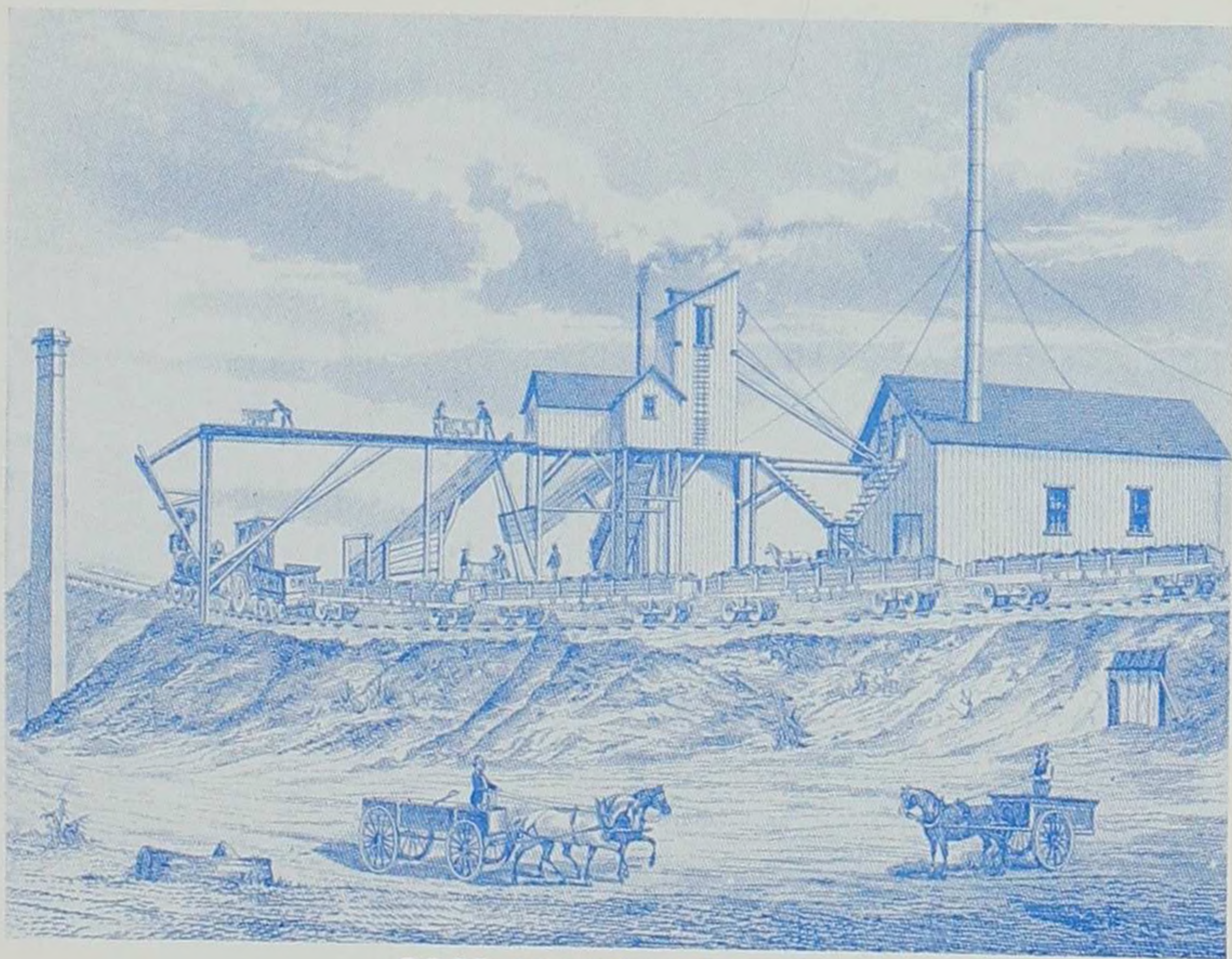


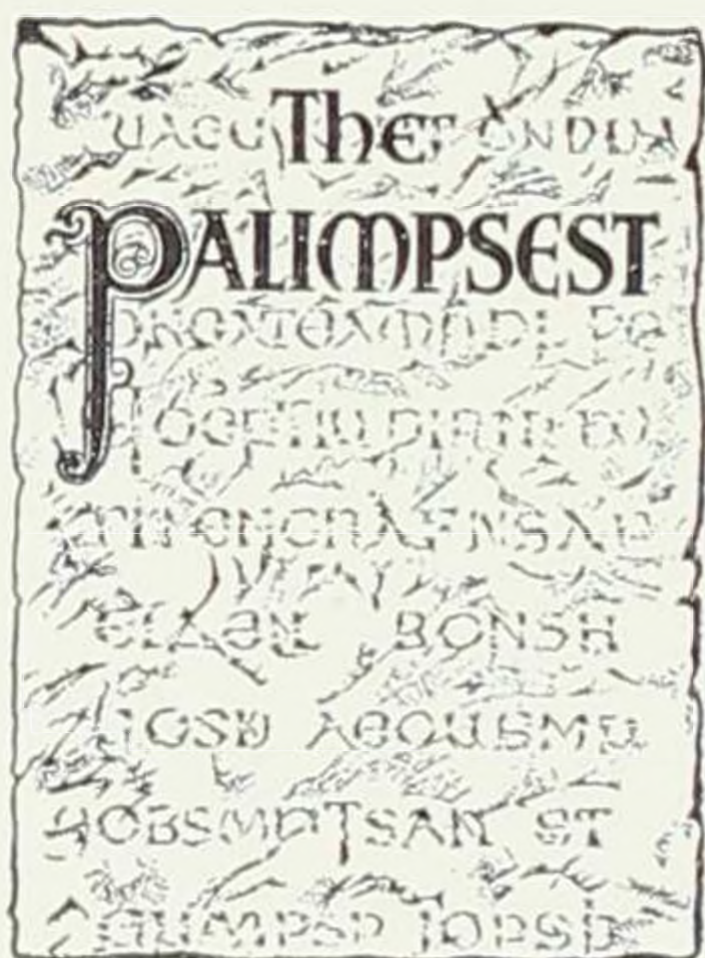
The **PALIMPSEST**



COAL MINING IN IOWA

Published Monthly by
The State Historical Society of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

DECEMBER 1953



The Meaning of 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.

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HARRIET CONNOR BROWN

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Front — South Park Coal Mine in Polk County.

Back — Top: Coal mining in Appanoose County during 1870's.

Bottom: The Downing House, a favorite Oskaloosa hostelry for drummers in the late 19th century.

Inside — Top: "Grandmother Brown's" home at Fort Madison in 1903.

Center: Harriet Connor Brown in 1907 and a photo of her husband, Herbert D. Brown, while Chief of the U. S. Bureau of Efficiency — 1913-1933.

Bottom: The Fort Madison Penitentiary in the 1870's.

Photos

Photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert D. Brown, and of Grandmother Brown's home, were furnished by the author. The mining and hostelry scenes, and the Fort Madison Penitentiary, first appeared in the A. T. Andreas' 1875 edition of *The Illustrated Atlas of the State of Iowa*.

Author

Harriet Connor Brown, a native of Burlington and the author of *Grandmother Brown's Hundred Years*, which won the *Atlantic Monthly* Award for 1929, now resides near Dundee, New York.

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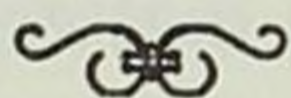
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Times Have Changed

Never in the history of humanity have more rapid and more significant changes in man's way of life been made than in the last half century. Comparing it with the Iowa scene of today, my thoughts dwell on what I saw in my native state when I traversed it in 1903 as field agent for the United States Geological Survey.

As that year opened, the Survey was completing a plan of cooperation with the Census Bureau for taking a census of the country's mining industries. My husband, Herbert D. Brown, was offered a supervisory position in that work and, after a good New Year's dinner with me and our little daughter, took a train for the coal banks of southern Iowa.

Under the sanction of a temporary appointment, I devoted myself, in the months that followed Herbert's departure, to editorial work for the Geological Survey. It was interesting work, absorbing work, following the adventures of our topographers and geologists in the uncharted

areas of our great American domain, but when night came I was lonely. Month after month went by and there seemed no prospect of Herbert's return. It was eleven months, indeed, before Uncle Sam permitted him to come back to Washington, but before that I took matters into my own hands and went to him.

When Herbert had been gone five months, I complained bitterly to the Survey "Chief of Division," who had charge of the mining census: "What do you Government officials mean, keeping families apart this way?"

"Well, let's see what we can do about it," he answered. "If you can pass the civil service examination that is being held for the Survey next week, I'll delegate you to field work in Iowa for the summer as your husband's assistant."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Get busy now and bone up on your economic geology."

I "passed," and was soon on my way to Iowa. Grandmother Brown — with Grandfather's cooperation — took care of our little daughter that summer in Fort Madison while I chased up and down the state after their son and eventually over the border into Minnesota. But, after all my straining, I did not see much of him. In a fortnight he was ordered to the Mesabi Iron Range, and I pursued my way alone in Iowa for many weeks.

Then it was that I really became acquainted

with my native state. I had thought, until then, that I knew Iowa, but I discovered that year that the Hawkeye State had a hinterland very different from the Mississippi river towns with which I was familiar. Having grown up on the bluffs at Burlington and visited only towns like Fort Madison, Keokuk, and Davenport, all similarly placed above the mighty Father of Waters, I had hardly realized that Iowa was a prairie farming state. The lives of my young friends in those towns had generally been shaped by two compelling deities, River and Rails. It was followers of these twain who had grown rich amongst us, lumber merchants and railroad magnates. It was they, and not the plodding farmers tilling the lowlands, who had been representing us in Des Moines and Washington.

Up to this time, I knew only the life and culture that had come to Iowa by way of the great transcontinental railroads spanning our majestic Mississippi at different points along the eastern border. The society of my birthplace had been tinctured with the ideas of the Boston syndicate that built the Burlington; similarly that of Davenport, the home of my friend, George Cram Cook (later known to fame as author and playwright), had been influenced by officials of the Rock Island, for which his father was an attorney; and that of Fort Madison, where Herbert Brown had grown up, was being colored by the Santa Fe.

Even such bits of the interior as I had glimpsed in my childhood had been observed under the auspices of our great railroad. I had sometimes been invited to go with my friend, Fannie Potter, in her father's private car as far as Albia, or perhaps even Creston. Her father, "Tom" Potter, was the masterful General Manager of the "Q," as the Burlington was generally designated in the days of its adolescent development from "Chicago, Burlington and Quincy" beginnings. On those trips we little girls were more attentive to what went on inside the private car — the arranging of its compact furnishings, the smooth performances of its colored caretakers — than in the life of fields and farms that could be seen from the car windows.

I did not realize then how much Iowa's wealth rested on agriculture. Reared in an environment of industrialism and steeped in its traditions, I had not been greatly moved, even in 1896, by the revolt of the western farmers to which William Jennings Bryan had given such eloquent expression. The preliminary agitation of the Populists had completely passed us by in Burlington and the other river towns I knew. But now, in 1903, for the first time, I saw Iowa in a new light, saw it no longer as an aggregation of hilly centers of industrial activity but as an area of exceedingly rich soil, stretching on and on toward the setting sun. Saw it as a background for modest freehold

estates rather than for railroad shops and planing mills. For the first time, I came face to face with many who were cultivating the good earth embraced between the Mississippi and the Missouri. I got, that summer, the feel and the smell of Iowa land.

I realized now another thing: that Iowa was still to a considerable extent a pioneer state, its cultural conditions hardly fixed as yet in one definite mold. In all the river towns that I knew, the population, though composed of different European strains, had shaken down to a homogeneous American pattern not very different from what I had observed in Massachusetts, where I had attended boarding school, and in New York State, where I had spent four years at Cornell University. What social customs we Burlingtonians did not inherit from New England we perhaps accepted from other sources by way of Chicago or St. Louis. We were, at least, more urban in our ways than rural. Getting away from the Mississippi Valley that summer, I found myself thinking of Iowa not as an entity but in terms of unrelated settlements of foreign-born people not yet assimilated into one congenial mass. Here were Germans, there Scandinavians, here Irish, there Dutch — many still clinging to their Old World memories and ways.

I came one week-end to a town called Pella. Passing an open door, that Sunday morning,

where religious services were being held, I was curious as I noticed the peculiar headgear of women near the door. I went in, thinking at first that the hymn they were singing was in German. No, it was Dutch. And so were the starched caps of the women and the wooden shoes of the men. My business in the town had to do with a young Dutchman whose English tongue I found almost as wooden as his shoes. He was clearly not yet completely Americanized but, while we strove awkwardly to reach each other's thought, to our assistance came his lively little daughter who, having had a couple of years in American schools, was quite able to serve as interpreter.

Iowa! The Pleasant Land — the Indians had called it. As I took note of its deep soil, its abundant crops and comfortable homes, its fat cattle and well-nourished people, I found myself recalling with pride stories I had heard from my elders of Iowa's early days that gave point and meaning to the scenes I now beheld.

Tales of the sons of liberty, who, after the revolutions of '48, had sought refuge here from European tyranny and made notable contributions to the thought of the "New World."

Tales of those Forty Niners who, while on their mad rush for California gold, had lingered in Iowa, perceiving that here, too, was a rich land awaiting settlement and cultivation.

Tales of immigrants from eastern states repre-

senting the soundest racial stock in America, who had flocked in during the decade of the fifties, hungry for lands and homes. So had Herbert's father and mother come from the old Northwest Territory — down the beautiful Ohio and up the turbulent Mississippi, the sidewheel steamboats in which they made the journey weighted heavily with human beings, horses, cattle, and household belongings. By the time my little mother, coming from Wisconsin, was ready for her part in the Iowa scene of the sixties, the railroad had reached the water's edge but had not yet spanned the Mississippi, and she was taken across its frozen waters in a sleigh. A few years later, however, when my father came from his Canadian home to seek his fortune in "the States," the railroad had bridged the stream and he was able to ride into Burlington on a car pulled by one of the "Q's" chugging steam locomotives.

Accustomed from infancy to regard the Great Railroad as a tutelary deity, I was a little disturbed when another thought began to intrude itself during the summer of 1903, as I traveled from settlement to settlement in Iowa. "Here is hardly the steady, even, well-distributed development that might be considered the ideal" was my thought. "Some sections look particularly favored by the railroads, others rather neglected. It is as if these great Transcontinentals are most of all intent on *getting across* Iowa rather than in stop-

ping anywhere to help it to its feet. "To the other side and beyond!" would seem to be their slogan."

With some surprise, I noted that there was a marked difference between the general appearance of the northern counties and that of the southern counties. The advantage was all with the northern counties, where the greater number of foreigners had settled, rather than with the southern tier, which had been populated largely by American frontiersmen, who, after several generations in the foothills of the Alleghenies, had pushed their way through Kentucky and Tennessee into southern Iowa.

Perhaps it was the dirt of the coal banks that had got into the general economy, but certainly the countryside of Mahaska County looked shiftless and disorderly beside the trim tidiness of the counties along the Minnesota border where Swedes and Germans had taken up farms and planted their groves of trees for windbreaks around their attractive farmhouses. Could it be, I asked myself, that in some respects certain immigrant Europeans are superior to some of those we called "native stock"?

How rich and peaceful the northern land appeared that year! Sometimes, when the noonday hush was on it, my heart swelled with feeling, as happened one day in the little town of Charles City when I stood on a bridge that spanned a tiny stream. I saw the people resting in the shade, the

cows browsing on the edge of the stream, and well-fed children were drowsing in cottages on their mothers' knees. I remember that at one house door a young woman of whom I asked my way suddenly smiled and said: "I've got the grandest baby. Come, see!"

My job in the mining census was "to pick up the delinquents." The reports of Iowa's principal producers, with the notable exception of the Gypsum Company at Fort Dodge, had already been collected by Herbert. On the government records, however, were the names of many little coal banks and stone quarries whose owners had not yet responded to the census questionnaire. It was my task to see if these people had perhaps gone out of business since the last census; if not, to help them assemble the data wanted by the government from such records as they had kept. Mostly, they were farmers who happened to have a small deposit of soft coal or a quarry of stone on their farm which they worked in desultory fashion when the demands of agriculture were not too pressing. Their bookkeeping was sketchy in the extreme. "See that cigar box on the window sill? What I make I put in there; what I spend I take out of there. What is left is mine." That was the way one farmer-miner explained his system. While none of these delinquents had any considerable production, the aggregate output was impressive and not to be ignored.

To collect the missing data often required traveling to places remote from railroad lines. How to reach such places was my main problem that summer. If the railroad did not bring me to a desired point, I must hire a conveyance or put my trust in "Shank's Mare." Automobiles had been thought of in 1903, probably some had been built, but I saw none in Iowa. Besides, had they been available, they would not have helped much on the Iowa roads of that day. Iowa had reason to rejoice in its rich alluvial soil, its deep glacial drift, its stoneless black mire, reason to be proud of the tall corn that sprang from its soft bosom; but the traveler desirous of moving over its surface quickly was justified in preferring the stony highways of less favored states.

When I had found a buggy for hire and a village boy to drive me to an outlying property where, according to government records, there should be a productive coal bank, it did not follow that I was sure of making the trip with comfort and expedition. We might flounder in a succession of mudholes and have some difficulty in pulling out. But I extracted what fun I could out of such adventures.

Several times the boys who drove me to such places provided the chief interest of the day: "Oh, so you were at the State University last year," I asked a nice bespectacled youth one day. "Tell me about it. Who was your favorite profes-

sor? I had a sister who took her freshman year at Iowa City before going on to big Cornell in New York State and she loved it. Going to study law, you say? Well, one of my teachers in the Burlington High School was Frank O. Lowden, now rising to fame as a lawyer in Chicago. He came to us fresh from the State University. He was a good teacher. And we had others too who did their Alma Mater credit."

A shy youth, with fine eyes, halting speech, big hands, and awkward feet, told me on another occasion that his father was a Congregational minister and had always hoped that he would study at the "Iowa College" in which the Congregational Church was interested at Grinnell. "So you are a child of the Iowa band!" I exclaimed. "How nice! From my youth up, I've heard good old Dr. Salter, the Congregational minister of Burlington, sing the praises of that company of Massachusetts youths with whom he came from Andover Academy to the Iowa wilderness, bringing the gospel of religion and education. It's a heritage to be proud of."

"But I don't want to be a minister or a lawyer or a professor," said this young man stubbornly. "I like farming. I want to do it scientifically — and where could one find a better locality for that than right here in Iowa?"

"Where indeed?" I echoed. "Well, won't your father let you go to the agricultural school at

Ames? I was never there myself, but I feel as if I were acquainted with it, because one of my pet professors at Cornell was old Profie Jones, who once taught there, and who made it a point to be especially nice to students from Iowa. His nephew, Raymond Pearson, who was one of my classmates, told me once he'd like to teach there too." I didn't dream, of course, that nine years later Raymond would be installed there as president.

Sometimes, when it was impossible to get to an outlying farm either by foot or buggy, I could reach it by telephone. Then it was that I realized the important part that "Tel & Tel" wires were destined to play in the development of rural America. A couple of times I spent the night on a "shakedown" in a farmhouse, but usually the telephone saved me from that experience.

I had gone through Cornell without ever sending a telephone message or receiving one. We made our "dates" by personal interview or the help of a trusted messenger. Even in Washington, ordinary householders had not yet begun to think of the telephone as indispensable — like the bathtub. It was not until that very fall, on our return to Washington, that Herbert and I had a telephone installed in our little domicile. Because the neighbors seemed to regard it as a community service, we were not altogether sure whether it was a convenience or a nuisance. But here, in rural Iowa that summer of 1903, I found that,

thanks to the country telephone and the friendly cooperation of the people (as if the whole countryside were one big family), I was able to carry on a good deal of business even when the roads were bad.

I soon made friends with "Central" at important points and often she voluntarily promoted my interests. "John Jones of Lost Creek Farm got a coal mine? Not that I ever heard of. Yes, he's still alive, but he's moved into the next county. Got a telephone? Not he." The next day, she might call me up to say: "You're the lady from Washington, ain't you? Wanting to know about John Jones having a coal mine? Well, they tell me Bill Sowers has bought his place and works a little coal bank on it. Got out quite a lot of coal last winter. Yes, he has a telephone; I'll connect you. You're much obliged, ma'am. No trouble at all."

With but one exception I found everybody kind and cooperative throughout Iowa. Freely, they opened up their simple records for inspection and at times seemed pleased at being shown the form in which the government would like to have the information kept. "And now that's done," the farmer or the farmer's wife would say hospitably, "come out to dinner."

At the dinner table I would usually find not only the farmer's family but his hired "hands," their sunburned faces freshly scrubbed. They were always polite but seldom talkative. Each

man's interest was too centered, I used to think, on piling up as fast and as high as possible a heap of corncobs in front of his plate to leave him any opportunity for interest in strangers. Once I found a colored man among "the hands" eating their dinner with a farmer's family in the western part of the state. Fresh from southern-touched Washington, I remember being rather startled at the sight.

When I came to pay for my dinner at such places, I usually had difficulty. "Oh, that's nothing. We don't want pay for the little bit you ate. What! You have to turn in a voucher for all your meals? Oh, let it go this time. Honest, we don't want your money." I suspected that the hesitation over signing my vouchers was sometimes due to a suspicion that I might be putting something over them. How could they know but that I might have some slick plan for getting their signatures on a mortgage?

Food came to be a major interest with me that summer. I was amazed at first and, finally, decidedly critical that, in the midst of plenty, the people in some instances were hardly what one would call well fed. Since then, thanks to the women's magazines and good school instruction in home economics, all that is changed.

I was used to hearing the men of the Geological Survey tell, after a summer of fieldwork in the southwest or northeast, of how good it was to re-

turn to the fleshpots of Washington and the green things from truck gardens around Chesapeake Bay, but I had not realized until then that the people of my own dear, rich Iowa needed instruction in the preparation of food. Despite Iowa's rich soil capable of growing almost anything, I was seldom offered appetizing meals at the public eating places. I could hear the hens cackling over their new-laid eggs, but when those eggs reached me they were swimming in grease. Meals heavy in starches and carbohydrates were the order of the day. Salads were rarely seen; the use of olive oil was practically unknown; fruits in their natural state were seldom offered.

It was not long until, like all the other drummers, I had the towns of the state mentally catalogued according to the kind of "grub" set forth in their different two-dollars-a-day hotels. Shutling from hotel to hotel, I came to have a feeling of sympathy for the low-spirited, homeless men I met looking for a comfortable haven in which to spend the Sunday holiday. "Two of the best-kept places in the state are run by women," one of them told me. "One is a house at Parsons, where a couple of old maids will give you meals 'like Mother used to make.' I always get there Saturday night if I can. Another is a little hotel at Nashua that is the cleanest place in all the state of Iowa."

Discouraged at the look of the rusty tin tub in

the bathroom at the end of the usual hotel corridor, I know just how glad he must have been to reach Nashua. "Oh, that I might pipe running water into this room," I would sigh as I begged for a pitcher of hot water at the end of a dusty day in a buggy or in the caboose of a freight train, rejoicing if I found plenty of clean towels on the rickety washstand where I sponged the clinging Iowa soil from my tired body. In later years, I have sometimes thought: "Why wasn't I smart enough to write some Emma McChesney stories? Surely I know all the old hotels in Iowa that Edna Ferber's heroine visited when selling her 'Heatherbloom' petticoats."

After encountering the same friendly drummer twice in a hotel carriage, I could smile on meeting his homesick eye. "What's your line?" said a nice chap to me one day, as we drove up to the hotel in Marshalltown in the cab. "I thought it might be corsets or crackers until I noticed that you didn't carry any sample cases. Insurance perhaps? Oh, government stuff! Well, we didn't think of that. Some of us fellows were speculating about you the other day at Anamosa. Wanted to invite you to go with us to see the Penitentiary there but you seemed absorbed in your magazine."

Occasionally I was able to spend Sunday with my little daughter. I remember a Sunday when one of my Fort Madison "in-laws" drove us out to Denmark past the old Academy where he had

received his education. Then I told him how I had glowed with western pride when I came east to Cornell University and found that its president, Charles Kendall Adams, had received his preparation for college at little Denmark Academy in Iowa.

My one disagreeable experience in a dingy hotel ended when the proprietor (who also owned a coal mine) accepted my ultimatum and finally answered a census questionnaire. I left this hotel with great relief, spending the next night in a clean bed in Webster City, where I had a joyful reunion with my old friend, Lottie Crosley. Lottie's father had once been warden of the State Penitentiary at Fort Madison. It was in the gardens roundabout that exemplary institution that Herbert Brown and I had played together in our teenage days — Herbert still likes to tell people he met me in the Penitentiary!

And so I went my more or less pleasant and troubled way that summer, bringing away with me in the fall a composite mental picture of the Hawkeye State that had characteristics I should never have seen had my observations been confined to the industrial towns along our great Mississippi. I received an impression of general well-being and contentment that was gratifying. I saw no real poverty. Nowhere a city slum! Everywhere the signposts of opportunity! I saw many pretty villages and towns. And many very prosperous

looking farms with fields of waving corn, fat cattle, and well-constructed houses with wide porches and big window-panes — sometimes with pretentious towers and cupolas and jig-saw railings. I observed that everywhere thought had been given to the erection of schoolhouses and churches. (I came to Des Moines in time to attend the inspiring Commencement exercises at Drake University.) I was proud that so much had been accomplished by Iowa pioneers in so short a time. The whole smiling land bore eloquent testimony to the industry of the early settlers. It was wonderful to see how satisfactorily this fruitful, beautiful domain had been taken possession of by energetic people of healthy human stock and to note the cultural homogeneity that was coming to characterize it.

And yet, at the last, how hard I worked to get out of my good birthright state! After I had "cleaned up" Iowa, I was to go on to Minnesota. Herbert, in the meantime, was expected to finish his work in the Mesabi Iron Range and proceed to Minnesota too. I could see that if I were very diligent and managed to reach Minneapolis as soon as he did, we might have three weeks together before he had to leave for the Black Hills, but if I dawdled I could not get there much before he had to be off again. "Three weeks!" Elinor Glyn wrote a daring story with that title! Well, to have three weeks with your husband instead of eleven months without him is worthy of a book.

I put on all steam to reach my particular boyfriend. In some of those little towns there was only one passenger train a day. Perhaps another train would go through in the middle of the night. My business usually had to do with one individual only in each place and was soon discharged. I hit on the expedient of saving time by spending a night in two different villages. Going to bed immediately after supper in one town, I could sometimes catch a train out of it in the middle of the night, and, on reaching my destination, finish up the night's sleep in the second town. Thus it happened that I contrived to sleep in something like twenty-nine different beds in the month of June.

Finally I was free to leave Iowa and join Herbert. I traveled all night in a Fourth of July excursion train from Dubuque to Minneapolis, getting what sleep I could curled up in a crowded coach amid excited children, bulging lunch baskets, and harassed parents, and arrived in the early morning at the Hotel Nicollet with a cinder in one eye and a wilted hat (which an excursion child had used for a pillow) flopping over the other eye.

The very correct clerk at the desk looked a little dubious when I told him who I was, but he let me go up to Herbert's room. When my immaculate husband opened the door and saw me standing on the threshold, there was more amazement than affection in his first glance. For a split second, I wondered if he would care to claim me or keep me;

but, magnanimously, he took me in and soon was efficiently removing from my tired person some of the soil I had brought with me from our dear Iowa.

Herbert and I returned to Washington in the fall of 1903. He put his strength into fighting the monopoly of our natural resources, and I put mine into publicizing the efforts of the Geological Survey and the vast resources of our expanding domain in Alaska and the Pacific. Herbert's efforts were warmly supported by Senators William B. Allison, Albert B. Cummins, and Smith W. Brookhart. Meanwhile, I was marching up and down Pennsylvania Avenue with other suffragettes demanding "Votes for Women," knowing full well that the petitions which I carried would be sympathetically received by William S. Kenyon of Fort Dodge.

Yes, times have changed. Our heads are white now. The gas engine has replaced the steam engine as the steam engine was then supplanting the horse and buggy. Iowa is linked now to all the world by automobile roads, by railroads, by waterways, by telephone and telegraph wires, by airplane routes, by thought waves, by electronics, by every kind of imaginable vibration and engine. Whether the changes that have occurred between 1903 and 1953 mean happiness for the human race, only time can tell.

HARRIET CONNOR BROWN

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