

A Note from the Author - John Quinley

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

October 2025

Hi all,

Last month my wife and I visited Galesburg. The folks there gave us a warm welcome. I am so glad I saw Sandburg's hometown. I learned much that I didn't know before.

The trip got me thinking about my youth in the Chicago suburbs, only a few hours away from Galesburg. This month's letter about Sandburg's first book of poetry, *Chicago Poems* seems about right.

John

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Construction of the DuSable Bridges (formerly the Michigan Avenue Bridge) began two years after the *Chicago Poems* was published.

“Chicago” and *Chicago Poems*

Dear Readers,

Sandburg was thirty-six years old when the influential *Poetry* magazine published his break-out poem “Chicago” in 1914. The poetry world took notice. He joined William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost, and D.H. Lawrence who also published in *Poetry* that year.

Sandburg's words forever identify the city as the:

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders.

In the poem he describes the darker side as well with its “painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys,” where the “gunmen kill and go free to kill again,” and seen in the “faces of women and children . . . the marks of wanton hunger.” He then defends the city and its people by challenging readers to:

His first book of poems, *Chicago Poems*, portrays ordinary people: who they were, how they behaved, what they believed, and their strengths and weaknesses. It makes poetry out of the industrial city: its crowds of nameless faces, its buildings and transportation systems, its industries and labor conflicts, and its poverty and crime. In *The America of Carl Sandburg*, Professor Hazel Durnell uses Sandburg's words to present a composite picture of the people depicted in Sandburg's working-class poetry:

From out of the great stormy maelstrom of its teeming masses, he drew for us the factory girl, the stockyard workers, the cabaret dancers, the weary toiler on his way to work, the shovelman in faded overalls, spattered with clay, the teamster, the negro dance with the lazy love banjo thrum, the sweating ditch-diggers, the railroad section hand, the stockyard worker's family, the expectant mothers, the onion picker, who comes down Peoria Street with kindling wood on the top of her head; the crippled man ill with tuberculosis, Anna Imroth who lost her life in a factory fire, the green and gray streams of workin' girls moving in the early morning on the downtown streets; Mamie, who tired of the small town, came to Chicago hoping to find romance and real dreams "that neer go smash"; the hoboes of cattle cars; the gipsy woman and others.

Sandburg also wrote about Chicago's infrastructure, which he saw as a living thing—evolving just like working people evolve. In "Skyscraper" he integrates the material of industry with the human condition. He writes that "People give it [the skyscraper] a soul":

It is the men and women, boys and girls so poured in and out all day that give the building a soul of dreams and thoughts and memories.

A nervous system:

Elevators slide on their cables and tubes catch letters and parcels
and iron pipes carry gas and water in and sewage out.
Wires climb with secrets, carry light and carry words, and tell
terrors and profits and loves—curses of men grappling plans
of business and questions of women in plots of love.

A skeleton system:

Hour by hour the caissons reach down to the rock of the earth and
hold the building to a turning planet.

Hour by hour the girders play as ribs and reach out and hold
together the stone walls and floors.

And it moves by rhythms of the day and seasons:

Hands of clocks turn to noon hours and each floor empties its men
and women who go away and eat and come back to work.
Toward the end of the afternoon all work slackens and all jobs go
slower as the people feel day closing on them...
By night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the stars and has a
soul.

Sandburg once said “Here is the difference between Dante, Milton, and me. They wrote about hell and never saw the place. I wrote about Chicago after looking the town over for years and years.” Sandburg’s poetic descriptions of Chicago will be forever linked with the place he knew so well.

Thanks for reading,

John Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg*, the print series *Letters from a Docent*, and the play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*. He 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.