Comment by the Editor

VAGARIES OF THE CENSUS

The census taker is instructed to remind each person who gives the intimate details of his own life and that of his family that all replies must be the truth and the whole truth. So insistent is the government on this, that census records are considered good authority as to age, but a critical researcher soon discovers that census records are sometimes fallible. Memory is not always a true guide and heads of families — usually the fathers — do not, it seems, always remember the ages of their children. Then, too, the census taker may make a mistake in recording the data given him.

Take, for example, the Stewart family as recorded in the Iowa census for 1856 and the Federal enumerations in 1860 and 1870. The head of the family, M. L. Stewart (Mathew L. Stewart in 1870), gave his age and the age of his wife correctly, but his wife appears as Lawrancy in 1856, Lancy in 1860, and Larency in 1870. The age of twin daughters, Emaline and Evaline, is given as one year in 1860, but Eva and Emma, apparently these same twins, are reported as nine years old in 1870. Mrs. Orvis, herself, is listed as

forty-eight in 1850 and fifty in 1860, but a son-in-law might well merely guess at the age of his wife's mother. Another puzzle is the identity of Martha and Harriet Stewart. Harriet appears in the 1856 census at the age of one year. She is not listed in the 1860 census, but reappears in the 1870 census and her age is given at fourteen. The 1860 census has a Martha and her age is given as five, but there is no Martha in either the census of 1856 or 1870. Are Martha and Harriet the same girl? Perhaps her name was Martha Harriet or Harriet Martha. Perhaps the parents did not agree on the name. Whatever happened, it appears that the census records for those years might be considered somewhat inconclusive evidence as to age.

R. A. G.