

MR. FLANAGAN, who is professor of American literature in the University of Illinois, here brings to a total of fifteen his major contributions to this magazine. The article's appearance appropriately coincides with the seventy-fifth anniversary of Lewis' birth and the fortieth of the publication of *Main Street*.

The MINNESOTA Backgrounds of SINCLAIR LEWIS' Fiction

JOHN T. FLANAGAN

SINCLAIR LEWIS was once questioned about the autobiographical elements in *Main Street* by a friend whose apartment he was temporarily sharing. The novelist remarked to Charles Breasted that Dr. Will Kennicott, the appealing country physician in his first best seller, was a portrait of his father; and he admitted that Carol, the doctor's wife, was in many respects indistinguishable from himself. Both "Red" Lewis and Carol Kennicott were always groping for something beyond attainment, always dissatisfied, always restless, and although both were frequently scornful of their immediate surroundings they nevertheless lacked any clear vision of what could or should be done. And then Lewis revealingly added this comment about *Main Street*: "I shall never shed the little, indelible 'Sauk-Centricities' that enabled me to write it."¹

One is tempted to remark that Lewis not only preserved these "Sauk-Centricities" in his later fiction, but that because of them

his picture of Gopher Prairie and Minnesota and the entire Middle West became both durable and to a large extent accurate. A satirist is of course prone to exaggeration. Over-emphasis and distortion are his stock in trade. But despite this tilting of the balance, his understanding of places and events and people must be reliable, otherwise he risks losing touch with reality completely. Lewis was born in Minnesota, he spent the first seventeen years of his life in the state, and he returned on frequent visits, which sometimes involved extensive stays in Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Duluth. A number of his early short stories and six of his twenty-two novels are localized wholly or in part in Minnesota. Claims in this connection might even be made for *Babbitt* and *Elmer Gantry*, although Lewis places the action for each in the fictional town of Zenith in the equally fictional state of Winemac.² In other words, Minnesota was the birthplace, for a considerable time the residence, and by his own request the burial spot of Sinclair Lewis.³ It was also in actuality or by imaginative projection the physical habitat of much of his fiction. Lewis' "Sauk-Centricities" were real, and even in any aesthetic evaluation of his work they are important.

¹ Charles Breasted, "The 'Sauk-Centricities' of Sinclair Lewis," in *Saturday Review*, August 14, 1954, p. 33.

² See *Elmer Gantry*, 81 (New York, 1927).

³ Lewis died in Rome. His ashes were buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Sauk Centre, January 20, 1951.



SINCLAIR Lewis in 1933

In a reminiscent article which he contributed to *The O-sa-ge*, the annual of the Sauk Centre Senior High School, Lewis spoke nostalgically of his Sauk Centre days, of the friendliness of the people, and of the indelible memories of boyhood.⁴ He still remembered vividly fishing and rafting on Sauk Lake, tramping the fields and woods on October afternoons, sliding down Hoboken Hill which, to the young son of Dr. E. J. Lewis, symbolized the West. Yet twenty-nine years had elapsed since his departure for an Eastern college, and for most of that period he had been out of touch with the town. There were visits, of course, prompted partly by filial devotion.

In the spring of 1916 Lewis took his wife (born Grace Hegger) to Sauk Centre to meet his family. One can infer from Mrs. Lewis' later account of the visit that both she and her husband felt that the experience was somewhat trying.⁵ They found the rigid mealtime routine irksome, the bridal dinner party with its formal decorations rather ludicrous, and both relatives and friends impressed by Lewis' money-making ability through writing but hardly

sympathetic with his vocation. Mrs. Lewis' portrait of Lewis' stepmother sounds like an adumbration of Carol Kennicott who, in 1916 of course, had not yet been conceived. The doctor's second wife was prominent in civic affairs, had launched an antitify campaign in the effort to improve sanitation in the local stores, and was president of the Gradatim Club, a local organization dedicated to current events. Moreover, she had been a pioneer in establishing rest rooms for farm women when they came to Sauk Centre to shop, an activity which not only anticipates one of Carol Kennicott's great reforms, but recalls a familiar Hamlin Garland short story.⁶

During this first extensive visit to Sauk Centre, Lewis tried hard to re-establish his working habits and engaged an empty room over Rowe's Hardware Store where he could type his three to five thousand words daily.⁷ At the moment he was working on *The Job*, an early novel about a career woman which had nothing to do with the Middle West. But it is not hard to imagine that he was storing away material he would eventually use in the novel he first thought of as "The Village Virus" but which appeared in 1920 as *Main Street*. Lewis as always was restless. After a short time in Sauk Centre, he and his wife visited Dr. Claude Lewis in St. Cloud and then began a four-months hegira from Duluth to San Francisco in a newly purchased Ford. Part of this journey, incidentally, was to be reflected in the novel *Free Air*.⁸

⁴ "The Long Arm of the Small Town," in *The O-sa-ge*, 1:83 (Sauk Centre, 1931).

⁵ Grace Hegger Lewis, *With Love from Gracie: Sinclair Lewis, 1912-1925*, 88-108 (New York, 1955).

⁶ "A Day's Pleasure," in *Main Traveled Roads* (New York, 1903), is supposedly based on a visit to Worthington.

⁷ Grace H. Lewis, *With Love from Gracie*, 95.

⁸ The copy of *Free Air* (New York, 1919) in the special Lewis collection in the University of Minnesota Library is inscribed by the author as follows: "Written in a bare room behind a photographer's studio in Mankato, Minn. to make it possible to write 'Main Street.'" Mankato, incidentally, figures in *It Can't Happen Here*, 449 (New York, 1935).

In the next dozen years Lewis was frequently in Minnesota and lived for short periods in different places. The year 1917 saw him residing in St. Paul, in a lemon-colored brick house on Summit Avenue, and in Minneapolis. During this Minnesota sojourn, Lewis also visited the Cass Lake lumber camps and slept in a bunkhouse.⁹ Two years later he was back in Minneapolis again hard at work on *Main Street*; the novel was continued during a summer spent in Mankato and was finished in Washington, where Lewis' stay was financed in part by a loan from his father. In 1926 Charles Breasted met Lewis at a house party on an island in Rainy Lake, where the novelist was somewhat gloomy because of the imminent death of his father and because he felt that Dr. Lewis had always resented *Main Street*. Lewis commented: "He can't comprehend the book, much less grasp that it's the greatest tribute I knew how to pay him."¹⁰

The decade of the 1940s saw Lewis spending part of his time in Minnesota and on one occasion deciding to make Duluth his permanent residence. Lewis' Minnesota diary is clear testimony that he felt a very strong pull toward the state, but that his innate restlessness would never permit him to sink deep roots.¹¹ While feverishly working on a particular project he could adjust himself to almost any locale and could enjoy the immediate environment; the novel completed, he sought other stimulation and the horizon beckoned.

In the fall quarter of 1942 he taught a

⁹ Grace H. Lewis, *With Love from Gracie*, 115.

¹⁰ Breasted, in *Saturday Review*, August 14, 1954, p. 33.

¹¹ Mark Schorer, ed., Sinclair Lewis, "A Minnesota Diary," in *Esquire*, 50:160-162 (October, 1958).

¹² *Esquire*, 50:161.

¹³ William J. McNally, in *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 20, 1943.

¹⁴ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 30, 1945; *Esquire*, 50:162. In January, 1946, Frederick Manfred, his wife, and the young novelist Ann Chidester visited Lewis by invitation at his Duluth home. See Manfred's "Sinclair Lewis: A Portrait," in *American Scholar*, 23:162-184 (Spring, 1954).

writing class at the University of Minnesota and apparently liked his contact with students and the university atmosphere. The preceding spring he had rented a house at Lake Minnetonka and in the fall of that year he lived in a house on Mount Curve Avenue in Minneapolis. But if he relished the society of the city, his impression of the downtown area was hardly favorable. He wrote on April 8, 1942: "Minneapolis is so ugly. Parking lots like scabs. Most buildings are narrow, drab, dirty, flimsy, irregular—in relationship to one another—a set of bad teeth."¹² The city actually impressed him as an overgrown Gopher Prairie, without either planning or style. On the contrary, Lewis found the Minnesota rural landscape highly attractive and was particularly pleased by the rocky, hilly farms and the wooded banks of the St. Croix Valley near Marine. At this time the novelist was working on *Gideon Planish*, which one writer termed Lewis' "Made in Minneapolis" novel, despite the curious fact that it has few references to Minnesota.¹³ The heroine, however, Peony Planish, hails appropriately enough from Faribault.

It was in 1945 that Lewis decided he had had enough of roaming the world and determined finally to settle down in Minnesota; the city he chose for his residence was Duluth. He bought the enormous house of Dr. E. E. Webber at 2601 East Second Street and there installed his personal possessions and his library of some thirty-five hundred volumes. Apparently he also plunged immediately into the composition of *Cass Timberlane*. But the Duluth winter irritated him, and on March 11, 1946, he observed that the ice was too sullen to melt. "Superior Street now seems meager, ill-constructed and -assorted; a small town—the First National Bank's proud building just a huddle of assorted brick boxes." The novel completed and the long winter over, Lewis' customary nomadism reasserted itself; he sold his house "because it is time to wander again" and left by car for New York on March 21, 1946.¹⁴ This decision

spelled the end to any close connection with Minnesota. He returned to the state for short visits and worked in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1947 doing research for *The God-Seeker*. But there was no further idea of permanence.

Geographically Minnesota is a big state, and even so indefatigable a traveler as Lewis did not see all of it. Indeed certain areas, such as the Red River Valley, the Pipestone region, and even the Arrowhead country seemed never to strike his fancy. On the other hand, he became rapturous about sections which were strongly photogenic, and if he discovered some of them too late to utilize them in his fiction he did not hesitate to recommend them to the public. On one occasion he listed seven areas which he had found scenically memorable.¹⁵ First came the St. Croix Valley, notably the view which the automobile traveler has as he begins to descend the hill on Highway No. 8 leading into Taylors Falls. Second was the Leaf Mountains section of Otter

Tail County, with the spectacular view of surrounding waters and woods from the top of Inspiration Peak. Third he cited most of Fillmore and Houston counties, chiefly the region adjacent to Chatfield, Lanesboro, and Preston. Next Lewis was impressed by the Mississippi River bluffs extending from Red Wing to La Crescent, a sight which evoked the familiar comparison to the Hudson Valley. Finally he mentioned two lakes for their special charms, Minnetonka and Minnewaska, and he added the area around New London in Kandiyohi County. When Lewis made this list in 1942 he had not yet seen the North Shore of Lake Superior. Presumably his sojourn in Duluth familiarized him at least in part with the littoral of the largest American lake.

BY BIRTH, by occasional residence, and by intermittent travel, then, Sinclair Lewis

¹⁵ "Red" Lewis Discovers Minnesota," in *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 2, 1942. A reprint appears in the *Conservation Volunteer*, 4:21 (August, 1942).

AMONG scenes favored by Lewis was this view of the St. Croix Valley near Taylors Falls



knew Minnesota. The interesting question is how freely and fully did he convert this knowledge into his fiction. Are specific people and places recognizable, are trends of settlement and economic and industrial development reflected, are specific historical events introduced? Lewis of course was a writer of fiction with the novelist's mandate to disguise and alter his material. Moreover, he wrote only one historical novel, *The God-Seeker*, and was thus little inclined to preserve the facts of history for their own sake. Yet there is ample evidence that his Minnesota heritage played a large part in his literary work.

It would be difficult and probably futile to attempt to establish personal models for many of Lewis' characters. The identity of Dr. E. J. Lewis and Dr. Will Kennicott is probably most complete. There is a good deal of Lewis in Carol Kennicott and probably much also in Carl Ericson, the barnstorming aviator of the early *Trail of the Hawk*. Undoubtedly Lewis knew radicals and liberals like Bone Stillman, Miles Bjornstam, and Seneca Doane;¹⁶ scientists like Max Gottlieb of *Arrowsmith*; sincere editors like Doremus Jessup of *It Can't Happen Here*. It has been contended that certain lineaments of Grace Hegger Lewis appear in Fran Dodsworth. Undoubtedly the Sharon Falconer of *Elmer Gantry* owes something to Aimee Semple McPherson, at that time notorious, and the radio priest and demagogic politician of *It Can't Happen Here* to Father Coughlin and Huey Long. But George F. Babbitt is certainly a composite character (even his patronymic was established only after Lewis had rejected

such names as Jefferson Fitch, Hornby, and G. T. Pumphrey) in whom many details and aspects were fused. To his great gifts of observation and mimicry, Lewis also added enormous inventive powers and an almost interminable ability to reproduce conversation.¹⁷ Under these circumstances it is unlikely that he would have been content merely to photograph individuals. When he does introduce historical characters like Father Augustin Ravoux, Chaplain Ezekiel G. Gear, William D. Phillips, and Joseph R. Brown in *The God-Seeker*, they are stiff and puppet-like, and are meant to give a sense of milieu which unfortunately proves specious.

With the physical background, the situation is somewhat different. It is true that Minnesota's larger cities—Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth—are mentioned occasionally. The smaller towns, however, rarely appear under their own names. Instead Lewis invented place names liberally and used them in several stories—hamlets like Schoenstrom, New Kotka, Curlew, Plato, and the famous village of Gopher Prairie, somewhat larger communities like Vernon and Wakamin and St. Sebastian, the town of North-ernapolis, and finally Grand Republic, the scene of both *Cass Timberlane* and *Kingsblood Royal*. Indeed, Sinclair Lewis might well have drawn a map comparable to William Faulkner's chart of Yoknapatawpha County on which he indicated the inter-connecting actions of his stories and identified the communities.

In the second chapter of *Free Air* the reader is mired in gumbo with the heroine on "this oceanically moist edge of a cornfield, between Schoenstrom and Gopher Prairie, Minnesota," some sixty miles north of Minneapolis. Fortunately Milt Daggett, a garage mechanic from Schoenstrom, comes along to extricate both heroine and car. In subsequent chapters Daggett becomes the romantic squire who follows Claire Boltwood from Minnesota to Seattle and is duly rewarded for his fidelity. In the first fifty pages of the novel, however, Lewis refers

¹⁶ Bone Stillman is the eccentric atheist of *The Trail of the Hawk* (New York, 1915); Miles Bjornstam is the village radical and indispensable town handyman of *Main Street* (New York, 1920); and Seneca Doane is the liberal lawyer of *Babbitt* (New York, 1922).

¹⁷ As a young writer, Lewis actually sold some twenty-three plots to Jack London. See Franklin Walker, "Jack London's Use of Sinclair Lewis Plots," in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 17: 59-74 (November, 1953).

not only to Schoenstrom and Gopher Prairie, but also to Joralemon and Wakamin, towns which were to become familiar to readers of his later stories. Moreover, he sketches two of these communities in the acid manner of *Main Street*.

Schoenstrom, for example, consisted of a brick general store, a frame hotel, a farm machinery agency, "the Old Home Pool-room and Restaurant, which is of old logs concealed by a frame sheathing," and Daggett's Red Trail Garage, the agency for tires, Teal cars, sewing machines, and binders, as well as the weekly office of the veterinarian. Daggett, incidentally, was the son of a New England-born doctor. Gopher Prairie, on the other hand, as Lewis conceived it in the fourth chapter of *Free Air*, had five thousand people, a commercial club, and an infinitely better band than Joralemon, its neighbor. The lobby of the hotel to which Claire Boltwood and her father went was notable for its poison-green walls, brass cuspidors, and insurance calendars; drummers lounged in the ragged chairs; and of the two baths available to hotel guests one was reserved and the other out of order. Another local color touch in this novel of 1919 was the slangy, talkative waitress who was more interested in learning about her customers than in serving them food. This same dismal hotel was probably referred to by Lewis in an earlier short story, "A Woman by Candlelight," in which the protagonist, a wholesale groceries salesman, proceeded from St. Sebastian via Joralemon to Gopher Prairie in a blizzard. "The rows of two-story brick stores running off into straggling frame houses, which made up Gopher Prairie, were covered with snow like a counter of goods with a linen cover smoothly drawn across them."¹⁸

Gopher Prairie, of course, receives its fullest exposition in *Main Street*, where it assumes some of the dimensions and color of the actual Sauk Centre but, more importantly, is universalized into the typical small town of the second decade of the twentieth century—shabby, dull, provin-

cial, and strangely complacent. The portrait is too familiar to repeat here. One should remember only that even on the physical level there are two Gopher Prairies, the tawdry, provincial community that was revealed to the disgusted eyes of Carol Kennicott fresh from college and the Twin Cities, and the glittering, inviting city that impressed Bea Sorenson, newly arrived from Scandia Crossing, population sixty-seven.

In 1924, at the request of the editor of *The Nation*, Lewis paid a return visit to Gopher Prairie and "interviewed" Dr. Will Kennicott. He found the Thanatopsis Club still operating and the materialism of the community focused in the general discussion of automobiles and golf. But he emphasized that in the ten-year interval since he had last observed the prairie community vast changes had occurred; the streets had been paved, the lawns seemed prettier and neater, old houses had been rejuvenated, and there was some new construction. When the two men stopped to talk "on the edge of Gopher Prairie—this prairie village lost in immensities of wheat and naïvetés, this place of Swede farmers and Seventh Day Adventists and sleeve-garters," Dr. Kennicott rebuked his creator for his radicalism and his scorn of material success. The physician also announced his intention to support Calvin Coolidge for the presidency in the coming election.¹⁹

Lewis' town of Joralemon receives passing reference in several stories. In "The Kidnaped Memorial," a Civil War veteran goes from Wakamin to recruit enough ex-soldiers to stage a Memorial Day parade. And it is from Joralemon that Young Man Axelbrod, whose name gives the title to one of Lewis' best short stories, goes to Yale at the age of sixty-four to get an education. Axelbrod learns soon enough that

¹⁸ *Saturday Evening Post*, July 28, 1917, p. 12.

¹⁹ "Main Street's Been Paved," in *The Nation*, 119:255-260 (September 10, 1924). The article is reprinted in Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, eds., *The Man from Main Street*, 310-327 (New York, 1953).

MAIN Street
of Sauk Centre
in the 1920s



age and youth do not mix well; indeed he is somewhat pathetic as a serious college student. But he conducts himself with dignity, has one or two stimulating experiences, and is content to return to his prairie community without a degree.²⁰

Joralemon is also the home of Carl Ericson, a young boy who after leaving high school attends near-by Plato College. Carl is interested in machinery more than in academic subjects, but his devotion to a certain liberal instructor permits Lewis to picture a fresh-water college with corrosive scorn. In due time Carl grows interested in aviation and, nicknamed "Hawk" Ericson, becomes famous as a stunt and exhibition flier in the novel called *The Trail of the Hawk*. The protagonist's subsequent travels take him far from Minnesota, but Lewis devotes the whole of Part I—twelve chapters—to the Joralemon-Plato scenes.

In 1935 Lewis to a large extent retold the story of *Main Street* in a magazine tale entitled "Harri."²¹ The setting is New Kotka, "a clean town, with birch trees and a few Norway pines and an unusually large water tower, in Otter Tail County, Minnesota, half an hour's drive from Fergus Falls." New Kotka, a dairy center, has seventeen hundred people. Harri, really Mrs. Harriet Bra-

ham, arrives with her two children to operate the Old Barne Souvenir and Booke Shoppe; lacking both experience and capital, she nevertheless has unlimited assurance. Indeed, although she resembles Carol Kennicott in her energy, her projects, and her reforming instincts, she is really a sinister opportunist who preys on both her suitors and her benefactors. Her base of operations eventually shifts to the Twin Cities, but not before Lewis has had ample opportunity to sketch the regional landscape and to praise the Leaf Mountains and Inspiration Peak. Of his later tales this is perhaps the richest in its details of the Minnesota locale.

THE TOWN of Vernon, the exact location of which is uncertain, is the scene of several Lewis narratives. Most of the action of "The Willow Walk," a curious mystery story in which a bank teller, Jasper Holt, plays a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde role, takes place there. Holt is so successful in his self-disguise that he is never apprehended as a defaulter; on the other hand, he loses the money he steals and has to resort to day labor to support himself. Palmer McGee, in "The Cat of the Stars," lives in the University Club of Vernon and is an assistant to the president of the M. & D. R. R., which Lewis elsewhere identifies as the Minneapolis and Dakota Railroad. The action of the story, however, has little to do with Vernon.²² In "Habeas Corpus" the protagonist is

²⁰ *Selected Short Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, 281–298, 321–337 (New York, 1935).

²¹ *Good Housekeeping*, August, 1935, p. 19, 64–75; September, 1935, p. 44, 166–181.

²² *Selected Short Stories*, 99–140, 143–158.

Leo Gurazov, a Bulgarian radical who owns a tobacco store in Vernon. The plot concerns his strained efforts to get himself deported so that he can join a homeland revolution, but they result only in landing him at Ellis Island for an indeterminate stay.²³

A more impressive story is "Things," a satiric account of social climbing and its perils. Lyman Duke is a Vernon real-estate operator who has had extensive interests in the woodland north of Grand Marais and who makes a comfortable fortune. His wife and daughter insist that he lead a social life commensurate to his financial standing. With misgivings, Duke builds an elaborate house in Vernon, fills it with expensive and fragile treasures, including Japanese ceramics, engages an army of servants, and puts himself at the complete mercy of the "things" that he has worked so hard to acquire. When he sees that the artificial life he is forced to lead has begun to warp his personality and bring unhappiness to his daughter, he deliberately sets fire to the house and—a later Silas Lapham by conviction, not by accident—reverts to a simpler existence.²⁴

"A Matter of Business" and "The Shadowy Glass" also have Vernon as their locale.²⁵ In the first tale James Candee, proprietor of the Novelty Stationery Shop, is torn between his normal desire to make money and his ambition to raise the aesthetic tastes of his community. He sells writing paper, cards, book ends, and gifts, but when he finds in the outskirts of Vernon a truly creative craftsman who has a flair for making original dolls, he invests in the Papa Jumas dolls. They are angular and gauche, but authentically different; despite the offer of a large manufacturer to make him sole agent of a conventional line of fluffy, commercial products, Candee continues to back the Papa Jumas line. "The Shadowy Glass" has somewhat more local color, and here Vernon is identified, inconsistently with other references, as being in the state of North Iosota. This is the story of Lelia Cor-

valan, who, after being reared in a convent, falls in love with Otis Corvalan and sees only too late that he is both deceitful and irresponsible. Life with Otis proves less romantic than she had envisaged it at first. Eventually, when he has been dismissed from several positions, Lelia decides to take up nursing and, abetted by her mother-in-law, she leaves to go into training in Chicago.

Details in several of these stories suggest that Lewis had a kind of fusion of Minneapolis and St. Paul in mind as a model for his fictional Vernon. It is neither the state capital nor a flour-milling center, but it is the hub of a railroad network, it has steel mills and glass industries, and it is the site of a university. Once the terminus of the Red River carts, it was settled about 1840 by emigrants from the East. "Nothing is very old in the Middle-Western city of Vernon," Lewis writes in "Habeas Corpus," but "in Mississippi Street remain the gloomy stone buildings erected by the early fur traders and a mysterious ancientness clings to the dark irregular way."²⁶ Vernon boasts of an Iosota Club and a Garrick Stock Company, and fashionable people live along its Boulevard of the Lakes. "Vernon society goes to Palm Beach and New York; it is in wholesaling, the professions, or the railroad; it attends either Saint Simeon's P.E. Church or Pilgrim Congregational; and it frowns upon vulgarity, labor unions, and all art except polite portrait painting."²⁷ To the north of Vernon, incidentally, an iron range richer than what Lewis calls the Mesaba has been discovered.

²³ *Saturday Evening Post*, January 24, 1920, p. 10, 112, 114, 118, 121.

²⁴ *Selected Short Stories*, 235–277.

²⁵ *Harper's Magazine*, 142:419–431 (March, 1921); *Saturday Evening Post*, June 22, 1918, p. 5–7, 81. "A Matter of Business" appears also in a recent treasury of material from *Harper's*, edited by Horace Knowles and published under the title *Gentlemen, Scholars and Scoundrels*, 460–477 (New York, 1959). It supposedly represents the best contributions to *Harper's* from 1850 to the present.

²⁶ *Saturday Evening Post*, January 24, 1920, p. 10.

²⁷ *Saturday Evening Post*, June 22, 1918, p. 5.

Finally, there are Northernapolis and Grand Republic. Though details are vague, it is possible that Duluth was Lewis' archetype here. Northernapolis is the scene of "The Ghost Patrol," the rather unconvincing story of an old policeman who refused to stay in retirement but would walk his nocturnal beat, trying doors and watching for pranks, until the authorities finally persuaded him to remain in a county home.²⁸ Northernapolis is the locale also of "Hobohemia" and "Joy-Joy," companion stories published in 1917 which deal with the courtship of Elizabeth Robinson by Dennis Brown.²⁹ Elizabeth, who prefers to be called Ysetta, has artistic ambitions; she wishes to write, to dance, or at least to lead a Bohemian existence. She leaves Northernapolis for the greater opportunities of New York. Dennis Brown, a Northernapolis lumber magnate, follows her and by a succession of remarkable exploits convinces her of his own artistic ability and persuades her to return to Northernapolis as his wife. As the mistress of a luxurious house in the fashionable suburb of Hydrangea Park, Elizabeth is about to sink into suburban opulence when the neighborhood is disrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Henrietta Flint. Mrs. Flint is writing a novel, to be called "Joy-Joy," in which she will preach her doctrine of the need for sunshine, happiness, and gaiety in life and for their symbolic realization in dancing. Elizabeth's original ambitions are dangerously reawakened by Mrs. Flint, but again her husband is more than equal to the emergency and soon brings his wife back to an even keel. Mrs. Flint, it might be remarked, has some of the reform impulses and the aesthetic insistence that were later to characterize Carol Kennicott and Harri.

With the exception of Gopher Prairie,

Grand Republic is the most fully pictured of Lewis' fictional communities presumably located in Minnesota. In *Cass Timberlane* it is described as a city of eighty-five thousand people. In *Kingsblood Royal*, the action of which postdates World War II, the population has grown to ninety thousand. Grand Republic is situated eighty miles north of Minneapolis and seventy-odd from Duluth, though the exact direction is not stated. "It is large enough to have a Renoir, a school-system scandal, several millionaires, and a slum." The city lies in Radisson County at the confluence of the Big Eagle and Sorshay rivers; the combined stream then flows west to the Mississippi. Lewis is careful to keep Grand Republic out of proximity to Lake Superior so that there can be no easy confusion with Duluth. But his account of its growth has a familiar ring: "Grand Republic grew rich two generations ago through the uncouth robbery of forests, iron mines, and soil for wheat."³⁰

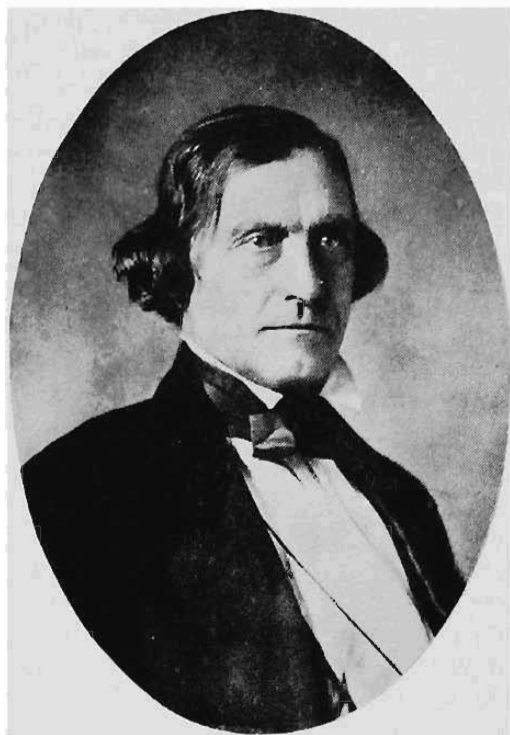
Grand Republic has preferred residential districts, such as Ottawa Heights and Sylvan Park, the latter being somewhat less pretentious than the former.³¹ Streets bear the names of Flandrau, Beltrami, Schoolcraft, and there is even a Joseph Renshaw Brown Way. The Radisson County Courthouse, comic in its hideous melange of architectural styles, might well serve as Lewis' final comment on the ugliness of many of the older public buildings in Minnesota. Built in 1885, "It was of a rich red raspberry brick trimmed with limestone, and it displayed a round tower, an octagonal tower, a minaret, a massive entrance with a portcullis, two lofty flying balconies of iron, colored-glass windows with tablets or stone petals in the niches above them, a green and yellow mosaic roof with scarlet edging, and the breathless ornamental stairway from the street up to the main entrance without which no American public building would be altogether legal." Downtown Grand Republic has other large buildings too, notably the twelve-story Blue Ox National Bank and "the Pantheon of the Duluth & Twin

²⁸ *Selected Short Stories*, 215-231.

²⁹ *Saturday Evening Post*, April 7, 1917, p. 3-6, 121, 125, 129, 133; October 20, 1917, p. 63, 67, 70, 73, 76.

³⁰ *Cass Timberlane*, 10 (New York, 1945).

³¹ *Kingsblood Royal*, 9 (New York, 1947).



JOE Brown, a character in *The God-Seeker*

Cities Railroad Station.”³² But across the tracks and along the Sorshay River are decrepit shacks and incipient slums which remind the observer of the frontier village that was to be seen on the same site seventy-five years earlier.

In *Cass Timberlane* the reader is kept constantly aware of the Grand Republic background; buildings and streets continually impinge upon the consciousness, and the social stratification is tied in with the economic development. In *Kingsblood Royal*, on the other hand, the real themes of the novel—race prejudice and the ostracism of Negroes—acquire inflated importance, and interest in the physical scene is supplanted by Lewis’ strident exposition of the dangers of bigotry.

BOTH THESE NOVELS are tributes to Lewis’ social observation, to his amazing ability to accumulate details that are at once amusing, relevant, and suggestive. They also confirm Lewis’ interest in the con-

temporary and the diurnal. Historical fiction in general did not appeal to him (he obviously preferred Dickens to Scott) because it seemed to lack immediacy; he could project through his eye rather than through his imagination. But in the centennial year of Minnesota Territory he published his one historical novel, *The God-Seeker*, the action of which takes place in 1849 in the area around the fictional Bois des Morts, two hundred miles west of Fort Snelling on the Minnesota River.³³

It takes Lewis fourteen chapters to transport his hero, Massachusetts-born Aaron Gadd, to the West. Aaron is motivated in his decision by missionary zeal, ambition, and a craving for romance. He travels mostly by river steamboat via St. Louis, Dubuque, and Galena; the final stretch of the river he sees from the deck of the “Dr. Franklin,” with Russell Blakeley as first officer and clerk. Minutes after his arrival at the muddy St. Paul landing, Aaron meets Father Ravoux, Vital Guerin, and Joe Brown; and Brown in particular is given a full characterization.³⁴ At Fort Snelling, prior to his departure for his missionary post where he would act as a carpenter, Gadd is introduced to Thomas S. Williamson, to Stephen Riggs, and to the Pond brothers, although none of these figures largely in Gadd’s future adventures. Transportation to Traverse des Sioux is later arranged by a trader on Gray Cloud Island, and eventually, by canoe and horseback, Aaron reaches his destination.

Gadd, a shrewd, industrious young Yankee, rises quickly amid his unusual surroundings. In relatively short time he meets Selene Lanark, daughter of the frontier trader and impresario Caesar Lanark, and

³² *Cass Timberlane*, 11, 12. See also Lewis’ equally scornful picture of the Zenith Athletic Club in *Babbitt*, 54–60.

³³ *The God-Seeker*, 53 (New York, 1949). In an appendix Lewis carefully distinguishes between the historical and the fictional characters. See p. 419–422.

³⁴ *The God-Seeker*, 113. In his appendix Lewis pays tribute to the ability and virtuosity of Brown. See p. 421.

the two are married, first in a civil ceremony by Joe Brown, later by a Unitarian clergyman using an Episcopalian ritual. When Gadd joins the trading firm of Buckbee, Lanark and Gadd, his subsequent fortunes are assured. Most of the rest of the novel can be quickly forgotten by the discriminating reader. Lewis' gift for caricature is always apparent, and his ridicule of certain evangelists and self-seekers is amusing if superficial. The characters, however, never come alive. He is perhaps least successful in delineating Indians. Certainly his hypocritical Black Wolf, a pure-blood Dakota who has attended Oberlin, is the least convincing of all. Black Wolf can discuss existentialism in perfect English; he also participates in the tribal feast of the raw fish and readapts himself to the blanket. As Caesar Lanark says cynically: "The typical Dakota is Isaac Weeps-by-Night, who is merely a little ahead of his fellows in giving up hunting for plowing, building a wretched shack and getting drunk on forty-rod whisky. That's what the children of Black Wolf will do . . . if they get born and survive."³⁵

In *Elmer Gantry* Lewis attacked the hypocrisy and excesses of irresponsible evangelism with all the virulence of which he was capable. In *The God-Seeker* he shifted his perspective from the contemporary to the historical and he also modified his satire. If Aaron Gadd's missionary associates are naïve, ill-informed, and even on occasion unscrupulous, Gadd himself is honest and moral. Lewis' picture of frontier evangelism is unflattering rather than vicious. He could not understand, for example, the consecration to a cause which led Edward Eggleston on the Minnesota frontier to adopt the peripatetic life himself until his health broke down, and then to choose a Methodist circuit rider as the hero for his fiction. Nor could Lewis sympathize with

the proselytizing activities of a Bishop Whipple. On the other hand, Lewis also resented the rapacity and cynicism of the Indian traders who exchanged shoddy merchandise and gaudy trinkets for valuable furs. His Caesar Lanark, to whom he ascribes a certain amount of intellectual sophistication, represents the more predatory frontier merchant. But even Lanark is a one-dimensional figure. Indeed most of the characters in Lewis' later novels remind one of a remark of Mark Twain when he was disparaging photography as a source of fictional portraiture. "Observation? Of what real value is it? One learns peoples through the heart, not the eyes or the intellect."³⁶ Lewis never ventured further from human reality than in his one historical novel.

IN A SENSE, however, Lewis was most faithful to his Minnesota background when he was least deliberately photographic or representational. As a native of a prairie community in Stearns County he was intimately aware not only of the rural area around him but also of the settlers. The German and Scandinavian farmers of the region figure prominently in most of his early stories and provide the often anonymous but always evident background of *Main Street*. Moreover, Lewis practiced his mimicry of speech by rendering the dialect of Teuton and Swede, and prided himself on his fidelity of transcription. His protagonists, to be sure, seldom represent these national strains, but his minor figures are frequently of immigrant stock. Lewis was also conscious of other ingredients in the Minnesota melting pot; the Yankees, who came early and quickly controlled lumbering and mercantile activities; the French, more nomadic and less socially important; the Central Europeans, who provided much of the manpower for the iron mining industry. In *Cass Timberlane* Lewis was especially careful to emphasize the fusion of races and tongues in his fictional northern town, though he made less use of them than

³⁵ *The God-Seeker*, 299.

³⁶ Mark Twain, "What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us," in *Literary Essays*, 148-170 (New York, 1899).

did Phil Stong in his novel, *The Iron Mountain*. In an essay which Lewis contributed to *The Nation* he labeled Minnesota the Norse State and emphasized the prominence of the Scandinavians in state politics, but he also tried to dispel the notion that Minnesota's population was made up only of emigrants from northern Europe. This was as much of a misconception, he argued, as the beliefs that Minnesota's topography is uniform or that a commonwealth which contributes dairy products and corn and lumber and iron ore to the nation is a region of one crop — namely, wheat.³⁷

History impinges frequently on Lewis' descriptions. The only Minnesota aborigines who appear in *propria persona* are the unconvincing Sioux of *The God-Seeker*, but Lewis was fond of impressing the recent development of Minnesota on his readers by stating that less than a century ago a particular town was a Chippewa-haunted wilderness. Indian legends are alluded to sparingly, the voyageurs are cited, and particular patronymics like Radisson are preserved as place names. The Sioux-Chippewa feuds are referred to occasionally, and

Lewis' ear was historically attuned to the creaking axles that characterized the Red River carts.

The varied economic history of Minnesota also is reflected in his fiction, although he wrote neither a novel of industry nor one of labor. No Lewis novel is set in the area of the iron ranges or in the northern forests; when he did tell a story about the wilderness he went across the border into Saskatchewan for a locale, as in *Mantrap*. But lumbering in general has a place in his novels—the streams which floated the logs, the lakes which held the booms, even the banks which pyramided the industry's money. Certainly the Blue Ox National Bank of Grand Republic is Lewis' bow to the Paul Bunyan stories. In the same way the milling industry is alluded to and is said to be one of the mainstays of such a city as Vernon. Agriculture, of course, is the occupation of most of the people who go to market in Gopher Prairie or the adjacent hamlets. Lewis' references to the cornland, the interminable fields in which the tiny

³⁷ "Minnesota: The Norse State," in *The Nation*, 116:624-627 (May 30, 1923).



A Main Street
view in
Sauk Centre, 1957

communities stand like oases, are usually satiric, but he could grow enthusiastic about the pleasures of field sports and the lure of lake and forest. Not even Mark Twain, recalling idyllic days on his uncle's plantation near Florida, Missouri, was more nostalgic than Lewis writing about fishing and hunting as a boy in Stearns County. Lewis never developed a projected novel about education, but one may presume that if this had materialized it might have dealt with the University of Minnesota, as some of the faculty members of that institution once feared.

AFTER the great decade of the 1920s, during which Lewis' best novels appeared, his work became repetitious, clamorous, imitative. Reviewer after reviewer complained that each new Lewis novel covered familiar ground and used familiar methods. Locale and names might be different, hotelkeeping or the penitentiary system or the dangers of Fascism in the United States might be substituted for small-town provincialism and Zenith real estate, but the technique was unchanged. Lewis' gifts of mimicry and selection of details remained as remarkable as ever, yet the stridency was more pronounced, the humor more labored. Unwilling or unable to change his approach, he wrote in the same way until the end, and his later fiction became attenuated and unconvincing.

It is always interesting to speculate why a writer reaches a point, either midway in his career or later, beyond which there is no development. Some writers say essentially what they have to say in their first book and do nothing but parrot themselves thereafter. Others are delayed in finding their real theme or their happiest medium until several books have come off the

presses. Only the rare few progress consistently and reveal increased stature and maturity as one published work follows another.

It seems quite apparent that in Lewis' case his fiction began to decline as soon as he got away from the Minnesota or at least the Middle Western background. Always a diligent researcher, he filled notebooks with details, names, phrases pertaining to whatever theme he had decided to develop, so that his picture of a location or a career is superficially authentic whatever it may lack in vitality. But "getting up" a subject in this fashion is not quite the same thing as writing from a reservoir overflowing with impressions and experiences. Lewis' youth in Minnesota and his early years as student and companion to his doctor-father were the reservoir out of which flowed six or more novels and many stories. When he tapped this source in his early maturity he produced his best work—*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*, *Arrowsmith*, *Dodsworth*. Upon returning to the source toward the end of his career he could still write with some authority, despite the familiarity of his technique. But much of the intervening fiction is stiff and self-conscious, and even the famous mimicry often palls. Lewis never lacked gusto even when not at his best as a storyteller, yet one can tire of excessive exuberance.

In later years Lewis was too restless, too nomadic ever to settle down anywhere. During his creative throes he was not especially conscious of surroundings—chair, table, typewriter, and isolation from society were almost his only necessities. But the book finished and out of the way, he needed change, and his peregrinations were endless and hectic. Nevertheless, he remained conscious of his formative years, and the impressions he gained from them served to solidify his fiction. He once paid sincere tribute to his Sauk Centre boyhood: "It was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life."³⁸ His fiction justifies the tribute.

³⁸ *The O-sa-ge*, 1: 83.

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