

## VACHEL LINDSAY'S ATHENS OF AMERICA

by  
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As the poet Vachel Lindsay approached Emporia, Kansas, on his 1912 walking tour of rural America he paused to write in his journal, "Emporia, the Athens of America, is just ahead..."<sup>1</sup> Reflection upon Lindsay's journal notation, and the era when it was written, may cause one to speculate about the factors which had transpired between the time the city was founded in 1857, and the date of Lindsay's first visit in 1912, to merit this spontaneous accolade.(Fig. 1)



Fig. 1 Poet Vachel Lindsay. Mr. Lindsay referred to Emporia as the "Athens of America." (Courtesy William Allen White Library, Normaliana Collection.)

This paper is an attempt to identify some of the factors that may have led to the noteworthy turn-of-the-century reputation enjoyed by Emporia. Commerce, transportation, communication and education will each be briefly examined from a geographer's perspective. The major portion of the paper will, however, focus on selected events at The Kansas State Normal School that typify its contribution to the community's reputation during the early decades of the 20th century.

It appears rather obvious that the city founders' initial purpose was to develop a commercial center in the fertile untapped region near the confluence of the Neosho and Cottonwood Rivers in east-central Kansas. Selection of the name Emporia -- the plural form of the Latin *emporium* (a trading place) -- offers the first clue as to their intent. Further evidence of their motive may be recognized in the names assigned to the town's primary streets. The main thoroughfare was designated Commercial Street, while others bore such names as Market, Merchant and Exchange streets.

Emporia's pioneers, unlike some of the zealous but short-sighted town builders of the era, seem to have been practical people with a vision of long range urban growth.<sup>2</sup> They were apparently aware of a principle of urban geography relating to the need for cities to become "multi-functional" places in order to grow and achieve permanence. While they developed the land and water resources of the area, a parallel effort was made to promote transportation, communication and education. Also detectable during this early period was an awareness of the importance of the arts and entertainment in maintaining a viable well rounded community.

Transportation arteries to facilitate the flow of commerce and stimulate further economic development were deemed essential by the town's founders. On July 21, 1857, just five months after the town began, the local "Railroad Committee" met with Kansas railroad pioneer Cyrus K. Holiday to discuss strategies for bringing rail service to Emporia.<sup>3</sup> Although trade and travel were

primarily limited to wagon traffic and a hack line for the next twelve years, railway service became available in 1869. On December 22, 1869, the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad arrived, and by the 14th of September of the following year the first Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe track reached the city.<sup>4</sup> Before the end of the 19th century, virtually all of America had become accessible by rail.

At the time of Vachel Lindsay's first visit, had he chosen to do so, he could have traveled by train. Even allowing for a lack of funds for a ticket, he might have followed the example of fellow poet Carl Sandburg who, in 1897, made the first of his many trips to the city as a "hobo" aboard a freight train.<sup>5</sup>

Two other transportation related items may be worthy of note. At the time of Mr. Lindsay's visit, local businessman "Mit" Wilhite was in the process of successfully convincing representatives of the national government that the proposed new federal highway linking the coasts (U.S. 50) should pass through Emporia.<sup>6</sup> Also in the year 1912, the city was celebrating the first anniversary of its electric streetcar system.

The communication tradition of Emporia is almost as old as the city itself. The Emporia Town Company was founded on February 20, 1857, and 75 days later the first edition of the local newspaper was printed. Preston Plumb's *Kansas News*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 6, 1857, began an era of uninterrupted news that has continued to the present. Throughout much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the city had two competing dailies, the *Emporia Daily Republican* and the *Emporia Gazette*.<sup>7</sup> The latter newspaper, William Allen White's *Emporia Gazette*, had already achieved national recognition by the time of Lindsay's visit.

Electronic communication had its beginning locally when telegraph wires

accompanied the railways into town. During the late 19th century, the first city telephone company had become operational. Although Emporia had no commercial radio station at the time of Lindsay's arrival, it was less than ten years later that a licensed radio broadcast was originated from the Normal School. On the 13th of April 1922, a live performance by renowned opera star Claire Dux was transmitted from Albert Taylor Hall on the campus of Kansas State Normal School.<sup>8</sup>

Education ranked high among the priorities of the early settlers. The first edition of the town's newspaper in June of 1857 carried an advertisement seeking a school teacher.<sup>9</sup> Mary J. Watson opened Emporia's first school on October 14, 1858.<sup>10</sup> Ten years later, there were 29 public schools in session in the county.<sup>11</sup> For brief periods during the late 19th century, such specialized learning facilities as a small business college and a conservatory of music were also operated in the city.

After narrowly failing in its bid to acquire the University of Kansas, Emporia was selected by the state legislature in 1863 as the site for The Kansas State Normal School. On February 15, 1865, K.S.N. began classes with an initial enrollment of only 18 students.<sup>12</sup> The College of Emporia, a denominational liberal arts college affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, enrolled its first students in November of 1883, becoming Emporia's second institution of higher learning.<sup>13</sup>

The two colleges were located on the same street, less than a mile apart. Both institutions attained national recognition for the quality of their academic programs and each provided many educational and cultural opportunities for the community. Although the "teachers" and "preachers," as they were often referred to by the local

press, were fierce rivals on the athletic fields they frequently cooperated to bring to Emporia cultural events seldom available in other small cities in the nation's heartland. Exemplifying these joint efforts during the early 1900s was the co-sponsorship of performances by the New York Symphony Orchestra.<sup>14</sup>

Educational institutions emerged as major assets for Emporia and undoubtedly had a stabilizing effect on the community. The education function, with its associated activities, may well have had the greatest influence on Mr. Lindsay's perception of Emporia as the "Athens of America."

The Kansas State Normal School evolved into Emporia's most enduring center for higher education. In 1923, the Normal School became Kansas State Teachers College and in 1977, its name was changed to Emporia State University. Although the school had grown and expanded its mission, the contribution it made to the educational and cultural life of Emporia during its sixty years as K.S.N. should not be overlooked.

The following account of events on the K.S.N. campus is an attempt to demonstrate the caliber of reputation-enhancing activities provided by the institution during the era of Mr. Lindsay's visit. The events listed are only selected examples to illustrate type and quality. A comprehensive listing would require a book-length volume. The time span considered will be from 1900 to 1923, which includes that part of the 20th century when The Kansas State Normal School still "officially" existed.

As a teacher training institution, the Normal School kept its faculty and students informed about that field by hosting numerous guest lecturers from many phases of education. These speakers ranged from university presidents, to public school officials and innovators in education. They represented all of the

geographic regions of the United States, as well as several foreign nations.

University presidents came from places as divergent as the Universities of Washington, Iowa and Maine. David Star Jordan, President of Stanford University, who lectured and conducted seminars during the summer of 1922, exemplified this scholarly group.<sup>15</sup>

Public school officials came from backgrounds as varied as the city of Chicago, the state of California, and the nation of Australia. The address of J.H. Hughes, Inspector of Schools For Canada, on July 17, 1906, was indicative of the international input.<sup>16</sup>

Bryon W. King and Anna E. George were two examples of education innovators of the period. Mr. King, an elocutionist, was a nationally recognized authority on training for the speech handicapped. Anna E. George, whose lecture series began June 20, 1914, was America's first Montessori student and the translator of Madame Montessori's teaching system into English.<sup>17</sup>

Hundreds of notable scholars were brought to the campus to lecture in various disciplines of the arts and sciences. Included among these were naturalist Henry Olds, chemist Harvey W. Wiley, economist Edward Allsworth, psychologist H. H. Goddard and folklorist John A. Lomax. One name that was easily recognized by the author was W. W. Atwood, formerly chairman of the Department of Geography and Geology at Harvard University. Dr. Atwood, one of the nation's foremost geographers, frequently conducted week-long seminars in physical geography at K.S.N. during the early 20th century.

The events that received the greatest attention were those featuring appearances by individuals or groups more widely recognized by the general public. Nationally renowned celebrities consistently

played to packed houses at the campus theater facilities. Individuals drawing large audiences included political figures, poets, authors, explorers, vocalists and virtuoso instrumentalists. Performances by orchestras, bands, ballets and other professional theatrical companies also played to capacity crowds.

Among the ranks of political personalities presenting addresses were Herbert C. Hoover, William Howard Taft and William Jennings Bryan. Mr. Hoover spoke at the Normal School before becoming president, while ex-president Taft lectured at the institution on two occasions. Renowned orator William Jennings Bryan, an unsuccessful aspirant to the presidency, often visited the campus. In addition to his formal orations, Bryan frequently spoke to classes in government and discussed politics at social gatherings.<sup>18</sup>

A variety of other political figures also came to the Normal School. A few examples were Martin V. Brumbaugh, former Governor of Pennsylvania, Sir Frederick Whyte, a member of the British Parliament, and Señor De La Garza, former Ambassador of Mexico.

Several literary personages of the era were evidently popular attractions. Poets, authors and journalists came to Emporia in great numbers. Representing poetry we find such names as Carl Sandburg (Fig. 2), Vachel Lindsay, and the Irish poet Seumas Mac Manus. Some of the formidable authors included Ida M. Tarbell, John Kendrick Bangs, and the internationally renowned British writer Hugh Walpole.<sup>19</sup>

Journalism was represented by dozens of the foremost correspondents and editors of the period. Two of those correspondents who may still be remembered by today's older generation were Irvin S. Cobb and Boardman Robinson. The lecturing editors came from such widely read publications as *Life*,

*Harper's*, and *Publisher's Weekly*. One rather unique member of the editorial fraternity was John C. Freand, editor of *Musical America*, who spoke at K.S.N. in

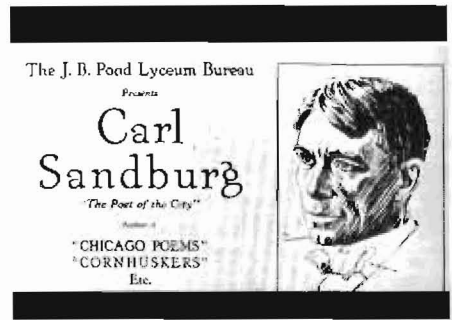


Fig. 2 Carl Sandburg on the occasion of one of his several Emporia appearances. (Courtesy of William Allen White Library, Normaliana Collection.)

1916. Mr. Freand was not only the editor of that publication, but in 1877, was its founder.<sup>20</sup>

In deference to space limitations, and with apology for lack of paragraph structure, the following list of individuals is offered to illustrate the varied backgrounds of other guest speakers at K.S.N.: Social reformer Jane Addams of Hull House, suffragist Isabelle Beecher, and prison reformer Maud Ballington Booth, were representative of the social activists of this period. Roald Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole, and Arctic explorer Evelyn Briggs Baldwin were among the international celebrities. General Nelson A. Miles, former commander of the U.S. Army, was a newsworthy figure during both the 19th century Indian wars and the Spanish-American War. John Mitchell, President of The United Mine Workers Union, lectured at the school at a time when national interest in labor unrest was high. The renowned sculptor Larado Taft demonstrated his art for both students and general public at Kansas Normal School.

Vocalists appear to have been major attractions at the institution. Because of

the level of student and public support for this form of entertainment, performances by acclaimed vocalists were often sold out well in advance of the events. Some of the most famous operatic soloists of the era sang at K.S.N. Many stars of Chicago, Boston and New York opera companies, as well as those from some foreign countries, visited the campus during the early 20th century. The New York Metropolitan Opera, alone, accounted for more than a score of these artists.

The following are a few of the male performers that have sung both at the New York Met and K.S.N. Tenors have included Paul Althouse, Rafaelo Diaz, and Guiseppe Agostini. Some of the baritones were David Bispham, Vincente Ballester, and Arthur Middleton. Mr. Bispham was widely recognized as having one of the most powerful voices of his time. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 David Bispham, Metropolitan Opera baritone, who sang at Emporia State in 1909. (Courtesy William Allen White Library, Normaliana Collection.)

So many legendary divas associated with the "Met" sang in Emporia, it is difficult to limit the list without a sense of guilt. Among the more famous sopranos were Frieda Hempel, Myrna Sharlow, Marie Tiffany, Madame Lillian Nordica, Madame Johanna Gadski, and Madame Alda (Gatti-Casazza). Anna Case, a "Met"

soprano who performed before a standing-room-only crowd on December 1, 1915, was so popular the Emporia telephone company installed microphones on the stage to permit phone patrons to hear the program in their homes.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the outstanding contralto voices were those of Merle Alcock, Frances Ingram, and Madame Ernestine Schuman-Heink. Madame Schuman-Heink, who returned many times to the campus, developed a warm rapport with the students. She became known to them, by her own request, as "Grandma." Preceding some of her later visits, the school paper would sometimes simply note, "Grandma" will sing here again in the spring.<sup>22</sup>

Virtuoso instrumentalists also shared the spotlight at K.S.N. The roster of musicians included such notables as flutist William Kincaid, who attained fame as a member of The New York Symphony, and the distinguished Dutch cellist Cornelius Van Vliet. Bohumir Kryl, once a part of the Sousa Band, was billed as the world's greatest cornetist. Although a variety of instruments were occasionally heard, the violin and piano were most frequently featured.

Violinists Camilla Urso, Mischa Elman, Maud Powell, and Olga Eitner typified the quality of performers during the period. Internationally renowned Camilla Urso played in Emporia many times, both before and after the turn-of-the-century.<sup>23</sup>

Pianists outnumbered all other solo instrumentalists. They were not only more numerous, but several of them played return engagements. Frank Mannheimer, for instance, who was featured at the dedication of Albert Taylor Hall on the Normal School campus in 1917, returned to Emporia at least five times. His most recent visit to the campus was in 1963. Other pianists of note that made multiple

trips to the Emporia stage were Augusta Cottlow, Ignaz Friedman, Mischa Levitsky, and Rudolph Reuter. Making at least one appearance each, during the era were Thuel Burnham, H.B. Turpin, Carl Machlin, and Nat Yves.

Orchestras and bands had already become an established tradition in Emporia at the dawning of the 20th century. The public schools, both colleges, and many social organizations maintained orchestras and bands. Emporia's "Town Band" had been organized in September of 1886.<sup>24</sup> The Music Department of the Normal School, guided by Professor Frank Beach, achieved national recognition during the second decade of the century. With so much musical talent, it is not surprising that performances by the nation's most renowned professional groups attracted large audiences.

Some of the largest and most prestigious musical aggregations of the day came to K.S.N. Many of these returned time and again to perform for capacity crowds. This tendency to return to Emporia may be related to "box-office," but another less tangible factor may have also been responsible for the phenomenon. Walter Damrosch, distinguished director of The New York Symphony Orchestra, when asked by a school newspaper reporter about this subject, noted that he especially enjoyed Emporia engagements because he knew of no other place where music was more appreciated or better understood.<sup>25</sup> Orchestras that highlighted the period were the Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York Symphonies. The Chicago Symphony was the earliest of the three to visit K.S.N., making its first appearance in 1902. The Minneapolis Orchestra, however, was the most frequent guest. It first performed at the Normal School in 1914, and returned often during the next twenty years. The New York Symphony was the largest orchestra to perform at the

school. Its 1916 performance set a record for the largest orchestra to perform in the State of Kansas at that time. The following year it returned to K.S.N., establishing a new record.<sup>26</sup>

The Irish Regiment Band and The Sousa Band exemplified those groups providing martial music. John Philip Sousa And The Sousa Band played in Emporia five times with three of those performances at Albert Taylor Hall. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4 "March King" John Phillip Sousa. Program for one of the Sousa band's many Emporia performances. (Courtesy of William Allen White Library, Normaliana Collection.)

While chatting with some of Emporia's elder citizens, who remembered Sousa's visits, the author was impressed by their vivid recollection of the events. They described the pageantry of the distinguished conductor marching his colorfully clad band up Commercial Street, across the campus, and into Albert Taylor Hall. The color and the stirring music associated with their "entrance" was, evidently, a major event in itself.

Shakespeare, opera, ballet, and Broadway plays were also common elements of the educational and cultural life at The Kansas State Normal School. Professional theatrical companies, whose casts were often comprised of the stellar performers of the time, frequently

Coburn Players, The Ben Greet Players, The Devereux Players, and the Shakespearian Playhouse of New York were among the most popular. The Ben Greet Players, who appeared several times at K.S.N. during the early 1900's, did not make their final visit to Emporia until June 11, 1941.<sup>27</sup> The Coburn Players included the Normal School on their first "western tour" in 1911.

Opera, although represented throughout the period by scores of solo artists, did not begin to appear in the form of professional "companies" until the WW I era. The San Carlo Opera Company's presentation of *Carmen* in 1917, however, began a tradition of such productions that continued well beyond the age of the Normal School. The early organizations included the San Carlo Opera Company, The De Koven Opera Company, and The Dunbar Opera Company. The talent of their personnel is attested to by the fact that many of the performers sang, at some time in their careers, with major European and American companies such as the New York Metropolitan Opera.

The most frequently appearing group was The San Carlo Opera Company. Its repertoire ranged from *Aida* and *Pagliacci*, to *Carmen*. One of its truly unique presentations was on November 22, 1922, when Japanese prima donna Tamiki Miura was featured in *Madame Butterfly*. (Fig. 5)

Ballet troupes were not frequently hosted by the Normal School. The few that did appear were, however, of great stature. Adolph Bolm, formerly director of The Imperial Russian Ballet, brought the Bolm Ballet to the campus twice. Probably the most noteworthy ballet event at K.S.N. occurred January 10, 1922. On that date, The Ballet Russe, featuring the internationally renowned ballerina Anna Pavlova, performed at Albert Taylor Hall.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 5 Program for *Madame Butterfly* featuring prima donna Tamiki Miuri (1922). (Courtesy of William Allen White Library, Normaliana Collection.)

Contemporary American theater was also a popular form of entertainment at Kansas State Normal School between 1900 and 1923. "Stock" companies were numerous throughout the history of the institution, but in the 20th century, when Chicago and New York theaters began to take their productions "on the road," Emporia was often included on their circuits. Broadway shows with New York casts became a relatively common occurrence. Although space prohibits anything more than a sampling of theatrical events, the following are a few of the plays and players that came before the footlights at K.S.N.

Some of the biggest hits were the Guy Bolton-P.G. Wodehouse musical "Oh Boy," the George M. Cohan-Sam Harris comedy "Going Up," and Jerome Kern's "Oh Lady! Lady!" Other popular productions included Mary Roberts Rinehart's "The Bat" and George Bernard Shaw's "Arms And The Man."<sup>29</sup>

Among the prominent actors of the period were Norman Hackett, Guy Bates Post, Frank McGlynn, and Otis Skinner. Thomas Jefferson, of the famous Jefferson theatrical family, made his final visit to

Emporia during the period. Actresses of renown were Madame Borgny Hammer, Evelyn Warden, Edith May Clark, and Ruth Chatterton. The most durable leading lady was May Robson, who starred in five plays at K.S.N. during the period. Miss Robson had previously performed at Emporia's Whitley Opera House in 1908, and returned later in her career to perform at The Kansas State Teachers College.<sup>30</sup>

### SUMMARY

The preceding account briefly mentions several factors that were responsible for the admirable reputation of Emporia, Kansas, circa the time of Vachel Lindsay's visit in 1912. This brief

paper focused, primarily, on the contributions of The Kansas State Normal School to that reputation. Other investigators might, just as easily, write a similar article that places more emphasis upon such Emporia institutions as The College of Emporia, the Whitley Opera House, or any of several civic organizations that contributed to the city's rich historic tradition.

In the mind of the author, however, three things seem obvious. First, the impression of Emporia as stated by Mr. Lindsay was not without merit. Second, The Kansas State Normal School was one of the major reasons for that image. Third, the "Athens of America" was, in truth, just ahead...

### END NOTES

1. Vachel Lindsay, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* (New York: The McMillan Co., 1914), p. 82.
2. Preston B. Plumb was one of the key figures of the Emporia Town Company and Emporia's first newspaper publisher. He became an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War, and later served as United States Senator representing Kansas. The current administration building at Emporia State University bears his name.
3. Jacob Stotler, *Annals of Emporia and Lyon County: Historical Incidents of the First Quarter Century 1857 to 1882* (Emporia: 1882), p. 14.
4. Laura French, *History of Emporia and Lyon County* (Emporia: Gazette Print, 1929), p. 37.
5. Charles E. Webb, "A Caravan of Culture: Visitors to Emporia, Kansas," *Heritage of Kansas*, Summer 1979, Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 30.
6. *Emporia Gazette*, November 22, 1911, p. 1; December 2, 1911, p. 1, 4. Background information on the national highway study.
7. The *Emporia Daily Republican* closed publication on June 2, 1905.
8. Charles E. Webb, *A Datebook of Famous Visitors to Emporia* (Emporia: E.S.U. Endowment Assoc., 1978), p. 28.
9. "Wanted, Teachers and Mechanics of all Kinds," *Kansas News*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 6, 1857, p. 4.
10. Webb, *Datebook*, p. 70.
11. Stotler, *Annals*, p. 67.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.



13. Ibid., p. 67.
14. Webb, *Datebook*, p. 14.
15. Ibid., pp. 42, 43, 48, 51.
16. *Normal School Bulletin*, July 21, 1906.
17. Webb, *Datebook*, p. 46.
18. Webb, *Heritage of Kansas*, pp. 40, 41.
19. Ibid., pp. 19-22.
20. Ibid., pp. 37-39.
21. Webb, *Datebook*, p. 84.
22. *Normal School Bulletin*, January and February 1923.
23. Webb, *Heritage of Kansas*, pp. 22-24.
24. Stotler, *Annals*, p. 68.
25. *Normal School Bulletin*, May 13, 1917.
26. Webb, *Heritage of Kansas*, p. 26.
27. Webb, *Datebook*, p. 43.
28. Ibid., p. 3.
29. Webb, *Heritage of Kansas*, pp. 9-10.
30. Webb, *Datebook*, pp. 18, 28, 84.