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## Sinclair Lewis'

# MINNESOTA BOYHOOD

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IN HIS LAST YEAR alive, lonely and far from home in Italy, Sinclair Lewis would stare moodily through his window and say with deep emotion: "I love America. . . . I love it, but I don't like it."<sup>1</sup> That statement was typical of Lewis' whole life and literary career, for he spent his life trying to save America's soul—an act of love—while at the same time he mercilessly ridiculed its manners, morals, ethics, habits, and social codes. This strange and tragic duality in one of America's greatest writers and Minnesota's best-known sons perhaps had its roots in the place where Sinclair Lewis was born and spent his boyhood, Sauk Centre.

<sup>1</sup>Perry Miller, "The Incorruptible Sinclair Lewis," in *The Atlantic*, vol. 187, no. 4, p. 34 (April, 1951). Lewis died on January 10, 1951.

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Stolberg, "Sinclair Lewis," in *American Mercury*, 53:453 (October, 1941); Merton M. Jeffers, "The Significance of the Pioneer in the Novels of Sinclair Lewis," 4, 5. The latter item is an unpublished master's thesis submitted at Brown University in 1951.

<sup>3</sup>Lewis himself noted this fact in his remarkably perceptive article, "Minnesota: The Norse State," in *The Nation*, May 30, 1923, p. 624-627. This article proves that Lewis not only had a deep affection for his native state, but a keen understanding of its social, economic, and cultural aspects.

Sauk Centre was, in 1885, a perfect birthplace for Harry Sinclair Lewis because this raw prairie town with its population of twenty-five hundred was a representative sample of provincial America. There, when Lewis was born, the pioneer tradition was still vital enough to considerably influence him, although the last generation of pioneers was to grow old and disappear during Lewis' youth.<sup>2</sup> His own father, Dr. Emmet Lewis, was himself a type of pioneer, for he had left the Connecticut that had been home to several generations of his family in order to go to frontier Minnesota and follow the difficult life of a country doctor. There, also, a new generation of pioneers, Scandinavian and German immigrants, was arriving, at first resented by the earlier settlers. Yet, within one generation, the children of these immigrants were to become even more American than the original settlers.<sup>3</sup>

It was, then, in the environment of a prairie town in the era of its transition from a dynamic frontier settlement to a static, civilized community, that Sinclair Lewis grew up. He was named, so the legend goes, for Harry St. Clair of the traveling theatrical troupe known as the St. Clair

Stock Company. Its performance of "East Lynne" at Sauk Centre in December, 1884, so excited Dr. Lewis that he persuaded his wife to name the unborn baby after the company's founder and leading actor. The baby was born on February 7, 1885, and, as hoped, it was a boy. When the proud parents drove to the county seat to register the name of the infant, however, the registrar, who was hard of hearing, wrote down "Harry Sinclair," rather than "Harry St. Clair," and so the name remained for posterity.<sup>4</sup> Many years later Lewis was to fulfill in deed the legendary theatrical source of his name when, late in his career, he turned for a time to writing plays, acting, and directing.

LEWIS' CHILDHOOD was a crucial period for him and it was to affect permanently his character and his work. Although it is at present difficult to trace in exact detail the history of these early formative years, Lewis' own writings are a good source of material for the story of his boyhood. On one occasion he wrote: "I was born . . . in a genuine prairie town, ringed round with wheat fields broken by slew and oak-rimmed lakes, with the autumn flight of ducks from Canada as its most exotic feature. My boyhood was alarmingly normal, midwestern, American — my father the prosperous pioneer doctor whose diversions were hunting and travel; my school the public school, with no peculiarly inspired teachers; my sports, aside from huge amounts of totally unsystematized reading of everything from dime novels and Ned books and casual sentimental novels to translations of Homer, were the typical occupations of such a boy: swimming in the creek, hunting rabbits, playing pom-pom-pull-away under the arc light in the evening. There was not much work — a few evening chores, of the woodbox filling sort."<sup>5</sup>

This is all true so far as it goes, but there is another part of the story Lewis did not tell here, although he did on some other

occasions, and this is the deeper part. Lewis was a poor athlete and a poor student. The boys he admired, his older brother Claude and members of his "gang," considered him too little and frail to allow him to "hang around" with them, and, in the thoughtlessly cruel way of children, they would trick him by diverting his attention elsewhere while they vanished and left him all alone. In school Lewis found little compensation for his lack of popularity and athletic prowess, for his eighth-grade report card showed that he ranked seventeenth in a class of eighteen. Even his extracurricular attempts seemed to bring him no satisfaction. Once, for example, he started a debating society in school, only to have a teacher take charge of it and formalize it, ruining it so far as he was concerned. He had been thwarted even earlier than this in his attempts to express himself, for at the age of ten Lewis had begun a newspaper and tried unsuccessfully to get his classmates interested, yet he continued to write it regularly solely for his own pleasure after the others disdained to help.<sup>6</sup>

All this is not to conclude that Sinclair Lewis turned to writing because he was a failure in the two great activities of childhood, athletics and school, although this may be partially true. Lewis himself stated the matter perfectly: "While I was a mediocre sportsman . . . I was neither a cripple nor a Sensitive Soul. With this temptation to artistic revenge was probably combined the fact that my stepmother (since my father remarried when I was six,

<sup>4</sup> See Bennett Cerf's column, "Trade Winds," in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, November 3, 1945, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Charles C. Baldwin, *The Men Who Make Our Novels*, 225 (New York, 1919).

<sup>6</sup> Lewis related several amusing anecdotes of his boyhood, including incidents of this kind, in an article entitled "Breaking into Print," published in *The Colophon*, new series, 2:219-221 (Winter, 1937). See also David Dempsey's column, "In and Out of Books," in the *New York Times Book Review*, February 10, 1952; and Christian Gauss, "Sinclair Lewis vs. His Education," in the *Saturday Evening Post*, December 26, 1931, p. 21.



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### MAIN Street, Sauk Centre, about 1925

she was psychically my own mother) read to me more than was the village custom. And my father, though he never spoke of them, did have books in the house, and did respect them, as one who had been a school-teacher before he went to medical school." In any case, before he was eleven years old, Lewis decided to be a writer, and by the time he was fourteen had already sent a poem to *Harper's*.<sup>7</sup>

In the summer of 1899, while he was working for the local *Sauk Centre Herald* as typesetter, hand-press operator, and society reporter, the fourteen-year-old Lewis had the thrill of first breaking into print with his story of a Sauk Centre bridge party. This thrill irrevocably decided him in his literary ambitions, although he was fired at the end of the summer when he asked for a raise because, in the opinion of the editor, he was already getting more than

he was worth. Undaunted, Lewis returned to his journalistic career the next summer as man-of-all-trades on the other town paper, the *Avalanche*, for the huge salary of three dollars per week.<sup>8</sup>

BUT OF ALL his childhood experiences, Lewis himself credited his reading as having the greatest influence on his literary career. The evidence for this is to be found in one of his own reminiscences of his youth: "His boyhood was utterly commonplace . . . except for a love of reading not very usual in that raw new town. He reveled in Dickens, Walter Scott, Washington Irving. Doubtless this habit of reading led to his writing. He began as a wild romanticist." Other examples of Lewis' favorite authors at the time bear out this youthful romantic taste. "Howard Pyle's King Arthur stories, based on Malory" were another strong literary influence, and Thoreau's *Walden* was Lewis' boyhood vision of Mecca.<sup>9</sup>

This romanticism, born and nurtured in Lewis' early bookishness, was modified by reading some of the works of Hamlin Garland (whom Lewis later credited with

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, in *The Colophon*, 2:217, 218.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, in *The Colophon*, 2:218; Lewis, "I'm an Old Newspaperman Myself," in *The Cosmopolitan*, April, 1947, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, eds., *The Man from Main Street*, 49, 169 (New York, 1953); Clifton Fadiman, "Party of One," in *Holiday*, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 6 (March, 1953).

teaching him that American life could be portrayed frankly and realistically), but it still remained the strongest basic element in Lewis' early philosophy and writing. For Sinclair Lewis, romanticism was a vital and dynamic ingredient in his nature, compounded out of boyhood dreams and longings, reading, an already active rebellion against the standards of his environment, and a growing, somewhat bitter realization that there were in Minnesota no ruined castles or fair damsels to be rescued.<sup>10</sup>

This sensitive, gawky doctor's son early felt the lash of the town's opinion and the weight of its judgment. Although the children of Sauk Centre loved Lewis for his ability to narrate stories that never ended or grew dull, their elders regarded him with good-natured contempt and generally agreed that he "would never amount to very much." At home Lewis had to face the silent disapproval of the two men he held most in awe and could never impress, even at the height of his fame—his father and his brother Claude. The Lewis family tradition was medicine, and it seemed to Sinclair that his father and older brother never forgave him for not following in their footsteps and becoming a doctor. At any rate, Lewis felt that he had never made them admit that being a writer might be as important as being a doctor, for in 1947 he wrote: "For sixty years I have tried to impress my brother Claude. It has been my chief object and my chief failure."<sup>11</sup>

So far as Sauk Centre was concerned, Lewis' literary ambitions were just one more proof that he was "queer." The townspeople may not have realized it, but they started a resentment in Lewis against what he took to be their Philistinism—a resentment that he nursed, slow-burning, through the years, and a resentment which played a great part in the writing of *Main Street*. In fact, Lewis is said to have first started the manuscript which was later to become *Main Street* in the summer of 1905, while he was home on vacation from his sophomore year at Yale. He started to write the

book because his neighbors' snide remarks about him—the Eastern college boy on vacation in his Minnesota home town—led him to question seriously for the first time the American myth of good-neighborliness. To sum up, the scorn of the citizens of his birthplace, Sauk Centre, and the disapproval of his adored father and brother, were to leave an open wound in Lewis' sensibility which profoundly affected his career—a wound which neither fame nor success nor wealth could ever cure. Later, Lewis' feeling of not being appreciated as a writer was to extend to include all America and was to become one of his most important and recurrent literary themes.<sup>12</sup>

THUS SINCLAIR LEWIS grew up, known to the town not only for his literary notions, but also for other, more serious heresies. At an early age he earned the personal attention of the Congregationalist pastor by questioning the story of Jonah and the whale. His Sunday-school teacher also found Lewis to be a rather alarmingly iconoclastic pupil, very reluctant to absorb doctrines and opinions which had never been challenged before. About the time Lewis was a high-school senior he "was being tutored in Greek by an Episcopalian parson who had read Plato, chewed tobacco, had been a chaplain in the Confederate army, and was known to have preached evolution." What effect this relationship had on Lewis is a matter for speculation, but the

<sup>10</sup> Fadiman, in *Holiday*, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 6; Lewis' Nobel Prize address. For the complete text of the latter, see the *New York Times*, December 13, 1930.

<sup>11</sup> See a letter of Hazel Palmer Lynam, who as a child knew Lewis, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 14, 1934, p. 628; Lewis, in *The Cosmopolitan*, April, 1947, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Maule and Cane, eds., *The Man from Main Street*, 214. For further discussion of the influence of Lewis' childhood on his career, see Miller in *The Atlantic*, vol. 87, no. 4, p. 30-34; and Ramon Guthrie, "The 'Labor Novel' that Sinclair Lewis Never Wrote," in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, February 10, 1952. The latter writer is especially good on the influence of Dr. Lewis on his son's career.

prototype of the "village atheist" or non-conformist which appears all through Lewis' work in such characters as Miles Bjornstam in *Main Street*, probably owes more than a little to this long-forgotten freethinker. Lewis also wanted to study French, but in Sauk Centre "this was going a bit too far."<sup>13</sup>

Despite his literary inclinations, Lewis admired the business and professional men in Sauk Centre. One of his boyhood visions was that of a life of success, comfort, and local prestige similar to that enjoyed by the town banker and even by his own father, but these Babbitt-like dreams were eventually submerged by other, more vivid dreams of writing, learning, and culture. One of Lewis' earliest, most persistent ambitions was his desire to be a scholar and historian, especially an Egyptologist. Now, it had been decided for Lewis that he was to become a teacher and go to the state university, as any ordinary young man

with a bookish inclination would have done. But Lewis was no ordinary bookish young man. He had been reading Charles Flandrau's *Harvard Episodes* and had been inflamed with the idea of going to Harvard, but Dr. Lewis insisted on Yale because he had originally come from the vicinity of New Haven, and so Yale was finally chosen.<sup>14</sup>

So, for the first time, Sinclair Lewis was to leave home. After six months at Oberlin Academy in Ohio to qualify him for the Yale entrance examination in Greek, Lewis made the long trip east to Yale and New Haven, in September, 1903, at the age of eighteen. He left Sauk Centre deeply marked by his boyhood there, for it had shaped him into a young prairie romantic, an idealist, already something of an individualist and a rebel, and already hopelessly intoxicated by that most potent of brews—printer's ink. For the rest of his life he was only to return to Sauk Centre on brief visits, yet he loved his birthplace enough to want his ashes interred there near those of his family and neighbors, in the Minnesota earth from which he sprang, in the little town where he was born.

<sup>13</sup> David Karsner, *Sixteen Authors to One*, 68, 69 (New York, 1928).

<sup>14</sup> W. E. Woodward, "The World and Sauk Center," in *The New Yorker*, January 27, 1934, p. 25; Karsner, *Sixteen Authors*, 70; Gauss, in *Saturday Evening Post*, December 26, 1931, p. 54.

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THE home of  
the Lewis family  
in Sauk Centre





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