



Children on the Farm

Through the Lens
of Photographer A. M. Wettach

■
by Leslie A. Loveless

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Robert Wettach works in a garden in the 1930s. The son of A. M. Wettach and Ruth (Grimes) Wettach, Robert and his family recently donated an enormous collection of photographs taken by his father from the 1930s through the 1960s. The images, now housed at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center), provide a detailed and informative look at the everyday life of midwestern farm families in the mid-20th century. The selection here focuses on children.

UNLESS INDICATED, ALL PHOTOS PAGES 2-23 FROM A. M. WETTACH COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)



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tos were eventually traced to A. M. "Pete" Wettach of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, a prolific and talented photographer who captured the details of the daily lives of midwestern farmers and their families during the mid-20th century.

Early in his career, Wettach held an administrative job with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) making agricultural loans to farmers in several Iowa counties during the 1930s and '40s. He was an enthusiastic, self-taught shutterbug, however, and brought his 5x7 Graflex camera along during his visits to farms. He stayed with the FSA, through its conversion to the Farmers Home Administration, until 1949, when he quit his job to take pictures as a freelancer full-time.

"The idea was to take photographs of subjects that I liked and then try to find a buyer," wrote Wettach in a short autobiographical sketch composed a few years before his death in 1976. In the mid-1930s he began selling his pictures to farm magazines such as *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*. Wettach took pictures of his neighbors, his family members, his FSA clients, and others, focusing on their earnest resilience through the Depression, World War II, and postwar years. The result is an incomparably rich picture of the everyday lives of farmers in Iowa and other midwestern states emphasizing their small joys and incremental successes, rather than the devastating setbacks that are often part of farm life.

Among Wettach's most captivating images are those of farm children. By the 1930s, child labor laws and changing social attitudes had largely removed children from most workplace settings. But the farm remained, as it

does today, both a work-site and a home, where children grow up and contribute to the success of the family business.

Wettach's pictures of farm children capture them in their everyday environments, going about their work or their playtime as they might regardless of whether a photographer was present. Many of these photos were clearly posed, if only for a moment, but few are unnaturally stiff or have the out-of-context aura of a family portrait.

It is hard to know what Wettach's motives were in taking some of these pictures. His main source of income from his photographs was from what he called "Handy Ideas," pictures of innovative solutions and gadgets developed by farmers. Many of the publications that would buy his gadget photos also ran attractive shots or theme montages of children, and Wettach may have had that market in mind when he took these pictures. He may have also, as he wrote in his autobiography, simply taken photographs of subjects he liked, and then tried to sell what he had on hand.

It is likely that he simply stumbled across many of his child subjects while looking for other material to shoot. Thelma Coon, whose son's picture with his homemade race car appears in the following photo essay, remembers that Wettach frequently visited their farm to take photographs of her husband's gadgets. The picture of Kenneth White on his pony was taken while Wettach shot images of White's father hauling clover. That photo ran in *Wallaces' Farmer* as a part of a photo essay on boys and their ponies, as did a picture of White's father at work. The picture of Marie Swenson Johnson shocking oats was taken while

Wettach was photographing her father at work in the field. In fact, Johnson, who was about eight years old at the time, remembers the day Wettach came to take pictures, but she never knew until recently—nearly 60 years later—that he had photographed her as well. That photo, one of his most beautiful images, may have never been published until now (Wettach often informed his subjects when their pictures were in print).

The life of the Iowa farm child from the mid-1930s to the 1950s, as captured by Wettach's camera, was a blend of work, play, and exploration in a changing home and farm environment. From before the turn of the century through the 1950s and later, farms were modernized with the introduction of utilities, such as telephone, electricity, and running water; the replacement of work animals and some of the manual labor with mechanized farm implements and tractors; and the increase in leisure time and availability of recreational consumer goods, such as radio and, later, television.

Despite the increasing conveniences, most farms remained demanding work environments, where the children's participation in "helping out" was necessary to the farm's success. Subjects interviewed for this article recall an impressive list of regular chores done matter-of-factly, even at a young age. Marie Swenson Johnson does not remember being asked to do chores; she remembers simply pitching in wherever she was needed. Kenneth White describes working alone herding cattle at a relatively young age. Nevertheless, farm work apparently did not interfere with school for any of the individuals interviewed. Only White remembers staying home "once or twice"



Photographer A. M. "Pete" Wettach in his office and darkroom, after 1960.

to help out; the others don't remember ever being asked to skip school.

Although fascinated by farm life, Wettach was not a farmer, nor was he a native Iowan. For a few years he raised turkeys, but his primary occupations were his work with the FSA and his photography. Born in 1901 and raised in New Jersey, he wrote that he was inspired to come to Iowa, after reading about it in high school in *Country Gentleman* magazine. With a degree in animal husbandry from Iowa State College, he taught at Ames High School and in North Hampton before working for the FSA.

Upon his death, Wettach left some tens of thousands of photos and negatives in the care of his son, Robert Wettach. Recently, the Wettach family generously donated a portion of these images to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Nearly 5,000 prints and negatives are now being processed at the Society's Iowa City center. On the following pages, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* offers a small sampling of this extensive collection.

Although the images in this essay portray farm children, the entire A. M. Wettach Collection vividly documents many significant subjects in the history of farming and rural life, including changes in technology, crops and livestock, domestic routines, home decoration, rural architecture, family life, and popular culture. Thanks to the thousands of images that Wettach captured on film, Iowans for generations to come will have a far richer view of farm life during the mid-20th century.

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Helping to sow oats, a young boy guides the horses in a slow walk while George Triska, of Henry County, keeps the end-gate seeder filled. Wettach's photographs from the mid-20th century show children involved in farm work during all cycles of field work, from planting through harvest.



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Wettach labeled this photograph "Baling hay on the George Swedenburg farm, Danville, Des Moines Co., Iowa" and added, "The boys think this is a lark." Odd nowadays to think that boys would find this job to be fun, but this automatic baler was their salvation from one of the most hated jobs on the farm: tying bales. Hand-tying was dirty, dusty work. This baler, an International Harvester 50-T, manufactured from 1944 to 1952, tied the bales automatically and delivered them directly onto the hayrack.



This girl is most likely using the mule and the long rope behind it to lift loose hay or bales up into the barn, via a hay fork and a system of pulleys. Young children, both boys and girls, were generally tapped to do this chore. (Date unknown.)

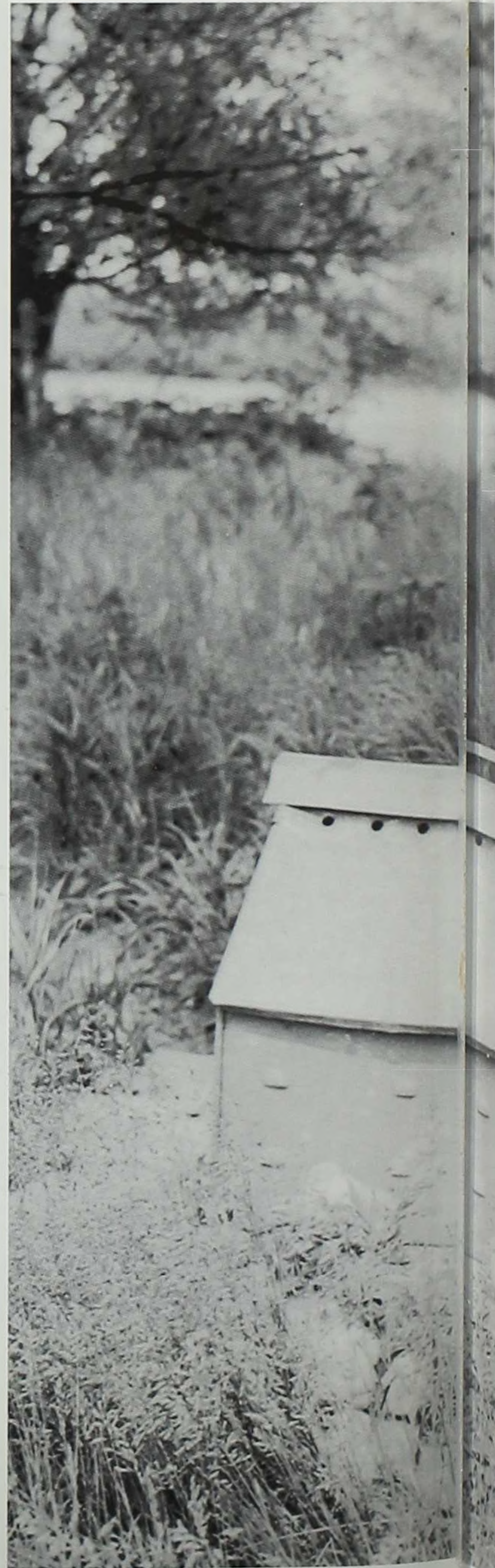
Tractors eventually replaced mules and horses for pulling the hay rope, but children were still often the ones called upon for this job. Here, another youngster watches from behind while the girl at the wheel backs up the tractor to pull the hay rope. (Date unknown.)



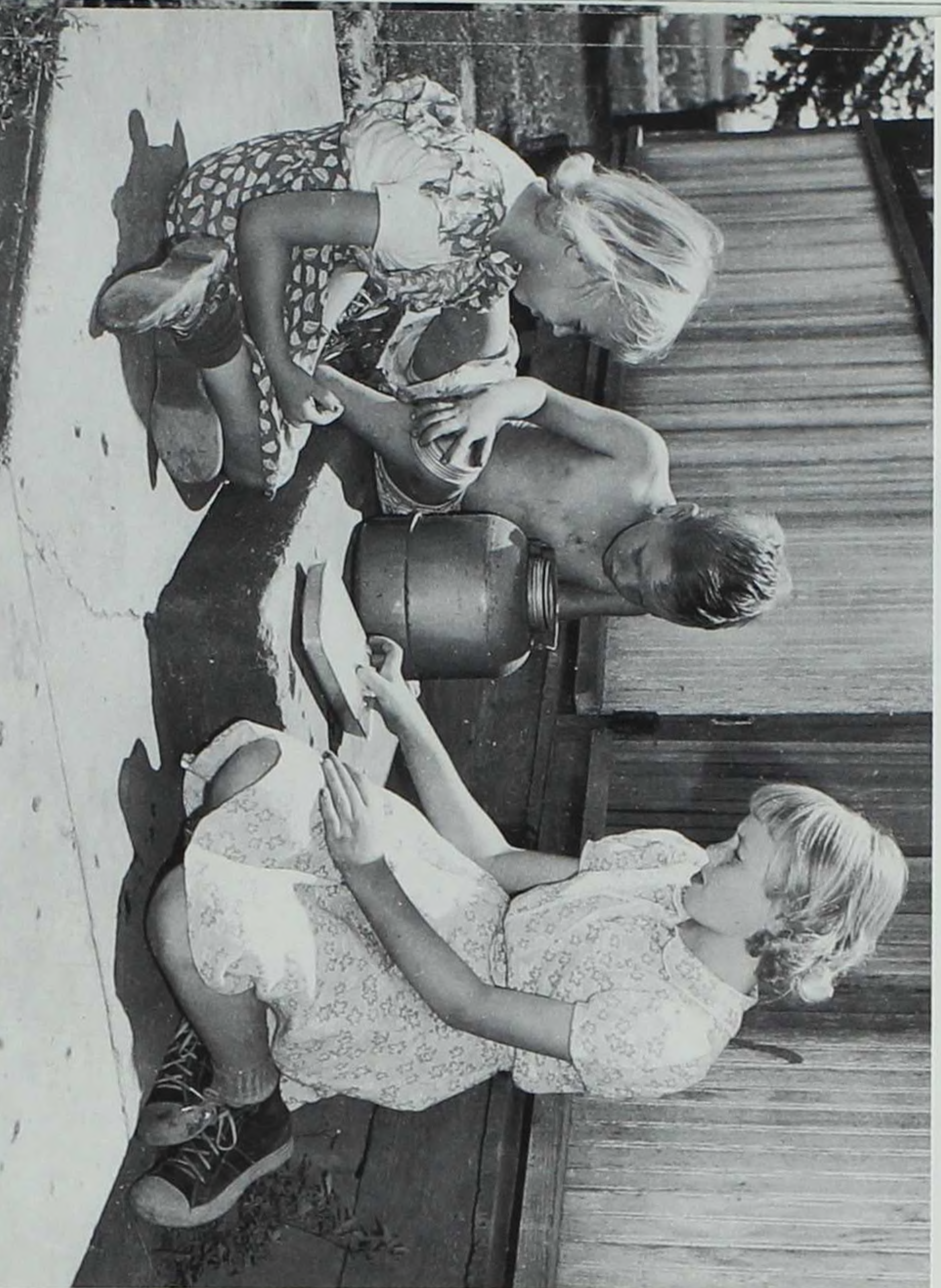


A girl adds ice cubes to a jug of lemonade made for a picnic. Rural electrification brought many modern conveniences to the farm, such as washing machines and refrigeration, which provided the ice these children are using here. Some children from this generation, however, remember the transition to indoor plumbing more vividly than electrification. The arrival of an indoor toilet and bathtub marked a big change in the everyday lives of the whole family.

Wettach captured this wary stand-off between hen and dog, as five farm children pose for his camera. Wettach's photos show a variety of animals on midwestern farms—from livestock, to sources of transportation and power, to family pets.







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Kenneth White (above) remembers his pony, Dolly, as a regular companion and assistant in his chores, which included herding stock cows each day. "It was all work on the farm," according to **White**, who recalls a heavy load of chores as a child. He eventually used money he earned from raising capons to buy a bicycle, despite his father's protests that "a kid riding a bicycle is no good for work." **Wettach** took this photo in 1939 when **White** was about eleven years old, as the boy was carrying drinking water to a clover hauling operation. The photo appeared in the October 21, 1939, issue of *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead* as part of a montage on boys and their ponies.

In cowgirl hat and curls, Linda Hudach smiles for Wettach's camera, April 1955. This is a classic pose of a mid-1950s farm child, on a toy pedal tractor that today would be a collector's item. John Deere dealerships sold these toys alongside full-sized implements. While younger farm children may have enjoyed playing on miniature tractors like this one, older boys and girls often drove full-sized tractors to help with field work and chores.



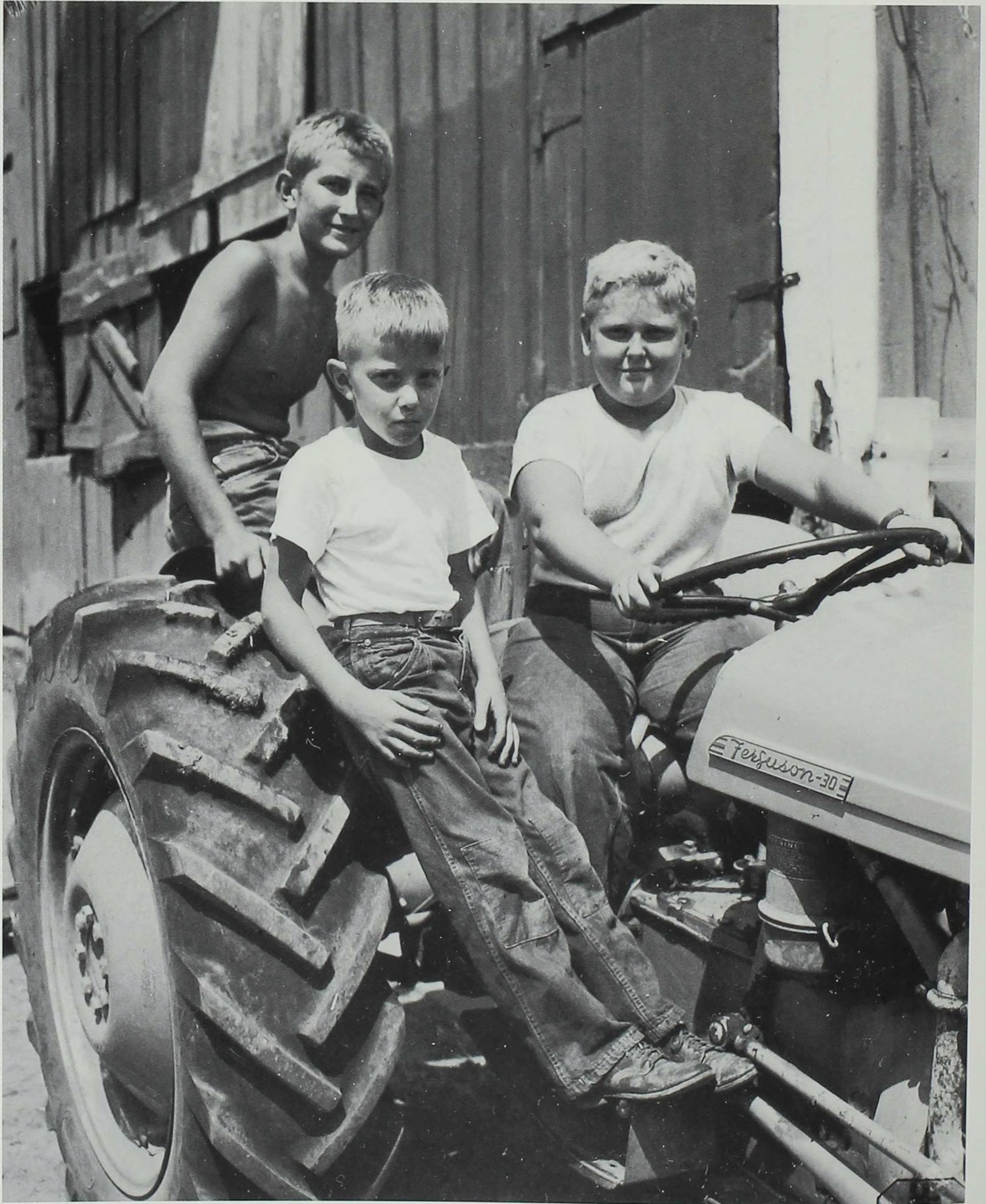




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Although not all of Wettach's photographs are identified (these two are not), his images of farm children nevertheless reveal details about their rural experiences a half-century ago, such as their everyday work clothes. Above, a rare photo of an African-American farm boy. Left: these boys' comfortable poses on this tractor indicate an overall familiarity with farm equipment.

Unaware that she is being photographed, Marie Swenson helps her father shock oats on the family farm eight miles north of Mt. Pleasant in the early 1940s. Interviewed recently, Marie Swenson Johnson remembers helping on the farm "without being asked" and preferred staying outdoors to play and to join in with the farm work. "I always spent all my time outside . . . so [in this picture] I was over there in the field, undoubtedly barefooted, because I always remember walking in oat stubble with my bare feet. Normally that would hurt people's feet, but my feet were tough then. I was out there because Dad was out there."



COURTESY OF MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS, MT. PLEASANT, IOWA



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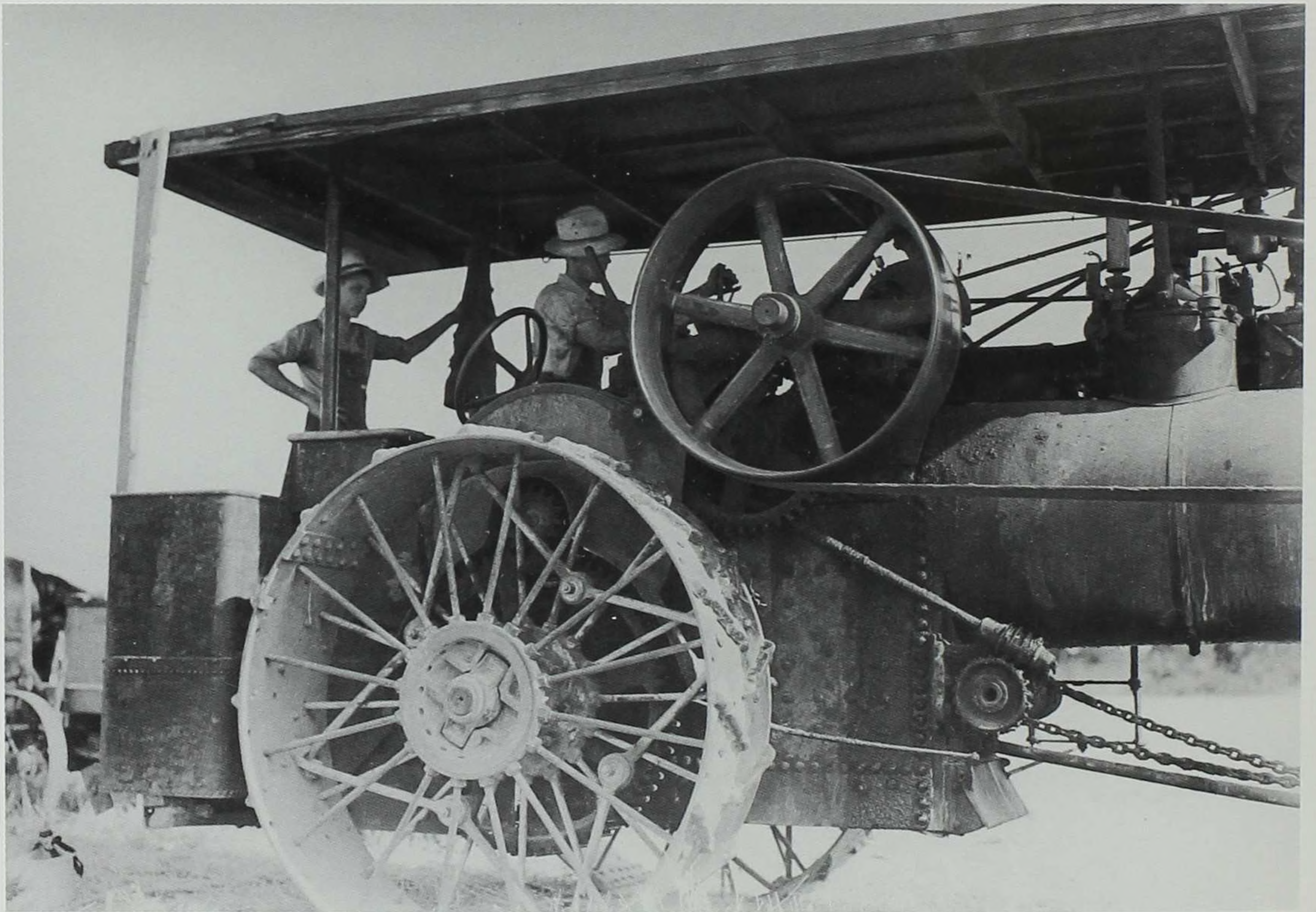
COURTESY OF MIDWEST OIL THRESHERS, MT. PLEASANT, IOWA



Wettach labeled this mid-1950s photo: "Donny Coon, son of Mr. & Mrs. Junior Coon, #2 Morning Sun, Ia. starts his 'racer'—built by his dad." Like many farmers, Alfred ("Junior") Coon enjoyed building gadgets inspired by thrift, creativity, and a need to solve everyday problems. In this case, Coon's young son Donny is the beneficiary of his father's tinkering. Wettach's interest in photographing what he called "handy ideas" made him a frequent visitor to the Coon farm, and he may have sold a number of pictures of Coon's more utilitarian creations. This photo, however, was probably never published.



Wettach wrote in 1956 or 1957: "This 4-day old Mexican burro colt is apt to have some busy days ahead of him with these three youngsters as companions. Albert Nau children, Mt. Pleasant, Henry County, Iowa." According to the youngsters' mother, Mary Nau, the burro was purchased as a pet by their grandfather. On occasion, he hitched the grown burro to a buggy to take the children to school.



A boy stands watch on a Case engine—new in the early 20th century, and perhaps some 40 years old at the time Wettach shot this photo. A board holding up the back of the canopy hints that this machine may have seen better days. Despite the advent of newer machines and combines, many farmers kept these older threshers as long as they would still run. Although newer machines were more efficient and required fewer hands to operate, many farmers had more labor (including farm children) than cash on hand to buy new implements.

The November 1, 1947, issue of *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead* captioned this photograph: "Helper in Harry Bryant's bean field in Henry County, Iowa, is Harry's daughter, Patty." This kind of image may make some farmers cringe, as modern gravity-flow wagons and grain bins have caused the deaths by suffocation of a number of children and youth. Although this picture most likely was intended only as a cheerful image associated with the fall soybean harvest, Wettach did sell photos with safety messages to *Wallaces' Farmer* and possibly other publications, using his son and others to pose in potentially unsafe activities. Ironically, few of these pictures addressed hazards of implements and tractors on family farms—now a major source of injury and death to children and adults—and focused instead on safety with hand tools, wiring, and livestock.

Next page: The final load of wheat shocks is headed for the thresher on a farm near Hawarden, in northwestern Iowa. For a close-up, see page 26.









PHOTO ON PAGE 24 & 26: COURTESY OF MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS, MT. PLEASANT, IOWA



Four youngsters who have probably helped to load these wagons hitch a ride to the thresher, where the work may continue until dark. Farm families often combined efforts with “threshing rings,” bringing the heavy equipment—and all family members old enough to work—from farm to farm within a neighborhood, until everyone’s crop was in. This is a detail from the photo on the previous page, taken near Hawarden. Although Wettach operated his freelance photography business from his home in Mt. Pleasant, he also traveled throughout Iowa and in other midwestern states—always with camera close at hand. ❖

NOTE ON SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The names of many of the individuals in the pictures shown here are not yet known to the author or to the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI). Information from readers about these photos, or about A. M. Wettach generally, is welcomed. Please contact the author or the editor of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*.

The author would like to thank Robert Wettach, M.D., of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, for generously sharing his father’s collection, and for many hours of interviews and great stories; Lennis Moore and other staff and volunteers at the Midwest Old Threshers Museum (Mt. Pleasant) for sharing their collection of Wettach photos and for providing invaluable information about farm life and history; Craig Zwerling, director of the University of Iowa’s Institute for Rural and Environmental Health, for his enthusiasm for and encouragement of this project; Kelley Donham, director, and Michael Rosmann, consultant, of Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH), for their insights; and the members of the boards of the Des Moines, Henry, Jefferson, and Lee County Farm Bureaus for helping identify and establish contacts with people photographed by Wettach. In addition to those mentioned above, original sources for this article included interviews with Thelma Coon, Marie Swenson Johnson, Kenneth White, Pat Bryant Doak, and Mary Nau, who were very generous in sharing their memories.

The author also thanks SHSI staff in Special Collections (Iowa City center); Mary Bennett for her enormous effort to bring this collection to the people of Iowa; Matt Schaefer for help with reference questions; and Eric Lana, assisted by

work-study students Jessica Brickey and Sarah Burk, for processing the collection.

Written sources consulted include: *An Iowa Album: A Photographic History, 1860-1920* by Mary Bennett (University of Iowa Press, 1990), for a look at photography prior to Wettach’s era; *Six Generations Here: A Farm Family Remembers* by Marjorie L. McLellan (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997), for a photographic history of a single family; *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* by Mary Neth (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), for insights on the political, social, and economic forces on farm families during this era; *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, edited by Elliott West and Paula Petrick (University Press of Kansas, 1992) and the Library of Congress collection of Farm Security Administration photos, viewable on the Internet at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>, for a comparative look at images of farm children by other photographers.

Readers interested in this subject matter may enjoy Gary Paulsen’s memoir, *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992); Carl Hamilton’s memoir, *In No Time At All* (Iowa State University Press, 1974); or *Tarpleywick: A Century of Iowa Farming*, by Henry C. Taylor (Iowa State University Press, 1970), tracing his own family’s history. Readers who wish to develop a history of a particular family farm may find *American Farms: Exploring Their History* by Douglas Hurt (Krieger Publishing Company, 1996) very helpful.