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The Iowa Environment

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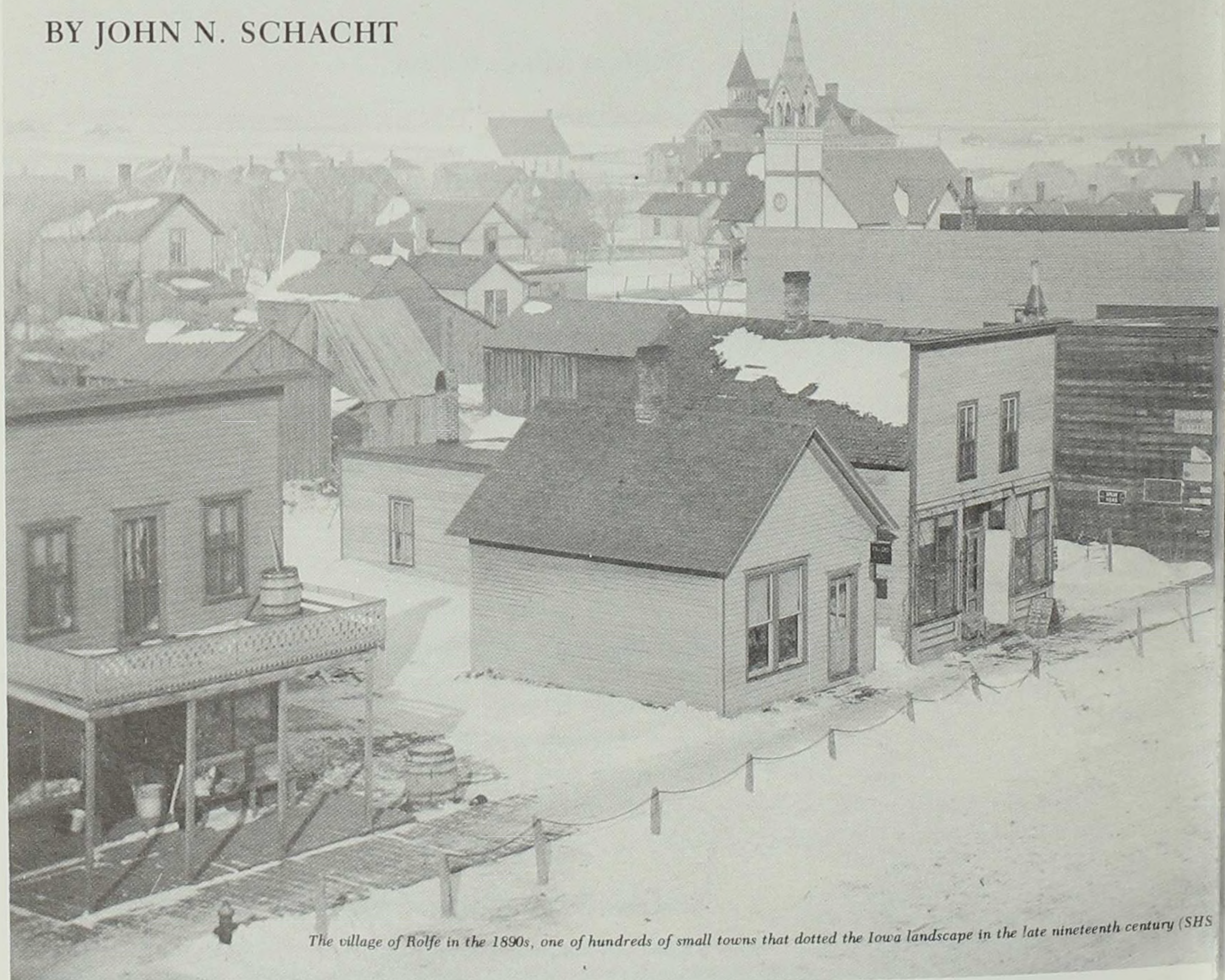
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How and why men from Iowa—Herbert Hoover, John L. Lewis, Henry A. Wallace, Harry Hopkins—were the leaders who shaped American history during the Great Depression a half-century ago

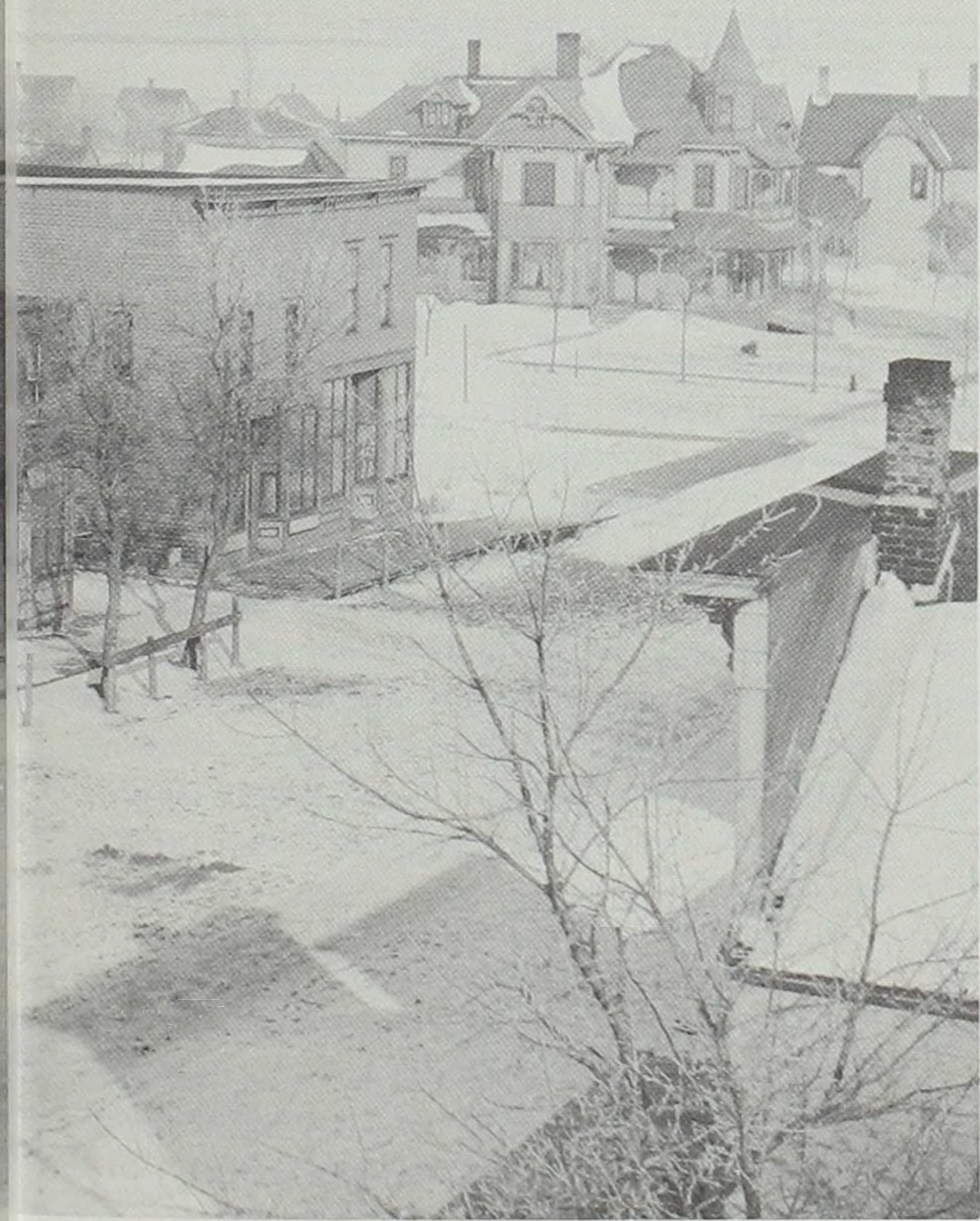


BY JOHN N. SCHACHT



The village of Rolfe in the 1890s, one of hundreds of small towns that dotted the Iowa landscape in the late nineteenth century (SHS)

THE PROV



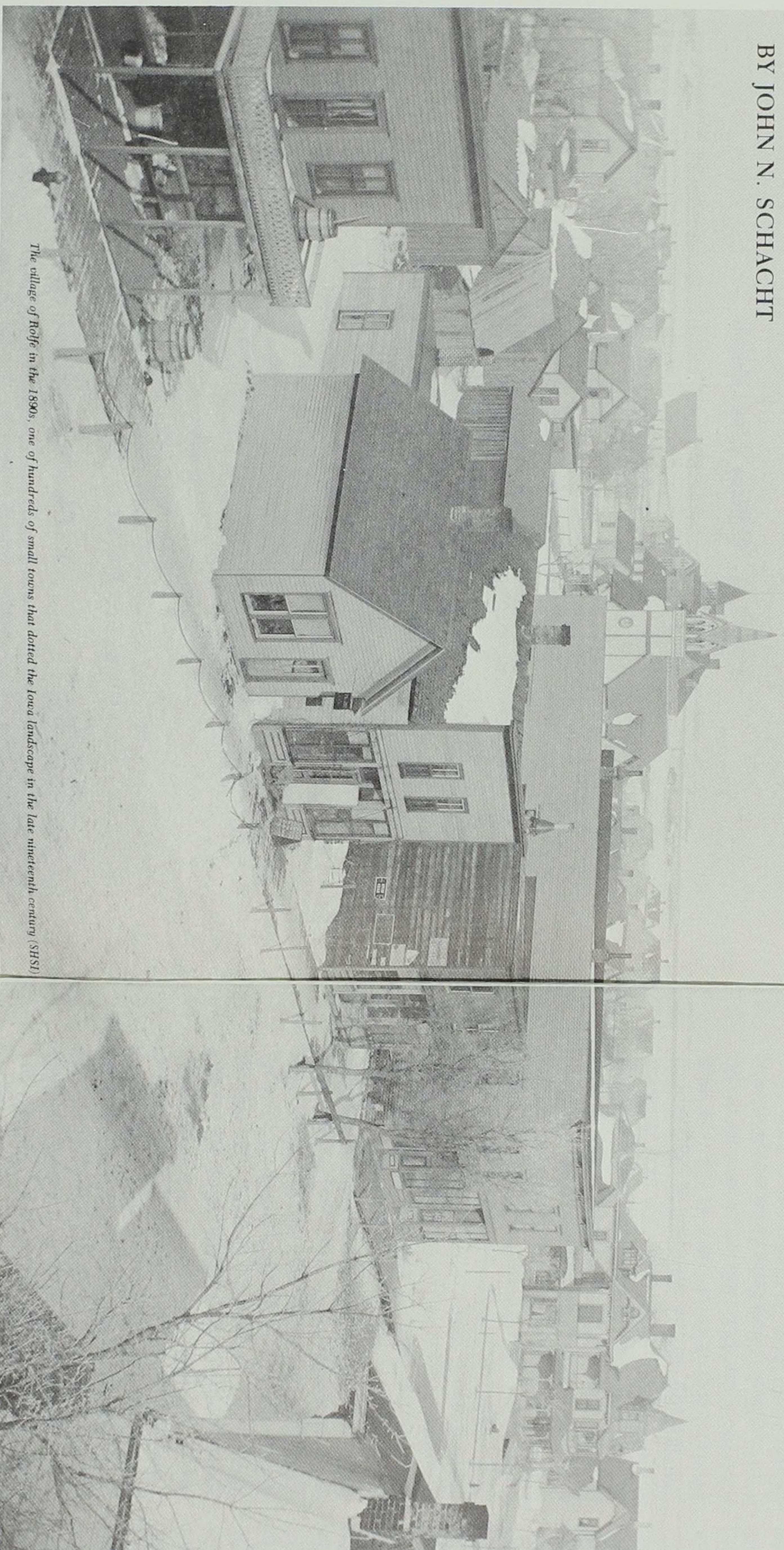
The 1930s, as Charles Dickens once wrote of an epoch 150 years earlier, might have been called the best of times, the worst of times, the age of wisdom, the age of foolishness, the spring of hope and the winter of despair. From the ashes of the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression rose the phoenix of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which shaped the direction of American government and society for two generations. Playing major roles in the drama of the decade—in the depths of the Depression and in recovery from it, in the building of the New Deal and in opposition to it—were four natives of Iowa. Aside from the towering figure of FDR himself, it would be difficult to name four people as important in national affairs between 1930 and 1940 as Herbert Hoover, John L. Lewis, Henry A. Wallace, and Harry Hopkins.

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LDERS

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THE PROVIDERS

The 1930s, as Charles Dickens once wrote of an epoch 150 years earlier, might have been called the best of times, the worst of times, the age of wisdom, the age of foolishness, the spring of hope and the winter of despair. From the ashes of the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression rose the phoenix of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which shaped the direction of American government and society for two generations. Playing major roles in the drama of the decade—in the depths of the Depression and in recovery from it, in the building of the New Deal and in opposition to it—were four natives of Iowa. Aside from the towering figure of FDR himself, it would be difficult to name four people as important in national affairs between 1930 and 1940 as Herbert Hoover, John L. Lewis, Henry A. Wallace, and Harry Hopkins.

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Each of these men had been nurtured in the Iowa environment. President Herbert Hoover was born into a Quaker community in West Branch and went on to gain world fame as a mining engineer before turning his talents to public life. United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis grew up in the coal towns of southern Iowa. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace's family had been leaders in Iowa agriculture and agricultural journalism for decades. And New Deal administrator and presidential advisor Harry Hopkins developed a social conscience in his years as an undergraduate at an Iowa liberal arts college.

Not that these four were the only Iowans in the public eye in those years. There were writers like James Norman Hall and Ruth Suckow; painter Grant Wood and cartoonist J.N. "Ding" Darling; journalist Marquis Childs; opinion analyst George Gallup; movie actor John Wayne; football's first Heisman Trophy winner, Jay Berwanger; baseball player Bob Feller; and band leader Glenn Miller—all Iowans by birth or upbringing. But Hoover, Wallace, Hopkins, and Lewis were movers and shakers of the first rank, men at the fountains of power who, as much as individuals can, made the 1930s what they were.

Why in this period should Iowans have been so predominant? Partly, no doubt, by coincidence. And yet it seems not entirely coincidental that a disproportionate share of the influential people in the 1930s came from Iowa. To see why, one must go back another half-century to the Iowa of the mid-1870s to mid-1890s, when these men were being born or growing up. Anyone from Iowa in those days had the *arithmetic*, so to speak, on his side.

In the first place, the Iowa of a century ago was not the statistically "average" state that it is

today (at or near the middle among the fifty states in area, population, and income per capita). The 1880 census ranked Iowa's population of 1,624,615 tenth among the then thirty-eight states; in 1900 its population of 2,231,853 ranked tenth among the then forty-four states. For twenty years or perhaps slightly longer, Iowa was the tenth most populous state—the highest proportionately it has ever been—and thus sheer numbers would predict more successes (and failures) from Iowa than from most states.

In addition, Iowa's population was in several ways special in its prospects for success in the American society of the time. In 1880 the state was seventh in the number of native-born whites (conversely, Iowa ranked twenty-seventh in "colored" population) and seventh in the number of native-born white males. Some 16 percent of Iowa's population was foreign-born, but fully one-third of the immigrants, like John L. Lewis's Welsh-born father and mother, came from countries where English was widely spoken. Also, most of Iowa's churchgoers were in the conventional Protestant sects (though there were important exceptions, such as the large Catholic enclaves around Dubuque and Carroll, and various utopian groups including the Amana Society). Therefore, most ambitious Iowans were in no danger of being frustrated by barriers of racial or religious discrimination or of language in whatever drive they were able to mount toward wealth and fame.

Furthermore, Iowans had the chance to become well educated—relatively. Originally, Iowa may have been, as Herbert Hoover once wrote, "populated by the more adventuresome and the more courageous, who fought their way along the ever extending frontier." But in the

The Iowa Environment

1880s that frontier had extended farther west. Swords had been beaten into plowshares. Corn was regarded as an unfailing crop; the stable economy which it provided enabled Iowans to turn some attention to things other than wresting a living from the soil. Keach Johnson has drawn a convincing picture of the shortcomings of early Iowa education, pointing out that the state's numerous schools (fifth most numerous nationally) were mostly one-room, ungraded establishments housed in unsuitable buildings and staffed by teachers who were mostly inexperienced and ill-prepared. Yet census figures and other evidence show that Iowans of a century ago valued education and put more into it than most states. Tenth in population, Iowa in 1880 was seventh in the number of pupils attending school and seventh in expenditures for school purposes. It was fifth in the number of teachers. In 1900 it was second in the percentage of children attending school (nor was this statistic unduly affected by racial makeup; it was third considering only its white population). The most convincing evidence of educational advantage is that Iowa led the United States in literacy in the 1880 census and again in 1900 and 1910.

Further, it seems likely that child labor did not deprive many Iowa boys and girls of schooling, as it did in the more industrialized states. Of course, many children—like the young Hoover, Lewis, and Wallace—were involved in farm work, but most of this was seasonal or before and after school hours. Altogether, the attitude of Anna Pickett Hopkins, who in 1901 engineered a family move to Grinnell so that her son Harry and her other children could have the advantages of higher learning, was not uncharacteristic of Iowans.

Iowa a century ago was also a comparatively healthy place to live. An orphaned Hoover had grim personal reason to know the threat posed by communicable diseases of that era. Yet Iowa children could expect to flourish and grow to maturity. "The healthfulness of the state ap-

pears to good advantage," wrote Iowa Secretary of State John A. T. Hull in 1883. "Only four states reported a smaller number of deaths [for 1880] in proportion to the entire population . . . and only three had a smaller proportionate number of deaths among the male population." And the moral environment was such that robust young men need not have feared being led astray by bad companions, at least to the extent that staying out of prison signified virtue. Iowa in 1880 was thirty-seventh among the thirty-eight states in number of prisoners per capita—and thirty-eighth of thirty-eight in female prisoners.

"Morality" might have been asserted in a subtler and more significant way. The social makeup of the state was such that children were likely to grow up possessing qualities that pointed toward success. Iowa was basically a state of freeholding farmers and those who served them—small businessmen, tradespeople, and professional people. Consider these 1880 census data: Iowa was, as always, highest of all the states in agricultural output per capita, and it was fifth in the country in the number of "planters and farmers." But it ranked eighteenth in the number of agricultural laborers—people working for wages. Thus, one sees a state in which a sense of ownership was strong, a state of small family farms. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century this was the kind of life designed to inculcate the Puritan staples of hard work, thrift, and self-reliance, salted with shrewdness and ambition.

This, then, was the atmosphere in which was raised a generation that would reach its prime of middle age in the 1930s. The athletes of the Thirties were younger, of course, and so were some of the others—Gallup, Childs, Wayne, and Miller were born after 1900—but most were boys and young men before 1900. They never lost traces of their nineteenth-century Iowa origins, and they owed many of their successes, and some of their failures, to it.