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*Shared Reminiscence*

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## Carl Sandburg

David Cooley  
Hendersonville, North Carolina

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In 1945, Carl Sandburg and his wife, Lillian, moved to the Hendersonville area from a small farm on the shores of Lake Michigan. A lot of people in the area wondered why this famous man had chosen our little community as his new home. He had paid what was thought to be an astounding price of \$45,000 for 248 acres of land that included a three-story main house, a barn complex and several outbuildings. Mr. Sandburg reportedly said he felt he'd bought an entire "village," and Mrs. Sandburg, a breeder of champion milk goats told friends that they had bought "a million acres of sky." The estate was once owned by C. G. Memminger, the first secretary of the Confederacy. I wonder if Mr. Sandburg, the greatest Lincoln authority knew this or, if he did, found it somewhat ironic.

### *I collected his garbage*

I was required to read some of his writings in high school, but the first time I came face to face with Carl Sandburg was an early morning at his home in Flat Rock. I had, along with John Shepherd, an older friend, established the first rural garbage collection service in Hendersonville. I was a junior in high school. Sandburg was a customer.

"Come on in," he said, as I went to his kitchen door to pick up his garbage. I opened the screen door to his kitchen and went in. There were wads of paper on the floor in the small room just off the kitchen.

"Please put those scraps in with your trash son and then we will have a 'goat milk cocktail'," he said. I did what he requested and have thought at least a hundred times or more "What if I had put those scraps into a separate sack and saved them for posterity?" There's no telling what they would be worth today. Maybe the fact that I was a high school youngster at the time caused me to think trash was trash. It did not occur to me that there could be any value in what was picked up from the floor.

I've wondered why "The Great One" even took notice of me and offered a kid picking up his trash a goat milk cocktail. It could have been because of his own recollections of being a lowly school janitor in 1899 when he was supporting himself at Lombard College in his hometown of Galesburg, Illinois. Or maybe he wanted to see if I could handle the challenge of drinking goat's milk.

His wife raised prize-winning goats. This is the connection with the goat milk cocktail. I can say, first-hand, that a goat milk cocktail is no reward for good deeds. Goat milk smells to high heaven and tastes awful. But, it was an honor to sit for a brief moment with the man recognized internationally as the greatest authority ever on Abraham Lincoln. And although I am a professed "died in the wool yellow dog democrat," Abe Lincoln was my hero.

### *Visitors annually near Lincoln's birthday*

Upon becoming head of the town's Chamber of Commerce, I would receive an inquiry every year near the date of Lincoln's birthday from some national or international media representatives about Sandburg and Connemara Farms where he lived. Always, one of the TV networks or nationally circulated magazines would send someone and sometimes a crew to Hendersonville for three or four days to do a story that would be shown on the network on Lincoln's birthday.

### *Edward R. Murrow comes to town*

A particular year that I remember to this day is when CBS sent Edward R. Murrow and Fred W. Friendly to do a piece on Sandburg for showing in prime news time on the network. I was able to meet with both of them on more than one occasion while they were in town. I even had the opportunity to help their crew with lighting, props, and other needs for their shooting. Mr. Sandburg was in his best form while they were here. He played the guitar and sung for them. He had them in his kitchen for a goat milk cocktail.

It sure was impressive for me to be “a fly on the wall” during their conversations and the shooting of the film that would eventually be used. I attended a seminar in Washington many years later than this particular visit with Sandburg. The leader of the seminar was Fred W. Friendly. I recalled to him that afternoon and the treat it was to have been with Murrow and him at Sandburg’s home. He remembered that particular time and recalled it fondly, saying “It was one of the best shows I ever did and it was enjoyable too.”

### *LIFE magazine photographer*

Another time that stands out in my memory is when a LIFE Magazine photographer came to Hendersonville to do a photo essay on Mr. Sandburg. I spent two full days with him in my role as Chamber of Commerce executive—taking him to various places all over the county. Sandburg was set up to address the student body at Flat Rock High School. I was with the photographer back stage. When Sandburg took the stage the photographer began shooting. He must have taken 100 shots or more. And, that was when what you shot was what you got. There were no digital cameras back then.

On the photographer’s last day here, I picked him up at Sandburg’s home and drove him to the airport. On the way there, I asked him what his secret was as a LIFE photographer and how was it that he and other LIFE photographers I had observed were so good with the camera. Without batting an eye, the photographer answered: “Take a lot of them.”

### *No curtains on the windows*

I asked Mr. Sandburg one day why there were no curtains on the windows in his home. He told me very quickly why: “Windows are to frame the beauty outside while curtains spoil that beauty.”

### *Technology vs. Sandburg*

The first remote controlled floor model TV I saw was at Connemara. It had been given to Carl Sandburg by his good friend, the president of Zenith Corporation. I was told that Mr. Sandburg gracefully accepted his friend's gift, although he was not a big fan of television. He believed it to be “a thief of time.”

### *Rotary Club speech*

Probably my last time seeing and observing Sandburg was when he was scheduled to be the speaker at the local Rotary Club luncheon. Beverly Middleton, the Chamber president, was a neighbor of Sandburg’s. He was very happy and excited about getting the poet to appear before his club members and offer a speech. Sandburg came with guitar in hand. “Bevo” as Middleton was called, gave a flowery and overly generous introduction. Sandburg rose from his chair, picked up his guitar, walked quietly to the podium, hit a couple of cords on his guitar and sung a short song. He then spoke for about five minutes and offered another short tune or two on his guitar. Much to the amazement and disappointment of the audience, Sandburg then sat down. He had finished! It could be recorded as probably the shortest presentation by anyone in the history of the local Rotary Club. Bevo was embarrassed.

### *Autograph for my daughter Ann*

Sandburg's secretary, Mrs. Johansen, was my across-the-street neighbor. I ask her if she would take the poet's first volume on Lincoln that I had purchased and ask him to autograph it for my daughter. He did it willingly for his secretary and told her I could pick it up the next time I came to collect the garbage. My daughter treasures his autograph to this day. The inscription reads "Happy days for Dave Cooley's beautiful daughter, Ann, and a bountiful life – Carl Sandburg."

### *This and that about "The Great One"*

Wick Andrews, a native of Flat Rock tells the story of his father and other gentlemen having frequent "social times" with Sandburg. They would drink single malt scotch and "sing into the night." I was told that Sandburg loved these get-togethers and encouraged them at every opportunity.

Louise Bailey, a county historian frequently referenced her time with Sandburg. Copying his manuscript of "Remembrance Rock" while using her "Two finger – hunt and peck system" on his manual typewriter was a favorite of hers.

Sandburg was very proud of the Connemara Farms square dance team started by one of his farm's Supervisors, Frank Mintz. He was considerably more proud of the team and its members when they won the square dance contest at the 1948 North Carolina Apple Festival and were invited to spend a week in his native Chicago as guests of Rock Island Railroad during the Chicago Railroad Fair.

Bill Sharpe, editor of STATE MAGAZINE visited Sandburg once during spring. He received permission from Sandburg to photograph him with his wife's goats and at several other locations on the grounds of Connemara Farm. One picture stood out in the mind of Editor Sharpe. It was Sandburg feeding a goat with a baby bottle of milk. The picture was picked up by the Associated Press Wire Service and ran in more than a hundred daily newspapers across the country—great publicity for Hendersonville that money could not buy.

### *My regular visits to Connemara*

I go to Connemara three or four times a year now. It is owned by the National Park Service. The Park Service continues to care for descendants of Mrs. Sandburg's original goat herd. The times I have been in the house, that is very modest in its appearance, remind me of the great man and his Lincoln works. I can almost hear him saying, "Let's have a goat milk cocktail son."

