BY A. L. HARDWAR

NOWN through the years, West Virginia has prided itself in its production of outstanding high school football players. Per capita, our state probably has turned out more stars than any other state in the Un-

Therefore, to say that a young man by the name of John Zontini of little Sherman High School in Seth was the greatest of them all would be a big statement.

But there are many who would unhesitatingly place the name of Zontini at the top of the list and if his deeds of 30 years ago had only been recorded, as they should have been, it is likely that his supporters would have had unmistakable proof of his great-

Certainly no young man has ever excited the imagination of West Virginia football fans as did the "Sheik of Seth" back in 1929 and '30, when he was named on Harry Stansbury's official All - State

The swift Italian quarterback developed so rapidly and became so great in such a short time that even his own family failed to record the number of touchdowns he scored and the number of yards he gained.

The simple statement that "he did everything that any football player could do" seems to sum up his career not only at Seth but later at Marshall College, the little school he chose over many others which certainly would have brought him All-America recognition.

\* \* \* AT SETH, the great Zontini played quarterback and because he called the plays for his team, modesty and a true sense of team spirit probably prevented him from scoring more touchdowns than he did. But even at that, if the records had been kept from game to game, he may have been credited with more points than any high school player living.

But Zontini didn't only run with the ball and call the plays. He did the kicking off, the punting, the placekicking, the passing and more than his share of blocking.

For some reason or other, possibly because no accurate records w e r e maintained, there has been no recap of this great athlete's career and for the same reason, this accounting of his deeds can only lay claims to his greatness.

\* \* \* BUT BACK in 1930, the name of John Zontini was a household word in West Virginia and it had spread to all corners of the land through the late Robert Ripley's famous "Believe It Or Not" nationally syndicated cartoon and because the wire services found good copy in his accomplishments.

He had blossomed into the limelight in 1929 when first picked on the all - state team. He had personally led the little Seth team to an undefeated season in which his team ran up some fabulous scores.

In eight games that year, Seth scored an amazing 286 points to only six for the opposition despite the fact that most of the schools met by Sherman were considerably larger and more experienced at the game of football.

BUT THE 1930 season was even more remarkable. In this one, Zontini was the glowing hero in a campaign that saw Seth all but annihilate the opposition, rolling up the total of 546 points to only 18 for the opposition.

How many touchdowns Zontini scored in 1930 may forever be a mystery but in one game, an 118-0 victory over Stonecoal (now Stoco), he is credited with scoring at least seven touchdowns.

Some say he scored as many as 15 of his team's 17 touchdowns in this one but not even John himself can set the record straight. At any rate, the Sherman team rolled up such scores as 58-0 over Man, 58-6 over Dunbar, 85-0 over Barboursville, 65-0 over Ceredo-Kenova, 61-0 over Buffalo and 35-0 over arch-enemy Madison along with some victories by lesser margins over South Charleston, New Martinsville and Wayne.

\* \* \*

IN A POST-SEASON game that year, which we will detail a little later, the Tide went down, 12-0, with Zontini a little off form because of an auto accident in which he was injured.

Little Seth High had been playing football only a year or two when Zontini first donned a uniform and not until 1928, when a handsome, mild mannered Bethany College graduate named Melvin L. Mackey came along to coach the Seth team, did his true greatness begin to show.

FOR THE THREE years Mackey had Zontini on his team, the Sherman eleven rolled up the amazing total of 1,007 points to only 37 for the opposition and lost only one game besides the post-season joust with Hun-

Mackey, now principal at Parkersburg High School, recalls the great performances of Zontini, who was called the "Galloping Goslin" by his Seth admirers. Mackey says John was the greatest high school player he ever saw but praised him more for the man he was.

"He had the finest personality I ever knew," Mackey said, "and on top of that he was unselfish and unspoiled." He was admired and loved by all who knew him.

"I guess my greatest thrill was to know he was the unanimous choice as captain of the 1930 All-State team." Mackey added.

"Another thrill came when he was on the first All-American high school team. It thrilled me for nice things to happen to him because he was so deserving and appreciative."

HIS PRINCIPAL, Emmett Stine, who was one of the guiding forces in John's early boyhood as ... well as later

in his life, also placed his great leadership and uns e l fishness ahead of the remarkable record he established on the football field. Mackey,

Stine, Lloyd Banks of the Sherman faculty and others tried to piece together his great career at a reunion at Seth two years ago.

But time had gone by too swiftly and there was no true record of his accomplish-"We used to clock him at 10.3 seconds in the 100 yard dash with his football uni-

form on," said an old team mate, Clarence Tamplin. "He could do back and forward flips from a standing position in his football attire and I doubt if there was anyone much faster."

AT MARSHALL, beginning his four-year varsity career in 1931, Zontini turned a mediocre team into a good one with his brilliant play. In his freshman year, he handled the ball only 91 times but turned in the amazing total of 865 yards.

Fred Burns, now sports editor of the Herald Dispatch, who was then publicity director for Marshall, warned that Zontini might run "all the way" the first time he got his hands on the ball in his first college game.

He did — going 65 yards against Fairmont to score on the first play from scrim-

He continued to dazzle the opposition in his sophomore year but in the tough Buckeye Conference, with not much of a threat from the other Marshall players, he was a marked man in every game. Still he dashed 88 yards against Miami and scored two touchdowns in each of the Georgetown, Transylvania, and Wittenberg games. He won allconference honors this year as he did the year after.

IN HIS SENIOR year he ended his career by scoring 39 points for a team that could win only four of 10

ZONTINI'S matriculation at Marshall College was surrounded by tales of kidnap-

. . .

ping, illegal recruiting and a complete disregard for ethics. But actually, John says, he picked Marshall from a long list of scholarship offers simply because he wanted to be close home.

"You must remember," he says, "that I was a country boy and didn't like to be too far from home. Marshall was just over the mountain and I thought it was the warmest and most friendly campus I

"I took a trip to Morgantown but I found it cold and a little depressing at that

It can now be told that John wrote his own ticket at Marshall. The Long family. publishers of both Huntington papers who also had interests in radio, saw to it that John's every wish was fulfilled when it came to actual

"Most of my needs weren't mine at all, but those of my family," John confesses. "I sent home about three fourths of every cent I got so that my family wouldn't go wanting too much."

BUT WHILE he had an almost unlimited call on the Long bankroll, John never abused the privilege. Every cent he asked for he needed and every cent back in those depression days went for a good purpose.

Back home, too, brothers Robert and Pete were pitching in to help the family by working in the mines.

"They sacrificed a lot for the rest of us kids," John recalled. "Without their help, Red and Lou and I would have been in trouble."

Red, or Lawrence, went to Tennessee and was a star. He is now junior high school coach at Charleston's Lincoln. Lou was likewise a star at Notre Dame and is now holding down a good job as recreational director in Euclid, O.

Not only Marshall, but several others were willing to deal for John, under the table if necessary, but his principal, Mr. Stine, always rode herd on the scouts who seemed to be getting a little too fan-

"Just be sure you get a good education and be sure you get what they promise," Mr. Stine would tell John.

MR. STINE, however, did not influence Zontini in any way in his selection of schools.

As a matter of fact, the Sherman principal had thought for a time that both Zontini and his running mate, blocker John Jarrell would finally wind up at West Vir-

Harry Stansbury, athletic director at WVU, and Greasy Neale, his coach, had courted the two Seth boys religiously

and had, indeed, gotten them summer-time jobs with the State Road Commission, along with such other potential Mountaineer footballers as Wilbur Sortet, Floyd Schwartzwalder, Fred Schweitzer and some others.

They were working at Logan when a long, slender, good natured fellow named Roy M. (Legs) Hawley appeared on the scene. Hawley was then athletic director at Marshall and felt that he could persuade Zontini to enroll in the Huntington school despite strong overtures from West Virginia.

"He got me off the job long

enough to go to Cincinnati to see the St. Louis Cardinals play a baseball game," Zontini said. "I came home with an autographed ball from the Gashouse Gang and the Dean brothers and with a pretty good idea that I would go to Marshall. It was just like a big high school to me and I felt at home there. Besides, the Longs had impressed me

WITH ZONTINI, of course, went Jarrell. This wasn't a part of the bargain. Jarrell went on his own true ability. But it had long been a foregone conclusion that the two

and I liked their sincerity."

\* \* \*

would go to college together. And they did.

They roomed together at Marshall and were as inseparable on the footbal field as they were on the campus.

Jarrell was a blocking back and a good one, especially for

"I learned long before we went to Marshall what to expect from John," he recalled. "His little mannerisms and the little signs he gave me from time to time not only made him a better runner but made me a better blocker. I knew every instant where John was going and what he had in mind. This was a big asset."

Jarrell now operates a general store in Seth.

\* \* \*

THE LAST two seasons of high school football were sensational ones for Zontini but the final game of his scholastic career ended in frustration and disappointment.

Unbeaten for the second year in a row there was agitation for a post-season game for charity with the unbeaten Huntington High Pony Express, which had laid claim to the 1930 state high school football championship.

Seth had no designs on the championship and, indeed, wasn't too anxious to play a post-season game. Perhaps it wouldn't had the good name of charity not been thrown into the arguments.

S. C. Hager, who carried the title of publicity director at Seth then, cleared up the Tide's feelings about the con-

"We consider our season closed," he wrote in a prepared statement to the newspapers at that time, "and we are not playing Huntington for the state championship. Whatever disposition may be made of the many championship contenders, this game should not have any bearing on our rating, regardless of whether we win or lose.

"Our squad is demoralized by indecision; some want to play and some don't. Whatever this attitude, conditions for this game are certainly not favorable to Seth."

HOW TRUE was that last statement, as developments proved.

Huntington won, 12-0, in a game played under somewhat circumstances at Fairfield Stadium.

Not only was the field flooded from hard morning rains and rain that fell during the contest, but there were other things, such as greasy pants, that upset the Sherman Tide.

Claiming that the use of grease on the pants of the Huntington players was ordered as a protection against the muddy field, Pony Express Coach Hoi Slutz defied the Seth players to find anything in the rule book that would prevent this practice.

rule against it but a couple of years later the rules-makers wrote in a couple of lines to outlaw such tactics. \* \* \*

EDDIE KING, all-state center at Huntington that season and later a coach at Huntington and Charleston high schools and at Morris Harvey College, chuckles as he recalls the incident.

"That's the only time I ever had any serious disagreement with Coach Slutz," Eddie said. "I didn't like the idea of using Armor grease. I was a Swift man."

He pointed out that it wasn't the grease that had as much to do with the outcome of the game as the ability of the Huntington team to stop Zontini.

"His yardage that day was practically nil," Eddie said, "so the grease didn't have anything to do with that."

LATER King and Zontini were team mates at Marshall and became fast friends. They still are.

"John was very modest and humble," King said. "He got more publicity than any Marshall player who ever lived but it never did go to his head or change his own nice way of living. He was the most popular guy on the team and the most popular guy on the campus. In short, he was just a great fellow and a great athlete."

DESPITE Zontini's great success on the football field, he always leaned toward baseball as his favorite sport and tried later to make a career out of professional baseball.

He got his start right here in Charleston back in 1935 as a member of Watt Powell's old Middle Atlantic League Senators. John had blinding speed, a good arm and good hands. But one of his failings, so common to many baseball players, was the fact that he couldn't hit the curve ball.

Besides football and baseball, Zontini was a better than average basketball player and a great javelin thrower in track. He once broke the state record for the javelin, a track event that has long since been discontinued in West Virginia. He heaved it 172 feet, 1 inch in a dual meet at Laidley Field against Rocco Gorman's Charleston team.

ZONTINI'S PARENTS were born in Italy and came to this country long before John was born. This big event occurred on Jan. 28, 1909, when the family—Max and Mary Zontini and his sister, Daisywere living in Denver, Colo. They named him John Amarblee Zontini.

\* \* \*

They later migrated to West Virginia where Max Zontini settled down to digging in the bituminous coal fields.

"Dad worked himself to death," Red Zontini said recently. "He died in 1942 at the age of 75 and was still digging coal. We all felt he might lave lived longer had his life been a little easier. But it was a big job raising a family of five and Dad never shirked his duty."

The mother now lives with her eldest daughter, who is now Mrs. Daisy Stanko, of Adena, O.

JOHN PLAYED baseball at Charleston two seasons, being the property of the Detroit Tigers. In 1937 he was promoted to Beaumont in the Texas League but couldn't stick. Subsequently he played at Alexandria, La., Evansville, Ind., Tulsa, Okla., Jacksonville, Fla., Toronto, Can., Portsmouth, Va., and Franklin, Va.

When John landed at Portsmouth in 1941, he became a prime favorite of the Portsmouth Piedmont League club owner, Frank Lawrence. He served Lawrence for seven years! playing the outfield and third base, except for 1944, when he went on lendlease to Toronto.

In 1948, when Lawrence branched out with a farm club at Franklin, Va., ne sent John there as a playing manager and made it possible for him to also carry on in a job he had taken with the Tidewater Supply Co. of Norfolk, Va.

He played there also in 1000 but finally quit to devote his full time to working for Tidewater as one of its master At that time there was no

salesmen. He holds that job today and John's great personality and winning ways have made him a buge success. He owns his home there and his family likes the town. HIS BEST BASEBALL season, the one that convinced

him that he could make a career of the game, was back there in 1937 at Alexandria, La., where he hit .342 and stole the amazing total of 78 bases. But baseball was not for John. Those curve balls sail-

ed over his bat in his sleep.

But he gave it a long, hard and earnest trial before quitting in 1950. In the meantime, John had taken onto himself a wife —

a pretty Italian lass from Baltimore named Rosalie Biz-"I didn't have much

Rosalie says. "From Bizzini to Zontini. They sound a lot alike." The Zontinis have three children. First came Mary Jo

trouble changing my name,"

17 years ago, then Tony, who is now 13, and finally Concetta, who is eight. Tony is some shakes as a football player already.

"He plays quarterback on the grade school team here," Mrs. Zontini said proudly, "and I think he does fine. He may make the jayvees at high school next year."

Back in those days at Seth in 1927, when the Sherman Tide was just starting football, there were hardships, plenty of them. But no sacrifice was too great for this little band of boys to endure for football.

Zontini, as well as some of the other players, lived at Whitesville. They had to hitch hike home after practice and it was nothing unusual for John and the others to walk a great part of the dis-

"I walked as far as eight miles many a time before getting a ride home," he stated. "There weren't many cars then and it wasn't easy to hitchhike. And no one ever heard of a high school student having a car."

THERE WERE about 18 boys on the Seth squads of 1929 and 1930 that actually saw more than limited service in the Tide's games. But they were eager and enthusiastic and, anyone will tell you, most durable.

"They followed a program that called for a Seth touchdown three minutes after they got the ball on a kickoff and five minutes after they kicked off to the other team." Principal Stine recalled. "You would be surprised how many times it worked."

How did Stine feel about having such an outstanding football team in his school? "These things can be dis-

turbing, especially in a small school," he admits, "Some times the main purpose of the school becomes secondary. But in the final analysis, it is a good thing." SETH'S school was so small

it could hardly house the less than 300 students on hand when John Zontini, John Jarrell and the others were fresh-And when the first football

team was formed, there were no dressing quarters. "We always had to carry

our uniforms home with us," Zontini stated, "This, along with our books, made that 14mile journey home a real long one, especially when you had to walk most of the way."

So, is it any wonder that Principal Stine and the others around the little Boone County communities of Seth and Whitesville are so proud of their heritage?

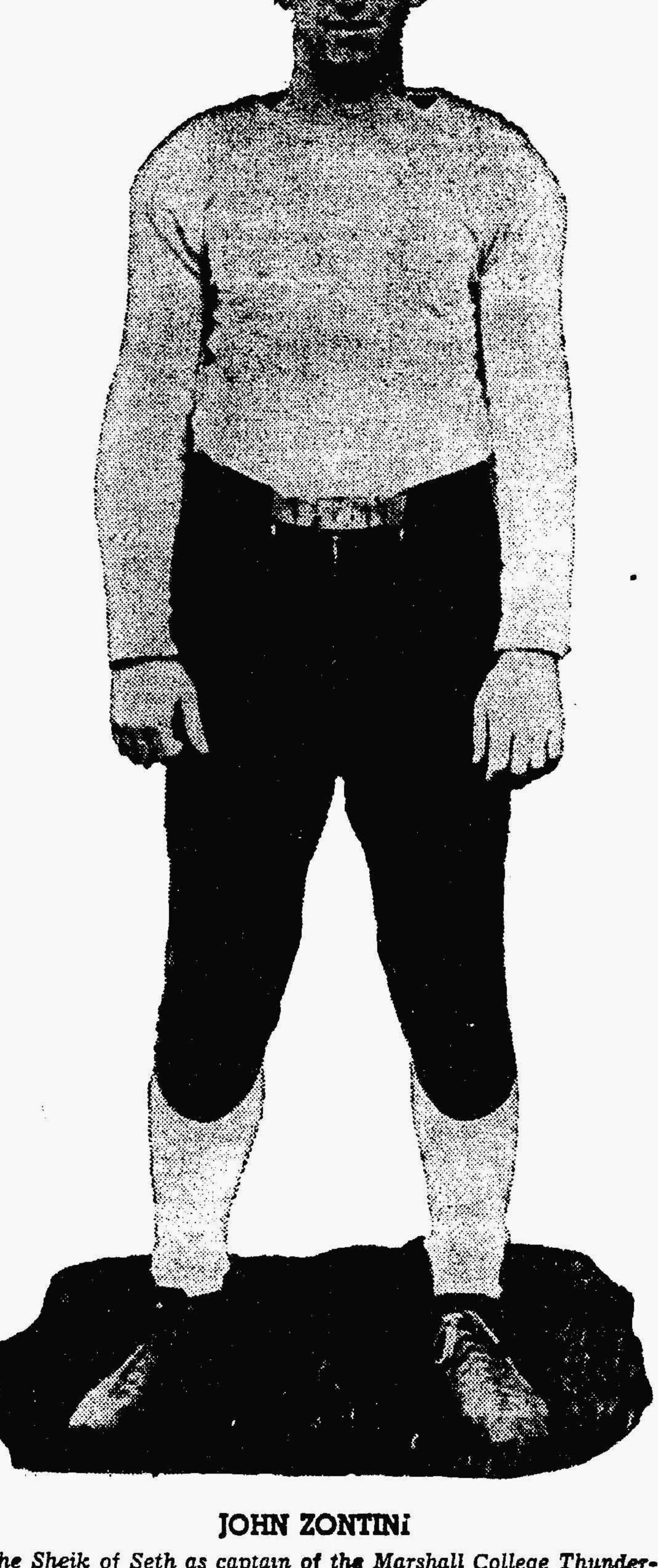
look back upon the history of this little school and give football some measure of credit for its success. The Stines and the Mack-

SOMETIMES it is nice, and

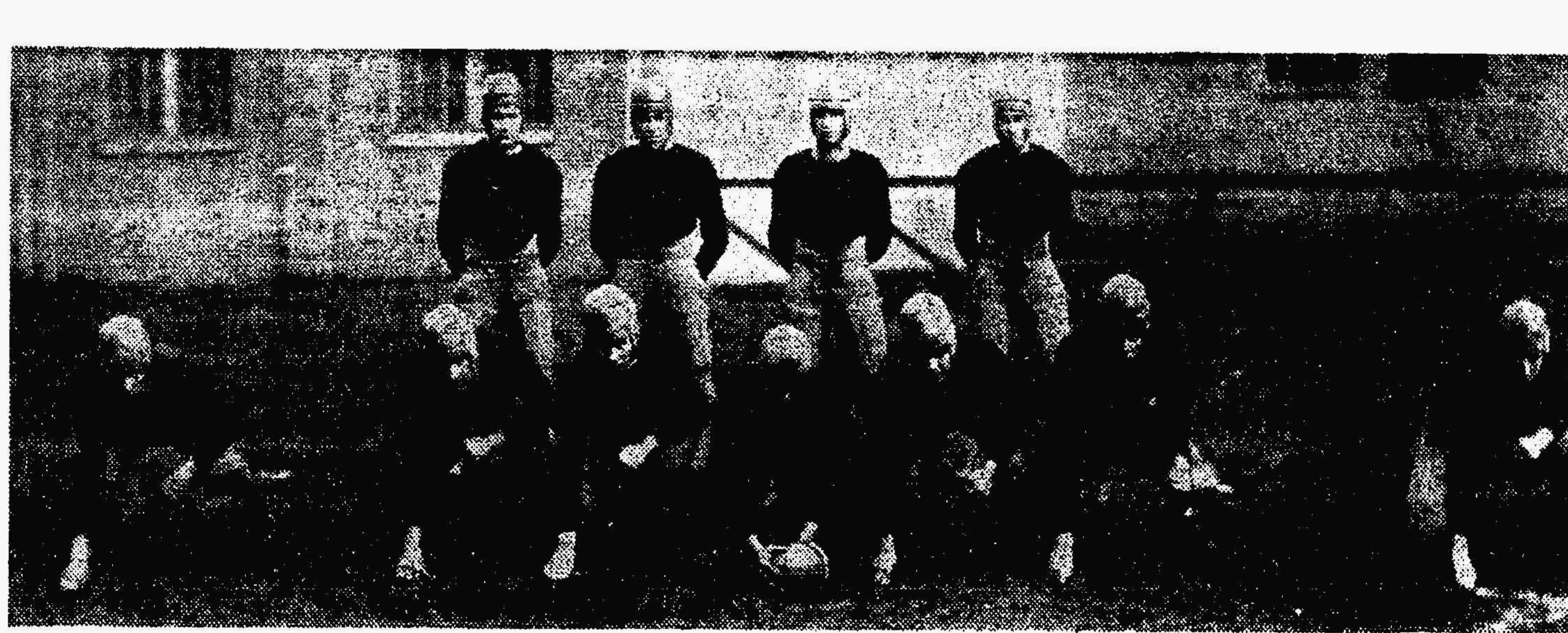
perhaps entirely proper, to

eys and the other members of the faculty helped. But how could any other

medium every have brought the lasting fame to the Sherman Tide that the football team did back in the days when the "Sheik of Seth" galloped into the headlines of pa-. pers throughout America?



The Sheik of Seth as captain of the Marshall College Thundering Herd in 1934.



THIS IS THE "WONDER" TEAM of 1930 at Seth High School which swept to 10 straight victories. The line includes, left to right: Clifford Goodwin, Wheatley Keffer, O. Michael, Dennis Coone, Torna Gogus, Hobart Hankinson and Arnold Tamplin. The backfield includes, left to right: Emory Bowne, John Jarrell, John Zontini and



AT A REUNION of the 1930 Seth team, held in 1957, these "old timers" came back to their alma mater. Left to right: First row—Clifford Goodwin, Clarence Tamplin, Oscar Michael, John Jarrell, John Zontini, Hobart Hankinson, Arnold Tamplin. Back row—Melvin Mackey, coach: Bramwell Brown, Emory Tamplin, Bill Harless, Cephos Ferrell, William Cowley, Emory Bowne and Emmett Stine, principal.