



A Confirmed Typomaniac: Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press

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INTRODUCTION

When considering the beginnings of fine printing in the Midwest in the Twentieth Century, Carroll Coleman's Prairie Press comes quickly to mind. Established in the 1930s, the Prairie Press published the work of contemporary writers in well-made volumes. The study that follows is both a history of the Prairie Press and a biography of Carroll Coleman.

Carroll Coleman did other things than publish books in the eighty-five years he lived, but most were somehow interwoven with the private press he established in the basement of his parents' home in Muscatine, Iowa, during the Depression years. Almost every major decision he made in the rest of his life was based on what he believed would be its impact on the Prairie Press. So there is little reason to be concerned here with differentiating between history and biography. It became my purpose to write an account of the life of a man who was, as he once described himself, "a confirmed typomaniac," with a genius for making beautiful books. Much of this story is focused on the books he produced over half a century and is thus the story of the Prairie Press which published them.

This has not been easy. The author knew Carroll Coleman for almost half a century before his death in 1989. Beginning as a casual acquaintance in the early 1940s, when Carroll helped design a new typographical dress for the weekly newspaper

which the Harrison family published in western Iowa, our friendship continued through the years when both of us served the University of Iowa in positions related to publications. It reached its most meaningful dimensions in the course of long conversations in the living room of his Iowa City home at 111 Lusk Avenue after I had returned in 1978 from teaching journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University for seventeen years. Over the next twelve years, my appreciation of Carroll Coleman's personal qualities increased. Still he was such a modest man, so self-effacing that it was not easy to get beneath the protective surface he maintained, a manifestation of what his friend and former associate, Harry Duncan, has described as "a painful need for privacy." One admired the man and his work, but wanted to probe deeper for answers to questions about him that remained.

Some of these answers have been found in the course of months spent with the papers that were almost literally excavated from the basement shop where the Prairie Press had been located, after they had been generously contributed by his widow, Genevieve Aitken Coleman, to the University of Iowa Libraries' Special Collections. These are unfortunately limited mostly to the years 1961-1965, but they provide a representative sampling of what Carroll Coleman thought about many aspects of the world in which he lived, as well as some indications of how the Prairie Press was operated.

To be the first person to have access to these papers, even before they had been processed and catalogued, was an exciting experience. Robert McCown, Head of Special Collections, made that possible and was helpful throughout the time spent with them. Others have contributed to filling in this picture of Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press. To keep interruptions at a minimum, there are no footnotes in this manuscript. Attribution of quoted materials is made within the text in most instances. The Carroll Coleman Papers and other University of Iowa records in Special Collections are the sources of other quotations.

This work does not pretend to be a definitive study. Interested readers and scholars will have to make educated guesses about some aspects of Carroll Coleman's life unless they are able to discover other sources of information. Unfortunately all available evidence suggests that his earlier and later papers were destroyed—most of them for want of space. I hope that, meantime, "A Confirmed Typomaniac" will help to enhance the limited knowledge the world has had of Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press, and that it will help to bring them the attention they so richly deserve, which was denied them during his lifetime.

THE BEGINNINGS

Carroll Coleman was the quintessential Iowan. He was born in Livingston—a crossroads settlement in the heart of the once thriving coal mining region of south central Iowa. When he was two years old, his parents, Ernest and Arminda Coleman, moved to a farm near Centerville, the seat of Appanoose County. Then the family moved to Centerville, where Ernest Coleman went into the real estate business. The Coleman family moved one more time—to Muscatine, when Carroll was twelve years old. There he attended high school, learned the printing trade, was married, and established the Prairie Press. In 1945, he moved to Iowa City, where he spent the remaining forty-four years of his life.

He never lived outside Iowa for more than a few weeks. He attended the Milo Banquet Linotype School in Toledo, Ohio, soon after his graduation from high school, and made a brief "tramp printing" tour of the Southwest, which he mentioned in his papers only to describe the broiling heat he had endured in Phoenix, Arizona. He never visited outside the United States.

Carroll Coleman carried on a kind of love/hate relationship with Iowa throughout his life. He talked and wrote—especially

in his later years—of moving to New England, to the Ozarks, or some other part of the United States. He entertained job offers from the University of Illinois Press and from the University of Oklahoma Press, but he rejected them. He was uncomfortable in large cities. On the few occasions when he went to New York City, he returned home sooner than he intended. He was a consistent advocate and defender of the uncomplicated and relatively unsophisticated life often regarded as characteristic of Iowa and the Midwest.

Even the Prairie Press was, in its beginnings, Iowan to the core. An anthology of Iowa poets was its first published volume. The concept of regionalism—so pervasive in the Midwest at the time—was much in Carroll Coleman’s mind. Only some years later, as the growing reputation of the Prairie Press attracted manuscripts from all over the world, was its Midwestern flavor tempered by other strains.

Yet Carroll Coleman never renounced his ties with his native Iowa, whatever the modifications of the purposes of the Prairie Press. He would not have been happy living in New England, and certainly not in any of the great metropolitan centers of book publishing. His Prairie Press would have been a different and less distinguished publishing house had he moved it to another part of the country.

Carroll Coleman grew up with books. His mother, Arminda Coleman, was a teacher in the public schools for many years. So were two of his sisters, both several years older than he. Carroll became an avid reader at an early age. The passion for books that would shape his life and fill his home and printing shop with numbers of books that far exceeded the available storage space began to develop before he entered school. The interest in printing and typography that combined with his love of books to produce the Prairie Press “probably started in my seventh year,” Coleman wrote to his friend, Oakley Cheever, “when I first opened a box that contained some rubber type, a stamp pad and a wooden ‘stick’ to hold the type for printing.” But, he went on, “the first time that I wanted to become a printer more than anything else was after I had set a

few sticksful of type in a school shop...The instructor was a born teacher, enthusiastic about printing and very kind to me, and I spent much of my time in that school shop."

Printing had not been Coleman's first choice of shop courses offered at Muscatine High School in his freshman year. He had intended to pursue an early interest in woodworking, but the course was overenrolled. So he had settled for printing, taught by Irvin Kraemer, who inspired Carroll Coleman and stimulated his interest in printing. (Kraemer later moved to Iowa City, where he became foreman of the University of Iowa shops area, after working for a time in the Hydraulics Laboratory.)

Carroll Coleman had already chosen his life's work when he was graduated from high school in 1923. He wanted to be a printer. He had bought a press and some type. As a senior in high school, he had begun to publish a quarterly magazine of verse, the *Golden Quill*. C.A.A. Parker of Saugus, Massachusetts, who published such a magazine, encouraged him and provided names of likely contributors. "Like so many little magazines of verse," Coleman later said of it, "it had a life of about two years." He had published another periodical, the *Pied Typer*, mostly for the amusement of himself and his friends, and he had worked part-time at several local print shops in his spare time and weekends.

Now he decided that he needed to learn something about mechanical typesetting (though he was always to prefer setting type by hand). So he enrolled in the Bennet School, where he spent a few weeks. Then he came home to Muscatine and became apprenticed to the Weis Printing Company. He gained admission to the International Typographical Union in 1927 and remained an active participant for many years. Fellow members of the Iowa City ITU unit recall his continuing involvement. Coleman went to work in 1927 for the Muscatine *Journal* as a compositor and sometime Linotype operator.

Working for a newspaper, he soon discovered, was not the way he wanted to spend the rest of his life. It was too much like working on a factory production line, turning out essentially the same product day after day. The job afforded him little

opportunity for the kind of creativity he wanted to practice as a printer. He had other reservations about newspapers. Most of them, he thought, were devoted to violence, sensation, and trivia. It was work that provided him no pleasure, but he stayed on at the *Journal* for the next seven years, salvaging as much time as he could for his basement shop, where he could do the creative printing that gave him satisfaction. Always in Carroll Coleman's mind was the prospect of having his own shop where he could spend full time doing the things he wanted to do with type and paper, but now he needed to gain more experience and, of course, to earn a living.

So he stayed on at the *Journal* where the workload increased as the size of the printing force was reduced by almost half as the Great Depression took hold. Then, in 1933, he was stricken with a rare heart ailment—neurocirculatory asthenia. He underwent two operations at the famous Cleveland Clinic Hospitals in Ohio. He spent the next year and a half recuperating at home—a period when many of the elements that would culminate in the early ventures of the Prairie Press began to exert their influence on him.

He was supposed to return to Cleveland for another operation but he stayed in Muscatine. Through this long convalescence he read poetry, for which he had always had a particular affinity. He developed friendships with several members of the Iowa Authors Club—among them Wilbur Schramm, Paul Engle and Edwin Ford Piper in Iowa City, James Hearst in Cedar Falls, Thomas W. Duncan in Des Moines, Jay Sigmund in Cedar Rapids, and Don Farran in Rowan.

Typography was another area he began to explore in depth and he had soon exhausted the Muscatine Library's holdings related to printing. He began to appreciate the extent to which typographical principles were bringing printing into the realm of art and his appetite for knowledge of the subject grew rapidly. So he began to seek fresh sources of information and found them—first at Iowa City, where Frank Luther Mott, then Director of the University of Iowa School of Journalism, helped him find materials, but especially in Chicago. Finding his way

to the famous library of the Lakeside Press, he came to the attention of William Kitteridge, internationally known book designer. It was Kitteridge who made it possible for Coleman to study the Lakeside collections of fine books and relevant texts.

Chicago's Newberry Library also provided Coleman the chance to examine and study many beautiful books and to become acquainted with the literature of book design, the history and aesthetics of type. He described the impact of these experiences a couple of years later (1936) in a 4-page pamphlet, "Notes on The Prairie Press":

For several years...I had been impressed and fascinated by the fine printing being done in both America and England by a limited number of craftsmen. I noticed that the best and most interesting work came from the smallest group in the industry—the private presses. Here, unimpaired by commercial restrictions and bravely ignoring profits and losses in most instances, a standard of craftsmanship was being established which seemed to me to indicate that printing as being practiced by these private presses might once more achieve the status of an art which it enjoyed in the days of the early masters of type and press, ink and paper.

Carroll Coleman had now resolved "to issue some books which would express my own ideas of design and typography." He had, he conceded, "little equipment and still more limited capital." The Prairie Press was to be established on these principles:

I had no desire to reprint the classics, feeling that field of printing had been somewhat overworked by many printers in commercial ventures in limited editions. I did not want to issue any of the second-rate work of famous contemporary authors, in the hope of selling books by means of a well-known name, nor did I intend to exploit the vanity of unimportant writers by publishing their scribblings at their own expense. I knew there were many writers in Iowa and the Middle West doing fine work (and by reason of this very fact often lacking mass appeal) who should be published. What could be more fitting than for a private press in the center of this area to attempt this, and what better name than the Prairie Press?

The Prairie Press announced by mail in October, 1935, that it contemplated publishing an anthology of poems by Iowa authors. To Don Farran, one of those invited to submit works, Coleman wrote that this was “de-



ecidedly not a pay-as-you-enter anthology.” A poet whose work was chosen for inclusion could purchase ten copies, “which is not likely,” or none, “which is extremely probable.” Coleman added that he had “no illusions as to the financial soundness of the venture,” suggesting that “all such ventures are foredoomed to failure, or at best to breaking even.”

Contemporary Iowa Poets appeared early in 1935. Its sixty-nine pages included works by thirty-six Iowans—among them Thomas W. Duncan, James Hearst, Ruth Lechlitner, Edwin Ford Piper, Wilbur Schramm, Jay Sigmund, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Worthington Smith, Jewell Bothwell Tull, and Roland White. McKinlay Kantor wrote that he no longer considered himself an Iowan and thus was not eligible. There was no response from Phil Stong. Acknowledgements for permission to print included *American Poetry*, *Attic Salt*, *Bard*, *Christian Century*, *The Forum*, *New York Herald-Tribune*, *Poetry*, and *Saturday Review of Literature*.

This first volume from the Prairie Press set high standards for the years to come. It was printed in hand-set Bulmer Roman, a typeface first used by William Bulmer at the Shakespeare Press in London, 1793, in “that magnificent edition of Shakespeare from which the press derived its name.” (Carroll Coleman later designated Bulmer as his favorite among all typeface, characterizing it as “hard working.”) Two hundred and twenty-five copies of *Contemporary Iowa Poets* were printed on Alexandra Antique Wove paper.

Reception of the anthology—both critical and financial—was less than enthusiastic. There were few reviews and Coleman commented caustically in a letter to Don Farran on April 3,

1935: "This review business is a funny thing. If you will examine the space given to reviews, you will find it practically pro rata with the advertising space of the publishers." His conclusion? "Quaint are the uses of publicity, and diverse."

Late in February, 1935, Coleman reported to Farran that "sales of the anthology have practically stopped with about half of the edition sold. I am sending out some literature on it in an attempt to stimulate sales...I have learned one thing—members of the Iowa Authors Club apparently do not buy books. With the exception of those represented in the anthology, I do not believe the circulars sent to the club members resulted in more than two sales."

A month later there was a bit of good news: *Publisher's Weekly* had listed the anthology as "one of the nine best limited editions of the past month." There was other good news about this time, too: Edmund B. Thompson of Hawthorn House had proposed Carroll Coleman for membership in the American Institute of Graphic Arts. "If selected," he wrote to Farran, "I would be the first printer from Iowa so honored." The nomination was approved and the Prairie Press became a frequent winner of AIGA book awards in the next three decades. As Coleman was to find throughout his life, however, such recognition did little to help him earn a living at printing these handsome volumes.

"The book business just isn't," Coleman wrote to Farran in July, 1935. He was planning to publish *Elephants at War*, a collection of Thomas W. Duncan's poems, but if sales of *Contemporary Iowa Poets* and volumes of poetry by Farran and Jay Sigmund that he had published did not improve, he would have "to promote a loan for the paper" for the Duncan volume. "Never publish books," his letter concluded.

Coleman wrote two weeks later that if the Duncan book did not sell well "I may have to quit the publishing business." He had decided that "maybe the people who go to bank nights are sane and I am crazy." (Bank nights were a form of lottery devised during the Great Depression by owners of motion picture theaters to attract customers.)

Coleman had written to Farran in March, 1935, that "I may return to my old job after the first of the month." He had been away from the Muscatine *Journal* for a year and a half, having found a substitute who would hold the job for him while he recuperated. Now the "sub" had taken a job out of town and "as they are planning a bulldog edition soon, they want me to come back if I will." (The "bulldog" edition is the first published each day, often composed largely of material from the previous day's last edition.)

A month later, however, he reported that "the local sheet has postponed the starting of the bulldog edition until fall, so I may defer the pleasure of returning to stories of murder, rape, incest, accidents and propaganda for the munitions manufacturers until fall—if my finances hold out."

His finances—there was the rub. So, early in November, he went back to work for the *Journal* on a part-time basis. "I had a faint hope at one time," he wrote to Farran, "that I might do well enough in the publishing to enable me to devote all my time to it, but having some knowledge of the book-buying public, I should have known better. On the four books I have published, I am just about \$125 in the red. But I have no regrets. I have enjoyed it and have had a lot of fun."

Coleman quit his newspaper job after only six weeks, having "had the flu" and "got disgusted with things." He was "at a loose end," which he found rather pleasant in that "it opens up a number of possible avenues for future development." Most of these, however, "require money, which is a thing of which I have very little at the moment."

Of the "possible avenues for future development" open to Carroll Coleman late in 1935, the one he chose was his own commercial printing shop on Mulberry Avenue in downtown Muscatine. It provided enough income to sustain him while allowing him some time to get on with book publishing he wanted to do under the Prairie Press imprint. Operating a commercial printing shop was not the ideal arrangement, but it kept him going for the next ten years, and in that decade the Prairie Press produced some of its finest volumes.

THE MUSCATINE YEARS

River towns have a character and flavor of their own. Muscatine, where the Prairie Press began, is such a town, dominated physically and psychologically by the Mississippi River. Jonathan Raban, the British travel writer, stopped off at Muscatine some years ago while on a small craft trip down the river. In *Old Glory* which is his account of that trip, Raban wrote of Muscatine:

Clearly, Muscatine was in possession of some secret of survival which had escaped almost every other town of its size I had visited. I had assumed that slow dereliction and depopulation were the inevitable fate of such places, doomed to squat and scrape a bare living in the long shadows of their ambitions of a century ago. There must, I thought, be something peculiarly boneheaded about Muscatine in its failure to grasp the basic principles that should have ensured its decline.

Carroll Coleman loved the town and the river. In his youth, he had roamed the banks of the Mississippi around Muscatine. This love of place is reflected in one of the early publications of the Prairie Press: *No Pink Shirts* (1938), a brochure in paper covers, by Kenneth Kaufman, subtitled "A Tribute to the Memory of Evan G. Barnard." Two reasons for publishing this title are cited: "First because it is a fine piece of writing and a splendid tribute to a great man, and second because Evan G. Barnard spent his boyhood in Muscatine, exploring every foot of the Mississippi River in his skiff and roaming the wooded hills above the town." The experiences of Barnard, who went on to Oklahoma to become a well-known writer about the Southwest, obviously spoke to the heart of Carroll Coleman.

Muscatine had been for many years a thriving small city, with something of a world reputation for its pearl button industry. The buttons were made from shells, taken from the river, in several plants. Other small industries provided jobs for additional workers.

Then, just as Carroll Coleman decided to establish the Prairie Press, the full impact of the Great Depression hit Muscatine. Its industrial problems were multiplied when the shells from which pearl buttons were made began to run out. A final blow was the severe drought of the mid-1930s which struck at agricultural operations in the area.

This was not an auspicious time to launch a business venture. Fortunately, the Prairie Press required little capital. Its first volumes were printed on a 10x15 Gordon job press, using hand-set type in limited selections of Bulmer, Goudy's Text, Arrighi, and a few titling fonts. The Prairie Press was operated simply and frugally.

Whatever its limitations in capital and physical plant, the fledgling press lacked neither vision nor ambition. It was founded on two principles, one of which was regionalism. "I gave ear to the teachings of my friend, Grant Wood, the artist," Coleman would later declare, "and I was convinced that I could do no better than to follow, in publishing, the regionalism that he advocated in painting. I envisioned editors, artists and painters working to produce beautiful books, which would embody the life and thought of the heart of the great Mississippi Valley region."

The Prairie Press may never have quite accomplished what was envisioned here, but neither did it ever lose the regional flavor that characterized its early years. Midwestern writers would always provide many of its titles. But the Prairie Press was soon receiving manuscripts of high quality from beyond the Mississippi Valley, many of them attracted by early examples of Carroll Coleman's bookmaking genius. Recognizing the limitations of regionalism, he published the best of these manuscripts, adding to the reputation of press and publisher.

A second major principle on which the Prairie Press was established was that its purpose was to provide an audience for gifted writers who had not yet established wide reputations. Typically several hundred copies of handsome, well-produced books were turned out and sold at very modest prices. From the first, Coleman rejected a prevailing notion that a principle

purpose of private presses was to turn out expensive editions of classic works that rich men could display in their libraries and show to their friends. One of his most often quoted comments expressed the hope that his would be known as the only private press that had not reprinted Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

Carroll Coleman chose a wide variety of manuscripts for publication, but there never was any doubt about his personal preference for poetry—a preference that added to his problems in making a modest profit. All four of the titles he published in the first year were poetry and he learned very soon that they did not produce sales that would repay the costs of his materials, much less an adequate wage for the hours of work that went into producing these handsome books.

Again and again throughout his publishing career, Coleman would announce his intention to quit publishing poetry. He would receive a manuscript from a poet of the calibre of Hayden Carruth or James Hearst and would write to express his pleasure with the work. Then he would express his regret that it was impossible to publish poetry because of financial considerations. Yet, more often than not, he would decide that he must put these poems in print. Few of these ventures repaid their cost, though the several volumes of James Hearst's works were popular, and *Findings*, a volume of Wendell Berry's poems, almost achieved the best-seller classification.

Carroll Coleman sometimes said that the ten-year period from 1935 to 1945 was the happiest of his life. These were the Muscatine years of the Prairie Press and undoubtedly there was both satisfaction and excitement in its growing reputation for excellence—both literary and typographic. Despite the financial frustrations, he was able to make a living from his various involvements with the printing business.

One of his best customers in these early days of printing operations was S.G. Stein (known as Sol). Stein was an early admirer of Prairie Press books and a regular customer for them. As president of the Grain Processing Company of Muscatine, he also saw to it that most of the company's printing orders

went to the Coleman shop on Mulberry Avenue. Members of three generations of the Stein family were friends of Coleman and admirers of his work. This relationship reached its culmination in 1961, when the Prairie Press published *The Stein Family of Muscatine*. S.G. Stein III recounts in a foreword the reasons for deciding to undertake a family history, then adds that "a further fortunate circumstance, another old friend from Muscatine, Carroll Coleman, consented to print this volume."

Carroll Coleman's reputation and that of the Prairie Press spread well beyond Muscatine in those early years. He had become acquainted with several members of the University of Iowa faculty. Frank Luther Mott, historian and author of short stories, became a particular friend of Carroll Coleman and was a long-time admirer of the Prairie Press. Mott, who was head of the University's journalism school, tried in the late 1930s to interest administrators in establishing a university press, with Coleman as its director. When that effort failed, Mott urged an unidentified Iowa newspaper publisher to contribute \$50,000 to bring the Prairie Press to the University and to subsidize its continuing operation, thus enhancing the University's growing reputation as a center for the arts. But, Mott wrote to Coleman, the publisher "didn't see things my way."

Others on the Iowa City campus became close friends: Grant Wood, who had joined the arts faculty; Wilbur Schramm and Paul Engle, bright young men in the English department; Edwin Ford Piper, poet and teacher of English. James Hearst, who lived in Cedar Falls, reported that on a visit to Iowa City he had conferred with several faculty members about the possibility of arranging for Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press to move to Iowa City.

Others outside of academic circles became Prairie Press enthusiasts. Thomas Henry Foster, president of the Morrell Packing Company operations at Ottumwa, was one of these. A dabbler in fine printing himself and a bibliophile who had built one of the Midwest's finest libraries, Foster began to collect

Prairie Press books as soon as they were published. Coleman particularly valued Foster's opinion, since he was a practitioner of printing.

Another Prairie Press enthusiast was Lawrence Oakley Cheever, who supervised Foster's library and was editor of the Morrell Company's employee magazine. Cheever, who became a close friend of Coleman's, did much to promote Foster's interest in the Prairie Press. He later moved to Iowa City and was employed by the State Historical Society of Iowa.

This growth in reputation was not confined to Iowa. The frequency of Prairie Press books among the best-of-the-year awards by the American Institute of Graphic Arts and various regional groups attracted wide attention. Designers and editors became acquainted with Coleman's work. The reputation of the Prairie Press among writers was attested by the growing numbers of manuscripts that were being sent to Muscatine for consideration.

The names of many who were—or soon would be—among the leading young American writers were included in the Prairie Press lists during these first ten years. August Derleth, Wallace Stegner, and James Hearst are representative of this group.

Stegner, a native of Lake Mills, Iowa, was to go on to a distinguished writing career that included a Pulitzer Prize novel. He was published only once by Carroll Coleman. *The Potter's House*, a seventy-five page novella, appeared in 1938. The relationships with both Hearst and Derleth extended over many years and the two provided many of the manuscripts that provided greatest satisfaction to their publisher.

Derleth was a member of a prominent family in Sauk City, Wisconsin, where he lived most of his life in a big house full of architectural quirks and assorted oddities collected by its eccentric owner. Gennie Coleman recalls that visits to the Derleth house were special occasions for the Colemans and others who were invited to Sauk City.

The Prairie Press published eight of Derleth's works between 1939 and 1969. The first of the Derleth titles, *Atmosphere of*

Houses, was taken from the previously published *Evening in Spring*, described in a publisher's note as "a spiritual biography, portions of which have appeared in *Story*, *American Prefaces*, and many others."

The Prairie Press published four volumes of Jim Hearst's poetry between 1937 and 1967. Ruth Suckow wrote in a foreword to *Country Men*, the first of these: "It is appropriate that James Hearst's poems, known for years to magazine readers but now collected for the first time, should be published by The Prairie Press." The Hawarden author continued:

Not that these are poems of local color; that would be putting them within limits which they do not deserve. It would not be fair, either, to stick on them that old tag, grown meaningless with overuse, of "poems of the soil." They are rather, in content and expression, an outgrowth of prairie country, not merely descriptive, rural in the lesser sense of the term, but having their center in a prairie farm and sharing in its loneliness and its broad horizons.

Carroll Coleman shared Ruth Suckow's admiration of and feeling for Hearst's poetry and he took special pleasure in publishing these poems of the prairie. He saw a good deal of Hearst, who taught at the Iowa State Teachers College (now the University of Northern Iowa) and was resident poet at Aspen Institute in Colorado for several years.

The Prairie Press published a long narrative poem in 1938, in blank verse, entitled *The Friends*. Its author was James Norman Hall, an Iowan who had written—with Charles Nordhoff—a well-received novel, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, published in 1932. Hall spent many years in the South Pacific, maintaining a home on the island of Tahiti, but he returned to Iowa occasionally and visited his home town, Colfax, located midway between Des Moines and Newton. He got to know Carroll Coleman on one of these visits and was impressed by the Prairie Press and the books it published.

Hall had long wanted to bring off a literary hoax and, early in 1940, he got in touch with Coleman. Would the Prairie Press, he wanted to know, collaborate in such an undertaking? Yes, Carroll Coleman responded, as soon as he had seen Hall's

manuscript. It was to become the best known of Prairie Press books, outselling all others. Its publisher would express astonishment when, some years later, a copy of the first edition sold for \$100.

Oh Millersville! was the book's title. Fern Gravel, its purported author, was introduced in a publisher's note:

The poems in this book were written in the first decade of the present century by a little girl who lived in the Iowa town which she chose to call Millersville.... The verses here printed were written in her ninth, tenth and eleventh years. They are reproduced as composed, except for punctuation, actually omitted in the manuscript. Titles also have been supplied.... The verses seem worth publication for the pictures they present of a particular childhood, and of the Midwestern community in which it was spent.

Critics agreed whole-heartedly. Fern Gravel's verses were lauded and compared with those of her contemporary, Edgar Lee Masters, whose gallery of small town rogues and their foibles in his *Spoon River Anthology* had won acclaim. There is a clear relationship between the two and it is to Hall's credit that he was able to achieve this similarity three decades later without permitting the element of parody to get out of hand.

A New York *Times* critic hailed Fern Gravel as "the lost Sappho of the Midwest." *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post* praised *Oh Millersville!* in glowing terms. Paul Engle, even then recognized as something of an Iowa poet laureate, wrote in the *Des Moines Sunday Register*: "There is so warm a feeling of validity about these verses and so accurate a sense of individual character that their import is far stronger than a simple amusement at childish simplicity."

The public was even more enthusiastic than the critics had been. The first printing of Fern Gravel's verses sold out in a month. The demand was so great that Coleman arranged for a second edition to be printed outside his own shop. This avoided the delay of setting by hand, but it was not up to Prairie Press standards and Coleman apologized for it many times. Even so, *Oh Millersville!* continued to enjoy great suc-

THE JOURNEY TO COME

Millersville, oh, Millersville!
That is my home and I like it, but still
I wish that once in a while I could go
To cities like Omaha and St. Jo.
You get tired of living in such a small town
With so few streets for walking around.
I would like to visit some larger places
And see many thousands of different faces
Of people I do not know at all
That you cannot see in a town so small.
But I wouldn't want to go for good;
Just for a while, and then I would
Want to come back to Millersville,
Because I love my home and I hope I always will.
But I love trains better than everything;
I would rather travel than anything.
Next summer I am going nearly out of this state,
To Keokuk; I can hardly wait,
On the Mississippi river. We will stay two days.
It will be the first time I have been such a ways
From Millersville. I hate to come home
So soon, but I guess we will have to come.
The convention my father is going to
Is for only that long, and when it is through
He must come straight back to his business here,
And I'll have to stay home all the rest of the year.

The first poem from *Oh Millersville!*

cess, marking the critical and financial high point of the first half dozen years of the Prairie Press.

Meantime, in far off Tahiti, James Norman Hall was also enjoying the unquestioned success of his brilliant hoax. He had originally approached Coleman about publishing these verses because he had wanted to see how critics would respond to them. When he had visited the Prairie Press in Muscatine while Carroll Coleman was hand-setting the type for *Oh Millersville!*, the two had discussed the humorous possibilities of their collaboration. Now both author and publisher were delighted by the success of their hoax. Not a single critic expressed doubt of the authenticity of Fern Gravel and her verses.

Questions were asked that presented problems. A request to reveal Fern Gravel's real name and to identify Millersville came from the book editor of the Des Moines *Sunday Register*, Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart (whose principal qualification for her position, Coleman once declared, was that "she owned the biggest diamond in Des Moines.") He replied that Fern Gravel had "consented to publication of this book only on condition that her identity remain secret. Since she still lives and since so many of the people about whom she has written in such a frank matter still live, it would be most embarrassing to all if she were known."

When, however, *Newsweek* magazine asked for a picture of Fern, Coleman felt obliged to provide one. Digging through family picture albums, he came upon a picture of two of his girl cousins, taken about 1900. He cut them apart and sent off the one of Fern Marsh—a serious looking, freckle-faced little girl, her hair in pigtails. James Norman Hall was delighted when he saw the picture a few weeks later. The little girl was just right. She was Fern Gravel exactly as she had appeared in his dreams of her.

Fern Gravel and *Oh Millersville!* enjoyed a remarkable vogue for six more years. Copies became scarce and Carroll Coleman wrote to a friend of his amazement that they were selling for twice the list price. The book had become almost a cult item.

This euphoria continued until Hall decided that *Oh Millersville!* had made its point. He revealed the truth in the *Atlantic Monthly* of September, 1946. "Fern Gravel: A Hoax and a Confession" made a clean breast of the Hall-Coleman collaboration to deceive. It also provided an elaborate and fanciful account of how Fern Gravel came to life (in Hall's dreams about his childhood in Colfax) and eventually dictated the poems, which Hall wrote down and sent off to the Prairie Press, insisting that Fern had indicated her preference for an Iowa publisher. After the success of this first collection of her works Fern had, according to Hall, wanted to provide more of them for a second volume. He had resisted her blandishments.

Oh Millersville! survived Hall's confession with little harm to the appreciation of any but the humorless. So real was Fern in the lives of some, however, that her creator received letters berating him. "You have murdered my best friend," one woman wrote. The verses can be read today—with knowledge of their tongue-in-cheek origins—with full appreciation of their validity as commentary on the time and place which were their subjects. There is only one way to understand the appeal of these verses. That is to read them.

The financial success of *Oh Millersville!* and its acclaim by critics gave a substantial boost to Carroll Coleman's career as a book publisher. Writers liked the kind of bookmaking Coleman was doing, combining simplicity with subtle artistry. They liked, too, his emphasis on the literary quality of the manuscripts he accepted. So the flow of manuscripts to Muscatine from all over the country increased dramatically. This, however, was a problem he could welcome at this stage.

His skills as designer and typographer were also attracting attention of other book publishers. Notable among these was James Laughlin, whose New Directions Press in Norfolk, Connecticut, was becoming a force in the publication of works by young writers. Laughlin, a member of the steelmaking family of the Jones & Laughlin firm, was an early admirer of Prairie Press books. He commissioned Coleman to design and print several books for New Directions. These were mostly

poetry, for which he provided a virtually unlimited budget and granted much freedom in matters of typography and design.

Other commissions were offered with increasing frequency. Alfred Knopf became an admirer of Carroll Coleman's work, though attempts to negotiate a commission kept running into various kinds of obstacles. Several university presses—notably those of the University of Illinois and the University of Chicago—made a variety of offers. Already there was talk about bringing Coleman to a college campus. George Domke, who taught printing at the Chicago Art Institute, suggested that the University of Iowa should establish a press with Coleman as its director. In a letter to Emerson Wulling at LaCrosse, Wisconsin, Coleman indicated his intention to explore the possibility with friends at Iowa City.

Stabilization came to Carroll Coleman's personal life at this time. He married Genevieve Aitken, a native of Muscatine, on August 28, 1940, at Davenport. Gennie had worked as an assistant in a dentist's office for several years after graduating from high school. She does not remember just when or how she met the young man who was to be her husband for almost fifty years. "In Muscatine at that time," she says, "you didn't meet people; you just got to know them over a period of time being with them in different groups, in different circumstances." They began their married life in several rooms set aside for them in Ernest and Arminda Coleman's big brick house at 110 West Eleventh Street in Muscatine. It was their home until they moved to Iowa City in 1945.

There were unsettling factors in the early 1940s too—notably U.S. involvement in World War II. In December, 1942, Carroll Coleman wrote to Emerson Wulling: "This (*The Dinner Party*) may be the last book of this press, for the duration, at least. I am finding it very difficult to sell copies of this book (poetry is very difficult to sell copies of any time), and the business complications you feared are showing themselves in increasing numbers. Then, too, there is the ever present, but yet unknown, knowledge that Uncle Sam may want me."

His persisting heart ailment made it unlikely that he would be called to the armed services. The shortage of materials that beset many printing operations did not prevent him from publishing a few books each year, nor from continuing to supplement his income from commercial printing. His relationships with writers and publishers continued to widen. Several stopped in Muscatine to see the Prairie Press at first hand and to become better acquainted with the quiet man whose work had won their respect and admiration.

Talk continued meantime among Carroll Coleman's friends about the need to provide him with a stable source of income that would assure him time to devote to the Prairie Press. His Iowa City friends and admirers—Mott, Schramm, Wood, Engle and others—sought ways of bringing him to the University. The beginnings of the Iowa Writers' Workshop enhanced a situation that seemed ideal for an exemplar of the bookmaking art.

The first such offer emerged, however, from the campus of Grinnell College, one of the country's fine small liberal arts schools. Thomas Duncan, poet and novelist whose works had been published by the Prairie Press, had moved from being book page editor of the Des Moines *Sunday Register* to a position as public relations director and teacher of writing at Grinnell. He soon began to urge Samuel Stevens, president of the college, to create a position which Carroll Coleman could be brought to the campus to fill.

Stevens invited Coleman to Grinnell to discuss possibilities in the fall of 1944. He proposed that the Prairie Press be moved to Grinnell, its purposes expanded to include publication of some trade books, with Coleman to assume responsibility for the college's printing. Such an arrangement would presumably provide a subsidy for continuing operations of the Prairie Press while the college would receive some profits from the sale of popular titles, as well as a quality printing service. Coleman asked for time to think about the proposal. He did not particularly like the idea of expanding the scope of the Prairie Press in the way President Stevens had proposed. He did not

want to find himself in a situation that might require alterations in the aims and purposes he had established for the Prairie Press ten years earlier when it began.

On his way back to Muscatine, Coleman stopped off for a visit in Iowa City with Wilbur Schramm, then head of the University of Iowa School of Journalism. He told Schramm about President Stevens' offer and asked his advice. Schramm asked Coleman to delay his decision until the possibility of a counteroffer could be explored with University administrators.

Within a few weeks, Wilbur Schramm had formulated an offer and presented it. Carroll Coleman would join the faculty of the School of Journalism as a full-time member. Half his time would be devoted to the Prairie Press. His remaining time would be spent administering a new typographic laboratory and designing University publications. Five thousand dollars would be needed to set up the laboratory. At Schramm's invitation, Coleman suggested T. Henry Foster, the Ottumwa packing house executive, as the likely donor. Foster agreed, specifying that his gift must be anonymous. Five thousand dollars was a generous gift in terms of the times and was adequate to equip the laboratory well.

Planning and equipping the laboratory were left entirely in Coleman's hands and he looked forward to the assignment. There were few such facilities in the United States, so this would be a pioneering experience. It had a strong appeal to a man whose mastery of typography had been demonstrated, but who had been able to buy only limited amounts of type for his own printing operations. How well he succeeded is attested by the enthusiasm of Professor Kay Amert who carries on the typography assignment at the University of Iowa almost fifty years after the laboratory was established. "He made all the right choices," she says, "with the result that little has had to be done to maintain its excellence and adequacy to our needs fifty years later."

Harry Duncan, Coleman's immediate successor as head of the typographic laboratory and recently retired as head of the Nebraska Book Arts Center in Omaha, has written that "not

only was his choice of typefaces clearly intended for fine book work, but a library of fine printing, including a few incunabula, directed attention to the great traditions—there was even an iron hand press on the press room floor.”

The concept of the typographic laboratory was illustrative of Wilbur Schramm’s innovative approach to the position he established for Carroll Coleman at Iowa. Schramm’s interest was in the artistry of typography, the creativity of bookmaking. He saw the new faculty position as a means of further enhancing the University’s reputation as an exemplar of the arts, which had begun some thirty years earlier under the presidency of Walter A. Jessup. Bringing Carroll Coleman to the campus would help to effect a synthesis bringing together the School of Journalism, the Writers’ Workshop, and a distinguished practitioner of the artistry of typography and bookmaking. It augured well for Coleman’s early notions of a confraternity of artists in the heart of the Mississippi Valley region.

Carroll Coleman chose to accept the Iowa offer. He had, of course, known Wilbur Schramm over a period of several years and worked with him in publishing poetry and short stories—Schramm’s own and some from students in the Writers’ Workshop. Most important, he saw in the Iowa proposal exactly the combination of opportunities he had hoped to find. He had no academic degrees, but any doubts he had about his abilities as a teacher did not dampen his enthusiasm. He accepted Schramm’s offer and began making plans to move to Iowa City the following summer.

Carroll and Gennie Coleman had regrets about leaving Muscatine. Many members of the Coleman and Aitken families still lived there, or nearby, and the Coleman family home was important to them. They loved the old town and the river that was at the heart of it. Muscatine was an easy, comfortable place to live. It had been good to them and they did not leave it easily.

Most important, it was in Muscatine that the Prairie Press had been begun and had achieved its reputation for excellence.

Carroll Coleman's friend, Emerson G. Wulling, has summed up the accomplishments of the Muscatine years:

In the first ten years of operations, the one-man Press turned out 27 books, most of which were hand-set, all of which were typographically competent, three of which were included in the Fifty Books—for 1937, 1944 and 1946. Several titles went into second editions and many of the 27 are out of print....In addition to books, The Prairie Press turned out 37 pamphlets and keepsakes from time to time and took job printing to keep solvent, certainly not to keep busy.

The Muscatine years provided few financial rewards. Adjustments were made in these first ten years—the gradual move away from regionalism, for example. Yet these ten years were essentially marked by strengthening of the goals and standards Coleman had set for himself and the Prairie Press when it began.

He had published the works of writers of promise, providing an audience that gave their works the exposure they needed.

He continued to regard himself as a facilitator, not a performer, as communicator, not as virtuoso.

He did publish books of high literary and typographic quality at prices that encouraged readers to buy them.

These were the goals with which the Prairie Press had begun. In those first ten years at Muscatine, Carroll Coleman had sustained and extended this simple credo.

THE MOVE TO IOWA CITY

Iowa's earliest settlers chose well when they decided on a site for their first state capital city. Iowa City is located in a wooded, hilly area at a bend in the Iowa River. The handsome capitol building was sited on a hill, looking west to the river and the bluffs beyond.

The capital was moved to Des Moines—a more central location—as Iowa spread west to the Missouri River. The building that had housed the state's government offices re-

mained, however, to become Old Capitol, the central building on the campus of the University of Iowa, which had been located at Iowa City as a consolation prize when the capital was relocated. (Some contend that Iowa City got the better of the bargain.) It became, in any event, an attractive university town, bisected by the river, almost entirely atypical of the stereotype of the flat, treeless towns of the American Midwest.

Iowa City remained a small town—the seat of Johnson County, with a population of about 20,000—when Carroll and Gennie Coleman moved there in 1945. It did have a character of its own, differentiating it from other small towns attached to large universities. There were sizable Czech and Irish communities whose political leanings made Johnson County one of the few Democratic islands in what was for many years a sea of Republicanism. Already, however, the University of Iowa dominated the town. Enrollment remained below the 10,000 level in 1945, but it would soon begin to rise sharply, as thousands began to pour onto the campus to take advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights.

Housing was scarce in Iowa City, however, even in 1945. Carroll and Gennie Coleman, accustomed to the spaciousness of his parents' home in Muscatine, had trouble finding a place to live which they could afford. Eventually they did find a small apartment at the corner of Burlington and Johnson Streets—a few blocks from the campus—where they lived for two years.

The death of Ernest Coleman, Carroll's father, in the summer of 1945 further complicated the move. Frequent trips back and forth between Iowa City and Muscatine were required to deal with problems in settling his estate. There was also the difficulty of finding a location for the Prairie Press. James Laughlin wrote in August, 1945, to offer an opportunity to design and print a volume of poetry for *New Directions*—either Thomas Merton or Jean Garrigue. Coleman responded in October that he would “like very much to do the Merton book but I am now in Iowa City and my shop is still in Muscatine, so guess I will have to pass it up.” Most of the printing equipment did remain for a time at 216 Mulberry Avenue, but when the

operator of an electrical repair shop wanted to rent the space, the Prairie Press had to be moved.

Machinery, type, paper, and other supplies were moved first to a building in North Liberty, seven miles north of Iowa City. This was decidedly inconvenient—too far away to be readily available at the end of a day's work at the University. So another location had to be found.

The first Iowa City home of the Prairie Press was in a building on East College Street that had once been a carriage house. It was less than ideal, with serious problems of adequate heating and proper humidity control. But Carroll Coleman did not mind wearing galoshes to keep his feet warm on the coldest days and his landlord, Norman Sage, was helpful and congenial. (Sage became so interested in fine printing as a result of watching Coleman at work and talking with him that he eventually established his own Maecenas Press—one of many inspired by the Prairie Press.)

Carroll and Gennie Coleman bought the house at 111 Lusk Avenue which became the home of the Prairie Press for its remaining years in 1951—six years after their move to Iowa City. A modest but comfortable bungalow-type structure, it is located on the west side of the Iowa River on a tree-lined cul-de-sac. Nearby is the sprawling complex of hospitals and clinics of the University of Iowa and the United States Veterans' Administration.

Considerable time and money went into preparing the basement at 111 Lusk Avenue for the printing shop. Racks and cases for the types and papers Coleman had acquired made the best possible use of the admittedly limited space. It was well that these preparations were made. Even with them, the basement shop became crowded within a few years. Carroll Coleman could never resist buying types and papers he admired even when, by his own admission, there was no immediate prospect of using them. Coleman often complained of the lack of room, while conceding that his own inability to acknowledge the space limitations of the house was responsible. When a University book club wanted to visit the shop in

1961, he told its sponsor, Frank Paluka, that it would be impossible for want of space where club members could sit or stand to observe what went on at the Prairie Press.

The first two years of Carroll Coleman's association with the University of Iowa were almost idyllic. He had doubted his abilities as a teacher but, as his former students testify, his enthusiasm for typography was quickly transmitted to them and he soon engaged and held their interest. The enthusiasm of a few students made teaching worth the effort, he wrote to Emerson Wulling, though he doubted he would want to be confined to the classroom. He was not so confined, however, and putting together the new typographic laboratory provided him great satisfaction. This was the center of the new world into which Coleman had moved and it gave him much pleasure to activate it.

Most important, perhaps, Carroll Coleman found himself among congenial people who shared some of his insights into the artistry of fine printing. During these first two years, Coleman worked in an atmosphere that encouraged him to pursue the goals he had set in the previous ten years. Wilbur Schramm and J. Earl McGrath, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, understood the importance of all the arts to education. They created an atmosphere in which artists like Coleman were stimulated to teach and practice their skills to the benefit of the entire University community. It was a heady atmosphere for an artist—one that was almost unique to the academic world of its time.

The Prairie Press was somewhat less productive during those first two years in Iowa City than it had been in the best of the Muscatine years. Yet there never was any doubt in Coleman's mind that both Schramm and McGrath regarded the Prairie Press as a significant part of his contribution to the University of Iowa as a faculty member. He anticipated their encouragement in combining academic responsibilities with creative activities—the one enhancing the other in a logical partnership.

Unfortunately for all these expectations, Wilbur Schramm left Iowa in 1947 to become assistant to the President of the



Carroll Coleman at the University of Iowa

University of Illinois and Dean of the College of Journalism and Mass Communications. Schramm made some overtures to Coleman about becoming Director of the University of Illinois Press. Nothing came of this possibility. Schramm had assured Iowa's President Virgil Hancher that he would not attempt to lure other faculty members to Illinois. Besides, Coleman was not at all sure he wanted to make another move so soon, especially since this would probably have meant abandoning the Prairie Press altogether.

Schramm's successor as Director of the Iowa School of Journalism was Leslie G. Moeller, who had joined the faculty in 1946 after wartime service in the U.S. Navy. Moeller, an Iowa Journalism graduate of some twenty years earlier, had a good reputation as editor and publisher of Iowa weekly newspapers and had been president of the Iowa Press Association. Bright and articulate, Les Moeller was a popular choice among Iowa newspaper people for the Director's job.

Moeller's ideas about the philosophy and purposes of the Iowa School of Journalism differed from Schramm's. He saw the school as principally a training ground for students who would go to work on the state's media—mostly, at the time, weekly and daily newspapers. So he took a quite different approach to several aspects of the faculty position that had been created for Carroll Coleman. The resulting changes, which came about over a period of years, completely undid Coleman's understanding with Schramm and Earl McGrath, who also left Iowa at about this time.

Changes were made almost immediately in the approach to typography and the purpose of the laboratory Carroll Coleman had created, with its emphasis on the art of typography and fine printing. Instead of providing an appreciation of the art of typography for interested students throughout the University, the course became a requirement for all Journalism majors. Coleman's teaching load was considerably increased and further limits were placed on the time available to him for operating the Prairie Press.

It soon became apparent that Moeller begrudged Coleman the time he spent on activities not strictly related to the School of Journalism. In 1950, Coleman's appointment was reduced from full time to two-thirds time. He was also to have been removed from the employee benefits program, but President Hancher intervened to prevent this action. A note from Allin W. Dakin, Administrative Dean, to Elwyn T. Joliffe of the business office, dated July 6, 1950, declares: "This will confirm our conversation of this morning that President Hancher has approved continuing Mr. Carroll Coleman on the retirement annuity program and as a participant in the group life and disability program. We will, however, continue to show him as two-thirds time, in view of the report from Professor Moeller."

Carroll Coleman's own account of these events is provided in a letter he wrote some years later to Gordon Strayer, Head of University Relations:

When I came to the University in 1945, it was with the understanding—verbal, it is true—with the department head and the dean that I be permitted to continue some of my work in publishing books, even though I was to be on a full-time basis. This was not at all unusual, as many faculty members had, and still have, the privilege of doing creative work of their own while holding a full-time appointment. (I read recently that one full-time professor at ISU earned more than \$170,000 in eight years by his sideline of real estate appraisal, which might be questioned as a creative activity.)

After I had been at the University a few years, the department head and the dean—now different men from those who had hired me—decided that I should not be permitted to continue as a full-time member of the faculty...I had no inkling there was to be any change until the president's office notified me I had been reduced to part-time status. In subsequent conversations with the dean [Dewey B. Stuit, who had succeeded Earl McGrath] he explained his set of values by equating my publishing of books with another faculty member who might be running a grocery store. (I did not embarrass him by pointing out that a full-time faculty member *was* running a frozen custard stand.) Among my publications was an anthology of work from the SUI writers' workshop. This, as with all the other books I had published, was issued at my own expense and to give the writers

encouragement and an audience....It seems to me a sort of double-talk on the part of the University to point with pride to their sponsorship of such a creative activity as the workshop, and to censure, by means of reducing to part-time status...a faculty member who insists on making his private contribution to the effort.

This patronizing attitude toward Carroll Coleman persisted throughout his years in Iowa City. When a general reorganization of the publications area was going on in 1956, it was proposed that a Director of Publications be named to supervise these operations. The position was created with Coleman in mind and he eventually agreed to take it. A senior University vice president, Harvey Davis, objected to giving him this title. "Director of nothing but printing" was the scornful term Davis applied in commenting on the appointment two different times.

Carroll Coleman became Director of Publications a little more than ten years after he had joined the Journalism faculty. He did not want the job, had in fact turned it down twice, but he was in a frame of mind by 1956 that made it easier to persuade him to make a change. His relations with Les Moeller and Dewey Stuit had not improved much, though he had been given tenure and moved up the academic ladder to the rank of full professor. There were more and more demands on his time and he had fallen farther and farther behind in the operations of the Prairie Press. Manuscripts he wanted to publish continued to pile up, though he drove himself to make time for book publishing. When he did agree to become Director of Publications (the job title also included University Editor and Superintendent of Mailing) Coleman observed in a cynical mood that at least he would be his own boss.

The position of Director of Publications had been created to deal with the situation resulting from the retirement of Fred M. Pownall, who had for many years combined responsibilities for the University's printing operations with being Publisher of Student Publications, particularly the *Daily Iowan*, a newspaper with a national reputation for excellence and a longstanding tradition of editorial freedom. Pownall, a former city editor of

the *Des Moines Register*, was a strong defender of that freedom. President Hancher, however, wanted the *Iowan* under much tighter faculty control and was determined to achieve it one way or another. So the two aspects of the job were to be separated.

President Hancher's objections to the often acerbic comments of the *Daily Iowan* on everything from administration decisions to musical and theatrical performances were directed to those involved with student publications. But the area over which Carroll Coleman now assumed control was a minefield of jurisdictional conflicts. Many of the publications previously had been within the jurisdiction of the registrar's office, whose present occupant was Ted McCarrel—a man with a considerable reputation as an empire builder, who was not about to yield any of his privileges without a battle. There were other fiefdoms of only slightly less impressive dimensions. Coleman was to report directly to the business office, but he believed he had the ear of President Hancher and his support in effecting changes to improve the quality of publications.

One thing Carroll Coleman insisted on before he agreed to accept the new position was that he be granted a six months leave. It would be without pay, but he hoped to be able to catch up on the accumulation of manuscripts at the Prairie Press. It was a gesture that did enable him to publish a few books, but he was frequently called back to the University—mostly to make decisions about the new department he was soon to take over. It was another frustrating experience for the Prairie Press.

Carroll Coleman stayed on as Director of Publications for the next five years—an experience that gave him little satisfaction. He had known there would be further restrictions on the freedom he had anticipated for the operations of the Prairie Press when he moved from Iowa City to Muscatine. Now he would have even less time for his own printing activities. But there had been little time in his schedule for the Prairie Press for ten years. Why not, he reasoned, accept a full-time appointment instead of the part-time status to which he had been reduced?

Even in this regard there was an irony of a special sort. When he had agreed to take the new job, President Hancher had asked him what salary he would expect. Naively, perhaps, Coleman had proposed that he start at the salary he was being paid for his two-thirds status. Then, he suggested, if he did a satisfactory job, his salary should be increased. It never was moved up even proportionally to the increases given some others who worked under him. Virgil Hancher wrote several times to commend Carroll Coleman for the improvements that were made in University publications, but he never quite managed to translate his appreciation into corresponding financial rewards.

Coleman had believed that he might get some artistic satisfaction from applying the principles of typography to the whole range of University publications. That would give him a sense of satisfaction which, along with whatever could be accomplished by the Prairie Press, would satisfy his personal needs.

That it never quite worked out that way can be attributed to several factors. For one thing, Coleman soon discovered that no one in the upper levels of the University administration—with the possible exception of Virgil Hancher—cared in the least about the artistic qualities of the publications that represented their University to the rest of the world. Also, as has been noted earlier, some individuals had come to regard certain aspects of publications as their fiefdoms and were not about to give them up easily. And, of course, most university administrators—not just those in Iowa City—were more concerned about the costs of publications than about their artistic qualities.

The highest hurdle in Carroll Coleman's path to what he had hoped to achieve was, however, probably his fixation on perfection. He simply could not accept the best that was likely to be achieved within the limitations imposed on him. He managed to find or import a few associates who shared his concern for perfection, but he was driven to distraction by many of those with whom he had to work every day.

Two years after his retirement in 1961, Coleman set forth his reasons in the letter, quoted earlier, which he wrote to Gordon Strayer. It was not, he insisted, "poor equipment or a dilapidated building," as had been suggested in an official report to Governor Harold Hughes on the reasons for loss of faculty members. "It is true," he added, in a typically tongue-in-cheek manner, "that when I entered the job I was the only person in the department without a desk, but this the University provided in due time." Why, then, had he been moved to resign? He stated his reasons straightforwardly:

The action on the part of the University that triggered my decision to leave was that of transferring my department to the area of student services without ever mentioning it to me that they had contemplated doing so, since we had no contact with students. But I would not have questioned their right to transfer it to the college of medicine if they felt it was necessary and desirable. So it was not the action but the method. I learned of it only by reading of it in the newspapers as an action of the state board of regents. I subsequently called the president's office, but was unable to confirm the action. I think you will agree that when the head of a department does not know what is to happen in his own department until he reads of it in the newspapers as an accomplished fact, when he cannot confirm the report by a call to the president's office, and is forced to accept the news version as his only notification, it is time to go. When the people who work in a department realize that the director knows no more about what is being done than they, it places him in a very weak position.

The Prairie Press had not flourished in the period of a bit more than fifteen years since it had moved from Muscatine to Iowa City, but neither had it languished entirely. Especially notable was the number of titles Carroll Coleman had printed for others—a practice he had begun early that burgeoned as his reputation for fine printing continued to expand.

As early as 1945, he printed *Some Natural Things*, a collection of the poems of James Laughlin, which appeared under the imprint of Laughlin's New Directions Press. Laughlin had visited Coleman while the Prairie Press was still located in

Muscatine. Laughlin's tall figure attracted the attention of many Muscatine residents when the two men had walked its streets together.

Hand-set in Coleman's favorite type, Bulmer Roman, on Ansbach cloth paper, this collection of Laughlin's poetry is a fine example of the bookmaking art—the kind of work on which the Prairie Press was building an international reputation. *Some Natural Things* was just the first of a series of collaborations with Laughlin and New Directions. In the same year, Coleman printed a volume of Richard Hart's poetry, titled *A Winter's Journey*, for Contemporary Poetry in Baltimore.

Two volumes for the Swallow Press of Alan Swallow appeared in 1946. Then, a year later, J.V. Cunningham's *The Judge Is Fury* was printed for joint publication by the Swallow Press and William Morrow and Company. Carroll Coleman would do more and more designing and printing books for others during the next quarter century, including volumes for commercial publishers and academic presses. Many of these were among his best work. One of these was Jean Garrigue's *The Ego and the Centaur*, done in 1947 for James Laughlin's New Directions. It was among the American Institute of Graphic Arts' Fifty Best Books of the Year—one of many Coleman books to receive that recognition.

A handsome version of *Ecclesiastes* was published in 1951, breaking away from Carroll Coleman's general policy of eschewing reprints of classic works. It was an exception for which lovers of beautiful books are continually grateful. Coleman had always wanted to try his hand at *Ecclesiastes*, but he never had been able to find a typeface that he thought suitable for it. Then Hammer's American Uncial appeared and he recognized it as the typeface for which he had been looking. The result is generally acknowledged to be one of the masterpieces of the Prairie Press.

This period also produced *Galland's Iowa Emigrant*, one of the most interesting and widely acclaimed works from the Prairie Press (it is another of the AIGA's Fifty Best Books). It was notable for other reasons—among them that the press run of

3,500 copies was considerably the largest for a Prairie Press volume. Printed for the State Historical Society of Iowa, it was widely distributed to members and others.

The book represents another of the interesting kinds of collaborations in which Carroll Coleman became involved. One of his friends and admirers on the Iowa campus was William J. Petersen (widely known as "Steamboat Bill") for many years a member of the History faculty and head of the State Historical Society of Iowa. It was Bill Petersen who conceived the idea of *Galland's Iowa Emigrant*, originally published in 1840 at Marietta, Ohio, by Wm. C. Jones. Carroll Coleman was an enthusiastic collaborator in the venture. "No attempt has been made to reproduce the original book in either typographic style or pagination," Coleman stated in the colophon. The handsome volume, printed in hand-set Bulmer type on Hamilton Victoria paper, does however evoke the sense of nineteenth century publications.

The years (1956-1961) when Coleman served as Director of Publications for the University were marked by a further decline in the publications of the Prairie Press. Except for 1956, when he was able to make some use of the six months' leave without pay before he assumed his new duties, during which he published six titles, he was lucky when he could find time to produce a couple of books a year. There was only one in 1958, two in 1959, but none at all in 1960, and one again in 1961.

Some of the finest books Coleman ever published were included among the products of these years. Notable among them is *Johann Amerbach*, a study of the fifteenth century printer by Donald Jackson, Coleman's protege and friend, who had become editor of the University of Illinois Press. This handsome volume, hand-set in American Uncial, black and red, included an original leaf published by Amerbach in 1487-88. It was one of the half-dozen books published by the Prairie Press in 1956.

The frustrations Carroll Coleman experienced in the operations of The Prairie Press during the years in Iowa City are revealed in correspondence over a five-year period relating to

another of his 1956 titles—*The Shadow on the Hour*, a volume of poetry by Ruth Lechlitner. Coleman admired Lechlitner's work (she was the wife of the Iowa novelist, Paul Corey). "I am planning the publication of a series of poetry pamphlets," he wrote to her in March, 1951. "Since you are one of the contemporary American poets whose work I most admire, I am writing to ask whether you might have a manuscript of 15 to 20 poems you would care to submit for publication in a series." He indicated that John Holmes and Mark Van Doren had already submitted manuscripts.

"There is no great hurry," Coleman responded when Lechlitner wrote that she was interested. He would not "be able to publish it before some time next year, as I have some books under way that are going to take a lot of time this year." He reported further delays a year later. His eye problems were more serious. Glaucoma threatened and there were orders to "let up on their use." He must earn a living, Coleman wrote, "and since publishing poetry is not a way of doing that, I have to devote most of the time that I can use my eyes to other things."

Lechlitner's poems remained unpublished almost three years later. Coleman wrote to her in January, 1955, to report that "almost all the time I would have had for publishing this last summer and fall" had been devoted to making arrangements for his mother to remain in her own home in Muscatine after the death of his sister, who had lived with Arminda Coleman. Then, in May, he reported that "a great press of work in connection with my job at the University has left me no time at all for my work recently." He would "finish up the details of your book and send you some page proofs" as soon as he could get at it, he promised.

These page proofs finally were mailed just after Christmas and Coleman hoped that "we can go ahead with the publication without any further extended delays." He added: "Too many things have gone undone in the past few years that should have been done. It is a wonder I have any friends. Perhaps I do not."

It was almost another year before *The Shadow on the Hour* was published. The torment Carroll Coleman endured during that last time is made clear in these excerpts from letters he wrote to Ruth Lechlitner from January to November, 1956:

I am hoping the book can be ready for publication in March or April...I do so appreciate your patience. Not all my authors are so kindly when the delays are long and unavoidable. I hope your patience can hold out a little longer. Since you returned the proofs to me I do not believe I have had half a dozen days for my own work....

Although I am on part-time pay, classes have been doubled over last semester and my work with the publications is heavier....I hope it can be published the latter part of September, but should not fix a date, having fixed so many dates. But you may be sure it will be out this fall. In spite of the fact that I am on leave without pay, I've had to spend three weeks on University affairs...If I only had those three weeks I believe I'd just about get done. As it is, I'm not going to finish at least one book, which frustrates me.

Much of what did appear from the Prairie Press during the years 1956-1961 was done on special order. These included an architectural plan for Hofstra College, a publication for the Caxton Club of Chicago, a collection of columns from the Davenport *Times* for distribution by the newspaper at Christmas. This was not the Prairie Press of earlier years, but Carroll Coleman worked hard at keeping it alive. And when the frustrations in relation to his work at the University of Iowa finally led him to resign—effective August 1, 1961—it was to the Prairie Press that he returned.

A BLOW FOR FREEDOM

When Carroll Coleman decided to exchange a tenured full professorship at the University of Iowa for the freedom that would allow him to devote full time to the Prairie Press, he said he hoped to live another twenty years in which he could publish a few books of which he might be proud, spend some

time traveling, and just enjoy life. He spoke and wrote often of the exhilarating sense of freedom that had resulted in the months immediately following the August, 1961 change of status. In November, he wrote to Merald Wrolstad, his former student:

The freedom is wonderful, as I knew it would be....It took me a little time to get down to work (in fact I'm not too far down yet), but I figured after all the years I ought to play a while. We bought a new car in July and have put more than 10,000 miles on it since that time. But the work is rolling in now and I'll have to hole up for the winter and get some of it done. I had thought I might send out some advertising to let people know I'm available for designing a few books, but it is a good thing I did not, for I already have enough on hand to keep me at it for the next eight months or so. And I want time to publish some books of my own. That was the idea, so I'll have to shut them off.

...I feel better than I have felt for years and the days are all far too short.

The 10,000 miles that Carroll and Gennie Coleman put on their new Oldsmobile were mostly accumulated in October, 1961, on a trip to New York City, to New England, and to points in the South. A few days were spent visiting book publishers and designers in New York, though the Coleman's stayed a shorter time than they had intended because he could stand being in the city only for brief periods.

A visit was also included to the home of Joseph Ishill, operator of the Oriole Press, whom Coleman described as "a Rumanian, a good scholar printer...familiar with four languages...and he reads, writes, prints and publishes and enjoys every minute of it. He has a fine though expensive library, and is living the best life a man can live on this planet, in my estimation."

Here Coleman was clearly describing the life he hoped to enjoy in whatever years remained. And surely all signs pointed that way for the Prairie Press and the man who now proposed to devote all his time to it and other aspects of the world of books in which he was happiest.

Indeed the next ten years were to be a kind of golden era for Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press. Beginning in 1962 (after he had got himself "back down to work") Coleman turned out a steady flow of handsome editions of quality manuscripts. The era began with a burst of eight books published in 1962, including several of which Coleman could be particularly proud.

One of these was *The Norfolk Poems* of Hayden Carruth, a volume of the works of the young American poet who had been editor of *Poetry* magazine—a protege of James Laughlin of New Directions, where he was then

employed. Coleman and Carruth carried on an extended correspondence over the next few years in which they exchanged views on a variety of subjects. Many of Coleman's letters were given over largely to attempts at encouraging a young man who had become profoundly disillusioned by the failure of his works—both poetry and fiction—to find public acceptance. Again and again, Coleman sought to persuade Carruth that he must continue to write, that his fine literary talent must be cultivated and published. The future appeared bleak for Carruth, who had been hospitalized for both depression and alcoholism. He had turned to the Prairie Press for publication on Laughlin's advice, after disillusioning experiences with commercial publishers. He did find satisfaction in the beautiful books in which his poems were now published, and in their publisher's personal support and encouragement.

THE NORFOLK POEMS OF HAYDEN CARRUTH

[1 JUNE TO 1 SEPTEMBER 1961]

*This time was a lovingkindness, J and Ann,
A summer, unrepayable. All a man
May keep are the leaves flung off as our green wave ran.
Dry leaves, can they be thanks? Perhaps they can.*

THE PRAIRIE PRESS
IOWA CITY

"I had and have very great admiration for Carroll and his work," Carruth wrote to the author in December, 1992. "The books of mine he published are splendid...In addition to his talents for typography, he was a fine person and an easy one to work with, always prompt in his responses and helpful in his suggestions. When I visited him in Iowa City in 1966 it was a really happy occasion for both of us."

Carruth, who moved about this time to the small Vermont town of Johnsonville, lent support to Coleman's speculations about moving the Prairie Press to New England. Nothing came of these notions, however. (One woman to whom Coleman wrote about the Vermont property she had advertised in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, wondered what he would rename his press if he moved it from Iowa to Vermont.)

A volume of the poems of James Hearst, whose work Carroll Coleman greatly admired, was also published in 1962. It was entitled *Limited View*. The *Five Mark Twain Stories* of Frank Luther Mott, another Iowa author who was a particular favorite of Coleman's—both as writer and human being—also appeared at this time. Its publication at a price of \$3.50 per copy brought forth an eloquent statement of the operating philosophy that had prevailed at the Prairie Press for almost half a century. Ward Schori of the Schori Press in Evanston, Illinois, had written to praise the book. He then added: "I hate to be critical of so beautiful a book, but in my opinion it is woefully underpriced, especially if it is a limited edition and you don't have wide distribution....At a round table discussion I heard publishers say that the cost of production should be 10 percent of the retail price. At that rate, your Mott book should be much, much more." Coleman's response was immediate and extended:

There are a number of factors in the price of this book that do not meet the eye.

One is that I feel I have something of a debt to Mott. Many years ago, when I was at Muscatine, he did a lot of things for me that I appreciated. He sent books my way that I really made money on. He went to bat for me with a well-heeled newspaperman, asking for a \$50,000 endowment for the

Prairie Press. He didn't get it in the end but he really tried, and I appreciated that. Then too, the book was started in 1952, and at that time costs were less, and when he asked me to set a price on it, as he wanted to buy quite a few copies, I feel obliged to stick by that price, not only to him but to everyone.

There's another aspect to low, or fairly low prices. It gets more of my books out, more people see them, they get more reviews, and these things in turn bring more books to print for others on which I make a good profit. Years ago I published a book of poems by Thomas Duncan. He was relatively unknown at the time. I didn't make enough to pay me 40 cents an hour for the time. But that book brought me in at least \$6,000 worth of other work, simply because people had seen the Duncan book....So this is a way of indirectly making money from a losing book.

....So don't worry about my low prices. I'll make out, and it brings me more work than I can handle and more good manuscripts than I can publish. I'm not a greedy man. In the first year away from the University I made our living and a few thousand dollars besides. Of course, we never have been big spenders. As Ned Thompson used to say, "A craftsman's life must include a simple home economy."

Carroll Coleman would become less sanguine in the next few years in his estimate of the financial stability of the Prairie Press, which tended increasingly to operate on the edge of serious difficulties. Many of these problems resulted from Coleman's high ethical standards, his good taste, and his penchant for publishing titles he knew had little chance of yielding a reasonable return.

Coleman received offers during this time to explore the possibilities of joining university press staffs—notably at Illinois and Iowa State. His response to such inquiries was to observe that he had had enough academic politics and red tape, though he did suggest that he understood that Iowa State's President James Hilton had things "a bit more firmly in hand" than they were at Iowa City. For that matter, President Virgil Hancher approached him at least twice after he had left the University to suggest that he return in a position that might

make better use of his interests and abilities than either of his earlier positions had done. Coleman was not tempted.

The health problems of both Carroll and Gennie Coleman had an inevitable influence on the operations of the Prairie Press during this ten-year period that followed his retirement. Both suffered physical debilities that left them—in varying degrees—far from their normal capacities.

Carroll Coleman's problems began early in 1962 with a vitreous detachment in his right eye. He wrote to the poet, Leslie Nelson Jennings: "This is giving me a good deal of trouble with flashing lights and other phenomena. I've had two examinations in the last four days and each puts me out of business for a couple of days. There is a possibility that the condition may result in a detached retina later. Apparently the next three or four weeks may tell something."

The tests went on into April and "stuff like black, heavy yarn" floated in front of his eyes. There was still the possibility of retinal detachment and Coleman worried about "an operation and more lost time."

The retina did not detach, but eye problems continued. Two years later—in May, 1964—he wrote to family members that "my eye continues to bother me," adding that: "My doctor is going to Europe soon, so I hope it holds together until he returns, as I would not feel so good about having some of the men in that department operating on it. I have seen too many on whom they have 'practiced,' as I believe the medical term is." (The comment is typically acerbic since, in fact, the Ophthalmology Department at the University of Iowa College of Medicine has long been internationally recognized for its excellence.)

Meantime, Coleman's doctor told him that he must reduce the use of his eyes by at least a third. This meant giving up either some of the reading he enjoyed so much or cutting back on the type setting and proof reading that were required to operate the Prairie Press. It was not a happy choice and it imposed further restrictions on the amount of work he could accomplish.

A far more serious health problem had begun to develop in the Coleman family at about this time. This was the onset of rheumatoid arthritis that was to reduce Gennie Coleman's mobility and to subject her to almost continuous pain. Canes and crutches helped her to get about for some years. The Colemans were able to enjoy an occasional auto trip, but these eventually became impossible. Of necessity, Carroll Coleman took over more and more of the house and yard work, further limiting his time for the Prairie Press. To friends he wrote admiringly of the fight Gennie waged against the crippling malady through exercise and therapy that he knew were painful.

Eventually, she was almost completely confined to the house at 111 Lusk Avenue. And although her husband was able to get about in Iowa City to look after shopping, appointments with doctors, and other essential activities, the Colemans now lived almost entirely to themselves. Neither complained about this state of affairs, although he did occasionally regret that not many aspects of the good life he had envisioned for them when he retired had continued for very long.

The decade from 1961 to 1971 was, however, a prolific period for the Prairie Press. Beyond that highly productive year of 1962 stretched a succession of almost equally noteworthy publishing accomplishments. These included many critical and artistic successes, though only a few were financially profitable.

Among the most notable was *Gauchos of the Pampas and Their Horses*, printed for Westholm Publications of Hanover, New Hampshire, which was operated by Herbert Faulkner West of the Dartmouth College faculty, with whom Coleman had struck up a close friendship and working relationship. Its authors were W.H. Hudson and R.B. Cunninghame-Graham. The book would be memorable for its foreword alone—written by J. Frank Dobie, that warm, wondrous Texan, whose identification with the subject matter (even though in not quite his own locale) shines through the foreword's pages. This was a beautiful volume and a memorable one in the best traditions of The Prairie Press.

Other titles that appeared under the Coleman imprint during this period included two more volumes of Hayden Carruth's poems (*North Winter* in 1964 and *The Clay Hill Anthology*, which Carruth has lately described as "one of the best-looking books I've ever seen by anybody," in 1970); another by James Hearst (*A Single Focus*, 1967). There were other volumes of poetry—by Philip Conrad, Myron Broomall, Leslie Nelson Jennings, Ethan Ayer and, under his own name this time, James Norman Hall. And there was Wendell Berry's *Findings*, one of the best and most popular of all the volumes from the Prairie Press.

The author whose work particularly dominated this period of the sixties was, however, August Derleth, whose relationship with Carroll Coleman has already been mentioned. The two men exchanged personal visits and carried on an extended correspondence, though few of their letters survive. (In one of these, Derleth warns Coleman in 1961 that his new-found "freedom" may prove to be illusory, "since few men are able to support themselves by doing what they want.") After both had suffered heart attacks in 1971, Coleman returned most of Derleth's letters to him because, he said, he did not want to expose his friend to embarrassment should others read them later.

The Derleth titles from the Prairie Press during this period total six, including some of the handsomest volumes Coleman published. Three are illustrated by wood engravings from the Wisconsin artist, Frank Utapetl, with whom Derleth frequently collaborated. Coleman had some reservations about using any illustrations in his books, having once told Robert Frost that they too often got in the way of the images that come into the reader's mind—or should do. He did agree that the works of artists like Utapetl and J.J. Lankes could add a useful dimension to a well-designed and well-printed book. The Derleth books are undoubtedly enhanced by these wood engravings.

Carroll Coleman was wary of using color and drama in the art of typography, but he was not afraid of them when the subject matter seemed to call for this treatment. A good example is Father Edward M. Catich's *Eric Gill, His Social and*

Artistic Roots, published in 1964. This small and very colorful volume, whose author was head of the Art Department at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, is one of the most striking products of the Prairie Press—a book that seizes and holds the reader's attention, without in any way detracting from the sound and thoughtful commentary on Gill and his work.

There are many other examples of the artistry that characterized the output of the Prairie Press during this decade. One other that deserves mention is entitled simply *K*. It is Carroll Coleman's contribution to the *Knopf Keepsake*, issued in 1965 to celebrate fifty years of publishing by Alfred Knopf—a particular favorite of Coleman's among book publishers. This four-page leaflet, only 4x7 inches in size, is representative of the many small-scale works from the Prairie Press illustrating how effectively typographic skills may be used in miniature forms.

There is frequent reference in Coleman's correspondence during this period to the need to devote considerable portions of his time to printing operations that would help sustain even the "modest home economy" of an artisan. He was still in the commercial printing business as a necessary supplement to his book publishing operations.

The Prairie Press maintained exceptional artistic standards even in this aspect of its activity. This was in part due to the fact that Coleman confined these undertakings to customers who shared his concerns for taste and artistry. Thus the series of yearbooks for the Rowfant Club of Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1960s represented high quality bookmaking. These were limited editions—about 200 copies—for members of this organization of bibliophiles of many years' standing. The Rowfant Club connection was established by Dr. Merald Wrolstad, who had been a student of Carroll Coleman while studying for a doctorate in Mass Communications at the University of Iowa. Wrolstad, a member of the staff of the Cleveland Museum of Art, was a member of Rowfant and it was his enthusiasm for Prairie Press books that led to the club's decision to engage Coleman to print its yearbook. It was a remunerative under-

taking and produced several fine examples of the bookmaking art. It was not, however, without headaches. The yearbooks were mailed individually to club members and in a few instances they reached their destinations in less than perfect condition, despite careful wrapping on which the Prairie Press prided itself. In one such instance, Coleman deplored the fact that all parcel post packages must survive an 18-foot drop to a cement floor in Chicago and suggested that the damaged book was a casualty of this treatment. Mail service was a continuing target for Coleman's critical darts.

Requests to publish books under the Prairie Press imprint with all costs paid by the author were frequent. Coleman insisted in such cases on retaining his right as editor to accept or reject the manuscript and he turned down more of them than he agreed to publish. He assumed the full cost of publication in most such instances, although he occasionally agreed to let the author pay the cost of marketing. This combination of principle and pragmatism enabled him to publish some manuscripts he might otherwise have had to turn down. He summarized this policy in a letter to Frederick Eckman of Bowling Green, Ohio, dated July 27, 1962:

I would be happy to see a manuscript of your work. I am by no means a "vanity" publisher, but I am not very well heeled and on occasion have accepted a book where the author supported the venture financially. It is really the only way I can keep going. If I published all books on my own entirely I would not be able to remain in business long, for I am sure you know as well as I the increasing difficulty of selling poetry in these days.

But an offer of assistance is never a deciding factor with me on any manuscript. The work is the thing with me and it must meet my standards, which I think are quite high, or I am not interested under any circumstances.

Coleman wrote in December, 1961, to Myron Broomall, one of the poets he published that "I don't expect to make money on such books...but I do like to recover the cost of materials and postage. On the other hand, I don't like the flavor of asking the

author to help out financially on his book." It was a dilemma with which he wrestled throughout his life as a book publisher.

Operational problems as well as financial ones plagued the Prairie Press during this period. Binding the books it produced was a particular source of difficulty. The Boston Book Company of Cambridge, Massachusetts, had long been Carroll Coleman's binder and he had been pleased with the quality of their work. But when the company went out of business soon after Coleman had gone back to spending all his time at bookmaking, the consequences were unpleasant. He wrote to David Ash, a friend who published a weekly newspaper in Toledo, Iowa, that he had "received Mott's *Five Stories* from the bindery and they botched it by trimming it to leave a larger head margin than had been planned, by almost a pica." When he had written to complain about the mistake and its consequences, the response had been to ask "but what can we do about it now?" Carroll Coleman's ensuing comment reflects the pessimism that characterized his thinking about many of the aspects of the world he lived in: "This incompetence in almost all lines of American life from education to industry is what frightens me. Or perhaps I should say the almost fatalistic acceptance of it by almost everyone as something about which we can do nothing frightens me."

Coleman's dissatisfaction with each of several binderies he tried led him eventually to do his own binding. As with everything he did in relation to bookmaking, his bindings were of high quality. Unfortunately, this added more hours to the time it took to produce each book that came from the Prairie Press. Given his meticulous approach to everything he did, the binding operation was a major undertaking.

Space limitations continued to plague the operations of the Prairie Press. Coleman's "pack rat" instincts resulted in his keeping and storing everything that came into his possession. Stocks of type and paper were added, even when they were not really needed and when available space was already occupied. He admitted that these crowded conditions added to production problems of the Prairie Press.

Throughout the early 1960s, the Colemans contemplated moving their home and the Prairie Press away from Iowa City. In addition to exploring properties in New England, they were in touch with realtors in Cedar Rapids and Davenport and considerable numbers of houses in eastern Iowa and western Illinois were explored. One that especially interested them was on a bluff above the Mississippi River near Savanna, Illinois. This was the one-time home of a riverboat captain and Coleman described it in glowing terms to a friend. Each of these possibilities was rejected—for a variety of reasons, though it was obvious that the predominant one was the unattractive prospect of moving the physical equipment of the Prairie Press even a short distance.

Correspondence with a number of people at this time makes it clear that Carroll Coleman had developed some sense of resentment in his feelings toward Iowa City—especially toward some of his associates during his years at the University of Iowa. There are indications, too, that he felt there was little appreciation in Iowa City of his growing international reputation as typographer and book publisher. These undoubtedly contributed to his consideration of the possibility of moving to another location that might be more congenial.

The overriding problems in the Colemans' lives and in the operations of the Prairie Press during these years was, however, their continually declining health.

Gennie Coleman's rheumatoid arthritis grew gradually more debilitating. Medication, special diets, physical therapy all were tried and at times some improvement seemed to take place. But always the ailment reasserted itself.

Carroll Coleman's health problems were more or less continuous throughout the last three decades of his life. Even in the most productive years of the Prairie Press (1961-1971), he was rarely able to accomplish all that he had hoped to do. In addition to eye problems, there were other disabling ailments. Then, too, he had never fully recovered from the neurocirculatory asthenia which had led to surgery on two occasions in the 1930s at the Cleveland Clinic.

The coronary attack that hospitalized Carroll Coleman in June 1971 put an end to his book publishing activities. Coleman spent many weeks in the University of Iowa hospitals following the coronary attack. After a short time at home, he had to be rushed back for an extended hospital stay, during which he underwent a series of tests to check on other symptoms. Finally, his patience exhausted, he demanded that the testing be stopped, to the considerable consternation of some of the attending medical personnel. He lived almost twenty years longer, but his health was never fully restored.

Those twenty years were largely barren for the Prairie Press. An occasional brochure or pamphlet with the Prairie imprint did appear. The striking Christmas greetings which the Colemans sent to their friends continued to brighten the holiday season for fortunate recipients. But Carroll Coleman simply did not have the time or the energy to produce the beautiful books so long associated with the Prairie Press.

There were some satisfactions. Honors were heaped on Coleman by individuals and institutions in recognition of his artistry through almost four decades. The highlight among these was the Grolier Club show from January through April, 1976, though ironically he was unable to go to New York to share in the honor paid him by this pioneer book arts group. "There is no catalogue for the exhibit at the Grolier Club," Coleman wrote to Emerson Wulling in February, 1976. "These shows in recent year have evidently yielded to the press of runaway inflation, as have so many other things. I printed a few small announcements and enclose one, in case I didn't send you one. I have probably mailed out not more than ten or so."

By the 1960s, the University of Iowa Libraries began to pay serious attention to Coleman's work. The building of a complete collection of Prairie Press publications became a priority concern. Shows in the handsome central library building were held on several occasions—most recently in April and May, 1992.

Even now, however, the Prairie Press and Carroll Coleman are little known at home. The Iowa press has continued to ignore the man and his work almost entirely. When he died in June 1989, the *Des Moines Register* did not even provide a news account of his death, much less comment on his importance in the world of arts and letters. The *Iowa City Press-Citizen's* obituary was strewn with errors and the only editorial tribute came a couple of weeks after his death in the weekly column of David Kanellis, who had been a long-time admirer.

Coleman died in a Coralville nursing home, after several weeks' confinement at Mercy Hospital in Iowa City and at home. Graveside services were at Greenwood Cemetery in Muscatine. His widow, Gennie, has continued to live at 111 Lusk Avenue in Iowa City, despite being almost totally immobilized. It had been impossible for many years for her to get up and down the stairs to the basement shop where the Prairie Press was located.

Several months after Carroll Coleman's death, I spent some time in that basement, searching for personal papers that he had stored there. Every inch of floor space was covered except for two narrow intersecting aisles. The papers I sought were in files behind eye-level stacks of accumulated materials.

All of this accumulation was subsequently removed from the basement shop by C.H. Wendel, who bought the mechanical equipment, type cases and paper stocks, which he removed to his own printing shop at Amana, Iowa. He also acquired use of the Prairie Press name and illustrative logo as part of the purchase. Wendel has indicated that he intends to continue its traditions, though there have been no tangible products of his intentions.

It does not seem likely, in any event, that the Prairie Press can be the same without Carroll Coleman. He brought to the enterprise a combination of typographic artistry and literary taste that is rare and unlikely to be duplicated. The reputation of the Prairie Press will live on, however, beyond the man who produced so rich a heritage of fine books in the productive years when the Prairie Press flourished.

ASSESSING A LIFE'S WORK

A number of attempts have been made to explain and interpret Carroll Coleman and the achievements of the Prairie Press. Some are sensitive and eloquent, yet none is quite able to explain the greatness of the man or the remarkable institution he established and nurtured through so many discouragements and tribulations.

There was little to suggest that this man would become one of the great artists of American bookmaking. He was born and grew up in rural, small town Iowa. A diploma from a small town high school comprised his formal education. His appreciation of art and literature—essential elements of his success—had been largely untutored, acquired on his own with his mother's encouragement. He might have been expected to become a skilled printer, perhaps the owner of a commercial printing shop producing a good quality of work.

And yet Carroll Coleman's life took a different turn from what may have seemed likely to come out of that background. It began very early to move in quite a different direction. A high school printing teacher inspired him to expand his horizons. The love of literature—especially of poetry—that his mother had encouraged led him to establish a quarterly poetry journal when he was a very young man. He sought ways of developing his printing skills into the art of typography. And all this came together in the establishment of the Prairie Press during a time when he was recovering from a long bout of illness, during which he had given much thought to what he wanted to do with his life.

The Prairie Press was Carroll Coleman's life for the next thirty-five years. He had, of course, a happy relationship with his wife, Gennie, who had accepted the need for a "simple home economy" and who had given him support and encouragement in the life of an artisan. There had also been a disturbed relationship with a great university which, having pioneered in recognizing the kinship between the arts and

liberal education, was unable to recognize him as the superb artist he was. There had been other relationships, too, but always it was the Prairie Press that was at the center of his life, the Prairie Press that motivated his decisions and his actions.

How and why did Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press achieve world-wide recognition among the admittedly limited group of those who appreciate the related arts of typography and bookmaking? The most perceptive estimate was provided almost fifty years ago by Emerson G. Wulling, now emeritus professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and long operator of the Sumac Press. Wulling wrote about "Prairie Press: First Decade" for *The Collector's Book Packet*, published by the Black Cat Press. After detailing his early acquaintance with Coleman and describing some of the relevant events in that first decade, he continued:

Prairie Press work has a quality which is not to be explained by a simple biographical or bibliographical history or by reference to a regional purpose. Few "kid" printers do more than imitate rather badly the kind of printing they see about them. Certainly the public does not demand or define excellence in printing. Where, then, did Coleman get his competence and incentive? We might say in looking at this case history that civilization has much to offer people: schools, libraries, journals, books, transportation to centers of expert activity, friendly counsellors, records of past achievement, all in ample variety to meet any need. But we cannot escape the observation that advantages have to be seized, that the inner drive has to provide motivation. The word genuine must not be used lightly. But something akin to the originality and force which are essentials of genius must be called on to explain how a few people use what is available to many in a way that the many are not capable of. Coleman had a great love of books, for reading them, because they have something to say. His printing is not precious or blatant; it is for facilitating the exchange of ideas. He believes that the printer is a facilitator, not a performer. Hence he attempts to use materials and techniques to aid communication and not show off virtuosity. This effort shows a good sense that accords with the better kind of genius.... Objectively, certain aspects of the Prairie Press product may be noted....Bulmer is the principal face by choice. Various other faces are used spar-

ingly, but with precise taste. The impression is neither kick nor sock, but even and firm. Illustrations are woodcuts printed from the blocks or zincs in woodcut technique, principally because they accord with type better than other techniques. Margins are generous, but not lavish. They are, of course, optically governed, not geometrically. Color is used sparingly but with calculation. Binding...is not makeshift, the details being precise and appropriate. In short, Prairie Press work has an Attic austerity, tempered with American vigor and workmanlike competence....There are experiments and fertile variations in the work, but always there are purposes and style stamped by the personality of the producer.

Much of what Emerson Welling saw in Coleman's early work as typographer and book publisher is mirrored in some of his own statements at various times concerning the art of typography. The best of typography, he once declared, is "practically invisible," going on to elaborate:

If the reader is conscious of the antics of the typographer, it means his attention is being diverted from the message. This does not mean that typography should be self-effacing. It can and should be spirited, lively and colorful, but it must not indulge in self-conscious and maudlin experiments, calling attention to itself and not to the message it is presenting. At its best, typography supplements and complements the text; it must never detract from it....

The message is the thing and the job of the typographer is to make the presentation as interesting as possible, but with clarity and vigor and simplicity. At first glance this would seem absurdly easy, but actually it is extremely difficult, for true simplicity, the kind that sparkles and stands out because it is so rare, is one of the last things most of us learn.

To appreciate the significance of those three words—clarity, vigor, simplicity—to Carroll Coleman's life work, one need only look at almost any of the books he produced at the Prairie Press. They account for those qualities which won these books so many awards and which continue to make them so widely admired among book collectors all over the world. They are true works of art in the visual and tactile sense.

Other exceptional qualities distinguish Carroll Coleman and the Prairie Press. One is the commitment to publishing works of literary distinction by living authors at prices that put them within reach of limited but often influential audiences. As Floyd Pearce of the Pterodactyl Press has written: "It is very likely that Coleman could have made a good living reprinting the classics in fine editions. But this went against everything the man stood for. His overwhelming interest was in publishing LIVING POETS (two resounding economic strikes against him!) in handsome books that sold for modest prices."

The literary quality of the published works of the Prairie Press is beyond question. Coleman did, however, make an occasional mistake in literary judgment. Or perhaps he was susceptible in a few instances to the sad stories that sometimes accompanied the manuscripts he received. Yet if one reads through even a representative sampling of the works that emerged from the Prairie Press over a period of some thirty-five years, literary quality is one of the hallmarks that makes a profound impression. Indeed one marvels that a private press, located so remotely could have attracted writers like Wendell Berry, Hayden Carruth, August Derleth, Mark Van Doren, and Alfred Kreyborg to its publication lists.

There were, of course, several reasons for this attraction. For poets—especially young poets without an established reputation—it was increasingly difficult to find a publisher among commercial firms. The Prairie Press was a welcome haven.

There were other reasons why so much poetry of such high quality found its way to the Prairie Press. Coleman's correspondence with a number of poets makes it clear that the quality of Prairie Press books they had seen had impressed them so favorably that they hoped their works might be presented with the same taste and artistry. The Colorado poet, Belle Turnbull, wrote to Coleman in 1957: "Just now I have found words to express my feeling about what you do for poets. You are the accurate and sympathetic accompanist to the singing voice."

If a single individual can be cited as having had particular influence on Carroll Coleman, hence the bookmaking and fine printing that he accomplished at the Prairie Press, it would be Daniel Berkeley Updike of the Merrymount Press. Updike's work and the principles that guided him came to Coleman's attention early in his readings at the Newberry Library and the Lakeside Press in Chicago. The principles Updike espoused are set forth in a short essay on "The Principles of Typography," to which the Prairie Press subsequently gave a handsome presentation.

These principles clearly guided Carroll Coleman through the years of operating the Prairie Press. Updike's words seem almost to have been written with Coleman specifically in mind. Almost identical sentiments concerning typography and the obligations of those who became engaged in the art of bookmaking were frequent in Coleman's conversation and correspondence. He had a clear concept of what he wanted to accomplish and it was strongly influenced by Updike's strictures.

Hands-on examination of some of the many volumes that emerged from the crowded printing shops on Mulberry Avenue and Lusk Avenue is essential to a full appreciation of the Prairie Press legacy. They bear the stamp of genius that glowed beneath the surface of this outwardly laconic Iowan who set out as a very young man to practice the art of typography at its very highest level. He achieved that goal many times over in the years when he operated the Prairie Press—in his own words "a confirmed typomaniac" whose mania made all lovers of fine books his eternal debtors.

The Coleman legacy is carried on today—and will be extended indefinitely—by the many young men and women who have come under his influence. Some were associated with him during the years he taught in the typographic laboratory at the University of Iowa, others by exposure to the books that came from the Prairie Press between 1935 and 1971. Carroll Coleman remained in touch with many of them, though unfortunately he kept no record of them and most of his correspondence with

THE PRACTICE OF TYPOGRAPHY



APPARENTLY it was not so much conditions as personality and education that produced the fine books of early days. Typography was good then, and has been so under varying circumstances and at different periods, whenever it was practised patiently by educated men of trained taste who had convictions and the courage of them. When we think of a Jenson or an Aldine book, a Pickering or a Morris edition, a definite typographical vision passes before the eye. All the great printers had a conception of what they *wanted* to do. They did not permit themselves to be overwhelmed by trade conditions, by so-called practical considerations, by 'good business, or the hundred and one excuses which printers make for being too ignorant, too unimaginative, or too cowardly to do what the older men did. Nor were they pulled about by ignorant customers who wanted first this type and then that; and by obliging whom the work would have become merely a series of compromises. If they had allowed what some stand-ardless, uneducated printers today allow, no individuality would have been left in their books to be remembered! . . . The old times were not so very good, nor was human nature then so different, nor is the modern spirit particularly devilish. But it was, and is, hard to hold to a principle. The principles of the men of those times (since they require nothing whatever of us) seem simple and glorious. We do not dare to believe that we, too, can go and do likewise. . . . The practice of typography, if it be followed faithfully, is hard work—full of detail, full of petty restrictions, full of drudgery, and not greatly rewarded as men now count rewards. There are times when we need to bring to it all the history and art and feeling that we can to make it bearable. But in the light of history, and of art, and of knowledge and of man's achievement, it is as interesting a work as exists—a broad and humanizing employment which can indeed be followed merely as a trade, but which if perfected into an art, or even broadened into a profession, will perpetually open new horizons to our eyes and new opportunities to our hands.

DANIEL BERKELEY UPDIKE

them went the way of his other papers. An occasional letter from one of them continues to arrive at 111 Lusk Avenue five years after his death.

Some are mentioned here and from this sample it is clear that they extended his influence in many directions. There were, naturally, a number who established private presses, publishing books of high quality. Indeed the number of such presses in the United States increased dramatically after 1935 and it is generally conceded that the quality of work from the Prairie Press was a key factor in stimulating this growth.

Others of Coleman's students found their careers in various phases of book publishing—mostly as designers and editors. Some of these became affiliated with academic institutions—with university presses, printing operations, and as teachers.

Carroll Coleman found both pride and pleasure in the continuation of the typographical laboratory at the University of Iowa after he had left it. He was an admirer of the work of both Harry Duncan and Kay Amert, who have extended the tradition of excellence he established there half a century ago. They have continued to provide students with essentially the same pleasure in and respect for the art of typography that were at the base of his own philosophy when he established the laboratory.

The most significant part of the Coleman legacy may well be this inspiration of interest and integrity which he roused in so many young people. Certain limitations of both time and space operate with respect to even the finest examples of the book-making art. There is, on the other hand, no way to limit the multiplying impact of the forces he set in motion when he inspired others to carry on the tradition he established as typographer, bookmaker, and teacher.

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place or another in these pages. A few additional comments are in order.

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A word about Gennie Coleman's contributions. Even though "A Confirmed Typomaniac" is dedicated to her, she deserves a further acknowledgment—that without her unqualified cooperation it could not have been written. My indebtedness to her is inestimable.

Two issues of *Books at Iowa*—those of November 1965 and November 1975—combine to provide a bibliography of the publications of the Prairie Press.

In the first of these (pages 15-33) Lawrence Oakley Cheever offers "The Prairie Press: a Thirty-Year Record." It includes 146 items.

Emerson G. Wulling is the author of "Carroll Coleman on Printing, with a Prairie Press Checklist, 1965-75" on pp. 11-24, 29-33 of the November 1975 *Books at Iowa*. It includes 23 more publications, with an addendum of other miscellaneous items.

The Prairie Press was, of course, almost wholly inactive after 1973. These checklists represent, then, the output of almost four decades. These are the books on which the reputation of the man and his press have been established.