

Spring 1978

Knox Now

& The Knox Alumnus



The Carl Sandburg Centenary

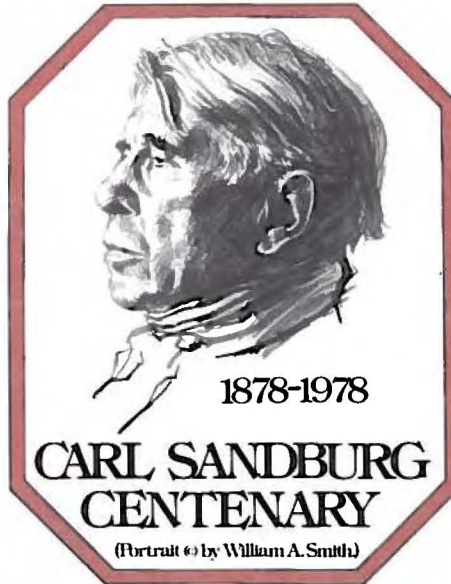
January 6, 1878 - 1978

Editor's note: Joan Dilts Neumiller was the Carl Sandburg Centenary project coordinator, a job with so many details to keep track of it sometimes must have seemed like herding lemmings away from the sea. It was a large undertaking and she did it very well as the success of the Centenary attests.

There are a few hundred of the Centenary souvenir programs left. If you would like one, send your name and address to the Public Information Office at the College. The programs were produced by David Amor, editor, and Christie Ferguson Cirone, '75, designer, and printed by Phil Lass, '38, who has also printed volume 64 of this magazine.

By Joan Dilts Neumiller

The College community kept its mind off the cold and snows of January by hosting a month-long Carl Sandburg Centenary celebration to honor its long-time friend and adopted son (Lombard '04) on



what would have been the Pulitzer Prize poet's 100th birthday, January 6. Centenary events to follow ranged from scholarly considerations to light-hearted folk-song.

January 6 was proclaimed "Carl Sandburg Day" in the State of Illinois by Governor James Thompson. Birthday activities

in Galesburg were shared by Knox, Carl Sandburg Community College, the Sandburg Birthplace, the Historical Society, the Philatelic Society, and other community groups. Opening ceremonies for the Centenary were scheduled at Knox at 11 in the morning. The day was mild, and even the bit of fog seemed appropriate, as the long line of notables we were to see during the month began to arrive: scholars, poets, journalists, TV personalities, folksingers, politicians—along with bus loads of school children, the old who once knew him and the young, ready to become acquainted. From the campus, the community, and from across the nation they came, to pay homage to Galesburg's native son.

Newsman Howard K. Smith, a long-time friend of Carl Sandburg, was keynote speaker at the ceremonies, held before a near-capacity crowd in the Knox Memorial Gymnasium. Sharing the platform was Gwendolyn Brooks who succeeded Carl Sandburg as Illinois poet-laureate and has also earned a Pulitzer Prize for poetry. President Fox presided along with Douglas Wilson, director for the Centenary.

Howard K. Smith had been on the Knox campus with Sandburg in 1961, when they worked together on a CBS documentary



Carl Sandburg



Howard K. Smith

film, "Lincoln's Prairie Years." His address was warm and personal, full of fond memories and sparkling with anecdotes. Both he and Gwendolyn Brooks set the stage appropriately for the four Saturday symposia to come, dealing with various aspects of Sandburg's life and work. It was to be the purpose of these symposia not only to re-evaluate Sandburg and his work, but also to explore the broader subject of the contributing role of the artist—poet, biographer, journalist—in a democratic society. Smith acknowledged the effect Sandburg's massive, 6-volume biography on Abraham Lincoln had had on him in his younger days when he took precious savings to buy the set, then proceeded to "read through it five times."

Gwendolyn Brooks noted the social concern of much of his poetry and how it appeared to many in his day as "ear-distracting yowling, as literary radicalism, as virtual irreverence." Many then were suspicious of the colloquial, the "common." She chided gently that too few of us today have the faith, the hope, the courage, to speak out as Sandburg did when he wrote in "The People, Yes:"

The panderers and the liars have violated and smutted it. Yet this reaching is alive yet for lights and keepsakes.

... from across the nation they came, to pay homage . . .

Following the ceremony, Knox hosted a Centenary luncheon in Seymour Union for some 200 friends and dignitaries, including the platform guests, the three Sandburg daughters: Margaret, Janet and Helga; artist William A. Smith, designer of the Sandburg commemorative stamp; Sewell Wright, son of Philip Green Wright who was Sandburg's teacher and mentor at Lombard; Julian P. Muller, representing Sandburg's publishers, Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, Inc., of which he is a vice president; Burl Ives, on hand to present a concert in tribute to his old friend later that evening at Carl Sandburg Community College; and Lauren Goff, retired curator of the Sandburg Birthplace. Also present were representative groups of students, faculty, trustees and administrators, visiting college presidents, officials of the city and district, of the State Historical Society, of the Federal Postal Service, and people from the community who had devoted time and effort to the Birthplace Association in the past as well as those who helped on the Centenary. The luncheon itself was a faithful duplication of the banquet given Carl Sandburg by Lombard Alumni when the poet participated in the Lincoln-Douglas Debate Centennial here in 1958—down to the apple

pie and cinnamon ice cream!

Three presentations were made at the luncheon. On behalf of the Lombard alumni, Sewell Wright presented President Fox with a plaque to be affixed to the Lombard Bell Tower, now on the Knox campus—the very same tower from which Sandburg once rang the bell to summon classes while working his way through college. Julian Muller presented a warm and personal tribute from Sandburg's old friend and publisher, William Jovanovich. And William Smith presented to Knox his original lithograph portrait of Sandburg, the one from which he had made the drawing for the stamp. He also brought laughter and tears to the eyes of all when he shared some precious tape-recordings made of Sandburg during some of the many visits the poet made to his home.

The First-day Cover Stamp Ceremony, presided over by William B. Bolger, (who has since become the new Postmaster General), was held early in the morning at Carl Sandburg College. But first-day covers were cancelled all day at three locations in town, including Old Main's Alumni Room. How appropriate, for Sandburg had often credited the plaque on Old Main's north wall, bearing the Lincoln quote about slav-



Sewell Wright and Gail Youngren, L'27, with the Lombard plaque.

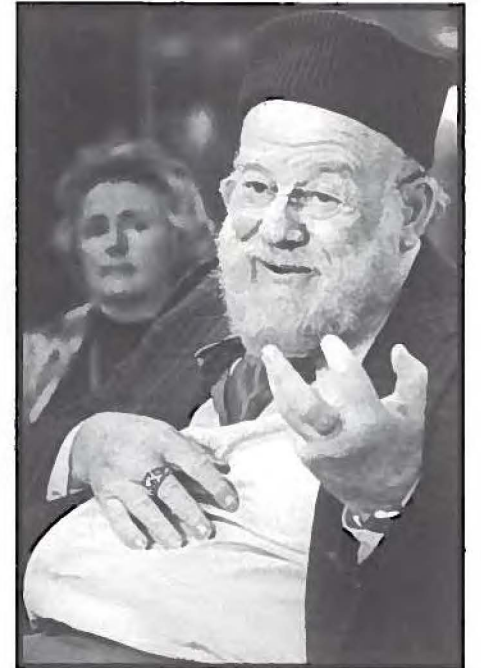


Gwendolyn Brooks

"Yet this reaching is alive yet/for lights and keepsakes."



William Smith presents a lithograph of Sandburg to E. Inman Fox, accepting on behalf of the College.



Burl Ives

ery, as having first stimulated his interest in Lincoln.

In the afternoon, birthday activities shifted back to Carl Sandburg College and to the Sandburg Birthplace. All in all, it was a grand experience in town-gown cooperation! Sandburg was doing what he liked best, bringing people from all walks of life together in a common purpose.

The following day began the first of the four Saturday symposia dealing with 1) Sandburg's Roots, 2) Sandburg the Poet, 3)...the Lincoln Biographer, 4)...the Popular Spokesman. These were all day affairs, held in Harbach Theater, with morning sessions devoted to the presentation of papers and afternoon sessions of dialogue and discussion. The participants had been carefully chosen not only for their scholarship or acquaintance with Sandburg, but in order to bring varying points of view to the areas of discussion.

The symposium on Sandburg's Roots on January 7, was chaired by Carl Sandburg College President William M. Anderson. Knox's own Hermann Muelder, professor emeritus of history and College historian, presented a paper on Sandburg's early days in Galesburg and showed how this town, mirroring many a U.S. 19th-century town and city, influenced Sandburg's later activities and writing. He dealt with the immigrant family—its status and struggle for improvement in the town soci-

ety and economy, with the railroad labor strife of the 1880's, and the small liberal arts colleges (Knox and Lombard) which played such an important role in steering Sandburg into an eventual writing career. North Callahan, history professor from New York University and author of a Sandburg biography, continued to trace the influences on Sandburg's development after he left Galesburg to wander about the country "hobo-style" and eventually take part in the Spanish-American War. Margaret Sandburg, the poet's eldest daughter, revealed new information on Sandburg's early years in Milwaukee—through the period of her father's courtship and marriage to Lillian Steichen and his work with the Milwaukee socialists of the early 1900's. (Carl and Lillian spent part of their honeymoon organizing for the Social-Democratic Party).

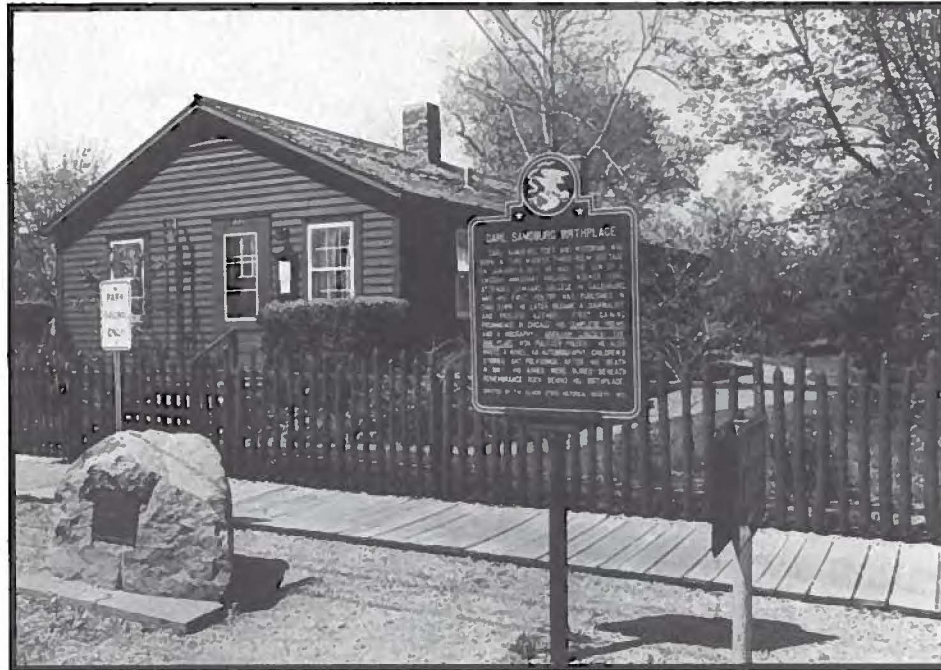
The panelists were joined in the afternoon by three discussants who provided additional background for the discussions. Alan Swanson, professor of Scandinavian Studies at Augustana College, described the times and places from which Sandburg's parents emigrated from Sweden. The Reverend Constant Johnson of Galesburg's Trinity Lutheran Church explored the religious influences in the poet's life—the Bible was the first book he had to read at home and "one out of every three of his poems deals with Biblical themes," he

said. Frederick Olson of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, gave further background on the Milwaukee Socialists. Many attending the sessions revealed that they had not been aware of this early social activity on the part of Sandburg. One commented on an evaluation form (used at all the symposia) that Sandburg's hard work is "an inspiration to others to tackle current social needs and issues."

The Sandburg sisters did much to impart a personal, closer feeling for the man being honored by their very presence during the opening weekend. This was especially true at Helga Sandburg Crile's concert of "Sweet Music," held Saturday evening in Harbach, when she shared family reminiscences and songs, using one of her father's guitars. Her own poem, dedicated to her father and with which she concluded her program, brought a standing ovation.

The second weekend of January was spent pleasantly delving into Sandburg's poetry, with readings and discussion during the Sandburg the Poet symposium and in the production of Norman Corwin's play, "The World of Carl Sandburg."

The play, presented three consecutive evenings by an all-faculty cast, was well staged, in concert-theater style. Ivan Davidson, theatre, (who also directed), Robert Whitlatch, theatre, with his guitar, Donald Torrence, communication, and



Sandburg birthplace, Galesburg.

Margaret Thompson, history, brought to life the love, hatred, bitterness, imaginations, perception, sarcasm and humor found in Carl Sandburg. The broad cross-section of poems and songs selected ranged from those about children to those about death, and concluded with a very moving passage from the Lincoln biography, *A Hundred Years*.

English professors and poets made up the panel for the Saturday symposium, chaired by Howard Wilson of Knox. Louis D. Rubin, from the University of North Carolina, used the poem "Limited," among others, to illustrate Sandburg's craftsmanship as a poet and explain the symbolism of his work. He emphasized the importance of sound in Sandburg's poetry and the need to read it aloud. Duke University's Bernard Duffey tendered a theory on Sandburg's "poetic vision" about the land—nature, landscape, and the people therein. "America in the raw," he called it. Poet John Knoepfle from Sangamon State delighted the audience by reading several Sandburg poems and following with a very definitive analysis of each. The afternoon session, when the panelists were joined by professors John E. Hallwas of Western Illinois University, Macomb, Keneth Kinnaman from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and Samuel Moon of Knox, produced some lively discussion. Was Sandburg "precise" or "vague"? Was he

the "rough-hewn poet of the practical, working world," or was he actually more "mystical"? There was common agreement that although he produced both good and bad poems, there is much more to Sandburg's poetry, upon closer examination, than he perhaps has been given credit for. Many came away from the session with the same feeling as that expressed by one member of the audience: "I saw Sandburg for the first time as a poet of complexity and depth. His reputation needs to be remade..."

The third weekend of the month belonged to the historians as they considered Sandburg as a Lincoln Biographer in Symposium III, chaired by Rodney Davis of the Knox history department. The list of panelists was impressive, though two were unable to attend in person due to the first major snow storm "out East." However, their papers were presented by others and they were able to participate in the afternoon dialogue quite successfully by means of Dr. Wilbur Pillsbury's miraculous conference telephone loud-speaker equipment.*

The head of the history department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Robert Johannsen, presented a very extensive critique of *The Prairie Years*,

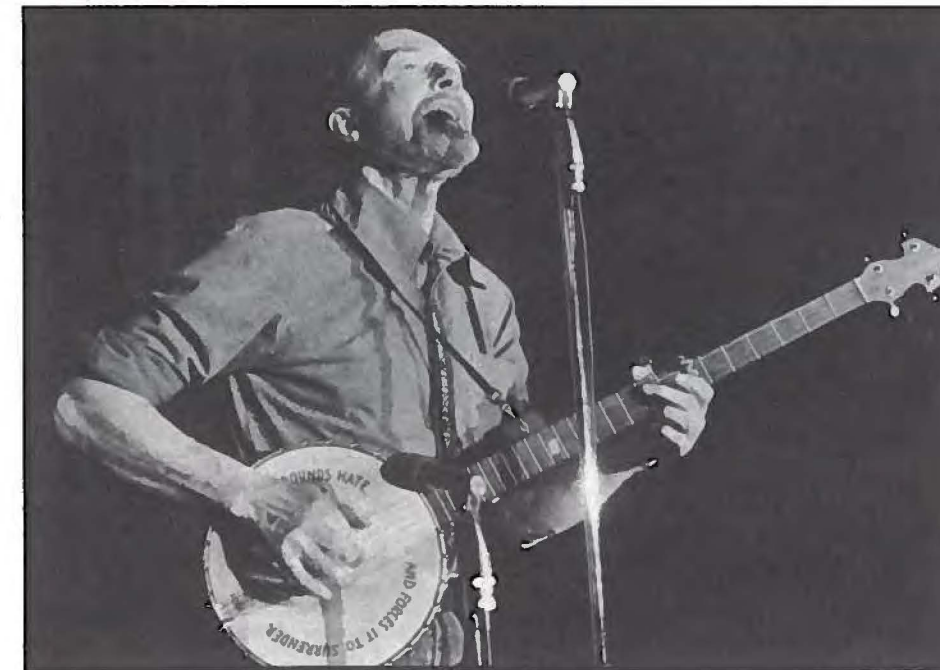
* Donated by Don Kuntz, '51.

(1921), which encompassed the views of past critics as well as his own. Incidentally, much of the "legend" incorporated in the original work was corrected, we were told, in light of later research on Lincoln, in Sandburg's one-volume edition of *The Prairie Years* and *The War Years* published in 1954). Illinois Congressman Paul Simon analyzed what Sandburg included and what he left out in the area of state legislative history, a field in which Simon has done research. But he was quick to point out that "this was like finding a bit of dust in a magnificent mansion." Stephen Oates, University of Massachusetts history professor, concentrated on the subject of "myth" and its significance for the citizenry of a democracy—though he stressed the importance of being able to separate the fact from the fiction. Biographer Justin Kaplan of Cambridge, Mass. drew some very interesting parallels between Walt Whitman (on whom he is currently doing a biography) and Carl Sandburg. Both, he felt, "delighted in myth," and he extolled the importance of myths in stirring aspirations, reminding us of the old proverb: "where there is no vision, the people perish." Kaplan felt Sandburg was trying to give us "a real man," the Lincoln which he had come to know and love.

No doubt about it—the stage was set for quite a discussion that afternoon when the panelists were joined by Roger Bridges from the State Historical Library, Victor Hicken from Western Illinois University, Macomb, and Michael Perman from the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle. When it was all over, those attending generally agreed that they had gained a better understanding of "how" and "why" Carl Sandburg came to write his massive work on Lincoln, and they were left with the feeling that the "poetry and deep music" and the inspirational qualities of the biography seem to insure it a permanent place in the annals of American literature.

On the evening of January 21, a very unusual and delightful program of 19th-century music: "The Abraham Lincoln Songbook" was staged in the new theatre at Carl Sandburg College. Hymns, parlor songs, minstrel songs, and war songs Lincoln knew and loved were presented by candlelight, concert-style in the fashion of the 1860s by "The New Hutchinson Family Singers," a group of faculty and students from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The group was led by English professor James Hurt, who interspersed the music with historical accounts contemporary to Lincoln. Jeffrey Sandborg, '75, was a member of the cast.

He celebrated . . . the wonder of the human species.



Pete Seeger

Journalists, a labor historian, and a well-known radio interviewer came to Knox on January 28 to discuss Sandburg the Popular Spokesman. This symposium was chaired by the Centenary project director, Douglas Wilson, director of Seymour Library.

"One of the most important factors that influenced the writing, poetry, and even the songs that were sung by Carl Sandburg was his dedication to the labor movement and the American Worker." This was the opening statement by William J. Adelman, a professor of labor and industrial relations at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle. Using slides, he proceeded to trace Sandburg's associations with social reformers, labor groups, and the working people themselves, chiefly during the period of his journalistic career in Milwaukee and Chicago. He quoted poems to further illustrate his point. "Workers can still find relevance in his words today," he said. Herbert Mitgang of the New York Times, editor of "The Letters of Carl Sandburg," expanded upon Sandburg's newspaper career. His series of articles on the Chicago race riots of 1919 would "hold up to this day in analytical understanding of the social and political injustices." (Mr. Mitgang's

think, all we learned in school was a poem about fog and a city of big shoulders."

A fitting climax to the whole Centenary took place that evening when some 3000 people of all ages and from all walks of life filled the Knox gym to hear Pete Seeger sing his tribute to Sandburg. America's current patriarch of folksong held that whole audience in his hand—for almost 3 hours of humor and song. Accompanying himself on guitar, banjo and recorder, encouraging the audience to join in (and they did, a good part of the time), he sang lullabies, protest songs from five decades, spirituals, an African Zulu song, a Hebrew chant, old and new folk ballads, and yes, many from Carl Sandburg's "American Song Bag" collection. He received three standing ovations. His warmth, his gentleness, his humor, his expertise—all make him a true balladeer in the Carl Sandburg tradition.

The Carl Sandburg Centenary was funded in part by a grant from the Illinois Humanities Council, (the largest they awarded in 1977) and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Exhibits on display throughout the month in various campus locations came from the Knox Archives and, on loan, from the Universities of Chicago, Illinois, and Texas—perhaps the only time so much Sandburg memorabilia will ever be together in one place. These, and special exhibits for each symposia, were arranged by Knox curator, Jacqueline Haring.

The Knox Office of Public Information has been receiving newsclips on the Sandburg Centenary from all over Illinois, from Milwaukee and St. Louis, from Detroit to Texas, New York (*Times*) to Los Angeles, Boston (*Monitor*) to Florida, Philadelphia to Denver, Canada and Mexico, and even from Yugoslavia (in an *International Tribune*). President Fox and members of the Centenary committee were interviewed for radio and TV broadcasts in Chicago, New York, the Quad-Cities and Peoria.

But what have we learned from all this? Can Carl Sandburg still speak to us now? And if so, will we listen? Will we accept this poet's challenge?

*"Be ice: be fire.
Be hard and take the smoothing of
brass for your own.
Be sensitized with winter quicksilver
below zero.
Be tongs and handles: find breathing
tokens.
See where several good dreams are
worth dying for.*

— Carl Sandburg
Breathing Tokens