

# THE IOWA CITY WRITERS' CLUBS

by  
Steve Wilbers

**I**n Iowa City on the Fourth of July, 1840 a crowd gathered in City Park to celebrate the completion of Iowa's first Capitol building. The day witnessed many toasts and toasters among whom one--an E. Bliss, Jr.--declaimed: "Iowa City; the splendor of her location, the rapidity of her growth, the enterprise of her citizens is unequalled by any town in the west; one year ago a naked spot of earth, now containing one hundred and twenty-five houses, and six hundred and four inhabitants. May her increase in literature and religion far exceed her increase of population." Iowa City did not remain a capital of government for long, but a century later the determined efforts of men like Norman Forester and Paul Engle helped to make it a recognized capital of a different sort. They established the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the subsequent growth of its reputation indeed made Iowa City known for "literature" far in excess of its population.

But between E. Bliss, Jr.'s hyperbolic toast and the beginning of the Writers' Workshop, Iowa City went through a

literary experience at once typical of America as a whole and of unusual interest in itself. Neither the writers' *clubs* of the '90s and later, or their predecessors in the literary societies of the 1860s, '70s, and '80s were unique to Iowa City. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, at a time when Larzar Ziff has said this country was trying to decide where to place literature in the American scheme of life, such literary organizations were common on college campuses. But perhaps due to a general movement toward a nationalist literature and to the peculiar talents of men like C. F. Ansley, John T. Frederick, and Frank Luther Mott, the clubs in Iowa City, unlike those in many other areas, took root, to flower in the 1920s and '30s as the Regionalism led by the *Midland* magazine. Such a growth makes the tradition of the writers' clubs one of the most exciting and colorful developments in Iowa City's literary history.

The later, more important writers' clubs evolved from the wide-spread literary societies, societies such as the Zetagathian Society, founded in Iowa City in April, 1861. One of the first long-lived





*The meeting-room of the Zetagathian Society.*

organizations of its kind west of the Mississippi, the Zetagathian Society remained active for some 70 years. Within three years, several more sprung up around it--the Erodelpian (October, 1862) and the Hesperian Society (Spring, 1863), for women, and the Irving Institute (February, 1864), for men. These societies came to dominate literary and social life on the Iowa campus.

The societies' stated purpose was to fill a gap in the University's curriculum. According to the University yearbook of 1894 (the *Hawkeye*), the founders knew "an important and necessary element in [the student's] education was lacking--that of literary culture," an element "the University did not furnish and indeed could not, owing to its limited resources." Literary culture, however, meant rhetorical and oratorical skills. Instead of concentrating on the creation of literature, for example, the Zetagathian

staged public debates, organized literary programs, discussed literature at weekly meetings, promoted a lecture bureau, maintained its own library and newspaper, and later--with the Hesperians--sponsored annual entertainments or "exhibitions," as well as annual plays, Memorial Day programs, and special presentations, like "The Old Fashioned Deestric School," a farce performed June 12, 1888 in the Grand Opera House at Clinton and College streets.

At a time when the Classics were central to course work, when the humanities were held in high esteem, when students generally aspired to literary culture as evidence of their "cultivation," it is easy to understand how the societies became so influential. There were no social fraternities, and nearly every student longed for the "society" of the literary organizations. "By the spring of 1869," Theodore Wanerus reports in his *History of the*





The "Coldren" Opera House on the S.E. corner of Clinton and College Streets in Iowa City where the Zetagathian Society staged its farce June 12, 1888 (after a photograph by Dr. Samuel Calvin).

*Zetagathian Society*, "the Zetagathian Society and its contemporary, Irving Institute, occupied positions of so much influence...that the choice of a commencement speaker was left to them."

When the Zetagathian Society first met, Iowa City still had the flavor of a frontier settlement. The Society grew to prominence in a town where Theodore Wanerus reports, "tree stumps and piles of brush obstructed the streets; and pigs and cows ran unmolested about the town." Indians, he says, "decked in gorgeous paint and blankets," were a common sight. The 13 original members held their first meetings in the northwest corner of Central Building (now Old Capitol), where the absence of light fixtures forced "the boys" to take turns bringing in three lamps that "without

chimneys, flickered and sputtered from their little sockets in the moldings around the wall, casting only a feeble glimmer on the proceedings." The only known earlier society was a loosely-structured, short-lived, fun-loving student group. John P. Irish, in the Zetagathian newspaper--*The Vidette*--of November, 1879, said this group "adjourned discussions to burn professors in effigy, carry wagons in pieces to the roof and put them up astride the ridge, and in other ways make life a burden to the Faculty."

By the turn of the century, the four original organizations began to lose their influence on student life. Competition from the newly founded fraternal orders, increased faculty control of student affairs, and a broader curriculum all took their toll, and where the Zetagathian



Society had once attracted as many as 200 visitors to its programs, by 1911 it could muster only its own members after the first week or two of school. Despite their declining popularity, all four societies managed to last through the 1920s, when a brief resurgence of like-minded groups took place with the Hamlin Garland, Whitby, and Athena Societies for women.

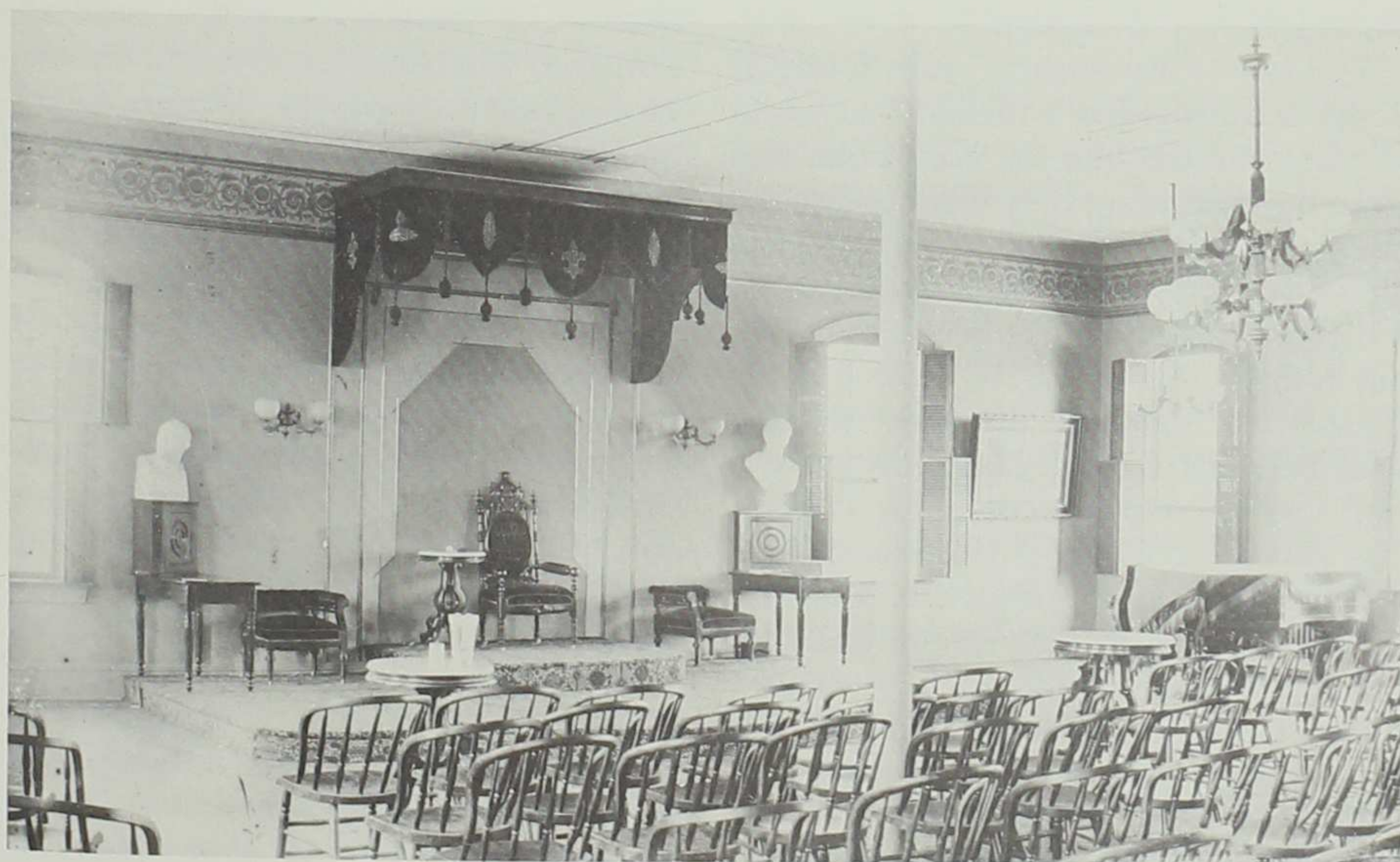
**I**n the early 1890s, when the literary societies still maintained some influence on campus life, a new type of literary association became popular in Iowa City. These were the writers' clubs. As individual organizations they were shorter-lived than the literary societies. The Tabard, founded on "Allhalloween," 1891, lasted for only five years. The Polygon first met in the spring of 1893 and lasted two decades. Ivy Lane, organized

in April 1894, managed to remain active until the early 1920s. But instead of single, long-lasting associations, the writers' clubs appeared in waves of unbroken succession over the next half-century, and by the time each of these three had ceased to function, other clubs just like them had sprung up to take their place.

Socially, they resembled the fraternities then becoming popular. Members of both sexes "rushed" at dinners and parties. The clubs had special pins, emblems, mottoes, colors, and even yells. Ivy Lane's colors were ivy-green and pearl-gray. The Polygon's yell went:

Wa Hoo! Wa Hoo!  
On! On! On!  
We are, We are!  
Poly, Polygon!

Despite the frivolity, the clubs emphasized one serious activity that set them apart from both the fraternities and the



*The meeting-room of the Irving Institute.*



older literary societies. They were tailored for young men and women who wanted to learn--and who wanted to practice--the craft of writing.

In keeping with the spirit of the "Progressive" education that was soon to transform the entire nature of college curricula in this country, the clubs used a practical method to improve their members' practical skills in writing--participants took turns reading original works and responded to those works as a group with suggestions and criticism. There was nothing particularly unique about this approach. Writers have always asked friends and colleagues to read and respond to their material. And similar clubs were appearing at college campuses all over the country. But the notion that writing skills could be developed through actual practice clearly indicates the shift away from the earlier tendency to treat literature as an "ornament."

The Iowa City writers' clubs founded in the '90s provided a format that could be incorporated into the classroom, and from the beginning they were tied to the University's Department of English. The University adopted their method when it offered its first course in creative writing in the spring of 1897--"Verse-Making Class." An honorary member of Polygon, Edward Everett Hale was head of the English department from 1892-95. His successor George Armstrong Wauchope was closely involved with the Tabard. Many student members went on to join the English faculty: George Cram Cook took part in founding the Tabard and later taught the first course offered by the University in poetry-writing; John Gabbert Bowman participated in both the Tabard and Ivy Lane, then went on to teach in the English depart-

ment and to become President of the University from 1911-14; Percival Hunt, active in Polygon as a student, became a central figure among instructors of creative writing while he taught the course in short-story writing between 1903 and 1921.

At the turn of the century a second generation of writers' clubs emerged. It was during this period that the clubs' members began to work toward the creation of a literary culture with roots in its immediate environment. Clarke Fisher Ansley joined the University faculty as head of the English department in 1899. Probably the first man to devote himself to making Iowa City a literary center, Ansley arrived from the University of Nebraska in Omaha, where he had started an advanced writing seminar for students with literary ambitions. Immediately he became involved with the Polygon, but soon he created his own group, called simply the "Writers' Club," and set about his personal struggle for creative writing. In his 19 years at Iowa, he managed to get several additional writing courses added to the curriculum, helped to establish more clubs, and offered invaluable advice and moral encouragement to young writers. Ansley became the guiding force in the creation of *The Midland*, the magazine that put Iowa City on the literary map.

Other second-generation clubs began to appear. Ansley established the Readers' Club as an adjunct to the Writers' Club in 1905. Notice of an apparently short-lived Early English Club appeared in the 1908 *Hawkeye*. But a more important club appeared in 1911. The Athelney Club--devoted to the study and practice of poetry--was conceived on



May 7, 1911 when, according to the preface of the *Athelney Book* (1918), four young men took a walk in the country to discuss "plans for forming a poets' club." They had a general purpose, but no definite plans, and they met again on May 20 to spend most of the evening reading their "own productions." A year later, they elected Ansley an honorary member, and he suggested the name "Athelney," after the tiny island where King Aldred's band took refuge from invading Danes.

The Athelney club was replaced in 1921 by the last important second-generation group. This group was to become known in the 1930s as the Poetry Society, but it began with outside-of-class sessions for students interested in writing poetry. They met in Edwin Ford Piper's office, amidst the friendly clutter of books and papers. Piper taught Chaucer and contemporary poetry at Iowa from 1905 until his death in 1939. He had joined Clarke Ansley's Writers' Club early, and he served as president of the Readers' Club in 1909 and 1910. By the time he and his students began meeting to fill the void left by the Athelney, he was a well-known literary figure in Iowa City. After four years of meetings, the group around Piper decided to follow its predecessor's publication of the *Athelney Book* with its own collection of poems for local distribution. The first four annual volumes of *Kinnikinnick* appeared in 1925. In the 1930s, Piper's group came to be known as the Poetry Society. Piper, who lived well into a third generation of clubs, was responsible for a series of "conferences for verse writers," with a more official status, special guests, and prior publicity. He was scheduled to participate in the

"round table discussions" called "writers' workshops" held in the summer of 1939, but he died of a heart attack that spring.

Just as the first writing clubs had differed from the literary societies by their emphasis on practical experience, this second generation--Ansley's Writers' Club, the Athelney Club, and Piper's Poetry Society--differed from the first by its interest in publication and its emphasis on localism or regional culture. These clubs functioned at a time when Midwestern writers like Hamlin Garland and Theodore Dreiser were challenging the predominant genteel tradition of the east by turning to their immediate environment. This new emphasis on the Emersonian tradition William Carlos Williams was later to describe as a "culture of immediate references," a distinctly American culture whose literature was based on native themes and native material.

The growing preoccupation with locale had a special impact on Iowa City's literary atmosphere. On June 10, 1902 visiting Harvard professor Josiah Royce delivered an address calling for a "higher provincialism" to the University's Phi Beta Kappa Society. He argued for a "wholesome" pride in locale that could save America from the "harassed mediocrity" produced by a mass culture. Royce's cogent arguments, the activities of the writers' clubs, and men like Ansley, Piper, and Frederick, helped set the tone for Iowa City's becoming a Midwestern center of literary Regionalism.

**T**he third generation of writers' clubs in Iowa City was a culmination of the tradition of practical experience and of the interest in locale begun in the



IVY CLBERTSON

1920





first and second generations. Regionalism became the banner of a Midwestern literature with the publication of *The Midland* (1915-33). The first issue offered a broad definition of Regionalism and something of a manifesto by its founder John Towner Frederick:

The magazine is merely a modest attempt to encourage the making of literature in the Middle West. The region is already renowned for certain material products and for financial prosperity; but the market of its literary and other artists has commonly been beyond the mountains, and the producers have commonly gone to their market. Possibly the region between the mountains would gain in variety at least if it retained more of its makers of literature, music, pictures, and other expressions of civilization. And possibly civilization itself might be with us a somewhat swifter process if expression of its spirit were more frequent. Scotland is none the worse for Burns and Scott, none the worse that they did not move to London and interpret London themes for London publishers.

Frederick had been a younger member of the second-generation Athelney Club, and along with Edwin Ford Piper, he became a leading Regionalist in Iowa City and a long-time creative writing instructor at the University. In fact, he got the idea of establishing his regional literary magazine from his participation in Athelney when it began publishing annual volumes of poetry, distributed locally, in 1914.

The new clubs popularized the practice of inviting out-of-town writers to give public readings of their works. With these clubs--the Saturday Luncheon Club, the Times Club, and the S.P.C.S. (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers)--there was, too, a marked

change in tone from the "high-seriousness" of the earlier period. The credit for establishing the first club to devote itself to bringing well-known writers to speak in Iowa City must go to John Towner Frederick and Frank Luther Mott.

In 1921 Frederick returned from a one-year teaching stint at the University of Pittsburgh to organize, with Mott's help, the Saturday Luncheon Club. Together they set up an arrangement for members to pay one dollar each semester for each of five meetings--50 cents to go for lunch, 50 cents for a guest speaker. The group held its meetings in the dining room of Youde's Inn, a huge privately-owned boarding house, then standing north of Old Capitol on Capitol Street.

In its time, the Saturday Luncheon Club managed to engage Carl Sandburg, Clarence Darrow, and Robert Frost, and before long, it began to outdraw the officially sponsored University lecture series. In the March 1962 issue of *The Palimpsest*, Frank Luther Mott recalled:

...how easy it was to get the men we most wanted, and for small fees. Frederick was a persuasive fellow, and many of our notables were interested in the *Midland*. We were never able to get Henry Mencken; but we did get Sherwood Anderson and Joseph Weaver and Leonard Cline and Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg and others...

We spent unforgettable hours with these visitors of ours. Fixed in my memory is a picture of Frost sitting on the small of his back in an easy chair after his talk and his readings, holding a glass of milk in his hand, and regaling us between sips with amusing Amherst legends about such diverse characters as Emily Dickinson and Calvin Coolidge--wonderful stories! And Sandburg intoning folk songs to the accompaniment of his guitar. And Anderson gathered with students before a fireplace, chatting, his face in the firelight looking for all the world



like that of a nice comfortable old lady. His talk, too, was mild and easy, but his ideas explosive.

The Saturday Luncheon Club soon became the subject of two heated controversies. In 1925, John Frederick extended an invitation to Sherwood Anderson. When certain townspeople saw Anderson's books in the local bookstores and learned he was coming to lecture, they demanded the lecture be cancelled to prevent Sherwood Anderson from "planting seeds of sexual revolution in Iowa City." Walter Jessup, President of the University, was pressured to fire Frederick if he continued his plan to bring Anderson to town. Frederick refused to cancel the lecture. He was backed by Hardin Craig, the Head of the Department of English.



Frank Luther Mott (courtesy Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries).

Anderson came, and he spoke as scheduled, but after all the trouble the mildness of his remarks was anticlimactic.

The second incident occurred four years later when John V. A. Weaver, born in North Carolina and best known for his poetry--though also known as a New York critic, Hollywood screen writer, novelist, and playwright--criticized Prohibition during his lecture at Iowa City. He angered a group of citizens from Oelwein, Iowa, and they sent protest letters to *The Des Moines Register* and to the University's Office of the President. The brouhaha gradually died down, but not before Frank Luther Mott felt compelled to send a letter defending the club to President Jessup. At the end of the letter, Mott said the Saturday Luncheon Club would probably suspend activities in May (of 1929) because it had not been financially successful in the last year or so. After the demise of the Saturday Luncheon Club, Frank Luther Mott helped to establish a new club, the Journalism Dinner Club, and the practice of inviting writers to lecture continued.

Mott's next venture gained even greater fame and notoriety. He and Harry Hartwick--one of *The Midland* writers--founded the Times Club in 1933. Following what was by this time a well-established precedent, the club sold tickets in advance of the lectures. As a way to insure small audiences, it limited its membership to 300 people. Years later, Mott marvelled at how the organizing committee "hypnotized three hundred Iowa Citizens in those 'depression' years to invest two dollars apiece in a hypothetical course of this character..." In fact, when the club sold the

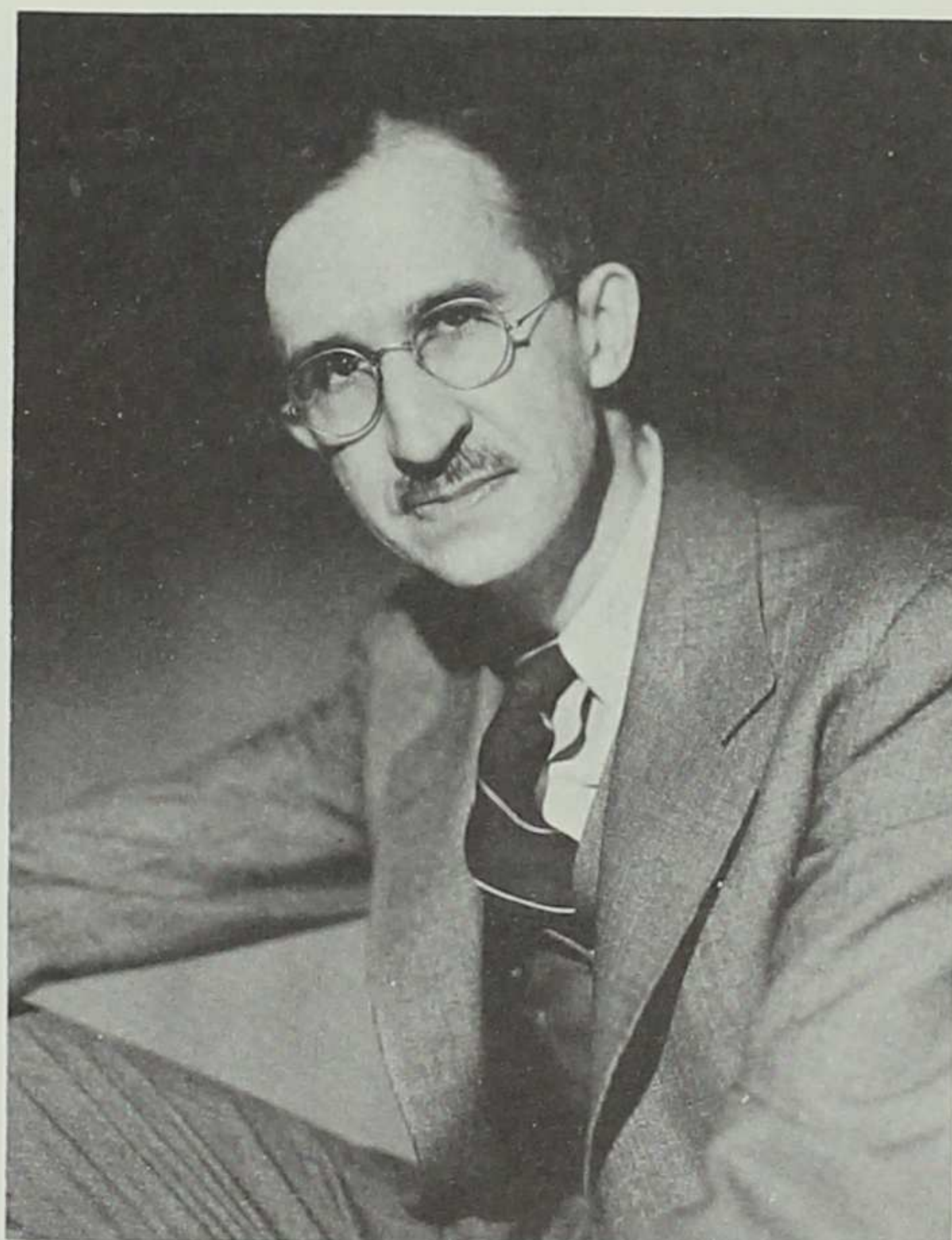


tickets, it did not even promise any specific program. But "the ticket sale always went over easily." Mott later explained:

We told them we thought we could get five or six interesting persons to visit us--not orators or professional platform men, but persons who had done things, and had ideas, and were willing to talk informally to a small audience of intelligent and sympathetic listeners. Watch the papers, we said, and you will see who they are and when they are to be here; that will be your sole notification of the meetings.

Mott said the club managed to get writers to speak for two reasons: Iowa City's proximity to Chicago, which made it possible for well-known writers visiting there to make a side-trip to Iowa City, and the Times Club's growing reputation, which made writers curious about its members and eager to visit them. Among the club's guests were the novelist O. E. Rolvagg, Henry A. Wallace, Donald R. Murphy (editor of *Wallace's Farmer*), Lincoln Steffens, and Christopher Morley. And once again the Times Club brought Frost and Sandburg to Iowa City.

The Times Club later gave birth to one of the more spirited and fun-loving groups in Iowa City's literary history. The executive committee of the Times Club was enlarged to 16 members and became a kind of club-within-a-club. Mott called this inner-group "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers" (or the "S.P.C.S." for short). Grant Wood, who was commuting from Cedar Rapids twice a week to lecture at the University and to lunch with Mott at "Smitty's" cafe, joined the group. Though the first president was Evans A. Worthley and the first vice-president Jeanne Doran, the "three wheel-horses of the organization," according to Mott, were Grant Wood,



John T. Frederick

Clyde Hart, and himself, the "eager beaver" secretary-treasurer. The membership remained close to 16, always divided among faculty, students, and townspeople.

The Society thought its main function was to spare guests of the Times Club undue harassment from overly zealous civic groups and individuals. The members wanted to do this by entertaining the guest writers at after-lecture parties given in their honor. The group decided that they needed a place with the right atmosphere. They looked over an abandoned country schoolhouse, a barn, and an old flour mill, but they could not agree on any of them. Finally, Roland Smith (known as "Smitty") offered them, rent free, the entire floor above his cafe. Smitty gave them *carte blanche*, and they outdid themselves. They furnished and decorated the space as two rooms--





*The "dining room" of the S.P.C.S. above Smitty's Cafe.*

a dining room and a parlor--in what Grant Wood "affectionately" called "the worst style of the late Victorian period." Mott described the scene:

We put an ingrain carpet on the floor and a flowered paper on the walls. We decorated with Currier and Ives prints; a fine chromo of that old favorite, "Rock of Ages," in which a lady clings to the foot of a cross on a great rock lashed by foam-tipped waves from the sea; embroidered mottoes, "God Bless Our Home," "Peace Be With You," and so on; and certain designs under glass formed from the hair of some dear departed. In the dining-room section a big table was covered with a red-and-white checked cloth, and a bulging sideboard stood in one corner. In the parlor was much red plush and walnut furniture--Boston rockers, and love-seats on either side of the marble fireplace. One big chair was made of steers' horns, with seat, back, and tassels

of green plush. A cottage organ, with elaborately carved walnut case and music rack, was ornamental, and proved highly useful at our parties. Upon a marble-topped stand stood a red-plush album, which, in the course of time, came to be filled with specially posed pictures of our guests and our own members.

The group sang old songs from the '90s, accompanied by an organ. They and their visitors dressed in false beards and moustaches and assumed melodramatic stances for the "specially posed pictures" they included in the red-plush album. Mott continued: "Almost always, conversation began with our guests' exclamations about the furnishings of our rooms. 'Oh, my aunt had a decoration piece of peacock feathers just like that in her front parlor! And it was set on just such a marble-topped stand!'"





*The "parlor" of the S.P.C.S. above Smitty's Cafe.*

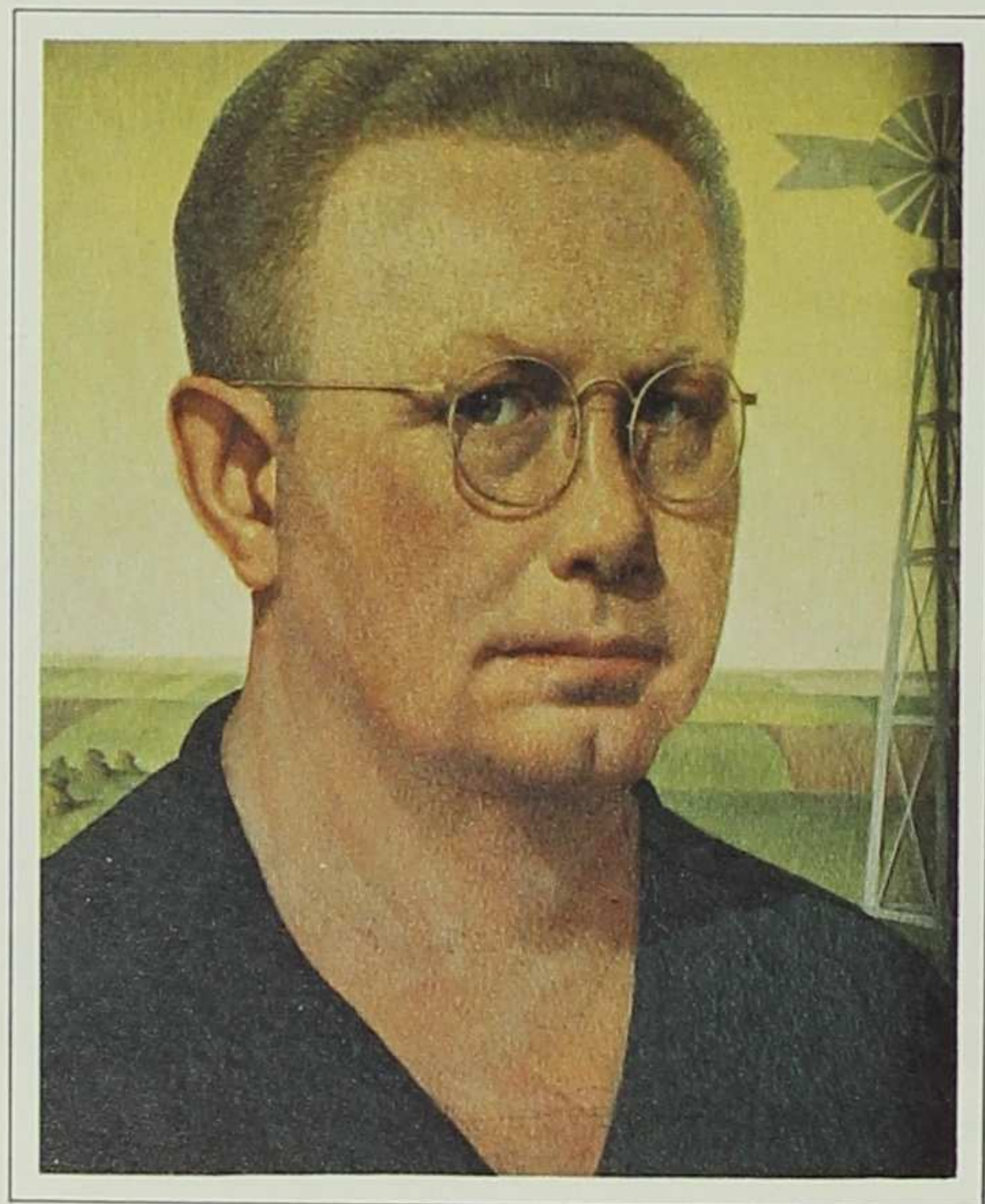
Each member of the group could invite two guests, and the rooms were always filled. Mott himself occasionally provided the evening's entertainment with a passionately melodramatic reading of "The Face on the Bar Room Floor." Sometimes Sigmund Spaeth played the organ, and "Steamboat Bill" Petersen led the group in singing old comic German songs. MacKinlay Kantor, at a party given in his honor, fervently recited "The Rebel's Prayer."

Many other famous guests came. Thomas Hart Benton, Stephen Vincent Benet, John Erskine, Gilbert Seldes, Nicholas Roosevelt, Edward J. O'Brien, Thomas A. Craven, Frederick Essary, Bruce Bairnsfather, Sterling North, John G. Neihardt, Thomas W. Duncan, Elmer Peterson, Lewis Worthington Smith, and

Alfred M. Bailey, all appeared, derisively posed, in the red-plush album (along with members Wilbur Schramm and Paul Engle--respectively, first and second Directors of the Writers' Workshop). The society also invited and entertained a number of blacks, including W. C. Handy, composer of "The St. Louis Blues"; Rosamund Johnson, a musician who accompanied and aided the near blind Handy; Rosamund's brother, James Weldon Johnson, then known as the "dean" of Negro poets; as well as poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

But the guest who generated the most publicity never came. The incident, known as "the Stein fiasco," occurred on December 10, 1934 when an enthusiastic audience assembled and eagerly awaited the arrival of Gertrude Stein.





Grant Wood's oil-on-masonite "Self Portrait" (courtesy of the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery).

When the S.P.C.S. learned that Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas had planned a visit to the United States and that Stein planned to lecture at Columbia and the University of Chicago, it immediately set about trying to coax her down to Iowa City. Rousseau Voorhies, an acquaintance of both Mott's and Stein's, gave the club a number of helpful suggestions and it tried a variety of approaches. In one ruse, it "organized" a "Rose Is A Rose Club." Members wore white roses to a special dinner (the organization's one and only meeting), had their photographs taken and sent the pictures Gertrude Stein. Mott later wrote:

She yielded to our blandishments and consented to come to us, for a very reasonable fee. . . . But by the time she had reached New York she had quarreled violently with Rousseau, and wired me to know if we had any connection with him. When I reassured her on that point, she wired me again to know if we were keeping the audience small. When I told her we always kept our audiences small, she sent me another telegram to find out how small. Between us, we kept Western Union busy for a day or two; but she finally said all right, she was coming, and she would speak on "The Making of *The Making of Americans*."

*The Daily Iowan's* front-page headline for September 14 read, "GERTRUDE STEIN TO LECTURE HERE," and requests for tickets poured into the Times Club. Despite carefully laid plans, a sudden winter storm spoiled the club's moment of greatest glory. Mott reported:

Came the tenth of December, and one of those great sleet storms which Iowa sometimes suffers. But our audience braved it all, some driving more than a hundred miles over icy roads. The audience was there, all of it, with perhaps a few more than the stipulated number; but the Misses Stein and Toklas, who had been scheduled to arrive by special plane in the early evening, were not there. About eight-thirty a Western Union boy arrived at our crowded lecture hall with the last of the series of telegrams from Miss Stein. It read: "PLANE GROUNDED WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN, GERTRUDE STEIN."

The Times Club and its auxiliary, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers, disbanded because, in a sense, they were too successful. According to Mott, the University Lecture Committee resented the way the unofficial clubs





Gertrude Stein (Culver Pictures)

always got the headlines. Mott was called into a conference with the President of the University and the Chairman of the Lecture Committee, and he agreed to suspend operations of the Times Club after a year's moratorium. Some of its members thought that he had given in too easily, and later Mott came to agree with them.

**F**rom the days of the Zetagathian Society to those of the Tabard in the 1890s and the Times Club in the 1930s, a certain excitement and spirit-of-place took shape and came to fruition in Iowa City. Each generation of clubs renewed and revitalized that spirit. And each renewal contributed to Iowa City's literary heritage, a legacy that made Iowa City fertile ground for the country's first full-fledged program in creative writing.



#### Note on Sources

Information pertaining to the 19th-century literary societies was taken largely from Theodore Waner's *History of the Zetagathian Society* (Iowa City: the Zetagathian Society, 1911), while the major sources for information on the later writers' clubs were: various issues of the University of Iowa yearbook, *The Hawkeye*; Milton Riegelman's *The Midland: a Venture in Literary Regionalism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975); and Frank Luther Mott's article, "The S.P.C.S.," which appeared in *The Palimpsest*, 43 (March 1962). Copies of *The Athelney Book* and *Kinnikinnick* can be found in Special Collections, the University of Iowa Archives. E. Bliss, Jr.'s Fourth of July toast in honor of Iowa City appeared in *The Palimpsest*, 57 (July/August 1976), and the reference to Larzar Ziff is to his *The American 1890s* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).