

# 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](http://www.sandburg.org)

Spring 2014

## FROM SITE SUP'T MARTHA DOWNEY

The centennial celebrations have begun for Carl Sandburg's literary works. In the March, 1914 issue of *Poetry* magazine Sandburg's poem "Chicago" was first published. The Newberry Library hosted an evening commemorating this poem's appearance in print. The Poetry Foundation will launch in April the "Favorite Poem Project: Chicago." "Chicago" is the first favorite poem featured. Mayor Rahm Emanuel has been recorded reading "Chicago" for the launch of this new project. [www.poetryfoundation.org/favoritepoemchicago](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/favoritepoemchicago)

Here in Galesburg we are once again finalizing plans for the 18th annual Carl Sandburg Festival, April 23-26. Note the name change. The festival committee felt it appropriate to use his full name. As part of this year's activities the statue of Carl Sandburg will be welcomed to the city of his birth. GPAC has worked hard for this addition to Galesburg's statuary. Congratulations to that organization.

Other festival events include the appearance of author Jennifer Niven. She began writing full time in 2000 and is the daughter of Sandburg biographer, Penelope Niven. Jennifer's nonfiction works include *The Ice Master: The Doomed 1913 Voyage of the Karluk* and *Ada Blackjack: A True Story of Survival in the Arctic*. *Becoming Clementine*, *Velva Jean Learns to Drive*, and *Velva Jean Learns to Fly* are three of her fiction works.

Jennifer says of her writing, "I've written nonfiction and fiction, both historical and contemporary. At first glance, my books are all over the map, but if you look closely they share a common theme: they are stories about ordinary people doing extraordinary things."

She will be talking at Carl Sandburg College and Galesburg High School on Thursday, April 24.

Later that afternoon she will be joined by her mother, Penelope, at Knox College. Together they will discuss mother and daughter writing. Saturday, April 26 at the Site's Barn, Jennifer will conduct a writers' workshop.

That Saturday evening the 7 pm Songbag Concert will feature folk musicians Dan Zahn and Kate Moretti. Following the concert the Poetry Slam will just be starting at McGillicuddy's. Galesburg is fortunate that Marc Smith, creator of the Poetry Slam, once again returns to lead the Carl Sandburg Festival's poetry slam.

Check <http://apps.sandburg.edu/Festival> for the Carl Sandburg Festival schedule and updates to that schedule. Plan to take advantage of the activities and programs offered during the festival. Join the celebration of Carl Sandburg.

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

By Will and Luz Schick

*(Ed. Note: This is the second of three installments by CSHSA members Will and Luz Schick. They are freelance textbook writers who moved to Galesburg from Evanston, Illinois in 2008. While researching their documentary **Boxcar People** for WTVP in Peoria, they came across George T. Edson, a researcher for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the late 1920's. The Schicks are in the process of writing a book about Charles and his three brothers, country editors in small Kansas and Nebraska towns, and "their take on the America unfolding in their lifetimes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—rural socialism, the Great Depression, the Mexican and 'Bohemian' immigrants they encountered, the decline of the Mayflower Puritans who were their direct ancestors.")*

(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.")

### Two Different Roads to Success

The next time Edson wrote to Sandburg his mood and his prospects had somewhat improved. Sandburg had sent him his next Asgard Press offering, a ten-page prose poem, "The Complaint of a Rose." The book was published the first week of 1908, and presumably Sandburg had sent a copy to Edson soon after that. Edson wrote that he has decided Sandburg has "a bigger heart than any other man I know."

Edson himself had had a breakthrough in his writing career—an illustrated, eight-part series that ran weekly in the *Kansas City Star* starting on December 15, 1907. Called "An Experiment in Living" it was a semi-fictionalized account of his move to the Ozarks. Edson reported that he was looking forward to finally being joined by others at his Ozark artists' colony and was learning to make his land more productive. He ended the letter,

*I have made a living with my hands since I have been down here, and a fat living it has been. I am pretty much at peace with the world. Peaches will be in blossom in two weeks and fishing will be prime in two months. The best game fishing in the world is right here. Ain't I a lucky proletariat?*

*Yours on the astral plain*  
C. L. Edson

The next letter is dated January 4, 1912, preceded by a four-year gap during which, not surprisingly, much has changed in the lives of both young men.

For most of this period of time Sandburg lived in Milwaukee. He married Paula on June 15, 1908 and

worked for various Milwaukee newspapers until he joined the campaign of Emil Seidel, Social-Democratic candidate for mayor. Seidel was elected mayor of Milwaukee in 1910 and hired Sandburg as his personal secretary.

In late 1908 Edson began splitting his time between making his living with his hands in Arkansas and working again as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. Earlier in the year the *Star* had published his "Ballad of Kansas City," a tribute to a rough and tumble city, not unlike Sandburg's "Chicago," but written five years earlier. In the first stanza Edson intones a litany of how other great cities got their start, as in "Hogs made Chicago with their dying squeal." As for Kansas City, he wrote, "Here stands a city built o' bread and beef."

By 1910 Edson had moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma for a relatively lucrative position as associate editor of the *Tulsa Post*. While on staff he also wrote a thrice-weekly column called "With Edson, the Post Poet." He was publishing about ten poems a week, ranging from tongue-twisters to whimsical light verse to political satire to serious literary efforts. Some of the poems (it's hard to tell how many) had been written over the years and unsuccessfully shopped to other publications. On January 22, 1911 he left the *Post* to join the staff of the largest weekly socialist newspaper in the country, *Appeal to Reason*, headquartered in Girard, Kansas.

Again, we cannot be sure of how many letters went unpreserved, but Edson's January 4, 1912 letter, on *Appeal to Reason* letterhead, responded to at least one Sandburg letter in which he complained about being paid only \$25 a week. Edson suggested that "the building up of an outside market is the solution of the problem." He then went on to describe how he supplemented his salary at *Appeal to Reason* with freelance work for several Kansas City newspapers. He wrote, "I can make about three hundred dollars a month now and for the first time in my life feel like a plute. I have 170 acres of good land down in Arkansas...I have the sweetest wife and daughter south of Milwaukee and am certainly in love with them."

At this point in their respective careers Edson seemed to have achieved slightly greater success. Each poet was writing for both socialist and mainstream publications, but neither yet had the big break that would propel him to the next level.

Edson was cheerily optimistic, and toward the end of the letter wrote, “Socialism is going to develop a press that will make a good market for us and we will get a few bones before the utopian stage comes when no one will write for money. It would do me a lot of good to see you again. Best wishes to Mrs. Sandburg and that perfect baby.”

The next letter was dated April 9, 1916—another four-year gap full of momentous changes had intervened. “Dear Old Sandburg,” Edson began, “It has been years since I had a letter from you. In the meantime you have become one of the biggest poets in the country.”

Edson was hardly exaggerating. In 1914 *Poetry* magazine published Sandburg’s iconic “Chicago” and later named it poem of the year. He continued to grow as a poet while writing about politics for the *Chicago Day Book*. *Poetry* published seventeen of his works in their October, 1915 issue. He made friends with Edgar Lee Masters and Theodore Dreiser, and his blockbuster collection *Chicago Poems* was soon to be published.

Edson was also enjoying unprecedented success. Although he was a Kansas farm boy who had gone to a respectable university, he took on the persona of “An Arkansas Man on Broadway,” for his successful column in the *New York Evening Mail*. (After a short hiatus, he moved it to the *Morning Telegraph*.) Exploiting his oratorical skills, he became a popular after-dinner speaker. He sold at least four poems to *Collier’s* that were gorgeously illustrated by the much-in-demand Ray Van Buren, who had also gotten his start in Kansas City. Selections from Edson’s New York column were reprinted in papers all over the country on a regular basis. It is highly likely that, as a New York City columnist with supplementary sources of income, he was making more money than Sandburg.

And yet his sense of inferiority was palpable in his April 9, 1916 letter, typed on *New York Morning Telegraph* letterhead. He deprecated his newspaper as a “sheet,” and wrote, “I am here because I didn’t quite connect as a fiction writer.” He mentioned that he had written “one of the biggest novels in the world” and described it as “a cross between [Upton Sinclair’s] *The Jungle* and [Edgar Lee Masters’] *Spoon River Anthology*.” He asked if Sandburg is still in Chicago and still with *System* magazine, which indicated that he hadn’t heard from Sandburg in over two years. Edson closed his letter,

“Drop me a line old comrade and tell me about yourself.”



Drawing of Edson that was included in one of his New York newspaper columns around 1912.

Sandburg responded to this letter, and sent along a copy of *Chicago Poems*, which had been published about the time Edson wrote. Edson replied to Sandburg on July 9, 1916 with congratulations, and some bad news. “Just before I received your wonderful book I was fired from the *Morning Telegraph* for insubordination.” Edson described the “wonderful book” (*Chicago Poems*) as “the most vigorous verse I have seen, aside from *Spoon River Anthology*. It has grieved me much to think that I have been unable to do anything to advance the publicity of the book” (because he was fired by the *Morning Telegraph*). Edson had particular praise for the poem “Statistics” and Sandburg’s send-up of evangelist Billy Sunday as the “slimy bunkshooter.” Once again, Edson expressed his longing for another face-to-face meeting with Sandburg.

...You know, I never saw you but once, that was in Chicago. I had a little sore spot on my finger where I had burned it lighting my pipe. When I shook hands with you I pressed that smarting spot hard against your manly paw so that I could get as vigorous an impression of you as possible in that one parting hand clasp, so the "flavor would linger." I was a raw cub, in those days. Life has chastened me since then, but I have always felt proud of having been able to attract your friendship....

For his next letter, dated May 21, 1917, Edson had returned to Arkansas.

Yep, I'm back on the old mountain farm. Can't stay away from it. I was in New York and made good from the start. Some people can't understand how a fellow could give up New York after having got established there....It disgusts me, as it does Jack London. The beautiful hills, woods, and streams for me.

Edson then offered Sandburg an 80-acre plot for \$350 which he calls "stunningly beautiful." (We've seen this piece of land, and Edson was not exaggerating.) He thanked Sandburg for a letter he recently received, so we are again reassured that there was an ongoing, nearly one-for-one correspondence.

Three weeks later the U.S. Congress passed the Espionage Act, which would soon all but strangle the socialist press in the country. Edson wrote to Sandburg, who was already souring on socialism at this point, "I am a hell roaring socialist and can make a socialist of any man if he will talk with me three hours. I have harvested a lot of guys and made them socialists. I remember you were a socialist while I was still a single-taxer democrat. You beat me to it, that's all; but when I got there I landed with both feet and I defies [sic] the world."

By the next time Edson wrote, on October 29, 1917, circumstances had changed for both men. Edson had left farm life behind (although not for good) and had taken a job in Aurora, Illinois as editor of Mooseheart *Magazine*, operated by the Loyal Order of Moose.

Sandburg's employer, the *Chicago Day Book*, had gone out of business, throwing Sandburg out of work. He soon signed on, briefly, with William Randolph Hearst's *Chicago Evening American* at \$100 a week. He almost immediately found the editorial policy too constraining, and moved on to

the *Chicago Daily News*. He had also published the patriotic, wildly successful poem "The Four Brothers" in the November issue of *Poetry*. Edson wrote,

I have just read your poem "The Four Brothers" and want to congratulate you on it. You have come to the full fruition of your powers, just at the time when your voice is needed in the cause of world democracy. I'm so glad to find that your genius is sane and right.

And although the two men lived in the same metropolitan area for the next nine months, the face-to-face meeting that Edson had wanted for so long never happened. At this time he might have been the problem as much as Sandburg—he was extremely busy with the editing, writing, and fundraising that his Mooseheart employers demanded. In his next letter, dated April 3, 1920, he wrote,

Dear old pal: I have read your "Corn Huskers" time and again with ever renewed delight. I am mighty sorry that I didn't get to see you when I was living in Aurora. I went to the [Chicago Daily] News one day and found out that you were in Scandinavia....

I have been out here in the suburbs of New York since the Armistice. I quit my job with the Moose when the war ended. I couldn't bear to prostitute what little literary gift I have to the task of wheedling money for Mooseheart from a lot of roughnecks.

Despite his stated preference for country life, Edson was back in New York and at the height of his career. He reported that a top-tier publisher (Brentano's) will release in the fall what would be his most successful book, *The Gentle Art of Columning*. He had been working the freelance market steadily for the past several years, and would soon be writing another New York column, called "Words and Music," for the *Evening Mail*. He was invited to be a member of New York's prestigious Lotos Club. (At the time, William Howard Taft was a member, as Mark Twain, who called it "the ace of clubs," had been years before.) He fraternized with many of New York's glitterati, as evidenced by the illustrious authorship of the four essays that prefaced *The Gentle Art of Columning*. The essays were by Don Marquis, one-time Knox College student and creator of the popular Archy and Mehitabel characters,

Christopher Morley, columnist for the *New York Evening Post*, Franklin P. Adams, co-founder with Dorothy Parker of the Algonquin Round Table, and George Lorimer, long-time editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

In his letter Edson is clearly proud that a major publisher had picked up his book, which he called “a treatise on newspaper humor.” But he seemed a bit apologetic about the use he had made in it of Sandburg’s poem “Child Margaret” from *Cornhuskers*. “In it is a humorous critique of free verse and lyricism contrasting Carl Sandburg and Don Marquis...The effect is a funny hoax,” he insisted. He finished up by briefly describing his in-progress novel of circus life called *The Guest of the Circus* and several other recent writing projects. And of course, he hoped Sandburg would visit him soon.

Three months later (July 13, 1920) Edson wrote hurriedly to tell Sandburg that he would be in Chicago the following week and would try to stop by. He asked if Sandburg would write recommendations for several poems Edson hoped to place in an upcoming anthology. “They are not political nor social. Just ballads of the fields and crops.” He said he was looking forward to Sandburg’s forthcoming poetry collection *Smoke and Steel*, indicating that Sandburg had written to Edson recently. Then he ended with a wistful admission of his own inferiority as a poet—perhaps he was still a bit uneasy about the unserious treatment he gave Sandburg’s poetry in *The Gentle Art of Columning*, which was about to be published.

*I fear that my letters have given the impression that I did not fully sympathize with your poetic art. The truth is that you and Edgar Lee Masters discovered a new world of poetry for me as for the rest of the intellectual world. The reason I do not write your kind of poetry is because I can't. I haven't the imagist genius. I can enjoy your marvelous pictures, but lack the visual gift that creates them.*

## GUITAR FRIENDS

By Barbara Schock

Carl Sandburg bought his first guitar in April, 1910 while working in Milwaukee. He liked the gentle tone of the instrument as well as the physical appearance. He learned three or four chords and stayed close to the melody of a song with his vocal accompaniment. A few years later when he began to give lectures across the country to supplement his income from writing, he would close his programs with the singing of folk songs he had collected. The audience responded enthusiastically to the music and his singing. Often he would socialize after the performance singing more songs and talking with people who knew the old-time words and music. Many more songs were added to his repertoire in this way. In 1926 he published nearly 300 of them in *The American Songbag*. Each was scored for the piano which was most commonly played in homes in those days. When the 1950 edition was published, the chord symbols for the guitar were included.

Over the years Sandburg had met and befriended many editorial cartoonists. In 1948 he was invited to stay at the home of Terry and Gregory d'Alessio at 8 Henderson Place on the upper east side of Manhattan. Both were artists and cartoonists. Greg was an expert on the classical guitar. Sandburg was allowed to use the top floor of their four-story brownstone where he could work and sleep. He arrived with paper luggage—one shopping bag filled with notebooks and writing paper and the other filled with clothing and personal items, including a box of cheroots and a bottle of bourbon. In the evenings friends would come to the house to share music and stories with Sandburg. He was the center of attention with his folk song singing and guitar playing. He loved the companionship of these artistic people.

Gregory d'Alessio was co-editor of the *Guitar Review*, a publication of the Society of the Classic Guitar. Sandburg had read the journal and wanted to become acquainted with classical guitar players. He wanted to learn to play as they did. Although Sandburg very much appreciated the music, his fingers were not sophisticated nor his knowledge deep enough to become a good player of classical guitar.

Being a poet and a writer, Sandburg submitted a prose-poem to *Guitar Review* for publication. It was entitled "The Guitar: Some Definitions by Carl Sandburg." He described the guitar as a portable companion and vibratory implement among other things.

In his travels across the country Sandburg developed friendships from coast to coast. Staying in homes of friends was much more pleasant than being in lonely hotel rooms. He purchased guitars and left them at those homes. They would be ready for him when he returned. Those friends would become part of his world-wide circle, and he loved every one in it. Occasionally, he would give his guitar to a person who had admired it. He would also send copies of his books to those friends. The books were often inscribed with short intimate poems expressing his love and admiration for the recipient.

Several years after Sandburg's death, Paula Sandburg, his widow, made certain four guitars still in their residence at Connemara, North Carolina, were repaired and put into prime condition. They are still among the artifacts on display at the National Park Service Site. The house at 8 Henderson Place in Manhattan is now a museum dedicated to the history of cartoons and classical guitar.

## MILWAUKEE VISITORS AT SITE

*(Ed. Note: In February CSHSA board member Chuck Bednar met Jonathan and Gale Daly of Milwaukee at the Site. Chuck learned from Mr. Daly that he plans to write a play about Sandburg. Here are Mr. Daly's comments about his plan.)*

Dear Friends and Admirers of Carl Sandburg,

A few weeks ago in the midst of an icy, snowy weekend my wife Gale and I bundled into the car and made the four-hour trip from Milwaukee to Galesburg. My visit to Carl Sandburg's hometown was part research trip, part recreation, and part pilgrimage.

I'm a professional actor, having been about it for the last thirty-five years. I work exclusively in theatre, and my very first professional job was at the Loretto-Hilton Repertory Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri. I was hired as a member of their "story theatre" troupe. Our job was to eagerly gather

pieces of what we considered to be great literature, dramatize it, and tour the country performing our work. It was then, in our mad scramble for material, that I first encountered the work of Carl Sandburg. We performed our own adaptation of "How They Broke Away To Go To The Rootabaga Country" from *Rootabaga Stories*. That story proved to be such a hit that we went back to that particular literary well again the following season, telling the wonderful story of Bimbo the Snip, and how his fingers stuck to the end of his nose when he wiggled his fingers at the iceman and the wind changed. My love of these stories led to a lifetime love of Sandburgiana of all kinds, but it wasn't until a few years ago that I hit upon the idea of delving deeply into his work with the goal of creating an evening of entertainment, featuring some of his poems, songs, and stories, and reminiscent of the personal appearances that he made throughout the United States in the course of his life.

Since then I have immersed myself in his poetry, listened to the recordings he made of folk songs (accompanying himself, of course, on the guitar), read his brilliant biography of Abraham Lincoln, been captivated by his memoirs (if only there had been a Volume Three, covering the last twenty years of his wonderful life!), eavesdropped through much of his personal correspondence, and enjoyed many of the books written by his peers, friends, and fellow troubadours. I am just beginning to decide on what material I will use in my "concert"- choosing about ninety minutes of material out of a lifetime of work is proving to be delightfully difficult-- but now that I've started, my interest in Carl Sandburg has become a magnificent obsession. And visiting Galesburg in February could not have been more inspiring. I am hoping to make it back for the big celebration toward the end of April---maybe the snow will have melted by then, and I can actually step through the yard to Remembrance Rock!

We Milwaukee natives have always felt as if we had a little piece of Carl Sandburg close to our hearts. His wife Paula was from Menominee Falls, which has now, thanks to urban sprawl, become almost a suburb of our city. Carl himself hung his hat for a little while in a little bungalow just north of downtown when he served as chief aide to Milwaukee's Socialist mayor at the turn of the century.

I think it's no accident that the last play I wrote, "To The Promised Land," also featured a resident of Milwaukee at the turn of the century who later went on to world prominence, Golda Meir. I'm inspired by the movers and shakers who once called Milwaukee home, and, in the case of Carl Sandburg, I have a particular desire to introduce people to a brilliant poet, journalist, folk music archivist, and historian who played such a prominent role in America through the first three quarters of the twentieth century.

I look forward to meeting you in April and in times to come. Who knows? Maybe someday soon we can gather at Old Main or in the backyard on Third Street and pass the time sharing stories about dear Carl. I'd like to think he'd enjoy that.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Gillard Daly

PS: I want to send along special greetings and thanks to Chuck Bednar for taking the time to chat during our visit, to Mike Hobbs for inviting me to write a little something for *Inklings and Idlings*, and to Ryan Cuscaden for taking the time to answer my barrage of questions, and then braving the snow, the ice, and the cold to show us around the Site on that cold morning in February.

## **SANDBURG PERFORMED IN EUREKA**

By Mike Hobbs

At the March CSHSA board meeting Secretary Pat Kane remarked that she had spoken recently with Jeff Putnam of the Peoria-based Celtic music group Turas which has performed a number of times at Songbag concerts. Jeff said that his family has a connection with Sandburg. In the 1930's his grandparents boarded him in their Eureka home when he appeared to give a public program.

Jeff's grandparents were Dr. Thomas E. and Josephine Wiggins. Dr. Wiggins began teaching English at Eureka College in 1924. He taught future president Ronald Reagan freshman English. Mrs. Wiggins took it upon herself to bring performers to Eureka, according to her daughter, eighty-seven year old Sarah Putnam, Jeff's mother, to add to the culture of the small community. Some of the performers had celebrity status, like Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch of the West in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. In 1939 Mrs. Wiggins brought another celebrity to Eureka, Carl Sandburg.



Standing in back Thomas Wiggins. In front, left to right, Sarah, Tom, Josephine, and Barbara Wiggins. 1931 Photo.

Sandburg spent a couple nights in the Wiggins' home. He slept in Sarah's brother's room upstairs in a bed that had been Kansas abolitionist John Brown's bed. She said the bed had come from a gift/antique shop owned by her aunt in Topeka.

Sarah recalled a meal prepared for Sandburg by her mother, a fine cook. Included in the meal were chicken croquets, a shrimp and asparagus salad, homemade mayonnaise, and apple pie with almonds in the crust. Canned food had become compensation for Dr. Wiggins in those Depression days. In the early 1930's Eureka College faced closure because of the hard times. An arrangement was made with its professors that in lieu of pay they would receive canned food from a warehouse in Bloomington. Some of the food served to Sandburg came from those cans.

Sarah said that “[a]t our house [Sandburg] played guitar a bit, [but] mainly was deeply engrossed in conversation. He came across to me as serious and focused, yet very pleasant. That shock of blonde hair was very prevalent!” A conversation between him and her mother lasted into the early morning hours.

In addition to being a fine cook Mrs. Wiggins was a pianist and an artist. Sarah said she was cultured. Her mother made a charcoal drawing of Lincoln on a white-surfaced chalkboard in her living room for Sandburg’s visit. It was two feet wide and three feet tall. Mrs. Wiggins periodically made drawings on the board for her family’s enjoyment. He was impressed by it, so she gave him a copy.

Sarah attended Sandburg’s program in the auditorium of Eureka High School. The place was packed. Sandburg appeared in slacks and a long sleeved shirt open at the collar. He both sat on a high stool and stood while telling stories, singing, and playing his guitar.



Lincoln Photo Josephine Wiggins Used As Model for Her Charcoal Drawing

Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association  
P.O. Box 585  
Galesburg, Illinois 61402-0585  
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