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# A Century of Verse

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## A Century of Verse

Songs and chants and poems are part of the inherited culture of all peoples, but who has recorded the lullabies which Ioway, Sioux, and Sauk Indian mothers sang to their children or the chants of the braves during a ceremonial corn dance? Who knows what songs were heard in Iowaland as the French *voyageurs* paddled their pack-laden canoes up and down the Mississippi River?

Yellowed letters show that pioneers on their westward trip into Iowa gathered around the campfires to sing "How Firm a Foundation" or blended English and Scotch voices in the old ballads such as "Barbara Allen" and "Annie Laurie". In the days before the Civil War, settlers sang Stephen Foster's melodies — "O, My Darling Nellie Gray" and "Old Folks at Home". At farewell gatherings before they sent sons to Shiloh or to Vicksburg, Iowans sang "We'll Rally Round the Flag, Boys".

But these were songs, remembered but not written by the pioneers. In a land where each man did almost everything for himself, it is not surprising that settlers on the frontier tried their

hands at verse-making. All through Iowa history, indeed, men and women have dabbled in verse; a few have written genuine poetry. Even Robert Lucas, Iowa's first Territorial Governor, spent much of his time during his last years composing religious poems and paraphrasing the Psalms into verse.

The first published poetry in Iowa was in the newspapers. As early as 1838 the Davenport *Sun* printed "Fort Armstrong", a poem written to commemorate the closing of the fort at Rock Island, and the same year a legislator, who called himself "Hawkeye", contributed to the *Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* several original poems which idealized the Indians and glorified the prairies. It was in June of 1838 that Thomas Gregg printed "The Indian Girl's Burial" by Mrs. Lydia H. Sigourney. So popular was the lady's poetry that Iowans named a town for her.

Some of this early verse was folklore, stories told in rhyme, several persons taking part in the composition. Such was "Hummer's Bell", one stanza of which was improvised by John P. Cook for the amusement of a crowd of men. It was completed by W. H. Tuthill. Such, too, was the lyric of the "Iowa Corn Song" first drafted by George Hamilton on the way to the Shriner Convention

at Los Angeles. In 1923 Shriners rollicked down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C., singing "We're from Ioway", hands held high to show the height of Iowa's corn stalks.

Iowa editors sometimes wrote the verses they published. At Delhi lived J. L. McCreery, editor of the *Delaware County Journal* and author of many poems, most of which have been long forgotten. One, "There Is No Death", erroneously ascribed to Edward Bulwer Lytton, became widely known, partly because of McCreery's prodigal use of printer's ink to establish paternity for the poem, and partly for its intrinsic value.

Another one-poem writer was Arabella Eugenia Smith, a school mistress at Tabor, who wrote "If I Should Die Tonight". This poem, like "There Is No Death", was attributed to various writers, including Henry Ward Beecher, but her claim to authorship was finally established. Not a little of the poem's popularity was due to a parody written by Ben King.

But writing verses is not the only aspect of popularizing poetry. Not enough credit has been given to the country editors of Iowa in shaping the poetical taste of their readers. Early editors in Iowa introduced many readers of their country weeklies to "The Children's Hour" and "The Chambered Nautilus"; and, as the Civil War ap-

proached, to the reflections of "John P. Robinson, he" from the *Bigelow Papers*.

Of even greater importance in shaping poetical taste for maturing Iowans was the famous series of readers published by William Holmes McGuffey. Prairie-bred boys and girls who grew up in Iowa between 1840 and 1890 not only learned "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and "Maude Muller", but were introduced to Byron, Milton, and Shakespeare.

Several Iowa lyrics have attained national fame. In 1857 a young man from Wisconsin visited Bradford, in Chickasaw County. As William Savage Pitts walked about, he paused to watch the sunset lights filter through the trees in a wooded glade nearby. In visionary mood he beheld a church at the head of the valley and his vision inspired both the words and music for "The Little Brown Church in the Vale".

Equally famous but of far different origin is "Sherman's March to the Sea", written late in December of 1864 by an Iowan while he was a prisoner of war at Columbia, South Carolina. Major S. H. M. Byers developed into a man of catholic tastes and activities, in turn lawyer, soldier, diplomat, author, and connoisseur of art. Today he is best known as the author of a "Song of Iowa" which practically every school child in

the State has sung to the tune of "My Maryland".

You ask what land I love the best

Iowa, 'tis Iowa.

Perhaps the first Iowan to demonstrate that the prairies and rivers of his adopted State rightly represented materials for literature was Leonard Brown, a teacher in several academies in Iowa. As early as 1883 he declared, "Encourage Iowa talent and leave the Italian to ply his vocation of artist in Italy." All in all Brown published three volumes of verses. As his especial province he chose to picture Iowa's past. He made it his avocation to hunt out the sites of Indian war dances, camps, and cemeteries; he collected Indian arrowheads and the legends of the Sauk, Fox, and Ioway.

A man with a truer sense of the fitness of mood, word, and rhythm was Tacitus Hussey, who wrote one of Iowa's songs — "Iowa Beautiful Land". In 1896 he published a book of poems, *The River Bend and Other Poems*, celebrating the Des Moines River. Among these is a delightful poem in dialect, "The Prodigals", frankly imitative of James Whitcomb Riley.

Interest in poetry found commercial expression in Iowa in 1894 when a man named Thomas W. Herringshaw published a volume of verse written by Iowans under the title *Poets and Poetry of*

Iowa. It contained "poems" by some one hundred and fifty Iowans, almost equally divided between men and women. He planned annual editions, but the one volume seems to have glutted the market.

In 1894 Hamlin Garland published a little volume called *Prairie Songs*. The book was bound in green cloth with three golden stalks of corn in full ear on the front and back covers. In one poem, called "Plowing", he depicted the farmer boy's delight when cold weather put a stop to the endless round of fall plowing; another presents very realistically the life story of a prairie mother who died at forty-six from the strain of child-bearing and the wearying routine of farm work.

When Johnson Brigham began the *Midland Monthly* in the late nineties, many young poets took advantage of its pages. In this magazine appeared the poems of Selden S. Whitcomb, the teacher-poet at Grinnell, Hamlin Garland, Emerson Hough, and Ellis Parker Butler.

The *Midland*, published in Iowa City and edited by John T. Frederick and Frank Luther Mott, furnished a medium for the younger poets of Iowa and the Midwest. Ruth Suckow's first contributions were in verse. One of the contributing editors was Edwin Ford Piper. Before his death in 1939 he published four volumes of poetry:

*Barbed Wire, Barbed Wire and Other Poems, Rimrock Road*, and last of all a book of sonnets called *The Canterbury Pilgrims*.

At Waubeek, Jay G. Sigmund delighted in the out of doors and recaptured the spirit of the early settlers — the herb doctors, the retired farmer. Like Leonard Brown and Edwin Ford Piper he gathered Indian lore. These he built into several volumes of verse which were published in the 1920's — *Pinions, Land of Maize, and The Drowsy Ones*.

Though his occupation was that of selling insurance in Cedar Rapids, Sigmund found time to encourage young writers. One of the young poets was James Hearst of Cedar Falls, handicapped by a severe accident while he was in the R. O. T. C. His two books, *Country Men* and *The Sun in the Morning*, recount country scenes, the friendliness of farm neighbors, and without moralizing he weaves into his verses a quiet and reflective philosophy of life.

At present, through excellent courses in poetry at the University of Iowa, Drake, Cornell, Grinnell, and other colleges, through creative writing groups, the Federated Women's Clubs, the Poetry Society of Iowa, and numerous other organizations, many people in the State are composing excellent poetry today. *A Book of Iowa Poets*



and *Iowa Poets* contain, among many others, poems from the pens of Raymond Kresensky, Sadie Seagrave, and Lewis Worthington Smith. Jessie Welborn Smith in a pamphlet, *What of the Iowa Poets*, has well summarized the work of present-day Iowa writers of verse.

A young poet who has published a half dozen volumes of verse and who is now heading the Writer's Work Shop at the University of Iowa is Paul Engle, who has published *Break the Heart's Anger* and *American Song*. In 1945 he published a slender volume containing sixty-four sonnets which he called *American Child*, poems about his little daughter Mary. The last one ends with this prayer:

"Let this, her land, be always such a place  
Where having freedom is like having bread.  
Where a clean landscape of a new child's face  
Is seldom by the boast of blood defiled,  
Where on the streets and alleys without dread  
Plays all day long the proud spontaneous child."

LUELLA M. WRIGHT