

The Robert E. Gard

READER

To Change the Face of America
From writings by Robert E. Gard

Part 1: Robert E. Gard, Community Arts Developer

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PART I

ROBERT E. GARD

Community Arts Developer

I was pondering once again the development of the community for the arts. I knew that the development of a community attitude friendly toward the arts was a Herculean task that must be faced. Finding ways to accomplish the task was a search that had underscored many of the experiments I had tried and one that had made me understand that the entire community must develop attitudes friendly to culture, especially drama.... The drama...should be the formulation of this spiritual core in life and should be expressive as only art can be of the deep answers in common men to the perennial threat of disaster, human dissolution, and community disintegration.... The people must see the arts as one means through which such answers can be obtained.... The ideas which have become apparent through the efforts of the American pioneers in the movement for a grassroots theater and allied arts must be spread more thoroughly back to the people.... Here on Sugar Bush Hill the wind blows hard. The forest lands stretch away and away as far as I can see. But beyond the forests there are the farms, the towns, the cities of Wisconsin, and beyond and around Wisconsin is all America waiting for the spreading back of the grassroots arts idea.

from Grassroots Theater

IF I AM LONELY IN WISCONSIN

FROM *Wisconsin Sketches*

If I am lonely in Wisconsin
It is never the fault of the people
For my friends are in every town.

I have journeyed
Through thirty years of restless movement
To visit Wisconsin places.

I have gone often in the cause of art
To meet artists or writers
Or to share a community play.

The art with the most blood is in the people—
No elitist I, nor have I ever been—
It is the grassroots where the essence of art
Most joyously flourishes.

I attach art to the well-being of America,
For I have seen farmers happily writing poems,
And whole communities participating
In music and drama.

How can a nation be weak
With those dedicated to art
Counted by millions in country and city places?

If I am lonely in Wisconsin it is not because
No one has said come here
Be with us today.

Yet in loneliness I have watched as on a high crag
Waiting a vast upspringing of people
In behalf of art.

A lonely nightwatcher sensing loneliness;
Yet is my loneliness of love.

I have been with you for an hour or a day
In joy with your joy
Accepting art in your country places.

In tears and laughter I have watched the people
Yet I have known what loneliness was
Because I desired the same joy
For all America.

John Curry from Kansas
Brought his art to Wisconsin
Inspiring country artists;

And Aaron Bohrod when Curry had gone
Went as I did to the towns
Speaking to the people about their art.
Of such concern was a great university the mother.

But if I am lonely it is more
Of the mood of the land.
It is loneliness of wild roadways
And the silence of those
Who were here long ago.

Of the people I am filled with joy and doubt
And wonder. Of the hills I am only a part
In their blue mystery.

I hear echoes through stone.
My loneliness is more the loneliness



*My spirit
responds to
rain and wind,*

*And to snow
falling in
silent wood...*

Of wanting to know, to become,
To be a part of.

My spirit responds to rain and wind,
And to snow falling in silent woods;
Of birdsfoot violets on sandy hillsides,
And of orange puccoon and small buttercups.
My loneliness is not of people,
For the people are growing in art.
My loneliness is more of small weedgrown graveyards,
And forgotten aspiring men and women.

Where are those to whom the old graves
Belong?

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

FROM *Arts in the Small Community*

America is coming of age. Note the many changing aspects of America.

A maturing America means a nation conscious of its arts among all its people.

Communities east, west, north, and south are searching for ways to make community life more attractive.

The arts are at the very center of community development in this time of change... change for the better.

The frontier and all that it once meant in economic development and in the sheer necessity of building a nation is being replaced by the frontier of the arts. In no other way can Americans so well express the core and blood of their democracy; for in the communities lies the final test of the acceptance of the arts as a necessity of everyday life.

In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy, or for the well-endowed museum, the gallery, or the ever-subsidized regional professional theatre. As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and in the places where the people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves.

The springs of the American spirit are at the grass roots. Opportunities must exist in places where they never have existed before. A consciousness of the people, a knowledge of their power to generate and nourish art, and a provision of ways in which they may do so are essential for our time.

If we are seeking in America, let it be a seeking for the reality of democracy in art. Let art begin at home, and let it spread through the children and their parents, and through the schools, the institutions, and through government.

And let us start by acceptance, not negation—acceptance that the arts are important everywhere, and that they can exist and flourish in small places as well as in large; with money, or without, according to the will of the people. Let us put firmly and permanently aside as a cliché of an expired moment in time that art is a frill. Let us accept the goodness of art where we are now, and expand its worth in the places where people live.

WHY AN ARTS PLAN?

FROM *Arts in the Small Community*

American history begins in small settlements, and crucial American values stem from them. Sixty million Americans now live in communities of 10,000 or less. These communities produce food and essential goods and services that cannot be adequately produced elsewhere since mining, lumbering, fishing, farming, and recreation require less-densely-populated areas. Small communities, in which the ideals and realities of American life are to be found, are a response to the general needs of the larger communities.

The small community provides more than it receives. Many young people flock to the great cities, poorly prepared to contribute to the cultural well being of the city and depleting their hometown of youthful energy and vigor. When, in turn, these same cities send back other people who are seeking new, vital, internal resources, the small community gladly provides welcome, but is subjected to strain and dislocation of its daily life. Some of the city dwellers who come to the rural areas are retired citizens; others are Americans of middle income who locate a second home in the country; and still others are the varied groups brought in by newly located industries.

These new occupancies not only place new demands upon the economy and public services of the small communities, but also put a strain on the cultural life. Consequently, as small communities undergo the depletion of cultural resources that results from their role as providers for American manufacturing and commerce; as they educate their young people only to see them located in cities; as older people remain or reside in these communities in their late years because of the lower cost of living and the more intimate social acceptance and recognition they receive as industry decentralizes; then the small community finds in arts development an important part of the answer to its new needs.

It is unimpressive to insist that the large cities, with their infuriated and burning ghettos, are but the tensions of the village subculture drawn large



American small communities... the heartland of our way of life.

upon the American scene, or that the village has always made war against enlightenment, spurning genius and stoning prophets. In fact, in that area of human anguish in which man recognizes that he can't go home again, he finds in the mythic properties of the rural village an ideal for life sustained to some extent by every small community. It is this ideal, crystallized and repristinated in accordance with contemporary art activity, that will provide new resource for all America.

The contribution of the small community to American life is immeasurable. The farmland, mountains, shore, and open spaces in relation to which American small communities are located, like the small communities themselves, are the heartland of our way of life. Because American literature depicts these home places, and American painters portray them, American localities are a part of the furniture of the human imagination throughout the world. It is our conviction that the development of high quality art activity in these communities may well lead to a new phase of renaissance in the arts.

Modern art activity can provide a new birth and new creative directions of usefulness for such a community. As art activity is developed, the community is re-created. The vital roots of every phase of life are touched. As the community is awakened to its opportunity in the arts, it becomes a laboratory through which the vision of the region is reformulated and extended. And as the small community discovers its role, as the small community generates freshness of

aesthetic response across the changing American scene, American art and life are enhanced.

Can the United States rediscover, cherish, and strengthen its small communities? Can we assign to small communities the important role deserved in the forthcoming renaissance in the arts? This plan is an answer to these questions.

WHAT IS AN ARTS COUNCIL?

FROM *Arts in the Small Community*

An arts council is a group of persons who care about the cultural life of the community and seek to express this concern by organizing to promote interest and activity in the arts.

We endorse...

The arts council organization was used in the Wisconsin test communities and proved effective. Since the method has been so successful, this national plan endorses the organization of an arts council as the effective way to develop arts in all communities.

Arts councils seek to foster an active concern for the community in enterprises dedicated to art, and seek to add arts dimensions to presently operating private and public agencies.

The ideal goal of the arts council movement is to create a society of qualitative excellence in which the resources of the nation may serve beneficial and creative purposes in community life through art.

The council is committed to a strategy beginning in minute corpuscles of community art interest, which are embodied in other organizations and activities as well as in art activity itself,

and affirms that art is basic to the general community good. This ideal of art enables the community to discover art and art to discover the community.

Art produces change. Councils acquainted with the traditions of art and traditions of their community are needed to mediate this change.

The concept is more than twenty-four years old; yet some six hundred recently formed American arts councils testify to its operational effectiveness.

Arts council organizations, no two of which are the same, are tailored to fit the need and opportunity of each community.

The council places art and artist in the mainstream of American life by equipping the largest number of people with active art interests.

The articulate neighborly sharing of excellence in art will interest leaders from every aspect of life. Some will join the arts council from community concern, others from general interest in the arts; still others from disciplined arts commitment.

Each type of leadership is important because the ideal of art, initiated from common experience, supports the ideal of art as America's common faith.

THE RIVER—THE SOURCE

FROM *Coming Home to Wisconsin*

From time to time I inhabit a kind of cave in Madison, Wisconsin, where I often retire to think, and to wonder. There are so many things nowadays to think and to wonder about. Science, astronomy, religion, have opened so many immense speculations; a simple faith has become most difficult to accept in view of the now-proven complexity of the universe; yet a simple faith might likely be the only stability I have against the grandeur of limitless space, of particles which somehow drifted through something like time toward intelligence... I find all that sort of speculation fascinating; but I suppose my thoughts are most ordinarily concerned with my adopted state, Wisconsin, where I have lived happily for nearly forty years. When I originally arrived in the early 1940s, folks often asked whether I was a native Wisconsinite, and when I said, “no,” they shook their heads sadly and said that I had really missed out, and that not being a Wisconsin native was something from which I could not expect to recover. But I did recover and adopted Wisconsin as my spiritual and physical home, and I have done my best through the writing of many books and through the conception of innumerable literary and cultural programs to recall and to preserve what I could of the history, heritage, and cultural image of this great Upper Middle Western state, so rich in lore and tradition, and human sensitivity. I believe this book has the central purpose of telling how and why I “came home to Wisconsin.”

Perhaps this story of a search and a mission that ended in Wisconsin must start in my boyhood, and at my boyhood home in Kansas; for the germinal sign of the search lies in the spirit of the prairie and all that the prairie has symbolized in a quest for meanings in my own life, and in the life of my state, Wisconsin.

There are two rivers involved here: the river of my youth and its flood of memory pouring out of my family whose roots were deep in the sod that lured

them west so long ago; and the river of my hope to unfold and make plain, at least to myself, the soul and spirit of a State which has become dear to me and to which I was swept by the youthful river. Always it seems, I am upon one river or the other; they meet at times, then they separate. They branch and merge eternally with past and present. There are rushes of memory and observation and savor.

I regard my cherishing of this flow of memory with awe and curiosity for everything that has happened is now observable by me through the spiritual window of a tiny office I occupy from time to time in Madison: a room at the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters which I temporarily adopted as my private place of seeing and telling. This sanctuary, which is apart from that more busy and sometimes frantic setting at the University of Wisconsin where I have labored for so many years is a sort of cave, private, mine for one year, to discover through its window, source and meaning.

Today, for example, because Dr. John Thomson, a noted botanist, has been at the Academy and we have been talking about prairie plants on which he and his wife, Olive, are authorities, I find that I am more and more intrigued and moved by the vestiges of the Wisconsin prairie and all that it meant in Wisconsin: primitive wildlife and new hope for settlers. I trace my emotion thereof to my boyhood where the prairie was a major theme of my young life. It grew more so as I further understood what the prairie represented. My father journeyed west from his boyhood home in Illinois because of the prairie and its indefinable call that moved so many young people. Perhaps it was the grass, and the images of the grass and the movement and freedom and openness which the grass and the fall time migration of birds, that motivated him.

I well know that the existing Wisconsin prairies are no longer worthy of an epic imagining. I realize that only relic prairies exist now of all the wide expanse that was once the southern Wisconsin prairie. Some prairie plants remain along old roads, at the edges of a wood; beside fields cultivated now for a hundred years there are some prairie plants; and along old railroads and, of course, where the prairie is being restored in a few places as preservation of something that once was very precious.

One of the great prairies of Wisconsin was the beautiful Empire Prairie of Fond du Lac County. How tragic that the reality of that prairie has vanished; all one can do is try with eyes closed to picture the land the way it was when the pioneers arrived. Into the wild, tall grass they came, and their tales of the fertile land, the swales, the hills with the rolling grass, give some idea of the way it was, and the way their spirits responded to the sense of bigness, the roll, the wildness.

There is little sense today of the joy of the arriving people. The older cemeteries throughout southern Wisconsin tell part of the story. Nathaniel Tallmadge was the best known of all the early Empire farmers. He was a York

State man, as many were in that part of the state, and the name of Empire they brought with them from New York. Tallmadge had served fourteen years as United States Senator from New York. When William Henry Harrison was nominated for President, Senator Tallmadge was offered the Vice Presidency. He declined. Perhaps he knew that more than political fame he wished to move to the great new West. Had he accepted the nomination he would have been President of the United States as Harrison died in office. At any rate, Tallmadge became interested in lands in Wisconsin, resigned from the Senate and was appointed governor of the Territory. He located a farm in the town of Empire; he spent the remainder of his life there and died in 1864. He was buried in the Reinze Cemetery, donated by him from his farm lands. The old Tallmadge farm is located in section nineteen; on the land today stands the St. Mary's High School.

I am very much moved by the whole prairie experience. I can imagine, almost as though I were there myself, the elation of the pioneers when they encountered the tall prairie grass. The whole experience has a special meaning for me, too, because I, in a way, am a product of the prairie encounter. I was raised in Kansas, of course, not in Wisconsin, but I think the experience of the prairie was very much the same. It is a temptation to relive, and my mood today is one of retrospect. I value the Academy experience because it affords me an opportunity to think back.

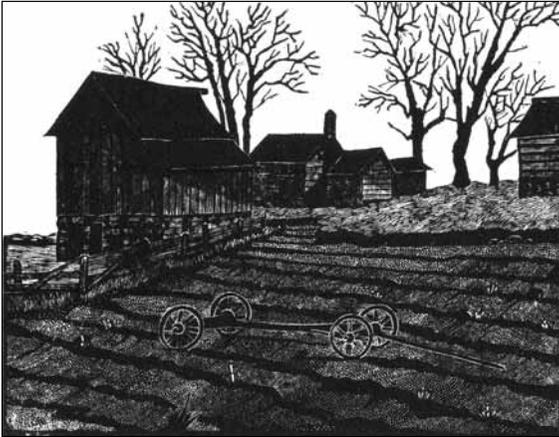
Retrospect can go anywhere your mind has ever been. My mind ranges often, and often far backward to all that I ever heard about my family, their roots, the countries from which they came. And beyond all frontiers, to a weak grasp of human history... all of man's comprehension can be confined, made real, for him, how ineptly he may speak or write of it, and meaning that seems pertinent, is another matter. I comprehend my own span, that's all I can safely say. From the moment of my birth, as I have heard of it, through the remembered days of my childhood, to now, through a devious way, forwards and backwards in the shadows of time always along my two rivers this is what I do often, searching the kernels of events that happened, that shaped my thought, that made me what I became eventually.

My regrets now, if I may speak of regrets, are those relating to the recollections of members of my family who might have revealed secrets that I have not been able to uncover. Who, really, was great, great, great, grandfather? An absurd question, but not to me, not after twenty years spent in futile genealogical searches, trying to find out what happened in those years after the American Revolution when my ancestor migrated from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, then to western Ohio. Who was he? Often I have almost had his identity, then it eludes me.

But what pleasure in genealogical research! What fascinating hours looking

among old papers, obscure books, in written accounts in old Bibles... the clue, looked for in courthouses among ancient deeds, land records, the pale ink that recorded old births and deaths. The hours of excitement of the search for family, for identity, for knowing who and of what you are!

Perhaps my father might have told me. But then, when I was young and careless of such things, I didn't ask. He never said. How can we be so blind?



*“When I seek to
rediscover the
Wisconsin prairie
I seek to rediscover
my own soul.”*

Now, for forty years he is dead. I could have asked him how it was when he was a boy in eastern Illinois, and about his father, whom I never knew. Grandfather Jacob Gard died in 1906, before my birth. I might have asked him about things which I have since discovered, that grandfather lived in a part of eastern Illinois where there were many Southern sympathizers; how he was fired upon by Copperheads in the woods because he expressed deep sentiments in favor of the Union, and how he joined the Illinois infantry... perhaps to escape being slaughtered from ambush... Ah yes, and I remember grandfather's medals which grandmother Mary Gard prized in her room at our house in Kansas; the medals I, a little boy interested only in the shape of the metal, in faded ribbon... not until I was nearly fifty, in a library at Madison, did I come to know what grandfather did in the Civil War. There I found the record of his regiment in the muster rolls of Illinois soldiers. And my letter to the National Archives in Washington brought me documents of his enlistment, his discharge, his pension. But I never asked my father about these things, and between us the book remained closed forever and forever.

The strange ways of a father and a son. Mysterious, obscure. How do they find their way to each other through time? Through time when the barrier of youth and age exists immutable between them? Family relationships are the things that make the most difference in our lives, no doubt, but when are we ready to comprehend?

I understand, somehow, that my Wisconsin experience is not complete, and my view of the place I live and love now is not complete without exploring how and why I am here. And the Prairie is very real to me. I recognize the Latin names of some Wisconsin prairie plants and I have learned how to look for the vestiges of the prairie when it lay virgin among clumps of oaks. And I wonder why I bother? Why is it all so dear? And then, as a novelist, or a playwright, I know why, of course, for all character is sourced in the past.

The prairie indeed has a dark and hidden vision. When I seek to rediscover the Wisconsin prairie I seek to rediscover my own soul. Suddenly as my fingers lie idle on typewriter keys, my mind plunges into the depths of my own span. I was a lad of eighteen, and in a certain darkness after midnight on a June night in the 1930s I was asleep in my room in our tall, narrow, Kansas farmhouse, and I was awakened by my mother who placed her hand nervously upon my shoulder and propelled me awake. I felt her hand very hard, desperate, shaking me and she was saying, "Bobby, wake up. Dad hasn't been here all night. I'm sick with worrying."

It took me awhile to get enough awake to figure out where I was and who it was shaking me; and then I heard what she was saying, and I began to feel scared. She kept shaking and talking, "He's been gone since supertime. Get up, please Bobby, go out and look for him."

"Now? What time is it?"

"It's about two."

"My gosh, he'll come back, won't he?"

"I don't know. Please."

"He shouldn't go off alone like that."

"I guess he's sick. Hurry, Bobby."

"You got any idea where he went?"

"Well, probably over toward the Neosho River."

"That's where he usually goes. You know that."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I'll try to find him."

"He might be hurt."

"I doubt it. He's always messing around over there. I'll go, though."

I got up, not hurrying, but feeling uneasy. I knew there wasn't any reason for it, but I began to get images of him lying out somewhere in a field, hurt or dead, maybe, and how I would feel and what I'd do if I did find him. I saw the

whole picture all the way through; stumbling over the body, seeing that he was dead, maybe, if I could really tell; then running as fast as I could back to the house to tell my mother. Then the calls for help, the lanterns lighted and carried by hurrying neighbors, and all of us running and muttering to each other while my mother stayed at home with a neighbor woman or two looking out after us from the back porch, crying for us to hurry...

I pulled on my overalls and blue shirt, fumbling for the buttons. The upstairs hallway light was on, but my mother hadn't turned on any light in my room, and I had to search for my heavy shoes back under the bed. I laced them up, and stood, ready to go, but not feeling much like it, except that the urgency of my mother now standing in the doorway made me hurry a little.

"Do you want to carry a lantern, Bobby?"

"No. It'd just be in the way."

"Be careful, don't *you* get hurt."

"Nothing to hurt me, and don't worry about him, either."

The old house was so tall and narrow that the stairs seemed to go straight up. As I stumbled down them, feeling for the wall on one side and the rail on the other as I'd done ever since I was big enough to go up and down by myself, I was reminded of the game I played when I was little—seeing how many steps I could jump down from the top. But tonight my mother followed me anxiously. I went through the downstairs hall, through the dining room and the kitchen and out onto the back porch. It was screened in and the screen door always squeaked when it was pushed open as I did it now, and I went down the three steps, the bottom one loose, and stepped onto the flagstone walk that was laid to the barn.

The night sky was clear, there wasn't any moon, but in the early morning, before dawn in Kansas, there is a night light in the open sky that illuminates the fields. Eastern Kansas is a land of wind and rolls of small hills, and creeks and slow rivers. It was open prairie land once, but no longer, and on about every side around our part, there were cornfields running right up close to many farmhouses. And there was a cornfield behind our barn.

I went through the gate and across the barnyard, smelling the manure, and saw that the work team, Jack and Pet, were over in a corner of the yard. I could hardly see them; they were there, faint against the starlight, but it was comforting to know that the horses were near. Friendly horses are comforting in the night, especially if you know them as well as I knew those two. I thought for a moment of putting a bridle on Pet and riding her bareback out to look for him, but then I decided I wouldn't, because there were fence gates to open and it'd take more time and she'd be a trouble, actually, in getting through the corn.

I cut across the edge of the cornfield, trying to not step on the new corn too much. It was coming up good, and would be indeed knee-high or better by the Fourth. It was due to be cultivated soon.

Beyond the cornfield there was the railroad track with tight barbed wire fences on both sides of the right-of-way. I knew where to get through the fence, where we'd worn a place under it, and I slid down this little hollow under the fence and down the embankment. I crossed the Santa Fe track, the rails glistening and going away, away, north toward the town of Iola and south through Humbolt to Chanute and Independence, and on down to Tulsa. I'd never been down that far and someday I thought I would set out to walk down the track, maybe catching onto a freight train as it came past, and riding some and walking some, clear down to Tulsa, and maybe clear on down to Texas. I had never been away from home for any time and felt the urge to go, to leave, and had a funny kind of thrilling feeling in my guts when I thought of myself all alone, walking on the railroad, or maybe out on the high road, just ambling from place to place, not caring, free and easy, just me to worry about. Not like now, with a worry on me and the uneasiness of my mother driving me, and I not knowing what to expect.

It isn't easy to find somebody in the real early morning hours; not out in a country of cornfields and pastures and small ravines and woods and rocks. It isn't easy to know where a person will go alone in those hours; but I knew something about how a certain person would go and where, especially if the person is your father and if you like him real well, and if you are worried about him, too, no matter what you have told your mother. Your father hasn't been acting just normal lately, maybe, and he has done some strange things like sit at the dining table and not say anything at all during a whole meal, and this is strange because he has been very talkative the times you sat with him at the table. He has sat there staring at nothing special, eating a few mouthfuls and then he cries out, "Damn it, God damn it," and this isn't like him, because he has always been very considerate of Mom. He wouldn't ever let a hired man swear in front of her. She was so particular about the name of God, the way all of the Baptists were in that part of the country about swearing. But here he was shouting the name of God right out and looking as if God had done a bad thing to him. It was shocking and I couldn't forget it, really, though it was buried down inside me somewhere. But here I was in the night walking out across the fields looking for him, and I was really scared. I know my mother was thinking that he had lost his mind or something, though she had said so often that there had never been a breath of insanity on either side of the family.

By the time I had crossed the little creek that never had much water except in flood time, and had crossed the pasture where our cows were still resting... I almost stumbled onto them in the dark and one rose, I guess it was Anabell, as Dad called her, big, red-spotted, and she gave out a loud grunt when she got up. I circled around the herd and went through a grove of trees that was near our south line fence and went off across the big alfalfa field. There was heavy dew

on the alfalfa, and I felt the wetness sopping my overalls and seeping through my shoes. It wasn't cold at all, just wet, and I never had paid any attention to wetness really. I just took wetness and dryness and temperature as they came, and the way I felt about feeling things like that, was part of the way I felt about everything... not caring, just going along. But now I did hurry, because it was as if something was driving me beyond my mother's fear and my own uneasiness.

I started to trot, keeping close to the line fence, and I guessed I would follow it along until it got close to the river, and then I would turn north, because that was one way that he did like to walk sometimes. There was an old burying ground over that way near the river, and the grass in there was pretty high. I never did understand why he liked to go over that way, but it was a favorite hike of his, and one on which he hardly ever took anybody else along. It might be where he was now, I didn't know, and if he was dead or something, then I figured that he might be in there in the tall grass among the old graves that had been there ever since the country was settled back in the 1850s and 60s. One thing that Dad liked to do was talk about that old graveyard, and he could sure interest me in it when he told how it seemed to him. Dad had something special in him, that was sure. When he got to talking it was really something, and neighbors of ours who heard him talk about earlier times and about some of his ideas said they'd never heard anything like it.

Dad was self-educated. Maybe, all added up, he had the equivalent of a high school education, and he was a member of the Kansas Bar and practiced law as well as farming. He used to say that he didn't get much schooling in Illinois after the Civil War. But he had all the words he needed to say whatever he wanted to say, and he read anything that was good: he had a set of the *Encyclopedia Americana* that he had read from Volume One on and just kept reading and studying it, and there was something else he had, that my mother said was like he was gifted with poetry or something. She said he was like a wind-harp that could play any kind of music that the wind decided. But you know it's not easy to live with somebody like that.

Every now and then as I moved along through the wet grass I yelled out for him, but I didn't get any answer, and my voice sounded loud and strange in the silent early morning. The birds weren't even awake, and there just wasn't any sound at all as I stood every once in a while and listened. I thought I might hear him coming, or walking, through the grass, the way shoes sound in grass when it is wet, a soft shushh-shushh, but I didn't hear that sound at all.

I turned north and went across a plowed field that had some hickory trees and oaks growing around the edge. It was over at the far edge of this plot that the old burying ground and the long grass was, and I headed for there. I hadn't been that way for a long while—the place was kind of eerie, actually. It sat all alone at the far edge of the plowed ground, a little island there, just some-

thing left over; but I had to go now, that was sure. I kept calling and getting no answer; but as I got closer to the tall grass I thought I saw a little flicker of light and I hurried up a little, running now, breathing hard, stumbling along over the rough earth. What I saw might have been just my imagination, because I wanted so much to see a sign of Dad. It could even have been a flicker of a will-o-the-wisp that I had heard him tell about so often.

But when I got near to the grass and came up to the edge, I could see that there was indeed light shining out from the middle of the plot. My heart started to beat really fast, because I was sure, then, that I would find Dad in there and that he would be dead or something. So I called "Hey, Dad, Dad," and pushed into the grass.

He was there all right. He was lying back, his head on a piece of old log, and he was sprawled out, his legs and feet stretched wide, lying back with the lantern beside him. And he didn't say anything when I came up beside him. I did, though. "Hey, you got Mom really worried. Why'd you stay out here all night?"

"I was told to come out here."

"Who told you? Who *could* tell you?"

"All of them."

He was getting old, you could see that. In the yellow light of the kerosene lantern his face looked thin and his body seemed very small and tired. He lay there with his hat back from his forehead. I was really worried now, because I thought sure that he was sick, or had lost his mind, and I didn't know what to do or say. It would be bad enough if this was somebody you didn't know at all, but to be confronted with such behavior suddenly, in your own father, who had always seemed so interesting and ahead of other people... that is hard.

"I heard you yelling." He whispered.

"Why didn't you answer?"

"I didn't want to spoil it."

"Spoil what?"

"Why, all this. And it's a good thing you came to find me. Because, boy, you are the last of the wandering Gards. It has to be up to you, boy."

"What has to be up to me?" I asked nervously.

"You'll find out."

"Come on back home with me."

"Sit down. I've got to talk. Your mother thinks I'm running out of time; or that I'm crazy, maybe. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Nope. But you've been acting awful funny."

"Is it funny, boy, to see the way things are?"

"I don't follow you, Dad."

"Sit over here. Here, sit down on this log. You and I always been pretty good friends, haven't we?"

“I guess.”

“And we’ve reached a time when things have to be evened out... when the Gards have run out of time. Not just me. All of us. All of us Gards. We moved west joint by joint, we just kept pressin’ on and on, and all of us had something we saw that we had to have. And now we’ve come to the end.”

“To the end of what?”

“To this land here. To this grass. This tall grass here. So tall you couldn’t see me, or hardly see my lantern. Look how this grass sets here in the middle of the land ready for growing. Everything’s gone. All that I saw here is gone. Do you know what I’m talking about, boy?”

“Not really.”

“I’m seventy-two years old. You’re young. Nobody else had the vision. But you got to have it. You are all the chance I got left.”

I unhinged myself down beside him on an end of the log. I knew we ought to be getting back to the house; that Mom would be worrying sick, that she would think that both of us had got into trouble, or hurt. I felt nervous, and the wind had come up a little bit and I heard the wind in the trees that weren’t far away.

“Let’s go home.”

“Nope. Not yet. What I’ve got to say might be the most important thing I ever said. Because you are my blood, boy. You are my chosen messenger, the one who can save my dreams for me.”

He reached over and took hold of my ankle. I felt his hand, very strong, an old man’s strong hand shaped by years of labor. It was the first time he had ever really touched me that I could recall. We Gards were never folks who touched and showed our affection for each other that way. But he held onto my ankle, like the claws of an eagle I thought. He pulled on my ankle and my leg, and sat up, scraping his heels into the grass in front of the log. He kept hold of my ankle, squeezing harder, and I let him do it; it was a strange sensation being held so hard by my father, and he used my leg to pull himself over so he could get his feet under him. He rose, very stiffly, letting me go as he stood. The grass in there was about shoulder high, very coarse prairie grass, and we couldn’t see much in the dark, though by that time the sky was just beginning to lighten. He looked like a dark shadow in the wavering grass and in the dim lantern glow, for he left the lantern sitting on the ground. He took hold of my arm when he got straightened up, and I stood up too. He pulled me beside him and started to move out through the grass.

“Come here. I want to show you.”

“Mom’ll be excited. We ought to be going.”

“She’s waited and waited for me. She’ll wait some more. She isn’t like me, boy. Her family isn’t like mine. Hers is religious. They put a lot of store by God

and how he tells them what to do. The Gards ain't that way. We go by God, but we go the way we got the strength to go. The way the wind goes; the way the clouds go. Come over here."

He pulled me along with him to the edge of the prairie. At the edge of the grass he stopped. The edge of the unbroken grass was higher than the plowed ground. We couldn't see very far out into the field, just a little way, but you could feel and tell that there were two different things: the prairie and the plowed ground, and I began to get a feeling that we were really all alone out there, and that maybe we wouldn't be able to get away. He kept holding my arm, harder now, and I thought of his hands, the way a man's hands get as he grows old, when you feel the hard bones and the muscles. My arm ached, but he didn't let up.

And strangely, he began to put into words what I was feeling before about being alone, unable to leave.

"We been cast up here," he said. "Cast up on this shore. This is an island in the whole ocean, and we are castaways, you and me, boy. No ship brought us here, but our wandering selves brought us here. This is the island of the Gards. And the Gards made the ocean, too."

I kind of knew what he meant. He'd told me many times when we were sitting out in the yard on a Sunday afternoon, and Mom had made a big pitcher of lemonade and Dad was sitting in his old wicker rocker that Mom had bought at the 1893 World's Fair at Chicago... I'd heard him tell plenty of times how the land was when he came out to Kansas in the 1880s... all prairie grass, hardly any plow broken, and the prairie flowers and plants all growing. Mom said Dad should have been a poet or a writer or something, and she couldn't see how he had got the talent to talk like he did; because there had never been a poet or a writer in the Gards as far as she knew. But now he just kept holding me, and he began to talk like he did out in the yard; but this time I seemed to be a real part of it.

"You know, boy, we saved this prairie grass here in the old burying ground, because we never wanted to disturb these graves. I don't know who these people are who're buried here. They were buried long before I came. But when the plow was turning the new sod, and the roots were breaking, when they drove the teams up to this part here they always stopped. Never broke this. Broke all the rest, and year after year we grew crops. Now this is all there is left, and the dream of the Gards is ended. You see why I come out here in the night and stay all night while your mother stays up at the house and worries about me? You see why I do it?"

"Not really. You ought to go home; you might get sick out here."

"Boy, it ain't sickness that is worrying me. Your mother wouldn't know. But I am worried about the death of dreams and the death of a country. I'm out here

in the night because this is all there is left.”

He stood for a moment; and with his left hand he grabbed at some of the prairie grass and jerked it loose. He held the grass over against me, so I could feel it and smell it. It had a dew-grass-acid smell, sort of pleasant.

“Here, take the grass. Ball it up, roll it around, tear it apart. Put it in your mouth, taste it. Chew on it.”

I tried to do what he said, getting more nervous all the time because what I wanted him to do was go home with me across the fields over to the house. I wanted to get him inside, into bed so Mom could watch out for him; and what I really wanted, I guess, was to get rid of the responsibility of him. But he wasn't going. I put a blade of the grass into my mouth and chewed on it. The juice was a taste I knew because I often grabbed spears of grass when I was walking along a fence or railroad and put them in my mouth. The taste always made me think of spring, somewhere about May, when everything is blooming in the fields in Kansas, and the new grasses are well up. There's a taste and spirit about fields and woods, and tastes of greens you can cook, and dandelions out in the yard, and meadow flowers and wild onions... all that came to me as I chewed on the prairie grass that night with Dad holding onto my arm.

“Now you *look*,” he said, “this grass here, this old burying ground that I have kept for you, boy, nobody else; this piece, this acre or so... this is not of our time, neither yours nor mine. It belongs to itself: the wild, the grasses, the roots, the fermenting soils; the wild things, the bugs, the people who used to live here... they all own this grass. I don't own it, and you don't own it. And look, how these grasses have browned and brittleed in the fall, and laid rotting under the snows. Look how the new shoots of the grasses push up in the spring out of the rot, and their roots are down in the rot, but the grasses taste sweet. You got to know how to listen. How to listen, boy.”

He stopped talking and I was afraid to answer him right then, for fear I would start him going again, and we had to get home.

“Listen to the wind,” he said. “Listen to how she breathes out, over the long grass; listen to how it is in August when she swirls out the corn leaves all over and across the field and rasps them together and roughens up across you as you walk in the tall corn at night. Feel the wind file the corn leaves against your cheek, boy, you felt *that*, and so have I, and listen to the sound of the wind in the August corn. Listen to the wind the way she whirls up the dust along the road and settles it down over the hedge rows, and how she sways the sunflowers in the fallow field and lightens up their yellow with white dust. You got to know how to listen to the wind in these tall grasses, and how it stirs up the grasses outside you and inside, too, and breathes the day, and the sunup and the evening. You got to know how to listen to the shadow of the past, and to the way this prairie grass was left here... all alone, a little prairie strip of all that was, and

all that was hoped for; for there isn't anything in what a man can remember that can't be listened to."

He was talking about the same way he talked on Sundays to Mom and me out in the yard; or to neighbors if they happened to come by. I was kind of cold now, I hadn't worn any jacket, just my work shirt with sleeves rolled up, and I shivered a little in his grasp. I guess he felt me shiver; he pulled me around to face him. He wasn't near as tall as I was, but he was a little bit heavier, sturdier built than I. I was a lot taller all right but I wasn't near as strong as he. Even now when he was old, I could feel the strength of him coming down into his hand. He came around a little now and looked me more directly in the face. I saw his face dimly, but it was sharp, like a hawk's bill, I thought, because he seemed so tense and eager, like a bird coming down out of the sky. It was when he was talking about the prairie and the way things were that he got tight and kind of desperate.

"I was there in the night, and the tall grasses were everywhere, weaving the wind, and I walked out into it, just me, alone, feeling something I never felt before, like this was the beginning of the world. The Creation. The Genesis. And like I was God himself, mastering over all, calling on all. My voice heard above the wind and up to the clouds. And I was young. Young. And I had come out seeking, searching, like my father and his father, never stopping, ever searching on and on. And I found the tall grasses—the roots of man and the roots of grass are all the same, and both of them require freedom to live and to be."

I felt like I was in some kind of a crazy play, and that I was playing one of the parts whether I wanted to or not. I tried to get away, but Dad was awfully strong, and I couldn't break his hold. He kept saying, "Don't spoil it, boy. Let it be. I want to show you how it was."

"We haven't got time. We got to go home."

"We'll go soon. I got to show you this, then I have something to ask you."

"What?"

As he spoke the words came out like little poems, and I remembered the time when my older sister was in high school and had to give a little talk about how the southeastern Kansas country looked in the days when the settlers came into it. She told her English teacher what Dad said and the teacher made her ask him to come to the school and give a little talk to the students about the early days. My sister didn't much want him to come, because she was afraid that he wouldn't change his clothes, and might shame her, I guess, but he did clean up real good after the morning chores were finished and went up to school and came right into the classroom and sat down in a back seat until the teacher asked him to come up to the front and talk. Mom heard all about it from the teacher, because my sister never did get it so she could tell what happened. But the teacher called up Mom on the telephone and said that Dad was the greatest



...it was a happy sound to me, like a million fiddle strings snapping; the cut of the blade of the plow, and the slow strength of the horses.

poet she ever heard, and that Walt Whitman never made any better poems than Dad did as he was talking to the students. Mom tried to get him to tell what he said but he never would and the students, like my sister, never could describe it either. But I guess he was pretty wild when he was talking.

“God, boy,” he suddenly continued, “you never held the handles of a sodbreaker. You never had the experience, as I did, of hearing the roots of the sod cutting and breaking; then it was a happy sound to me, like a million fiddle strings snapping; the cut of the blade of the plow, and the slow strength of the horses. Look, boy, get hold of the plow handles!”

He made me lean and take hold of imaginary plow handles, and he yelled, “Hey! Gitup!” to imaginary horses, and I swear I felt something in my hands and arms, the power of a plow cutting through sod, the grasses bending over and breaking down; the turning under, the fall of the heavy strips of *cut* roots and grass. I felt it, and as he yelled at the horses, I was there in the old days with him, walking along behind the plow. I felt unreal and foolish, too, and I couldn’t get completely into the game he was playing with himself and with me. I knew it was a game and I think he knew it was a game, too, but somehow he

was living over his life.

We came to the edge of the grass and he stopped, and forgot the game and the imaginary horses all at once. He took hold of my hand.

“Boy, you’ve got to help me. I raised you up to understand. It’s the time for you to go seeking as I did. You never yet met the Stranger, and you never felt the roots and the body of the grass as I did. And I broke all the sod that I could get that was mine. It’s gone. The tall grass is gone, and you ain’t going to find that. But you got to find something. There’s something out there that is like the grass was to me. I come searching for it. And you got to find out what they left in place of the grass, because I am an old man and I have to know before I die. I can’t go, because I have no youth left in me. But you go. You go and find and tell me what it is that you are searching for. I got this feeling so deep and bitter. You go, boy. You go searching and find a Stranger in the grass like I did; unless you do, boy, my life is over and all that I found in the middle of the grass is nothing. All the Gards will be dead. You go. Go, boy go.”

“Where do you want me to go?”

He grabbed me hard by the arm. “Say you’ll go.”

I wanted to humor him, and I didn’t have any idea what he wanted me to do. He said he wanted me to go somewhere, nowhere, where there was a stranger, whoever *that* was, standing in the middle of a big field of prairie grass. He had never mentioned a stranger before. I guessed that in his mind he could go anywhere or do anything. There wasn’t any limit. But I was different. I couldn’t talk like he could, and make everything seem like a story or a play. I couldn’t do any of that and hadn’t. And I didn’t want to go wandering away without knowing where I was headed. The Depression was a tough time to go anywhere, anyhow. All the tramps and hobos that were drifting through the country, and you could see them anytime as you stood along the Santa Fe track, riding in the coal cars, or maybe on top of the box cars. Dad just expected me to start going, looking for some more prairie grass that wasn’t out there anymore. Well, I wasn’t going to do it. But I said, “Oh, sure I’ll go. I’ll go if you’ll come home with me. Mom’ll be crazy with worry.”

“When will you leave?”

“Oh, I don’t know, soon.”

“Tomorrow.”

“I can’t tomorrow. But soon, I promise if you’ll come home.”

“Go tomorrow if you can,” Dad said. “Go tomorrow if you can, boy. You got a long ways to go.”

He let go of my arm and walked into the grass to get his lantern. The light wavered and dimmed and then got strong again as he lifted the lantern above the grass and turned up the wick. The light was growing in the sky, and the morning Kansas wind was rising. The grass lay bent over, combed out by the

wind, and I shivered in the early morning coolness. I couldn't make a thing out of what had happened. I just had the feeling that something tremendous had happened to me, and I wanted to get home. And as far as going away was concerned, I would forget about that, because I was sure that he would forget it... after he'd had a good rest, and we'd let him sleep in the morning. I would do all the chores myself, and maybe Mom would help some. But I wasn't going anyplace, no matter what. He was an old man and talked a lot, and needed to calm down, from what, I didn't know. I knew that he was excited and that he figured something had gone sour with his world, and that there wasn't any more wild prairie... that much I understood; but I was awfully tired.

He took hold of my arm as we started across the plowed field. "You got an awful lot to do to get ready to go," he said.

FEELING FOR PLACES

FROM *Grassroots Theater*

I know that a great deal of the joy I have felt as a worker in back-country American theater has sprung from my feeling for places. My father loved our part of eastern Kansas and perhaps transmitted to me his intimate knowledge of towns and prairies. Or it may have been my early association with things on and about our Kansas farm that has made a search for the flavorings of America one of my greatest pleasures.

There was our local river, for instance, the Neosho. The Indians called it that; it means rapidly rising water. In flood time it would reach out across all the lowlands, and from our upstairs windows the whole north and west would be a great brown sheet in the morning light. On the Santa Fe railroad tracks that cut east of the river the folks would sometimes gather to watch the flood water rise or to just silently watch the young corn leaves swirl around in the rapid water and come loose from their rootings. On the bridge where the Missouri Pacific crossed the river there would usually be a crowd of white and negro boys with fish lines, hoping to drag in a mud catfish. About once a year a boy would slip off the bridge and into the muddy water and would be sucked down and lost. Then the whistles at the water works would blow, and a search would go on into the night until the body was pulled out—usually down below where the river made a sharp bend. And when the flood receded the corn stalks would be lying flat against the earth, frayed and brown, and the whole earth would give off a musty smell, and cracks would begin to grow until the earth was a pattern of twisty brown cracks.

It seemed to me that the men of our town and countryside were shaped by the river and that the river knew and held their destinies. It crushed at will and gave at will, too, because in good years corn grew in great, tall stalks in the bottoms, and the ears were often half as long as a man's arm. And in good years the women's faces were serene as they sang hymns in the kitchens while their

menfolk stood at nightfall leaning on pigpen fences listening to the soft grunting of hogs and thinking, perhaps, of the corn that would fatten the pigs.

There was the river, and there was the earth along the river all plow-broken except for a prairie acre or two where there was a tangled burying ground. I saw that our earth like our river shaped men's lives and that in dry years the earth whirled away from the roots of the corn and our neighbors' faces grew long and solemn and the women quit singing hymns in the kitchens and the men praised God in small voices with the edges of questions sticking out.

The river, the earth, the sky. In the sky at dusk the nighthawks swooped and boomed, crying as they crisscrossed the air, and after a hot day a coolness would come out of the ravine that ran down to the river—a coolness and a loneliness. There were sweet singers in the bottoms along the river and on the uplands too. They sang of Scotland and Holland and Ireland and of Illinois and Indiana. There were lips that could be kissed under the rustling corn leaves, and there was sweating work to be done in the heat of the day heaving the heavy alfalfa onto the hay racks and then pitching it off in long ricks.

My observations of the life around me were pure waves of sensation which beat against me and tossed me this way and that on billows of pleasure that had no other meaning. Good and evil were inextricably mixed, and I did not care to separate them. I sensed that the river was cruel, but when I slipped the saddle off my mare and shrugged off my clothing and swam the horse across the river in the early morning hours, the water, the smooth movement of the swimming horse, and my own careless appreciation were welded into a wordless poem. There were mists that rose from the lowlands and stimulated my night-time imagination, and I was a void, an opening, a space into which sensations poured in confusion.

Looking back, I can see how these things helped to give me a taste for the flavorings of places, but a taste for theater came my way through the purest chance. Certainly, my father gave me no leaning in that direction. He was a country lawyer, a Kansas pioneer who set great store by the economic development and welfare of the countryside, but he had little sympathy at all for cultural matters. To him the arts were participated in by women or the weaker members of society and had no real place in dynamic community development.

Though he was a self-made and almost completely self-educated man, he encouraged me to go to the University of Kansas where he hoped I would become interested in law or business. I disappointed him by floundering around for a couple of years with no noticeable inclination for a profession. The nearest I came to it was once during a visit to Kansas City, Missouri, when a handwriting expert at the YMCA told me that I had a modest amount of literary ability. I could attach no possible value to his judgment, and neither could father. So I wandered America for a while in the middle of my college career, just as many

other Americans were wandering and seeking during the early depression years. I returned to Kansas University for my junior year no nearer a career than I had been before but with a keen remembrance of people and places I had known and seen and a deep liking for a wandering life.

Now it happened that there was a professor of speech and drama at Kansas University named Allen Crafton. He was small physically, as men go, with bright blue eyes and a thin nose that looked as translucent as a mellow clarinet reed. But there was so much about him that was legendary tales spun by students which grew with the telling—that my characterization of him can afford to be extravagant and perhaps sound a bit like a legend.

Crafton was a pagan-god figure whose lips were stained with the juices of barefoot-tramped grapes. He had steel in his hands and art at his fingertips. He could paint a magnificent landscape or write a poem of mighty tone or of aching, small joys. He was capable of turning out—and did turn out—a novel in a week or a play in ten days. It didn't really matter that they were not published. He seldom tried the publishers.

Women tended to follow him like dogs, and good men shoved for a place at his side. He was regarded as a wit, a philosopher, a roarer of bawdy ballads, but he could be as sensitive as harp strings in a soft wind. He was a staunch friend, and he would fight for friends like a demon. He savored the unusual, but tolerated the usual and found it useful. He loved and was a judge of good liquor and good smoke, but he was grateful for inferior stuff if a poor man offered it to him. He lived the life of Everyman; yet he kept a personal integrity and was at once malleable and impregnable. He seemed to live a man's full lifetime every day. He rode the sun like a chariot. He had a quick mind capable of whipping out at sensation and fact and gathering them into a child's wondrous pattern of imaginative grace.

Crafton had imbibed the goodness of places. He had traveled to the far cities of the earth, and he spoke of them in their own fashion. He turned back the landscapes he viewed like the pages of a book, seeking the sights and sounds of old generations.

His friends said that Crafton was undoubtedly a genius but that he would perhaps die unsullied and unknown. So there is poetic truth in all that I have written about him. And it is with gratitude that I look back on the time in 1937 when I stood with him one afternoon on the south side of Mount Oread at Lawrence, Kansas.

The prairie grass grew lush where we were standing, just as it had when the great Wakarusa Valley lying before us was the carpet of the pioneers. The grasses rustled gravely in a slow wind that seemed to blow from a wild spot on the opposite hill where the bones of men killed in Quantrill's raid on Lawrence

in '63 were lying in prairie graves. The big University buildings were at my back and the whole scene was laced through with nostalgia, for I was leaving Kansas and I knew that Kansas would never be my home again.

I first met Allen Crafton when I was a junior in the University. That was 1933, a bad time for everybody. Students I knew were living in chicken houses or in the back seats of Model T Fords. They were tracking down cockroaches in the University buildings at night and selling these quick insects to biological companies. They were doing most of the manual work of the city of Lawrence, and they were endlessly pleading with suspicious merchants and heartless landladies for credit. The struggle was primitive, too, and the highlight of the week might be a hike on Sunday night along the Union Pacific railroad and the Kaw River with twenty cents worth of hamburger for five fellows and a few matches to light a fire.

It was a bad time and a sad time. Often some sensitive spirit got too tired and leaped from the Kaw River bridge, or gagged and burned his throat and belly with poison. But it was a good time for militant ideas and pleasures of mind clashing with mind. It was a time when sham and unreality dropped away and when the girls looked deep into the eyes of their men for the soundness of soul that was in them.

Allen Crafton opened his home and often his purse to the Kansas students, but his generosity alone was not the reason for his popularity. He was an extremely able teacher. Among his course offerings was a course in playwriting. This course interested me. I had never quite forgotten what the handwriting expert at the Kansas City YMCA said, and I had been experimenting and dabbling with writing during my early college years.

I wrote some short narratives for a good teacher named Margaret Lynn who knew and loved the prairies and had written books about them. My writings, I remember, were all brief episodes about people and places I had seen in my wanderings. Miss Lynn said the sketches were good but that they were merely impressions and had little central idea. She said I probably had some good materials but that until I developed a philosophy of writing the materials would not do me much good. Although I was completely ignorant of every aspect of dramatic writing and although I had seen only a few plays in my life, I thought that a course in playwriting might do me some good and help me learn the philosophy of writing Miss Lynn had said I needed.

In 1933 when I decided to take Professor Crafton's playwriting course the depression was at its peak. There were more breakdowns caused by malnutrition, and our Chancellor, E. H. Lindley, decided that something drastic must be done. He assembled a lot of the cases of what students were doing to keep alive and went off one day to Washington to see FDR about American college life. The result of Chancellor Lindley's visit was the CSEP—"College Student

Employment Project”—which created jobs in American colleges and paid students a small sum per month. To most students the money was a profound godsend. It broke the tensions. It rippled away the drawn tightness on the faces. It started up new fires and creative hopes. The CSEP was certainly not the greatest thing that FDR did, but it saved many young hearts from breaking.

I was one of the first students to apply for and receive one of these jobs. When the committee asked me what kind of work I would like to do which would benefit me and still allow me to earn the money, I replied that I did not know. I would like a day or two to decide. And it was during this small decision period that I first attended Crafton’s playwriting class. He talked about character, and he had the great dramatic characters of world drama waiting at his lips to illustrate what he said. I listened with fascination, for I knew that he was talking about life itself and that the characters he was using as illustration were easily within my own comprehension.

After class, I walked over to old Fraser Theater. The heavy oak double doors were closed, and when I pulled them creakingly open the dim theater seemed very silent and lonely. I stood a moment looking at the empty seats and the silent blue curtain and the frame of the stage opening with its scrolls. There was a cold unreality about the place that made me uneasy. When I opened a door at the side of the stage, a curious odor came from the stage itself. Ahead of me there were six steps going up to the level of the stage, and in a moment I moved up them. There was an even deeper silence on the platform. A bare bulb burning high up cast a hard little light down upon the stage boards, and the curtains hanging around the stage seemed to move as if in a tiny draft. Ahead of me against a wall was a stack of scenery with a flat, dusty, dry smell about it, and high over head there was a small creaking and swaying sound as though a small breeze were swaying heavy ropes in wooden pulleys.

I put my hand on one of the curtains, and a filter of dust fell in the dim light. I walked out on the stage and wondered what I was to do here. I wandered around. There was a steep flight of steps at the left side going up into a high dimness. The floor around the stairs and near the walls was littered with pieces of crumpled kleenex smeared with lipstick and make-up, some odds and ends of clothing, and a pile of boards. I turned and stood in the center of the stage. It was the first theater I had ever taken the trouble to examine from the stage side of the footlights, and as I stood looking out at the seats that rose gently in front of me I tried to imagine the stage peopled by the characters Crafton had told us about. I found the experience pleasant, and I stood on the stage for a long while. The next day I saw the University committee and told them that I wished to work in the theater. They assigned me to Crafton.

He was rightly dubious at first, but after he found that I was willing to do any kind of work from scrubbing the stage to building scenery and acting we

became fast friends. I got fifteen dollars a month for working with this master of stage design, lighting, painting, and costume. He was an excellent carpenter and a good sculptor and carver. He could write a play, if he wished, or act with wondrous art. But he was most magnificent of all as director of the play.

Every day of my last two years in college was a day of creative joy because of my association with Crafton. The mighty dramatic literature of the world came to life for me. I read everything, looked everywhere for ideas. Food and clothing did not matter. The theater at Kansas University was my playground and I worked and dreamed there day after day.

I enjoyed working for Crafton at least partly because of his deep love of Kansas people and places. I stayed on as his assistant for a couple of years after graduation, and we talked increasingly of a theater of the Kansas people based on the history and tradition that seemed to make Kansas unique. One morning after one of our talks I was working on the stage and a thick cloud of dust began to drift down from the heights of the stagehouse. I was building some flats, but I let them lie and climbed to the attic. I went to the windows, and as I looked westward out across the great valley it seemed to me that the valley was curtained with thick, black velours. The richness of the prairie country was blowing away, and the whole plains lay in a whirling, drifting torment. It was as though from the attic windows I could sense all America writhing and gasping as from a great wound.

My father had been a Kansas pioneer, but the frontier that he knew was ended. It could probably never return or be relived; the depression with its floods and hungers was the end, perhaps, of a scene that began with the push West and ended in the spiritual and physical torment of the American people. If the power, the drive, the call that had sent my father forth from Cumberland County, Illinois, to Kansas was now somehow responsible for young and old wandering futilely through the depression, then, indeed, I thought, we must seek a new, inward expansiveness that would enrich us, not so much in silver and gold but in our whole soul and feeling.

Crafton had said many times that this inward growing must be of the art that was in us and of a recognition by all people of the goodness of the stuff of America re-created in terms of theater so that theater might be an accepted part of our lives. In his own way, in his own theater, Crafton was making his belief live magnificently and was probably finding his own salvation. But I wondered how his idea could spread—how it could come to everybody.

As I stood at the attic windows alone with the great dust curtain curling around Old Fraser, it did not seem strange to me that, somehow, somewhere, I might become a tiny part of the spreading of such an idea. Afterwards, I began to wonder whether the people of America might be drawn closer together in tolerance and in joy in one another through their stories and songs, their presents

and pasts told and sung in a theater whose stages were everywhere and whose actors were the folks in the cities and on the farms, in the crossroad places and in the back places where the American past lay quiet and undisturbed. I thought about it a great deal and talked it all over with Crafton.

Then, one day Crafton told me that if I were really interested in native American theater I should go to Cornell University to study with A. M. Drummond, who had made some big steps toward a New York State theater. I applied for a scholarship to Cornell, received one, and so at length I was standing with Crafton, as I have said, on the side of Mount Oread one afternoon in 1937.

There was silence between us, and my thoughts were reaching out beyond the valley to encompass my experiences in American places. I had heard American voices from the deep South, from the West and the Northwest, from New England and Texas and the middle country. I had heard a singing that was Mexico and had felt a vast, unspoken sensation that was Canada. Somehow I knew that these voices and feelings must relate themselves to a theater I earnestly desired to help create but could not really define. I hoped Cornell and Drummond would teach me American theater.

I got set up in a room on Dryden Road, Ithaca, New York, in September, 1937. Crafton had told me that Professor Drummond, who was the Director of the Cornell University theater, had already been interested in a theater of the New York State people and that he had started an interesting country theater at the New York State Fair in 1919. Crafton had told me, too, that Professor Drummond was quite unique, but he did not enlarge on that statement. I did not comprehend, when I arrived at Ithaca one rainy afternoon: that I was embarking on an experience that was to alter my whole life and that I was to make the acquaintance of a man whose ideas and examples were to be the actual groundwork of experiments in which I was to engage later.

As I think back over the leaders in American theater I have known, I am certain that Professor Drummond is the most complex of them all and probably the deepest thinker. Here is a man who made the Cornell Dramatic Club one of the outstanding college theater organizations of the country. He directed the club in outstanding productions of fine European plays, and in many cases his productions were the first in America of those plays. He set the standards of scholarly research in theater at Cornell and created a splendid program of graduate study. He made theater a respected area of study at Cornell, and the influence of his academic ideas, especially in aesthetics, spread far and wide among American universities. Yet this same man was able to feel the utmost elation in his New York State Fair experiment of 1919, when he took the Cornell Dramatic Club to the Fair at Syracuse and established a country theater which became widely talked about throughout America. He proved that he was

at least as interested in helping to establish a taste for good theater among the country folk of New York State as he was in producing plays in his own theater at Cornell. His country theater was one of the really significant early demonstrations of what an excellent theater program could do in raising countryside drama standards.

Drummond's friend, George Pierce Baker of Harvard, wrote to him after the New York State Fair experiment: "If you can demonstrate to the people of the countryside how relatively easy it is to give plays well, and that it is just as easy, or easier to give good plays rather than poor ones, you will have done real service to both your community and the bettering of appreciation of drama in the country."

Professor Drummond did demonstrate these things. His Cornell Dramatic Club played to six thousand persons a week at the State Fair. The country theater, which was established in a wing of one of the older buildings, was packed for every performance. As Professor Drummond has written: "We had 400 seats, and 500 standing room. Both were filled." The country theater was open even when productions were not on just for folks to walk through and see, and there was always a crowd looking the stage over and asking questions about stage lighting, scenery, make-up. But, Drummond has recalled: "The audience were in a way undemonstrative. It was a 'demonstration' and they were serious. We even preceded every play with a short, informal talk on the idea of the thing. But in their undemonstrative way they laughed and nudged each other and beamed and wiped furtive tears and voted it good and stayed for more and sent their friends. There is something in it."

Zona Gale of Wisconsin was extremely interested in the New York State Fair theater and waived the royalty on her play *The Neighbors*, which was the Drummond headliner. She wrote to Drummond:

I should be very glad that the play be given without royalty in country theatres, when the play is given for the benefit of any civic or other social enterprise. We might come at something picturesque, with an appeal to the imagination.

*The use of *The Neighbors* is offered free to any country theatre which will use a part of the funds so raised for the following purposes, or will prevail upon some member of the community to carry out the following:*

*To plant at least one long-lived shade tree in the community; or
To plant a fruit tree by the roadside; or
To plant a spruce or a balsam to be used, when so desired, as
a community Christmas tree.*

One tree for every performance!

And if the producers wish to give really good measure for the use of the

play, it is recommended that they conclude the evening with a community gathering, with community singing and dancing, and a discussion of the things which their community needs.

Furthermore, it is understood that the producers, the cast, and the audience at such a performance shall all be neighbors to everyone, as long as they live.¹

I find it extremely interesting, looking back, to note that Zona Gale had this connection with Professor Drummond's country theater experiments and perhaps helped in some way to formulate, or at least to confirm, some of his ideas about countryside drama. Zona Gale's home town was Portage, Wisconsin, and she had been very active in the development of the Wisconsin Dramatic Society, perhaps the earliest little theater movement in America. Professor Thomas Dickinson, then of the University of Wisconsin, founded the Society in 1910. On March 10, 1912, he wrote to Zona Gale to ask her to do a short play which the Society might produce, *The Neighbors*, which, incidentally, was written in just a few days, was the result.

The love of home place is apparent in much of Zona Gale's writing. Professor Drummond was impressed by the honest, human qualities of her characters, and I have certainly been no less so in my work with the Wisconsin Idea Theater. It is impossible to estimate the effect of Zona Gale's writings on the feeling of Wisconsin people for Wisconsin places, but it was perhaps the success of Zona Gale as a playwright—her *Miss Lulu Bett* was a Pulitzer Prize winner—which focused the great popular interest on her as a Wisconsin personality and threw playwriting and theater in general into a very favorable light in the state. Zona Gale's regard for regional themes, her interest in community development, and her success as a professional writer undoubtedly made subsequent drama development easier in Wisconsin.

Professor Drummond emerged from the State Fair theater with the convictions, which he stated in an article in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1921, that plays of high literary value do "go" in the country and that local groups can be stimulated to do acceptable work. He was positive, too, that there was great latent interest waiting to be aroused in the communities of New York State.

Years afterward, when I was established in Wisconsin, Professor Drummond wrote to me:

I am pleased with your efforts in the behalf of regional drama. Not so much that regional literature and drama needs help, as because your appreciation of and presentation of the life and idiom that spring from near the soil, and from common ways of feeling and expression, are the basic stuff of our best writing, and our best thought about the many types and attitudes that make up our varied country,

¹ Quoted in A. M. Drummond, "A Countryside Theatre Experiment," *Quarterly Journal of Speech Education*, VI (Feb., 1920), 46-47.

its people and loyalties.

I think our best literature is in a true sense regional, and our greatest American writers and dramatists have done their richest work when they were rising from or returning to their native heath, folkways and sentiments.

The contemporary interest in regionally-based literature, both factual and fanciful, its success on the stage and in the press, encourages us to think that a new generation of American writers, dramatists, musicians and painters may be drawing content and style from native roots to challenge the merit of the American-bred writers of the Nineteenth Century.

And your encouragement of such an interest in your own region is a true if modest aid to some of those who will make American literature.

My personal debt to Professor Drummond is very large. It was his theories and ideas that drew my own into focus, just as it was the State Fair experience that probably made his own interest in regional drama development more keen.

Drummond's personal interest in New York State was, of course, very great. He was born in Auburn, and his entire family relationship was calculated to make him extremely fond of his town, his familiar countryside, and his neighbors. He was educated at Hamilton College, Cornell, and Harvard. During his younger days he wandered into almost every corner of central New York country and established the intimate relationship which fixed so firmly his desire to see the theater arts flourish in the back-country places he knew and loved. Nostalgia, however, was not Professor Drummond's chief motivation. He felt a keen sense of responsibility to his region and hoped to motivate a movement that might breed a superior kind of home-grown theater.

Although Professor Drummond has never formally stated it, I believe his thinking about theater in the region centered around the hope of developing fine original plays authored by the people of the area. His course in playwriting at Cornell developed several well-known playwrights, the most outstanding of whom is Sidney Kingsley.

His theory of countryside playwriting was that writers should be encouraged to consider themes and subjects closely allied to their own places. Cornell, the leading educational institution of higher learning in the region, ought, he thought, to assume a leading role in stimulating local playwriting by drawing the promising subjects and materials to the attention of writers. Cornell should stand ready to assist the local writers once they had their plays underway.

Drummond himself was a master play doctor. He believed that a body of highly usable original plays might be developed jointly by the authors and by someone like himself able and willing to straighten out the kinks in the scripts. These plays, once they were developed, would be of great service to local theater groups which, ideally, *ought* to be interested in the region where they

existed and therefore *ought* to be concerned with doing regional plays.

I do not think that Drummond had any illusions about the various groups' obvious preference for Broadway plays. He simply hoped that the larger city groups might try an original play once in a while. It was the smaller rural groups which I am sure he had in mind as doing most of the original play production.

His theory about this body of regional plays was extremely sound. He planned to distribute the plays on a non-royalty basis to help to counteract the excessively poor plays found in the commercial publishers' lists—the plays which rural groups left to themselves almost invariably selected. He did not expect to develop any great authors in his playwriting scheme. His chief desire was to see the theater come into its own as an interpreter of regional life.

The State Fair country theater, I am sure, led Professor Drummond to contemplate long-range plans for regional development in New York State.

It was three weeks after I arrived in Ithaca before I encountered Professor Drummond. During that time I noticed that students spoke of him with awe, sometimes with downright fear. When I finally met him I could see why. He is an immense man with great shoulders and a proud head. He holds his entire body more erect than any man I have ever seen. He usually wears a hat that is turned up a little at the brim and crushed down in an indescribable fashion on the crown. Behind his glasses are wonderfully alive eyes that can freeze you or warm you according to the mood of the man.

One day I was nervously waiting for him in his office when he entered slowly but with sure movements. He got his chair into exactly the position he wanted, sat down at his desk, and began straightening out some papers. Then he opened a drawer and looked for several moments among some files. He got up from his desk and went to his bookcase. He pondered over several volumes, finally took one down and laid it on the corner of his desk. He said, "Oh, dear!" in a sudden expulsion of all the breath in his lungs, and then he sat down. Finally he sighed, looked at me with a kind of glare that had a great deal of distaste in it, and said: "Well, what do you think I can do for you?"

I said, quite timidly, and a little pompously: "I want to work with you and for you, Professor Drummond. I am interested in a theater that will grow from the hearts and the everyday lives of the American people. I want to learn from you how such a theater may be encouraged."

He glanced at me quickly, then began to fiddle with some more papers on his desk. He picked up a letter and read it through carefully. I could see the date on the letter; it was about six years old. I thought that his careful reading of this old letter was eccentric, but later he made me understand that a fine letter, with all the ideas clear and the prose sturdy, was something to keep on one's desk and refer to and reread many times just for the sheer tonic of it. That was

probably why Professor Drummond was reading the letter. Anyway, he finally put the letter down and said, "Well, I dunno," and began drumming the top of the desk with his fingers.

I got up to leave, thinking that he wanted to get rid of me. He let me get as far as the door of his office, then he said, "Oh, Gard!"

I turned around and he was holding out the book he had taken from the shelf. "Have you read Carl Carmer's *Listen for a Lonesome Drum?*"

I said, "No, sir."

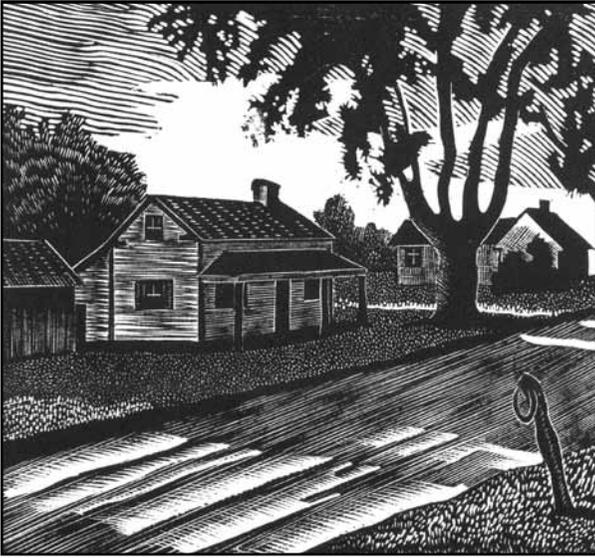
"Well, you might look it over. Pretty good."

I took the book, thanked him, and got to the door again. He called me back several times to chat about seemingly inconsequential matters. I was puzzled when I left his office; yet I had the feeling that I had met a great man; that he knew a great deal about me; that I did not know anything, really, about him.

At Kansas I had learned the fascination of ideas. At Cornell I learned, among other things, the rigors of discipline. This was an ordeal by fire under perhaps the most terrifying master in America.

The method of this amazing man was so complex and painful that the agonized student did not really know what was happening to him until things had happened. Little by little, with stinging rebuke, calculated irony, or with fabulous, small whips of rhetoric he stripped the student of practically every bit of encumbering ambition, pride, eagerness, and initiative. With students who could take it, his method was directly brutal. He might provoke the student with the most amazing accusations, defamations, and deflations, and when the poor student rose at last in desperate self-defense he would never be able to get a defense underway. Little vanities and conceits were either tossed out of the window or the student, in endeavoring to keep them, submitted himself to the most horrible tortures. He was often stood up before his classmates and flayed until, hot with shame and futile anger, he was sent forth to study himself.

All this torment was of course hitched to learning. The man was so mature, so worldly wise, that he pushed no one beyond the absolute limits of endurance, and the whole result of the Drummond ordeal was not only a vast respect and affection for the man but was also an increased desire for the ferreting out of truth and a new and stimulating liking for scholarship. For, after stripping the student down to nothing, Professor Drummond, slowly, and with the utmost patience, began to build him up again. This was almost an unconscious process. It might begin with a single "Good!" scribbled on the front leaf of a paper over which the student had spent his blood; yet so meager had been the Drummond praise until this point and so vast the Drummond integrity that the student grabbed this tiny straw of praise and wandered about in an ecstatic daze showing the paper to his friends and truly believing that he must have written a minor masterpiece.



*...the forgotten
roads, the wild
places where few
persons went...*

If the student were acting in one of the masterly theater productions that Professor Drummond directed in the Cornell University theater, a note written on a slip of cheap, yellow paper might be handed to the student by the stage manager. The note might say merely, "Smith, 1 per cent improved!" and the student would strive with all his might to make the part 2 per cent better the next night, just to get another one of those priceless scribbles. Professor Drummond could inspire superhuman feats of intellect and strength with a word or a gesture, simply because the student felt that a word or a gesture from Professor Drummond that was not ridicule or debasement meant that Professor Drummond considered the student worthy of some small respect. It was a kind of signal that a small part of the student's self-respect might be assumed again.

Professor Drummond was a man with a volcano burning inside of him. When the fire burned bright he was incomparable, wonderful, brilliant. He could tell stories beyond any living master of story-craft, or he could hold a group of keen intellectuals spellbound. When the fire burned low, however, he was grumpy, full of cliches and apt to complain woefully of his ills. He was, in other words, extremely human, with most of the human frailties that beset all of us. Some of his frailties seemed rather larger than ordinary, perhaps, because he was rude on occasion when rudeness did not actually appear necessary. He made little attempt to pay back the ordinary social obligations in the conventional way, much to the distress of hostesses who complained that he should certainly know better or that he was ungrateful for the attentions heaped upon

him. He paid little heed to the complaints about his misbehavior, but he found his own way to return kindness.

With students he was training, however, he was completely generous. He almost always paid the check at restaurants or bars. If a fellow achieved any sort of respect in Professor Drummond's eyes, then suddenly that fellow might be left to pay the check, and if he went out with Professor Drummond for food or drinks thereafter, he had better look out for himself. If a student came to Professor Drummond full of real trouble, he would be taken behind a closed door where no one might hear or suspect and be given excellent advice or helped with money. God knows how many Cornell students survived through the opening of Professor Drummond's pocketbook or how many men and girls told him their involved private troubles.

The general principles upon which he taught had great bearing on my feeling for places and for theater in relation to places. His principles were basic to the broad approach to theater I have tried to develop. This partial list of the Drummond principles is my list, not Professor Drummond's. I am sure that he never drew up any such list as this:

A man must have within himself the seeds of self-improvement.

He must not fear introspection; he must have an abiding faith in what he believes.

He must bring forth the best that is in himself in order to rightly understand himself and his works in relation to other men and to the arts.

He must respect knowledge and be able to discern and use wisely the best sources of learning.

He must respect people and must carry always a learning attitude toward any man.

He must respect place and the flavor of the countryside and develop fearlessly and poetically his regard for a familiar scene and remembered event.

He must be broad in outlook; he must not be a man pedantically interested only in the narrow, dusty corners of knowledge but one who is willing to carry ideas to the people everywhere.

He must see theater as a reflection of man; he must see drama not as a toy, a bauble, a plaything but as an instrument sensitive to all the sights and sounds of mankind.

He must have ideals but no rigid fixity of mind that might make him argumentative, impatient, and intolerant of other ideas or ideals.

He must savor and try the temper of America and acquire a thorough knowledge and understanding of her peoples, traditions, figures of speech, and historical trends.

Often the ideas that one discerned in Drummond's teachings of what a man ought to be and do were taught in the very awesome and wondrous presence of nature on top of a New York State hill, perhaps after a dinner at the Taughannock House, the Dryden Hotel, or some other country inn when the August northern lights were softly rolling the skies and the great valleys and wide stretches of the New York State land were mystically and faintly discernible. Then he was at his best. He would stand on the hill, a landmark himself, and point out the interesting places and scenes. At these times he was a poet, and the forgotten roads, the wild places where few persons went, the hulk of an old steamboat sunk in Cayuga Lake were the substance and subject of his poetry. He loved central New York above anything on earth. From him I learned a love for this soft, mysterious country of hidden drums and slender, deep lakes and long valleys.

If Professor Drummond liked any of the things I was doing at Cornell he gave little sign. During the first months I got no little notes on yellow paper, except the kind that made me wish to crawl into a hole somewhere and die. I wrote plays and passed them to him, and he passed them back with many suggestions, often, for revision, but with no indication whatever that the plays were good in idea.

Professor Drummond's famous course "66" was the place where students came face to face with dramatic theory. Wide reading was required. Searching questions addressed to the students brought them one by one to the front of the class to sit at the master's right hand where he demonstrated how feebly they grasped the meaning of Aristotle, Komisarjevsky, Gordon Craig, Evreinov, Jacques Copeau, Appia, Bakshy, and Jourdain. I did not comprehend then how greatly I was to rely on the ideas of some of these writers in my later work. Hardly a day goes by now that the *Poetics* of Aristotle does not come up somehow or that connections cannot be made with the theory of lighting advanced by Appia or with the theater-in-life idea of Evreinov. It seems logical to me now that if regional drama standards are to rise it must be through an acquaintance at least with the best thinkers in the field of dramatic and aesthetic theory.

I made scenery in the theater and helped work it for all the plays. Because I always spoke in tones so very low and so indistinct that many persons had great trouble in hearing me, Professor Drummond called me "the whispering Mister Gard" and generally worked on my sensibilities until along in the Spring, without any warning whatever, he suddenly cast me in the character of Captain Shotover in Shaw's *Heartbreak House*.

This part calls for considerable skill in acting; the character is a complex one; and the part calls also for a voice fitting a retired sea captain. I was numb with terror. Yet such was the personality and influence of Drummond that he drew a voice out of me. Little by little, with the most infinite care, my voice

grew in volume and projection, and little by little Professor Drummond moved his rehearsal chair back in the auditorium. I had no idea, really, what was happening until suddenly during a dress rehearsal my curiosity as to whether or not I could be heard grew too strong to be contained. "Professor Drummond," I bellowed, "can you hear me?"

There was a short pause while the sound bounced between the theater walls, and there was a longer pause during which Professor Drummond seemed to be lost in a kind of wonderful self-admiration. "Gad!" he said, "the whispering Mister Gard has spoken!" And this was about the only comment I received. But in all the long years of our subsequent and comradely professional relationship I do not think anything I ever did pleased him half as much as my development of a voice. I developed a voice simply because Professor Drummond willed that I should.

Yet, despite the fact that this small encouragement came my way, I grew more and more despondent, because it seemed to me that I was slipping backward, that the freshness of the idea about theater I thought I had when I left Kansas was no longer good or powerful. I was conscious only of needing to know so much and of so often seeming to find myself incapable of mastering the disciplines of graduate study that Professor Drummond insisted upon. So I sank lower and lower, developed a very nasty disposition, and was on the point of chucking the whole Cornell affair. The Cornell library chimes that had seemed so lovely to me early in the year now seemed to symbolize the University's apartness from life. I was tired of books. I wanted somehow to be merged into a more direct life stream. I hungered for open country, machines, men, animals. I believed that I had failed to find at Cornell any semblance of what I had come there to find—sympathetic and expert guidance toward the kind of theater of people that I had dedicated myself to work for.

Then, too, I had written a play that I liked, based on experiences I had had, and I was proud of this work. Professor Drummond had been holding it for nearly three months, and I felt that he must have thought it pretty bad stuff. All-in-all, I was down in the dumps. So one morning in May I went to Professor Drummond's office and told him I guessed I had better be leaving Cornell. There was silence for a while; then he said, "Who told you to go?"

"Nobody."

"Better think it over."

He obviously had more to say, and I sat and waited. "Better think it over," he repeated. "I've been working very hard for the past two months to get you a fellowship with the Rockefeller Foundation. I want you to stay and help me start a new theater project in New York State. Maybe we can learn something about stories and people and theater that will help the whole idea of American theater along."

I sat very still. The reversal was terrific. I felt like laughing; then I felt a great wave of affection for this big man who knew so exactly what to do. And I understood in that moment that everything I had experienced at Cornell, every debasement of soul, every moment of torment, every indication of faint praise, every book I had read had been calculated to make me a better worker, a more worthy worker for a larger scheme.

He said: "I had just this morning received a wire from Dr. David Stevens in New York. He would like to have you come down to the Foundation and see him."

I stood up. "I would like to stay at Cornell if you really think I could help."

He shoved the play I was so proud of across his desk to me. "I was going to send you back your play this morning. I'm sorry I kept it so long."

I took the play and saw that he had written on the cover: "This play has a real flavor of America that I like tremendously. Come and see me. I have some news for you."

That evening I dined with Professor Drummond at the Ithaca Hotel. The check lay between us on the table for a long time. Finally I picked it up.

There is good land for farming in New York State, but most of the hill land is poor. Its top soil has been spoiled by careless growing, and the wild growth is creeping back. In the hills I found people from Oklahoma, Dakota, and Kansas who had fled to the East, away from the sting and filter of the dust. I saw how the hope had faded from these Western faces and how thin the crops they grew looked against the futile soil. I knew many of these families, and in the time that I knew them they seemed to drift away, one by one, leaving the hills lonely and without laughter.

For two months I soaked up the sights and sounds and the lore of New York State. I walked among the grape harvesters working on the steep hillsides above the long, narrow lakes. I cherished the picture of the foliage greens and harvest purples and the bright kerchiefs of the pickers. I sat with old men and heard their stories of past days. I met a wonderful professor from Cornell—a jolly fat man with a bald head and thick glasses. He sang the ballads of the land in a beautiful tenor voice, and when he knew that I was not going to write a book and use his material he told me masterful stories of New York State people and places.

I traveled all over the state. I met the people everywhere. I heard yarns about outlaws, bogeymen, farmers, pretty teachers, milk strikes, revival preachers, murderers, buried treasures, race horses, haunts, wondrous cures, and probably hundreds of other things. I sat in crossroads stores, hung over back fences, sat on front steps, milked cows, chewed the fat with the boys at the Spit and Whittle Club at Dryden, New York, and generally engaged in any occupation

that allowed for yarn swapping. It was a happy time, and all through it Professor Drummond left me quite alone. Then one day he sent for me.

I went to his office with acute hesitation. Surveying my activities I could not actually see that I had accomplished much. I felt that what I had seen and heard from the people had point in the sort of theater I imagined might spring from the land and the people, but I feared that Professor Drummond would ask me what books I had read, and I knew that I could not impress him. I expected the ax to fall.

I went into his office. He was writing, and he wrote for a while. Then he said, "Well, what have you been doing?"

I blushed and said, "Professor Drummond, I have been hearing stories and swapping lies."

"Where have you been?"

I named two or three dozen places I had visited. He said, "Well, there's plenty to do."

"Yes, sir."

"You think this floating around is worthwhile?"

"Yes, sir."

He said, "I was hoping you would think so. It's the only way you ever get the real flavor of the region." He stood up. "I have my car downstairs. Let's go!"

Touring the central New York countryside with Professor Drummond was like being blind and suddenly seeing the unbelievable beauty of sunlight and landscape. It was like that, yet something more, for he seemed to endow the land with a mystic poetry that sprang from his sensitiveness to present and past. There seemed no back road that Professor Drummond did not know. There was no hilltop he had not seen and no valley to which he attached no mysterious significance. The land, the people, the winds and rains all added up to a complete and satisfying unity for Professor Drummond, and so perfectly were these things reflected in his observations that word pictures dropped from his lips like impressionistic paintings.

Sometimes at night we would stand on a high place called Butcher Hill from which all the land seemed to drop away to the North, to Lake Ontario, and then all the grumpiness, all worldly disillusion, the entire burden of life rolled away from him and he would speak for hours of the legend and of the folklore of places.

As such talk went on and on, broken occasionally by excursions to eat wonderful country food in corners of the land that only Professor Drummond seemed to know, I fell more and more under the spell of the country. It was a bewitchment that stimulated fantasies of imagination and sapped creative strength. I lived every day as a mad kind of excursion, breathing into a subconscious creativeness everything I saw and felt and heard. I had no inclination to

work. I rebelled against writing. The whole state was my stage, but I could not formalize the product of my senses into characters that were like life, nor could I merge the fantasy of ideas that rushed through me into the tight packets that were the plots and themes of plays.

There was a sudden stop to this madness. I visited a county fair one day at Morris, New York. In one tent a stage had been set up, and the tent was packed with people. They were old folks and young folks and farmers and city people. They were eager; they were in festival mood. They wanted theater, excitement. They wanted hearty humor, dramatic picture, furious impact. They had a right to expect such things, for the plays they were there to see were billed as being from rural life. Rural life to these people meant kindness, neighborliness, strong appreciations of land and wind and color. Rural life meant the strength of outdoor bodies, the good simplicities of food and work and neighborhood fun. Rural life meant songs and games, stout problems in land economics, education for the kids, and a savor of the things that were essentially part of their own place. Rural life meant a tiny thread of loneliness, too, and maybe a very occasional breath of tragedy. Rural life meant the neighborhood arts of careful canning, weaving, quilting. Rural life meant everything these people knew and understood—the whole goodness of their lives.

The plays were billed as rural life plays, and they were played by local young people and adults. When they began, I, too, was eager, for I had seen the broad, free life of American country places. But when the plays were over, I looked at the faces around me. Anticipation had turned to a solemn disinterestedness. There was no laughter, no tears—only definite exodus that was filled with vague irritation. There was no festival here—only the departure of an initial eagerness that had seemed very precious and deep.

The reason seemed to me then quite clear. The plays were not rural plays. True, they were supposedly set in the country, but their characters had no relation to the kind of country life I and the folks around me knew. They had very little relation to life anywhere. They were dreary in tone; they were filled with bad jokes lifted from a collection read somewhere or heard on somebody's radio. The characters were stereotypes of real people. They maundered on and on about poor housewives who had no pianos or washing machines or they talked in clichés about cruel fathers who would not let sons or daughters have boy or girl friends or join 4-H clubs. They hinted at shotgun weddings, and they dusted off the old conflicts between the farm and the city. They sawed back and forth on the fringes of obscene jests about the farmer's daughter and the city slicker.

I remember thinking, as I walked out of the tent into the autumn sunlight, that this was the only real theater the people in this place knew, that there could be only failure and disillusionment in such plays, and that such plays were evil and would kill any art that might grow here. I paused as I thought of the rural

life that I knew in Kansas, of the wheat fields, of the mighty machines biting through the yellow grain, of the harvest parties, and of the wild singing and dancing. I thought of New York State grape pickers singing on a steep hillside, of a farm mother holding a little child against her breast, of the terror of a violent storm, and of faces full of suffering from pain and lost crops. As I stood thinking, the great Butternut Valley that was all around Morris turned golden in the afternoon light. I looked at the hills, and suddenly my spirit was filled and lifted with a clear knowledge. I knew that there must be plays of the people filled with the spirit of places, and my aimless activities assumed meaning. I felt the conviction then that I have maintained since—that the knowledge and love of place is a large part of the joy in people's lives. There must be plays that grow from all the countrysides of America, fabricated by the people themselves, born of their happiness and sorrow, born of toiling hands and free minds, born of music and love and reason. There must be many great voices singing out the lore and legend of America from a thousand hilltops, and there must be students to listen and to learn, and writers encouraged to use the materials.

The next day I went back to Ithaca and sought out Professor Drummond. When I told him what I had been thinking, he said, "I'm glad some of the ideas have been jelling for you." And we sat down at his table and made some plans for a playwriting project for the state of New York.

Professor Drummond said that there were probably a lot of people in New York State who wanted to write plays. He said that we would try to get in touch with these people and that the result of our efforts might be such a bloom of country-grown plays that the entire state would enjoy the aroma of up-country life. He said that outside the University playwriting classes, there had been almost no attempt to get the people to think and write dramatically of themselves. When I asked him how many people might try writing a play, he refused to estimate, but his eyes warmed up, and I knew that he was dreaming of a large number and that both he and I were hoping for sensational results. I suppose that when we were alone and remembered the soul tormenting rigors of playwriting, we had some serious doubts, but these doubts did not in the least deter us from trying. Indeed, so great was our faith in the people, so real was our dream of a people's theater, and so confident was our belief in the goodness of the folklore and life of the region that it was almost as though some old central New York Indian god had endowed us with this dream as a special mission.

This dream soon became a reality. Our first task was the preparation of a letter which we circulated widely through the mails and got printed in papers and magazines. The letter pointed out that many persons, young and old, should be interested in writing a play about New York State, that as soon as good plays became available they would be circulated throughout the state, and

that anyone might receive advice and perhaps assistance by writing to Professor Drummond or me at Cornell University. The letter stated also that we were eager to get in touch with folks who might have some good ideas for plays so that we might pass these ideas on to possible authors and that we wished people would get in touch with us who might like to present some of these plays in their own communities.

Perhaps Professor Drummond knew what we were letting ourselves in for, but I did not. All I had was enthusiasm and a capacity for work. I needed both, for immediately our mail overflowed the boxes. There were letters scattered everywhere. Such a good thing as a secretary to help handle this spate of potential culture was a part of our dream that we had not dealt with. But every letter was answered, and the ideas, the encouragement, the offer of free publicity, good will, even love, made us believe that maybe, just maybe, we had touched a popular chord. The letters were filled, some of them, with a sort of fresh hope, as though a farmer or a housewife or a grocer or a country doctor after years of working and thinking and dreaming suddenly saw a chance to speak of the things he lived by. Some of the letters were neatly typed. Others were written in illegible scrawls with soft lead pencils. A few were written in foreign languages—in French, German, and Finnish.

There were letters that I remember particularly well. One was from a farmer's wife in Cattaraugus County, New York, Mrs. D. H. Chambers. She wrote that she was much interested in writing a play about the Dutch Hill war, a rather comic incident of the land troubles of the 1840s which took place on her farm. She wrote: "I have never expressed myself in the dramatic form, but I am willing to learn. I have a brother who has been fairly successful in dramatic writing and you may possibly have heard of him. His name is Maxwell Anderson."

There was a letter from a fellow up in the Adirondacks who caused me great concern. He wrote:

Was reading this day of your playwriting announcement in the paper. I wish I had until July to submit my contribution. However, I plan, or want to send, or make a contribution. I know a lot of women folks will try writing plays, and I want to try just to spite the women. I don't like the idea of giving women more chance or call for action over men, as women are not only first in nearer all things but has the world with a fence around it.

Now, has the story got to be submitted in play form, or will a story do the trick? Just what do you call a one-act play? I wish I could get a specimen copy just in case I must submit full form. Will be glad to receive any assistance, and I am obliged to ask you to hurry.

There is not a preponderance of women characters in my stories, and only

some have several characters. Do you require many characters, or will as few as several be enough? Please explain matters out to me. I want to find out what you want, if I can. Will a one-act play permit of more than one continuous scene or scenery? How many or how few words would you say would suffice? Please tell me what constitutes a one-act play so that I can tell at a glance what it is like. A stamp is enclosed for reply. Such envelopes as I have are misfits. Don't see how I can send you the usual envelope, sorry.

P.S. What shall I write about?

This mountain man never wrote a play, though he sought and received plenty of information. But as the personal mail got less bulky, our boxes began to fill with larger envelopes, brown ones with first class postage, containing plays of every sort. These we read over and sorted out and mulled over, and soon again I was engaged in a tremendous correspondence, teaching play-writing by mail, offering encouragement, criticizing or praising what seemed hundreds of manuscripts. Overnight my job became almost completely office work, though I had no office and the manuscripts were apt to be spread over tables in any corner I might find temporarily vacant. Then people began to drift into Ithaca to see us about their work. A woman from Buffalo brought her play about Underground Railroad days at Niagara Falls. An old man with long gray hair came to see me with a jolly little play about antique collectors. A machinist from around Rochester brought two scripts about workmen. A girl from the western part of the state brought her play about grape pickers. A thin young man came with his play about a schoolhouse that was painted in big red and white checks. (One faction in the community had once wanted the schoolhouse painted red, the rest of the community wanted it painted white. They had compromised.) Folks came from all points of the compass with plays that reflected many facets of regional life.

There was excitement in meeting these people and talking with them. They were new signs of an art expression that seemed to be springing up joyously everywhere, and so infectious was the spirit of this simple movement that Professor Drummond and I were caught up in it. We began to write, too, and several plays were our joint efforts. One of the plays I wrote grew out of an incident I had witnessed while wandering in the hill country of New York State. One evening I was on top of a high hill and I saw a thin old man sitting under a lone cedar tree strumming on a guitar. After a while he began to sing a slow song about a sad wind in a willow tree. I listened to him sing, and when he finished the song a wind came over the hill and brushed through the cedar. Then the old man stood up with a dream on his face and made a speech to an old friend who was lying in a cemetery grave a piece down the hillside.

"Tom," the old man said, "I can see you over yonder astanding up beside

your stone. I expect you recall like me when these hillsides was green with crops and the young fruit trees tender with spring blooms. You kin see them light yellow colors in April and smell the earth new turned.

“Looka, yonder, Tom, down the line of the hill there, see them timbers sticking up out of the long grass? That was the Ervay house and the Barnes house was down below it. Who’s that beside ye, Tom? Lucy, I expect. And is that Lally over in the corner holding her baby?”

“Everybody is gone off the hill but me, Tom. Young pine trees is growing everyplace now. Recall my place that was so fine set against the far side of the hill? Them white columns on the front porch was good to see. Could see them from a mile away, and my fields back the house spread with new wheat.

“The state’s went and bought my farm, Tom, and they’re making a woods out of it. The land’s wore out, they say. Yesterday the mail stopped comin’.

“Nothin’ but the wind left. There’s wind ablowing through the old cedar, and it’s the night wind over the graves.”

The old man put his guitar under his arm and walked down the hill. He lay down with his head up against one of the stones. The old man took his place, with his lyric speech and guitar, in a play that symbolized the New York wild country.

From the famous frontier preacher the Rev. Lorenzo Dow we fabricated a play in which the Reverend raised the devil from a flour barrel in a settler’s cabin, and thereby converted the entire settlement of Schoharie, New York. We wrote radio scripts about the old 999, the New York Central engine that set a world’s speed record, and about Colonel Tom Meachem of Oswego and his big cheese—biggest ever made. We fixed the frontier propensity for tall yarn spinning into a play called “Bill Greenfield’s Legend.”

We tried out a lot of new plays in the Cornell University theater and slowly began to build up some really actable scripts. Then we decided that we must write a long show that would set the temper of the thing we were trying to do. We hoped that such a play might draw the attention of the state to our project. For a subject we turned more or less naturally to one of the greatest of the New York State tales, the famous yarn of the Cardiff Giant.

Almost anyone, these days, knows the story of this hoax that took place in 1869 in the little village of Cardiff when a great stone man was uncovered by well diggers on the farm of “Stubby” Newell. The discovery of this figure aroused thousands of simple, God-fearing folk to fever pitch, for they believed the stone giant to be a religious manifestation, one of the Biblical giants of Genesis. Great scientists, too, were hoodwinked for a time and considered the find to be one of the important paleological discoveries of the age.

The hoax was actually fabricated by a cigar maker from Binghamton named George Hull. One day George was arguing with a preacher in Fort

Dodge, Iowa. The preacher claimed loudly that there “were giants in those days” and Hull maintained there were not. The preacher did George down in the debate, and George went out and hired men to cut a great block of gypsum out of the river bank at Fort Dodge. Then George shipped this block of stone to Chicago where he got a tombstone cutter to carve the block into the form of a giant. George got the giant to Binghamton, then shipped it by wagon to Cardiff, the wagon traveling at night for secrecy.

George was first cousin to “Stubby” Newell. Stubby let George bury the giant on his farm. In the dead of night the deed was done. The giant lay buried for a year. Grass grew over the spot secluded under the shadow of a great hill. One day Stubby hired a couple of men to dig a well right on the spot where the giant lay buried. When the men encountered a great stone foot and dug a little more to see what manner of creature lay buried there, they both tossed their shovels and ran to the village to spread the news.

In a few days Newell’s farm was tramped over by seething humanity. A tent was erected above the giant’s grave, and Hull, Newell, and company, which included by this time the famous Homer, New York, banker, David Hannum (later known fictionally as Harum), were coining money at the rate of 5 per cent on \$3,000,000!

Everybody wanted to see the giant. Certain ladies viewing the sculptured wonder fainted dead away, for Hull’s tombstone carver had left nothing to the imagination. A dentist, Dr. Boynton, pronounced the work to be of Caucasian, not Indian, origin and called it the noblest work of art that had come down to us. The Board of Regents of the state of New York came to view the colossus, bearing with them insurance in the words of the state geologist, Dr. Hall, who called the giant the “most remarkable object brought to light in this country deserving of the attention of archeologists.”

And so it went. Preachers basing sermons on the giant gleaned converts like falling chaff. One fool from the Yale Divinity School identified the giant as a Phoenician idol brought to this country several hundred years before Christ. P. T. Barnum, recognizing the giant as a magnificent showpiece, offered to buy it for sixty thousand dollars, and when he was refused, went off to New York to make a duplicate. He displayed it as the only authentic Cardiff Giant.

Professor Marsh of Yale at last exposed the hoax for what it was—a crude and recently carved block of gypsum, something which President Andrew D. White of Cornell had maintained from the first.

While Professor Drummond and I were speculating about the Cardiff Giant as a potential dramatic subject, a dreamer from the south came to visit us at Ithaca. This was Paul Green, who long before had caught a vision of a people’s theater, and who had been ever since working toward that end with Professor Koch of North Carolina University.

This tall man with the sensitive face and deep eyes made a profound impression on me. His plays were pointed out as the foremost regional dramatic expression in America. He spoke simply, yet like a poet, and everything in the earth and sky and of men had a philosophic meaning for him. He spent long hours talking with me. When he heard the story of the giant he began to grin and get excited and to walk up and down. He said the yarn demonstrated the universality of human folly, and he insisted that Professor Drummond and I start writing the play immediately.

So one day in the early Spring we drove up to Cardiff, up Highway II that runs north from Cortland to Syracuse, and we paused a little while on a great fill that the glaciers left across the Onondaga Valley like a high wall. We looked down the valley flats, across the salt well derricks, toward the little town of Cardiff near which the giant once lay. The valley was quiet and mysterious, with the hill they call Bear Mountain shadowing it from the west. It was a scene to inspire awe. Several years later, Professor Drummond writing the introduction to the published version of the drama, *The Cardiff Giant*, remarked:

The traveler south of Syracuse along Route II at close of day will sense mystery rising with the mile-long shadows from the great valley at Cardiff and with night coming down the dark slope of Bear mountain to the west, or off the star-crowned hills of Pompey to the east—mystery which could cause him to think some wonder might come upon us there, and he would, maybe, believe, as did Onondagans of the sixties.

For the Indians well knew this valley and these hills as places of old mystery: stone giants clanking through the underground; great men of old striding across the hills; gigantic Indian prophets of centuries gone who had foretold the coming of the white men, and who had prophesied that they themselves, after death, would again be seen by their peoples.

The earlier whites actually exhumed bones of huge, prehistoric men along the hills of Pompey, and later where the first roads and the railways edged into the rocks on their routes into Canastota or Cazenovia! Mystery in the old days had possessed this land of solemn and rugged beauty; and so now from our “joy in believing” in a wonder, even the “American Goliath” is not perhaps so remote from some of us.

We found an old man in Cardiff, Mr. Nichols, who lived alone in a shack. He was the son of one of the fellows who had dug the well and uncovered the giant's foot. Mr. Nichols had seen the giant lying in its grave, and he had some yellowed photographs of the scene and the wonder. He took us to the exact spot where the hoax had taken place. From him we got the atmosphere and the flavor of the event. We found other old-timers who remembered songs that were

sung at the revival meetings or who had poems that had been written to commemorate the find. We discovered relatives of Stubby Newell, and little by little we assembled a fine body of working materials.

Such materials included, in addition to the items described, notes made from the newspapers of the period, the *Syracuse Journal* and the *Ithaca Journal*, especially, from articles in magazines describing the wonder, and from actual statements gleaned from published lectures by various personalities involved. We also dug a bit into the backgrounds of Stubby Newell and George Hull, and we did extensive reading relating to the topics of the times and to the state of New York crops and climate in 1869. In other words, we assembled a fairly complete body of information pertaining generally to the region in the particular year we wished to set the drama.

During our work collecting materials, we discussed the form of the play. We believed that the play must be flexible in form to allow for the inclusion of many scenes and numerous characters. We wanted to draw a merry picture of country life in New York State with its color and variety including the social "bees," the rural school, the church picnics, the political argufiers, and all the rest. To do this, we knew that we must think more in terms of a "show" than of a strictly plotted play. Therefore, with the excellent models of the ancient Chinese theater, the "living newspaper" dramas of the Federal Theater, and the newly produced *Our Town* before us we conceived a New York State show.

One critic, Professor Henry A. Myers of the Cornell English department, thought that we had been successful. He wrote in the *Cornell Alumni News* as follows:

The Cardiff Giant will long serve as a model for advocates of native drama. It deserves, however, to be judged in the larger category of true comedy. In keeping with the homely simplicity of central New York in 1869, the authors see themselves as putting on a show rather than as presenting a play. They have done both. Rich as The Cardiff Giant is in spectacle, excitement and incidents that make a good show, it is fully as charged with the significance that makes a good play. The chorus of school-girls, the canal men, and the State Board of Regents, the showmen and farmers are the very stuff of which laughter is made, but in the laughter and behind it is the revelation of the human spirit through the medium of language.

I got up a first draft of the play which seemed pretty good to me, but Professor Drummond said: "Gard, this is too long. We'll have to cut it." And then he began to work on the play. He proved that he was a true lover of New York State and her stories, for he lengthened the play, added characters, scenes, and generally filled the whole thing with his intimate understanding of the people,

their language, their music and poetry. The final draft of *The Cardiff Giant* had ninety-eight speaking parts. In the first production in the Cornell University theater I played nine parts myself.

When the curtain rose to an enthusiastic crowd of New York Staters and the Narrator was on the stage saying, “You gotta imagine yer back in 1869; that’s when the hoax jelled—in October, ‘69!” it was as if the spirit of central New York State had come alive.

And in the very first scene the folks all began to go to Cardiff to see the giant, and the Erie canallers sang their famous song:

We was forty miles from Albany,
Forget it I never shall,
What a terrible time we had one night
On the E-ri-e Canawal!

Politicians, Farmers, Merchants, Professors, Indians, rich men, poor men, beggermen, dogs! And the preachers began preachin’, and the ladies of the Methodist, Free Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Hard Shell, Spiritualist and all the other churches began singin’ revival hymns, and Dave Harum, P. T. Barnum, Bob Ingersoll, the Board of Regents of the State of New York, the Bloomer Women, and the Yale professors all got on stage at once yelling that the giant was an honest-to-God sign from on high! Yes, sir, in the first scene there was a lot going on, but there was more to come, with the giant lyin’ in his grave there on the stage, and crowds of people milling around and demonstrating lots of kinds of human folly!

When the audiences saw the big show they went away thinking that the New York State Plays project was sure off to a good start, and some of them went home and did some thinking about York State and sent us a lot of good yarns.

I can still feel the central New York State land calling me. When I close my eyes, the patchwork hillsides across the deep valleys are as vivid to me as though I stood on the Cornell campus on a May morning and looked west toward Mecklinburg. I might have lived and dreamed forever in the Finger Lakes country if it had not been for the war. But suddenly one day, there it was, and the course of our creative project in New York State was instantly altered. There was writing, yes, but it was frenzied writing on wartime themes, and when we looked about the land, there were no longer home-grown plays on country stages. Sadly we admitted that the dream must wait, and for me, indeed, the York State project is only a green memory. I have never lived in New York State since.

There were many ideas that I took away from Cornell. Most of these ideas were simply a part of the maturing of other, larger ideas and not definable in themselves. But the large ideas about regional theater that I took away were

definable. Reduced to general terms they are these: A concept of theater must be broad enough to include many things. The traditional materials of the region, at least those having possible literary significance, must be assembled. Writers must be encouraged throughout the region. The people of the region must be “let in” on what the regional drama project is trying to do and a friendly public attitude toward the project must be established. The university should take the role of leadership in the theater arts not only on the campus but throughout the region.

These ideas became very important to me as I moved to Alberta, Canada, to help develop the stuff of a native cultural expression in the province and then to Wisconsin where an idea of theater grew and developed into an idea of place more than merely geographical.

THE WISCONSIN IDEA THEATER

FROM *Prairie Visions*

Individual responsibility and initiative is so highly thought of at the University of Wisconsin that if I had gone out into the state and had not been heard from for several months, I doubt whether anyone would have questioned whether or not I was doing valuable work. It is wonderful to work in an atmosphere and in a tradition of that kind.

But I didn't go anywhere for a time. I sat in my corner and thought and made plans, or visited around the University with men who had been pioneers in many fields, It was stimulating, and for almost the first time I felt that I had stature and respect among men who had made remarkable achievements in fields outside my own. My status at the University I found, was rather unusual. Mine was one of the first appointments the University had made that cut across departmental lines. I was a member of the faculties of three University divisions, and this, I was told, had been done to give me support and backing of the entire University.

These early days at Wisconsin were good days, but they were worrisome, too. I was eager to get into the field, to meet the people of the state. But I held myself back. I believed that certain things must be done first. There must be a name for a great state-wide theater movement. There must be a state-wide office at Madison with roots of communication going into the state. There must be plans for a theater on the campus where new plays by the regional authors could be played in try-out productions. There must be a playwriting project set up. There must be liaison made with the arts of music and painting, so that the whole field of a person's art concept might progress. There must be a touring company organized to carry plays of the region to the people of the region, and there must be a banding together for purposes of education and philosophy of all the theater interests of the state; and there must be a folklife organization to preserve and collect state tradition. And although I had freedom and good will I

was still, with the exception of a few, almost alone in understanding of the largeness of the thing I was going to attempt. I worried considerably.

The name was a first concern. I thought of such inept titles as the “Wisconsin Theater Program,” the “Wisconsin People’s Theater,” the “Wisconsin State Theater Project.” I discussed possible names with many persons, but nothing materialized. Then one day I was reading a book by a man named Charles McCarthy. This book was called *The Wisconsin Idea* and it seemed to mean a wonderful sort of expression of good will that arose in the state after 1900—a peaceful means used with intelligence to accomplish reforms and general good for all the people. Later, after the political meaning of the Wisconsin Idea had slipped into disuse, the University became the symbol of its meaning in the undiscouragable quality that has come to mean broad and untiring service, and a giving out of the fruits of knowledge by those that have knowledge, to those who have a need of it.

The term itself seemed to have no very general usage when I first went to Wisconsin. Indeed, many persons I talked with about the Wisconsin Idea had heard the term but had only the most vague idea of its meaning. I was greatly intrigued by it, however, and it suddenly occurred to me that here was the perfect name for the new Wisconsin experiment in theater, especially since the name reflected so strongly the University’s idea of service.

We therefore had some letterheads printed up with the name The Wisconsin Idea Theater along the top of the sheet and it seemed to me that I had found a very unique and original name for our state-wide work. It was a week or so later that I made an interesting discovery. I learned that in 1913, in the very heyday of the original concept of the Wisconsin Idea, there appeared the first issue of a small magazine called *The Play Book* published by the Dramatic Society of Milwaukee and Madison. Leading figures in this organization, which was really the first “little theater” movement in the nation, were Zona Gale of Portage, Thomas Dickinson of Madison, who later became a leading writer on the American Theater, William Ellery Leonard who later achieved a national reputation as a poet and Thomas Wood Stevens who became a greatly loved teacher of drama, and play producer. And in this first issue of *The Play Book* there was an article, entitled of all things, “The Wisconsin Idea in Theater!”

The article was written by Percy MacKaye who also became well known for his plays and his poetry. He wrote, *The Wisconsin Idea* which today [1913] is stirring our nation so deeply in government, science, civics, agriculture and the progress of the people’s self rule, is big with a promise even greater, perhaps, than that which President Van Hise of the University has suggested so admirably in his work.

“The part played by the University of Wisconsin in the development of its idea appears likely to strike even more deeply into untilled fields of man’s

spiritual nature than the plowshares of the state into nature's loam... and the seed being sown in the former is being selected, nurtured with the same scientific spirit as the latter. I refer to the work being done for the art of the theater by the Wisconsin Dramatic Society.

"The policy of the Society is to produce plays of Middle-Western life, written and acted by Americans of the Middle West. Wisely perused it should achieve a notable success. The Society deserves the interest of all Americans solicitous for the growth of the theater as a social institution. The Society desires... to quicken the art of the theater in the soil of society itself, through technical training of the imaginations, dramatic instincts and latent art-impulses of the people in all their natural and local variety. I would take occasion only to note the tremendous vitality and importance of this movement as a necessary and inevitable extension of *The Wisconsin Idea*."

So in 1913, 33 years before our version of a Wisconsin Idea Theater was conceived, there had been this statement which at least approximated one theory on which Frederic Koch of North Carolina and Professor Drummond and a lot of other people had been working: that fine playwriting could be nurtured in the regions of America, and that the result would greatly contribute to theater art. I was particularly eager, therefore, to see what had become of this first movement in Wisconsin, which apparently had had such an excellent start.

An examination of the remaining issue of *The Play Book* show that the idea of an indigenous theater slowly sank from view. The writers and the editor of *The Play Book* turned to a pedantic approach to theatre, and though a few of the plays that had been written as part of the philosophy of the movement like *The Neighbors*, by Zona Gale, remained popular, the basic principle of the encouragement of plays of middle western life seemed forgotten. Perhaps it was the First World War that was responsible. In its deeper sense, however, it was probably the social unrest that lead to the unstable 1920s and that bred a literary trend that emphasized the expatriate type of writer, removed from his homeland and looking back with dissympathy upon the scenes with which he was most familiar.

When I thought about it, it seemed to me that probably it took the great depression to awaken sincere regard for the American scene and its interpretation through authentic materials, and an awareness of the tempers and themes of the American regions. The dust storms of the 1930s, as I well knew from my Kansas days, focused attention on those troubled areas and the people. The wonderful myth of American individualism: every man's ability to pull himself up by his own bootstraps and to make himself an independent part of American commercial life, was at least partly undermined. Sham and unreality suddenly dropped away, and somehow, out of the crying trouble, a new love for the American scene was born.



I was, of course, intensely interested in the Wisconsin land and the lore of the people.

Thinking about it like this I was very proud that I had unconsciously chosen a name for a new Wisconsin theater movement that had such tradition. The gap had been bridged, and it seemed to me that now we were ready to begin on a permanent project, for certainly a great trend in literature was toward sympathetic American portrayals of scene and character. Folklorists were having a field day, and great treasuries of American folklore were actually best sellers in American bookstores—something that had certainly never happened before. The American drama, too, sometimes behind the other arts in the reflection of trend, was trying desperately to catch up, with some musicals and dramatic shows carrying strong native themes.

The drawback, of course, to a mature theater and interpretation of the state was the lack of new writers, capable of writing good serious and comic plays. I determined to do what I could about this lack, and to provide as many stages as I could that would be the workshops of the new writers. I envisioned a plan somewhat like Alexander Drummond's in New York or along the lines of the

one I had directed in Alberta, where the materials of the region, the stories and the songs might be collected and made available to writers. I determined that a playwriting project would be among the first of the many phases of The Wisconsin Idea Theater and then subjects of Wisconsin folklife. I hoped to write myself, and to discover major themes and subjects of the region.

Cogitating about such responsibilities, I began to look, to listen, and to learn. I heard of the pioneers who swept into Wisconsin in the 1830s and '50s and '60s and '70s from many nations, with a deep hope of homeland. I saw the results of their long, hard effort in the transformation of the land, and I wanted to know more about what they did, and what their motivation was. Suddenly the first thoughtful phases of the beginning Wisconsin Idea Theater were over and I was plunged into the active process of creation.

I was, of course, intensely interested in the Wisconsin land and the lore of the people. I had learned to turn my imagination almost at will into a theater where the dramatic highlights of the past and present were rolling across the stages of my mind in a sort of panorama that seemed to roll on and on without end. Sometimes, in the middle of a Wisconsin woods, I would stop for a moment to listen to the wind rising in the pines, and the wind would make me remember how it must have sounded in those greater forests before the lumbering days, or how the wind carried the great flocks of passenger pigeons across the sky, darkening the sky, rippling the water, scurrying the clouds, driving the rains, hurling the sleet and snow, casting the storms upon the Wisconsin pioneers. And as the wind would die to a whisper I could hear voices in the wind. Lonely voices. The pioneer women were lonely sometimes. Perhaps I was hearing their voices. Or perhaps the faint wind was the symbol of a memory of the freedom people sought in Wisconsin, and found. The wind remembers.

Sometimes in the night, thinking about my new weekly dramatic radio program, "Wisconsin Yarns," I would hear the wind and it would seem filled with fear. In my mind I could see a boat wrecked on Lake Michigan; the old Lady Elgin, maybe, that proud ship that carried three hundred Milwaukee citizens to their deaths on the evening of September 7, 1860. Or the fear in the wind might be a great storm sweeping up the Mississippi Valley to strike suddenly at the quiet towns along the river's banks in Wisconsin or Minnesota.

Or the rivers themselves stimulated me to wondrous imaginings: Often I would stand on the stoned banks of the old canal lock at Portage, Wisconsin, and I would remember the dream of those men who had joined with this canal the Fox River to the Wisconsin. And I would remember that the dream was about laden ships coming through the Great Lakes to Green Bay and through the Fox River system and so to Portage where, through this mile of canal, they would enter the Wisconsin and steam down to the Mississippi and so on down to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. Or I would remember the lumber rafts that

floated down river on the St. Croix, the Chippewa, the Black, the Eau Claire and Wisconsin, and how the proud side-wheelers churned up the Mississippi.

And sometimes as I went through the Wisconsin countrysides it was as though I heard imaginary cries of joy. The pioneers shouting for joy at this new land to break and clear. Or it was the crying of thanks to God of the mingled European peoples: the '48 men from Germany trudging into Wisconsin, fled from their revolution-torn nation; or the Norwegians, the Danes, the Swedes, the Poles, the Finns, the Lithuanians, the Hungarians, the Yugoslavs, the Welsh, the Cornish folk with their mining picks and their pasties, the Scotch folk and the English folk. These cries my mind was hearing were from the Swiss people coming to settle at New Glarus, or they were the cries of Kentucky and Virginia men coming to settle the Southwest part of the state. Those cries were the cries of settlement. New land! Rich land! Free land! New life in heavy hearts! Yes, the pioneers, the new settlers, the blood and bone of Wisconsin.

And I was hearing laughter, too, the laughter at tall frontier tales spun by the people about this land to which they had come. And with the laughter is the cheering for the local heroes. Cap'n Scott of old Forts Howard and Crawford who was the best shot with rifle or pistol living man ever saw. Never touched liquor, Cap'n Scott didn't. If he had he sure couldn'ta bored two potatoes tossed into the air, firing as he would from the hip. Was a remarkable man, was Cap'n Scott, just like Davy Crockett, for when coons saw the Cap'n a-coming they would come down off'n their perch and surrender, just like they did for Davy. And when a reckless fellow one time challenged Cap'n Scott to a duel, the Cap'n calm as could be, shot off a piece of the feller's liver and restored him to the best health he ever had!

Or did you ever hear of the Scotch Giant? Seven feet and six inches tall he stood. Lived over to Belmont. Weighed four hundred and fifty pounds, he did. Could swing a plow over his head with one hand, or lift a bar'l of whiskey by his fingers. Could hold a dozen eggs in the palm of each hand and not break one! Or did you hear of Pierre Paquette that worked up to Portage who was so strong that when one of his oxen gave out Pierre just yoked himself into the team and pulled along with 'em? Or did you hear o' Allen Bradley of Rock Island that measured four feet around the chest and wore moccasins because no shoes would fit him? His hands were broad as shovels and he could cut seven cords of body maple in a day. Could lift a thousand pounds. Easy.

Or maybe those cheers are for Whiskey Jack who was hero of the raftsmen, and fought and drank his rowdy way all up and down the lumbering rivers! Or maybe they're for Ernie Hausen, who lived right over in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, and was the world's champion chicken picker. Can pick a chicken blind-folded, or handcuffed, or wearing mittens, or with his bare feet, and his world record is picking a chicken clean in three and one half seconds. He can make

eighteen or twenty-four dollars an hour picking chickens. Easy.

There's a drumming sound in the air sometimes in Wisconsin. There's a strange drum that sounds from Lake Michigan, too, whenever a ship is lost. And there was a sound that I'd fancy I'd hear sometimes that was like the sound of a breaking heart. Maybe it's old Chief Black Hawk's heart breaking when, after the Black Hawk War, most of his people had been killed, and he'd been taken prisoner. Or I was hearing the breaking heart of Eleazer Williams, of Green Bay, Indian missionary, victim of grand delusions. Perhaps it was his heart breaking when at his death, he must have realized that he simply couldn't make the world believe that he was the Lost Dauphin of France, rightful heir to the French throne.

And along with the imaginary things heard, my eyes were seeing the lore of raw theater, and transmitting the feeling of theater to my creative self. I noted the rising land of the Baraboo Range of purple hills, and knew an inner theater that the mystery of their color brought to life. I was seeing the pea vineries in canning time, where Mexican laborers wearing bright handkerchiefs were working side by side with the Wisconsin farmers. Their movements, as they pitched the green vines into the shelling machines, was the movement of living drama.

One time I stopped to watch a country auction, and I saw the personal belongings of the last member of an old Wisconsin family being auctioned off. The auctioneer lifted from a trunk a yellowed wedding dress, and when he asked for bids there was a titter of nerved-up laughter that brushed across the audience. And then the laughter was still as a very old lady made her way from the back of the crowd and offered her small bid for the dress. It was undisputed and she took the dress and tottered away with it. At a local gathering that night I heard the story, and it was like a play, for the dress had been worn fifty years before by one lady, but it should have been worn by the old lady who finally bought it.

A feeling for places, and at least an instinctive understanding of the lore of the people seem basic to the creative processes of anyone wishing to make sincere and honest dramatic interpretations of regional scene.

GRASSROOTS ART

FROM *Coming Home to Wisconsin*

So many of my efforts are, in part, only a prelude to the very special and unusual encounters that occasionally take place. I remember one fall-time journey which carried me into the woods north and east of Hayward, a country of deep swamps and timber where coarse grasses rasp together slowly in the filtering breezes. It is country where a flick of movement sensed far away through and among the splashed shadows might mean an alerted deer, a country where the moss-covered stumps and the dim trails recall the days when the forest was a setting for crawling, endless motion and echoing sound of the great lumberjack days. I had heard of a man in this woodland who was delicately attuned to all the sights and sounds of the forest and whose pencil, crayon, and brush had given life to the essence of the forest itself. I wished to meet him, for the image of woodland artist living in solitude and sketching and painting with sensitive, intimate passion for the forest reality stimulated my curiosity.

I found his cabin, finally, and stood for a moment looking at it. It was a shack of unpainted boards with one tiny window and a low, plank door. The dooryard was a bramble patch with a path to the outhouse. Among the brambles were the skeletons of old machines, bleak, unidentifiable. The whole scene was interlaced with loneliness, and the ugly vestiges of human habitation filled me with uneasiness. I walked around a skimpy woodpile and approached the door.

As I came to the door I could hear a soft, yet rough, sound from within the shack and I paused a moment trying to define it. It rose and fell and fell and rose and was somehow echoed by the broken flow of the wind in the tops of the pines away from the clearing. I knocked at the door.

Instantly the sound stopped and a tremendous barking began. A voice said, “Quiet! Quiet, damn ye!” and the barking stopped instantly. There was motion beyond the door and suddenly it was pulled open violently. The smell came first, even before I could focus on the man who stood in the open door, a smell

that instantly flooded my mind with memories of other bachelor shacks I had visited in Kansas and New York and Alberta, especially Alberta, where bachelor living was defined on prairie and on mountain by rigid rules of filth and convenience. As I peered at the man and the cluttered interior I could see that he was short, that his hair was intensely black and uncombed, that he wore no trousers at all — only dirt-streaked drawers that ended in huge, thick-soled shoes.



The whole scene was interlaced with loneliness...

I could see at the far edge of the room his bunk, out of which he had quite obviously just crawled. It was occupied now by two huge hounds who looked at me steadily from the depth of human-warmed blankets.

There is a delicacy about situations such as this. Doors close so easily. Perhaps intuitively my eyes stayed on the dogs and I said, with the memory within me of dark-tan hounds in an eastern Kansas woodland on a frosty October night, “Those are fine dogs.”

He moved slightly. “They are.”

“They trail?”

He said, “They are good.”

To break the conversational ice I told him I had lived near a river, the Neosho, in Kansas, a great coon river, where there were mussels to be had in plenty, where there were ravines and tall cottonwood timber, where in the fall a good dog’s voice could be heard near two miles, and where, when the dogs would call, we would hurry through the woodlands and over the frost-stiff grass with a lantern throwing crazy shadows around us as we ran.

He moved away from the door and I went in. We fenced, jockeyed, and

eventually I admitted that I was from the University, that I had heard he was an artist, and that I had a sincere desire to view his work. He quite properly denied this for a time, but eventually he reached under the bunk and pulled out a bundle wrapped in old canvas. He grabbed the hounds by the necks and jerked them off the bunk. He laid his bundle carefully on the bunk and unrolled it. Here were some cheap crayons in boxes, a couple of dime store watercolor trays, some pencils and brushes and tubes of oil. There was also a roll of what looked like common, white shelf paper. He lifted the roll and smoothed it out. One by one he lifted sheets of paper and spread them on the bunk. The wildlife of the northwoods was there, suddenly, in the filthy shack, reproduced in breathtaking originality against delicate backgrounds of swamp and grasses and the dead rubble of decaying forest. I stood for a long while gazing at the pictures. After a time I said, "I've got to be going. Thanks for one of the great experiences of my life."

"Come back anytime," he said, and he began to gather his pictures, tenderly rolling them again for the bundle. He retied the bundle and thrust it under the bunk. As I went to the door the hounds jumped on the bed again and snuggled into the blankets.

A PORTRAIT OF PLACE

FROM *Grassroots Theater*

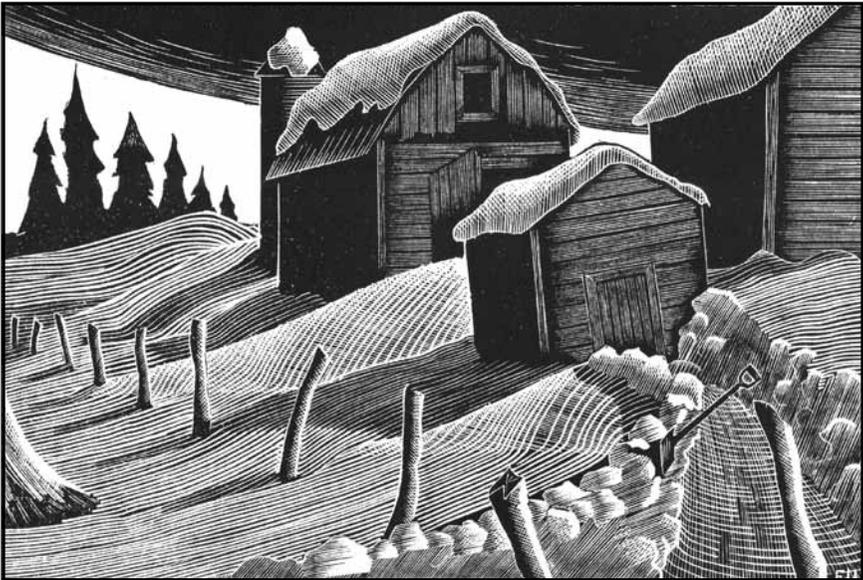
Wisconsin does not possess the soft insistent mystery of central New York nor the overpowering breadth of the Short Grass country of western Canada, but the state has its own appeals which, to me, are always more the result of Wisconsin traditions than of the geographical character of the land. One of these traditions is certainly the attitude with which people accept the Wisconsin Idea in education. For example, I was invited one evening "to make a talk on drama" at a crossroads town hall set at the edge of a large cornfield near Oconomowoc. The lady who invited me, Mrs. Isabelle Tremaine, the wife of a prosperous farmer, had written: "Come on for supper. Afterwards you may make your talk."

I arrived at the Tremaine farm about six and was discussing rural approaches to the drama with my hostess when Mr. Tremaine staggered into the kitchen with an ugly gash in his forehead. He had smashed into a steel stanchion in the dim barn and was temporarily hors de combat. Now, cow milking in its various forms is one of the skills one never forgets and certainly I had had enough milking in my Kansas boyhood to make a permanent impression. I offered to take over at the barn and my offer was accepted easily, naturally.

The Tremaines had a milking machine, but there were certain cows who would not stand for machinery. With my head in a warm flank I meditated about a state where the role of a professor from the University is as natural to cowmilking as to conducting classes in adult education. The people of Wisconsin through their tradition of the Wisconsin Idea understand the necessities of milking and adult education equally well, and professors and people are generally on common ground. After I had finished the milking and had had a bite to eat I went to the hall and gave my little talk. It was accepted by the rural audience with the same ease and naturalness and understanding that my offer to milk the cows had been. With such understanding of motives and methods I, at least, have found the strong flavors of Wisconsin places pleasant to savor. I

have become familiar with Wisconsin's past, and I have found the past always adding spice to present observations. Not to know the past of a region is like viewing the setting but never seeing the drama.

How empty a trip westward from Madison toward Mount Horeb and Mineral Point would be for me if I did not know that I was traveling on the ridgeroad, the old military highway which carried the heavy lead wagons rolling slowly from the mines at Mineral Point, New Diggings, Benton, and the whole southwest. How empty my journey would be if I could not imagine the rolling wagons, the drivers, their speech, the dust, the blue jackets of cavalrymen, the settlers' rigs, and the immigrants from Europe on foot plodding along the ridgeroad, seeking new freedoms of many kinds, finding new freedoms in the valleys and on the hillsides. How empty my journey if I did not know that to the north and south of the road were valleys where Norwegian names are thickly sown with, here and there, a few Irish, English, or German shoots sticking through. I know that there are other valleys not far from the road where Swiss names are as thick as Norwegian and others where German names blanket the



Grant County is a county of low hills, farming country cut sharply by ravines and valleys and quick flooding streams...

countryside. It is warming to know where the plantings of names lie on the land and to know how the seed came to the soil.

It adds zest to my journey to know that the ridgeroad is the stamping ground of an elusive “haunt”—the Ridgeroad Ghost. In 1820 near Mineral Point, a Missouri man murdered a Virginian in a quarrel over a pretty Cornish girl. The Missouri man got the maiden, but the Virginian took up a flitting, terrorizing vigil as a ghost along the ridgeroad. He is seen sometimes riding a two-wheeled rig to which is hitched a splendid team of blacks (breathing fire, some say) The team and driver appear suddenly on the ridgeroad at night weaving in and out of traffic, causing squeals of terror and sudden endings to midnight romance. The Ghost sometimes is said to appear riding the cowcatcher of the occasional engine which huffs its slow way across the ridgeland on the Chicago and Northwestern branch line. The Ghost is not seen so often nowadays, since many of the Welsh and Cornish folks who lived along the ridgeroad have disappeared. But an imaginative traveler can spot him. I have.

The folklore of the region is always the coloring of the region’s portrait, and the response of Wisconsin people to adult education is a part of the picture, too, an inspiring part, especially when the educational program is attached to the arts. For example, Grant County is a county of low hills, farming country cut sharply by ravines and valleys and quick flooding streams. There are towns, too, which seem to me to be very mid-American. One cold March afternoon there was a meeting at Lancaster. This was a meeting of a group of Grant County rural artists. They had been called together to see the movie the State Department in Washington had made of their Grant County art activities. Many of the artists were actors in the movie. They brought their neighbors and families to see this movie which would be shown in nations all over the world to demonstrate that rural America has a culture of its own. The meeting was held in the local movie theater where there was 35 millimeter equipment. The place held about six hundred persons and it was full. Many of the business people of Lancaster came in, too. In the lobby of the City Hall next door paintings were piled and stacked, waiting to be taken upstairs and displayed. The artist-in-residence from the University of Wisconsin was to attend the showing of the movie and, afterward, to offer criticism and suggestion on many of the paintings brought in by the people. There was to be a supper, too, held right there in the display hall, and many of the farm ladies had brought covered dishes, or pies, cakes or meats.

I drove over from Madison with Aaron Bohrod, the artist-in-residence, Jim Schwalbach, the traveling Extension artist who had arranged the meeting, and a gentleman from the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, Edward D’Arms. He had come out to see at first hand some of the field work in the arts going on in Wisconsin. He was interested but a bit unbelieving.

“Perhaps,” he had said on the way over from Madison, “we are not ready for a people’s art expression in America.”

We sat in the back of the theater and saw the movie which had been produced by Julian Bryan who had done many good films. It was good, a work of art. The rural folk in the cast with their easy naturalness turned out to be some of the best actors we had seen. We were excited, and D’Arms expressed eagerness to go upstairs and see some of the paintings these rural folk had been doing.

We climbed the City Hall stairs and entered a long room. It was jammed with people, and there were countless original paintings lined up along the walls on tables. A passage opened before Aaron Bohrod as he went to the far end of the room. He was greeted with enthusiastic and friendly calls from every side. The people were not embarrassed. The fact that he was an outstanding American artist made no difference in their attitude toward him. He was one of their group. He believed in them and what they had been doing. He set up an easel and called for the first painting.

An elderly farm woman brought the first one. It was of a barn and cattle and a tree. Bohrod set it on the easel and commented with respect. He called attention to good points and bad, making his criticism always constructive and helpful. Then came a bachelor who had turned a corn bin into a studio; then came a high school girl, a feed store operator, more housewives, and a school teacher, a country doctor. More and more.

We watched and listened. D’Arms grew thoughtful. He made notes in a black book, asking for names and occupations of the people. Finally someone thought of food. Pictures were taken off the tables and the food was spread. We all sat down together. A grayed little lady sat beside D’Arms. She said to him, “Do you see why we like to live in Wisconsin?” He said, “I think I do.”

One night in 1950 I was invited to a farmers’ meeting that had a double purpose. The first purpose was the discussion of an economic measure near to the community’s heart, and the second purpose was to discuss what that community might do through theater to draw the community into a more cohesive body. My part was distinctly secondary on the program.

The economic question was this: Our Wisconsin Legislature recently put through a law requiring that farmers have a separate milkhouse with a concrete floor and that they haul the manure away from the barns every day. There was a date set at which time all the milkhouses must be ready. Many farmers disliked the law. They were short-handed. They had no time to build a new milkhouse. Some of them had always let the manure pile up around the barn throughout the winter and, by Gad, they would continue to do so!

This particular meeting turned into a hot one. The chair got into trouble trying to keep order, and the county agricultural agent was almost mobbed be-

cause some of the folks blamed him for their plight. This community had also summoned its state assemblyman to be present; he had voted for the milkhouse bill in the legislature. They said violent things to him. The discussion was not getting anywhere. They wrangled for a while and then decided to call it off. They turned the meeting over to me.

I was in an uncomfortable spot, faced by anticlimax and the probable futility of trying to stimulate interesting discussion in this particular atmosphere. I knew I simply could not talk about drama in ordinary terms. It suddenly occurred to me, as I fumbled about, that the previous discussion had aspects of a drama: conflict, character, excellent dialogue. So I set about fabricating, without the people actually knowing what was going on, a comic situation in which the various factions and individuals were either for or against the milkhouse law, and before we realized it a kind of group play was actually in progress, only now it seemed in terms of comedy, exciting but laughable, for I had attempted to exaggerate the purpose on both sides and to enlarge on the innocence of the county agent and to exaggerate the well-meaning, slightly self-pitying attitude of the legislator as well as the anger of several of the more outspoken opponents of the milkhouse bill.

In the informally dramatized version of the affair that we made up there at the moment the farmer was getting his whacks at the legislator and the county agent was making his excuses but within the framework of a creative situation. Somehow feelings seemed cleansed, purposes made clear, and actually everyone began to enjoy the situation. In fact, that particular group enjoyed it so much that they decided to put the dramatized discussion on again at a later gathering. And they did, with a big spread of good country grub, with some rural paintings hung around the walls of the hall, and with some singers from a county-wide rural chorus furnishing another aspect of the occasion.

We have tried this kind of community, or group, drama a number of times with general good success. It is, of course, a purely presentational sort of theater in which the members of the audience are actually the actors. The play, if it may be called that, is frank theatricality with the theatrical elements simplified and frankly artificial.

This kind of dramatic expression, which could find great place in countryside life, has a body of precedent. For example, during the nineteenth century Nietzsche, Tolstoi, Rolland, and Appia developed theories of "art for life's sake" and considered a kind of "communal" drama as the art of the future. The form of the group play I have described bears a slight resemblance also to the theatrical concept of Evreinov, the drama theorist and playwright who formulated a theory of drama-in-life.

The form has special value to groups of young persons, especially, who are able to free themselves from their inhibitions and from the ordinary conven-

tional restrictions of the realistic stage. Crowd scenes, for instance, are apt to be highly dynamic and expressive, perhaps confusing to the spectator but satisfying to the participant who is the chief one involved. It is the participant's show. Within its framework is endless scope for education on the part of a leader who may aid the participants in working out more satisfying ways of self-expression through dramatic movement and interplay with other participants.

I have traveled Wisconsin in all its seasons in my search for the flavor of the state. I recall a cold morning at the University's experimental farm at Spooner, up in the northwest corner of the state. It was November, late in the month. Snow was on the ground, and a wet, chilling wind was coming across the cutover and the swamps.

The young home demonstration agent and I paced nervously about the room. We were wearing our heavy coats. She had had a lot of experience with north country economics, very little with theater. She looked continually at her watch. She was embarrassed. She said, finally, "Well, Mr. Gard, I sure hope somebody comes."

I said, "So do I."

That morning I had driven up to Spooner from Chippewa Falls over glass-slick roads. Earlier in the month we had written from the office in Madison: "Dear County Agricultural Agent: Spooner has been selected as a regional meeting place for a one-day drama training school. Would you please notify all persons in your area and the agents in surrounding counties so that interested people may attend?"

We had exchanged several letters. The Spooner office had written that there had never been much drama in that part of the state; folks were scattered out, sort of; and they didn't have much free time. It was hard to scrape a living out of the north country earth; so they hadn't given much thought to putting on plays, but... well, if you want to come up we'll give your training school idea a go. Better wear your long underwear and carry a shovel in your car guess you haven't been up our way.

So here I was, and it was time for the meeting to begin; and not a single person had arrived. The young home agent said, wistfully, "I do wish one person would come." She glanced at me and I knew that she sincerely hoped my trip would not be entirely barren.

I said, "Keep calm."

We paced some more, and finally she said, "There is a lady over in the eastern part of the county who put on a play once. They... they said it was awfully funny."

I said, "That's nice."

She said, "After all, Mr. Gard, the weather is terrible."

She heard a noise, she thought, and rushed over to the window. A car was pulling into the yard. I ran to look, too. She cried, "There are three in that car! Three!" Sure enough, there were. Two ladies and a small boy. The young home agent rushed out to greet them and I thought, "Well, three is the size of this workshop." But it wasn't. More cars pulled into the yard. Suddenly the room was full of people. They entered cautiously, some of them, glancing at me as we shook hands. There were housewives and a surprising number of men. The home agent and I got chairs and more chairs. We were excited now and she was glowing, gratified. She whispered: "They are interested! I can hardly believe it! But they wouldn't have come if they weren't interested! "

Pretty soon the meeting was started. We talked about plays and community life, about local history, legends, about what they could do with their own groups, about playmaking in their own communities. I did not need, I found, to sell them on the idea of theater. Once they saw how theater was a part of their lives they carried me along. They represented church groups and schools. Several rural schools had let the kids off for a day so the teachers could attend the workshop. There were farm men and women. "Too bad weather to work outdoors much," the men said, attempting to pass off their presence as just something to do or just somewhere to go with the wife. But they were interested and showed it, especially when we got around to discussing playwriting based on themes familiar to the region.

One lady said to me: "But, Mr. Gard, we would love to do plays in our town, but we have no stage. We have a town hall, but there's not even a platform."

I told them that although there is a vast amount of the old fashioned and ordinary process of play production going on in Wisconsin, we have become aware of numerous experiments that seem to show that a new idea of theater is evolving. I told them that to some extent the old theater realism is dying out and that many plays are being staged without curtain, footlights, or even scenery. I told them that I believed the emphasis seemed to be coming at last to a real appreciation of human character and situation basic to people's lives. When plays cannot be found to fit the needs of the people, someone or some group must make up a play; in such playmaking there is a wonderful freshness.

I told them about such a play I saw that represented life on the town square at Stevens Point. I reminded them that Stevens Point is a small city in the heart of a large settlement of Polish people and that these Poles as well as others are in the habit of bringing farm produce to sell on the square. The play, I recalled, was colorful with dancing and singing—dances and songs the people sang and danced and everybody knew. The play used characters and subjects familiar to the central part of Wisconsin. The play was a hit, and I told the group that I believed that if we could again make our theater meaningful and joyful in terms of ourselves a great American people's movement in theater would spring to life.

I showed them how to arrange the chairs in the hall so that plays might be presented in the center of the room, and I discussed the movement in central staging that is finding popularity all over America. It was a new idea to most of the folks. We talked more theater and had lunch together.

In the afternoon a group of writers came in. Three of them had original novels. It was dark night when I got away from the farm. I said goodbye to the young home agent. She said, "You're sold on this stuff... plays and writing and art, aren't you?"

I said, "Are you?"

She said, "We'll have a drama festival up here this Spring."

RURAL WRITERS

FROM *Grassroots Theater*

I had an unformulated notion when I came to Wisconsin that a state-wide program in creative writing must be one of my objectives. As time went on I studied the possibility more and more. A conscious stimulation of wide interest in creative writing had never been attempted in the rural areas of the state. Playwriting had been emphasized by the University from time to time, but the whole idea of creative writing as a countryside movement had not been dealt with. Besides its worth to the individual, I saw in creative writing a stepping stone leading toward the public consciousness of the arts I visioned as a possible major result of all our work in Wisconsin. I saw creative writing as one intensification of the home-based or home-grown culture ideal. And I saw the Wisconsin Idea Theater, more and more, as a kind of center around which a campaign to encourage and develop home-grown theater, art, and literature might be conducted. I sensed intuitively that a free literary movement in rural areas might spread and grow quickly, since writing did not necessarily require the same group focus characteristic of theater participation.

The Rural Art project had grown from thirty exhibitors in 1938 to fifteen hundred in 1948, and I saw no reason why creative writing might not be equally well received as another creative facet of Wisconsin country life. From what I had observed in other places of the widespread desire to write, I guessed that the Wisconsin countryside was ripe with poets and that the sheets of all the original short stories and plays written each year in the state would probably paper all the rooms in all the houses of at least a small Wisconsin town.

For a long while I had wanted to open the creative writing idea up, expand it beyond just playwriting, and at last I determined that this must be done. I realized that there were several considerations one must make in developing such a literary movement. My aim was not only to awaken people to the creative factor in their lives but also to stimulate them to the ultimate production

of literary art forms. I recognized the values of a self-expression program on a broad sociological level in keeping with the general principles of the Wisconsin Idea, but I also envisioned fine books and plays and stories arising out of the broad movement through a few particular talents. The third notion inherent in the idea of a people's literary movement was, of course, that of area interpretation. I hoped for poetic or deeply sensitive writing about home themes superior to that brought out by the State Centennial.

All these considerations I had mulled over, but by the Summer of 1948 no actual plan had materialized. The opening up of a creative writing idea developed without warning. I had discussed many times with Wakelin McNeel, "Ranger Mac," the naturalist and 4-H Club leader, the possibility of encouraging the writing of more good short plays for young people's use. We knew the great need for a sincere, creative dramatic literature within the performing capabilities of young rural folk, and we thought that perhaps an appeal made directly to the leaders of 4-H clubs in the state would have merit. We hoped that several of the more creative leaders themselves would write plays which might be widely used by many groups. I volunteered to meet in Madison for a few days with any of the leaders who might wish to come and participate in a kind of writers' roundtable with the specific purpose of developing rural-life plays. Wakelin McNeel made the offer known through his office channels, and a few weeks later on a hot June morning when I had almost forgotten about the proposal my phone rang. It was McNeel and he said:

"There are nine people from rural Wisconsin here to see you."

"What for?"

"They want to talk about that writing."

"The rural plays?"

"Sure."

I said, "I wish I'd known they were coming today. I'm pretty busy."

"One of the women has thirteen children."

"A farm woman with thirteen children has time to come to Madison and talk about writing?"

"She's here," he said.

"All right, I'll see them right now. Where?"

"Bascom Hall. There's a classroom reserved."

I went up the Hill to Bascom. I found the nine people in a hot room that looked out on the slope down to Lake Mendota. There were eight women and one boy. The boy was about eighteen years old. One of the women was tall and gray, two were young, one was fat and jolly, one was quiet and serene, one was dark and small, two were middle-aged. They waited for me to say something, and as I paused a moment looking at them, for no reason at all, I began to remember the happy and careless life I led as a kid in the Neosho River Valley

down in Kansas. And it seemed that my early experience had had for me the unshackled quality of complete freedom, the gaiety, the unreasoned and complete savoring of the goodness of earth and sky, the unquestioning appreciation of neighbors and music and dancing. And with the memory of the free wildness of my youth running through me these folks who had come to see me were transformed. I forgot that they had come to Madison to talk about the technical processes of creative writing. They became, instead, a symbol of a group of my neighbors in Kansas or of people I had encountered on my wanderings, people who knew a wordless appreciation of the theater that was life.

Then I said to the eight ladies and the one boy: "You are like a group of my neighbors when I was a kid down in Kansas."

The tall, gray one said: "You remind me a little bit of a neighbor of mine up in Manitowoc County. He's a farmer. Not really a very good farmer."

"Why did you come?"

"I don't know exactly. Except that we've heard that you want people to write about their own places and the folks they know well. I think I could do that."

I said to them: "Tell me about yourselves. Where did you come from and what kind of places are they?"

And then began one of the most incredible experiences I ever had. These nine persons stayed at the University for three days; and every day about 9:00 in the morning we would start talking together. And as we talked our lives and the struggle in them emerged to lie against the whole fabric of our native places; and as we talked, hour after hour, a kind of fantastic play that was like life itself began to emerge and to encompass us all within its spaceless and formless self. There were times when we would speak, not as ourselves, but as imaginary characters that grew from our talk of people and events that were as real as the earth itself. The whole affair was a kind of dramatic ecstasy in which we were both the actors and the audience, the dancers and the music.

When the three days were over, it was as though a kind of dream had ended, with no more explanation than that with which it had begun. Then we awoke suddenly and realized that we had hardly mentioned the processes of writing at all and that, instead of a partly completed manuscript tucked in pocket or purse, we had only a confused but terribly exhilarating sense of something that had stirred our lives.

When the group was ready to leave Madison, I said: "I have met with hundreds of groups like this one, and I have seen hundreds of plays, but I have never had a deeper sense of theater than we have had together."

The tall, gray lady said: "I think it was because we all had something to express, and we did express it, and maybe the memory of it is somehow better than the written play.

"I wish there were more persons like yourselves."

“Mr. Gard,” said the tall, gray lady, “there are hundreds and thousands of rural men and women who live on the land and love the land and who understand the true meaning of the seasons and man’s relationship to man and to his God.”

I said: “If that is so, the plays they send to me don’t reflect such an appreciation.”

She replied that she thought one reason the plays reflected little poetic appreciation of the area was because everything was made to seem too complex, too technical, too difficult. She said there must be a great, free expression. If the people of Wisconsin knew that someone would encourage them to express themselves in any way they chose, if they knew that they were free of scenery and stages and pettiness that the plays we do seem so full of, if they knew that someone would back them and help them when they wanted help, it was her opinion that there would be such a rising of creative expression as is yet unheard of in Wisconsin and it would really all be a part of the kind of theater we had had these past three days, for the whole expression would be of and about ourselves.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

FROM *Coming Home to Wisconsin*

What indeed, did I come to accomplish in Wisconsin? I return again to my early days at Madison. It is 1945, a hot afternoon in early September. I am in the catacombs of an old red brick building they call Science Hall. It is where a man I am to work with has his office. Leslie Brown is slim, gray, very alert, very friendly. Among other subjects, he is concerned with the importance of the arts in people's lives. He is a specialist in popular education, in adult education. We fence for a moment, estimating our purposes, backgrounds. Suddenly Brown grabs an old straw hat. "Let's go have a beer... where we can talk."

We walk silently to a nearby tavern on University Avenue. Brown said, as we sat down, "There used to be over a hundred brands of beer made in Wisconsin and if it hadn't been for the opposition of the German Saloonkeepers League, we'd have had Woman's Suffrage a long time before we voted it in 1919. Also, there are practically an infinite number of bars in Hurley, Wisconsin, a town of about a thousand. And Wisconsin stands fourth in the national per capita consumption of all liquor; and first in the nation in consumption of brandy."

"Really?"

He said, "All that information is purely incidental. Now tell me what are you going to do in Wisconsin? There is a lot of curiosity about you here. What are you going to do that hasn't already been done?"

I took a deep breath. This was it, really. Talk before had been cheap. Now I had to say it. I said, "Look, Brown, I've done a lot of things and seen a lot of places, but nothing I did or saw meant anything until I tied it all up with the Arts and with theatre. That was back in Kansas. Then I was in New York and got interested in the happenings the people remembered; the way they spoke, the dramatic countryside events; and all of that became a theatre for me, too. Later I was working up in Canada, with the memory of the frontier right there, close enough to touch, and that was exciting; a great epic sensation of the past

and how the land was transformed.

“Everywhere I’ve been it’s as though there’s a person or an experience that has revealed to me a new part of the picture; a picture that I want to help develop, and that I hope will lead to an art in America more widely accepted than we’ve ever dreamed. In Kansas a professor named Allen Crafton opened the world of theatre for me. In New York at Cornell another professor, Alexander Drummond, taught me discipline and the wonderful, strange mystery of tales and legends that are a part of the light and shade of this picture of America’s raw theatre and art, because perhaps America will only be as great as her myths and traditions. In Canada I could see what profound effect the frontier has had on us as an American people, and how the necessities of life have to be a part of our art thinking. And long before all that, when I was a very young man, I set out from my Kansas home and experienced the raw, cutting edge of life—the Depression, the drunks, the revolutionaries, the con-men, the workers, the farmers, the weak, and the strong. Now, God help me, in Wisconsin I’ve got to discover still another part of the picture, and hopefully that will be the final part.”

Brown took a large swallow of the beer that made Milwaukee famous. I couldn’t tell whether he had been listening or not. “What is this part of the picture you’ll try to find in Wisconsin?”

I said, “It might be something like this: There are rumblings again about a more deeply American National Theatre. I get letters and hear this talk all the time, about fine American plays touring through the American countryside again, maybe under a national subsidy, and theatre centers and art centers growing in the larger cities. That will be wonderful, and it will be a part of the American cultural idea, but it will not be the largest part and it will not be my part. My part is in the back country, away from the largest center, where the hardest battle is being fought. My part and work is with the creative force that is in the people, and this creative power, developed slowly, in keeping with the life of the people, might finally swell the idea of the arts to a national spiritual crescendo.

“You talk damn big,” Brown snarled.

“And I tell you something else. I believe we ought to try to open a creative life for everyone; in the schools, the communities, on the farms, in the cities... maybe even in the bars and taverns. The arts must now come into their own. It’s the next great American thing we must do.”

The tavern was empty except for ourselves. Brown suddenly stood up and started to pace around, holding his beer glass and making gestures. “I can see this thing growing, too. Everybody ought to be a part of it. The kids and the high schools, and the community groups and the farm folks, the older people, working together and getting closer together through a big idea: through a sensibility of the arts as necessary in life. Maybe soon the federal government will

really get into the picture.”

“You’ve got it right.”

“I don’t know much about the arts,” Brown said. “But I’ll help.”

Brown was wrong. He had the most profound sense of art for he understood that everyone has to live a part of his life in art and in make-believe. During the time he remained in Wisconsin he was a brother to me, and constantly an inspiration.

I have tried sincerely to keep those ideas I expressed that afternoon so long ago, foremost. I have tried to help make Wisconsin a proud territory of the human spirit; of the sensitive approaches of man to homeplace, nature and to art. Through the arts, through so many cultural summations of Old World to New, I have tried, tried, tried; so many communities, so much teaching, travel, seeding—Success? Looking backward now, the State, as I conceived it, appears like a battlefield. The debris of conflict is everywhere; discarded dreams lie helter-skelter like thrown shields of ancient warriors; yet a sense of unique Middle West civilization is there, too, and above the plain, some monuments.

Looking further backward at the years of my Wisconsin experience, I am appalled and unbelieving as I observe the scope and number of projects, ideas, schemes, educational programs and organizations that have been launched largely, I suppose, out of the sense of mission that brought me to Wisconsin. I only hope that the great men and women who shared my beliefs know somehow that the arts in Wisconsin are alive and that they are thriving through the work of University Extension and the much more recent Wisconsin Arts Board. Sometimes I even think that Mr. McBride would know and approve. I have often comforted myself by thinking that he was going to fire me from the gang because he knew I ought to be doing different work.

I recently found documents in our archives relating to my establishment of the Rural Writers and the friendship of a great volunteer leader, Fidelia Van Antwerp; to the founding of the Wisconsin Idea Theatre Conference; the Wisconsin Regional Writers; the Council for Wisconsin Writers; the National Community Theatre Training Centers. I found abundant correspondence with the officers of the Rockefeller Foundation; with David Stevens; with Les Paffrath of the Johnson Foundation (always a backer of my programs); plans for Wisconsin Folk Drama tours that David Peterson, L.G. Sorden and I launched; the fine program in behalf of minorities, the handicapped and incarcerated “The Arts and Human Need;” the Upper Middle West Professional Playwright’s Laboratory with Dale Wasserman; with the founding of the Rhinelander School of Arts; programs of cooperation with the countries of Finland and England; the forming of the Wisconsin Arts Council and Foundation; work with Native Americans; with rural communities; with the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences,

Arts and Letters; with state folklore and folklife; work with the elderly; with the Wisconsin Bicentennial Commission; with book publishing and scores of letters to and from my good friends, Cap Pearce and Charlie Duell in New York at Duell. Sloan and Pearce; projects with Augie Derleth and other writers; with Allen Crafton and Alexander Drummond; with a hundred graduate students and assistants; with the Arts and the Small Community; the National Endowment for the Arts; with 4-H Clubs; with the National Theatre Conference; with national surveys of the American Theatre; with national and international organizations; conferences with thousands of writers eager to realize themselves... and the establishment of the Robert E. Gard Wisconsin Idea Foundation at Aldebaran Farm at Spring Green. All these things I have done, or caused to be done.

My life in Wisconsin has been a rich one; yet overall the whole experience of “coming home to Wisconsin” has taught me how necessary it is to probe deeply into the life and background of a region if the feeling of what has really transpired is to be important. It is something beyond the superficial, and even beyond the bitter necessities that a land imposes upon its settlers; it is more the spirit of a place and its distillation in human lives. That theory applied now makes me sure there must be even more great writing about the development of Wisconsin. I do not mean more history, already splendidly done. What I mean is a great and dramatic portrayal of the spirit of the people of Wisconsin... in terms of their epic arrival, struggle, the design of their nationalities. A magnificent canvas ought to be created. I am familiar with the scope of the Wisconsin land, and how the land beckoned to people. I know what happened when they converged upon Wisconsin, freedom seeking, land seeking, their families destitute for the most part, their women self-sacrificing and humble, but with terrible pride and courage. I have read the epic novels of Rolvag, the novels of Moberg; I have read the novels and the stories of Hamlin Garland, but in all of them something is lacking that is implicit in the Wisconsin story. It is a vision that was here; a great responsibility to self, to future, that ended, finally, in the concept of the “Wisconsin Idea:’ If a writer could catch that flicker of world greatness... buried in so many, many humble and seeking hearts... there it would be. It was, of course, this elusive thing, this heartrending idealism of simple people and also the terrible intellectual necessities that helped bring about free education and libraries; the gift, at least in part, of early free-thinking German intellectuals, who beginning in 1845 brought and maintained the search for a world betterment. It seemed to congeal, to focus, to become inevitably a part of Wisconsin, the soul, the spirit.

All of this, with the smell of manure on the spring air, the way the rivers look in April, the dark of forest tracks, the far flung University that spreads

its influence into every home... the farm girls and boys with multitudes of hard-won fair ribbons, the great cattle herds... the brown of fall corn, the silos, the barns so large, the fields so many, seen from above, in the air. The green of summer, the contours, and the wish for the cold green of primitive eras...all of this...drew me, draws me, and makes the Wisconsin sensation real for me. It is a sensation that “comes home” to me every time I realize this is my Wisconsin. I am at home here with all of this.

ALTERING THE FACE AND HEART OF AMERICA

FROM *Grassroots and Mountain Wings*

When I was asked to say something pertinent as to where we have been in this fascinating game of encouraging the rural arts, I got to thinking, well, yes, maybe I could say something about that because I must now be one of the oldest living survivors of that somewhat gallant group of men and women who believed that America could become something greater and more glorious in the arts, and perhaps at the grassroots.

At the end of a recent book of mine “Prairie Visions” I wrote this paragraph: “I have tried sincerely to make Wisconsin a proud territory of the human spirit, of the sensitive approaches to home, nature, and to the arts. Through the arts, through so many cultural summations of the Old World to New, I have tried, tried, tried, visited so many communities, done so much teaching, travel, seeding—Success???? Looking backward now, the State, as I conceived it appears a battlefield. The debris of conflict is everywhere; discarded dreams lie helter-skelter like thrown shields of ancient warriors; yet a sense of unique heartland civilization is there too. And above the plain some monuments...”

And having written that, and still looking back, I wonder why I had to struggle so hard to effect small changes in community and personal life. You’d have thought some folks would have known better.

Well, maybe to start with, it was hard because in America we have tended to stereotype our communities and regions in certain ways. “That’s just the way this place is, always has been, and danged if we’re going to change it much.” The views of local life are often exaggerated, but accepted as the way people are, look, or the way they are said to look and act in certain areas. And because we are and have always been a very regionally oriented people, very conscious of roots, and despite terrific changes in communications and travel which have smoothed us out, we are still conscious of our stereotypes, sometimes embarrassed by them, or amused. For example, we were once reluctant to admit that

anything very good or great, beyond the stereotypes, could come out of my home state of Kansas.

William Allen White, our great Kansas sage and small town newspaper man (*The Emporia Gazette*) once made a speech as a distant aftermath to his noted editorial "What's the Matter With Kansas." He quoted, "Oh potatoes, they grow small out in Kansas. And, they eat them tops and all out in Kansas." There are forty-three stanzas to this ballad, he said, and the burden of the song is that Kansas is about the 33rd degree in the lodge of the royal arch demon, and that a man, after going through Satan's whole sizzling inferno is sent to Kansas to get homesick for Hades. But in the first place we do not eat them tops and all out in Kansas. We eat them mashed with chicken gravy and ham gravy. And in the second place, we do not have to fill our wells with rocks to keep them from blowing away; nor do we trim the claws of catfish to keep them from scratching the bark off the trees in dry weather. Neither do we send our abstracts to Missouri, so that grasshoppers may not destroy the titles to the land. But these beliefs are so prevalent that the streetcar horses laugh till their sides ache when they see a Kansas man.

Well, every state and most communities have their humorous stereotypes. My own home town of Iola, Kansas had its too; but about the only one I heard as a kid was that Jesse James, on one of his southern forays took one look at Iola and passed it up as a bad job, and went on to Humboldt, and didn't find anything there either, and later on it was cautiously whispered that it was Henry James and not Jesse James who finally took Iola by storm.

But I learned early that such places as Iola and Humboldt, which inevitably have their stereotypes and characterizations, usually hide a sort of affectionate pride which may mask a deeper and very real and sometimes beautiful humanity, gasping for expression and recognition.

Sometimes we have had to simply push aside the overlay of these local prides and stereotypes to get at the living thing underneath; and sometimes this uncovering isn't easy; because we have been taught in school that reverence for the home town, home state and home place is a very real thing... even if we do make up funny or sometimes cruel things to say about them. We have always responded to much that is sentimental and not very good art in America, but which is tender, too. The poems we read and appreciated in my elementary school days sometimes began:

"Oh, fair Kansas, the home of my longing heart,
I'm turning my face to you.
To feel your soft breezes once again
To look at your skies of blue..."

These were the kinds of things we learned in school and in Sunday School.

I remember not feeling at all dismayed when we sang: “Jesus wants me for a *sunflower*.” That was simply justifiable pride.

Later on, before I was really seized by the art bug, I was certainly conscious that we were apt to be called rustics, or rubes, in Kansas. And maybe this came from the way we looked, or from the traveling theater companies which played so often in small town America and called us hick towns or rubes, and the boondocks. And it took us some time to climb away from these characterizations which kind of slowed down our creep toward rural culture. Anyway, I was enough aware to appreciate a small poem which appeared in some old newspaper:

“The chaps that fashion rural plays
No more find types of hick or jays,
Nor bumpkins, boobs or rustic rubes
Among the Kansas boondocks.
The Kansas all know how to write
As well as William Allen White
And they debate affairs of state
As well as Victor Murdock.”

Of course, all this poeticizing isn't in the mainstream of rural community arts. But in a way it is, too, because local prides of many kinds linger behind serious arts development. Local history, local tradition, learned locally, might and has, done much to push onward rural arts movements. Most rural or community culture groups that I am acquainted with start with local lore. In general, people love their regions and their home areas, enjoy poking fun, and occasionally get down to brass tacks to make a local scene a better place to live.

The old influences of the frontier were still very evident and hard to deal with in my young day. My dad, a farm boy from Illinois, had few inclinations to start any kind of rural art movement when he came to Kansas. He came to view the tall prairie grass of which he had heard. But he developed his poetic symbols anyway. I didn't learn about this until I was in high school and had somehow written my first poem, which I think softened me up for what I finally saw going on in him. He was grieving for the poetic ideal, the tall grass, which had been there when he arrived and which wasn't there anymore, and which he had helped destroy.

Which, of course, brings forward the subject of just what kind of nation we are. Our beginnings and our split from Britain is known by all, and save for the long lingering influence of British culture, more and more mitigated through the 19th Century, really our first hundred years or so did little to breed an indigenous American culture. Other than our folk-ways, which had their own style

of dramatization, there wasn't much by way of indigenous American drama or community arts, which was taken very seriously. But the frontier, as Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in his landmark essay, "The Influence of the Frontier on American History," was something of powerful influence. First, we had the necessities of transforming huge areas of land; a task so difficult and dangerous that there was hardly any time for gentle considerations other than household arts, quilting, weaving, furniture making. It was breaking the land, destroying the heavy prairie sods, growing crops, resolving difficulties with the Indians, with the railroads which controlled huge acreages of land along rights-of-ways, or resolving in the west, difficulties with the really large ranching interests. Then, the tasks of taking new homesteads, staying on them and proving a claim to the land. Infused through this was the lasting influence of new settlers, many of foreign birth, who brought wondrous and different values to America, and a determination to make new homes better than they had in the Old Country, and to make a better chance for their children.

Hard work, and passionate devotion to the land, and always the problems of finding markets, getting railroads built, local governments established. Finding somehow a kind of social life which depended on neighborhood get-togethers, home dances and fiddling, rough games, pie suppers, once in a while a quilting bee, and once in a while a singing bee or a spell-down. Schools must be established, churches built. What a huge task our American settlers had, and afterward... later, with you and me, the inevitable consideration: how has all this affected you and me in our determination to estimate America as a cultur-



*When I seek
to rediscover
the Wisconsin
prairie I seek
to rediscover
my own soul...*

ally-minded nation? For somewhere along in my earlier life I became conscious that I was a product of all that had happened. I learned that both my father and mother were of the westering drive, with all the hangovers and values of hard-working people, determined, in every material way, to be attached to the land.

And as I grew and became more aware, and was influenced by several wonderful teachers, the idea dawned that just maybe there was some kind of relationship in all that had happened, to me. I think I developed the notion quite early that maybe in some of our neighbors the sparks ignited by the fever of the western movement were out. I suppose I didn't then really miss the absence of original painting or pictures of any kind (other than calendar art) or the general absence of books and good magazines in homes. I didn't articulate it then, but I suppose I might have wondered why, after the glory and excitement of the search and transformation of a new land, that fever didn't lead on to something else, equally exciting and glorious... and I suppose that in my inarticulate way, I had a glimmer that this might have been the arts. It wasn't, of course, and in one incident this was highlighted for me when I heard about a neighbor woman on a far away valley farm, who was publicly threatened with the insane asylum if she didn't stop sitting at the kitchen table trying to write verses, when she could be shoveling manure in the cow-barn.

And, then, unexpectedly I discovered something about my dad. He would disappear sometimes in the night, and these night excursions became mysterious to me as I grew aware of them. One night I went in search of him, alarmed at his absence, and found him finally, sitting in the midst of a small, remaining patch of wild prairie grass. Once this plot was the long-ago burial ground of a wandering tribe of Indians who had a village on the east bank of the Neosho River. I remember sitting down with him in the grass while a kerosene lantern flared beside us. And he began to explain somewhat inarticulately why he was there, and why this place was important to him. I finally got the idea. About all the wild tall prairie grass was gone. When he'd arrived, the grass was so tall and the constant Kansas wind blew and swayed and bent it so romantically. Now the sod was all broken in our neighborhood. He said to me that night, "Now go out, boy, find the new prairie grass." I finally understood that he meant for me to go out, a searcher, and find the symbols that would change my life, and perhaps help create something great and wild and new for America. It seemed an impossible thing he was asking me to do, but I did agree to go, and before I departed on my life journey I wrote a poem... finished years later, but conceived then, and tried to synthesize what I thought a kind of Grail in America was about, possibly my search for what was left may in some way be a part of why I was requested to write this article.

Meanwhile, what was happening in American communities. Rural sociologists, like Professor John Kolb of Wisconsin, were trying to analyze what had

happened and what was happening. So many communities in earlier days had been closed. Nationalities, of which in Wisconsin there were a great number, remained jealous of their ethnic heritage, and indeed frowned on any intermarriage at all for one or two generations. Then about the third generation that began to break down; but for the most part in the 1920s and 30s it was very much an inner-ethnic culture society, folk dances, nationality games and contests, ethnic musicians, occasionally a play in German or Bohemian or French. And in rural places where there was an intermixture of strong American-generated culture not much at all went on. Indeed, among farmers and businessmen there was a sort of unexpressed suspicion of the arts... and of course, of family members who tried to write or paint, or who perhaps seemed to put too much of their time on making plays. Plays were a little less suspicious because a play could be a kind of community event, enjoyed by a number of people, as was church music and occasionally a community chorus. Indeed, the Wisconsin Dairyman's Association actually used plays to draw farmers to dairy meetings. The most primitive plays were definitely crude, rough, with two or three farmers under a large sheet, one of them holding a crude cow's head up in front... pretending to be an unmanageable critter, and then one or two farmers with some uninhibited comic flare, trying to milk her, with foreseeable consequences. The audience loved such a play... they didn't call it art. They just called it country fun; but next week or so maybe another gossip would put on a simple play which had a story. And this was great too... almost as great as seeing old Brindle kick the stuffing out of Joe and Tom who were trying to extract a little milk for baby, etc. Farmers came from miles away to view such entertainment, and since they had nothing else they thought it was wonderful. And I believed that plays even on such crude levels did something for the community. Little by little I developed the sensibility that more than anything I enjoyed watching people struggling to make their community better places, and to have some fun, especially in the kinds of places I myself knew so well. I slowly began to conceive of the rural arts as the most challenging part of America's search for a self-being.

More and more I discovered that my star, or whatever it was, was pointing me toward experiences profoundly effective on me: such as discovering a prairie acre at the University of Kansas, Mount Oread, on a slope behind the library... just one acre of wild prairie preserved as a memorial to those pioneers who had crossed that way, heading west on the Oregon Trail. And in this acre I found intimations of my Dad's acre in which he sought the remains of his early poetic drives. And the acre at Mount Oread seemed somehow to symbolize my real entry into art when a timely FDR program in 1933 provided a minor wage to work in the Kansas Theater, learning stage-craft, writing plays and finding worlds undreamed of, opening for me through drama. Maybe the prairie acre symbolized the growing love I developed for local history, and a dawning idea of

what local lore and backgrounds can mean to a community, leading often to the expression of a community's heart through theatrical presentation of heritage, theme and character. I also began to be conscious of plays on the local scene, and I went whenever I got the chance to see community plays in rural areas. I could see that the levels of play selection and the whole methods of presentation which realistic plays require, had to be improved, and I put this down as one thing with which I wanted to help and especially to try to steer community groups away from stereotyped presentations in poorly written plays, of doleful and pitiable aspects of rural family life: cruel fathers who wouldn't stand still for any talk of a piano or an organ or melodeon in the house, though mother wanted one desperately, so that Alice and Bill might begin to take lessons. The solution was always: chicken and egg money saved, nickel by nickel by Alice and her mother until... yes, one day a piano does appear, and when Dad unwillingly observes little Alice sitting down, to begin "Humoresque" he suffers a big change of heart... and says, why yes, he himself has always wanted to play the piano... maybe the barn work could get done in time for him to have a little practice too! And so forth, I admired the theme of these plays which showed that there was this hunger for something beautiful in the home. I determined that I wanted to do what I could to portray and to encourage new plays that would seek the real lives of rural people, and the poetry that I knew lay in the lives of rural folk and emerged from their nearness to the land and to neighbors. Such concepts as "quality" or "merely recreative" or "Yes, but it's not really art, you know" didn't really occur to me then though I heard a great deal of scathing talk about these concepts later. I suppose, I learned in time that the recreative arts are fundamental to arts in rural places; and that out of the fundamental desire to have fun with the arts there may well be something more profound that will emerge. That is, if faith and hard work are present and the right leaders are discovered to guide and preserve the very fragile and precious art-motives in home places.

I learned as much as I could about the real necessity of getting at the urges present in all communities, and in most human beings, to find and recreate in visual art, plays, stories, music, the indigenous symbols: so that people recognized the plots of virgin prairie, the landmark ideas and realities that motivated their lives. And I never wasted much time in arguments over whether art in rural areas was worthwhile, or whether it was just trash, done by untrained amateurs. I knew, absolutely, that it was worthwhile and that doubtless it could be improved. I think I somehow saw even then that there was a definite role for the professional artist in the small and rural community. If that could be arranged, I could see how the community would gain from mentorship and example. I could also see that the relationship of the professional artist to the community was complicated and difficult, but needed to be taken into account.

I was a graduate student in 1937–38, at Cornell University, working with one of the great philosophers and masters of drama and esthetics, Alexander M. Drummond, probably the most impressive teacher I have ever known, and one who was certain that the arts must be deeply rooted in American communities. My work at Cornell with Professor Drummond gave me some insights which were alternative to “quality” and “professional.” We substituted the wonderful words “joy, fulfillment, comprehension, change of attitude and selfless participation”... as concepts and values as good or better than the thin “professional” requirements. At one well-remembered national theater meeting held in New York, I tried my best to explain what had happened to a certain community in a rural area, when, instead of learning and presenting a scripted play, we made up a play which tackled a vital human community problem. And I tried to tell how the whole area got involved in a wonderful kind of drama, expressive, meaningful, close to life and close to being or more basically theatrical “quality” than many smooth and artificial professional plays I had seen on the New York stage. The play we made was like a catharsis, in the words of Aristotle who set out the poetics of theater and poetry and music. By that time, my New York audience was perplexed by what I was trying to do. How I wished I might show them just how it was. Anyway, I worked with many native playwrights in New York State, helped them to write and to make plays, and better than anything to help turn the play festivals that were going on, especially among young people into experiences of joy... not doleful mouthing of stereotyped dialogue, sometimes poorly directed and often sullenly presented.

Our aim was to get to the heart, to infuse, to inspire if need be, to find proper leadership and to nourish. We tried not to go in and then withdraw and assume that the growth would take care of itself. And a farmer knows the initial labor has to be kept up; to be in touch, supportive, for a period at the beginning of a cultural development is vital.

I regard David H. Stevens, once director of Humanities for the Rockefeller Foundation, as one of the great leaders and catalysts for a deeply rooted respect for arts at the grassroots. From Vice President of the University of Chicago, he moved to New York to a position that allowed him to encourage, teach and fund many vital American cultural programs. Among the figures that he helped to realize dreams of arts development were Paul Green of North Carolina, Baker Brownell of Northwestern, Frederick Koch of North Carolina (the father of American folk drama), Howard Mumford and Margo Jones of Dallas, George Izenur of Yale. Stevens made possible such monumental projects as the film library of the Museum of Modern Art, and examples of innumerable grants to scholars and movers in literature and drama... everyone during the 1930s and 40s regarded Stevens as the “grandfather of American arts.” He was warm, direct, decisive and generous... more than that, he was quickly sympathetic and

intuitive. He seemed to know what would work and what would not, and whom to trust. He had profound concern for the arts of the American countryside.

My association with him was very long and always rewarding. At the end of a challenging graduate student year at Cornell with Alexander Drummond, I received an unexpected offer from Sweet Briar College in Virginia to come there and teach. Because I was very poor and the salary looked impossibly attractive to me, I went to Professor Drummond and told him I'd decided to accept the offer. He said with no hesitation: "That would be a bad thing for you to do. I have made an appointment for you to go to New York and see David H. Stevens at the Rockefeller Foundation. He wants to see you in the morning."

I had just time to borrow \$35 from Professor Drummond, change my clothes and catch the Black Diamond train for New York. The address was the RCA Building, 49 West 49th Street. When the elevator whipped me up to the 55th floor, I had no idea what to expect. I sat down in the reception room to wait. I had with me one of the full length plays about rural Central New York I'd written, and I thought that Dr. Stevens might want to read it. But when he appeared, an intense, vital man, with very level, penetrating eyes, he said no word about reading a play. He merely gave me a firm handshake, asked about Professor Drummond, and said, "I have arranged a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship for you. We will also finance your work in New York State... I have written this to Professor Drummond. But now we want you to go out to Kansas for a visit to your old home. I'm very interested in ideas you might have as you look at things out there again. I'm happy to see you. Good-bye and good luck. Greet your mother for me."

That was all, but it was the beginning of forty years of deep friendship and steady encouragement and understanding. I have met and talked with many men and women who had an association with David Stevens and each had his own account of their first meeting; always friendly, decisive, and intuitively correct.

My work in New York State went forward, and my interest in native arts was continued after Stevens sent me to do research in native literary materials in the Province of Alberta... I learned that some of the living men and women who had established homes in the frontier period of Western Canada settlement were still alive. I had a chance to meet them and to record their stories. I began to see more clearly that a sense of place was essential to any sincere movement in the rural arts. You had to sacrifice and to love the place where you lived, and you had to feel so strongly about it that your emotion came through in poetry and art. I encountered this idea strongly in Canada; and somehow when the neighbors out there got together to put on a play, they might ask Mrs. Riley if they could use her old rocker as a prop. She said sure they could, but be careful because one of the rockers was kind of weak. Once Mrs. Riley herself appeared

in the play and sat and rocked in the old chair which was her grandmother's and she'd brought it with her from Ontario. As she sat in the chair and then she told some of her story, the symbols became more clear and important. They were so proud of these intimate things so near and dear to them, and each object became so deeply theatrical.

We didn't really worry about "quality" then, or being "professional." We were after deeper values, ideas devoted to and dear to courageous human hearts. I cherished the gatherings at somebody's house, or at a town hall. Here women and an occasional man, gathered to stitch a quilt or to work together on a creative community Christmas project, or to read a play aloud, or just to exchange stories of the way it was when the first ones came out. That was one of my rarest pleasures, to talk to those who were the first, and to record those persons' remembrances.

Later, of course, through the years, I have been harpooned by certain officials of cultural bodies (they should have known better) who wouldn't budge from their static view that the only community arts that could be funded were those that had a professional slant—they didn't care much what—just something that could be called "professional" and therefore have "quality."

I suppose that those who doubted that anything of very much good could come out of the rural areas couldn't have been familiar with an event of mighty importance to rural people everywhere and to their development of a sense of culture. It was in 1914 that Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act which in the long run probably did more for the development of a locally-based concept of the arts than any other one piece of legislation. For the first time, Federal money was made available to the counties of America so that there could be a permanent county agricultural agent at the county seat, and attached to his staff a home demonstration agent, as they were called, to work with the farm women, and later on a 4-H Club agent, and now resource agents, tourist agents, and other personnel. I thought that most influential for my purposes were the home agents who came into direct contact on the local scene, with farm women. General homemaking was one aim, but many went beyond just learning how to can, and clean, and preserve. They encouraged the women to take pride in their homes, to learn about flowers and wild floral arrangements, to hang pictures—not just the usual calendar kind: "stag at bay," or the "Horse Fair," or "September Mom," but real paintings if she could find them, and have some good books in the house and several better magazines: and many nice and often homemade things to make the house seem more attractive.

I say all this was important because of the vast system that developed: roots in every county and in many places they were, and still are, the homemaker groups that stimulated early arts groups, or "councils" though this term didn't figure much until the past sixty years or so. A better deal for farm women took

into account the endless miles a farm wife walked every day, just doing chores. *Country Gentleman Magazine* conducted a survey that showed that a farm woman walked about twenty miles every day. Sometimes the men helped to correct this great energy and time expenditure, and the women had more leisure for the arts.

But there was another great development that all this new activity stimulated and helped. The Smith-Lever Act was 1914, and in 1915 great new cultural tremors began in American theater and other arts. The idea dawning so late that America ought to respect local artists. The American theater had been strangled by great commercial interests who financed and controlled immense chains of theaters and railway cars. They moved plays of the shallowest kind around the country into most of the smaller communities. But about 1915, new forces began to show. New American writers wrote plays about real people and places, and there began to be expressions in American music and art and dance. I cannot say positively that the opening of new avenues of expression to rural people had immediate effect on the new appreciations in American theater and art, but they certainly helped to prepare the climate, and to open the way for the great new American Community Theater movement.

Community theaters, of course, existed in some places before 1915, but I have always felt that the influence of the American Drama Guild, organized in the late teens and early 20s and which swept the whole country, had a definite start from what was going on all over as a new consciousness of native arts. One might have thought that the Drama Guild had a highly elitist development because the Junior League and other such organizations were very instrumental. But that was not the case. The purpose of the Guild was to stimulate theater art at the community level, and bring better plays to American places. They succeeded admirably in doing that, and when the Drama Guild ebbed in the late 1920s, it left hundreds of continuing community theaters in its wake. Later on, some of these theater organizations became the nucleus for community arts councils.

My own time in arts development came dynamically into being in the 1930s and 40s, but I noted these developments, and when Stevens suggested that I take a large journey to scan several possible sites for future arts development, I eagerly accepted. With Rockefeller funds again, I swept around the country, and came at last to Madison, Wisconsin. It was early World War II time and the Northwestern Train from Chicago was packed with service men and women. When I stepped down from the railroad car in Madison, I was simply swept along with the crowd. I wondered what Stevens had in mind by sending me to Wisconsin. All he'd said was: "Better take a look at Wisconsin. And when you visit Madison don't go directly to the University Department of Art. You won't find much fresh going on there I think. Go on over the hill to the College

of Agriculture, that's where things are happening."

Well, I walked up State Street, climbed Bascom Hill, didn't pause except to inspect the great Abraham Lincoln statue, and finally came to the Greek Revival brick building called Agriculture Hall. Inside the front door was the Dean's Office sign. I figured that the Dean should know what was going on, and I turned into that door. By doing so, I came into contact with one of the great influences on American rural arts. Dean Chris Christensen was an immense Dane. He sat at an immense desk with a painting behind him of a farmer standing in the midst of yellow wheat, a boy on one side of him, a girl on the other. He was testing the grain for the coming harvest. I stood in awe in front of the painting and the Dean said: "That painting is by Curry. John Stewart Curry. Do you know his work?"

"I certainly do. He's our best-known contemporary Kansas artist."

"Curry's here on this campus," said the Dean. "I built him a studio here on the agriculture side. He paints there, and rural people from all over the state come to watch him, and to talk with him. We've got a rural art movement going now. I was determined to have Curry here. He's our artist-in-residence... maybe the first at a state university. But what a time I had with the art people. They didn't want him. They said there was nothing in the rural areas worth encouraging. But I rode over there. He's here. I'd like for you to meet him. Stevens told me you were coming."

Well, I did meet John Curry that day, and at his house when I went there was August Derleth, Wisconsin's great regional author. They had just finished doing a "Rivers of America" book on the Wisconsin River. Our talk was long and enthusiastic. "Dean Chris wants poetry to become as important to Wisconsin farmers as scientific agriculture," Curry said.

I felt I'd really come home!

And that's the way it turned out. In the spring I got an offer to join the University of Wisconsin faculty to launch a new cultural program bringing together the arts groups and talents of the whole state. I joined the faculty at Madison in the Fall of 1945.

I named the new program "The Wisconsin Idea Theater" because I saw the grassroots arts development as a kind of theater in which the whole state was the stage. The Wisconsin Idea had swept the country in earlier years of the century when LaFollette in government and Van Hise in education had brought the University faculty into a close working relationship with the state house and with the people. The name helped me because people knew what I was trying to do. The response was wonderful. Almost magically the community theaters, the art groups, the musicians, the writers arose from war-time doldrums. One of the first things I began was a "Wisconsin Rural Writers Association" in which we invited all the writers who lived in rural areas or on the farm, to let themselves

be known. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of poems were sent to me... and out of the flurry and the excitement, a movement to parallel the Rural Artists was formed. Both movements, with "Regional" substituted for "Rural" go forward today, stronger than ever.

But, although events seemed to move so swiftly and contemporaneously for me, seminal ideas had been planted in the state as early as 1910. Then a young professor of English at Wisconsin had proposed to a suspicious and reluctant English faculty that there must be a new course in American Drama. Horrors! Nothing good in English Lit had been recognized since 1832. American drama? What was good about that? But Dickinson wore them down, and he did offer the first such course, so far as I know, at an American State University. Then he went further. From among his students he organized what became the prototype for American community theaters. He organized the Wisconsin Dramatic Society, and drew around him the most talented writers in the state to provide native plays. Zona Gale, of Portage, Wisconsin, wrote the first one... a memorable local play called, "The Neighbors." And Dickinson went on to make the arts a vital force in the Progressive movement in Wisconsin... the chief political expression of those times.

But as years went by, little by little, I began to perceive that all of these cultural influences ought to be looked at from the potential of grassroots bodies, groups, organized especially for the total nourishing and promotion of the arts on home grounds. All of this sounds like old stuff now, of course, but then, in the early 50s the idea of total home grown culture was not very seriously taken. In chunks, like rural art and theater, it flourished separately here and there. Now it seemed necessary for the arts to be brought forward on a common front.

I don't mean to imply that I started the arts council movement. Here and there were examples of that, such as at Winston Salem where Ralph Burgard had done pioneer work, and where Chuck Mark who went to Winston Salem via my group at Wisconsin, carried it on, and both became dynamic factors in the national movement of the Arts Endowment. There were all kinds of things that were influential on me. David Stevens had brought me into contact with Hallie Flanagan whom Harry Hopkins had appointed in 1935, to head the new Federal Theater, and the hangover of this great program, so ingloriously ended by a doubting Congress, was still felt in rural and city places. Hallie was a most unique person, small, exceptionally bright, and deeply emotionally dedicated to the welfare of the arts in America, especially of course, the theater arts. But she envisioned a national chain of art centers representing all the arts where talented artists of all kinds from local areas might be permanently employed. That never materialized as she wished, but her great programs of the Living Newspaper and her social dramas involved talents across the nation. In many places, some small, some large, she made a deep impression, which in some

ways is still going on. Chiefly, perhaps, this is so in acceptance of the idea that plays hitting hard at the grassroots lives and crises of people can be done, and participated in by local people. She visited me at Cornell and I took fire from her passion for people in places and their creative potential. She saw the arts as central to community development; the arts groups becoming crystallizers for whole projects of community improvement and appreciation. She saw youth working happily with age, and the whole relationship coming together in a beautiful passion for change and improvement.

And Stevens brought me into contact with Baker Brownell, Northwestern University philosopher, whose books were and still are landmarks for community awareness and change. He saw the arts as great humanizing elements in the community, lending a “humanness” so often doubted or misunderstood. With Rockefeller funds provided by Stevens, Brownell and another professor from Northwestern, Dean Melby, performed a great service for the state of Montana. They went there to develop, among the four Montana educational institutions, a single program in the arts, including regional literature and drama.

The project had some unusual results. In one small town, Darby, they reorganized all community activities. Darby was almost a ghost town as far as anything challenging was concerned. There was nothing in Darby to endear the place to its citizens; one of its weaknesses was that it was used as a sort of hideaway or haven for nineteen state and county officials who were there only to sleep and went away by day. Brownell and Melby so changed the whole character of community life that the officials had to give back more than they got. They became participants in a project devoted entirely to Darby and area community life. They enhanced the place through its interesting local history and through its unique place in western history. Young people began to return to Darby, and the town has prospered moderately since. Brownell also worked with key individuals like Joseph Kinsey Howard, a newsman who wrote brilliant accounts of life in his state, and produced a noted book, “Montana Margins.”

Brownell came to Wisconsin. I saw to that, and I believe he guided us in early thoughts about the significant project “The Small Community and the Arts” which we undertook in 1966. Men like Stevens and Brownell, in my opinion, just aren’t around anymore.

The proposal which was created in Wisconsin in 1965 and sent forward to the new Arts Endowment and its chair, Roger Stevens, in 1966, had come out of something like the crucible I have been trying to describe. It was grassroots all the way. It was aimed at a very large segment of the American population, because I had learned from the 1960 census that 66,000,000 people in America lived in communities under 10,000. I also discovered that, so far as the arts were concerned, not very much was known about these 10,000 person communities, and even much less about the multitude of smaller communities and their sur-

rounding rural spaces. There was virtually no written record of the way arts had been nurtured and furthered. I began to think how glorious it might be if we could bring forward a plan, test it in experiment and offer a way in which communities all over the nation could view the arts and further them as a part of everyday American life. It certainly wasn't any small idea that we were generating. When somebody asked me why in the world I wanted to launch such a plan in America where there had never been overmuch support for grassroots art, and they were sure it wouldn't work. They reminded me that the big museums and the great orchestras and the professional theater had always shied away from farmers painting pictures or writing stories and putting on plays. Just recreation, they said. But I replied that if recreation can be viewed as the joy of living and can bring or can be guided to bring, creative purpose to people, and if the symbols of art can be identified in the community and an arts consciousness can be encouraged and helped to grow, then the grassroots way may be the only sure way toward wide acceptance of the arts. And as friends and advisors pursued me on this subject... of whether the arts may be just for the few capable of understanding them and talented enough to participate at a high level... I think I must have replied, "Now look, America is coming of age. Note the changing aspects of this nation. A maturing America means a consciousness of the arts among all the people. Communities East, West, South, and North are searching for ways to make community life more attractive. The arts as I see them are central to community life. The arts as I see them are central to community development in this time of change... let us hope, change for the better. The frontier and all that it meant in economic development, and in the utter necessity of building a nation, is certainly being replaced by the frontier of the arts. In no other way can Americans express the core and blood of their democracy. For in the communities, lie the final tests of the acceptance of the arts as a necessity in everyday life. In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy or for the well-endowed museum, or for the subsidized professional regional community theater. As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength it becomes dear that her strength is in the people, and that it lies in the places where people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves. The springs of the American people are at the grassroots. Opportunities must exist in places they have never existed before. As consciousness of the people... a knowledge of their power to generate and nourish art, and provision of ways in which they may do so are essential for our time. If we are seeking in America, let it be seeking for the reality of democracy in the arts. Let art begin at home, and let it spread through the children and their parents, and through the schools and the institutions and through government. And let us start by acceptance, not negation... acceptance that the arts are important everywhere, and that they can exist and flourish in

small places as well as large, with money or without it, according to the will or the people. Let us put firmly and permanently aside the cliché that the arts are a frill. Let us accept the goodness of art where we are now, and expand its worth in the places where people live.”

We got the grant... \$250,000. We had to match that, so we had a half million to encourage and stimulate the rural community arts. Our Chancellor was nervous about the match; but our communities responded with assets in-kind which more than made it up. And each community in our tests has gone on in arts support. *Spring Green* has opened unbelievably, and much inner strife and suspicion has abated. Chiefly, when we began, the suspicion was focused on deceased Frank Lloyd Wright whose great house Taliesin lay across the Wisconsin River. Now, however, Wright’s influence is Spring Green’s greatest benefit. The Spring Green Art Fair is a living, permanent reality. The River Valley Players produce regularly in the old playhouse in the village, now called the Gard Theater. Lately a Catholic church burned, and they built a new church the people obtained the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation architects to make the plan. Spring Green has the look now of a proud arts center.

Portage has remodeled from a church, an art center whose influence has spread through the entire area.

Friendship continues to encourage local musicians, writers and artists. When we began the work with Friendship we heard that there were many fine string players living in the surrounding country. We made contact with some of those, and actually had enough for a fine string orchestra. A daring letter went from me to Leonard Bernstein in New York, inviting him to come and direct the orchestra for a performance. In a kindly reply, Leonard Bernstein declined. But the orchestra went ahead anyway with their own local conductor.

Rhineland has developed the Northern Arts Council which sponsors the Rhineland School of the Arts each summer. And the Council sponsors a national art show which has grown in prestige.

The book we prepared while the experimenting was going on was called, *The Arts In The Small Community... A National Plan*. We distributed more than 40,000 nationally. And now the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies has reprinted it, and its distribution continues. One small thing remains to be said. Many persons wanted to help, and they did. Some asked why they should, and for the book I wrote this poem:

If you try what may you expect?
First a community
Welded through art to a new consciousness of self
A new being, perhaps a new appearance—
A people proud

Of achievement which lifts them through the creative
Above the ordinary...
A new opportunity for children
To find exciting experiences in art
And to carry this excitement on
Throughout their lives...
A mixing of peoples and backgrounds
Through art, a new view
Of hope for mankind and an elevation
Of man... not degradation
New values for individual and community life
And a sense
That here in our place
We are contributing to the maturity
Of a great nation.
If you try you can indeed
Alter the face and heart
Of America