

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Phil Stong's Hawkeyes

This volume is advertised as an intimate biography of Iowa, one of the first of a series planned by Dodd, Mead & Company for the forty-eight States. It is, in fact, a mixture of reminiscence (both personal and second hand), history (with many question marks), and description. In the foreword and the seventeen chapters, the author has assembled an amazing collection of stories about Iowa events and people, told in his breezy dramatic style. The foreword is headed Nicollet's Bowl. Among the chapter titles are Forums (general stores as centers of pioneer life), Corn-fed Art, Justice, Revolt, Worship, Indian Stuff, High Sassiety (devoted chiefly to the Masons, the P. E. O., the W. C. T. U., women's clubs, and the society page of the Des Moines *Register*), Big Red Schoolhouse, Land of the Free, The Grapefruits of Wrath (an optimistic picture of farm tenancy), Flies in the Ointment (including lack of bathrooms), The River, and Crops (two pages).



Phil Stong can write; there is no doubt about that. For example, here is one of his comments on a shooting match: "Certainly the turkey was not unusually worried about its life — turkeys are always worried, and these no more than usual." In another chapter the author writes: "The Iowa country was full of school teachers and preachers, a little while after settlement, who fancied themselves as budding Whittiers or Emersons or Lowells. They taught what they wished they knew." But isn't this true of all good teachers and preachers? Closed minds are no indication of learning. Cynical but expressive is the observation, "When a man does something, it's news; when a lady does something, it is usually society page."

There are also excellent descriptions of places and events — the view of the countryside as a boy saw it on Saturday afternoon; the story of the curmudgeon who bet ten cents he could split a bullet on the sharp edge of an axe, smashed the much prized hand-made handle, and considered the joke on the owner worth the dime he lost; the characterization of the hired man; the vivid portrayal of pioneer conditions.

But on the whole, this book is a disappointment, a greater disappointment because of its possibilities. If the publishers intended this series to portray the true characteristics of the States, Iowans



have good reason to feel cheated in their representation. *Hawkeyes* is a sardonic caricature of Iowa.

For one thing, the volume was evidently written in haste. Was it more important that the Iowa book should be *first* than that it should be *good*? Mr. Stong wrote (on page 36), "You can't rush a tree or a stand of corn or a hen or a moo cow and this fact impresses itself upon the thinking and behavior of the people". Although Mr. Stong is, or was, an Iowan, he evidently did not learn that you can't rush a book either, even a best-seller.

One of the most evident faults of *Hawkeyes* is best expressed by the homely phrase which came from pioneer kitchens — "half-baked". Bread was an important item of food and the housewife who did not allow sufficient time for her loaves to bake through was outside the circle of the elect, and "half-baked" came to be a term of derogation indicating slovenliness and a lack of judgment.

This hasty compilation probably accounts for the large number of errors. The very first statement in the first chapter is wrong. Iowa celebrated its Territorial centennial anniversary in 1938, not in 1939, as stated in the book, although a number of towns held celebrations on the later date. The Iowa State Fair presented the pageant on Iowa history in August, 1938.



Was it State pride which led Mr. Stong to write, "these scoundrels had the highest literacy rate in the country in 1840"? In using the term "scoundrels", he is sarcastically quoting a phrase used in Congress. The census figures do not, however, bear out his claim. If Iowa had a population of 43,112 persons in 1840, with 1118 of those over twenty years of age listed as unable to read and write, what about Connecticut with a population of 309,978 and only 526 illiterates or even Michigan with 2173 unable to read and write out of a population of 212,267.

And the so-called boundary war between Iowa and Missouri did not involve "a hundred years of not too bloody hostilities". The old dispute involved several conflicting lines run by surveyors and was settled once and for all by a decision of the United States Supreme Court in 1849. The recent redefinition of the southeastern boundary was necessary because the Des Moines River refuses to recognize the jurisdiction of either Iowa or Missouri.

In preparing his copy on the "Cow War" in Cedar County, Mr. Stong says he secured his information "first-hand" from a "Federal vet". This man appears to have given him some misinformation. The farmers made no distinction between Federal and State agents and, in fact, the testing



was done by authority of the State law. Was the "Federal vet" responsible for the statement that the government veterinarians were "inoculating healthy ones against the disease"? He would have something there if he could prove that bovine tuberculosis could be prevented by inoculation. No claim of immunizing cattle was made, however; the test was and still is used only to detect infected animals.

There are a number of questions on other points the inquiring reader would like to ask. Who was the Dominican priest who "preached the first sermon in the state"? Father Charles Van Quickenborne, the first priest to hold services in Iowa, was a Jesuit. Father Mazzuchelli, the well-known Dominican priest, did not come to Dubuque until 1835, some two years after religious services had been held there by the Reverend Aratus Kent and other ministers.

There is also a question about the assertion that "the government" (whether Federal or State is not specified) requires the Indians residing near Tama to marry according to the white man's law but has ruled that the use of peyote is "entirely all right". The Indians are not required to comply with the marriage laws of the white men, and the government does not approve the use of peyote. The Indians checkmated efforts to eliminate



it by claiming that it was used in religious ceremonies.

And the story of Keokuk's joke on LeClaire and Black Hawk during Black Hawk's trip through the East in 1833 is so good, one is reluctant to point out that neither Keokuk nor LeClaire was with Black Hawk on that trip.

Mr. Stong has had newspaper experience and been around a lot. How did he come to make the statement that "Except for the matter of Mr. O'Connell, our first murderer mentioned in Chapter Three, I have not been able to find an account of any lynching that was not duly authorized by the state, either in the history of Iowa or the history of lynching." Just what he means by "duly authorized by the state" is not clear, but his search for lynching data must have been very casual indeed, for an article published in *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics* in 1912 listed some sixty men who had been put to death in Iowa without benefit of legal court trials. Incidentally the man executed in chapter three was named O'Connor.

Any one who reads proof knows how easy it is to miss the spelling of names. "Kirby Paige" seems to refer to Kirby Page. LeClaire spelled his name with an e at the end. The proof reader, however, can not be blamed for Voltaire Paine Twombly Kneeland. Voltaire Paine Twombly



was the son of Samuel T. Twombly, one of Abner Kneeland's associates, and his name was not Kneeland. Or is the confusion of names meant to suggest a family scandal?

The attention of farmers in Iowa is called to the "processing taxes" not always "faithfully reported". Why should they report non-existent taxes? The Secretary of Agriculture would be surprised to learn that he has been demoted to the head of a Bureau. And the institution maintained by the State at Oakdale is not "the infirmary for minds".

If facts are considered inconsequential in a best-seller, what about style? Mr. Stong can write well. Who then was responsible for this sentence (found on page 22): "They very were certainly were not." Perhaps the proof reader let that get by, but what does this sentence mean? "There was fear at the Convention that, if the question of recovery of an escaped slave should come up, Iowa might become a Negro state, because of its rich, almost free lands and its immunity to the statutes of other states or to anything less than federal law."

Another sentence which indicates hasty or fuzzy thinking is this one: "Their idea of a proper legal procedure was one such as that indicated in the constitutions of the Claims Associations — find



out which man is squatting and then 'throw him off.' " Mr. Stong ought to know that the men who formed the claim associations were all "squatters", occupying land not yet for sale. The claim associations merely guaranteed the right of the first claimant.

There can be no doubt now that the Indians of Iowa lacked art. On page 126 Mr. Stong tells us, "Curiously, the Indians never developed any pictorial art." Three pages later he remarks, "it is strange that the Indians never developed a pictorial art worthy of a first-grade school child", and to clinch the matter, he writes on the following page, "the Indians never created or began a pictorial art." Three times and art is out.

"Iowans", says Mr. Stong, "have little faith in violence as an ideological argument, in spite of the fact that the state has produced Buffalo Bill, Frank Gotch — the greatest wrestler who ever lived — and the current baseball pitcher, Bob Feller, and also Lillian Russell." What is the Iowa biographer's idea of "violence as an ideological argument"? Should we infer that the Hawkeyes are generally pacifists or athletically incompetent?

The hasty preparation of this volume is aggravated by the flippant attitude of the author. Although Mr. Stong writes as an Iowan and evidently has some affection for his native State, he



snubs what he calls the "Sheep-Dip School" of writers because, he says, they misrepresent Iowa conditions; yet there is much that is condescending and contemptuous in his own comments, especially on churches, schools, and government.

"The Sabbath", writes Mr. Stong, "is the Lord's Day, held holy by a lot of old women and quivering Legislatures [legislators?]." In another place he says: "Ministerial volubility and the cawings of some trained regiments of elderly ladies have frequently led to unusual and undesirable effects in the behavior and culture of Iowans, but for the most part the conventicles furnish little more to the state than a pleasant and convenient resource for its reasonably exuberant social life."

Of the rural schools of Iowa (which he also calls grade schools), the author writes: "It will probably occur to these people [the farmers] by and by that paying for a bus is cheaper than paying semi-educated imbeciles to operate schools". It has not occurred to Mr. Stong, apparently, that the transportation of children by bus has its own health and social problems, that the teachers in these rural schools are often the daughters of the farmers, and that the rural schools have no monopoly on mediocrity.

In a comparison of the State University and the Iowa State College there is this comment: "The



law and medical schools are by no means up to the comparative ratings of the Ames cow-physicians, but the doctors are good enough and it doesn't make much difference what a lawyer is taught in college."

Of the government, the critic writes superciliously: "Politics has fortunately never risen above the status of a children's game in Iowa." Charles Mason, one of the wisest lawyers of early Iowa and a member of the first Territorial Supreme Court, is dismissed cavalierly, after quoting his legalistically phrased indictment of a murderer, with this sarcastic comment, "Unfortunately there is no record of their having then and there hanged the aforesaid Charles Mason." These and many other clever phrases are not the humorous comments of a man who pokes fun at the frailties common to humanity; they are acid, flippant remarks which suggest a superiority complex.

But suppose we accept these comments as clever and witty thrusts at certain defects in Iowa life. There is a still more serious criticism of this book, a book which has been published, we are told, to represent Iowa at home and in other States. There are an inexcusable number of off-color stories and obscene allusions in *Hawkeyes*. Most Iowans are familiar with the problems and practices connected with breeding livestock, but smutty stories are not



characteristic of Iowans and have no place in a book which should be fit for a home or school library.

In the days of Queen Elizabeth, the English cooks used a great many condiments and herbs, because lack of refrigeration and poor sanitation frequently resulted in spoiled meats, too strong for even the hearty eaters of that day. To make things appetizing, spices were sprinkled over the food. Because the people bathed infrequently and clothing was seldom changed, perfumes were lavishly used by the better classes to overcome unpleasant odors. Phil Stong reverses the process: the book is sprinkled with filthy and offensive stories and allusions and leaves a bad taste in the reader's mouth and an unpleasant odor in his nostrils.

One is often inclined to marvel at the author's vocabulary along other lines. He knows a lot of seventy-five cent words. Look at echolalia, minuscule, gooiily muliebritious, and prosencephalon!

The impression is formed from reading *Hawkeyes* that there are less than half a dozen really intelligent persons who live, or have lived, in Iowa, among whom, we assume, is the "state biographer". Next to him is Grant Wood, of whom the author rhapsodizes, "It is possible that Grant Wood is one of the greatest painters who ever lived; aside from that there is nothing much in the



arts of Iowa that is likely to prove immortal, at this time." Greatest among the poets is Paul Engle. Among the lesser lights is Ruth Suckow (Mrs. Ferner Nuhn) who "writes like a nun in hell". Is this a pun?

It is something to learn that *Hawkeyes* is not expected to be immortal, but it is unfortunate that Iowa is represented, even temporarily, in the Sovereign State Series by a volume that is, roughly speaking, one-fourth wrong, one-fourth dull, one-fourth offensive, and only one-fourth good. It might so easily have been a really great book.

RUTH A. GALLAHER