

7-1-1948

# A Man and His Garden

Mary Culbertson Ludwig

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Ludwig, Mary C. "A Man and His Garden." *The Palimpsest* 29 (1948), 204-213.

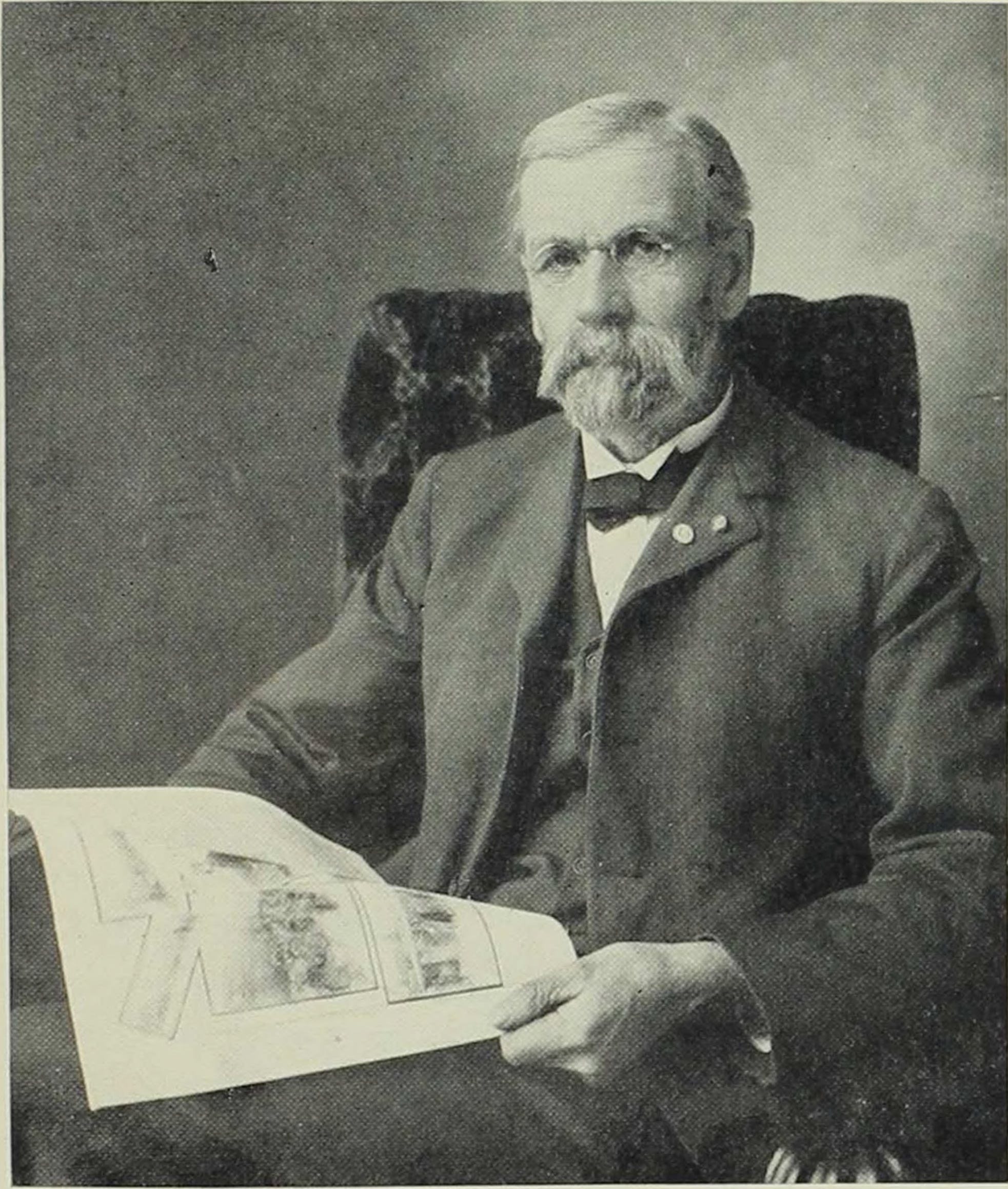
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol29/iss7/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## A Man and His Garden

" 'Tis the story of a life. Real gardens, like children grow and develop with the years. The story begins away back in the careless past" — as Eugene Secor spoke, the members of the Iowa State Horticultural Society listened attentively. Their 76-year-old beloved friend was telling them the story of his life as if he were painting the picture of a lovely garden.

To fill in the details of Eugene Secor's life story, we must go back to the middle of the nineteenth century to a small farm in southeastern New York. There in Peekskill Hollow, New York, eleven children were born to Alson and Sarah C. (Knapp) Secor. Eugene Secor, one of the eleven, was born on May 13, 1841, on the home farm. The blond child spent only a few terms going to school in the little log schoolhouse of Putnam County, for strong helpers were needed at home. Eugene's father loved to work with plants — budding, grafting, and experimenting. New fruits were constantly tried on the hillside farm where Eugene was "born and grew, and barefooted drove home the cows." As a little girl plays with dolls, so Eugene started experimenting with



EUGENE SECOR

plants. How thrilled he was when his first graft on a seedling apple tree survived and flourished.

In this environment he matured — “tall and slim and green”. But there came a time when the tow-headed boy was no longer tow-headed. “Years, and generations of dark haired ancestors from sunny France had changed his flaxen locks to a light brown. . . . He no longer drove home the cows from the hillside pasture. No longer did he sleep in the attic with nothing between himself and the stars but shingles. . . . No more was he to fish in the beautiful creek . . . go bobbing for eels . . . no more partridges would he lure into traps under the red-berried dog woods on the hillside. . . . He followed Horace Greeley’s advice: ‘Go West, young man.’ ”

When he reached the age of 21 (1862) Eugene followed his elder brother, David Secor, to Winnebago County, Iowa, where David was county treasurer and recorder and served also as the Forest City postmaster. Young Eugene worked for a time, learned the mason’s trade during two summers and taught two winter terms of school, and then enrolled at Cornell College at Mt. Vernon, Iowa. When David Secor enlisted in the regiment formed from the Second and Third Iowa Infantry in September, 1864, Eugene was called home to take charge of his brother’s office and the

postoffice as a deputy. He remained there until the end of the war.

By 1865, Eugene had decided it was time to "settle down" in this still "new" country, and on September 17, 1866, he married Millie M. Spencer, a pretty, frail, 19-year-old girl, whom he had courted at Forest City and in Cedar Falls where she was attending school. Millie Secor was musical and intelligent. Although she was never physically strong, she was a capable mistress of Eugene Secor's home. For her he built "The Shelter", a beautiful spacious home at Forest City, fronted by a miniature park and surrounded by the oak trees that he loved. Eugene Secor was progressive and through the years he equipped their home with the latest conveniences of the day. He was one of the first householders to put in a furnace, running water, electric lights, and a telephone, and to have a typewriter.

It was in this home that the ten children of Eugene and Millie Secor were born and there the parents saw six of them die. The lovely, quiet home proved a true shelter for his invalid wife in the last years before her death on April 29, 1912, when she was 64. Only four of the ten children were living when Millie Secor died. Three sons — Willard (died May 27, 1915), Alson, one-time editor of the farm magazine, *Successful*

*Farming* (now — 1948 — living in Hollywood, California), and Manly, a resident of Waterloo, Iowa — and one daughter, Nina, who remained at home with her father and after his death stayed at The Shelter until shortly before her death in 1942.

Over the years, Eugene Secor donated much of his time and energy to the public. In 1869 he began six years as clerk of the courts, and he was county auditor beginning in 1876 for four consecutive years. He was a member of the Forest City Board of Education for 15 years. In 1878 he was appointed one of the commissioners to supervise the incorporation of Forest City and at the election in 1879, he was elected mayor and held that position until April, 1882. In 1884 he was again elected, serving for two terms. For two years, 1885–1887, he was Winnebago County coroner and he served as councilman for five out of the eight years between 1883–1891. In 1892 this “true democrat but always a staunch Republican” was a delegate to the Republican National Convention. In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him postmaster of Forest City and the job was his for the next five and a half years.

In November, 1901, when he was sixty years old, Eugene Secor was elected Representative from Winnebago County in the Twenty-ninth

General Assembly and served two years, but he was not a candidate for re-election. During his tenure Mr. Secor was named chairman of the Horticultural Committee and served on seven other standing committees including Agriculture, Schools and Text-books, Police Regulations, and the Agricultural College.

Not all his activities were political. In 1887 he helped organize the Winnebago County Agricultural Society and was its first president. He also rose to leadership in his church, and in 1892 was a delegate to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to which denomination he belonged.

In spite of his limited education, Eugene Secor surrounded himself with good books and intelligent people. He appreciated the advantages of higher education and gave precious time to his duties as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Iowa Agricultural College from 1888 to 1894. He also served on the Board of Trustees of Cornell College for twenty years and he was proud of an honorary M.A. degree from that school.

Perhaps it was because of his interest in public affairs and his constant seclusion to study and write that he seemed aloof, not only to his friends but to his children. To those who did not know him well, he appeared to be an austere man. His

speech and manner were gruff when he was displeased, but he was broadminded and tolerant at a time when tolerance was unpopular. All races and creeds were received with sincere hospitality at the Secor home. Because of his sober appearance many did not understand this tall, handsomely bearded man, and often lost his quiet humor. "He could burn one up with sarcasm, but his poetry and writing are so full of romance, and tenderness, that we know he was at heart a very loving and generous man."

Eugene Secor loved books and he spent many hours reading Shakespeare, Longfellow, and the classics to his wife and children. He was also a poet and author in his own right. He wrote for newspapers and several of his works have been published. One of these was *Verse for Little Folks and Others*, published by his son, Alson, "for the purpose of putting some of my father's nature verse into a form in which they may be better preserved". Another collection of verse, *Echoes from the Shelter*, was "dedicated to the memory of her who named and adorned the home". Each year at Christmas-time a small paper-bound collection of verse was sent to his friends instead of the customary card. One year, five years before his death, he called his greeting "The Calendar". It contained a poem for each



month of the year in addition to "Good Morning" and "A Day".

In addition to these many non-paying tasks, he was part owner of a real estate business and director of a private bank organized by himself and others in 1882 under the name of Secor, Law, and Plummer, later incorporated as the First National Bank of Forest City.

In his "spare" moments Mr. Secor raised colonies of choice bees. He had begun this work about the time of his marriage. His apiary was never large but in 1892 he had 75 colonies of bees. He wrote much for bee publications on subjects ranging from the breeding of bees to "extracted honey and bee pasture from alsike clover", but it was for his songs and poems, many of which were sung at the beekeepers' conventions, that he became well known and long remembered by beekeepers all over the country. He was, however, recognized as a bee authority and in 1892-1893 he was the sole expert judge of the apiary department at the World's Columbian Exposition held at Chicago. For many years he served as a judge for the bee and honey exhibit at the Iowa State Fair. His own bees were outstanding and were known all over Iowa.

Eugene Secor's chief delight was the out-of-doors. He loved to think of the possibilities hidden

in a seed. The Shelter became a show place in the Middle West for its flowers, shrubs, and fruits, and every tree and shrub, except for a few native oaks and lindens, was planted by Mr. Secor himself. Each tree bore a zinc label giving its name, the date of planting, and the name of the donor.

One of Mr. Secor's outstanding contributions, covering half a century, was the trial and testing of new varieties of plants that he might determine their value and adaptability for north central Iowa. His findings, often at considerable expense to himself, were given freely to the public. He experimented with ornamental trees and shrubs as well as flowers and fruit trees.

In an article written in 1914 for *The Guide to Nature*, he said, "Man was created to be happy. He was endowed above all other creatures with a large capacity for enjoyment. Knowledge increases that capacity. Ignorance is not bliss and 'tis not folly to be wise. . . . Anyone who has reached middle life and has failed to become interested in the out-door world has missed something which no amount of mere book-learning, or even material prosperity alone can supply."

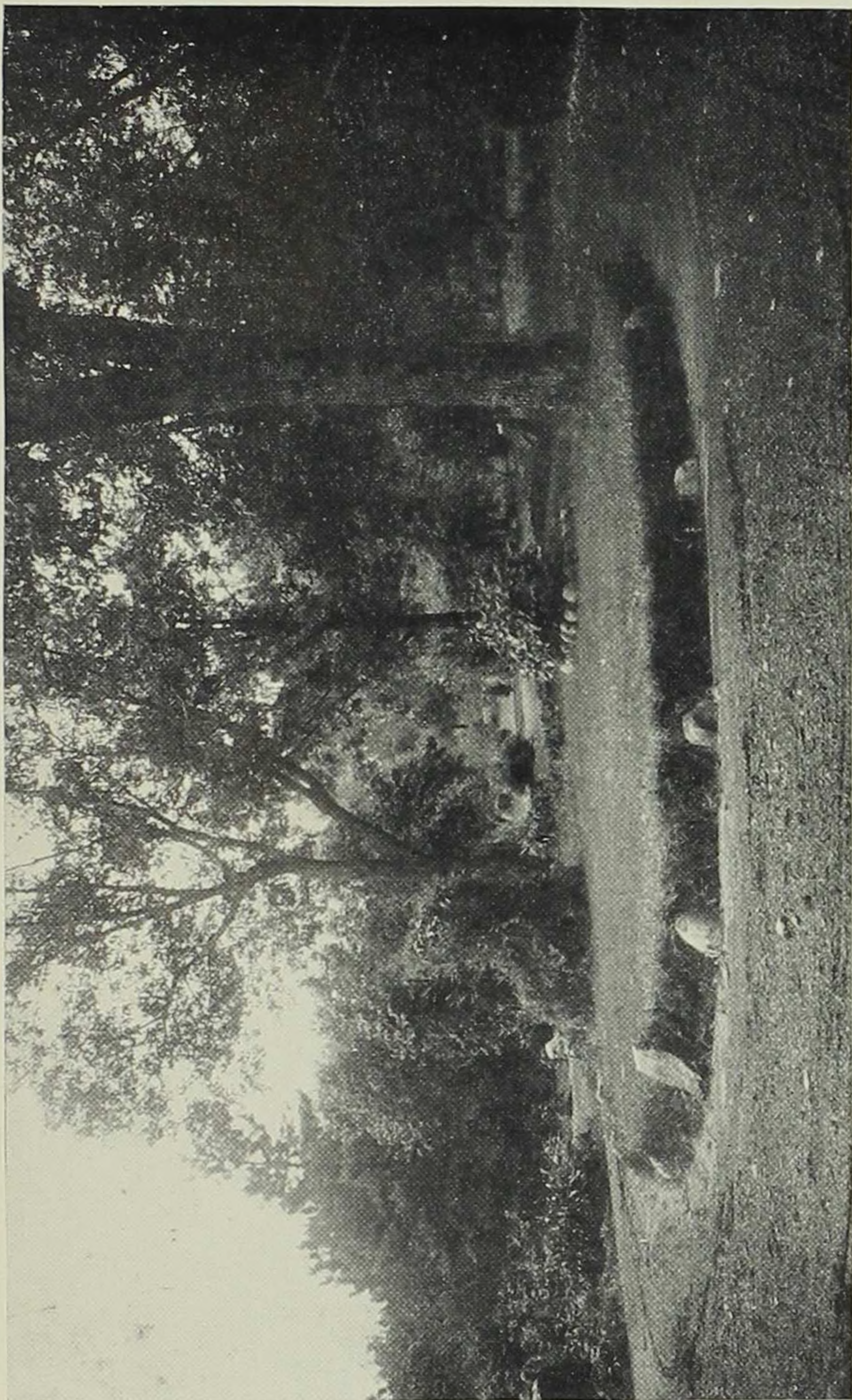
For thirty-five years he was an enthusiastic member of the State Horticultural Society and read innumerable papers at its meetings. In 1901 in a paper read before the members of the North-

western Horticultural Society on "The Coming Winter Apple for Northern Iowa", he reminded his audience of "the importance of growing apples adapted to our needs. Let us plant more seeds and select the best until we get what we want." He predicted "if a hundred men in this district would pursue this course one of them would produce the coming winter apple for our climate."

Eleven years later he strayed from the usual theme of horticultural papers to urge that trees be planted in rural schoolyards, not only for protection in the winter but also to afford an opportunity for the school children to learn the kinds and names of trees. He said, "These could be so grouped as not to interfere with an open playground and yet not in straight rows. . . . I like rather to see them in groups, like a company of informal picnickers."

In 1917 he gave a paper before the Horticultural Society, a reminiscence, in which he likened his life to a garden. He told of his boyhood, his decision to come west, the simple life he had always preferred, and his dreams for the future. Iowa, he said, is "God's garden, planted and cared for before our time for the enjoyment of those who were to occupy this fertile field."

Though he worked with all shrubs, fruits, and flowers, peonies were his favorite — "They laugh



VIEW OF THE SECOR GARDEN

at 30 degrees below zero", he said, and at The Shelter he grew hundreds of seedling peonies. For years he had the reputation of having one of the most complete collections of peonies in northern Iowa and he established what he called "Peony Day", when, in the height of the blooming season, the public was invited to visit The Shelter. One of his favorite peonies, a beautiful white variety, was named after his unmarried daughter, Nina.

Eugene Secor was also interested in breeding Shorthorn cattle and this interest had tragic consequences. On May 14, 1919, when Mr. Secor was in his 78th year, he was gored and killed by an angry bull as he attempted to herd it into the barn.

Keen and active to the last, Mr. Secor mellowed with age and seemed less reserved, more friendly. His last few years were spent quietly at home with his garden, a few colonies of bees, and some cows to care for. Eugene Secor had accomplished his mission. His prayer had been heard and granted. "Creation is not finished. Every seed holds the secret of a new revelation. Oh my soul, may I not be a co-worker with the Almighty in making fairer the face of the Earth?"

MARY CULBERTSON LUDWIG