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Commentary

L Edward Purcell

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COMMENTARY

An Iowa newspaper columnist a few years ago wrote that a newspaper article has "the half-life of a fried egg." However true this statement may be in the short run, it is definitely not so for historians. While not many people are interested in reading last week's paper, a news story of 80 years ago may be fascinating.

In fact, newspapers are one of the historian's most important sources. Newspapers usually provide the basic facts and show the context of historical events. First hand reports, such as diaries or memoirs, are generally accepted as more reliable and more significant; however, an historical book or article seldom is written without the aid of the journalists of the past.

As Peter Harstad and Michael Gibson point out in their article on the 1885 junket of Iowa's Republican editors, the local influence a paper exerted was considerable.

Living as we do in the 1970s, bombarded by images and information at a breathtaking rate, we may tend to discount the effectiveness of newspapers or magazines. However, in a pre-electronic age, the printed word often functioned in ways very similar to television in our time. The local paper brought news, gossip, and political propaganda from the town, county, and state levels. At the same time, local papers carried "boiler plates" or "patent sides" which were prepared in Chicago or eastern cities. These pre-printed forms—which reduced the burden on the local editor—carried national news, national fiction, and national advertising. Iowans read many of the same ads for the same pro-

ducts as did people in Minnesota, Nebraska, Colorado, and even (perhaps) Idaho.

No matter how isolated rural mid-western life may seem at a backward glance, it is clear that many forces tugged people away from purely local concerns.

Even the recent tendency to criticize the national media had a parallel in early Iowa. The editor of the Dubuque *Iowa News* complained in January 1838 about the role of the eastern literary establishment in forming opinion throughout the nation. He carefully drew a distinction between "useful" eastern literary publishers and the "cheap publications which sprang from the 'Franklin Place' and the 'Athenian Buildings,' Philadelphia."

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the opportunities for sharing in a national culture increased with the wide circulation of popular magazines and best-selling novels. Iowans and Idahoans read the same stories in *Harper's*, *Munsey's*, and *Leslie's* magazines. The *Des Moines Leader* devoted a full editorial to the fictional death of one of the popular literary heroes of the 1890s. Press trips such as the one described in 1885 and the reports which followed also played an important role in broadening the horizons of local people.

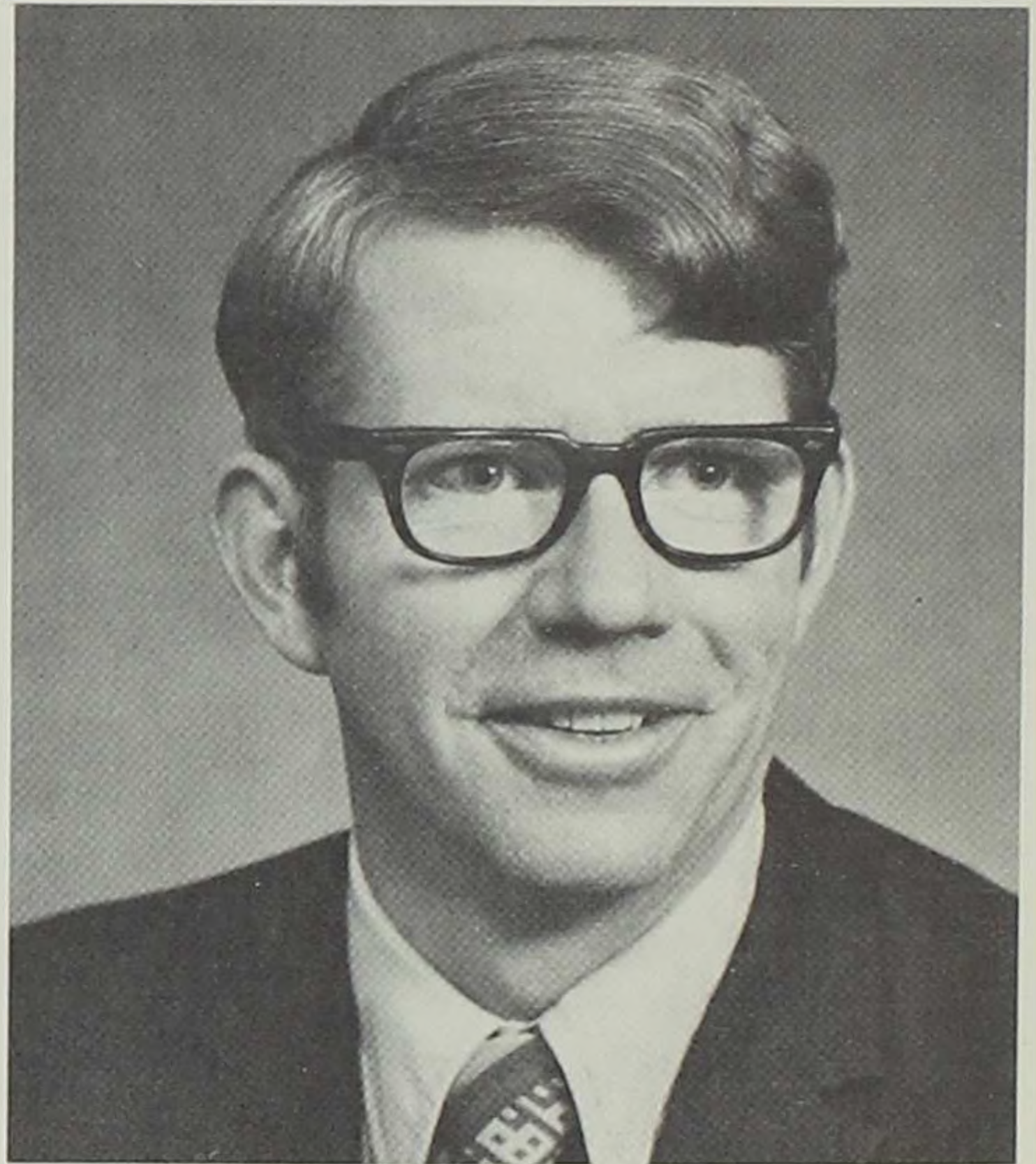
Newspapers are a fascinating study. Not only do they provide information, but they demonstrate the sinuous intertwining of localism and nationalism. □

L.E.P.

CONTRIBUTORS:

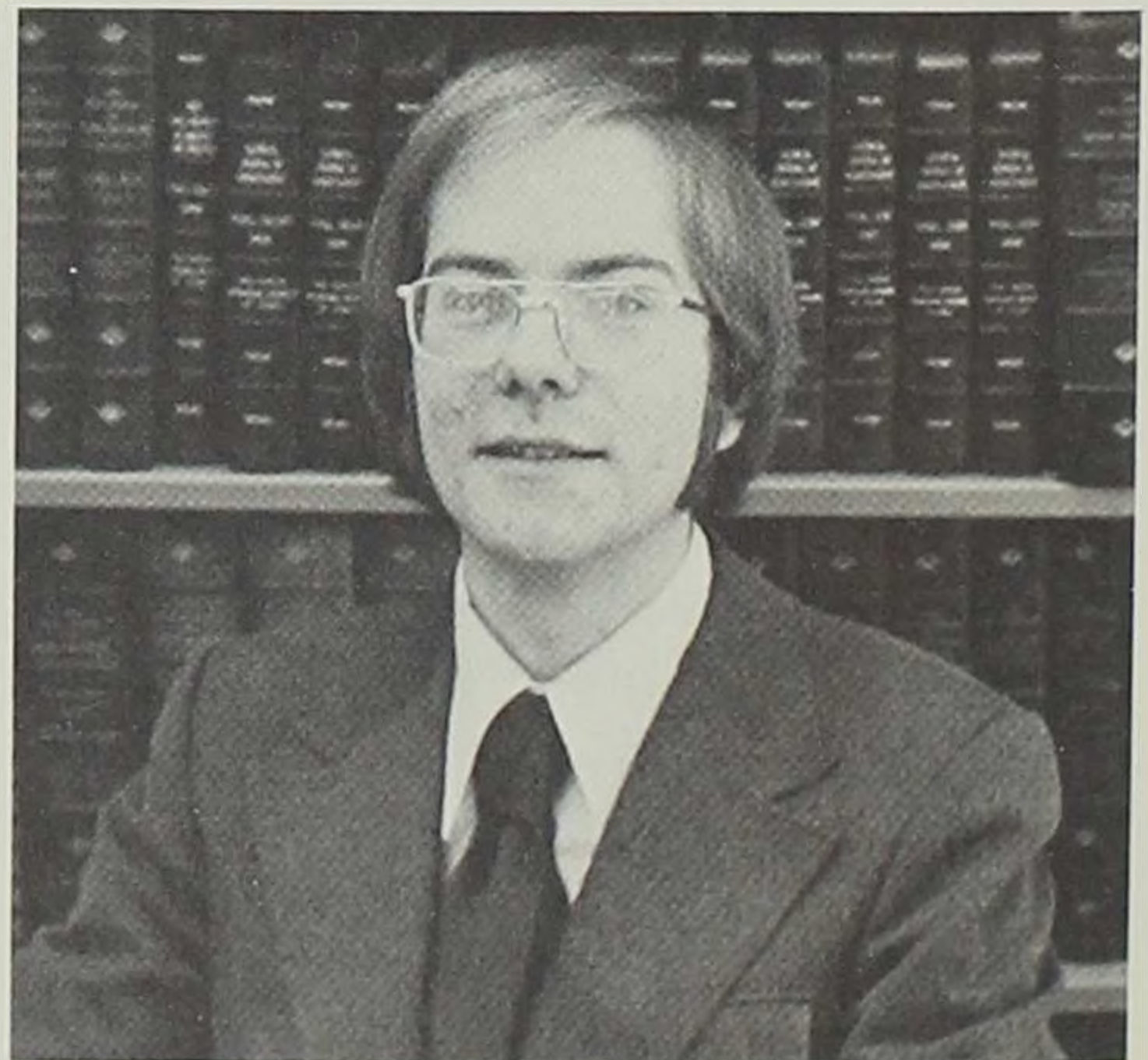
PETER T. HARSTAD has been Director of the State Historical Society of Iowa since August 1972.

He dedicates this article to the memory of John H. Merriam, colleague, hunting partner, and friend, who died in a hunting-boating accident in the fall of 1973. A 10,924-foot peak in the White Cloud Mountains of central Idaho has recently been named "Merriam Peak" to honor this ardent conservationist who kindled his interest in the out-of-doors along the banks of Buffalo Creek, between Ryan and Coggon, Iowa.



MICHAEL D. GIBSON is Administrative Assistant/Research Associate for the State Historical Society of Iowa. A native of Pocatello, Idaho, Mr. Gibson joined the staff in June 1973. He attended local schools in Pocatello, and in 1970 he received a B.A. degree in American history from Idaho State University. Before coming to Iowa, he served as a research assistant for the Department of History at Idaho State University, while doing graduate work. He recently completed a bibliography on the Western American novel which was published in the *Journal of Popular Culture* and simultaneously in book form.

With this background, it is clear why Mr. Gibson has a special interest in the topic of "Idaho - Iowa."



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