

A Note from the Author - John Quinley

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

September 2025

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Dear Readers,

Colleges across the country have recently opened for the fall semester. For many, they provide a foundation for life. This was certainly true for Carl Sandburg.

During my visit to Galesburg this August, I visited all three colleges that were operating during Sandburg's youth. Both Brown's Business College and Lombard College are closed, but the Brown College building is still in use, and the Lombard College grounds are now a middle school. Founded in 1837, Knox College continues to offer a liberal arts education. All had a part in Sandburg's development.

Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

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Sandburg pictured with the 6th Regiment Illinois Volunteers (center)

Soldier to Student

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, and author of books, and 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.

Dear Readers,

Sandburg wrote the above words during his college years when he had hopes for his future, even if “they were vague and foggy.” Before college, however, he seized on the change for adventure in the faraway Spanish-American War, enlisting on the first day the government called

for volunteers. In a letter home, he describes how he and his fellow soldiers waded ashore in deep water holding their rifles above their heads, battled swarms of mosquitoes that bit until their eyes were swollen shut, and watched puffs of smoke rise from distant gunfire. He called the war “a dirty and lousy affair while it lasted.” His term of enlistment ended a few weeks after the war ended.

Sandburg never expected to go to college—after all, he had little money and hadn’t attended high school. But because of his wartime service, Lombard College offered him free tuition for a year, but not room and board. To work his way through, he rang bells to announce class changes and swept the gymnasium floor. He fought fires for the local fire department, which gave him a room to sleep in (along with fourteen other men). When school wasn’t in session, he went door-to-door selling stereoscopes—a device that gave working-class families a way to educate their children about the geography, history, and culture of a wider world.

Sandburg embraced life at college. He wrote for and edited the student newspaper and yearbook. He acted in plays, competed in orations and debates, sang in the Glee Club, and joined the Poor Writers Club to write poetry. He played football (very briefly) and baseball; and was captain of the basketball team—a brand-new sport at the time.

During his four years at Lombard, he took classes that interested him the most—literature, rhetoric, and history. Because he didn’t follow a formal curriculum, he had about a year of classes still required to graduate. So, he didn’t get a degree. Nearly three decades later, Lombard awarded him an honorary Doctorate; and over the years, three dozen other institutions would follow, including Harvard and Yale.

Like most of his fellow students, Sandburg’s college years were a time of discovery and questioning. He wrote, “I was sure there are ten men in me, and I do not know or understand one of them.” But by the time he left, the foundations of his life (his family, town, travels, soldiering, and college), had been laid. In *Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background*, author Karl Detzer concludes:

By the time Sandburg was through with college in 1902, all the seeds of his later years were planted; the design of what he has become and what in the future he still will become was sketched in lightly, perhaps even a little grotesquely. His prairie boyhood, his hobo adventures, his early poverty, his love of the chase spurred on in the game he made of selling pictures, his

affection for words, his interest in Lincoln, his sympathy for the underdog, his nonconformist way of life, the calluses on his hands—all these adding up to the Sandburg we know today.

Thanks for reading,

John W. Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg* and the play *The Many Lives of 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.