

Hamlin Garland and the Homestead Act of 1862 **by Kurt Meyer**

On June 13, 2021, the Homestead National Historic Park in Beatrice, Nebraska hosted a panel discussion that focused on authors who lived through and wrote about the homesteading experience. Panel members represented six authors: Phoebe May Hopper, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Hamlin Garland.

Panelists were asked to address the same topics about their author's experiences, perspectives, and role in remembering the Homestead Act of 1862. It was my honor and pleasure to represent Hamlin Garland. The following is a lightly edited version of the notes I spoke from on that occasion.

Introduce yourself and the author you are representing.

My name is Kurt Meyer. I am representing Hamlin Garland. An informal poll of librarians (meaning not statistically or rigorously reliable because, well, you know those zany librarians!) ... at any rate, this poll done several decades ago attempted to ascertain who the finest author was from each state. It was one of those click-bait articles we fall for sometimes, although this was long before social media commandeered significant blocks of our lives.

The response in three of the fifty states was "Hamlin Garland!!!": my home state, Iowa; Wisconsin, where I lived for a half-dozen years some three decades ago; and South Dakota, where Garland homesteaded around 1890. Three of the fifty. Pretty good, Hamlin!

I am pleased to represent Hamlin Garland's literary contributions to the world today. ironically, an author recognized for work set in rural communities, Garland spent his professional life in four of our country's then-largest cities: Boston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Garland primarily wrote fiction, nonfiction, and historical fiction (is that an actual category?), although he also dabbled in almost any form of writing where compensation might be generated.

Meaning, at various times, Garland was a reporter, a poet, a short-story writer, a novelist, a biographer, a memoirist, a playwright, and an essayist... a broad portfolio for a farm boy from, among other places, Mitchell County, Iowa. My home. Mitchell County is a rural region of 10,000 county residents adjacent to the Iowa – Minnesota state line, a place my ancestors have called home since 1854, some 15 years prior to the Garland family arriving. It's worth noting, the population of Mitchell County crested in the census of 1910 and, although reasonably stable now, has been on a what I will call a "slow leak" for the last century.

Let us know about you and your connection/knowledge to the author you are introducing. Also, Introduce audience to your author's life and writing.

I became vaguely familiar with Garland when I was a schoolboy, because Hamlin had a local boyhood connection. For eleven years, he lived near where I grew up, from his age 10 to 21. In the last quarter-century, I have presented on Garland in nine states, including in Garland's "home communities" in Iowa, Wisconsin and South Dakota, and in twenty of Iowa's 99 counties. I have served as President of the Mitchell County (Iowa) Historical Association, Panel Chair of the

Hamlin Garland Society for presentations at the American Literature Association annual conference, and I just completed a three-year stint as President of Humanities Iowa.

A modest claim... as of several years ago, I completed my Garland collection and now have all his published books and booklets. I recently reached the same status with Edna Ferber, and am closing in on Frederick Manfred (Feike Feikema), Garland colleague Henry Blake Fuller, and poet Richard Eberhart... but we're not here to discuss them.

Hamlin was born in 1860 and died in 1940, writing until the very end of his life. He did NOT attend college, although at age 21 he graduated from Cedar Valley Seminary, in Osage, Iowa, my county-seat town, a combination high school / junior college. Having completed his education, he set out to seek his fortune, a fortune he never really found. A successful, well-recognized, well-regarded author, an early Pulitzer Prize winner, he was never a smashing financial success. He married an artist, Zulime Taft, sister to the better-known Chicago sculptor, Lorado Taft. Their marriage curtailed her career, meaning his was the only family income.

Hamlin was a rough contemporary of another author represented here today, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and told tales from many of the comparable midwestern settings. In fact, they both lived briefly in the same rural community – Burr Oak, Winneshiek County, Iowa – although NOT at the same time. Some of Garland's descriptive writing of landscapes, of nature, of agrarian life after the Civil War, are comparable to Wilder's, although Wilder was writing for a different, younger audience.

How did your author view the Homestead Act?

The Act and its subsequent legislative alterations were essential to the Garland family. The Homestead Act and the expansion of railroads – both of which were accompanied by land speculation and those who engaged in it – formed the two strands, the “DNA helix”, of rural settlement in the post-Civil War years in the Upper Midwest. If there can be called a third element, it was the significant influx of immigrants from places like Scandinavia and Germany.

In many respects, Dick Garland, Hamlin's father, was comparable to Charles Ingalls, Laura's father, with frequent family moves, always in hopes that with hard work and south wind, they would finally “make a go of life”. The Garlands didn't homestead in Iowa, but Hamlin's father, Richard DID become what amounts to a land speculator in Dakota Territory... eventually joined by sons Hamlin and Franklin. Neither brother stayed the requisite five years, but rather sold the land they were speculating on, Hamlin netting a profit of \$200.

Curiously – and off topic – if you ‘google’ Garland and homestead as I have, you will be referred to an article entitled “Homestead and its Perilous Trades”. This was Garland's attempt at investigative journalism. The story appeared in McClure's Magazine and was about steel manufacturing and Andrew Carnegie in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Homestead.

How does your author portray homesteading characters?

My author WAS a homesteader, in Dakota Territory, now South Dakota. It was a challenging, difficult, and lonely experience for him, partially because it coincided with a time when he wanted to be elsewhere doing other things, including seeking more education. For Garland, homesteading was a

means to an end... the end being once he secured clear title, he'd sell to support the next chapters of life. He was restless, committed to moving as fast and as far away from farm life as possible.

His homesteading characters generally possessed basic, salt-of-the-earth personalities... sturdy, stoic, stolid, not particularly imaginative, but “make-do” (or “make-do-without”) types. Self-sufficient and self-contained. Hardy and helpful. Neighborly, to the extent they had neighbors and knew them, willing (but not necessarily eager) to engage with people who crossed their paths, with a “nub” of reserve always present, at least until a stranger had been around long enough to pass muster.

Garland utilized his homesteading experience to observe human qualities, to absorb human characters, and to envision human adventures, all important skills for writers of both fiction and non-fiction. He read voraciously during his homesteading years. Without doubt, his brief Dakota years gave him a deeper, richer well to draw on – as he did – throughout his half-century writing career.

What was the impact of your author's work during the time of publication and today?

Garland was a literary trail-blazer... ahead of his time in several ways. For example, Garland was among the very first writers to advocate a realistic portrayal of farm life, an early and prominent agrarian realist... one who depicted rural life as it was, as he experienced it directly, in Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota. (Bear in mind, a century ago, one-third of the US population WAS rural... today, it's less than one percent.)

Garland's stories were, in effect, a realistic counterbalance to a then-prevailing stereotypical “happy farmer,” whistling while headed out to milk the cows, pail swinging to the music. Garland told the truth about frontier farmers, both men AND women. Rooted in a deep connection with his mother, he was unusually sensitive to the plight of women, particularly farm women.

Garland's rural views were those of a native: (quote) “I see life from the working side of the fence (great phrase!), not from the buggy of the visiting city novelist. I was one of the men binding grain under the scorching sun... and I was NOT noticing the glint and shimmer of the light on the golden grain. The beauty of the scene is there truly enough, but beneath it all are pain and squalor... I aim to put all there is in the scene, on the surface AND beneath... the golden butter and sunshine do NOT make up the whole of farm life.” (close quote) Later, Garland recalled that he (quote) “put in the storm as well as the sun (and) included the mud and manure as well as the wild roses and the clover.”

What do you see as your author's legacy?

Through his work, Garland became a spokesperson for 19th century agrarian society – the first to capture the hardships, the disappointments, and the isolation of farm life. Garland saw farmers as human beings rather than through hazy romantic cataracts.

According to literary historian Carl Van Doren, before Garland, authors wrote about the frontier from the perspective of its VICTORS; Garland featured the lives of its VICTIMS... a soldier returning from war, a tenant trapped by his landlord, a son neglected by parents, (quoting Van Doren), “and particularly the daughter whom a harsh father ... or the wife whom a brutal

husband... breaks or drives away – the most sensitive and therefore the most pitiful victims of them all.”

(More Van Doren) “Garland did what American novelists had been doing ever since ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ forced millions of Americans to imagine what it might be like to be a slave. He revealed new regions and layers of experience. If these were American facts, they had a right to appear in American fiction. ‘American’ could not be understood so long as only a part of it was known.”

Here let me close with what I regard as an important observation: Garland’s pioneering work in developing perhaps America’s most distinctive contribution to world literature, the western. Garland’s novel, “The Eagle’s Heart,” featuring his protagonist “Black Mose”, is the quintessential western, preceding Owen Wister’s “The Virginian” (a book often cited as “the first western”) by two years. Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour sold more volumes, but Garland was early – very possibly, FIRST – into the western genre.

[(Wikipedia) “The Virginian is a 1902 novel by the American author Owen Wister ... and is considered the first true fictional western ever written, aside from short stories and pulp dime novels, though modern scholars debate this.” NOTE: I’m obviously on the side of modern scholars on this matter.]

In “The Eagle’s Heart,” Garland’s hero is a self-reliant cowboy, trailing into the mountains, trading a confining past for freedom under western skies. Garland observed, “It was an adventure story based upon the lives of my playmates in Osage, Iowa, most of whom hoped at some time to run away and become scouts or cowboys.” The novel helped create iconic images of the classic cowboy and the conventional western, rooted in adventures he and his cohorts envisioned by moving west, **not to homestead**, but to roam the untamed high plains.

Summing up Garland’s achievements as an author, Garland scholar Joseph McCullough observed, “Garland reflected in his works the most vital intellectual, social, and aesthetic ideas of his time, responding as a zealous reformer to such issues as the rise of Populism, the single tax, Indian rights, the struggle for women’s rights, evolution, local color, and impressionism. He and William Dean Howells were spokesman for new currents that were forming in American literary history. He indicated the direction future writers would take.”

What insights into the Homestead Act can readers learn from your author's writings?

Garland’s insights are not so much about the Act as they are about the land speculation, the boom towns that sprang up, the individuals who homesteaded or were attracted to homesteading (perhaps similar to those who, like Garland, headed to Alaska for the gold rush... something he also wrote about). Garland’s life was certainly affected by the Act and its downstream. He speculated in Dakota Territory and capitalized on the experience both for the insights it gave him into human nature and human experience as well as the independent study opportunity it afforded him to steep himself in literature, in history, and in political movements.

Consciously and unconsciously, Garland made use of every opportunity and experience that came his way, drawing on it to bring life to his writing. As noted earlier, in Garland’s own

words, "I see life from the working side of the fence." This is the insight and a vitally important perspective gained from reading Garland's writing.