

Iowa Literary Magazines

When youthful Iowa was still primarily a land of pioneering adults, some curious mental twist prompted the settlers to establish colleges in every city of promise (and what city was not promising?), so that by 1850 there were fifty "paper" colleges in the State. Seemingly it never occurred to any one that before there could be colleges there must be students. In like manner, before there were readers to support them, or writers to contribute to them, there were outcroppings of "literary journals" in the pioneer cities. They were little more than newspapers, however, and their infant birth-cries were soon hushed when they suffered death by malnutrition.

The dream to establish a magazine to express the literary sentiments of the West has a long tradition. In its earlier phases it was expressed in the *Journal of Belles Lettres*, established in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1819; the *Western Quarterly Review*, begun in Cincinnati in 1832; the *Western Literary Journal*, established in Cincinnati in 1836, and many others. In Iowa the dream did not materialize until much later when a returning tide of sectional consciousness brought the *Midland Monthly* into the world.

Published at Des Moines by Johnson Brigham,

the first number (January, 1894) announced the periodical to be "a home magazine, affording scope for the best talent in literature and art, and proving for the home circle a class of reading essentially interesting, not solely to one member of the family, but, in some respects at least, its oldest and its youngest members alike". Its field was to be "the world in general, and the midland region in particular". Amateur as well as professional writers were solicited to contribute.

Each number consisted of about one hundred pages. There were stories of novel length, short stories, and poems; there were, moreover, descriptive, travel, and historical sketches. Women's clubs and matters of education received considerable attention. The "Midland Book Table" reviewed current literature, with emphasis perhaps on literature pertaining to the Middle West. Illustrations, both photographs and drawings, were numerous. All in all the magazine made a good appearance.

Unfortunately, from a financial point of view, the venture was not profitable. The subscription price was only \$1.50 for the year. Although the supporters of the magazine were enthusiastic over its future, an inability to procure advertising at paying rates brought the undertaking to a close at the end of 1898. Years later, in writing of the demise of his journal, Mr. Brigham said: "When an opportunity came to turn over the magazine to St. Louis parties, I felt a sense of relief, feeling that if the

Midland Monthly were doomed to die, I, at least, would not have to attend the funeral. It 'died and made no sign'".

The *Midland Monthly's* claim upon immortality rests, perhaps, chiefly upon the fact that it helped to keep a dream alive. Unquestionably it stimulated an interest in the literary possibilities of the Middle West. More specifically it will be remembered in its connection with Hamlin Garland, some of whose "Prairie Songs" appeared in the first number, and whose "Boy Life in the West—Winter"—suggestive of *Boy Life on the Prairie*—made a part of the second number. Some other well known names are included in the list of contributors, among them Emerson Hough, whose short story of Arizona and Apache Indians, "Belle's Roses", was published in June, 1895. Ellis Parker Butler contributed a number of short poems and Alice French a short story or two. Still other writers well known to Iowans who wrote for the *Midland Monthly* are Harvey Ingham, Irving B. Richman, and Cyrenus Cole, not to omit Mr. Brigham himself.

In 1915 *The Midland*, unrelated save in name to the *Midland Monthly*, made its initial appearance in Iowa City. It was founded by a group of students who were assisted and encouraged by several members of the University faculty. Possibly because its founders were for the most part young people, the first number radiated enthusiasm, its atmosphere suggestive of the crusader's spirit. The

experience of Middle Western writers, said the editor, "proves that the spirit of the Middle West does not at present find adequate expression. . . . We have found, too, that the Middle West possesses a regional consciousness. We have met with a response not bounded by rivers nor limited by state lines. The Middle West exists as a unit in the life of the world. It is waiting for self-expression. . . . The possibilities for the development of a western magazine, devoted to the service of all our classes of reading and thinking people, have been little more than suggested. But we trust that we have made clear the magazine's belief in, and dedication to, the highest interests of the Middle West."

With the passing of time, *The Midland* has laid less and less stress on sectionalism. In 1920, five years after the founding of the magazine, its editor said, "the publisher and the editors of *The Midland* hope that their familiarity with the life of their neighbors may be helpful to good writers whose interpretations are true. To this degree *The Midland* was and is sectional. Probably it is not more sectional than other magazines; probably its isolation makes it more conscious of sectionalism."

In the issue of January, 1930, just fifteen years after the initial number, the outward features of regionalism have been definitely left behind. No longer content with its original subtitle, "A magazine of the Middle West," the editors, John T. Frederick and Frank Luther Mott, now feel that their

journal may rightly be called "A National Literary Magazine". The new phrase on the cover and title page, says Mr. Frederick, "is in somewhat belated recognition of the fact that almost from the beginning the material printed in the magazine has come from all parts of the country". Similarly, the readers of *The Midland* have long since ceased to be limited to the Middle West. It was perhaps inevitable that the purely regional appeal should cease when the magazine became established.

To one of its original tenets, however, *The Midland* still adheres: it is not a commercial enterprise. It is not endowed, and editors and contributors alike receive no compensation. Admission to its pages is not determined by the apparent popularity of the material, but by the taste of the editors. Honesty of treatment and artistry with which effect is created are two standards by which contributions are judged. The publication is amateur in spirit and is especially devoted to the work of young writers. It does not seek noted names. Indeed, its greatest material service may be the discovery and encouragement of talent that has later become generally recognized. Among the better known writers whose early efforts first appeared in *The Midland* are Ruth Suckow, Roger L. Sergel, Edna Bryner, and Philip Stevenson. Edward J. O'Brien has said that "during the past few years *The Midland* has made more discoveries and focussed them more clearly than any other periodical".

It is too early to judge *The Midland* finally, especially since its ends are so difficult to define. Commercial success it does not seek, and so will not attain. One might suggest that its fifteen years denote success, if *The Midland* itself found "virtue in mere longevity". Pleasure in writing and pleasure in reading, perhaps its ultimate goal, are elements not easily measured, yet one feels that behind and beyond all tangible standards of attainment are assurances of truth and honesty that are ends in themselves.

The Husk, published thrice a year at Mt. Vernon since 1922, does not aspire to be a national magazine; neither does it attempt to be regional in character. It seeks to be a college literary magazine that reflects life rather than collegiate conventionalities. Primarily its contributors are students or alumni of Cornell College, though Carl Sandburg and Jay G. Sigmund, two of its notable supporters, are neither. The fine amateur atmosphere of this slender little periodical was excellently voiced by its first editor, Alfred E. Longueil, in the sentiment that "hard trying is ultimately worth more than achieving; that the spirit in which things are done counts for more than things done; that the attitude of the craftsman toward his craft, of the thinker toward his thought, is a more vital contribution to life than any concrete achievement of craftsman or thinker". Where the endeavor is so much more significant than the deed, possibly there is an irrelevancy in recall-

ing names, yet somehow one remembers, among the contributors of verse, Thelma Lull, Jewell Bothwell Tull, and Kathryn Fenstermacher. Janet McBroom's short story, "A Dissertation on Roast Pork", has received O'Brien's high commendation.

At present the magazine is edited by Clyde Tull of the English department. The art department of the College, under the direction of Nama A. Lathe, assists in making the publication attractive through cover designs and illustrations of stories and verse. Unlike the almost severe simplicity of the cover design of *The Midland*, the cover of *The Husk* appears in new guise with each issue. The linoleum cuts illustrating the magazine are good. This is a handsome little periodical.

The Tanager is published bi-monthly at Grinnell by the English and journalism departments of Grinnell College. Although many of its contributors are students, there are frequent articles by such famous writers as James Norman Hall, Ruth Suckow, Carl Sandburg, Gamaliel Bradford, Hamilton Holt, and others. In the main, the objectives of the journal are apparently literary; the forum, however, is represented by articles and editorials in which non-literary matters are discussed. A regular feature of the magazine consists of book reviews, which have been accompanied in the later numbers by interesting illustrations. *The Tanager* has been published since 1926.

If Iowa is ever to produce a commercially suc-

cessful literary magazine, the day of its realization still seems far distant. Mr. Brigham's attempt was a brave one and served a useful purpose in a period of transition, yet it is doubtful whether there would now be an intrinsic virtue in a similar enterprise. If there is an aspect of contemporary American literature that is conspicuous and generally recognized, it is regionalism. But it is a regionalism that no longer needs to struggle for expression in periodicals of a local character. There is, however, and perhaps forever will be, an apology for the amateur journal whose hope is to "lighten and brighten life" through writing, and for the editor who believes that "trying is ultimately worth more than achieving."

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