

The
PALIMPSEST

Volume 70, Number 4

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

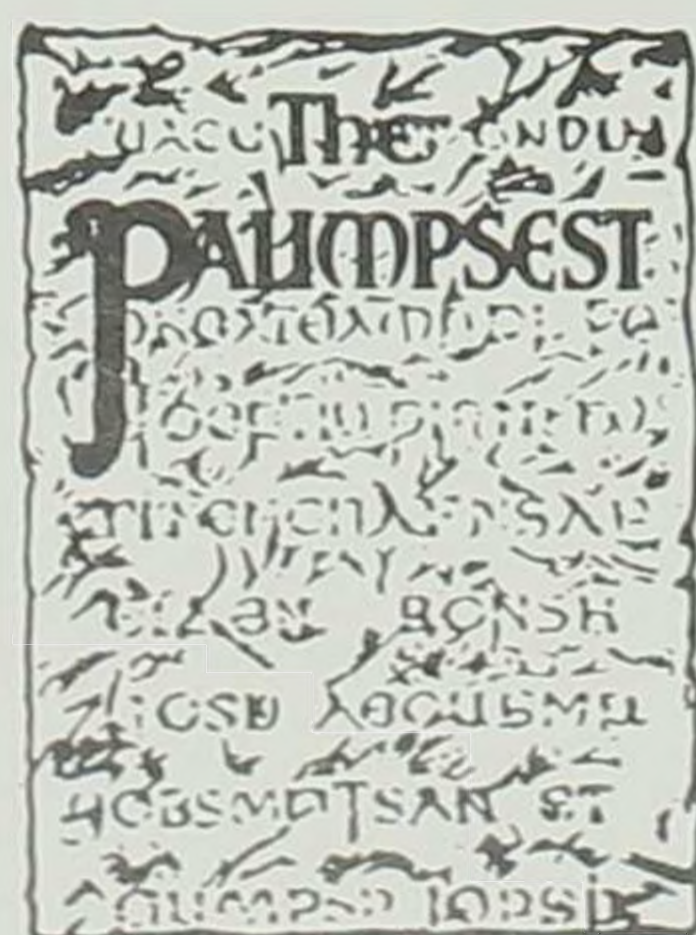
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Inside —



Advertisers of Iowa's independent oil companies sought to evoke state pride. The origin and date of this cardboard sign are unknown, but its message is quite clear. In this *Palimpsest* we take a close-up look at selected artifacts from the Society's recent "Out of the Mud" museum exhibit and the stories they tell about Iowa's "independents" early in this century.



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest (pāl'imp/sēst) was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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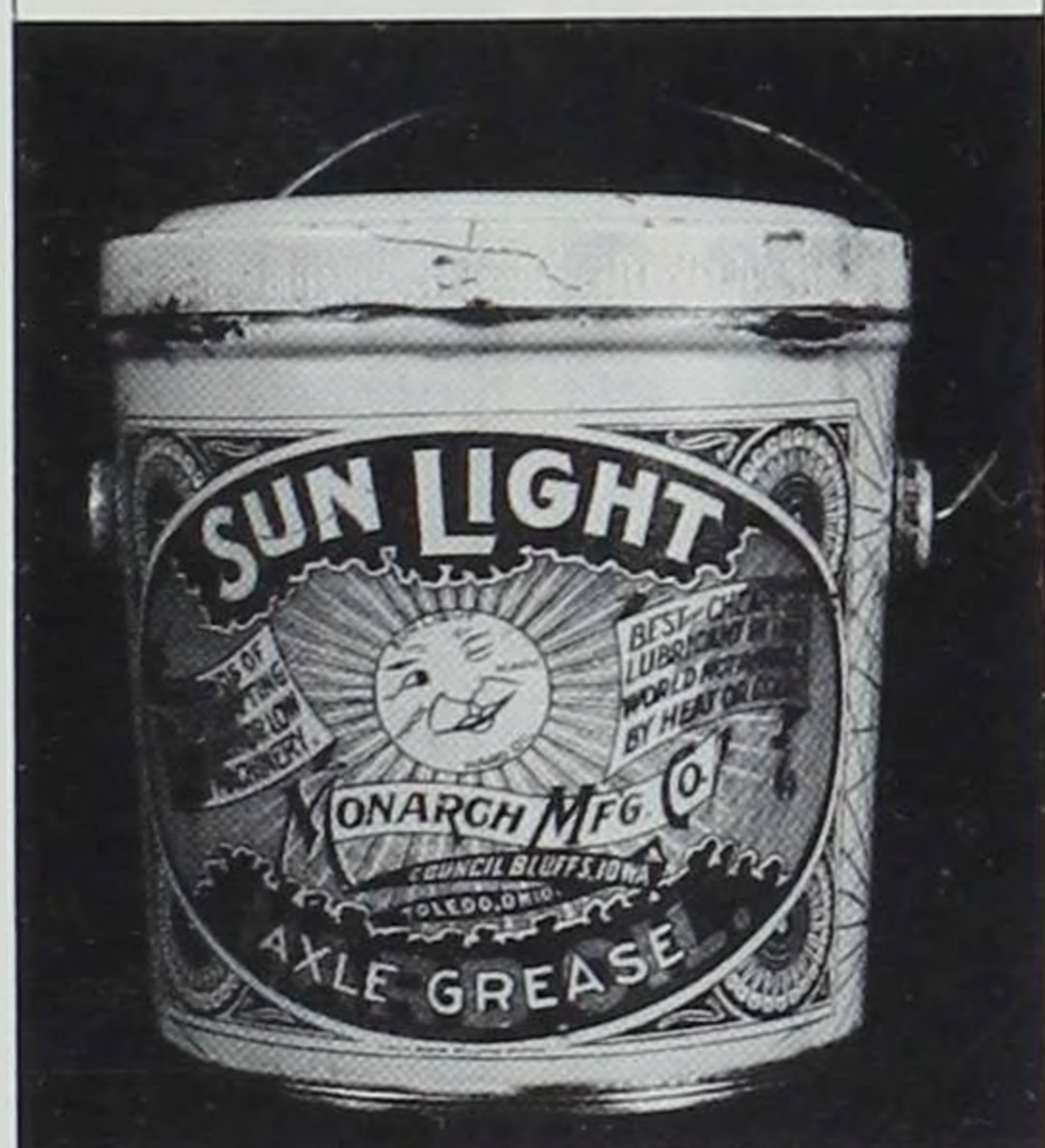
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Althea Sherman 164



Sun Light Axle Grease 198



Steward Taylor 186

COVER: Althea Sherman's oil painting of a goldfinch balancing on a thistle symbolizes one Iowan's record of human values and natural resources.

The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

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"I am heartsick over their diminishing numbers," wrote Althea Sherman of her beloved birds in northeastern Iowa.

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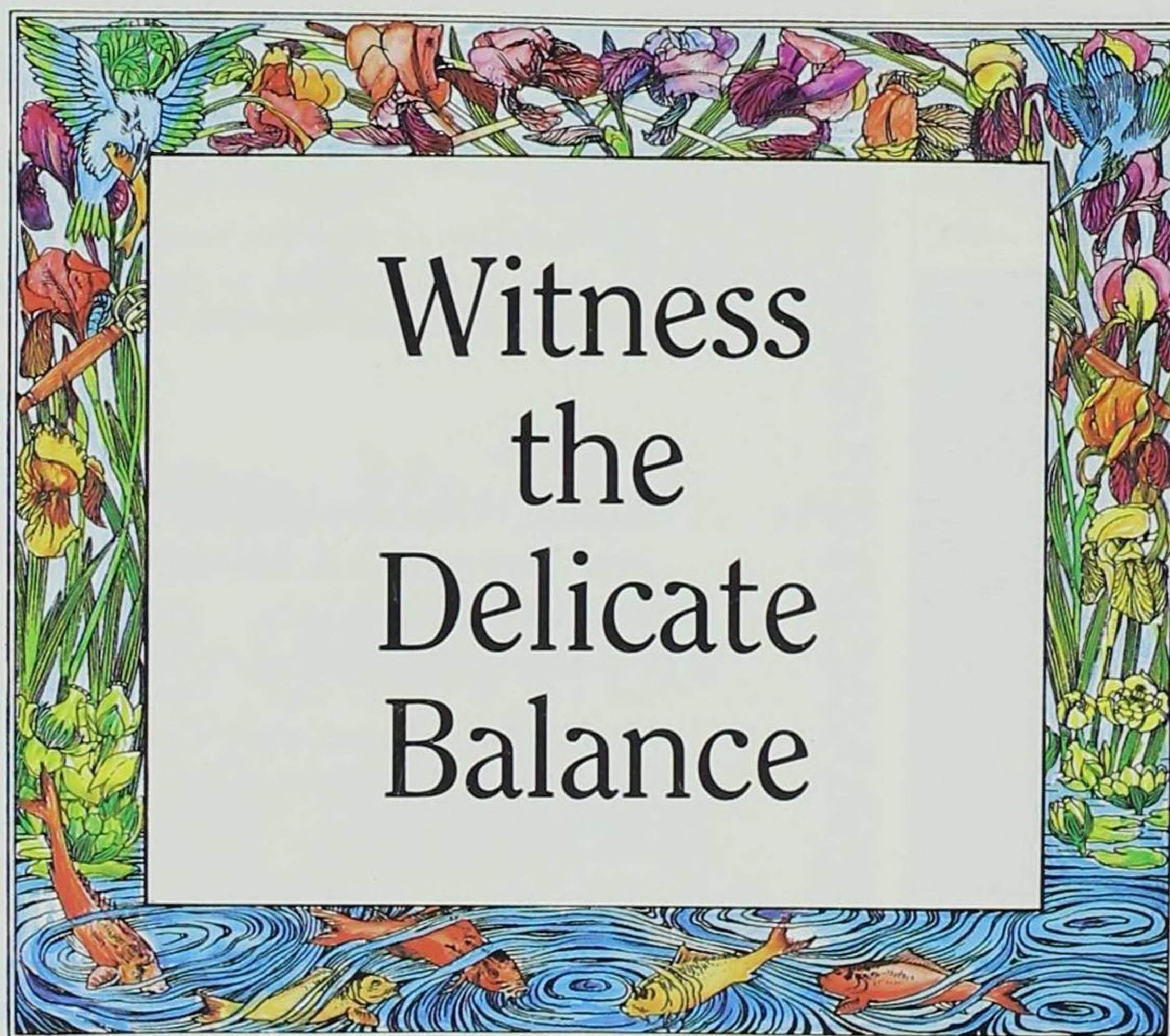
Young Steward Taylor was making wagons in West Liberty, Iowa, when he first met John Brown. Like a handful of other young men, he laid aside his tools and took up the cause.

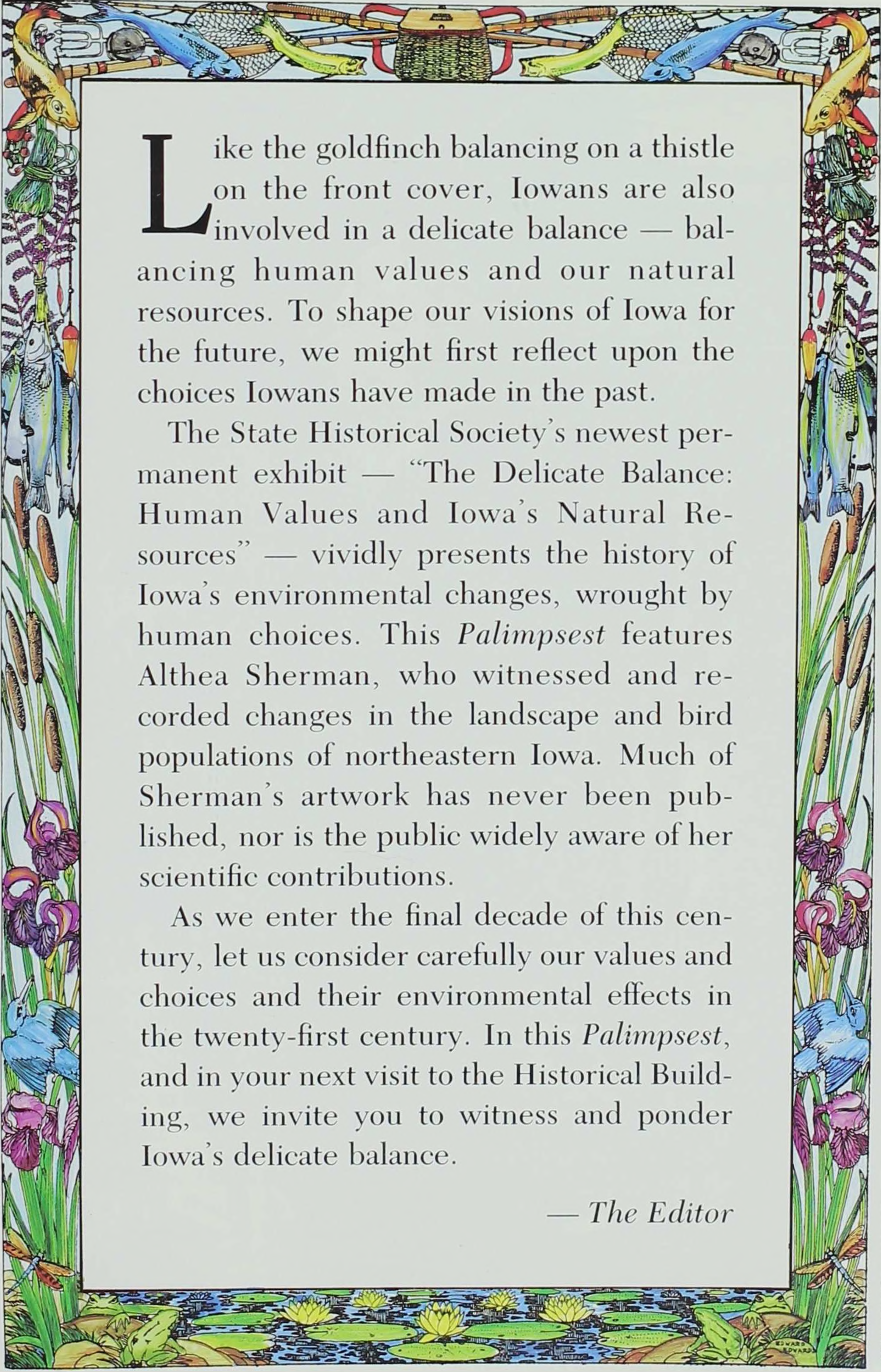
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by Jack Lufkin

As Model Ts chugged into Iowans' lives, local entrepreneurs entered the burgeoning market for petroleum products.

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Like the goldfinch balancing on a thistle on the front cover, Iowans are also involved in a delicate balance — balancing human values and our natural resources. To shape our visions of Iowa for the future, we might first reflect upon the choices Iowans have made in the past.

The State Historical Society's newest permanent exhibit — "The Delicate Balance: Human Values and Iowa's Natural Resources" — vividly presents the history of Iowa's environmental changes, wrought by human choices. This *Palimpsest* features Althea Sherman, who witnessed and recorded changes in the landscape and bird populations of northeastern Iowa. Much of Sherman's artwork has never been published, nor is the public widely aware of her scientific contributions.

As we enter the final decade of this century, let us consider carefully our values and choices and their environmental effects in the twenty-first century. In this *Palimpsest*, and in your next visit to the Historical Building, we invite you to witness and ponder Iowa's delicate balance.

— *The Editor*



OBERLIN COLLEGE ARCHIVES

Althea Sherman and the Birds of Prairie and Dooryard

A Scientist's Witness to Change

by Sharon E. Wood



YEAR AFTER YEAR, between 1918 and 1932, hundreds of people made their way to a Clayton County crossroads called National, Iowa. They braved spring mud and summer dust, traveling on rutted country roads in northeastern Iowa. There was no rail service to National; by 1918, there wasn't even a post office. But the visitors kept coming — college professors with groups of students, eminent scientists and amateur naturalists, "automobile tramps" out for fun on an afternoon drive. So many came that Althea Sherman finally gave up counting her callers.

By 1932, the year she stopped keeping track, the 79-year-old Sherman had led more than seventeen hundred visitors on the tour through her backyard laboratory. Stout, white-haired, and possessed of an encyclopedic

knowledge of her natural environment, Sherman was an object of admiration and curiosity to her visitors. She had spent more than twenty years teaching art in schools and colleges around the country. Then, shortly after the turn of the century, at an age when most people would be looking forward to retirement, Sherman began a new career as a scientist. By 1918 she had established a national reputation as a meticulous observer and interpreter of bird and animal behavior.

Sherman lacked professional scientific training, but she made up for this through rigorous self-education. Working from her home in a tiny village in northeast Iowa, Sherman subscribed to a variety of scientific journals and studied them carefully. She joined scientific organizations and corresponded with other researchers. Soon she began publishing her observations in regional journals and presenting papers at scientific meetings. In 1912, only seven years after she published her first article,

Opposite: Althea Sherman at her home in National, Iowa (pronounced Nā'-shūn-al). Above: Young catbirds — one of several of Sherman's drawings and oil paintings published here for the first time.

fellow ornithologists honored Sherman by electing her to the rank of "member" of the American Ornithologists' Union. Limited to one hundred persons, the "member" category was an honor bestowed on only three women before Sherman. During a career spanning nearly three decades, she published more than seventy articles and notes on ornithology, animal behavior, and natural history. Her articles appeared in some of the most prestigious scientific journals of the day — the American Ornithologists' Union's *Auk*, the National Audubon Society's *Bird-Lore*, *Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, *Journal of Mammology*, and the *British Avicultural Magazine*. By 1921, when she was nearly seventy, her reputation was such that she was selected for



Later in life, Althea Sherman applied her art education to paint landscapes and birds. Here, a thrush perches on a stalk of milkweed.

inclusion in the third edition of *American Men of Science*.

Sherman owed her success in this new career to her naturally keen powers of observation (enhanced by years of training as an artist), to disciplined study, and to her ingenuity in turning the domestic space around her home into a laboratory for research. She designed an observation blind, a variety of nesting boxes, and a remarkable 28-foot tower containing a false chimney to facilitate her study of chimney swifts — all of which were built on the acre or so surrounding the house she shared with her sister.

A daughter of the first generation of European-American settlers on the Iowa prairie, Sherman brought to her studies a sensitivity to the signs of change about her. The cycles of seasons, the life cycles of the birds whose nest lives she observed, even the cycles of crop rotation practiced by her farming neighbors all found their way into her densely written journals. And woven through these cycles are her poignant observations of the long-term changes that occurred during a lifetime of nearly ninety years: the native plant and animal species that disappeared under the pressures of agricultural development; the new species that arrived to replace them; the changing weather patterns that affected not only crops but also the birds and animals that shared the land with farmers. Sherman often regretted that members of her parents' generation had not been more careful observers of the natural world. Their help, she thought, would have made it possible to trace the changes on Iowa land from the very earliest days of settlement. Perhaps this is why she took such pains to record in journals and in art the changes to which she herself was an eyewitness.

ALTHEA SHERMAN was born in Farmersburg Township, Clayton County, Iowa in October 1853, the fourth of six children. Her parents, Mark Sherman and Melissa Clark Sherman, had settled in northeast Iowa nine years before. A New Hampshire native reared in Essex County, New York, Mark Sherman was



During Sherman's lifetime, prairie became farmland and woods became lumber. Sherman recorded these changes, through scientific observations of birds and through artistic perceptions of changing landscapes.

the son of a tanner and shoemaker. He learned those trades himself, but by the 1840s, most shoes were produced in large factories in towns like Linn, Massachusetts. Shortly after his marriage in 1842 he, like many displaced craftworkers of the period, determined to move west.

In 1844, after an unprofitable stay in Milwaukee, Mark Sherman bought land in sections 25 and 26 of Farmersburg Township. That summer, he erected a log pole house at a cost of seventy-five cents (a considerable bargain over the twenty-eight dollars, twelve and one-half cents Thoreau would spend a year later at Walden). Mark, Melissa, and their new-born daughter Emma spent nearly a year in that simple shelter before a sturdy frame house was built. For the next twenty-one years, the Sherman family lived and prospered on their prairie farm, and five more children joined Emma:

Ada, Amelia, Althea, Mark, and a daughter who died in childhood.

Mark Sherman was part of the generation that transformed the prairie into a rich agricultural resource. In doing so, he achieved considerable personal success as a farmer. Sherman bought land on a Mexican War land warrant for seventy-nine cents an acre. By 1850, the real estate was valued at \$2500, and the household included one farmhand. Six years later, the Shermans employed two hands and the wife of one of these men. On land that eleven years before had been virgin grassland, they produced 15 tons of hay, 540 bushels of spring wheat, 400 bushels of oats, 900 bushels of corn, 150 bushels of potatoes, 80 hogs for sale, 3 cattle for sale, 500 pounds of butter, and 1,000 pounds of cheese. By 1860, they were employing three farmhands to farm 267 acres (80 unimproved). The farm was

worth \$6,000, and Mark Sherman's personal estate was valued at \$10,000.

Years later, his daughter would write regretfully of the prairie life — both plants and animals — that vanished under the pressures of agricultural development, but Mark Sherman's success as a farmer also lay the groundwork for Althea's later career in science. He was able to pay for the best education available to a young woman of her generation, and his estate would provide financial security for her old age and money to support her research.

ALTHEA began her education in the common schools of Farmersburg Township. High schools were rare in the 1860s, so the teenaged Althea and her older sisters Amelia and Ada traveled forty-some miles to the academy at Upper Iowa University in Fayette to prepare for college. (In the nineteenth century, most colleges and universities — especially in the Midwest — operated preparatory divisions in addition to their collegiate courses.) By the mid-nineteenth century, dozens of colleges — including several in Iowa — offered degrees to both women and men, but the oldest and best of these coeducational institutions (and the model for most of the others) was Oberlin College in Ohio. After the money and effort Mark and Melissa Sherman had already invested in sending their daughters to Fayette, college was a natural next step. In 1869, the three sisters journeyed together to Ohio to enroll at Oberlin.

No one who knew them in college would have guessed that of the three Sherman sisters, Althea would one day be the sister honored for her contributions to scientific research. While Amelia and Ada began preparing for careers in medicine, Althea devoted herself to the study of art. Years later, she would remember her art education at Oberlin as "very bad," but as a young woman she was an enthusiastic student, saving some of the drawings and paintings from her student days throughout her life. The subjects of some of these paintings suggest that art teachers at Oberlin saw drawing and painting as genteel accomplishments. One allegorical painting showed "Winter" in the guise of a

wizened crone. A carefully drawn portrait of Lincoln honored the recently martyred president. Another portrait, depicting Eugénie of France, may have been Sherman's tribute to the empress who, while serving as regent, visited painter Rosa Bonheur in her studio and bestowed upon her the *Légion d'Honneur* — the first woman so recognized.

Althea's interest in art did not keep her from working seriously at her other studies. Oberlin was coeducational, but it maintained two separate degree tracks: a classical course and a literary course. When the college opened in 1833, administrators assumed that only men would choose the classical course, while women would confine themselves to the less rigorous literary course. But from the start, some highly motivated women had always chosen to pursue the more prestigious classical course, and Althea Sherman was one of these. More than forty years later, Sherman attributed her success as a scientist in part to the training in Latin and Greek she had received in Oberlin's classical course.

After graduating from Oberlin in 1875, Sherman taught school for a while, then returned to Oberlin to earn a master's degree in 1882. For the next few years, she alternated periods of teaching with further training as an artist. She taught at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, taking a leave of absence in 1885 to study with the Art Students' League in New York City. In 1887, she moved to Wichita, Kansas, to be near her sister, Dr. Ada Sherman St. John. There she gave private instruction in drawing until she was called back to her parents' home in National to help care for her father, who was gravely ill. A year later, she was again able to spend time studying in New York City, and in 1892 she took a position as supervisor of drawing in the Tacoma, Washington, public schools, where she remained until 1895, when she returned to Iowa once again to care for her aging father. This time, her stay was to be more or less permanent. Mark Sherman died in 1896, and Althea remained to care for her mother until Melissa Clark Sherman died in 1902. From then on, Althea remained in National, sharing the family home with her older sister, Dr. Amelia Sherman.

Amelia Sherman had been a country doctor



in National since the mid-1880s, and she continued her practice for many years to come. Althea, however, found her opportunities less satisfactory. "My professional work was the study and teaching of Art," she wrote in a 1918 letter to Oberlin College. But her tiny hometown proved "unsuitable for progress" in this field. Casting about for an activity to occupy her energetic mind, Sherman rediscovered the birds she had loved in girlhood. National may have been no place for an artist, but "its environs . . . were found very favorable for research work in some lines of Zoology." Gradually, Sherman began to redefine her profession. To the 1900 census-taker, she called herself a "teacher of art," but by 1910, she was listing her occupation as "bird study at home."

Sherman attributed some of her success as an ornithologist to her "painstaking" drawing lessons at Oberlin. Upper left: Birds, at one, two, five, and six days old. Lower left: Young flickers, drawn in 1910. Below: Typically detailed entries from record books: "June 25 Same old heat. Early, as I was watching the swallow's nest, I notice[d] one young Kingbird out of the nest about two feet from it while three stood in the nest. The one outside returned to nest once or twice while I was making observations. One parent (presumably the male) seemed to be on guard while the other did the feeding. Food was brought at 5.43—5.48—5.53—5.55—6.00 6.05½ About once every five minutes."

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Temp 70 above normal
Exceedingly hot on two
days showers in most of Iowa
Kingbirds



IT IS TEMPTING to look upon Sherman's first career as an artist and teacher as the typically genteel occupation of a middle-class lady. If this were true her later decision to pursue a scientific career might seem a fairly dramatic break with the past. But while drawing and painting were certainly part of the ornamental education offered to young ladies in the nineteenth century, by the time Althea Sherman was studying and teaching, training in art — particularly drawing — had become more than just a sign of culture and taste. It had become a valuable skill.

In the late nineteenth century, a working class trained in drawing was considered an asset to American industry. "Drawing is the language of mechanics and the ability to use the pencil freely lies at the foundation of success in many mechanical pursuits," wrote Isaac Clarke in a government pamphlet called *Art and Industry* (1885). "Without such education the



Sherman: "This is a sketch of the brook to the south of our house as it was about 1890." By 1895, Sherman's teaching career would be over. The area around National, Iowa, would serve as both laboratory and artistic inspiration.

American artisan must gradually descend in the scale of industry and content himself with a menial scale in life." Among the trades that acknowledged the need for such training were "carriage makers, taxidermists, sign writers, marble cutters, machinists, upholsterers, dyers, paperhangers, designers, and teachers." Drawing was no longer just one of the ornamental branches of education; and it was usually as a teacher of drawing, not painting or art, that Althea Sherman found employment.

Especially during her years as supervisor of drawing instruction in the Tacoma public schools, Sherman would have been emphasizing the mechanical, practical aspects of drawing as a craft, as a tool to facilitate other kinds of work. In a period before high-speed cameras, one of the kinds of work with which artists regularly assisted was the recording of visual phenomena for scientists. The development of high-quality wood-engraving, photoengraving, and chromolithography created a demand for artists who could meticulously illustrate the plants, animals, and fossils, as well as experiments and observations, discussed in scientific publications. Her own training might have emphasized the genteel side of drawing and painting, but Sherman's work as a teacher would have acquainted her with these areas in which art and science merged.

Years later, Sherman acknowledged that the skills she learned as an artist served her well in her second career as an ornithologist. In a 1918 letter to Oberlin encouraging the college to add entomology to its curriculum, Sherman wrote, "That my work in these lines [zoology] has been such as has received the hearty approval of scientists I believe is due . . . [to] Drawing under the instruction of Miss Wyatt (which from an *art standpoint* was very bad, but was painstaking; How often the word "painstaking" has been used in press comments on my work is interesting to note.)" Training as an artist helped give Sherman patience and an eye for detail — indispensable talents for the student of animal behavior.

The paintings and drawings now held by the State Historical Society of Iowa reveal that Sherman herself was far more skilled in the use of the pencil than the brush. She painted many landscapes and was an admirer and perhaps a



Sherman's depiction of a mill, Fayette, Iowa. Daughter of a successful farmer, Sherman regretted that abundant harvests required the loss of natural habitats.

student of New York landscape artist George Smillie (several of her paintings have notes identifying them as copies of Smillie's work), but her use of color in these paintings remains clumsy and amateurish. Much more satisfying are drawings of the birds she loved and studied so carefully.

Drawing became a tool Sherman used in her own research on birds. She not only prepared finished studies of her bird-subjects, but also made quick sketches in her notebooks to help her remember visual details. The margins of her early journals often feature thumbnail drawings of new birds observed near her home, with notations about colors and arrows to point out identifying features. After she had identified the bird, she would record its species next to the sketch. Similar sketches helped her remember feeding postures, nest positions, and the size of family groups. One notebook contains a detailed drawing of a bat,

noting its resting posture and wing structure.

Drawing was a useful skill for an independent ornithologist, but Althea Sherman was not opposed to more modern methods of research. She learned to use a camera as well, and her journals record some comical moments attempting to photograph birds who simply would not pose for the camera. Unfortunately, her photographs seem not to have been preserved.

SHERMAN'S WORK and training as an artist may have provided fertile soil for her late-blooming scientific career, but the seeds had been sown much earlier. It is not hard to imagine how a girl growing up in the 1850s and 1860s, in a region just undergoing the transition from prairie to farmland, would have found in the wildlife that

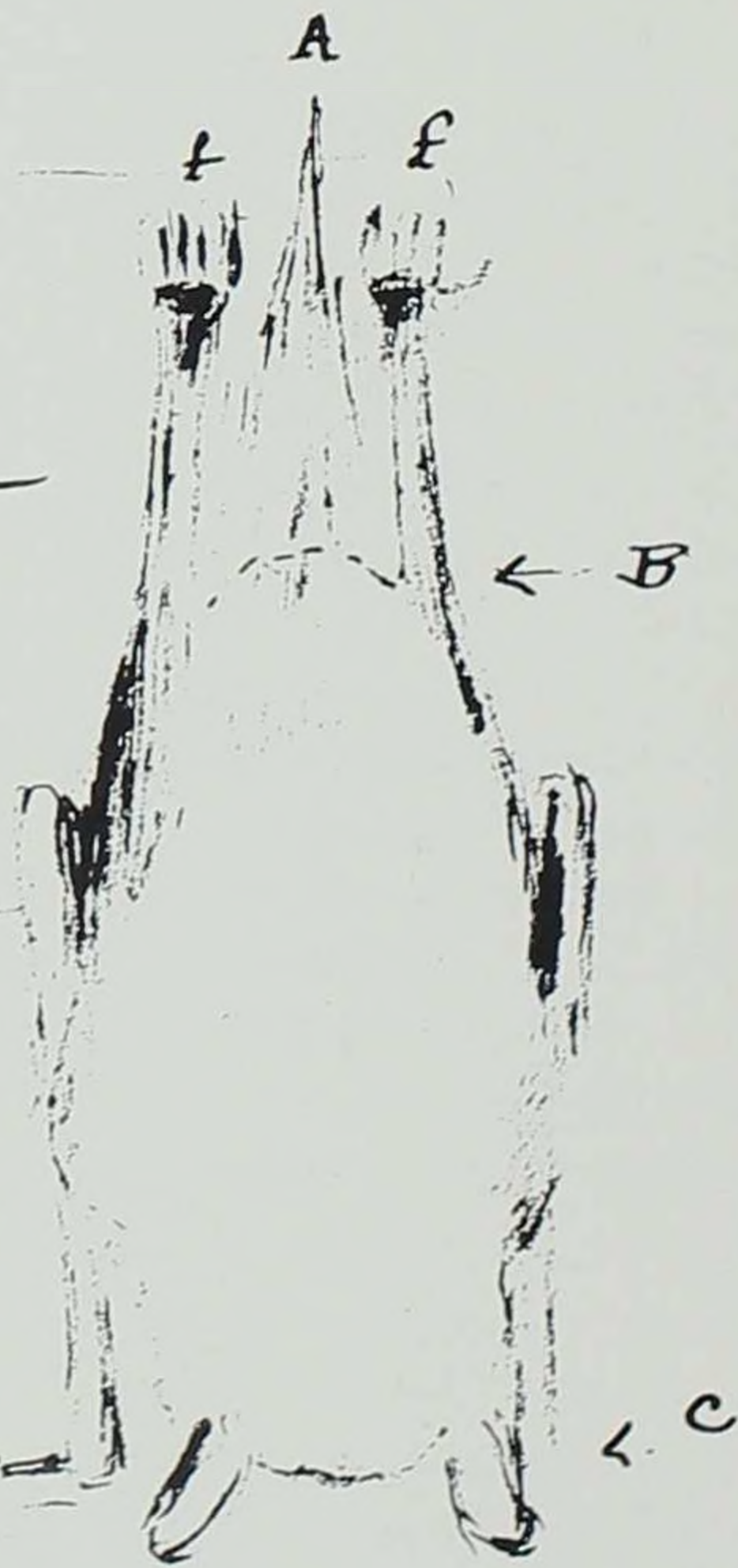
abounded all around her home a source of endless fascination. Later, as a young teacher right out of college, Althea took pleasure in sharing her own wonder with children. A former student recalled, "There was never another teacher like her. She took us into the woods a few rods away, showed us how flowers grow; how seeds ripen; how leaves are constructed and how they breathe; how to know trees by the bark." Even her interest in birds and their habits had its childhood origins. Althea was one of several neighborhood children who gathered two hundred prairie-chicken eggs and hatched them under domestic hens, hoping to tame them. The experiment was a failure; every chick eventually wandered off and died.

Prairie chickens and wild turkeys — for which the nearby Turkey River had been named — were only two of the many ground-nesting species common to the open prairie

July 17

The bats were in windows
Nos 1 & 5. The one in No 5
I found out on the slats of
blind in this position ~~by~~
Full stretch 3 inches.

This shows it with middle
of "tail" extended. Most of
the time the end was bent
over as a hook, = A. The
membrane that terminates in
this hook is transparent with
a heavy muscle through the center showing
the blood red color a little, the two "hind



Sherman did not limit her observations to birds. Above: description and drawing of a bat from her July 1915 journal.

near Sherman's childhood home. Both cliff and barn swallows nested in the barnyard, and Althea remembered them as "the chief bird joys of our childhood," skimming the air in scores. "A lack of trees and telephone poles accounted for the absence of the Northern Flicker and Red-headed Woodpecker now so abundant," Sherman later wrote. While the flicker — Sherman's favorite bird in later years — was uncommon, other tree- and hole-dwelling birds found a habitat in woodlands not far from her childhood home.

When Althea's father had retired from farming in 1866, he moved from the home where Althea spent her childhood to a newly built house at the south end of National's Main Street. Only three years later, Althea and her sisters left for Oberlin, and the years that passed until she returned to care for her aging parents made their own changes on the land. Originally, the space surrounding the house was "open prairie devoid of tree or shrub." But when the family moved in, the acre or so around the house began to be transformed from prairie to domestic space. Elm, maple, and cedar trees were planted, and an orchard with plum and apple trees, and gooseberries, mulberries, raspberries, and elderberries. A barn was built close to the house. When Sherman began to study birds, she found that these alterations, combined with the natural habitats provided by the land, gave her the raw materials she needed to transform her dooryard into a laboratory for bird study. She spent the next decades devising structures to transform these raw materials into a space for science.

In the unused barn and elsewhere around the acre, Sherman placed nesting boxes of her own design. The first of these were devised for flickers, but it took a year or so of experimentation before she arrived at a design that suited both her needs and those of the flickers. The successful boxes were made of soap crates, nailed up inside the barn against holes drilled in the barn wall by the flickers themselves. Each box had a peephole in the top and a hand-hole near the bottom, closed by a trapdoor and "large enough to withdraw the hand while it held a well-grown nestling." These boxes enabled her to note with great accuracy the incubation period of eggs, the feeding habits of



"Those the Cats Love Die Young." Sherman sometimes set scientific objectivity aside when she wrote about her love of birds and her sadness as some species decreased.

parents, and the weights of eggs and nestlings, among other things. They also made it possible for her to draw accurately the postures of birds within the nesting space, recording this information without greatly disturbing the birds.

Her studies of rails, marsh wrens, screech owls, and sparrow hawks were aided by another structure, a wooden blind erected in 1907 in the marshy ravine on the west edge of the lot. The blind was forty-six inches square, with a door on one side and one window on each of the other sides. It was elevated on posts. Originally intended only for observation of migrating birds, it eventually became the site of a nesting box that attracted two species of predators. First screech owls, then sparrow hawks made use of this box, allowing Sherman to become the first person to publish first-hand observations of the nest lives of these species.

By far the best-known piece of Sherman's laboratory equipment — and the one that drew



OBERLIN COLLEGE ARCHIVES

so many of her curious visitors — was the tower she had built in 1915 to aid her study of chimney swifts. Before she designed the tower, the only way she and the ornithologists with whom she corresponded had been able to observe the nest habits of the chimney swift was “by standing on a box placed on a chair” and using “a hand-mirror thrust through a stove-pipe hole into a chimney.” The obvious inconvenience of this method meant that much about the swift — a prime example of the kind of bird that came west with European-American settlement — remained unknown. To remedy this, Sherman had the tower built in the yard behind her home. Nine feet square and twenty-eight feet tall, the tower contained an artificial chimney two feet square that ran “down the center of the tower to a depth of 14 feet.” Below the “chimney” were two low-ceilinged stories: a bottom room used for the storage of items related to bird study, and an

upper room that gave access to the base of the chimney, where there was a zinc pan to catch rainwater (and, as Sherman soon discovered, bird excrement, enabling her to know whether swifts had roosted in the chimney overnight). A flight of stairs wound around the “chimney,” and peepholes and windows gave views of the interior of the chimney, where the swifts nested. Sherman was especially pleased with her design for the windows. Instead of being flat glass surfaces flush with the chimney wall, they were made of two panes of glass meeting in a wide “V” shape that jutted into the chimney. She could put her head into this opening and look “to the bottom or to the top of the chimney . . . without unduly frightening the birds.”

Sherman found the tower ideal for studying the swifts. She could shade one of the windows looking into the chimney with paper and place a lamp there, casting just enough light for her to watch the swifts’ activities at night. The swifts themselves obligingly built their first nest just below one of her observation windows. This made it possible for her to look right down into the swifts’ nest — something impossible using the old technique of looking in a hand mirror thrust into a stove-pipe hole. Sherman made a sketch of the swift’s position on the nest to share this information with other ornithologists.

She used the tower for other kinds of observations as well. The outside windows, which looked out on the trees and shrubbery behind her house, gave her an excellent, elevated vantage point from which to view birds. One year, a mourning dove built its nest in a tree branch about ten feet from a tower window. Her description of how she watched that nest reveals a good deal about how she made her observations—and about the way she combined her scientific work with her domestic obligations. “I rose early and at about five o’clock in the morning arrived at the watchout with an armful of sewing, expecting to spend the entire day there,” she wrote. “The watching of a Mourning Dove’s nest is a dreary task, unless one can do something besides watch. If one knits, that is a good occupation, for the eyes must be lifted to the nest at least once a minute, since the exchange of place on the nest



Opposite: An artificial “chimney” ran through the center of this tower, allowing Sherman to observe and sketch chimney swifts in their natural, albeit awkward-appearing, nesting position (above).



Ground-nesting species disappeared as farmers plowed up the prairie and rotated crops, requiring new nesting sites.

is done so quickly and quietly it easily escapes detection."

Sherman's casual assumption that the "one" to whom she was giving advice about making scientific observations would also be one who sewed or knitted was probably startling — or amusing — to most of her readers. Only a handful of women were pursuing serious work in ornithology at that time. But her description also suggests how domestic labor intruded on her time in ways a male ornithologist would never have had to confront. Indeed, this mingling of bird observation with domestic tasks occurs more than a few times in her writing: she cannot maintain a perfect watch on her bird tower because she must take time to get supper, and she jokingly compares the "food cards" of seed and suet she prepares for winter bird feeding to the "food cards" (rationing pledge cards) women used during World War I.

These casual references point up one more important source of Althea Sherman's success in scientific research. At a time when most women pursuing scientific research struggled for access to the laboratories and observatories they needed to do their work, Sherman could literally work at home. She could combine some domestic chores with her scientific labors, and she did not have to confront the expectation that she would work all day at the laboratory and manage a home on her "leisure" time. But even more important than this was the fact that Sherman did not have to break any barriers to gain access to her laboratory. She was conscious of discrimination against women in the professional societies to which she belonged; but in her own lab, she had to be neither admitted nor hired, she had only to work and to write. By working as an independent, she offered no threat of job competition to "men of science."

DURING her own lifetime, Sherman achieved recognition by her colleagues as a thorough, competent researcher. But in recent years, her work has been all but forgotten. The few who have noted it have tended to dismiss it as naive and of little importance. By some measures, this is true — especially when only her published work is considered. Although Sherman published more than seventy articles and notes during her career, most of them were produced during the first fifteen years of her work as an ornithologist. And many of her earliest published notes simply recorded observations, offering little interpretation. Over fifty when she began this second career, she spent years in reading and observation before she began to produce the kind of carefully argued and documented interpretations of animal behavior that make a real contribution to scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, just as her mind was at its keenest, her body began to betray her. She was unable to complete and publish many of her studies.

Often sick, Sherman lacked the energy to keep up a rigorous schedule of writing. Arthritis made writing by hand painful and often impossible. She began using a typewriter for correspondence and eventually limited herself to one letter a year to each friend, but field notes still had to be kept by hand. These began to diminish in number and thoroughness as the years went by. "I am old and am very slow, yet within a year I manage to do considerable work," she wrote in 1921 to Margaret Morse

Nice, a young ornithologist in whose work she had taken an interest. "I must keep abreast [of] the times in world affairs and read the scientific magazines that come to me, so I read while combing my hair, when eating, and when resting, but I have written nothing on my bird histories since early last spring."

Another drain on Althea Sherman's time and energy was the daily burden of housework. Sherman often complained bitterly of the amount of sheer labor this entailed, and the steady stream of visitors who came to see her laboratory only added to the load. The Sherman household had few "modern" conveniences to ease the load. In 1943, at the time of Althea's death, water was still drawn from an open well with windlass, rope, and bucket — the last of its kind in the neighborhood. Margaret Nice apparently encouraged her to hire domestic help, but Sherman's letters protest that there was none to be had in their neighborhood. The letters also hint darkly that sister Amelia was too miserly to spend money on help or modernization.

In the end, one of Althea Sherman's most important contributions to ornithology may have been Margaret Morse Nice herself. Like Sherman, Nice was an independent, largely self-trained ornithologist, who studied birds from her own home — first in Oklahoma, later in Columbus, Ohio. She was also thirty years younger than her mentor. Nice had originally written to Sherman with questions about an article Sherman had published, but their correspondence quickly developed into a cross-country friendship. Sherman provided Nice with advice, support, and encouragement. She cautioned her not to let a lack of professional recognition cause her to doubt her own abilities as a scientist, and she could be positively sarcastic about the treatment women received in the scientific organizations to which both she and Nice belonged. "When women receive any honors, they may accept same thankfully," she wrote in 1925. "I have said and I believe it, that no woman will ever be made a Fellow [the highest rank in the American Ornithologists' Union]. . . . Man's nature must change before a woman is a Fellow." She warned Nice against the dangers of letting household responsibilities drain time and



"Screech owl, ten days old." When screech owls nested in Sherman's bird blind, her subsequent observations of their nest lives were the first published in her field.



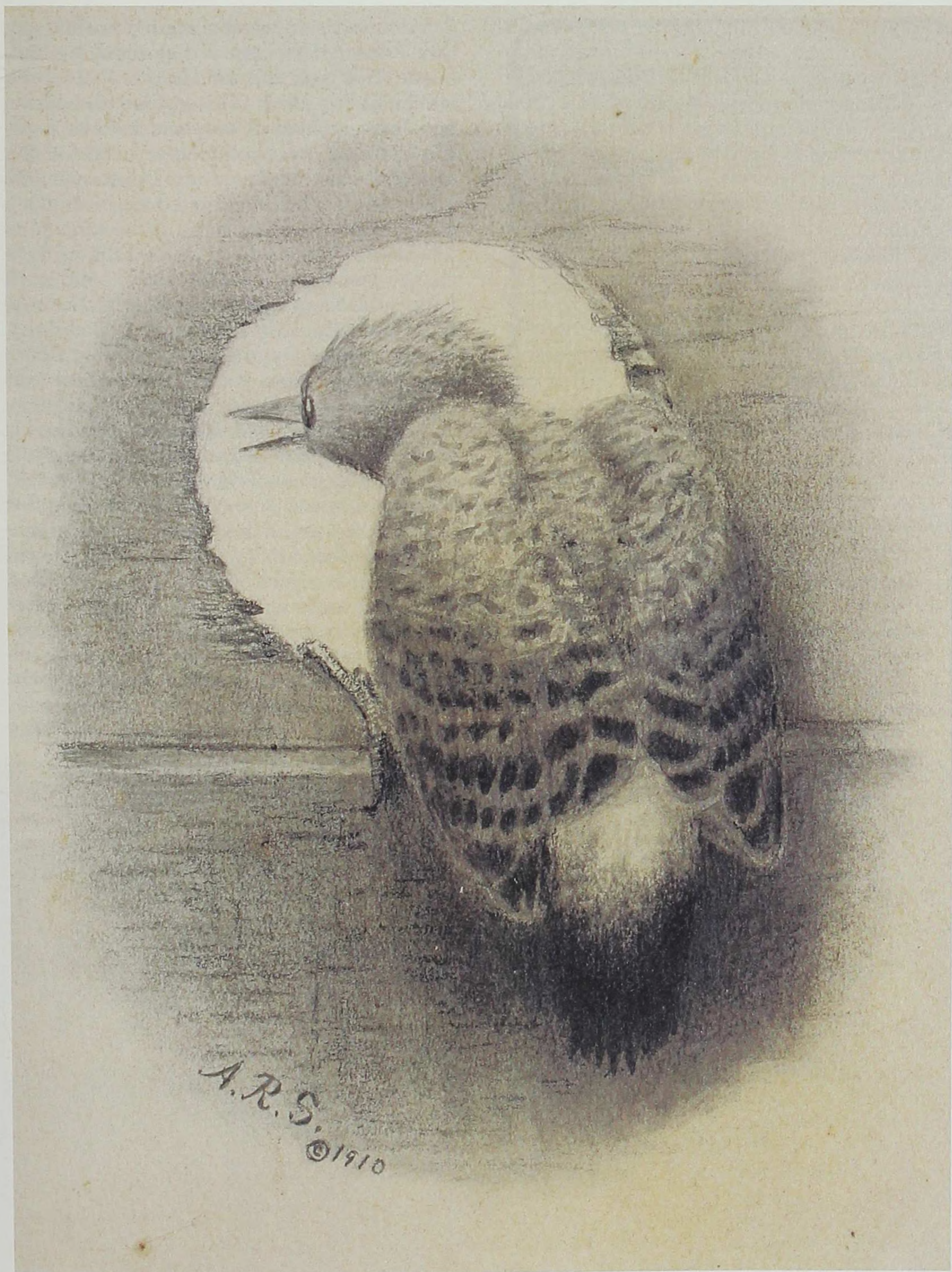
Above: Sherman's note: "A Bird Thoroughfare: Scene on the Volga River Near Fayette, Iowa, sketched in 1897 under Mrs. C. B. Coman transcribed in 1906." Opposite: 1910 drawing of a flicker: "Hurling a Derisive Yelp."

energy from scientific study. And she provided a model of scholarship that may have helped set the direction for the younger woman's work.

Ernst Mayr, the German biologist, has written that Nice "almost single-handedly, initiated a new era in American ornithology" by emphasizing the "study of bird *individuals* because this is the only method to get reliable life history data." The importance of closely observing individual birds was something Althea Sherman had argued for in her letters to Nice, and it was characteristic of Sherman's best work. In one early letter to Nice, Sherman sneered at the laxity of some published research. "Speaking confidentially," she wrote of a study of mourning doves, "[this project] seems to me more like a dream than a study. I regard the *study* of one hundred and eleven Mourning Dove nests as a good-sized job for forty or fifty years." Nice carried the principle of limited study of bird individuals much further than Sherman, experimenting with banding and other techniques to mark particular birds. Sherman, writing from her Iowa home, applauded these innovations.

"**T**RUTH and hard work are the exactions of science," Althea Sherman once wrote. Spending countless tedious hours observing her subjects and many more studying scientific journals, Sherman held both herself and others to high standards. She had little patience for self-proclaimed "bird-lovers" who "dabble a little in bird-lore so they can gabble about birds." But her scorn for "bird-lovers" should not mask the fact that she herself was first and always a lover of birds. She never lost her delight in the darting flight of the cliff swallow or the "brilliant combination of colors" afforded by the sight of a red-headed woodpecker feeding alongside two Baltimore orioles. It was with great sadness that she noted in the mid-1920s a clear decline in the number and variety of birds to be seen around National. In a letter to Margaret Nice in 1928, Sherman wrote, "I was greatly depressed by the reduced number of birds. . . . I did not see a Phoebe a half dozen times in the whole season. Brown Thrashers were scarce. My daily averages dropped by one more figure." A year later, the news was still bad: "I am heartsick over their diminishing numbers," she wrote.

Sherman was not alone in noting that birds that had once been numerous seemed, as the



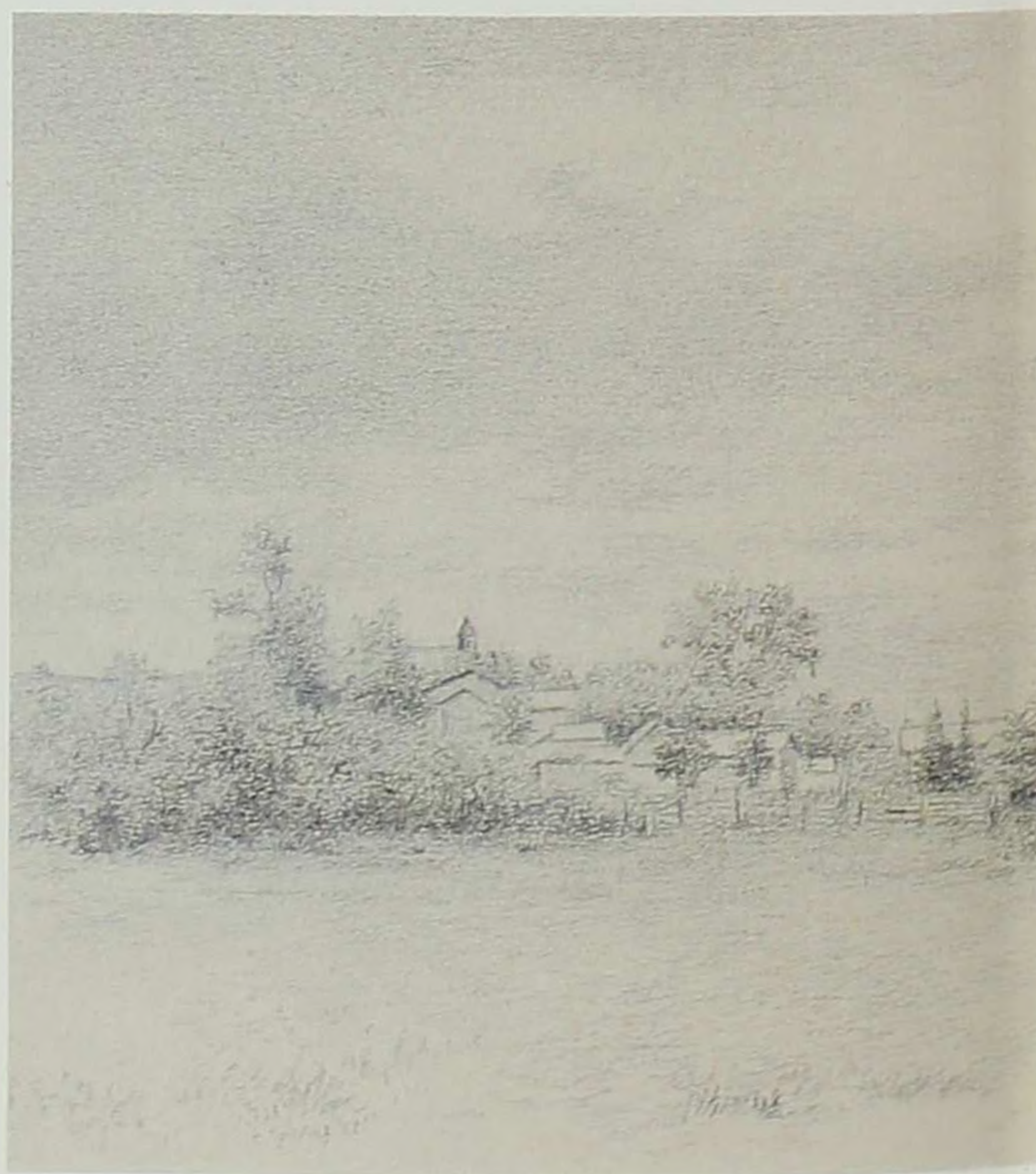
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Sherman's yearly notebooks run from 1903 to 1936 and are filled with daily entries on individual birds and occasional sketches. Some notebooks include monthly tallies of species observed. Here, August 1907 totals.

twentieth century progressed, to be vanishing. Other Iowans commented that the booming call of the prairie chicken — once the strange music by which farmers had done spring planting — had become a sound rarely heard. So had the bubbling notes of the bobolink and the fluting of the western meadowlark. But Sherman recognized that these birds were not just vanishing; most of them were being displaced by other species. As settlers plowed and planted and grazed their animals on the prairie grasses, as they built houses and planted orchards and windbreaks, they irrevocably changed the habitats that had once supported these birds.

"On unfenced portions of prairie, where herds of cattle grazed, and many beautiful wildflowers (now gone forever), were to be

found the eggs or young of ground-nesting species," wrote Sherman of her pioneer childhood. This was the landscape where prairie chickens, bob-whites, meadowlarks, bobolinks, upland plover, and killdeer flourished. By the twentieth century, most of this prairie was fenced and plowed, destroying the grasslands that had sheltered these birds. Crop rotation, practiced by most of the farmers in Sherman's neighborhood, forced the birds to change their nesting sites yearly, and even pasturelands were not always safe. "I have yet to hear of farmers in this neighborhood shooting Bob-whites," wrote Sherman, "but I have seen some of them show deep concern over injuries done to nesting birds by their plows and mowing machines. It is these implements that have worked destruction; these and the life-sustaining cow." No vegetarian herself, Sherman nevertheless observed wistfully that if human beings had developed vegetarian habits and synthetic dairy products, "the ground nesting birds would not have fared so badly." Bobolinks and meadowlarks remained more numerous around National than in nearby areas because "the small pastures of the villagers, the cemetery, the churchyards, and the twenty acres constituting our County Fairgrounds have remained in grass year after



year," permitting the birds to nest in peace.

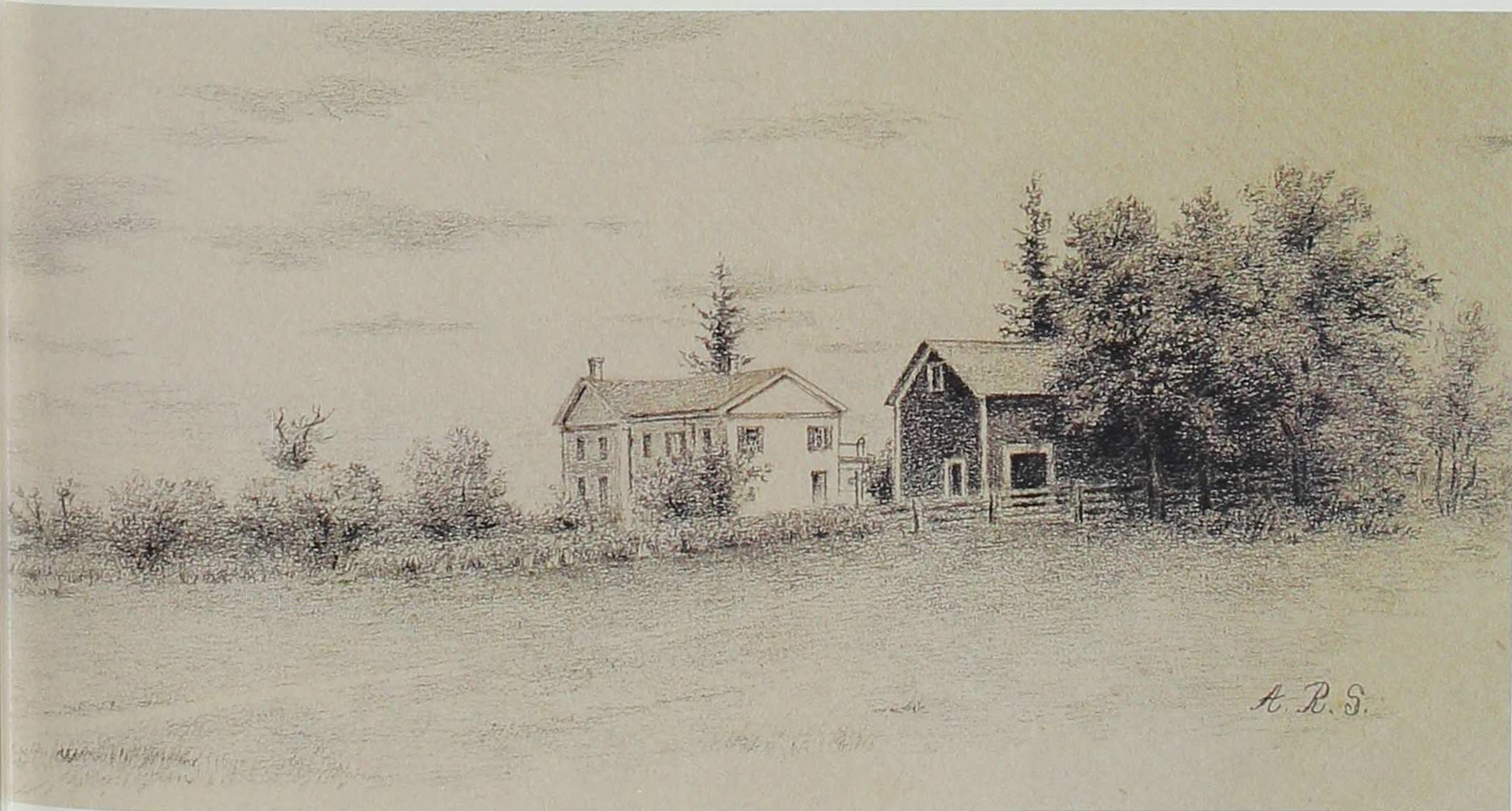
Other farming activities changed the bird populations as well. The planting of evergreen windbreaks, which began in the last decades of the nineteenth century, greatly increased the number of bronzed grackles in the Midwest. "The farmers like to see the grackle following the plow, picking up the larvae of the May beetle, known as the white grub worm, which destroys their corn," observed Sherman. But the cordiality that marked relations between farmers and grackles did not hold true in the grackles' relations with other birds. As the number of grackles increased, native species that shared their nesting sites, like kingbirds and chipping sparrows, began to vanish.

Sometimes even the intentional activities of "bird-lovers" could have devastating effects on the bird population. Sherman was famous — or infamous — for her campaign against house-wren boxes, calling the teachers who encouraged their students to build and install the boxes "criminal." While her rhetoric could be inflammatory, Sherman's reasoning was sound. House wrens are among the most territorial of common birds. When a pair chooses a nesting site, they systematically search out all other nests nearby and destroy the eggs by piercing them or tossing them from the nest.

Chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, bluebirds, other wren species, vireos, and other small songbirds are the usual victims of wren aggression, and the arrival of large numbers of house wrens can be devastating to these birds. House-wren boxes, with small holes to protect the occupants from their natural enemies, encouraged a disproportionate number of wrens to breed, rapidly displacing other species. Only the goldfinch, which nests later than the other birds, seemed relatively immune to attacks.

Sherman's monthly tallies of the bird population confirmed her observation that wrens had driven many other birds from her dooryard, and she feared the long-range consequences for native species. A late freeze in 1907 had killed, by some estimates, millions of

Below: Althea Sherman's dooryard, 1906. In Chapter 1 of her *Birds of an Iowa Dooryard* (posthumously published in 1952), she cites 162 species identified "either on our place [the dooryard and her surrounding lots] or in the air overhead." Sherman insisted her "dooryard" was not a cultivated garden but an acre of outbuildings, a few vegetables and flowers, and an orchard. "A large part of the trees . . . are plum trees, bearing harvests mainly of birds' nests. There is toleration for plum trees for several reasons: They take care of themselves and are thorny and brushy about their trunks, thereby offering desirable sites for bird nests."





OBERLIN COLLEGE ARCHIVES

Binoculars in hand, Sherman watches for birds. (Photo taken in 1923.) The acre around her home in National gradually turned from open prairie to a mix of shade trees, berry bushes, and fruit trees — attracting different species of birds, which Sherman diligently recorded with pencil and paintbrush.

warblers, vireos, and flycatchers throughout the Midwest. “It was a bereavement for bird students to have the beautiful family of warblers come so near extinction,” Sherman wrote. At the time of the freeze, most ornithologists took comfort in the knowledge that natural increase would eventually restore the number of warblers. But Sherman’s observations showed that this never happened. After twenty years, the number of warblers, by Sherman’s count, was decreasing — not increasing. House wrens had taken their place. Bluebirds, too, had suffered inordinately. Sherman’s early bird counts showed bluebirds in her neighborhood more than one hundred days a year. In 1926, she saw bluebirds on just four days; in 1927, on eleven days. “What does this mean?” she wrote angrily. “Nothing less than that I am being wronged, defrauded, cheated out of my rights to the pursuit of happiness by the maintainers of wren boxes to the north of me.”

BY 1943, the year of Sherman’s death, the village of National had all but vanished. It had been declining for years, and as their neighbors died or moved away, Althea Sherman and her sister had purchased many of the houses, so that “the birds in an unmolested state tenanted the deserted homes of man.” In 1937, Althea added the abandoned Congregational church to her collection — to prevent its being turned into a tavern. (The Methodist church had already become a barn.) Gradually, Althea Sherman came to own many parcels of property around the acre that had been her home and laboratory for half a century.

In her will, she laid out her plans for her now extensive holdings. Designating the National

The chipping sparrow (opposite) and kingbird lost nesting sites to the bronzed grackle, which thrived in the Midwest as farmers planted evergreen windbreaks and plowed up grub worms.



Cemetery Association her heir, or if they refused the conditions, the State of Iowa, Sherman willed "that the old Sherman homestead together with the 'mill-lot' be kept in a condition attractive to birds much as it has been during my lifetime. That the House Wren not be allowed to breed there, nor the Screech Owl, nor other conditions allowed that will unfit it to be a bird sanctuary." She also made provisions for the preservation of her notebooks, drawings, and paintings by the state, and endowed a professorship at Oberlin College, "to be occupied by a Professor who shall each year give some special instruction in the study of birds." Sherman's notes and drawings were preserved, and Oberlin received its endowment, but the bird sanctuary she envisioned in National never materialized. Sherman's heirs refused her conditions, and the land was eventually sold off.

Visitors to northeast Iowa can still stop in

Opposite: The wildrose and goldfinch, Iowa's state flower and bird, painted in 1936. Below: bluejays.

National today, though they won't find it on most state highway maps. The marshy brook where Sherman studied sora rails from her blind has vanished, a victim of modern drainage systems. The church, her home, and virtually all the other houses that once stood in National are long gone, replaced by a modern motel and a handful of houses of recent vintage. The county fairgrounds and the cemetery remain, but these, once the last preserves of bobolinks and native prairie wildflowers, are now neatly mowed. Near Althea Sherman's grave, a single mound of birdfoot trefoil — a yellow-blossomed immigrant from Europe — breaks the smooth expanse of green. And the air is silent, save the whirring of insects and the rusty voice of a crow, high above, in the evergreen grove nearby. □



NOTE ON SOURCES

The primary sources for this article are Althea R. Sherman's posthumously published book, *Birds of an Iowa Dooryard* (1952); letters in the Margaret Morse Nice Papers, Cornell University Archives; letters and other materials in the Oberlin College Archives; Althea Sherman's will and inventories, Clayton County Clerk's Office; and letters, journals, field notes, drawings, and paintings in the Althea Sherman Collection, SHSI-Des Moines. *Portrait and Biographical Record of Dubuque, Jones, and Clayton Counties* (1894) and *History of Clayton County, Iowa*, vols. 1, 2 (1916) provided historical material on the Sherman family, as did U.S. Census for Iowa, Garnavillo

and Farmersburg townships, Clayton County, 1850, 1856, 1860, 1900, 1910; and Iowa State Census, Farmersburg Township, Clayton County, 1915, 1925. Important secondary sources are Mrs. H. J. Taylor, "Iowa's Woman Ornithologist: Althea Rosina Sherman, 1853-1943," *Iowa Bird Life* 13 (1943), 19-35; Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (1982); Milton B. Trautman, "Margaret Morse Nice," in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period* (1980); and Diana Korzenick, *Drawn to Art: A Nineteenth-Century American Dream* (1985).



An Iowan's Death at Harpers Ferry

"The men in the ranks are too often forgotten in the adulation we give the leaders. Brown's memory will never be as sacred a thing to me as the memory of some who fell with him."

— George Gill (treasurer of John Brown's provisional government)

by Richard Acton

JOHN BROWN and his group of twenty-one men took and held the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), for thirty-six hours in October 1859. Much has been written about John Brown, little about his band. One of the most interesting characters among that colorful group was a young Iowan named Steward Taylor, who marched into Harpers Ferry utterly convinced he was going to die.

Militarily Harpers Ferry was an unqualified disaster. Ten of the men were killed. John Brown and six others were hanged. Only two of those involved in the fighting and the three rearguards escaped. But as antislavery propaganda, the insurrection was a brilliant success. The newspaper reports of the incident initially appalled most Northerners, but Brown's subsequent statements, letters, trial, hanging, and funeral stirred Northern admiration and con-

science, and the episode brought fears of future abolitionist and slave insurrections to the South.

Harpers Ferry is regarded by historians as a landmark on the road to the Civil War and hence the abolition of slavery. Few such tiny groups of men, however fanatical, however idealistic, have given such a jolt to history. A loathing of slavery — both fanatical and idealistic — drove Steward Taylor to leave Iowa and follow John Brown for two years before Harpers Ferry. Yet he has received scant historical attention.

STEWARD TAYLOR was born in Uxbridge, Canada, on October 29, 1836. His mother, Miss Jane Taylor, married a Mr. Foote some years after his birth. Taylor went to a local school, where (according to his brother) an American teacher



Steward Taylor came to Iowa as a seventeen-year-old wagonmaker. Two weeks before his twenty-third birthday he fought at Harpers Ferry. After Taylor's death, fellow spiritualist William Maxson had the young man's portrait painted and proudly displayed it in his Iowa home for decades after Harpers Ferry. (Here, another image of Taylor.)

instilled in him "the Spirit of Freedom." He went to work as a boy learning the trade of wagonmaking, while living with his mother's father, David Taylor. When he was seventeen, Taylor decided to immigrate to Iowa. After two years in eastern Iowa, he traveled in Missouri and Arkansas and for the first time saw slavery in practice. He returned to West Liberty, Iowa, and worked there making wagons.

John Brown — Taylor's future mentor and senior by thirty-six years — had spent his early years failing in farming and business, siring a vast family, and reading the Old Testament. He had decided to devote his life to fighting slavery and in 1856 ruthlessly battled proslavery forces in "bleeding Kansas." When Kansas

quieted down, Brown determined "to make an incursion into the Southern states, somewhere in the mountainous regions of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies," or so he told the group of young men he had gathered around him. He said that "God had created him to be the deliverer of slaves the same as Moses had delivered the children of Israel." Brown was extremely vague in explaining his plans to his followers, but he did discuss with John Kagi, his second in command, the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry as a possible target.

In December 1857, John Brown and his men planned a brief stay in the Quaker community of Springdale in eastern Iowa, confident of a sympathetic abolitionist welcome. In that



small village Brown knew there were many who supported his goal of abolishing slavery but not his means to achieve it. One Quaker summarized the village's ambivalence when he said to Brown, "Friend, I cannot give thee money to buy powder and lead, but here's twenty dollars towards thy expenses."

Steward Taylor's first contact with Brown occurred during the Springdale hiatus. Taylor's friend and former roommate George Gill, who lived at nearby West Liberty, had known Brown in Kansas and introduced Taylor to him. Apparently Taylor and Brown got on well from the outset. Gill wrote: "The old man's puritanical views and Steward's modern theology clasped most beautifully & often."

The original plan had been for the men to go on to Ohio for military training. Finding himself short of money Brown stayed briefly at the house of the Quaker John H. Painter and then went east in search of money to back his plan. He left his group of ten men quartered for the winter with a non-Quaker, William Maxson, who lived about three miles away. The men were drilled for the incursion by one of their own number, a former regular soldier in the United States Army. The weapons used were wooden swords, although some men had their

own guns, and much of the drill consisted of studying military manuals. Tuesday and Friday evenings were spent on formal debates. Maxson was an enthusiastic spiritualist, and when the weather was too bad to go out, the men, several of whom had been converted to spiritualism, spent much time spirit rapping. (They believed they could communicate with the spirit world by knocking on a table.) Singing was also a popular pastime, and some of the young men spent their leisure hours flirting with the Quaker girls. Several of the men were keen on literature — one Richard Realf was a poet.

Clearly Taylor was dazzled by Brown's followers — "those Glorious fellows," he later called them. As Taylor was ardently antislavery, a spiritualist, and fond of literature, debate, and music, he had much in common with the group at Maxson's house. Apparently a gregarious young man, Taylor was described by his brother as having had "friends on every side," and he seems to have been popular in Springdale. He was on particularly warm terms with one Quaker couple, Moses and Charlotte Varney, and their daughters. Maxson, his fellow spiritualist, was especially fond of him.

By the time John Brown returned to Spring-



JEREMIAH G. ANDERSON.



EDWIN COPPOC



BARCLAY COPPOC.

Opposite: Steward Taylor's commitment to John Brown grew as ten of Brown's followers wintered over at the William Maxson home three miles outside Springdale in eastern Iowa. Above: After Brown returned in the spring of 1858, Jeremiah Anderson from Des Moines and brothers Edwin and Barclay Coppoc from Springdale joined the cause.

dale in April of 1858, Steward Taylor was a committed member of the group that had quartered at Maxson's for four months. Three other Iowans enlisted at the same time. They were Edwin and Barclay Coppoc (two Quaker brothers from Springdale) and Taylor's friend George Gill. Jeremiah Anderson of Des Moines joined subsequently.

STEWART TAYLOR was among the twelve men who accompanied Brown in May to Chatham, Canada, forty-five miles east of Detroit. Brown had decided to call "a *quiet* Convention . . . of *true* friends of freedom," as he wrote in his letters of invitation. The purpose of the convention in Chatham was to set up a provisional government and to recruit men for an attack on the slave states. Brown hoped certain Eastern financial sympathizers would also attend. But the convention consisted only of John Brown, his twelve men, and thirty-three black residents of Canada.

Taylor and the others listened as Brown related how for years the idea of giving liberty to the slaves had possessed him "like a passion." He described how he had prepared himself by inspecting fortifications in Europe and by studying guerrilla warfare. Upon the first intimation of a plan of liberation, he explained,

the slaves would immediately rise up all over the South. Brown would set up a freed black state in the mountains and beat off state militias or the United States Army. This new state would proceed with education; there blacks would be taught "the useful and mechanical arts, and . . . be instructed in all the business of life." Brown was certain that a successful incursion could be made, and that the slave states could be forced to recognize the freedom of those who had formerly been slaves within their borders.

Brown presented a plan entitled "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the people of the United States." Each member swore an oath of secrecy, and the constitution was unanimously adopted — Steward Taylor's signature is the eighteenth ratifying the document. Brown was elected commander-in-chief, John Kagi, secretary of war, George Gill, secretary of the treasury, and various other offices were filled. The position of president, however, was declined by both of the black men nominated. Before adjourning, a committee of fifteen was appointed to fill that vacancy and others.

The convention must have been a remarkably heady experience for twenty-one-year-old Steward Taylor, who found himself appointed to the committee to elect a president. Straight after the convention Brown and his men were to embark on the grand design. But Taylor's morale slumped when the invasion of the

Southern states did not take place immediately. In Ohio after the convention, Taylor wrote to Dr. H. C. Gill in Iowa of his discouragement over this "most critical point" in their endeavors. John Brown was chronically short of money, and his men had to fend for themselves as best they could until the call for insurrection. One of Brown's men wrote later that month: "Taylor [is] working among the Shakers for fifty cents a day. . . . Taylor told a hard story of suffering, privations and fatigue. He laid out one night with another poor devil like himself."

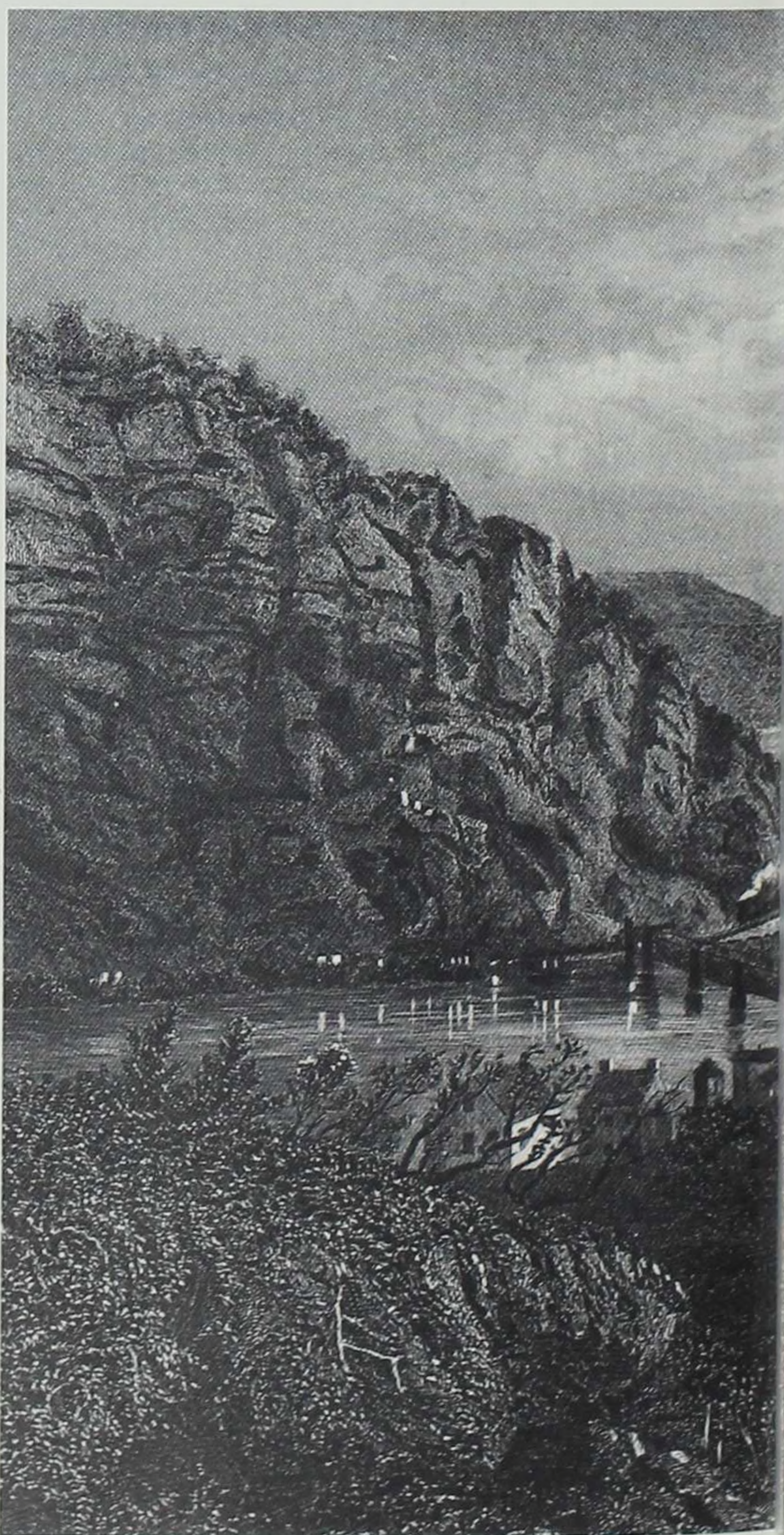
Taylor had the dogged commitment to his cause to wait out Brown's early delays. Those who have commented on him emphasize his self-discipline. George Gill, for example, wrote that Taylor had "wonderful tenacity in all things, especially in regard to his conceptions of right. He was essentially practical. Moral in thought or practice, he was thoroughly reliable. A vegetarian at one time [he] would eat but one meal a day." Certainly the attributes of self-discipline and willpower appear in his intellectual pursuits — studying, successfully learning the violin (for which he had no aptitude), and teaching himself to be a first-class stenographer. But Steward Taylor had little tolerance for physical discomfort. Gill described a journey he made with Taylor: "I concluded to take a little trip up to Sandusky city. . . . I persuaded Steward Taylor to accompany me. The trip and style of travelling was too much for Steward; after walking half-way and lying out one night he took the back track, and arrived at Cleveland worn out in body and spirit."

Taylor and the other men converged on Cleveland to meet John Brown on June 21, 1858. Brown explained that because of the treachery of a former colleague, his financial backers had decided to delay the proposed invasion. He handed out small sums of money to Taylor and the others and bade them be true to their cause, once more leaving them to support themselves and await instructions. The men scattered, and Taylor went to work in Ohio.

That winter Taylor visited his family in Canada. There he helped establish a literary association and took a leading part in its debates.

He delivered a lecture on "Man's rights to Man," which was warmly applauded by a large audience. Shortly before leaving Canada, he indiscreetly told some friends of his plans. They remonstrated with him. He replied, a cousin later recalled, that "his country called aloud for him, to take . . . his life in his hands and go forth to fight for the slave."

From Canada Taylor went to Chicago and subsequently got a job working on a farm near Bloomington, Illinois. According to his brother, Taylor "was overcome with distress" when he lost contact with the John Brown





CHARLES PLUMMER TIDD



JOHN HENRI KAGI.

Of Brown's followers, only John Kagi, Brown's secretary of war, knew that a possible target was the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, at the fork of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. When Brown finally disclosed the details, Charles Tidd and Brown's sons branded the plan an act of suicide. Steward Taylor and others joined the dissidents—but Brown's charisma quickly pulled the group together again. They waited out the final months before the attack in a farmhouse five miles from the small Virginia bordertown of Harpers Ferry (below).



PICTURESQUE AMERICA, WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, ED. (1872)



DANGERFIELD NEWBY.



WATSON BROWN.

Left: Ex-slave Dangerfield Newby was the first killed as farmers and militia tried to regain their town from Brown and his twenty-one men. With the rifle works lost, and besieged in the engine house, Brown sent his son Watson out under a white flag. Watson returned, wounded.

Opposite: From the engine house, John Brown and his remaining men tried to defend their final post as more armed troops surrounded them, "firing volley after volley." Brown's men returned a "brisk fire . . . to keep them from charging upon us."

movement and "thought for a time that he was to be left out." Taylor wrote to a friend in Springdale, "I expected momentarily I would be relieved of my doubts, which arose from my losing communication with my friends. I [kept] waiting day after day for word and at last gave it up. Then my hopes were partly crushed, I felt as though I was deprived of my chief object in life. I could imagine no other cause than want of ability or confidence."

John Brown was not worried about Taylor's ability or self-confidence — he would have taken anybody to swell the tiny army of his Provisional Government. One man he recruited was described as "frail, one-eyed, and either emotionally unbalanced or mentally retarded." Taylor, in contrast, was "of medium height, stout and stocky in form. . . . Very quiet in his ways, helpful, a good comrade, always even tempered."

Brown had been purposely delaying for more than a year as he awaited financial support. During this time he diverted attention from his proposed invasion of Virginia by a dramatic slave-freeing raid on Missouri in December 1858, in which he took eleven slaves through Iowa and thence to Canada. At last, his backers provided over two thousand dollars for his enterprise. The necessary weapons for his army — 198 Sharp's rifles and 200 revolvers (at one time stored in Iowa) — were waiting to be delivered. Furthermore, a thousand pikes to arm the risen slaves were being constructed. Brown decided that this was the time to call the men.

NOW, MORE THAN A YEAR after he had seen anything of John Brown or "those Glorious fellows," Taylor received a letter from John Kagi on July 3, 1859. Taylor wrote back from Bloomington that same day: "The pleasure that it affords me in receiving your token is unbounded, it has removed the cloak of suspense and doubts with bright hopes of cherishing my young and seemingly long desires that the object is within my reach. It is my chief desire to add fuel to the fire. The amount may be small, 'but every little helps.' My ardent passion for the gold field [to free slaves] is my thoughts by day and my dreams by night," Taylor continued. "I often think I am with you. Bringing it [freed slaves] forth in masses that surprises the world and moving it with all sweetness and holesomeness adds still another determination. . . . Please let me know as soon as possible. For, if it was very sudden, I might be some troubled to get my money, as it is very scarce stuff here."

Despite his joy, Taylor ended the letter with a characteristic complaint about walking. "I must go to town this afternoon; quite a walk — 5 miles — but if [this letter] is as long going to you as that was coming to me, I must not delay a minute."

During the next month John Brown rented the Kennedy farm, five miles from Harpers Ferry. To give a semblance of normality to the farmhouse, he installed one of his daughters-in-law and his sixteen-year-old daughter, Annie, there. Kagi, his secretary of war, was



posted at the rail head at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, near Harpers Ferry, to receive the men and arms.

By August 3 Steward Taylor had arrived at Chambersburg. Thence he moved to the Kennedy farm. There he and the other young men hid in a loft by day while the young women cooked, washed, and fended off inquisitive neighbors.

John Brown made endless trips to Chambersburg to collect the arms as they arrived. In mid-August, for the first time, Brown told his men the details of the final plan: Attack Harpers Ferry and capture the federal government armory, arsenal, and rifle works — thus acquiring the arms necessary for the next phase. Slaves and dissident whites alike would join them. Then with the guns from the arsenal they would rapidly move south, and more slaves would flock to them from the plantations. Continuing south, they would raid more arsenals, and yet more slaves would join them — until slavery was at an end.

Mutiny rumbled among some of the young men, led by Brown's sons and another man called Charles Tidd. Steward Taylor was among those who feared that they would be trapped in Harpers Ferry — it would be suicide for their small number to try to hold the town against militia and federal troops. There was tremendous argument; Brown resigned his command. Within five minutes his resignation was refused, the men were all on his side, his plan was accepted. Life at the Kennedy farm returned to hiding and waiting for more men to arrive.

Annie Brown is the main source of information about events at the Kennedy farm, and her comments about Taylor in her letters are enlightening. She thought him a "very peculiar person" and emphasized his belief in spiritualism, though his "belief was more in theory than in practice." Taylor was "nearer to a 'born crank'" than the other men, and he "believed in dreams and all sorts of the 'isms'" of the day. Neither she nor any of the others could shake

him of his fixed belief that he was going to be one of the first killed at Harpers Ferry. He predicted his own death, and described it to Annie. She said that he "talked as coolly about it as if he were going into another room."

Annie wrote that Taylor spent his time at the Kennedy farm studying and "improving his mind," as he called it. He was constantly the victim of jokes by the others, which he "always took good naturedly." Believing he was destined to die, he sent farewell letters to his friends and relatives. To a young woman cousin he wrote: "I . . . hope to occupy a place in your memory." Annie recalled that after writing these letters, Taylor was as "calm and content as ever." One of the men found him writing one day and called out, "Boys, Steward is writing his will!" Taylor just laughed.

During these two months, John Brown kept hoping that more men would arrive to swell his army — especially the blacks who had attended his convention in Canada. But of these only one came to Harpers Ferry, making five blacks all told. Various men who had promised to come did not. All the weapons arrived, however, and at the end of September the two young women were sent back to the Brown farm at North Elba, New York.

On October 15 three more men arrived. Now there were twenty-two men mustered at the Kennedy farm, and Brown decided the time had come to make his move. He left three as a rearguard at the Kennedy farm and led his other eighteen followers into Harpers Ferry on the night of Sunday, October 16, 1859.

SORTING THROUGH the many detailed accounts of that night, it appears that Steward Taylor was first ordered to guard the covered bridge leading across the Potomac. After he and the other raiders secured the bridges, they took possession of the arsenal, armory building, and rifle works. The next move was to seize slave-owning hostages. A party of six men was sent on this expedition.

The prime target was Colonel Lewis Washington, a prosperous slaveholder, great-grand-

nephew of the first president, and an aide to the Governor of Virginia. His name and job alone were worthy of great propaganda value, and in addition Washington owned a sword that had allegedly belonged to Frederick the Great and had been presented to George Washington. The raiders duly took Washington hostage, liberated four of his slaves, and seized the famous sword. (Washington identified Steward Taylor as having been one of his captors.) A local farmer and his son were also captured, and six more slaves added to the party. The raiders returned with their hostages and armed the ten slaves with pikes. Taylor's dreams appeared to be coming true — armed slaves stood in Harpers Ferry.

During the night Brown's men took more hostages. The first fatality was tragically ironic. In the darkness one of Brown's men killed the baggage master at the railway station — a free black man. A passenger and mail train was halted for some time and then allowed to go on its way. With gunfire in the town the Lutheran church bell was soon tolling an alarm. Two villagers spread the word in neighboring towns. News of a major abolitionist and black insurrection was sent to the president of the United States and the governor of Virginia. Soon the alarm was spreading across the nation. "Fire and Rapine on the Virginia Border," newspaper headlines would scream.

As morning dawned and workers arrived at their jobs, more hostages were taken. One of them was Jesse W. Graham, an armory workman. Held with the other prisoners in front of the fire-engine house, he begged the raider in charge to allow him to go home and tell his family. The raider yielded, and "a small man" believed to have been Steward Taylor escorted Graham to see his family and brought him back again.

John Kagi, in charge of the detachment holding the rifle works, sent messages to John Brown that they all must move out immediately. Brown inexplicably hesitated, perhaps awaiting slave reinforcements. Soon all was militarily lost. Armed farmers and militia poured into the town, and a general battle commenced. The militia known as the Jefferson Guards drove the raiders from the bridges. Dangerfield Newby, an ex-slave in John



Brown's band, was the first raider killed. Brown gathered his men and his eleven most valuable hostages into the engine house. He sent his son Watson and Stevens, another of his men, out under a white flag. Both were badly wounded. Watson crawled back; Stevens was taken prisoner. The youngest raider, twenty-

Below and above: Robert E. Lee led the U.S. Marines in a final attack. Inside the engine house the few left were either killed, wounded, or captured. Brown's insurrection had reached its end.

year-old William Leeman, was shot down trying to escape into the Potomac. Kagi's party was driven from the rifle works; two were killed, one taken prisoner. The raiders in the engine house killed the mayor of Harpers Ferry and two other men.

Steward Taylor was in the engine house with John Brown, his remaining men, and the hostages. According to hostage accounts, the raiders fired through loopholes in the walls and out of the partly open door. Iowan Edwin Coppoc (who was captured unharmed and later hanged) described Taylor's end: Taylor and Oliver Brown "fell by the engine-house. Taylor lived about three hours after he was shot; he suffered very much and begged of us to kill him. . . . During these last moments we could not administer to their wants such as they deserved, for we were surrounded by the troops who were firing volley after volley, so that we had to keep up a brisk fire in return to keep them from charging upon us." So Steward Taylor died as he had predicted — though his dream of ending slavery would not come true



Youthfulness marked Brown's followers. William Leeman was twenty when he was killed; Annie Brown wrote of him, "He was only a boy." Brown's young and devoted neighbor from North Elba, Dauphin Thompson, was twenty-one when he died in the engine house; Steward Taylor, twenty-three. Except for John Brown and two others, all were under the age of thirty.



WILLIAM HENRY LEEMAN.



DAUPHIN ADOLPHUS THOMPSON.

until the next decade brought the Civil War.

The following morning the United States Marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee stormed the engine house, killing two more raiders, wounding John Brown, and capturing the remaining two. John Brown's attack was over. In all, ten of his men had been killed; five had escaped — among them Taylor's fellow Iowan, Barclay Coppoc. Seven, including Brown, fell into the hands of the Virginia authorities and were tried and executed for treason to Virginia, murder, and other crimes. Brown was the first hanged, on December 2, 1859. He was buried on his farm near North Elba, New York.

FROM HIS VERY FIRST interview after his capture John Brown — madman to some, villain to some, martyr to others — clung to his messianic conviction that he was right. His sole purpose was to end slavery, and his interviews, letters, speeches at his trial, and demeanor at his execution continued to carry this message across America.

The zealotry of Brown will always overshadow the men who had followed him to Harpers Ferry. But without those twenty-one individuals, he would never have had the means to ignite the nation's wrath or conscience. George Gill, a follower of Brown (though not to Harpers Ferry) and a friend of Taylor's, said of Brown: "[He was] very selfish, and very intolerant, with great self-esteem [and] immense egotism. . . . And yet the very concentration on self commanded the grand advance on American slavery." Of Taylor he

wrote: "He gave promise of being a great man."

In considering Steward Taylor's place in history, perhaps the best epitaph is the contrast of his two burials. After the battle, the bodies of all the dead raiders were gathered up from the various parts of Harpers Ferry and the rivers in which they lay. Taylor's body was carried out of the engine house and laid on the grass in front of it. The bodies of Iowan Jeremiah Anderson and John Brown's son Watson were given to a Virginia medical school. The difficulty was what to do with the remains of Steward Taylor and others. Burial in one of the Harpers Ferry cemeteries was out of the question — public opinion had quickly vilified the raiders. A man called Mansfield was given five dollars to dispose of the bodies, including Steward Taylor's. Mansfield put them in two wooden "store boxes" and buried them unmarked three feet down, about half a mile from Harpers Ferry.

Taylor and seven others were buried in a common grave, unmarked on the riverbank of the Shenandoah.





John Brown's home in North Elba, New York. His grave is enclosed by the picket fence in the foreground.

along the Shenandoah River, near the water's edge.

Forty years after the Harpers Ferry raid — and thirty-four years after the Civil War had ended — a Dr. Thomas Featherstonhaugh exhumed the bones of Steward Taylor and the seven others. He found them wrapped in the rotting threads of their great blanket shawls. The bodies were taken to North Elba, John Brown's grave site in New York. There they were placed in a handsome casket with silver handles and a silver plate bearing their names, presented by the townspeople of North Elba. The bodies of two of the hanged raiders were also brought to North Elba from New Jersey.

On August 30 a funeral service was held. Fifteen hundred people attended, and eulogies were read of each of the men. The same clergyman who had performed the last rites over the grave of John Brown now conducted the funeral service for ten of his men.

In 1859 Steward Taylor and the others had been outcasts unworthy of decent burial. In 1899 the wheel of history had turned. A detachment of the Twenty-sixth United States Infantry fired a volley over the open grave. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Particular thanks are due to Pat Michaelif of the Kansas State Historical Society for locating and forwarding copies of correspondence concerning Taylor in the society's Hinton Collection. The correspondence comprises four notes and memoranda by George Gill, two letters from Taylor's brother Jacob, and a biographical sketch by Taylor's cousin Miss Lizzie P. Hughes. There are various spellings of Taylor's christian name. "Steward" was used by his friends and relatives and has been adopted throughout this article. The only book which contains much information on Taylor is Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men With Some Account of the Roads They Traveled To Reach Harper's Ferry* (rev. ed. 1894). The two general books most related are Oswald G. Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years After* (rev. ed. 1943); and Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (1970). A large number of secondary sources have been used, too numerous to be listed. (An annotated copy of the original manuscript is in the *Palimpsest* production files, Special Collections, SHSI-Iowa City.) Special mention must be made of the "Mason Report," *U.S. Senate Committee Report* (1859-60) sec. II; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* 11 (1893); L. R. Witherell, "Old John Brown," *Davenport Daily Gazette* (1877 and 1878); Irving B. Richman, *John Brown Among the Quakers and Other Sketches* (1894); Thomas Featherstonhaugh, "John Brown's Men: The Lives of Those Killed at Harper's Ferry," *Publication of the Southern History Association* 3 (1899), 290-91; "The Burial of the Followers of John Brown," *New England Magazine* n.s. 24 (1901), 128-34; and C. P. Galbreath, "Edwin Coppoc," *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 30 (1921), 414-15. Several Iowa historians have stated that Iowans George Gill and Charles Moffett went to Harpers Ferry with John Brown. They did not go.

My heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Patricia, and to my editor, Ginalie Swaim. Their help and patience made this article possible.



Iowa's Independent Oil Companies

by Jack Lufkin

FROM 1910 TO 1930, as the popularity of automobiles soared, many locally owned oil and gasoline companies opened across Iowa. The town filling station became as commonplace as the town livery stable and blacksmith shop had once been.

Iowa's independent oil dealers helped fill the insatiable demand for petroleum products by automobile owners, especially those who lived on farms. Discovering the practicality of driving their low-priced Model Ts or flivvers to town for business and pleasure, farmers came to view automobiles as a necessity; by 1926 over 98 percent of Iowa's farmers owned cars. Registration of cars in Iowa rose from about 10,000 in 1910, to over 407,000 in 1920, to 716,000 in 1929, ranking Iowa among the highest in the United

States in per capita ownership.

The growth of the oil industry coincided with the emergence of the automobile industry. In fact, merchants of gasoline, motor oil, and other automotive lubricants assumed the position as the largest subsidiary industry to automaking. Independent oil companies aggressively carved out a small but significant slice of the nation's oil business. The term "independent" first applied to virtually all oil companies not affiliated with the mammoth Standard Oil Company. Soon after its founding in 1870 by John D. Rockefeller, Standard Oil developed an efficient system for exploring, drilling, refining, producing, marketing, and distributing petroleum products (specifically kerosene, which was replacing whale and coal oil for lighting). By the time the automobile created a huge demand for gasoline, Standard Oil (despite the Sherman Anti-Trust Act) controlled some 90 percent of the nation's refining capacity and 85 percent of the petroleum market. Larger national independents — including Shell, Gulf, Pure, Texaco, Cities Service, Mid-Continent Oil, and Phillips Petroleum

— came to be known as "major" oil companies because they explored for and produced crude oil. The term "independent" evolved to mean small oil companies engaged only in refining or distribution.

Local Iowa oil companies generally bought oil and gasoline from independent refiners in Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, or Texas. Until pipelines became more widespread in the late 1920s, refiners shipped their oil by rail. Independents might add a few ingredients to their oil, give it a creative name, glue company labels onto standardized, mass-produced cans, and market the oil as a unique product. Distributed in large barrels, five- and one-gallon cans, or smaller containers, the product was generally delivered to service retailers or directly to customers by industrious sales representatives until service stations appeared in most every community.

Today these colorful oil and grease cans and signs are silent reminders that dozens of independent oil companies existed in Iowa in the early twentieth century, promoting their products

Above: Etched milk glass globe, c. 1926, Iowa Oil Company, Dubuque.

Special thanks to John Chance and Scott Anderson, owners of the artifacts and station photos. The signs and cans, photographed by Chuck Greiner, are from the Society's recent "Out of the Mud" exhibit.



Below and left: Side panel of a Liberty Oil can reveals a range of products offered by the Des Moines company until its demise in 1930. International Oil was also founded in Des Moines during the automobile industry's dramatic growth. International operated seven local service stations until it became a Mobil Oil distributor in 1930.

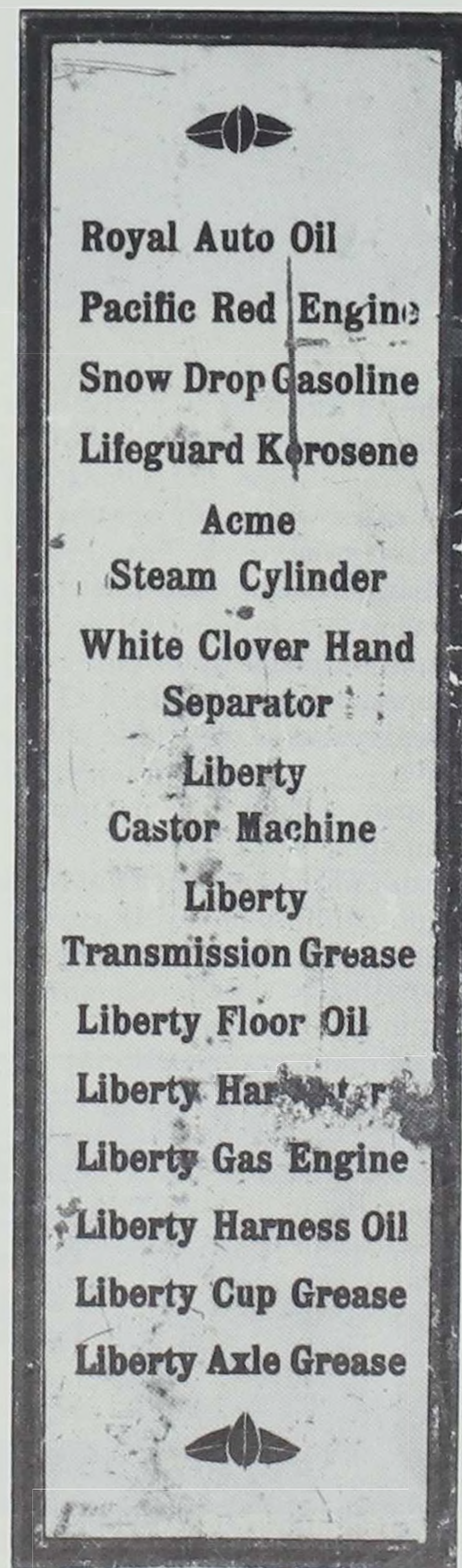
with creativity and pride. Some companies began business before the automobile age, selling other petroleum-based products such as kerosene and household lighting oils, and lubricating fluids for harnesses and other leather products. Others were founded during the early years of the automobile era. Companies used various advertising strategies in their struggles to survive in a growing, highly competitive national market. Profiles of four companies can offer examples of what was once a thriving marketplace of independent oil companies in Iowa.

MARSHALL Oil Company typified a number of Iowa oil companies that began operations before automobiles affected the oil industry. Founded in 1897 by Marshalltown partners Leroy R. Willard and George H. Ruth, the company refined and sold Roseine, a kerosene-type product for oil lamps. Marshall Oil also sold several brands of axle grease, oil-based medicinal products, and Peroline sweeping compound. When automobiles entered American life, Marshall Oil adapted to the auto-

mobile market by adding four grades of French Auto Oil and Monarch Gasoline to their product line. By 1907, Marshall Oil had stations in Oskaloosa and Mason City, Iowa, and in Lincoln, Nebraska. A sales force of thirty-two covered a ten-state area, from Iowa to Montana.

In a local advertisement from 1907, Marshall Oil tossed barbs at the greatest threat to small independents, the "terrible Standard octopus." The Marshall Oil ad proclaimed, "Few have known the fierceness of that competition or the energy that has been expended . . . in educating the public to demand quality every time in the oil it uses. . . . Every artifice of a competitor whose methods have become a national sensation has been met and overcome." The same advertisement reminded Marshalltown residents of the importance of the company's \$32,000 payroll to the local economy.

Another advertisement for Marshall Oil appeared in 1910 as a waltz — "French Auto Cylinder Oil," by A. A. Holthaus and Charles L. Johnson. On the cover of the sheet music two men in gog-





gles and dusters speed across the countryside. The lyrics are pure advertising:

"The craze of the nation
the best recreation
is whirling around in an auto

With sister with wifey or your
girl so sweet,
A pleasure believe that's hard to
beat,
But pay strict attention
to a matter I'll mention
And a great deal of trouble you'll
save —
For many a good time an auto
can spoil
No fault of the auto, not the right
kind of oil.

I'll venture to say
That in passing each day
you will notice some auto in
trouble
With chauffeur frowning on
bended knee,
He's trying to find what the
matter can be
A pointer to you sir and a good
pointer too sir,
Don't blame the poor auto, it's
you —

Now don't fuss and fume as you
lay in the soil
Use good lubrication, French
Cylinder Oil."

Around 1920 the Marshall Oil payroll had climbed to \$200,000 for 172 employees. After the death of co-founder Leroy Willard that year, the company remained independent four more years. Marshall Oil then merged with Diamond Products Company, a Chicago paint company. Within a few years, the production and sale of oil products ceased.

HAWKEYE Oil Company of Waterloo marketed its products in handsome green cans bearing a side profile of a hawk. Formed in 1908 by R. S. Caward in Waterloo, Hawkeye Oil sold its own Faultless Auto Oil, to accompany Pennsylvania-refined Crescent Gasoline, in its own Faultless Service Stations.

Standard Oil and other large companies had first opened filling stations in 1907, and stations had quickly become the site of greatest sales volume and the most intense competition. (Some companies still sold gasoline from curbside pumps, but the pumps were outlawed in some Iowa towns because of the potential danger and were slowly phased out.) Gulf and Shell Oil designed stations whereby cars drove off the street into an area beside a gas pump. Other companies also standardized the design of their filling stations to

promote their image. Hawkeye Oil opened stations in sixty communities, most of them in Iowa. From 1919 to 1922, their sales increased 150 percent and more filling stations opened in Iowa and South Dakota.

Hawkeye Oil considered a faultlessly managed station as a key to success. In March 1922 the company instituted a newsletter, the *Hawkeye Weekly* (later the *Hawkeye Gusher*) for agents and filling station managers. A rich historical record, the newsletter provides insight into the workings of an independent. Instead of wailing about the unfair competition in the oil industry, the newsletter urged employees to improve their appearance and performance. Its first issue directs station attendants to lift up the hood and "Snap off in a courteous manner, 'You need a quart of oil,' and we will guarantee that the

Below: This Hawkeye Oil station in northeast Iowa mimicked an early design for major service stations, the canopy, popular until the 1930s.

Upper right: A half-gallon Faultless Motor Oil can bears Hawkeye Oil's hawk logo. Herring Motor Company originated in Atlantic, Iowa, where Clyde Herring (later governor of Iowa) sold model Ts for his friend Henry Ford. Herring moved to Des Moines in 1914 and sold oil products, including Hermoline.





reply seven times out of every ten will be, 'Alright, let's have it.'"

The newsletter continued: "You are not a competent agent or employee, unless you sell every automobile owner just a little more than he intended to buy when he came in. It does not take much ability or brains to sell gasoline, as that is sold as soon as the autoist turns into the station." In April 1922, Hawkeye Oil announced that service station attendants would wear a uniform with a cap and shirt with a "Faultless Oil" logo and matching trousers.

The newsletter repeatedly prodded station managers to keep their stations clean — specifically to sweep the station four times a day, clean the grease and oil off the drive daily, keep their offices tidy, and avoid leaving buckets and cans around. "See that the ladies' rest room at your station is a place that any lady would not hesitate to enter," the newsletter reminded managers, "and be very strict to see that it is a ladies' rest room." Even the globe atop gasoline pumps affected a station's image, according to the *Hawkeye Weekly*, which reported, "We

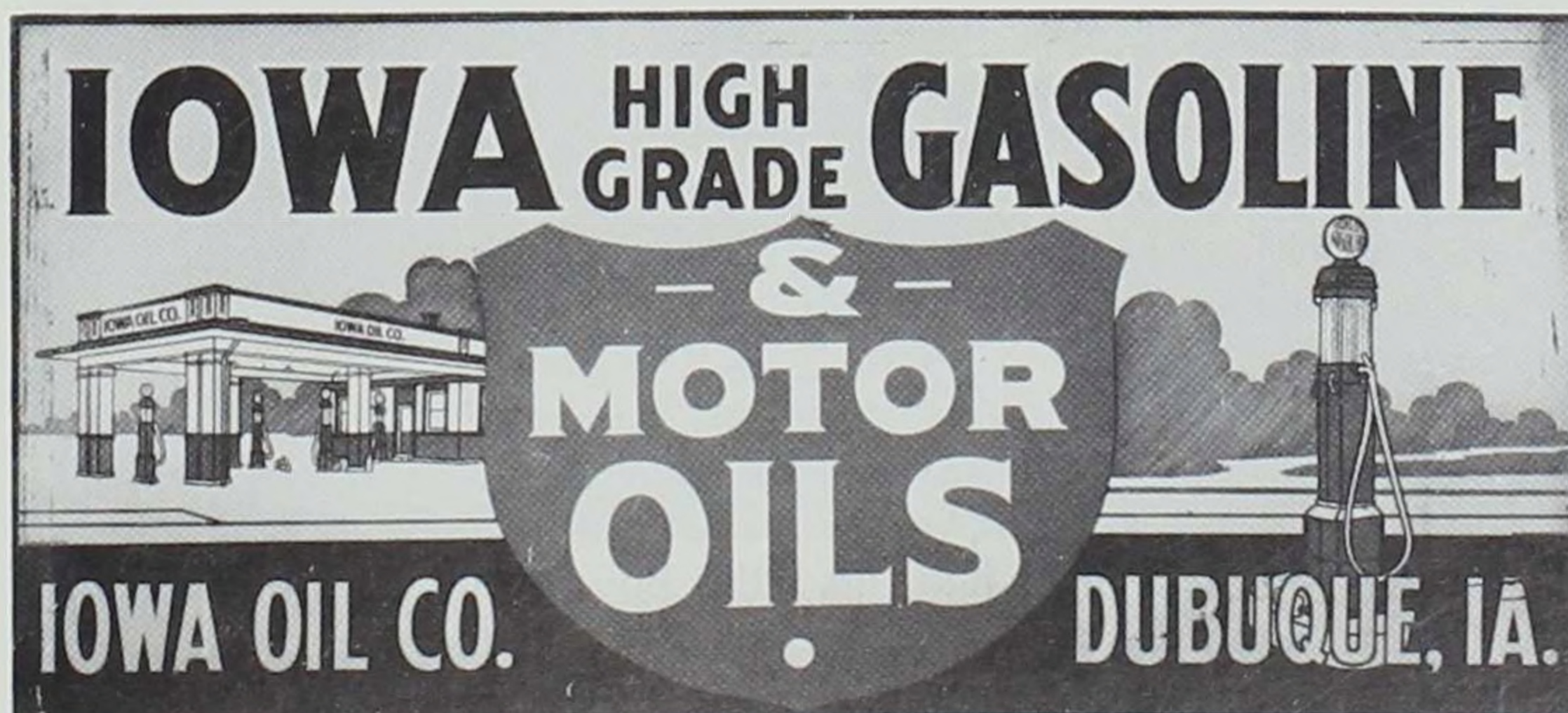
regret to say that we have seen stations where the globes . . . were nearly half full of gnats and flies. . . . This looks bad at night and it shows that the attendant is taking very little pride in the neatness of the station."

As a promotional device, Hawkeye Oil gave twelve thousand free Faultless ink blotters and several hundred large desk blotters to students and teachers in the Waterloo schools. "We believe that within the next thirty days every home in Waterloo will be using Faultless blotters," the April 1922 newsletter announced. "Everyone is highly commending

The Hawkeye Oil Company for such a plan of advertising."

In 1926 Hawkeye Oil became Blackhawk Oil, under new management and a new slogan, "All Over Iowa." A year later the company was bought out by Mid-Continent Petroleum Corporation (later known as Diamond or Sunray D-X). It became another casualty of the forces of centralization in the oil industry.

IN COUNCIL BLUFFS, brothers H. A. and F. H. Searle founded Monarch Manufacturing Company in 1894. The



This Iowa Oil Company sign probably dates from 1925. Founded in 1906 for motorists and boaters, the Dubuque company still operates today.



A late 1920s filling station in Webster City shows the extensive use of the triangular "Independent Oil" insignia and globe-top gravity pumps. (Gasoline-pump companies began to use globes atop gas pumps for advertising purposes about 1910.) A Custer Battlefield sign directs early auto campers to continue their westward trek.

company manufactured oil and grease for a variety of uses, including Sun Light Axle Grease and lighting fuel. In response to their primary customers, automobile drivers, the Searles changed the company name to the Mona Motor Oil Company in 1925.

That year Mona Motor Oil built a modern plant to handle a burgeoning business. Its new regional headquarters in Council Bluffs housed a laboratory and space for compounding a paraffin-base lubricating oil. The plant had the capacity to annually manufacture more than fourteen million pounds of Sun Light Axle Grease.

Mona Motor Oil used a new

form of communication to promote its image. In February 1925 H. A. Searle began building a \$35,000 radio station in Council Bluffs, appropriately called KOIL. First an affiliate of CBS and later of NBC, the station reached a nationwide evening audience with a standard menu of music and entertainment. KOIL served as one of forty official farm information radio stations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1927 it became an official voice of the Boy Scouts of America, sponsoring its "American scout tribe of the air."

In 1932, Searle was forced to resign from Mona Motor Oil in the

wake of charges of evading state gasoline taxes. Barnsdall Corporation of Oklahoma, a large stockholder whose oil products Mona had been marketing, took over the smaller company. (Barnsdall also marketed Quaker State products, a name still recognized today.) Radio station KOIL was sold to another company.

ONE COMPANY that survived longer than most independents may have succeeded because, in the owner's words, it tried to play "the big man's game." In 1925 Roy C.

Smith began with three hundred dollars to found the American Petroleum Company in Davenport. He concocted his own oil called American Motor Oil, claiming that it reduced the "chatter" or violent shaking common in Ford Model Ts. His secret ingredient was castor oil. In 1928 Smith began opening stations and selling gasoline, attracting customers from his former employer, independent Central Oil and Grease Company of Rock Island, Illinois.

Smith's autobiography, *I Wasn't Like the Cautious Man* (1987), provides some eye-opening accounts of how sales representatives hawked their oil products. "Let's say we come across a farmer," Smith recounted. "We see he has all the oil he needs. So we make up a story. 'Yeah,' my partner tells him, 'we were taking this barrel of oil to another farmer over in the next county. Come to find out he just bought himself a new tractor. Can't use this grade now. So we're kind of stuck. We'd rather just sell it at a loss than ship it back. Hate to lose money on it, though. What d'ya say to this? We'll sell it to you at carload price. That's what we pay for it when we get it from the refineries. Now, you can't beat that!'"

"Likely as not the farmer would buy from us," Smith continued. "They found it hard to turn down our bargains, and we really did sell at bargain prices. It's just that we liked to make the bargain seem better than it actually was."

According to Smith, Standard Oil salesmen told "cock-and-bull stories" about how competitors' oil would ruin motors. "This didn't stop us though. . . . I caught on good to the tricks of the trade." In 1932 Smith adopted a sales tactic he hoped would offset Standard Oil's attempts to discourage the public from buying other companies' products. Smith priced his kerosene at half what Standard charged. Customers who came to

his stations to buy kerosene ended up buying gasoline there, too.

Sales ploys such as these worked well for Smith. Adopting a cash-only policy in the 1930s, he survived the Great Depression. Beginning in 1947 his son Marshall carried on the business, liquidating the service stations and selling only propane gas for several more years.

BY THE LATE 1920s, most of Iowa's independent oil companies had been swallowed up by larger, regional independents and emerging national companies whose names are familiar to motorists today. Although Standard Oil was clearly the biggest enemy of independents, other major companies helped

squeeze the smaller companies out of the Iowa gasoline and oil market. The centralization of the oil industry followed suit with centralization occurring in many other industries, such as automobile making. Major companies could afford to advertise on billboards, radio, and television, increasing customer identification. They attracted the growing tourist business by allowing easy use of credit cards at thousands of outlets and covering large regions well beyond the scope of the small independent.

By the 1930s competition heavily favored the major oil companies that owned most of Iowa's bulk stations and service stations and, hence, could control prices. In 1935, two thousand Iowa oil merchants crowded into the state capitol to press for a chain-store



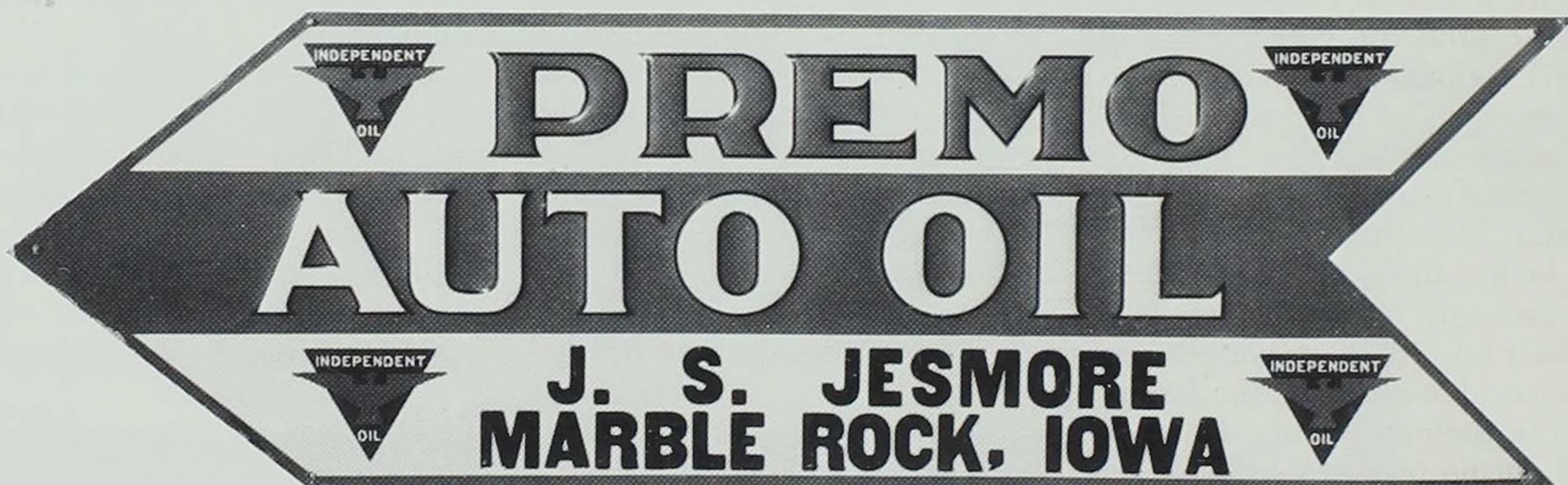
Rare today, the once ubiquitous one-gallon can, often with its own spout, was mass-produced for a throw-away society. Mona Motor Oil Company was based in Council Bluffs. Manhattan Oil Company, founded in Des Moines in 1905, patented Trop-Artic in 1912. (In 1930, after three buy-outs, the Trop-Artic name was bought by Phillips Petroleum.)

tax on the large oil companies. The legislature passed one of the highest such taxes in the nation. Reeling from this legislation, Standard sold three hundred stations in Iowa and released eight hundred workers. Nevertheless, Standard remained as visible as ever in Iowa — and avoided the tax — by extending leases to dealers of Standard stations. This strategy became known nationally among

oil executives as the “Iowa Plan” and was used in other states.

Still hoping to protect and promote common interests, in 1937 the independents formed the Iowa Independent Oil Jobbers Association in Manchester, Iowa, comprising 135 members. (The association later changed its name to Petroleum Marketers of Iowa.) Many of the independents that survive today are franchisees and

do not own stations bearing their individual names. Today the names of the old independents and their products still emblazon the oil and grease cans held in private and public collections — colorful documentation of Iowa’s early independent oil companies. Their past reflects local energies and creativity in competing against what became an inevitable economic situation. □



The triangular “Independent Oil” logo, symbolizing an individual owner’s pride, borders this metal sign. Premo Oil was a leading product of the Mason City Oil and Grease Company in north-central Iowa and south-central Minnesota. Founded in 1917, the company had 22 filling stations, 40 delivery vehicles, 75 employees, and a 150,000-gallon storage tank. In 1926 Champlin Refining Company of Oklahoma bought the company.

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article has its roots in research for the recent “Out of the Mud” museum exhibit, about the early automobile age in Iowa. No comprehensive history or survey of petroleum sales and activities in Iowa has been written. Select secondary sources about the industry nationwide include Scott Anderson, *Check the Oil* (1986); Michael Berger, *The Devil’s Wagon in God’s Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America* (1979); John Jakle, “The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970,” *Journal of American Culture* (Spring 1978); Christine A. Pyle, “America Hits the Road and the Road Loves It,” *Postcard Journal* (Spring/Summer 1986); and *Then and Now: Journal of the Historical Society of Marshall County* (August 1988). Sources dealing with petroleum his-

tory in Iowa include *Petroleum Marketers of Iowa* (1987); *I Wasn’t Like the Cautious Man: The Life of Roy C. Smith* (1987); “The Automobile Age,” *Goldfinch 4* (Nov. 1982); Joan Halloran, “Effects of Changes in Communication Upon Business Services of Iowa Agricultural Villages, 1920–1935,” *Iowa Journal of Business* (Nov. 1937). Iowa newspapers provided valuable information about specific companies located in the same cities (*Marshalltown Herald*, *Mason City Globe*, and *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*). The author wishes to acknowledge members of the Oil Products and Ephemera Collectors Club (OPEC) for valuable suggestions and assistance, especially John Chance, Scott Anderson, and John Logsdon.

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Trees flank the canopy of a tidy Sunshine Oil Company service station in southern Iowa in the mid-1920s.

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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 slogan "An Iowa industry by Iowa men" and an image of the Statehouse decorate a one-pound can of Rex Graphite, a product of Marshall Oil. One of dozens of independent oil companies in early twentieth-century Iowa, the Marshalltown company manufactured several kinds of axle grease for horse-drawn conveyances and later for automobiles. More on early oil companies appears in this issue.

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