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An Old Friend with a New Name

Ginalie Swaim

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Exciting news from your editor

An Old Friend with a New Name

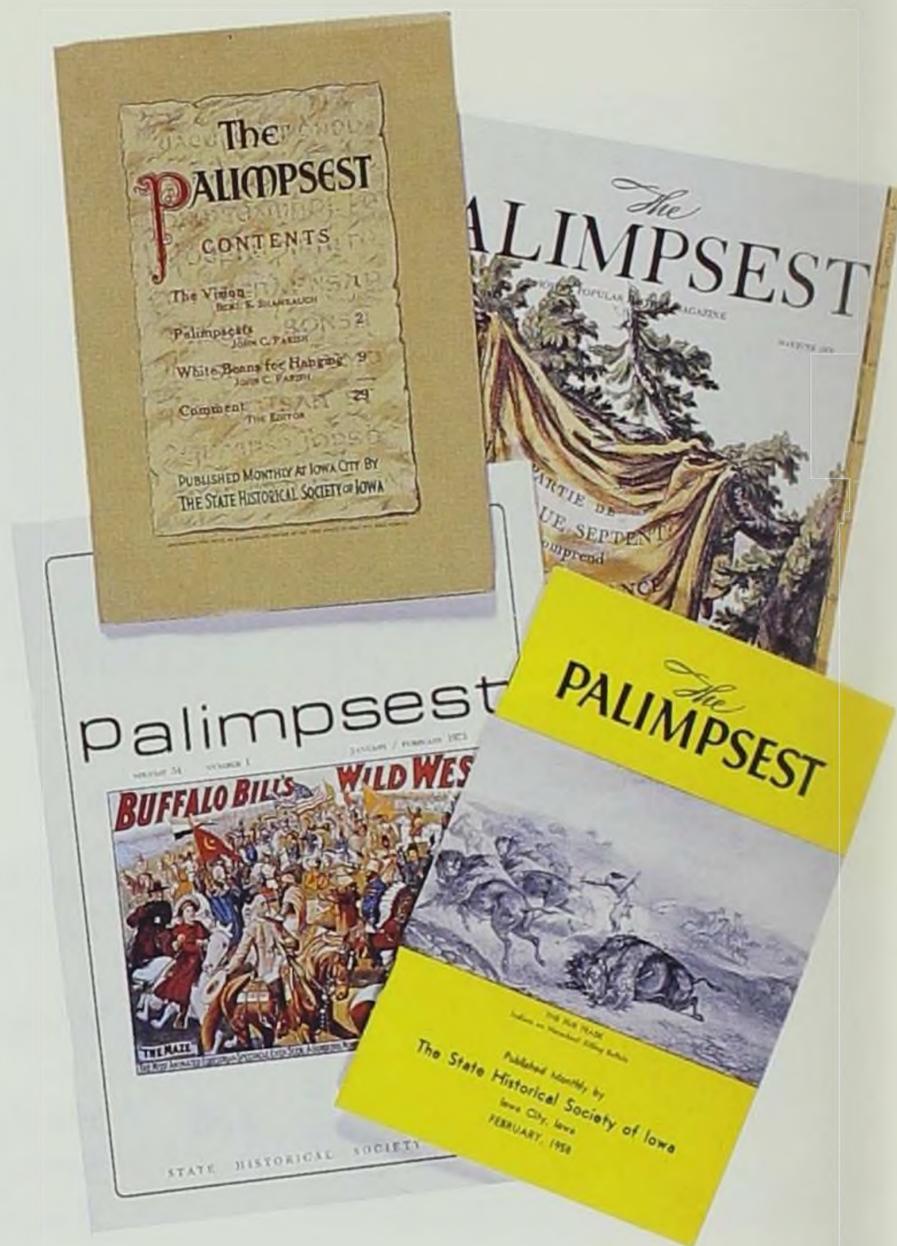
Recently a reader wrote to us: "I always avoided your magazine because I didn't know what a palimpsest was or how to pronounce the word (I still don't know how!). But then I received a gift subscription to the magazine and was delighted to discover it's about Iowa history. I'll bet there are many others like me who would enjoy the magazine if they weren't scared off by its strange name."

This is a story all too familiar to me. As editor of the magazine, I'm naturally interested in reaching as wide an audience as possible. It's frustrating to know that the name on the cover of the magazine may alienate people before they have a chance to discover what's inside.

So it is with great excitement—and a few tears—that I announce that the magazine you hold in your hands will be rechristened in 1996. For seventy-six years it has borne the intriguing and unique name *The Palimpsest*. Starting with the spring 1996 issue, our new name will be *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*. (We're following the standard publishing custom of naming a magazine what it is, and we think it has a nice lilt, too.) Our bigger size, about 8x11, will allow more variety in design and layout and more economical use of paper.

This won't be the first change, as you can see from a few sample covers shown here. Since 1920, it has grown from roughly 5x7 inches to 7x10. The design of the nameplate has changed four times. Illustrations have increased from none at all, to an insert of black-and-white plates, to today's color images of photos, artifacts, and documents. The cover has changed from a small brown cover, to a glossy solid-color cover with a small black-and-white photo, to our current showcase covers with full-size color photography.

The growing visual richness of the magazine reflects basic truths about the past—



that history is more than words, and that it isn't black and white. We are reminded, too, that history isn't just for people who recognize unusual words like "palimpsest." Therefore, after long study, we have decided the magazine needs a new, friendlier name.

"Why change the name now, after seventy-six years?" you ask. "It's a venerable and unusual title. What's more, I finally know how to pronounce it."

I agree that the word "palimpsest," once learned, "trips along softly on the tongue this way" (as Meredith Willson says of "Gary, Indiana"). But, oh! to master that word "palimpsest."

We've taken to heart what many of you, our loyal readers, have told us—in your letters, survey responses, and phone calls with research questions or subscription orders. For nine years I've listened to our readers and researchers and writers puzzle over the word. I've provided it in awkward pauses in a conversation, modeled it when I sensed the speaker was deliberately skirting it. With

foot-high flashcards, one per syllable, I've coached a busload of history enthusiasts on how to pronounce the name. And still people stumble over it, or ask, "Now, what does it mean again?"

Our reasons for changing the name are threefold. First, people who don't know *The Palimpsest* won't get a feel for the magazine from the name alone. As one reader advised some time ago: "Change the name to reflect Iowa history—nobody knows what it's about."

Second, people have a hard time pronouncing the name. "Even college graduates slur over it," another reader confessed. "I haven't found an ordinary person who could pronounce the name." Another remarked, "If you can't pronounce it, it is hard to sell it!"

Perhaps most important, for the magazine to keep bringing Iowa history to more people, it needs a name more people can understand. "I realize the historical significance of the name," a reader commented, "but perhaps another name might attract more subscribers." Even American writer Gore Vidal, whose autobiography was just published, in a 1994 interview remarked about those memoirs: "They're entitled *Palimpsest*—a word nobody will know."

Many of our readers and writers and editors (including me) cherish the name and its long tradition. Some appreciate the title because history, like a palimpsest, has multiple layers. "It is probably the only unique name in the world repertoire of magazines," one reader wrote. Another thought the name "gives it distinction." I agree, and I want you to know that this has not been an easy or quick decision. My colleagues and I at the State Historical Society of Iowa have struggled with this issue for years.

We have become convinced that we must

focus less on our affection and respect for the word "palimpsest," and more on our greater goal (and official mandate) of reaching ever wider audiences with the fascinating story of Iowa's past. A clearer title will also help you share your enthusiasm for the magazine with your friends who don't yet subscribe. (Can it be that there are curious, thoughtful people who don't yet subscribe? Let's bring them on board!) What's more, a clearer name will bring more researchers to the magazine's solid research, and more classroom teachers and students to its accessible information.

In the premiere *Palimpsest* in July 1920, founder Benjamin Shambaugh explained the magazine's aim: "that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished." We are now taking another step forward in this tradition by replacing a

title on the cover that unfortunately has been to many a locked door with a secret password. We are changing it to a name that will be a wide-open door with a welcome sign.

What will not change is our commitment to bringing you four issues a year chockfull of compelling Iowa history. In fact, we're planning exciting new ways of presenting

more stories and photos in every issue.

Over the decades of *The Palimpsest's* existence, we have been heartened by your loyalty to the magazine and to the cause of disseminating Iowa history. Thank you. As we enter Iowa's 150th year of statehood, we want to count on your ongoing support for the magazine and its revitalized mission. And for those of you have especially cherished the name *The Palimpsest*, please give the new title—*Iowa Heritage Illustrated*—a try. I think you'll soon find that this is a change for the better. Look at it as an old friend with a new name.

—The Editor

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