

Bertha Shambaugh's Frog Folk

by Jean Berry

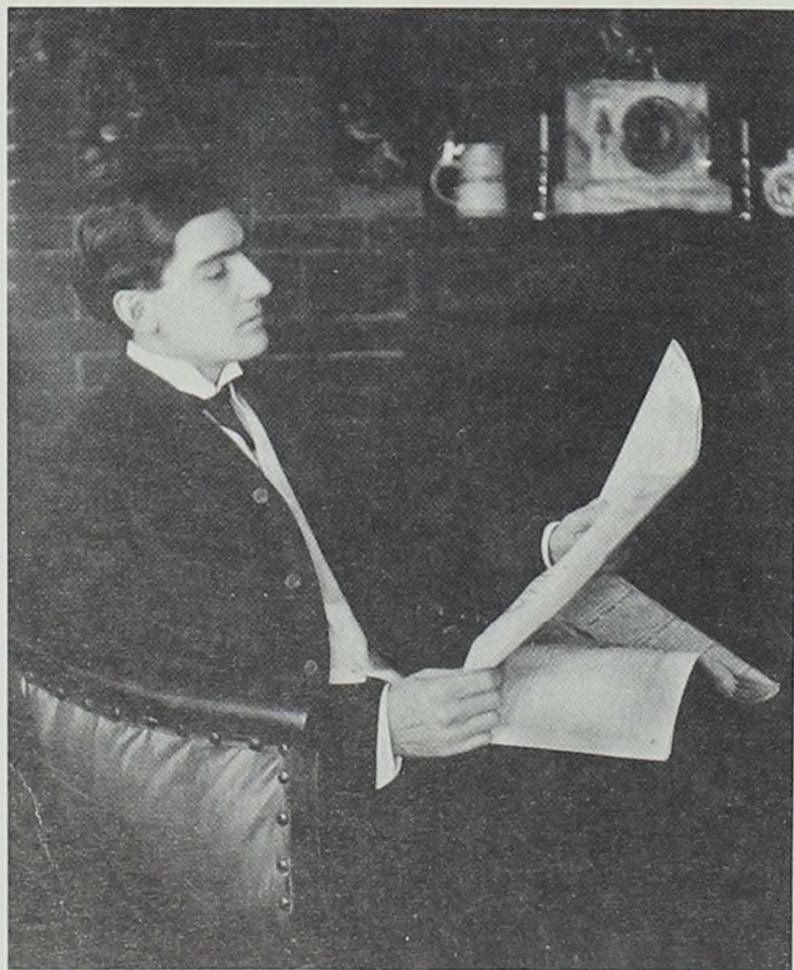
AROUND 1910 Bertha Horack Shambaugh created in watercolor and verse the "Frog Folk" — a whimsical community of frogs whose habits bear amusing resemblance to our own social customs at the turn of the century. Bertha was about thirty-nine at the time of this project; yet her active, childlike imagination, and her love for her young nieces and nephews (frequent and adored guests in her home), allowed her to create this fantasy world with pencil and brush.

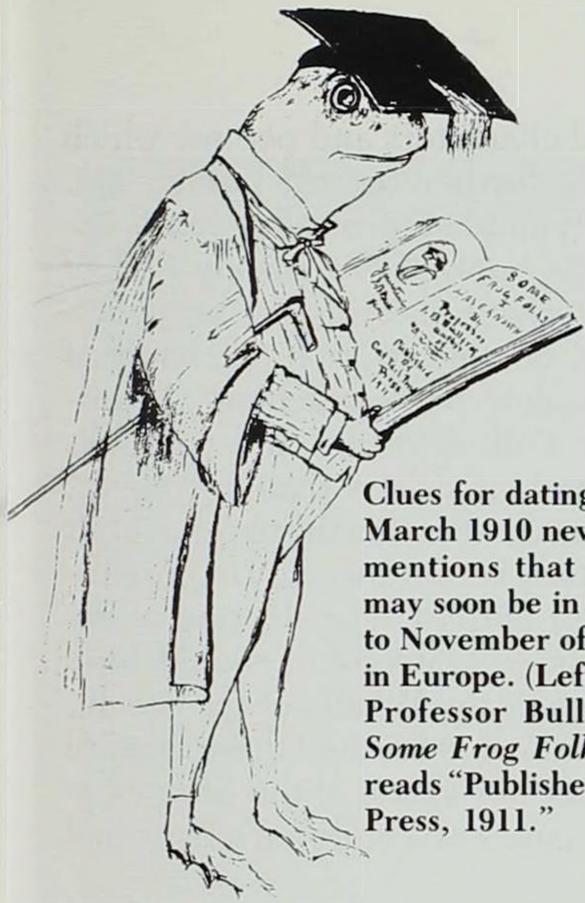
The Frog Folk poems and illustrations were one of the many "literary endeavors" that Bertha's niece Katharine Horack Dixon remembers were always spread out in the upstairs workroom of the Shambaugh house on Clinton Street in Iowa City. Bertha's hope that the Frog Folk would become a children's book

is suggested in her playfully composed "Minutes of the Town Meeting of Frogville," wherein Mr. Bull Frog resolves that "the charming lady who has so delightfully set us forth in picture & verse, be urgently requested to give her productions to the world."

The Frog Folk collection consists of fifteen poems plus numerous illustrations in various stages of completion — from gridded, preliminary pencil sketches to delicate, detailed watercolors. The collection is housed at the State Historical Society of Iowa, as part of the Shambaugh Papers. As a volunteer in 1987, my assignment to match the hodgepodge of uncaptioned pencil sketches with the poems was sometimes a challenge. It required determining that a certain hobble skirt and sparkling jewels worn by Madam Toad at her dinner

Benjamin Shambaugh at home (c. 1904) and Bertha Horack Shambaugh (1910). For another portrait, see back cover.





Clues for dating the Frog Folk: A March 1910 news story on Bertha mentions that her "Frog Folk" may soon be in color. From April to November of 1910 she traveled in Europe. (Left) The title page of Professor Bullfrog's new book, *Some Frog Folks I Have Known*, reads "Published by Cat Tail Pond Press, 1911."

party were the same ones worn by an unidentified figure in a pencil sketch; or that a drawing of garden tools and seed packets could only have been intended to illustrate "The Garden of the Wood Frogs." It was like fitting together the pieces of a delightful puzzle.

The Frog Folk illustrations clearly show Bertha's interest in science and nature, which had long been evident. At age eleven she had produced meticulous drawings from life of native wildflowers and had read a paper, "The Anatomy of a Grasshopper, with Original Drawings," before the local Agassiz nature society. When she was seventeen, she read a paper on *Lepidoptera* before the state Agassiz society. "One of the best in the session," reported the *Swiss Cross* (a popular science magazine), "with a number of original plates finely executed in pencil."

We trust that the bumblebees, the clover, the cattails, and the frogs illustrating her poems have also been faithfully executed. Bertha's fanciful notion of dressing her little creatures in gowns and suits and giving them tiny umbrellas, top hats, canes, and purses probably did not interfere with her scientific integrity. Ever a perfectionist, she complained in a note pencilled alongside a sketch: "I am baffled by the legs of the Sporting Frog. . . . There ought to be 4 joints."

Bertha's interest in the natural sciences had

brought her to the State University of Iowa in 1889, where Thomas Macbride, eminent scientist and world authority on slime molds, was her botany professor. Macbride's influence as a mentor must have been profound, but in one of her Frog Folk poems Bertha couldn't resist a playful reference to his special scientific interest: "The spotted Toads of Slimemold Ditch/Have suddenly grown very rich."

Bertha was born in 1871 to a family who prized education, literature, music, and gentility. As a young girl her pursuits seem to have been mostly creative, a direction she continued to follow after marriage. (Her niece recalls that as a young matron Bertha "embroidered a lot, but I don't think she mended.") Her parents, Katharine and Frank Horack, encouraged their daughter's interest in science and photography. As a high school student she was given a camera, and we can imagine the unconventional Bertha lugging it, complete with tripod, about Iowa City to photograph schools and bridges, a lime kiln and a mill, even a tavern. Her documentation of the Amana Colonies in 1890 and 1891 through more than a hundred photographs testifies to her use of photography to capture a society that was fast disappearing. Frequent use of her photographs as bases for sketches and paintings underlines her zeal for reproducing precise detail.

Although Bertha gave up photography soon after her marriage in 1897 to Benjamin Shambaugh, she employed her irrepressible creativity in other areas to augment and display his considerable talents. Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh soon became a University of Iowa institution, climbing rapidly through the academic hierarchy to head the political science department in 1900 and to assume the newly created office of superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1907 until his death in 1940. Benjamin's infectious interest in Iowa history fostered a similar response in Bertha, and much of her time was spent in research, map and chart making, editing, and designing book covers for Historical Society publications. At home her creativity showcased Benjamin as the impeccable host of perfectly executed dinner parties, for which the guest list, decorations, menu, and table conversation were largely a result of Bertha's care-

ful and inventive planning. Her every effort seemed bent toward promoting her husband's image.

Benjamin, in turn, encouraged her literary and scholarly endeavors, publishing her carefully researched *Amana: the Community of True Inspiration* as a Historical Society book in 1908 and its revision, *Amana That Was and Amana That Is*, in 1932. He also urged her to complete and publish the Frog Folk as a children's book.

Yet the Frog Folk project was to be an unfulfilled dream. Its potential is most evident in "The Frogs and the Bumble-Bees," for which there are five completed watercolors. Three other poems each have one or two finished watercolors, a total of nine. It is evident that several delightful, fully executed pencil drawings await only the touch of the artist's brush to bring them into exquisite color.

One poem for which illustrations regrettably are incomplete is "The Burglar Alarm." One of Bertha's funniest, cleverest creations is Dame Leopard Frog in nightcap and bug-bedecked wrapper, ready to vanquish with frying pan and broom whatever intruder might show himself.

Like the Pooh books of Bertha's contemporary, A. A. Milne, her poems, while not of his quality, would appeal to children yet entertain adults. On this adult level, it is tempting to read into Bertha's poems and drawings a reflection of events in her own life. As his editorial notes reveal, Benjamin thought that the "social stunts" of the grown-up frogs "afford rich opportunities for satire and illustrations" in "Madam Toad Gives a Dinner." Bertha seems to agree, poking fun at one of her own innumerable dinner parties honoring visiting lecturers. The bumbling Mr. Toad with his grudging hospitality (and inability to find his tie) is quite unlike the socially adept Benjamin, but perhaps Bertha knew a Mr. Toad who needed to be instructed in the niceties of entertaining. Two unfinished pencil sketches from this series point up a custom of the time: the gentlemen frog guests retreat to the library for stories and shop talk, a drink of swamp root and a smoke, while the lady frogs adjourn to the parlor for "blistering" gossip.

It may never be known why the Frog Folk remained unfinished and unpublished, unlike

the Cooky-Land characters and poems, which advanced a little further toward publication. (Bertha designed and had printed several copies of a prototype book of *The Happy Folk of Cooky-Land*.) Perhaps she was too busy with other aspects of her life to give the hours of attention to complete the watercolors. Admittedly, the Frog Folk drawings and paintings show more competent artistry than the poems. Perfectionist that she was, Bertha may have felt in the end that they weren't worthy of publication. In addition, faithful reproduction of the delicate, many-hued watercolors would have been difficult and costly. Whatever the reason, we can wish that she had finished these magical drawings and that her vision of the little creatures filling the pages of a children's book had become reality.

THE SPOTTED TOADS HAVE MONEY NOW

The Spotted Toads of Slimemold Ditch
Have suddenly grown very rich.
They made their money in a week
By selling oil in Willow Creek.
(Of course there are no oil wells there
But H²O there is to spare.
It freely flows o'er sand and rock
And that's what counts in selling stock.)
Of well — no matter when or how,
The Spotted Toads have money now.
Old names and ways they have forsook
And Slimemold Ditch is now "The
Brook";
The Slough's a Lake and to keep pace
Their home is now a Country Place.
Of late they've bought a family tree
And ordered a new pedigree
At great expense — but contracts read
"Full satisfaction guaranteed."
And Madam Toad wears diamonds now
Upon her fingers, breast, and brow.
Their friends they number by the score
Who knew them not in days of yore.
All Frogville bows and bends the knee
And Toad-folk toady eagerly;
No Puddle-ite asks when or how
The Spotted Toads have money now.





*This doesn't to the host apply
 His tie was looking for his tie
 And left the room somewhat awry
 When guests were ushered in*

MADAM TOAD GIVES A DINNER

Some days ago — perhaps a week
 Professor Frog of Willow Creek
 Arrived in Cat-tail Pond to speak
 (Professors often do).
 And Madam Toad a dinner gave,
 Which honor Mr. Toad would waive
 But did at length agree to brave
 (As all good spouses do).
 The Madam set about with skill
 Her list to make and spouse to drill
 Some fundamentals to instill
 And precepts to enact.
 And every Lady-Frog can guess
 Which task gave Madam real distress
 And which was crowned with most success
 (Or least — to be exact).
 Professor Frog was fancy free
 Tho' Lady-Frogs would willing be
 This grievous state to remedy
 They would — for woe or weal.
 With Widow Wood Frog who concedes
 She's getting rather tired of weeds
 To head her list Dame Toad proceeds
 With altruistic zeal.
 Miss Tree Toad is invited too
 (In case the Widow wouldn't do)
 And Spring Frog's name is placed hereto
 (In case the Widow would).
 Thus solving problems most implexed
 The newly wedded Green Frogs next

The Madam to her list annexed.
 (A bride is always good.)
 "The Bull Frogs in the Pond are new,
 The Croakers we're indebted to.
 There's really nothing else to do,
 I'll add them to the list."
 "And now my dear," the Dame did chide,
 "Remember you must take the bride."
 And meekly Mr. Toad replied,
 "I will if you insist."
 "The caterpillars in cocoon
 Must not be eaten with a spoon.
 Don't pass the salted flies too soon.
 And do cheer up a bit."
 Thus Madam Toad with tact and skill
 Her plans did make and spouse did drill
 (And which proved well and which proved nil
 'Tis best here to omit).
 Well, everything was ready quite
 On the appointed party night
 The Madam's plans to expedite
 And program to begin.
 (This doesn't to the host apply
 Who still was looking for his tie
 And left the room somewhat awry
 When guests were ushered in.)
 . . . Young Green Frog talked of exercise
 And Bull-Frog talked of catching flies.
 Spring Frog said nothing and looked wise
 While Croaker sat and ate.

The Lady-Frogs with interest glow
(Dame Croaker thought the service slow
And what was borrowed and what no
Began to speculate).

The guests the Madam's taste exalt
(Dame Croaker hopes she finds no fault
But thinks the butterflies lack salt
The June-bug pie a mess).

Anxious beads Toad's brow bedew;
He failed to ask if there were two
Or if one Grasshopper must do,
And how was he to guess.

At length the Lady-Frogs adjourn
With eagerness to talk they burn
Of friends and enemies by turn.

(And blisters soon they raise.)

Alone the Men-Frogs stories swap,
The Swamp root corks begin to pop,
And wreathed in smoke they soon talk shop
In scientific phrase.

The Bull Frog's motor boat arrives,
The Men-Frogs then hunt up their wives.
In grieved surprise the Madam strives
To hold the parting guest.

"I pray you do not hurry so.
It can't be late. Oh, surely no!
How quickly pleasant time does go!"

(Any Frog can add the rest.)

"'Twas sweet of you to think of us
Your dinner was most sumptuous."
The guests with accents unctuous
In chorus bid adieu.

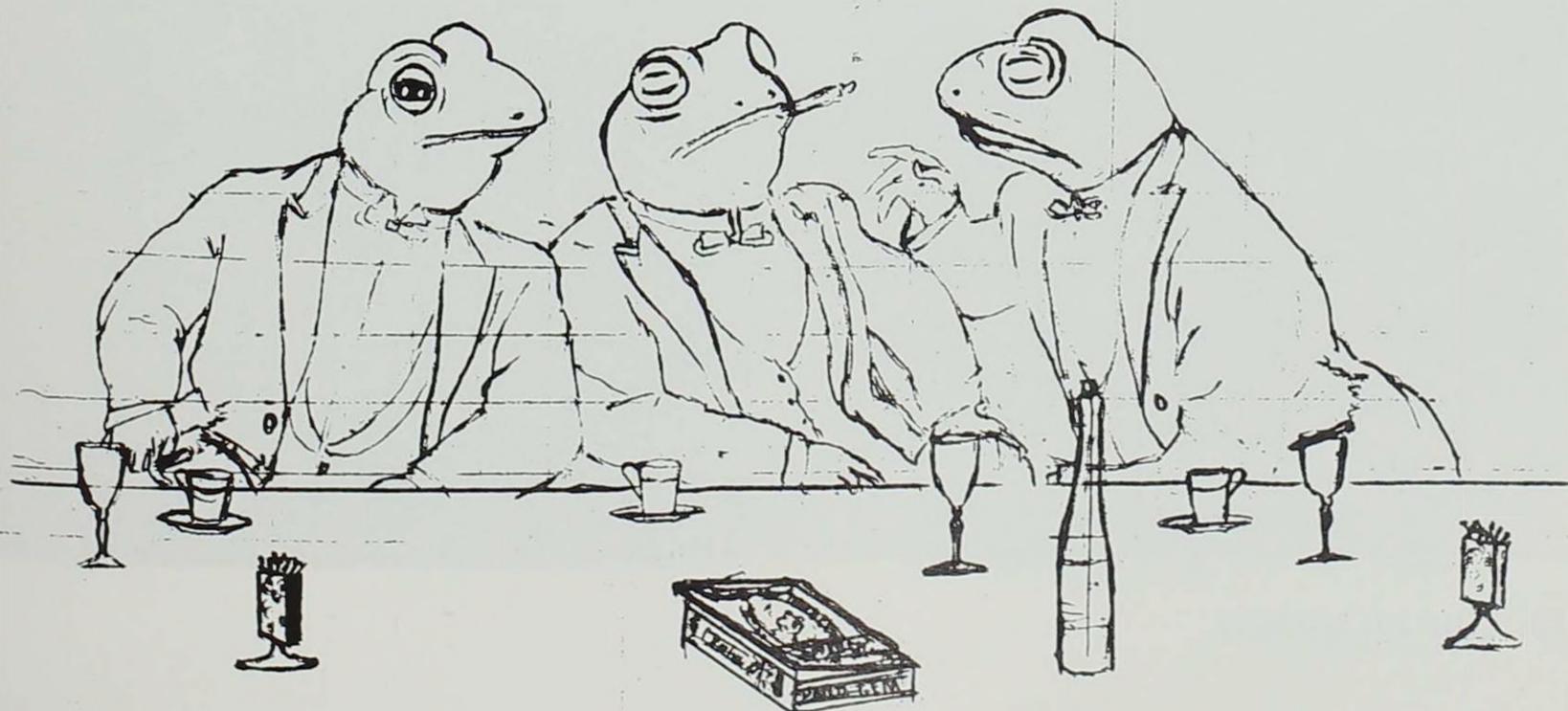
"'Twas good of you to come to dine,"
Quoth Madam in tones saccharine.

"The pleasure was, believe me, mine."
(And Toad believed it too.)



Bertha Shambaugh's Frog Folk often mimic her social world. Frog ladies wear fashionable silks and jewels; frog gentlemen wear tuxedos and smoke their cigars with an air of the good life. A frequent hostess for visitors to the University of Iowa, Bertha fashioned personalized table decorations for every guest and every event, making dinners at the Shambaugh house memorable occasions. Author Hamlin Garland delighted in the "comical little effigies" of characters in his *The Middle Border*, which she created out of ears of corn and bits of fabric. When children were guests, they received the same courtesies that dignitaries received, yet individualized by Bertha's appreciation of what children enjoyed.

A sensitive and skilled hostess, Bertha didn't miss the humor of such situations, parodying her turn-of-the-century social world. A 1910 news story on her reports: "In her leisure moments she has indulged in a sportive fancy, combining the work of her pen and pencil, wherein Frog Folks are made to take on the foibles and eccentricities of mere man, a work that may be produced in colors soon."







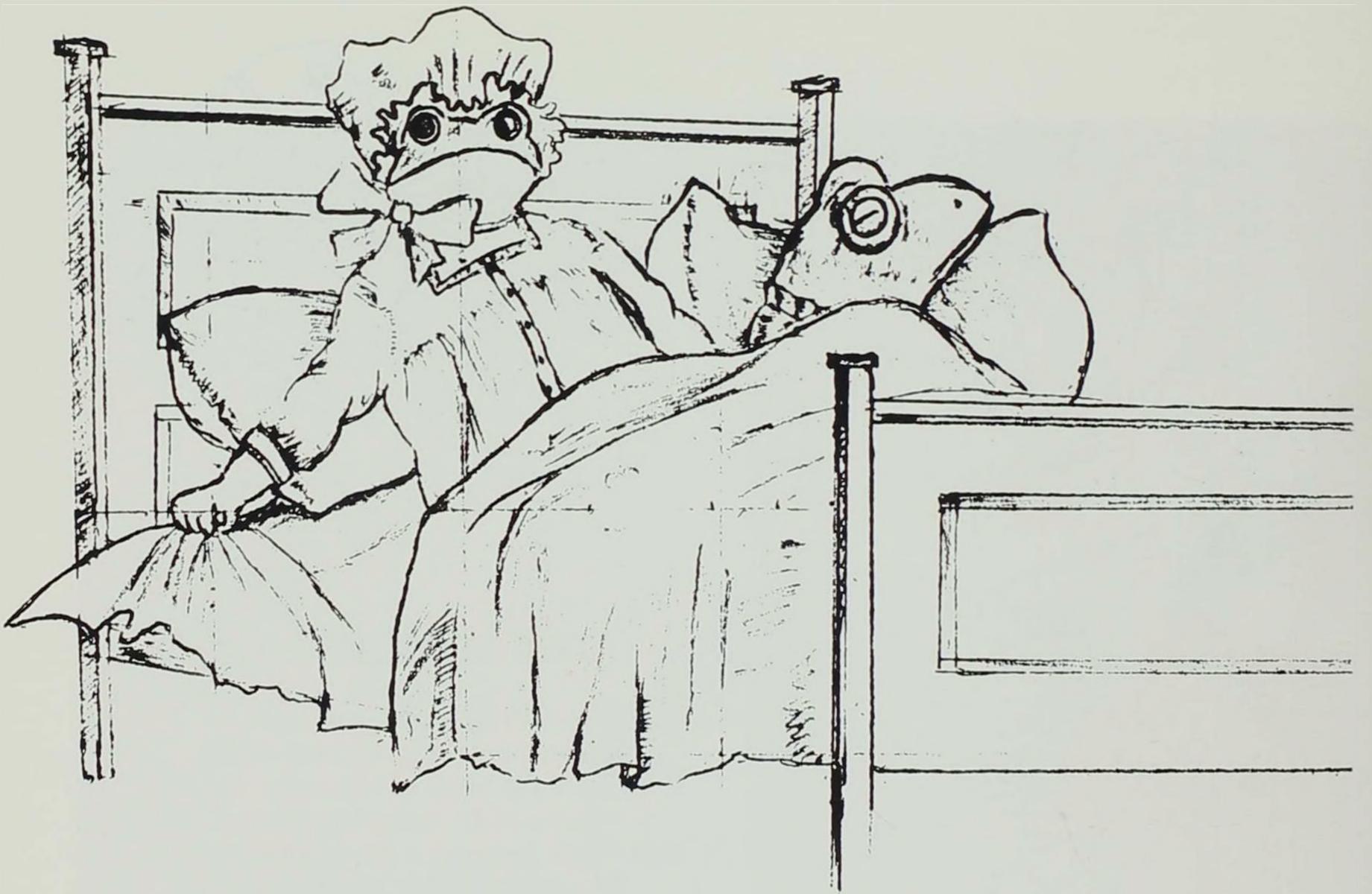
THE SPORTING FROG

Old Green Frog is a hunter bold
 A Sporting Frog of truest mold,
 Who feels the need of exercise
 Whene'er he notes the buzz of Flies.
 And when he hears a June-bug hum,
 By stress of work is overcome.
 "An outing may avert real ills
 And save," he thinks, "some doctor bills."
 So off he starts before 'tis day
 And hops, oh my, the longest way
 To find a place where some frog keen
 Had once a caterpillar seen.
 He climbs the roughest quarry ledge
 And wades all day through prickly sedge
 To follow up a Bug so wee
 It must have strained his eyes to see.
 He'll climb and swim and wade and hop
 And never for a moment stop
 To rest his bones or take a bite
 Till driven homeward by the night.
 And for the waiting Froggies there
 He draws forth with triumphant air
 A Worm, a Squash-bug, and a Bee.
 "Twas quite worth while" — they all agree.
 And then he tells them by the by
 He almost got a Dragon-fly.
 To sight a Beetle he succeeds
 Which crippled fell among the weeds.
 When audience at length has fled
 This tireless hunter goes to bed
 In dreams his game to manifold
 This Sporting Frog of truest mold.

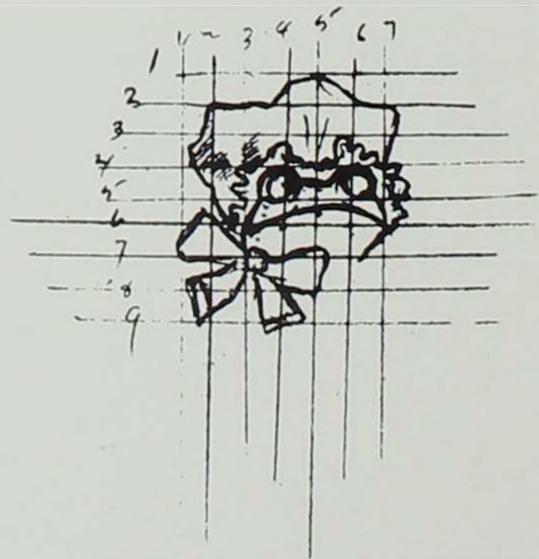


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Illustrations for "The Burglar Alarm" apparently never progressed beyond pencil sketches. Awakened, Mrs. Frog brandishes a frying pan and broom. Mr. Frog (in pajamas fastened by "frogs") fearlessly investigates, carrying a golf club as a weapon — or perhaps as an instrument of authority. (Leafing through the Shambaugh photograph collection, one recalls Benjamin's habitual use of a cane or walking stick.) Another pencil sketch shows a cluster of curious neighbors in nightclothes.



THE BURGLAR ALARM

Dame Leopard Frog awoke one night
A noise she plainly heard.
So presently with main and might
Poor Mr. Frog is stirred.

“A cricket on the roof maybe,”
Does drowsy Frog surmise;
“At worst a spider possibly
In the store-house after flies.”

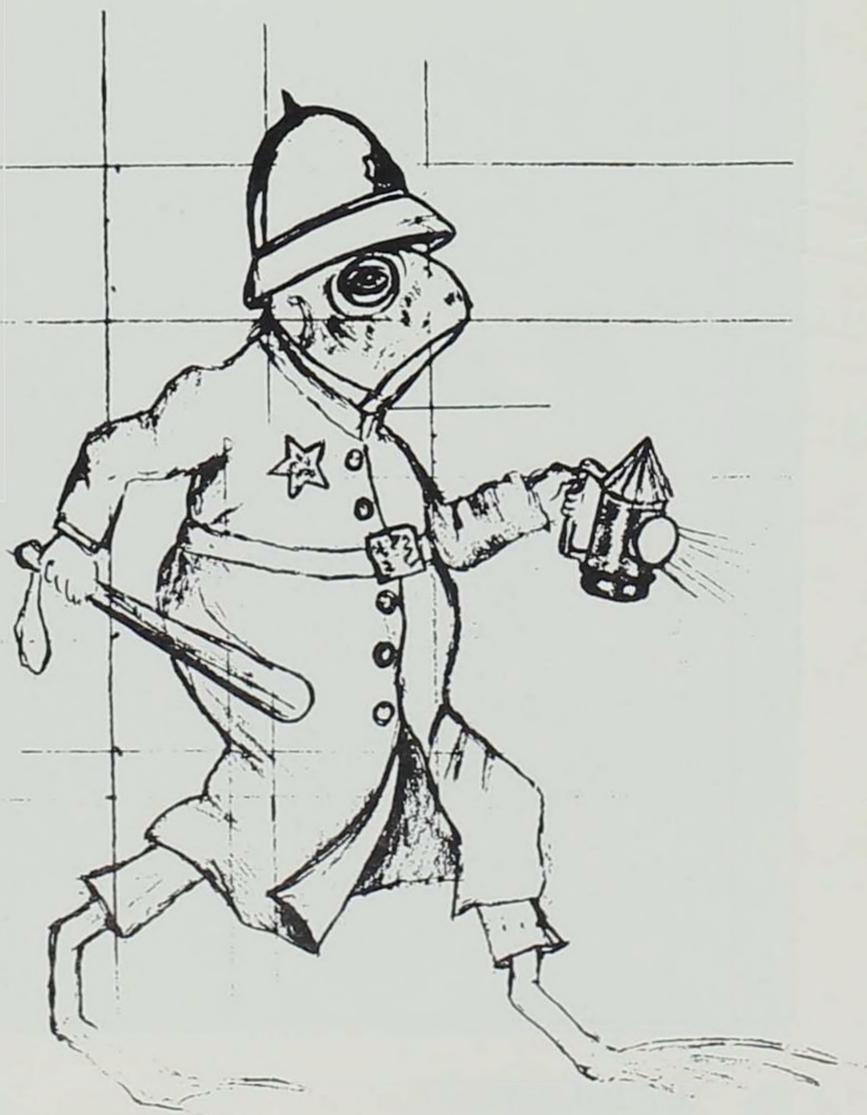
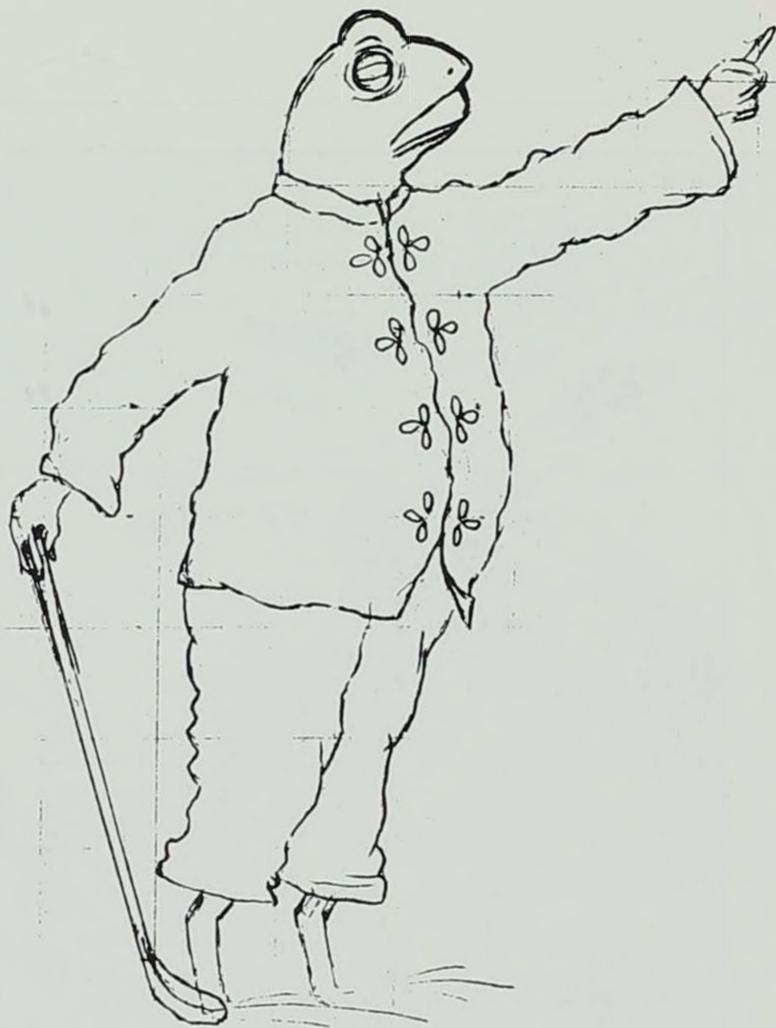
But Mrs. Frog — she thinks of snakes,
And talks of turtles too,
Till drowsy Frog at length awakes
(As decent spouses do).

His shoes and hose elude his quest;
He stubs an aching toe.
The things he says, it is not best
That pious folks should know.

He rouses up Policeman Toad,
Which takes much time and skill.
Soon neighbors gather in the road
In, well — in dishabille.

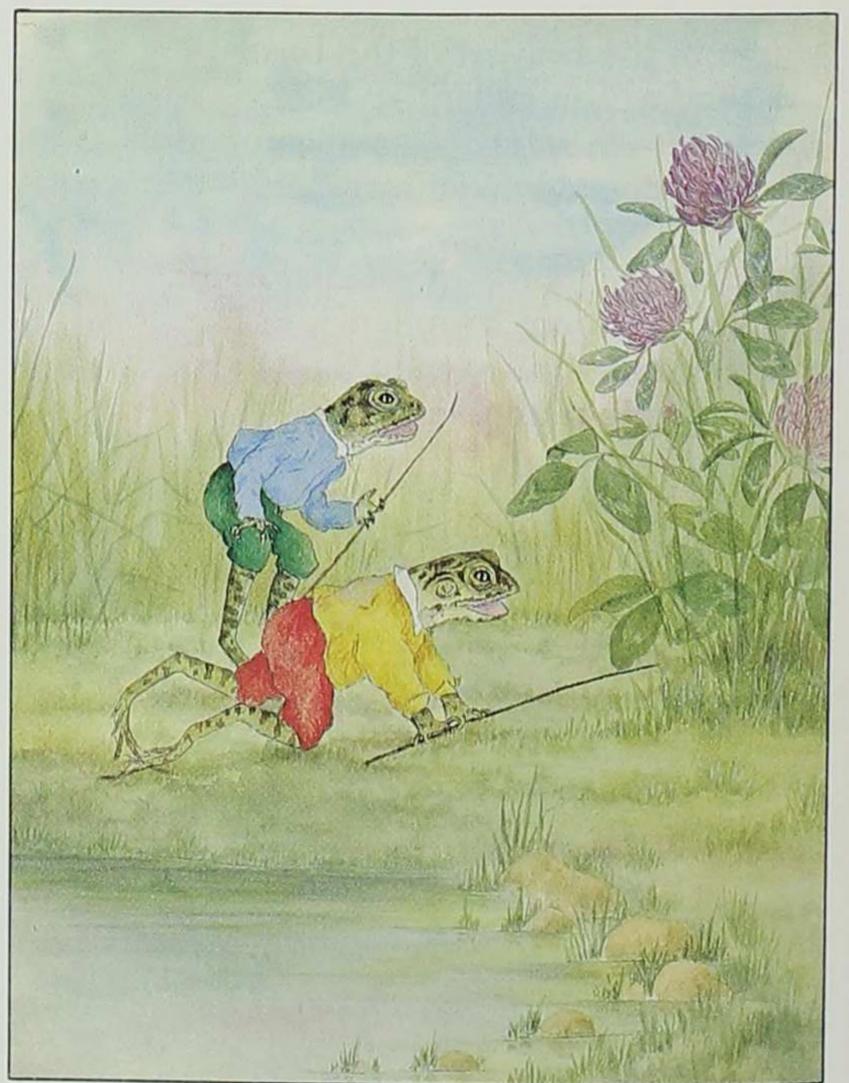
At length the bravest of the band
Set forth in gallant style.
The rest — in safety — take command
And give advice meanwhile.

And did success the quest surround?
Ay, valor has its meed!
A field-mouse on the step they found
A-cracking pumpkin seed.





This poem is the only one with a seemingly complete series of watercolors. In illustrating her poems, Bertha Shambaugh combined her interest in science and nature with her artistic talents, realistically painting wildflowers and native grasses. Here, she playfully includes a rare four-leaf clover. The too-curious frog boys could have used some good luck.

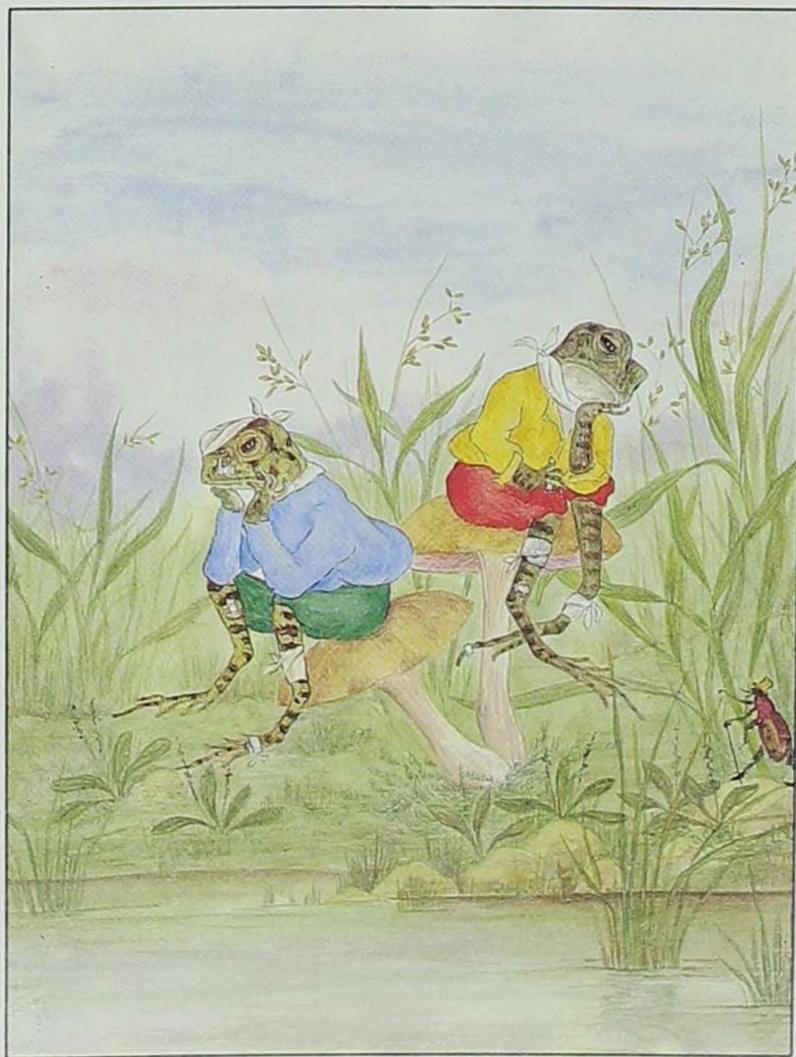
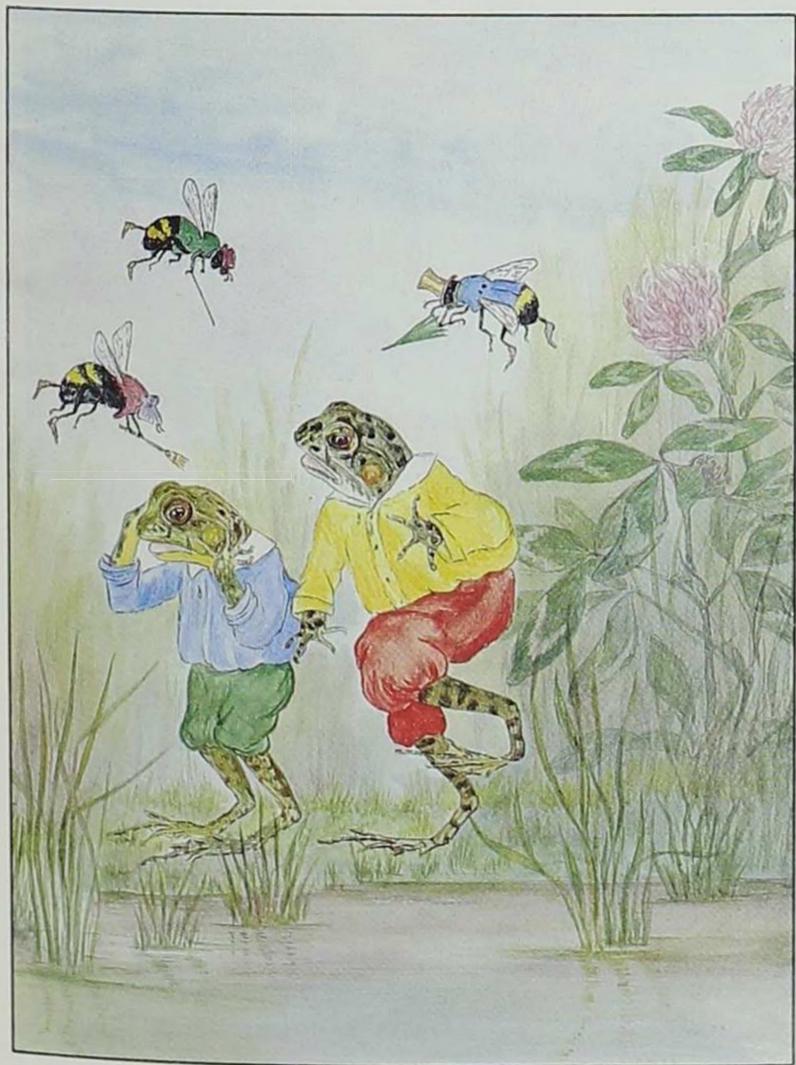


THE FROGS AND THE BUMBLE-BEES

A big and burly Bumble-bee
And his busy buzzing family
Live in the clover tall and rank
That grows upon the Frog Pond bank.
Old Grandma Toad oft times declares
When Frog-folk mind their own affairs
It matters not who lives nearby,
A Bee or Bug or Butterfly.
Forgetting quite what Grandma said,
Two Froggies to the clover sped.
They thought 'twould be a splendid joke
Into the Bumble's nest to poke,
And so they did — and presently
Out tumbled Mr. Bumble-bee;
And Mrs. Bee with much ado
With Grandpa Bumble-bee came too,
And Aunts and Uncles by the score
Out of the clover patch did pour.
Two little Froggies lame and sore
Next day their troubles pondered o'er,
And they recalled with aching head
The things that Grandma Toad had said.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Major sources used were articles and research by Mary Bennett (SHSI Special Collections Librarian), including "Bertha M. Horack Shambaugh: Her Use of Photography" (unpublished manuscript, 1980, State Historical Society Special Collections); interview with Katharine Horack Dixon (1982); "Images of Victorian Iowa," *Palimpsest* (March/April 1980); and "An Amana Album," *Palimpsest* (March/April 1977). Mary Bennett's interest in the Shambaughs, her enthusiasm for the Frog Folk, and her expert direction and advice were largely responsible for my pursuing this idea. Other sources include the House Books in the Shambaugh Family Papers in the University of Iowa Archives; Addie B. Billington, "Iowa Women Whom All Iowa Delights to Honor," *Des Moines Register and Leader*, March 20, 1910; and John C. Gerber, with Carolyn B. Brown, James Kaufmann, and James B. Lindberg, Jr., *A Pictorial History of the University of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1988).





THE GARDEN OF THE WOOD FROGS

The cost of living was so high
 The Wood Frogs thought that they would try
 To have a garden of their own,
 And bills and dues and debts postpone.
 Of course they went to some expense
 For garden seeds and implements,
 For overalls and such supplies
 The amateur most always buys.
 They studied garden books and lore,
 Seed catalogues they did explore.
 Much time and thought without lament
 These froggies on their garden spent.
 Good Father Frog did dig and spade
 And Froggie Junior lent his aid;
 While Mother Frog did plant and sow
 And Sister Froggie helped to hoe.
 When rain and sun their aid have lent
 These Frogs are filled with great content.
 The morrow's cares have slipped away;
 Who says that gardens do not pay?
 They raised a splendid crop of slugs
 Of caterpillars and of bugs.



Working with the Frog Folk collection brought to mind my brief acquaintance with Bertha Shambaugh in 1940, when I worked in the State Historical Society office (then in Schaeffer Hall) under the direction of Ethyl Martin, who had succeeded Benjamin Shambaugh as superintendent of the Society. Mrs. Shambaugh was assembling a tribute to her late husband in a book to be titled *Benjamin Shambaugh: As Iowa Remembers Him*. I typed her handwritten pages, after which it was my mission to hand-deliver the manuscript to her at the house on Clinton Street. At the time I did not know the illustrious history of the house — that it had been lovingly and carefully designed by Benjamin and Bertha in the early years of their marriage; that it had been the center of much of the intellectual and social life on the University of Iowa campus; that it had seen famous university visitors — from Jane Addams to Hamlin Garland to a Russian grand duke — seated in the hospitable dining room at Bertha's famous dinners. All of this Bertha recorded in the House Books, which occupy many volumes in the Special Collections of the University of Iowa Libraries. After Benjamin's death she was to write in the last House Book entry, "The House Book too is dead — it was only Benjamin who gave meaning to the record."

— Jean Berry