

LAND OF THE FREE

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY, NEW YORK

We don't know



We aren't sure



For a hundred and fifty years we've been telling ourselves





We cut our brag in the bark of the big tree —  
“We hold these truths to be self-evident:  
that all men are created equal;  
that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights;  
that among them are life, liberty. . . .”

We told ourselves we had liberty



We told ourselves

The proposition was self-evident



We told ourselves  
This continent was poor in tamable animals



We told ourselves we were free because we were free.

We were free because we were that kind.

We were Americans.

All you needed for freedom was being American.

All you needed for freedom was grit in your craw

And the gall to get out on a limb and crow before sunup.

Those that hadn't it hadn't it.

"Have the elder races halted?

Do they droop and end their lessons wearied over there beyond the seas?

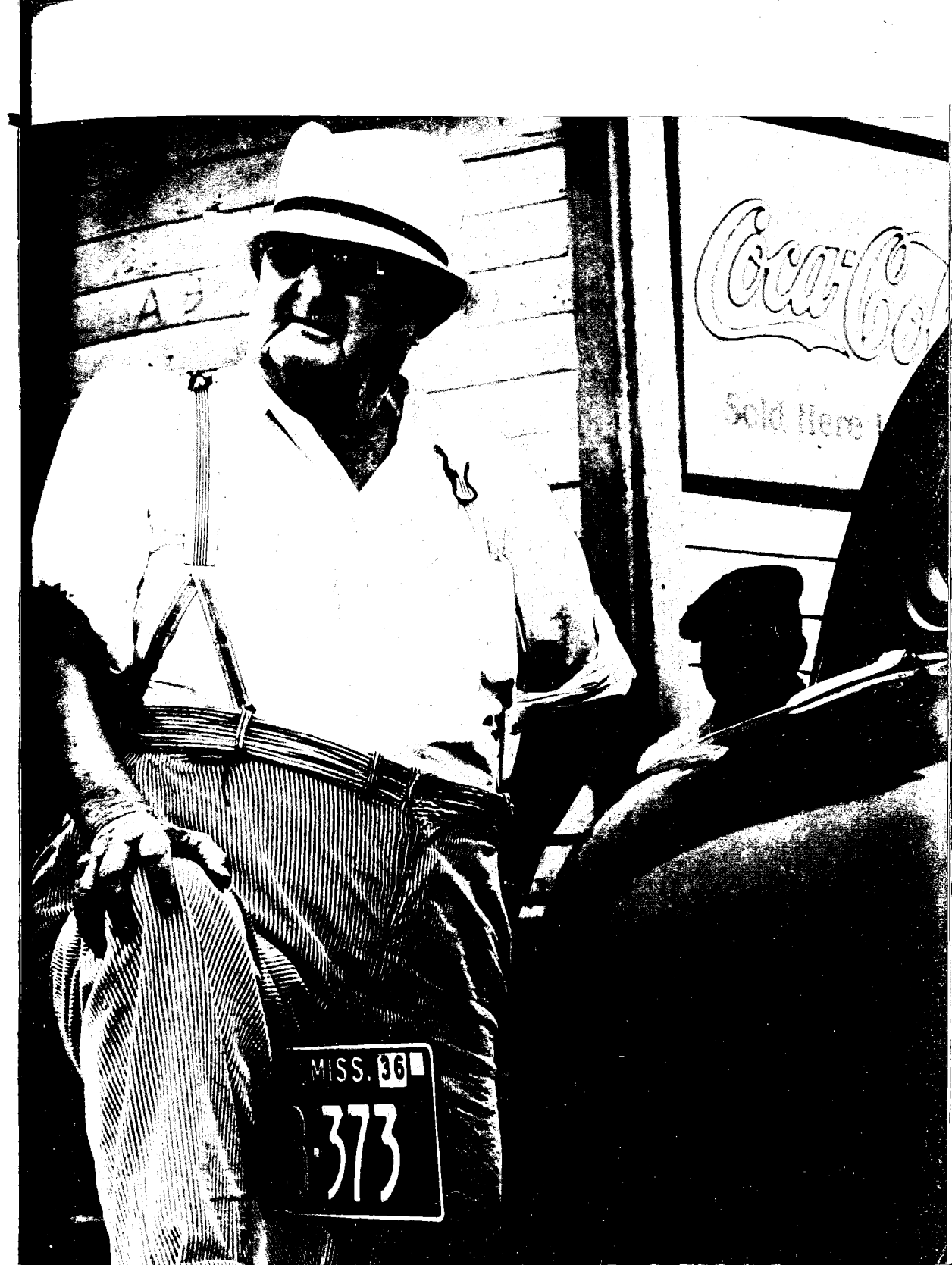
We take up the task eternal and the burden and the lesson —

Pioneers O Pioneers."

We told ourselves we were free because we said so.

We were free because of the Battle of Bunker Hill

And the constitution adopted at Philadelphia



Now we don't know



We're wondering



Maybe the proposition is self-evident.

Maybe we were endowed by our creator  
With certain inalienable rights including  
The right to assemble in peace and petition.

Maybe.

But try it in South Chicago Memorial Day  
With the mick police on the prairie in front of the factory  
Gunning you down from behind and for what? For liberty?



Maybe God Almighty wrote it out

We could shoot off our mouths where we pleased and with what and no Thank

But try it at River Rouge with the Ford militia.

Try it if Mister Ford's opinions are otherwise.

Try it and see where you land with your back broken. . . . .





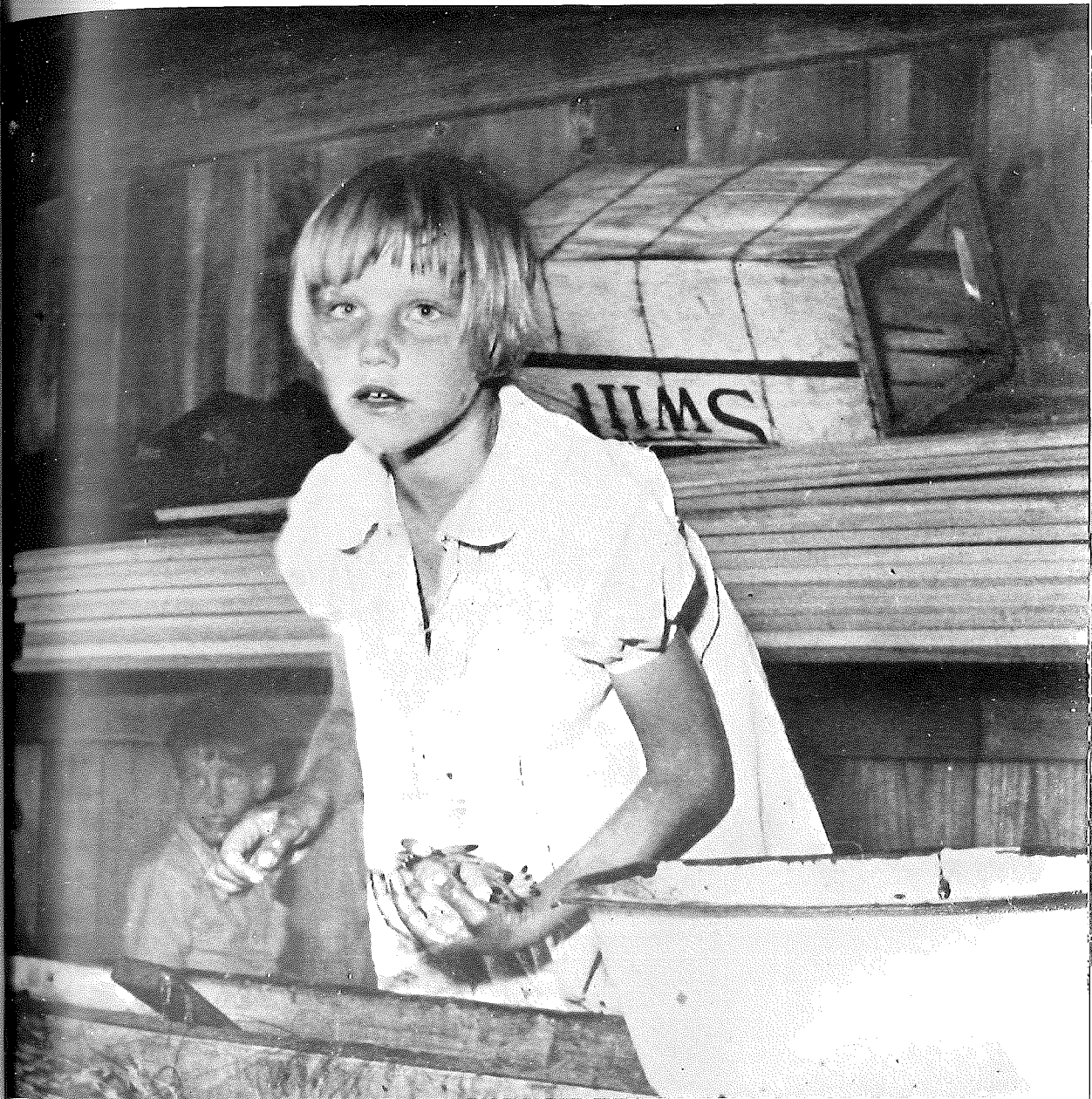
Maybe the constitution assured us our liberties

But tell the six-year cotton-tops in Texas

Canning the crawfish in the ten cent cans —

Heading the shrimps because the law can't stop it:

Tell them our liberties won't let us stop it. . . . .



Maybe we fought to be free at Bunker Hill

But tell it in Arkansas: tell the cotton choppers:

Dan Shays would have a word to tell them:

Dan Shays thought so: he had fought there —

Bunker Hill he fought at: Saratoga —

Dan Shays is a hole in the Pelham hills:

His memory is a door stone in the pine trees:

Boston taught him:

Boston embalmer of history

Blots his name out on the school book page.



Maybe the proposition is self-evident

Or maybe it isn't

Maybe we just thought so



Maybe we thought so by the land before us

Maybe we thought because the land went on  
Liberty went with the land: there was always liberty:  
There was all outdoors to be liberty. . . . .

We don't know



Maybe the liberty we thought we had  
Was room to be left to ourselves to have liberty. . . . .

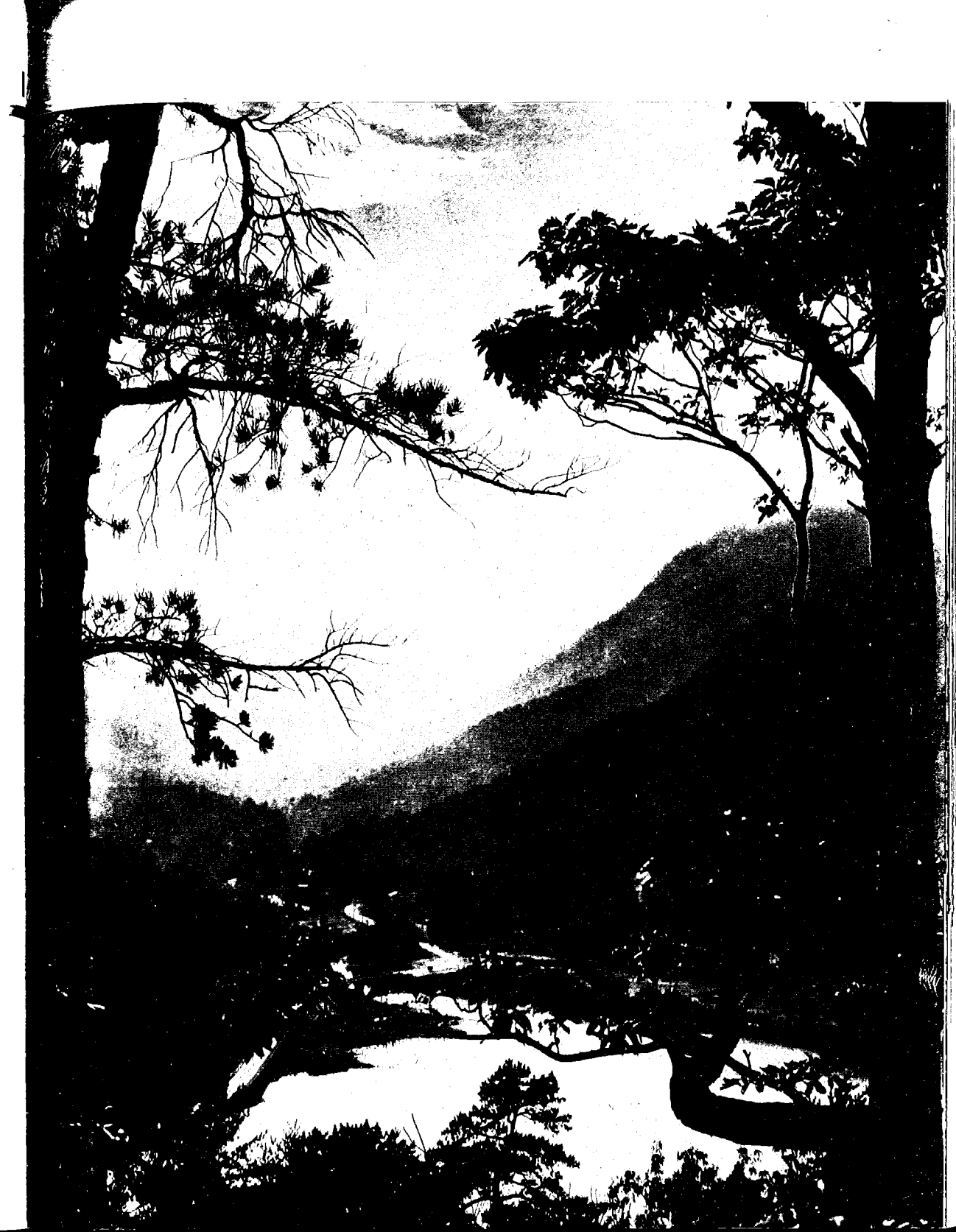


Most of the time till now we never wondered

We worked west by the creeks in the Shenandoah:

In the glades of the Alleghenies we laid us down:

The singing of locusts came over our sleep from the westward





Most of the time till now we never thought:

There was always some place else a man could head for



There was always the forest ahead of us opening on —  
The blue ash in the coves of the Great Smokies:  
The hickories staking the loam on the slow Ohio:  
The homestead oaks along the Illinois:  
The cypresses on the Arkansas to tie to:  
The cottonwoods following water: the wild plums:  
The lodgepole pines along the hill horizon





There was always the grass ahead of us on and on  
Father to father's son:

Prairie grass to buffalo grass. . . . .

Bluegrass. . . . . Prairie shoestring. . . . .

Climbing out of the bottoms of rich rain

To the great shoulders of silence and sunlight

And on over the benches and over the draws —

The sloughgrass to the pommel on the prairies:

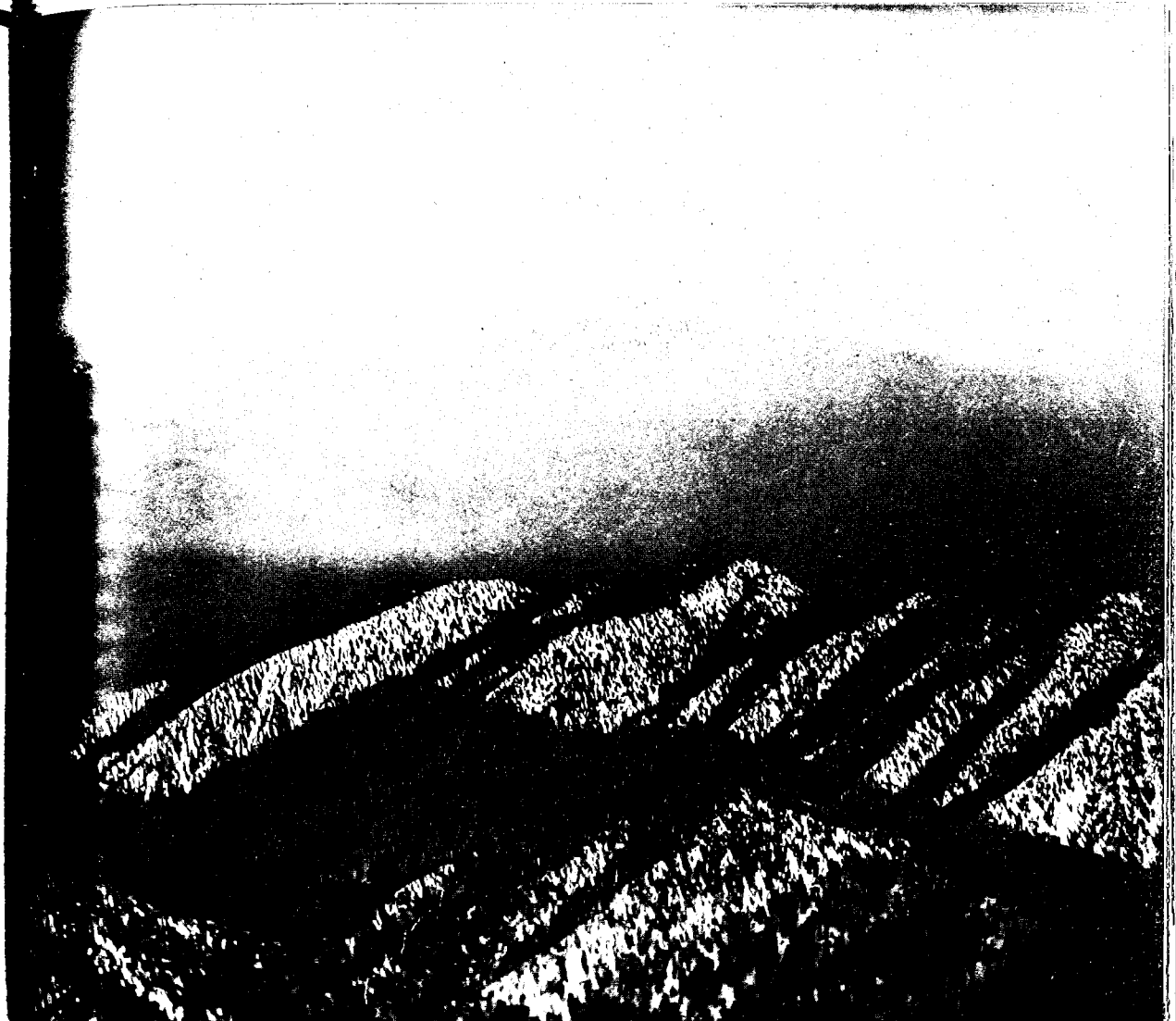
The bluestem to the stirrup on the plains:

Buffalo grass to the fetlock on the ranges:

The sage smelling of men: tasting of memory



We looked west from a rise and we saw forever



Most of the time till now we never thought

It's only now we get wondering



Now that the land's behind us we get wondering



Now that the pines are behind us in Massachusetts

2



Now that the forests of Michigan lie behind us —  
Behind the blackberry barrens: back of the brush piles:  
Back of the dead stumps in the drifting sand:

Millions of acres of stumps to remember the past by —  
To remember the Upper Peninsula hushed with pines:  
To remember hemlocks singing in Wisconsin:  
To remember over the water the birches remembering



Now that the forests of Michigan lie behind —

The east wind on the Lake for a generation

Smelled of the smoke out of Michigan . . . . . out of the pines.



Now that the rivers that ran under trees are behind us —

The prairie rivers with catfish and hickory shad:

The water silky with sun after thunder: the ducks on them:

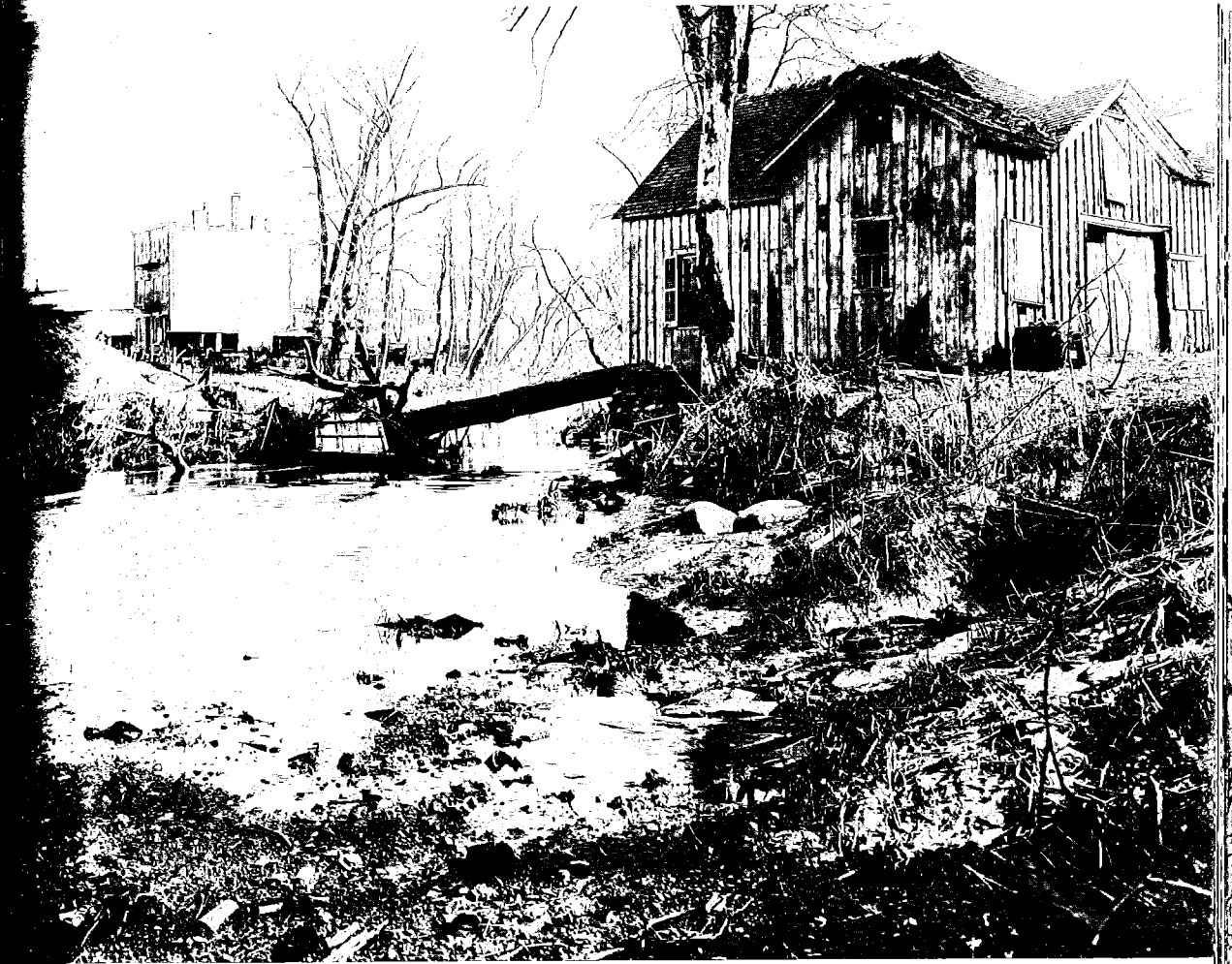
The mountain rivers amber in their channels:

Now that the rivers are back of us: back of the mud-banks:

Back of the dead perch on the slimy sand:

The stream-beds stinking in the August sunlight:

The pools sluggish with sewage: choked with tree trunks:





Now that the grass is behind us: the measureless pasture

Greening before the last frost left the ground:

Yellow by middle summer: cured in autumn:

Tawny: color of hide: windy as water:

A mile up: big as a continent: clean with the

Whole sky going over it:

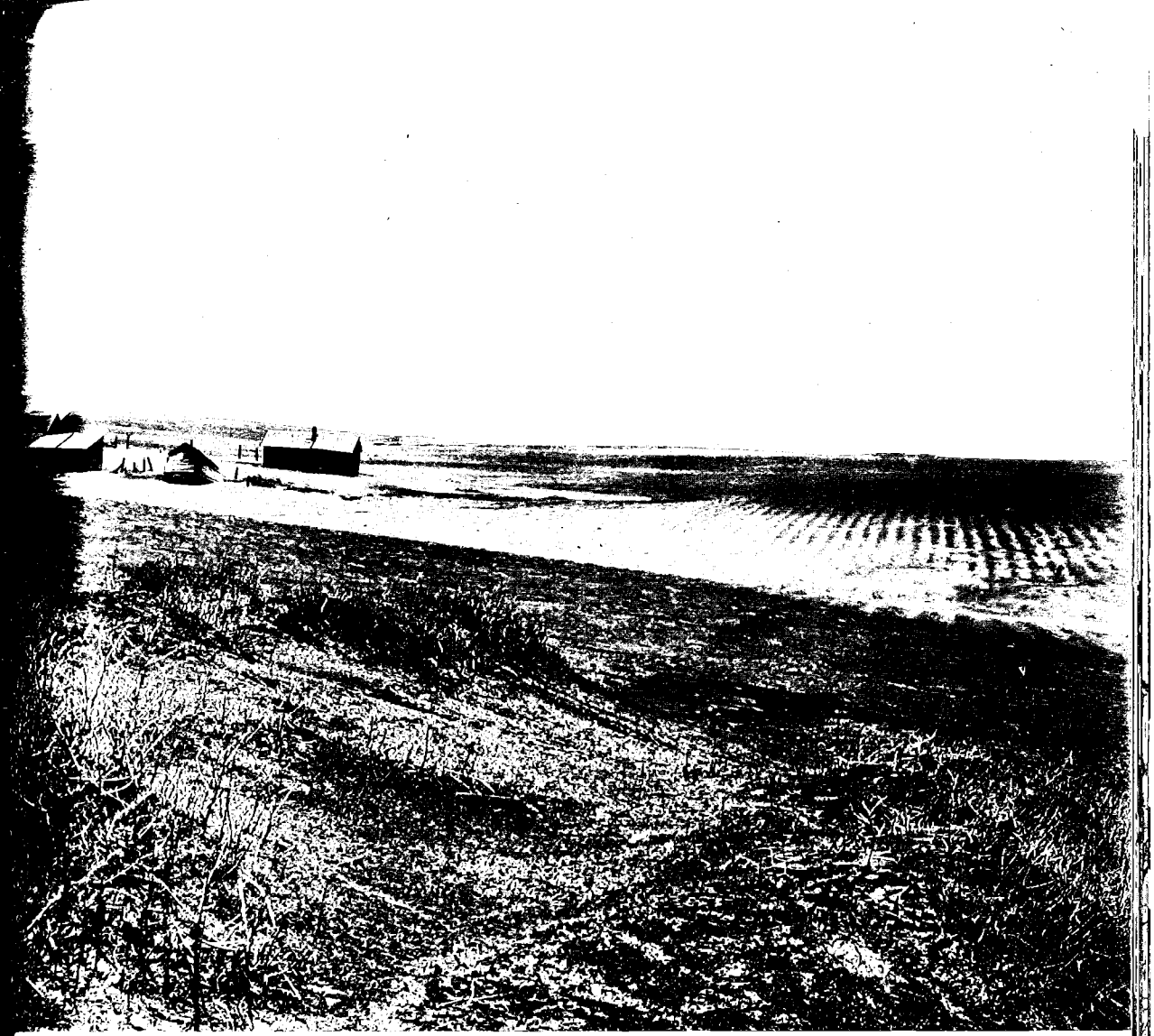
Sun's pasture. . . . .

Now that the grass is back of us: back of the furrows:

Back of the dry-bone winters and the dust:

Back of the stock tanks full but not with water:

Back of the snakeweed greasewood ripgut thistle

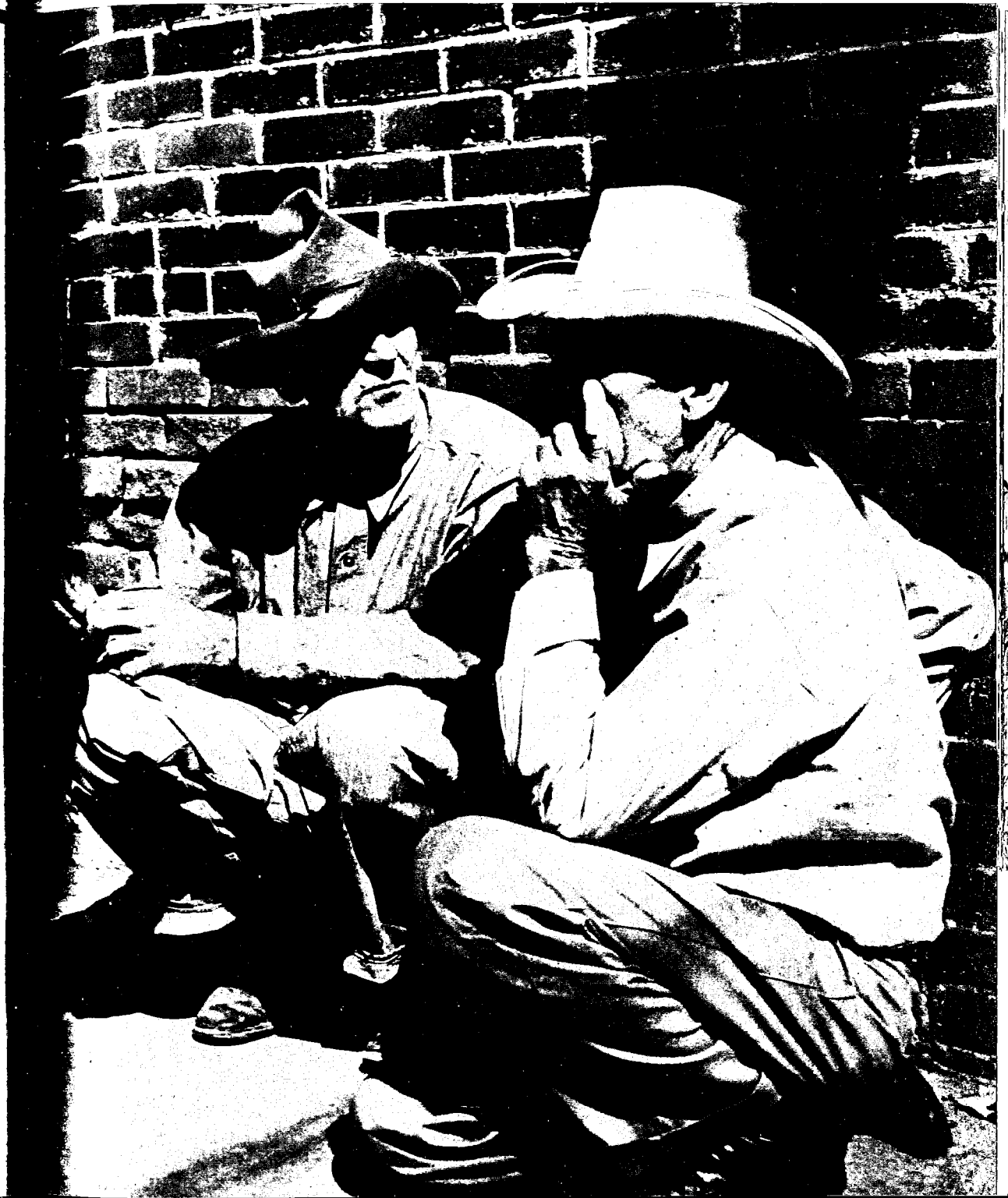


Now that the land's behind us we get wondering

We wonder if the liberty was land and the  
Land's gone: the liberty's back of us. . . .



We can't say



We don't know



We wonder whether the proposition was self-evident  
Because of a quarter section of free land  
And the room as they used to say on the grass in Nebraska  
To look any goddam sonofabitch in the eye  
And tell him to head for hell at the next turn-off

Whether the proposition was self-evident  
Because of the carpenter up in the town in Wisconsin  
Heckling the candidates: Lincoln telling him back —  
“We will give you a farm.  
Uncle Sam has a farm for every one of us.”

And Uncle Sam has a farm for every one of us only they're  
Gone now: the homesteads are narrower —



Whether the liberty we meant was standing  
Easy and soft on the front stoop in our galluses  
Giving the company lawyers directions for getting there

Whether the great American dream was the dream of  
Standing alone on the front stoop in our galluses  
Telling them soft and easy how to get there

And the stoop sags in the sun and we're not telling them



We can't say



We aren't certain





We voted ourselves a quarter section of land

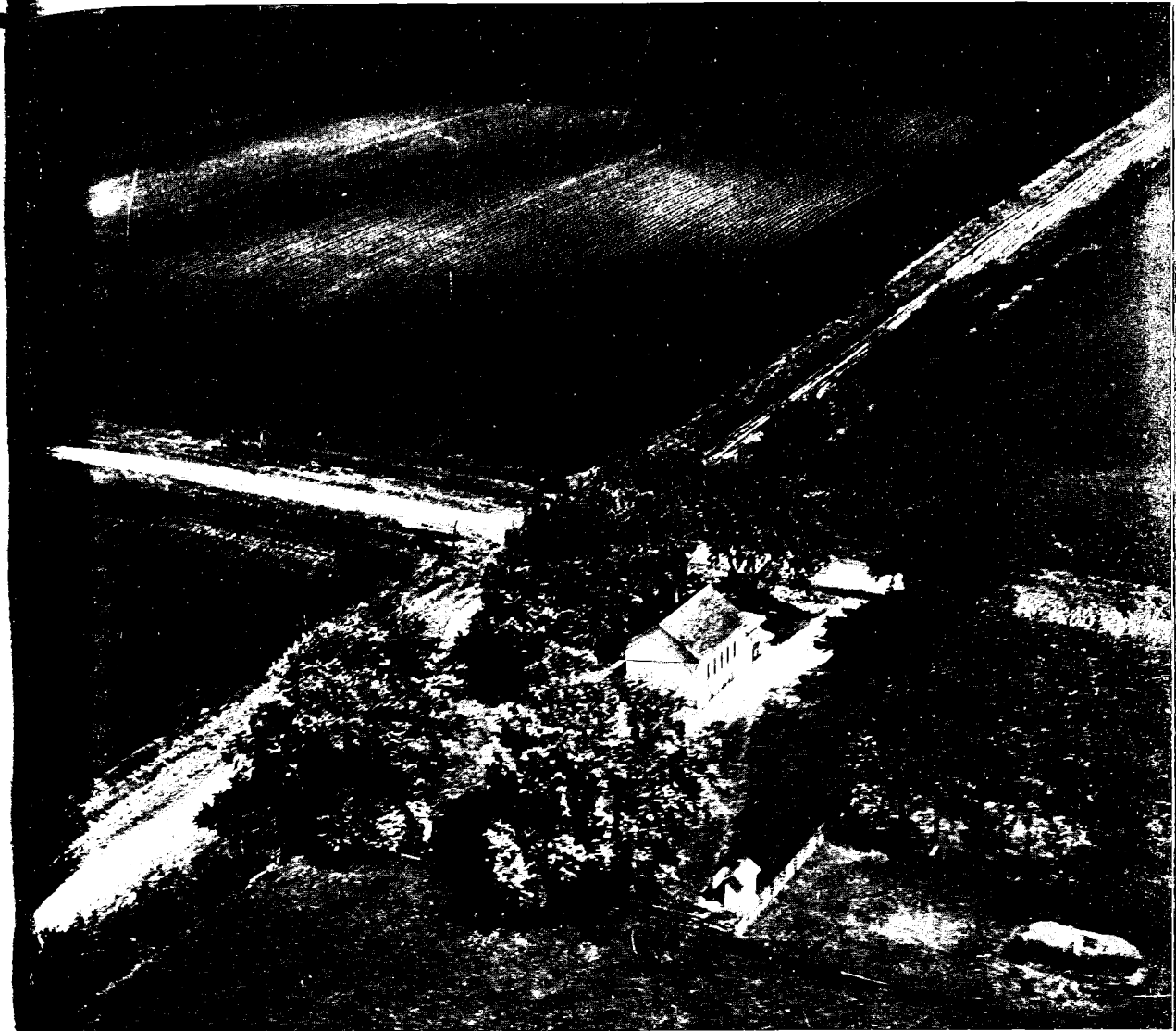
We elected ourselves a hundred and sixty acres of  
Solid ground to our feet and we fenced it in  
For the sons of bitches to look at us over the fences



We squared the country for liberty laying it off  
With the posts plumb on the section lines and the fences  
Following due west from the creeks of Kentucky  
To the counties bigger than Delaware: christened for congressmen



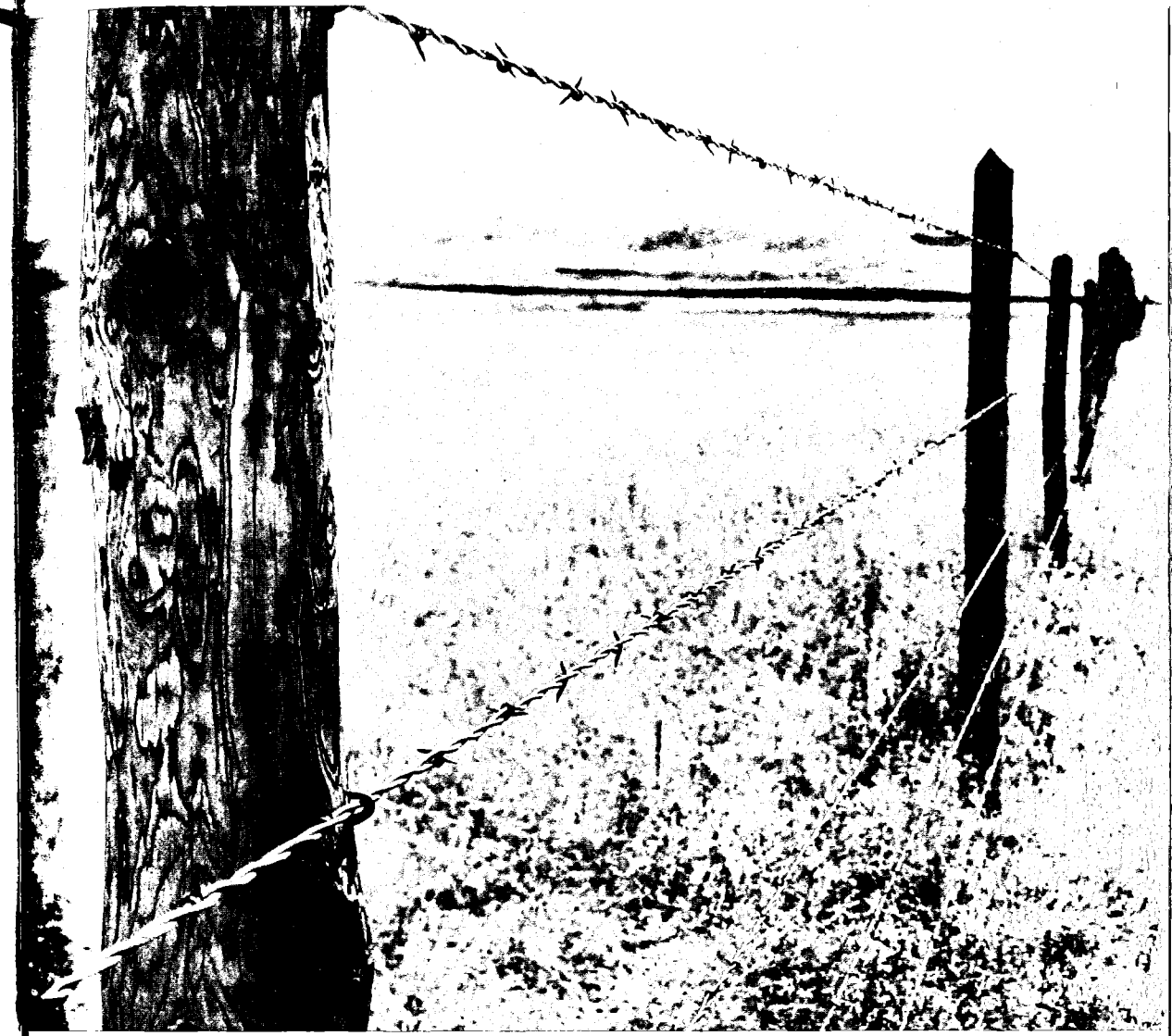
We allowed for the north and the south and the east and the west at the  
Four Corners letting the creditors by  
On the tarred roads with the barbed wire for scenery



. . . . whether we thought we were free by the barbed wire

We can't say

We aren't sure



All we know for sure is — we're not telling them



4

All we know for certain now — the stoop  
Sags with the give of the ground and we're not telling them

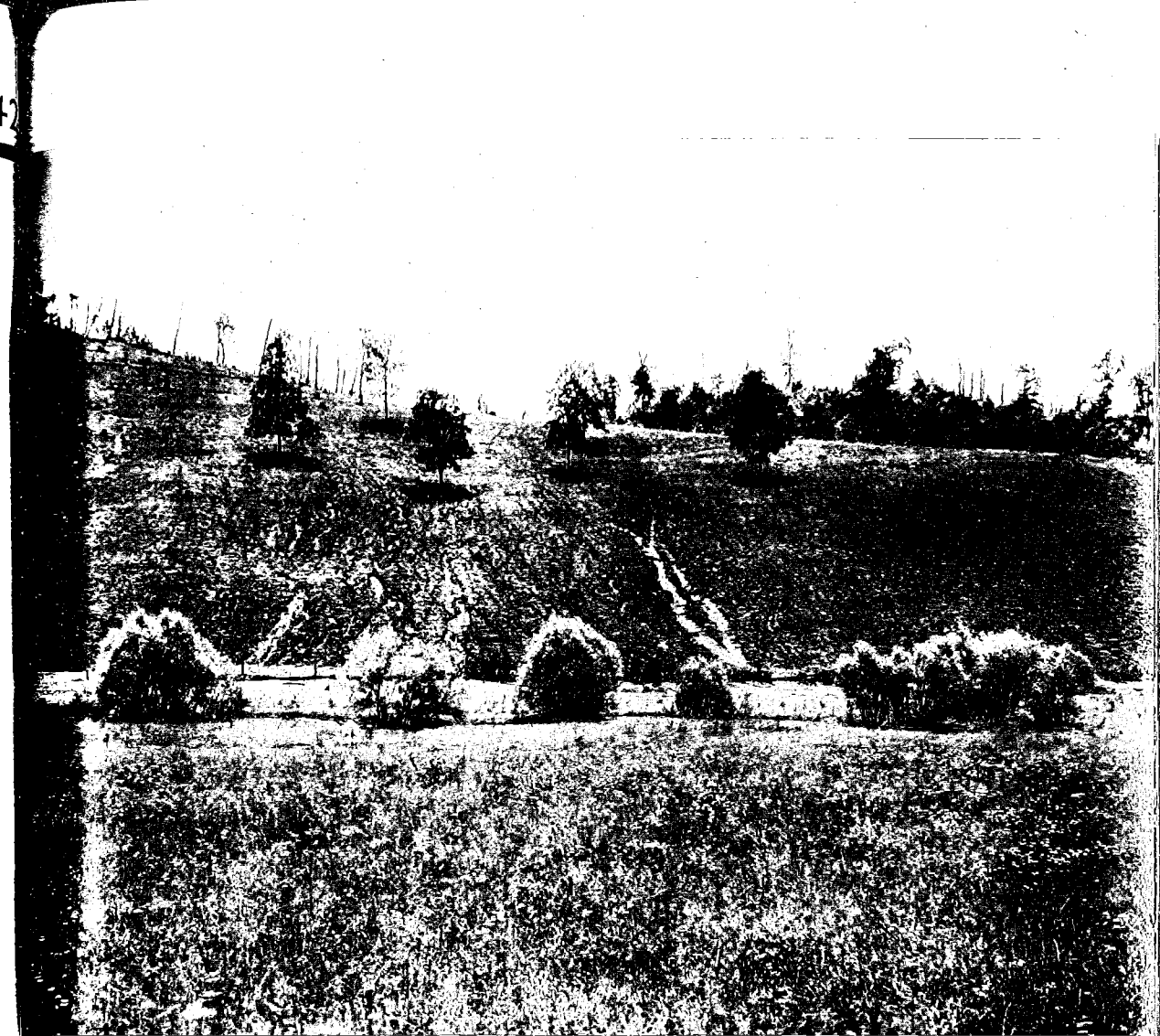


Under our feet and our hands the land leaves us:  
The continent richer than any: heavy with earth:  
Spade-head deep with leaf mold where the trees were:  
Handle deep with black land under grass:  
The new continent: new in our time even: —  
Whole counties cankered to rock and hard-pan:  
One acre in twenty dead as haddock:  
Two farmers in five tenants: the rest of them  
Hoeing the company's mortgage for three rows:  
Hoeing their own on the fourth till their backs break with it:  
The tilled land of the Mississippi Valley —  
"The most spacious habitation for man in the  
World anywhere" —

goldenrod where the corn was:

A quarter and more of it —

goldenrod where the corn was



And we're not telling them: not from our own front doors:





Not from the front stoops sagging toward the ditches:

Not from the gulleyed acres tilled for cotton:

Cut for burdock: harvested for stones



Not from the brittle orchards: barren gardens:  
Dog-run houses with the broken windows:  
Hen-shat houseyards where the children huddle  
Barefoot in winter: tiny in too big rags:  
Fed on porkfat: corn meal: cheap molasses:

Fed on famine rations out of fields

Where grass grew taller than a child could touch once



All we know for certain — we're not telling them:

The land's going out from us under the grants and the titles and  
We're not telling them

not from the tenant farms

Breaking our fingers with another's labor:

Turning another man's sod for him: planting his bean patch:

Restless rain against another's roof

Odorless lilacs in another's dooryard



Under our feet and our hands the land leaves us and  
We're not telling them:

not now:

not from the

Worked out corn fields where the soil has left us

Silent and secret: coloring little streams:

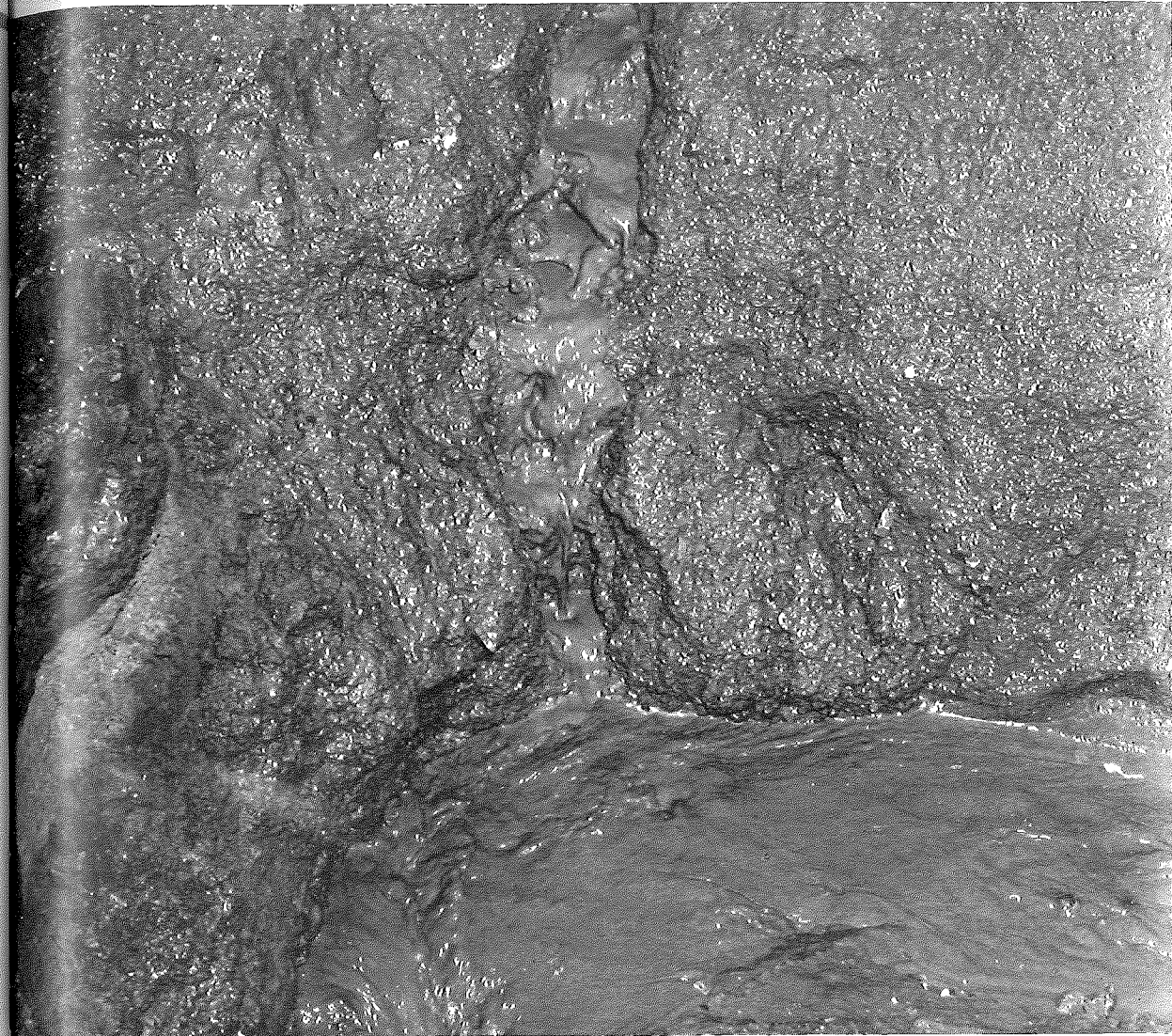
Riling in yellow runnels after rainfall:

Dribbling from furrow down into furrow and down into

Fields fallow with winter and on down —

Falling away to the rivers and on down

Taking the life with it



Taking the bread with it:

taking a good man's pride in a

Clean field well tilled: his children

Fed from furrows his own plow has made them



All we know for sure — the land's going out from us:

Blown out by the dry wind in the wheat:

Blown clean to the arrow-heads under the centuries:

Blown to the stony clay . . .

and we get wondering:

We wonder if the liberty was land



We wonder if the liberty was grass

Greening ahead of us: grazed beyond horizons. . . .

The dust chokes in our throats and we get wondering





We wonder whether the dream of American liberty  
Wasn't the standing by the fence to tell them:

And we're not standing by the homestead fence  
And telling any man where he can head for:

Not in these parts:

not with this wind blowing:

Not with this wind blowing and no rain





To tell the sons of bitches where to head  
You need your heel-hold on a country steady



You need a continent against your feet

53



We've got the public highway we can stand on

Men don't talk much with the road to stand on



We've got the public highway when the tractors  
Crowd the hoes off till the houses sit there  
Empty and left as though the floods had hit them





We've got the public highway when the tractors  
Crowd the hoes off till the houses sit there  
Empty and left as though the floods had hit them



We've got the road to stand on when the mule teams  
Drown in pasture corners by the fence —

The river rising on the parlor table





We've got the road to go by when we've got to:

Blown out on the wheat we've got the road:



Tractored off the cotton in the Brazos —





Sawed out in the timber on the Lakes —



Washed out on the grass land in Kentucky —



Shot-gunned off in Arkansas — the cotton —





We've got the road to go by where it takes us

We've got the narrow acre of the road

To go by where it gets to

We can go there



We've got the cotton choppers' road from Corpus Christi  
North over Texas: west over Arizona:  
Over the mesas: over the mile-high mountains:  
Over the waterless country: on west





We've got the pea-pickers' road out of California

North into Oregon: back into Arizona:

East to Colorado for the melons:

North to Billings for the beet crop. . . . back again. . . .



We've got the fruit tramps' road from Florida northward —  
Tangipahoa Parish Louisiana:  
North to Judsonia Arkansas: east to Paducah:  
North to Vermilion Illinois. . . . into Michigan. . . .



We've got the crop contractors at the cross-roads. . . .



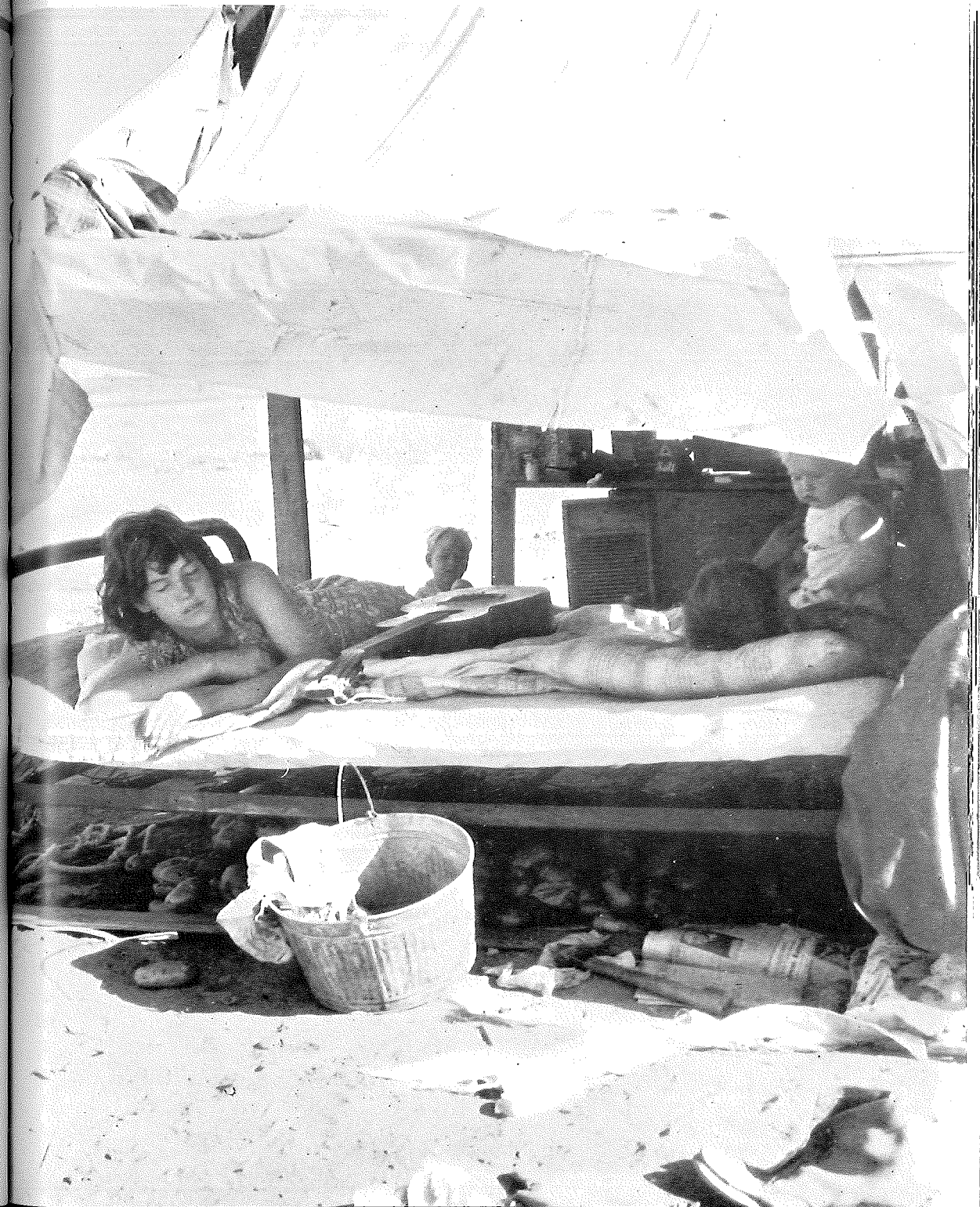


We've got the narrow acre of the road  
To go by where it gets to

We can get there



Get to California with the sunshine  
Shining on the sunshine in the sun



Get to public grass in California





Get to parkways by the public fences



Get to roadside camps across the junctions

72



Get to the bedrooms on the through-way streets





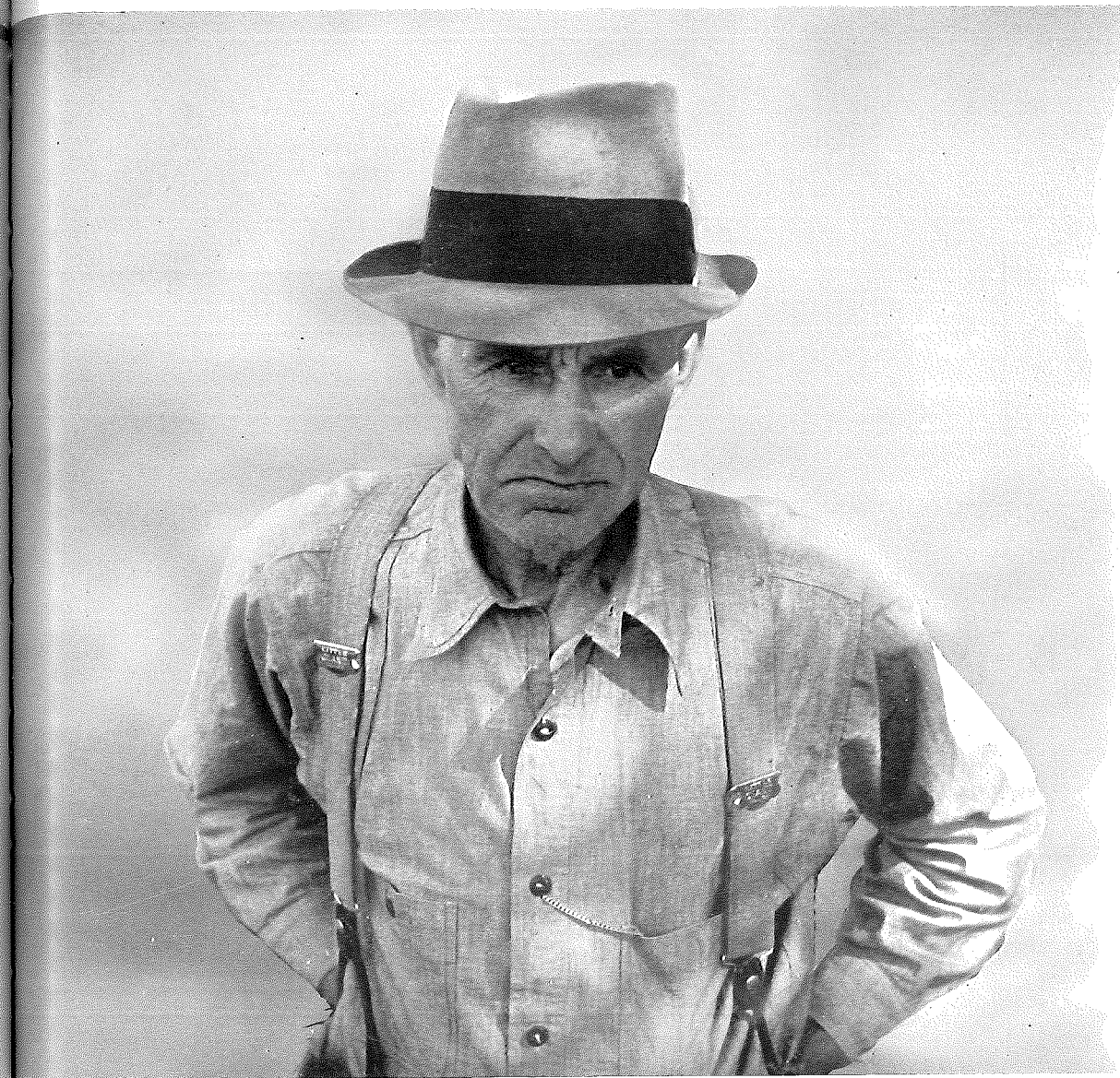
We've got the road to go by where it takes us

We've got the narrow acre of the road  
To go by when the land's gone

We can stand there

Keep our damn-mouths shut and we can stand there

We can stand till sundown with our mouths shut



Men don't talk much standing by the roads

Not in California:

Not remembering the vigilantes at Salinas:

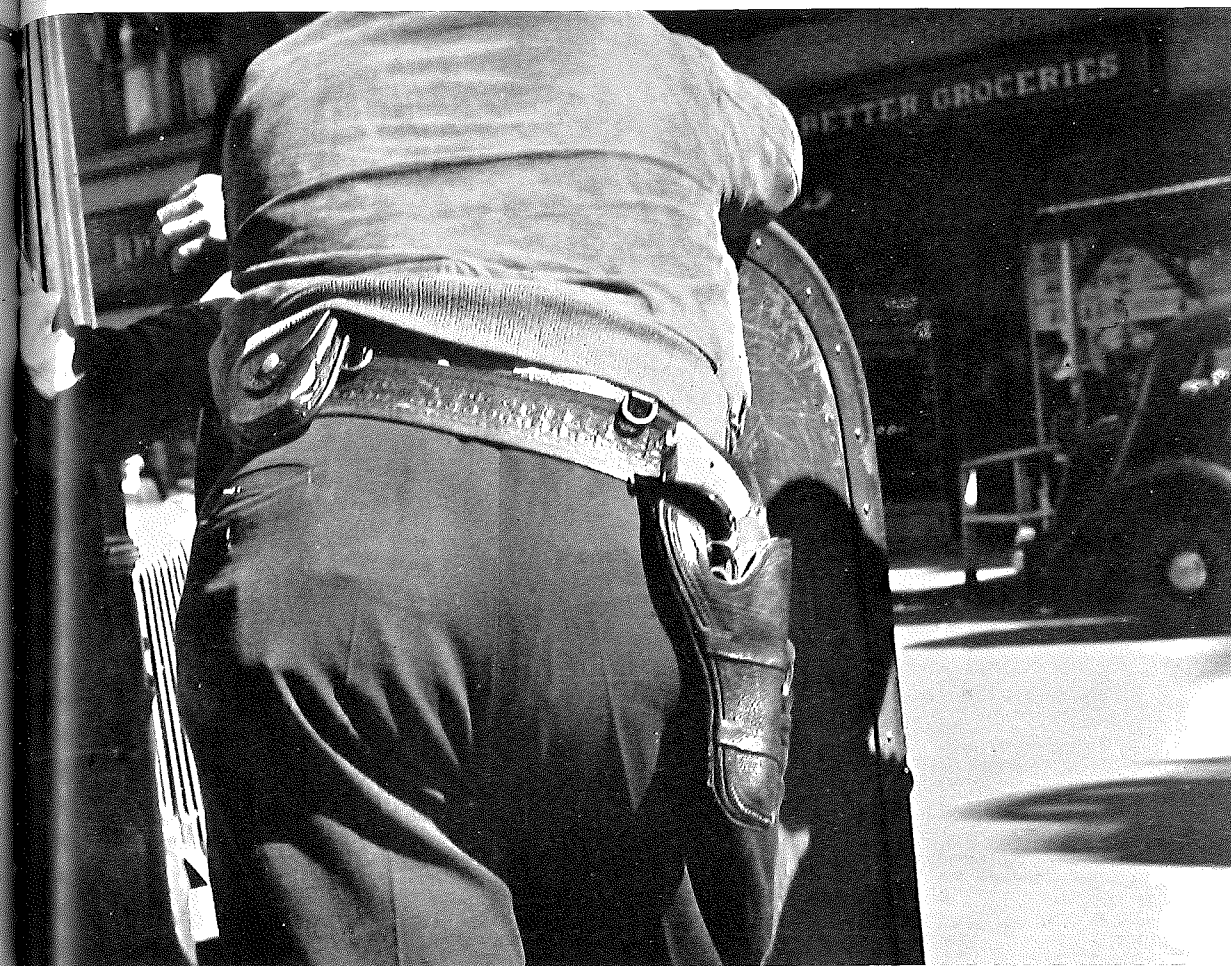
Not remembering the bunk-house at Salinas and the

Silence when the shots stopped. . . .

Not in Marked Tree Arkansas: not often:

Not in Tampa where the flogged man died:

Men don't talk much standing by the roadside





All we know for sure is — we're not talking



All we know for sure —

We've got the roads

To go by now the land's gone



We're not talking



We're not talking now:

we only wonder



We wonder whether the dream of American liberty  
Was two hundred years of pine and hardwood  
And three generations of the grass

And the generations are up: the years over

We don't know





It was two hundred years from the smell of the tidewater  
Up through the Piedmont: on through the piney woods:  
Till we came out  
With our led calves and our lean women  
In the oak openings of Illinois

It was three generations from the oak trees —  
From the islands of elm and the islands of oak in the prairie —  
Till we heeled out with our plows and our steel harrows  
On the grass-drowned reef bones of the Plains





"Four score and seven years" said the Orator

We remember it differently: we remember it

Kansas: Illinois: Ohio: Connecticut.

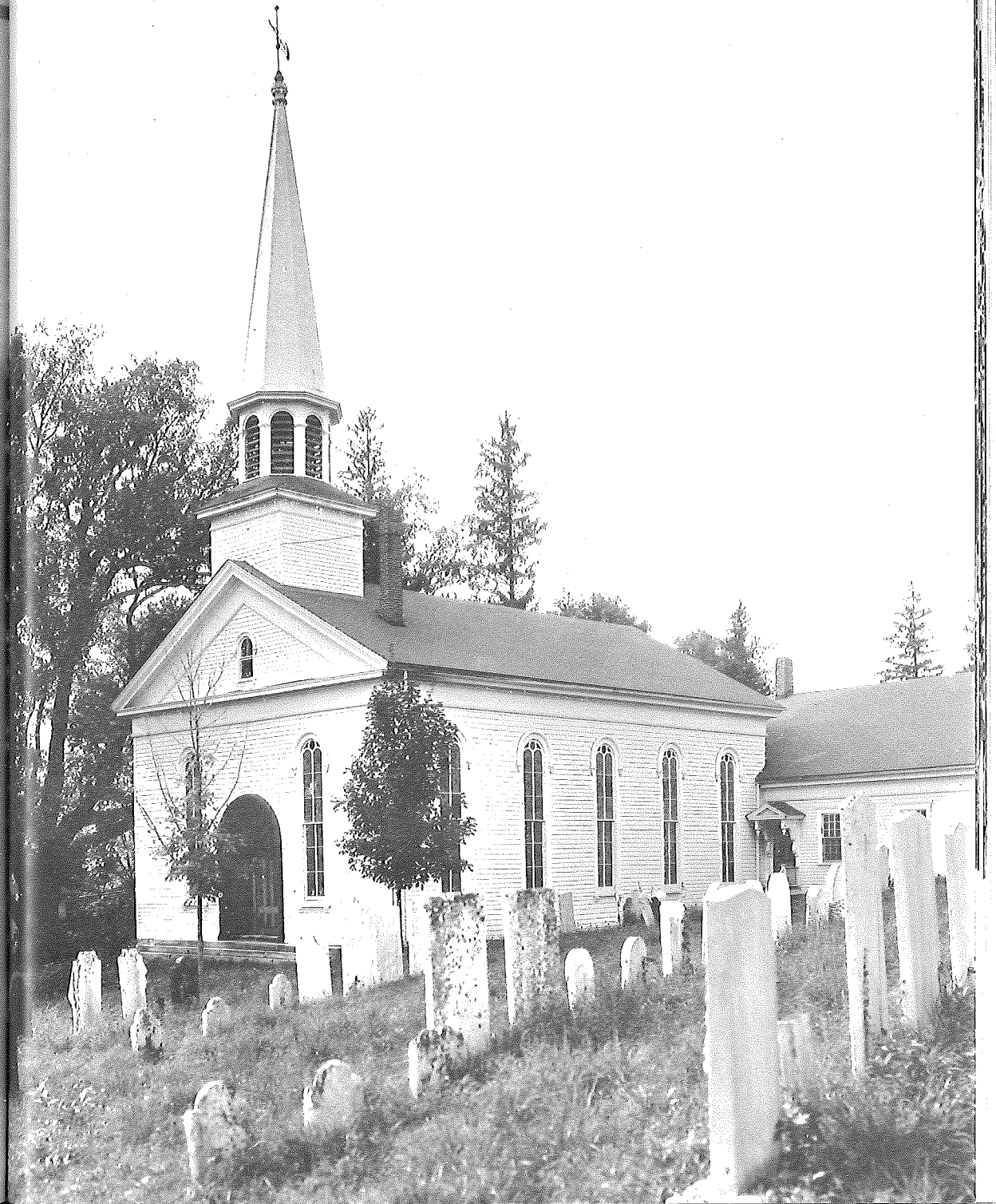
We remember it Council Bluffs: St. Louis:

Wills Creek: the Cumberland: Shenandoah

The long harangues of the grass in the wind are our histories

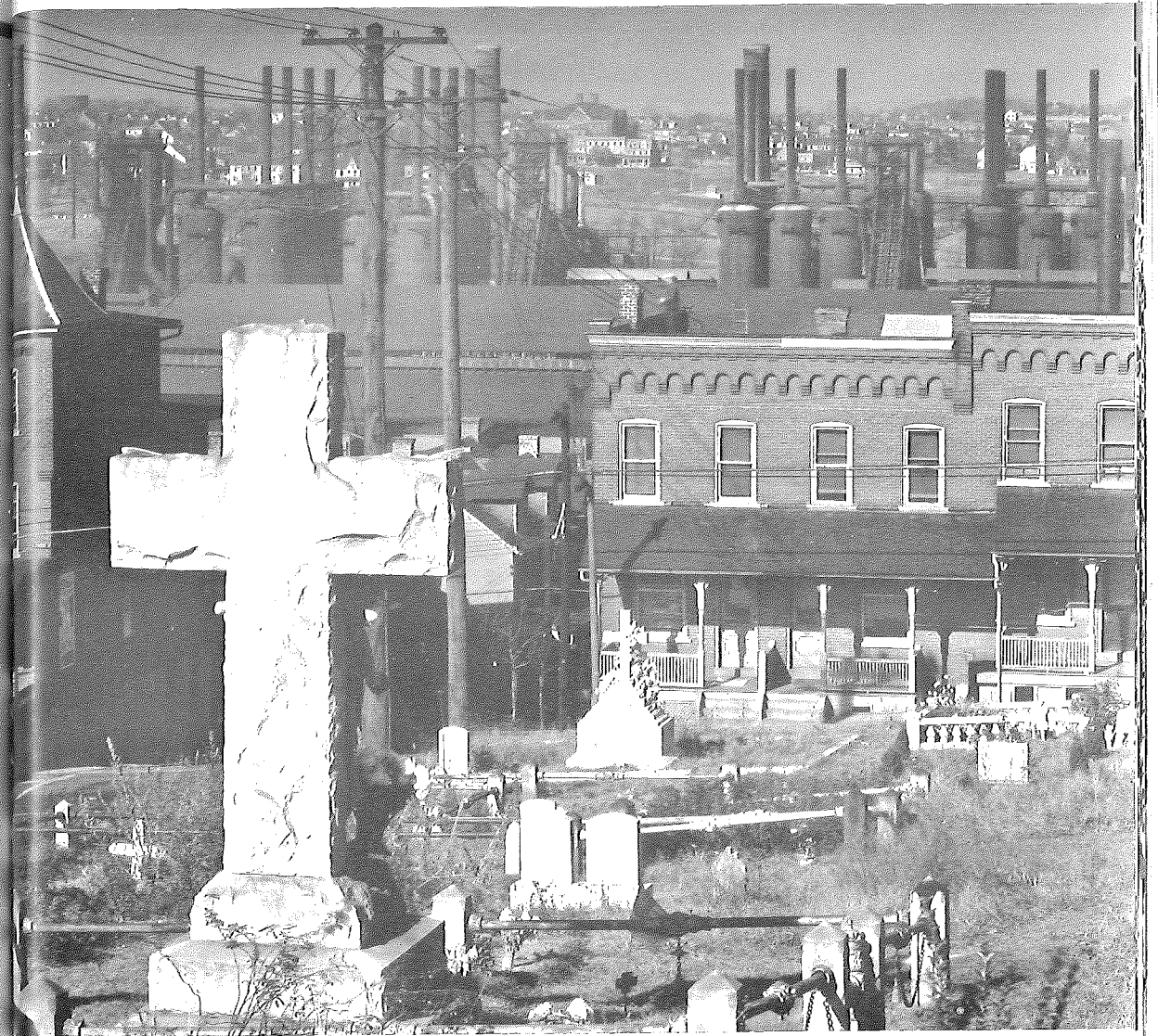
We tell our freedom backward by the land

We tell our past by the gravestones and the apple trees



We wonder whether the great American dream  
Was the singing of locusts out of the grass to the west and the  
West is behind us now:

The west wind's away from us

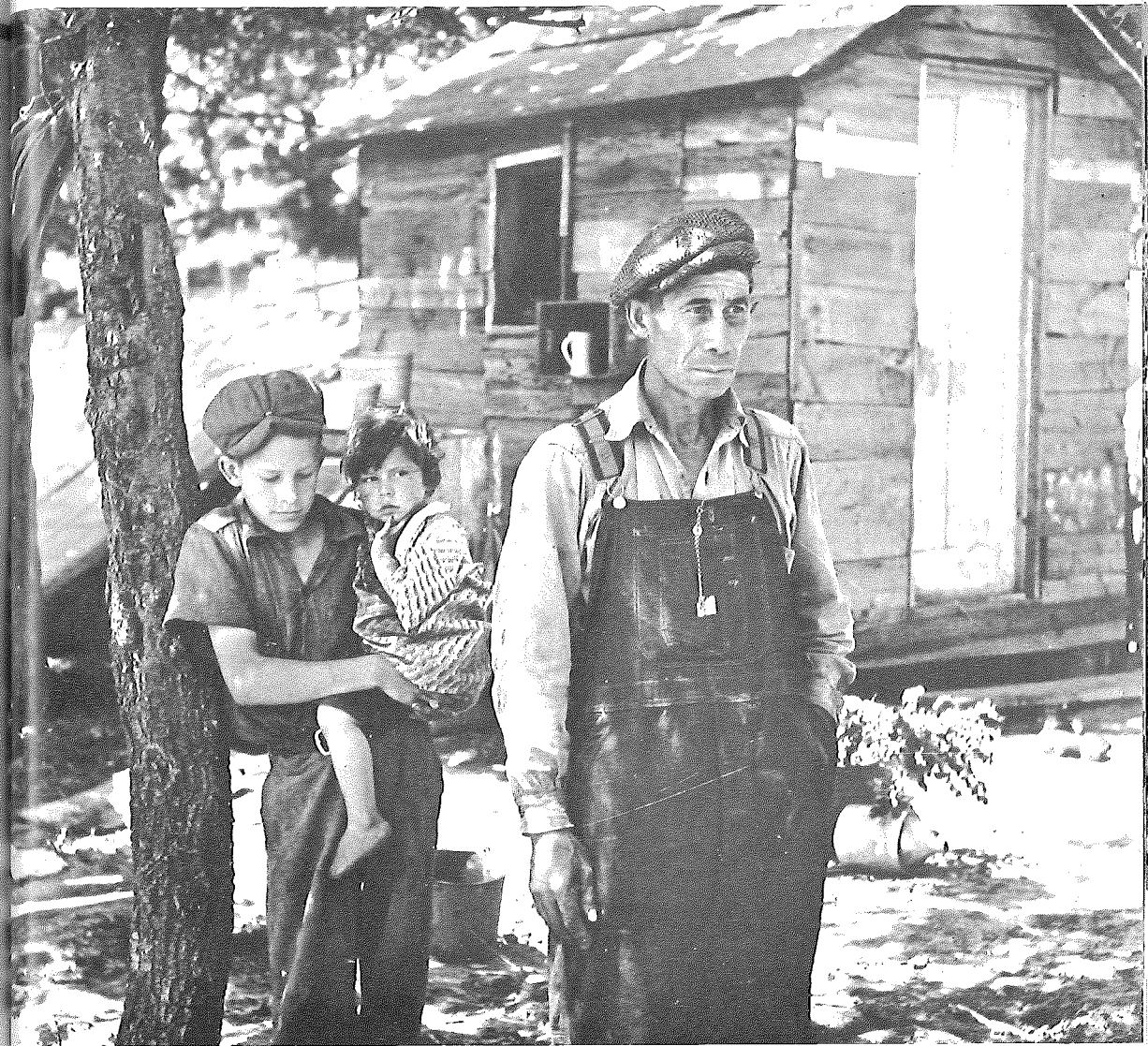


We wonder if the liberty is done:

The dreaming is finished

We can't say

We aren't sure

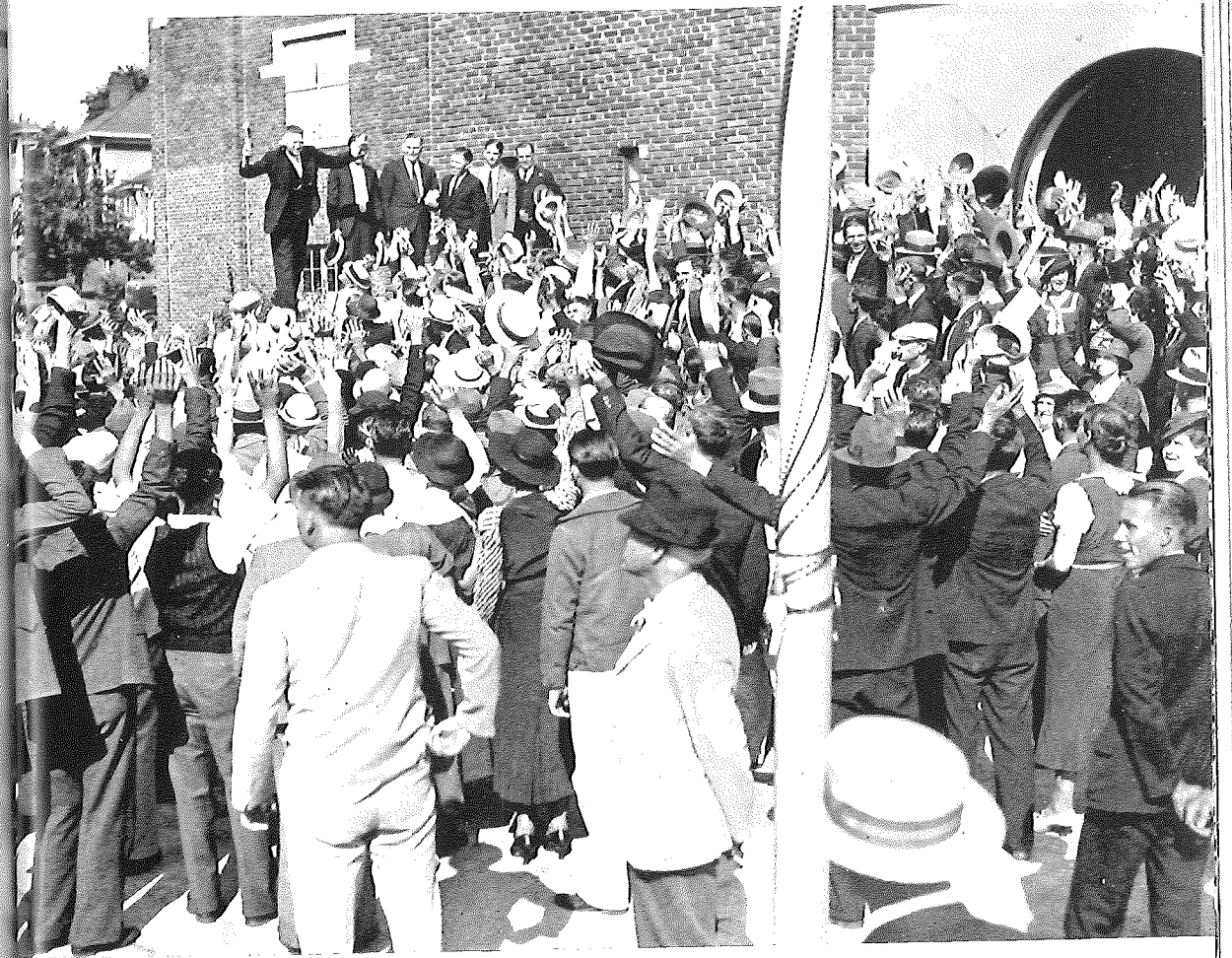




Or if there's something different men can dream



Or if there's something different men can mean by  
Liberty. . . .



Or if there's liberty a man can mean that's

Men: not land





We wonder

We don't know

We're asking



## NOTES

"Land of the Free" is the opposite of a book of poems illustrated by photographs. It is a book of photographs illustrated by a poem. The photographs, most of which were taken for the Resettlement Administration,\* existed before the poem was written. The book is the result of an attempt to give these photographs an accompaniment of words. In so far as the form of the book is unusual, it is a form imposed by the difficulties of that attempt. The original purpose had been to write some sort of text to which these photographs might serve as commentary. But so great was the power and the stubborn inward livingness of these vivid American documents that the result was a reversal of that plan. The poem was written in July and August, 1937, at Conway, Massachusetts.

A. MacL.

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\* The photographers for the Farm Security Administration (formerly Resettlement Administration) are Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Carl Mydans, and Theodor Jung. About twenty pictures come from sources other than the Farm Security Administration files: these are the pictures by Margaret Bourke-White, Willard Van Dyke, Wayne Bell for 'Life,' Pictures, Inc., National Child Labor Committee, U. S. Forest Service, W. H. Lathrop and W. B. Bradford and R. W. Hufnagle for Soil Conservation Service, 'Field and Stream Magazine,' Ewing Galloway, New England Council, 'The Daily Pantagraph' (Bloomington, Illinois), Tennessee Valley Authority, William M. Rittase for Black Star, John Gutmann for Pix, Acme Newspictures, and The Publishers' Photo Service.

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