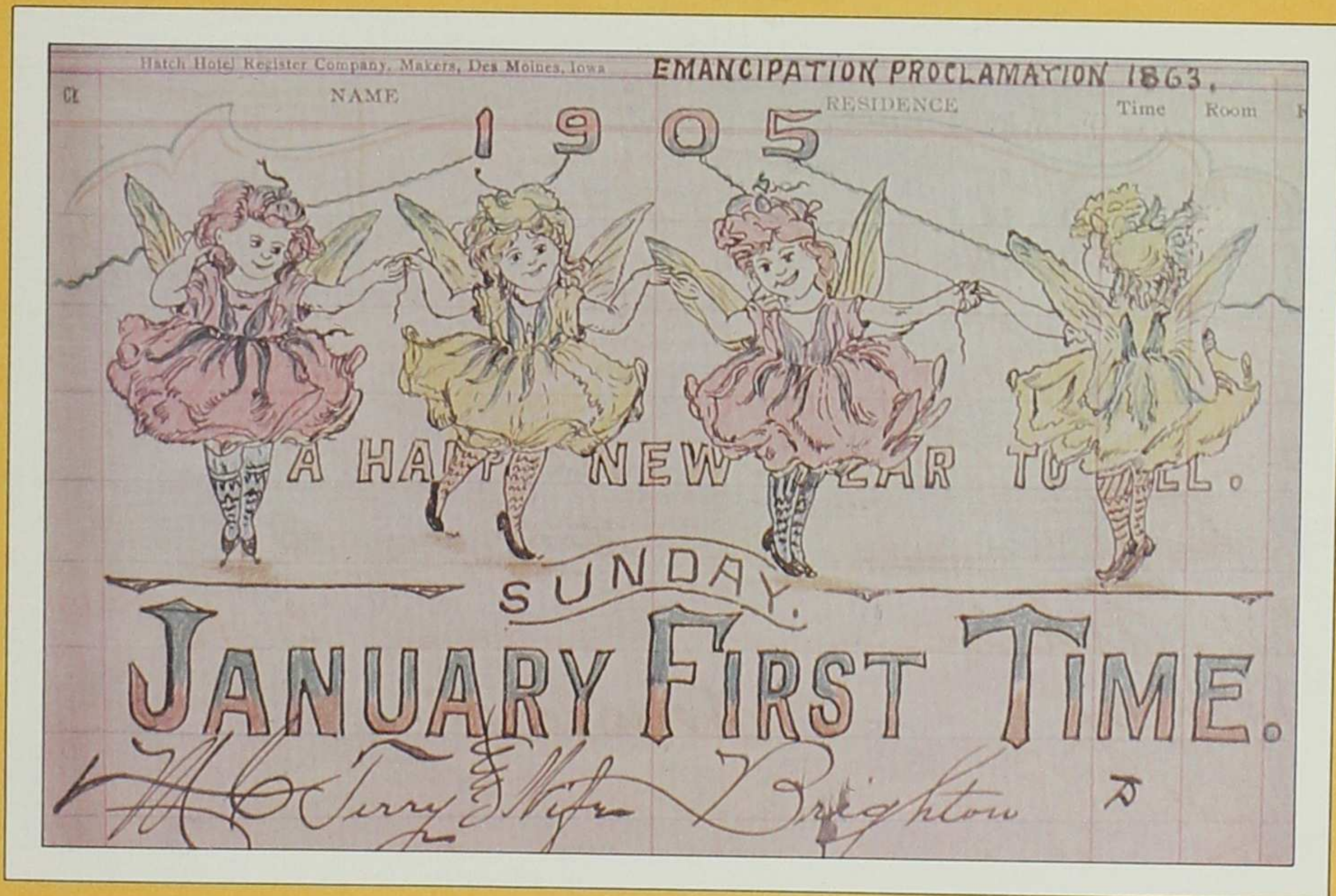


# The Palimpsest

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 58 NUMBER 1

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 1977



An unusual Iowa hotel register

IOWA STATE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT  
DIVISION OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tucked inside the cover of this issue of *The Palimpsest* are copies of an interesting document: reproductions of the first "circular" of the State Historical Society, dating from 1858. The Corresponding Secretary of the Society apparently sent the circular to new members, announcing their election by the Board of Curators. This year is the 120th anniversary of the Society's founding, a milestone observed at a special ceremony in the newly-restored Old Capitol on the campus of The University of Iowa. On January 28, the modern State Historical Board held its regular monthly meeting in the same building where legislation establishing the Society was passed by the General Assembly in 1857 shortly before Des Moines became the Capital City.

We invite you to use the enclosed reproductions to write to friends who are not now members of the State Historical Society. Urge them to join. They will receive six issues per year of *The Palimpsest* as well as the Society's quarterly newsletter and substantial discounts on other publications. Director Peter Harstad has included a message on the last page of the circular.

This will be a pleasing and appropriate way to call to the attention of your friends one of the oldest cultural institutions in Iowa—the State Historical Society. If you want more copies of the circular please write and let us know how many you can use.

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# The Palimpsest

VOLUME 58 NUMBER 1

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 1977

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Division of the State Historical Society, 1976  
Peter T. Harstad, Director

L. Edward Purcell, Editor

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Cover: *Pixies greeted patrons of the Midland Hotel in Brighton, Iowa on New Year's Day 1905. For the story of this unusual hotel see p. 12.*



### *The Meaning of the Palimpsest*

In early times a palimpsest 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.

# *An Iowa Schoolgirl -- 1860s Style*

*By*

*Robert E. Belding*

“They came to plant the common school  
On distant prairie swell . . .”

Since those words were written by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, recorders of our American education history have dealt sparingly with early schools beyond the New England area. There has been an enduring assumption that New England set the pattern, and the New England school system simply moved west of the Berkshires as frontiers expanded. Until recently, educational historians have hardly noticed the influence of other areas on educational institutions. Few texts in educational history make reference to Iowa, even though the first state university to accept women along with men was at Iowa City, and the first “chair” for education (called Didactics) was founded at the same institution; furthermore, Iowa was the first state to write its own history of education (Clarence Aurner’s five volume *History of Education in Iowa*). It was a mark of frontier Iowa that wherever natives or foreigners with children settled, district schools were established as quickly as a church or a general store.

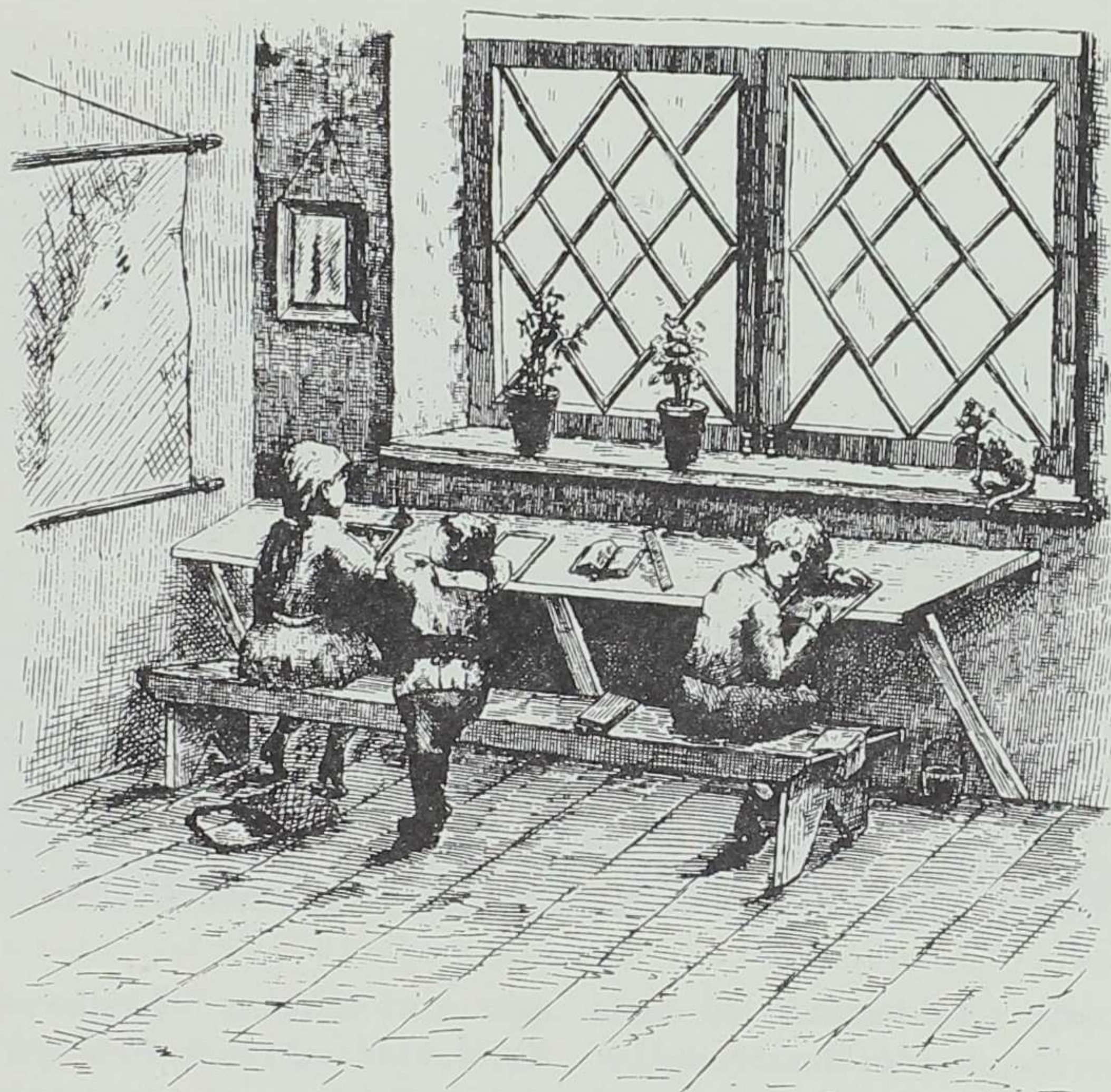
Let us suppose for the moment that we could be transported backward in time to the year 1860 and the fictitious village of Rudland, Iowa. There we might have met and interviewed Lettie Corbin, a young student in a “typical” district school in eastern Iowa. Lettie was 15 years old and an extremely attrac-

tive girl. Her dark hair bounced in natural springs over her sloping shoulders, and her sober countenance brightened only occasionally in a smile. By nature she was a serious young scholar with a mind of her own, seeking out and devouring any available reading materials. She was a committed student, eager to answer the all-American call of the time for more female teachers.

Lettie had already been exposed to the teacher’s side of the desk, although at the time of her interview she was still a student in the “winter term” of the district school — a session that lasted each year from the last harvest to the earliest spring planting. Duration of such a school was established by the winter sun, with school starting whenever the sun was “up” and closing just before it was dark. Thus, both the calendar and the daily schedule were controlled by the shifts and caprices of Mother Nature.

Lettie had spent the previous summer helping young boys and girls through what was called the “summer term” — six weeks in midsummer when the most urgent home chores were reduced. Her work in this supplementary school convinced her that one day she would be capable of instructing youngsters regularly in the basics of formal education.

The interview took place one Feb-



(from *Benj. Butterfield, The Growth of Industrial Art, p. 83*)

ruary afternoon following Lettie's school session. The teaching master had stoked the school stove to keep the room warm as Lettie and I sat facing each other on adjacent school benches. We were near the large and drafty classroom windows where the dwindling sunlight provided the room's only illumination. Lettie confessed that "when the sun isn't out, the school session is cancelled, for we have to huddle close to the windows anyway to catch the winter light."

We could hear the irregular thud of axes chopping. An "addition" to the school was under construction — not an adjoining room, but a separate and identical building, several feet detached from the compact structure in which we sat. Already this line of separated buildings had become a distinct characteristic of

schools in growing Iowa communities of that day.

In other ways this Rudland school was typical of the frontier institutions in eastern Iowa. It was an unadorned building both inside and out. The novel invention called the blackboard had already replaced individual slates, and this small token of progress had been nailed, not too horizontally, to the bare plaster wall.

Children walked to and from school from the farms that were huddled together for winter warmth and security. In some compact communities children broke the school day by walking home to lunch. No schools provided lunches, nor did children pack them to bring to school with their books. There were no interruptions for recess or bells to punctuate



*A teacher and pupils, Centerville, Iowa.*

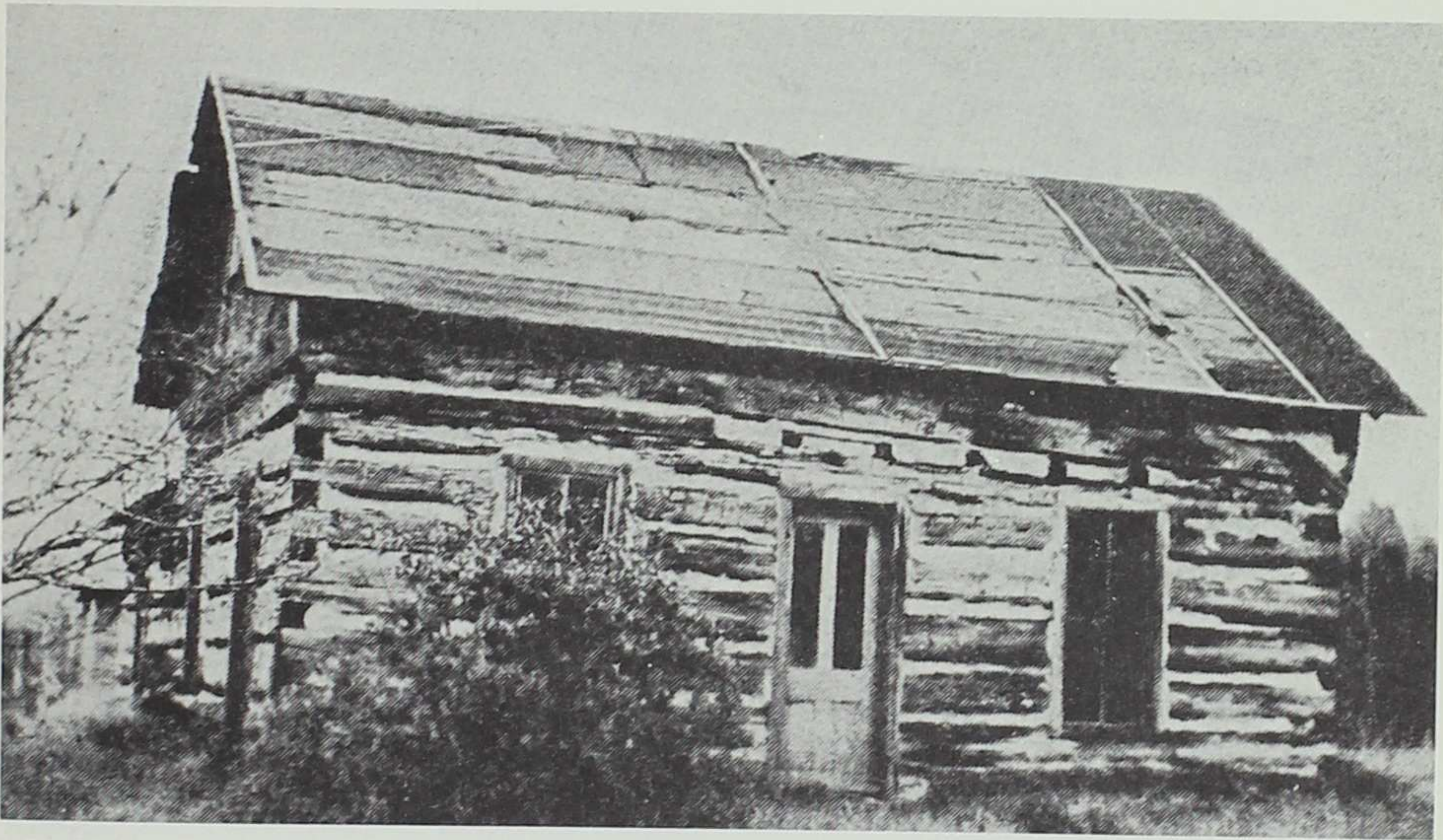
the school day. Children of all ages crowded into the single classroom, for this was years before the appearance of school officers to build additional community schools and separate children into different grade levels.

Lettie reported that before she entered this winter school she had attended for several years a summer school containing boys and girls up to the age of 12. In fact, she returned to such a school each June in order to gain some experience in what she hoped would be her future calling. Her summer teacher was a woman, and because pupils there were likely to be younger than in the winter school, they were said to be better behaved. In the current winter session, her teacher was male, as indeed were three out of every four prairie teachers.

“In my earlier schools, everyone studied the same things, but now — during the winter — we have all different

ages and subjects,” Lettie commented. As she mixed recitation with reminiscence, it became apparent that most of her fellow scholars were boys, yet the differences in their ages and talents were pronounced, with the youngest admitted at age five.

At that moment a fellow pupil passed the window, a gangling lad employed by the village store who returned to the winter session for “loosely two months.” This reminded Lettie of another friend who cut lumber as his principal winter occupation but re-entered school “without much of a bath” for a few unconservative weeks in winter. “That boy,” she recalled, “used to come regularly to school here until he was 12, when most kids his age were here together. He left town to do all sorts of odd jobs, but he came back to school for the winter. He’s almost 17 now, and acts embarrassed to be so old and in school. He *is* the oldest boy in our school when he’s here.



*A log house, used as a country school (author's collection).*

"Then there's Olav who lives in the next town, but attends school here. He'll be going off to an academy soon because the schoolmaster discovered that his Latin and Greek were good; then he'll probably attend college. The master told him to get away from home and to use his brains in more schooling. Olav is a sober boy, with nicely-cut, blond hair, and I wish he wasn't leaving town!" Lettie's face pinked visibly from this unscheduled observation, then she hurried on to list other students and their talents. Most appeared to be destined to remain on the farm, but some were uncomfortable there and felt the lure of the outside world. One dreamed of making his fortune in the mines at Dubuque. Another thought of the coal areas of central Iowa. A few even wanted to buck the westward tide and head for Saint Louis or even "notorious Chicago." As she spoke it became apparent that there could be no identifiable pattern among

students in this winter school.

Our view of the road dimmed with the vanishing sunlight, but the cherry-red glow from the black stove took over and proved sufficient for me to record the answers to more questions. I asked what was being taught at winter school, and she declared that subjects shifted, depending on who was teaching at the time. The total list of courses she had been exposed to, in more or less complete fashion, seemed overwhelming, but the wide-spread academies, with their broader and more novel curriculums, were influencing even the remotest district schools of the frontier. In a vague way Lettie must have thought the influence good, for she intended to leave home to attend a boarding academy, mainly for the purpose of arming herself with "normal" courses which would develop for her the "powers to teach."

Lettie used her notebook to recall the

courses she had since first entering the winter term. There seemed to be no order of introduction to these courses. They included under the name of English, such subjects as Analysis of Words, Elements of Criticism, and Elocution. "Religion" incorporated Natural Theology, Evidences of Christianity, and Analogy of Religion. Lettie recalled that one gentleman teacher had taught what he called Geography of the Heavens, and for six weeks Government Instruction was taught straight from a civics manual brought west and carefully preserved by the teacher. "That same teacher was a sea captain, so he taught a course in navigation. He didn't stay long, because the bigger school boys chased him out of town with big sticks.

"We had 'Drawing' sometimes as a term course, and while the others were

busy with 'lesser studies,' some of the boys studied Greek and Latin to prepare for college. Sometimes we got a little French and German — not enough to be worth much. None of these courses lasted more than three or four months of winter term."

Miss Corbin's current courses were freshest in her mind. In addition to the essential Elocution already mentioned, she had finished Geometry Begun and had advanced into Geometry Completed. The Natural Philosophy she was taking concerned physical phenomena such as the solar system and the earth's rotation, and the textbook for this had journeyed across America, picking up hand-written illustrations and suggested experiments that could be performed with a minimum of rustic equipment.

Lettie's class in literature used a re-



(author's collection)

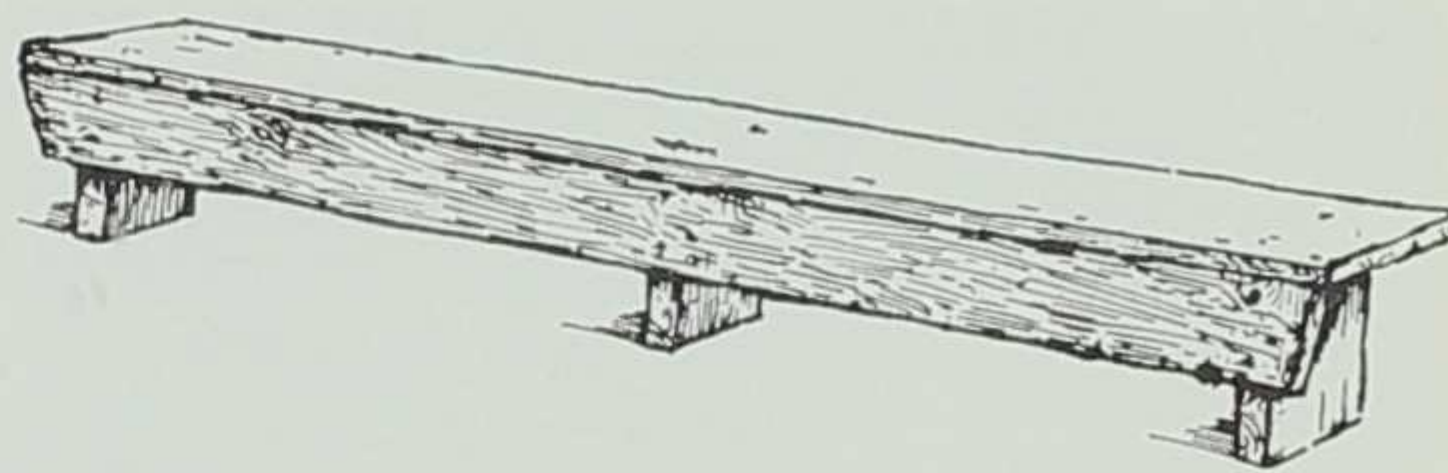


cently-issued text by William Spalding, called *History of English Literature*. As this book passed among students, they read samples of Dark and Middle Ages Masterpieces, the Origin and Growth of the English Language (which turned out to be the text's uniting thread), and the Specimens of Modern Literature exclusively from England. Included in the text were bland biographical notes on the authors represented.

Nor was the agriculture which enveloped the young students' lives completely neglected at school. Asa Gray's work on Vegetable Physiology was studied, page by page. The main substance of the text comprised 34 lessons, illustrated with wood engravings. The Glossary and Dictionary at the far end of the book helped clarify the technical language which seemed to extend well beyond typical rural usage. The mortar that bound all courses and justified each was a claim that they all, in their own vague way, "cultivated the mental powers."

Lettie recognized an obstacle in her academic life — something existing at school but reinforced at home. Around her, new institutions were being created to accommodate the young, emerging America; there were few regulations to abide by, and endurance and muscle seemed to be more important than brains. This was revealed in the resistance of a number of pioneers to the entire idea of formal schooling, and required attendance was not even visible on the horizon.

Even the winter school Lettie was attending reflected this situation. The teacher was free to teach whatever he happened to know, using whatever textbooks had been stashed aboard his



westward transport. If there was a system to teaching, it was his very own. Teaching aids were sparse, and whatever was used had to be manufactured on the spot by the teacher.

I asked Lettie for an example of teacher invention. She chuckled and told me about the geometry class where the volume of a cone with a sphere inside it was illustrated spontaneously when the teacher placed a wastebasket over his head. "I think we all remembered that lesson preached to us from inside the basket."

Lettie was asked to describe the teachers, who came and went so frequently in winter school. Prudently, she referred to the master who preceded the present gentleman. The teacher had remained for only part of the term, and when he resigned, the school was closed for lack of a master. She characterized him as "typical," saying he had delivered ponderous monologues to the students, with little concern whether his charges absorbed his educated phrases. Lettie confessed that his college education showed through; he had stopped by here on his way west, hoping to find some spot where his Greek would be appreciated!

She graphically described this pathetic figure. Students avoided him, for his whisky breath hovered like a deep-brown fog around his face, nor was that the only identifiable odor that followed the man. He was a gangling fellow, thin and hardly able to remain



(author's collection)

vertical through the onslaughts of the larger boys. His feet were encased in home-cobbled boots, laced high but sliced or deliberately torn down the sides. Once she recalled that his switch, usually applied to selected boys, was replaced one day by an enormous piece of crude pipe with which he whacked a chunk out of his high desk. The alarm ricocheted off the plaster walls, and for ten whole minutes there was not a sound, not even the scuffle of a boy's boot. She recalled that for the first time since school had started that year everyone could hear the sounds of nature through the loose windows of the schoolroom.

If indifferent instructors were not enough, extra emotional burdens were thrust on school-aged children, since

they were pressured to decide early their course in life. Many around Lettie had already left home, although this was more a characteristic of boys than of her own sex. Lettie was quick to admit that females in general faced fewer critical decisions; her gender left her with less confusion and a clearer direction in life than was true of her male counterparts. One anxiety both sexes shared had to do with religion. Evangelical conversion was expected by the mid-teen years. Adolescent believers were prone to aggravate the religious conflicts that already existed in the diminutive community. Lettie had seen her own brothers in tooth-busting fist fights with boys from neighboring farms who were raised in a slightly different faith.

The decisions made by confused 15

and 16 year olds were not always the right ones, nor would they "last." Lettie was disturbed by the number of young people who left their homes before they were old enough to understand what they were doing, and she admitted that she was speaking from her own family experience at the very time of the interview. The mobility of the adolescent population, with frequent absences from home, indicated the unsettled quality of this period in life, but, Lettie declared, maybe decisions and confusions were necessary to "growing up."

School discipline was not an immediate problem for Lettie herself, yet the antics of the boys around her were apparent, and the difficulties the schoolmasters had in keeping ahead of the boys' restlessness were incessant reminders to her of youth's impatience if not its treachery. The school chimney that boys had blocked in order to smoke out the master and close the school for the day was but one in a plotted sequence of pranks.

There was good reason for Lettie to wish to work with younger children, before they started to outwit their teacher. I asked her to imagine herself as a teacher in winter school for children and teenagers, but somehow she could not see herself there. The many adult responsibilities already pressing on her moved Lettie to confess that the "children grow up too quickly" in this country.

Perhaps she was too close to later childhood and her own adolescence to observe objectively differences in deportment between the younger children and her own peers; the dividing line between such ages did not seem clear. She felt the older boys were more unru-

ly, and the teacher had to make greater efforts to "break their wills." Lettie confessed that the master's stick was administered more and more as the boys stretched upward in age. As if to explain the constant need of discipline, Lettie declared that it was not easy for boys, who often had become semi-independent, to return to the confinement of formal schooling, even for short periods in the slack farming season. Some boys were already earning their entire living at age 15, and one of her older brothers had been compelled to pay his father in cash for "breaking his domestic contract" in order to join an adventurous band of men headed west.

Once more, Lettie returned to the circumstances in the "conditions" of boys that caused them more uncertainties than the girls of her acquaintance. From her own experience with other families of the area she surmised that a death in the family most often altered a boy's plans, and the male youths she knew had a more bewildering selection of apprenticeships, on other farms or even in other communities, than did the females whose assigned lot seemed to be to help mother and assist in the rearing of younger children within the family. One of her own brothers, formally apprenticed, was compelled by contract to attend winter school for two months of each year, and this reversion to the structured discipline of the schoolhouse was enough to "ruffle his behavior."

Lettie squirmed in discomfort at this recitation of some of her own distressing observations about her present schooling. Thus it did not take much to pry open her memories of the summer term which had started early in her life and to which she planned to return sometime



in the future, but on the far side of teacher's desk. "I began going to summer term school when I was 3 years old, and I was 9 before I started to attend the district winter school. The summer term teacher was Mrs. Rudd, who taught me to read and reckon and write. It was more home-like than winter term, and everyone seemed to behave better. We liked school and paid attention to Mrs. Rudd, because she might tell our parents if we didn't.

"We spent most of our time on spelling; I think I learned to spell before I learned to read. We almost memorized

Noah Webster's *Speller*. To me the spelling bees were fun . . . We still have them in winter term."

The light had diminished now to the stove's lonely flicker, leaving amorphous shadows on the classroom wall. There was just time for one last question to Lettie: "Why have you decided to teach?"

Lettie replied that through her experience in summer term she had decided to commit herself to teaching these impressionable youngsters. She thought there was a place for women in teaching, recalling the statement she

had read a few years before, made by Mr. Eads, Iowa's Superintendent of Public Instruction, that it would be well to employ women teachers, since the "tender, patient care, so requisite to the proper development of these young plants" was "more naturally and prudently exercised by that sex."

I joined Lettie to give the fire a final stir and we locked up the schoolhouse. Outside, night had pushed downward and away the brightness, yet ragbags of clouds snuggled each other, some supporting the sky, others piled beyond sight or skimming the horizon. Lettie

noted what she called the "extra-curricular" colors — the untamed tints and splotches which extended well beyond the routine reds and pinks she had learned in the classroom. Her sensitivity was bound to help make her a good teacher.

Lettie and I parted after I had thanked her for her cooperation in my peripatetic effort to report student views from our past. She walked up the road, with a pack of schoolbooks under her arm, like the conscientious teacher she dreamed of becoming. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based in primary and occasional secondary sources on the history of Iowa and of the midwest. Principal sources utilized were Clarence Ray Aurner's *History of Education in Iowa*, published by the State Historical Society in five volumes between 1914 and 1920, John A. Nietz *The Evolution of American Secondary School Textbooks* (Rutland, Vt., 1966), Joseph F. Kett's contribution to T. K. Hareven's *Anonymus Americans: Explorations in 19th Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971) and our state author, Henry Stuart's *Development of the High School Curriculum in North Central States from 1860 to 1918*. Of special value were two of Iowa's own productions, "An Account Book of Jesse Barry" in the *Iowa Historical Record* (XIII, p. 110) and *Journal of the House, 1856-1857: Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction from Iowa Legislative Documents, 1857*.

Less frequently useful sources were found in Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier School-master* (New York, 1957), John S. Brubacher's *History of the Problems of Education* (New York, 1966), Frederick M. Binder's *The Age of the Common Schools, 1830-1865* (New York, 1974) and Harry G. Good's *A History of American Education* (New York, 1956). The case approach used here is especially appropriate to John Higham's delineation of our historical eras established in his *Writing American History* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1970).

# **Aden Auld's Hotel Register**

by  
L. EDWARD PURCELL

Few things in life are more mundane than a hotel register, a record of who stayed where, what nights, and for how much. However, in Brighton, Iowa the register of the Midland Hotel during the early years of this century was decidedly different. Aden W. Auld was the clerk at the Midland, and his inclinations toward art led him to create a highly unusual specimen of hotel register.

Each day, Auld decorated the Midland's register with fancy lettering and sketches, sometimes in color. His creations ranged from simple day and month headings to ambitious compositions incorporating patriotic imagery and detailed notes on historical and local events. The juxtaposition of Auld's drawings and the names of overnight guests makes the register a fascinating combination of art and daily journal. The Midland's register from October 1904 to October 1905 recently came to the State Historical Society of Iowa as a gift from Mr. Laban Fleak of Cedar Falls.

Aden Auld, born at Brighton in 1853, worked at the Midland Hotel from at least 1897. The Midland was owned by

L. C. Fleak, son of a prominent early settler and hotel keeper in Brighton. The elder Fleak ran the Eagle Hotel until it burned in the 1860s, and he then built the Fleak House. Following his death, the second hotel suffered the same fate, burning down in 1893. His son kept alive the family tradition with the Midland.

Auld also followed family tradition. His father, James Auld, settled in Brighton in 1849 as a chair maker and painter. He had been a practicing "steamboat painter" in Ohio according to his biography in the county history. Aden Auld must have been hard put to measure up to his father's local achievements; the elder Auld was mayor, town assessor, recorder, township clerk, secretary of the local Masonic Lodge, secretary of the Brighton American Bible Society, helped organize the first Sunday school, and served on the board of the Methodist Church. And he was the father of 12 children.

Aden Auld seems to have lead a less active life. His obituary (he died in 1906) noted he lived all his life in Brighton and he "was of a very quiet, unassuming

nature and had no desire for notoriety or fame." He is listed in several sources as a "painter," and the obituary even said "some of his work is exceptionally fine and his ability as an artist is known all over the United States."

Whatever his reputation, Auld's work on the Midland Hotel register was distinctive. He spent considerable time and effort on some of the sketches, producing elaborate scenes — often with patriotic themes. He frequently drew President Theodore Roosevelt (recently

come to office after McKinley's assassination), and he did many portraits of women. Some of the more complex drawings came on holidays such as St. Patrick's Day and Christmas.


Auld's hotel register is — to say the least — an unusual historical artifact. It is all the more interesting because one can scarcely imagine such a thing today, when checking into a hotel is a matter of credit cards and cash registers. In the day of the Midland Hotel, the personal touch was still very evident.

Date



FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

Hatch Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

U.S. Possesses Porto Rico 1898.



NAME	RESIDENCE	Time	Room	Remarks
				
<p><b>TUESDAY</b></p> <p><b>OCT. 18</b></p> <p><b>1904.</b></p>				
<i>Elmer</i>	<i>Burl</i>	<i>7 35</i>	<i>530</i>	
<i>W. S. A.</i>	<i>Osaka</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>1700</i>	

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK  
 Hatch Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

NAME	RESIDENCE	Time
<b>TEDDY</b>		
	<b>THURSDAY</b>	
Born October, 27-1858	<b>OCT. 27-04</b>	
<i>W. Van Gordon</i>	<i>Oskaloosa Ia</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>W. Van Gordon</i>	<i>Oskaloosa Ia</i>	<i>B</i>

Date

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK  
 Hatch Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

NAME	RESIDENCE	Time	Room	Remarks
<b>FRIDAY</b>		<b>18-1904</b>		
<b>NOVEMBER</b>				
<i>P. G. Govey</i>	<i>Lutesville Ia</i>	<i>D</i>		
<i>J. H. Newmod</i>	<i>Delta Ia</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>6:30</i>
<i>S. E. Brown</i>	<i>" " "</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>6:30</i>
<i>G. W. Cobb</i>	<i>Oskaloosa</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>7:00</i>
<i>A. H. ...</i>	<i>Delta</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>16</i>	



FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

NAME	RESIDENCE	Time	Room	Remarks
 <h1 style="text-align: center;">MONDAY</h1> <h2 style="text-align: center;">NOV. 14</h2> <h3 style="text-align: center;">1904.</h3>				
<i>A. P. Weaver</i> <i>Burl.</i> <i>D 9</i>				

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

*Sleeping tonight.*

NAME	RESIDENCE	Time	Room	Remarks
<p><i>Child.</i>      <i>Union Stockyards opened at Chicago 1888.</i></p> <p><i>of Bert Tennant &amp; Edith Overstrom Married at Lockridge</i></p>  <h1 style="text-align: center;">A MERRY XMAS TO ALL</h1> <h2 style="text-align: center;">SUNDAY. DEC. 25-04.</h2>				
<i>W. C. Ferry</i> <i>city</i> <i>D</i>				

Date

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

Match Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

30 Below 5-A NAME 15 Below at 3 p.m. Mrs. Hagan Dred

RESIDENCE Time Room R

THURSDAY, FEB. 2, 05.

6 WEEKS MORE.

Farragut Fleet left Ft Monroe 1862

NAME	RESIDENCE	Time	Room	Remarks
<i>Ames</i>				B
<i>J. E. Terry</i>	<i>Nebraska</i>			D
<i>E. W. Benschergast</i>	<i>Adrian Mich</i>			D

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

Match Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

Mable Schofield's slayer, Chas Thomas sentenced for life.

NAME RESIDENCE Time Room Remarks

INAUGURATED PRESIDENT TODAY

DELIGHTED

TEEDY

1860

HERE WE ARE AGAIN BOYS.

FIRST US CONGRESS 1789.

FIRST REPUBLICAN President 1861

SATURDAY, MARCH, 4-05.

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

Hatch Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

NAME: A WEARRIN OF THE GREEN  
RESIDENCE: RIOY OF WOMEN SAVANAH GEORGIA 1864  
Time Room Remark

MARCH 17- 465  
Patrick the Apost  
Patron Saint of Irele  
Founded the Churr  
at Kringford, Lou  
County Down, Ulst  
"Emeralds Isle"

St. PATRICKS DAY  
FRIDAY  
MAR. 17-05.

F. Gubris	7	City	B	2
C. Thomas	12	Wash. Iowa	B	3
			SR	

Date

FOR CATALOGUE OF HOTEL SUPPLIES, SEE BACK OF THIS BOOK

Hatch Hotel Register Company, Makers, Des Moines, Iowa

NAME: B.S. RAT CLIFF BORN JULY 4<sup>th</sup> 1859  
RESIDENCE: Hannibal Hamlin 1891.  
Time Room

Vicksburg Surrendered 1863

Base Ball. Washington vs Brighton.

Fred Jenkins	14	City	B	2
Fannie Sales		City	B	2

# *Electric Traction Promotion in the South Iowa Coalfields*

by

H. ROGER GRANT

At the turn of the twentieth century, "interurban fever" struck Iowa. This was the heyday of both the steam railroad and the newly-perfected electric traction railway. As novelist E. L. Doctorow says of the era in his best-seller, *Ragtime*: "Tracks! Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries . . . that the future lay at the end of parallel rails. There were long-distance locomotive railroads and interurban electric railroads . . . all laying their steel stripes on the land, crisscrossing like the texture of an indefatigable civilization."

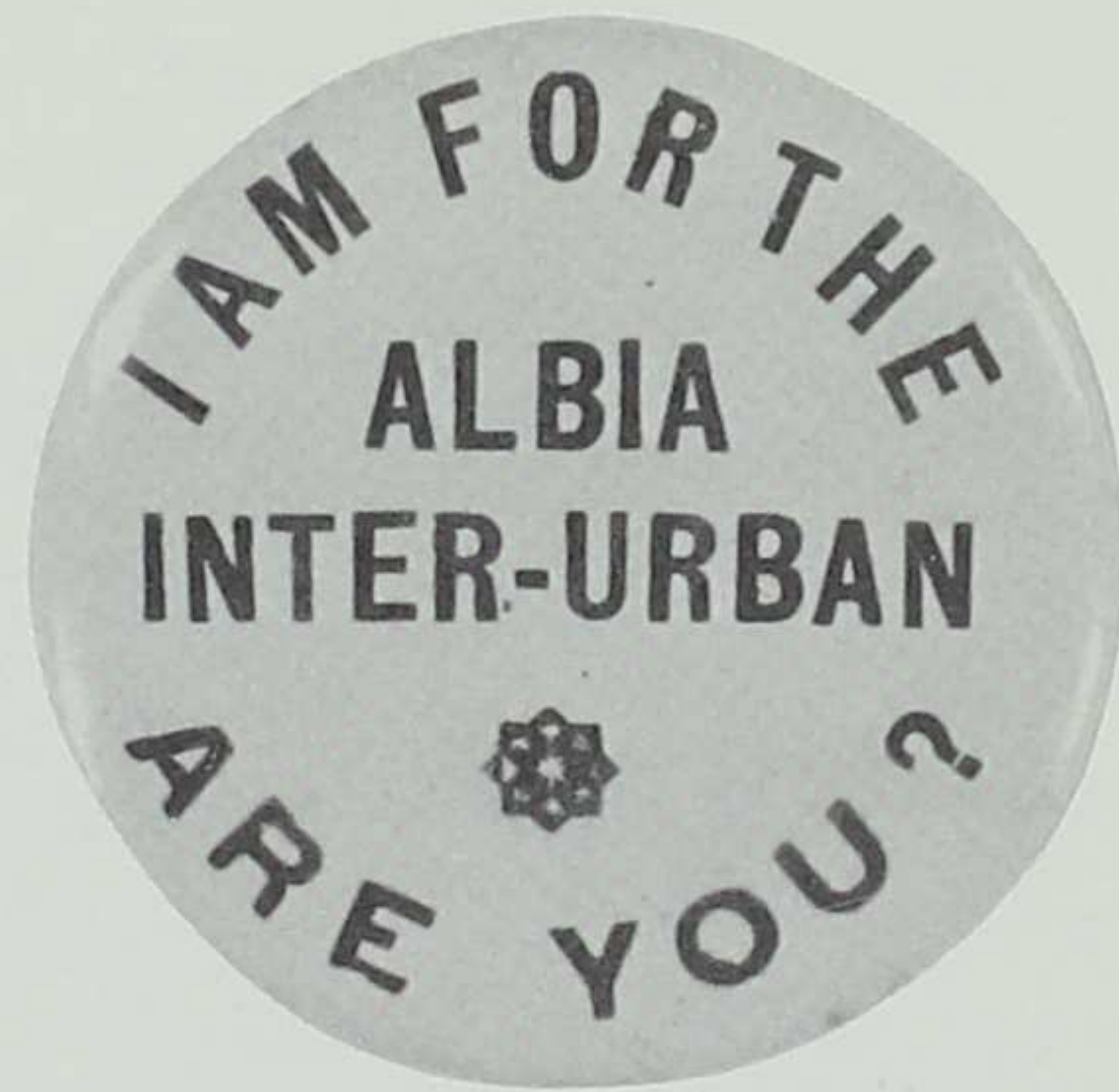
The great boom in electric interurbans nationally came in two bursts, one between 1901 and 1904 and the other between 1905 and 1908. Nearly 1000 miles of track were in operation in 1897; by 1905, there were 8000. In 1915, the nation's interurban network peaked at slightly over 15,000 miles. Although Ohio and Indiana were the heartland of the electric intercity railroads, Iowa constructed 489 miles of interurban lines, the greatest mileage of any state west of the Mississippi River except California and Texas.

What was the electric interurban railway and why did it become so popular? Unlike the electric street railway, which provided solely local service within a community and possibly a short extension into the nearby countryside to serve a "trolley" amusement park, lake, or cemetery, the interurban was designed to connect two or more communities with services similar to those provided by a conventional steam railroad — hauling passengers, express, and often carload freight. According to one enthusiastic observer, the electric intercity railroad would "perform a service for mankind as notable and perhaps ultimately as great as that rendered by its steam-operated precursor."

The popularity of electric traction — whether in Iowa or elsewhere — is easily explained. If a community or region lacked adequate steam service, an electric road could solve the problem. Interurban service would give farmers, miners, and others convenient access to the cultural and economic opportunities in the larger cities and towns; these communities could thus profitably tap a

larger trading area. When in operation, electric lines usually offered hourly or semi-hourly service, rather than the two or three runs a day of the steam roads. Moreover, interurbans, unlike steam-cars, would stop at farmsteads, village crossings, or virtually anywhere. And the electric railways were clean; there were "no cinders, no dirt, no dust, no smoke." The traveling public also liked the less expensive rates. This was particularly appreciated after years of discontent with high and arbitrary steam railroad and express company charges. Of course, this new mode of transportation, with all of its advantages, extended the range of travel. Despite the coming of the automobile, highways were primitive. In Iowa, the state's "vicious and viscous and generally impassable brand of mud" gained a national reputation. It would be years before the good-roads movement succeeded in lifting the state out of the "gumbo."

**T**he idea of the electric interurban became important in the coal fields of southern Iowa that grew rapidly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While coal had been mined commercially since the 1870s, the increased demand for locomotive fuel set off a boom, and prompted coal-mining firms, often subsidiaries of the rail carriers themselves, to invest heavily in the region. Monroe County was a good example. The development of large, deep-shaft mines in the 1890s and early 1900s by the



*A lapel button, worn by promoters of the Albia Interurban (courtesy of the author).*

Wapello Coal Company and the Consolidated Coal Company — the former a corporate affiliate of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad and the latter a satellite firm of the Chicago & North Western Railway — explains why the county, which produced only 100,000 tons of coal in 1883, reached an output of two and one-half million tons by 1907.

Understandably, the population of southern Iowa's five leading coal-producing counties grew steadily, even spectacularly, between 1890 and 1910. The total population of these counties — Appanoose, Mahaska, Marion, Monroe, and Wapello — increased 25.9 per cent during these 20 years. The greatest expansion was in Monroe and Appanoose counties, 86.1 per cent in the former and 51.4 per cent in the latter. Individual communities reflected the increase, as the larger towns served as supply points for the coal industry. For instance, Cen-



*Payday at Buxton, July 4, 1907 (courtesy of Mrs. T. H. Dearing, Albia).*

terville, the seat of Appanoose County, had 3,668 residents in 1890 and 6,936 in 1910. Mystic, also in Appanoose County, grew from 875 in 1890 to 2,663 by 1910. The population of Ottumwa, Wapello's seat, increased from 14,001 in 1890 to 22,012 in 1910. Oskaloosa, seat of Mahaska County, moved from 6,558 to 9,466 between the 1890 and 1910 censuses, while Albia, the Monroe County seat, more than doubled its size from 2,359 to 4,969 during this same period. Two other Monroe County communities boomed even more. Hiteman, nonexistent in 1890, had approximately 3,000 residents in 1910 and Buxton, established in 1900, had at least 6,000 inhabitants by 1907.

This population growth, which coincided with the national mania for electric railways, created a fertile environment for interurban promotion. The new

mining camps, with their many potential patrons, their close proximity to one another and to older communities, their general lack of adequate steam railroad service, and their poor local highways, were attractive to would-be traction builders. The South Iowa coalfields could not be ignored.

**T**he first talk of interurban construction in the coal fields came in 1895 when Oskaloosa merchants proposed a small inter-city system, but this and dozens of similar efforts seldom got past the planning stages. The story of traction promotion in South Iowa is most graphically seen in the case histories of the three electric roads actually constructed: the Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway; the Albia Interurban; and the Centerville, Albia & Southern.

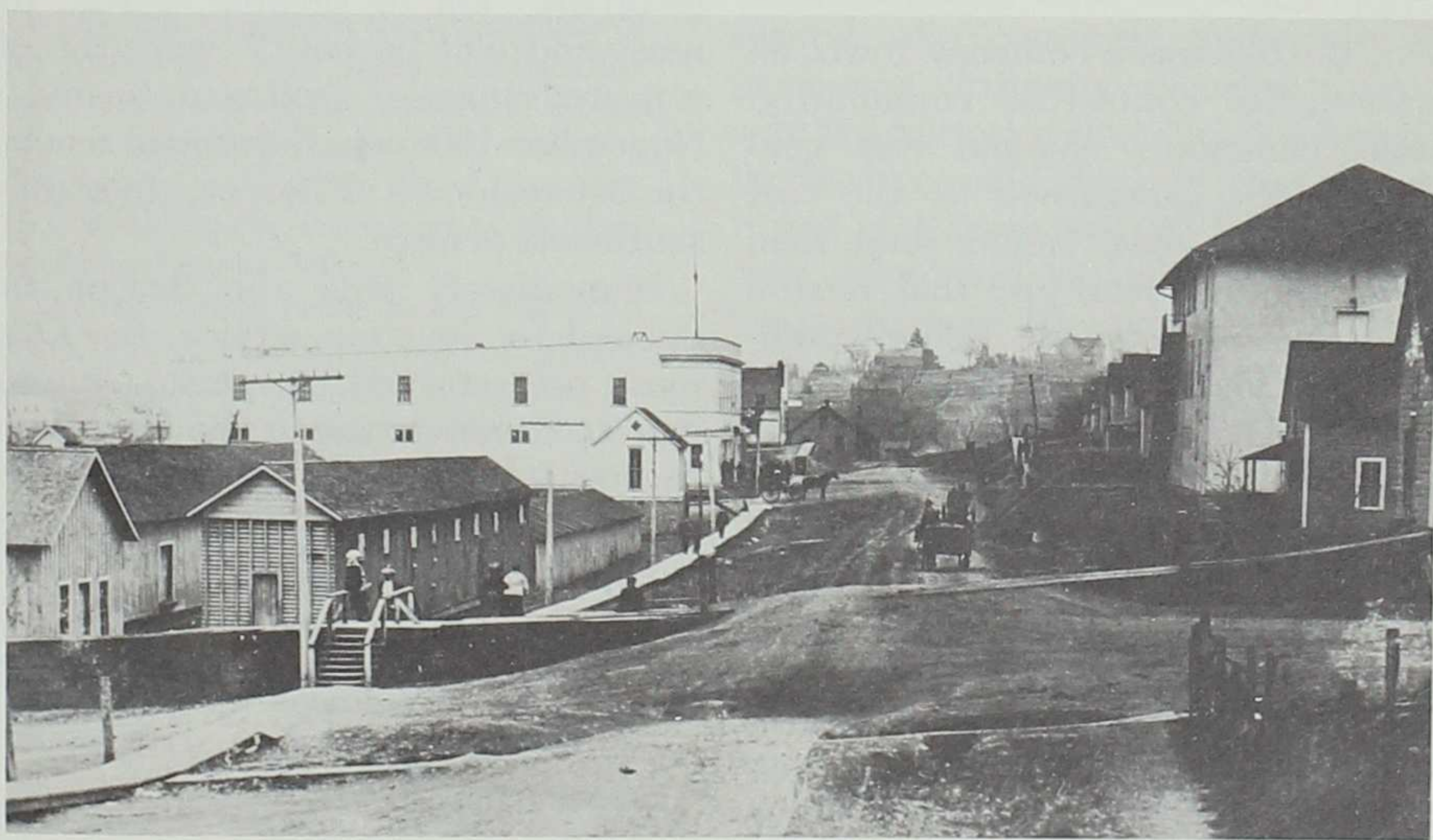
In 1902, two traction promoters,

Henry E. O'Neil of Omaha, Nebraska and J. F. Springfield of Ottumwa, opened a highly-profitable electric light, heating, and street railway business in Oskaloosa. These men at first expressed no interest in interurbans. However, local merchants in the Spring of 1904 enlisted the services of O'Neil and Springfield as "field managers" to explore the possibility of building a high-speed electric railway of approximately 20 miles from Oskaloosa southwest to the mining camps of Beacon, White City, and Buxton. After more than a year of study — on June 19, 1905 — the interurban proposal was officially incorporated as the Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway Company. Fourteen months later, Mahaska County voters by a three to one margin approved a special bond issue which, along with a stock subscription drive, ultimately raised

more than \$100,000.

The road's objective, Buxton, was not the typical South Iowa coal camp. It was large, populated by blacks, and totally company owned. In 1900, the Chicago & North Western Railway, through its Consolidated Coal Company, purchased 8,600 acres of coal property in Bluff Creek Township in northeastern Monroe County and bought another 1,600 acres in adjoining Mahaska County. The railroad leased mineral rights under additional land. It then moved a portion of its old Muchakinock camp in southern Mahaska County to the new townsite during the summer of 1900, and within a few years the population there totalled 3,500, eventually reaching 6,000 (one source says 9,000). Local legend claimed that Buxton was "the largest unincorporated city in the United States."

The labor force in Buxton was pre-



*A view of Buxton, circa 1906 (courtesy of the author).*

dominantly black. "Nine-tenths of [Buxton residents]," noted the *Monroe County News* in 1907, "are of the negro descent." Although black miners already lived in Muchakinock, the C&NW recruited more for Buxton, largely from Alabama. The railroad preferred blacks since they worked cheaply, did not form militant unions, and relieved the area's labor shortage.

At first glance, life in Buxton seemed good. The huge company store, which at its zenith employed 135 clerks, offered merchandise that ran the gamut from "caskets to safety pins." The town's newspaper, *The Gazette*, reported in 1906 that "Our school attendance has grown from 300 children to 650. The church buildings have increased from three to five. . . . The YMCA has outgrown its commodious building and a separate building for the boy's department has been secured. . . . the new telephone system has taken the place of the old."

Yet, Buxton was a company town, an economically controlled community. Miners commonly charged that consumer prices, established by the coal company, were much higher there than in surrounding towns and that Buxton lacked certain services. These conditions were made worse by the inability of Buxtonites to shop conveniently elsewhere. Local roads were awful — some of the state's worst — and the steam railroad situation was not much better. The C&NW operated just a single passenger train through town. This line, an 80-mile branch from the carrier's mainline at Belle Plaine, served only sleepy farming villages and small mining towns — stations like Guernsey, Deep River, What Cheer, Tioga, White City,

Cricket, and Miami. Therefore, Buxtonites eagerly backed a direct traction line into Oskaloosa or some other large community.

Understandably, Oskaloosans viewed the Buxton terminus as a potential El Dorado. Observed a local newspaper: "The interurban idea presented itself to the business sense of Oskaloosa merchants when the Muchakinock coal camp . . . dwindled and passed and when the new town of Buxton in Monroe County took the miners and their dollars from Oskaloosa. Business interests demanded easy access with the growing camp of Buxton and the interurban was the thing to bring about the desired conditions." Oskaloosa businessmen believed firmly that "miners spent, farmers saved." If only they could tap the miners — never mind if they were black!

For nearly a decade Oskaloosans sought to reach Buxton with their interurban. "On to Buxton!" "This line must and will be built!" were the oft-repeated slogans. Optimism soared in November 1906 when the road reached the 300 residents of Beacon, three miles southwest of town.

Immediately after the Beacon line opened for revenue service, the Oskaloosa press turned to special "interurban" columns to argue the benefits of the road, hoping, of course, to achieve completion of the project. A typical story, aimed at farmers, read:

Joe Shaw, a representative farmer living southwest of Beacon, is an interurban enthusiast. While in town yesterday he told one of the directors of the interurban company that he would not only give the right-of-way as surveyed through the farm but he would contribute \$200





*Ceremonies in the Spring of 1907 on the west side of the public square in Albia to mark the construction of the Albia to Hocking line of the Albia Interurban (courtesy of Mrs. W. A. Magie, Albia).*

toward the building of the extension from Beacon to Buxton. Since the Beacon line was put into operation the advantages of the interurban have been emphatically impressed on Mr. Shaw's mind. If all the farmers along the proposed extension would do as well as Mr. Shaw has promised, work on the extension of the line would not long be delayed.

The interurban is the farmer's best asset in getting his stuff to market. Beacon people are of the opinion that the new interurban line is a big advertisement for them. Already Oskaloosa people have been hunting butter and eggs in the place and are buying meats at the local shops.

But wishful thinking could not complete the interurban from Beacon to Buxton. Several factors destroyed promotion efforts. The Panic of 1907 temporarily ruined the "foreign" money market; the road's initial cost of more than \$35,000 per mile (compared to the

average cost per mile of \$15,000) consumed virtually all of the available local capital; the company continually experienced difficulty securing right-of-way at a fair price from "money-hungry" landowners; and there existed the real threat of Albia promoters building their own interurban to Buxton. The Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway was stalled. Its Lilliputian size earned it the distinction of being one of the nation's strangest interurbans.

**A**lbia's interurban story was more successful. After the turn of the century, this bustling seat of Monroe County delighted in being called Iowa's "Capital City of Coal." Initially, local traction promoters — Levi Tiltson Richmond of Albia, Calvin Manning of Ottumwa, and W. E. Gant of Holton, Kansas — had their eyes set on construc-

tion of two lines — one three miles south from Albia to Hocking, a mining community of 800 operated by the Iowa Central Railroad, and the other, seven miles long, to the northwest to serve the prosperous, progressive town of Hiteman, home of the Wapello Coal Company.

Early in 1907 Richmond, an officer in Albia's Farmers & Miners Savings Bank, began raising locally the \$30,000 for the Hocking project. By June, the Albia Interurban Railway proudly opened its new line, although the Hiteman extension proved to be a greater challenge, simply because its longer length raised construction costs (estimated between \$60,000 and \$75,000). But early opera-

tions of the Hocking division encouraged promoters. "This line during the first sixty days of operation," beamed a company official, "brought into Albia from Hocking and Rizerville [a small coal camp between Albia and Hocking] 215 passengers per day, or 6450 per month, the majority of which it is safe to assume have expended some money in this city." During this same period the firm took in a daily average of \$35, while operating expenses amounted to only \$19 per day.

Promoters Richmond, Manning, and Gant bombarded the citizenry with the commonly-argued advantages of interurban service. They emphasized, for example, the poor and expensive quality



*Car Number 9 of the Albia Interurban Railway (on the Hocking run) nears the southwest corner of Albia's public square, circa 1910 (courtesy of Mrs. John H. Bickert, Albia).*



The Hiteman Supply Company in Hiteman, Iowa, circa 1910. This was the "company" store, owned by the Wapello Coal Company (courtesy of Mrs. T. H. Dearing, Albia).

of existing transportation between Albia and the coal towns. One story ran: "It now costs from 40 cents [one way] to come from Hiteman via the steam railway, and then you have to go to Tower 307 [a junction west of Albia where the CB&Q Hiteman branch met the mainline] and many times wait for a belated train." (It would later cost only 15 cents to ride the interurban cars that ran hourly.) Of course, the economic advantages were never ignored. "There are 800 miners at Hiteman," observed the promoters, "and they are the best buyers on earth. They must be brought to Albia and they must have the proper facilities to reach the city." And they argued, "[Hiteman] ladies . . . can come to Albia and make their purchases the same as the Hocking ladies now do and be at home in time to prepare their morning purchases for dinner." (When the line opened, special cars ran on payday to bring miners to town.)

There were additional arguments in favor of the Hiteman extension. Merchants were told by promoters that direct access to much of the \$200,000

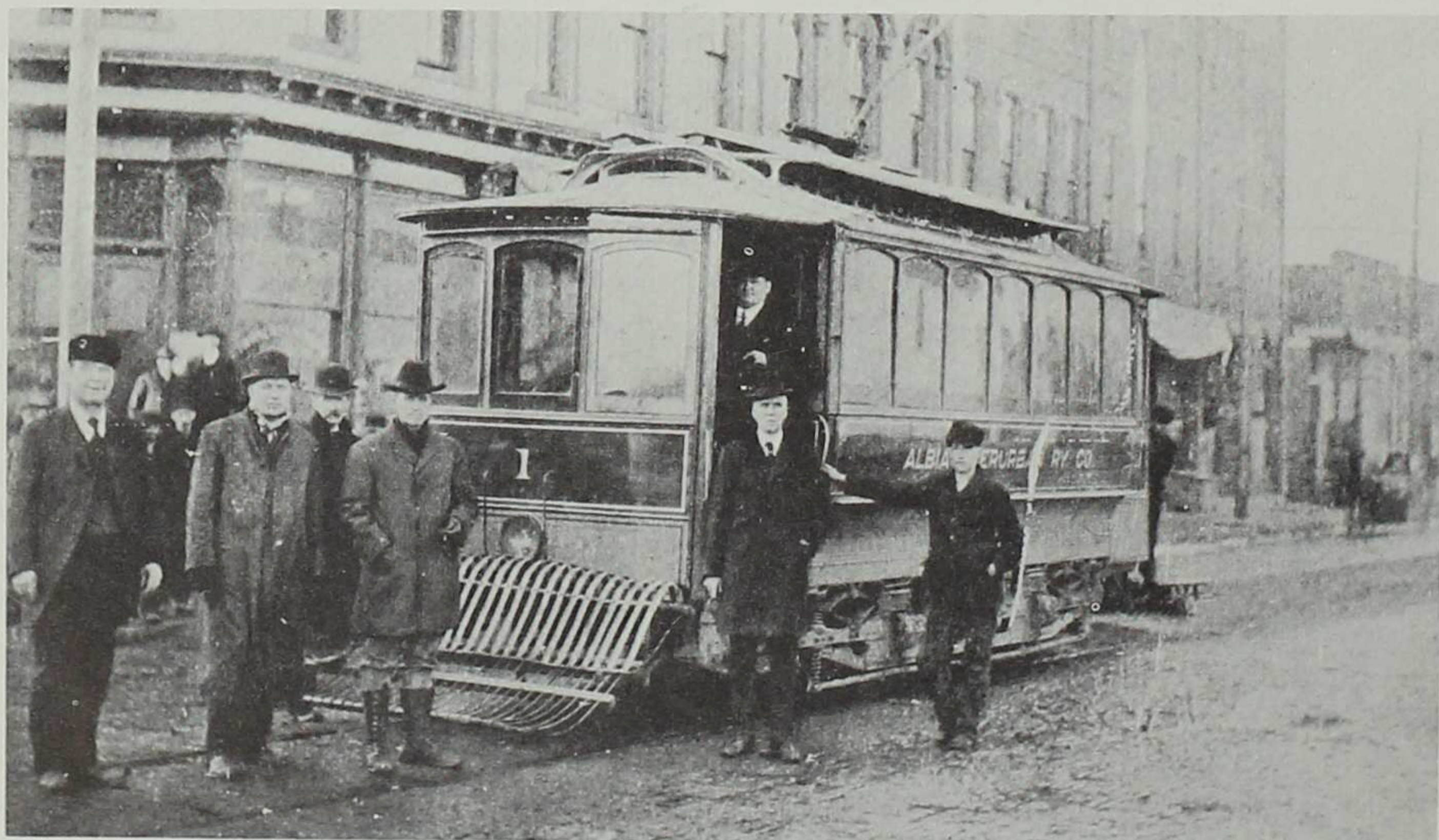
monthly mining payroll could "in a short time . . . stamp out the business now done through mail-order houses." It was pointed out to residents along the projected line that land prices would rise dramatically. Farmers would find, for instance, that they could profitably sell small parcels of real estate because miners would undoubtedly want to buy an acre or two near the interurban (thus convenient to work) "to do a little farming besides working in the mines." Perhaps appealing to local pride and to well-known examples of "corporate arrogance" during this time, promoters suggested that "it may be five or ten years before some big capitalist would come along and build it [Hiteman line] and run it for his own interest, *as he pleases*, and make all the profits *regardless of the people concerned*." They therefore concluded that "it would be a thousand times better for everyone to have it built now." And these same Albia traction boosters realized that mining camps were ephemeral: "[In time] Hocking and Hiteman will be worked out and the people will not be in those

towns to be reached." They saw the interurban as a means of permanently building up the Albia economy. "We must make good and develop the town so it will not need the mines."

In the Spring of 1908 only \$9,000 remained to be raised to guarantee the Hiteman project. Mass meetings, smokers, and continued solicitation of residents, particularly professionals, finally produced the needed capital. One technique used was having young men take stock and work it out on construction of the line, one half of their labor to be paid in cash and the balance in stock. The railway was speedily built; the first car ran from Albia to Hiteman on

December 16, 1908. In a great moment of self-congratulation the *Albia Union* announced: "WITH HITEMAN FINISHED, OTHER LINES WILL INEVITABLY FOLLOW."

Backers of the Albia Interurban also had a Buxton line in mind. Albians saw Buxton as the great interurban prize, just as Oskaloosans did. Unquestionably, a strong sense of urban rivalry developed between the two county-seat communities. Albia newspapers repeatedly mocked Oskaloosa's failure to build from Beacon to Buxton. The *Albia Republican* of December 24, 1908, for one, said: "They [Oskaloosans] built a line not quite as long as the Hocking line, and



After the opening of the Albia to Hiteman line, the promoters of the Albia Interurban posed in front of one of their cars. Left to right are: L. T. Richman, W. E. Gant, Charles Ross, and Calvin Manning. The man in the car is probably A. J. Beckett (courtesy of Mrs. John H. Bickert, Albia).

then they quit. Since that time, they have been doing nothing along a line of building interurbans. Albia, however, has finished the Hocking line, built to Hiteman, and it is dollars to donuts we will have a line running into Buxton before Oskaloosa advances another foot." Concluded the *Republican*, "Over at this end of the line we do things, and we have a right to feel our oats!" The Oskaloosa press was extremely sensitive to these barbs, but it usually responded with platitudes that warned Albians that the Beacon to Buxton project was far from dead.

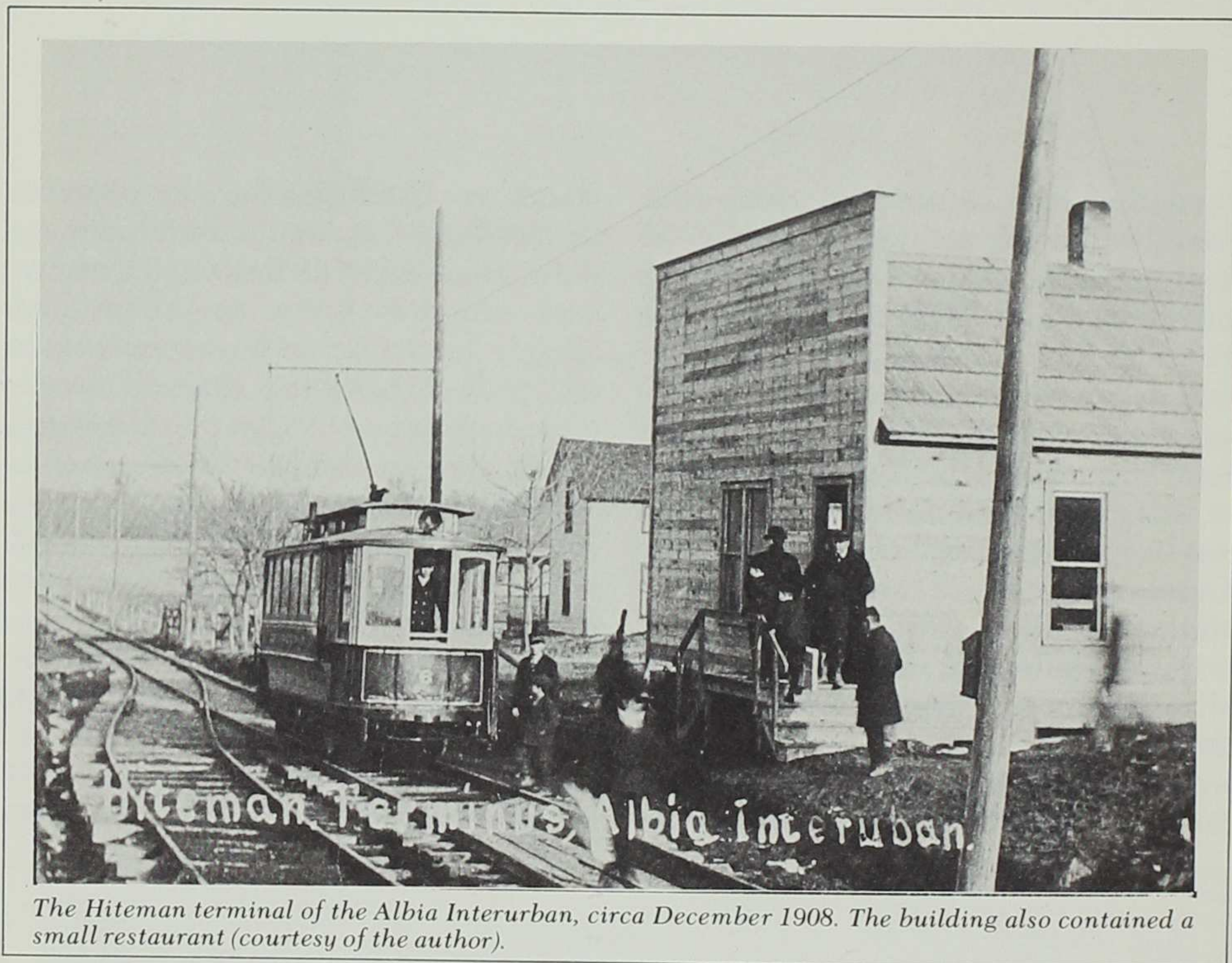
The momentum seemed to be with the Albia Interurban. Soon after service

began to Hiteman, the company announced that it would build the ten miles from Albia to Buxton. There was every reason for optimism: the two lines already operating were money-makers; the project faced no difficult terrain (Oskaloosa promoters, on the other hand, would have to bridge the treacherous Des Moines River); the country between Albia and Buxton was "thickly settled" with farms and scattered mines; and Buxton continued to thrive.

Yet the project sputtered. Local promoters knew that they would have to have outside capital if steel rails and trolley overhead were ever to be installed. The Hocking and Hiteman lines



An Albia Interurban Railway car on the Cedar Creek bridge, one half mile east of Hiteman in February 1911 (courtesy of the author).



The Hiteman terminal of the Albia Interurban, circa December 1908. The building also contained a small restaurant (courtesy of the author).

had consumed their own capital and most of the Monroe County investment dollars. Then, in June 1910, the *Electric Railway Journal* (the traction industry's trade organ) reported that the Albia Interurban had authorized a \$300,000 bond issue for the Buxton extension and that New York financiers would sell these construction obligations. Even before this report, local papers said that an Albia-Buxton interurban was "definite." Such a disclosure prompted the *Bussey Press* to exclaim: "History tells us that in the days of the Roman Empire, 'All roads led to Rome.' Truly this is today [the case] of Albia."

Despite such optimism, Albians never saw their Buxton line. The New York

banking house of Reynolds, Davis & Company, after selling approximately \$10,000 of construction bonds, abandoned the project. The reasons are unknown, but likely the opening of new mines by Consolidated Coal in western Monroe County, which started to syphon off Buxton's population, frightened the eastern business community. By the end of 1911 the Albia press no longer discussed a solely local line to Buxton, but spoke rather of having some stronger system finish the job.

The new hope for an electric road to Buxton from Albia centered on what became southern Iowa's largest

and most successful electric traction project, the Centerville, Albia & Southern Railway. Unlike the previous two systems, most of the CA&S had been built earlier as a steam railroad. Dating from 1879 and known as the Centerville, Moravia & Albia Railway, this road linked the three communities in its corporate title. Owned by prominent Centerville attorney, businessman, and politician Francis M. Drake and New York financier Russell Sage, this 24.5 mile line had an exciting history. It was leased in the early 1880s to the Wabash, then it was operated as an independent steam shortline, and in 1890, it was reorganized as the Albia & Centerville Railway and subsequently leased to the Iowa Central.

The property, never in good physical condition, had deteriorated badly by the early years of the century. Reported the *Albia Republican* in 1909: "We were away from the city the other day and a gentleman remarked he knew where Albia was all right, that it was on the line of the Albia-Centerville Railway. The A & C is the butt for about all the jokes and gibes that can come to the railway or about a railway. The train service is as poor as it possibly could be. . . ."

Patrons and all those desiring good service between Albia and Centerville took heart in 1910 when a group of largely out-of-state investors, led by William A. Bollin of New York City, acquired the Drake-Sage property, ended the lease with the Iowa Central, and then set about to rebuild the line as an interurban. In March 1910, they formed the Southern Iowa Traction Company, but unfortunately "found it difficult to float bonds on the property that had been losing money each year under the past inef-

ficient management while operated by the Iowa Central."

After several unsuccessful tries at financing the electrification and the line's extension (the promoters surveyed their own Albia to Buxton route), the Southern Iowa Traction Company in early 1914 sold out to the Centerville, Light & Traction Company, a firm headed by two local financial wizards, Frank S. Payne and D. C. Bradley. These men, who already owned a lucrative electric power business in the area and the Centerville streetcar system, had opened in 1909 a seven-mile interurban from Centerville northwest to Mystic, a booming mining town on the Milwaukee Railroad which lacked direct access to Centerville. The Mystic line by 1914 enjoyed the third highest net earnings per mile for any Iowa railroad, and both Payne and Bradley believed that they could earn handsome profits with the Southern Iowa Traction property.

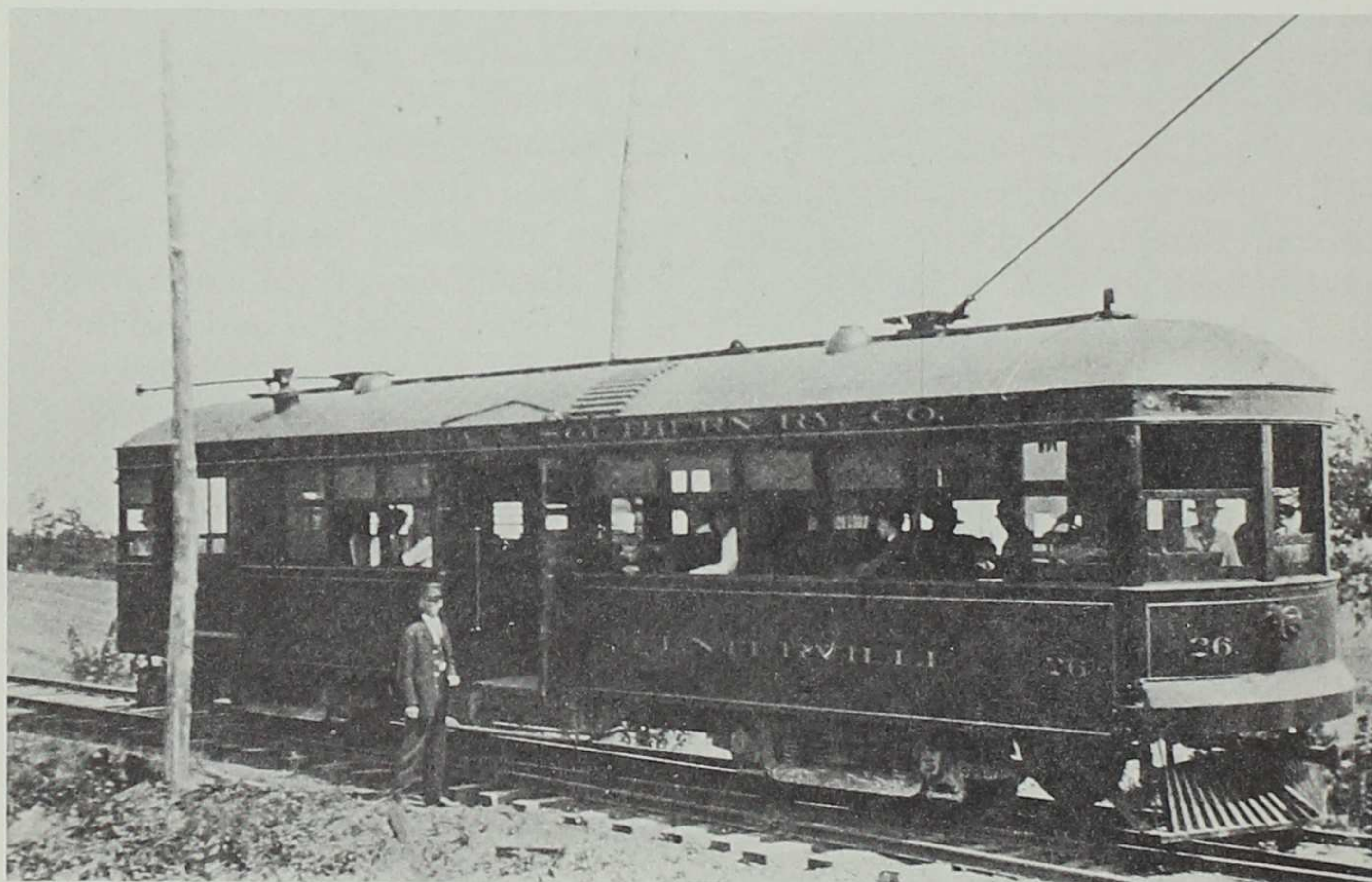
#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Key source material used for this article came from the interurban trade publications, *The Street Railway Journal* and *The Electric Railway Journal*, and local newspapers, especially *The Oskaloosa Herald*, *The Albia Republican*, *The Monroe County News* (Albia), *The Albia Union*, and *The Semi-Weekly Iowegian* (Centerville), for the pertinent years.

Also helpful was the "standard" history of the electric traction industry, George W. Hilton and John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960).

A version of this article was presented at the Eleventh Annual Northern Great Plains History Conference held at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse on October 22, 1976. A copy of the complete documentation for both the conference paper and this article is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City.

My special thanks for photographic assistance to my mother, Mrs. Thomas H. Dearing of Albia, and to Mrs. John H. Bickert, Mrs. W. A. Magie, and Robert W. Larson, all of Albia.



Car Number 26 of the Centerville, Albia & Southern in 1919, near Hilton, Iowa, four and one half miles south of Albia (courtesy of the author).

News of the Centerville, Light & Traction take-over of the old steam line was warmly received in both Centerville and Albia. Centerville's *Semi-Weekly Iowegian* felt that "now there will be an opportunity for the people from the north part of the county to get to their county seat town where they naturally want to come to trade." And added the paper: "Not only the people directly along the line and at Moravia will be benefited, but the whole wide territory each side of the track as a long drive can be saved by driving to the interurban just as many in the northwest county now do in driving

to Mystic and then taking the cars." Unlike the rivalry that developed between Albia and Oskaloosa over the Buxton line, Albians greeted electrification as a great step forward for them, too. They did not view the road as potentially hurting business. "The merchants of Albia have places of business that are larger and better than Centerville. They carry a more diversified stock and are in every way more fully up with the items and ready to meet the demands of all shoppers."

The first electric cars rolled over a completely refurbished Centerville,



Albia & Southern — the wholly owned affiliate of the parent CL&T — on July 27, 1914. Rather than plan a line north to Buxton, now a dying community, owners of the CA&S focused their efforts instead at improving the carload freight and package express business, opening new mines along the line, and making the property “the profitable passenger short line via Albia.” They succeeded in all efforts.

**B**y World War I enthusiasm for electric traction in South Iowa and throughout the nation had flagged. Viable alternatives to the interurban now existed. Rubber tires, not flanged wheels, symbolized popular interest in intercity transportation. Noted the owner of one of the Midwest’s most unprofitable traction firms, the Mexico, Missouri Investment and Construction Company, in 1917, “When this enterprise was started ten years ago, [electric] railroads were prosperous and railroad securities were regarded as good

investments. Now they are not wanted at any price.”

The 1920s were a time of retrenchments and abandonments for electric traction. In southern Iowa the owners of the Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway junked their road in 1920; by 1925 all interurban operations of the Albia Interurban Railway (reorganized in 1916 as the Albia Light & Railway Company) had been abandoned; and the same decade saw service trimmed on the CA&S. What had once been thought “the latest harbingers of a higher state of civilization” had totally passed. Perhaps South Iowans were fortunate that they did not construct more miles of electric railway, for as the nation’s leading historians of the interurban have concluded, “Few industries have arisen so rapidly or declined so quickly, and no important industry of its size had a worse financial record.” Yet, the earlier excitement for traction in the South Iowa coalfields reveals the age-old quest for profits and a more glorious future. □

## CONTRIBUTORS:

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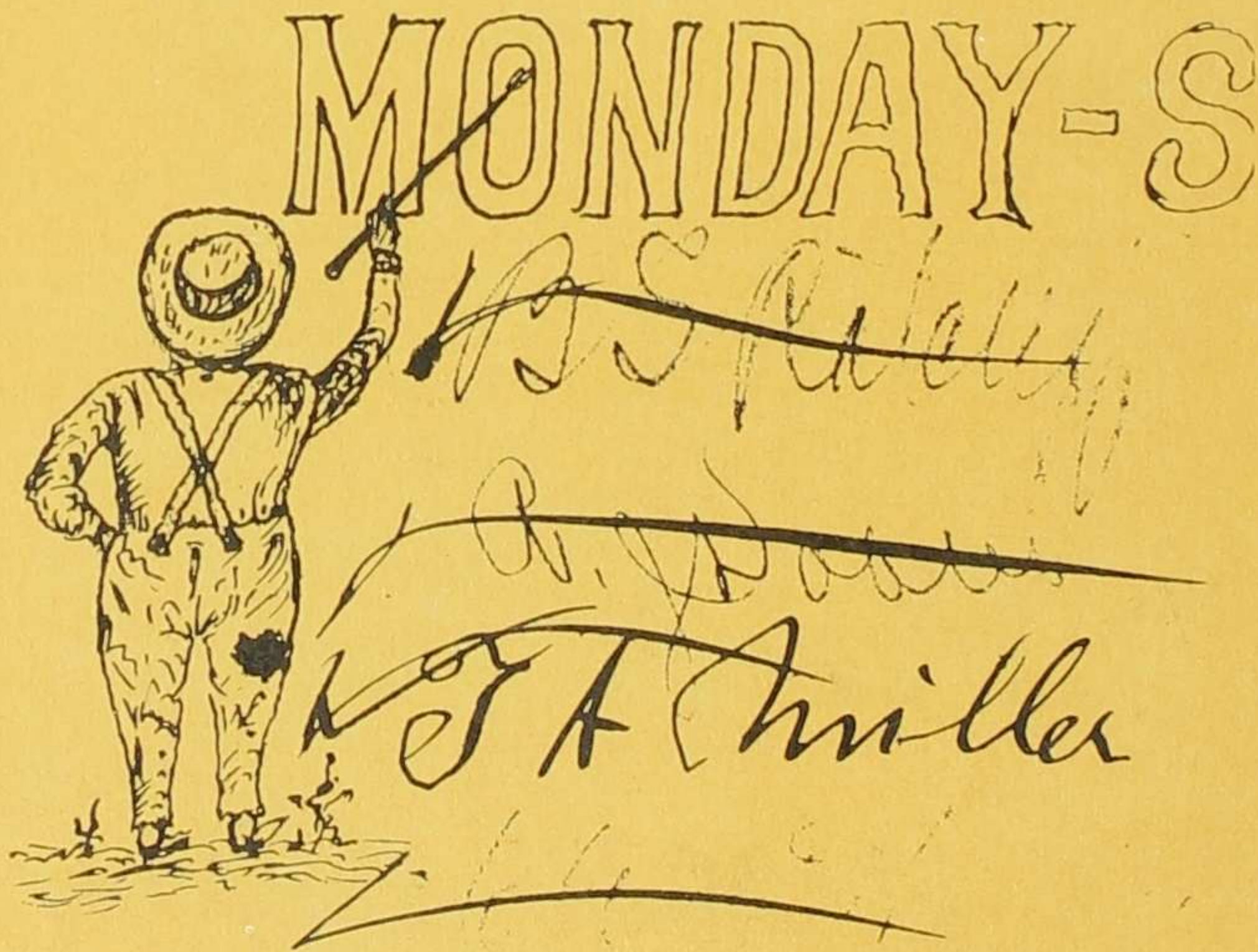
H. ROGER GRANT teaches history at the University of Akron in Ohio. He is a prolific writer, contributing articles to many historical periodicals, including *The Palimpsest*. He is currently at work on a book-length study of insurance reform in America during the Progressive Era and another on country railroad depots. He is co-editor of *Years of Struggle: The Farm Diary of Elmer G. Powers, 1931-1936*.

Correction: The building shown on p. 183 of the Nov./Dec. 1976 *Palimpsest* was misidentified as The First Methodist Church in Waterloo. As several sharp-eyed readers have pointed out, the picture is of a Methodist Church in Cedar Falls.

**Coming in the next issue:  
A Look at the Amana Colonies**

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A charming detail from Aden Auld's hotel register.



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