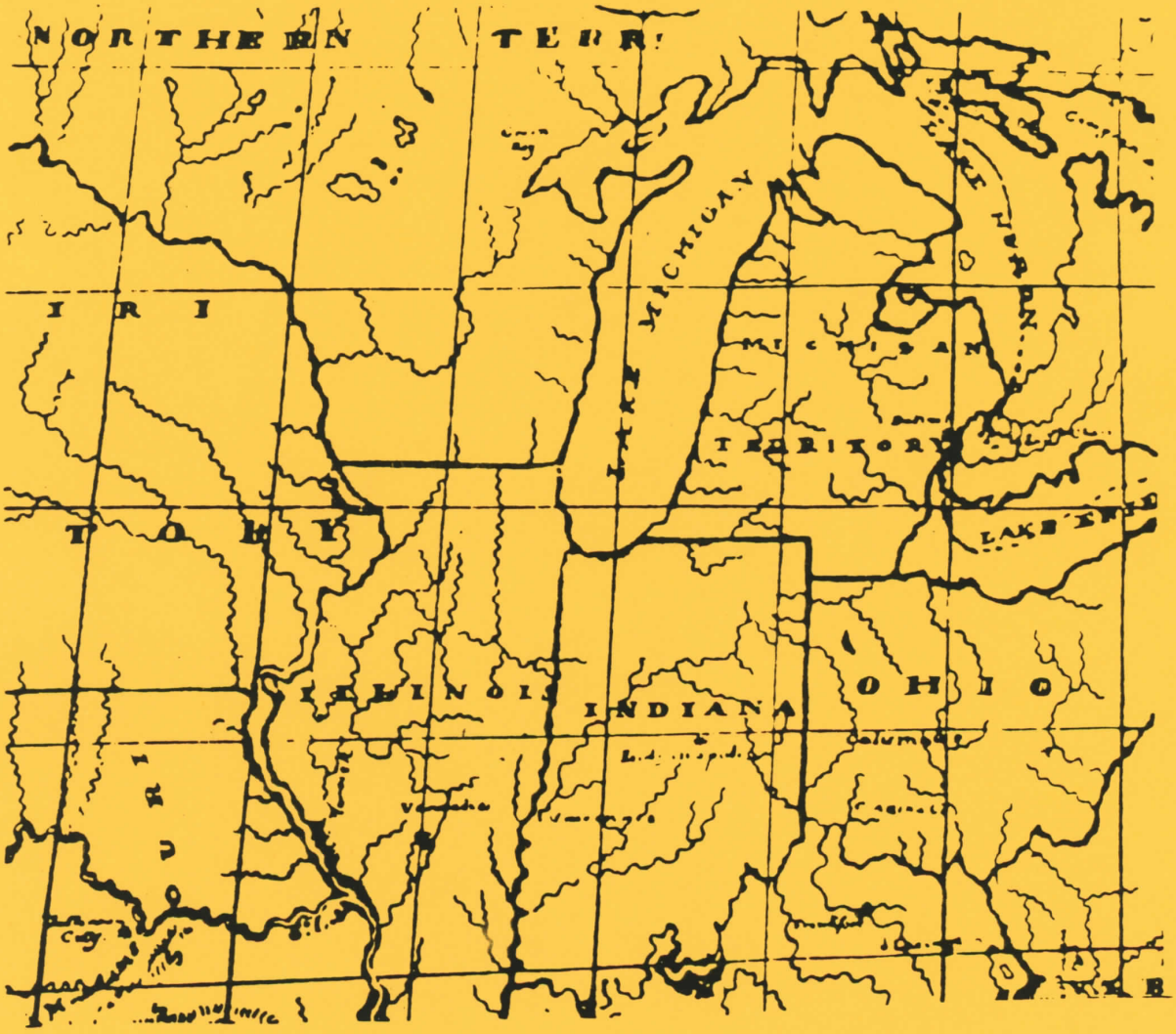
6-12-86

SML Newsletter



The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

The Center for the Study of
Midwestern Literature and Culture

Founded 1971

Volume Sixteen
Number One
Spring, 1986

Society for the Study of

Midwestern Literature

NEWSLETTER

Volume Sixteen, Number One Spring, 1986

CONTENTS Page

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature

Officers, 1986-1987

President:	Kay Rout Michigan State University
Vice President:	Ellen Uffen Michigan State University
Executive Secretary/Treasurer:	David D. Anderson Michigan State University
Secretary:	Roger J. Bresnahan Michigan State University

Executive Council

Expires 1989:	Frederick C. Stern University of Illinois at Chicago
	Guy Szyberla University of Toledo
Expires 1988:	Pauline Adams Michigan State University
	Paul W. Miller Wittenberg University
Expires 1987:	Marilyn J. Atlas Ohio University
	Roger Bresnahan Michigan State University
Bibliographers:	Donald Pady Iowa State University
	Robert Beasecker Grand Valley State College

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature

NEWSLETTER

Volume Sixteen, Number One Spring, 1986

Published at Michigan State University with the support of the Department of American Thought and Language.

Editorial Office: Ernst Bessey Hall
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1033

Editor: David D. Anderson

Associate Editors: Marilyn J. Atlas
Roger Bresnahan

Editorial Assistant: Valarie J. Kelly

Published in Spring, Summer, Fall.

HEMINGWAY AND THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Conger Beasley, Jr.

Ernest Hemingway was very eager to go to Kansas City. He wanted to get away from his parents and the stifling, middle-class atmosphere of his boyhood home of Oak Park, Illinois; and he wanted to work for the Kansas City Star, which in 1917 was one of the half-dozen great American newspapers. A fledging writer, he had produced numerous sketches and articles for his high-school newspaper. After graduation he decided to go to Kansas City where he could learn more about the craft of writing. Tyler Hemingway, his father's brother, was a successful businessman there and an old college classmate of Harry Haskell, chief editorial writer for the Star. The connection paid off, and in mid-October young Hemingway stepped off the train at Union Station, ready to assume his duties as a cub reporter.

In 1917 Kansas City was a lusty town of 300,000 people, only a few decades removed from its brawling frontier origins. Bounded on the north by the Missouri River and to the west by the Kansas state line, the city was rapidly expanding south and east over low, rolling hills fingered by myriad, tree-fringed creeks. Broad thoroughfares like the Paseo and Grand Avenue were reaching further away from the river, opening up new neighborhoods for development that featured handsome brick and limestone residences. However, the heart of the city -- its vital, human core -- remained near the junction of the Kaw and Missouri Rivers in a section known as the West Bottoms and continuing east through downtown to the hilly Northeast district. Along this narrow strip flourished a variety of enthic elements -- Irish, Germans, blacks, Italians, and Jews -- crowded and

jumbled together into a dense, boisterous mass. Squalid tenaments and ramshackled apartments proliferated; on the bluffs facing the West Bottoms squatters lived in tarpaper shacks and occasionally in caves. Redlight housed dotted the area, featuring women of easy virtue who offered themselves to the young cowboys working in the stockyards and the drummers who prowled the gritty downtown streets in search of entertainment.

Presiding over this polyglot society was the figure of Tom Pendergast, who operated one of the most efficient and colorful big-city political machines in American history. When Ernest Hemingway first arrived in 1917, the economic and business center of the city, spurred by the construction of a new Union Station just south of downtown, was in the process of shifting away from the river. Since the 1870s the depot had been located in the West Bottoms, and it was around this transportation hub that Tom Pendergast and his older brother Jim had been able to organize their power. Utilizing a combination of patronage, blackmail, and personal favors, the brothers managed to weld the various factions of the local Democratic Party into a formidable political force. Upon Jim's death in 1911 Tom took control and immediately sought to extend his influence into the new districts that were opening up as a result of the city's explosive growth.

Young Hemingway reluctantly moved into his Uncle Tyler's rosy brick house on the 3600 block of Warwick, a polite neighborhood of grassy lawns, shade trees, and clipped shrubs. He stayed there only a short time before transferring to an apartment with Carl Edgar, a friend from Michigan, further out on Agnes Street. Every morning he rode the trolley down to the Star's editorial offices at 18th and Grand. The ride was much longer than from Warwick, but Ernest didn't mind; he didn't get along with his uncle, and he was determined to establish his own identity. He had come to Kansas City to learn to be a writer and a man.

Carlos Baker, his biographer, has remarked, "He counted on the Star to polish his prose and on Kansas City to educate him in the seamier sides of human experience." In neither case was he to be disappointed.

The assistant city editor of the Star was C.G. "Pete" Wellington. It was Wellington, as much as any other individual, who helped shape the famous Hemingway prose style. He had been hired from the Tope Capital in 1912 by William Rockhill Nelson. As assistant city editor, he was the official custodian of the Star style sheet, which emphasized short, declarative sentences and the frugal use of adjectives. The style sheet had been formulated by Nelson and two editors, T.W. Johnson and Alexander Butts. It was a galley-length sheet containing 110 rules of writing that governed the type of prose that appeared in the Star. The first paragraph reflected several of the characteristics that would appear later in Hemingway's fiction: "Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative."

Every page of the Star was crammed with stories. The front page ran seven columns featuring as many as 25 different stories of state, national, and international significance, all written by members of the staff. The use of dialogue was encouraged, provided it was crisp and authentic. In conjunction with the style sheet, Pete Wellington stressed the need for a flexible narrative style as opposed to the rigidly inverted news story with its artificial lead, second lead, and key qualification points. Wellington's aim was to capture and sustain reader interest, and to do that he emphasized techn es more appropriate to the novel or short story than journalism. Instead of sa ctorily answering the questions who, what, where, and when, Wellington encoura his reporters to tell the truth about what they observed with clarity and precision. "In the hands of such a man -- patient, severe, devoted to the paper

in general and readable, lucid prose in particular -- the style sheet was never a rhetorical prison," declared Charles A. Fenton, an early Hemingway critic. "It was a kind of bellows with which words were controlled and structured."

As a cub reporter, Hemingway earned $60 a month. He was described by his associates as "talkative, deferential, anxious to please, a little awkward." Possessed of abundant vitality, he always wanted to be in that part of town where the most exciting things were going on, which usually meant the area from Union Station down through the stockyards to the Missouri River. He found Kansas City both "wonderful and unsavory", though it was precisely this latter quality that he found so compelling. An intense curiosity about human suffering drove the young man out into the streets to experience the knocks the tough young city dished up daily to its inhabitants. Pete Wellington complained that he would all too readily hop an ambulance to visit the scene of an accident, leaving his desk in the newsroom untended.

His love of action stimulated his creative juices, and he turned out a staggering amount of copy, which Pete Wellington edited according to the demanding standards of the Star style sheet. Hemingway labored over his short paragraphs, polishing and refining them, striving for the right balance between tone, rhythm, and content. American journalism was emerging from an era of turgid, flamboyant prose, and the aim of the Star and other important newspapers was to produce copy that not only was easy to read but that reflected the vernacular of the new industrial nation.

At the same time that new journalism standards were being forged, a few old literary ones were being faithfully observed. The editorial room of the Star in 1917 was an exciting place for a talented and impressionable youngster with pretensions of becoming a great author. A distinct literary atmosphere prevailed that more than compensated for Hemingway's limited formal education. For years

William Rockhill Nelson had insisted that part of the Star space be devoted to reprints of modern and classical literature to both "interest and elevate" the subscribers. While Hemingway was there, several other reporters like Russel Crouse and Clifford Knight were working on novels. Reminiscing about those days, Knight described the editorial room as "something more than just another newspaper . . . There were good men in the top spots, as good as there were in the business, and after the paper went to press and things slacked off, you could go and talk to almost anybody; you could dream dreams and talk about the novel you were going to write someday."

The reporter who undoubtedly had the most impact upon Hemingway was a legendary cop-baiter and barroom brawler named Lionel Calhoun Moise. Moise, "a nomad reporter who acknowledged no master," was a fabulous character, a rough-and-tumble man with uncompromising personal and professional standards. The idol of all the cubs, he was a staunch believer in pure, objective storytelling. His favorite writers were Conrad, Kipling, Dreiser, and Twain, and he would hold forth loudly upon their merits to cub and veteran alike, leaning forward in his desk chair and jabbing his finger for emphasis. "No stream-of-conscious non-sense," he lectured; "no playing dumb observer one paragraph and God Almighty the next."

Hemingway's own pugnacious enthusiasm embroiled him in a scrape or two during his Kansas City days. Once he was having supper with a friend named Leo Fitzpatrick in a cafe on 17th and Grand. A teamster began baiting

Fitzpatrick about his colorful necktie, and when he wouldn't stop, Hemingway threatened to slug him. The two stood up and exchanged punches. In the melee Hemingway shattered a glass showcase containing cigars. His exploit was the talk of the newsroom for several days, and the young reporter proudly displayed his cut hand to anyone who asked.

Despite his youthful exuberance, he struck many people as being basically shy. A slight speech impediment made him pronounce his "l's" as if they were "w's." Tall, gangly, with dark hair and dimpled cheeks, he attracted people instantly with his vitality and good humor. His chest and arms were muscular from a summer of hard work on his father's farm in Michigan, and he moved with sly, cat-like grace of a natural athlete.

One who succumbed to the Hemingway appeal was Ted Brumbeck, a fellow cub reporter and member of a prominent Kansas City family. The previous summer Brumbeck had been an ambulance driver for the Red Cross on the Western Front. The stories he told of his aventures fired Hemingway's desire for glory and action. Before coming to Kansas City, Hemingway had tried to enlist in the Army but had been rejected due to defective vision in his left eye. Together with Brumbeck he applied to the Red Cross in the spring of 1918. While waiting for final confirmation, the two friends decided to leave their posts at the Star. On April 30 they drew their last paychecks and boarded the train to Chicago. Hemingway's father had reluctantly given his approval to the scheme, and the two men were fishing in Michigan in early May when word came

from the Red Cross to report to New York for their physicals.

Hemingway left Kansas City full of hope and enthusiasm. Ahead of him lay a life of international renown and legendary fame; behind him was a solid six-month apprenticeship in the arduous craft of writing. When he began composing fiction in 1919, Kansas City was to provide a rich reservior of material for him to draw on. Several sketches survive, along with two stories -- "A Pursuit Race" and "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." Evidently there were others, but they were lost in December 1922 when a valise containing three years worth of manuscripts disappeared in the Gare de Lyon in Paris.

While professors and critics have made much of the influence of such literary figures as Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and Erza Pound upon the young writer, not enough credit has been given to Pete Wellington and the others at the Star who had an important effect upon the development of his genius. Perhaps the most significant praise came from Hemingway himself, who, in an interview in 1940, said that "those were the best rules I ever learned for the business of writing . . . No man with any talent who feels and writes truly about the thing he is trying to say, can fail to write well if he abides by them."

The Worth of the Harvest: James Hearst and His Poetry

Jeff Sears

Part I: INTRODUCTION--A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

To truly appreciate the poetry of James Hearst, you have to have known the man. It is not enough to know that in the sixty years of his writing career, Hearst published over 600 poems; that he received two awards from the State of Iowa for lifetime achievement in the arts; that he has been called "Iowa's best poet[1] by such experts in Midwestern literature as Clarence Andrews and John T. Frederick; and that several nationally influential figures--Harriet Monroe and Robert Frost among them--have at one time or another championed the cause of his poetry to a larger audience. Certainly these facts alone suggest that Hearst's poetry deserves the kind of serious attention this study represents; yet an even more convincing argument is the man himself.

I first became aware of James Hearst the man through a television program which I happened to have the opportunity to see while living in Waterloo, Iowa, in the spring of 1976. I didn't really know what to expect when I tuned in, though some years earlier I had heard of Hearst vaguely referred to as "the Robert Frost of the Middlewest." Would he use the dry wit and rustic prose of Frost? Would his work (very little of which I had seen) be an adaptation of the Frost style to Midwestern materials? Secretly, I perhaps hoped for someone

and something more original; yet it had been the comparison to American's best-loved poet that had originally made Hearst's name stick in my mind.

As I waited for the program to begin, I half-imagined I was about to see Frost at the lectern: a great, imposing, almost hulking figure, with deepest eyes under famous bushy eyebrows, the head topped with a distinctive shock of white hair. But when Hearst appeared on the screen, this image, as well as my other preconceptions, vanished. For here was a man whose physical appearance, beyond its extreme contrast to Frost's, was absolutely unique; and in its uniqueness, it bespoke a lifetime of unique suffering, and a unique character that had somehow emerged to endure that suffering.

First, he was in a wheelchair--that fact struck the eye like a shot. And closer examination showed a man who clearly belonged there, and who had most likely been there for a long time. His arms were thin and his legs useless. His small frame sagged, and, elbows on knees, he had to prop his rather large head on the heels of his rather large hands to keep it from sinking to his belly. Every movement was a struggle; and every physical task took two or more than three tries to accomplish: repositioning a leg that perhaps had become stiff; adjusting his posture to show more attentiveness to the interviewer; grasping and opening the book or magazine from which he wished to read. As I watched, it occurred to me that he used his hands like spatulas tied to the ends of his arms, keeping

them flat and wedging them under a knee, or pinning a page between them as he turned it over in his lap. As the interview went on, even the effort to take a breath and begin speaking seemed almost too much. Surely old age alone would not account for all of this. Surely there must have been an old, and severe, injury, I thought; and I found myself wondering, how old, and how severe? and how could a man stand it." And more to the point, why, despite this man's evident helplessness, did he arouse no pity in me? The longer I watched, paradoxically enough, the less I found myself thinking of him as "in a wheel-chair." How could someone in his condition find and project the kind of dignity that rebuffed every feeling but respect? Part of the answer showed in his face. There were to be sure, the lines of hard years on his high forehead and around the edges of his wide mouth. But as he listened to his interviewer, his strong jaw seemed to set in an almost subconscious expression of determination, and there was a preoccupied intensity in his sharp eyes. Oh, and he could laugh! A full, open smile often stretched across his face, in appreciation of a clever remark by his interviewer.

And then he read from his work, and the revelation was complete. He read just four short poems. But here, in the dry, colloquial, and distinctively Midwestern matter-of-factness of his voice, were immediately evident a certain strength and a sort of acceptance. And then, in reading the last poem, he

spoke of "the smell of fear, of hate and despair"[2] as calmly as another poet might speak of a day in June--and I thought again of the phrase "the Robert Frost of the Middlewest," and I thought for an irreverent moment that one could just as well, had Frost been born a couple of decades later, have called him "the James Hearst of New England." For beyond general similarities of tone and subject matter (Hearst himself had commented on the "far orientation" of his poetry), the originality and force of both, as men and as poets, seemed equally obvious to me.

But was the whole of this man's work as interesting as a brief sample indicated? And if it was, why hadn't I heard more about him and his work? It took a long time, in the weeks, months, and years that followed my viewing of that program, for me to find what I feel to be the answers to these questions; but I would not have spent the time any other way. For I got to know a body of poetry that is indeed of considerable merit; and I had the immeasurably rare opportunity to get to know its creator, a man so modest that he didn't even feel he deserved the title "poet." ("I call myself a 'man who makes poems,'" he told me when I first visited him, in May of 1980. "I've always thought that a real poet can just write out of inspiration, and not have to work as hard at it as I do."[3]) To speak of Jim's consistently original work in terms of broad comparisons, it could be said that he shared the best qualities of three of his

older contemporaries: Frost's expressionistic use of the milieu he knew best; Sandburg's ability to praise the common and women he knew, in a mixture of their own language and the language of Biblical and classical epic; and William Carlos Williams' emphasis on the sharply concrete portrayal of immediate reality. Jim's poetry is, on the whole, less ambitious than that of Frost, Sandburg, or Williams, which may help to explain why he has yet to share their national reputations; for it was never Jim's aim to do anything but register with artistic care his own admittedly limited range of experience and emotions. Yet he is more than a "farmer-poet," as he has often been labeled in acknowledgement of his lifetime of farming and involvement in farm affairs. Rather, Jim shaped meaningful poetry out of every aspect of his experience, primarily as farmer, but also as city-dweller, teacher, brother, son, husband, and lover. And while he valued the authentic quality he could give to poems drawn exclusively from his own life and the life around him, he always sought for an element of the universal in the particular.

As for Jim's connection with Frost, it is well known that he and Frost had a long and close acquaintanceship that spanned the last thirty years of Frost's life. Yet Jim's style of writing, especially in the middle and late stages of his career when he knew Frost best, was clearly his own: a unique combination of fundamental poetic devices (especially personification, and the long,

cumulative, often comma-spliced sentence) in a flexible, complex tool perfectly suited to Jim's own way of observing, feeling, thinking, and talking. Certainly he shared many qualities with Frost, which no doubt helped bring them together: introspection and a sometimes hidden sensitivity; intellectual realism and forthrightness; closeness to nature and to the men and women who make a living in it; and democratic convictions regarding art, politics, and human relations in general. But all these qualities came to Jim, as they came to Frost, out of his own genetic, familial, social, and cultural heritage. Jim Hearst was always, and often stubbornly, his own man.

How, then, does one account for the present state of Jim's poetic repute? An overemphasis on his limitations; an overstatement of his influences; and, at root, an inability and disinclination on Jim's own part to promote his own cause. Yet, regardless of the opinions of those who have glanced only casually at Jim's work and dismissed it--and indeed, regardless of the opinion of his work which he himself appears to have held--Jim does deserve a place among those American originals who have made a tradition of raising the local idiom and the commonplace detail to an expression of human spirit. To be sure, Jim's poetry has its faults: more often than he would have liked, his poems have not escaped the residual influence of the flowery quasi-Victorial style he was consciously rebelling against; and occasionally a poem of his does fail to rise above the

prosaic facts and words that are its basic substance. But to those in sympathy with Jim's aims, his work as a whole affords unique pleasures. And not the least of these is an insight into the heart of a very remarkable human being.

Jim's ultimate claim to literary recognition may in fact be--to bring my personal appreciation back to where it began--that to know Jim's poetry is to come that much closer to having known Jim. How old, and how serious, was the injury that put him in the wheelchair in which I first saw him? Very old, and very serious: the result of a nearly fatal accident he suffered in his teens. How did he find the courage to come through this, and a long series of other profound personal reverses, including the untimely deaths of two people very close to him? Partly by turning these experiences, or at least his reactions to them, into material for his verse.

For much of Jim's life story, I must defer to Jim's own autobiographical accounts, particularly My Shadow Below Me (Iowa State University Press, 1981) and Time Life a Furrow (State Historical Society of Iowa, 1981). Therefore, I have not tried to cover every available biographical detain in the pages that follow. Rather, I have tried to trace the general development of a unique poet and his poetry, to outline the course of his long writing career, and to describe and assess the whole of his notable literary contribution. My methods in preparing this study have been scholarly; I have examined hundreds or previously

unexamined, in some cases previously unknown, items of correspondence, original manuscripts, newspaper articles, and other primary sources, and I have formally interviewed many of Hearst's important literary associates as well as having frequently enjoyed the hospitality of my subject himself. Yet non-scholar and scholar alike will find interest in the story and explications that follow; and indeed, it may well be for other than scholarly reasons that James Hearst's poetry becomes a part of your life.

Colo, Iowa
October 29, 1983

Notes

1. Clarence Andrews, in an interview with the author in Iowa City, January 13, 1983.

2. John T. Frederick, in a letter to Frank Paluka, dated April 4, 1968, in the University of Iowa Library.

3. "Neighborhood in the Suburbs," in Proved by Trial (LaCrosse: Juniper Press, 1977), p. 10.

4. May 10, 1980.