

# MidAmerica XXV

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

The Twenty-fifth Anniversary Issue

Edited by  
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To the memory of  
John Towner Frederick  
1893-1975



## PREFACE

### The First Twenty-five Years of *MidAmerica*

While this prefatory essay for the twenty-fifth edition of *MidAmerica* was taking shape in my mind, I wandered into Ray Walsh's Curious Book Shop in East Lansing to check out new arrivals. Ray had told me he'd acquired a number of Sherwood Anderson titles, and there they were: three or four novels, none of them particularly desirable except as working copies, in the fiction section, and three or four autobiographical works of the same condition in the biography section. Wondering who might have cleared his or her shelves so unwisely, I checked each for a name or other inscription, but there were none—except for a penciled note on the flyleaf of Ray Lewis White's 1969 edition of Anderson's *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*. It read:

Do an article on folk expressions in  
SA, as the drafty house walls on p. 208:  
"You could throw a cat through the cracks."

Also p105, p113  
—for David Anderson's new journal.

I have no idea who wrote the entry or owned the book, but I assume that "David Anderson's new journal" was *MidAmerica*, that the note was written sometime in 1973, when *MidAmerica I* was, against all odds and a good deal of advice to the contrary, taking shape, and my initial reaction to the note was regret that I didn't have the essay to consider for *MidAmerica I* or *II*, or, indeed, any of the following issues. The essay was never submitted to me; it was never published elsewhere, and, to the best of my knowledge, never written, its only memorial that anonymous note on the flyleaf of that well-read, well-used copy of *Tar*, which I promptly bought.

The year of that unwritten essay is still clear in my mind. The idea that was to become *MidAmerica* had been with me for several years, perhaps ever since the MMLA section meeting that October

morning in 1969, in the old Chase-Park Plaza Hotel in St. Louis where I listened to Sanford Marovitz's paper on Howells Alexander Kern's on Dreiser and Fitzgerald, and then gave my own on Sherwood Anderson, all within the context of social criticism. Something stirred in me during that program that eventually, by March 1971, after a good deal of advice sought, some accepted and some rejected or ignored, the Society became a tentative reality.

Perhaps at the same time the idea for *MidAmerica* germinated certainly by 1973 it had been publicly announced, contributions and advice sought and accepted or rejected, and the journal, initially announced for Fall 1973, went to press in October 1973 to appear early the next year. Although I didn't say so in either public announcements or the preface to *MidAmerica I*, I kept two principles in mind that first year, and I live and edit *MidAmerica* by them even yet. The first has to do with commitment: bringing a journal into existence is a profound commitment and responsibility, best remembered when the work piles up, other activities may seem more attractive, and money is short. Often in the early years the journal seemed as demanding of my time and the Anderson bankroll as any half-dozen offspring, but societies and journals, like children, eventually mature to the point where they seem less demanding. *MidAmerica*, unfortunately, hasn't quite reached that point, but 25 is young.

The second principle is equally important, and to forget it is equally dangerous: never give an academic institution power over an organization or a journal in exchange for financial support. Many journals and not a few organizations have succumbed to the temptation, only to be eliminated when budgetary shortfalls, real or imagined, make them tempting targets. Institutional vagaries have never financed, influenced, or controlled either the journal or the Society.

In the preface to *MidAmerica I* I tacitly acknowledged those principles when I wrote that "The first issue of a new publication normally appears as the result of hard work by editors, writers, and countless others, but often it also appears because of hope and enthusiasm that outweigh either logical evidence or financial support. The latter is certainly the case with the publication of *MidAmerica I*..."

The Roman numeral I, I insisted, was not a volume number but an important part of the title, suggesting both beginning and con-

tinuing, which I presumptuously proclaimed in that preface: "...*MidAmerica I*, in spite of its diversity, does not encompass all of Midwestern literature or exhaust its dimensions. Rather, as *MidAmerica II, III, IV*, and beyond will make evident, this first volume will have become the point of departure for further, even more diverse explorations that continue to reflect the dedication of the Society and its members to the study of the literature of the American Midwest, past, present, and future."

Somehow, in the late twentieth century, *MidAmerica II, III, IV*, and beyond did come, each an addition to our knowledge and understanding of the literature of that great area between the mountains, the area drained by great rivers and great lakes, a region that, in less than a century became synonymous with the nation as it began its direction of the courses of American politics, technology, language, and literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the Civil War the Midwest has had a peculiar role it will not relinquish in a new milleneum. As became increasingly evident in *V, VI, VII*, and beyond, Sherwood Anderson's *MidAmerica*, that land between the mountains, is America.

Here, then, is *MidAmerica XXV*, another venture along that diverse and yet singularly uniform path into the study of Midwestern literature, past, present, and to come. It is suitably inscribed to John Towner Frederick, editor of *The Midland*, 1915-1933, who showed us the way.

July, 1999

DAVID D. ANDERSON



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JANEY GETS LOCKED IN THE  
BOHEMIAN CEMETERY FOR THE NIGHT  
for Bill Kloefkorn

ANN BARDENS

You know the place,  
way at the top of one of Omaha's sudden  
hills. You know,  
right off of Center Street, where  
the sign at the gate says NO ARTIFICIAL FLOWERS  
ON THE GRAVES BETWEEN APRIL 1 AND NOVEMBER 1 and  
every other grave has artificial flowers and  
it's only October 7. You know  
how they lock the gate at midnight, so the spooks  
won't escape, I suppose. Well, anyway, there she was  
wandering around the graves like some lost  
ghost, looking for her home—or maybe  
just one too many  
Bohemian beers at Lorna's Fan Tan Club  
below.  
She's spooky, all right,  
always strolling  
through graveyards, pencil and paper in her hand. What  
is she really looking for, I wonder. Well, makes no  
difference—that particular October  
night she stayed too  
long and someone locked  
the gate before she finished  
looking,  
and so she walked all night  
among the Sedlaceks and Lavickas, feeling  
at home  
enough by dawn to lie down and sleep beside

McCormic Mildred and McCormic James TOGETHER FOREVER  
while the sun rose purple over  
Woodman Tower rising  
above real trees.

Central Michigan University

## LIFE IN PRAIRIE LAND: ELIZA FARNHAM'S TRANSCENDENTALIST TEXT

NANCY MCKINNEY

With *Life in Prairie Land*, Eliza Farnham wrote essentially a travel book detailing her experience in Illinois from 1835 to 1840. I was taken more with Farnham's personality than with her account of life on the prairie frontier, though the fascinating narrative proves compelling enough to encourage a reader. Farnham, a New Yorker, traveled to Illinois to join her married sister, Mary Roberts, who had earlier homesteaded with her husband and his family in Groveland, Illinois, near Pekin in Tazewell County. While in Illinois, Farnham married, had a son, and lost her sister and son to illness. In 1839, while her husband, Thomas Farnham, led an expedition to Oregon, she traveled throughout the state; she describes traveling to Alton in southern Illinois and Springfield in central Illinois, and visiting friends in the Rock River country, in northwestern Illinois. When Thomas Farnham returned from Oregon the couple moved back to New York. Farnham became known as a social critic, writing and speaking on women's issues, working for prison reform, and meeting the New York literati.

Following her husband's death while traveling in California in 1848, Farnham sailed to California early in 1849 to settle his estate. For a number of years she operated a farm, El Rancho de Libertad, in Santa Cruz County. In 1856 Farnham returned to New York where she worked for abolition and women's rights, speaking at the 1858 Woman's Rights Convention. She died in 1864. Besides *Life in Prairie Land* (1846), Farnham's books include *California, In-doors and Out* (1856), *My Early Days* (1859)—retitled *Eliza Woodson* and republished in 1864, *Woman and Her Era* (1864), and *The Ideal Attained* (1865).

Both John Hallwas and Robert C. Bray have discussed connections between *Life in Prairie Land* and New England Transcenden-

dentalism. Bray ranks Farnham “one of the most important social thinkers ever to discuss emigration to Illinois,” because of her contributions to prison reform and her years of writing and lecturing on women’s issues (47). He states that “Farnham’s romanticism in *Life in Prairie Land* shows distinct affinities with New England Transcendentalism and deserves serious study in this context” (47). Hallwas charts William Cullen Bryant’s influence on Farnham and the evidence of Emerson’s *Nature* in Farnham’s handling of the “theme of spiritual rejuvenation through contact with nature on the prairies” (300, 312, 314-16, 320). Hallwas reports “no verbal parallels with *Nature*,” but “unmistakable” influence nonetheless (316).

When I read Lawrence Buell’s genre study, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (1973), the work suggested a method to examine and evaluate Farnham’s book. I employed two approaches used by Buell to show how *Life in Prairie Land* may be considered a Transcendentalist text. One approach, my focus in this essay, investigates how the demands of vision and of expression “reinforce and qualify each other in Transcendentalist writing” (14). The other approach focuses on the “principal genres or formal traditions upon which [Transcendentalists] drew” (16). Buell describes the following generic traditions and their application in Transcendentalist writing: the conversation, the essay, the sermon, the literary travelogue or excursion, the catalogue, the diary, and the autobiography (17). In addition, Buell delineates the “leading characteristics” of Transcendentalist rhetoric: inchoate structure, prodigal imagery, wit, paradox, symbolism, aphoristic statement, paratactic syntax, and a manifesto-like tone (18). Buell denotes as “main tendencies” in Transcendentalist writing “the impulses to prophesy, to create nature anew for oneself, and to speak in the first person singular” (20). And, finally, Buell considers spirit, nature, and man the “three most significant intellectual and literary concerns of the Transcendentalist movement” (19).

*Life in Prairie Land* manifests many of the specific characteristics outlined by Buell. Farnham’s subject matter includes spirit, man, and nature; she prophesies, creates nature anew, and uses the first person perspective. Message and vision dictate Farnham’s genre choices and prose style. Theme, not specifically addressed by Buell, reveals Farnham’s social concerns. Her most urgent themes include the Course of Empire, the Machine in the Garden, and the Cult of Domesticity. *Life in Prairie Land* disseminates a female voice and

view of not only the Illinois frontier, but also of mid-nineteenth-century American society.

I have found *Life in Prairie Land* to be an example of the Transcendentalist aesthetic. Farnham employs a Transcendentalist inchoate structure which reveals her message and vision. She employs a multi-generic approach which advances her message according to her vision.

Farnham's message is that the development of the resource-rich West will be central to the nation's advancement; the approach to the development of the West should reflect Eastern American attitudes and modes of living. The West, unspoiled by civilization, has the potential to improve individuals both physically and spiritually; the potential to improve individuals extends to the potential for improving the nation's citizens and society in general. Farnham's vision is of a synthesis of the best aspects of the opposing Eastern and Western regions, producing a new and better civilization. She envisions a dissipated Eastern society renewed and invigorated by Western freedom and abundance. She also sees the purposeful, practical Eastern culture accomplishing the development of Western potential. Farnham's message and vision dictate her form of expression.

A study of the structure of *Life in Prairie Land* reveals a typically Transcendentalist inchoate structure which, in turn, reveals Farnham's message and vision. The denotation of *inchoate*—being only partly in existence or operation, imperfectly formed or formulated—may create the incorrect notion that Transcendentalist writers employed either a haphazard structure or no discernible structure at all (Merriam Webster). In fact, they used nature as a model and accepted the Romantic concept of organic form (Buell 147). They believed that a work of art "should take shape like an organism according to the nature of the thing expressed" (147); an organic structure grows out of the work itself and develops according to the work's own nature. The microcosm became a model for structure, as in Emerson's *Nature* (158-9). Cycles of nature were used frequently as organizing elements (163).

The structure of *Life in Prairie Land* illustrates the Transcendentalist tendency toward inchoate structure. The organic structure grows out of the narrative itself and mirrors the unpredictable quality of Farnham's journey. The book is separated into two parts. Part one begins with Farnham's account of her journey from St. Louis by steamboat up the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, then overland by

wagon to the home of her sister, Mary Roberts, near Pekin, Illinois. It continues with sketches of the neighbors; a description of Eliza's marriage, her early housekeeping, and the birth of her son; and a long narrative by Eliza's sister, Mary, about her family's arrival and life there. Part one ends with Mary's death after a long illness and with the sudden death of Eliza's son shortly thereafter. Part two includes accounts of Farnham's extensive travels in the area, sketches of neighbors and wildlife, and a meditation on the region's history as well as speculation on possibilities for its future. Part two concludes with Farnham's departure for the East.

The break between part one and part two is itself illustrative of a seemingly eccentric structure which actually arises organically out of the narrative. Hallwas partially ascribes the change in tone apparent after the break to the deaths of two of Farnham's family members (298). Not only because of the deaths, but also because Farnham had several purposes for the work, and each purpose dictated a different approach, the structure is fractured.

The structure of *Life in Prairie Land* mimics the structure of Farnham's journey. The unpredictable and surprising events of her physical travels and spiritual quest are recounted in a narrative that is equally unpredictable, with varying chapter lengths, themes that recur unexpectedly throughout the book, surprising relationships between cause and effect as well as between expectation and reality. Consequently, the book's very design, in its unconventionality, suggests that we cannot entirely trust our senses, nor can we entirely trust our logic and past experience in looking at the West. Only a syncretic vision will suffice.

In trying to detect an underlying pattern or structure in *Life in Prairie Land*, I found several organizing patterns, spatial and temporal: the theme of the outer journey, appropriate to a travel narrative and highlighting one of the two major concerns of the book, the development of the region; the theme of the inner journey, conventional to the *bildungsroman* with its emphasis on the narrator's personal development, the other focal point; a cyclical seasonal pattern emphasizing a natural order, appropriate to a Transcendentalist work and a chronological arrangement of chapters, again highlighting the parallel between Farnham's personal development and the nation's geographical expansion. A counterpointed pattern of action run through and contradicts the chronological chapter arrangement, creating a series of recurrent thematic motifs throughout the book.

Farnham weaves a tapestry effect of motifs and themes so that her concerns sound throughout the book.

The theme of the journey contributes the narrative frame of *Life in Prairie Land*. At the beginning of the book, Farnham describes the final leg of her journey to Illinois, the beginning of her travel narrative; at the end of the book, Farnham leaves Illinois, never to return.

The journey is an archetypal symbol that metaphorically represents progress toward a spiritual or inward goal, rather than a physical destination. *Life in Prairie Land* yields information beyond that of an objective account of a physical journey; the archetypal journey theme frames Farnham's narrative, establishes her as the main character and narrator in the American *isolato* tradition, and signals a spiritual journey.

Farnham uses the regional network of rivers as a recurring motif, creating a pattern which reinforces the journey theme. In the first paragraph of chapter one, Farnham introduces the network of rivers motif by stating that the travelers' "question was how and when they should prosecute the remainder of their voyage up the principal eastern tributary which the father of waters receives above the Ohio" (3). She adds, "We had traveled far enough on the western waters already," suggesting the existence of a water route into the region (3).

At the end of the book Farnham leaves the "free plains and far-reaching streams" of Illinois (269). As she bids farewell to the "land of majestic rivers [,]" Farnham states that the "bright waters of Lake Michigan dance around our steamer" (268). Farnham's farewell follows a romantic discussion of the history of the area's settlement, including the "wandering trapper and the solitary ... missionary" floating from "fort to solitary fort" "on streams, thousands of miles in length" (264).

At one of the two focal points of the book (page 133), Farnham extends her use of watery images by discussing "[o]ne of the most impressive features of this magnificent land, ... the magnitude of its streams" (133).<sup>1</sup> Farnham describes the vastness and sublime beauty of the region, the spiritual effect of traveling on the "tributaries," and the spiritual effect of mental reflection upon the streams:

There is a sublimity in journeying on these great waters which language cannot describe. ... It is not in looking out upon them. To the mere optical sense they are often less impressive than the puny streams of the east. It is in the association—the idea that the water

which ripples at your side has come from a far land, a land full of unexplored wonders and beauties. The reflection opens an immense field of thought and inquiry, and makes you long to be transported to the region where all these exist. (133-4)

Farnham's discussion of traveling the western streams follows her powerful description of a steamboat disrupting the silence of the natural world. She juxtaposes two scenarios, one of man and nature in harmony with one of man and nature in opposition. Taken together, the scenarios illustrate authorial ambivalence toward the development of the West. The juxtaposition represents a traditional use of pastoral—specifically, the machine in the garden theme.

The introduction of a machine into an idyllic rural setting was a "literary commonplace" during the 1840s (Marx 17). Marx cites several examples: the locomotive in *Walden*, the New England textile mill in *Moby Dick*, and the steamboat smashing the raft in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (15). The emblematic machine in mid-nineteenth-century American pastoralism speaks to the process of industrialization and the "ugliness and squalor" engendered by the "new factory system" (18).

Marx cites as a "distinguishing mark of pastoral set in the New World" the "close juxtaposition of fact and fancy" due to the "actuality of the landscape" (47). Before the discovery of the New World, the setting in pastoral was acknowledged as ideal (47). Pastoral since the Age of Discovery has come to mean a temporary retreat from the "corrupt" city, a renewal period spent in the "raw wilderness," and a return to the city with the hope of applying what one has learned (69, 71). *Life in Prairie Land* stands as an underappreciated example of American pastoralism. Farnham's journey to the Illinois frontier can be viewed as a renewing retreat from the East before a return there with the hope of improving society. Her book represents an effort to improve society through her account of the experiences and discoveries detailed in the text.

At the same time that they offer the promise of renewal, pastoral works "qualify" and thus "bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture" (24). Working within the pastoral tradition, Farnham exhibits a complex perspective as she relates incidents that express ambivalence toward the West and toward development of the West. Nature is not only beautiful and beneficial, but also destructive. The West is at once a garden and a wasteland;

it offers freedom and opportunity in the midst of primitive lawlessness. Farnham considers the Native American perspective as she weighs the effect of civilization by white settlers upon the land, animal life, and waterways. She sensitively describes the encroachment of civilization upon nature. She astutely speculates that pioneer settlement and all it entails will radically alter the face of the countryside. On one hand Farnham praises Yankeeism, nationalism, the movement westward, and the progress of civilization. At the same time she regrets progress at the expense of the countryside; she laments the hastening of the Native Americans' "natural loss of dominance" which she likens to players moving off-stage (225). Through the use of pastoral Farnham expresses ambivalence, but ultimately acknowledges the inevitability of westward expansion.

Because New England was becoming industrialized and urbanized during the mid-nineteenth century, it may seem inconsistent that Farnham should advocate its use as a model of development for the West, a region whose very landscape and lack of development represented the greatest attraction to her. In fact, Farnham was not against development. She viewed progress as a natural pattern. She regarded the settlement of the West as having been accomplished by subsequent groups of newcomers displacing the settled population. Farnham states that "as the numbers of [emigrants] increase, the [first settler] retires before them as the Indian has retired before him. He forms the second wave that pours itself into the bosom of this wilderness" (215). Farnham offers many portraits of the Suckers (Illinoisans). In one instance she asserts that the frontier residents, by virtue of their character are suited to primitive conditions:

Their minds exult in the boldness and freedom of those enterprises which demand little practical detail. The dangers which hung over their early years have cultivated in them a certain boldness and love of adventure which find no proper field but on the wild frontier. The richness of the soil has obviated the necessity of severe labor, and they have consequently grown up with habits of indolence and a want of practical talent, found in no other free states of the Union. (216)

Despite their "peculiarities," Farnham admires the Suckers for their "strong intellects, bold and vigorous ideas, and their vast fund of knowledge, drawn from sources with which a more artificial society is too little acquainted" (216). Yet—perhaps somewhat egocentri-