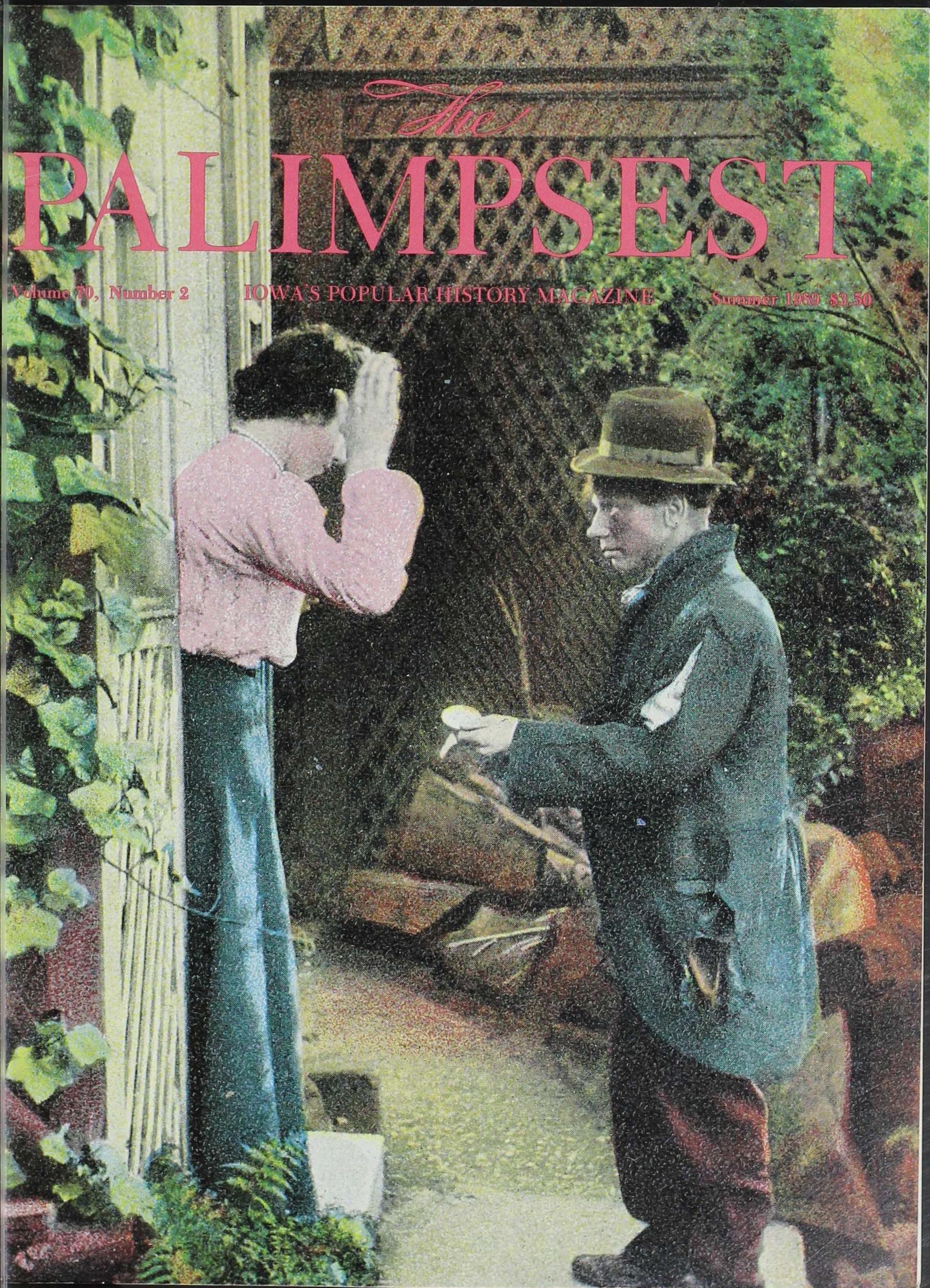


The
PALIMPSEST

Volume 70, Number 2

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Summer 1989 \$3.50

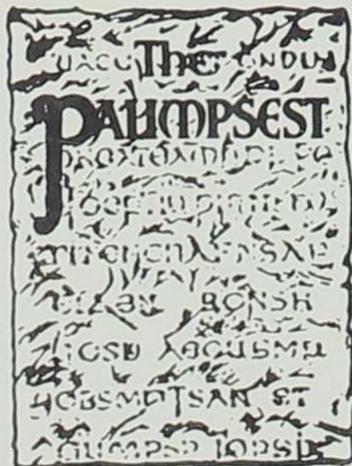


Inside —

ART FISCHBECK COLLECTION, SHSI



Every August the small Iowa town of Britt becomes a magnet for hoboes and tourists during its national hobo convention, featuring a grand parade, king and queen coronation, tours of the hobo jungle, and hobo stew for everyone. The convention has been an annual event since 1933. Above: "Scoopshovel Scotty" (in robe) shakes hands with Harry "King David" Beetison, as William J. Fullon attends, hat in hand (1939). In this *Palimpsest* read about Britt's first hobo convention in 1900, billed as "more fun to the square inch than the town ever saw before." For information on this year's convention, August 11-12, contact Britt's Chamber of Commerce.



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest (*pal 'imp/est*) 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.

THE PALIMPSEST (ISSN 0031-0360) is published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa. © 1989 State Historical Society of Iowa.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA (SHSI) is the historical division of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the State of Iowa. The Society operates in two locations, Des Moines and Iowa City. The museum, historic preservation, and a research library are located at Capitol Complex, Des Moines, Iowa 50319, phone (515) 281-5111. Publications, development, field services, and a research library are located at 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240, phone (319) 335-3916.

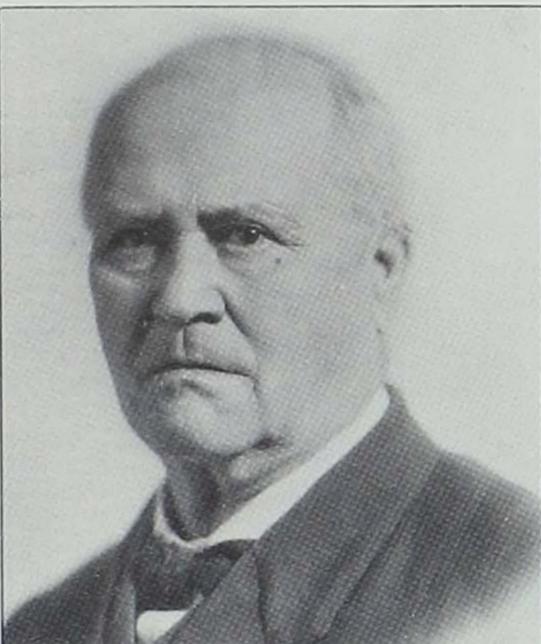


SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS: *The Palimpsest* (quarterly popular history magazine), *Iowa Historian* (bimonthly newsletter), *The Goldfinch* (Iowa history magazine for young people, 4 per school year), *The Annals of Iowa* (quarterly journal), books, research guides, technical leaflets. Catalogs available.

SUBSCRIPTIONS/MEMBERSHIPS/ORDERS: Contact Publications, SHSI, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240, phone (319) 335-3916.

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

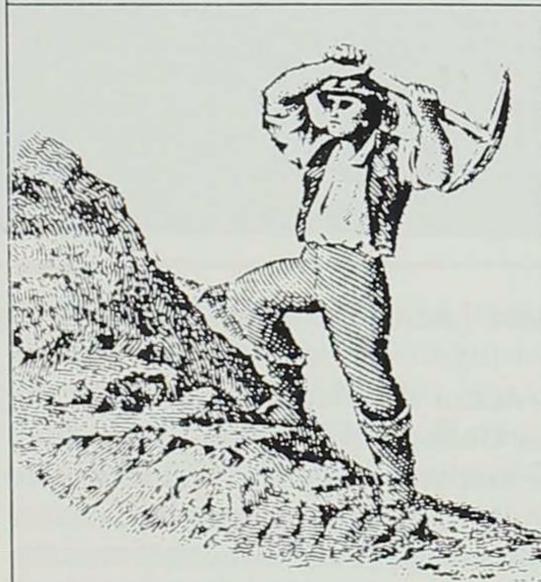
This code (© 1989 State Historical Society of Iowa, ISSN 0031-0360/89/\$1.00) indicates the copyright owner's consent to reproduction of an article for personal or internal use. The consent is granted, however, on the condition that the copier pay the stated per-copy fee of \$1.00 through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 21 Congress Street, Salem, Mass. 01970, for copying beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law. The consent does not extend to other kinds of copying, such as copying for general distribution, for advertising or promotional purposes, for creating new collective works, or for resale.



Bailey boosts Britt 87



Victorian symbols 62



A Dubuque miner 50

COVERS: The tramp motif appears often on picture postcards. Front-cover caption: "Missis, will yer please sew me a shirt on this Button?" On the back: "Coming home by rail."

The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

VOLUME 70, NUMBER 2

SUMMER 1989

- 50 **To Go Free**
by Richard Acton
- 62 **Messages in Stone: Symbolism on Victorian Grave Markers**
by Loren N. Horton
- 73 **Trestump Tombstones in an Iowa Cemetery**
by David A. Brose

Special Section

- 75 **Working and Wandering**
From the editor
- 76 **The 19th-Century Harvest Hand**
by Terry Ofner
- 87 **Britt's First Convention**
by George A. Horton
- 93 **The Postcard Tramp**
- 96 **'You Were Just One of the Unfortunate Ones'**
by Merle Davis
- 103 **Hobo Sketches by an Amana Station Agent**
by Cliff Trumpold
- 107 **Time on Your Hands**
photographs by Chuck Greiner



Editor's note: The following article, "To Go Free," is the first in a series of articles by an author new to the *Palimpsest* and to Iowa. Richard Acton is the name under which the fourth Lord Acton writes. As a barrister, he brings to his study of Iowa history tenacious research skills. As a visitor, he brings the curiosity and objectivity of someone unfamiliar with Iowa.

Acton was born in Shropshire, England in 1941; his ancestors had been of that country since the twelfth century. In recent generations, however, his branch of the family had lived, married, and worked on the continent of Europe. Acton was the first in the direct male line to have been born in England since 1709. Three acts of Parliament were thereafter passed to confirm the family's nationality

— a situation most genealogists perhaps do not encounter.

In March 1988 Acton married a professor at the University of Iowa College of Law, and since then has divided his life between England and Iowa. He has spent his time in Iowa writing, and he became interested in the history of Iowa because it was the home state of his wife, Patricia Nassif Acton. As he had spent much of his life in southern Africa, he became interested in early Iowa race relations and thus became familiar with the case of Ralph. His research has led to a series of articles about early Iowa history that will appear in this and future issues. The following article commemorates the 150th anniversary of the first reported decision by Iowa's territorial supreme court, on July 4, 1839.

To Go Free

by Richard Acton

There were slaves in early Iowa. The first star-spangled banner hoisted at Dubuque, on the Fourth of July, 1834, was made by a black slave woman. Dred Scott is believed to have built a wooden shack on his master's plot near Davenport in the mid-1830s. Sixteen slaves, all at Dubuque, were counted in the Iowa census of 1840, compared to one hundred and seventy-two "free colored persons." The previous year one former slave had been dramatically judged to belong in the ranks of the free. His name was Ralph.

Ralph was born in about 1795. He was a slave in southern Kentucky and belonged to a man

Above: Lithograph of Dubuque in 1845, by J. C. Wild.



Acton is from a family of historians. His cousin, Sir Harold Acton, is a distinguished author of histories of Florence and Naples. A younger brother, the Hon. Dr. Edward Acton, is senior lecturer in Russian history at the University of Manchester, England. His great-grandfather, the first Lord Acton and eminent British historian, may be best known for his phrase: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Acton hopes to continue to divide his time between England, where he will be active in the House of Lords, and Iowa, where he means to try to follow the advice of his great-grandfather to students of history: "Learn as much by writing as by reading."

To Go Free

by Richard Acton

There were slaves in early Iowa. The first star-spangled banner hoisted at Dubuque, on the Fourth of July, 1834, was made by a black slave woman. Dred Scott is believed to have built a wooden shack on his master's plot near Davenport in the mid-1830s. Sixteen slaves, all at Dubuque, were counted in the Iowa census of 1840, compared to one hundred and seventy-two "free colored persons." The previous year one former slave had been dramatically judged to belong in the ranks of the free. His name was Ralph.

Ralph was born in about 1795. He was a slave in southern Kentucky and belonged to a man

Above: Lithograph of Dubuque in 1845, by J. C. Wild.



Editor's note: The following article, "To Go Free," is the first in a series of articles by an author new to the *Palimpsest* and to Iowa. Richard Acton is the name under which the fourth Lord Acton writes. As a barrister, he brings to his study of Iowa history tenacious research skills. As a visitor, he brings the curiosity and objectivity of someone unfamiliar with Iowa.

Acton was born in Shropshire, England in 1941; his ancestors had been of that country since the twelfth century. In recent generations, however, his branch of the family had lived, married, and worked on the continent of Europe. Acton was the first in the direct male line to have been born in England since 1709. Three acts of Parliament were thereafter passed to confirm the family's nationality

— a situation most genealogists perhaps do not encounter.

In March 1988 Acton married a professor at the University of Iowa College of Law, and since then has divided his life between England and Iowa. He has spent his time in Iowa writing, and he became interested in the history of Iowa because it was the home state of his wife, Patricia Nassif Acton. As he had spent much of his life in southern Africa, he became interested in early Iowa race relations and thus became familiar with the case of Ralph. His research has led to a series of articles about early Iowa history that will appear in this and future issues. The following article commemorates the 150th anniversary of the first reported decision by Iowa's territorial supreme court, on July 4, 1839.

Acton is from a family of historians. His cousin, Sir Harold Acton, is a distinguished author of histories of Florence and Naples. A younger brother, the Hon. Dr. Edward Acton, is senior lecturer in Russian history at the University of Manchester, England. His great-grandfather, the first Lord Acton and eminent British historian, may be best known for his phrase: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Acton hopes to continue to divide his time between England, where he will be active in the House of Lords, and Iowa, where he means to try to follow the advice of his great-grandfather to students of history: "Learn as much by writing as by reading."

CASH FOR NEGROES.



I will pay as high cash prices for a few likely young negroes as any trader in this city. Also, will receive and sell on commission at Byrd Hill's, old stand, on Adams-street, Memphis.

BENJ. LITTLE.

500 NEGROES WANTED.



We will pay the highest cash price for all good negroes offered. We invite all those having negroes for sale to call on us at our Mart, opposite the lower steamboat landing. We will also have a large lot of Virginia negroes for sale in the Fall. We have as safe a jail as any in the country, where we can keep negroes safe for those that wish them kept.



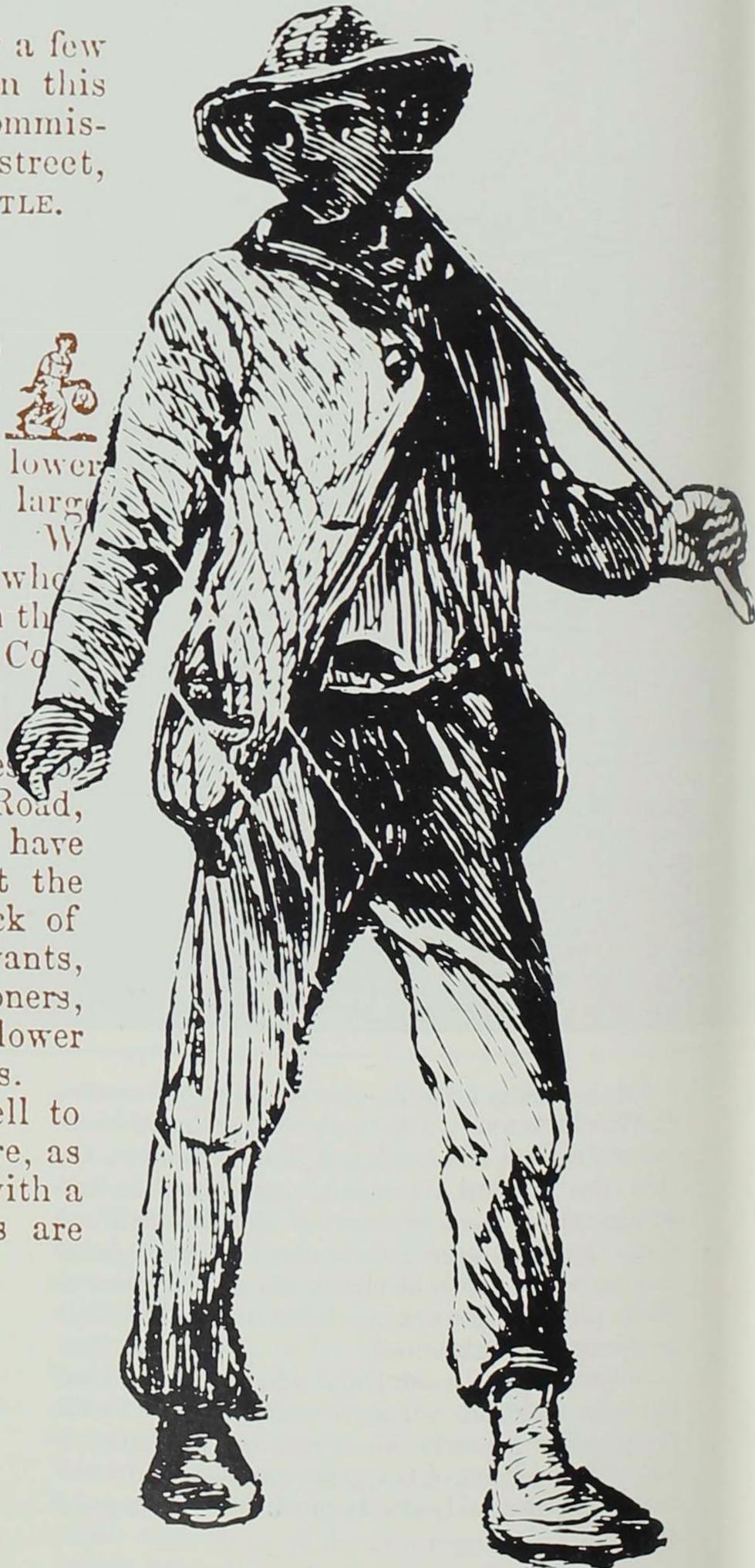
BOLTON, DICKINS & Co

SLAVES! SLAVES! SLAVES!



FRESH ARRIVALS WEEKLY. — Having established ourselves at the Forks of the Road, near Natchez, for a term of years, we have now on hand, and intend to keep throughout the entire year, a large and well-selected stock of Negroes, consisting of field-hands, house servants, mechanics, cooks, seamstresses, washers, ironers, etc., which we can and will sell as low or lower than any other house here or in New Orleans.

Persons wishing to purchase would do well to call on us before making purchases elsewhere, as our regular arrivals will keep us supplied with a good and general assortment. Our terms are liberal. Give us a call.



Slave ads are from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, presenting the original facts and documents upon which the story is founded (1853). Opposite: A portion of the 1830 Kentucky bill of sale records Jordan J. Montgomery's purchase of Ralph, with four other slaves for \$820, from his father. (No images of Ralph are known to exist. The images used here to depict Ralph are taken from nineteenth-century history sources.)

named William Montgomery. On November 5, 1830, Montgomery sold five of his slaves for \$820 to his son. The bill of sale read: "sold to the said Jordan J. Montgomery one negro man by the name of Ralph aged about 35 years." The next two slaves sold were "one negro man, Ben, aged about 80, one negro woman Celia aged about 60 years." (Ben and Celia were the right age to have been Ralph's parents.) Also sold were Harry, aged fifty, and Delilah, aged forty. The bill of sale was registered on the day it was made in Lincoln County, Kentucky — the home of both Montgomerys.

In 1832 Jordan Montgomery moved Ralph and his other slaves to Marion County in northeast Missouri. He registered the Kentucky bill of sale at the county seat, Palmyra, on May 21 of that year. The twenty-seven-year-old Montgomery and his wife Susan had a young family — by 1840 it had grown to seven children under the age of fifteen. Montgomery owned a block of land near Palmyra, and Ralph's life in Missouri was presumably spent as a farm laborer. Montgomery's cash position seems to have deteriorated in the next years, and he took a paid job as county assessor of state taxes for the year 1835. But the previous year he had already taken a step to raise money. He had made a written contract with Ralph to sell him his freedom.

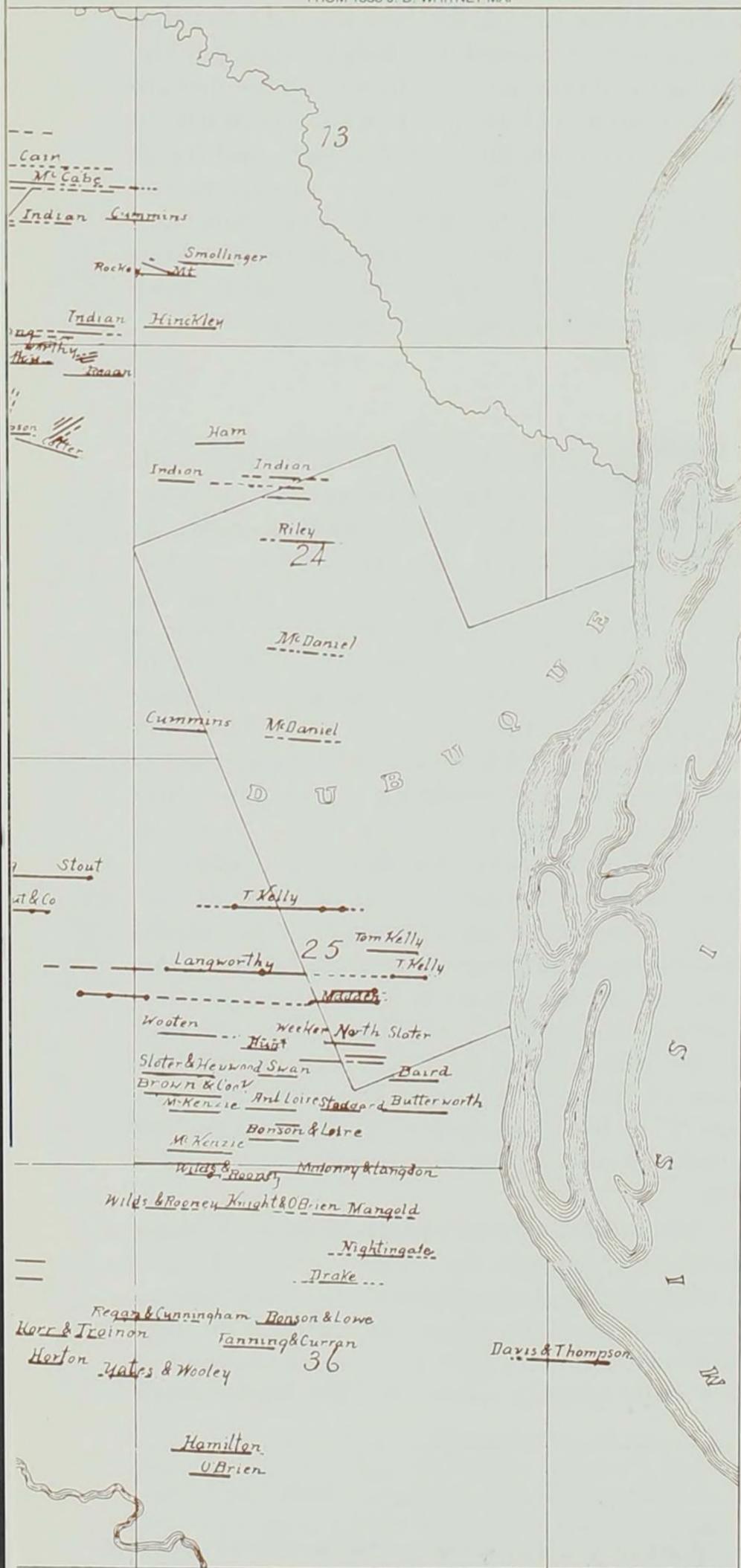
The contract was undoubtedly made for reasons of commerce rather than sentiment. Jordan Montgomery was no abolitionist. He already owned two slaves when he bought Ralph, and he still held a young woman slave in 1840. The price of Ralph's freedom was five hundred dollars, with an additional fifty-dollar payment for his hire. The sale price was about average in Missouri then for a male slave of Ralph's age. Slaves were often hired out by the year, and the going rate for a year's hire was slightly above 10 percent of a slave's market

value. So the fifty-dollar hire fee indicates that the parties envisaged that Ralph would pay the full amount in a year. Fortunes had been made mining lead in Dubuque (in what was shortly to be referred to as the Iowa District), and Ralph hoped to make the necessary money in the mines to buy his freedom. As a precautionary measure, the contract stipulated interest from January 1, 1835. Jordan Montgomery gave Ralph permission to go to Dubuque.

RALPH SET OUT from Palmyra with the contract in his pocket and traveled the three hundred miles to Dubuque. He arrived there in the first half of 1834 and commenced mining for lead. Little is known of his home life. There is reference in a Dubuque miner's 1845 diary to Ralph's wife, but when the marriage took place is unknown. One historian records that a woman named Tilda, who contributed twenty-five cents to the building of the Dubuque Methodist Church in 1834, was a sister of Ralph. But whatever his family and spiritual life, Ralph's lead mining was not a great success. Despite being industrious, he hardly made enough money for food and clothes, let alone to pay Montgomery for his freedom. References to Ralph's lead mining show his diggings a little to the west of Dubuque. Slightly east of Ralph's diggings were the crevices worked by Alexander Butterworth, an Irishman who was to play a vital part in Ralph's life.

Alexander Butterworth left Missouri to mine lead in Dubuque the same year as Ralph. Unlike Ralph, he prospered — in addition to his mine he had a wheat and cattle farm near the town and was a partner in one of Dubuque's few early grocery stores. In 1838 Butterworth

to the said Jordan J. Montgomery one negro man by the name of Ralph aged about 35 years



An 1858 map of Dubuque shows lead deposits mined by Butterworth, McKenzie, and Bonson, names that figure in Ralph's story. Ralph's diggings were probably a little to the west of Butterworth's.

was elected a trustee of the town council of Dubuque and served on the town committee to arrange the dinner to celebrate the birth of the Territory of Iowa on July 4.

Thomas S. Wilson, then district court judge resident at Dubuque, described Butterworth as "noble hearted," a quality he undoubtedly inherited from his spirited old mother. The ancient Mrs. Butterworth was able to date her birth by the fact that she was sixteen when the Catholic Stuart cause had been finally defeated in 1746 at the Battle of Culloden in Scotland. When Butterworth was married in 1837, his mother — then an incredible 107 — danced "quite briskly" at the wedding.

The early population of Dubuque was so small that everybody must have known everybody. Alexander Butterworth and Ralph had adjacent mines, and doubtless Ralph and everyone else frequented Quinlan and Butterworth's grocery store. Ralph and Butterworth were obviously acquainted. But in May 1839 Butterworth would prove they were more than just fellow miners who had both come from Missouri. They were friends.

While Ralph was still toiling in the lead mines, the Iowa Territorial Assembly passed "An Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattoes" in January 1839. Under section 6 of the act, if any person (or his agent) applied to a justice of the peace and proved that a black person was the claimant's property, the justice of the peace was required to direct the sheriff to arrest and deliver the individual to the claimant or agent. This law would affect Ralph's future.

MEANWHILE in Missouri Jordan Montgomery had become county clerk of Marion County. In November 1838 he entered deep financial waters. With three partners he borrowed four thousand dollars from the Bank of the State of Missouri. The terms of the loan required the money to be repaid on May 15, 1839, and Montgomery was liable for the full amount. Montgomery's financial position was extremely weak at the time — in February he was taking advantage of his position as county clerk to borrow \$60.95 from the county. With May approaching there was nothing like the

necessary money to repay the huge loan to the bank. Montgomery was owed \$550 and five years' interest by Ralph. Slave prices had risen since their contract. One source of funds could be tapped; an asset could be realized. Jordan Montgomery sent an agent or agents to Dubuque.

In the last week of May 1839 the Virginians (as the two agents have always been known to historians) swore an affidavit in front of a justice of the peace that Ralph was the property of Jordan Montgomery and that they were his representatives. The justice issued his precept under the Blacks and Mulattoes Act directing the sheriff to deliver Ralph to Montgomery's agents. Ralph was working on his mineral lot a little to the west of Dubuque when he was seized by the sheriff and handed over to the Virginians. They handcuffed him, put him in a wagon, and — deliberately avoiding Dubuque — drove south to Bellevue. There Ralph was taken on board a boat bound for Missouri, and the boat's master confined him in the vessel.

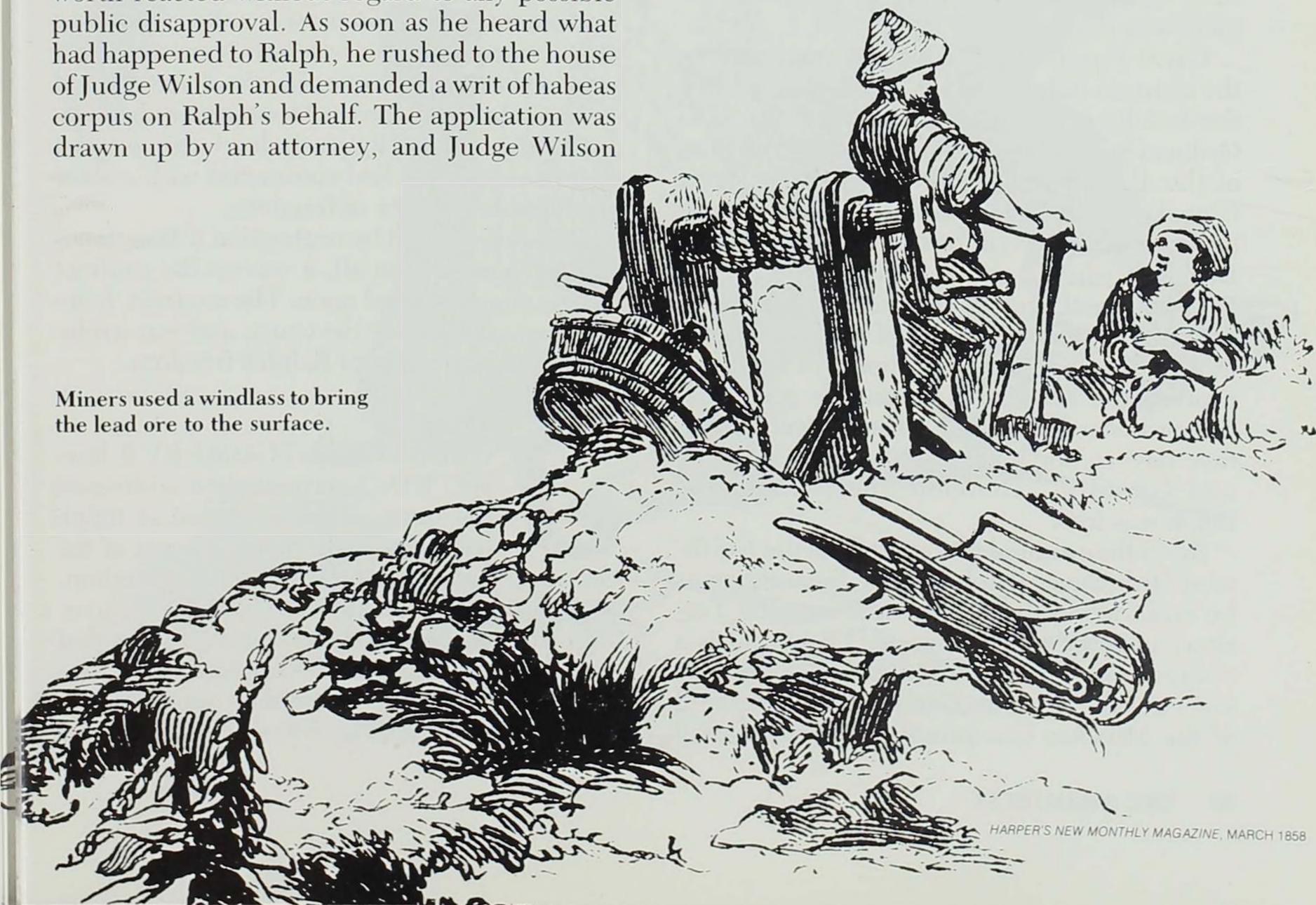
Word of Ralph's fate reached the ears of Alexander Butterworth, who was plowing on his farm on the outskirts of Dubuque. Butterworth reacted without regard to any possible public disapproval. As soon as he heard what had happened to Ralph, he rushed to the house of Judge Wilson and demanded a writ of habeas corpus on Ralph's behalf. The application was drawn up by an attorney, and Judge Wilson

issued the writ of habeas corpus. The sheriff in obedience to the writ galloped off to Bellevue, and Ralph was rescued from the boat. The sheriff returned to Dubuque with Ralph, who appeared before Judge Wilson.

There is no court record of Ralph's appearance in the District Court. The *Iowa News* in Dubuque reported on June 1, 1839: "A case of importance to the owners of slaves in this Territory was last week brought before Judge Wilson, which has not yet been determined, time having been granted for bringing up witnesses at a distance." Judge Wilson later explained how he proceeded: "The case was heard, but at my suggestion was transferred to the Supreme Court of the Territory, because of its importance." The Supreme Court opinion stated that this transfer occurred by agreement of the parties.

The Supreme Court of the Territory of Iowa consisted of Chief Justice Charles Mason, a brilliant New York lawyer, Associate Justice Joseph Williams, a clever and witty Pennsylvanian, and Associate Justice Thomas S. Wilson, a popular Ohioan appointed at the amazing age

Miners used a windlass to bring the lead ore to the surface.



of twenty-four. Each supreme court justice was in addition responsible for the district courts in one of the three districts into which Iowa was divided.

Sitting in Burlington at 8:00 A.M. on July 4, 1839 — the first birthday of the Territory of Iowa — the Supreme Court heard what would become the first case reported in the Iowa Law Reports. The case was *In the matter of Ralph (a colored man) on Habeas Corpus*. The Supreme Court Order Book signed by the chief justice records that only Chief Justice Mason and Associate Justice Williams heard the case. Presumably it was thought unsuitable for Associate Justice Wilson to sit, as the matter had already come before him as judge in the District Court.

The lawyer for Ralph (the petitioner) was the brilliant David Rorer of Burlington, who represented Ralph without charge. Rorer was a native Virginian who had manumitted his own slaves while living in Arkansas. Rorer gave the oral presentation before the Supreme Court and was assisted by his partner W. Henry Starr, J.D. Learned of St. Louis, assisted by John V. Berry of Dubuque, represented Jordan Montgomery (the claimant). The facts had been agreed on by the parties, and the argument was purely on the law.

David Rorer began a lengthy argument to the court on Ralph's behalf. He first urged that the Articles of Compact contained in the 1787 Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States northwest of the river Ohio (known in history as the Northwest Ordinance) applied to Ralph. Ralph had resided at Dubuque when it was part of the Territory of Wisconsin and later when it became part of the Territory of Iowa. By means of section 12 of the Organic Laws (the constitutions) of both territories, the Northwest Ordinance governed. The ordinance provided: "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said Territory." Therefore, Rorer reasoned, Ralph was free.

Rorer then argued that apart from the Northwest Ordinance, Ralph became free as soon as he came to reside in what was now the Territory of Iowa with his master's consent, as a consequence of the 1820 Act of Congress known as the Missouri Compromise. Section 8 of the Missouri Compromise began: "[I]n all

that territory ceded by France to the United States, under the name of Louisiana, which lies north of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes north latitude, not included within the limits of the state contemplated by this act [Missouri], slavery and involuntary servitude . . . shall be, and is hereby, forever prohibited." As the Territory of Iowa lay in the area where slavery was prohibited, and as there was no law by which Ralph could be removed, he was free to exercise his right to remain in Iowa. In support of this argument Rorer relied on various authorities, and concluded with an appeal to "much earlier and higher authority" — the law of the prophet Moses.

The Blacks and Mulattoes Act of 1839 had prohibited blacks from settling in Iowa without evidence of freedom and the posting of a five hundred dollar bond. But Rorer argued that as Ralph had come to Dubuque before the Territory of Iowa was founded (in fact, before there was even a civil government in the area at all), Ralph could not be said to have violated that law. Furthermore, Ralph was not a fugitive slave under the Blacks and Mulattoes Act or under the laws of the United States. He had come to Iowa by the voluntary consent and agreement of his former owner. By permitting Ralph to come for an indefinite period to that part of the United States in which slavery had been prohibited, Jordan Montgomery had virtually manumitted Ralph. Indeed, the very fact that Montgomery had contracted with a slave presupposed a state of freedom.

Rorer concluded by urging that if Montgomery had a remedy at all, it was on the contract for the money agreed upon. The contract, however, was not before the court, and was irrelevant to the question of Ralph's freedom.

JORDAN MONTGOMERY'S lawyer, J.D. Learned, then addressed the court. He argued that as Ralph had failed to perform his part of the contract by not paying the price of his freedom, he should be regarded as a fugitive slave. Accordingly, he could be claimed under that section of the Missouri Compromise that provided: "[A]ny person escaping into [the territory thus set apart], from whom labor or



service is lawfully claimed, in any state or territory of the United States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid."

He further urged that slavery was not prohibited in the Territory of Iowa. The Missouri Compromise was not intended to affect the rights of individuals without further legislative action. It was merely meant to direct local legislatures to pass laws prohibiting slavery. And the Missouri Compromise contained no sanction and consequently had no binding force.

Alternatively, Learned argued, even if the Missouri Compromise was intended to operate without further legislation, it did not work as a forfeiture of slave property. So it would go no further in this case than to merely require Montgomery to remove his property (Ralph) out of the territory. Learned compared the case to one of property invested in private banking contrary to the provisions of a statute, where although the owner might be made liable, the property would not be confiscated.

THE SUPREME COURT issued its decision the same day. In the handwritten record of its proceedings of July 4, 1839, were the following words: "[I]t is therefore ordered and adjudged that he [Ralph] be discharged from further duress and restraint, and that he go hence."

The unanimous opinion of the Supreme Court (made available to the press within two days) was written by Chief Justice Mason. The opinion first dealt with procedural irregularities — the case had come before the Supreme Court by none of the ordinary methods of application in an appellate court. Nevertheless, "[t]he proceedings having been transferred to this court, it will be proper for us to make such a disposition of the matter as might have been made by the District Judge while the subject was before him."

The court roundly dismissed the argument of Montgomery's lawyer that because Ralph had failed to pay the price of his freedom he should be regarded as a fugitive slave: "Such a construction would introduce almost

unqualified slavery into all the free States. . . . We cannot countenance such a doctrine. . . . [T]he claimant permitted his slave to come to this Territory. The permission seems to have been absolute; but there was also an understanding that the latter was to pay the former a certain amount, as the price of his freedom. How the failure to comply with this understanding could render a removal, undertaken with the master's consent, an escape, we are unable to comprehend." Although Ralph should, indeed, pay the debt, the court stated that "no man in this territory can be reduced to slavery" for failure to do so.

The court also rejected the argument that the Missouri Compromise was a mere naked declaration requiring further action and sanction by the given territory: "Congress possesses the supreme power of legislation in relation to the Territories, and its right to prohibit slavery, at least in relation to slaves subsequently introduced, is doubtless legitimate. Has that right been exercised in relation to this Territory? The language of the Act of 1820, in relation to the district of country in which this Territory is embraced, is, that slavery therein 'shall be, and is hereby, forever prohibited.' This seems to us an entire and final prohibition, not looking to future legislative action to render it effectual."

The court dealt with the additional argument that the Missouri Compromise, if applicable, did not work a forfeiture of slave property: "It is true that the Act . . . does not, in express terms, declare a forfeiture of slave property, but it does, in effect, declare that such property shall not exist."

The court continued: "The master who, subsequently to that Act, permits his slave to become a resident here, cannot, afterwards, exercise any acts of ownership over him within this Territory. The law does not take away his property in express terms, but declares it no longer to be property at all."

The opinion went on to reject the argument that private banking was indistinguishable from slaveholding: "Property, in the slave, cannot exist without the existence of slavery: the prohibition of the latter annihilates the former, and, this being destroyed, he becomes free."

In the light of its ruling under the Missouri

Compromise, the court apparently felt it was unnecessary to consider Rorer's argument that Ralph was also free by virtue of the Northwest Ordinance. The opinion ended with a powerful statement of principle: "When, in seeking to accomplish his object, [the claimant] illegally restrains a human being of his liberty, it is proper that the laws, which should extend equal protection to men of all colors and conditions, should exert their remedial interposition. We think, therefore, that the petitioner should be discharged from all custody and constraint, and be permitted to go free. . . ."

THE SUPREME COURT DECISION was a major item of news. It was prominently reported by both Burlington newspapers in their next editions, and the following week both newspapers printed Chief Justice Mason's opinion in full. One of the papers, the *Iowa Patriot*, commented: "This decision will doubtless secure the approbation of all who profess to be the friends of humanity and law throughout the Country, and obtain for the Judiciary of the infant Territory of Iowa a name abroad, which could not, under other circumstances, have been gained."

The immediate reaction of slave owners in the Territory of Iowa is not recorded. The following year, however, the heads of eleven Dubuque families announced their defiance of the law to the assistant marshal who took the federal census. He enumerated sixteen slaves among these eleven households. Instances of slavery continued to be reported, and as late as

1852 a man called L.P. "Tune" Allen brought two young slaves into Iowa from North Carolina. He held them there a year and then sold them to someone in Missouri.

Following the Supreme Court's decision, Ralph continued his mining in Dubuque. Judge Wilson reported that "he afterwards struck a big lode, but gambled it away." Certainly the scattered references to Ralph in the contemporary diary of Richard Bonson, an Englishman who ran a blast furnace and mined lead in Dubuque, showed that Ralph had erratic fortunes. In August 1841 the diarist was "weighing Rafe's mineral." A year later he went to Mackenzie's diggings "to take [over] Rafe's part of the diggins." In October 1844, however, Bonson was "weighing for Black Rafe" again. Ralph's fortunes seem to have taken a new plunge in 1845. In May Bonson's wife was sick, and Bonson, needing domestic help, went to town "to get Black Rafe's wife to come and stop with us," and on July 14 "had . . . Rafe spading in garden." Later that month Ralph was again in front of Judge Wilson in the Dubuque County District Court. A blacksmith named William Newman had judgment awarded against "Rafe Montgomery" for \$17.37 with court costs of \$1.64.

By the late 1840s the golden age of Dubuque lead mining was over. During that decade the black population had declined by more than half, and Muscatine had overtaken Dubuque as

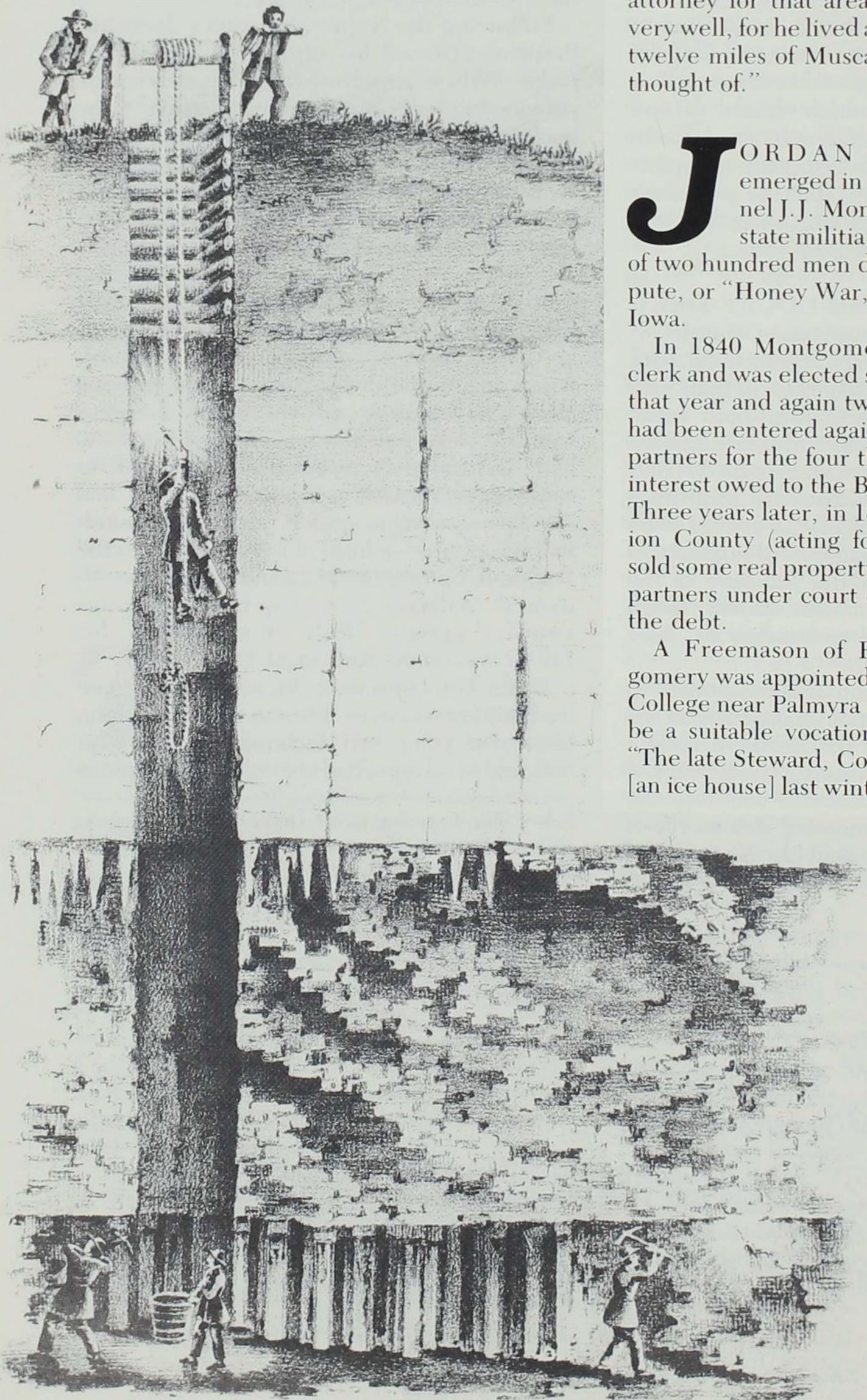
Below: The Supreme Court Order Book (Volume A, 1838-1853) states the court's decision in "Jordan J. Montgomery vs. Ralph, a man of color."

Thursday morning July 11. 1839. Court met pursuant to adjournment. Present, Charles Mason Chief Justice, and Joseph Williams associate.

Jordan J. Montgomery

Ralph a man of color

And now on this day, this cause was submitted to the Court by consent, on a case of facts stated and on file; and it appearing to the satisfaction of the Court, on argument of Counsel, that the said "Ralph a man of color, is free by operation of Law; it is therefore ordered and adjudged, that he be discharged from further duress and restraint, and that he go hence without day



the largest center of black residents in Iowa. Ralph seems at least to have found a measure of tranquility. T.S. Parvin, at one time district attorney for that area, said: "I knew [Ralph] very well, for he lived and died on a farm within twelve miles of Muscatine where he was well thought of."

JORDAN MONTGOMERY emerged in December 1839 as Colonel J.J. Montgomery of the Missouri state militia commanding a regiment of two hundred men during the boundary dispute, or "Honey War," between Missouri and Iowa.

In 1840 Montgomery resigned as county clerk and was elected sheriff of Marion County that year and again two years later. Judgment had been entered against Montgomery and his partners for the four thousand dollar debt and interest owed to the Bank of Missouri in 1840. Three years later, in 1843, the coroner of Marion County (acting for Sheriff Montgomery) sold some real property of Montgomery and his partners under court order towards satisfying the debt.

A Freemason of Palmyra Lodge, Montgomery was appointed steward of the Masonic College near Palmyra in 1844. It proved not to be a suitable vocation. His successor wrote: "The late Steward, Col. Montgomery, erected [an ice house] last winter, the roof of which fell

In the 1840s Ralph continued to mine lead in Dubuque. Here, a cross-sectional view of a lead deposit. (From David Dale Owens, Senate Document 407, Congressional Series #437)

in with the first heavy rain last spring . . . if it were repaired, its location is so distant from the refectory that it would be comparatively of little value." Montgomery's farming efforts were similarly unfortunate: "The farm has been occupied by . . . the Steward for the purposes of husbandry, and so far as the Steward is concerned, has yielded no profit this year. . . . The yield of the crop would have been considerably larger, but for the wretched condition of the fencing, allowing much to be destroyed by horses and hogs." In June 1845 the Board of Curators of the Masonic College reported that they had ended Montgomery's career as steward. Jordan Montgomery moved to St. Louis, where he became an insurance agent and lived in the house of one of his sons. Thirty years earlier he had owned at least five slaves and a considerable amount of land. By 1860 his net assets had dwindled to \$1,400.

THE DECISION in Ralph's case stood for seventeen years and was followed in such lower Iowa court cases as Rachel Bundy (1841) and Jim White (1848). The principle of law in *In the matter of Ralph* was annulled by the majority of the United States Supreme Court in the 1857 decision *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which Abraham Lincoln called "an astonisher in legal history." Ralph's case was not cited by any of the justices in their opinions in *Dred Scott*.

A very eminent jurist considered the place of *In the matter of Ralph* in history. In 1906 the Honorable John F. Dillon said: "True it is that the Dred-Scott decision afterwards rendered was in direct conflict with Judge Mason's decision on Ralph's case. But in the civil war, a higher body than either of those courts, namely the American people, in their primary and sovereign capacity, overruled the Dred-Scott decision and re-established the doctrines of the Iowa court in Ralph's case."

Although Ralph had benefited from the law of habeas corpus, many laws of the first years of Iowa discriminated against black residents. From the very beginning the congressional act setting up the Territory of Iowa in 1838 had given the vote to white male citizens only. During the next four years a battery of racist laws were passed: schools were opened only to

whites; the militia was confined to free white males; blacks coming to Iowa were required to produce a certificate of freedom and a five hundred dollar bond; blacks were prohibited from being witnesses against whites in any court case; marriages of blacks and whites were declared illegal and void; and statutory relief of the poor was denied to blacks. Just six months after the decision in his case, Ralph was even denied the vote in his own town — the "Act to incorporate the City of Du Buque" limited the municipal franchise to white male citizens.

But to Ralph the freedom of Iowa was infinitely preferable to the slavery of Missouri. One morning several years after the court case Judge Wilson, who had issued the writ of habeas corpus, found Ralph working in the judge's Dubuque garden. Judge Wilson asked him why he was there. Ralph replied: "I want to work for you one day every spring to show you that I never forget you." — A gesture of gratitude for the right to go free. □

NOTES ON SOURCES

The information on Kentucky and Missouri is from records in the offices of the Marion County (Missouri) circuit and county clerks; federal censuses; Masonic pamphlets; R. I. Holcombe, *History of Marion County Missouri 1884* (reprint; Hannibal, The Marion County Historical Society, 1979); Harrison Anthony Trexler, "Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865," *Johns Hopkins Univ. Studies in Historical and Political Science*, ser. 32, no. 2 (1914). The report of the case is in Bradford's Reports (Galena, 1840) and Morris Reports (Iowa City, 1840). Ralph's Dubuque life is from "Address of Judge T. S. Wilson at the Opening of the Supreme Court-room," *Iowa Historical Record* (April 1887), pp. 460-61, and a typed copy of Richard Bonson's manuscript diary located at the Dubuque County Historical Society. Butterworth's life is from Dubuque contemporary newspaper accounts and county histories. The details of Ralph's arrest are from Judge Wilson's accounts and J. A. Bradford, *Reports of the Decisions of the Supreme Court of Iowa . . .* (Galena: Pub. by Order of the Legislature, 1840), pp. 3-7. The original summary of the judgment is in the Supreme Court Order Book, vol. A (1838-1853). Other authorities include Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978); Lucius M. Langworthy, "Dubuque, its history etc.," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 8 (1910), p. 417; (1910); Robert R. Dykstra, "Dr. Emerson's Sam: Black Iowans Before the Civil War," *Palimpsest* (May/June 1982) and "White Men, Black Laws: Territorial Iowans and Civil Rights, 1838-1843," *Annals of Iowa* (Fall 1982); Theodore S. Parvin, "The Early Bar of Iowa," *Historical Lectures Upon Early Leaders in the Professions*; Hon. John F. Dillon, "Early Iowa Lawyers and Judges," *The American Lawyer* (June 1906); contemporary Dubuque and Burlington newspaper accounts; the federal census; and early statutes of Territorial Iowa. An annotated version of this article is on file at the State Historical Society in Iowa City.



Messages in Stone:

Symbolism on Victorian Grave Markers

by Loren N. Horton
photos by Gerald Mansheim

ALTHOUGH many people have studied the gloomier symbols on grave markers in eighteenth-century New England, fewer have studied the emotional, the romantic, the sentimental symbols used on grave markers during the Victorian period, when the major part of the United States was settled and developed. The symbols followed the frontier and seem remarkably similar, from Ohio and Michigan in the East to California and Oregon in the West. The settlement and development of Iowa fits almost perfectly within the Victorian period (roughly 1840–1910), making Victorian grave markers a wonderful case study of the symbols used during that exuberant time.

Although few groups in history used symbols with greater enthusiasm than the Victorians, ornamentation and decoration are basic to all cultures and historical periods. Through ornamentation the articles of everyday life are made visually pleasing, and colors and designs are used to soften the tedious work underway with the utensil or tool involved. As use of particular types of decoration or ornamentation become more traditional, they acquire common meanings, becoming part of that group's communication techniques. Because the Victorians

extended their use of symbols to grave markers, the shapes and sizes of the markers, and the ornamentation, words, or numbers placed on them, can be read as clues to the Victorians' personal or cultural taste.

Besides marking graves with elaborate grave stones, the Victorians surrounded the graves with non-functional objects. Fences, gates, benches, flowers, shrubs, trees, ponds, bridges, and urns were commonly found in cemeteries after 1831, a turning point in cemetery appearances. That year was the founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was the first so-called "rural" or "garden" cemetery, and one of the earlier uses of the word *cemetery*. A cemetery, from its Greek root, means a large dormitory where many people are sleeping. This is an entirely different concept from the earlier terms of "burying ground" or "grave yard." Mount Auburn utilized the topography so that walkways and driveways curved with the contours of the hills. (In such cemeteries the Victorians suspended their practice of placing all grave markers facing the same direction, believing that the deceased could then rise up facing east at the Second Coming of Christ.) Non-native species of trees were planted, lagoons created, shrubs and flowers introduced, and the whole atmosphere was as much like a park as a place for graves. Because parks were uncommon, people used the cemeteries for this purpose. Sunday afternoons might be spent visiting the

The overturned basket would have portrayed death to the Victorians. The plethora of symbols on this grave marker show many aspects of the Victorian language of symbolism. More examples appear on the following pages.

family plot in the cemetery and might include a picnic lunch or a tea at the site. Fences and gates set one plot off from another, much as the fences and gates at one's home did. Benches were for sitting on, the walkways were for strolling, and the driveways were for leisurely drives in good weather to admire the botanical specimens throughout the cemetery.

In such a context, grave markers became more ornate as different materials came into use, the technology of carving and inscribing changed, and the meaning of many symbols came to be standardized. It was literally possible to transmit a message about the deceased by what symbols were placed on the grave marker. For example, some of the Victorians' language of flowers, used for social communication, was transferred to use on grave markers. Just as a lover might send a message to his beloved in the choice of flowers in a bouquet, so might a survivor send a message to the cemetery visitor about the deceased in the choice of flowers carved on the grave marker. Likewise, in the elaborate language of leaves, oak leaves, common for a man's grave marker, symbolized strength of faith (not physical strength). Ivy symbolized steadfastness of faith; palm leaves (sometimes mistakenly portrayed as ferns) symbolized salvation of the soul. Other categories of symbols include trees, musical instruments, architectural details, household furnishings, lodge and military emblems, fruit, pagan symbols (the urn and seashell), and Christian symbols (angels, palm leaves, and the gates of heaven). Numerous biblical verses were used to support the meanings of the symbols. The following photos from midwestern cemeteries illustrate some of the major categories of symbols.

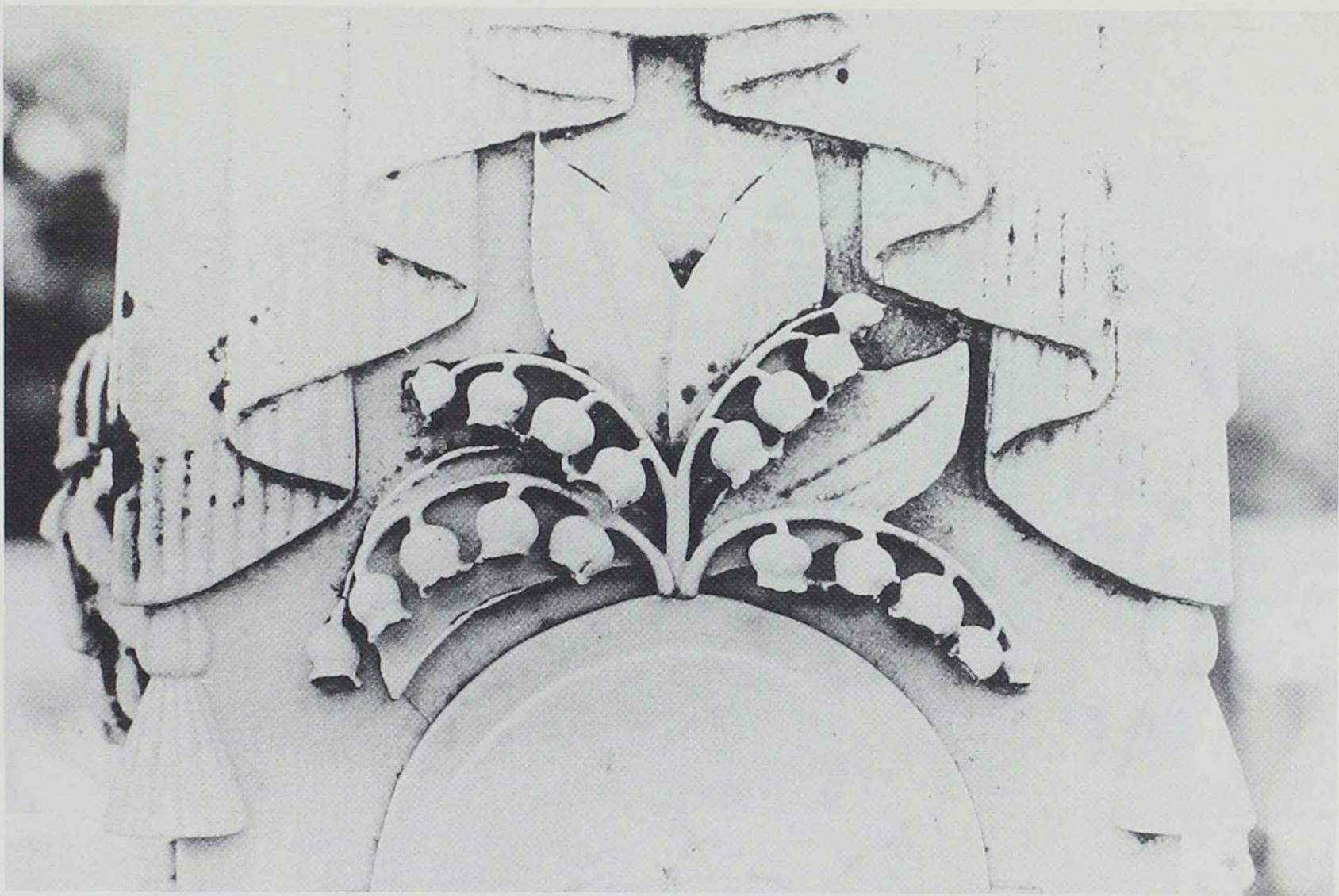
The Victorian period was a time of conspicuous spending in life and in death. Homes were large and elaborate when financial resources allowed it, interior furnishings and decorations were equally elaborate, and clothing clearly indicated wealth and social status, or the lack thereof. Because the attitude about the remains of the deceased was that they were resting or sleeping, it was thought desirable and proper to surround the resting place with familiar objects. Large and elaborate markers were covered with symbols of the

articles the deceased could have afforded and enjoyed during life. Pillows, baskets, cradles, chairs, and beds all signified the repose of the body, just as the heavenly symbols signified the repose of the soul.

Although many twentieth-century symbols are the same ones the Victorians used, they may now have different meanings or no commonly known meanings at all. Today one probably chooses a symbol because it is attractive or because one simply likes it. In the Victorian period, however, the survivors chose particular symbols, confident that their "message" would be commonly understood. This transition in the use and meaning of symbols from the nineteenth to the twentieth century is little understood. In studying Victorian grave marker symbols, we must be careful to not let our twentieth-century values and standards interfere, and to not read the symbols as fact. Although nineteenth-century guidebooks for stone carvers indicated what certain symbols meant, some people undoubtedly used certain symbols because they liked them, had a personal association with them, or were imitating their neighbors' choices. The tendency to conform was strong in the Victorian mind, particularly the middle-class mind. (Even if one were not in the middle class, one might like to behave as if one were.) Meanings of symbols discussed here are what most of the people probably thought most of the time. Nevertheless, the grave markers of the Victorians, and the symbols used on them, are vivid manifestations of the thoughts and ideas of an interesting and important historical period.

NOTE ON SOURCES

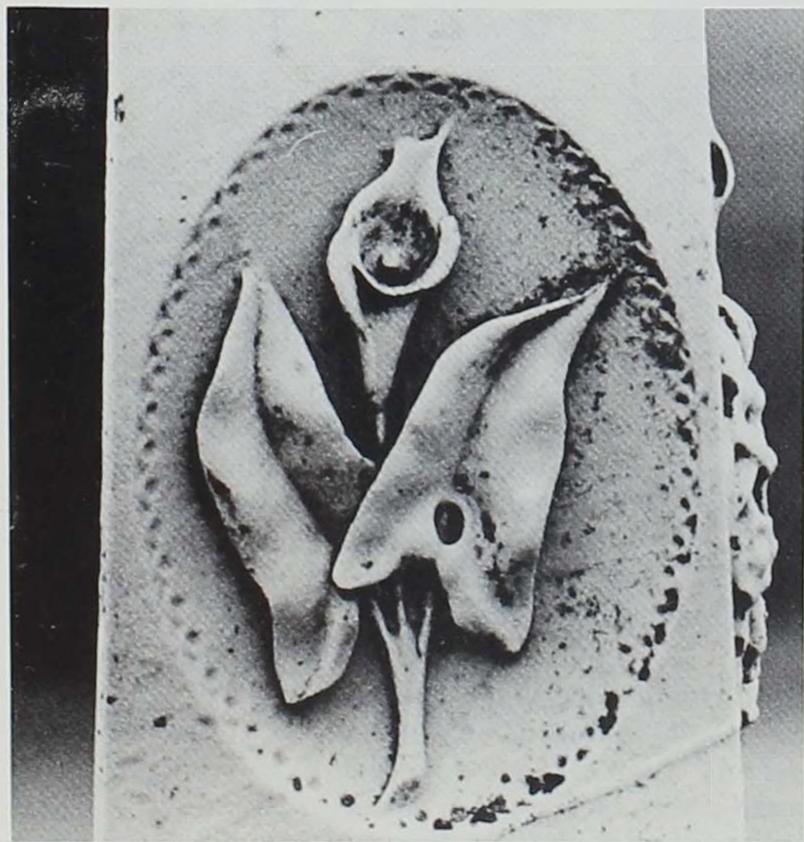
The best short account of the rural cemetery movement and the founding of Mount Auburn is Barbara Rotundo, "The Rural Cemetery Movement," *Essex Institute Historical Collection*, 109 (July 1973), 231-40. See also Thomas Bender, "The Rural Cemetery Movement: Urban Travail and the Appeal of Nature," *The New England Quarterly* 47 (June 1974), 196-211. A good account of gravestone symbolism in Iowa is found in Coleen Nutting, "Cemetery Symbolism of Prairie Pioneers: Gravestone Art and Social Change in Story County, Iowa," *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*, 31 (1984), 1-135. Another is Joan I. Unsicker, "Forgotten Images: Nineteenth Century Gravestone Motifs in Peoria County," *Western Illinois Regional Studies*, 5 (Fall 1982), 172-83. Between 1856 and 1872 Joseph B. Robinson published guide books for stone carvers with designs for grave markers, monuments, and churchyard memorials. The nineteenth-century etiquette books are also rich sources of the meanings of symbols, and other symbols used at that time.

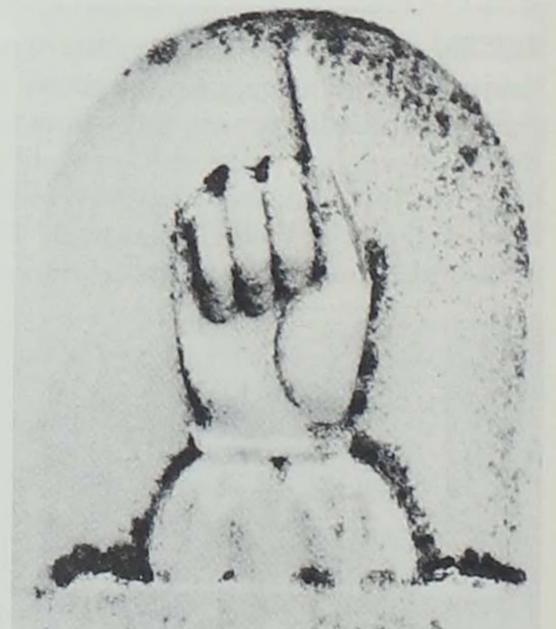
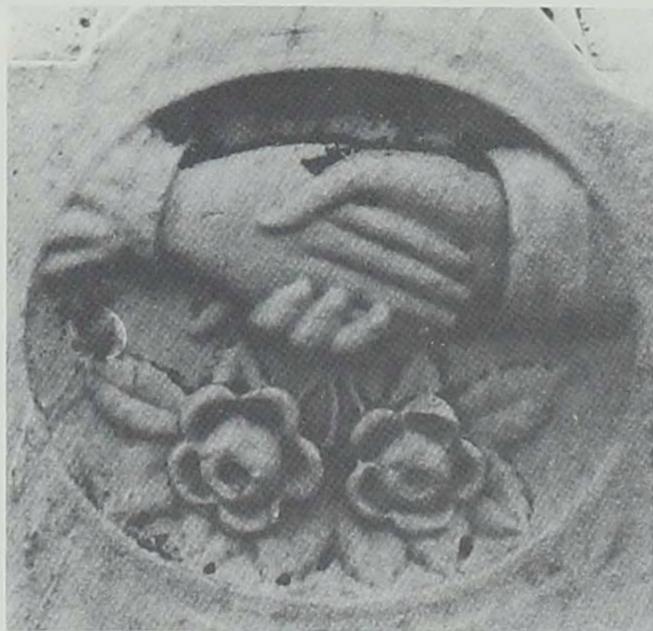


The lily and the lily of the valley symbolize purity and innocence, and appear on the grave markers of female children and adolescents and young unmarried women. Rarely used for male children, lilies were virtually unknown for adolescent boys or young men. This perhaps suggests a Victorian attitude that girls might be pure and innocent, but boys never could be.



The rose adorned grave markers as a stylized rosette in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and became more realistic in the Victorian era and twentieth century. The rosebud with a broken stem (above), or two roses and a bud (indicating parents and child) often were used for the death of a child. A rose symbolizes love and beauty. Beauty meant the quality of the soul and the life lived, rather than physical beauty. Roses in full bloom are used for adults, often for women. A bouquet of roses magnifies the quality of a single rose.





The hand appears in several designs. A broken link in a chain (upper left) symbolizes the death of a family member. (This is not to be confused with the IOOF lodge symbol of three links.) Clasped hands may mean the eternal unity of a husband and wife; the clergy's blessing on the soul; the fellowship of a lodge; or even God's welcome to eternal life. A forefinger pointing up means that the soul has gone to heaven. A hand reaching down and forefinger pointing downwards does not mean the soul has gone to hell, but that God's hand is lifting the soul up to heaven.



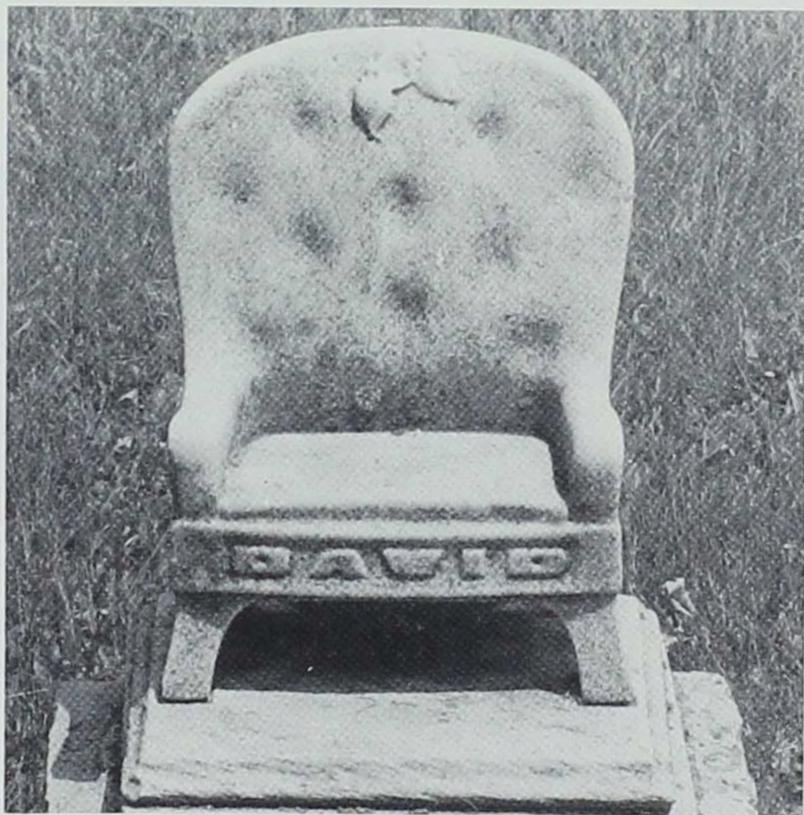
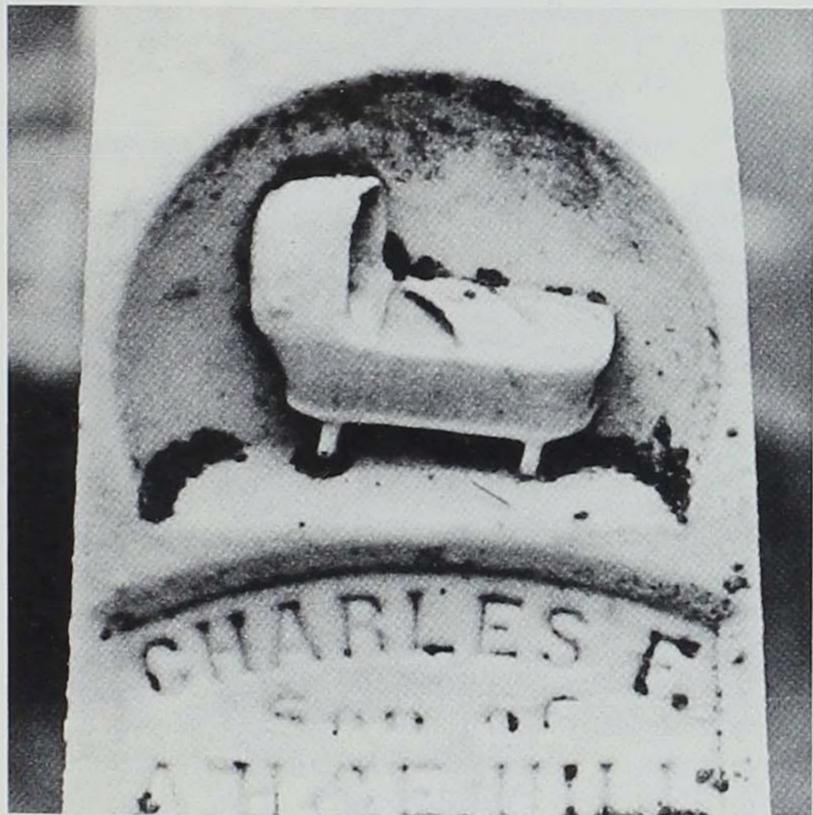
Measurements of time are less common symbols but among the most dramatic. Clocks and watches are often stopped at the hour of the death. Sun dials are also used. The hourglass is an ancient symbol of life and death. A winged hourglass has double meaning: the sands of time have run out and the soul is flying to heaven.

Just as the Victorians furnished their homes with an abundance of objects, so they carried out this same theme of "more is better" in their cemeteries. Surrounding the dead with objects reminiscent of that with which they lived was all a part of the Victorian idea of the dead only sleeping.

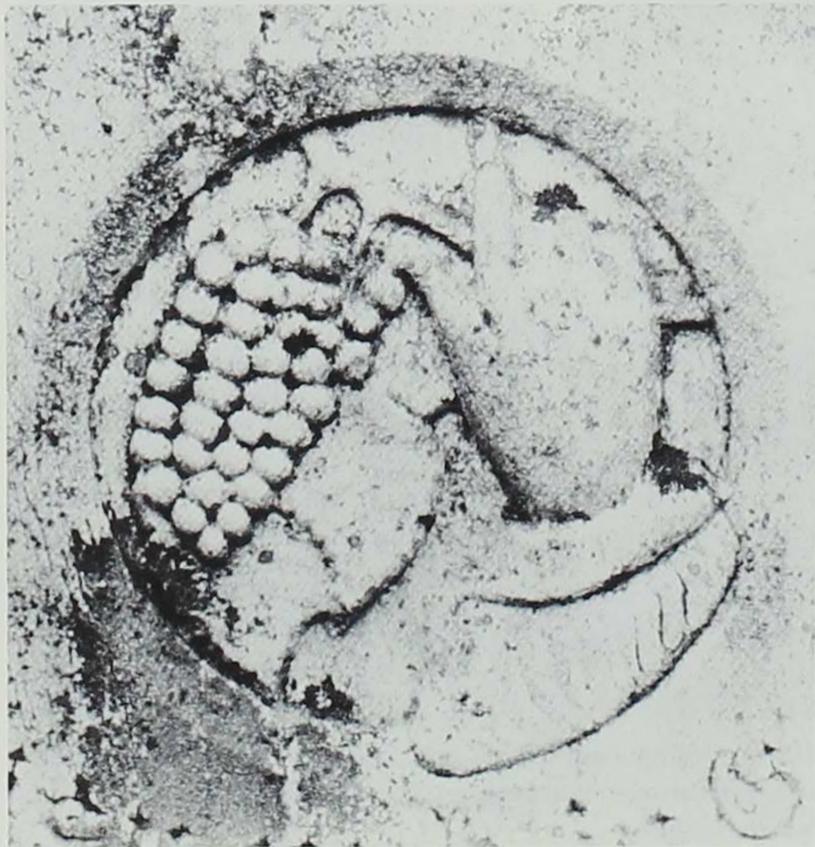
Any kind of drapery (sometimes on pedestals) represents an even more obvious relationship to household furniture. The folds of the draperies (right) are often carved with much detail, and the fringe and tasseled cords are all intended to make the deceased feel at home in the cemetery. The pedestal likewise acts as a piece of furniture. An object such as a Bible, a wreath, a dove, or an urn might rest on it. (Occasionally pedestals may be stylized obelisks, which is quite another concept indeed. The obelisk is an Egyptian symbol, and to the Victorians anything Egyptian was automatically associated with death.)



The classical architectural symbol of the pillar or column takes many forms. The complete pillar is simply a feature borrowed from a building, again with the idea of making the dead feel at home in the new surroundings. Fluted or smooth, it may have ivy vines creeping up the side or torches at the base. It may be surmounted with an urn or have wreaths draped over the top. A broken or incomplete column, however, symbolizes a life ended. This is another example of the borrowing of pre-Christian objects. The classical Greek column could become, for the Victorians, a useful symbol of death, just as could the Egyptian obelisk.



While an empty cradle or chair symbolizes the loss of that individual, it also represents the provision of familiar objects for the deceased. A representation of a child resting in a cradle or bed (above) was often used. A chair sometimes held a hat or shoes and stockings, as if the child had just undressed for the night.



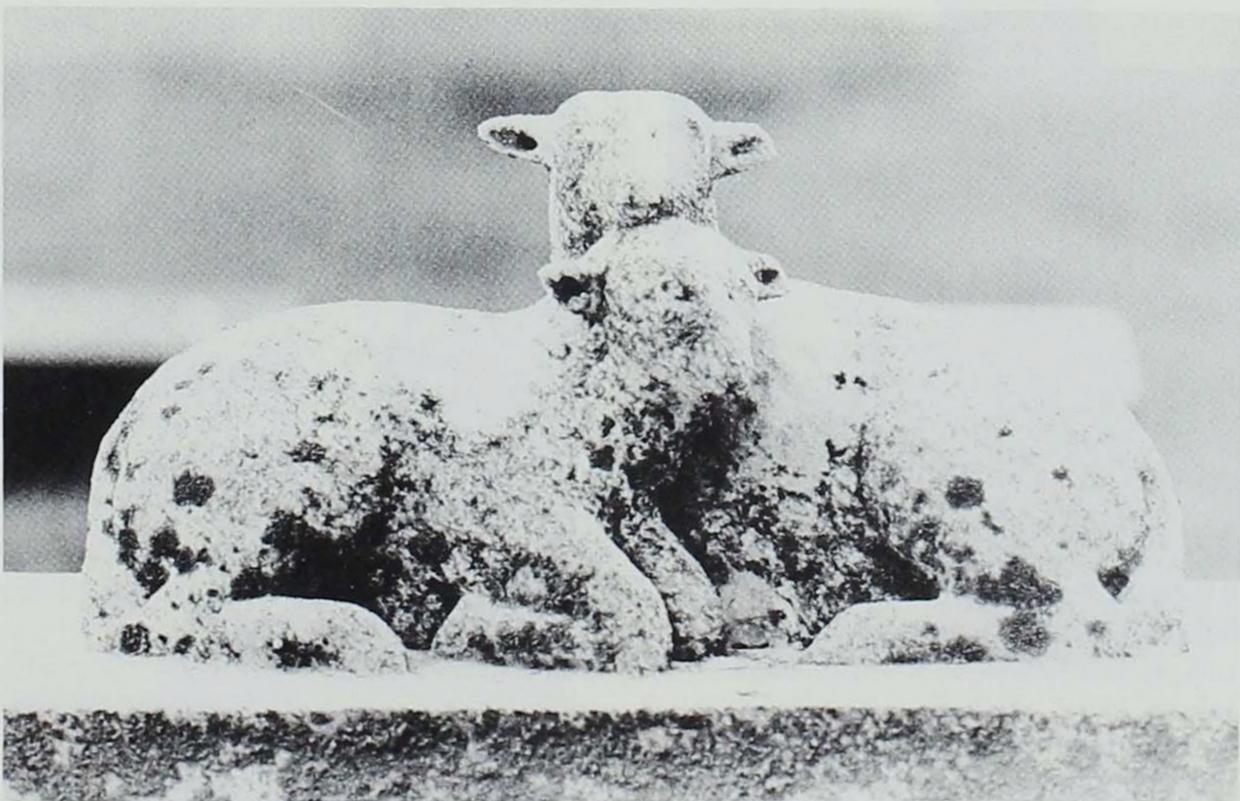
Wheat usually appears bundled into a sheaf and is ordinarily used on the grave markers of persons of fully mature years. Wheat is harvested when it is ripe and fully matured, and so with elderly people, to the Victorian frame of mind. If they have reached the biblical span of years, then they may be harvested to live in heaven. To the Victorians, this was exchanging a life with the probability of pain and suffering for a life where God would wipe away all tears. And, of course, it assured the survivors of the salvation of the soul of the deceased.

Sometimes a scythe or sickle appears with the wheat or alone on the grave markers of persons who have reached a maturity of years. In Revelation 14:18 is written, "Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe." Prior to the Victorian era, the scythe commonly appeared with a skeleton. It was a bald indication that life was short, people were sinners, and the grim reaper would inevitably come. Even softened with the Victorian ideas, the scythe and sickle are among the gloomier of the symbols used on grave markers.

A cluster of grapes (left) ordinarily means that the deceased was of mature years, ripe and ready for harvest by God. Rarely found with other fruits, grapes often appear in multiples of clusters. (The meaning of grape leaves separate from the fruit is obscure.)



When a book is portrayed on a grave marker and the words "Holy Bible" are not carved on it, it is most likely a book of life in which the good and bad deeds of the deceased are written. It may be open, closed, held in a hand, or sitting on its edge. A closed book suggests the finality of life. An open book, with one or both pages blank, suggests that the final acts have been written. There are no more words to be written and no reason to turn to a fresh page.



Symbolizing purity and innocence, the lamb often marks the death of a child. This Christian symbol relates to biblical references to Christ as the shepherd, believers as the flock, and body of the church as the sheep of His pasture. Perhaps one of the three or four most common symbols throughout the United States, the lamb is found in three-dimensional form, in relief sculpture, and in incised carving. And it is one of the most common symbols used on a baby's grave in the twentieth century.



The weeping willow vividly conveys the Victorian concept of death and mourning. Sometimes it is accompanied by a lamb, a plinth, or urn, or the kneeling figure of a classically garbed, grief-stricken woman. The Victorians loved to use the weeping willow on grave markers and to plant weeping willows in the cemetery. In both cases, it led to the proper frame of mind for visitors. A few references mention that if a weeping willow is cut down, it will send up new sprouts, symbolizing the soul's rebirth. Just as likely, people used the weeping willow because it looks sad.



Found in abundance in Iowa cemeteries, the dove symbolizes a winged messenger of God. Especially poignant is the dove flying upward with a broken-stemmed rosebud in its beak, indicating the death of a child. An olive branch or riband in its beak (usually labeled "rest in peace") probably indicates peace to the soul of the deceased. An anchor (here, with dove) often symbolizes that the soul is anchored safely in God's harbor. It seldom relates to the sea or navy.



Victorians often considered angels to be without gender and dressed them in classical clothing. The angels might bring the message of death or carry a soul back to God. Instances were common where the soul in the angel's arms was an actual image of the deceased. Angels rarely appeared on pre-Victorian grave markers.

Treestump Tombstones in an Iowa Cemetery

by David A. Brose

photos by Steven Ohrn

TOMBSTONES carved in the shape of treestumps are often found among other more conventional grave markers in midwestern cemeteries. Treestump tombstones appeared as early as 1840, and the tradition survived until at least mid-twentieth century. The markers vary in height from fourteen inches to over eight feet.

Treestump carvers generally chose Bedford limestone, quarried between Bloomington and Bedford, Indiana. Carving the characteristic "bark" is easier on even-grained limestone than on harder stones like granite. Carvers often added ornamentation to symbolize personality traits, habits, occupations, or hobbies of the deceased. At Woodland Cemetery in Des Moines, where these photos were taken, a range of examples illustrates the tradition.

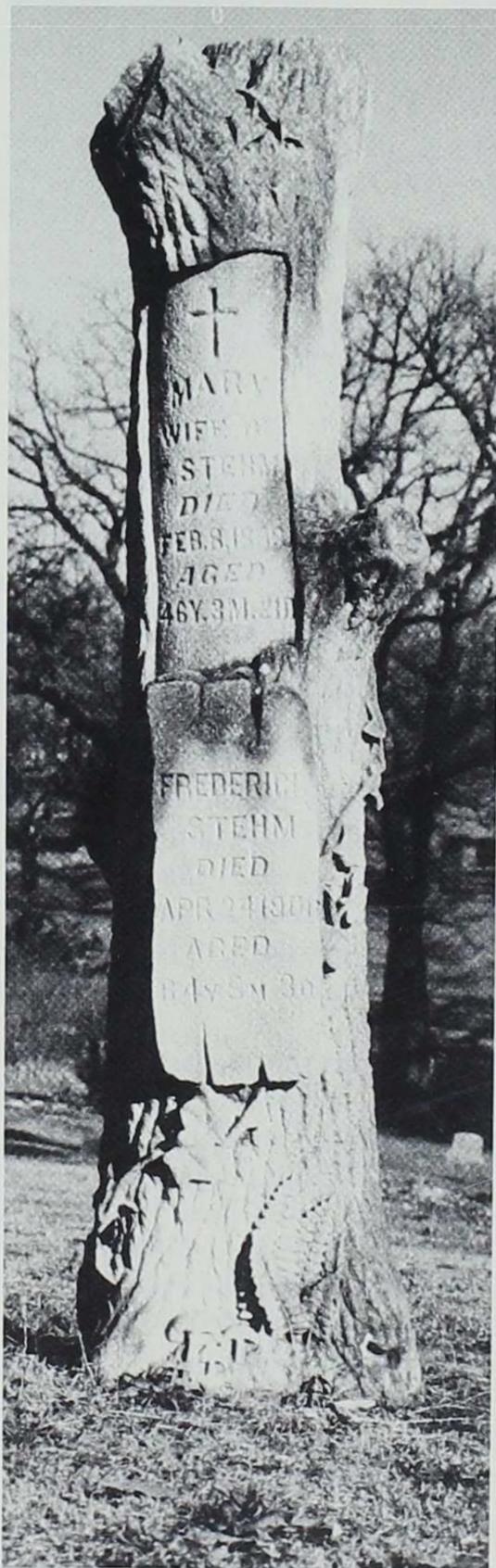
Folklore professor Warren E. Roberts (Indiana University at Bloomington) explains, "These stones were popular because they were of low cost to produce, and the stonecarvers themselves found them to be easy to create. The log is very easy in size and scope to produce, and they can be ornamented with anchors and chains, flower symbolism, and the like that can represent and reflect the life of the person for whom they are made. With a treestump-style stone you had great latitude. If the carver made a mistake it

could be integrated into the stone to look like part of nature. Other stonecarvers could not integrate a mistake into their work the way that these particular treestump carvers could."

Colorado stonecarver Henry Cicutto agrees that "they're not really so hard. The log is easy. Now when someone wants a log with an axe or an anchor with a chain, that's another matter." Yet one reason for the popularity of the treestump marker may have been its potential to be individualized with personal symbols.

The treestump itself symbolizes an ended life, as these markers most often replicate a broken tree trunk, abruptly cut off. Though one treestump marker in Woodland is actually ceramic rather than limestone, the size may symbolize the infancy of the person it commemorates. Only fourteen inches high, the ceramic marker was made as a tribute to infant Edward Louis Israel, whose short life spanned December 26, 1911 to January 21, 1912.

Details artfully carved into treestump markers bear more symbolism. The rose, for example, can symbolize everlasting love. One marker uses the symbol figuratively and literally. A treestump adorned with a large carved rose is inscribed "M.H. King and His Wife Rose." The limestone treestump that marks the grave of Henry Sanders (1858-1892)



Typically, a section of "bark" appears to have been peeled back, leaving space for carving.

includes carved ivy, a symbol of strong and enduring faith and steadfastness. Another incorporates musical symbolism; a large harp is carved into a treestump marker inscribed "Louis." In the



Russell family plot, a carved book rests on top of a treestump marker inscribed "P.T.R."; the book may symbolize a love of literature or represent the Book of Life, a common Victorian symbol on grave markers.

Similar to the treestump markers are examples that use branches or logs. In the Russell family plot, a chair is formed out of a limestone slab for a seat and limestone "branches" for the arms and backrest. The marker for Peter Barton Henry (1820-1875) is a cross, made of two large limestone logs. The cross symbolizes the Christian faith of the deceased or "the old rugged cross."

Treestump markers sometimes bear the motto or insignia of the fraternal benefit life insurance society Woodmen of the World, or sometimes of Modern Woodmen of America. Denver monument carver Roy Erickson recalls, "Thirty or forty years ago people who belonged to Woodmen of the World would bring in a certificate which would entitle them to either fifty dollars, some of them

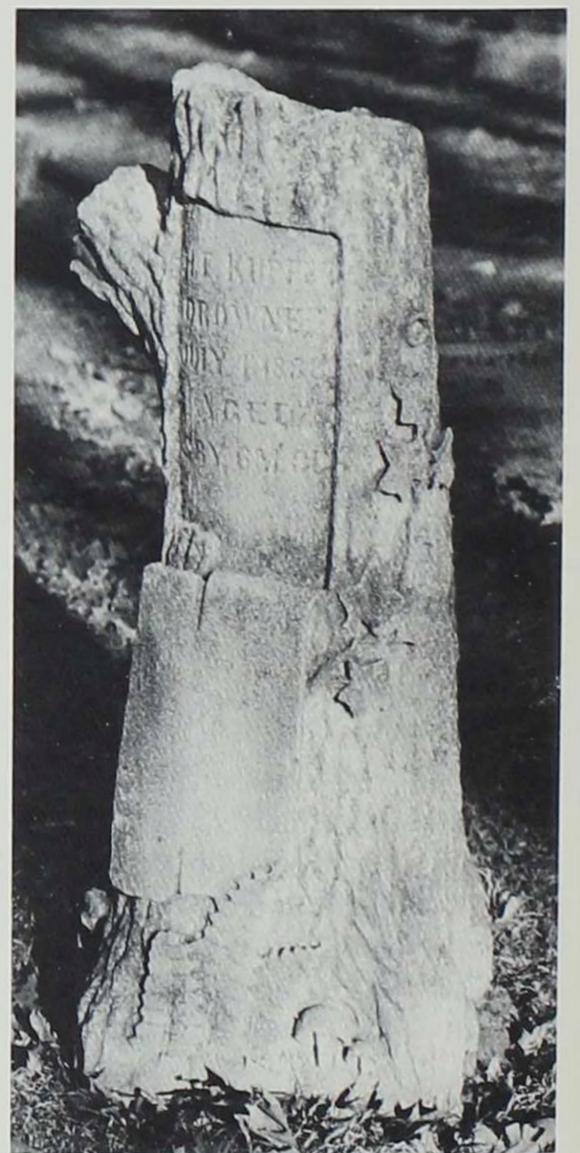
maybe a hundred dollars, credit towards the purchase of a monument. It was part of their insurance policy. And [the organization] encouraged members of the Woodmen of the World to put the insignia on their markers." From a society catalog members could select markers carved to resemble treestumps, branches, logs, or the like. In choosing this sort of marker through their organization, they participated in a tradition practiced by many people.

The markers remained popular into the 1940s, roughly paralleling the decline of quarrying and stonecutting in the Bedford quarries. Although individuals across the country still carve treestumps, most modern stoneworkers lack the necessary skills. Taste and costs are also factors. Today's technician can laser-etch or sandblast-stencil a standardized stone marker (generally a granite blank, readily available at monument dealers) much more quickly and inexpensively than a craftsman could handcarve the more individualized treestump marker. Furthermore, today's cemeteries often limit the height and size of markers to accommodate grass mowers. Modern tastes, methods, and restrictions simply leave no place for the limestone treestumps.

The question that remains is who carved the treestump markers that were apparently once so popular in Iowa and the Midwest. Stonecarvers traditionally carved their name near the bottom of the marker, but as the stone settles the name may sink from view. Because most treestumps are carved from Bedford limestone, it is possible that they were carved in southern Indiana, where the stone is quarried and where a deep-rooted tradition of carving still exists, and then shipped to Iowa, where a local cutter added the name and dates. Or perhaps

treestump carving was a widespread skill, practiced in Iowa and elsewhere.

Though their origin remains a puzzle, the treestump markers we find in Iowa cemeteries clearly express the creativity and sensitivity of the carver. Still creating the treestumps, Colorado stonecarver D. Deorio observed, "I know that these will last. We leave our mark. These will be here long after I'm gone." □



NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources used include interviews by Phyllis Harrison of various Colorado stonecarvers in 1984; interviews between David A. Brose and Warren Roberts (1979 to present); and articles by Roberts in *Pioneer America*, including "Tools on Tombstones: Some Indiana Examples," 10 (June 1, 1978), 106-11; and "Traditional Tools as Symbols," 12 (Feb. 1980), 54-63. Brose has photographed and documented treestump tombstones in the Iowa towns of Des Moines, What Cheer, Marshalltown, and Cedar Falls.

Working and Wandering

“MISSIS, will yer please sew me a Shirt on this Button?” asks the fellow in the postcard caption on the front cover. The response of the woman on the doorstep isn’t clear. Will she slam the door at his impertinence? Will she laugh warmly at his rather broad request and, instead of making a shirt for his button, give him an old shirt headed for the rag-bag and a sandwich from the kitchen? Is it trust or doubt in his eyes? What should we read in her raised hand?

This special section uncovers the ambivalence the American mainstream culture has historically demonstrated toward a smaller segment of society — the vagabond. Titled “Working and Wandering,” the section looks at the nineteenth-century harvest hand during Iowa’s wheat-growing years; Britt’s first hobo convention in 1900; the tramp motif on picture postcards; the unemployed who searched for work in the twenties and thirties; individual hoboes who routinely stopped at the Amanas; and folk art practiced by itinerants and others with time on their hands.

The ambivalence of mainstream America has appeared on many levels. A society needs migratory labor, and yet it fears the transient life-style. Elected legislators vote for strict vagrancy laws, while individuals continue to extend acts of personal kindness from their kitchen doors. Railroad management sets strict policies against those who hop freight trains, but railroad workers frequently offer them food and warmth. Small-town promoters host a national hobo convention, and the citizens lock their doors.

Perhaps the ambivalence arises from differing attitudes about work. Nineteenth-century

America depended on a large pool of migratory laborers and itinerant craftspeople. Today most Americans earn a living in the conventional manner, nine-to-five or three-to-eleven, and then return home. Likewise, some honor and obey the work ethic, while others choose to work sporadically. Still others, in both centuries, have had to search for employment or struggle for decent wages.

In preparing this section, we encountered many who had personal stories of working and wandering, and we added sixteen pages to this *Palimpsest* to accommodate some of those stories. Probably many of us remember wanderers coming to the back door willing to do odd jobs in exchange for a meal. As children, we found X’s chalked on the sidewalk or side of the house, proof to the next wanderer of our generosity. Others of us remember the freight trains in the thirties crowded with men — and sometimes families — traveling to the Dakota wheat fields or the Washington orchards. Some of us may have been on those freight trains.

Behind the Great Depression stories and the nineteenth-century journalistic exaggerations, look for the spirit to survive and the search for personal dignity. We found it in Hamlin Garland’s accounts of migrant harvest hands, in early efforts of organized labor, in the acquired skill (despite incredible danger) of hopping freight trains, in a small town’s efforts to put itself on the map.

The following section culls from historical resources and oral histories the voices and experiences of the Americans who have wandered and worked, and the varied attitudes of the mainstream society through which these individuals have moved.

—The Editor

The 19th-Century Harvest Hand

by Terry Ofner



CENTURY, JUNE 1899

LEGEND has it that “Erie Crip” and “Phillie Pop,” two discharged Union soldiers, were the founding members of the informal fraternity of freight-hopping hoboes. The two seasoned soldiers, accustomed to the marches and camaraderie of military life, found the prospect of domestic existence somewhat claustrophobic. So while most of the nation’s veterans were heading back to the farm or factory, our two “knights of the road” hitched a ride on a passing freight train to see what lay ahead.

The rapidly expanding nation required a host of restless and homeless men such as Pop and Crip to build its roads, to harvest its wheat, to work the northern pineries, as well as to lay the track for the railroads the men rode from place to place. In their search for livelihood and occasional adventure, Crip and Pop and the thousands of other marginal workers in American society would encounter public attitudes ranging from indifference to hostility. Local and national newspapers of the period can be read as a barometer of prevalent public attitudes toward itinerants who worked and wandered their way across Iowa in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Most of the itinerant laborers who traveled

by rail and steamboat to Iowa each summer of the 1860s were part of one of the most remarkable seasonal events of the period — the wheat harvest. Untold numbers of migrant laborers converged on the wheat belt by train- and boatload to harvest the ripening crop.

During the years immediately preceding and following the Civil War, Iowa was fast becoming one of the nation’s leading producers of wheat. In 1860 Iowa ranked eighth in the Union in wheat production, raising more than eight million bushels. By 1870, Iowa jumped to second behind Illinois, producing more than twenty-nine million bushels. Iowa wheat production peaked in 1875 when farmers sowed nearly three million acres, reaping nearly forty-four million bushels.

A timely harvest was crucial to farmers. Wheat, once ripe, had to be cut and bound into sheaves before the grain over-ripened and scattered. A delay of as little as a week could reduce yields considerably. Because much of the wheat in a region would ripen about the same time, and since the process of reaping the wheat required more workers than were available locally, the farmers hired itinerant harvest hands.

Over the years the midwestern farmers and

harvesters developed a rather simple hiring system. The harvesters, traveling in bands by rail or steamer, would arrive in a major trading center such as Davenport. A farmer would then drive in by wagon, hire four or five harvesters, and take them to the farm for the duration of the harvest.

Local newspapers often announced the arrival of harvest hands — giving an approximate number of harvesters looking for work. The *Daily Davenport Democrat* of July 15, 1869, reported: "Some two hundred or more harvest hands were congregated along Front street today, waiting for bids from farmers."

The harvest hands were, of course, subject to the uncertainties common to all agricultural pursuits. If crops were poor or if rain delayed the harvest, the demand for their labor would decline sharply. Such seemed to be the case in the summer of 1869 in eastern Iowa. Much of the wheat crop was behind schedule or ruined due to a wet growing season. A short announcement on July 16 in the *Democrat* brought home the grim reality of the uncertainties the harvesters faced: "Harvest hands are asking for work. Prices yesterday were \$1.25 and few employed. Last year at this time prices were \$4.50 to \$5.00." But five days later the *Democrat* could report of improving conditions: "The [steamer] City of St. Paul landed another crowd of harvest hands last night, some of whom were seriously discussing the question of lodging. The harvest hands are finding places [to work] at \$2.50 to \$3.00 per day."

On rare occasions a reporter might offer his readers a short sketch of the sort of life the harvesters led, as in this note in the *Democrat*: "The men see the hard side of life; in the northern pineries during the fall and winter, then rafting during the spring, and during the harvest [they] follow the river up, and are here again ready for the pineries late in the fall."

IN SPITE OF relative prosperity for the farmers in the region, not all was well in the Iowa wheat fields of the 1860s and early 1870s. The *Daily Davenport Democrat* reported tension between the farmers and the harvesters in July 1868: "Notwithstanding the large numbers of harvest hands that have

been arriving in the city for a week past, our farmers find some difficulty in engaging them at ruinous prices. About four dollars is asked, and at that price they will not work more than a day or two before they leave, and oblige the farmers to leave their fields and come to the city for others. In some instances they are so important that they ask what reapers are used — what they are to eat and drink — and whether they are to sleep in the best beds or not."

The harvesters, it seems, understood the law of supply and demand. Through banding together and through a primitive form of strike, the harvesters discovered they could leverage higher wages from the farmers. A writer for *Harper's Monthly* managed to capture the harvesters' technique in process while watching from the front porch of a hotel in St. Charles, Minnesota, in August 1868.

The hands had arrived from Iowa the day before by boat and train "looking like a detachment of Goths and Vandals on a marauding expedition." They had started the harvest season near St. Louis, Missouri, and had worked field after field until they had reached Minnesota. The reporter recorded this exchange between the field hands and the hotel landlord:

"Landlord, have there been any farmers in yet wanting hands?"

"Well, gentlemen, not as I've seen; but they'll be coming in now pretty fast. Turner, I heard, was around yesterday looking for some help."

"What are they paying here now?" asked another of the gang. He uttered his question in a hard, resolute way, as if he had made up his mind what he would get, and didn't care much what was paid.

"Well, the price isn't fixed yet," replied the landlord, "but the farmers talk about not giving more'n two dollars a day."

"They'll pay more than that before the week's out," rejoined the other, sententiously.

"What are they paying down below?"

"Three dollars; and they'll have to come to it here. There's a big pile of wheat this season — half again as much as last."

"I know it; but there will be men enough. Every boat will bring up its crowd."

"Well, you'll find yourself mistaken — you

see. Bet you, we don't bind for any two dollars — no, nor any two and a half — will we boys?"

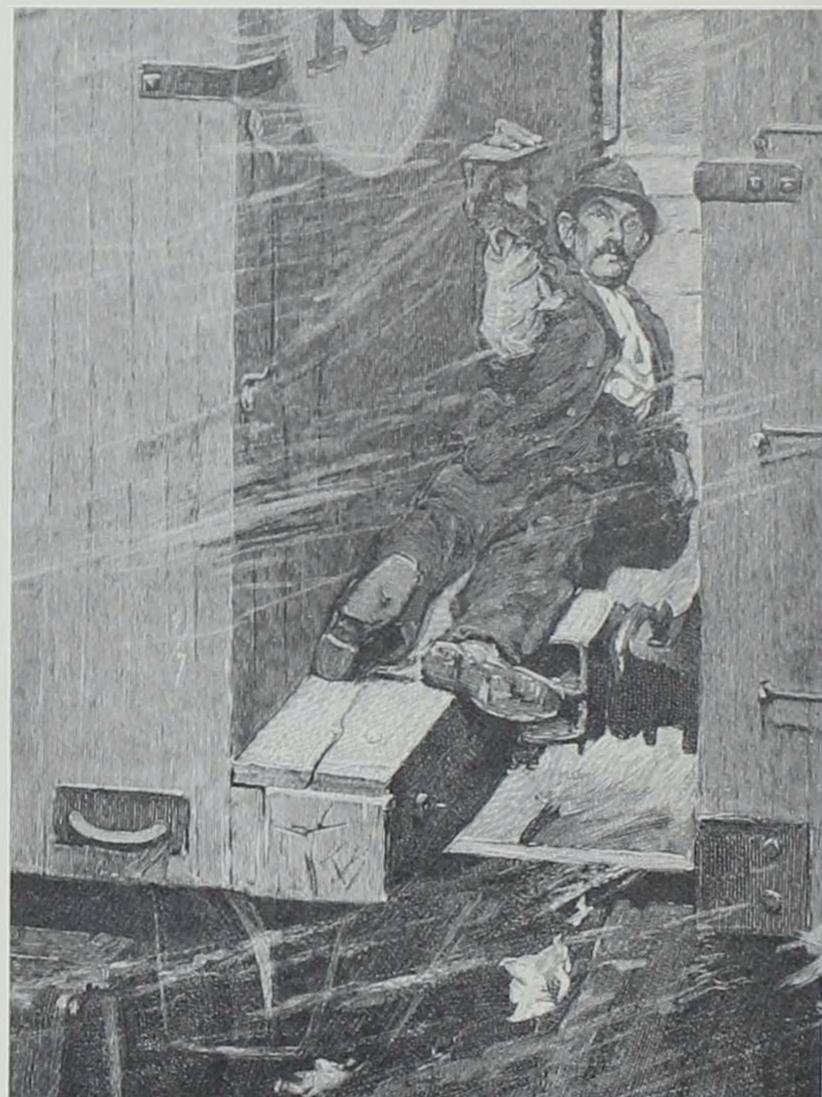
The others grunt their determination to stick to three dollars without flinching.

The harvesters hoped to catch the farmers in a bind. When there were few harvesters available, they could afford to wait until farmers were desperate enough to pay higher wages for their help. The harvesters sometimes won the day. More frequently, new hands flocked to the fields and wages tumbled. Whatever the outcome, the harvesters' bargaining technique was not one to ingratiate the harvesters with either farmers or the middle-class townspeople. For the farmers, the annual hiring of harvest help became one of the major uncertainties of wheat farming.

BECAUSE a ready fund of harvest labor was essential for a speedy and timely harvest, it stands to reason that ambivalent feelings would build up around the harvesters — feelings born of the farmers' dependence on the labor of a group of unmanageable outsiders. Such ambivalence is evident in the writings of Hamlin Garland, the midwestern novelist who wrote of growing up in the 1870s on his father's wheat farm near Osage, Iowa. While expressing the shock that the unorthodox life-style of the hands provoked in minds of the more conventional citizens of the community, Garland's portraits of the harvesters also provide some of the most colorful and detailed pictures that come to us from the period.

"They reached our neighborhood in July," wrote Garland, "arriving like a flight of alien unclean birds, and vanished into the north in September as mysteriously as they had appeared. A few of them had been soldiers, others were the errant sons of the poor farmers and rough mechanics of older States, migrating for the adventure of it. One of them gave his name as 'Harry Lee,' others were known by such names as 'Big Ed' or 'Shorty.' Some carried valises, others had nothing but small bundles containing a clean shirt and a few socks."

Though Garland worked alongside the hired help, it is doubtful he enjoyed their fellowship. They were not, in Garland's words, "the most



JOSIAH FLYNT, TRAMPING WITH TRAMPS (1901)

Jumping freights was a free way to travel, but not without its risks of expulsion or severe injury.

profitable companions for boys of fifteen." Indeed, the harvesters represented much that the exponents of conventional mainstream morality saw as reprehensible. The itinerant laborers were, according to Garland, "reckless young fellows, handsome, profane, licentious, given to drink, powerful but inconstant workmen, quarrelsome and difficult to manage at all times. . . . and on Saturday night and Sunday spent their wages in mad revels in the country along the river, where a couple of road-houses furnished harbor and amusement for their like. 'We take no orders from any man,' they often said, and made much of their freedom to come and go."

Yet this "freedom to come and go" may well have appealed to the young farm boy, moored as he was to the monotony of prairie life. In his autobiographical novel of the period, Garland let his nine-year-old protagonist, Lincoln, dream of the romance of the road the harvest hands inspired: "To Lincoln there was immense fascination in these men. They came

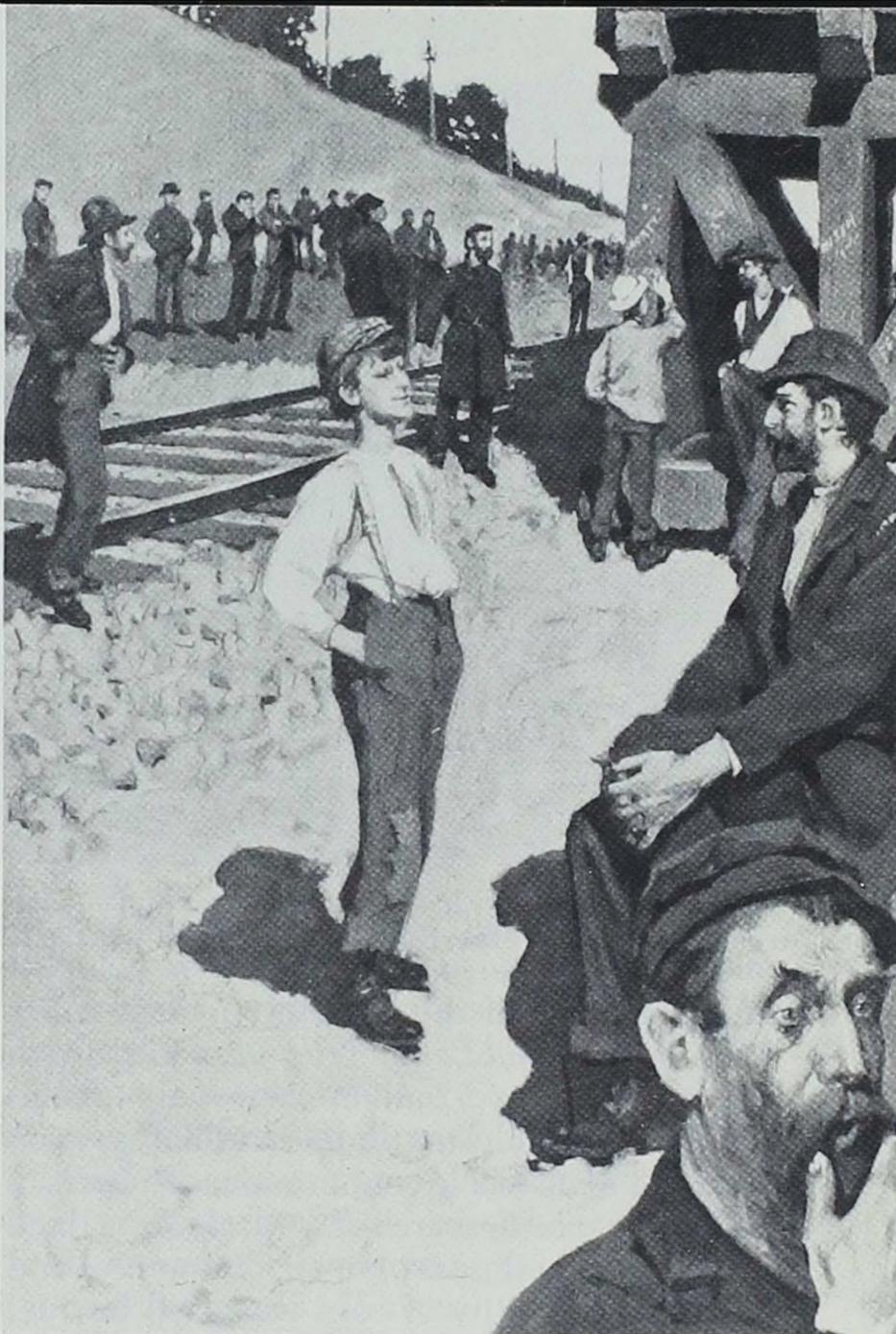
from distant lands. They told of the city, and sinister and poisonous jungles all cities seemed, in their stories. They were scarred with battles. Some of them openly joked of 'boarding at the State's expense.' They came from the far-away and unknown, and planned journeys to other States, the very names of which were poems to Lincoln."

And in spite of their "mad revels" and licentiousness, the young Garland could not help being seduced by their blend of gentility and flair: "When dressed in their best they were dashing fellows. They wore close-fitting, high-heeled boots of calfskin, dark trousers, with a silk handkerchief in the hip pocket, a coloured shirt with gay armlets, and a vest, genteelly left unbuttoned. A showy watch-chain, a big signet-ring (useful in fighting), and a soft black hat completed a costume easy and not without grace."

From Garland's writings it appears that the harvesters themselves were proud of their independence. The local farming communities, for their part, probably remained indifferent to the social and material needs of the harvesters. The local "road-houses" may well have been the only entertainment available to the itinerants. But such entertainments further isolated the workers from middle-class residents.

Apart from the suspicion that settled communities have historically held for outsiders and wanderers, economic factors may well have further motivated the farmers' and townsmen's distancing behavior. Local farming economies could not absorb the extra laborers beyond the time of harvest. By maintaining a distant and aloof attitude toward the itinerant harvesters, local communities could rest assured that the unwelcomed laborers would move on after the harvest was completed.

Through such methods, the postwar wheat-farming economy in the Midwest developed a network of uneasy and unwritten contracts between railroads, hotels, farmers, and harvesters — contracts designed to bring the wheat harvest in before it blighted in the field. Railroads often looked the other way during harvest season when harvesters stole rides; townspeople and innkeepers prepared each summer for the inundation of hands; farmers



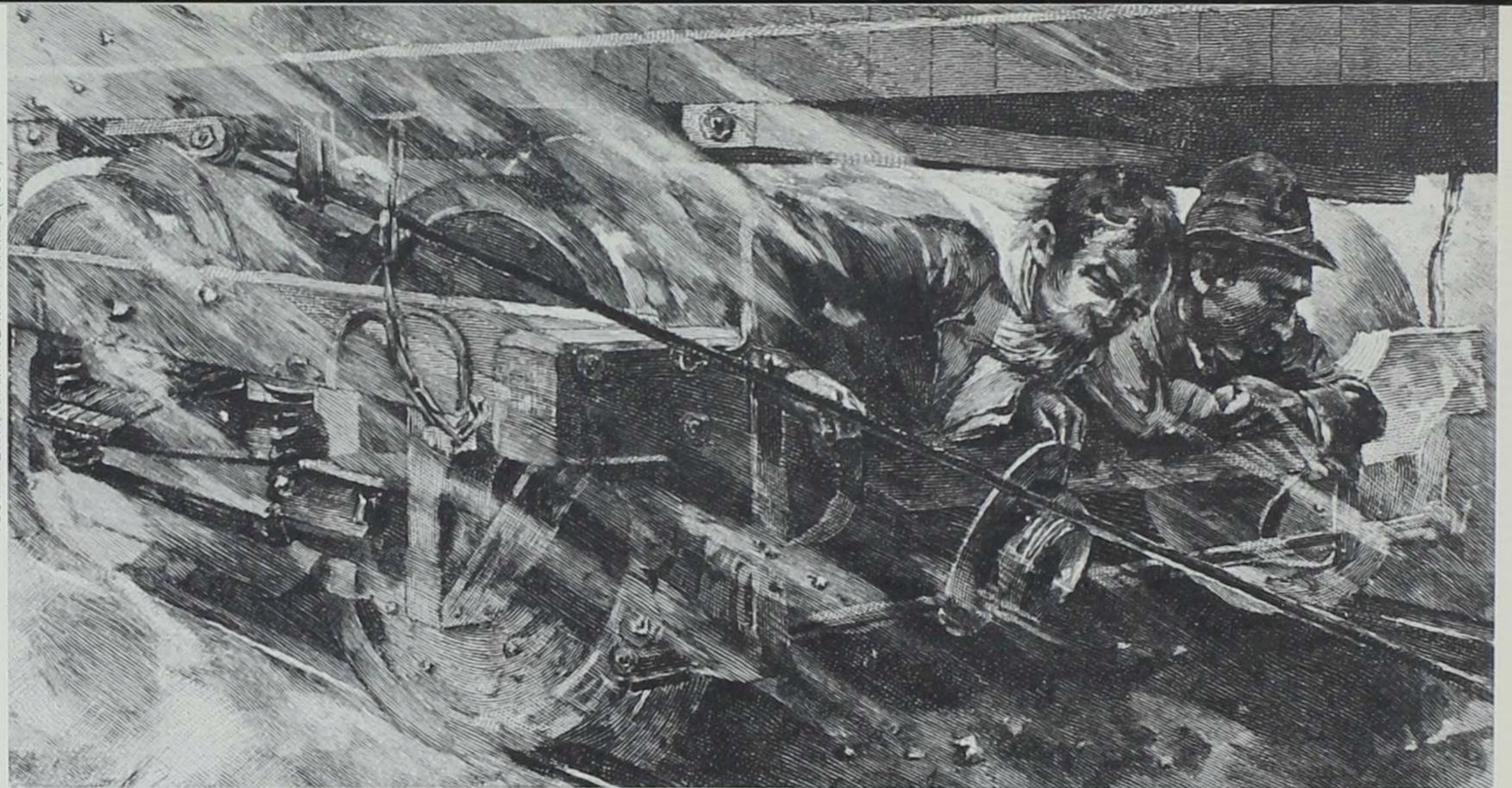
CENTURY, JUNE 1899

Author Josiah Flynt feared that children running away on freight trains would grow dependent on the adventure and frequent change of scenery. Victims of "railroad fever," they would find it impossible to settle down.

agreed to feed and house the harvesters; and the harvesters themselves agreed to continue living on the fringe of the economy — to accept the grudging hospitality of the wheat farmers during harvest and to move on after it was over.

Yet, in spite of their life of constant movement, the harvesters hardly seemed downtrodden and disadvantaged; rather, they seemed to have taken a certain pride in their rough yet vital livelihood. But trouble loomed on the horizon, not only for the harvesters, but for the nation at large.

IN SEPTEMBER 1873 several major New York banking houses failed, causing the stock exchange to close until October. A financial panic ensued that ushered in an economic depression that lasted for much of



Author Jack London, whose wandering took him into Iowa, claimed that of all the ways to ride a freight, "riding the rod" required the most expertise and courage but was the least detectable by yard detectives.

the remainder of the decade. In September 1875 the *National Labor Tribune* of Pittsburgh reported that two million men were unemployed and wandering about in idleness; mine closings forced whole communities of miners to take to the road in search of work. In Iowa, land values dropped sharply; an "immense and unknown" quantity of corn was used for fuel because it was cheaper to burn than coal or cordwood. Workers in the cities suffered pay cuts and lay-offs. In May of 1877, the day laborers working for the city of Dubuque were being paid a dollar a day. By July the C. B. & Q. railroad had reduced section-hand wages to ninety cents a day, an amount one newspaper reporter noted was little better than beggary.

Although times were hard for everyone — farmers, townspeople, and itinerant workers alike — little ink was spent in Iowa newspapers empathizing with the plight of harvest hands. Indeed, the itinerant harvesters often acted as lightning rods for some of the pent-up frustrations the economic depression generated. The term "harvest hand" nearly dropped from the journalistic vocabulary during the depression of the 1870s, only to be replaced by the term "tramp" — a term that to readers connoted laziness and mendicancy. Most newspapers accused these "tramps" of being unwilling to work or of demanding unreasonable wages from Iowa farmers. The papers rarely acknowledged the problems the tight economy and

other social changes were creating in the lives of the harvesters.

With the contraction of the money supply, there was little cash in the farm economy to hire extra hands at the rate that would allow them to live decent lives. Times were so bad that middle-class townspeople sometimes took the jobs once relegated to the harvesters. A correspondent for the *Iowa State Register* reported such a situation on August 6, 1877: "Notwithstanding there are many hungry tramps at almost all hours of the day begging for 'grub,' farmers are having trouble [getting] what help they need through harvest. Owing to the hard times, our lawyers, squires, doctors, wagon makers and blacksmiths are most all in the harvest field making \$2 a day."

An influx of unemployed miners and factory workers from the eastern industrial states also competed for the same harvest jobs, and may well have sparked isolated episodes of violence between the regular harvest hands and the recently unemployed. The introduction of labor-saving machinery also reduced the demand for harvest laborers, inspiring some reports of sabotage against the new machines. In all events, there were more harvesters than jobs, a situation that idled many workmen on the streets of Iowa cities. The newspapers called these idlers "tramps," and warned that they posed a definite threat to the citizenry. On April 8, 1877, the *Burlington Hawk-Eye*

asked: "Tramps: Shall Burlington be Infested with Them?" The *Hawk-Eye* warned of the impending invasion: "With the mild weather of spring come the tramping feet of the vast army of unemployed. . . . This is but the advance guard of the unnumbered hosts who will swarm through the streets, who will sun themselves in groups on the levee during the day, who will skulk around the suburbs in the evening. . . . Everyone remembers how they fought on the levee, disturbing the peace and injuring the reputation of the city."

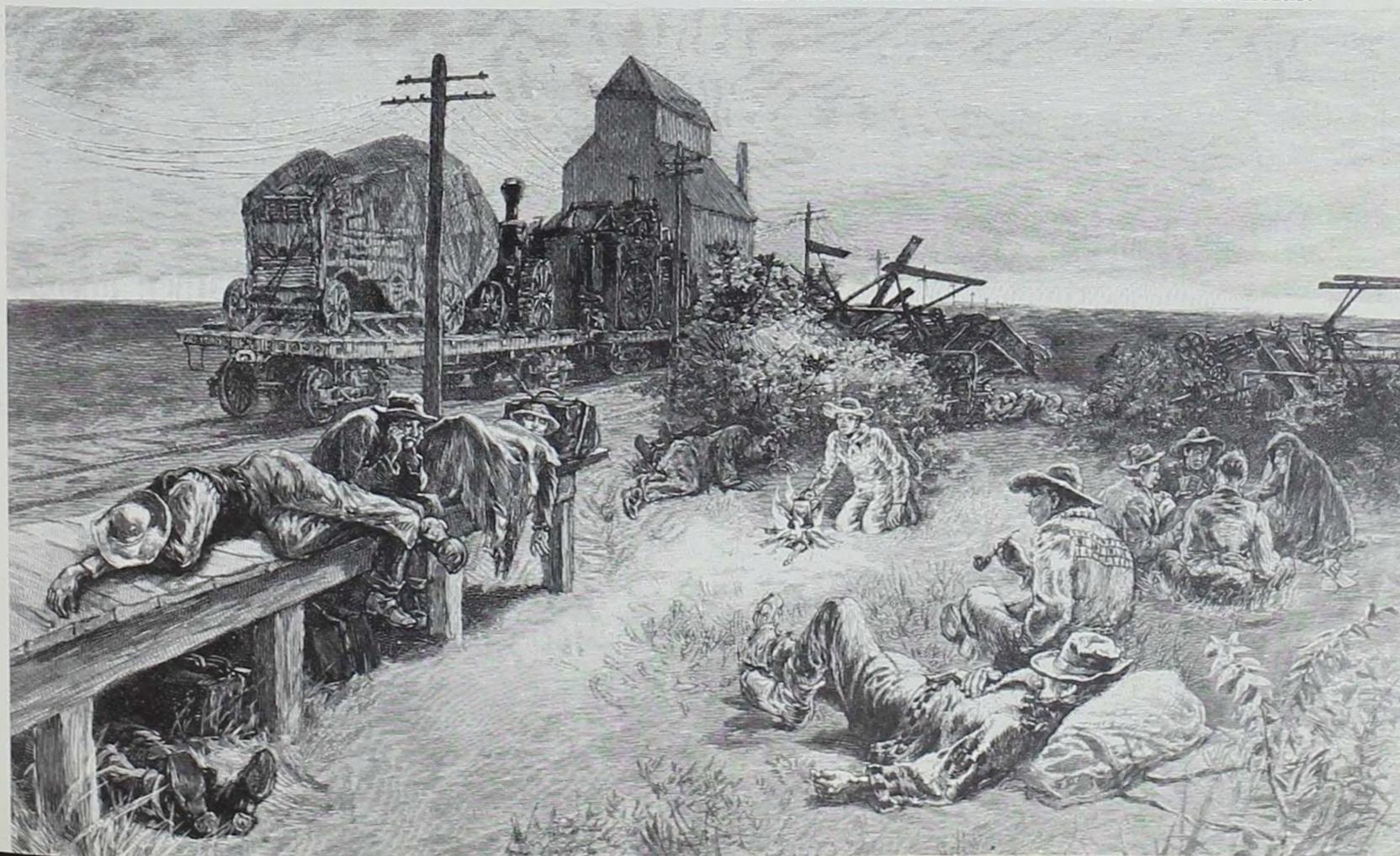
The *Hawk-Eye* acknowledged that the tramps may well have been honest men who found themselves jobless after the financial crisis of 1873 that "closed the mills and mines, the factories and foundaries where they were wont to earn by honest toil a livelihood." Nonetheless, the paper's view was not one that questioned the economic structures that created the vast army of unemployed in the first place. Nor did it sympathize with the unemployed laborer unable to find work in the wheat harvest or anywhere else. Rather, it viewed unemployment as a moral failure on the part of those idled. Tramping in search of work became, for the *Hawk-Eye* and other newspapers, one of the great breeding grounds of idleness: "The great majority of tramps who will, unless restrained, overrun this city this summer, are . . . shiftless, indolent and worthless. Many of them have become so by tramping. They will

not work when opportunity is given."

Iowa newspapers were not alone in expressing these attitudes. The national press was publishing similar images of the tramp. Indeed, Iowa newspapers may well have taken their cue from such mainstream national papers as *Harper's Weekly*. In September 1876 it editorialized: "'Knights of the turnpike,' as they are facetiously called by a correspondent . . . but better known under the simpler cognomen of 'tramps,' have of late become a recognized class in our community. Formerly we were accustomed to hear only occasionally of these dangerous stragglers, who wandered through villages, alarming women and children by their wild appearance and imperious demands for food and shelter, but of late the country has been infested with them. They are no longer simply traveling beggars, but thieves and robbers, without respect for persons or property."

Harper's Weekly was not alone in portraying the unemployed and migrant workmen as the lazy and dangerous tramp. Francis Wayland, a charity reformer of Yale, recommended withholding charity from tramps since it only encouraged their idleness. He also recommended harsh suppression of tramps, for they composed a "dangerous class" that was "at war with all social institutions."

There was little that the harvesters or other itinerant laborers could do to combat this new Harvest hands rest in the western wheat fields.



HARPER'S WEEKLY (DECEMBER 13, 1890)

negative image voiced by the commercial press and the middle-class charity reformers. The itinerants' life-style had changed little — they migrated with the harvest and other seasonal employment as before. But severe economic changes had precipitated a shift in public attitude against those who lacked a permanent address, or otherwise fit the stereotype of the tramp.

The newspapers of the day both reflected and molded such public opinion. Their inflammatory prose and stereotyping certainly metamorphosed many otherwise honest workmen into the "dangerous class" the moral reformers railed against. As a young man, author Hamlin Garland himself experienced the dehumanizing effects of joblessness and hunger when confronted with the unyielding and inhospitable coldness of New England farmers. He and his brother were trying to work their way to Boston during a summer vacation from school. What started as a pleasant lark in the land of Emerson and Thoreau, turned into a rather unpleasant initiation into the world of tramping: "Jobs, it turned out, were exceedingly hard to get. The haying was

over, the oats mainly in shock, and the people on the highway suspicious and inhospitable. As we plodded along, our dimes melting away, hunger came, at last, to be a grim reality. We looked less and less like college boys and more and more like tramps, and the house-holders began to treat us with hostile contempt.

"No doubt these farmers, much beset with tramps, had reasonable excuse for their inhospitable ways, but to us it was all bitter and uncalled for. . . . All humor had gone out of our expedition. Each day the world grew blacker, and the men of the Connecticut Valley more cruel and relentless. We both came to understand (not to the full, but in a large measure) the bitter rebellion of the tramp."

WHETHER IOWA NEWSPAPERS were riding on a national wave of sensationalist rhetoric waged against the new class called "tramps," or genuinely reacting to events in their own communities, is impossible to determine. But whatever the cause, the language

Harper's Weekly (September 2, 1876) warned that "a cottage where the male members are at work in some distant field is usually the spot selected by the tramp as the scene of his depredations. Our engraving . . . shows us the alarm and danger to which women and children are frequently subjected" until the arrival of the "yeoman" (here visible beyond the doorway). The long-range revolver (opposite) was advertised as one solution to the tramp terror.



Our NEW Model LONG RANGE Revolver.
"TRAMPS' TERROR."

Price **\$3** Including 100 CARTRIDGES!
 Every Revolver Warranted Full
 Nickel Silver Plated and
 Best English Steel. Rifled Barrel,
 deadly accuracy and long range
 combined; automatic action.
 Cylinder revolves when
 Hammer is RAISED.
 BEST Low-priced
 Revolver Sci-
 ence can
 produce.

Use Regular
 Cartridges, kept
 by all dealers.

Specially
 adapted for the
 Pocket. Weight, 7 ounces.
 Loads without removing the
 Cylinder, either to receive
 Cartridge or eject shell.

This is
 the Weapon
 for Police,
 Bankers, and
 Household use.

5,000
 Testimonials.

UNEQUALLED OFFER.
Full Nickel Silver Plated
7 Shot Revolvers as
Premiums.
A MONTH'S AMMUNITION FREE
 Tramps, Burglars and Thieves infect all parts
 of the Country. Every One Should be Armed.

Address

"Half Bellow is
 the First Law
 of Nature."

With 100 Cartridges,
 only **\$3.**

WESTERN GUN WORKS, 69 Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

used to report the actions of itinerant laborers in Iowa newspapers reached a fever pitch in the summer of 1878. An August 1 headline of the *Davenport Democrat* warned: "Tramps on the Rampage in Iowa: Trains Seized, Towns Mobbed, and Crimes Committed." The report told of twenty tramps armed with clubs and bludgeons that took possession of a train at Janesville, of one thousand tramps who had compelled the citizens of Plymouth and Nora Springs to feed and clothe them, and of a gang of tramps who had accosted a German farmer near Mitchell.

On August 9 two tramps were blamed for the ravishing of a woman in Henry County, prompting the *Avoca Delta* to say: "We have come to Phil. Sheridan's conclusion on the Indians — there are no good tramps but dead ones." The *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, in the meantime, ran an advertisement for a revolver that sold under the name "Tramp Terror." The sales pitch suited the times: "Tramps, burglars, and thieves infest all parts of the country. Every one should go armed." The late 1870s were not good years to be an unemployed migratory laborer looking for work in Iowa.

JUST AS THE DEPRESSION of the 1870s generated a good deal of anti-tramp rhetoric, it also gave rise to anti-tramp laws. In 1876 the Iowa legislature added a section to the vagrancy law which stipulated that persons convicted of vagrancy or begging could be fined up to fifty dollars and

sentenced to hard labor at the rate of seventy-five cents a day until the fine was paid. The definition of a vagrant was broad enough to include unemployed harvest hands waiting to find work in the fields.

Owing to the prevalence of a work ethic that viewed unemployment as a personal and moral failure rather than a social problem, few voices outside the trade-union movement spoke on behalf of the laboring classes. Fewer still argued for such unconventional and marginal laborers as the itinerant harvester. During the height of the "tramp scare" in Iowa in 1878, those that did voice concern for the tramps were often motivated more by political "third-party" ambitions than by true solicitude. In 1878 the *Lehigh Union*, a Greenback newspaper, used the tramp issue to attack its Republican opponents: "If Christ were among us to-day, associating with the poor, going from house to house and preaching the gospel, every Republican paper in the land would call him a 'lazy tramp,' or a 'dangerous Communist,' and would cry out with one accord, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'" Responding to this the Republican *Hamilton Freeman* of Webster City retorted: "Yes, if the Savior of mankind was on earth and did go about the country burning farm machinery, insulting and outraging every farmer's wife and daughter he found unprotected (as the Greenbackers' 'poor tramps' do) and refused to earn his bread by honest labor . . . every decent man would cry out 'crucify him.' But the Savior was the friend of the poor and downtrodden, as the Republican party has ever been." In the midst



of the rhetoric, the tramps and harvesters were left to shift for themselves — a practice, it seems, they were perfectly willing and capable of doing.

But more changes awaited the harvesters — changes that would impinge on those who relied on Iowa's wheat crop for summer work. Infestations of chinch bugs and swarms of grasshoppers plagued Iowa wheat fields. Farmers began to realize that they could turn a greater profit by converting from wheat production to a combination of corn, hogs, and cattle. Other wheat farmers, faced with declining yields, opted to move west as the Dakotas opened to homesteading.

As the wheat belt moved west, and as Iowa farmers converted from labor-intensive wheat production to the more family-based corn and livestock agricultural economy, attitudes toward the itinerant laborer shifted as well. Since Iowa farmers no longer needed large numbers of seasonal labor, the state could strengthen its laws against homeless workers without endangering the agricultural economy. Whether impelled by the shift in agricultural practice, or by other motives, Iowa

“They ketches four of us and makes us run the gauntlet, and believe me I run,” reported one vagabond about an Iowa community. “The natives stands on each side for a quarter of a mile or more. . . . They hit us wit’ stones and whips. . . . I’ll bet there was two hundred men there, an’ a dozen women.” (Quoted from Bruns, *Knights of the Road*).

lawmakers strengthened the state vagrancy law several times before the end of the century. By the 1890s persons convicted of being a “tramp” (a new legal category), could be sentenced to hard labor or solitary confinement. If they refused to work, they could be put on a bread and water diet for the duration of their sentence. The ultimate effect of the anti-tramp legislation was to make the unemployed worker a criminal.

BY 1900, very few bands of itinerant harvesters followed the south-to-north work cycle through Iowa. Most Iowa farmers were now raising corn. The prevalent image of the harvest hand was no longer the proud and swaggering harvester of Hamlin Garland's memory; nor was it the dangerous tramp brandishing a bludgeon, as in the

days of the tramp scare. Both older images had been replaced by cartoon caricatures of lazy tramps or hoboes that were popularized in the national press — tramps with names such as Weary Willie and Dusty Roads, who were thankful for every chance to avoid work.

Iowans, as well as most Americans, apparently no longer felt threatened by itinerants. With the days of economic hardship thought to be a thing of the past, and with stiff vagrancy laws believed to be protecting them, city dwellers and farmers alike could afford to laugh at the antics of the emasculated and impotent caricature of the comic-strip tramp. But such laughter was likely nervous laughter — a form of protective device to manage the ambivalent feelings the vagabond workers and wanderers had inspired.

J. J. McCook, a turn-of-the-century charity reformer, took great interest in vagabonds and collected hundreds of life stories from wanderers of all descriptions. From his interviews and surveys he speculated on the roots of the

vagabond's life-style. He noted that the dividing line between the life of a normal citizen and the vagabond's was perhaps not as clear and comfortable as most people were willing to admit: "The average man grows up to live a regular life and to work as a part of it. . . . we are taught to believe that there is a necessary relation between doing our daily tasks, eating our regular meals, going to bed in a fixed place, rising at a prearranged hour, wearing a certain kind of clothes, — that there is between all this and being 'good,' an unalterable relationship. . . . when suddenly to one of us comes the discovery that we can stop all this and yet live — nay, grow fat, perhaps, and vigorous and strong; drop worry and responsibility . . . go everywhere, see everything, choose his own company, read the newspapers, vote often, commune with nature, live and die the lord of creation again. And when that discovery comes, it is apt to be fatal."

The vagabond, for McCook, was an individual who had escaped the confinements of



JUDGE (DECEMBER 7, 1895)

By the late 1890s the wanderer had become standard fare for readers of humor and satire. Farmer Greene asks, "Hain't yer got no business?" Wandering Willie replies, "W'y, yes; jes' at present I'm advocatin' better roads."

conventional life. Weary Willie and the laughter he inspired may well have represented a reverse of the work ethic — a release from some of the discontents and boredoms of settled existence.

IT WOULD BE FOLLY to assume that all Iowans treated the migratory laborer in the inhospitable fashion suggested by the newspapers and moral charity reformers of the period. Indeed, many Iowa households probably offered meals, odd jobs, and charity to wandering persons, otherwise the reformers would not have felt compelled to argue against the practice.

But the press maintained an indifferent, and at times hostile, attitude toward the itinerant workers who labored in the state. From the evidence provided by the newspapers of the period, Iowans were anything but cordial. It appears that local inhabitants merely tolerated

itinerants when their labor was required. When economic hardships or changes in agricultural practices reduced the demand for migrant laborers, a grudging hospitality gave way to open hostility. The state finally legislated laws designed to control and suppress them. Through it all, Iowans rarely recognized the itinerant for what he was — a laborer willing to work at jobs few others would take. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources were Iowa and national newspapers and magazines of the period. Secondary sources include Hamlin Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (Lincoln, 1961), and *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York, 1917). Roger A. Bruns's fine overview of hoboes, *Knights of the Road* (New York, 1981) and its thorough bibliography proved very helpful. See also: Eric H. Monkkonen, ed., *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935* (Lincoln, 1984). Agricultural sources include Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairie in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963); and Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa, Land of Many Mills* (Iowa City, 1940).



SAVED.

FLOWERY FIELDS — "Is dere any demand fer farm laborers between here an' Squedunk?"

FARMER JONES — "Naw; I reckon th' farmers hev hired all th' help they need by this time."

FLOWERY FIELDS (*shaking his partner*) — "Wake up, Weary! We've struck de right road at last."



Hark! Hark! Hark!
The little dogs bark.
The beggars are coming to town
Some in rags and some in tags
And some in velvet gowns.

The National Tourists Union

—WILL BE HELD AT—

Britt, Iowa, August 22nd, 1900

Britt's First Convention

by George A. Horton

THE EDITOR of the *Britt News* puzzled over the hobo convention that had just ended in his town. "The only way to find out anything about a tourist meeting is to attend it," he wrote, "and after the thing is over you do not know much more about it than you did before."

Editor Simkins was not the only confused journalist who had covered the 1900 convention of Tourists Union No. 63 in little Britt, Iowa. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* had exclaimed, "Tramps, real tramps, tramps with tin cans tied to their waists and wearing weird whiskers, have been arriving all day. The citizens of Britt have all along regarded the affair as a huge joke and have taken great delight in sending out picturesque descriptions of a tramps' convention at which no real tramps were expected. In the first place the tramps were not expected to be able to find the town of Britt."

The promoters and participants in the first Britt hobo convention are long since gone, leaving only newspaper accounts of the convention and the events leading up to it. And what newspaper accounts there were! More than a dozen midwestern newspapers sent correspondents, and the correspondents sent back long, somewhat embellished accounts. But by finding common factors in the accounts

we can piece together what probably happened in August 1900 in Britt — an event that would go down in hobo history and eventually spawn a small-town tradition of August hobo conventions.

The idea for the first hobo convention arose three years before Britt's convention. As a slow freight crawled toward Indianapolis on a fall day in 1896, two travelers sharing a boxcar passed back and forth the idea of a brotherhood or union of their own kind. What brought the two together — and what unified thousands of men — was their love of rambling about in search of work or in search of adventure. Still in his twenties, Charles Noe worked on a Sycamore, Illinois newspaper when he wasn't hopping freights. Since boyhood he had stolen rides on trains, taking "to the grime and grease of a box car like a duck to the water," a Britt paper would later report. "Onion" Cotton, a road-wise rider who ran a small flop hotel in Danville, Illinois, also enjoyed rambling about in this style. Noe and Cotton started talking about the common needs of "tourists" — slang for various social degrees of tramps and hoboes in the world of vagabondia.

Their ideas for a protective tourists union bounced off the boxcar walls and banged together like the draw-pins and link couplers that held the cars together. Noe was aware of

the thousands of men who "work a while in one town and then pick up stakes and hoof it to another." Added to these itinerant shoemakers, railroaders, cigarmakers, designers, molder, printers, actors, tailors were the society tramps: "men that don't work, wear good clothes, and when they get busted away from home bum it back again on a box car or come back counting ties."

By the next spring Noe and Cotton had printed up union cards and buttons, written a constitution and by-laws, and planned a convention at the hub of all train stops: Chicago. The novel idea appealed to many who loved the road. Young tourists came by the hundreds. Old road-wise hoboes, some who had never stopped moving since the Civil War, showed up and were welcome. A second annual convention met again in Chicago in 1898, and tourist union chapters formed in nearby towns.

Exactly who belonged to Tourists Union No. 63 isn't totally clear. One 1899 newspaper account characterizes the tourist union as made up of "lively young men of respectable families" who invite genuine tramps "to give zest to their annual conventions." Others — railroad officials and segments of the public — feared the tourists as a rise of a new socialist union or a "revival of Coxeyism," and successfully pressured Noe and Cotton to move the third convention out of Chicago. Although some members had probably marched in Coxey's and Kelly's armies of the unemployed, the tourists union reportedly intended no seditious acts or governmental interference but sought to "make the struggle for existence a pleasure instead of a burden." Nevertheless, Noe and Cotton chose Danville rather than Chicago for the 1899 convention.

Adventurous young men and professional hoboes shared a common need for improved relations with railroad employees, freedom to search for work, and protection from the scores of state vagrancy laws that could send them to the rockpile. The tourists union attempted to address these needs while celebrating their camaraderie. Convening around a hobo jungle campfire, the Danville conventioners reported on safety and standards of conduct, confided the best places for handouts and new ways of riding the rails, and explained hobo

signs and symbols members might encounter on the road. Members were initiated, and titles, taken from hobo camp life, were handed out: Headpipes, Route Pickers, Guiding and Guardian Angels.

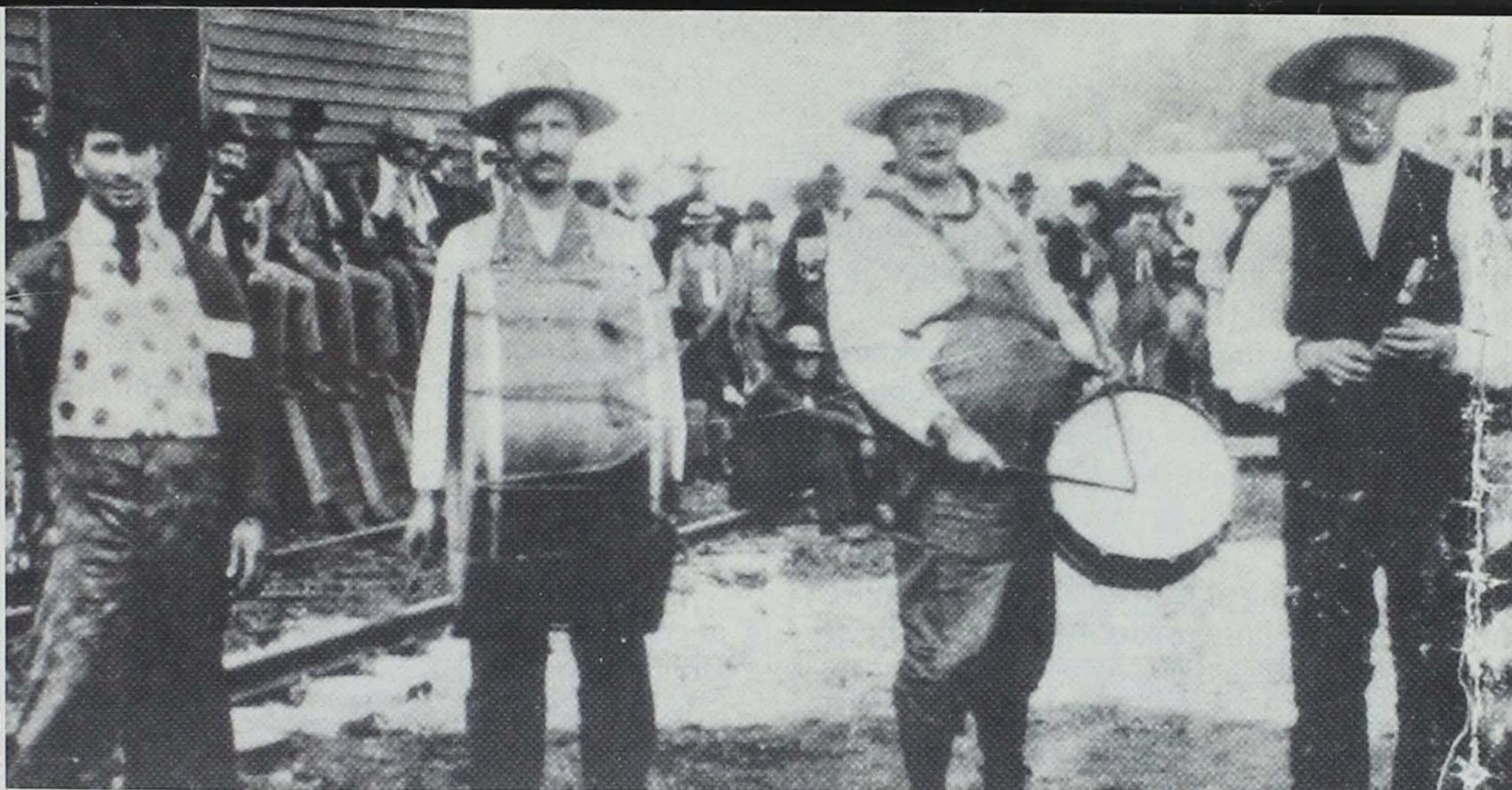
Noe acknowledged that the tourists had met in Danville for "social purposes" but promised that by 1900 they would take up political concerns. "We have invited the hobos to come to the convention and we are going to give them a good time and all they can eat and drink. Next year we'll get the hobo vote in line." The *Chicago Chronicle* reported that for 1900 "no effort will be spared to have thousands of tramps gather" at Decatur, Illinois, or Burlington, Iowa.

THE SUMMER OF 1899, small-town entrepreneurs Thomas Way and Truman A. Potter spied the story about the Tourists Union convention in a Chicago newspaper. Looking for ways to promote their sleepy little village of Britt in north-central Iowa, they wrote to tourists union president Noe, urging him to consider Britt (instead of Burlington or Decatur) for the 1900 tourist convention.

Upon Potter and Way's invitation, Noe traveled to Britt. It took only minutes to see that the town would be perfect. Britt was the junction of the Minneapolis & St. Louis and the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroads; numerous freight trains passed through the town of 1,540. Noe reportedly also liked the black soil of Hancock County — springy to the step of the "walking" delegates, or tramps. With Britt attorney W. E. Bradford on hand, a deal was made. Britt would get the national hobo convention, August 22, 1900.

Most Britt townspeople were probably not yet aware of the concessions made to the tourist union members (which Noe estimated in the thousands): a full deed to the city, a boxcar of beer, two days of slumgullion (hobo stew), and all dogs to be muzzled.

Motivated by small-town boosterism, Potter and Way recognized that whatever brought attention to Britt would likewise bring attention — and perhaps profits — to these two movers and shakers. Way was either part



Bailey brothers' band: unidentified fellow in vest marks time as O.S., E.N., and E.L. Bailey (and townspeople) meet the trains bringing the conventioners.

owner or founder of a Britt bank, the fire fighting company, a newspaper, a real estate and insurance office, and a telephone company. And "anything in Britt that Tom Way does not own is owned by Tom Potter," the *Daily Iowa Capital* claimed. Furthermore, since 1898 Britt had been skirmishing with nearby Garner to become the new county seat. Way regularly exchanged jabs with the Garner editor in their weeklies.

Potter and Way gave responsibility for convention promotion to "Bailey of Britt," a nationally known humorist and publisher of the *Britt Tribune*. Edward N. Bailey was well suited for the job. "Bailey is not related to the partner of Phineas T. Barnum," a Des Moines colleague wrote, "but is a whole circus in himself. He is a roly-poly creation of adipose and good humor, but his stubby hands can write some of the most cutting and risqué utterances of Iowa journalism." Bailey looked kindly on the convention plans and caught the spirit and the language. He dubbed Potter "the originator, the instigator, the initiator, the accelerator, the innovator and the head exasperator" of the hobo convention.

With great pride, the July 19 *Britt News* announced that while Philadelphia and Kansas City might have their national conventions, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids their political and business conventions, Spirit Lake and Clear Lake their chautauquas and religious gatherings, Britt would be "the only town in Iowa and the third in the United States to be honored with the Annual National Convention

of Hobos." The convention was set for August, "when the walking is good and the weather is right for the delegates to lay out at night under the cover of heaven."

The promoters printed and distributed posters, assuring the public that it would be "well worth coming many miles to see the deliberations." The novelty appealed to reporters and railroaders and "barber shop yarn spinners," who talked it up. Knights of the road heard about it through the grapevine or the premiere issue of Noe's *Tourists' Union Journal* (a newsletter defending the rights of the hobo).

AS THE CONVENTION DATE approached, it was clear the promotional efforts had succeeded. The Clinton (Iowa) *Dispatch* noted that every westbound Northwestern freight brought ten to twenty-five hoboes into Iowa, and hundreds more were on foot. Congregating near the Clinton railroad bridge across the Mississippi, they cooked, washed up, and enjoyed "the luxury of a shave" from a hobo barber. "We're fixin' up for our hobo convention," an "old grime veteran" told a reporter. "All the boys 'ill be thar, we wanter look the best we kin."

In Britt, merchants decorated their windows and shops with the hobo theme. Tom Way

strung a banner across South Main Street indicating tourist headquarters. In turn, Bailey strung a banner from the *Tribune* office proclaiming "Tourist Hindquarters."

Britt was growing by the hour. One reporter wrote that hoboies were "dropping from bumpers and brake beams" of every train passing through Britt. Reporters and detectives, politicians and ministers arrived, drawn by the crowds.

On the morning of the convention the tourist union officials and a delegation of eighty arrived from Chicago in a car chartered by Noe and Cotton and covered with banners. The Britt cornet band and Bailey's ragtime band escorted them to the fairgrounds, in time for the afternoon entertainment and races. (Way later recalled that the hobo foot race took two hours and "that the time watch wore out before it was over.")

THE REPORTERS assigned by large and mid-sized dailies to treat the convention seriously were beginning to believe, wrote one correspondent, "that it was a burlesque" but decided to "play the game to the end." Way and Potter coaxed them along, hitching up a team to take "the boys out to see the sights" — the grain elevator, the town pump, the arch over the cemetery gate, the fairgrounds race track and amphitheatre, and "Ed. Bailey's spitoons."

With delight, the correspondents reported that Britt's publicity stunt, designed to draw crowds of onlookers, was backfiring because genuine hoboies were arriving. "Britt now sees that the affair has passed the proportions of a joke," the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* wrote, "the news reached the genuine tramps and they were not deterred from coming."

"Fully 2000 tramps will be here by Wednesday," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* announced. "The only thing that is worrying [Britt] is the fear that 1999 of them will like the town and vicinity and will not agree to move away."

Another paper claimed that Britt citizens had "made the fatal mistake of treating the hoboies with levity." Bailey's fife and drum corps was "all dolled up like hoboies and playing

the latest ragtime tunes." "The young men of the town dressed up as tramps and tried to get gay with the delegates. The town sports made up after the style of 'Old Hoss Hoey' and tried to qualify for seats in the convention. . . . Members of Tourists' Union No. 63 were obliged to lock the doors in order to keep out the sports." Suspicious of the press, delegates reportedly charged twenty-five cents for interviews.

Perhaps judging that Americans were weary of continual news stories on the McKinley and Bryan presidential campaigns, the reporters seized the convention for its comic relief. They lost little time in getting the hoboies to nominate their own presidential ticket. Papers from coast to coast kept the wires humming with the big question: What is happening at Britt?

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* parodied the pulse of backroom politics: "A Nomination committee . . . has been in session under the water tank down by the railroad all the afternoon earnestly discussing the matter. At present the Nomination committee is making a house-to-house canvass at back doors soliciting food and will take the matter up at a meeting behind Tom Way's woodshed tonight. . . . Excitement is intense, and the chickens are roosting high."

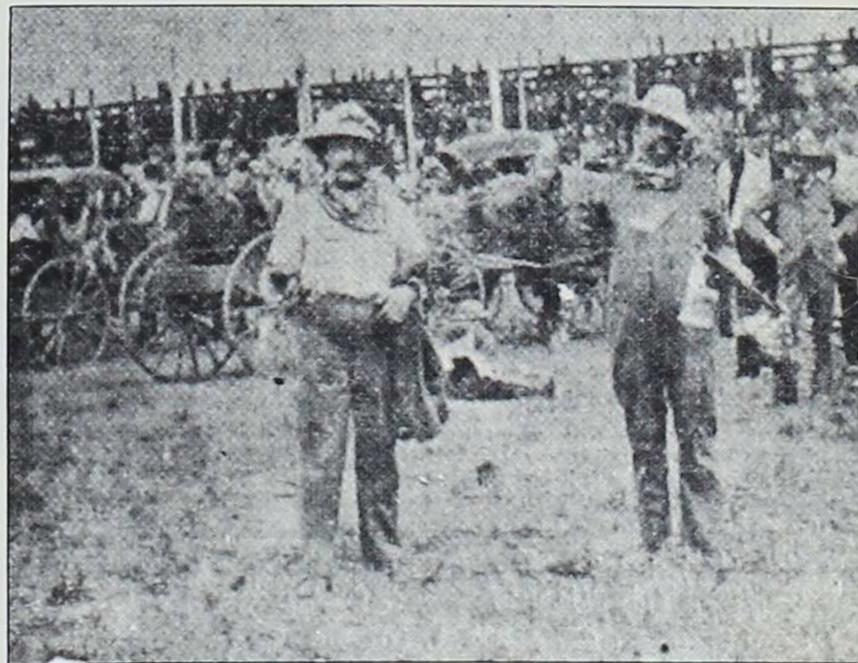
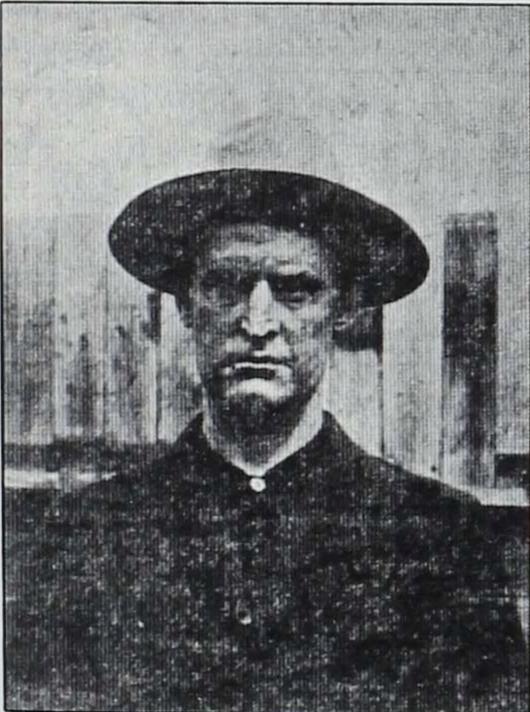
Delegates agreed on a hobo platform with some of the planks poking fun at their stereotype:

1. We are in favor of legislation for the establishment of rocking chairs in all brake-beams on all railway cars and coaches.
2. All bulldogs shall be muzzled and any dog swallowing his muzzle and biting a Tourist shall be shot.
3. Any housewife offering a hobo her own making of mince pie shall be declared guilty of treason and shall be punished accordingly.
4. All cushions and bumpers to blind baggage must be cushioned and upholstered.
5. The word "bath" must be expunged from the dictionary and any person caught bathing shall be tarred and feathered.
6. We believe in the free and unlimited distribution of beer without waiting for the aid or consent of any of the breweries.
7. No blanket stiff who squares it will be allowed to hit the road a second time.
8. We are opposed to all foreign wars, as

**IMAGES FROM
THE PRESS**

Right: "The Dewey Notification Meeting" (Minneapolis Tribune)

Below: Filipino Joe, Dewey's running mate (Saint Paul Pioneer Press)



Above: "Representative Group of the Languid" (Saint Paul Pioneer Press)

Left: "The Anti-Prosperity Party: The Anti Movement Carried to Its Logical Conclusion" (Minneapolis Journal)

the loading of transports necessitates too much work.

The hoboes chose Admiral Dewey for presidential candidate. "Dewey is our logical candidate," Nebuchadnezzar Lloyd, delegate from Utah, explained. "In the first place he has been thrown down and roasted by all the other parties. From the day he sailed he wanted to be president. Naturally we know how he feels. Then he is one of us, because he never had but one home and he gave that away. He believes in free trade, imperialism, silver, gold, and everything else that is repudiated by the other parties. He's our choice."

For Dewey's running mate, the crowd selected delegate "Filipino Joe." Rising to speak, Joe shifted his tobacco quid and made one campaign promise: "Ladies and gents: I'm no speechifier. The people wot brought us here has treated us great. Britt has been good to me an' I intend bein' good to Britt."

Joe and his fellow tourists apparently kept that promise. Although reporters noted that nervous townspeople were locking their doors and hiding their silverware, the *Iowa State Register* admitted that "no depredations were committed."

"THE HOBO CONVENTION has come and gone," the *Britt News* reassured its citizenry a few days later. "Nobody was killed, the town was not burned, nobody robbed. Britt is the best advertised town in the United States and is still doing business at the same old stand." "If everybody did not have a good time," the paper added, "it was their own fault as there was all colors of fun afloat."

Union president Noe had predicted a few thousand tourists, but after the convention the *Britt News* joshed, "The crowd in attendance was very variously estimated from 20,000 down. . . . Anyway it was the largest crowd for its size ever congregated in the state of Iowa." The *Iowa State Register* reported: "The town was so large [400 bona fide hoboes] it scared itself, and will not be over the boom for years."

The midwestern papers acknowledged the publicity coup their own correspondents had helped Britt bring about. Attesting that Britt

had "more varieties of genius" than any other American town, the *Sioux City Tribune* admitted that "Britt has had the entire country wondering for three weeks whether the hobo convention announced to be held there was a fake or the real thing." The *Tribune* continued, "They not only got the advertising they wanted, but they got a convention big enough to scare the people half out of their wits. When it was over the hoboes departed in peace, and didn't even take the town with them. And now they are trying to run Tom Way for congress in the Tenth."

The *Chicago Inter-Ocean* joked that "Britt is populated by very ambitious people who lay awake nights trying to study out some scheme that would bring their burg fame." The *Saint Paul Pioneer-Press* grumbled, "There are plenty of towns anxious for the advertising and willing to run the risk of thievery and rapine in order to get the bums and the newspaper notices. Britt won out this year through the efforts of Tom Way [and Truman] Potter."

Tom Way used the Britt convention as another jab in his ongoing county-seat war with the equally ambitious small town of Garner. In his *Britt News*, he smirked, "The Hobos were all sent to Garner the next day as they wanted a nice quiet place to rest for a day or two."

Britt had achieved fame. Young society tramps had had their lark. The professional hoboes no doubt weathered the jokes at their expense, relishing the brotherhood while guarding their cherished privacy. Reporters and readers had enjoyed a break from the McKinley-Bryan campaign.

"It was advertising that Britt was after, and she got it," Editor Simkins chuckled, well aware of correspondents' embellishments. "Let the good Lord have mercy on the reporter of the daily paper when he goes up to the pearly gates and tries to get in." For a few days in August 1900, reporters had shone the national spotlight on a spunky small Iowa town and its honored guests, the hoboes. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources for this article were period newspapers covering the Tourists Union conventions of 1897-1900. See also Gretchen Carlson's "The Hobo Convention," *Palimpsest* (July 1931).

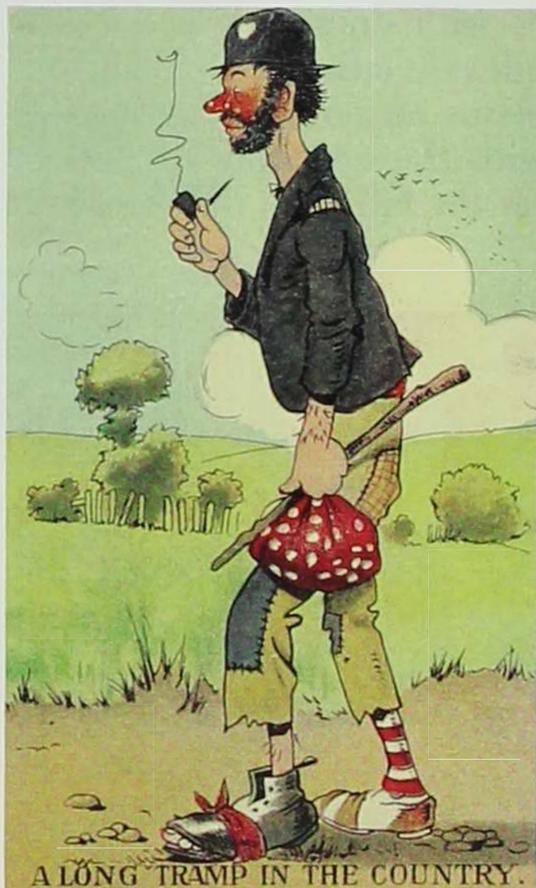
The Postcard Tramp

The wanderer on picture postcards is always dressed in oversized shoes, a crumpled hat, and patched trousers. With a tin can slung around his neck and a bundle tied to a stick, the bearded tramp chomps on a cigar or pipe, sharing the joke of the postcard's caption. His image has become an American icon, one that our society sometimes accepts affectionately through the humor of a Charlie Chaplin or a Red Skelton.

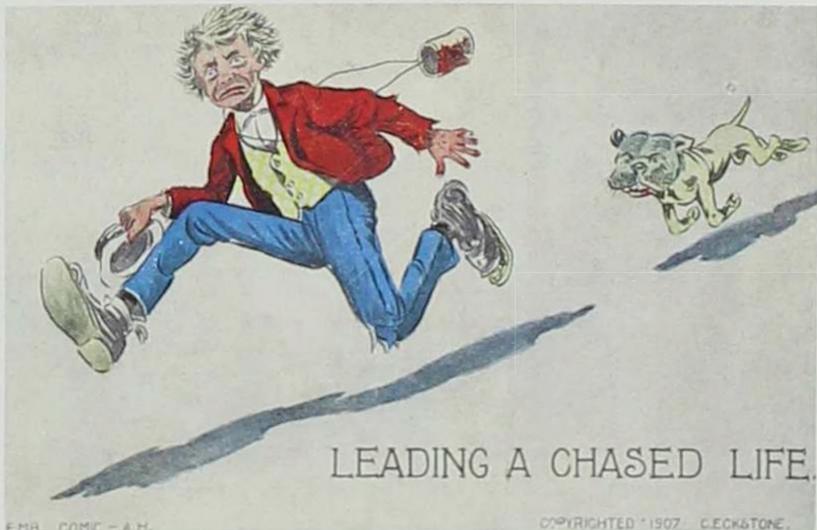
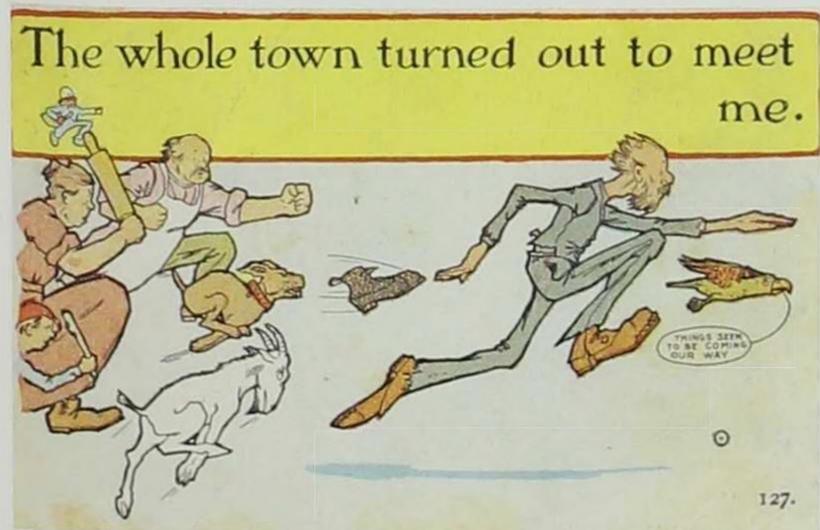
The popular motif of the postcard tramp appears in this sampling, part of *Palimpsest* contributor George Horton's extensive collection of hobo memorabilia. These examples generally date from 1906 to 1919 (sending and collecting picture postcards were quite popular in these decades), but the stereotype continues on cards printed in subsequent decades.

In choosing a picture postcard with the tramp motif, the sender slips into that character to convey travel details or to share a joke. Looking underneath the humor, however, one detects stronger messages from mainstream culture, messages about our society's attitudes towards the vagabond.

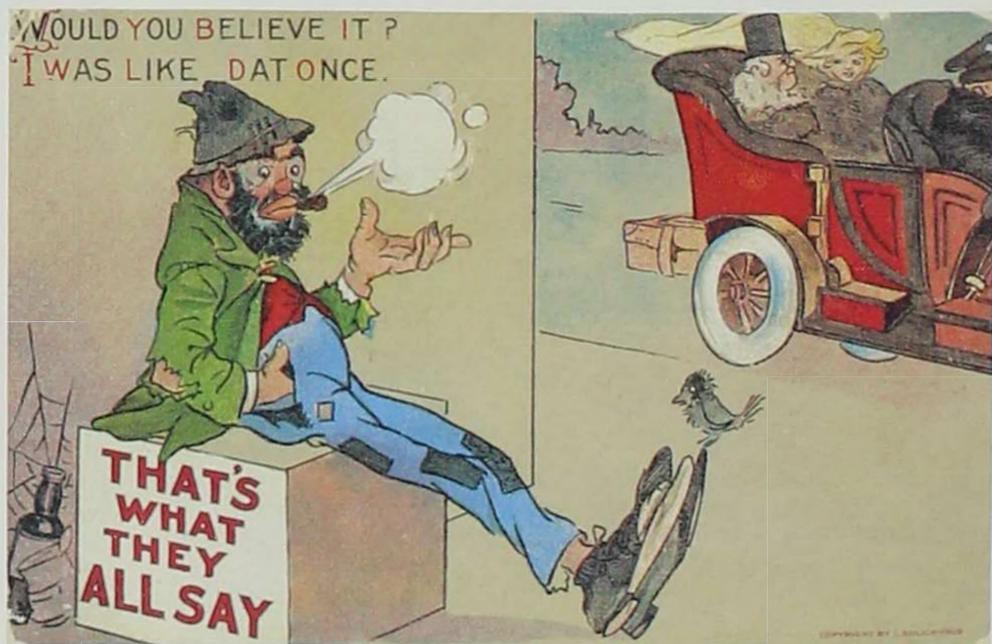
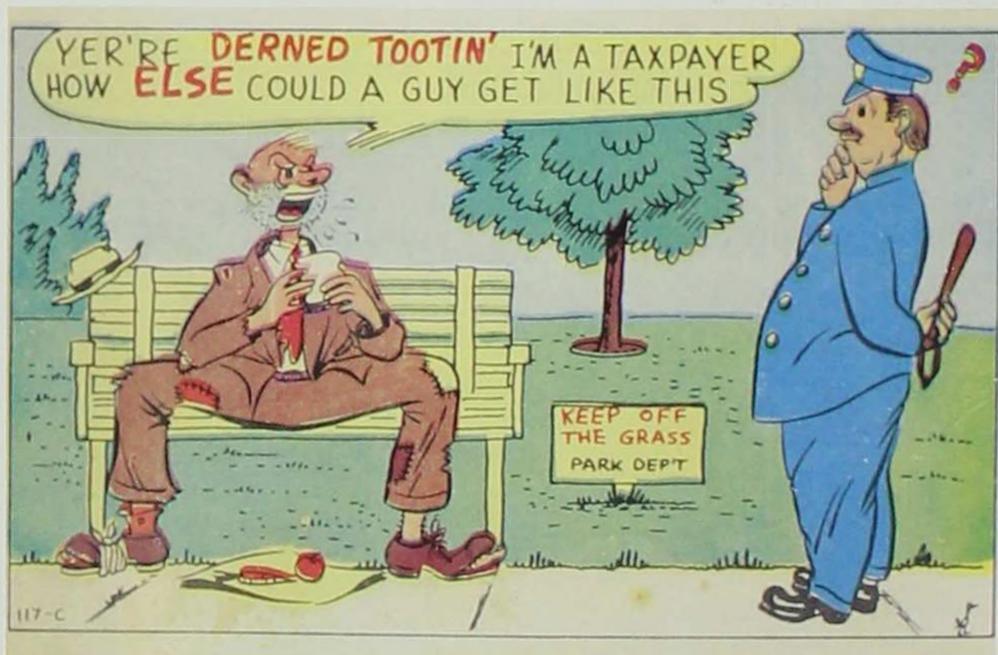
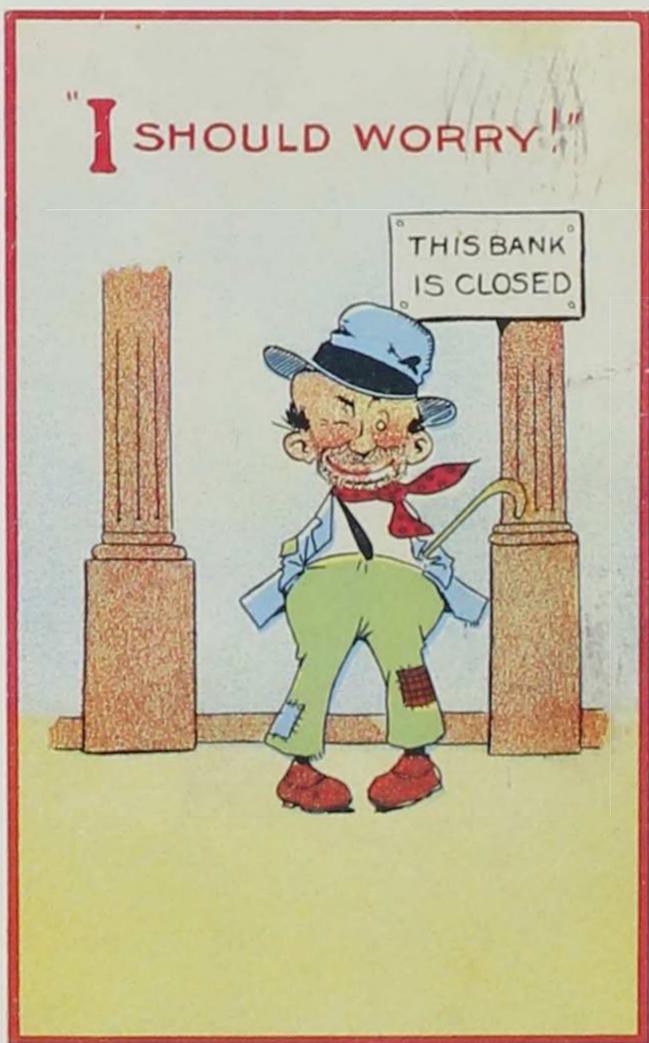
—The Editor

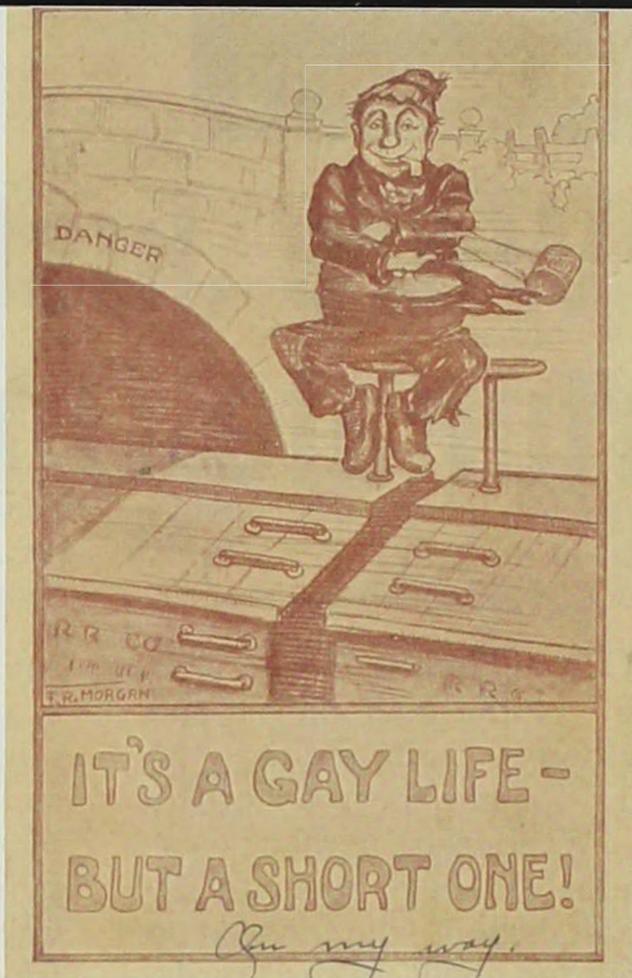


Double meanings and puns abound on cards portraying the tramp as an unwelcome visitor.



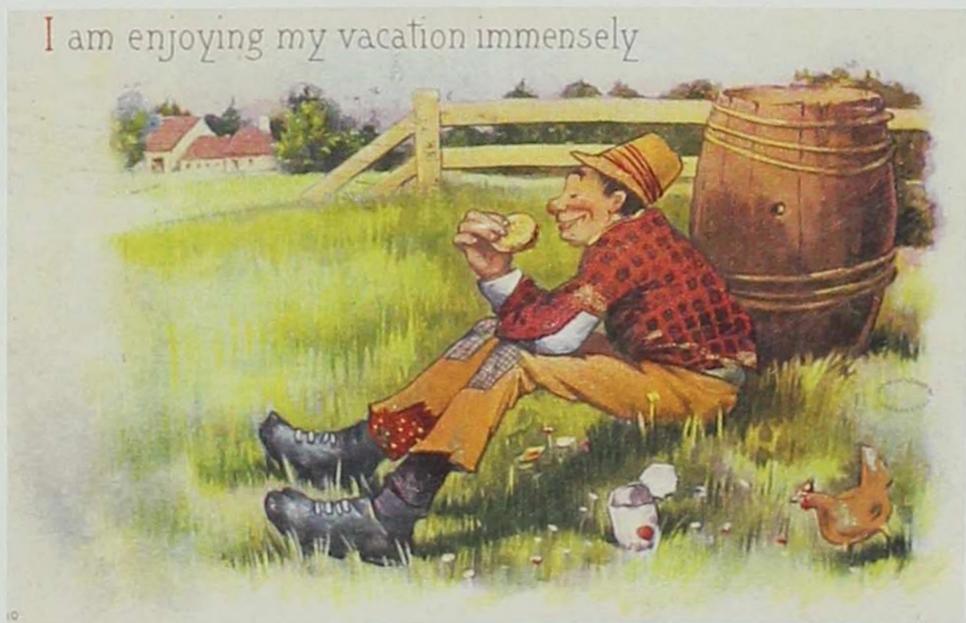
The postcard tramp speaks for all of us with empty pockets. The peniless, victimized character complains on our behalf, finding fault with the economy or government for the fall from riches to rags.





Above: Frequent elements of the wanderer's life — misfortune and danger — are turned into humor on these picture postcards. One individual's misfortune triggers no compassion in the stern-faced lady of the house, and the very real danger of riding freight trains becomes a joke about the risk of a carefree life.

Right: To most of us, the life of the vagabond appears to represent a break from propriety and obligations. Discarding social expectations and responsibilities and donning a favorite floppy hat, we seek the open road on our too-short vacations — and send a postcard to the folks at work back home.



'You Were Just One of the Unfortunate Ones'

by Merle Davis

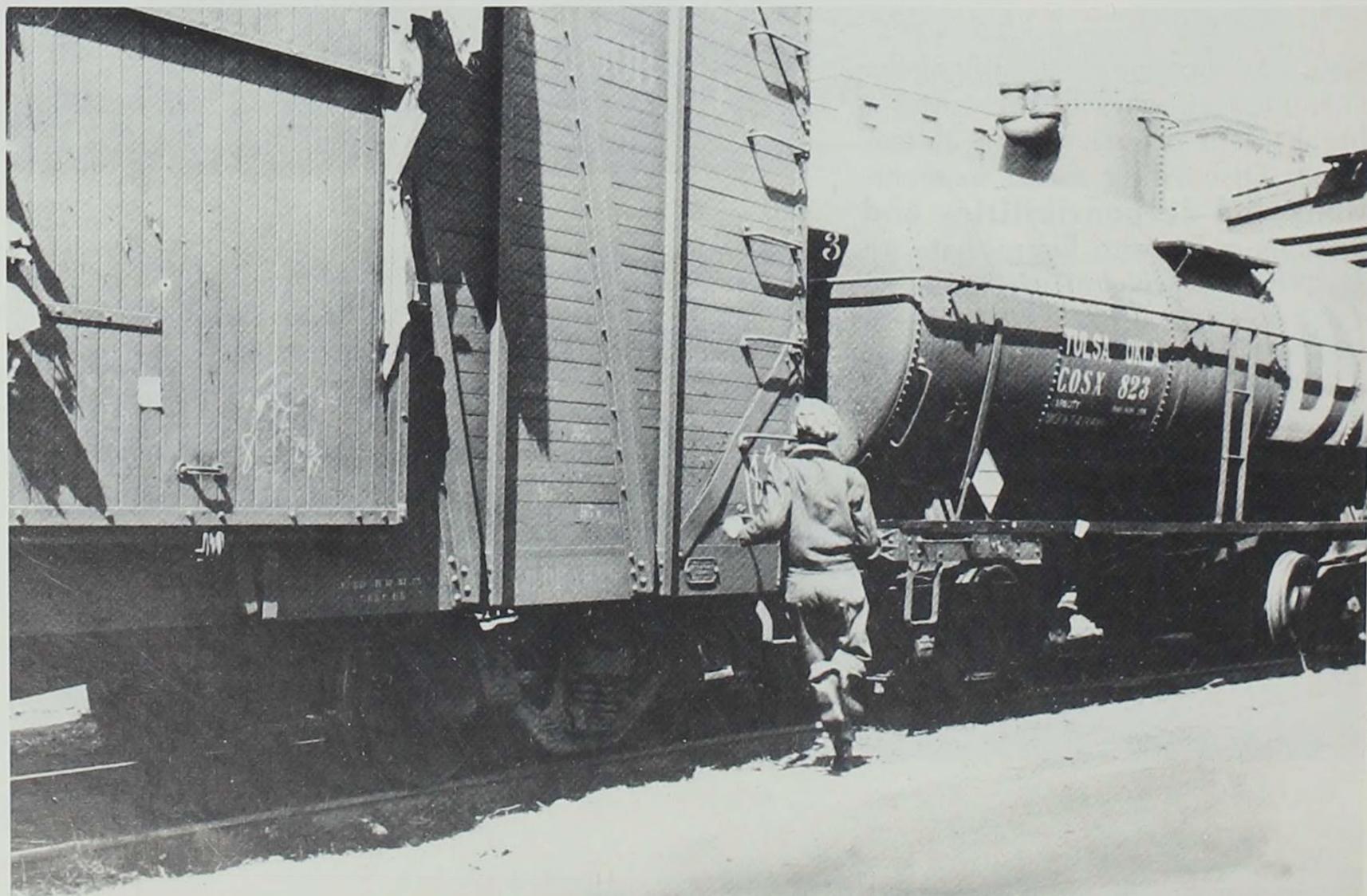
PROSPECTS of employment continued to lure the unemployed and downtrodden — and, indeed, the ambitious — onto the road in the twentieth century. Wanderlust perhaps compelled some individuals to seek a romantic life on the road, but most persons who traveled on freight trains, wandered about railroad yards, and camped in hobo jungles were among the unfortunate ones who were traveling about the country desperately looking for work.

Life on the road was harsh. Stealing rides on trains was neither simple nor safe. Death under the wheels of a speeding train posed a constant threat. Migratory workers sometimes came to fear both train crews and railroad detectives. Certain rail lines gained notoriety for their rough treatment of transients. In 1932 the Southern Pacific alone ejected 700,000 per-

sons from its freight trains. Companions acquired casually on the road or in hobo jungles might be thieves, thugs, or worse. Townfolk and farmers alike often branded itinerant workmen as tramps, bums, hoboes — dangerous persons, both dreaded and despised. Loneliness, hunger, and privation were the constant traveling companions of the rootless laborers. Migratory laborers frequently were not only homeless, jobless, friendless, and often penniless — they were largely unorganized.

The one organization best remembered for harnessing the potential power residing in the brains and muscles of the great mass of unorganized migratory and exploited workers was

One of thousands: A man hops a freight (Dubuque, 1940), photographed by John Vachon for the Farm Security Administration.



the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Founded at a Chicago convention in 1905, the IWW sought to organize all workers into one big union and thereby bring about a general restructuring of society. The IWW preached and practiced non-violent direct action in the settlement of industrial disputes, whether they were on the shopfloor or in the harvest field. IWW organizers found recruits in skid rows and hobo jungles, in workplaces and on freight trains. The IWW reached its peak in strength around World War I, but vigilante attacks and governmental suppression on the federal, state, and local levels led to its virtual demise in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Yet well into the 1920s, the red union card of the IWW guaranteed safe passage on freight trains in some parts of the West. Packing the same card in other places could lead to the rock pile or a roughing up by vigilantes. For many of the outcast and downtrodden, the IWW provided a practical schooling in the ultimate importance of organization and solidarity.

The Great Depression threw hundreds of thousands of Americans out of work. In the winter of 1932/33, estimates placed the number of unemployed persons at 25 percent of the workforce. Thousands took to the road for the first time, some for weeks, many for years. Husbands and fathers left their families. Teenagers took to the railways and highways by the thousands, some in search of work, others bound for no place in particular, simply wandering. In 1932 roughly two million young people were traveling around the United States. Des Moines railroadmen estimated in 1933 that four to five hundred young people were daily riding freight trains through the city. Although most of the transients found stealing rides on freights were male, one Des Moines railroad official guessed that four or five girls road freight trains into the city each day. In 1933 it was estimated that sixty thousand females were on the road in the United States. Families sometimes road the freights together, the children accompanying their parents to whichever destination the train would carry them. Most railroads serving Iowa allowed riders to travel unmolested on freights, and occasionally train crews even coupled extra cars onto trains to furnish shelter for

riders during bad weather. Although some youths lugged battered grips or carried extra clothing wrapped in brown paper bundles, most trekked across the country with only the clothes they were wearing. Upon arriving in cities like Des Moines, they usually sought out the hobo jungles, where they would sleep, boil coffee, make friends, bum a meal, perhaps look for work, and prepare to board another train. These were the outcasts of American society — the unemployed, the uprooted, the unfortunate ones.

The experiences of these individuals form an important chapter in the history of working people. In the mid-1970s the Iowa labor movement set about to document the history of the working people of Iowa and their unions. The Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, bore primary responsibility for directing and financing this effort through its Iowa Labor History Oral Project. Trained historians traveled about Iowa and neighboring states conducting oral history interviews and collecting other historically significant materials relating to midwestern working people. Many of the interviews dealt with the recollections of individuals who took to the road in the 1920s and '30s, or with railroadmen who came into frequent contact with hoboes and transients. The following edited excerpts were gleaned from some of these interviews.

Circulating

Wanderlust certainly compelled some persons to take to the road.

A Mason City railway switchman recalled: "There was Scoopshovel Scotty and Hairbreath Harry and many other ones. . . . One fellow by the name of Sullivan [would] come around every spring when the weather would get kind of mild. He'd sit on the tie pile and play the mouth organ. We'd always invite him down to our yard office and give him a sandwich or something, or make arrangements so he could eat over there at Long's Restaurant on Third Street. We enjoyed him every spring. We looked forward to him! There was a lot of fellows. . . . I felt sorry for them. Didn't seem to be looking for work, just circulating."

A railroadman from Mapleton remembered:

"I always had the urge to travel, even when I was a young boy. Before I had guts enough to leave home, I used to hop freight trains and ride them up the hills for fifteen, twenty miles and then jump off and walk back. I got a little experience when getting on and off these trains. Then, as I got older . . . I'd side-door Pullman around the country. You had to be like a tomcat, because you had to spring through the air at the right time, or you'd be slammed up against the boxcar. . . . I even rode the blinds on a passenger train. It was quite a deal if you could say you rode the blinds on the Southwest Limited or the Rocky Mountain Limited. A few times you'd get kicked off by the brakeman or conductor or fireman. It was rough at times."

Bumming

Most people who rode in, under, or on top of freight and passenger trains without going through the formality of paying fares were not seeking adventure or excitement. They bummed around the country in search of work.

A Des Moines man who would later mine coal, drive truck, and help build farm machinery recalled being on the bum in the 1920s: "I made up my mind I wasn't going to school anymore [when I was sixteen]. The old man, if you didn't bring any money in, you wasn't staying under his roof. I couldn't find a job. So then me and him got to fighting and arguing, and I just went on the bum, riding freight cars all over the country. Wherever I could pick up work, I picked up work. I worked in the wheat fields, harvesting wheat. Worked in beet fields. I worked anyplace I would find work. Slept in the barns. [Farmers] wouldn't let us in their houses. You had to work for them, [but] you slept in the barn. They had a little table built out under a tree or something, and they fed you. That's as close as you got to the house. You were up at daylight, and you were out there until dark."

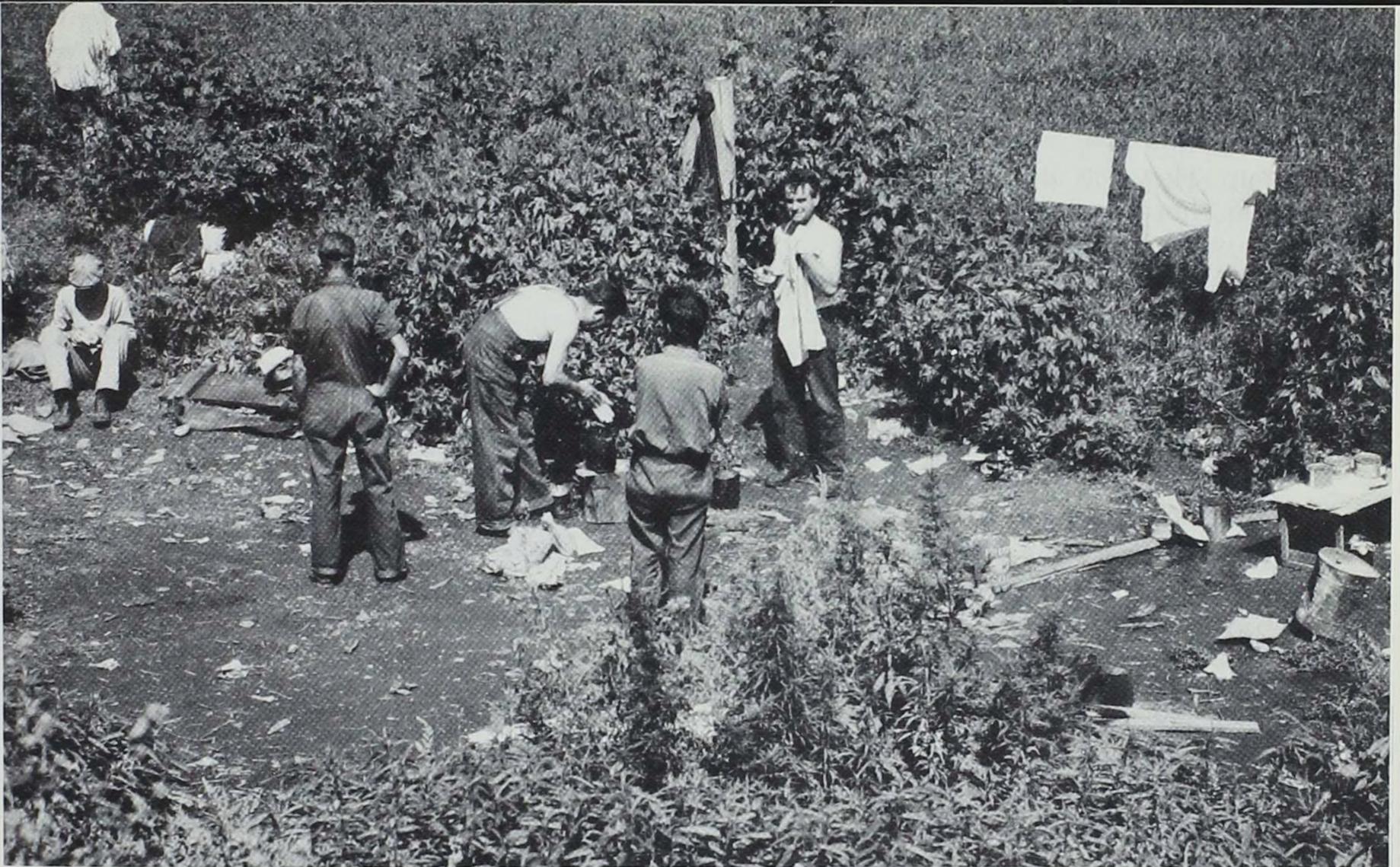
A Des Moines bricklayer who was working in Chicago when the Great Bull Market crashed recalled his experiences: "There was a little work, but not much. All them big buildings,

they just didn't have the money [to finish them]. They went broke. That's when I started on the bum. . . . Back in them days, when you was on the bum, if you'd find a job, [and] the guy didn't want to give [you] a job, some bricklayer would come and go to the foreman and say, 'Say, listen, let that kid work a day.' That'd give me some money. They'd volunteer to let me work in their places, which happened to me several times. It was just that you was on the road, and you was broke, and nine out of ten times you didn't have any money at all.

A Waterloo man who would later help manufacture tractors remembered: "The freight train was the best way to go. It was rough going, because you got kicked off and so forth. There was a lot of them riding. We took off and was going out to Montana, out to the wheat harvest, and see if we couldn't get a job. So we rode the freight trains. I'll never forget when we were pulling out of Fargo, North Dakota. We waited in there overnight, and there was over five hundred of us [who] crawled on a freight train."

A Fort Dodge truck driver recalled: "There was three of us [who] traveled together. Traveled everywhere west of the Mississippi practically. We would be gone three, four, six months at a time, and then come back. Our main object in running around the country was to find jobs, like dishwashing, peeling spuds, picking fruit, cutting hay. During the harvest we would be on the threshing runs. Out of Cheyenne, Wyoming, I suppose at one time maybe about forty of us [were] on one train, all going different directions. And you'd break up. Some of them would be going south to Arizona, some of them going north to Washington and Oregon."

An Estherville packinghouse worker vividly recounted: "For a whole year I just traveled, slept in the boxcars or wherever you could get a place to sleep. Jails. Anywhere that you could lay down. Place where there was sand for the railroads, you sleep there, anywhere. Oh, you survived. There was a lot of bakeries and butcher shops. You bummed them. Worked a little for your rolls and bread. You just done that, that's all. Usually I had a pack sack, and if you get a little work somewhere, you'd get some bacon ends or something like that. . . . I



didn't fool around the South because I might get put on a chain-gang. I was just a little scared of it. . . . A train would probably have a hundred on it; probably a hundred, hundred and fifty guys on a train going through. You were just one of the unfortunate ones, like everybody else. I met guys with real good educations. I was out in Idaho. There was a guy, he had paper wrapped on his feet. He was wrapped in paper clear to his knees to keep his feet warm. The newspaper come down and took a picture of him. Didn't have any shoes. Wrapped in paper."

Camping

Hobo camping grounds — or jungles — left indelible impressions on the memories of railroad men and migratory workers.

A railroad brakeman and conductor from Waterloo explained: "Generally, wherever there was a water tank around the railroad there was a hobo jungle there. There was one at Independence, there was one at Manchester, and there was one on the left side of the track down at Dubuque, just about five, six blocks down from the river from our coal shed and water station. . . . There were anywhere from

A hobo jungle outside Britt, 1939.

six to fifteen fellows in that camp most of the time. Down at Dubuque they could sleep under the bluff there. And then, if the weather was bad, they'd crawl in some empty boxcars that were in dead storage right close to this jungle."

A locomotive fireman from Waterloo also remembered the Dubuque hobo jungle: "[Hoboes would] go uptown and get them [coffee] grounds from the restaurants and dry it, take an old gallon can, pour water over that, and they'd make you the best cup of coffee you ever drank. You never drank any better than a hobo cup of coffee! Our engineer used to take cold water to Dubuque. He'd grab our company bottles [and] go down there to the hobo camp and get two bottles of coffee for us so we'd have coffee from there to Waterloo!

"Then they'd go up the [Catholic] sisters' place. They'd always get a handout there. . . . They'd go uptown and talk some butcher out of soup bone, come back there and throw it in a tin can. They maybe had an old five-gallon oil can or something that they'd got ahold of. Cut the top out of it and put it on the fire. Boil that old bone there and throw in the carrots and potatoes. Boy, you'd get a good feed out of it! I've eaten a lot of [stew] down there in the hobo

camp. They was always very sociable. You go down there, and they'd divide up with you if you wanted something to eat!"

A Mason City railroad brakeman and conductor recounted: "Right over here . . . just this side of the tracks, there was a hobo camp in there. There was a few trees in there. They never done no damage, the hoboes didn't, but they would go around and beg. They'd come and knock on your door and ask you. If you give it to them, all right. If you didn't, all right. . . . When them fellows left that camp, the cans they used for teakettles and coffeepots, they cleaned them all up. . . . And they would hang them in the trees so the next guy could use them. They really were gentlemen, as far as that's concerned, the majority, now."

The Mapleton railroad man recalled: "I met some real interesting people there [in the jungles]. It was rough at times. There was a few nights, too, when I went to sleep on hard coal and used the weeds that I pulled up for a mattress. I was only sixteen years old, but I got a college education out of it."

A Sioux City man who spent a short time riding the rails in 1933 related: "It was new to me, sitting around the jungles listening to older folks talk, professional hoboes. I wasn't professional. I was an amateur. . . . If you had

a penny or two, you'd throw it in the kitty, and you got a meal."

The Des Moines bricklayer also recalled jungles: "In Niles, Michigan, one time I was in a big jungle. . . . Maybe two hundred men in there, cooking, cleaning their clothes, boiling their clothes out, and all that kind of stuff. Oh, it was terrible. Wherever you went, you had them jungles. Guys moving this way. Guys moving the other way. And they was all good guys. You never seen no trouble. They would help one another. What these guys were, then, were just regular old American workingmen that were looking for work."

Harassing

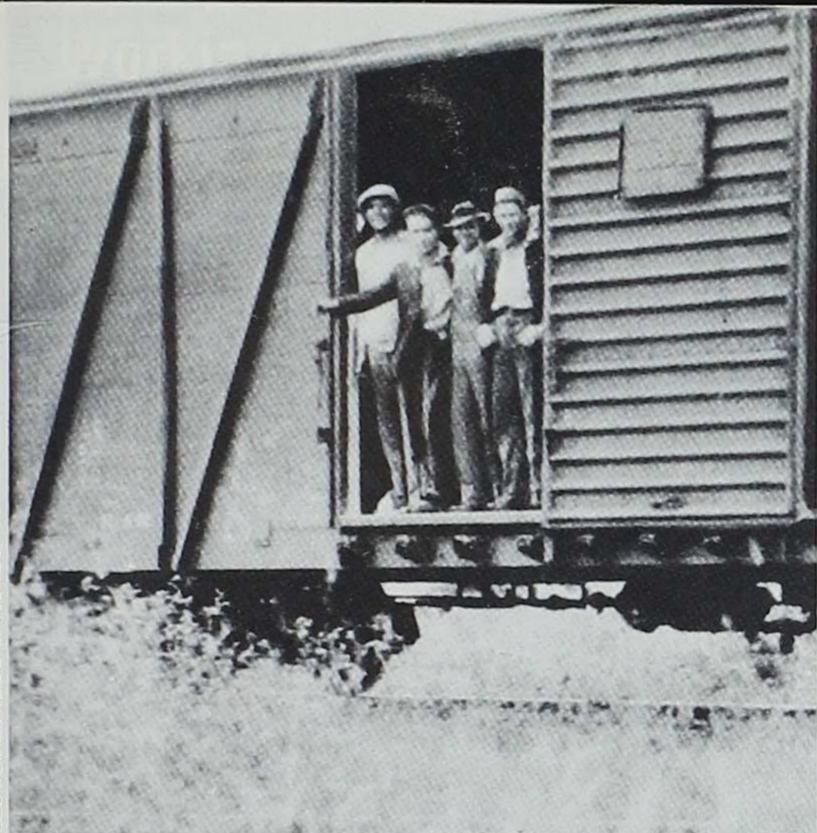
Migratory workers, as well as professional hoboes, needed to be on constant alert lest they suffer harassment at the hands of local law officers, railroad detectives, or unscrupulous train crews.

The Waterloo brakeman and conductor explained: "I just greeted them or spoke to them as I saw them on the train, but I never stopped to visit with them any more than to say

The train schedule set the tempo for a wanderer's day of waiting and riding. Below: A handful of men stop off in Britt (1930s). Opposite: Fellow travelers share a boxcar as they ride through Des Moines, 1934.

ART FISCHBECK COLLECTION, SHSI, PHOTO BY SAFFORD LOCH





'Hello,' or 'Where are you going?' or something like that. No, I didn't chase them off, and I didn't try to shake them down for a package of cigarettes or whatever, like some fellows have."

The Waterloo locomotive fireman said: "They got on whenever they wanted to. We never paid any attention to them. They rode on the back of the tank. We didn't say anything, [but] just coming over the back of the tank they might scare the daylights out of you, if you stepped on one of them or something like that. Used to go back and get one [to] see whether he wouldn't pull coal for you. Give him a sandwich or something, if you had an extra sandwich, if he was hungry. Tell him to come down and pull some coal for you. And then, of course, if it was cold weather, it was nice and warm down there. . . . Of course, the doggone lazy brakeman, they didn't want to [shovel coal] because they didn't want to get dirty!"

The Mason City brakeman and conductor recalled: "No, never a trainman chased a hobo. They helped them. If there was an empty car, they told him where it was. They helped him because the brakeman's out there in the dark with a light, [and] the hobo's out there in the dark with a club. He's got the advantage on you, so you better be good to him. You didn't have to be afraid of them. They wouldn't hurt you. There was a lot of very, very honorable men as hoboes, well-educated. Jim Love, a conductor down here, always felt bad because he didn't get an education, and after he got to running trains, [and] we had a hobo [aboard], he would have him in the caboose, and many,

many times he split his lunch with him just to get the information out of that hobo. . . . There were some drunks, sure. There's evils in everything. But the majority of them were very intelligent men."

The Des Moines bricklayer remembered: "We [had] come into Guthrie, Oklahoma. And the railroad dick, he flashed his flashlight in there. He seen us up in one corner [of the boxcar]. Down in the other corner there was three colored fellows that [had gotten] in the freight car with us. Man! That's when we got in trouble. . . . So they took us down and put us in jail, kept me overnight. We come before the judge; and the judge, he sentenced them three colored fellows to the peanut farm, and the other two guys that was white, they put them on some other kind of deal they had there — not a peanut farm — to clean up the parks and so on. So the judge asked me, 'What identification have you?' I had a paid-up union card. That judge must have been a good union man . . . or something. He kind of accepted that, and he told the policeman, 'Take this kid down and see that he gets a good breakfast.' But I had to promise I wouldn't ride the train out of Guthrie, Oklahoma!"

The Waterloo factory worker recalled: "[Train crews] didn't give us any trouble. Just had these yard dicks that did it. They weren't as bad as they'd been years ago. Years ago they were really ruthless. I know we caught one freight train out of a town in Dakota. We caught one there, and he chased us off three times. . . . We come into a town [in the Dakotas], and the freight stopped there and wasn't going to leave till next morning, and they threw us in jail. We said, 'We'll sleep in the boxcar.' They says, 'No, you won't. You're going to jail.' I'll never forget that as long as I live. Soon as it got dark and we turned the lights off, the bedbugs were so thick you couldn't hardly stand it. We never slept a wink all night."

Organizing

Many of the transient workers who hit the road in the 1920s and 1930s first learned about trade unions and the importance of organization and

solidarity through their contact with the Industrial Workers of the World.

A Des Moines machinist recalled the late 1920s: "When [my dad] went broke, I went from one place to the other looking for jobs. You rode the boxcars, and I rode plenty of them. I ran into these IWW guys in hobo jungles. I never was a member, but I was around with the IWW. 'I Won't Work' — some people would say that was the slogan of the IWW. Others would say it was 'I Want Work.' Another one was 'I'm Willing to Work.' There used to be signs in different towns: 'IWW's — don't let the sun set and find you here.'"

A Sioux City packinghouse worker recalled the same years: "Between threshing and picking potatoes in Minnesota and Idaho, knocking apples in Washington, [I traveled for] a period of about six years. . . . I did join [the IWW in Kansas]. That was about my second year of making the harvest there. The main operation they conducted was trying to get the people not to go out to the farms unless they could get a guaranteed wage when they went. Of course, in that day we were talking about two bucks a day; three would be tops. . . . Then they tried to establish that a stacker or a guy on the header barge, or different jobs you done through the harvest, should pay a little more than handling a pitchfork. I think they did have the effect of making the people conscious that they should at least bargain for what they was going to get paid."

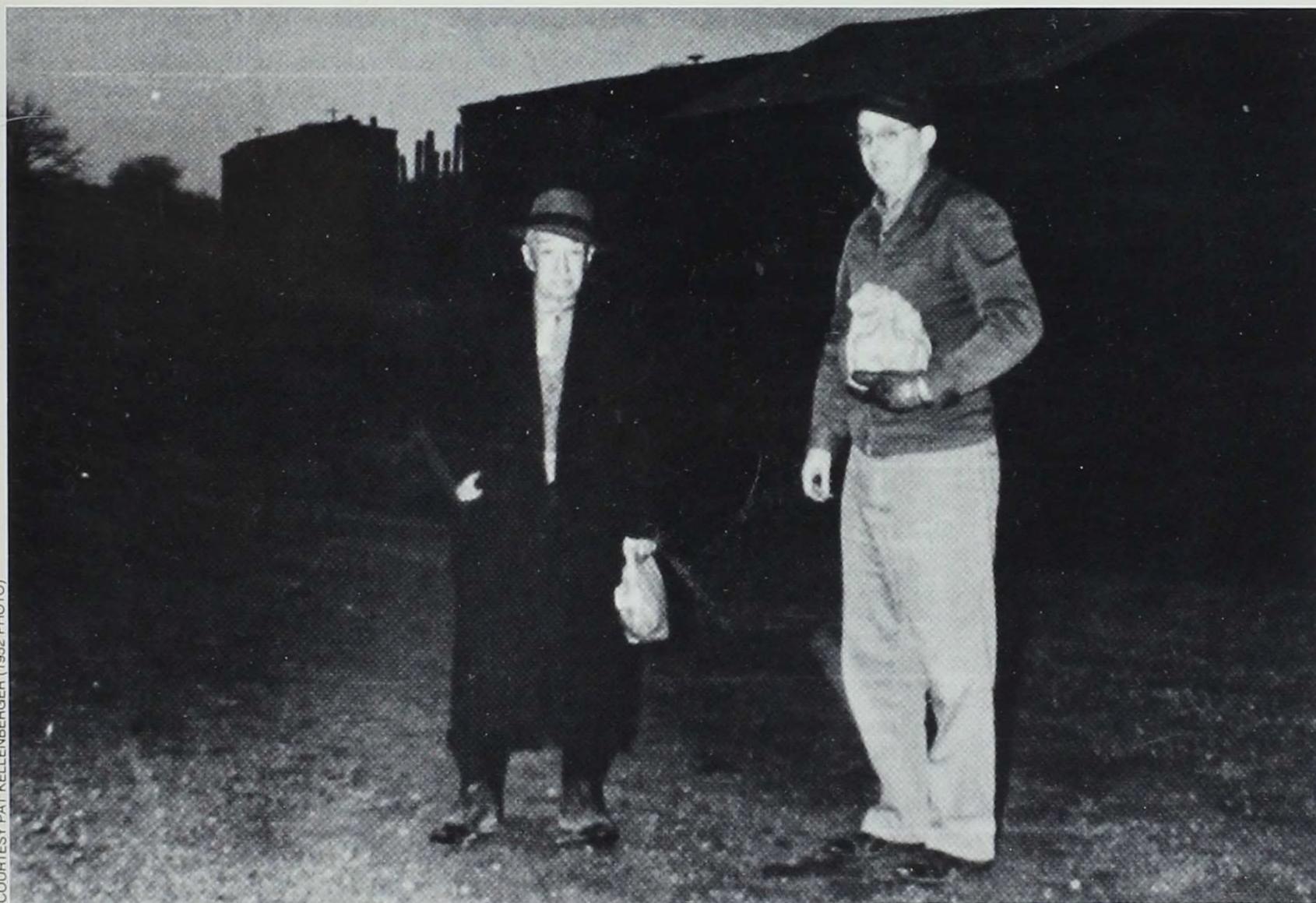
A Cedar Rapids truck driver said: "I moved for about twelve years. I rode the freights all over the United States. I made the harvest in the Dakotas, and the apple orchards in Washington, and the hops in Oregon. You couldn't call me a fruit picker or anything like that. I drove truck. I seldom worked in the fields. I worked on the Green River Dam in Colorado [and the Grand] Coulee Dam in Washington State. I did a little bit of everything over all those years. Went back and worked in the lumber camps a while up in northern Michigan. I got into mining. I worked in several mines around Butte. I worked in the highest elevation mine located in the United States. I worked for the U.S. Valadium Company at Bishop, California, in a shaft that was [at] eight thousand feet. That was a tungsten mine. The

union up at Bishop was the IWW, Industrial Workers of the World. I guess that was about their last stronghold, but, holy cow! you had clean sheets on the bed! Living conditions were a big thing with them, with the Wobblies. They dealt with boomers and miners and lumberjacks and grain harvest workers."

The Estherville packinghouse worker remembered: "I heard they were hiring at Fort Peck, Montana. So I went down there. They didn't even want to take me. Finally, I went down into the tunnels. They were water tunnels. The boss said, 'You must really want a job bad enough to come down here and see me.' He says, 'I'll hire you.' So I went to work in the tunnels there. They hired nothing but tramps. That's all they would hire there, because they were killing them off just like flies. And that's why I got ahold of the IWWs. I finally joined the Industrial Workers of the World. . . . My first knowledge of unions was [from] them. I didn't know too much about unions at that time, but I talked to this buddy of mine. We worked together. He said, 'Well, look, you can't lose anything.' So we joined. We went right [in] with them. They were tough. Those old IWWs, when a grievance started they got right around the boss. And that's where it was ended, right there. The only way we had to settle the grievance [was] right there. You couldn't take a grievance to the office. They just stuck up for what was right, that's all. It was just a worker [who] wanted his rights. That's the only way we got it. The worker with his rights, that's all." □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The excerpts of interviews used here are from the massive collection of oral history interviews collected and processed by the Iowa Labor History Oral Project. Mark Smith, Secretary-Treasurer, Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, authorized the use of interviews from this collection for the preparation of this article. The bulk of material dealing with unemployment and the movement of transient labor in Iowa in the 1930s came from the files of the *Des Moines Register*, especially for the summer months of 1932-1934. Among the most useful books for background information were Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933*; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW*; Joyce Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, v. I, *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933*.



COURTESY PAT KELLEBERGER (1952 PHOTO)

Against the silhouette of a freight train, Amana station agent Herb Zuber (right) and Indian Joe Ferns, one of several hoboes Zuber recalls in the following sketches.

Hobo Sketches by an Amana Station Agent

by *Cliff Trumpold*

HUNDREDS of hobo wayfarers passed through the Amana Colonies in eastern Iowa every year. The Amanas were an oasis for the hobo, a place where he could count on a handout from the communal kitchens in the seven colonies. Many times the church leaders had admonished the Amana villagers: "Turn ye not away

when ye are asked." The doors were opened to all. When the Amana Colonies changed to a capitalist economy in 1932, the communal kitchens were closed. But townspeople continued the tradition of hospitality and generosity, feeding hoboes from their private homes.

Most of those who came were nameless and

lived in the fringes of a shadow world, asking only for a slice of bread. Nobody ever saw them arrive. They would just appear, hang around for a few days, and — as quietly as they had come — vanish. If a hobo abused the Amana hospitality by overstaying his visit, he would be “offered” a job, and, more often than not, would leave on the next train.

But some of the hoboes did accept jobs. Outside laborers were always in great demand to perform menial tasks, especially on the village farms during planting and harvesting time. They became hired hands and received a generous wage, a place to hang their hats, and

three meals a day at a designated village kitchen. In the fall, after the hay had been stacked and the wheat and corn put up in the giant granaries, they would draw their pay, wrap up their few meager possessions, and leave for warmer regions.

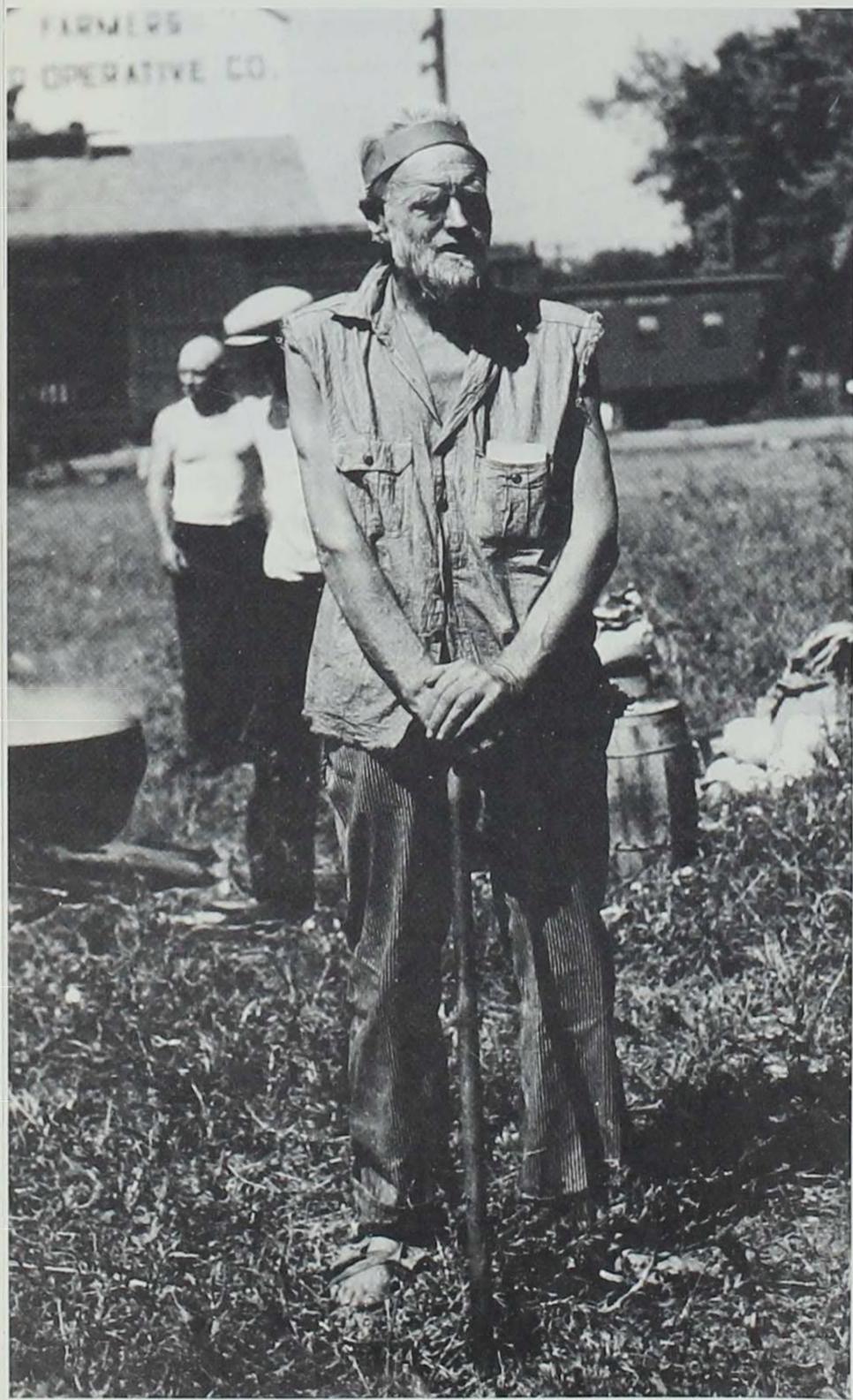
Occasionally, some of the hoboes who were approaching middle age would realize that life on the open road was losing its fascination. They gradually tuned out the siren song of the locomotive whistle and settled in one of the Amana villages, where they quietly assimilated into the mainstream of the working class. When they died they were buried in the village cemetery, rarely noticed by more than a brief obituary. Their only legacy was a mute, concrete headstone. Their epitaph was a name and a date.

Most of the hoboes who passed through Amana during the first half of this century were “pretty decent fellows,” according to Herb Zuber, retired South Amana depot agent. He is quick to add that there were also some disreputable individuals: “We had pickpockets and worse. You had to be careful. And I know we had hard, tough criminals hanging around in the jungle, west of Upper South.”

Zuber’s tenure as station agent began in 1923 and lasted for fifty years. The Great Board of Elders, Amana’s elite ruling body, had wanted him to become a teacher, but he politely refused and was assigned the position of assistant agent and shortly afterward was promoted to depot agent.

The job was not an easy one. “In those days everything came by rail,” he recalls. The South Amana Depot was the interchange between the Rock Island Railroad in the village of Lower South Amana and the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul in Upper South Amana. A tremendous amount of passenger and freight traffic passed through the villages every day. North- and southbound passengers from the Rock Island, and local travelers from Conroy, Marengo, and other nearby communities, would gather at the little depot. As they sat around the stove a hobo oftentimes would walk in to warm up. Remembering the reaction of the passengers, Zuber laughs, “You know, some of those hoboes hadn’t had a bath in a year.”

“I remember a hobo who called himself the



ART FISCHBECK COLLECTION, SHS; PHOTO BY SAFFORD LOCH

Hairbreath Harry, photographed in 1934 at Britt.

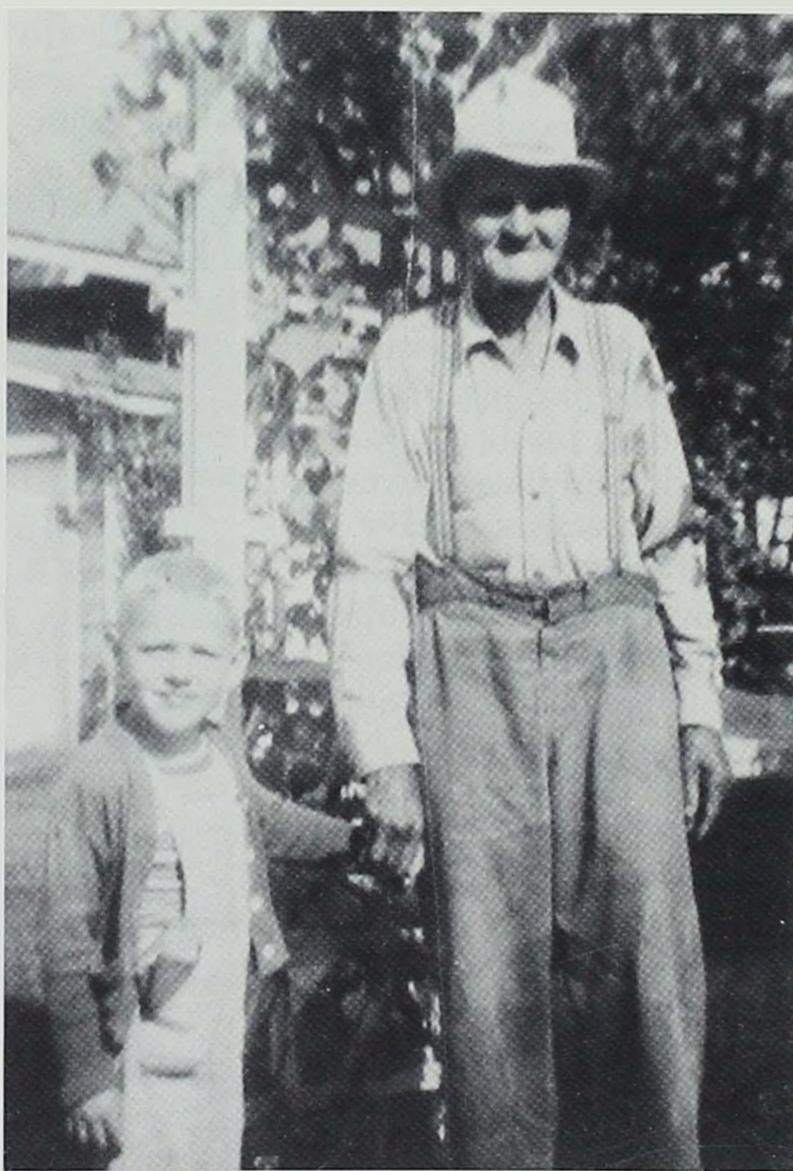
King of Tramps. He cut his initials on everything. Several times I told him that if I ever caught him cutting around the depot I would give him hell. I nailed him one day," Zuber recounts. "He had just finished cutting his name . . . about an inch deep on a slant, in a thick, solid oak door. I was about to reprimand him when I saw his knife. . . . I thought about it a little. He had his name on the outhouses, on the freight doors on the south side of the depot, and on every telephone pole within five miles. I don't know how he found time to keep his knife sharp."

Most of the hoboes sported self-styled nicknames, and Zuber remembers many of them. In the following sketches, built from Zuber's memories and perceptions and recorded in an oral history interview in February 1989, the hoboes who stopped in the Amanas emerge as individualists who led lives of great freedom — and great danger.

FIREDOWN WILLIAMS was a Welshman, or possibly a Scot. He stemmed from well-to-do aristocracy and would have inherited a title and considerable wealth had he remained at home. He enjoyed a cup of wine occasionally but rarely drank to excess. His headquarters were in South Amana but he spent a considerable amount of time in Middle Amana, where he frequently held court in one of the west-end wine cellars. He was very articulate and apparently well read, as he was up to date on most world events and had a studied opinion, always radical, on most of them.

When Firedown headed south, he never failed to stop in Wellman, Iowa, thirty miles away. He probably spent half his days in Amana and the other half in the Amish and Mennonite community in that area. His favorite overnight hangout was the corncob bin next to the furnace in the basement of the Green Island country school. One winter morning in 1940, a county maintenance crew running a snowplow discovered his body in a roadside snowdrift.

Hairbreath Harry Ryan never wore anything



COURTESY AL KELLENBERGER

Pittsburg Blackie found contentment in his friendship with young Pat Kellenberger of South Amana (1952).

made of leather. To ward off the cold, he would wrap layer upon layer of gunnysacking around his feet and legs. One bitterly cold, winter day, Zuber went out to check on him. He walked along the tracks until he came to the stockyards where a pile of sand had been placed next to the loading chute to provide footing for the animals should the ground become ice-covered. Harry had built a big fire in the sand and was lying on his back, kicking his frozen bare feet in the hot flames of the fire.

One of Hairbreath Harry's treasured possessions was an old tin cup that he dragged in front of him on a length of wire. He always walked backwards, the result of a childhood mental affliction.

Harry was moving out one day on top of a boxcar on a westbound freight train traveling downgrade at around fifty miles an hour. Probably daydreaming or getting his bearings, or maybe just enjoying the passing scenery, he didn't notice an approaching water tower, onto

which a previous train crew had inadvertently failed to secure a heavy swing chain suspended from the fill spout. The massive chain, whipping merrily in the slipstream of the fast-moving train, just cleared the top of the cars, but left no room for anyone — such as Harry — unfortunate enough to be riding there.

Indian Joe Ferns sported a full head of white hair, “thick like pig bristles,” Zuber remembers. Indian Joe had become a hobo after his wife and child had drowned in the Galveston flood. He was a very heavy drinker, often to the point of physical insensibility. One December evening in 1936 after a full afternoon of serious drinking, he fell and passed out on the trail of the hobo jungle west of South Amana. A heavy snow fell that night, three or four feet, and after midnight the snow turned to rain. Early the next morning the wind shifted and the temperature plummeted to four above. The story goes that Joe awoke, terror-stricken to find himself completely encapsulated by three feet of solid ice. Somehow he managed to free himself.

“It’s unbelievable how much the human body can stand. He was a helluva good guy,” Zuber commented. “I would have trusted him with my life. I have his Bible around here someplace. I used to bring him down to my house and he would read to my young son, Tommy. He just quit coming around sometime in the early fifties. I wrote to a lot of places where he used to stay . . . even the universities around the Midwest, you know, the cadaver departments. He just disappeared off the face of the earth. Probably buried in some Potter’s Field, unknown, like so many others.”

Pittsburg Blackie was a confirmed hobo until he cast aside his cane and walking shoes and settled in South Amana when he was in his eighties. He died at ninety-five after spending the last years of his life living in an old woodshed owned by Al Kellenberger, a villager who looked after him. He now lies in the local cemetery, not as Pittsburgh Blackie but as Henry Strasburger. He had spent nearly a full lifetime on the road — the only life he ever really knew and the only life he loved.

Texas Ben frequently worked for the South Amana farm and the old community kitchen. He didn’t really need the money because he

seemed to have a secret funding source. “Here, Herb,” he’d say, peeling a bill off a fat roll wrapped in an old handkerchief. “Here’s an old twenty for you.”

Ben suffered a horrible end. He had climbed into an empty boxcar on a westbound freight one evening while it was parked in a yard siding. The door of the car was slightly ajar and Ben stuck his head through the narrow opening at the precise instant the locomotive “hit” the string of cars. The sudden impact slammed the heavy door shut, instantly crushing Ben’s skull.

Mush Faker was a traveling umbrella repairman in the days when ladies carried parasols. He carried the tools of his trade in a quiver slung across his back. Occasionally he would stop at Zuber’s house and sing for his son, Tommy. His favorite song was “The Face on the Barroom Floor.”

The freight train was the magic carpet for the hobo, but it often exacted the ultimate toll from the unlucky man who slipped and fell from his perch on the rods underneath, or lost his hold on the ladder while riding the couplings between the cars. One of these unfortunate hoboes was Frank Kane. Kane had been drinking on one spring day in 1940, when the 9:40 Rock Island passed through South Amana. Apparently he stood too close to the tracks as the high-speed train thundered by. The vortex spun him around and pulled him under the wheels.

The first to be notified was Zuber. He rushed to the scene of the accident. Realizing that another train was due shortly, he gathered up the arms, the legs, the head, and whatever else he could find. After placing everything in a neat pile, he took a last look at all that remained of Frank Kane, and left to call the coroner.

Zuber’s experiences present a fascinating interface of the hoboes and the Amana people. “I don’t think there’s anyone in the state of Iowa who knew more hoboes,” he claims. “They came, got their wine and three square meals a day. What more do you want? They had a place to sleep . . . and they were really wanted,” he says. “There was always some work available for them. . . . One-eye Robert Norton summed it up one time: ‘Herb, this is peaceful valley. It can’t be any better in heaven.’” □

Time on Your Hands



Folks with time on their hands know that it takes a sharp knife, a steady hand, and a patient mind to whittle or carve. Consider this whimsical, 7½" creation, rivaling a Swiss army knife and carved from a single piece of wood.

At flea markets and in railroad yards, George Horton of Vining, Iowa, has kept a sharp eye out for examples of such skill and patience, and shares with us here some of his hobo memorabilia. Hoboes' ability to carve is most commonly evidenced by their monikers, or nicknames, carved like trademarks on railroad sheds and water tanks. Because most of these pieces lack identification, however, the carved objects here might well have been created by anyone with time on their hands.

Horton considers many of these examples as the sort of token or trinket a hobo might carve and give to someone in exchange for a favor. His collection also includes material examples of discrimination against hoboes and memorabilia from Britt's annual hobo convention.

The product of any folk art varies from creator to creator. Some may be small triumphs or ingenious extensions of a skill passed from one to another. Some, more crudely done, merely maintain the tradition. Nevertheless, all are expressions of an individual's personal style. And indeed, as a participant in the itinerant folk art tradition, who is a better example of individuality and personal style than the American hobo? —*The Editor*



Above: Carved from a single piece of wood, the ball-in-the-box is still an extremely common creation. Some shown here were found in flea markets; one, in the walls of a small-town depot. Hoboes sometimes wore the simpler ones (front row) as slides on red bandana neckerchiefs.



Left: Carved from peach pits, a squirrel (clutching an ear of corn) and a monkey (1¼").

Right: A collection of miniature tools (actual size). Each pair of pliers is carved from a single piece of wood, and the hinges work freely. Sets like these may have been made for children.



Below: "Tramp art" was a popular craft, practiced by anyone with a knife, a supply of uniformly thick wood from cigar boxes or fruit crates, and the patience to chip-carve the strips and glue or nail them in place. The layers of notched wood, characteristic of tramp art, also adorn frames, shelves, boxes, hanging cabinets, and miniature furniture. This box has padded velvet sides and top and measures 11½" x 8½" x 7".



*photographs by
Chuck Greiner*



Left: More creations from the whittler's knife. Two whistles (one shaped like a gun); chains from a single piece of wood; and a shoe, heart, and horse. These may have been carved by hoboes as tokens in return for a meal or other kindness.



According to Horton, unemployed engravers, and others with such skills, created "hobo nickels" by altering the profile on Indian-head nickels. Encased, some may have been used as watch fobs.



Today's hoboes still create tokens of their personal style: leather pendant by "Knot-man" (son of "Alabama Hobo") and cable ring by "Frisco Jack." The rings have been auctioned at Britt's hobo festivals to raise money for the hobo section of the town's Evergreen Cemetery.

Right: This watch fob probably once belonged to the occasional hobo (called a "yegg") who gambled — an activity frowned upon by professional hoboes under their code of conduct.



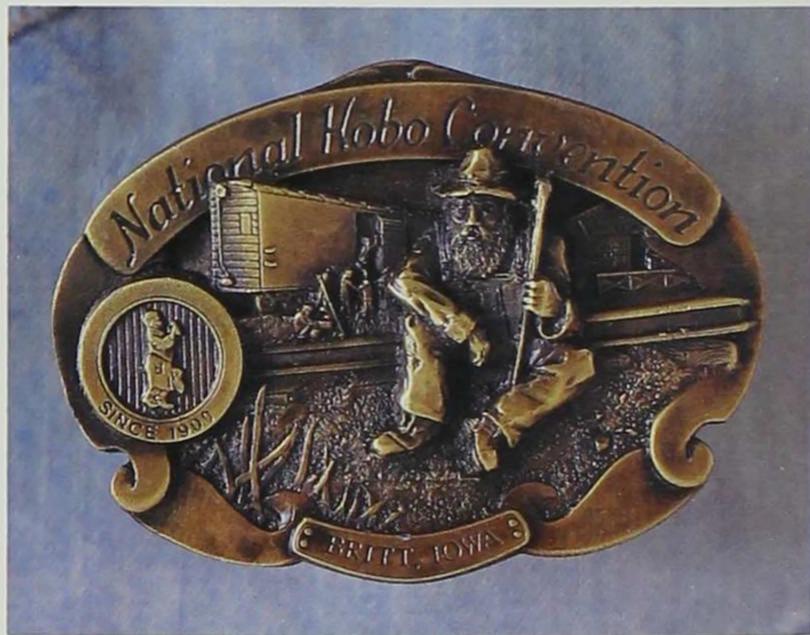
Above: Several forms of discrimination against the wanderer: A railroad detective's hefty sap (steel wrapped in leather) was found in the Boone depot. "Indolent Ivor" appears as the stereotypical tramp in this deck of playing cards. The Iowa Code in the 1890s listed strict vagrancy laws. A sample from *The Latest Tramp Jokes*: "First tramp: 'I once possessed a splendid dog who could always distinguish between a vagabond and a respectable person.' Second tramp: 'Well, what's become of him?' First tramp: 'Oh, I was obliged to give him away. He bit me.'"

Fourth Annual
CONVENTION
TOURISTS UNION
NO. 63.



Britt, Iowa,
August 22, 1900.

Below: In 1900, Britt's movers and shakers planned the hobo convention as a promotional scheme to bring attention to their small town. Revived in 1933, the yearly National Hobo Convention continues to keep Britt in the public eye every August. Britt's Chamber of Commerce recently marketed a limited edition of this commemorative bronze belt buckle (the 1900 convention logo appears in the small circle on the left).



Above: A rare ribbon from the first Britt hobo convention. (Pre-1900 conventions were in Chicago and Danville, Illinois.) The link and coupler (above "Britt, Iowa") is the linking device between railroad cars. Horton believes that Tourists Union founder Charles Noe used a Weary Willie caricature as the union logo. He carries his tin can for handouts and suspends from a stick his grub box with a bit of flour.

Right: Modern-day legends of the hobo world surround a celluloid Britt convention button, believed dating to 1900. Sale of the large buttons benefits Britt's new hobo museum and the cemetery fund.



CONTRIBUTORS

Richard Acton, the fourth Lord Acton, is a barrister and free-lance writer now living between Oxfordshire, England, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He was born in England, raised in Rhodesia, and educated at Oxford University. He has worked in business, banking, and law in England, the United States, and Africa. Most recently he was a senior law officer in the Ministry of Legal and Parliamentary Affairs for the government of Zimbabwe.

David A. Brose is Director of Community Arts and Cultural Heritage Programs for the Iowa Arts Council and was formerly the State Folklorist for Colorado. His interest in carved treestump tombstones began during his studies with Dr. Warren Roberts at Indiana University at Bloomington, where he received his M.A. in ethnomusicology.

Merle Davis is a native of Fort Dodge. He pursued graduate studies in American history at the University of Northern Iowa and Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Davis formerly served as field representative of the Iowa Labor History Oral Project and is now on the staff of the State Historical Society in Iowa City.

Chuck Greiner has contributed frequently to the *Palimpsest*, most recently through his photos of the Victorian stenciling in the Statehouse. A photographer for over thirty years, Greiner now operates his own portrait and commercial studio in Randall, Iowa.

George A. Horton was raised along the Rock Island Railroad in Conesville, Iowa, and has spent the last sixteen years working for the Chicago Northwestern Railroad. An ex-Marine and former Vista volunteer, Horton is on the council of the National Hobo Association and is a member of Hoboes of America and Tourists Union No. 63. He lives with his wife in Vining, Iowa.

Loren N. Horton has worked for the State Historical Society since 1973 and has taught junior high through college levels. He is a member of the Association for Gravestone Studies and the Cemetery and Markers Section of the American Culture Association. He received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Northern Iowa and Ph.D. from the University of Iowa.

Gerald Mansheim is an architectural photographer with a long-time interest in Prairie School architecture. His book, *Iowa City: An Illustrated History*, was published this spring.

Terry Ofner is a native of Bettendorf, Iowa. He taught at Scattergood Friends School in West Branch for several years before returning to the University of Iowa to pursue graduate work in English education. He now serves as an editorial assistant at the State Historical Society.

Steven Ohrn is the historic sites coordinator for the State Historical Society. He recently published *Remaining*

Faithful: Amana Folk Art in Transition and curated the traveling exhibit of the same name.

Cliff Trumpold has lived all of his life in Middle Amana except for three years in the Navy and two playing baseball in the South. He is presently gathering material and photos for a booklet chronicling local baseball teams in the Amanas.

LETTERS FROM READERS

On Bertha Shambaugh and ladies' hats

The last issue was especially interesting to both Mrs. DuVal and me because we knew the Shambaughs rather well. We enjoyed the well-written article on Mrs. Shambaugh's art. We have been members of the Historical Society for many years and find the articles in the *Palimpsest* to be greatly interesting and highly informative.

I would like to call your attention to one very small error in the spring issue [on the caption on page 15]. I believe the date of the picture should be 1914 instead of 1934. An examination of the style of dress, the primitive automobile, and the presence of several carriages and buggies indicate that the photo is of World War I vintage. As final proof check the hats of the ladies in the picture!

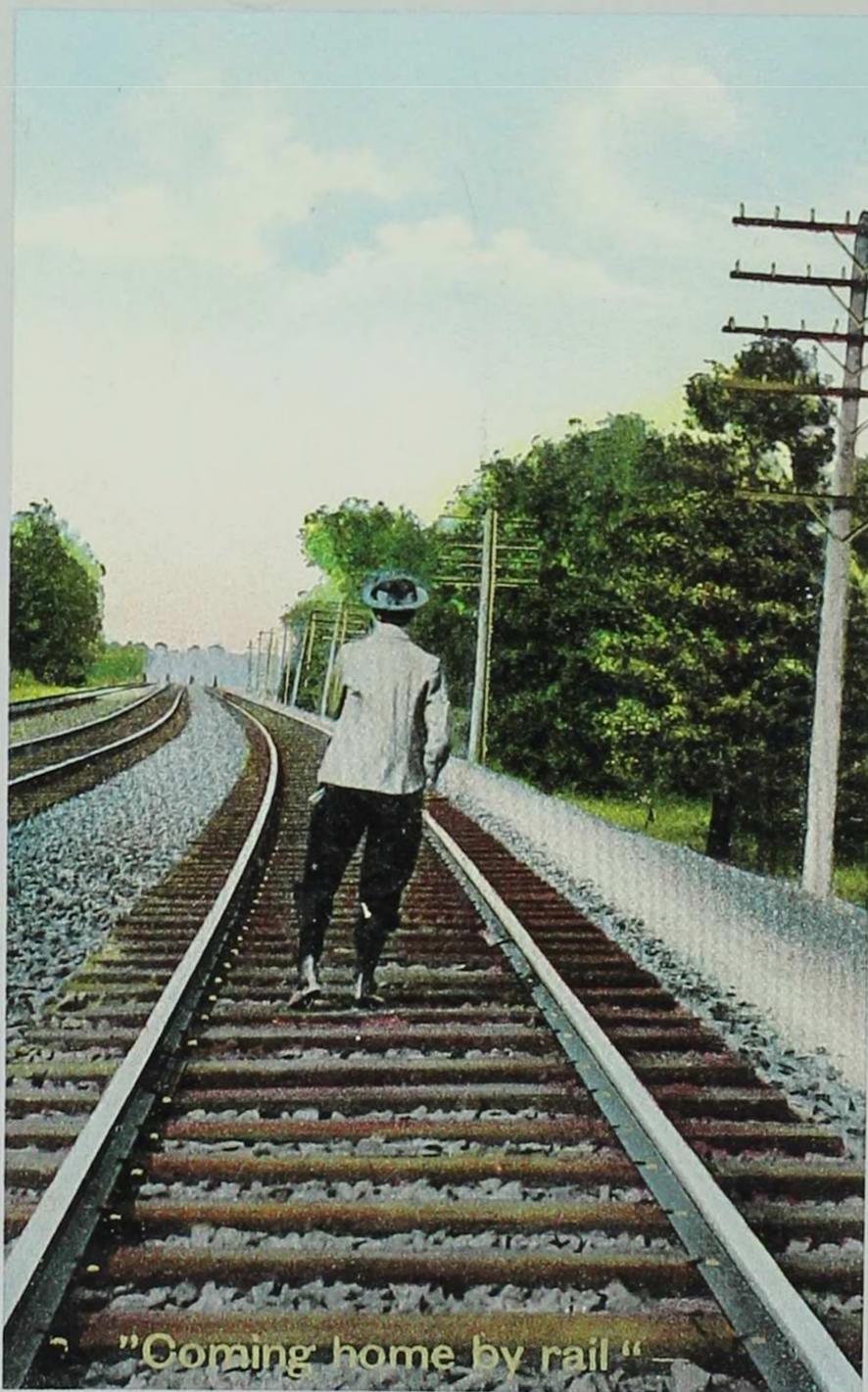
F. A. DuVal, Mt. Vernon, Iowa

Another reader also pointed this out. Thanks for the correction. We always appreciate hearing from sharp-eyed readers — and all readers.

The *Palimpsest* welcomes letters. Published letters may be edited for clarity and brevity. Write: *Palimpsest* Editor, State Historical Society, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

SUBMISSIONS

The editor welcomes manuscripts and edited documents on the history of Iowa and the Midwest that may interest a general reading audience. Submissions that focus on visual material (photographs, maps, drawings) or on material culture are also invited. Originality and significance of the topic, as well as the quality of research and writing, will determine acceptance for publication. Manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced, and follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (13th edition). Standard length is within ten to twenty manuscript pages, but shorter or longer submissions will be considered. Include a list of sources used and a brief biographical sketch. Because illustrative material is integral to the *Palimpsest*, the editor encourages authors to include photographs and illustrations (or suggestions). Please send submissions or queries to Ginalie Swaim, Editor, *The Palimpsest*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.



THE PALIMPSEST (ISSN 0031-0360) is published quarterly by the State Historical Society in Iowa City. Second class postage paid at Iowa City, Iowa. Postmaster: send address changes to State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.