# Prairie-Town Boy Short Guide

## Prairie-Town Boy by Carl Sandburg

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# Overview

Prairie-Town Boy is the autobiography of the poet and historian Carl Sandburg, written when he was in his seventies.

Adapted for young readers from the longer Always the Young Strangers, which the New York Times called the greatest autobiography ever written by an American, the book tells of Sandburg's boyhood in Galesburg, Illinois, and continues through his entrance into college. In these memoirs, Sandburg recalls the people, places, and experiences that influenced his youth, including those that led to his deep respect for the common person and to his interest in the life of Abraham Lincoln. The book shows the role that immigrants—particularly Swedes—played in the settling of the Midwest, and in effect presents a social history of America in the 1880s and 1890s.

# About the Author

Carl August Sandburg was bom on January 6, 1878, in Galesburg, Illinois. His parents, August and Clara Sandburg, were Swedish immigrants who never learned to write. Carl left school after the eighth grade and held numerous odd jobs, including those of newspaper carrier, custodian, milk delivery boy, pharmacist's assistant, and barbershop shoeshine boy. At age nineteen, he decided to be a hobo, riding on railroad boxcars to Iowa, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. The following year, he returned to Galesburg and worked as an apprentice house painter and then enlisted in the Illinois Volunteers, serving as a private in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War.

After returning from the war, Sandburg enrolled as a special student at Lombard College in Galesburg, where he served as editor-in-chief of the Lombard Review and reporter for the Galesburg Evening Mail While a student, he also worked as a fireman and school janitor, and sold stereographs for Underwood and Underwood. He received an appointment to West Point, but failed the entrance examination in mathematics and grammar.

Sandburg dropped out of college only a few weeks before graduation and traveled as a salesman for Underwood and Underwood. His first three works, In Reckless Ecstasy, The Plaint of a Rose, and Incidentals, were published in 1904 and 1905 under the name Charles A. Sandburg. He gave lectures on Walt Whitman and other subjects, and he wrote and edited for numerous publications in Chicago and Milwaukee, occasionally using the pseudonyms Crimson, W. C. Coulson, and Sidney Arnold.

On June 15, 1908, Carl married Lillian (Paula) Steichen, a Latin teacher who became a champion breeder of dairy goats. They had three children, Margaret, Janet, and Helga. Both Paula and Carl supported and worked for the Social Democratic party: Paula translated German editorials into English, and Carl wrote a pamphlet entitled You and Your Job. In 1910, Carl became the private secretary to Emil Seidel, Socialist mayor of Milwaukee. He also wrote for the Day Book, a tabloid newspaper in Chicago that covered social issues.

Sandburg joined the staff of the Chicago Daily News in 1917 and continued to write for the paper until 1930. His articles on blacks in Chicago, originally written for the Daily News, were compiled in The Chicago Race Riots (1919).

During World War II, the Chicago Times syndicated his weekly column on the war in Europe; some of these articles were collected in a book entitled Home Front Memo (1943).

In addition to his newspaper work, Sandburg also wrote poetry and won the 1914 Helen Haire Levinson Prize for best poems of the year with poems published in the March issue of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse. He shared the Poetry Society of America prize in 1919 for Cornhuskers and in 1921 for Smoke and Steel (1920), and he was named a Phi Beta Kappa poet by Harvard University in 1928 and by William and Mary College in

1943. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951 for his Complete Poems (1950), and he received the Poetry Society of America gold medal for poetry in 1953.

He also won the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup in 1960 for Harvest Poems 1910-1960(1960) and in 1961 for Wind Song. In 1963 he received the International United Poets Award as "Honorary Poet Laureate of the United States of America." His other books of poetry include Chicago Poems (1916), Slabs of the Sunburnt West (1922), Early Moon (1930), The People, Yes (1936), and Honey and Salt (1963). Collaborating with Norman Corwin, Sandburg adapted his poetry for the stage in a play entitled The World of Carl Sandburg in 1961.

Sandburg spent many years researching and writing about Abraham Lincoln.

A two-volume biography, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, was published in 1926, and an adaption of the first twenty-six chapters of this book was published for young adults as Abe Lincoln Grows Up. Sandburg wrote Mary Lincoln: Wife and Widow (1932) with Paul M. Angle, and his four-volume Abraham Lincoln: The War Years (1939) received the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1940. Sandburg collaborated with Frederick Hill Meserve on The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln (1944).

He also wrote the Lincoln Collector: The Story of Oliver R. Barrett's Great Private Collection (1949). Sandburg received numerous awards for his work on Lincoln, including the Friends of Literature Award (1934), the Theodore Roosevelt Distinguished Service Medal (1939), the American Academy of Arts and Letters gold medal for history (1952 and 1953), the New York Civil War Round Table silver medal (1954), the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Lyndon B. Johnson (1964), a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People award for being a "major prophet of civil rights in our time" (1965), and many honorary doctorates.

Sandburg wrote fairy tales for children, initially invented as stories for his daughters and later published as Rootabaga Stories (1922) and Rootabaga Pigeons (1923). He also loved music, particularly folk songs, and closed, his lectures by singing and playing the guitar. He published two collections of American folk songs: The American Songbag (1927) and New American Songbag (1950).

Sandburg's autobiography, Always the Young Strangers, was published in 1952 and received the 1953 Taminent Institution Award. Prairie-Town Boy is an adaption of this autobiography for young adults. Sandburg also wrote a historical romance, Remembrance Rock (1948), and in 1960 served as a consultant in Hollywood for the movie The Greatest Story Ever Told. Sandburg died on July 22, 1967, at his home, Connemara, in Flat Rock, North Carolina.

He was eighty-nine years old.

# Setting

Sandburg is born in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1878, twenty years after one of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas's debates is staged in the town.

At the time of Sandburg's birth, persons who knew and served with Lincoln still live in the area, and the country is still recovering from the Civil War. Galesburg is a young community, predominantly Republican and recently settled by immigrants, including many from Sweden.

The Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroads link the city to the rest of the nation. Although its population is only fifteen thousand, Galesburg boasts three colleges and is nicknamed "the Athens of the Midwest."

# Social Sensitivity

Sandburg treats religion, particularly Swedish Lutheranism, with sensitivity and objectivity. He shows how his parents' faith shapes his upbringing, comments on how an immigrant landowner might view God as a farmer, and quotes the words of a zealous shoe repairman's witness. He does not, however, judge or preach. Instead he states personal beliefs vividly through his descriptions of meeting a man with no arms at the circus or through his realization that alcoholism can ruin a person's career.

Sandburg is openly sensitive to the needs and rights of blacks, and he tries to pass this sensitivity on to his readers.

But readers may be offended by some of the language Sandburg uses, such as calling the upstairs of the new auditorium a "Nigger Heaven." In using such a term, however, Sandburg is not showing prejudice but reporting a commonly-used title, just as he means no offense by relating the nickname of one of his best friends, Frenchy Juneau.

Sandburg takes a candid view of immigrants. He does not stereotype or glamorize persons of any nationality.

His feelings are hurt when a Swedish family in Kansas is the first to label him a bum. He does, however, admire the influence and spirit that immigrants bring to the Midwest. He shows this admiration in his unsuccessful attempt to swap for a pocket biography of nineteenth-century Swedish-American inventor John Ericsson.

Readers who are aware of Sandburg's interest in politics will recognize incidents and characters in Prairie-Town Boy that may have influenced his later political stances. For example, the behavior of Republicans during a presidential campaign rally for James G. Elaine cause six-year-old Carl to wonder about the difference between Republicans and Democrats, and Sandburg says that the Socialists Mr. Sjodin and his son John "got him to think" about Socialist issues. The autobiography, however, handles politics with a calm rationality: Sandburg remembers and even interprets political situations from his youth, but he does not propagandize or ridicule.

# Literary Qualities

Carl Sandburg's autobiography combines a collection of personal memories with the carefully researched history of a midwestern town. Each chapter of the book describes the people, places, and events that shaped an aspect of the writer's life. The biography is not fictionalized but gives authentic representations from Sandburg's own experiences. Sandburg devotes most of the narrative to descriptions and insights rather than action or conversation. Although the biography is not documented or footnoted, the events of the story have legitimate basis both in fact and feeling.

The tone of Prairie-Town Boy is warm but honest, poetic but unsentimental.

Sandburg uses vivid details and natural impressions to show the vulnerability, awkwardness, and sensitivity of a boy.

Written by a man in his seventies, the autobiography is a simple and thoughtful look at life that contains no moralizing or bragging. The book has unity of form and style, but each character and event stands alone; themes and characters, while important, may not be reintroduced. The end result resembles a scrapbook rather than a tightly woven collection of stories.

# Themes and Characters

Numerous individuals appear in Prairie-Town Boy, but the one major character throughout the book is Carl Sandburg himself. The book centers on the many influences that shape the author's outlook on life, featuring a "scrapbook" of themes and memories rather than action and drama.

Family history and its effect on a person's life is one of the basic themes of the book. Sandburg's parents, August Sandburg and Clara Mathilda Anderson, and their relatives, John and Lena Krans and Magnus Holmes, come to America from Sweden, hoping for a better life and bringing with them a love for the land, a dedication to hard work, and a strong faith in God. Because they have a vision for themselves and their new country, they take financial risks and willingly change their names and their way of life, yet they always maintain a warmth and respect for their heritage.

Carl's immediate family significantly influences his life. Of the family's seven children, two die of diphtheria. Carl works before and after school from the time he is eleven to help support the family, and while he would prefer to go to high school, he quits school after the eighth grade in order to bring in money for the family. His father, a blacksmith for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroads, is a hard-working, somber, and unsympathetic man with little appreciation for education. Unable to write his name, he refuses to learn to read English and becomes furious when his children spend his hard-earned money on books. Carl's mother, however, smiles easily and encourages her family's interest in learning.

Sandburg illustrates the background of his love for books, history, and public speaking by describing his childhood hunger for learning. At the age of four, he longs for the ability to read. He lists his favorite books, which include histories and pocket biographies; acknowledges the encouragement of an excellent eighth-grade teacher; and recalls his first experience at public speaking in a Demorest Silver Medal Declamation Contest.

Prairie-Town Boy also develops a social history of America before the turn of the century, showing in characters such as George Brown, the mayor of Galesburg, and Newton Bateman, the president of Knox College, examples of the era's pioneer spirit. The lingering influence of Abraham Lincoln makes a deep impression on Carl. The political climate of the time comes to life as Sandburg describes his memories of a Republican rally for James G. Blaine, an unsuccessful presidential candidate; his attendance at a funeral parade for former president Ulysses S. Grant; his conversations with the Socialists; and his experiences in the military. The Sandburgs' financial difficulties mirror the hard times that many people face after the stock market panic of 1893, and Carl's experiences in a variety of jobs present a colorful picture of the types of work that are available. He gives a firsthand description of the life of a hobo and mentions details in midwestern life, ranging from visits to country fairs and the Barnum and Bailey Circus to descriptions of the different varieties of outhouses. The book gives an inside look at the leisure activities that people enjoy during the late nineteenth

century, including baseball, minstrel shows, boxing, and listening to Thomas Edison's talking phonograph.

Prairie-Town Boy is a story of hope and responsibility. It challenges young people to look closely at life in order to leam what it has to offer, and to look closely at themselves to find ways to take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Who were George Brown, Newton Bateman, and Justin Finley, and why do you think Sandburg chose to open his autobiography by discussing them?

2. Why is Sandburg disappointed with Robert Todd Lincoln and William Jennings Bryan?

3. Compare the personalities, backgrounds, and interests of Sandburg's father and mother.

4. What kind of relationship do Swedish immigrants, especially John Krans, Magnus Holmes, and August Sandburg, have to the land? What hopes and hardships did the land represent for them?

5. Why does Sandburg change his name from Carl to Charles? How does this compare to Holmes's name change?

6. What effect does Joe Elser have on Sandburg and Mart? In what ways does he serve as a father figure for them?

7. What role does the kitchen play in Sandburg's boyhood home? Why do you think that Sandburg goes into such a detailed description of this room?

8. What effect does Ulysses S. Grant's funeral parade have on Sandburg? What issues and questions does it raise for him?

9. Describe Sandburg's attitude towards baseball. Why is baseball such a popular sport at this time, and how does it get Sandburg and his friends into trouble? Why does he decide not to become a professional baseball player?

10. What impressions do the people in the circus side show have on Sandburg?

Which of these people does he admire?

Who does he feel sorry for and why? Who does he not feel sorry for and why?

11. In what ways is the Schulz Cigar Shop a significant location for Sandburg?

12. Who are the "Dirty Dozen" and how do they get their name? What is Sandburg's relationship to this group?

13. Describe Sandburg's attitude towards police officers and the law.

What experiences does he have with jails, and what are the differences between these experiences?

14. Discuss young Sandburg's attitude towards work. What kind of jobs does he hold? Which jobs does he like and which does he dislike? Why? Why do you think he changes jobs so often?

How do you think the jobs make him feel about himself?

15. What is Sandburg's impression of Chicago on his first visit? What does it symbolize for him as a youth? How does this compare to his later feelings about the city?

16. What does Sandburg mean when he says, "I was not a hobo in Lamed, Kansas"? What are some of the things you think Sandburg might have learned from being a hobo?

17. By the end of the book, how is Sandburg different from his father? How is he similar to him?

18. How does Sandburg's military experience differ from the typical military experience? How does it change his life?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What does Sandburg mean when he says that there is "no regular pattern" of person living in Galesburg? How would you describe the town and its inhabitants? What is the significance of Sandburg calling himself a "PrairieTown Boy"?

2. Why do you think Sandburg is so fascinated with Abraham Lincoln? Compile a list of people and places mentioned in connection to Lincoln in Prairie-Town Boy. What is the significance of each?

3. Compare Sandburg's autobiography with his biography of Lincoln, Abe Lincoln Grows Up. What similarities exist between the boyhoods of the two subjects?

4. Research the American economic situation in the 1880s and 1890s. What were the causes and results of the stock market panic of 1893? How did it affect the Sandburg family?

5. Research what it meant to be a hobo. Who were the hobos, what was their lifestyle, how did society relate to them, and what were some of their philosophies and traditions? How did a hobo differ from a bum?

6. Who are Sandburg's boyhood heroes and why does he admire them?

7. Compare the books Sandburg reads and admires as a youth with the books he eventually writes as an adult. How is he influenced by his early experiences with books?

8. Research the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Why, where, and when were they held? What topics were debated?

Who was considered the winner? How did these debates compare to the political debates of today?

9. Trace how Sandburg develops an interest in each of the following during his youth: music, poetry, history, common people, newspaper reporting, and his making public appearances and lectures.

10. Sandburg describes the Sjodin family as "the first real radicals I knew."

In what ways does Sandburg's later life reflect the Sjodin political viewpoint?

# For Further Reference

Detzer, Karl. Carl Sandburg:A Study in Personality and Background. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941. Written before Always the Young Strangers was published, this biography provides an overview of the earlier years of Sandburg's career.

Golden, Harry. Carf Sandburg.

Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961.

This biographical essay on Sandburg, written by a close friend, provides a personal portrait of a great American writer. The book gives an overview of Sandburg's life and work, shows the development of his ideas, and presents some unique material and insights. It is well indexed.

Steichen, Edward, ed. Sandburg: Photographers View Carl Sandburg.

New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966. A photographic essay of Sandburg, compiled by the award-winning photographer who was also Sandburg's brother-in-law.

Steichen, Paula. Carl Sandburg's Home: Official National Park Handbook.

Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1982. This handbook, written by Sandburg's granddaughter and containing numerous color photographs, describes the Sandburg home at Connemara and presents a concise biography of Carl and Paula Sandburg. It includes an excellent chronology of Sandburg's life and a list of reference materials.

# Related Titles

Prairie-Town Boy is an adaptation of Always the Young Strangers, a longer autobiography covering the same period of Sandburg's life. Always the Young Strangers, which the New York Times called the greatest autobiography ever written by an American, differs from Prairie-Town Boy in that it is written for adults and thus is more complicated, contains greater detail, and uses illustrations and explanations that might be inappropriate for young readers. It also contains an index, making it easier to locate facts about Sandburg's life.

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