



Votes for "Everywoman"

Nellie Griswold Francis, the Women of Rondo, and Their Suffrage Crusade

LEETTA M. DOUGLAS, PAGE 1

Cameos (top to bottom): Lillian McKnight, May Black Mason, Elnora Smith, Bessie Miller

By the Numbers . . .

Sinclair Lewis was the first US citizen to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930. The Minnesota-born author, whose doctor father once worried his son would never make anything of himself, wrote twenty-three novels, many of which were adapted to film.

Interscholastic athletic teams on which Harry Sinclair Lewis played in high school:

0^a

By 1930, languages into which one or more of Lewis's novels had been translated:

13^b

Main Street's rank on the Modern Library list of 100 Best Novels:

68^c

Appearances on college syllabi of Sinclair Lewis's work:

399^d

Rank of Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* on Amazon's Top 100 list in January 2017:

4^e

Minnesota-born writers who have won the Nobel Prize for Literature:

2^f

To learn more about the author, see Ralph L. Goldstein's article "The View from Summit Avenue: Inspiration Point for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*" on page 12.

SOURCES: See page 23.

ON THE COVER

Portrait of Nellie Griswold Francis by artist Jennifer Soriano, based on an image from *The Appeal*, May 7, 1921. Original is a 16" x 11" charcoal drawing with sprayed gouache and a Sumi-nagashi ink print wash on heavyweight watercolor paper, which will be part of an upcoming *Persistence: Continuing the Struggle for Suffrage and Equality, 1848–2020* exhibition at Ramsey County Historical Society. Art courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society. Cameo images from *Musical America* 28. Courtesy of University of Minnesota Libraries.



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Message from the Editorial Board

As always, the stories of our people make history. We are pleased to publish Leetta Douglas's profile of Nellie Griswold Francis, a Black suffragist and civil rights leader in Saint Paul during the early twentieth century. Francis and a group of determined women worked to advance the cause of women's right to vote with the Everywoman Suffrage Club in the Rondo neighborhood and later supported progressive causes nationally. This issue also features Ralph Goldstein's article on Sinclair Lewis's ties to Saint Paul, where he wrote parts of his novels, including *Main Street*, which was published one hundred years ago. And Mark Taylor presents the story of Perrie Jones, longtime city librarian, whose legacy includes establishing The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. Finally, we note that we will miss Paul Verret, who acted as a wise steward of philanthropy. During his term as RCHS board chair and continuing on, Paul had unflagging faith in our mission and our ability to fulfill it.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Correction: Regrets to Campbell Casper, whose first and last names were reversed in the article "Public Archaeology: Unearthing the Past in Ramsey County and Beyond" in the Spring 2020 issue.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon. Thanks to the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, the Sinclair Lewis Society, and The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library for their financial support.

The View from Summit Avenue: Inspiration Point for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*

RALPH L. GOLDSTEIN

On a fine June morning in 1903, eighteen-year-old Harry Sinclair Lewis emerged from the Clarendon Hotel at Sixth and Wabasha Streets and walked to Central High School to take the last of the examinations that might qualify him to enter Yale University. He'd traveled to Saint Paul and taken the exams the previous year, passing only eleven of thirteen. In 1903, he passed them all. In the late afternoons following the testing that was conducted over three days, the 6'1" redheaded boy from Sauk Centre strolled through the capital city in his ill-fitting clothes. He noted in his diary that he "went up to look at the magnificent white marble Capitol, which is being built,"¹ marveled at the residences on Summit Avenue and the grand view from the edge of a huge cliff, and declared, "I like St. Paul very well better than Chi or Mpls. Woul'd [sic] like to live here."²

Returning to the city in October 1917 as an accomplished writer of short stories and novels that enjoyed a modicum of critical praise, Lewis leased for his wife Grace Hegger Lewis and three-month-old son, Wells, the house at 516 Summit Avenue, which had been built three years earlier.³ During their nearly six-month

stay, he cranked out more stories to pay the bills while imagining scenes including the view from the cliff that ultimately found a place in *Main Street*, the novel published in 1920 that would succeed beyond Lewis's most optimistic expectations in gaining the nation's attention. That groundbreaking work, along with *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth*, brought him the renown that led in 1930 to being the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature and continues to secure his place in the world literary canon. Footloose throughout much of his adult life, Lewis nevertheless regarded his home state as a lodestar, providing inspiration for his writing and a comforting place to return.

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of *Main Street*'s publication, and Saint Paul has plans to honor Lewis with an exhibition at the Minnesota Historical Society and a historical presentation about his life at the History Theatre in 2021.⁴

Growing Up "Harry"

While growing up in rural Minnesota, young Harry, as he was called then, was seen by some as a misfit. Older brothers Fred and Claude were more outgoing and athletic, less introspective than the avid reader of history and literature. Lewis's teenage diary reflects both a fierce attachment to Sauk Centre and a simultaneous yearning to flee the town's provincial confines to test his academic prowess in the Ivy League. It shows his developing skill as a keen observer of others and his involvement with peers as an active cribbage player, literary society president, and yell king at basketball games. Afflicted by a severe case of acne, Lewis was less attractive to girls than he would have liked. He particularly pined for the lovely Myra Hendryx, enthusing about her in a diary entry, "What a waist, what a head, what arms, what shoulders,

At the insistence of his father, Sinclair Lewis used the Clarendon Hotel as home base in 1902 and 1903 when in town to complete college entrance exams. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*



and what legs! O, what a charming girl she is and how I love her.”⁵ Seizing on any shred of conversation that might indicate interest on her part, his hopes went unfulfilled, and in a sort of payback twenty-two years later, Lewis endowed George Babbitt’s wife, whose plump middle-age neck bagged and whose corsets bulged, with the name Myra.⁶

Lewis’s father, an esteemed doctor in the community of 2,200, was doubtful about the boy’s future. He once remarked to his sons, who went on to careers in local agriculture and medicine, “You boys will always be able to make a living. But poor Harry, there’s nothing he can do.”⁷ Nevertheless, convinced that his youngest son’s passionate aspiration for Yale over colleges closer to home was sincere, Dr. Lewis agreed to support the boy’s desire to matriculate there.

Yale English professor William Lyon Phelps noted Lewis not taking “the slightest interest in the idols of the place—athletics, societies, and so on”⁸ and shared with him an appreciation for Minnesota poet Arthur Upson, who maintained correspondence with Harry after they met at Brooks Bookstore in Minneapolis, where Upson worked part-time. Phelps was impressed by Lewis’s frenetic energy and supportive of the freshman’s early literary efforts that included becoming the first member of his class published in the *Yale Literary Magazine*.⁹

Becoming a Writer and the Makings of *Main Street*

The earliest stirrings for *Main Street* began in the summer of 1905 when Lewis returned after his sophomore year to Sauk Centre, where the contrast between the provincial town and the swift intellectual currents of the East stood out for him in sharp relief. His diary reveals his irritation with what he calls “this dull, too-familiar bourgeois life.”¹⁰ But the ennui was broken that summer when Lewis met Charles Dorion, a young lawyer with common interests. Dorion eventually left town after failing to attract an adequate clientele. Decades later, Lewis explained envisioning for *Main Street* the character of lawyer Guy Pollock “as a learned, amiable, and ambitious young man . . . who started practice in a prairie village and spiritually starved.”¹¹ Shortly before returning to Yale, Lewis wrote, “‘The village virus’—I shall have to write a book

of how it getteth into the veins of a good man & true.”¹²

One of Lewis’s first attempts to depict this “virus” crippling the aspirations of the rural young is in the short story “A Theory of Values,” published in 1906 by the *Yale Monthly Magazine*. It begins as a letter from small-town resident Karl Nelson to college student James Bradford, thanking him for the tour of “hustling Minneapolis, and your chat of courses at the U. of Minn., of books and of occupations possible for the college man, [giving] me something beside the weather to think about.”¹³ Karl is a store clerk who reads Charles Dickens, follows politics, and tries to save money to start law school in the Twin Cities, but his hopes evaporate as his aged parents need his help with chores and paying the mortgage. Born into a supportive family that saved him from a similar fate, Lewis shows in this story his emerging talent for mimicry and ability to capture local speech.

Following graduation, Lewis lived in the bohemian community of Carmel, California, and after brief stints with newspapers in San Francisco and Waterloo, Iowa, he settled down in New York City where he met *Vogue* caption writer Grace Livingstone Hegger, who became his wife on April 15, 1914.¹⁴

As the young couple set off two years later to visit his family in Sauk Centre, Hegger Lewis sensed her husband’s nervousness that prairie-village simplicity and his family’s home life might disappoint her. Mother was welcoming, but Dr. Lewis less so. They were to take their

Always on the road—newlyweds Grace and Sinclair Lewis loved to travel. They are packed up and ready to go in this 1916 image. Courtesy of the St. Cloud State University Archives.



Sauk Centre's Main Street in the early 1920s. Courtesy of Sauk Centre Area History Museum.



Sinclair Lewis grew up in a home/doctor's office on Third Street in Sauk Centre. Today, the street has been renamed Sinclair Lewis Avenue. From the Prints and Photographs Division, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

meals at specific times, keep the connubial bedroom door open at night to let a breeze flow through the house, and avail themselves of the Saturday night bath using hot water from the kitchen tank. Once, when Hegger Lewis suffered from “the curse” and Lewis asked that a breakfast tray be brought to her, his father complained about “New York fol-de-rols” making trouble for the maid. They would have left in anger the following day had not Dr. Lewis brought home a copy of *Woman's Home Companion* containing his son's story “The Innocents” and expressed pride over it.¹⁵

The visit enabled Lewis to see the place through his bride's eyes: exposing her to its puritanical small-mindedness, visualizing Dr. Lewis's office as *Main Street's* Carol Milford Kennicott might have first seen her husband Will's, and experiencing his own ambivalence about familial comforts and oppressiveness. He had previously shared with his wife his idea for a novel about “the village virus,” and the ideas continued to germinate a year later in Saint Paul at Summit Avenue's “lemon meringue pie” house, nicknamed for its bright yellow brick and white trim. The house was the scene of parties described later by Hegger Lewis where both millionaire industrialists and Farmer-Labor officials could fraternize and where there was a

reading by members of Saint Paul's Little Theater Association of one of Lewis's early ventures, *Hobohemia*, a play that follows a Midwestern businessman to New York in hopes of winning back his sweetheart enchanted with Greenwich Village's art scene. The play had a brief run at the Unique Theater on Hennepin Avenue.¹⁶

While living in Saint Paul, Lewis considered writing a novel based on the life of the late railroad magnate James J. Hill, whose mansion was nearby at 240 Summit Avenue, but *Main Street* kept nibbling at him.¹⁷ The family stayed at the Summit Avenue house through the winter and early spring. The couple's sense of belonging in wartime Saint Paul was similarly brief, as Hegger Lewis remembered the criticism leveled at them for her refusing to discharge a nurse who was German, for Lewis's visit to a lumber camp near Cass Lake where there had been labor agitation, and for his defense of violinist Fritz Kreisler's support of Austrian artists.¹⁸

Lewis left the city for New York in March of 1918. His wife and son joined him in April. Numerous short-term rentals around the country followed, but Lewis applied the finishing touches to his book back in New York. In her memoir, Hegger Lewis describes the creative process that took place leading up to its publication:

Main Street was with us day and night. We talked about it constantly when we were alone . . . he often phoned me from his workroom to tell me some adroit situation which had just come to him or to discuss the right word to use when the thesaurus failed him. He brought home a dozen pages at a time for me to read, never taking his eyes off me as I went through them, and demanding to know what in the pages had caused each change in my expression as I read, what had brought a smile or a laugh, what had made me cry.¹⁹

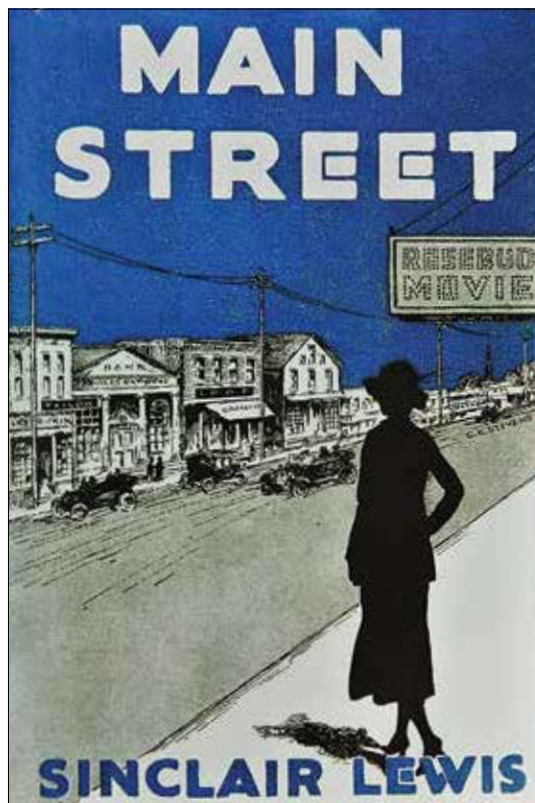
Main Street Mania

The rootlessness and hectic moving from place to place prior to *Main Street*'s publication did not hamper its ultimate impact. After reading the manuscript, Lewis's publisher Alfred Harcourt estimated the book might sell 40,000 copies, a number well above the author's own hopes. Heywood Broun's review three days before *Main*



Sinclair Lewis began early work on his novel *Main Street* while living at 516 Summit Avenue, although, according to his wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, the home was more conducive to entertaining and parties than solitary writing. Lewis finally had to rent a nearby workroom to concentrate. Courtesy of Summit Images, LLC – Robert Muschewske and Leaetta Hough.

Street's October 23, 1920 publication stoked an immediate demand that mushroomed through the holidays such that bookstores struggled to keep copies in stock. When a novel reaches beyond the usual book-buying public, observed writer Malcolm Cowley, "it is being purchased



A 1920 edition of Sinclair Lewis's wildly popular novel *Main Street*. Photo by Jim Umhoefer, courtesy of Roberta Olson and the Sinclair Lewis Foundation.

Sinclair Lewis autographed and dedicated this photograph to W. S. Leeds of New York two years after the publication of *Main Street* in 1922. Courtesy of the Local History Center at The Port Washington Public Library.



by families in the remoter villages, families which acquire no more than ten books in a generation. In the year 1921, if you visited the parlor of almost any boarding house, you would see a copy of *Main Street* standing between the Bible and *Ben Hur*.²⁰

What was it about this novel that drew in the multitudes?

On a hill by the Mississippi where Chipewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Nor was she thinking of squaws and portages, and the Yankee fur-traders whose shadows were all about her. She was meditating upon walnut fudge, the plays of Brieux, the reasons why heels run over, and the fact that the chemistry instructor had stared at the new coiffure which concealed her ears.²¹

She is Carol Milford, daughter of the Northern Middlewest, whose “every cell . . . was alive—thin wrists, quince-blossom skin, ingénue eyes, black hair.” She’s an enquiring spirit and member of the Class of 1909 at the fictional Blodgett College, the church-affiliated school “on the edge of Minneapolis,” where families

send their children to be protected from “the wickedness of the universities.” Set at a historic crossroads between earlier traditions and modern potential, as American rural precedence erodes and urban influence looms larger, so *Main Street* begins.²²

Carol was born not in a prairie town but in Mankato. Her independent streak leads her to want “to be different from brisk efficient book-ignoring people,” and as senior year approaches, she cycles through career possibilities: town planner, teacher, and, following the advice of an English professor, librarian. After graduation from Blodgett and a course in professional library work, Carol finds herself “not unhappy and . . . not exhilarated,”²³ employed at the Saint Paul Public Library.

One Sunday evening in 1912 at the invitation of a friend, Carol is at supper talking extensively with a doctor visiting from rural Gopher Prairie, Will Kennicott, who wonders if she’s sick of the city. As Lewis himself noted as a teen about Saint Paul, Carol declares, “I don’t know of any lovelier view than when you stand on Summit Avenue and look across Lower Town to the Mississippi cliffs and the upland farms beyond.” Will knows the Twin Cities, took his BA and MD at the U and his internship in Minneapolis, “but still,” he tells Carol, “you don’t get to know folks here, way you do up home. I feel I’ve got something to say about running Gopher Prairie, but you take it in a big city of two-three hundred thousand, and I’m just one flea on the dog’s back.”²⁴

The Sunday supper leads to a walk along the river, where as the two of them look back at the city’s hills, “an imperial sweep from the dome of the cathedral to the dome of the state capitol,” Will makes his pitch: “Come to Gopher Prairie. Show us. Make the town—well—make it artistic. It’s mighty pretty, but I’ll admit we aren’t any too darn artistic. Probably the lumber-yard isn’t as scrumptious as all these Greek temples. But go to it! Make us change!”²⁵

They marry and settle in the prairie town, where her immediate options are three: “Have children; start her career of reforming; or become so definitely a part of the town that she would be fulfilled by the activities of church and study-club and bridge-parties.” She’s not ready for children, and her husband wants more financial security before they have them. Neither

in Mankato nor in Saint Paul did church-going hold importance for her, and neither is Carol eager to play bridge, which one of Gopher Prairie's leading ladies claims is "half the fun of life." Some say Carol is eccentric and patronizing, too frivolous and too chummy with her maid; they resent her references to anywhere farther away than Minneapolis, resent her dressing well, and resent her showing off by saying "American" rather than "Ammurrican." From Guy Pollock, graduate of Columbia Law School who left New York for Gopher Prairie, she becomes aware of the "village virus" that "infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces . . . lawyers and doctors and ministers and college-bred merchants . . . who have had a glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs, but have returned to their swamp."²⁶

Yet Carol forges ahead with hopes to create a special place for free dances and lectures on important topics, to refurbish the city hall, library, and public women's restroom. These ideas fail to gain traction, and she begs Will "to 'run down to the Cities' with her" for a break from small-town existence.

They take the train to Minneapolis. Her mood brightens when they reach the hotel, where the room furnishings, letterhead stationery, and ice-water tap delight her. They buy clothes and books, Carol goes to a hairdresser, and they eat at a Chinese restaurant that has "a brassy, automatic piano playing."²⁷ Exploring Minneapolis,

(t)hey looked across Loring Park and the Parade to the towers of St. Mark's and the Pro Cathedral,²⁸ and the red roofs of houses climbing Kenwood Hill. They drove about the chain of garden-circled lakes, and viewed the houses of the millers and lumbermen and real estate peers . . . They surveyed the small eccentric bungalows with pergolas, the houses of pebbledash and tapestry brick with sleeping-porches above sun-parlors, and one vast incredible chateau fronting the Lake of the Isles. . . .²⁹

Back at home, however, Carol's mood darkens, as she sees her neighbors as a "savorless people, gulping tasteless food . . . and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world." A trip to California and a temporary separation

from Will relieve her weariness of the prairie town, to which she eventually returns.³⁰

Now a "Somebody"

Its authenticity, study of compromise, and refraction of history and sociology through fiction were part of what drove an unprecedented number of readers, many of whom hailed from small towns, to this novel. Critics Lewis Mumford and E. M. Forster recognized Lewis for his convincing, photographic-like portraits.³¹ Influential editor and author H. L. Mencken lauded *Main Street* for "its packed and brilliant detail . . . [its] attempt not to solve the American cultural problem, but simply to depict with great care a group of typical Americans . . . represent[ing] their speech vividly and accurately."³²

Praise was not universal. W. J. McNally in the *Sunday Tribune* saw Lewis striving so hard to avoid sentimentality that he leaves in the horrors but slights the beauty of both prairie town and big city. McNally found the realism hollow and inauthentic and the depictions of Minneapolis faulty. But conceding some of the novel's strengths, notably the conflict between individual and community, and predicting controversy to ensue over the book, McNally concluded that Minnesotans can be proud "that one of its sons has scored an achievement" and that its publication "represents a notable day in Minnesota's literary history."³³

And there was this seemingly congratulatory letter to Lewis from Saint Paul native F. Scott Fitzgerald, who called *Main Street* "the best American novel. The amount of sheer data in it is amazing! As a writer and a Minnesotan let me swell the chorus after a third reading."³⁴ Biographer Robert Sklar finds ambiguity here, as "'sheer data' was not a stylistic quality Fitzgerald was likely to admire."³⁵ A month earlier, Fitzgerald had written to editor Burton Rascoe a snarky assessment of contemporary writers: "I still think [Floyd Dell's] *Moon-Calf* is punk, [Sherwood Anderson's] *Poor White* is fair, and *Main Street* is rotten."³⁶

In her memoir, Hegger Lewis recalls that she and her husband did not know Fitzgerald when they received his letter, and they fraternized with him very little thereafter. Disdaining the fast, rich crowd she saw "Fitzgerald regard[ed] as supremely admirable. . . . Most Americans at

that time lived more like Sinclair Lewis characters; there was more substance to life than Fitzgerald's glossy version."³⁷

But Lewis was not without riches. Driving a beige Cadillac from New York in 1922, Lewis stopped in Sauk Centre to visit his father. Lewis reported to Harcourt, "The town far from resenting M. St. seems proud of it,"³⁸ an impression coming chiefly from Dr. Lewis, who shared clippings about the book with his patients. Two months before the doctor's death in 1926, in contrast to his earlier assessment of his youngest son's capabilities, the proud father told a reporter that "Harry always was a bright boy . . .

very keen of perception . . . see[ing] things that both the other boys missed. I suppose that's one of the things that made him a writer, that faculty of seeing little things others never noticed."³⁹

The accolades kept coming, including the three-member Pulitzer Prize jury's recommendation to give the 1921 fiction award to *Main Street*. Pulitzer trustees, however, found Lewis's novel wanting and instead gave the prize to Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*. Rankled that a small group of administrators could represent themselves as the supreme arbiters of American literary merit, he rejected the prize when it was given five years later to *Arrowsmith*, his novel of

Sinclair Lewis, Iconoclast

Known for their satiric bite, Sinclair Lewis's novels offer critiques of middle-class conformity (*Babbitt*, 1922), science denial (*Arrowsmith*, 1925), fraudulent clergy (*Elmer Gantry*, 1927), demagoguery (*It Can't Happen Here*, 1935), racism (*Kingsblood Royal*, 1947), and cultural hegemony (*The God-Seeker*, 1949). The struggle of the weak against the powerful is a recurring theme. So it was with feminist sympathies. Lewis wrote *The Job* (1917), *Main Street* (1920), and *Ann Vickers* (1933), all of which feature a woman protagonist seeking an independent identity, personal satisfaction, and meaningful work. *The Job's* Una Golden rises from working-class obscurity to prominence in business, relieves herself of an unhappy marriage, and finally experiences "solid joy in . . . taking part in the vast suffrage parade of the autumn of 1915, and feeling comradeship with thousands of women."^a *Ann Vickers* advocates for suffrage, immigrants, prison reform, state-supported social work, and she earns a PhD! Golden, Vickers, and *Main Street's* Carol Kennicott reconcile their career aspirations with their desires for marriage and motherhood.

The impetus to write these novels emanated in part from Lewis's experiences campaigning with wife Grace Hegger Lewis for the ill-fated 1915 New York State women's suffrage initiative.

Hegger Lewis canvassed in poor neighborhoods, while Lewis, calling himself a "suffragent,"^b declared from the back of a car "that if a human being who was a man had the right to vote, a human being who was a woman had the same right."^c Along with a small corps of male allies who attracted jeers and refuse thrown from spectators, he joined the 25,000 women marching up Fifth Avenue advocating for the initiative's passage. In her memoir, Hegger Lewis believed her husband's interest in suffrage came simply from his hating prohibition of any kind.

Later in his personal life, however, Lewis acknowledged or ignored, depending on the condition of his marriages to two powerful women, the notion that "everywhere in America women have, if they care to seize it, a power and significance at least equal to that of the men about them."^d As each of the marriages soured, a corresponding change can be seen in his novels' principal female characters. In addition to Kennicott, Hegger Lewis inspired Lewis's rendering of the carefree upper-class New York girl Ruth Winslow won over by rural Minnesota aviator Carl Ericson in *Trail of the Hawk* (1915) but also the vain, narcissistic wife in *Dodsworth* (1929). From her tomboyish bob to her bold professional confidence, Vickers takes much from second wife Dorothy Thompson but so does the bossy, tiresome Winnifred Homeward of *Gideon Planish* (1943).

Although sympathetic to underdogs, Lewis was suspicious of political dogma. He warned in *Gideon Planish* of the increasing manipulation of consumer and voter vulnerabilities, and in the course of his research for *Kingsblood Royal*, he met prominent black writers and civil rights leaders, including NAACP executive secretary Walter White. Toward the end of his life, Lewis kept in touch with White, leaving for the NAACP and Urban League part of his estate.^e

As William Shakespeare knew, fictionalizing history can illuminate the present. Lewis must have had in mind the issues raised in his penultimate novel, *The God-Seeker*, when he returned for the last time to his hometown to address a Chamber of Commerce dinner. There, he praised Minnesota's pioneers but criticized their land management and, worst of all, their "philosophy of prejudice."^f Certainly Lewis didn't shy away from social justice issues he felt needed to be addressed. He addressed them unapologetically in his writing. Regrettably, we find ourselves embroiled in many of the very same issues today.

an idealistic young doctor who challenges the medical and pharmaceutical establishments. In a public statement that made front-page news across the country, Lewis warned other writers not to acquiesce to such authority lest they “become safe, polite, obedient, and sterile.”⁴⁰

Why then did Lewis readily accept the Nobel Prize for Literature? Fending off charges of hypocrisy, he distinguished the Pulitzer, given ostensibly for the best American novel of the year “in obedience to whatever code of good form may chance to be popular at the moment,” from the Nobel, “an international prize with no strings tied” given on the basis of the winner’s “entire work up to the time of the award.”⁴¹ That didn’t still the critics. “It is a good deal easier to reconcile one’s artistic conscience to a \$46,350 prize than it is to one which happens to be, under the terms of the Pulitzer award, exactly \$45,350 less,” carped the *Minneapolis Tribune*.⁴²

That Turbulent, Untethered Life

The criticism didn’t help Lewis’s confidence. “Harry had a huge inferiority complex . . .,”⁴³ his brother Claude once said. Hegger Lewis knew of his alienation in childhood, adolescence, and college. As an adult, his scarred face, thinning hair, cigarette-stained teeth, and shrill voice could be off-putting to others, and, as his first wife inferred, “must have intensified that early sense of inferiority, but . . . when he had spoken for a few minutes one saw his words and not his face.”⁴⁴

Second wife, Dorothy Thompson, was not as kind, remembering him as “singularly helpless at anything requiring the concentration and control of his hands or limbs. His mechanical competence extended to the ability to change a typewriter ribbon, and stopped there.” His erratic moods were exacerbated by alcohol; he was frequently ill-tempered with friends; a physically and emotionally distant father to Michael, the son Thompson bore him; and all the women with whom he was close left him, as Thompson saw it, “driven away by the impossibility of penetrating the curtain that screened him from any real intimacy; or he left them, forever disappointed.”⁴⁵

Always a Minnesota Boy

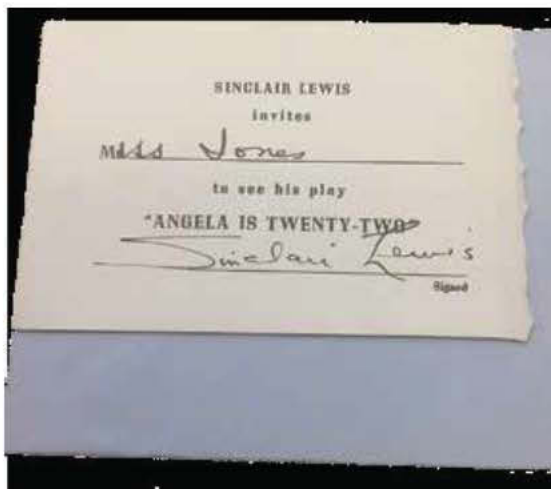
Lewis led a whirlwind life of lengthy European journeys, national lecture tours, and stints in

Hollywood. He also settled in and out of Connecticut and New York as well as rural estates in Vermont and Massachusetts. That said, it would seem misplaced to call Minnesota his home. Throughout the decades, however, he continued to touch base.

On return trips in the 1920s, Lewis frequented Kilmarnock Books at 84 East Fourth Street and encouraged manager Thomas Alexander Boyd, who was also literary editor of the *St. Paul Daily News*, to write a novel of his own.

In 1939, the Twin Cities became a destination for Lewis’s play, *Angela Is Twenty-Two*, which he had conceived with Fay Wray, perhaps best known for being the love interest in *King Kong*. In the initial performances that toured the Midwest, Lewis himself played elderly physician Hillary Jarrett who falls in love with young Angela. The January 18 performance at the Saint Paul Auditorium capped a busy day for Lewis who, earlier at a joint session of the Minnesota Legislature, praised former Secretary of State Frank Kellogg and William and Charles Mayo but warned against provincialism. Following the January 19 performance attended by Sauk Centre residents who had traveled to Minneapolis to see the production at the Lyceum Theatre, the group feted Lewis at a reception at the Nicollet Hotel. There, joined by Lewis’s relatives and Governor Harold Stassen, former neighbors, teachers, and classmates enjoyed meeting him again, assuring that if they were ever upset about his depiction of a small prairie town, they now were proud of him.⁴⁶

During the 1940s, Lewis made numerous trips to Minnesota, sinking shallow roots and bringing his late middle-age impressions to bear on his earlier ones. From a rental home on



Sinclair Lewis’s play *Angela is Twenty-Two* entertained audiences at theaters in the Twin Cities. Saint Paul City Librarian Perrie Jones received a signed invitation from Lewis to attend the 1939 performance. (See page 32.) Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

Lake Minnetonka, he traveled throughout the state in 1942, stopping in small towns and wondering in his diary, “These Main Streets have improved so much in solidity of architecture. . . . Did the complaining Carol Kennicott help?” With renewed affection for his hometown, he noticed “stores have new fronts with tapestry brick; black and translucent glass; neon and fluorescent lights. . . . Even second-rate country roads hard-surfaced. . . . Beauty shops in small places; women using many cosmetics, have hair dressed, nails colored.”⁴⁷ Following the road trip, he rented a home on Mount Curve Avenue in Minneapolis to finish his novel *Gideon Planish*. He taught creative writing at the University of Minnesota, after which he purchased a mansion on East Second Street in Duluth. He lived there sporadically from 1944 to 1946, conjuring his fictional Grand Republic, Minnesota, as the setting of his next two novels, *Cass Timberlane* (1945) and *Kingsblood Royal*.

In September 1947, Lewis made his last visit to Minnesota, staying for two months at The Saint Paul Hotel while researching at the Minnesota Historical Society for his penultimate novel, *The God-Seeker*, set in and around mid-nineteenth century Saint Paul. Published two years before his death, Lewis regarded it as “certainly the most serious”⁴⁸ among his books.

Respects to a Minnesota Author

His months of research in Saint Paul afforded him the chance to spend time with a few Minnesota friends who noticed his debilitated physical

appearance. Poet and novelist Meridel Le Sueur shed tears when she saw him.⁴⁹ Exacerbated by alcoholism, his condition continued to deteriorate, and on January 10, 1951, Lewis died while working in Italy. The funeral service held in Sauk Centre’s high school auditorium included a reading from “The Long Arm of the Small Town,” a piece Lewis had written twenty years earlier at the invitation of the school’s yearbook staff to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary edition. In it he concluded about his formative years, “It was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life.”⁵⁰

In numerous ways, his memory is kept alive: his family home is now a museum on the street renamed Sinclair Lewis Avenue, and at the corner of Main Street is a mural prominently featuring Lewis as a young man. The Chamber of Commerce hosts the annual Sinclair Lewis Days festival, and in a happy irony, the high school’s athletic teams, on which gawky Harry could never play, are now called The Mainstreeters.

Lewis’s major novels remain in print, some of them assigned not only in college English departments but also for courses in urbanization, consumerism, history, and geography. The 2016 presidential campaign caused sales of Lewis’s 1935 nightmarish tale of demagoguery *It Can’t Happen Here* to spike, inspiring a new stage adaptation of the novel and community readings nationwide. The Sinclair Lewis Society, formed in 1992 for the purpose of encouraging the study of Lewis’s life and work, regularly receives inquiries from readers in the US and around the world.

A view of Summit Avenue in 1903 when young Sinclair Lewis set out on his own to explore the city. *From the Prints and Photographs Division, courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



It's clear that the writing and legacy of the "Minnesota Tumbleweed," the affectionate nickname given Lewis by his first wife, endures.

And while multiple plans to recognize the anniversary of Lewis's *Main Street* have been rescheduled to 2021 because of COVID-19, residents and visitors should still make time *this* year to walk in Sinclair Lewis's footsteps, and as the young man did on his early visits to the city, admire the magnificent views from Saint Paul's Summit Avenue.

Ralph Goldstein was curious as to why Sinclair Lewis seemed to get less attention than other American Nobel laureates, so he started reading Babbitt in a public park near the construction site of a gated community in Southern California. To the sound of bulldozers making way for

*a slew of luxury homes, Goldstein came across the lines that George Babbitt "made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay."⁵¹ Since that moment, Goldstein has read Lewis extensively, written articles for *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, and currently serves as the Society's president. He is retired from teaching literature and composition at the junior high, high school, and college levels.*

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Sinclair Lewis scholars and fans: Ted Fleener, Barbara Comoe Goldstein, George Killough, Richard Lingeman, Robert McLaughlin, Susan O'Brien, David Page, Sally Parry, Dave Simpkins, Tom Steman, and Jim Umhoefer.

The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis: A Historical Presentation

The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis, written by Bob Beverage and based on a story idea by producer/director James Gambone, imagines the early twentieth-century author Sinclair Lewis being interviewed in present time by Minnesota television personality Don Shelby^a on the one hundredth anniversary of his well-known novel, *Main Street*. Shelby, who plays himself, is joined by actresses Laura Esping as first wife Grace (Gracie) Hegger Lewis and Michelle Berg as Dorothy Thompson, Lewis's second former spouse. Pearce Bunting takes the role of the famous writer. Together, the four reflect on Lewis's life and the relevancy of his literary achievements. The eighty-minute presentation is lively and informative for audiences with or without prior knowledge of the author or his work.

Shelby recaps Lewis's prodigious writing output, from magazine articles and short stories to novels, plays, and film adaptations. Aside from his talents, the production establishes the author's outsider status not only in Sauk Centre but at Yale University, where he called himself "a pock-marked faced country boy from Minnesota mixing with East Coast elites."^b

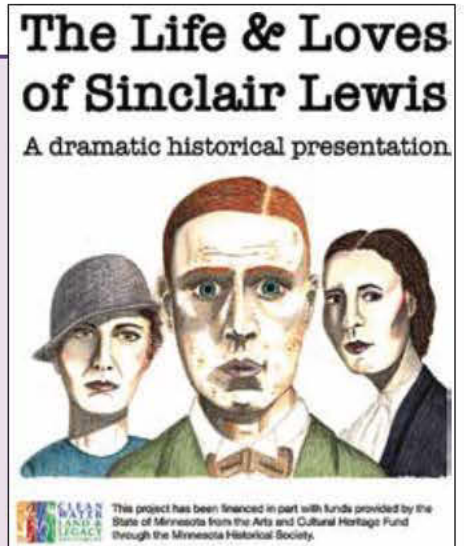
In the performance, Hegger Lewis fondly remembers their courtship, Lewis's support of women's suffrage,^c their early travels together, and the birth of their son, Wells. Thompson's arrival at the party turns the focus to Lewis's growing fame and why he refused the Pulitzer but welcomed the Nobel. The audience is also reminded of the author's 1935 bestseller, *It Can't Happen Here*, which was inspired partly by Thompson's expulsion from Germany the year before for writing negative pieces on Hitler and the Nazis. The ex-wives are cordial with one another,

remembering Lewis as an aloof father who cared more for his writing than for the son each woman bore him, and they carp at him about his later companionship with Marcella Powers, thirty-six years his junior.

While depicting Lewis as occasionally cantankerous, Beverage's script refrains from showing him as staggeringly drunk. Humorous asides,

such as Lewis's use of the iPad, brighten the mood. The script nears conclusion with the author's affection for Sauk Centre. Lewis insists that his disapproval of prairie villages was equal to his criticism of New York, Paris, and major universities. To wrap things up, Shelby invites the audience to acquaint itself with the Minnesota author's many books.

The Life And Loves of Sinclair Lewis was originally scheduled to debut at Saint Paul's History Theatre in October 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is currently rescheduled for July 15-18, 2021. Check the History Theatre and Sinclair Lewis Foundation websites for updated information.



The upcoming historical presentation of *The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis* at Saint Paul's History Theatre in 2021 will provide a fresh look at the complexity and relevance of Sinclair Lewis's literature in the world today. *Courtesy of Gracie Stockton.*

NOTES

1. Sinclair Lewis, transcribed diary (hereafter SL Diary), June 26, 1903, Yale Archives.
2. "Clarendon Hotel," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R.L. Polk & Co.), 1903; E. J. Lewis, letter to "Harry" Lewis, June 14, 1902, in SL Diary, 45-47; SL Diary, June 26-27, 1903, 134.
3. St. Paul Building Permit 63489, Ramsey County Historical Society Research Center. The home was built by Butler Brothers Company; owned by William Butler.
4. Because of COVID-19, the Minnesota Historical Society plans to celebrate the centennial of Sinclair Lewis's book *Main Street* with a rescheduled exhibition opening in the spring of 2021. A presentation of *The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis* at The History Theatre, in conjunction with the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, has been rescheduled to June.
5. SL Diary, 2-3; SL Diary, November 17, 1900, 5.
6. SL Diary, March 18, 1902, 37; Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922), 7.
7. "Population of Sauk Centre, MN, 1900," accessed May 12, 2020, <https://population.us/mn/sauk-centre>; Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: Dell, 1961), 19. Fred Lewis worked in a local flour mill. Claude had a successful medical practice in St. Cloud. Ben DuBois in Robert T. Smith, *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 4, 1968, cited in Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), 7.
8. William Lyon Phelps, "Men Now Famous," *De-lineator* 117 (September 1930), 94, in *Sinclair Lewis Remembered*, Gary Scharnhorst and Matthew Hofer, eds. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 21.
9. "Hail! Minnesota," University of Minnesota, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://cla.umn.edu/music/ensembles-creative-work/marching-band/history-traditions/school-songs/hail-minnesota>. Poet Arthur Upson (1877-1908) moved to Saint Paul in 1894. He studied at the University of Minnesota and revised portions of the school song, "Hail! Minnesota," which was adapted as the state song in 1945; "100 Years Ago," University of Minnesota Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collection, September 2005, 2, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.lib.umn.edu/pdf/holmes/v9n3.pdf>. When Lewis wrote *Main Street*, Carol Kennicott describes Eric Valborg, an aspiring poet, as "Keats was in his face, and Shelley, and Arthur Upson, whom she had once seen in Minneapolis;" Phelps, 94.
10. SL Diary, August 3, 1905.
11. Sinclair Lewis, "Introduction to *Main Street*," in Harry E. Maule & Melville H. Cane, *The Man from Main Street: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904-1950* (New York: Random House, 1953), 214.
12. SL Diary, September 12, 1905.
13. Sinclair Lewis, "A Theory of Values," in *The Minnesota Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, Sally E. Parry, ed. (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2005), 19.
14. Grace Hegger Lewis, *With Love from Gracie: Sinclair Lewis 1912-1925* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 29.
15. Lewis's birth mother, Emma Kermott Lewis, died when he was six. A year later, Lewis's father married Isabel Warner Lewis, called "Mother" by the boys; Hegger Lewis, 89, 93-94.
16. Hegger Lewis, 115; "'Hobohemia' to Be Presented by the Unique Players," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, April 27, 1919, 57.
17. Hegger Lewis, 114.
18. Hegger Lewis, 116.
19. Hegger Lewis, 145.
20. Alfred Harcourt, *Some Experiences* (Riverside, CT: privately printed, 1934) in G. Scharnhorst, 80; Heywood Broun, "Books," *New York Tribune*, October 20, 1920, 8; Malcolm Cowley, "Garcong! Garcong!" *Brentano's Book Chat*, May/June 1927, 26, cited in Lingeman, 158.
21. Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1920), 1.
22. Lewis, 2.
23. Lewis, 6, 7, 10.
24. Lewis, 13.
25. Lewis, 16-17.
26. Lewis, 85, 44, 95, 156.
27. Andy Sturdevant, "Gosh: What Would Dr. and Mrs. Kennicott of Gopher Prairie Have to Say?" *Minn-Post*, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.minnpost.com/stroll/2014/02/gosh-what-would-dr-and-mrs-kennicott-gopher-prairie-have-say/>. Sturdevant suggested the hotel might be based on the Leamington or Dyckman, and the Chinese restaurant "is probably an anachronistic reference to the famous Nankin Café on 7th Street a block east of Hennepin (which opened in 1919)."
28. R. L. Cartwright, "The Basilica of St. Mary, Minneapolis," accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.mnopedia.org/structure/basilica-st-mary-minneapolis>. Built in 1914 in Minneapolis, the Church of the Immaculate Conception was known as the Pro-Cathedral. In 1926, it became the Basilica of Saint Mary.
29. Lewis, *Main Street*, 213.
30. Lewis, 265, 450.
31. Quoted in D. J. Dooley, *The Art of Sinclair Lewis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 261.
32. H. L. Mencken, "Consolation," in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Mark Schorer, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1962), 19.
33. McNally, 61. McNally gripes: "At none of the four likely Chinese restaurants Will and Carol would've gone to would there be 'a brassy automatic piano;' they would have to be cross-eyed to see St. Marks and the Pro-cathedral by looking across Loring Park and The Parade . . . and in Chapter II the Mississippi would have to reverse its course in order for them to walk 'from St. Paul down the river to Mendota.'"
34. Letter to Sinclair Lewis, January 20, 1921, in *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 467.
35. Robert Sklar, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 82.
36. Letter to Burton Rascoe, December 7, 1920, in

Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan, eds. (New York: Random House, 1980), 73.

37. G. Lewis, 187; John J. Koblas, *Sinclair Lewis: Home at Last* (Bloomington, MN: Voyageur Press, 1981), 42. "The Literary Punch Bowl," *St. Paul Daily News*, July 9, 1922, 6. In 1922, Hal and Gracie were said to have visited the Fitzgeralds, who were summering at White Bear Yacht Club.

38. Sinclair Lewis to Alfred Harcourt, July 9, 1922, in *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930*, Harrison Smith, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952) 104.

39. "'Sauk Centre Has Sheepish Pride in Sinclair Lewis,' Says St. Paul Dispatch Staff Writer," *Sauk Centre Herald*, June 17, 1926, 3, cited in Lingeman, 287.

40. "Letter to the Pulitzer Prize Committee," in Maule and Cane, eds., 19.

41. Sinclair Lewis, statement to the press, November 5, 1930, in *From Main Street to Stockholm*, 297.

42. "Lewis Wins the Nobel Award," *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 7, 1930.

43. Quoted in Dorothy Thompson, "The Boy and Man From Sauk Centre," *Atlantic* 206 (November 1960):39-48. Reprinted in Vincent Sheean, *Dorothy and Red* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 273.

44. Hegger Lewis, 45.

45. Thompson in Sheean, 282-283.

46. Brian Bruce, "Thomas Boyd: Jazz Age Author and Editor," *Minnesota History Magazine* (Spring 1998): 11; "Lewis Returns to Warn State of Provincialism," *Minneapolis Star*, January 18, 1939, 7; "Folks from 'Main Street' Honor Most Famous Son," *Minneapolis Star*, January 20, 1939, 26.

47. *Sinclair Lewis, Minnesota Diary 1942-46*, George Killough, ed. (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 2000), May 28, 1942, 89 and June 28, 1942, 113-14.

48. Sinclair Lewis to A.S. Frere, December 30, 1948, from Yale Archives, cited in Lingeman, 529.

49. Lingeman, 525.

50. Sinclair Lewis, "The Long Arm of the Small Town," in Maule and Cane, eds., 272.

51. Lewis, *Babbitt*, 2.

Notes to "By the Numbers" on the inside front cover

a. Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: Dell, 1961), 30.

b. James M. Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 204. "By 1930, eleven of Lewis's thirteen books had been translated into Russian, German and Polish; seven into Hungarian, Danish, Norwegian, and Czech; six into French; four into Dutch; two into Spanish; and one, *Babbitt*, into Italian and Hebrew. Most of Lewis's books had also been translated into

Swedish." Today, some books also are available in Slovene and Serbo-Croatian, Portuguese, Japanese, and Chinese.

c. "100 Best Novels," Modern Library, accessed April 14, 2020, www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-novels/.

d. "Authors," Open Syllabus Explorer, accessed April 14, 2020, www.opensyllabus.org/results-list/authors?size=50&findPersons=sinclair%20lewis.

e. Brian Stelter, "Amazon's best-seller list takes a dystopian turn in the Trump era," *CNN Business*, January 28, 2017, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://money.cnn.com/2017/01/28/media/it-cant-happen-here-1984-best-sellers/>.

f. "All Nobel Prizes in Literature," Nobel Media AB 2020, accessed April 14, 2020, www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature. Minnesota leads the nation with Sinclair Lewis (Sauk Centre) as the first American writer to win in 1930 and Bob Dylan (Duluth) as the most recent in 2016. Other US-born recipients: Eugene O'Neill (New York, 1936), Pearl Buck (West Virginia, 1938), T. S. Eliot (Missouri, 1948), William Faulkner (Mississippi, 1949), Ernest Hemingway (Illinois, 1954), John Steinbeck (California, 1962), and Toni Morrison (Ohio, 1993).

Notes to Sidebar on p. 18

a. Sinclair Lewis, *The Job* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1917), 314.

b. Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), 73.

c. Grace Hegger Lewis, *With Love from Gracie* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 68.

d. Sinclair Lewis, "Is America a Paradise for Women?" *The Pictorial Review* (June 1929) in Harry E. Maule & Melville H. Cane, *The Man from Main Street: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904-1950* (New York: Random House, 1953), 304.

e. Charles F. Cooney, "Walter White and Sinclair Lewis: The History of a Literary Friendship." *Prospects*, 1 (1976): 72, 75.

f. "Lewis Says World End is 'Bitter Jest' for Pioneers," *Sauk Centre Herald*, October 9, 1947, cited in Lingeman, 526.

Notes to Sidebar on p. 21

a. Don Shelby is an award-winning journalist, television anchor, and star and producer of a one-man show on Mark Twain.

b. Bob Beverage, *The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis*, Sinclair Lewis Foundation, 2020.

c. See Dave Simpkins's article "Sinclair Lewis: Suf-fragment" in *Minnesota History* at <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHistoryMagazine/articles/64/v64i08p330-336.pdf>.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

The mission statement of the Ramsey County Historical Society
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The Ramsey County Historical Society's vision is to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, delivering inspiring history programming, and incorporating local history in education. Our mission of *preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future* guides this vision.

The Society began in 1949 when a group of citizens preserved the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. The original programs at Gibbs Farm (listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974) focused on telling the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, the site also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways. RCHS built additional structures and dedicated outdoor spaces to tell the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Heyate Otunwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine, *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved its library, archives, and administrative offices to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 to allow greater access to the Society's collection of historical archives and artifacts. In 2016, the Research Center was rededicated as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

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Perrie Jones in the early 1940s around the time she stepped into the role of city librarian. Her presence and the ideas and changes she brought to the table still positively impact the Saint Paul Public Library System today. (See "The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library Celebrate Seventy-Five Years: Honoring Perrie Jones, The Librarian at the Center of It All" by Mark Taylor beginning on page 24.) *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*