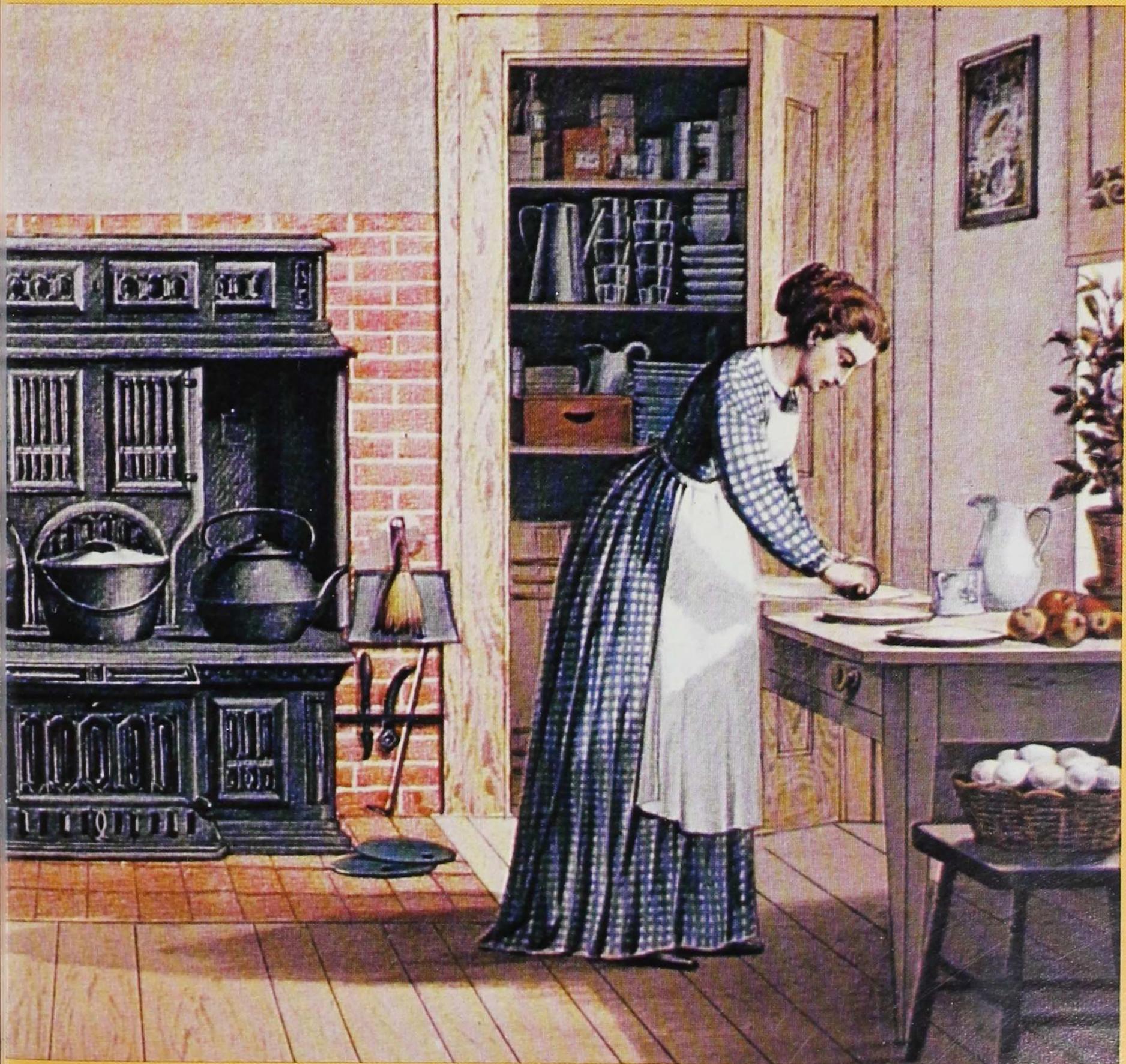


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PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 63 NUMBER 2

MARCH/APRIL 1982





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The
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Loren N. Horton, Acting Director

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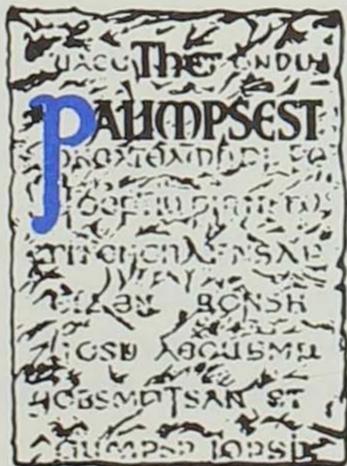
CONTENTS

The Dubuque Female Seminary: Catharine Beecher's Blueprint
for 19th-Century Women's Education, by Robert E. Belding34

Women at Home: A Photographic Essay
by Mary Bennett42

Davenport's Golden Building Years
by Edmund H. Carroll, Jr.52

Cover: A Prang lithograph of the 1870s presents an idealized portrait of the domestic environment in which most Iowa women worked in the nineteenth century, but the photographic essay by Mary Bennett appearing in this issue of The Palimpsest offers a more candid view of circumstances among earlier generations of Iowa women. In another article, Robert E. Belding examines the ideas of educator Catharine Beecher, whose Dubuque Female Seminary sought to teach young Iowa women the practical arts necessary for efficient housekeeping. Together the two articles suggest the social and intellectual context in which pioneer feminists such as Mason City's Carrie Chapman developed their ideas about the need for change in the relations between the sexes. (Bettmann Archive)

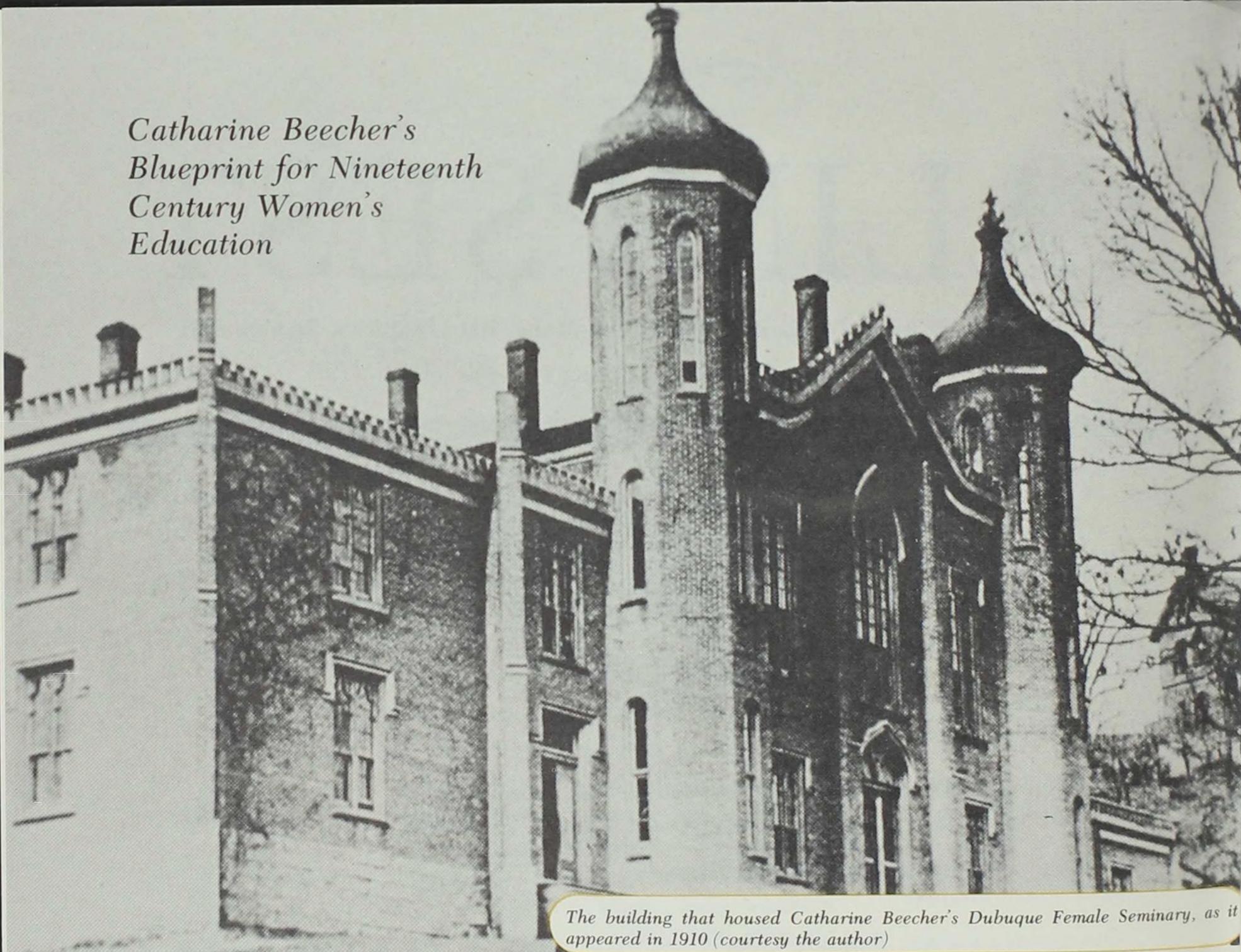


The Meaning of the Palimpsest

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 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.

*Catharine Beecher's
Blueprint for Nineteenth
Century Women's
Education*



The building that housed Catharine Beecher's Dubuque Female Seminary, as it appeared in 1910 (courtesy the author)

THE DUBUQUE FEMALE SEMINARY

by Robert E. Belding

Mention education in Iowa in a discussion of the state's history before the Civil War and the image that most often comes to mind is that of a log schoolhouse, a class of about a dozen students ranging from children to young men, and a teacher whose own education extended only a bit beyond that of the students he or she was teaching. Even the oldest Iowa towns along the Mississippi had not progressed far beyond the frontier stage of development by this time, but there were a number of serious attempts to

provide Iowa's population with educational opportunities on a par with the established eastern schools of the time. One of these was the Dubuque Female Seminary, founded by Catharine Beecher in 1853.

Catharine Beecher was a member of one of the most illustrious families in the intellectual and religious ferment in America in the antebellum decades. Her father was the prominent Congregational minister, Lyman Beecher, and she was a sister of Henry Ward Beecher, one of slavery's most active opponents, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As a member of a well-to-do New Eng-

land family, Catharine received the standard private education for young ladies of her time, including drawing, painting, and music. But this did not prepare her very well for supervising the large Beecher household after the death of her mother when she was sixteen, a fact that no doubt influenced the strongly practical character of the schools she later established.

In 1824 Catharine founded a very successful private girls' school in Hartford, Connecticut, and in 1832, when her father became the president of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, she founded the Western Female Institute there. Catharine's health problems and the financial stringency that followed the Panic of 1837 brought an end to the school, though it had flourished for its brief lifespan.

By the late 1830s, Catharine Beecher had become convinced of the need for new educational opportunities in the rough-hewn cities of the growing West, and from Cincinnati she moved on to found the Milwaukee Female College in 1850. While she hoped to make her permanent home in Milwaukee, Beecher also established colleges at Kalamazoo, Michigan, at Quincy, Illinois, and at Dubuque.

Dubuque's 3,000 people welcomed the formation of Beecher's new school with open arms. The city had early gained a bustling prosperity based first on lead mining in the region and later on the steamboat trade on the Mississippi River. Several private schools had been established in the city, but they had proved to be short-lived, and no public school system had yet grown up to replace them. As a result, when Catharine Beecher visited the city on a fund-raising campaign for her school she was hailed as a "household divinity."

The building constructed to house the Dubuque Female Seminary, renamed the Dubuque Female College in 1854, was something of an architectural oddity. With turrets and battlements and lacy spires, it took on an oriental appearance, a fortress-like structure seemingly designed to protect its occupants

from the less-civilized elements of the community and, if necessary, from Indian attack. The Dubuque *Miners' Express* described it as "retired, elevated, healthy and romantic."

Though the oriental style of the College's home might have suggested the opulence and leisure of the pampered upper class, the blueprint that Catharine Beecher devised for her schools emphasized practicality in its list of courses and propriety in its regulations on student deportment. Reacting against her own education in the niceties of social life, Beecher's goal was to train young women who would be proficient teachers early in their lives and efficient homemakers after their marriage. Disagreeing with many of the women's rights activists of her time, she did not intend to provide her students with an education in the then male-dominated professions, but to train



Catharine Beecher (courtesy the author)

them to be successful in the areas open to women in American society at the time.

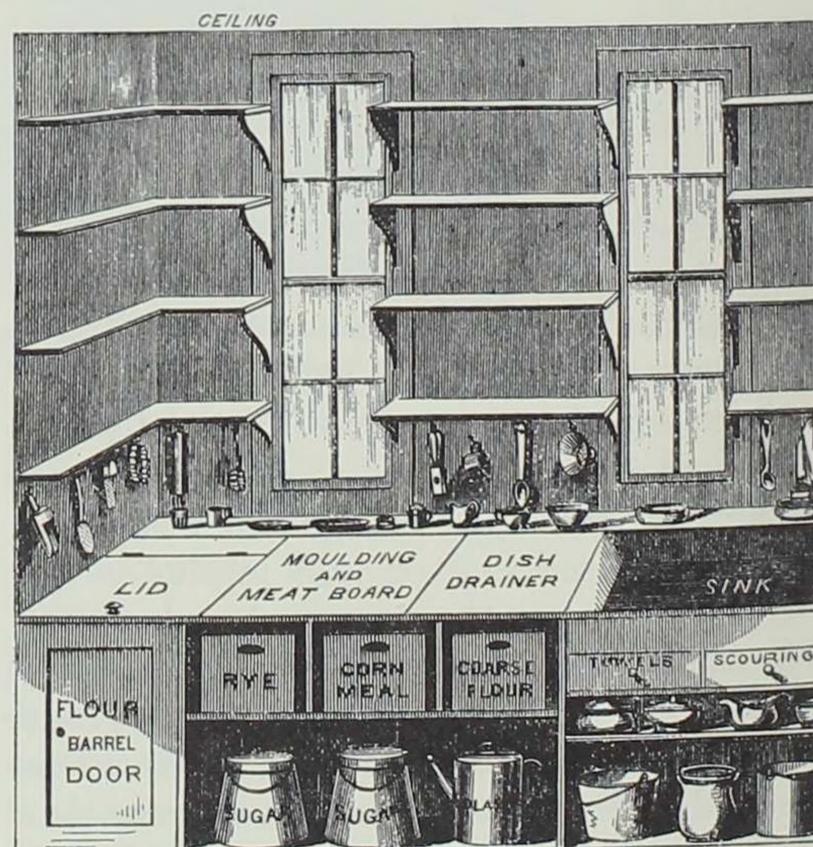
To provide what Beecher considered to be a proper atmosphere for study, the college catalog specified in detail the type of conduct that would be either required or prohibited in the school. One statement on classroom manners, for example, reminded the girls that "movement will be limited to recitation or the exercise of penmanship. The rustling of skirts will not be tolerated." Warnings about corridor behavior were less specific. The catalog, and a notice posted in the hallway, vaguely admonished: "Do not leave anything in the school corridors which will damage your character." A "narrowly modest" mirror was provided in the entry hall, but the students were warned not to tarry before it for more than a minute at a time lest they become vain. They were also warned that such idle games as chess and checkers would not be allowed anywhere on school grounds, and that "without exception females are to contain all emotions of anger, fretfulness and discontent."

Other regulations required that the students appear at school in a drably-colored dress filled out by at least seven layers of petticoats, and to have an umbrella and a proper pair of mud shoes. Headgear was limited to one orthodox bonnet. If jewelry was worn to school, the student was to surrender it to the headmistress upon arrival and to pick it up at the end of the day, along with a firm reprimand. The equipment the students were to supply was fairly simple: an atlas, a Bible, and a copy of Beecher's own text on the operation of a Christian home. Since this work, entitled *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, had already achieved widespread popularity throughout the country, many of the students no doubt simply brought along the family copy from home.

Though the college was a day school and all its students were commuters, Beecher re-

quired the students to eat their noon meal at the school, and her female teachers ate with them to serve as commendable models of table manners. Lunch was, in fact, listed as a non-credit class in the school's catalog.

The severity of the regulations that Beecher outlined for her students gives the Dubuque Female College the appearance of having been a solemn and silent cloister, and indeed Beecher was described by a visitor to her school in Milwaukee as "a kind of lady-abbess in educational matters." But the regulations were not unusually severe for girls' schools of the time. Beecher simply adapted them from her successful schools in the East and from the ideas followed by Emma Willard in her girls' school in Troy, New York and Mary Lyon, who



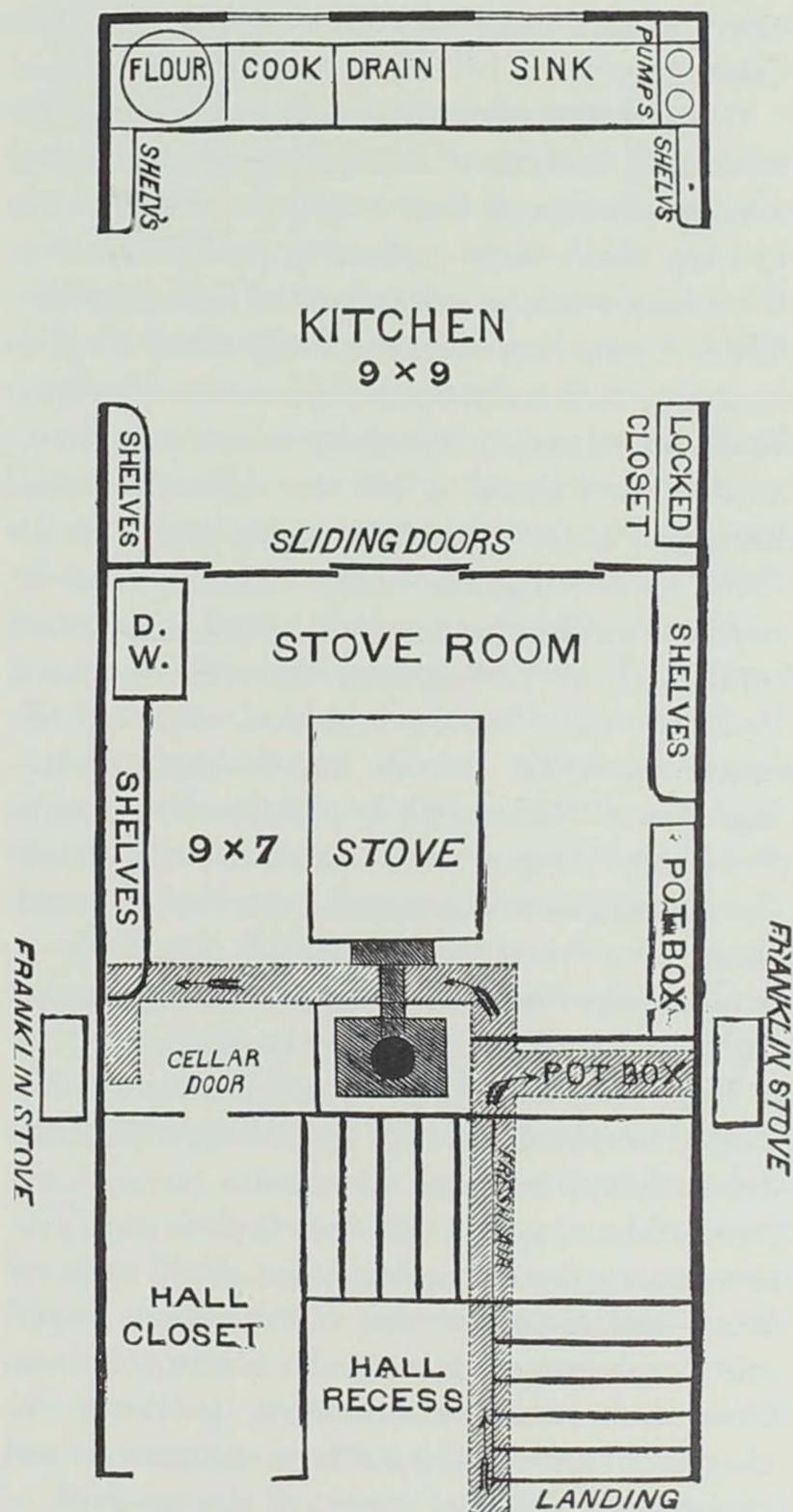
"In most large houses, the table furniture, the cooking materials and utensils, the sink, and the eating room, are at such distances apart, that half the time and strength is employed in walking back and forth to collect and return the articles used," wrote Catharine Beecher in 1869. Here is her plan for an efficient sink and cooking-form, reprinted here from *American Woman's Home*, published by Catharine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. (SHSI)

had founded Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts.

Since the graduates of the Dubuque Female College were expected to be homemakers for most of their lives, Beecher made home economics the core of its curriculum. And the core of the home economics course was Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. This was intended to be an American text on the efficient management of an American home. It was designed to replace the standard European works that had been in use up to this point and that included, for example, discussions of the place of butlers and other domestics in the operation of a properly-run English mansion. Beecher, in contrast, described a home that was to be largely without servants and that therefore needed to take advantage of efficient planning and the labor-saving inventions that were becoming more widespread as the century progressed.

Beecher drew most of her ideas from her own early experiences in running the Beecher family household in Connecticut and Ohio. She had always had a preoccupation—not to say an obsession—with her own health, and as a result her *Treatise* included many valuable recommendations on heating and lighting a home and on a daily program of exercise. Many of Beecher's concerns were, in fact, only beginning to be recognized as important influences on individual health in the mid-nineteenth century, and the popularity of her text went a long way toward promoting them.

In her plan of domestic economy, Beecher indicated that the mother in the ideal home would need scheduled time away from her children, so she urged that they be sent for six hours a day to a nursery school, and later to a common school. (School attendance was not compulsory in most of the country at this time.) At nursery school, which she hoped would be taught by the products of institutions that followed her ideas, children would acquire habits that would be reinforced in the properly run home. Cooperation, self-denial, and benevo-



Floor plan of the kitchen and stove room described in *American Woman's Home*. Glazed sliding doors keep kitchen heat and odors from spreading through the house. (SHSI)

lence were, Beecher maintained, three qualities prerequisite to selflessness and service to God, and these qualities, along with consistency and honesty, would be embodied in the ideal teacher and passed along to her students. Even in the nursery school there would be mental discipline in the form of instruction in

the qualities necessary for molding Christian character.

Beyond home economics, Beecher's plan for educating students at the College also included a range of subjects that would serve them both in their short-term careers as teachers and in their longer careers as informed homemakers. Chief among these was the study of the English language and its proper expression. The girls read, for example, carefully censored classics so that they could select the right models of literature both for their students and later for their own children. Their leisure time as mothers could also be well spent, they were reminded, by poring over the same selected literature. The works included many of the newer American authors, like Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Fenimore Cooper. This, she believed, would not only acquaint the native-born students with their own heritage, it would also help to Americanize the many hundreds of immigrant children found in cities like Dubuque.

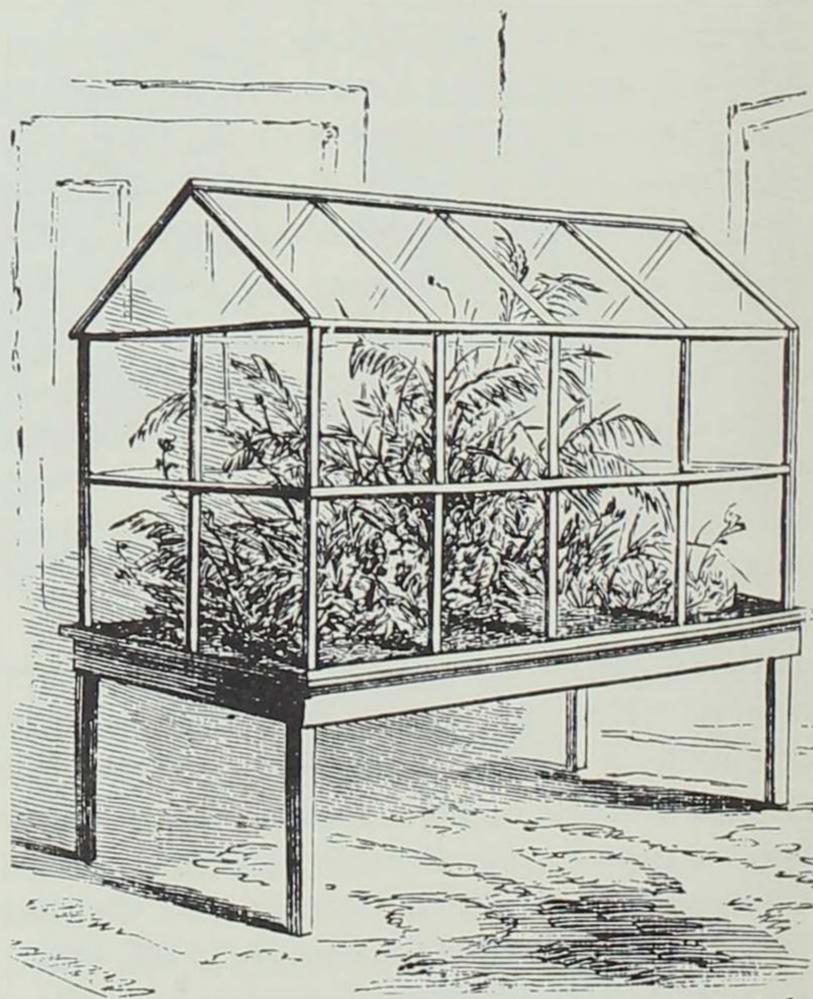
The academy's English instruction also included versification and, lest a wife embarrass her husband in social situations, correct pronunciation. By the nineteenth century, personal correspondence had been raised to an art form, and to insure that her students would enjoy a lifetime of leisurely correspondence from the parlor desk (and to promote the character traits of sympathy, imagination, and perception) Beecher stressed the analysis of classical essays and practice in student composition. There was, however, no room for foreign languages in her prescription for the Dubuque school. She considered strange tongues to be a superfluous adornment suited only to wealthy homes; English should suffice as practical equipment for a Christian home.

Arithmetic was to be included in the academy's curriculum, using Beecher's own textbook, which employed problems involving kitchen measures and grain bins. But Beecher was careful not to include higher mathematics

in the offerings, because she believed an eastern professor's statement that "the subject would cause women to forsake having children, so charmed would they be with quadratic equations." Nor would she teach philosophy in her school, for she shared the common belief that the subject would certainly weaken the female constitution so that she would be unable to bear normal children.

Though Catharine rebelled against many of the traditional religious beliefs of the rest of the Beecher family, she did include a strong spiritual element in her school's curriculum. The three religious courses were "Evidences of Christianity," "Moral Lessons," and "The Bible." These were required "in order to render all teachers grave," she said. The content of each subject was clearly ordered in sound

continued page 40



Design for a "Ward case," recommended by Catharine Beecher as a way busy homemakers might enjoy "a fragment of the green woods brought in and silently growing; it will refresh many a weary hour to watch it." (SHSI)

The Beecher Family

The influence that the Beecher family—Lyman Beecher and his succession of three wives and thirteen children—had on American intellectual life before the Civil War can be expressed in three words: religion, education, and abolition. The antebellum decades were a time of ferment in American thinking about these issues, and at one time or another a Beecher could be found at the center of each movement for change.

Lyman Beecher was the most traditional member of the family in his religious views, having been strongly influenced by Timothy Dwight in his years as a student at Yale. Though he was trained in the Calvinist orthodoxy of the New England tradition of Jonathan Edwards, he followed a new school of Calvinism that stressed the freedom of the human will and the religious experience of revivalism. Too conservative for some Congregationalists, too liberal for others, nevertheless he did influence the course of American religious thought, first as a minister in Boston and then as president of the newly established Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati from 1832 to 1850.

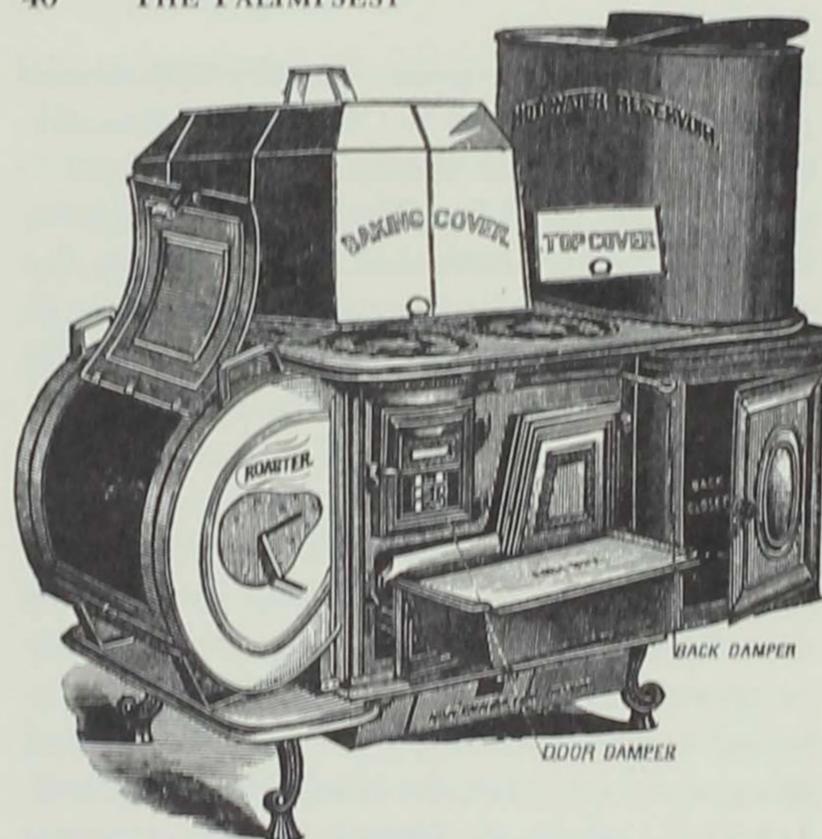
Lyman Beecher expected all his sons to be ministers, and four did in fact become prominent Congregational ministers, though not without a great deal of religious questioning on their part. Henry Ward Beecher was the most influential of the four. Speaking from the platform of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York (he never spoke from a pulpit in his own church), Henry attracted a weekly audience of from two to three thousand people to hear his energetic sermons on a wide range of issues, social as well as religious.

Though the Beechers were a New England family, their influence on education came mainly in the western states. In addition to

Catharine's work in promoting the formation of academies for women in Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa and Lyman Beecher's years as president of the Lane Theological Seminary, the Beechers contributed to expanding the educational opportunities of the West through Edward Beecher's service as president of Illinois College at Jacksonville from 1830 to 1844.

The third area where the Beechers left their mark was in their opposition to slavery. Both Lyman and Henry Ward Beecher denounced slavery in their sermons, taking the position that slavery should be confined within its contemporary limits so that eventually its own internal weaknesses would destroy it. Edward Beecher, too, aided the abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy's efforts in Illinois before Lovejoy's death at the hands of a mob at Alton in 1837. But the Beechers' best-known attack on slavery came from Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet had been strongly affected by the condition of the fugitive slaves she saw being channelled northward through Cincinnati. She wrote her novel later at Brunswick, Maine while her husband, Calvin Stowe, was serving on the faculty of Bowdoin College. When her story appeared in book form in 1852, it struck a spark of public sentiment, selling three hundred thousand copies within a year. Ultimately, it convinced hundreds of thousands of northerners of the moral indefensibility of slavery as an institution.

Perhaps the Beechers' greatest contribution to American society in the first half of the nineteenth century was their enthusiasm for the causes they supported. Many of their ideas about religion, education, and slavery were innovative and experimental, but many others were simply part of the intellectual climate in which they lived. Whether from a church's pulpit, a speaker's platform, or a college lectern, what the members of the Beecher family provided was the energy to spark people to action, action that they might not otherwise have taken.—Alan M. Schroder



"With proper management of dampers, one ordinary-sized coal-hod of anthracite coal will, for twenty-four hours, keep the stove running, keep seventeen gallons of water hot at all hours, bake pies and puddings in the warm closet, heat flat-irons under the back cover, boil tea kettle and one pot under the front cover, bake bread in the oven, and cook a turkey in the tin roaster in front. The author has numerous friends, who, after trying the best ranges, have dismissed them for this stove, and in two or three years cleared the whole expense by the saving of fuel."—Catharine Beecher, *American Woman's Home* (SHSI)

Note on Sources

Sources authored by Catharine Beecher include: "Female Education," *American Journal of Education*, II (number 45); *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper, 1855); *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (New York: Harper, 1874). Textbooks by Beecher were also consulted, including *The American Woman's Home* (New York: Ford, 1869) and *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (New York: Harper, 1855).

Other sources include: "Catharine Beecher," in *The Educated Woman in America*, ed. Barbara Cross (New York: Teachers College Press, 1965); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Mae Elizabeth Harveson, "Catharine Beecher, Pioneer Educator" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1932); *Dubuque Miners' Express*, May 16, 1853; and a catalog titled *Dubuque Female Seminary, Circular* (Dubuque, 1855).

Beecher fashion and their combined effect was intended to "stuff the cranium with moral and mental nourishment." If anyone questioned these outcomes at the time, their words apparently did not survive. Indeed, faculty and students who might not have agreed with these elevated purposes would not have been attracted to the institution in the first place.

Required chapel attendance complemented the array of Christian courses. As a starter for each day it "ignited" the program and invariably included choral exercises, scripture reading, prayer, and a brief religious exposition—always conducted by Beecher herself when she was in town. Her own puritan background echoed in her printed warning that "all light conduct in the sanctuary is offensive to God." Monday's chapel service reflected the honor system practiced among the students, as a show of hands indicated who had attended church the previous day.

Women's schools were the first to teach biology (that is, health) apart from medical training. Young ladies were perceived as frail vessels, and Catharine's own health was a never-ending concern for her. Again, much of the contents of her course reinforced what she had written in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* and included directions on how to care for the sick at home and how to treat the grandmother who could usually be found rocking in front of the domestic hearth or the newly invented cookstove.

Health training extended into required calisthenics, which again was not a Beecher invention but was a standby of women's education in general. Beecher had deliberately situated her Dubuque school on an embankment to assure that all the girls began their day with a lofty climb. Against the cliff at the back of the school was an open-air grove—inside an impenetrable fence—where girls breathed deeply and drilled by the numbers. The importance placed on calisthenics reflected Beecher's belief that "Soul, body and mind are like a single musical

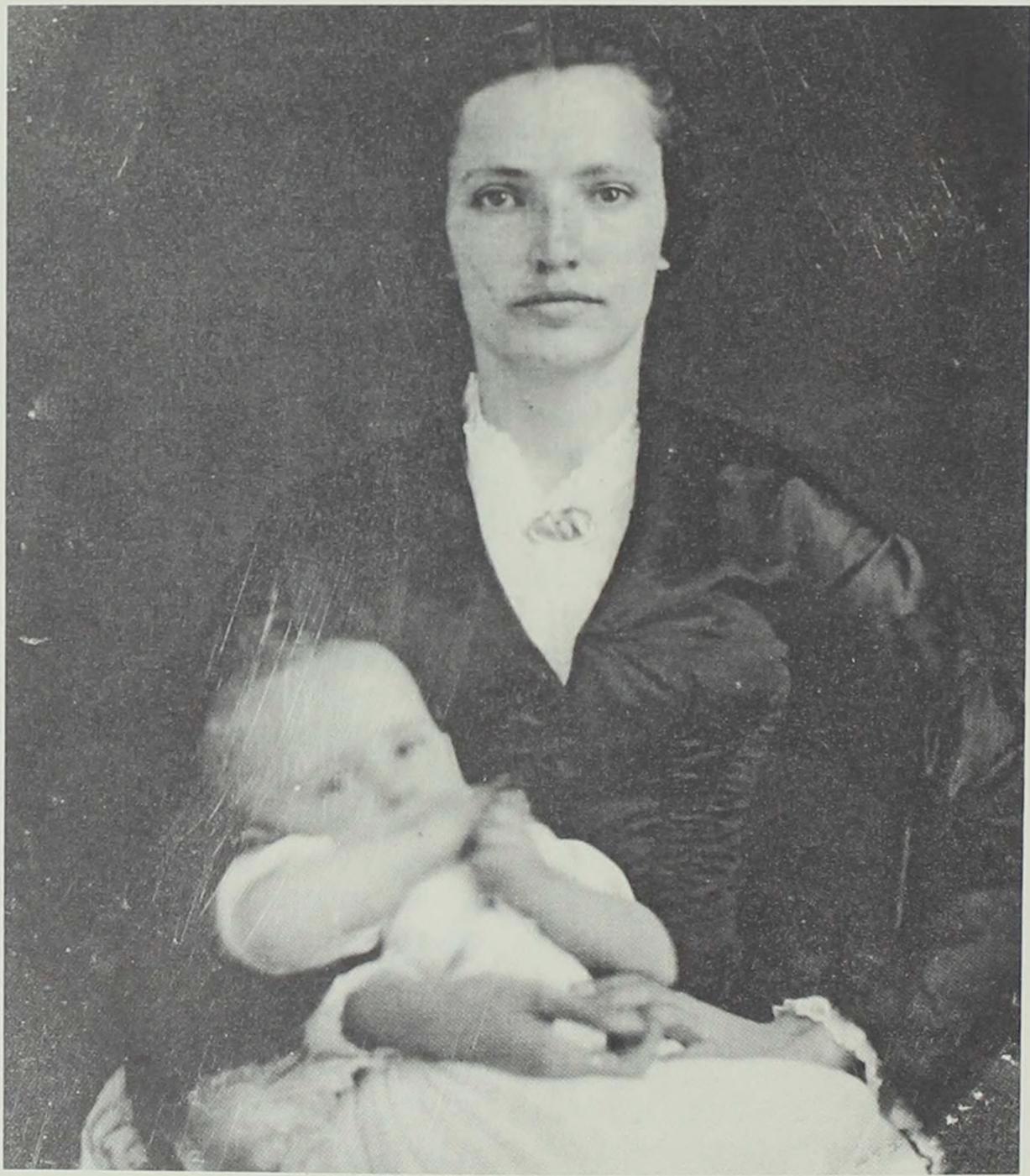
chord which must be struck in unison."

Whether training her students in home economics, English, religion, or health care, Beecher was fully prepared to adopt new approaches to teaching and to modify educational theory to fit the needs of the practical situation. At the time that she was developing her first seminary for girls in New England, Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut were airing the pedagogical views they had developed from their observations in Europe. Later, Calvin Stowe, her sister Harriet's husband, discussed his own Prussian views on education when the Beecher family was living in Cincinnati. From them, Beecher adopted the concept of the necessity of actually *training* competent teachers, a German import, and Europe's new psychology of classroom management. In adopting the idea of instructing students first in concrete and familiar notions and later moving on to more abstract and less familiar concepts, for example, Beecher started her geography instruction with the local environment and worked outward to the area, the state, the nation, and ultimately the world. Another aspect of the new psychology from Europe insisted that students should understand rather than simply memorize the content of their courses. This novel idea she also pressed upon the teachers in her school. Some of the components of Beecher's eastern plan for ladies' education were not, however, suitable to the western frontier, so she quickly adjusted them to the social environment that surrounded her institution. Wherever she taught, Beecher minimized theory in favor of practical application.

Catharine Beecher's guidance was needed to

direct the female academies she had founded in the West, but as the 1850s wore on she spent less and less time there. She was determined to operate them as endowed institutions in order to maintain their tuition rates at levels that would open them to more than simply the children of the wealthy. But local funds to create the endowments often could not be found, so Beecher was forced to spend more and more time in the East on fund-raising expeditions. Finally, in 1859 she returned permanently to the East to retire and to regain her health, and her Dubuque school expired "quietly like a gentle woman."

But her impact on the West was not to be erased. Her principles of home economics were added to those of other pioneer women of her day, and they left their impact on many private academies and public schools across the country. In her retirement years, Catharine Beecher recorded her *Reminiscences*. In these she quotes letters from her graduates indicating that the noble intentions of their headmistress had been fulfilled. The social and cultural movements they became involved in spread far beyond their expected employment as teachers and "wives both immediate and enduring." Some led in the establishment of municipal libraries, city parks, and improved schools. Some raised a call for public nurses, and a few graduates became nurses themselves without further training. They demanded clean and paved streets and refurbished neighborhoods. As middle-class wives they stood behind many community betterment projects. On the whole, they found that there was little discrepancy between Catharine Beecher's principles and their application to life beyond her schools. □



*A daguerreotype of Esther Mendenhall with her baby, taken around 1850.
(SHSI)*

WOMEN AT HOME

by Mary Bennett

The role of women in our society today is a very complex one, but a common thread ran through the lives of the women who lived in Iowa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. No one generalization can be made about these women, but most were tied to the home, and the basics of family life often centered around women. The home was definitely in the feminine domain, and it was a place where a woman could excel and showcase her talents.

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With few opportunities for employment or participation in activities outside the home, many women focused their attention on marriage and family life. Most were economically dependent on men, and their destiny was a life of domestic labor and childbearing. Education was accessible to those women who chose it, but unlike education for men, most school curriculums focused primarily on preparing a woman for her role in the home. At home, families emphasized training their girls in practical skills necessary for the traditional roles of wife and mother. The popular notion of a

“proper sphere” for women meant that most women’s lives revolved around the duties of running a household.

The home was one place where a woman could exert considerable influence. She was largely responsible for raising children with acceptable moral attitudes. In fact, the potential to influence her children was often cited as a reason why a woman did not need political or economic power outside the home. A woman could contribute to the economic well-being of the family by managing its financial resources efficiently or by selling homemade goods and services. A farm wife might sell eggs and butter, and a woman in town might take in sewing or ironing.

Whatever her role, a woman drew her identity from her home life. The strength of the home as a social institution depended in large part on the presence of a woman. She tried to bring grace and refinement into the home, and these qualities helped to bring pleasure to family members and friends. Perhaps more than her male counterpart, she attempted to instill an appreciation for music, culture, and art. She demonstrated her elegance and good taste by stylishly decorating her home, but above all, she created a comfortable setting for family life.

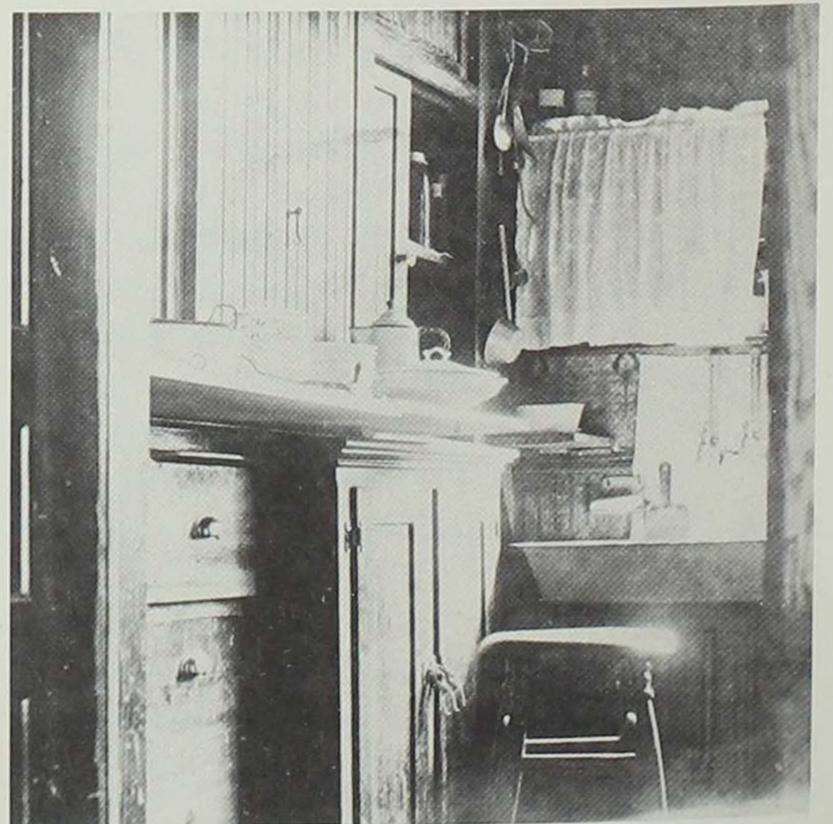
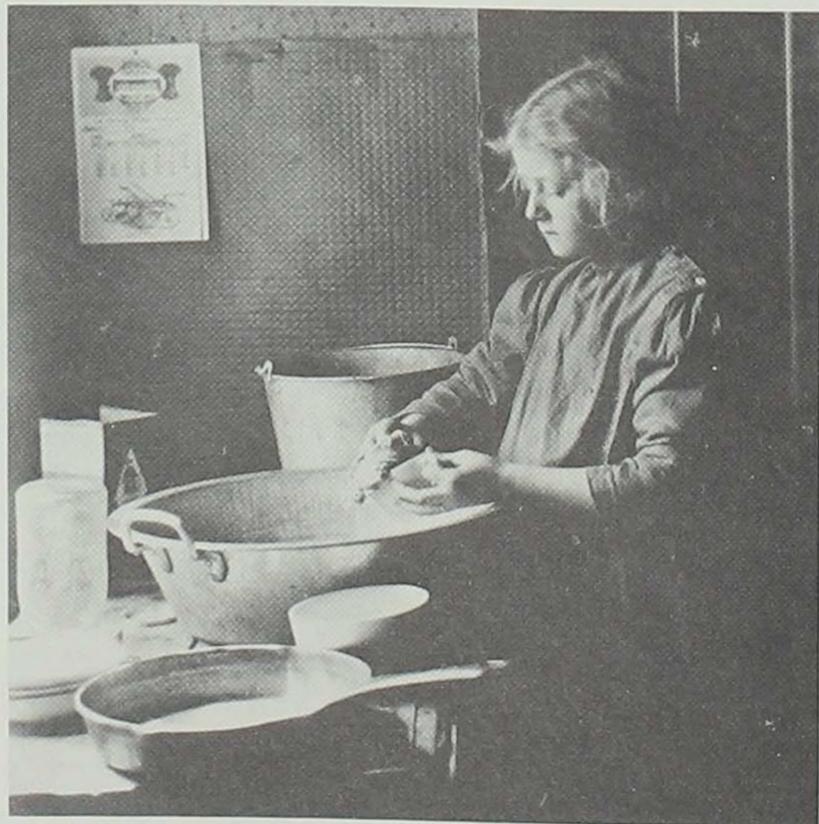
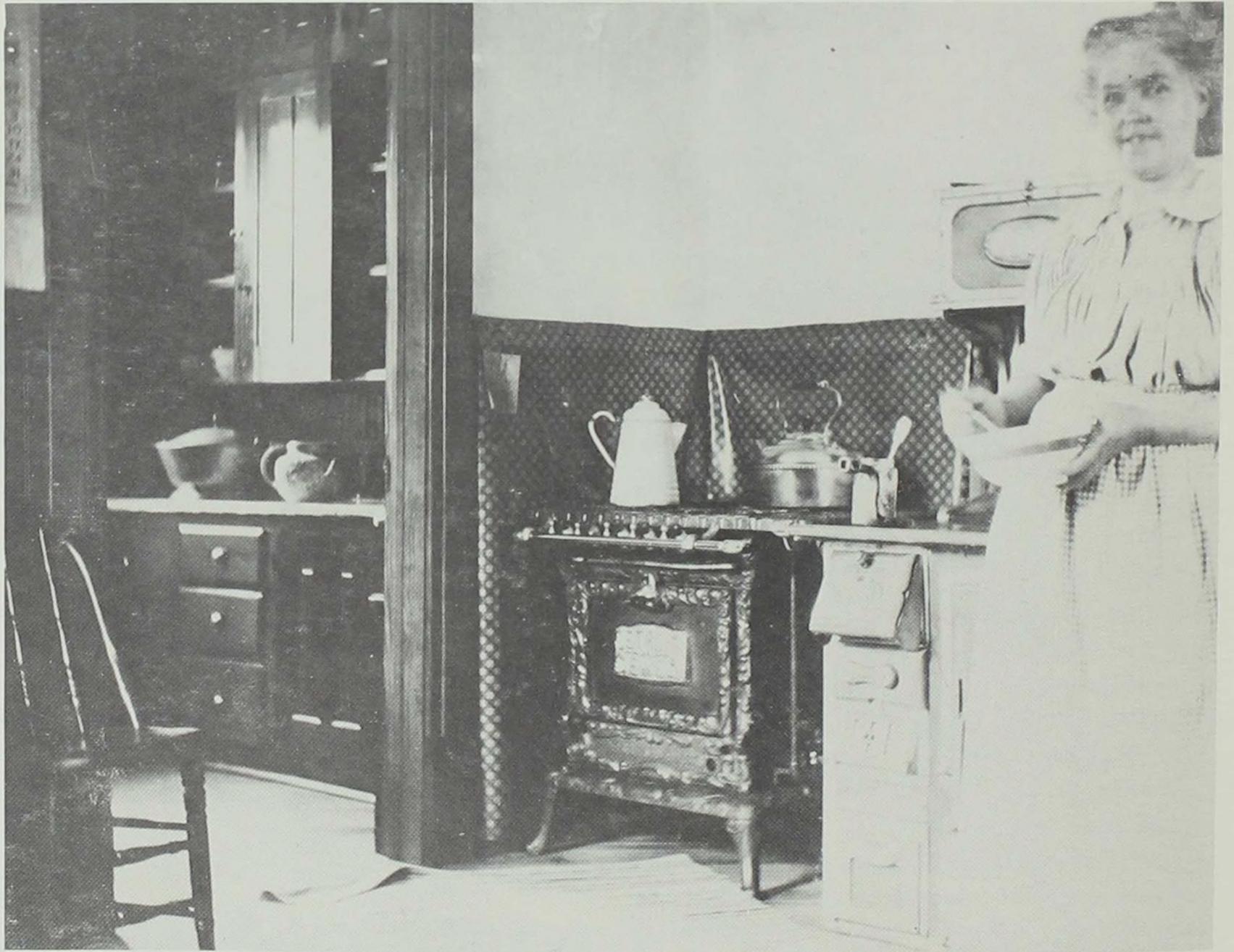
The modern life of the twentieth century modified the place of women in society, but the vast majority of women still found their rewards in homemaking. Women assumed new roles in public life by participating in more diverse occupations, by voting, and by joining organizations, but they still had primary responsibility for the household. Even today, many women who combine the careers of an outside job and homemaking find that much of their identity and fulfillment generates from the home.

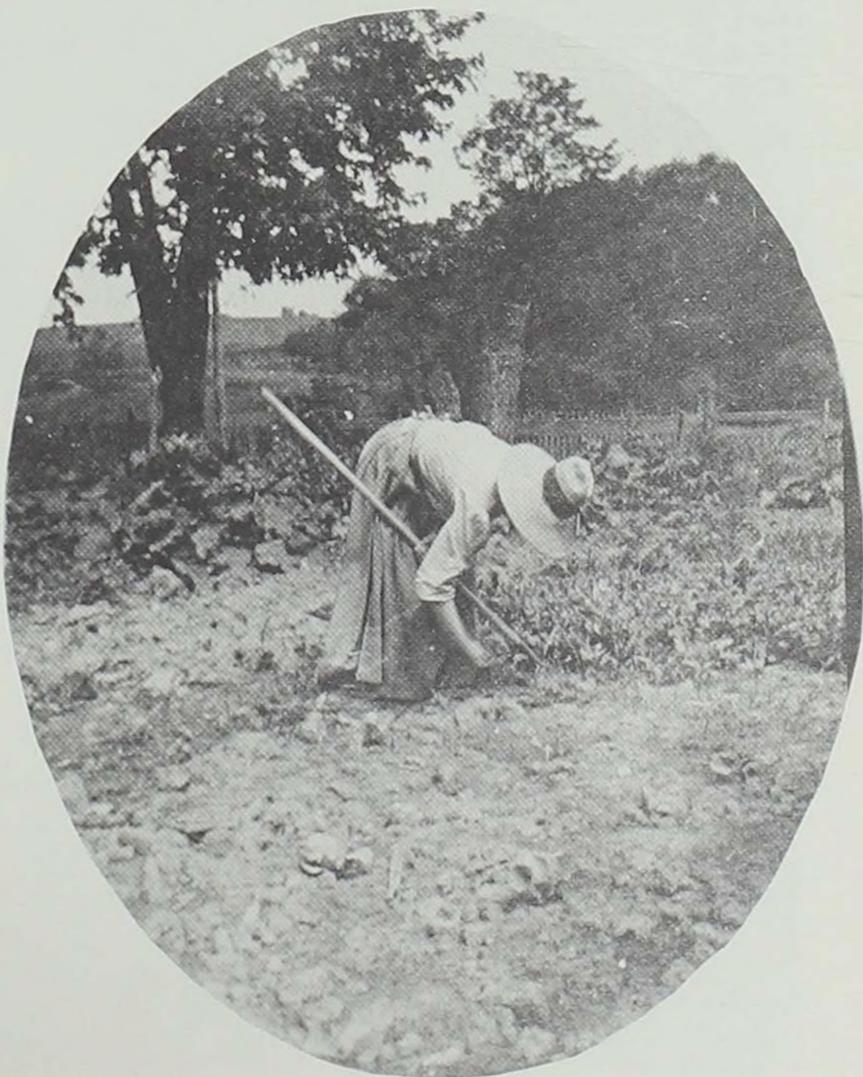
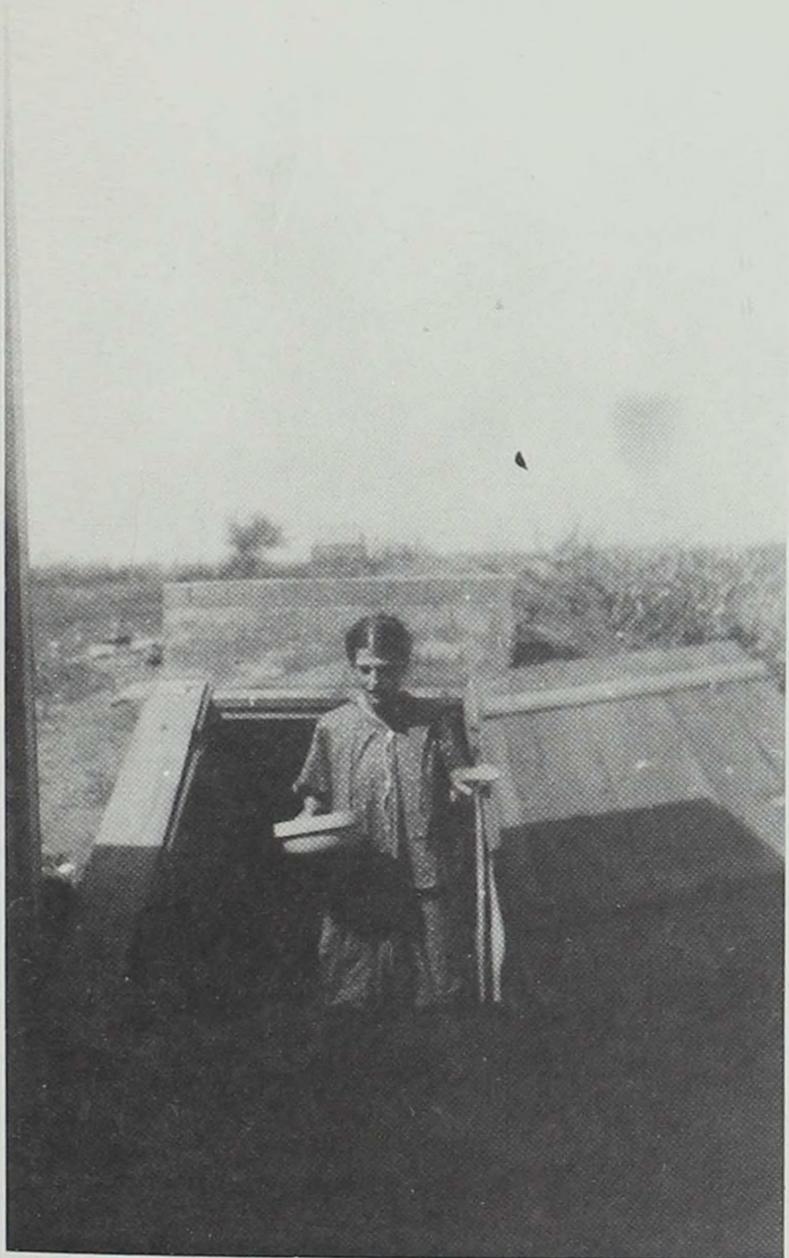
Photographs of women in the intimate surroundings of their homes are very rare. These photographs illustrate how the home life of women in Iowa has changed and how it has remained the same.



Domestic chores occupied the majority of women’s time at home. Above, a woman hangs up laundry on an outside line at the turn of the century (from the Marsh Family Collection, SHSI); below, three women pose with common nineteenth-century household items: a broom, a water basin, and embroidered cloth. (SHSI)

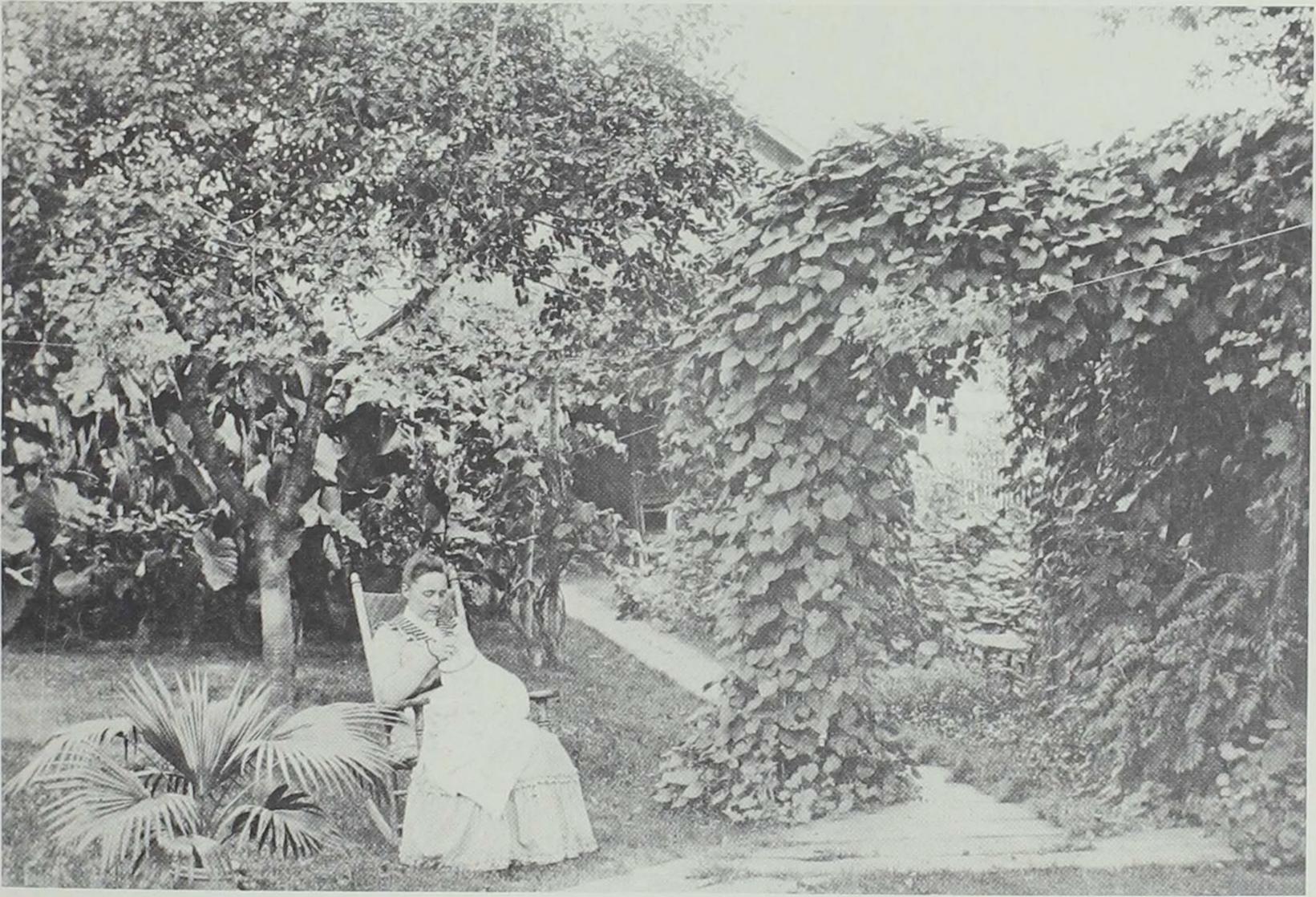






Opposite page: top, a photograph from the Pratt Family Collection provides a detailed look at a turn-of-the-century Iowa kitchen (SHSI); lower left, young Frances Edith Babcock undertakes the dishwashing chores, circa 1910 (SHSI); lower right, the pantry of Rachel Mather Bush's apartment on North Linn Street in Iowa City, about 1910. This page: above, a woman emerges from the family fruit cellar, which provided storage for much of the family's food supply (Henrietta Harris Collection, SHSI); top right, a rural Kensett woman continues her laundry chores without regard for the weather (Nels L. Roslien Collection, SHSI); bottom right, working in the family garden, largely a woman's responsibility at the time this photograph was taken, circa 1910 (SHSI)





Opposite page: top, Karoline Gabelmann works with the cold frames for her garden in Clarksville, circa 1925 (SHSI); bottom, a Kensett homemaker feeds her chickens. (Nels L. Roslien Collection, SHSI) This page: right, Ellen Mather reads in the parlor of her West Liberty home, 1895. Mrs. Mather was the mother of Rachel Mather Bush, pictured on page 48. A photo of Mrs. Katharine Mosnat Horack taken around 1905, above, shows another pastime popular among Iowa women earlier in this century—embroidery. Mrs. Horack, pictured in the garden of her home in Iowa City, was the mother of Bertha Horack Shambaugh, pioneer Iowa photographer and the subject of an article featured in the March/April 1980 issue of *The Palimpsest*. (SHSI)





As many of the photographs on these pages show, there was much that we would consider elegant about life at home in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Queenie Hortense Cox of Pella relaxes on a chaise lounge with a book, right, and with her embroidery, below (both photos SHSI), while left, Rachel Mather plays the piano in the parlor of her family's home in West Liberty, circa 1905. (SHSI) Below right, another Iowa woman arranges flowers in a photograph taken in 1917. (SHSI)







The Ben Katz family enjoys the warm weather in the backyard of their Iowa City home, circa 1915, left. Helen Katz Robeson, seated third from the left, was an accomplished concert violinist and had performed on the Chautauqua circuit in 1913 and taught at the State University of Iowa. In 1918, however, she abandoned her professional career following her marriage to Professor George Robeson, a native of Lohrville. Again in this photograph are the ubiquitous sewing projects so common among women in this period. (SHSI) The photograph on the lower left depicts a sewing project of much larger scope, a quilting party held in the parlor of the Lutheran Church in North Liberty in 1915. (SHSI) On this page are two portraits of domestic life in turn-of-the-century Iowa. Right, the family of Dr. Love enjoys some time together in their richly furnished parlor, circa 1895. (SHSI) Another doctor, R.J. Vigers of Merville, took the photo below using a shutter release cable in 1912. Dr. Vigers is seated at the extreme right. (SHSI)

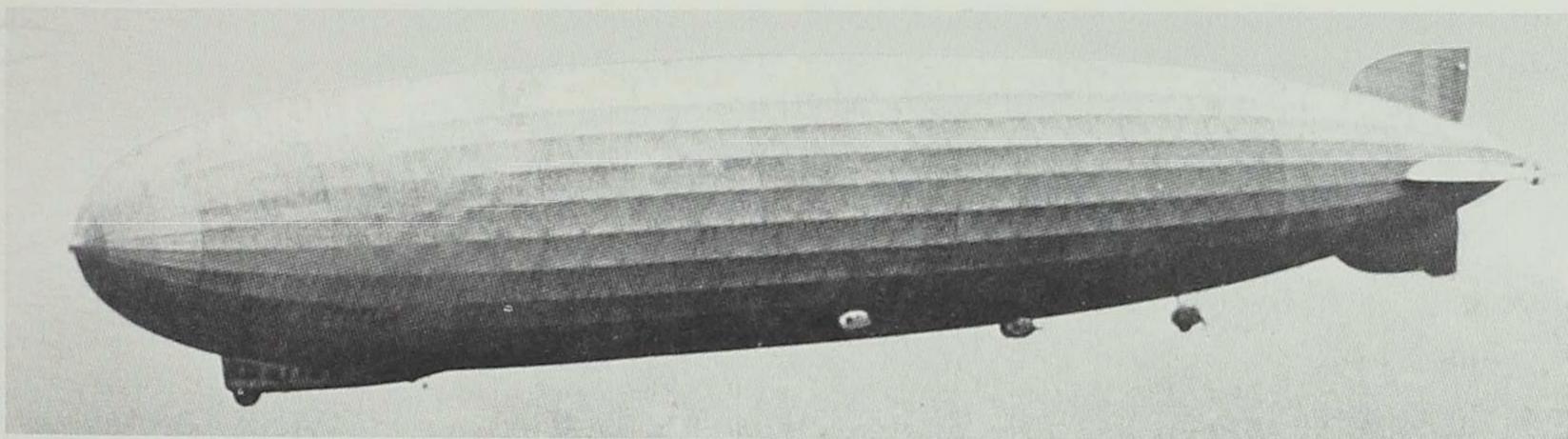


Images of women performing domestic chores or enjoying their leisure moments are difficult to find. The Society encourages donations or loans of photographs depicting the lives of women in Iowa.



DAVENPORT'S GOLDEN
BUILDING YEARS





COURTESY QUAD-CITY TIMES

On August 28, 1929, all Davenport paused to gaze into the sky. On this day, Dr. Hugo Eckener piloted his *Graf Zeppelin* over the proud river town. While Dr. Eckener soared overhead and Davenport's numerous German-Americans cheered from below, the city showed off the face of her new downtown skyline. Throughout the 1920s, Davenport had witnessed an unprecedented stream of building. Each new construction site prepared the way for the emergence of office buildings, banking houses, and movie palaces.

The rise of new buildings reflected Davenport's growth and prosperity, and the succession of ribbon cuttings by her commercial leaders reinforced their unbridled optimism about the city's continued expansion. Postwar Davenport, as the commercial center for the Tri-Cities (which included Rock Island and Moline, Illinois), had a pressing need for expanded commercial space. To meet this demand, the pace of construction quickened.

The forces working to push Davenport building upward crystalized between 1919 and 1931. Rising real estate prices, physical constraints on the downtown area's outward sprawl, and advances in building technology formed the

foundation of this era of downtown construction. From the 1880s, Davenport's role as the commercial center of the flourishing Tri-Cities had led to increasing congestion along her main commercial arteries: Front, Second, and Third streets. Competition for prime commercial corners bid prices on land ever higher. Moreover, physical and natural constraints on the downtown worked against an outward progression of growth. As historian Edward Espenshade has noted, Davenport's distinction as a railroad "Loop City," along with the downtown's east-west progression of growth parallel to the river, straightjacketed an outward expansion of major building. Escalating costs and physical constraints, taken together, forced builders to look upward, not outward, when considering expansion.

The introduction of the elevator and structural steel in building design before the turn of the century was a technological catalyst for the "vertical revolution." Architects now had a means by which to overcome previous limitations on building heights.

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by Edmund H. Carroll, Jr.

For Davenport, the completion of the Scharff Building marked the arrival of the "elevator age." Patients of B.J. Palmer, Davenport's "fountainhead" of chiropractic care, were whisked by one of the city's first elevators to Palmer's top-floor clinic in the Ryan Block. After 1900, D.H. Burnham, renowned Chicago architect and planner, sent Davenport's office elevators even higher. The W.C. Putnam Estate enlisted Burnham to design what was called Davenport's first "real skyscraper," the eight-story Putnam Building, which opened to tenants in 1910. The landmark building was built at the heart of the commercial core and incorporated the latest construction designs tested earlier in Chicago buildings. The building hung on an iron-steel system of internal support, a breakthrough that freed the walls from supporting the weight of the building and thereby introduced reinforced concrete construction to the Tri-Cities. After the Putnam Building opened, Davenport businessmen—confronted with accelerating commerce, higher land prices, and congestion—pressed architects and contractors to incorporate better building techniques and designs into their plans.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, restrictions on construction other than work essential to the nation's war effort halted the parade of new buildings throughout the country. Yet, the Tri-Cities boomed with

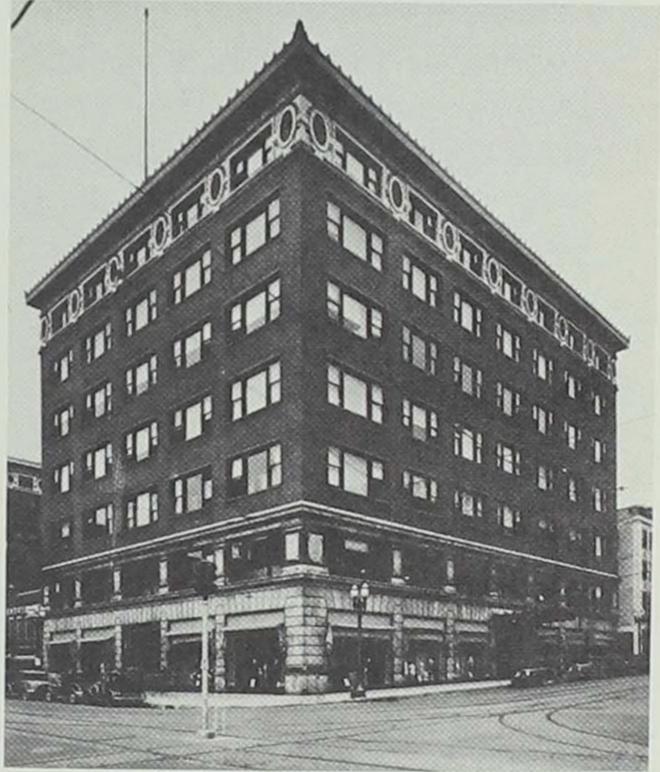
the prosperity that came with the war, and Davenport shared in the benefits of the area's burgeoning production. Davenport manufacturers received over \$30 million in war contracts. Davenport's population swelled as the manufacture of munitions at the Rock Island Arsenal drew more and more people to the area. Employment at the Arsenal climbed from a few thousand in the prewar years to over 14,500 in 1918. Farmers also shared in the wartime prosperity as the beneficiaries of record commodity prices. John Deere & Company and other farm-implement manufacturers that were concentrated in Moline and Rock Island worked overtime to satisfy farmers' demand for new machinery. Bank deposits filled Davenport bank vaults, merchants rang up record sales, and Davenport factories expanded their payrolls. By war's end, the city's financial, retail, and wholesale establishments, flush with prosperity, were bursting to expand their commercial space.

Fed by pent-up demand and nationwide prosperity, the United States emerged from the war with a voracious appetite for new homes, buildings, roads, and plants. Although residential construction loomed larger in dollar terms, commercial building left an impressive mark on Davenport and many other cities throughout the country. The years from 1919 to 1931 in Davenport were highlighted by several major downtown building projects. Local prosperity gave the initial push; New York provided the guiding light. All the nation watched as New York buildings went higher, culminating with the Empire State Building in 1931. "What New York had," wrote historian William Leuchtenburg in *The Perils of Prosperity*, "every interior city had to have too, and those on the prairies erected their own towers. The skyscraper was as certain an expression of the ebullient American spirit as the Gothic cathedral was of medieval Europe."

Note on Sources

Much of the information in this article came from the archives of the Davenport Chamber of Commerce and from the files of the Davenport *Democrat and Leader* and the *Daily Times*. The author also consulted Edward B. Espenshade's *Urban Development at the Upper Rapids of the Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944) and John H. Fetzer's 1945 University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, "A Study in City Building: Davenport, Iowa." Studies of national conditions during the war and postwar years include: William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); and George Soule, *Prosperity Decade: From War to Depression, 1917-1929* (New York: Rinehart, 1947).

An annotated version of this article is on file at the library of the State Historical Society.



Chicago architect D.H. Burnham designed the Putnam Building (left) and the M.L. Parker Building (right) to incorporate a structural steel framework, the heart of modern skyscraper design. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce) The two buildings anchored a block on Second Street in Davenport's commercial core. (SHSI)

Flush with the earnings from wartime prosperity and optimistic about the city's prospects for the future, Davenport set out on a decade of commercial construction. A generation of city builders, men whose direction and industriousness brought building plans to fruition between World War I and the Depression, loomed as large as the buildings they erected. Daniel Burnham, writing a year after the completion of the Putnam Building, encouraged future city builders to "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work. . . . Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty." Throughout Davenport's building years, prominent Davenport businessmen made their contributions to the city's skyline.

Henry "Hummer" Kahl led the way in bringing changes to the face of the downtown. Kahl was a man of bold vision and inexhaustible energy who had risen from laborer to vice-

president of the Walsh Construction Company, a nationally noted railroad and general contractor. He inaugurated postwar building in a grand fashion with the announcement in 1919 of his intent to build the \$1.5 million Kahl Building and Capitol Theater. Kahl's plans envisioned a building both larger and grander than its predecessor, the Putnam Building. His ten-story office building, complete with lavish basement restaurant and ground-floor retail space, was hailed by the *Daily Times* as "the biggest feature in the business history of the city." Betty Adler, writing for the same newspaper, reported that Kahl's elaborately decorated, 2400-seat movie palace "marked an epoch for Davenport. All the Tri-City Symphony orchestra, the art league and the women's clubs have been trying to do to spread the gospel of culture has been given a new impetus by this Capitol Theater."

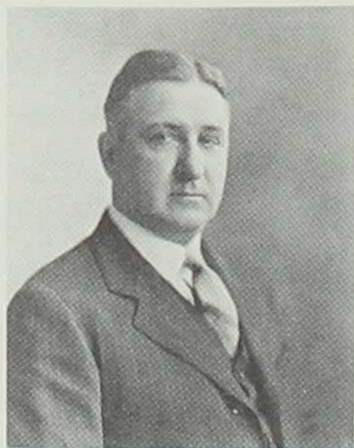
The time between the ground breaking and

completion of the building proved to be a trying one for Kahl. Postwar inflation pushed the cost of materials and labor far beyond his original estimates. In 1919 Kahl paid \$226,000 to C.A. Ficke, a man of equal foresight, for the commercial corner on which his building rose. The builder had recognized Davenport's urgent need for more office space. Yet many chided Kahl for building on such an out-of-the-way site on West Third Street, an area away from the Second Street commercial core.

Still, Kahl proceeded with his plans, undaunted by criticism and rising costs. A 1920 *Daily Times* article reported, as Kahl had predicted, that the building's office space was being rapidly filled. And the article added that "the construction of the Kahl block gives Davenport its largest downtown block and relieves considerably the shortage of office and

storage space so prevalent in 1919 and the greater part of 1920." Increasing employment in Davenport's service fields, a pronounced national trend throughout the decade, kept the Kahl Building filled with national branch offices and doctors' and lawyers' offices. Equally important, the project's completion pulled much of the city's business and entertainment activity away from Front and Second streets. All but two of the major downtown building projects of the Twenties sprang up along Third Street, part of a natural progression of growth away from the congestion of the two established streets.

With the contractors working on Kahl's massive project and the four-story addition to the Blackhawk Hotel that



Built in 1919 and 1920, Henry Kahl's ten-story office and theater building met part of Davenport's postwar demand for office space and a cultural center. (portrait courtesy Henry C. Wurzer; photo courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)



would make it the largest hotel in Iowa, all signs indicated an even bigger construction year for 1920. A 1920 article in the *Democrat and Leader* listed almost twenty different businesses and organizations considering various building plans and noted a local prediction that about \$6 million in construction would be begun during the year. Actually, however, the years 1920 and 1921 proved to be only moderately active for the construction industry in Davenport. The *Democrat and Leader* concluded that "the steadily advancing cost of material and labor, coupled with the throttling influence of federal reserve banks on the money market, conspired to discourage any extensive construction."

Across the river, Moline and Rock Island shared in the area-wide surge of postwar building, albeit at a less pronounced pace. Declining economic conditions, which especially battered the farm-implement manufacturers, did not forestall big building projects in either Illinois city. In 1920, Moline, flush with profits earned from its implement industry's wartime sales, saw the Moline Trust and Savings Bank complete construction on a \$557,000 eight-story office and bank building. Soon after, Moline subscribers raised money to finance the \$1.5 million LeClaire Hotel and Theater Building. The towering fifteen-story hotel soared above all other Tri-Cities buildings. In Rock Island, the 1920 announcement of plans to build a \$900,000 theater and hotel, the Fort Armstrong, highlighted the city's postwar construction. But the tide of building exuberance did not last beyond Moline's record 1921 rate of construction, as both cities reeled from the sweeping curtailment of Arsenal employment and the notable downturn in the farm-implement industry.

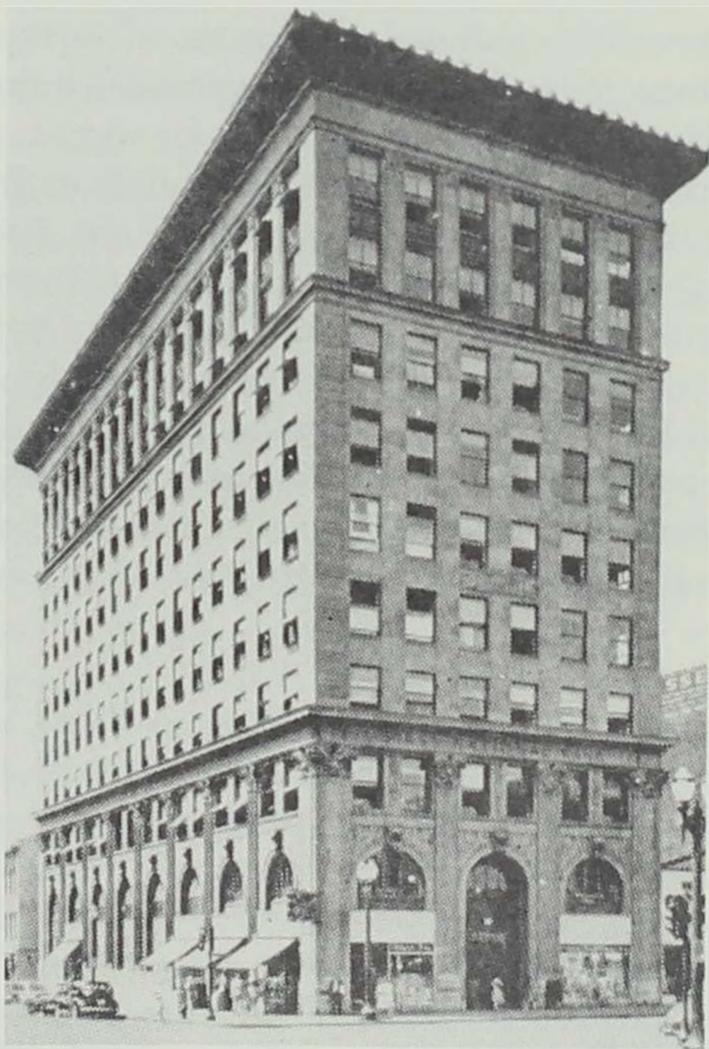
Davenport, however, was insulated by a broader-based economy that included many small consumer-goods producers, an expanding service sector, and an area-wide domination of the wholesale business. As a result, it

witnessed a surge in downtown building after the lackluster years of 1920 and 1921. This was spurred by national conditions of increasing prosperity underpinned by expanding business and greater purchasing power for wages, combined with cheaper and more readily available mortgage funds to renew construction. For the next seven years, in fact, according to historian George Soule in his book, *Prosperity Decade*, mortgage rates and construction costs dropped to a level compatible with the nation's building demand. In response, Davenport bankers, retailers, and private organizations dusted off their shelved building plans and set to work.

Census figures for 1929 revealed what Davenport businessmen had long known: years of momentum had reinforced Davenport's position of dominance over the area's commercial activities. From a radius of over thirty miles on both sides of the river, industrial workers and farmers flocked to Davenport's numerous offices, retail stores, and wholesale houses. Amid the dawn of installment credit, the city's retail sales were greater than the sales in Moline and Rock Island combined. Davenport's wholesale business outdistanced that of her neighbors by more than two to one.

Davenport's retail dominance was reflected in the construction work begun in 1922 for a large modern department store to house the M.L. Parker Company, built by the W.C. Putnam Estate on its Second Street property east of the Putnam Building. The million-dollar Parker Building was designed by junior members of Daniel Burnham's Chicago firm, the firm that had designed the Putnam Building twelve years earlier, and the seven-story department store replicated the style and size of its predecessor.

The M.L. Parker Building, reflecting the expertise lent by leaders in department store design and construction with its bargain base-



Major new buildings for the deposit-rich First National Bank (left) and Union Savings Bank (right) were monuments to Davenport's prosperity in the Twenties. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

ment and twenty-six separate departments, encompassed the largest retail floor space under one roof in Iowa. For those entrusted to carry through W.C. Putnam's wish to modernize his Second Street property, the completion of the Putnam Building's twin tower was a proud occasion.

Two deposit-rich Davenport banks seized the headlines in 1923 by announcing major building programs that pushed the year's building activity to unprecedented levels. Flush with funds garnered from the area's war boom and expectations of future business gains, the First National Bank and the Union Savings Bank built proud banking

houses topped by floors of new commercial office space.

One hundred and fifty men labored for over a year to ready the First National's ten-story skyscraper, eight office floors supported by the banking room's ornamental fluted pilasters. Irvin Green and Joe R. Lane, chief officers of Davenport's oldest bank, supervised planning of the building's rich details, right down to the completion of the facade's last carved stone plaque. As the three high-speed Otis Elevators ferried their first passengers to the building's tenth floor, the work crew of John Soller—a Davenport contractor who also built the Masonic Temple, the Democrat Building, and the Federal Bakeries Building—hurried to finish work on Second Street's newest addition.

Over on Third and Brady streets, Union Bank President George Haeur craned his neck to watch the construction of his firm's million-dollar bank and office building. Hoggson Brothers, renowned New York bank builders, pressed into service an army of iron workers, masons, and carpenters to finish the neo-classical structure. The offices offered prospective tenants the latest in innovations: circulating ice water, compressed air, gas, and high-tension electric current.

Newspaper accounts stressed that the additions to downtown office space would satisfy an unmet demand. Nevertheless, neither building's occupancy rate approached that of the Kahl Building. Nor did either bank have any ground-floor commercial space, other than its own, to offset taxes and maintenance costs. Both banks stretched their resources tightly to accommodate the grand projects. Yet the mounting wave of new office space—reinforced by civic pride and unfettered optimism, and the perceived need to “keep up with your neighbor's building plans”—foreshadowed the day when it would spill over and inundate the existing demand.

The record building pace achieved in Davenport in 1922 and 1923 extended beyond commercial building. It ap-

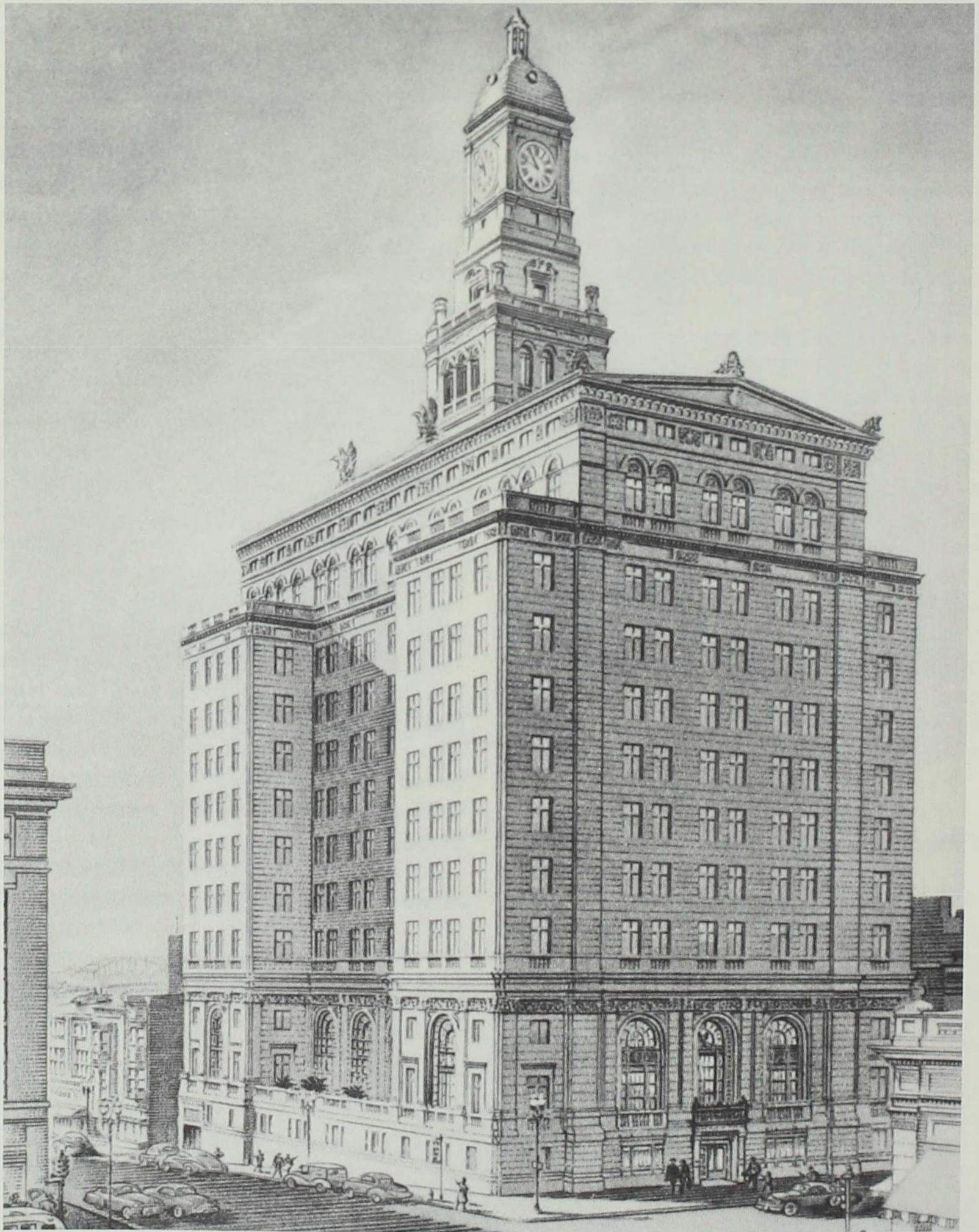
peared that every charity and fraternal organization had the building bug. Between 1922 and 1923 Davenport's local organizations, cramped by inadequate facilities or in need of more space to accommodate greater membership, kept fund raisers and contractors busy. The Eagles pointed with pride to their new \$350,000 fraternal lodge. The Lend-A-Hand Club for young workingwomen revered its new \$200,000 home. The Masons built an immense million-dollar temple, complete with a 3,000-seat auditorium. A \$185,000 addition enhanced the public library's book collection.

Nor were Davenport's educational institutions dormant. St. Ambrose College, bolstered by a fund-raising drive that raised nearly \$900,000, erected Davis Hall, the first of a series of buildings the college constructed during the decade. B.J. Palmer, the sometimes eccentric and always provocative leader of the Palmer School of Chiropractic and WOC Radio, spent over \$350,000 between 1920 and 1923 to erect new administrative and classroom buildings for the Palmer School. The school's building program reflected its founder's optimistic belief that, with time, his student body would expand beyond its contemporary enrollment of nearly 2,000 students to over 21,000.

In 1924, Palmer unveiled plans to erect a monument worthy of his grandiose aspirations:

COURTESY DAVENPORT CHAMBER OF COMMERCE





The new home of the American Commercial & Savings Bank became a Davenport landmark as the Davenport Bank and Trust Company Building. (courtesy Davenport Bank and Trust Company)

the Kindt Concerterium. This was to be a sprawling \$500,000 auditorium patterned, according to the *Democrat and Leader* "after the Mormon Tabernacle at Salt Lake City, but on a larger scale." The 6,000-seat auditorium with its \$180,000 pipe organ was to be used for Palmer School assemblies, concerts, and theatrical presentations. Actually, the Concerterium never moved beyond the drawing boards, but its very conception serves as an example of the high-reaching optimism of the age.

The mild recession of 1924 weakened the base of confidence on which Davenport construction projects were launched. With one exception in 1925, the building pace declined, then sputtered forward, coasting on the strength of residential building and minor commercial activity. Had it not been for United Light and Power's decision to build its new headquarters in Davenport in 1925, the lull following the flurry of activity in 1922 and 1923 would have continued into 1927. The huge utility syndicate's five-story headquarters, begun the same year that its Davenport subsidiary, Peoples Light, completed its \$3 million Riverside Power Plant, kept workers busy when other new construction slackened. Meanwhile, Davenporters could look across the river to see Rock Island's long-awaited hotel, the nine-story Fort Armstrong, nearing completion.

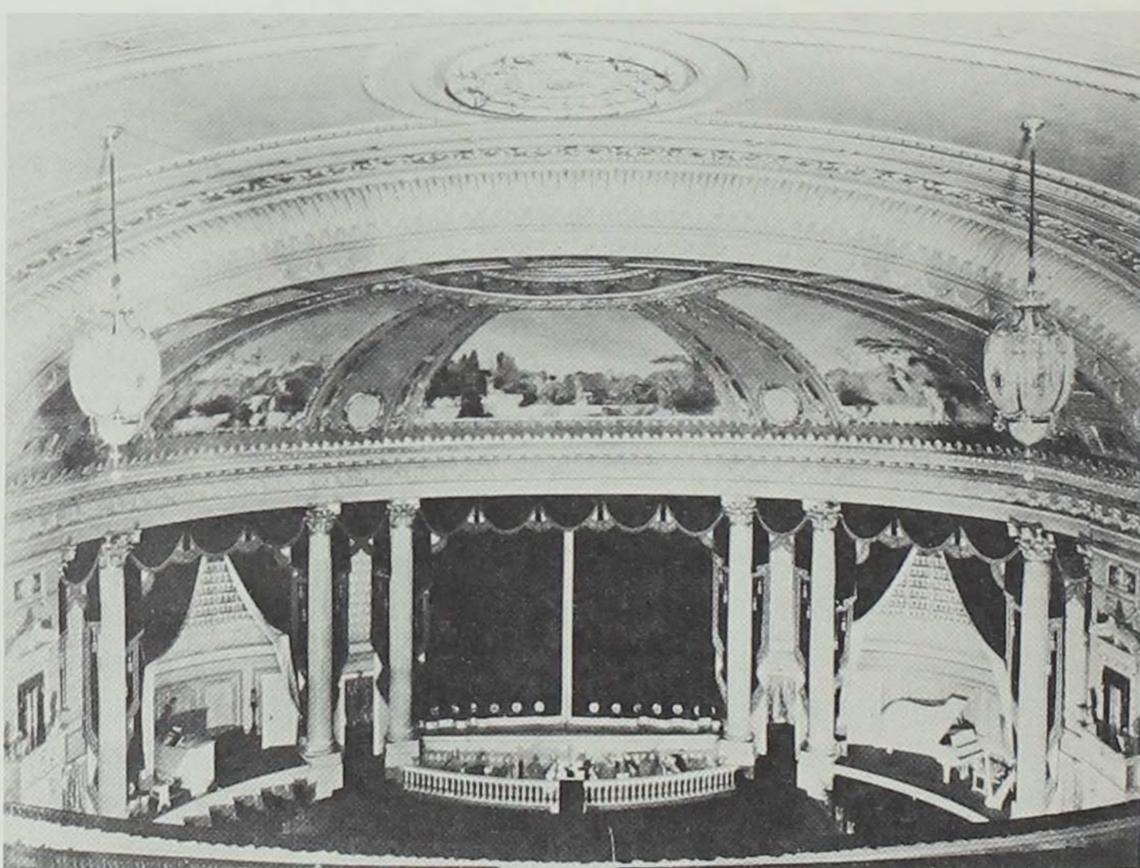
Downtown Davenport building revived in 1927 on the strength of the American Commercial & Savings Bank's dramatic announcement of its intention to erect a new bank and office building. When completed, the terraced-style structure (now the home of the Davenport Bank and Trust Company) rested upon the location of its predecessor at Third and Main. Built at a total cost of almost \$2 million, the building, with its eleven floors of office suites astride a cavernous three-story banking room, all topped off by a massive clock

tower, boosted Davenport's claim to true skyscraper status. The vaulted banking room was highlighted by a wall mural depicting scenes from Davenport history. The bank selected Walsh Construction to erect this crowning symbol of postwar prosperity, a fitting honor for the Davenport-based firm. Under the leadership of Patrick Walsh, and later his son Thomas, Walsh Construction made a lasting imprint on Davenport. The Blackhawk Hotel, the Sacred Heart Cathedral, the Kahl Building, and the American Commercial Building all took shape under Walsh supervision.

American Commercial's new home mirrored Davenport's swelling stream of bank deposits, which funded most of the major projects. Davenport bank deposits grew from \$43 million in 1921 to just over \$64 million in 1930, and Ray Nyemaster and Ed Kaufman had guided American Commercial's rise to the largest savings bank in Iowa. Davenport made claim to being the financial capital of Iowa.

But now ominous clouds were beginning to gather on the economic horizon. Nationally, the easy bank credit that flowed into real estate promotions had prompted speculative projects in commercial building that had begun to exceed the demand for space; the construction industry had been caught up in the speculative mania of the Twenties. Occupancy rates, and therefore the builders' return on their investments, were beginning to fall.

In Davenport, however, building went on. Davenport's economic resilience, shored up by renewed production at area farm-implement factories and the Davenport Industrial Commission's success in attracting new industry to the city, provided a final burst of construction in 1929 and 1930, a year beyond the limit of most cities' building booms. Davenport's population increased by 8,000 between 1926 and 1930, and 1,800 workers were added to Davenport payrolls. By 1930 Davenport was listed as one of the top twenty cities in the country in total building under construction.

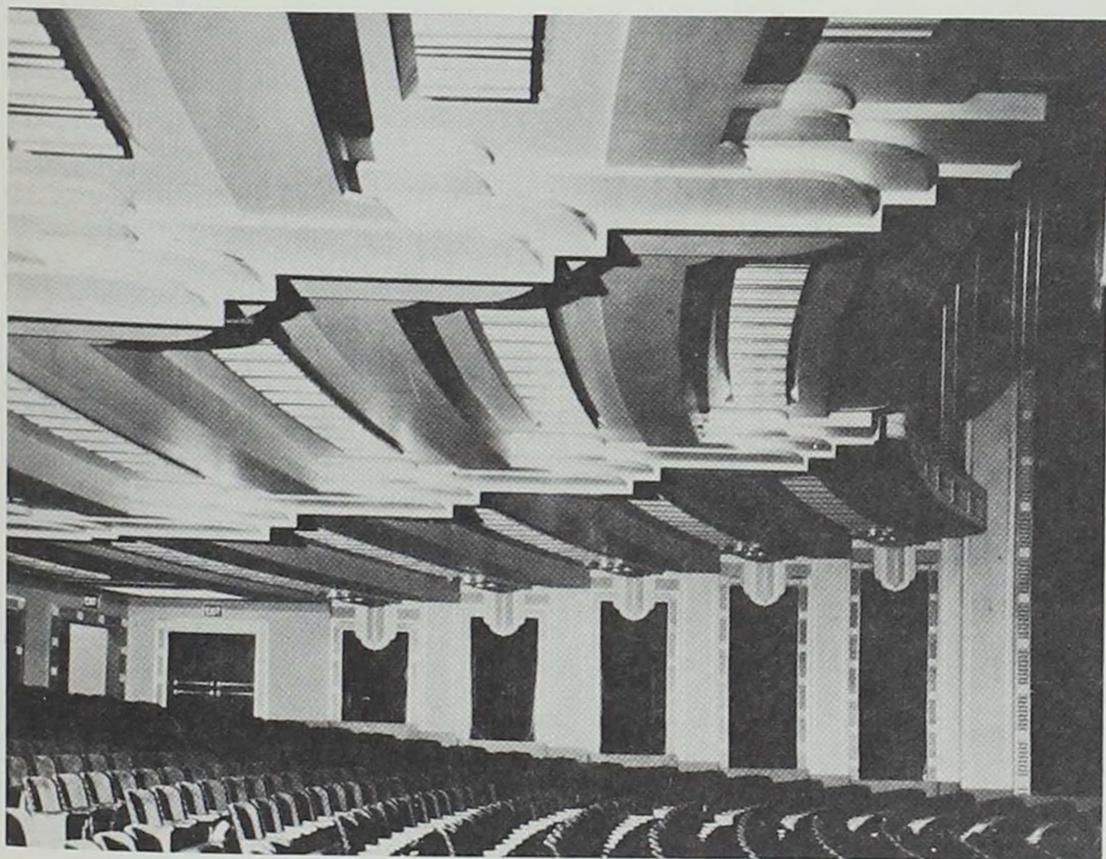


The ornate, opera-house style of the Kahl Building's Capitol Theater (left) contrasted sharply with the contemporary Art Deco style of the RKO Orpheum Theater in the Mississippi Hotel Building (right), though

Projects underway included a \$500,000 addition to Mercy Hospital, a \$100,000 river-front stadium, a \$750,000 nursing home for the Royal Neighbors of America, and George Bechtel's \$2 million hotel-theater building in the downtown area. Across the river, International Harvester led the area's implement industry through three years of major building. In 1930, construction activity flourished in

Moline, highlighted by the completion of the eight-story Fifth Avenue Realty Building.

George Bechtel provided downtown building watchers with one last topic of conversation. Bechtel, who was known as "the father of Iowa Municipal Bonds," left his mark on the city by constructing the Mississippi Hotel and RKO Theater on the corner of Third and Brady streets. The ten-story building, with a theater



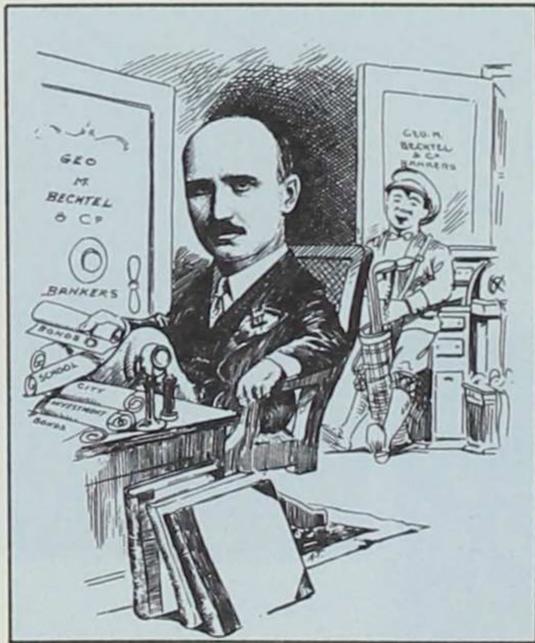
they were built only ten years apart. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

built expressly for sound pictures, gave employment to a workforce of over two hundred. The Lundoff-Bicknell Company, builder of Chicago's Palmer House and several prominent Midwest theaters, erected both structures. Built in prosperity's dying days, neither the hotel nor the theater proved to be profitable investments; by the time they were completed, hotel rooms and theater seats

abounded in the Tri-Cities. The eminently successful Bechtel, caught up in a burst of civic and personal pride, had taken out a mortgage on continued prosperity using unbridled optimism as collateral. On the eve of the Depression, according to knowledgeable contemporaries, the Mississippi Hotel had an occupancy rate of little better than 25 percent.

After 1930, when the Depression finally set-

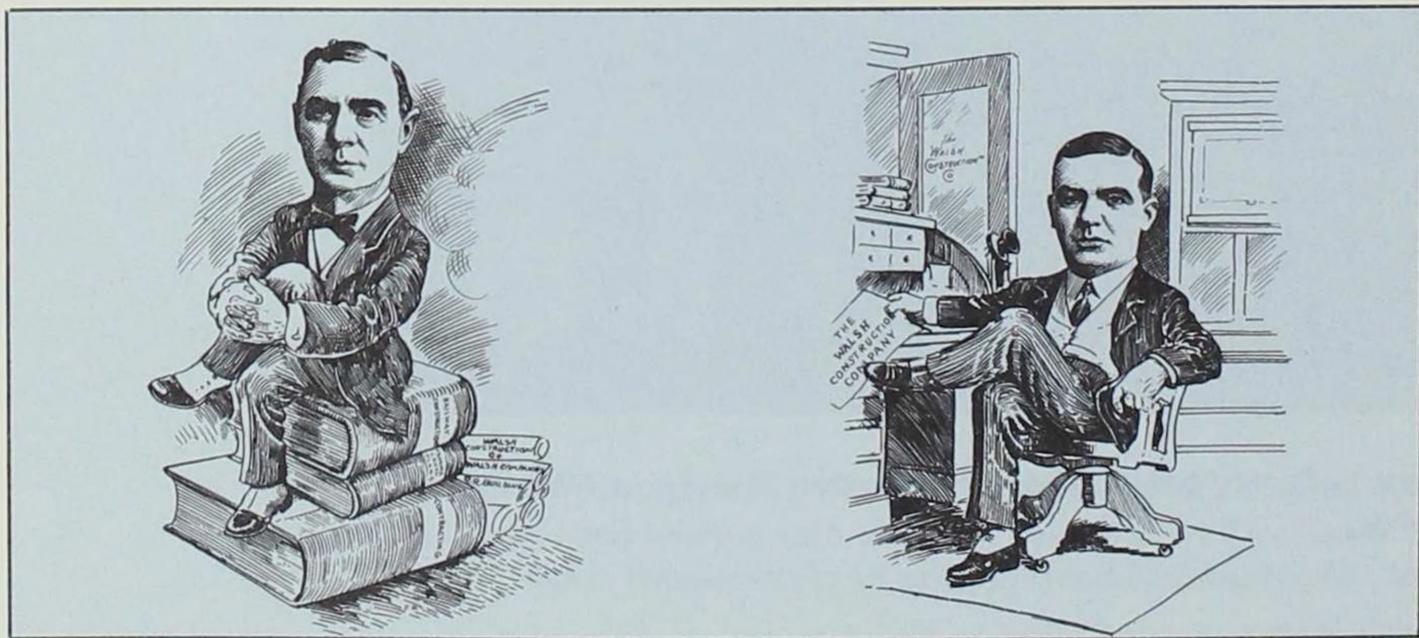
Four Men Who Left Their Mark on Davenport's Architectural Heritage



George Bechtel, builder of the Mississippi Hotel and Orpheum Theater



John Soller, contractor for the First National Bank Building and other major downtown buildings



Patrick Walsh (left) and his son Thomas, supervisors of the construction of the American Commercial & Savings Building, the Blackhawk Hotel, the Sacred Heart Cathedral, and the Kahl Building (drawings courtesy Quad-City Times)

tled on the city, Davenport's golden years of commercial building came to an end. Its proud bank doors closed during the Bank Holiday of 1933, and some never reopened. Many of Davenport's new offices, theater seats, and hotel rooms went unoccupied. The buildings

themselves survived, however, after World War II, when Davenport emerged from the economic depths stronger than ever. They graced the city with a vibrant skyline, a distinguished contribution to Davenport's building heritage. □

THE Goldfinch

Now in its second year of publication, *The Goldfinch* brings the pageant of Iowa history to young readers. Each issue focuses on a single topic in Iowa history—Immigrants or Architecture or Pioneer Farming—and covers the story in easy-to-read prose and handsome illustrations. Material published in *The Goldfinch* is based on original research conducted by editor Margaret Bonney and her staff at the State Historical Society.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Indians in Iowa (April 1982) |

The Goldfinch is published four times per school year by the Iowa State Historical Department/Division of the State Historical Society.

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