

The Nineteen Thirties

Phil Stong

Phil Stong — whose contribution was of major importance in the 1930's — has the distinction among our Iowa writers of having returned to the same town again and again in successive novels and stories, until it has acquired through accretion of character and incident an assured and vigorous individual reality. His "Pittsville" is broadly sketched in *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow*:

There were only a thousand people in Pittsville, but the town was scattered — four houses on a block a hundred yards square seemed crowded. This was not true, of course, in the six blocks of Water Street, where fifty or sixty business houses were crowded into the desirable space close to where the founders had thought the teeming docks of river traffic would grow up. They had thought that ninety years before, when the railroad was an amusing but dangerous and expensive trick.

The economic life of Pittsville is presented more fully by Stong than is that of any other Iowa town in fiction. In *Career* (1936) we have a general store treated almost as a character in its own right, with the rows of ledgers that concretize its relation to the community over a period of almost a century:

They were large, squarish books, stoutly bound; the Kreugers had all been large, squarish people, stoutly bound. . . . Ray had seen these books all his life, but now, suddenly, since he had participated in the closing of one of them, he was struck with awe at their antiquity. "1844." He took out the first one gingerly. "Gee, Dad, do you know you could write out a history of the town from these ledgers?"

In this novel Stong is writing about the crucial period in the history of Iowa small towns, that of the triumph of the automobile; and nowhere has the immediate impact of that change been more adequately expressed.

It was a novel primarily of farm life, *State Fair* (1932), that won Phil Stong his first general fame. The close relation between the farm and the small town is prominent in many of his books. The storekeeper, here a generalized, almost mythic figure, is a "point of reference" character in *State Fair*. Farm families, possessed of wealth and marked by a sense of community responsibility which ties them closely to small town life, are the dramatic centers of *The Long Lane* (1939) and of *Village Tale* (1934); in the latter novel the tiny village of Brunswick, definitely located as near Pittsville and also on the river, affords the specific setting. Speculation in farm land is a dramatic factor in *Career*, which includes the detailed technique of a crooked land deal, and the havoc wrought in the community by a bank failure which is the result of land speculation. Albert Brubaker,

of *The Long Lane*, lives on a large and prosperous farm which his family has owned for generations, but has an insurance business in Pittsville and is County Treasurer. This book holds something, though not so much as one could wish, of the special atmosphere of the rural courthouse, and gives a hearty and fairly veracious sampling of county politics.

In *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow*, Stong recognizes the social stratification of Pittsville:

There were very definite social lines between the River Rats, Courthouse Hill, Nigger Hill, the Schoolhouse Top, South Pittsville, and the center of the town. All these things in a town of less than a thousand people.

He does not, however, get "het up" about it as do some of the other writers who deal with Iowa small towns. He is, rather, amused by it, and he is aware of the essential fluidity of the lines so drawn, their susceptibility to modification under the impact of personality: this is, indeed, the essential theme of *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow*. When Slaughter Somerville of *Village Tale* resists the attempt of Lulu Drury to seduce him — in one of Stong's not infrequent incidents that are somewhat less than convincing — his rejection of the girl is due not to her status as "river rat" but to her personal depravity and to his allegiance to another woman — who is also of lower status.

Stong's best realized characters are boys and girls. He always treats childhood with insight and

sympathy, and probably his finest achievement is Kenneth Brubaker of *The Long Lane* as Stong follows him through the ordeal of adjustment following the desertion of their home by his mother — to marry an uncle whom the boy has especially loved. It is in part the employment of Kenneth's point of view in his first visit to Des Moines, where Albert Brubaker, his father, finds solace in business and new friends, that enables Stong to give to that city the only really lively and substantial portrayal it has received in our fiction. The genuineness of Kenneth, too, imparts greater vitality and convincingness to the feminine characters of *The Long Lane*. His mother, and especially the star actress of the Des Moines stock company (who becomes his stepmother) achieve stronger delineation than most women in Stong's novels. With few exceptions — among them the venomous Lulu Drury — they are easy to forget. Stong's males have a general penchant for physical violence. They thrive on mayhem — aristocrats and river rats alike — and almost unfailingly become involved, before their stories end, in prodigious battles.

Bright veins of the romantic permeate the substance of Phil Stong's fiction. They appear both in his conception of character and in the patterns and incidents in which his characters are displayed. The accepted obligation to tell a good story leads him again and again to dependence on

melodrama, to arbitrary manipulation of action, to loss of conviction. But what matters most about Stong is that he *cares* about Pittsville and its people. He likes them. That, the reader never doubts. Robust, salty, varied, his fiction unfailingly has the dimension of sympathy, the larger truth that comes from love.

MacKinlay Kantor

There are few pictures of an Iowa small town anywhere in our fiction equal to this, in MacKinlay Kantor's *The Jaybird* (1932):

Shortly before dusk, they walked into the town of Carington. It consisted of several hundred small houses, each with its garden and woodsheds and shrubbery, clustering around the brick core of the courthouse square. The silver-green wave of sleeping oats came licking up to the outer skin of the town on the north, and on the south the long, timbered ridges fell away toward the plum-colored haze of Missouri. . . .

They sat on a bench with a warped, wooden back, under the elms beside the old brick courthouse. They faced the north side of the square, where most of the better stores seemed to be — two restaurants, a drug store, a pool hall. Far away across the grass, on their right, was a livery barn and a lumberyard; and on the left side of the square was a dilapidated row of frame structures — a few stores and more empty buildings. There were many robins yodeling in the trees overhead, and at the edge of the wide street was a hitching rack where horses and buggies waited for people.

Possibly Kantor's best treatment of Iowa is in his autobiographical *But Look, the Morn*; but *The*

Jaybird has been a remembered favorite of mine ever since its appearance. Its somewhat far-fetched story — of a small boy and his hard-drinking, fife-tooting, G.A.R. grandfather tramping and hitchhiking across Iowa — has both exuberance and tenderness. Alone among our works of fiction it does justice to what I knew as a truly distinctive aspect of small town life fifty years ago: Decoration Day, “a great holiday in Clay City, this day of graves,” with the stores closing and the parade to the cemetery, the speeches, the fife and drum corps, the Women’s Relief Corps. Kantor renders it all accurately and without derision. Kantor’s Clay City, like Stong’s Pittsville, is viewed through no rose-colored glasses; but it is viewed with humor, and portrayed with gusto, with candor, and with adequate good will.

More recently Kantor has used Iowa small towns as settings for a series of novelettes or long short stories — a form for which he has a special liking and one in which he has done some of his best work. The first of this series was *Valedictory* (1939): the story of commencement night for the class of 1922 at the Shelldrake, Iowa, High School, told from the point of view of Ty Morley, the high school janitor who has loved the youngsters and his work and is now to be retired. It is a story marked by warmth and kindness as well as by a vivid sense of the place and the event. Selective? Yes. Another writer could have looked at

the same occasion and seen nothing but ugliness: the strain of jealousy, concealed guilt, and faithful service unappreciated. Kantor has shown elsewhere in his work an abundant ability to recognize and deal with ugly aspects of life. A great realist would present both sides, no doubt. But there is a place in good fiction for the honest sentiment that marks *Valedictory* and its successors. In *Happy Land* (1943), it is "Hartfield, Iowa" in which we spend a fateful day: the day that brings to the proprietor of Marsh's Drug Store and his wife the news that their only son has been killed in battle. This story is especially rich in sound details of setting. We are with Mr. Marsh "in front of the kind old house, halting for a moment to listen to a mourning-dove up in that big maple somewhere." The most recent of the Iowa-focused novelettes of MacKinlay Kantor is *God and My Country* (1954), a quiet but memorable story of a scoutmaster in a small Iowa city — through him, of the whole community which he helps to shape.

Thomas W. Duncan

Thomas W. Duncan's most substantial treatment of the Iowa scene, in his *Gus the Great*, did not appear until 1947. But ten years earlier, in *We Pluck This Flower*, Duncan had pictured sharply the hotel that is a feature of every small Iowa city:

On the North Side of Main Street, Hotel Baker's plate-

glass windows and line of sidewalk chairs and red stone facade welcomed them into a dark lobby: leather seats encircling iron pillars; an oil painting of fish spilling from a basket; the Rotary emblem above the desk pigeonholes; the soggy register; the scratchy pen.

He had given his heroine an emotional thrill that very many Iowans have felt:

She had never been in Des Moines. When she saw the gold dome of the capitol gleaming in the early sun a surge of odd emotion clogged her throat, for it seemed somehow heroic that the capitol should be standing on a hill where less than a century before only Indian wigwams were pitched beneath tall clouds.

Duncan's writing has a good deal of the force and pungency of Stong's; but there is a fundamental difference in the attitudes of the two men toward their material. At bottom, as I have noted before, Stong is fond of his characters and the places where they live. He likes people — he has relish even for bad people; and he likes Iowa even when he laughs at something Iowan. It is otherwise with Duncan. The first part of *We Pluck This Flower* seems to have been written chiefly as an exposé of small-college social politics. The reader shares, throughout the book, what appears to be the author's controlled dislike for the heroine and nearly all the other characters.

The story line of *Gus the Great* is as vagabond and peripatetic as is the circus which affords some of its best atmosphere, and the book is as richly

varied in its numerous cast of sharply individualized people as is the big show itself. Backgrounds of town and city are only incidental in this book, treated with no major purpose to portray or satirize, but two are firmly established. The best is "Clayton Junction," "a smoky railroad town, a junction point . . . old and down-at-heels." Towns dominated by the railroad, junction points and division points, are a part of Iowa. Usually they have had a Mahoney's Saloon, as does Clayton Junction. It is doubtful that they have often given quite such melodramatic attention to pregnancy out of wedlock as Clayton Junction gives Doll Burgoyne, or that many of them have had newspapermen like the one who, immediately upon rescuing Doll from a mob of children, advises her to read Voltaire.

Clayton Junction is adjacent to "Tamarack" (the relation suggests Marion-Cedar Rapids, as does the dendrological name of the larger town). Tamarack, however, never emerges from Duncan's pages as a felt place, though there is lively observation in the stage setting for one sequence:

As for the house itself, a great service would have been done the Tamarack scene if the architect who designed it had been hit over the head with a hammer soon after birth. But that had not occurred, so out of the civilization of the moustache cup and the celluloid collar the house came into being. Upon the observer's retina it created the impression of simultaneously sprawling and towering. Around two sides of the house ran a veranda whose roof was supported

by pillars as spindling as a spinster's leg, with a froth of wooden lace at the thigh. At either end of the house great wooden watchtowers rose, embrasured with round-bellied bay windows, and topped by roofs looking like enormous dunce caps.

This sketch attests to both Duncan's observation and his cleverness. We have all seen this mansion — in some one of a score of Iowa cities — and we recognize it with due tribute to the author's hilarity. But seemingly this effort exhausted his interest, for no other scene in Tamarack rises more than feebly and vaguely from the page. The fine opportunity offered by the amusement park which affords background for a number of incidents is ignored; the Commercial Club draws only the most tenuous breath of life. The vitality of the novel — which is abundant — resides in the characters; but these are for the most part exotic, exceptional, with little of authentic dramatic relationship to the communities they passingly inhabit.

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