

# INKLINGS AND IDLINGS

The Newsletter of the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association

313 East Third Street • P.O. Box 585 • Galesburg, Illinois 61402 • (309) 342-2361 • www.sandburg.org

Fall, 2011

## FROM SITE SUPERINTENDENT MARTHA DOWNEY

The commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War has begun. Here at the Carl Sandburg State Historic Site Mike Hobbs, Barbara Schock and Christian Schock did a wonderful program about conditions on the eve of the war. This program in article form can be found at the Galesburg Planet website.

Born only thirteen years after the conclusion of the Civil War, Carl Sandburg spent a significant portion of his life studying President Lincoln and that conflict. His efforts yielded the four volume *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. Sandburg's knowledge of the Civil War began in Galesburg. In *Always the Young Strangers* he writes of learning about the Civil War and knowing Civil War veterans.

The first biography he owned was one he found. It was *A Short History of General P.T. Beauregard*. "The Beauregard book began with a little poem that made me expect he must be one of the greatest generals that ever lived....After reading the book I felt the poem went too far. The book made him out a just fair-to-middling general and a good deal of an actor...."

This Beauregard book was one of a series of books published by Duke Cigarettes. The subjects in this series included John Ericsson, a Swede, who designed The Monitor and James B. Eads who built ironclad gunboats for the Union. The Ericsson book was one that Sandburg coveted but never owned.

Writing about the Galesburg Opera

House's destruction by fire, Sandburg told of entertainments he had seen there. One was the diorama of the Battle of Gettysburg to which the admission was 5 cents. However as the program went along and the curtains depicting the battle were explained, Sandburg's mind wandered. "I got to wondering if he [the lecturer] had children to support and what kind of children they were, and how many, and if there were five or six that was plenty to buy shoes for...."

Besides the more formal methods of learning he listened to the stories Union veterans told. These seem to have had the most impact on the young Sandburg. One man in particular remained strong in Sandburg's memory, Joe Elser, a renter at the Sandburg's Berrien Street home. Sandburg wrote:

"Joe Elser had been in The War. There was only one war then a man could have been in, the war over the Union and the slaves. Joe had had near four years of it. He went in as a private and came out as a private. He had been in battles. He would take stove wood and kindling, put one piece on the floor 'where they were lined up' and another 'where we stood.' Then he would change the wood pieces to show 'where they came at us' and 'where we counter-charged.' He had heard bullets flying and seen men fall and he named the places. He had never been wounded....He didn't make himself out any kind of a hero. 'You enlisted and then you took what come.'"

Elser discussed what the soldiers ate, wore, how they camped, talked, and cussed. He also related to the young Sandburg some of the less reported and more sordid details of the

war including the assault of a woman by soldiers.

After a few years Elser moved from the Sandburg house and disappeared from their lives, but not from Sandburg's mind. "I like to think about him. I don't get tired of trying to remember what he was like. Out of what he had he made a pretty good life of it....He learned somehow to get along without being afraid of what is or of what is to come."

From these glimpses of the Civil War in Galesburg Sandburg eventually became one of the major historians of President Lincoln and the Civil War. These next four years will give us time to remember the events, battles, and people, and think about how it expanded our country's definition of freedom.

#### **FROM CSHSA PRESIDENT CHUCK BEDNAR**

In accepting the responsibilities of providing leadership to the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association, our board is creating an exciting agenda and setting goals for the coming year. Sandburg is quoted as saying, "Nothing happens unless first a dream." We are believers, focusing on strengthening the mission statement of the Association and encouraging new memberships.

The knowledge of Carl Sandburg is a rich source of strength and wisdom to all lovers of American literature. He is relevant to people of all walks of life, young and old, who pursue the American Dream.

The passing of our Association's president Norm Winick last year was a sad occasion. No one can follow his footsteps for the leadership he had given over the years. During this time of transition Rex Cherrington provided the right kind of direction to guide our Association through our spring activities. Our thanks to Rex who is retiring from the board. His voice will be missed at our meetings, but he assures us he is readily available to lend his

knowledge and interest in Sandburg and local history.

A number of devoted members of our board have gone "out to pasture", including Patti Christianson, John Heasley, and Christian Schock. John devoted over eight years as treasurer and has promised to remain heading the Songbag concerts, his first love. Christian served over thirteen years of service to the Association. When Christian talked about issues, we always listened. His perspectives helped guide us in the right direction. Thanks to all for your contributions!

As we look forward to the future we have the generous support of Martha Downey, Site Manager of both the Sandburg Birthplace and the Bishop Hill State Historic Site. A representative of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency for over twenty-five years, she is a prominent member of the Illinois Association of Museums. With grace she wears two hats as site administrator for the two locations. Martha has looked after the best interests of the Sandburg Birthplace Site. Our hats off to you!

This season we are indeed fortunate to have Bert McElroy as Site Interpreter. He effectively and graciously greets visitors and provides a unique dialogue of Sandburg's early life in Galesburg. He also meticulously manicures the park and grounds with care and concern, making it a showplace for visitors to enjoy as they stroll to view the quiet repose of Sandburg memorial known as "Remembrance Rock".

It is a special privilege to support the activities of the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association. Your participation can make a difference. We believe an active membership is the lifeblood of any organization. Sandburg is recognized worldwide for his remarkable contribution to American literature. This is evidenced by the hundreds of visitors to the Site each year. How fortunate the community is to claim this world-renowned writer as their most

famous native son.

As members of the Association we should be ever vigilant of our forebears in their goals to discover and restore the Birthplace. Led by Adda George in the 1940's this brave band of community activists had the vision, commitment, and resolve to preserve the Site for future generations.

Now it's our turn. A number of our board members represent second and third generation families who were in the past a part of hundreds of volunteers who dedicated their time to preserve the Sandburg Site as a national landmark, a cultural place to visit.

With your support membership in the Association merits from all of us the need to remain persistent and resolved, especially in the current state of tough economic times. It is our obligation that in some way by our work we prove ourselves worthy heirs to those who have gone before us. It is in this spirit that our Association endeavors to provide a bright promise for the Birthplace with new strength and purpose, educating future visitors about Sandburg's remarkable literary career.

## 2011-2012 CSHSA OFFICERS & DIRECTORS

At the Annual Meeting of the CSHSA on July 12 the following officers and directors for the 2011-2012 term were elected: Charles Bednar, President; Barry Swanson, Vice-President; Rick Sayre, Treasurer; Bert McElroy, Secretary; and Directors Laurie Muelder, Stan Shover, Tom Foley, Mike Hobbs, Barbara Schock, Tede Verner, Gary Wagle, Barbara Cantrell, Gayle Stewart, and Martha Downey (ex officio).

## FIRST PUBLISHED SANDBURG INTERVIEW?

CSHSA Member Rex Cherrington contributed a copy of Walter M. Yust's story

"Carl Sandburg, Human Being" which appeared in the January, 1921 issue of the literary magazine *The Bookman*. Was this the first published Sandburg interview?

Rex provided the following biographical information about Yust: he "was a well known writer of newspaper and magazine articles during the first half of the twentieth century. Soon after his graduation from the University of Pennsylvania he began as a writer for the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger* and later worked for a New Orleans newspaper. He wrote articles for a variety of magazine including *The Bookman* and *Literary Review*. His most often quoted work today comes from his review of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald which appeared in *Literary Review*. In 1930 he became American Editor in Chief of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a position he held until 1960, the year he died at Evanston, Illinois.

Prior to meeting him Yust acknowledged that Sandburg "has been called the most brutal of American poets"; his *Chicago Poems* and *Cornhuskers* contained "amazing, heavy-fisted verse." He thought that Whitman "hoped for experimenting poets" like Sandburg when he wrote in his "American Primer" that "a perfect use of words uses *things*—they exude in power and beauty . . . . Words are magic . . . limber, lasting, fierce words. Do you suppose the liberties and the brawn of These States have to do only with delicate lady-words? with gloved gentleman-words? . . . The appetite of the people of These States, in talk, in popular speeches and writings, is for unhemmed latitude, coarseness, directness, live epithets, expletives, words of opprobrium, resistance."

Yust wrote that "Europe holds [Sandburg] to be one of the most authentic voices, if not the authentic voice, of the new world spirit since Whitman. . . ." He admitted that in his eyes Sandburg was "an Olympian personality", and was surprised by Sandburg's voice when he first talked to him on the telephone to arrange the interview. "It was not a hard, slaggy, iron and steel voice, but a rich, soft, friendly baritone." The interview was



conducted at the Chicago *Daily News* where Sandburg was a member of the editorial staff.

Asked if he “dashed off his finished product in the quick fire of inspiration, Sandburg said that the piece he was currently working on “will not be ready for publication for perhaps two years.” According to Sandburg, “he pares down and cuts and polishes his verse with the care and patience of an ancient worker in gold.”

“I get a 'hunch' in the first place,” said Mr. Sandburg, explaining the birth of his poems. “I have been an editor of a business journal and I have watched business men, and I know that big business movements begin first with a little hunch. They come to me as they come to business men. When I have the hunch I write it down in lead pencil; and I slowly gather together all the ideas I want to cover in the piece. When I have fashioned a unit, first in lead pencil, I typewrite it. And then I carry it around in my pocket, and read it and reread it, in the office here, on the train, in the trolley, in one-arm restaurants, and I think about it. Maybe I do that for a month, or a year, maybe two years; changing words and lines to carry the rhythm best suited to the idea and the emotion; rearranging; writing and rewriting. Rarely do I feel that a piece is ready without at least a month's or two months' revising. When I first put a piece to paper, one time out of ten I think I have written something that will last and live just as I have written it. Nine times of of ten, it must be toted about in my pocket for a while and changed over and over again. I wrote and rewrote 'Prairie'—it is the moving sonorous poem that begins *Cornhuskers*—“fourteen times before it was ready for print.”

Asked if he had written any other Lincoln poems besides “Firelogs” (*Cornhuskers*, 1918), Sandburg replied, “I have written other Lincoln poems, but I mean to write still another. It is a trilogy on Lincoln and it will aim to break down all this sentimentalizing about him. We go into a politician's office today or into the office of a fish who's squeezed men poor all his life, and we have grown to expect to see the face of Lincoln

looking down from the wall. It's curious company he keeps these days, and it makes me sick. My treatment of Lincoln, who was a strong advocate of violence and war, when violence and war seemed to him necessary, will be the rawest ever attempted, I believe.” Five years after the Yust interview *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* was published.

Regarding his writing style, Sandburg told Yust, “When I was a boy I wrote with rhyme and metre too. And I published a volume of juvenilia. Thank God there were only a hundred copies printed. I never use rhyme now.”

“My reading? Mostly the Bible, Ibsen, and Chinese poetry.” Yust noted that “among other artistic influences of his are Scandinavian and negro melodies. For Mr. Sandburg delights in music, especially in the old negro melodies: he thrums them on his own banjo and their character is discernible in much that he has written.”

Going back to the discussion of Sandburg's sometimes harsh style, Yust wrote that “Mr. Sandburg's verse is not always brutal. . . . Louis Untermeyer [poet, critic, editor, anthologist, 1885-1977] has called him the 'tenderest of living poets.' And you can find this tenderness in the pity and delicacy of many of his poignant poems; it makes him easy to talk with comfortably; you mark it in the neighborliness of his informality, in the soft rich tones of his voice; in his delight in children.”

Yust concluded, “Mr. Sandburg's poems are not an expression of eccentric individualism but . . . they are an honest attempt to express a richly developed personality. That is why they are authentic poems. That is why Mr. Sandburg must discard rhyme and conscious metre, that is why he must use living 'common' words. Mr. Sandburg's poems are Mr. Sandburg. They are powerful, live, brutal, gentle, and human—and so is he.”

## THE LINCOLN ROOM AT THE COTTAGE

CSHSA President Chuck Bednar contributed two 1949 *The Daily Register-Mail* stories about the Lincoln Room that was attached to the back of the Sandburg Cottage.

In her "Society" column staff writer Ellen Burdick wrote about the dedication and formal opening of the Lincoln Room scheduled for Memorial Day, May 30, 1949. She noted that the Lincoln Room had been completed nearly a year earlier and had been informally dedicated on October 7, 1948, the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lincoln-Douglas at Knox College. Lincoln's Birthday, February 12, 1949, was originally set aside for the formal dedication, "but icy roads that practically isolated the city at the time necessitated the change" to May 30. Ms. Burdick wrote that the Lincoln Room was "once the leanto of Sandburg's modest natal place" and would be "for people everywhere a new Lincoln museum, with an ever growing wealth of documents, pictures, furniture, dishes, kettles, books—that should make Galesburg a Lincoln 'must' along with Springfield and New Salem." In the room with its knotty pine walls and ceiling cross beams was "the unusual, thoughtful original of Lincoln that is set above the brick fireplace. A portrait study by the late N.C. Wyeth, this youthful Lincoln is pensive, with downcast eyes. Contributed by the artist's widow, who refused to sell the painting to art collectors, this modern work is doubly appropriate as it appeared in a recent woman's magazine with an article by Carl Sandburg, 'What Would Lincoln Do Today?'"

Next to the fireplace sat a period fireside chair donated by the students, parents, and teachers of Douglas School which Sandburg and his sister Mary had attended. Bricks "warmed by the fire" were donated by J. Orton Finley of Oneida and were from a building that had been torn down in the previous year that had stood across from the Methodist Church on North Kellogg Street. "In earlier years this building was one of the strategic underground railway stations." A large copper pot that sat

next to the fireplace was from Adda George's ancestors. There was also a pitcher that was a wedding gift from Lincoln to Elizabeth Burner Gulihur of New Salem on August 23, 1831. On an old pine desk from Bishop Hill was a wooden ox carved by Earnest Elmo Calkins. It would later be joined by another carved ox and a wagon, "a facsimile of the one in which Lincoln came to Illinois in his boyhood." Among documents in the Lincoln Room was "one little-publicized letter sent from Rio to President Lincoln, [in which] some citizens of Rio berate the president in no uncertain language, calling him 'no fit man to sit with Washington and Jefferson,' and sparing no biting terms in opposing his emancipation proclamation." Also included was Sandburg's honorable discharge from the army after the Spanish-American War.

In a news story about the May 30, 1949, formal opening ceremonies of the Lincoln Room Ms. Burdick quoted speaker Dr. Jay Monaghan, Illinois State Historian and Lincoln scholar, "Lincoln is the foremost literary figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century . . . [who took] a strong international position, for our Civil War was a test of democracy." He went on to say that "Lincoln is still the man to look to in the combat of ideologies between Russia and the United States." Sandburg had intensified public interest in Lincoln. According to Dr. Monaghan, "At the time of Sandburg's *Prairie Years*, interest in Lincoln had lessened—now Lincoln books have increased, showing Sandburg's influence on scholars in studying the life of Lincoln."

The ceremonies included greetings by Adda George, "appropriate songs" by the Knox College Gnos Singers directed by Willard Franklin, the dedication speech "Prairie Prophets" by Central Congregational Church pastor Rev. Alan Jenkins, a brief talk by Galesburg Mayor Ralph B. Johnson, and the presentation of a guest book by Galesburg Chamber of Commerce representative Burrell Barash. "An honored guest of the afternoon who was introduced to the several hundred persons present was Mary Sandburg Johnson, sister of Carl Sandburg, who came from her

home in Los Angeles, Calif., for the ceremonies."

## **CARL SANDBURG BIRTHPLACE, ORIGINS OF SUPPORT, INCORPORATION, AND EVOLUTION**

(The following essay was contributed by Bert McElroy, Carl Sandburg State Historic Site Interpreter and CSHSA Secretary):

The birthplace of Carl Sandburg was acquired in 1945 as the result of an association formed by Adda Gentry George to govern the maintenance and restoration of the imperiled structure. A dedicated visionary, Adda George, a former English teacher who retired in Galesburg, rallied others to aid her insightfully urgent cause. Through her leadership the Birthplace was located and purchased, and the Sandburg Birthplace Association was formed to assure its preservation.

She was encouraged by Paul Angle, Librarian of the Illinois State Historical Society, early in 1941 to identify Sandburg's birthplace in Galesburg as a monument to the poet. Adda's inquisitiveness led her to Mary Sandburg, Carl's older sister, who showed Adda a subsequent family home on Berrien Street. Adda's perseverance overcame Mary's initial reluctance, whether innocent or intentional, to identify the tiny rundown house at 331 E. Third Street, which will later in this essay be referred to as the Cottage and the Birthplace. Once located, her advocacy resulted in a plaque being placed on the Cottage, and eventually the City of Galesburg embraced the concept of a boulder on the terrace. Knowing that the home was in such disrepair, that it may have been looming for demolition, Adda began to form the Sandburg Birthplace Association to support its preservation. She pursued an aggressive fund-raising drive when Joseph Cheneler, the son of the Sicilian widow, who lived in the Cottage, offered her a sixty-day option to buy.

Led by her inspiration and perseverance, the Cottage was purchased by the Sandburg Birthplace, Inc., an Illinois corporation. The warranty deed was recorded April 25, 1945. The Birthplace was officially dedicated on October 7, 1946. The celebration was attended by numerous dignitaries, reporters, photographers, and featured Marshall Field as the speaker. Carl Sandburg did not attend the ceremony. He first visited the restored Birthplace on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday January 6, 1948.

Numerous acquisitions were received by the Association—furnishings, memorabilia, and family letters. The 1940's renovation included re-planking the floors, plaster, wallpaper, and extensive restoration of the clapboard siding, and as the February 23, 1953 issue of *Life* magazine documented, even the privy was to be retained. The badly deteriorated summer kitchen at the rear of the Cottage was removed, and in 1948 the Lincoln Room was erected in its place to house Lincoln items which had been given to the Association and furnishings given by the Sandburg family. The Lincoln Room was dedicated May 30, 1949, and modified the visitors' experience, doubling the size of the original 20' X 22' mainframe structure.

With failing health Adda George turned over the leadership of the Sandburg Birthplace Association to Juanita Kelly Bednar, who served as president from 1959 to 1967. Under her enthusiastic leadership the fund-raising Penny Parade was initiated in 1961 to augment the operation, preservation, and restoration of the Birthplace. The adjacent home at 313 E. Third St. was purchased as a caretaker's residence. Mr. and Mrs. Lauren Goff moved into the house when it was dedicated as the Adda George House in July, 1963. Mary Goff, a volunteer hostess since 1953, became the official hostess. Lauren devoted a full schedule upon retirement from a trucking company on June 30, 1965. The acquisition of the additional property enabled the Association to establish the development of the Sandburg Park to the rear of the properties. Utilizing the Remembrance Rock theme to honor



Sandburg's only novel, the evolving park provided a serenely wonderful landscape which enticed Sandburg to request that his ashes be laid to rest there, an honor bestowed on September 30, 1967. The next day's memorial service was attended by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, Lincoln scholar Ralph Newman, sister Esther, wife Lillian, and his daughters. During the eulogy Margaret read the "Great Hunt". Following the death of Mrs. Bednar in 1968 Lauren W. Goff was elected president following a decade of service as treasurer. The Sandburg Birthplace was deeded to the Illinois State Historical Library in 1970 and retained Lauren as the curator until he retired to Florida in 1977.

The curator position evolved into the position of Site Manager under the Illinois State Historical Library and was held by Loraine Seelbach prior to Carol Nelson becoming Site Manager and Site Superintendent under the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in 1985. She was succeeded in those positions by Steve Holden. Carol's twenty-five years service to the Site concluded in 2003, and Steve with close to twenty years of service to the Site retired in 2009. Their stewardship in their official roles as interpreters and ex-officio members of the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association's Board of Directors led to further development of the Site. The brick walk back to Remembrance Rock continued over to the George House and board walks were laid on the south frontage along with graveled parking. The flagstone path coined Quotation Walk was added to the perennial garden where the Sandburg family's garden and chicken coops once stood.

In the early 1990's the State renovated the caretaker's house back to a former Greek Revival facade. The entry door and stairs were relocated to augment a formal heightened foyer that highlights the overhead bust of Carl Sandburg. After moving the garage back to the north, building mover Forest Eugene Meyers removed the Lincoln Room from the Birthplace's mainframe and attached it to the rear of the George House. The attachment became the exhibit hall that contains an

elaborate chronology and many Sandburg artifacts.

A board walk patio was erected and the brick walk that continued over to the George House was extended back to the Barn by the new Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association incorporated in 1994. Picket fences were upgraded, including privacy fencing to the east and north boundaries of both properties. The Barn was heightened with a steeper roof, cedar sided, and extended forward accommodating an entry foyer and restrooms.

The Association continued to augment the project with landscape lighting, lily plantings, and a sound system, thus providing an indoor venue for folk music, lectures, and various other functions for the community and visitors to enjoy. After a wind storm severely damaged the Historic Site resulting in the removal of several large trees, crab apple trees were planted on the city terrace compliments of a gracious donor and our current landscape tender. The Association's sponsorship of the Songbag Concert series and scholarly talks continues to be funded by contributions to the Penny Parade and from proceeds from the gift shop. The Site is the venue for Illinois Humanities Council's Road Scholars speakers, the Black Earth Film Festival, the Spoon River Creative Writers, and various Sandburg Days Festival for the Mind programs.

Because of a host of community activists, visionary, committed risk-takers, the Carl Sandburg State Historic Site, still known as the Sandburg Birthplace, remains a tribute to Galesburg's most famous native son. In continuity and evolution the Sandburg organization's philanthropy continues to augment the State of Illinois' commitment to the restoration, preservation, and educational dissemination of Carl Sandburg's Birthplace, his accomplishments and his final resting place, "a place to remember."

## 2011 CSHSA DUES

If you haven't paid your 2011 dues yet, please do so by mailing your check made out to "Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association" and this form to:

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