Richard Boudreau

A Sesquicentennial Look at Literary "Firsts" in Wisconsin

In the century and a half since statehood, writers from Wisconsin have reached out from purely local to regional audiences, then on to national, and in some instances, world audiences. Along the way they have garnered prestigious awards in this country, including Pulitzer Prizes and National Book Awards, as well as various citations and recognitions internationally. The state’s presses, both small and commercial, and its long-standing literary organizations and support groups have fostered and continue to foster writing of all kinds, underscoring Kentucky poet Jesse Stuart’s assessment of Wisconsin as the “writingest state in the union.” In celebration of our state’s sesquicentennial, it seems particularly appropriate to step back in time and review once more and in depth the antecedents of this rich literary heritage.

Wisconsin’s literary beginnings predate even territorial times: the oral traditions of the Native Americans were already centuries old before European contact. But the first actually taken down were orations, recorded by translators or scribes or witnesses at treaty parleys and truces, the earliest dating back nearly three centuries, and including several councils conducted by the Americans as they began taking over the area following the War of 1812. One of the most moving speeches came not from a treaty conference but from a formal surrender, the so-called death-song of the Winnebago chief, Red Bird, at the Portage in 1827. Besides orations there were songs: dream, war, love, hunting; chants, nearly all from religious rituals; and tales, both secular and sacred, particularly from the Ojibwa, Menominee, and Winnebago, who still maintain their dominance in the area. These were collected over the years by various ethnologists, beginning with Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who married an Ojibwa mixed blood, his most important informant, and including work by Walter James Hoffmann with the Menominee, Paul Radin with the Winnebago, and Frances Densmore with the Ojibwa.
With the inundation of the Americans into what became part of Michigan Territory came the printing press and almost immediately after, the newspaper. The first press was located in the oldest white settlement, Green Bay, and the first newspaper, The Green Bay Intelligencer, began its life there December 11, 1833. The first booklet published in what would be Wisconsin was an Ojibwa almanac, printed in 1834 on the Green Bay press, not, as generally believed, Increase A. Lapham’s study of the plants and shells on the west shore of Lake Michigan, published two years later in Milwaukee on what was the third printing press in Wisconsin. Lapham’s Wisconsin Gazetteer, published in 1844, however, was the first book with “durable binding” printed in the Territory. But the earliest book written by a “Wisconsinite” was Dr. William Beaumont’s account, published in 1833, of his famous experiments with Alexis St. Martin, whose unhealed wound to the stomach allowed for Beaumont’s remarkable research on human digestion.

Such achievements in publishing in a new territory were not remarkable, perhaps, but in June 1842, The Garland of the West, appeared—and it was remarkable. It was the first literary magazine in the entire Northwest Territory. Started by Edward Young and Julius H. Kimball in Southport (later Kenosha), it attempted to bring literature, particularly poetry (sentimentality reigned supreme) to the frontier. Its editors had good writers (one, L. P. Harvey, became Civil War governor of Wisconsin, tragically drowning on a visit to the front in 1862; another, Michael Frank, editor of the Southport newspaper, became known as “the father of the free school system” in Wisconsin) and great expectations—but little chance of success. By the third issue, that for August, Young was alone as the editor, and after some delay, he brought out the September and October issues combined as one, signalling difficulties. “Somewhat bleached and cut short of its fair proportions by the fall frosts,” the Milwaukee Courier wryly noted. Young then relinquished it to the Sholes brothers, Charles C. and C. Latham (later inventor of the typewriter), who changed the name to Wisconsin Monthly Magazine, promising to shift its focus to “useful reading matter instead of lovesick trash.” Their attempt, however laudatory, failed, but, since no copies are extant, it is not known when the magazine ceased publication.

Newspapers, however, thrived. Besides news of all and sundry, they were filled out with trivia, both informative and humorous, as well as with sketches, tales, and, particularly, verse. Newspapers were most important in fostering poetry in the new territory and state. They printed numerous single poems, called “waifs” by ambitious versifiers, most of whom were women. Famous names among Wisconsinites were Carrie Carlson (Mary Booth Chamberlain of Beloit), Ada F. Moore (Ellen E. Hall Phillips of Stevens Point), Nellie A. Mann (Helen A. Manville of La Crosse), and Nellie Wildwood (Mary Elizabeth Parnsworth Mears of Oshkosh). Each of them eventually legitimized their “waifs” by gathering them into collections published in the ’60s and ’70s. Despite all of their activity, however, what has been considered the first collection of Wisconsin poetry was written by a man. Adolf Schults, a self-proclaimed exile from Germany, published Lieder Aus Wisconsin in 1848, but his ties to Wisconsin are suspect. If not Schults, either Hiram Alvin Reid of Beaver Dam or Orpheus Everts of Hudson, seem to be candidates with collections of poems published in 1856, but their residency seems suspect as well.
That would seem to give Mary Elizabeth Farnsworth Mears the distinction of publishing the first book of verse in Wisconsin, a claim that has often been made. Her long poem, *Voyage of Pere Marquette and Romance of Charles de Langlade or, The Indian Queen*, was printed in Fond du Lac in 1860. The long historical narrative has sometimes been referred to as Wisconsin’s first “epic.” But there was a much earlier claimant even to that title: *The History of Black Hawk, with which is interwoven a Description of the Black Hawk War and other Scenes in the West* by E. H. Smith, published in Milwaukee originally in 1846. Two years later Elbert (or Egbert) Herring Smith re-published the book with extensive alterations under the title *MA-KA-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak; or, Black Hawk, and Scenes in the West.* Other editions followed, and he evidently spent the rest of his life trying to make a living from his “epic.” And since neither Smith’s nor Mears’s books are collections of poems and since the three male writers mentioned probably do not qualify as Wisconsinites, the honor of the first collection of poetry apparently belongs to Mary Booth Chamberlain (Carrie Carlton); her *Wayside Blossoms* appeared in 1862.

With drama the past is murky and inconclusive. The first play published in the state seems to have been *The Drummer, or New York Clerks and Country Merchants*, edited by a Mrs. Partington and published in Milwaukee in 1851. But Mrs. Partington, a sort of Yankee Mrs. Malaprop, was a fictional creation of Boston printer and journalist, Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber. And since the action of the play takes place in New York City with no apparent tie-in to Wisconsin and since its supposed author was a resident of Boston, it should probably be discounted. The first Wisconsin drama actually performed in Wisconsin, as far as we know, is the one written by the ubiquitous Mrs. Mears. Her play, *Black Hawk*, held the stage for a run of three weeks in Madison about the time of the onset of the Civil War, but it is not known when she wrote it or whether she ever published it.

The first memoir, it has long been assumed, was the still popular and oft-published book by Juliette Magill Kinzie, *Wau-Bun, The Early Day in the Northwest, 1856.* It is primarily the account of her two and a half years at the Portage, 1830-33, with her husband, John Kinzie, Indian Agent to the Indians gathered in the vicinity of Fort Winnebago. More than that, it presents a sympathetic treatment of her nearest neighbors, the Indians, especially of the women. And the memoir delineates the last months of their sojourn there during which the Kinzies share in the restricted rations and near starvation of their neighbors. Written in a lively, engaging style, it is a moving, remarkable account.

But, as it turns out, it is not the first memoir. That achievement belongs to a Dominican priest, Rev. Samuel Mazzuchelli. Shortly after his ordination in 1830 this Italian missionary traveled extensively in the territory from Mackinac Island to Prairie du Chien, serving both Indian and White, Protestant and Catholic. Among other duties he served as chaplain to the second session of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature which met in Burlington, Iowa, in 1836. On a trip back to his homeland after 12 years in the territory he wrote an account of his labors: *Memoirs, Historical and Edifying Among Various Indian Tribes and Among Catholics and Protestants in the United States of America.* It was published in his hometown, Milan, Italy, early in 1844, about the time he returned to his missionary field in territorial Wisconsin.

If we consider Mrs. Kinzie’s book a mem-
oir rather than an autobiography, then the first autobiography in Wisconsin literature was *The Life-Line of the Lone One* by Warren Chase, published in 1857. Though Chase is the subject of his autobiography, he refers to himself throughout in the third person (as did Rev. Mazzuchelli in his *Memoirs*) or as the Lone One. He uses his birth year of 1813 as a starting point and arranges each chapter to cover one decade in his life. It is in the third chapter, 1833–1842, that he arrives in Southport in territorial Wisconsin, nearly destitute, with a very ill wife and a sickly first born. But his fourth chapter is of utmost interest: during that decade he joins a Fourierite socialist group, eventually becoming its leader, establishing in 1844 the communal settlement of Ceresco on land incorporated into the later village of Ripon. While he served as the leader of the “Wisconsin Phalanx,” he also became a delegate to both constitutional conventions in Madison and was elected to the first state senate. The Ceresco community disbanded in 1850, perhaps the only utopian community of that era to finish in the black. Chase became a spiritualist minister and moved further west, finally settling in California where he died in 1891.

The first novel in Wisconsin has for years been considered *Bachelor Ben* by Ella Giles, published in 1875, but there are a number of earlier claimants to that distinction. The first novel printed in Wisconsin was published “by a citizen of Milwaukee” in 1857. But with the story set entirely in New York State, it seems reasonable to assume it was written well before the “citizen” moved to Milwaukee. The next novel published was *Walter Ogilby* by Mrs. Kinzie of Wau-Bun fame. It appeared in 1869. That too is set in the East with no tie-ins with Wisconsin. But her second novel, *Mark Logan*, the Bourgeois, published posthumously in 1871, is set in what would become Wisconsin, along the Fox-Wisconsin river route the summer of 1827 (Mark Logan witnesses the surrender of Chief Red Bird). Because the author is certainly a writer with strong Wisconsin ties and because the story is the first involving the state as setting, it would seem to be the clearest choice for Wisconsin’s first novel.

Determining what could be called the first Wisconsin short story would be a monumental, if not impossible task. Copyright laws in the United States were confusing, largely ignored, and generally unenforceable; international copyright laws were not in place until much later. That meant that editors could, in effect, reprint tales and stories from any source whatever, including the best writers of the day. Nor, in fact, did the term, short story, exist; it did not come into use until the 1890s. If the first short story by a Wisconsin writer cannot be identified, we can at least suggest a couple of collections that might qualify for the title of the first book of short stories. Both are by George Willbur Peck: *Peck’s Sunshine*, in 1882, which includes some of his longer humorous tales, and *Peck’s Bad Boy and His Pa*, in 1883, made up of short episodes in the life of the “Bad Boy.” With illustrations alternating almost equally with the text, the latter could also be considered the precursor of the comic strip.

A sesquicentennial seems an ideal time for a reconsideration, and in the review just completed, we have evidence that alters a number of assumptions about our literary past. Increase A. Lapham’s booklet of 1836 was not the first pamphlet published in the state, though his *Wisconsin Gazetteer* of 1844 was certainly the first book published here. And the first book written by a Wisconsinite, William Beaumont’s treatise of 1833, can be added to the list of literary firsts.
Garland of the West, 1842, is a remarkable first—the first literary magazine in the entire Northwest Territory. The first memoir is clearly that of Rev. Mazzuchelli even though written in Italian and published in Italy in 1844. Mrs. Mears loses two firsts attributed to her, for a book of verse and for the “epic,” but gains another, the first play by a Wisconsin, Mark Logan, published in 1871. And humorist/governor, George Wilbur Peck, appears to have title to the first short story collection published in the state.

With literary antecedents such as these stretching back into the earliest years, how could Wisconsinites fail to recognize and to honor such auspicious beginnings and the prodigious outpouring of writing that has ensued in the last century and more in their state? Perhaps there is no better way to acknowledge such a rich literary heritage than to take note of, and to honor, our present day writers and to search out, read, and cherish good books by Wisconsin authors of whatever era.

Endnotes


2The best source to begin such a review is Orrilla T. Blackshear’s Wisconsin Authors and Their Books: 1836–1975 (Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1976).


"See, for example, the speech of Sau-sa-man-nee in Wisconsin Historical Collections, Vol. X, pp. 143–45. Native American orations are scattered throughout the volumes of this invaluable collection.

5"After a moment’s pause, and a quick survey of the troops, and with a composed observation of his people, he spoke, looking at Major Whistler, and said: ‘I am ready.’ Then, advancing a step or two, he paused and said, ‘I do not wish to be put in irons. Let me be free. Have given away my life—(stooping and taking some dust between his finger and thumb and blowing it away)—like that’ (eyeing the dust as it fell and vanished), then adding, ‘I would not take it back. It is gone.” From Moses M. Strong, “Indian Wars,” Wisconsin Historical Collections, Vol. VIII (Madison: The State Historical Society, 1879), pp. 262–63. Red Bird died in prison soon after his surrender.


The booklet is referred to in the biography of Rev. Samuel Mazzuchelli by Jo and J. Alderson, The Man Mazzuchelli: Pioneer Priest (Madison: Wisconsin House, 1974), Chapter 5 (no page nos.), and again in the Alderson’s article on Mazzuchelli in the Wisconsin Academy Review, Summer, 1998. Only one copy of the booklet is known to exist; it is located in the Library of Congress. The only other reference to its being the first published in Wisconsin is found in footnote 13,
page 87, of the Positio, or A Documentary Account of His Life, Virtues and Reputation for Holiness used as the basis for consideration in the Roman Catholic Church for Rev. Mazzuchelli’s beatification, published in Rome in 1898.


9Legler, 119.

10See Legler, p. 120: Increase A. Lapham, Geographical and Topological Description of Wisconsin (Milwaukee: P.C. Hale, 1844). This was popularly known as the Wisconsin Gazetteer.

11William Beaumont, Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juice and the Physiology of Digestion (Plattsburgh, New York: Allen, 1833). Dr. Beaumont was stationed at Mackinac Island in 1822 when he began to treat St. Martin's wound. Dr. Beaumont then served at Fort Howard, Green Bay, from 1826–28, and at Fort Crawford, Prairie du Chien from 1828–1832, where, from 1829 on, the majority of his experiments were carried out.


13Quaife, 47.

14Quaife, 47.

15See Oscar Wegelin, “Historical Fragments: Wisconsin’s First Versifiers,” Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 1, 1921–22, pp. 64–67. The book, written in German, was published in Germany (by J. Badecker of Elberfeld and Iserlohn); it’s possible that Schults never lived in Wisconsin or that he visited here for a short time only.

16Hiram Alvin Reid, The Heartlace and Other Poems (the author, 1856) according to Blackshear, but the book was published in Davenport, Iowa, that year, and he claimed many years later that it was the first book of poetry printed in Iowa, not Wisconsin. “Orpheus Everts, One way or another. An Indian Legend and Other Poems. (Hudson: Times Printing Office, 1856)” according to Blackshear, but the book was published that year in La Porte, Indiana, not in Wisconsin. He was a member of the law firm of Tuttle, Reyman & Everts in Hudson from 1859 to 1861. Though Reyman became prominent in Wisconsin, Everts disappeared from sight.

17Among many others over the years, Legler, p. 121. But even as recently as Janet Ela’s “Sculptor Helen Farnsworth Mears” in Wisconsin Academy Review, March, 1986, that claim was repeated. The Helen Farnsworth Mears of the article title was one of Mrs. Mears’s three talented daughters.

18See Oscar Wegelin, “Historical Fragments: Wisconsin’s First Versifiers,” Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1918. Written “by a Western Tourist” this book was published in New York in 1848 and was the one Legler discounted because he did not think the author had residency in Wisconsin. But in an interesting aside, the whole story of the “Wisconsin Bard” is rendered in The Chronicles of Milwaukee by A. C. Wheeler, 1861. Smith, a teacher in a rural school near Southport, took himself seriously as a poet. He was apparently led on by others in what they intended as a massive joke which boomeranged when Smith began to profit from his “epic.”


20This is all very curious. Wegelin was apparently aware of the “true” Mrs. Partington because he mentions Shillaber, though Wegelin de-
cides Shillaber had nothing to do with the piece. Since there is no other information available, we can only conjecture: the manuscript was written by Shillaber and printed by a friend; the manuscript was pirated; the manuscript was written and printed by persons unknown who might or might not have lived in Wisconsin.

21Publius V. Lawson, “Mary Elizabeth Mears: 'Nellie Wildwood,'” Wisconsin Historical Society Proceedings, 1916, p. 255. The claim is actually made by her daughter, Mary Mears, in a letter she wrote to Lawson shortly after her mother’s death.


23Alderson, Chap. 10 and “Sources,” at the end of the book. His Memoirs were essentially unknown to Wisconsinites until their translation in 1915 by Sister Mary Benedicta Kennedy, O.S.D., the order that Rev. Mazzuchelli founded, headquartered at Sinsinawa. The book was reprinted in 1967. Rev. Mazzuchelli founded many parishes in southwest Wisconsin, eventually settling in Benton, Wisconsin, where he served as pastor until his death in 1864.


26See Richard Boudreau, “Wisconsin’s First Novel,” Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters 86, 1998. Two other books in Blacksheer appear to be possibilities: Teone by Rusco (Mary Ann Smith, Milwaukee, 1862), and The Friar’s Curse by Michael Quigley (Milwaukee, 1870). But neither is a novel; both are long narrative poems in the style of medieval romances.

27But in Publius V. Lawson’s article, “Mary Elizabeth Mears: ‘Nellie Wildwood,’” in Wisconsin Historical Society Proceedings for 1916, daughter Mary Mears claims that her mother was the author of many fugitive poems and stories which appear in editions of the early newspapers of Wisconsin.” If so, Elizabeth Farnsworth Mears may hold another first: the writer of the first Wisconsin short story.

28The first collection of short stories about which there would be no argument is that of Capt. Charles King: Starlight Ranch, and Other Stories of Army Life on the Frontier (Lippincott, 1890).

Richard Boudreau, Professor Emeritus, UW-La Crosse English Department, is co-editor of The Critical Reception of Hamlin Garland, 1891–1978, and editor of The Literary Heritage of Wisconsin, Volumes 1 and 2. He holds degrees from St. Mary’s College, Winona, Minnesota, Marquette University, Milwaukee, and University of Wisconsin-Madison. Address: 2132 Winnebago Street, La Crosse, WI 54601.