

A French-Canadian immigrant who prospered, Leon LaMarre sits proudly in front of his grocery and dry goods store, his family on his porch next door.



# BENNINGTON

## A Small Town on Glass

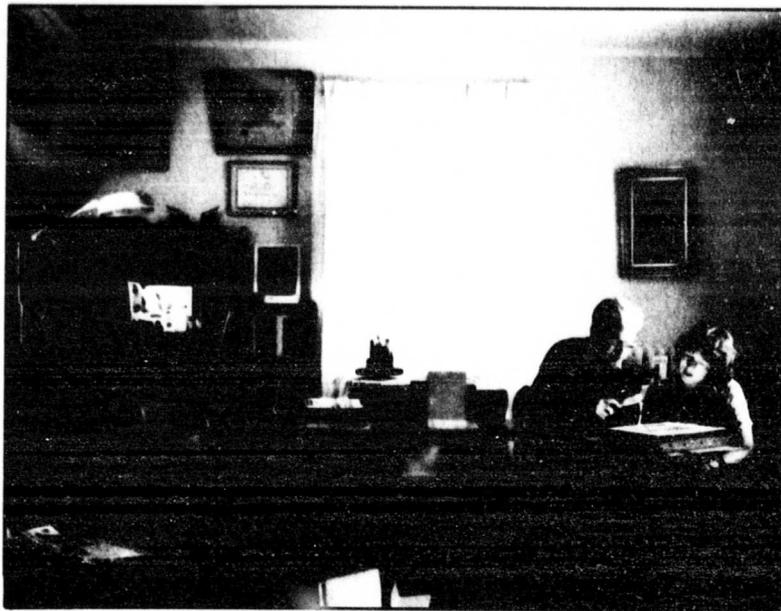


# PRESERVED

Good luck and a determined woman save the long photographic record of a historic era in Vermont

by **Oliver Jensen**

# Photographic Lineage



Tordis Iselhardt and the late Robert Weichert working with the Bennington pictures, 1982.

**T**he history of any town, large or small, has the air of a surreal play, one on which the curtain never goes down. The cast changes constantly; the set does not—except that from time to time scene shifters steal in with fresh furnishings, backdrops, even entire buildings. The plot is improvised by the characters as they go along. It can be as somnolent as watching grass grow, or bursting with action. And such dramas, of course, never end.

Our subject here is Bennington, Vermont, a picturesque setting at the foot of the Green Mountains, tucked into the southwest corner of that state. The time is the latter part of the nineteenth century, slopping over a little into the beginning of the twentieth—the age of photography. It is about a century since the first settlement in 1761—or Act I—in what was then known as the New Hampshire Grants, land claims that were hotly disputed by the neighboring province of New York. What with border battles and then the American Revolution, followed by fourteen years of the “Independent Republic of Vermont” until statehood came as a relief in 1791, Bennington was all frantic action. The Green Mountain Boys, led by Ethan Allen and his enormous kindred, were in the thick of it. They seized Fort Ticonderoga, with its stores and invaluable cannon, from a sleepy British garrison. They fought beside Gen. John Stark’s militiamen in the Battle of Bennington, a victory that fatally weakened Gen. John Burgoyne’s attempt in 1777 to drive south from Canada to New York.

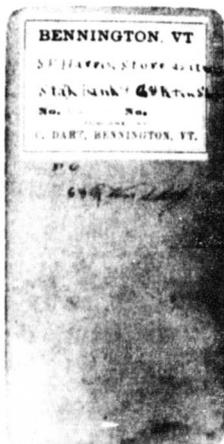
Dominating the stage is the giant figure (some say six feet six) of the legendary Ethan, variously

regarded, then as now, as either a hero or a profane rowdy, or perhaps some of each. His followers state it as fact that he once killed an attacking bear by shoving his powder horn down its throat and, on another occasion, strangled a mountain lion with his bare hands. Once when Ethan and his cousin Remember Baker were in the woods at night, sleeping off a drinking bout at the Catamount Tavern, Remember was awakened by some hissing sounds and saw a rattlesnake repeatedly biting the sleeping figure beside him. He sprang to his feet and grabbed his musket, but then the snake pulled back of its own accord, weaving unsteadily, and lurched drunkenly into the underbrush. As Remember remembered, Ethan awoke complaining of “damnable, bloodsucking mosquitoes.”

A century later the setting has changed: how peaceful, how prosperous the old frontier outpost has become! Bennington is still small but is spreading out. Knitting mills have sprung up all along the Wailoomsac River, and woolen and cotton mills. Bennington manufactures boxes, machinery, stereographs, and collars and cuffs. Immigrants have poured in heavily from Canada, while the Yankee farm boys ventured westward in search of better farmland. Local farms nevertheless still place a lot of cans on the milk trains bound for New York and Boston. Railroads and wagon roads have replaced the two old Indian trails that crossed here at the “Four Corners.” The Vermont Soldiers Home is here, but what recalls the heroic past the most is the great Bennington Battle Monument, dedicated in 1891. It is the highest memorial to a battle in the world, 306 feet altogether.

What is truly unusual about Bennington among most American small towns, however, is that so much of its photographic record still exists. Elsewhere, many collections of one or two photographers’ work are preserved in archives, but in this case we have a *succession* of photographers, with most of their known work in one private place.

Bennington’s first professional cameraman was Calvin Dart, a daguerreotypist and then a photographer who moved there in 1838; in 1882 he passed his business on to William H. Sipperly. Sipperly made stereographs as well as ordinary photographs and had practiced his art in Saratoga and other upstate New York towns. He was also a wanderer, who, after six years, sold the business again, in 1888. The buyer was Madison E. Watson, a Vermonter of skill who must have decided that photography was a poor, hard living



Calvin Dart’s backing label was very plain.

because he gave it up in 1899 and went to the West Coast. The successor to the job, and to the growing pile of negatives, was steady Wills T. White, who kept at it for forty years and retired in 1939, leaving behind a new pile of wedding, portrait, school, and other work, still using glass plates into the 1920s.

The Bennington Hoard (as I think of it) slumbered on peacefully and undisturbed in White's abandoned studio on the third floor of the Bennington *Banner* building until 1959, when it attracted the attention of Robert L. Weichert, a civil engineer and skilled amateur photographer who had come up from New York to Bennington. He was working for the *Banner* as a temporary replacement for a draftee when he began to explore that top floor. The unwanted "old-time" photographs, as he called them, caught his imagination. After a while he acquired the whole collection, except for some that went to the elegant little Bennington Museum. Over the next twenty-five years Weichert added more negatives, prints, and ephemera to his collection and started to put things in order (by subject interest and quality, rather than by photographer).

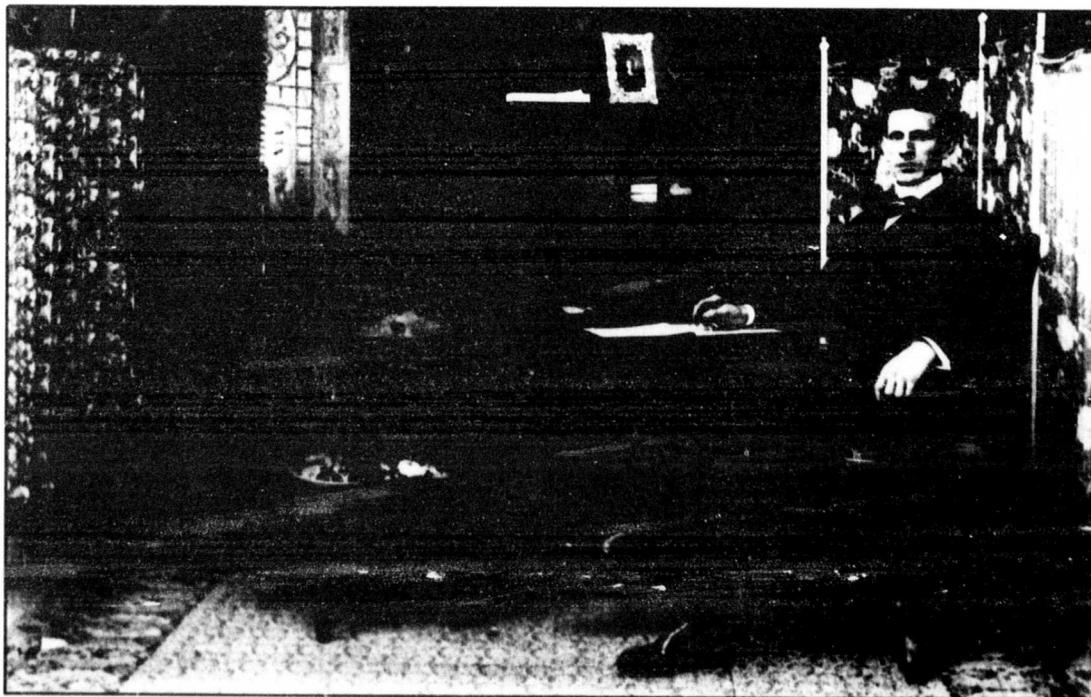
Wearing but still caught up in his task, Weichert was joined in his project by a vigorous and much younger enthusiast of local history and its interpretation to the public, Tordis Ilg Isselhardt. A 1958 graduate of Bennington College, with an M.A. from Middlebury College, she had extensive experience in preservation and museum work.

She started a business with Weichert, called the Weichert-Isselhardt Collection, Images from the Past, and together they bought a house on Main Street simply to house the photographs. Isselhardt worked to catalogue and conserve the material. She continued after her partner's death in 1983, supporting her project by giving entertaining lectures and slide shows all over the state and selling high-grade prints from the collection.

If you pass through Bennington, as my wife and I did last year, and if you take a meal in the fine restaurant housed in the disused Bennington railroad station, you will see more of the Weichert-Isselhardt Hoard, handsomely enlarged on the walls. That is how we found it and heard from the collector's own lips this statement of her self-imposed mission: "To help people transcend the barriers of time and place to understand any community or culture as the expression of its people."

Chew on that a moment. I think I am for it. If you want to know more, go to Bennington's "Four Corners," where the Molly Stark Trail crosses what I call "the Ethan Allen Trail," and head a couple of blocks west on Main Street. Tordis Isselhardt's place is across from the big church. She's still collecting, has plans for a book, and the play called Bennington goes on.

Oliver Jensen, a founder and former editor of this magazine, is now a Contributing Editor.



Sipperly spent just six years in town.



Watson, third in line, played up his artistry.

Wills T. White, the town photographer from 1899 to 1939, seen in an early self-portrait.

# Faces of the Town



This is one of the hundreds of unidentified portrait groups, but it rivets the eye. Isselhardt calls it simply "Daughter." Those penetrating, confident eyes suggest that this woman rules the roost.

At the E. Z. Waist Company of thrifty Bennington, the four sons of the firm's superintendent—Woodhull, Philip, Arthur, and Richard Hall—modeled union suits for Wills T. White in 1915.

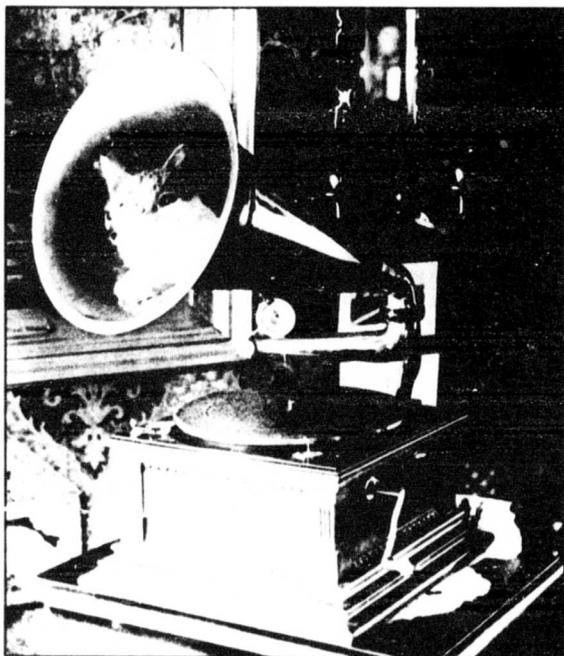


A trio of ladies and one male escort stopped for this picture sometime in the 1890s. Dimly seen in the distance is the great Battle Monument.

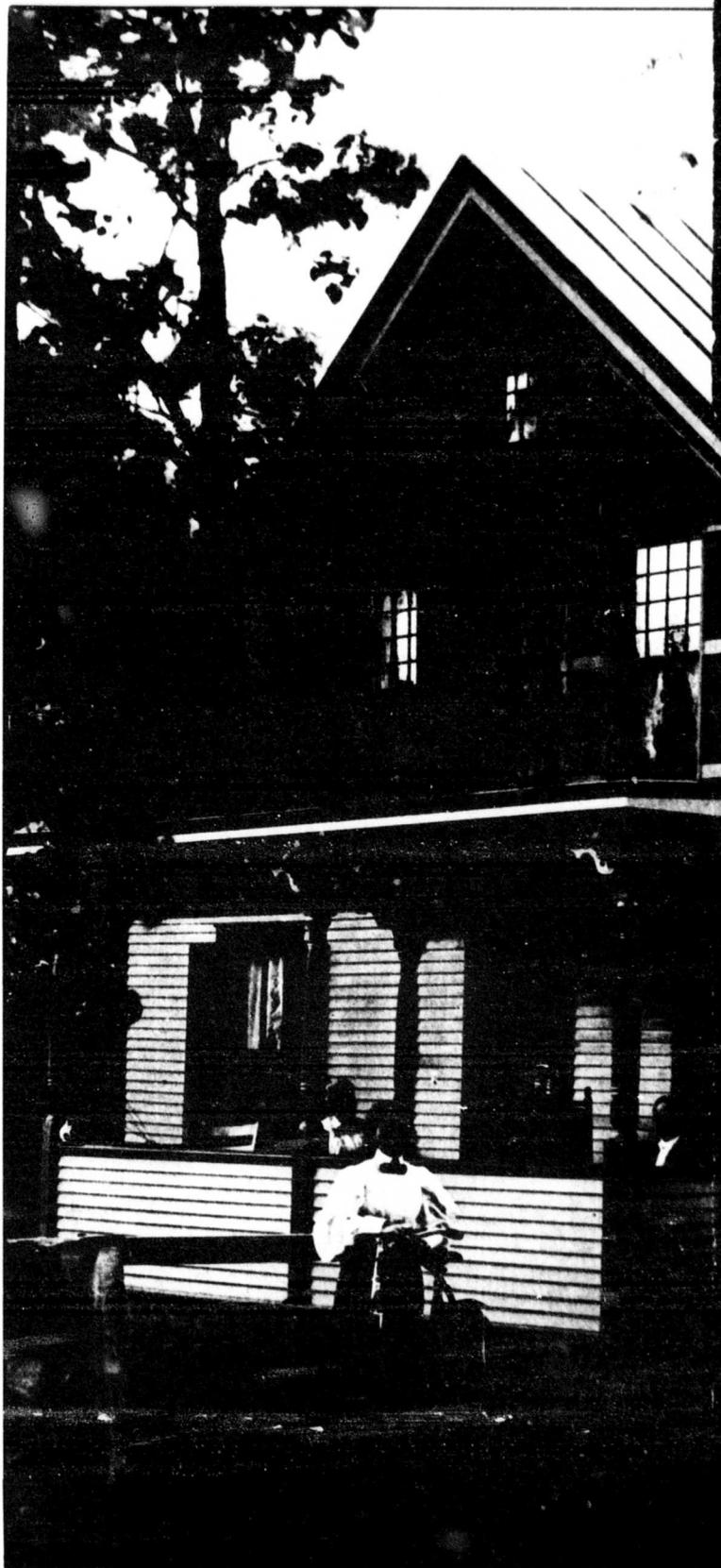
# Houses Great and Small

The playhouse below is a simplified miniature of the "Big House" (thirty-five rooms) of these children's grandparents, Gov. and Mrs. John G. McCullough. That summer (around 1905) there was also a tepee on the grounds.

Here is one of many "Sunday afternoon" groups, posing on lawns and porches of both grand and humble houses.

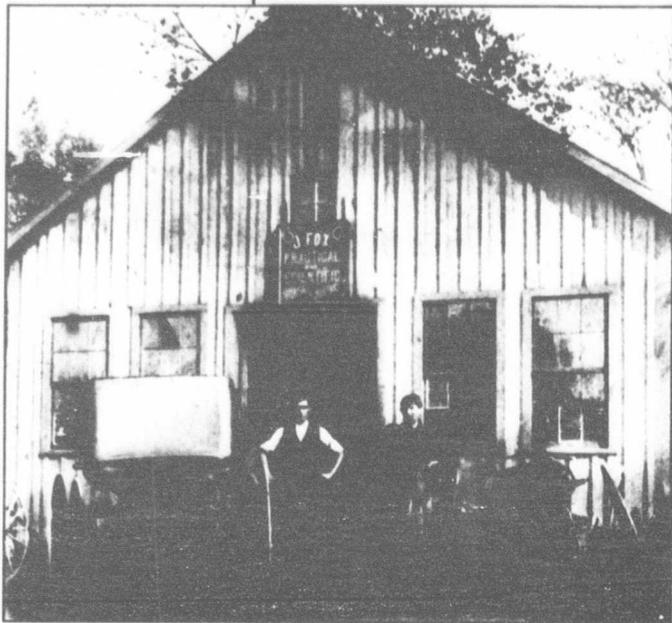


Cute animal pictures were always photographic staples, but in no way could kitty have leapt backward, unassisted, into this Gramophone.



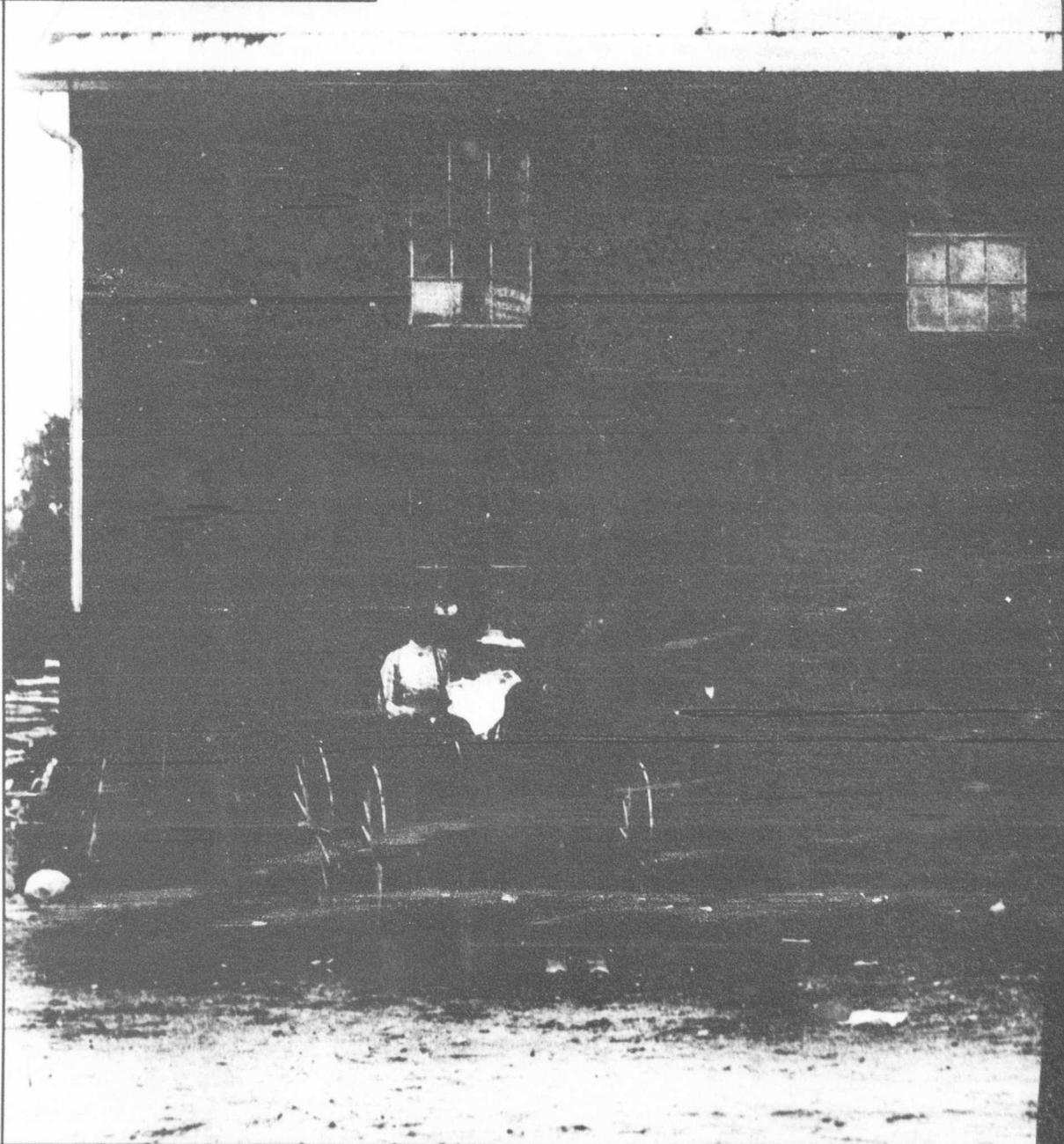


# In Business



It was the age of the horse, whose only "service station" was a proliferation of blacksmiths.

Advertising was in its infancy, although the Foxes of Depot Street, Bennington, "Practical and Scientific," seem to be doing less well than the "Practical and Artistic" Moon Shop at nearby Shaftsbury (right). Both buildings exist no more.

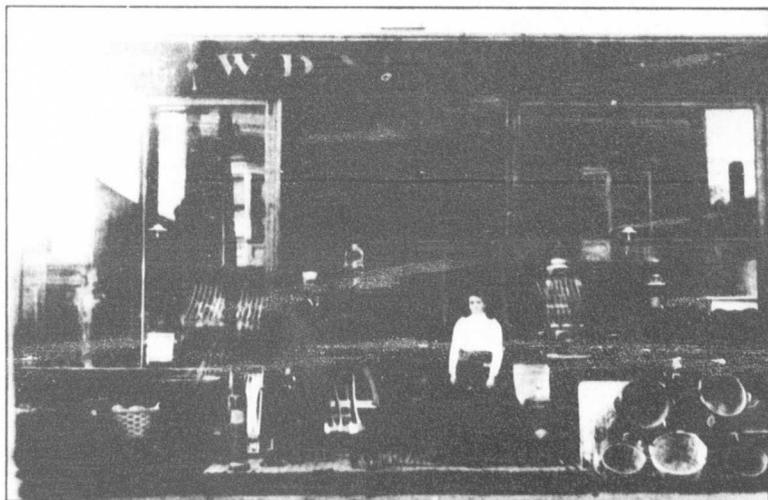


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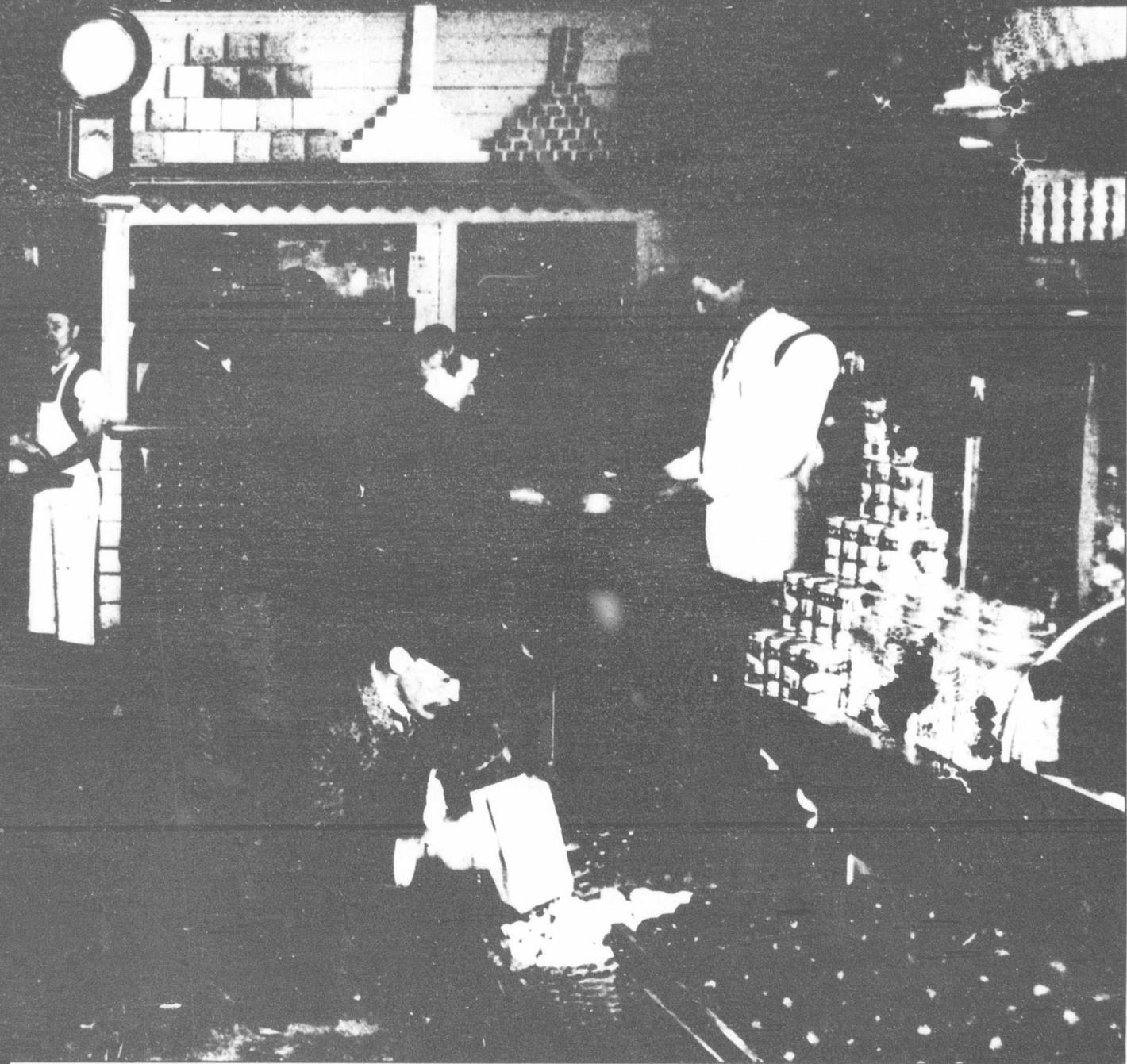




Gibson's Grocery on Main Street (above), photographed by Madison Watson about 1898, had, said the Bennington paper, "a spacious, well-arranged interior" and many "tempting delicacies," which the man kneeling in the foreground is studying with care. At the right the emulsion on the glass negative has peeled off in certain parts.



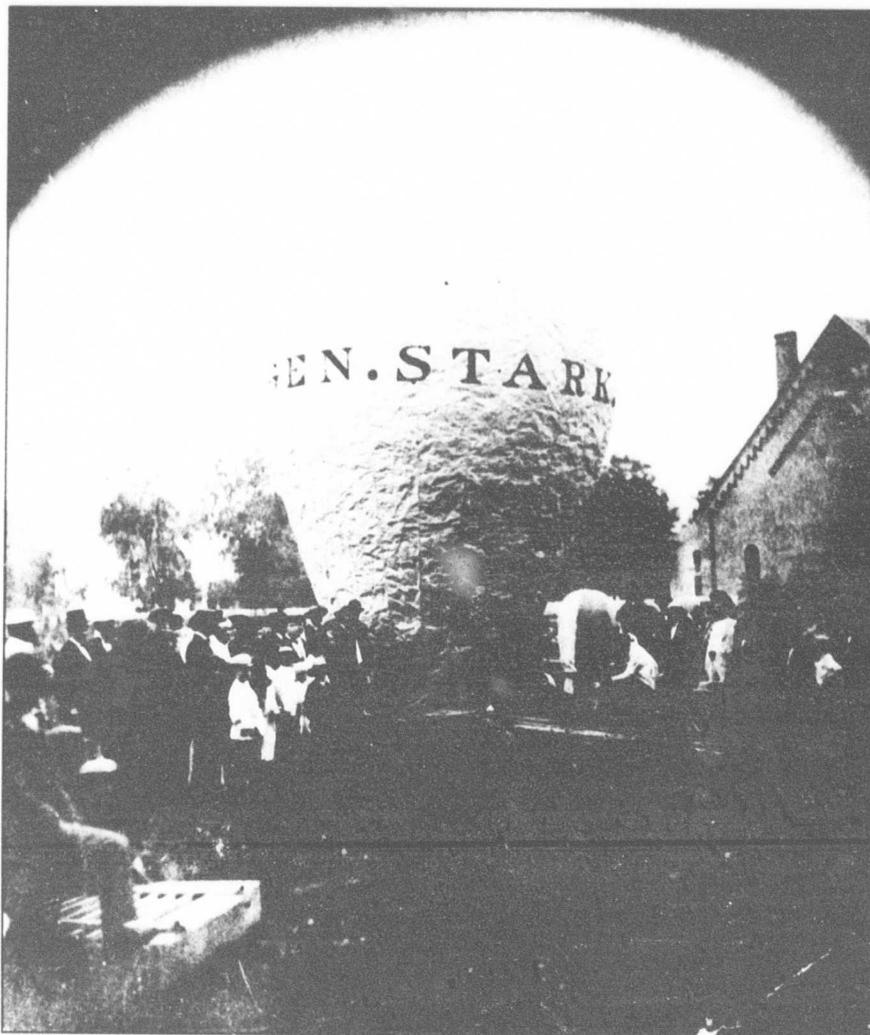
The building (left) burned in 1924, but the store is still in business, virtually unchanged. It is now Adams Hardware. Note the reflections from across the street.



Bennington was not a shopper's paradise like Boston, but it was, in St. Paul's phrase, "no mean city" either; the express-company wagons would bring you anything from afar, if you could be patient. Hawks's Harness Shop (near left) displays the martyred Presidents on some unknown occasion.

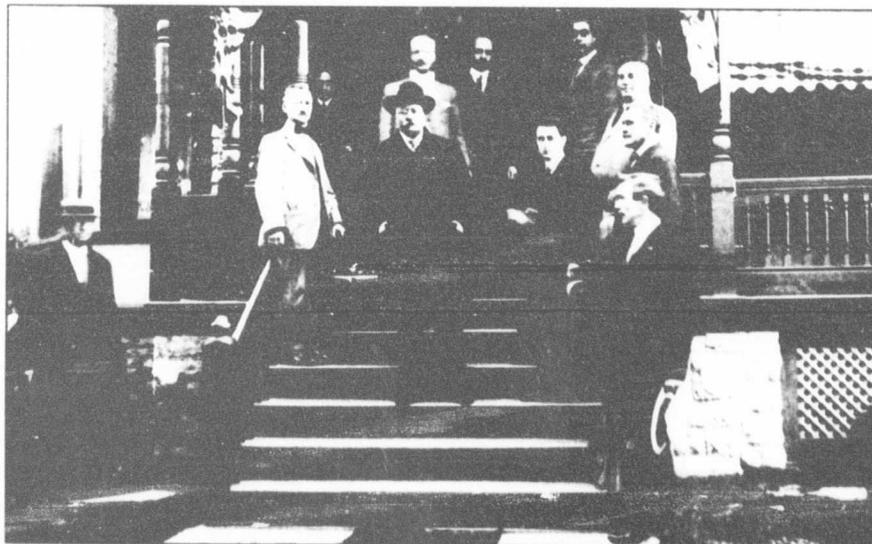
# Great Moments

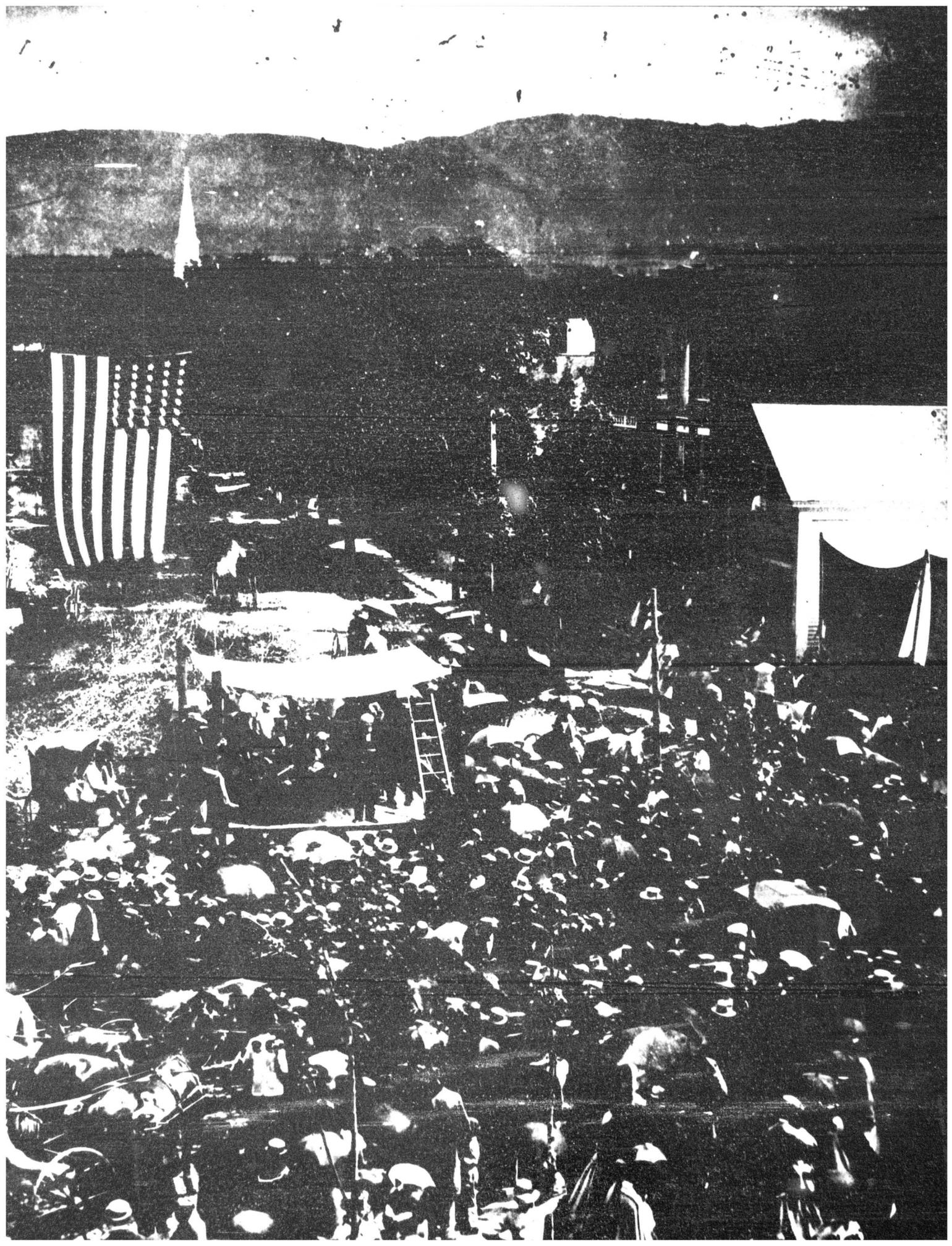
Bennington's biggest day was not July Fourth but the glorious sixteenth of August, "Battle Day," remembering General Stark's victory over the British force that sought to raid the town's military stores and glossing over the fact that the actual fighting took place just over the state line in New York. This homemade hot-air balloon did the honors in 1870.



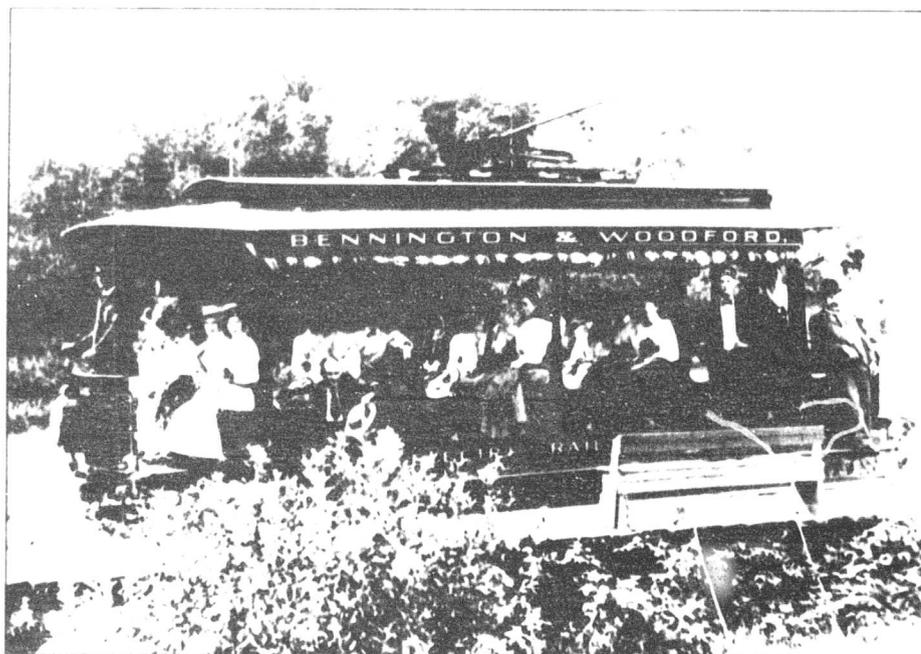
The great Horace Greeley himself came to town to speak at a Republican rally in 1868 (opposite). In this half of a stereograph he is speaking before a crowd that is using umbrellas as sun shields.

On August 29, 1912, during his "Bull Moose" campaign for the Presidency, Theodore Roosevelt raced in, spoke for an hour at a breakfast rally, then posed with supporters at A. J. Cooper's house.



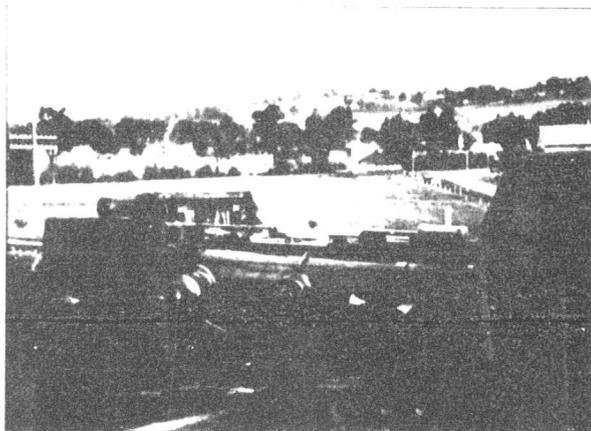


# Joys and Horrors of Travel



Happy excursion groups like this on the nine-mile Bennington & Woodford trolley enjoyed the ride as well as the casino, theater, and dinner at the other end. Madison Watson's plate is a jewel. Alas, after three years a flood wiped out the little line.

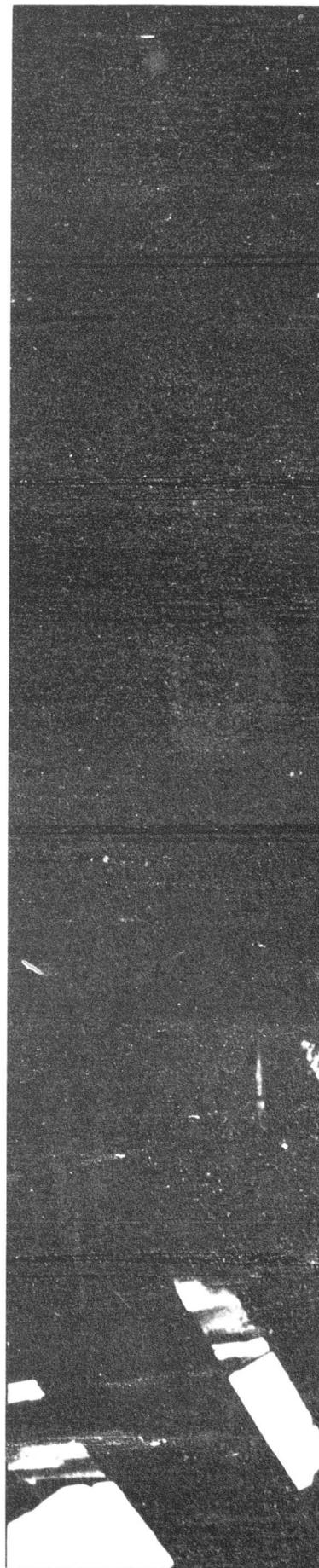
Study the scene at right a moment. Has a train crashed into the river through the floor of this covered bridge? No, for even the last car just made it; the train was running fast. No one was even injured. But it was a deliberately plotted job by train wreckers at Childs Bridge on the Bennington & Rutland, September 6, 1893. Their motives remain unknown.



This engine flopped over on the Bennington & Rutland on an unknown date, in full view of the Battle Monument, but there is no further information.



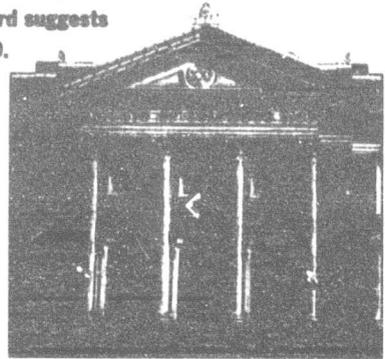
No portrait of Vermont can be complete without a picture of the state's "mud season." Here a milk wagon is meeting a motorcar. Mud is eternal.





**THE COVER:** A member of the 82d Airborne takes aim near Jubail, Saudi Arabia, last August. For a look at what the historical record suggests may happen to him and his comrades, see page 100.

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