

Posters on the Hill Address

The Research

The “Discovering Character with Sandburg: New Territory in an Annotated Transcription” project began with transcribing and annotating one of Carl Sandburg’s personal notebooks from the early 20th century. I transcribed 138 pages of a handwritten notebook and then researched the context of Sandburg’s notes and added annotations, 30 pages of which are completed. Here I must acknowledge both the University of Nebraska’s Undergraduate Research Program and the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Illinois for making this project possible. Dr. Kathryn Benzel, my mentor, visited the Rare Book and Manuscript Library the summer of 2009 and helped me begin transcribing one of the notebooks from digital photographs. We named this notebook the 1902 notebook because the dates in the Sandburg business accounts match with those of the spring of 1902 and the content coincides with ideas that Sandburg published in both of his early works: *In Reckless Ecstasy* and *Incidentals*. The transcription and annotations revealed the types of experiences and literature that influenced Sandburg in his formative years after he left Lombard College (1904-1906) and give insights into the creation of Sandburg’s earliest published works as well as his development into “The Poet of the People.” During the process of transcribing and annotating the documents, we discovered connections between Sandburg’s early works and personal notes as well as possible influences from the notebooks on his later works. Although the early notebooks are now a piece of history, they are also the key to opening new doors in knowledge about Sandburg, his poetry, and his America.

Like many historical documents throughout the country, Sandburg’s personal notebooks are currently archived but not widely available to scholars in print or electronic media. Thus, the primary purpose of the annotated transcription was to preserve these notebooks and to make them accessible to more scholars. These personal notebooks are particular to studying Sandburg and his life because they give insight into a period when he was exploring the workings of human character and his

own soul, as well as inventing his own poetic voice. Yet, scholars can use the notebooks as primary documents not only in studying Carl Sandburg, but also in examining the history of his period. The notebooks contribute to researching the social concerns, politics and even humor of early 20th century America.

Although a transcription fulfills the first basic need of research—the preservation of historical documents—we found that annotating the text contributed to a fuller understanding of the work through its context. In fact, annotations are a virtual necessity in reading Carl Sandburg’s notebook as many of his notes are quotations from other works or authors. Modern technology makes it possible for researchers, like me, to find the same sources Sandburg read and to begin creating a setting/background for the notes. The annotations display, in detail, the sorts of materials Sandburg was reading and what he found important in them. Just as Carl Sandburg gathered from past authors, scholars today can develop by gathering from him, and they will benefit more from an electronic version of an annotated transcription than from a document that is tucked away in an archive. In order for scholars to move forward in any subject, they must know and understand the history of their discipline. This project actively addresses both the history and future of its subject, Carl Sandburg.

The Experience

The process of transcribing Carl Sandburg’s 1902 notebook was both challenging and exciting. Frustrations during this first stage of the work came mainly from indecipherable script and because it was my first opportunity to work in such proximity with another’s shorthand, handwriting, and scribbles. My initial attempts at interpreting Sandburg’s handwriting were slow and often mistaken, but throughout the course of the transcription I developed a relationship with Sandburg’s handwriting, so to speak. An amusing example of common moments in my research was when I tried to understand his writing on page 26. Initially, between the omitted

consonants I speculated a section to say: "...which can make (a world?) of us (people?) by Stone" and "Thoreau scopes of "in which church worshiped." Upon a later reading, I realized a truer meaning: "...which can make God of Newspaper by Stone" and "Thoreau reading scraps of "newspaper in which lunch wrapped." I found moments such as this, when Sandburg seemed to have played a joke on me, perhaps the most enjoyable. As I became more practiced in transcribing and understanding Sandburg, I also came to think of the notebook as a collection of small puzzles for me to solve. The notebooks are written in both pen and lead pencil but the words written in lead are often light and difficult to decipher. At times I would sigh in defeat as I bracketed nearly whole sentences in question marks, but more often I got along congenially with Sandburg.

The focus of the "transcription stage" required deliberate attention to the smallest details of Sandburg's handwriting and to the patterns of his notes. However, the annotation process required a shift in my view of the work to see the notebook's broader realm of influence. While transcribing I looked for literal representation but through the annotations I actually read Sandburg's words and it was through this phase of the project that connections to his poetry and to American history became apparent. In one particular passage, I remember being so concerned with discerning the words "that" and "thought" that I did not read the notes until I revisited them in annotating. The passage said: "If there are moments when student of hist[ory] falls forward on the table to bury his head in his hands, it is at th[a]t time when he fears the tho[ugh]t has even for an instant scurry[ed] across his br[ai]n, "There had been no progress from Then till now." I then realized how easily I could lose myself to the minute details of the project and disregard the actual ideas and issues of his time, on which his notes touch. The annotation process allowed me to explore not only classic author's works but also the media through which average Americans at the turn of the century would have read them. Dr. Benzel and I have speculated that much of the eclectic nature of Sandburg's reading was due to the popularity of book magazines, seasonal or yearly publications containing a plethora of reading material. The experience of annotat-

ing the transcription was exciting as the puzzle pieces I had dusted off in transcribing now began to fit together.

My experiences with Carl Sandburg and his notebook were especially unique due to the virgin quality of his texts and because I was forced to be independent in the work. Despite my growing relationship with Sandburg and even though I had the guidance of Dr. Benzel, I sometimes felt alone in my struggle with the text. This work is unprecedented, which contributed to my hesitancy to make conclusions at first. Eventually, I realized that there was no "right answer" that I could calculate and thus finish my research. That being said, this particular annotated transcription is by no means complete; there is more text to analyze and I trust it will continue to reveal more about Sandburg's poetry. However, scholarship builds upon itself and I have learned to accept the ongoing nature of my research. Through the transcription and annotations I gained confidence in my own ability to address and be active in new scholarship, a truly unique opportunity for an undergraduate student. This project has achieved the goal of contributing to background knowledge of Carl Sandburg, as a unique person, and as an iconic American poet. Sandburg was a master of capturing the human character in his poetry and through his notebooks we hope to capture his character and historical atmosphere.

Influences on My education

My experience with the Carl Sandburg notebook has taught me more about research and scholarship than any other single project during my undergraduate career. I have always loved to learn and had considered attending graduate school since my start at the University but have wavered on the area or areas I wanted to pursue. Like most college students, I toyed with various ideas for my future course of study and my future in general, but lacked a sense of calling to any specific area in History or English. For a time, I even decided I would not go to graduate school because I didn't see the purpose of dedicating myself to something for which I lacked passion. However, I have undergone a transformation of sorts in my understanding of scholarship and my desire to learn.

The transcription and annotation project has certainly played its role in this development because I am encouraged by the fruit of sustained discipline in a particular area. I have since realized my enthusiasm for literature and of the desire to impart to other students the joy of studying. I truly believe that we can all examine ourselves and the state of our own souls through literature. Therefore, it was especially exciting to realize that Carl Sandburg also explored human nature through literature. Sandburg has taught me more than how to read his handwriting through the project. Though I may not personally agree with him on everything, he has nurtured my idea of understanding human nature through literature and demonstrated perseverance in writing that I hope to emulate. I will be applying to graduate programs in the next year and hope to complete my degree in English literature with a focus on historical study.

My experience with this research has significantly enhanced my undergraduate education. Through the University of Nebraska Kearney's Summer Student Research program I have been able to interact and learn with both my peers and faculty. Dr. Benzel has pushed me to expand my idea of scholarship, to develop my self-discipline and to strive to excel in undergraduate studies. I feel quite fortunate to have been given the opportunity to do research of this kind as an undergraduate, especially in the humanities. The perspective I have gained through researching Carl Sandburg, transcribing his notebook, and annotating the work has influenced my understanding of literature and history in classes I have and am taking. The critical and analytical research skills fostered by this project have served me well as an undergraduate and I trust they will enhance my future academic career as well.

In conclusion, this research is valuable to Sandburg studies as it examines an untouched, primary text, transfers the information into a more accessible electronic format and gives background information and context for Sandburg's notes. With the help of technology and the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, I have been able to work with a primary text through digital photos. The internet also allowed me to research for the annotations with relative ease and accuracy that would not have been possible even ten years ago. We will continue to annotate

the 1902 notebook and hope to carry on with some of Sandburg's later notebooks. The process of transcribing and annotating the notebook is illustrated on my poster, so I encourage you to examine it if you would like to read Sandburg's handwriting and the annotations for yourself. Ultimately the entire progression of this project has been one of discovery: discovery about Sandburg personally, discovery about working with primary sources, and discovery about new scholarship.