

## The Garland Story by Kurt Meyer

Remarks presented at the Opening of  
“Hamlin Garland Revisited”  
November 21, 2021

My Garland story today is really the story of how this magnificent portrait ended up in Osage. It all started maybe a quarter of a century ago, when I became convinced and more than a bit frustrated that Hamlin Garland’s Mitchell County years were being overlooked by scholars, historians, and authors... those who really should know better.

This was a typical write-up. “Hamlin Garland was born in West Salem, Wisconsin in 1860. He moved numerous times with his family, homesteading in his early 20s, before moving to Boston, then to Chicago, where he wrote books and short-stories about his experiences and people he encountered shortly after the Civil War.”

Okay. All true. But this brief capture jumped right over his formative years, between the ages of 10 and 21, in Burr Oak Township, Mitchell County, Iowa. And some 25 years ago, I set out to – ahem – correct this oversight. I was convinced, if I could persuade the small number of scholars, historians, and authors writing about Garland and his era, between the 1890s to the mid 1920s, a 30-plus year time frame, to actually VISIT North Iowa, they would then encounter the scenes and the sites, perhaps even the remnants of physical structures and societal patterns that made such an indelible impression on young Hamlin that he wrote about it throughout his distinguished 50-year career.

But, of course, that wasn’t going to happen. So, “Plan B”: Take Garland’s setting on the road. I wedged my way onto the program of the Hamlin Garland Society that was sponsoring a panel on Garland at the American Literature Association national conference, that year, about 2000 (I’m not certain of the precise year) in Boston. I convinced my talented friend, Jon Morris, to assist me by taking photographs of Garland-related scenes... illustrating with photographs what Garland was saying with words.

The two of us then presented our “overlooked... so look again” theory before a select audience – maybe a dozen people – several of whom were related to me. Ah, but there were three or four Garland scholars there... and they were intrigued... interested... eventually, convinced. I don’t know how persuasive I was... but I WAS persistent.

The coterie of scholars teaching, researching, writing about Garland is small, such that we all can dine together when the conference recesses. Perhaps due to our size, this “table” of scholars is exceptionally open and friendly and welcoming. After presenting at several conferences, I chaired the Garland panel for several additional years. One year, the panel included a presentation by a professor who has since become a friend, Roark Mulligan. Roark surfaces a bit later in this story, so remember his name.

That year, almost a decade ago now, the conference was in San Francisco & Garland scholar and friend Keith Newlin, professor at the University of North Carolina – Wilmington, author of the definitive Garland biography, and colleague Roark planned to visit Hamlin's grand-daughter, Vicki Doyle Jones, who lives nearby. He asked if I wished to join them... my answer was yes. Vicki is a talented artist, as was her grandmother, Zulime. Shortly thereafter, she offered to paint a portrait of her mother, which she donated as a gift to the Mitchell County Historical Society. This is her painting.

This last summer, Roark, who had been serving as President of the Society AND its webmaster, said he'd be willing to tend to the website... if only someone else agreed to be President. I asked what the role entails. He said responding to periodic emails. I told him I thought I could manage this.

He warned there was an email "backlog" that needed to be addressed... including an invitation from the Cliff Dwellers Club in Chicago to collaborate with them to bring more attention to the Club's founder... Hamlin Garland. And oh, an email from some guy named Martin who was trying to interest an organization SOMEWHERE in a portrait of Hamlin Garland his father had painted shortly before Garland's death.

I reached out to my friend Denis Boerjan, who I have known for more than 50 years, who is on the board here, and asked about potential interest on the part of the Historical Society. This is how Keith Martin, Sr's extraordinary portrait of Hamlin Garland ended up HERE. Martin Senior's son, Keith Martin, Junior, had taken it upon himself to find "good, more appropriate homes" for certain objects in his parents' estate. This Garland portrait is one such example.

There IS a price tag affixed to the painting from 1937... \$450, that during the intervening 84 years is the equivalent in purchasing power of \$8,500 today. This is NOT to say this is what this portrait would fetch in an open market... come on, you watch Antiques Roadshow. Its value could be significantly greater, or significantly less. I'm just telling you the price initially attached by the artist and what that is in today's dollars.

A closing note: as the new President of the Garland Society, I also followed up on the inquiry from the Cliff Dwellers Club, located across the street from the Art Museum, in Chicago. As noted, Garland founded the Club in 1907. I met with Club leaders and the organization has a very fine portrait of Hamlin Garland hanging above their fireplace, THE most prominent location in the Club's handsome facility, painted by a distinguished artist, Ralph Clarkson, former club president, and a good friend of Hamlin's. It is an exceptional painting.

If given my choice, however, I vastly prefer the Martin portrait. I'm thrilled it's found a new, permanent home in Mitchell County. Thank you, Denis, for your exceptional dedication, talent, and effort, bringing "Hamlin Garland Revisited" to life. Like the portrait, the exhibit is terrific! Thank you all for joining in the festivities this afternoon and for your kind attention these last few minutes.