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by members of*

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edited by
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In honor of
Jon Hassler

PREFACE

Midwestern Miscellany ranges widely over the Midwestern cultural landscape in its second appearance (Fall 1998) this year in its most recent incarnation. In time, it ranges from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth; in place, it extends from Eastern Ohio to the Upper Great Lakes country and beyond; in subject matter, it includes works as diverse as conventional criticism, personal experience, and memoirs. Yet beyond that apparent diversity is the single narrative of the attempt to come to terms with the place and time in which the Midwest and its people came into being and to define the relationship of individual human beings, past and present, to those elements that have given and continue to give the Midwest its peculiar identity.

Fitting, then, is the dedication of this issue to Jon Hassler, distinguished novelist and recipient of the Mark Twain Award of 1997.

November, 1998

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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WHY “IT’S CRAZY TO STAY CHINESE IN
MINNESOTA”: A MEDITATION ON
DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

ROGER JIANG BRESNAHAN

Eleanor Wong Telemaque’s memoir, *It’s Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota* (1978) is a title that has been shifting around my working bibliography for many years, even surviving the transition from 3 x 5 cards to hypertext. Just below the fully conscious level in my ruminations about race in America, the title is one that I have long thought I would eventually have use for. The book itself, however, has proved remarkably elusive. Indeed, when I went to find it I discovered that the title I had inscribed in my memory and in my bibliographies must only have been an approximate one. When I described my problem—finding a book for which I had only an approximate title—on my department’s listserv, I got several helpful responses, one with the actual title. Thus armed, I accessed the electronic catalogue of my university’s library but found no listing. The University of Michigan Library? None. Surely the University of Minnesota Library? None. The Big Ten and CIC Libraries? Ah, two hits: Detroit Public Library, where it’s listed as a juvenile title, and Purdue. I filed an interlibrary loan request and waited. As I did so, the idea of this paper grew to encompass an autobiography by James D. Corrothers, who was born in the Cass County, Michigan, settlement that had arisen from a station on the underground railway and who grew up in the vicinity of South Haven and Muskegon on Lake Michigan. In contrast to Booker T. Washington’s fawning *Up from Slavery*, the Corrothers title, *In Spite of the Handicap* (1916) implies the same in-your-face approach to race in America that W. E. B. DuBois had revealed in the early chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

I only heard once from the interlibrary loan office at the MSU Library. That was the overdue notice chastising me for abusing the privileges upon which we all depend. It was beginning to appear that there were powerful forces preventing me from reading or even holding that book. Still, I was hopeful as I went over to the library to straighten out the confusion. If they have sent an overdue notice, I reasoned, that must mean they still have it over there somewhere and I can at least have it overnight. No book.! Lost? Never borrowed? Returned without ever notifying me, the patron? Stymied, I have gave up finding the actual volume, for the time being.

Still, the title is one to conjure with, is it not? It encapsulates what Myrdal called "The American Dilemma"—what to do about race in our country. Surely it would be good if families in Minnesota could "stay Chinese." It would be good for an immigrant family's sense of self-worth. And surely it would be good for Minnesota! Same for everywhere else in this country. Yet the title implies the failure of the American experiment in a way that should make us all feel ashamed. The confirmation of that failure is that the title probably does not inspire shame but resignation. The title tends, I think, to confirm common-sense values in American society, while it reveals its own impossibility. These ruminations led me to that remarkably accurate, yet stunningly cynical, American figure of speech concerning "a Chinaman's chance" or "a Chinaman's choice." Yes, it IS crazy to stay Chinese in America, in the Midwest, or in Minnesota, yet America, the Midwest, or Minnesota will not allow any other solution.

Oddly, it would NOT be crazy to stay Scandinavian in Minnesota. Then the only drawback would be Garrison Keillor's sort of fond mocking of one's cultural heritage in a way that actually reaffirms its centrality rather than reinforcing its marginality. Eventually I did find the book and, as I had suspected, it's title is problematic: except for Eleanor, the Wing family does choose the "CRAZY" option to stay Chinese, though they discover that Minnesota is too isolated to sustain their ethnic identity.

Though classified as juvenile fiction by the Library of Congress, the book is a memoir of Eleanor Wong (Wing in the book) and her family in the late '40s or early '50s just prior to her departure for the state university in Minneapolis. The setting is a town near the Iowa border where the Wings run a Chinese restaurant. They are the only Chinese in town, though they are frequently visited by somewhat

well-off relatives from Austin. Throughout this time, the family is expecting their lease on the restaurant to be renewed. In the end, though, it is not and the many white friends the Wings thought they had cultivated over the years were unable to help. The family is saved by the head of a powerful tong organization, but they must retreat to San Francisco.

For the Wing family, then, attempts at integrating into the social fabric of the town are thwarted. They learn that one can "stay Chinese" only with the mutual support of others of identical ethnicity, and that for Chinese the possibility cannot exist in Minnesota. For Eleanor's experience, too, the title is problematic. As she waits on the platform for the train that will take her to Minneapolis—a seemingly self-conscious echo of George Willard's departure from Winesburg—she is speaking to a young man from China who has been living with her family. Though she is in love with him, it is clear that he will leave the United States to help build a new society in China. It is in this connection he reminds her that she is "Chinese ... but mostly American," to which she replies, "I think that's good. ... It's crazy to stay Chinese in Minnesota" (118). Although Eleanor knows from her experience in high school that she will always be marginalized, she also knows that she really cannot be fully Chinese in Minnesota.

Similarly, W. E. B. DuBois chose to stay Negro, the term then in common usage to describe his otherness. He begins *The Souls of Black Folk* with a clear statement of the issue:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, "I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word." (1)

When Americans of the majority culture—whites—are talking about race, they are almost always talking about a vastly different issue than Americans of minority cultures, except to the extent that

they have made a deliberate effort to understand the other's point of view. And that only partially. That difference became apparent very early in the American discourse on race, as is evident in the dispute concerning race and individual talent that involved Jefferson and Banneker. Writing in general terms, ostensibly to Condorcet, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson expressed such virulently racist beliefs about the intellectual and creative capacities of African descendants as are hard to reconcile with the popular conception of the man: "Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the white; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous" (Query XIV, 266). Only reluctantly was he drawn to speculate on individual cases, most notably when Benjamin Banneker took issue with these views, presenting his own accomplishments in complex astronomical calculations required for his almanac. Jefferson responded to Banneker that the deficiencies he had observed might be the result of "the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America" as he insisted that "no body wishes more ardently" to ameliorate their condition "as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit" (982). Years later, writing to Joel Barlow, Jefferson was less generous in his appraisal of Banneker: though exceptionally talented in his own right, he could not possibly have achieved the distinction he had without white help. (Kaplan 123)

Right from the beginning, whites have tended to speak of race in impersonal and collective terms while blacks and others have tended to see it in individual and personal terms. Banneker sought to soften Jefferson's conception by demonstrating his own competence in exactly those mathematical and scientific pursuits that Jefferson most valued. And Jefferson steadfastly refused to acknowledge those individual talents lest he be forced to concede his blanket denunciation of the race. Even now that we know that race is not a biological determinant but a social construction, Americans of the majority culture and those of minority cultures still tend to talk past one another. Nothing, I think, has brought that so clearly into the public forum as the division of opinion along racial lines in the O. J. Simpson murder case and the Tawanna Brawley kidnapping and assault. In both instances, African Americans have tended to believe that O. J. wa

railroaded by the police and that Tawanna Brawley was victimized by law enforcers precisely because those patterns fit their experience. And Euro-Americans, whose experience tends to confirm the protective role of the police, have tended to believe that Simpson killed his ex-wife and that Brawley made up the whole story.

To return, then, to W. E. B. DuBois and the unasked-and-unanswered question. DuBois narrates the incident where race first impacted upon his world, and thus his encounter with what whites have liked to call "the race problem." The story of the girl who refused his visiting-card is well known, as is the reaction of DuBois as a young child:

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep though; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination time, or beat them at a foot-race; or even beat their stringy heads. (2)

In this first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," DuBois introduces several concepts embedded within the various narratives that follow. One of these is the veil, a notion very like the more contemporary one of the glass ceiling. The metaphor is a powerful one because it is individualistic. The veil allows one to see the other world but imperfectly. And even if one individual is able to creep through, the veil still remains for all others in the stigmatized group. For example, the veil was parted by the magnates of American industry for Booker T. Washington, whom they greatly admired, when they arranged for him to receive an honorary doctorate, which meant they could call him "Doctor Washington" rather than the socially problematic "Mister" or the embarrassingly demeaning "Booker." Likewise, rather than permit Washington to be subjected to the personal indignities of Jim Crow travel, George Pullman had a private rail car backed down the Tuskegee Institute's rail siding. Significantly, though, the veil is parted in this and other instances for the convenience of the dominant culture rather than those behind. Its effect, these accommodations served to avoid unpleasanties rather than to ameliorate the larger social context.

The corollary to the notion of the veil is what DuBois calls “ever feeling his two-ness,” that is, his gift of second sight—seeing the world both as an American and as a Negro:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconcilable strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

“The history of the American Negro,” DuBois tells us, “is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (2). Calling for “co-worker(s) in the kingdom of culture,” DuBois says the American Negro “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both : Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (3).

Just as DuBois shows that physical prowess was for him, and by implication for all Negroes in America, a prerequisite of mental and social advancement, Corrothers writes of necessary battles in his youth. “In those days, that part of Michigan was pretty rough, as all newly settled communities are. People loved fisticuffs. Being the only coloured boy in the village, I had to thrash nearly every whit boy in town before I was allowed to go to school in peace.” (22) Flogged without reason by his teachers, he came back each time with his books, ready to study and thus gained some measure of respect. In this incident, and elsewhere in the opening chapter, Corrothers makes it clear that Negroes in the North in the generation following the Civil War were neither welcome nor understood. Of the teacher who flogged him he concedes with second sight, “Some of the teachers, like the children, had, perhaps, never seen a coloured boy before.” (23) Indeed, after narrating several similar instances he italicizes his point: “*The North was not used to coloured people.*” (24) However accommodating on an individual basis, however willing

somewhat lift the veil on a personal basis, these largely white towns could suddenly grow intolerant, as in his description of the South Haven race riot that occurred when the town was filled with excursioners from Chicago and Kalamazoo and "the Negroes were beaten, and chased like rabbits." (29)

Through his young manhood James Corrothers worked a variety of jobs in the lumber town of Muskegon, in Chicago, and throughout northern Indiana and Ohio. At Springfield, Ohio, where he spent some time, he had a poem published in the local newspaper, *The Champion City Times*. Reminiscent of Jefferson's skepticism concerning Banneker's abilities, the wife of his employer repeatedly asked "'You wrote it, but who was the author of it.'" (63)

In the late 1880s, when Corrothers was about twenty, he went to work as a porter in the counting-room at the *Chicago Tribune* where he learned again the meaning of the veil. Called into the office of William Bross, he learned of his deceased predecessor who had worked there faithfully for twenty years and was told, "if *you* can be a good boy, James, you can remain here for twenty years. Corrothers' comment on this incident reveals the sort of double-consciousness DuBois had written of:

Mr. Bross was no doubt a sincere friend of my race. As Lieutenant-Governor of Illinois, from 1865 to 1869, when Illinois was the first state to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Mr. Bross, as presiding officer of the state senate, had been the first person to sign it. But I saw by the position he had taken in his conversation with me that he considered the Negro an undeveloped man, fitted only for the most humble things in life. Upon this plane he was willing to help him, and to stand by him. He never dreamed a Negro could *want* anything different. (81-82)

Later on, assigned to do a story, in his spare time, about the economic improvement of the citizens of color in Chicago, he found that his subjects were wary of newspapermen because "coloured people had been so persistently misrepresented by the Northern press in those days" and that "even intelligent coloured people were made to say 'dis' and 'dat' in the average newspaper, and sometimes ludicrously misrepresented as carrying a 'rabbit's foot' or a razor. (82-83) The care he took in representing people accurately was to naught, however, as a rewrite man repeated all those linguistic stereotypes and even depicted some of the most prominent African American cit-

izens of Chicago in the most virulently racist caricatures generated by the minstrel shows: "... nearly every sentence of my story had been recast into what was then the customary newspaper way of speaking of coloured folk." (84) Asking the editor to right the wrong by giving him the chance to be a reporter, he found that "the apparent ludicrousness of (the) request made him laugh outright." Told to stick to his place ("You already have a better job than the average coloured fellow of your age") he experienced "a bitter realization crept" over him—"the boding anathema of my colour!" (85)

Similar experiences are retold by Corrothers throughout the rest of the book, continuing through his variously intertwined vocations of student, newspaper features writer, teacher, preacher, and minister. In time, though, Corrothers became a somewhat well known poet, even trying his hand at dialect poems under the guidance of his good friend, Paul Laurence Dunbar. And like DuBois, he began to see that in his published work, particularly his poetry, he could make use of his second-sight. "I considered that I was making a new start in literature; and that I was working for my *race*, as well as for myself and family." (229) His work appeared in DuBois's *Crisis*, Gilder's *The Century*, Hampton Institute's *The Southern Workman*, *The American Magazine*, and the leading newspapers of the North. The quality of second-sight and "ever feeling one's two-ness," as enunciated by DuBois, together with an acute consciousness of the veil informs Corrothers' poetry. Among the better known and more frequently anthologized of his poems are "The Negro Singer"—his tribute to Dunbar—, "At the Closed Gate of Justice," "The Dream and the Song," "The Complaint of the Sorehead," "An Indignation Dinner," "Mammy's Growin' Ole," and "The Shadow on a Race." His work with dialect required him to learn a poetic language with which he was not familiar. Though he "had always detested dialect" on account of its stereotypical connotations, he found in Dunbar's use of dialect "a new dignity and beauty" together with "splendid material which I had overlooked, and which all Negroes but Dunbar had allowed to go begging. ... I saw, after I had read a few of his pieces, that certain thoughts could not be expressed so well in any other way as in dialect." (137)

To return, then, to the trope of *It's Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota*, one might say it's self-defeating to live behind the veil, but that no other options are presented. Eleanor Wong Telemaque's memoir, which I eventually obtained in photocopy form from my col-

league, Joanne Isbey of University of Detroit-Mercy, is summarized thus on its Library of Congress catalog card: "A seventeen-year-old Chinese American and her family tread a balance between the Far East and the Middle West." In brief foreword the author writes: "This is a true story. The names of the white men (the *lo-fan*) [are changed] to protect the innocent. But the names of my father and mother are their own."

Decades before DuBois came to the same conclusion, Corrothers reveals his "most guarded conviction that the race question would never be definitely settled in America; that the whites would *never* extend to us the full commercial and social privileges which other races enjoy here; that all we had suffered and done in this country was merely disciplinary and temporary, and that the Negro's *destiny* was AFRICA." (102)

I close this meditation with another passage from the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here DuBois describes the difficulty of making something of oneself in this world, a hard job for whites but because of the veil even harder for persons of color:

The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all; walls straight and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to the sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above. (2)

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ELIZA FARNHAM AND THE PRAIRIE

NANCY MCKINNEY

Life in Prairie Land is a collection of sketches about Eliza Farnham's frontier experience in Illinois from 1835 to 1840. Published in 1846, her book is a precursor to the local color movement and to American literary realism. Farnham's willingness to describe the unpleasant aspects of her experience leads to a "complexity of perception" which John Hallwas predicts will earn her book due recognition (314). Farnham demonstrates a Romantic sensitivity to the Midwestern landscape as she details not only the influences of land upon the settlers, but also of settlers upon the land. It is that sensitivity to landscape which Hallwas contends is the book's "greatest claim to a position of importance in early Midwestern literature" (309). *Life in Prairie Land* merits critical attention as an example of the kind of literature that bridges gaps between travel literature, local color realism, and romantic iconography.

Although *Life in Prairie Land* consists of a series of sketches, it reads like a novel. As Farnham states in her preface, she intended to write "one or two brief sketches descriptive of Life at the West," but after writing "some hundred and fifty pages," she found herself "far from having said all [she] felt ... [and] willingly resigned [herself] to the current of [her] feelings and wrote on" (xxxiii). The structure of the book unites the sketches; together they form an objective and reliable picture of the West as Farnham observed it.

The book is divided 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 her sister's home in Pekin. It continues with sketches of the neighbors; Farnham's marriage, her early housekeeping, and the birth of her son; and a long narrative by Farnham's sister, Mary, about her family's arrival

and life there. Part one ends with Mary's death after a long illness and the death of Farnham's son. Part two includes accounts of Farnham's extensive travels in Illinois, sketches of neighbors and wildlife, and a meditation on the history of the area and possibilities for its future. Part two ends with Farnham's departure to the East.

James Hurt aptly defines *Life in Prairie Land* as travel literature. The book incorporates elements of a travel narrative, but Farnham did not restrict herself to that genre. The book represents an elaboration of the typical "brief, tentative accounts of the prairie travelers' narratives"; she extends her narrative into an "exploration of the meaning of the prairie" (Hurt 24). The prairie appears not as an "incidental setting," but as a "living presence" (24). Hurt notes that "the central action ... is an encounter with the prairie and an attempt to understand it in terms of human life, and to give it a cultural meaning" (24). Hurt characterizes "The First View of the Prairie," a motif which appears in "practically every traveler's account of early Illinois," as "so common that it constitutes almost a topos of western travel writing" (8). He states that "by the 1830s the prairie had been described so often that prairie passages had taken on a rather formulaic quality, following conventions of Romantic picturesque travel writing, adapted to a novel landscape" (8).

The First View of the Prairie typically includes "searching out and studying scenery," sublime thoughts, the mention of flowers,

the almost obligatory comparison to the ocean, with comparisons of groves of trees to islands, and the almost equally common comparison of landscape to cultivated English parks with conventional insistence that the works of nature exceed those of man. (Hurt 8-9)

Farnham's account of her first view of the prairie is typical, yet obviously particular to her own experience. It took place on what Farnham terms "a glorious April day" under emotionally charged circumstances (25). She and her brother were completing the last few miles of their journey and she was excited with thoughts of a reunion with her sister. Not only that, but "one of the great desires of [her] life that yet remained ungratified, was to see a prairie" (26). Anticipation mounts as through "openings among the groves" they catch glimpses of what their driver calls "little meadows ... [and] nothin at all in the way of a prairie" (26). But, soon "the country opened before [them], and swept away to the eastern horizon, a dis-

tance of many miles—a smooth, open plain, undotted by a tree or other familiar object” (26).

Farnham combines sea imagery and the vocabulary of an artist as she recounts her vivid memory of the scene: “I see it now, its soft outline swelling against the clear eastern sky, its heaving surface pencilled with black and brown lines, its borders fringed with the naked trees!” (27). The scene inspired silence:

We had burst into exclamations of delight a dozen times before, when the little glades opened around us, but now there was not a word uttered. Both were lost in contemplation of the sublime spectacle which lay before us. We had no inquiries to make. Nature spoke to us in her own unequivocal language. (27)

Farnham acknowledges that “afterwards [she] saw many [prairies] more magnificent—many richer in all elements of beauty, many so extensive that this appeared a mere meadow beside them, but no other had the charm of this” (26).

Because Farnham’s first encounter with the prairie occurred in early spring before the emergence of lush foliage, her account focuses on the immensity and grandeur of the plain rather than on the variety of plants and flowers. However, on many occasions she describes in detail the vegetation and wildlife of the prairie and its surrounding timbers.

Farnham depicts one particular dawn using the traveler’s formulaic terms to uncommon effect. The effect results from Farnham’s effort to control the angle of vision and to teach the reader how to look. She directs the reader to look over the distant plain, “unbroken save by one ‘lone tree’” (44). From that remote focal point, the reader is invited to follow upward then downward, moving inward, as “light creeps slowly up the sky” as “heavy dews which the cool night has deposited glisten on the leaves and spikes of grass, and the particles, occasionally mingling, are borne by their own weight to the earth” (44-45). The individual blade springs back into “its natural curve” with a motion that imitates the wind, which has not yet begun to stir “the pulseless sea beyond” (45). Again the reader’s view is directed outward to the plain, “a vast ocean, teeming with life [,] redolent of sweet odors!” (45). Then from that sea comes a

steady succession of innumerable [birds’] voices. It comes up near you and travels on, ringing more and more faintly on the ear, till it is returned by another line of respondents, and comes swelling in full

chorus, stronger and nearer, till the last seems to be uttered directly at your feet. (45)

Birds and insects “in the wood behind us” join the voices (45). Finally, the sun emerges, flooding the “grassy main” with “dazzling light”; once again Farnham directs the reader to look outward toward the sparkling prairie sea (45). Farnham’s extended use of sea imagery to render the immensity of the prairie enables her to create waves of sensory images which place the reader at the center of a Romantic encounter with the prairie.

Though *Life in Prairie Land* was written during the heart of American romanticism, it incorporates elements we now attribute to realism and to local color writing, a kind of realism. Nina Baym, writing about the nineteenth century novel, considers it “not unfruitful to think of local color writing as an intermediate form between travel literature and fiction” (116). She explains that the “reportorial interest in local color novels” was considered by reviewers “a distraction” from the plot (116). Reviewers held that the “intense ongoing interest of the ‘novel proper’ was likely to be diluted by accounts of regional life” (116). On the other hand, to those interested in “reportorial material” and “actualities,” a fictional story line would not only “distract,” but also “falsify” (116). Because of that conflict of purpose, the sketch became “the form of choice for ... regional writing”—in a sketch a fictional story line was not an issue (116). We can consider *Life in Prairie Land* an example of the intermediate form between travel literature and fiction.

Clearly Farnham’s book fits the definition of local color writing, even though she wrote much earlier than 1880, when local color became a dominant interest in American literature. Holman states that “local color writing lacked the basic seriousness of true realism [and that] it was content to be entertainingly informative about the surface of special regions” (270-271). On that point Farnham’s book diverges from Holman’s definition. Farnham achieved a more serious purpose beyond the desire to entertain and inform.

Not that the desire to entertain does not inform Farnham’s book. Indeed, humor is an important element in *Life in Prairie Land*, as it is in regional writing and in the early nineteenth century novel. Lucy Freibert and Barbara White state that “by the 1830s American humor had come into its own” (149). They credit “economic and political stability, westward expansion, and a general air of security which

allowed people to breathe more easily and laugh more readily” for a national “confidence that encouraged writers to assume a comic stance” (149). Citing Walter Blair in *Native American Humor*, Freibert and White state that “increased mobility, almanacs, newspapers, dramas, and travel books intensified awareness of national and regional differences and prompted humorous comparisons” (149). Farnham uses humor to express how foreign the prairie residents seem to her. As she describes their speech, dress, and attitudes, she provides comic contrasts with familiar eastern modes; she details the ludicrous and incongruous aspects of western life.

Besides humor, Farnham incorporates dialect and stock characters, two other elements of local color. Farnham explains words and usage as she sketches the characters she meets. For example, when a steamboat hand calls ‘Cappen, please to come *hyur*,’ Farnham’s footnote explains that “it is difficult to convey by any written combination of letters the sound of this word as uttered by the natives . . . It is more like *yur* preceded by *h* sharply aspirated, than anything else to which I can liken it” (5). Hallwas comments that Farnham’s use of dialect “looks forward” to the local color movement of the 1880s (307). He also notes that Farnham’s vividly drawn portraits are “almost types, or stock characterizations of small-town culture” (307). Hallwas cites Farnham’s portraits of “the money-grubbing preacher” and “the talented, dedicated physician” as examples of types which “prefigure the kind of American character types that would be common in local color literature later in the century” (307). Hallwas makes the point that Farnham’s characterizations describe the “actual mix of individuals who inhabited the frontier” and so “can be viewed . . . as a step toward literary realism” (308).

Farnham’s inclusion of many instances which illustrate differences between reality and expectation speaks to her willingness to discuss unpleasant experiences. Realization of those differences creates ambivalence toward the land and region, an attitude which remains characteristic of Midwestern literature. Diane Quantico attributes the “ambivalence often found in Great Plains fiction” to “preconceptions [which] did not fit the world the settlers left behind or the ones they faced” (xvii). More, Annette Kolodny names Farnham as one of the women who “became promotionalists for a New World Eden” (8). Kolodny cites *Life in Prairie Land* as part of the tradition of female writers who create a body of popular fiction about the prairie frontier by describing the frontier and familiarizing it fo

their readers (8-9, 175). Kolodny holds that Farnham and others reacted to their exclusion from the male-based frontier myths by creating their own frontier myths and infused a distinct female presence into the popular culture (5). Farnham may have contributed to the female myth of the West as a New World Eden, but she did not romanticize it. She did not balk at presenting the harsh and unattractive realities of Western life.

In *Life in Prairie Land* Farnham has taken a decisive step towards literary realism. Writing about the contributions of early women writers to the development of the American novel, Freibert and White assert that women were “pioneers” in some areas, “notably realism” (2). They note that frontier romances by Ann Bleecker, Lydia Child, and Catharine Sedgwick “describe the harshness of the wilderness” and “compare favorably” to works by James Fenimore Cooper; they surpass Cooper’s in depicting the suffering of frontier women and the “strength and endurance [women] developed” (3). Bleecker, Child, and Sedgwick “employed lifelike details in the manner of their contemporaries [Sara Josepha] Hale and [Caroline] Kirkland, who were among the earliest American realists” (3). By virtue of her depiction of women’s “strength and endurance” and of her attempts at verisimilitude, Farnham has earned a place among these early American women realists.

Freibert and White state that “the exact descriptions of places and events of everyday life presented in Hale’s *Northwood* (1827) and Kirkland’s *A New Home—Who’ll Follow?* (1839)” indicate “the expansion of realism taking place in the novel generally at the time” (4). They note that while men like Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Royall Tyler, and John DeForest “set works in the public and political sectors,

Hale and Kirkland focused on the individual and the family in the local settings, thereby anticipating the form of realism that arose later in the century in the works of Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (4)

Noting the gradual emergence of the late nineteenth-century realism movement, Freibert and White discuss transitional writers (183). They point to Hale and Kirkland as precursors to “pioneer realists who were active in the 1860s and 1870s” such as John DeForest, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward (183). Hale and Kirkland, among

others, were “consciously striving for realistic effects” (183). Hale’s *Northwood* was “dedicated, in her words, ‘to the delineation of scenes faithful to nature’” (183). Kirkland’s works about the West employ “almost all the techniques ... [now recognized] as characteristic of realism” (183). In addition, the authors note Kirkland’s influence on Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rose Terry Cooke, “later realists who were familiar with her work” (183).

Life in Prairie Land can lay claim to being an example of a pioneering work in the tradition of Hale and Kirkland. Farnham’s book predates the realistic period in American literature, but it incorporates elements which we now attribute to realism. Farnham provides her reader with detailed observations and descriptions which compare to the realists’ camera eye perspective. Her use of the realistic convention of fictionalized identities enhances the plausibility of her characters. For example, referring to someone as Miss _____ or Mr. F _____ makes it seem that an identity exists which the author is attempting to shield. Farnham’s inclusion of unpleasant realities, both of the region and her experience there, contrasts with typical romantic writing and indicates an intent “to go beyond the conventions of romantic travel literature and do justice to the reality that she experienced in Illinois” (Hallwas 310, 11).

Farnham’s complexity of perspective becomes apparent as she relates incidents which reveal ambivalence toward the West. Nature is not only beautiful and beneficial, but also destructive. The West is at once a garden and a wasteland; the West 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 describes the encroachment of civilization upon nature when her meditative solitude is disturbed by the “slow, measured march” of a steamboat (131-132).

Farnham’s complexity of perspective arises from her viewing the Midwest through the eyes of a topographer, historian, woman, writer, and poet; it results in a more serious purpose beyond that of the local colorist’s to entertain and inform. It results in Farnham’s own statement of her philosophy on nature in the tradition of Emerson, Bryant, and Thoreau. Farnham’s response to nature is Transcendental. The comfort she is finally able to find, after the death of her sister and son, is not vaguely religious, but specifically Transcendental in character. Robert C. Bray notes that Farnham’s romanticism “shows distinct

affinities with New England Transcendentalism and deserves serious study in this context” (47). Moreover, Farnham was acquainted with Transcendentalist writers. During the period when Farnham was writing *Life in Prairie Land* she often attended the literary salon of Anne Charlotte Lynch, where she met William Cullen Bryant; it is likely she met writers like Poe, Margaret Fuller, and Richard Henry Stoddard who also visited the salon (Hallwas 299-300).

Unifying Farnham’s narrative is what Robert Bray terms “a sustained and lovely hymn to the land” (16). He characterizes Farnham’s “pursuit of solitude in nature” as “spiritualized” and “romantic,” but he credits her with “perceptively not[ing] the restless, rootless tendencies of the westward movement” (21). Farnham uses her sister’s experience to illustrate both the westward-moving wanderers who did not stay long and the prairie settlers bound to a new home by love for the land who did stay. She presents Mary’s narrative of her family’s journey from the East as a microcosm of the westward movement. The difficult trek into “a new creation” purifies and strengthens the travellers; they are able to buy the ‘claim’ of a ‘squatter’ moving out (Farnham 151-153). Mary’s family represents the wave of new homesteaders arriving continually to take the place of those who move on. At the same time Mary addresses the appeal of the region to those who choose to remain—the beauty in nature, social and physical freedom, and the opportunity to participate in the “mighty Future” of a region so possessed of natural resources (54-55). Mary states, “To bear a part in developing this, seems to me equally calculated to stimulate and gratify our noblest powers” (55).

For Farnham the prairie not only provided the means for development of the human’s noblest powers, but it also created the setting for her own personal development. Hurt has categorized *Life in Prairie Land* as a spiritual autobiography (25). He suggests that “the two parts of the book present a pattern of crisis and recovery in the heart of the natural world” (26). More, Farnham’s experience can be seen as an “active construction of the prairie as a microcosmic field of struggle” through which she discovers the inner resources to “be at home in the world” (27, 29). The division between parts one and two signals Farnham’s inner change. In part two, tone is noticeably different; Farnham becomes warmer and less satirical. She seems kinder in her characterizations and her snobbishness disappears. Additionally, Farnham becomes more reflective on the subject of man and nature. Throughout the book Farnham states general prin-

ciples, then, using herself or her Western acquaintances as examples, shows the results of those principles in action. *Life in Prairie Land* stands not only as a record of Western life, but also as a record of Eliza Farnham's spiritual journey.

Life in Prairie Land merits critical attention as an example of the kind of literature that bridges gaps between travel literature, local color realism, and romantic iconography. Farnham reconciles two competing impulses—the romantic, represented by her use of nature and poetry, and the realistic, represented by her attention to history, geography, and topography. Farnham's journey is both literal and spiritual. The interest in *Life in Prairie Land* lies in Farnham's fusing of genres. It is a "curious book," Hurt comments (33). Part of the curiosity stems from a flexibility of genre which allows it to fit into several overlapping categories. Farnham's book is a collection of sketches which reads like a novel; it is at once expository essay, historical chronicle, cultural history, Romantic narrative poem, local color realism, and spiritual autobiography. To again cite Hurt, *Life in Prairie Land* is

a Romantic travel narrative looking outward at the world and an inward-looking exploration of spiritual crisis and recovery. The two strains produce a strangely touching account of the Illinois landscape charged with emotional meaning. (33)

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A NAME ON THE LAND

DAVID D. ANDERSON

Actually, the name is on the land in many places between the Appalachians and the trans-Mississippi Midwest, in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri, most frequently as a county, but almost as often as a country town, a crossroads, as well as the name of the Ohio hamlet where the one who carried the name into the Midwest and attached it firmly to the land in many Midwestern places met his fate.

Perhaps the name originated at an obscure English or Scottish stream crossing, even as Oxenford became Oxford and a center of commerce as well as learning in the twelfth century. Like Oxford, the name has two syllables; it is a name that emerged briefly from obscurity into notoriety and ultimately to return to its current obscurity even as it endures on the land in so many places. It emerged from obscurity to find its places on the land as a result of one of the countless skirmishes in the many campaigns against the Ohio Indians and their British and colonial allies that marked the American Revolution in the West—west of the Appalachians, that is, in what is now the Midwest, a war seen by the Indians not as a war for independence but a war of colonial aggression, against which the British and occasional colonials were allies on the side of justice and freedom.

The name that made its indelible mark on the land in those critical decades in North America in the late eighteenth century is that of William Crawford, farmer, surveyor, Revolutionary soldier, friend of George Washington, and victim of the war with the Ohio Indians.

Born in Virginia in 1732 of Scotch-Irish parents who migrated to Pennsylvania and then to Virginia, Crawford alternately farmed and surveyed, and, like his friend George Washington, fought in the colo-

nial wars that culminated in the American Revolution. At the start of the Revolution, he immediately became active, first as a member of the committee of defense at Pittsburg; then he aided in raising Virginia regiments. Commissioned Lieutenant-Colonel of the 5th Virginia Regiment on February 13, 1786, he was promoted to Colonel of the 7th Virginia, which he led in the battles on Long Island, the retreat from New York, and the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown. In November 1777, Congress sent him to Pittsburg, where he commanded militia in the defense of the West against the Indians. He erected Fort Crawford on the Allegheny, Fort Laurens, the first fort in what would become Ohio, and Fort Fincastle, at what is now Wheeling, West Virginia. In 1780 he visited Congress to request support for frontier protection and for an expedition against the British and Indians at Sandusky and Detroit. Neither was forthcoming, and in late 1781, after Yorktown had been fought and won, Crawford requested retirement. Early in 1782, in good health at fifty, Crawford settled at his home on the Youghioghny River. He hoped for a peaceful retirement in his cabin by the river, surrounded by children and grandchildren in a country newly free.

But the end of the war in the East did not mean either a secure frontier for the settlers or free open land across the Ohio for those who would go on to the West. Nor did the British and their influence leave the Ohio Country, but they continued to support their Indian allies, as did the notorious Girty brothers, George, James, and Simon, Jr., frontiersmen, Indian partisans, and, to many American frontiersmen, traitorous renegades.

But Crawford's retirement did not bring peace in his life, nor did peace come to the frontier on either side of the Ohio. Border depredations continued, and the establishment by Moravian missionaries of colonies of Christian Indians on the Muskingum River, chiefly Gnadenhutten, but also Schaenbrunn and Salem, provided a focal point for the settlers' fears and hostility. Two companies of what passed for militia on the frontier, led by Lieutenant-Colonel David Williamson, a veteran of Lord Dunmore's War and the Revolutionary War in the West, raided the Moravian settlements late in 1781 and captured a few hostages, who were taken to Fort Pitt, threatened, and released. Faced with a good deal of criticism for his relatively mild treatment of the Indians, Williamson led another raid in March, 1782. The 80 or so members of the raid, described by Theodore Roosevelt in *The Winning of the West* as "the brutal, the vicious and the ruffi-

anly,” and a few honest men, raided Gnadenhutten, captured 96 prisoners, and in fine democratic fashion, voted what to do with them. The majority, with 18 in the minority, voted that they be executed. While the minority proclaimed that they called upon “God to witness that they were innocent of the crime to be committed,” the majority began its bloody work. While the Indians prayed, all 35 men, 27 women, and 34 children were tomahawked, scalped, and burned as the village was destroyed.

The event was not one of the moments in the settlement of the Ohio frontier of which we can be proud, and it put the Ohio Indians, chiefly Wyandots, Delawares, and Shawnees, not to mention the British still ensconced in Detroit, on notice that the struggle for the West would continue—Indians seeing it as a war against American aggression, the frontiersman as a crusade against savagery—as well as for cheap land—, and the British, kindly supportive of the Indians, as a geopolitical issue, although they didn’t know the term.

Continuing tension and occasional firefights led Brigadier General William Irvine, commander of Fort Pitt to call up Pennsylvania and Virginia militia to march against the Ohio Indians at Sandusky—now Upper Sandusky—, defeat them, and bring peace to the frontier. About 400 men, some of them veterans of the Gnadenhutten atrocity, assembled at Mingo Bottom, near present Steubenville, and voted Colonel William Crawford their commander. Reluctantly, after General Irvine requested that he take command, Crawford made his will, divided his extensive land holdings among his wife, his son, his son-in-law, and his male grandchildren, provided for his four slaves, and joined his command at Mingo Bottom.

The attacking force, including Williamson as second in command, Lieutenant John Rose of the Regular Army, Dr. John Knight, surgeon, as well as Crawford’s son-in-law Major William Harrison, his son John Crawford, and his nephew, William Crawford, moved promptly out of Mingo Bottom on May 25, 1782, for a campaign that would last 20 days and result in one of the more inept performances in American military history even as it gave to Ohio, Midwestern, and American myth the hero whose name remains on the land. The force, 480 strong, advanced through what are now Jefferson, Harrison, Tuscarawas, Holmes, Ashland, and Crawford counties and into Wyandot. They met the Sandusky River in eastern Crawford County and followed it to Old Town—now near Upper Sandusky—and on to the north. Throughout the march, Indians, obviously scouts, were

rarely seen and only at a distance. Three miles north of present Upper Sandusky, Crawford's mounted scouts met a "large body" of Indians occupying a grove of trees. Shots were exchanged and Crawford's men dismounted and drove the Indians from the grove, now known as Battle Island. Crawford's main force advanced, and on June 4, 1782, the Battle of Sandusky, as it was called, began, three and a half miles northeast of present Upper Sandusky.

Immediately engaged were Delawares under Captain Pipe, a war chief whose memorial stands at Battle Island, and Simon Girty, in British uniform. They were quickly reinforced by Wyandots under Zhaus-sho-toh and Matthew Elliot, another renegade or partisan, two companies of English troops, and 44 lake Indians. On the second day they were further reinforced by 140 Shawnees, more English troops, and more lake Indians. Captain William Caldwell, a British officer, took command, Girty and Elliott, both versed in the Indian languages, serving as liaison.

Although clearly outnumbered, Crawford's force fought well, occupied the high ground, and easily won the first day. The second, June 5, was a draw, and that evening, discovering that the Indians had been reinforced again by a force of Butler's Rangers, including two field pieces and a mortar, as well as more Indians, Crawford held a council of war, which decided on an orderly withdrawal. At about 9:00 p.m. the withdrawal began.

But withdrawal under heavy attack soon became retreat and for some, at least, became nearly a rout. The main body stood near the Olentangy River in what is now Whetstone Township, Crawford County, about five miles southeast of present Bucyrus, and in a brief firefight lost three killed and eight wounded, and the retreat went on. They reached Mingo Bottom and crossed the Ohio on June 13; on June 14 the volunteers were discharged. More than 150 of the troops were missing, some, including Crawford's son John, straggling in some days later.

Still missing, however, was the commander of the expedition, Colonel William Crawford, and the surgeon, Dr. Knight, and the rest of the story is found in a work called *The Narrative of Dr. Knight*, first published in Pittsburg in 1782 and reprinted many times, as well as a work called *The Narrative of John Slover*, a guide in the expedition, the latter taken down as what we would call oral history from the illiterate Slover's spoken memories by one H. Brackenridge and published with Knight's narrative in 1782.

Both narratives make exciting and gory reading even yet. What had been planned as an orderly withdrawal deteriorated quickly, because of poor American intelligence—the Indians' was far superior—, poor communications, and obvious lack of training and discipline. Knight and Crawford and others fell behind, Crawford trying to make order and to insure the carrying off of the wounded. Crawford searched unsuccessfully for his son, his son-in-law, and his nephew, as well as Lieutenant Rose, and finally he, Knight, and a changing handful of others, began their retreat.

Within 24 hours they were captives of a band of Delawares. Two of their party, Captain Biggs and Lieutenant Ashley, attempted escapes but were killed and scalped. The others remained in the Indian camp until June 10, when the prisoners—eleven alive and four scalps—were paraded and then marched to the camp near the Sandusky, north of the present Upper Sandusky. Crawford met with Simon Girty, an old acquaintance and sometime comrade in arms, who promised him to do everything in his power to save them but said that the Indians were enraged at the captives. Girty did tell Crawford that his son-in-law and his nephew had been captured by the Shawnees but pardoned and freed, the latter a series of events that was later proved either a lie or the result of faulty information on Girty's part.

The dimensions of the Indians' fury quickly became evident. Captain Pipe had all the prisoners' faces painted black, a sign of impending death. As Crawford and Knight were moved to another town they saw the bodies of four of their fellow prisoners, tomahawked and scalped by the path, and later squaws and boys fell on five others and tomahawked them. Of the eleven initially captured, only Crawford and Knight survived, and young Indians delighted in thrusting their fellow prisoners' scalps in their faces as both were beaten with sticks and fists.

Out of consideration for late-twentieth-century sensibilities it is perhaps best to draw the curtain of time over Knight's description of Crawford's torture, burning, scalping, and death near what is now the hamlet of Crawford in northeastern Wyandot County, Ohio, but Knight had no such consideration for the sensibilities of his contemporaries.

The next morning, Knight, a sacrificial gift to another village, was taken past the site of Crawford's death. There were only bones in the ashes, the remains, he was told, of his "Big Captain."

Knight's later escape is itself a frontier epic of 22 days of fear and fatigue after six of captivity, torture, and starvation. With the publication of his narrative later that year, he rejoined his regiment, married, moved to Tennessee, fathered ten children to populate the frontier, and died on March 12, 1838.

Knight's narrative and the oral history of John Slover remain graphic testimonials to a tragedy that need not have been, that perhaps should not have been, and repercussions echoed in Western Pennsylvania for years, and, as when one wanders along the Sandusky in search of Indian relics, as I have, they echo even yet. But immediate echoes were harsh. A few survivors straggled in, including Crawford's son, but more horrendous were the fatalities discovered, including the scalped and mutilated corpses of Crawford's son-in-law and his nephew. But most shocking is our realization that the entire campaign and its results echo most clearly the incident at Gnadenhutten the year before.

Crawford died an ambiguous death, at once a hero, a scapegoat, and an instrument of justice—a hero to colonials become freemen, a scapegoat for those who had carried on brutal injustice in the Ohio country, an act of justice for those who saw, participated in, and celebrated his end, including, perhaps, the ubiquitous Simon Girty. The Ohio Indians then and for the rest of their attempts to keep the land, were never routed on the battlefield; they were routed, however, on pieces of paper in Paris on April 30, 1783, and at Greenville, Ohio, in June, 1795. But their denouement came when Tecumseh fell at the Battle of the Thames in another century, another nation, another war. But those who had sought and won independence came across the mountains and up and down the rivers to take the land, and they came in such numbers that by 1820 one third of the American population was in the West—west of the Appalachians. And with them they carried a legend and a name, a name that endures on the land.

Two interesting footnotes remain: First: Lieutenant John Rose was really Gustav Henri De Rosenthal, a Russian aristocrat, born in Livonia, Russia. After a successful-for-him-duel in St. Petersburg, he fled to America, served in the Revolution, provided much of the strength of the retreat from Upper Sandusky, and then, pardoned by Czar Alexander, he returned to Russia in 1784. The only Russian who fought for American independence, he died in Russia in 1829.

Second: A quote from James Anderson in *Ohio Historical and Archeological Publications* (1898) suggests the dimensions of the

Crawford myth: "If Socrates died like a philosopher and Jesus Christ like a God, then verily this man, courageous soul, whose sufferings were a thousand fold greater, died like a hero, and patriot, and martyr. His name should live in the great American heart, and in the pantheon of history, while true patriotism is cherished, and the memory of the father of our country revered.

Great Crawford! Unselfish, magnanimous, heroic, your apotheosis is assured! and rolling years will only confirm and emphasize the solemn edict."

Perhaps. But his name does endure on the land.

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FAMILIES

WILLIAM THOMAS

My Aunt Susan could talk well on many subjects, but one she talked on superlatively, and if she failed to get onto that herself I would say "Tell me some more about our delightful family." Then she would recount how the bull bunted old Uncle Joe Phillips into the water tank and how she and her brothers tormented their slow-witted Uncle Jim, and tell about Hans Werter, the German music student who became a man of renown, the dangers and embarrassments of taking a girl out in a dogcart, and what might happen to a party dress. Her delicate phrasing of indelicacies was a literary marvel, and if she told me the same thing several times, the repetition solidified my picture of the life they had or an added detail clarified or sharpened it, and there was always a good chance that she would recall an episode she had not thought to tell me before. During hours of talk about these good and pleasantly dull people, whose activities are so much more interesting in recollection than they could have been in the happening, I would be seeing Aunt Susan as a sixteen-year-old tomboy, a belle of twenty-three, or a plump matron of thirty-five instead of a wizened old lady in a wheel chair.

Susan's knowledge, however, was nearly confined to firsthand experiences of her generation, and I was impelled to supplement it with earlier names and dates. The first significant date is 1806, when Nathaniel and Anna Brundige Wyatt came with Anna's parents and brothers into the valley of the Olentangy River. Nathaniel and Anna had four sons and six daughters, of whom all but one daughter lived to rear families of from four to ten offspring. Scarcely less prolific were their fifty grandchildren, and, with second marriages in both generations, the lines of descent are such as to elate a genealogist. Once (when I could not procure drawing paper in a roll) I covered

the back of a strip of wallpaper with a great chart comprising all the names and dates I could ascertain of both near and remote connection. It was, however, from one son, Samuel, that sprang the host of Wyatt progeny who used to be introduced to me at family reunions as my cousins. I then had no idea who they really were, and when I looked with incredulity at some skinny girl with pigtails whom I disliked at sight, or a freckled-faced lad who appeared ready to fight at a word, I would be told "She's your cousin, you know" or "Why, he's your cousin."

Samuel Wyatt married his cousin Lovinah, daughter of Nathaniel Brundige. Editha, the oldest of their nine offspring, Susan's grandmother, is earliest to come alive in the family picture, and as that is filled in it becomes more and more dominated by the vigorous personality of this capable, strong-willed, and resourceful woman. Her life was not a good one, in the sense of giving her joys and comforts and satisfactions, but it was a full one, and as only those who experience great sorrow can apprehend the highest delights, I like to think it was other than a life of unalloyed pain. By her first marriage, in 1839, to Wright DeVore, she had three sons. Samuel died at sixteen, Cyrus was killed "at the battle of the Arkansas Post" in 1863, and only Sanford lived out a life expectancy. Wright DeVore died in 1846, and after five and a half years of widowhood Editha married Michael Phillips, whose *Geburt und Taufschein* states: "Diesen beyden Ehegatten, als Peter Phillips und seiner ehlichen Hausfrau Eka-terina eine geborne Enders ist ein Sohn sur Welt geboren, im Jahr A. D. 1806 den 3 Tag October. Dieser Sohn ist geboren und getauft in America, im Staat Pensilvanien. ..."

Was it real emotional attraction that led Editha at thirty-one to marry the forty-five-year-old bachelor, a cobbler whose financial status could hardly have bettered her situation? It is charitable and reasonable to think so. Everywhere Michael appears his ineffectuality is manifest. He was so meticulous, so slow, so imbued with the spirit of the craftsman that he literally could not make a living at cobbling. Whether Editha's self-assertion was innate or developed out of necessity, obviously she was the manager of this pair, and the land they owned was in her name. The had a daughter, Mary Jane, and after there was a son-in-law things were better. Michael was a gaffer about the house.

To look at their pictures in Mary Jane's album is a sentimental journey into America's past. How I should like to have known them

all! Michael, very old, with his benign face and a glint in his eye that says as plainly as anything can that he was not above inciting his grandchildren to mischief. His brother John, very like him in appearance, more self-conscious at having to pose. His brother David, younger, but with a chin beard and somewhat dour. And his brother Joseph, with what must have been one of the handsomest, most luxuriant beards in all Christendom, a double for Herman Melville as J. O. Eaton painted him. Peter, their father, smooth-shaven but with straight hair combed forward from the middle of his head and over his ears. Fanny Eleanor Lanz Howald, "the Grossmutter" (she was born, grew up, and married Andrew Howald in the Swiss canton of Bern), a personification of the dignity and grace and charm of serene old age. Her twin sons, John Fredrick and John George, at twelve or thereabouts, as undistinguishable as newly-minted dimes, with a marvelous solemnity of countenance they could not have worn unless preparing to perpetrate a joke. Jacob Howald, their brother, and his wife, Nancy. Michael's twin sisters, Susan and Jane Ann in youth, wearing velvet jackets over basques and voluminous taffeta skirts. Cyrus DeVore, a sober young man with a shadow of chin whisker. Editha's youngest sister, Ruth, a plain girl but beautiful in middle age, and her handsome husband. Their brothers, "Uncle Sam," "Uncle Davey," "Uncle John," "Uncle Jim." George Howald and Mary Jane at the time of their marriage. Editha herself, with sharp and severe face—a disappointment, for in the genealogy her role is almost that of a heroine. Her mother Lovinah, who, born in 1799, outlived her, with her second husband, David Dudley.

How to get by their voluminous garments, beyond their gay or sad eyes, to see into their minds? What did they feel, and what did they think? Little evidence survives. So far as I know none kept a journal, and the only written records of their lives, other than vital statistics, are in a few preserved letters. Those exchanged between George and Mary Jane before their marriage are of so private and personal a nature that reading them now seems a breech of trust. But time has made them social history. Under date of 21 July 1872 he addresses her "Dear Friend" and begs her to excuse him for failing to keep an engagement. His explanation is not very good: his brother Jacob persuaded him to go "to quarterly meeting over at fulton Creek" even though "i know i could enjoyed myself beter with you than i did where i was." If she still thinks him worthy of her company he "will call in two weeks from last night if it will be al rite with

you." If it is not all right he "will com anaway." He cannot come sooner "because fred wil want the buggy next Saturday." Her answer is unknown. Ten months later he writes while recovering from the measles: "... it has ben so long scince I hav seen you I most hav forgotten how you look but I expect you look as gay as ever gay as a peach and twice as sweet." He is "loosing al the good buggy rides." Then, after half a page—there is no punctuation or paragraphing—of trumpery and (mirabile dictu!) the weather: "I dont feel mutch like writing I am deaf and that makes me bout half mad I dont know wheather I will ever get over my deafness or not I did not know that the measles wer half that hard but i took cold what made me worse." More self-pity, and he comes to the point: "I never wanted to see one person so bad in my life as i want to see you." Then, realizing this may be found somewhat immoderate, "I just thought I would write to pass away time." In a letter to him (not an answer to the foregoing), she addresses him "Friend George" and proceeds to comply with his request "to tell you all of the news," which fills three pages. On the fourth: "I wish you was here tonight, but as you are not, and cannot be tonight, I hope that it will not be very long untill you can be here, for I am wanting to see your very bad, for it seems like a long time since I have seen you. I must close. I remain as ever, your friend." They did not write their love in plain words, and I wonder if they even dared speak it; such were the reticence and conventions of their day that they could only tell how much they missed each other. But the spirits of the lovers breathe from these letters, though it is not easy to think of my grandmother, who in my recollection is a rather crotchety old woman, as the same being as this glowing girl.

There are letters to Michael from his brothers Samuel in Pennsylvania and Jacob at Bellville, Ohio telling abouts crops, prices, wages, the children, and business opportunities. In the summer of 1827 Samuel proposes coming to Ohio if Michael will assure him he can obtain work as a miller. But "now there is such a noise about the banks that a person dont know whethr to venture from home or not." In 1848 Jacob debates between entering the employ of a cabinet-maker and setting up his own shop. In February 1864 Sanford DeVore, in the Union Army, writes to his mother, who is evidently in distress from want of firewood. (Where was Michael, or what was his condition?) He advises her to "hire the would cut let it cost what it will." And "If you can only get along till I get home will try and make times easier somehow or other." He tells her "you must not get

like grandmother and always look at the worst side of the picture." (Was that Lovinah's way?) He expects to be home within three and a half months. (May he have misdated the letter and actually been writing in 1865?) But on the first of June 1865 he is still in the army, in North Carolina, "doing the last work of closing the rebellion." Officers are absent and he has been commanding his company more than a month. He has "some notion standing examination for a colored regt in the regular army" but "I shal not go against yur will."

Sanford came home and the following January was married. Editha lived twenty more years and Michael eighteen. Their difficulties must have been resolved somehow. Their lives—those of Mary Jane and George, Michael and Editha, Editha's sisters and brothers, and the generations behind them—were good lives in freedom from want and dear. None became rich, for one generation could not accumulate property enough to go far when divided among the next, and a few died poor. Yet the abject suffering of urban poverty was something they never conceived of. Money was scarce, and they knew hard times; but most of their edibles—grains, vegetables, fruits, and meats—grew on the land; George Howald and Mary Jane reared a family of seven and provided for several other relatives on eight-five acres. They were mostly farming folk, though the men might follow various occupations in youth before they settled down to farming or combined farming with dealing in grains and livestock. Many of the women, including Mary Jane and Lovinah, taught school before marriage, as young women do now.

But for the country dwellers they were lives of intellectual poverty and what must have been for at least a few of the women bitter loneliness, mud-bound in winter to drafty, musty houses, impossible to heat adequately, where all the water used had to be pumped or drawn by hand and carried, lit through the long evenings by kerosene lamps or tallow candles, with the lantern on a kitchen shelf for carrying to the barn or the privy. They might sing and play at the organ (Michael was an amateur flautist), work needlepoint, or make scrap-albums out of cuttings from *The Youth's Companion*, *Arthur's Home Magazine*, *Peterson's*, or *Godey's Lady's Book*—but not dance or play cards. Their letters testify that families living no more than a dozen miles apart saw each other only during the summers; and then, when the roads were dry, the fastest transportation, aside from the railroad, was horse and buggy. Visiting was planned months ahead. They could send letters, but not packages, by post,

and had to go to the village post office to mail and collect them, where they would receive also *The Cincinnati Weekly Times* and a local weekly newspaper.

None were intellectuals, for had they been a recollection or a tradition or some tangible evidence would have remained. I should like to think of Lovinah and Editha reading Scott and Cooper and Irving and Dickens and Thackeray, and going to hear famous lyceum speakers, but I do not know that they did. If they did not share the view which held novels in general to be morally injurious, it is more probable that they read Susan Warner, Mrs. Southworth, Mary J. Holmes, Maria Cummins, and Augusta Evans. I know Mary Jane, my grandmother, read these sentimental and sensational writers, in youth and after. Many years a widow, she suffered partial paralysis in her old age, and endured a sad and lonely end of life with periodic shifts from one house to another of her daughters and sons-in-law. But she liked reading, and passed a good deal of time that way. Her great solace was *The Youth's Companion*. Her enthusiasm for this publication was life-long (I believe she was a subscriber from girlhood), and as she lived three and a half years after its demise she must have missed it sorely. As is aptly said by Frank Luther Mott, "There has never been another periodical quite like it, and in the opinion of the oldsters there can never be another so good."* That is exactly what my grandmother thought of *The Youth's Companion*.

Lovinah, Aunt Susan remembered, greatly admired *Charlotte Temple* for its grave moral lesson. Michael had books, and a printed bookplate bearing his name and the place and date of purchase. But when a man dies all his glory among men dies also, and it is hardly any time until his belongings are scattered or become mere lumber to his descendants (many relics in the attic of my grandmother's farmhouse were destroyed when that house burned in 1924), and the only books of Michael's I have ever seen are *The Universal Pictorial Library* and Howe's *Historical Collections of Ohio*. The bookplates in these bear different dates (though both are of the year 1848), so I cannot conclude that Michael acquired all his books on the same day, and it is equally difficult to believe he had a bookplate printed every time he bought a book. One supposes he made a dated list of his purchases and had the printer run off the requisite number for each date. The family record of marriages, births, and deaths was kept in

**A History of American Magazines*, Vol. II, p. 274.

Editha's bible, but most of the record antedates the book, for she was near the end of her life when she came to possess it.

After the several months during which I was able to ascertain and order many facts about these forebears, they had come to be as real people whom I had talked to and heard speak, and their existence continued in my thought and my life and would remain there until my life's end. It signified nothing that those among them I knew best had been dead sixty years. It was my privilege to hold the knowledge of them that had been given to me until I could transmit it to someone of a newer generation who would also revere them. This is the immortality of men and women who do not write books or music or paint pictures or become renowned statesmen or jurists or make inventions or discoveries. They do not, any more than skilled or learned folk, wholly die, but live in the minds of those who come after them, dying only if those fail to give them there a small place.

Late Ohio State University Marion

MY HOME TOWN: THE EMPTY PLACES WE LIVED IN THE MIDDLE OF

ELMER SUDERMAN

“You can’t go home again.” Thomas Wolfe.

“That’s shit.” Bill Holm.

Quoted by David Lee, *My Town*

Sometime I think Wolfe was right, sometimes Bill. The truth is they are both wrong. You can’t leave home: “The landscape of your childhood is ineradicable.”¹ After fifty-five years I still carry its red dirt under my fingernails. Much of my life I’ve been trying, if not to go back, then to remember Fairview, Oklahoma, and the Sued Hoffungsfeld Mennonite Brethren church where I spent the first twenty years of my life, to discover, if I can who I was before I became what I will presently cease to be, or failing that to make sense of my home place, to get it right, to domesticate it. My father who homesteaded a quarter section when the Cherokee Strip opened in 1893 domesticated it by stretching barbed-wire fences, building a house, granaries, a windmill, plowing the sod and planting and harvesting wheat. To find my way around its infinite space and labyrinthine byways I have to create verbal landmarks.

I’m going to explore from as many angles as I can the neighborhood and its landscape, concentrate upon my remembered earth, wonder about it, listen to its sounds, taste its foods, smell its odors, touch its red dirt, and see its terrain in order to discover, if I can’t learn why, at least where I was placed.

It isn’t that I really want to go home. I’d be miserable. Sometimes I want to forget Sued Hoffungsfeld and Fairview:

In that Oklahoma County seat
which sang gospel hymns

accompanied by south wind
 and then, after church, everyone
 in bed, moaned to far-away stars,
 I grew up.

Before I left that town
 its dirt roads took me
 only as far as the steepleless,
 drafty church and to farms
 living lives of quiet desperation.

When I left that town
 I have tried to forget,
 I took a road that held no signs
 to tell me where I was going.

Dreaming south back to that town
 I wonder if I've lived all my life
 in that fenced-in, wheat-field
 surrounded town I can't forget.

I

Sued Hoffungsfeld and Fairview are situated in a flatland spread forever on and on over the rim of a landscape too big to be clearly taken in. At night, it is bounded by the evening star, the morning star, the north star and Orion. A world that large with a sky even larger is hard to concentrate on.

During the day it is bounded on the east by Isabella, a town lost in the black jacks, the Cimarron River on the north, the Gloss Mountains, not really mountains but buttes, on the west, and on the south Homestead—two elevators, a filling station and a high school—and a little beyond the Gypsum hills. That landscape on which is imposed Jefferson's grid is a little easier to concentrate on.

Ironically my Mennonite ancestors chose this boundary-less frontier so they could isolate themselves from the "welt," the wicked world. They erected artificial barriers to separate us from them, our land from their land: first the osage orange with its smelly hedge apples which the Mennonites had brought over from Russia; then barbed wire fences. But the most important barrier was an invisible

one: Low German, *plautdietsch*, defining and limiting our world and separating us from those others we called “Yankees.”

Low German was our litmus test: The first time my family met Norma, who was to become my wife, they were all at my mother’s house waiting for us. They knew that Norma was a General Conference Mennonite, the church my grandfather and seventeen others had left in Russia because they felt it had become too worldly.

My oldest brother-in-law greeted Norma in Low German and waited for an answer. He got more than he bargained for. Norma could speak *plautdietsch* more fluently than any one in my family. She was immediately accepted, particularly when they discovered that she also sewed her own clothes, baked bread, and had been baptized by immersion. They didn’t ask her if she had been converted. Anyone who spoke Low German as well as she must have been born again.

Ours was a tri-lingual community. We spoke English in town and school, High German in church, and Low German at home. I don’t know whether our roosters crowed in Low German, but I think so. The wind blew in Low German. Shep, our dog, may not have barked in Low German, but he understood it better than English, just as our horses and cows did.

Those who spoke the High German though of *Plautdietsch* as an inferior language, a dialect. Slop Bucket Dutch, they called it. *Plautdietsch* does have a limited vocabulary, but it has all the elemental names: *Weit* (wheat), *Wolkj*, (clouds) *himmel* (sky), *raagen* (rain), *kjaj* (cows), *pead* (horses). Low German named our foods: *broat*, *tweehack*, *rollkoake*, *kielke*, (homemade macaroni, but macaroni doesn’t taste nearly as good as *kielke*), *ruehrei* (scrambled eggs), *pluma moos en shinka flesh*, *papanat*, *tjbroadn schoka*, *wreninkje*.

It has a pungent vocabulary: *oas*, *bussig*, *tualeide*, *pludat* for example, which lose much in translation, because the smell of carrion or rotting flesh isn’t as offensive as *oas*; anger is hardly the same as *bussig*, torture just won’t do for *tualeide* which is not quite as strong as torture but stronger than teasing, though it has much of the connotation of teasing, and chattering doesn’t quite capture *pludat*. And “He has a fart caught catawampus in his gut,” well, it simply won’t do for “*dee haft die poop djvage jeklampt*.” I need that expression which indicates that a person is out of sorts, but implies much more. Norma understands it as she understands that one who *pishdt me a us hee drinkt* is a vainglorious man.

She understands that Low German has no word for love. *Ekj sie die goot* — “I like you,” is the best we can do, or on more ardent occasions we can say “*ekj sie die sehe goot*” (“I like you very much”).

But even Low German was not enough to keep the rest of the world out of the empty places we lived in the middle of. We were soon cooking and making love in English.

I wonder if I didn’t think *Plautdietsch* when I plowed for my brother on the home place which he had rented after my parents retired to Fairview when I was nine years old. From that 1935 McCormick Deering I maneuvered around the stubble fields pulling a three bottom plow after wheat harvest, I could see most of my world.

Plowing meant getting up before the roosters crowed. It meant walking to the outhouse when it was so dark you needed both hands to find your ass. Smelling as you walked the pungent assertions of skunk, hearing the croak of the bullfrogs, the chirp of sparrows, the wind, smelling of distance, rising or falling, turning, or whispering, or whistling, or howling or moaning or blowing through the cottonwood trees — whatever wind does, but always blowing. One day it stopped and the chickens fell over.

It meant sandburs painfully puncturing bare feet particularly those lodged in the soft part of your foot just below the large toe and the one next to it, and standing on one foot — carefully — to pull them out. It meant squishing fresh warm chicken shit between bare toes which nothing today squishes like. The bed invited me to return, but I had to turn down the invitation. I had to plow stubble fields.

Once on the tractor in space that “seemed for once to find embodiment,”² nothing hemmed me in, only mystery and wonder, barbed wire fences, and section roads. There were no natural boundaries, only the indubitable fact of the prairie: space as far as eye could see which melted into more space beyond, the illimitable distances the eye could not grasp, and, what I could grasp, a lot of wheat stubble to be plowed.

I did not get dizzy spinning 836 miles an hour around the earth’s axis and orbiting around the sun 64,800 miles an hour, or feel particularly insignificant two million light years from the Andromeda galaxy. We cast a long shadow that tractor and I. I was just hot in the often 100 plus degree temperature, and bored, mostly, and dirty, for clouds of dust hovered over the plow and tractor, and when the wind, the ubiquitous wind, was behind you, the red dust sifted down the

back of your shirt into your neck, down the front and into the sides of your blue bib overalls into your belly button — and lower — until you were sure that you'd never get it off. Harvest, however, was worse. Then itchy wheat chaff stuck to your sweaty body. Dirt was definitely better.

Had I known that St. Hilary, a fourth century bishop and patron saint against snake bites, had said that “everything that seems empty is full of the angels of God,” I might have looked for angels flying with the gulls that followed the plow. I doubt that angels would be foolish enough to hover around the dusty tractor, especially if they had hay fever or asthma. And no good angels could fill the space between the swarms of gnats hovering over my head. But I didn't need angels. I had sizzortails whistling and wheeling and diving overhead, *kjriesles* (dust devils) dancing their way across the stubble fields.

In the late 1930s, a teen-ager, sitting on the hard hot iron seat of the tractor, I was too busy watching the three bottom-moldboard turning under four inches of brittle yellow stubble to look for angels. Had angels been there, they might have told me that every square foot of soil I turned over contained more than 1200 living creatures and up to two billion bacteria and many millions of fungi, protozoa and algae in a mere teaspoonful of soil, and surely they would have protected me from the 4500 horsepower per square acre the sun's energy equaled every day. A lot more than I realized was going on there, and no angel told me. I did not need angels to tell me to watch the brilliant sunsets or in the morning to take a deep breath of the freshly turned damp gumbo and wheat stubble.

The penetrating, metallic smell of gasoline and oil from the exhaust of the tractor was something else. Too much of it gave you a headache. The tractor didn't fart like horses whose pungent farts, smelling of alfalfa and natural odors of outdoors were more to my taste. Nor did the tractor offer the tactile pleasure of horses' snot, blown at you with a prolonged, vibrating snort, while you were on top of a load of oats bundles on the hayrack, and you knew it wasn't raining, even if it felt like it.

Plowing didn't take the concentration that harvest did when you had to be sure that the combine you were pulling was cutting a full swath. Plowing wasn't much work. Creeping along at four miles an hour, you just had to keep the right two wheels in the furrow and turn the corners at the ends of the field.

I could always look at the only pecan tree in our neighborhood on the southeast corner of our farm. My sister-in-law made memorable pecan pie from those hard shell pecans. I watched the sky for storms, never knowing if, or when, they would hit. I didn't stop plowing until I had to, so with no cab on the tractor I got drenched when it rained and paralyzed with awe and fear when lightning struck.

In this arid country rain was usually welcome, but not always, not in harvest. My father knew that not all rain was beneficial.

“You need to know about rain,” my father said, not knowing I was not going to be a farmer, like everyone else in our family had been for as long as he could remember

and would learn all I needed to know about rain from evening weather forecasts.

“Rain isn't just rain and, hard as it is to believe, drought here more common,

not just any rain is welcome. A pissing rain, lasting for several days, can like Noah's flood, drown out everything, especially wheat, in Spring, or a strong wind pouring

sheets of rain across the prairie can — and does — tangle wheat stalks in muddy ground making it almost impossible for header to pick up.

That's as bad as gully washers which cut up the land and leave gashes so deep you have to be very careful when you cross them with tractor and combine.

What gullies don't tear away dries so hard that topsoil blows all the way into Kansas where they don't need it as much as we do. Hardest to believe, but it's true, a thunder storm

roaring in at the end of an afternoon
 when it's been over one hundred degrees
 in the shade, burns wheat, steaming it
 on the stalk so it won't pay to combine.

Most important though, you have to learn,
 and it takes a long time to learn,
 and some never learn, that it doesn't
 do any good to know all this because there's

not a damn thing you can do about rain.
 You just have to be philosophical
 about rain and learn, the quicker the better,
 that rains start when they start

and stop when they stop; no sooner, no later."

What was true of rain was true of much of the natural world: there wasn't a damn thing you could do about drought, or dust storms when we could see almost as much of our farm over our heads as under our feet, or tornadoes when we hurried into the storm cellar with its musty smell of old potatoes and spider webs brushing across our faces, and dark, very dark, and the mice and tarantulas. They were, we said, acts of God.

Plowing, I could watch haughty crows with shiny ebony feathers flapping in the sky above and dream about going to college, being with people who discussed ideas, read books. My parents owned three books, five if you count the Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs: a dime novel, Horatio Alger's *Only an Irish Boy* and a German Bible. I discovered the two novels in the attic one rainy afternoon when I was in the second grade and read them at once. I never found out where those novels came from, but I wanted more stories.

Over all that tractor noise I think of
 the miles between me and the towns
 where the books are, not in book stores
 but in Carnegie libraries that all look alike.

Someone told me,
 but I found it hard to believe,

that there were huge libraries
with over a million books.
I'd have to plow through a lot
of barbed wire fences,
I thought, and many country roads
and paved city streets
to reach those libraries.

From that tractor I could clearly see Lone Peak at the north end
of the Gloss Mountains. The image of that peak is still clear in my
mind.

Unless a thunder shower
or a dust storm
concealed it for a while,
it was always there,
a lone sentinel on the northern edge
of a low rim of hills
we called Gloss Mountains.
Civilizations ten thousand years
ago knew it. Cherokees and Comanches
took their bearings from it.
It told those who made the run
into the Cherokee Strip
where they were and steadied them
as it later steadied me, the son of one
who made the run.

Yesterday driving highway 60
west from Enid I saw it again,
the Cimarron River ahead of me
behind which Orienta's wheat elevators
rose up in the middle of acres of wheat stubble
where land unfolds far into western sky
and then abruptly, without warning,
that gypsum butte rising out
of red earth into clear Oklahoma sky.

"I will lift up my eyes
unto the hills from whence

cometh my help," I said again
as I often did as a boy,
that butte telling me where I was
and who in all that primitive space.

Some of the long day I wondered what the land I was plowing
must have been like when my father broke the sod forty-five years
earlier.

Plowing east, sun setting
behind me, farmhouse receding
in the night, I wondered how it must have been
before father stretched barbed-wire fences
north, south, east and west
to keep cows and horses in
and separate pasture from wheat.
Out here when all was grass,
how could he have known
without fence or section roads
whether he was here or somewhere else
when that somewhere else was so much
like here, there seemed to be no difference?

I have gotten the cows from what is left
of that buffalo grass and looked back
to see if I could tell how I had gotten
where I was. People should leave footprints,
but I had left no footprints.

A bull snake slithered through the grass.
I stepped aside so's not to step on him,
then watched until he disappeared and wished
him well as he, I thought, wished me well.
He seemed to know where he was going
in this darkling world, which was more than I knew.
I thought to follow him to see if his
being there was merely chance.
I hesitated not really wanting to know
if another creature shared my anxious quest.

I looked again to see if he'd come back
for me or missed me, as I missed him,
afraid, and strangers in a world we hadn't made.
But seeing only falling night
turned back to find that house
surrounded now by darker night.

My father must have experienced even more impenetrable darkness in his dugout and then his sod house with only kerosine lamps. He must have dreaded sunset as much as I welcomed it.

From that tractor I could see the rambling, drafty house where I was born, its chicken house, granaries, sheds, a windmill with its stock tank into which we threw watermelons to cool, the yard full of sandburs, weeds, bailing wire, chicken shit, dog shit, cat shit, and in the pens cow shit, pig shit, horse shit, human shit and a lot of bull shit.

Yet it was and always will be the home place: Isabella, Oklahoma; party line telephone number 814-F4 (the only number other than our current one I remember); Peerless, district 166, the one-room schoolhouse, which I attended for the first three years, a half mile north, We sang Stephen Foster songs: "Old Black Joe" and "My Old Kentucky Home." We matched our spelling ability and our arithmetic skills against other near-by country schools. We prepared for weeks for the Christmas program.

Soon after sunset my brother waved me in or relieved me. That relief would come just in time to cast doubt on what I seriously considered: that it was quite possible that God *had* stopped the sun so Joshua would have enough daylight to beat the hell out of the Philistines. If it hadn't stood still then, it did, I was quite sure, stand still on plowing and harvesting afternoons.

II

Plowing west, I could see the water tower for Fairview where my parents had built a new home at 301 South Seventh and retired in 1929, just at the beginning of the Great Depression. Father made sure the lot was a corner lot, on the east side of the street so he could sit on the porch swing and watch the storms come in. The lot was large enough to have a chicken house and a fenced in pen to keep twelve chickens. We usually got ten eggs a day and once thirteen. Fairview

was a two-block-mainstreet town with a population of 2000 souls and a few heels. The town like the surrounding countryside was laid out on the grid, streets intersecting—as they should—at right angles, blocks all 100 yards long.

The north-south Main Street and highway 60 cut the town in half. East and west, Broadway cut the town in half. On Main Street were two grocery stores—10 cents for a loaf of bread—a hardware, Cornelsen Chevrolet, where my father traded for a new car every three years; Smith Drug store where Gracie Williams cheerfully made malts or poured fountain cherry cokes for Victor Becker and me after Thursday night choir practice, and on the north end of Main Street the post office. Twice a day after the doodle bug arrived from Wichita a hundred and fifty miles away, my father picked up our mail: the *Enid Morning News*, the *Zionstote* from Hillsboro, Kansas, *The Vorwerts* from Winnipeg, *The Fairview Republican*, the utility bills (\$4.04 for water and electricity), and an occasional letter from Kansas relatives. Junk mail was rare then.

On the way home he would stop at the creamery to sit on the church bench and talk for awhile with the other members of the spit and whittle club.

Other businesses were on Broadway: the abstractors's office where Dee Baker shot and killed hot-headed Louie Woodring who threatened Dee Baker because Louie thought Baker had overcharged him for an abstract; the White Rock cafe (twelve hamburgers for a dollar); *The Fairview Republican* for which I wrote news stories about high school events; barber shops (30 cents for a haircut) always crowded on Saturday nights; and, the show piece of the town, the five-story Cornelsen Hotel—the only building in town with an elevator—with a restaurant on the lower floor where the Rotary Club met.

In the next block east the City Building, built during the depression by one of the New Deal alphabet programs. It had city offices, an auditorium, and the city library where I read all the Rover Boy series, and tried to check out *Gulliver's Travels*, but the librarian wouldn't let me. I read it in the library when she wasn't looking and found out why when I read how Gulliver put out the fire in the Lilliputian castle.

Further east, box-like houses, most in need of repair, some with bermuda grass but most with weeds. The churches were here: Methodist, Christian, and Baptist. The Assembly of God—the Holy

Rollers—met on Main Street in what looked more like a warehouse than a church. We didn't have any church steeples so familiar in Minnesota. But then we didn't have any Lutherans or Catholics in my home town.

The grade school, where Miss Schuh, the fifth grade teacher taught me to define the parts of speech and diagram sentences, was close to the Methodist church. Two blocks north was the high school, where Miss Derryberry along with all the other high school English teachers in Oklahoma taught George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Shakespeare's "As You Like It," and Miss Underwood, dark hair, dancing brown eyes, only a little more than a year older than I, coached our debate team which was cheated out of the state championship because of some biased judges.

There I made straight A's except for a B in Geometry, stayed after school to talk with teachers, taught a Bible Study class, won first place in the state in original oratory and extemporaneous speaking contests, played the lead in the Senior play, "The American Passport," (You can imagine what we called it backstage) and was the class treasurer.

It was, by and large, an ordinary and typical Midwest small town where not much happened.

The only important thing that happened
in my home town was that it
and the county it was the county seat of
voted with Maine and Vermont for Landon in 1936.
We wanted Roosevelt to build a channel around
our county and float it up to New England
so we could secede with Maine and Vermont
with Landon as our president.

No one had invented the pen made of wheat stubble and the ink made of red gumbo necessary to write poetry or fiction about my home town.

No one has written a novel
about my home town.
Whatever would it have been about?
Nothing ever happened there
except the old boredom

and the long ritual of the mundane:
sitting on the porch swing rocked
by preaching and the revival hymns
the Baptists down the street
sang on hot summer evenings
while we read Mutt and Jeff
and the Katzenjammer kids.

It held no stories for us,
this town, where I grew up,
none anyone told, at least.
No one remembered, if they ever knew,
what stories of Comanches
and Cherokees roamed the land
we left red behind three bottom plow
sowing our meager crop of dry stories
about the price of wheat,
and the prospects of next year's crop,
planting dust storms which blew away
away the stories we should have told.

Our family was large; seven children. I had three sisters and three brothers, all married with children of their own when I was eighteen. My oldest sister was born in 1898 (She's still alive) twenty-two years before I was; my father was 53, my mother 45 when I was born. They gathered at 301 South Seventh quite often, but we didn't recall old times or tell stories. We discussed the prospects for the wheat crop, the price of wheat, the weather. Others in the community discussed the indications that Franklin Roosevelt was the antichrist, a kind of fiction. Didn't the symbol for the NRA match the sign of the anti-Christ described in the book of Revelation, suggesting along with other equally convincing examples that the second coming was near?

There were stories to tell. My father made the run into the Cherokee Strip, my mother walked 200 miles from Marion County, Kansas, to Oklahoma beside the covered wagon pulled by stupid and obstreperous oxen. My parents were the first couple to be married in the sod church; they lived in a sod house with dirt floors where their first three children were born. I tried to get father to tell his story, but he remained taciturn in three languages. He distrusted stories and was sure pliers and bailing wire were more useful than any fiction.

Because there were no stories, I read avidly in the City Library.
Perhaps because father told no stories,

I think about him often, wondering
about stories he did not tell
so I might tell for him
stories that might be true.

Like this one:

On their weathered lumber wagon,
its wooden wheels, steel-circled,
sending dry, sluggish reports
a half mile out from the Chisholm trail
Dan, my father, and two companions, creaked
their weary way south to homestead
a quarter section of land
in the Cherokee Strip.
It was rough going, and slow,
particularly at first, the only team
of horses father could afford
only partially broken. At Wichita
the horses, tractable now, strong,
willing to tackle any mudhole or gully,
had learned enough Low German to obey orders.
Each day seemed longer than the one before,
the first as long as buffalo grass they
rattled over, the pitch dark nights longer than the days.
Lonesome as long, loud coyotes' howl
at unanswering sky, their only company rattlesnakes,
south wind, September thunder storms, cold earth
at night, hot sun by day and shadows
of moving thunder heads under their feet,
they wondered if they should have waved
good bye to parents, brothers and sisters.
Tired, their eyes pulled into infinite prairie
rolling forever on and on over world's rim,
they watched whirlwinds carry dust and grass
across the prairie, watched scissortails
cut a path through evening sky,

watched red ants carry heavy loads,
watched prairie dogs watching them,
their sentinels alert to the men's slightest move,
scolding them for camping on their land.
Homesick, their stomachs rumbling
for something more than *reesche Tweeback*,
the traveling food their mothers
had sent with them, they sang
"*Was kann es schoenres geben.*"
It seemed out of place in this bleak land.
At Hitchcock on the southern border
of the Cherokee Strip, they waited impatiently
for crack of pistols
to take them into the promised land.
Once in the strip, men and horses sweating,
they struggled to pull the wagon
across Deep Creek's steep banks.
Father chose a quarter section he thought
the creek ran through, but wasn't sure.
No roads, fences or hedge rows told
which way north was. They would come later.
Father watched the sun sink into empty
reaches of western sky, watched buffalo
grass sweep up to meet horizon, wiping out
size and distance leaving him without shape or form
for his mind to cling to, the unknown
bearing in from many miles on all sides.
That night, father found the North Star.
The creek was his, drought-dry, but later, when
it rained, not often, providing badly needed water.
That night, his thoughts hovering between land and sky,
between Kansas and endless solitude
in the middle of which he had been set down,
shaken by loneliness with too many
names to find words for, surly south wind
blowing around wagon he would sleep under,
father fingered kernels of Turkey Red winter wheat,
seed from wheat his father had brought
from Russia to Kansas, seed he meant
to sew in red soil he camped on.

Unsettled, he looked to the North Star
 for something to hold on to.
 That was a long and lonely night.

If he did not know that his past told a story, I did.

Coming to Kansas from the Ukraine,
 age eleven, working from sunrise
 to sunset busting sod for others
 to help his parents build their

first sod house;
 homesteading a quarter section
 when the Cherokee Strip
 opened; buying in 1910 his first

model T and later a long line
 of chevrolets, did he know, sitting
 there at that window
 rocking and humming

“Die zeit ist kurtz
 O mensch sei weise”
 that his past told a story?
 If he did he never told me.

And I asked.

III

I could not see the Sued Hoffungsfeld Mennonite Brethren Church, the heart of my home, from the tractor. I did not have to see it. Its presence was ubiquitous.

We were an ethnic church and generally recognized other Mennonites by their common names: Friesen, Epp, Wiens, Harder, Becker, Unruh. All of our ancestors had been Mennonite since the seventeenth century and all had come from Russia to America in the 1870s. We had a shared history. We were not really all that different from other churches, except for our pacifism. But we thought we were different — and better.