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“HAWKEYE”

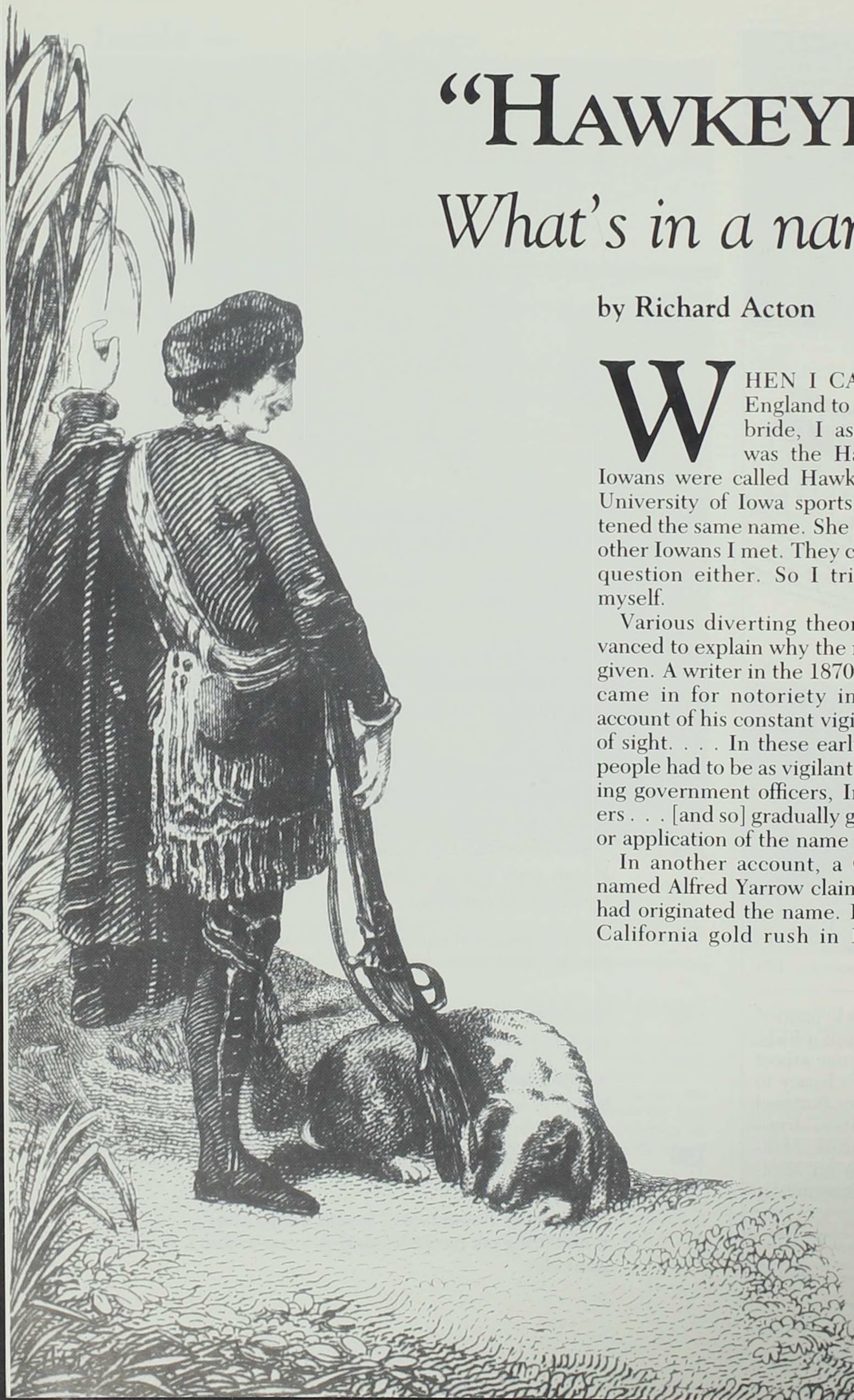
What's in a name?

by Richard Acton

WHEN I CAME to Iowa from England to marry my Hawkeye bride, I asked her why Iowa was the Hawkeye State, why Iowans were called Hawkeyes, and why the University of Iowa sports teams were christened the same name. She had no idea. I asked other Iowans I met. They could not answer my question either. So I tried to find out for myself.

Various diverting theories have been advanced to explain why the name Hawkeye was given. A writer in the 1870s stated: “The hawk came in for notoriety in all localities, on account of his constant vigilance and keenness of sight. . . . In these early days of Iowa, the people had to be as vigilant as hawks, in watching government officers, Indians, and intruders . . . [and so] gradually grew the appellation or application of the name of Hawk-Eyes.”

In another account, a Civil War veteran named Alfred Yarrow claimed in 1922 that he had originated the name. Returning from the California gold rush in 1855, Yarrow had



crossed Iowa and the Mississippi. He had asked the inhabitants of the Illinois town in which he found himself: "Let's see, what do they call that land across the river?" According to his account, the villagers didn't know. Having shot a hawk in Iowa the previous day, Yarrow decided the land should be called "Hawkeye" because the name pleased him.

The evidence reveals, and historians generally agree, that it was actually the brilliant pioneer lawyer David Rorer who suggested applying the name Hawkeye to the people of the future Territory of Iowa in early 1838. Born and educated in Virginia, Rorer rode on horseback to Little Rock, Arkansas, in the fall of 1826 and established a law practice. In 1835 he freed his slaves and, with his wife and four young children, set out for a new life on the Iowa frontier, settling the following year in the hamlet of Flint Hills — the Burlington of the future. There he practiced law and built the first brick house in what was to be Iowa. In 1839 he would win a unanimous verdict in the first reported decision of the Territory of Iowa Supreme Court — the landmark slavery case "In the matter of Ralph (a colored man) on Habeas Corpus." Rorer appeared in innumerable important cases and, late in life, wrote three weighty legal tomes. A *Chicago Tribune* obituary in July 1884 described him as one of the ablest lawyers and most learned law writers at the American bar.

A genius in legal matters, Rorer was active in the early push for territorial status. At the Burlington Territorial Convention of November 1837, Rorer chaired the committee that drafted the petition to Congress to create a separate territorial government for "Iowa." Anticipating the birth of a new territory, which would eventually become a new state, Rorer observed that the inhabitants of other new Midwestern states had acquired rather unfortunate nicknames — "the Suckers" of Illinois and "the Pukes" of Missouri. One historian reports that the people of the Black Hawk Purchase (the nucleus of Iowa) lacked sufficient

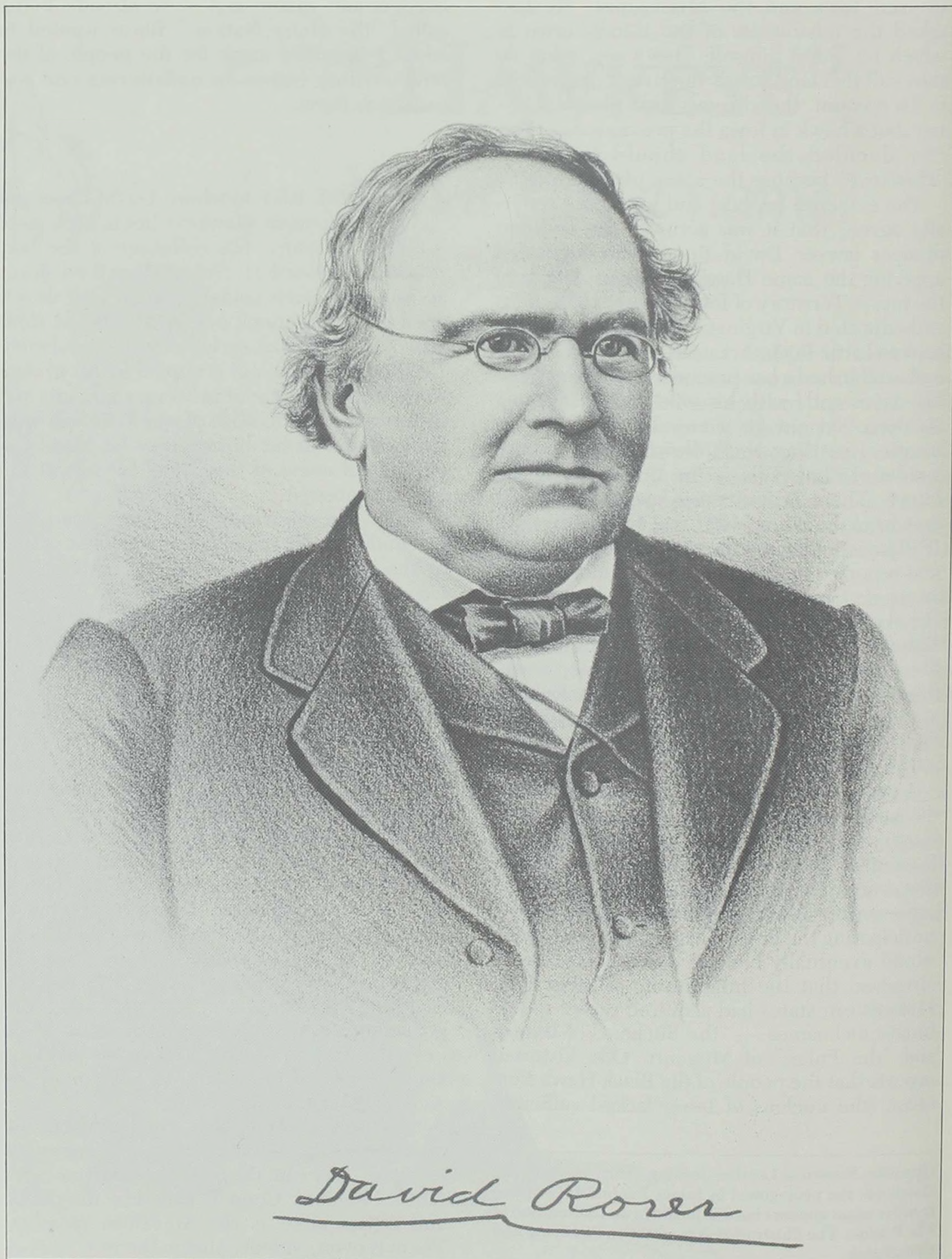
barbers and razors and were already being called "the Hairy Nation." Rorer wanted to adopt a dignified name for the people of the new territory before an unflattering one was cast upon them.

THE KEY to where David Rorer got the name Hawkeye lies in his leisure pursuits. His colleague at the bar, Edward H. Stiles, described Rorer as "an omnivorous reader" with a "well-developed taste for general literature." It was similarly reported in an early biographical sketch: "All [Rorer's] time not occupied by his professional duties was spent in literary pursuits and historical research, both of which he was very fond of, and in his library may be found the writings of many of the ablest authors of the past and present."

Rorer, like thousands of his contemporaries, had undoubtedly read the most popular author of the period — James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper's best known works were *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Deerslayer*. His novels were phenomenal best sellers. Edition after edition was published. *The Last of the Mohicans*, which first appeared in 1826, sold out so fast that the publisher decided it should be stereotyped for more printings. He had plates made of all Cooper's novels "which," he wrote, "has not happened to any living author of works of fancy." In the 1820s, only nine books had the distinction of having a total sale exceeding one percent of the population of the United States in the decade in which they were published. Five of these were by James Fenimore Cooper, and the easy leader was *The Last of the Mohicans*. *The North American Review* of July 1826 joined in the general acclaim: "Mr. Cooper . . . has the almost singular merit of writing American novels which everybody reads. . . . the public voice has long since confirmed to him the appellation of the American novelist."

It is inconceivable that David Rorer, the omnivorous reader with a taste for general literature, was not thoroughly familiar with James Fenimore Cooper, hailed by the public and critics alike as *the* American novelist. There is even evidence that in the year 1838 —

Opposite: Known as Leatherstocking, Natty Bumppo, or Hawkeye, the protagonist in James Fenimore Cooper's frontier sagas appears here as he did in an 1832 edition of *The Prairie*. The illustration is credited to Pickering and Greatbatch.



the year Rorer suggested the name Hawkeye — Cooper and *The Last of the Mohicans* were still popular in Rorer's hometown of Burlington. In June 1838 the only American novels reported missing from the Wisconsin Territorial Library, established at Burlington the previous year, were both volumes of Cooper's works. Later that year, T.S. Parvin, the Territorial Governor's private secretary in Burlington, was sent *The Last of the Mohicans* for Christmas by a lady friend in Ohio.

The overwhelming popularity of Cooper's writings helps to explain what inspired Rorer to choose the name Hawkeye for the future Territory of Iowa. Cooper's greatest creation in these books is the hero of the frontier known to his Indian friends as "Hawkeye." The character Hawkeye (also known as Leatherstocking and other names) appeared first in *The Pioneers* (1823), then in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and later in *The Deerslayer* (1841). Hawkeye became a national institution among the reading public.

Uncas, the Indian hero of *The Last of the Mohicans*, gives a glimpse of Hawkeye's qualities in the following dialogue:

Uncas took the scout by the hand, and led him to the feet of the patriarch.

"Father," he said, "look, at this paleface; a just man, and the friend of the Delawares."

"Is he a son of Miquon?"

"Not so; a warrior known to the Yengeese, and feared by the Maquas."

"What name has he gained by his deeds?"

"We call him Hawkeye," Uncas replied, using the Delaware phrase, "for his sight never fails."

In Cooper's earlier book *The Pioneers* (set later in time), Uncas's father, the old chief Chingachgook, said of his friend: "Hawkeye smoked at that council, for we loved him."

So when David Rorer suggested the name Hawkeye for the people of the forthcoming Iowa Territory, he was undoubtedly giving them the heroic name of Cooper's Hawkeye. The name was widely known as that of the leading fictional hero of the day — a part of

contemporary culture. And it was especially suitable for the people of a new territory. All of the Black Hawk Purchase was then the frontier — Hawkeye was *the* frontier hero. All Iowans were then pioneers — *The Pioneers* was the very title of the book in which Hawkeye first appeared. The land had been Indian land until the settlers arrived in 1833 — *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pioneers* were all about settlers and Indians. The name of Hawkeye — a just, courageous, admired hero — was ideal for the people of the new territory.

YET THE NAME also had an echo of another contemporary hero — this one a real, rather than literary, figure. Black Hawk, the Sauk war chief, had long resisted the advance of the pioneers. In 1813 his siege of Fort Madison had forced the troops to burn the fort and evacuate. In 1832 he had fought and lost the Black Hawk War in Illinois and Wisconsin. The ensuing treaty compelled the Sauk and Mesquakie to cede the nucleus of Iowa, and the settlers poured in from 1833. The area became known as the Black Hawk Purchase.

Black Hawk himself was taken as a prisoner to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, thence to Washington to meet President Jackson, and ultimately held at Fortress Monroe. His subsequent tour of Eastern cities and the publication of his autobiography made him a national figure. By 1838 he was living out his old age near Fort Madison.

The ring of the name Black Hawk in "Hawkeye" evidently appealed to David Rorer and his colleagues who helped launch the nickname. He suggested "Hawkeye" to one of these colleagues — James Gardiner Edwards.

Edwards was a newspaperman, and in 1838 was about to start the *Fort Madison Patriot* after several unsuccessful newspaper enterprises in Illinois. On March 24, 1838, he published the first number of the *Patriot*, and on page 2 he wrote of the congressional bill to separate "the proposed Iowa Territory or Black Hawk Purchase" from Wisconsin Territory. He then printed a paragraph suggesting the name: "If a division of the Territory is effected, we

Opposite: David Rorer, a genius in legal matters — and in promotional matters for the new Iowa Territory.



propose that the Iowans take the cognomen of Hawkeyes. Our etymology can then be more definitely traced than can that of the Wolverines, Suckers, Gophers, &c., and we shall rescue from oblivion a memento, at least, of the name of the old chief. Who seconds the motion?" On the same page there were no less than four stories about Black Hawk, referred to in some as "the old chief." Among them was an account of Black Hawk's recent visit to the newspaper, and a report that Black Hawk had attended a Fort Madison ball in "full court dress."

Black Hawk was a unique figure to the early settlers. On July 4, 1838, he appeared at a Fort Madison celebration of the Declaration of American Independence and the birth of the Territory of Iowa. The lawyer Philip Viele (whose sister David Rorer, by then a widower, married the next year) delivered the oration. There followed a dinner on the bank of the Mississippi. After many other toasts, James Edwards toasted Black Hawk: "[To] Our Illustrious Guest Black Hawk. — May his declining years be as calm and serene as his life has been boisterous and full of warlike incidents." Black Hawk's response speaks quietly of an accepted transference: "It has pleased the Great Spirit that I am here today — I have eaten with my white friends. . . . I liked my towns, my cornfields and the home of my people. I fought for it. It is now yours — keep it as we did — it will produce you good crops." It was his last public appearance. He died on October 3.

THE NAME HAWKEYE had now been suggested in a newspaper, and one evening in the autumn Edwards put it to a group of prominent men at the Burlington House hotel. Among them were Territorial Governor Robert Lucas and other territorial officers. Everybody present liked the name. That winter Rorer, Edwards, and Rorer's eloquent law partner Henry W.

Opposite: "Muck-a-tah-mish-o-kah-kaik, The Black Hawk, A Sac Chief." This image of Black Hawk, by George Catlin, appeared in *Dr. Prichard's Natural History of Man*.

Starr decided that a means must be found to gain public acceptance and popularize the nickname. Edwards, who had moved to Burlington in September, suggested a bald announcement in his new newspaper. But David Rorer thought that the best way of promoting the name Hawkeye would be to get people to take it for granted. The way to achieve that was to write a series of letters to the *Iowa News* in Dubuque, thus planting the nickname in the readers' minds. Rorer composed four lengthy letters anonymously signed "A Wolverine Among the Hawkeyes." Fellow lawyer Shepherd Leffler copied them so Rorer's handwriting would not be recognized, and they were sent off to Iowa newspapers in early 1839.

The four letters, given huge prominence in the Dubuque and Davenport newspapers, were purportedly written by a traveler from Michigan visiting Iowa. The term "Hawkeye" was used frequently and favorably, as in "that charming lustre of the eye and healthful glow of cheek peculiar to the Hawkeye people" and "the enterprise and industry of the Hawkeye farmers." The chief Black Hawk appears often. In the first letter the "Wolverine" quoted a rather belligerent fellow boasting in a pub that he was a Hawkeye almost "next a' kin . . . to the great Black Hawk himself." In the second letter the Wolverine described a pilgrimage to Chief Black Hawk's former residence and headquarters.

The letters are written in a literary, educated style, with romantic detail of Iowa's beauty and fertility, but they are mercilessly critical of certain aspects of the territorial scene. The anonymous Wolverine narrator was incredibly rude about Governor Lucas, *The Burlington Gazette*, and the town of Bloomington (now Muscatine), which resulted in letters to the newspaper and editorial comment. Interest was aroused by the anonymity of the author. The Wolverine letters manifestly created a stir, and historians date popular acceptance of the name Hawkeye to their publication. Indeed, shortly after the second "Wolverine Among the Hawkeyes" letter, Parvin, the governor's secretary, used the nickname in a diary entry: "Mother confined with a daughter — a young Hawkeye."

By autumn Edwards was confident of the

general popularity of the nickname. Acting on the suggestion of his wife, he changed the name of his Burlington newspaper on September 5 to the *The Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot*. Under the headline "The Hawk-Eye," he wrote: "The present number of our paper comes out under an additional and we hope an acceptable name. . . . Every state and territory has its peculiar cognomen. Universal consent has confirmed the one by which Iowa is distinguished. It may not be generally known by what means this name was given her." And he reprinted his *Fort Madison Patriot* editorial of March 24, 1838, that had explained the need for a favorable nickname and the proposal to commemorate Black Hawk. Having at last founded a successful newspaper, Edwards proved himself an outstanding journalist and eventually became known as "Old Hawk."

By 1841 the name had appeared in political speeches at the highest level. Iowa's new Whig governor, John Chambers, responded to a formal speech of welcome in May with these words: "Let us . . . be citizens of Iowa — 'Hawkeyes,' if you please, in spirit and in truth. I will be a 'Hawkeye' and in the discharge of my official duties will endeavor to do impartial justice to all."

IN 1977 State Representative James D. Wells of Cedar Rapids proposed that the nickname of Iowa be enshrined in law. In an editorial entitled "We're the Hawkeyes," the *Des Moines Register* commented that official sanction was not needed: "We like the name Hawkeyes, and we imagine that most Iowans do. For well over a hundred years — without benefit of legislative exertion — the people who came here have been heirs to a nickname that wasn't embarrassing to them."

One hundred and fifty years ago Rorer and his cohorts, Edwards and Starr, established a nickname that should certainly have made Iowans feel proud. James Fenimore Cooper's fictional creation was a popular frontier hero familiar to the reading public of the early nineteenth century. The Sauk chief Black Hawk played a pivotal role in Iowa's history; in Starr's

words: "The great chief . . . seems to form a connection-link between two races, and, more than any other, to symbolize the great transition from the dominion of the Indian to that of the white man." As a twentieth-century traveler in this state, not unlike the Wolverine, I am delighted that my wife and her fellow Iowans should be known by the name of Hawkeye — a just and brave hero of fiction, with the added echo of Black Hawk, a remarkable man in Iowa's history. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

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