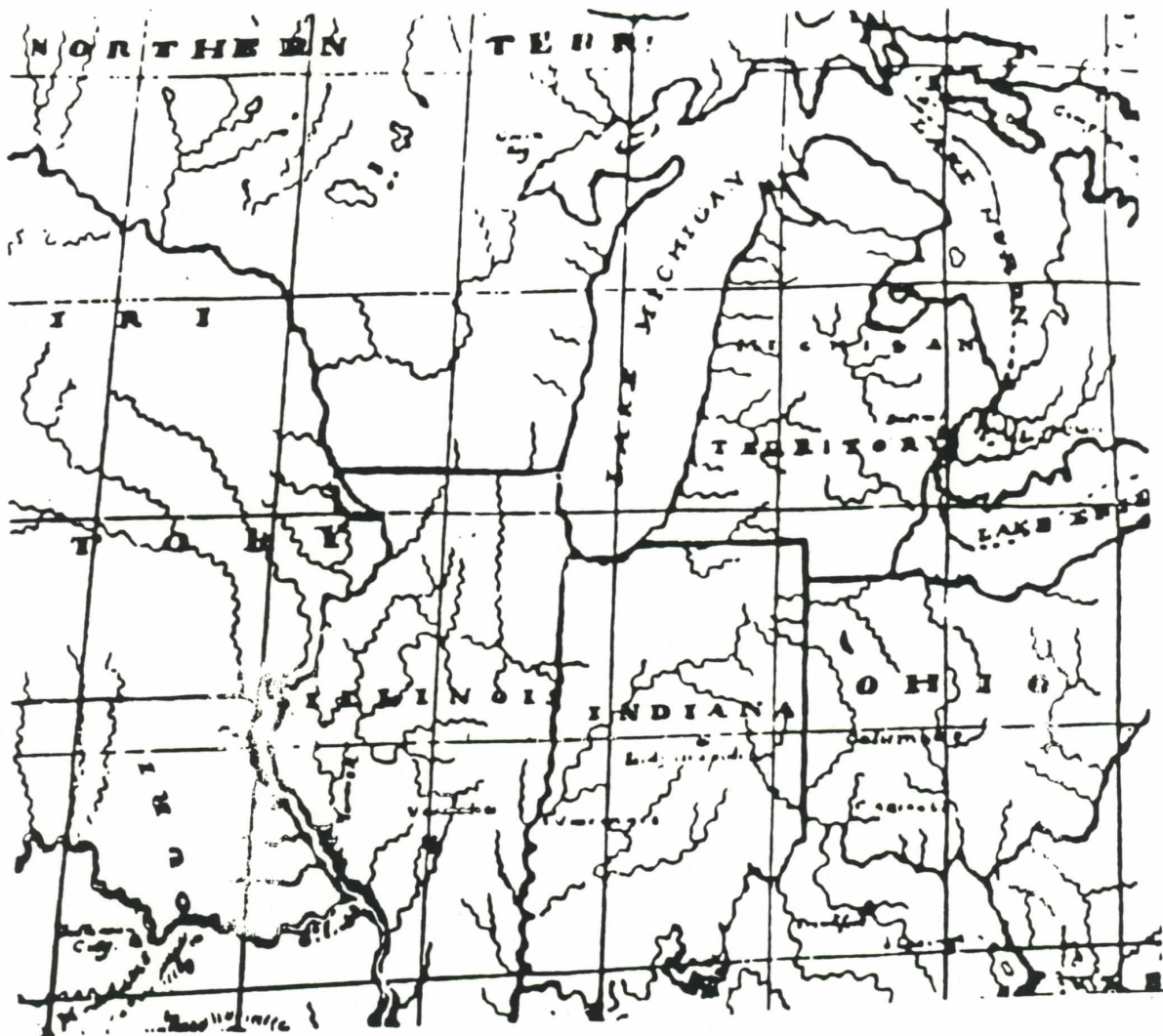


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SML *Newsletter*



The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

The Center for the Study of
Midwestern Literature and Culture

Founded 1971

VOLUME NINETEEN

NUMBER TWO

Summer, 1989

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Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

Newsletter

Volume Nineteen, Number Two

Summer, 1989

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

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Published in Spring, Summer, Fall

**Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature
Newsletter**

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Number Two

Summer, 1989

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—Caricature by Eva Herrmann.
Thomas Beer



What Thomas Beer brought
into our letters was an aris-
tocratic sense of precision.



Thomas Beer

THOMAS BEER

David D. Anderson

Thomas Beer died suddenly of a heart attack in his apartment in the Hotel Albert, 65 University Place, in New York, on the morning of April 18, 1940. He was in his 51st year, and (curiously and coincidentally), his death was exactly 49 years, almost to the moment as I write. On the morning after his death, the New York Times in its lead obituary, devoted 24 column inches to the fact of his death and the career that had come to an end.

In spite of the length and prominence of the Times obituary and the restrained detail with which it recounted the facts of his life and achievements, I receive two responses when I mention his name today: most frequently, the response is "Who's Thomas Beer?" More rarely, when the name is somewhat familiar, the response is more complex, asking why I, such a notorious Midwesterner, should know or care or be curious about a man who was such a quintessential Eastern, who was a graduate of the Mackenzie School at Dobbs Ferry, New York University, and of Yale, a near-graduate of Columbia Law School, a former member of a prominent Wall Street legal firm, and a resident of Yonkers for more than forty of his fifty years? Even the place of his birthplace--Council Bluffs, Iowa, on November 22, 1889--a fact which enshrines him forever in my friend Clarence Andrews's pantheon of Iowa greats--is certainly not enough to redeem him from the fact that before he was two, his family had moved to Yonkers, and to the best of my knowledge he never returned to the state or city of his birth; in fact, the memories and memoirs of some of his friends suggest that he never even mentioned his Iowa origins. Indeed, until the Times obituary told them otherwise, the assumption of many in the Eastern literary and cultural establishment was that he, like Henry James, of whom he reminded many of his older contemporaries, had been one of them since--indeed, long before--his birth.

If the Times obituary gives no real clue to my interest, it does define the accomplishments of a man who made a significant if fading contribution to the literature of his time. He was a "noted author", a recreator of The Mauve Decade (1926) of the 1890's, which "won praises"; he was a biographer of Mark Hanna (1929) and Stephen Crane (1923); he published three novels, The Fair Reward (1922), Sandova! (1924), which Ernest Boyd had called in his New York Times review "the best American novel of the season"; and The Road to Heaven (1928), all of which, incidentally, were set in the East, and two of which were rooted in the nineteenth century, which had also provided the substance of his biographies of Crane and Hanna, and his cultural history of the 1890s. The Times also

acknowledges his collection of short stories, Mrs. Egg and Other Barbarians (1933), containing stories first published in The Saturday Evening Post, of which Margaret Wallace wrote in his Times review that Mr. Beer had "*the gift of saying little and suggesting much*"; that he could endow a character with a simple physical trait or an unconscious gesture "*by which the character would stand fully defined and revealed*." Of the substance of the stories, their setting, their people, the intricacies of the relationships defined, the Times is silent, although it does recount that

Grace and economy of words marked all his writing. In much of it there was subtle humor. Mr. Beer hated to state flatly that a thing had occurred. He preferred to suggest it by allusion. This writing habit at times caused him to be charged with being obscure, but more frequently earned him praise...

The obituary remarks further that Mr. Beer had never married, that he had served honorably overseas during the Great War, that he had given up law for literature on his return, that his late lawyer father, William Beer, had known and supported Hanna, that he was survived by his mother and sister of New York and a brother of Nantucket.

While Beer's publishing record--seven varied volumes in little more than a decade--suggest that, on a slow day for news in 1940, just after the German capture of Norway and Denmark, and just before the Nazi spring offensive in Western Europe, Beer might conceivably merit such a prominent and detailed obituary, it still fails to answer the two initial questions: "*Who was Thomas Beer?*" and "*Why should a notorious Midwesterner find him interesting?*"

Perhaps the most important clue to the worth of Thomas Beer as a writer, a "*noted author*," and a man entitled to such prominent posthumous attentions, even on, slow day for news, lies in his recognition in a series of publication events that appeared in the literary and intellectual journals of his day, both before and after his death, in his substantial attention in the most noted assessment of American literature of his time, and that culminated in the posthumous publication of two substantial collections of his work, together with detailed comment by distinguished critics, and issued by his publisher, editor, and friend, Alfred A. Knopf, who not only published the collections under his own name rather than that of his firm, but also contributed extensive notes and sympathetic comment to the dust

jackets.

Typical among the earlier writings about Beer is a review essay by Margaret Whipple in *The Bookman* for June 1928 on the occasion of the publication of *The Road to Heaven* his last novel. In examining his then six published volumes of fiction, biography, and social history, Whipple sees in each and in toto *"masterly embodiments of scene... his characters marvelous portraits... With every work from Mr. Beer's pen,"* she writes, *"comes a greater artistry of conception and expression, and all are gratefully suave in a world of books blatant and shrieking"*.

In the latter comments are echoes of Emily Clark's personal essay on Beer in *The Saturday Review of Literature* six years later. In the essay Clark combined a mixture of biographical fact--sometimes intuitive rather than objective fact--and personal memoir, together with revealing quotes of her intuitive fact: *"He is not a 'Middle Western' writer. His family moved from Iowa via Minnesota to Yonkers before he was four years old";* of his travels: *"...he has gone nowhere except to Europe, Nantucket Island, Cleveland, Ohio, in 1929 for information concerning Mark Hanna, and California a few years ago, for reasons which I have not yet been able to determine, but connected, I think, with hygiene, not Hollywood";* of his nature that *"he definitely belongs in one of the two classes into which Max Beerbohm has divided the human race. One half of the world, Mr. Beerbohm explains, are hosts, the other half, guests. Tom Beer is, incomparably, a host."*

Perhaps Clark's two most telling inclusions are a quote from Beer and her final assessment. On the occasion of their meeting, at a luncheon given by the Knopfs in New York in May 1924, she remembers the conversation turned to the resurgence of Southern writing. *"Why is there a literary movement toward Richmond?"* Beer asked. *"There is something sinister about it. It is almost like the military movement started in that direction by Grant. I used to think I might go there some day. But it must be very much like the Algonquin."* In defining Beer's nature, she recounts an experience:

A woman who has read and admired his books but never met him, asked me lately: "What is he like? Is he a man-of-the-world?" I could only reply: "I am not sufficiently a woman-of-the-world always to recognize a man-of-the-world when I see one, so I don't know. But this I do know--he is a Gentleman-of-the-Old-School"(689).

However, more telling than either literary assessment or personal memoir are two essays that appear after his death. The first is "*Thomas Beer: Aristocrat of Letters*", a posthumous personal literary and cultural assessment in *The Saturday Review of Literature* for May 4, 1940, written as cultural history as well as personal tribute by his friend and admirer Lewis Mumford; the second, published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* on September 13, 1941, is "*Thomas Beer as Remembered by Two Classmates*," Monty Woolly and Cary Abbott, both of whom were members, with Beer, of Yale's distinguished class of 1911. It was published on occasion of the publication by Knopf of the first of his two volumes of Beer's work.

The latter essay by Woolly and Abbott contains personal anecdotes that go back nearly thirty years to define Beer's prodigious memory, his penchant for telling tall but believable tales and giving plausible explanations for natural history about which he--or his audience--knew nothing, his interest in music as diverse as "*Die Walkure*," "*Showboat*," and "*Frankie and Johnnie*"; his planned book on modern esthetics, entitled "*Form, Color, and Design*"; his lavish and toothsome Christmas dinners, accompanied by equally lavish gifts and a reading, not of "*A Christmas Carol*" or the Christmas gospel, but "*the tale from Ezekial of those two jaunty harlots Ohalah and Ohalibah*"; followed by that of "*old King Daniel and the beautiful Shulamite*" (13).

Somehow, however, in spite of Messrs. Woolly and Abbott's confessions to "*a memory of our host that never dims*" (13), the memories seem less than either the man or his work, less, indeed, than the contents of his *Times* obituary.

Of the two essays, Mumford's is not only the more immediate but the more complete and finished, and it stands as the most important and accurate assessment of Beer yet written, perhaps the best that will ever be written. The man, his art, and his times are revealed as no formal obituary statement ever could, even in that long lead obituary in the *Times* on a slow day for news as Europe was coming apart. First Mumford places Beer in the paradoxical continuity of American faith.

In April, 1940, the American people still prided themselves on their neutrality, their safety, and their righteous indifference to the woes of the weak: the Nazis swiftly overran Denmark and invaded Norway in a brazen flutter of lies: and

Thomas Beer, a soldier whose intelligence never let him be callous, and a writer whose most trivial short story might carry praise of silent courage, died in a hotel on University Place. In this Hotel, Albert Pinkham Ryder had first encountered the image of Death Riding around a Racetrack.

These events were not unconnected. Beer knew war at first hand. No one who ever heard him could forget his picture of an operating room in a hospital behind the lines, where suddenly he was aware of sloshing around a floor slippery with blood. But unlike his fellow-countrymen at present, he knew that there were evils worse than war, and worse disasters than death. His agitation over America's complacent anesthesia, its failure to oppose the world-engulfing calamity of barbarism, may well have produced the spasm that caused his heart at last to stop. He died alone, somewhere between five and nine in the morning on April eighteenth. He was fifty years old (3).

But the facts of Beer's life are less important than his works, all of them written in *"a span of literary activity...almost as short as that of Stephen Crane. Ten years covered the publication of the literary studies and the stories by which he will live--"* Stephen Crane (1923), Sandoval (1924), The Mauve Decade (1926), and Hanna (1929). *"These were his principal works."* Mumford writes:

The decade in which he flourished has lately been the subject for petulant and partisan depreciations. But if nothing else were at hand to justify the work of that period in literature, if the contributions of Brooks, Frank, Rosenfeld, Parrington, Sandburg, Williams, and Constance Rourke should all be lost, the existence of the handful of books that Thomas Beer wrote would still identify the period as a notable one. . . ." (3).

"What Beer brought into our letters," Mumford summarizes, "was an aristocratic sense of precision, of intellectual balance and moral poise, and above all, a standard of exacting craftsmanship that too few of our writers have possessed" (3).

Such an assessment of the slender list of books of one brief period in a man's life is high praise indeed, and the evidence abounds in Beer's work to attest to its accuracy. Who else but Thomas Beer could define the

parameters of his study of *The Mauve Decade* of the '90's--of "pink striving to be purple" --so audaciously and accurately as in his opening lines:

They laid Jesse James in his grave and then Dante Gabriel Rossetti died immediately. Then Charles Darwin was deplored, and then, on April 27, 1882, Louisa May Alcott hurried to write in her journal: "Mr. Emerson died at 9: p.m. suddenly. Our best and greatest American gone. The nearest and dearest friend Father has ever had and the man who helped me most by his life, his books and his society. Illustrious and beloved friend, good-bye!" So she made a lyre of yellow jonquils for Ralph Waldo Emerson's preposterous funeral and somehow steered Bronson Alcott through the dreary business until he stood beside the coffin in the damp cemetery and mechanically drawled out the lines of a dire poem...[and] stepped back from the grave into which his one importance sank. . . (9).

Who else but Beer could end his account of the decade by concluding that "The whole nineteenth century had been rotten with the disease of greatness and its wretched successor seems unwilling to get rid of this malady" (182) as the nation gathered in New York for the great parade that ended the century and its "splendid little war" with destiny on horseback:

How they roared! Theodore Roosevelt! . . . Theodore Roosevelt! The figure on its charger passed, and a roar went plunging before him while the bands shocked ears and drunken soldiers straggled out of line, and these dead great, remembered with a grin, went filing by (203).

Beer, Mumford concludes, "had not discovered aristocracy in the flaunting nineties; nor had he discovered it in the sordid New York of the bootleg era. But he had at least created one veritable aristocrat: himself; and the witness of that creation in his work" (17).

This was the Thomas Beer deserving of obituarial celebrity in the pages of the *Times* and of his works, *Hanna* and *The Mauve Decade*, that continue to delight, while his *Stephen Crane*, with all due respect to John Berryman, is still the best thing done on that short-lived wonder. Even though Alfred Kazin was later to dismiss Beer with some distain in *On*

Native Grounds (1942) as, with Cabell and Hergesheimer, one of "*The Exquisites*"; yet he admits that "*Beer's histories retain an effect of solidity, of a job clearly seen and cleverly performed. . .*" (239-240).

The clue to Beer's current obscurity rests, I think, in that condescension with which Kazin and the other critics among the New York intellectuals of the Partisan Review, Nation, and New Republic circle dismissed Cabell, Hergesheimer, Bromfield, and others of the old American aristocracy of letters, each of whom is deserving of a better literary and critical fate.

But what Kazin and his critics ignored was an important dimension of Beer's work that had been dismissed just as casually by his supporters. Of this dimension Mumford wrote "*That Thomas Beer spent so much of his talent on popular fiction was a weakness that arose out of the excess of a virtue; namely: his high talent for hospitality and for lordly acts of generosity*" (17). In other words, the more than 150 stories that Beer published in The Saturday Evening Post, The Century, Harpers, Smart Set, and other journals are dismissed as potboiling mistakes

This was the work collected in Mrs. Egg and Other Barbarians (1933) and posthumously in Mrs. Egg and Other Americans (1947), and it was the work not of "Thomas Beer, Aristocrat of Letters", as his Eastern friends knew him and Mumford eulogized him; it was the work of the other Thomas Beer, the Thomas Beer who, born in Iowa to a Midwestern lawyer, spent his summers until 1910 not on the Cape or at the Shore but in the birthplace of his father and the home of his paternal grandfather, Justice Thomas Beer of Bucyrus, Crawford County, Ohio. The stories of the Egg family, set in Beer's fictional Zerbetta, Ohio, are Beer's memoirs of Bucyrus and of his paternal relatives. (Surely it was in Bucyrus rather than New Haven or Yonkers that the phrase "*Egg in your beer*" first must have piqued Beer's imagination.)

That Beer could write so easily of the world he knew, "*the milieu in which he had been brought up, of which he was a lifelong part*"; the world of the Eastern aristocratic establishment, surprised no one, including his sympathetic critic and editor Wilson Follett, but the fact that he wrote the Egg stories equally easily and well presented them with "*the great paradox and central mystery of Thomas Beer*", again in Follett's words, that "*His baker's dozen stories, on the other hand, reveal aspects about which he knew, comparatively just about nothing first-hand-aspects belonging to the nuclear best of farm, village, small-town, small-city life. . . and yet all his versions of this life seem like an artesian flow and of an insuperable abundance*" (XIV).

But the paradox is not Beer's; it is that of his friends, supporters, critics, and admirers, who knew only Thomas Beer of Yonkers and Manhattan and not Thomas Beer of the secret place in which he retreated in memory and imagination in his short fiction. Yet echoes of his fascination with Bucyrus are clear in the stories, and echoes of it as a secret place in his mind recur in the other better-known works. In *The Mauve Decade*, for example, in a discussion of American women and the daring literature of the '90's, in an examination of letters to the editors of popular magazines, he recounts:

... there comes too, a hint of the slow battle between the city and the small town. "Your people in New York" are doing thus and so. "I suppose", said Mrs. Janette B. Frovisher, "the society women in New York like to read swear words, but--" And yet in Bucyrus, Ohio, a copy of Zola's "Nana" went from soft hand to soft hand until it came back to its owner in the state of a worn Bible and slim fingers stained the pages of a tall "Salamambo" opposite to the plate of Matho squatting with his head against the knee of the Princess, who cried out: "Moloch, thou burnest me!" while the kisses of the warrior, Gustave Flaubert said, seared her body, more biting than flames. However, he was French (38).

In *Hanna* he returned not only to the political tradition of Ohio Republicanism that he had imbibed at his father's knee--but not his grandfather's--but he returned too to a figure--in fact, three figures--who loom large in his memory--his grandfather, Thomas Beer, of Bucyrus, his father, William Beer, native of Bucyrus, and the subject of the book, Mark Hanna, Ohio robber baron and steel and President-maker. And as his father criss-crosses the Midwest in support of McKinley and Hanna in the Fall of 1896, the Main Line of the Pennsylvania and of Ohio Republicanism, stopped frequently in Bucyrus. In the opening pages of *Hanna*, Thomas Beer, "the burly young lawyer from Bucyrus," appears in Columbus as news of Lincoln's assassination is heard in the streets. In the Appendix Beer, he quotes his father's letter from a later political campaign:

.... Leaving Pittsburg Wednesday afternoon, I saw friends along the line and arranged for help in Columbiana, Mahoning and Stark, Trumbull, Wayne,

Richland, Crawford, Ashland, Defiance, Williams, and Lucas. I stopped off at my father's home in Bucyrus, Crawford County, between trains, and ascertained from him the attitude of the Gold Democrats of the State--he being in close touch with all the leaders of that wing. I went on to Lima, Allen County, where I had arranged to meet Senator Hanna . . . (629).

Yes, Bucyrus was Thomas Beer's secret place, the source of his short fiction, the place that remained unknown to those Eastern associates who knew him and his work less well than they believed, that resulted in sight so short that Follett can ask *"How on earth can he have known about an America altogether strange to his urban and cosmopolitan pattern of existence?"* (XIV). Somewhere in the Ohio heavens I suspect that the last of a long line of Ohio Thomas Beers and William Beers might enlighten him. But I suspect the Beers too busy chuckling and gossiping as they recount the foibles of the Eggs and Beers of Zerbetta and Bucyrus, Ohio. And they must laugh as they relish the cosmic pleasure of those memories of Bucyrus and Zerbetta, fused into the secret place of America's aristocrat of letters, a gentleman of the old school, whose secret Ohio place remained with him, a secret to the end.

Michigan State University

From a Midwest Notebook:

THE FARMHOUSE

William Thomas

Our house was like nearly all old farmhouses, ill-arranged, ill-lit, and odorous of rag carpets saturated with dust. It faced west, on a knoll two hundred yards from the river and a hundred yards from the road. The original structure, dating from 1856, was a rectangular box with a porch in front and a kitchen attached to the back. It was a "story and a half" house; that is, the eaves were at a height midway in the walls of the upper floor, where the upper halves of east and west walls sloped inward with the roof. Successive alterations had converted the kitchen to a dining room and made a new kitchen with a small room beside it (my grandmother's bedroom), added a half story room over the dining room, and inclosed one end of the front porch to make a small room which my mother used for sewing.

Off the north side of the kitchen was a pantry, and off the dining room, between the pantry and parlor, a north porch inclosed on three sides. In the east end of the pantry was an upground cellar, with a brick floor about three feet below the ground level. The kitchen had outside light only from the back door, whose glass panel was never tight enough to withstand the jar when the door was slammed, and my father would be very angry when I was so unfortunate as to have broken it.

There was a board walk from the back door, and south of it a windowless structure called a "smokehouse", where meat was cured, filled with kettles and other butchering paraphernalia. Between the smokehouse and the house was a space of two and a half or three feet, always dank and mephitic because it was here, out the back door of her bedroom,, that my grandmother habitually emptied her chamberpot. Once a visitor, unfamiliar with the house and attempting to reach the kitchen door via this passageway, narrowly escaping a deluge.

The stair went up from the front, and beside it was a hall ending with a door (never used) to the north porch. The stair to the big cellar went under it from the dining room, and the cellar stair landing also connected with the hall. From the first landing, upstairs, where the door led to my parents' room, you turned and went up three more steps to the upper hall and thence to the two other bedrooms, north and south. Between the bedroom door was an alcove, curtained to conceal a bedclothes box and the heterogeneous household rubbish which never got thrown away. Broken clotheshorses, bags of carpet rags, discarded garments, bundles of unused wallpaper, and stacks of McCall's Magazine were hidden by that red curtain.

The south bedroom was mine, and it had south windows at opposite sides of the chimney which came up from the fireplace below. That lower room had a west window

and none to the south. The fireplace was flanked by a built-in cupboard and a built-in clothespress. The fireplace itself was never used within my recollection; it was closed off by a zinc-sheathed board, and in front of it was a base-burner (removed in summer to the smokehouse); it and the cupboard and the clothespress were all torn out with the rebuilding of 1919.

The north room, the parlor, having two north windows as well as a west window, was much lighter than the other; it was here that, when the minister came to dinner, we prayed; otherwise it was used very little. That was not because it was sacrosanct, but because it was accessible only from the front of the house. I read there a good deal, but I never liked the parlor because of the rug. That rug, with its monstrous floral pattern and vivid green background, survived the rebuilding and all the years thereafter; I saw the last of it only in December 1945, at the farm auction. It brought twenty-six dollars.

The kitchen walls were never without several calendars and almanacs, one of the larger calendars always bearing notess on dates when cows were due to calve and when potatoes were planted and wheat was sown. On the walls of the other rooms downstairs were many big framed pictures. In the dining room a realistic still-life of Concord and Muscat grapes, peaches, walnuts, and maple leaves; a house by a lake shore that looked (because it was painted on the glass) as if made of mother-of-pearl; two more colored prints, one a bouquet of roses and the other of cows in a meadow. In the living room a chromolithograph of young men and women (in attire of the 1850's) picking apples; and crayon portraits of my grandfather and grandmother. In the parlor two enormous steel engraving with religious subjects, "The Resurrection" and "The Ascension"; another of Abraham Lincoln and his family, with the Capitol dome in the background and all their names below; a colored engraving of "Niagara Falls in Winter"; and photographs of my Aunt Angeline and my Uncle Lincoln in heavy walnut frames. In my grandmother's bedroom a big plaque in memoriam to that dead uncle and dead aunt, with a white dove and gilt lettering on a black ground; and a reproduction of Hofmann's "Christ in Gethsemane."

Those were not all: there was a Currier and Ives lithograph of three oval-faced females with yellow-, red-, and blue-draped torsos entitled "Which Will You Marry?"--a prize my father had won in school; smaller spaces had group photographs of long-grown-up school attendants and of my mother's family, photographs in ornate frames of my cousin Charley as a baby and my cousins the Jefferson sisters. The upstairs rooms had more such photographs--although at some indeterminate date I took them out of mine and substituted pictures of Sitting Bull, Poor Bull, Short Bull, and other Indian chiefs, and reproductions of covers from The National Sportsman. I also had sepia prints of the Roman Colosseum and Alma-Tadema's "A Reading from Homer" (whose artist and title I was ignorant of); a pleasing design of small cloth squares (that came in cigaret packages and had been given me by somebody) depicting famous ball players; a big Lone Scout flag, the LSA monogram in red on a blue ground; and pennants commemorating, among other institutions, Yale and Cornell and the Ohio State

Fair 1917.

After the war of 1914-1918 my father determined to remodel the house. The alterations were so extensive that, as he later said, it would have been better to tear the old house down and start anew. He did not mean that altogether; in saying it he was expressing a small pride in having done the wrong thing, when the right would have been too great a departure from convention and the wrong had precedent. The shape of the old house disappeared; it became a nearly-square two-story house with a one-story kitchen attached; and, with the village carpenter as architect, the change from an old house with many things wrong with it to a new one with many other things, and some of the same, wrong with it.

During the rebuilding we lived in the garage, a concrete-floored lean-to attached to the granary. The car (a 1915 Reo) was sheltered within the granary itself, and in the upper part I had my bed, where ordinarily was a grain bin. My parents' bed was on the garage floor, at the west; the east end was the kitchen, and the cooking range had its pipe going out a window. Flies were bothersome, and my mother was wont to dwell later upon the inconveniences of that summer. I remember it only with pleasure, for to sleep so near the roof made me feel like a pioneer in his rude cabin, and I liked the sound of rain on the shingles. With the move, the rubbish of the upper hall alcove was disposed of, but it was not necessary to take anything out of the cellar, and there, on top of the walls between the joints, my grandmother's patent medicine bottles continued to repose in dusty emptiness for many years.

For my grandmother a room was procured with the Lucas family, who lived on the Jacob's farm. She disliked being made to leave the dwelling which was satisfactory to her as it was, with the prospect of returning to a new room which might not suit her even though it contained a wash basin and a water closet. She was eighty-seven years old, and scarcely to be blamed for that view. But if the passage of years teaches anything at all, it must be that truth whose utterance made Heraclitus famous, and the fact that one is eighty-seven and doesn't like it will not retard the ceaseless flowing of things. She lived in the new room only a little more than four months, dying in March 1920.

The black walnut siding of the old house was added to the woodpile and later chopped up for kindling, and as we became accustomed to the new house, the old went out of my consciousness and almost out of my recollection.

Ohio State University Emeritus

From a Midwest Notebook:

NEIGHBORS

William Thomas

Mr. Everett's farm adjoined ours on the north, but his house was on the west side of the road, back a long lane. My father, eminently practical, did not like long lanes, and I too could perceive how it put Mr. Everett at a disadvantage: it was too great a distance from the house to the river. He was a devoted fisherman, and was often to be seen, carrying several cane poles and always wearing rubber boots, following the Bend to a likely spot where perhaps he had for several days baited the carp with bits of dough or grains of corn. He always used dough-balls on the hook and seemed able to catch fish any time he wished to. This was mysterious to me, whose hook no fish would attach itself to, whether it were baited with dough, worm, or craw-dad. So I gave up fishing early in life, and inclined to the view of a professor of English whom I later met that The Compleat Angler is a delightful book but fishing a very overrated sport. Mr. Everett, who probably never heard of Izaak Walton, knew nothing of the sporting angler's scorn of the carp--an unreasonable prejudice, for a carp properly prepared is as savory as the cat--and would bring us sometimes a handsome seven- or eight-pounder, when he had caught more than his family could eat.

Mr. Everett was withal a man of wide and varied experience, for it was hardly possible to mention a subject which he did not hold an opinion on or to speak of a phase of human endeavor that his knowledge or experience did not touch; his personal narratives were interminable, and if you asked him a question as lucid as "What is this shrub that grows along the fence-row?" you might hear about a Texas horse race of 1896 or what Leadville was like in its boom before you got the answer--if the answer came. The subject he was unwilling to discourse on was how to catch fish: that was his secret, and his implied view was that it might remain to the rest of the world a mystery. Being a countryman, he would have no truck with fly-casting or any sort of artificial baits; the Scioto had only carp and catfish in it, anyway, no game fish, and if you had talked of fishing as a "sport", he would scarcely have understood. Yet for many years it was, I dare say, his principal interest in life, not second even to his farming. (It is easy to understand why my father did not think highly of Mr. Everett as a farmer.)

Of Mr. Everett's sons, Lawrence and Vernon were grown men in my childhood, and Ray was so much older than I that we were never companions. My earliest associations were with the Riders. Their house, to which belonged fifty acres, was easy to reach--you had only to climb a couple of fences, and there you were. That the house was very old was evident, for in central Ohio a log house was an oddity at the beginning of this century. This was a "settler's cabin", built of big hewn logs and chinked with mortar, and had some time been plastered inside. Its doors scraped on their sills, and its floor rippled, and it was exactly the sort of house you would expect the Riders to live in, and they were exactly the people you would expect to find living in it.

I was at the Riders' a great deal. Eddie and Arthur were young men, with young

men's interests and activities, but Perry was not so old as to find me uncompanionable. He seemed to have a special liking for me, and when I was not at the Rider house Perry was likely to be at ours, and I know we had happy times together, though I cannot remember anything we did. The Riders were also fishermen, but their fishing was more varied than Mr. Everett's. In summer they kept trot lines set nearly all the time, and used a seine.. And every now and then, when I went to their house, one of them would lead me to a barrel and show me a big turtle.

At some time, then or later, I learned that Clydie was not the boys' mother. But I probably knew what a stepmother is, and found nothing odd about her situation. It was many years before I knew she was the housekeeper whom August had never married. Their alliance was so far in the past that her status as common-law wife was no longer a subject for comment, and she went by the name of Rider.

The Rider family moved away in 1911, to a house at Newman's, and , though this was only a mile off, Perry was lost to me as a companion. At the age of five one might permissibly go two hundred yards to make a visit but not a mile.

Ohio State University Emeritus

From a Midwest Notebook:

MY HORSE-AND-BUGGY DAYS

William Thomas

In the wintertime I customarily rode to and from high school with Carl Jacobs in his storm buggy, the horse spending the school day in the village livery stable. A storm buggy was the common vehicle for use after the motor car was blocked up off the barn floor for the winter. Before the early 1920s, when road-building over the whole country made possible what we take so readily for granted, our great system of transnational highways, it was customary to discontinue use of the motor during the winter, not because the roads were impassable but because that was the condition of most farm lanes. The coming of all-weather roads generally demanded good lanes, and most farmers graveled, cindered, or stoned until they had them.

Previously one of every three or four farmers probably had a sleigh in his barn loft, but it was an heirloom then. Whether it was actually true that we didn't "have winters like they used to have", snow seldom stayed long on the roads, and the sleigh was almost never used. Its disuse was a corollary to the ever-increasing effort of man to secure bodily comfort at all times and under all circumstances--instead of putting on more clothing and wrapping up in blankets for protection against the cold, he would ride in a room on wheels, where no wind could strike him and the cold would be tempered. The answer in the middle west of the early twentieth century was the storm buggy, a box with sliding doors on the sides and a glassed front with a slot below the glass for the lines. One would like to relate it to the coach, of honorable lineage, but it was unlike any form of that vehicle. Over the axles instead of between, it was high, top-heavy, and ugly; and if it were other than quite new the doors were bound to rattle, and no amount of tinkering with the latches would silence them. It seems to me somehow characteristic of the second decade of this century.

Before motor cars were numerous and used the year round, a road horse, for use with the buggy, was a necessity and was kept for that purpose only. The young men strove to possess fast horses; George Landon had a little black mare that could beat anything else in the neighborhood. Ours was a chestnut called Daisy. But she was bought only a year or two before the motor car, and my horse-and-buggy days were with her predecessor, Queen, when I would be taken with my parents in the open buggy, myself sitting on a little folding seat between their knees. We went thus to Prospect once a week, nearly always Saturday afternoon, with eggs to exchange for groceries, and some times my mother and I would drive Queen to Marion. That was only a nine-mile trip each way, but Queen was old and slow, and on a cold day in fall or winter I could not make it home without having to relieve myself, and, when we were well out of town

and nobody else was in sight, would stand in the buggy and spatter the road between the wheels.

In preparation for these trips my mother insisted that I wash my feet before putting on clean stockings; for, said she, if I were to meet with an accident and have to go to the hospital, there I would be ashamed to have dirty feet. I felt there was some flaw in this logic but could not apprehend exactly what it was.

Queen died, and Daisy too became decrepit with the years. In her old age she was no longer needed for driving and was demoted to light farm tasks, but she had the heaves and was not much good. Ralph McLead and I sometimes drove her in the summer evenings, two and a half miles west to Centerville, which had once been a village. It was now only a cluster of houses with a schoolhouse and Charley Collins' store, but Charley Collins was the only place where we could buy a brand of pipe tobacco called "Bulldog", which we then fancied superior to any other. By that time, however, my horse-and-buggy days were really over.

Ohio State University Emeritus

A ROBERT FROST OF THE MIDDLEWEST?

Jeff Sears

One of the most important personal relationships of James Hearst's life, and the one least understood by his readers and admirers, began in the Country Men years. The circumstances under which it began are not clear. But somehow--either from Hearst himself or from one of Hearst's literary friends--Robert Frost received a copy of Hearst's Country Men manuscript in 1933. According to mutual friend Ferner Nuhn, it was not Frost's habit to solicit such samples, nor even to acknowledge their receipt, leery as he was of lesser-known poets angling for dustjacket endorsements. But, having satisfied himself by consulting Nuhn that Hearst had no such purpose, Frost did something almost unheard of; he wrote back:

You must forgive me if I seem to have taken you too literally when you told me to take my time over your poems . . . The truth is I read the poems straight through when they came and I have read them all several times. They are true and good poems. Every one is a subject and your note rings clear. I like them very much. Let's be friends on the strenght of them and let's see more of each other's work. I believe I'll enclose you one of mine, "A Bird Singing in Its Sleep."¹

This straightforward praise from such a highly respected and widely loved poet was staggering. The letter stayed in Hearst's pocket for weeks.

Yet despite Frost's offer of friendship, Hearst did not follow through on Frost's offer to exchange further work; nor did Hearst have the chance to meet Frost until April of 1940, the occasion being a lecture by Frost at Iowa City. Paul Engle, who helped arrange Frost's visit, wrote to Hearst over a year before the lecture date:

Another word about Frost. He mentioned you this winter 1938, said it would be fine to meet you.²

Excerpt from Chapter 3. The Country Men Years (1931-1943) in The Worth of the Harvest: James Hearst and His Poetry.

Hearst, however, did not seem overly anxious about the fact that their meeting would be postponed for another year and a half. And Frost was not entirely prepared for what he saw the night they finally met. The place was the home of Dr. George Stoddard, in Stone City, near Iowa City; an evening reception, organized by Stoddard and Engle, followed Frost's lecture on the University of Iowa campus. The evening happened to be a chilly one, like many early spring evenings in Iowa; and Frost, arriving before Hearst, was seated on a sofa near the hearth, at the far end of the large living room, away from the front door. When Hearst arrived, Frost turned to see who was coming in. According to eyewitness Ferner Nuhn, a "look of surprise, and perhaps pity"³ came across Frost's face when he found that the rather slight, mustached young man leaning apparently helpless on his brother's arm was James Hearst.

Having met, the two men did become friends, and Frost's first visit to Maplehearst Farm came in late 1940, the occasion being a lecture by Frost at Iowa State Teachers College (now the University of Northern Iowa) in Cedar Falls. During Frost's tour of the farm, mandatory for each new visitor at Maplehearst, Frost was properly impressed by its size, and by the richness of the good Iowa soil. "You could eat it the way it is," he said, "wouldn't have to put it through vegetables."⁴ He was also impressed by Hearst's efforts to do his part in working the farm; and he continued to express his interest in Hearst's poetry, going so far as to ask him for a copy of the new manuscript he was working on, with a view toward seeking an East-Coast publisher for it. But Hearst's reaction to this unusual gesture by Frost was a flat refusal: "If my poetry is going to make it, it will make it on its own."⁵ Frost later commented to Hearst's mother that he thought James was right to want to stand on his own. Shortly after his visit, however, Frost prevailed on Ferner Nuhn to try to talk Hearst into sending the manuscript after all. Frost eventually acquired a copy, though there is no direct evidence that Hearst changed his mind. The strongest likelihood, based on letters from that time, is that Nuhn sent his own copy, representing it to Frost as Hearst's "only copy,"⁶ and thus requesting its return whenever Frost should be through with it. And there is evidence that Hearst knew Frost had this copy. In any case, Frost seemed intent on doing Hearst the favor; and Hearst seemed equally intent on refusing it. During the fifteen months which Frost held the manuscript, Hearst contracted with Prairie Press publisher Carroll Coleman to bring it out under the title The Sun at Noon. And finally, on March 26, 1942, Frost wrote to his publisher William M. Sloane III:

Dear Bill:

I'm sending you separately some poems I have had on my mind on my conscience and on the shelf for too long a time. I didn't write them. But I like them rather well though not nearly as well as I like the fellow who did write them. He is the interesting Iowa farmer I may have spoken to you about. Many of us are his admiring friends, including the Iowan Vice President of the United States [Henry Wallace]. His name is James Hearst and he is already known for one volume of verse (Prairie Press publishers) that went through an edition. The story that goes with him helps sell the verses. He is partly paralyzed from a diving accident and only holds up his end with his brother farming a big Iowa farm by virtue of what he can do with the big machinery once he is lifted into his seat by someone else . . . I tell you all this for obvious reasons. and I might add that I have wondered if Henry Wallace mightn[']t be induced to go on the jacket of his book with the aim of bringing Hearst out of his regional existence into a national. Now you've got all the elements, you can be left to judge for yourself. Only please deliver judgement quickly--Hearst mustn't be kept waiting cruelly long. Mind you I'm not pressing. Some of the poems I like very will . . . Ever yours

Robert⁷

Hearst would know nothing of this letter until its publication over twenty years later, and when he would finally have the opportunity to read it, he would be quite upset. The tone of the letter suggests that Frost had been dragging his feet in carrying out a request made by a close friend whose verse he likes only "rather well." And of course Frost's apparent suggestion that his publisher play on the public's sympathy to "help sell the verse" would touch a very sore spot indeed. But perhaps Hearst's biggest objection would stem from his insistence on being viewed as his own man. Having been warned by friends how closely his verse resembled Frost's on occasion, he wanted no part of an arrangement, in fact or on paper, that made him appear to be a Frost protégée or imitator. "I didn't write [these poems]," Frost cautioned Sloane; but as far as Hearst was concerned, Frost should not have suggested that such a mistake could be made.

By Hearst's report, Frost himself never saw his work as an influence on Hearst's. In fact, according to Hearst, if the two of them ever discussed their poetry at all, it was to speculate on their differences. And in fairness to Frost, it has been suggested that his reference to Hearst's "story" in his letter to Sloane was just a clumsy way of saying that here was a man whose life, as well as his verse, was "interesting." But the matter of the letter aside--Hearst, after all, would not see it till after Frost's death--Frost's pursuing the matter of doing Hearst a favor after being flatly turned down did enough damage. A distance between the two men would persist throughout an active acquaintanceship that would last for the rest of Frost's life. Were Hearst and Frost friends? "We spent a lot of time together," Hearst has said.⁸

One small incident reveals the underlying tone of Hearst and Frost's relationship. On a later visit to Maplehearst, Frost noticed some of his books on Hearst's shelves. He asked Hearst, "Have I signed these for you?" Hearst said no--and that was the end of the conversation. Frost did not offer to sign, nor did Hearst ask. One commentator who wishes to remain anonymous has said that they both should have been spanked.

It does seem unfortunate that Hearst felt he had to turn down a genuine offer of help from such an influential source, especially in light of his earlier experiences with national publishers. Yet there was a basis for his fear of being put in Frost's shadow. In spite of the facts, journalists and others have continually applied to Hearst the handy label "Robert Frost friend," with all the misleading implications of Frost's letter to Sloane. And Hearst's verse, at least during the Country Men years, did bear some general similarities to Frost's. Hearst poems sometimes unintentionally recall earlier Frost pieces, as with "Belief" and Frost's 1916 poem "A Time To Talk":

My neighbor and I have stood in the sun,
And talked and left some work undone. . .

--"Belief"⁹

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I've hoed,
And shout from where I am, "What is it?"
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,

Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

--"A Time To Talk"¹⁰

Companion peices such as these show the shared rural experiences and values of the two poets, as well as their common humanity. These examples also show how in his early verse Hearst used traditional verse forms and a casual tone reminiscent of Frost's work.

Hearst's later poems depart quite purposely from traditional forms such as Frost used. From 1933 on, under the acknowledged influence of Frost's supposed rivals Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters, Hearst experimented more and more liberally with free verse; this may account for Frost's only half-hearted praise of the Sun at Noon manuscript. Frost, who dismissed free verse as "playing tennis without a net,"¹¹ commented in his letter to Sloane: "Some of the poems I like very well. Maybe the book would gain by the elimination of the poems that echo Spoon River." Yet some of Hearst's later works too show important similarities in temperament to Frost's. In their prime, both poets developed a wry sense of irony and a complex attitude of toughness and sensitivity. The tone of Hearst's 1958 poem "Success," for example, closely resembles that of Frost's "After Apple-Picking":

I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
--"After Apple-Picking"¹²

I find I've traded even, farm for sweat . .
I read on the tax receipts the land is mine.
--"Success"¹³

The subtle attitude of Hearst's 1976 poem "Dirge for an Old Wound" recalls "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things":

The house had gone to bring again
To the midnight sky a sunset glow.
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood,
Like a pistil after the petals go.

The barn opposed across the way,
That would have joined the house in flame

Had it been the will of the wind, was left
To bear forsaken the place's name.

No more it opened with all one end
For teams that came by the stony road
To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs
And brush the mow with the summer load.

The birds that came to it through the air
At broken windows flew out and in,
Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm,
And the fencepost carried a strand of wire.

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.¹⁴

Interestingly, those "versed in country things"--as opposed to the "we" of the fourth stanza--cannot avoid dwelling "on what has been"; that would be inhuman, if not impossible. Rather, they do not dwell "too much" on past tragedies, as if trying to strike a difficult balance between grief and survival. Hearst's poem, though different in style, carries the same theme:

If too much attention to pain
neglects the morning of a new day
better let the inner man bleed
than bind up an old wound when
there is work to be done.¹⁵

But despite a common ground of tone, sensibility, and subject matter, a sharp

contrast runs through the whole of both men's work. In relation to the reader, Frost seems detached and abstract, and sometimes a bit presumptuous:

... the sign we sign
for too much dwelling on what has been. . .

... the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.¹⁶

... there is a time to talk.

Hearst takes a personal tone and persuasive approach, lacking some of the sense of universality in Frost's work:

... better let the inner man bleed . . .
when there is work to be done.
I'm greater for holding one fruit in my hand
than a heaven of stars in my eye.¹⁷

We should stand often against the sun . . .
[for the time] of forever we spend alone.¹⁸

Horace Gregory, among his other praise of Hearst's Country Men poems, wrote to Ferner Nuhn that Hearst seemed to be:

... a Robert Frost of the Middlewest who is not
influenced by Robert in the least which is a tribute
to his own integrity and makes him fit to stand up
against Robert on equal ground.¹⁹

Whatever their similarities and differences as men and as poets, Frost and Hearst were both part of a larger movement in American poetry, sharing with Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and others such as William Carlos Williams the goal that Wordsworth set forth for his own time and place:

The principal object . . . was to choose incidents and
situations from common life, and to . . . describe them . . .
in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the
same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination,

... and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them ... the primary laws of our nature ...²⁰

In adapting this purpose to twentieth-century America, Frost used exclusively traditional forms and the voice of the Yankee rustic. Hearst would take the very different voice of the Midwestern farmer and break away from the conservative models of form such as Frost provided.

Thus Hearst, at near-middle age, was beginning to break old habits of writing. In other important areas of his life as well, he was preparing to open himself to new possibilities--possibilities that would be realized in disappointment and fulfillment.

NOTES

1. in a letter, dated August 5, 1933, in the James Hearst Papers at the University of Northern Iowa.
2. in a letter, dated March 3, 1939, in the James Hearst Papers at the University of Northern Iowa.
3. in a personal interview with the author, October 19, 1980, at Cedar Falls, Iowa.
4. quoted by James Hearst in a personal interview with the author, May 31, 1980, at Cedar Falls.
5. from a personal interview of James Hearst by the author, May 31, 1980, at Cedar Falls.
6. in a letter to Kathleen Morrison, dated August 21, 1941, copy in the James Hearst Papers at the University of Northern Iowa.
7. Lawrance Thompson, editor, Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1964), No. 389, pp. 499-500.
8. in a personal interview with the author, May 31, 1980, at Cedar Falls.
9. in Country Men (Muscatine, Iowa: The Prairie Press, 1937), p.14.
10. E.C. Lathem, editor, The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1969), p. 124.
11. quoted by James Hearst in a personal interview with the author, May 31, 1980, at Cedar Falls.
12. Robert Frost, p. 69.
13. in Limited View (Iowa City: The Prairie Press, 1962), No. 3.
14. Robert Frost, pp. 241-242.
15. in Snake in the Strawberries (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1979), p. 68.
16. "Mowing," in Robert Frost, p. 17.

17. "The Reason for Stars," in *Country Men*, p. 44.
18. "Belief," in *Country Men*, p. 14.
19. in a letter dated March 28, 1924, in the James Hearst Papers at the University of Northern Iowa.
20. in Stilling, editor, *Selected Poems and Prefaces* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965), pp. 445-448. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," 1798.