

## —About this issue

This issue features selections from Dorothy Grant's reminiscences of Ferner Nuhn and Ruth Suckow that are important and I hope interesting to our readership. Dorothy submitted the text of a series of talks which she gave during the Suckow centenary observances. The two articles which I have put together from Dorothy's own prose deserve preservation in printed form. I hope that they add the special anecdotal touch that only someone closely acquainted with both Ruth and Ferner could provide. What better place than the pages of the RSMA Newsletter? Dorothy has kindly sent me the text of seven of her talks. Space limitations forbid reprinting the texts of all seven talks in the journal. Indeed, they are inevitably somewhat repetitive, inasmuch as Dorothy needed to provide background material for each of her talks.

Last year's issue of the *Ruth Suckow Newsletter* featured the Hawarden perspective on Ruth. This year, since the Association Board is meeting in Cedar Falls and because Dorothy Grant provided the materials, you will see both Ruth and Ferner from a Cedar Falls perspective. As we consider the direction of future scholarly projects and the archival materials available, especially in the University of Iowa Library Special Collections, we may decide that now is the time to urge scholars to explore more deeply the Nuhn-Suckow relationship to the creative milieu of the 1930's. Dorothy's reminder in this issue of Ferner's comments on a host of prominent creative artists and thinkers they met at Yaddo and the McDowell colony provides the impetus for digging into the correspondence of the couple and noting especially what opinions they shared and also did not share with their contemporaries.

**The cover**—a reproduction of a painting of Ruth Suckow by Ferner Nuhn, for which he apologizes, saying "it is not fair to Ruth" (see p 7). Nevertheless, we have chosen this reproduction of Ruth with cat for our cover as a way of emphasizing Ruth and Ferner as a couple—really the theme of this issue. (The original of the painting is in the Ruth Suckow papers in Special Collections in the University of Iowa Libraries.) —the editor

## **Ferner Nuhn: His Art and Writings**

A limited biography by Dorothy Grant

Ferner Nuhn was born in Cedar Falls on July 25, 1903. His father, William, was in banking and real estate. His mother, Anna, was the typical at-home mother and home-maker of those days. There were three children: Marjorie, Hilde, and Ferner. (I remember Anna Nuhn very well, during the 1940's and 1950's, as a member of the serious Charles Eliot Club.) He graduated from the Cedar Falls High School in 1920 and received his B.A. degree from North Central College, Naperville, Illinois, where his uncle (Dr. Edwin Roll) was the president. He took some classes at ISTC (Iowa State Teachers College), and did graduate work at Columbia University, New York. While there he said, "I decided I already knew too much," so stopped to have more time to write. He was already contributing to *The American Mercury*, *The Christian Century*, *The New Yorker*, and many of the Quaker publications. He got an M.A. in literature from the University of Illinois in 1925.

He was a serious literary student and early on did free-lance writing. He had begun his writing career before he was twenty years old, having published articles and poetry. The writings of Ruth Suckow intrigued and challenged him. He knew she was spending summers in Earlville, Iowa, where she had her "Orchard Apiary" of eighty hives. He wanted to visit her. When the Ruth Suckow Memorial Park was dedicated (1982) in Earlville, Ferner told of his first meeting with Ruth. He had driven from Cedar Falls, had had a long afternoon of good conversation, and was invited to a chicken dinner at a neighbor's. Ruth lived in

Earlville from 1920 to 1926. We know he visited her a good many times and they both enjoyed their serious discussions about literature. Ferner noted that anyone who spent long hours writing stories was an oddity in any small town. People could understand Ruth's bee-keeping: that was visible work -- but he remembered when Ruth was "only writing," her neighbors would tell a visitor that "she is not working today." For six years she operated the business, which according to Ferner "was by no means a pastime. It was a commercial operation." During the winters, using the money she had earned, Ruth worked as a writer in Greenwich Village. Ferner is known to have visited her there.

Rebecca Christian, in preparing her one-woman play about Ruth Suckow (called "Just Suppose"), read much of Ruth's and Ferner's correspondence, which she has called "a rich lode of her letters, journals, and photos in 56 boxes that occupy 28 linear feet in Special Collections at the University of Iowa." Robert McCown, former Head of Special Collections, said that "the strength of the collection is its letters." In her comprehensive article ("She Wrote of Iowa — and Life") in the 1992 winter issue of *The Iowan*, Christian wrote, "During this period (of bee keeping) a letter arrived from a young literary critic in Cedar Falls who asked for her 'disposition toward pilgrims visiting you: if or when you are at 'home.' " Apparently the answer was positive, because, as Christian writes . . . " on a scorching August day in 1926, Ferner Nuhn drove to Earlville in a Model-T Ford and began a relationship that lasted both of their lives." ("She Wrote of Iowa" 68). At the Dedication of the Ruth Suckow Memorial Park, Ferner told more of that first meeting,

Courtship letters show that Suckow fretted about their age difference. (She was 36, he was 25). In an affectionate letter dated Aug. 17, 1928, Ferner playfully compared Ruth to his cat, "Persephone." (Both writers were very fond of cats.) "You also have a kind of innocent open stare, sweet and demure. But I could add that it doesn't give you away any more than Persephone's gaze gives herself away. Also both of you have sharp claws, though neither of you use them much." He added, "I'm not afraid of you any more, I think." (Letter, August 17, 1928, Ruth Suckow Papers) Six months later they were married. She wrote to her aunt from San Diego in 1929, "This is just to tell you that Ferner and I were married yesterday. We start out with several things in our disfavor, but a very great deal of love in our favor." An observer said, "Ferner found an artist who could translate the Midwest, and in Ferner, Ruth found a critic who could understand the translation." During their many years of marriage, they consulted each other, but did not collaborate.

Christian's narration in the play continues

The two set off for seven years of constant travel, roosting and writing in cabins, ramshackle old houses or writers' colonies in places such as the Iowa Mississippi River town of McGregor; northern Minnesota; Des Moines; the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough, N.H.; and Washington, D.C. They also visited the writers' retreat, Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, where Suckow hated the pretentious atmosphere of artsy largesse from people 'rotten with money' but loved the quiet and the food. At Yaddo, each writer had his/her own small cottage/cabin. Lunch was brought on a

tray, left at the door, so as not to disrupt the writer's creative time.

One summer when both Ferner and Ruth were attending a writers' workshop, he, instead of writing, made sketches of certain members of the group. (The original set is in the Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.) Later, he had the pictures Xeroxed and wrote a little ten page booklet of comments on the various paintings. Ferner gave Fred Kerchival (former President of the Cedar Falls Trust and Savings Bank) the photocopies of the pictures, and the booklet. Since then, Fred gave the set (October 1991) to the Hearst Center for the Arts. With the kind permission of Mary Huber, Director of the Hearst Center, I have been able to see these copies and to reproduce the remarks Ferner had written in the booklet. Nuhn called them, "Figures of the Thirties, Character Sketches in Oil" by Ferner Nuhn. They showed a wide interest in people and their occupations. Ferner says, "Most of the persons portrayed in this collection were fellow colonists of myself and my wife, Ruth Suckow, in the early 1930s, at Yaddo, the art colony near Saratoga Springs, New York, or at the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough New Hampshire. Included in the list are the names of some nationally-known artists, playwrights, poets, essayists, composers, and novelists as well as the name of Henry A. Wallace, who is described as "Agriculturalist, Author, Statesman." This collection is significant not only because of its connection to Nuhn and Suckow, but for the primary documentation and intimate insight it provides into the lives of major figures on the political scene and in the arts during the 1930s.

The list consists of William Rose Benet, poet and playwright; Charles Wakefield Cadman, composer; Carl Carmer, novelist, editor, conservationist; Leo Fisher, sculptor; Felix Fox, composer; Frances Frost, poet, fiction writer; Robert Frost, poet; Horace Gregory,

poet, critic, editor; Albert Halper, novelist; Roy Harris, composer; Charles Hearst, Iowa farmer; Jeffrey Levy, painter; John Cowper Powys, novelist, poet, essayist; Evelyn Scott, poet, novelist; Ruth Suckow, novelist; Henry A. Wallace, agriculturist, author, statesman; and John Brooks Wheelwright, poet, critic.

Nuhn describes how the project began: "The series began as a diversion one afternoon at Yaddo, when Albert Halper and I decided to paint our impressions of each other. We were writers, not artists. Albert, a native of Chicago, author of . . . novels of a proletarian sort. He was a young man with a truck-driver's build. It seemed amusing to seat Albert in an ornate, carved chair called 'The Bishop's Throne,' a characteristic article of furniture in that romantic, baronial castle called Yaddo, which had been the estate of Spencer and Katrina Trask."

Here are Nuhn's comments on the sketches as they are recorded in the booklet in the Hearst collection:

[Editor's note: unfortunately the printing of the sketches with the commentary must await another occasion. We felt Nuhn's commentary by itself might whet the appetite of other researchers. The original of the booklet from which Dorothy Grant quotes was published as "Figures of the Thirties: Character Sketches in Oil." by Ferner Nuhn under the auspices of the Honnold Library, Claremont Colleges. Bold-face type for emphasis supplied by me.]

Albert's picture of me — perhaps because he had a poorer model— somehow did not come off. Mine of Albert [**Halper**] was the first of this collection.

I have apologies to make to two of my subjects: Carl [Carmer] was a big, likable man with a boyish grin, but in repose his face had a grim, nail-biting look. I wanted to show both these faces. . . . but could not bring off the grin. I regret this halving of the whole Carmer, but Carl was gracious enough to take no offense. . . . My other apology is to Ruth Suckow. Ruth's first novel was about country people, and one might have supposed that she was a husky farm girl. Daughter of a minister, Ruth was actually petite, with very small hands and feet. The tapering calves and Alice-in-Wonderland stockings and slippers are, I believe, not out of place. Ruth loved cats, especially Snow White, shown in the picture, who graced our home for some sixteen years. She would use a cat for a prop in a picture, if one were handy. But the half-eclipsing of Ruth's face by Snow White is a little too much—that with the blanking out of her eyes by the glasses. The picture is not fair to Ruth." (This is the painting reproduced on the cover of this issue—ed.)

[William Rose Benet, 1886-1950. Poet, Playwright] Benet A Buddha-like look of repose.

[Charles Wakefield Cadman, 1881-1946] Cadman-Composer of From the Land of Sky-blue Waters and At Dawning. He seemed to enjoy my picture of him.

[Frances Frost, 1905—} Poet, Fiction Writer Frances Frost - Vermonter, not

related to Robert. Author of children's books. One of the events of that year at the Colony was her elopement with another Colonist. She was a girl who seemed to be going places.

Two of the MacDowell Colony pictures are missing. Tess Slessinger, short story author. Years later, from Hollywood, she asked to buy the picture. Whether it exists somewhere now, I don't know. Cowper, Wallace, Frost were made in other circumstances. All of them, however, are of people I knew and observed personally during the decade of the 30's.

Most notably absent is **Edwin Arlington Robinson**, pictured in the white linen tennis hat he always wore. E.A. was the Dean of the MacDowell colony. It was a privilege to eat at his table. I was making mental notes of E.A.'s face. My picture of the poet, though it might be called informal, was by no means irreverent. It was admiring, even adulatory. He is striding across the Colony grounds, its buildings a tiny background at his feet. 'Man Against the Sky', the title of one of his poems, is the conception I had in mind.

Toward the end of our stay, I showed my pictures to the assembled colonists. I watched for E.A.'s reaction. 'Hmm, is that me?' was all he said. Next morning, Chard Smith who planned a biography, came to my studio. Chard liked the picture but he told me E.A. was worried. 'You know how shy he is of publicity. He's afraid you'll publish it. He'd feel easier if he owned it himself, so he wants to know if you will sell it.' On the whole, I felt flattered



and told myself E.A. might really like the picture, even though he did not wish it made public. I sold it for \$25. Thirty years later, I met Chard Smith who was soon publishing E.A.'s biography. 'Did you ever come across that picture of E.A.?' 'Never found a trace of it. E.A. must have destroyed it.' Was it right for him to buy it, with the hidden intention of destroying it? Anyway. I mourn a little for this missing figure of the collection."

Yaddo was more avant-garde than the MacDowell Colony. A vivacious member was Evelyn Scott. She made a sensation by eloping to Brazil with her college teacher. Later married C.Kay Scott (writer). She was demonstrative. She started toward me with fingers out-stretched as if to claw him. Stopped, smiled and said, 'I like it.' "

**[John Brooks Wheelwright** 1897-1940. Poet, Critic] "He was one of Boston's 'privileged eccentrics.' I knew him at Yaddo in his customary garb of white linen suit, lavender shirt and scarlet bedroom slippers. Eccentric he was and he said, 'Freud would have loved me.' He seemed pleased at my depiction of him.

**[John Cowper Powys** 1872-1963. Novelist, Poet, Essayist] "Engaged in a great public debate with Bertrand Russell on the subject of marriage. Had had an unfortunate marriage. Wales. Came to USA and met and lived with Phyllis Playter, the union which, in all but formality, was a marriage of the truest sort. They were appreciative readers of Ruth's stories and novels of Iowa. The descriptions of Iowa life fit into Phyllis' memories of Kansas.

Later, went back to Wales. Ruth and I visited him when in his 90s. Frail. Asked his wife, 'Who is that man I so hate?' 'G. B. Shaw.' 'Yes, Shaw! Shaw! He is all steel and glitter like some machine. Oh, I hate him! I hate him.' Raised his arms, but it was all somehow histrionic and quite without malice.

[Henry A. Wallace— 1888-1965. Agriculturist, Author, Statesman] "editor of *Wallaces' Farmer* Character analysis of him, whom he admired. 1934 [Ferner] invited to work as a writer in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. For two years, as a 'Specialist in Information,' I worked up data, wrote pamphlets, and did other chores. When the AAA was temporarily sidetracked, I was taken off the payroll, and for three months, Wallace paid me the same salary from his own pocket to help him research and write his book *Whose Constitution*. Last saw him in 1961 at his experimental farm in Westchester County, New York. Retired. Working with corn and chickens and experimenting with hybrid of gladioli, strawberries. Ten percent of the nation's egg production came from his line of hybrid chickens. Made extensive trips to Guatemala and Santo Domingo to improve agricultural practices. Henry took a lively interest of my picture of him.

[Robert Frost—1874-1963. Poet] Came to know him in the early 1930's when we spent three summers and one winter in Dorset, Vermont, and is

not far from South Shaftsbury where Robert and Eleanor lived. Took years to learn how complex a figure he was. Not prepared for the raciness and bite of his conversation as he told anecdotes of Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robinson Jeffers, Vachel Lindsey. Respectful to E.A. Robinson. A photo of Henry Wallace and Norman Thomas, with Frost's arms around each man. 'There I was in the paper with my arms around those two great radicals.' [Ferner] 'took issue with Frost about 'rugged individualism and the New Deal's version of collective action.' Frost, in person, acknowledged the fine letter and said it deserved an answer. [Thirty years later, Ferner found out that Frost had actually had written an answer, and then decided not to send it. Found the letter among his papers, and Frost's biographer (Lawrance Thompson) sent it. Ruth and Ferner spent two fall months in Frost's home, (hay-fever season). Frost visited in Nuhn's home in Cedar Falls.]

[Charles Hearst 1904—. Iowa Farmer] "The Hearst family farm lay a few miles west of my home town of Cedar Falls in a prime soil-belt called 'Tama silt loam.' It is some of the best farm land in the country. If visiting friends wanted to see an Iowa farm, Ruth and I took them to the Hearst farm. Among such visitors were Sigrid Undset, Robert Frost, John Dewey, and the singer, Roland Hayes. We liked to give visitors the impression that we were showing them a typical Iowa farm and farm family. With its faded red barn and imperfectly picked-up farm yard, the farm was indeed representative, and the Hearst brothers were real farmers. One would have to admit, however, that

Charles and his brother, the Iowa Poet, James Hearst, were somewhat exceptional as individuals. In any case, our visitors would go away impressed. In my picture, the Hearst farm makes a low-lying background for the figure of Charles.

Two other of Ferner's oil paintings are in the Ruth Suckow Library in Earlville, one is of Ruth's cottage, and the other is one of their always-white cats. He also made a bookplate for Ruth, using an illustration of a cat.

When Ferner's father's health began to fail, they moved back to Cedar Falls, where they both became very active in the community. Rebecca Christian wrote, "With family money from a real-estate business, Nuhn was a cultivated . . . charmer who could afford to dabble in his interests—literary criticism, painting, writing, carpentry and Quaker activities." ("She Wrote of Iowa" 68). Of the latter, he took a very active part in the area and national meetings, as well as doing considerable writing for the publications. Ever since World War I, Ruth was definitely a pacifist, and later in life she joined the Quakers, where Ferner was very involved.

Ferner was always interested in art. His sister, Marjorie, was a professional artist. He supported her interests and travels to the south-west, and later sponsored her art shows. He gave the Hearst Center for the Arts, several of Marjorie's water-colors, along with a special storage place for works of art, so they are well protected. One time he went to her studio and saw a picture of a donkey, as always with a halo, discarded in the waste-basket. He retrieved it and told her that the head was good. He cut off that part and framed it. The Grants bought the picture at an art auction, one of the social events of the Cedar Falls Art League that he

founded. Mrs. Anna Nuhn, his mother, contributed, rent free, the upper floor of the Miller Shoe Store (4th and Main) as a permanent place for the League to have art classes, exhibits, opening receptions, and other social events, including the annual meetings. The Cedar Falls Art League gradually developed into the "Arts Alive" organization, with ties to the Hearst Center for the Arts.

Both Ruth, and especially Ferner, contributed an immeasurable amount to the life and culture of Cedar Falls for their ten years of residence. Her health began to fail, and in 1947 they moved to the south-west (Arizona) for a better climate for Ruth's rheumatoid arthritis and Ferner's asthma and allergies. Eventually they purchased a home and settled in Claremont, California, where Ruth noted there was "culture to burn." Ferner remarked that "if people in Claremont - a community of retired teachers, librarians, and ministers - could go to heaven or to a lecture on heaven they'd choose the lecture." Ferner, especially, became very active in civic affairs.

Ruth died on January 23, 1960. At the memorial service for her in Cedar Falls, Dr .H.W. Reninger said, "Ruth Suckow leaves as she came, an artist with incorruptible integrity whose moral and spiritual values were the foundation of her life and art." Five years after her death, Ferner married a favorite cousin of Ruth's, Georgeanne Dafoe. In 1966, Ferner was Claremont's citizen of the year, the award being given for his efforts in planning the Pomona Valley Open Community Program by creating a better and more pleasant climate for community groups.

After Georgeanne's death, Ferner moved to the Friend's House Retirement home in Santa Rosa. He died there on April 9, 1989. There were Memorial Services for him in Santa Rosa

and Claremont. Ruth is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, next to her father. They have identically-shaped head stones. Ferner is buried next to Ruth, but there is no marker for him. These two persons, Ruth Suckow and Ferner Nuhn, made a unique team in their dedication to each other and to their creative skills. Both left much for the generations that followed them. We in Iowa and Cedar Falls, especially, should cherish those gifts and the remembrances of them.

Ferner wrote an article for *The Iowan* after his wife's death, "Always she returned to Iowa, rejoicing in the superb farm land, tree-shaded towns, and unpretentious friendly people. From whatever direction she approached Iowa—and again and again, she and her husband found themselves returning here by car. "Ruth noted by various signs that the country 'is beginning to look like Iowa'" (Christian 68).

Notes:

Christian, Rebecca. "She Wrote of Iowa—And Life," *The Iowan*, Winter, 1992.

Ruth Suckow Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

Nuhn, Ferner. "The 'Orchard Apiary': Ruth Suckow in Earlville," *The Iowan*, Summer, 1992.