

Phil Stong in Retrospect

Phil Stong was one of Iowa's best known literary figures. During the past quarter century few American writers have surpassed his output in fiction, non-fiction, and articles to various magazines such as "Christmas in Iowa," reprinted herein from *Holiday* magazine. To Iowans it must always be gratifying that Phil Stong loved his native state, and the things that make up the warp and woof of its history. At any rate, a large share of his literary effort dealt with his hometown, its interesting characters, and his cronies of yesteryear.

Perhaps no other Iowa author has written with more enthusiasm about his home community and state. Like MacKinlay Kantor, Phil Stong had a deep appreciation of the value of the publications of the State Historical Society for the novelist. Thus, when he received the contract from Dodd Mead to write *Hawkeyes* in their State Series, he wrote Benj. F. Shambaugh, Superintendent of the Society, expressing his pleasure at the rich material afforded in the Society's publications.

The Iowa book in the Dodd series has to be *genre* material as you have observed. At the same time I don't want my things to be utterly unscholarly — as was the

case with "State Fair" when I had the moon come up twice the same night, once from the east and once from the west. This involved correspondence with my old college roommate, Dr. Harvey Davis of Ohio State [now Provost of the University of Iowa], who had a minor in astronomy. I finally quelled Harvey by suggesting that the detection of such an error would not get a Nobel prize for even a kindergarten student — false argument, of course; but even I would have noticed the moon was behaving erratically if one of the fifteen or twenty people who read the script before publication had noticed it.

That the material published by the Society was proving helpful is attested by a letter of October 10 to Dr. Shambaugh regarding his book on *The Constitutions of Iowa*. With characteristic candor, Stong wrote: "The debate over prayer at the first convention as you have reported it is splendid — I am burglarizing it, of course." Twelve days later he wrote: "I would very much like to be a member of the Society though you will probably regret the invitation long before I am through annoying you for information and material. I expect to be writing about Iowa for some years yet."

On December 2, 1939, Phil Stong sent in his initial membership dues in the Society. The rapidity with which he wrote is attested by the following comment on his progress with *Hawkeyes*:

The Iowa Book is about 50,000 words along — a little more than half finished. It is a little more difficult than I had anticipated — it is hard to find trees because of the forests.

I expect to finish early in January. I wonder if you have

some promising student up there who would care to glance through it and check it for me for a fee which it would be almost extravagant to call 'nominal.' I would like, above all things, to have you do it yourself, but even I haven't the nerve to ask a recognized scholar to trifle with a book that is definitely not one of scholarship.

Phil Stong was only twenty-two when he submitted his "Hymeneal" to Professor John Frederick for publication in *The Midland*. Appearing in the November, 1921, issue, the opening paragraph of Philip Duffield Stong's story gave promise of future imaginative writing skill:

June, the first, and Pittsville — the smothering hot winds already beginning to blow fitfully across the Mississippi from the ribbed grates of Illinois corn-fields; the young corn reaching greedily after the sunlight which dallied now and would be wanton in July; the oldest inhabitants, and some not so old, already reserving chairs and crates in the traditionally cool spots beneath the trees that made Water Street a Great Green Way. Up from Water Street the dusty roads were powdered grey and drab — darker where the arched elms and maples shadowed the road with arches clean-cut by their distance.

Pittsville was quiet in summer — it was also quiet in spring, fall, and winter. The white houses were small, but peaceful and dignified beneath the peace and dignity of the trees, which rose in a crescent terrace from the ox-bow of the river, low-voiced and austere.

I met Phil Stong personally of all places at the State Fair a score of years ago when he was being interviewed over the radio as a notable Iowa celebrity. Thereafter our contacts were always at

long range. In my correspondence with him, I was always impressed with his infectious, almost boundless sense of humor. When his Literary Agent furnished me with a picture of Stong for Professor Frederick's "Early Iowa in Fiction" in the October, 1955, issue of *THE PALIMPSEST*, Stong wrote:

I was never very fond of that picture — it makes me look purty. However, it does show my bull neck to advantage — the result of innumerable hours of 'bridging' when I was trying to be a wrestler back in Drake.

Stong was pleased with Professor Frederick's evaluation of his works as a fiction writer. On November 19, 1955, he wrote me as follows:

Dear Bill;

In my long and disgracefully leisurely career, if one can call it that, as a writer I have not often encountered such encomia as this one of John Frederick's in the current issue of *Palimpsest*. John must have written it with some self-satisfaction, since he was one of the first to guide my toddling footsteps as a writer, till they attained their present teetering condition.

Anyway, I'd like to have a few more copies to forget carelessly on my publisher's desks — they might affect advances. Also I'd like to have a copy sent to my mother . . . I'm enclosing a dollar to cover what the traffic will bear. . . .

Best,
Phil

It was during this correspondence that I approached Phil for copies of some of his works

which were not on the Society's shelves. I urged autographed copies with some appropriate comment, such as Ellis Parker Butler had made in many of his volumes he had given to the Society. "Ellis Parker Butler! What a fine person," Phil replied. "I knew him for a few years before his death." He then forwarded under separate cover several of his missing volumes properly autographed.

In his *Jessamy John* he wrote: "Don't read this — it will put you in a frightful minority. Phil Stong"

In his *Return in August* he inscribed — "This book is probably not quite as bad as it first seems, let us hope. Let us hope. Dubiously — Phil Stong"

It was just a few years ago that I asked Phil Stong, MacKinlay Kantor, and Harry Hansen to write articles for me about their boyhood in Iowa. Mac Kantor was finishing up *Andersonville*, but Harry Hansen was able to come through and his article appeared in the April, 1956, issue of THE PALIMPSEST. Although busy with his writing, Phil expressed delight with my invitation, pointing out that Grandfather Duffield had written of his frontier experiences in the *Annals of Iowa*. With characteristic humor, Phil wrote:

The SEP [Saturday Evening Post] does, indeed, pay me upwards of \$250 [\$2,500 would be closer] but for a piece like this I'll be glad not to have to pay myself. . . .

About how much wordage? I'll be through with "BLIZZARD" in about a month and I have only some trifling futures at the moment. It takes a little while, after you finish a novel, for the well to fill up again. (Never mind with what it fills up — discouraged frogs and suicidal cats, in my experience of cleaning cisterns.)

Mother probably has enough pictures, about Linwood and the home of my first five years — however, I've meant to make a little album about the place for twenty years and this might be a good time to do it. . . .

Unhappily for posterity, death intervened, and Phil Stong was unable to complete his assignment. "Sometime I want to get you down to Linwood Farm," he wrote me on November 28, 1955, "but with three books and a flock of other things I haven't been able to make it myself this year." The writer regrets he was unable to accept this generous invitation but has lived over vicariously in "Christmas in Iowa" the happy days when Phil Stong was young in heart, both as a lad and as a distinguished author, the joyful Christmas days in old Keosauqua.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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NON-FICTION

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A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PERIODICAL LITERATURE BY AND ABOUT PHIL STONG*

TITLE	PERIODICAL	DATE
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Magic of Mountains	Holiday	July 1953
Missouri	Holiday	Nov. 1953
November	Sat. Rev. Lit.	Jan. 1, 1955
Christmas in Iowa	Holiday	Dec. 1952
First Road of the Land	Holiday	Aug.-Nov. 1952
Friendly Ozarks	Holiday	Aug. 1951
Holiday in Michigan	Holiday	July 1951
Panama	Holiday	Jan. 1953
Sweet, Tender, Wonderful	Holiday	June 1952
Drake University	Holiday	Oct. 1949
Great Lakes Passage	Holiday	Aug. 1950
Hot Springs	Holiday	Jan. 1951
Minnesota Iron Giant	Holiday	July 1950
Mark Twain Cruise	Holiday	March 1949
State Fair	Reader's Digest	Oct. 1948
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Portrait	Sat. Rev. Lit.	July 28, 1945
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*Compiled from *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*
 **Novels
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