"Iowa Historical Moments"

A Project of
the State Historical Society of Iowa
with
KDSM-TV (Des Moines)

Fact Sheets

Volume 3

"Iowa Historical Moments"

Fact Sheets

Contents

American Gothic House

Grant Wood visited Eldon, Iowa, in 1930 and was struck by a very simple house with an unusual gothic window. Inspired, Wood used the house for the backdrop of one of the world's most famous paintings, *American Gothic*. He intended the painting to portray an older smalltown man and his daughter. Most viewers, however, saw them as the epitome of the American farmer and his wife. The models for the couple were his sister, Nan Wood Graham, and his dentist, Byron McKeeby of Cedar Rapids. Some saw in the painting a mood of despair in the stoical faces; others felt hope and strength in the calming, curved lines, in the gothic window whose shape contains a cross and points heavenward, as does the similarly-shaped pitchfork.

Wood received national acclaim in 1930 when the painting won the $300 first prize at the Art Institute of Chicago's contest for American painters. Since then, *American Gothic* has become perhaps America's most famous image.

Countless parodies of the painting have been produced by slightly altering the form or the content of the original *American Gothic*. Parodists have given the dour couple smiling faces, placed them in front of different buildings, and substituted their faces with those of celebrities, thus drastically changing the image and producing yet another interpretation of Grant Wood's painting. Such imitations have served to advertise products, critique social and political issues, and just make people laugh. The sheer number of parodies has made the image of *American Gothic* one of the most recognized in the world.

In 1991, owner Carl Smith donated the house in Eldon to the State Historical Society of Iowa to ensure its preservation. There are plans for a major visitors' center to be built on the site. Meanwhile, visitors are invited to see the site and create their own personal parodies of *American Gothic*.

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The Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940

Mid-November Iowa weather usually provides the conditions favorable for hunting, and the Armistice Day holiday was once a popular occasion for hunters to hone their skills. The holiday would coincide with a sharp plunge in the thermometer that sent migrating ducks to sheltered areas along the Mississippi River — where waiting duck hunters set up decoys.

On November 11, 1940, a low-pressure system collided with an arctic air mass over the Upper Mississippi region. The result resembled a winter hurricane. First came freezing rains that glazed everything with ice. Then blowing snow covered the ice and made visibility almost nil. In 16 hours the temperature dropped 45 degrees, from 54 degrees to 9 degrees Fahrenheit.

The storm caught many hunters by surprise — few were dressed for winter conditions, and being near the water in their "duck blinds" made matters even worse. Hunters were stranded in the bitter cold as winds gusting to 80 miles per hour produced waves up to seven feet high. It grew so cold so fast that parts of the river froze in waves.

The fierce winds and frigid temperature prevented efforts to rescue many of the hunters overcome by the storm. The blast continued for nearly an entire day, finally abating somewhat on November 12.

Some 160 people died during the 24-hour storm. The *Des Moines Register* headline for November 13, 1940, declared: "26 Hunters Dead, 5 from Iowa" but other accounts estimated a much higher death toll.

By far the most dramatic and tragic aspect of the storm was the grief it brought to those families who lost loved ones on the Mississippi. But the storm also caused chaos in the inner regions of the state. Ice and snow blocked highways, causing travelers to seek shelter. Airline flights were halted and the railroads stopped. At least 7000 turkeys froze or were smothered — just 17 days before Thanksgiving. The *Des Moines Register* reported that unscrupulous breeders sold turkey carcasses as "freshly frozen" in direct violation of Iowa food laws.

Coincidentally, the word "blizzard" may have been coined in Iowa. The *Estherville Vindicator and Republican* used the word in 1870 to describe a severe winter snowstorm. Both *The American College Dictionary* and *The Oxford English Dictionary* credit the word's origins to Iowa.

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Bix Beiderbecke

One of the great figures of the Jazz Age, Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke, is an Iowa legend. Born in Davenport in 1903, Bix began playing music by ear as a toddler and music became his first love — a passion that lasted throughout his short life.

Bix never had formal training as a musician, and many critics say it was his lack of training that gave his music its extraordinary impact. His was an innovative sound many musicians would one day copy. Bix became interested in jazz when his father brought home a record by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. In 1917, he scraped together enough money to buy a beat up cornet from the local hock shop; the young Beiderbecke would practice unceasingly.

No fan of formal education, Bix dropped out of school, too busy playing his cornet to pay attention to studies. He worked with local orchestras in Chicago, and eventually joined the Wolverine Orchestra in January 1924. The group cut a few records before Bix left.

After a few more temporary orchestra stints, Bix resumed his formal education at the University of Iowa. But this venture lasted a mere three weeks. From Iowa City Bix moved to New York and played with a group called The Ramblers. In St. Louis he played in an orchestra led by Adrian Rollini. The spring of 1926 found Bix in the Jean Goldkette Orchestra; soon afterwards Bix recorded his own solo "In a Mist." He then went on to join Paul Whiteman's band, which had featured many great artists like the Dorsey brothers and Bing Crosby.

In 1927, Bix recorded one of the most famous solos in Jazz history, "Singing the Blues." He was, however, struggling with health problems and alcoholism, and he took a rest from his intense schedule in Davenport in 1929. Retuning to New York, he joined the Dorsey brothers and copyrighted two piano pieces, "Flashes" and "In the Dark."

During his last year, the 27-year-old became ill and worked little. On August 7, 1931, Bix Beiderbecke died from pneumonia.

Today, Bix's legacy is celebrated during the annual three-day Bix Fest held in July in Davenport's Le Claire Park. Dixieland and jazz bands from across the country play in honor of Bix. Also, the nationally famous Bix Run race is held in downtown Davenport. The Avati brothers, Italian filmmakers based in Davenport, restored the Beiderbecke home and made a film about Bix. Davenport artist Loren Shaw spent more than 1,000 hours painting a Bix Beiderbecke mural on the wall of the downtown Davenport building.

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The Colby Motor Company

When the automobile was new, Iowans not only bought them — they made them. Between 1891 and 1940, nearly 50 brands of cars were made in Iowa. One notable manufacturer, The Colby Motor Company, produced several thousand vehicles during its brief lifetime.

Mason City entrepreneur, William Colby, founded the Colby Motor Company on September 29, 1910. The first Colby, a five-passenger touring car, took to Mason City's streets on November 12, 1910. It performed to all expectations and was fast enough to garner for its test driver a speeding ticket from local police.

Colby equipped his cars with premium materials and an engine designed to withstand Iowa's winters. Colby automobiles were put through endurance tests over the state's rutted, muddy dirt roads. The cars passed the tests with flying colors, including a 658-mile run from Minneapolis to Helena, Montana.

Colby also participated in the newly developing dirt-track car races being held throughout the Midwest. Billy Pearce, a Colby driver on the racing circuit, broke many track records and won trophies for the company. He died in 1911 while racing the Colby Red Devil in Sioux City. The car was repaired but never raced again.

The Colby Motor Company was short-lived. A competitive auto market, company mergers, and subsequent reorganizations put the company out of business in 1914. Only one Colby has survived the last 70 years. It was carefully restored and is displayed at the Kinney Pioneer Museum in Mason City.

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Cornhusking Contests

Once called Iowa's "Battle of the Bangboards," cornhusking contests had a brief but lively history in the state's rural communities. Farmers husked by hand with special hooks attached to a glove at the palm or thumb. In 1924 the farm journal, *Wallace's Farmer*, invited the state's best cornhuskers to enter a contest for the fastest and most efficient cornhuskers. For the next 17 years, cornhusking contests at the county, state, and national levels became popular. The NBC network broadcasted national contests, and sponsors awarded cash prizes (and sometimes turkeys). Spectators came for the thrill of the competition and for the chance to learn better cornhusking techniques. The contests came to end around World War II, when new technology was introduced that made cornhusking by hand obsolete.

OTHER FACTS:

• Women were mentioned sometimes as helping their husbands with cornhusking but there were no official contests for women to compete in.

• The contests were standardized by Henry A. Wallace in 1924. Huskers competed for 80 minutes nonstop, starting at 10-minute intervals signaled by a gun fired into the air. They were scored on the gross weight of corn husked, with deductions for any excess husks. The top scorers were then allowed to apply for the next level of competition. Competitors listed their age, weight, height, and wrist circumference (the average husker would swivel and turn his wrist 7000 times per 100 bushels). Farmers used these events to compare the various cornhusking techniques.

• The equipment used varied, but almost all huskers used a husking hook of some kind, either a thumb, peg, or palm hook attached to a glove or mitten. Stores offered an assortment of other items, such as thumb stalls (intended to help in grasping the corn), wrist guards, and special oils for "huskers hands," yet most huskers saw no real advantage in these products. The wagons used to catch the corn were called "bangboards" or "throwboards" because one side was much higher than the other side so huskers could toss the corn without worrying about their aim.

• Henry A. Wallace hailed cornhusking champions as rural athletic heroes with strong moral character. He hoped that such praise would inspire farmers to enjoy cornhusking more — thus increasing their productions — and also to help keep more young men on the farm.

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Covered Bridges in Iowa

Excerpts from Leslie C. Swanson's *Covered Bridges in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin.* Moline, Illinois. [pamphlet] 1970.

Iowa's economic growth went into high gear in the post-Civil War period and most of its 60 or more covered bridges were erected from 1868 to 1880. A few were built before that era and some scattered ones were erected as late as 1890.

Two cores of covered bridge building developed in Iowa, one across about a dozen counties in the southern part of Iowa, and the other, a smaller group, in the northeastern corner of the state near the borders of Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

About 80 percent of the spans were erected over very small rivers and creeks in the southern counties and about 12 to 15 more were erected over slightly larger rivers as the Turkey, Maquoketa, and Volga Rivers in "Little Switzerland," the picturesque northeastern area. More than three-fourths of the counties in Iowa were never reached by this type of timbered construction.

Iowa's early road development was slow and as late as 1846 a network of wagon trails reached only the eastern counties. In the next two decades the west-ward push gained momentum and stagecoach lines spread over roads which linked the growing towns.

The earliest covered bridge building in Iowa coincided with the development of Fort Des Moines, an historic U.S. Army establishment at the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers. The first was the Owens covered bridge, erected in 1844 across the North River in Polk County. A bridge was needed there in bringing in lumber for the construction of the fort. G.B. Clark was commissioned by the U.S. government to build the bridge, receiving as payment the sum of $3500 and a half section of land. This bridge served the Dragon Trail, as the road was known in those days, for a period of 42 years, being swept away in the fall of 1887. A new bridge was erected in 1887 and it remained in use for more than 50 years before the road was re- routed and the channel of the river changed.

The bridge was finally taken over by the Polk County Conservation Board which moved the span in 1968 to Yeader Creek Park near Des Moines. Moving of the bridge was made necessary by the Red Rock Reservoir project. . . .

The contruction of covered bridges reached its zenith in Madison County. . . .
Madison was not settled until 1846 but its growth was remarkable. Settling there was a group of hardy pioneers who proved to be an industrious and resourceful lot. Within the space of three decades they built a chain of saw mills and gristmills, a network of wagon trails and a series of 16 covered bridges.

The county developed at a fast pace and the bridge builders kept busy for more than a decade erecting spans at key points. The picturesque Middle and North Rivers cut through several townships in the county and the wood was mostly cut by saw mills, powered by the very rivers the bridges were intended to cross. Eleven mills were erected on Middle River, which eventually was spanned by several covered bridges. . . .

After reaching their peak count of 16 in 1884 the covered bridges of Madison County gradually dwindled. One by one they disappeared as they gave way to flood, fire, vandalism, and abandonment. The count had dwindled to ten in 1933. . . .

In 1950, the decision was made to save the remaining seven bridges. Steps were taken to repair, strengthen and paint them. Meanwhile, about 30 other covered bridges were razed elsewhere in Iowa.

Only 6 covered bridges now remain in Madison County.

Farm Security Administration Photographs

In 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression, Iowa became part of one of the most important documentary photograph projects ever conceived. Employed by the Historical Division of the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration), photographers traveled throughout the country to document the effects of hard times and to gather visual support for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

From North Carolina to the Dakotas, from Missouri to California, they portrayed a country gripped by a devastating depression. The nearly 2,000 images taken in Iowa show worn and tired farmers, small towns devastated by the economic crash, and urban scenes such as men standing in line for a mission meal. These photos amply demonstrate the need for government assistance in this rural state.

What started out as a picture file for political purposes, however, became one of the most powerful photographic statements of all time. The gifted photographers hired for the project captured on film not only the tragedy of impoverished tenant farmers, but their strength and endurance.

The FSA photo project continued until 1943, when the United States' entry into World War II diverted government energies and resources. Nearly 200,000 negatives and more than 70,000 prints survive in the Library of Congress. The photographers of the Farm Security Administration had produced a lasting national treasure that is one of the most famous and widely used photograph collections in the world.

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Grotto of the Redemption
West Bend, Iowa

The Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa, was created and built by Reverend Father Paul M. Dobberstein. Born in 1872 in Rosenfeld, Germany, he emigrated to America when he was 20 years old and studied for the Catholic priesthood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Just before his ordination as a priest, Dobberstein became seriously ill with pneumonia. He vowed to build a shrine to Mary, Mother of Jesus if he were allowed to recover from his illness.

In 1898 he came to West Bend, Iowa, to serve at St. Peter and Paul's Church. While serving his parishioners full time he began gathering ornamental stones to build his shrine and fulfill his promise.

In 1912, with the help of one man (Matthew Szerensce) he began work setting the various stones in concrete. The grotto became a lifelong project and work continued after Dobberstein's death in 1954. Over 100 train car loads of materials were used to build the grotto.

OTHER FACTS:

- The grotto is the largest of its kind, covering an area larger than a city block. It has the largest collection of minerals and petrifications anywhere in the world, and the shrine's geological value has been estimated as high as $2.5 million.

- There are nine separate grottos all depicting a scene from the life of Christ. Italian marble statuary, such as the replica of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, can be viewed throughout the grottos. The stones, minerals, fossils, and shells have been gathered from all over the United States and from dozens of foreign countries.

- Adjacent to the grotto is St. Peter and Paul's Church in which Father Dobberstein built his Christmas chapel. The chapel depicts the nativity scene and includes a 300-pound Brazilian amethyst valued at more than $5000.

- Father Dobberstein also worked on other grottos and memorials in such Iowa towns as Riverside, Carroll, Dubuque, Wesley, Humboldt, and Pocahontas.

- The grotto is financed by donations; hourly tours are given from June 1 to October 15. Open for viewing year round, the grotto attracts more than 100,000 visitors each year.

- The Grotto Restaurant serves home-cooked meals from 11:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. daily from June 1 to October 15. Camping and motel facilities are located close by.

- The grotto is located two blocks off of Highway 15 at the north end of West Bend. For more information call 515-887-2371.

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Hispanics in Bettendorf, Iowa

William and Joseph Bettendorf came to Gilbert, Iowa, in 1902 after a fire destroyed their Davenport factory. Their business, the Bettendorf Company, produced various metal parts for agricultural equipment, and also side frames for railway car trucks.

The company employed many people, and Gilbert soon developed as a company town. The company provided housing and social activities for their workers. In 1902 the village was renamed Bettendorf in honor of the brothers.

During World War I the traditional labor pool became scarce, and the Bettendorfs began to recruit workers from recent immigrant groups. One group was Hispanic immigrants.

Hispanic people had moved to the Quad City area to find work. They considered the Bettendorf Company a desirable place to work. The company in turn found Hispanic workers reliable and competent. The workers, however, had little opportunity for advancement within the company; the barriers of language and cultural differences were difficult to surmount.

Families settled in company housing known as the Holy City. Community life revolved around religion and family. With others in the Quad Cities, Bettendorf Company Hispanics founded Our Lady of Guadelupe church. It was initially housed in two boxcars. Among other manifestations of Hispanic culture was a community band, formed by one of the earliest immigrants, Peter Macias.

When the Bettendorf Company dissolved in the 1930s, many families were already well established in the area, and sought other employment in the Quad Cities. Today, local Hispanic heritage prospers through celebrations and organizations.

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The Ice Industry in Iowa

Before the advent of modern refrigeration, people had to depend on ice boxes to keep food cool. These ice boxes were designed to hold both food and large blocks of ice. Providing these blocks of ice was an important industry in Iowa during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Local and itinerant ice harvesting crews began working nearby rivers and lakes around the new year. Various tools and methods were used for cutting and extracting the ice, including large saws and horse-drawn cutters. By the twentieth century, workers used motor-driven saws. Ice was then taken to the ice house to be stored until summer. The ice house was a double-walled brick or wood building where ice was covered with layers of hay or sawdust to keep it from melting.

When the weather turned warm, the demand for ice would begin. The ice wagon, delivering ice door to door, was a common sight in Iowa towns. The large demand for ice made it one of the top commodities handled by the U.S. shipping industry.

While ice harvesting was a very profitable business, it was also risky. In addition to possible physical danger to employees, there was the chance that not enough ice had been stored to meet the summer-time demand, or that a warm winter might produce a meagre supply.

Modern-day refrigeration techniques became available in the early twentieth century. By the 1930s the nearly universal availability of refrigerators greatly reduced the need for the ice industry, and therefore it quickly declined.

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☛ For a first-hand look into Iowa's ice industry, visit the Ice House Museum, Cedar Falls Historical Society, Cedar Falls, Iowa.

Alfred William Lawson and the University of Lawsonomy

Alfred William Lawson was born in London, England, in 1869. When only 3 weeks old, he came with his parents to North America; they settled in Windsor, Ontario, and finally in Detroit, Michigan. At an early age, Lawson worked various odd jobs such as shining shoes, selling newspapers, and painting houses. In his late teens he left Detroit to play on numerous baseball teams. From 1888 to 1907 he played on and managed several minor league teams. He traveled extensively and studied physics and economics in his spare time.

In 1904, Lawson published his first book, *Born Again*. The book, loosely based on his own life, exposed baseball's corruptive influence. In 1908 Lawson became interested in the fledgling aviation industry. He published his own aeronautical magazine called *Fly* and was editor of another called *Aircraft*. He also became a member of an influential group called the Aeronautical Manufacturers Association. In 1917, Lawson started his own aircraft corporation in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He supplied the army with aircraft during World War I.

After the war, Lawson struggled to keep his aircraft company going. He bought a bigger factory and relocated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He tried building passenger airplanes and managed to secure an air mail contract with the federal government. Because Lawson's investors were pressuring him for results, he rushed the prototype of one of his passenger planes into a test flight in poor weather conditions. When the airplane crashed, it took Lawson's company down with it.

The decade of the 1920s was a transitional one for Lawson. He continued to work for other airplane companies as a designer, but hated the idea that he was no longer an owner. During this period he also published books outlining his theories of natural law that would later be the basis of his philosophy known as Lawsonomy. According to Lawson, everything in nature operated on the principles of "penetrability," "zig-zag and swirl," and "suction and pressure." But no matter how much Lawson publicized his principles, no one seemed to pay them much attention.

In 1931 Lawson published his book *Direct Credits for Everybody*. It set forth his economic principles of a classless society, free education, free health care, and spreading the nation's wealth among the people equally. He also formed a conspiracy theory that bankers and financiers had caused the nation's economic problems.

A riveting speaker, Lawson attracted fairly large crowds across the Midwest; his draw was aided perhaps by the fact that so many people were out of work. He started a group called the Direct Credits Society and many of its followers had an almost cult-like devotion to Lawson.

With the start of World War II prosperity returned to the country and membership in the Direct Credits Society started to shrink. Lawson thought he needed other outlets to spread his doctrines. He hoped to establish both his own university and also a way to publish his books and newsletters.

In 1943 Lawson managed to raise $80,000 to purchase the defunct Des Moines University property and buildings. At the Des Moines University of Lawsonomy (DMUL), classes were taught in Lawsonomy, management, oratory, music, gardening, mechanics, and theology.

According to his book, *Lawsonian Religion*, DMUL was to teach both knowledge and kindness, and serve as an ecclesiastic college for Lawsonian religion. Only men were admitted to the college because a father had taken DMUL to court when it enrolled his daughter without his permission and then kept her there against her will. There was no tuition but students would work part time in the machine shop and on agricultural and engineering projects.

The only texts allowed were Lawson's books and speeches. His speeches were to be committed to memory and recited repeatedly by the students. He believed his theories of Lawsonomy were so complex that it would take a student 30 years to earn a degree. Students who earned the degree were called Knowledgians.

Lawson believed his students should be healthy in body as well as mind. No meat was allowed in the diet. Tobacco and alcohol were also prohibited. Students were up by 6:00 a.m. and in bed by 10:00 p.m. Physical exercise was promoted as well as dunking the head in cold water twice daily, sleeping in the nude, and changing bed sheets daily.

Suspicion about DMUL arose among the people and press of Des Moines. Neighborhood residents were angered when they could no longer walk through DMUL property because of a fence that was being erected. Des Moines tax assessors were sent to examine the DMUL premises to see if it was truly conducting the educational activities necessary to maintain tax-exempt status.

In 1952 Lawson was called before a U.S. Senate small business subcommittee. He was questioned about why the university had purchased 62 war surplus machine tools for educational purposes and then sold 45 of them at a large profit. By 1954, with only 20 students enrolled, DMUL was facing termination. At it peak, the university had about 100 students enrolled. Also, the Bureau of Internal Revenue was demanding taxes on the war surplus machinery sale, and the city of Des Moines was demanding back property taxes. In November of 1954, Lawson was forced to sell DMUL.

Two weeks later, on November 29, Lawson was found dead in a San Antonio hotel room. Alfred Lawson left some interesting legacies. In rural Wisconsin there still exists a University of Lawsonomy, supported by elderly students and Knowledgians who continue to study Lawson's principles and emulate his way of living.

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Murphy Calendar Company
Red Oak, Iowa

One of the oldest and largest makers of decorative art calendars is the Thomas D. Murphy Company of Red Oak, Iowa. In 1889, Thomas Murphy and E.B. Osborne, two young newspapermen, were casting around for ways to augment their income from the printing business. Osborne came up with a calendar incorporating the name of 22 local advertisers in a drawing of the new Montgomery County courthouse. The following year they founded Hawkeye Printing Company (changed to Osborne & Murphy in 1891). To increase sales, Murphy and Osborne used a new printing process call "Moss types," the first halftones used for illustrations. They took samples of their work to Denver where Osborne secured $1600 worth of business. This represented an initial loss, but by their third year they sold $18,000 worth of calendars.

In 1895, differences between the two partners caused Murphy to sell his interest in the company to Osborne. Murphy also agreed to stay out of the calendar business for five years. At the end of five years Murphy decided to return to calendar-making with his brother-in-law, William Cochrane. Together they formed the Thomas D. Murphy Company.

Murphy began to use the most advanced techniques of printing in making beautiful full-color (and black-and-white) calendars. He did not invent any new process, but he made good use of the best available techniques. The company's speciality became the art calendar. An art critic would probably dismiss most of the paintings used in the calendars as middle-brow or even amateurish; yet it's this lack of pretension that gives the calendar art its charm.

This appeal to the general public helped Murphy build a highly successful business that expanded rapidly its first few years. He built several plants and, in 1904, even a British sales office. In 1920, the company built its own power plant and leased a local hotel to serve as a dormitory for its workers. The Thomas D. Murphy Company was consolidated with American Colortype Company in the late 1920s.

During the Great Depression, American Colortype sought to close the plant in Red Oak, and Cochrane decided to buy it for himself and his sons-in-laws. Cochrane ran the company until his death in 1941, leaving control of the company to his three sons-in-law: Lyman Turner, John L. Crofts, and Malcom Lomas. In 1951, Lomas bought out his two brothers-in-law, and became president and chair of the company. In 1982, Jordan Industries bought the company. Through a merger in 1989, the company became part of JII Sales Promotion Associates. Still a vital business, the Murphy Calendar Company has steadily increased its business each year for the past 60 years.

Thanks to JII Sales Associates for permission to use Murphy Calendar Company items in the video vignette.

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Orphan Trains in Iowa

For seventy-five years thousands of homeless children from crowded urban areas found new homes in rural America by way of "orphans trains" and a system called "placing out."

In the early 1850s New York City police estimated that 10,000 children were destitute, living on the streets, and heading toward lives of crime and victimization. Pioneering New York social worker Charles Loring Brace estimated that the number of such children was even higher — around 30,000. To help these children, Brace was a founder in 1853 of the New York Children's Aid Society. Brace doubted that institutionalization would help these children, so he devised a system of "placing out" destitute children into homes — largely in the rural Midwest. Brace believed that the Midwest in particular was populated by solid, hard-working, wholesome families who could provide homeless children with the best chance to escape poverty and hopelessness.

Not all the children sent west were orphans gathered off the streets by the New York Children's Aid Society. Many parents in overcrowded urban settings were unable to care for their children, and elected to give legal guardianship to the Society. In some instances, parents temporarily left their children at an institution, only to later find that their children had been sent west.

In the placing out system, groups of up to two dozen children were put on train cars along with nurses and agents who were in charge of the children's care during the trip and in placing them in the communities. Agents had previously contacted individual towns, and local committees coordinated applications from potential foster parents. Local newspapers published advance notice of the train arriving. Prospective foster parents and interested bystanders would be on hand when the train arrived. As the children lined up at the depot or a meeting place, farm and townspeople made their choices; the remaining children were taken to the next town. Foster parents agreed to raise and educate the child through age 16. Follow-up visits by an agent of the Society were made periodically. Few of the children were actually adopted by their foster parents; the Society maintained custody of most of them.

Many orphan-train children fared well in their new homes and communities, finding loving and generous families. Others were abused or overworked. Some were sent from one home to another. From 1854 to 1929, about 150,000 orphans were sent by train from East Coast cities to foster homes in 20 states. Two-thirds of these were placed by the New York Children's Aid Society, the rest by other social charities that adopted the system. In Iowa, the trains made numerous stops over the years at such communities as Clarion, Iowa City, and What Cheer.

The placing-out system and orphan trains ended as social work became professionalized, as welfare philosophies shifted toward keeping families together, and as new local, state, and federal child-welfare laws were passed.

[Thanks to: the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, for permission to use the ad, "Wanted: Homes for Children," in the video vignette; and the Museum of the City of New York for permission to use the photo, "Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters at Night," from the Jacob A. Riis Collection.]

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Pine Creek Grist Mill
Muscatine County, Iowa

In January 1839 the Iowa territorial legislature and Governor Robert Lucas gave their approval to develop the first dam and water mill site in Iowa. Nine years later, Benjamin Nye built the Pine Creek Grist Mill (also known as Nye's Mill) in Muscatine County at a cost of $10,000.

The mill was sold for $8,750 in 1927 to the State Conservation Commission, which made it part of Wildcat State Park in 1935. The Pine Creek Grist Mill is on the National Register of Historic Places, but is now closed to the general public.

The mill is located on the west bank of Pine Creek, between Fairport and Montpelier in Muscatine County. At the time of its construction — of native rock and lumber — its 14' x 14' timbers were the largest in any building in the Iowa Territory.

The mill has 4 levels. Grain was rolled or ground on level 1, then elevated to level 3 for sifting and dressing. From there the grain went to level 2 for final sifting/dressing, and then back to level 1 for sacking. Level 4 contains machinery to work the grain elevators, and specialized processing machinery.

Power production machinery is located on level 1. Initially the mill was powered by a large wooden "overshot" wheel located in the northeast corner of level 1. Water was channelled to flow over the top of a wheel into pockets or paddles. The weight of the water pulled the wheel down, turning a shaft attached to a gear system that powered the milling machinery. Power turbines and an auxiliary steam engine were installed around 1860. These improvements increased power and efficiency, and worked well even when water was in short supply.

Milling with water was a slow process. Grain was funneled between the large granite grindstones (burrstones) and ground into meal or grist. The bottom (nether) stone was usually stationary, while the top (runner) stone rotated. Channels cut into each stone brought grain between the stones, or moved grist to the outer edges where it was collected for further processing. Millstones had to be sharp to prevent fermentation of the grain as it was crushed.

Water mills were important in early Iowa. Often a miller would build the mill at a convenient site, then clear and work the surrounding land to attract settlers. Mills were often the center of social activity, serving as postal offices and trading spots. The process of milling grain was slow and dependent on machinery and good weather. People who brought grain to the mills for processing often had to wait for the right conditions. In the meantime, they socialized.

By 1879, there were 712 flour mills in Iowa, using 1,002 water wheels and 287 steam engines. Water wheels were susceptible to damage by ice and floods, and a drought could cripple them. Eventually steam and electricity replaced the dam-and-wheel method.

The swift rise of the milling industry in Iowa between 1830 and 1880 coincided with Iowa's rise to second in the nation in wheat production. Wheat flourished in early Iowa because it required little attention and no special machinery. During the 1880s and beyond, wheat production declined from the effects of insects, adverse weather, and poor soil conditions. Cheaper land farther west and unfavorable railroad rates also helped end wheat production in Iowa. And with no wheat production the need for water mills declined in Iowa.

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Round Barns in Iowa

Excerpts below from *Without Right Angles* by Lowell Soike.

"The round barn," cheered B.J. Diers in 1914, "is getting to be quite the thing out here in Iowa." Its future seemed bright, indeed. After all, this carpenter and builder from Granville had just erected an immense ninety-foot version on a farm in northeastern Plymouth County and found, to his delight, "favorable comments coming from everyone who has seen it." And now, during the winter months, he was busy putting the finishing touches on a design for an eighty-four-foot model to be built in the spring. Others shared his enthusiasm. A seventy-foot Iowa round barn with self-supporting roof, portrayed in the "Breeder's Gazette," drew the editor's praise as being "solid as a rock" and "just the thing for a windy country." Meanwhile, when the farm journal *Field Illustrated* featured a hollow-clay-tile version from Iowa, its editor acclaimed that "hundreds of Iowa farmers have taken a liking to barns of this design."

Yet within a decade editorial and other support for the barns had evaporated, and today the traveler sees few round barns across the state. Despite their relatively small number, however, one would be mistaken to dismiss the round barn as some fleeting expression of Americans' past eccentricity. Its story, in fact, illustrates far more — namely, the experimental phase of a movement that aimed to make farm practices more efficient and economical.

What we think of as the "traditional" Iowa farm has in fact always known constant change. Today the farmstead is increasingly horizontal, as farmers embrace long, sleek, metal, single-story pole buildings for housing their machinery or mechanized hog-raising operations. This visible recent trend, however, obscures a gradual and more fundamental change spanning several generations: farmers' adoption of the circular form for buildings and structures. If farmers of the 1880s could return to view the farm of the 1980s, many, if not most structures would appear to them strange and bewildering. They would find buildings broken up and softened by infusions of circular buildings and structures from silos to slurry tanks, from grain bins and feed-mixing bins to corn cribs and water tanks. Among the earliest, and certainly the most spectacular agricultural uses found for the circular form came when farmers introduced the round barn to the farm. . . ." (p. 2)

". . . The barns appeared during two periods in Iowa — the 1800s and the years between 1905 and 1920. Additional patterns emerge if this broad trend of construction is broken down into types of round barns: octagon, true-round, and other polygonal barns. Octagon barns completely dominated the first period, while true-round barns prevailed during the second. Other polygonal barns — the six, ten, twelve, and sixteen-sided varieties — could be found scattered throughout both periods, though most were built between 1910 and 1920. . . ." (p. 3)

"The enthusiasm for building round barns in Iowa coincided with two surges of general barn-building. One wave of barn construction in Iowa that peaked in the early 1890s overlapped a time of round barn popularity, and a second peak, occurring about 1910, came exactly when round barn construction hit full stride. The fortuitous correspondence between general barn construction and interest in the round barn may explain why the state has so many good examples of this unusual building." (p. 5)

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The Rural Electrification Administration

Thomas Alva Edison harnessed the power of electricity in the late nineteenth century. In 1879 he invented the incandescent lamp. By 1882 he had opened the Pearl Street Station, generating and delivering electricity throughout New York's lower Manhattan district. By the turn of the twentieth century, every major American city had electricity. It spread rapidly to smaller cities and towns. But power companies considered the prospect of extending power lines to rural areas too expensive. So rural America did not participate fully in this technological advance. Only 15 percent of rural Americans had electricity in 1920. That situation contributed to a growing estrangement between urban and rural Americans.

The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was established in 1935 as one of the Roosevelt administration's New Deal programs. It provided loans for rural Americans to form cooperatives that could supply electricity to rural areas. During the depths of the Great Depression, many rural Iowans came up with the five-dollar fee to join their newly authorized local Rural Electric Cooperative. Then they went out and purchased irons, radios, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. By 1940, 40 percent of Iowa farms had electricity. This jumped to 90 percent by 1950.

The everyday lives of rural Iowans changed drastically overnight when electricity arrived. Farms became more productive. Much of the drudgery was removed from housework. And radios — next to electric irons the most popular of all electric appliances in the 1930s — brought entertainment and information into the living rooms of rural Iowans, breaking down some of their feelings of isolation from the modern world.

OTHER FACTS:

• The first day that cooperative lines carried power to an Iowa farm was in December 1936, when the Boone Valley Electric Cooperative energized its lines.

• The first loan approved by the REA for construction of a generating plant went to the Federated Cooperative Power Association of Hampton, Iowa, which began supplying electricity to customers in March 1938. The plant still stands.

• During WWII, the REA instituted a REA Production Award to draw attention to the ways electricity could boost wartime production on the farm. The first winner, in 1943, was the Ralph Childs family from Delaware County, Iowa, a member of the Maquoketa Valley Rural Electric Cooperative.

• A survey found that of the members of a rural cooperative less than one year old: 84.3% had purchased electric irons and radios, 63.2% washing machines, 48.2% vacuum cleaners, 35.5% toasters, 27.1% electric motors, and 16.2% electric water pumps.

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Power and the Land. A classic documentary film produced in 1939 and distributed by RKO Radio Pictures. It is the "before and after" electricity story of a family in rural Ohio.

Snake Alley
Burlington, Iowa

Snake Alley, connecting Burlington's downtown business district and the shopping area on North Sixth Street, is called the "Crookedest Street in the World." Constructed in 1894 as an experimental street design, Snake Alley was listed in Ripley's Believe it or Not and rivals San Francisco's famous Lombard Street for the "Crookedest" title.

Three German immigrants designed and constructed the road, reminiscent of the streets in their European birthplaces. Burlington, built in a valley, had to develop roads that climbed the steep hills surrounding the town. Snake Alley was built to provide a direct route up one of the hills, climbing a nearly perpendicular slope through its repeated switchbacks that reduce the grade.

Burlington legend says that fire horses were tested with a gallop up the alley. Horses still breathing after ascending the curves were judged worthy of pulling the city's fire equipment.

Snake Alley was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Several homes bordering the alley date to the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s, and give a Victorian feel to the winding street.

The Surf Ballroom & Buddy Holly
Clear Lake, Iowa

The February 3, 1959, headline of almost every Iowa newspaper blared the death of Buddy Holly, the 22-year-old rockabilly legend famous for such hits as "Peggy Sue." Holly, along with co-performers Ritchie Valens and the "Big Bopper," and Iowa pilot Roger Peterson, died when their plane crashed outside Mason City. The musicians had just played for more than 1,000 fans at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake.

The Midwest was Holly's stronghold of fans, partly because of his extensive touring of small towns. But small towns didn't mean small audiences. Holly and other rock 'n' roll bands always drew large, enthusiastic crowds from surrounding areas.

Iowans have not forgotten this rock idol. Each February, a memorial concert revives fifties and sixties music in the Surf Ballroom. Pilgrims in bobby socks and greased-back hair converge on Clear Lake from all over the world, proving that Buddy Holly's style of music can still pack the house.

OTHER FACTS:

- Charles Hardin Holley was born in Lubbock, Texas, on September 7, 1936. His mother nicknamed him "Buddy." The "e" in Holley was later left off a recording contract and the spelling stuck.
- In 1957, Holly put together "The Crickets," which included at different times: Jerry Allison, Larry Wellborn, Niki Sullivan, Joe B. Mouldin, and Tommy Allsup. The name would later inspire four youths from Liverpool to name their band "The Beatles."
- Eight singles were released by Holly and The Crickets, two of which — "Peggy Sue" and "That'll Be the Day"— sold over a million and a half copies. Two other Holly songs recorded without the Crickets — "It Doesn't Matter Anymore" and "Raining in my Heart"— were released after his death.
- Holly biographer John Goldrosen considered the Midwest "prime territory for rock 'n' roll stage shows." He writes, "Even the small Midwestern towns of 25,000 to 100,000 had large ballrooms which were usually filled by crowds wholly out of proportion to the size of the local population." Holly and The Crickets played in several Iowa towns, including Council Bluffs, Decorah, Davenport, Fort Dodge, Oelwein, and Waterloo.
- The Iowa plane crash was memorialized in Don McLean's song "American Pie" as "the day the music died."
- The first Surf Ballroom opened its doors on April 17, 1934, and hosted a number of famous acts, including Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Guy Lombardo, and Cab Calloway. This building burned to the ground in 1947. The Surf was rebuilt later that year a few hundred yards from the original site. The Surf continued to host big names, but the style of music began to shift from big bands to rock.
- The first Buddy Holly Memorial weekend in Clear Lake was held in 1978, organized by a local radio station. A memorial has been erected near the entrance to the Surf Ballroom and a nearby street has been renamed "Buddy Holly Place."

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Toolesboro Mounds

Toolesboro Indian Mounds National Historic Landmark, near Wapello, Iowa, is administered by the State Historical Society of Iowa. The Toolesboro Mounds are a physical manifestation of the Hopewell mortuary traditions of the Middle Woodland period of Iowa prehistory. Characterized by conical burial mounds, the Toolesboro mounds date to around 1 A.D.

Hopewell sites like those at Toolesboro often contain elaborately crafted artifacts from exotic raw materials such as copper from the Great Lakes, obsidian from the Rocky Mountains, mica from the Appalachians, and conch shell from the Gulf Coast. These materials indicate an elaborate trade network stretching from Minnesota and Wisconsin to Florida and from Iowa to New York. Artifacts such as copper awls and axes, effigy pipes, human and animal figures carved from stone, and finely made chipped stone spear points are common at such sites.

Most of the original mounds at Toolesboro were destroyed during excavations in the late 1800s. Two mounds are preserved intact. This site, like all prehistoric burial sites, are now protected under Iowa law.

Toolesboro has a park, a reconstructed prairie, 14 acres of woodlands, and a visitors' center. It's open from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, Friday-Monday, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. or by appointment. For details call 515-281-7650.

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Woodbury County Courthouse
Sioux City, Iowa

It was called an "architectural experiment . . . unusual and extreme" and it was unwanted by many citizens of Woodbury County. Despite the objections, the county board of supervisors proceeded with the plans for a new courthouse. The board's aim was to build a courthouse that would rival all other courthouses in Iowa with its architectural boldness. On January 5, 1915, the board approved Sioux Citian William L. Steele's initial courthouse proposal, with its Gothic Revival style of architecture.

After gaining the board's approval, Steele turned to his Minneapolis colleagues George Elmslie and William Gray Purcell; together the three drafted a new design proposal based on their collaboration. The new sketches showed a brick building 10 stories high. The upper six floors featured an office tower rising from the 60-foot-high base that contained the main offices. The board officially accepted the sketches on December 7, 1915.

In February of 1916, the board awarded the construction contract to the Minneapolis firm Splady, Albee and Smith. Construction soon began, and on July 10, 1916, the cornerstone was laid. The building was completed on March 1, 1918, at a cost of about $850,000.

The Woodbury County Courthouse is the largest public building designed by a "Prairie School" architect. Inspired by the American prairies, this architectural school emphasized horizontal lines, earth tones, and harmony between indoor and outdoor elements.

The focal point of the courthouse is the entrance with its mighty mosaic figure that stands for the spirit of LAW. Classical features include columns on the west side and the dome of the rotunda. Native American influences are contained in the terra cotta carvings. Carved buffalo heads on the rear of the building and a spread-winged eagle atop the tower suggest the vitality of the westward movement.

Today, seventy-five years later, the building remains mostly unaltered, and stands as an outstanding example of modern common sense and architectural accomplishment — and as a testament to the enthusiasm of its early supporters.

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