

Becoming an Author . . . 1930s Style

PHILIP GERBER

As a product of the farming country of Western Iowa during the first quarter of this century, Paul Corey rather naturally selected that time and place as the setting for his first works of fiction. By the very early 1930s, already publishing in periodicals like *The Midland*, Paul had begun writing earnestly on the manuscript which eventually became his first novel, *Three Miles Square*. When his Iowa story "Barn Dance" appeared in 1934 in *Hub*, a fragile and short-lived mimeographed quarterly published in Cedar Rapids, it was accompanied by an autobiographical sketch in which Paul rather grandly announced that he was "working on a novel about a section of the country three miles square and ten years deep."

His method involved writing in discrete units, incidents in the lives of the Chris Mantz family that might be published separately as short stories and afterwards incorporated into a larger pattern. In fact, in the very first draft of his novel each chapter is named. Some of the titles are "Death in the Valley," "Meat Ring," "Auction," "Ice Pond," "A Barn Dance," "A Bridge is Built," "Horses and Mules," "His Punishment," "Duck Flying High," "The Fat Does Not Burn," and "Touch," all or most of them having been used as titles of stories which were published sequentially as Paul wrote them. The autobiographical element was predominant from the beginning. As an example, his story "A Bridge is Built" in the *Windsor Quarterly* for Spring 1934 contains the summary statement, "A widow had a hard row to hoe to keep her family respectable. She had to be a manager," reflecting rather precisely the problems faced

by Margaret Corey when her husband, Edwin, died in 1905, leaving her substantially without funds but with a large young family and a farm to manage. In the same story, Paul experimented with the "Dutchy" accent prevalent among German settlers in Shelby County: "Good nide vor a puggy ride, ja. You shutt porrow ze old voman's puggy and dake ze *fraulein* vor a puggy ride." Happily, the phonetic excesses were toned down by the time his novel was published.

The stories that poured out of Paul's family memories came thick and fast, and publishers were receptive. His farm tales appeared in a variety of magazines, most of them no longer in existence, journals such as: *Hinterland*, *Blast*, *The Magazine*, *The Frontier and Midland*, 1933: *A Year Magazine*, *Signatures*, *Direction*, *Kosmos*, *The Anvil*, *Story*, and *Scribner's*. *The Magazine*, printing Paul's story "A Son of My Bone" in 1935, announced positively that the young author was working on the first book of what eventually would be a trilogy dealing with a typical middlewestern small town.

That first book had already been drafted, in fact, and had been proposed to Simon and Schuster, whose Clifton Fadiman wrote Paul on 13 November 1934 that S&S would like to see the novel when it was completed. Within a week, Paul wrote back to say that the novel was done and already underway in a second draft, and he implored Fadiman to counsel him concerning his career:

I'm in a quandary and badly in need of some sound advice. In 1927 you gave me some sound writing criticism after reading an early attempt at the novel which I submitted to Simon and Schuster. Might I presume to ask your advice now? The novel I'm working on is the beginning of a middle-western trilogy and runs to a hundred and fifty thousand words. Living up here on what doesn't quite amount to a "subsistence homestead," I hesitate to submit it because I feel that no publisher will risk starting a fellow off on as big a venture as this. I feel that perhaps I should shelve the idea and do a sixty or seventy thousand word book and try to get that published first.

I'll give you a rough summary of this trilogy. The first part covers the period 1910 to '17. I've taken a typical section of farm country three miles square; the story centers about one family—the Mantz family—but interwoven with the struggle of this family are

sketches; a la "A Barn Dance," dealing with the other families in the "square," building up the social and economic patter of the work. The second and third books cover the periods 1917 to '23 and 1923 to '30. The second takes the Mantz family through the war boom and the succeeding panic—the scene shifting between the section three miles square and the county seat town. In the third book the family has settled in town,—a typical middle western county seat town. And in the second and third, like the first, I will build up the collective and social pattern by means of short sketches interwoven with the story.

I admit that the idea is ambitious for a beginner; and ambitiously, I like to think of this trilogy as the center panels in a written mural of the collective spirit of America. Eventually, I'd like to carry the idea farther somewhat after the manner of M. Zola's Rougon-Macquart stories. But right now I don't know which way to step. A chapter of the novel appears in the spring issue of the Windsor Quarterly: "A Bridge is Built." I'm attaching a list of the places my short stories have appeared and some of the things said about them. Will appreciate it very much if you can see your way clear to giving me a little directing.

On 24 November Paul promised to have his new version of the novel in Fadiman's hands by 7 January of the coming year. S&S did receive the manuscript, apparently on schedule, because by the first of March 1935 Fadiman reported that an editorial decision might be expected within a week. Paul was keeping in close contact, providing S&S with information about his roots as a writer. The data included his reading "assiduously" in authors such as John Cowper Powys, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and other recent Americans, as well as novels by the French Zola and the Russian Tolstoy. "I do believe their influence has stamped my work with value," he wrote in an unmailed letter to Fadiman, who on 7 March sent the worst news a fledgling novelist can hear: rejection of the manuscript. Readers at S&S had found the book too long, afflicted by pedestrian prose, peopled by characters lacking in humor and imagination, and based upon a less than enthralling plot in which no single character stood out as being central to the story.

Such news might be enough to plunge the ordinary writer into total dejection and set him burning his typewriter on a

fiery pyre built of all his holographs. But Paul Corey persisted, early in 1936 sending *Three Miles Square* on to McGraw-Hill, where it was summarily rejected because its story line lacked "dramatic high-lights." Undaunted, Paul in November approached W.W. Norton, but with the same pessimistic result. On 15 February 1937, Paul tried Thomas Y. Crowell: no luck there. Six weeks later, *Three Miles Square* went to William Morrow & Co., along with a letter to editor Frances Phillips in which Paul portrayed himself as "the James T. Farrell of farm fiction," young Farrell just then basking in the national lime-light after a great success with *Studs Lonigan*, the first of his many chronicles of Chicago's Irish-Catholics. Morrow kept the manuscript for seven weeks, then rejected it, finding that its people did not live as intensely as they perhaps should.

Seemingly determined in masochism, Paul in May 1937 tried the important house of Harcourt, Brace & Co., publishers of the best-selling midwesterner, Sinclair Lewis. Rejection. At the end of July, despite reviewer-critic Granville Hicks's enthusiasm for Paul as a writer, Macmillan declined the opportunity to publish. On 24 July, at the suggestion of Benjamin Appel, E.P. Dutton asked to see *Three Miles Square*, which by now Paul was energetically revising in hopes of overcoming its perceived flaws. But this auspicious beginning led only to another letdown. Another year drew to an end with the manuscript positioned at Scribner's, where Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe were important writers. Marian Ives of Scribner's wrote to tell Paul that, having read through the first and final sections, her feeling was that the lows in his story were not low enough, the highs not sufficiently high. Far from losing his sustaining sense of humor altogether, which might have been more than understandable under the circumstances, Paul replied the very next day (2 December), saying that "If time enough goes by, [*Three Miles Square* will] become a real historical novel"!

In rapid succession, other disappointments came in: 11 January 1938. After considering the full manuscript, Scribner's turned it down.

By March 1938, The Viking Press, publishers of the rapidly-rising John Steinbeck, had kept Corey's book long enough to stir the embers of hope, and he wrote to Marshall Best at that firm with the thought of overcoming any doubts as to his marketability:

Thanks for your letter informing me of the status of my manuscript with Viking.

Of course the author's opinion of his own manuscript and its commercial possibilities has little weight with a publisher, but I believe "Three Miles Square" will pay for itself in the long run. Supposing it doesn't pay for itself immediately. I believe that if I'm given an opportunity, and with it as a good sound foundation, I can write stuff that will be commercially successful and will eventually pull "Three Miles Square" into a paying-its-way class. It seems to me that my novel can't be considered solely as fiction — it's social history. If it is published, no future historian of the middle west of this period can't adequately deal with his subject without considering carefully "Three Miles Square." Don't you think so? 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. Don't you feel that upon this basis of considering the book, sales to libraries alone would take up considerable of its cost of production.

I'm dumb about publishing, but I would like to convince you that I've the stuff in me for a successful investment.

On 18 March, news of the Viking rejection was delivered.

3 June 1938. Having considered the revised version of the novel, sent at the suggestion of Paul's friend Granville Hicks, Harcourt, Brace issued a second and final NO.

At the end of July 1938, Paul having gone with the McKeogh and Boyd literary agency, Ruth Boyd suggested a myriad of changes in the manuscript and sent it back to Putnam's for another try. Having just finished a total revision and not finding his alterations effectual, Paul balked at any further changes. Word about his book was getting around New York: early in July Paul had a letter from Donald S. Klopfer of Random House asking to see *Three Miles Square*; and a month later Mavis McIntosh of the McIntosh & Otis agency told Paul that Jerre Mangione had recommended the novel to them as a work they might wish to represent.

Now, after four years in which soaring hopes had alternated with plunging disappointments, events began to pick up—but nearly too late to kindle much enthusiasm in the beleaguered author. Mangione had also recommended *Three Miles Square* to the Bobbs-Merrill company of Indianapolis, and on 6 August Paul was invited by the Bobbs-Merrill New York representative, Lambert Davis, to bring his novel in for consideration. Mavis McIntosh soon concurred in the decision to do so, and in November, being favorably impressed himself, Davis told Paul that he was sending the novel to company headquarters in Indianapolis where a final verdict would be forthcoming. The two-months' wait from late November until 24 January 1939 must have been agonizing for the author, but the outcome was guaranteed to cause all anguish to pass as if it had been a bad dream, for on that day Mavis McIntosh told Paul Corey that Lambert Davis had offered her a Bobbs-Merrill contract for publication of his *Three Miles Square*.

McIntosh and Otis received an advance of \$100.00 for Paul Corey's first novel. Deducting their 10% commission, they forwarded \$90.00 to Paul, and he, with unimaginable relief and vindication—and also with a bit of his tongue in his cheek, apparently—wrote to tell Lambert Davis, "I am happy to have moved another step in this great modern literary game." Another \$100.00 advance was paid in June, recognizing Paul's delivery of a final manuscript incorporating the few changes requested by the publisher.

Three Miles Square was published on 20 September, with as much advance publicity as a first-time novelist might expect. News stories about Paul were part of the plan to drum up interest in his book and appeared in a variety of versions in newspapers nationwide. This account which popped up in a most unlikely spot, the Charlotte, North Carolina *Observer*, is typical:

Corey Sells Eggs Ahead; Finishes House And Book
Author of "Three Miles Square" Hits Upon Ingenious Idea
That Permits Him to Complete His Home.

Because a customer for his egg business agreed to buy and pay for in advance, a three-year supply of eggs, Paul Corey, author of

"Three Miles Square," was able to complete a house he was building with his own hands near Cold Spring, New York. The customer paid \$300 in advance for three years' egg needs. The money permitted Mr. Corey to finish a small stone cottage secure against winter. Snug in his new house Mr. Corey was then able to finish an ambitious writing project which resulted in the manuscript for "Three Miles Square," a story of farm life in Iowa, where Mr. Corey was born. Louis Mumford has called "Three Miles Square," "one of the best novels of agricultural America which anyone has produced in our generation." It was published September 20.

In 1931 Paul Corey, with his wife, Ruth Lechlitner, poet and critic, bought a rugged, undeveloped farm near Cold Spring, New York. There they established a chicken and egg business and began the construction of a stone cottage. The cottage stands on a hillside with a view of the Hudson and Bear Mountain. All of the work on it was done by Mr. Corey alone, though he had never before any experience in construction. At one time, with winter coming on, he ran short of money needed to complete the house.

Then he developed the ingenious idea of selling his eggs far in advance for cash. So the money to complete the house was raised, which in turn made possible the completion of Mr. Corey's novel of the farming region where he grew up.

In addition to the usual magazine notices, *Three Miles Square* was reviewed in dozens of newspapers, whose regular book columns were the most immediate link with potential purchasers and readers. Sometimes the evaluations were written by local reviewers, but just as often they amounted to little more than regional adaptations of syndicated reviews issued from New York. The praise given by the highly-respected author Lewis Mumford in his jacket blurb was often excerpted locally. The *World Herald* of Omaha, Nebraska, compared Paul Corey to Iowa's better-known author, Ruth Suckow, author of *Iowa Interiors* (1926) and *The Folks* (1934). The *Advocate* of Stamford, Connecticut, noted that "The Mantz family occupies the central position in the novel and each of its members becomes a real person as we read of his or her story in . . . the years between 1910 and 1916." They could not know, of course, how very closely the fictional Mantz family resembled its model, the very real Corey family. Paul had constructed a rather complete

“Census For Three Miles Square” which was removed from the printer’s copy of the novel before publication. In it he had listed the members of the Mantz family as being:

Christopher Albert	Farmer	[age] 40
Elizabeth Bohning [Mantz]	Housewife	35
Andrew Earnest		14
Verney Margaret		12
Charles Wolmar		10
Otto Christopher		2

In Paul’s family, his father, Edwin Olney, had been forty-nine when he died in 1905, his widowed mother forty-two. The eldest son, James Olney, was then nineteen, three years older than the elder daughter, Elizabeth Flourence. Two years younger than “Bess” was Paul’s brother Henry Fuller, and after another two-year period Robert Longfellow had been born. Probably for dramatic purposes, Paul deletes another sister, Ethel Gertrude and another brother, Challenge Richard, thus widening the actual gap between himself and his next-in-line sibling from five to eight years. These are significant changes, yet the family Mantz is quite recognizably the family Corey. “Corey’s writing,” said *The New Republic* for 18 October, “is as forthright and honest as his characters.”

The key review, the most telling of all, and no doubt the most influential, was that which appeared in *The New York Times*, written by Margaret Wallace and entitled “A Very Fine Novel of the Rural Scene”:

We have had in the past few years a number of honest and fairly impressive novels about farm life in the Middle West. This latest entry, Paul Corey’s “Three Miles Square,” stands head and shoulders above any of them. This is not simply because it is bigger—though a good case could be made for the thesis that size itself is a virtue in a novel. It is certainly not bigger physically than Sophus Winther’s Nebraska trilogy, and perhaps only a third again as long as Herbert Krause’s “Wind Without Rain.” It is undeniably more inclusive than these or than any similar story that comes to mind.

One would say from a study of recent novels that there were two ways of looking at life on the farm, and Mr. Corey has adopted them both. The pattern of his story, which is technically interesting in itself, has made this possible. The burden of his theme is

concerned with the Mantz family and their hard and ambitious struggle to get ahead. Chris Mantz died suddenly in 1910, leaving Bessie with a heavily mortgaged farm and four small children. She could have sold the farm and moved into the village. Her neighbor, Jensen, who was anxious to get his hands on the Mantz land, strongly advised it. She might have married again. This seemed to every one a reasonable course and Billy Hildebrande, Ed Wheeler's landless brother-in-law offered himself as a logical candidate.

Young Andrew Mantz, who considered at 14 that he was fit for a man's job, stoutly opposed both expedients. His father had cherished great plans for the farm and for giving his children a good education, and Andrew insisted that he could carry them out. He could take over the work and study at night. By the time he was 21 the mortgage would be nearly paid off and he could go away to school, leaving Wolmar in charge of the farm. From Bessie's point of view it was less a matter of choosing than of postponing any final choice. Meanwhile Andrew set doggedly to work on the winter wheat he knew his father had intended to plant.

The Mantz family by themselves would have been enough for most novelists. But Paul Corey has here a corner of Iowa three miles square and an acute awareness of the fact that it takes all kinds of farmers to make anything resembling a farm problem. Some of the Mantz neighbors are competent and industrious and some are not. Some are content to worry along with a horse and buggy, others are too optimistically willing in good times to borrow money and buy a car. Some are hard as nails—like Jensen, who will take advantage of a defenseless widow if he can—and these tend to prosper. Others, like Pete Thorne, are kind hearted and somewhat liable to bad luck. Each year, from 1910 to the dawn of 1917, we are given a fresh panel for this picture of the changing life of a farm community. Through the separate stories of these dozen families, through their rivalries and common enterprise and local enthusiasms and scandals, a pattern appears. The rural world is gradually shedding the last remnants of its pioneer individualism and taking on a contemporary color of cooperation and mechanization and confused economic philosophies. Mr. Corey is too good a storyteller to put it in so many words. Wolmar Mantz playing with his toy piledriver and planning to build an automobile is a more expressive symbol.

"Three Miles Square" is consistently a good story first of all. Mr. Corey never loses sight of his human values and he knows the country he is writing about inside out. He would certainly agree that farmers have a hard life, for he is as familiar as the next writer with hailstorms and hog cholera, mortgages and money-lenders.

These are not enough to rank him with the doleful school of farm novelists. Nor is he tempted, on the other hand, to build a rustic idyl of the relative security and self-respect that go with landowning. Both aspects are part of the same picture, and he reminds us how incomplete one is without the other.

Mr. Corey has the novelist's sure instinct for interpreting life solely in terms of the people who are living it. It is mainly because the Mantzes themselves are so real because we take such absorbing interest in their purely private struggles and ambitions, that "Three Miles Square" strikes one as the best farm novel that has come along in many a day.

As 1939 wound down toward the Thanksgiving holiday, with another World War (although no one called it that yet) underway since September and the Great Depression (although few knew it yet) about to end, the Poughkeepsie *Eagle-News* invited fledgling novelist Paul Corey to be its guest editorialist. His contribution appeared on 25 November and expressed his innate sense of individualism through an appeal to the pre-industrial agrarian spirit which he saw as representing the essential strength of the American people. To him that spirit, as Willa Cather and other midwestern writers had also written, seemed vitiated by the great change from farming to factory jobs, from the ingenuity of "make do" improvisation to an enervating reliance upon products of technology. The factory and the farm lay at opposite and inimical poles. A good deal of what lay at the heart of *Three Miles Square* and would motivate the remaining two volumes of the Mantz trilogy—as well as serve as a behavioral guide during the remaining half-century of its author's personal life—was expressed in Paul's editorial:

ANOTHER SPIRIT

A great many people today blame the ills of our times upon the vanishing of the Pioneer Spirit from one-third of the Nation, without asking what gave this spirit and what took it away. It was born of necessity when our forefathers raced to conquer a continent, ripping their standard of living from their environment. Sods were good enough for a hut wall, and dried buffalo dung burned with a clear blue flame. The women dehydrated beans and the milk-full kernels of corn, storing them away for winter; they

harvested buffalo berries and the tart wild plums in the valleys. The men tilled the land with cumbersome tools and when these tools broke down they were repaired with the best available material. They learned to fix things quickly, ingeniously: there was much work to be done and no money for fancy repair jobs—and no place to get such repair jobs done. A dream built from the wealth of the land around them was enough to drive them on. This life conditioned a pattern of behavior—a contriving to “make do,” a way to outwit circumstance and progress. Two decades ago that cunning of fingers was still with us—when a man could tie the old Ford together with baling-wire and make it go.

But in the early twenties young men, sons of pioneers—old foxes of environment—were pulled from school and field and inveigled into the greatest form of regimentation yet devised, the assembly line. They repeated one task hour after hour, day after day; they were well paid for it. But when the assembly line broke down, they were not called upon to contrive some ingenious way of making it go again. They squatted on their hams while the mechanic did the repairing. Had they offered to help, they would have been fired for meddling. Thus were these sons of the pioneers conditioned, and when the economic assembly line of our nation broke down they squatted on their hams waiting for some mechanic to fix it.

What about the daughters of pioneers? They have been given ready-mixed flours, vegetables in tins, and a synthetic fog in packages, which has been sliced and called vitamin full bread. Their electric irons have heat indications for Wool, Silk and Cotton, and it's no longer necessary for the daughter of a pioneer to test the heat, judging it for the cloth to be pressed. None of these things are designed to build self-reliance, a will to “make do” when they are no longer forthcoming.

Our industrial refinements have conditioned the pioneer spirit of our people. They can hardly be blamed for not having this spirit now to use to cope with the ills resulting from the system which produced these same industrial refinements. The dream built from the wealth of the land around them is still present, but they are looking for another spirit to find its realization.

During the long years that *Three Miles Square* trudged the discouraging rounds of the publishing houses, Paul Corey was far from idle as a novelist. He used that time to continue writing his stories and to complete the second and third books of his Mantz trilogy. The second installment, called *The Road Returns*, was published by Bobbs-Merrill on the strength of the

promise shown by *Three Miles Square*. It appeared in October 1940 and was reviewed for *The New York Times* by Edith H. Walton:

Paul Corey's "The Road Returns" . . .

Some seasons ago Paul Corey published a fine, solid novel called "Three Miles Square," which dealt with an Iowa farm family, the Mantzes. "The Road Returns" continues this family's story, but it is a better book, even, than its predecessor and its scope and implications are wider.

Starting with America's entrance into the war, it covers the years of feverish prosperity followed by ruinous decline which were war's particular gift to the Middle West. Like all their friends and neighbors, the Mantzes were crucially affected both by the boom in farm prices and by their ensuing, unforeseen collapse. They shared the bewilderment and tragedy of a whole, far-flung region, and their story, therefore, has more than a personal significance. Though the Mantzes come first, as they should, "The Road Returns" sets them brilliantly against a background of change and ferment in the Midwestern farm country.

By 1917 the Mantzes are well on the way to winning a long struggle which started when Bessie was left a widow with four young children. As Mr. Corey recounted in "Three Miles Square," she was enabled, somehow, to hold on to her farm thanks to the precocious strength and firmness of her eldest son, Andrew. Now—as "The Road Returns" opens—Andrew has at last been set free to pursue his dream of studying architecture and the farm is being run by Bessie's second son, Wolmar. Though the latter's real interest is in mechanics, he has agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to carry on this burden until the youngest brother, Otto, can step into his shoes. In short, Bessie's plans, and her fierce ambitions for her children, seem destined to be slowly realized. For Bessie is determined that they shall better themselves and "be somebody," using the income from the farm to implement their climb.

Then, abruptly, the war which had seemed so remote disrupts all Bessie's plans, for Andrew is called to fight in the first draft. Bitter and heartsick, he is obliged to abandon his studies, and when he returns two years later he lacks the spirit to resume them. The war has broken some essential spring in Andrew. He is neither willing to go back to managing the farm nor to make the difficult effort to continue his schooling.

Andrew's defection, plus the increasing restiveness of Wolmar, who is running things so slackly, in the end convince Bessie that it is futile to retain the farm. Though it wounds her to do so, she sells

out at a price which would at one time have seemed staggering and moves her family to the adjacent town of Elm. Richer than she has ever been, she figures that the income from her mortgage payments will amply suffice to educate Otto, on whom her hopes are now centered. The years that follow are full of struggle and incident. Andrew and Wolmar both marry, and as Andrew sinks in the scale—descending to odd jobs of carpentering and the like—Wolmar by sheer gasping selfishness begins to make his way until he is the owner of a small garage. That he forces his mother to lend him money at the expense of Otto's education bothers the ruthless Wolmar hardly at all. To detail the fortunes of the Mantzes seems to me, however, necessary. The real point is that they all become engulfed in the blackness of depression which descends upon Iowa and the country in 1921. As crop prices and land values plummet downward, as farmers go broke and banks fail, Bessie discovers that her security was illusory. Not only are the mortgage payments discontinued, but soon the farm itself is once more on her hands. The Mantzes are just about back where they started from and Bessie's dreams are still unfulfilled. Real and vivid, however, as the Mantzes are, from the caddish Wolmar to sensitive young Otto, there are other more general pictures which flash before one's eyes, leaving an unforgettable impression. One sees the newly rich farmers, swaggering in fine cloth and silk, and reaching out greedily for more and more land. One sees them later, deflated and disheartened, with all their cars and their gadgets lost to them. As well, there are swift, stinging glimpses of the influenza epidemic, of the suicide of a German who has been hounded quite unfairly, of bank runs and mill failures and mounting poverty and distress. In brief, a people who have deserted their slow, steady ways to pursue a false rainbow find themselves tricked and cheated, disillusioned and bereft. In the end, war and its aftermath returns them whence they came—to hard, plodding labor and the land.

Mr. Corey tells a full, rich story, sweeping in its scope, and leaves the possible implications to the reader. Whatever moral one may draw from it, "The Road Returns" is, first of all, an honest and admirable novel which deals with living people juxtaposed against a community. Not only is it one of the best Midwestern stories which we have had for some time but it re-creates superbly an era of the first importance.

The Mantz trilogy came to a prompt close with *County Seat*, published in 1941. *The New York Times* review by the popular novelist Louis Bromfield rather fittingly summed up not just

County Seat but the entire trilogy as well:

A Small Middle-Western World

Mrs. Christian Mantz is dead. They buried her yesterday and half the town of Elm and part of the county were present at the funeral. There were wreaths and wheels of flowers and tears were shed not only by those who loved her but by those who disliked her or were indifferent to her. They did not come, I think, to sit in the church or stand in the cold by the open grave because they loved her. She was not a lovable person. Even her own children could not have loved her, although sometimes her son Otto, more sensitive and intelligent than the others, must have felt pity for her—at least toward the end of her life after he had escaped her domination.

No, I think her town and county neighbors paid her respect at the end not because they loved her but because somehow, without quite knowing why, they understood that she was a symbol, a very integrated part of the American life of her time. There are fewer of her kind nowadays and perhaps it is a good thing, although there was much in her that was strong and virtuous and admirable. Yet in the end what was good was nullified by the iron quality of her will and the fanatic quality of her determination that her children "should amount to something." That is an expression which is pre-eminently American. It has been at times in American life the slogan of a million dominating mothers.

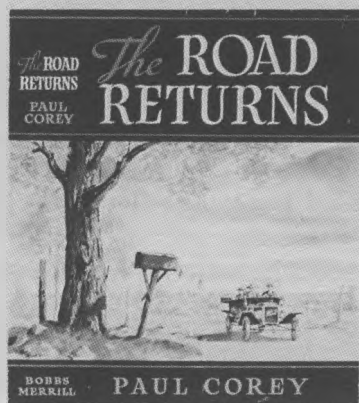
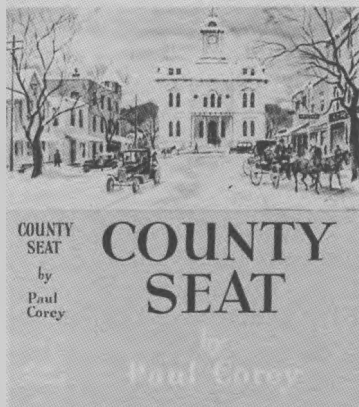
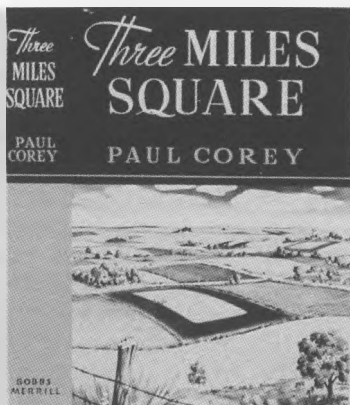
Mrs. Mantz was the grim yet sometimes sympathetic and pitiable heroine of three novels by Paul Corey which together make as true and recognizable a picture of one large phase of American life as has been written. The novels are "Three Miles Square," "The Road Returns," and "County Seat." The last concludes a remarkable and absorbing trilogy devoted to the life of a humble woman who began life as a country school teacher, married a Middle-Western farmer, was widowed and devoted the rest of her life to a fanatic endeavor to mould the lives of her children to her own ends. It was not that she wanted them to be happy or attain a rich fulfillment of their abilities and talents and happiness. Blindly she wanted them to be "something better" than she and her husband had been. Blindly she never saw that their capacities were far below the standard of her ambitions for them. Like so many American mothers, she refused to understand until the end that you cannot either by will or ambition or bullying, make brass into gold. It takes silk to make a silk purse and there wasn't any silk in the Mantz children. They were simply good, undistinguished average people. Mrs. Mantz pushed too hard and she only succeeded in embittering herself and very nearly ruining the lives of her children.

The theme of the book takes on an almost classic quality because of its truth and its prevalence in America. Mr. Corey has treated it simply, as it should be treated, with what by the literary fashions of today might be called an old-fashioned realism. His method is fundamentally right, although there are moments when one wishes that for a time he might have relaxed the conscientious realistic attitude and given us some of that inner fantastic unreasoned and romantic reality which is a part even of the dullest and most respectable citizens. Even the small town business man, going his unvarying monotonous daily round, has moments of unbalance, of poetry and of fantasy. It is the conscientious determination to avoid all evidence of such vagaries which makes the three books seem to belong to the '20s where "photographic realism" was a la mode.

Nevertheless all three books have the peculiar absorbing quality of a familiar photographed scene in which there is an abundance of clearly lighted details in each one of which one finds a nostalgic pleasure. The books too are remarkable in the accuracy of detail in picturing the past thirty or thirty-five years in a small Middle-Western world. Future historians seeking material for theses upon such a subject would find it all, alive and real, in these three novels. Reading them is very nearly the same as living in such a world in time and space.

The three novels are of equally excellent quality. They have the same warp and woof. "County Seat" is a true and absorbing book, and the three together make a notable achievement in American writing.

In writing his Mantz trilogy, Paul Corey always looked back over his Iowa past from the vantage point of the 1930s. Yet that important and disturbing decade did not figure in his fictional story, which ended during the later 1920s, prior to the Wall Street crash. Paul was married to the poet and critic Ruth Lechlitner, who, like him, was a graduate of the University of Iowa, and they were living north of Manhattan in Cold-Spring-on-Hudson, where he was separated by 1500 miles from his boyhood home. In western Iowa, the desperate farm crisis of the thirties was underway simultaneously with the widespread drought that had already contributed the ominous term "dust bowl" to the American vocabulary. In 1935 Paul was drawn back to Iowa, ostensibly to gather material for continuing his trilogy. But he was curious also to see for himself the devasta-



tion that had been wrought in territory that he remembered as verdantly green and Grant-Woodish. In his story "Aunt Birdie's Cookies" (*Hinterland*, October-November 1936) he drew upon his journey, after long absence, to see his aged aunts in Atlantic, Iowa. Under the guise of the fictional John Benton, Paul notes that the green line of maples he had remembered from his youth are gone, killed by the drought; and his aunts are penniless. But their inbred spirit of self-sufficiency, like his own, remains as strong as ever. It is expressed in fiction by his Aunt Birdie Benton:

"The Bentons take care of themselves, Johnny, and don't you forget it! They won't accept charity, they'll work their fingers to the bone first—they'll starve. . . . What's the country comin' to? Folks ain't got no pride no more. I'd be ashamed—ashamed to take charity."

But traveling another two days westward to the even more drought-stricken plains of South Dakota, where his sister Bess had gone to homestead twenty-five years before, Paul found her in 1935 devastated by the Depression

and the dust. He portrays his encounter with "Hilda" in "Aunt Birdie's Cookies," translating literally the name of her new hometown, Fort Pierre, as Fort Stone. Hilda has lost her homestead and her teaching job and is reduced to living with another woman in the meager back rooms of another family's residence. It takes John Benton only a few minutes to size up the situation, and at this moment of revelation he speaks involuntarily with words that simultaneously describe and accuse: "You're on the County." Hilda, even more firmly grounded than he in old-fashioned tenets of self-reliance, admits her shame:

"I stayed off as long as I could. My savings ran out, my certificate had expired and I couldn't get a teaching job. I had to apply or starve. More than once this last year, I've been hungry. I was forced to do it. . . . I want to work! I've offered to do house work. . . but people can't afford to have anyone help them in their homes."

So impressive was the havoc wrought by wind and blowing dust in Iowa and South Dakota that Paul Corey, ever the fictionist, was moved to record his impressions at once in a story and then to insert the story into his manuscript of *Three Miles Square*, inventing for that purpose a similar natural catastrophe which he placed sometime around the year 1912. That story/chapter was given the simplest and most inevitable of titles: "Dust." It has the power and immediacy of recently experienced events:

By the third day the farm country had passed into a perpetual dusk. The sun, at high noon, was a white gold spot passing over a saffron-colored world. Out of the southwest howled the wind, wave after wave, sweeping the ridges and hilltops, scooping down into the valleys, adding new substance to the unnatural twilight.

Jim Bradley told his hired man to quit work in the field. There was no use trying to harrow in the oats because it only stirred up more dust. The grey horses had turned brown. They shook themselves, the harness jangling. The wind whirled away the cloud of silt loosened from their coats and they emerged grey again. The hired man's face was black where the dust had caked to the perspiration. Jim Bradley set him hauling manure.

The farmer, a strapping six-footer, big-boned and with a tough tanned face, walked slowly across the yard to his house. He leaned against the wind stream. Once its force ebbed and he took several quick steps to keep his balance. Then it struck him with new strength and he fought his way forward, leaning again.

The farm buildings seemed submerged in swift currents of brown water. An eddy whipped his crumpled felt hat from his close-cropped iron-grey hair, but he caught it and jammed it back on his head. His eyes were watering and bloodshot from the stinging dust. He coughed and spat a brown clot on the ground. In an instant the spot was covered with coagulating silt. The wind snapped the house yard gate out of his grasp and swung it back, straining the hinges. With an effort he pulled it shut and latched it. Once in the kitchen, he paused like a sleepwalker awakening; then went to the water pail and gulped down a dipper full of water.

His wife, robust and bony like himself, said nothing but looked at him in the shadowy room with a harassed expression. The wind howled about the angles of the house and the fine dust beat against the window panes. He said: "It's blowin' the grain right off the fields."

"It's so dark in here I need a light to work by," she complained. "And it ain't two o'clock yet." Bradley turned to the kitchen window. "If it keeps this up for a couple more days we won't get half a crop of small grain." He had seeded a hundred and fifty acres into wheat, oats and barley. He was depending on his small grain crop because he had to raise two thousand dollars by the middle of September.

An apathetic frown darkened his already dark face. He felt more annoyed at not being able to work in the field than by seeing his fields swept bare. The rolling dust clouds fascinated him but they were merely evidence of an impending tragedy that would not make itself felt for six months. He didn't need the two thousand this very minute. Those promisory notes weren't due for a long time yet. After a while the dust storm would pass, — ten days, a week — then he would watch his sparse remaining grain germinate and the fields come on with half a stand. Ah, by fall, he would be used to the fact that he had lost his grain crop. He had six months to grow hardened to the reality. That was the advantage of farming.

Tragedies came slowly and you had a chance to get used to them. For the swift blows of Fate, — lightning, cyclones, hail — you carried insurance, but these gradually growing destructive forces, dust storms in March, scorching winds in August, floods and

droughts, — well, you got used to them. Perhaps by autumn he could raise the two thousand some other way.

Bradley turned away from the window. He couldn't stay in the house. He couldn't see the dust clouds and his fields being blown away when he was in the house.

"Do you suppose Catherine and Jigger will stop this afternoon?" his wife asked.

"Don't know," he answered and plunged again into the brown sea. Somehow, all thoughts of his daughter and son-in-law and grandson were obscured by clouds of dust. The wind at his back swept him across the yard and into the barn. He passed down the long line of stalls to the slope on the lea side where Lark, the hired man, was loading manure.

"By cripes! Almost blow you away," Lark said. He grinned and his white teeth flashed in his flexible dust mask.

From the high position of the buildings the two men could look about over the half circle of hills and valleys and watch the dust clouds roll up. It seemed as if the rumps of the ridges were sprouting huge brown ostrich plumes. Each plume meant a bushel of wheat loss. Each plume was worth about a dollar and as fast as they grew they were plucked.

Bradley helped with the loading. He had to do something to keep occupied. The wind made him nervous. It banged the doors on the barns and blew about the yard everything that was loose. There was no lull in the rushing wind tide. Sometimes a cluster of bare-branched trees would stand out sharply in the brown landscape, then suddenly disappear, — apparently vanish completely because the landscape remained brown. The white gold spot that was the sun moved slowly down the brown sky.

"The air's so thick with dust," shouted Lark, "that if it'd stand still you could farm it." The cattle bellowed in the lot, huddled on the lea side of the old strawpile, coughing and milling about. The hogs grunted in the hog house. Little dust drifts formed at the corners of the buildings, extending farther and farther into the yard.

Lark said: "If it'd rain now, boss, your oats would be growin' up in the clouds." Bradley grinned. This fellow, Lark, was a joker all right.

A little after three o'clock, Jigger Curtis and wife and child drove into the yard. The young man came down behind the barn and talked to his father-in-law and Lark. Yes, his small grain was being blown to smithereens. The whole neighborhood's small grain crop was being blown to hell. He said: "There's only one place in luck, I know of. That's the Mantzes. They've twelve acres of winter

wheat that's ankle high and the wind can't do much to it. And Andy Mantz got his oats and barley harried in before that last soaker. The stuff's up and got roots." The young man leaned his wiry body against the wheel of the manure spreader and hooked one heel over the hub cap. He hocked and spat.

"That Mantz kid's always in the field early," remarked Bradley. He was thinking that maybe there was something to this winter wheat idea after all. Now if he just had that field of his in winter, instead of spring wheat, half of his crop would be saved. "You gotta have a drill for winter wheat," he said. "Where'd the Mantzes get one?"

"Andy rented it from a guy south of Elm."

There was other news of the neighborhood. Carter had to buy hay for his stock because it was too early to put them out to grass. He hadn't gotten any hauled before the storm started and now the wind blew the stuff off the hayrack as fast as he put in on. His cattle hadn't had anything to eat for several days.

A large white plymouth rock rooster tried to lead his little flock of hens around the corner of the barn. Once in the open, the wind stream caught him, sending him tumbling down the slope, squawking and flopping his wings. The hens scurried back to shelter, cackling with fright. The men laughed.

"That fellar better be careful or he'll be pecking grain up in the sky," yelled Lark.

"Didn't it send him a rollin'," shouted Jigger. Bradley was gradually growing numb to the wind, indifferent to the suspended tragedy which hung over him, yet whirled so furiously past. He was still thinking that if he had sown winter wheat he'd saved half his crop. The thought somehow compensated for the fact that later, —come August, come September, he'd do a dance for Oscar Rhomer, the banker, to get two thousand dollars. His son-in-law was happy-go-lucky. If the wind blew the seed off the fields, there wouldn't be so much to harvest. Not so much work, hey? And you couldn't work in the fields a day like this. The wind'd blow you to smithereens. Almost tipped the car over, drivin' along the road. Jigger Curtis was a renter, paying five dollars an acre. But he didn't worry about whether or not he would be able to pay the balance of his rent come fall. What was the sense of worrying, hey? He and Catherine had been looking at a radio that afternoon in town. Mr. Stark, who owned the music store, said he'd sell it to them on time. They didn't have to pay it all down.

When the daughter told Mrs. Bradley about the radio they were going to buy, the mother only shook her head. That wasn't the way she and Jim Bradley had managed to get on all these years. No

siree! But the baby, her first grandchild, was such a little honey-bunch that she forgot about Jigger and Catherine buying on credit. And Bradley said nothing to Jigger about it. He didn't believe in interfering with the young folks and what they wanted to do. He and his wife stood with their backs to the abrasive wind and watched the young couple drive away in the dust storm. Oh, they'd made sure that baby Jim was well bundled. The loose top of the model "T" tilted ahead of the wind, occasionally the car was obscured, then revealed again, finally it disappeared over the hill on the road home. Darkness came swiftly. The wind did not lessen and in the black night the dust beat and choked and stifled everything exposed to it and the fields were swept cleaner and cleaner.

Bradleys and the whole neighborhood went to sleep to the sound of clacking doors and the hissing of dust against the window panes. They slept later than usual in the morning, not knowing when dawn came. The wind kept up its fury and the farmers plunged into the brown sea as if they had lived forever in its depths.