

Fall 2009

The Man from Main Street: Bringing Sinclair Lewis into the 21st Century

Thomas D. Steman

St. Cloud State University, tdsteman@stcloudstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/lrs_facpubs

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Steman, T.D. (2009). The Man from Main Street: Bringing Sinclair Lewis into the 21st Century. *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, 18(1), 1, 3-4, 14-15.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at theRepository at St. Cloud State. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of theRepository at St. Cloud State. For more information, please contact rswexelbaum@stcloudstate.edu.

The Man from Main Street: Bringing Sinclair Lewis into the 21st Century

Nobel Prize winning author Sinclair Lewis passed away in Italy in 1951, almost 60 years ago. His legacy survives today with countless books, short stories, and plays. These writings are freely available at libraries across the country. Several books, such as *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Our Mr. Wrenn*, and *Free Air*, are available online on Google Books, making Lewis available at home anytime. Besides his published works, Sinclair Lewis left behind a collection of correspondence, photographs, and drafts of his writings. These unpublished records may be accessed physically at several archives across the United States, yet almost nothing is available online. Putting material of any author on the Internet instantly makes it more accessible, published and unpublished. So why not Sinclair Lewis?

Lewis unpublished material is scattered across many archives, some of which are:

Yale University: <http://webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/beinecke.lewis.con.html>

University of Texas at Austin:

<http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxtf/view?docId=ead/00077.xml>

Minnesota Historical Society: <http://www.mnhs.org/collections/>

Port Washington Public Library (in New York State):

<http://www.pwpl.org/collections/special/SinclairLewis/>

Syracuse University: http://library.syr.edu/digital/guides/t/thompson_d.htm (Dorothy Thompson papers)

The St. Cloud State University Archives can be listed among these Lewis archives. While the University Archives primarily has records created by St. Cloud State, we are fortunate to also have a collection of Lewis personal papers, as well as organizational records, and manuscripts from many Minnesota authors, including Lavyrle Spencer, Bill Meissner, and Joanne Fluke.

Unpublished material of, from, and about Lewis at the University Archives includes:

- *Lewis Family Papers*: Correspondence, photographs, and scrapbooks from Lewis's brother Claude and his family, Lewis's parents, and Sinclair Lewis himself, including signed books.
- *Sinclair Lewis Letters to Marcella Powers*: 262 letters written by Lewis to Marcella Powers, 1939 to 1947. Powers was a close friend of Lewis in his later years.
- *Ida Compton Papers*: Most of the collection consists of personal letters between Lewis and Compton (then Kay), and correspondence between Compton and others, including Alec Manson, Claude and Helen Lewis, and Lewis biographer Mark Schorer.
- *Hubert Ireys Gibson Collection of Sinclair Lewis*: Hubert Gibson served as Lewis's secretary for the initial drafts of the Sinclair and Lloyd Lewis penned Civil War play, *Jayhawker*. This collection contains drafts of the play and some correspondence from Lloyd Lewis to Sinclair Lewis.
- *Joan McQuary Collection of Sinclair Lewis Letters*: Dating from 1942 to 1945, 19 letters written by Sinclair Lewis to Joan McQuary, a former student of his from the University of Minnesota. In these letters, Lewis discussed a wide variety of topics, giving a sense of his life while living in New York City around the time he finished his novel *Gideon Planish*.

For further information on Sinclair Lewis material held by the St. Cloud State University Archives, which is located in St. Cloud, in central Minnesota, just 40 miles southeast of Lewis's hometown of Sauk Centre, please visit:

<http://lrts.stcloudstate.edu/library/special/archives/authors/default.asp#lewis>

There is next to nothing of Sinclair's Lewis primary source material on the Web. Realizing that, I pursued two opportunities to pioneer Lewis material for wider access to the world. Providing these resources online would be an excellent resource to learn more about Sinclair Lewis the man, while promoting and providing for more research and scholarship of this famous Minnesota author. When published, users will see the actual written word of Lewis as he discusses his day-to-day experiences, and especially the creative process he used to create his later published works.

Sinclair Lewis Letters to Marcella Powers

In 1996, St. Cloud State purchased the letters from Mary Branham, a longtime friend of Marcella Powers. Branham inherited the letters as part of Powers' estate after Powers' death in 1985. In August 1939, Lewis, who was 54 at the time, met the 18-year-old Powers at the Provincetown Theater in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, during rehearsals for *Ah, Wilderness!*. The letters started soon after their first encounter and continued until 1947, ending shortly after Powers married Michael Armine. These 262 letters provide an intimate and critical mass of primary source documentation for scholars and others interested in the life and times of Sinclair Lewis. They give an up-close view of Lewis' life through his most personal and intimate friend at that time.

In these letters, half of which were written while Lewis lived in Minnesota, the author described a wide variety of experiences in his life, ranging from the furniture purchased for his various homes, to parties he attended and celebrities he met, to his travels, and to his time as a faculty member at the universities of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Minnesota – Duluth. More importantly, Lewis discussed articles and short stories he was writing, as well as his research and writing for his novels *Cass Timberlane* (1945) and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947).

While attending the Minnesota Digital Library (MDL) (<http://www.mndigital.org/>) annual meeting in the summer of 2008, I brainstormed ideas to contribute to MDL's web portal, *Minnesota Reflections* (<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/>). MDL, which has its beginnings at St. Cloud State, is a non-profit coalition of Minnesota libraries, archives, historical societies, and museums to create a digital collection of the state's unique resources available on the Web. Over 100 repositories have contributed 40,000 images and documents to Minnesota Reflections. Marian Rengel, MDL's outreach coordinator, is located at St. Cloud State.

With the background and knowledge of the benefits of wider access through the Web, MDL was the perfect collaborator. Since I was relatively new to the position at St. Cloud State, I wanted the University Archives to become relevant again and to do it in a big way. For MDL, the project would increase the types of resources on *Minnesota Reflections* and help raise its profile across Minnesota and the country. This was an opportunity for both collaborators to spotlight each other, as well as highlighting and providing a critical mass of primary resources from a world famous and Minnesota-bred author.

Despite the idea of providing wider access to the letters, could it actually happen? Scanning, creating and providing metadata, and uploading the images of the letters, though taking time and money, was not the major issue. Would the Lewis family and its literary agents buy into the project? With the support of the Learning Resources & Technology Services (LR&TS) dean, Dr. Kristi Tornquist, and Ms. Rengel, I began my quest to secure the proper permissions to move ahead.

In the fall of 2008, I spoke with Jean-Paul Lewis, grandson of Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson. Mr. Lewis endorsed the project. He agreed that the project, if approved by Lewis's literary agent, would help keep the legacy of his grandfather alive.

With the blessing of Mr. Lewis, I approached the literary agents for approval to publish the letters. After months of negotiation, the literary agents gave their blessing. Once I received permission, I submitted my application to MDL for the letters to become part of *Minnesota Reflections*. Response from the MDL review committee was overwhelming. In April, the letters were delivered to the Minnesota Historical Society and digitized. With additional financial support from Dr. Tornquist to help process and add metadata to the images, as well as to properly organize the actual physical letters, the project is very close to completion. The letters will be available on the Minnesota Reflections site soon, hopefully by the end of September. The finding aid for the letters is available at:

<https://libsys.stcloudstate.edu/archon/?p=collections/findingaid&id=15&q=>

Allowing the Marcella Powers letters to be published in their entirety will provide scholars a critical mass of primary source material on Sinclair Lewis. In essence, it will help keep and increase the scholarship surrounding the author. Researchers of all ages and educational levels, as well as scholars worldwide, will be able to view the letters online and form their own views of Lewis during the 1940s, his creative process, his life as a famous writer, and his personal relationship with Marcella Powers.

Jayhawker

In 1933, Sinclair Lewis collaborated with Lloyd Lewis, a *Chicago Daily News* drama critic and historical writer, to write a Civil War play. The play was “to deal with the Kansas-Missouri border raids before and during the Civil War; with the emergence, through oratorical bombast, of the first United States senator from Kansas, a wild roisterer not quite a criminal; with a scheme to end the Civil War through the seizure, by both parties, of Mexico; and with a love story.”¹

In the fall of 1934, the play, which was previously titled *The Skedaddler*, *The Glory Hole*, and *Brother Burdette*, was staged in Philadelphia, Washington, and New York. The play was not a success, closing just after a few weeks on Broadway. In 1935, the play was published in novel form.

Hubert Gibson served as a temporary secretary to the Lewis collaboration in late 1933. While transcribing the manuscripts for Sinclair and Lloyd Lewis, Gibson was often called upon to act out many sequences in the play. More importantly, Gibson kept drafts of the play as it was written that fall. The typewritten drafts, with handwritten revisions, showed how the play

evolved while being written in Chicago. The result of that collaboration was a rough draft of the play. Comparing this version to the final printed version from 1935, the final Chicago manuscript was far from complete.

The drafts were unseen for nearly 75 years by the public. In October 2007, the children of Hubert and Frances Gibson (Doris, Barbara, and David) donated the material to the St. Cloud State University Archives. The manuscripts are available for access. To view the finding aid for *Jayhawker*, please visit:

<http://lrts.stcloudstate.edu/library/special/archives/authors/HubertGibson.asp>

This past winter, I received an internal new researcher grant to create a “proof of concept” featuring *Jayhawker* material. Working with JC Turner, the former Associate Dean for Operations at LR&TS at St. Cloud State, we were inspired by the work of Mary Shelly and her book *Frankenstein*. Authorship of *Frankenstein* has been questioned since the book was first published in 1818. Scholars felt that Mary Shelly’s husband Percy was the true author. Charles Robinson, a professor of English at the University of Delaware, was determined to end that speculation. In *The Original Frankenstein*, Robinson analyzed the original handwritten manuscripts held at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. Robinson isolated Percy Shelley's comments and changes from the story in his wife’s hand. Both texts - with and without Percy's contributions – were printed in *The Original Frankenstein*. For the story from the Chronicle of Higher Education, see <http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i11/11b01201.htm>

With *Frankenstein* in mind, we sought to create a Web-based project that used video, audio, and other dynamic methods for an interactive package to access and explore. If the project receives more funding from external grant agencies, we will complete the project and make it available to Lewis scholars.

A great deal of content had to be developed to create an interactive experience for users. So, keeping the proof of concept piece in mind, we selected one scene from one act to focus our efforts. We hoped to keep the project manageable and be delivered on time. I analyzed the many drafts of *Jayhawker*. Depending on the scene, there were two to five different drafts of each. The drafts were typewritten with comments and changes made by hand. We did not determine who made the comments, but it was likely that at least three men, Hubert Gibson, Sinclair Lewis, and Lloyd Lewis, made the revisions.

How did they work on *Jayhawker*? They took the play scene by scene. Sinclair Lewis and Lloyd Lewis “would discuss a scene thoroughly, improvising speeches as they went, making notes, and then each man would write out a version of the whole.” Then the two authors would exchange drafts and would comment on each other’s attempt. Afterwards, they would write a combination of the two. Lloyd Lewis was responsible for the content of the scenes, while Sinclair Lewis took on the love story, as well as finalizing the dialogue.²

Once the scene was selected for the proof of concept, the first and final drafts were scanned. There were other drafts for the scene, but we felt that if included, it would not be manageable.

The final printed version was also scanned and included to demonstrate how much the scene changed from inception to the final product.

Video and audio were also a key piece to the project. Two English faculty members were recruited to provide “expert” commentary for video. They were given copies of the drafts to analyze beforehand. One faculty member discussed the play itself, how it fit into Sinclair Lewis’s life, and his work at the time it was created. The other spoke of the creative writing process, connecting specifically to *Jayhawker*. Clips then were selected from the interviews and edited for viewing. To give users a sense of the play itself, LR&TS staff were enlisted to participate in an audio performance of the three versions of the selected scene with sound effects added.

Historical context was an important piece to this project. Research was done and summarized to allow users a sense of the collaboration of Sinclair Lewis and Lloyd Lewis, the production of the play, and its success (or not). Several secondary and primary sources were consulted, including the Gibson collection and the Lloyd Lewis papers held at the Newberry Library in Chicago (see the full finding aid at <http://mms.newberry.org/html/Lewis.html>). In addition, scans of key documents from the Gibson collection, as well as images of Sinclair Lewis from the Lewis Family papers were created and added to the project. These images and documents were interspersed within the video, the history document, and part of a photo gallery included within the project.

Though not a significant work of Sinclair Lewis, the fact the drafts survived is extraordinary. Scholars can examine the play itself, much like Robinson did with *Frankenstein*, to learn more about the creative process of Sinclair Lewis and Lloyd Lewis. In addition, the project provides an example of how to interactively present *Jayhawker* to scholars. Resources are made immediately available for users to understand why the play was created, its significance, and its impact on the authors without additional research. Whether or not the project is further funded, it's an excellent way to make archival material, especially of world famous authors, come alive and be available at any time.

Conclusion

With the door open for both of these projects, the hope is to spark more interest and attention to the Nobel Prize winning author Sinclair Lewis. His work is important to understanding 20th-century American literature and ready to be rediscovered. The Web and the availability of materials can help fuel that interest. A by-product for the St. Cloud State University Archives is for more people to learn about the repository and what material it holds, especially records of, about, and from Sinclair Lewis. I hope to provide digital access to additional Lewis material in the future. And what better way to get Lewis back in the public eye by finally bringing the author to the 21st century?

¹ Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 590

² Schorer, 590