

Carl Sandburg

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Arts and Letters does not consider photography an art, and therefore has not bestowed membership on Edward Steichen, the great American photographer and a man whom Carl considers one of the important influences in his life.

"Photography not an art? Why, Steichen's 'Family of Man' is a great epic poem, which has been seen by millions of people all over the world . . . a poem which requires no translation and can be understood by illiterates."

Carl has publicly expressed his dislike for the obscurity of much contemporary poetry. "Steichen says I shouldn't be so critical, and he's probably right," laughed Carl. "After all, I've written poems myself that I don't understand."

Carl's appearance a few years ago on a television program commemorating Lincoln's birthday was brilliant. Sandburg's reading of his own work is matchless. His great voice echoes the most subtle nuances of meaning—ironic, comic, tragic. After the program, the producer congratulated Carl on his superb performance and then added, "We've just had a telegram from Robert Frost demanding equal time!"

Only one with a special affinity for children could have written *Rootabaga Stories*. Rarely have I seen a man to whom children were so magnetically drawn. One of my daughters, Kim, now 11, took her first baby steps to go to his arms.

On one of his visits he was wearing shoes that had zippers instead of laces. Immediately after his arrival he demonstrated his ability to take the shoes off or put them on by manipulating the zipper with the toe of his other foot. It made an indelible impression on Kathlin, my two-year-old, and both she and Carl enjoyed the ritual of repeated demonstrations each day that he was with us.

I'VE HEARD several versions of the classic apocryphal Sandburg story, but the one that I like the best was told to me by Steinbeck in 1954. It seems that several of Carl's newspaper cronies devised an elaborate practical joke to play on him during the days when he was writing his monumental biography of Lincoln and had completely given himself over to his subject. They engaged an actor, who for many years had portrayed Lincoln on the stage, to encounter Sandburg on one of his lone early-morning walks.

This is the way the actor described the meeting: "I had applied the full make-up, the beard, the mole above and to the right of the corner of my mouth, and gotten dressed in the characteristic Lincoln long coat, stovepipe hat, roll-pressed trousers, gaiters. It was still dark and quite foggy. Just at the time and the place that I was told I would meet Mr. Sandburg, I saw a shape emerge from the fog. As it drew closer, I recognized that it was in-



The white-thatched poet likes to play the guitar and sing to his own accompaniment.

deed Mr. Sandburg. I said nothing, just continued walking toward him. As we came abreast, Mr. Sandburg neither altered his pace nor seemed surprised. He simply tipped his hat, said, 'Good morning, Mr. President,' and continued on."

When an envelope from Carl comes in my mail, it may contain a short note or thoughtful comment on some matter of concern to both of us, or it may enclose a few delightful unpublished poems—perhaps some of his playful poems called simply "Bugs" or "Rats."

Once he sent a dozen or so yellowed pages clipped from a magazine dated before the turn of the century, pages that he had kept in his files all these years and that he now wanted me to have for their inspirational content. Alongside the text, in Carl's handwriting, were his own comments, relating the printed text to conversations that we had had.

I SPOKE TO CARL the day before I was to leave for a tour of the U.S.S.R., and he advised me to keep a journal. "Look hard, and try and see everything you can without prejudice. We've got to learn to live with those people. The Russians are going to be with us for a long, long time."

The next year, Carl himself visited the Soviet Union, and he was struck by the air of conspiracy. "There is more *secret* knowledge than *known* knowledge there!"

Asked if it is true that Russian women engage in types of manual labor for which only men would be hired in the U.S.A., he answered: "It is true that you see women doing such work, but I feel less sorry for the women of Russia than I do for some of those in this country who spend so much of their time being psychoanalyzed!"

Sandburg's eighties are vintage years. He has a new volume of poems being published today called *Honey and Salt*, and it has the gravity and the joy, the enthusiasm and the import that are characteristic of the man and his work. And the work goes on, promising more riches.

An old friend of Carl's, visiting him in Flat Rock, N. C., was being shown the countryside. "That," indicated Sandburg, "is the highest point in the Great Smoky Mountains."

"No, Carl," his friend disagreed, "you are the highest point in the Great Smoky Mountains."



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