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A Song and a Slogan: Regional Influences on Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters

(TITLE)

BY

AMANDA DUNLAVEY

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2008

YEAR

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Abstract

The works of Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters have been largely overlooked by critics in spite of their initial popular success. However, these authors deserve further study, especially in light of the growing popularity of regional writing. When studied in a biographical context, the works of Sandburg and Masters illustrate that the most profound influence on their lives and works was that of their early lives in Central Illinois. It was there that they found their most fertile subject matter, developed their political beliefs, and established their connection to nature. Studying the two in tandem can form the foundation of a school of Illinois poetry that takes the area and its everyday citizens as its subject matter, uses Midwestern language and nature imagery, and addresses local legends like Abraham Lincoln.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

Dedicated to Steve Dunlavey for reading my papers even though he didn't want to and always making dinner when I needed him to.

I would like to thank my readers, Carol Stevens and Fern Kory, for taking time out of their summers to help me with this project. I would also like to thank all my professors for the good job they do.

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Introduction

"When you spend a lot of time / in one place, one place / spends a lot of time in you"

--William Kloefkorn

In his poem "Prairie," Carl Sandburg wrote, "I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover,/ the eyes of its women, gave me a song and a slogan" (Sandburg, *Complete Poems* 79). In this passage, Sandburg tells the reader that the prairie, and by extension his childhood in Illinois, was his inspiration. The same could be said for Edgar Lee Masters. Just as great Southern writers like William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor produced works that defined the spirit of the South, Sandburg and his contemporary Masters did so with the Midwest. Both were raised in Central Illinois, and the language, speech patterns, political issues, and imagery of that region found their way into almost every piece of their work. Both skillfully captured the physical beauty of the region and the depth and feeling of the people, both ordinary and extraordinary, who lived there. Masters especially drew attention to the private tragedies of "bumpkins" living in the small Midwestern towns of Central Illinois. By bringing out the inner turmoil of small-town people and using stark, often shocking imagery such as ". . . I never Saw a dead face without thinking it looked Like something washed and ironed" from "Mrs. Kessler" (*Spoon River Anthology* 225), Masters was able to turn the old idea of the blissful pastoral village on its ear by bringing out the dark, conflicted, human side of village life. Sandburg, too, was able to encapsulate the experiences of the people who live in the Midwest, highlighting voices of both urban Chicago and rural Central Illinois in works like *Chicago Poems*, *Cornhuskers,* and *Smoke and Steel.* Under

the treatment of these two authors, small-town folk and urban immigrants were afforded a depth, humanity, and dignity that had been lacking in the works of other authors.

Both Masters and Sandburg immersed themselves and their work in the Midwest, broaching many questions about writing in place: What defines an Illinois poet? What makes the writing of Masters and Sandburg different from that of their contemporaries? What can we learn about regional influences on authors from these two accomplished poets who worked in a transitional era influenced by both realism and modernism? Studying the lives and works of Masters and Sandburg shows us that, while there are many other influences on an author's work, the most important is that of childhood. Even though both of these men lived and worked outside the rural Illinois of their youth, their experiences there shaped them into the writers they became, good and bad. They also continued to turn back to those early influences again and again in later works like *Illinois Poems* for Masters and *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years* for Sandburg.

Unlike many of their contemporaries, Masters and Sandburg harked back to the tradition of Walt Whitman rather than what Masters called "The Knickerbocker Schools" of poetry that produced modernist works like T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Since they both asserted regional values, their work responded to their early lives in small, Midwestern towns rather than to what they saw as the elitist values of the East. This early life was, in fact, the major influence on both their work. The landscape, culture, and history of central Illinois influenced their work and defined who they were as Midwestern writers.

Sandburg, especially has often been touted as the original "American Poet." In fact, when *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* came out in 1922, the promotion for the book labeled him as "perhaps the most American of American poets" (Niven 397). Masters has received similar accolades. This is significant because of Illinois' place in the history of the U.S. In his book *Illinois: A History*, Richard J. Jensen called this "crossroads state" a "microcosm of the United States" because of its patterns of settlement, diverse population, and combination of industry and agriculture. He goes on to state that "The story of Illinois is the saga of the hopes, fears, aspirations, and achievements of its people . . . it is America's story too" (ix). Therefore, by studying the writing of authors so completely grounded in the story of Illinois, we can learn a lot not only about what defines the Midwest, but also by extension, America as a whole.

These authors have a great deal in common, and these similarities are manifested in their work. Both were largely self-educated and remained in the United States throughout the time of their most productive writing. Neither of them went abroad to learn or sharpen their craft; instead, they took their inspiration from what they saw around them and what they remembered from childhood. The two authors knew each other, and enjoyed a rivalry sometimes friendly and sometimes adversarial. Even though both Masters and Sandburg left Central Illinois at an early age, references to the region continued to show up in both their writing. This deep connection to Illinois becomes such an integral part of their poetry that it helps construct a specific regional genre: Illinois Regional Poetry.

Masters' best-known work is *Spoon River Anthology*, a series of over two hundred epitaphs from the cemetery of a fictional Central Illinois village. It was really

his first deeply autobiographical work, and much of what would follow would be as well, focusing mainly on his childhood in Lewistown and Petersburg. He based some of his most famous poems on real people he knew in Central Illinois, such as his grandparents and his childhood friends and enemies. He is also well known for his poems about local celebrities. "Anne Rutledge" is based on Abraham Lincoln's legendary first love, and "William H. Herndon" is based on Lincoln's (as well as Masters' father's) former law partner.

Sandburg wrote on a number of different topics, all the while incorporating imagery that hearkened back to his Central Illinois roots. Even when writing about urban Chicago, the language that Sandburg chose evokes images of the prairie rather than the concrete jungle. In her biography, Penelope Niven asserts that the greatest influence on Sandburg's work was his time spent in the city of Chicago, but I disagree. His early life as the son of poor Swedish immigrants living in an ethnic enclave within the city of Galesburg, Illinois, influenced his Socialist political beliefs as well as his writing, long before he ever moved to Chicago. Sandburg never really got over his poverty-stricken childhood, and he spent much of his life coming to terms with it, leading him to embrace Socialism and to try to use his work as a poet, biographer, and journalist to try to make things better for people like his father. This is apparent even in *Chicago Poems* where he wrote a number of poems about immigrant life. The struggles that he observed in his father while living in Galesburg led directly to political works such as *The People, Yes.*

In addition, both authors were also known for expressing the strong political views attained early in their lives through their creative works. This is nowhere more apparent than in their works on Abraham Lincoln. In both poems and biographies, each

author sees what he wants to see in the person of Abraham Lincoln, and those portrayals of the former president give the reader almost more insight into the mind of the author rather than the subject. For example, Masters' take on Lincoln was shaped by his views as a Jeffersonian Democrat, leading to the scathing indictment of Lincoln that earned the author death threats from residents of his home state. By contrast, Sandburg's biography was much more flattering, even going so far as to portray Lincoln as a Socialist. Masters wrote several other politically influenced biographies, including one on the poet Vachel Lindsay. Sandburg wrote a number of political tracts and was well known for his work as a journalist. Though both authors wrote both prose and poetry, they are known principally as poets.

Critical views of both authors have been mixed at best, and for neither author has the accumulation of critical work been as expansive as that for, say, Robert Frost or Walt Whitman. This lack of critical attention occurs in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that both authors were once considered celebrities and enjoyed a great deal of popular success. In the long run, both poets garnered criticism for their experiments with free verse and realism, eventually being labeled "vulgar" and "low class." Sandburg's work was often summarily dismissed under the heading of the "hog butcher school" of poetry, and he was rejected for the Nobel Prize for being "to Americanese" and "flaunting of the North American airs and syllables" (Niven 489). Brian M. Reed criticized Sandburg's political poem "The People, Yes" for its "images extracted in no particular order from an image bank labeled 'rural midwest'" (200). As for Masters, after the initial uproar over *Spoon River Anthology*, his image suffered after being repeatedly unable to duplicate that success either critically or popularly.

But the biggest critical hit to both authors came with the rise of the New Critics. In the early 1930s Joseph Warren Beach wrote to Sandburg,

> I believe you are in for a considerable period of critical sniffing . . . There is a group of young critics, who would like to be poets, who are making a great to-do over what they call classical or intellectual standards. . . . They will examine you through a spy glass and shoot their poisoned little arrows at you. . . . for you have become a big mark. (Niven 469)

Neither Masters nor Sandburg set much stock in what became the New Critical approach or anything they considered "avant-garde" poetry. When asked about this "new" poetry, Sandburg said, "I say to hell with new poetry. They don't want poetry to say what it means. They have symbols and abstractions and a code amongst themselves—sometimes I think it's a series of ear wigglings" (Niven 622-623). Masters held similar views, which he discussed in "The Genesis of Spoon River" in 1933 as "such worthless experiments as polyphonic prose, an innovation as absurd as Dadaism or Cubism or Futurism . . . all grotesqueries of the hour, and all worthless since they were without thought, sincerity, substance" (Garcia 82).

When scrutinized through this New Critical approach, Masters and Sandburg's work did not hold up as well as that of other authors, leading many scholars to write off the majority of their work. According to John Hallwas, their honesty and use of "poetry grounded in the facts of the American experience . . . makes the poet's background so important for a deeper understanding of the work" (3). Therefore, when examined through a situated biographical lens, the poems gain a depth and a character that reveals much about each writer's early life and about regional writing in general.

When using this biographical lens, it is important to take into account both the author's background and historical events of his lifetime. According to George Watson, author of "Are Poems Historical Acts?" the biographical approach supplies "a correspondence of some kind between what the poet and his age might reasonably be thought to have in mind, on the one hand, and the true meaning of the poem on the other" (30). While the technical skill of Sandburg and Masters may not have been as well developed as some of their contemporaries, when studied in this light, their poems and prose develop a whole new dimension. It is at once the story of how an author is made and how a region functions within the course of history.

Each poet's work deserves further study. Cesare Pavese said of Masters, "How, at this point, can we fail to recognize in (Masters) the lineage of Hawthorne and Melville, indefatigable and misanthropic inquisitors of the heart's secrets and of the dilemmas of moral life?" (Bidney 187). In addition, Penelope Niven answered the critics of Sandburg's use of language by describing his writing as "living language of modern speech and vernacular, not a pale or archaic classical language" (243-244). Since these authors were so politically minded and so focused on the ideas of what it meant to be writers and citizens of a particular region, this approach will work best because it takes into account the historical and cultural context of each author and his work, rather than examining the literature as if it occurred in a vacuum. This is definitely an area of study in which there is room to explore and produce new ideas.

The four chapters that follow will trace the pattern of the Illinois influence on the development of each author's work. Chapter one will give background on the region in question and the authors' early lives, while relating that background to specific works.

After exploring these two poets' political beliefs and how they developed, chapter two will discuss how the poets' regionalism went national and addressed larger historical issues. Because the authors' early lives in Illinois influenced the formation of their politics and its manifestation in their writing as well, these themes are even felt in poetry and prose written long after they left Illinois. Chapter three will expand on chapter two by examining the authors' work on the specific topic of Abraham Lincoln. Both were born and bred on the legend of Abraham Lincoln and wrote vastly different works on the subject. According to Herbert Russell's biography of Masters, both men were poor biographers who did very little research and used this format as a platform for their own political views. Chapter four will examine how these two poets used words to conjure a specific picture of the region in the minds of their readers. Both were extremely adept at conjuring images of the Midwestern prairies, fields, and rivers of their childhood. The landscape of Illinois found its way into poetry addressing urban subjects for both poets. Illinois imagery of nature never left their work, in spite of their moves to New York City and Chicago.

Chapter One

"The past is a bucket of ashes." --Carl Sandburg

The key to understanding the lives of these authors, and of regional writing in general, is to understand the region itself. The Central Illinois of Masters and Sandburg includes the Western half of the state reaching from the valley of the Illinois River in the east to the Mississippi in the west and from the Springfield area north to Galesburg. It is a sparsely populated agricultural area of great natural beauty. The settlement of Illinois plays an enormous role in the history of the state, as well as in the character of the region that influenced these two authors.

Illinois was settled in a series of waves, the first beginning in the early part of the nineteenth century. These first settlers, like the paternal grandparents of one Edgar Lee Masters, were Southerners from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas. They were poor and often escaping the planter aristocracy of the South. These first settlers came to the state by way of the complex system of rivers and streams. Most settled in the bottom third of the state, which seemed to the new inhabitants like the land of Canaan, causing them to call the new region "Egypt" (Jensen 3). At the time, it was thought that the upland prairie areas did not contain soil fertile enough to sustain people because there were no trees, and the sod was so difficult to break through. Therefore, they stayed in wooded areas close to the rivers and streams and practiced subsistence agriculture because of the lack of commercial centers. Many of these settlers moved often because they soon discovered that the soil could wear out quickly without crop rotation and fertilizer. They grew only what the families needed to survive, which left much of the year open for the production of spirits. It was a very hard life that these people lived, and

alcohol was a big part of it, as were familial and clan ties and male dominance. Law and education were seen as unnecessary. In fact, public education in Illinois was not established until the 1850s (Jensen 17).

Because of the next wave, by the mid-nineteenth century, Illinois was the "fastest-growing territory in the world" (Jensen 32). The state grew from about 25,000 pioneer families in 1830 to more than 300,000 in 1860, making it the fourth largest state in the union. The total population in 1870 would have been around 2,500,000, and that number would double by the end of the century (32). The second, and much larger, wave of settlers would be made up mostly of Yankees and German, Irish, and Swedish immigrants, like August and Clara Sandburg. They were what Richard Jensen called "modernizers." Whereas before Illinois had been a "lazy man's paradise," populated mostly by Baptist Southerners with similar ideas about how the state should be run, the influx of Easterners would pull the earlier settlers, sometimes violently, into the modern era of the industrial revolution (33-34).

The power in this new wave of settlement lay with the Easterners who were mostly Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. They believed in hard work, temperance, and moral reform. Many, like the group that settled Galesburg, were millenialists or utopians looking to form a new Eden on the prairie. They were industrious enough to break the sod and farm the upland areas that the Southerners had written off as useless. Suddenly, towns and cities were springing up, and Illinois was becoming a commercial center as the prairie farmers looked to modern agricultural methods to get the highest possible yield from the former prairies. By the middle of the

century, railroads crisscrossed the state, and Chicago was rapidly growing into the country's second-largest city.

Masters, Sandburg, and the rest of their generation were caught up in the clash between opposing forces, and their two hometowns became perfect examples of the conflict in the state. Masters, himself, personified this conflict. Throughout his life, Edgar Lee Masters was a supremely divided, troubled man. This division was mainly a result of his upbringing and his parents' troubled relationship. Throughout Central Illinois, the conflict between East and South led to division on issues such as temperance, education, religion, and politics. Masters' love of his paternal grandparents, Southern Democrats, and his problems with his mother, more Eastern-influenced, would eventually lead to his passionate espousal of Jeffersonian Democracy, the belief that representative democracy is the highest form of government and that the life of the yeoman farmer is the highest ideal to which one can aspire. Formed around the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, Jeffersonian Democrats believed in individual freedom, separation of church and state, and that the industrialized city is the root of all evil. Masters believed that he saw this ideal being personified in his paternal grandparents and their associates in Petersburg, and he idealized this time and place for the rest of his life. This idealized notion of the virtuous Jeffersonian farmer unspoiled by modern industrialization, capitalism, and technology would form the cornerstone for his body of work. Many proponents of Jeffersonian Democracy bemoaned the rising immigrant population and the change in the demographics of the U.S. population. John Hallwas stated that "no American author was more deeply troubled by that change than the author of *Spoon River Anthology*, who fused his awareness of it with his memories of social conflict in Lewistown, his

admiration for the pioneers, his love for his grandparents, and his idealized view of conflicting social groups and cultural decline" (42). Masters himself states in *Across Spoon River* that "my deepest conviction is that when I am my best self, I am that old gentleman of Virginia stock reincarnated" (43).

Though Masters was born in Garnett, Kansas in 1868, his father moved the family back to Illinois shortly after Masters' birth (Russell 4). His relationships with his parents and grandparents would form the basis for his work, attitudes about life, and political ideals. Masters' mother, Emma Dexter Masters, was a difficult woman who had been raised in New England, the daughter of a Methodist minister. She never became acclimated to life in the Midwest, and tried to impose her Eastern views on her husband. Masters had a strained relationship with his mother throughout his life. He wrote of her in his autobiography:

> When she was happy, she was ecstatic; and when she was depressed, she was dark, sometimes with a tender melancholy, at other times with threats of storm; and when she was indignant, all her energies came to hand. Then she did not merely give way to little chidings or half articulate scoldings . . . but she sent bolts of lightning right and left, and settled things with emphasis. (Russell 12-13)

"Lee" Masters came to equate the problems between his parents with the problems he saw around him. He described the situation between them as a "union of conflicting and irresistible forces" (13). Because he identified more with his father, that was the way he leaned politically as well, eventually eschewing anything related to "East" and

"Republican" as being representative of his relationship with his mother. The conflict within the Masters family echoed what was going on around them in Illinois. While vilifying his mother, Masters deified his paternal grandparents.

Hardin Masters was the son of Squire Davis and Lucinda Masters, Southern transplants who had spent most of their lives in the Midwest. They lived in Sand Ridge Township outside Petersburg, Illinois, a town with a very strong Southern influence. In 1871, Hardin Masters, having not found economic opportunity in Kansas, moved his family back to Petersburg. For a time, they lived on the farm at Sand Ridge, but soon moved to a series of houses in and around Petersburg. As a small child, Masters spent much of his time on his grandparents' farm, and most of his happy childhood memories center around it. Their peaceful lifestyle and orderly farm was a marked contrast to the division and chaos in Hardin and Emma Masters' home. It was also the image of the Jeffersonian farmer that Masters would come to believe in so strongly. He said in *The Sangamon* in 1942, "I am happy that this was my nurturing spot of earth, as it is still my spiritual home" (Hallwas 6). In fact, Masters would spend the rest of his life idealizing this place and time and searching for a way to recapture it. His method of choice for this search was through his writing. That idyllic "Petersburg environment" would form the touchstone to what Masters thought America should be. According to John Hallwas in his introduction to the annotated *Spoon River Anthology*, "Sand Ridge became a region of the mind, a time as well as a place," he goes on to say that "In one sense *Spoon River Anthology* was a spiritual quest for 'the Petersburg environment,' an attempt to recover what had vanished—from his life and from American culture—by memorializing it in his poetry" (6-7).

"Lucinda Matlock" and "Davis Matlock" are two of Masters' most autobiographical poems. They are based closely on his grandparents, Lucinda and Squire Davis Masters. Masters idealized his grandparents as well as the town in which they lived. He repeatedly valorized the way they lived their lives and claimed to wish to emulate them, even though he never actually did. In *Across Spoon River*, he described his grandmother as "a woman of vitality, simplicity, and good humor" and his grandfather as a man of "simple piety, good will, hopefulness, and spiritual vision" (Hallwas 422-423). Both poems are about living life to the fullest, which is exactly what Masters believed his grandparents did. The last line in "Lucinda Matlock" is "It takes life to love life" (295). In "Davis Matlock," the idea of living life is tempered with the instruction to live for God as well:

> Well, I say to live it out like a god
> Sure of immortal life, though you are in doubt,
> Is the way to live it.
> If that doesn't make God proud of you,
> Then God is nothing but gravitation,
> Or sleep is the golden goal. (296)

Other details in the poems are based on the lives of Masters' grandparents as well. One of these would be the line in "Lucinda Matlock" about going to the dances at Chandlerville, which is where Lucinda Masters met her husband. The poems "John Wasson" and "Rebecca Wasson" were based (even using the same names) on Masters' great-great grandparents, early pioneers and survivors of the American Revolution. These poems

further embodied Masters' ideal of the "idealized pioneers" who epitomized his Jeffersonian idea of America (Hallwas 51).

However, Petersburg was not the only Illinois small town to have a profound effect on the mind of the budding writer. In 1880 when Masters was twelve, Hardin Masters moved the family about forty miles north of Petersburg to Lewistown, Illinois, near the Spoon River. If any town in Illinois symbolized the South/East divide, it was Lewistown. In many ways, the environment in Lewistown had an even more profound impact on Masters than Petersburg did, mainly by providing a marked contrast to the idyllic setting that Masters had built up in his mind.

Lewistown is the oldest town in Fulton County. It was originally settled by Ossian Ross, a veteran of the War of 1812 from Seneca, New York, who was the first veteran to claim his allotted quarter section in the military tract on the frontier. The town was named for Ross' son Lewis and was incorporated in 1822. Masters immortalized the house built by Colonel Ross as the "McNeely Mansion" in the *Anthology.* Fulton County was organized in 1823 to include almost the entire northern half of the state. Even today, Lewistown residents are extremely proud to point out that, at one time, residents of Chicago had to come to Lewistown to do business with the county (Hollandsworth 194). At the time Hardin Masters moved his family to Lewistown, it was a town on the rise. The old Southern influence, like that of Petersburg, was being replaced with the Eastern philosophies of modernization and social reform. It was a town full of modernizers and free-thinkers, with a surprising amount of culture for such a remote area. Lewistown was a town devoted to learning and to the law. It boasted the first school in the county in 1823 and the first college, short-lived Lewistown College, in the late nineteenth century. The

pride of Lewistown in the 1880s was the three-story high school run by a "Princeton man," which Masters would later describe as something of a joke (17). Joke or not, the educational system in Lewistown at the time was a vast improvement over the scattered selection of country schools in Petersburg.

The Eastern influence in Lewistown was felt, not only in the schools, but in the law as well. The first practicing attorney in Fulton County came from Maine to Lewistown in 1824, and the favorable climate for lawyers was what drew Hardin Masters there. He would find it difficult, at first, to become established because he was a Southern-influenced Democrat who was casual about religion and enjoyed a drink in Republican, protestant, temperance territory, but he eventually became a "leading member of the profession, an ardent Democrat, mayor of Lewistown four times, and school trustee for twenty years," according to *A History of Fulton County* (21). He would also practice law with Lincoln's former partner, William H. Herndon, to whom Masters would devote and entire entry in the *Anthology*. After an ill-fated stint at Knox College Academy in Galesburg, Hardin Masters encouraged his son to study law and work in his office. He participated in several cases, some of which also made an appearance in the *Anthology*. One of those was that of George Weldy in 1887. The case became the basis for "Jack McGuire" whose lawyer in the poem, "Kinsey Keene" had his own poem based on Masters' father. Keene of the poem is caught up in an ideological struggle over temperance with the town banker and newspaper editor, much as Hardin Masters was in real life.

Masters also worked at one of the local newspapers, the *Lewistown News*, where he would publish his first poems himself. A feud with a rival editor, William T. Davidson of the *Fulton Democrat*, led to his first published poem, "The Minotaur:"

The Minotaur

Bill Davidson

National Ode

Dedicated to His Majesty

King Satan

* * *

By the Author

In that vile sheet the "Democrat,"

Bill Doth weekly boast.

To read it some all night have sat.

In Hell he'll surely roast.

At slandering Bill doth oft excel.

This truth all can conceive.

Lies from his mouth escape pell mell

As water from a sieve. (Russell 22)

This poem is the result of an on-going feud between Hardin Masters and Davidson on the subject of saloons. Temperance was one of those issues that really highlighted the South/East divide in Illinois. It was, at its core, a religious issue, contradicting the beliefs of Jeffersonian Democracy on the matter of separation of church and state. As you can see from the poem, Masters took this issue very seriously. Masters even returned to

Davidson many years later with equal venom when writing "Editor Whedon" of the *Anthology*. While the writing is much more sophisticated, the sentiment is exactly the same, "Your eight-page paper—behind which you huddle, Brawling through the megaphone of big type: 'This is I, the giant. . . . Crushing reputations, or bodies, if need be, To win at any cost, save your own life" (213). The really interesting thing about Masters is that he built these conflicts up in his mind until they became truly larger than life, especially when one considers that he never lived the Jeffersonian ideals that he held as gospel.

One thing that Masters would actually admit to having in common with the Eastern-influenced "modernizers" was a commitment to education and culture. Lewistown was not entirely devoid of culture in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1883 a hotel opened in nearby Bernadotte, which became a "favorite spot for artists who came from Chicago and many other places to paint and view the beauty of the old village" (Hollandsworth 78-79). From 1884-1889, Fulton County was also home to a chapter of the Illinois Historical and Scientific Society led by Dr. W.S. Strode, "William Jones" of the *Anthology*. "Lee" Masters was a member of this organization, and gave presentations on Walt Whitman, clairvoyance, and imagination (Hallwas 7). Josephine Craven Chandler wrote in *Spoon River Country*, "The correspondence of this modest, almost retiring citizen of Bernadotte, and later of Lewistown, brought the world strangely close to this remote community, establishing with points far and wide invisible lines of communication" (282). It was during this time that Masters fell in love with Margaret George, the first of his many, many love affairs. He would devote a great deal of space to her in the *Anthology* with a host of intelligent, free-thinking women—"Caroline

Branson," "Amelia Garrick," "Julia Miller," and "Louise Smith." It was also during this period that Masters first read what would become one of his major literary influences, Percy Shelley.

Masters desperately wanted to be a writer, but he felt insecure about his future and unsure of what to do with his life. He felt that poetry was not a manly enough occupation and was unwilling to try to make his living solely as a poet. Masters had a love for creature comforts. He hated the law, but soon had a growing practice in Chicago while trying to write on the side. Unfortunately, until the publication of *Spoon River Anthology*, he had had very little success. The problem with Masters' work up to *Spoon River Anthology* was that he was trying too hard to copy his heroes, like Shelley, and not putting enough of himself into the work. He was somewhat embarrassed by his background and lack of formal education, constantly reading and trying to prove himself to others. He was also so deeply divided about what he believed versus what he actually practiced that he tended to hide behind a mask in his work. The editor of *The Writer*, a literary magazine that had published some of his poems, wrote to Masters, "Try to be natural in your writing. Why waste your time on the vapor of a dream? Give to literature more vital stuff; waking life furnishes a million stirring themes. Try one of them" (Russell 27). Sandburg, who shared a friendship with Masters at the time, also challenged him to find his own voice. According to Herbert Russell, "What Sandburg did was to help free Masters from his reliance on socially correct models of verse and make him see the poetry in the commonplace of Illinois" (65). William Marion Reedy, who first published the "Spoon River Poems," also encouraged Masters to expand his vision and "write about life." Surprisingly, as he put it, "something answered in Masters

one day, some burst of creative energy engendered by rage, which swept away his complexes, his ideas of what poetry should be like, as a flood sweeps away dykes. 'You want life?' he answered. 'Very well, you shall have life, and by God you shall have it raw'" (Russell 67). What resulted was Masters' greatest work, *Spoon River Anthology*. There were a number of intersecting factors that led to the creation of *Spoon River Anthology* in the spring of 1914. They include outside influences like Sandburg and Theodore Dreiser, Reedy's suggestion that Masters read *The Greek Anthology*, Goethe's "The Dance of Death," and a visit from the author's mother in May of 1914 in which the two spent a great deal of time reminiscing about the old home towns. The fact is that he had been thinking about writing a novel about his childhood in Central Illinois for some time. Living in Chicago had made him see that there was value in the stories of his childhood, and somewhere in the month of May 1914, he started putting them down in verse. The first eight were published in *Reedy's Mirror* on May 29, 1914, under the pseudonym "Webster Ford." They were an instant success. They would continue to be published in serial form over the next year and half, and in 1916 the book version came out, including new material (Russell 67).

At first, Masters did not know what he had. He doubted the value of this new work until it started to become successful. Masters put this struggle to find his own style in verse down in the poem "Petit, the Poet." This poem is about a writer discovering that there is poetry in everyday life, and that sometimes it is necessary to move beyond the old formulas and create something new.

> Life all around me here in the village:
>
> Tragedy, comedy, valor and truth,

Courage, constancy, heroism, failure—

All in the loom, and oh what patterns!

Woodlands, meadows, streams and rivers—

Blind to all of it all my life long.

Triolets, villanelles, rondels, rondeaus,

Seeds in a dry pod, tick, tick, tick,

Tick, tick, tick, what little iambics,

While Homer and Whitman roared in the pines. (173)

Both Masters and Petit rediscovered their unique cultural heritage, and once Masters figured this out, he never looked back. The most blatant examples were his autobiographical novel *Skeeters Kirby* and his children's novel *Mitch Miller*, as well as his autobiography, which ended in 1917. In a way, that may have contributed to his lack of later success. While Sandburg moved on and wrote about new influences in his life, Masters remained stuck in his childhood and ignored later experiences. He would also retreat behind a new mask in his work, that of the outraged political writer. Masters used much of his later work as a platform to try to convince people that the Petersburg way of his grandparents (which never really existed the way he thought it did) was the way America should be. Everything that Masters would write after the *Anthology* would be directly linked to his quest to recapture and deal with his childhood. He once said, "'Spoon River' is my life, since it came from me as my summation of what I had seen and lived" (Hallwas 34).

While Carl Sandburg's work was not as overtly autobiographical as Masters' was, elements of his childhood pop up again and again in his work. Galesburg, like

Lewistown, was a source of conflict and inspiration in the young author's life. However, Galesburg was a very different town from either Lewistown or Petersburg. Galesburg was the Eastern-influenced, modern, industrial town that went against everything Jefferson and his followers stood for. Unlike Masters, however, the conflict that shaped Sandburg was not East versus South, but Capitalist versus worker and native-born versus immigrant.

Galesburg was founded in 1835 by George Washington Gale, a millenialist minister from New York who envisioned a town, college, female seminary, academy, and theological seminary dedicated to spreading the word of God and preparing ministers for work on the frontier (Lee 19-21). The first group of settlers, who would become the town leaders for most of the nineteenth century, were followers of Gale's who shared his vision of abolitionism, moral reform, and temperance (26). They wanted to make Galesburg a model for other frontier communities. As more settlers began to arrive, conflicts arose among members of rival churches, immigrant groups, and with nearby towns that did not share Gale's vision. Most of the conflict in and around Galesburg came from differing views on temperance and slavery. It was much like the conflicts Edgar Lee Masters was dealing with in Lewistown. Galesburg was Eastern-influenced, and the surrounding communities, like Knoxville, were more Southern-influenced. Blacks were drawn to Galesburg because of the anti-slavery beliefs of many of its citizens, and it became a stop on the underground railroad (31-32). The situation with pro-slavery neighbor Knoxville had never been friendly, but it got even worse in 1852 when incentives and somewhat slippery dealings by Galesburg city leaders won Galesburg a railroad contract over Knoxville, the county seat (31-32).

Although the Swedish population had begun to grow from 1847-1850 after a cholera epidemic forced them out of the utopian community at Bishop Hill, the surge really began with the need for more labor after the advent of the railroads. This led to new businesses in the town and the migration of workers—immigrant Swedes, Germans, Irish, and blacks. The Swedes were the largest immigrant group in town; they had their own churches, banks, and businesses. In 1851 the *Hemlandet* became the first Swedish-language newspaper in the U.S (34). One of those immigrants to come to Galesburg was August Sandburg in 1869 at the age of twenty-three. After working for a time in New York, Sandburg moved west in search of economic opportunity working for the C.B.&Q. Railroad Line (Niven 2-3). His main ambition in life was to raise his economic status, and Galesburg seemed like just the place. Because of the railroads, Galesburg was rapidly becoming one of the most important cities in downstate Illinois. In 1858 it was chosen as the site for the fifth Lincoln-Douglas debate because of its population and accessibility by rail (Lee 37).

In fact, the city was growing so quickly that it led to a number of social problems such as water, infrastructure, crime, and class conflicts. The Galesburg *Republican* wrote in May 1870, "We see no reason why Galesburg should not be the foremost manufacturing city in the state, possessing as she does, all the natural resources within her limits to make her such. Let all of our citizens and capitalists, interested in advancing the interests of our city, give this subject their attention" (46). Unfortunately, these "citizens and capitalists" were to have so many labor problems in the coming years, that this goal was put on hold, and these labor problems would have a great impact on a railroad worker named August Sandburg and his family.

Most of the residents in the county resented the success of the city of Galesburg and found fault with the policies of its economic leaders, such as high rates to ship goods, referred to as "railroad extortions." Reduced hours and salaries after the Panic of 1873 led to unrest among railroad workers, and Galesburg would be the site of major strikes in 1877 and 1888. Galesburg historian Jean Lee states, "By the 1880s most of the city founders were dead and the early vision of Galesburg spiritually transforming the West had been forgotten. Religious fervor was replaced by the desire for material growth. Leaders in the city, no longer ministers, but capitalists, held a more worldly vision" (46). Those capitalist leaders like Clark E. Carr, George A. Lawrence, and Edgar A. Bancroft lived happy, secluded lives up on "Quality Hill" seemingly uncaring about the struggles of their workers (46-49). The issue that most shaped Sandburg as a young boy was not an ideological one like it was for Masters, but a purely economic one.

Carl Sandburg, known at the time as "Charlie Sandberg" to hide his Swedish ancestry, was a close observer of this situation. According to Lee, " . . . his first and lasting impressions of the community were from the perspective of the working class" (57). He delivered papers to Quality Hill and was able to contrast that life with that of his own family.

For a while it looked as if August Sandburg would be able to achieve his ambition of raising his economic status by buying property and renting it for profit. However, in 1889 a lawsuit over a lien on one of August's properties "added an impossibly heavy weight to all he carried" (Niven 17). This, added to the general hard times associated with the Panic of 1893, was a major setback on the road to financial freedom for August Sandburg. "Charlie" witnessed his father's financial hardships, and was forever shaped

by them. It was around this time that he started to develop his Socialist beliefs, though he wouldn't have known what to call them at this time. In his later years, he described his feelings after the C.B.&Q. railroad strike of 1888:

> The boys I ran with, the striking engineers whom I knew to speak to, the wild and furious talk against "scabs," hit deep in me. I was a partisan. I could see only one side to the dispute though my little head did no thinking and had no accurate information about what lay behind the crying and shooting. . . . And why was I all for the strikers and against the railroad? It could be that I knew some good men among the strikers and they were human and I liked them, whereas the Q. railroad was a big unhuman something that refused to recognize and deal with the engineers who in all weathers took their locomotives out along the rails hoping to pull through without a collision or a slide down an embankment. I was a little ten-year-old partisan. I took a kind of joy in the complete justice of the cause of the strikers. (Niven 13-14)

The strike was not discussed in the Sandburg household. When "Charlie" told his mother about how he felt, she simply said, "Be careful you don't talk about it to Papa. It worries him" (14).

Sandburg's relationship with his father defined him as a person and an author just as Masters' relationship with his mother did. While Masters spent most of his life trying to convince people that things were better in the past, Sandburg looked to the future, trying to make life easier for people in same situation as his family—immigrants, poor farmers, and blacks. He worked tirelessly to give these people a voice that they had not

had before, and he kept working no matter how much success he achieved. Very late in his life, Donna Workman, a friend in Chicago, still saw the effects of Sandburg growing up poor, "Carl, with all his richness of genius and money, was a perennial *Poor Man.* He *felt* poor. Honest to God poor. . . . The first time he ever took me to dinner, he took me to a beanery, and we had a bowl of bean soup and one of his sandwiches he pulled from a pocket" (Niven 658).

Sandburg's gentle and compassionate handling of working-class and immigrant subjects is a direct result of the influence of his father and the others like him in Galesburg and Chicago. "Jack" is a poem about a man who "worked thirty years on the railroad, ten hours a day, and his hands were tougher than sole leather" (*Complete Poems* 22). "The Shovel Man" also shows Sandburg's mastery of the imagery of the working man when it describes "the overalls faded from sun and rain in the ditches; Spatter of dry clay sticking yellow on his left sleeve . . ." and makes its subject thoroughly human in the last line when it goes on to say, "And a man with a pair of fresh lips and a kiss better than all the wild grapes that ever grew in Tuscany" (9). That is the thing that really sets Sandburg's work apart; not only does he tackle subjects who are working class and immigrants, but he injects them with a personality and a dignity that is lacking in many other treatments. In "Fish Crier" he goes so far as to suggest the radical idea that one may actually find happiness and fulfillment in selling fish from a cart, "His face is that of a man terribly glad to be selling fish, terribly glad that God made fish, and customers to whom he may call his wares from a pushcart" (10).

Farmers are treated with equal dignity and care in Sandburg's poems. In his youth, he spent time around farmers, and even worked for several years delivering milk

from a nearby dairy farm. With "Illinois Farmer" the feeling is reverent and wistful. This poem begins "Bury this old Illinois farmer with respect." It then goes on to illustrate the depth of devotion that these men (and women) have to their work. "The wind he listened to in the cornsilk and the tassels, the wind that yellow ears in the bushel basket at the corncrib, the same wind will blow over the place here where his hands must dream of Illinois corn" (88). Sandburg knew that farmers tend to eat, sleep, and dream farming. They work every day of the year; they go out to chore in weather that would keep most people locked in the house; they give everything to their work, and this poem asks us to give them the respect that they deserve.

On the other hand, "New Farm Tractor," will produce a chuckle from anyone who has spent any time around farmers. This poem talks about the changing of farming from animal-powered to mechanized equipment. The reader can sense the difficulty of adapting to the change, and that is exactly true. Farmers tend to be pretty resistant to change; they also tend to be pretty attached to their tractors (as if they were animals rather than machines). The line, "The Farm boy says hello to you instead of twenty mules—he sings to you instead of ten span of mules" illustrates that point" (258-259).

Another place where Sandburg's early influences show up is in his use of language. His speech and writing patterns were shaped by the Swedish of his mother and father as well as the hometown Midwestern speech of Central Illinois. For his mother, Clara, English was a second language, and she had no concept of spelling and grammar, but it is easy to see from her letters that she had a flair for language that she passed on to her son. In 1908 Sandburg's future wife, Paula, wrote in one of her letters to him that she found his prose "strong, simple, direct, and full of joy and wisdom—it shows the noble

strength and stature of your soul." When he criticized her for using overly formal language, she replied, "I'll try always to say 'hard work' instead of 'arduous labors' hereafter" (Niven 153). Although many readers and critics found his use of informal, direct language refreshing, he was often criticized as being too common or "vulgar." After one of his lecture performances, one listener remarked, "Is this poetry? I thought poetry ought to be refined" (Niven 349).

Like Masters, Sandburg went through a period where he had to sift through his many influences and try to find his own style. This process began at Lombard College in Galesburg where Sandburg was reading authors such as Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, Francis Bacon, John Bunyan, Joseph Addison, and Daniel Defoe, but his biggest influence of the time was Walt Whitman. He was beginning to discover the power of words "in the Illinois Corn Belt, in a classroom looking out on pastures and farm wagons hauling hogs, hay tomatoes, turnips . . . the feel and the smell and noises of London a hundred years before . . . books and writers can cross oceans carrying the heart's blood of men who write" (Niven 49-50). At Lombard, he also met Professor Phillip Green Wright, who would become a life-long friend and mentor, introducing Sandburg to Socialism and the lecture circuit, which would be his bread and butter throughout his career. An early poem, "In Illinois" (1906), shows the development of Sandburg's style as he moved away from Whitman and toward what Penelope Niven called "shorter lines and simple word portraits of familiar scenes."

In Illinois

The grass is at the richest of the year.

The rivers curve along the bottoms

Flashing silver faces to the sky . . .

Yellow, scarlet, russet leaves

Spangle all the woodland—

Premonitions hover in the boughs . . .

Tomatoes redden in the sun,

As proud as any flower

Of their kinship with the soil. . . . (101-102)

Sandburg started to find his style while writing in the Brooks Street fire station in Galesburg. The job was recommended to him by his brother, Mart, who thought it would give "Charlie" time to write. While working there, he "settled on free verse" and was "still searching widely for subject and voice" (Niven 99). His 1909 essay "What Do You Think?" from the *The Fra* is another early example of his free verse style (206). Not long after, Sandburg would leave Galesburg for good. Like most artists, he was "restless in Galesburg" and had a love/hate relationship with his hometown, "chafing at the narrow boundaries which confined him there . . . He loved the arc of the prairie, the clean, open contours of the fields falling away to the horizon, but he wanted to explore other places" (28). In his lifetime, Sandburg wandered the country as a hobo, a soldier, a traveling salesman, and a political activist. He would live in Milwaukee, Chicago, and rural Michigan and North Carolina. It would not be until after Sandburg moved to Chicago in his thirties that all his influences would solidify into something truly unique as in his best work, but the germ of that work started all the way back in Galesburg.

In many ways, the story of the development of these two authors is really the story of defining a system of values. Their different upbringings instilled certain values

in them that shone through in their work and reflected the differing values causing conflict among the rest of the people in Illinois. For Sandburg, that meant being torn between the two opposing Northern or Eastern principles of Capitalism and Socialism, two different perspectives on Northern ideology totally incompatible with each other, yet totally dependent upon each other at the same time. For Masters, the conflict was more psychological, as he internalized a division that he saw around him and in his parents. The problem with Masters, though, is that he gave a great deal of lip service to Jeffersonian Democracy and the idealized farmer, but lived the majority of his life in industrial, Eastern-influenced cities writing to make money and please the literary elite that he claimed to despise. The conflict within himself created a great deal of anger within Masters, and that anger came out in the tone and content of his works. Both authors used their work as a platform to expose and evaluate these conflicts, which is why both eventually became known for their political writings.

Chapter Two

"The fireborn are at home in the fire." –Old Swedish Saying

Sandburg and Masters were both extremely politically influenced poets, albeit with completely different political beliefs and methods of imparting those beliefs through their work. Sandburg's career as a journalist and Masters' as an attorney meant that they were both immersed in politics in their everyday lives. In many ways, they were two sides of the same coin, both representing different factions of the same set of Midwestern values. The story of Midwestern politics in the early part of the twentieth century is the story of the struggle between opposing forces—South vs. East (North), Capitalist vs. Labor, Native-born vs. Immigrant. The core of almost any political issue of the time can be traced back to one of these conflicts. In addition, the Midwest was emerging as a place with its own identity, personality, and set of values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cheryl Temple Herr defined the mindset of the Midwest as

> . . . a state of mind in the American consciousness—a metaphor accentuating an amorphous traditionalism deployed in the "family"; a largely unreflective patriotism; an ethic of hard work and democratic-socialist egalitarianism; community spirit of the action-oriented, "barn-raising" sort; a commitment to "basic values"; moral, spiritual, and educational fair-dealing and loyalty to one's employer; a parsimony on principle; a verbal commitment to the myth of the family farm even in a period of agribusiness takeover; an international export-ethic and aspiration to multinational prowess; a healthy local skepticism about all such claims; and the social practices surrounding American rural and

> small-town life, particularly those of the community potluck supper, the church social, and county fair." (Quoted in Pichaske 103)

Careful readers can see all these values reflected in Sandburg and Masters' poetry, since each piece in some way uplifts the farmer, family, and community. For both authors, almost all their works had that political edge, both poetry and prose. In some cases those political beliefs were obvious and intentional. In others, they were more subversive. Sandburg was often more upfront about his politics, while Masters slipped his views in whenever he had a chance.

Early in his career, Sandburg was known as a political writer, but by the 1940s his image as a cuddly, homespun, guitar-playing sage had dulled his earlier radical edge. Additionally, as he got older, his views began to soften from his role as a Socialist organizer to a poet with a more generalized goal of making things better for the group simply known as "The People." As with the rest of his career, the evolution of Sandburg's political beliefs began all the way back in Galesburg.

Sandburg defined his political views in the fall of 1919 when, spurred on by other intellectuals and world leaders, he decided to write his own political creed. This was a time in which being labeled a "radical" or "agitator" could ruin a career. Because of the highly inflammatory nature of the poet's words, it was not made public until much later, but it reveals a great deal about the man and his beliefs. According to Sandburg,

> If I have a fixed, unchangeable creed then I am saved the trouble every day of forming a new creed dictated by the events of that day. . . . I am a socialist but not a member of the party. I am an I.W.W. but I don't carry a red card. I am an anarchist but not a member of the organization. . . . I am

> a Francis Heney Republican and a Frank P. Walsh Democrat and a Victor Murdock Progressive but I am free to vote any ticket or back any candidate I pick in the next campaign. I belong to everything and nothing. If I must characterize the element I am most often active with I would say I am with all rebels everywhere all the time as against all people who are satisfied. . . . I am for the single tax, for all the immediate demands of the socialists, for the whole political program of the American Federation of Labor, for the political and economic measures outlined in the Progressive and Democratic party platforms, and the trend of legislation and activity voiced by Woodrow Wilson in "The New Freedom." . . . Until the earth is a free place to free men and women wanting first of all the right to work on a free earth there will be war, poverty, filth, slums, strikes, riots, and the hands of men red with the blood of other men. (Quoted in Niven 346)

In his political statement, Sandburg states that he "was not a member" of several parties and organizations, when in reality he had spent several years working as a member of the socialist party and had an impressive political resume. Although August Sandburg was a devout Republican, his son "Charlie's" first political leanings would be toward Socialism. He began moving in this direction all the way back in 1888 when he sided with the strikers against his father's employer, the C.B.&Q. railroad line (Niven 13). His experiences with his family made him see that the system was not working. The family of childhood friend John Sjodin introduced Sandburg to the formal concept of Socialism and fueled his idealism with their frank family talks around the dinner table in their house

in Galesburg. Sjodin stayed in Galesburg and became a painter, union organizer, grocery story proprietor, and Socialist candidate for mayor (Niven 23-24).

Another influence on Sandburg's socialist leanings was his mentor from Lombard College, Professor Philip Green Wright was a member of the Socialist Party and influenced the young poet even further. During this time, Sandburg immersed himself in political writing, submitting pieces to a number of different socialist publications as well as a weekly column in the Galesburg *Evening Mail* (Niven 93-107). Wright also got Sandburg involved in the lecture circuit, where he gave a number of lectures, including one called "Three Great Blunders of Modern Civilization" which expressed his political views about child labor, war, and the penal system (Niven 117). Sandburg's work on the lecture circuit in Wisconsin led him to become friendly with a number of members of the burgeoning socialist party, and in 1907 he was appointed district organizer for the Social-Democratic Party of Wisconsin and eventually private secretary to Emil Seidel, the first Socialist mayor of Milwaukee (Niven 135).

Sandburg's star was rising in the party when in 1908, he served as a delegate to the National Socialist Convention in Chicago (Niven 172). In his role as a journalist, he served on the staff of several papers with Socialist and radical leanings, most importantly Chicago's *The Day Book.* He also served as a war correspondent in Stockholm for the Newspaper Enterprise Association; this job led to his being brought up on charges by the government for conspiracy. This was due to a series of deceptions and misunderstandings, and the charges were eventually dropped (Niven 323-326).

In fact, most of Sandburg's energy up to about 1918 was devoted in one way or another to politics. His writing reflects this devotion. During his early career, Sandburg wrote

very little poetry and a great deal of political prose. His *Dear Bill* letters (1909) published in *La Follette's Magazine* outlined his Socialist political philosophy. One of these eventually became *You and Your Job*, a pamphlet successful in its own right. Again, most of what Sandburg was writing at this time was an attempt to make life better for working people like his father. Penelope Niven states that, with *You and Your Job*, "Sandburg had joined past and present, drawing poignantly from childhood memories of his father's economic struggle, as well as his own daily encounters with the economic realities of 1908" (190). His interest in politics carried over into other areas of his life as he struggled to support his growing family.

Hearkening back to his father's Republican leanings and the proliferation of the Lincoln myth in Illinois, in 1910, he wrote an article of the Milwaukee *Social Democratic Herald* to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's birthday in which he portrayed the former president as a Socialist. He would return to Lincoln as a subject again and again in many different forms during his career. Incidentally, this article marks the first byline from Carl Sandburg (rather than "Charles" or "Charlie" Sandberg). With encouragement from his wife, Paula, he had finally come to accept and embrace his Swedish heritage, making his portraits of immigrant life more credible.

Forced to work on poetry only in his rare free time, Sandburg continued to hone his style. Penelope Niven states that he "found politics spilling over into the new poems, energizing them, shaping them into terse, symmetrical free-verse forms, stripped of lyricism to stark, realistic, images" (216). Along those same lines, in 1910 Sandburg wrote a poem called "The Hammer," a tribute to his father and to workingmen everywhere. The poem relied upon the image of "His father's Swedish hammer [which]

had been a prized possession, an emblem of work, hope, and pride" (Niven 216). It seems that his focus on political prose and his career as a journalist postponed much of Sandburg's serious literary work until later in life, which may have enhanced his poems by giving him more experiences from which to draw.

The style Sandburg was developing with poems like "The Hammer" became fully realized by the publication of *Chicago Poems* in 1916. Mark Van Wienen's article "Taming the Socialist: Carl Sandburg's Chicago Poems and its Critics" highlights political leanings in Sandburg's early work. The basic thesis of this article is that the response of the "literary and publishing establishment" to *Chicago Poems* caused Sandburg to water down the political sentiment in his later work and focus more on "imagist" writing. I would tend to agree with Van Wienen that Sandburg's politics grew more general and less radical as he got older. However, he makes a few assumptions about Sandburg that I feel need to be addressed. First of all, Van Wienen gives a summary of Sandburg's political resume, much as I have done here, but he completely omits any mention of Sandburg's early life as an influence on his politics, starting the story with Phillip Green Wright. In addition, Van Wienen has labeled Sandburg a "socialist intellectual" removed from the struggles of ordinary people. He then points out that this is problematic because it somehow makes the work less sincere or valuable.

> As critics of Marxism have regularly pointed out, the role of the intellectual speaking on behalf of the People is hardly without complications. These difficulties also apply to Sandburg's poetic persona who knows the popular mind while being distanced from it. (93)

In another section of the article, Van Wienen further discusses the issue of a poetic "persona" while analyzing the poem "Choose" when he says, "The persona which Sandburg adopts here is not the disinterested poet but the committed radical who stands alongside and allows himself to be identified with common laborers" (92). Van Wienen basically states here that Sandburg has stepped outside himself to adopt a "persona" not his own.

However, Sandburg did not need to adopt a "persona" when writing about the working class. The reason that Sandburg "allows himself to be identified with common laborers" is because he was one, plain and simple. It just does not work to lump Sandburg into the category of disinterested intellectual. This was a man who lived the struggles of the people about whom he wrote. He was not a pampered, middle-class, university-educated intellectual. He was a man who was born in a tiny, four-room cabin and was forced to quit school at age thirteen to work several jobs in order to help support his family. This was a man who had ridden the rails with hoboes, sold stereoscopes door-to-door, and fought in the Spanish-American War. It was his status as a veteran that enabled him to enter Lombard College with free tuition while working as a firefighter and salesperson, but his lack of a high school education put him so far behind that after four years he was unable to graduate. At one point during his tenure at Lombard, his father was able to buy a larger house on Berrien Street in Galesburg, while working as a blacksmiths' helper working ten-hour days for fourteen cents and hour, gardening, and renting property. Because of this, "Charlie" was able to boast, "We were very near to being Middle Class" (Niven 47). Even in 1916 when *Chicago Poems* was released, Sandburg was a man trying to support a growing family by working as a journalist and

writing poetry only in his spare time. Carl Sandburg was not a man who was "distanced" from the common people, which is why he was able to write about them so eloquently. It was this passion and immediacy that made *Chicago Poems* and much of Sandburg's other early work so powerful.

Throughout his career, Sandburg wrote many overtly political poems, some of them (like *The People, Yes*) epic in length. However, one of his earliest and best is "Masses" from *Chicago Poems*, arguably Sandburg's most successful book of poetry and an extremely political volume. The poem begins by listing places he has been, and then continues . . .

> Under the stars on the prairie watching the Dipper slant over the horizon's
> grass, I was full of thoughts.
> Great men, pageants of war and labor, soldiers and workers, mothers lifting
> their children—these all I touched, and felt the solemn thrill of
> them.
> And then one day I got a true look at the Poor, millions of the Poor, patient and toiling; more patient than crags, tides, and stars; innumerable, patient as the darkness of night—and all broken, humble ruins of nations. (*Complete Poems* 4-5)

This poem is pretty typical of Sandburg in many ways. It exhibits the Illinois influence in the sense that the *prairie* was the place that provided the genesis of the narrator's idea. The incorporation of images of the natural world in a highly political poem is another of Sandburg's most often-used techniques. Notice the incorporation of images like "grass," "stars," "crags," and "tides." References to the "Poor," with a capital letter even, are

another. Sandburg, while so masterful at brining out the struggles and humanity of individuals, seems to have a harder time working in generalizations. His work loses some of its power when he reverts from his character sketches to references to the faceless "Poor" or "People."

While many of Sandburg's later volumes of poetry were less overtly political than *Chicago Poems*, he never abandoned politics altogether. In 1936 he released *The People, Yes*, which Archibald MacLeish said "ought to be required reading for every man in every American metropolis who thinks of himself as a radical . . ." (Reed 181). While most critics would agree that, as a poem, it is certainly not his best work, its one hundred plus pages indicate that politics in America was still on Sandburg's mind even in the late 1930s. It also shows the Illinois influence in lines like

> From Illinois and Indiana came a later myth
>
> Of all the people in the world at Howdeehow
>
> For the first time standing together:
>
> From six continents, seven seas, and several archipelagoes,
>
> From points of land moved by wind and water
>
> Out of where they used to be to where they are,
>
> The people of the earth marched and travelled
>
> To gather on a great plain. (*Complete Poems* 440)

In Sandburg's world, the great change will come from the prairies of his youth rather than the industrial cities that had led the way up to that time.

In fact, time influences people along with place, which is certainly true of Sandburg. Most of his best work was written right around the time of World War I, and

that also had a profound effect on his work as he began writing poems specifically to influence people's attitudes about the war. As a veteran of the Spanish-American War, Sandburg knew something about the reality and futility of warfare. In 1898 Sandburg lied about his age and enlisted in Company C of the Sixth Illinois. His war experience basically consisted of long marches in oppressive heat with little actual combat. Most of the men in his troop were ravaged by sickness and starvation. He wrote in his later years that his experiences as a soldier were "a nightmare of blood, fever and blunders" (Niven 38-43). Because of his childhood, experiences as a soldier, and socialist leanings, during World War I Sandburg took a decidedly anti-war stance, both personally and in his work. Penelope Niven described a meeting with British anti-war poet Siegfried Sassoon in 1919 that sums up Sandburg's attitudes about war:

> Sassoon told Sandburg "it seemed funny to think of me coming to tell Chicago that war doesn't pay."
>
> "Maybe a few of them'll believe you," Sandburg replied. "But they can't know unless they've been there themselves. Bullets, bombs, bayonets, gas, are nothing more than words to them." For Sassoon that moment was "the central point" of his time in the United States. (348)

This quote explains Sandburg's technique in his early war poems. Since people would not believe that war "doesn't pay" unless they had "been there themselves." Sandburg used his writing as a chance to make people feel what war was really like.

An example of Sandburg's early war poems is "Ready to Kill," which combined Sandburg's concern for the workingman with his anti-war beliefs, and there is a definite sense of anger and resentment that comes through in this poem.

> Ten minutes now I have been looking at this.
>
> I have gone by here before and wondered about it.
>
> This is a bronze memorial of a famous general
>
> Riding horseback with a flag and a sword and a revolver on him.
>
> I want to smash the whole thing into a pile of junk to be hauled away to the scrap yard.

These lines encapsulate the anger that Sandburg felt for the privileged, upper-class leaders of the military. He goes on to explain that there are much more important pursuits in life than making war:

> I put it straight to you,
>
> After the farmer, the miner, the shop man, the factory hand, the fireman
>
> and the teamster,
>
> Have all been remembered with bronze memorials,
>
> Shaping them on the job of getting all of us
>
> Something to eat and something to wear,
>
> When they stack a few silhouettes
>
> Against the sky
>
> Here in the park,
>
> And show the real huskies that are doing the work of the world, and feeding people instead of butchering them,
>
> Then maybe I will stand here
>
> And look easy at this general of the army holding a flag in the air,

Once the people who really make a difference in the world have been honored sufficiently, then the narrator will be willing to honor the general. Then Sandburg turns to graphic imagery to drive home his final point:

> And riding like hell on horseback
>
> Ready to kill anybody that gets in his way,
>
> Ready to run the red blood and slush the bowels of men all over the
> sweet new grass of the prairie.

The last line, as well as the earlier use of words like "butcher," makes the point that war is needless slaughter, and there are more noble pursuits in this world. In this poem and others such as "The Four Brothers," Sandburg dealt with the subject of war in a very blunt, graphic way. Many other poets of the times handled the subject "more impressionistically." Harriet Monroe of *Poetry* magazine championed this poem. She believed that it was the responsibility of poets to "get rid of war" and set "Ready to Kill" up as an example of the "new poetry of war" (Niven 256).

Later war poems handle the subject in a softer, but no less effective, fashion. Many of these poems also use rural imagery to suggest that the idyllic life he led in Illinois serves a healing purpose opposed to the destructive impulses of war. "Grass" is one of Sandburg's more well-known poems, and it isn't as blatantly influenced by Illinois as some of the others. This poem is blatantly anti-war, though, with lines like "Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo./ Shovel them under and let me work--/ I am the grass; I cover all" (*Complete Poems* 136). The battles mentioned get more recent as the poem progresses—Gettysburg, Ypres, and Verdun. However, I would argue that the use of grass as a symbol in this poem is another example of Sandburg looking back to the

prairie for inspiration. After all, what makes a prairie a prairie? Grass. Lots and lots of grass. Sweeping expanses of grass. In this poem the grass is the healer of the wounds brought about by war, and it will "cover all" if we "let [it] work." The grass is so important here that it is even personified. The poem is told from the point of view of the grass. There were other ways that Sandburg could have made his point here, but the fact that he chose grass shows another example of his Illinois influence. He does this in "Ready to Kill" as well when he writes in the last line, "Ready to run the red blood and slush the bowels of men all over the/ sweet new grass of the prairie" (Niven 256).

While Sandburg's public image downplayed his role as a political radical, that was a huge part of his personality as a person, journalist, and poet. Later in his career he became a national celebrity and friend to several presidents, and in many ways that is a result of his abandoning some of his radical ideas. However, it was also a sign that the country was moving more toward the left as well with policies like the New Deal. Regardless of the change in Sandburg's politics, the fact that he was willing to challenge the status quo in his work allowed him to influence the beliefs of many Americans.

The story of politics and Edgar Lee Masters differs greatly from that of Carl Sandburg. Like Sandburg, Masters used his writing to disseminate his political views. Unlike Sandburg, Masters tended to bury those views within the subtext of his work. Also, where Sandburg looked ahead, trying to find solutions within the scope of the modern world, Masters' politics can be summed up with the old cliché of trying to recapture a more innocent time. Like many people living in transitional eras, Masters believed that things would be so much better if they could just be more like they were in the past. For Masters, the past meant the early 1800s before the Civil War and Northern

industrialism had corrupted the agrarian, pioneer spirit of America. In his mind, Masters' America was the America of Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson—if what he idealized, a Jeffersonian vision of he Midwest, ever really existed at all. Of course the irony of all this is that Masters was never content to live the ideals that he so passionately advocated.

This Jeffersonian worldview began as a reaction to the contentious situation in the home in which he was raised and was heavily influenced by his father. In 1896, Masters and his father attended the Democratic National Convention in Chicago to hear William Jennings Bryan, who John Hallwas described as the "champion of agrarian America and of the political myth of the Democratic party, which viewed itself as struggling to return the nation to the simple and noble way of life originated under Jefferson and achieved under Jackson" (40). Masters described the event, which would influence the rest of his life, in his autobiography:

> It was a spectacle never to be forgotten. It was the beginning of a changed America. Bryan's voice, so golden and winning, came clearly to my ears as he said, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." And as the vast crowd rose in ecstasy and cheered, and as the delegates marched about yelling and rejoicing for the good part of an hour, I sat there thinking of what I had read in Milton, in Mill, in More, in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, in Shelley, and resolving that I would throw myself into this new cause, which concerned itself with humanity. . . . A new life had come to me as well as to the Democracy. And at night at the apartment my father and I talked. Bryan would sweep the country, who had robbed the people

> since 1861 and whose course had made it so impossible for a young man to get along in the world. . . . Andrew Jackson had come back in the person of Bryan! (Quoted in Hallwas 40)

The convention excited Masters to the point that he dedicated much of his life to working with the Democratic Party. He also worked on Bryan's campaigns in 1896 and 1900. This experience and his negative views on colonialism and the Spanish-American war, which he believed only served the interest of big business and took the country farther away from the agrarian vision of Jeffersonian America, prompted the young writer to further study and to try to crystallize his vision of what America should be. This vision would be felt in such pre-*Spoon River* works as *The Constitution and Our Insular Possessions* (1900), the poem "Samson and Delilah" (1903), *The New Star Chamber and Other Essays* (1904), and the play *Maximilian* (1902). Masters was rarely as overt as Sandburg when it came to politics, and his favorite method seemed to be the subtle reference in poems, plays, biographies, or novels. Of course, Bryan would not "sweep the country" that year or any year, and as time went on Masters began to become more and more disenchanted with the state of the country until he had basically given up hope that his vision would ever be realized, and that resentment would make itself felt in his works as well.

This disillusionment shows up in a number of his works. As Masters stated in *The Tale of Chicago* in 1933, "There are two strains of blood in America, one that stayed close to the soil and developed character and originality, the other that struggled for riches in cities and became parasitical" (Quoted in Hallwas 41). He addresses this second group specifically in "Give Us Back Our Country" in 1935:

> Give us back our country, the old land,
>
> The cities, villages, and measureless fields
>
> Of toil and song, the just reward and sleep
>
> That follows after labor performed in hope.
>
> For this America is not mere earth,
>
> But living men, the sons of those who shouldered
>
> A destiny and vision. . . . (Quoted in Hallwas 43-44)

This poem is reminiscent of Sandburg with its bold political statement. As with Sandburg, Masters was for the workingman. However, Masters had a different view of what the workingman was. His was a more mythic notion than Sandburg's. For Masters, America did not belong to the immigrant, factory worker, or day laborer. His vision was more about the landowning gentleman farmer—courageous, spiritual, independent, and descended from the earliest pioneers. Masters' idealized workingman is of the "old land" and is one of the "sons of those who shouldered/ A destiny and vision." The very American personified by his grandfather, Squire Davis Masters.

Much more common with Masters was the subtle political reference, as seen in "Aaron Hatfield" from *Spoon River Anthology*. In this poem the speaker describes himself as "Standing before the pioneer men and women/ There at Concord Church on Communion day,/ Speaking in the broken voice of the peasant youth/ Of Galilee who went to the city/ And was killed by bankers and lawyers . . ." (329). Indeed, throughout the *Anthology* and many of Masters' other works the villains are invariably the bankers, lawyers, and capitalists whose interests conflicted with the pioneers and gentleman farmers depicted as heroes. He believed that rampant capitalism was the very thing that

was ruining his idea of America, and bankers and lawyers were often the tools used by big business to advance their own interests. This is especially interesting because Masters himself was a successful lawyer, as was his father.

One place where Masters' contradictory politics is most apparent is in *Illinois Poems.* Written in 1941 at the tail end of Masters' life, it encompasses many of the contradictions in his personality. Part nostalgic remembrance, part political tract, part homage to his best-known work, this collection is a very telling portrait of a very complicated man.

In *Illinois Poems*, Masters combines nature imagery and political rhetoric. "Illinois Ozarks" and "Country and City" are examples of Masters using his poetry to advance his Jeffersonian political ideals. This is a big place where his internal conflicts show up very clearly. Both poems bemoan the urbanization and industrialization of America and the loss of the agrarian pioneer culture that Masters claimed to love, while spending his entire adult life in industrial cities. In "Country and City" he even writes in the first person as if he were one of the people who still clung to this "ideal" lifestyle. "What is the city? What is it like?/ We do not know here, we who keep/ The days for work, the nights for sleep" (41) The poem suggests that the people of the country need not know about the inferior ways of the city. The use of the first-person "we" belies the fact that Masters was living in New York at the time, far from his idealized country. "Illinois Ozarks" also uses the first person, and goes so far as to suggest that England was plotting to retake the United States, or at least to exploit it economically, " . . . that in time the heavy soil/ Of the Revolution should prove an episode's/ Meaningless day, and this our sovereign soil/ Should once again be England's commerce spoil" (13). The

interests of big business aligning with England would make the revolution and the strides made by the earliest Americans "meaningless" and return the country to colonial status.

"Wilbur D. Masters," rather than being a fond remembrance of his beloved uncle, is another place where Masters overtly states his political beliefs, specifically that the Whigs and Republicans had forced America to stray from the true path of the Democratic Party. "And all the glory of greed and wrath/ That took America from the path/ By the fake log cabin that replaced the true:/ How Jackson's work was ruined by that crew/ Of Henry Clay, with this the consequent woe/ Of America walking where no man can know" (66). This poem is very specific in its political references. "Jackson's work" refers to Andrew Jackson, the president Masters believed to be the true inheritor of Jefferson's vision of America. He portrays Henry Clay, the founder of the Whig party and former speaker of the House of Representatives, as the one who "ruined" "Jackson's work." Just as he did with William T. Davidson in "The Minotaur" and "Editor Whedon," Masters vilifies anyone who disagrees with his political vision. Furthermore, since he lived in cities, worked as a lawyer, and lived off the money of his capitalist father-in-law, he blames all the problems in the country on people who live their lives the way he chooses to live his own.

Another place where Masters' politics become contradictory is in his treatment of World War I. Masters has often been criticized, and rightly so, for rushing his poetry into print because he needed fast money. This is nowhere more apparent than in Masters' poems about World War I. He started out with an anti-war stance, which worked for him in *Spoon River Anthology* with poems like "Knowlt Hoheimer."

I was the first fruits of the battle of Missionary Ridge.

> When I felt the bullet enter my heart
>
> I wished I had stayed at home and gone to jail
>
> For stealing the hogs of Curl Trenary,
>
> Instead of running away and joining the army.
>
> Rather a thousand times the county jail
>
> Than to lie under this marble figure with wings,
>
> And this granite pedestal
>
> Bearing the words, "*Pro Patria.*"
>
> What do they mean, anyway? (*Spoon River Anthology* 113)

While this poem is ostensibly about the Civil War, the fact that it was written in 1914 leads the reader to believe that at least some of the inspiration had to be the Great War, which was just beginning in Europe. The last two lines even share the sentiment of the best-known World War I poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen, which was written in 1918. Both poems assert that those old standby expressions of patriotism are simply lies that do not mean anything. This poem also shows Masters' agrarian ideals in that it would be better to stay at home and endure the county jail than to go off and fight in a war that Masters believed was pushed on the country by Northern industrialists and abolitionists.

However, Masters' Jeffersonian political ideals could be corrupted by greed. After *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters wrote a few anti-war poems like "The Love-Death" and "Epitaph for Us" which turned out not to be lucrative, so he turned to pro-war poems. In 1918 he was asking one hundred dollars for "The Winged Victory of America." According to Herbert Russell, "He was not comfortable with this pro-war

stance, however, and pieces he published in this vein are so dominated by the deadly triumvirate of politics, propaganda, and prayer that there is little room left for poetry" (127). Masters' handling of the war issue is indicative of the general decline of his career. After the great uproar over *Spoon River Anthology*, he was never able to duplicate his success because he was too focused on making money and pushing his own agenda, which is not very Jeffersonian.

Another place where the problem of Masters putting his politics before his art becomes abundantly clear is in his biographies. Masters used his biographical work to pontificate on his own political agenda. He wrote biographies on Abraham Lincoln (which will be discussed in the next chapter), Walt Whitman, Vachel Lindsay, and Mark Twain. Of those biographies, the most successful and well received was *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America*. The reviews of the day are the best way to understand the reception of a book, and they can be very telling. Two common threads run through those reviews—he did not do enough research and shaped what facts he had to accommodate his own purposes. One of the most positive reviews was John Herbert Nelson's from *American Literature*, which stated, "The strength of the biography lies partly in its clear presentation of facts but even more in the honesty with which the full story is told." However, Nelson does state that there are problems with the work. He says, " . . . the material included on Lindsay's boyhood is scanty and unsatisfactory . . .," but the most important criticism comes on the subject of Masters' editorial voice:

> In addition to the biographical matter proper, the book contains sections devoted to the American background against which Masters sees Lindsay,

> and against which he wishes the reader to see him. In these sections a good deal of prejudice has entered . . . (340)

More scathing was Fred W. Lorch's review of *Mark Twain: A Portrait*, also from *American Literature*. Again, Lorch voices the complaint that "Many inaccuracies arise from slipshod workmanship . . ." and "Many of Mr. Masters' quotations from Mark Twain's writings are inaccurately rendered or garbled . . ." (375). Lorch, like Nelson, also criticizes Masters for twisting the facts to suit his own purposes:

> . . . it is obvious that for Mr. Masters Mark Twain has become a symbol of all that is regrettable in American life and that his chief sin was his failure to espouse the proletarian cause. And since, at bottom, Mr. Masters evaluates Mark Twain's literary activity from a strictly proletarian point of view, blaming him for embracing bourgeois ethics and politics . . . and not from that of a disinterested critic dealing with the work of a creative artist, his portrait of Mark Twain is sadly distorted. (374)

These reviews are representative of the ones Masters received after *Spoon River Anthology*. The impact that Masters' politics had on his work was to give him an excuse to worry less about the actual subject and more about how to use that subject to make the point that he wanted to make. In the case of the biographies, especially, Masters chose subjects and did research specifically with his own views in mind. He set aside concerns about historical accuracy and readability to focus on politics, resulting in an inferior product. The cycle became self-perpetuating then, because by this time Masters was trying to support himself exclusively with his writing. When one project failed to make

money, that just forced Masters to rush on to the next one without proper research and editing.

So while Sandburg was rising to prominence, Masters was struggling to duplicate his early success and to make ends meet. Sandburg was able to incorporate his politics in a way that did not alienate his readers and compromise the quality of most of his work, which is something that Masters was never able to do. A possible reason for this could be that Sandburg did his best to live his ideals and make peace with the ideological conflicts of his childhood, while Masters continued to wallow in conflict and self-doubt. Masters would eventually become resentful of Sandburg's success, and what began as a friendly relationship back in 1914 would continue to deteriorate until it completely broke down when both authors tackled the same subject—Abraham Lincoln.

The two authors' treatment of Abraham Lincoln further illustrates their use of politics in their writing. Both tried to imbue their Lincolns with their own traits and political beliefs and to use the life of the former president to influence their readers. Again, as with much of their other works, Sandburg's point of view was able to enrich his work on Lincoln, while Masters' imposition of his political ideals detracted from his work.

Chapter Three

"Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing." –Abraham Lincoln

People in Illinois are raised on the Lincoln myth. They are nourished by it from childhood in much the same way the corn is nourished by the summer sun. It is right there on our license plate, "Land of Lincoln." Any city, town, or village with any kind of Lincoln connection (and they are numerous) has played up that connection to gain notoriety and attract tourist dollars. There are Lincoln historical sites in Springfield, Charleston, Beardstown, Galena, Bloomington, and many others in Illinois alone. The village of New Salem, just a few miles from Edgar Lee Masters' boyhood home of Petersburg, has been completely restored as a state historic site. We all know the story—the great emancipator's humble origins in Kentucky and Indiana, his move to Illinois, his rowdy youth in New Salem, marriage to Mary Todd, debates with Stephen Douglas, and eventual election to the presidency where he led the country through the Civil War and freed the slaves before he was brutally assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. The Lincoln legend gives people hope that common citizens from humble origins can rise up to accomplish great things. This was no less true during the time to Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg. In fact, the image of the former president may have loomed even larger then because it was more immediate. Masters was born in 1868, only three years after Lincoln's death, and Sandburg followed ten years later. It is no wonder, then that so much of their work would be inspired by and treat Lincoln as a subject. In many ways the two authors both bought into and debunked the Lincoln myth, but both authors

certainly put their own stamp on the legend of Abraham Lincoln. Where Sandburg approached Lincoln from the angle of a childhood hero he considered the savior of the country, Masters saw Lincoln as a representative of everything he believed had gone wrong in America. Unfortunately for Masters, the country preferred Sandburg's version of Lincoln's life.

Carl Sandburg had been fascinated with Lincoln since his childhood. Penelope Niven states that "Since boyhood, he had admired Lincoln. He had grown up listening to the talk of people who saw Lincoln with their own eyes, and heard him speak. Galesburg was full of Lincoln history" (407). Sandburg himself stated in the preface to *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years,*

> For thirty years and more I have planned to make a certain portrait of Abraham Lincoln. It would sketch the country lawyer and prairie politician who was intimate with the settlers of the Knox County neighborhood where I grew up as a boy, and where I heard the talk of the men and women who had eaten with Lincoln, given him a bed overnight, heard his jokes and lingo, remembered his silences and his mobile face. (Quoted in Niven 408)

Sandburg's interest in Lincoln is sprinkled throughout his poetry. In "I Am the People, the Mob" from *Chicago Poems*, he states, "I am the audience that witnesses history. The Napoleons come from me/ and the Lincolns. They die. And then I send forth more Napoleons and Lincolns" (*Complete Poems* 71). In "Caboose Thoughts" from *Cornhuskers*, the narrator muses, "I never had supper with Abe Lincoln./ . . . But I've been around." (94). There are a number of small references like this, most of them used

with a sense of reverence tinged with a wish on the author's part to know more about the man who was the real Lincoln.

Sandburg seems conflicted about how to reconcile the myth of Lincoln with this wish to know the real man. This conflict is the subject of a puzzling poem from *Cornhuskers*, "Knucks." The poem begins in that reverent tone:

> In Abraham Lincoln's city,
>
> Where they remember his lawyer's shingle,
>
> The place where they brought him
>
> Wrapped in battle flags,
>
> Wrapped in the smoke of memories
>
> From Tallahassee to the Yukon,
>
> The place now where the shaft of his tomb
>
> Points white against the blue prairie dome,

At this point the poem shifts to the more commonplace and carries a more conversational tone.

> In Abraham Lincoln's city . . . I saw knucks
>
> In the window of Mister Fischman's second-hand store
>
> On Second Street.

The narrator then discovers that the knucks are for sale at thirty cents a piece and that the proprietor sells "a carload a month of these." The narrator does not seem to know quite what to make of this, and falls into wondering what this display of capitalism means and what "Abe" would have thought about all of it.

> And there came to me a set of thoughts like these:

Mister Fischman is for Abe and the "malice to none" stuff,

And the street car strikers and the strike-breakers,

And the sluggers, gunmen, detectives, policemen,

Judges, utility heads, newspapers, priests, lawyers,

They are all for Abe and the "malice to none" stuff.

This could mean that all the people who seem to be at odds with each other, but still claim to believe in the "malice to none stuff" are simply giving lip service and need to re-examine their priorities. Mister Fischman did not seem to understand the ponderings of the narrator, however:

I started for the door.

"Maybe you want a lighter pair,"

Came Mister Fischman's voice.

I opened the door . . . and the voice again:

"You are a funny customer."

Then the poem returns to its reverent tone for the closing lines:

Wrapped in battle flags,

Wrapped in the smoke of memories,

This is the place they brought him,

This is Abraham Lincoln's home town. (121-122)

Sandburg seems unhappy here with the treatment of his hero and his legacy by the people who should have cared about it the most.

The idea of what happens to a hero after death is addressed again in "Cool Tombs," also from *Cornhuskers*. "When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs,

he forgot the cop-/perheads and the assassin . . . in the dust, in the cool tombs." The poem goes on to discuss Ulysses Grant and Pocahontas before concluding with "Take any streetful of people buying clothes and groceries, cheering a hero/ or throwing confetti and blowing tin horns . . . tell me if the lovers are losers . . . tell me if any get more than the lovers . . . in the dust . . . in the cool tombs." (134). What Sandburg seems to be saying here is that everyone is equal after death "in the dust . . . in the cool tombs."

Sandburg's epic political poem *The People, Yes* includes several references to and passages inspired by Lincoln. Written in 1936 between Sandburg's two major Lincoln works *The Prairie Years* and *The War Years*, he does not seem to be any more certain about the nature of the man or the myth. In section 57, he writes, "Lincoln?/ He was a mystery in smoke and flags . . ."; the rest of the section consists of a series of questions and attempts to answer them through quotes from the man himself. Sandburg asks if Lincoln was a poet, a historian, or a man who "gather[ed] / the feel of the American dream and see its kindred over the earth?" (521-523).

The People, Yes also includes language and ideas inspired by Lincoln's own words. On July 4, 1861, Lincoln stated, "Accordingly, they commenced by an insidious debauching of the public mind . . . they have been drugging the public mind" (Niven 504). Then, seventy-five years later, Sandburg wrote in *The People, Yes*:

Can you bewilder men by the millions
With transfusions of your own passions,
Mixed with lies and half-lies,
Texts torn from contexts,
and then look for peace, quiet, good will

between nation and nation, race and race,

between class and class?

The Lincoln influence could be felt throughout Sandburg's career in all the different types of work that he did. By the end of his career, he had immersed himself so much in the Lincoln legend that he was regarded as one of the experts in the field, and was even asked to address Congress for the anniversary of Lincoln's birthday in 1959. Sandburg's fascination with Lincoln probably comes from the fact that Sandburg, as well as people who knew him, saw a lot of himself in Lincoln. There were a number of people who believed that Sandburg was uniquely suited to write a biography of Lincoln. Alfred Harcourt said, "You're just the boy to do this—to understand Abe and make him real in real times when life went on so differently" (Quoted in Niven 411). Benjamin Thomas states in *Portrait for Posterity* in 1947, "He grew up in the same part of the country where Lincoln spent most of his life; and he must have been attracted to him early. Like Lincoln, he is a common man with an uncommon mind. He has the same ideas about America that Lincoln had" (Quoted in Niven 433).

Sandburg felt close to the president because of his working-class background and his struggle to move up in the world. In 1910, in honor of Lincoln's birthday, Sandburg wrote an article for the Milwaukee *Social Democratic Herald* in which he portrayed Lincoln as a socialist and used him as a symbol of his commitment to the "common people." Sandburg reminded his readers that the man who would someday rise to the highest office in the land began as a "shabby, homely man who came from among those who lived shabby and homely lives." He went on to state that "He never forgot the tragic, weary underworld from which he came—the world of labor, the daily lives of toil,

deprivation and monotony. Against these things he fought. He struggled for more—more food and books and better conditions—for the workers . . ." (Quoted in Niven 209). These lines could just as easily describe Carl Sandburg as Abraham Lincoln, which may explain Sandburg's commitment to his study of Lincoln as well as his reverent portrayals of him.

On the other hand, Edgar Lee Masters had a different history with regard to the Lincoln legend. Masters had more direct ties to Lincoln as a person than Sandburg did, and, because of this, he had a much different view of the former president. As with much of Masters' life, his Lincoln education was divided. Living in the epicenter of the Lincoln myth, he was raised on the legends just like anyone else. However, several members of Masters' family, including his beloved grandfather, knew Lincoln personally or knew people who knew him. The most important connections were Squire Davis Masters, who hired Lincoln twice as a lawyer and heard him argue a case at the Masters home while serving as Justice of the Peace, and Hardin Masters, who worked with Lincoln's former partner, William H. Herndon. Unlike Sandburg, however, Masters had reason to disregard the reverent image of Lincoln in Illinois. Herbert Russell stated, "it was a Masters family tradition to be suspicious of Lincoln" (269). In his biography *Lincoln: The Man*, Masters describes how his grandfather felt about Lincoln:

> He was against Lincoln and voted against him, as others of like conviction did. When I was growing up, and was imbibing the Lincoln myths, I was puzzled and shocked to know that my grandfather, whom I saw invested with all nobilities, had voted against Lincoln. . . . When I asked him to explain his vote to me, he replied that he disliked Lincoln's politics, and

> disapproved of his career as a politician, and that he feared Lincoln's preachments would bring war. (227)

Squire Dave Masters' attitudes about Lincoln were not surprising when one remembers that he was a Southern-born Democrat who, while disliking slavery himself, upheld the rights of the Southern states to use it.

Edgar Lee Masters, then, straddled both sides of the Lincoln issue depending on what his purpose was at the time. As a child, he had learned the legends just like everyone else. His early work, for the most part, does nothing to contradict what everyone already believed about Lincoln. Later in his career, however, he tried to challenge what his readers thought they knew about the president. His poetry, especially *Spoon River Anthology,* generally upholds the Lincoln legend, while his prose attempts to break it down. The opening poem of the *Anthology*, "The Hill," ends with the lines"

> Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,
> Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary's Grove,
> Of what Abe Lincoln said
> One time at Springfield. (88)

These fictional residents sleeping "on the hill" in Spoon River revel in their fond memories of Illinois' most famous resident. Another poem in the *Anthology*, "Anne Rutledge," upholds the myth that Lincoln had a tragic love affair with a woman in New Salem that affected him for the rest of his life. The story goes that Anne Rutledge, jilted by her fiancé, formed an attachment to Lincoln but died before they could marry. The poem furthers the legend that Lincoln and Rutledge had a great love affair and that she was the inspiration for the greatness that he would eventually achieve:

Out of me unworthy and unknown

The vibrations of deathless music:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all."

Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,

And the beneficent face of a nation

Shining with justice and truth.

I am Anne Rutledge who sleeps beneath these weeds,

Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,

Wedded to him, not through union,

But through separation.

Bloom forever, O Republic,

From the dust of my bosom! (288)

The repetition of the phrase "out of me" reinforces the idea that Rutledge was the inspiration for Lincoln's greatness, as do the last two lines, "Bloom forever, O Republic,/ From the dust of my bosom!" This became one of the most popular poems in *Spoon River Anthology*, made even more important later on when it was inscribed on a new tombstone for Anne Rutledge's grave in Petersburg. However, in his biography of Lincoln, Masters refuted the story of the Lincoln/Rutledge affair and chalked it up to another falsehood in the Lincoln myth.

Another well-known poem from the *Anthology* is "William H. Herndon," based on Lincoln's (and Hardin Masters') former law partner. This poem seems to uphold the Lincoln legend in lines like, " And I saw a man arise from the soil like a fabled giant/ And throw himself over a deathless destiny/ Master of great armies, head of the republic

. . ." (291). However, the poem takes a different turn when it states, "O Lincoln, actor indeed, playing well your part,/ And Booth, who strode in a mimic play within the play . . ." Was Masters saying that here that Lincoln was not all that he had been made out to be? The poem is certainly sympathetic to Herndon, who Masters portrays as sitting alone pining over his former partner's glory, "There by the window in the old house . . . Often and often I saw you,/ As the cawing crows winged their way to the wood/ Over my house-top at solemn sunsets,/ There by my window,/ Alone." This portrayal of Herndon seems accurate since he wrote a biography of Lincoln after his death that was not terribly flattering. Masters used this work as his main source when writing his own biography in the 1930s.

In fact, biography was the medium that both authors used to express their own beliefs, ideals, and insecurities through the person of Abraham Lincoln. Both Masters and Sandburg portrayed their respective Lincolns as an offshoot of themselves, with varying results. This is another place where the Illinois influence can really be felt, since they chose the most famous Illinoisan as their subject matter. The Lincoln biographies were also a place where the two authors competed for recognition, effectively ending their already-shaky friendship.

The first of the full-length Lincoln works was Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* in 1926. *The War Years* followed in 1939, as well as a biography of Mary Todd Lincoln in 1932. The multiple volumes of *The Prairie Years* and *The War Years* were repackaged in different ways, including one-volume editions and a condensed paperback edition. The whole package represents the culmination of Sandburg's lifetime of work. In many ways, he had been working up to it from the beginning of his career.

In 1925 he wrote to Amy Lowell, "Ain't it hell the way a book walks up to you and makes you write it?—Don't you feel almost predestinarian?" (Quoted in Niven 425). The original idea came out of Sandburg's work on *Rootabaga Stories*. He wanted to write another book for children and noticed that there was not a good children's biography of Abraham Lincoln available at the time. Eventually the project evolved beyond a children's book, but Sandburg's other focus on Lincoln's early life stayed intact. He wanted to "sketch the country lawyer and the prairie politician." Sandburg's reasoning being, "if he was what he was during those first fifty-two years of his life it was nearly inevitable that he would be what he proved to be in the last four" (Quoted in Niven 415).

Sandburg tried to delve into the mind of the real Lincoln, discovering himself in the process. He drew from what he knew of Lincoln and his own experiences to extrapolate the thoughts and feelings of the real man. Many of Sandburg's friends and relatives agreed that readers could learn as much about Sandburg from the book as they could about Lincoln. Negley Cochran, Sandburg's one-time boss, wrote to Sandburg after the release of the book, " . . . you got his soul all mixed up with your own . . . In reading your book I caught your own soul peeping out from between pages, paragraphs and words" (Quoted in Niven 436). Alice Corbin Henderson of *Poetry* magazine agreed, "For two weeks I've been living with your Lincoln, and with you. I simply can't say how fine I think the book is—it's my guess that it will live as long as this civilization. . . . I was struck by things which you knew about Lincoln because you know them about yourself . . ." (Quoted in Niven 436-437).

Lincoln and Sandburg did have a number of things in common, probably the most important of which was their love of language, which Sandburg explored in his biographies. While Sandburg has been criticized as a poor historian, no one can argue with his effective use of language. The multi-volume work is a joy to read, with echoes of Sandburg's poetic language coming through. Sandburg's mentor, Philip Green Wright, called *The Prairie Years* a "prose poem" and wrote to Sandburg, "you are so much a poet by nature that poetry suffuses your ostensibly prose works, and to use this irrepressible background of poetry which gives wings to your prose is more delightful where your genius takes this form than in your confessedly poetic productions" (Quoted in Niven 437). There are probably several reasons for Sandburg's poetic writing style in the Lincoln biographies. First, Sandburg was a poet by nature. His love of playing with language went all the way back to his childhood when he was trying to learn to use the English he was required to know for school; it was a love that he also inherited from his mother. Second, Lincoln was something of a frustrated poet himself who was known to write verses in his younger years. As we know from his speeches and political writings, Lincoln loved words almost as much as Sandburg did. The writing style may have been one more tribute to Sandburg's hero. Third, Sandburg was trying to write a biography that would be interesting and accessible to the average American. The work is descriptive and lyrical enough to keep the reader interested, but not complex enough to dissuade most people from reading it. One example of Sandburg's use of poetic language comes in the passage on Lincoln's mother's death:

> She knew she was dying, called for her children, and spoke to them her last dim choking words. Death came October 5, 1818, the banners of

> autumn flaming their crimsons over tall oaks and quiet maples. On a bed of poles cleated to the corner of the cabin, the body of Nancy Hanks Lincoln lay in peace and silence, the eyelids closed down in unbroken rest. To the children who tiptoed in, stood still, cried their tears of want and longing, whispered and heard only their own whispers answering, she looked as though new secrets had come to her in place of the old secrets given up with the breath of life. (34)

The Prairie Years, especially, reads more like a novel than a traditional biography. It is lovely to read, but does little to change our ideas about the Lincoln myth. In fact, Sandburg relies heavily on many old stories that have since been shown most likely to be falsehoods, such as the Anne Rutledge affair. Adding to the fictional feel of the book, Sandburg imagines a number of scenes to illustrate the young Lincoln interacting with the people around him. One of these dramatizes Lincoln's early law studies:

> During the fall and winter of 1832, business didn't pick up much. Berry wasn't interested, and Lincoln was reading and dreaming. Early harvest days came; the farmers bundled grain in russet fields. From the Salem hilltop the valley of the Sangamon River loitered off in a long stretch of lazy, dreamy haze and the harvest moon came in a wash of pumpkin colors. Lincoln could sit with uninterrupted thoughts, free day after day to turn and look into himself. He was having days that might nourish by letting him sit still and get at himself. He was growing as inevitably as summer corn in Illinois loam. Leaning against the doorpost of a store to which few customers came he was growing, in silence, as corn grows. He

> had bought at an auction in Springfield a copy of Blackstone, the first of the law books to read. One morning he sat barefoot on a woodpile, with a book. "What are you reading?" asked Squire Godbey. "I ain't reading; I'm studying." "Studying what?" "Law." "Good God Almighty!" (68)

It is perhaps because of its extreme readability that the Sandburg biography became the definitive work on Lincoln well into the second half of the twentieth century. Again, because both he and Lincoln were common men at heart, Sandburg wanted his biographies to accessible to an everyday reader. Even today Sandburg's works show up more than any other on lists of works about Abraham Lincoln, and the Sandburg birthplace is listed as a Lincoln historical site on the Abraham Lincoln Online website. Part of the reason that we have the ideas about Lincoln that we do is because of Sandburg's biography.

Sandburg's biographies were wildly successful and earned the writer a great deal of money and recognition. Masters, in the meantime, was living in New York City and struggling to get by, still coasting on his reputation from *Spoon River Anthology*. He was extremely jealous of Sandburg's success and felt that Sandburg was copying him and riding on his coattails. When Masters heard that Sandburg was writing a biography of Lincoln, he became enraged. He made the following comments to a friend:

> Amy Lowell bracketed me with Sandburg in her book, though I have no part with him in any way. Others have done the same thing. It helped him; it hurt me, so far as such an absurdity could hurt. Then little things occurred, trifles . . . I found Sandburg's footprints in Petersburg, Illinois, among my intimates, and almost everywhere I had lived; and I always

> found him following me to pick up the same advantage that came to me or the crumbs of it, altogether a sort of stealthy following, and watching, and undermining where possible.
>
> The truth is that he has no country; he is not attached to Galesburg, where he was born, while I have the Lincoln country as mine, by right of birth, because of the affection of the people, and because I have portrayed it. I understand that he is now writing a life of Lincoln. Why! (Quoted in Russell 273)

Amy Lowell's equating of Masters and Sandburg was not unique. In fact, the two were often lumped together with Vachel Lindsay simply because they were all from Illinois. While Lindsay's poetry was extremely different from that of the other two, he also wrote about Lincoln. Therefore, writing about Lincoln may be another quality of an Illinois poet. However, Masters felt that he had sole right of ownership over the Lincoln story based on his roots in Petersburg. Therefore, he decided to write his own story of Lincoln's life. By doing this, he could accomplish several goals. First of all, he felt that a biography of Lincoln would "always sell for years to come" (Russell 276), solving his money problems for good. Second, it was a way to show up Sandburg. Third, discrediting Lincoln would discredit the Republican Party, which was a great boon to Masters, who was an ardent Democrat. The years between 1860 and 1912 saw only one Democratic president, and Masters saw this period as the downfall of his idea of the perfect agrarian, Jeffersonian America symbolized by his paternal grandparents in Petersburg. Masters stated that "The Republican Party started the [Civil] War to entrench themselves politically, so they lifted up Lincoln to keep themselves entrenched; and they

did it and have done it" (Quoted in Russell 275). All these factors led to *Lincoln: The Man*, which was published in 1931. Masters spent only fifty-seven days writing and revising his, relying principally on two sources—previous biographies by William Herndon and Albert J. Beveridge (Russell 271-274).

The book is a vast departure from Sandburg's. Masters tries very hard to discredit Lincoln, and by extension the Republican Party, in order to benefit the agrarian Jeffersonian ideals that were represented by the Democratic Party that Masters supported. The book has very little to say about Lincoln that is positive. Masters refutes not only the Lincoln myth but also his own ideas about the idealized Midwestern farmer in editorial comments like

> There was a callousness and dumbness about some of the pioneer people of the Middle West, which persist to this day, and have become the nourishment of a sort of semi-barbarism, sometimes becoming cruel bigotry, at others a sort of savage indifference to the refined interests of life; and of this quality, in some particulars, was Abraham Lincoln. (13)

Not only is *Lincoln: The Man* an uncomplimentary biography, in certain ways it is barely a biography. Masters interjects long editorial passages, often praising and analyzing other political figures, like Andrew Jackson and Stephen Douglas. Masters uses these figures, many of whom were his heroes, as a contrast to Lincoln, "Douglas had that prime indicium of genius, energy. He was always doing something; while Lincoln, though ceaselessly playing at politics, seemed to confine his industry to letter writing and to scheming" (80). The middle section of the book contains long, extremely detailed chapters on the Compromises of 1820 and 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred

Scott Decision that barely mention Lincoln. These chapters include more of those editorial passages interjecting Masters' political opinions. This is evident in passages like the following:

> War was surely impending about this matter of slavery; but men can never know the truth at the time. If they had known what slavery was, if they had minded their own business, there would have been no war, no treading of grapes of wrath, no triumphant Jehovah of the Jews. Adams was a Whig, as Lincoln was; and Whigs cared for the law when it was on their side. When the law was against them they appealed to revealed morals, to God. (175)

This quote represents one of the few that even mention Lincoln in this chapter. Unfortunately, it is not about Lincoln at all, but rather about Masters' feelings about the Whig Party, which he believed to be responsible for the Civil War. Masters was generally disapproving of war, as were his father and grandfather. This quote seems to be saying that, because of this disapproval, he would rather have left slavery alone than endure the brutal Civil War. He also takes great pains in the book to establish that Lincoln, while not in favor of slavery, was not in favor of equality for African-Americans. He seems to believe that this clarification somehow validates his point. Masters' ulterior motive for writing the book edges out the purpose expressed in the first paragraph, which stated the purpose was to create an "examination of his mind and nature" (1). Masters uses Lincoln as a scapegoat for everything that he sees as wrong with the country—big business, industrialization, urbanization, etc. He dedicated the book to Thomas Jefferson and stated in his conclusion, "Our greatest Americans are

Jefferson, Whitman and Emerson; and the praise that has been bestowed on Lincoln is a robbery of these, his superiors. . . . Lincoln crushed the principles of free government" (494).

The interesting thing about *Lincoln: The Man* is that Masters does much the same thing as Sandburg, in that he finds a great deal of himself in his Lincoln, which may explain why he was so critical of the man. Sandburg explains the biographer's role this way, "In the story of a great pivotal figure at the vortex of a vast human struggle, we meet gaps and discrepancies. The teller of the story reports, within rigorous space limits, what is to him plain, moving, revealing. . . . this in part explains why any Lincoln biography is different from any or all other Lincoln biographies . . ." (*The Prairie Years* 18). These two authors, especially, had good reason to search out those pieces of information, which supported the type of biography they wanted to write. Sandburg found information, which pointed toward Lincoln as champion for the working man, while Masters looked for anything which would discredit the man his grandfather had not trusted.

Possibly most revealing is that Masters criticizes Lincoln for many things that he did himself. For example, he criticizes Lincoln for marrying his wife for money and social standing, "Her father was a man of wealth; and it is possible that the ambitious Lincoln conceived that her father's means would be a help to his ambition. It is possible and probable too" (Russell 276). Masters, himself, married his first wife for money. His comment at the time was, "when a man is ambitious in a field in which there is no money for a living, he must marry it" (276). Masters also criticized Lincoln for nearly running out on his wedding and submitting to a loveless, difficult marriage—two concepts that

seem contradictory as well as two things that Masters did himself. Masters also saw in Lincoln some of the frustration and heartache of his own stalled career:

> Lincoln, who was sensitive and of a brooding imagination, saw the days drift by without anything happening to give any meaning to his life. At forty-five a man is near the climacteric of his powers, but of what use is that if there be no place or work in the world for him, and if his life does not ensphere itself and revolve on to some significant destiny? Locked up powers, obstructed energies and baffled dreams are daily death to a strong man; and Lincoln had been now for years a thwarted will. (225)

It is important to remember that in 1931 Masters had quit the law to concentrate on writing full time, yet had not had a real success since *The New Spoon River* in 1924, and most of his most cherished works had achieved very little success. The frustration that he felt can be read throughout his later works, especially *Lincoln: The Man*.

But what was the reception of this very critical, overtly political biography? Very poor indeed. The middle of the Great Depression was not a time when the average American wanted his heroes debunked. Americans wanted to be secure in their past because the present and future were so uncertain. According to Herbert Russell, "What they wanted . . . was what Sandburg had already given them in *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*. What they got was something else" (277). There was an enormous backlash to the book. The *New York Times Book Review* quipped, "Charles Dickens was kinder to Bill Sikes" (Quoted in Russell 277). Several booksellers refused to carry the book. A Congressman from California proposed a bill to ban *Lincoln: The Man* from being sent through the mail. There was talk of removing Masters' poem "Anne

Rutledge" from the tombstone in Petersburg. Masters himself, as well as his publishers, was inundated with mail, much of it threatening (277-278).

One contemporary review by M. M. Quaife for *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* called it "a diatribe of eighteen chapters and 200,000 words" (260). The review goes on to say, "Mr. Masters has merely utilized President Lincoln as a convenient frame upon which to display his view of contemporary American civilization" and "To the reviewer it seems extreme, needlessly bitter, and frequently invalid; in short, the author has adopted the role of prosecuting attorney, rather than that of impartial judge or historian" (260-262). But the worst criticism was saved for the conclusion of the article:

> Frequently the author assumes the role of ranter, at times an incoherent one. Often his judgments are so partisan that only their utterance in the heat of the conflict instead of two generations after its close, would serve to extenuate them. At times, one is led to suspect that the author himself does not know what he is talking about. For example, in the statement about the poverty of sexual equipment of Seward, Sumner, Chase, Stevens, Lincoln, and Robespierre (p. 428), does he wish to convey the idea that all statesmen are libertines; or that moral principles are non-existent? Or, perchance, does he know as little as the reviewer, what he is really trying to say?" (262)

Needless to say, *Lincoln: The Man* accomplished none of Masters' goals in writing it. It never made him any money. In fact, it actually lost money in Europe (Russell 279). It did absolutely nothing to unseat Sandburg's work as the most popular Lincoln biography, and may have actually hurt Masters' political causes rather than helped them. It certainly

put the final nail in the coffin of Masters' literary career. After the publication of this book, Masters would have trouble even finding a publisher for subsequent works. Worst of all, after the initial uproar, the book basically went away. Today it is very difficult to find, and appears on none of the readily available Lincoln bibliographies on the internet.

It would seem that Masters went too far in his attempts to reconcile his divided childhood and return to the idyllic setting of his youth. Sandburg, on the other hand, profited greatly in both money and fame by returning to a hero from his youth. The difference could be attributed to a number of factors. First, it could simply mean that the country was more in tune with Sandburg's positive message about Lincoln than Masters' critical one. Second, Sandburg's literary reputation was strong enough in the 1920s and 1930s to help carry any project that he wanted to attempt, while Masters was fighting against his literary position. Third, and I think most important, Masters was writing from a very negative place when he started *Lincoln: The Man*. His main motivating factors were greed and revenge. He wanted revenge on Sandburg, the Republicans, his mother, and anyone else he felt was against him or "undermining" him. Sandburg, on the other hand, was writing from pure admiration and academic interest in his subject, which is always a better place to start.

Chapter Four

"The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other." --Jane Smiley

In "The Prairie: Sandridge" from *Along the Illinois*, published at the very end of his career, Edgar Lee Masters wrote:

> To contemplate the prairies is
> To fathom time, to guess at infinite space,
> To find the Earth-spirit in a dreaming mood.
> In Illinois the prairies are a soul,
> A muse of distance eyeing the solitude. (34)

Even in 1942 while living in New York City, Masters felt a mystical connection to the natural world of his childhood. Sandburg made a similar statement in one of his early essays:

> Freedom is found, if anywhere, in the great outdoor world of breezes and sunshine and sky . . . To get out into the daylight and fill your lungs with pure air, to stop and watch a spear of grass swaying in the wind, to give a smile daily at the wonder and mystery of shifting light and changing shadow, is to get close to the source of power. (Quoted in Niven 126-127).

Both authors expressed, in their works and their personal statements, a deep connection to the natural world, especially that of the Illinois of their childhood. As Masters stated, the prairie is a soul; it gets inside a person to form an almost mystical connection. Any reader of Masters and Sandburg should be able to divine this connection as is manifests itself in their work. There are countless examples of the authors using the imagery of the

prairie and the landscapes of Central Illinois in a very powerful, almost mythic representation. For Masters, John Hallwas stated that his use of nature imagery hearkened back to a "symbolic landscape" that represented the idyllic childhood days on his grandparents' farm. It "conveys a spiritual refuge from the world of frustration, struggle, and conflict" (48). For Sandburg, Penelope Niven stated that he "relied on nature for solace and reinvigoration" (126). It is no wonder, then, that imagery of the natural world penetrated so much of their writing. For both poets, the landscape not only served as a refuge or place of solace, but a tangible connection to a region that helped construct them as Illinois poets. For Masters, it meant remembering a time before the strife in his parents' marriage and in the surrounding community divided his personality and instilled him with a cynicism that kept him from realizing his ambitions. For Sandburg, it meant being connected to the happy times of his childhood and to the common people he cared so much about.

This connection to the landscape goes beyond Masters and Sandburg to affect other Illinois writers as well. In his article, "Where Now 'Midwestern Literature'?" David Pichaske examines the link between Midwestern writers and nature imagery, specifically the issues of space and wind. Pichaske discusses the way that the open spaces of the Midwest pervade the psyches of the people who live there, which influences the work of Midwestern authors. He explains the impact of space on the Midwestern mind this way:

> Empty space may be an opponent against which humans struggle for survival, identity, or sanity. Life in the Midwest has moderated since the early days of settlement when large numbers of immigrants went insane

> . . . Conversely, open space may offer restoration, protection, release from dark anxieties and complexities, the chance for a fresh start. (105)

Pichaske illustrates the principle of space and wind by using the work of a number of contemporary authors. He also explains that this same phenomenon can be seen in the art and literature of Mongolia and of the Lakota/Dakota Indians. When this tribe made their home in the forests, their art was "composed of curving lines and animal figures." After moving onto the prairie, "their art turned to straight lines and geometric figures, 'the straight line of the prairie extending itself'" (106). This psychological phenomenon may explain the use of the prairie as a magical source of power in the work of Masters and Sandburg. The power of the natural landscape marks common threads in the works of a number of very disparate writers like Mark Twain, Masters, Sandburg, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, and Jane Smiley.

Masters' most famous work, *Spoon River Anthology*, is not known as a work of nature poetry. Masters was really concentrating on presenting the people of Spoon River as characters in this work, rather than describing their physical surroundings. However, because the characters in the work are so masterfully drawn, the character drives the amount of description in the poem. If the character speaking is one who would notice and dwell on his natural surroundings, then the poem contains more description. If the character is not likely to have noticed his surroundings, then Masters does not put words into his mouth that would sound unnatural there. The type of character determines how much description and natural imagery one finds in the poem.

The result is that the book actually contains several excellent examples of nature poetry, including "Hare Drummer" which John Hallwas called "one of the best pastoral poems in American literature" (49).

> Do the boys and girls still go to Siever's
>
> For cider, after school, in late September?
>
> Or gather hazel nuts among the thickets
>
> On Aaron Hatfield's farm when the frosts begin?

The character of Hare Drummer is most likely based on Masters' childhood friend Henry ("Hare") Hummer (Hallwas 374). Much of the poem is a description of what the children used to do together, and much of it is taken directly from Masters' own childhood.

> For many times with the laughing girls and boys
>
> Played I along the road and over the hills
>
> When the sun was low and the air was cool,
>
> Stopping to club the walnut tree
>
> Standing leafless against a flaming west.
>
> Now, the smell of the autumn smoke,
>
> And the dropping acorns,
>
> And the echoes about the vales
>
> Bring dreams of life. They hover over me.

At this point, the poem changes tone. Hare Drummer wonders what happened to all those happy childhood times, and if any of his old comrades have joined him in death. It is the element of reminiscence in this poem that leads to the amount of description used.

The poems dealing with more immediate concerns tend to have less description, but this speaker is looking back fondly and remembering every detail.

> They question me:
>
> Where are those laughing comrades?
>
> How many are with me, how many
>
> In the old orchards along the way to Siever's,
>
> And in the woods that overlook the quiet water? (116)

Not only is this poem a lovely example of nature imagery in lines like "Stopping to club the walnut tree/ Standing leafless against a flaming west," but it is also a remembrance lifted directly from Masters' childhood near Petersburg. Even more so, however, it is Masters longing for the simplicity of his country childhood, which, in his mind, was a time when everything was right with the world and the country.

Another poem from the *Anthology* in this same vein is "Jonathan Houghton." This one has a more desperate tone and uses more ornate imagery than "Hare Drummer." The poem begins with many lines of quiet description, such as, "The forest beyond the orchard is still/ With midsummer stillness;/ And along the road a wagon chuckles,/ Loaded with corn, going to Atterbury." It then describes the character as a child and his reaction to this setting, "And a boy lies in the grass/ Near the feet of the old man,/ and looks up at the sailing clouds,/ And longs, and longs, and longs/ For what, he knows not:/ For manhood, for life, for the unknown world!" At the end of the poem, it takes a different turn, however:

> Then thirty years passed,
>
> And the boy returned worn out by life

And found the orchard vanished,

And the forest gone,

And the house made over,

And the roadway filled with dust from automobiles—

And himself desiring The Hill! (256)

This poem represents, more than anything, Masters' desire to turn back the clock and find that simpler life that he idealized from his childhood. This character would rather die and move to The Hill than live with the changes that have been wrought by technology and "progress." This poem represents a simplified, yet more extreme, version of Masters' philosophy of Jeffersonian Democracy, in that the idealized farmer is the most pure embodiment of America and that technology and big business will ruin everything that the farmer holds dear. The way nature is represented in Masters' works substantiates his vision of an ideal America.

Though he was known principally for the epitaphs of *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters wrote other nature poems, especially late in his career. *Illinois Poems*, published in 1941, and *Along the Illinois*, 1942, are both collections of nature poems about the scenery and landscape of Central Illinois, and both were published by a small press in Prairie City, Illinois, a tiny town about forty miles from one of Masters' hometowns—Lewistown. Interestingly enough, Masters used this unlikely platform to showcase his own political beliefs. Masters rarely wrote nature poems simply to play with language or to offer a word snapshot of something he had seen. He almost always had an ulterior motive, whether that was to underline a political concept or to revisit an incident from his childhood.

In fact, many of the poems, such as "Illinois" from *Illinois Poems*, are nostalgic remembrances of the nature and landscape of Illinois. This poem shows the cycle of life in the prairie landscape through the seasons and the cycle of the rivers. "So flows the Illinois, Kaskaskia,/ The Kankakee to the Mississippi Way,/ Around and around from clouds to rain, /And then to clouds again" (11). Even in the more complex poems, Masters uses much of this kind of imagery of the natural world. Besides often being beautiful examples of nature imagery, they work to fix the poems firmly in a place—Central Illinois. The savvy reader could probably guess the area about which the poet is writing even without titles and place names. This is true of many other Midwestern writers as well.

In "Prairie Wind" from *Along the Illinois*, Masters returns to the idea of the prairie as a magical, mystical force in the universe:

> O prairie wind! O ever seeking soul
> That wanders like time, and even when at rest,
> Surrounded by silence, speaks the unfathomed whole
> Of human feeling by your kindred breast,
> You voice us, for we as souls are wind,
> Who wander, seek, lament, are blind (54)

The last two lines are significant because this was a time in Masters' life when he was looking back on a life often misspent and lamenting the outcomes of decisions. In "Migratory Birds" he compares the lives of the birds to that of people. The poem begins by noting the freedom of the birds from the trappings of human consciousness:

> What have they gained obeying their natures so,

Save blind fulfillment? But they are never sent

To emptiness, nor disillusionment,

Nor pain for misseeing what they could not know.

He goes on to compare the migration of the birds to the lonely wandering of human beings:

The human heart has not this measurement

Of Nature's goodness: forced as well to grow

Beyond a Spring and Summer, and to fly

Forward to lands which tempt, and may deceive;

It pays for its obedience, won to leave

A happiness or a duty, or to deny

Love, peace, a hearth. What is it to achieve

Life with such losses under a lonely sky? (11)

This poem was written at a time when Masters was living alone in New York, estranged from his family and separated from his "spiritual center" in Illinois. Read in this way, this poem becomes a very sad commentary on a man who seems to be regretting many of his life's decisions.

Most of the remaining poems are reminiscences of scenes from Masters' boyhood. Again, he constantly espouses the virtues of the life that he left behind in his twenties. Unfortunately, as poems such as "Bernadotte" show, you really can't go home again. The poem ends with the lines, "And now the mill in ruin stands, and only/ A few deserted houses, looking lonely,/ Remembering of what they are bereft." (*Illinois* Poems 36). A few of the poems in this collection hearken back to *Spoon River Anthology* by

using similar themes or characters, in fact, some of the characters are the same. It is interesting to wonder what the *Anthology* would have been like if it hadn't been written in the first person, and "Buddy Traylor" answers that question. It is the story of a black cab driver who, while he isn't dead yet, is certainly on his way. Told from the point of view of the townspeople, it lacks the immediacy and poignancy of the epitaphs in the *Anthology*. These poems also show that Masters needed a reliable editor. "Fiddler's Contest" is a wordy and wandering poem that could be wonderful if cut down to a manageable length. It is funny and musical, but is just too long and hard to follow. All in all, *Illinois Poems* and *Along the Illinois* illustrate how far Masters had fallen from his glory days of *Spoon River Anthology*, both personally and professionally. The poems also illustrate Pichaske's ideas on the use of space and wind in Midwestern writing with references to the freedom of birds flying, "prairie winds" and "lonely" skies.

Of the two authors, when one thinks of nature poems Carl Sandburg is probably the more likely to come to mind. Sandburg wrote on a number of different topics, all the while incorporating imagery that hearkened back to his Central Illinois roots. Sandburg really lays it all out in the opening to "Prairie." In this passage, he comes right out and tells the reader that the prairie, and by extension his childhood in Illinois, was his inspiration. The rest of the poem goes on to describe other places that the author has seen, but always comes back to the prairie. In fact, one could say that about much of Carl Sandburg's poetry—it all comes back to the prairie. It would be interesting to do a study seeing which words appear most frequently in the poems. My guess, beyond the filler words like *the* and the being verbs like *is*, would be *prairie* and *sea*. At first those two words seem contradictory, but anybody who has spent a lot of time on the prairie knows

that they can seem all too similar. The structure of the poems even sometimes seems to resemble a prairie with the long, flowing lines giving way occasionally to shorter ones. This creates an ebb and flow that could simulate waves on the ocean or tall grass blowing in a wind. Even though this verse is about as free as it comes, and just when you think you may have found a pattern, it changes, there is still a kind of music to the lines. An example of this rhythmic pattern can be found in "Our Prayer of Thanks" from *Chicago Poems*:

> For the gladness here where the sun is shining at evening on the weeds at
> the river,
> Our prayer of thanks.
>
> For the laughter of children who tumble barefooted and bareheaded in
> the summer grass,
> Our prayer of thanks.
>
> For the sunset and the stars, the women and the white arms that hold us,
> Our prayer of thanks . . . (48)

Even when writing about urban Chicago, the language that Sandburg chose evokes images of the prairie rather than the concrete jungle. This juxtaposition of city and country goes even a step further in "Chickens," part I of "Poems Done on a Late Night Car" where the poem begins, "I am The Great White Way of the city" and continues to describe the narrator's greatest desire as "Girls fresh as country wild

flowers,/ With young faces tired of the cows and barns" (61). Even while living in the "Great White Way of the city" the narrator, and maybe Sandburg himself, longs for his country roots.

There are many other examples of Sandburg using country imagery with city subjects. In "Slabs of the Sunburnt West" (#6) he describes the library building as being "naked as a stock farm silo." In "Chicago Boy Baby" it states, "It was a windy night in October, leaves and geese scurrying across the north sky, and the curb pigeons more ravenous than ever for city corn in the cracks of the street stones." "Lavender Lilies" talks about the "cool summer wind" and bluejays and pansies "lay lazy in the morning sun" around Lincoln's statue in Garfield Park. "Bitter Summer Thoughts—No. 3" starts out describing firecrackers from China, watermelons from Egypt, books, brass lights and tug-boats, but ends with "Yet a corn wind is in my ears, a rushing of corn leaves swept by summer, it is in my ears, the corn wind." Here, just as with other Midwestern writers, Sandburg uses the image of the wind and the open space. While the prairie imagery becomes seemingly more infrequent as the years progress and Sandburg becomes farther removed from his childhood, it never goes away and always remains just under the surface.

One important place where Sandburg uses this rural imagery to describe urban subjects is in his popular children's book *Rootabaga Stories*. In it he tells the story of two skyscrapers who decide to have a child. Sandburg describes the parent skyscrapers as "looking out across prairies, and silver blue lakes shining like blue porcelain breakfast plates, and out across silver snakes of winding rivers in the morning sun" (134). When

the skyscrapers discuss having their child, they decide that their child must be a "free" child:

> "It must be a free child," they said to each other. "It must not be a child standing still all its life on a street corner. Yes, if we have a child she must be free to run across the prairie, to the mountains, to the sea. Yes, it must be a free child." (137)

The definition of "free" here being able to enjoy the open spaces outside the city, just as Sandburg did as a child. This story gives the reader the sense of being high up and looking down on the landscape, as if from the top of a skyscraper. This different view, as well as the act of personifying skyscrapers, goes back again to Pichaske's definition of Midwestern writers infusing their work with space.

Rootabaga Stories also gives us an example of Sandburg writing about the magical qualities of the prairie. In the story "How to Tell Corn Fairies If You See 'Em," Sandburg attributes the majesty and magic of the prairie states to magical beings called corn fairies, and "All boys and girls know that corn is no good unless there are corn fairies." In this story, the narrator invites the reader to become a part of the landscape of the rural Midwest in passages like:

> Have you ever stood in Illinois or Iowa and watched the late summer wind or the early fall wind running across a big cornfield? It looks as if a big, long blanket were being spread out for dancers to come and dance on. If you look close and listen close you can see the corn fairies come dancing and singing—sometimes. If it is a wild day and hot sun is pouring down while a cool north wind blows—and this happens sometimes—then you

> will be sure to see thousands of corn fairies marching and countermarching in mocking grand marches over the big, long blanket of green and silver. Then too they sing, only you must listen with your littlest and newest ears if you wish to hear their singing. They sing soft songs that go pla-sizzy pla-sizzy-sizzy, and each song is softer than an eye wink, softer than a Nebraska baby's thumb. (205-206)

Again, here is the idea that there is magic in the open spaces of the Midwest. *Rootabaga Stories* is important because Sandburg's purpose in writing it was to give American children American stories to which they could relate. He was tired of knights and princesses in medieval Europe and wanted something that would capture that which makes America unique. What he gave us was prairies, cornfields, and the trains of his youth in Galesburg. That was America to Carl Sandburg.

As Masters wrote in "The Prairie: Sandridge," the prairie is a muse. As both these authors show, it gets inside the people who live in it. The fact that both authors kept returning to it in their word choice, imagery, and subject matter illustrates the influence that their lives in Central Illinois had on them. The fact that Masters longed to return to his childhood roots in Petersburg and Sandburg used rural Midwestern imagery even when writing about urban subjects underlines that influence. If these two authors had not lived their formative years in Central Illinois, their work would be extremely different if they had become writers at all.

Conclusion

"You are yourself the *Achievement.* We shall do our best *to do something*—to leave some *thing* that we have produced here on earth as a bequest. But we'll remember that *the life we live* is more important than the *works we leave*."

--Paula Sandburg

Any reading of the works of Masters and Sandburg will demonstrate their connection to the region of Central Illinois and the larger Midwest. Regional writing in American literature is a growing field of study today, and critics like Kent Ryden have begun analyzing the impact of place on literature. Ryden developed a definition of a regional writer. A regional writer "writes the region" in two ways. First, he takes the region as a subject. Second, he takes on the stereotypes and assumptions of that region either to reinforce or to challenge them (523).

However, Ryden also believes that the normal rules of region do not apply to the Midwest because its development as a region was not as defined as that of New England, the South, or the West. The regional identity of the Midwest, instead, happens on a "smaller scale" and has more to do with a specific place of origin than of a larger region. Ryden calls this phenomenon "location of the historical in the self" (519-527). Midwestern writers, then, must rely on their own experiences to define their identities and that of their region. A study by James Shortridge on how the Midwest developed as a region reinforces the idea that regional identity in that part of the country is based more on small communities than on large geographical areas. The study also focuses on the importance of place in human development. Shortridge states, "We now realize that place

attachments are profound, perhaps a basic human need. . . . They are also exceedingly complex, for places are centers of meaning" (209). Because of the Midwest's position as "cultural core of the nation," the meaning created there is transmitted into the culture of the nation as a whole. The meaning created in the cities and small communities of Illinois and the larger Midwest, then is that of the "independent farmers creating a rural, egalitarian culture" which values traits such as "self-reliance/independence, pride/kindliness, openness, realism/pragmatism, strength of character, thrift, humbleness, industriousness, progressivism/idealism, and morality" with "extravagance and exploitiveness" mentioned as traits no longer present in the culture (213). All of these values are echoed in the work of both authors and could also explain their popularity.

Both Masters and Sandburg made their experiences and their connection to Illinois a priority in their work. They both wrote about Illinois extensively, and they both worked within the definitions and assumptions about the region: Sandburg reinforced them for the most part, while Masters challenged them in *Spoon River Anthology* and *Lincoln: The Man*. When one examines the body of work of Masters and Sandburg within the context of regional literature and a situated biographical lens, there is no doubt that their childhoods in Central Illinois influenced their work more than anything else, and the two authors can be taken together to begin to define a sub-category of Illinois poetry.

In spite of their connection to place, Masters and Sandburg are mentioned in most scholarly works on regional writing chiefly as influences on later Midwestern authors like Sinclair Lewis, if they are mentioned at all. Yet in their own time, both authors enjoyed unbelievable popular success, which can sometimes hurt a literary reputation rather than

helping it. *Spoon River Anthology* sold 80,000 copies within the first four years of its publication and "broke the record set in America for sales of a book of verse" (Russell 115). More important than sales was its reputation. It became "the most read and talked-of volume of poetry that had ever been written in America" (Quoted in Russell 2). Its influence was far-reaching, able to be felt in such important works as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (1946-1958) (Garcia 81). The accolades heaped on Sandburg are far too numerous to mention all of them, but among the most important are his Pulitzer Prizes. Sandburg won the Pulitzer Prize twice, once in 1940 for *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* and once in 1951 for his *Complete Poems*. Sandburg's work became so popular in the United States that he became a national celebrity. There is no more telling tribute to the man than the fact that, after his death in 1967, close to six thousand people converged on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington for a national tribute sponsored by Chief Justice Earl Warren (Niven 703). Sandburg's home in North Carolina, Connemara, is now a National Historic Site. In his hometown, his birthplace is now a State Historic Site containing the final resting place of his ashes, as well as his wife's. There are dozens of schools named for him, including Carl Sandburg Community College in Galesburg. Interested parties can attend the Sandburg Days Festival and the Songbag Folk Concerts in Galesburg or Edgar Lee Masters Day in Lewistown.

Nothing is more revealing than the praise heaped on the authors during the height of their careers. Frank Lloyd Wright said of Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories*, "All the children that will be born into the Middle West during the next hundred years are peeping

at you now, Carl—between little pink fingers, smiling, knowing that in this Beauty, they have found a friend" (Quoted in Niven 393). Aldai Stevenson called Sandburg "the greatest interpreter of the prairies to talk to and about the prairie people" (Quoted in Niven 594). William Allen White, editor of the *Emporia* (Kansas) *Gazette* stated that

> Of all today's modern poets, it seems to me that you have put more of America in your verses than any other . . . The others are academic, theoretical, remote, but your verses stink and sting and blister and bruise and burn, and I love them. . . . I wish every student in America could read these verses. (Quoted in Niven 360)

With regard to Masters, Ezra Pound wrote in the *Egoist* after the publication of *Spoon River Anthology*, "AT LAST! At last America has discovered a poet" (Quoted in Russell 84).

However, contemporary criticism has often run more along the lines of the following comment about Masters: "full of blank-check homilies and morals telegraphed from three states away" (Quoted in Stanford 13). But critics who really study Masters and Sandburg, like John Hallwas, tend to find more credibility in their work. In his introduction to *Spoon River Anthology*, Hallwas states:

> This new understanding of *Spoon River Anthology* will hopefully provoke a reconsideration of its place in American literature. Despite the well-known assertion, repeated for seventy-five years, it is not simply an expose of small-town life, akin to *Main Street* (1920) by Sinclair Lewis. It is a far more personal, experimental, and probing work. (68)

These poets deserve to be studied and appreciated, especially since "uniquely American" might be the best way to describe Masters and Sandburg. Like the rest of us, they each carried around the memories and scars of their childhoods for the rest of their lives. Also, like all good writers, those memories and scars found their way into their works. In his introduction to Sandburg's *Complete Poems*, Archibald MacLeish addressed this problem, "Europeans . . . do not truly understand him but Americans do. There is a raciness in the writing, in the old, strict sense of the word raciness: a tang, a liveliness, a pungency, which is native and natural to the American ear. And underneath the raciness, like the smell of earth under the vividness of rain, there is a seriousness which is native too—the kind of human, even mortal, seriousness you hear in Lincoln" (xxi). More than anything, these two poets established the parameters of a school of Midwestern, especially Illinois, writing the influence of which can be felt today. A serious study of their ability to take the conflicts of their early lives and translate them into their writing, their use of nature imagery, experiments in free verse, use of plain language, and in-depth character studies can enrich the study of American literature today. Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters are our poets—American poets, who especially belong to us in Illinois. We should not let them fade away.

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