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# Emmetsburg Years

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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Emmetsburg Years

Fifty years ago there was a popular saying, "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy." My whole life is an illustration of how true this is.

I was born and brought up in a small town in Iowa and during my sixty years as a practicing journalist I have traveled over much of the world. As it was my job to do, I have talked with kings, prime ministers, presidents, and hundreds of other famous men, in politics, the arts, and business. Yet never for a moment have I been, in my own eyes, anything other than what Hamlin Garland designates as *A Son of the Middle Border*. Not a day goes by that I don't see in myself some evidence of the culture in which I was nurtured.

This seems to me a matter for pride, rather than any other emotion. Fifty years ago Sinclair Lewis wrote a best-selling novel, *Main Street*, poking rather bitter fun at his own birthplace, only a few miles from my own. A few years later, Henry L. Mencken became editor of *The American Mercur-*

ry, and spread far and wide his contempt for the "booboisie" of the Middle West, an area he had never lived in and never wanted to. I knew these men; both were unstable characters in widely different ways, but between them, they caused the Eastern intelligentsia for a few years to scorn the culture of the prairies.

Yet their successors are singing a different tune today. The virtues of our broad heartland now appear better than they once did. We look back in a better light on people—most of whom worked hard, married for life, and brought up their children with a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind." My Iowa was one state in which every successive generation was better educated than the one that went before it, and grasped eagerly (as Sinclair Lewis's heroine in fact did) at any opportunity to share in the culture of the Old World and its reflection in the New.

I was born in 1889 in Emmetsburg, then a town of little more than 2,000 inhabitants in northwestern Iowa, thirty-two years after the terrible Spirit Lake Massacre, and about the same number of miles from its scene. Though my town was only about twenty years older than I was, I never heard of the massacre until I was twelve years old. Its pioneers had experienced terrible hardships, but all traces of them had been eliminated by the time I was growing up. Emmetsburg seemed to me to have been there forever—wide streets shaded by

big trees, Victorian houses set in broad lawns, ample porches with swings suspended by chains.

The massacre, which came to have a profound meaning for me, has been described by other writers in earlier issues of *The Palimpsest*, and needs only a bare summary here. It took place on March 8, 1857, not at Spirit Lake, but at West Okoboji, where Arnolds Park now stands. A wandering group of Sioux Indians surprised the settlers early one morning, killed forty of them, and dragged off three young women and a fourteen-year-old girl, Abbie Gardner. Two of the women were murdered; the third and the girl were ransomed separately and returned to civilization.

When I was twelve, I chanced to visit Arnolds Park, where the state had erected a monument on the site of the massacre. Abbie Gardner, now a widow and only in her mid-fifties, had returned to the scene. In a log cabin a few yards from the monument, she had set up a small shop and was selling—of all things—Indian souvenirs! I bought a tiny birchbark canoe; also a twenty-five cent pamphlet written by her and in which she told the story of the massacre.

I report this incident, unimportant to everyone but me, because of the impression it made. I suddenly discovered that my world, which seemed so safe and secure, was after all not far removed from violence and terror. I never forgot this lesson.

The finances of my family had been wiped out

by the depression of 1893, and we had to scramble for a living. When I was eighteen, I faced the prospect of having to work my way through college, if I could go at all. But then a prosperous cousin offered to help out, to the extent of \$40 a month—a fortune!

It was almost instantly decided that I should go to Stanford. These were the days of the great migration of Iowans to California, and it was understood that my parents would follow as soon as possible. With great trepidation (I had never been away from home before), a few days after my eighteenth birthday I set out on the first long train journey of my life, a journey from which, in the truest sense, I would never return.

(This story is that of an Iowa boy with energy, imagination, courage, and confidence, a young man who through sheer personality and drive, reached the very pinnacle of success in his chosen field. He never shunned work, he always accepted responsibility, he never whined at adversity. He was a man whose dynamic career modern youth can study with profit and inspiration. The Editor)