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The Lost History Of Boomtown: Some Interpretations from Hamlin Garland

BY HARLAN HAHN

Mr. Hahn's article evolved from a speech he delivered at the dedication of the Hamlin Garland Memorial Plaque in Osage, Iowa, Mr. Hahn's home town and once the home of that most famous portrayer of rural Midwestern culture. Drawing upon Garland's autobiographical works, Mr. Hahn points to the novelist's endless longing for a tradition, or sense of history, in a land characterized by a lack of permanence. Mr. Hahn in his speech remarked: "Osage was only one stop in the restless trek of Garland's family which led from Maine to the Dakota's. Garland himself was never able to shake this pioneering transiency, moving from Iowa to Boston, New York, Chicago, and finally that resting spot of seemingly all Midwesterners, California." Garland sought and failed to find in the Midwest a continuity with the past. The following article attempts to explain why. Mr. Hahn's study, though focused upon some of the social and economic patterns of the "Middle Border" in the late nineteenth century, strikes a contemporary note— one which may help us to significantly evaluate our own sense of history in the Middle West today.

Mr. Hahn, a graduate of St. Olaf College, recently received his Ph. D. from Harvard, and is in his first year of teaching as assistant professor in political science at the University of Michigan.

Popular attitudes about history may have as much validity for the historian as the persons and events of by-gone eras. An understanding of how people at any given point in time view history may contribute as much to the knowledge of their historical development as the conditions which are normally recorded in history books.

Excellent cases in point are the small communities in the rural Midwest which appear to have contributed disproportionately to the cultural development of America.¹ An insight into the attitudes toward history held by residents of rural Midwestern communities may have some bearing on historical attitudes in America generally.

Perhaps the most perceptive observations on the rural Midwest can be gained through the eyes of a writer who used the Middle Border as the constant theme of his literary work. "As a professional critic in the virgin field of contemporary American letters and as a self-appointed press agent for the local-color school of fiction,"² Hamlin Garland was more concerned with faithfully recording his early environment than with imaginative flights into the literary stratosphere. It was his autobiographical work which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1921. He was "a great reporter, a good painter The personalities in his autobiographical books, those sincere and vivid memories of himself and his family, *The Son of the Middle Border* and *The Daughter of the Middle Border*, are more vivid, more outstanding than the characters in his fiction and are sure to live longer."³ Garland "must finally be measured not as a literary artist in fiction, but as a literary chronicler."⁴

As a self-proclaimed "veritist," Garland was peculiarly qualified to depict accurately the way of life in the rural Midwest in the second half of the nineteenth century. Unlike earlier writers who had romanticized the frontier West, Garland and his "realist" colleagues sought to paint a true picture of the drudgery and ambition that moved the pioneers of the Middle Border.

¹ The importance, at least symbolically, of small towns in American society can be easily appreciated by reviewing the emphasis which they have received in Republican presidential campaigns in the twentieth century.

² Jean Holloway, *Hamlin Garland: A Biography*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960, p. 23.

³ Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, "Hamlin Garland—The Hardy of the West" in *Hamlin Garland, A Son of the Middle Border*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1926, pp. 12-14.

⁴ Lewis Worthington Smith, *Des Moines Register*, October 5, 1930.

Garland has generally been associated with "the trenchant and severe Western fiction of town and country, narrative of protest 'concerned with the toil of drab and laborious days.'"⁵ However, the irony of his theme was the defeated optimism of the pioneers rather than the oppressiveness of their task. Not the conditions, but the mood of frontier life prevented them from developing a tradition which would give significance to their efforts to create a civilization in the West. Thus these participants in history were unable to develop a sense of history.

Although their endeavors on the frontier were essentially similar, Garland understood the important distinction between farms and small towns that is encompassed by the term "rural." He recognized "the close and often antagonistic relationship between farm and town that unquestionably was a major social fact for a long period of Iowa's history."⁶ In *A Son of the Middle Border*, he tells of his fears of moving from the farm to Osage, Iowa, where his father briefly managed the local elevator. Osage "was quite commonplace to most people but to me it was both mysterious and dangerous, for it was the home of an alien tribe, hostile and pitiless."⁷ Although Garland and his family moved only four miles, they were transported over a considerable social distance. It was a distance fraught with both conflict and respect.

At times the antagonism between farmers and the residents of small towns spread from adolescents to adults. However, generally the farmers were kept subservient to small towns by the superior social and cultural advantages of these pioneer cities. "Most of the conditions of farm life tended to keep the farmer in a status inferior to the town."⁸ In addition to his frequent descriptions of the toil and monotony of farm

⁵ Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature*, New York: Pageant Books, Inc., 1959, p. 219.

⁶ John T. Frederick, "Town and City in Iowa Fiction," *The Palimpsest*, (February, 1954), p. 53.

⁷ Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962, p. 160.

⁸ Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951, p. 171.

life, Garland often spoke of the attractions of the small towns. Apparently his youthful fears of moving to Osage were at least partially mitigated by the fact that "it put an end not merely to our further pioneering but (as the plan developed), promised to translate us from the farm to a new and shining world, a town world where circuses, baseball games and county fairs were events of almost daily occurrence."⁹

The relationship between farms and small towns, since it was frequently strained, was never one of mutual attraction. In recording his family's first visit to Osage, Garland recalls that "we pointed at each shining object with cautious care. Oh! the marvelous exotic smells!"¹⁰ While the towns existed primarily to serve the needs of the entire rural area, they were probably never so regarded by either the farmers or the town folk. To both groups, the small towns were the meccas that brought a coveted culture to a foreign land. As a result, farm families followed the lead of the small towns with a begrudging acquiescence that occasionally flared into open revolt. The residents of small towns, on the other hand, generally ignored the farmers in their efforts to emulate their counterparts in the larger cities. "For the townspeople, many of whom were agents of railroads, banks, grain and feed companies, the chain of identification was not with the farmer but with business."¹¹ Because of their superior social, cultural, and economic status, the small towns were in a position to exercise almost unchallenged leadership over the surrounding farm areas.

The pretensions of nearly every small town to become a major metropolis form an important and oft-neglected chapter in Midwestern history. Perhaps Garland's clearest analysis of the history of small towns in the Midwest can be found in his early, unpublished novel, *The Rise of Boomtown*.¹²

⁹ Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, p. 147.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹¹ Lubell, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹² Donald Pizer, ed., "The Rise of Boomtown: An Unpublished Dakota Novel by Hamlin Garland," *South Dakota Report and Historical Collections*, XXVIII (1956), pp. 345-389.

In the opening lines of this manuscript Garland describes the birth of "Boomtown," which was modeled after Ordway, South Dakota, the last stop in his parents' westward trek:

Boomtown in strictness did not grow, develop, or rise— it collocated. It aggregated into squares, into avenues, in much the same mysterious fashion that particles of iron come together upon a magnet. An unseen power broke out upon the prairie and lo! in a single night (speaking with poetic license) the buildings, the personages, and four-footed beasts, the brag and bustle that make up visible Boomtown were in juxtaposition and 'rearing.'¹³

Boomtown burst upon the world and its own inhabitants without the benefit of a sense of planning and expectancy.

The haste of Boomtown's inception stimulated an overwhelming preoccupation with the establishment of commercial facilities. The most immediate and demanding concerns in founding a community were "problems centering on the advancement of business."¹⁴ The vigorous promotion of the community's social and cultural offerings was, of course, a natural complement to its business endeavors. In reaching solutions to these problems, the people of Boomtown were sustained by an enormous optimism. As Garland said:

This predominant characteristic of its citizens triumphant over defeat, rose above every disappointment, every nonfulfillment of their dearest hope, every cruel and waiting suspense. They all had the utmost confidence that Boomtown must ultimately become the great railroad center of southern Dakota.¹⁵

In Garland's chronicle the railroad comes to Boomtown, and for a time the town prospers. But eventually the railroad pushes farther west, and Boomtown is left to compete with numerous other similar communities for business and industry. This development, however, does not plunge the town's promoters into despair. On the contrary, it affords them an opportunity to bolster philosophically the prevalent faith in Boomtown's future. Major Mullins, the owner of Boomtown's chauvinistic newspaper, tells his young reporter, Al-

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁴ Stanley Ekins and Eric McKittrick, "Meaning for Turner's Frontier: Democracy in the Old Northwest," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXIX (September, 1954), p. 342.

¹⁵ Garland, *The Rise of Boomtown*, p. 354.

bert Seagraves, who is a fictionalized impersonation of Garland himself:

'See, Seagraves, we can afford to play a sort of paternal part in the valley. To him that hath shall be given is an exact fact with the towns in a county. Railroads are not in the least sentimental. They go to that town which can give them the most money. They spot not for malarial districts, central location, or any other of the considerations which might be supposed to have weight with them. If we gain the preponderance of trade here, we can afterwards absorb all the rest.'¹⁶

The problems of establishing a commercial center in a rural area required constant effort to insure that any advantages gained would not be lost. The belief in Boomtown's ultimate prosperity was incessantly refurbished and defended with a determined militancy. The reason for this is relatively obvious. Any diminution in confidence about the town's future might yield less commercial effort and, consequently, a sagging community economy. The perilous prospects of achieving success in a community where many residents had invested their life savings made it continually necessary to reinforce the dominant optimism. Even when Boomtown was faced with the loss of the county seat, the Major reiterated, " 'To them that hath shall be given is the law of growth in towns.'¹⁷

All this "boosterism" had a profound effect upon the attitudes toward history held by residents of small rural communities. Initially, the birth of these towns was not accompanied by the long gestation that is conducive to the development of a sense of history. As Garland said of Boomtown, "It was in fact bewildering to 'the outcast of the effete East' . . . to have one building pointed out to him as 'the oldest in town' when the only evidence of extreme age was a slightly grayish tinge dimming the luster of the shingles or the clapboarding."¹⁸

Years later, writing in West Salem, Wisconsin, his birthplace and the home which he established for his parents, Garland complained about the lack of tradition in the community, "It has no history. The only moss I have is a patch

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

on my woodshed."¹⁹ The main source of his despair was the attitude of the townspeople. "Life at West Salem had disillusioned him. The villagers were progressive. New ideas appealed to them and they liked fads They wanted nothing to do with outmoded ideas."²⁰

The people living in small towns were so concerned about keeping up with new developments and making certain that their community was ahead—or at least even—with these developments that they neglected their contact with history and tradition. Since the future held the promise of prosperity, it was naturally the focus of their attention. As Garland wrote in *The Rise of Boomtown*:

Boomtown had no past to speak of, and nothing great at present—but the future! Oh! the future of Boomtown was a great world. It was infinite in range and suggested a vast history of the most superlative and unparalleled sort.²¹

With their eyes turned constantly toward the future, the residents of the small towns had little use for the past. Under the circumstances it would have been unusual if history had occupied a high place in their scale of values.

In these attitudes, as well as in commercial matters, the farmers generally followed the lead of the small towns. In summing up the history of the westward movement, Garland wrote that the farmers were "always seeking a fairy world, the beauty of which would insure content."²² He added that "the hope which led these farmers was also potent in the action of the town builders, railway engineers, and all the other 'boomers' of the new country. A love of untraveled regions combined with the hope of unearned increments is the force which built our inland cities and founded our inland states."²³

However, this view of small towns seems at variance with

¹⁹ Hamlin Garland, *Companions on the Trail*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931, p. 496.

²⁰ Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954, p. 21.

²¹ Garland, *The Rise of Boomtown*, p. 353.

²² Hamlin Garland, *The Westward March of American Settlement*, Chicago: American Library Association, 1927, pp. 23-24.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

those who have observed the powerful effect of traditionalism in rural communities. It has been noted, for example, that small town politics "is predominantly a one-party politics which is reflective of a highly integrated community life with a powerful capacity to induce conformity."²⁴ Thus, in the main, the influence of traditional modes of life in small rural towns is a product of the community's essential homogeneity.

In *The Rise of Boomtown*, Garland noted this phenomenon in the following words:

A town (speaking now of the people) acquires a character like an individual, and often this peculiar character, whatever it may be, will dominate it. It seems to be able to exclude, naturally and easily, those who do not harmonize—or if not to exclude, to transmute to the general likeness the individual character of each newcomer.²⁵

Although there was a surprising turnover in the early population of small towns, one suspects that individual characters were more often transmuted than excluded. Sharing similar economic and social aspirations for themselves and the region in which they had invested their savings, the residents of small towns probably shared similar attitudes.

Thus the homogeneity of small towns also produced a common set of beliefs. As a prototype of rural communities throughout the Middle Border, "Boomtown was a town of faith, it was a faith of the most militant order."²⁶ Much of this faith centered on an optimistic confidence in the future of the town. Garland notes, for example, that Boomtown had some "growlers" who were pessimistic about the community's eventual prosperity. "But they were the exceptions, and moreover it was only a subterfuge to draw out the other party's earnest and glowing declaration of faith, under whose genial glow the growler softened into smiling content and acquiescence, much like a cat under the influence of firelight."²⁷

²⁴ V. O. Key, Jr., *American State Politics*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956, p. 227.

²⁵ Garland, *The Rise of Boomtown*, pp. 353-354.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

In reviewing his memories of Boomtown, Garland states that "it is incredible, not that owners of town lots should have such faith, but that they could imbue others and newcomers with the same boundless enthusiasm and confidence in the future of a townsite on which there were not twenty shanties. But they did and easily—yea more, they kept the same magnetic control throughout the extent of discouragements which would have seemed fatal to the prospects of any other town."²⁸ A widespread and determined confidence in the community's eventual prosperity was the web which held together the small town's preoccupation with the future and its unwillingness to depart from traditional ways of doing things. The seemingly paradoxical strains of boosterism and traditionalism in a rural community were merged in a militant faith that demanded confident optimism from all its adherents. In a sense, therefore, the most prevalent and compelling tradition in small towns was an unwavering faith in the town's eventual prosperity.

This militant, traditional faith in the town's future constituted a hegemony that prevailed in all aspects of community life. In politics, for example, the natural identification with business interests and the demands of this optimistic faith have produced an unshakeable Republicanism in small towns. Similarly, the prevalence of these strains of thought produced an attitude in rural communities that has inhibited a respect for history.

A number of other factors also contributed to the failure of the small towns to develop a sense of history in the rural Midwest. One such factor was the restlessness displayed by the early settlers of this region. Garland's own family probably followed a typical pattern as they moved from West Salem, Wisconsin, to Winnesheik County, Iowa, to Osage, Iowa, and to Ordway, South Dakota, in their relentless trek westward. To these pioneers westward expansion meant simply a constant movement from "the settled to the unsettled."²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

²⁹ Garland, *The Westward March of American Settlement*, p. 23.

This unceasing migration left Garland, and possibly many others, with a deep dissatisfaction. Their restlessness naturally yielded a sense of rootlessness. The continual mobility of his family was mirrored many times over in Garland's later life. One observer has concluded that Garland's preoccupation with "wooden houses, ephemeral things" represented a deeper "resentment against the constant change and rootless nature of his family life."³⁰

The small towns were afflicted with the same rootlessness that plagued the farmers. After the death of his mother, Garland took his father back to Osage, Iowa, "but both were astounded at how few people they knew, although they had been gone thirty years. Most of his father's friends were dead or had moved. The few remaining groped for a sense of permanence in their brief visit with this companion of former years."³¹ While the small towns were probably less transient than the farm population, rural Midwestern communities seemed to lack the stable settlement that normally contributes to a sense of history.

Still another factor that retarded the development of a sense of history in small towns was the historical setting in which they were founded. Most of these communities were platted during the era dominated by the Civil War. In the years following their birth, the world changed rapidly, and the towns strove unflinchingly to keep up with it. As Garland himself said:

My own life is not yet a long life but I have seen more of change in certain directions than all the men from Julius Caesar to Abraham Lincoln. I have seen the reaping hook develop into the combined reaper and thresher, the ox team give way to the automobile, the telegraph to the radio, and the balloon to the flying ship . . . Television is certain to arrive tomorrow.³²

Since many of the economic hopes of the small towns depended upon their ability to capitalize upon scientific and technological advances, they were naturally concerned about progress. Consequently, much of their way of life in the

³⁰ Atherton, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Hamlin Garland, *Back-Trailers from the Middle Border*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1928, p. 375.

past was relegated to obscurity instead of being preserved.

The rapid technological progress in agriculture and business produced an uneven development in rural areas. In a classic study of a small community, it was found that "the unequal development and change of particular segments of community life mean that at some points the community is more intimately linked to its own past than at others."³³ These towns may partially fulfill their original purpose in serving the surrounding farm land. However, the sharp fluctuations in the economic and social conditions of agriculture as well as the internal changes within the community have undoubtedly been a disrupting influence. The restless migration of their inhabitants and the abrupt transitions between an agricultural and a commercial economy which these communities endured have made it difficult to develop any sense of continuity with the past.

As a product of the rural Midwest, Garland sought, but was unable to find, the concept of history as continuity. In commenting on his love of the songs of his youth, for example, he said, "I have tried to tie on my children's memories with mine, with intent to continue the web unbroken through my generation and theirs."³⁴ Garland was seeking a notion of history which was absent from his heritage. "Garland apparently decided that a sense of continuity could not be found in midwestern culture."³⁵

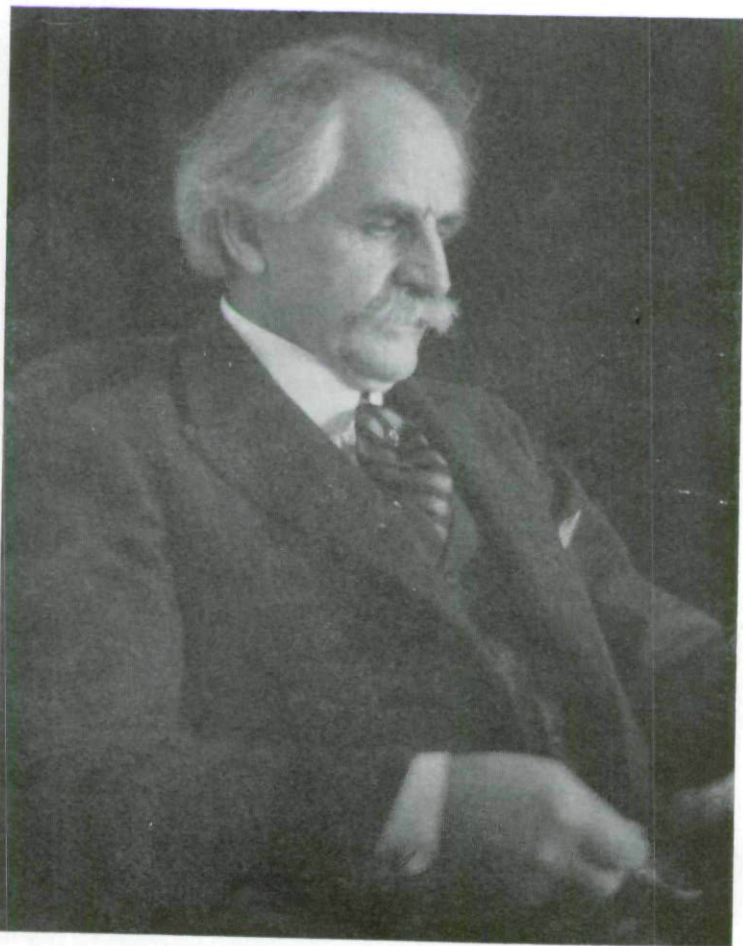
In later years he became increasingly disillusioned. His visits to the Middle Border were less frequent and of shorter duration. He abandoned his efforts to write at the Homestead which he had established for his parents at West Salem, Wisconsin. "Theoretically," he said, "my native village was an ideal place in which to write, but actually it sapped me and after a few weeks depressed me It became more and more evident that to make an arbitrary residence in a region which did not itself stimulate or satisfy me was a mistake."³⁶

³³ Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958, p. 5.

³⁴ Quoted in the *Des Moines Capitol*, November 28, 1917.

³⁵ Atherton, *op cit.*, p. 20.

³⁶ Quoted by Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



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Garland did not experience a feeling of living in intimate contact with the past.

In large measure, his failure can be explained by the failure of the leading elements of the rural Midwest to provide an informing tradition, a sense of continuity, or a link with the past. The culture from which Garland emerged lacked any deep reverence for historical values. In his futile efforts to discover a sense of history, Garland diagnosed many of

the causes of this void. The preoccupation with the future on the Middle Border was probably the major reason for its neglect of the past.

Although there were marked differences in the early culture of farms and small towns in the rural Midwest, both areas shared certain characteristics which have stimulated an antipathy to history. In general the attitude of this region toward history can only be characterized as ahistorical, or possibly anti-historical. The restlessness of early settlers and the changing world in which the towns developed have inhibited the sense of stability and permanence which is conducive to historical respect. The confident optimism in the future and the influence of traditional modes of thought united in a creed to which nearly everyone subscribed. In fact, boosterism was probably the major tradition of most small towns in the rural Midwest. Unlike many other traditions, however, boosterism by its very nature contributed little to an acute cognizance of history. There was little time or opportunity to pay much heed to the past. The future has always been the focus of attention in small towns, and history has suffered as a result.

The St. Mary's Ghost

Flying saucers? Nonsense! In 1947, when flying saucer reports were appearing in the headlines frequently, a staff writer for the Des Moines *Register* made a trip to St. Mary's, Iowa, in Warren county, to interview citizens on the subject. The consensus was that people's imaginations had just been working overtime dreaming up the shiny flying discs.

But, in their opinion, their own local "spook-light" ghost was another matter. Though local people might not have seen saucers, some of them certainly had seen the light. It hadn't been appearing as often as formerly, but some of the younger people insisted they had seen it recently—something

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