

Paul Corey's Mantz Trilogy

ROBERT A. McCOWN

Over the years novelists have attempted to portray the historical development of the state of Iowa, and the novels of such writers as Ruth Suckow and Phil Stong are regarded as useful documents of social history. In any account of the state, of course, agriculture would play an important role, and farming has not been neglected in works of fiction. Herbert Quick dealt with the pioneer era of Iowa farming in his *Iowa or Prairie Trilogy*.¹ The early twentieth-century farm, which saw the birth of modern mechanized agriculture, has been portrayed by Paul Corey in his "Mantz Trilogy."

A knowledge of the first thirty or so years of Paul Corey's life may be relevant to an understanding of the trilogy.² Corey was born on July 8, 1903, in Shelby County, Iowa. He was the son of Edwin Olney Corey, who farmed 160 acres in western Iowa, and Margaret Morgan (Brown) Corey. The youngest of seven children (five boys and two girls), the child had a famous ancestor in Giles Corey, who was a victim of the Salem witchcraft trials.³ Paul's paternal grandfather was a veteran of the Mexican War who managed not to find any gold in the rush of 1849.

¹ See Allan G. Bogue, "Herbert Quick's Hawkeye Trilogy," *Books at Iowa*, 16 (April 1972), pp. 3-13.

² Biographical sketches of Corey appear in Frank Paluka, *Iowa Authors: A Bio-Bibliography of Sixty Native Writers* (Iowa City, Iowa: Friends of The University of Iowa Libraries, 1967), pp. 178-179; Harry R. Warfel, *American Novelists of Today* (New York: American Book Company, 1951), pp. 101-102; Maxine Block, ed., *Current Biography, Who's News and Why, 1940* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1940), p. 194; Barbara Harte and Carolyn Riley, eds., *Contemporary Authors, A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works*, Vol. 5-8 (1st revision; Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1969), pp. 250-251; and Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: Wilson, 1942), p. 315.

³ At the age of eighty Giles Corey had boards laid across his chest with rocks placed thereon until he was pressed to death. He appears in the second of Longfellow's *New England Tragedies*; in a play by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, *Giles Corey, Yeoman*; and in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*.

When Paul Corey was not yet two years old, his father died and his mother had to struggle to keep the family together. The running of the farm was left to the older brothers.⁴ His education began in a one-room Iowa school house. At the age of eleven he started a novel about Indians but didn't get beyond the first chapter. Later he wrote a 5,000-word short story which he gave to a friend to read, but the friend lost it.

In 1918 Mrs. Corey moved to Atlantic, Iowa, the county seat of Cass County, which was south of their Shelby County "homeplace." In the fall of 1917 Paul had entered high school there. He also worked part-time in a jewelry store and later in a music shop. During the summer months he was employed as a farm hand. The anecdote has been told that he once talked his English teacher into having the class write a novel with each student contributing a chapter. Then he outlined the plot and wrote more than half the chapters at fifty cents each. Regardless of this incident, he graduated in 1921. That fall he left home to attend The University of Iowa. A good many years later a fellow student remembered him:

He belonged to a popular fraternity and was something of a ladies' man. But he was not too well supplied with money, as I recall him, and he had to spend much of his time following such pursuits as repairing phonographs for citizens of Iowa City and working in a library. He was an ardent supporter of Robert M. LaFollette, Progressive candidate for President in the 1924 election, and I believe he organized or headed a student organization for the promotion of that ticket in the state of Iowa.⁵

Besides his employment and other activities, Corey must have found The University of Iowa in the 1920's a rather exciting place from an intellectual and literary point of view.

While a student Corey had courses with Professor Edwin Ford Piper, a poet and collector of western ballads and songs who devoted much of his time to encouraging students to write. Contemporaries of Corey as students at Iowa included George Gallup, pollster; Marquis Childs, columnist; E. Douglas Branch, historian; and Charlton Grant Laird, linguist and novelist. One of the literary highlights of that period in Iowa City was *The Midland, A Magazine of the Middle West* edited by John T. Frederick and Frank Luther Mott. Ruth Lechlitner,

⁴ In the summer of 1909 the oldest girl in the family, Elizabeth, moved to South Dakota, where she staked out a homestead, taught school, operated a ranch, and wrote home a letter every week describing all that happened to her. Corey is presently working on a book about this sister, based on her letters.

⁵ Warren L. Van Dine, "Paul Frederick Corey," one of a series of unpublished papers in "My Memories of Some of the Literati at Iowa in the 1920's," Warren L. Van Dine Papers, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

a young editorial assistant in the office of *The Midland*, was to be the future Mrs. Corey.⁶

He received his bachelor's degree in journalism in 1925. His mother lived to see her youngest child complete college, but she died later that year. The young graduate moved to Chicago, where he first worked in Kroch's bookstore and then spent eight months as a reporter for *The Economist*, a real estate trade paper. Because he hoped to become a serious writer of fiction, Corey decided to move to New York. Economic necessity forced him into a variety of different jobs between 1926 and 1931. He was employed by the Retail Credit Company, the New York Telephone Company, where he worked on the Brooklyn directory, the *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* as a reporter, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and later the *National Encyclopedia* as a picture researcher.

In 1928 Corey married Ruth Lechlitner, and they combined their savings to go to Europe on an extended honeymoon. They spent several pre-Depression months traveling and writing in France, Spain and England. On their return to New York they went back to work, but found that they had little time for serious writing. In 1929 they purchased a few acres of rocky, sloping woodland terrain in Putnam County, New York, in the highlands of the Hudson River north of the town of Cold Spring. Hoping to have more time to write, Paul and Ruth Corey decided to move permanently to the "farm" in 1931. By raising vegetables and fruit and establishing a chicken and egg business, Paul tried to earn a living. At one point when their financial situation looked desperate, an acquaintance agreed to pay three hundred dollars in advance for eggs which were to be delivered as needed. Without any knowledge of carpentry or stonemasonry Corey built a small cottage on the farm. Nine years later this same cottage was sold at a profit. In 1937 the couple started to build a gabled fieldstone house called "Treadmill Terrace." They moved into the new house in

⁶ Ruth Lechlitner (A.B., University of Michigan, 1923) came to Iowa City to work on *The Midland* and take graduate studies, receiving her M.A. in 1926. Later in New York City she worked for several publishing companies, including the H. W. Wilson Company; for twenty-five years she reviewed poetry for the New York Herald Tribune Books. Her poems have been published in *The Midland*, *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Saturday Review*, *Discourse*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Carleton Miscellany*, *Literary Review*, *Southwest Review* and in other periodicals and university quarterlies. Three books of poems are: *Tomorrow's Phoenix* (New York: the Alcestis Press, 1937), *Only the Years* (Prairie City, Ill.: The Press of James A. Decker, 1944), *The Shadow on the Hour* (Iowa City: The Prairie Press, 1956). A fourth collection, *A Changing Season* (Boston: Branden Press, Inc.) will appear in 1973. She has also written two plays in verse produced on radio.

1939, and in 1941 their daughter Anne was born. Meanwhile Paul began to publish short stories in *The New Caravan*, *Story*, *Blast*, *Frontier and Midland*, *Windsor Quarterly*, *The Magazine*, *Hinterland*, and *Scribner's*.

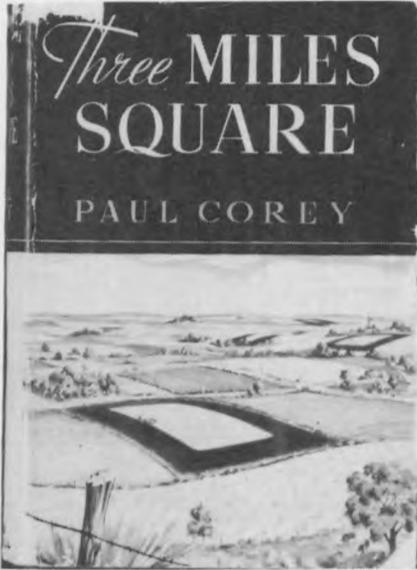
In the early 1930's Corey began work on a middle-western trilogy which would cover the period from 1910 to 1930. However, finding a publisher for these novels during the Depression was not an easy task. Eventually the Bobbs-Merrill Company of Indianapolis, the publisher of Herbert Quick's Iowa novels, agreed to publish Corey's works. The first volume, *Three Miles Square*, appeared in 1939 and was followed in rapid succession by *The Road Returns* (1940) and *County Seat* (1941).

Three Miles Square, the first volume of the Mantz trilogy, begins with the death and burial of Iowa farmer Chris Mantz in 1910. The widow, Bessie, is left with four children, Andrew, Verney, Wolmar, and the baby, Otto. Even though there is a mortgage on the farm, the widow decides to stay and to have fourteen-year-old Andrew, the oldest son, run it until he is twenty-one. Then he will go to school and study architecture and by that time the next son, Wolmar, will be old enough to take over. Andrew operates the farm and makes improvements on it. The widow refuses a chance to remarry, but her daughter, Verney, elopes with Clem Joergensen, a member of a dredge crew working on the Mantz land. Mrs. Mantz "had hoped that her daughter would go on and get an education; do the things she had wanted to do when she was a girl."⁷ At the end of the novel, Andrew breaks off his engagement to one of the neighboring farm girls and goes off to Des Moines to study architecture. Chris Mantz had wanted to be an architect, but later "superimposed that ambition upon his first born!"⁸

The second novel, *The Road Returns*, covers the years 1917-1923, a period of prosperity and speculation followed by ruinous decline for Iowa farmers. Wolmar Mantz runs the farm rather badly. Andrew, attending college in the capital city, is drafted at the outset of World War I and spends about two years in the army. After his discharge, Andrew loses interest in going back to school and becomes a carpenter in Des Moines. Because Wolmar doesn't like the farm, the widow sells out to the old family enemy, Sorrel Jensen, and moves to the town of Elm (Atlantic). Here Otto starts to high school and gets a job repairing clocks and phonographs, and Wolmar goes to work in a garage. Andrew gets married, loses his job, and returns to Elm looking

⁷ Paul Corey, *Three Miles Square* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939), p. 437.

⁸ Corey, *Three Miles Square*, p. 25.



Two editions of *Three Miles Square*, the first volume in Paul Corey's Mantz trilogy. Upper left: the American first edition, published by The Bobbs-Merrill Company in 1939. Lower right: a Danish translation published in Copenhagen in 1948. From the Iowa Authors Collection.

for work. His mother asks him why he didn't go back to school after the army. "Too hard. It wasn't lack of money. I couldn't buckle down after being in the army so long."⁹ Andrew finds a job, loses it, and then decides to raise chickens and vegetables on a three-acre lot on the outskirts of town. Wolmar obtains an even better position as a mechanic, marries, and then borrows money from his mother to buy a small house and some land on which to build a garage of his own.

The post-war recession of the early 1920's strikes rural Iowa, and the Elm Savings Bank fails in the fall of 1922, and many lose their savings. Jensen, unable to meet the payments on the farm he purchased from the Mantz family, tells the widow to take it back. "The road returns" for Andrew as he goes back to run the homeplace while Otto sets off for The University of Iowa.

County Seat, the final volume of the trilogy covering the 1920's, finds Andrew dissatisfied on the farm, Wolmar successfully operating a garage, Verney and her husband living with Mrs. Mantz, and Otto at the University. "Otto realized that he was going to college because it was a drive of his family that some one of them must get a thorough education."¹⁰ Andrew joins an older man in Elm as a partner in a contracting firm to build houses, and Mrs. Mantz rents the farm. Otto has a sordid affair with an Elm girl, graduates from Iowa, and gets a second-rate job in Chicago with the Chicago Telephone Company. Things go from bad to worse for Andrew as his partner in the contracting firm embezzles the firm's assets by playing the grain market. The partner dies and the firm is declared bankrupt. With the coming of the Depression, Otto loses his job and comes back to Elm. His return is a terrible blow to Mrs. Mantz because she believes that with his education Otto can find a "white collar" job if he wants to work hard. When Otto asks his mother to rent the farm to him, she feels that her life has been wasted. Otto tells his mother: "I believe the greatest problem in the country today is farming—it's a problem that must be solved. I can play a part in it and that means more to me than all the white collars and money-making baloney you've allowed to influence your entire life."¹¹ Otto, who had felt cheated because he had not had his chance to farm as did his brothers, is happy to be back on the "homeplace."¹²

⁹ Paul Corey, *The Road Returns* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1940), p. 278.

¹⁰ Paul Corey, *County Seat* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941), p. 55.

¹¹ Corey, *County Seat*, p. 376.

¹² For an analysis of the Mantz trilogy by a literary critic, see Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 93-98 and pp. 206-207.

The Mantz trilogy constitutes a social and economic history of rural Iowa from 1910 to 1930, an era when many changes were taking place on Iowa farms. Ed Crosby, a friend of the Mantz family, organizes a neighborhood "meat ring" so that the farm families in "Three Miles Square" would be assured of fresh meat more often. He establishes a cooperative grain company and is involved in the organization of the Farm Bureau in the area. Farmers and their sons become increasingly machine minded. There are new crops such as alfalfa, cattle are tested for tuberculosis, and drainage projects take place.

With the coming of World War I there was an increase in crop prices and land values, and for the first time some farmers began to make a good profit. They started to pay off their debts, buy new machinery, automobiles, and Delco light plants, improve their property, and sometimes buy more land. Unfortunately, some farmers thought the boom in farm prices would continue forever and borrowed money from bankers eager to lend. Speculation in land was widespread. Some farmers sold out and retired to live in county seat towns or in California.

The War years saw rural Iowans buying Liberty bonds, but also engaging in ugly anti-German demonstrations. The editor of the *Atlantic, Iowa*, newspaper later wrote: "There was liberal use of yellow paint on the premises of some citizens, whose patriotism was doubted, many of whom, in our opinion, were innocent of disloyalty."¹³ Like a medieval plague, the Spanish influenza epidemic hit the United States in 1918-19. Corey's treatment of the death of a father and his two sons is a memorable episode from the trilogy.

The deflation of farm prices and the collapse of the land boom after World War I hit many of the farmers very hard.¹⁴ The 1920's may have been good times for some, but not for the farmers who faced a burden of debt. A few farmers even made "hootch" from their corn crop to help pay their obligations. Change continued, however, as radios became more widespread and more people went to the movies. Hard surfacing of roads was one of the big political issues.¹⁵

¹³ Edwin Percy Chase, "Forty Years of Main Street," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 34 (July 1936), p. 256.

¹⁴ Background sources on Iowa agriculture for the period 1910-1930 include Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture: An Historical Survey* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1951), esp. chapters 8-10; and Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), esp. chapters 1, 3, and 4.

¹⁵ For a study of the politics of the 1920's in Iowa, see Don S. Kirschner, *City and Country, Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920's*, Contributions in American History, Number Four (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1970).

The crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression brought hard times as well to the merchants, bankers, and professional men in Elm, who had invested in the stock market.

Corey wrote about the Mantz family with the knowledge and experience of a youth spent in Iowa and with the eyes of an acute observer. The novels are realistic and authentic. He gives accurate descriptions of mechanical objects such as the pile driver of the bridge gang. Even the smallest details are not neglected: sick members of the family are put in the "front room" and oyster suppers are served on special occasions. More important, perhaps, are the rural beliefs and attitudes displayed by the characters in the novels: Anti-intellectualism, fundamentalism, keeping up with the neighbors, and the idea that farmers actually work but urban dwellers, such as bankers, only go to the office. Then, too, in the 1920's some farmers, clerks, merchants and others became members of the Ku Klux Klan and joined in with that organization's hatred of Catholics, Jews, Negroes, and immigrants. The changing scene of the 1920's made some men anxious, uncomfortable, and dissatisfied, and the Klan pointed to scapegoats.¹⁶ All of these attitudes can be found in the Mantz novels.

In the 1940's Corey continued his life as a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. He published articles, stories, juvenile works, and practical how-to-do-it books about home building and furniture design. *Acres of Antaeus*, another major novel describing the battle of small farmers against corporation farms during the depression years, came out in 1946. That same year Corey began to turn over the manuscripts of his books to The University of Iowa Libraries. For the Mantz trilogy, the collection includes notes, early drafts, deleted material, final drafts or printers copies, correspondence with editors and critics, reviews and advertisements. Manuscripts for later works are also in the Library.

In 1947 the Corey family moved to Sonoma, California, to the Valley of the Moon, just across from the Jack London ranch, where Paul Corey again built his own home. About the same time he was cited by The University of Iowa as one of its ninety-nine outstanding living alumni. The 1950's saw a continued output of stories, articles, and books on furniture and homes. Corey later commented on his writing of this period: "I would like to be remembered for my fiction which I feel has been a credit to me. But like a good many others, I could not make a living out of fiction, so I turned to something more lucrative

¹⁶ For the activities of the Klan in Iowa, see the very good analysis in Kay Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa: A Study in Intolerance" (unpublished M.A. thesis, The University of Iowa, 1967).

which happened to be designing furniture that people could build themselves.”¹⁷ In 1968 Corey published his first science-fiction novel, *The Planet of the Blind* (London: Robert Hale, 1968).¹⁸ He continues to live and write in California.

The Mantz trilogy should be read by both social historians and those who enjoy first-rate story telling. The author purposely set out to write from a sociological viewpoint. “What I’m trying to do is an agrarian ‘Middletown’—farms can’t be dealt with the same way the Lynds handled a typical town, that’s the reason for my approach.”¹⁹ In a review of *The Road Returns*, Louis Bromfield, another farm novelist, offered a suggestion which seems to apply to the whole trilogy: “Read it: aside from the pleasure you will have, you will learn much and it will do a great deal toward helping to understand this vast curious country of yours.”²⁰

¹⁷ Paul Corey to Frank Paluka, March 21, 1966, Paul Corey Papers, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

¹⁸ Subsequently this book was published in the United States, *The Planet of the Blind* (New York: Paperback Library, 1969), and then in Germany, *Die Radarwelt; Science-Fiction-Roman*, Bastei-Science-Fiction-Taschenbuch Nr. 6 (West Germany: Bastei Verlag G. H. Lobbe, 1972).

¹⁹ Paul Corey to Marshall A. Best, March 10, 1938, Paul Corey Papers, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

²⁰ Louis Bromfield, “The World of the Small Town,” review of *The Road Returns* by Paul Corey, in the New York Herald Tribune *Books*, November 3, 1940, p. 2.