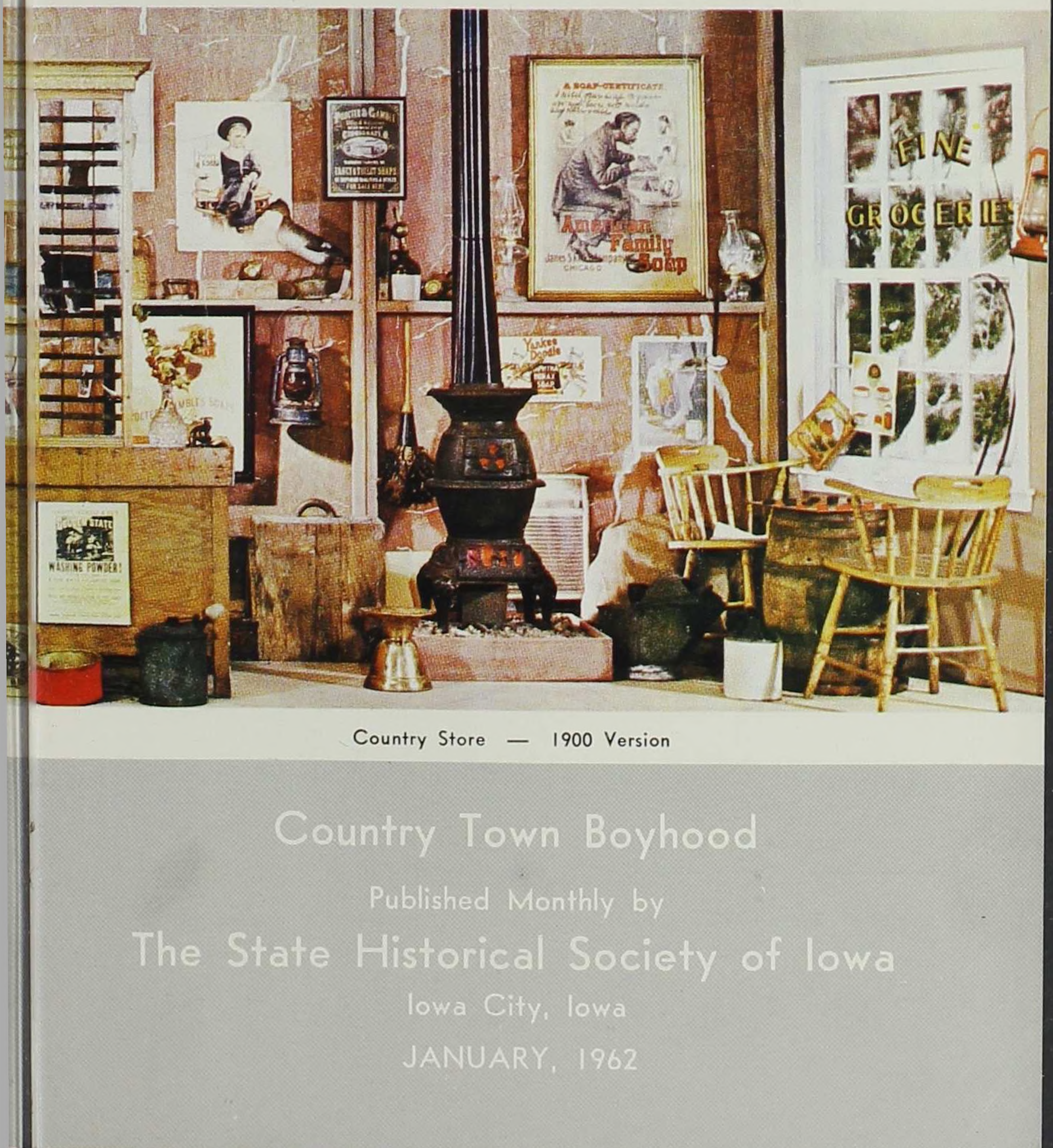
The PALIMPSEST



Country Store — 1900 Version

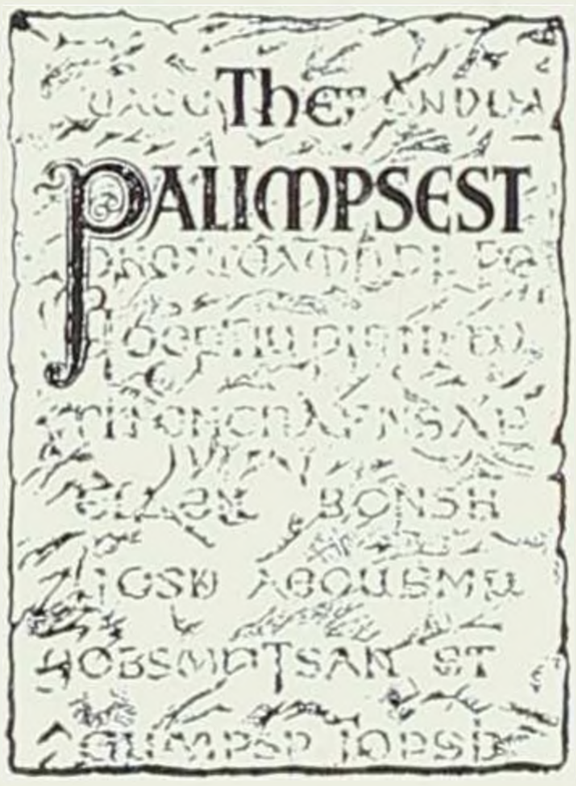
Country Town Boyhood

Published Monthly by

The State Historical Society of Iowa

Iowa City, Iowa

JANUARY, 1962



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 record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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Illustrations

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Author

Frank Luther Mott, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *A History of American Magazines,* was born in Keokuk County, Iowa, in 1886. He received his early education in Iowa and taught at Simpson College and the University of Iowa before becoming Dean of the College of Journalism of the University of Missouri in 1942. The stories printed herein are from a prospective book by Dean Mott entitled *Time Enough: A Series of Autobiographical Essays,* to be published by the University of North Carolina Press. Professor Mott has been Dean Emeritus at the University of Missouri since 1951.

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

PRICE — Included in Membership. Single copies, 25 cents.
MEMBERSHIP — By application. Annual Dues $3.00
ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLIII ISSUED IN JANUARY 1962 No. 1

Country Town

The little town of the Middle West during the 1890's was something different from the quiet village of New England and New York state. Nor was it like the small Southern town or the bustling city-to-be of the West. The kind of little town in which I grew up existed mainly to serve the families that lived on the farm round about. These Iowa farmers were a remarkable race. They were horny-handed sons of toil, and all that; but they were much more than mere field laborers. They were, as a rule, strong characters. It seems to me that the dominant quality that characterized most of them was a hardy individualism. Being much alone, in the fields, behind the plow, the farmer had a habit of thinking things out for himself. Usually he raised, besides his crops and livestock, a large family — all within a rather stern discipline of hard work, hearty food, the fear of God, and self-reliance.

The country town was integrated in a thousand ways with this rural life and activity. And yet it

had an entity of its own, never wholly apart from the farm and the farmers, but designed also to serve those who were serving the farmers. This entity comprised three institutions — the church, the school, and the store. You might think the town churches and schools were wholly for townsfolk, but that would be a mistake, for a few farm families always attended services in town, and a number of country boys and girls came into town to high school. But the store was the real mixing-bowl. Though some of them, like the implement stores, found their patronage almost wholly among the farmers, and most of them were inclined to cater to the country trade rather more than to that of the town, it was the stores that demonstrated most definitely the social and economic integration with the rural elements that was the essence of the small town.

I tell the story as I saw it. Whoever wishes to read an historical survey treatment of the Mid-western small town may find a thoughtful and entertaining one in *Main Street on the Middle Border,* by my friend Lewis Atherton; but the "survey" I shall set forth here is one obtained through observations of a wide-eyed boy who lived in three different Iowa towns in the eighteen-nineties. One of these places claimed over three thousand population; the others each had about two thousand and enjoyed the prestige of being county seats.

My story conflicts with some observations recorded by others, and especially with the more jaundiced accounts. Mine was a comparatively happy childhood, and there is not much hate-distortion in my recollections of it. I have read many studies of the small town by writers of fiction and by sociologists; and some of them have emphasized its ambitious aping of city ways, some its sexual vices, some its rapacity and propensity to "gouge" its farmer patrons. In those allegations there is almost always some truth, for men and women of many types of character made up this village society; but my own memories are chiefly of good, well intentioned people, a "folksy" society, a healthy environment. Again and again my recollections return to the basically rural nature of the small town as I knew it, its green look, its fresh outdoor mood. It was countrified. No suburb this: *sub rure* rather than *sub urbe*.

Church for Editor Mott and his family was the local Methodist Church. Church life was organized into a full day of activities on Sunday, prayer meeting on Wednesday night, choir practice on Thursday night, week-day afternoon Aid Society and Missionary Society activities for Mother, and a "protracted meeting" throughout two to six weeks in the Winter to warm up the religious emotions of the old church members and get some new ones in.

No lying late abed of a Sunday morning! Up

bright and early we were, to get our chores done — milking the cow and cleaning the barn, feeding the chickens, emptying the ashes and filling the woodbox and coal-bucket, and so on — all in plenty of time to wash and dress carefully for Sunday School at ten. This weekly "getting ready" included the blacking of shoes for the family, finding a collection penny and a clean handkerchief for each child, and getting us all started together and in good time in a seemly Sunday procession. Mother, of course, had the oversight of all these details, as well as the responsibility of getting the dinner roast on to cook while we were at services; and in addition she had on her mind thoughts for the Sunday School class of young girls which she was about to teach — a duty which she took very seriously. But I am sure that the Sunday morning parade of husband and wife followed by four spick-and-span children all setting off for Sunday School was her pride and joy.

At Sunday School we received cards bearing colored pictures of Bible scenes for attendance prizes, and papers to bring home for Sunday reading. Of these, the *Classmate,* to which some of the *Youth's Companion* writers sometimes contributed, seemed to me far the best; it was for the older scholars. After Sunday School, we children were usually allowed to run home and read our papers and await the return of our elders for Sunday dinner. But occasionally there was a campaign to

keep the children for preaching service. One preacher named McKee (would I could forget him!) once promised to give a Bible to each child who would attend service for a full year and turn in at the end of that time a schedule of the texts the preacher had used in his fifty-two sermons. I not only fulfilled the requirement but wrote out each text on a fancy card taken from a set of greeting samples in Father's printing office, all bound together in ribbons with Mother's help. This fancy record of my fidgetty attendance at many dull sermons was presented through my Sunday School teacher as intermediary; it mildly amused the Reverend Mr. McKee, who never remembered to give me a Bible.

For Sunday dinner we nearly always had a generous roast of beef, put on the fire in an iron kettle before Sunday School and timed to be done about twenty minutes after twelve. In Winter the roast was cooked atop the hard-coal burner in the dining room, in Summer on the back of the kitchen stove. If the preacher over-ran the twelve o'clock closing time for morning service, Mother was on pins and needles; she could smell her roast burning five blocks away. Nor was she the only one. Housewives in general despised long-winded preachers; and most ministers, mindful of this feature of domestic economy, advanced upon "Fifthly and Finally" a few minutes before twelve and finished on the dot — or, well, nearly on the dot.

What wonderful Sunday dinners! Luscious roast beef, with potatoes browned in its juices; and then, when meat and potatoes had been removed, rich brown gravy made after them in the pot! Perhaps the supreme pleasure was one that was passed around among us children, Sunday after Sunday, of swabbing the bottom of the pot with crusts, thus regaling ourselves with the richest of the gravy on home-made bread.

After dinner, there were naps. There were no games on Sunday, except checkers. I cannot explain this exception, but it is true that Father sometimes indulged in this quiet diversion with us of a Sunday afternoon. Of course, the little ones had to be at "Yunra Lig" at three. Junior League was a branch of Epworth League, the Methodist young people's society. I cannot remember any pleasure in the junior affiliate; but Epworth League, which met before church in the evening, was a challenge to me, because by the time I was fourteen or fifteen I was given the responsibility of organizing programs for some of the meetings. This was fun, and fitted in with the training I was receiving at about the same time in "rhetoricals" at school.

Evening services were chiefly for the younger members and the popular audience, and became important to me only after I began "going with girls" and singing in the choir. The morning choir was composed of performers of some local reputation, but at the evening service there was a choir

of young folks. Seeing the girls home from church at night was exciting — especially the ordeal of asking them. Taking a girl *to* church was almost tantamount to announcing an engagement, but taking her home was different. Boys would line up outside the church door as "church let out" and wait until the girls of their choice emerged. Then a boy would step out and mumble, "See you home?" He did not need to speak very plainly, for the girl understood clearly enough what he was up to. If she said "No," the disappointed swain slunk off quickly into the shadows, hoping against hope that not all his friends had seen him "turned down." It seems strange that there were not frequent fights among rivals at the church door, but such occurrences were rare. It was all decorous and according to a fixed social code which permitted no interference with couples who were "going steady" and which recognized fully the girls' privilege to accept or refuse without insistence or annoyance. Choir practice offered similar opportunities, but there the group was smaller. Epworth League "socials" gave many a boy (myself among them) his first opportunities for dating.

Thus church-affiliated activities, though centered upon Sunday, were by no means limited to that day. Mid-week prayer meeting was attended by all the "pillars" and many humbler, but faithful, members. I sometimes went with my mother; and though I was, as a rule, rather bored by the pro-

ceedings, I found some interest in the eccentricities of the ancient ones who habitually offered testimony or prayer, or both, at these gatherings. There was one patriarchal saint who prayed every week for all the great of the earth — President McKinley, Queen Victoria, Senator Allison, Admiral Dewey, the Governor, the Mayor, and so on, down to the preacher and "the few here humbly foregathered in this sanctuary." And another old valetudinarian with creaking joints would kneel painfully and begin, "Here, O Lord, on the bendified knees of this sinfullen, fasticaten body —" and so on. Or at least it sounded like that: what he really was speaking to the Lord about was his "sinful and fast-decaying body." Artificial as prayer meeting seemed, it doubtless brought "spiritual refreshment" to many by furnishing an opportunity for religious utterance.

The Ladies' Aid Society was an important part of the church socially and financially. Was the old aisle carpet worn out? Talk to the Ladies' Aid about it. Was the parsonage shabby for want of paint? Call on the Ladies' Aid. The Aid Society "socials," fairs, food sales, and dinners were important community events. The Missionary Societies were active, too, both Home and Foreign; and there was some competition between them in fund raising and sponsored events.

The Easter Collection was the great goal and occasion of the Women's Foreign Missionary So-

ciety. We children, who did not receive allowances from our parents until much later, employed many devices to raise our own contributions; but everyone had to do his part, for competition between Sunday School classes for the largest joint donation was keen. One year I dug horse-radish root, grated it, and put it into old bottles with a little vinegar and water and sold it about the neighborhood. I made my grater by cutting a piece of tin from an old baking-powder can and pounding nail holes through at close intervals. The grating was hard on hands, and the horse-radish got into one's nose and eyes; but the neighbors bought the stuff and liked it, and I had the satisfaction of thinking my dimes helped save the souls of some of the "heathens."

The Home Missionary activity that I remember best was the Flower Mission, for which we collected great quantities of home-grown flowers to send to hospitals, charitable homes, penitentiaries, etc. They were sometimes sent a long way off; I think the express companies cooperated in the work as a contribution to charity. The nearest beneficiary of our Flower Mission was the county jail, the few inmates of which were undoubtedly surprised to have their cells brightened by sweet peas and roses. This gesture of a sentimental penology had some curious effects, not all of them pleasing to the Missionary Society; but some stories always came back of suffering made easier to

bear, hard hearts touched, and lives reformed by the ministry of flowers.

The greatest church effort of the year, however, was the revival meeting, which usually came in the Winter. The stated objects of this series of meetings were to save sinners and to revive the fainting religious spirit of the church itself. Though the regular minister sometimes delivered the sermons, preachers with aptitude for evangelistic work — professional "revivalists" — were usually invited in. Their preaching was nearly always emotional, and they were skilful in developing a community excitement which came to a climax in the mesmeric frenzy of the final meetings at the church. I confess with sorrow that after these many years I cherish a deep resentment against "revivalists" who caught me in their web of mass hysteria when I was a boy: my psyche still bears the scars of that experience.

A little later, as a high school lad, I went through a series of meetings led by William A. ("Billy") Sunday. This was in the years when that great evangelist, newly recuited from the ranks of professional baseball, was still giving attention to the smaller towns; later he was taken over entirely by the great cities. In my home town it had to be a "union effort," in which the Methodists and the Presbyterians joined. There was at first much objection to taking in the Presbyterians, many of whom (it was whispered) played cards

and danced. But the Reverend Mr. Sunday would come to Audubon, Iowa, only if the churches would join forces in one big drive on sin, and he had his way. He also had his way about an auditorium. The Presbyterians had a smaller membership but a larger church; the Methodists, in order to meet the seating capacity challenge, erected a temporary gallery in their church with the intention of bringing the meetings within a Methodistic aura. But as soon as Mr. Sunday got into town and took one look at the gallery monstrosity, he declared it unsightly, unsafe, and unsuitable, and moved over to the Presbyterian Church. "Billy" Sunday always ran the show; he made his own aura.

By this time I was inured to the hypnotics of revivalism. Oh, I was loyal to "Billy" and his works; I was on his side, and I sang in his big choir throughout the meetings. But I could watch him objectively and analyze his techniques and effects. His acrobatic homiletics were a sight to behold: with one foot on the seat of a chair and the other on top of the lectern, he would shake both fists in the faces of his gaping congregation and call them hypocrites and liars. When he prayed, he took it for granted that the Lord knew baseball slang as well as Scripture, and he talked to Him familiarly: "You know I'm doing the best I can for these hypocrites down here in Audubon, Iowa, Lord. I've preached Your word till I'm hoarse, I've held

meetings day and night, I've shouted and agonized and prayed. I've worn myself out, but the Devil has a strangle holt on the people of Audubon, I guess. I've pitched fast strikes right over the plate, Lord — no curves. If you know of anythink else I can do to make them quit their lying, and going after other men's wives, and sneaking around to the drugstores for their whiskey, and cheating their neighbors, why, just you let me know, Lord, and I'll do it! You know I'll do it if it kills me, Lord!"

There was some disillusion in the aftermath of a series of "Billy" Sunday meetings. I remember the quarreling after the Audubon meeting about whether the Methodists or the Presbyterians would get this or that new convert, and which church would get more than the other. Also, though all, in the closing days of the meeting, had allowed a mass enthusiasm to sweep them into making a whopping big farewell testimonial collection for the evangelist, after he was gone, with the money in his pocket, a feeling grew that it was not a very nice thing to have so much cash taken out of town so easily. Then too, there was the inevitable backsliding. "Billy" Sunday's athletic figure had scarcely disappeared, waving his hat to the crowd from the rear platform of the single passenger car of the "accommodation train" on the branch line, when word got about that the star convert of the whole meeting was on a sensational bender.

What great centers of our social life the churches were! It seems to me that more than half the social activities of our town radiated from the church. There were the ice-cream "sociables," the lawn parties, the cake sales, the fairs, the big church dinners, the Ladies' Aid bees, the Epworth League parties, the Christmas Eve exercises (with program and tree and gifts for all), the annual church-wide Sunday School picnic, and more, and more. And the church services themselves were, of course, social events of importance, where we met and visited with friends, and the young people began courtships.

Lodge meetings, for some unregenerates, took the place of church services; but for most people church and lodge seemed to supplement each other, and much was made of the religious teachings in the rituals of the "orders." Protestant ministers commonly belonged to the lodges (sometimes to several) and if they did not "go through the chairs," at least served as chaplains. Many others would belong to two or three such organizations. My father was a good Mason, an Odd Fellow, and a Knight of Pythias. The costumes of the "orders," their marching and parades, and their funeral and Memorial Day services were fascinating to a young boy. It was an impressive sight when a lodge in full regalia would attend church in a body, as most of them did annually.

Some social life clustered also around the

schools — especially about the high schools. I have very little memory of my first two years of school. I had been enrolled in the First Room of the What Cheer, Iowa, Public Schools only a few weeks when I marched in what I faintly remember as a tremendous parade down the Main Street of the town to celebrate the quadricentennial of Columbus' discovery of America, a tiny American flag clutched in my hand.

By the time I reached the Third Grade, we had moved to Tipton, where my father had bought a newspaper, and I was doing very badly in school. Every day was agony to me. Worst was mental arithmetic: 2 plus 7 divided by 3 times 9 plus 3 times 10 less 200 divided by 10. Answer? A flurry of hands waving in the air, but never Frank Mott's hand. He had been lost in confusion and woe away back at "times 9 plus 3." One afternoon Father visited our Room; and when we were all lined up at the blackboard, showing off for the editor by doing some quick arithmetic, he saw me peeking at what my neighbor was writing down in a desperate effort to keep up with the class. Oh, no; Father never punished me for that cheating, but he did mention it that evening at supper. I am sure our parents were worried about the school relations of both their sons; my brother was having even a harder time than I was, and later in the year was demoted one grade. My worst memory of that painful year is of the public punishment of one

of the boys in my class, for I do not know what offense. He was about twice as big as any other boy in our Room; and the "Professor" (as we called the Town Superintendent of Schools) and the janitor tied him up on two chairs on the rostrum and beat him with straps. I had never known any violence at home, nor ever seen much brutality on the playground or anywhere else; and this was a truly shocking experience for me. Maybe it taught us young spectators some kind of lesson, as it was doubtless supposed to do: I am sure it did not teach us to love or respect our elders.

The only thing I remember enjoying in the Third Grade was singing the popular swinging hymn-tunes of that time. We always had devotional exercises in the morning (as we had on the day of that memorable beating), and we sang with a will, "Work, for the Night is Coming" and "We Are Washed in the Blood of the Lamb." It was a couple of months after the official beating of the boy in our Third Grade that some of the big boys in the high school caught the "Professor" in a second-floor corridor and threw him downstairs, nearly breaking his neck. A little later the "Professor" resigned.

I think such abuses were not very common in Iowa schools in the Nineties. In this case there was a political clique which was in control of the Court House, the town government, and the schools. Father and his newspaper were engaged

in a bitter contest with this group, and there was a feeling at our house that the Professor was revenging himself against Father when he demoted my brother; but we were instructed never to say anything of the sort outside of the home, and Mother was the only one who ever expressed herself freely on the subject.

Fourth Grade was far better. Teacher was a large, pretty girl with a pink and white complexion, and we all loved her. On the last day of school we gave her a farewell present. We had a committee on collection of funds for this purpose, another on the choice of a gift, and a third on the presentation. We all dug down to find nickels and pennies to make up what we thought was a fine sum, which we turned over to the purchasing committee; and after much deliberation that group bought a box of toilet soap, very lovely and perfumed. I was on the presentation committee; and Mother, who never failed us on such occasions, supplied verses which she taught me to declaim in proffering the gift. I wish I had those "Verses on Presenting a Box of Soap to Our Dear Teacher" to insert here; alas, they perished with the occasion, but in their time and place they were esteemed beautiful.

Fifth Grade was wonderful. I should like to burn a candle here to the memory of Miss Elizabeth Jones, a teacher who had an abiding interest in the development of the untried minds and budding talents of the boys and girls who passed

through the Fifth Room. Miss Jones permitted the son of the Methodist preacher (who was a Bryan-ite) and me (who idolized McKinley) to debate free silver for half an hour at a time many days during the stirring presidential campaign of 1896. She allowed me to handle, and read during school hours, a volume I shall never forget — *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with Gustav Doré's illustrations. She encouraged us to stand on the rostrum and tell stories, — even to spin yarns. There was a small, good-looking, glib boy in our Room who came from a family which had belonged to a traveling actors' troupe, and had settled in our town for some reason; this lad fascinated all of us by his thrilling narratives of adventure — some of which, I suspect, came out of the nickel story-books which most of us were not allowed to read. In one of his fables he told us how he had been "stunted" in his infancy so he would always be able to play juvenile roles, but there was nothing "stunted" about his free-flowing imagination.

On Fridays we sometimes had spelling-matches, which were very exciting. I had just begun to learn to set type and was therefore rather unexpectedly interested in spelling. But the scholar who was head of our Room in all branches, including spelling, was a girl named Jean. She was tall and slender, and her light-gold hair, unbraided, flowed down her back in a shining cascade to her waist. One Friday afternoon, when everyone else

had gone down and Jean and I were exchanging "phthisic" and "fuchsia," she suddenly went perfectly white and sank to the floor in a faint. I had never before seen anyone faint, and was terrified. I guess I was in love with Jean, in a distant, fearful way. She was an ice-maiden, daughter of a stockman-banker who had a palatial home in the edge of town. I think she died young: I cannot believe that she grew up to become fat and hearty, bearing five bouncing babies in a happy marriage. I am sure she died young.

I do not remember much about the Sixth Grade, and I think I "skipped" the Seventh when we moved to Audubon. In that town's Eighth Room, I found Miss Ella M. Stearns, a truly great teacher, who, after making many generations of grade-school pupils her debtor for life, served for years as County Superintendent of Schools. She was a strong but genial character, whose speech betrayed her New England origins. She was equally good at teaching all the branches — history, geography, reading, arithmetic, spelling — but I think we all looked forward most to the half-hour of reading from some fascinating and improving book with which she opened every morning's exercises.

In high school, Miss Harriet Bilharz, with a brand-new diploma from Northwestern University, was a brilliant teacher. It was the first time I ever had a college graduate as a teacher; and this was an inspiration, for our parents had assured

their four children from infancy that they were to have college educations. Under Miss Bilharz I read my first Latin — *Caesar's Commentaries* and the *Aeneid*. But it was under Miss Jennie Riggs, who came a little later, that I devoured every line of every page of Pancoast's *History of English Literature*. As I look this book over now, I find it a singularly dull text; whether it was Miss Riggs who made it exciting then, or whether my interest was due to the fact that about that time I suddenly discovered the world of letters, I cannot now tell.

It was F. P. Hocker, Town Superintendent of Schools, who at last taught me to find satisfaction in mathematical studies, and helped me to discover that pure delight in plane geometry which I recall as one of the pleasantest memories of my high school life. "Professor" Hocker had an artificial limb, the straps of which squeaked when he moved and thus always betrayed his approach to delinquents. We boys generally called him "Cork-Leg" in conversation beyond the reach of our parents' ears, or his. But we had real respect for him. He loved to lead the school in singing favorite songs, such as "On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away" — one that reminded him of his Indiana boyhood. He would beat time with a long wooden blackboard pointer, a rapt expression on his leathery old face. It was his interest that made the Audubon schools among the first, at least in towns of its size, to employ a regular music teacher. "Professor"

Hocker also showed his initiative by installing the town's first telephone system, and by erecting a corn-canning factory at the edge of town — all while he was attending to his chief occupation, the direction of the schools. Old "Cork-Leg" was a great man. He spent his latter years running a washing-machine factory in El Reno, Oklahoma.

Miss Bilharz was the daughter of the town's leading store-keeper, who was chairman of the Methodist Board of Stewards ("Stuarts," I thought they were called), lived in the best house in town, and was later president of a bank. Emil Bilharz had one of those big, double general stores, one side of which was dominated by the exciting smell of new calico and gingham prints, and had a long counter in front of high rows of shelves loaded with yard-goods, with revolving stools for shoppers along the counter; and the other was distinguished by the stronger mingled odors of coffee, apples, cheese, and such grocery products competing from their barrels and cases. In the back of the store was the clothing stock for men and boys, and hung from the ceiling were lanterns, tinware, rubber boots, and so on. There were also dishes, lamps, glassware, and the like somewhere back there. And in a shed at the rear were drums of kerosene and gasoline. For a child the most fascinating corner of the store was the one in which the glass covered candy case stood, with its chocolate drops (cone-shaped nougat covered with a thin

coat of chocolate), its licorice in long black strings, its tiny red-hots, its brightly striped curled candy — such a delectable treasure hoard, and our pennies were hot in our fists! Townsfolk usually stayed away from Bilharz's on Saturdays, for then the great "emporium" was thronged with the farm trade, visiting, talking crops, carefully shopping. Bilharz's Store was a great institution, famed the county over.

In the small towns I knew in the Nineties and around the turn of the century, there were usually one or two general stores, and in addition at least one all-drygoods store, a clothing store or two, and a couple of smaller groceries competing with the big general store. Each of the groceries had its own delivery wagon, driven by a clerk in regular hours, and by a hustling boy after school and on Saturdays. There were often two drugstores, stocked not only with the standard items of the pharmacopoeia, but also with stationery, schoolbooks, and notions; the old-fashioned ones displayed in their show-windows glass containers filled with colored liquids (I long wondered what magic philtres these were, and it was a disappointment to learn that they were only colored water), while the more progressive druggists would fill their front windows with brushes and combs, fancy soaps, and even books. Most of us had a nagging suspicion of all druggists because it was common knowledge that some of them dispensed

more Old Crow and similar beverages than calomel, quinine, or ipecac. Soda fountains in drug-stores were an innovation in the late nineties, though there were ice-cream parlors in connection with restaurants.

Just off the corner of the Square was the butcher-shop, with beef and pork carcasses hanging on hooks along the wall, sawdust on the floor, and the butcher with blood-stained apron at work by his chopping block behind the counter. In a county-seat town there were likely to be a couple of such shops. Two or three times a week Father would come home from the office at noon bringing ten cents worth of beefsteak done up in butcher's paper, a heavy, coarse, brown wrapping to soak up the oozing blood; there was enough of the meat in such a purchase for our family of six. Sometimes I would be sent down to the butcher-shop for a five-cent soup-bone for our big Saturday meal. When Father bought the Sunday roast for twenty-five or thirty cents, the butcher would throw in a nice piece of liver free.

Then there was a hardware store; it might also handle agricultural implements, or another concern might take care of the latter trade. If so, the implement store would be just off the main street, so it would have room to display in a shed or out in an open lot next to the sidewalk its gaily painted green and yellow and red wagons and plows, harrows and hayrakes. Nearby was the lumber-yard,

with its long shed odorous with freshly sawed pine.

But let us return to the Square. By the end of the Nineties, there was in every small town a "racket store," forerunner of the later five-and-ten; and often a little jewelry and watch shop, with a small stock of rings, gold pens, and so on. The furniture dealer doubled as undertaker, and would also order pianos from Des Moines. Stuck in somewhere was a harness-shop, redolent of new leather, with the harness-maker busy in the rear with his awl and thread. The only harness-maker I ever knew well loved conversation, and he had a few cronies who would sit with him for hours every day discussing in their slow way many things, old and new, far and near. Talk would go on all day long, six days a week, while D. E. Soar, the harness-maker, would cut and shape and sew, interrupted infrequently by the entrance of a customer.

I must not forget the milliner. Her store might be open only seasonally, for most women concocted their own hats from materials bought at the other stores; but in the Spring there was a rush of business, and the proprietress had to employ a bevy of assistants to make up new hats to order or to "make over" old hats for her customers. Gossips whispered that these milliners' assistants were flibbertigibbets, and not to be trusted too far.

There were no chain stores, except in the lum-

ber business. Brand goods, which were soon to revolutionize merchandising everywhere with their special packaging, backed by intensive promotion, were not prominent in the stocks of small-town merchants in the Nineties. There were a few clothing trademarks that were well known, as the W. L. Douglas $3 Shoe and Plymouth Rock $3 Pants, and also R & G Corsets (and others) for the woman, and Ferris Waists for the girls. Quaker Oats was supplanting bulk oatmeal by the later Nineties, supported by a national advertising campaign. Gradually the great flour manufacturers were pushing their products in and driving the local mills out of business. Royal Baking Powder, in its red cans marked "Absolutely Pure," Baker's Breakfast Cocoa, and Arm and Hammer Soda in packages were standard. Soaps (Pears', Ivory), cleaners (Sapolio, Pearline), and tobaccos (Horseshoe plug) were prominent brands goods in the Nineties. Of course patent medicines had been necessarily trade-marked and packaged for a hundred years and more.

But in the stores that I knew as a boy, we bought most things in bulk — sugar, salt, coffee, lard, dried fruits, cookies, and so on. Canned peaches were a luxury, but most of our households "put up" enough fruit in season to last through the Winter and Spring. The women made their own dresses, coats, and lingerie; and the drygoods in greatest demand were yard goods and trimmings.

On Saturdays, and on the rainy days of Summer when work in the fields was impossible, the stores and streets of the town would be crowded with slow-moving, visiting crowds, in which townsfolk mingled. Father would occasionally bring some friends from the country home to dinner on Saturday, but usually those who came from some little distance for a day in town expected to lunch off a dime's worth of cheese, with crackers free. Very few farm families would go to the restaurant or hotel for the extravagance of the twenty-five cent dinner, though stockmen commonly did.

There were hitching facilities along Main Street and around the Square. Teams were almost never put up at the livery stable, but fed from corn or oats brought along in the back of the rig or wagon and watered at the town trough. Dust was inches deep in the streets in midsummer, and the town sprinkling-wagon brought welcome relief both downtown and in the residential districts; this service was supported by the subscriptions of the merchants and the citizens served. In wet weather, there was no such defense against the mud, which was everywhere, so that in a bad season it took good driving to avoid getting stuck in the middle of Main Street.

Some farmers — especially the young bloods — liked to frequent the barbershops, and perhaps play pool on the tables kept in a back room. Some

with a taste for rough conversation and whiskey would hang about the livery barn. There were saloons in What Cheer when I was a young child there; it had begun as a coal-mining town, and the "wet" element was strong enough to defeat the "drys" in a state allowing "local option" but dominated by a prohibition policy. But in the more typical Iowa towns in which I lived later, only liquor from drugstores or bootleggers was procurable, or from supplies laid up on occasional visits of friends to Chicago or Kansas City. Yet there was always the town drunkard. There was Old Briggs, once a law partner of the famous Benjamin F. Butler, who now and then would stop a half-frightened boy to recite to him long passages from the *Aeneid* in hiccupped Latin. "Where on earth does Old Briggs get his whiskey?" people asked. But cheap liquor was often to be had around livery stables and poolhalls. There was also a good deal of drinking by some people on festival occasions, as though red figures on the calendar were invitations to intoxication. Thus there was some drunkenness on the Fourth of July, Christmas, New Year's, at weddings, and during County Fair week; but this was not general.

The town's hotel was something apart from a boy's life. Patronized chiefly by "drummers," it existed on the periphery of the community. It sent hacks to meet arriving trains, mainly to pick up the salesmen and their sample-cases. The drays, with

their heavy teams, also met the trains to transfer freight. In many towns there were two trains daily, one each way, and the arrival of one was always an exciting event — a highlight of the town's day. Children were sometimes allowed to "watch the train come in," though many parents disapproved the custom, especially for growing-up girls. This was because every "drummer" was believed to have bold eyes for a young girl and strange seductive powers over feminine virtue. Besides the hotel, there was the restaurant, with two or three tables and a lunch-counter, and a pervading odor of frying things. House-flies, a pest of all our homes in summertime, swarmed in the restaurant despite sticky flypaper everywhere. But you could buy a big meal, with meat and vegetables and pie, for a quarter — if you had a quarter. I was fifteen before I ate a restaurant meal.

Nor did the Court House mean much to a boy except for its position as a rather awesome architectural display piece set in the Square. Occasionally I visited the County Auditor's office to collect the bounty paid for gopher tails I had brought up out of their holes by pouring in water at one end and catching them in a noose as they emerged at the other. And once, because the young defense lawyer was a neighbor, I was permitted to edge my way into a crowded courtroom to listen to the final argument in a murder trial. The young lawyer was George Cosson, who later married my teacher

Jennie Riggs and in the course of time became Iowa's Attorney General. When I was in high school, George found time for long conversations with me, and I found his independent mind a great stimulus. "You will never benefit from school work," he told me one day as we walked along the wooden sidewalk on one of Audubon's shaded streets, "unless you become emotionally concerned. You have to be excited about geometry or you'll not do well in it." Of course, the doctrine was as old as Plato, but it was new to me then, and seemed very wise. After many years of trying to use the principle in teaching, I still think it wise; but I have learned painfully that whatever a teacher may do to create such excitement, there is little hope for a student who is unwilling to dig deeply enough below the surface of a subject to find for himself the gold of a passionate interest in it.

In many a county-seat town, as I have suggested, the business district was built up around the Square, in the center of which the Court House, the pride of the county, often displayed stone columns or even a dome. But in Audubon in my boyhood the Square was there all right; but every attempt to vote bonds to erect a fine Court House was defeated by the southern part of the county, which stubbornly clung to the opinion that its town of Exira should be the county-seat. It was a standoff; the northern two-thirds would not name Exira as county-seat, and the south third stubbornly re-

fused to give Audubon a Court House. Meanwhile the Square remained a city park, with only a small bandstand in the middle of it; the county and court business was conducted in a rickety big red-brick building east of the Square; and most business houses lined a Main Street running down hill to the westward.

That bandstand in the park was the scene of the Tuesday night concerts by the local band in the Summer season. These concerts brought in evening crowds, stores remained open, people visited, children ran here and there squealing and shouting, young bloods from the country with their girls and fine rigs drove into town, ice-cream parlors did a rushing business. But town bands had a way of disintegrating after the season, losing their directors, failing to get merchants' donations for new instruments; and thus in most towns there were periods without so much as a fife and drum corps for the Fourth of July parade.

One group was always with us, inhabiting the benches in the city park or in the shade of the Court House lawn. This was the "chin and chaw club" of old men, mostly retired farmers, who on every fine day foregathered to exchange reminiscences, talk politics, gossip about the misdoings of the younger generation, or just sit and chew tobacco, and occasionally spit.

The Opera House, like the Court House, was mainly outside my boyish purview. My parents

thought the strolling troupes, with their offerings of melodrama and farce, were a bad influence; and on only four occasions in my boyhood did they yield to their children's pleadings to attend shows at the Opera House. One of these was a hypnotist's exhibition, which had produced a sensation in the town, and in which one of our printers was a predisposed and successful subject throughout the week's engagement. There was much laughter over the tricks which the hypnotized persons, who were well known to the audience, would be made to perform. But I found it all rather frightening, and especially so when one man was made rigid under hypnosis and laid down as a bridge spanning the distance between two chairs, his shoulders on the seat of one and his feet on that of another; then a big block of limestone was laid on his belly and a man with a sledgehammer broke it in two with a mighty stroke — all without apparent harm to the subject. More pleasant, and almost as thrilling, was the home-talent play, "The Union Spy," the first dramatic production I ever saw. The role of the leading comic in this piece was played by a shoe clerk with the not inappropriate name of Hamm. As the story goes, this character, who was a very fat soldier, was captured by the Confederates and confined in Andersonville Prison, where he became a very thin soldier. (Hamm was naturally thin, but was well padded in the early scenes.) After his escape

from Andersonville, he explains to the audience:

They used to call me "Fatty Jones,"
But now they call me "Skin and Bones."

For several nights those lines brought down the house, but the night we were there Mr. Hamm fluffed them. He got them started wrong: "They used to call me 'Skin and Bones,' " he began; and then, realizing there was nowhere to go from there — or scarcely anywhere, — he finished in a burst of inspiration: "But now they call me — 'Nothing'!" My father loved to recount this story, and always ended by declaring that it was one of the greatest examples of presence of mind he had ever observed.

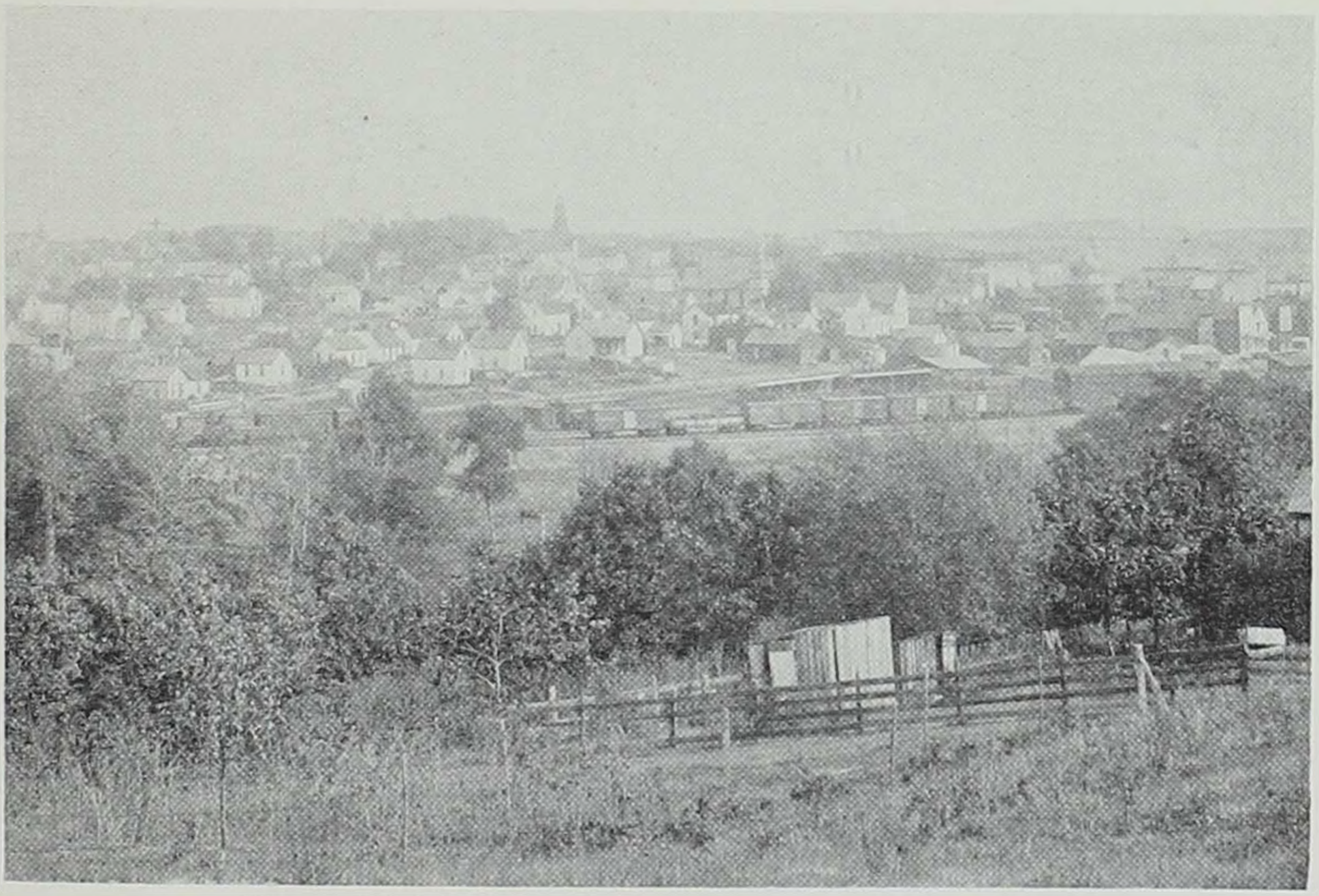
Our parents relaxed the taboo against the offerings of traveling players when "Richard III" came to town. Was this not Shakespeare, and history to boot? So Father took us to the play on press tickets, and we saw the crook-backed Richard, heard him plotting evilly for the throne, and arrogantly wooing Lady Anne. We wept over the young black-velveted Princes in the Tower and their terrible fate, and we listened breathlessly to the ghosts: "Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow!" We were thrilled by the midnight soliloquy of Richard in his tent, familiar to us from our father's reading of it at home. The marching and counter-marching before the battle, the orations of the leaders to their armies, and finally the tremendous excitement of the duel between Richard and

Richmond kept us literally spellbound. Father had to whisper to us that these were trick swords with which they were fighting: Richmond's weapon really did not pierce the heart of the fallen King, now lying prone upon the stage. But it required the reappearance of Richard in a curtain call to reassure us completely.

The other play by a traveling company we saw in the Opera House was "Uncle Tom's Cabin." To youngsters who had heard Mrs. Stowe's work read to them in infancy, this unseemly hodgepodge of farce and melodrama was a disappointment. We laughed uproariously at Marks; but we resented a little the introduction of Quakers as comics, and the pathos was not successful.

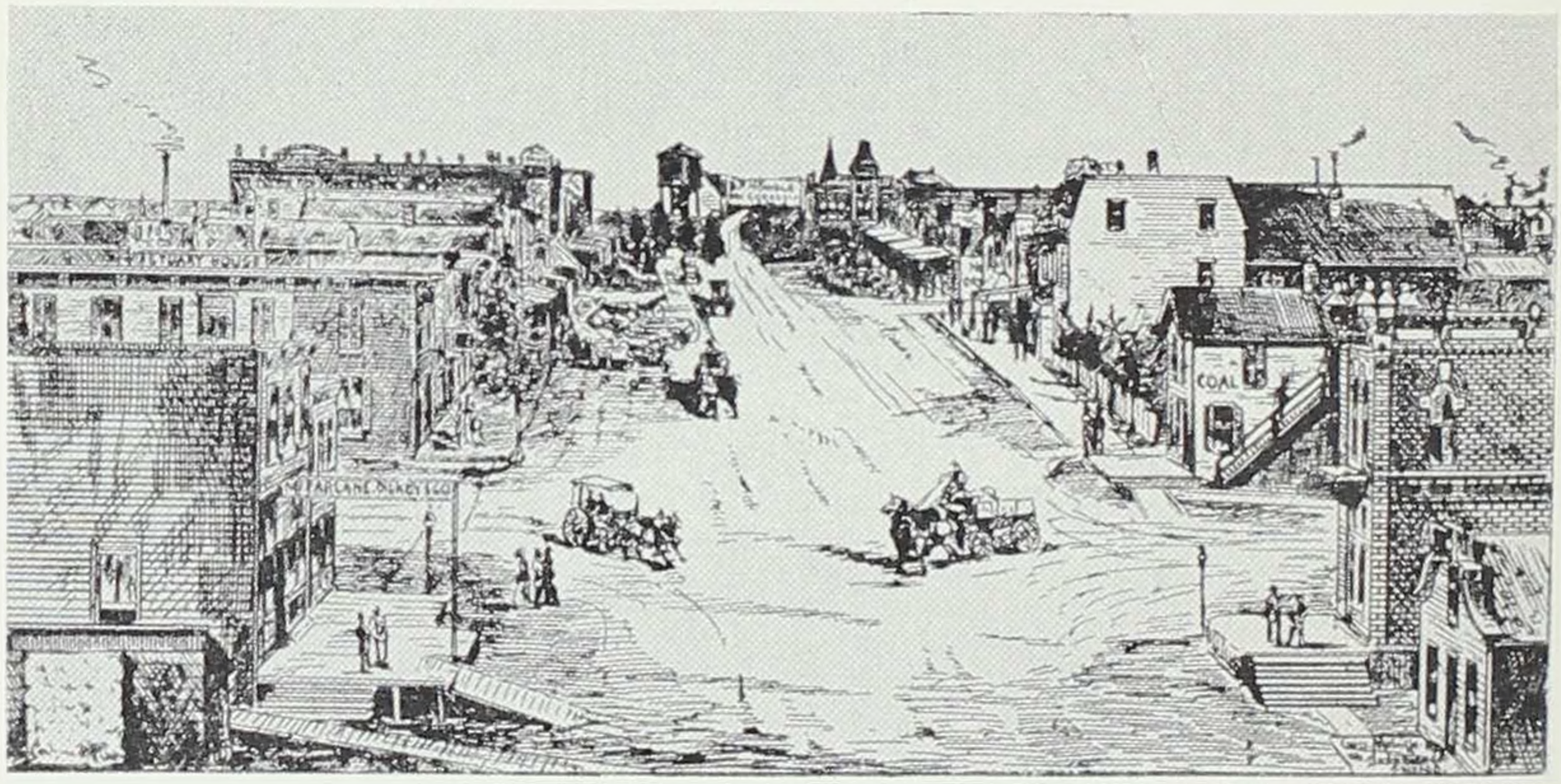
The annual visit of the circus was a great event for both town and country, for children and grownups. The editor's children were never fearful of not getting into the big show, because its press agent was always generous with complimentary tickets. Mother never went, having some Quakerish feeling of impropriety about it; but Father was a circus fan and herded us children through the menagerie, bought peanuts for us, and sometimes even indulged in tickets for the "concert" following the main performance — which we were always so desperately anxious to attend but invariably found so disappointing.

Less sensational but much more important were the visits of lyceum talent to our town. The Lec-



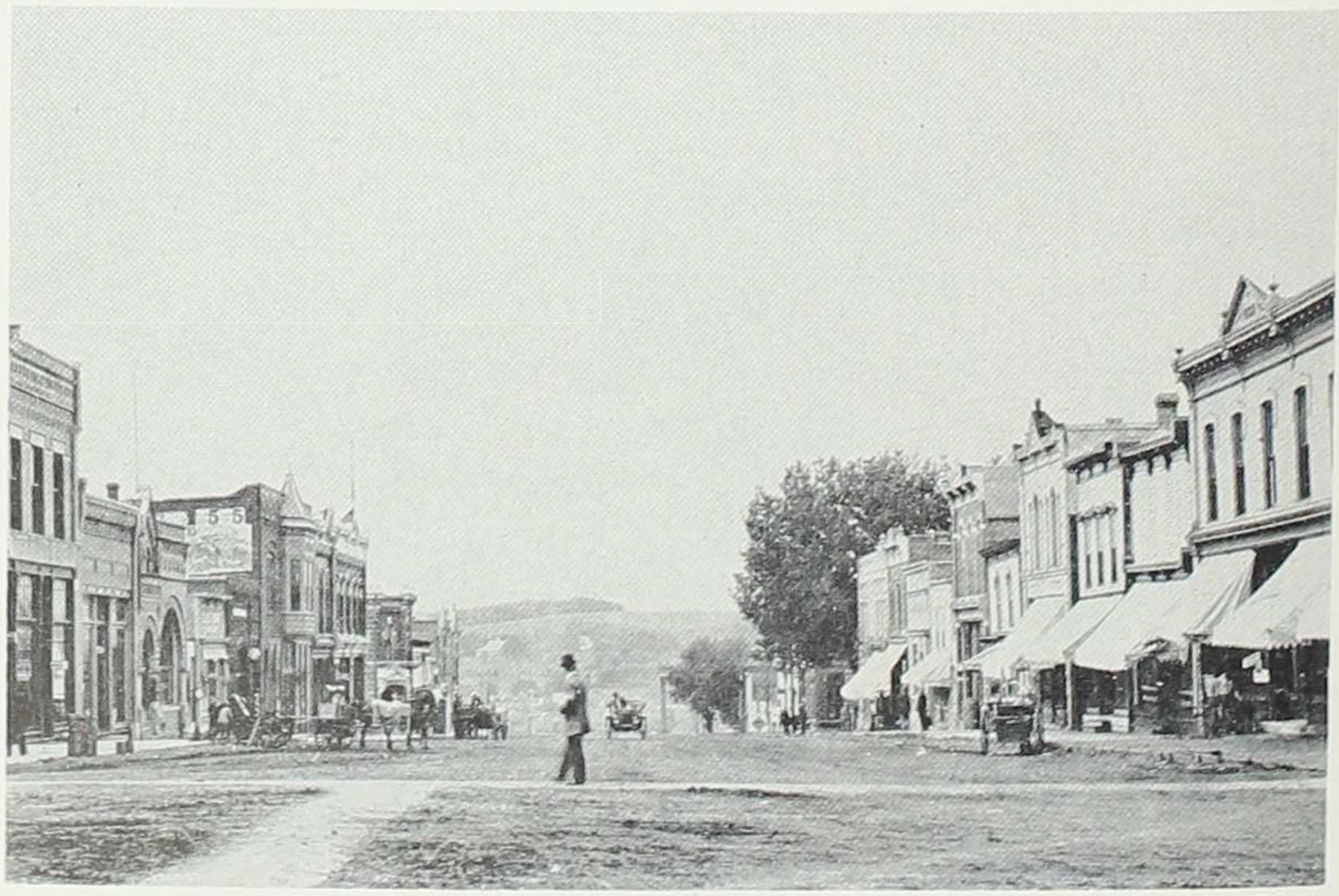
View of What Cheer from Southwest Hill About 1890

Frank Mott Recalled a Visit with His Father to the Commercial Hotel to Consult a Phrenologist



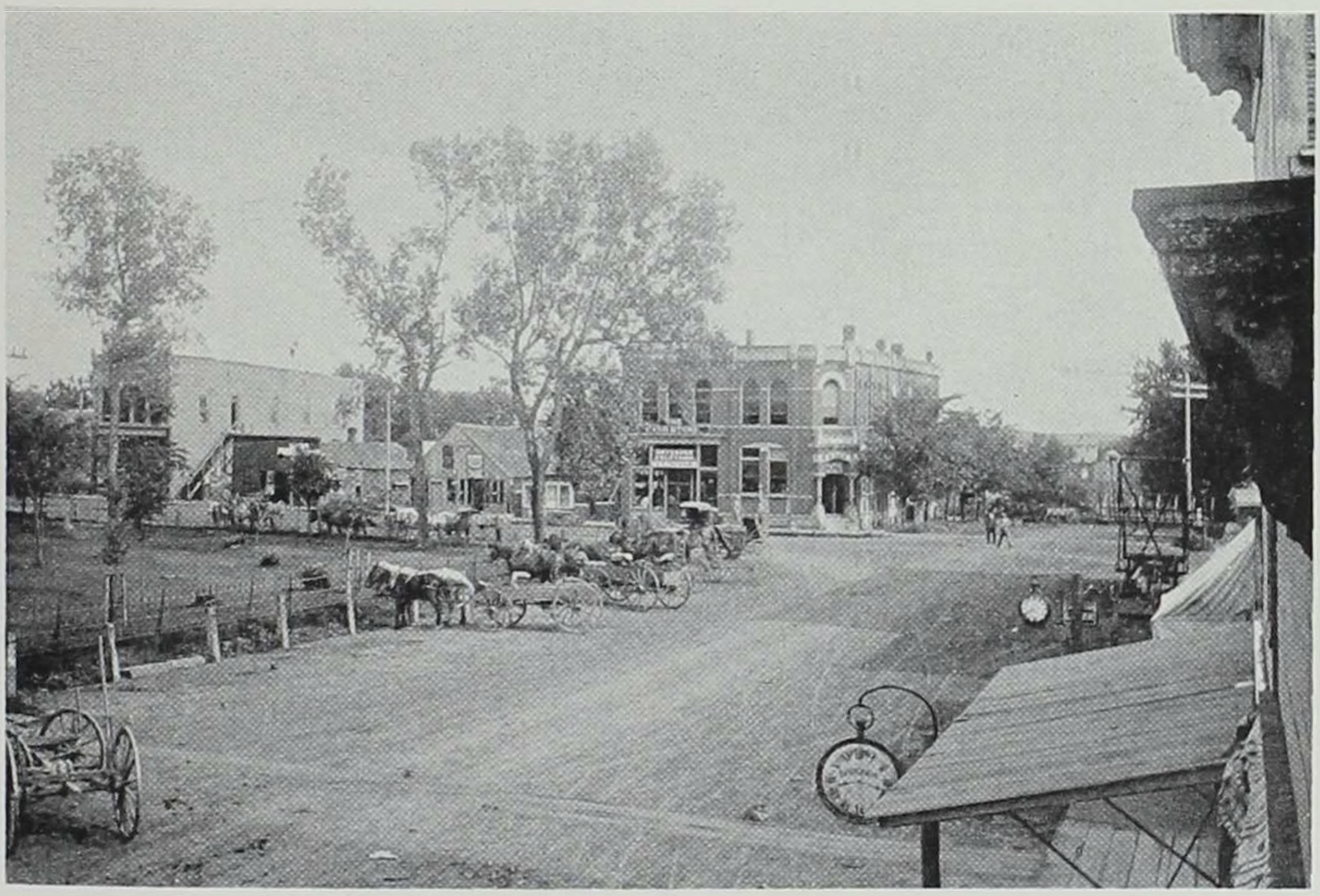
Courtesy Audubon Public Library

Woodcut of Audubon in Early Days



Library of Congress Photo

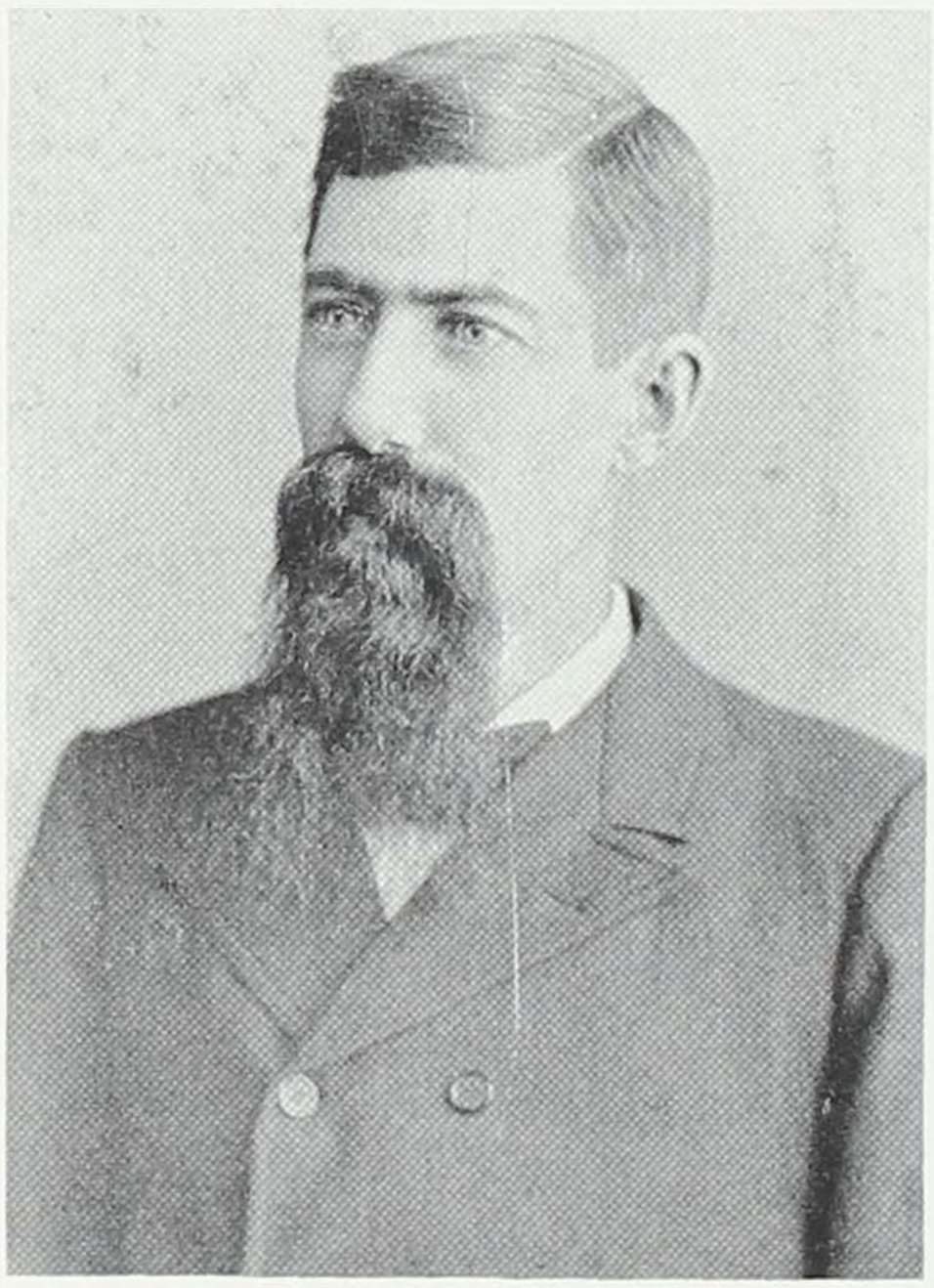
Audubon in Transition — From Buggy to Horseless Carriage



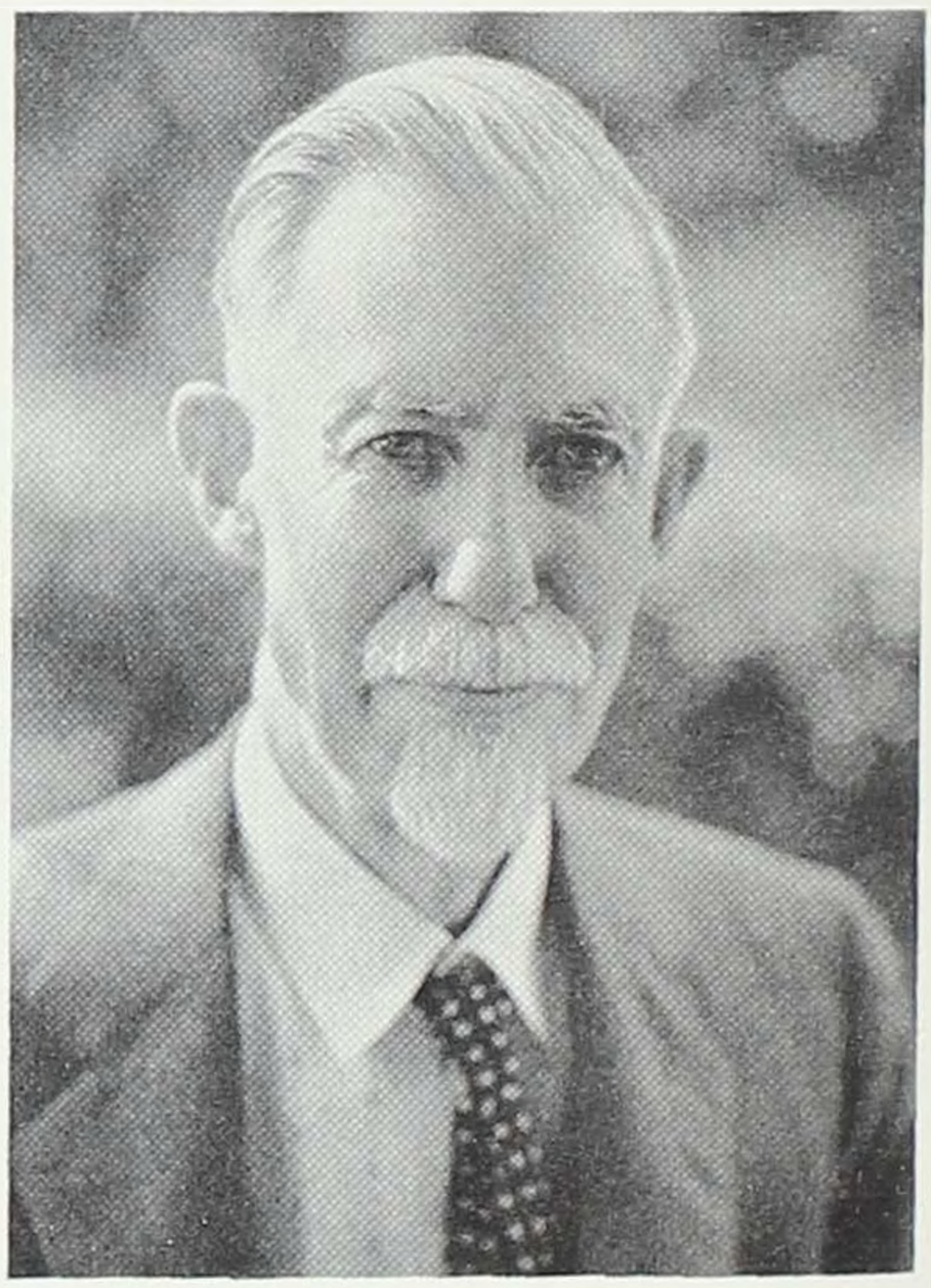
Mount Ayr — Corner of Square in about 1895

Kinsell Hardware Store in Mount Ayr

David Charles Mott



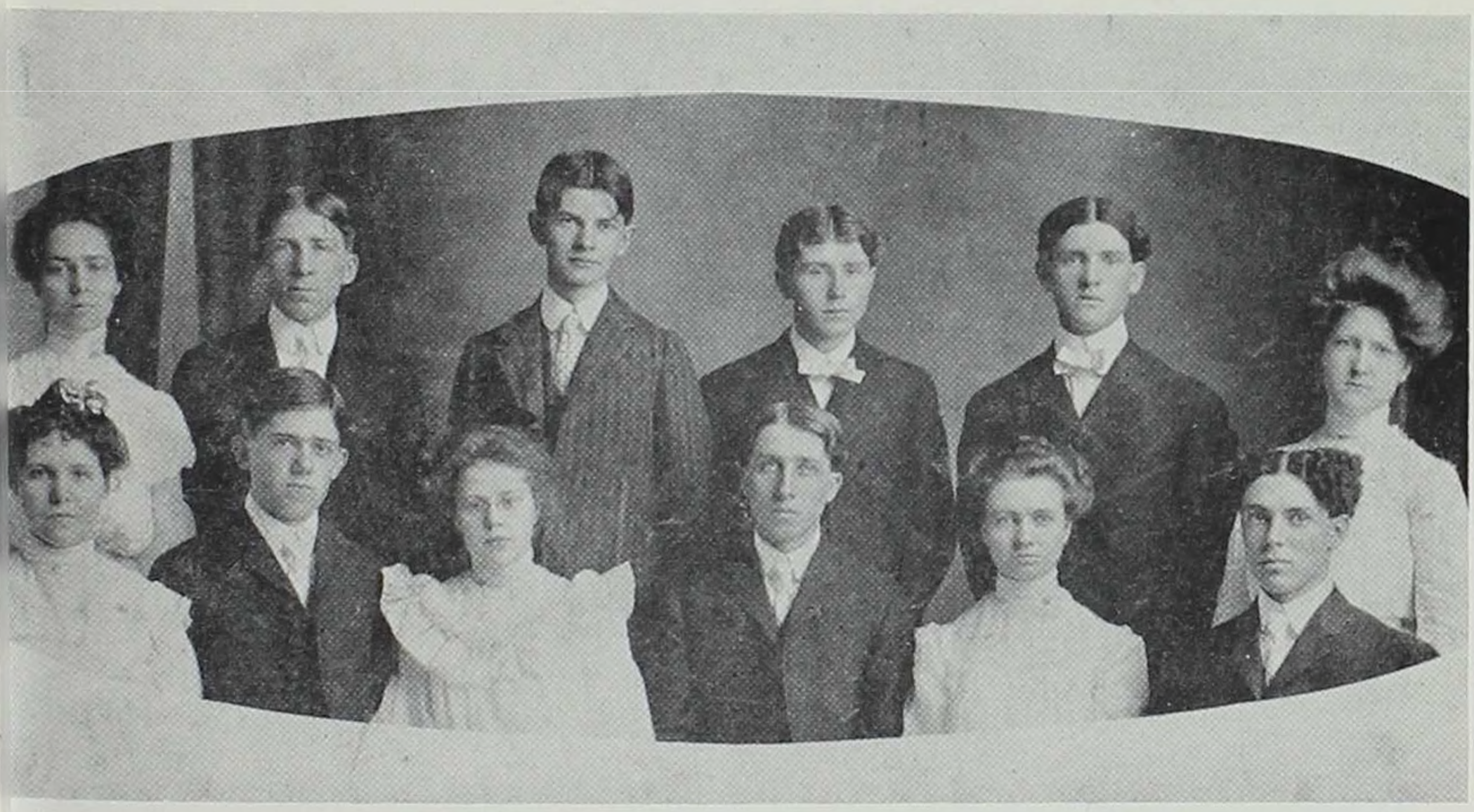
As Editor-Publisher



As Research Historian

The Mott Family in 1893

Mary E. Frank, 7 Ethel, 4 Russell, 9 David C.



Audubon High School Graduation Class — Frank Mott in Front Row, second from left

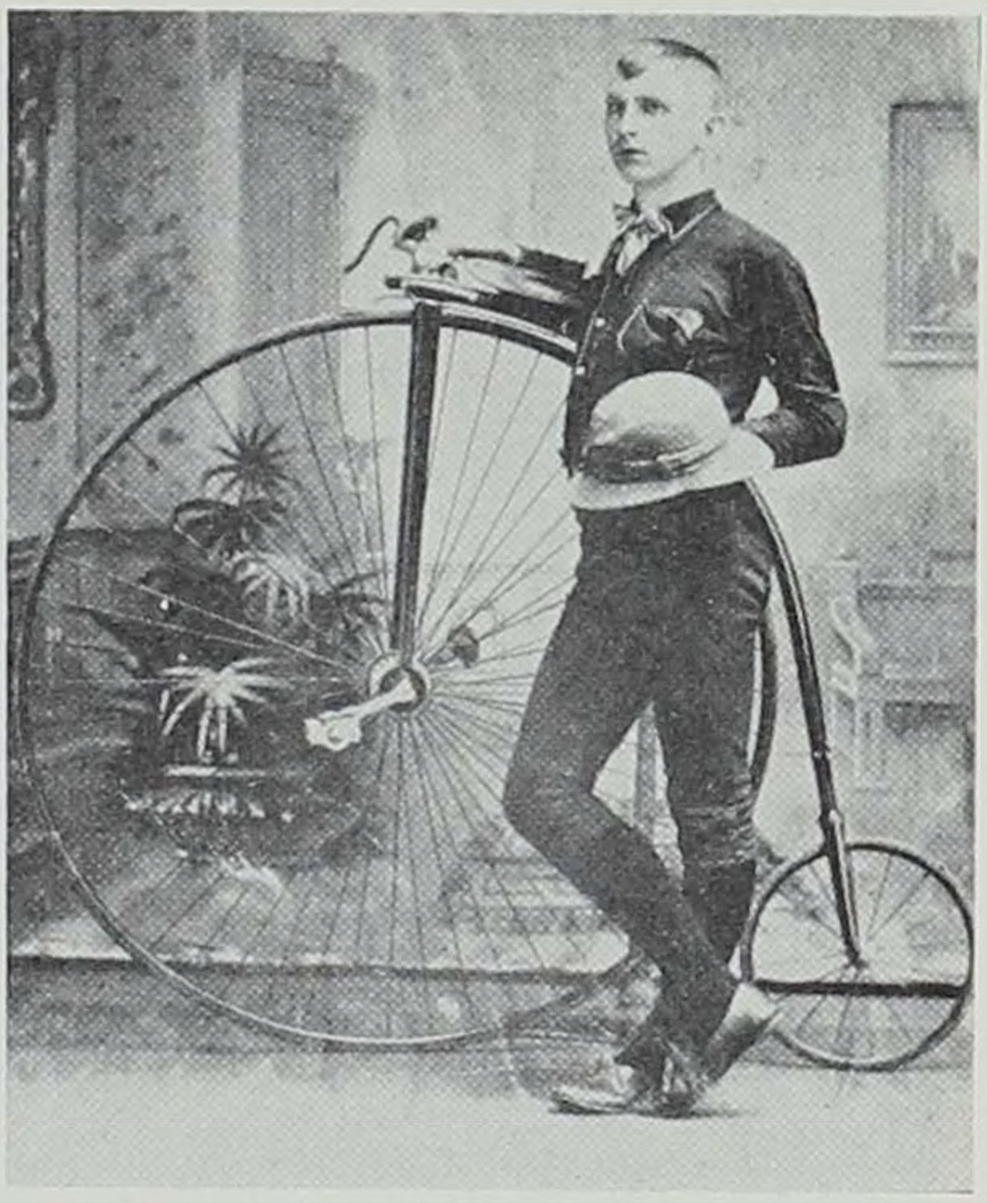
ethodist Episcopal Choir in Audubon in 1902 — Frank Mott is Tallest Boy, second from right

David C. Mott (right) and His What Cheer *Patriot* Printing "Force" about 1890

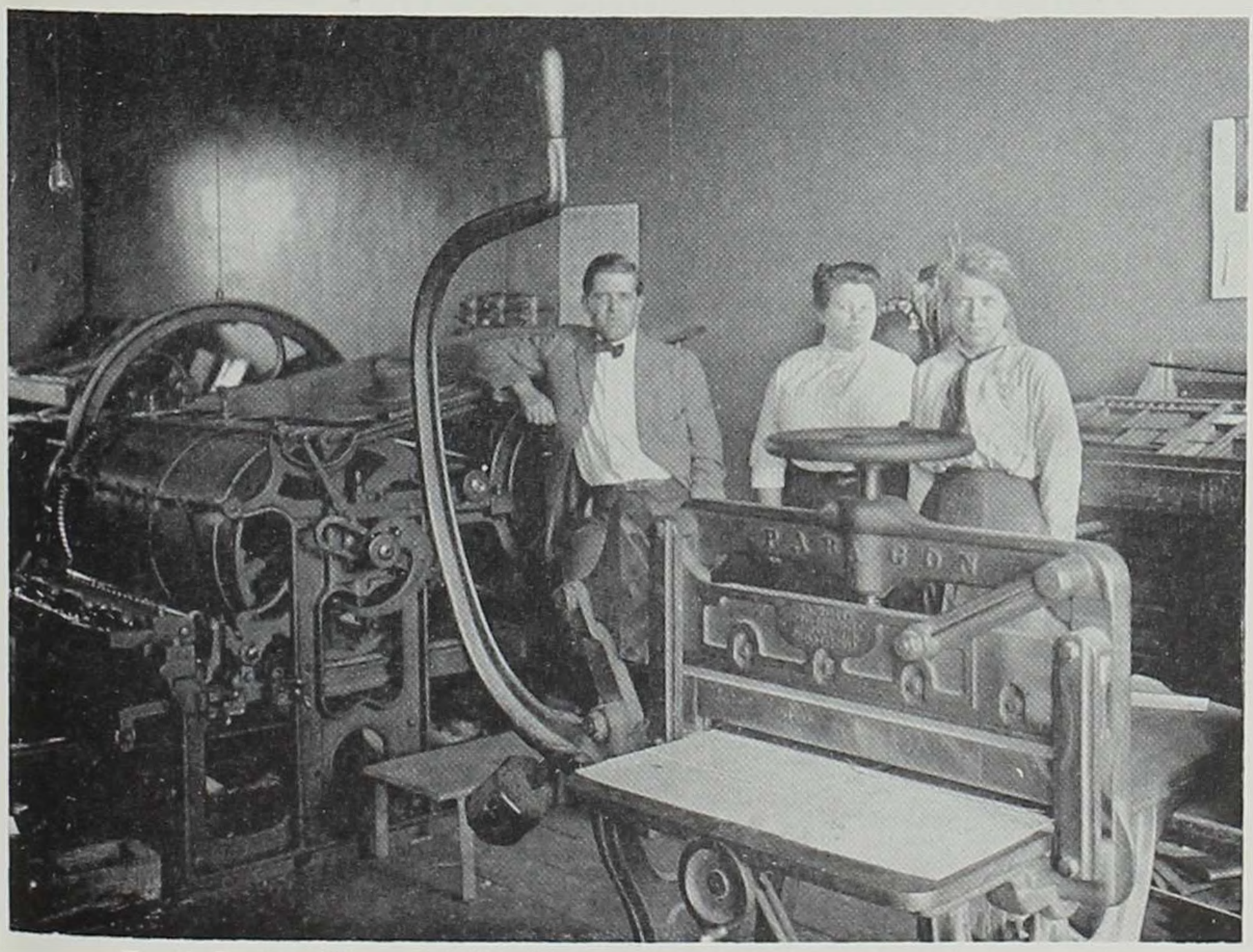
David C. Mott (rear) and His Tipton *Advertiser* Printing "Force" about 1897

Uncle Artie

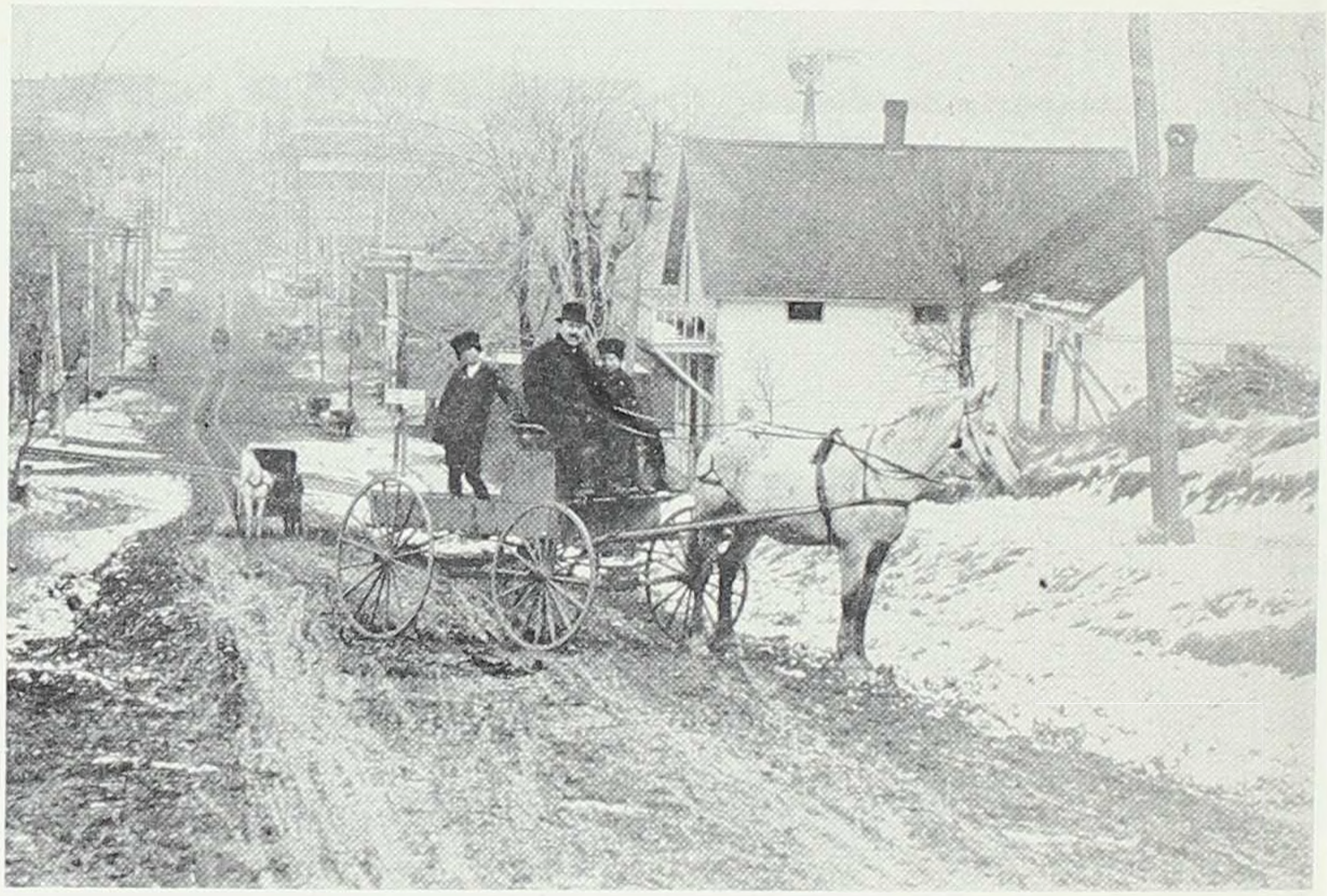
At the Case of Tipton *Advertiser* about 1896



With His Bike Ready for Spin on Dusty Roads of What Cheer



Frank Luther Mott and His Grand Junction *Globe* "Force" about 1914



A Typical Country Town Scene in 1890's

Many buildings still stand but Marengo is not the same since the Motts published the *Republican*

ture Course furnished a series of cultural-social events which illuminated many a long Winter. These series of lectures, concerts, and dramatic readings were presented by a group of guarantors, by a church society, by a women's club, or by any organization which the lyceum agency could induce to accept the responsibility of selling tickets on a percentage basis. How important these lectures were to us is something it will be difficult to make the reader in this age of radio and television and automobile travel understand. We were much more isolated culturally than any small town can be today. A visit by Bishop McIntire, William Jennings Bryan, James Whitcomb Riley, J. Ellen Foster, or William Hawley Smith was something to be anticipated with delight and then recalled and talked over for weeks afterward.

I usually earned my admission to the lyceum events by distributing circulars about the coming attraction throughout town. It was not an easy job, but I was well paid when I listened enthralled to men like Henry Watterson and Robert J. Burdette. The first "lecture" I ever heard was mainly a series of readings from his own poems by Will Carleton. Of course he was not much of a poet, really; but how thoroughly we enjoyed "Gone With a Handsomer Man" and "Over the Hill to the Poorhouse"! He could make us laugh or weep, and his homely philosophy was very satisfying.

The circus, Fourth of July celebration, Lecture

Course, and County Fair brought together all elements of the townsfolk and the country people for miles around. Such gatherings illustrated the fact that ours was virtually a classless society. There were bankers and draymen, of course, and farmers and merchants, and Preacher McKee and Old Briggs. In many Iowa towns there were Catholic groups, which sometimes had elements of "apartness." But there were no slums, and no areas "on the wrong side of the tracks," as in more industrialized communities. On the whole, we were pretty homogeneous. If there was an upper, or dominant, class, it included perhaps a dozen men, — the leading banker, the outstanding lawyer (perhaps a judge), a doctor who took an interest in public affairs, the owners of two or three of the biggest stores, the ministers of the largest congregations in town, the superintendent of schools and the editor of the leading paper.

The banker requires special mention. Not only did he represent Money and Sound Credit in the community, but he was often as much of a personal adviser in family matters as was one's pastor or doctor. He was consulted by the father who was debating whether to send his boy to college, by the old man who was thinking of taking his wife on a trip to California, and by the widower who wanted advice about marrying again. Of course customers needing loans confided to him the stories of their misfortunes, or their hopes for

expansion of their various operations, and all such matters, often in intimate detail. A wise and friendly banker was a great asset to a small town; a stingy and self-centered one was a curse.

Following the rural pattern of our community, our small industries were definitely countrified. Our butchers bought stock off the farm, for example, processed it at the slaughter-house on the edge of town, and sold the meat from the carcasses at their shops.

The mill also bought neighboring farmers' products — corn, wheat, buckwheat — and ground them into flour, meal, and "shorts" for townspeople, for the producers on a grist basis, and sometimes for a modest city trade. How we used to look forward to the first fresh corn-meal of the Autumn! Mush was our staple supper diet throughout the Fall and Winter; it was easy to prepare and said to be highly nourishing. But we got rather tired of it, even when it was ameliorated by sorghum molasses, and the meal became stale and musty after a year; so as soon as we learned that farmers had brought the first corn of the new harvest to the mill, and small quantities of fresh meal were available, Mother would hurry my brother and me off, with a flour-sack and a half-dollar, to visit the miller in his dusty, shaky, noisy old mill and get a supply of the tasty new crop.

The blacksmith worked chiefly for the farmers, shoeing their horses and repairing their imple-

ments. But the townsfolk had horses, too, and things to repair. One of my very early memories relates to a visit that I made at the age of six or seven to the blacksmith shop in What Cheer to have a hoop made. In our neighborhood all the children were getting rolling-hoops with the propelling "stick" a short iron bar attached to the hoop itself by a closed loop at its end. My father gave me the large sum of twenty cents to buy one, and I found the adventure of ordering it myself and seeing it made as much fun as rolling the new hoop home. The cindery, horsey smell of the shop, its dim interior in which the taciturn, leather-aproned smith found a long iron rod from which he cut a length for the job in hand, the bright red glow of the iron as he welded the ends together, with sparks flying: these things are still clear in my memory. The town had a tinner, too, who had his shop in the rear of the hardware store and turned out special pans and utensils for the housewife, stovepipes, pails, and such like.

The creamery was another local industry which served farmer producers. Owned cooperatively by the farmers, most of its product was shipped to out-of-town markets. Shortly after the turn of the century, factories for canning sweet corn were set up in many small towns in Iowa, but most of them did not last long. I have spoken of "Professor" Hocker's canning company in Audubon; I worked in his factory one Summer.

Creameries and dairymen could not do much business selling their products to local consumers, because nearly every family kept a cow. My father bought some feed at the mill and had a farmer fill our haymow every Summer, and we furnished some fodder to Bossy from our garden. Father also bought pasture rights in a field two or three blocks from our home where other families had their cows; it was a communal pasture. Then throughout most of the year, my brother or I would trudge out to the pasture with a milkpail morning and evening, halter Bossy and tie her up and milk her. On a warm Summer evening, there is nothing so penetratingly hot to a boy who is doing the milking chore as the flank of a large yellow cow, and nothing so vexing as the lashing of a cow's tail in fly-time. We raised chickens, too, of course. Much of their feed came from garbage — an unknown word to us; we said "chicken-feed" or "slop." Many of our neighbors kept a pig in a pen in the back-yard. We had one when we lived in What Cheer — a cute piggy in infancy, but he grew big and fat as his kind do, and he squealed so when the men took him away to the slaughter-house that he broke our hearts. We never had a pig after that. Anyway, there was some talk about pig-pens in town not being entirely sanitary; certainly most of them were malodorous.

Many of us were, in a way, small farmers. We surely raised big gardens. In my family, each of

us had an individual section of the family garden for his own; and though the general plan came from our parents, each child had his own responsibility and his own pride in what he got out of his plot. I acquired at that time a passion for gardening that has been with me all my life. I came to regard the raising of vegetables as a creative art — something dreamed up and followed through from seed catalog to dinner table. To see the seeds I have planted breaking through the ground has for many years brought a new excitement with every recurrent Spring and Summer. Hoeing in my garden has seemed to me a calm and philosophic exercise, useful and healthful, and mildly relaxing and satisfying. And picking the first succulent green peas, bringing to the house the first fat red tomatoes, snapping off the first roasting ears: these are the climax of the year for the kitchen gardener.

And as far as household conveniences were concerned, we were little better off than the farmers. We got hard water from our own wells, and soft water from our cisterns or from rain-barrels set under the roof-spouting. We had no plumbing; we used the primitive backhouse for a toilet, and a tin tub set on the kitchen floor for our Saturday night baths. We had no electricity in our house until after the turn of the century, and then the lighting came from globes attached to drop-cords. Electrical appliances came into our home very slowly indeed. No telephones, no central heating,

no electric refrigeration in the Nineties; such novelties had to await the coming of the fabulous Twentieth Century. Our ice-box was just that: a nickel's worth of ice shared space with perishable foods. Ice was supplied from wagons which distributed it from house to house in the hot weather. We children would pursue those wagons through the streets begging for the crystal-cold pieces which the friendly iceman would chip off when he hewed out the five-, ten-, and fifteen-cent blocks for the housewives. The cutting, storing, and distributing of ice was an important local industry. My memories of skating in zero weather on the creek at the bottom of our town are tangled with pictures of men and teams cutting ice and hoisting the blocks into the big ice-house on the creekside.

And so we were rural in many ways. Our little town was part of the country landscape, nestled in the green pastures and woodland, the crop-bearing fields. From almost anywhere in town, a walk of fifteen minutes took us out into a country road.

Well, all this was more than half a century ago. We still have small towns in the Middle West, but they are different. They have been transformed by three factors: the agrarian revolution, which has reduced the importance of the small farmer with his independent operation (and now bids fair to eliminate him); the coming of the automobile, good roads and electronic communication, which have shattered the walls of isolation that used to

surround the rural communities; and the growth of brand marketing and pressure selling, which have not only ruined the primitive general-store system but have brought modern living in the small towns into step with that of urban communities.

Nobody wants to go back to the old times, but some precious things have been lost along the road to the new day. The chief loss, I think, has been that of the independent, self-reliant spirit that was once the central characteristic of the agricultural community. It was sometimes a prickly thing, and hard to deal with, but there was a fine American integrity about it. It is not entirely gone, of course; but inside toilets, bathtubs, electrical appliances, and canned goods have not only "civilized" the small town but have conditioned it for the acceptance of our modern enveloping "mass culture" in exchange for the tough old self-reliance.

But this is old man's talk. It is not easy to recall to a just and equitable bar of memory the life and institutions of one's boyhood, and recollection sometimes spreads too rosy a hue over the past. One's eyes were keener and more roving in those days, the taste of an apple was more pungent on one's tongue, and every day brought new and exciting experiences. This is, after all, a personal chronicle; and perhaps what I have been saying in my little essay about the small towns of the Nineties is that once upon a time I was a boy in four of them.

The Old Printing Office

We called it a "country" printing office, because its chief output was a "country" newspaper. Nowadays we talk of the "community" newspaper. The word "country" is now applied mainly to hillbilly music and a curious kind of fellow known as a "bumpkin" or a "hayseed." Like the words "villian," "boor," and "churl," all of which originally meant countryman or farmer, the word "country" itself seems to have descended in the scale of respectability. The philological standing of his word-symbol appears to have followed the downward curve of the countryman's economic status.

My father was not ashamed to call himself a "country" editor: he was proud of the designation and the vocation. He hoped I might follow in his footsteps; and in recommending such a career to me when I was a boy, he said that it had been his observation that, except for an occasional rascal or drunkard, the editor was always looked up to in his small community. It might not be a big puddle, Father said, but the editor was always one of the big frogs in it. I think that was true. Whatever hierarchy of leadership the country town possessed held assured places for the edi-

tors — or at least one of the editors of the two or three local papers. The editor was usually a political oracle; and he was sometimes sent to the legislature or appointed to state office. He was actually a liasion bringing the outside world of events and situations together with the life of the home community. He was supposed to be the best informed man in town on questions of the day. "They expect the editor to know everything," said my father, and added, "You must get a good college education."

Father always regretted that he had never gone to college, but he made up for the lack of such training by the cultivation of a studious habit throughout life. He was a tall man, standing six feet two, and of spare figure. He wore a full beard, dark red in color, which in its prime lay luxuriantly on his breast; as he grew older, he trimmed it more closely, until in his old age it was a white Vandyke. Father was a quiet man, whose strong feelings were always well controlled. Mother claimed that she had once heard him swear: it was when he was cleaning out a well and was surprised to discover a lost log-chain at the bottom of it.

"What did he say?" I once asked Mother.

"Better forgotten," she replied. "I don't want thee learning bad habits."

But I had never heard Father utter a profane word, and I persisted. Finally Mother confessed,

in a shocked undertone, that on that famous occasion he had exclaimed, "Great Scott! It's the old log-chain!"

Father was thoroughly honest and just. I think he never told a lie; he could not even engage in a game of innocent deception without completely giving himself away. Yet he was in the thick of politics most of his life. He represented his county in the state legislature for a term or two, and later served for a number of years on Iowa's Board of Parole.

The plant from which he issued his weekly newspaper and in which he conducted a job-printing business consisted of a "front office" and a "back office." The former was much the smaller and was devoted to editorial and managment activities, and the latter contained the mechanical department. In most Midwestern towns in the Eighteen-nineties, the printing office was all in one room; and that was chiefly because the editor and manager was himself a printer and carried his editorial sanctum with him while he worked at the case or the press. Entering the front door of such an office, one walked directly into a fascinating confusion of characteristic smells, sounds, litter, and orderliness within disorder. But in our shops there was always a "front office," because Father had never learned the printer's trade; and besides he liked privacy for conferences with visitors, for business transactions, and for writing.

Father often said he was sorry he had not gone into the "back office" for a while before he bought his first paper, the What Cheer *Patriot*, so he could have learned the mechanical side of the country newspaper business. Probably it was as well that he had not done so, for many a country paper in those years suffered from the editorial inattention of a proprietor who was kept busy getting out rush jobs of letter-heads and sale-bills. But I am glad that he insisted on my learning the printer's trade in my boyhood, for it is good for anyone to have a mechanical trade, whether he uses it for a long or a short time.

I set my first type in the office of my father's Tipton *Advertiser* in 1896, when I was ten years old. My first copy was a piece of reprint credited to "Ex." to indicate that it had been taken from some paper obtained by "exchange"; and it probably had bounced around among many papers before Father had clipped it from one of his own "exchanges." It was a bit of verse with "run-in" instead of broken lines, dealing with a man's troubles in the Spring, from house-cleaning, wet feet and colds, too much gardening, and so on, in which every stanza (paragraph) ended with the plaintive plea: "Listen to my tale of wo!" It took me three or four evenings, working after school, to get this masterpiece of wit into pica type. I had almost finished the second stickful when, in my awkwardness, I dropped the whole thing on the

floor. The printers laughed, thinking that now the boy was getting his first experience with pi; but when I scrambled down off the high stool to pick up the remains, I found the type intact in the stick! I had not learned to justify my lines properly, but had forced thin spaces in so that every line was very tight; indeed they were so tight that the type could scarcely be removed from the stick when it was ready for dumping on the galley.

I had plenty of experience with pi after that, however. Some years later, helping out in a rush hour when we were late getting to press, I removed my case, which was "poor" in type by that time, from the stand in order to shake it (a method of getting the remaining type out of the corners of the boxes and making it easier to pick up); but in my clumsy hurry, I dropped the entire case. There it was, pied all over the floor. I turned in dismay toward the foreman — and knocked a full galley of type ready for the forms off a galley rack. If I had not been the editor's son, I should have been booted out of the back door.

But usually setting type was, if not fun, at least mildly pleasurable. Monotonous it was, indeed, but there were always the twin challenges of speed and accuracy. On a Saturday, when cases were full and the office was clean and comparatively quiet after the hurly-burly of a Thursday press-day, followed by the "throwing-in" of Friday, when the type was returned to the cases — then

it was that setting type was peculiarly satisfying. Beginning with a new case, the boxes rounded up full, and the type cool and damp from fresh distribution, was a little like sitting down before a generously loaded table — just as working from an almost empty case, with dust at the bottom of the boxes, had been like starvation diet.

Sometimes the copy itself was interesting and instructive. I enjoyed setting up my father's editorial in bourgeois (pronounced berjoice); and I was always pleased when I found an excerpt from the current *McClure's* or *Harper's*, sent out by the magazine as promotion, on my hook. But how inexpressibly boresome was the monthly job of setting the patent medicine notices in nonpareil!

The principal machinery used by a country printing office in the Nineties included eight or ten stands of type, a cylinder press, a couple of job-presses, and two or three imposing stones. The type stands and cases were of wood, and nearly always old and battered; it seems to me I never saw new printing equipment in my boyhood. We continued to use type long after it was badly worn, too, though our supply was sometimes replenished by those "foreign advertising" agencies which paid in printing materials instead of cash. Perhaps once in a decade a prosperous country weekly would come out in a "new dress" of brand-new body-type and fresh, sharp heads.

The newspaper press most commonly used was

a flat-bed machine with a big tympan-bearing cylinder known as the Campbell. Because it was hand-powered, and a stout man was required to turn the wheel on press-day, we nicknamed it the "Armstrong" press. We printed only the front and back pages, buying the sheets already printed on the second and third pages from the Western Newspaper Union in Des Moines. These "patent insides" were filled with miscellany suited to the small-town and rural audience, including farm and garden hints, a serial story, the Sunday School lesson, and a lot of advertising. The pages were generally large in the early Nineties, but there came a swing to a format with eight smaller pages, numbers two, three, six, and seven being "patent insides"; and still later there was such a strong movement to "all home print" that a few years ago the very last supplier of the "ready-print" papers ceased and desisted.

The Gordon job-presses were not hand- but foot-operated. You gave the flywheel a turn, and then you kept the machine going by a foot-pedal as you stood in front of it feeding in blank sheets with one hand and removing the printed ones with the other. This we called "kicking off" a job. It was tiresome, especially with the larger jobber, and there was always some danger of getting a finger caught and crushed.

Steel is now used for the imposing surfaces on which the printer makes up his type forms, but in

the days of which I write "the stone" was always made of stone, chipped around the edges perhaps, but very satisfactory for imposition. In later years, I found making up my own front pages in my own printing office one of the most interesting of a printer-editor's tasks.

My father called his group of employees "the force." It consisted of a foreman, two all-'round printers, two lady compositors, and a "devil" who worked after school and on Saturdays.

At least, such was the personnel when my brother and I took turns "deviling" on the Tipton *Advertiser* in the Mid-Nineties. Our duties ranged from sweeping the floor and burning trash in the back yard to setting type and learning to feed the small jobber. Cleaning up after press-day was no easy task, for wastepaper, rags grimy with grease from the press, and dabs of sticky printer's ink seemed to be everywhere. Moreover, our job was complicated by the printers' habit of chewing tobacco. It was commonly said that printers were subject to lead-poisoning because they were constantly handling type, which contains a considerably proportion of lead in its composition, and that the best antidote was chewing tobacco. This was probably a medical fable invented as an alibi by nicotine users; however, most printers chewed plug-tobacco, and the "devil" had to cope with their expectoration. We improvised spittoons from the heavy, small boxes in which we

had received shipments of type and plates, filling them with sawdust and placing them conveniently near the type-stands, stones, and presses; but the chewer's aim was often imperfect.

Father was always particular about his foremen, and I remember them all as men of good character and some skill in "the art preservative of arts." Three papers that Father owned at various times he eventually sold to his foremen. For the other printers he often had to take what he could get, and they sometimes drank too much; indeed, I remember that we were often late with the first issues following the Fourth of July and Christmas because of trouble getting reorganized after the sprees that many printers regarded as their right on those holidays. I do not wish to wrong the average printer of those days: many of them were men of industrious habit and excellent character. My Uncle Artie worked in Father's printing office for several years; he was a fine, spruce young man who excited my unbounded admiration by dressing up in approved bicycle costume — sweater, tight pants, and black stockings — in the evenings and riding a high-wheeler along the wooden sidewalks and dusty streets of What Cheer.

Our foremen were always strictly charged to see that the printers never annoyed or insulted the young women who set type for us, and who were themselves models of circumspect deportment. I

well remember the two rather tall and buxom ladies who worked at adjoining cases in the back of our office at Tipton. Tightly corseted, wearing long skirts and shirtwaists with high collars under their aprons, with hair coiled high over artificial foundations known as "rats," they made an imposing and Eminently Respectable appearance.

Itinerant printers appeared once in a while, and sometimes, when job-work was plentiful, they were welcomed and put immediately to work. They came unannounced from nowhere, and they disappeared without warning into limbo. They had rainbows 'round their shoulders that lured them always to the next town, or into the next state. "Tourist typos" my father called them. They usually brought some curious craft secrets with them — a new ingredient for our home-made blocking glue, a secret for a paste for "single wraps," a formula for an ink to imitate embossing.

Usually these wanderers would stay with us no more than three or four weeks at the most, but I remember one man in his thirties who declared his intention to settle down, and who stuck with us for over a year. He was the son of parents who were circus performers and he had been trained as a child aerialist; but a fall from a trapeze had injured his feet and turned him from the big tops to the printing office. He was tattooed all over the upper part of his body; and when he worked near the big window of the shop in the summer-

time with his shirt off for coolness, he drew such a crowd on the sidewalk and made such a scandal that a sleeveless undershirt had to be prescribed as minimum clothing. Whether this offended him, or what it was, one morning he simply did not show up. He left no debts behind him; indeed he had a couple of days' pay due him and he had paid his landlady ahead for board and room. Apparently the old wanderlust had carried him off between days. We never heard of him again.

Many of these "tramp prints," as we came to call them, were alcoholics. Either they drank because they were jobless or were jobless because they drank; probably it was the latter, since in those days of hand-set composition it was usually easy to get a "sit" in almost any town.

The climax of the week in the printing office was the Thursday press-day. The stress and strain, hustle and hurry of the weekly effort to "get out" on time brought the whole office to a high pitch of activity. Putting the last paragraphs of news in type picked from nearly empty cases, setting the last heads, correcting the galley proofs with swift care, marking and placing the corrected galleys for the make-up man — all these things were parts of the planned urgency of press-day. What a welcome sound was the rat-tat-tat of mallet on planer which announced that the front-page form was ready to lock up in its chase! While the heavy form was being transferred to

the bed of the press, we were laying clean papers on the stones and tables in readiness for the operation of hand-folding the edition. Also someone was preparing the patent mailer which, when it worked, addressed the folded papers; and another was laying out the wrappers for the single-list of papers to be dispatched to a distance. To help with the folding, the editor often recruited his whole family. My own mother, when her family was small, used to help fold papers on press-day. Some editors' wives worked so much in the office that they became practical printers, and occasionally one of these small plants was operated entirely by the editor's family. But on any paper, the tensions of press-day were bound to affect all the editor's family, and everyone helped as he or she could — with the news, the mechanical work, the folding, wrapping, and mailing, and the final carting of the papers to the postoffice.

I have been describing the old printing office as I remember it at the very end of the Nineteenth Century; and I realize I have been putting it all in a fixed status, as though it did not vary in place or in time. I write what I remember; but I know that there were many differences between various towns and the printing offices in them, and that improvements took place from time to time. There were better towns, better offices, and better papers than ours, and many that were worse. Perhaps ours were fairly typical.

Changes came fast about the turn of the century. The greatest one was the adoption of gasoline engines to operate the presses. In 1898, my father, having bought the Audubon *Republican*, installed in its plant a new Country Babcock newspaper press which would print two pages at a time, and put in a gasoline engine to power it. There was some skepticism in town on the question of whether such a sputtering contraption would actually run such a big press, and run it evenly enough to print well; and there was also some resentment on the part of the muscular fellows who were thrown out of a Thursday afternoon job by the newfanglement. But it did work, under the careful nursing of Grif Wolf. Grif was the only man in town who really understood the mysteries of an internal-combustion engine; and on many a press-day afternoon he received an emergency call to make haste to the printing office, where the press stood still while time was running out, and get that pesky engine started.

A few years later the line-casting machines began to revolutionize printing in the weekly shops. Before the casters came, however, Simplex Typesetters had been installed by some of the more daring publishers; but they broke type and made too much trouble. A primitive line-caster called the Typograph had some users. I operated one for some months. This machine had exposed wires down which the matrices slid to the assembly

line when released by a heavy touch on the keys. When the line was complete, I turned a crank three revolutions to perform the casting operation, then tipped the whole fan-like top of the machine back so the "mats" would return down the wires ready for use in the next line. I never got so I could set much more on the Typograph than I could by hand. It was not until the Mergenthaler Linotype and the later Intertype came to dominate the field that mechanical composition became important in the country office.

The first casting machine I ever saw was a Mergenthaler on exhibit at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha in 1898. My father took me with him on a two-day visit to this great fair; but the only things I saw there that I now remember clearly are the Linotype and an Igorrote village which had been transported bodily from the Philippines, complete with nearly naked natives. My observation of the Igorrotes was brief, though fascinated; but I later spent a year operating a Linotype, and my life has had certain connections with that mechanical marvel ever since.

But that was when I was on my own. In the years when I was a boy in my father's office, our equipment was more rudimentary. We did not even have central heating at Tipton, and my brother and I had to bring in the wood to keep the fires in two stoves going all winter. There was no typewriter in our office until Father traded

advertising space for a primitive Blickensderfer in 1899, but he never learned to use it with facility.

The subscription price of the typical Midwestern weekly during the Nineties was a dollar a year. The rate was often quoted at a dollar if paid in advance and a dollar and a quarter when past due, but usually the editor was so glad to have the old account paid that he would throw off the extra quarter. The "delinquent" subscriber was the curse of the American weekly newspaper for more than two hundred years; but when an editor knew most of his thousand or so patrons personally, it was hard to strike the names of any who fell a little behind off the list. Besides, many farmers felt reluctant to pay for anything they had not received — which seems reasonable. I doubt if my father really lost a great deal in bad accounts. I remember his calling me into his office one day and showing me a pile of ten silver dollars on his desk. "Ole Olsen, from the southwest corner of the county, was just in and paid his subscription," Father said; and added, "I thought you might like to see it sometimes pays to trust a man. I knew Ole would be in sometime. He is all right — just a little slow." Ten years slow.

The advertising rate on our paper was eight cents a single-column inch in the Nineties, but Father raised it to ten cents just about the turn of the century. That made it cost three dollars to insert a quarter-page "ad." Most of the advertis-

ing was paid for at the end of the month, or, in the case of transient business, in advance; but there were a few large accounts that were settled annually. With those few stores we ran a year's bill on which our parents charged purchases, while the merchants would let their own advertising and job-work bills pile up. Settling such accounts on the day following New Year's was very exciting for the family. Since we were always careful to keep the balance on our side, Mother could at these times get the yard-goods she wanted for new dresses, we children got new shoes and so on, and there were always settling-up treats of candy.

Most country editors provided a column or two of "editorials." These articles and paragraphs were usually written with care and read with respect. Later consolidations, which have commonly left only one paper in a town, have had a tendency to prevent participation in controversies; but sixty years ago, when every town worth its salt had at least two newspapers, sides were always taken, and with vigor. The rival editors often engaged in bitter quarrels. Those battles of the types, though often carried too far, with their personal attacks, invective, and intemperance, did stimulate reader-interest in editorial columns, and perhaps sharper thinking about issues. Unrestrained scurrility and personal attack were commoner in the pioneer press; but in the Nineties

there were still editors who loved to print innuendo and even outright accusation regarding the characters and private lives of their "contemporaries" of the opposing party, all in fancy writing adorned by such epithets as "poltroon," "blackguard," "the miserable slang-whanger who edits the filthy sheet which disgraces our fair city." It is easy, however, to over-emphasize the vulgarities of the fighting editors of those days; there were also many sober and respectable country Greeleys and Danas whose articles were read with quiet acceptance at home and quoted with approval abroad.

My father was a controversialist in his editorial column, especially on party matters; but he was never violent. On the whole, I think his editorials were too heavy, but they suited certain tastes of the times. Perhaps his very moderation, and his sedulous abstention from invective, sometimes provoked rival editors to excesses of attack; certainly there were times when he caught it hot and heavy. Father was a Republican by family tradition and by personal conviction. It seemed as though his Republicanism was a built-in element of his personality. "That galled and jaded wheelhorse of the Republican machine," the editor across the street once called him. I think Father rather liked that jibe.

Occasionally Father would with some effort strike a lighter note. The most famous piece he

ever wrote was about a prayer he had heard a country preacher offer one Sunday. This was in the midst of the drought of 1898, and also in the time of the Spanish-American War. Here is the prayer as Father set it down on his arrival at home, and as he published it in his paper the following week:

> . . . And O Lord, we ask for rain. Thou hast taught us to come to Thee to ask for what we need, and we need rain. Thy servants of old prayed for rain, and their prayers were heard. Elijah prayed for rain, and his prayer was answered. The ground is parched, the grass is dying, the heat oppresses us so we can hardly breathe. O Lord, give us refreshing rain!
>
> We prayed for rain last week, and it has not come yet. Perhaps we did not need it as badly as we thought. Now the farmers say we will not have half a crop unless we have rain soon, but then some would say that anyway. But we know we need rain! O Lord, we need money to carry on this righteous war for humanity, and we need crops to get the money with; so, Lord, give us rain that we may have the crops.
>
> Thou hast tempered the winds to our battleships. The typhoons and the hurricanes of the Tropics have not molested them. Thou hast given us the victory, and we praise Thy name. . . .

The story ended simply by telling how, as the editor drove home that afternoon, he noticed a cloud in the Northwest "as small as a man's hand," and how that night the whole countryside received a generous downpour. This article was quoted in the Des Moines *Register*, picked up by

other papers, and reprinted all over the country.

Mother contributed a "Temperance Column" to our paper. She began it in the face of What Cheer's seven saloons, and later continued it in dry Tipton. Much of it — both prose and verse — was original, though some was carefully "selected." When I reached high school, I wrote weekly "School Notes" for the paper. We all gathered "items"; we were conscious of representing the paper wherever we went.

It has long been common for urban satirists to undervalue the local news reporting of the small-town weekly. But that report and record has, in fact, certain great and fundamental values. Devotion to home is the first loyalty, the foundation of patriotism, a primary virtue. The country paper is dedicated to the homely matters — to births and deaths, the churches and the schools, crops and weather, the parties and bees of the home folks. William Smith has been painting his house; Mr. and Mrs. Richard Jones have been enjoying a visit from their son, Sam, who is doing so well in Cedar Rapids as an inspector in the new Quaker Oats factory; the Christian Endeavor will have an ice-cream social on the A. Y. Simmons lawn Thursday evening, with adjournment to the nearby church basement in case of rain. William Dean Howells once defined the realist as the writer who "cannot look upon human life and declare this or that thing unworthy of notice." The country

editor was (and still is) a realist who is committed to the belief that such bits of life and social intercourse as are recorded in the "items" of his news columns make up an important sum of human living. And the record which he prints serves to unite and solidify community interests and community loyalty.

My father never thought his work trivial or of little consequence. We all looked upon our paper as the historian of many lives. We know that we put the town and country down in black and white — joys and sorrows, good and ill, peace and war, prosperity and failure. We watched the growth and development of the community, the decay of some institutions, the setting of new patterns. Our paper recorded all these things, bringing our people and the little episodes of their lives and the town's events together within the compass of a few columns weekly. Thus any country paper welds together all the elements of its social group in a continuing history.

As I look backward at the country paper of the Nineties and the first decade of the new century, it seems to me to have performed three services — in some instances badly, indeed, but in many very well. It was the contemporary historian of local events; it offered an editorial column that was often thoughtful and sometimes influential; it contributed to the economic welfare of its community by affording an advertising medium and

by acting as a leader in progressive movements.

For many years now, everything in America has been irresistibly swept up into the prodigious heaps of the great cities and their sprawling suburbs. But some nine thousand newspapers remain to serve about that many small towns throughout the nation. The weekly of today, however, is not the same country paper I knew as a boy; it has a linotype, it is illustrated by local pictures, it is smarter, it serves its advertisers better, and it sells for from two to four dollars a year. Nor is the town it serves the same, as I have already tried to show in my essay on the country town of my boyhood; it is no longer a semi-isolated hamlet, undisturbed by the blare of automobile horns, unstirred by the incursion into its midst of the strange phantasmagoria of "show business" on electronic screens in every home.

But in spite of changing patterns, the home paper of today has the same spirit of neighborliness and service that it has always had, and continues to integrate the life of its community. It was the object of my fascinated devotion throughout my early life, and I have never lost my deep interest in it. The local editor, the country printing-office, and the home-town paper have played a vital part in many lives through many years.

Frank Luther Mott

The stories in this issue of THE PALIMPSEST are by one of Iowa's most distinguished native sons — Frank Luther Mott. Born on a farm in Keokuk County, Mott delineates life as he knew it growing up and working by the side of his father in his country newspapers in What Cheer, Tipton, Audubon, and Marengo. The character of his Quaker parents left an indelible impression on the mind and personality of their talented son.

David C. Mott, the father of Frank Luther Mott, was born in Washington County, Ohio, in 1858, and came to Iowa with his parents — George W. and Abigail B. Mott — in 1863. David was educated in Keokuk County and in the Friends Boarding School at Barnesville, Ohio. He began teaching school in 1877 but turned to farming two years later. In 1881 he married Mary E. Tipton of West Branch. Four children — Russell, Frank, Ethel, and Mildred — were born of this union.

In 1888 David C. Mott forsook the farm to become a country editor and publisher. He bought the What Cheer *Patriot,* which had been established in 1880 in a thriving coal mining town. For a quarter of a century, from 1888 to 1912, David

C. Mott was identified with the following newspapers and communities:

Newspaper	*Years*	*Population* *1890*	*1900*	*1910*
What Cheer *Patriot*	1888-1892	3,246	2,746	1,720
Tipton *Advertiser*	1893-1897	1,599	2,513	2,048
Audubon *Republican*	1897-1905	1,310	1,866	1,928
Marengo *Republican*	1907-1913	1,710	2,007	1,786

His son, Frank Luther Mott, served as co-editor of the Marengo *Republican*. According to Harold Ellis, business manager and co-publisher of the Marengo *Pioneer-Republican* since 1930, the paper edited by David C. and Frank Luther Mott "possessed a literary quality probably never equalled by any other Marengo publisher."

David C. Mott served two terms in the Iowa General Assembly. From 1911 to 1919 he was a member of the Iowa Board of Parole. He then became editorial assistant in the Historical, Memorial, and Art Department in Des Moines, serving in this capacity until retirement in 1937. He died in 1941.

Frank Luther Mott inherited many of the qualities of his father. In addition to a brilliant mind, he possessed unflagging industry, a vivid imagination, and a rare though quiet sense of humor. He attended Simpson College from 1903 to 1906, received his Ph.B. from the University of Chicago in 1907; his M.A. from Columbia University in 1919, and his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1928.

In 1910 he married Vera H. Ingram of Mount Ayr. The Motts have one daughter — Mildred Ingram Wedel. In 1914 young Frank struck out on his own as editor and publisher of the Grand Junction *Globe*. In 1917 he forsook the role of country editor for the teaching profession, excelling in research and writing. He taught in Brooklyn, New York, but returned to Iowa and Simpson College in 1919 where he taught English until 1921.

During the next twenty-one years Frank Luther Mott was intimately associated with the State University of Iowa, beginning as an Assistant Professor of English and serving as Director of the School of Journalism from 1927 to 1942. He was joint editor and publisher of *The Midland*, 1925-1930, and associate editor from 1930 to 1933. He was Editor-in-Chief of the *Journalism Quarterly* from 1930 to 1934.

Scores of honors have been awarded Frank Mott, including the Pulitzer Prize in history for his *A History of American Magazines* in 1939. Other outstanding books are his *American Journalism: A History* (1941), *Jefferson and the Press* (1943), *Golden Multitudes* (1947). He has served as editor of several important news series. Through it all he has remained the same quiet and modest soul who endeared himself to thousands during his sojourn in Iowa.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

FRANK LUTHER MOTT
Enjoying one of his Best Sellers *(Golden Multitudes)* in his study. Original Best Sellers in background.

FRANK AND VERA MOTT
In their home at Columbia, Missouri. (Insert) Rose Cottage was their first home in Marengo.


BAKING POWDER
GOLD DUST
Pearline
ASK FOR
MUTH'S
BREAD
IVORY
JUST FEED THE HAND
tra Large