

# The Palimpsest

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 58 NUMBER 5

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 1977



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# The Palimpsest

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Cover: A late nineteenth-century advertising card. For more such colorful images, see p. 144.



## 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.



# IOWA GOTHIC: The Villisca Ax Murders

by  
*B. J. Zenor*

Something was wrong. At eight o'clock on a fine June morning Joe Moore had not yet arrived to open his implement store. His clerk had worked for Moore long enough to know that his boss was always on time. It was one of the reasons why the business had grown until it rivaled the successful Villisca Hardware and Implement Store owned by F. F. Jones. Villisca, Iowa was a small town -- too small, really, to support two implement stores. That Moore could make a living from his business proved his acumen and his dedication. The clerk was worried -- worried enough to start for the Moore home.

Meanwhile, Moore's brother Ross talked to Mary Peckham on the telephone in his drugstore. Mrs. Peckham said she was concerned because there were no early morning stirrings at the house next door--Joe Moore's house. Ross Moore thanked Mrs. Peckham for her concern and hung up. Joe always got to the store before seven. Ross quickly slipped off his apron, started for the house. What he would find there put sleepy little Villisca into headlines all over the country.

In 1912, Villisca was a lovely, thriving little community. Nothing had ever happened there that made national headlines. Nestled between two branches of the Nodaway River, located on the Bur-

lington Road, the city's reason for being was the railroad. Platted in 1858, Villisca was actually only a "paper town" until the first train came through Southwest Iowa in 1869. Now it lived up to all expectations -- busy, but with no crime to speak of; bustling, but a nice place to raise children. Best of all, it deserved its Indian name: *Villisca*, pretty place.

As Ross rushed to his brother's home he probably worried about Joe's odd lateness. What could possibly have happened? Ross had seen the family the night before, during the children's exercises at the Presbyterian Church. The family all seemed well. Little Herman had carried off his part in fine fashion, a boy to be proud of. When Ross arrived at the house around 8:20, he found the clerk, E. F. Selley, and Mrs. Peckham waiting outside. The front door was locked, the clerk told him. He couldn't rouse anyone, he said. Ross looked up at the imposing white house. The shades were all shut tightly. The family never shut the shades. Something was wrong.

Several neighbors had gathered about and someone suggested forcing the front door. Ross Moore produced a key ring. He picked out the one that fitted the door. He pushed the onlookers who had crowded around him aside and went in alone. He called a few times and waited, expectantly. No one answered. Everything



looked normal enough. One of the little boys' hats lay on the hall table. Nothing odd in that. He decided to try the downstairs bedroom first. If someone was sick, there was no need going upstairs and disturbing them. When he passed the parlor door, he did see something odd. There was a lady's skirt draped over the glass portion of the door. And the downstairs bedroom door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open a little farther, and when he did, he saw it--a large, quite large, pool of blood.

He couldn't bring himself to look any farther. He turned. He left the house. The neighbors in the front doorway watched him walk out, slowly, carefully. He asked someone to go find Marshal Horton. And bring Doctor Cooper, he said.

Horton arrived and started on the upstairs floor. In the first bedroom he found Mr. and Mrs. Moore lying peacefully in their bed. The covers were undisturbed. There were cloths over their faces. It was when he removed the cloths that he realized the full horror of the scene. The faces and heads of Mr. and Mrs. Moore were brutally hacked beyond recognition. Horton, perhaps needing fresh air, walked over to the window and tried to open it. It was tightly locked. He retraced his steps, and he noticed for the first time a lighted kerosene lamp on the floor near the foot of the bed.

In the second bedroom, next door, he found the children, lying peacefully in their beds, under the equally horrifying undisturbed covers, with the equally horrifying cloths over their faces masking the gaping wounds. They were all there: Katherine, Boyd, Herman, Paul. Their toys lay scattered about the floor where they had left them when they went to bed.

## \$2,000 REWARD

For the arrest and conviction of the murderer or murderers of J. B. Moore and family and Lena and Ina Stillinger at Villisca on the night of Sunday, June 9, 1912, the state of Iowa, Montgomery county, citizens of the city of Villisca, and the adjoining community offer a reward approximating \$2,000.

By authority of the governor the state of Iowa has offered \$500 for each murderer taken dead or alive, the county has offered \$500, and citizens of Villisca have increased the amount by over \$700. The John Deere Implement company of Omaha telegraphed their willingness to subscribe any amount for this purpose, and citizens of Clarinda and other neighboring towns have sent word of a reward fund being raised. It is likely that by the end of the week the reward will total over \$2,000.

## STANDING REWARD

There is also a reward of \$1200 standing for the apprehension of the Monmouth murderers.

Horton studied the scene: the windows were locked, but there was no lamp on the floor to light the murderer's way.

Horton went downstairs slowly. Someone had already told him the Moores had company. That would explain the downstairs bedroom. In the third bedroom he found two little girls. The scene was much the same. One lay as unruffled as the victims upstairs. The other had her arm outflung, as if she had tried to ward off a blow. The arm had been slashed. Both faces were unrecognizable. Two dresses had been tossed on a chair near the closet. He lifted them carefully. Underneath he found two small Bibles, one inscribed to Lena Stillinger, the other to Ina Stillinger. He put them down. He replaced the dresses. The room was hot, stuffy; the windows locked. A kerosene lamp sat on the floor, still lit, now nearly empty. By





Joe Moore



Mrs. Moore

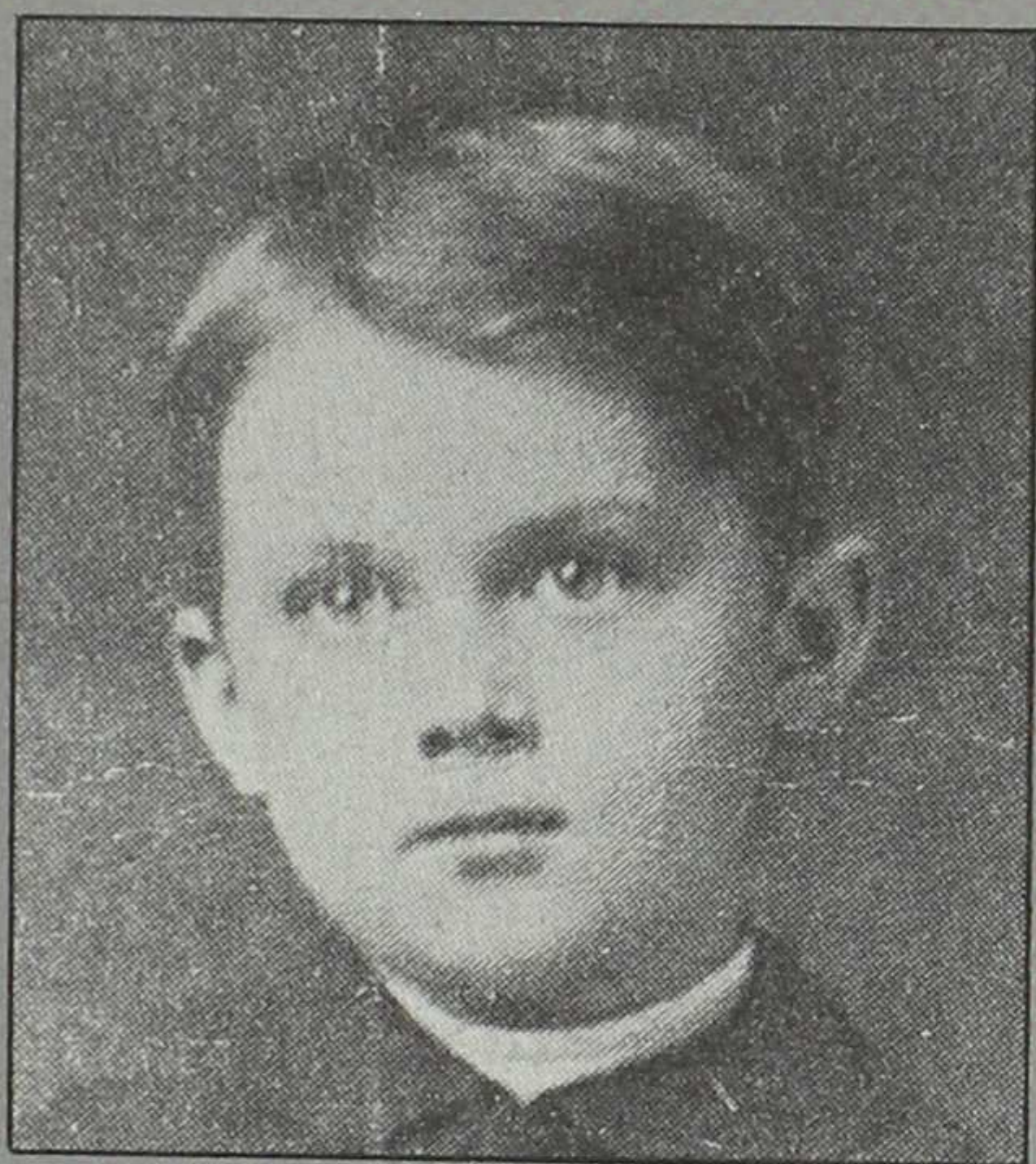


Boyd Moore



Paul Moore





Herman Moore



Katherine Moore



Ina Stillinger



Lena Stillinger

*(photos courtesy Edgar Epperly)*



its yellow glow, Horton noticed a small package half under the foot of the bed--a cloth-wrapped package, six by four inches. Inside he found a portion of a bacon slab. He rewrapped it. Hereplaced it under the bed. He turned to find Dr. Cooper standing in the doorway, and he asked the Doctor to go upstairs. When he turned again to leave a few moments later he saw something he had missed. A hatchet leaned against the wall near the bed. The entire length of the hatchet was covered with blood and with strands of hair.

Except for the dress hanging over the glass portion of the door, Horton found the parlor undisturbed. The dress hung so as to block out any light coming from the house. The pulled shades took care of the light in the rest of the rooms. Further on, in the kitchen, he found bloody fingerprints on a pulled-down shade. On the table there he found a basin filled with reddened water where the murderer had clearly washed his hands. And next to that he found the slab of bacon from which the portion in the guest bedroom had been taken. And there was a smoky smell in the room so he checked the stove. He found several pieces of half-charred paper--legal documents, mostly deeds.

The Marshal and the Doctor left the house together. Horton locked the door and posted several neighbors to guard the home. He called Sheriff Jackson at Red Oak and Coroner Linquist at Stanton. When Jackson arrived at noon, the town was already in an uproar. A thousand people milled about the streets. Villisca, usually lucky if it saw two motor-cars, now was clogged with over 400.

Jackson called out Company F of the Iowa National Guard to restore some order, but there was not much it could

do. The town's official night watchman resigned in disgust. The newspapers, over eager to get information, printed any story they thought their readers would like, sometimes only half-truths and speculation. They added to the general confusion, while Marshal Horton and Sheriff Jackson worked quietly, giving them few statements.

Wild tales circulated in the newspapers of escaped lunatics from the State Insane Asylum at Clarinda and exotic stories of roving bands of Negro tramps. *The Bedford Free Press* claimed to have secret information about a fanatic religious cult based in Denver, a cult demanding blood sacrifices for atonement and sending several messengers of destruction out to slay families in their beds. The murderers looked alike--they were all of average height and wore full, bushy, black beards.

The most frightening part of the cult-slayers story was that they supposedly struck all over the nation. And, it was true that the summer of 1912 was an especially bloody one. There had been ax murders in many towns. The Wednesday before the Villisca murders, Rollin and Anna Hudson had been found murdered at their home in Paola, Kansas. They had been hacked to death in their sleep with an ax. A lighted lamp had been left on the floor. Similar murders had taken place in Colorado Springs, in Ellsworth, Kansas, in Monmouth, Illinois, and in Rainier, Oregon. Some papers placed the number of like crimes as high as one hundred.

For a long time in the Villisca case, no one reading the newspapers could be sure exactly who had been murdered. Mr. Moore's name was often given as Joseph, when in fact it was Josiah. The Stillinger girls were sometimes the Spillinger girls and sometimes the Stillings. The final,



official death count read: Josiah B. Moore, 43; Mrs. Moore, 39; Herman, 11; Katherine, 10; Boyd, 7; and Paul, 5; Lena and Ina Stillinger, 11 and 8, respectively.

**T**he coroner's inquest began on Tuesday, under the direction of County Coroner A. L. Linquist, with a jury of three men. After the coroner's jury viewed the dead, the bodies were moved from the house at midnight on June 10 and placed in the fire station. The fire station was not a large building and the fire-fighting equipment had to be moved across the street into a park to accommodate the bodies.

Mrs. Peckham testified before the jury first. She told how she had become aware of the "terrible stillness" around the Moore house and the restlessness of the livestock. Implement clerk Selley came next. He retold the story of the discovery and said that Mr. Moore, as far as he knew, had no business enemies. Dr. Cooper followed Selley. He gave the unofficial time of death as about five or six hours previous to the discovery, between 2:00 and 3:30 a.m. He said he was sure the killer had not used chloroform or like drug to stun the victims. However, both he and another doctor--F. S. Williams--agreed that it was likely they had been bludgeoned with sandbags, rendering them unconscious so the murderer could, at his leisure, "cut and pound away at them." Several relatives and neighbors testified then. The neighbors all said they might have heard noises, they might have seen shadows that night, but they could not be sure. Harry Moore, another brother, testified that he could not identify the ax Marshal Horton found as Joe's property. Selley swore it was. The inquest left people baffled as ever

and even served to deepen the mystery.

But the first official investigation had not been entrusted to human hands. Shortly after the discovery, word had been telegraphed to Beatrice, Nebraska for Elmer Noffsinger's famous bloodhounds. They arrived on Monday night, before the inquest, aboard Number 12, the Chicago Express. Taken to the house, the dogs sniffed the ax handle. The scent, although 18 to 20 hours old, seemed strong. They went off the east end of the porch, up 6th Avenue north to 2nd Street, turning west on 2nd to 1st Avenue and the opposite end of town. The trail ended at the West Nodaway River where a bloody handkerchief was found. The dogs were taken across the river. When that failed, they were started all over again. But it was no use. The bloodhounds left in disgrace the evening of the inquest on Number 9, the Denver Flyer.

The so-called "scientific experts" were no more help than the dogs. They fought constantly among themselves. Criminology at the turn of the century was a hotbed of controversy. In one camp were the Lombrosoists, named after the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso thought catching a criminal very easy--all you had to do was look for a certain type. A criminal had very large jaws, high cheekbones, single lines in his palms, and handle-shaped ears. When the Lombrosoists held sway in the investigation, there was a lot of face and feature studying.

Then came the Bertillon experts. The original Bertillon method (referred to as anthropometry) was merely a system of criminal identification. Years before, Alphonse Bertillon, a filing clerk in the Paris Prefecture, noticed all criminals were described as merely tall, average,



or short. He set up a Bertillon card on criminals with such information as exact height, trunk length, head length, ear length and width, color of eye white, etc., the combination of which he thought would never be the same for any two men. He was the first to advocate "mug shots." At a conference in the United States in 1896, it was discovered that 150 police forces and prisons were using the Bertillon method of cataloging. But a few years later a man named Hershel discovered a person's fingerprints were unique, and criminology moved into fingerprinting.

Each system came into play in Villisca. Each adherent argued his system was the best. William McClaughrey from Leavenworth, Kansas had been called in to examine the bloody handprint on the window shade in the Moore home, so he was probably a fingerprint expert, but the newspapers identified him as a Bertillonist, which would have infuriated the crusty Bertillon, still alive in Paris. Until his death in 1914 he refused to believe that "tiny spots on human fingertips" could ever compete with his system.

A consultation with "Aunty" Hamilton, highly-respected Red Oak soothsayer, brought no better results. Aunty did manage to predict the route the bloodhounds would take, impressing everyone, but when she said the slayer was a Villisca citizen she struck too close to home. The *Villisca Review* put it tartly: "...inasmuch as she told all the story by looking at coffee grounds in a cup it is doubtful if the coffee grounds knew any more about how to find the murderer than the authorities do."

After the inquest, several arrests were made, ranging from a frightened hobo to Joe Moore's brother-in-law Sam Moyer. Rumor had it that Moyer and Moore

had feuded over Moyer's treatment of Moore's sister. Moyer was arrested in Mohawk, Nebraska, but he had an alibi and he was released.

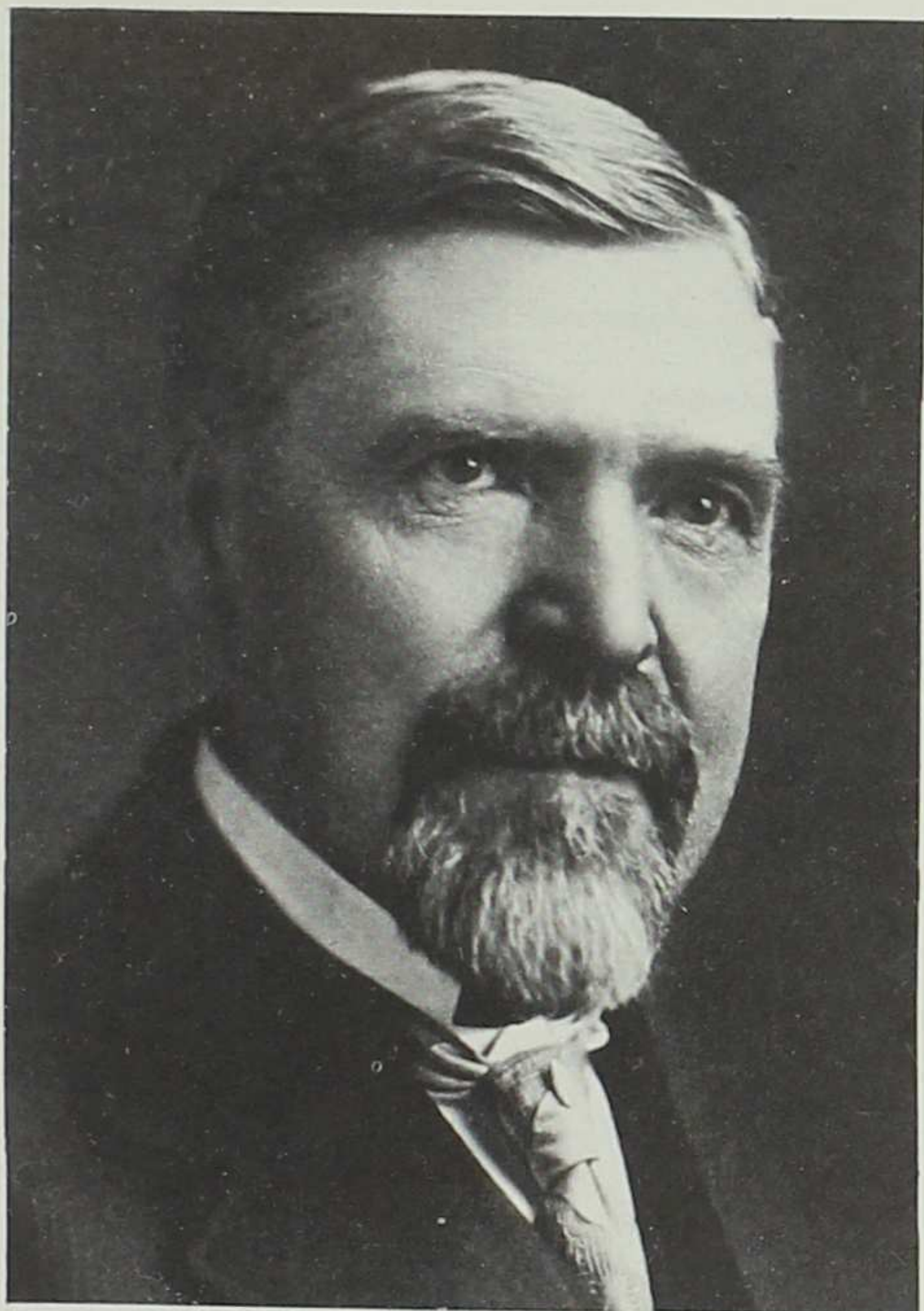
On Thursday, June 13, while the colorful criminologists fought to outdo each other, the victims were buried. Seven thousand people flocked to the little town. The funeral was not quite the family affair the relatives wished. The crowd was too immense for any church or auditorium in the town, so services were held in a little park located on the town square. Covered with floral displays, the caskets were placed in the town hall and remained there during the service. Though the coroner's jury members and the press had viewed the bodies, few of the relatives wanted to "look upon the awful sight," and the lids remained closed. Rev. F. J. Ewing, minister of the Presbyterian Church where the victims had made their last public appearance, delivered the sermon. The bodies were then taken to the cemetery in a procession a quarter mile long. The town's only two hearses carried the adults; separate carriages the children. Also on Thursday, while most of the population attended the funeral, all of the bloody bedding was removed from the house and quietly burned. The house was fumigated.

After the funeral, the visitors began to leave and the National Guard was recalled. The case disappeared from the pages of the newspapers. Interest waned. Even this notice in the *Villisca Review* failed to rekindle it:

#### \$2,000 REWARD

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*F. F. Jones (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).*

inger at Villisca on the night of Sunday, June 9, 1912, the State of Iowa, Montgomery County, citizens of the city of Villisca, and the adjoining community offer a reward approximating \$2,000.

By authority of the governor the state of Iowa has offered \$500 for each murderer taken dead or alive, the county has offered \$500, and citizens of Villisca have increased the amount by over \$700. The John Deere Implement Company of Omaha telegraphed their willingness to subscribe any amount for this purpose, and citizens of Clarinda and other neighboring towns have sent word of a reward fund being

raised. It is likely that by the end of the week the reward will total over \$2,000.

No one tried to collect the reward. If the local authorities still searched for the solution to the mystery, their lack of success threatened to turn the bloody event into an obscure memory. For almost two years, the ax murders lost their status as good copy.

Then, in 1914, the Burns National Detective Agency assigned a Kansas City detective to the case, and the drama shifted from murder and mystery to indictments, investigations, and courtroom battles. J. N. Wilkerson worked hard, but he was overly fond of seeing his name in the paper. He thought he found a likely suspect in the person of "Blackie" Mansfield, a packing-house employee. What made Mansfield worthy of suspicion is not clear, but Wilkerson managed to hound the grand jury into investigating. It refused to bring an indictment against "Blackie." The detective, angry at its rejection, dropped a bomb that shocked a great many of the citizens of Villisca.

Wilkerson charged that a Villisca businessman had influential friends who were on the grand jury, and that he used these friends to thwart the indictment of Mansfield. Why should a businessman be interested in the release of a packing-house worker, a possible murderer? Because the businessman--F. F. Jones--hired Mansfield to kill the Moores!

F. F. Jones, a leading light in Villisca, probably could easily have been voted "Most Prominent Citizen." Born in Bath, New York, he had come to Iowa at age 27 and had taught school in Brooks before settling in Villisca. Once there, however, his star had begun to rise. In 1882 a book-



keeper for an implement store, by 1892 he owned his own implement and hardware business. By 1895, he managed the Farmer's Bank. He became a member of the Iowa House of Representatives for three years and a member of the Iowa Senate for two. He was a Methodist and Episcopalian Sunday School superintendent for 30 years and conducted a Bible study program for 25. But though he was very prominent, Jones was not very popular. Many people seemed to envy, to suspect, his quick rise in Villisca.

Wilkerson held mass meetings to raise money for his crusade against Jones. Wilkerson told his audiences Jones was a wicked man. Jones had Moore killed because of the victim's rival implement store. Jones was in fact so evil, he hired a maniac who not only slew Moore, but went berserk and killed Moore's entire family. Many people were convinced by Wilkerson, however pale this argument may seem now. He raised several thousand dollars.

Jones immediately slapped Wilkerson with a \$60,000 slander suit for linking his name with the crime. The court at Red Oak returned a verdict for the detective, which served to spur him on. The case grew so big that Iowa Attorney General H. M. Havner decided to take full charge of the investigation. After Havner took over, the grand jury once again refused to return an indictment against Jones. Wilkerson, stymied, charged Havner with "misconducting" the grand jury investigation in order to protect Jones. Finally, when Wilkerson had spent three long years pushing his case against Jones, the local authorities came up with another suspect, surely one of the most unusual and puzzling personalities in criminal history.



*Attorney General Havner (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).*

The Reverend George J. Kelly was an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. Coming from England in 1905, he married an American and attended theological seminary in Omaha. Though he never graduated from the seminary and was never ordained in this country, he nevertheless served congregations in Iowa, Illinois, South Dakota, and Nebraska. He was much admired for his fine voice and his excellent sermons. But a darker side of the Reverend Kelly had been slowly emerging.

Kelly was an eccentric in a time when eccentricity was tolerated and even looked upon with secret admiration, but his behavior had begun to alarm his



Sutton, Nebraska congregation. He had gotten into the habit of leaping out at passersby from behind trees and shouting: "They're after me! They think I killed them at Villisca!" Several Suttonites protested rather strongly to the authorities, but by the time the law tried to look up Kelly, he was gone.

In Villisca and Red Oak, the gadfly Detective Wilkerson kept the case open almost singlehandedly. There had been quite a few rumors in that hot summer of 1917 to the effect that an indictment had been handed down by the grand jury in the ax murder case. Only the officials knew for sure and they were not talking. Detective Wilkerson and his accusations had alarmed and inflamed many people. They wanted action on the case, the sooner the better.

Then, the Reverend Kelly suddenly surfaced in Red Oak and gave himself up. Only then did the public discover that the grand jury had indicted him for the Villisca murders. Wilkerson, incensed, held on like a bulldog to his fixed idea. He hired Omaha's Boyd Theatre and presented there a two-hour denunciation of the Attorney General and his methods. Kelly was an innocent dupe, he said. Jones was guilty, and Attorney General Havner was shielding him.

On August 31, 1917 more than five years after the murder, Kelly made a confession. He said he arrived in Villisca the night before the murder of the Moore family and stayed with the Reverend Ewing. Sunday night, they all attended the Children's Day service in which Herman Moore played so prominent a role. After church, Kelly talked with the Reverend Ewing and Mrs. Ewing until 11:30. The June night was especially warm, and the Ewings spent it in a tent

on their lawn. They left Kelly alone in the house. He tried to sleep, but he was overtired and bothered by a whirring sound in his head. Soon he began to feel even sicker. He decided to take a walk to get some fresh air. He left by the front door, he said, and walked across the street to the Presbyterian Church.

Kelly talked of pondering a sermon he was planning called "Slay Utterly," when suddenly a voice told him to "go on." He said he felt himself in the grip of something he could not understand. God was telling him to slay utterly, and he did not know where he was or where he was going. Then, he saw a shadow which the voice of God told him to follow. He was led to the back of a house. Though he did not know who lived there, he heard the voice telling him to slay utterly, and he replied: "Yes, Lord, I will."

At the back of the house he found an ax. He picked it up and continued to follow the shadow. He said he was led to the front door and told: "Go in, do as I tell you: slay utterly." As soon as he entered the door, the voice said: "Come up higher." He climbed the stairs, believing he was climbing Jacob's ladder.

In the first room he saw children lying in bed. The voice said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Kelly replied, "They are coming Lord." He began "sending those children somewhere." And then he went to the parents' room and did the same.

Kelly said he grew tired and went downstairs to find a place to lie down. He noticed the downstairs bedroom. Inside he discovered the Stillinger girls. "More work yet," the voice told him, and he continued his sacrifices.

At last he laid the ax down. He returned to the Ewing home. He went back to bed.



He left on the 5:19 train the next day, and he returned to his home in Macedonia, Nebraska at 7:30.

On the basis of the confession, the State Department of Justice decided to go through with a formal trial. On September 4, shortly after midnight, Kelly was brought from the Harrison County Jail, in Logan, where he had been held. On advice of counsel, Kelly completely repudiated his confession. The stage was set for a very interesting trial.

**I**t began Tuesday, September 4, 1917 at 10:10 a.m. Kelly was brought in smiling broadly, followed by his wife. Attorney General Havner immediately asked that new evidence be introduced to support his contention that no "third degree" methods had been used on Kelly to get the confession. Kelly's attorney charged they had. Kelly, still smiling, pleaded not guilty. That ended the first session. Havner, the other prosecution attorney, F. F. Faville, and County Attorney Wenstrand were stopped at the courthouse door by the press. Before the opening of the trial, they had hinted broadly at important new evidence coming up. Now Havner explained the new evidence consisted of several witnesses who would claim Kelly had discussed the murder with them before it was common knowledge.

Wednesday, the defense challenged Judge Boyes as being from out of the district. Boyes said he had been appointed by the Chief Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court and would not budge. Six jurors were examined. Three were released because they said they had formed an opinion. The prosecution briefly lost Havner when he was arrested and charged with interfering in the grand

jury investigation. He posted the \$1,000 bond and went on with the trial.

Also Wednesday, Wilkerson popped up again. He had formed the Iowa Protective Association, mainly for the protection of Kelly. Now, prospective jurors had to be asked if they were members. Wilkerson must have been quite convincing; the president of the Association was the Stillinger girls' father Joe.

Thursday and Friday were taken up with more jury selection. The judge admonished Wilkerson, seated at the defense table, for showing jurors a newspaper photo of Kelly in a friendly pose with a relative of one of the victims. During the questioning of one of the jurors, Kelly began to weep uncontrollably.

The next week was taken up with jury selection. On Thursday, Mr. C. T. Brown became the last juror, joining J. D. Isaac, Samuel Erickson, Carl Nimrod, S. R. Pike, Jess Rankin, Wesley Dodge, Henry Bruce, Helmar Walgrean, James Edwards, George Bass, and E. B. Straight. Havner took time off to go to an agricultural fair six miles south of Red Oak. There, in his position as Attorney General, he took part in a raid on a "Hoochy koochy" show. The net was two gambling wheels and one young Creston girl who was returned to her mother.

Day nine, Friday, brought some more interesting testimony. Several people testified that Kelly had talked to them excitedly about the murders before they were common knowledge. The piece of bacon found at the foot of the Stillinger girls' bed came up. Kelly had been in jail before, and one of his most peculiar habits had been the sneaking of a small piece of food off his plate, wrapping it up, and hiding it upon his person.



In the afternoon of that day, the prosecution brought the ax to court. When Havner carried it by him, Kelly shifted position, but showed no signs of emotion. He sat as he always had, with his left hand pressed tightly against his left temple. Dr. Linquist, the coroner, identified the ax as the one he found standing against the wall in the room occupied by the Stillinger girls. The Bibles by which the mutilated Stillinger girls had been identified were shown. There were tears in Mrs. Stillinger's eyes when the story was recounted. Also the fact that F. F. Jones' son's land adjoined that of the Moores came to light. Hank Horton, the marshal, said it looked as if someone had tried to wipe off the ax--he had discovered lint clinging to it. He also testified the ax was covered in blood and brain matter from handle to head.

The next day, Saturday, was a bad day for Kelly. Mrs. Marquard, a laundry marker in Council Bluffs, said a shirt sent to the laundry with the notation that it should be returned in the Macedonia basket was covered with blood. The agent for the laundry said next that Kelly told him that some of his laundry did not come

back from Council Bluffs. This took place in June 1912. A Mrs. Miller of Macedonia also testified Kelly told her that one of the Stillinger girls had "roused up" and caused the murderer some trouble in dispatching her.

On September 17, a jailer from Sioux Falls, South Dakota stated that Kelly had confessed to the murders while a prisoner there in 1914 and 1915. The jailer quoted Kelly: "I killed those people at Villisca, Iowa--the Moores and the Stillinger girls." Morally damaging testimony came from a Miss Beulah Callaway, telephone operator. At Christmas time in 1912, Kelly made an unusual proposition to Miss Callaway: "Rev. Kelly wanted me to pose for him in the nude so he could paint my picture. He persuaded me for an hour, but I wouldn't do it. He said that the Bible had pictures of nude women and it would be no harm for me to pose for him in that way."

On Wednesday, Mrs. Ewing, the minister's wife, told the court that Kelly's bed at their home had been slept in and there were no bloodstains. Also a court reporter testified Kelly told Havner that he did it because he was insane, and that "I have been insane since a child, that was my mother's testimony." A probation officer from Sioux City stated that Kelly told him he had been confined in the federal hospital for the insane in Washington, D. C. for sending improper letters to a young girl. The attorneys for the defense, Mitchell of Council Bluffs and A. L. Sutton, spent the entire day trying to prove Kelly insane and picturing his confession as forced.

Thursday the defense reinforced the insanity plea. Several witnesses testified Kelly mentioned to them his insanity. "If God wants for me to burn a barn I must

#### Note on Sources

The Villisca Ax Murders story, for some reason, is not extensively covered in Iowa history books. The only popular history book which I could find which mentions it is the excellent section in Don Brown's *Tell a Tale of Iowa* (Des Moines: Wallace-Homestead, 1965).

I relied mainly on newspapers, especially the daily *Des Moines Register and Leader*, the daily *Fort Dodge Messenger and Chronicle*, and the weekly *Bedford Free Press*. Also, to a small extent the *Shenandoah World*. The murders are covered in these newspapers from June 10, 1912 through the end of June. The first trial covered the period from September 4 through September 29, 1917. The second trial was from November 24 through the 26, 1917.

Another interesting source (and probably a very accurate one) is a reprint of the *Villisca Review* that details the murders and subsequent days. There is no mention of the trials, however. Old copies of *Who's Who in Iowa* were valuable for personality profiles. The information about fingerprinting and detective styles is from *A Pictorial History of Crime* by Julian Symons (New York: Crown Publishers, 1966).



do it and if He wants me to slay utterly I have to do that too." (How that must have horrified the jury; all farmers save one.) Friday consisted of more insanity testimony. A Dr. Fitzsimmons said that once, while Kelly was in custody, he had frothed at the mouth and "acted paranoiac." In Winner, South Dakota, another witness maintained, Kelly asked several girls to pose nude for photographs. An official of the Sioux Falls Jail stated that in March 1914, Kelly became convinced he was Woodrow Wilson.

Saturday, September 22 at 10:55 the defense rested its case. Kelly had never been put on the stand. The prosecution introduced new evidence tying Kelly to several fires in Sutton, Nebraska. On Monday, Albert Jones testified he was at home when the murders took place. He had talked to Joe Moore at about eight o'clock, he said, and then he had gone home. Wilkerson, for reasons known only to him, still doggedly clung to the F. F. Jones murder theory. The prosecution, just as doggedly tried to sweep it away.

Tuesday, the closing arguments and addresses were given. J. J. Hess, another prosecution attorney, flavored his remarks with ax-swinging. The defense had effectively argued that the tiny Rev. Kelly--5 feet, 2½ inches--could not have made the ax cuts in the ceiling of the house. Hess tried to show that Kelly could easily have made the marks while swinging the ax. Hess also made sure the jury knew four important points: 1) Kelly told people of the crime before it was generally known; 2) Kelly seemed to know details of the crime that only the axman could have known; 3) Kelly had confessed his guilt while in jail at Sioux Falls; and 4) Kelly had made a voluntary sworn confession.

The next day, Hess concluded with an

impassioned plea: "For God's sake don't turn this man loose where your baby and my baby may be the next victims. He sent eight innocent people to their graves and he wants to send more!" "Put him," said Hess, "behind bars for life." Once again Hess raised the bloodstained ax above his head. Kelly slumped in his chair and covered his face with his left hand, leaving only a small opening through which he stole a glance at the ax. Then his eyes dropped downward and he stared at the floor. Hess went on to call Kelly everything from a degenerate to a religious fanatic.

The speech of the defense was not nearly so interesting, parroting as it did Wilkerson's contention that Havner was using Kelly for a scapegoat. The defense attorney, Sutton, unconsciously was not above conceding the questionable morality of its client: "If Havner can hold up his head after the way he has handled this case he is a bigger degenerate than Kelly!"

Thursday, Kelly once again declaimed his innocence. The grand jury had indicted him on murder in the first degree in the death of Lena Stillinger. The jurors in the murder trial were given a choice: 1) Murder 1st--death or imprisonment for life; 2) Murder 2nd--life or not less than 10 years; 3) Manslaughter--not more than eight years or a fine of not more than \$1,000; 4) Not guilty; 5) Not guilty by reason of insanity.

On the twenty-first day of the trial, September 28, the jury was discharged at 1:25 p.m. for failure to find a verdict. It had cast 22 ballots. The score was always the same--11 for acquittal and one not guilty by reason of insanity. The same day, in a surprise move, the grand jury indicted Havner for oppression in office.

Saturday, September 29, Kelly was

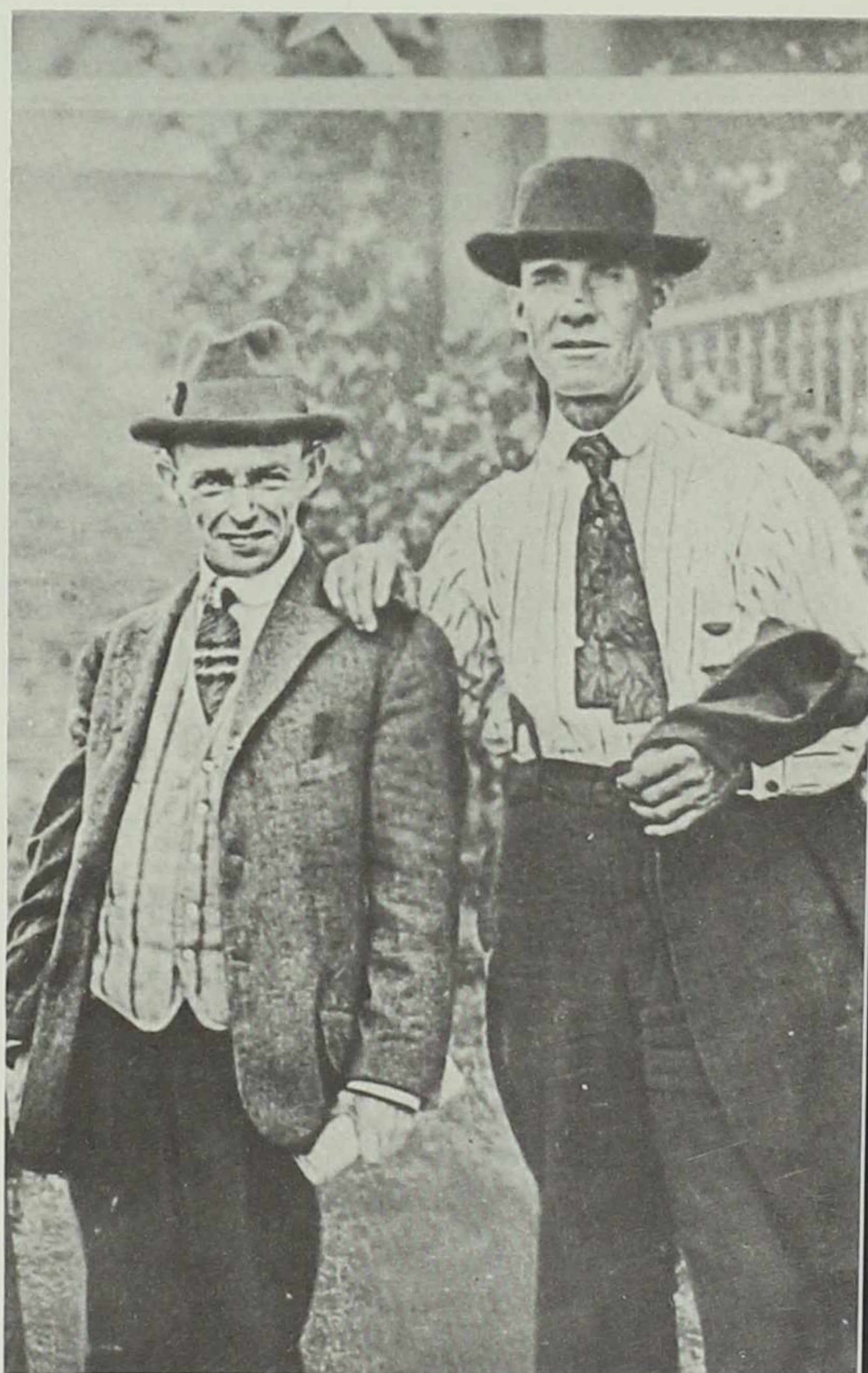


removed to the Logan jail. It was discovered that Juror Brown, the last member chosen, had been the holdout--for not guilty by reason of insanity. He was vilified by the other members of the jury.

The second trial began on November 24, 1917. Havner, the shadow of his indictment hanging over him, once again prosecuted. On Monday, November 26, the jury retired at 4:15 p.m. It returned four hours later with a vote of not guilty. Kelly beamed. He said "Fine, fine." He had a contract to lecture on the Chautauqua circuit and planned to write a book called *A Pawn in the Game*.

It was finally over. Havner went on to become the Republican candidate for Governor in 1920. F. F. Jones rested on his besmirched laurels in his beloved Villisca. Wilkerson, at last, gave up the case and dropped out of sight. Kelly was never heard from again. At the same time the official trial records disappeared completely.

Old wounds heal, but the mystery remains. Was Kelly the guilty one? Lena Stillinger, the only victim cut below the head, must have awakened and tried to fight off her attacker. Kelly told Mrs. Miller one of the girls had "roused up" and caused trouble. How would he know, unless he had wielded the ax? But was Kelly the kind of cool character who would methodically cover all windows and door cracks in the house with clothes and shades to block out the light for passersby? Would he calmly retire to the kitchen, fill a pan with water and wash his bloody hands? The murderer had done all this, and the details of such actions were conspicuously absent from Kelly's confession. Yet Kelly said he had killed the Stillinger girls last, and it was their room where the ax was found. Would an inno-



Rev. Kelly and Detective Wilkerson (picture courtesy Edgar Epperly).

cent person know that? It goes on and on, a vicious, confusing circle.

Or, was the old seeress right when she looked into her coffee grounds for the murderer and found there a Villisca resident? Was the resident F. F. Jones, pursued for years by the Detective Wilkerson? No one knows. Only eight white markers in the Villisca cemetery and the white house in town stand--mute reminders of Iowa's most puzzling crime.

□



# Pictures for Winter Days

Among the most charming examples of late nineteenth-century color lithography are advertising cards. In many ways similar to post cards, advertising cards were prepared with attractive scenes printed in bright colors. Patent medicines, special foods, or household items were the most common products to be found on advertising cards--sometimes national products, sometimes local. Retailers often used stock cards (pre-printed elsewhere) to boost sales.

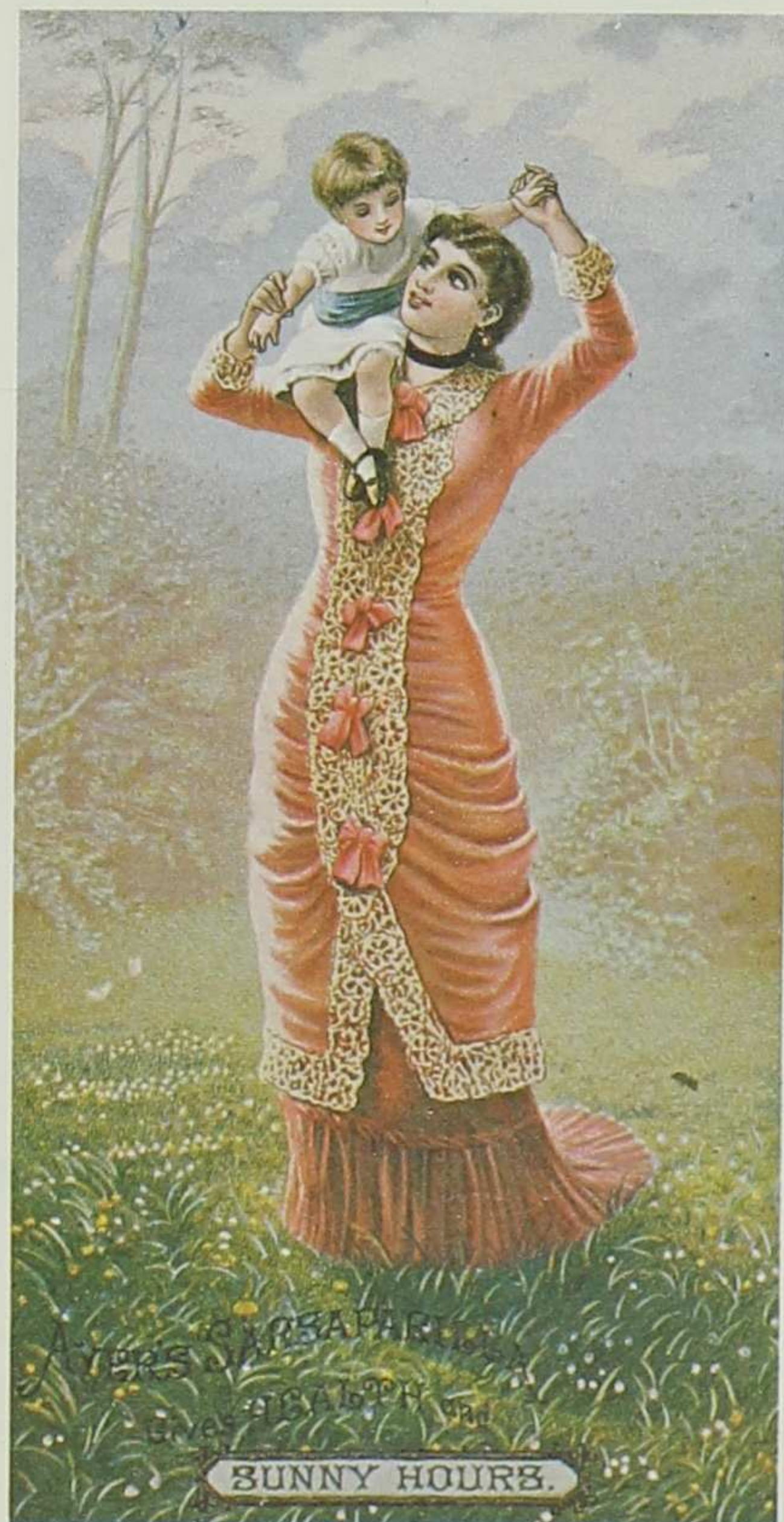
The State Historical Society has many examples of such advertising cards, often preserved in scrapbooks made by Iowans young and old during the long winter months when entertainment was something you did not get from a cathode ray tube. Jeanette Mather York recorded in 1965 her memories of scrapbooks and the role they played in social life at her family home. The quotations accompanying the following examples of advertising cards are from her reminiscence.







"The making of scrapbooks was always a winter time job . . . Only on days when raging blizzards made roads impassable for visits did we work on them."







"Each of the three older girls had a scrapbook of this type . . . Each saved his cards and pictures against the day. Colored illustrations were not common in the early 1890s. When the mid-day dishes were washed we gathered around the dining room table with accumulations, our scrap books and a dish of flour paste."







"Mother took care that each had her fair share of the best of the cards and pictures. When sorting and trading had finished, work began. Each planned a page. Mother did some shifting to get as many cards as possible on a page."





"From earliest memory [we] had an insatiable love of pictures. We poured over scrapbooks for hours, remembering tales told us and making up others. Any free time... we might be found in the library or 'back parlor' pouring over our scrapbooks."



# The Granger Homestead Project

by Dorothy Schwieder

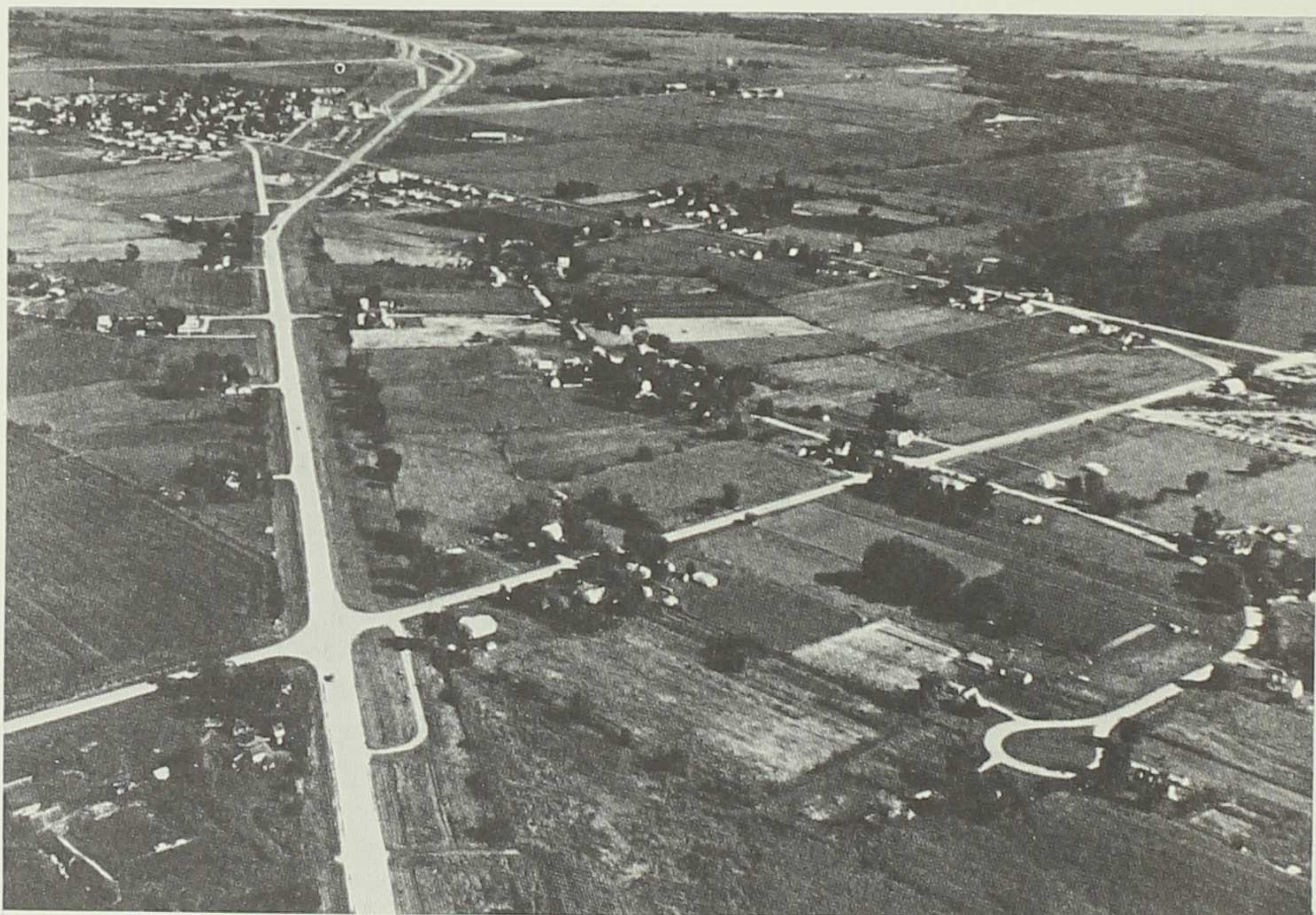
In March 1934, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes notified officials in Granger, Iowa that their community had been selected as a site for a New Deal subsistence homestead. The project was made possible by the National Industrial Recovery Act, passed in 1933, which allowed for assistance to low-income industrial workers living in depressed areas of the country. More specifically the Iowa project, initiated by Granger parish priest Luigi G. Ligutti, was intended to provide better housing for economically depressed families, especially families of coal miners, located in the Granger area. With its completion, Granger became one of approximately 100 New Deal communities established across the United States during the 1930s. The housing project soon attracted national attention as one of the more successful community efforts sponsored by the federal government.

At the time of the homestead selection, the Granger area was an ideal site for an experiment in subsistence living. Although surrounded by fertile, productive farm land, the Granger area also included a significant portion of Iowa's deeply depressed coal mining industry. Beginning in the 1870s, several deep shaft coal

mines had been opened in Dallas and Boone counties; by the 1930s, nine mines were operating within a 15 mile radius of Granger with a combined work force of 2,500 men. Because most Iowa coal mines operated only during the fall and winter months the majority of miners averaged just 180 working days each year. Some men earned additional money during the off-season by hiring out to nearby farmers or working as section hands for the local railroad. Most, however, were unable to find additional work with the result that their yearly earnings averaged around \$900.

Of the many deprivations suffered by the miners, the most serious was housing. Because most coal mines were sunk a considerable distance from existing communities, company officials found it necessary to provide housing for the mining families. Previous experience had taught Iowa's coal operators that coal seams might end abruptly thus necessitating a quick abandonment of the mine. Because of the transitory nature of the industry, houses were constructed quickly and cheaply. In fact, the typical mining camp house built during the 1920s cost about \$250, contained four rooms and measured 24 feet square. The best that





*An aerial view of the Granger homesteads.*

could be said for company housing was that it rented cheap, with each unit costing between \$6 and \$8 per month.

While the transitory nature of the coal industry tended to perpetuate the dismal housing situation, an equally powerful influence was the attitude of mine owners and operators. After 1900, large numbers of southern and eastern Europeans emigrated to coal fields in the Middle West. Company officials frequently regarded these families as being "morally and mentally inferior" not only to native-born workers but also to emigrants from northern and western Europe. Given this attitude, plus the conviction that mining families did not take proper care of company housing, many operators felt justified in building only substandard housing as well as refusing to provide upkeep for the completed units.

Indeed, some company officials stated openly that eastern and southern Europeans were not entitled to a higher standard of living. At the same time, mine operators continually turned a deaf ear to the miners' pleas that they would gladly pay higher rents if better housing were available.

Because of their temporary nature, most camps also lacked adequate educational facilities. Only a few mining communities had schools that extended beyond the fourth grade, and those that did operated the additional grades for only four months during the year. Most children finished school by the time they were 12 years old while some finished as early as nine or ten. Because few parents had the resources to send their children to a neighboring town for further schooling, the young people's education essen-



tially ended before they entered their teens. For girls, the situation was less crucial as most remained at home under the supervision of their mothers where they helped with household chores and cared for younger family members. For boys, however, the situation was more difficult. Unable to work in the mines until they were 16 and lacking any opportunity for vocational training which would prepare them for types of work other than mining, most youths spent three or four years idling away their time, mostly in the local pool halls. By the time they reached 16, with limited education and no occupational skills, they had little choice but to follow in their father's occupational footsteps.

Going hand in hand with inadequate educational facilities were extremely meager social opportunities. Organized recreational facilities did not exist for the young people, and most mining camps were located too great a distance from larger communities for children to take advantage of activities there. Without automobiles, which few mining families had in the 1920s, it was difficult to get to town for any event. Most miners had large families; so with overcrowded four-roomed dwellings, there was little incentive for young people to stay at home. The result was that during the winter most children frequented the local pool halls while in the summer they loitered around the dirty, dusty streets. Every summer it was anticipated that at least two or three mining camp children would drown while swimming in the nearby Des Moines River.

Yet, even as the 1920s wore on and the outlook appeared increasingly bleak and uncertain for mining families, a change

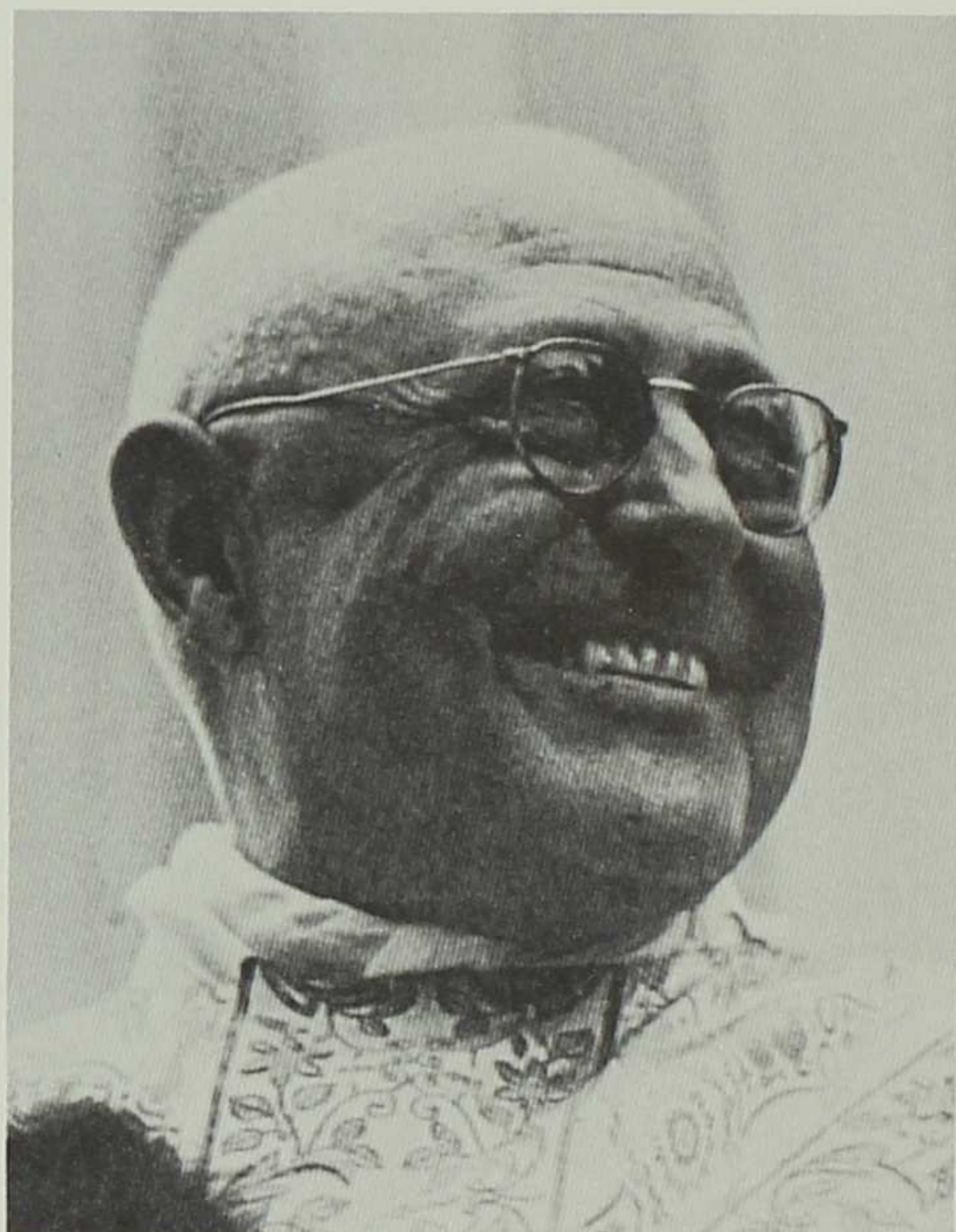
was in the making. In 1926, Father Luigi Ligutti was installed as a parish priest in Granger. Born in the Province of Udine, Italy in 1895, Ligutti had emigrated to Des Moines in 1912. He graduated from St. Ambrose College and then attended St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland. Ordained in 1917 at age 22, he taught for several years at the Des Moines Catholic High School (later Dowling High School) and then accepted a three-point charge in Harrison County. It was a propitious move as during his six years at Magnolia, Woodbine, and Logan, he became well acquainted with the problems of his rural parishioners. In 1926, Father Ligutti moved to Granger where his congregation contained not only rural families, but also residents from the nearby coal camps. As he became better acquainted with the mining camp families, he became increasingly distressed over their squalid living conditions and the total lack of opportunity for young people. Convinced that the camps were a totally-unfit environment for raising families, and in fact, were fertile fields for crime, he looked to the land as a remedy for the miners' problems. The young priest had brought from his native Italy a deep love of the land; his years in Iowa intensified that feeling as well as bringing out a deep humanitarian concern for needy, disadvantaged people. In Granger, Father Ligutti saw in the land a potential remedy for his parishioners' many economic and social problems. In 1932, he addressed a convention of Catholic Church officials in Omaha where he summed up his philosophy about the relationship between the family and rural living: "The farm is the ideal place to raise children; it furnishes ideal home surroundings for mutual love and help. It



avoids neighborhood quarrels. It affords opportunities for developing personal tastes in beautifying the surroundings of the home."

A year later, passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act presented the concerned priest with what seemed to be the ideal solution. The act included Title II, Section 208 which provided for the creation of the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation. The federal government then appropriated the agency \$25,000,000 to "provide for aiding the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers." Hearing about the federal subsistence program, Father Ligutti immediately went to work. Within six months he had organized a local sponsoring committee and had submitted a petition to the federal government for the Granger homesteads. The petition called for the building of 50 homes located on approximately 225 acres of land adjacent to the town of Granger. Each home site would include about four acres of land so the family could raise most, if not all, of their food supply. The homes, ranging in size from four to six rooms, were to be completely modern. The 50 homesteaders would be selected mostly from the families residing in the area's nine coal camps.

Not content to merely send in the petition, Father Ligutti hurried off to Washington to confer directly with government officials. He later observed that during his visit, "we left no one unseen who could have helped the cause in any way; high ecclesiastics, ambassadors, politicians, cabinet members, the National Catholic Welfare Conference and many others were enlisted in the hastening of the approval." Soon Father Ligutti's efforts bore fruit as he received



*Fr. Luigi Ligutti*

official word about Granger's selection on March 15, 1934.

Father Ligutti considered the Granger area to be an ideal site for the project. With good farm land, residents could enjoy the advantages of rural living. Yet, the project would be located only a short distance from a community where homesteaders could take advantage of existing religious and educational facilities. Moreover, the project was within commuting distance of the mines where most homesteaders would be employed. Another advantage was the close proximity to Iowa State College (now Iowa State University) at Ames. From the beginning of the program, federal officials had stressed the need for involvement of state and local organizations and had particularly singled out land grant colleges as potential collaborators. Early in the planning, a special committee of



ISC faculty members had been organized to act as consultants to project personnel.

An important part of Father Ligutti's thinking on the proposal was the concept of self-help. Through his influence, original plans called for all homesteaders to contribute labor to some phase of the project. Not only would that provide for cooperation among them but also would reduce the total cost of each unit. Plans called for families to aid in excavating, building roads, constructing homes, landscaping, and other phases of project development. The number of work days each homesteader contributed would be credited to his account, thus reducing the final cost of his homestead. The homesteaders had reacted enthusiastically to the proposal and on their applications had listed the number of hours they could work per week as well as the types of work they could do. Before this phase could begin, however, federal officials altered the program, declaring that all construction must be done by contract and all contracts would be handled in Washington. Father Ligutti was deeply disappointed over this change as he felt that the self-help concept should be a vital part of the program.

During the following winter, plans for the project moved along rapidly. In February 1935, officials signed contracts with the J. E. Lovejoy Company of Des Moines for the construction of 50 homes. Eight months later, the builders had completed their work, and by December, homestead families were moving in. Of the 50 homes, five had four rooms, 33 had five rooms, and 12 had six rooms; the five- and six-roomed houses were two storied. All homes contained full basements, bathrooms, central heating

units, and hot water tanks. Each family had the choice of either a combination garage and poultry house or a small barn. Water was provided on each home site by an individual well and electric pump.

The selection of homesteaders was perhaps the most crucial part of the social experiment. Obviously needy people would be considered, but officials did not consider this to be a relief project. Therefore, only people employed at least half-time would be considered as applicants; otherwise, officials feared they could not keep up the monthly payments. Announcements of the project were placed in newspapers in the Granger area. By April 1934, officials had received 65 applications. The local sponsoring committee had been made responsible for securing applications as well as the final selection of homesteaders. Federal guidelines suggested that the committee include the following information on each applicant: nationality of parents, personality and temperament, marital situation, stability and resourcefulness, moral habits, general conduct, and intelligence and realization of the significance of the project. A staff person from the Department of Economics and Sociology at Iowa State assisted the local interviewers.

In May, Granger officials received word that the Division of Subsistence Homesteads had changed the application policy. Local officials were to be relieved of the decision on applicants and instead were to forward pertinent interview data to Washington. Federal officials would then make the final decision.

The completed list of 252 homesteaders finally approved by the federal authorities reflected the social composition of the neighboring mining camps--a large



percentage of Italian and Croatian families along with a few families of Austrian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Slovakian, Dutch, and English descent--and represented a wide range of occupations from street car operator to bookkeeper, although most were miners. At first the introduction of a "foreign element" into the community caused long-time Granger residents to fear the area would soon look like a slum, and they expressed reservations about the project. They feared the construction of a mining camp in their midst, and when Father Ligutti first mentioned the idea of a homestead project, several local businessmen took him aside, reminded him he was a poor country priest who did not understand the depressed miners in his parish, and declared the reason miners lived in sordid housing was because they did not and never would know any better. "Give 'em bathtubs," local citizens said, "and they'll be storing coal in them. The houses will be wrecked in a year or two."

Other fears also surfaced concerning the homesteaders. Because the project was being initiated by a Catholic priest, a few residents feared that all homesteaders would be Catholic and other faiths would be excluded. Local farmers expressed concern that farm and garden produce raised at the project would mean increased competition for them. Because the homesteaders would be living on federal property, they could be exempt from taxes thus causing some Granger residents to assert that the public schools and other tax-supported facilities should be closed to them. The original objections quickly faded, however, and from the beginning, the project was something of a showplace. Homesteaders did a great deal of home beautification

in the form of sodding and planting of trees and shrubs. Reports written about the project rarely failed to comment on the pride of possession shown by the owners and reflected in the freshly-painted homes and carefully-tended yards.

With the celebration of the homesteaders' first anniversary in December 1936, it was apparent that the Granger project was rapidly becoming both a state and national attraction. A steady stream of visitors--ranging from Vatican officials to rural life leaders from Australia, Europe, and Latin America--all trooped to the small, Dallas County community to view the experiment firsthand. In 1936, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt visited the project and was the guest of the fourteen-member Joseph Biondi family. Mrs. Roosevelt's visit was particularly significant as she had earlier intervened on behalf of the homesteaders. In the initial planning some federal officials regarded the subsistence program as a relief measure and therefore advocated that houses should be small and inexpensive. Mrs. Roosevelt, vitally interested in the program from its inception, finally convinced these people, among them her husband, that the homes should be modern, spacious, and well-constructed.

It was also apparent by December 1936 that the project was off to a successful start under the watchful, loving eye of Father Ligutti. The young priest's presence permeated all phases of the project: on Sunday morning, he preached to the homestead families; on week-days, he taught homestead children at the local Catholic high school; throughout the week, he visited the families in their project homes. As well as



guiding his parishioners in spiritual and educational matters, Father Ligutti also gave them a great deal of practical advice. He advised them continually to use their acreages to the fullest advantage and to experiment with new products whenever possible. In keeping with his philosophy some families were urged to raise peanuts while others were told to try raising Angora rabbits.

By the end of the first summer, Father Ligutti believed that the project was progressing satisfactorily. He proudly pointed out to a visiting newsman that despite the drought, the average value of each resident's garden and grain had been \$100. Father Ligutti calculated that with an average yearly total of \$176 for house payments, and considering that families had saved \$100 on their food through home production, homesteaders were left with a balance of \$76 for a full year's house payments, or \$6.50 per month. The priest estimated that in a good year, the average value of produce raised at the project would be \$500. Success with the raising of food reaffirmed Ligutti's basic belief in the subsistence approach, a belief that he expressed many times in the following manner: "People should have one foot in industry and the other on the land. Then if industry goes kerplunk, the families will still have their homes." Father Ligutti's thinking proved only too accurate as during the latter 1930s, working days in the mines became fewer and fewer. Yet, because of the subsistence project, the miners lived comfortably and raised their children in a stable, healthy environment.

A major complaint that Father Ligutti could not resolve, however, concerned the final disposition of homestead property. At the time of occupancy the fed-

eral government informed the homesteaders that they had 30 years in which to pay for their holdings at an interest rate of three percent. The federal government had originally appropriated \$100,000 for the Granger homestead, but several months later added an additional \$25,000 when the local sponsors insisted that the homes should have full basements. Still another \$50,000 was added a short time later, raising the average cost of each homestead to \$3,500. Although the homesteaders had been making monthly payments since December 1935--with payments ranging from \$14 to \$18--the government had given them no guarantee of eventual ownership. In December 1938, Father Ligutti described the financial arrangement as "little more than a rent agreement," adding, "we want something more permanent." By late 1941, with 36 of the original families still in the project, the homesteaders had paid back about \$50,000 of the original cost. Yet, increasingly, the feeling among them was one of vulnerability over the uncertainty of the arrangement. Adding to the homesteaders' uneasiness was the fact that the project had been shifted several times from one federal agency to another. At the project's inception, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads directed the program. A short time later, in fact even before the homesteaders occupied their houses, President Roosevelt transferred all property and assets of the Division to the Resettlement Administration. Then, in 1937, the Farm Security Administration was founded and took over the subsistence programs.

During the following year, however, two significant events took place for homestead residents. In January 1940, Father Ligutti left the community to



become executive secretary of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, a loss keenly felt by homesteaders and Granger residents alike. Appointed to take his place was Father John J. Gorman, Father Ligutti's assistant. The second event concerned the long-awaited final disposition of project housing. For several years before 1942, the Farm Security Administration had been under heavy pressure from both government officials and farm leaders to liquidate all community projects. In 1942, the FSA moved to phase out the Granger project as well as other subsistence projects. Following that move, homestead families formed the Granger Homestead Association, Inc. with Father Gorman as manager. The local homestead association then assumed title to the project housing--purchasing the holdings from the federal government for just under \$100,000--and made purchase contracts with the homesteaders. The Granger homesteads then came under the control of the Federal Public Housing Authority which collected payments on the purchase contracts. At the time, it was estimated that the Granger homesteads had cost the government \$216,189.87 or about \$4,324 per unit.

The Homestead Association, anticipating further changes in ownership and hoping to maintain stability within the community, set down rules for the sale and transfer of property. When an occupant of the project completed his final payment, he received a "restricted deed," with restrictions on the order of a zoning ordinance. Included were restrictions on the construction of commercial buildings on any plot. Moreover, a home owner had to secure the Association's approval before he could make

an addition or improvement to his property. Also, before an owner could sell, the Association had to approve the new buyer, thus controlling membership in the Association.

Better housing was only one goal envisioned by Father Ligutti, however, at the inception of the Granger project. Homestead families were not only to live together, but were also to work together, thereby enriching their lives socially as well as improving their economic status. One major way residents hoped to achieve these mutual goals was by organizing three co-operatives. The largest, the Granger Homestead and Community Co-operative Association, was a buying, selling, manufacturing, and recreational co-operative. The charter stated that the enterprise could "engage in any activity which contributes to the general welfare of the people in the homestead." As a result the co-operative bought and sold a wide assortment of products, ranging from seeds to canned goods. Co-operative officials sponsored recreational activities including classes in English, piano, and weaving as well as planning community social events. The two smaller co-operatives had more specific functions: one owned a tractor, plow, disk, harrow, and mower that it rented to individual members; the other co-operative operated a credit union.

Throughout the 1930s, homestead families held yearly celebrations. In December 1938, the members hosted a banquet in honor of their third anniversary. They proudly pointed out that they had imported only coffee for the meal; otherwise, all food served had been grown on the homesteads. It was also reported that the homesteaders had cut their purchases at the local grocery store by 50



percent since moving into their homes. Each August the residents held a fair, the most important social event of the year, at which they displayed their handicrafts and farm products. Members also staged athletic events and performed folk dances.

In 1939, the Farm Security Administration contributed funds for the construction of a community building which quickly became the center of social life at the project. One activity made possible by the new center was weaving. The Association purchased four large looms which it installed in the community house. The group then hired a trained technician to visit the project for two weeks, helping the women assemble the looms and instructing them in proper use of the equipment. Soon the women were designing, weaving, and dying their own cloth for dress material as well as rugs and drapes.

Other social outlets were also available to homesteaders. A young men's baseball club was organized in Granger with a local coal company furnishing uniforms and Granger businessmen supplying funds for equipment. Most members of the team came from homestead families. In the fall of 1936, homestead residents organized a community band under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. At the same time a Boy Scout troop was organized for homestead youths with similar groups set up for girls. Sometimes the residents sponsored community events. In October 1936, the homestead women served a spaghetti dinner in the Catholic church hall in Granger; approximately 300 people attended. The local schools attended by homestead children were also involved, offering many family activities.

These increased social opportunities not only greatly enriched the lives of the homesteaders, but also brought them together to share community problems and interests.

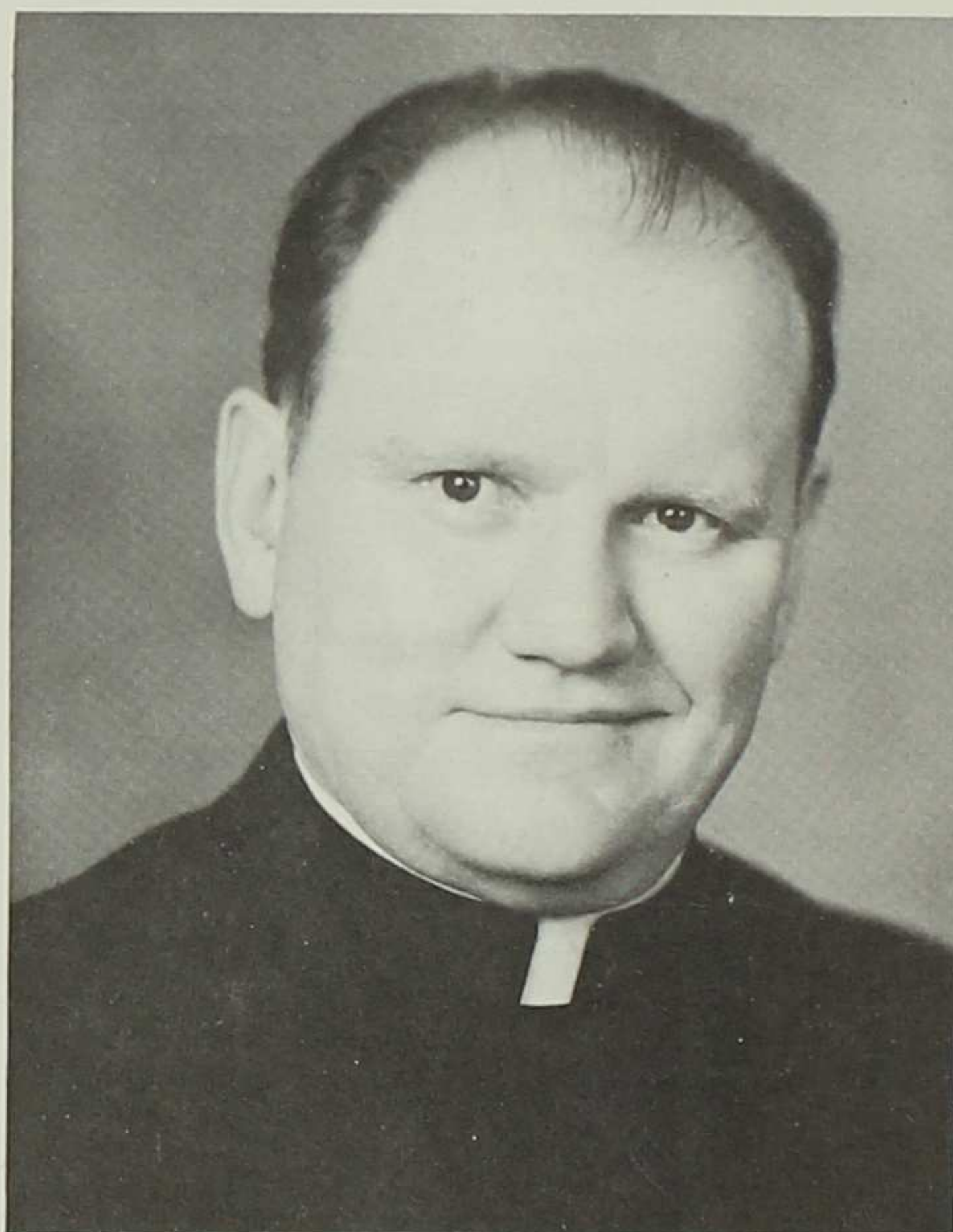
Educationally, the young people also benefited from the project. In 1936, Father Gorman introduced a series of vocational courses at Assumption High School, the Catholic school in Granger. Raised on a farm near Perry, Father Gorman, like his predecessor, had experienced first-hand the educational deficiencies of the mining communities. Set up to remedy these shortcomings as well as to provide a fuller, richer life for all rural young people, the vocational curriculum attracted wide attention in the Catholic press as an innovative experiment in Catholic rural education. Under the program, boys could take courses in animal husbandry (specializing in poultry production management, dairying, hogs, or other animals); crops and soils; vegetable production and management; landscaping and floriculture; fruit growing; and bee culture. Girls had the opportunity to take courses in homemaking, home management, nutrition, preparation and cooking of food, child care, and care of the sick. The school schedule stated that the "chief aim of the course was to prepare young women to conduct a home in the country as it should be conducted."

Although local and federal officials voiced concern from time to time over the problems of molding diverse ethnic groups into a socially-integrated community, the task did not appear too difficult. Both Fathers Ligutti and Gorman played crucial roles in helping to bring the homesteaders together as a fairly cohesive social unit. The many



adult classes and lectures presented by the Extension Service at Iowa State College were also influential in bringing homesteaders together for a common purpose. From the project's inception, the Extension Service sent speakers to present programs on such diverse topics as landscaping, consumers' co-operatives, vegetable crops and small fruits, bee culture, and food and nutrition. Moreover, local institutions made an impact as homesteaders and their children attended the local churches and schools. Also important, although less obvious, was the community-mindedness that mining camp residents themselves brought to the project. Because life in the camps had been difficult, mining families had always displayed a strong tradition of mutual aid. Whenever tragedy struck, everyone came to the aid of the unfortunate family. Moreover, the traditional banding together in the face of deprivation and adversity had produced a strong sense of unity and loyalty among mining families.

Still, a few practices did exist that reflected ethnic separateness. Some homesteaders spoke little English and thus were not able to take part in all community events. A few families made no attempt to become involved. An unusual aspect of homestead living, usually associated with the European backgrounds of the homesteaders, was the practice of using basements for living purposes, rather than the first floors of the homes. All project houses had full, well-finished basement, complete with tiled walls and cement floors. A large number of families had moved the kitchen stove to the basement, along with floor lamps, tables, radios, and other furniture, and the lower area then be-



*Fr. John Gorman*

came kitchen, dining room, and living room. Families not only ate in the basement, but also spent their evenings there. Frequently housewives decorated the empty living rooms with needlework, photographs, and bric-a-brac. When asked about the unusual living arrangement, some homesteaders replied that they were fearful they would not be able to maintain the house payments and so used the basement to prevent any deterioration of the main part of the house. Also, they pointed out that in the winter-time, heat from the furnace kept the family comfortable in the basement, and the rest of the house did not have to be heated. Throughout this period, however, the bedrooms were used for sleeping. Father Gorman, associated with project families for 33 years, believed that the desire for sociability accounted for the practice. Mining families had been accustomed to getting together in



large numbers for meals and other social occasions but quickly discovered that the kitchens and dining rooms of the project homes were too small to accommodate large numbers. Thus, a move to the basement not only prevented wear on the homes, but also enabled families to keep their social groups intact.

Following World War II, the homestead project experienced its greatest change. In 1946, the last major coal mine in the Granger area, the Dallas Mine, closed down. The closing did not force any families to relocate, however. All miners continued to live in the project but looked to surrounding communities for employment; a few men went to work in the Shuler Mine at Waukeet, but most found work in the nearby communities of Des Moines, Perry, and Ames. With full employment rather than seasonal mine work, many families sold their poultry and livestock and rented out their acreages. By 1946, the Association owed the federal government only \$24,594.62, and that sum was dwindling every month as payments continued to be made on the 13 unsold homes.

On January 1951, the Granger Homestead families celebrated a long-awaited event. By then, only eight members had not paid for their homes in full, and as each of the eight families had arranged for a private loan, there remained no further need for the Association. Members thus voted to dissolve it, and with that step, each householder became an independent home owner. At the time, project officials estimated that homestead families had invested between \$3,000 and \$3,500 each in their homes. Overall, that was about 30 percent less than the holdings had cost the federal government in 1935. By 1951,

32 of the original families remained; four male householders had died, and a few families had moved away. Several householders had retired. During the homestead's entire history no one had defaulted on his loan. Occasionally because of ill health or job loss, some families had been forced to delay payments; eventually, however, all were paid.

With the dissolution of the Granger Homestead Association, Inc. in 1951 and the securing of the property deeds by most residents, the major goal of the homesteaders had been realized. By this time, however, their lives had changed dramatically. Since the male homesteaders were no longer employed as seasonal coal miners, the dual foundation of "one foot on the land and the other in industry" was unnecessary. With their economic wants satisfied and their co-operative enterprises ended, the homesteaders had become fully integrated into the economic and social life of the surrounding community.

Although the story of the Granger project is only a small part of the total history of the federal subsistence homestead program, a brief comparison is instructive for several reasons. First of all, the planning and development of the Iowa project proceeded rapidly, much in contrast to other New Deal communities. Some communities were still in the building stage as late as 1941. In fact, the Granger homesteads, in terms of size and cost, had come remarkably close to fitting the model community envisioned by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. Yet, the Iowa project was by any standard a modest endeavor compared to most other community undertakings. The



most publicized, Arthurdale, West Virginia included 165 homes and cost the federal government 2.7 million dollars. Also well publicized was the Penderlea project in North Carolina which contained 192 homes at a cost of 2.2 million dollars. Perhaps the most crucial difference between Granger and the other homesteads was that the Iowa site had been located near the residents' work, precluding the need to create new industries to support them. At Arthurdale and Penderlea, efforts to attract industry had proven exceedingly difficult. Overall, although the Granger project had been modest in scope, it had been manageable in practice.

While the Granger project succeeded in providing better housing for low-income families, improved housing was only one goal of the New Deal planners in 1933 and 1934. Although never defined in a precise way, federal officials clearly hoped that their model communities would usher in a new age of community living. Milburn L. Wilson, Director of

Division of Subsistence Homesteads, viewed the experimental communities as "a new frontier, as the locale for a new way of life . . ." which would produce a "new, improved man, with new attitudes, and values." Moreover, Wilson believed a new type of community life would result with "handicrafts, community activities, closer family relationships, and cooperative enterprises." He referred to it as the "community idea." Apparently this goal was never realized in any of the projects; nor did the communities succeed in producing any imitators. Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, the federal government had abandoned the community idea all together.

Still, aside from the dreams of the New Deal planners and the changing policies of the Washington bureaucrats, the Granger experiment had a significance all its own. If the program is viewed at the local level, which indeed it was intended to affect, an important goal was realized. The project homes did lift the coal miner out of the squalid environment of the mining camp, making him a new man with "new attitudes, and new values." Because of that opportunity, he was able to raise his children in an acceptable social environment. For the first time, miners and their families became full-fledged members of society, taking advantage of educational, political, and social institutions that had previously been beyond their reach. Children in the project were no longer relegated to the same dreary existence that their parents had known before 1934. Perhaps in the

#### Notes on Sources

The author wishes to thank Paul Taff, Ames, for his insights on the initial planning of the community and Father John J. Gorman, Elkhart, for providing information on all phases of the project. Father Gorman lived in Granger for thirty-three years. The major written sources included Raymond P. Duggan, "A Federal Resettlement Project: Granger Homesteads," (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1937); Iowa State Board of Health's report, "Housing Conditions, Iowa Coal Mining Camps," 1919; and the following secondary sources: Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow A New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, 1959); Luigi G. Ligutti and John C. Rawe, *Rural Roads to Security: America's Third Struggle for Freedom* (Milwaukee, 1940); and Vincent A. Yzermans, *The People I Love: A Biography of Luigi G. Ligutti* (Collegeville, 1976). The Des Moines Register proved an invaluable source in covering Granger homestead events between 1935 and 1951.



final assessment, the most perceptive view was expressed by Father Gorman, director of the project from 1940 to 1951. In response to homesteaders' concerns that their sons and daughters were leaving the project because no opportunity existed for them there, Father Gorman observed that the project had been

geared to the "emergency demands of a particular situation involving a single generation." It was not, he believed, geared to solve the problems of the succeeding generations. Viewed in this way, the Granger project proved a successful social venture. □

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