

# INKLINGS and IDLINGS

The Newsletter of the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association

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Fall, 2010

## America's Poet: America's Pastime

By Martha Downey  
Site Superintendent

Who this summer has not commented or complained about the heat and humidity we have experienced? Yet signs abound that fall is coming. Schools have begun, cornfields are drying, and the Songbag Concert series has begun again. Football season may have started, but America's national pastime is looking towards the World Series. Games have taken on an importance not apparent during those sweltering July days. Carl Sandburg knew baseball. It was a game he played often during his years living on South and Berrien Streets.

He relates in *Always the Young Strangers* the joy of playing baseball from morning until dusk. According Sandburg he along with Fatty Beckman and Skinny Seeley were the "craziest." Sandburg wrote, "We began playing earlier in the spring and kept on later in the fall than the other boys. We began playing earlier in the morning and we played later in the evening than the others. We played in late October and early November till the first frosts came and the last russet apple had fallen from a tree at the back fence of the pasture"

Carl Sandburg was a baseball fan. He wrote of baseball, of knowing its statistics and which teams were winning and which teams were losing. "Across a few years I could from day to day name the leading teams and the tailenders in the National League and the American Association. I could name the players who led in batting and fielding and the pitchers who had won the most games. I filled my head with this

knowledge and carried it around. There were times my head seemed empty of everything but baseball names and figures. I could hear them rattling around in my head. I had my opinions about who was better than anybody else in the national game. Therefore I now understand the Great American Ball Fan and all his follies. I was an addict and I know why pop bottles have been thrown at umpires, though I have never at a season end thrown a good straw hat on the grandstand floor and jumped on it to crush the life out of it." (*Always the Young Strangers*)

Sandburg did not reserve baseball only for his prose. A long game between Rock Island and Chillicothe is recounted in *Cornhuskers*:

"I remember the Chillicothe ball players grappling the Rock Island ball players in a sixteen-inning game ended by darkness.

And the shoulders of the Chillicothe players were a red smoke against the sundown and the shoulders of the Rock Island players were a yellow smoke against the sundown.

And the umpire's voice was hoarse calling balls and strikes and outs and the umpire's throat fought in the dust for a song."

This fall's Songbag Concert Series has begun. Mark Sept. 25, Oct. 30 and Nov. 27 on your calendars as dates for these concerts. Go to [johnheasley.com/songbag](http://johnheasley.com/songbag) concerts for details. The Beanhive and Uncle Billy's will be providing the intermission refreshments.

# Pioneer Railroading in Western Illinois

On June 26, 2010 CSHSA Vice-President Rex Cherrington presented a talk for the Railroad Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony in the Muelder Room, Seymour Library, Knox College entitled "Pioneer Railroading in Western Illinois". He began his talk by reciting Sandburg's poem "Washington Monument by Night" (1922). He continued:

The line from the poem upon which I wish to focus is "Nothing happens unless first a dream." As Carl Sandburg contemplated the Washington Monument he thought of the dreams upon which the Republic was founded. Railroads can also be considered as monuments and represent the dreams of many.

We will discuss briefly the dreams of some people in this part of the state, the land between the two rivers, the Illinois and the Mississippi, known as the Military Bounty Tract, so named because the land had been set aside for the veterans of the War of 1812. This region was settled at first by small numbers of people from Kentucky, Tennessee and Indiana, the so-called Hoosiers, but it was more heavily settled and developed by those Easterners who came later, the so-called Yankees. Yankees came a little later, after the building of what was then, America's largest of internal improvements, the Erie Canal. Many of the settlers in Western Illinois came by way of that canal which opened in 1825. New York got its first railroad the next year, the Mohawk and Hudson, the first of America's railroads to use a steam-powered locomotive engine.

It was their dreams that brought people west. They had seen what internal improvements in the form of new modes of transportation had done for the benefit, economic and social, for the east. They wanted to bring the cultural institutions of the east with them. As Herman Muelder, for whom this room is named, had said to us in one of his classes, these Yankees saw the frontier as an infant, and they came here to do what they could to see that it was raised properly.

By the 1840's there were railroad meetings held all around Western Illinois. The dream was building a railroad to reach Chicago to connect with new railroads going east and the use of water transportation on the Great Lakes and Erie canal, so agricultural products could be sold for better prices in the eastern markets

and to better facilitate the settlement of this region which was then the frontier.

On February 12, 1849, which was coincidentally, Abraham Lincoln's fortieth birthday, a charter was obtained for the Peoria and Oquawka Railroad. James Knox, a Knox College trustee and United States Congressman, from Knoxville, Illinois became the first President of the Peoria and Oquawka Railroad. This railroad was largely promoted by people from Peoria, Knoxville, Monmouth and in time, Burlington, Iowa. It seemed that Oquawka people never really shared the dream. On that same February 12, 1849, rather through coincidence than by design, citizens of Aurora, Illinois formed the Aurora Branch Railroad Company.

The Quincy railroad promoters had obtained the 1837 charter of the Northern Cross Railroad, one of the oldest charters in the state that resulted from the Internal Improvement Acts of 1837. By 1851 the Northern Cross, led by its president, Nehemiah Bushnell, had obtained permission from the State of Illinois to build a branch from Quincy through the Military Bounty Tract to connect to any railroad going toward Chicago.

The people of Galesburg had dreams that were different than the people in Knoxville, and in 1851 they formed the Central Military Tract Railroad, whose first president, ironically, was one of those so-called Hoosiers, former Illinois Lieutenant-Governor William McMurtry. The original plan was for the railroad to go north from Galesburg to Henderson and Ontario. When that plan was abandoned the people of Henderson, including McMurtry severed their ties to the Central Military Tract Railroad. The people of western Illinois were able to find others who embraced their dreams. Financing for the Central Military Tract Railroad came from John Murray Forbes of Boston among many others who did not live in the Military Tract.

In the decade following the formation of the Peoria and Oquawka in 1849 there were changes. Dreams were not always shared by everyone in the Military Tract, and there were conflicts as the people had different dreams. The Peoria and Oquawka was unable to raise the capital to complete its construction and failed. The Northern Cross tied its future to the Central Military Tract railroad. The Aurora Branch became the Chicago and Aurora Railroad and that soon became the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad which absorbed the Northern Cross,



Central Military Tract and Peoria and Oquawka. Out of these dreams, through cooperation and conflict, came one of America's great railroads which lives on to the present in the BNSF.

What does all this mean in human terms? A woman from Sweden with dreams of a better life came to the United States of America. She was working in a railroad hotel on the CB&Q at Bushnell, Illinois, a town named for one of the presidents of the Northern Cross Railroad. It was there she met a man from Sweden who came to this country to pursue his dreams and he worked for the CB&Q Railroad. Soon after they met, he proposed marriage to her. As that woman later told her son, 'I saw it as my chance and I took it.' That son was Carl Sandburg. His father worked for the CB&Q for nearly four decades and through his employment provided for his family.

Carl grew up in Galesburg, the hub of the CB&Q and a place with great history. Carl's dream was to become a writer, and he became a great craftsman of the language. He admired another great craftsman of the language and a man with some ties to Galesburg, Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, as a young state legislator, was in favor of the Internal Improvements Act of 1837, which granted the original charter to the Northern Cross Railroad which became an essential part of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy. I will not go so far as to contend that Abraham Lincoln made Carl Sandburg possible, but the point I wish to make is that railroads do not just connect the dots on the map that represent villages and cities. More importantly they connect the hearts and minds of people and have done so for many generations and no doubt will for generations yet unborn.

What a magnificent railroad exists today because of dreams of long ago. Let me share this thought just for fun about how history would be different if the people of Oquawka had embraced that dream in 1849 the way the people of Burlington did. We might today call this mighty railroad the ONSF rather than the BNSF.

In closing let me encourage you to embrace your dreams once you have decided that the fulfillment of your dreams will be for the benefit of society. Make plans, set goals and get lucky. Yes, that's right. Get lucky. A farmer once said to me that his success had been pure luck, but he had noticed that the harder he worked, the more his luck increased."

## Excerpts From "Carl Sandburg's Wisdom Through Humor"

The following are excerpts from "Carl Sandburg's Wisdom through Humor" (2010) by Walter Moss, Professor Emeritus of History, Eastern Michigan University. To read the full nine-page text go to [wisdompage.com/Sandburg Essay.doc](http://wisdompage.com/Sandburg Essay.doc).

"That Sandburg had a rich sense of humor there can be no doubt. After his death, Paula wrote, 'It seems to me that Carl and I were always surrounded by children, books, and animals. The children had everything that the two of us had to give—love, attention, and in Carl's case, the gift of imagination and humor.' He entertained both his children and many others by writing and reading out poems and children's stories and singing folk songs, many of which were humorous. . . .

One of his best friends, Jewish-American humorist Harry Golden, wrote that 'he was the first American historian who made use of the native American talent for telling tall tales, for laughing, and for appreciating the vernacular.' In one of his Lincoln volumes, Sandburg stated that 'Lincoln was the first true humorist to occupy the White House. No other President of the United States had come to be identified, for good or bad, with a relish for the comic.' Sandburg then devoted most of a chapter to examples of Lincoln's humor. In his epic poem *The People, Yes* (1936) at least a third of the work was devoted to people's often humorous myths, folklore, and sayings. His chief biographer, Penelope Niven, writes of his youthful 'exuberant sense of humor' and quotes one of his friends who noted his 'redeeming sense of humor.' . . .

[I]n addition to his massive multi-volume work on Lincoln (for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in history), it was primarily his poetry (for which he also won a Pulitzer) that made him famous. And it is there that we should primarily look for his humor. In his introduction to Sandburg's *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960*, critic (and poet) Mark Van Doren wrote: 'Carl Sandburg . . . brought something back to poetry

that had been sadly missing in the early years of this century. It was humor, the indispensable ingredient of art as it is of life. Just as we cannot take a man seriously who lacks the sense of humor, so we cannot take the poet. Humor is the final sign and seal of seriousness, for it is proof that reality is held in honor and in love.' . . . .

Wise person that he was, Sandburg saw that life is both a comedy and tragedy, containing vibrant life and sad death, the beautiful and the ugly, the wise and the foolish, moments of transcendence and ones of banality. As the Bible's book of Ecclesiastes says (and Sandburg admirer Pete Seeger later adapted for his folk song 'Turn, Turn, Turn'):

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die . . .

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance. . . .

Sandburg's poetry is full of the incongruous, of contrasts, of things that don't seem to fit together—and yet paradoxically sometimes do. In *The People, Yes* . . . he mentions the Irish policeman who arrested a Pawnee Indian and said 'why don't you go back where you came from?' He later adds,

The people is a tragic and comic two-face:

hero and hoodlum; phantom and gorilla twisting to moan with a gargoye mouth

In one of Sandburg's early poems, 'Child of the Romans,' he ironically contrasts an Italian-American railway worker who works a ten-hour day, lunches on bread and bologna, and keeps the roadbed of the rails so smooth that 'flowers in the cut glass vases' of the dining cars 'shake hardly at all,' not bothering the men and women in the dining cars, eating steaks and strawberries and cream. In another early poem, 'To a Contemporary Bunkshooter,' Sandburg contrasts a fire-and-brimstone preacher with the true message of Jesus:

You come along. . .tearing your shirt. . .

yelling about Jesus.

Where do you get that stuff?

Jesus had a way of talking soft and outside of a few bankers and higher-ups

among the con men of the Jerusalem everybody liked to have this Jesus around because he never made any fake

passes and everything he said went and he helped the sick and gave people hope.

You come along squirting words at us, shaking your fist and calling us all damn

fools so fierce the froth slobbers over your lips. .  
.always blabbing we're all going to hell straight off and know all about it.

I've read Jesus' words. I know what he said. You don't throw any scare into me. I've got your number. I know how much you know about Jesus. . . .

Folly occurs in part because of our ignorance. In the preface to his *Complete Poems*, he wrote that 'the inexplicable is all around us. So is the incomprehensible. So is the unintelligible,' and he quoted humorist Will Rogers--'We are all ignorant but on different subjects.' In *The People, Yes* he adds:

Who knows the answers, the cold inviolable truth?

And how few they are who search and hesitate and say:

'I stand in this whirlpool and tell you I don't know and if I did know I would tell you and all I am doing now is to guess and I give you my guess for what it is worth as one man's guess' . . . .

Sandburg's chief biographer [Niven] said that he believed in 'the courage to go on doggedly,' and that 'love for work or others can enable transcendence over harsh circumstances.' She also wrote that 'for Sandburg, poetry was the supreme myth, which enables human beings to endure reality, to survive it, even to transcend it.' [H]e realized the importance of transcendence. Although he believed in some sort of divine force, he adhered to no specific religious faith, once humorously declaring 'I am a Christian, a Quaker, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Shintoist, a Confucian, and maybe a Catholic pantheist or a Joan



of Arc who hears voices. I am all of these and more. Definitely I have more religions than I have time or zeal to practice in true faith.' . . .

Laughter as a means of maintaining mental balance was something Sandburg also mentioned in his Lincoln books[:]

'On the day after [the North's crushing defeat at] Fredericksburg the staunch old friend, Issac N. Arnold, entered Lincoln's office [and] was asked to sit down. Lincoln then read from [humorist] Artemus Ward. . . . That Lincoln should wish to read this nonsense while the ambulances were yet hauling thousands of wounded from the frozen mud flats of the Rappahannock River was amazing to Congressman Arnold. As he said afterward he was shocked.' He inquired, 'Mr. President, is it possible that with the whole land bowed in sorrow and covered with a pall in the presence of yesterday's fearful reverse, you can indulge in such levity[?] Then, Arnold said, the President threw down the Artemus Ward book, tears streamed down his cheeks, his physical frame quivered as he burst forth, 'Mr. Arnold, if I could not get momentary respite from the crushing burden I am constantly carrying, my heart would break.' And with that pent-up cry let out, it came over Arnold that the laughter of Lincoln at times was a mask.'

Although Sandburg had nothing like the burdens Lincoln had to bear during the Civil War, he did have his own difficulties. Two of his three children (all girls) had serious health problems, one with epilepsy and the other with learning disabilities that prevented her from finishing high school until age twenty-two. Partly because of his fear of long-lasting medical bills, he worked incredibly hard to provide for his family's financial needs, and in 1927 suffered a nervous breakdown. 'but humor helped him to see that he had strayed from the path of wisdom. He indicated that his doctors told him to work less and told a friend that 'if I don't work less, play more, and give the Works [his body] a chance, I'm a plain ridiculous fool.' Although decades later an editor still described him as 'one of the hardest working writers I have ever known,' he never again suffered another breakdown, and his sense of humor helped him retain a proper balance between work and relaxation."

## **Chicago Daily Tribune Stories About the Birthplace in the 1940s**

CSHSA Board Member Rick Sayre contributed the following stories about the Sandburg Birthplace that appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1963) in the 1940s:

February 18, 1945, by Harry Hansen in New York—  
"We in New York have been pleased to see that Galesburg is taking care of its literary reputation by working to buy and refurnish the little cottage in which Carl Sandburg was born. The valiant efforts of Mrs. J.E. George, who started this campaign single-handedly, are to be applauded as an example for women in other communities. For such local shrines have a definite place in influencing the youth to become aware of opportunities in its own back yard. Galesburg has an important place in the educational history of the middle west, and its association with Lincoln and Douglas has been revived by Carl Sandburg's writing. But it is as an authentic voice of the prairie that Sandburg will live in American literature. The interest of Swedish-American organizations is also worth noting, for, as the son of Swedish immigrants, Carl Sandburg demonstrates how deep-rooted their democracy is. Mrs. George, who lives at 258 N. Academy [St.]. In Galesburg, had charge of the first meeting the other day of the Carl Sandburg Birthplace, Inc., the first organized step of this commendable project."

September 8, 1946, by Harry Hansen in New York—  
"Word already has gone out thru the news services that the little cottage in Galesburg where Carl Sandburg was born 68 years ago will be dedicated as a memorial to the author on Oct. 7. As Carl is still alive he does not intend to wander like a ghost thru the premises on that day, but it has his cooperation, and he will get a glimpse of the old place, now painted, repaired and placed in order, when he attends the reunion of company C, of the Veterans of the Spanish-American war, in Galesburg, Sept. 12."

Ralph Newman, Fanny Butcher, Lloyd Lewis, Marshall Field, and a number of others who have been associated with Carl or his work will speak, either at the cottage or later at a dinner in the Custer hotel. Mrs. Adda Gentry George, president of the Carl Sandburg association, who is mainly responsible for bringing this project to a successful issue, tells me

that she hopes to have a contribution from Quincy Wright, who was Carl Sandburg's English teacher at Lombard college and helped his first faltering steps in verse, which at that time showed a distinct Kipling influence.

The day of the dedication coincides with the anniversary of the Lincoln-Douglas debate, always an important date for Galesburg. The cottage has three small rooms, now filled with some of the original furniture as well as characteristic pieces of the period, and photographs, books, and manuscripts."

October 6, 1946, by Fanny Butcher-- "Tomorrow in Galesburg, Ill., a unique event is to take place... The Carl Sandburg association, formed to preserve the birthplace of a great poet-historian, biografer [sic] (and in a minute I'll tell you a secret about something else he's becoming) will celebrate Carl Sandburg day. . . . At 4 p.m. the dedication of the little house at 331 East Third street will take place, at 6 there will be dinner. . . [Sandburg] will be one in absentia, however, and will not, as one weekly magazine put it, 'shatter precedents by attendance at the dedication of this birthplace'. . . . He is a modest man, and he wired the magazine asking them to say that he was NOT going to do that. 'If present then,' his wire read, 'my remarks would consist chiefly of the ancient proverb 'Praise no man till he is dead.'

Tho Mr. Sandburg may not be present at the ceremony, his modesty can never, unless he plugs his ears tight shut, keep him from hearing thunders of praises which always resound in his vicinity. . . . His career as a writer is almost unique. Whom else can you think of who holds top rank in so many fields of creative literature? . . .

As a historian his work is overshadowed by this genius at making characters live, but when the Pulitzer prize was awarded for the Lincoln saga it was a tossup whether it should be given for history or biograpy [sic]. . . . Nobody has written more delightful or idea-full books for children... 'But he is not a novelist?' you say.... There you are wrong. . . .

And this is the secret I promised to tell you. . . He is working on the last 50 pages of this first novel [*Remembrance Rock*], a magnificent panoramic picture of America, beginning with the Pilgrims in England, their flight to Holland, their escape to the welcominThear, then the Civil war. It is the fictional history of one American family who sought, fought for, and found freedom. . . . The seed for the novel

was planted by a plea from Hollywood that he do a historical script for a movie. . . . The book will be published sometime probably next year and it will put Carl Sandburg in the front rank of American novelists. . . and also be one of the great books of a year that looks as if it would be a really great one for American letters."

## Juanita Bednar Attended Sandburg's 85th Birthday Party In New York City

On January 6, 1963, Juanita Bednar, president of the Carl Sandburg Association, attended a dinner given by Harcourt Brace & World (Sandburg's publishers) at New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel honoring Sandburg on his eighty-fifth birthday and the publication of *Honey and Salt*. What a wonderful, exciting experience that must have been for Mrs. Bednar.

CSHSA board member Chuck Bednar, contributed a copy of the dinner's guest list with hand-written comments by his mother. Those comments are shown in parentheses.

Guests included Edward Albee, Marian Anderson (I talked to her), Mrs. C.Y. Belknap (Adda's [George] daughter), Mr. and Mrs. Richard Drummond Bokum (this is Fannie Butcher, famous Chi[ago] Trib[une] columnist, her husband sat next to me & (N[ew] Y[ork] Times columnist [Harry] Hansen on other side, my dinner partner), Dr. and Mrs. William Braye (writer, Carl's friends), Helene Champlain (my friend), Mrs. e.e. cummings (husband poet, he died this year), William O. Douglas (Chief Justice U.S. [Supreme Court], he spoke), Dave Garroway, Adda George, Harry Golden (N.C. publisher, writer), Mrs. Alfred Harcourt, Mrs. Ernest Hemingway (Mary, good looking), Anne Hill (Adda's granddaughter), Ralph Ingersoll (former Galesburg owner Coulter-Disc Mfg.), Mahalia Jackson (she sang), Gunnar Jarring (ambassador from Sweden), Nathan Kroll (Carl's mgr.), Mrs. Lloyd Lewis (husband columnist), Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Mitgang (N.Y. Times), Ralph G. Newman (Chi[cago]), Mr. and Mrs. Sophocles Papas (pro guitarist), Mr. and Mrs. Carl Sandburg, Helga and Margaret Sandburg, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Steichen, John Carl Steichen (son), Karlen Paula Steichen (daughter), Mr. and Mrs. John Steinbeck, Mr. and Mrs. Mark Van Doren, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore White, Mr. and Mrs. Quincy Wright (his father discovered Carl at Lombard).



# *Please join or renew your membership in the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association*

The Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association promotes awareness of the historical and cultural significance of Carl Sandburg and the Carl Sandburg Historic Site in Galesburg.

We support a variety of educational and entertaining programs and the collection, preservation and display of materials which celebrate the life, times and achievements of Carl Sandburg.

## **Membership categories and benefits:**

All members receive 10% discount in the museum store, Inklings & Idlings, free admission to concerts and special events and the knowledge that every member is helping to preserve the heritage of an outstanding American poet and historian.

- ☐ \$10.00 Individual
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