

Early Park History—

The Long, Noisy Road to Places of Quiet Beauty

STORY BY BRIAN BUTTON

As a national leader in state park development in the 1920s, the history of Iowa State Parks is a story of preservation, vision, competing interests, calloused hands and legacy.

Originally an innovative thought in its time, the concept of Iowa's state parks sprang from university scientists who used dogged zeal to persuade citizens to establish places of natural refuge. The idea percolated, evolved and grew for 25 years before the first park, Backbone, was dedicated in 1920. What propelled these leaders was their study of Iowa's botany and other sciences and the devastating transformation of nature by earlier settlers in what became the nation's 29th state in 1846.

"The Most Beautiful Land"

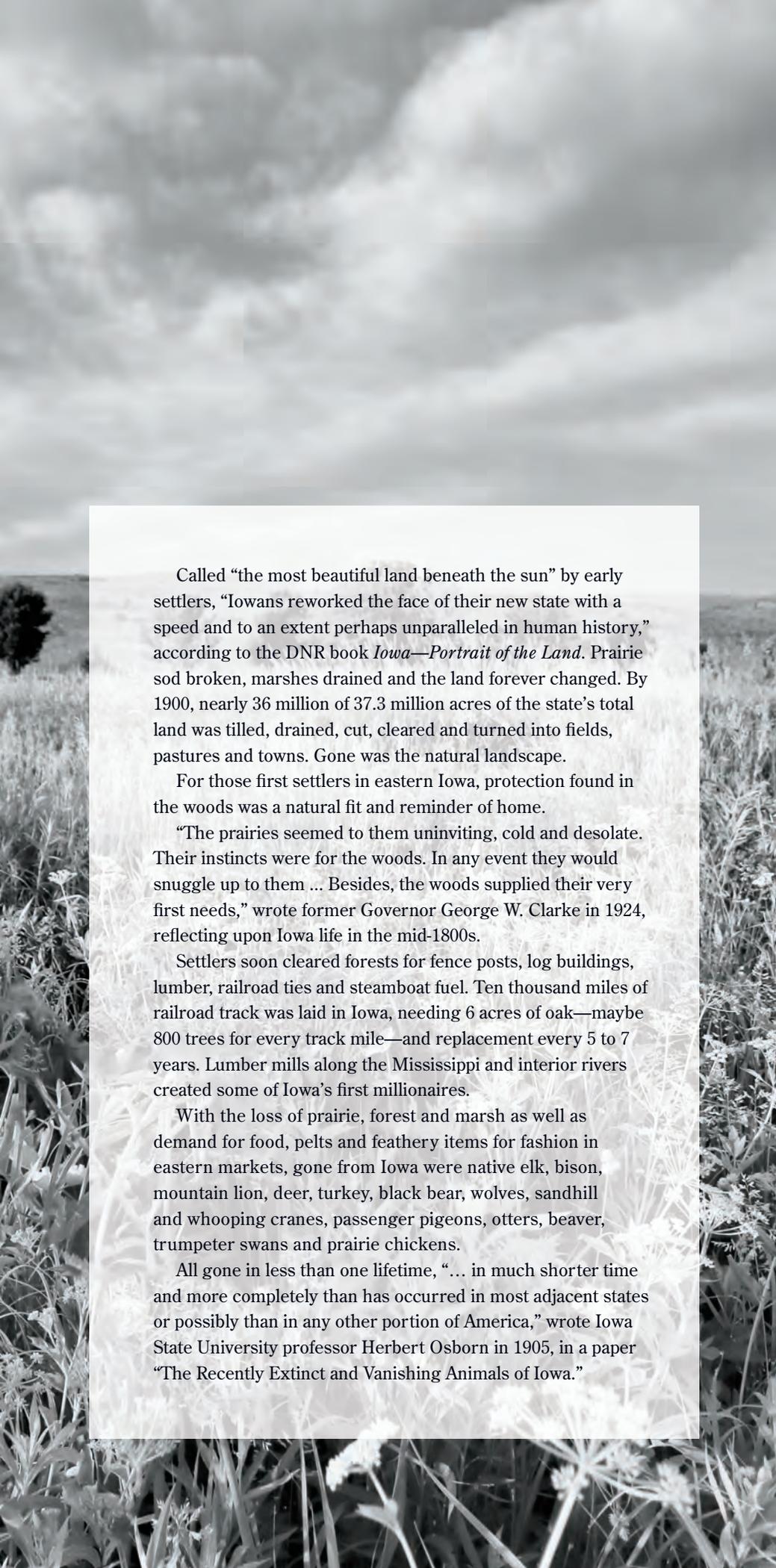
Europeans first viewed this land in 1673 when Joliet and Marquette paddled into the Mississippi near Pikes Peak State Park. Yet the land remained largely untrammelled until after

the Black Hawk War when on June 1, 1833, a 50-mile swath west of the Mississippi opened to settlers. Prior, some accounts suggest about 50 white people lived here, mostly transient trappers and traders. The Iowa Territory, named in 1838, quickly drew 23,200 settlers. Statehood hit in late 1846 and settlers flooded in.

For the past 5,000 years, a blanket of prairie cloaked three-quarters of Iowa. Pothole marshes dotted the flatter north-center. Forests covered about 20 percent, primarily in the east and along river valleys elsewhere. And while native peoples lived here thousands of years, they had a low impact on the land.

The untouched face of nature wouldn't last long. Even by the slow, arduous methods of walking, wagon, horse and boat, by 1880, the population ballooned 70 times to more than 1.6 million.

PRAIRIE PHOTO BY KRISTI BURNS; ELK, BISON, CRANE BY ERIC BURSON



Called “the most beautiful land beneath the sun” by early settlers, “Iowans reworked the face of their new state with a speed and to an extent perhaps unparalleled in human history,” according to the DNR book *Iowa—Portrait of the Land*. Prairie sod broken, marshes drained and the land forever changed. By 1900, nearly 36 million of 37.3 million acres of the state’s total land was tilled, drained, cut, cleared and turned into fields, pastures and towns. Gone was the natural landscape.

For those first settlers in eastern Iowa, protection found in the woods was a natural fit and reminder of home.

“The prairies seemed to them uninviting, cold and desolate. Their instincts were for the woods. In any event they would snuggle up to them ... Besides, the woods supplied their very first needs,” wrote former Governor George W. Clarke in 1924, reflecting upon Iowa life in the mid-1800s.

Settlers soon cleared forests for fence posts, log buildings, lumber, railroad ties and steamboat fuel. Ten thousand miles of railroad track was laid in Iowa, needing 6 acres of oak—maybe 800 trees for every track mile—and replacement every 5 to 7 years. Lumber mills along the Mississippi and interior rivers created some of Iowa’s first millionaires.

With the loss of prairie, forest and marsh as well as demand for food, pelts and feathery items for fashion in eastern markets, gone from Iowa were native elk, bison, mountain lion, deer, turkey, black bear, wolves, sandhill and whooping cranes, passenger pigeons, otters, beaver, trumpeter swans and prairie chickens.

All gone in less than one lifetime, “... in much shorter time and more completely than has occurred in most adjacent states or possibly than in any other portion of America,” wrote Iowa State University professor Herbert Osborn in 1905, in a paper “The Recently Extinct and Vanishing Animals of Iowa.”





Iowa's "father of conservation"
Thomas H. Macbride (1848-1934)

The Rise of Science

In 1895, enter Thomas H. Macbride. The then 47-year-old botanist at the University of Iowa—and its future president—had witnessed these land changes. Considered Iowa's "father of conservation," he spoke to the Iowa Academy of Sciences for need of "rural" parks—a contrast to landscaped parks in eastern cities. Macbride wanted to preserve remaining natural areas to inspire, promote health and happiness for citizens, serve as outdoor learning places for future scientists and show future generations how the state originally appeared.

At that time, many Iowans considered a "park" to be the public ground around the town square and courthouse, or even a cemetery. Macbride's new ideas would take a while to catch on.

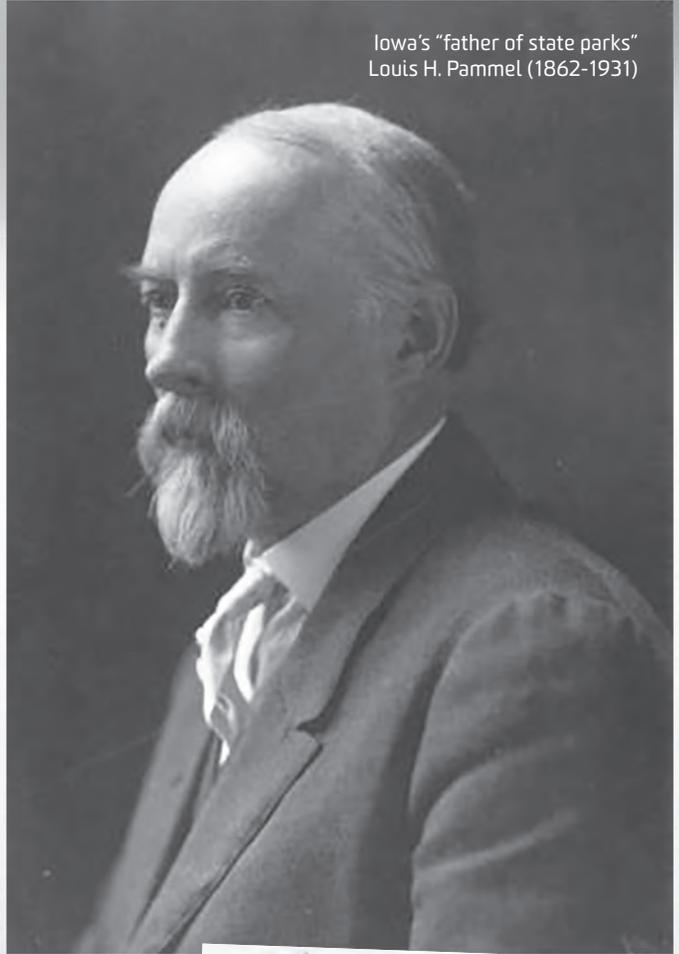
Like-minded others, notably Iowa State University botanist Louis Pammel and University of Iowa botanist Bohumil Shimek, would join Macbride to form the Iowa Park and Forestry Association in 1901. The organization, to promote parks for conservation, formed as Pammel's idea. They spent years convincing and rallying Iowans. They met with local townfolk, church groups and wrote editorials for small town papers. Momentum built as citizens and science and civic groups joined cause. And at a time when women still could not vote, women's clubs

PHOTOS BY DNR ARCHIVES



The array of low-slung camp barracks shown above are long gone, but the stone beach house and shelter remain and would soon be lakeside after the CCC-built dam backed up the Maquoketa River to create today's 85-acre lake, yet to fill in this image. LOWER RIGHT: ISU botanist and "father of state parks" Dr. Louis Pammel leads a botany trip to Ledges State Park, dedicated in 1924.

Iowa's "father of state parks"
Louis H. Pammel (1862-1931)

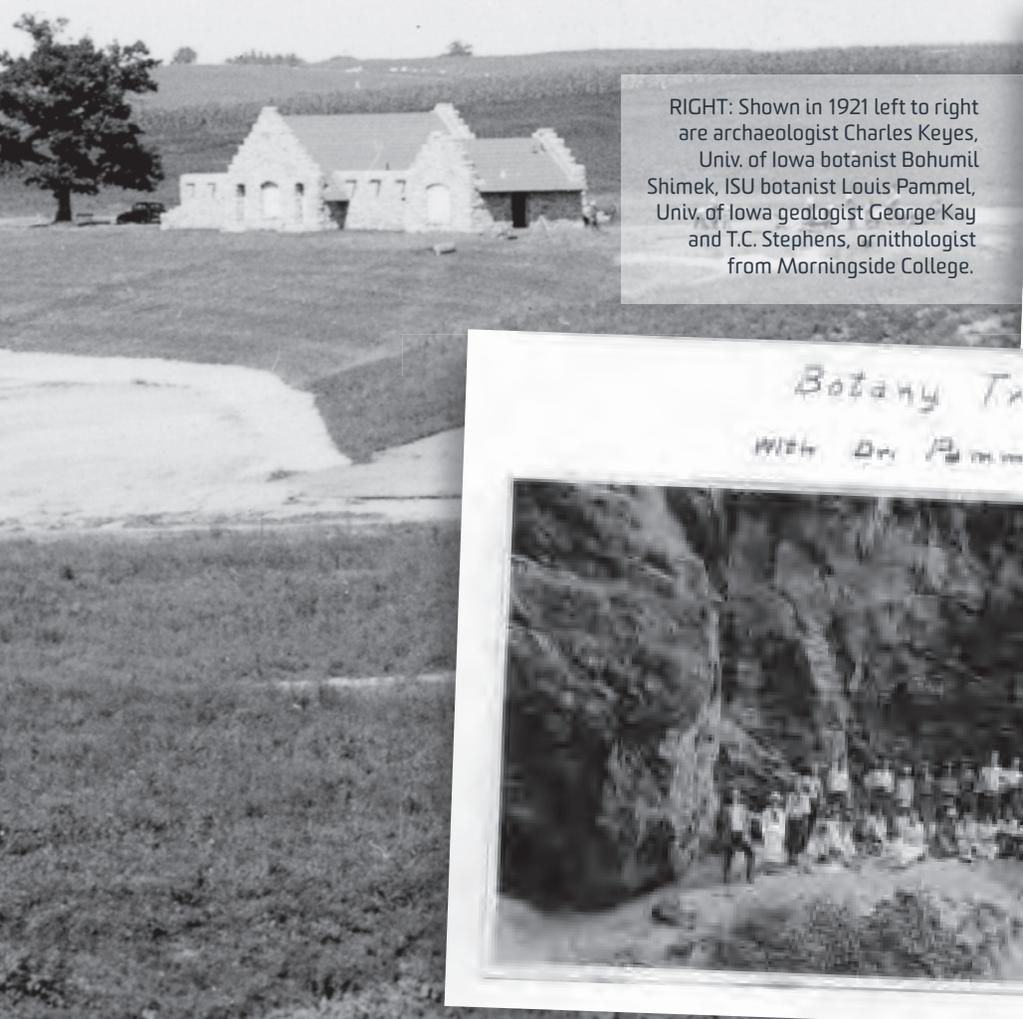


greatly helped promote park and conservation efforts with their sizeable influence and organization. Together, these allies propelled passage of Iowa's State Park Act of 1917—authorizing funds for land and creating the State Board of Conservation to help select parcels.

While some parks existed in a few states, the act put Iowans among national leaders in creating a park system in such an organized, devoted manner.

The act mentions areas of "historical, scientific and scenic" importance and aimed at preservation of animals, rare plants, unique geology, Native American mounds and buildings where Iowa history was made. "The framers of this law wished to show generations yet unborn what Iowa had in the way of prairie, valley, lake and river," said Pammel in a 1929 address over WOI radio. He added, "part of this heritage left to us was not only for the present generation, but that its citizens of the future had a just claim on this heritage ... let us do our part to make them happy." He continued, "This generation has no right to destroy that which was given to us."

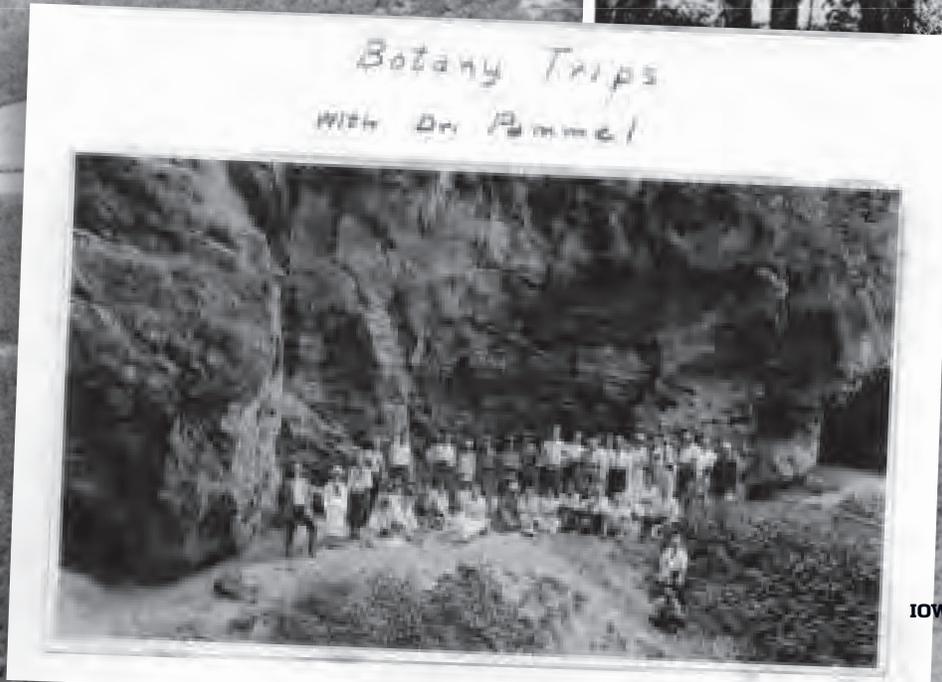
It was the highly driven, energetic Pammel who emerged as "father of state parks," tirelessly working to expand parks. As chair of the State Board of Conservation from 1918 until 1927, he traveled extensively to speak, visit natural areas and garner newspaper coverage.



RIGHT: Shown in 1921 left to right are archaeologist Charles Keyes, Univ. of Iowa botanist Bohumil Shimek, ISU botanist Louis Pammel, Univ. of Iowa geologist George Kay and T.C. Stephens, ornithologist from Morningside College.



Director of the Iowa Archaeological Survey
Louis H. Pammel, botanist from Iowa State
University and T.C. Stephens, ornithologist from
Morningside College (for scientists not only from Iowa and the
Laboratory)



Just What Should a State Park Be?

Among the visionaries and public, ideas varied. Pammel advocated several types of parks—some for conservation and others for recreation. In the “roaring 1920s,” greater affluence, access to automobiles and efforts to create roads and highways spawned a new type of travel tourism. Having easy access to natural areas created great park interest not only among the public, but also for developers and commercial interests. In the late 1800s, Macbride was concerned about turning the state’s remaining natural gems into overdeveloped resorts with so many man-made amenities to devalue the natural areas they were protecting. Some interests pressured parks as resorts, or demanded restaurants and privately owned cabins. The preservation versus recreation and overuse dilemma would remain a difficult balancing act.

The leaders of the parks movement had a list of top areas to protect—Ledges, Dolliver, Fort Atkinson, Palisades, Maquoketa Caves and Bixby to name a few. Macbride visited Backbone in 1864, as did Pammel in 1918, who wrote “...the white pine are among the largest and oldest native white pine in the state. I saw a stump nearly four feet in diameter and I should judge that these trees go back to the time when Iowa belonged to France. The Indians protected these trees and why should we not do the same.”

After decades of swaying the public, leaders and obtaining funds and land, Backbone State Park’s dedication was set for October 1, 1919. Heavy fall rains washed out crude bridges and trails, and mud covered picnic areas. A new date, May 28, 1920 was selected. Dignitaries from Des Moines took a Pullman train car to the town of Lamont, which hosted a complimentary breakfast for all. An estimated 5,000 people attended, but some sources tallied 7,500.

The second park, Lacey-Keosauqua, was dedicated later that year in October. It was just the start as the Board of Conservation had a report listing seven other areas purchased or donated, plus 99 areas proposed by citizens.

In July 1922, Macbride could say, “Ladies and Gentlemen, friends of the living world, lovers of Iowa and her beauty—successfully administered, this park-movement shall indeed go far.” Parks become much more than havens for birds and flowers, game-preserves, a refuge for wildlife and playgrounds for all the people—parks shall “show us real democracy” and will “help the moral tone of all our social life” by bringing education, fairness, unselfishness in self-control and “obedience to regulations for the common good.”

Iowa Leads the Nation in Parks

So impressed were Americans with Iowa’s parks movement, the head of the National Park Service, Stephen T. Mather, requested a national conference on state parks be held in Des Moines in 1921—in early January. He said, “It is certainly a pleasure to be here in Iowa, a state that has made such a splendid start in state park development.” He would add, “Suffice it to say that the Iowa state park survey has won the admiration of the country.” Iowa’s Board of Conservation, chaired by Pammel, “offers an example to all non-partisan boards who want to accomplish real things,” he added.

In a 1921 issue of *The Annals of Iowa*, the editor noted, “... it is remarkable for so young a state as Iowa, to step out of its ordinary economic and governmental course and create places for amusement, recreation and scientific research. The older states had made but little progress in this direction, when Iowa, with but meager precedent, enthusiastically entered upon the work. Public opinion, the great director of state policies, demanded it.”

By 1931, Iowa had one of the largest numbers of state parks in the nation. And the 1930s would bring remarkable progress despite the Great Depression.

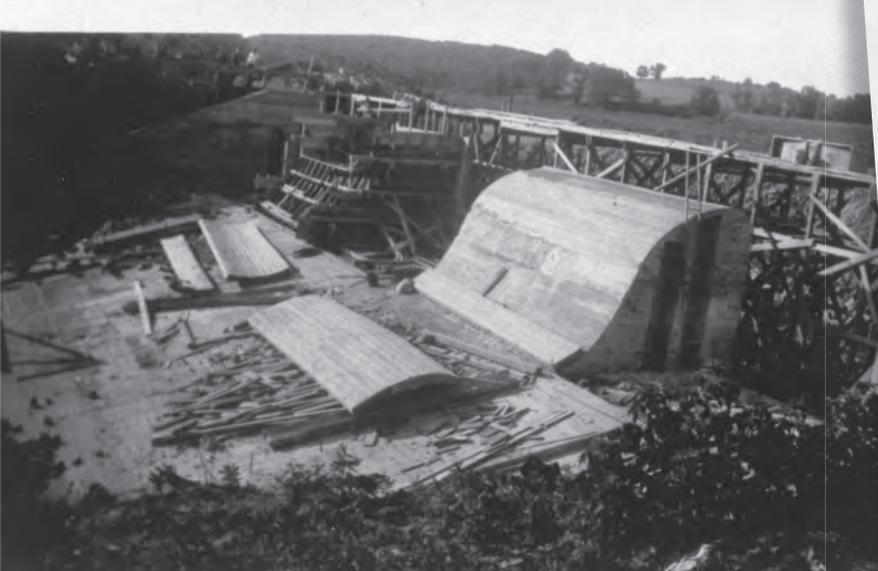
Parks Boom in the Bust of the Depression—The CCC Era

Work over the previous decades proved a boon for the state. The Iowa Twenty-Five Year Conservation Plan detailed a system of parks, refuges for wildlife, public hunting grounds and preserves. It laid out goals for erosion control, conserving lakes and streams, creating dozens of artificial lakes and reforesting Iowa.





At Iowa's first state park, Backbone, CCC crews construct the dam in the 1930s to create today's 85-acre lake.



It Was Perfect Timing

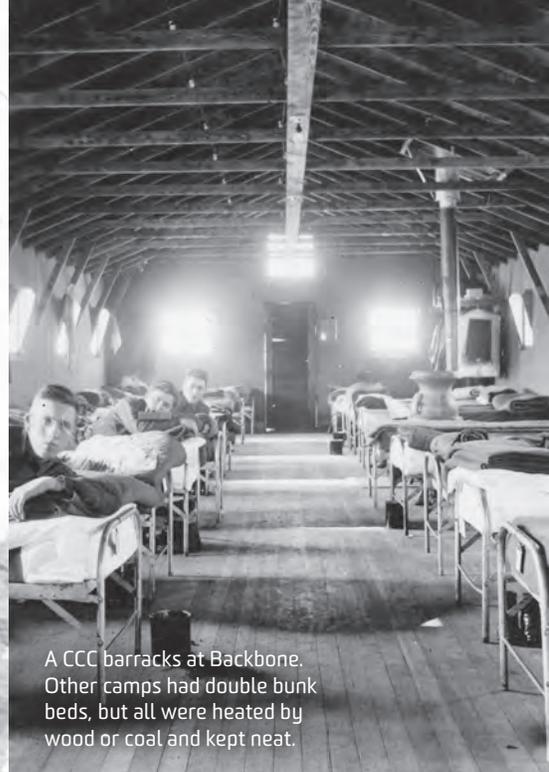
President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated in January 1933 when Great Depression unemployment peaked at 25 percent. Iowa's conservation plan was "shovel-ready," helping to immediately qualify for federal relief and jobs programs. By April, Iowa was approved for 16 camps of the Civilian Conservation Corps—the first camps west of the Mississippi.

The CCC program attracted jobless young men. In camp, they had good food, shelter, uniforms, medical care and were paid \$25 per month (about \$500 today), but \$20 had to be sent home to support parents and siblings to benefit more people.

By the end of the year, 22 CCC companies in Iowa employed about 7,500 men. The visible program gave needed morale boosts, jobs and money while tackling natural resource depletion. The CCC worked in 39 Iowa state parks,

planted several million trees statewide for reforestation and built fish hatcheries. They did much without aid of heavy equipment, using brawn, shovels, wheelbarrows, chisels, sledges, pick axes and hand saws. For example, at Backbone, two CCC camps built many of the iconic park structures including the stone bathhouse, boathouse and more, plus the dam and 85-acre lake.

Nearly 46,000 men would work Iowa's 46 CCC camps at its peak in 1935 in addition to other federal jobs programs. More than a thousand structures were built—rustic stone and timber lodges, shelters, bridges, amphitheatres, dams, beach houses and cabins, trail staircases and overlooks, plus sewer systems, park entrances, trails and roads. Many remain the most beloved, finest park constructions a century later. The enormous work output met 70 percent of the park and preserve development recommendations in the state's 25-year plan—in under six years.



A CCC barracks at Backbone. Other camps had double bunk beds, but all were heated by wood or coal and kept neat.

Life In the CCC

Former CCC member Owen Wenger of Brooklyn, Iowa joined at age 20 in 1935. It was a good opportunity. His mother was a widow with four children. “My mother had quite a hard time. We lived pretty meager, I tell you.” He quarried rock at Lake Keomah State Park for the bathhouse and custodians home and worked at the camp tree nursery, which the road didn’t reach. “We would take a rowboat, tools and our dinner over with us, of course.” When the weather warmed they swam. “By the time I got out of camp ... I was a pretty good swimmer.”

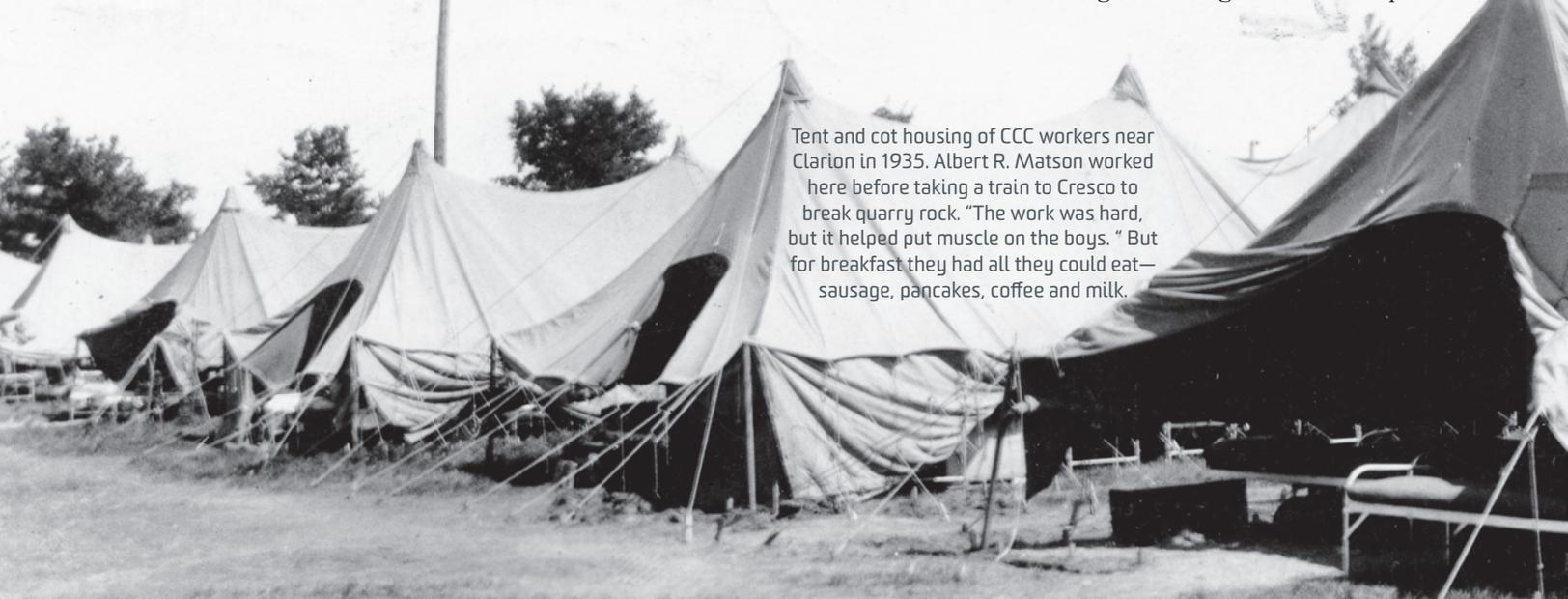
Camps were run by the military with order, discipline, precision and pride. Wooden barracks, built by the men, were heated by Iowa coal or wood stoves. Former CCC member Henry Young said in a 2002 interview, “everything had to be perfect,” or else you did it over again—dishes, bedsheets, polishing and waxing wood floors and even shining the wood

stoves daily. As an unintended consequence, these young men seamlessly transitioned into military life at the outset of WWII.

After work days and on weekends, the young men would go into town to socialize. There were dances, movies and other events. Many would marry, survive a world war and die together in old age.

Camp newsletters reflect humor, latest gossip and news about dates with women in town, but also show that Backbone barracks No. 4 was quarantined for measles on March 13, 1934. A camp at Dolliver State Park quarantined just days later for scarlet fever for nearly a month.

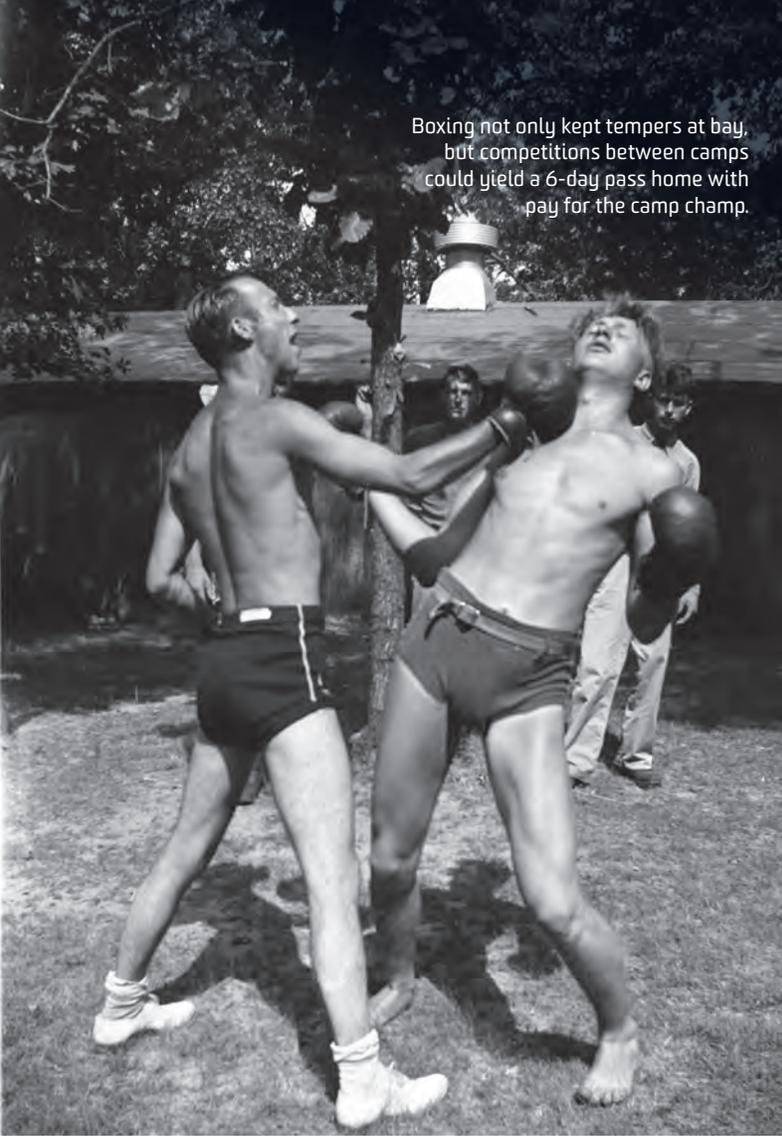
For Henry Young, “if you had problems, you would fight it out with gloves on if you started trouble in the field. It didn’t happen too often, (things were) usually pretty peaceful.” Boxing not only kept tempers at bay, Young says it provided recreation. Winners of boxing matches against other camps



Tent and cot housing of CCC workers near Clarion in 1935. Albert R. Matson worked here before taking a train to Cresco to break quarry rock. “The work was hard, but it helped put muscle on the boys.” But for breakfast they had all they could eat—sausage, pancakes, coffee and milk.

PHOTOS BY DNR ARCHIVES/ADA HAYDEN COURTESY IOWA STATE UNIV.

Boxing not only kept tempers at bay, but competitions between camps could yield a 6-day pass home with pay for the camp champ.



received 6-day passes to go home with pay.

Classes and education were offered, too. For Wenger, who spent months quarrying and cutting limestone blocks with chisels and sledge, “my hands were pretty stiff” so he dropped typing class.

The work was arduous. Quarrying stone block by hand. Breaking rock to size with hammers, hauling soil and sand with wheelbarrows to make beaches and dams, wielding shovels and pick axes to dig, trench and make trails.

During the war, the CCC programs ended, but prairie preserves were created, led largely by the work of Iowa State University botany professor Ada Hayden. The post-war years saw more parks added for primarily recreation purposes as park usage boomed to unprecedented highs.

Today, the immense CCC-era stone and timber lodges, shelters and beach houses provide photo opportunities for visitors. And Hayden Prairie, Shimek State Forest and state parks named after Pammel, Macbride and Ding Darling pay homage to early voices for conservation.

Iowans should be proud of the intense focus, drive and labor of those that created our park system. Perhaps more important is for the centennial to spark thoughts on the future of our parks and natural areas and for new leaders and visionaries to embrace the heritage and continue down the long, noisy road to places of quiet beauty. 🐾



Nearly 46,000 men would work Iowa’s 46 Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps at their peak in 1935. More than a thousand structures were built—rustic stone and timber lodges, shelters, bridges, amphitheatres, dams, beach houses and cabins, trail staircases and overlooks, plus sewer systems, park entrances, trails and roads. Many remain the most beloved, finest park constructions a century later. The enormous work output met 70 percent of the park and preserve development ideas in the state’s 25-year plan—in under six years. RIGHT: Dr. Ada Hayden (1884-1950) of Iowa State University was a botany professor and early advocate of prairie preservation. The first state preserve, Hayden Prairie, is named in her honor.

