Before World War I

Hamlin Garland

The portrayal of Iowa towns in fiction got off to a good start. In one of the first and finest of the short stories of Hamlin Garland, "A Day's Pleasure" (in *Main Travelled Roads*, 1891), we have one of the most memorable treatments of small town people and experience in the whole record. The story is that of a farmer's wife who accompanies her husband to town. She is pictured with Garland's characteristic unsparing realism: ". . . her best dress . . . had never been a good fit, and now she was getting so thin it hung in wrinkled folds everywhere about the shoulders and waist. . . . Her hair loosened and blew unkemptly about her face."

Her small shopping is soon completed, and she is compelled to wait for her husband. The grocer is impersonally kind to her — he is accustomed to the presence of such farm women in his store; but she grows ashamed of staying there so long, and goes out to tramp the streets of the little town for hours, carrying her heavy baby. Ultimately she is befriended by a town woman, the lawyer's wife, who invites her to come into her pleasant house for a rest and treats her with genuine kindness. The

town itself is seen sharply and accurately for the raw and limited place it is: ". . . a cluster of small frame houses and stores on the dry prairie beside a railway station. There were no trees yet which could be called shade trees." The farm woman is viewed with the profound compassion characteristic of Garland; the action of the town woman gives the story a dimension of human significance which it would otherwise lack.

Humor — a rarity in Garland — marks a somewhat later story, "Some Village Cronies" (*Prairie Folks*, 1895). It chronicles a checker game between the champions of Rock and Cerro Gordo counties. The contestants "were seated in Robie's grocery, behind the rusty old cannon stove," and their gallery included the local editor, judge, "professor," and others. The humor turns on persistent and unsparing chaffing of one of the players, Colonel Peavy, about his baldness.

> "Did you ever notice, gentlemen, how lying and baldness go together?" queried Foster [the editor] reflectively.
>
> "No! Do they?"
>
> "Invariably, I've known many colossal liars, and they were all as bald as apples."

So it goes, on and on. Yet the Colonel, sorely beset as he is, wins his game.

For the most part, however, Garland's Iowa fiction is of the farm rather than the town. Though he records delightfully in *A Son of the Middle Border* his experience in the town of Osage when

his family lived there for a short time, and that of boarding in town in order to attend the academy after his parents returned to the farm, he made little other use of this material in his fiction. In his farm stories, when "town" is mentioned it is usually with an undertone of the hostility felt by the farmer toward the banker who holds a mortgage, or the merchant who demands payment of a bill.

In one of the longest of Garland's stories that employ a town setting, "A Stop-Over at Tyre," there is a memorably-phrased reference to the "small, dull towns where farmers trade and traders farm." Thus, in spite of the small space given to town life in his fiction, Garland did recognize the close and often antagonistic relationship between farm and town that unquestionably was a major social fact for a long period of Iowa's history. He did achieve real literary artistry in the best of his stories.

Octave Thanet (Alice French)

Totally different from Garland's harsh experience on Iowa farms was the early life of Alice French, who under the pen name "Octave Thanet" gave to American literature its first sustained and competent portrayal of a small Midwestern city. She was the daughter of a New England capitalist who early acquired business interests in Davenport and moved there. When his daughter began to write fiction in the 1880's she used at first her experience of an earlier sojourn in Arkansas.

It was not until the appearance of *Stories of a Western Town* in 1893 that she turned definitely to Iowa for her material.

During the next ten years Octave Thanet was widely read and highly esteemed. She was regularly named among the foremost regional writers of the time (with the Middle West as her special field), and her stories appeared in major literary magazines. When she died in 1934, at the age of eighty-four, her work had sustained the unjust condemnation and subsequent neglect which the period of the First World War and the 1920's had visited on most of the fiction of the preceding generation. A reappraisal will find a good deal of value in the Iowa stories and novels of Octave Thanet.

Although her stories are sentimental, they achieve an interesting and fairly objective picture of "Fairport." It is a city of definite social classes, with little crossing of the lines of demarcation — though in "Tommy and Thomas" we have the story of a saloon-keeper's son who rises to political power (and deserves it), and achieves a socially distinguished marriage. In these stories we visit an old-fashioned furniture factory of many floors, the neat cottage of a workingman, a crowded tenement, and a mansion set in a hillside estate. We see a good deal of the general face of Fairport, with its brick-paved streets, its streetcars, its many trees, its hills above the river. This background is

never self-consciously supplied — it is functional. Her stories, for all their "happy-ending" quality, hold interest and gain a qualified conviction: to me, they seem improbable stories about real people.

Representative of Octave Thanet's treatment of an Iowa city in fiction, and perhaps the most interesting of her novels, is *The Man of the Hour,* published in 1905. Octave Thanet was a disciple of William Dean Howells, and in nothing more devout than in her emulation of his attempts to deal in fiction with the urgent contemporary problem of worker-employer relations. Thus, *The Man of the Hour* has as its central character a young man who — born to wealth as a member of one of Fairport's mill-owning families — becomes for a time a radical labor leader and union organizer, but later returns to the employer class as one who works constructively for better understanding.

The plot is excessively complicated, and the sequence of events not wholly convincing. But the novel is marked by detailed presentation of the "upper upper" class of Fairport's society — an aristocracy by no means of wealth alone, but one in which professional achievement and family background are recognized. The presentation is notably objective. Sometimes it is definitely satirical, as in the portrayal of the guest at a whist party of the elite who reports:

> There are two strikers' families live opposite us, down

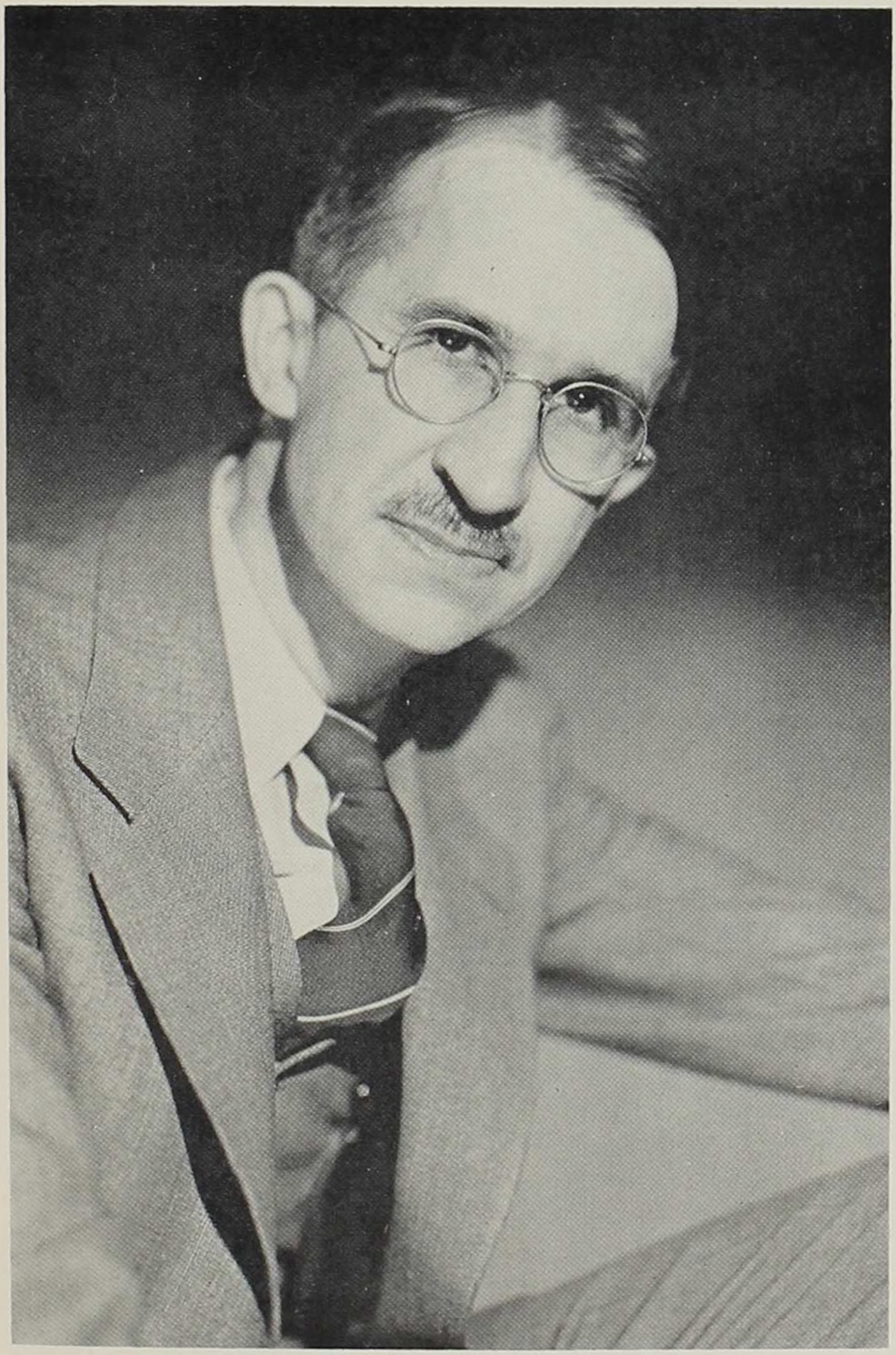
in the ravine on St. Katharine Street; I don't suppose they've had a *good* meal for a week. I send them in skim milk every day, and in fact I tell Nannie to give them anything we've left over.

The contrasting group of workmen's families is less extensively treated, and with measurably less sureness. The portrayal of a corrupt union organizer carries more conviction.

One of the socially significant general aspects of Iowa town and city life stressed by Octave Thanet is the effect of the Centennial Exposition of 1876. She felt the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 was especially "the West's dream of beauty," because of its stimulating interest in the arts and in shaping public taste. Also she notes that in the decades following the Civil War, "the Woman's Club lifted a modest finger at the passing car of progress, and unobtrusively boarded it." Fairport had two women's clubs in 1881.

> Both clubs tackled the same great themes of ethics and art, and allotted a winter to the literature of a nation, except in the case of the Greek and Roman literatures, which were not considered able to occupy a whole winter apiece, so they were studied in company. The club possessed a proper complement of officers, and their meetings went from house to house. . . . Only at a moment of excitement was the chair addressed by her Christian name.

That has deftness which may well have made Howells proud of his disciple. Despite her not always gentle satire, Octave Thanet recognized the substantial part played by women's clubs in shap-



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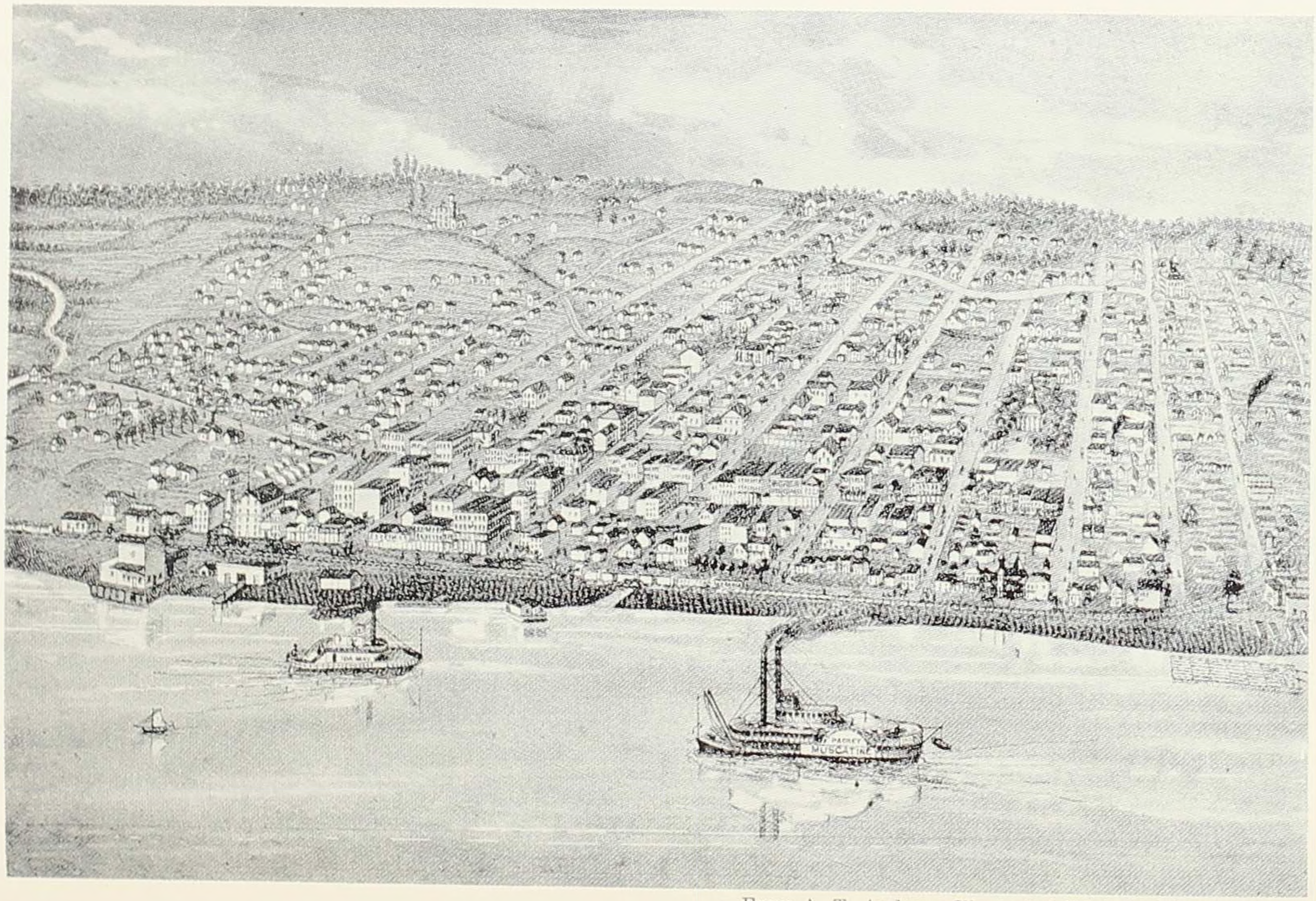

—From A. T. Andreas *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa*

Bird's Eye View of Muscatine

ing the cultural life and aspirations of Iowa cities and towns. The pages of the old *Midland Monthly* bear extensive evidence of their activity. All in all, the work of Octave Thanet repays thoughtful attention, both as literature and as social history. Her "Fairport" is the most sustained and penetrating fictional study of a small Midwestern city, in Iowa or elsewhere, before the First World War.

Susan Glaspell

The novels of Susan Glaspell were written at the beginning and almost at the end of her long and distinguished career as a playwright. *The Glory of the Conquered* appeared in 1909, *The Visioning* in 1911, and *Judd Rankin's Daughter* in 1945. These novels are so little identifiable as Iowan, however, in any way, that I shall not consider them here. Miss Glaspell's chief work is in her plays.

Ellis Parker Butler

A realism not unlike that of the early Hamlin Garland marks Ellis Parker Butler's serious novel of an Iowa town, *Dominie Dean*. It was published in 1917, at a time when the pressure of world events caused many good books to receive less attention than they deserved. The "Riverbank" of this novel is identified by the author's inscription in the copy owned by the State Historical Society of Iowa:

While the scene of this book is laid in Muscatine, I did *not* have the Rev. A. B. Robbins, of Muscatine, in mind when writing the character of David Dean, but based him on an uncle of mine, Lemuel Butler, a physician, who died when I was a boy and he was himself still a young man.

In an introductory note to the friend, a clergyman, who "suggested the writing and helped me with incident and inspiration," Butler says that he feels that his central character has become "less . . . a creature of my imagination than . . . someone I have known and loved all my life." In some degree he becomes just that to the reader. In the portrayal of David Dean, Butler achieved something rare in fiction: a character who is wholly and consistently a good man, and yet both credible and interesting. It is the genuine realism — as quiet and as uncompromising as that of Howells — with which Butler portrays the town of Riverbank (where David Dean lives his long life as a Presbyterian minister) that saves the central character from mawkishness and falsity; for David is completely integrated with the town in every aspect of its life.

You will have to imagine Riverbank as it was then to fully understand David and 'Thusia: the mean little business street with its ugly buildings and dust, or mud, ankle deep; the commercial life out of all proportion to the social life, so that few men thought of aught beside business; the fair, shady streets of homes with maples already overarching the streets and the houses of white or brick-red, all with ample lawns around them. You can see David

leave the little white manse beside the brick church and walk the shady streets, making a pastoral call or going to the postoffice. Those pastoral calls! Serious matters for a young dominie in those days! The dominie was expected to come like a plumber, with his kit of tools, ready to set to work on a leaky conscience or a frost-bit soul, and his visits were for little else but soul mending.

David's life as a dominie was no bed of roses. Church quarrels were frequent and intense, more often over purely personal matters than those of doctrine, though the latter gave trouble too. Some of David's gravest difficulties stemmed from the aggressive friendliness of one of his parishioners, the formidable Mrs. Lucille Hardcome.

She had money. . . . As Lucille furnished it her house seemed to us palatial in its elegance. . . . She certainly managed to get everything into the rooms that they would hold — even to a grand piano and a huge gilded harp on which she played with a great show of plump arms. . . . She painted a little, on china, on velvet and on canvas, and her rooms soon held a hundred examples of her work. . . . You could tell her roses from her landscapes even from across the room, for she painted large. It was the day of china plaques, and Lucille had the largest china plaque in Riverbank. It was three feet across. It was much coveted.

Many of us can remember a Lucille Hardcome, in some other Iowa town. She and her house are authentic, both as data of social history and as a literary creation. There is authenticity, too — and the power of understatement — in our last view of David Dean, "a discarded and worn-out old man":

I walked up the hill and over the hill and down the other side, to where the cheap little cottages stand in a row facing the deserted brickyard which will, some day, be town lots. I found David on the little porch, sitting in the sun. . . . He was very feeble. . . . It was evident they were very poor.

Altogether, the story of Dominie Dean is a truly worthy and substantial contribution to the literary record and interpretation of Iowa life. It is interesting to note that — among the several important professional groups represented in every Iowa town — the clergymen have received by far the lion's share of attention: first with *Dominie Dean,* later with Ruth Suckow's *The Bonney Family* and *New Hope,* and still later with the fine books of Hartzell Spence. As for *Dominie Dean,* the quality of this serious novel is so good as to make one wish that Ellis Parker Butler had written others, rather than devoting his powers to *Pigs Is Pigs* and the other little books, pleasant as they are, that won him fame as a humorist.

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