

To the students in Professor Bansen's class who are studying the backgrounds of Nebraska authors.

When you come to Weeping Water you will of course notice the Congregational Church and also the Methodist. In the first I was converted (my first conversion. I had several others, but I failed the test in all. The last time I was converted was in the Congregational Church in Eugene, Oregon, and at that time I vowed to become a missionary to "Darkest Africa". After a month this also failed, and in the many years that have passed, I have been comforted by the thought that it was a good thing that resolution failed both for Africa and me in equal parts). Now, after this digression I wish when you look at the Methodist Church you would try to envision a nervous boy 17 years old [standing] with other boys on the edge of the sidewalk waiting for the end of the services and especially for the girls who would emerge arm in arm. The idea as explained to me by my bold friend, Pete, was to pick out two girls, follow them for a block or so until they reach the tree-shade part of the walk. At that time you should speak the formula "Can I see you home" (the greatest sin as I see it now is using the word "can").

We did that. The girls accepted us, and now on an incomparably beautiful summer night such as is a part of Nebraska, there began for me a short series of mind-shaking and spirit stirring experiences. At that moment every part of the [fabric] of my past life was torn apart, a blinding flash like that on the road to [Damascus] enveloped me, and my creative life, such as it is, came into being. (Not full blown of course—nothing in life begins fully developed.)

My otherwise easy speech trembled on my lips. I tried to suppress my gasping for breath, and my legs grew [wobbly] as Eva took my arm and squeezed it gently. Later leaning against the railing of the sidewalk over a small ravine, she finally put her arms around my neck and kissed on the lips hanging for what seemed like eternity—it became an eternity for me. It was the first time I had kissed a girl and it was the last time I was ever to experience the eloquent quality of that particular human action.

On the way home in my buggy with faithful Florie between the shafts, I remained dazed with wonder over the discovery of the meaning of life. Going north over Gospel hill I finally calmed myself enough to reach into my left hip pocket for my plug of horseshoe chewing tobacco and as I lifted it to my lips I was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of horror. Should I let this plug of tobacco touch the lips where Eva's beautiful lips had touched mine.

In disgust I threw the plug away and basked under the moon in my supreme virtue. Before I reached home, before I had driven a mile, I wanted to go back and retrieve the plug. But I didn't, and I quit chewing tobacco forever. But I could still show you the spot where it was thrown. I never again passed it without looking into the wooded roadside as though I would expect a spirit to rise and return a precious pleasure of my youth to me. Now, in old age I still long for my "filthy habit." Every creative writer clings to his past with a fierce tenacity. Each important incident opens a separate memory back from which the currency of his creative life is drawn. So on that night, I kissed a girl for the first time. I quit chewing tobacco, and before I went to sleep I promised the vague indefinite aura that enveloped me—I promised to become a good Christian. The first two lingered forever, the third failed. But I don't regret that, although others to my sorrow have.

Now, that you have me on my way you must visit the farm where I grew up. When you top the hill, pause for a moment. Below in the little valley you will see a grove where our house

once stood. From the place where you view it, I have paused a hundred times in my youth to see the smoke rise from the chimney and to envision the [sense] of our kitchen, of my mother and to realize and feel deeply the sense of security and love. There was in this [sense] loneliness and beauty and ineffable joy. But you must not forget that life without loneliness may also be without meaning.

When you leave the farm and go to Elmwood, I wish you would approach it from the south. Just after you cross the bridge and approach the hill that leads to the town, and on your right, you will see the area that was once a park. It was here that many of the memorable Fourth of July celebrations of my childhood and youth took place.

Just off the road to your right and half way up the hill was the dance pavilion and speaker's platform. In the seats on the slope facing the platform, on July 4, 1910, I heard William Jennings [Bryan] give an oration—certainly the greatest oration I was ever to hear in my life. That was one of the great experiences of my life. There was another on that day, which at first glance may seem trivial and unworthy of mention on the page as the Great Commoner's oration. But for me it was a turning point in my view of man.

On that day, July 4, 1910 in Reno, Nevada, Jack Johnson, a negro (as we said then) fought Jim Jeffries for the heavyweight championship of the world. Johnson knocked out Jeffries in the 15th round. I like millions of other Americans were absolutely stunned. No negro no nigger could ever equal a white man. This was monstrous. There were riots all over the United States. Negros were killed. Millions of betting men lost millions of dollars they had bet on the fight.

All this is introductory fact. What it meant to me was that the false concept of the black man that I have absorbed from my surrounding culture was wrong. On that day I began the slow climb toward the recognition that all men are brothers, that no race or group possesses an interior strength or virtue superior to any other.

So on that day from a great white man I learned the deeper meaning of democracy and from a black man I gained understanding and learned a deeper sense of humility.

Have happy days in your tour. I wish I could be with you in fact as I most surely am with you in spirit.

Sophus Winther

(No part of these comments may be published without the author's consent.)

Comment in the side margin of the page: Of course study the Horsepasture. My life would be empty without it. S.K.W