

ca 1950

Dear Murray:

Please do not take any of this too seriously. At this stage, I am merely feeling my way, having no very clearly defined notion of what it is that I want to do.

If such a thing is possible without making it too anecdotal, I would like to make this a story of a community, the counterpart of which, I think, no longer exists. That is: The little self-sufficient nucleus of self-sufficient people who lived in and around a very small Kansas town (361 inhabitants, to be exact) in the latter part of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century. There were no automobiles, and the graveled road had not yet been put through the town, widening horizons and enlarging little worlds until they lost their identity.

These people must have come from somewhere; but they never went anywhere, never moved away. Even when I was a child, they seemed an integral part of the geography of the place, seemed to have rooted and grown there as it were. Also, even to me as a child, they seemed a unique lot, their lives filled with a strange pathos and a sometimes stranger comedy. I have written many short stories about them through my early years of trying to write. Some I have kept and some not. And, whereas they are not good stories, they do have a certain clarity of observation and a certain truth.

Once when Mr. Campbell (Stanley Vestal) asked me what I wanted to write about, I told him I wanted to write about the people who came to my father's funeral. I still do.

Most of them have joined him in the little cemetery now, his own contemporaries. They lie neighbor to neighbor under the uncut prairie grass. When Earle and I stopped in there last month, I felt more at home in the ragged little cemetery than I did in the community itself, for there were more people there whom I knew. I kept remembering their faces, their characteristics and their mannerisms and little stories about them. The way the men used to get all burned up over the way the government and the country were going to the dogs and stamp around our little kitchen, and the way the Civil War veterans used to march up the hill on Memorial Day, their beards blowing back and their eyes on the flag and their shoulders proud. We were sort of border-line there you know. We had one Confederate veteran I remember. But he finally just mingled in with the others and became simply "a veteran." Which ought to prove something or other about wars.

But to get back to my father's funeral: Everyone knew "Billy Price" because he had been there for so long. He was indeed a "kind of landmark", a stubborn lovable little Englishman rooted into his stony farm. He died after I left home. At the age of 86. Got up one morning and did the churning, and emptied his pockets carefully into the buffet drawer (he never trusted either a doctor or an undertaker) and sat down in his old rocker and died there.