Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Twenty-One

[Vachel’s insert introducing his self-published Village Magazine (1910)]

by

Dennis Camp
Professor Emeritus
University of Illinois at Springfield
Springfield, Illinois

[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org. Choose “Biography” and then “Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay.” The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association.]
21. Springfield (1908)

“it is a glorious democracy of hogs, where everyone tries to get his foot in the trough”

September and October, 1908, while Vachel was preparing to lecture Springfield on overcoming prejudice, Springfield was preparing to seek revenge on Joe James. Safely returned to the Sangamon County jail in early September, James was arraigned in the Sangamon County Courthouse on September 5 and charged with the murder of Clergy “Posey” Ballard. George Richardson was released from custody on the same day, and wisely decided to spend time with friends in Decatur, before returning to Springfield. James’s trial began September 14, and the Illinois State Journal (September 15, p. 1) trumpeted: JAMES TO FACE DEATH PENALTY.

The unfortunate defendant’s picture is on page five. On September 15, the prosecutors presented their case, relying on allegedly relevant pieces of clothing and on eye-witness accounts by the Ballard family. “Witnesses for the state wove a web of circumstantial evidence around Joe James yesterday,” the Journal reported on the first page of the September 16 edition. Meanwhile, during the day on the 16th, the defense presented its case, focusing on drugs, alcohol, and self-defense (Ballard had been chasing James). On the 17th, the jury of twelve white men deliberated seven hours and found James guilty of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to die by hanging: Joe James was going to be lynched, this time legally.

On September 19, the Journal reported that an execution date had not yet been set, and that James was spending time reading his Bible. The Journal also revealed that many “blacks” had been prepared to leave Springfield in case of “a wrong verdict” (that is, in case the jury found James innocent). Fortunately, the reporter speculates, “It is believed that the sentencing of James will allay to some extent the bitter feeling that has existed here between the two races” (p. 7). The very next day, September 20, the Journal disclosed the decision of the local authorities: JOE JAMES TO HANG FRIDAY OCTOBER 23. The unnamed reporter adds that the defendant had begun to “weaken,” had asked for religious consultation, and had “resorted to prayer” (p. 1). On September 21, the Journal described how Sheriff Werner was planning James’s execution, and the reporter includes a revealing explanation: Jail Space Is Very Limited. Three days later, on September 24, the Journal headline reads: JURY FREES ABE RAYMER. After three hours of deliberation and a single vote, the jury of twelve white men found Abraham Raymer “Not Guilty” of any crimes. Reading page six of the same newspaper, Springfield citizens could take a collective sigh of relief: Joe James had been newly baptized. The following day, September 25, the newspaper declares that James has professed Christianity; and, on September 28, the new Christian is said to have attended jail church services and is preparing “to meet his Maker” (Journal, p. 5).

In early October, the Journal related that James wanted to write a book to try and save others from making the same mistakes he has made, especially mistakes involving alcohol
(James to Write Book on Life, October 2, p. 6). Still, the newspaper cannot resist the spiteful news that Joe James “Calls for food many times a day” (Jailers Call James Glutton, October 5, p. 2). On October 7, Springfield learned that the gallows had been moved to the Sangamon County Jail (Journal, p. 7); and the next day, October 8, the newspaper adds that Joe James has refused the opportunity to view the gallows (p. 7). On October 9, Abe Raymer is again found “Not Guilty” in a second trial: RAYMER FREED OF RIOT CHARGE. After twenty-four hours of deliberation, a second white male jury absolved Raymer of any and all charges: Finding Big Surprise is a Journal subtitle (p. 1). At this point, Sangamon County State’s Attorney, Frank Hatch, must have realized that no jury of white men in Sangamon County was going to find any white person guilty of any crime against any African-American in Springfield, Illinois. Hatch’s realization was only reinforced the next day, October 10, when Ernest “Slim” Humphrey was also found “Not Guilty” of any race riot crime (Journal, October 11, p. 3).

In the interim, the guilty Joe James’s fate was ever more imminent. On October 9, the Journal published an account of how the authorities were measuring the gallows: FIGURE OUT DROP FOR JAMES’ DEATH, the headline reads, with the subtitle: Deputies Studying Weights and Measures (p. 7). Then, on October 10, Springfield learned that invitations would soon be in the mail: ONE HUNDRED MAY WITNESS HANGING (p. 5). Apparently deputies were not only measuring the gallows but also measuring the corridor in the county jail, trying to determine how many spectators could be seated in front of the execution platform. Then, on October 13, the Journal advises that Joe James’s mother would like to visit her son, but the family is too poor to make the journey to Springfield (p. 1).

In the same newspaper, on page five, there is a picture of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, under the headline: WILL DELIVER TEN ADDRESSES ON THE RACES. The accompanying article is on page ten:

Y.M.C.A. PLANS LECTURE SERIES

NICHOLAS VACHEL LINDSAY IS SECURED

Will Deliver Ten Addresses Treating the Subject of the Various Classes of People Inhabiting This Country From Practical and Sociological Standpoint

“Tomorrow evening at 8 o’clock will mark the beginning of a lecture course, conducted under the auspices of the Young Men’s Christian Association, the variety of which will be unique. The course, consisting of ten lectures, will be given by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, who will take occasion to treat the various classes of people inhabiting our commonwealth from a practical and sociological standpoint.

“As an aid in these lectures on the races in America, Mr. Lindsay will have charts and illustrations,” the unnamed reporter continues, and then itemizes “The List of Topics.”
To advertise his course, Vachel prepared a booklet, which he obviously made available to the *Journal* reporter. The newspaper’s itemized “list of topics” echoes the exact wording in this booklet—for nine of the ten lectures. One lecture is listed differently: “November 18, topic to be announced later.” We may suspect that this particular lecture could be controversial, and the logical guess would be the planned lecture on African-Americans. But in the YMCA booklet, the November 18 talk is advertised as an evening devoted to a discussion of “The Ghetto Jews”; and we will consider this lecture in its rightful place.

The 1908 race riot made international news, as two black men were lynched in Abraham Lincoln’s adopted hometown. It appears, though, that Springfield prejudice (indeed, racial prejudice in many American towns and cities in the early 1900s) extended well beyond African-Americans.

Meanwhile, two weeks before the lecture series was to begin, Uncle Boy received an indulgent, answering letter from Richard Watson Gilder (see the previous chapter, Note 10). In his response (dated October 4, 1908), Vachel clearly demonstrates awareness of an older man as an “uncle” figure, and confesses that, even at his young age, he has played the role many times:

The friendship of an older man is a peculiar thing. The young man is asked to make good, by the older man, and to report on it from time to time. The older man will take a deep interest, if he is still building up a following, since he is wise enough to know that is the only way to build up enthusiasm of a personal sort for his own work. If he has arrived at a secure position, like the editor of the *Century* [Gilder’s position], or several captains of finance I call my friends, his attitude is more that of an uncle, or a grandfather. He wants to see the youngsters get there, but he don’t want to be disappointed. And having a wide circle of youngsters, he is apt to have a hurried impersonal word of affection for each one, unless some enterprising grandson camps on his doorstep with a letter like this I am writing.

Young as I am, dear sir, I have written letters like this one of yours to me, several different winters to the fifty members of my Y.M.C.A. class in New York. I have made each letter different, though I forgot half the faces and two thirds of the names. I knew, as you do, the value of a personal hold, and the value of spiritual heirs. . . .

I know that as a rule, the genuine communion of souls is between disciples only a day or so younger, and their teacher who is disguised as a comrade. I learned long ago to look for the sure thing of friendship from men of ability a little younger, and young disciples and comrades are the only necessities. The older man is merely a recorder of things done, a recognizer of the accomplished fact. The old men that value me, do it because of the young men I bind to me, the young men who seem to understand me. They—the old men—do not expect to understand. They examine credentials, and take the rest for granted. All these things are set forth in better style in a paragraph of F.W.H.
Myers sketch of Wordsworth—where first I learned them. But I have found them true one hundred times in New York. . . . [Note 1]

I send you a booklet [the brochure advertising the YMCA lectures, see above] which demonstrates that I am setting forth on the joyous task of building up a little following here, similar to that I have in New York. I assure you there is no drunkenness like that which comes to the soul when you have stirred a young man’s ideals and made him talk about his philosophy of life till twelve o’clock over a cup of cocoa—or as the Y.M.C.A. puts it—a “social hour.”

My greatest follies will come about because these boys have flattered me, and made me think of myself an infallible oracle; my greatest sacrifices will be to win the drink of their praise. Incidentally, I hope to build up a new generation of “leading citizens in embryo” in this Y.M.C.A. Springfield needs a new civic ideal, nearer that of Florence or Athens, and the Y.M.C.A. is the natural place to preach it. We have a big new booming Association, and in ten years, if I am here every fall, I may build up a saving remnant who will love civic beauty as well as civic righteousness, and legitimate civic revelry, as well as puritanic reform.

Rehab and Mammon have ruled this town a long time, and its only hope is to make itself unique. [Emphasis added.]

The riot, Vachel continues, was the result of Springfield’s exceptional young people abandoning their city, leaving “the town to the fools, the villains and the weak. . . . These people need a vision of a possible Springfield.” And one way to begin is to abolish “poison liquor . . . . I would as soon step into a fire as a saloon.”

Springfield, of course, did not have the advantage of Uncle Boy’s explanations to “dear Mr. Gilder.” But this very important letter, quoted entirely in Marc Chénetier’s Letters of Vachel Lindsay (pp. 25-28), is a superb introduction, not only to the YMCA lectures but also to the life and intentions of Uncle Boy—his recent past, his immediate present, and his twenty-three years to come. [Note 2]

2

The men who attended the opening YMCA lecture on “The Indian” (women were not allowed at YMCA events) listened to a presentation contrasting the native Americans of yesteryear with the native Americans of the present. In August, Vachel announced he would begin his series with the English; but in the succeeding two months, he changed his mind. As rioter after rioter was exonerated by white male juries, it was obvious to everybody that rescuing Springfield and Sangamon County from racial prejudice was next to impossible, almost as impossible as a journey to the ideal “Tree of Laughing Bells.” What was required amounted to all-out war; and Indians had been some of the best fighters in the recent past, especially during the “Great Sioux War” of 1876, highlighted by the battle at Little Big Horn.
By way of contrast, contemporary native Americans excelled in “farming and football,” and the latter reference offers a clue as to what the lecturer had in mind. In fall, 1908, the Carlisle Indians put together one of the best football teams in the United States. As early as the month of Vachel’s birth, November 1879, American authorities decided that Indians were not being assimilated into American “culture” quickly enough. Captain Richard Henry Pratt (1840-1924) founded the first of several non-reservation boarding schools, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Pratt’s motto was “Kill the Indian, and Save the Man”; and the Carlisle school focused on eradicating any and all native American clothing, language, and traditions. The avowed goal was to “civilize the savages,” although Pratt’s detractors referred to the goal as “cultural genocide.” Young Indians were recruited from reservations, dressed in military uniforms, and accorded a traditional white man’s education. All students were given “paleface” haircuts and required to attend Christian churches. An “outing” system placed many students with local families, especially farmers, where they lived and worked alongside “ordinary Americans.”

Carlisle, however, was first and foremost a school, and its students wanted to participate in extracurricular activities, especially sports. The Carlisle Indian track team, as anyone can imagine, was one of the best in the country; but youngsters of all races want to pursue the newest and latest activities. For students at Hiram College and at the Carlisle Indian school, especially in the 1890s, American football was the latest and most desirable pastime. At first Captain Pratt refused the students’ request, but he finally relented and the team began playing in 1893. Then, beginning 1899, under new coach Glenn Scobey “Pop” Warner, Carlisle was quickly recognized as a football powerhouse. Indeed, by 1908, during Warner’s second tenure as coach, the Carlisle Indians were one of the best football teams in the country. And with star player Jim Thorpe (“Bright Path” was his Sac-Fox name), Carlisle would be, for a time, the best. [Note 3]

Football obviously was not Uncle Boy’s primary interest in 1908, although he may well have pointed out that the Indians’ skill at fighting served them well on the football field. Vachel’s attention focused on the misguided attempt to homogenize native Americans, that is, the attempt to kill “Indian-ness.” Fear and hatred of diversity comprise the very essence of racial prejudice, and Vachel’s message to Springfield is clear: wise people, great cities, exemplary civilizations—all embrace diversity. Imaginative creators like Lucifer cannot stand the boredom of a homogenized heaven; even ordinary citizens, if they use some imagination, should be able to realize the undesirability of a traditional heaven. Who in their imaginative mind could desire not only endless church services, in Mark Twain’s opinion (Letters from the Earth), but also endless church services with like-minded, like-looking people—roughly like Hiram College in the 1890s, when the first draft of “The Last Song of Lucifer” was composed?

Diversity, however, can mean chaos, unless there is perceivable unity as well; and the perception of unity in diversity is the role of the imagination, the role of the poet. Vachel’s primary source for the philosophy and purpose behind the 1908 YMCA lectures is Percy Bysshe Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry (1821, published in 1840). The human mind has two powers: the reason which perceives differences and the imagination which perceives affinities (“the eternal”) within those differences. Imaginative perception is the special expertise of all poets, who are generally the organizers of groups and societies, the prophets and legislators of the civilized world. The two images most often used to communicate perceived unity within diversity are from music, and thus the word HARMONY (which occurs no less than eleven times in Shelley’s essay). The first musical image is the symphony orchestra, where anyone can hear and see what
happens when diverse instruments perform a work of art: a concerto, a symphony, etc. The second musical image is the song, with its melody but also with its supporting parts, its HARMONY. Quite simply, Uncle Boy was attempting to use poetry to educate Springfield about HARMONY. A great city is like a great symphony orchestra; a great mind is an imaginative, poetic mind. Springfield must learn that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” the closing words of Shelley’s Defence. Springfield must learn that social unity, as in the “United States,” does not mean sameness (like a symphony orchestra comprised only of violins) but HARMONY, the unity of diverse instruments, diverse peoples. And, as an important corollary, Springfield might also recognize that Dr. Lindsay’s unemployed son was attempting to justify his role as a man of letters, a man of imagination—an organizer of his world.

“GIVES TALK ON INDIAN,” the Illinois State Journal reported, in a small article on page five (October 15), subtitled: Nicholas V. Lindsay Delivers First of Series of Ten Addresses at the Y.M.C.A:

The first of a series of lectures to be given by Nicholas V. Lindsay on the people of America was delivered last night to a large audience gathered in the Y.M.C.A. building. Mr. Lindsay discussed from a practical and sociological standpoint the American Indian, and by the use of charts and illustrations particularly impressed some of the predominant traits of the redskins upon his hearers. The lecture was a most interesting one and by a clever intermixture of information about the noble red man the speaker held the close attention of all. The native genius of the Indian was discussed and from the war paint and feather stage the aborigine was traced to present day farming and football playing redskins.

The next lecture will be on the Anglo-Saxon and will be given next Wednesday night. Later talks by Mr. Lindsay will take in the Irish, German and other classes of American people.

Mr. Lindsay, who believed he had drops of Indian blood flowing in his veins (see Chapter 2, pp. 4-5), had hurled his tomahawk at Springfield’s feet. The battle was joined, and it would continue to be waged over the next nine weeks and, for that matter, over the next few years.

Before moving to the Anglo-Saxon lecture, the lecture that Vachel planned to begin with when the series was announced in August, we should note that the speaker had a basic pattern in mind for each of his presentations. He confessed to Portuguese girlfriend Nellie Vieira in October 1909 that he had been “crowded for time,” and thus had been unable to tell “the story of the Portugese^ of Springfield . . . . using my usual method.” That method, he explained, would have led him to dig out “the history of Brazil—a brilliant example of your people’s genius to which North America does not yet do justice—all South American Republics are not alike, and I understand Brazil is the better sort. Then I would have looked up some translations of the Portugese^ poets—and given them a boost—and then finished up with the usual question: ‘Why do you ask these people with so brilliant a history in the Past—why do you ask them in America to be business men only? Why don’t you rejoice in the colorful elements they supply in America, in the strains of talent they bring?”’ [emphasis added]: “But the tendency is all the other way. Neither Americans nor foreigners like to be picturesque. They all want to look like Clothing store dummies and act like Gibson and Henry Hutt Pictures. Thirteen German boys in my boys^ class of twenty denied having German progenitors till I absolutely tricked the information out of them. Now this point of view will do for the Irish, the Germans and the haughty Anglo-Saxons. But the Italians cannot disguise themselves. The Jews cannot. Many
Slavs cannot. So these people—and the Portuges^ must be proud of themselves (even though the Germans, and even the Irish are cowards, and try to be just plain boarding-house Americans.)’’ [Note 4]

The passage reveals that Uncle Boy’s battle for diversity extended beyond the race riot itself. The rioters were not the only enemies of diversity: most Springfield citizens, including the youngsters, aspired to be little more than “just plain boarding-house Americans.” Uncle Boy was determined to battle this timid, conventional thinking, at least in regard to the youngsters, the fountains of promise and hope for the future.

On the morning of October 21, the Illinois State Register announced Vachel’s second effort in the “Society” column (p. 7): Lecture by N. V. Lindsay. “The second of the series of ten lectures on the various nationalities of the world will be given this evening at the Y.M.C.A. by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay at 8 o’clock. The topic for this evening will be the English race, that is the Britishers, the original English people. These lectures are free to all members of the association and all men who care to attend. There is no charge for admission and the association officials are only too glad to have every man who finds it possible to do so attend these lectures.”

Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay may have been amused to learn that their son is described as having “traveled extensively through the old country and knows whereof he speaks. He illustrates his lectures with his own drawings and also [has] designed several novel posters for advertising his talks. One especially fine [poster] is an allegorical drawing showing the mermaid and the pearl diver. The following poem also appears on this poster, it having been composed by the lecturer.” And I quote the newspaper exactly, because one has to wonder if the media may have had a hand in creating the local impression that Uncle Boy was a little “strange”:

England is a mermaid,
Who thinks she owns the sea;
The oysters, pearls and amber,
The rocks, the coral-tree.

And is a fisherman^  
Who makes the pearls his own.  
He cluthes^ them in awful deeps—  
The mermaid lets alone.

Half dead he rises in his goat^  
She rides upon the spray.  
She blinds him with her trident,  
She takes his pearls away.
It requires a lot of imagination, after all, to envision pearl divers clut[cing]hing pearls when they rise at sea in their goats [boats].

We can only guess as to whether or not the Register’s scintillating announcement hurt attendance at Vachel’s evening performance. Anyway, the following day (October 22), the Illinois State Journal reported:

Lindsay Gives Second Lecture.

A fairly good audience listened to an interesting address last evening, given by Nicholas V. Lindsay at the new Y.M.C.A. building, on the subject, “The Anglo-Saxon.” The lecture was the second of the series of ten by Mr. Lindsay, begun a week ago last night.

The speaker discussed the traits of the ancient Englishmen, and pointed out the characteristics of the modern American which reflected these traits. The Scotch, he said, were reflected most clearly in the modern Presbyterian, the belief in which constituted the Scotchman’s earliest religious creed. Many habits and characteristics of the American business man were simply modern improvements upon those qualities of the English, the speaker said in substance.

Following the lecture the speaker conducted an informal discussion of the English race, the members of the audience asking questions which the speaker answered. This feature proved to be a pleasant and profitable diversion. (Page 7)

No reference is made to the poems Uncle Boy used to exercise the imaginations of his audience, but the drawing of the telephone lines across the bottom of his poster suggests that communication was a major theme. Almost certainly, Scotsman Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) was one example of the modern “business man,” in this case the businessman who turned speech and communication into a contemporary, money-making enterprise. [Note 5]

Meanwhile, the day after Vachel’s Anglo-Saxon lecture, Springfield was assured that everything was in order for the hanging of Joe James. PLANS COMPLETE FOR EXECUTION, the Illinois State Journal headlined (October 22, p. 12): “At 7 o’clock yesterday morning Sheriff Werner informed James that the pardon board refused to commute the sentence and then the negro broke down for the first time since his arrest.” [Three days earlier the Journal had reported PRISONER REMAINS SULLEN: “the same sullenness which seems a natural gift to him, which has marked his whole career in this city, still is present, and outside of his religious teachers no information can be drawn from him relative to his acts on the night the crime was committed” (October 19, p. 5).] On the nights of the 21st and 22nd, James was served his favorite dinner: fried chicken. He would also be given “a new suit of clothes and his other apparel will be new. He will be costumed in black, will wear a white shirt and have black patent leather shoes.”

On the fateful morning itself, October 23, the Journal trumpeted:

JOE JAMES CONFESSIONS ON EVE OF HANGING FOR BALLARD DEATH

Condemned Negro Tells Spiritual Advisor
Execution in His Case Is Justified
PLANS FOR EVENT COMPLETED

The article itself opens with a purported quote from the lips of Joe James: “When Sheriff Werner hangs me, he will not be hanging an innocent man.”

At 10:00 a.m., on October 23, Joe James was escorted to a hallway at the Sangamon County Jail. Here he confronted the gallows machinery for the first time. The *Illinois State Journal* offered a detailed account the next day:

**WITH A PRAYER ON HIS LIPS, JOE JAMES IS HUNG ON GALLOWS**

Murderer of Clergy Ballard Pays Extreme Penalty for His Atrocious Crime

RETAINS NERVE TO THE END

Ascends Death Trap With a Steady Step and After Declining to Make a Final Statement, Quietly Awaits Drop into Eternity

“Joe James, confessed murderer, was hanged in the Sangamon County jail yesterday morning. At 10:32 o’clock James was sent plunging into eternity, and exactly eleven minutes, thirty-four and one-fifth seconds later was officially pronounced dead.” DROP BREAKS NEGRO’S NECK a subtitle trumpets; but then the newspaper reports one disappointment:

**COMPLETE CONFESSION NOT MADE**

The expected complete confession as to the motive which led him to commit the awful crime of murder did not come. A public statement asking forgiveness and charging his crime to whisky and evil associations was given out after the hanging. This was James’ last acknowledgment that he was guilty of the crime for which he was punished. Voluntarily given, the plea for forgiveness made it certain that an innocent man had not suffered the death penalty.

Thus it was when Joe James dangled from the hangman’s noose, the lifeless body of the young negro expiated the murder of Clergy A. Ballard.

It was the fifth hanging in Sangamon County history, the *Journal* calculated, adding that 147 people witnessed the event. The paper even published special praise for local authorities: “Every detail of the death machine worked with nicety and precision. There were no bunglesome hitches, no agonizing delays, and no harrowing unnecessary mistakes.” The *Journal*’s rival paper, the *Illinois State Register*, reported that, “dressed in its splendid new clothing,” the body was put on display at a local funeral parlor, with seven thousand curious citizens filing past (October 24, p. 1). Both newspapers commented that, when he stood on the scaffold, Joe James seemed more “composed” than many in the audience.
And so, with the publication of the October 24, 1908, newspapers, Springfield was finally finished with the itinerant Joe James, “the typical Southern darkie,” from Birmingham, Alabama. He was, according to his mother, a month shy of being eighteen years old (see Chapter 20, Note 6). The lethal straight-edged razor apparently never was found—and was conveniently forgotten.

By a twist of fate that proves again truth is stranger than fiction, the third YMCA lecture, in part, focused on “The Police Force”—a modern-but-lesser version of the authority that Vachel felt Irish poets had exercised in Europe. Indeed, with the inclusion of Yeats and Shaw, the speaker likely believed the falling off was relegated to the United States. Yeats and Shaw continued to be literary giants, at least on the eastern side of the Atlantic; and literary giants, in Uncle Boy’s mind, are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” the real authority figures. The lecture poster displays the essential focus, showing how the Irish harp and the Irish “singers” dominate the Irish cop and his weapon of choice, the shillelagh. The lecture must also have included humor, since the reference to “The Wisdom of Mulvaney and Dooley” manifests the speaker’s knowledge of Rudyard Kipling (*Mulvaney Stories*, 1897) and Finley Peter Dunne (*Mr. Dooley’s Philosophy*, 1906). In fact, Vachel’s drawing of the Irish harp is very like the illustration on the title page of Dunne’s book (which, like Kipling’s, is online at Google Books). We are forced to speculate on “Lecture Three” because, oddly enough, neither the *Illinois State Register* nor the *Illinois State Journal* mentions the lecture. Both papers are normally filled with references to and accounts of the most mundane news and events concerning Springfield and its citizens. (We know from the “Personals,” for example, that Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay were in London at the time of the August race riot.)

In contrast, on November 4, both the *Journal* (**LINDSEY IS TO SPEAK**, p. 8) and the *Register* (**LINDSEY TALKS AGAIN TO-NIGHT**, p. 12) published brief announcements of “Lecture Four. The Germans.” The *Register* reporter does get the speaker’s name correct in the body of the report, and also reveals some interesting details concerning the lecture series: “The fourth in the series of the Lindsay lectures in the Y.M.C.A. course will be given at 8 o’clock tonight in the new building on South Seventh Street. The subject for the discussion tonight will be ‘The German.’ Mr. Lindsay will bring to this lecture some things of unusual importance. The average attendance for the first three lectures in the course has been about 100 men per night. With a discussion of ‘The German’ in this evening’s session there comes a natural division in the course.” The reporter does not explain the “natural division,” but Vachel’s booklet reveals that the next two lectures will focus on “The Negro” and “The Ghetto Jews,” the two groups in Springfield most hated by many Northern European immigrants, that is, “The Anglo-Saxons” (Lecture Two), “The Irish” (Lecture Three), and “The Germans” (Lecture Four). [Note 6]
The following day, November 5, the *State Journal* offered a brief account of the lecture:

**LECTURES ON GERMANS**

*Nicholas V. Lindsay Continues His Series of Talks Delivered at the Y.M.C.A.*

“The sturdy business qualities of the Americanized German were delineated and lauded in the fourth lecture of a series given by Nicholas V. Lindsay at the Y.M.C.A. last evening. The Germans, he said, predominated in Europe in the avenues of learning, warfare, science and music, yet in America they had exhibited little else than the ability to make the most of business ventures. The lecturer’s address last night was one of much interest, and a good audience of young men greeted him upon his fourth appearance.”

The particular “business ventures” associated with the Germans are not mentioned in the newspaper, but Vachel’s poster, with its depictions of sausages and pretzels, gives us a clue. Meanwhile, the dominating tuba (an instrument first patented by Prussians Wilhelm Friedrich Wieprecht and Carl Moritz in 1835) suggests that the speaker continued to emphasize the desirability and power of music and harmony, all in his courageous attempt to overcome Springfield’s antipathy toward distinctiveness and diversity. Old world Germany had generated many famous composers, and Vachel’s lecture series, as the *State Register* announced, was subtitled: “Composite Associations of Springfield” (November 4, p. 12: emphasis added).

The next two lectures, the middle two of the series, must have required all the courage Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay’s son could muster. Before consulting newspaper accounts, we can simply glance at Vachel’s poster for “Lecture Five: The Negro,” and see that the sizable banjo sets the tone and the theme for the lecture. During his years in New York City, Uncle Boy witnessed firsthand the growing influence of African-American musicians and song writers, stars like Bob Cole and brothers J. Rosamond and James Weldon, along with vaudeville standouts [Bert] Williams & [George] Walker. Sadly, in Springfield, Illinois, as the newly
exonerated George Richardson would discover, the usual employment for “the negro” was sweeping up the messes abandoned by others. Even extraordinary talent like Scott Joplin’s was no guarantee of success, especially in America’s heartland. “The negro is as heartedly hated here as anywhere by the general populace,” Vachel advised Richard Watson Gilder a few days before the lecture (November 6). “As far as the sober can see, we are as likely to have ten riots as one. But I can tell you more in a future letter. I am going to give the matter a special probing this week. Next Wednesday we have a special discussion on the negro, for which I must prepare, and if possible I may turn the material into an article for the Outlook.” Clearly, it was not a lecture the writer was looking forward to: “I hate the necessary probing into the tenderloin [the vice district in any city, the Levee for Springfield] where the whole business began and ended, and the interviews with the self-avowed political sinners who run the town, and who have the information. . . . Of course, Springfield people know the negro’s debt to Lincoln, but as the theme grows more perplexing, they do not like to think on it, and not through any disrespect. They think of him in the matter he surely accomplished—the restoration of the union, and the furnishing of a great example of Americanism. We know too well he did not completely solve the race question” (Chénétié 28-29).

TO LECTURE ON NEGRO, the Illinois State Journal reported (November 11, p. 5): “Nicholas V. Lindsay Will Deliver an Address at the Y.M.C.A. Tonight.” The brief article reads: “Nicholas V. Lindsay will give his lecture on the negro at the Y.M.C.A. building at 7:30 o’clock this evening. The lecture is expected to be the banner address of the series. With interest in the subject especially alive and freshened in the minds of everyone in the city, the topic will appeal to Mr. Lindsay’s audience with special force. At the close of the lecture the usual informal discussion of the subject will be held. All young men are invited to the meeting tonight.” The following morning, November 12, the Journal published a brief summary: LECTURES ON NEGRO, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Discusses the Freedman Before Y.M.C.A. Audience. “The lecture given by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay in the new Y.M.C.A. building last evening proved one of intense interest and the discussions which followed were easily the most spirited of any so far in the course.” Perhaps Vachel was disappointed in the brevity of the Journal’s response, but he must have been pleased to find the story on PAGE ONE.

Any disappointment with the Journal would have disappeared when Uncle Boy unfolded his Illinois State Register (November 12) and turned to page four:

N. V. Lindsay on Negro Question

An Interesting Lecture at the Y.M.C.A. Last Night—Colored Men Take Part in Discussion

The lecture last night by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay at the Y.M.C.A. building with the discussion which followed, proved of such interest that the session was prolonged almost an hour beyond the regular closing time. Several of Springfield’s most respected colored citizens were present, and were able to contribute not a little in the way of fresh views and information as to the actual condition existing in Springfield.

After a discussion of the work of Lincoln, showing how deep a hold he has upon the sons of Illinois, the lecturer pointed out the necessity of an everyday understanding of the
The negro question, for we cannot always be in the lofty mood of Lincoln, and it is the petty everyday misunderstandings that make race prejudice most bitter. The fact that Williams & Walker or Cole & Johnson can draw big audiences from white people, he said, shows that there is a place to begin in establishing a mutual respect on both sides of the race line; and, of course, there is no question that such leaders as Booker Washington are heartily respected by the higher element of the whites, who draw the race line even more sharply.

The whole point of the lecture was that, while the race line will grow more definite, there is a chance for more respect on both sides, and while the negro organizes his own life and depends more on himself, he will receive his due applause from sober-minded white men, who will in turn affect the whole body of white society. [Note 7]

Finally, both newspaper accounts end with references to “next week’s lecture . . . upon the Ghetto Jews,” with the Register adding an important update: “with the interest in this series continually growing, a large attendance is assured. This course of lectures bids fair to become one of the most popular, useful and interesting contributions the Y.M.C.A. has made to the life of Springfield, and Mr. Lindsay is to be congratulated upon his foresight and studious efforts which have made it possible. Every Wednesday night for the next five weeks, any man in Springfield will be welcome at the discussion of the live topic of the future of Springfield and its cosmopolitan population.”

The day following “Lecture Six,” the Illinois State Register reports that Vachel shared the YMCA podium with his brother-in-law, Dr. Arthur Paul Wakefield (Wakefield and Lindsay Talk, November 19, p. 7). Paul is identified as one “who was, for several years, medical missionary to China”; and he addressed the “changes which probably would be made” following the death of China’s “dowager empress.” (Empress Dowager Cixi had just died, November 15, a few days shy of her 73rd birthday.) The “second lecture” of the evening, the Register article continues, “was delivered by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, and was on the topic, ‘The Ghetto Jews,’ being one of the series he is delivering before the men of the association.” The Lindsay family may have been amused by the reporter’s description of this second speaker: “Mr. Lindsay is a man who spent much of his time in travel and who knows whereof he speaks,” the reporter not adding, of course, that most of Mr. Lindsay’s travel was afoot, as an itinerant literary tramp.

“Following the talk,” the article discloses, “there was a discussion of the various points which [the speaker] had brought out and which was participated in by many of the men. In the discussion the lecturer showed his audience that the Jew was really a part of us rather than a foreigner, and where he [the Jew] was entitled to
more of a standing than he is accorded.” Finally, the reporter reveals that Uncle Boy was slowly
gathering stature in Springfield: “The talk was well prepared and delivered in a masterful
manner, being illustrated by drawings which are the productions of the speaker himself, who is
an artist of ability as well as a powerful speaker.”

Powerful or not, Vachel faced a difficult challenge: the “standing” of the Jew in
Springfield was not much above the standing of the African-American. To the argument that
Jews were the oracles of God, the prejudiced Christian responded that it was the Jews who killed
Christ. Jews were not allowed to join the city’s better organizations, like the local country club.
Several Jewish shops, as we saw in the last chapter, were forced to open in the Levee, where they
were destroyed alongside African-American businesses during the riot. It is hardly coincidental
that several Jews played an important role in establishing the NAACP: Joel Spingarn (the first
chairman), Arthur Spingarn, Henry Moskowitz, and Rabbi Stephen Wise, to name only a few.
Indeed, there is a wealth of published material on both the similarities and the differences
in attitude toward African-Americans and Jews at the beginning of the last century. However,
Uncle Boy’s experience with prejudice directed at Springfield Jews was much more personal
than many may realize. Uncle Boy was in passionate pursuit of a Jewish woman when he
delivered his November 18 lecture.

We do not know a lot about “Ray,” Rachel A. Hiller, except that for the past twelve or so
years she had been teaching Latin at the Springfield High School, living in the home of Susan
Wilcox (502 South State Street), and serving as President of the Springfield chapter of the
National Council of Jewish Women. She was obviously a few years older than her suitor, since
she had been his teacher when he was a sophomore at the high school (see Chapter 5, Note 6).
In Proceedings of the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women (November
1896: online at Google Books), Hiller is not only listed as President of the Springfield chapter
but also as teacher of a local study group. Her teaching methods, as outlined in her report, could
have influenced a young student named Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, since these methods are very
similar to those he would use in his New York City classes:

REPORT OF THE SPRINGFIELD, ILL., SECTION.

We have one circle of twelve (12) members. We have met once in two weeks, at which
time the lesson previously assigned on Jewish History is recited. The Bible is our main
text-book. We hope this year to cover the periods of—

1. The Patriarchs.
2. The Life in Egypt.
3. The Life in the Wilderness.
4. The Period of the Judges.
5. The Kings to the division of the Empire.

We have just completed the first period. Since the leader considers the work of each
individual, no matter how crude, of far greater value than even the hearing of a good
lecture or a fine paper, her plan has been to assign a lesson (giving a full outline on that
lesson so as to insure thoughtful study), and to expect every member to be prepared on
the entire lesson. Thus far, she thinks her plan has been very successful.

RACHEL A. HILLER, President. [Page 74]
At the very least, Vachel and Rachel could share notes on teaching.

Oddly enough, we learn a little about Rachel Hiller from letters Vachel wrote to another woman he was pursuing romantically: Nellie Tracy Vieira. Of Portuguese descent and eleven years younger than her suitor, Nellie was a student at the Cumnock School of Oratory, Northwestern University, Evanston. In October 1909, she experienced some sort of snub, some mistreatment that both she and her suitor attributed to her dark complexion, her dissimilarity. Her confessional letter (apparently lost) opened the floodgates of Uncle Boy’s mind, and he wrote extensively on being a victim of prejudice: “. . . you and I are both Isolated^, as you are beginning to discover, and weep. You belong in Portugal and I belong in the moon. Inasmuch as we have undertaken to live in this alien land, let us make common cause and fight the Philistine, the Bromide^, the middle class, be ourselves, and seek for the elect, who do not object to folks being queer, and coming from the moon, or Portugal. . . . You are going to tread the winepress alone, as I have done, from the day I was born.”

The mistreatment of woman due to race then led Vachel’s mind to the struggles of Rachel Hiller, although he was not yet ready to confess to Nellie that Rachel had been more than an acquaintance: “Rachel Hiller has been through what you must go through. She has made her way as a brilliant individual, a solitary soldier of fortune, against odds and come out triumphant. To my mind she has the most valuable social and intellectual standing of any woman in Springfield,” and so on (see Chapter 5, Note 6). As for youthful Nellie, Uncle Boy counsels: “I want you to start slowly to build up your own line of self-defense, to fortify your own soul. Of course it does not pay to try to argue with the snobbish, or Rachel Hiller would have been admitted to good society because she was kin to the authors of the Old Testament.”

Instead, Nellie needs to fortify her soul with poetry concerning her racial background: translations of the poetry of “Camoens” [Luis Vaz de Camões (1524-80)] and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Catarina to Camoens” and “Sonnets from the Portuguese.” “If you cannot get any further,” Nellie is advised, “put great books on your shelves—and read them and say to yourself—these are my friends, some of them my countrymen” (Fowler 177-180). A little more than one week later, in a letter dated “October 27, 1909,” Vachel comments offhand: “Today I wrote Rachel Hiller the first letter since our bust-up last fall, asking her opinion of my book [The Tramp’s Excuse and Other Poems], and assuring her she was no longer dangerous to my peace of mind since I was proud to say I was infatuated with Miss Nellie Tracy Vierra^ of whom she has probably heard. I will hear from Rachel all right” (Fowler 226). Indeed, Rachel Hiller experienced not only a “bust-up” with former student Vachel Lindsay but also a “bust-up” with Springfield, Illinois. She had either moved, or was about to move, to New York City, where she clearly felt more at home. 

Thus, we have a clue as to the subject of Lecture Six: the children of the authors of the Old Testament “should be revered and heeded as the people with a genius for religion.” Instead, in contemporary Springfield, they are asked “to be money getters.” And the Vieira letters also indicate the speaker’s attitude toward the “money getters . . . . All the advice I have given you applies anywhere in America,” Nellie’s suitor comments, adding “outside the business world. There of course all questions of rank and precedence and peculiarity are forgotten, it is a glorious democracy of hogs, where everyone tries to get his foot in the trough. You will find the commercial world pleasantly free of the questions I have here discussed, and if you meet these folks in ten years they will bow down all right, if they fancy you have twenty five^ cents in your
pocket that they might get if they were courteous and patient. For most of them will be grubbing for a living” (Fowler 180).

5

Personal experience and “grubbing for a living” both formed the framework for YMCA “Lecture Seven: The Italians.” The Illinois State Register (November 26, p. 4) published one of the longer reviews concerning the series to date:

NICHOLAS VACHEL LINDSAY
LECTURES ON ITALIANS.

________________

Interesting Address Given at Y.M.C.A. Last Evening—Tells of “Little Italy” in New York.

________________

There was a large and enthusiastic audience at the Y.M.C.A. last evening to hear Nicholas Vachel Lindsay give the seventh of his lectures of a series of ten dealing on the characteristics of the different nationalities to be found in Springfield. His subject last evening was “The Italian.” In his talk he dwelt considerably on his experiences and personal adventures with the Italians in the Nicholls tubing works of New York [see Chapter 16], where he was a day laborer with them for three months. He discussed also “Little Italy” of New York, almost every section of which he has visited, telling how they observed Thanksgiving day.

The reporter goes on to summarize “How the Ice Man Danced,” Vachel’s story of a Thanksgiving evening spent with friends in a New York City “wild Italian bar room” (see War Bulletin Number Five, in Prose 116-121). “With this story as a text,” the article continues, “the lecturer pointed out the difference in the motives of these people who came to this country and our ancestors, who came to [New] England and established the day on which we give thanks to the Lord for all our blessings. He also gave many illustrations of what an Italian can become in an English speaking country, using Rossetti [Dante Gabriel Rossetti] as one. . . . Following the lecture about an hour was spent in a discussion of the subject on which the speaker had dwelt. This proved one of the interesting features of the meeting, as a large number of interesting and useful questions were asked by many of those present. . . . Mr. Lindsay will at his lecture to be given in December [2] use as his subject ‘The Poles.’”

Rossetti, along with John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (the P.R.B.) in 1848. And, as we saw in Chapter 9 (p. 18), Vachel read the P.R.B. writers when he was a student at the Chicago Art Institute in February 1901. “I am going to make the P.R.B. the basis and starting-point of any art reading I may do,” he explained, “because I can understand them and their spirit.” He had lectured on the P.R.B. as early as 1906, when he was in Atlanta (Chapter 17, p. 24); and he would lecture on them again several times more over the next two years. Like John Ruskin and William Morris, he was especially attracted
to the P.R.B.’s aversion to materialism; and he wholly agreed with their emphasis on beauty and simplicity.

In contrast, we do not know much about “Lecture Eight: The Poles,” even though the Illinois State Journal did publish a short review (December 3, p. 5):

**LINDSAY SPEAKS ON POLISH MINER**

Delivers Address to Senior Members of Y.M.C.A. and Tells of Future of Foreigner in America

“Nicholas V. Lindsay delivered an interesting and instructive lecture last night to senior members of the Y.M.C.A. His topic was ‘The Polish Miner in America.’ The lecture was illustrated with a series of posters. Mr. Lindsay’s knowledge of his subject together with volunteer comments of his hearers brought out clearly the position of the foreign miner in America and his future place in American society.” What is noteworthy is a follow-up comment: “A series of interesting and instructive lectures is being arranged by Nicholas V. Lindsay for the junior members.” With what we know about Uncle Boy’s emphasis on the promise of youth, we can judge that he was not entirely pleased with an audience limited to “Senior Members of the Y.M.C.A.”; and he was determined to do something for the younger set. [Note 9]

One thing is certain about Lecture Eight: with Vachel’s love of counterpoint, the presentation contrasted the darkness of working for King Coal with the brightness of exceptional Polish minds, such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1573) and Madame Marie Curie (1867-1934). And with the lecture series’ emphasis on music and harmony, the speaker likely spent time discussing “the poet of the piano,” Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), who was born near and grew up in Warsaw. Perhaps Vachel also had something to say about the work of the “Three Bards,” the three famous Polish poets: Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849), and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812-1859). Mickiewicz’ poem “Ode to Youth” is a work Uncle Boy would have found especially appealing: “O Youth! give me thy wings, / That I may mount aloft from this dread earth / And soar to where Enthusiasm flings / Its light on nobler things / Waking new blossoms of most wondrous worth, / And blessing Hope with dreams of her beloved ones.” This Polish “Tree of Laughing Bells,” as it were, was available to Vachel in the English Verse series: *Translations*, ed. W. J. Linton and R.H. Stoddard (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883, available online at Google Books).
On the night of December 9, 1908, Vachel again shared the YMCA podium with a second speaker, a man the Register advertises as “Dr. Wei, the Noted Chinese Physician” [ORIGIN OF CHINESE NAMES, December 9, p. 9]. The very long article quotes Dr. Wei (a.k.a. Dr. Paul Wakefield), who explains that English names are not acceptable in China: “When one enters China one of the first things required is a Chinese name. . . . In the first place all Chinese characters are monosyllable and you cannot spell with them for the characters do not of themselves express sound. Further, the Chinese have two hundred ‘name’ characters, and to use other than these would seem to them impossible. You would have to spend all your time trying to explain and then the Chinaman would not understand. I say there are two hundred Chinese names. That is, family names. To get my goods through customs I must have a name at once. So a Chinese scholar was sent for. He decided upon ‘Wei’ for family name, and ‘Keh Fei’ for given names. Why so? Because foreigners coming to China have tried to get Chinese names as near like the first syllable of their English names as possible. So Wei-Keh-Fei (Way-Geh-Fay) sounded like ‘Wa-ke-field’—as near as Chinese characters could.”

The long article continues quoting Paul on the Chinese and names, concluding with a tease for the evening lecture: “I have chosen, to advertise myself as ‘Dr. Wei,’ in part to get your attention, but chiefly because I shall try in my talk to-night to give my viewpoint of a Chinaman. A very interesting view if we could really get at it. I shall largely use conversations I have had with Chinamen who were friendly enough to speak frankly, and not Chinese fashion—fear to give me an adverse opinion for fear of hurting my feelings or from fear of being impolite. I shall draw from native papers and magazines and consular reports. In fact, I shall try—for one night—to be a Chinaman, frankly giving his views of America and Americans.” [Note 10]

Dr. Wei’s presentation was a resounding success, according to the Illinois State Register (DR. WAKEFIELD ON CHINESE, December 10, p. 9), and there likely was some good-natured needling in the Lindsay family home. “The lecture given by Dr. Paul Wakefield at the Y.M.C.A.,” the Register trumpeted, “was without doubt one of the most interesting lectures which has been given at that place for many a day”: a very interesting analysis, since Dr. Wei’s brother-in-law had just delivered eight lectures in eight weeks! “There was a large attendance,” the Register reporter continues, “and following the address by Dr. Wakefield, or Dr. Wei, as he is known in China, a lively discussion was participated in by the audience. Among the many things brought up was the high ideal of the Chinese, which is learning. This most all Chinamen seek . . . .” Dr. Wei also emphasized China’s resources (enough coal to furnish the world for “800 years”) and the Chinese respect for age (“they do not like to give up their old customs”). What Vachel likely found most interesting, though, was the Chinese attitude toward potential captains of industry, such as “King Coal”: “. . . the people of China are awake and she wants railroads, mills, streetcars, foundries, factories, wants her resources developed, etc. All these
things she wants and needs to make it one of the greatest countries in the world. ‘However,’ Dr. Wakefield said, ‘there are some things she does not want. They do not want the few to amass the wealth and they do not want the few to have the ‘special privileges’’ [yes, the reporter’s pronoun usage is also “interesting”].

With nine lectures completed, Vachel readied Springfield for his grand finale: **CLOSE LECTURE SERIES: Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Will Deliver Last Address Tonight on “City Beautiful,”** the *Illinois State Journal* announced: “The last lecture of the Lindsay series at the Y.M.C.A. tonight will be in the nature of a personal declaration of principles. He will speak along the line in which he is especially interested, ‘The City Beautiful.’ All those men who have been interested in this course heretofore will be especially welcome. All people interested in the **Springfield public school system**, Springfield carnivals, Springfield writers and **music of the highest sort**, are especially welcome.” [I have highlighted these two passages to demonstrate Uncle Boy’s continuing focus on (1) the young and (2) music and HARMONY.] The *Journal* reporter continues and emphasizes the lecturer’s reliance on art: “Mr. Lindsay will base his discussion on forty posters, which he has used heretofore in his lectures on ‘The Races.’ From every poster a special application will be made to Springfield’s condition, with a special suggestion on ‘How to Make Springfield Unique’” (December 16, p. 5).

The *Journal*’s rival paper, the *Illinois State Register*, not only announced “Lecture Ten,” but also provided an extended summary of what the audience could expect:

**HOW TO MAKE THE CITY UNIQUE**

*Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Will Advocate Some Radical Changes in City in Talk at Y.M.C.A. To-night*

“The lecture course on ‘The Races,’ by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, at the Y.M.C.A. building, has been attended by some of the most earnest and solid leaders of the community,” the *Register* article begins. “Mr. Lindsay wants, especially, men of this type to come this evening to his final lecture, ‘How to Make Springfield Unique.’ He will advocate a great many fantastic changes which will shock these gentlemen, no doubt, on first hearing of them. Nevertheless, he is anxious to give these suggestions to these very men, because they will be most apt to remember them”:
Mr. Lindsay is ambitious to have his ideal that Springfield should become a great center of culture, fixed firmly in the minds of all conservative people here. He may not be correct in his suggestions on how to bring it about, but he feels that he can stir the zeal of many men who have been groping in this direction, and convince them that there is enough talent in Springfield already to make her a brilliant town, if that talent were brought to bear upon the city life, and not concealed in special cliques or circles of culture.

The lecture will then focus on Uncle Boy’s interest in succeeding generations: “The workingman of Springfield is the man who needs it most; because in the next generation he or his son will be the leader of Springfield. Then, in that day, he must have in his soul some admiration for music, painting, sculpture, which will prompt him to beautify the town. The captains of industry of the next generation are the Poles, the Italians, the Lithuanians, the Greeks and other men whom we now consider foreigners in Springfield. These men must be given the highest American ideals, so that they will make the town lovely and cultured when they achieve the power to do so. In their own countries men of this type have produced the greatest civilizations that the world ever saw. The only trouble is that here in America the workingman is taught to love money, and nothing else. When he becomes a power in Springfield through his money he is just as rude as when a workingman, except that he wears better clothes, pays a little more for what he eats, and minds his manners a little more.”

What follows in this lengthy Register article is essentially a prose summary of the poem composed to celebrate the occasion, “On the Building of Springfield,” Uncle Boy’s 1908 Christmas present to the city of his discontent:

Our whole population must be taught that civic beauty is more valuable than civic wealth—that it is not so important for Springfield to be big as for her to be different—that the little towns in the history of the world have been the most famous towns, have furnished the world with philosophers, writers, statesmen and all those things which make a city worthwhile. Take for instance Athens, who furnished Rome with her culture until the fall of Rome; Florence, who furnished Italy and Europe with culture through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; Nuremburg, the very center of Germany; Oxford, which dominates the great intellects of London to-day; Cambridge, which is as near to a cultured town as we have in the United States, being the center to which all the intellects turn to-day; all these are little towns. Cambridge, with all her prestige, is a town very easy to excel. She stands as a center of scholarship and literature, but her knowledge of art, of music and of architecture are not startlingly unique. Springfield in a generation can pass her in all these matters, and in five generations could easily excel her in literary prestige. The real all-round cultured American town has never yet been built. Illinois is destined to produce that town. These cities of the Middle West, full of typical Americans—give them time and they are bound to find their cultured center. Springfield can be that center if she has the ambition. (December 16, p. 7: obvious typos have been corrected.)

The next morning, December 17, the Illinois State Journal confirms that Uncle Boy said essentially what he said he was going to say to “quite an audience of enthusiastic hearers” (UNIQUE CITY IS THEME: Vachel Lindsay Discusses Improvement of Local Conditions in Address at Y.M.C.A., p. 4). The State Register, on the other hand, published
another long article, one that especially manifests Uncle Boy’s emphasis on “the generations yet to come”:

**LINDSAY GIVES LAST LECTURE**

**“THE FUTURE OF SPRINGFIELD” IS CLOSING THEME**

**Deals With Business Conditions and Urges a Better Civic Life as Duty Which We Owe to Generations Yet to Come**

The last of the series of talks given last evening at the Y.M.C.A. by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, “The future of Springfield,” was a fitting climax to the ten talks given on “Composite Citizenship,” and proved one of the strongest and most interesting. In his preceding lectures he has told of the characteristics of the various nationalities which go to make up the city of Springfield, and especially noting the line of work in which they are most competent and for which they have become noted as a race.

In his talk he said there were three sorts of people in Springfield, which he would discuss. They were the good people, the bad people, and the businessman. In speaking of the good man he said the average church of to-day is an epitome of middle class cheapness and complacency. It has made a natural enemy of the workingman, for whom Christ died, and on the other hand those who understand the highest things of scholarship, music, philosophy, architecture and find their Christ indwelling in these, do not find Him in the middle class church member.

**Talks of Businessmen.**

In dealing with the businessmen he said: “They are neither Pharisees nor sinners. They are the sort that are diplomatically on the fence in regard to every question beneath the skies, unless they thing it is a matter that ‘hurts business.’ And when their business is disturbed, they snarl like dogs, roar like lions and squeal like pigs. Gentlemen, there is a scripture for you—‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of god.’ I say, any man with a dollar in his pocket is in danger of hell.”

However, on progressing with his talk he said, “Gentlemen, we are all goody-good men, you cannot redeem this town by voting on the bad things. Consider the parable of the tares and the wheat, that were left side by side till the harvest. Consider the wheat and forget the tares. You have to make this town beautiful, as it will not stay good for two hours.”

**Duty to Posterity.**

“I say to you, as bad men, you know that revelry is a necessity of the soul, and many a good time is more wholesome than it seems to the Pharisees. Christ himself appeared to be a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of the Publicans and sinners. Nevertheless, you know, Oh, bad man, that **this town is full of children who have a right to inherit wholesome institutions of pleasure**—noble customs of revelry rather than the debased; holy public splendor, rather than poisoned splendor behind closed doors. They have a right to unspotted bodies and blanched minds—not overtempted, not
cynically disillusioned. They have a right to grow up in a city for whose customs they
have a thrilling response that makes them ordinances of god. By allowing crude shows in
our theatres instead of good ones, by allowing hasty carnival decorations instead of those
well thought out, by allowing outrageously poor pictures to be hung on the walls of
private houses, by allowing ordinary music in our streets, when good music can be had
by prayer and fasting—by talking common political gab, and by common reform
hysteries instead of thinking deeply into social conditions with the hold of the world’s
text-books—by taking our pleasures like blind, hungry beasts instead of men of
judgment, brotherhood and culture, we are wrongdoing the next generation and shaming
our town.”

**Duty to Posterity.**

“Our newspapers and orators assume that government has its strongest foundations in
the rank and file of the people. They do not hesitate to submit to the grave technical ideas
of administration, and the best of them believe that the voice of the people is the voice of
God. But those who have the rule and organizing of our culture, the theatrical managers,
band masters, editors, school boards, have no faith in the people’s taste. They thrust upon
them as much of the bad as they can stand, instead of the best. Cheap vaudeville, cheap
comic supplements, rag-time music, blatant billboards and the like, come about because
the men in authority, and the leaders of the cultured circles, have a contempt for the
workingman, instead of providing a great civic life for the whole people.

“Seas and oceans of misunderstood talent are sweeping in on us from Europe. We
employ them as manual labor only, though their souls are instructed in many things our
souls need. Let us make a city so stimulating that the talented Irish boy can become
unique as Yeats or Shaw; that the great minded German boy can become unique as Dürer
or Goethe or Wagner; that the exceptional negro boy can develop in circles among his own people,
work like that of Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

**Hopes for the City.**

“Let us hope highly for Springfield and build her slowly, remembering the centuries to come. Some
day we will have more architects than lawyers, more landscape gardeners than physicians, and men
will be orderly because they adore the beauty of our city towers, and feel the authoritative majesty of
their foundations; and physical trouble will be light and transient, and healed by a walk in one of the
public squares or a prayer in one of our churches, and men can give their whole strength to the
building of the city’s soul.”

And thus Uncle Boy’s efforts to build a better Springfield ended, at least temporarily, with
the quotation marks indicating that the Register reporter had been given a copy of the final lecture.

In the decade to come, Vachel would continue to wrestle with the beautification theme, finally
publishing what, at the time, he considered to be his magnum opus, *The Golden Book of Springfield* (1920).

Quite by coincidence, I finished writing this chapter the day after a young woman with the given name Lindsay, from Florida State University, visited the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic Site (February 2011). She is writing a master’s thesis on Vachel, with special focus on the role of music in his poetry. When I asked what led to her interest in Vachel Lindsay, she answered that one of her friends is Vachel’s great great granddaughter. I was proud to tell our visitor how the State of Illinois has carefully restored Vachel’s Home; how friends of Vachel promoted Lake Springfield (with the Vachel Lindsay bridge crossing at the center); how friends of Vachel planned superb scenic and recreation areas, such as the Lincoln Memorial Gardens; how Springfield, Illinois, is the site of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library, the latter standing just in front of where Sheriff Werner’s Sangamon County jail stood, the jail where itinerant Joe James was legally lynched; and how President Barack Obama, in 2008, announced his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States at the same Old State Capitol site where, in 1908, Prohibitionist Party Presidential candidate, Eugene W. Chafin, thwarted the bloodthirsty rioters (see Chapter 20, p. 32). Vachel’s prophetic cauldron seems to have been working overtime when, in 1908, he proclaimed: “Record it for the grandson of your son—/ A city is not builded in a day:/ Our little town cannot complete her soul/Till countless generations pass away” (“On the Building of Springfield,” *Poetry* 168). [Note 1]

### Notes for Chapter Twenty-One

[Note 1] The paragraph Vachel refers to is in F[rederic] W[illiam] H[enry] Myers, *Wordsworth*, published in the *English Men of Letters* series, ed. John Morley (London: Macmillan and Co., 1885), p. 165: “And now, while the inner circle of friends and relations began to pass away, the outer circle of admirers was rapidly spreading. Between the years 1830 and 1840 Wordsworth passed from the apostle of a clique into the most illustrious man of letters in England. The rapidity of this change was not due to any remarkable accident, nor to the appearance of any new work of genius. It was merely an extreme instance of what must always occur where an author, running counter to the fashion of his age, has to create his own public in defiance of the established critical powers. The disciples whom he draws round him are for the most part young; the established authorities are for the most part old; so that by the time that the original poet is about sixty years old, most of his admirers will be about forty, and most of his critics will be dead. His admirers now become his accredited critics; his works are widely introduced to the public; and if they are really good his reputation is secure” (available online at Google Books).

In important ways, the goal of creating his “own public in defiance of the established critical powers” explains an appreciable amount of Uncle Boy’s activity over the next few years. He continued to “teach” a class of high school boys at his home, and he continued to self-publish much of his work, freely giving it to neighbors and mailing it to any and all who sent requests. The bottom line is that his efforts finally proved successful, but not until 1913-14.

[Note 2] Richard Watson Gilder was not the only person to receive advanced notice of the YMCA lectures. In the “Society” column of the *Illinois State Register* (October 13, 1908, p. 5), under the subtitle *Via Christi Study Class*, we read: “The members of the Via Christi Study class were entertained in a charming manner yesterday afternoon at the home of Mrs. V. T. Lindsay when her son, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, who spent much of his time in New York...
studying art and painting, delivered an interesting talk. His topic was ‘A Panoramic View of the Important Events in History from Rameses to Roosevelt.’ He has lectured much in the east and [the talk was] illustrated with drawings made by Mr. Lindsay.” The YMCA lectures, in part, grew out of Vachel’s *Litany of the Heroes*, entitled, in 1908, *The Heroes of Time*. The poem, in turn, manifests the influence of “Mrs. V. T. Lindsay,” whose two college plays were staged in Springfield when Vachel was a boy. “These plays were written in a similar style to the *Litany of the Heroes*,” Vachel avers, “and I suppose that is where I found the idea” (see *Poetry* 946-947).

Kate’s second play, with the title “Colloquy,” focused on the particular skill of each separate nation (Italians and painting, for example), a focus that is very suggestive of Vachel’s approach in the first nine YMCA lectures.

[Note 3] At the beginning of the 20th century, the football powerhouses largely played in the Ivy League (Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Penn State) or nearby (Syracuse and West Point). The game itself was more like rugby than contemporary football. In fact, it was Pop Warner who popularized several aspects of the modern game: the forward pass, the lateral, the reverse, the fake handoff, etc. Warner’s players were undersized, but quick and shifty, and they thoroughly enjoyed outsmarting the “palefaces.” There is speculation that Pratt consented to football so that the smaller Indians would learn a lesson, namely, how inferior they were as compared to the paleface. But with Pop Warner and Jim Thorpe, the Carlisle Indians could compete with anybody, and sports teams across the country decided to use “Indians” or “Braves” or “Redskins” as mascot names. See Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). For additional insight into Vachel and the American Indian, see Massa, pp. 155-157.

[Note 4] Illustrator Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944) established the ideal of feminine beauty and independence in his pen-and-ink sketches of the “Gibson girl,” the ideal that thousands of American women aspired to at the turn of the 20th century. The suave, handsome “Gibson man” was the perfect partner. Henry Hutt (1875-1950) was as famous as Gibson in setting the fashion for the up-to-date female. Like Vachel, Hutt had been a student at the Chicago Art Institute, and *The Henry Hutt Picture Book* (New York: The Century Company, 1908) was a popular gift at the time of and just after the YMCA lectures.

Gibson and Hutt espoused sameness in dress in much the same way that the popular drama of Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), *The Melting Pot* (1908), espoused sameness in daily living. Born a Jew, Zangwill envisioned a world where racial and religious diversity were eradicated, not unlike Richard Henry Pratt’s efforts at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Vachel’s goal was to teach Springfield that unity did not have to mean sameness, that sameness would be as boring as Lucifer’s “heaven.” Unity, thanks to Shelley and his Greek forebears, could mean harmony, the excitement of religious and racial diversity within the bounds of order and form: the unity in diversity. Ironically, the image of the melting pot used on the programs announcing Zangwill’s play, with the fire beneath, suggests a final product more like the traditional hell than the traditional heaven. Vachel’s Lucifer would say “Amen.”
Scotsman Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) was born into a family concerned with elocution and speech. Bell’s mother and wife were deaf, so that the inventor’s interest in communication came naturally. In March 1876, Bell was granted his most famous patent, and although there is extensive debate as to whether or not he was the first to discover electronic voice communication, the telephone would soon be an everyday reality. Fellow curmudgeons may like to know that Bell considered his invention a distraction, and would not allow a telephone in his study. For the Lindsay family telephone number, 167, see Chapter 5, p. 8.

An unnamed *Illinois State Journal* writer suggests another “natural division” in Vachel’s series: “The lecture next week will be upon the Ghetto Jews. The past five lectures have been upon the races which have gone to make up the American of today, the next five will deal with America in the making, taking up the races which are now most in evidence among our immigrants” (November 12, 1908, p. 1).

In “Adventures While Singing These Songs,” written in October 1922, Vachel discusses his relationship with African-Americans from the time he was a little boy. “We have so many negroes that we had race riots for a week in 1908. I took time off for months to argue the matter out with a good friend, a local negro lawyer, Charles Gibbs, who was just then beginning to practice law” (*Poetry* 952-953). Quite fortuitously, a long letter to the editor from “CHAS. S. GIBBS” is published alongside the *Illinois State Register* announcement of the YMCA lecture series (August 15, 1908, p. 11). Entitled “Time for Action,” Gibbs’s letter illustrates the attorney’s moderate stance and outlines a more traditional way than Vachel’s in dealing with race rioters: “Springfield, Ill., Aug. 14—Editor Illinois State Register: Having seen in the Register this morning an account of the brutal and dastardly assault of Mrs. Hallam, I want to ask if it is not time that some action was taken to furnish better protection to the homes of Springfield. Our police do all they can do under the circumstances, but why not enlarge the police force, so that the city can be better policed? Every citizen of our city is proud of the record of our police force and the achievements of such men as H.H. Marks, Evan Jones, Harry Taylor, Billy Burton and James P. Loomis. Henry Bogardus and others will go down in history alongside the Pinkertons and Scotland Yard leaders, as thief catchers; but they can’t do it all. It is up to the citizens at large to meet this great wave of crime. Lawyers, jurors, officers and citizens as a whole must combine to stay this impending disaster to home and government. I can say here and now that the colored citizens of Springfield and of the whole state of Illinois and of the nation deplore and condemn all crime and criminals, let them be white or black. And we stand ready to help as jurors or as attorneys or as just plain common people to stop this wave of crime: it was a colored officer who arrested Richard Walton. It was a colored officer who furnished the clews that led to the capture of the alleged perpetrator of another crime of a few short weeks ago, and now I am not asking too much when I ask in the name of right that all people of our city, both white and black join with our police force and sheriff’s force to put crime out of the ring, or at least to reduce it to a minimum. We can do this by a petition to our city council to enlarge our police force, by furnishing to the officers any and all information we may possess that will aid them in their work of apprehending criminals, by doing our duty in utter disregard of any after consequences, in ridding our city of undesirables. The saloon owners and bartenders can assist in this great movement by telling the loafers and bums to move on. I do not believe the people of Springfield want the saloons eliminated, but I do believe they want regulation, but this can only be brought about by the hearty co-operation of the saloon men themselves. Let’s co-operate. CHAS S. GIBBS.” [Fair enough, but we do know about one Springfield citizen who did want “the saloons eliminated.”]
Occasionally, when Vachel visited New York City over the next few years, he would renew his acquaintance with Rachel. There are several references to her in his datebooks; and one letter fragment (dated “Feb. 21, 1914”) and one Valentine poem (dated “March 15, 1918”) are collected in a “Vachel Lindsay” folder housed in the James Madison Memorial Building of the Library of Congress. The Valentine poem plays on the respective names, as in the lines: “Vachel rings on with Rachel as a chime / So rhymes young love until the end of time.”

As further evidence of extensive preparation for these YMCA lectures, Vachel spent a night underground with local miners, learning firsthand what the men were forced to endure. Richard Watson Gilder was advised: “Tonight at ten I go out to inspect a mine all night. I shall remember your letter in the black lungs of the earth” (Chénetier 35: the letter is dated “November 29, 1908,” and the lecture was delivered December 2).

Vachel must have enjoyed the diversity that Paul’s lecture brought to the YMCA series. The information on Chinese names was especially interesting: “Instead of ‘Mr.’ in Chinese you are called ‘teacher’ or ‘Hsien Seng,’ while doctor is ‘Ih Seng.’ A coolie is respectively called ‘Low’ or ‘Old.’ We had a gateman named ‘Dai.’ Now Dai means fool. Low Dai or Old fool would not seem suitable for a name—but it is not uncommon in China.

“A month after birth a Chinaman receives his ‘milk name.’ When he begins school he gets his two character literary name, which he uses in all literary matters till he graduates. On marriage he gets his ‘great name,’ while upon passing his examination he receives his official name. So his teacher may sit and speak of him by his official name, his wife call him by his great name, a school mate by his literary name, his father by his ‘milk name,’ and all with perfect propriety and with no confusion to a Chinaman.

“But this is not all. After death he is given a posthumous name to go upon the tablet in the ‘Hall of Ancestors.’ For instance, Li Hung Chang, upon death, was made a god. The next world to a Chinaman is the lower world and practically all the worship is to buy off or appease the devil so as to gain immunity for one’s ancestors. You can see in this the keen desire every Chinaman has for a son to burn incense, offer ‘prayer money’ or sacrifice. A girl can do none of these things and the social condition of the Chinese woman today is almost entirely due to this one fact” (Illinois State Register, December 9, 1908, p. 9). Li Hung Chang or Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) was a civilian official famous for suppressing several major rebellions. Queen Victoria recognized his efforts by conferring upon him the title Knight of the Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order.

While a number of serendipitous events reflect coincidence for many people, Uncle Boy’s favorite metaphor was an evanescent visit from “the purple mist from the sky.” See Chapter 19, Note 2. “Some people say ecstasy can come only after good works, or Conversion, or Eating the Wafer in Catholic Communion, or in the hour of Supreme love for Woman,” Vachel advised Nellie Vieira. “But I know God comes down sometimes without the asking. I know I will be happy tomorrow, and maybe write many poems. I know that the Father is Smiling” (November 3, 1909, in Fowler 253).