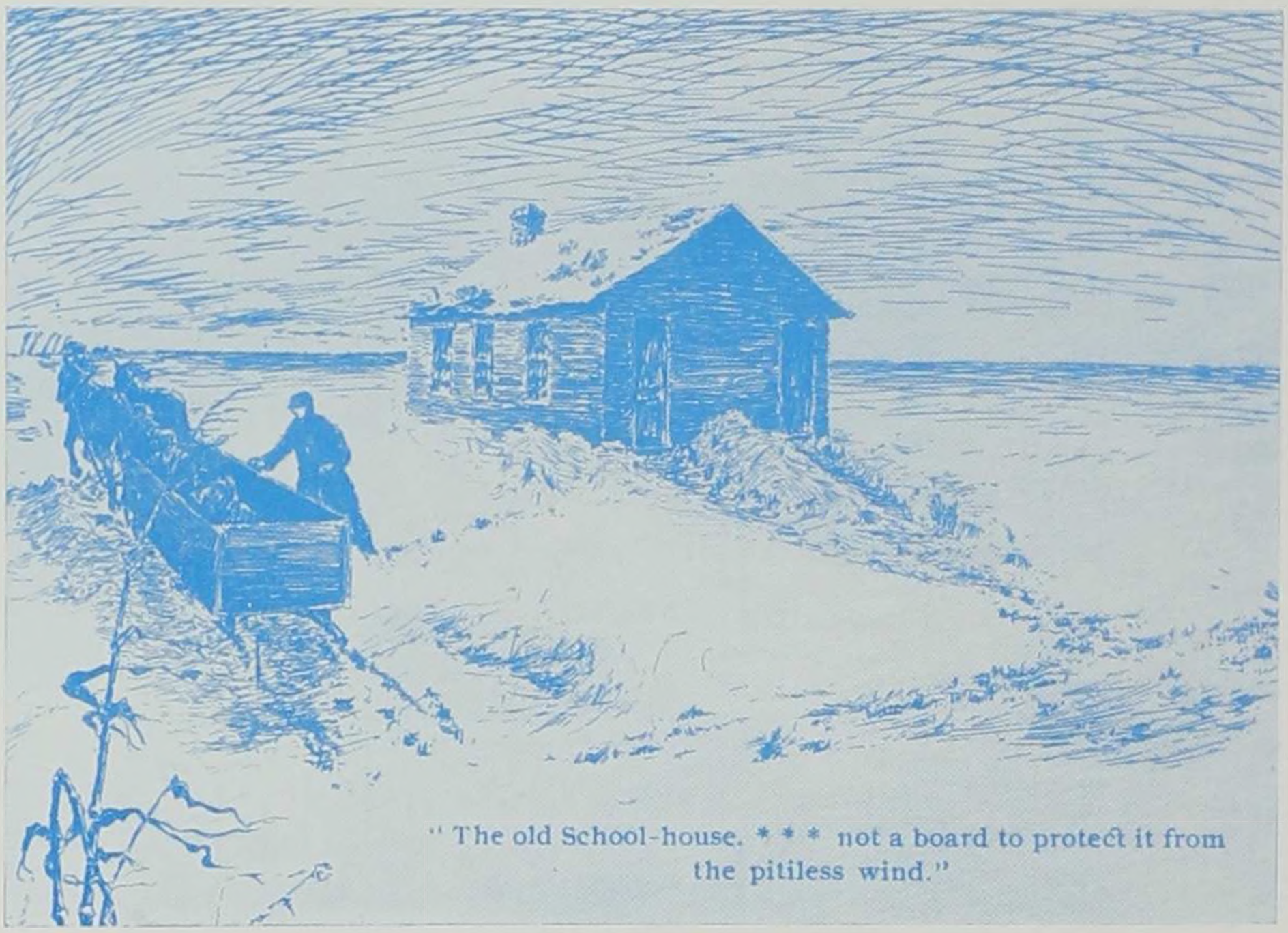
The PALIMPSEST



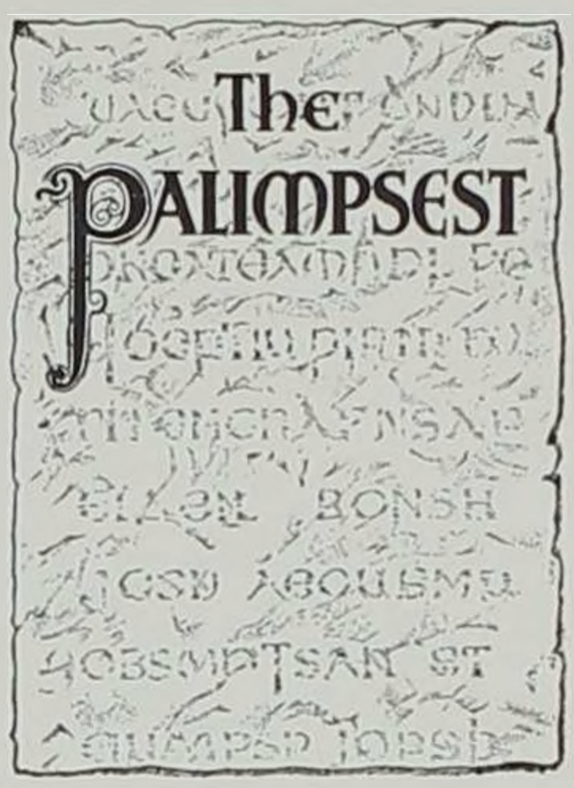
"The old School-house. * * * not a board to protect it from the pitiless wind."

Published Monthly by

The State Historical Society of Iowa

Iowa City Iowa

MARCH 1951



The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

Contents

Cover

Front — The old school-house in pioneer Iowa.

Back — Reproduction of Hamlin Garland's "Boy Life in the West — Winter" in *The Midland Monthly,* February, 1894.

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

PRICE — 15 cents per copy; $1.50 per year; free to Members

MEMBERSHIP — By application. Annual Dues $3.00

ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXII ISSUED IN MARCH 1951 NO. 3

By Way of Introduction

From its beginnings, much of the literature of the United States has been regional in character and emphasis. The fathers of our national literature were regionalists — Washington Irving in his stories of the Hudson Valley, James Fenimore Cooper in his novels of the Western New York frontier — because they wrote of those aspects of the national life which they knew best. So were John Greenleaf Whittier and — most emphatically — Nathaniel Hawthorne. So were the too little appreciated founders of our national literature in the South, James Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms. Henry David Thoreau was a dyed-in-the-wool regionalist in the texture of his writing, for all the cosmic range of his thinking.

Regionalism as such was sunk in strident sectionalism in the years just preceding the Civil War. It speedily recovered, however, to become a major phase of our literature in the last third of the nineteenth century: with Bret Harte and Mark

Twain writing of the West; George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and many others in the South; and in New England Whittier again, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Even William Dean Howells and Henry James were regionalists in parts of their work.

Again regional writing was submerged at the beginning of the present century, by the flood of historical romance and by the popularity of the "muckraking" novels. But in the second decade of the century the regional movement was renewed, to continue to the present time: first in the Middle West, with the work of Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and many others; then in the South, with DuBose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Caroline Miller, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and many others; in New England, with Kenneth Roberts, Gladys Hasty Carroll, and on to John P. Marquand; on the Pacific Coast, in the Northwest, in the Southwest. This latest regional phase of our literature has been pre-eminently rich in the South; William Faulkner, currently the nation's most prominent writer of fiction, is the most intensely regional of them all.

It is our purpose in this article to consider one sharply narrowed portion of this major aspect of our national literature. We shall examine the fiction devoted to the presentation and interpretation of a single phase — farming — of the life of a single state, Iowa.

The American critic James Gibbons Huneker says in the introduction to his autobiographical work *Steeplejack* that the critic is obligated to give his reader a full account of himself, a *precis* of his experience, in order that the reader may be able to apply proper discounts and allowances to what he says. Without taking this injunction too literally, it may be pertinent to record the fact that I was born and grew up on an Iowa farm — a rather small and poor farm, duly equipped with a mortgage. And although I no longer live in Iowa, there has been no year in the more than fifty since I was old enough to ride the horse hoisting hay in which I have not done a considerable amount of common farm work with my own hands.

It has been a rich experience rereading some books after a lapse of as much as thirty years; trying to see the body of work as a whole, to evaluate it item by item, to recognize its common qualities and the general lines of emphasis.

The Beginnings

The two letters which were published in THE PALIMPSEST for December, 1950, under the title "Farming in 1866," afford an all but perfect preview of our field. It is clear that both "Maggie May" and "Farmer's Wife" were fictionizing a bit — exaggerating, emphasizing some details, and suppressing others, in accordance with their feeling about farm life in Iowa, the one anti- and the other pro-everything about it. These letters give evidence that the impulse to record and interpret their experience was general among the farm people of Iowa in the nineteenth century. There are thousands of such letters in the old newspapers.

Yet this impulse was surprisingly slow in finding the form of literary art. I have examined all of the stories in a file of *The Midland Monthly*, the "family magazine" with distinct literary emphasis which was edited by Johnson Brigham at Des Moines in the 1890's. The first item in Volume I is a story by Octave Thanet, Miss Alice French of Davenport, then Iowa's most distinguished writer. Its scene is an Iowa poor farm — but there is not a single detail in the story which would identify its setting as a farm, or as Iowa. Another story

by Octave Thanet, in Volume III, is similarly devoid of validating detail for its Iowa farm setting. To Volume VI Mrs. W. S. Kerr contributed a story called "The Graveyard at Dorn," which has a theme typical of farm life — a quarrel about a fence-line — but no localizing detail. Hamlin Garland's autobiographical sketches, *Boy Life on the Prairie,* were serialized in *The Midland Monthly*. But the three stories I have mentioned are the only Iowa farm stories I could find in this Iowa magazine! There are stories of Scotland and Italy, of Louisiana and New England and the Dakotas, and some of them are rich in regional detail; but there are none of Iowa. I cannot believe that Mr. Brigham had an editorial prejudice against Iowa farm stories. Apparently no more were offered to him.

It seems, then, the result of a fortunate accident — that Hamlin Garland lived for a time on Iowa farms and went to school in Iowa — that "the Iowa farm in fiction" is firmly established in the literary history of America and is represented in almost all anthologies of our national literature. The short stories of Garland's *Main Travelled Roads* were the product of the impact of Midwestern farm life on Garland after he had gained perspective by residence in the East. They portray a period of widespread hardship on Iowa farms, and of ruthless exploitation of farmers. Most of the stories are about Wisconsin farm

people, but the few which have definite Iowa settings are among the best: "Under the Lion's Paw," "A Day's Pleasure," "Mrs. Ripley's Trip." These stories are achieved in bold and broad strokes. They are sometimes faulty in technique; but they have authority, integrity, and emotional power. They are worthy of the contemporary recognition which they gained from Howells, and of the place they have won in American literature.

Garland himself was inclined in later years to underrate these early realistic stories. In his novel, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), he has his hero — a writer — say: "I don't admire the country people unreservedly . . . my experience with them has not been such as to make them heroic sufferers, as the new school of fiction sets 'em forth." But these stories remain, after sixty years, very much alive. They have strong characterization, rich texture of farm experience, vigorous drama. They meet the requirements of literature, and of regional literature.

Rediscovery of the Pioneers

In the days of the Revolutionary War, population long dammed at the Alleghenies began to trickle through the passes across the mountains. In the span of a single long human life from the time of Daniel Boone, the occupation of the continental United States had been substantially completed — the wilderness from the Alleghenies to the Pacific subdued and transformed. To my mind, this is the most dramatic event in human history. No movement of peoples elsewhere in the world's record is comparable to it in extent, in swiftness, and in lasting significance. This great drama was composed of innumerable individual dramas, the experience of men and women and especially of families.

Perhaps the heightened cultural nationalism stimulated by the first World War helped to open the eyes of American writers to this material, though Willa Cather had shown the way as early as 1913, with *O Pioneers!* In any case, effort to portray the westward movement of the nineteenth century, in its varied phases, became a striking and important element in regional literary endeavor in the decade of the 1920's, especially in the Middle West.

Herbert Quick's *Vandemark's Folly* (1922) was the first and the best of Iowa's contributions in this field. I have found positive pleasure in re-reading this novel, after nearly thirty years: in its vitality, its sensitiveness, its firmness in portrayal of people, especially of the central character, "Cow" Vandemark himself. It is a romantic fiction, as are most of the novels of this group. Plot elements are abundant, and everything that can be utilized for dramatic conflict or effect is brought in — outlaws, a blizzard, a prairie fire; but all these elements are firmly integrated with the story as story, and all are made to contribute to the development of character.

Quick had a firm grasp of the historical process as illustrated in the growth of Iowa — a grasp which becomes even more evident in the novels which followed *Vandemark's Folly*: *The Hawkeye* (1923), which records much of the development of a farming community; and *The Invisible Woman* (1924), which probes — less effectively — the intricacies of Iowa politics. He was keenly aware of the social problems that accompanied the process and were parts of it. Vandemark observes on one occasion: "They looked like town people; and I knew already the distance that separated farmers from the dwellers in the towns . . . the difference between those who live on the farms and those who live on the farmers."

Perhaps what I value most of all in *Vandemark's*

Folly is the loving and precise observation of varied aspects of the pioneer experience, as in this picture of the pasque-flowers of the prairie: " . . . The woolly possblummies in their furry spring coats protecting them against the frost and the chill, showing purple-violet on the outside of a cup filled with golden stamens."

Vandemark was Dutch, and much is made of his Dutchness. But his was not a Dutch community. *The Able McLaughlins,* in Margaret Wilson's novel of that name (1923), are Scotch; and their story is one of a Scotch community as well as of individuals. Portrayal of both is sharp and vigorous. Miss Wilson gives the reader strongly the sense of opportunity experienced by the pioneers, and the sense of stewardship which this opportunity aroused in the best of them: "Even yet he could scarcely believe that there existed such an expanse of eager virgin soil waiting for whoever would husband it. . . . Their rich soil, they promised themselves, was to be richer by far for every crop it yielded." *The Able McLaughlins* has humor — one of the rarest ingredients in Iowa farm fiction, unfortunately. Miss Wilson is not averse to making her addition to the tradition of Scotch thrift:

> Andy McFee . . . who was so careful of expenditure that when his corn got a little high in the summer he always took off his shirt and hoed the weeds in his skin, to save the wear of the cloth . . . or John McKnight, who when he

went to mill always took with him a hen tied in a little basket, to eat the oats that fell from his horse's mid-day feeding.

Miss Wilson achieved, too, genuine distinction in another area too little penetrated by writers about farmers, in Iowa or elsewhere — an understanding of what, essentially, makes farmers farm:

> To John . . . a field of wheat was a field of wheat, capable of being sold for so many dollars. To Wully, as to his father, there was first always, to be sure, the promise of money in growing grain, and he needed money. But besides that, there was more in it than perhaps anyone can say — certainly more than he ever said — all that keeps farm-minded men farming. It was the perfect symbol of rewarded, lavished labor, of wifely faithfulness, of the flower and fruit of life, its beauty, its ecstasy. Wully was too essentially a farmer ever to try to express his deep satisfaction in words.

Something of this deep comprehension of the relation between the farmer and the land is in Josephine Donovan's *Black Soil* (1930). In this novel we have Irish pioneers, and a quietly religious spirit. It holds much richness of authentic detail. Though the shaping of the story is in some degree romantic, as in all the novels in this group, the characters are real — marked by a genuine heroism that is neither strengthened nor obscured by romantic complication.

With *Vandemark's Folly, The Able McLaughlins,* and *Black Soil,* Iowa may be said to have rediscovered her pioneers.

The New Realism

Meanwhile another kind of regional fiction had begun to appear in the United States. For understanding of its purposes and methods we must look in part to influences from England and from Europe which were making themselves felt strongly in all American literature in the years of the first World War and those following it: to Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy, to Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield, to Proust and Thomas Mann, and, later, to Joyce. Discarding romantic conventions, the writers of this "new realism," as it came to be called, sought in fiction, often quiet and outwardly uneventful, to realize values of inner experience. Beginnings in this direction appear in the work of some of the contributors of distinguished short stories to the early volumes of *The Midland* (founded in 1915), whose longer work falls outside the limits of this study. Walter J. Muilenburg's very fine novel, *Prairie* (1925), tarries only briefly in Iowa before the scene shifts to Dakota. R. L. Sergel's *Arlie Gelston* (1923) is primarily about Iowa small town and city life, though the Iowa countryside is everywhere felt in it.

In the work of Ruth Suckow, also, the Iowa

small town is central; but many of her most memorable characters are people who have retired from the farm, or are the children or grandchildren of farmers; and the sense of the interdependence of the country town and the country, a deep realization of their profound relationship, marks all of her work.

Miss Suckow's only novel which deals chiefly with farm people and farm life, *Country People* (1924), still seems to me, as it did when I first read it, somewhat too bare a chronicle of a German farm family. It depends too largely on generalized narration, and rarely achieves genuine dramatic poignancy. Miss Suckow never made that mistake again. Such later novels of Iowa small town people as *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925) are wholly realized as dramatic experience, and are deep in sympathetic penetration of their characters. Miss Suckow's longest novel, *The Folks* (1934), though it has little direct presentation of farm life, carries a constant sense of the nearness of farm concerns to the interests of its characters. Perhaps it is significant that both of the Fergusons, father and son, who are major figures of the novel, go back to the land temporarily in time of stress. The younger thinks for a time that he could find happiness there, in work with his hands. In Miss Suckow's latest novel, *New Hope* (1942), the farm and farm life again are matters of background, but of integrated and essential background. On re-

reading I have recognized the remarkable achievement of this novel more fully than I did on its appearance: the marvelously rich and complex tissue of personal attitudes and emotions and of family and community relationships, all revealed through the consciousness of a child — and always with ease, with naturalness.

In *New Hope* Miss Suckow suggests the essential differences in the feeling of men toward the land and toward farming:

> Andy had sometimes remarked, even to Dave, that Dave didn't care about farming. "You look upon this piece of land," Andy had told his brother, "as an investment first of all." And when Dave had then demanded, "Well, don't you? Isn't that the way you look at it?" Andy had replied shortly, "No, I don't. I look at it as the place where we live and are going to raise our crops."

In *New Hope*, too, we find recurringly — though always integrated and necessary to the whole impression of the work — those portrayals of the Iowa land itself in which no one has equaled Miss Suckow:

> Across the trampled barnyard, hard and dry in Autumn sunshine, they had a view of fields brown or dark gold, rising slowly toward that limitless horizon. . . . They looked over trampled stubble, plowed earth, uncultivated pastures, here and there the brushy softness of a planted grove — all rough and new, yet thriving; hazy in the dusty, golden air; and beneath the freshly turned soil, that ancientness, archaic, inscrutable; kind, but with a savage mystery, almost hidden.

It is in her short stories, however, that Miss Suckow has given us her best portrayals of the Iowa farm in fiction. Relatively few of the stories deal wholly or primarily with farm life and farm people. But such stories as "A Start in Life," "Retired," "Four Generations," and "A Rural Community" perform the miracle of which the short story at its very best is capable: their revelation is at once extended and profound. Within the space of a few pages, they open for the reader the significant outward circumstances and the inner tensions, the quality and the meaning of experience, for a family, a community, a whole way of life. In these stories of Ruth Suckow, the Iowa farm has received its highest literary expression thus far.

One other writer whose work marked the decade of the 1920's is worthy of consideration with Miss Suckow: J. G. Sigmund, whose stories appeared in *The Midland* and were collected in *Select Poetry and Prose* (1939), edited by Paul Engle, and in the earlier *Wapsipinicon Tales* (1927). Sigmund's stories seem without art. They are utterly simple and natural in their response to the demands of his material. They are marked by unerring choice of the revealing detail, by profound sympathy. Sigmund had a keen eye for the eccentric, the comic, and a warm sense of humor. He had also a deep sense of the tragic reality which often underlies a surface seemingly dull and prosaic. Sigmund's poems, often fictional

in effect and actually highly condensed short stories, possessed the same qualities. His interpretation of Iowa farm people and experience in poetry has been surpassed only by the work of James Hearst. Sigmund's fame has never spread widely beyond the borders of Iowa. In his own state it should be kept green as long as readers remain who value self-forgetting devotion to truth, and utter sincerity.

The volumes of *The Midland* for the 1920's contain no small number of genuinely distinguished stories of Iowa farm life, the work of writers who did not, for one reason or another, attain book publication. I remember especially the work of Alma Hovey, Clarence Sundermeyer, and Vernon Lichtenstein.

The Later Realism

The 1930's brought drought to Iowa, and the burden of a general depression to intensify the economic troubles with which farmers had contended all through the decade of the twenties. In the country as a whole, realistic fiction became increasingly critical in this period, with the work of John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and others, and sometimes took on a Marxist tinge. The body of writing about Iowa, and especially about Iowa farm life, in the 1930's and early 1940's was very large, far exceeding the production of any preceding period. Whatever leadership *The Midland* had provided (publication was suspended in 1933) was extended and amplified in this period by *The Husk* at Cornell College, under the editorship of Clyde Tull; by *American Prefaces*, in its short but brilliant career at the State University of Iowa, under the editorship of Paul Engle and others; and to some degree by other magazines. Their files are rich with significant stories and sketches of Iowa farm life.

The fiction dealing with Iowa farm life which was produced in the 1930's was as remarkable for its variety as for its abundance. This fact is strikingly illustrated by the first novel of the decade

to fall within our field, Phil Stong's *State Fair* (1932). Definitely romantic elements are mingled with the realism of this book — so shrewdly mingled that it became widely popular and has been recently reissued in a twenty-five cent edition. These romantic elements add nothing to the novel's literary stature; to my old-fashioned mind they are distinctly bad, not only artistically but morally. But after subtraction is made for them, there remains in *State Fair* a substantial body of fresh and sound and very much worth-while writing. Stong achieves the difficult task of presenting interestingly and without mawkishness a genuinely happy married couple — a phenomenon considerably more rare in fiction, I venture to say, than in fact — on the Iowa farm or elsewhere. The elder Frakes are moderately prosperous, modestly successful. They have encountered reverses, but they have not been floored by them.

There is humor in *State Fair*, too — a robust humor such as American fiction of recent years far too generally lacks. No other hog in literature can be compared with Abel Frake's "Blue Boy" — and that in itself, seriously, is no mean achievement. The novel holds, too, the highly individual and attractive character whom we know only as the "Storekeeper," of whom we see far too little. American fiction could do with more such characters, too, genuine originals sketched with gusto and sympathy. Finally, there is in *State Fair* a

deep and real feeling for the Iowa countryside, the land itself: a quality most clearly felt in the chapter which narrates the long night drive in a truck — taking Blue Boy to the Fair — which is the best part of the book.

Clear at the other edge of fictional motive and method is Howard Erickson's *Son of Earth* (1933), a grim novel of unlovely experience and unlovable people, but one marked by genuine insight and power. The story goes back to 1895, when Tolf Luvversen, who is just nineteen though he has been "working out" for years, decides to keep his earnings for himself instead of giving his money to his shiftless stepfather. The opening chapters give a strong portrayal of his family's bitter poverty, in contrast to the comfort and thrift of the Sondergaard farm where Tolf works. He is driven by a vague but earnest desire to "make something of himself," an ambition which centers itself on getting a job with an "English" (English-speaking) family, and making himself attractive to an "English" girl. He does get the job, and becomes infatuated with his employer's sister-in-law, a loose and shallow woman who laughs at him, plays with him, and finally repudiates him shamingly. Tolf goes to pieces, becomes a drunken bum, but in time achieves a partial regeneration. The book ends with his forlorn satisfaction in having, at least, the comfort of a riding plow, and some pleasure in his children.

The ugly detail in this novel is functional, not lugged in artificially. Tolf's life is genuine tragedy, and its elements are all pretty well accounted for. On the whole, *Son of Earth* is a sound rendering of significant aspects of Iowa farm life.

Farm material in Winifred Van Etten's *I Am the Fox* (1936) is largely limited to a single chapter — entitled, somewhat revealingly, "Saga of the Bible Belt." The heroine and her brother travel across southwestern Iowa in the depression years, living in a trailer, while the brother does repairing and construction work for the insurance company which has taken over most of the farms. "You don't really want to know these people," the brother accuses. "You'd rather not be bothered." The view we get, through the heroine's eyes, of the succession of slovenly homes and shiftless families is indeed fairly external and unsympathetic. But we do encounter the Fergusons, whose kitchen is "polished and cheerful" and whose children are in college, though they are tenants now on what had been their own farm; and we see the McKees, hauling the drought-ruined total crop of corn from twenty-five acres in one wagon box two-thirds full — and singing the tall corn song! Hence the total picture, though heavy with sordid details, does not fail of human truth.

Wallace Stegner's early novel, *Remembering Laughter* (1937), is inferior in every way to his highly distinguished and substantial later books,

The Big Rock Candy Mountain and *The Preacher and the Slave,* neither of which falls within our field. *Remembering Laughter* presents a situation which is highly dramatic and highly exceptional: so far from the range of familiar human experience that all Mr. Stegner's psychological insight and all his artistry — by no means inconsiderable even in this early work — scarcely avail to give it validity and importance in the reader's emotion.

Certain details, of minor importance in themselves as they appear in this story, raise a question of some interest in relation to the whole problem of regionalism — and indeed of realism. On one occasion, the characters walk through a field of corn which is "forming ears plumed with green silk." Yet we are told explicitly that this corn is only "waist high" — rather puny corn, for Iowa. Ornithologists will be interested, also — and farm folks who know pigeons — to learn that Mr. Stegner's pigeons lay speckled eggs.

These details are trivial, admittedly. To the reader of purely urban experience they do not matter. But for the reader who knows the life with which the book deals, I believe that these little slips go far toward canceling the effect of the whole work, making it seem false and artificial. The realist, especially the regional realist, cannot afford to take the chance of using material he does not know thoroughly.

Its firm grounding in fully assimilated experi-

ence is one of the impressive qualities of the work of Paul Corey. His *Three Miles Square* (1939) traverses the circle of the farm year and the full range of farm occupation and experience, with unfaltering accuracy and authority. Nor are events and processes overwritten, overdramatized, or paraded in any way. They are presented as matters of course, as parts of the texture of farm living, properly subordinated to the more significant human experience to which they are peripheral and incidental.

For *Three Miles Square* is a book about people. To a remarkable, an amazing degree it is a book of many people. Warmly and firmly realized in flesh and blood as individual human beings, they live in its pages, not two or three or five of them but dozens, scores. In this novel Paul Corey undertook to portray a whole community, a whole neighborhood, "three miles square," with one family as the focus, the center of interest, but with every family, every person of the neighborhood, included in his own right as an individual and in the web of relationships — and with a score of transients thrown in. He achieved and controlled this multiple presentation to a degree rarely paralleled in the world's fiction.

Proportion and emphasis are admirably adjusted in this novel. The Widow Mantz and her children, the three sons and the daughter, dominate the reader's attention. It is their book. But

the Jensens, the Dugans, the Wheelers, the Crosbys, the Langs, the Jepsens, and many more are in the book too. Wisely, Mr. Corey did not attempt to devise a plot intricate enough to include all his characters in its web. The treatment of many of them is incidental, even tangential. But they and the occasions of their appearance in the narrative are integrated as parts of the whole life of the community; and that life is lifted into dramatic significance and intensity by the strong lines of conflict which run throughout the book — between the Mantzs and certain of their neighbors, and within the Mantz family itself.

One of the fine achievements of this novel is the indirect characterization of the Iowa farmer, Chris Mantz, with whose death the story opens. It is accomplished through revelation, bit by bit, of what his neighbors had thought of him, and by the force of his will, his plans, as felt in the family as the children grow up, in the years preceding the first World War. The social history of the times is adequately recorded — the mortgages and forced sales, the gradual rise in prices to the levels we now know as the basis of "parity"; the coming of the automobile, of alfalfa, of drainage projects. But always these are presented in the dramatic terms in which they presented themselves as part of the experience of Iowa farm people, without digression or undue emphasis. Difficult and essential elements in the story — the impulse of the

widow to remarry, for example, and the sexual conflict experienced by the oldest son — are handled with candor but with fine sureness and restraint. There are a few details which I suspect Mr. Corey might omit if he were writing the novel today: it might seem less important to be the uncompromising realist now than it did in the 1930's. But the flaw — many critics would not consider it a flaw — is trivial in relation to the whole effect of the work.

In *The Road Returns* (1940) and *County Seat* (1941) Paul Corey carried on the story of the Mantz family, and to a less degree that of the farming community presented in the earlier book, with the same sure grasp and wide range in characterization and the same authenticity in every aspect of the material. The trilogy as a whole constitutes the most substantial literary interpretation thus far made of Iowa farm life.

Always the Land (1941) is marked by the sure sense for the right detail, the certain knowledge of the right word, which readers of Paul Engle's poems would expect:

> The light of the bare sun was leaving the sky faster than its heat. The gray of evening lay on the hill, but the sultry warmth of day hung in the tight air. Holstein cattle were moving out to pasture after the final milking, step by slow step, pausing to crop a mouthful of grass, or merely to stare with their empty eyes at nothing at all. Over their flanks the big white and black spots met in jagged lines like seacoasts on a map.

Always the Land is a story of an Iowa farm; but on this farm cows and fields and crops merely provide financial support for the breeding and training and showing of saddle horses. Jay Meyer, the partially paralyzed but still powerful man who owns the farm, is an "old horse guy"; and his grandson, Joe, carries on the tradition. From the first line of the first chapter, it is clear that Paul Engle knows and loves horses. Jay Meyer tells of a horse with a "chest deeper'n a well, low-traveling, easy-trotting, and a heart like God never puts in a man, the kind he keeps for race horses." It is equally clear that Paul Engle understands horsemen and their work. He tells us how Joe Meyer, training a horse, "merged with it, and they became a single intent animal, moving in precision around a circle of earth." Perhaps the finest characterization in the book is that of Henry Hope, another "old horse guy," who comes to work at the Meyer farm. I know of no other work of fiction that even approaches this novel of Paul Engle's in fullness and fidelity of portrayal of the men whose lives have been dominated by the love of fine horses. These men are members of a dedicated group, a special kind, somewhat like Conrad's men of the sea. They receive in this book the tribute of understanding which they deserve.

The hardness of change from old ways to new tends to be marked and dramatic on a farm. Joe

Meyer and his grandfather are in harmony on most matters, but they cannot agree about the propriety of accepting a government loan on sealed corn. The resulting conflict — matched in some measure on many an Iowa farm in the early years of governmental aid — gives *Always the Land* an immediate relation to social history. This conflict is not so firmly integrated with other elements of the novel as I could wish, especially in the later chapters. But the total effect of Paul Engle's novel is such as to make me wish that with his poetry he had also written more novels.

The ambition of farm parents for their children to have a life different from their own is a familiar theme in farm fiction — perhaps because it was a frequent phenomenon in farm homes in the years when most of our writers were growing up. In Don Jackson's *Archer Pilgrim* (1942), this ambition is contrary to the desires of the child, a boy who has decided at the age of seven that he wants to be a farmer, and has never changed his mind. The resulting conflict and the boy's defeat — at the hands of the girl he thinks he loves, as well as those of his parents — send him to a college experience largely sterile, then to wasted years of work in a garage, until at last he finds his way back to the farm.

The central figure of this story, whose name gives the book its title, is very finely drawn. He becomes real for the reader, and highly interesting.

His experience is authentic. When he goes out to shock oats, we are immediately sure that the writer not only knows how to shock oats, but how it feels to shock oats — which are slightly different matters. The one could be learned from watching; the other could not. The whole texture of farm experience is rendered with similar authority; and all the characters around Archer Pilgrim are presented with sympathy and consistency even in their opposition to him — his father most notably. But it is the reader's acceptance and liking of Arch himself, won in the first scene of his seven-year-old resolution, that gives the book strength and drive and weights its ending with meaning: "What a fool thing you have done, Pilgrim, he told himself. . . . Why have you done this. The answer was at his feet. As he tramped along the fence row with quick, alert steps, his shoes pressed into soft, brown soil."

Eleanor Saltzman's brief novel, *Stuart's Hill* (1945), is a fine example of a writer's recognition and realization of a significant theme in Iowa rural life which has been generally overlooked. This book tells the story of a country church, and more especially of its slow disuse, its decay, and its final destruction. This story is told in terms of the life of the neighborhood as seen and shared by William Stuart, who gives the land on which the church is built, and, later, by his son, James. Miss Saltzman had shown in her earlier novel,

Ever Tomorrow (1936), a peculiarly warm and easy rendering of the texture of farm and community life, with sparse but telling detail and a sure sense of what will reveal essential character. In the few and quiet pages of *Stuart's Hill* these qualities are intensified. It is the little church as symbol which one most remembers from this book, however: as symbol first of the close-knit and unitary character of the small farming community in the days of the building and constant use of the church; as symbol later of the weakening and dissolution of this sense of neighborhood, with the changes of the years.

Feike Feikema, in *This is the Year* (1947), found in his Frisian immigrants to Iowa a group not previously portrayed in fiction, with distinct cultural backgrounds. He pictures for the reader also a fresh geographical setting of exceptional interest, in the extremest northwest corner of the state. Ideas of contour farming and other methods of soil conservation are given expression in this novel. A few incidents attain marked dramatic power — most notably the "penny sale," at which farmers, banded together to resist foreclosures, compel clerk and auctioneer to sell stock and machinery for a few pennies. The buyers then turn their purchases back to the former owners, whose debts have been cleared by the process. This episode in Mr. Feikema's novel achieves strong realization of group emotion.

The good things in Mr. Feikema's novel are all but lost, however, in a jungle of detail. Though so much of this detail is of a clinical nature that the book might prove useful as collateral reading in a course in veterinary surgery, it is less its quality than its quantity that weakens the book. Presumably striking or shocking details when multiplied indefinitely become simply tiresome. The attempt to startle the reader, endlessly repeated, defeats itself. A similar burden is laid on Mr. Feikema's story by its style, which maintains a shrill, oratorical level and makes extensive use of coined words and exclamatory sentences. Selection and restraint are worthy disciplines for the writer of fiction. Whether in disregarding them Mr. Feikema follows Thomas Wolfe or later models I do not know; but he has robbed his characters of much of their interest and convincingness, and *This is the Year* of its tragic significance.

Our record of interpretations and portrayals of the Iowa farm would be incomplete, it seems to me, without mention of certain books fictional in form but biographical or autobiographical in substance. Iowa literature is rich in books of this kind. Among them, *Grandmother Brown's Hundred Years* (1929), by Harriet C. Brown, excels our historical novels in its re-creation of pioneer days and the pageant of Iowa's history. MacKinlay Kantor's *But Look, the Morn* (1946) has the drive

and gusto, the dramatic suspense, and the memorable characterization of an excellent novel. Though it has little direct treatment of farm matters, it holds so much of the Iowa small town that it is relevant to the country too. Leo R. Ward's *Holding Up the Hills* (1941) presents men and women and children of an Irish and Catholic farming community in a series of sketches, subtly and strongly individual in flavor and sense. The same writer's *Concerning Mary Ann* (1950) focuses the same community in the long life of one of its people, set down quietly as a human chronicle, often amusing and always alive. It is a good book with which to round out our record to the mid-century.

By Way of Summary

The portrayal of the Iowa farm in fiction, from Garland to Feikema, has shown a faithful response to the major currents in our national literature. It has attained levels of high achievement in each successive phase. Sincerity has been the prevailing common denominator of the writers who have created this portrayal. Many have been moved by love of the life they portrayed, some by rebellious anger against its circumstances. But in general they have been clear sighted, blinded neither by anger nor by love; and they have tried to tell the truth. Almost without exception they have escaped the trap always baited for the unwary regionalist: the mistaking of the means for the end, the exploitation of regional peculiarity or idiosyncrasy as such, for its own sake.

In 1922 I began to teach at the State University of Iowa what was, I believe, the first course in contemporary American literature ever offered at an American university. I have been teaching such courses ever since. For the last fifteen years I have been regularly occupied as a reviewer of current books, in addition to my teaching. I venture to introduce these personal details at this point, not in deference to the dictum of Huneker

which I mentioned at the outset, but because the fact that the study of contemporary literature has been my business for nearly thirty years — as well as my special interest — may lend a degree of authority to the conclusion at which I have arrived as a result of the survey which I have outlined in the preceding pages: that for the period surveyed, no other state can show a portrayal of its rural life in fiction so rich, so varied, and so generally sound as can Iowa. As a native Iowan, I think this is as it should be.

Yet the job is not done. The unused materials and unrecognized opportunities in the field far exceed those that have been utilized. Whole regions of the state have been neglected. Where are the novels which capture the immensely rich life of the great rivers which border the state, in their intimate relationship to the life of the people of the farms and towns beside them? Where is the novel which pictures the landscape of the northeastern corner of the state and its effect? We lack authoritative revelation of the dynamic relationship between farm and town in Iowa — especially in terms of the lives of business and professional men, merchants, bankers, doctors, and lawyers. We lack adequate portrayal of success in farming as opposed to failure — of the lives of the relatively prosperous and happy. In recent years the nation as a whole has been aroused to a new concern for the land itself, a questioning as to what we

have done with our land and what we are to do with it. The American people are beginning to see, with rapidly increasing sharpness and clearness, the basic importance for the very preservation of our national life and of the race itself of that essentially religious feeling for the land — that sense of stewardship — which has always been the mark of the true farmer. The writer can always find fresh terms for that ancient and ageless theme, man in relation to the earth.

FICTION WITH AN IOWA BACKGROUND

Compiled by Luella M. Wright
Associate Professor, State University of Iowa

Aldrich, Bess Streeter
The Cutters (1926)
A Lantern In Her Hand (1928)
Miss Bishop (1933)
The Man Who Caught The Weather (1936)
Mother Mason (1939)
Song of Years (1939)
Journey Into Christmas (1949)

Brigham, Johnson
The Sinclairs of Old Fort Des Moines (1927)

Brown, Bernice
The Shining Road (1923)

Brown, Harriet C.
Grandmother Brown's Hundred Years (1929)

Butler, Ellis Parker
Dominie Dean (1917)

Buxbaum, Katherine
Iowa Outpost (1948)

Corey, Paul
Three Miles Square (1939)
The Road Returns (1940)
County Seat (1941)
Acres of Antaeus (1946)

Donovan, Josephine
Black Soil (1930)

Downing, J. Hyatt
Sioux City (1940)
Arthur Trant (1941)

Duncan, Thomas
O, Chautauqua! (1935)
We Pluck This Flower (1937)
Gus The Great (1947)

Engle, Paul
Always The Land (1941)

Erickson, Howard
Son of Earth (1933)

Feikema, Feike
This Is The Year (1947)
The Chokecherry Tree (1949)

Ford, Elisabeth
No Hour of History (1940)

Frederick, John T. (Editor)
Stories From The Midland (1924)
Out Of The Midwest (1944)

French, Alice (Octave Thanet)
Book of True Lovers (1887)
Stories of a Western Town (1893)
Heart of Toil (1898)
Slave To Duty (1898)
The Captured Dream (1899)
The Man of the Hour (1905)
Stories That End Well (1911)

Fuller, Iola
The Shining Trail (1943)

Garland, Hamlin
Jason Edwards (1891)
Main Travelled Roads (1891)
Prairie Folk (1892)
A Spoil For Office (1892)
A Member of the Third House (1892)
Rose of Dutcher's Coolly (1895)
Wayside Courtships (1897)
Boy Life on the Prairie (1899)
Other Main Travelled Roads (1913)
A Son of the Middle Border (1917)
A Daughter of the Middle Border (1921)
Trail Makers of the Middle Border (1926)

Glaspell, Susan
The Glory of the Conquered (1909)
The Vixioning (1911)
Judd Rankin's Daughter (1945)

Hoffmann, M. M.
Young and Fair Is Iowa (1947)

Jackson, Don
Archer Pilgrim (1942)

Jerger, Joseph A.
Doctor—Here's Your Hat (1939)

Kantor, MacKinlay
Valedictory (1939)
Happy Land (1942)
But Look, the Morn (1946)

Laird, Charlton
Thunder on the River (1949)

Medary, Marjorie
Prairie Anchorage (1933)
Prairie Printer (1949)

Meigs, Cornelia
As The Crow Flies (1927)

Muilenburg, Walter J.
Prairie (1925)

Quick, Herbert
Aladdin and Co. (1904)
The Brown Mouse (1915)
The Fairview Idea (1919)
Vandemark's Folly (1922)
The Hawkeye (1923)
The Invisible Woman (1924)

Russell, Charles E.
A Raftin' on the Mississip' (1928)

Saltzman, Eleanor
Ever Tomorrow (1936)
Stuart's Hill (1945)

Sergel, Roger L.
Arlie Gelston (1923)

Sigmund, J. G.
Wapsipinicon Tales (1927)

Spence, Hartzell
One Foot In Heaven (1940)
Get Thee Behind Me (1942)

Stegner, Wallace E.
Remembering Laughter (1937)

Stong, Philip D.
State Fair (1932)
Stranger's Return (1933)
Village Tale (1934)
Career (1936)
Buckskin Breeches (1937)
If School Keeps (1939)
Ivanhoe Keeler (1939)
The Long Lane (1939)
One Destiny (1942)

Suckow, Ruth
Country People (1924)
The Odyssey of a Nice Girl (1925)
Iowa Interiors (1926)
The Bonney Family (1928)
Cora (1929)
The Kramer Girls (1930)
Children and Older People (1931)
The Folks (1934)
Carry-Over (1936)
New Hope (1942)

Van Etten, Winifred Mayne
I Am The Fox (1936)

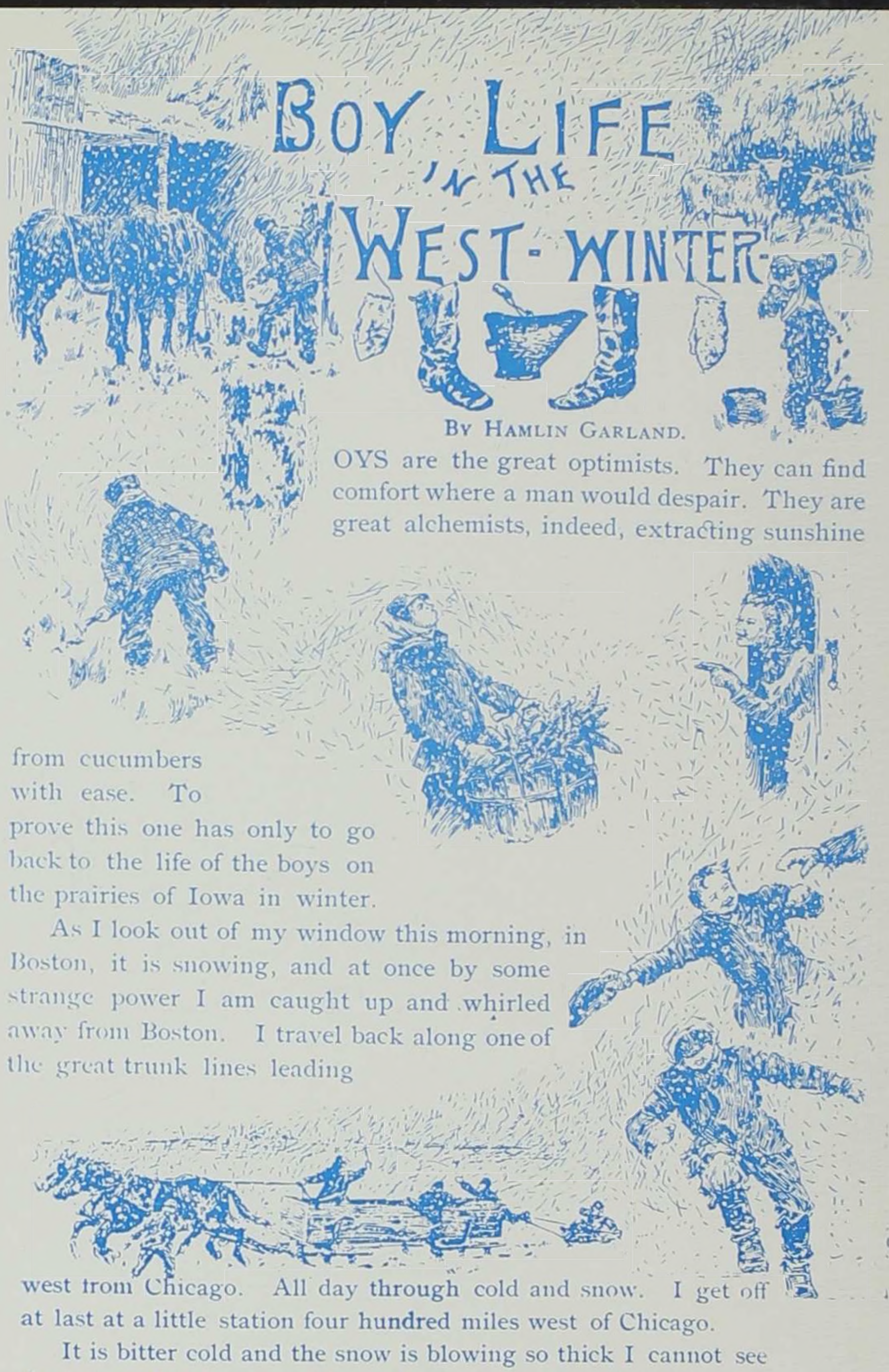
Van Vechten, Carl
The Tattooed Countess (1924)

Ward, Leo R.
Holding Up the Hills (1941)
Concerning Mary Ann (1950)

Wilson, Margaret
The Able McLaughlins (1923)
The Law and The McLaughlins (1937)

Yoseloff, Martin
No Greener Meadows (1946)
The Family Members (1948)

Brigham, Johnson—A Book of Iowa Authors by Iowa Authors (1930)
Iowa Authors and Artists—Prairie Gold (1917)
Mott, Frank L.—Literature of Pioneer Life in Iowa (1923)
Petersen, William J.—A Reference Guide to Iowa History (1942)



BOY LIFE IN THE WEST-WINTER-

By Hamlin Garland.

BOYS are the great optimists. They can find comfort where a man would despair. They are great alchemists, indeed, extracting sunshine from cucumbers with ease. To prove this one has only to go back to the life of the boys on the prairies of Iowa in winter.

As I look out of my window this morning, in Boston, it is snowing, and at once by some strange power I am caught up and whirled away from Boston. I travel back along one of the great trunk lines leading west from Chicago. All day through cold and snow. I get off at last at a little station four hundred miles west of Chicago.

It is bitter cold and the snow is blowing so thick I cannot see the town. I look up and down the track — a deep furrow lost in snow in either direction. A desolate and cheerless spot.

A team, humped and shivering, stands waiting for me, and I leap into the seat beside the driver, who resembles a grizzly bear, so thick his buffalo coat. We set off at a tearing pace up the street lined with maples through whose branches the wind howls ferocious monody. The night is coming in the east.

But when we face the north we feel again the full power of the weather. The sky is bright as burnished steel ; the sun low down in the west is red and angry — partially veiled by the driving snow. The wind strikes the face like a lash, closing the nostrils and penetrating to the bone through every chink in one's clothing, as it drives upon us out of the frozen level north.

I bow my head beneath the buffalo robe. I can see nothing,