects many long-standing friendships. Letters from his friend and fellow naturalist Jim Gurney span sixty years (from 1918 to 1978). Other letters are photograph requests—many by doctors, some for customized Christmas cards, a few for advice on where to study medical photography. (In answering the latter, Kent often expresses the desire to set up such a course at the University of Iowa.) Although most of the correspondence is to Kent rather than from him, it nevertheless reveals his personality, humor, and compassion. Even without a camera, we get a very clear picture of Fred Kent.

—Mary Hansen, SHSI volunteer archivist