Bird’s-Eye View Map of Marengo, Iowa, 1868

Bird’s-Eye View Map of Marshalltown, Iowa, 1868

Main Street in Elliott, Iowa, 1900

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1900
Horse-Drawn School Bus in Webster, Iowa, 1928

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1928
Wooden Bus of the Renwick Independent School in Iowa, October 1937

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, October 1937
Logs Hauled on a Sleigh by a Team of Horses in Seward, Alaska, between 1900 and 1930

"Logs being hauled on a sleigh by a team of horses along the government railway, 35 miles from Seward," between 1900 and 1930. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Farmer Harvesting Corn with a John Deere Tractor, 1945

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1945
People Loading Potatoes onto a Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railcar, 1903

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1903
“Sirloin Special” Hauling Cattle from Hampton, Iowa, to Chicago during Iowa Beef Month, October 1950

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Associated Press, October 1950
Drivers and Delivery Trucks of the Farmers Mutual Co-Op Creamery in Sioux Center, Iowa, May 1940

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, May 1940
Main street life

The Goldfinch explored the archives at the State Historical Society of Iowa for details about the sights, sounds, and smells of main street!

by Julie Siedler

Main street was a place to shop, trade, catch up on local news and politics, have farm equipment repaired, and listen to a local band concert. These shoppers pose in front of a Sabula, Iowa restaurant in 1901.

Old photographs tell us how main street has looked throughout Iowa history, but photos can’t reveal how main street felt, smelled, and sounded. We must look to other historical documents—written by those who lived at the time—for these details.

In a 1976 writing contest, senior citizens across Iowa wrote about the main streets in their childhood towns. These essays take us back to Iowa in the early 1900s when main street was a vital economic and social center.

Horses added to the sounds of main street. Hooves made clapping noises as horses walked on dirt, brick, or cobblestone roads. As they waited at hitching posts, horses whinnied and neighed. After taking a refreshing drink from the water trough, they snorted, shaking their bridles while their reins made heavy, rustling sounds.

Wooden wagon wheels “thunk thunked” through town, sending up little clouds of dust and making far different sounds than today’s rubber wheels on

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Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Siedler, Julie, “Main Street Life,” The Goldfinch, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 11-12, 1997
concrete. When it rained, wagon wheels cut huge ruts in dirt roads that filled with water, making main street a muddy mess.

Mary Bentley fondly remembered riding down Sioux City's main street in 1913. "The thrill of my life was to sit on the lofty seat beside the driver and help drive the team down Main Street." These open wagons were comfortable in spring, summer, and fall, but Mary and others bundled up for winter trips.

Elevated wooden sidewalks, like the one pictured on the cover, helped keep people out of the sloshy mud and dirt. But townspeople wore heavy boots and shoes, just in case. As women went about their shopping, you would have heard the faint brushing sound of their skirts trailing on the sidewalks.

Sounds from the blacksmith shop rang down main street as the smithy made horseshoes and other metal items. The bellows whipped up a hot fire with a gusty "whoosh." The "clank clank" of the hammer hitting the anvil could be heard across town. Arlene Dutton wrote that in her hometown, "the sound made you put your fingers in your ears!"

Just like the ring of the blacksmith's hammer, the smells of main street drifted through the community. The piles of horse droppings, mixed with mud, gave off a distinct, unpleasant odor. Most Iowans in the early 1900s were accustomed to this smell, but they still watched for horse droppings when they crossed the street.

Main street had pleasant smells, too. When the bakery door opened, people on the sidewalk smelled fresh bread, cakes, pies, and candies.

Ruth Barkley, whose father owned a general store in 1910, remembered that in the family store "the first smell to meet the nostrils was the sauerkraut [sawr-uh-KROWT]. It was kept in a large wooden barrel with a loose lid." Tubs of fish, barrels of pickles, sacks of coffee, and a large wheel of cheese all added to odors that greeted customers when they entered the general store.

Barkley also remembered...
the smell of fresh sawdust from the lumber mill just down the street. “I used to love that smell,” she wrote. “Occasionally in the meat market I would get a faint whiff of wood when the meat man had covered the floor around the meat blocks with fresh sawdust.”

In many Iowa towns, the railroad tracks ran parallel to the nearby main street. Evelyn Williams remembered that the railroad depot in her hometown of Leeds was across from the movie theater. “We loved to watch the trains come in and if we were daring enough we stood on the platform when the 5:00 Flyer came in,” she wrote. “How it shook the whole place and almost took our breath away.”

Most movies in the early 1900s were silent flicks accompanied by a piano player. Some were shown outside on main street. Ellen Graham Lemke remembered that in her hometown “the piano player made the most wonderful sound effects. She knew just exactly the right mood music to play. How she would thump that old piano when the rustlers were running from the sheriff, or play that sneaky music when the bad guy was sneaking up on our hero. That music would make our hair stand on end.”

As main street changed, so too have its sights, sounds, and smells. Now we see electric signs overhead and yellow stripes on the pavement below. We smell gasoline and diesel fumes and listen to the sounds of car horns and radios, motorcycles, and in-line skates zipping over concrete sidewalks. In many Iowa towns, much of the hustle and bustle has moved to the mall, but main street in some places is still where folks come to buy, sell, and socialize.

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Siedler, Julie, “Main Street Life,” The Goldfinch, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 11-12, 1997
Train Carrying Logs, between 1900 and 1920

Train with a Blade Traveling through a Snow Drift, 1905

Today we take automobiles for granted. They are everywhere, Most families own a car. Buses, too, provide motorized transportation in cities as well as for cross-country travel. Trucks deliver goods all over the country. We would not know how to get along without these forms of transportation.

Back in 1900 horses provided power for most travel. People usually thought in terms of ten-mile trips. If they wanted to go farther, they planned to take a train. Railroad depots were usually no more than ten miles from where a person lived. Trains came and went often. For example, in the town of Jefferson there were seven westbound and six eastbound trains daily.

But trains had their limitations. Railroad transportation began and ended at the depot. For trips between town and farm, for emergencies, or for pleasure riding, people used a buggy or a wagon, pulled by a horse.

Then came the automobile. It solved the problem of slow, short-range transportation, and it bridged the gap between the railroad station and a traveler’s final destination.

The first motorcars appeared around 1900. At first, people did not think of them as something useful; they were more like toys. Early cars were also expensive and undependable. They always seemed to be breaking down, and tires went flat as often as once or twice a day on an all-day trip.

But automakers worked to improve their machines and lower the cost. By 1908, Henry Ford had brought out his Model T. It was inexpensive, reliable, and built to run well on country roads and in small towns. It was simple to take care of, and the cost was low enough so that many people could buy it. The speed at which people traveled

expensive adj. — high priced.
inexpensive adj. — not high priced.
in a Model T (20 miles per hour) greatly reduced the time it took to get from one place to another. It wasn’t long before several motor car companies were producing inexpensive vehicles. Soon the whole country was on wheels, driving toward many changes in their daily lives.

The owners of these more dependable, low-cost autos still faced a few problems. In the winter, water in the radiator expanded as it froze, popped the metal seams, and leaked out. To prevent this, some drivers just drained the radiator, put the car up on jacks, and stored it for the winter season. Some kept the car in use by filling the radiator with hot water in order to get it going. Horse blankets covered the motor and radiator to keep it warm while the occupants conducted their business or visited with friends.

Springtime brought different problems for motorists. Roads turned to quagmires as they thawed. Sometimes, people laid boards over the muddy stretches and the drivers who could keep all four wheels on the planks continued on their way. Those who bogged down in the mud would seek help at the nearest farmhouse. With a team of horses, the car could be pulled out of the mire. Some farm people charged for the service, others had no fee.

Learning to drive and care for a car was simple. It took only a knowledge of basic mechanics to fix something if a gasoline-powered engine should happen to stop. Farmers had an advantage in that they were already experienced with gasoline engines because they had used power on their farm machinery. Boys and girls who grew up when those first autos came into use learned to drive at an early age. Some were only eleven or twelve years old. There was less concern about serious accidents then, because cars did not go very fast and there were so few of them on the road.

As people used automobiles for transportation, their way of life began to change. They traveled longer distances and took more trips than in the past. Social life began to include many more activities. Shopping habits changed. Education and health care improved.

Good roads or bad, Iowans took to the highway, venturing far from home in their automobiles. One family traveled to see relatives in New Hampshire, another went to visit a brother in South Dakota. Carloads of summer vacationers headed for Lake Okoboji and even to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, camping along the way and cooking their meals by the roadside. Most people had lived their whole lives within a few square miles, acquainted only with a few neighbors and those in the nearby town. These same people could now travel to visit faraway relatives. They could also travel to other areas of the country to see firsthand how others lived.

The choices seemed to end only at the ocean’s shore. By the 1920s motor outings and vacations had become a national activity, and cowans jumped into their autos right along with the other travelers. Weekends became a time for travel as well. People began to look forward to Sunday drives into the country for sightseeing or picnics. People who before had lived too far away could now enjoy an afternoon of baseball, and hometown games attracted larger crowds. Saturday night

quagmire n. — soft, sticky mud.

mire n. — soft or deep mud. v. — to sink or stick in mud.

experienced adj. — having knowledge or skill gained from doing or seeing things.

acquainted adj. — having knowledge of something.
Excerpts from *The Goldfinch’s “The Automobile Age,”* November 1982 (pg.3)

became shopping and fun night, especially for farm families. People drove to town, listened to the band, met their friends, shopped (some stores stayed open til midnight), and saw the latest movie.

Iowans had lived isolated from one another on farms or in small towns. Now they could easily meet to exchange ideas. Often they met to learn something new, or to solve a problem of a neighborhood, the town, or the school. Automobiles provided an important chance for women to leave their homes for a few hours and still get their daily housework finished. For women who worked outside the home, automobiles provided a wider choice of places to live. No longer did the rural schoolteacher have to board with a family near the school — she could live in a nearby town and drive to work.

Before automobiles appeared, Iowans planned a few major shopping trips a year. Usually, they traveled to a city to stock up on things they needed. The rest of the time people shopped by mail or in the nearest small town. With a car, shoppers could choose to shop in one of several towns, not just the nearest one. Once, it had taken all day to travel ten miles, shop, and return. With a car, a person could travel sixty miles in the same amount of time. Because shopping habits changed, long established stores in smaller towns lost business as people chose to drive on to a city to trade. But while some businesses disappeared, new ones were established to meet the new needs of motorists.

Even the way people shopped for groceries changed. Most grocery stores ran a free delivery service for town customers at the time automobiles began to appear on the streets. A note with an errand runner or a phone call placed the order. The store clerk selected the items and the groceries were delivered to the house. With an automobile, a housewife could drive to the store herself and choose the items she wanted. Brand name products had just begun to be advertised, and they competed with other goods in price. Now the housewife could compare prices and quality and make her own selections. Soon, merchants began to advertise specials to attract the shopper on wheels. And although families might continue to shop at their favorite store, they could be lured by a special, and become introduced to another grocery store.

The grocery store as we know it today could not have developed without the car. After the 1920s the number of small grocery stores became less as a few larger stores attracted more and more of the business. Most stores stopped their regular delivery service by the early 1940s when World War II gasoline rationing forced a cutback in motor vehicle use. Grocery stores also continued to develop toward one-stop shopping centers by adding meat counters, dairy cases, and even over-the-counter drugs.

As people traded in their horses for cars, livery stables and blacksmith shops went out

rationing n. — the allotment or share of a supply; as in gasoline rationing.

livery stable n. — place where horses are boarded and where horses and carriages may be hired; sometimes called the livery.

of business. In some cases, livery stable owners switched to automobile repair and service. Automobile garages and gasoline service stations soon replaced the livery stables and the blacksmith shops. Iowa's carriage manufacturers also felt the effect of automobile use. They either went out of business or changed to the manufacture of automobiles.

Because it was possible to travel a long distance in a short time, education improved, especially for students living in rural areas. For many years children attended country schools within walking distance of their farms. These schools, however, only went through the eighth grade. High schools were most often located in towns, and the chances of attending them

Before Rural Free Delivery (RFD), people on farms had to pick up their mail at a post office in town. This usually meant the family waited for mail until someone went to town for some other errand. RFD brought daily mail delivery to farm dwellers. Automobiles replaced the horse and buggy on RFD routes, making it possible to increase the distance covered from eleven to forty-four miles.
Excerpts from *The Goldfinch’s “The Automobile Age,”* November 1982 (pg.5)

The most satisfactory investment for the country physician, Harry P. Engle, M.D., Newton, Iowa.

When I purchased an automobile I had had no experience with machinery of any kind, and knew practically nothing concerning the principles of a gas engine.

My three years' experience in a motorcar has been with a single-cylinder, 9-horsepower, water-cooled gasoline machine. I have taken care of it myself. I have averaged over 3,000 miles each year and have found the cost of driving a motorcar to be less than keeping a team, and the comfort, convenience and pleasure place the automobile so far ahead that I never expect to own another horse. I have driven the machine at all times of the year, over all kinds of roads. With the patent chain treads for mud and ice and calcium chloride for zero temperature you can always be sure of getting back home.

After driving the car about six months I sold my horses, but when the roads are very bad I depend on the livery, preferring, as I did when I owned a team, to drive the livery horses over the worst roads. Mrs. Engle is an automobile enthusiast and handles the car with perfect ease, starting the engine without difficulty, and I feel sure that everything will be all right when she is out driving.

Ninety-five per cent of all my trouble has been with the pneumatic tires. A medical friend tells me that he has completely solved this problem by using solid rubber on his machine, and that the solid tires do not (as claimed by pneumatic people) jar the machine to pieces. I have concluded to try them when in need of new tires.

There is no question about the usefulness of an automobile to a physician. It is so much quicker and can be left standing anywhere without an attendant. It can easily cover twice the ground in a day that a horse can, and in the summer, when the warm weather is hard on a horse, the auto is a great advantage, as both machine and driver are cooler when going fast.


were much better for town children than for those living on farms. Students from farms often boarded in town which meant they could not help out at home. There was also the expense of board and room. With an automobile, students could live in the country, drive to and from school every day, and still help on the farm.

Even before automobiles, rural schools had begun to **consolidate**. This meant the students needed to be transported several miles from home to the consolidated school. Horse-drawn wagons served as the first buses, but before the end of the 1920s faster motor-powered buses had replaced the old horse-drawn hacks.

Doctors were among the first to use automobiles for business. They often visited patients at home, and with a car the doctor could reach a patient miles away in a few minutes. Gone were the long buggy rides taking an hour or more each way. Patients could also get to a city hospital and the special care available there.

Fifty years ago the State University Hospital in Iowa City purchased a fleet of cars to provide transportation to the hospital from any place in the state. This meant that Iowans could receive special care for illnesses that could not be treated in nearby towns. The transportation service still transports patients to Iowa City.

By 1922, Iowa was second (behind California) in the number of people per automobile in the state. For every five Iowans there was one car. Even during the Great Depression (the 1920s and 1930s) when people had little money and many were losing their farms, automobiles remained in use. By then, cars were considered necessary by those who owned them. Although the number of cars purchased decreased, people repaired their old cars and kept them running.

During the early 1940s the nation was at war. Passenger autos went out of production while factories turned out tanks, machine guns, and airplanes for the armed forces. By the time the war was over in 1945, the cars people owned were very old. Manufacturers could barely keep up with demand. More people wanted and purchased cars each year.

By the 1960s the problems created by the large number of automobiles in use could not be ignored. The exhaust from autos polluted the air. Accident rates climbed as careless drivers continued to use the highways. In 1973, gasoline consumption was higher than the supply. Gasoline shortages, combined with high prices for fuel caused people to think about the way they used their cars. Some people decided to use other means of transportation when they could. The state of Iowa helped to finance eighteen city bus systems to encourage more efficient fuel use.

Some people predict that new forms of transportation will someday replace automobiles — others say cars are here to stay. We do know that seventy years ago, whether traveling short distances or long, for business or pleasure, Iowans chose automobiles as the way to go.

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Chugging into Cherokee

The people of Cherokee waited in 1869. They waited for the railroad to come. There were only thirty-nine families on the lonely northwestern Iowa prairie at Cherokee. Sioux City was the nearest place, sixty miles and an eight day round-trip away. There would never be very many people at Cherokee without a railroad—but the railroad was coming!

A man bought twenty acres of land in the little settlement and marked it off for town lots. He opened a general store and planned to have his town ready when the railroad came. Soon there was a newspaper, livery stable, and blacksmith. An attorney and physician set up practice. Cherokee was ready.

Finally the railroad owners decided exactly where the railroad route would go. The track curved in and out of the beautiful Little Sioux Valley, making a horseshoe bend. When the rails were laid they were one mile south-west of the town! The business people decided it was better to be as close as possible to the railroad depot, so they moved their businesses over one mile to be nearer to it.

The town of Cherokee grew rapidly after the railroad arrived. More homes and businesses sprang up, built with lumber brought in on railroad cars. In just one year over two thousand people arrived to live in Cherokee County. Farm people settled on the surrounding prairie and began shipping their produce to market on the railroad. The first people of Cherokee had been right. The railroad had helped their town to grow.
Workin' On the Railroad

It took many people to keep the railroads running smoothly. Railroad workers lived in towns along the railroad lines in Iowa. Locomotive engineers and firemen, passenger and freight conductors, porters and brakemen worked on the moving trains. Many more people worked in railroad shops, roundhouses, or depots. Mechanics, carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, and machinists worked in shops keeping cars and locomotives in good repair. To keep things on the tracks and in the railyard running safely, there were watchmen, section hands, switchmen, and gatekeepers. Agents, clerks, and telegraph operators worked at the busy railway depot selling tickets, keeping records, and sending messages.

Workers at the Illinois Central Railroad's Waterloo shop, 1915.

IOWA TOWNS CONTAINING MORE THAN 100 RAILROAD WORKERS, 1895

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A railroad equipment factory was built at Bettendorf. In 1920 three thousand people worked at the Bettendorf Company. The factory continued to manufacture high quality equipment until the Great Depression forced it to close in 1930.
Tipton Consolidated School Buses, 1940

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, 1940
Eclipse Lumber Company Truck in Clinton, Iowa, 1913

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1913
Fire Truck in Shenandoah, Iowa, October 1950

 Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, October 1950
Main Street Construction in Shenandoah, Iowa, October 1950

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, October 1950
Main Street in Columbus Junction, Iowa, 2003

Logging Truck in California, June 2013

Iowa’s Rural Public Transit System, 2014

Iowa’s Rural Public Transit Systems

Region 1 - Northeast Iowa Community Action Corporation
Region 2 - North Iowa Area Council of Governments
Region 3 - Regional Transit Authority
Region 4 - Siouxland Regional Transit System
Region 5 - MIDAS Council of Governments
Region 6 - Region Six Planning Commission
Region 7 - Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments
Region 8 - Delaware, Dubuque, and Jackson County Regional Transit Authority
Region 9 - River Bend Transit
Region 10 - East Central Iowa Council of Governments
Region 11 - Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency
Region 12 - Region XII Council of Governments
Region 13 - Southwest Iowa Planning Council
Region 14 - Southern Iowa Trolley
Region 15 - 10-15 Regional Transit Agency
Region 16 - South East Iowa Regional Planning Commission

“Thomas’s Rural Public Transit System,” Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT), 2014. Courtesy of Iowa DOT
Grain Elevator in El Campo, Texas, March 11, 2014
Diesel Locomotive in Lamar, Colorado, May 20, 2015

Train Snow Plow in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, August 4, 2015

Highsmith, Carol M., “A train snow plow, which might as easily be called a train snow PROW, sits idle on a summer day in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. But it gets plenty of action in Colorado’s snowy Rocky Mountains that surround the town,” 4 August 2015. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Dusty Scene of a Farm Truck and Equipment near Taylor, Mississippi, November 11, 2017

Highsmith, Carol M., “Dusty scene as a farm truck and equipment gather the remains of the year’s crop after a harvest for use as fodder, or silage, used to feed farm animals,” 11 November 2017. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Forklift Loads Bales of Cotton onto a Trunk near Marks, Mississippi, November 11, 2017

Bus 12 Leaving a School in Pella, Iowa, 2018

2018. Courtesy of Rebecca Helland
Person Next to a Row of Young Corn Crops, June 28, 2018

2018. Courtesy of Rebecca Helland
“Compare... Cargo Capacity” Infographic, February 25, 2019

“Compare... Cargo Capacity,” Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT), 25 February 2019. Courtesy of Iowa DOT
Barge Carrying Containers near Bellevue, Iowa, Date Unknown

Date Unknown. Courtesy of Pixabay
Snow Plow in Rural Iowa, Date Unknown

Date Unknown. Courtesy of the Iowa Department of Transportation
Panoramic Map of Chicago, 1857

Panoramic Map of Davenport, Iowa, 1888

Elevated Railroad in New York City, 1896

“So. Water St., Chicago, Ill., the busiest street in the world,” 1899. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Marine Terminals in New York, between 1900 and 1910

Express Trains in Subway at Spring Street, New York, 1905

Lumber Steamer Being Loaded in Gulfport, Mississippi, 1906

Fire Station No. 1 in Waterloo, 1908

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1908
Wagons Removing Snow in New York City, January 1908

"[Wagons removing snow]," January 1908. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Madison Avenue in Chicago, Illinois, between 1910 and 1920

“Madison Ave. [i.e. Street], west from Wabash [Avenue], Chicago, Ill,” Detroit Publishing Co., between 1910 and 1920. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Automobiles Parked on a Street in Des Moines, Iowa, 1913
Horse-Drawn Wagon Filled with Flynn Farm Dairy Milk Cans in Des Moines, Iowa, 1915

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1915
Western Union Messengers in Des Moines, Iowa, August 1918

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Shearer & Johnson, August 1918
Ford Commercial Airplane, 1925

Roadway in Des Moines, Iowa, 1928

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1928
Fire Truck in Waterloo, Iowa, May 1938

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, May 1938
Workers Repairing a Streetcar in Council Bluffs, Iowa, 1945

Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines Register & Tribune, 1945


Highsmith, Carol M., “Red Line Metro subway train going one way arrives to join a train about to head the other direction at Metro Center Station, a transfer station to other lines beneath downtown Washington, D.C.,” between 1980 and 2006. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Bus in Georgia, September 14, 2001

Busy Street in New York City, May 8, 2010

8 May 2010. Courtesy of Pixabay
Aerial View of Boeing Passenger Aircraft in South Carolina, May 1, 2017

Highsmith, Carol M., “Aerial view of Boeing South Carolina. That’s not a location but the name of the Boeing Corporation’s Commercial Airplanes division, located in North Charleston, South Carolina,” 1 May 2017. Courtesy of Library of Congress
Massive Container Ship in Savannah, Georgia, May 20, 2017

Fleet of Snow Plows in Iowa, Date Unknown

Iowa Department of Transportation, Date Unknown. Courtesy of Iowa DOT