

Hi Friends,

The Holidays are a time when friends and family get together. Sandburg couldn't be with family during his extensive presentations around the country, but he could be with friends. After he became famous, he could have stayed at five-star hotels, but if he couldn't be at home, he wanted to stay with friends who made him feel at home.

This letter tells the story of two hosts that shared their homes and families over several decades—Lilla S. Perry and Gregory d'Alessio. They both authored books about their time hosting Sandburg.

Wishing you a happy Holiday Season with your family and friends,

John

Letters from a Sandburg Docent – December 2024

By John W. Quinley



Sandburg's first visit to the d'Alessio home described in print and image by Gregory d'Alessio

Standing there at the open door, he held in each hand a bulging shopping bag, the weight shown in the rigidity of his arms, the tautness of the bag handles, and the prominence of the veins standing out on the tops of his brown-freckled hands. The luggage contained all his needs of a longish stay: shirts (all white, but one, which was a heavy plaid), long johns, socks, hankies; and for his immediate needs, a dozen oranges, a quart of goat's milk, a fifth of Jack Daniels, and books.

Long Term Hosts

Dear Readers,

Sandburg traveled three to five months each year on the presentation circuit and made additional trips for speeches and personal appearances. After he became a national figure in the 1920s, he could have stayed at five-star hotels, but he was more comfortable and productive with accommodation closer to what Paula provided back home. In particular, he relied on long-term hosts who, over several decades, shared their homes—sometimes for weeks at a time. Two of these, Lilla S. Perry and Gregory d'Alessio, authored books about their time with Sandburg.

In her book, *My Friend Carl Sandburg*, Perry shares that she met Sandburg during an American Library Association convention where he was speaking. She was a member of the Friday Morning Club in Los Angeles—the second largest women's club in the country. The club had already hosted Sherwood Anderson and William Butler Yeats. At Perry's encouragement, Sandburg made his debut with the club in 1920. In subsequent years he often stayed with the Perrys saying, "It wouldn't seem natural to camp anywhere when I'm in Los Angeles except with the Perrys. . . I feel at home around here. They know my ways. They let me come and go. They make no plans for me that I have to tie in with."

In 1948, almost three decades after Perry met Sandburg, Gregory d'Alessio (a New York City syndicated cartoonist, painter, and classical guitar enthusiast) in his book *Old Troubadour: Carl Sandburg with His Guitar Friends* wrote that he heard a stranger's voice on the telephone say, "I hope the guitar gang is free tonight. If so, what are the chances of getting together? This is Carl Sandburg." This marked the beginning of a unique musical, literary, artistic, and social association lasting until the mid-1960s.

D'Alessio said of his hosting experience that:

Any friend of Carl Sandburg, whoever was his host knows that as a house guest, he was not a problem. You found out quickly how easy he was to feed, to entertain; you saw how well he could take care of himself, how Spartan were his needs. Then your anxiety to make good as the host of a truly great man faded away. He made you feel at home . . . when he would say to us from time to time, You're not what's wrong with the world, we believed him.

Both the Perry and d'Alessio families accommodated Sandburg with an upstairs room, his favorite place to write. D'Alessio expressed concern about the thirty-eight steps that the then seventy-year-old Sandburg would need to climb a few times each day. Sandburg made fun of the situation, showing d'Alessio how he could slowly navigate one step at a time; then he just scampered up. "No problem with my ticker," he said, "we got steps just like this back home in Connemara" where his study was also on the third floor.

Both families also provided buffers from unwanted or unexpected guests who would demand Sandburg's time and attention. His celebrity—along with his love for home-cooked meals—was why he avoided restaurants. One evening when Perry did manage to take him to a restaurant, the server told Sandburg that a lady seated across the room was inquiring if he was the famous Carl Sandburg. He mischievously replied, "You can tell her that I am Robert Frost."

But there were times when Sandburg welcomed a party. D'Alessio recalls, "When word got around that the poet-troubadour was to be in our midst, it was impossible to avoid a scene here like the last night of the Mardi Gras in Rio de Janeiro." The parties drew a host of luminaries from publishing and the arts. Guitarists, humorists, folk singers, opera stars, and more would perform.

Just like Paula, Perry and d'Alessio kept a place in their upstairs rooms quiet so Sandburg could work; served as a buffer, protecting him from the many people who vied for his attention—especially after he rose to fame. His long-term hosts helped with mundane things of life to provide this home away from home that Sandburg treasured.

Thanks for reading,

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