

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

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John W. Quinley

Hi Friends,

Carl Sandburg wasn't the only writer in the family. His wife, Paula, wrote thirty articles in goat journals and magazines. She also helped establish the American Dairy Goat Association, served as its director for over ten years, and made speeches at conferences and agricultural schools.

Sandburg's eldest daughter, Margaret, edited seven books of her father's unpublished writings. In ***The Poet and the Dream Girl***, she organized her parents' love letters and in footnotes explained the historical context. For Sandburg's unpublished second biography, ***Ever the Winds of Chance***, she completed the editing process, working from one hundred twenty-three pages of typewritten shorthand in which most of the vowels were omitted. She also edited ***Breathing Tokens: One Hundred and Eighteen Previously Unpublished Poems*** and worked with University of Illinois professors, George and Willene Hendrick, on four other books of further unpublished poems and stories.

His granddaughter, Paula, wrote ***My Connemara***—a wonderful memoir of her growing up at the farm in North Carolina. It includes chapters about her mother, brother (John Paul who is now a retired engineer), her grandfather and grandmother, her uncle Edward Steichen (the world-famous photographer), and the fascinating people who came to see the poet and historian. Paula shares stories about her ramblings over the estate's pastures, woods, and mountains, writing, "this was the new world where I would grow up, exploring foot by foot and day by day for a decade every stream, branch and cavern." She "shared secrets there in the wilderness of the hills, and I could always trust my grandfather to keep them."

But by far, the youngest daughter, Helga, was the most prolific of the Sandburg women. For this month, the selection for ***Letters from a Sandburg Docent*** is about her.

Thanks for reading,

John

Writer Helga Sandburg



Helga Sandburg playing a guitar and speaking from a podium.

Dear Readers,

It must have been exciting for Helga Sandburg to grow up with parents that were so exceptional: to hear her father read from his books at dinner; to meet journalists, authors, artists, and celebrities who came to visit; and, from her mother, to learn the science of developing a world-class herd of goats.

When Helga began to write seriously, Carl advised “write until it hurts.” She was forty in 1958 when her first novel was published and would eventually write seventeen books in several different genres. She wrote three books of poetry on a broad range of subjects. One review noted that she, “sweeps deftly from primeval man to the atom bomb. She talks of love and death and birds and animals with an understanding and quiet perception one can

only marvel at.” She wrote five books of children’s stories where she explores lessons in life, like the young boy in ***Bo and the Old Donkey*** who must deal with the impending death of his beloved pet. Her characters and settings depict everyday life; they are not the fantastical characters and places of the Rootabaga Country created by her father.

She published one book of short stories—a genre her father didn’t attempt—and four novels. All the books are steeped in the historical details of the time in which they are set. In her novels, Helga wrote about the life of her characters—"the songs they sang, the way they spoke and the animals they owned and the crops they made...of their household customs...of their bees and flowers.” Her first novel, ***The Wheel of Earth***, was based in the early twentieth-century Midwest. An article in ***The New York Times Book Review*** described it as:

A strong and intensely interesting novel that commands deep respect for its compassion and its integrity...Miss Sandburg writes with a power and simplicity that is sometimes elemental and yet is shot through with imagery almost startling in its vividness.

Her third novel, ***Owl’s Nest***, takes place in the summer lake community of Harbor Michigan where Helga lived for almost twenty years during her youth. She wrote that, “it was almost an excuse to tell of the love affair between me and the dunelands. And I put it in the children and the water and the dogs and the rafts and the songs.” In her poem, “Great Lake of My Childhood,” she writes:

*Great Lake of my childhood, dangerous and beautiful,
Will you never let me go?
Tonight again you come into my dream,
Churning and foaming, and almost drowning me,
And hurling me upon the shore.*

Helga also wrote four books of non-fiction. One of the best, cowritten with her husband Georg Crile, chief of surgery at the Cleveland Clinic, was ***Above and Below: A Journey Through Our National Underwater Parks***. The book is a highly personal, almost day-by-day account of George's, Helga's, and her daughter Paula's adventures with the land and sea animals in America's underwater parks from the Everglades to the California Channel Islands.

Her book of folk songs and music, ***Sweet Music: A Book of Family Reminiscence & Song*** included one hundred fifty of the songs she heard growing up, along with anecdotes from her life. With a nod to the evolution of folk music, she writes:

The songs that come from people grow slowly as they are handed from mouth to mouth, and unless there's a quality about that the people like, they're bound to die. Almost everyone who handles a song changes it slightly... this is correct; it is the tradition.

Finally, she wrote memoirs about her famous parents: *A Great & Glorious Romance: The Story of Carl Sandburg and Lilian Steichen*, "the story of a daughter's search into her past, a story of beginnings and ends"; and *Where Love Begins: A Portrait of Carl Sandburg and His Family as Seen Through the Eyes of His Youngest Daughter*. It was described as:

...a book of unusual depth, charm, and insight into a loving and talented family, into the creative processes of one of the nation's literary giants, and one woman's attempt to realize the potential of her own gifts.

Although Helga's fame never reached the level of her father's, she was an outstanding writer and led a remarkable life. Someone should write her biography.

Thanks for reading,

John Quinley is the author of the book, ***Discovering Carl Sandburg: The Eclectic Life of an American Icon***, and the play, ***The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg***. He is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock, North Carolina. Contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com with questions and comments or to inquiry about speaking engagements.