

# A NEW YORK VENTURE in NORTHWEST IOWA

## The Iselins Build a Mill

by Lowell J. Soike and John P. Zeller

**A** FEATURE of development in northwestern Iowa during the post-Civil War decades is that New York money lay behind many railroad and other Western ventures. Less well known though is that wealthy New Yorkers themselves sometimes took an active and direct part in their projects, living in the community of their investment while maintaining their vital connections back home. We find such a story in the lives of Henry and John Iselin, young and ambitious sons of a prominent New York family, whose enterprises shaped development in early Sheldon, Iowa.

Founded in 1872, the O'Brien County town of Sheldon had over one thousand residents by 1879 and had become the largest and most important town in the northwest corner of Iowa comprising O'Brien, Osceola, Lyon, and Sioux counties, which at that time contained vast tracts of unimproved virgin lands. In the great race for material advantage, Primghar, Sanborn, and other nearby rival towns were all

vying for county-seat status as they kept a weather eye out for live railroad, commercial, or industrial prospects. Situated at the junction of the east-west Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway and the northwesterly-running Sioux City & St. Paul Railway, Sheldon held an edge over its rivals.

Among the railroad and large-scale speculators who owned large amounts of unsettled land near Sheldon were the town's namesake, Israel Sheldon, and George I. Seney. Israel Sheldon was a New York City stockholder in the Sioux City & St. Paul Railway. Seney was president of the Metropolitan Bank in New York. He owned a 1,280-acre "trustee farm" just south of Sheldon and invested heavily in the Omaha railroad and in real estate in northwest Iowa and southwest Minnesota.

Although absentee ownership of large tracts of land actually tended to retard population growth, the town of Sheldon nevertheless grew because of the capital improvements made by Eastern investors. With "almost magical



Harry Iselin (front row, far left) poses with other members of the "Sheldon Ten," a young men's social club. Back row: Fred Piper (editor Frank Piper's brother), Hank Phileo, Frank Zander, Milt Allen, Homer Conant. Front row: Iselin, Sam Ladd, Harry Waite, George Spaulding, Frank Babcock.

COURTESY SHELDON HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND MUSEUM

effect," according to a local editor, the investors' efforts to improve their large holdings brought money into the town and prompted "more determined efforts" by others to build Sheldon's economy.

One of the most determined efforts was made by members of the prominent Iselin family. Adrian G. Iselin, the head of a banking family and part of an exclusive circle of New York society, purchased various pieces of land a few miles north of Sheldon between 1877 and 1883. Some of it he apparently bought as trustee for his sister-in-law, Margaret Tomes Iselin. Within a few days after the purchase of about 1,200 acres in August 1877, her eighteen-year-old son, Henry S. Iselin, arrived in Sheldon to develop the property as a large stock farm.

Delighted to see the arrival of a new resident of obvious means, Frank Piper, the editor of the *Sheldon Mail*, lauded Henry Iselin's "intention to erect several buildings this fall, among which will be one of the finest

residences in the entire Northwest. . . . Mr. Iselin is a valuable acquisition to the interests of this part of the northwest and particularly Sheldon." Thereafter, editor Piper hardly let a chance go by to report the goings-on of Henry Iselin.

**Y**OUNG, confident, ambitious, and determined to make a success of himself in the West, Henry S. Iselin — or Harry, as he was more often called — busied himself building a "mammoth" stock farm while watching for other opportunities. With thirty head of horses, 130 head of cattle (he shipped the butter back to New York for sale), and plenty of hogs and poultry, Harry's operation quickly reached respectable proportions. The first several months the command of investment money came from family members. With his mother's death in June 1878, however, Harry's resulting share of the family

fortune gave him a more direct say in shaping his own prospects.

Within weeks of returning from the funeral in New York, he decided to erect a large Halliday feed mill and to add more farm machinery and manufacturing implements to his operation. The wind-powered feed mill gave him experience in the milling business. Although it had been erected for use on his own farm, the mill soon was reported to be "doing custom work for this whole section of country." Meanwhile, no doubt, Harry read and heard editor Piper's persuasive arguments that "Sheldon wants a steam grist mill, and wants it badly."

As in other country towns that had secured railroad connections, a craving had set in to lure a manufacturing plant to Sheldon. The town had one individual who made sure its prospects as a future trading center outshone those of its rivals. Singing the song of future development, editor Frank Piper aggressively promoted Sheldon's economic expansion. He pleaded for "some first class miller" to seize the obvious opportunity. Sheldon "would soon be on the high road to greatness if she had a flouring mill," Piper argued. "With two railroads, a town of 700 inhabitants, one of the finest farming countries under the sun and not a mill within 30 miles the only wonder to us is that some man with mind and money had not before discovered the opening."

By early 1879 Harry Iselin was taking steps in just that direction. Journeying to New York in April, Harry returned with his oldest brother, thirty-year-old John H. Iselin, who operated a New York City import-export commission business. Ostensibly, John had come "to take a peek at Harry's farm and see what he has done," but quickly it became clear that more was involved. If Harry had failed to convince John about the mill investment in New York, he evidently succeeded in Sheldon. During John's visit came the announcement that a steam grist mill "is to be built by H. S. Iselin, Esq. a gentleman of ample means, late of New York."

While John Iselin initially continued to look after New York interests, Harry Iselin took the lead in organizing the venture to build the mill. Amateurs they might be at milling — as were entrepreneurs Pillsbury and Washburn when

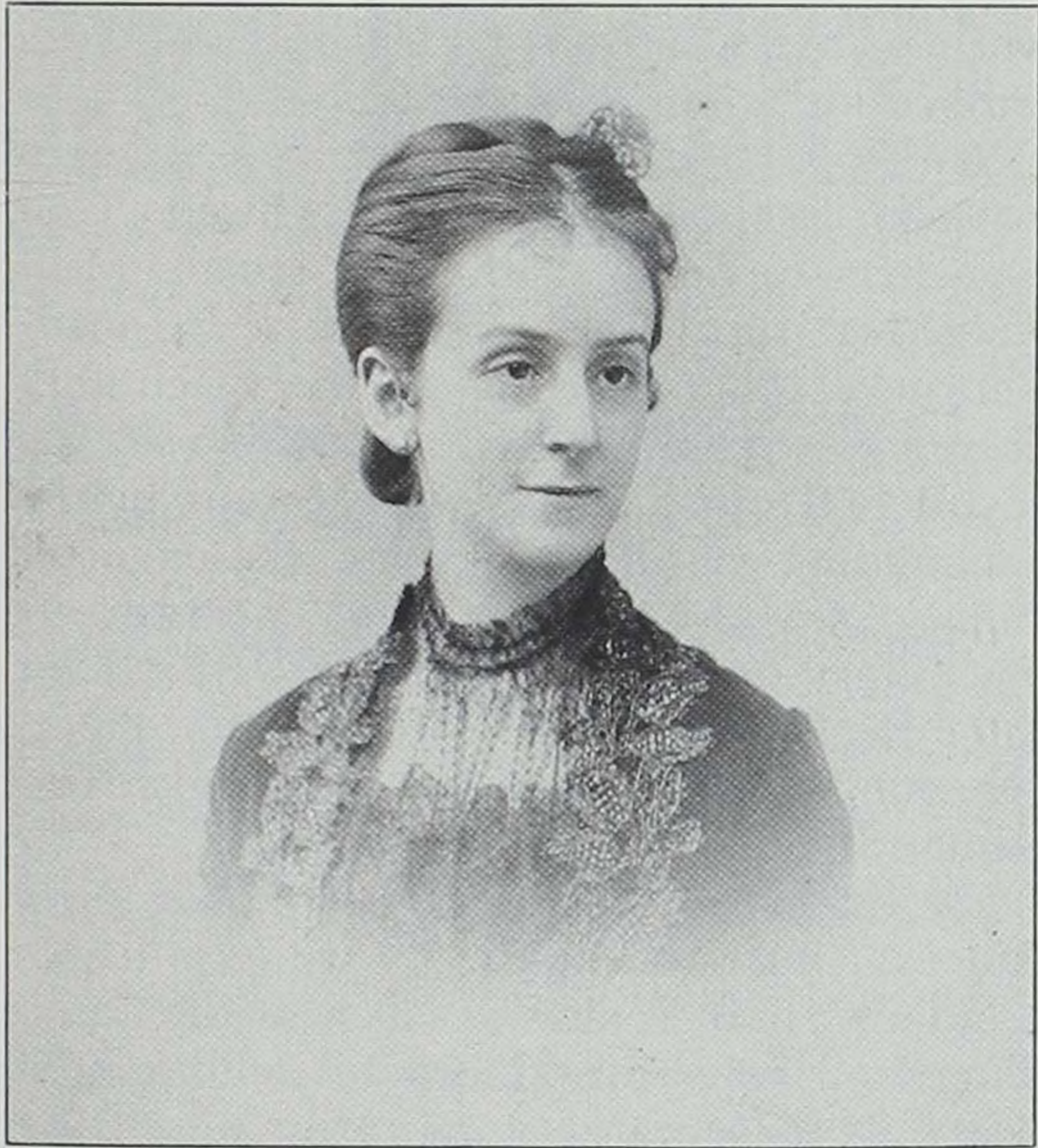
they first erected their great Minneapolis mills — the Iselins were nevertheless confident they had the money and sense to employ the best equipment and workers available in order to build and run a substantial Iowa operation. With the brothers' considerable experience as commission merchants, the flour and grain products not sold locally would find a market through their branch houses in Chicago and New York or by consignment.

Shortly thereafter, Harry was traveling to Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Milwaukee — the region's leading milling and mill-provisioning centers — to line up the necessary mill builders and outfitters. He called upon the most reputable firms and individuals in the business, especially those associated with the Washburn mill enterprise. In fact, Harry thought he had hired the boss miller at the famed Washburn mills for \$1,500 a year, but the negotiation failed. For the design of the building and the arrangement of machinery, Harry opened discussions with the prominent mill-furnishing firm of O. A. Pray and Company. (Otis Pray had erected the huge Washburn B mill in 1866 and built the Cataract and Palisade mills in Minneapolis.) Harry contracted with Pray to design and furnish a five-run steam-operated flour mill. The Iselins would hire masons and carpenters to build the foundation for the engine and boiler and frame the mill according to Pray's drawings.

By the third week of June, Harry had chosen to lease a site on the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul road at the southwest corner of town. By early July the cellar had been excavated and well diggers were "progressing nicely." Pray's and Iselin's goal was to have the mill ready to run by October 1.

Meanwhile, the Iselins were thinking even more grandly. Harry purchased seven acres just south of the mill, laid out lots, and commenced building six houses for employees, each to cost \$750. The tract would come to be known as Iselinville.

**T**HE BUILDING SCHEDULE for the mill, however, soon fell apart. "What day can you have the mill house up and floors — stairs and etc. finished for us?" O. A. Pray & Co. wrote in mid-July 1879.



Mary and John Iselin's East Coast life-style enchanted the editor of the Sheldon newspaper, who frequently reported details of their travels and acquisitions.



PHOTOS COURTESY WARBURTON G. ISELIN; SHSI (DES MOINES)

"We have one car loaded with lumber and it must go forward," they urged. "We are very full of machinery and will ship a car Monday and you can store it in the depot there until your house is completed." In early August Harry Iselin answered that he needed at least a month to finish framing. By mid-September his carpenters were still studding the structure. The well-diggers had exceeded one hundred feet with no water in sight; the crew was doubled and worked day and night. Quite obviously, Pray's October 1 deadline for installing the machinery would not be met.

By September 22 the mill was enclosed and floors laid. Hoping to make up for lost time, Harry wrote Pray to "let me know at once when you will send the millwrights." Within a week the millwrights arrived, as did the head miller, W. W. Place, and his two assistants.

A terrible blunder then became apparent. The height of the basement story was a foot too low for the machinery. Back in Minneapolis, head miller Place and Pray considered the options of altering the machinery or further excavating the basement. Place wired Iselin: "Raise the mill one foot." Jack screws arrived at express while millwrights dug installation

points in the foundation. Within four days Harry Iselin could report success: "I have raised the mill to the desired height without accident; the roof is almost all on."

The fright marked a pivotal event in the mill enterprise. Evidently worried about the floundering project, John H. Iselin and his wife arrived within a few days from New York with plans to stay until the mill was in running order. Within three weeks, John was handling all correspondence with O. A. Pray & Company, including renewed pleas for more millwrights.

As the eldest surviving family member, thirty-one-year-old John Iselin was trustee of various family estates on his father's side and had inherited substantial wealth from his mother. Most of his New York business dealings were in importing and wholesaling silk. Through his marriage to Mary Philipse Gouverneur, John was "intimately allied" to wealthy families on the Hudson whose landholdings dated to colonial times. After John and Mary's grand wedding, they had settled at her estate, Eagle's Nest, described in New York papers as "the most conspicuous residence in the Highlands of the Hudson,

perched on the brow of a mountain" across the river from West Point.

When John and Mary Iselin arrived at Sheldon, however, townspeople knew little of John Iselin's background other than that he was a monied New Yorker. But what they saw of his character, they liked. John Iselin, the editor said, "is a genial, whole-souled, frank sort of man, and one who will make and keep friends wherever he goes."

Sheldon citizens apparently were enamored with the Iselins, judging from the newspaper coverage they received. Residents opened up their paper on any given week to read about the Iselins' comings and goings. Piper sprinkled his pages with such news as "Mr. John H. Iselin . . . has crossed the Atlantic 40 times." Sheldon's proud attentiveness to the Iselins did not go unnoticed, as the snide remark of a neighboring town paper testified: "The Sheldon papers don't let John H. Iselin & Co. go out the back door without personal mention. That's independence of the press."

**D**ESPITE CONSTRUCTION delays, John and Harry Iselin apparently had no second thoughts about their endeavor. During John's month-long stay, they hired architect and builder C. J. Skuse to construct the houses, cooper shop, store, and barns in their milltown, Iselinville. Well-diggers had found a vein of water at 172 feet, but it flowed too slowly, and they dug on. Another contractor was feverishly digging thirteen wells for Iselinville. And the Iselins bought the Sleeper & Logan grain warehouse in Sheldon. (Scant information exists about the Sleeper family, who operated a private bank in Sheldon during this period. Yet their name would figure frequently in Iselin business dealings — as eventually would the name of Scott Logan.)

John Iselin returned in mid-January of 1880 from a holiday in New York to see his new Iselinville store nearly completed and another contractor's work well under way on four of the dozen houses. The brothers scoured the countryside for enough wheat to keep the mill running steadily once it started up. By the end of the month they had over 10,000 bushels of

wheat on hand, and over 60,000 bushels of corn cribbed in various locations.

With plenty of grain but still insufficient water for the boiler, the brothers hired a Chicago firm to finish drilling by steam. Millwrights completed their work by mid-February 1880. Starting up the machinery drew a crowd of townspeople eager to see the result of Iselins' heavy investment in the "upbuilding" of Sheldon. When the engineer turned up the steam, the "ponderous machinery began to move." "HURRAH for John H. Iselin & Co.!" wrote editor Piper, "Hurrah for the Sheldon Flouring Mills! Hurrah for Sheldon! In fact, 'rah for 'rah!"

The Sheldon mill was a state-of-the-art "New Process" burrstone mill. By using multiple grindings, bran removers (such as the "middlings purifier," introduced to milling eight years before), and a panoply of sifting machines, greater amounts of high-quality flour could be obtained from spring wheat. (Although the more effective rollers were beginning to replace burrstones in American flour mills, the change was costly and still somewhat experimental, within the scope of only the largest commercial mills.)

In terms of productivity, the Iselin mill's daily capacity of 1,000 barrels placed the mill well above all competitors in northwestern Iowa. Sheldon's citizens had reason to be proud; even Sioux City would not have a mill that could equal two-thirds that of Iselins' daily capacity. The mill's nearest rivals stood about twenty miles down the railroad line in Le Mars. There two mills operated, each capable of producing only half the daily capacity of the Sheldon Flouring Mill.

The smoke and steam rising from the mill operation served notice for miles around that the Iselins were now in business, and the brothers soon hired a grain buyer and advertised for "five competent coopers to make flour barrels." The Iselins' store and mill stood crowded with customers. Three times a day the shriek of the steam whistle reminded all that the long-awaited mill was at last grinding.

The Iselins now turned their energies to other ventures. During the spring of 1880, they traded a cottage in Iselinville for a farm south of Sheldon on which to raise 2,000 young

**Wholesale and Retail!**

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# NEW GROCERY!

NEW YORK STORE, adjoining SHELDON FLOUR MILLS,

Sheldon, Iowa.

**New Goods ! Lower Prices !**

Will be opened Saturday February, 14th, 1880, where can be found the

**Largest Stock of Groceries in O'Brien County,**

and which will be sold LOWER than anywhere in Northwest Iowa. Having purchased our goods in New Y, Y. in large quantities and for CASH we thereby save all Chicago profits which saving we propose to give the people of Sheldon and vicinity. Liberal discounts to

**CASH PURCHASERS!**

and those buying large quantities. Special inducements to the trade.

*Highest Cash Price paid for Country Produce.*

We sell good Tea for 40 cts. per pound ; good coffee for 16 cts. per pound ; good Sugar for 9½ cts. per pound.

**CIGARS, WHOLESALE AND RETAIL.**

**Goods Delivered FREE to ANY PART OF THE CITY.**

The Iselins' New York Store, which adjoined the mill, promised the lowest grocery prices in northwest Iowa.

hogs (for Eastern markets); they installed a telephone line between their store and the meat market on Ninth Street to speed customers' orders; they drew plans for a three-story brick wholesale establishment; and they doubled the size of their office, erected a substantial barn in Iselinville for thoroughbred horses, and built a large blacksmith shop and an addition to the cooper shop. Their investments in Sheldon did not go unnoticed — or unpraised. Reporting that the brothers were planting handsome trees throughout Iselinville, the *Sheldon Mail* acknowledged the Iselins as "men of enterprise, intelligence and uprightness."

Notwithstanding the Iselin investments, or Sheldon's adoration, design flaws brought mill shutdowns that spring. "Owing to serious defects in the construction of the Sheldon Flour Mill," reported one editor, "its product has been of a quality not only unsatisfactory to the proprietors but unsalable to the local trade." The Iselins undertook costly alterations.

By May the mill was running again at "full blast," shipping out carloads of flour, feed, bran, and oats. By late July, enough wheat had been purchased to keep the Iselin mill running for a year. Meanwhile plans advanced to build a 47-foot elevator to hold 30,000 bushels.

More Iselin family members now resided in Sheldon. In "excellent spirits" and with plans to stay "at least six months," John returned in early May with his wife and three children. Mary was eight months pregnant and soon gave birth to a daughter at Harry's farm northwest of Sheldon. Harry returned from the East with another brother, George, an attorney, who also gave serious thought to locating in Sheldon.

**A**LL SEEMED to be going exceedingly well as the young millowners entered the fall season. As a large force of workers finished the "mammoth elevator," the mill ran day and night to fill advance orders for 100,000 pounds of flour.

The Iselins hired a Chicago man by the name of Knapp to take charge of general business operations, and John Iselin found time to attend to other matters. He planned and helped finance the construction of a new Episcopalian church in Iselinville. He traveled to Spirit and Okoboji lakes for a week in October. At the same time, it was reported that the Iselins would "build a large addition to the Sleeper residence," where evidently John and his family were living.

The Iselins' generosity showed itself during the Christmas season. After a shopping trip in St. Paul, John and Mary gave each of their seventeen married employees a hundred pounds of their fancy patent flour and, to each of their fourteen unmarried men, a box of choice cigars. Within the family, perhaps the finest gift was Harry Iselin's present of a handsome Chickering piano to his sister-in-law, Mary.

Outward appearances pointed to buoyant prospects. Editor Piper lauded his town as "SHELDON THE HUB." The mill had had a good year. It had employed 35, ground 650,000 bushels, "shipped over 600 cars and received 300 and did a business of nearly \$600,000." It

would soon be enlarged from 10-run-of-stone to 13-run.

With the close of the holidays, Mary and Harry Iselin traveled to New York, he on business and she to visit family. Upon her return, reported John in mid-January 1881, the two of them would travel south for a few weeks of rest and recreation.

Then, abruptly, John Iselin changed his vacation plans. In mid-February John and an employee were "off on an important business trip to New York," but no details were disclosed. The March 3 *Sheldon Mail* reported that John H. Iselin is very ill in N.Y." One month later the paper stated that "John H. and Harry Iselin are absent from the city [Sheldon], but are expected to return the later part of the week."

Finally on April 7, readers of the *Sheldon Mail* opened their paper and saw the following item: "John H. Iselin and Co. are experiencing financial embarrassment. On Tuesday Sheriff Shea and Deputy O'Donnell levied upon their mill elevator, and all residence property, to satisfy claims in the hands of A. W. Sleeper and Bro. aggregating between \$20 and 25,000. The Messrs. Iselin are away from home and it is thought they will return in condition to rally and continue business again. We hope they may."

**W**ITH THIS ANNOUNCEMENT, the story of the Iselins' accumulating troubles began to unfold before the public, layer by layer. The first disclosure dated back to the previous summer of 1880, when the mill had been running only five months. Financially strained by past construction delays, yet confident of eventual profits from expanded investments, the Iselins had needed to borrow money. They had called on the private banking house of A. W. Sleeper & Bro. in Sheldon and the First National Bank of St. Paul. In July they obtained a loan of \$2,500 from Sleeper. They also borrowed \$17,323 from the First National Bank of St. Paul, with Sleeper as their trustee, and put up the Sheldon Flour Mills and property as collateral. Of the larger loan, \$5,000 was

in the form of a promissory note to satisfy certain immediate claims against their company and due within sixty days. The remaining \$12,323 owed to the St. Paul bank was to be paid back within four months at the Sleepers' banking house. The promissory note of \$2,500 to the Sleepers also would come due on November 15. But signs of prosperity had suggested no problem with meeting these loan deadlines. After a brief shutdown when wheat ran short, the mill resumed full operation. By September workers replaced an existing warehouse with a 30,000-bushel elevator.

One additional shadow cast on the Iselins' sunny prospects was an impending court case by mill builder O. A. Pray & Co. over a contract disagreement. As construction delays had mounted in 1879, O. A. Pray and the Iselins had become ever more at odds over who bore responsibility for mistakes and additional expenses. After an exchange of accusatory letters, Pray had written the Iselins in early February 1880 that "it seems to us at this time that we should meet you at the mill, and there and

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## JOHN H. ISELIN & CO.,

*Commission Merchants*

—AND—

## Dealers in Grain

New York,

Chicago,

Sheldon.

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### CONSIGNMENTS

—OF—

### CATTLE, HOGS, GRAIN AND PRODUCE

SOLICITED AND OPTIONS DEALT IN.

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then fully adjust and settle all these little differences. You must not forget the delays caused us by not getting your building finished at the time you agreed and set our work back and we were compelled to do it all in cold weather and short days." Pray specifically asked "to have the young man [Harry Iselin], with whom we had the most of our talk, there when we go out." Despite reconciliation efforts, the parties could not work out their differences. Pray filed a mechanic's lien for \$2,580 against the Iselins in late March 1880. In December the county district court judge supported the lien and ordered the sale of mill property sufficient to pay the claim. Coming up with \$2,580 seemed of no particular consequence to the Iselins. Business was good that month. Mill workers were busily filling a Minneapolis order for fifty carloads of ground feed, and the *Sheldon Mail* informed its readers that "the Sheldon Flour Mills have all the orders on hand they can fill for six months." But despite another order for fifty carloads of ground feed from Niobrara, Nebraska, the Iselins evidently showed no inclination to erase their indebtedness to O. A. Pray — or to pay off the two bank loans.

By April of 1881, with the bulk of their debt overdue and the Sleepers now pressing the matter, word was getting around to others waiting payment. Seven rushed to file liens and suits in circuit court. After an anxious week of awaiting the Iselins' return from back East, Sheldon townspeople learned the bad news: John and Harry were dissolving their partnership. "The business will hereafter be conducted by Harry S. Iselin, who succeeds the old firm," the paper reported, "and he will settle all outstanding liabilities of John H. Iselin & Co. and collect all debts due said firm."

John Iselin had returned to Sheldon but remained "indisposed" and "confined to his home most of the time," perhaps feeling the strain of their financial plight or still recovering from his severe illness suffered in New York.

Harry Iselin, who had initiated the mill investment, took charge of getting the business back in operation. Perhaps feeling responsible for the way things had gone, or sensing John's unwillingness to put any more into the opera-

**HENRY S. ISELIN,**

DEALER IN

**WESTERN LANDS,**

**Sheldon, Iowa.**

Branch offices at LuVerne and Heron  
Lake, Minnesota.

**WILD AND IMPROVED LANDS**

IN NORTHWESTERN IOWA,

and in Rock, Noble, Murray and Cot-  
tontwood counties,

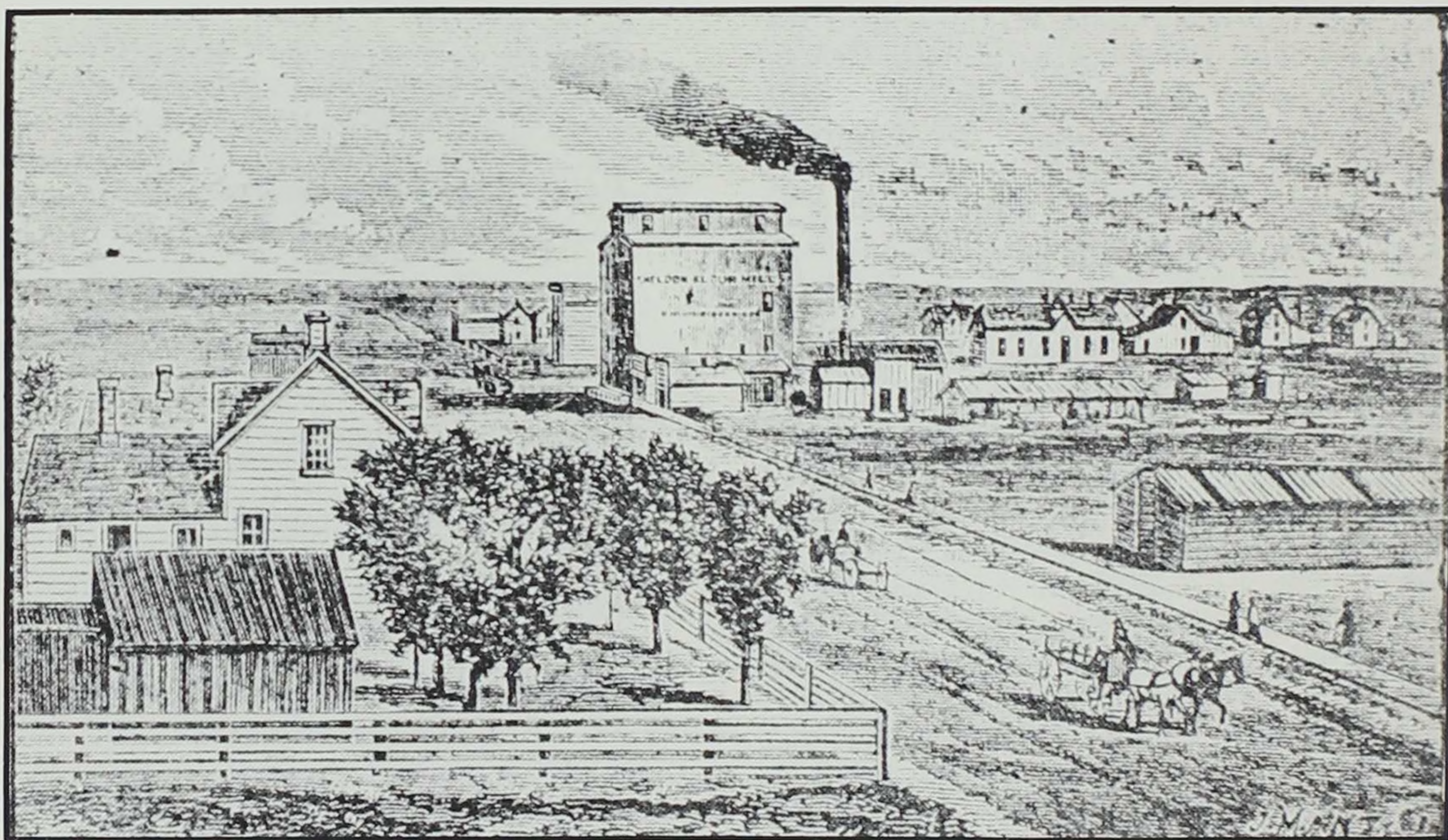
**MINNESOTA.**

tion, Harry undertook, in editor Piper's sympathetic words, to "continue alone at the helm hereafter, but it is understood that he is not at present in a position to stay the onslaught of creditors."

Before dissolving the partnership, Harry and John had struck a deal with the Sleepers. For a one-year promissory note for \$14,000, the brothers conveyed to A. W. Sleeper a deed of trust on their mill property, town lots, and improvements in Iselinville, all of which Harry might redeem upon payment of the debt. The Iselins made three more promissory notes totalling \$6,000 — all due within three months — and Sleeper received title via chattel mortgage to various personal property, including two fine teams of horses, other mares and colts, rigging for the wagons, buggy, bobsleighs, the office and office furniture, all the grain in the new elevator, the flour and grain products manufactured by the mill, and all the barrels. Thus, the Iselins paid \$6,000 to their creditors and regained control of their mill property.

**"T**HE MILL goes on. Good enough!" declared the editor of the *Sheldon Mail*. The rival editor of the *Sheldon News* shared in the town's relief and worry: "To have them





shut down would be one of the greatest misfortunes that could befall this place.” Ambivalence marked the community as it sorted out this turn of events. “We but reflect on the sentiments of the community at large,” wrote Piper of the *Mail*, “when we say that profound sympathy is felt for the present difficulties for the Messrs. Iselin . . . , realizing as all must, that the Iselins have done a grand, good work for the upbuilding of the town and the development of the surrounding country.”

If the Iselins suffered personal financial stringency, it was not immediately apparent in their life-style. At the public sale in early May of Iselins’ chattel property — horses, colts, buggies, sleighs, and a large quantity of cigars — the family bought much of it back, even though the prices generally equalled their value. They also continued their pattern of extensive travel back and forth to the East. Furthermore, on May 12 the *Mail* reported that “the appearance of the Iselin residence is being very much improved by the addition, to the east side, of a long and tasty veranda.”

Throughout most of May the mill operated at “full blast” but by June it was idle again. The exasperated editor of the *Sheldon Mail* lost all

Clouds of steam from the Iselins’ mill marked the Sheldon skyline as the burrstones ground flour and meal.

patience: “The mill don’t grind and probably won’t very soon under the present administration. John H. Iselin & Co. may as well resign.”

Now the private banking house of A. W. Sleeper and Bro. stepped in, both to protect its interests and, if possible, to arrange things to come out ahead on the matter. On June 1, Sleeper took possession of the Iselins’ mortgaged personal property, including notes owed to John H. Iselin & Co. and their accounts. On June 20 he took possession of the mill, the mill property, the elevator, and other improvements (consisting of sixteen dwellings, a blacksmith shop, a store building, three barns, and a cooper shop). In this foreclosure action, the Iselins might have expected Sleeper to protect his interests, but their opinions soon began to change about his designs, intentions, and sense of ethics as a businessman.

The critical moment occurred on June 24 when Iselin property went on sheriff’s sale to satisfy the O. A. Pray judgment from the previous December. To the Iselins’ undoubtable dismay, W. H. Sleeper (brother and partner of

A. W. Sleeper) and W. B. Bowne (an investor from Mt. Holly, New Jersey) bought up the mill property for \$3,050. Then, to their utter disbelief and consternation, the Iselin brothers watched as Sheriff Shea issued to Sleeper and Bowne a certificate of purchase. The certificate was not subject to the Iselins being able to redeem it within one year — as provided by statute — but executed as a deed absolute. Immediately recording the deed at the Primghar courthouse, Sleeper and Bowne then claimed to be the absolute owners of the property.

For a few weeks rumors persisted that the Close Brothers (English land speculators who owned 75,000 acres in northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota) were negotiating with the Sleepers for the mill. But the Sleepers cleaned and fixed the Iselin mill, bought a supply of wheat, and leased it temporarily to E.N. Toucey, a former head miller under the Iselins.

The Iselins meanwhile, stung by the prospect of losing their entire investment, readied a counterattack to stop the Sleepers from selling or devaluing their remaining interest. They filed a motion for the county circuit court to appoint a receiver to “hold and dispose” the disputed property. Harry also filed a “cross bill” alleging that the value of their properties far exceeded the indebtedness, and that the excess received in the sale of their mortgaged chattel property should have been credited to their debt. These bankers, Harry declared, were fraudulently “depriving” the Iselins “of all means of extricating themselves from their financial embarrassment.” He charged that Sleeper and Bowne had “conspired and confederated” to obtain everything for “a mere nominal sum, and leave the defendants still indebted to them and others.” Harry also alleged that A. W. Sleeper was refusing to account for the rents and profits from the properties or applying these to the debt, and that the conspirators had intentionally obtained the Iselins’ property at the sheriff’s sale for the Pray judgment so as to cloud the title to ownership.

The Sleepers and Bowne denied all charges, stating that neither the mill nor the improvements were worth what the Iselins claimed. At a hearing in late November, Judge Zuber affirmed the Iselins’ right to redeem their

property, and appointed I. S. Struble of Le Mars to act as receiver of the estate. The Sleepers and Bowne appealed the decision to the Iowa Supreme Court.

**W**ITH PROSPECTS improving, John and Harry moved forward. Editor Piper reported with pleasure that in the next month the Iselins would pay \$3,000 and “redeem their property from sheriff’s sale.” This would remove the “clouded title” issue thrown up by Sleeper and Bowne’s claim to absolute title. But the Iselins had more in mind. “It is rumored,” continued Piper, “that by the time the remainder of their matters get into shape, they will redeem still further, even to the amount to all they owe. It is to be hoped they will, for they have already suffered heavier losses and experienced more painful embarrassments, than men of their enterprising character should.”

In fact, their sense of enterprise led to a new venture, announced in late January in the *News*: “Mr. Henry Iselin is now snugly located in the rooms formerly occupied by the *News*, and is prepared to do any amount of business in the real estate line.” The younger brother “has business in him,” said the editor, and would soon publish a real estate guide. He hung out two “new and tasty land signs” and soon the papers were reporting his energetic real estate activities and how his agent, Pomp McCormack, a “cunning man of words,” was persuading buyers that the lands thereabout were “a veritable blooming Eden.”

All was not so well for the Sleepers, who still held title to the mill. With wheat prices high and flour prices low, head miller Toucey had quit the mill and had opened his own flour and feed store. Under the new head miller, the mill ran half the time while Sleeper and Bowne worked hard to secure sufficient grain.

Fortunes then took another turn. For some unknown reason the Iselin brothers’ “redemption scheme” fell apart, and in April the court-appointed receiver resigned because his private interests kept him too busy.

Nevertheless, the Iselins pushed ahead. Their well-received monthly real estate journal, *The Big Four*, focused exclusively on the

four northwest counties of Lyon, O'Brien, Sioux, and Osceola. Each month or so, five thousand copies were distributed locally; it was hailed as the "finest real estate journal ever issued in the Northwest." Attempting to reach foreign investors, the Iselins wrote, "We especially solicit correspondence from our English readers, being satisfied that we have it in our power to open up to them opportunities for investment, on either a large or small scale." In fact, by June the Iselins announced plans to open offices in London and in New York "to accommodate our European and Eastern friends." The highest praise came from an editor in nearby Sanborn who was relieved that land sales were now being "conducted by respectable and prominent men" like the Iselins. Decrying earlier "land sharks," the editor believed that the Iselins rightfully deserved the term "dealers in real estate."

Through these turbulent months, John Iselin assumed a low profile. Harry's name appears regularly as an escort of this or that excursion of land seekers, but John seems to have been a silent partner. Only his domestic activities drew notice in the papers — the fever suffered by John's youngest child, or the conveniently arranged barn he owned, which the groom kept in perfect order.

If John hoped to regain their investment through court action, he would suffer disappointment. In June 1882 the Iowa Supreme Court heard Sleeper and Bowne's appeal. Judge Adams reversed the district court's order, concluding that the Iselins had not been entitled to a receiver.

In December 1882 the Iselins found themselves in a courtroom again. Henrietta C. Tomes — John and Harry's aunt — had claimed earlier that she owned a portion of the real estate described in the Iselin trust deed to Sleeper in July 1880. Supported by her nephews, she argued that her property should not be seized and applied to her nephews' debt. John Iselin testified in district court that in late 1879 when investment prospects had seemed so bright, he had indeed encouraged his aunt to sell certain New York stocks and bonds and reinvest the money in Sheldon property. "My opinion," John had written his aunt, "is that property will increase largely

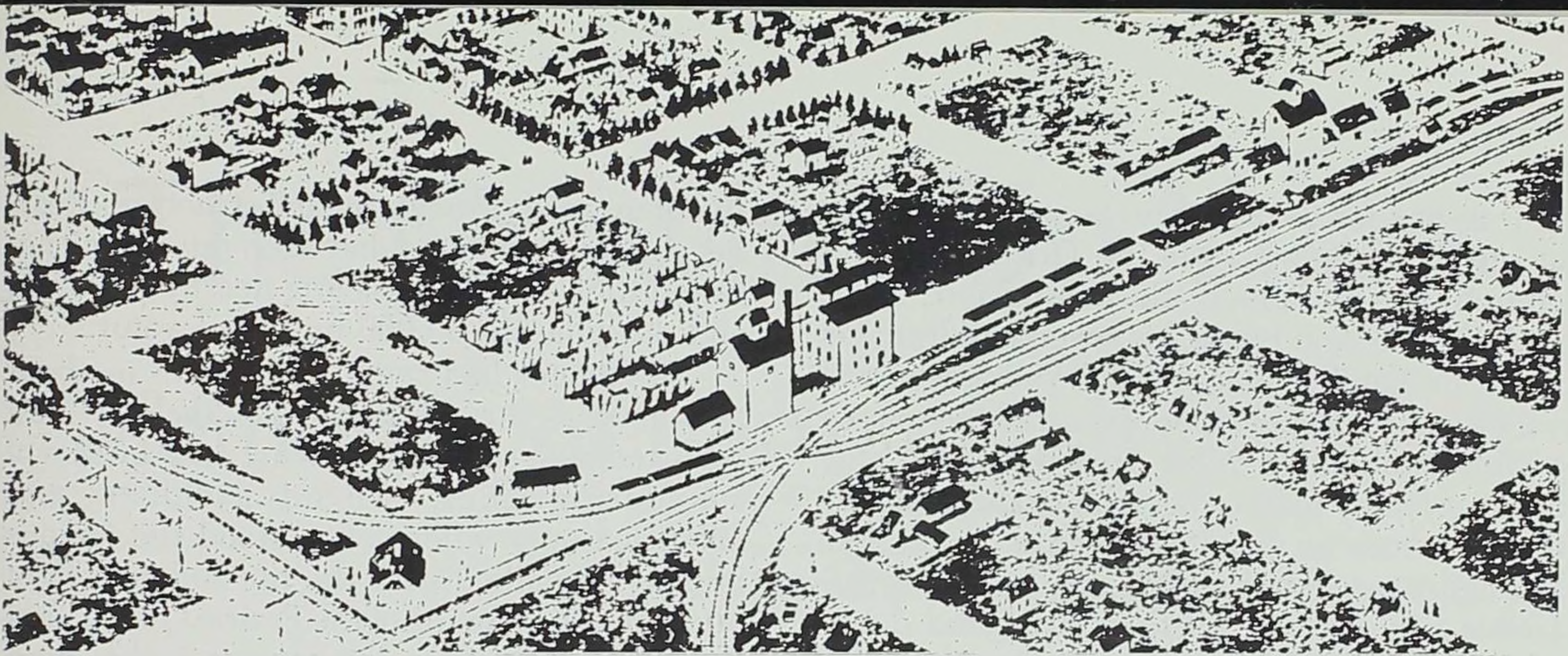
here within the next few years, and I can give you no better proof of my confidence than that I am investing in it largely myself." She had followed his advice and had invested \$5000 in Iselinville.

The Sleepers, as expected, contended that Henrietta Tomes was not entitled to these lots because John and Mary Iselin had misrepresented the properties as being "clear and free from encumbrance." The district court found in favor of the Iselins' aunt, stating that she not only owned the lots, but was entitled to all past rents and profits.

Interestingly enough, the plans of the Sleepers' banking house — whether in taking over and running the mill or in putting together their numerous trading deals — never found praise in the Sheldon press. Their activities mainly drew nonjudgmental comment, a hint to the contrary being when the *Sheldon News* reported that "A. W. Sleeper is on another of his mysterious visits to St. Paul."

During the fall of 1882, while the parties fought their various cases through the courts, the Sleepers and Bowne leased the mill for two years to an Illinois firm described as "old hands in the milling business" with "ample capital to make things boom" in Sheldon. Within five months, however, the mill was back in the hands of Sleeper and Bowne. Watching their mill become outdated as rival flour mills installed the new roller process, they decided to invest another ten to twelve thousand dollars in modernizing and starting up the mill. They attempted to put together a stock company, but too few subscribers materialized. In January 1884 they finally sold out to G. Y. Bonus of Dubuque. Sheldon townspeople contributed an extra two thousand dollars cash to prevent millers in Le Mars from removing and reconstructing the mill in their town. Bonus installed additional machinery and commenced operating in November 1884 as the Prairie Queen Roller Mills.

**F**ROM THE DECEMBER 1882 trial of their aunt's case to the spring of 1883, the Iselins continued their land business. Relying on earlier experience in shipping produce, they advertised 100,000



The milltown of Iselinville lay south of the flour mill.

white ash and box elder trees for sale at \$3.50 per thousand. Their 29-year-old brother, George Adrian Iselin, a lawyer, now served as editor of their *Big Four Journal*, between trips visiting friends and hunting in Minnesota. Harry also traveled extensively.

Then, a split evidently occurred between Harry and John. In late April John "embarked in the land business individually" and moved into another office while Harry set about building a new land office on Third Avenue. This situation lasted only a few months. At summer's end, citizens of Sheldon read a single, short sentence marking the passing of a five-year era: "John H. Iselin and family have gone back to New York to live."

Harry now extended his real estate operations into Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas by being appointed land and emigrant agent for two railroad companies. To handle the expanded business, he joined with T. B. Springfield in partnership. Whether putting up flaming posters of forthcoming excursions, escorting land-seekers on sales tours, or printing substantial press runs of the *Land Journal*, Harry Iselin set a vigorous pace in his quest to somehow succeed in the West. After a time, however, he began to show less devotion to his quest for success in Sheldon. He sojourned to the East from May until September of 1884. Upon his return, he proposed to "push the land business harder than ever this fall," but by December he sold his business interests to his partner and returned to New York. "We are not informed what business he will engage," wrote the editor of the *News*, "but wish him well in his new field."

The Iselins' venture in Iowa marked a turn-

ing point in their lives. After John returned to New York, he turned away from the business world. He devoted his days to developing Eagle's Nest, living the life of the country gentleman and raising blooded stock on the Hudson River estate. Yet his personal life grew increasingly troubled. Within five years John began drinking to excess, and he soon began to worry family members by his "prodigious liberality." "No man," reported a fellow New Yorker, "ever went to Mr. Iselin with any sort of a story asking for money that he didn't get it."

When some of the family's Hudson Valley landholdings ultimately had to be sold because of this generosity, John agreed to relinquish administrative control over certain estate matters. But as he continued to mismanage funds, his brother Isaac and sister Emily Iselin MacDonald took action. They petitioned the court to appoint a commissioner to look into John's alleged habitual drunkenness. Although at first determined to contest his family's attempt to deprive him of his traditional business responsibilities, John — ill at his home — ultimately presented no defense. Four days after the jury judged him incompetent, John H. Iselin died in his forty-seventh year, his wife at his bedside.

Harry Iselin's subsequent years also proved quite unlike those he had spent in Sheldon. A year before John's death, Harry departed for Paris. There he married, raised seven children, worked as an international banker, and restored a large manor home in Normandy. After suffering a stroke and an ensuing long

illness, he died in 1932 at his home in Versailles at age 72. Somewhere in the Dragey Manche churchyard in France, he lies buried, along with his wife and two of his seven children, far from the familiar places of his younger years.

Perhaps one would have expected the sons of a well-established New York business and banking family to have been more successful in their venture on the Iowa prairie. Profit and loss figures are not available as clues to why the Iselins failed to pay off their loans and debts when due. Nor do we know whether the huge orders for flour and meal so enthusiastically reported by editor Piper were enough to turn a profit. Perhaps they had misjudged their suppliers and competitors, as wheat production shifted from Iowa into Minnesota and the Dakotas in the 1880s and the Minneapolis mills dominated the midwestern market.

On the one hand, the Iselin brothers appear to have been too trusting and naive in terms of Sleepers' actions. On the other, they were evidently shrewd enough to not pour all their personal fortune into the venture. Rather, after an initial infusion of their own money they relied on the investment capital of others. Then, when the mill enterprise soured, it was the Sleepers who became saddled with the mill while John and Harry Iselin went back East.

What cannot be denied is that through their boldness and ambition, they acquired the title of "townbuilders." They brought money into Sheldon, created new jobs, and built a mill that would become a fixture of Sheldon's economy for four decades. Under new owner G. Y. Bonus, the burrstone mill was converted to a roller mill in 1884. Additional financially sound improvements were made after Scott Logan bought the mill in 1890. Under Logan and subsequent owners, Prairie Queen Mills operated until the late 1920s.

**T**HE IMPRINT left by the Iselins on Sheldon is today largely indistinct. On a late Wednesday afternoon in April 1932 the fire alarm rang at the mill (which had been closed down a few years earlier). The flames — helped by a brisk northwesterly wind and dried timbers — quickly

swept upward through the tall structure. Fearing their spread, Sheldon firefighters concentrated their efforts on saving nearby buildings and the adjacent 60,000-bushel elevator.

"The flames had spent themselves in about two hours," the editor of the *Sheldon Mail* reported with sadness, "leaving only a waste of smoldering ashes, twisted machinery and fallen masonry where once stood the famous mill so long allied with the life and growth of Sheldon. The passing of the Prairie Queen, and the other landmark, the former Iselin store building, tears one of the first chapters from the early history of this city."

The location of the residences of Harry Iselin or John and Mary Iselin are unknown, as are any indications of Harry's stock farm north of town. The various buildings in Iselinville — the cooperage, blacksmith shop, three barns — either suffered destruction or, as in the case of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, were moved to new sites, only to be later demolished in making way for modern development. What exists is a plat map titled "Iselin's Second Addition to the Town of Sheldon" — and perhaps a few of the fifteen houses they erected. Evidence of the Iselins' short but grand era of townbuilding has nearly vanished, with little left to symbolize the years when Sheldon so closely tied its hopes and fortunes to the energetic investment activities of two young New York entrepreneurs. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Four major types of reference sources proved especially valuable in preparing this article. First, much was gleaned from newspaper commentary found in the *Sheldon Mail* and the *Sheldon News* for the years 1877–1884, and in the *New York Times* and *New York Herald* during the period May–June 1895. Second, for information on the Iselins' problems relating to mill construction, contracts, and legal actions, we relied on circuit court filings in the case between O. A. Pray versus J. H. Iselin & Co., 1880 (records of which are administered by Clerk of Court, O'Brien County Courthouse), and in the record of filings and appeals contained in published proceedings of the Supreme Court of Iowa (June and September terms, 1882; September and December terms, 1883). Third, valuable Iselin family information was drawn from the correspondence of Susanne J. Walker (daughter of Henry S. Iselin), Warburton G. Iselin (grandson of John H. Iselin), and Peter Iselin. Fourth, we are indebted to Karen Mitchell, Richard E. Bauer, and other members of the Sheldon Historical Society for the willing time and assistance they gave to our research work.