

# The **P**ALIMPSEST

MAY 1942

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## THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

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## THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

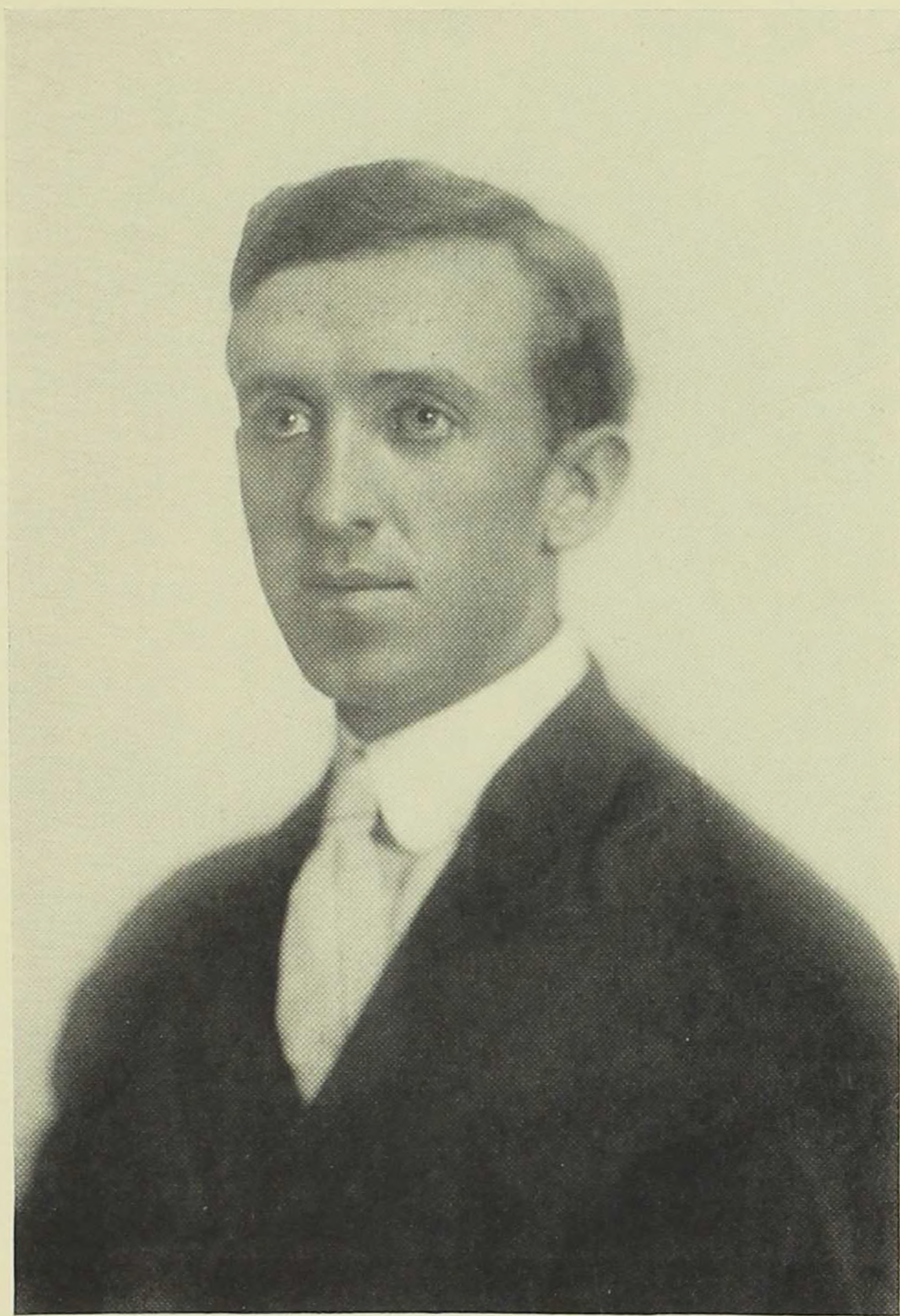
In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the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

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records 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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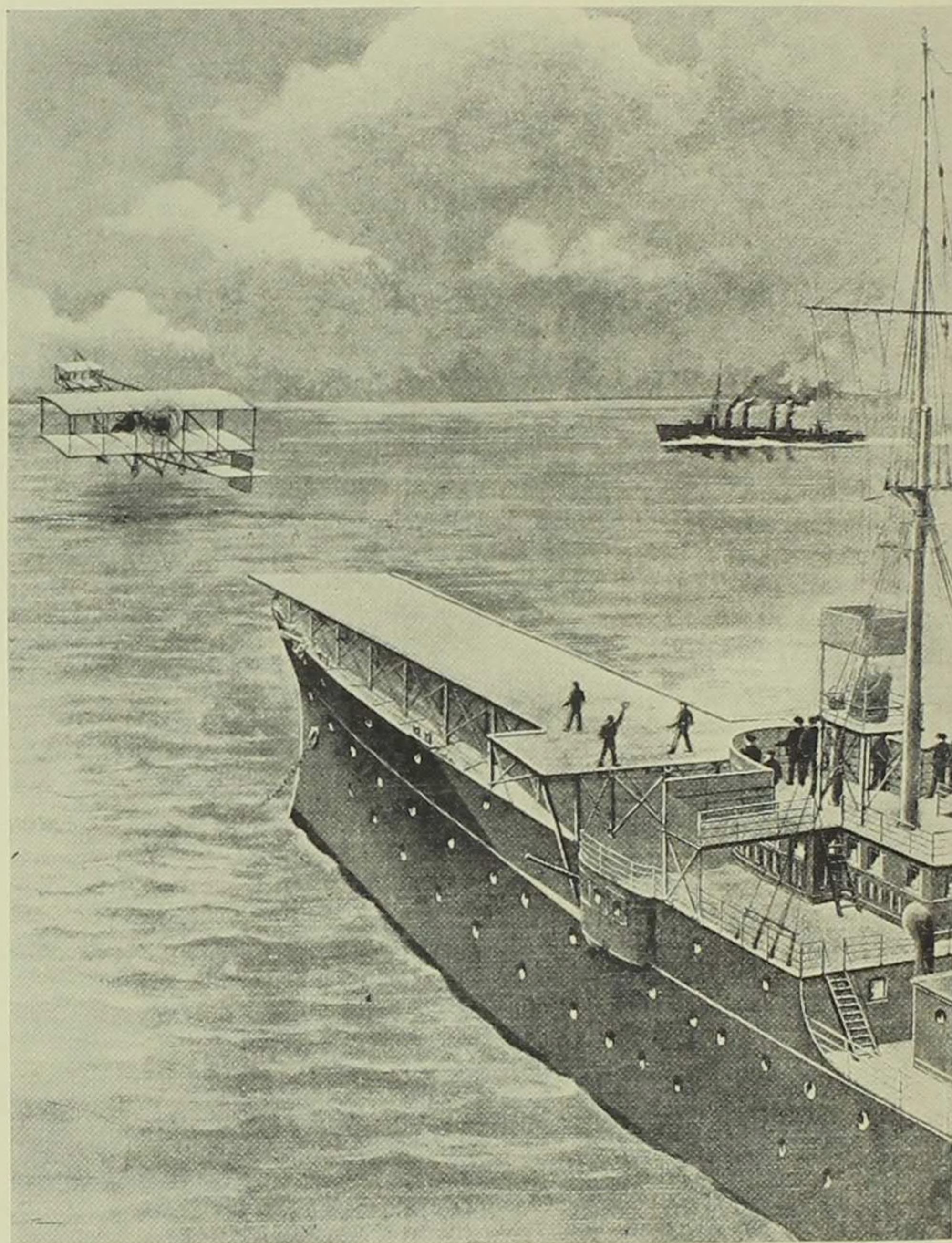
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EUGENE B. ELY

COURTESY OF H. HARRINGTON



DRAWING BY C. MCKNIGHT-SMITH

COURTESY OF SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

ELY TAKING OFF FROM THE BIRMINGHAM

J. G. H. Harper

May 18<sup>th</sup> 1942

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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## From Ship to Shore

At a time when the whir of the airplane motor is a familiar sound, when great airplane carriers constitute a vital part of the United States Navy, when thousands of Iowans are serving in the naval air forces, and when preparation is being made for basic naval pre-flight training at the State University, it is fitting to recall that an Iowa youth made the first flight from ship to shore. A few weeks later he flew from shore to ship and again from ship to shore. Thus the idea of the aircraft carrier was conceived.

Prior to 1910 the airplane was not a seagoing craft, nor in any sense amphibian. The achievements in human flying were confined exclusively to the atmosphere over land. But this was a time of experimentation, of adventure, of striving to accomplish spectacular feats in aviation. Men had only recently learned to fly in heavier-than-air machines with some degree of assurance. If they could conquer the air—fly over sea as well as land

and from ship to shore and back again—a new era of transportation would be opened. Perhaps a new military weapon could be forged. Daring aviators everywhere were striving to be the first to succeed in this new and thrilling adventure.

As the airplane was improved the scope of its usefulness expanded. One plan was to speed up mail service by flying letters ashore from incoming vessels. Two attempts in 1910 to launch an aeroplane from the deck of a Hamburg-American liner fifty miles off Sandy Hook failed. Meanwhile, military authorities were interested in the progress of aviation, particularly for observation work. The Navy was intrigued with the possibility of using aircraft in connection with battleships and cruisers. Aviators, anxious to be first to demonstrate the potentialities of their craft, were willing to risk their lives.

Early in November, 1910, an inclined platform twenty-five feet wide and eighty-five feet long was built over the forward deck of the cruiser *Birmingham* and Eugene B. Ely was engaged to attempt the first flight from a naval vessel to a designated place ashore. He assembled and tested his Curtiss biplane on the race track at Jamestown, Virginia. By Monday, November 14th, he was ready for the flight, though the weather was not propitious. The plane was transferred by

government tug to the Norfolk navy-yard and placed aboard the *Birmingham*. Accompanied by four torpedo-boat destroyers including the *Bailey* and *Stringham* from Annapolis, carrying Assistant Secretary Beekman Winthrop and other naval officers, the *Birmingham* left Norfolk at 11:30 A. M., and steamed thirty miles down Chesapeake Bay.

The object of the experiment, according to the Navy, was to "demonstrate the possibility of an aeroplane of the existing type leaving a ship for scout purposes." The platform over the bow of the ship was sloped forward to accelerate the take-off. Plans were also made to steam forward into the wind to augment the force of the air with the speed of the ship and thus assist the aviator in making the flight from a short runway.

At one o'clock a report was received from Cape Henry that there was fog over the lower bay, and that light rain was falling. It was feared that Ely would be obliged to postpone his flight. An hour later, however, a wireless message from the cruiser announced that preparations were being made according to schedule. At 2:48 P. M. another message complained that the engine of the biplane was making so much noise that communication was impossible. Apparently they were warming-up the motor. A few minutes later came the words "Ely

off". It was not necessary to steam into the wind, for Ely "easily succeeded in making the flight while the ship was at anchor, thereby increasing the value of the experiment."

Witnesses saw the daring aviator coast down the platform, dip down to the bay, hit the water with a splash, rise again, and presently land at Willoughby Spit, a point of land about two and a half miles distant from the cruiser. Despite wind and rain, Ely had decided to attempt a flight. "Watching a favorable opportunity between squalls, he had his engine started, and ran his machine down the incline at a rapid rate. As it left the platform it settled rapidly till it struck the water with a splash, which the spectators supposed marked the termination of the flight. Instead, however, the machine rose again and continued on its way. It reached a height of 150 feet or more, and traveled straight for the nearest land, where it descended without a mishap. Mr. Ely attributed his downward plunge to a faulty movement of his control wheel. When the machine struck the water, the propeller was damaged, and the spray flew up in his face, and so clouded his goggles that it was with the greatest difficulty that he was able to see his way to shore. After landing on the beach near the Hampton Roads Yacht Club, he found everything except the propeller in

good shape. He could have flown back to the cruiser had he deemed this expedient."

On the cover of the *Scientific American* for November 26, 1910, was a full-page illustration of this first flight from ship to shore. News of the exploit was widely proclaimed. Ely was accorded a place of high honor as a daring, spectacular, and successful aviator, and was awarded a prize of \$500 by the United States Aeronautical Reserve. The most significant feature of the flight, in the opinion of the *Scientific American*, was "the fact that the aeroplane started under its own power from the cruiser at rest. With but an 85-foot run and a 30-foot drop, and considering the bad weather conditions, this was an excellent performance."

According to the Navy this experiment "demonstrated the conditions governing the location of future platforms on shipboard for this purpose, and showed that they could be installed without interfering seriously with the other features of the ship." Moreover, "landing on or near a ship or returning with information after a scouting trip appears to be practicable", reported the Secretary of the Navy.

"This experiment and the advances which have been made in aviation", continued the annual report for 1910, "seem to demonstrate that it is des-

tined to perform some part in the naval warfare of the future. It appears likely that this will be limited to scouting. A scout which is not strong enough to pierce the enemy's line can get as near as possible and then send an aeroplane 30 or 40 miles, obtain valuable information and then return to the scout. Even if the aviator did not land on the scout he could be brought on board and deliver his information. The loss of an aeroplane would be of no moment, as the ship may easily carry others. The distinct value of service of this kind is easily seen.

"The department contemplates further experiments along these lines, with the belief that it will be necessary in the near future to equip all scouts with one or more aeroplanes to increase the distance at which information can be secured."

This success served as a powerful incentive for further adventures. Two months after his spectacular exploit in Hampton Roads, Ely was in San Francisco participating in another naval aviation experiment. Glenn H. Curtiss, who had trained several Army and Navy officers at his flying school in California, was anxious to demonstrate the value of aircraft in warfare. Again with the coöperation of the Navy, Ely made a twelve-mile flight in a Curtiss biplane from Selfridge Field to the deck of the cruiser *Pennsylvania*

which was anchored in San Francisco Bay. Thus the feasibility of flying from shore to ship was demonstrated.

For the purpose of accomplishing this landing a special platform had been erected on the stern of the vessel, and canvas shields had been stretched on each side to catch the machine if it should slide off the platform. Special arrangements were made to stop the airplane after it landed.

Ely left the field about 10:30 A. M. on January 17, 1911, climbed two thousand feet, and crossed the San Bruno hills at a great height. He then headed straight toward the warship. At the proper point he shut off his motor and glided down for a perfect landing. He had so little trouble in performing this feat that he believed he could do it nine times out of ten under moderate weather conditions. Although floats had been fitted beneath the lower plane on each side of the center section, this proved to be an unnecessary precaution. The aeroplane was "brought to rest by means of a score of ropes stretched across the platform above the two rails which ran its entire length. These ropes were attached to sand bags at each end, and they were found to act as an efficient brake in checking the momentum of the machine."

The flight of twelve miles was made in thirteen

minutes. Soon after Ely took off from Selfridge Field, the sailors "in the fighting tops of the warship" anchored "amid the dense shipping in San Francisco Bay" sighted him as a "tiny speck" above the hills. "The speck grew larger as it rapidly approached and the surfaces of the biplane were outlined against the sky. As it neared the harbor Ely's air craft descended rapidly until, when he flew over the *West Virginia* and the other smaller vessels, he was only 150 to 200 feet in the air. At just the right moment he shut off his motor and glided down to the platform on the stern of the *Pennsylvania*. He struck this 32x127-foot platform 25 feet from its outer end, which sloped downward 4 feet in 10."

After a reception of about an hour on shipboard, Ely returned to Selfridge Field the way he had come in sixteen minutes. This was the first round trip flight between shore and ship. It was the second flight Ely had made from ship to shore. This time he did not strike the water, but soared off for a perfect flight and a happy landing. Again Ely was widely acclaimed as a skillful aviator and again he was awarded a prize of \$500 by the United States Aeronautical Reserve.

Eugene B. Ely probably deserved the epithets that were applied to him. Contemporaries called him a "super-skillful pilot", a "hyper-daring dare-

devil", an adventurous and confident "knight of the air" who declared that given power enough he could "fly a barn door". He was born before the days of the automobile or the airplane, on October 22, 1886, on an Iowa farm six miles east of Williamsburg. His father, Nathan D. Ely, was later an attorney and served as a colonel in the United States Army during World War days. His mother was Emma Harrington, a resident of Williamsburg.

When he was about nine years old Eugene moved with his parents to Davenport, where he attended the city schools. While yet in his 'teens "Gene" became deeply interested in automobiles and went to work in a local garage. Presently he was recognized as an expert driver and mechanic. Leaving Davenport young Ely found employment in the town of Cosgrove in Johnson County, where he became chauffeur for Father Smyth, whose automobile was reputed to be "the best in the State". Ely was recognized, at least locally, as "the best driver in Iowa". For a considerable length of time Father Smyth and Ely held the automobile speed record between Iowa City and Davenport.

The story is told that some years later a resident of a nearby village and a friend of the young chauffeur, not having seen him about for some

time, inquired of Father Smyth where Ely had gone. The priest hesitated for a moment, and then with his distinctive Irish brogue, replied: "Ah yes, Ely, Ely, I remember him well. He became entangled in the snares of a woman. He's married now." Ely was indeed married, and his bride was Miss Mabel Hall of San Francisco, California.

Meanwhile, Ely had taken up his residence in California, where he was engaged in the automobile business and was known as an expert driver. In a short time he was conducting an auto stage line from northern California to Oregon.

It was while he was thus engaged that his inquiring and mechanical mind became interested in aviation. He joined the school which Glenn H. Curtiss had established, probably sometime in 1909. In this new adventure he soon became recognized as a leader in attempting to master the air. "No one had a clearer or cooler head, no one more thoroughly understood the mechanical requirements of aerial navigation." Recognizing him as a daring and skillful aviator, Curtiss induced Ely to join the Curtiss Exhibition Company in 1910 and become one of the leading demonstrators of the Curtiss-built airplanes. It was in this capacity that he performed his epoch-making

feats of flying to and from the decks of naval vessels.

But Ely was not content with making scientific flights for the Navy. He was eager to establish new speed records. As a competitor of J. C. Mars, Charles K. Hamilton, Hugh Robinson, C. C. Witmer, Lincoln Beachey, and other ace aviators of his day, he entered many races and won his full share. In 1910 he participated in the International Aviation Meet at the Belmont Park race course, Long Island, New York. In August of the following year he competed for a \$5000 prize in a race from New York to Philadelphia, but he lost this contest to his distinguished competitor, Lincoln Beachey, who in June had demonstrated the maneuverability of the aeroplane by flying down the Niagara River gorge and under the suspension bridge. Ely was also with the group of experienced aviators who entertained large crowds at Niagara Falls with their stunt flying.

Ely had a reputation for being a prudent flyer, but the thrills of stunt flying tempted him to take unnecessary risks. In October, 1911, he had a contract for a seven-day series of flights at the State Fair at Macon, Georgia. Huge crowds had witnessed the early performances with great interest. Perhaps the expectations of the spectators

prompted him to climax the exhibition by some extraordinarily reckless maneuvers. The daring "birdman" started his final flight on the 19th in his usual optimistic manner. He circled the field at a great height, whence he descended rapidly, and glided to a level in front of the amphitheatre. Imitating a favorite Beachey trick, he dipped steeply, but the motor failed to pull the plane up again. Instead of alighting on the wheels, the lower end of the cross frame struck the ground and the impact threw the young driver from the seat. Within a few minutes Eugene Ely was dead.

News of the fatal crash was flashed across the continent. Messages of condolence and floral offerings came from many friends who were widely scattered. That the career of one of America's great pioneer aviators had come to such a tragic end was universally lamented. His body was brought home to rest in the Harrington Cemetery near Williamsburg. There in a secluded spot on the Iowa prairie the mortal remains of Eugene B. Ely lie mouldering in the grave "but his soul goes marching on".

On February 16, 1933, President Hoover presented to Colonel Nathan D. Ely the Distinguished Flying Cross as a posthumous award to his son. Captain Walter N. Vernon, White House naval aide, explained that this recognition

of Eugene B. Ely was "for extraordinary achievement as a pioneer civilian aviator and for his significant contribution to the development of aviation in the United States Navy". Rear Admiral W. A. Moffett declared on that occasion that Ely had demonstrated by his flight from the *Birmingham* "that airplanes were not confined to land utility, but that they could be flown from ships at sea. The modern aircraft carrier is the logical materialization of that demonstration. His landing on the U. S. S. *Pennsylvania* in San Francisco Bay two months later was a further demonstration of the possibilities for use of landplanes on shipboard.

"Not only is recognition due him, however, for thus creating a dream of the future which has borne the fruits of reality, but for his experimentation which brought him in the end to an untimely death. His noteworthy contribution is undisputed, and it is fitting that the Congress of the United States should thus take cognizance of that contribution."

The thrills and adventures of those early exploits have faded into history but in the years to come, when the history of aviation shall be written, Eugene Ely will be remembered primarily as the aeronautical explorer who first flew from ship to shore.

J. A. SWISHER

## J. I. Cavett of Vandalia

Undoubtedly one of the most significant changes in our social order during the last three decades has been the decline of the small rural towns which played an important part in our society during the nineteenth century. This decline has been accompanied by the rapid rise of large cities. As an example of this, the proportion of the total population of the United States classified as rural by the United States census (that is, in centers of less than 2500) has declined from 54.2 per cent in 1910 to 43.5 per cent in 1940. Similarly, in Iowa this proportion declined during this same period from 69.4 per cent to 57.3 per cent. Two developments have contributed largely to this decline, namely, the automobile, which brought into being one of the most extensive and finest systems of highways in the world; and the rise of the mail-order houses. However, it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the social and economic changes which have wrought so much havoc to the rural towns and villages in the United States; rather, it is to describe one of these towns in central Iowa, two miles from where I was reared, and record some of the typical changes

that have occurred there, particularly in relation to a pioneer storekeeper.

The October 16, 1941, issue of the *Prairie City News*, published in the town of Prairie City, located seven miles from Vandalia, brought the news that J. I. Cavett, at the age of ninety-one, was closing his store in Vandalia after having spent seventy-five years of his life as a merchant in that community. In a way his experience corresponded to the rise and decline of the town he served. To three generations J. I. Cavett personified Vandalia.

According to the records, Vandalia, first called Quincy, was founded by John Quincy Deakin who, in the autumn of 1845, rode up the Indian trail on horseback from Henry County. Evidently being well impressed with this part of the Territory of Iowa, and being himself a surveyor, he took up land from the government and shortly thereafter laid out the village. Twenty years later, in 1865, Vandalia had a population of nearly 500. According to the *History of Jasper County* published in 1878, supplemented by other information, the village then had four general stores, two mills, two hotels, three blacksmith shops, two wagon shops, a plow factory, two shoe shops, a harness shop, a cooper shop, a pump factory, and a carding machine. The stagecoach on the route

from Keokuk to Omaha stopped at one of the Vandalia hotels. There was also a saloon in the town.

Now the population has shrunk to about sixty. One small general store started a few years ago is run by a grandson of Rev. George Miller who preached for many years in the village. There are no other business places.

That the early settlers wanted to keep in touch with their relatives and with other happenings of interest is evidenced by the fact that a post office was established in the village on February 17, 1848, under the name of Con. The founder of the village, John Q. Deakin, served as the first postmaster. This name was changed to Vandalia on March 13, 1856. J. I. Cavett became the postmaster on July 20, 1895, and continued in this capacity until the office was closed on March 30, 1907.

Vandalia was served by a "star route", whereby mail was brought from Des Moines twenty miles away every other day by horse-drawn vehicles. The mail carriers, among whom were included Press Adams, Jonathan Fleming, Ed Cooper, and Jim Rose, would go to Des Moines one day and return the following day with the mail. This star route was a forerunner of rural free delivery, for the mail carrier accommodated

residents who lived along the route by delivering their letters and papers in passing. Generally they would also take produce including butter and eggs to the stores in their light-weight "Democrat" wagon, and on the return trip would bring back goods along with the mail. Such mail as was not delivered en route was distributed at the post office.

It was my duty as a boy to ride my pony to the post office each Saturday afternoon to get the week's mail. Since my father was very fond of reading, we took several papers and magazines. Among those I recall were the *St. Louis Republican*, the *Kansas City Star*, and the *Farm Journal*. In this latter each month there was a little squib about Peter Tumbledown.

Mrs. E. C. Webb, who came by covered wagon from Ohio to Iowa in 1865 at the age of five, went to school in Vandalia between then and 1870. Although now eighty-one years of age, she has a most remarkable memory. "The Vandalia schoolhouse was located about where it is now", she says. "It was an old-fashioned building — one long room heated by a stove or stoves (I'm not sure which) and furnished with old-fashioned wooden benches and desks. At the time I went to school, there were about a hundred pupils enrolled, ranging in ages from beginners to grown

boys and girls twenty-one and twenty-two years old. Among the pupils enrolled were five Cavetts — Orlando, John [of whom this story is written], Nora, Oscar, and Sylvester.

"There were two teachers whose names were Shaw and McFall. All classes were in that one room, two at a time — one in each end of the building. Reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and spelling were most important.

"The schoolhouse was sort of a social center for Sunday school and other programs. I remember attending a Community Christmas Tree there, and seven or eight years later my sister and I with some other friends attended a large school exhibition put on by people of the community. They had a home talent negro minstrel, with good singing and orchestra music."

At one time Vandalia was an independent school district. With the loss in population the school enrollment has of course declined, until today there is only a one-teacher school with twenty-two pupils. Since 1937 it has reverted to the jurisdiction of the school township. Back in the nineties the Vandalia school had a reputation of being difficult to manage. One of the teachers who was able to control it by one means or another was my first teacher — Frank S. Shankland, now District Judge in Des Moines.

The Baptists built a church soon after the Civil War. It is still in use and so has served the community for a long time, not only for religious services, but for a large number of funerals. Also, each year the Memorial Day services are held in this church. That was an important event in my boyhood memories — to see the church filled with people and to see the flower girls all dressed in white. One such girl was assigned to decorate the grave of each soldier buried in the cemetery. In the horse-and-buggy days, these girls marched from the church to the cemetery about one and one-half miles away. Although the village has declined in most other respects, that is not true so far as churches are concerned. A second church was built a few years ago, so the village now has two. Moreover, money was raised by subscription to rehabilitate the Baptist Church.

Probably the most important factor in the decline of Vandalia was the lack of a railroad. The early settlers hoped that the Rock Island would pass through on the way to Des Moines, but the route was located farther north through Newton and Colfax. Then there were prospects of attracting the Des Moines Valley Railroad. Indeed, during the activities preliminary to building that road, according to the county history of 1878, "a survey was made through Vandalia, from which

incident the people drew strong hope of securing the road; but in this they were doomed to disappointment, for the settled policy of the projectors of the enterprise, which was an outgrowth of the Des Moines Navigation Company, was not so much to build railroad track as to get land". Consequently a longer route was followed through Monroe and Prairie City. And when the Wabash railroad was extended to Des Moines, it followed the Des Moines River. Thus Vandalia was left between these two railroad lines, with practically no hope of ever having the benefit of that form of transportation.

The history of the village undoubtedly would have been much different had a plan for the location of the State capital been carried out. Three commissioners were appointed by the General Assembly in 1847 to select a new site as near the geographical center of Iowa as possible. After exploring several eligible places they designated a spot on "a beautiful prairie in Jasper County, between the Desmoines and Skunk rivers" about six miles northeast of Vandalia. They laid out a town called Monroe City and sold lots, but made the mistake of investing in some of the choicest locations themselves. The next General Assembly abandoned the whole project. If the seat of State government had remained there, the village of

Vandalia, which had been laid out two years before, would probably now be a suburb of the capital city.

Since Vandalia during the time of the Civil War was the largest town in that vicinity, it must have been the center of a good deal of activity. According to one historian who described the rallies held in the nearby groves during the war, the residents would go to the store and buy whole bolts of muslin which were unrolled on the grass in place of a tablecloth. Dinner was then spread on the cloth, and when the meal was over some prominent person spoke.

One enterprising writer made this statement: "In 1860 when the country called for help, not a place of its size could be found flowing with more patriotism than this little village that sent out regiment after regiment." For a village of 500 population to furnish several regiments seems to overstate the probability a trifle.

In this connection Mrs. Webb has described a Fourth of July celebration which she attended at Vandalia shortly after the Civil War. "I only remember attending one celebration of the Fourth of July at Vandalia. It was held at the west edge of Vandalia in the form of a picnic, with patriotic speeches and a brass band hired from an outside town. There was a circle swing run by horse-

power, and of course there were stands selling lemonade and other things to eat and drink. In the evening there was a platform dance. The music for dancing was furnished by a fiddler with some one to accompany him on an organ, and the caller. The platform was large enough for two sets at a time. Old and young participated. People loaded into wagons and came for miles, and there was a good crowd — I should say between five and eight hundred."

With a population of this number it is strange that Vandalia was never incorporated. Undoubtedly there must have been a large number of smaller incorporated towns in the State. According to the 1940 census there are about forty incorporated places in Iowa with populations less than 100. Three of them in Dubuque County each have fewer than forty inhabitants. Vandalia throughout its history has been governed simply as a part of rural Des Moines Township. For many years Ed Cooper, who, like the founder of the village, John Q. Deakin, came from Henry County, was justice of the peace. Apparently he, together with the other township officials, was able to provide satisfactory local government. Ed Hayes, a farmer who lived two miles east of the village and who was much interested in the law, gave legal advice to persons in and around the village.

Obviously, the loss of the post office in 1907 was a serious blow to Vandalia. Occasionally coal mining contributed to the prosperity of the village. At one time a paper called the *Vandalia Visitor* was published monthly by Ira E. Draper, generally known as Ellis Draper. At the head of the paper was printed this statement: "Owes No Man Anything". The subscription rate was a dollar per year, and according to the records the circulation was about one thousand.

A number of physicians have been prominent in the history of Vandalia. These included Dr. H. C. Potter, who practiced in the village around 1870. According to Mrs. Webb, who remembers him, "He was a good doctor, giving of his time, night and day, to the people of the surrounding community." He was followed by Dr. Carson Kitchen, who had taught school in the village and later returned to practice medicine. As a boy I recall Dr. A. M. Norris, to whom I was frequently sent for medicine. I remember, too, that he always inquired how much money I had, planning each time to leave me five or ten cents to get candy at the store. Also, in the person of Henry Gorham the village had a resident who for many years practiced medicine to some extent but mainly ran a drug store. The house in which he lived was a most interesting one located immediately west of

the store. Just back of it was the well with two buckets on a rope and pulley for drawing the water.

Undoubtedly the most notable structure in the village was the Pulver house located on the hill east of the store. A number of years ago the Congressional Library requested for its files blueprints and descriptions of representative pioneer homes in Iowa. This house was one of eleven selected by Edgar R. Harlan for this purpose. Erected about 1857, it was a seventeen-room structure of the Swiss chalet type. It was built with wooden pegs and bolts instead of nails. The lower portion of the dwelling was constructed of stone, while the upper parts were walled-in brick with outside wood facing. Unfortunately, this fine example of pioneer architecture was destroyed by fire in 1939.

It is of interest to note that this house was occupied throughout its entire existence by the Pulver family. The builder, Daniel Pulver, was followed by his son, William, who in turn was followed by his daughter, Irma, who, with her husband, Jay McCoy, lived in the house at the time it was destroyed. Daniel Pulver was a furniture and casket maker, using solid black walnut which grew in abundance in that community. He used the first floor for his workshop and storage place for the caskets. I recall as a boy trying to keep

away from this place, which then seemed very spooky. Later, when I was a young man, my wife and I served as best man and lady at the marriage of Altha, one of William Pulver's daughters.

Such names as Wagner, Danner, Thompson, Hourine, Van Horn, Wes and Tom Brown, Deakin, Hatfield, Draper, Hayes, and Means were familiar as pioneers who had played an important part in the development of the community. Another character which interested me very much was Max Smith, who was alleged to be a hypnotist. Also, he "witched" for water when a farmer was going to dig a well. This he did by taking a small fork of an apple tree and holding one of the prongs in each hand with the main stem pointing at an angle toward the ground. He would then walk over the area where the farmer wanted the well. If he passed over a good vein of water, then, according to his theory, the main prong would be pulled toward the ground, thus turning the stems in his hands. He did this one time on my father's farm before digging a well. Observing my skepticism, he insisted that I should try the procedure. I must admit that at the spot where a very good well was dug (which is now still in use) there was a downward pull on the main prong. Whether this was merely a coincidence or whether there is really something to the procedure

I do not know. At any rate, I still vividly recall that experience.

For at least fifty of the seventy-five years which J. I. Cavett was a storekeeper he was a dominant figure of the community. No matter what the occasion — Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Christmas, funerals, church, school, or politics — Mr. Cavett was at the center of it. He made generous contributions to all worthy causes, largely controlled the votes of the village and community, and in many other ways served as spokesman.

Moreover, with the low operating expenses, since he ran his business almost single-handed, and being willing to accept a small margin of profit, he attracted trade for many miles. In fact, as a boy I was much impressed with the so-called "big" farmers who came for miles to buy huge quantities of groceries, shoes, and clothing because of the bargains offered. His store was not a grocery store, but in modern parlance a department store, because he not only sold groceries, shoes, and clothing, but dry goods, hardware, harness, machinery, and patent medicines. Furthermore, if he did not have what a customer wanted he would order it from the "runner" the next time he came.

With such a large volume of trade, he did much credit business. Growing out of that he took

poultry, hogs, cattle, horses, grain, and what-have-you on these accounts. Many customers took unfair advantage of Mr. Cavett's willingness to grant credit to any one who needed it. With the coming of automobiles and the development of mail-order houses, it was a common practice among some people to go to Des Moines or order from a mail-order house when they had cash, but when they needed credit they went to J. I. Cavett. As a result of this he lost many thousands of dollars in bad debts. Typical of his reaction to this development in its early stages, I recall a large sign which he placed on the front of his store bearing these words: "Take Your Butter and Eggs to Sears & Roebuck." He adopted a practice of issuing due bills. These were given in lieu of goods not traded for produce at the time, but could be turned in later in exchange for supplies. They read in this manner: "Due John Holy — Two dollars and eighty-four cents (\$2.84).

J. I. Cavett."

Today we hear a great deal about public forums where current problems are discussed and solutions proposed. Well, during my boyhood — and no doubt for a long time before — Cavett's store maintained a perpetual forum. Near the back of the main store building was an enormous heating stove. Surrounding it and extending about two

or three feet in each direction was an ash pit kept in place by "two-by-four's" attached edgewise to the floor. This provided sufficient scope for the most random spitter. Just beyond the pit were some old double school seats for both the audience and the participants. In the winter, in particular, questions of both local and national significance were daily decided in this forum. Sometimes the smoke was so thick it was a little difficult to see the issues clearly. Nevertheless, in true democratic fashion, and accompanied by strong and picturesque language, these issues were settled with a finality which left nothing in doubt.

The going here was especially good during heated presidential campaigns. The one I recall clearly as a small boy was the Bryan-McKinley campaign in 1896. Mr. Cavett, being a staunch Republican (he has voted for every Republican candidate for president beginning with Ulysses S. Grant), led the McKinley forces. In fact, his control of the community was so strong that only the most loyal and courageous Democrats would speak against him. Among these were Rev. George Miller, John Hayes (who for many years was elected township assessor by the Democrats), his brother Ed Hayes, and my father. On the night of the election Mr. Cavett and a group of loyal Republicans, among whom was my grand-

father, went to Prairie City to get the returns by telegraph. They did not return until the next morning, when, according to the reports, they were still a little tipsy.

What has been recorded here for Vandalia could be duplicated for hundreds of similar communities throughout the country. The passing of these community centers is to be regretted, for they made a significant contribution to democracy. One of the frequent observations made today is that local government has broken down. When a community now has a difficult problem, the first reaction is to appeal to the State government, and thence to national authorities. Vandalia in its heyday never thought of passing on its problems to Des Moines or Washington. The only direct knowledge I had as a boy that the Federal government actually existed was through the post office, and the fact that every three months my grandfather who had served in the Civil War got a pension check for \$36.

When I was in Vandalia for a visit about a year ago and saw Mr. Cavett's store, which once teemed with life and activity, now deserted; the "back room", once filled with hardware, machinery, kerosene, and the like, now torn away; the shelves, once filled to overflowing with goods of all kinds and the candy case once designed to

make a boy's mouth water, now empty, I had a feeling of depression because this had come to pass. Here was an enterprise which had once supplied the life blood to a bustling, thriving community, now no longer functioning.

Yet despite all this, there was the man who had served the community for three quarters of a century — ninety-one years of age — still bravely trying to carry on. The announcement that the store had closed merely made official what in reality had already happened. As I pondered over these things I was reminded of the words of Oliver Goldsmith in "The Deserted Village":

But now the sounds of population fail,  
No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale,  
No busy steps the grass-grown footway tread,  
For all the bloomy flush of life is fled.

T. C. HOLY

## An Iowa Anecdote

### GRANDMA'S WOODEN SOW

It was a morning in early summer back in Iowa's infancy when great grandmother was young. Great grandfather was away driving cattle from his farm in Poweshiek County to Davenport. The trip would require several weeks. Grandma was looking after the stock while he was gone.

During the night, a sow had died farrowing eleven pigs. As grandmother stood looking at the dead sow, she wasted no time wailing over the loss. Instead, true to her Dutch ideals of thrift, she began trying to devise some way to save the baby pigs. It was apparent at once to her practical mind that the loss of both the sow and pigs would cut entirely too big a hole in the profits.

It was impossible to feed the pigs on the bottle as she did not have the necessary equipment. Besides, the bottle method would consume too much time. There were cows to milk, hogs to feed, the garden to tend, household tasks to perform, and no one but grandma to do all the chores. She had to find some way of feeding the orphans which would be a good substitute for nature's method and not take too much time.

All at once she hit upon a plan. Whenever great grandmother made up her mind to do anything, she started right at it. She hunted around until she found an old log which had been hollowed out for a watering trough. Along each side of this log she bored holes. Then she stuffed rags into these holes. She poured milk into the log and trained the wee pigs to suckle the rags. In this way the pigs were fed and they thrived on the nourishment received from their wooden mother.

Upon great grandfather's return, he laughed long and heartily when he first beheld the greedy little pigs tugging away at the old log, each one at his accustomed place. He poked all sorts of fun at grandma's wooden sow and predicted an untimely end for the pigs.

But, grandma had the last laugh. Her pioneer resourcefulness won out, for every single pig survived and all grew into strong healthy porkers. How she did enjoy relating her experience of raising those orphan pigs. And she lived to be ninety-three.

HAZEL B. TERABERRY

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