

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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## The S. P. C. S

There is entirely too much speech-making in the world today. Bad and mediocre speech-making I mean, of course; and that includes most of it. Every service club the country over must, for some occult reason, have a half-hour speech after each weekly luncheon. Every church group must call for a sermon at least once a week, not because its minister has anything new to say or any talent for saying it, but because custom forces him to be a preacher as well as a pastor. College classes listen to interminable lectures when the matter discussed could be presented far better in print, on the screen, or through laboratory demonstration. Political leaders and would-be leaders pour forth endless streams of double-talk. Professional lecturers ply their tricks. Persons who have achieved notoriety for this or that take to the platform. And incidentally, what is so useless, dear reader, what is so vain, nugatory, tiresome, and unprofitable as a commencement address? But we must have them: we must have all this speech-making, and

more. One great "system" blankets the United States with its classes to teach every man to be an "effective" speaker, for such a stupendous flow of talk requires constant recruitment of talkers. Thus nearly everybody becomes a public speaker at some time or other, whether he really has anything to say or not.

I think I must some day make a speech about it all.

Certainly I have made my own contribution — and no small one — to this universal abuse. I remember well sitting on the platform of a church where a high school commencement was being held and hearing a local minister addressing God through an "invocation" in the familiar fashion affected by some preachers: "O Lord, we have had a busy day, first with the exhibitions in the school rooms, then with the junior exercises, and then at the picnic in the schoolhouse yard, and now here at the commencement program. And we pray that as soon as the speaker here has finished, we may go to our homes in peace and quiet to refreshing sleep. Amen." The words were addressed to the Lord; but the hint was intended for the speaker, and I did my best to follow it. I think the best speech I ever made was one to a Rotary Club which had asked me to discuss "Freedom of the Press" during Newspaper Week. I shall favor my readers with the entire speech herewith: "Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Rotary Club:

There is no such thing as freedom of the press. I thank you." Then I sat down, to the consternation of the program chairman. Of course, I spoiled it all later by yielding to the urging of the president to go on and say something about it anyway, and I talked for a while about the nature of freedom and the controls to which the press is subject. It would have served me right and paid me well for my smart-aleck "hamming" if the Rotarians had all walked out immediately after I had sat down, but they were so intrigued by the spectacle of a man who actually appeared not to want to make a speech that they stayed it out.

Now, I am convinced that the blame for this vast sea of mediocre speechifying should not be laid upon the speech-makers, but upon the audiences that demand it. It has become conventional to require speeches on all occasions, whether or not anything really needs to be said at length. Moreover, it is an American tradition that whenever a man achieves some fame or some degree of note, he must be dragged to the platform whether he is a good or bad performer thereon. The chain by which he is thus dragged is made of dollars and is therefore hard to break. And so Ralph Waldo Emerson, who admitted that he was born with a pen rather than a tongue, long earned much of his living by lecturing; Horace Greeley, who cut a poor figure on the platform and repelled hearers by his squeaky voice, and who once con-

fessed to Henry Ward Beecher that he always considered a lecture successful if half his audience stayed through to the end, was a platform "star" for many years; and so on. Even good speakers, moreover, have often loathed the lyceum because of the strains of travel, the discomforts of bad hotels and irregular meals, the treatment of inconsiderate hosts and lecture committees.

For myself, I have little commiseration to spare for bored and restless audiences; they have brought their punishment upon themselves. Save your pity, say I, for the poor speaker, harried from platform to platform, ineptly introduced, suffering from indigestion and hoarseness and supertensions.

All this is by way of general introduction to the history of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers. For specific introduction, I must go back to the latter years for the *Midland* magazine at Iowa City and the group of writers in the faculty and student body of the State University of Iowa at the end of the 1920's.

John Frederick and I, who edited that magazine, agreed that we would all profit by a kind of friendly communion with some of the leading American writers of our time if we could get them to come out to Iowa City, not as orators or lecturers but as our guests for conversations, a spot of counsel and advice, and a little after-luncheon talk. The luncheon audience would be small and the atmosphere informal. I think we called the in-

formal sponsoring organization the *Saturday Luncheon Club*.

It is remarkable how easy it was to get the men we most wanted, and for small fees. Frederick was a persuasive fellow, and many of our notables were interested in the *Midland*. We were never able to get Henry Mencken; but we did get Sherwood Anderson and Joseph Wood Krutch and e. e. cummings and John V. A. Weaver and Leonard Cline and Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg and others. Perhaps one or two of those I name were guests of a later incarnation of our Club, because when Frederick took the *Midland* to Chicago at the end of 1930 I continued the procession with a Journalism Dinner Club for a season or two before founding our famous Times Club.

We spent unforgettable hours with these visitors of ours. Fixed in my memory is a picture of Frost sitting on the small of his back in an easy chair after his talk and his readings, holding a glass of milk in his hand, and regaling us between sips with amusing Amherst legends about such diverse characters as Emily Dickinson and Calvin Coolidge — wonderful stories! And Sandburg intoning folk songs to the accompaniment of his guitar. And Anderson gathered with students before a fireplace, chatting, his face in the firelight looking for all the world like that of a nice comfortable old lady. His talk, too, was mild and easy, but his ideas explosive.

The Times Club was organized in 1933. Harry Hartwick, who liked naming things, was godfather to it. Its membership was limited to three hundred, to insure small audiences. Each member paid in two dollars and was given a ticket admitting him to whatever meetings the Club had for that year. We did not promise any specific program: we told them we thought we could get five or six interesting persons to visit us — not orators or professional platform men, but persons who had done things, and had ideas, and were willing to talk informally to a small audience of intelligent and sympathetic listeners. Watch the papers, we said, and you will see who they are and when they are to be here; that will be your sole notification of the meetings. At this distance, I find it hard to understand how we hypnotized three hundred Iowa Citizens in those "depression" years to invest two dollars apiece in a hypothetical course of this character, but the ticket sale always went over easily.

I carried on a wide correspondence with many prospects, utilizing all my own contacts and those of my friends to interest the kind of persons we wanted to visit us. Since we were not far from Chicago, many of our eastern friends made a visit to that metropolis include a side-trip to Iowa City. Eventually many came without asking any fee whatever, though commonly we paid a fifty-dollar honorarium, and in a few cases we stretched it to

a hundred dollars or even a hundred and fifty. But mostly our visitors came because they were interested in us.

I think our first guest was the novelist O. E. Rolvaag. Another early comer was Henry A. Wallace, not at that time famous in politics. He brought with him an editor of *Wallace's Farmer*, Donald R. Murphy. "Seems like Donald and I never have time to settle the problems of the world at home," said Henry, "so I thought we'd do it on the road down from Des Moines." They therefore drove down in a decrepit Model "T" Ford at a speed of twenty-five to thirty miles an hour, but they got an early start and arrived on time.

One Sunday evening Lincoln Steffens called me from the hotel. "Well, I'm here," he said. "Come on down and let's have some talk." I had met him a couple of years before, when we were both on the program of a Women's Club Federation convention; but his wife, Ella Winter, was the featured speaker, and while she was doing her stuff, Steffens and I had a long talk about many things in the hotel lobby. At that time I invited Steffens to stop off and visit us at Iowa City on one of his frequent trips between his home at Carmel, California, and New York, and he said he would. I had renewed my invitation now and then by correspondence; and now here he was, as he said, asking me to come down to the hotel and continue our conversation where we had left off some two

years earlier. But I got a group of students together and we had a late supper with him, and he discussed social and political questions with us until after midnight. His Times Club talk the following evening was a typical success for that group; Steffens was a small man with an inadequate voice; he was by no means a Master of the Platform, but he had a steady flow of ideas, and before a small audience in an informal atmosphere he was immensely stimulating.

We had Frost again, and Sandburg again, but it was Christopher Morley's visit in the spring of 1934 that really opened our eyes to the needs and possibilities of the Times Club operation. That, and Grant Wood's ever-active genius for original projects. Grant was now coming down from his studio-home in Cedar Rapids twice a week to lecture at the University, and I was having lunch with him every Tuesday at "Smitty's" Cafe. He had become interested in the Times Club and had helped me to get Morley as a visitor. A few weeks earlier Wood had been in New York and Morley had given a cocktail party for him; now Wood wanted to return the courtesy with a party in a typical Iowa setting — but what was available? Not a lounge at the University Union, not "Smitty's," not a private house; these lacked the proper atmosphere. Finally we fixed upon a log-cabin road-house across the river. We had a good time, but the place was not right; we wanted

something with distinctive connotations of our own brand of hospitality — something symbolic of the special kind of junto the Times Club was and the performance it stood for. We had felt this lack in our entertainment of other guests, but the visit of Christopher Morley seemed to point up our shortcomings and stir us to action.

We enlarged the executive committee of the Club to sixteen members, and this group I dubbed "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers." Immediately the S. P. C. S. set out to do three things: find a home for itself, furnish such a place suitably, and devise a type of program that would entertain and amuse the guests of the Times Club and be fun for us all.

We considered various places that we might buy or rent as a home. We looked over an abandoned country schoolhouse near town, a big hay-mow in a well-built barn, an ancient flour-mill; and we enjoyed planning remodeling jobs. But nearly everything we considered involved financing that was too ambitious for us. Then Roland Smith — the "Smitty" of our favorite eating rendezvous and the friend of all of us — came forward with the solution. One of his speculations in Texas oil wells had recently come through with a gusher, and he was feeling even more generous than usual. He offered us, rent free, with all facilities furnished, and for as long as we wanted it, the full floor above his cafe. We would have *carte blanche*

to do with it whatever we chose. And so the S. P. C. S. had a home, accessible, unencumbered with debt, ready for our devices.

What we resolved to do was to furnish this space as two rooms — a dining-room and a parlor — all in what Grant affectionately called “the worst style of the late Victorian period.” We put an ingrain carpet on the floor and a flowered paper on the walls. We decorated with Currier and Ives prints; a fine chromo of that old favorite, “Rock of Ages,” in which a lady clings to the foot of a cross on a great rock lashed by foam-tipped waves from the sea; embroidered mottoes, “God Bless Our Home,” “Peace Be With You,” and so on; and certain designs under glass formed from the hair of some dear departed. In the dining-room section a big table was covered with a red-and-white checked cloth, and a bulging sideboard stood in one corner. In the parlor was much red plush and walnut furniture — Boston rockers, and love-seats on either side of the marble fireplace. One big chair was made of steers’ horns, with seat, back, and tassels of green plush. A cottage organ, with elaborately carved walnut case and music rack, was ornamental, and proved highly useful at our parties. Upon a marble-topped stand stood a red-plush album, which, in the course of time, came to be filled with specially posed pictures of our guests and our own members.

That picture-taking stunt was fun. We got

some false beards and mustaches from a costume house, and picked up some old-fashioned hats, collars, ties, and coats; and with these we would dress up our visitors and photograph them for our red-plush album. Thus we got Grant Wood with mustache and sweeping sideburns posed with his bearded friend Thomas Hart Benton in a highly artificial photograph-gallery posture beneath a framed motto, "Home, Sweet Home." We got Stephen Vincent Benet in choker collar, ascot tie, and sideburns. We got John Erskine, then at the height of his fame as Columbia lecturer on epic poetry and author of the best seller *Helen of Troy*, in an extraordinary flowing white beard, Sigmund Spaeth at the organ with a soulful expression and a bar-tender's mustache, Mackinlay Kantor with a black beard as wildly luxuriant as that of any cartoonist's version of a Russian nihilist, John Towner Frederick as a bearded farmer in work-jacket and broad-brimmed hat and with pitchfork in hand, Gilbert Seldes drinking tea from a mustache-cup in order to protect the fine hirsute decorations on his upper lip. And so on, and so on. We hesitated to suggest to Nicholas Roosevelt, a dignified statesman of a man, that he submit himself to this childish game; but as soon as he saw what the red-plush album already contained, he exclaimed, "Oh, aren't you going to take a picture of me for that gallery?" So we got him in a "kady" hat, beard, stiff collar, and all.

The chief function of the S. P. C. S. was, of course, giving after-lecture parties to our visitors. Each member of the group was allowed to bring two guests, and our rooms were always filled. There were sandwiches from downstairs on the table, ice-buckets with bottles of soft drinks and beer, and pots of coffee; we never served "hard liquor." Almost always, conversation began with our guests' exclamations about the furnishings of our rooms. "Oh, my aunt had a decoration piece of peacock feathers just like that in her front parlor! And it was set on just such a marble-topped stand!" We came to expect, and to await with pleasure such an upsurge of nostalgic memories on the part of every middle-aged visitor who saw our exhibition for the first time.

Nearly always there was an informal program of some kind or other. Sometimes the company merely gathered around about our guest, sitting on chairs or on the floor, and drew him out with questions. Usually there was some singing of the old songs of the nineties, with Dorothy Pownall, newspaper woman and one of our members, at the organ. When Spaeth was with us, he sat at the organ all evening, leading the choruses and singing solos himself from a wonderful repertoire of sentimental songs of the Nineties. "Steamboat Bill" Petersen, later superintendent of the Iowa Historical Society, used to lead us in one of those old repetitive songs in comic German dialect:

Bill: Ist das nicht der Gartenhaus?  
 Chorus: *Ja, das ist der Gartenhaus!*  
 Bill: Und es hat ein roof on top!  
 Chorus: *Ja, es hat ein roof on top!*  
 All (*fortissimo*): ROOF ON TOP; GARTENHAUSE!  
                           OH, WIE SCHONUS. OH, MAGNOLIUS!  
                           OH, WIE SCHONUS GARTENHAUS!

and so on and on, sometimes with prompt-pictures as guides.

Sometimes someone would take the floor with a recitation. I shall never forget the fervor with which MacKinlay Kantor recited "The Rebel's Prayer" at a party we gave him. Occasionally (semi-occasionally, perhaps) I read "The Face on the Bar Room Floor" with melodramatic passion, turning my back on the audience after the introductory part for a quick costume and facial change before assuming the bum's character as he tells his sad story. And sometimes the two Helens (Reich and Dawson) and Vera Mott and Bessie Hart would retell in swaying unison the pathetic tale beginning:

'Twas a cold and stormy evening  
 When our Nellie went away . . .

Our S. P. C. S. membership, which was always kept at or near sixteen, was divided among faculty, students, and townspeople. I think our first president was Evans Worthley, Unitarian minister, though a little later we made it a rule always to elect a student to that position. Tom Yoseloff,

now a New York book publisher, was our president in the season of 1934-1935. The young city editors of the community's two daily newspapers were active members, and the Times Club and S. P. C. S. owed much of their success to the "play" our activities always received in the papers. Frederick Kent, best of university photographers, was a faithful member, always on hand with camera ready to take pictures for the album.

In looking over a memorandum dated September 27, 1935, the following composed the "Executive Board" of the first S. P. C. S.:

Evans A. Worthley, *president*

Jeanne Doran, *vice-president*

Frank Luther Mott, *secretary-treasurer*

Lee Allen

Graham M. Dean

Clyde W. Hart

Mrs. Ernest Horn

Fred Kent

Wm. O. Merritt

William J. Petersen

Seymour W. Pitcher

Mrs. Dorothy M. Pownall

Helen Reich

Grant Wood

But the three wheel-horses of the organization were Grant Wood, artist; Clyde Hart, sociologist; and Frank Mott, eager beaver. We owed much to the original ideas and the contributions in time and energy of Wood, and to the lively initiative and industry of Hart. As for me, I kept track of the finances, the Times Club schedules, and this and that. I still carried on a furious correspondence with possible guests. We prepared a beautifully printed "flier" which was in effect a whimsi-

cal invitation to come and visit us, address the Times Club, and see if the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers lived up to its name. This carried a charming decoration in the style of the Nineties showing a hand pouring water from a rose-decorated pitcher into a hobnail-glass tumbler. Grant Wood made the original as a pen-and-ink drawing and we reproduced it on the cover of our brochure. But more effective than anything else in bringing desirable visitors our way was the talk that got about among writers and artists about our activities; the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the *New York Herald-Tribune* printed pieces about us, and soon the S. P. C. S. was being mentioned here and there in other newspapers and magazines, and even in books.

I have named a number of our famous guests, but I am not going to attempt a complete list of them here. I ought not to omit mention of several Negroes whom it was our pleasure to hear and to entertain. I think the first of these was W. C. Handy, composer of "The St. Louis Blues" and other great popular pieces. He was accompanied by Rosamund Johnson, himself a musician of importance, who was a great help to the almost blind Handy in his appearance before our club. A group of students had improvised a small orchestra, which was seated on the stage, and the boys were thrilled to have the great Handy conduct them in a somewhat ragged rendition of his famous

Greetings from

The Society for the Prevention  
of Cruelty to Speakers

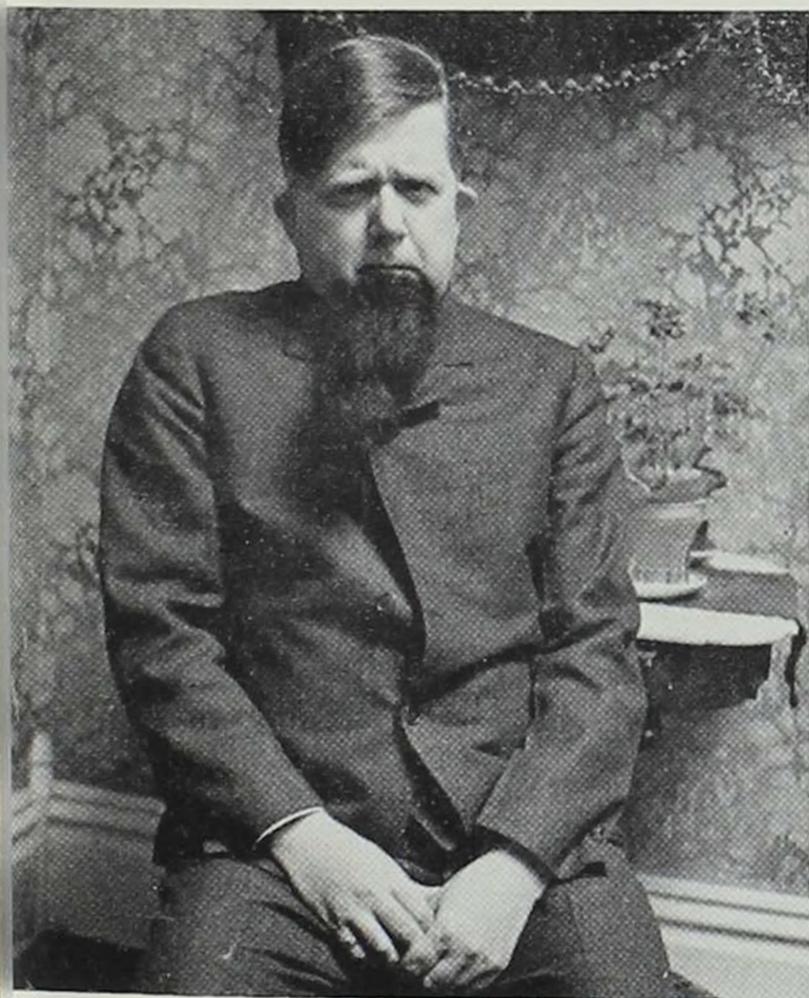


Being a Special Bulletin from

The Times Club

Iowa City, Iowa

SOME S. P. C. S. BOARD MEMBERS



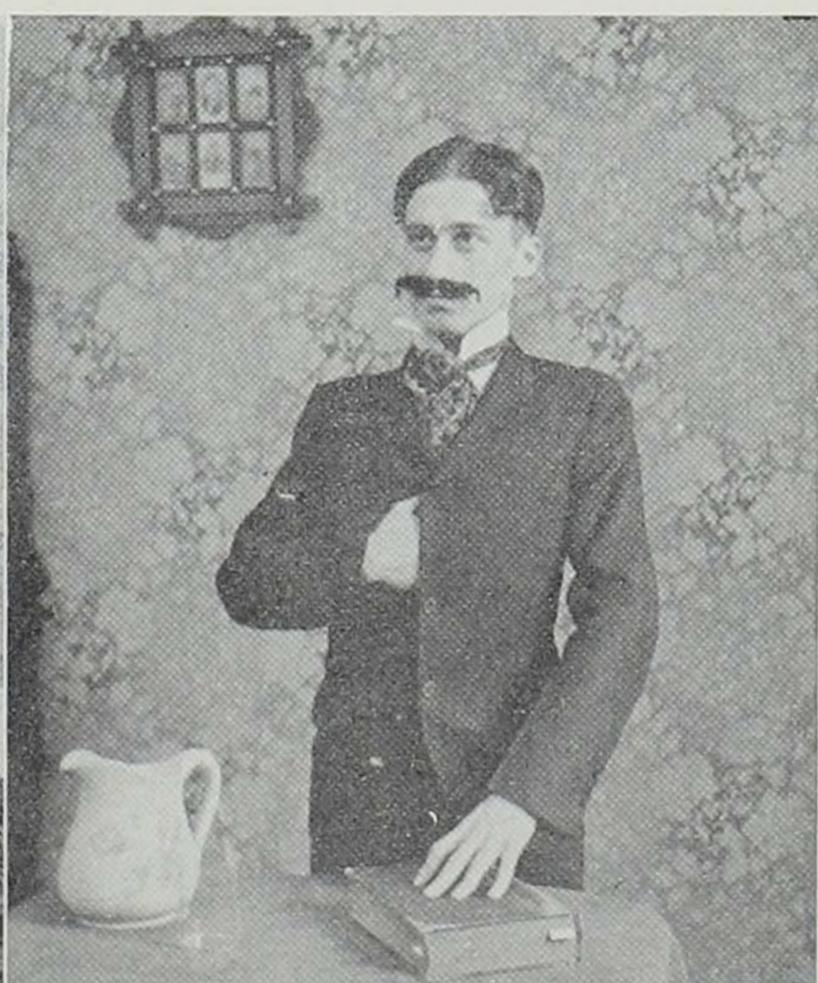
FRANK LUTHER MOTT



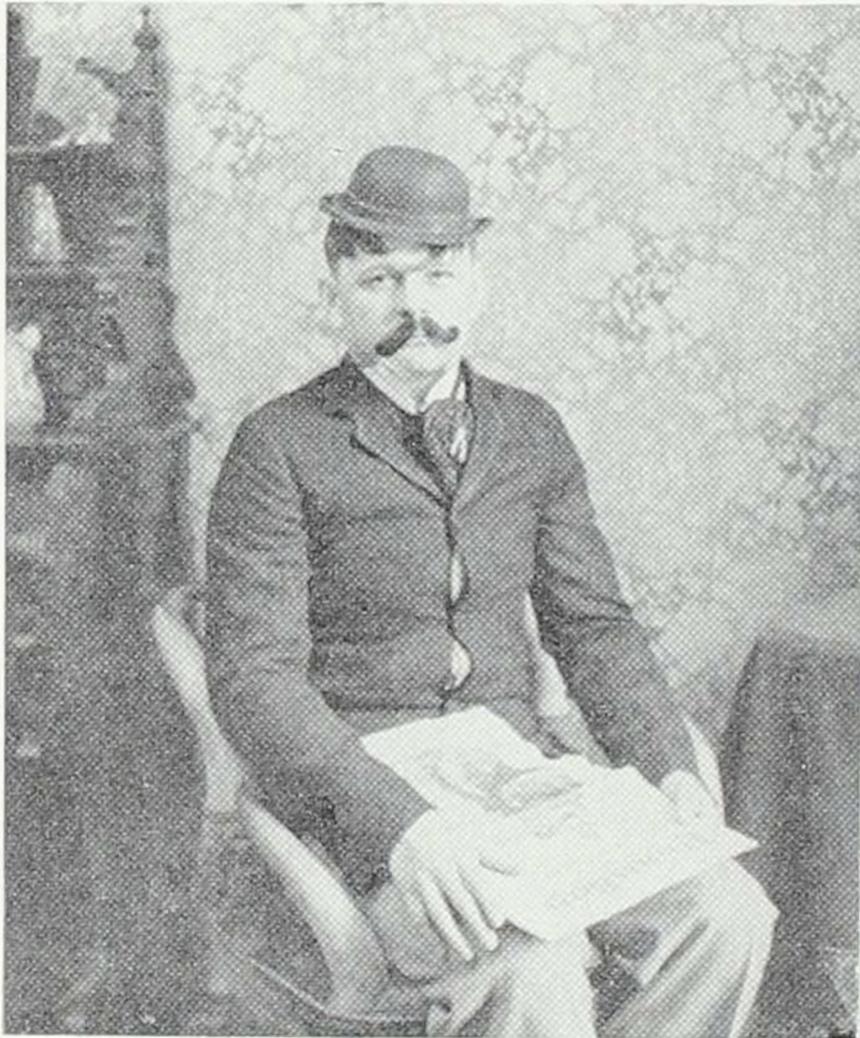
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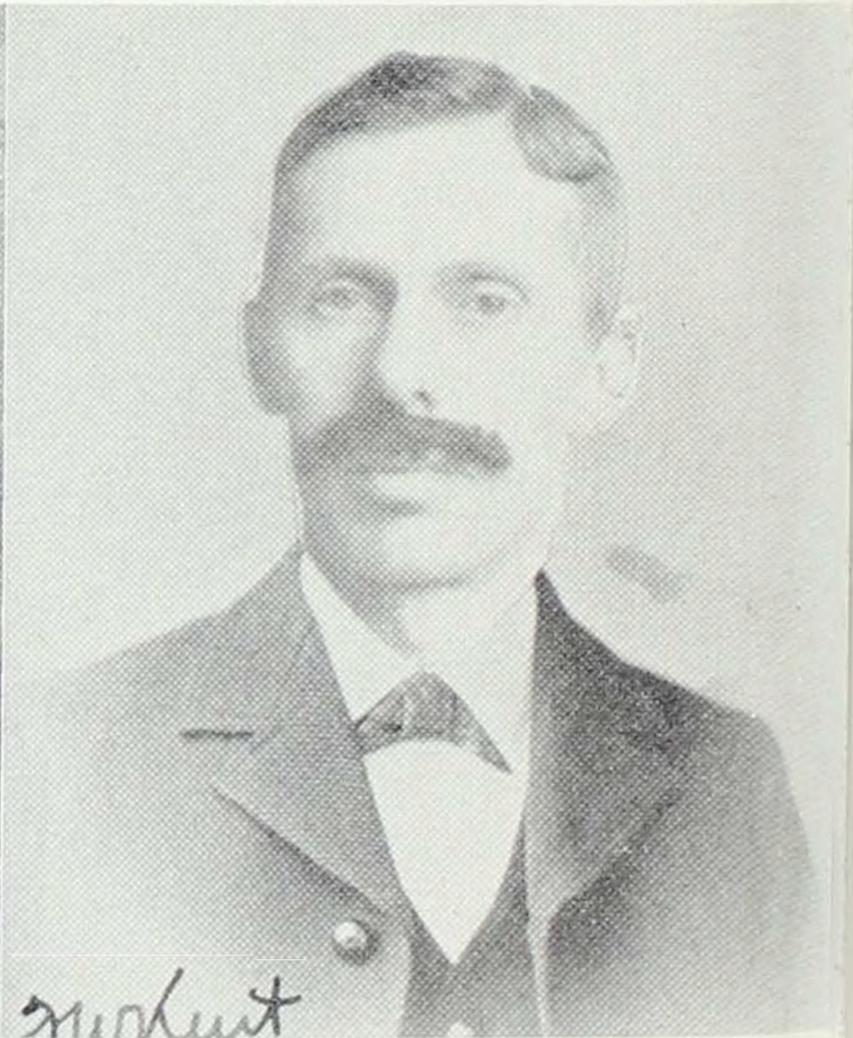
GRANT WOOD — THOMAS HART BENTON  
(Guest Speaker)



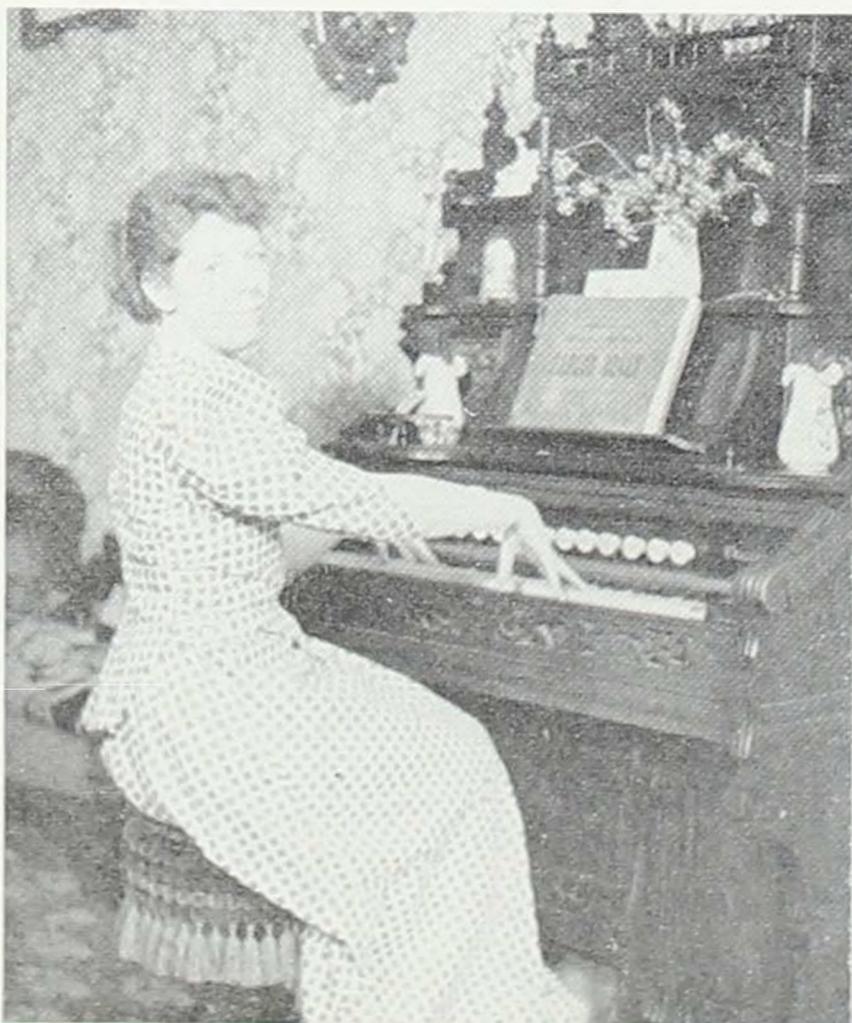
TOM YOSELOFF



WILLIAM J. PETERSEN



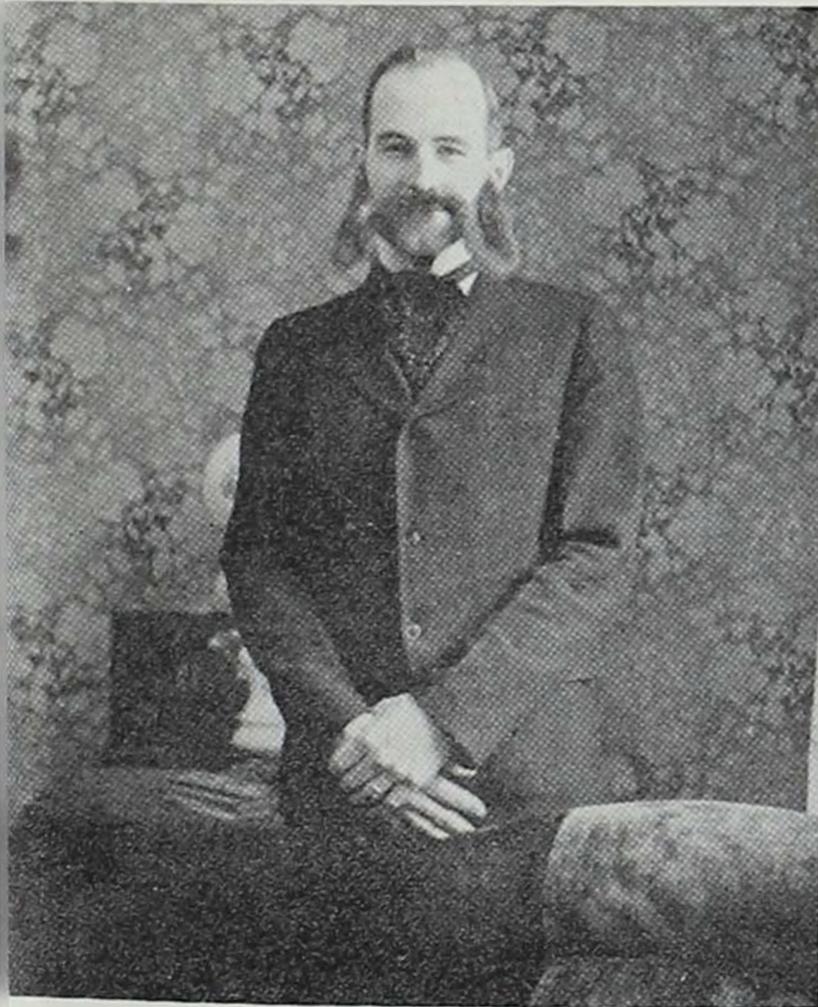
FRED KENT



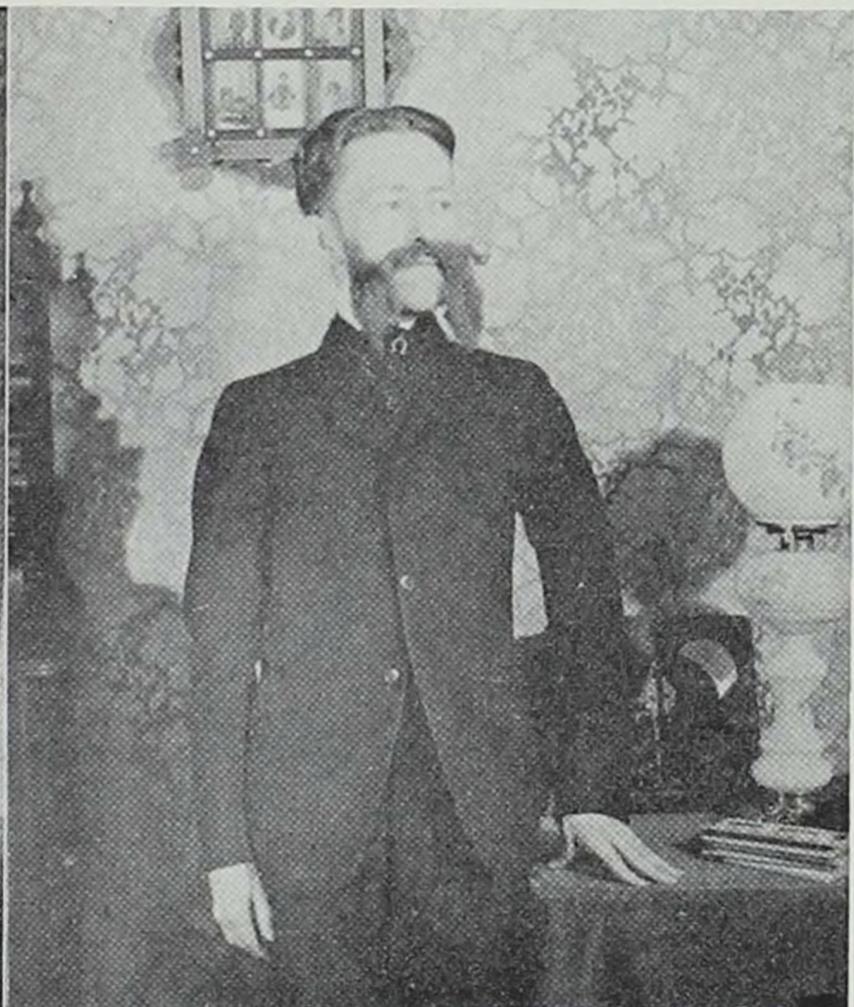
DOROTHY POWNALL



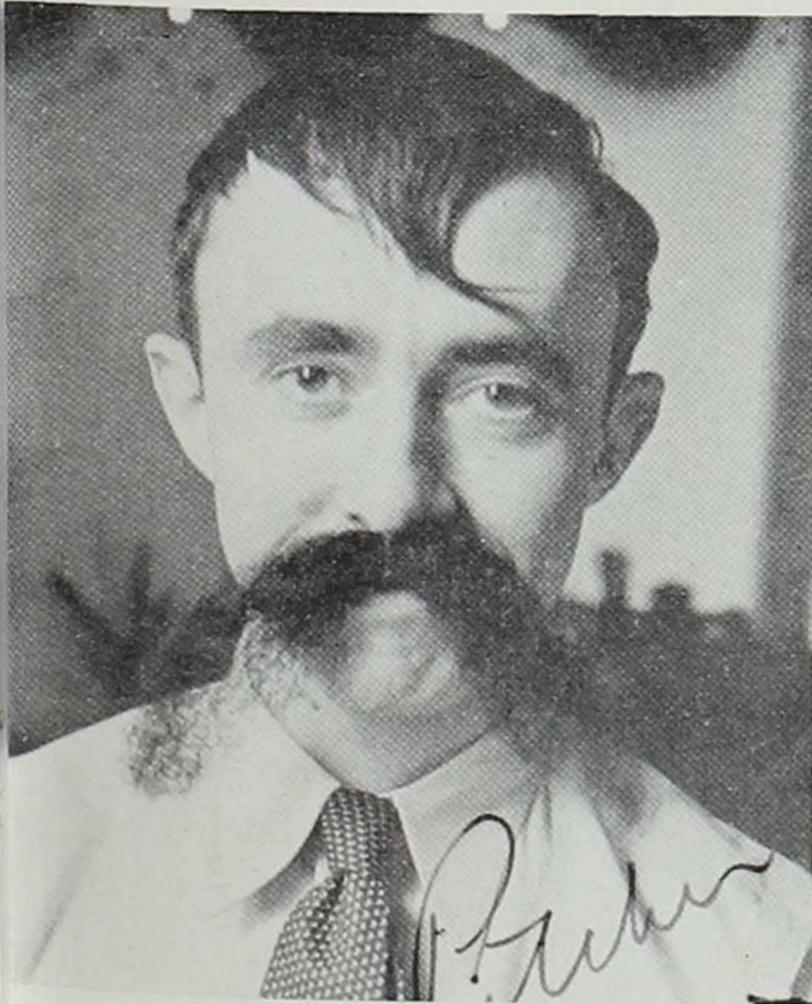
HELEN REICH



GRAHAM M. DEAN



LEE ALLEN

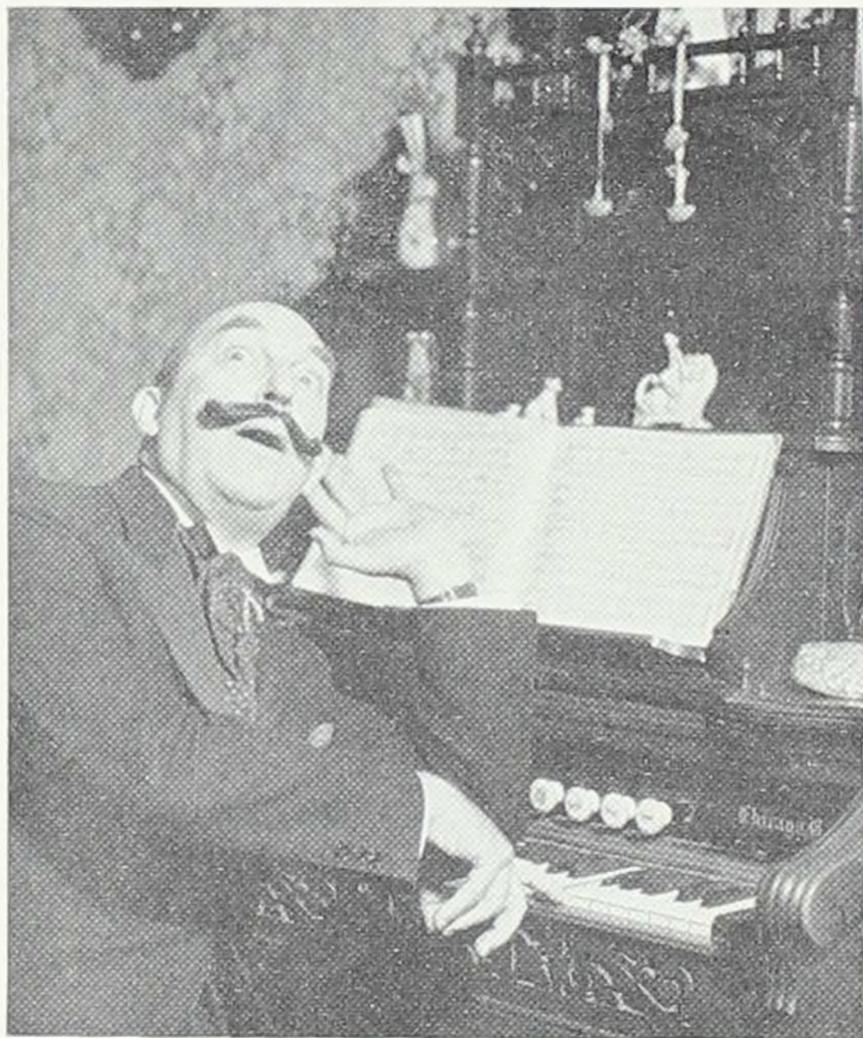


SEYMOUR W. PITCHER

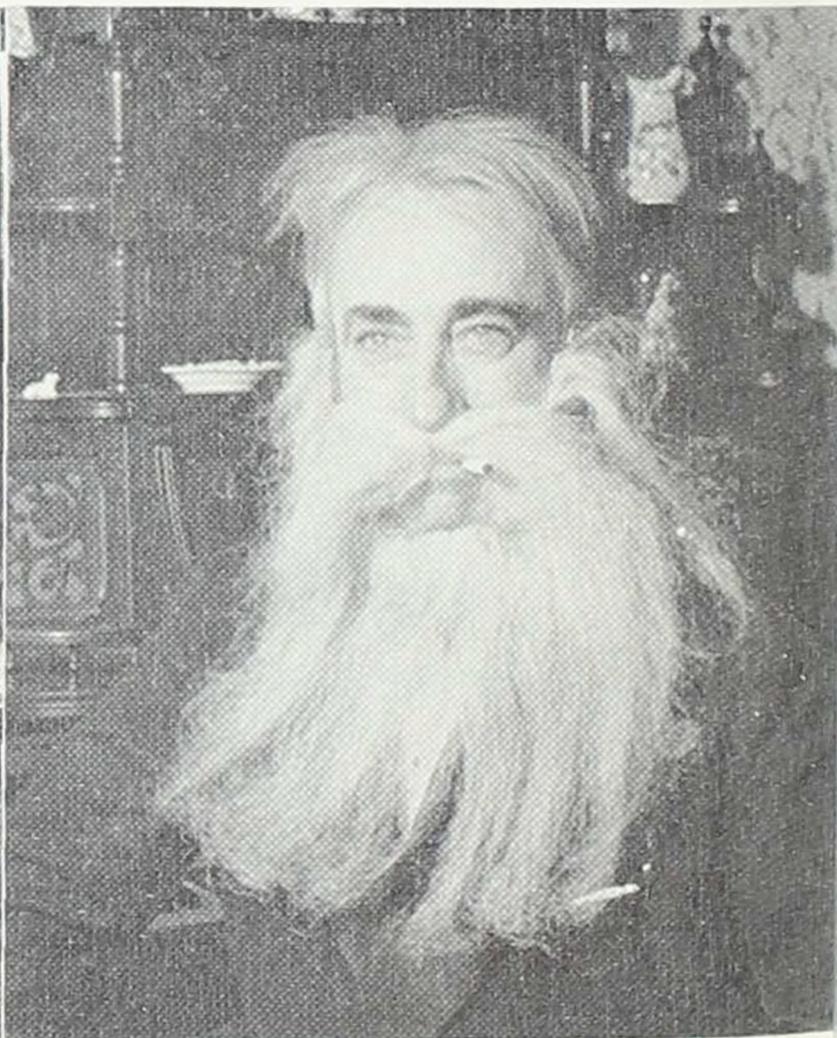


DON PRYOR

SOME NOTABLE GUESTS OF TIMES CLUB



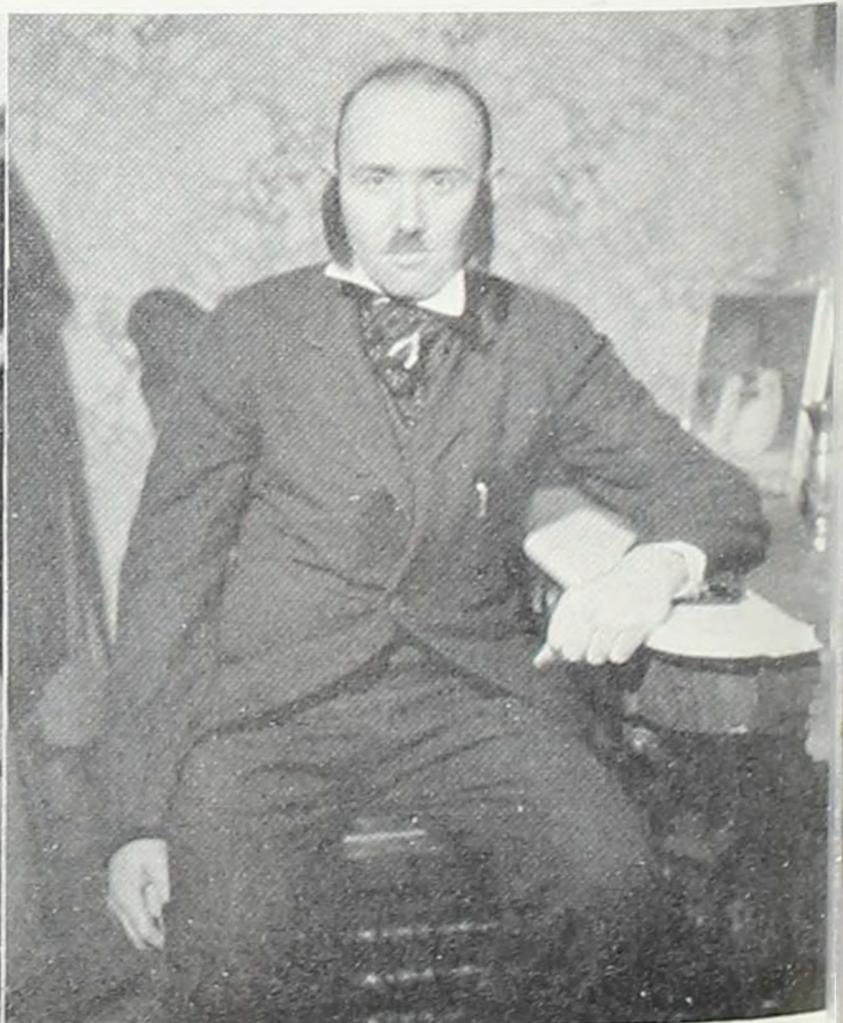
SIGMUND SPAETH



JOHN ERSKINE



CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



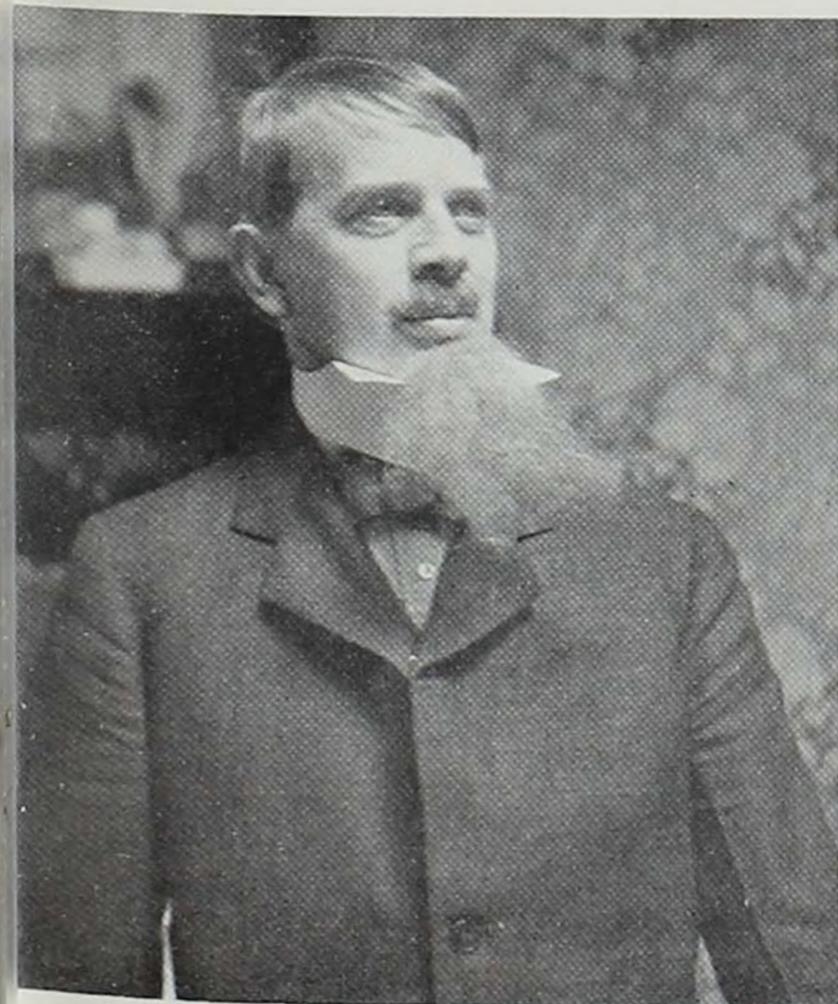
STEPHEN VINCENT BENET



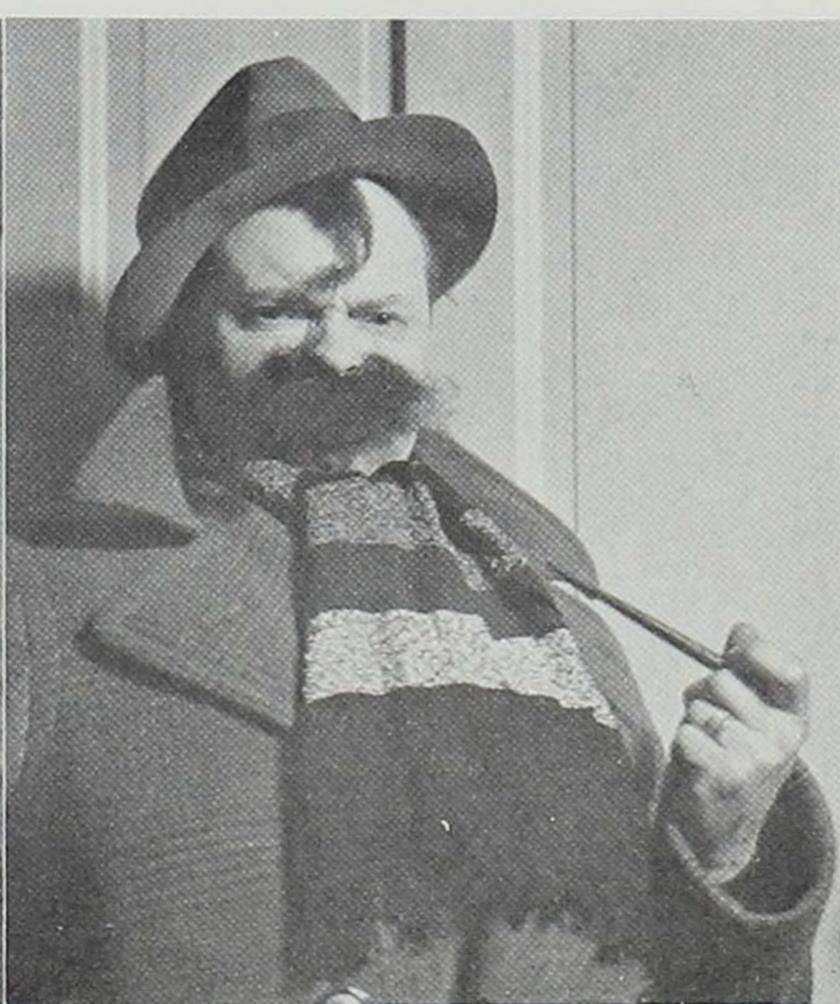
THOMAS A. CRAVEN



FREDERICK ESSARY



EDWARD J. O'BRIEN



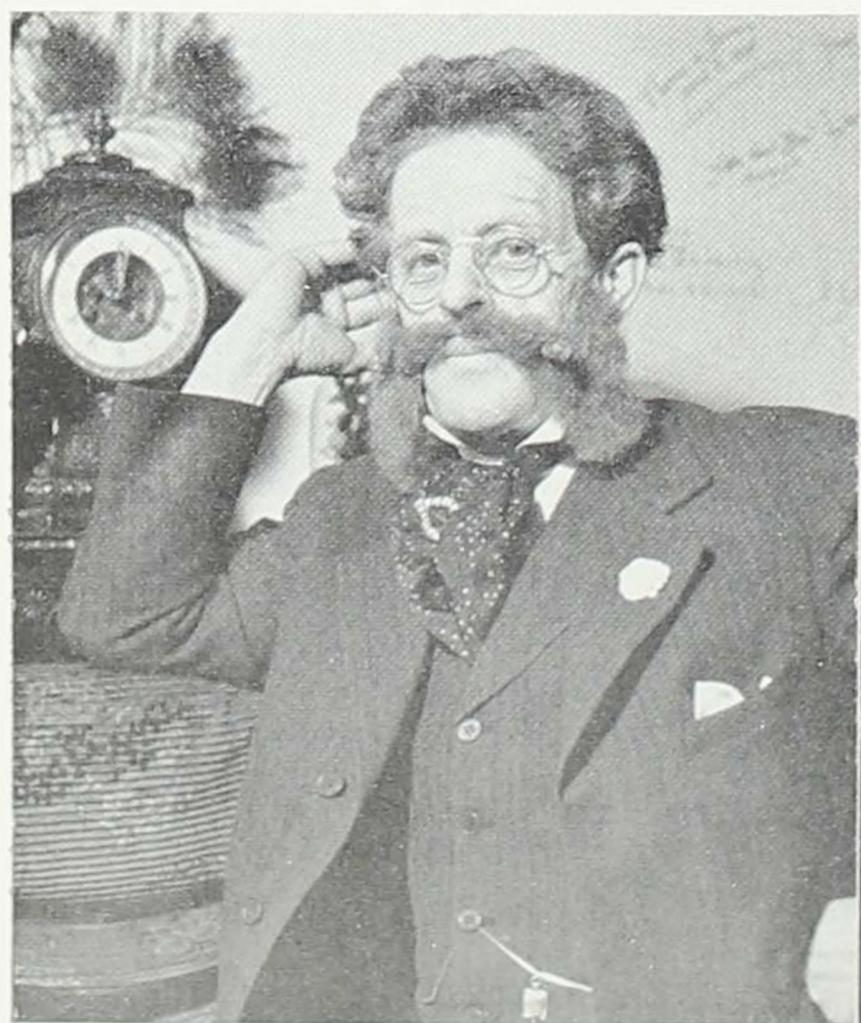
BRUCE BAIRNSFATHER



STERLING NORTH



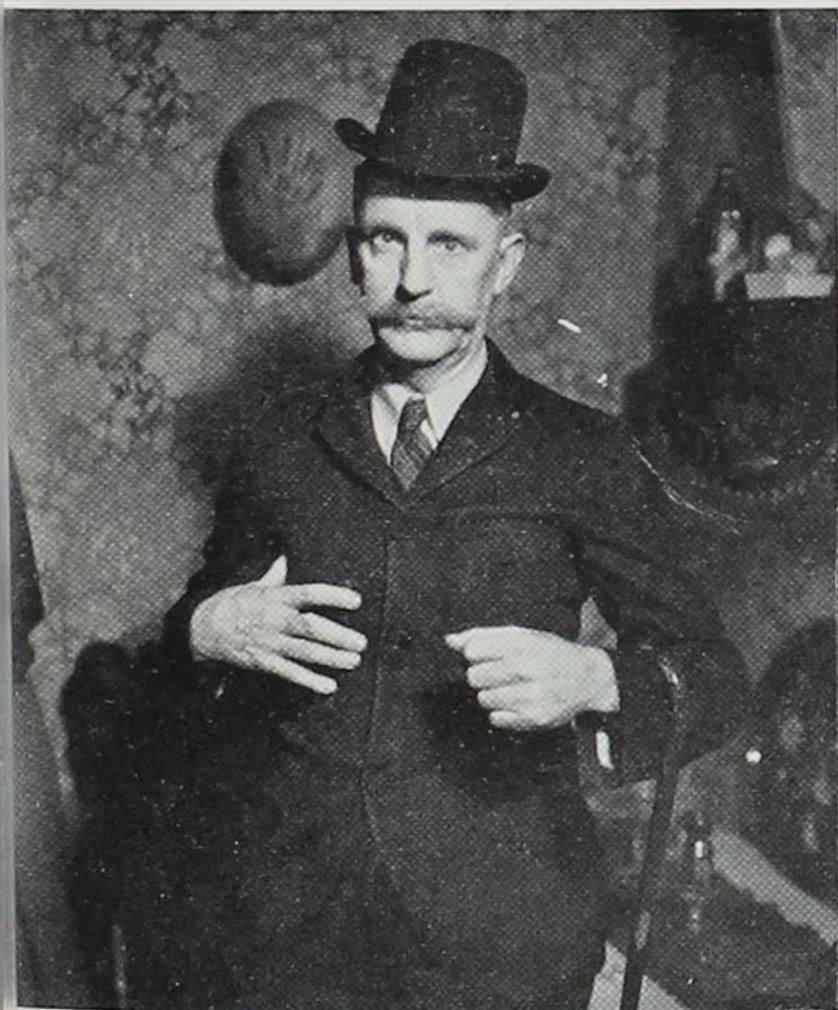
GILBERT SELDES



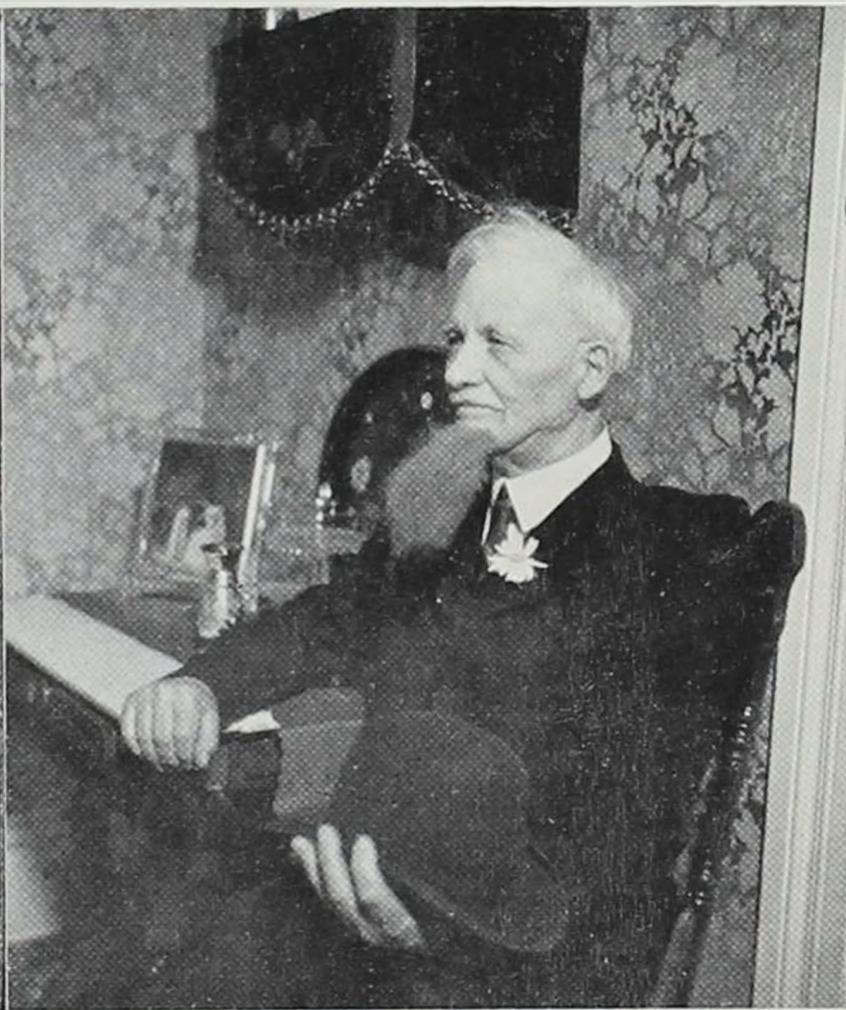
JOHN G. NEIHARDT



THOMAS W. DUNCAN — MAC KINLAY KANTOR



ELMER PETERSON



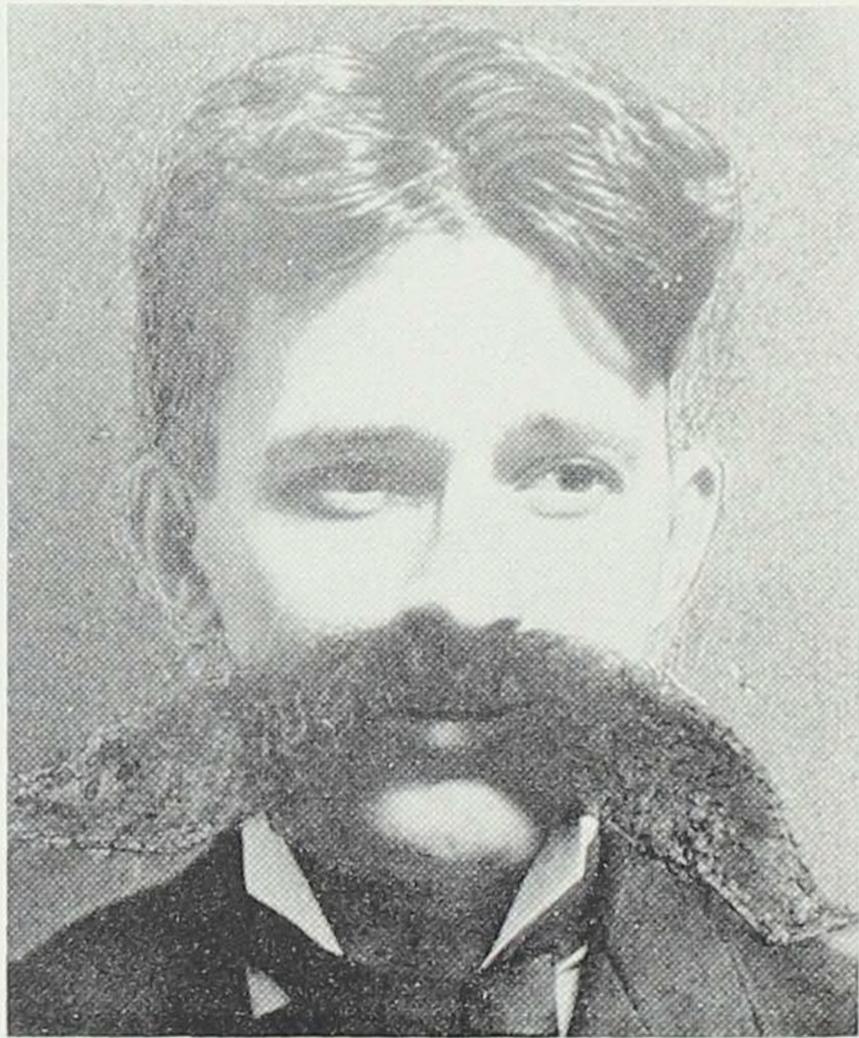
LEWIS WORTHINGTON SMITH



NICHOLAS LONGWORTH ROOSEVELT



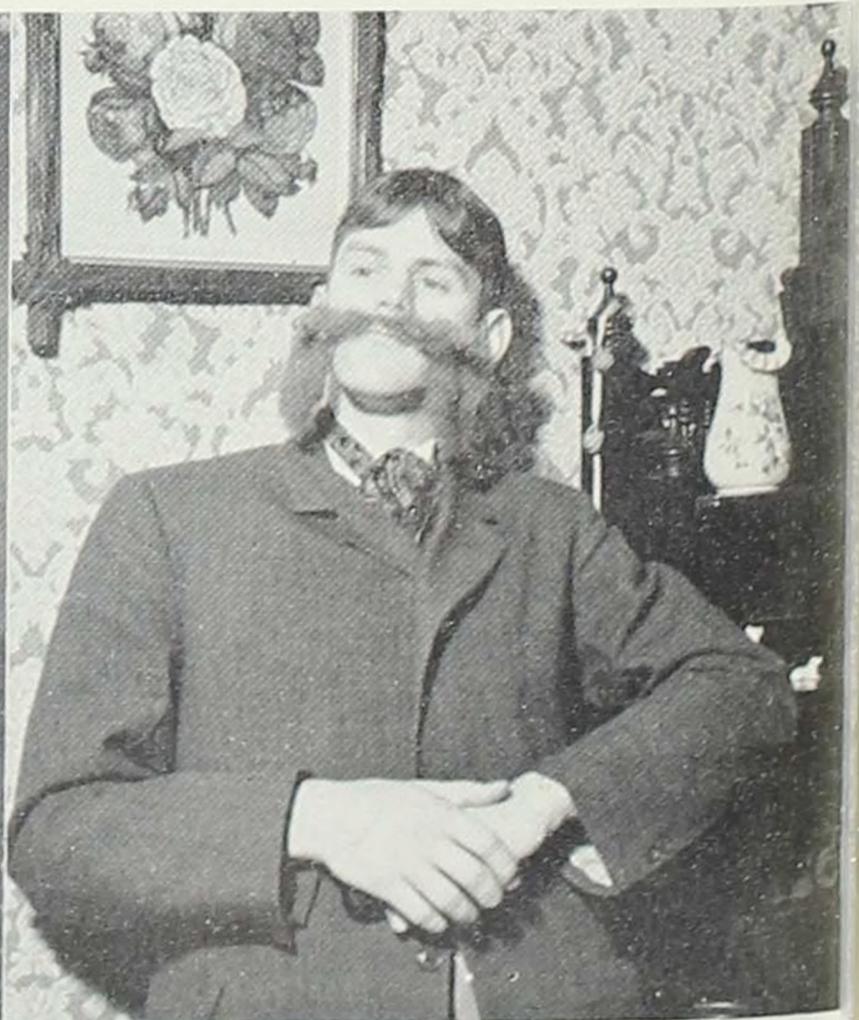
JOHN T. FREDERICK



WILBUR L. SCHRAMM



ALFRED M. BAILEY



PAUL ENGLE

*Dear Friend and Prospective Guest:*

☞ *As we look forward to your coming to us on \_\_\_\_\_, we are hoping that it may prove to be a happy visit for you. We wish to do all that we can to make it so. To that end, would you be good enough to jot down some memoranda here:*

☞ *Do you wish us to make hotel reservations?*

*Or, do you wish to be entertained at a private home?*

☞ *Do you wish to be met at the train?*

*If so, when do you expect to arrive?*

☞ *Do you wish to be undisturbed after your arrival, or may we take you for an automobile ride to "see the University"?*

☞ *Do you wish to meet a small group of "kindred spirits" informally? The Executive Committee of the Club would be delighted to give a small luncheon or dinner for you while you are here, but we do not wish to impose upon your good nature. Please let us know your wish in the matter.*

☞ *Do you wish to Rotarianize, Kiwanisize, Lionize, or otherwise yield to the importunities of service clubs or similar groups while in our midst? We're just asking you.*

☞ *Have you any suggestions as to the introduction before your lecture?*

☞ *Is there any other way in which we can serve you?*

☞ *We look forward with the pleasantest anticipation to your visit.*

"Blues." Rosamund's brother, James Weldon Johnson, then known as the "dean" of Negro poets, was a later guest, as were the poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. Hotels made some difficulty about these visitors, and we took them into our own homes. I well remember sitting up late with Cullen in my study at home reading the manuscript of what was to be his first published novel, *One Way to Heaven*.

And finally, I must say something about the guest who brought us more publicity than any of the others, but who never came. This was Gertrude Stein. When we learned that Miss Stein and her alter ego Alice B. Toklas were contemplating a visit to the United States in the fall of 1934, we at once began trying to interest her in talking to the Times Club and being the guest of the S. P. C. S. Rousseau Voorhies, a chap I had met, was most helpful in suggesting approaches. Among other things, we organized a "Rose Is A Rose Club," had ourselves photographed at a dinner of that organization (its one and only meeting) and sent a picture of the dinner party, with all of us wearing white roses, to Miss Stein. She yielded to our blandishments and consented to come to us, for a very reasonable fee, on the evening of December 10. But by the time she had reached New York she had quarreled violently with Rousseau, and wired me to know if we had any connection with him. When I reassured

her on that point, she wired me again to know if we were keeping the audience small. When I told her we always kept our audiences small, she sent me another telegram to find out how small. Between us, we kept Western Union busy for a day or two; but she finally said all right, she was coming, and she would speak on "The Making of the Making of Americans." We were besieged with requests for tickets after every seat was taken. Dorothy Pownall had a story in the *Des Moines Tribune* in which she said, "Those who have thought it hard to get tickets to world series games have never encountered a real ticket shortage. They ought to try to get into the Gertrude Stein lecture." Came the tenth of December, and one of those great sleet storms under which Iowa sometimes suffers. But our audience braved it all, some driving more than a hundred miles over icy roads. The audience was there, all of it, with perhaps a few more than the stipulated number; but the Misses Stein and Toklas, who had been scheduled to arrive by special plane in the early evening, were not there. About eight-thirty a Western Union boy arrived at our crowded lecture hall with the last of the series of telegrams from Miss Stein. It read: "PLANE GROUNDED WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN. GERTRUDE STEIN." I allowed our Student President Yoseloff the honor of breaking the news to the audience. He did it very well, and the audience took it all in

good part. . . . A guest is a guest is not a guest.

The Times Club and its auxiliary, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers, gave us a grand hayride while they lasted. But they were too successful. The University Lecture Committee felt that its course had lost prestige through this upstart, which was always able to grab the headlines. Wheels turned within wheels, as they will in the operation of a great university, and eventually I was called into a summit conference with the President and the Chairman of the Lecture Committee. I was not actually on the summit level, I am afraid, and I compromised by agreeing to a moratorium for the Times Club to last a year. My friends tell me I gave in too easily, and probably I did.

The Times Club was never revived. The S. P. C. S. rooms were maintained for a while, then fell into disuse, and the furniture was placed in storage and much of it disappeared. A few years later, Grant Wood died, Clyde Hart joined the University of Chicago faculty, and I was called to Missouri.

But I like to think that we did something, in that place and time, toward making the lecture platform a little more justifiable and rational, and that we helped to alleviate the hard lot of the public speaker. Anyway, many people, guests and hosts alike, enjoyed the experiment.

FRANK LUTHER MOTT