

The Nineteen Twenties

Herbert Quick

Within half a decade, 1915-1920, there were added to American literature the Spoon River, Illinois, of Edgar Lee Masters; the Winesburg, Ohio, of Sherwood Anderson; and the Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, of Sinclair Lewis. In his autobiography, *One Man's Life*, published in 1925, Herbert Quick rebuked the practice of "a school of writers":

. . . who have set themselves to the analysis and description of country, village and town communities, with the purpose of displaying . . . their . . . sordid drabness, their utter poverty of inspiration, their lack of men and women above the plane of two legged horses and cattle. . . . I have spent a good deal of my life in such communities, and I have never failed from time to time and at important crises in my life to make contact with the souls who led me outward and upward.

Quick himself, in his novel published the preceding year, *The Invisible Woman*, and its predecessor, *The Hawkeye*, had failed to establish any strong sense of either physical or social setting in his Iowa towns. The only sustained impression of his "Monterey, Iowa," in *The Invisible Woman*, is in Christina Thorkelson's experience when she

first leaves the farm to work in the law office of Creede, Silverthorn and Boyd. She hears: ". . . the chorus of calls to work by the whistles of the few mills and industrial plants of Monterey — a chorus of which the good citizens were as proud as of the stone-crusher roar of the electric cars." As we read on, however, we find the novel strangely lacking in authentic atmosphere of a growing industrial city. Monterey proves to be only a vaguely modified small town, in which everybody knows everybody else and his business. An especial disappointment is Quick's failure to render a flavorful setting for the various county seat towns and county courthouses visited by Christina as a court reporter. There is the same failure in his treatment of Des Moines as the "convention city." Iowa politics is vastly oversimplified here, as throughout the book, in which the best elements are the characters and the plot. It is only in his treatment of the farm and the countryside that Quick contributed substantially to the creation of a durable literary image of Iowa.

There was a curious dichotomy in the American fiction of the 1920's, well illustrated in the treatment of Iowa cities and towns. On the one hand there was the hostile attitude toward American life which Quick strongly indicted. On the other hand there was the discovery of excellence in American life, the celebration of heroism and of dramatic achievement, chiefly in the record of the

American past as exemplified in specific communities. This second attitude, less strikingly apparent than the first, was nonetheless an important and characteristic aspect of the fiction of the decade following the First World War, in all regions of the nation. In the Middle West it is illustrated by O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, by Quick's *Vandemark's Folly*, and by the best work of Margaret Wilson and Bess Streeter Aldrich — both viewed here as writers of the 1920's because they attained prominence in that decade through their novels dealing primarily with farm life, though their most interesting studies of Iowa towns came a few years later.

Margaret Wilson

It is only in *The Law and the McLaughlins* (1937) that Margaret Wilson treats an Iowa town with any fullness, but in this book her touches are excellent. In a dramatic scene when Jean McLaughlin goes to the jail at night to release a prisoner, we see the scattered dwellings and outhouses of the village clearly, and the pasture coming right up to the courthouse. There is a brilliant, brief impression of the sheriff's house at Massabini, with its marvels of modernity to farmer eyes: "A sort of built-in sink, with tin washbasins in it, and a soft-water pump right in the center." The portrayal of the Iowa town in this novel is not limited to physical details:

Already the question of schools and taxes were [sic] dividing the inhabitants of Leader into two classes. The Scotch wanted a graded school, however much it cost them in taxes — a good graded school. The New Englanders wanted that, and an academy as well. Why should their children have to go forty miles to college when they might as well have a college in their home town! Hadn't every town in Iowa where New Englanders settled the beginnings of a college?

Bess Streeter Aldrich

It is in the story of just such a college — “Midwestern College” — that Bess Streeter Aldrich's *Miss Bishop* (1933) chiefly gains its place as the most interesting of Mrs. Aldrich's novels from our present point of view. It is located in “Oak River,” which can readily be identified as Cedar Falls.

In 1846 the prairie town of Oak River existed only in a settler's dream. . . . By 1876 it was sprawling over a large area with the cocksureness of a new midwestern town fully expecting to become a huge metropolis. . . . [It] has now settled down into a town of ten thousand.

The first building of the college is opened in 1876, and the central character of Mrs. Aldrich's novel is one of the first students. This building later becomes “Old Central Hall,” and is used as focus and symbol of the action throughout the book. The story of Midwestern College is perhaps typical of many colleges that have played so great a part in Iowa's history. This novel is almost a year by year chronicle, in terms of the personalities of teachers and presidents, curriculum

changes, and the addition of buildings and equipment.

As fiction the book's value is lessened by too great dependence on coincidence in the building of the plot, and by superficiality resulting in part from the disproportion between scope and length: only a master could have achieved with adequacy so much in so little space. Yet *Miss Bishop* deserves respect for its recognition of a great theme — the history of our colleges rendered in dramatic human terms — and for the sound values repeatedly revealed in its characterization.

An earlier work of Mrs. Aldrich, *The Cutters* (1926), provides a faithful and friendly account of another Iowa town:

Meadows, the abode of the Cutters, was not a city. . . . It was a small town in one of the Mid-West states, where there are almost as many hogs as automobiles. It had some pleasant homes, a good school, five churches, and a few blocks of stores.

Meadows is already subordinate to the nearby shopping center of Dale City. *The Cutters* is made up of rather sentimental and usually humorous stories, turning on incidents of family life.

Carl Van Vechten

In contrast to the sympathetic view illustrated in the work of Margaret Wilson and Bess Street-er Aldrich is the treatment of "Maple Valley, Iowa" in Carl Van Vechten's *The Tattooed*

Countess (1924), a novel which belongs emphatically to the more hostile type of fiction of the 1920's. In spite of a red-herring reference to Cedar Rapids in the text, it is not hard to determine the identity of the Iowa city to which the ultrasophisticated countess of this novel returns to visit her sister, and in which she finds diversion and solace in the person of a youth of aesthetic perceptions and pretensions. The time is 1897, and the Cedar Rapids of that day is pictured rather more fully and clearly than is Octave Thanet's Davenport of a corresponding period. We see "Pleasant Avenue," favored street of the well-to-do, with its "straight rows of elms, whose branches met and even interlocked, forming a canopy, a roof of leaves over the carriage." We visit "the quarter devoted to the Bohemian residents," where the cottages were painted in gay colors. There were signs in Czech, and women "with bright handkerchiefs bound about their heads or worn as scarfs around their shoulders, sat on their low doorsteps. Geese, chickens, and dogs owned the yards." We have a definite close-up of the city's industrial area, with "the great grain elevators, towering up to the sky," the maze of railroad tracks, the river almost dry.

In externals, then, Van Vechten's portrayal of an Iowa city is superior to most of those we shall find in our fiction. Internally *The Tattooed Countess* is straight out of Sinclair Lewis — a Sin-

clair Lewis whose style has grown stilted and is curiously marked by exotic words. Maple Valley is largely a localized Zenith (as made famous in *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*). We hear echoes of Sinclair Lewis in a tiresomely repeated joke about the local boosting of improvements (water works and a new high school building) which are still only prospective, and in a burlesqued "local pride" speech by a man who wants to get elected to the school board. The local journalist, dressmaker, musical prodigy are Lewis-like caricatures. The book has the merit that the countess is treated as unkindly as are all the other characters; but there is no hint that her view of Maple Valley is distorted or inadequate.

Roger L. Sergel

A more balanced realism marks another Iowa novel of the early 1920's — Roger L. Sergel's *Arlie Gelston*. Its first chapters establish a firm and accurate, though wholly unobtrusive, impression of "Coon Falls," where Arlie Gelston's father is the station agent. The town is felt through the characters, projected through their attitudes of aspiration or rebellion or acceptance, rather than objectively rendered: though the "Bijou" movie theater, where Arlie gets a job after quitting school against her parents' wishes, is brilliantly realized. The major values in *Arlie Gelston*, however, arise from universal human situations, the regional spec-

ification of which, though authentic and emotionally valid, is not in itself of primary importance. They are values of character and conduct which, in their complexity and in the sympathetic comprehension with which they are viewed, give the novel a continuing claim on serious attention.

Josephine Herbst

A painful family situation in a small town, apparently in Iowa, is the core of Josephine Herbst's competent novel, *Nothing Is Sacred* (1928). One of the three Winters sons-in-law has been using "lodge money" for what his sister-in-law calls "high living"; the old people have to mortgage their home to keep him out of prison. The book presents a searching but rather static group portrait of the family, with relatively little dramatic development of any character. There is no strong sense of the town. Social stratification is expressed in the existence of separate "groups" at the lodge dances. The defaulter's fellow lodge-members and church-members are a scummy, selfish lot without exception. A firm, controlled prose, and a proved capacity for rigorous selection of telling details, give this novel a distinction in execution not fully matched by its substance.

Ruth Suckow

The Second World War and the mid-century have given us a new perspective in relation to the literary output of the 1920's. Perhaps we have

not yet attained the historical distance requisite for decisive critical evaluation, but we can be much more sure of our judgments than we could be twenty years ago. In rereading the work of Ruth Suckow, therefore, I was happy to realize freshly and more fully than ever before — how good her books are. A lot of water has gone under the literary bridge since she wrote *Iowa Interiors*, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, *The Bonney Family*, *The Kramer Girls*, *The Folks*, and *New Hope*. Reputations have risen and fallen, fashions in fiction (only less transient than those in dress) have waxed and waned. In my work as a book reviewer, and a teacher of contemporary literature (and, presumably, for my sins), it has been my lot to read hundreds upon hundreds of new books of fiction through these years. At the same time I've been studying older American fiction — Hawthorne, Melville, Howells, James — year after year. It is against this background and with this perspective that I have reviewed Ruth Suckow's work, and that I believe it to be a part of American literature in the precise sense, marked by values that are durable and truly distinguished. She is the one all-Iowan writer for whom I can make this claim with confidence.

It is obvious that Ruth Suckow's early experience as the daughter of a Congregational minister gave her rich material. The life in half-a-dozen Iowa towns is beautifully recorded by Miss

Suckow in her most recent delightful book, *Some Others and Myself* (1952). But it is the spirit in which Miss Suckow used this material that made possible her achievement — a spirit neither partisan nor hostile — and her dedicated power as a writer that produced it. The town is *there* in her work, just as it was, for better or worse, set down neither with love nor with hate — save love for the living fact of whatever hue, hatred of the writer's besetting weaknesses of distortion and artifice. Her "New Hope," in her novel of that name, and her "Morning Sun," of *The Bonney Family*, are only the brightest of a whole gallery of towns in Miss Suckow's novels and stories, all firmly individualized, authentic, seen with penetration and in significant aspects. Can anyone ever get more of the atmosphere of an Iowa town of fifty years ago through a single detail than she does in the picture of little Wilfred Bonney bringing home the family cow? "Women getting supper smiled to see him trotting down the wide road through the soft warm dust patterned with shadows of leaves and branches, talking companionably to the cow."

A sense of place *as place* is strong and omnipresent in Ruth Suckow's work. Essence of Iowa is on an opening page of *The Bonney Family*:

There was something lush and rank about the mid-western summer — the moisture in the heat, the loftiness of elm branches with their dense foliage, the hot nasturtiums along the walk to the barn.

She has a special genius for houses: that of *The Kramer Girls*, that of the Grunewald sisters in "One of Three Others," that of the old couple in "Uprooted" are fused with the inmost experience of the story in each case and contribute substantially to it. Though small towns afford the backgrounds of most of Miss Suckow's books, she can etch sharply the raw, new residential district of "The Rapids" in *The Kramer Girls*, and touch deftly the college town of "Vincent Park" (where, to the horror of a professor's wife from New England, "some of the professors had actually never been abroad, and two or three of them had never even been east") in *The Bonney Family*.

But people are Miss Suckow's real concern, of course — people in their relation to other people and to their communities. The town is very strongly felt as social background in "Susan and the Doctor" of *Children and Older People*. Often a child's mind is the center of illumination for the community, as in "The Man of the Family" of the same volume, with the boy beginning to earn money by working at the drugstore. It is the extensive use of the child's point of view in *New Hope* which lends the town of that name its special interest, and the novel part of its high distinction. The world of high school youngsters is sensitively revealed in the adolescent Ruth of *The Kramer Girls*. It is the strong sense of a totality of such relationships that makes Miss Suckow's

towns so real and so important. Social distinctions exist in these towns; there are the relatively rich and the relatively poor, the privileged and the unprivileged. The boundaries change. Of the deaf spinsters in "One of Three Others" — "All three belonged to leading families; or what had been leading families" — and are so no longer. In nothing is Miss Suckow's mastery of her material more sure than in her ability to present people at extremes of the social scale with equal force and equal sympathy. In "Mrs. Vogel and Ollie" of *Some Others and Myself* we have a grand assortment of outcasts and misfits — the foul-mouthed Dee Slack, the mildly insane Queen Victoria Allerdyce, One-legged Joe, Mrs. Fickel — the hangers-on who relish Mrs. Vogel's sympathy and Ollie's coffeecake. They are portrayed very clearly, with abundance of sharp detail, but with no malice, no tinge of exploitation. In the same volume, in "An Elegy for Alma's Aunt Amy," we have the other extreme:

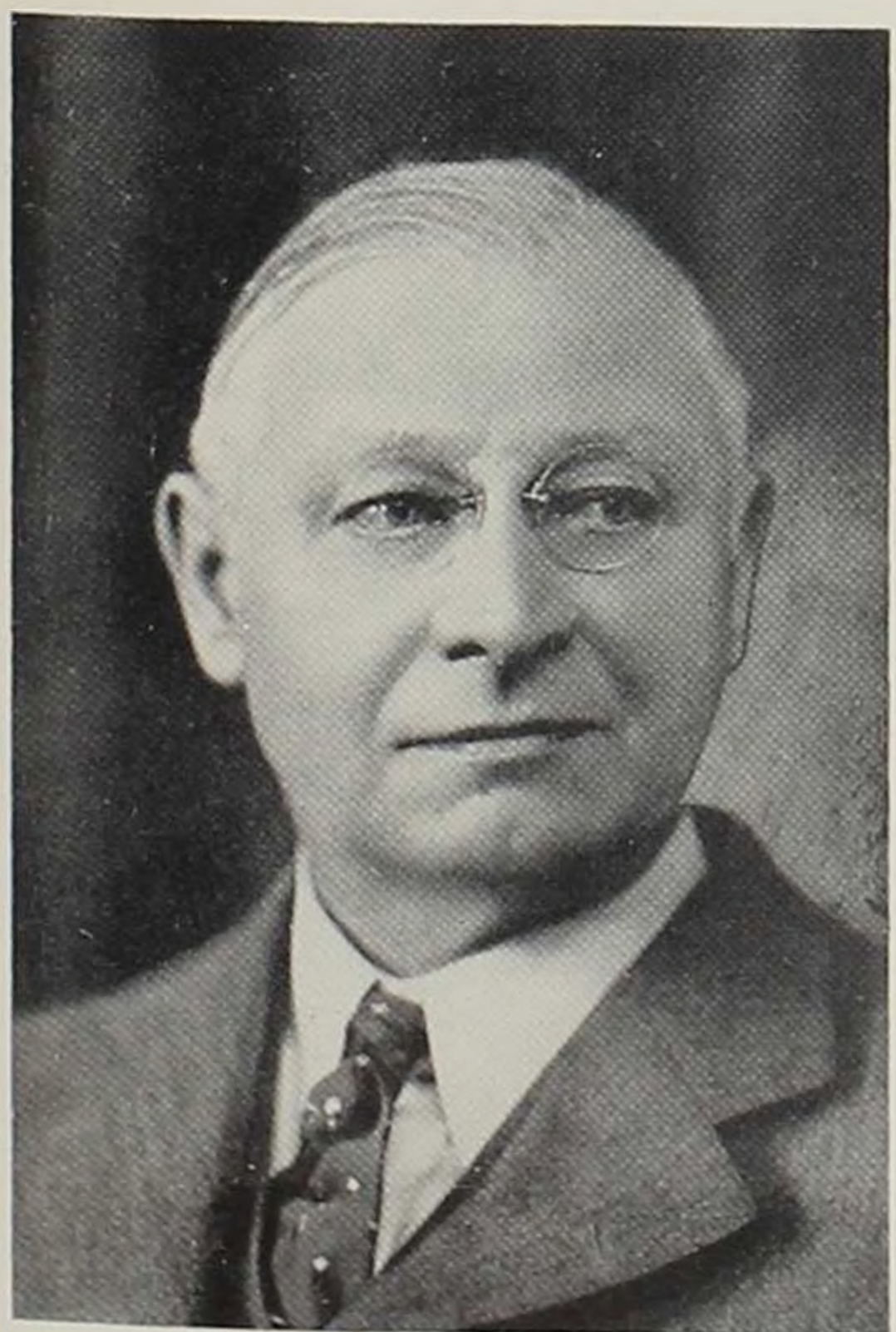
They were Middle-Western ladies. They were workers. Idleness — such an idea of ladyhood — filled them with disdain. They had known some early hardships. Although Mrs. Root was well-to-do — and Mr. Root had been "an awful good husband" — her fingers were a little knotted, and her figure was spread, and she had an ample, motherly bosom. Mrs. Root was getting elderly, but there was not much that went on in the town without her. She baked her marvelous angel cakes for the church suppers, and helped make the coffee for the high school banquet;



HAMLIN GARLAND
West Salem, Wis. (1860-1940)



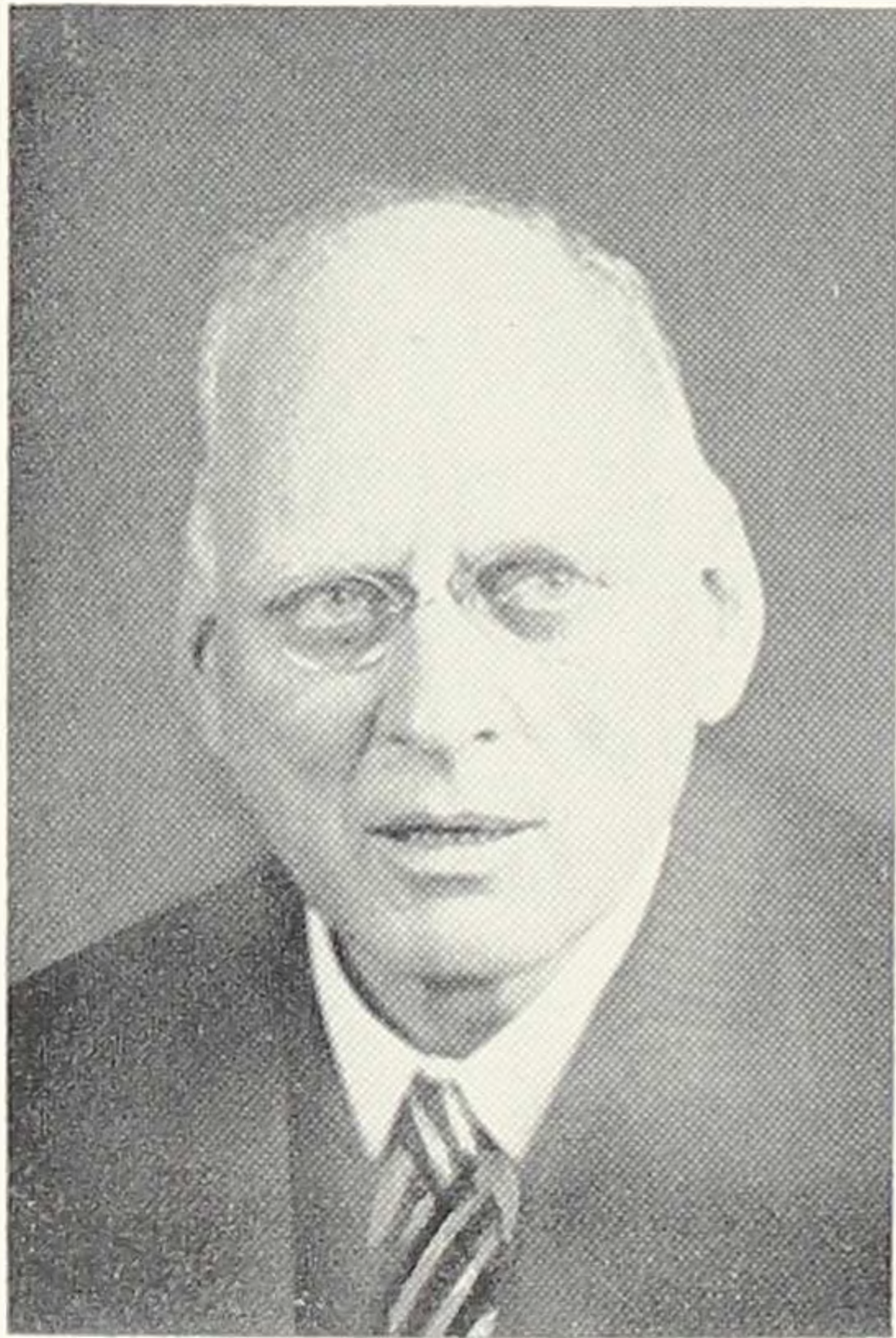
OCTAVE THANET (ALICE FRENCH)
Andover, Mass. (1850-1934)



ELLIS PARKER BUTLER
Muscatine (1869-1937)



SUSAN GLASPELL
Davenport (1882-1948)



HERBERT QUICK
Steamboat Rock (1861-1925)



BESS STREETER ALDRICH
Cedar Falls (1881-)



CARL VAN VECHTEN
Cedar Rapids (1880-)



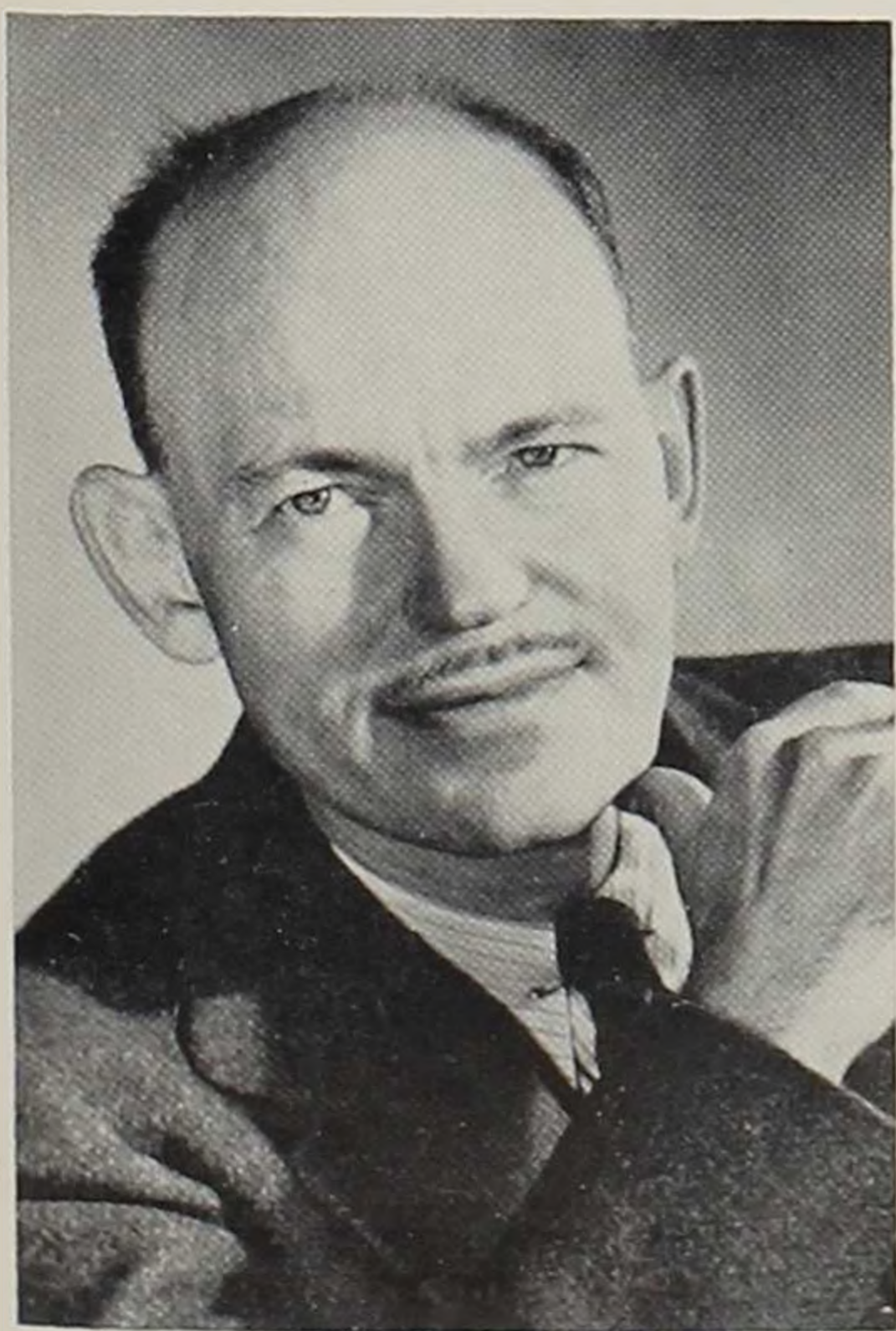
RUTH SUCKOW
Hawarden (1892-)



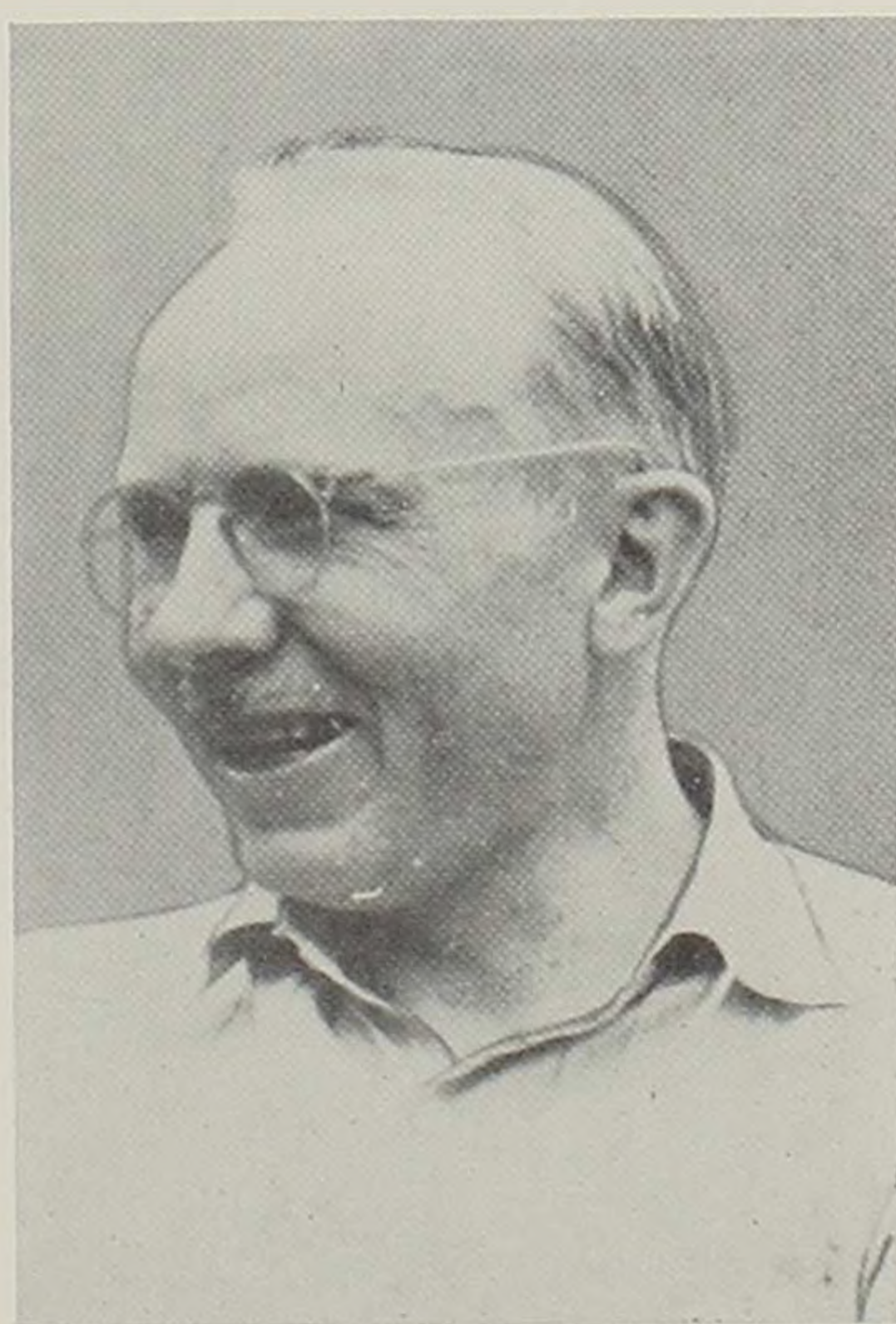
PHIL STONG
Keosauqua (1890-)



MACKINLAY KANTOR
Webster City (1904-)



TOM DUNCAN
Casey (1905-)



PAUL COREY
Shelby County (1903-)



J. HYATT DOWNING
Granville (1888-)



ELISABETH FORD
Mt. Vernon (1893-1944)



MARTIN YOSELOFF
Sioux City (1919-)



HARTZELL SPENCE
Clarion (1908-)

and people came to her for roses for the graduation exercises and for snowballs on Decoration Day. No kind of domestic crisis daunted her. . . . She would have been ashamed not to be found capable in any purely human emergency.

The close relation of town and farm is almost universally present in Miss Suckow's work: as social contrast or conflict, as economic interdependence, or as mere physical nearness. Sarah, of *The Bonney Family*, "was possessed with a desire to get out to the open road beyond the streetcar tracks, where she could feel the wind cold against her face and see the dark, moist country look of the shocked corn." In the two thousand words of the story, "Retired" (*Iowa Interiors*), she has achieved the finest portrayal of the retired farmer in all American literature. She has seen more clearly than any other writer the recurring dramatic situation, within Iowa families, of contrasts and conflicts between those who stay on the farm and those who leave it, and has treated it more thoroughly, with many variations of character and incident: most fully in *The Folks*, but also with especial poignancy in *New Hope* and in such stories as "A Rural Community" and "Four Generations."

The modification, external and internal, of Iowa towns and cities by commercial and industrial changes is rarely a major theme in Miss Suckow's work, but it is not neglected. Sarah Bonney, re-

turning to *Morning Sun* after World War I, finds many changes:

. . . stretches of new paving, stucco houses of a very modern quaintness, a chain store with a brilliant red front in place of Anderson's old grocery on Main Street. . . . Fourteenth Street dresses, cheaply up to date and slightly askew at the seams, in the windows long sacred to bolts of "reliable" linen. Cars were parked thick round the court house, and people no longer took leisurely summer outings on the river. There was only one old row-boat for hire.

As social history, then, Miss Suckow's work is more inclusive than it would seem at first; and it is always and wholly authentic. But "sharply set in time and place" as her people unfailingly are, they are also unfailingly "treated as eternal souls." To grasp this truth with some fullness is to begin to measure the achievement of Ruth Suckow as a writer.

JOHN T. FREDERICK