Eddie Bowles & James Hearst

In the 1981 book, *Time Like a Furrow,* the Cedar Falls farmer-poet (and namesake of the Hearst Center for the Arts) James Hearst wrote about his experiences growing up on a local farm before the era of industrial agriculture. In one chapter, he writes of his memories of meeting Eddie Bowles for the first time, more than fifty years earlier.

James Hearst and James McAlvin

Hearst first met Bowles sometime between 1914 and 1918. Bowles was introduced to Hearst in late February or early March between those years, thanks to Hearst's father, who needed Bowles to cut logs to heat their house. Bowles' saw was transported on the back of his truck while he was helping the Hearsts cut the logs. Young James Hearst was fascinated and impressed by the machine.

James Hearst noted that Eddie Bowles was the first Black man he had ever met, and, as detailed in the "Cedar Falls as a Sundown Town" display, there were reasons why that may have been the case. But what was most memorable to Hearst and his siblings was hearing Eddie tell stories about his time in New Orleans. Like many Cedar Falls residents whose paths crossed Eddie Bowles, James Hearst came away with fond memories half a century later.

Wood Gathering

Turn history back a few pages and find the account of a time—say, B.G. & B.O. (before gas and before oil)—when we used wood for heating. The cookstove and the furnace had to be fed if meals were to be cooked and the house kept warm. This meant that a harvest of wood had to be gathered each year, sawed and split and piled ready to burn. This was a winter job, when the fields were all locked in their beds of snow and ice, and during the short days the men spent their time doing chores, mending harness, and making ready to bring in the wood for the next season.

In those days, the farm depended on wood for more things than heating the house. We cut and cured ash for eveners, neckyokes, doubletrees, and wagon tongues. Smaller pieces, trimmed and smoothed, became hammer and ax handles, a frame for the grindstone, and new legs for the workbench. Sometimes we squared-up oak logs for beams or sills in a machine shed or hog house. The demand for wood never ended. But to us children the main use seemed to be for the house. Our awareness here came from the armsful and basketsful that we carried from woodshed to kitchen and cellar.

When the logs were hauled home, we piled them in what seemed to us a huge pile. The big ones went on the bottom and the smaller ones on top because Father and the hired men could throw them into place. Then, late in February or early in March, Father asked Eddie Bowles to bring his saw rig and cut the logs into stove-length chunks. This took most of a day. The saw itself measured about four feet across, the circumference cut into wicked-looking teeth. One side of a frame held the saw fastened to an axle, a long shaft that crossed the frame. On the other end, a small belt wheel received the belt that drove the saw. Up in front was a massive one-

cylinder gasoline engine with two big flywheels.

Eddie Bowles was black, the first black man we had seen. But his color did not interest us as much as his ability to handle the engine and the wood. He sat at the dinner table with us and captivated us children with stories of his life in New Orleans. But his real importance for us came when he adjusted his carburetor, turned on the gas, opened a petcock to relieve the compression, and turned those big flywheels around and around until the engine coughed a time or two and then settled down to regular explosions, shooting gas out of the open petcock until Eddie closed it. Then he slipped the belt over the small belt wheel and, while the big wheels were spinning, slipped it over one of them. You had to be skillful and quick to do this. "A good way to lose a finger or two," Eddie said.

Then Father and the men carried the logs, one at a time, and laid one end on the platform just back of the saw blade. Eddie took hold of the end, measured with his eye the right length for a chunk of stove wood, then all the men pressed the log forward into the saw. After a few logs had been sawed, Eddie spread the sawdust around where the men stood so no one would slip on the ice and snow. "You can't be too careful around a saw," Eddie said. That's why he always stood closest to the blade and handled the chunks of wood as they were cut off. He gave them a toss onto a rapidly growing pile, or if the chunks were too big, he laid them on the ground beside the pile. He moved the rig several times to keep even with the diminishing pile of logs. This gave him room to throw the chunks, too, because the chunk pile built up pretty fast.

From that day until field work started, anyone who had a spare moment grabbed an ax and split the chunks into pieces to fit into the kitchen range. The bigger chunks we saved for the furnace. Each one of us had his own chopping block and ax. Father and the hired men could split a chunk in two or three pieces, then hold the pieces with one hand and slab off the right size for the stove. We boys struggled manfully, but the wood never split as easily for us as it did for the men. Only after a hard freeze could I set up a straight-grained maple or oak block and slab it off as the men did.