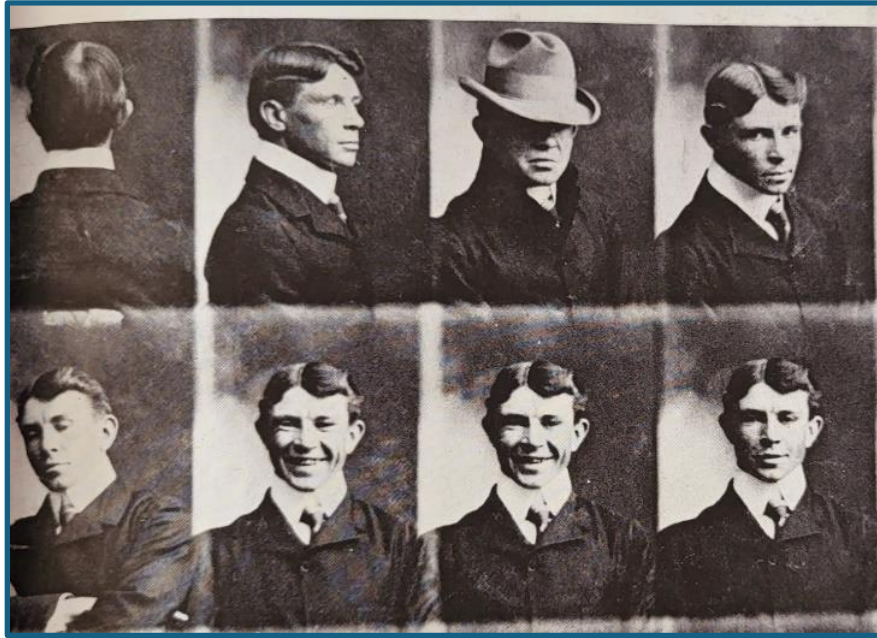


Letters from a Sandburg Docent

November 2024

John W. Quinley



Photos taken during Sandburg's college days

Everything All the Time

Dear Readers,

After dropping out of school at the end of eighth grade to help his family during the Panic of 1893, Carl must have thought he would make a living by working with his hands. After all, most of the folks in town did just that. But his horizons seemed unlimited when he unexpectedly entered college six years later. In his autobiography, *Ever the Winds of Chance*, Sandburg wrote:

I had wonderings and hopes but they were vague and foggy. I couldn't see myself filling some definite niche in what is called a career. I might become a newspaper reporter, a foreign correspondent, an author of books, an advertising copywriter, or an actor, a Lyceum lecturer, an agitator, an orator, maybe a congressman, or an independent drifter defiant of all respectable conformists. This was all misty.

Rather than pursuing a single career, Sandburg embraced nearly all of these and more. He became a poet and political activist; investigative reporter, columnist, and film critic; lecturer, folk singer, and musicologist; Lincoln biographer and historian; children’s author; novelist; and media celebrity. During the first half of the twentieth century, he seemed to be everywhere and doing everything.

Sandburg didn’t pursue his interests in isolation from each other but wove them into an integrated mosaic. He drafted socialist poems and articles to support his efforts as an activist for the Social Democratic Party in Wisconsin. His news stories about working class struggles became the subject of his poetry. His reviews of silent films helped expand his imagination for his children’s books and poetry. And both his poetic and journalistic skills helped shape the character of his books about Abraham Lincoln.

Instead of pursuing his passions one or two at a time during different periods of his life, Sandburg pursued them throughout his lifetime—typically many at the same time. It’s hard to keep track. The table below shows when and the degree to which he pursued his interests. There are highlights for each ten-year period provided below the table.

Sandburg’s Pursuits Over His Lifetime									
	Social Activist	Journalist	Poet	Speaker/Singer	Children’s Author	Lincoln Historian	Novelist	Auto-Biographer	Films/Celebrity
1900-1909	XXX	XX	X	X					
1910-1919	XX	XXX	XXX	XX					
1920-1929	X	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX			XX
1930-1939	X	X	XX	XX	X	XXX			X
1940-1949	XX	XX	X	XX		XX	XXX		XX
1950-1959	X	X	X	X		XX		XXX	XX
1960-1969	X	X	X	X	X				XX

Highlights	
1900-09	Joins <i>To-Morrow</i> newspaper; organizes for Social-Democratic Party of Wisconsin
1900-19	Serves as private secretary to Socialist Mayor of Milwaukee; joins <i>Day Book</i> newspaper; publishes <i>Chicago Poems</i> and <i>Cornhuskers</i> (Pulitzer Prize); writes movie reviews for <i>Chicago Daily News</i> ; publishes <i>The Chicago Race Riots</i>
1920-29	Publishes <i>Smoke and Steel</i> , <i>Rootabaga Stories</i> , <i>Slabs of the Sunburnt West</i> , <i>Rootabaga Pigeons</i> , <i>Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years</i> , <i>The American Songbag</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i> , and <i>Abe Lincoln Grows Up</i>
1930-39	Publishes <i>Early Moon</i> , <i>Mary Lincoln Wife and Widow</i> , <i>The People, Yes</i> , and <i>Abraham Lincoln: The War Years</i> (Pulitzer Prize)
1940-49	Publishes <i>Home Front Memo</i> and <i>Remembrance Rock</i>
1950-59	Publishes <i>Complete Poems</i> , <i>Always the Young Strangers</i> , and <i>Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years</i> ; delivers Lincoln Day address before a joint session of Congress; tours world with <i>Family of Man</i> exhibit; becomes celebrity on television
1960-69	Consultant for <i>The Greatest Story Ever Told</i> ; publishes <i>Wind Song</i> and <i>Honey and Salt</i>

I hope this letter gives you an overall view of the interests Sandburg pursued throughout his lifetime. Upcoming letters will paint a picture of his life and pursuits during the Chicago Years (1900–1927), Michigan Years (1928–1944), and the North Carolina Years (1945–1967).

Thanks for reading,

John Quinley is the author of ***Discovering Carl Sandburg*** and is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com.

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