

A Poet from Spoon River

Edgar Lee Masters





Preface

Interest in Edgar Lee Masters and Lewistown, the site of *Spoon River Anthology*, inspired this study of the subject, the characters, and the poet.

There was a time, not long ago, when the Lewistown populace would not speak of Masters or his family. Masters sites and characters from the Anthology were, at best, discussed in whispers. Many people in Lewistown had lists of the characters with their actual names. Certainly, not all of the characters from Lewistown were identified. It has been accepted that the good characters in the Anthology were from Petersburg and the bad characters from Lewistown. This might have been reversed had Masters spent his later years in Petersburg instead of Lewistown.

The Lewistown Chamber of Commerce, after securing one of the more reliable character lists, has identified and marked the graves of Anthology characters buried at Oak Hill Cemetery (Masters's "The Hill"), and St. Mary's Cemetery. There are certainly more buried at Oak Hill, but their identification remains a mystery.

This booklet is dedicated to Charles O. Parkinson, "Spoon River Charlie", whose original writings on Masters founded the basis for this book; to Eileen Mason, a retired High School English teacher, for her tireless efforts editing and structuring the original work; to David S. Boyd, former Tourism Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce for typing and providing artwork; to Lloyd Chambers, Sexton of the Lewistown Cemeteries, who made the identification and location of the characters an easy task; and of course, Edgar Lee Masters, a pioneer of modern literature and poetry for taking that first step into the forbidden.

The original booklet was further edited and reformatted in 2015 for circulation during the 100th anniversary celebration of the publishing of *Spoon River Anthology* as a stand-alone volume.

The Anthology

Spoon River Anthology was first published as a series of poems in *Reedy's Mirror* in 1914 by William Reedy of St. Louis, with the author being "Webster Ford". In 1915, the true author was revealed as Edgar Lee Masters, and the book was published under Masters's copyright in his name. Apparently Masters originally feared the public reaction to the book during a period that he was quite ill. A year later, having recovered from his illness, he elected to publish the work under his true name. The poet later thanked Reedy in the front of *Spoon River Anthology*. Thus, the work was originally published in *Reedy's Mirror* in bits and pieces, and it was Reedy who would persuade Masters to publish the work in its present form. Masters and Reedy were to remain friends for many years, and Masters took Reedy's death as a great personal loss.

There has been much speculation by local folks that Edgar Lee Masters was not the poet, but Judge Winters, known as "Judge Sommers" in the Anthology. This speculation is used upon later writings of Edgar Lee Masters which seemed to be a different style than the Anthology. This has never been proven, nor has any evidence been produced that would confirm this claim. On the other hand, those making these accusations were the characters of the Anthology or their descendants. More than likely it is "Sour Grapes"!

The Poet from Spoon River

Born in Garnett, Kansas, in 1868, Edgar Lee Masters was to become well known in Illinois and eventually throughout the world for his creation, *Spoon River Anthology*. Shortly after his birth, his parents returned to Petersburg, Illinois. When he was 11 the family moved to Lewistown, Illinois, the model for fictional Anthology town of "Spoon River". In Lewistown, Masters attended school and graduated from High School in 1886. Masters later spent a year at Knox Academy in Galesburg, Illinois, studying Greek before returning to Lewistown to read law at his father's law office.

As a young man, Masters was an avid reader of Shakespeare and other books and became quite a writer in his own right.

Working at the old Lewistown News Masters was beginning to form his great interest in writing. His gift of recall is proven by *Spoon River Anthology*.

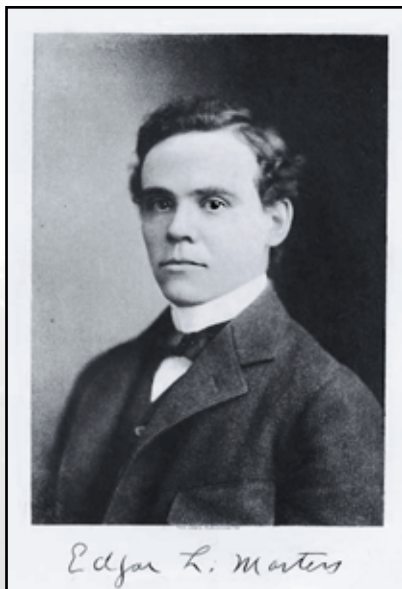
Another force in his life was the fact that his father, Hardin W. Masters, was an attorney who was considered a tyrant to his family and showed favor toward his daughter Madeline instead of Edgar Lee. However, while studying law at his father's office, Edgar Lee was closer to his father than he had ever been. Without question, exposure to his father's law office files would provide Edgar Lee with much

inside information for the characters he was later to create in *Spoon River Anthology*.

Masters's father was also Mayor of Lewistown exposing Edgar Lee to much material about local politics and individuals who later became characters in *Spoon River Anthology*. From his work at the Lewistown News, study in his father's law office, research in the county courthouse, and local gossip at the Blacksmith Shop, Edgar Lee had a wealth of information to draw from to construct the Anthology.

Edgar Lee often spoke about the fact that he thought his father could have been treated better and offered more in Lewistown by the Ross family, his old friends. The Ross family, whose son Lewis gave the town its name, was a great political force in the community but offered little support to Hardin W. Masters and his family. He did become quite successful in his own right, establishing a successful law practice, being elected Mayor of Lewistown four times, and was later appointed Master in Chancery.

Edgar Lee was very interested in political and economic issues. He was aware of tragic weakness of human beings and the terrible contrast between their ideals and their actions. He grew angry with injustice. In *Spoon River Anthology* Masters found a way to present his ideas. Using voices of the dead to



tell of the grudges, indignation, and views of life's mysteries, Edgar Lee created a world that will live forever. Written when Masters was in his mid-forties, we have the *Anthology* speaking from tumbled down headstones with the voices of a murderer, a drunkard, a banker, a loose woman, and many more. Masters used this format to show his hatred of political graft and to place himself on the liberal side of prohibition, women's rights, free will and free love! In the *Anthology* he clearly defines his independent moral code. Some of the characters were factual, some were imagined, but all die simple deaths or commit suicide and "all are sleeping on the hill".

The poet loved this area, the Spoon and Sangamon River regions of his youth and the areas and people were made prominent in his books. Now, a century has passed since *Spoon River Anthology* was published and Lewistown has either forgiven or forgotten the notoriety of the characters from the book. Lewistown has finally allowed *Spoon River Anthology* to be placed on its library's shelves and to be sold in town shops. The whispering and gossip about who is what character has also died out.

At the time of the publication of *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915, Edgar Lee Masters's mother was librarian at the Lewistown Carnegie Library. It must have been an embarrassing moment when the library board forbade the publication to be placed on its shelves. In fact, it was the mid-1970s before *Spoon River Anthology* could be purchased in Lewistown. Of course, talk in Lewistown was reserved to the parlor and certainly not in the classroom. Those most "insulted" by *Spoon River Anthology* and its characters were those the poet described with slings of wit and literary barbs.

Many copies of the original publication were purchased elsewhere and brought home to Lewistown to be studied by the curious and the gossips. Lists began to be drawn by some identifying the actual characters. Some of these lists are still available.

The character "Editor Whedon" and many like him, were still alive when the book became available, and embarrassment was brought into their lives after "that smart ass Masters spilled his immoral guts". Even Rev. Abner Peet while lunching in his retirement home in London Mills, Illinois, passed out his distaste for the works and the author when Edgar Lee's book hit the

streets back home. “Banker Rhodes” passed away and joined his friends on the immortal “Hill” in the north of Lewistown. Cause, probably the Anthology!

There were those in Lewistown who loved the quilt Masters created of his old home town and proudly told others so! Such was the case of another editor who later not only enjoyed the poetry but also exchanged letters on a regular basis with the poet himself for many years. This was Editor E. Reese of the Lewistown News.

Much to the liking of some of those depicted so well, the writings of the poet were to be more or less forgotten by the area and their ancestors through the decades of the 30s, 40s and 50s. But in the 60s something happened that would indeed make the poet’s works, in his own words “more lasting than stone”! It was a renaissance of sorts, a renewed interest in “the good old days”, in American history, our forefathers and their accomplishments. In its own way it was a dedication to him who opened the pages of everyday life in small town America and exposed it to the world.

Some of the Characters

There was a real “Butch Weldy” who killed the town Marshall Jack Logan. The act happened only a block from Weldy’s home. Butch had been drinking and when confronted by the Marshall an altercation took place. Weldy was pistol whipped by the Marshall so Butch went to his home, secured his pistol and returned to find the town Marshall. Upon finding Jack, Butch shot him dead through the heart. Weldy was convicted and sent to prison for a time. Upon his release from prison, he was given the lock from his cell as was the custom in those times. Said lock is still in the possession of a family in Lewistown. Weldy returned to Lewistown and took up the trade of locksmith. He lived out his life peacefully in a small home only a block from the spot where the Marshall confronted him. When the Lewistown Chamber of Commerce rebuilt the planter in Porter Park in 1985, the Chamber discovered a time capsule. This time capsule had been fabricated by Mr. Weldy in 1914 from copper plate and soldered so well that the contents remained as good as the day they were deposited.

The poet refers to “Willie Metcalf”, with the description of what

people called the “village idiot” in those days. However, in true life the town did possess such a poor soul! His name was Charlie Metcalf! Charlie was the brunt of a good deal of practical joking that today would be considered inhuman treatment by most.

“Chase Henry” was a real person, an individual that was well liked by the populace. However, he did seem to be possessed by the “devils brew”. “Silas Dement” on the other hand was a fictitious name but in fact was Chase Henry. When Chase, A.K.A. “Silas Dement,” died he was denied burial in Oak Hill Cemetery and was interred in St. Mary’s cemetery in an unmarked grave. Both characters were actually heroes but suffered bad fame because of the nature of their deeds.

Nathan Beadles was another early pioneer who lived in a fine mansion at the northeast corner of Milton Avenue and North Main Street. The US Post Office now stands where the Beadles Mansion once stood. Beadles was a very successful merchant in “Spoon River” (Lewistown) and built the Beadles Block which still stands on the north side of the county courthouse square. He was a active man in the community and did indeed donate his wealth to the town. Somewhat of an introvert, Beadles had an underground passage dug from his home, diagonally across Main Street intersection with Milton Avenue, south along Main Street beneath the sidewalk to the corner of Washington Avenue, thence west along Washington to the Beadles Block Building. His daily trips to and from the business were made through this tunnel. For the most part, this tunnel has been filled in, but many in town remember its existence. In the Anthology, Nathan Beadles was the character “Nicholas Bindle”. At Oak Hill Cemetery, the Beadles grave is surrounded by wrought iron fencing. Beadles remains lie in the center and his two wives are interred on each side of Nathan.

In two instances in the Anthology, the poet wrote of himself under the guise of “Theodore the Poet” and “Webster Ford”. Many of the names in *Spoon River Anthology* are fictitious, picked at random from the Illinois Constitution and other sources. Others are transposed, and some are actual names. The name “Alfonso Churchill”, in the epitaph about “Edgar Larkin,” was a composite created from the names George Churchill, a Galesburg educator, and Alphonso Newcomer, a Knox College professor and the subject of the “Professor Newcomer” epitaph. The real names

of Hannah Armstrong and Chase Henry, residents of Lewistown; Rebecca and John Wasson, Masters' great-great grandparents; William Hearndon, one of Lincoln's law partners and a law partner of Hardin W. Masters, Edgar's father, and Anne Rutledge, an acquaintance of Lincoln, appear as titles of the epitaphs written about them. It is said that sixty-six of the characters are from the Spoon River country, fifty-three from the Petersburg, New Salem, Sandridge area. Those living in the village of Lewistown when *Spoon River Anthology* came off the press immediately associated the correct name to the deeds of the "Soul" doing the speaking from the "Hill". In other words the poet who wrote of himself under the guises of "Webster Ford" and "Theodore the Poet", and used other pseudonyms that seemed to fit the poet's choice, was still recognizable to those who knew the circumstances of that particular verse!

The poet also wrote of "Old Bill Piersol", who grew rich trading with the Indians. He was in true life Captain William Phelps who with his wife, Caroline Kelsey, was the subject of the book *The Yellow Rose: A Wilderness Honeymoon*, written by "Editor Whedon". The book, has since been republished by the Lewistown Historical Society as one of the finest illustrations of Captain William Phelps and his trips up and down the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers and his dealings with Chief Black Hawk and successor Chief Keokuk. It was these Indians that named Phelps wife "Yellow Rose" because of her beautiful, flowing blond hair. Noted here, that the author, "Editor Whedon", also "Deacon Taylor" and "Robert Davison" from the Anthology, was actually William T. Davidson, the editor of the *Fulton Democrat*.

In "Reuben Painter", the poet disguises the facts of his own school days and exploits here in "Spoon River". The teacher called "Emily Sparks" was in reality a fine teacher by the name of Mary Fisher who taught English in the local school. She encouraged the Edgar Lee to follow a literary career. In the verse on "Emily Sparks", Emily refers to Edgar Lee wondering "whatever happened to her boy"?

Edgar Lee's grandparents, whom he held in high esteem, were referred to as "Lucinda and Davis Matlock" in the Anthology. They were from Petersburg, a place where Edgar Lee experienced some of his greatest joys. He recalled his boyhood times spent on their farm as his best memories!

Places Referenced in the Anthology

Standing yet today are the stones so vividly described by the poet, the 'Lincoln Pillars' which were part of the third courthouse, that "Silas Dement" torched. These pillars were saved by the local townspeople and erected atop "the Hill" at Oak Hill Cemetery on North Main Street in Lewistown.

"Bindles' Opera House", which was described very eloquently as a donation of the proud citizen "Nicholas Bindle", still stands today on the north side of the courthouse square weather-beaten after these many years with the "clumsy bust of Shakespeare" still protruding from under the name of the building. It has stood since 1876 and will always stand in *Spoon River Anthology* as "Bindles" even though the man's real name was Nathan Beadles. In 1915, as now, the townspeople knew the difference!

In the courtyard of the present courthouse, stands the cannon, including one that stood in the yard of the Ross Mansion, home of Lewis Ross. Masters referred to that family as "McNeely", however, the real name was Ross as Lewistown was named for Lewis Ross, the eldest son of the founder Ossian Ross. It was Lewis Ross that was named in *Spoon River Anthology*. The Ross family being sympathetic to the cause of the North, were strongly opposed by some whose sympathy lay with the South.

One block north of the Ross Mansion site, directly across the street from St. James Episcopal Church, stood a home occupied by one of the Southern sympathizers, who also trained a cannon on the Ross Mansion. It is said that both cannons were loaded and ready to fire.



"Lincoln Pillars" in Oak Hill Cemetery.



Beadles Opera House in the early 1900's.

Reverend Abner Peet's church still stands in the center of "Spoon River" just as it has since the building was built in 1856 directly across the Main Street from the main entrance to the Fulton County courthouse in Lewistown. It was this church that the poet tells us the sanctimonious banker "Rhodes" ran as well as the bank.

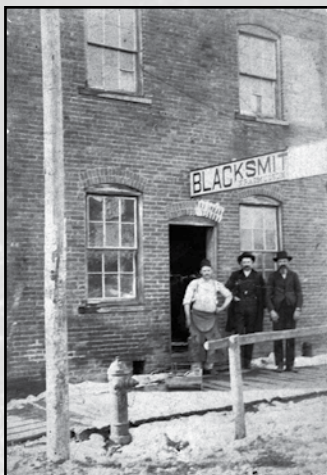
The old Blacksmith Shop still stands in Lewistown now as a museum and tourist attraction. It was a favorite gossip center in the old days and a favorite spot of Edgar Lee Masters. Undoubtedly it was a source of much of Edgar Lee Masters's local characters as much information was circulated about the pot belly stove each day.

The old Waggoner Hotel (Hotel Spoon River) where Edgar Lee and his mother first stayed after arriving in Lewistown from Petersburg, has since burnt to the ground. Now completely gone, all that remains are the stories told of the Hotels bustling past.

The boyhood home of Edgar Lee Masters stands on the corner of South Main Street and East Avenue D. This home has been remodeled but the basic structure is much the same as it was in Edgar Lee's day. Presently it is a private residence, but hopefully it will be preserved for history.

The home of Hardin W. Masters still stands at the corner of West Milton Avenue and North Adams Street. The Masters family owned this home sometime after Edgar Lee was gone from Lewistown. However, Edgar Lee certainly stayed there on his return trips to Lewistown. It is said that he did some of his writing there when visiting.

Hardin W. Masters' law offices were on the second floor of



*Rasmussen Blacksmith Shop
in the late 1800's early 1900's.*



*Ferris wheel in front of the Spoon River
Hotel in the early 1900's.*

the building standing at the southwest corner of the intersection of North Main Street and Milton Avenue. The offices were in a suite on the second floor, at the front of the building overlooking Main Street. Edgar Lee worked at these offices along with his father and probably gathered information for *Spoon River Anthology* from his father's files.



Cannon in front of the Lewis Ross Mansion.

The old high school referred to so many times by the poet was demolished in 1980 after consulting engineers felt the structure unsound. Oddly, the estimated 5 to 10 days razing time turned into several months as the old, unsound structure refused to yield to the contractors' machinery. The old school and the Catholic Seminary which once stood on the east side of town are now both gone, as are the canning factory, woolen mills, cigar factory, bee escape factory, colleges and other early enterprises that were brought by the pioneer spirit gone in reality, but saved by the pen of poet in *Spoon River Anthology*.



1. Lincoln Pillars, Oak Hill Cemetery
2. Beadles Opera House
3. Fulton County Courthouse
4. Ross Mansion Park
5. Presbyterian Church
6. Rasmussen Blacksmith Shop
7. Masters's Boyhood Home
8. Hardin W. Masters Home

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Illustration of Edgar Lee Masters on front cover by David S. Boyd.

Photos by Amanda Woodruff and Ed Emig. Historic photos from the Nicki Hazzard collection.

This edited third addition published in 2015 by:

Lewistown Chamber of Commerce

City of Lewistown

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Printed by Havana Printing



100th
Anniversary
Spoon River Anthology

