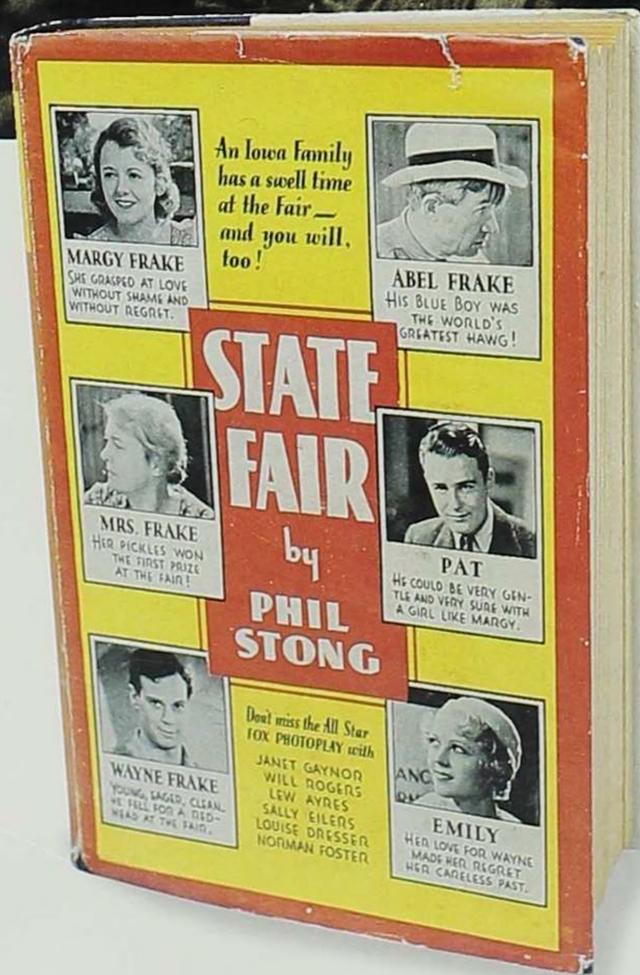




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# “Mr. Stong’s Dreamy Iowa”

by Chris Rasmussen

The spotlight was on Iowa when Phil Stong’s bestselling novel, *State Fair*, was made into a Hollywood movie, first in 1933 and then in 1945. Above: Iowans throng downtown Des Moines for the premiere in August 1945.

**T**he most popular state fair of the early 1930s was not to be found on a fairground, but in bookstores and movie theaters. In 1932, Iowan Phil Stong published his first novel, *State Fair*, which in turn became the basis for the successful Fox studio film of the same name in 1933. Ironically, state fairs, which in recent years had been threatened by the popularity of mass entertainments like motion pictures, now became the backdrop for one.

While farmers and fairs around the country struggled to weather the Great Depression, Stong and the Fox studio scored a hit with their idyllic depiction of farm life, in which hard times were virtually invisible. Stong's novel reassured Americans that the family farm and the farm family would endure forever. At the very depth of the Depression, while another native Iowan who had left the state for bigger and better things was being hounded out of the White House, Phil Stong offered Americans an archetypal, if not necessarily typical, midwestern farm family—cheerful, successful, and utterly content with farm life. Despite a few implacable critics, the popular response was overwhelming. Through the novel and film, "Iowa," like some brand-name product, was being packaged and marketed coast-to-coast to meet Americans' nearly insatiable demand for reassuring images of a bucolic, rural life seemingly impervious to urban problems or economic depression.

After helping to create the vogue for such light-hearted tales of rural America, Phil Stong soon became its captive. Although he aspired to write about other themes and locales, his publishers had quickly branded him a local colorist, whose sole function within the literary business was to produce innocuous stories about the Midwest. Eventually, Stong reconciled himself to this literary division of labor and ultimately published thousands of pages on his native state during his career.

Stong's roots in Iowa ran deep. His maternal grandfather, George C. Duffield, came to Iowa from Ohio as a boy in the 1830s, and eventually became one of the state's most prominent early settlers. He joined the California gold rush, and returned with enough wealth to establish himself as proprietor of Linwood, a sizable farm in Van Buren County. For nearly 20 years, Duffield served as a director of the Iowa State Agricultural Society, which ran the state fair from 1854 to 1900; in his later years, he boasted that he had attended more Iowa state fairs than anyone alive. Although Duffield died in 1908, when his grandson Phil was only nine, he cast an enduring influence over Phil Stong's life. Steeped in his family's past and the state's

past, Stong was often unable to distinguish between them when crafting his novels and chronicles of Iowa.

The Stongs were not farmers. Phil Stong's father, Ben, ran a reasonably prosperous dry goods store in Keosauqua, and sent his son to Drake University in Des Moines to prepare for a career in business or law. The younger Stong, however, encouraged by his professors at Drake, soon devised other plans, which he proclaimed to his father with that mixture of lofty purpose and righteous indignation that only an undergraduate can muster. "I am going to be a writer. . . . To write—that is all [I] hope for, that is all I work for, that is in my mind every minute. It is the salt on my food, and the balm on the petty bruises that the world occasionally gives me. . . . The fire is in my mind, and it will burn a way for me in the world, sometime."

Upon graduating from Drake in 1919, Stong taught high school, pursued a master's degree in English literature at Columbia University, then returned to Des Moines in 1924, where he soon landed a job writing for the *Des Moines Register*. Among the many stories that Stong covered for the newspaper was the state fair, which always received extensive space in the paper.

Dissatisfied with his journalistic career, Stong revived his literary aspirations. In 1925 he returned to New York, where he hoped to work at a newspaper "and hit the typewriter hard in my off time," he told his parents. He landed a job as a wire editor for the Associated Press, vowing "to write my books and get out." In November, he married Virginia Swain, a *Des Moines Register* reporter and aspiring novelist. She joined him in New York, where she wrote serials for newspaper syndication.

Over the next few years Stong held a series of journalistic jobs and pecked out stories and novels in his spare hours. Virginia had occasional successes, and Phil himself had a few nibbles. Despite his growing cynicism about the business of literature, Stong still aspired to be a serious writer, and regarded magazine fic-

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



**Known best for his novel *State Fair*, Phil Stong was one of Iowa's most prolific writers. He was born in Van Buren County, Iowa, and 1999 marks the centennial of his birth.**

tion only as a means to pay the rent. He confessed that most of his and Virginia's short stories were rubbish, but hoped for one big break, which would render him "independent of place and job," so he could devote himself to serious writing. "I hope that in spite of our pot-boilers," he wrote his parents in early 1927, "we may do some decent things before we have to be buried." In 1929 he declared that "I would rather do distinctive stuff and take my chances on starving to death. Not that I haven't written stuff to bring in the cash."

In 1931, Stong joined the advertising agency of Young and Rubicam. He had written twelve novels—all of which had wound up in the wastebasket. Stong's wife suggested that he write something about Iowa's state fair, and the idea appealed to him. A few days after he began, his literary agent, Ann Watkins, called to commiserate over the Depression's effect on publishing and to inquire whether he had written anything lately. According to Watkins, publishers were seeking "a Sinclair Lewis story more humorous and fairer to small town people than *Main Street*." Stong now shared the idea with Watkins: "I sketched my story 'State Fair,' and added that I had just finished 10,000 words of it over the week-end."

Encouraged by Watkins's enthusiastic response to his work-in-progress, Stong cranked out his new novel. He later recalled that he would come home after work, eat dinner, strip down to his shorts (it was summer, and the heat was intolerable), and begin writing. He wrote two thousand words each night while downing two quarts of stiff, Prohibition-era beer. By the middle of August he had finished one draft of *State Fair* and dozens of drafts delivered from Billy's, his neighborhood speakeasy. Thus was Phil Stong's tale of a farm family's week at the Iowa State Fair written in a Manhattan apartment.

The story begins as the Frakes, a farm family in southeastern Iowa, are preparing for their trip to the state fair in Des Moines. Abel is eager to show his Hampshire boar, "Blue Boy," which he fully expects to capture the fair's grand prize sweepstakes. Melissa pins her hopes on her pickles. Their children—Margy, 19, and Wayne, 18—are frustrated with their current romantic interests and are restless for adventure. That night, they all climb into their truck after carefully loading Blue Boy, the jars of pickles, and a week's worth of food.

In a few hours, the pickup rolls through the gates of the state fairgrounds, and the family pitches camp. Throughout the week, Melissa busies herself with cooking and mending, while Abel frets over Blue Boy

and the upcoming competition. On the midway, Wayne encounters an adventurous, pleasure-seeking woman named Emily, and Margy meets cosmopolitan, hedonistic newsman Pat Gilbert. As the week unfolds, both Wayne and Margy fall headlong into romantic affairs. Eventually realizing that she and Pat are incompatible, Margy refuses his proposal of marriage, though not his sexual advances. And Wayne, also the wiser after several evenings with Emily in a downtown hotel room, admits that he could never adapt to life off the farm, nor could she to life on the farm. This irreconcilability of urban and rural life is the crux of the novel.

At the fair's end, the Frakes drive back home. Proud and content, Abel has won the grand prize with Blue Boy, and Melissa has placed first with her pickles. The younger Frakes, however, slump in their seats, exhausted and despondent. Oblivious to their recent romances, Melissa attributes their sullen moods to the end of fair week, though she does remark, "My goodness, you don't seem to me like the same youngsters came up to the Fair with me." Although Abel and Melissa would doubtless be scandalized to learn of their children's sexual affairs during the fair, Wayne's and Margy's sudden coming-of-age only renders them more content with farm life, and each will reunite with a hometown sweetheart.

**A**fter a few revisions and publishers' rejections, the manuscript was accepted for publication by the Century Company of Philadelphia. Stong predicted a modest success for the book: "I don't think it has the stuff for a resounding success, but I think it will sell 10,000 copies, finally, get fairly good reviews and give me a small entrance to the literary field." At the same time, he was hopeful that his agent would be able to sell the novel to a Hollywood studio, because "if she can place it with the movies that means D-O-U-G-H Dough." Stong already had plans for this dough, should he come into it: he intended to purchase his grandfather's old farm, Linwood.

Published in May 1932, the novel rapidly exceeded Stong's expectations, climbing onto best-sellers' lists in New York, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, and other cities. Several major newspapers published the novel as a serial. The book was chosen, along with John Dos Passos's *1919* and Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*, as American entries in a Paris competition. The Literary Guild decided to publish the work as a Guild selection, assuring Stong a much

larger income from the book. As Stong excitedly noted, however, "it means more than that—it means that I can sell everything I write; it means a big sale to non-Guild buyers; it means almost certain movie sale; it means possible dramatization; it means that I'll be taken seriously by critics and readers right from the jump, instead of as fiction hack; and it means that I can kick this #\$\$\$#&~\$\$# [advertising] business in the pants and never do anything or go anywhere I don't want to again."

Elated by the popular response to *State Fair*, Stong now began to look forward to the almost inevitable movie sale, including a job as a screenwriter "at some kind of crazy salary." In early June, he wired home triumphantly, "State Fair sold fox fifteen thousand dollars twelve weeks Hollywood at three hundred dollars first six weeks three hundred fifty after stop option to be called prior to August plans for coming home depend on these arrangements love to all Phil."

At the very depth of the Depression, Phil Stong was suddenly wealthy enough to realize his dream of purchasing his grandfather Duffield's farm. Stong's desire to own the 400-acre Linwood was a mixture of sentiment, calculation, and, as he later told reporters, "faith in Iowa." He was earnestly devoted to his grandfather's memory, and proud to bring Linwood back into the family. Conveniently, of course, many farms, including Linwood, were for sale in 1932; it wasn't necessarily a good time to buy a farm, but it was a good time to buy one cheap. By late June, Stong, en route to Hollywood, had agreed to the terms of the sale and become proprietor of Linwood. The farm, which had fetched upwards of \$110,000 during the 1920s, had become his for only \$9,500. He delegated management of the operation to his father and his brother, Jo, and hired a tenant to farm the place. Stong was now owner and landlord of Linwood, the ancestral farm.

**M**eanwhile, the novel's reviewers were divided into two camps, those who found it a pleasant afternoon's diversion, and those who found its cheerful depiction of rural life disconcertingly divorced from the harsh economic conditions confronting many farmers in 1932.

"It is a crackerjack first novel, filled with folk customs and drolleries, two seductions, and a prize-winning Hampshire hog. A swell time . . . [with] more downright gayety and solid amusement than we have encountered in a novel in years," wrote novelist Laurence Stallings. "As for Abel, the bucolic farmer

who bred and raised Blue Boy, he seems to be just what he and his kind have been insisting for years they are—the backbone of the country."

*Greater Iowa*, published by the Iowa State Fair Board, recognized the novel's "freedom from the pessimistic point of view . . . so prevalent in novels dealing with the midwestern scene." The *Fairfield* [Iowa] *Ledger* ventured that "Stong evidently has the ability and the courage to write a good novel about farm life without trying to make the boisterous laugh at a single-gallus 'hayseed' or to encourage the cynical to use Millet's 'Man with the Hoe' for the frontispiece."

To Stong's annoyance, his old employer, the *Des Moines Register*, gave the book a chilly reception. *Register* reviewer Donald R. Murphy informed readers that "Phil Has Forgotten Some Things About State Fairs." Many of Murphy's complaints were quibbles over factual details in the novel—descriptions of the swine barn, the judging pavilion, and the like. But these errors of fact were trivial compared with the novel's love scenes. Murphy commented: "The State Fair Board may wish to point out to the parents among its patrons that the moral dangers of the fair are much less great than Mr. Stong indicates; and to the young among its patrons, that the amours of which Mr. Stong writes are far from typical. Most casual affairs of the kind are a good deal uglier and have worse results. The atmosphere of Stong's incidents is taken straight from continental fiction. Here in Iowa we take our seductions a good deal more seriously."

Murphy apparently had heard from enough readers who thought that "young people . . . must be protected from such books." M. L. Archer of Fort Dodge, for one, scolded the book in a brief reader's review on the *Register's* book page: "Is Iowa hog-minded? All the world will think so now. Abel stood by until the blue ribbon was pinned. Melissa worked hard at tent house keeping. Where were the two adolescent children? Loose. An American tragedy."

Murphy did acknowledge that Stong had captured the atmosphere of the fair, had crafted the Frakes's moonlit drive to Des Moines with "real poetic feeling as well as humor," and had treated "with respectful admiration, that modern wonder the Iowa state fair." He also applauded Stong's attempt to write "a moderately cheerful book" about midwestern farm life, as opposed to the grim view offered by realist writers.

It was Stong's cheerfulness, however, that landed him in trouble with other reviewers. "Happy nations, we have all heard, have no history," wrote Louis Kronenberger in the *New York Times*. Stong's Iowa was

such a land, one seemingly impervious to political strife and economic downturns. The novel was thus so devoid of realistic characters and significant conflicts that it "can—in a word—teach us nothing significant about life." Even more pointed criticism came from Robert Cantwell, writing in the *New Republic*, who observed dryly that "Mr. Stong's dreamy Iowa would seem an even more appealing land if we did not have so much evidence indicating quite clearly that it does not exist."

Critics of the novel were not mere killjoys. The years following the stock market crash of 1929 were extraordinarily troubled and uncertain times for America, as the 1920s already had been for its farmers. Published in 1932, *State Fair* makes little mention of the Depression, and few references to the ravaged farm economy. Besides one or two remarks about falling prices and banks, only one page hints of troubles ahead, suggesting that Stong had set the novel before the 1929 stock market crash. In a scene near the end of the novel, the Storekeeper comments: "I remember business in 1903 and 1910 and 1913 and 1920. I've let my stock get a way down. We're going to have a depression and a big one before another year's out." He advises Abel: "Don't buy anything till next winter. Business is too good. Whenever everybody spends a lot of money, then pretty soon they've haven't got any money to spend." Yet Stong's belief that farmers were prosperous and content never wavered, and he boasted that *State Fair* was a deliberate attempt to create an upbeat portrayal of midwestern farm life, as a self-styled "one-man revolt" against the dominant, bleak tradition of American rural fiction, stretching from Iowa novelist Hamlin Garland to southern writer Erskine Caldwell.

**N**ow in Hollywood, Stong had loads of exciting news for the folks back home. Will Rogers had prevailed, landing the film's role of Abel Frake, and Janet Gaynor would play Margy. The supporting cast was also first-rate: Lew Ayres was cast as Pat, Sally Eilers as Emily, and Louise Dresser as Melissa. In a final casting decision, director Henry King decided to purchase the fair's champion Hampshire boar for the role of Blue Boy, and also decided to film background shots for the movie at the 1932 Iowa State Fair.

There was less cheerful news as well. Stong soon discovered that he did not care much for screenwriting or movie-making, especially under Henry King, whom he variously described as "an ass," "crazy," and

a "sap." King, apparently, did not think much of Stong, either. Although Stong had been hired by Fox to adapt the novel for screenplay, King eventually replaced him with experienced screenwriters and crafted a good deal of the script himself. In any case, Stong regarded himself as a serious novelist, not a screenwriter, and was anxious to return to New York to begin work on his second book. When Fox offered to retain him at \$500 a week, he declined.

Whatever their disagreements, no director was better suited to capture Stong's mythic farm story on celluloid. King had realized immediately that *State Fair* lent itself perfectly to his cinematic style, and urged Fox to purchase the rights to the story. King, not unlike Iowa painter Grant Wood, knew precisely how to evoke the archetypal farm family and the iconic appeal of the farmstead and fairgrounds. Plot and dialog, as King later recalled, were secondary: "The images came first and the sound supplemented them."

King's film made one major change to Stong's story: according to Hollywood's formula, *State Fair* had to have a happy ending, and so, after parting company at the fair, Margy Frake and Pat Gilbert are reunited in the film's closing scene. This bit of rewriting short-circuited Stong's message about the irreconcilability of rural and urban lives, and was one of the many disputes that soured his relationship with King.

After attending *State Fair*'s premiere in January 1933 at Radio City Music Hall, Stong wrote excitedly to his parents about box office grosses and his prospects for selling subsequent novels to Hollywood, but he neglected to mention whether he had liked the film. By mid-February, he had sold film rights to his second novel, *Stranger's Return*, to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (the film would be directed by King Vidor), and was receiving—and spurning—offers of \$1,000 per week to write screenplays. As bread lines lengthened and mortgages were foreclosed, Stong's stock was soaring: "Isn't the depression awful?" he joked.

Critics received the film *State Fair* somewhat more favorably than the novel, although they voiced similar complaints concerning the plausibility and morality of Wayne's and Margy's liaisons and the irrepressibly happy depiction of farm life. Some reviewers were untroubled by the implicit conservatism of the film's cheerful depiction of farmers. *Variety* declared the film "a winner all down the line," promising that "those who know their rural America will find it ringingly true." The *World-Telegram* admired its "charms and cozy truths," and *The American* called it "a romantic comedy-drama of rural America, rich as the soil itself, and 'homely' as the heart of the hinterlands." When

the film opened in Iowa in February, the *Register* pronounced it "an accurate presentation of its subject, with only a few exaggerations that would be noticed only in Iowa" but did not elaborate on those. Arthur R. Corey, secretary of the Iowa State Fair, commented, "Of course, the producers have taken the liberty reserved by all artists to modify or exaggerate certain scenes for the sake of effect," but he thought the essential story was "very interestingly portrayed."

Other critics, however, charged that both the author and the film studio had willfully overlooked the economic troubles that had befallen the American farmer. Leftist critic Dwight MacDonald managed to dig his fingernails into the armrests of his seat and resist the urge to stalk out of the theater, but afterward found it "hard to write with the proper critical restraint." "At a time when the American farmer is faced with ruin, when the whole Middle West is seething with bitterness and economic discontent, a movie like *State Fair* is an insulting 'let 'em eat cake' gesture," MacDonald fumed. "The vaudeville rusticity of Will Rogers, the 'cute' doll face of Janet Gaynor—thus Hollywood embodies the farmer! There was no excuse for the cheerfully trivial tone of the whole thing, the studied avoidance of anything more serious in the life of the farmer than whether his hog will win the state championship. And the slick, marshmallow sweet Hollywood photography was in itself just cause for a national farmers' strike. What a chance for a realistic documentary of American farm life in these times! And Hollywood gives us a movie about as earthy as the gingham overalls in a musical comedy number."

Critics notwithstanding, the film was tremendously successful at the box office, and impressed enough people within the movie industry to be nominated for the 1932/33 Academy Award for Best Picture. Indeed, *State Fair* and Noel Coward's *Cavalcade* (which in the end captured the Oscar for Best Picture) rescued Fox from the brink of bankruptcy. There were individual triumphs as well: *State Fair* was arguably the pinnacle of Will Rogers's screen career and a last hurrah for Janet Gaynor, whose star began to fade afterward. Even Blue Boy became a star in his own right,



Although Stong was pleased that Will Rogers and Janet Gaynor (above) would star in the 1933 Fox film *State Fair*, critic Dwight MacDonald felt differently. In his mind, Rogers's "vaudeville rusticity" and Gaynor's "doll face" did no justice to farmers in the Thirties, "seething with bitterness and economic discontent."

stealing several scenes with his wry, grunted observations. When the celebrity porker met an untimely death in early 1934, he was accorded an obituary in *Time*: "Died. 'Blue Boy,' prize hog, film actor, star of the Phil Stong-Will Rogers cinema *State Fair* . . . of overeating and overgrooming; in Hollywood."

**B**asking in the success of the novel and film, Stong seemed to have launched a promising literary career. He conceded that *State Fair* was not exactly *The Great Gatsby*, but felt confident that his best work was yet to come. Unfortunately, both the dictates of the publishing business and Stong's own talents confined him to the style and material he had employed in his first novel. Within the publishing trade, Stong had already been typecast as a local colorist. Before *State Fair* had even been published, his editor had urged him to follow it with "another farm novel" and his agent had suggested that he write an entire novel about the Storekeeper, one of the more intriguing characters in *State Fair*.

Although he aspired to write about other themes and locales, Stong was willing to exploit the niche he had carved for himself for all it was worth. His second

novel, *Stranger's Return*, reiterated many of the themes of *State Fair*, and similarly incorporated autobiographical details from Stong's life. A few miles down the road from the Frake farmstead, Grandpa Storr's farm, Storrhaven, has become the scene of family wrangling. His granddaughter, Louise, who is Grandpa's only surviving lineal descendant, has suddenly arrived at Storrhaven, seeking refuge after ending an unhappy marriage to an East Coast newspaperman. Although Louise has never before been to Iowa, she immediately feels at home upon her "return" to the ancestral estate. Meanwhile, Grandpa's conniving stepdaughter Thelma and niece-in-law Beatrice, who currently stand to inherit Storrhaven, fear that he will deed his estate to Louise; they conspire to swindle the farm from the old man before he dies. Ultimately, the wily Grandpa thwarts his scheming would-be heirs, announces that Louise will inherit the farm, and sends Beatrice and Thelma packing. Days later, he dies. Just as Phil Stong had recently gained ownership of his ancestral home, Louise Storr rescues Storrhaven from the clutches of Thelma and Beatrice.

Stong next sought to write a sophisticated novel, one that did not shy away from serious problems. The result, *Village Tale*, published in 1934, offers a relentlessly unflattering portrait of the Frakes's hometown and of small-town life generally. The novel revolves around a feud between Slaughter Somerville, scion of the county's wealthiest family, and Drury Stevensen, descendant of a long line of failed farmers. By the novel's end, Slaughter has savagely beaten Drury, caused his wrongful arrest for murdering Somerville's hired hand, Bolly (who actually committed suicide), and stolen a neighbor woman away from her eminently dislikable husband. Stong, who had been castigated for his sugary depiction of farm life, had now concocted an unpalatably bitter version of rural America. As an attack on the proverbial conformity of small-town life, *Village Tale* hardly suggested an appealing alternative.

When *Village Tale* rolled off the press, Stong

boasted that "I can say, without vanity or exaggeration, [that it] gives me a place among the important American writers of this time." Others disagreed. Louis Kronenberger of the *New York Times Book Review* savaged both the teller and the tale, conceding that Stong had a literary gift, but charging that he misused it in order to please both "discriminating and indiscriminating reader alike." Kronenberger labeled Stong "a realist who, at the decisive moment, runs away from the truth," warning that he "seems to be heading dangerously toward popular success."

With three novels to his credit, Stong was eager to leave rural Iowa behind and to write a story set in an entirely different locale. As he wrote to a friend in 1934, "Confidentially, I'm trying to get away from the pig and pickle and playboy stuff and see what I can do on my merits. In other words, I'm trying to write a book that will be sufficiently sound to make people forget that I wrote 'State Fair.' I'm not ashamed of the little story, but I'd hate to stand on it." Stong

was keenly aware that the vogue for stories set in rural America was already waning. Hollywood had expressed no interest in *Village Tale*, he claimed, because "so many studios tried poor imitations of *State Fair*, for flop after flop."

His attempt to break out of the mold of farm novelist, *Week-End*, takes place in Connecticut, where Stong had recently purchased an estate. Socialite Flora Baitzell has invited a few of her affluent friends to her country home to celebrate her 33rd birthday. As the weekend turns into drunken revelry, a tangle of crisscrossing sexual attractions and jealousies turns increasingly squalid. On Saturday, the four male guests drive to a nearby bootlegger's house to buy some apple jack, but an automobile accident on their return trip severely injures Flora's gigolo, and decapitates her stockbroker. In the aftermath, the stunned survivors contemplate life's brevity and resolve not to postpone happiness a moment further: by *Week-End's* end, each has paired off with a new lover. It was enough to make all but the most jaded reader homesick for the Frakes's Iowa farmstead.

Stong's escape from Iowa as literary material was brief. *Week-End's* reviews were almost unanimously

AUTOGRAPHED COPY FROM SHSI (IOWA CITY); PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHARLES SCOTT

Stong autographed this copy of his novel *Jessamy John*, warning: "Don't read this—it will put you in a frightful minority."



PHOTO BY CHARLES SCOTT; BOOKS FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA (IOWA CITY)

unflattering. Disheartened when "the New York papers all said 'back to the farm,'" Stong abandoned his more ambitious literary aspirations and reconciled himself to a career as a self-supporting but relatively unimportant author, retreating to the themes, characters, and locales developed in his first three novels. He also began to write children's books, because, he said, "one of these kid books is as good as an annuity policy—they keep paying you all your life."

Eventually, he produced eight more novels (all generally uninspired) set in southeast Iowa. In 1936 he published *Career*, the central character of which is another small-town storekeeper. *Time* magazine declared that the novel was final proof, if any were needed, that Stong had traded his serious literary ambitions for sales figures and movie rights. Unfortunately, *Career* did not move rapidly from booksellers' shelves, prompting Stong to contemplate the sagging trajectory of his own career in a letter to his parents: "I suppose I'm a spoiled brat but I hoped that 'Career' would have a big circulation; several reviewers said it was better than 'State Fair' and I know it is a great deal better than 'State Fair' but it simply doesn't seem to make an impression. Of course, 'State Fair' is more of a curse than a blessing by this time. It had some impact as a

**Over three decades, Stong wrote more than 40 books—including eight novels set in southeastern Iowa and several children's books. A chronological list appears below.**

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|--|---|
| <i>Shake 'em Up! A Practical Handbook of Polite Drinking</i> (coauthor, Virginia Elliott) (1930) | <i>Captain Kidd's Cow</i> (1941)  |
| <i>State Fair</i> (1932)   | <i>The Princess</i> (1941)  |
| <i>Stranger's Return</i> (1933)  | <i>One Destiny</i> (1942)   |
| <i>Farm Boy: A Hunt for Indian Treasure</i> (1934)   | <i>Way Down Cellar</i> (1942)   |
| <i>Village Tale</i> (1934)   | <i>Missouri Canary</i> (1943)   |
| <i>Week-End</i> (1935)   | <i>Censored, the Goat</i> (1945)  |
| <i>The Farmer in the Dell</i> (1935)   | <i>Marta of Muscovy; The Fabulous Life of Russia's First Empress</i> (1945)               |
| <i>Honk: The Moose</i> (1936)  | <i>Jessamy John: A Novel of John Law and the Mississippi Bubble</i> (1947)                |
| <i>Career</i> (1936)   | <i>Positive Pete!</i> (1947)  |
| <i>No-Sitch: The Hound</i> (1936)  | <i>The Prince and the Porker</i> (1950)   |
| <i>Buckskin Breeches</i> (1937)  | <i>Hirum, the Hillbilly</i> (1951)  |
| <i>High Water</i> (1937)   | <i>Forty Pounds of Gold</i> (1951)  |
| <i>The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow</i> (1937)   | <i>Return in August</i> (1953)  |
| <i>County Fair</i> (1938)  | <i>Mississippi Pilot; With Mark Twain on the Great River</i> (1954)                       |
| <i>Edgar: The 7:58</i> (1938)  | <i>Blizzard</i> (1955)  |
| <i>Young Settler</i> (1938)  | <i>A Beast Called an Elephant</i> (1955)  |
| <i>Ivanhoe Keeler</i> (1939)   | <i>The Adventure of "Horse" Barnsby</i> (1956)  |
| <i>Horses and Americans</i> (1939)   | <i>Mike; The Story of a Young Circus Acrobat</i> (1957)                                   |
| <i>The Hired Man's Elephant</i> (1939)   | <i>Gold in Them Hills; Being an Irreverent History of the Great 1849 Gold Rush</i> (1957) |
| <i>The Long Lane</i> (1939)  |   |
| <i>Cowhand Goes to Town</i> (1939)   |   |
| <i>If School Keeps</i> (1940)  |   |
| <i>Hawkeyes: A Biography of the State of Iowa</i> (1940)   |   |

## RETURN IN AUGUST

This book is probably not quite as bad as it first seems, let us hope. Let us hope. Obviously —

Phil Stong

AUTOGRAPHED COPIES FROM SHSI (IOWA CITY); PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHARLES SCOTT

Phil Stong  
with apologies.

Stong autographed these copies of *Return in August* (his 1953 sequel to *State Fair*) and *Forty Pounds of Gold* (an Iowa farmer's gold rush adventures). Though its book jacket promises "action, earthy dialogue, and genuine humor," Stong autographed this copy, "With apologies."

good book, but more as a new way of looking at the Middle West. Now I have to live up to both things, when I've already exposed my notion that the people of the Middle West are darned good people."

After *Career's* disappointing reception, Stong began converting virtually every aspect of his family's and Iowa's history into published prose. He first turned his attention to a novel based on his grandfather Duffield's diaries of life in frontier Iowa. *Buckskin Breches*, like each of Stong's previous Iowa novels, scrambled history, autobiography, and fiction. Stong had a tremendous psychological investment in the work, and he fretted that it might exhaust the autobiographical wellspring from which he had drawn his novels. As he confided to his parents, "When I finish this book I will have used up a mighty big piece of my life and heritage."

*Buckskin Breches*, however, did not deplete Stong's reservoir. During much of 1939, Stong was at work on two books he considered "nonfiction," one an autobiography, *If School Keeps*, and the other the curiously titled *Hawkeyes: A Biography of the State of Iowa*, which was suffused with Stong's idiosyncratic sense of humor. His penchant for conflating aspects of his own life and the history of Iowa was never more apparent than in the nearly simultaneous publication of his life story and his history of Iowa.

**A**mid Stong's prolific output of novels and stories, his nostalgic evocations of fairs consistently engaged readers' interest. Trading on the success of his first novel, Stong wrote several magazine articles and other pieces on fairs throughout his career. In 1938, he published *County Fair*, ostensibly a work of nonfiction, lavishly illustrated with photographs by Josephine von Miklos and filled with Stong's glib observations on fairs and fairgoers. And in 1945, the enduring appeal of his story of the Frake family's week at the fair

was confirmed, when Fox released the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *State Fair*, also based on Stong's novel (though to his chagrin, Stong discovered that he would receive no royalties from Fox for this production because, in his own words, "they make their contracts too dern good"). Always a champion of the fair and its traditions, he was enlisted by a fellow Iowan in 1950 to help fight the fair board's decision to abandon horse racing. "Let us also abolish corn, hogs, cakes, pickles and everything else that has had a part in the greatness of Iowa," he responded sarcastically. "Next year I intend to enter some chow mein, borscht and a kangaroo."

In 1952, two decades after he had made his publishing debut with *State Fair*, a novel whose success he could not duplicate and whose themes he could not escape, Phil Stong was typing its sequel, which became the basis for a novel, *Return in August* (published in 1953). Reporter Pat Gilbert has proved unable to confine himself to one place, but has held a series of jobs at newspapers and magazines. Now based in New York, he roams the globe as a feature writer for *Lark*, "the Illustrated Magazine of the American Scene." His latest assignment, one which he accepts with considerable apprehension, is to cover a cattle-rustling trial at a county courthouse in southeastern Iowa. In addition, Gilbert's editor suggests that he take advantage of his trip to the Midwest to write a piece on "The Fair Revisited," since he had covered the Iowa State Fair as a journalist some 20 years earlier.

Meanwhile in Iowa, the lives of the Frakes have changed little during the intervening decades. Blue Boy has long since been ground into "weenie wurst," of course, but Abel and Melissa are still thriving on their farm. Wayne has married Eleanor, his high school sweetheart, and they have settled into an amicable, if unexciting, life together. Margy had been similarly content, if hardly passionate, in her marriage to hometown beau Harry Ware, right up to the day his

tractor overturned, crushing the hapless farmer to death. Truth be told, Margy has not felt true love since that week, now 20 years past, when she toured the state fair with a restless young reporter named Pat Gilbert.

As in most of Stong's fiction, everything turns out neatly. At the close of the story, Pat and Margy are reunited, with no further separations in sight. Two decades later, Stong had rewritten his tale with a happy ending, just as Hollywood had.

In April 1957, Stong suffered a fatal heart attack. Even in his obituaries, Stong's critics would not relent. The *New York Times* credited him with seeking "industriously but vainly" for 25 years to duplicate the success of *State Fair*, but minced no words about the result: "Although he was a popular writer, he disappointed serious-minded admirers and critics. Those who had hoped that he might contribute more profoundly to American literature felt that he had betrayed his talents."

The *Des Moines Tribune* was more charitable. The newspaper declined to pass judgment on Stong's literary talents, noting instead that, despite his long residence in New York and Connecticut, he "never had ceased to belong to Iowa and to be claimed by this state as a favorite native son." Whatever his shortcomings as a writer, Stong was a local boy made good, and so earned the admiration of many Iowans.

*State Fair* enjoyed a life of its own after Stong's death. In 1962, Fox released another version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, starring Pat Boone as Wayne Frake and Ann-Margret as Emily. Studio executives, fearing that Iowa would no longer entice moviegoers, transplanted the Frakes and the fair to Texas. In 1996, the musical was produced on Broadway, where it received generous, if not ecstatic, reviews.

**T**he phenomenal success of the novel *State Fair* in 1932 had led Phil Stong and some literary critics to believe that he was on the cusp of a significant literary career. Unfortunately, he was hemmed in not only by his own limited talents and experiences, but also by the vogue for rural fiction that he had helped to create. Although he wrote with genuine fondness and affection for his native state, he banged out novel after novel about Iowa because neither his abilities nor the dictates of the publishing trade would permit him to do otherwise. Despite his valiant effort to escape, Phil Stong was effectively kept down on the farm.

Nonetheless, Stong's contribution to the Midwest's cultural heritage is mixed. He strove to write tales of rural America that were immediately familiar and appealing to a mass readership. America's rapid urbanization and industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had led many citizens to question the virtues, even the continued existence, of farm life, as many farm families seemed almost eager to forsake the land to enjoy the amenities of city life. To Stong's credit, he depicted farm families that were not ignorant and disgruntled, but intelligent, likable, and reasonably contented with rural life. However, in creating characters and stories that would have broad appeal, he was sometimes inattentive to the specificities of midwestern life—to the everyday language and concerns of farmers during the Depression—to an extent that left his novels curiously devoid of much that was identifiably midwestern. Beginning with *State Fair* in 1932, Stong churned out a prodigious supply of novels, depicting a dreamy vision of midwestern life designed to reassure Americans everywhere that the family farm, long regarded the wellspring of the nation's virtue, had not yet run dry. ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The Philip D. Stong Papers are held in the Archives, Cowles Library, Drake University, Des Moines. Additional Stong correspondence is at Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, University of Iowa, Iowa City. Major secondary sources on Stong and his writing include: Clarence A. Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1972); Emily Stong, "Philip Duffield Stong, (1899-1957): 'Novelist Laureate of Iowa,'" MA thesis, Adelphi University, 1974 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms); Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle-Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965); John T. Frederick, "The Farm in Iowa Fiction," *Palimpsest* 32 (1951), 121-52; and John T. Frederick, "Iowa's Phil Stong," and William J. Petersen, "Phil Stong in Retrospect," *Palimpsest* 38 (1957), 520-30.

Coverage of *State Fair's* publication appeared in the *Des Moines Register*, May 8, 15, 22, 1932; and in *Greater Iowa* (Iowa State Fair Board, Iowa Dept. of Agriculture), 18:2 (June-July 1932). For reviews of Stong's work, see Louis Kronenberger, "The Brighter Side of Farm Life," *New York Times Book Review* (May 8, 1932), 6; and Robert Cantwell, "This Side of Paradise," *New Republic* 71 (July 6, 1932), 215-16. On the movie's premiere, see *Des Moines Register*, February 18 and 19, 1933; *Des Moines Register* and *Des Moines Tribune*, August 29, 1945; and the August 1945 script for radio announcer Ted Malone, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines center). The most thorough analysis of Henry King's film *State Fair* is in Walter Coppedge, *Henry King's America* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 72-91. See also: Henry King, oral history, Directors Guild of America, "State Fair" folder, Film Studies Dept., Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Annotations to this article are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City). The editor thanks Craig Kohl, University of Iowa Photo Service, for his expertise in photographing individual frames from the 1945 Fox Movietone News film (reproduced on pages 146 and 149).