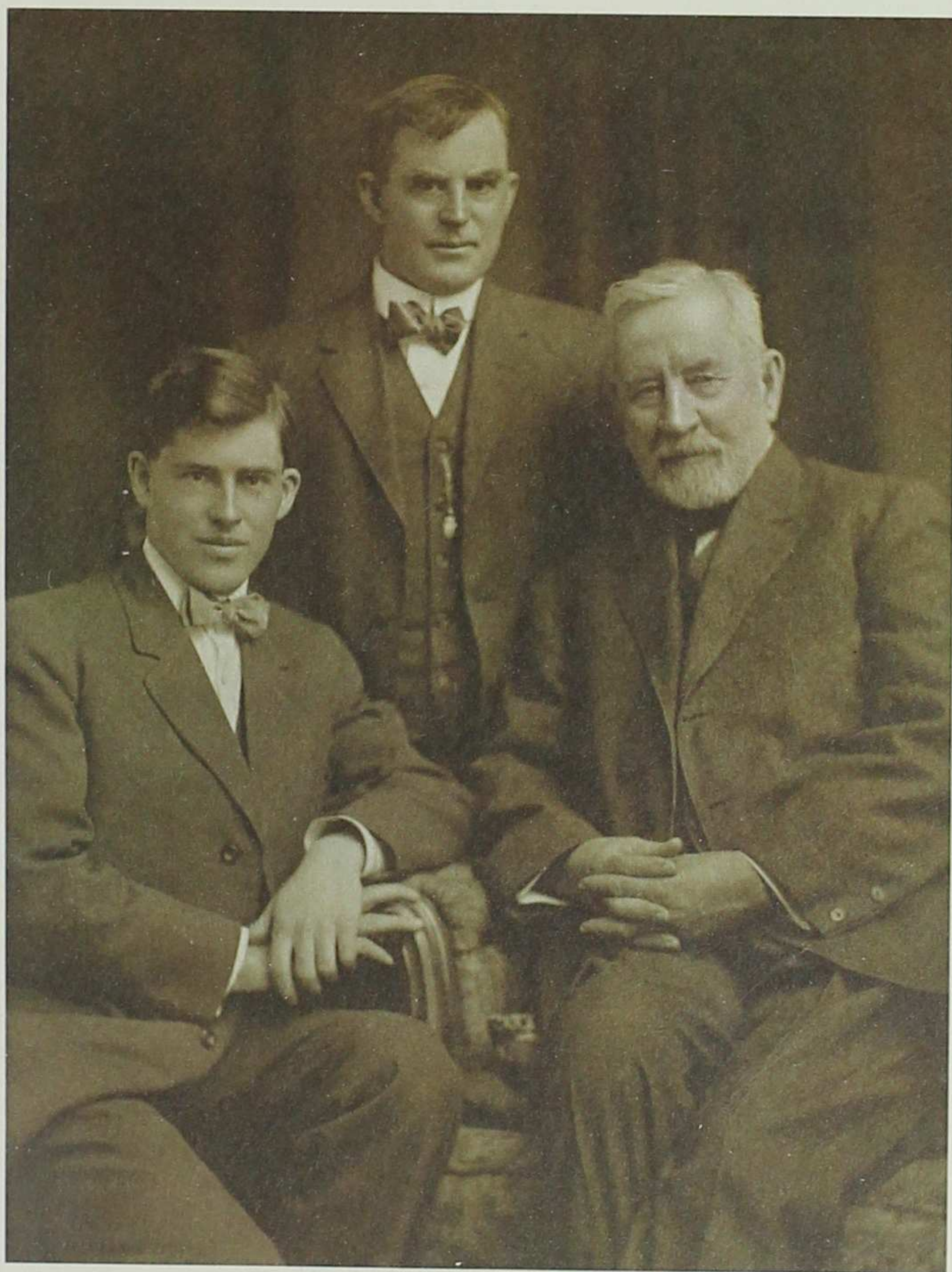


# The Palimpsest

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 58 NUMBER 4

JULY / AUGUST 1977



The Iowa Wallaces

IOWA STATE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT  
DIVISION OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



## Election Results

Almost 2,000 of the Society's 8,413 members cast ballots in the recent State Historical Board election. Incumbent LeRoy G. Pratt of Des Moines was re-elected from Iowa's Fourth Congressional District and Melvin H. Goeldner of Osceola from the Fifth District.

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# The Palimpsest

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JULY / AUGUST 1977

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Division of the State Historical Society 1977  
Peter T. Harstad, Director

L. Edward Purcell, Editor

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Cover: Three generations of Iowa Wallaces: grandfather "Uncle" Henry, son Henry C., and grandson Henry A., the most prominent of all, who tells of his boyhood in Iowa, beginning on p. 98 (photo courtesy of James W. Wallace).



## 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.



# On Growing Up in Iowa

## An Oral Memoir

by  
Henry A. Wallace  
edited by  
Robert K. Bower

### Introduction

*The name Wallace is familiar to Iowans. Students at two central Iowa educational institutions -- Simpson College and Iowa State University -- attend classes or live in buildings bearing the name. A recently-erected state office building on the Capitol grounds in Des Moines has been dubbed the Wallace Agricultural Building. And, undoubtedly the nation's most successful agricultural magazine, begun in 1894 and still in existence, carries the name in its title.*

*The most renowned of the Iowa Wallaces, Henry Agard Wallace (1888-1965), left a typical Midwestern childhood to eventually become Vice-President of the United States under Franklin D. Roosevelt. His influential and sometimes stormy political career included two cabinet posts (Secretary of Agriculture and Secretary of Commerce) and a bid for the Presidency as the Progressive Party nominee in 1948.*

*His grandfather and father, both Henrys also, made the Wallace name widely-known and respected -- especially in agricultural circles -- with their powerful farm publication, Wallaces Farmer. After graduating from Iowa State University in 1910, young Henry A. Wallace worked on the family magazine, and he assumed the editorship in 1921 when his father (Henry C. Wallace) became Secretary of Agriculture. He authored many articles and books during these years before embarking on a career in politics, and among his accomplishments during this period*

*was the development of hybrid seed corn for commercial use.*

*Much information about the private as well as the public Henry A. Wallace is available in the reams of correspondence and other materials making up his papers. Much of this material, including a diary and a transcript of oral reminiscences, was opened to the general public for the first time in November 1975, ten years after Wallace's death. The following memoir of his early days in Iowa is an excerpt from the reminiscences, a series of interviews with Wallace conducted at Columbia University in 1950-51.*

*This excerpt from the opening pages of the massive 5,500-page transcript contains alterations in the order of the narrative as well as minor changes in punctuation and spelling. Except for deletions of superfluous material (indicated by ellipses), the following is just as Henry Wallace spoke it.*

*The assistance of Earl M. Rogers, librarian for the University of Iowa Special Collections, and Louis M. Starr, director of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, in making the material available and clearing it for publication is gratefully acknowledged. This excerpt from *The Reminiscences of Henry A. Wallace* (copyright 1977 by the Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York) is used by permission.*

R. K. B.



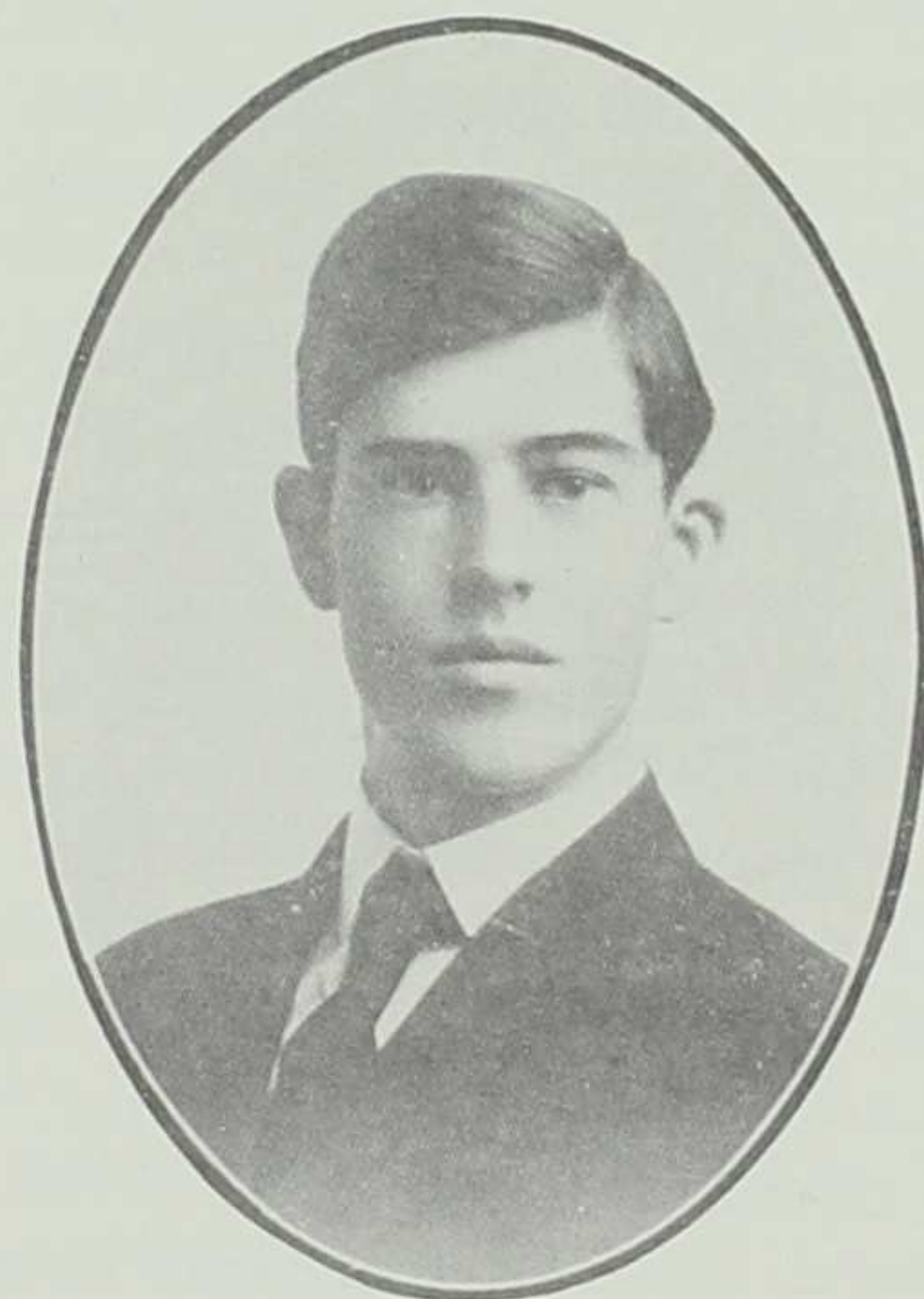
My earliest recollection is in driving to town in a bobsled on a very cold day when they had the rugs spread across the knees of the older people and forced me to stay under the rug in the dark to keep warm.

My second recollection is my parents taking me to stay all night in a hotel at Creston, Iowa, which was fourteen miles south of the farm where I was born. We stayed all night at the hotel at Creston because we were catching the train the next day to go up to visit my grandparents in Des Moines. That was the first time that I ever saw a railroad train and I remember particularly the noisiness of the trains running near the hotel at Creston -- Creston is on the main line of the CB&Q and is a division point.

The first time I ever met other children, I think, was on that trip to Des Moines when I was about between three and four years old. I had a sister who was born in 1891 when I was a little past three, but the first time I saw any large number of children of my own age was when I went to Des Moines on that occasion.

I do remember at one time getting lost in a corn field at the farm. They had a large corn field right across from the house, and I wandered away in the corn field. There were sand burrs growing in the corn field and they got into my socks and hurt quite a bit so I began saying, "Where is mama's baby?" and they found me as a result of that. They had quite a search. That part of Iowa was rather wild in those days.

My greatest pal in those days was a collie dog. The collie dog would sit on the back porch and snap flies, so I'd imitate the collie dog and snap at flies. Occasionally I caught one and then would be very much surprised. I don't have any remembrance of that myself, and these last two stories were told to me by my Uncle Dan.



*Young Henry A. Wallace as he appeared in the 1910 Bomb, the Iowa State University yearbook. Henry's collegiate peers saw him as "A chip of [sic] the old block" (courtesy Iowa State University).*

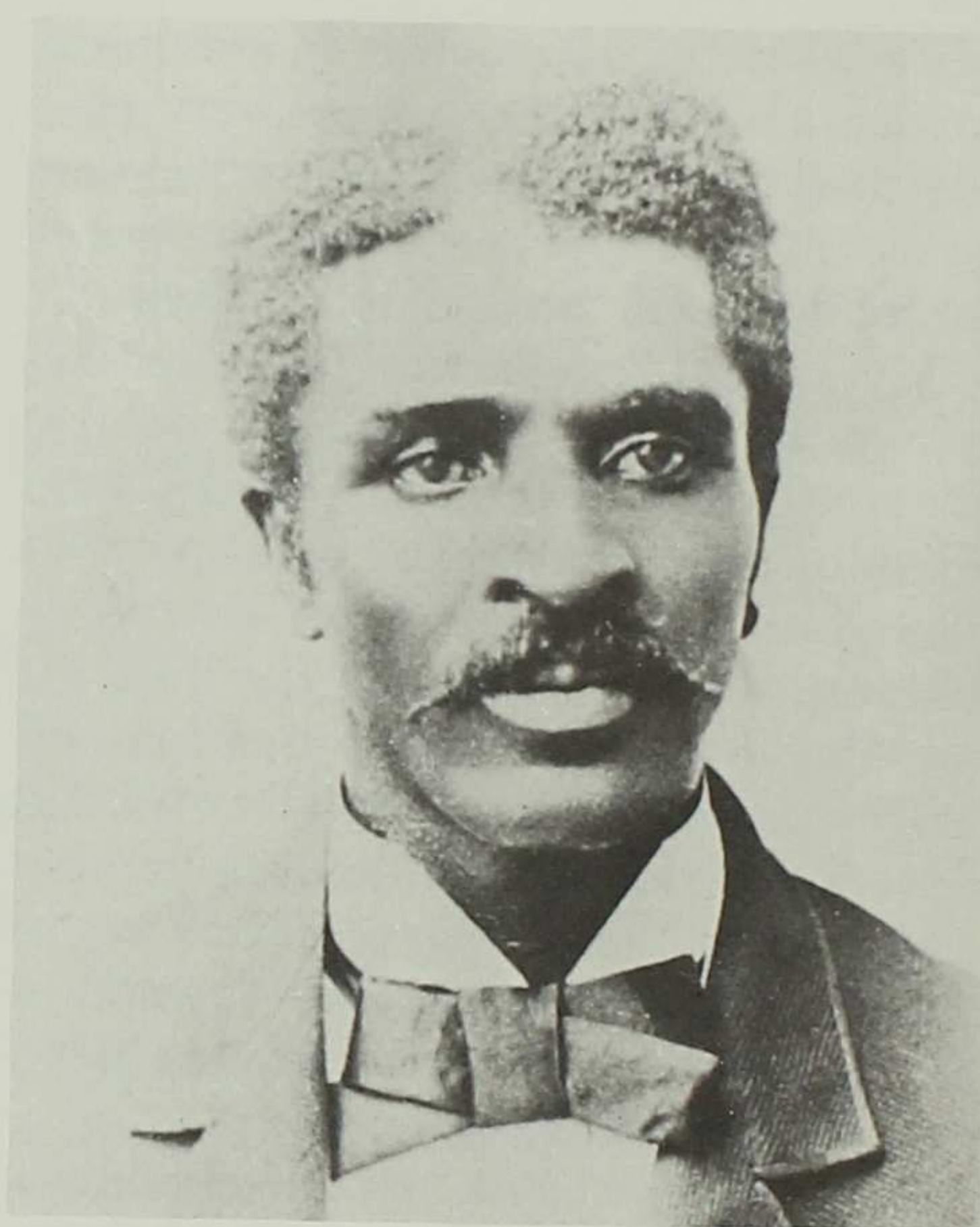
We left the farm, and my father became a professor of dairying at Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts about 1892, when I was about four years of age. At that time he had a very close friend by the name of George Washington Carver, a Negro who was specializing in botany at the time, although later he became more famous as a chemist. His first love, however, was always plants, and, as is the case with many Negroes, he liked white children, and he took a fancy to me and took me with him on his botanizing expeditions and pointed out to me the flowers and the parts of flowers -- the stamens and the pistil. I remember him claiming to my father that I had greatly surprised him by recognizing the pistil and stamens of redtop, a kind of grass --



grass *agrostis alba*, to be precise. I also remember rather questioning his accuracy in believing that I recognized these parts, but anyhow he boasted about me, and the mere fact of his boasting, I think, incited me to learn more than if I had really done what he said I had done. I may have done it, but remember rather questioning it at the time.

George Washington Carver was a very tall, slender Negro at the time and a very kindly person. I had a very great affection for him, simply because he was patient. I suspect that he and my mother, between them were responsible for my acquiring a love of plants at a very early age. At the time, I was only a boy of about five years of age, and I think I would probably be making up things if I went into further detail about George Carver at this time. Of course later on I became *very* well acquainted with him, and one of the very first things I did when I became Secretary of Agriculture was to utilize the opportunity of picking up the old acquaintance.

Mr. Carver had come to Ames from Simpson, where, incidentally, my wife had gone to school. (He had been born in Missouri.) Just how he happened to come to school at Simpson, a Methodist institution, I do not know, but from there he went on to Ames. From Ames, I believe, he went straight to Tuskegee and remained there for the remainder of his days. At any rate, when I met him at Tuskegee in 1933 or 1934, I found that he was still very much interested in plants, especially in the breeding of *Amaryllis*. Inasmuch as the Department of Agriculture had done some rather extensive work with *Amaryllis*, I saw that he was given some of the new sorts which the Department had brought out -- which made him very happy.



George Washington Carver's graduation picture from Iowa State University in 1894 (courtesy Iowa State University).

Sometime before his death, when a painter was painting him, he insisted on being painted with an *Amaryllis* flower. I believe this painting can be found in the Smithsonian Institution today.

I attribute my love of plants to my mother and to Mr. Carver, although I think my father was in the background of it. My mother liked plants very much, and under her supervision I did my first crossing of plants, which happened to be pansies. I remember that I planted the seed of the cross with a great deal of interest and was much interested in the outcome. It happened that in that particular outcome, the flowers were not as pretty as either parent, but I attributed to them unusual value simply because they had been crossed. (I was about eight years old at the time.)

In my early life, I would say that I thought completely in terms of seeds,



plants, and farming. At that time, I had no thought of public life.

When we moved to Ames in 1892, our family was comprised of my mother, my father, my baby sister, and myself. My uncle Dan and grandfather didn't live with us. We lived on a farm which was five miles from a little town called Orient, Iowa, fourteen miles from Creston to the south and I suppose about the same number of miles from Greenfield to the north.

We then moved to Ames and my brother John was born in 1894 at Ames. My sister Annabelle, who was born three years after I was, was born without any doctor in attendance since it was quite a ways to a doctor and easy to make a miscalculation with regard to time. My mother had none of her children in hospitals. I didn't realize that children were no longer born in the home until I had one.

My father had not finished his agricultural course when he went to work farming. He had started to work farming when prices were higher than when he quit. My mother had received some small inheritance and they invested it in Suffolk Sheep and short horned cattle which didn't pan out too well. My father when he sold off in 1892 didn't have very much money when he went to finish up his work at Ames, but he did know Tama Jim Wilson there who was Dean of Agriculture and he found it possible simultaneously to finish up his work in agriculture and also to teach dairying. He worked very hard, was very thin, and as a result when he caught typhoid in 1893 he almost died. That apparently affected his gall bladder and I suspect he never was in first class health all the rest of his life, but he never admitted it.

My father was a very capable person. He was a rather short man, about five feet

six inches tall. I suspect his growth must have been stunted because the family didn't have much money when he was young. He learned to chew tobacco at a rather early age and to smoke at a rather early age. He was very good at setting type. He set type in his father's print shop in Winterset, Iowa, and he learned to chew tobacco from the other printers there. That was a printer's habit in those days -- to chew tobacco. I never really knew he chewed tobacco myself until he was fifty years of age. Uncle Dan told me about it; Uncle Dan told me a great many things about father.

I've never played much golf -- maybe only six or seven times in my life, but I remember that after Father began to play golf I played with him a few times. When we'd be changing our clothes in the shower I noticed that his underwear was colored very yellow under the armpits from the excess tobacco in his system oozing out. It was terrific the degree to which he smoked. My grandfather also smoked a great deal. They smoked pipes and cigars; they didn't smoke cigarettes to any great extent -- Grandfather not at all, and Father very little. Grandfather smoked Pittsburgh stogies.

Father had very great dexterity at games of all kinds and at all kinds of work. He was *very* good with his hands. He was good at sports. He could take up any of our childhood sports and rapidly become very proficient at them even though he had not engaged in them before. He took up golf when he was past forty and became very good at golf. He played some tennis, which he had taken up after the age of forty, and became quite good at tennis.

He had an innate sense of rhythm and tune and he could play a guitar well. He could fix tools well -- he had tool sense. He



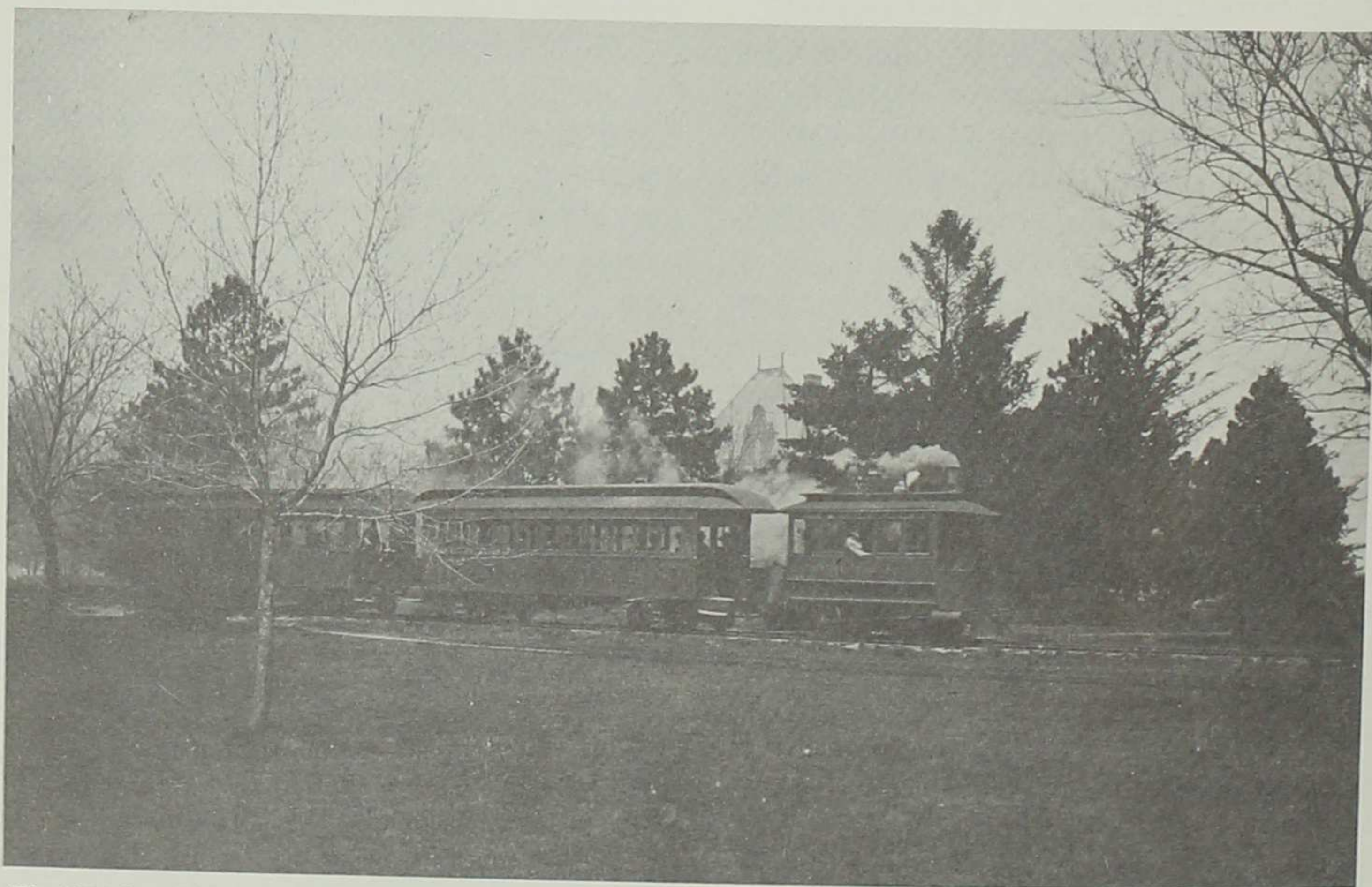
was an excellent businessman, though he was the worrying kind. He was distrustful of humanity. Neither my grandfather nor myself were, but Father was very distrustful which probably made him a good businessman, though on one occasion he would invest his money unwisely following a hunch.

While Father was rather a small man, he had unusual dexterity and physical capacity. In the mental world, he was a good businessman -- he was a good politician, which my grandfather was not. Of course neither my grandfather nor Father ever ran for any office, but Father understood what was going on in the political world in a most unusual way.

My first political recollection was in 1892, when I heard my father say to my mother, the day after the Presidential election, that hard times were coming be-

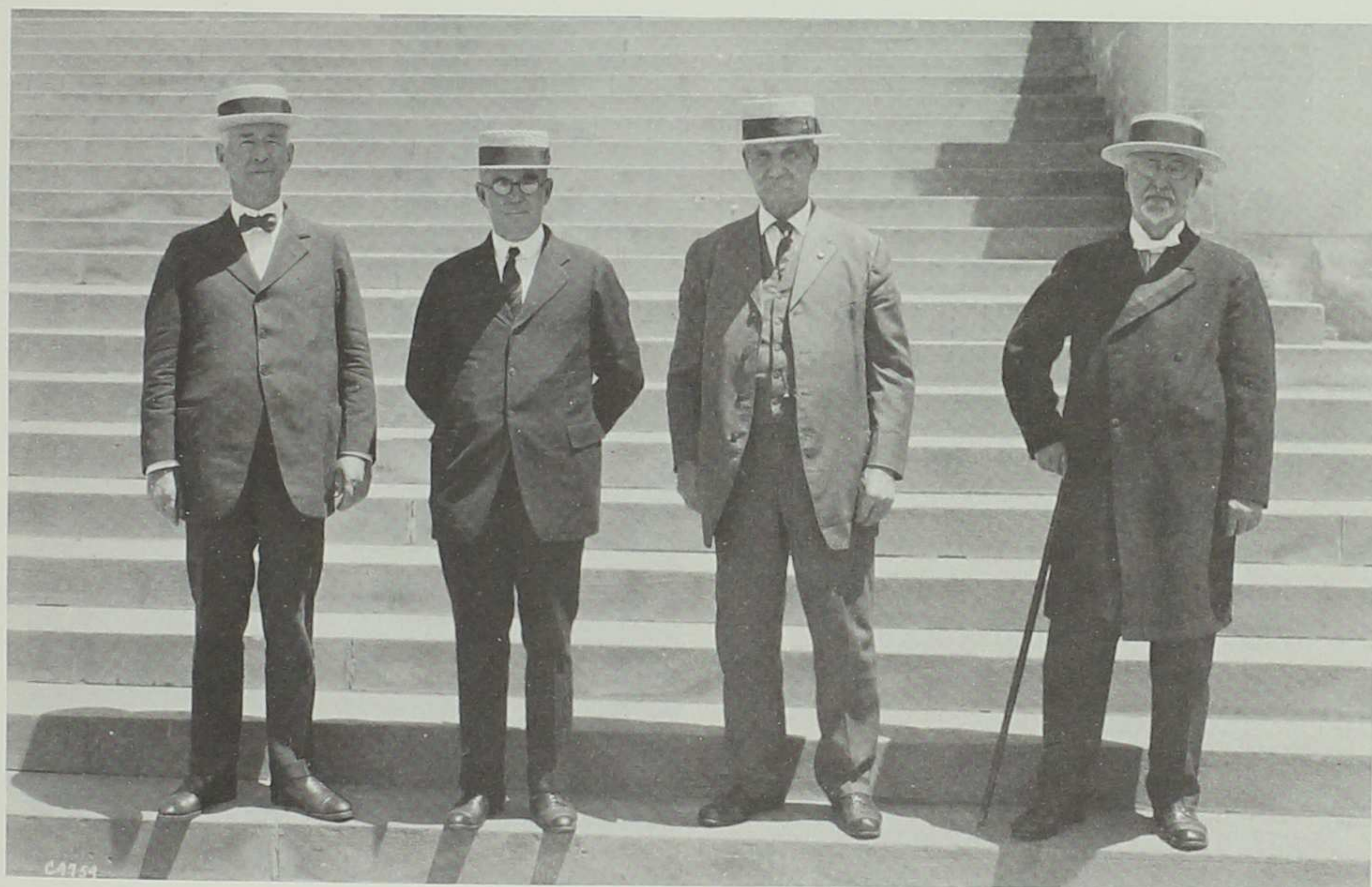
cause Grover Cleveland and the Democrats had been elected. For many years thereafter, I associated the word "Democrat" with hard times. My grandfather used to say, "Democrats can't read." The farmers used to say the Democrats were those wet Irish Catholics over along the river.

My uncle by marriage, Newton B. Ashby, was a Democrat and was looked on to some degree as the black sheep of the family on that account. In 1893, he was appointed by Cleveland to be Consul to Dublin. In the late 1880s and early '90s he had been a lecturer for the Farmer's Alliance, which was essentially a part of the Populist Movement, and worked to some degree later on with the Democrats. Apparently Cleveland's appointing of my uncle, Newton Ashby, as Consul was an overture to this radical element among the



*The "Dinke," a steam motor line operating between Ames and the Iowa State campus, made enough impression on Henry A. Wallace for him to recall it a half century later (courtesy Iowa State University).*





Distinguished-looking faculty of Iowa State University include on the left the long-time dean of agriculture Charles F. Curtiss and next to him Henry C. Wallace. Also pictured are Mr. Eckles and John Gosling (courtesy Iowa State University).

farm people of the Middlewest. He had written a book entitled, *The Riddle of the Sphinx*.

I don't remember too much about the days in Ames. I do remember the Russian thistles or tumbleweeds blowing up from the Northwestern railroad tracks against the house making big piles. While the wind was blowing the tumbleweed up I remember the howl of the wind around the corners of the house. That kind of a howling wind in the fall of the year still makes me think of those days. I really can't seem to remember much about Ames, although there were various professors that would come to my father's house. There was one veterinarian named Stalker.

I used to go out with Father occasionally to the college. I suspect he took me out

to relieve my mother of household duties. We'd ride out on what they'd call the "Dinkey," which was a sort of Toonerville trolley affair -- run by coal however. It connected the town of Ames with the college which was about two miles distant. The "Dinkey" was discontinued about 1900 or 1905.

The professor of Animal Husbandry at Iowa State College when my father was professor of dairying was C. F. Curtiss and in those days our families seemed to be rather close together. I remember that we had Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner together on one occasion and I worked hard one afternoon teaching one of the Curtiss girls, who later became the first wife of John Cowles of *Look* magazine, how to creep.

I remember I was astonished when I was in Ames with the gum-chewing abil-

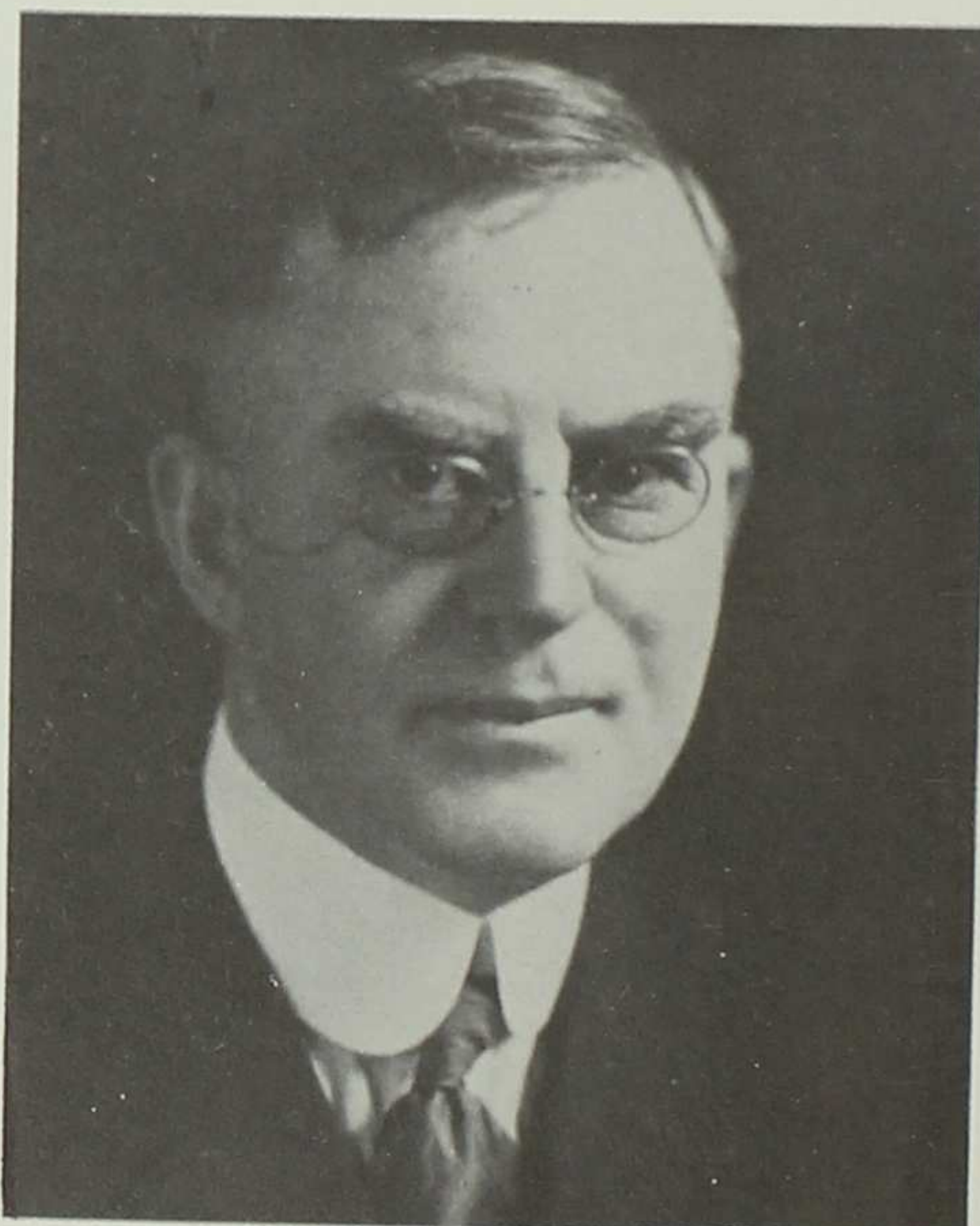


ity of a girl in the neighborhood by the name of Lena Pitts. She could crack her gum like those who now chew bubble gum. She could do that better than any other child in the neighborhood.

My mother represented a good housewife and mother of the type which had no use for women's clubs. Until I was twelve she had no use for salads because she thought they were some new-fangled notion that was being foisted on the American people by women's clubs. She was so busy with her children that she didn't see how any woman could afford the time to go to a woman's club. Later on, she changed her views completely when family circumstances improved and she had time to go around with women of her own age. But while I was a child she had no use for activities of this sort simply because she couldn't have. What she couldn't have, she had no use for. My grandmother used to try to push her into taking an active part in women's clubs, but she resented this.

My mother suffered to some extent from my aunt Josephine because I think Aunt Josephine felt that Father had married beneath him when he married my mother. As a matter of fact, my mother's ancestry was all old American. I think the most recent one that had come to this country had been in 1745, while Father's ancestry had come more recently than Mother's. His grandfather, John Wallace, had come here about 1830. Mother was more completely old-fashioned American stock than Father was, but Aunt Josephine felt very aristocratic. She'd traveled in Europe and Mother had not -- she never did.

Mother was old-fashioned New England American stock with all their prejudices, frugality, their ability to pinch pennies to the utmost. My instinct today



*Henry C. Wallace, father of Henry A. (courtesy James W. Wallace).*

would be to avoid very carefully the spending of any unnecessary money, although if I get much interested in something in a scientific way, I'll spend thousands of dollars.

Mother had a very great effect in forming my personal habits with regard to money. She never drank coffee, and so I never drank coffee until I passed the age of fifty. Mother never smoked of course and had a strong prejudice against smoking, so I didn't smoke. She didn't drink liquor. Of course, the various relatives by whom she was raised didn't believe in going to the theatre or playing cards and Mother didn't go to the theatre until I was about ten years of age or so, and then she enjoyed it very greatly and tried to get Aunt Lucy to go to the theatre. When I was about fifteen she began to play bridge and she became quite a good bridge player. Father and she used to play bridge quite a bit.



I first learned to read as a result of my mother teaching me and didn't go to school until we moved to Des Moines in late 1895, when I was seven years old and entered the first grade.

In 1895 we lived at 1619 7th Street in an old house on the north side of Des Moines. This was the place where lower middle class people lived. I went to Oakland School through the first four grades in north Des Moines.

At Oakland School about the only thing that I can remember is the playground. In the wintertime there was a hill that would ice over and we'd get a barrel-stave, sit on it, and go down hill.

I was fairly good at school. Usually I was competing with some very bright Jewish girl -- or a Jewish boy but usually a Jewish girl -- to be the brightest boy in the class. I think they probably incited me to efforts along that line. It never would have occurred to me in the first instance but they seemed to set great store on it so I'd see if I couldn't be as bright as they were.

I remember in the first or second grade the teacher asked, "How many of you think that oak trees have flowers?" All the children agreed that oak trees had no flowers. I insisted that they had flowers, that I'd seen the flowers on the oak trees, and so when the teacher came out on my side, I was very much puffed up. The mere fact of having demonstrated a knowledge which the other children didn't have caused me to seek for more psychic returns along the same lines. I'm sure I must have made myself quite a nuisance to my companions because they weren't in the slightest degree interested along those lines.

I remember the great tragedy along about the second or third grade was that I

had a Golden Wyandotte hen in the backyard at 1619 7th Street. I used to gather up the eggs, though I wouldn't gather them up every day. On one occasion I gathered two or three eggs, put them in my pocket, forgot to take them out, and went to school with them. They smashed in my pocket and made an awful mess in my side pocket. For some reason or other, the teacher felt that I shouldn't have done that and made me stand in the corner of the room. I thought that was unjust and that was the great tragedy of my first three years -- the indignity of standing in the corner of the room because I'd forgotten to take the eggs out of my pocket.

Later on we were taking a big cork, putting a horseshoe nail through the cork, and then we had to have feathers to put in the other side of the cork so we could throw it up against the side of the barn like a dart. I was so thoughtless as to chase my beloved Golden Wyandotte hen for the purpose of getting some feathers to put in this. My mother gave me a lecture for that, which I richly deserved.

In north Des Moines the two children I can remember most were Clifford and Alice Depuy. Clifford Depuy's father had one of the early poultry magazines and they kept chickens in their backyard. Clifford Depuy, himself, as a boy was one of those who developed his capitalistic instincts very early. He would make lemonade and sell it from a sidewalk stand. He had no hesitancy about proclaiming his wares to the passing public in a very loud tone of voice. I couldn't understand how a person could do a thing like that, and felt that Clifford was really very superficial in his approach to life by indulging in activities of that kind. Today [1950] he runs the *North American Banker*, a publication published in Des



Moines. He's very conservative and has written many editorials against me.

There was another boy by the name of Louis Sanderson whom I knew. I never did know what became of him, but he was more nearly my own age. Clifford was about two years older. We used to go out walking quite a bit around the woods in that territory.

I remember the campaign of 1896 very vividly, because all the boys took sides and argued about McKinley and Bryan. There were McKinley and Bryan pictures in the windows of private homes. Everyone in Des Moines used to put up a picture of his favorite candidate. Father was very strongly for McKinley, and Grandfather was too. My grandfather had been very much interested in monetary theory -- at one time, I think, was for bi-metalism. But with the situation as it existed in 1896, he felt that the way to bring prosperity and stability to the United States was to stay by the old-fashioned gold standard. He felt that Bryan was dangerously radical, I guess, although my grandfather was much more progressive than the ordinary Republican.

I remember walking around the street one Sunday afternoon with my father and mother, counting the Bryan and McKinley pictures and deciding that Des Moines was going to vote for McKinley. My father was very much relieved thereby. He felt that Republican victory would mean the success of the publishing business which he had just started in Des Moines with his father and brother.

The habits of the family changed very greatly as the paper began to make money about 1900 or thereabouts. The habits didn't change all at once, though.

Along about 1898 we moved to 38th and University Avenue to a dilapidated house with sagging floors. When we were out looking around to find a house to move to, we dropped in on the people who were renting this house and who were from the Ozarks. I remember the man saying to us, "Take a cheer (chair)." It was explained to me that these people had no education and that proper people just didn't speak this way. So we moved into this tumbledown old house and lived there for a year or two.

There were ten acres in connection with this house. It was out on the west edge of town. There was an old barn connected with it that had no electric lights. It was my duty to take care of the sow and her pigs, the cow, and the horse. It was really rather tough. Also I had to bring in the sorghum which had been cut -- that was the sorghum fodder. My father had seeded it in the spring, then cut it and put it into round-ed cocks. It was my duty to pry enough of it loose with a pitchfork to carry it into the barn to feed to the cow. The snow would come and freeze down the ends of it so it was awful hard to pry it loose.

I remember having a terrific admiration for my father on either Thanksgiving or Christmas when he went out with me and we worked very hard and got enough loose to last for a week or two. The vigor with which my father attacked the problem impressed me enormously because he got so much more done than I had been able to get done.

My sister used to hold the lantern when I'd go out to milk the cow or take care of the pigs. If it was real cold I'd put her into the box which held the bran while I milked. She rather liked the warmth of being in this box that held the bran. I suspect she wouldn't remember it now, but





*The entire Henry C. Wallace family posed for this group portrait in 1921. Left to right are Henry C. Wallace, Mary, Henry A., Annabelle, John B., Mrs. Henry C. Wallace, James W., and Ruth (courtesy of James W. Wallace).*

she had a pointed kitty hood woven out of some kind of angora thread. Annabelle made a cute little girl in her kitty hood, and she'd traipse along with me to do the chores.

Annabelle always supported me, and I think she was closer to me than my brothers because she was more nearly my age and knew what it was like when the family had a hard time. My brothers came on when the family had an easy time, so that my brothers took on the habits of a family in comfortable circumstances.

I had two brothers, John and James. My mother used to call John "mother's sunshine boy." He was a very happy boy and was born on April 1, 1894. I was loaned to the neighbors for that day when John was coming.

James weighed less at birth than the others and had probably come a little too soon after John and didn't start out with quite as much vitality as the other children. He had long flaxen hair when he was a boy and was better looking than the rest. He loved to climb trees.

As the oldest child I was raised in the stern tradition. This is true of the oldest boy in so many families. Then the discipline lets up very much later on, and the results are usually better later on when the discipline is relaxed. The oldest one has to carry the brunt of the parents' enthusiastic but wrong ideas. So I was called Henry -- that's all, with no nickname that I can remember.

When we moved in 1900 or 1901 to 3780 Cottage Grove, which was on the same ten



acre piece just about two blocks away, the new house cost \$5000 -- which was an awful lot of money in those days -- and it had a third floor. My Uncle John came out and built a house next door to us and his cost \$6000. We had the best houses in the neighborhood.

My father planted an orchard and I started a hot bed and grew all kinds of vegetables -- tomatoes, cabbages, celery, and so on. I took care of our cow and my uncle's cow, which I didn't resent particularly until when I went to college [and] found that he was paying the boy who took my place three dollars a week. That discrepancy caused me to feel there was a certain amount of social injustice in the whole thing. But our barn didn't have any electric light in it and my uncle's barn had an electric light, so it was such a relief to work where there was an electric light that I felt it was almost a privilege to take care of Uncle John's cow.

I liked the cows and I liked the chickens. I usually liked plants better than animals, as a matter of fact. I appreciated the animals because they gave manure that nourished the plants.

When my sister, Ruth, was born it meant that there had to be a lot more water in the house and I was the water system. I had to go down in the basement and pump enough soft water up. We had hard water and soft water -- the hard water I pumped in the backyard from a well and the soft well and the soft water I pumped from a cistern. They were two different kinds of pumps and this water went up to two separate tanks in the attic of the house and I'd have enough water there to take care of the household needs.

It was good exercise all right, especially doing the pumping in the backyard. I have pretty strong back muscles to this

day, as a result of that exercise. I don't have any particular athletic ability, but I do have a certain kind of strength on the basis of that exercise. That is, I remember the boy who could put the shot further than anybody else at high school. I wasn't any good at shotputting, nevertheless I could lift heavier weights than this high school athlete. My strength was based on farm work, and his on athletic training.

About 1902 I ran across a catalog from R. M. Kellogg at Three Rivers, Michigan, about the wonders of strawberries, so I ordered six different kinds and put them out in what is now 38th Street between Cottage Grove and Kingman Avenue. There's a paved street going through there now, but in those days it was part of my garden. I planted my strawberries there of six different sorts. I inveigled my brothers to help me plant them. I gave Jimmy the "Senator Dunlap" variety to take care of, and I think my brother John got the sample variety to take care of. Jimmy's did very well. John's didn't do as well -- it was the fault of the variety, not the fault of the care. I didn't get so very much work out of Jimmy and John -- they didn't see why they should be compelled to take care of strawberries just because I was interested in strawberries, although they did like to eat them.

I remember when we moved to 3780 Cottage Grove; we were building a chicken house. There was an old Swede carpenter who said as we children were playing around in the chicken house, "This is a fine place for the shickens and the shilds." A little later I was walking along in this chicken house with rather a low ceiling and I bumped against the ceiling and said, "Oh Damn!" It's the only time that my mother ever heard me swear, and I got a laying out for that. I'd





*A 1916 picture of four Wallace generations: grandfather Henry, son Henry C., grandson Henry A., and great-grandson Henry B. (courtesy of James W. Wallace).*

committed the unforgivable sin.

About that time I made a deal with a man by the name of Foy to raise chickens for him. He furnished me with one hundred eggs of White Wyandotte chickens, and I bought an incubator that was run with a kerosene lamp. I had to watch the temperature very carefully, but out of those hundred eggs I only got about fifty chickens, which was a great disappointment. I didn't know whether it was the fault of the eggs or my care of the incubator, but there were supposed to be more chickens than that. But I fed out the chickens and later on I was very much gratified when Foy came around to see the roosters that were finished out and said that they were outstanding examples of White Wyandottes. The White Wyandotte breed has always been rather notorious for lack of fertility, but I didn't know it in those days. Nobody's ever sorted out a good strain of White Wyan-

dotte in this country yet, and Foy certainly didn't have it in those days. But anyhow they were impressive, full-breasted roosters, and Mr. Foy was happy to buy them.

Later on we grew quite a number of Barred Rocks, and I remember I used to take them when they were about four pounds in weight to 24th and University Avenue to market. I remember the mother of one of the pupils in the sixth grade, where I was, admiring them so greatly -- "Where could she buy such fine chickens as these?" That was Mrs. Peck... whose husband was in one of the leading life insurance companies in Des Moines.

My grandfather usually came to visit us on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and several times in between. My grandfather traded off the Adair County farm which my father had farmed back in the late '80s and early '90s for a farm about ten miles southeast of Des Moines in northern Warren County. In the process of running that farm, I got acquainted quite a bit with my grandfather because I would drive down in the horse and buggy with Grandfather or with Father to this farm. It was an all day's trip to do that. Later on we used to go down in an automobile to this farm. I got acquainted with Grandfather while walking with him over the fields to see how the clover seeding was coming along, how the winter wheat crop looked, and so on. Grandfather was always trying out some new idea. I don't think Grandfather ever made much money out of farming, but he was always much interested in trying out new ideas and then writing about the new ideas. Insofar as he made money it was writing about his experiments, rather than by actually converting the experiments themselves into cash.



But he did, over the years of his life, introduce many new agricultural practices. I think he was the first to grow clover in western Iowa. I think probably he was the first to bring bluegrass into that section of western Iowa in the late '70s.

I wouldn't say that he impressed me as such a glamorous figure . . . but as a substantial one. That is, he was more like God. I don't think the word glamorous is correct -- he was a very solid person. I think there was much more fun in his make-up than I ever realized. I don't think a grandchild can ever realize what his grandparents are really like, or a son can ever realize what his parents are really like -- it seems impossible. It's one of the misfortunes that you can't get really acquainted with any of your relatives for that matter. There's something strange about the whole relative situation -- I don't know what it is. I'd like to have known my parents as human beings instead of as parents. I think I would have liked them very much better, because I think they were both very remarkable human beings.

Until we moved to 3780 Cottage Grove I associated with children of the lower middle class who had a great disdain for

children with parents with more money. They would speak in awed terms of people who were rich -- that was something that the ordinary children just couldn't understand about people being rich.

We didn't finally make the complete transition to being *utterly* respectable until 1912 when we moved to 37th and John Lynde Road, which was over south of Grand Avenue. Grand Avenue was the place where the real wealthy people lived. That was in 1912. Father built a house that cost \$50,000. In 1917 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. visited us out there and we were amused when he said, "How nice this simple little country place is." It was a nice place and was later bought by E. T. Meredith who was Secretary of Agriculture in the last year of Wilson's administration, and later was bought by, I think, Mike Cowles.

Three Secretaries of Agriculture lived in that house and there have been various noted people entertained there. Theodore Roosevelt was there; Howard Taft was there.

This rapid resume is an illustration of the way life changed for a number of Americans from about 1890 on up to 1914. □



# Reverend G. D. Forssell and His Magic Lantern Shows:

A Clue to America's Popular Imagination  
in the 1890s

by

Ralph F. Bogardus and Ferenc M. Szasz

In the early 1890s, itinerant minister G. D. Forssell of Lansing, Iowa toured Iowa and Minnesota as a traveling lecturer. For a modest admission fee, his audiences saw a set of over 120 glass slides picturing the "Life of Christ," the "Evils of a Great City," and the dangers of alcohol, all projected by an acetylene lamp onto a sheet or screen. Before radio, before motion pictures, even before good half-tone reproductions in newspapers and magazines, this ancestor to the nickelodeon was immensely popular all over America at the end of the nineteenth century. Magic lantern shows had been around for at least a century, and in America had played an important social role. Covering a vast range of subjects, shows like Forssell's entertained and instructed audiences in every corner of the country and often helped to create the atmosphere for social reform movements.

Of Forssell himself, little is known; most of his slides, however, have survived, and they are now part of the collection at Gibb Farm Museum in St. Paul, Minnesota. The collection includes Forssell's Sears Magic lantern, its leather case, some 70 of the approximately 120

slides making up his original collection, and an orange, black-lettered handbill. Forssell used commercially-produced black-and-white and hand-colored slides, and if he followed the custom of the day, he spoke to the images on the screen rather than from an elaborately prepared text.

Forssell undoubtedly found a ready response as he told the familiar story of Jesus. The Bible was an integral part of late nineteenth-century life and a staple of popular reading. Several American clergymen wrote best-selling books on the life of Jesus, and the New Testament frequently served as a source for commercial stereo cards. Unfortunately, only one of Forssell's slides from this series survives -- a hand-colored illustration of a sunset -- so one can only speculate whether Forssell's complete show contained slides of similar illustrations, live actors posing in biblical costumes, or both. Indeed, the use of images of live actors is entirely possible since that practice was widespread among both amateur and professional photographers of the day. The mid-nineteenth-century English pictorialist photographer Oscar Rejlander,



**TWO BIG LECTURES**

**"Evils of a Great City"**

Giving in a most attractive way the shameful life of a great city. The cause why the many thousands of laboring people have to live poorly while their employers have fine dwellings, are well-living and piling up their thousands and millions. The wages-question and what the laboring people should do NOW to rise and better their conditions is remarkably explained in this lecture.

**"Life of Christ"**

A fine collection of noted events from the miraculous and wonderful life of our Saviour Jesus Christ here on earth beautifully illustrated by 60 fine Colored Lantern Slides. It is a choice lot out of the many

These lectures are illustrated by about 120 nearly all fine colored slides, illuminated on the canvas in tall, clear views by my Acetylene Magic Lantern.

Don't let a good opportunity go by. Ask for ticket today. Which one is to precede is reserved by the owner.

**REV. G. D. FORSSELL.**

Rev. Forssell's handbill.

for example, created his famous and popular "Two Ways of Life" allegory in this manner, as did Julia Margaret Cameron when she made her illustrations for an 1874 edition of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. So, too, did Alexander Black, who produced photo-plays for late-nineteenth-century American lantern slide show audiences. Examples of posed photographs also exist in one of Forssell's shows, "Evils of a Great City." If Forssell's "Life of Christ" show did use images of live actors, it might well be seen as a precursor to later film spectacles such as *The Robe* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Temperance, Forssell's second theme, also would have sounded familiar to his audience, and they were probably sympathetic to the message. Anti-liquor agitation and temperance movements had been prominent in the upper Midwest

since the earliest days of settlement. Newspaper articles and editorials against the evils of drink were plentiful throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, and Iowa had outlawed liquor in the 1880s.

Judging from the surviving slides, the model on which Forssell based his temperance message was probably T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* (1854). Long forgotten except by antiquarians and social historians, Arthur's novel stands as one of the significant books of the nineteenth century. Its enormous sales gave a great boost to the movement to enact state prohibition laws, and it probably ranks second only to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of contemporary impact. Like Stowe's novel, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* was also made into a play, and its success spawned numerous other melodramas on the same theme. Variations continued to occur in the popular arts well into the twentieth century. In 1909, for example, D. W. Griffith used this theme in his film, *The Drunkard's Reformation*, and drinking and bar-room scenes appeared in his *Broken Blossoms* (1919) where they helped to show the cause of the brutal character of the antagonist. In the preface to the 1860 edition, Arthur's publisher noted that *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* "is marred by no exaggerations, but exhibits the actualities of bar-room life, and the consequences flowing therefrom, with a severe simplicity, and adherence to truth, that gives to every picture a Daguerrian vividness." When Forssell added slides to this narrative, the publisher's point became literally true.

Forssell's temperance message began "scientifically." He showed eight artist's sketches depicting the inside of the hu-



man stomach as it progressed from "Temperance," through "Moderate Drinker," "Drunkard," and finally to "Drunkard on Verge of Grave." The series ended with a slide labelled "Appearance of Stomach during Delirium Tremens," to reinforce its rather grisly "scientific" point.

Next, using slides of artist's drawings made by "McIntosh Stereoptican Co., 35 & 37 Randolph Street, Chicago, Ill.," Forssell told the stories of two families. Paralleling Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress," he began with a slide of a dapper young man entering his home and being greeted by his happy wife and children. Then, the young man was pictured drinking gaily at a fashionable hotel bar. The remaining slides documented his degradation. He was shown returning home drunk, carousing in lower class bars, being arrested for drunkenness and finally being driven by drink into hallucinations, robbery, and murder. His family was also dragged into poverty and despair by his drunkenness. In the last slide, he was shown dying alone on a riverbank while lightening flashed ominously in the background. The lesson could not have been put more harshly.

The second tale, however, was more cheerful. In "The Drunkard's Reform," the main character was not a dapper dandy but a sturdy, bearded workingman who stopped off at a saloon for beer. His daughter, who was with him, was taunted by another, better dressed child. As the caption noted, "His child's clothes are ridiculed and his pride is touched." Immediately, "He forms a resolution and leaves the tavern," and when he arrives home, "He informs his wife of his resolve." Shortly thereafter, "His sobriety raises him to the position of foreman,"

and in the last slide, his wife and three children are seen enjoying the "Happy Home of a Temperate Man." Forssell's message was melodramatic, simple, and quite clear. Art, entertainment, and morality had all combined for a single purpose.

While temperance and the life of Christ were common themes, Forssell's "Evils of a Great City" lecture promised a taste of the exotic. It was no accident that it received top billing on his advertising poster. Although he used some slides of drawings and some of professional actors, the majority of the city views were documentary images. As a result, these slides were realistic in a way the others were not. If Forssell had taken the photographs himself, which is possible but very unlikely, he would rank as a minor social documentary photographer. The best images offer a vivid portrayal of end of the century urban life. But these were undoubtedly commercially made slides (though the photographer and company producing them are not recorded), and it is important to note that these photographs -- as was often the case with images made of New York and other cities during this period -- copied the format, and sometimes even the scenes, found in the work of Jacob A. Riis.

It is very likely that these slides provided Forssell's audience with their first pictures of a major city and its poverty. The city was New York, with its street scenes, tenements, ten-cent-a-night flophouses, dormitories for homeless newsboys, street "toughs," bootblacks, and even "Labor Agitators." His shots of the "Street Arabs," "The First Development of Character," and "The Little Beggar Girl" were stark, direct images. They have lost none of their power over the



years. Yet, interlaced with the realistic portrayal of urban life are other images that display Forssell's rural morality. While he acknowledged the city's poverty, he also linked it directly with his earlier message of temperance.

There were many slides of saloons, "growler gangs," a man lying drunk on a sidewalk, a "Drunkard's Widow," an "Arrest for Drunkenness," a pawn shop, the race track, pool playing, and card playing. There were also scenes of a murder (posed), a police van, a court room, and several images of prisons and prison life. These included views of Sing Sing, prisoners having dinner at Blackwell's Island, and a Sunday church service at the Tombs. Finally, there were a number of images of death -- the morgue, a prisoner's burial, and Potter's Field, the pauper's burial ground.

It should also be noted how these slides are captioned: "Little Waifs at Supper," "First Glance at a Tenement House District," "Wharf Rats," "Betting Stand at the Race Track," "The Little Beggar Girl," "The Young Bootblack," "Murder," "Blackwell's Island, Prisoners Marching to Dinner," and so on. The company that made these slides mixed realism and melodrama in a manner extremely fashionable in late nineteenth-century America. Some of the captions are factual, but others remind us of Horatio Alger's stories. This sensibility was so pervasive that even Theodore Dreiser fell into the practice, blending these modes in the story and chapter titles of *Sister Carrie* (1900).

It is clear from this conglomerate of slides that Forssell saw a direct relationship between alcohol and urban poverty, intemperance, gambling, crime, and death. His solution to these city problems can be deduced from the last three slides

of his show. These are "Central Park," a placid landscape scene, "Summer Holiday in the Country," where a city boy is depicted happily plowing a field behind a horse, and "The Sheaf of Wheat," an artist's sketch showing wheat being made into bread (happiness and life) or beer (destruction and death).

Despite his rather simplistic outlook, Forssell's use of the photograph enabled him to achieve a realism possible only through this medium. Thus he joined a small, but select, group in American life. It included Episcopal Rector John T. McCook, who took photographs of New Haven, Connecticut slum areas and Jacob A. Riis, who took the now famous images of New York's poor, immigrant sections. McCook used his photographs to better local conditions, and Riis pioneered in using both photographs and the travelling lantern slide show as a means of social reform.

Though the burden of Forssell's message was the evils of city life and the need for temperance and self-control, his slide shows may have also aided the growing sentiment for social justice legislation. As such, he would have helped prepare the group for the early twentieth-century phenomenon of Progressivism with its numerous reform measures. When Rev. G. D. Forssell presented his magic lantern slide shows, he may have thought he was merely telling the life of Christ and of the evils of alcohol and big cities. But his message had broader implications. □



## THE DRUNKARD



1. "Domestic Happiness -- the Greatest of earthly blessings."

## Note on Sources

The authors wish to thank James Gearity and Ralph Holcomb, both graduate students in American Studies at the University of Minnesota, for bringing this collection to our attention. Thanks are also due to Robert Drake, site manager of Gibb Farm Museum, and the Ramsey County and St. Paul Historical Society for permitting us to research, copy, and use the materials in Forssell's collection.

The basic sources for this article are as follows: The original slides and handbill are held by Gibb Farm Museum, St. Paul, Minnesota. For references to film and the lantern slide show, see Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, 1976). For references to the history of photography, see Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*, rev. ed. (New York, 1964); and Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography from the Camera Obscura to the Beginning of the Modern Era* (New York, 1969). Other references useful to this study are Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (Univeristy Park, Pa., 1967); T. S. Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* (Philadelphia, 1860 [also available in a modern Belknap Press ed.]); Lawrence Gowing, *Hogarth* (London, 1974); Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, 1890); and Ferenc M. Szasz and Ralph F. Bogardus, "The Camera and the American Social Conscience: The Documentary Photography of Jacob A. Riis," *New York History*, 55 (October 1974), 408-36.



2. "Introduction of Sorrow -- A Loving Heart Made Sad."





3. Arrested for drunkenness.



4. Death of a drunkard.



## THE DRUNKARD'S REFORM



1. Drinking at the bar.



2. "His child's clothes are ridiculed and his pride is touched."





3. *"He forms a resolution and leaves the tavern."*



4. *"He informs his wife of his resolve."*





5. "His sobriety raises him to the position of Foreman."



6. "Happy Home of a Temperate Man."



# Bob Burdette and the *Hawk-Eye* Sharpshoot a General

by  
Philip D. Jordan

There's many a story told behind grim, granite walls.

Complaint and rumor are whispered fearfully behind cuffed hands, passed surreptitiously from cell to cell, and silently signaled by sign language. The penitentiary is its own world, a ghetto insulated from free-walking mankind, whose inmates are not names but numbers. The lockstep is the march of the convict, and some move to the jangle and clang of chains. But, despite restraints and regulations, talk goes on. One of the strangest yarns told behind bars and printed outside the walls, involved not only prisoners but also the humorist Robert J. Burdette and his newspaper, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, and an attempt to sharpshoot a major general of the Army of the United States.

The skirmish, if not the battle, began in the state prison at Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1874, when the institution bulged with men convicted of crimes against the State of Iowa and the Federal Government. But in addition to murderers, thieves, thugs, counterfeiters, and mail robbers there were those who once wore the blue of United States infantrymen and the yellow of the cavalry. These were military prisoners, some white and others black, who, for one reason or another, had fractured army regulations, had been tried and convicted by army courts, and sentenced to serve out their terms in Fort

Madison, then, under government contract, an authorized federal penitentiary.

The Army of the United States, after the Civil War, was, for the most part, campaigning across the wide Missouri on the western plains--escorting civilian wagon trains, protecting the mail, guarding workmen laying railroad track, and fighting Indians who were making a last and pathetic stand to hold their hunting grounds against a never-ending flood of cattlemen and sheepmen and just plain dirt farmers armed not only with pistols and rifles but also with rolls of barbed wire. The burning and the shooting and the blood-letting, even though Iowa newspapers were full of frightful stories, meant little to many Hawkeye residents to whom the Platte and the Little Big Horn rivers were not much more than names somewhere "out west thar," and the western Sioux, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, were looked upon as obstacles to gold rushers thronging the Black Hills.

The immediacy of the military-Indian frontier of the 1870s was pointed up graphically to Iowans in a little-known incident having its origin in military posts on the plains and culminating in the Fort Madison prison. From the West to Omaha, Nebraska, and from there eastward, a steady flow of army malcontents and deserters moved through Council Bluffs, towns in central Iowa, and

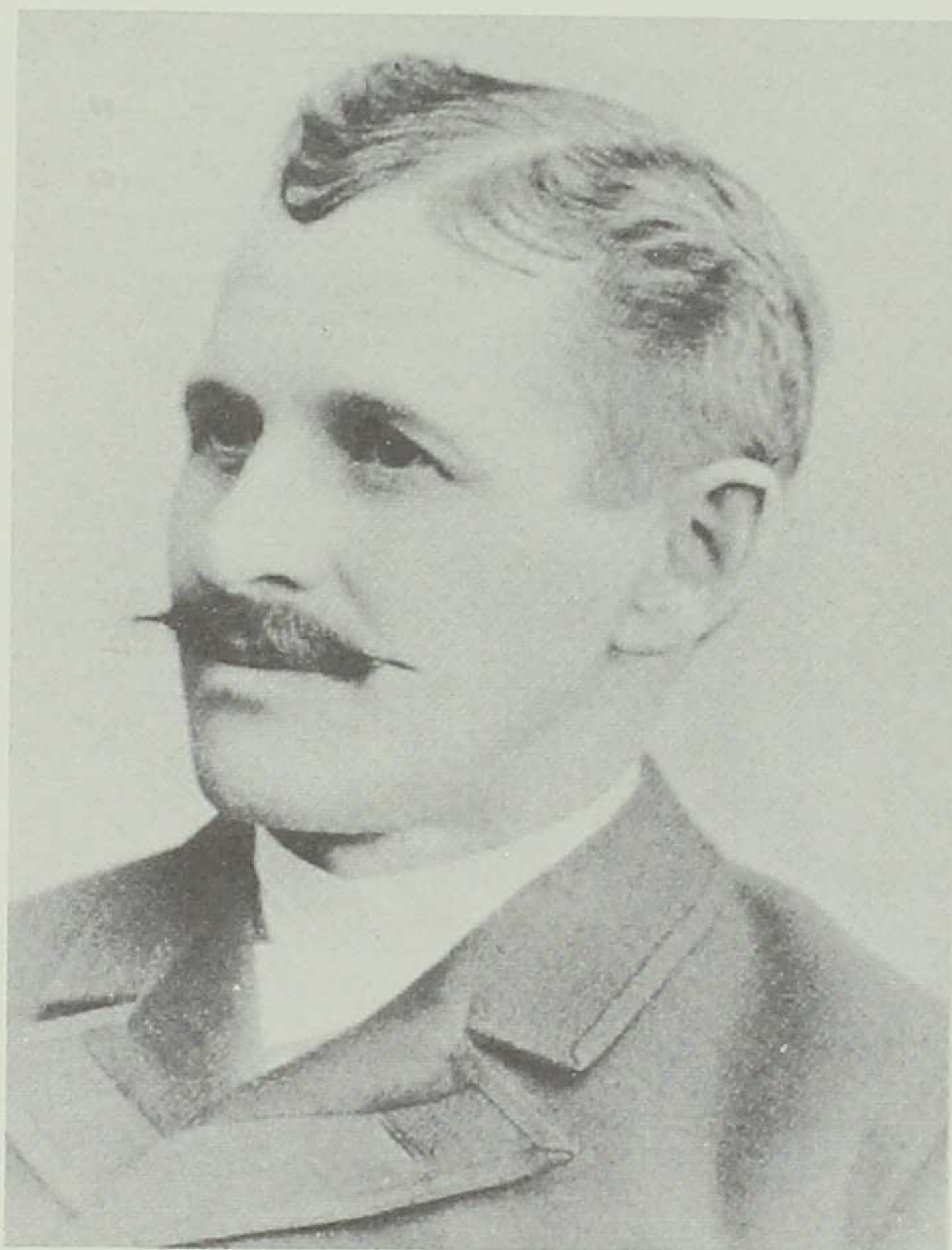




General James S. Brisbin (from *Generals in Blue*, 1964).

Davenport and Burlington en route to Fort Madison. Editors frequently spoke of their passage. Newspapers for years regularly reported troop movements en route west in papers such as the *Hawk-Eye* and also, for example, in the columns of *Plattsmouth Herald* and the *Nebraska State Journal*. Plattsmouth was a flourishing community across the Missouri River close to Iowa's western border, and the *Nebraska State Journal* was published in Lincoln, the capital. Army news was reported in the *Omaha Bee*.

No Nebraska editor, however, paid more attention to the shipment of deserters and other military prisoners east to Fort Madison than did the staff of the *Hawk-Eye*. Their irritation at the confining of convicted soldiers in Fort Madison resulted in a heated quarrel with the paper's publisher and managing editor pitted against an army general.

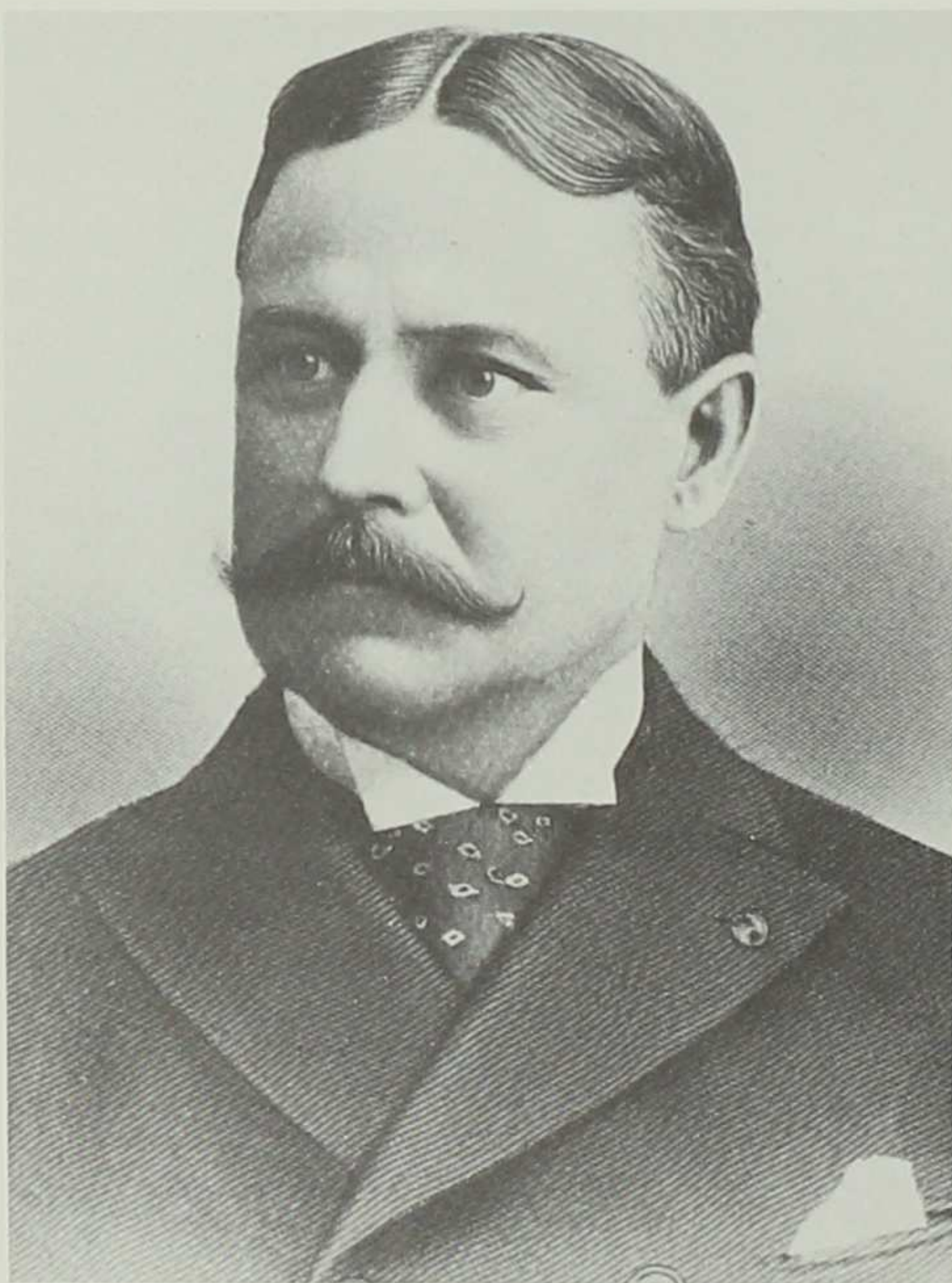


Bob Burdette

Each of the protagonists possessed impressive qualifications. Frank Hatton, with curled mustache and penetrating eyes, feared no man and would gleefully pick a quarrel. Editor of the *Mt. Pleasant Journal* after the Civil War, he purchased the *Hawk-Eye* in 1874. His editorials could be curt, pungent, and biting. Hatton's managing editor was Robert J. Burdette, humorist and free-swinging but normally gentle satirist, known the nation over for his comical *The Rise and Fall of the Mustache* whose title, it was waggishly rumored, paid tribute to his boss's hirsute foliage on the upper lip. General James S. Brisbin, perhaps known primarily for his long command of black troops and in 1881 as author of the widely read *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains*, was a stern disciplinarian with a short-fused temper.

All three--Hatton, Burdette, and





Frank Hatton

Brisbin--served during the Civil War. Hatton, at age 15, was a drummer boy in the Fifteenth Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Burdette enlisted as a private in the Forty-Seventh Illinois Infantry and was mustered out as a private. Brisbin began his military career as a second lieutenant, First United States Dragoons, and by March 1865 wore the single star of a brigadier general. After the peace, he re-entered the army and, in 1874, was commanding Omaha Barracks, Nebraska with the rank of major-general.

Brisbin, in Omaha, had his hands full of trouble, and Hatton and Burdette, with other Iowa editors, were willing to make further trouble. Editorial criticism of the army, pointed as it was during the Civil War, increased, rather than diminished, after the war. Somehow or other the glory and glamor of military service now was tarnished and tawdry. Perhaps this

was a delayed reaction on the part of editors who themselves had marched and carried muskets, had disliked or hated army life and routine, and now were in a position to "get even." Perhaps it was a breaking out of the long-lived, contemptuous rivalry between volunteer troops and men of the regular army. And perhaps editorial censure had its roots in the rigid distinction between officers and enlisted men. The Davis County, Iowa, *Republican*, in November 1874, capsulated this view, saying, "The system of our regular army, by making snobs of officers, and machines of the men, should be changed."

Hatton wrote that officers held contempt for their men, and "in every such case his men despise him, and with reason," for such officers were asses and mistreated their men. Such outbursts--and they were numerous--might conceivably have been put down as unfounded editorial excesses had not one day, during the summer of 1874, Burdette suddenly become aware of frequently-published, and to him most peculiar and unusual, news items. All told of the transfer of the military prisoners from western posts to prison in Fort Madison. They arrived from the Third United States Cavalry stationed at Fort Russell, Wyoming, not far from the on-coming route of the Union Pacific Railroad, from Fort Fetterman, also in Wyoming and on the Oregon Trail where the Fourth Infantry was posted, from the famous Fort Laramie, at the junction of the Laramie and North Platte rivers where the Second Cavalry was garrisoned, and from Fort Cameron in far-away Utah, where the Fourteenth Infantry was headquartered. They came also from Brisbin's command at Omaha.



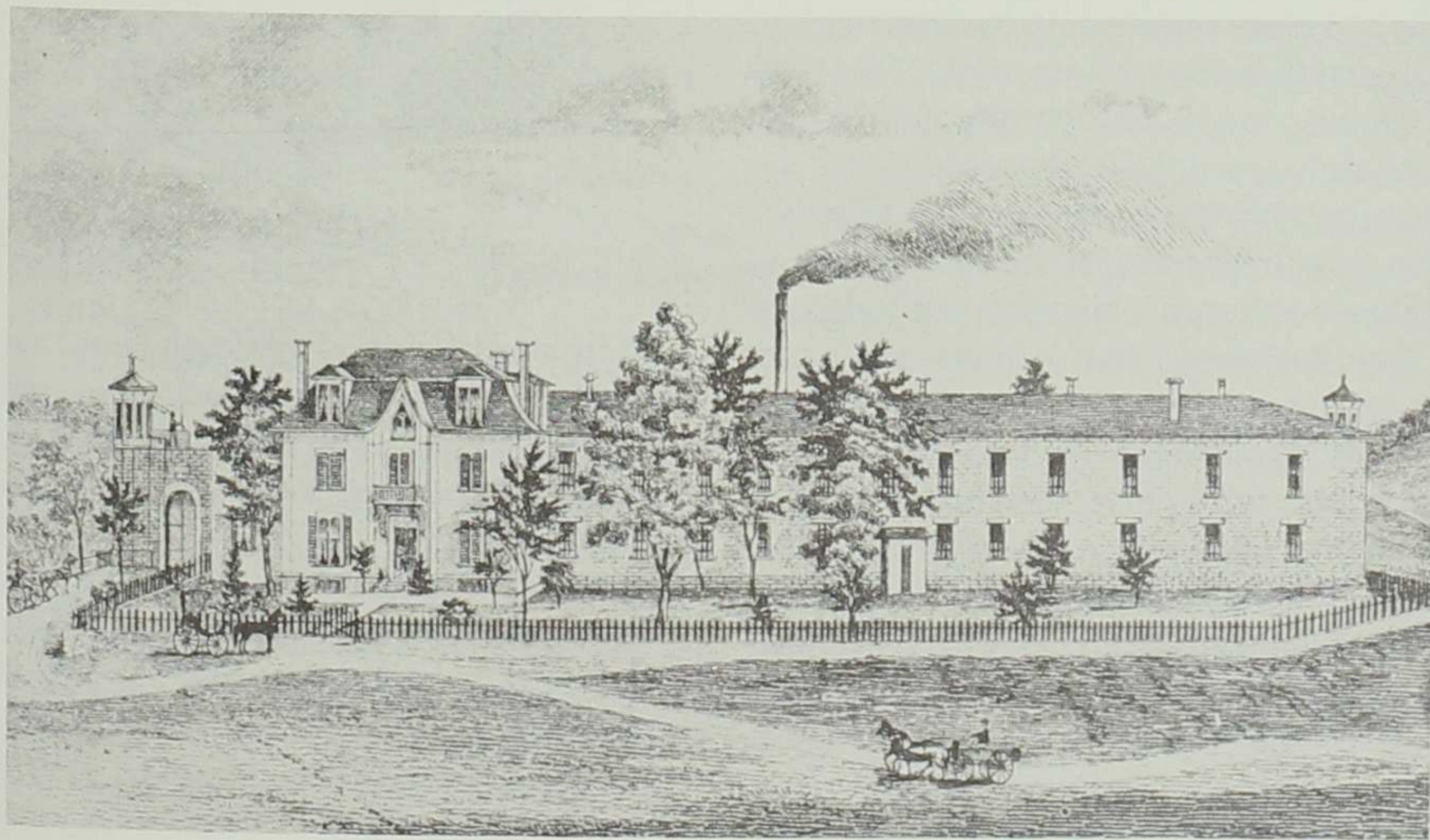
Burdette, whom relatively few persons, then or now, recognized as being as sharp a reporter as he was a witty humorist, traced their routes. Then, in August 1874, he traveled to Fort Madison to interview the prisoners and learn why they were there. He was told that of a total of 315 convicts, about a hundred were servicemen, "most of them here because rather than longer endure the brutal treatment they received at the hands of petty officers," they preferred jail. In a long, five-column story, published August 23, Burdette quoted what was told him.

Private John Gilmore, Third Cavalry, said frankly: "I deserted because I couldn't stand the bad treatment of the first sergeant any longer. He was an abusive tyrant, and none of his superior officers ever interfered with him." Gilmore admitted frankly that rations at Fort Russell were good enough and admitted also that, when he deserted, he carried away with him a government issue revolver. "I was sent here on charges of desertion

and the theft of a revolver."

James McCanna, Eighth Infantry, told Burdette he deserted from Beaver, near Salt Lake, Utah, mostly because of ill-treatment by non-commissioned officers. Thirteen others left at the same time. McCanna insisted he was not a deserter, but was in Fort Madison because he got drunk and hit a corporal. "I am better treated here, better fed, and cared for," he said. "In the army a private soldier is treated like a dog." Charles Churchill, Ninth Infantry, stationed at Omaha, was a Civil War veteran. He was convicted for selling a government uniform and for desertion. "It never does a private any good to complain," he lamented. "We had to make and tend to officers' gardens." He, like McCanna, insisted he was better treated in prison than when he was in the army.

Dennis Newport, another infantryman, made no bones of the fact that he was a deserter. He fled his outfit at Omaha, he recounted, because enlisted men were



*The Iowa State Prison at Ft. Madison (from Andreas Atlas of Iowa, 1875).*



badly treated and sworn at and because his first sergeant was surly and overbearing. "There is no inducement to the soldier to be faithful," maintained a deserter from Fort Steele, where the Thirteenth Infantry was stationed. "I would rather be in the penitentiary than the army, because good behavior is appreciated here, and it isn't in the army. The private soldiers are misused in every way."

Of the many interviews Burdette put into type, all were similar. Except for minor details, all emphasized contempt of officers for enlisted men, brutality, and complaints of being forced to perform menial chores for unappreciative brass. Not one soldier denied he had deserted or claimed he was innocent of the charges against him. But all, in one manner or other, alleged they would not have acted as they did had they been properly treated. Taken collectively, their narratives, as Burdette set them down, were a severe indictment of the army.

Perhaps Burdette's printed narrative might not have created such a fuss in official quarters had not Hatton published in the same issue a scathing editorial. "If the stories these men tell," he wrote, "of inhuman treatment on the part of officers, of the downright swindling in the issuing of rations whereby the private soldiers are almost starved that a company fund may be raised from which the officers can draw at will, it is certainly time that the Secretary of War or the Commanding General of the army should take the matter in hand." Hatton slashed at the policy of sending army prisoners to state penitentiaries to be shut up "with thieves, burglars and murderers, dressed in the garb of State convicts and treated like such in all respects." This, he believed, was an outrage.



*A foot slogger of the western army, as seen by Frederic Remington (from Harper's Weekly, August 21, 1886).*

What really singed official braid was Hatton's burning denunciation of officers. "It is not necessary for us to dwell at length upon the stories of cruel treatment by officers which these men relate." His blistering continued. "Enough is known of the average regular army officer to give credit to these reports. . . . If the stories these men tell of their officers are true, the shoulder-strapped tyrants should be stripped of their authority." If, on the other hand, the men deserted from



"pure cussedness," Hatton held that nothing in army regulations justified confinement in state prisons. He concluded with the hope that the efforts of the *Hawk-Eye* would expose the entire matter to the view of higher authority.

Hatton and Burdette had not long to wait. Somehow or other, a copy of the August 23 issue of the *Hawk-Eye* fell into the hands of General Brisbin at Omaha. He replied in a long, explanatory communication which Hatton published in full on September 5. The General, attempting to curb his wrath while penning an objective, reasonable explanation, was somewhat less than successful. He counterattacked by furnishing an abstract of the official record of McCanna and comments on others whom Burdette interviewed. In proper military style, Brisbin listed the specifications of charges against McCanna. They were impressive. McCanna had called Sergeant Christian Nagel, sergeant of the guard, "A Dutch — — —" while Nagel was on duty. McCanna had forcibly resisted Nagel and two other non-commissioned officers. McCanna, when ordered to make less noise, had replied, "Not for you, you — — —," and then deliberately hit a corporal with his fist three times. McCanna had been drunk and unfit for duty several times.

Private Churchill, said Brisbin, deliberately deceived and misled Burdette. Indeed the General flatly repudiated all information given by the Fort Madison prisoners. Carried away by his emotions, Brisbin wrote that army officers as a group were kind-hearted and considerate, anxious to make their men as comfortable as possible and to promote the good of the service. If the *Hawk-Eye*, he continued, really wished to know what

army life was really like, the paper should send a reporter to visit military posts and not rely upon prison lies and gossip.

Hatton was elated with the hornet's nest he stirred up. His answering editorial appeared in the same issue with Brisbin's letter. The *Hawk-Eye*, wrote Hatton crisply, was protesting primarily against the confinement of military personnel in state prisons. That was the real issue. "We don't care how drunk private McCanna got, or how far he knocked Corporal Quinn with his clenched fist." Hatton called Brisbin an "Omaha Napoleon." Furthermore, Hatton pointed out gleefully, the General, even if a graduate of West Point, was an inept writer and could not spell simple words correctly.

Had Brisbin been smart, his strategy would have led him to drop the matter. But the references to his misspelling so pricked him that he bent himself to composing a reply, published by Hatton on September 17. By this time the Hatton-Burdette-Brisbin feud was a conversation piece throughout Iowa. "County editors," lashed out Brisbin, "are all common scrubs--I was one, once myself--and it won't do for them to assume airs that do not by right belong to the fraternity." He rebuked Hatton for saying he was graduated from West Point, which was untrue. He listed his military record--seven commissions between 1861 and 1865 and 27 engagements. "Where were you during the *unpleasantness*, and where did you keep your graveyard?" he asked Hatton.

Then, his personal spleen exhausted, Brisbin, ignoring the *Hawk-Eye's* repeated assertion that its main objection was the lodging of convicted soldiers in state prisons, insisted upon discussing army desertions. This was a touchy subject. It had been since the army first was organ-



ized. General Grant was plagued by desertions during the Civil War. Desertion assumed alarming proportions in the West after the war. General George A. Custer freely admitted it. Indeed, some officers of the Regular Army considered "the malady incurable" and added that soldiers expected little justice when hailed before a courtmartial. Brisbin, no matter how he argued, could not successfully deny all this. Yet he attempted to convince as best he could both the editors and the readers of the *Hawk-Eye*. He advanced all the stereotypes: men ran away because they were homesick, because they wished to sit by the bedside of sick fathers, mothers, sisters, because they yearned to see once again and hold the hands of wives, children, and sweethearts. After developing this heart-throb, the General finally got around to admitting that those in the ranks departed informally because they drank too much, because they resented doing chores for officers, because of low pay, and because of inadequate quarters. He, however, emphatically denied that troops were anything but well-fed, well-clothed, and kindly treated and cared for. Officers were honest and capable gentlemen.

Hatton turned this "long-winded" letter of Brisbin's over to Burdette for reply. Known generally throughout Iowa and the nation as the author of gentle humor and witty lectures, Bob Burdette, in this instance, displayed, so far as is now known, his only example of viperous prose. Indeed, authorship of the answer to Brisbin was not established until recently.

There is a distinguishable difference between the literary style of Hatton and Burdette, and in the reply subdued flashes of the humorist's pungent wit light the prose.

Burdette wrote of General Brisbin, "rigged in full dress uniform," charging upon the *Hawk-Eye*; of Brisbin being less "ravenous after his rations of blood" than previously; and of stoutly maintaining that "neither the gold-fringed writing of a Major General nor the gatling gun English of a warrior of twenty-seven engagements" would alter the paper's views or opinions. This was only a beginning. Irked by Brisbin's sneering reference to scrub editors, Burdette went at him.

"The portrait which the General paints of himself as a country editor, while it may justify his assertion so far as he is concerned individually," said Burdette waspishly, "will hardly warrant him saying that 'all country editors are scrubs,' and we are very much inclined to agree with him that it ill becomes a self-admitted 'scrub' to 'assume airs' even after he has been transformed into an epauleted soldier. You may promote and title the 'scrub' if you will, but once a 'scrub' editor and he's a 'scrub' editor."

Brisbin, honestly enough, had mentioned in his letter that a new penitentiary was being completed at Fort Leavenworth, and it would not be long before military prisoners would be sent there instead of Fort Madison. Burdette should have been satisfied with this and accepted it. Instead, he castigated the





*The cavalry responds to "Boots and Saddles" by Remington (from Century Magazine, January 1892).*

General on the unreasonable grounds that the building of a new federal prison would not right the wrong under which soldiers serving in the Iowa penitentiary were suffering. Even though the penitentiary records of military convicts at Fort Madison were destroyed long ago, there is no evidence that inmates there "suffered." Indeed, the testimony Burdette himself took from them clearly indicates they thought they were better treated than when in the ranks.

When copies of Burdette's rejoinder reached the Fort Madison prison, no

doubt there was a certain amount of rejoicing. Indeed, rumor, passed from mouth to mouth through the years, indicates this to be true, even though it cannot now be firmly established. What tickled *Hawk-Eye* readers the most was Burdette's reply to Brisbin's rhetorical question: "Where were you during the late *unpleasantness* and where did you keep your graveyard?" There was nothing of the loveable and slightly mischievous Master Bilderback--a stock character in Burdette's humorous tales--in Burdette's reply. "In answer as to



where our whereabouts were during the war and where we kept our graveyard," wrote Burdette, "we answer, we were a private soldier, a common knapsack carrier, and we kept our cemetery about a half mile further in front than any Major General we ever saw in the army."

The controversy and the sharpshooting ended with Burdette's reply, but the echoes of the literary guns lasted long. For years, veterans of the Civil War and the Indian campaigns, heard and remembered. Old-timers, warming themselves in the sun on benches in courthouse squares, testify to this. Their routine daily greeting to one another, they said, was, "Where yuh keepin' your grave-

yard?" The answering password, in voices cackling with age, was "Brisbin! Brisbin!"

Few, if any, of the oldsters knew or recalled exactly how or when or where their salutation originated. They could not have known all, for the complete narrative is set down here for the first time. The incident had become a military-inspired folkway. Many on those benches with their canes beside them would have been amazed to learn that the roots were in an Iowa penitentiary, that an Iowa newspaper had shot down an army general, and, finally, that the searing caustic of an Iowa comical author had turned full circle to become little more than a jest. □

#### Note on Sources

The official records of military prisoners confined in the Fort Madison penitentiary were destroyed years ago. However, the entire account, including the correspondence between the editors of the *Hawk-Eye* and General Brisbin, was printed in the *Hawk-Eye*. Supplementary information was taken from Iowa and Nebraska newspapers as indicated in the text. The primary source for readers interested in army desertion is, of course, the multi-volumed *War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, but the general reader will find more than adequate material in Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War*; George A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains*; Don Rickey, Jr., *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay*; Francis Paul Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet: The Role of the United States Army in the Development of the Northwest, 1815-1860*; Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*; and, for example, Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Guarding the Frontier: A Study of Frontier Defense, 1815-1825*. Clara B. Burdette has published a semi-satisfactory biography of her husband, *Robert J. Burdette His Message*, and the June 1923 issue of *The Palimpsest* carried an article by Sherman J. McNally, which treats of Burdette as a humorist. The evidence that old soldiers picked up and used a modification of Burdette's and Brisbin's "graveyard" sentence is from notes taken by the author from his grandfather, Frank H. Jordan, who served with the Fifteenth Volunteer Infantry and was a treasure trove of military anecdotes, each of which when checked out in later years proved reliable.



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The Division of the State Historical Society and the editor are not responsible for statements of fact or opinion made by contributors.





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