

Hi Friends,

Sandburg never earned acting credits in films, television, or on the theater stage, although his performance—giving lectures, reciting poetry, singing folks songs, and ad-libbing with audiences—required a carefully crafted stage persona. He also never wrote a play or an opera, although the play about him, *The World of Carl Sandburg*, toured the country, and a one-act opera about his book, *The People, Yes*, was broadcast on the radio.

This month's *Letter* shares Sandburg's experience as a reviewer of silent films, a writer and advisor for the movies, and a celebrity on television.

Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

P.S. My play about Sandburg, *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg: Everything, Everywhere, All the Time*, will be performed starting this spring and continuing through the fall. More about that later.

Letters from a Sandburg Docent – April 2025

John W. Quinley



Monroe and Sandburg in New York City Apartment taken by Len Steckler

Affair with the Film Industry

I wish I could have been with her that day. I believe I could have persuaded her not to take her life.

Sandburg writing about Marilyn Monroe in *Look* magazine after her suicide.

Dear Readers,

Who would have guessed that despite an age gap of nearly five decades, Marilyn Monroe and Carl Sandburg were good friends. They first met either in 1958 during the filming of *Some Like It Hot* or two years later, when Sandburg was temporarily given Monroe's dressing room as his office—he called it the un-dressing room.

Sandburg never earned acting credits in films or on television, although his platform performance—giving lectures, reciting poetry, singing folks songs, and ad-libbing with audiences—required a carefully crafted stage persona. He was also a reviewer of silent films, a writer and advisor for the movies, and a celebrity on television.

A pivotal new direction for Sandburg began in 1920 when he became the staff film critic for the *Chicago Daily News*. All the great silent movie stars like Charlie Chaplin, Tom Mix, Douglas Fairbanks, Lillian Gish, Rudolph Valentino, and Clara Bow traveled to Chicago to promote their films. Sandburg interviewed them all there and made trips to Hollywood as well. From 1920 to 1928, he wrote more than two thousand film reviews.

Sandburg got his first opportunity to work directly in the movie industry in 1929 when silent-era movie mogul D. W. Griffith asked him to consult on his upcoming cinematic biography of Abraham Lincoln. Sandburg turned down the offer, but more than fifty years later, a film based on Sandburg's Lincoln biographies was produced in a 1976 TV miniseries titled *Lincoln*, starring Hal Holbrook.

Sandburg had two opportunities in the 1940s to work directly in filmmaking. The first was to write and narrate a war documentary called *Bomber*. The second was to draft an epic novel about the American spirit for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Called *Remembrance Rock*, it turned out to be much too long for a film adaptation. It was a great story, however, and I suspect it might make a great series for today's streaming market. The last opportunity was in the 1960s to assist in writing the script for *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Although he made only minor contributions to the film, he enjoyed his year and a half in Hollywood.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Sandburg appeared as a celebrity guest for hosts such as John Daly, Ed Sullivan, Howard K. Smith, Dave Garroway, Steve Allen, Milton Berle, and Gary Moore. And the renowned film star Gene Kelly danced on television to words written by Sandburg:

Tell your feet the alphabet.

Tell your feet the multiplication table.

Tell your feet where to go and watch 'em go and come back.

Can you dance a question mark?
Can you dance an exclamation point?
Can you dance a couple of commas?
And bring it to a finish with a period?

Television producers Fred Friendly and Edward R. Murrow came to Sandburg's North Carolina home in 1954 to film an episode of their news magazine show *See It Now*. In 2012, a documentary called *The Day Carl Sandburg Died* aired on the PBS American Masters series. The film featured poetry, folk songs, and original interviews by Helga Sandburg Crile (Sandburg's youngest daughter), singer Pete Seeger, writer Studs Terkel, biographer Penelope Niven, and others.

Sandburg's groundbreaking forays into the film industry extended over nearly fifty years from the 1920s to the 1960s. Whether as a movie critic, screenwriter, or celebrity guest (or as a platform artist), Sandburg was at heart a performer. He always played himself.

Thanks for reading,

Quinley is the author of *Discovering Carl Sandburg* and is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com.