

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

November 2025

John W. Quinley

Dear Readers,

There are people today who are feeling powerless to counter the direction our country is going economically, politically, and morally. Sandburg addressed the people during an early time when so many felt powerless in the light of the Great Depression.

Sandburg never lost faith that the American people and democracy would prevail. Let's hope he was right.

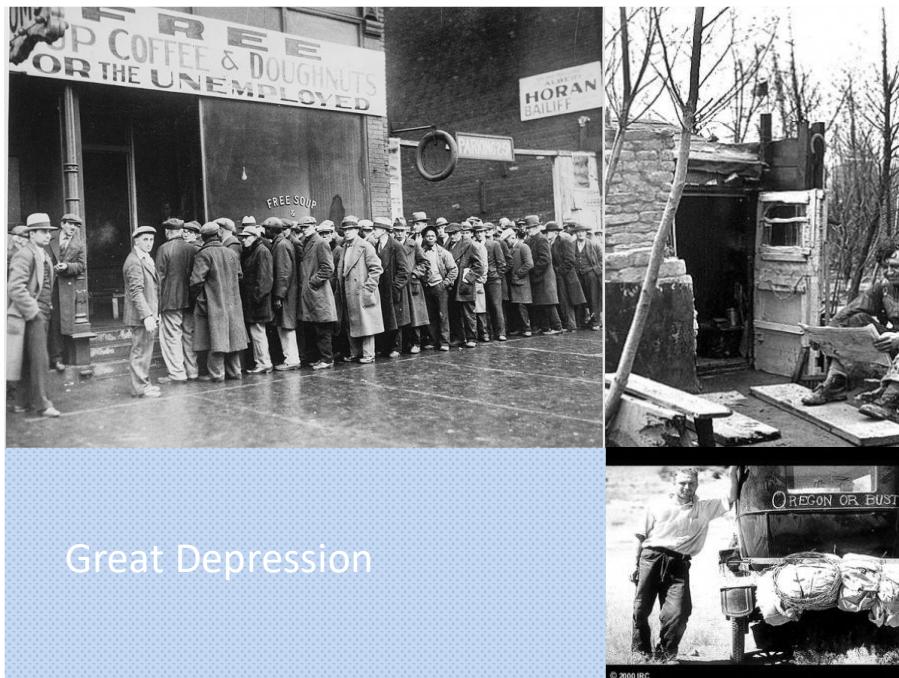
Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

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Hope for the People

These are heroes then—among the plain people—

Heroes, did you say? And why Not? They
give all they've got and ask no questions and
take what comes and what more do you
want?

The People, Yes

Dear Readers,

The Great Depression in the 1930s led to mass unemployment and underemployment throughout the United States. The American landscape was spoiled with shuttered factories and businesses, house and farm foreclosures, and soup and bread lines. Many lived in shanty towns or left nearly everything they owned to go west to look for work. At its peak, one-fourth of Americans of working age were unemployed or worked part-time for a fraction of their former earnings.

In *The People, Yes*, Sandburg describes these struggling masses as “Without a stake in the country/Without jobs or nest eggs/Marching they don’t know where/Marching north south west—.”

Street walking jobhunters, walkers alive and keen,
sleepwalkers drifting along, the stupefied and
hopeless down-and-outs, the game fighters
who will die fighting.

He asks,

Have you seen men handed refusals
till they began to laugh
at the notion of ever landing a job again—
Muttering with the laugh,
“It’s driving me nuts and the family too...”

Have you seen women and kids
step out and hustle for the family
some in night life on the streets

some fighting other women and kids
for the leavings of fruit and vegetable markets
or searching alleys and garbage dumps for scraps?

Have you seen them with savings gone
furniture and keepsakes pawned
and the pawntickets blown away in cold winds?

As the Depression wore on, people began to think these new realities of life were permanent, that “around the corner may be prosperity or the/worst depression yet: who knows?/Nobody.” Rather than holding a failed economic system accountable, they blamed themselves, creating a legacy of hopelessness.

Sandburg wrote *The People, Yes* to lift the hopes of the people who “In the darkness with a great bundle of grief...marched in tune and step with the constellations of universal law.” It was a message of hope rooted in the resiliency of the people.

The people will live on.

The learning and blundering people will live on.

They will be tricked and sold and again sold

And go back to the nourishing earth for rootholds,

The people so peculiar in renewal and comeback,

You can’t laugh off their capacity to take it.

The mammoth rests between his cyclonic dramas.

The People, Yes, however, delivers much more than its central message of hope. It is an epic, book-long single prose poem organized into 107 sections of discrete categories (proverbs, anecdotes, yarns, cliches, biographies, legends, character sketches, folk-wisdom, dialogues, and songs) and thematic clusters (greed, class struggle, war, love, marriage, hope, materialism, and peace). Sandburg weaves together a tapestry of diverse

American experience across generations and cultures. In the foreword, he describes his work as:

Being several stories and psalms nobody
would want to laugh at

interspersed with memoranda variations
worth a second look

along with sayings and yarns traveling on
grief and laughter

running sometimes as a fugitive air in the
classic manner

breaking into jig time and tap dancing
nohow classical

and further broken by plain and irregular
sounds and echoes from

the roar and whirl of street crowds, work
gangs, sidewalk clamor,

with interludes of midnight cool blue and
inviolable stars

over the phantom frames of skyscrapers.

In the last poem of the book, Sandburg returns to the message of hope and resilience. He asks, but doesn't answer, the perennial question, where are we going as a nation?

The old anvil laughs at many broken hammers.
there are men who can't be bought.
the fireborn are at home in fire.
the stars make no noise.
you can't hinder the wind from blowing.
time is a great teacher.
who can live without hope?
In the darkness with a great bundle of grief
the people march,
In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for
keeps, the people march:
“Where to? what next?”

Sandburg collected bits of Americana for decades to provide the foundation for *The People, Yes*, and it took him eight years to write it. It was his last major book of poetry, and for many scholars it marked the culmination of his work as a poet. It was his favorite.

Thanks for reading,

John

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