

Showing Up

by Kurt Meyer

meyer6601@aol.com

I've been thinking a lot about Hamlin Garland lately.

I know, it's a slightly unusual interest. Garland died 81 years ago, a longer span of time than even his lengthy life. Despite smoldering embers of interest among North Iowans, something I poke at periodically hoping to generate flames among the faithful, regional Garland awareness is probably about where it was two or four decades ago. It may have been more widespread at the time of his death, in 1940. It's hard to tell.

Three recent data points. First, in May I taught a life-long learning class at NIACC about the first two Pulitzer Prize winners with a significant Iowa connection, Garland and Edna Ferber. Garland lived in rural Mitchell County between the ages of 10 and 21, a vitally important time in his development as an author and an individual. He utilized these years to observe human qualities, to note characteristics, and to envision potential adventures... all essential skills for a writer. As I told the class, Garland's Iowa years gave him a deep, rich "well" to draw from throughout his half-century writing career.

I initially encountered Ferber when my family lived in Appleton, Wisconsin in the late 1980s and early '90s. That community helped launch her writing career, but prior to her living in Appleton, Ferber spent seven early childhood years in Ottumwa, Iowa. I'm connected to both Garland and Ferber by having lived in communities that helped shape these remarkable writers.

Second, I'm pleased to represent Garland on Sunday, June 13, at Homestead National Historical Park in Beatrice, Nebraska. I am participating in a "Homesteaders Authors Panel" with individuals representing Bess Streeter Aldrich, Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Phoebe May Hopper. My observations may be slightly different than panel colleagues, since the other five authors are women.

After leaving North Iowa, Garland was himself a homesteader, near Aberdeen, South Dakota. It was a challenging, lonely experience for him, partially because he longed to be doing other things, including seeking more education. For Garland, homesteading was a means to an end. Once he secured clear title, he envisioned selling his claim and moving away from farm life as quickly as possible.

One observation I'll share Sunday runs contrary to the homesteading theme: that is, 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 several years. Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour sold more volumes, but Garland was early – very possibly, FIRST – into the western genre.

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." This 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.

My third Garland reference is an event happening on Sunday, June 20, Father's Day. The Mitchell County Historical Preservation Society is hosting the eleventh annual Summer Solstice Garland poetry reading, 2:00PM, at Garland's boyhood home, 3907 Noble Avenue, northeast of Osage. This outdoor gathering features Garland poems inspired by sights and sounds the author encountered on Iowa prairies before these areas met up with the plow. The event is free of charge and open to the public; attendees should bring a lawn chair.

These three experiences are reminders that although Hamlin Garland has been gone for more than eight decades, his writing and his impact are still very much alive today.