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## Readers theatre revives story of Pulitzer winner at Dutch museum

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Jeff and Karen Barker stand in the living room of their former home in Orange City. The two former professors in the Northwestern College Theatre Department will present a staged reading of “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” on Tuesday, July 11.

Photo by Doug Burg

ORANGE CITY—When James Schaap took a recent trip to the eastern half of the state, he stopped in Osage at the Mitchell County Historical Museum to see what he could learn about Hamlin Garland, a once acclaimed author who has faded into relative obscurity.

“I stopped in the museum in Osage because I figured, ‘Well, what’s there to know about this guy?’” Schaap said. “Sure enough, they had just done a little feature on him.”

Well known in his day, Garland won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for “A Daughter of the Middle Border,” a sequel to Garland’s acclaimed autobiography “A Son of the Middle Border.” His family settled near Osage in the second half of the 19th century, and the old Garland homestead is still there, a site of historical interest for travelers like Schaap.

The museum docent pointed Schaap in the right direction.

“The homestead is still there; I mean, this is a long time ago — 1872. So, I got in the car and went out there, and sure enough, this house — who knows how it’s been changed — but this house is still there,” Schaap said. “That was really cool, and that put me back into reading him.”

When he stumbled on Garland’s short story “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip,” Schaap saw an opportunity for a miniature revival of the once-popular author’s work. He set about adapting the story as a piece of readers theatre, and a staged reading of “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” will take place at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 11, at the Dutch-American Heritage Museum in Orange City.





Pulitzer Prize-winning author Hamlin Garland spent part of his boyhood on this homestead near Osage in the late 19th century. Photos submitted

Photo submitted

A prolific author himself, Schaap spent decades as a professor of literature and writing at Dordt University in Sioux Center. He also is a familiar voice on the radio, and his program, "Small Wonders," can be heard every Monday morning and afternoon during the NPR news segment on public radio station KBIT FM 90.3 in Sioux City.

## ‘A hoot’

“I found ‘Mrs. Ripley’s Visit,’ and I just thought it was a hoot. It was terribly funny. And because of the fact that, basically, it’s a dialogue, I thought, ‘You know, I can reshape this into a readers theatre,’” Schaap said. “So, I did. I took the story, and I pulled it apart, and I created a readers theatre out of it.”

The tradition of bringing history to life through staged readings is not new at the Dutch-American Heritage Museum. The first such reading took place five years ago when a group of actors performed a piece about the “Schoolhouse Blizzard” of 1888, which stranded children across the Midwest on their journeys home from school.

Schaap describes “Mr. Ripley’s Trip” as “a rollicking good readers theatre piece” and “part Garrison Keiller, part cartoon.”

It tells the story of a frontier farm wife determined to visit relatives in New York, despite the protests of her provincial husband.

Schaap describes Mrs. Ripley this way: “A gutsy old woman wanting to visit home a half a continent away, a plan her old grouch of a husband simply won’t abide.”

Not all of Garland’s stories are funny, but the author’s commitment to literary realism encompassed humor as well as hardship. Garland, unlike his romantic counterparts, wrote unflinchingly about the harsh realities of farm life on the early frontier. He was best known for his short stories, and especially his collection “Main — Traveled Roads,” which includes “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip.”

## ‘Middle Border’ lit

Garland spent his childhood in Wisconsin and eventually Iowa, a westward movement typical of the period, when settlers of European descent encroached further into the reaches of the Western frontier. A self-styled “son of the Middle Border,” Garland’s early writing explores the place that formed him, and the themes and characters that preoccupied the author transcend state borders. Rather than a Wisconsin writer or an Iowa writer, he was a regionalist, claiming the vast and often unforgiving plains of America’s Middle West as his boyhood home.

“He really capitalized on an area he called ‘Middle Border literature,’” Schaap said.





Karen Barker teaches an acting class at Northwestern College in Orange City in 2017. She retired in 2020, but will return to N'West Iowa with her husband, Jeff Barker, to perform in a staged reading July 11 at the Dutch-American Heritage Museum in Orange City.

Doug Burg

Garland headed east in his 20s, to Boston and Cambridge, where he became a man of letters and eventually won acclaim as an author. His most highly regarded works are situated in the Midwest, in boyhood memory, and Schaap believes they are worthy of renewed attention.

“The story of the rural Midwest doesn’t get a lot of play today,” Schaap said. “The rural Midwest itself — its story and its history and its novels and its grand plays and everything else — just don’t register very much in the national psyche.”

## Barkers return

After adapting Garland’s work, Schaap agreed to narrate the reading, but finding actors equal to the task of reading the parts of Mrs. and Mr. Ripley was going to be difficult. Garland wrote dialogue that reflected the way his rural characters actually spoke, and it is colorful and colloquial.

“Part of its charm is sort of the ‘darn, durr’ way in which they talk, which would mean putting on a character in a way that not all human beings can so easily,” Schaap said. “Part of its color is the way in which they talk. I said, ‘It’s going to be a little harder to do, but I think people will really like it.’”

In a meeting of the museum's board of directors, board member Jill Haarsma brought up the possibility of recruiting Karen and Jeff Barker for the roles. The Barkers retired from Northwestern College in Orange City in 2020, but they left a rich legacy at the college, where they were professors of theatre for 32 years.

"I knew that their place in things at Northwestern was very large, but I didn't know them that well at all," Schaap said. "But I knew that the rest of the board was right, that if you get the luminaries here to read, people know it's worth going to hear them."

The Barkers agreed to transform themselves into the colorful, bickering Ripleys.

"Just getting a built-in reason to return was a big part of it. But I'm very excited to work with Jim Schaap," Karen Barker said. "All my years in OC I don't think I ever got to work with him in any capacity."

She suggested the reading might benefit from a formal introduction, and before the actors take the stage, Keith Fynaardt, a professor of English at Northwestern, will offer a short lecture about Garland's work, placing it in literary and historical context.

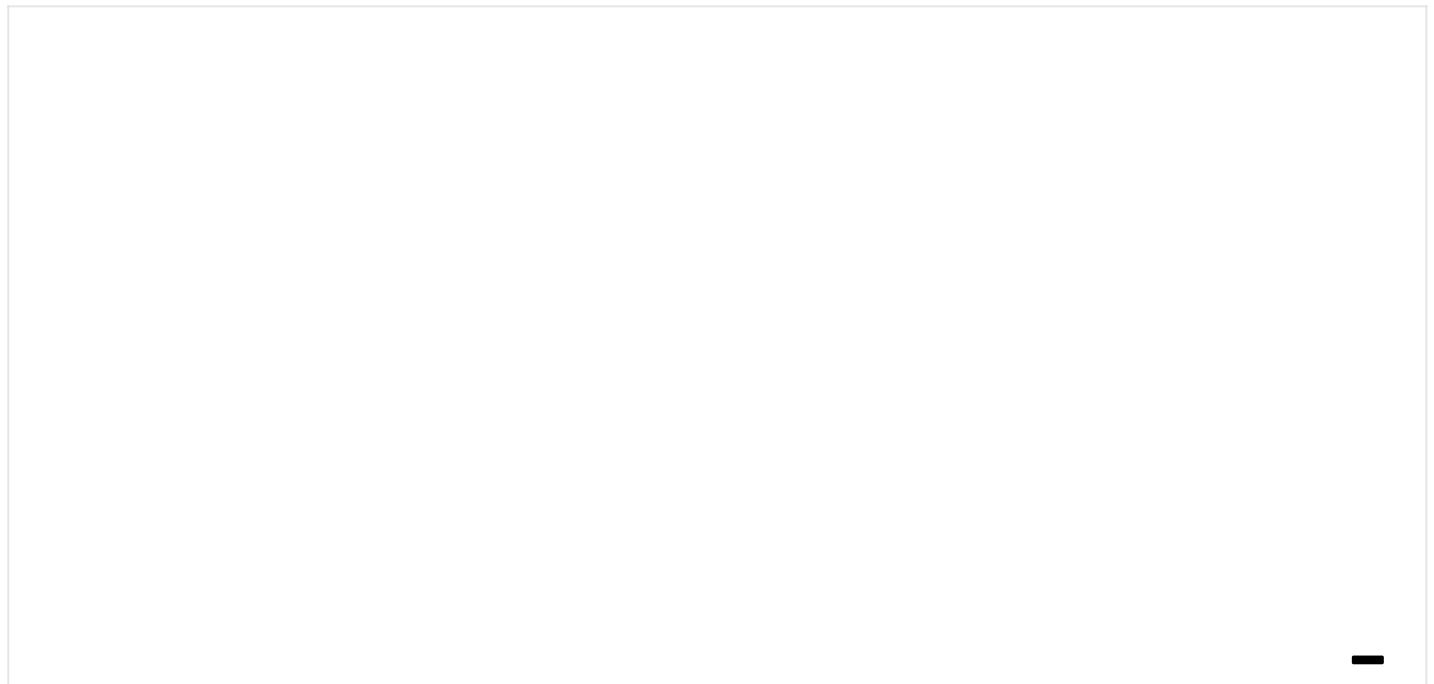
"I didn't know anything about this author, so I assumed it would be very helpful for people to know a context," she said.

Ultimately, though, audience members can expect a good time.

"This story is just fun — and funny," Karen Barker said. "I love the character I'm playing because she's feisty — my favorite type of character to play."

"People will laugh, and they'll find it lovely," Schaap said. "Ultimately, it's kind of a rom com."

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