

# The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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SPRING 2018



*Dave and Linda Simpkins. Photo by Ted G. Fleener*

## TRIBUTE TO DAVE SIMPKINS

Dave Simpkins, the publisher and former editor of the *Sauk Centre Herald*, passed away unexpectedly on February 23, 2018. Born in South Dakota, he grew up in Minneapolis and died in Vining, Minnesota, on his farm where he spent his summers as a child. He joined the Army, and later the GI Bill took him through journalism school at the University of Minnesota, leading to a long and successful career as a newspaper publisher. Dave invested his time, money, and ingenuity in every town he adopted. In Elbow Lake, he founded the *Sodbuster* newspaper and later published the *Grant County Herald*, making it the first weekly newspaper west of the Mississippi to use computers and desktop publishing. In Sauk Centre, he published the *Sauk Centre*

————— Tribute to Dave Simpkins *continued on page 4*

## TRIBUTE TO JOYCE LYNG

Joyce Lyng, a member of both the Sinclair Lewis Society and Sinclair Lewis Foundation, passed away on April 1, 2018. A tribute to her will be in the Fall issue.

## CONGRATULATIONS TO THE INCOMING OFFICERS OF THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY

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*Ralph Goldstein*

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## FRESH PASTURES: SINCLAIR LEWIS BUYS THORVALE FARM

*Susan O'Brien*

*"I am selling the Duluth house; it has been extremely agreeable to be here, but now I want fresh pastures (as I regularly do about every 18 months)."*

*—Sinclair Lewis!*

Lewis would find his pastures in the flat valleys that slope beneath the Massachusetts Berkshire Hills, down from the southern border of Vermont where he had also lived, for what was to be his last home on American soil. He had great powers of real estate discrimination, from decades of buying and selling property; he had lived in too many houses, estates, and locations to count. An entire book by John Koblas, *Sinclair Lewis: Home at Last*, is devoted exclusively to his Minnesota residences; for example, the "lemon meringue pie" house on St. Paul's Summit Avenue, a wide boulevard of extravagant mansions and the same street as former resident F. Scott Fitzgerald (39).

————— Fresh Pastures *continued on page 8*

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To receive an electronic version of the *Newsletter*, which includes color versions of the photos and images, e-mail Sally Parry at [separry@ilstu.edu](mailto:separry@ilstu.edu)

## The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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**STRAIGHT OUT OF SOUTH DAKOTA: A REVIEW OF *FROM WARM CENTER TO RAGGED EDGE: THE EROSION OF MIDWESTERN LITERARY AND HISTORICAL REGIONALISM, 1920–1965* BY JON K. LAUCK. U OF IOWA PRESS, 2017**

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*Ralph Goldstein*

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That Sinclair Lewis loved his native land and its people is unmistakable, as is his commitment to the Midwest as a worthy literary setting. Part of the evidence is in his reply to a letter from a Midwestern woman who wanted to become a writer, who asked if it was necessary “to come to New York, live in Greenwich Village, get a job in a publishing house.”

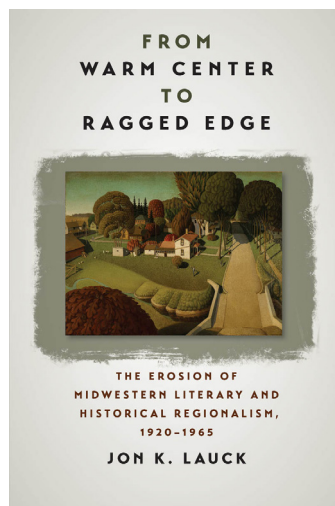
Was it possible, she wondered, to write only of what she knew: an existence bounded by her town and nearby farms, familiar only with growing up, marrying and mothering, suffering widowhood and poverty, “and longing to do something beyond Main Street”? Lewis commented that any genius who could “fully and passionately” write of such experiences, set in the Midwest, “could sit down beside Flaubert forever content.” In correspondence with others Lewis maintained that he liked Gopher Prairie, liked George Babbitt, and couldn’t have created them otherwise. Responding to the critic Carl Van Doren, who averred in the *Nation* magazine’s “Revolt from the Village” series that Lewis felt differently, Lewis insisted that he loved even those characters who might be classified as “dull.”

It is against Van Doren, critic Van Wyck Brooks, and anyone past or present who overlooks the Midwest’s importance that Jon Lauck directs his ire in his book, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965*. In it, Lauck, the founding president of the Midwestern History Association and an adjunct professor of history and political science at the University of South Dakota, first surveys how the Midwest purportedly “faded from our collective imagination,

fell off the map, and became an object of derision,” and then seeks to “bolster the new and concerted search for the history and culture of the lost region at the heart of our nation” (3). Lauck’s title is borrowed from Minnesota émigré author F. Scott Fitzgerald’s restless character Nick Carraway, heading for the East from the region that had become in Nick’s words

not “a warm center” but “the ragged edge of the universe.” Countering Van Doren’s revolt thesis that characterizes Fitzgerald along with Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson as cultural rebels, Lauck insists they remained loyal to the Midwest despite their occasional carping about the region. As proof he cites Fitzgerald’s reported nostalgia for St. Paul and Nick Carraway’s return to the Midwest, endearing comments toward the region from Masters and Anderson, and notes that even Brooks, after recovering from a nervous breakdown in the 1920s, embraced the Midwest’s “stability, calm, and community,” confessing in 1952: “What an ass I was at the age of 22!”

Calling Lewis “the most famous of Van Doren’s rebellious quartet,” Lauck concedes that he defies categorization and that Lewis’s ambiguity expressed in the novels reveals his affection for the Midwest (28). He notices George Babbitt and Sam Dodsworth finally finding comfort in *Zenith*, and that the criticism Lewis gave Gopher Prairie was not in excess of that which he gave to “New York, or Paris, or the great universities” (30). But claiming that “Lewis’s fondness for the Midwest is



————— Straight Out of South Dakota *continued on page 13*

## CONTRIBUTORS

*The editor of the Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles or sending in notes.*

Thanks to Frederick Betz, Rick Diguette, Ted G. Fleener, Ralph Goldstein, Jackie Koenig, Richard Lingeman, Randy Maas, Quentin Martin, Robert McLaughlin, Susan O’Brien, Bob Ruggiero, Jörg Thuncke, Ellen Strenski, Dan and Mary Stroeing.

Tribute to Dave Simpkins *continued from page 1*

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*Herald* and later developed a partnership with his employees, going on to establish Star Publications, which publishes the *Dairy Star*, *Sauk Centre Herald*, *Melrose Beacon*, *Albany Enterprise*, *Sauk Rapids Herald*, *Benton County News*, and *Country Acres*. He also transformed *Minnesota Bike Trails & Rides* into the *Minnesota Trails Magazine* and served as president of the Lake Wobegon Trails Association. In Sauk Centre, Dave was most proud of helping to establish a community foundation, saving the Carnegie library, and bringing internet access to town. Over the years, Dave became an expert on Sauk Centre native son Sinclair Lewis. He spoke on Lewis in New York City, Sauk Centre, and on television, and was completing a book based on the author's childhood diaries. In lieu of flowers, memorials can be made to the Sauk Centre Area Community Foundation Fund (SCACF). Online memorials can be made via [communitygiving.org/donate](http://communitygiving.org/donate) and list SCACF Dave Simpkins in the memo. Mailing address: SCACF, 1601 Hwy 12 East, Suite 9, Willmar, MN 56201.

Dave was a wonderful host when the Sinclair Lewis Society held its conferences in Sauk Centre over the years, in conjunction with the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, and was a staunch member of the Sinclair Lewis Society, often contributing to the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*.



*Dave Simpkins interviewing Sinclair Lewis (Robert McLaughlin) and Dorothy Thompson (Sally Parry) at the Lutheran Pie Social, Sinclair Lewis Days 2012.*

Here are some reminiscences of Lewis Society members about Dave.

I considered Dave a good friend, someone with whom I could always talk about all things Sinclair Lewis. My husband, Bob McLaughlin, and I visited with him and Linda at their home when they lived in Sauk Centre, and we would always socialize with them when we were in town. One of my favorite memories of Dave is when we both spoke in New York City at the unveiling of a plaque on a house in Greenwich Village where Lewis lived when he was just starting out as a writer. A group of Lewis Society members then had lunch at the White Horse Tavern, got a tour of the Greenwich Village that Lewis would have known, and then Bob, Dave, Linda, and I had dinner at the home of Lewis biographer Richard Lingeman and his wife Anthea, where we talked for hours about Lewis. It's one of the best days I can remember. Dave, Richard, and I have kept up an email correspondence

over the years about Lewis, and that included drafts of the book Dave was working on. I'll miss the emails and Dave's cheerful enthusiasm for Lewis, Minnesota, and all things Norwegian.

Sally Parry

Executive Director, Sinclair Lewis Society



I only vaguely remember when I first walked into the *Sauk Centre Herald* office and first met Dave. It was some years ago on a research trip for my then still-in-progress Lewis bio. He was of course, as everyone who knew him will attest, generous, friendly, helpful, kind—and I'm starting to reel off the Boy Scout Laws so I'll stop. He was all those things, a good man and a credit to his community, to which I imagine he gave a lot. On one visit I remember him taking photos of a Sinclair Lewis Days parade with a speed graphic flash camera, looking like a reporter out of *The Front Page*. This was the Editor/Publisher of the paper. Which is just to say that he was a solid, down-to-earth, in-a-good-way humble person. He and Linda visited us occasionally on their trips to New York, where I live. Not often enough, but we enjoyed having them for dinner. On one visit I took him to a weekly editorial meeting at *The Nation*, where I was then an editor. I think he enjoyed giving our Brain Trust the small-town editor's progressive views on Minnesota and US politics and I know they enjoyed listening to him. They were lucky to have the chance, as were all who knew him.

Richard Lingeman

Author, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*



What a shock it was to learn that Dave Simpkins had died suddenly on the family farm in Vining, Minnesota! Just last July Dave appeared full of vitality and enthusiasm while participating in the latest Sinclair Lewis Conference in Sauk Centre, where he had served for many years as publisher and editor of the *Sauk Centre Herald*, which had reported on the young Harry Lewis as early as April 28, 1898 (Schorer 6). Not only as editor of the *Herald*, but also as a leading member of the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, Dave relentlessly promoted the life, work, and legacy of Lewis in Sauk Centre. When Sauk Centre decided to close the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center and sell the valuable property fronting I-94 to developers to replace the Center with a chain

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Tribute to Dave Simpkins *continued on page 6*

## RUTH SUCKOW: IOWA GEM

*Ted G. Fleener*

*Waterloo Community Schools (retired)*

Ruth Suckow, a contemporary of Sinclair Lewis, was born in Hawarden, Iowa, on August 6, 1892. Both of her parents were the children of German immigrants. Her father was a Congregational minister. As a result, she moved often to Iowa towns including Le Mars, Algona, Manchester, Grinnell, Earlville, and Cedar Falls. She came to consider Cedar Falls as home.

Suckow attended Grinnell College before going to Boston to study at the Curry School of Expression, from which she graduated in 1915. She later attended the University of Denver, earning both a bachelor's and a master's degree. During this period of her life, she worked in the summer as a waitress at Yellowstone Park and taught as a graduate assistant at the University of Denver.

One of the more interesting aspects of her life was her involvement in beekeeping. Her father accepted a pastorate in Earlville, Iowa, in 1919 and she moved there to be with him. She moved into a cottage on the edge of Earlville, living a life of bare simplicity. Suckow made a serious study of beekeeping and toiled long hours at it in order to support herself as a writer. She kept 80 hives and was known as the beekeeping author to friends and farmers in the area. Her business, Orchard Apiary, was successful, with Suckow driving as far as Dubuque to sell her honey. She divided her time between keeping bees in Earlville in the summer and writing her stories in New York City in the winter. She was able to experience the weather and the cycle of the seasons so important to farm work. This beekeeping experience also honed her sense of realism in her writings about rural people.

Suckow began writing both fiction and poetry when she lived in Colorado. Once she moved back to Iowa, she continued to work on her craft. She had four poems published in *Poetry* in June 1921, including "Beauty."

I went where pines grew;  
Beauty I found in these,

In stars, and in the strange  
Twisted boughs of trees.  
I went where houses were;  
Beauty I found then  
In eyes, and in the strange  
Twisted lives of men. (qtd. in Kissane 26)

An unpublished poem from her journal in the early 1920s calls to mind Robert Frost's conversational style. It tells of a dog that followed her on a winter ramble. Here's an excerpt from the end of it.

I rather think that I've met that same dog since,  
But we always pass each other.  
He never gives me a narrowed look—"Now isn't that  
the girl—?"  
He knows what humans seldom know—  
That a thing is when it is,  
And then it's over.  
And so we keep that moment on the hill intact—  
That satisfaction of black earth and aging snow—  
And never talk about it. (qtd. in Kissane 27)

Suckow's connection with the *Midland* in Colorado, where she had both poems and short stories published, helped launch her career as a published author. The relationship also led to a friendship with the editor, John T. Frederick of the University of Iowa, who introduced her work to H. L. Mencken. Mencken encouraged her to submit work to the *Smart Set*. Suckow told others that "He was like a kind old uncle to me" (Kissane 24). At one time, Mencken ranked her as one of the top ten American fiction writers ("1978 Iowa Women's Hall of Fame Honoree"). On one occasion he said, "She was unquestionably the most remarkable woman writing stories in the republic" (Longden).

————— Iowa Gem continued on page 14

### NEW MEMBERS

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

Edward Angran  
Iowa City, IA

Marlys Gaucher  
Arlington, MN

Rick Diguette  
Tucker, GA

store, Dave said, “Babbitt won out. George Babbitt would have loved to develop that land.” Nevertheless, the Foundation was “undaunted. We still have a story to tell” (*Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, 25.2, Spring 2017: 18–19). Over the years, Dave did his part in telling Sauk Centre and the Sinclair Lewis Society stories about Lewis, for example, “Lewis Would Have Loved Sinclair Lewis Days” (*Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, 9.1, Fall 2000: 20), “Lewis Catches Flivver Fever: Author Enjoyed the Early Motoring Days” (*Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, 11.2, Spring 2003: 2, 13), or “Lewis and the Bryant Library” (*Sauk Centre Herald*, July 13, 2004). But Dave was also writing a book about “Becoming Sinclair Lewis,” based in particular on Lewis’s early (unpublished) diaries. In conversations at each Sinclair Lewis Conference I attended (1997, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2017), Dave talked about his assiduous work on this book. We were never quite sure, however, how much of Lewis’s early life he wanted to cover, and just when we thought he was nearing completion of his book, he told us at the Lewis Conference in July 2017 that he was so fascinated with the story of the early life and development of Lewis that he wanted to extend it, but would not or could not say by how many more years! Sadly, therefore, Dave’s book remains unfinished. It would be a tribute to his memory and memorable contribution to the biographical study of Lewis if his (un-extended) manuscript could be edited by a colleague and published posthumously. My lasting impression of Dave is of his emceeding the rousing Sinclair Lewis sing-along of songs Lewis once had sung, like “In the Good Old Summertime” and “Main Street: A Fox Trot Song,” at the Jitters Java Café, 403 Main Street, Sauk Centre, on July 13, 2017. Sauk Centre and the Sinclair Lewis Society have lost a great spirit!

Fred Betz

President, Sinclair Lewis Society



At last year’s Sinclair Lewis Conference in Sauk Centre, some of us were late to leave the Palmer House. As we waited for the light to change and cross the street, someone remarked on the mural painted on the side of a building. The light turned green and we crossed to the other side of the street. Dave’s office was in the opposite direction but he chose to accompany the six or seven people in our group. As we had numerous questions about the mural and the series of images, Dave became our docent. He took his time to not only explain each visual image but the background and historical significance to the viewer and the Sauk Centre community. This was only one example of Dave’s kind spirit and his willing and generous

nature to share his knowledge. Every time I met him and had a conversation with him, I learned something new. Dave made something I had overlooked seem more clear or significant, as he would explain why I should see it from a position I had not considered or explored. I am very grateful to have known him and his willingness and generosity in sharing his extensive SL knowledge. The world will be a little less bright without him but the light he shared with us will be carried within us as long as we live. He may be gone, but he will not be forgotten.

Thanks Dave for a life well lived. Our condolences to Linda, the extended Simpkins family, and the community of Sauk Centre.

Dan and Mary Stroeing  
Red Wing, Minnesota



Sauk Centre has a mythic quality for those who have only read about it. A deeper appreciation for the place and its people requires time on the ground. As participants were arriving for the 2017 Sinclair Lewis Conference, Dave Simpkins met with a group that included several first-time visitors, sharing some of the research for his nearly finished book about the young Lewis. During that informal, unhurried afternoon in the Palmer House he also answered questions about recent changes in the town, the Farmer Labor Party past and present, the coming of Walmart, Trump winning Stearns County, where the railroad station once was, and where there are still good places to fish. With his reporter’s notebook at his side, Dave often jotted down notes as the conversation continued. Later, he escorted us to the mural on Sinclair Lewis Avenue and explained how each of the six panels depicts an aspect of Sauk Centre history.

Lively, congenial, and restlessly curious was the man I was fortunate to meet that day. I can only begin to understand the loss of Dave Simpkins to his community, but I believe his life will continue to inspire those who knew him.

Ralph Goldstein  
Incoming President, Sinclair Lewis Society



I met Dave a few years ago and was invited to his farm for a visit. Linda made us a delicious meal. Later he came back to our place at Wadena, Minnesota. Like good Minnesotans, we had a walleye dinner at the Boondocks cafe. He toured my old

## WHAT WERE THEY READING THEN? A PREFACE TO MORALS BY WALTER LIPPMANN, 1929

Rick Diguette  
Georgia State University

*An occasional feature on books that were popular when Sinclair Lewis was writing.*

Most Americans are likely to associate the year 1929 with the crash of the New York Stock Exchange and the ensuing Great Depression, but it also happened to be a very good year in American letters. In addition to the release of *Dodsworth* by Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, Nella Larsen with *Passing*, Dashiell Hammett with *The Dain Curse*, and Thomas Wolfe with *Look Homeward, Angel* all made their publishing debuts that year. Although the nonfiction side of the ledger wasn't nearly as impressive, Macmillan & Company published Walter Lippmann's *A Preface to Morals* in May, a book that went through no less than six printings before the year was out.

Walter Lippmann's career as a journalist and political commentator, spanning six decades, garnered him two Pulitzer Prizes, the first in 1958 being a Special Citation "for the wisdom, perception and high sense of responsibility with which he has commented for many years on national and international affairs." Then four years later he was honored once again, this time for his 1961 interview of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Perhaps best known for his nationally syndicated newspaper column *Today and Tomorrow*, Lippmann wrote more than twenty books on a variety of topics, including politics, foreign relations, public opinion, and the Cold War. He also served as an advisor to a number of presidents, most notably Lyndon Johnson with whom he had a very public falling out over the Vietnam War shortly after Johnson had honored him with a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964. When he passed away in 1974 at the age of 85, Lippmann was generally considered to have had no peers in American journalism.

Lippmann directed *A Preface to Morals* to those of his readers "who no longer believe in the religion of their fathers" but who feel as a result that "there is a vacancy in their lives" (9). In the chapter "The Dissolution of the Ancestral Order," he goes to great and provocative lengths accounting for the reasons why it is so "difficult for modern men to conceive a

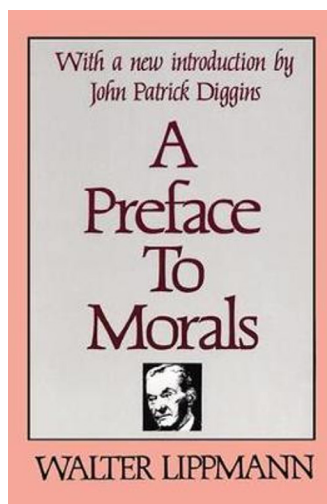
God whom they can worship" (51). Arguing, for instance, that "faith grows well as it is passed on from parents to their children amidst surroundings that bear witness" (61), he notes that many of the religiously disaffected are now city dwellers far removed from the rural faith communities where their parents lived and died. "The deep and abiding traditions of religion belong to the countryside," he adds, where "man earns his daily bread by submitting to superhuman forces whose behavior he can only partially control" (62). But life in the city, where the forces of nature are to a great extent neutralized, succeeds in severing that cosmic connection; "the city" he says, "is an acid that dissolves this piety" (62-63).

The book's second section, "The Foundations of Humanism," begins with this summary:

The upshot of the discussion to this point is that modernity destroys the disposition to believe that behind the visible world of physical objects and human institutions there is a supernatural kingdom from which ultimately all laws, all judgments, all rewards, all punishments, and all compensations are derived. (143)

Our ancestors ascribed to the "Christian doctrine that man must subdue his naïve impulses, and by reason, grace, or renunciation, transform his will"; the predominant view of modernity, however, concerns itself "not with the reform of desire but with the provision of opportunities for its fulfilment" (152). While these two approaches to life are destined to remain a constant source of conflict and confusion, Lippmann believed that the promotion of humanistic virtues like "courage, honor, faithfulness, veracity, justice, temperance, magnanimity, and love" (221) could effectively fill the void left by the decline in religious observance.

In the final section of *A Preface to Morals*, Lippmann notes that "the acids of modernity" have worked to blunt the



————— *A Preface to Morals continued on page 16*

Tribute to Dave Simpkins *continued from page 6*

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farmhouse and seemed to enjoy my interest in books. On another occasion we had a meal at Stella's in Battle Lake. Perhaps my most interesting memories are the two times I was invited to the summer midfest of the local Sons of Norway Lodge at his farm. He was a wonderful host and both times it was very relaxing. I loved watching how he related well to everyone, especially his two small granddaughters (the adorables). As the grandfather of two small girls, I could relate to that. I was part of that round table at the Palmer House with Dave and many others. I also got in on the lesson he gave us about the murals. He knew the story of it all, and I believe he posed for one of the pictures. Like most of the other members of the society, I knew of Dave long before I met him. Before the meeting last summer, he and Joyce Lyng were the only members I had met. That evening at the Palmer House and at the discussion of the mural was the last time I saw him. Life is finite. We all need to enjoy it like Dave did.

Ted G. Fleener  
Sinclair Lewis Society Board of Directors



Even though I only met Dave a couple of times, he was so warm, welcoming, and amusing I was instantly drawn to him. It's hard to imagine Sauk Centre and the Sinclair Lewis Society without him. My condolences to his family.

Quentin Martin  
Sinclair Lewis Society Board of Directors



Dave contacted me about reprinting in the *Sauk Centre Herald* something I had written in the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* or for the Lewis listserv. I don't remember what it was, but I do remember how warm and polite he was in making his request and equally gracious in his thanks for such a small thing. This was indicative of a true gentleman.

Susan O'Brien  
Incoming Sinclair Lewis Society Board Member ✍

Fresh Pastures *continued from page 1*

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Ida L. Compton, then a young graduate student, part-time bookstore manager, and novice book reviewer who became close to the author, wrote in her memoir, *Sinclair Lewis at Thorvale Farm*, "Lewis's choice of Williamstown was based on the premise that college people are more intellectual, and less apt to be provincial in their social ideas and inhibitions" (34).

Lewis had expected to be socially overwhelmed by the President of Williams and invited immediately to be a guest lecturer at the college.... He had gambled on what he thought was a sure thing: a writer in the cordial atmosphere of the intellectual community of a small college noted for its social life and interest in scholarly pursuits. (33)

But he would never be invited to join the college in any capacity.

The aspect that would not disappoint him was the peaceful beauty of the wide valley that cradles the town. On both sides of Route 7, approaching the quintessential New England village of Williamstown, narrow rivers and rocky outcroppings hug the roads; the green fields that run up to the Taconic Mountains are dotted with old white New Englander

farmhouses and their offspring, iconic poppy-red barns. This landscape would be painted and reproduced by generations of artists. The love of art and the surrounding countryside eventually led Sterling and Francine Clark to establish the famed "The Clark" Institute in Williamstown.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed it would be difficult to find a more beautiful area in all of New England and impossible not to recognize that, particularly since Lewis had previously resided at Twin Farms in pastoral Barnard, Vermont, and thus had a basis of comparison. After often dreary, arctic winters in the rusty city of Duluth, Williamstown no doubt held aesthetic as well as scenic appeal and fulfilled his recurring need for yet another new place. Other famous people already had discovered the area, as the headline in the *Berkshire Eagle* proclaimed on March 24, 1949: "Men of Distinction Choose Williamstown for Country Homes as South County Fades." They included Governor William Vanderbilt of Rhode Island, songwriter Cole Porter, and other society notables. Locals said Porter was a regular patron of local bars, while Lewis was almost never seen in town once he moved to Oblong Road.

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Fresh Pastures *continued on page 10*



## WHAT THEY WERE READING THEN? *COUNTRY PEOPLE* BY RUTH SUCKOW, 1924

Ted G. Fleener  
Waterloo Community Schools (retired)

Ruth Suckow, an Iowa writer often labeled a regionalist, offered her novel, *Country People*, to H. L. Mencken for publication in the *American Mercury*, but the length of it led Mencken to suggest that it be published as a book. Originally serialized in the *Century Magazine*, *Country People* was published in 1924 by Alfred A. Knopf, the year before Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* was published. Lewis was aware of Suckow's work and greatly admired it. As Ferner Nuhn, her husband, once commented, "It was written in a surprisingly short time, without agony or revision; seemingly, the work was the result of a unified burst of inspiration" (Kissane 52).

The novel stands as a monument to her storytelling ability. It portrays a family of German immigrants over four generations, from frontier days to the prosperous Iowa of the 1920s. The first settlers of the Kaetterhenry family travel by steamboat in the 1850s to Guttenberg, Iowa, which is located in the same county where this reviewer lives. The family become totally absorbed in farming. It's a smooth flowing story, with Suckow's analysis of these German immigrant farmers focusing on their practical and materialistic sides. Their attitude and work ethic contribute to what makes Iowa special.

The central figure of the story is August Kaetterhenry. His marriage to Emma is described in detail, as well as their struggles in farming, although they eventually become very prosperous landowners. The novel recounts their problems in World War I, when August finds himself treated badly by some people because of his German heritage. This deeply hurt August and baffled him because he had been born in Iowa and had lived there his entire life. He considered himself an American. He fared somewhat better than some of his German American neighbors because he had two sons in military service. (Compare this to Lewis's short story "He Loved His Country.")

Another gift of Suckow's is the excellent portrayal of the characters as real people. A good example is when August first meets Emma, his future wife; he likes her, but pragmatically wonders if she is strong. He also admires that she knows how to wait on threshers during harvest.

It appears that Suckow feels much closer to Emma than to August as she tells their story. Emma is a fully fleshed out character. She is often shown gardening, and it's clear that she especially loves having a flower garden.

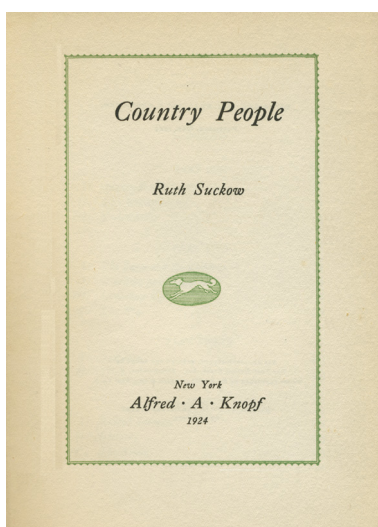
One of the strengths of the novel is how well defined the characters are. The reader can feel the determination in August as a young man scrimping and saving to buy his own farm. Suckow also inserts German dialect to add realism and a sense of place to her story.

The narrative is crisp and clear and goes into considerable detail. When Emma has an illness and goes to the Mayo Clinic for treatment, August becomes deeply concerned. You can feel his angst when she has a gallbladder operation. The trip to Rochester was a medical success, but some parts of it were very hard on August. He had never been in a situation where he had not had to work, and he did not find any interest in talking with people about ailments. There was no one he

could find to talk farming with, which was his main interest. It becomes a very long three weeks for August before they are allowed to return home.

Emma really enjoyed being waited on and treated with deep consideration while she was ill. When she left for a boardinghouse for a few days before going home, she missed the caring attention of the nurses and a young intern. When they returned to the farm, Emma fell back into her routine, but August became extremely thoughtful and no longer took her presence for granted.

Like many farmers in Iowa do even now, August came to a time in his life when he decided to let one of his sons take over the operation of the farm and move to town. One question that arose was who would take care of Emma's father who had been living with them. This problem was solved when their son Carl and his wife Clara, who were going to take over the farm, said they would take on the responsibility. There is the



Country People continued on page 16

One might speculate that the pleasing village of Williamstown was the personification of Carol Kennicott's *Main Street* dream for Gopher Prairie. Here is the requisite classic American architecture, open green space, charming shops, art galleries, local theater, and the stately Williams Inn, where Lewis stayed while waiting to move into Thorvale. Williamstown has changed very little since then; even today Garden Club ladies still fuss over flowering plants in public places; students and professors stroll the landscaped greens of Williams College; and tourists seek out sites like the 1753 house, a reproduction of an old settler's cabin. If a village had been built expressly to pass Carol's specifications, it would closely approximate Williamstown.

By the time Lewis came to the Berkshires, he was the highly celebrated author of nineteen novels, numerous short stories and essays, and five plays; six of his most famous novels had been made into major films. He was the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, and a wealthy man. But his personal life was unhappy. Both his marriages had ended in divorce; his oldest son Wells was killed in World War II, and his relationship with younger son Michael was troubled and distant. He had engaged in a predictably futile romantic relationship with young actress Marcella Powers, who would briefly come to Thorvale but then leave him permanently for the marriage and children she wanted. Probably in an effort to stay connected, he would bring Marcella's mother to Thorvale to become a kind of a live-in companion (Lingeman 520).

Pius M. Gagnon, O. Carm., of the Carmelite Brothers, which would eventually own Thorvale Farm, documented the property search and acquisition in *Before Carmel Came to the Berkshires*:

In the middle of the 1940's "Red" Lewis contemplated buying a farm in the Berkshire area of Massachusetts . . . With his friend, the late Professor Samuel Allen of Williams College, a collector of Lewis's first editions, who at the time was boarding at the Williams Inn where they met, he toured the Taconic trail in October 1944. Professor Allen introduced Lewis to Sanborn G. Tenney, Jr., a local real estate broker who in April 1946 rented Thorvale Farm to him (Lewis) for five months. Lewis at the time was living at the Algonquin on West 44th Street in New York City. On April 15, 1946, the novelist returned to Williamstown and stayed at the Williams Inn for one week. After beginning the actual writing of his novel, *Kingsblood Royal*, on the 20th of April, at Williams Inn, he moved into Thorvale on the 22nd. Almost at once he decided

to buy the property. On June 13th he paid the sum of forty-five thousand dollars to the Tookers (Dr. Norman B. of Princeton, NJ, a physician, and wife) for their farm, which comprised 547.5 acres, excluding a very small lot of one and a quarter acres (at 239 Oblong Road.)

At this time no survey of the property was made. The deed included, besides the Georgian mansion, a pool, tennis court, two farmhouses, which were now considered as guest houses, and a grove of over three thousand trees of many varieties: maple, birch, oak, hemlock and spruce. (19)

Gagnon noted, "During the first two years of his stay at Thorvale Farm, Sinclair Lewis farmed the land, but during his last year there he did not. Lewis rather enjoyed the role of farmer and liked to look upon himself as 'The Squire of Oblong Road'" (20).

His previous residence in Duluth, at 2601 E. Second Street, was a mansion large enough to house a convent for Dominican nuns, who bought that property from him. Eventually, the Catholic Carmelite Brothers would buy Thorvale. These ownerships are ironic after reading this quote from Compton's memoir: "I asked him about his interest in Protestantism and he defensively answered, 'There are two menaces today—Catholicism and communism—they have much in common and they definitely are threats to progress'" (31). To further the irony, he had already written the flaming exposé of hypocrisy in religion, *Elmer Gantry*, in 1927, and at Thorvale would complete a second novel of a similar theme but less incendiary treatment, *The God-Seeker*. The latter was Lewis's first attempt at a historical novel. It was published in March 1949 and has the Berkshires for its opening setting.

According to Horne's retrospective: Thorvale was a Georgian-style home of frame colonial construction with seven bedrooms, multiple fireplaces, a large "dressing room" off the master bedroom, and three maids' rooms. The massive living room had a majestic view of Mount Greylock, the highest point in Massachusetts, rising from an elevation of 1,500 feet. What he would have at Thorvale, which he did not have in Duluth, were a swimming pool, tennis court, two farmhouses used for guests, a grove of over 3,000 trees and a semiworking farm.

Lewis subsequently invested another \$70,000 in renovations. With a purchase price of \$45,000, this \$115,000 total

has an estimated value of \$1,557,706.59 in today's dollars ([dollartimes.com/calculators/inflation](http://dollartimes.com/calculators/inflation)). In 1947 he bought another 240 acres, bringing his estate acreage to approximately 780 acres (Gagnon 20). He supervised the gentleman farming aspects while maintaining his strict writing schedule. His highly disciplined working habits resulted in the completion of his novels *Kingsblood Royal* and *The God-Seeker*, plus an unpublished work, *Over the Body of Lucy Jade* (later to be rewritten in Italy and posthumously published under the title *World So Wide*) (Lingeman 537–40).

The real fun for Lewis seems to have been in the running of the property. Lewis involved himself in every aspect of the renovations, hiring Kenneth Reynolds, an architect from Albany, and David McNabb Deans, a local contractor, who was likely to be called shortly after 5 a.m. by the enthusiastic owner, who could get quite excited about a brand new project. They remodeled, refurbished, and installed a large thermopane window in the living room—the better to enjoy the view (Gagnon 19). The new heated chicken coop was the “finest in all New England,” Lewis proclaimed, but later, on the subject of chickens producing fresh eggs for him, he told Compton if he lived to be 100 and the chickens “laid eggs at prodigious rates, each egg would cost him only about ten dollars” (40).

A 1916 owner named Thorvale “Thunder Valley” after the Norse god of thunder. From his terrace Lewis could watch the cloud shadows expand across the mountain and anticipate the thunderstorms that rolled through. His wide, open views were somewhat atypical of New England, which tended toward thick woods and closed spaces.

Lewis entertained; Horne wrote, “Friends like Luther Mansfield were welcome to drop in around 4, to call him ‘Red,’ and were served drinks by a secretary, although Lewis was on the wagon during those years. Other guests included publisher Bennett Cerf and his wife; author John Gunther, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and critic Carl Van Doren; Walter White of the NAACP; and actress Marcella Powers.”

Whatever hope Lewis had to become part of Williams College dissipated when the president failed to issue any invitations or ask him to lecture. This slight, as he saw it, was the beginning of new grudges and alienation from others in the village, a life-long approach to relationships that likely created or supported the need to make those geographic moves “every 18 months or so.” Compton decided, “Part of the problem was Lewis’s own fault; part was due to a certain protective aloofness among members of the Williams community. Lewis could not see that pride and awe would prevent people from seeking him out and overwhelming him with the warm welcome he had anticipated” (34).

Further Horne stories illuminating relationships include this one: Rev. George E. Beilby (also spelled Bielby in several sources) of the First Congregational Church was pleasantly surprised when Lewis agreed to speak at a men’s dinner. In his talk Lewis “hailed the Protestant religion as the antithesis of authoritarianism and urged a permanent men’s club in the church.” Later at a small gathering in Williamstown, Rev. Beilby asked Lewis to clarify his views and unfortunately quoted some remarks by W. H. Auden on the subject of inspiration. “Don’t talk about religion to me,” Lewis raged, “I know more about religion than you’ll ever know. Auden is nothing but a. . . . I’m the author of my own works, and no one else.”

His midnight phone calls to college professors Samuel Allen and Luther Mansfield were not well received; he complained hotly about the fact that his young research assistant had been refused access to the Williams College Library. It seems impossible that Lewis, a Yale graduate and consummate researcher, would not have clearly understood college libraries have to maintain strict standards of use and lending in order to protect their acquisitions. But take serious offense, he certainly did: “How would it look,” the infuriated author demanded, “if tomorrow’s *New York Times* carried the headline, ‘Nobel Prize-Winning Novelist denied use of Williams College Library?’” (Horne).

Yet he could also be very kind. He was outraged when Max Flowers, a teacher and theater director at the college, suffered a nervous breakdown from bad treatment and ultimately resigned. Lewis invited Flowers and his wife to live in one of the guesthouses until Flowers was rested (Gagnon 22).

Lewis granted few interviews during his Thorvale days. But in an October 13, 1944, interview by an unnamed *Berkshire Eagle* reporter, while still considering whether or not to move to the Berkshires, Lewis made some telling comments in response to whether or not he planned to use Williamstown, or any other place, or use real people, as models in an upcoming novel. One senses a reporter’s possible nervousness in the question.

“I resent the implication that I am such a clumsy workman! I question anyone’s supposition that I am such a shyster that, that I am so idle, that if I write about something I don’t even need to look at it.”

“If I write about a red-headed lawyer down in Tucson, Arizona, in 1942, and in 1944 about a red-headed lawyer in New York, that man is convinced he is the same person. I rarely write about actual persons,” he told the reporter.

When this subject simmered down, Lewis explained there were two ways of “infuriating” any community he visited. “One way is to write about it in a book, and another way is not to write about it at all” (“Sinclair Lewis Returns to Town”).

After two years of residence, not even the glory of the Berkshire Hills and the idyllic village could stop him from channeling his restless spirit or give lasting health. While at Thorvale, he was so plagued by pneumonia that his brother, Dr. Claude Lewis, came from Minnesota to attend him (Gagnon 21). No doubt Dr. Lewis once again entreated Lewis to stop drinking.

Did he move from Thorvale to Italy, his last residence, in the everlasting hope of finding restoration of health or some aspect of peace and real friendship? He had come to Williamstown with enthusiasm and an initial desire to build relationships, as the end of his initial letter to Williams College Prof. Luther Mansfield appears to signal:

Please give my profound regards to Professor Miller, and the cat of Professor Root, and ask them all (especially that incomparably wise and chummy cat) whether they think Williamstown would like me as a neighbor. Sincerely yours, Sinclair Lewis.

“There was an idea that Lewis was a dull man, with no personality, just a writer,” said John Koblas in a November 22, 1981, interview with columnist Robert T. Smith of the *Minneapolis Tribune*. “I found a man with warm feelings, who cared about humanity. He was probably more interesting than [F. Scott] Fitzgerald ... a lot of [Lewis’s nastiness] could be the result of his troubles showing the warmth he had.”

Though once again relationships did not last, yet, in the end, Williamstown did satisfy his avocation of buying, renovating, and improving a large property. But as with all of his many other residences, to Sinclair Lewis, who left ruptured relationships behind when he departed, beautiful Thorvale Farm was never truly home.

## EPILOGUE

Following his departure, Thorvale was on the market but was not sold until after Lewis died. A minor portion of the acreage had been sold off by the time the Carmelite brothers of New York bought the property for \$57,000 on April 10, 1952. At an undated time a large dormitory-style addition was put on the side of the main house to provide residences for novitiates and other visitors.

In 2002 Linda White, a local theater director, and her physician husband, purchased Thorvale Farm for the cool

sum of \$2.1 million. Paul Harsch, president of the realty firm Harsch Associates, said on his website it was the highest price for a residential home in Williamstown history. The late Shah of Iran, Mohammad Pahlavi, in exile, had owned the only other home that had brought a \$2.1 million price; his mansion was located across from the prestigious Clark Art Institute ([harschrealestate.com](http://harschrealestate.com)).

Private owners, including a gentleman who collected and restored old cars, resided at Thorvale Farm until it went the way of many high-end Massachusetts properties and was sold at auction to a developer in February 2016, for \$279,000. By then, asbestos in the Carmelite addition had become a hazard so serious it would have to be removed at tremendous expense. In any case, the addition was an eyesore, the spare modern architecture inconsistent with the stately Georgian home to which it was attached. The grounds were unkempt and the house had become a home for pests. The good news is that a developer with expertise in solving these issues was probably exactly the right buyer for Thorvale Farm.

## FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, A BRIEF HISTORY OF THORVALE FARM AT 239 OBLONG ROAD, SOUTH WILLIAMSTOWN, MA

(The following notes are condensed from *Mount Carmel Christian Life Center*.)

1768: William Torrey, a shoemaker from Middletown, Connecticut, and his brother John, settled along Oblong Road. William owned 50 acres and built a white farmhouse at the base of the road for his wife, Hannah; one of their children, David, inherited the farm and raised his large family there.

1799–1909: David Torrey’s son William inherited the family farm down the road, and his son Myron, sometime after his marriage to Harriet Converse in September 1834, bought 100 acres close by and built a second farmhouse up the road from his parents’ home. Minerva Torrey, William’s adopted daughter, lived at the lower farmhouse with her husband, Lewis J. Gardner. She died in childbirth after her second son was born and her husband remained on the farm until a few years before his death in 1909.

1909–1912: Dr. John H. Denison, a Williams College graduate and a retired Congregational minister, gathered parcels from the two Torrey farms and other land for a summer home. His wife, Caroline, was the daughter of the fourth president of Williams College, Dr. Mark Hopkins.

Fresh Pastures *continued from page 12*

1912–1916: Dr. Denison sold the farm to Henry Adriance, a bachelor lawyer from New York City, who named it Thorvale, for the “thunder that can nosily roar through the Berkshire valley.”

1916–1946: The property was purchased by Dr. and Mrs. Norman B. Tooker. Dr. Tooker worked for the Princeton, New Jersey, Health Department and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. In 1917 he commissioned a Boston architect to build for his family a summer home in the Georgian style that was then in vogue in Williamstown.

1946–1951: After thirty years at Thorvale, Dr. and Mrs. Tooker sold their farm to Sinclair Lewis. When Lewis died in Rome in 1951, he had not yet sold his property. The real estate firm of Previews International sold it for the Lewis estate. In 1949, Lewis had sold the lower, white farmhouse to his real estate broker who, in turn, sold it to two separate buyers; thus that section of the property was not in the next sale.

1952–1974: The Carmelite Brothers bought the property, which Previews had offered at \$65,000, in 1952 for \$57,000 and established a monastery. The Brothers oversaw construction of an addition, at first intended only for novitiates but eventually to house students.

*I wish to express my appreciation to Sarah Currie, executive director, and Paul Guillotte of the Williamstown Historical Museum for their invaluable assistance in producing material on Thorvale Farm from the 1940s and advising me on Lewis's time there.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Prof. Luther Mansfield at Williams College, 1946; quoted in Horne.

<sup>2</sup> Formally the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute.

<sup>3</sup> *Mount Carmel Christian Life Center* and the various newspaper clippings cited are courtesy of the Williamstown Historical Museum.

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Straight Out of South Dakota *continued from page 3*

not what he is remembered for,” Lauck points to the spiking of book sales in the twenties and thirties caused by Lewis’s love of “scandal” and self-promotion, and laments that his work is used instead by “literary critics and intellectuals ... eager to assault small-town provincialism” (30–31). Bernard DeVoto, a nearly forgotten literary historian cited favorably in Lauck’s study, railed against Lewis as one of the writers of the twenties who most egregiously misrepresented American culture. Lauck omits, however, Lewis’s rejoinder to DeVoto where he contended the writers under attack “so loved their country that they were willing to report its transient dangers and stupidities” (*Saturday Review of Literature*, April 15, 1944).

Joining Van Doren and Brooks in a group identified as inimical to the pleasures of small-town, rural culture are three

writers branded by Lauck as “New York Intellectuals” (*his capital I*), Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, and Irving Howe, alleged believers in something Lauck calls “cosmopolitanism” and inspired by Marx and Lenin. In subsequent decades, according to Lauck’s analysis, Midwestern regionalists throughout academia lost out to “cosmopolitan intellectuals and Marxists” who enshrined the revolt thesis, establishing a “dogma of rootlessness,” embracing mass culture dominated by coastal media, and establishing a “transnational racial politics” (66). Regionalism suffered as well, Lauck maintains, when Midwesterners opposed to international entanglements

————— Straight Out of South Dakota *continued on page 14*

Straight Out of South Dakota *continued from page 13*

were “dismissed as cranks” (75). These voices included the leaders of the America First movement and Charles Lindbergh, demagogically featured in Philip Roth’s nightmarish *The Plot against America*, a novel somewhat akin to Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*.

That a revival of regionalism is the antidote to the hollowness of mass culture, as Lauck concludes, would be easier to warm up to were it not for the rhetorical ugliness emanating from the White House and those who claim to be the occupant’s allies. Chants of “blood and soil” and “America First,” after being relatively muted for decades are heard once again, and Trump aide Stephen Miller accused a CNN reporter of having a “cosmopolitan” bias. The word has a tainted history, but Rich Lowry, editor of *National Review*, the conservative magazine to which Jon Lauck occasionally contributes, assured readers

that “it is not a poorly disguised screed against the Jews.” Fair enough, but how can the authoritarian populism fueled by utopian restoration dreams (“Make America Great Again!”) and linked to regionalism be reassuring? What’s the status of the election-night promise to rebuild the nation’s infrastructure? What’s being done to stem the brain drain of Midwestern university graduates to the coasts? Is it true that the vice president, hailing from Columbus, Indiana, is friendly to billionaires who favor foreign-labor outsourcing and cuts in government spending? Lauck doesn’t address these questions nor does he define the practical steps leading to a warmer, more convivial local life. For starters he might take notice of places that reject big warehouse stores and keep supporting independent merchants who help maintain community bonds. For that, unfortunately, he can’t look to Sauk Centre. ✍

Iowa Gem *continued from page 5*

In 1929, Suckow married a much younger man, writer and artist Ferner Nuhn of Cedar Falls, Iowa. They were together for almost 30 years and were very supportive of each other’s work. They spent time living in New Mexico as well as Washington, DC, where Nuhn worked for the Department of Agriculture. Suckow and Nuhn shared a love of white cats, and he painted a portrait of her holding one.

While being mentored by Frederick and Mencken, Suckow found the form of writing that suited her best. She began to write very rapidly, including a novel, *Country People*, published in 1924. (See “What Were They Reading Then,” page 9, for more commentary on the novel.) She also wrote for numerous other magazines, including the *Smart Set*, *American Mercury*, *Harper’s*, and *Scribner’s*. She rarely had her writing rejected.

The Ruth Suckow Memorial Association website calls her an itinerant writer and very reluctant regionalist (it was a term she did not care for). Her descriptions of Midwestern families, especially in Iowa, with attention to their towns and farms, was based on her keen observation of the world around her in the early 1900s. Suckow was recognized for her well-written dialogue and social analysis. A strong feminist, she showed special insight into her female characters and examined social issues of the day as well as family relationships, personal

growth, and differing gender expectations. Her portrayal of strong and independent women and their struggle for self-realization is a focus of such works as *Cora* and *The Kramer Girls*. Her topics also included German immigrants to Iowa, a group that reflected her own heritage as the granddaughter of German immigrants. One of her works, *The Bonney Family*, is partially based on Suckow’s life as a minister’s daughter. Her knowledge of the land was such that she was asked to serve on the Farm Tenancy Committee during the Roosevelt administration.

In the early thirties, she began work on what many considered her best novel, *The Folks*. Published in 1934 and a Literary Guild selection of the month, the novel is set in a small Midwestern town. A signed two-volume set was issued to commemorate the event. (A review of this novel in the “What Were They Reading Then?” series will appear in a future issue of the newsletter.)

Suckow’s life was marked by recognition from literary giants of the day. Sinclair Lewis, in a letter to his publishers, quotes a note from H. L. Mencken, praising Suckow’s work as “lucid, remarkably real, firm, jammed with promise” (qtd.



Fleener with Suckow’s headstone.  
Photo courtesy of Randy Maas

Iowa Gem *continued on page 15*

in *From Main Street to Stockholm* 95). This praise is based on her short stories and magazine articles and was made even before her first novel was published.

Suckow's most productive period of writing was the nineteen-twenties and thirties. During her lifetime, she wrote twelve novels, the second to last, *Some Others and Myself*, published eight years before her death, in 1952. This was a collection in two parts. The first part was a collection of seven short stories and the other a personal memoir covering such topics as her childhood, her spiritual journey, and the influence of her parents, especially her father. The dust jacket quotes a review from in the *New York Herald Tribune*:

Miss Suckow reports American speech as accurately as Sinclair Lewis, but she has none of the bitterness of his satire. She has the insight of Sherwood Anderson, with none of his restless anger. She has something of Willa Cather's sun on soil, with neither her glamour nor her homesick retreat into the past.... Miss Suckow sees beyond her own generation. She is not content to chronicle the American past; she catches the vision of a generation just coming to expression.

Suckow often traveled with her husband, and in 1952, moved to Claremont, California, for health reasons, as she had developed rheumatoid arthritis. She and her husband lived there until her passing on January 23, 1960. She was laid to rest in Oakwood Cemetery in Cedar Falls, Iowa, next to her father. In 1989, her husband passed away and was buried next to her on the north side of her resting place.

The Suckow Papers at the University of Iowa are an amazing resource. They include notebooks, manuscripts, and over two hundred letters in chronological sequence, including many from her editors. Besides Mencken and Frederick, they include letters from Carl Van Doren, Robert Frost, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and Floyd Dell. Frank Paluka's *Ruth Suckow: A Calendar of Letters* is very insightful in giving the researcher some thoughts on the importance of the collection. Perhaps the most interesting item for this writer is a handwritten letter to Suckow from Frost, dated December 24, 1931. In it he praises her work and comments on her visit with him and his wife. He also writes about their friendship. A very well-written note, it

reflects well on Ruth Suckow and her work; it is a treasure.

In 1992, 32 years after her death, and on the hundredth anniversary of her birth, Suckow was honored with a one-woman play about her life, *Just Suppose*, written by Rebecca Christian of Dubuque, and starring Lenore Howard of Dubuque as Suckow. The play was performed in the seven Iowa communities where Suckow lived or worked and is still occasionally done. Ruth Suckow was inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame in 1978.

Ruth Suckow had a great awareness of the power and beauty of the world around her, and her work reflects well the time and place in which she lived. Her writing is succinct, descriptive, and crisp and her words still speak to us today, if we take the time to listen.

*I would like to thank Sally Parry for her encouragement of a story about Ruth Suckow. She has continually encouraged my search for good authors who are not as well known as they should be. She also helped locate a copy of the New York Times obituary for Suckow. I am grateful to Randy Maas of Cedar Falls, Iowa, for making a trek with me to Greenwood Cemetery in Cedar Falls to photograph the headstones of Ruth Suckow, Ferner Nuhn, and Suckow's father William J. Suckow. I would also like to thank Lisa Pope and the staff of the Elkader, Iowa, public library for allowing me to spend time in those quiet surroundings to do my writing and my research. For those interested in learning more about Ruth Suckow, a Google search will reveal many links. A superb source of information is the Ruth Suckow Memorial Association: [www.ruthsuckow.org](http://www.ruthsuckow.org).*

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Headstones of husband Ferner Nuhn, Ruth Suckow, and father William Suckow. Photo courtesy of Randy Maas

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*A Preface to Morals* continued from page 7

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moral force of religion because it failed to stay current with the times. “The trouble with the moralists,” he adds, is that “they think they are dealing with a generation that refuses to believe in ancient authority [when] they are, in fact, dealing with a generation that cannot believe in it” (316–17). The modern moralist must not expect to command obedience as faith-based authorities once did. They could depend on the accumulated weight of time-honored moral traditions, many of which had come to seem outmoded and therefore inapplicable to the modern world.

Although *A Preface to Morals* will soon reach the ripe old age of 90, it isn’t quite the outdated relic one might think it would be by now. The Millennials among us, or those Americans between the ages of 21 and 35 who now constitute this country’s largest demographic group at slightly more than 75 million, are less likely to be religious than the members of any other group, and by a considerable margin at that. According

to a 2015 Pew Research poll, “35% of adult Millennials are religiously unaffiliated,” which is twice the number of religiously unaffiliated Boomers, their parents. Much like many in the audience Lippmann addressed back in 1929, Millennials typically don’t view themselves as being bound by the cultural traditions of previous generations. Indeed, they may even feel estranged from them. They also tend to view the church as well as many other public institutions with a good deal of skepticism, especially when it comes to morality.

*A Preface to Morals* was Lippmann’s most popular book and “struck a chord for a generation seeking recovery from the disillusionment of the late 1920s” according to Michael Kirkhorn. It was both a popular Book-of-the-Month Club selection and a well regarded work of cultural commentary. The fact that it has remained in print for almost a century testifies to the continuing validity of its insights and analysis. ✍

*Country People* continued from page 9

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normal undercurrent of drama here as a family deals with what happens when their children have children.

The senior Kaetterhenrys build a new house and move to town, and while Emma seems to enjoy the new life, August is restless without meaningful work. Within a few years, August passes away after a series of strokes. The detailed obituary, which was filled with praise for August, gives Emma a deep sense of pride.

Emma forges on, learns to get the mail, write checks, and do all the business matters August attended to. She settles well into her new role, enjoying visits with friends as well as church and social events such as ladies aid. Emma is fortunate in that she has an independent income, owning two farms and receiving rent from them. August, the thorough German farmer to the end, left a will that he knew would take care of her needs.

Emma got up early every morning, just like on the farm. She raised more flowers now that she had time. She spent time with her grandchildren, making them cookies and sewing them clothes. Emma had friends to talk to and at the end of the story she and a friend converse about being grateful for having homes and enough income to live on, with children to look after them. They close the conversation by talking about a neighbor who had to go to the poor house and how grateful they are that won’t happen to them. Emma responds with the German dialect: “Ja, that’s true, too.” Emma had come full circle in the story, and in the last chapters of her life she was at peace and content.

*Country People* is a wonderfully descriptive narrative of a time long ago, from the mid-nineteenth century to early in the twentieth century in eastern Iowa. However in reading it as a rural Iowan today, I find that the more things change, the more they stay the same. ✍



## DEPARTMENTS

### SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

From the *Chicago Tribune* (Dec. 31, 2017: sec 5, page 5): “Just a half-hour’s drive from the major ski resorts in southern Vermont, Twin Farms feels like an elevated take on the classic New England bed-and-breakfast. Its famous soufflé pancakes are reason alone to book a stay. A main lodge, housed in an eighteenth-century farmhouse, features four rooms with vintage flags, antique quilts and other Americana. Sixteen individually designed cottages are scattered across the 300-acre grounds, all with fieldstone fireplaces and screened-in porches. Guests can go sledding out the door, then thaw out in the spa’s Japanese furo, a type of sleek wooden bathtub. For a more social stay, check out the inn’s Art of a Vermont Winter event series, which includes furniture-making workshops with local woodworker Thomas Shackleton and murder mystery weekends. From \$1,500, all-inclusive.”



The ugly side of America is the topic of Linda Gordon’s *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017). Clay Risen, in an essay for the *New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 10, 2017: 18), writes “One of Gordon’s tasks is to show that the 1920s we think we know—a Gatsbyan bacchanal of speakeasies, flappers and mob hits—was just an urban, coastal bubble. For most Americans, it would appear, the decade was more like something out of *Babbitt* or *Elmer Gantry*: a country turned inward against the world, small-minded and cruel. A country in which the Klan and its values—so-called Americanism, xenophobia, white nationalism and patriarchy—were the norm. An America, Gordon all but says, not unlike today.”

Bob Ruggiero, a Lewis Society member from Houston, highly recommends the book, noting the following discussion of the conformity of new KKK members: “Popular writers also mocked Klanspeople’s conformity. Novelist Sinclair Lewis regularly made fun of the Klan type. George Babbitt, in his 1922 novel *Babbitt*, gave birth to a common noun that describes a close-minded, narrow-minded, conformist whose interests and ethics were confined to the business world: ‘Just as he was an Elk, a Booster, just as the priests of the Presbyterian

Church determined his every religious belief...so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fixed what he believed to be his individuality.’ In his 1927 *Elmer Gantry*, Lewis specifically ridiculed the evangelical and racist beliefs of his hero.”

On the Klan as a fraternal/business order: “The connections made through the Klaverns could lead to jobs, customers, investment opportunities. Sinclair Lewis noticed this, writing in *Elmer Gantry* of ‘the new Ku Klux Klan, an organization of the fathers, younger brothers and employees of the men who had succeeded and become Rotarians.’”

On racism/nationalism: “Similarly, like fascism and especially its Nazi version, the Klan promulgated a racialized nationalism: it conflated the ‘nation’ with a master ‘race,’ that is, ‘Nordics.’ Sinclair Lewis warned that should fascism come to the United States, it would appear as patriotic and entirely American. In his 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here*, the fictional fascist senator Berzelius Windrip promises ‘to make America a proud, rich land again.’”

[Note: Bob Ruggiero will have an interview with Linda Gordon in the Fall *Newsletter*.]



“Mort Walker, Historian” by Cullen Murphy is an appreciation of the recently deceased cartoonist Mort Walker, creator of “Beetle Bailey” and “Hi and Lois” (*New York Times*, Sunday Review, Feb. 4, 2018: 2). Cullen, whose father was an illustrator of “Prince Valiant,” wrote “He explained to me on one occasion that the idea of having Trixie—the baby in ‘Hi and Lois’—convey her innocent but often searing observations exclusively by means of thought balloons, came to him after observing how Sinclair Lewis had handled interior dialogue.”



*It Can’t Happen Here* is listed in the Penguin catalogue for “First-Year Experience & Common Reading Programs.” The description: “A cautionary tale about the fragility of democracy, it is an alarming, eerily timeless look at how fascism could take hold in America. Written during the Great Depression, when the country was largely oblivious to Hitler’s aggression, it juxtaposes sharp political satire with the chillingly realistic rise of a president who becomes a dictator to save the nation from welfare cheats, sex, crime, and a liberal press.”



Our sincere condolences to the family of Laurel Hessing, a member of the Sinclair Lewis Society for many years, as well as a playwright and poet. Several of her plays were produced by the Theater for the New City in New York including *The Little Prince*, *The Golden Bear*, *Sketching Utopia*, and *The Further Adventures of Uncle Wigly*. Lewis Society members may remember her *Sketching Utopia*, which focused on the utopian community Helicon Hall, where Sinclair Lewis worked as a janitor. Three members of the Society, Clare Eby, Peter Paulino, and Richard Lingeman, attended performances of this musical and provided reviews in the Spring 2001 (9.2) *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*. Paulino called the song “Main Street,” sung by the character of Hal Lewis, “one of the highlights of the evening.” Hessing was also historian of Free Acres, a collective founded in New Jersey in 1910 and still in existence. Hessing lived at Free Acres for a while, starting in 1939, and performed in literary and dramatic activities there as a child. Among the early residents of Free Acres were Thorne Smith (author of *Topper*) and his wife Celia, and actor James Cagney and his wife, Billie.

## SINCLAIR LEWIS SCHOLARSHIP

Ellen Strenski’s “*It Can’t Happen Here*, or Has It? Sinclair Lewis’s Fascist America” was published in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29.3 (2017): 425–36, [www.tandfonline.com/eprint/dfhbTbuBvfi47wgfnPjj/full](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/dfhbTbuBvfi47wgfnPjj/full). She writes about how *It Can’t Happen Here* anticipated Donald J. Trump’s

campaign in many ways. “The institution Lewis attacks in *It Can’t Happen Here* is the American political system—corrupt leaders, bread-and-circus campaigns, and gullible voters.” Reading this satirical attack through the lens of Lewis’s patriotism, Strenski analyzes Windrip’s political campaign, and parallels it to Trump’s. Both men exhibit a sort of “clownish swindlerism” in their appeals to voters, and speak to a “Forgotten Men” segment that connected with their rhetoric. *Zero Hour—Over the Top and The Art of the Deal* serve as “part biography, part economic program, and part plain exhibitionist boasting.” There are promises to do things differently, break through the logjam in Washington, and help the ordinary worker by lowering taxes, increasing wages, and getting rid of the Other. “Lewis is a social satirist in the Mark Twain tradition, and his novel is worth reading today for its suggestive parallels with current history and its good-hearted humor.”



Frederick Betz and Jörg Thunecke have a fascinating essay, “Two Cautionary Tales against the Socio-Political Background in Germany and the USA in the 1930s and 1940s: Sinclair Lewis’s Novel *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) and Philip Roth’s Novel *The Plot Against America* (2004),” published in the online *Newsletter of the International Feuchtwanger Society* 20 (2016): 8–34. It’s even scarier to read it now that we’re over a year into the presidency of Trump. The essay discusses the influence of Dorothy Thompson on the novel, as well as the use of Raymond Gram Swing’s political writing. The connections between the real life figures on which Lewis may have based some of his characters, in both the US and Germany, is very striking. The essay is a follow-up to their 2005 presentation at the Sinclair Lewis Conference in Sauk Centre.

—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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OCTOBER MISCELLANY 2017

66. Lewis, Sinclair. *Mantrap*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926. \$1850

First Edition. Review copy with rubber stamp on front flyleaf: “Advance Copy.” A fine book in an unusually bright crisp dust jacket that has had two long tears to rear panel, and one shorter one to spine panel, expertly repaired with Japanese paper. Nonetheless, an exceptionally fresh copy of a scarce jacket with virtually no paper loss.

67. —. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. \$2750

First edition. First issue binding with *G* resembling a *C* on spine. Rear hinge expertly repaired. This copy signed by Lewis on flyleaf and dated Washington "10/16/34." Some minor rubbing to cloth. Else a near fine copy in a bright unfaded dust jacket with some restoration at top and bottom of spine panel and to jacket folds. Scarce signed.

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PUBLIC AUCTION SALE 2462

NOVEMBER 14, 2017

200. Lewis, Sinclair. *Arrowsmith*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925. Price realized (with Buyer's Premium) \$1125.



Publisher's cream buckram-backed blue paper boards, printed paper spine label, a bit mottled, with extra spine label inserted at rear; top edges gilt, others uncut; a few signatures partially split, bookseller's label to rear pastedown; card slipcase with crude tape repairs, chipped.

One of 500 numbered copies signed by Lewis, this copy being number 61. The book for which Lewis was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and which he famously refused, writing to the committee that their mission statement suggests that "the appraisal of the novels shall be made not according to their actual literary merit but in obedience

to whatever code of Good Form may chance to be popular at the moment."

PUBLIC AUCTION SALE 2461

NOVEMBER 7, 2017

249. Lewis, Sinclair.  
Autograph Letter signed.  
Paris, 4 March 1925.  
Price realized (with  
Buyer's Premium) \$406.

From Jimmy Van Heusen collection sold for the benefit of Cazenovia College. To "Dear Mr. Glick," expressing pleasure at his use of *Babbitt* in his course,

mentioning that his *Arrowsmith* is being published tomorrow, and suggesting that he obtain a pamphlet about him from his publishers. 1½ pages, written on the recto and verso of a single sheet.

"Indeed I am pleased & honored to learn ... that you are using 'Babbitt' in your contemporary fiction course. No, I'm afraid I have nothing in particular to say about the book, except that I am very fond of George F. Babbitt. My publishers ... have, in connection with the publication (tomorrow!) of my new book, 'Arrowsmith,' published a pamphlet about me which might be of use to you...."

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CATALOG 58

46. Elmer Gantry Productions/United Artists, 1960. \$275.

*Elmer Gantry*. Vintage double weight photograph from the set of the 1960 film. Director Richard Brooks gets up close to direct Burt Lancaster as Lancaster holds Jean Simmons.

Based on the 1927 novel by Sinclair Lewis. Nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, winning for Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay. 8x10 inches (20x25 cm). Near Fine.



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