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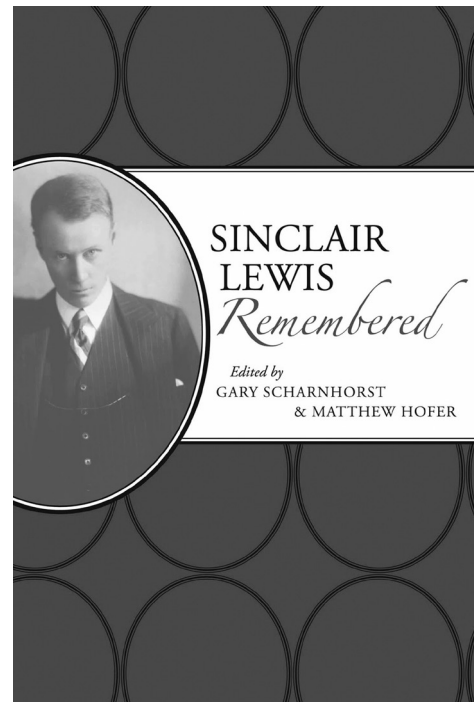
IN DEFENSE OF GOPHER PRAIRIE: *MAIN STREET* AS A CRITIQUE OF URBAN CULTURE

James Nixon
Glasgow University

“Lord, how that book of Lewis’, ‘Main Street,’ did bore me, as much of it as I read; it just rambled on for ever, and all he could see was that some of the Gopher Prairie hicks didn’t go to literary teas quite as often as he does!”
—Philip McGarry, *Elmer Gantry*

In an article published by the *New York Tribune* in 1921, Heywood Broun printed a response to *Saturday Evening Post* journalist Frank O’Malley’s article, “Main Street, Manhattan.” In what became a highly popular essay, O’Malley argued that Broadway is just as provincial in its psychology and attitudes as “any street in Gopher Prairie.” Broun’s argument, far from criticizing O’Malley, helped substantiate the former article, with one alteration. “Our case against Mr. O’Malley rests on the fact that he had no right to put Main Street in Manhattan, because it isn’t there: it is in Brooklyn.” Found between Plymouth Street and Fulton Street, Broun details his exploration of the antiquated (and largely forgotten) Main Street of Brooklyn. Consisting of a number of hotels, restaurants, and confectionaries, its similarity to Sinclair Lewis’s Gopher Prairie is made clear throughout the article, with Broun commenting at one point that, “here, if anywhere in Main Street, is the home of the Thanatopsis Club,” a reference to the women’s study group in *Main Street*. Written just over a year since the critical acclaim of *Main Street*, in which Lewis examined the realities of small-town America, both Broun and O’Malley’s articles reflect a growing cultural response that brought into question the indomitably urban status of the large cities. Like numerous other early 20th century authors such as Edith Wharton,

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RED IN RETROSPECT: A REVIEW OF *SINCLAIR LEWIS REMEMBERED*, EDITED BY GARY SCHARNHORST AND MATTHEW HOFER, UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS, 2013

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

Editors Gary Scharnhorst and Matthew Hofer have put together a very valuable collection of reminiscences of Sinclair Lewis from his friends and acquaintances over the years. The book is divided up into segments, which correspond with the major phases of his life, ranging from Isabel Lewis Agrell (Lewis’s niece) on the early days in Sauk Centre to a

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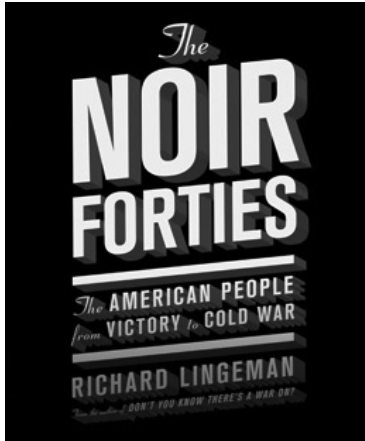
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**YOU SHOULD REMEMBER THIS: A REVIEW OF *THE NOIR FORTIES:*
THE AMERICAN PEOPLE FROM VICTORY TO COLD WAR,
BY RICHARD LINGEMAN, NATION BOOKS, 2012**

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University



Richard Lingeman, author of *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*, as well as a two-volume biography of Theodore Dreiser; *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1609–The Present*; and *Don't You Know There's a War On?: The American Home Front, 1941–1945*, has just written his latest book, *The Noir Forties: The American People from Victory to Cold War*. It's a follow-up on American society after *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, examining how the country evolved from the end of the war through the Korean War. Beyond the well-researched history, the book also serves as a sort of memoir, since Lingeman served as a counter-intelligence agent in Japan from 1954 to 1956 with the Army Counter Intelligence Corps. It's not clear how much intelligence was actually gained through his work, but it provides an interesting entrée into a period that has helped to shape our present day society.

As Lingeman begins his story, the book seems as though it were written in black and white, like the film noir that he uses as cultural references throughout. We read through the smoky haze of time and are confronted by lots of facts—for example how many were wounded, died, or disappeared during the war—and how that affected America once the peace treaties were signed. A quote from John Gunther's 1946 best-seller *Inside USA* reflects the cynicism:

Yet once the war is over its backwash smears over us, and the nation succumbs to greed, fear, ineptitude, fumbling of the morning hopes, shoddy dispersal of the evening dreams.... Does [this] show that to become efficient this country needs the stimulus of war? Does it mean that 295,000 [sic] Americans have to be killed in order to give us true effectiveness as a nation?

Business leaders strategized, even before the war was over, that defense spending was good for them and that it should be continued. I found it very telling that Charles E. Wilson, president of General Electric, in 1944 proposed a “permanent war economy,” which would help prepare the country for future threats. American business, with its desire to keep profits high and wages low, helped to shaped the postwar political discourse. The president of the Advertising Federation of America called the war “The War That Business Helped to Win,” and business reminded politicians over and over what they wanted.

Veterans who came back were often angry or scared by the complacent world that they returned to, one in which unions were pressured to make sacrifices so that businesses would have higher profits. Those who did not play along, whether they were actors or politicians or union workers, were often called communists or thought to be soft on communism and were threatened in various ways. This “Red Scare,” much like the one in the 1920s, forced people to conform to the way the political winds were blowing or face tremendously unpleasant consequences.

Lingeman also includes short sections that break up the chapters called “Voices,” in which both well-known and everyday people express their confusion and concern. For example Henry A. Wallace is quoted as saying in disgust “that every March the [Truman] administration has a crisis looking toward war,” because of the fear of the Soviet threat which was actually good for conservative businessmen and politicians. The Korean War ends the book, followed by an epilogue in which Lingeman as Cold Warrior recalls his indoctrination, his fear of being labeled a security risk, and his questioning how much one should put up with to serve one's country. He ends with a recent visit to Nagasaki and his attempts to bear witness. “*You try not to be complicit, but sometimes you must or risk not being part of your times, not having lived. Life is learned through the living of it. Being an actor in history, being part of your times.*”

I was born in 1953, the year the book ends. It gives me insight into the world in which I grew up and sad for the waste and the fear and the greed. *The Noir Forties* is a sad and eye-opening examination of the space between the wars, which was not so peaceful after all. ✍

In Defense of Gopher Prairie *continued from page 1*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, and Theodore Dreiser, Lewis belonged to a literary school brought up on the turbulent cultural clash between the urban and rural sectors of American life. Maxwell Geismar defined this class of American writers as “the Middle Generation,” who wrote between America’s transition from an agrarian and provincial society to an industrialized urban world power. The keen sociological critique that typified Lewis’s writings found plenty of material in the relationship between urban and rural American life, primarily through the cultural anxieties and interactions of his characters in novels such as *Main Street*.

The publication of *Main Street* was, until Lewis’s even greater success two years later with *Babbitt*, the peak of his writing career and his first mainstream success. At the time of its publication, when distinctions between urban and rural were becoming more and more pronounced, it was viewed first and foremost as a critique of rural, small-town America. Other literary portrayals of rural America at the time of *Main Street*’s publication were to varying degrees similarly critical (Tanselle 175). Works such as Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*, Sherwood Anderson’s *Poor White*, Zona Gale’s *Miss Lulu Bett*, Floyd Dell’s *Moon-Calf*, and *Main Street*—all published in 1920—would become representative of early 20th-century provincial criticism, what Carl Van Doren would summarize the following year as “The Revolt from the Village.” *Main Street*’s fictional Minnesota town of Gopher Prairie became a byword for aggressively rural, small-town communities (i.e. conservative, small-minded towns locked in social and cultural stasis), and the use of the term *Main Street* became a commonplace complement to this description. As Elizabeth Stevenson comments, within a few years of *Main Street*’s publication “everyone had adopted Sinclair Lewis’ epithet” (225). The generous quantity of New York media coverage, most popularly found in the *Evening World*, frequently used Gopher Prairie as a metaphor for provincial communities devoid of artistic and cultural merit (“‘It’s Me’ Doesn’t Pass ‘He Don’t’” 12). A

letter to the editor published by the *New-York Tribune* in 1921 reinforced the cultural void to be found in provincial America. In discussing his knowledge of small towns across the country, the writer found “the people were as blind to beauty, narrow-minded and prejudiced as Mr. Lewis could wish” (J.E.G. 4). Minnesota coverage of *Main Street*, which for the most part ignored the novel, was usually defensive. Newspapers such as the *Princeton Union* reported that Lewis’s examination of *Main Street*, *Gopher Prairie*, was never meant to be limited to Minnesota, or more broadly, the Midwest: “The same prejudices, the same blindness...can be picked up along the Main street that winds through all America as well as the short Main street that runs through Gopher Prairie” (“Does Not Score Small Towns Only” 6). The *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* reinforced this further, criticizing New York’s assumed cultural superiority compared to the small towns of America: “Frankly, we never have thought that the small American town received a square deal in ‘Main Street’; we have thought it a distorted picture” (“Main Street and Bemidji” 4). Another example can be found in the columns of Philadelphia’s *Evening Public Ledger*. In a particularly acerbic defense addressed to the editor, a letter denounces Philadelphians (and other urbanites) who declare their cultural superiority to the Gopher Prairies of America: “The mixture of nincompoops and regular people is about the same here as elsewhere...The people of Gopher Prairie have the same proportion of culture, refinement and education that residents of cities have” (H.R. 14). The contemporary media coverage of *Main Street* illustrates the fractious cultural communications between the urban and the rural communities of America that Lewis’s novel produced.

For townspeople, Lewis’s novel “struck the nerve of status anxiety” among upward-striving townspeople, many of whom felt that hailing from a Gopher Prairie had become a social liability (Lingeman 159). Since the vast majority of

————— In Defense of Gopher Prairie *continued on page 5*

CONTRIBUTORS

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CASS: ANATOMY OF A MONIKER

Charles Pankenier

From the beginning, Sinclair Lewis was inclined to affix unusual given names to important female characters. For every “Carol” or “Fran” or “Ann,” there was an “Istra” (*Our Mr. Wrenn*) or “Una” (*The Job*), a “Tanis” (*Babbitt*) or “Leora” (*Arrowsmith*), and even a “Bethel” (*Bethel Merriday*).

With leading male characters, the naming evolution followed a somewhat different path, beginning with the humdrum William Wrenn, extending through the equally unexceptional Will Kennicott, George Babbitt, Martin Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry, and Sam Dodsworth, and then veering off into latter-day eccentricity with Myron and Ora Weagle, Doremus Jessup, and Gideon Planish.

That brings us to the eponymous “Cass” of *Cass Timberlane*, one of the most unusual of Lewis’s naming choices. Its rarity is confirmed by the fact that it has a remote chance—even one in 1,000—of appearing as a male name according to current databases of given names, and probably had similar or worse odds in 1945, when the novel was published.

Susan O’Brien has described Duluth judge Mark Nolan, from whom the character was drawn, and we know that Red consulted telephone directories in cities he visited, prospecting for monikers he might incorporate in his writing. But what was the source of this unlikely name?

Richard Lingeman recounts a February 1918 Lewis research trip from St. Paul to Cass Lake, near Bemidji. Lewis Cass, a prominent statesman, US Senator, and presidential candidate had explored the territory as early as 1820, and left his surname on a Minnesota county, as well as a significant body of water and associated town.

As for how this surname became a first name: at the

time, Lewis was renting on St. Paul’s exclusive Summit Avenue, in a yellow-and-white confection he called “the lemon meringue pie house.” Among other lavish residences for the city’s elite were at least eight nearby homes in the same neighborhood designed some 30 years earlier by another Minnesotan—a man named Cass Gilbert, who had gone on to create the spectacular Minnesota statehouse as well as New York City’s Woolworth Building (for more than ten years, the world’s tallest skyscraper). Cass’s “starchitect” celebrity was near its peak, and likely had some currency in St. Paul social circles that winter, not to mention in a nearby watering hole that may have been familiar to both the architect and the writer.

Twenty-five years later, in 1943, we can close the circle. Schorer tells us that when a visitor to Red’s Central Park West apartment was discovered to be from Minnesota, Lewis challenged him to name the counties of their home state. Achieving no more than the southernmost tier, the pair withdrew to ponder—at length—an atlas and a large map of Minnesota on the study wall, reviewing every county including, naturally, Cass County.

Schorer adds this note to his account: Judge Timberlane, trying to stay awake in a sleepy courtroom, “plunged into the Counties of Minnesota, all eighty-seven of them, with their several county-seats.”

So “Cass” may have lodged in Lewis’s memory for a quarter-century, from his brief sojourn in St. Paul society and a wintry research expedition, only to be awakened during a New York dinner party in time to become the title character of the most well-regarded novel of Red’s late career. ✍

In Defense of Gopher Prairie *continued from page 4*

Main Street’s audience was located in small towns or rural areas (which is no surprise considering the subject of *Main Street* as well as the largely rural population of native-born Americans in 1920), people who were worried about being considered uncultured sought to remedy this by reading *Main Street* (Brace 148). A large portion of *Main Street*’s reception can therefore be argued to have less to do with reviewing or examining Lewis’s novel and more to do with identifying oneself culturally, which was for many people an urban identification through the negation of rural traits and attitudes. However, as

the opening quote from *Elmer Gantry* suggests, Lewis became concerned with the largely negative perceptions of rural culture that *Main Street* garnered. In examining urban and rural cultural communications in *Main Street*, we see that Lewis—far from wishing to solely mock small-town America—is as adamantly criticizing urban cultural attitudes through the protagonist of Carol Kennicott. The popular rural derisions found in *Main Street*’s contemporary reception can therefore be considered

————— In Defense of Gopher Prairie *continued on page 6*

highly ironic when the book is positioned as a critique of urban culture, rather than as a critique of rural America.

The character of Carol Kennicott can be seen as a successor to Lewis's previous female idealist, Claire Boltwood of *Free Air*. Although Carol does not have anywhere near the same indomitably urban status Claire enjoys in belonging to a rich social set in Brooklyn Heights, New York, she shares the idealism, and subsequent confrontation with her outdated ideas of rural life, that Claire finds in her travels throughout the West. Furthermore, once removed from the large city of St. Paul, Carol in effect transforms herself into a Bohemian pariah when faced with the mild manners of Gopher Prairie. However, at closer inspection, the urban status that Carol imagines herself possessing is problematic. Her encounters with the Bohemian sets of Chicago—studio parties “with beer, cigarettes, bobbed hair,” and radical philosophical discussions—did little to elevate her status as an urbanite, but rather left her feeling even more alienated from these urban practices: “It cannot be reported that Carol had anything significant to say to the Bohemians. She was awkward with them, and felt ignorant” (*Main Street* 9–10). After a year's stay, she went back to St. Paul, “and that was the beginning and end of her Bohemian life” (10).

Her imitations of urban mannerisms also go awry at Sam Clark's party. After being introduced to the flapper-like mannerisms of Juanita Haydock, Carol finds her own urban status undermined. In order to reinstate her sense of urban cultural status, she begins to imitate Bohemian-like qualities. She flirtily discusses her purchase of a pair of gold stockings, her wish to stage a musical comedy, and her candid opinions on sex, all delivered in a flapper-like dialect: “I bought oh! a vociferous skirt which revealed my perfectly nice ankles to the Presbyterian glare of all the Ioway schoolma'ams...” (45). However, she is unable to maintain this imitation after a few minutes: “They gaped for more. But she could not keep it up” (46). Throughout the party she falls indefinitely between wishing to appear more provocative by imitating urban standards—shown in her flapper displays—while also ruminating that she should conform to traditional standards: “She wished alternatively that she had worn a spinsterish high-necked dress, and that she had dared to shock them with a violent brick-red scarf which she had bought in Chicago” (41). To her own annoyance, Carol is unable to ever fully conform to the urban practices she wishes to emulate. She too, like many of Lewis's characters, wishes to appear urban while in the safety of her traditional values.

Furthermore, exchanges with her husband Will Kennicott—typically on the issues of art and poetry and his lack of

appreciation for either—displays her own snobberies towards those she considers to be rural. In reaction to his muted response to her recital of Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, she pities his attempts to appreciate her urban cultural practices: “when she saw how much he was suffering she ran to him, kissed his forehead, cried, ‘You poor forced tube-rose that wants to be a decent turnip!’” However, the same night when she and Will venture to the motion pictures, for all her urban pretensions, she finds herself ashamed at her enjoyment of a lowbrow comedy: “But the fact is that at the motion-pictures she discovered herself laughing as heartily as Kennicott at the humor of an actor who stuffed spaghetti down a woman's evening frock” (121). Her snobbery towards dressmaker Mrs. Swiftwaite's urban pretensions and dresswear—that she noted looked “the more rustic in her effort to appear urban”—can be easily reflected on her own strained urban displays. For all Mrs. Swiftwaite's metropolitan airs, such as her descriptive use of the term “New-Yorkish” in describing her clothes, her excessive amount of makeup, and her “hysterically checkered” skirt, her urbanity is more deserved than Carol's, since she spent a number of years living in New York: “She was wondering whether her own airs were as laughable as Mrs. Swiftwaite's” (354). In these numerous challenges to Carol's urban status, she realizes her own paltry relationship to a culture she is trying to represent.

In much the same way that Carol toys with the idea of throwing herself into urban, cosmopolitan conventions—her wish “to become one of the young women who dance in cheese-cloth in the moonlight” (9)—her interest in transforming a prairie town into something beautiful is shown to be similarly flawed due to her romantic ideas about country life. Her dismay at Gopher Prairie has less to do with its limitations for reform, and more to do with it not fitting in with her treasured notions of rural life. Rather than the wilderness of the 19th-century prairie town she imagined, she finds Gopher Prairie to be, in many respects, rather modern. Far from a collection of “lonely farms,” Will describes the technological advancements that the area has seen, from an increase in automobiles and use of the telephone, to rural delivery service: “they're bringing the farmers in closer touch with the town” (22). Instead of the use of plank walks within Gopher Prairie, it has “seven miles of cement walks already” (14). Far from Carol's idea of the humble country doctor she finds in fiction, her husband's medical practice is shown to be as much guided by the same commercial eagerness and medical cronyism that *Arrowsmith* highlights in New York and Chicago. In regards to the labor problems

TWIN FARMS TODAY

Susan O'Brien

On June 24, 2012, my husband and I were traveling near Barnard, Vermont, when we decided to stop and try and visit Twin Farms, now an exclusive New England resort. We had not been in Barnard Village in many years but noted few changes. The one exception is that the great general store, once the heart of this small village, has closed. Formerly the store served as something of an informal information center for those interested in Dorothy and Sinclair, in addition to a cozy lunch counter and general supply center for the village. In days past it was a welcome relief from the crowded, touristy offerings in nearby Woodstock.

My husband, a seasoned journalist skilled at gaining entry past barriers, managed to talk us into a brief tour inside "Dorothy's house." The manager, a friendly but harried and rushed

lady, opened the steel gate and in seconds we were standing in the "Great Room," the room Lewis wanted that was created by adding a portion of a standing barn. The original loft railing of the barn (and the entire addition) still remains. The floor of the basic room had to be raised three inches in order to accommodate the addition. In this, I believe Lewis was ahead of his time in designing a room in which, as he said, people could be playing chess in one corner, reading a book in another corner, and so on.

It's a room of magnificence to match or surpass the rest of the almost fantastically renovated/decorated house. Each room is appointed very differently, with interesting works of art, obviously fine furniture, books and bibelots to impart a warm and welcoming atmosphere. According to the information in the marketing book, "Pastoral 12 Twin Farms," the property was purchased by Thurston Twigg-Smith (a New England name if

I ever heard one, and one Lewis might have found interesting) as a second home for his family. In 1993 he expanded it to become "a romantic country getaway, a sophisticated escape steeped in history and charm..."

Now set on 300 lush acres, Twin Farms operates "Dorothy's house" as a hotel with six suites, including "Dorothy's Room" and "Red's Room." A new house, "The Farmhouse at Copper Hill," is the most recent addition and provides four additional suites, and there are ten cottages, built as part of the resort, dotted around the landscape. Perhaps this "Copper Hill" house was built to replace the original one that burned down, to justify the name "Twin Farms" again, but I'm just guessing.

After nineteen years of intense effort, Twin Farms just this year made

it into the exclusive "Relais et Chateaux Collection, 2012," a very exclusive glossy white guidebook to the world's most expensive hotels, resort-like spas, and experiences. We were given a copy of this book along with the other large marketing books developed just for Twin Farms. A Twin Farms cottage rate is \$3,100 a night; after I read some of the other entries in "Relais," that began to seem like a bargain. A Relais-suggested property offering "an exclusive experience on the Serengeti" goes for \$14,420 per night.

Otherwise, Twin Farms is only advertised on the Internet. It certainly does not appear in the "Tour Vermont" free guides available at every gas station and convenience store. The narrow road up the hill to the property remains coarsely covered in gravel only, and we drove past the resort the first time; it



Dorothy Thompson's Twin Farms home in Barnard, Vermont

————— Twin Farms Today *continued on page 16*

Gopher Prairie faces, rather than the town aligning itself with their local farmers, the majority of the townspeople are very critical of them. This, as Lewis Atherton notes, became one of the noticeable social changes within the urbanized small towns of early 20th-century America. As the small towns became more cosmopolitan, an emphasis on “social unity” significantly lessened (290). A University of Minnesota report on the town of Ada, Minnesota, emphasized this slackening of social relations further, whereas “formerly the village people and the farming population mixed freely in the social activities of the village, to-day there is very little social intercourse” (Weld 74–75). Ezra Stowbody, president of the Ionic bank, notes that labor troubles can be relieved through financial coercion rather than cooperation: “Of course, if they have loans you can make ’em listen to reason. I just have ’em come into the bank for a talk, and tell ’em a few things” (*Main Street* 49).

As Richard Lingeman notes, few reviewers noted Lewis’s examination of the economic structure of the small town in *Main Street* (159), what Carol notes as the “sterile oligarchy” of Gopher Prairie ruled by the businessmen (267). Radical economist Thorstein Veblen detailed the strong business-minded foundation that is crucial in small-town culture. The manipulation of the farmers in rural communities is created through the small town’s “business-like endeavor” to control land values in relation to its increase in population and cultivation of its agricultural area. In a sentence that sounds similar to George F. Babbitt’s own financial manipulations within Zenith, Veblen argues that the small town “never loses this character of real-estate speculation.” All cultural practices, Veblen argues, come from this common pecuniary interest, “which commonly masquerades under the name of local patriotism, public spirit, civic pride and the like” (317). Furthermore, the Thanatopsis Club’s reading of statistics and factual information on English writers such as Jane Austen and George Eliot (*Main Street* 134) helped avoid any incisive discussion of the corrosive political and social theories their works could offer to Gopher Prairie. If there are any political or social discussions, they are undoubtedly in favor of Gopher Prairie’s elite. As Carol finds in her discussion with Mrs. Cass, matters within Gopher Prairie tend to be decided on their economic and political worth, from Carol’s hopes to redesign the town, to readings of Tolstoy: “Don’t you think that was a grand paper Mrs. Westlake read about Tolstoy? I was so glad she pointed out how all his silly socialistic ideas failed” (137).

This dilution of artistic and cultural activities is, however, certainly not limited to Gopher Prairie. With Maxwell Geismar’s comment that Zenith is essentially “Gopher Prairie

come of age” (88), there is considerable reinforcement in Lewis’s Winnemac novels that illustrates the provincialism of urban communities. Lewis’s later city novels such as *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith* depict the provincial attitudes that many of his supposedly urban characters hold, as well as the strong commercial similarities shared between the town and the city. In both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* Lewis makes reference to Dante to demonstrate the inseparable relationship both Gopher Prairie and Zenith share in regard to artistic and cultural practices. While Gopher Prairie’s promotion of Dante’s works are used unabashedly for the sole purpose of boosting the town (*Main Street* 267), Vergil Gunch of *Babbitt* shows a similar lack of appreciation for classic literature by criticizing Dante for not possessing the usefulness of the “practical literature” (126) exemplified by newspaper poet and adman T. Cholmondely Frink. *The Job*’s Eddie Schwartz’s disdain for realist literature—“these nasty realistic stories” (198)—as well as Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh’s asinine medical poems in *Arrowsmith*, illustrate similar forms of the provincialism found in Gopher Prairie. It is somewhat ironic—particularly in discussing urban snobbery toward small-town America—that in Lewis’s city examinations artistic activities are also pressured to be nonpolitical, ineffectual, nonconfrontational, and essentially nonmodern. Although the cities have more resources to provide sophisticated and creative institutions for their populations, there is very little demand for it. As Lewis notes, these forms of cultural activity are conspicuously limited in cities that are more interested in reading about patent medicines and steel sales than attending George Bernard Shaw productions (“Unpublished Introduction to *Babbitt*” 17–18). It is this lack of cultural and artistic appreciation that keeps these municipalities—regardless of their size and proportion—a mixture of urban and rural qualities, rather than decidedly urban.

Gopher Prairie’s practice of quaint social clubs such as the Jolly Seventeen and the Thanatopsis Club, and the later phenomenon of Boosterism may seem exclusively rural, but they are no more rural than the numerous social cliques and cultural attitudes presented in Lewis’s cities. The Thanatopsis Club can be considered merely a less extravagant form of George Babbitt’s Zenith Athletic Club, and the Jolly Seventeen can be considered to be just another one of the associations, business clubs, and lodges that Martin Arrowsmith finds himself drafted into during his assistantship in the city of Nautilus, Iowa. Furthermore, as later displayed in the booster activity Babbitt participates in during his trip to Monarch, there is little

SARCASTIC BUT SYMPATHETIC, *BABBITT* IS PREMIER MIDDLE-CLASS NOVEL

Mark Roth
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* is ranked 953,241 on the Amazon sales list, which tells you that not many people read the 1922 novel anymore.... But Lewis was the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, and many consider *Babbitt* to be his greatest creation.... More importantly, some have argued that *Babbitt* is the quintessential middle-class novel, even if it does turn a jaundiced eye on the aspiring suburbanites of the fictional city of Zenith.

There is no escaping the satiric bite in the novel, but Richard Lingeman, a Lewis biographer and a senior editor at the *Nation*, said a close reading shows that Lewis actually liked George Babbitt and allowed him by book's end to break free from some of his narrow-minded views.

There are also plenty of parallels between Babbitt's world of the bustling 1920s, as it hurtled heedlessly toward Black Tuesday, and the housing boom of the 2000s, as America borrowed its way toward the 2007 housing collapse.... Like many who are suffering in today's downturn, George Babbitt was a real estate agent. He believed America should be run like a business—although he was not quite sure what that meant—and he believed in the virtues of family, civic clubs, the church, and progress.

Whatever principles he espoused became capitalized in his mind. Chief among them was Vision, and Babbitt felt he was a man with an abundance of Vision.... He also wasn't above using Vision to manipulate a situation if it meant he could turn a profit. In one instance, he signs up a speculator friend to buy an empty lot next to a neighborhood grocery, after hearing the store owner wants to expand and build a butcher shop.... He persuades the friend, Conrad Lyte, to buy the dilapidated store on the lot for \$11,000, then invites the grocer, Archibald Purdy, to his office, and tells him he can have the parcel for just \$24,000.... Purdy complains, and so Babbitt "persuades" Lyte to bring the price down to just \$21,000.

"The work of the world was being done," Lewis wrote. "Lyte had made something over nine thousand dollars, Babbitt had made a four-hundred-and-fifty dollar commission, Purdy had, by the sensitive mechanism of modern finance, been provided with a business building, and soon the happy inhabitants of Linton would have meat lavished upon them at prices only a little higher than those downtown."

Babbitt also was acutely attuned to social classes in Zenith. He belonged with fellow small-business owners to the

Athletic Club, and they all agreed that they hated the elitist Union Club—Zenith's version of the Duquesne Club—because it was a "rotten, snobbish, dull, expensive old hole... you couldn't hire me to join."

Still, when Babbitt gets a chance later to invite Union Club member Charles McKelvey to his home for dinner, he and his wife work themselves into a lather to make it a success. Despite all their preparations, though, the evening goes badly, and the McKelveys make excuses to leave early. The Babbitts then wait eagerly for a return invitation that never comes.

Not long after, the Babbitts are talked into a dinner invitation from an old college classmate of his, Ed Overbrook, who was "gray and thin and unimportant." They go, trade small talk, and soon, Babbitt realizes "they had nothing more to say. Babbitt was sorry, but there was no hope; the dinner was a failure." On the way home, Mrs. Babbitt starts to worry that they will have to invite the Overbrooks to their place, but in the end, they agree that "the best way [was] just to let it slide. It wouldn't be kind to them to have them here. They'd feel so out of place and hard-up in our home."

In this one brilliant chapter, Lewis showed how eager Babbitt was to be accepted by the elite he usually scorned and how oblivious he was to treating his social inferiors exactly the same way.

As the story unfolds, Mr. Lingeman said, Babbitt is increasingly aware that something about his materialistic life is unsatisfactory, but it doesn't come to a head until his best friend shoots his wife in a domestic argument and is jailed. Babbitt then suffers a midlife crisis. In the process, he even sympathizes with some striking telephone workers and refuses to join a new anti-immigration group, which infuriates his fellow Athletic Club members.

By the end of the book, Babbitt becomes a wiser and more flexible man, and it is clear that Lewis actually likes his protagonist, despite lampooning his values for most of the story.

The irony of the success of *Babbitt*, Mr. Lingeman said, is that "while the '20s was sort of the era where you could satirize the boobs and the businessmen, the '30s was much more political," and when Lewis wrote a later novel called *The Prodigal Parents* in which he "praised the middle class as the basis of civilization, more left-wing authors gave him

————— Sarcastic but Sympathetic *continued on page 17*

difference between the fervent boosting of Gopher Prairie and nearby Joralemon, and that found in the Winnemac cities of Zenith, Monarch, Pioneer, and Sparta. In *Main Street* the Gopher Prairie banners are inscribed with “Boost, Boys, and Boost Together—Put Gopher Prairie on the Map” (416); in Zenith they are equally encouraging with banners adorned with “Zenith the Zip City—Zeal, Zest and Zowie” (*Babbitt* 160). In Gopher Prairie the booster speeches delivered by realtor James “Honest Jim” Blausser emphasize the possibility of Gopher Prairie one day becoming as big as Minneapolis, finally gaining the reputation that the town deserves (415); in Zenith an equal aspiration is held onto by boosters such as Babbitt, with signs aspiring to have Zenith reach the one million population mark by 1935 (*Babbitt* 160). This emphasis on population growth suggests a very limited understanding of what defines Zenith, or more generally a large city, as an urban space, and suggests a further kinship between Lewis’s “transitional metropolises” and his portrayal of small towns such as Gopher Prairie (“Unpublished Introduction to *Babbitt*” 18). It is this cultural dalliance between the towns and the cities that Carol notes makes Gopher Prairie “no longer merely provincial.” Urban sneers towards Gopher Prairie are unjustified in an age where the “greatest manufacturer is but a busier Sam Clark, and all the rotund senators and presidents are village lawyers and bankers grown nine feet tall” (*Main Street* 267).

Carol finds herself disconcerted by this modern and traditional mixture, which dilutes her previous ideas of being a thorough urbanite in comparison, finding herself confronted with the urban qualifications of fellow Gopher Prairieans like Fern Mullins and Erik Valborg. Furthermore, for a character who consistently prides herself on her own urbanism, she ironically formulates her plans for Gopher Prairie on an older blueprint, where she envisions transforming Gopher Prairie into its former, less modern age, finding “in the history of the pioneer was the panacea for Gopher Prairie”(150). Her visit with the pioneer family the Perrys helps her to envision a much simpler Gopher Prairie, where she draws from them “the principles by which Gopher Prairie should be born again—should again become amusing to live in” (152). Her attempts to reform Gopher Prairie are shown to be based on a muddled, intangible connection to rural America’s past and an unwillingness to admit that Gopher Prairie is not the model town she had hoped for. Far from the idyllic small town she first envisioned, Gopher Prairie is instead found to be a hybrid between urban and rural cultural qualities, something she finds disconcerting: This “smug-in-between town...it was neither the heroic old nor the sophisticated new” (151). Her

disappointment with life in Gopher Prairie therefore has less to do with its overtly rural attitudes, than with the fact that it isn’t rural enough.

For all of Gopher Prairie’s real limitations that Lewis depicts in *Main Street*, he never intended to sacrifice Carol as an urban martyr in the process. In his planning of *Main Street* there was never any question of positioning Carol as an esteemed urbanite, and neither did he consider using her interactions within Gopher Prairie to depict a comprehensible cultural contrast between the urban and the rural. Far from what authors like Floyd Dell argued as Lewis’s assault on small-town American culture, Carol’s relations to Gopher Prairie are designed to show her *own* limitations, not Gopher Prairie’s (Tanselle 176). She herself is confronted with her own commonplaceness when she moves to Washington, DC: “it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting” (*Main Street* 439). In a draft ending of *Main Street*, Lewis planned for Carol to leave Gopher Prairie and run off with the young tailor Erik Valborg, a character with similarly pretentious urban aspirations. However, Lewis, in a letter written to James Branch Cabell, underlined the difficulties of fitting this ending into the character of Carol; she was, for all of her pretenses of rebellion and urban sophistication, very traditional-minded: “I, too, wanted Erik to seduce Carol, but she would have none of it—for all her aspirations of rebellion she was timorous; she was bound; she would never have endured it” (Hutchisson 29). Carol, in her travels to California and Washington, DC, comes to the realization that it was her numerous half-baked reformations, her own snobberies toward her husband, and the general unwillingness of Gopher Prairie to transform to the standards of Greenwich Village that makes her so unhappy. The final pages of *Main Street* end with her admitting that she had been creating a myth of the town through her own urban pretensions: “I’ve been making the town a myth... I’ve been forgetting that Main Street doesn’t think it’s in the least lonely and pitiful. It thinks it’s God’s Own Country. It isn’t waiting for me. It doesn’t care” (439).

Carol’s disdain at the urbanism of Gopher Prairie however is shown to be relative compared to the perspectives of other characters in *Main Street*. When Carol initially arrives in Gopher Prairie, she finds herself viewing the town at the same time as Bea Sorenson, a young woman who had travelled there for the “excitements of city-life” (38): “she was meditating that it didn’t hardly seem like it was possible there could be so

many folks all in one place at the same time” (39). For characters like Bea, brought up in the village of Scandia Crossing, with all of its sixty-seven inhabitants, Gopher Prairie seems like a metropolis. Certainly by early 20th-century census standards Gopher Prairie’s population of 5,000 people would put it at double the population needed to define it as an “urban place” (*Urban and Rural Areas* 2). It is this contrast, between Carol’s disgust at the “tawdry, provincial community” to Bea’s astonishment at the “glittering, inviting city,” which makes Lewis’s critique of Carol even more coherent (Flanagan 6). In Lewis’s depiction of Gopher Prairie in *Free Air*, he details the New York urbanite Claire Boltwood checking her initial suspicions about the general inquisitiveness and friendliness of the townspeople: “‘Why!’ Claire gasped, ‘why they aren’t rude. They care—about people they never saw before. That’s why they ask questions! I never thought—I never thought!’” (*Free Air* 46). For Brooklyn Heights’s own Claire Boltwood, possibly the most urban of all of Lewis’s characters, to revise her own snobberies towards Gopher Prairie shows the relativity of urban and rural perspectives on the small town.

In 1924, in an article written for the *Nation*, “Main Street’s Been Paved!,” Lewis returned to his character of Will Kennicott for a fictional interview. Ten years after Carol’s own arrival in Gopher Prairie, the prairie community had undergone vast changes. The streets were now fully paved, the lawns more decorative, old houses had been rejuvenated, and new buildings and houses were being constructed. The reforms that Carol had once pushed prematurely onto the community of Gopher Prairie were now taking place. However, although Gopher Prairie is described as becoming urbanized, remnants of its more traditional elements still exist, such as the Thanatopsis Club, and Will’s disdain for radicalism in any form. Even Lewis’s hometown of Sauk Centre, the blueprint for Gopher Prairie, isn’t safe from a similar urban evolution. As the *Rotarian* reported in 1928, “‘Gopher Prairie’ at last has answered Sinclair Lewis” with the creation of the Rotary Club, an evolution of the Zenith Athletic Club: “Apparently Main Street is willing to risk the possible superlatives—if it can secure some other things, which, it believes, Rotary may help to provide” (“Rotary in Gopher Prairie” 38).

In examining *Main Street* as a critique of urban culture, we see that Lewis never intended to criticize small-town America any more than he meant to criticize any other form of municipality. In an interview provided by the *New York Evening World* in 1921, he dispelled the comfortable presumption that the Main Streets of his fiction were confined to rural America, arguing that the world is in fact full of Main Streets:

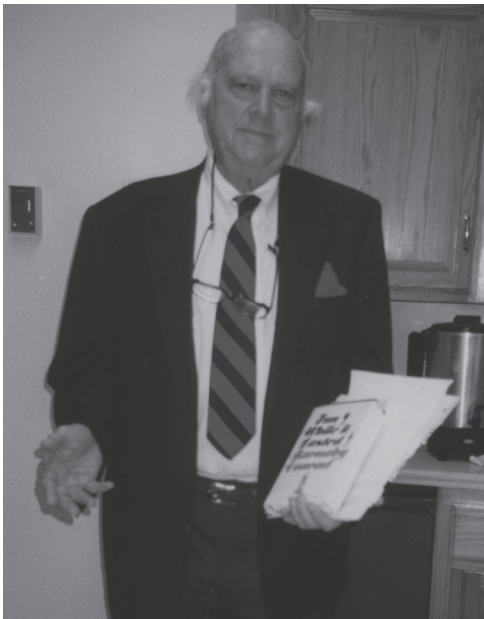
“Wherever a group of provincials are gathered together is Main Street.” Furthermore, he discussed his own doubts about the assumed qualities of the American city, seeing the celebrated urban traits of cosmopolitanism, Bohemianism, and modernism as far less palpable in reality: “It is in America you expect to find modernity, culture and broadmindedness, yet you often only find the assumption of these qualities” (Marshall 3). *Main Street* reaffirms Lewis’s comments by depicting how problematic it is to assume that urban communities guarantee urban sophistication, or that rural communities guarantee traditionalism. Lewis’s characters, like the communities they inhabit, exist within urban and rural cultural hybrids, fraught with their own conflicts between rural traditionalism and urban aspiration, as well as their assumptions about what each of these cultures essentially means and how much they can adhere to them. With this in mind, it is Carol’s own assumptions regarding rural America, her fraught urban idealism, and the general snobberies of urban America that are criticized and ultimately confronted in *Main Street*.

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BARNABY CONRAD, LEWIS'S SECRETARY, DIES AT 90

Barnaby Conrad, who served as Sinclair Lewis's secretary in 1947, during the time that *Kingsblood Royal* was published, died at his home in California in mid-February. Mr. Conrad was the guest speaker at the 2000 Sinclair Lewis Conference in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, and proved a delightful visitor, entertaining the conference goers with memories of Lewis and other famous people he had known, as well as drawing pictures of Lewis and demonstrating his facility for recreating Lewis's signature. One of his jobs as secretary was to respond to letters sent to Lewis and sign checks so that Lewis didn't have to bother. Over fifty years later he was still quite good at it.



Barnaby Conrad

Conrad lived the sort of life that would make a good novel. When he was 19 he attended a bullfight in Mexico and was so taken with it that he began lessons with the famous bullfighter Felix Guzman. Unfortunately the first time that he brought his cape before a live bull he was gored in the knee. He left Mexico to attend Yale University, and later joined the State Department where he was assigned as a vice consul in Spain. He picked up his interest in bullfighting again, became the protégé of Juan Belmonte, and fought under the name "El Niño de California." Bullfighting became the topic of his first two novels, *The Innocent Villa* (1948) and *Matador* (1952),



Barnaby Conrad and Sally Parry pose at the Sinclair Lewis Conference in Sauk Centre, 2000.

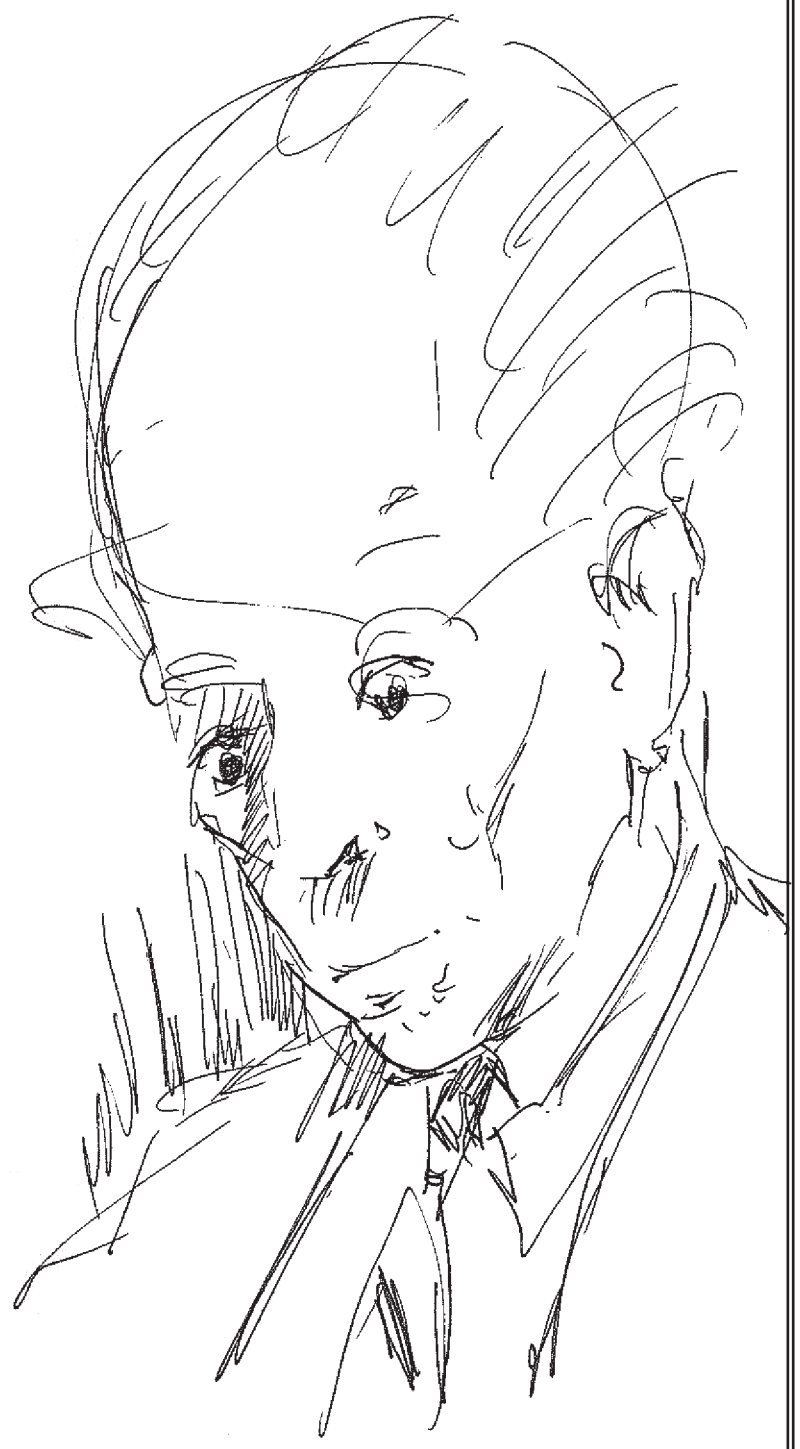
which sold over two million copies, as well as several other books including the memoir *It Was Fun While It Lasted* (1969).

He was a talented pilot, painter, and cocktail pianist and opened his own nightclub El Matador in 1953. His friends included Ray Bradbury, John Steinbeck, and William F. Buckley, Jr., and his portraits of Alex Haley, James Michener, and Truman Capote hang in the National Portrait Gallery. Conrad was the author of over 30 books, and supported other writers, founding the Santa Barbara Writers Conference in 1972, an annual conference that is still being run, at present by Monte Schulz, son of *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles M. Schulz.

While Conrad worked for Sinclair Lewis, they often discussed writing. Lewis is the central character in Conrad's novel *Dangerfield* (1961), a thinly disguised novel of the months that they spent together. During their discussions Lewis talked about a topic for a great novel—that John Wilkes Booth did not die after assassinating Lincoln, but escaped to the Far West and became a solid citizen, ironically killed by a madman while portraying Lincoln in a town pageant. Conrad and Lewis signed a contract to write the book, but nothing came of the idea until a couple of years ago when Conrad finally wrote *The Second Life of John Wilkes Booth* (2010) which was reviewed by Ted Fleener in the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* Fall 2011 (20.1). It was to be his last book. It was a fitting conclusion to a fascinating life. ✍

Sally & Bob
Westwood
St. Louis
Jan 1

- and just maybe,
Barney Coward
July 12 2000
Sand Center



LEWIS'S ST. AUGUSTINE HOME FOR SALE

A former home of Sinclair Lewis is for sale. Call Michelle L. Santorelli at (904) 315-0010 or visit this link for more information:

<http://www.trulia.com/property/3094025258-177-Surfside-Ave-Saint-Augustine-FL-32084>

It is described as follows:

Sngl. Fam.-Detached, Bungalow-ST AUGUSTINE, FL
177 Surfside Ave This quaint cottage nestled in the oak hammocks of North Beach offers the charm of a private retreat once occupied by Sinclair Lewis, the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The large Coquina fireplace is an instant conversation piece as you enter the Living Room and includes photos provided by Yale University of Sinclair Lewis standing next to this same fireplace. Relax on the Back Porch or the Hot Tub and enjoy views of the ICW & Vilano Bridge. This serene estate includes 5 lots on a tidal creek, which offers boat navigation to the ICW. Two of the lots covered by the creek offer the option of building a stilt home. Two additional detached buildings offer extra storage and can be used for an office or library.

[Ed.: In correspondence with her I noted that Lewis rented a house in 1916, the same year the house was supposedly built. Here's her reply: "Thanks for such a quick response. Our historical records indicate he visited St. Augustine several

times. Here's a newspaper article based on some research of a local historian & the current homeowners. Apparently I'm mistaken that he officially owned it, but actually rented it long term. I'm sure it's likely the date built on the home is incorrect. Unfortunately, that's not uncommon."]

The *St. Augustine Record* ran a story on this house on April 15, 2009. Here are some excerpts.

SINCLAIR LEWIS'S VILANO HOME: "PEACEFUL HOUSE IDEAL FOR YOUNG NOBEL WRITER"

BY MARCIA LANE

The one-story shingle house where Sinclair Lewis began his full-time writing career is surrounded by twisting trees and palms. From the wide back porch, you look out across the water to the city of St. Augustine and the spires of what is now Flagler College.

When Yvette and Sinclair Schindler first bought the residence and surrounding lots 20 years ago, contractors called the cottage uninhabitable and advised them to tear it down and build a new place. It wasn't until they held a garage sale in 1990 to clear out some things that they discovered the house's place in literary history. Local historian David Nolan showed

————— Home for Sale *continued on page 17*

In Defense of Gopher Prairie *continued from page 11* —————

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Red in Retrospect *continued from page 1*

section called “World So Wide,” after his last, posthumously published novel.

Starting with a useful, ten-page overview of Lewis’s life and works, the volume gathers together the recollections of all sorts of people who knew Lewis and their memories of him—as a novelist, a storyteller, a social critic, a friend, and a drinker. What makes this volume most valuable is the variety of pieces collected, from newspapers and magazines, some of which are no longer in print, to excerpts from memoirs of many well-known and not so well known people, all of whom are identified by the editors as to their relationship to Lewis and the context in which the pieces were written.

Among the writers included are one of Lewis’s favorite Yale professors, Chauncey Brewster Tinker, who recalls Lewis as his “best student”; the poet William Rose Benét who knew Lewis at Yale and lived with him in an artists’ colony in Carmel, California, in 1909; and Harrison Smith who knew Lewis from his early days in the publishing business and who later edited *From Main Street to Stockholm*. In a 1951 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* he remembers meeting Lewis for the first time and realizing that he had met his first genius, “a man who violently and passionately cared about the same kind of things that had been vaguely concerning me, that here was a man dangerously aroused, brilliant.” Both of his wives, Grace Hegger Lewis and Dorothy Thompson are represented, as well as several of Lewis’s publishers, including Elizabeth Jordan, a manuscript reviewer for Harper and Brothers who read the manuscript of his first adult novel *Our Mr. Wrenn*; George H. Doran, who founded the George H. Doran Company (which eventually became Doubleday, Doran); Alfred Harcourt, the publisher of Lewis’s novels of the 1920s; and Bennett Cerf, publisher and cofounder of Random House, which published Lewis’s last several novels.

After Lewis became a well-known author, he came in contact with literary and newspaper figures throughout both the United States and Europe. One of my favorite pieces is by the European correspondent Frazier Hunt whom Lewis met in London. They traveled around Britain together, drinking and meeting with a wide variety of people. One night they stopped in Glasgow and were appalled at the drunkenness and misery

they saw. Lewis railed, “God damn the society that will permit such poverty! God damn the religions that stand for such a putrid system!”

Lewis traveled all over in search of people, ideas, and stories. A meeting with Morris Fishbein, the editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, led to an introduction to Paul De Kruif, a microbiologist who later became his collaborator on *Arrowsmith*. Fishbein recalls a raucous taxi ride in which they picked up the activist and former Socialist Party presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, because Lewis wanted to talk to him about an idea for a labor novel. Lewis later decided against writing it, as Ramon Guthrie describes in an essay from the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters*.

There are memories of Lewis winning the Nobel Prize; of his flirtations with Fay Wray, Kitty Carlisle, and Ida Compton; of his sadness over the death of his son Wells in World War II; and of his interactions with Barnaby Conrad who was his secretary around the time that *Kingsblood Royal* was published. Several important pieces come from visitors to Thorvale Farm, including Betty Stevens, a Minnesota journalist, and Horace R. Cayton, Jr., an African American sociologist and writer who was mentioned in *Kingsblood Royal*.

The three closing essays are a sad postscript to Lewis’s life, from literary historian Perry Miller’s “The Incorruptible Sinclair Lewis” to his last secretary Alexander Manson’s memories to a brief piece by author Frederick Manfred on Lewis’s funeral.

The editors are dismissive of Lewis’s writing after the Nobel Prize, and the material that they gathered for the second half of his life reflects this. There is also little from his family, outside of his two wives, which might have provided a fuller picture of Lewis within the context of his family. But because the focus is on material that was published rather than letters and other private writings that is understandable.

Sinclair Lewis Remembered is a wonderful collection and tribute to Sinclair “Red” Lewis, a brilliant, lonely, and acerbic critic of American life. Scholars and admirers of Lewis will appreciate this volume for bringing together a myriad of voices that recall how their lives intersected with his. ✍

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome to the new members who have joined the Sinclair Lewis Society since the last issue.

Daniel and Megan Roberg
Sauk Centre, MN

Bob Ruggiero
Houston, TX

IN MEMORIAM: JERRY LEATH MILLS AND PATTI PAGE

Jerry Leath Mills, author of “Sinclair Lewis, Jack London, and the ‘Bo-Teaser,’” for the Fall 2002 (11.1) *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, has died. He taught for many years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where his focus was English Renaissance literature. He was on the editorial board of the journal *Studies in Philology*, and wrote about many of the South’s best contemporary authors. His 1996 *Southern Literary Journal* essay “Equine Gothic: the Dead Mule as Generic Signifier in Southern Literature” is widely considered a classic, and was featured in the *New York Times*, among other publications, not long after it was published. The article has been credited with inspiring a light-hearted literary cottage industry of “dead mule spotting” in Southern fiction.

Patti Page, the honey-voiced alto whose hits like “Tennessee Waltz,” “Old Cape Cod,” and “(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window” made her one of the most successful pop singers of the 1950s, died January 1, 2013 in Encinitas, California. She was 85. She had briefly been a singer with Benny Goodman. Other hits included, “With My Eyes Wide Open, I’m Dreaming,” “Cross Over the Bridge,” “Mockin’ Bird Hill,” “Allegheny Moon,” and her last hit, “Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte.” She briefly pursued a movie career in her early 30s, playing an evangelical singer alongside Burt Lancaster and Jean Simmons in *Elmer Gantry* (1960), David Janssen’s love interest in the comic-strip-inspired *Dondi* (1961), and a suburban wife in the comedy *Boys’ Night Out* (1962), with Kim Novak and James Garner. ✍

Twin Farms Today *continued from page 7*

is shrouded in trees; there are no signs to tell you you’ve arrived. This is not much of a problem for many guests, who are personally picked up at the Burlington Airport and shuttled to the resort.



Our host-manager had to leave very soon. She was scheduled to teach fly-fishing to a young man from Spain who had flown in for the lessons, after he learned she was the best in New England. Therefore, I was unable to take photos of the inside of “Dorothy’s house,” as it came to be known, because there was not time. (However, anyone who would like to see it might be able to request a copy of the marketing books, which show many of the rooms in detail.) But for anyone interested they do offer a private view of what Twin Farms looks like from the outside today.

I can’t even contemplate what Dorothy Thompson and Sinclair Lewis would make of their home today. I had some

feelings about the luxury and polished exclusivity the current owners have cultivated. I have so admired Dorothy for making her country home a working farm; it must have been so interesting then to watch her create her gardens and care for the farm. As a resident now of a similar environment a couple of hours from Twin Farms in rural New Hampshire, I know how rare such efforts are becoming. And I have to add that I know that Dorothy was very expert in her understanding of her Vermont environment. She once commented, “Wildlife and agriculture don’t go together; you have to pick one or the other.” I wish I could talk to her today about how she kept her plants from the sneaking treachery of the woodchucks.

All around Barnard now mini-estates and not-so-mini mansions are popping up, smack in the middle of small but still-working, real farms. Will this change the “real Vermont experience” people are willing to spend \$3,100 per night to get? Or is Twin Farms on its 300 private acres going to remain safe from pernicious development?

As I stood gazing at the view they enjoyed from their front windows, as I studied the beautiful plants in Dorothy’s garden—some that she planted are still growing—I couldn’t help but feel sadness. How could they not have been happy together in this incomparable place? Admittedly, June 24 was quite possibly the most perfect of summer days; winter is not so charming here. Well, wherever they are now, I hope they have found the peace that eluded them when they lived together all too briefly at Twin Farms. ✍

Sarcastic but Sympathetic *continued from page 9*

a lot of grief over it...He was always on the outside looking in," Mr. Lingeman said, "so he didn't admire the aristocracy either." As for the middle class, "he could criticize them and yet he could love them as real people."

In *Babbitt*, Lewis created a character who shared many of the same questions about life that overspent, status-conscious Americans might have today.

"As a family man, *Babbitt* finds himself on a treadmill and he talks about how he is just like a machine trying to make money and sometimes wonders what the point of it is," Mr. Lingeman said. "He asks, 'why do I make this money to send

my kids to college when they disrespect me and my wife is passive and doesn't really appreciate me?' and he has to find some meaning in all this, and in the end, he discovers that having the right values are more important than the material things."

As with so many famous novels from the past, *Babbitt* sits far outside the limelight today. But "I think he is a very quintessential American character," Mr. Lingeman said. "Lewis's publisher said, 'You've invented a character who lives beyond the pages of the book.' I agree with that. His struggles and dilemmas and thoughts and challenges are still valid today." [Originally published Nov. 20, 2011.] ✍

Home for Sale *continued from page 14*

up and told them, "This is a famous house." Yvette Schindler remembers she laughed at the discovery, at least in part because her husband's name was Sinclair. "We never planned to tear down the house," Yvette Schindler said....

When Lewis lived there, the yard was mostly white sand. These days there are azaleas and ferns amid the trees and a metal sculpture of a rhino. "It's wonderful, fertile land. I don't do anything. Everything just grows," said Schindler. She calls it a place of "serenity....It's extremely peaceful." It is, in fact, the kind of place where you'd expect to find a budding author.... These days, there's a little guest house on the property, but the main structure is much as it was in the days when Lewis and his first wife rented it for several months.

The couple would certainly recognize the coquina fireplace that dominates one end of the living room. On each side of the fireplace are photographs featuring the house and Lewis, including one of the Nobel Prize-winner standing next to that very fireplace. "If you look at the picture and then stand by the fireplace you can see he must have worn his trousers very high," Yvette Schindler said, pointing toward one photo of the tall author beside the fireplace. His trousers are high on his waist with the cuffs several inches from the floor. Most guests can't resist the urge to measure up to Lewis, and sidle over to stand by the fireplace. The photos are copies from Yale University where Lewis graduated and which has a large collection of his memorabilia. It was at Yale he became friends with a member of the Benét family, and that may have led to his interest in St. Augustine. Nolan calls finding the Lewis house "one of my favorite discoveries."

St. Augustine's connection to Pulitzer Prize-winner Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings is well documented; the Lewis connection is less well-known. He sees it as a "small claim" to literary fame for the city and doesn't want to see it forgotten.

"I knew Sinclair Lewis had lived in St. Augustine, but finding where it was, that was the trick," said Nolan, an author who has become an expert on the area's history. "It's been an obsession for years. I just started looking around."

When Lewis came to St. Augustine in 1916 he had just sold three short stories to the *Saturday Evening Post*, "the" magazine of the day. He decided it was time to quit his day job and be a serious writer. He stayed at the Valencia Hotel on St. George Street and found a cheap house for rent in the North Beach area. "He had this pattern with both of his wives. He wrote novels about them; two novels about each," Nolan said. The first would be a positive portrayal, while they were still in love. The second would be after the divorce, when the love was gone.

During his first stay in St. Augustine, Lewis and his wife took part in the town's social life. Nolan has found references to him in the *St. Augustine Evening Record*. Lewis would visit St. Augustine later and seemed to enjoy the city and showing it off to the love of the moment.

One *Record* story tells of a visit in later years made with his "niece" and their visit by moonlight to the Castillo de San Marco. As it turns out, the "niece" was actually his "third great love," a young actress named Marcella Powers, "But she was so much younger he was embarrassed to introduce her, so he told people she was his niece," said Nolan.

Schindler said neighbors were surprised to discover the Lewis connection to the area. It was only after they had been there awhile that one longtime resident told of Lewis "a little intoxicated on the back porch." These days that back porch remains a perfect place to sit and enjoy the North Beach view as Lewis once did.

For the complete story, go to: http://staugustine.com/stories/041509/news_041509_003.shtml. ✍

DEPARTMENTS

WEB NOTES

Liam O'Brien, Professor and Chair of the Department of Film, Video, and Interactive Media at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, writes "Happy to add a nail to the coffin of the old Sinclair Lewis authorship myth. A complete misassignment of quotation: "When Fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross."

"I grew up at 187 Carmalt Road, Hamden, Connecticut (the village of Spring Glen in Hamden was then, as now, very much a bedroom community for Yale faculty). My neighbor, kitty corner across the street, was Hal Luccock. Rev. Hal always wore a collar, even when mowing his lawn. A finer man you would not meet. He handed out fistfuls of candied corn at Halloween and put up with our torments on Door Bell Night.

"Halford Luccock was the author of the actual sentence, and we are hopefully a better nation for the warning." [Ed.: I emailed back to ask for some confirmation in print, but have never heard back.]

My dear mother, Vivienne Brady, was greatly concerned that the local NE Indiana library did not have a copy of *It Can't Happen Here* on its shelves in the late 1950s. Because of her insistence and efforts, the book was ordered for her book club. To her tween daughters she said "make sure this book is in your local and personal library and that you read it several times during your lifetime." Thanks, Mom; seems most appropriate this election year.

My interest in the Sinclair Lewis Society is prompted by a question about a watercolor painting I have had for years. It is signed "Unfinished sketch Objibway children, Garden River 1923, H. S. Lewis." The painting is of two young girls who have very dark hair.

As I recall, Garden River is on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It has been years since I read a biography of Mr. Lewis, but at that time I conjectured that he may have traveled through there around that time; it is a route he might have taken between Minnesota and the East and a relatively cool getaway

during the heat of August.

His signature, if in fact it is his, does not confirm the "sketch" is his. It may have been done by someone else, a friend or family member, and signed by him. Hopefully you or other Society members may have an interest in confirming whether or not this painting has some connection to "Harry" Sinclair Lewis.

I salute you and all who created the Sinclair Lewis Society. We are having a very hard time identifying First Edition Points for his books. And, whereas, some booksellers on the major sites like abebooks.com and bookfinder.com sometimes detail some points, we have yet to find any such information for our Lewis books, other than a few who claim to have a "stated first printing."

For example, we just struck out totally regarding a copy of *Kingsblood Royal*. It has absolutely no edition or printing details on the copyright page, just the year of 1947. Sure, it could be a reprint, but one remains clueless because we have yet to find a site that details said points. John Steinbeck's books are notorious for hellish mass confusion in this area, so much so that the Steinbeck Society has people who are experts in this area and write scholarly papers and share research on the topic.

Is the Lewis Society into something similar? If so, please direct us where to go. If not, could you provide any contact e-mail addresses for anyone who may have expertise in this area? Thank you very much for any assistance you may be able to provide. [Ed.: Thanks for the kind words. I know that *Firsts* magazine once did an issue focusing on Sinclair Lewis so there may be information there. I don't remember the issue offhand but I'm sure if you emailed them, they could direct you. I know I have a copy somewhere, but it's not to hand.

There is also *Sinclair Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography* by Stephen Pastore (YaleBooks 1997). He was a collector and lawyer who had a good description of the first editions. However, there were some irregularities in his collection so although it's handy, it's also wise to get the information verified elsewhere. I did check his description for the first of *Kingsblood Royal* and he says it has "First Printing" at the top of copyright page. I checked one of my KRs and it's true.

I hope this is a help. Let me know what else I can do. The Society publishes a twice-yearly newsletter which has a roundup of interesting editions of Lewis novels and what booksellers are asking for them.]

I think it's wonderful there is a Sinclair Lewis Society. I've loved his work for years and I've read many of his books, including ones that most people don't bother with, such as *Kingsblood Royal* and *Cass Timberlane*. I'm currently reading *Work of Art*. I've read *Main Street* several times and plan to reread it soon. You get the idea.

I am moved to write because I have been wanting to break into electronic book publishing for awhile, and when I recently searched for "Sinclair Lewis" for Kindle, I noticed that somebody is offering a book called "Ann Wickers." I can't imagine why Amazon would allow a misspelled title on its site, and I am sure I could do better than that. Do you happen to know who the copyright holder is for Lewis's works that are still in copyright? [Ed.: Thanks for writing. I looked up "Ann Wickers" and noted that there was a comment about it being the wrong title and apparently a very shoddy job of scanning.]

Always glad to hear from another Lewis enthusiast. The Society publishes a twice yearly newsletter; the latest issue of which I've attached because of your interest. I teach a lot of Lewis, including *Kingsblood Royal*, which was fascinating to do. This past fall our English majors did a reading of the play of *It Can't Happen Here* right before the election, which I hope scared them all.

The literary agents for the Lewis estate are
McIntosh & Otis
353 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10016
(212) 687-7400

The contact at the estate is Eugene Winick.]

Did Lewis write something about the "Society for the Promotion of Madness Among Respectable Classes"? [Ed.: Not that I know of. "Cheap and Contented Labor" is probably the snarkiest title he came up with.]

I am writing from Guadalajara, México and I am interested in the life and work of Mr. Sinclair Lewis. I am looking for images of the diploma and medal received by Mr. Lewis when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930. Do you know where I can find such images?

I have looked on the Internet, and so far haven't found anything. [Ed.: Thank you for writing. It's always good to hear from those interested in Mr. Lewis. The medal and other materials that Lewis received when he won the Nobel Prize were donated to the Beinecke Library at Yale University. You

should probably start by contacting them. If that doesn't work, let me know. I have a framed copy and could take a picture of it for you.]

Charles Pankenier writes: I don't know if you've seen Holland Carter's review of Justin Wolff's new biography of Lewis's contemporary Thomas Hart Benton, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). A few excerpts from Carter's review: "In 1934, ...Benton...was the country's most famous painter...[with] his picture on the cover of *Time*. In 1949, Jackson Pollock...appeared in *Life* teasingly headlined "Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" What changed in...15...years?...American art...changed from illustrating provincial sagas to dramatizing universal myths."

And "Benton, who lived from 1889 to 1975, is not a significant presence now. The particular audience he painted for is long gone; the one that has replaced it knows nothing about him. Generally speaking, the elite art establishment of museums and scholars that he reviled has pegged him as at best a period artifact."

And "He wanted to be an artist. His father, who considered art an unmanly trade, was furious; the two were never close again." And "Benton's character, as depicted by Wolff at this [early] point, will remain consistent: a combination of combative self-confidence and profound uncertainty."

And "Strained and broken friendships were common in Benton's life. So were professional battles." And "Leery of partisan ideology and sensitive to personal assault, real and imagined, Benton kept shifting his politics from left to right and back...But then, everything, everything about him was conflicted...He claimed that his work honored the average American, yet his murals are laced with satirical figures of working people." And "[Benton] labored long to achieve a decisive narrowness—he might have called it refinement or sharpness—in his art."

Of course, I've done some cherry-picking of passages that fit my personal interpretation of Lewis; even so, the analogues are striking.

SINCLAIR LEWIS SCHOLARSHIP —

Albert H. Tricomi, a distinguished teaching professor at SUNY-Binghamton, has published *Missionary Positions: Evangelicalism and Empire in American Fiction* (UP Florida, 2011). One of the chapters, "Contesting America's Missionary Destiny in Sinclair Lewis's *The God-Seeker*," a reworked

version of an article he wrote for *Studies in American Fiction* in 2007, is a very thoughtful analysis of one of Lewis's lesser-read and discussed novels. Tricomi reads it not so much for aesthetics but as a culturally significant novel, "well managed and intellectually challenging," in that it provides "authentic, diachronic perspectives and the power of its historical vision of American identity." It will make you read *The God-Seeker* with new eyes.

Claire Bruyère, a retired professor of American literature and civilization at the University Paris VII-Denis Diderot, has published "Creative Reading, or the New Life of Literary Works: American Instances" in *Mémoires du livre/Studies in Book Culture* 3.2 (2012). The abstract is as follows:

The "creative reading" referred to here is an extension of the reading of literature. To be inspired by a previous text is as old as literature itself; what we wish to understand is why the (re)reading of a number of works of imagination published in the United States between 1915 and 1940 leads contemporary writers, stage or film directors, composers, illustrators, and multimedia artists to adapt or transpose them. Why these works, in particular? Some "creative readers" reveal, in their productions, scripts, projects, and interviews, the ways in which they interpret works by "classic authors" such as Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. They also reveal how they hope to bring their spectators or readers, especially the younger ones, to share their enthusiasm and read the source texts. The role of new technology cannot be overestimated, both in artistic creation and in the circulation of information.

Included in her essay are discussions of some of the reworkings of Lewis novels, including *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth* into other media.

Here is the link: <http://www.erudit.org/revue/memoires/2012/v3/n2/1009345ar.html>

SAUK CENTRE NEWS

Sinclair Lewis Foundation President's Annual Report

2012 became a year of "goals and projects" for the Sinclair Lewis Foundation. The Annual Meeting planned for February 7, 2012 (Sinclair Lewis's Birthday) at the Interpretive Center had to be postponed, because of adverse weather. This meeting would not be held until April. Present at this meeting

were six members, besides the eight board members, and it was noted that the board could have as many as 13 members on the board. Nominated as new members were Joyce Lyng, Jo Alene Glinnon, Alice Karakas, Allan Coenen, and Daniel Roberg. President Colleen Steffes resigned—so elections were held. New Officers: President: Joyce Lyng; Vice-President: Jo Glinnon; Treasurer: Irene Trisko; Secretary: Roberta Olson.

Goals and projects and possible projects had to be reviewed. All of the projects listed here are board approved and most have all been completed. One of the first celebrations in 2012 was the 100th anniversary of *Hike and the Aeroplane* (Sinclair's first book publication in 1912) written under the pseudonym Tom Graham.

Other goals: it was decided that the SLF should have its own website—within a few months, we did. (www.sinclairlewisfoundation.com, e-mail is sinclairlewisfoundation@gmail.com)

Some of the other projects: (1) SLF museums were listed on the "Museums of Minnesota" and "We Go Places" websites. (2) We promoted National Museum month in May at our local museums, by advertising on local TV stations, newspapers, and radio stations. (3) The SLF took part in celebrating "From Main St. to 8th Street" in St. Cloud. Sinclair's brother, Dr. Claude Lewis's house (now owned by St. Cloud State University) was called the "Alumni House" and is now known as the "Lewis House." (4) Took part in Sinclair Lewis Days—visibility/by selling books, souvenirs at the Palmer House, and sponsored an antique car in the Sinclair Lewis Parade (with Sally Parry dressed as Dorothy Thompson and her husband Bob McLaughlin as Sinclair Lewis). (5) We hosted "Sauk Centre Chamber After Hours" at the Museum. (6) We were videotaped by "Life to the Max" in May and by "Authors Road" (about very famous authors) in August. (7) The 23rd Sinclair Lewis "Writer's Conference" was a success. Don Shelby, area newscaster on television and radio, and an author, was the Keynote Speaker. (8) The Minnesota Association of Library Friends nominated the Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home as one of its "Literary Landmarks." The ceremony will be on July 16, 2013. (9) A project that we began to think about in 2012 is a "Mini-Opera of *Elmer Gantry*," put on by the University of Minnesota's Music Department. It will be held right after the Writer's Conference in 2013. (10) SLF Interpretive Center/Museum is still for sale by the city of Sauk Centre. A fundraiser is being planned for 2013, which you'll be hearing more about, as well as the other goals and projects for this year.

Joyce Lyng, President
Sinclair Lewis Foundation

SINCLAIR LEWIS FOUNDATION

A NON-PROFIT CORPORATION



OPERATING THE LEWIS BOYHOOD HOME MUSEUM

“Not one of Lewis’s contemporaries has kept so close to the main channel of American life as Sinclair Lewis—not only is he an American telling stories, but he is America telling stories.”

Sinclair Lewis refused to accept the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *Arrowsmith*, but he did accept the Nobel Prize for his body of work including *Main Street* on December 12, 1930 and thereby giving Sauk Centre, Minnesota a place to “come for a visit.”

That was the “Main” reason for restoration of the Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home which was dedicated Memorial Day 1970 and the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center, completed and dedicated in 1975. Through the efforts of many proud citizens the “door of welcoming” has been kept open for hundreds of people from all walks of life.

No other entity in Sauk Centre has brought more people into our community. The records show that the Sinclair Lewis Boyhood home averages 800 visitors in six months and the Interpretive Center close to a thousand. Registers in both places show that in 2012 people from 38 states and seven countries visited our “Main Street” and the comments they wrote in our logs indicate just how special these two places are to our community. Comments such as: “Worth coming all the way from London to see.” “I wish more places in the U.S. honored our writers”—Oregon; “What a great place, it makes Sauk Centre special”—Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; “It is a privilege to experience this museum”—California.

How many other small communities can claim visitors from Germany, Japan, Scotland, Canada, Chile, France, England, Denmark, and 38 states in one year? That is why the Sinclair Lewis Foundation Board is determined to keep the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center and Boyhood Home alive.

Now is an important time and we are asking your help to keep our heritage alive. The Sinclair Lewis Board wants to keep the Interpretive Center in its present location but that will be left to the Sauk Centre City Council. If the Council sells the property we will have to move. But it is our hope to raise enough money enabling us to stay on the land and keep the visitors’ center at this special location. What other city on I-94 has such a beautiful and educational entrance?

The Sinclair Lewis Board voted to engage in a city, state, and beyond fund drive to raise as much money as possible and in addition seek grant monies to meet our goal. We believe saving this special place should be a top priority for this city and the citizens who have worked so hard for so long to preserve our great heritage.

Upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Lewis wrote: “Were I to express my feeling of honor and pleasure in having been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, I should be fulsome and perhaps tedious and I present my gratitude with a plain ‘Thank you.’”

The Sinclair Lewis Foundation Board will do the same. Your donation will be extremely appreciated, and we offer our plain “Thank you.”

THE SINCLAIR LEWIS FOUNDATION BOARD AND MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE

Sinclair Lewis Foundation • P.O. Box 25 • Sauk Centre, MN 56378 • 320-352-5201

www.sinclairlewisfoundation.com • e-mail: sinclairlewisfoundation@gmail.com

—Collector's Corner features catalog listings from book dealers as a sampling of what publications by Lewis are selling for currently. [Thanks to Jacqueline Koenig for her contributions to this section.]



COLLECTOR'S
CORNER

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Ten West Micheltorena Street,
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Phone: (805) 962-2141 Fax: (805) 966-5057
Email: ralphsipperbooks@cox.net
ralphsipperbooks.com

261. Lewis, Sinclair. *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928. \$2,500.

First edition. A fine copy in an especially fine dust jacket with just a bit of niggling wear at the spine.

260. —. *Dodsworth*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929. \$6,500.

First edition. Laid into this copy is an evocative TLS, dated May 5, 1946, from Walter Huston to Laurence Olivier. "I appreciate your inviting me to the showing of *Henry V*. It took great courage to make this picture...It is as modern as today's newspaper...a truly great achievement...the finest acting I have ever seen in any picture. Walter Huston." *Henry V* was among Olivier's finest performances, as was Huston's portrayal of Sam Dodsworth (on the stage as well as the screen). A fine, fresh copy in a fine, first issue dust jacket. Housed in a custom-made clamshell box.

259. —. *Cheap and Contented Labor*. New York: United Textile Workers, 1929. \$500.

First edition. Laid in is a letter from the United Textile Workers to Lewis's secretary at the time, Louis Florey, forwarding a copy of *Cheap and Contented Labor*. The first issue, lacking quotation marks at the beginning of *Dodsworth* on the title page. Pictorial wrappers. Near fine.

258. —. *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922. \$7,500.

First edition, first issue. Laid into this copy is a brief ALS from Lewis: "Feb 14, 1922. Dear Mrs. Powell, I'm sorry but I have no bookplate. Yours is utterly charming. Sincerely yours, Sinclair Lewis." A highspot of 20th Century American literature that is seldom seen in collector's condition. A fine copy in a fine dust jacket of this quintessentially eponymous novel with minor repairs to the spine by a master paper conservator.

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CATALOG 180

178. Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran 1934. \$350.

First edition. Very slight sunning to the spine ends, else near fine in near fine dustwrapper with a single tiny nick.

Ken Lopez, Bookseller

51 Huntington Rd., Hadley, MA 01035
Phone: (413) 584-4827 Fax: (413) 584-2045
Email: klopez@well.com
www.lopezbooks.com

CATALOG 160—SPECIAL ISSUE

48. Lewis, Sinclair. *The Job*. NY: Harper & Brothers (1917). \$9,500.

The first issue of his third book under his own name and his first attempt, he later said, to write a serious novel. *The Job* was controversial for its realistic depiction of a woman in the workplace and laid the groundwork for Lewis's great novels of social realism in the 1920s. Offsetting to endpages from jacket flaps and slight wear to board edges; near fine in a price-clipped dust jacket professionally restored to near fine. An extremely scarce book in jacket.

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