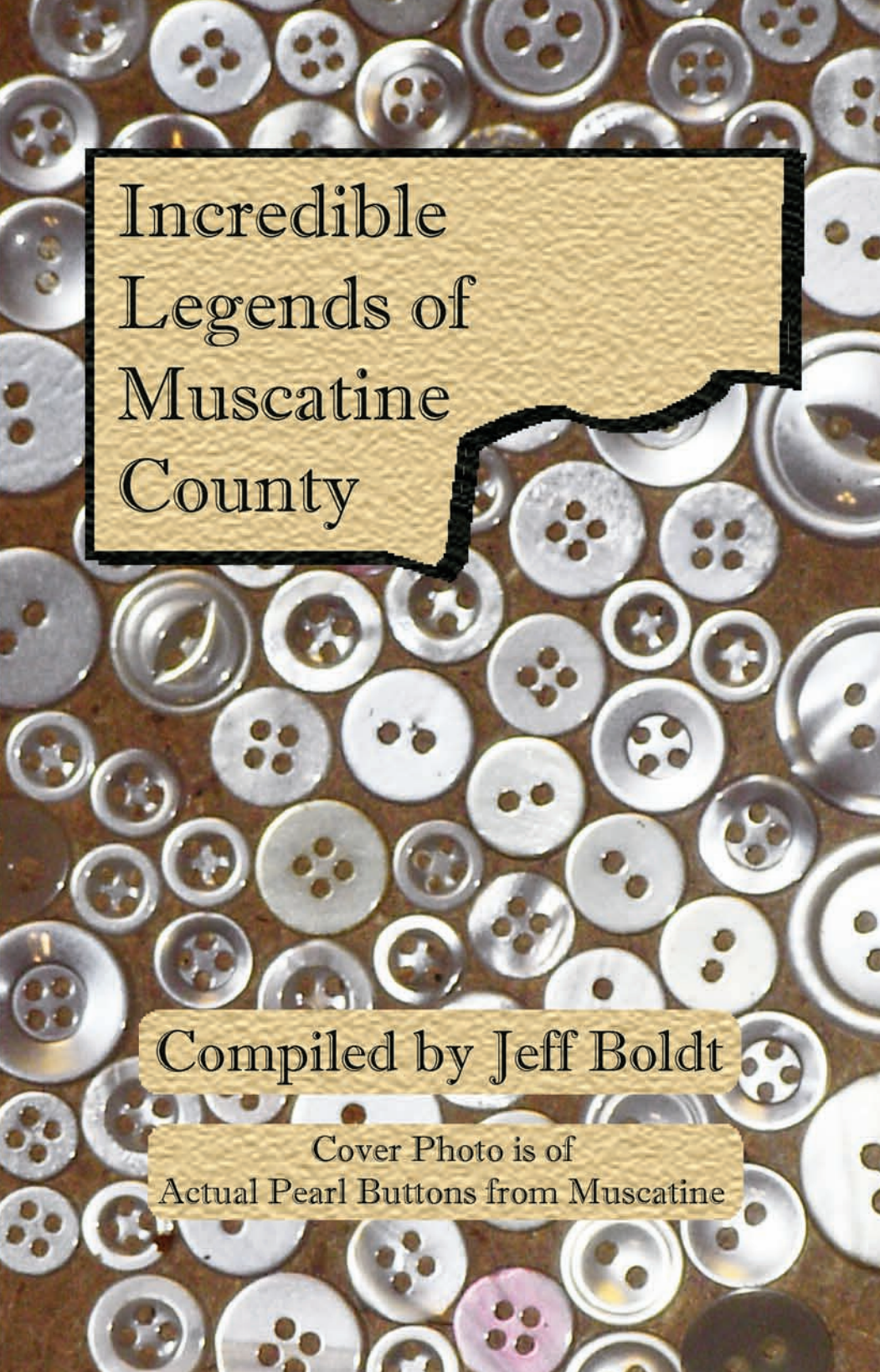


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Incredible Legends of Muscatine County

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Incredible Legends of Muscatine County

Compiled by Jeff Boldt

Cover Photo is of
Actual Pearl Buttons from Muscatine

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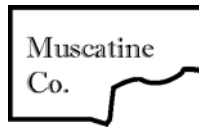
Some characters, locations and events in this book are from actual historical accounts. The legends and events are fictitious and any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is intended purely as entertainment.

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The Visitor

By Maggie Longtin

As a visiting nurse, I travel to the homes of shut-ins and check up on them. I live in West Liberty but am employed by Community Nursing of Muscatine.

One day I was to go to Atalissa to visit old Mrs. Mortensen. I arrived there and she let me in. She seemed in good spirits and was very happy to see me. She let me know she didn't get too many visitors since her son had passed away a few years ago. Usually Mrs. Boylen from down the street would stop in to check on her but she would never stay to visit. Needless to say, I was a welcomed guest. Mrs. Mortensen talked the whole time I was there. I get that a lot from the lonely people I visit. I checked her pulse and blood pressure

and listened to her heart—between sentences that is. Together we would sit down and make up a grocery list of things she needed and I would run to the store and get them for her. I also would check the house and straighten up a little. One day I noticed a picture with a young Mrs. Mortensen and a strange man. He looked a little familiar but I could not place him. I asked her about the man in the picture. She sat down, got a huge smile on her face, and proceeded to tell me this story.

“That was taken back in 1930. My son, Clem, was a car mechanic and had a tow truck back then. He would travel along Route 6 when there was no work and find people broken down in their cars. Clem was a good boy, big hearted, and would do anything to help you out. But Clem was a bit slow. He wasn’t good at reading or writing or too good with figurin’ numbers. His speech was a little slow and the other kids used to make fun of him in school. But that boy could tear down a car engine and put it back together better’n anyone could. In that respect he was a genius. He spoke slowly and people could tell he was a bit touched. But his big heart made up for his lack of social graces. There wasn’t one single Sunday we’d go to church that there wasn’t somebody asking him questions about their car...or tractor...or some piece of machinery out on the farm. A lot of those Sunday afternoons, he spent visitin’ some of those folks to

work on their cars and farm equipment. I reckon he could have made a lot more money if he would have charged the same prices they charged in town but Clem was too big-hearted for that. He only charged a few dollars for the work he did.

One day Clem was out along Route 6 when he came upon this broken down car. He stopped and asked if he could help and the gentleman was pleased to let him do so. Clem towed the man's car back to the garage outside. He brought the gentleman in and I offered him some lemonade and cookies while Clem looked at the car. About twenty minutes later, Clem came in saying something about a fuel pump or some contraption. He needed to run into Muscatine to get a part to fix the car. He took off and I tended to our afternoon guest.

The gentleman said he was a performer. He had done work with circuses and different theatrical outfits. It seems he was on his way to perform in Kansas City. He was originally from Vincennes, Indiana but had done a lot of traveling throughout the Midwest to perform in different places. He was a very funny man with all kinds of stories. He asked about Clem and why Clem seemed to be so different. He liked Clem and thought Clem was funny. Not in a mean sort of way...because he was slow and all...but in a comical way...his speech and word patterns. He

even mimicked Clem a bit and it was funny. I laughed out loud and that just seemed to spur the entertainer on more. He was a very gracious and funny man. You could tell he was from the Midwest; he just had that down to earth, common sense way about him. I liked him very much. He was very entertaining.

About two hours later, Clem came walking in the back door. He told the gentleman his car was all fixed up and ready to go. The gentleman asked Clem how much he owed him. Clem said it was twenty dollars for the part and probably about thirty-five cents in gas to get the part and that he was only going to charge the man five dollars to install it.

The thing was, Clem couldn't add up the numbers in his head so he stammered a bit. He looked at me and I just smiled. Clem went to the desk and got a piece of paper and tried writing the numbers to add them up. He was having troubles.

The gentleman handed Clem fifty dollars and said that should cover it. Clem was astonished; fifty dollars was more money than he had seen in quite a while. We got out the Brownie and took pictures of the gentleman and me, and then him and Clem. He wanted us to send him copies of the pictures. He wrote down his name and address and we promised him we would send the pictures and we did.

The gentleman kissed me on the cheek and thanked us for being so friendly. The name on the address he had given us was Richard Skelton. Later on, that man went on to become the famous TV and movie star, “Red” Skelton. I used to watch him on his TV shows and he did all kinds of different characters. One really stood out to me. He did this slow-witted cab driver named Clem Kadiddlehopper. I swear it was the same character he did of my Clem in the kitchen of my home. I had gotten to spend the afternoon with Red Skelton. Right here in my house...right here in Muscatine County, “Red Skelton.”

Well Mrs. Mortensen held onto that picture and stared at it. Tears of pride were welling up in her eyes. She got up, walked over to her desk, opened it up and pulled out an envelope. It was yellowed and crinkled a bit; you could tell the letter had been taken in and out of the envelope many times. She handed it to me and told me to read it.

“Dear Ira and Clem,

Thank you for sending me the pictures of my visit with you. Despite my car breaking down, it was a lovely afternoon and I thank you both once again for your hospitality. God Bless, Red Skelton.”

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I tried to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat. I carefully folded the letter back up and gently placed it back in the envelope as if I was holding a priceless treasure. I am sure to Mrs. Mortensen it was. I put it back in the desk for her and left to go get the groceries on the list we made up.

On my drive home that day, I thought about how exciting it must be to meet someone who becomes famous. And having proof in the form of a letter that you had. Of all the little back stop towns in the country, her life got to cross with his that day. A man that went on to become a legend was right here in Muscatine County.

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