

# 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

Winter 2014

## FROM SITE SUPERINTENDENT MARTHA DOWNEY

### The Site is Open this Winter!

With the winter temperatures has come good news. The Carl Sandburg State Historic Site is open this winter. Ryan Cuscaden has been hired by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency to have the Site open Fridays and Saturdays 9 am to 4 pm and Sundays noon to 4 pm. Ryan's presence at the Site will allow for an expansion of public hours when spring arrives.

This past holiday season the Site with financial support from the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association decorated a Christmas tree in the Illinois Governor's Mansion. Patti Christianson designed and made the ornaments depicting a variety of characters and objects from Carl Sandburg's beloved *Rootabaga Stories*. Among the items adorning the tree were clowns, zizzies, pigs with bibs, five rusty rats, red slippers, a watermelon moon, cream puffs, and a gold accordion. It was charming and appropriate that the Sandburg tree was in the library at the Mansion. Thank you to Patti for her creativity and energy.

Be sure to put February 22 on your calendar. The Spring Songbag Concert Series begins that evening at 7 pm with a concert by Turas, a Celtic band. This Peoria area group has become popular here in the area with previous performances at the Site and in Bishop Hill.

Stop by the Site to meet Ryan soon and see you at the February Songbag.

## CSHSA WEBSITE & FACEBOOK

Visit the CSHSA website by searching for sandburg.org. Visit us on Facebook by searching for Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association.

## PENNY PARADE AT SITE JANUARY 31



Photo by Tom Foley

The annual Penny Parade will be held on Friday, January 31 from 1 to 3 pm at the Carl Sandburg State Historic Site. Knox County students have been asked to collect pennies which will be donated to the CSHSA on that date to fund projects and maintenance at the Site in these times of uncertain state funding. If you would like to donate to the Penny Parade, stop by the Site on January 31, or mail your donation to CSHSA, Penny Parade, P.O. Box 585, Galesburg, IL 61402-0585.

## CARL SANDBURG'S FIRST BIG FAN: THE STORY OF C.L. EDSON

By Will and Luz Schick

*(Ed. Note: This is the first of three installments by CSHSA members Will and Luz Schick. The Schicks are freelance textbook writers who moved to Galesburg from Evanston, Illinois in 2008. They "discovered" Galesburg on a Knox College visit for their daughter. Both of them grew up in Chicago (Will is a fifth-generation Chicagoan), so they had learned about Carl Sandburg and his poem*

"Chicago" very early on. Last year they produced a documentary for WTVP in Peoria, *Boxcar People*, on the Mexican railroad workers who lived with their families in boxcar camps in Galesburg.)

According to the Schicks, "In the course of researching that documentary, [we] came across George T. Edson, a researcher for the U.S. Department of Labor in the late 1920s who traveled the country interviewing Mexican workers. Edson's style of writing in his reports—common-sense and direct, yet with flashes of poetry, irony, and humor—captured [our] imagination so much that [we] took a road trip to the University of California at Berkeley last summer to find everything he wrote for the U.S. Department of Labor.

"Toward the end of that road trip, in Topeka, Kansas, [we] learned that George came from an extraordinary family of editors and writers. Three brothers, including George, were 'country editors' in small towns in Kansas and Nebraska. The fourth, Charley, hit the big time in New York as a columnist. [We] are in the process of writing a book about the Edson brothers and their take on the America unfolding in their lifetimes in the early 20th century—rural socialism, the Great Depression, the Mexican and "Bohemian" immigrants they encountered, the decline of the Mayflower Puritans who were their direct ancestors. The Edson brothers had much to say about all that, and more, in their newspaper writings, offering a dazzling view into rural and urban America at that transformative time. This piece is about Charley, or as he was known, C.L. Edson, who—as [we] were delighted to discover last December—was one of Carl Sandburg's earliest literary soul-mates."

(*Authors' Note*: "Through his long and illustrious career Carl Sandburg corresponded with many equally famous literary colleagues. But before his career began, in the difficult early years during which he struggled to define himself, his craft, and his place in a turbulent American society, Sandburg forged a friendship through letters with another young poet and alter ego, Charles Leroy Edson. What remains of this correspondence provides an intriguing glimpse into the preoccupations and passions that shaped and drove both poets at a formative age, when they were both unknowns on a similar path. It also raises interesting questions—as the two friends matured and their paths diverged—of talent, choices, fulfillment, and fate.")

## A MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY



Charles Leroy Edson, born in 1881 in Wilber, Nebraska. This photo was taken in about 1915.

Carl Sandburg was editor of his college's literary magazine, the *Lombard Review*, during the 1901-1902 school year. At some point in late 1901 he began to exchange letters with Charles Leroy Edson, a student at the University of Kansas. Together with his younger brother George, Edson printed, edited, and distributed a magazine they called *The Automobile*. The January 1902 issue of the *Lombard Review* printed one of Edson's *Automobile* poems and, in a separate notice, Sandburg waxed poetic about Edson and his publication:

*Picturesque and vigorous prose has come from his pen, besides verse of excellent quality. Keen satire, biting wit, frolicking humor and coruscations of common sense mark the Automobile. Nor are pathos and the sublime neglected, for many a page gleams with grave fancies and glows with the incense burned to unknown goddesses.*

At the time, Sandburg was a twenty-four

year old senior, and Edson was still a twenty-year-old sophomore. The two college editors began a sporadic correspondence that stretched over forty years, though they met in person only once. Fourteen letters from Charles Edson to Carl Sandburg are preserved in the Sandburg Collection at the University of Illinois. Unfortunately, only one of Sandburg's replies is in the archives.

Sandburg and Edson formed an immediate bond. In the early years they found common ground in their humble beginnings, their political views, their love of the outdoors, and their lofty literary ambitions. Despite being nearly four years younger, C. L. Edson (the professional name he used most often) was at first the more successful young writer. Even before he was praised in the *Lombard Review*, he had published his first poem (outside of his own journal), and a few months later an anti-war poem he published in *The Automobile* was picked up by the national journal *Public Opinion*.

Soon after leaving college Edson began working as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. He continued to sell poems, usually light verse, to other publications. He soon had his own column in the *Star* and by 1910 was associate editor at the *Tulsa Post*, all the while continuing to pursue his freelance writing career. Over the years he published poetry, short stories, and non-fiction in publications such as *Life*, *The Nation*, *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Puck*, *Judge*, *Travel*, and H. L. Mencken's highbrow monthly, *The Smart Set*.

In 1912, still only thirty years old, Edson moved to New York City in an unsuccessful effort to sell a novel. But within weeks he had landed a job writing a humor column for the *New York Evening Mail*. In 1920 Brentano's published Edson's *The Gentle Art of Columning*, a parody of "how-to" books and literary criticism that amused much of the non-writing public as well as his sophisticated New York colleagues. C. L. Edson's career unraveled in 1926, and we will explore below, in some detail, how that came about. But first, we'll look at his early letters to Carl Sandburg.

The first dated letter in the collection is handwritten and sent by Edson to Sandburg on January 29, 1903. He began, "I'm afraid I've waited so long you will have flown, and this will never reach you." Clearly, Edson was responding to a letter from Sandburg which has not been preserved, so we know we are joining the correspondence in progress.

Edson's letter did eventually reach him, but Sandburg had indeed flown. He was in Vineland, New Jersey, estranged from his family, writing poems, but no letters home. He was supporting himself by selling stereographs, but with little enthusiasm.

In his letter, Edson refers to Sandburg's poem "The Falling Leaves," which had appeared in the November, 1902 edition of *Thistle* magazine, edited by Lee Fairchild, a college mate of Sandburg's from Lombard College. Although it was Sandburg's first published poem, it was not an objective endorsement of his talent, having been published by a friend. Still, Sandburg sent a copy of *Thistle* to Edson for his approval, who "read with interest" his contribution.

Edson devoted much of this letter to summarizing the oration he gave for a school competition. Presumably referring to a previous letter, he wrote, "I threw away my oration on Immortality after I had completed it and wrote one on Death is Beautiful," an interesting topic for a twenty-one year old to choose. He spent two pages describing this oration, then two more copying out a poem he eventually published elsewhere. He asked Sandburg if Lee Fairchild might be interested in something like it, then concluded: "Let's go to Europe together summer after next Sandburg. What's your idea?"

Edson's next letter was dated "January last," and was possibly sent January 31, 1903, two days later, although 1904 cannot be ruled out. In it he wrote, "You guessed that [I] am an admirer of Elbert Hubbard, and as a matter of fact I am. But how the h—I could Sandburg tell?" Sandburg had been exposed to Hubbard, the flamboyant, long-haired iconoclastic utopian, no later than 1901, when he gave a speech at Knox College. The opinions of Sandburg and Edson indeed were intertwined and developing in similar directions at this time, due clearly to their similar temperaments and experiences.

The next letter is undated, but was probably written in the spring of 1903. At that time Sandburg was still in New Jersey. Edson began, "Say old man, it's a shame. I received your letter nearly 2 weeks ago, and have not answered it yet. But I have not forgotten you..." Edson then proceeded to talk about the journalism class he was taking and Lena, the new love of his life, whom he would marry two

years later.

The next surviving letter from Edson to Sandburg was mailed on January 24, 1906. During the intervening twenty-one-month period Carl Sandburg's mentor and ex-professor Philip Green Wright had founded Asgard Press in his basement and published Sandburg's poetry collection, *In Reckless Ecstasy*. In early 1905 Sandburg had holed up in Aurora, Illinois where he supported himself selling stereographs while he continued to study and write.

In February and March *To-morrow* magazine published the first poems Sandburg had published without benefitting from a Lombard College connection. By summer he had moved back to Galesburg where he worked at his neighborhood fire station and wrote "Inklings and Idlings" for the *Galesburg Evening Mail*. In October *To-morrow* published Sandburg's profile of Elbert Hubbard. During that period of time Edson lived in Kansas City working as a reporter for the *Star* while selling a handful of poems to other publications.

The January 24, 1906 letter began, "Dear Old Sandburg: Thanks for the *Lyceumite*. So you are back in the journalism business. I suppose now I must give up the hope of a visit from the Scandinavian warrior. Say, I'm going into the lyceum business myself I guess. I am perfecting a sort of chalk talk...."

In late 1905 Sandburg had been working on his oratory talents, and must have written of his plans to Edson, enclosing a copy of *Lyceumite*, the trade magazine of professional orators. Edson had just gotten married and complained in the letter that he was making only \$20 a week at the *Star*.

In April of 1906 Sandburg moved to Chicago and joined the editorial staff of *To-morrow*. The same month, *To-morrow* published "The God-slayer," a poem by C. L. Edson, most likely due to his connection to Sandburg. Despite his editorial duties, Sandburg was preoccupied at this time with making a name for himself as a lyceum orator. In late 1906 Asgard Press printed a brochure for him that included testimonials from Elbert Hubbard, Phillip Green Wright, the *Galesburg Evening-Mail*, and C. L. Edson. Clearly, there was some communication between the two young men in late 1906, although the letters no longer exist.

Late 1906 is also the probable timeframe for the only face-to-face meeting between Sandburg and Edson, to which Edson refers several times in his letters. They met in the town of Bloomingdale, Illinois and rode the train into Chicago to see a baseball game. This was almost certainly in August or September of 1906, when Sandburg was briefly living in Aurora, Illinois. Edson, unfortunately, describes it only as "a game between Boston and Chicago," so it could have been either the Cubs playing the Boston Beaneaters or the White Sox playing the Boston Americans (soon to be renamed the Red Sox). Chicago was baseball crazy that year, with both the Cubs and White Sox winning their respective pennants. (The Cubs compiled the best winning percentage in baseball history that season, but the White Sox won the World Series).

The year 1907 was pivotal for both young men. Early in the year Sandburg worked for the *Lyceumite*, then threw all of his energy into polishing his lyceum speech, a tribute to poet Walt Whitman entitled "An American Vagabond." He gave the speech at Elbert Hubbard's huge annual convention, and it was well received in a number of cities. But few bookings resulted, so late in the year he connected with the Wisconsin Social-Democratic Party. This move provided him with a more reliable income, professional writing experience, and later, an introduction to Lilian (Paula) Steichen, his future wife.

The year was no less momentous for Edson. In June he moved to the Arkansas Ozarks with the intention of starting a writers' and artists' colony with his younger brother George and several friends from Kansas City. His next three letters to Sandburg are postmarked Dennard, Arkansas. The first is dated August 29, 1907,

*Dear Old Sandburg:*

*...Yes, I'm located in Arkansas. Up in the mountains in the back woods. If you wish to see an ox team on the highway, here they are...Come down here and see the customs in vogue in this country in 1814. I couldn't tell you all the odd things in a letter. I am doing no literary work at present but chopping out railroad ties. Fine hard work. Sandburg you are not living since you began floating about as an illustrious grafter. Come down here and work a few days in the timber and you'll be young and ambitious again...*

*What t'all is your bold little book about? I'll tell you the theme of my novel when you get here. My plans are to live and work day to day eating all the grub I can get and just drinking in the beauties of creation. Be sure and come soon. I can put you to work in the timber and work some of the poetry out of your system. We could visit solid for 6 months and not get over all the ground. I must stop now and get my broad ax.*

*Yours for the Revolution*

*C. L. Edson*

Sandburg's "bold little book" must have been *Incidentals*, in which he writes, "The hopes of youth have been scorched and scarred in me but the romance of life has not burned out nor the glory of living been extinguished." Edson's letter also makes explicit a commonality between the two young men that had only been hinted at in previous letters, namely that they are both revolutionary socialists.

Edson wished to get to know Sandburg better by extended personal contact and had he written a similar letter two months sooner, it might have happened. In June, 1907 Sandburg had joined a friend at his retreat near Homer, Michigan to live and work in the country, as Edson had suggested he do in Arkansas.

Edson's next letter to Sandburg was mailed from Dennard, Arkansas on December 1, 1907 in care of the Sandburg's Lombard mentor, Philip Green Wright of the Asgard Press. Sandburg had just been appointed district organizer by the Wisconsin Social-Democratic Party board, and was enthusiastic about his new job. Edson didn't know this at the time, and tried his best yet again to elicit a visit.

Since Edson's last letter Sandburg had sent a copy of his pamphlet "Incidentals". Edson wrote that he read it straight through and that his wife Lena had read it and pronounced it "great." It was "like a good long letter from you and harked me back to days that are now entombed," he wrote, and laments that he had "dropped into the rut of journalism," and that he had only sold one poem in the past six months.



I SAT DOWN ON A LOG AND TRIED TO THINK OF MY NAME.

Edson wrote an illustrated, eight-part series for the *Kansas City Star* "An Experiment in Living," a semi-fictionalized account of his move to the Ozarks. This drawing shows how exhausting his fictional alter ego found the task of cutting railroad ties in the Ozark woods.

Most of all, he compared himself unfavorably to Sandburg. "You have continued more along the lines of my then endeavor than I have." Winter gloom may have contributed to Edson's overly pessimistic feelings about his writing career, but he seemed to be coming to the realization that he wasn't quite in Sandburg's league.

Edson tried to lure Sandburg down to Arkansas with "a barrel of corned beef, my own make, two hogs ready to smoke, and meal and potatoes in the house besides pipe and tobacco. What more could mortal want? Books? I have books..." He offers to let Sandburg read his novel, and continues his entreaties for a visit from him. "You come, old soul partner, for you are free... I am a socialist and a revolutionist with the best of you but kindred souls are so scarce. I have not met one since I met you several years ago. I don't want to 'hail each other in passing' and glide on into the trackless void never to meet again." Sadly, that is more or less what came to pass.

*(Ed. Note: If any readers have further information on the Sandburg/C.L. Edson connection, please contact the Schicks.)*

## **SANDBURG RECORDINGS ON ALUMINUM DISCS**

*(Ed. Note: This story was written by Heather Munro for the Western Illinois Museum in Macomb. Used with permission. Copyright 2014 Western Illinois Museum.)*

The January Artifact of the Month at the Western Illinois Museum is a set of aluminum records. These two discs were acquired to be part of a display about the poet and historian, Carl Sandburg, at the museum when it was formerly located on the third floor in Sherman Hall at Western Illinois University. It is believed that the aluminum discs are recordings of Sandburg, either speaking or singing. Carl Sandburg was born in Galesburg, Illinois and remains one of the region's most famous citizens. The two little aluminum records on display at the museum each have a paper label identifying them as MARVEL VOICE REPRODUCING RECORDS. They both have a paper sleeve with the following printed on the outside:

### **MAKE YOUR OWN RECORDS!**

*Take this metal disc and play it as you would any ordinary record on a phonograph. To obtain the best results use a loud tone needle. Sing into the sound box loudly and distinctly; if possible use a megaphone. When you have finished, play it over again and hear YOUR VOICE. It is advisable before using to let the needle go once over the disc to remove dust particles, which may have accumulated.*

Making a personal recording on an aluminum disc was popular during the 1930's and lingered around as a novelty until the 1960's. There were coin-operated "record-your-voice" booths at fairs, arcades, record shops and music stores. Many people made recordings for fun or to give as gifts. Some radio stations recorded radio broadcasts on aluminum discs. Perhaps these two aluminum discs record Sandburg speaking or singing or at a radio broadcast. Due to the condition of the discs, it is not possible to play them to hear the recording.

The little three-room cottage where Sandburg

was born on January 6, 1878, and where he spent part of his boyhood is now a State Historic Site, and can be visited at 331 East Third Street on the south side of Galesburg.

Sandburg enjoyed a long and varied literary career. From a start working as a newspaper reporter, he went on to write numerous volumes of poetry. Known as the 'Poet of the People,' Sandburg was famous for his rugged, individual free verse style. Another of his notable accomplishments was his six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, which stands as one of the best selling and most widely read biographies of Lincoln. For his poetry and his biography, Sandburg received Pulitzer Prizes in 1919, 1940 and 1951.

Sandburg spent a lot of time traveling around the country lecturing to school and college audiences and to the American public. He played the guitar, sang folk songs, and recited his poetry. He collected and published folk songs, many of them he printed for the first time. He appreciated folk music far ahead of its popularity in the 1960's. Audiences across the country loved Sandburg so much, that until the end of his life, he was in great demand as an entertainer.

Starting in the 1930's and continuing for the rest of his life, Sandburg made recordings of his writings and of his singing. His albums were very popular. In 1959 Sandburg was awarded a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Performance - documentary for his 1958 narration of Aaron Copland's Lincoln Portrait, performed by André Kostelanetz and the New York Philharmonic. Sandburg loved performing and being in front of an audience. He performed not only in front of live audiences, but wherever the opportunity presented itself. On television he appeared on two episodes of The Ed Sullivan Show, and also made an appearance as a mystery guest on What's My Line?, a popular game show. He lived in Hollywood during much of 1960, working as George Stevens' creative consultant on the film, "The Greatest Story Ever Told." He seemed to enjoy his fame and celebrity. He met many famous people: he had dinner with Charlie Chaplin and went to the Friars Club "Roast" dinner for Gary Cooper where he sat next to Dean Martin and Audrey Hepburn. He was a guest on the Tonight Show with Jack Paar, went to parties, and met Marilyn Monroe. Late in life, while at his home in North Carolina, he enjoyed a visit from the folk singer Bob Dylan. An admirer of Sandburg, Dylan gave him a few of his albums, as

Sandburg did not have any of his records.

In 1959, in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, Congress met in joint session to hear an address by Sandburg. As of 2013, Sandburg is the only American poet ever invited to address a joint session of Congress. He also visited the White House and chatted with President Kennedy. Besides three Pulitzer Prizes and a Grammy, President Lyndon Johnson awarded Sandburg the Presidential Medal of Freedom, this nation's highest civilian honor. Sandburg also appeared on the front covers of most of the major magazines of his time and had numerous schools named after him. Sandburg achieved a level of popularity and national fame unusual for a poet.

Sandburg died July 22, 1967, at the age of 87, and his ashes were placed under a large boulder at his birthplace in Galesburg. These aluminum recordings, possibly by Sandburg, serve as reminders of one of the region's greatest literary figures. The records will be on display at the museum from January 2nd through the 31st, 2014.

## FIRST PUBLISHED POEMS

By Barbara Schock

By 1914 Carl Sandburg and his wife Lilian and baby daughter Margaret were living in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago. He was working as editor of a small trade journal in the daytime and spending evenings writing and rewriting his poems. Lilian carefully typed the poems and sent them to editors of eastern magazine publishers. All were returned to the disappointment of the writer and his typist.

The Sandburgs had been reading a new magazine of poetry published in Chicago since 1912. It was titled *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* and was the creation of a 52-year-old spinster, Harriet Monroe. The circulation of the magazine was less than 1500, which was a number that would not suggest the publication continuing for any length of time. Nine poems were typed and dispatched to 543 Cass Street, where the editorial offices of Poetry were located. In early March Sandburg received a check for \$70 (equal to almost three weeks of his wages). Needless to say, the members of the Sandburg household were delighted. They also

received an invitation to a banquet at which William Butler Yeats, the distinguished Irish poet, was to speak. It was held at the Cliff Dwellers Club in Orchestra Hall on Michigan Avenue. Miss Monroe loaned Lilian an evening dress for the occasion. With his professional habit of taking notes Sandburg made his own record of the distinguished people present. Yeats' comments about poetry writing were especially interesting to him. Yeats suggested writing in a simple style, not wanting a lot of rhetoric in poems. He was in favor of free verse, even though it was much more difficult to write.

Through contact with the *Poetry* office, Sandburg became friends with Vachel Lindsey and other well known writers and poets of the time. The poems he submitted to *Poetry* included "Chicago" which helped make the reputation of the city. The first lines are known around the world. Another of the poems was titled "Who am I?" It reads,

*My head knocks against the stars.*

*My feet are on the hilltops.*

*My fingertips are in the valleys and shores of universal life.*

*Down in the sounding foam of primal things I reach my hands and play with pebbles of destiny.*

*I have been to hell and back many times.*

*I know all about heaven, for I have talked with God.*

*I dabble in the blood and guts of the terrible.*

*I know the passionate seizure of beauty*

*And the marvelous rebellion of man at all signs reading "Keep Off."*

*My name is Truth and I am the most elusive captive in the universe.*

Later in 1914 Sandburg received the first Levenson Prize for poetry. It included a cash award of \$200. Salmon O. Levenson established the prize in memory of his wife, Helen. It was to provide annual recognition of the work of an American poet. The Levenson family has established an endowment for the continuation of the prize to this day. The list of winners includes many prominent writers of the twentieth century.

**SANDBURG WROTE ABOUT THE NEWLY-MINTED LINCOLN PENNY IN 1909**

"The face of Abraham Lincoln on the copper cent seems well and proper. If it were possible to talk with that great, good man, he would probably say that he is perfectly willing that his face is to be placed on the cheapest and most common coin in the country.

"The Penny is strictly the coin of the common people. At Palm Beach, Newport and Saratoga you will find nothing for sale at one cent. No ice cream cones at a Penny apiece there. 'Keep the change' says the rich man. 'How many Pennies do I get

back?' asks the poor man. Only the children of the poor know the joy of getting a Penny for running around the corner to the grocery. The Penny is the bargain counter coin. Only the common people walk out of their way to get something for 9 cents reduced from 10 cents. The Penny is the coin used by those who are not sure of tomorrow, those who know that if they are going to have a dollar next week they must watch the Pennies this week. Follow the travels of the Penny and you find it stops at many cottages and few mansions. The common, *homely face of 'Honest Abe' will look good on the Penny, the coin of the common folk from whom he came and to whom he belongs.*"

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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