The Western Association of Writers
A Literary Reminiscence

By GEORGE S. COTTMAN

More than thirty years ago, Meredith Nicholson, then at the threshold of his reputation as a man of letters, happily introduced himself as such by making an historical and critical study of literary development in his native state. What Mr. Nicholson gathered up in this study, The Hoosiers, amply proves that the transition of Hoosierdom from a rather crude condition to the cultural status of 1900, during the last half of the nineteenth century, makes an interesting theme to say the least, and one that flatters the pride of the loyal Indianian. This pride is now not a little in evidence, it being quite the custom for books and articles about Indiana to dwell laudingly on our intellectual upthrust.

In view of this one rather wonders why such scant attention has been paid to the literary manifestation exemplified by the Western Association of Writers. Perhaps it is because it did not sufficiently issue in some kind of practical results, as organizations are supposed to do; or that it rested not so much on solid accomplishment as on the little vanities of would-be writers. Even if these charges were true (and at worst they are only partially true), the fact remains that as a manifestation it was an integral part of our literary history, and as such challenges interest. As an expression of the local cultural influences then at work it took on an unusual, or even unique, form. So far as the writer knows there was nothing else in existence quite like it. It was neither a club nor a series of conventions in the ordinary acceptance of those terms. Rather it was more like an old-fashioned country "literary society," suited to all tastes, where those regaled might hear anything from the poetical winnowing of angels' wings to a dissertation by Tomps on "dreenin' swamps". An enlarged and expansive "literary," let us say, whose hospitality extended to kindred spirits beyond the borders of the state; which congregated year after year for the pure joy of the thing, and in numbers that filled good-sized auditoriums.

1 Mr. Cottman was actively connected with the Western Association of Writers, much of the time as one of the officials.
The organization which assumed the somewhat ambitious name, "The Western Association of Writers," was, despite its broader implications, largely an impulse of the literary spirit in Indiana, although in its membership were a good many from other states. It was originated and kept alive chiefly by Indiana writers. It held all of its gatherings on Indiana soil throughout its existence, except one, when a meeting was held at Dayton, Ohio. The Association was active for twenty years or more, dating from 1886, and the memory of it is now perpetuated on at least a few literary shelves by three modest souvenir volumes containing the "Sayings and Doings" of as many meetings. More meetings were not similarly commemorated because of that ever-familiar explanation, "insufficient funds." Subsequent to these records a fairly complete collection of programs has been preserved by the writer, along with newspaper matter currently printed, such material serving to check this article, which is largely reminiscent, relative to the years 1891 to 1904. Before 1891, data has been obtained from Miss Mary E. Cardwill, one of the editors of the souvenir books and the author of the historical sketch in the volume for 1889. Her sketch, which deals with the beginnings of the Association may, in turn, be prefaced by a consideration of the local literary conditions at that time.

Meredith Nicholson says in The Hoosiers that the success of several Indiana authors, particularly that of Maurice Thompson and James Whitcomb Riley, "were of a great stimulus to literary ambition in Indiana". This may be true, especially as regards Riley, judging from the epidemic of Hoosier dialect that broke out after his advent, but the greatest of all stimuli were the local papers that here and there and at different periods afforded outlets for the literary urge. The old Locomotive, the first Indianapolis paper of a literary character, which flourished before the days of Thompson and Riley, reveals in its files, as Jacob P. Dunn puts it, "a wealth of poetical aspiration that is fairly startling. There was poetry of every class, from the most pathetic obituary to the most frivolous doggerel and on all subjects from 'Autumn' to 'Pogues Run'." Some years later when several periodicals that encouraged local writers, particularly the Saturday Herald and the Sunday Journal, appeared in Indianapolis, the effect was like that of a bed of flower seeds responding to warm
rains. There were generous crops of poetry and essays with occasional fiction.\(^2\) The *Saturday Herald*, under three successive owners—George C. Harding, J. C. Ochiltree and the Hyman brothers—was especially generous of its space to contributors, and thus, though their productions were rarely or never paid for, there was drawn to its weekly columns a happy family of amateur literati who became mutually acquainted at long range. This was the situation when the idea of an organization of these kindred spirits found birth. The notion seems to have germinated in two or three minds about the same time. In the summer of 1885 Mrs. Maria Louise Andrews, of Connersville, Ind., suggested to the then editor of the *Herald*, Mr. Ochiltree, the bringing together of his contributors for a more intimate acquaintance. He was willing that his paper should stand sponsor for such a scheme, but nothing further was then done. Then the same idea cropped up in a correspondence between three *Herald* contributors, J. N. Matthews, H. W. Taylor and Richard Lew Dawson, Matthews advocating “a gathering of the poets of the Wabash valley in some convenient city or resort, for the purpose of enjoying whatever pleasure might result from a meeting so novel and unique”. This struck the other two correspondents as a happy proposition and the trio tried out the question in the columns of the *Herald*, inviting the views of others. This, it seems, was quite independent of the beginning initiated by Mrs. Andrews,\(^3\) but she soon joined forces with the other movers, and a little later, under date of April 3, 1886, she and Mr. Dawson, as joint authors, published in the Chicago *Current*, the following “call”, addressed to the “Literary Profession”:

A call is hereby extended to all writers of verse and general literature, and especially to the writers of the Wabash valley and the adjacent states, to meet in convention in June, 1886, at the city of Terre Haute or Indianapolis, Ind. The objects of this meeting are as follows:

1. To form an association of the literary profession for mutual strength, profit and acquaintance.

2. To discuss methods of composition, and all topics pertaining to

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\(^{2}\)Riley’s prose stories first appeared in the *Journal*; his “Flying Islands of the Night” in the *Herald*. Among his fellow-contributors to the *Herald*, I find the names of H. W. Taylor, T. C. Harbaugh, James Newton Matthews, Richard Lew Dawson, Ben D. House, Will Farrand Felch, Emma Carleton, Margaret Holmes, E. S. L. Thompson and Geo. S. Cottman. Most of these are now dead and forgotten, but all were then aspiring to imperishable crowns.

\(^{3}\)Since writing this paper, I have found in a letter from the late Mrs. Emma Carleton this statement: “Mrs. Andrews, whom I knew intimately, was the original inventor of it [the W. A. W.]. I heard her plan it long before she could get any men to take any interest in it.”
the advancement of literature in America.

3. To produce and publish a representative volume of western authors from the miscellaneous poems, stories and sketches read during this convention or festival.

A full attendance of all writers is earnestly desired in the hope that the success of this gathering may result in permanent good to American literature and the welfare of its professional workers.

Please make known at once your purpose to attend, choice of location, and the character of your contributions.

This call, reprinted in circular form, was next sent out to all the author band within a certain radius whose addresses could be obtained. The response convinced the promoters of the plan that their enthusiasm was not misplaced. More than a hundred answers endorsing the proposed experiment were received, and the movement speedily culminated in what proved to be the first of many meetings, held June 30, 1886, in the auditorium of Plymouth church in Indianapolis. Something like seventy-five representatives of the writing profession attended, and they brought their poems and essays along for a literary exhibition. The convention was of such unusual character that it excited quite a little local attention. The Indianapolis Journal had this to say of it:

Indiana has taken the lead in a number of things, but the most novel and fanciful, as some supposed, was to be the convention of western authors to be held in this city. When these writers, however, did meet, the assemblage, instead of being food for laughter, as some persons thought and even went so far as to say it would be, proved to be a very practical and business-like body.

While the most of those who gathered at this first meeting had small claim to literary reputation, a number of well-known names gave prestige to the venture. Maurice Thompson, then one of Indiana's best-known men of letters, was made president, which office he held the first three years. Vice-presidents were Will Cumberbatch, Jonathan W. Gordon, Judge Clarence A. Buskirk and Judge Cyrus McNutt. In the membership were James Whitcomb Riley, Ida Husted Harper, Mary Hartwell Catherwood, Margaret Holmes Bates, Dan L. Paine and Ben D. House. A little later we find the names of Sarah T. Bolton, William Dudley Foulke, John Clark Ridpath, John M. Coulter, and Evaleen Stein. That faithful wheel-horse in the cause of Hoosier literature, Benjamin S. Parker, was actively affiliated from the beginning.

This initial meeting, which was regarded as experimental,
so encouraged its sponsors that another one was held in October of the same year, and others again in 1887 and 1888, all at Indianapolis. This was a formative and a growing period. The sessions were lengthened, first to two, then to three days' duration—which may be taken as evidence that “a good time was had by all”. Meanwhile the organization was trying to get acquainted with itself and its possibilities. First it took the name “American Association of Writers,” which, to an outsider, rather appealed to the risibles, in view of the obscure and local character of the society. Then it was changed to “The Western Association of Writers,” an appellation not so inept, since not a few who shared in membership came drifting in from beyond the borders of our state.

Next there was a rather strenuous effort to decide and clarify the purposes of the association. That it was to promote a more intimate acquaintance among the literary fraternity, to feed their aspirations and stimulate their work was generally understood and agreed to, but much else that was said by way of “purpose” was little more than sounding brass and tinkling cymbals so far as real meaning was concerned. The various views advanced relative to material benefits to the craft meant little because literature as represented by this group was, with few exceptions, not a gainful occupation but a cultural indulgence, however much the practitioners might hope for monetary returns. For example, one of the propositions was “to protect the interests of American writers against piratical publishers.” So far as most of the W.A.W. folks were concerned this was rather superfluous since they had nothing to protect. Their books, in most instances published at the expense of the authors, rarely paid for the printing, and the assumption that a pirate was lying in wait to reprint them was little short of ludicrous. This may sound unfeeling, but the bald fact, as revealed in the history of the organization, is that the writers there represented took themselves a bit too seriously, their self-appraisal challenging a jeer from those who knew the facts. It was these amiable little vanities that explain the Journal’s remark above quoted about the meeting being “food for laughter”. From the beginning and throughout the existence of the society, there were those who poked fun at it more or less good-naturedly on account of its pretensions, as they thought, and without any very close examination
as to its real excuse for being. Roswell Field, a brother of Eugene, who wrote for a Chicago paper, dubbed the organization the “Gravel Pit Association” (because of the place where most of its meetings were held) and regaled his readers with periodical doses of ironical humor at the expense of the literary fledglings. Others called it a mutual admiration society, and one caustic wit put frills on this by describing the movement as a verbal pact or gentleman’s agreement that “I will listen to yours if you will listen to mine.” And so it went, but still the poets met to trill their chorus of roundelay's, while the essayists, philosophers, educators, doctors and what not disseminated their various kinds of literary effusions.

By the time of the fourth Indianapolis convention, the W.A.W., as it familiarly came to be called, had assumed a permanency of character. Miss Cardwill tells us that “these meetings had resulted in the formation of many pleasant acquaintanceships, and a genial social atmosphere was a specially noticeable feature of the fourth convention”. This fraternal spirit engendered by repeated personal touches and kept alive by those staunch members who made the backbone of the society throughout its existence, was the cement that gave coherency to the organization rather than did any utilitarian ideas about protecting writers or making their output more salable. At this time, too, the place of meeting was shifted from the heart of the city to a far more ideal environment. This was Spring Fountain Park, an idyllic, rural resort on the shores of Eagle lake, near Warsaw, Ind., which later became Winona Park, the Presbyterian assembly grounds. Than this spot with its shady groves of forest trees, its profusion of gushing crystal waters, its limpid lake, and withal, its ample hotel and auditorium accommodations, nothing could be more inviting as an Arcadian setting where poets and birds alike might sing their melodious lays. In appreciation of this, the W.A.W. here pitched its camp and here held its annual love feasts from 1889 till its final dissolution some sixteen years later.

The character of the proceedings and the quality of the literary output of the W.A.W. is fairly represented by the

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4 Mrs. Carleton, in her letter above referred to, says that Richard Lew Dawson addressed a poem to Mrs. M. L. Andrews as his “Sister in Poesy,” and she, not to be outdone, wrote one to him as her “Brother in Poesy”; whereupon Mrs. Carleton, with characteristic humor, dubbed the newly-fledged society the “Bips and Sips.” Dan L. Paine and Meredith Nicholson, she adds, “took it up and we had a good deal of surreptitious fun over it.”
three souvenir volumes already referred to, these being the records for the years 1889, 1890 and 1891. The programs were made up of addresses and essays liberally interspersed with poems and recitations. The prose offerings, sometimes ponderous and boresome, it must be said, generally had some phase of literature as the theme, and revealed a pervasive consciousness that centered on the question of an indigenous western school of writers. A persistent note was that this school should be free from domination by eastern influences, coupled with a belief that segregation and mutual encouragement would stimulate local belles-lettres. The quality of the verse, for the most part was such as may be found in the "poets' corner" of any newspaper that sees fit to encourage the Helicon folk by maintaining this modest stall for Pegasus, with now and then that strain of real quality not to be defined but which is known when found. Indeed, did not special mention savor too much of partial favors a number might be named as worthy devotees of the muse who, when at their best, gave proof of that unappeasable hunger for the divine mysteries "Which hurts and haunts and blesses us forever."

Of one author, however, an exception will be made because she was so unlike all others. This was Evaleen Stein, one of the most exquisite spirits that ever found expression through our local periodicals. As an interpreter of nature—with a love that amounted to a passion—she had no peer among our poets, and to all those influences that emanate from nature she responded as does a sensitized film to light rays. Moreover she possessed the art by which to convey her subtle messages through her verse, even to those who cared little for the nuances of nature. Headings of her own productions were, in their own way, as inimitable as were Riley's in his way, and she was a prime favorite on the platform.

This brief appraisal of the W.A.W. is an attempt to pick out the various elements and ideas that entered into the composition of the Association. In the writer's view, the point of interest lay not so much in the actual literary standards of the organization as in the fact that all kinds of authors who were moved by the literary impulse, flocked together so insistently year after year. It was the gravitating to each other of kindred spirits who in their daily environments, found scant appreciation of the fugitive fancies that haunted them. Since
this sympathetic social contact carried with it the cordial invitation to make an exhibit of those fancies it offered a special incentive for the annual meeting. And why not? The cynical dart—"I'll listen to yours if you'll listen to mine" carries a barb more cruel than just. Literary, particularly poetical, expression is a reaching upward toward the realm of ideals whether or not a certain standard of merit is attained, and such an effort is much to be desired in a world of sordid aims. The humble sparrow lisping from the wayside hedge and the bobolink spilling forth his riotous melody of crystal notes to take the ear captive contribute each in kind to the fulness of the perfect June day and to the gladness of the world, for, says Richard Realf—

Every little brown bird that doth sing
Hath something greater than itself and bears
A living word to every living thing.

From this angle, then, pure fellowship as the lodestone merits attention. The philosophically inclined tell us ever and anon about the psychology of religion. Here we have at least glimpses of the psychology of the literary urge. The mass of offerings, verse and prose, rounded up into programs year after year showed what obsessions were born of that urge and how individuals of a certain temperament hungered and thirsted for the power to express themselves in words. A large percentage of them had an intense craving for that sort of publicity vaguely called "fame", and the hopelessly mediocre as well as the talented nursed the hope that they were entitled to the lime light. Indeed now as then, very often the vanity is in inverse ratio to the talent; but after all this is said we find (in that day, at least) our exponents of literature seriously headed toward morals, beauty and idealism.

After changing the place of meeting from Indianapolis to Eagle Lake [Winona], the meetings, usually held in the month of June, were extended to a full week, counting the coming and the going, thus making of them prolonged festivals. On Monday of the chosen week, the members would come gathering in, and that evening was given over to a general reception and reunion at the park hotel, on which stimulating occasion the winged steed inevitably tried his pinions as though getting in fettle for the next four days. And during those four days,
if one may so express it, his wings were kept flapping. Without this evidence to prove it, one would never suspect that there existed such an appetite for rhyme. Every morning till noon and every evening, poems long and short were in order, being everywhere sandwiched in between the prose contributions of the programs. There were also symposiums where samples on a given theme were presented. In the proceedings for 1890, we find “A Poem by Nine Ladies,” and “A Poem By Seven Gentlemen”. Again offerings were bunched a dozen or so together and called “A Surfeit of Rhyme,” though no one seemed to be surfeited, the relish for more rhymes seeming to be just as keen by the time of the next session. Evidently sentiment leaned hard in the direction of poetry and the versifiers who got a chance to be heard as well as to hear had their innings as never before or since. The prose exercises were sometimes diversified by papers and discussions on such odd themes as “Why the Pawpaw Is Poetical and the Turnip Not.” In the program of 1901, a novelette written by six collaborators was read.

The W.A.W. borrowed some prestige from various celebrities who either were regular members or occasional contributors to the programs. Of the former class, John Clark Ridpath, John Uri Lloyd, W. H. Venable, Coates Kinney and Eugene F. Ware were all men of more than local literary reputation who were among the continuous supporters of the Association. Amos W. Butler, though a scientific rather than a literary personage, was a substantial pillar in an executive capacity, while among those who might be ranked as distinguished visitors at one time or another were Robert J. Burdette, then at the height of his fame as a humorist, Frank L. Stanton, of the Atlanta Constitution, Myron W. Reed, Young E. Allison, Mary Hartwell Catherwood, and others. James Whitcomb Riley attended irregularly, but whenever present was honored as the big card, and his readings were the highlights of the occasion.

Not least among the golden memories of those days is that of the purely social intercourse of long sunny June afternoons when earth and sky and sparkling waters were at their best, and our genial fraternity surrendered itself to sweet-do-nothing. The meetings were usually at the beginning of the summer season at Winona Park and we had the spacious hotel ver-
andas and the nooks and byways of the shady grounds virtually to ourselves, and these, during the hours of informal companionship, suggested a scene from Arcadia with groups a-stroll or groups at rest wherever the spot seemed most inviting. Here the seeker after entertainment could find it spiced to his taste what with philosophic discussions here, a snappy argument there with its give and take, or elsewhere a story-swapping contest or exchange of persiflage, there was no lack of intellectual enjoyment. John Clark Ridpath, Will Cumback and Eugene Ware were noted as raconteurs and always lived up to their reputations. Not less famous for his trenchant wit was W. P. Fishback and there were others who could scintillate. Riley, whenever present, was an attraction above all others, for, in the midst of an informal park bench audience as on the rostrum, he carried his own inexhaustible tang. One who knew Riley only from his writings did not half know the fascinations of his personality. A memorable meeting was one when he and "Bob" Burdette made an inseparable team and added to the gaiety of life as the spirit moved them.  

Another source of diversion on the side, which very few will now remember was a little sub-organization of the W.A.W., which called itself "Ye Owl Club," and which originated with a score or so of the lighter-minded, who were never ready to go to bed when other folks did. It had its "initial flocking" in 1895, and an "official owlery" printed by it show the officials to be classed as the "Most Grand Hoo! Hoo!", the "Grand High Hoo!" and other Hoo Hoos of lesser degrees. The by-laws stated that this "club shall hold its meetings during the atmospheric disturbances of the annual W.A.W. week, and its function shall be to recuperate its members after the severe cerebrations of the day. Its sessions shall be mildly organic and of a character to cheer but not inebriate. Sessions shall not begin before 10 P.M. nor continue after cock-crow." The qualifications for membership were the ability and willingness to contribute, whenever the Most Grand Hoo! Hoo! so commanded, "an impromptu song, story, recitation, hoot or other recuperative diversion." The Owl Club had fun while it lasted but fell into desuetude be-

8 For matter pertaining to Riley and the W. A. W., see an article by George S. Cottman, "Some Reminiscences of James Whitcomb Riley," in Indiana Magazine of History (June, 1918), XIV, 96-107.
cause, as some claimed, the hotel proprietor would not “allow a rebate for unused sleep.”

As a grand finale to the week’s festival, Friday evening was given to a banquet with toasts galore when the literati could give proof that they had not yet run dry. On Saturday there was a general exodus amid fond au revoirs and hopes of reunions yet to come.

Just why or when the W.A.W. ceased to exist is not easy to learn. So far as the writer’s own reminiscent knowledge goes there are limitations since he was not in touch with the Association during its later years. The latest program in hand is that of 1905. By that time interest seemed to be on the wane, largely due, doubtless, to the fact that death had taken many of those who had been the pillars of the organization. Also this program shows a dominating infusion of new names and a corresponding scarcity of old familiar ones, seeming to bear out a contention that a Chicago group among the members had largely taken over the society. In 1907 there was a called meeting of those who remained of the older membership, and about twenty-five came together at the Claypool Hotel in Indianapolis to consider the question of a resuscitation of the Association. Nothing came of this, and the writer long believed the effort to be the last expiring struggle, but a newspaper clipping discovered more recently shows that in 1908 there was a meeting at which Charles Eugene Banks, of Chicago, was elected president for the succeeding year.¹ With the recording of this fact, the story must, at present, be concluded.

¹ The programs show that Banks had been president during 1904 and also during 1905. So far as I can work it out from my incomplete collection of programs, the following persons, in the order named, served as presidents of the Association: Maurice Thompson (three years), Benjamin S. Parker, John Clark Ridpath, Cyrus W. McNutt (?), H. W. Taylor, T. B. Redding, Will Cumback, A. W. Butler, W. H. Venable, W. F. Fishback, Eugene F. Ware, Mark L. DeNotte, Lee G. Harris, Will Cumback (a second term), W. W. Pfrimmer, Minnetta T. Taylor, Charles E. Banks, (two or three terms). The three souvenir volumes of Proceedings that were published were compiled by Miss Mary E. Cardwill, Mrs. L. May Wheeler, and Mrs. M. Sears Brooks.