

MIDAMERICA XXII

*The Yearbook of the Society
for the Study of Midwestern Literature*

Edited by
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In honor of
Douglas Wixson

PREFACE

With the observance of the Society's Twenty-fifth Annual Conference, the symposium "The Cultural Heritage of the Midwest" and the concurrent Midwest Poetry Festival in May 1995, this anniversary year concludes with the publication of *MidAmerica XXII*, containing the symposium's prize essay, Guy Szuberla's "George Ade at the 'Alfalfa European Hotel'" and the Festival's prize poem, Mary Ann Samyn's "Midnight in the Kitchen," as well as a varied and distinguished array of essays and the Annual Bibliography of Midwestern Literature for 1993, ably edited by Robert Beasecker.

Suitably, this *MidAmerica* is dedicated to Douglas Wixson, recipient of the MidAmerica Award for 1995 and author of *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990*. A work that exemplifies the excellent studies that Society members have contributed and continue to contribute to our understanding of the literature of our time and place, Wixson's study, a career-long pursuit, re-discovers and re-defines the work of a significant writer and a genre too long overlooked.

October, 1996

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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MIDNIGHT IN THE KITCHEN

MARY ANN SAMYN

Teeth and eyes, fish with open
mouths: fragile world she dreams of
like pictographs hung in museums
where she's been. She wants

The kitchen like a concert hall,
faint music of cornfields plowed
under, this small town gone.

She wants her knife and fork,
flash and gleam of Beethoven,
spotlight on her hands, fingers
plucking at the plate, strange harp.

Night is a half-note, small word.
Day rides like dirt in the wind,
a thickness, fields on her tongue.

She wants subtraction, chip of paint,
iridescent scale from the frame's
narrow fins. Then glass in pieces,
shutters come unhinged and banging,

wide throat of window, something
circling there or swimming through.

Royal Oak, Michigan

GEORGE ADE AT THE "ALFALFA EUROPEAN HOTEL"

GUY SZUBERLA

No one, without the heavy armor of qualification and a snootful of Jim Beam, will ever declare George Ade, author of *The Girl Proposition*, *The College Widow*, *Woman Proof*, and "The Fable of Sister Mae, Who Did as Well as Could Be Expected," to be a "feminist." Yet, in oblique and oddly congruent ways, his novel *Doc' Horne* (1899) finds a loose fit in Sidney Bremer's definition of the Chicago "Residential Novel," a genre she firmly identifies with feminist strategies for "'writing beyond' individualism and other masculine values" (85). Whether Ade's *Doc' Horne* moves beyond "masculine values"—as Bremer with a nod to Rachel Blau DuPlessis outlines them—is a question that leads to a simple and direct answer. It does not. The Residential Novel, according to Bremer, "recreated" a "woman's sphere" and an extended or idealized "civic family." Ade's novel embraces the value of its male characters' modest ambitions, humorously parades their assertions of individual will, and insists that certain retrograde Victorian pieties about "gallantry," love, and marriage make for the utmost common sense. The book can be read, on such points, as a companion piece to Ade's tradition-bound newspaper sketch, "The Advantage of Being 'Middle-Class.'" Despite all this, I want to argue—with a brace or more of qualifications—that Bremer's definition of the women's Residential Novel opens a useful perspective on *Doc' Horne* and Ade's particular and limited notions of the "civic family."

Bremer sees two large and largely separate traditions in early Chicago fiction: the "Standard Chicago Novel" and the "Residential Novel." (She does not take up *Doc' Horne* or Ade under either heading.) For her, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Robert

Herrick's *The Memoirs of an American Citizen* (1905), Will Payne's *The Money Captain* (1898), and Henry Blake Fuller's *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893) represent the Standard Chicago Novel. These are, as she states, stories of an urban "melodrama": tales of a "lone" newcomer's struggle against the city; they record at once the "demoralizing impact" and "material grandiosity" of Chicago's civic life. Such stories of Chicago, "City of the Big Shoulders," emphasize a masculine public sphere and heroic acts of individual enterprise; they speak of the city's menace and its economic power through what Bremer calls an "exclamatory and explanatory rhetoric." Summing up this canon and its values, she concludes that its male authors ignored "the communal and organic continuities that were also a part of Chicago's story" (78-80).

That neglected part of Chicago's story fell to the women who wrote the Residential Novel. Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Clara Laughlin's "*Just Folks*" (1910), Elia W. Peattie's *The Precipice* (1914), and Edith Wyatt's *True Love* (1903) represent a tradition and literary genre that stressed family ties and participatory democracy, that valued social, "rural and urban continuities" (80). These authors, Bremer says at one point, "enmesh their characters in family networks. . . ." Even when a central character "strikes out on her own in Chicago," as Peattie's Kate Barrington does, she typically and quickly finds a "familial substitute." Through her central character, Peattie invokes and reiterates Jane Addams' vision of the city as "a great home" and a "civic family" (90). In short, the women's Residential Novel deploys a "communal protagonist," makes the group and the family network "the central character"—its authors inevitably prize the collaborative life and communal values over the hard-bitten city's commercial ethos of alienation and self-assertion.

Ade's *Doc' Horne: A Story of the Streets and Town* (1899) situates a group protagonist at its center. Though its title seems to announce a conventional lone hero, its miscellaneous cast of type-characters—Doc', the lush, the "lightning dentist," the actor, the book agent, the bicycle salesman, the freckled boy, and assorted other con men and transients—form themselves into a "small community" (101). The four or five principals and a rotating cast of supernumeraries rent rooms at the Alfalfa Euro-

pean Hotel, a clean if low-rent residential hotel “toward the smoky center” of Chicago’s downtown (26). Their struggle and stories of ambition, set to the loose rhythms of an episodic plot, unfold on a modest scale; the novel’s rhetoric seems archly domestic, faintly ironic, never keyed to a grandiose or exclamatory pitch. Unlike the Standard Chicago Novel, then, *Doc’ Horn* mutes documentary evidence of the business world and discounts its assumed mythic power. We see these men at leisure telling stories after work and outside business hours. Ade’s translations of middle-class ideology, in fact, place this novel’s ethos somewhere just outside both of Bremer’s genre designations.

If Ade writes “beyond” the narrative and ideological form of the Standard Chicago Novel, it does not follow that he’s written a standard or new-form Residential Novel. Had Bremer considered Ade’s *Doc’ Horne*, she might well have argued that the very transiency of the all-male Alfalfa group, their evident detachment from family and their apparent indifference to an extended “civic family”—along with their removal from the settled routines of the village—demonstrate that they are cut off from those “evolutionary continuities” and “social bonds” defining the residential novel. Not all the lonely men in the Alfalfa Hotel set out to marry or to find a surrogate family. In the end, most remain bachelors, separated from what Bremer terms “a network of ongoing overlapping relationships” (87). The novel’s narrative telos does not carry them onward into some idealized community and “civic family.”

Ade scholars have often remarked that, in his journalism and in his fiction, he discovered or recreated within Chicago the intimacy and sense of community that tradition granted to Midwestern small towns and suburban villages. Perhaps better than anyone else, James DeMuth makes this claim in *Small Town Chicago*. Speaking of Ade’s “typical story,” he says:

Ade will introduce a character as an isolated individual, usually new to Chicago and apprehensive about finding a secure place there. Then, as the story develops, Ade will carefully mute the character’s apprehensions about employment, personal security and social acceptance, which he had initially raised. He will unfold the various means by which an isolated Chicagoan is initiated into a wider and more secure community. Briefly and



THE ALFALFA EUROPEAN HOTEL

Plate 1. "The Alfalfa European Hotel." Line drawing by John T. McCutcheon from *The Chicago Record* (28 July 1897) showing Doc' and his circle before the Hotel entrance.

unexpectedly, a character will be drawn into the lives of his neighbors to discover, if only for a moment, that the routine relationships of a small community are still possible in the large intimidating city. (47)

DeMuth's formulation directs us to look to Ade's fitful if transient realization of the "small community" within the city: neighborhoods, boarding-houses, street corners, pool halls, and other examples of democratic social space. What he does not point out, however, are the many ways that Ade's "small community" depends upon what the anthropologist Fredrik Barth calls "boundary-constructing process." The city's democratic space as Ade plots and formulates it in *Doc' Horne*, alternately includes and excludes the outsider and codified "other." This novel implicitly constructs certain boundaries, giving particular significance to those that separate the Alfalfa European Hotel and its small community from Chicago's immigrant and ethnic groups.

Eighteen of the twenty-seven chapters of *Doc' Horne* first appeared in Ade's *Chicago Record* column, "Stories of the Street and the Town." The untitled series ran intermittently in the *Record* in 1896 and 1897. For the finished novel, published in 1899, Ade rewrote sections, invented chapter heads, dropped certain episodes, and deleted several of James T. McCutcheon's line drawings. He generally shuffled the order of the original installment. To bridge gaps in the narrative and round out the ending, he added nine wholly new chapters. In an insertion clearly written for the novel, Ade addressed his readers as follows:

In the succeeding pages, when it is related that Doc' and his companions moved in and about the hotel, it is not to be concluded that they had the hotel to themselves. Many strange people came to the desk and claimed their keys and rode upwards on the tremulous elevator. Men whose names do not appear and whose comments will be suppressed stood at a respectful distance and heard what Doc' had to say of love and life. (27)

Ade grants his readers what the critic Peter J. Rabinowitz calls "a license to fill" (148-54). We are to understand that events in the gaps and blanks of the text continue along a pre-ordained path: the conversations that are not heard still occur, the "marginally strangers" we do not see continue to exist and act in the shadow

owed background. Even without Ade's intrusive authorial announcement, we could infer their silenced presence—and much else—from one rough and ready rule of realism. Ade need not, through full and repetitive re-enactments, remind us that at all hours crowds of shoppers, workers, clerks, theater-goers, and others ebb and flow through downtown Chicago. Their presence or absence just outside the doors of the Alfalfa might be gathered from scattered references in the text and, of course, from our own assumptions about this urban world: in other words, from the sense of reality and those social constructs of the modern city that readers share with Ade.



AN EVENING SESSION

Plate 2. "An Evening Session," drawn by John T. McCutcheon, shows the bearded Doc', telling a story in the lobby of the Alfalfa European Hotel (*Doc' Home*, 45).

But why should Ade first mention the "strangers" within the Alfalfa only to suppress further references to them? Why allude to the "babel of voices" and "squirming multitudes" outside only to indicate that, for the principal characters, they hold no palpable existent or significance (49)? We need not take too seriously Ade's whimsical suggestions that such erasures suit his convenience as a novelist busily managing already overcrowded pages. Ade's narrative strategies and general purpose run in far too many other directions. For one thing, suppressing detailed representations of the strangers within the Alfalfa draws a circle tightly around Doc' and his "little community." Doc' and his "satellites," as they tell their stories and exchange the secrets of their pasts, seem to emerge from the loneliness that grips them. Ade's erasure of the outside crowds and "strangers" within inevitably foregrounds Doc', his companions, and their "fellowship" (101). Such representations and actions, to recall Fredrik Barth, signal both community "membership and exclusion" (15).

That is nowhere more clear than in chapter two, "The First Symptom of Matrimony." The "lightning dentist," standing in the doorway of the Alfalfa one night, watches the deserted and rain-washed streets outside. Seeing two pedestrians slosh along, he pulls his coat collar up and "shivered with sympathy." From his perspective, we then see:

Doc' Horne, the actor and the lush seated in drooping silence near the steam heater. They had moved their chairs toward the radiator as if to deceive themselves, but they knew the radiator was the coldest thing in the room. Doc' Horne had been attempting to read an evening paper. Even the paper was moist, for it did not crackle when he folded it and gave it a disgusted fling.

"Bad night," observed the dentist, gloomily, rubbing his hands.

"Miserable, miserable," said Doc' Horne. (9-10)

This unpromising exchange of tired greetings brings the four together. In the lush's room, they talk desultorily for a time, refuse their host's offer of whisky and seltzer, and, having exhausted "the commonplaces," Doc' proceeds to tell a long and complicated story about his brush with matrimony.

With a grandiloquent air and an assertive manner, Doc' expands to fill the part of the rustic sage.¹ If that role and the

intimacy it implies stand at odds with the urban setting and the immediate circumstances—he's known his three listeners but a short time—he more than makes up for it in his "reassuring" gestures and the engaging prologue to his tale:

"Here we are gentlemen, four of us," said Doc' Horne. "All of us have reached the age at which men should marry—perhaps have all passed the age at which it is advisable to choose a helpmate." (12)

Doc' thus states and reifies their common identity. Of course, this community of bachelors—he poetically christens them "Benedicts"—does not represent the same continuities of a family and the enmeshing "family networks" that Bremer found in the women's "Residential Novel." But the Alfalfa group is nonetheless bound together by Doc's stories or, rather, by the cycle of stories and story telling that he initiates. This night, he tells a fantastic tale about his forced marriage to a Brazilian beauty. In subsequent chapters, a half-dozen or more Alfalfa residents, each in his turn, will tell an answering tale or two, and this exchange of secrets and personal histories—however exaggerated, boastful, and fanciful—will draw them into a "small community."

Ade contends, in lines much quoted since he wrote them, that "Chicago is a city made up of country people, . . . a metropolis having a few saving virtues of a village" (25). As if to support such claims, he casts nearly uniform accounts of the small town and rural origins of Doc' Horne and his companions. The "lightning dentist," like Ade himself, comes from "an interior county of Indiana"; the actor—aging, shabby, but dignified—hails "from a farm in Ohio"; the lush, from a "village" in New York. Ike Francis, proprietor of the Alfalfa, once ran a hotel in a country town. With the exception of the tough-talking "freckled boy," none of the Alfalfa crowd and, for that matter, almost no other principal characters that we see come from Chicago. Even the Alfalfa European Hotel, "overtopped by two mountainous structures," seems to stand apart from the city and the modern urban landscape that surrounds it (26).² Like the "lightning dentist," the hotel and its residents are "in the city but not part of it" (179).

Within the Alfalfa's rooms and office, Ade recreates the intimate scale and atmosphere of the village store, the loafers'

bench, and the neighboring farmer's front porch. The McCutcheon line drawings that show Doc' telling a tale in the Alfalfa lobby or before its entrance door could, with a few changes in detail, grace a story about a small town in the Midwest (plates 1 and 2). Though we see no pot-bellied stove, no feedbags, and no crackerboxes, though no one smokes a corn cob pipe or chews on an alfalfa sprout, Doc' and his huddled circle still strike the iconic poses that Josh Billings and other rustic sages codified. Like them, the Alfalfa group forms a tight circle, leans forward to hear homely aphorisms and lines of native wit. The Alfalfa European Hotel in such scenes takes on the familiar comfort and insulated security of a sit-com space: the feel of "Cheers," that place "where everybody knows your name." Within the fictional space of the Alfalfa, Ade can exorcise the city's impersonal and alienating spirits. Doc' and the others in the Alfalfa "colony," as they tell their tales in the hotel office, return to Crosbyville, Pagowic, Plankinac, Leadville, and the other farms and villages that figure in their narratives. Or rather, they transform this bounded and islanded piece of the city into a surrogate country town.

As long as Doc' and company remain within the enclosure of the Alfalfa, so long as they stay within the homogeneous community that the Alfalfa preserves, they need not encounter "the other," need not confront the city's strangeness, immensity and heterogeneous character. Ade's aphoristic assertion, "Chicago is a city made up of country people," frames this idea of community as a paradox. But, as Ade must have immediately recognized, it also stated a half truth. Little more than a half-dozen lines later, he acknowledges that Chicago is a city made up of new immigrants *and* country people:

In 1880 the population was 500,000 and few over. In 1900 it is to be 2,000,000, census or no census. Ask any real estate man. . .

Whence came the 1,500,000 increase? From Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Poland, Russia, China, Austria, Greece and any other country you choose to name. Also from all those towns set in close columns in the United States Postal Guide. (25)

In a Dreiser or Fuller novel, as Bremer has argued, such a recital of documentary facts and population figures typically