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THE EVOCATIVE POWER OF PLACE NAMES  
IN THE POETRY OF CARL SANDBURG

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One of the devices used by regional writers is to incorporate into their work the place names that evoke the spirit of their region. To anyone who knows the Middle West well, Carl Sandburg's use of this device is especially effective. He grew up in Galesburg, a middle-sized town in west central Illinois, situated on a flat prairie with few topographical features discernible for many miles around. The prairie, then, embodied his emotional homeland for the rest of his life. His moving poem "Prairie" contains the line, "O prairie mother, I am one of your boys." The Middle Western names that he frequently brought into his poetry comprise the principal part of his "onomastic idiolect," to use the term that W.F.H. Nicolaisen has popularized.

The state name Illinois, with its liquid sound, has an attraction for him. His poem "Illinois Farmer" has several repetitions of it:

Bury this old Illinois farmer with respect.  
He slept the Illinois nights of his life after days  
of work in Illinois cornfields.  
...The wind he listened to..will now blow over  
the place here where his hands must dream of  
Illinois corn.<sup>1</sup>

Many years later Sandburg asked, "Send me a sumach leaf from an Illinois hill." And again: "The river is gold under a sunset of Illinois. .../The river...now speaks to the Illinois sky." In two later books are the lines: "Sweeten these bitter wild crabapples, Illinois/October sun," and "The Illinois corn leaves... / run in sea waves of sun silver."

Other state names attract him, too, as when he wrote: "My love is a yellow hammer spinning circles in Ohio, Indiana. My love is a redbird shooting flights in straight lines in Kentucky and Tennessee." Speaking of Western pioneers, he said: "Came a lean hungry-looking hombre with Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas on his wind-bitten face." He speaks of "one night in Kansas with a hot wind on the alfalfa," and a contrast is found in a poem years later about the "drive of blizzards across Nebraska."

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For anyone growing up in Galesburg, the name with special magic in it is that of the Mississippi River. I share this feeling myself from my upbringing in Iowa, a few miles west of the river. Going over to visit the Mississippi was an emotion-laden experience. Sandburg's references are frequent, as in these instances: "The Mississippi bluffs wear snow hats"; or "as safe as the bridge over the Mississippi at Burlington"; or "Steamboats turn a curve in the Mississippi crying in a baritone"; or "bywords portentous as a big bend in the Mississippi River." In speaking of the "Red Man's dreams," he asks: "Who are the Mississippi Valley ghosts, of copper foreheads, riding wiry ponies in the night?"

Of the town names attractive to a Middle Westerner, one has a power above all others -- namely, Chicago. Sandburg, in the year 1914, made his first impact in the world of letters by the appearance in the magazine Poetry of his famous poem entitled "Chicago," beginning, "Hog Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat," and so on. Throughout his career he kept reverting to Chicago. When he published Slabs of the Sunburnt West in 1922, his fourth volume, the lead-off poem was "The Windy City," offering many contexts of the name Chicago. In an apostrophe to it he declared: "Long ago we gave you a name, / Long ago we laughed and said: You? Your name is Chicago."

He later made reference to his earlier self in the lines, "One of the early Chicago poets, / One of the slouching underslung Chicago poets." In his survey of American witticisms he records: "Down in hell they debate whether there is a Chicago." Yet in another mood, he declared:

Sometimes the seeds and cross-fertilizations  
now moving in Chicago may inaugurate  
a crossroads of great gladness.

The same goes for Omaha and points west,  
for Buffalo and points east.

Even Chicago's streets are often referred to. Inasmuch as Sandburg spent much of his life as a newspaper man there, they offered him considerable subject matter. Among many others, I find the following street names: a "fish crier down on Maxwell Street," "...on a Halsted street car," "...on the Michigan Avenue asphalt," "...down on Clinton Street south of Polk," "...the corner house at Congress and Green Streets," "... shopping crowds at State and Madison," "...sky-scrapers around Wacker Drive."

The names of Illinois towns have a special flavor to a Galesburger. Peoria, forty miles to the east, was notorious as a wicked town. A line from Smoke and Steel reads: "These girls from Kokomo and Peoria...since they are paid-for,... let us get their number." And yet Peoria had a rival, reported

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in lines shortly before his death:

They always did say  
Springfield is a wickeder town for women  
than Chicago.

Sandburg is attracted to the Indian names especially, a combination of the exotic and the musical. He thinks of the schoolchildren hearing how "The Blackhawks ... ran on moccasins ... between Kaskaskia, Peoria, Kankakee, and Chicago." He speaks of "a white gull forming a half-mile arch from the pines toward Waukegan." He is attracted to the name Chillicothe in a line in an early poem, "I remember the Chillicothe ball players grappling the Rock Island ball players." This is probably the Chillicothe in Illinois, fairly close to Galesburg; but his attraction to the name Chillicothe is shown in his poem of that name, with the lines:

There was a man walked out  
Of a house in Chillicothe, Ohio, --  
Or the house was in Chillicothe, Illinois,  
Or again in Chillicothe, Missouri.

Other Middle Western names appear in lines that refer to "A barge whistling in a fog off Sheboygan," or a "new moon over Lake Okoboji," or "poppies in a back yard / in Ashtabula," or "The light of a white moon in Waukesha, Wisconsin." How

evocative of the Middle West are the following lines, written shortly before his death:

Corn tassels shining from Duluth and Itasca

From La Crosse to Keokuk and St. Louis, to the Big Muddy,

The yellow-hoofed Big Muddy meeting the Father of Waters.

One of the most problematical of the Middle Western names used by Sandburg (and it appears time and again) is Omaha. He spent some time in that town in menial jobs, and he developed an ambivalent attitude towards it. In one of his earliest poems he has the lines:

I am riding on a limited express, ...

Hurtling across the prairie. ...

I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: "Omaha."

Here the place name has a belittling effect, in contrast to cosmic considerations, in that "all the men and women" on these coaches, as he points out, "shall pass to ashes." In a later poem he revealed a despondent mood in a hotel in Omaha:

Here in Omaha

The gloaming is bitter

As in Chicago

Or Kenosha.

On the other hand, his poem entitled "Omaha" gives praise for its virility and vitality:

Omaha, the roughneck, feeds armies ...

Omaha works to get the world a breakfast.

In other passages he speaks of "the evening mail droning from Omaha to Chicago," or "pearls lost in Vienna found in a fishcan in Omaha," or of a hobo "washing his shirt in a jungle near Omaha," or of "The unemployed ... marching toward Omaha toward Tulsa." The name Omaha quite clearly called up a variety of images to Sandburg.

Another town name with a fascination for Sandburg is Kalamazoo. This name has often appeared in American usage as that of a joke town, but Sandburg takes it seriously in his poem, "The Sins of Kalamazoo." As it begins:

The sins of Kalamazoo are neither scarlet nor crimson.

The sins of Kalamazoo are a convict gray, a dishwater drab.

Throughout this long poem the name recurs frequently, as if it haunts him. Many years later he gave the name the following curious setting:

So they all stood still and listened,

Everybody except a little old woman from Kalamazoo

... because she was stone deaf.

In his poem "Localities" he states outrightly that he is attracted by the names of places where he has never been. In this case the oddity of the names presumably caused him to use them. As that poem goes:



Wagon Wheel Gap is a place I never saw  
 And Red Horse Gulch and the chutes of Cripple Creek. ...  
 The fly-by-night towns of Bull Frog and Skiddoo,  
 The night-cool limestone white of Death Valley ...  
 From a shelf road in Hasiampa Valley:  
 ... places they are I never saw.

Sometimes Sandburg's use of names seems to be sheer incantation. He relishes the names for what they have meant to him as a Middle Westerner. They appear to be brought in to emphasize his closeness to the land. In his long poem "Cornhuskers" of 1918 appear the lines:

Omaha and Kansas City, Minneapolis and St. Paul,  
 sisters in a house together, throwing slang, growing  
 up.

Towns in the Ozarks, Dakota wheat towns, Wichita,  
 Peoria, Buffalo, sisters throwing slang, growing up.

Sometimes Sandburg goes in for lists, just as Walt Whitman did. In his poem Good Morning, America, Sandburg deals with the flowers officially designated in each state, and this entails a catalog of state names:

The blue cornflower along the tracks in Illinois --

The pink moccasin hiding in the big woods of Minnesota --

The wild prairie rose scrambling along Iowa roads --

and so on throughout all the states. In The People, Yes, of

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1936, he has a catalog of the tall buildings he has seen, and thus has a series of lines on a wide assortment: "...Chicago ... from Battery to Bronx ... San Antonio ... Washington ... Duluth ... Atlanta ... Detroit ... Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo ... Los Angeles ... St. Louis, New Orleans, Minneapolis and St. Paul ..."

I have described Sandburg as a regionalist, but this orientation does not prevent him from having a deep appreciation of other regions. In fact, as I have long believed, a true regionalism is not parochialism, but may result in enhanced understanding of other regions. Sandburg shows well a pride in the diversity of the United States. In illustration, one may take his poem "Work Gangs," in which he imagines box cars in a mile-long train chattering to each other. As they say:

I came from Fargo with a load of wheat...

I came from Omaha with a load of shorthorns...

I came from Detroit with a load of flivvers.

I carried apples from the Hood River last year and  
this year bunches of bananas from Florida.

All parts of the United States have had their names memorialized by Sandburg. His poem entitled "Pennsylvania" is replete with its names. As it goes:

I have been in Pennsylvania,

In the Monongahela and the Hocking Valleys.

In the blue Susquehanna ...

Spring and the hills laughed

For New York State he gives the passage, "...the blossoms fell ...somewhere on the Erie line and the town was Salamanca or Painted Post or Horse's Head." Concerning George Eastman's suicide in Rochester, he wrote: "Cool he was ... about it along the slopes of the Genesee Valley of New York."

Names from New England appear in a passage of Good Morning, America:

I remember riding across New Hampshire lengthways.

I remember a station named "Halcyon," a brakeman calling to passengers "Halcyon!! Halcyon!!"

For the Deep South he refers to "the wharves of Natchez and New Orleans." What a spread of names is found in the lines:

Wrapped in the smoke of memories

from Tallahassee to the Yukon.

For Texas he mentions "the long dirt road from Nagadoches to Austin." He quotes the Texas saying, "Between Amarilla and the North Pole is only a barbwire fence." Further west he finds "a five-gallon hat in Albuquerque." He covers wide territories when he describes "us, the people" as "Riding with mail sacks across ... the Rockies, the Great Plains, the Mississippi, the

corn belt, the Appalachians."

An interesting rhetorical development, in a strained metaphor, is recorded in his lines: "The mockingbird ... warbles in the underbrush of my Chattanooga of hope, gushes over the blue Ozark foothills of my wishes."

Let us now turn to another phase of Sandburg's use of place names. He draws upon names as emotional symbols of the country's past. For the settlement period, he speaks of "gray patterns of sleet on Plymouth Rock." And for the Revolution is a reference to "red prints of bleeding feet at Valley Forge in Christmas snow."

The names of the Civil War were especially deep-felt by Sandburg. From my own boyhood, around 1910, I remember the long lines of Civil War veterans, the Grand Army of the Republic, marching in patriotic parades, and I often heard about the battles in which my two grandfathers fought, on opposite sides. Sandburg held that the "panorama of war" could find --

Room for Gettysburg, Wilderness, Chickamauga,

On a six-foot stage of dust.

He imagines himself saying: "I had my arm shot off / At Spotsylvania Court House." He repeats the name Shenandoah many times, probably because of the beauty of its sound:

In the Shenandoah Valley, one rider gray and one

rider blue, ... it's all old and old nowadays  
in the Shenandoah.

And all is young, ... among old dreams ... of  
a rider blue and a rider gray in the Shenandoah.

Another reference, in Cornhuskers, brings the war names past World War I: "Appomatox is a beautiful word to me and so is Valley Forge and the Marne and Verdun." Later in life Sandburg called upon names from World War II, by asking: "...was he there at Iwo Jima, Okinawa / or places named Cassino, Anzio, the Bulge?"

I have had time in this short paper to deal with only a small fraction of the place names used by Sandburg, and the full range would show much more richness than I have been able to give you. As a poet reflecting the American spirit, second only to Whitman, Sandburg has called upon America's place names to carry a large burden in his message. In her survey of American poetry, Babette Deutsch has said that Sandburg "celebrates, as few have done, the spaciousness of the Midwest."<sup>2</sup> The place names, I believe, have been important in achieving this sense of spaciousness. Some are used because of the special associations understood by Middle Westerners and others because of an intrinsic esthetic appeal. A careful weighing must be made of certain names, such as Chicago, Omaha, Kalamazoo, Peoria, or

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Mississippi River. Without any doubt, the use of place names represents an important aspect of Sandburg's artistry.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The lines quoted in this paper are all to be found in The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg (Revised ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), xxxi, 797 pp.

<sup>2</sup>Her Poetry in Our Time (2nd ed.; New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963), p. 55.