

John G. Neihardt, Poet Laureate of Nebraska

By FRED L. HOLMES

THERE is only one poet laureate in the United States. This title that takes one back to the days of John Dryden, William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson, of England, has just been bestowed on John G. Neihardt by the Nebraska legislature. Not only is he the first man who has such an honor conferred on him by any state in the Union, but he is the only poet since the days of the Cambridge group to have one of his long epic poems dealing with American life published in a volume by itself for use in the schools. Two editions were exhausted in a single year.

Up to 1914, John G. Neihardt was an obscure poet, who made his home at Bancroft, Nebraska. For more than 20 years he had been making a study of the hardships of the early pioneers, the fur traders and the trappers who came into the plains region following the famous expedition of Lewis and Clark in 1804. These men he has immortalized in a poem, "The Song of Hugh Glass." Instant recognition came. Teachers demanded it for use in the schools. Then the Nebraska legislature, in the spring of 1921, caught the inspiration and passed the following joint resolution:

"Whereas, There is the closest connection between the growth of civilization and the developments of literature, and

"Whereas, wise commonwealths in all ages have recognized this relation by lifting the poet to the same plane as the statesman and military chieftain, and

"Whereas, John G. Neihardt, a citizen of Nebraska, has written a national epic wherein he has developed the mood of courage with which our pioneers explored and subdued our plains, and thus has inspired in Americans that love of the land and its heroes whereby great national traditions are built and perpetuated, and

"Whereas, our people wish to exalt such gifts of the human spirit, therefore be it

"Resolved and enacted, by the house of representatives, the senate concurring, that John G. Neihardt be, and hereby is declared poet laureate of Nebraska."

Laureate was the name first applied to poets who were honored by the gift of a laurel wreath. It is now a title of an official of the royal household of Great Britain and has been recognized there for more than 500 years. The ceremonies conferring the laureate honors on John G. Neihardt were held at Lincoln, Nebraska, June 18, 1921. They were conducted by the Nebraska University faculty, and the presentation was made by Dean L. A. Sherman.

"This is an auspicious day and date for Nebraska," said Dean Sherman. "No other state, it appears, has by legislative recognition, a poet laureate. No other state, we may fairly say, has such a reason. Nature has not shaped for us, in this paradise of prairie country, mountains that might become by myth of fancy the home of gods and muses. There is, there can be, no Olympus, no Parnassus here. But we have that which has given fame to all the sacred groves and mountains and fountains of spiritual history. We have the poet's informing vision, and shaping hand.

"The ceremonial that we assembled to witness is by no means a novel one. In the days when Parnassus was, in the youth time of the arts, sons of Apollo were crowned publicly with his laurel. And so at the close of the Middle Ages was Petrarch crowned at the capitol in Rome. Were our own great new capitol finished, it would have been fitting that the first poet laureate of Nebraska should have been honored at its portals."

Before the audience which came to witness these coronation ceremonies, came a slender man just 40, whose heavy hair and large head would mark him conspicuous in any audience. He was simple of address—simple as had been his life. The Poet Neihardt was born in an unplastered one-room structure on a rented farm near Sharpsburg, Illinois, January 8, 1881. Shortly after the birth of this son the family moved to Northwestern Kansas, where pioneer conditions prevailed and the family residence was a sod house. Five years later the family went to Kansas City, Missouri, and in 1892 to Wayne, Nebraska, where Neihardt was educated at the Nebraska Normal School. He was so poor that he earned his tuition by ringing the chapel bell hourly to announce the convening of classes.

Even in his youth there was a noticeable mysticism and melancholia in the nature of Neihardt. As a little boy he wanted to become an inventor and the backyard of the Kansas City home was strewn with cable line systems, tunnels and grades and turbine engines. When the boy was 10 years of age his father died and his mother supported herself and children by working for 50 or 75 cents a day. It was while living in Kansas City that the awe and pervading atmosphere of the West settled with all its subtle meaning into his nature. The Missouri River as it comes sweeping down through the plains at Kansas City touched him with a feeling of loneliness and insignificance, later to be portrayed in the poem, "The River and I."

"I remember well the first time I looked on my turbulent friend, who has since become as a brother to me," said Mr. Neihardt in explaining this hushed feeling and a sympathy inspired by the river. "It was from a bluff at Kansas City. I know I must have been

a very little boy, for the terror I felt made me reach up to the saving forefinger of my father, lest this insane devil-thing before me should suddenly develop an unreasoning hunger for little boys.

"For the summer had smitten the distant mountains and the June floods ran. Far across the yellow swirl that spread out into the wooded bottomlands, we watched the demolition of a little town.

"Many a lazy Sunday stroll took us back to the river; and little by little the dread became less, and the wonder grew—and a little love crept in.

"If in a moment of despair I should reel for a breathing space away from the fight, with no heart for battle cries, and with only a desire to pray, I could do it in no better manner than to lift my arms above the river and cry out into the big spaces, 'You who somehow understand—behold this river! It expresses what is voiceless in me. It prays for me!'"

At 11 years of age Neihardt forgot his toys, his sailboat, his engines and machinery, and, following a dream, decided to become a poet. It was not unnatural, for his father had scribbled many unpublished lines.

"It was as if a voice called me from my mechanical inventions, saying: 'Come away. This is not the thing,'" explained Mr. Neihardt. "That was the first feeling which I had and it is this compelling influence which has guided my life since."

Shortly afterward Neihardt wrote the first of his verses, "The Stubble-Haired Boy." At once he began to collect a library of good books in cheap bindings. The first volume of poetry he owned was "Idylls of the King," obtained as a premium for soap wrappers. His first verses were published in the Cook County

(Illinois) *News*, when he was nearly 14 years old. His first poem for which he received pay was printed by the *Youth's Companion*. It was written in 1900 in a potato patch with the back of his hoe for a desk and was called "The Song of the Hoe."

For nearly six years, 1901-7, Neihardt lived among the Omaha Indians, studying their character, history and legends. He had taught country school two years at Hoskins, Nebraska. When this desire came to know more about the world than the ordinary human sees, he spent his summer tramping through Kansas and Missouri and between the ages of 16 and 20 he engaged in the occupations of farm hand, hod carrier, office boy, marble polisher, stenographer and teacher.

Neihardt has always been poor. When he had finished the normal school he wanted to go to the state university, but was without funds. Carrying in one pocket a copy of Tennyson and in another Browning, he went back to work in the beet fields for 50 cents a day, and as he crawled on his hands and knees, weeding and thinning the beets, his brain was busy with the great dream. It was called "The Divine Enchantment," and was finished in 1900. As soon as the beets were harvested he began the composition of the poem and continued work on it for more than two years.

It was while as a boy living in a sod house in Northwestern Kansas that Neihardt conceived the greatness of the West, the compelling beauties of the prairie, the immensity and boundless sweep of its vast untrammelled acres. The Greek and Latin poems which had inspired him in his college course now awakened in him a desire to picture this western advance of civilization as an epic.

"The four decades during which the fur trade flourished west of the Mississippi River may be regarded as a typical heroic period, differing in no essential from the many other great heroic periods that have made glorious the story of the Aryan migration," said Mr. Neihardt in explaining how he conceived the idea of writing western epics. "The heroic spirit, as seen in historic poetry, we are told, is the outcome of a society cut loose from its roots, of a time of migration, of the shifting of populations. Such conditions are to be found during the time of the Spanish conquests of Central and South America; and they are to be found also in those wonderful years of our own West, when wandering bands of trappers were exploring the rivers and the mountains and the plains and the deserts from the British possessions to Mexico and from the Missouri to the Pacific.

"We lack the sense of racial continuity. For us it is almost as though the world began yesterday morning; and too much of our contemporary literature is based

on that view. The affairs of antiquity seem to the generality of us to be as remote as the dimmest star, and as little related to our activities. But what we call the slow lapse of ages is really only the blinking of an eye. Sometimes this sense of the close unity of all time and all human experience has come on me so strongly that I have felt, for an intense moment, how just a little hurry on my part might get me there in time to hear Aeschylus training a chorus, or to see the wizard chisel still busy with the Parthenon frieze, or to hear Socrates telling his dreams to his judges. It is in some such mood that I approach that body of precious saga-stuff which I have called the Western American Epos; and I see it, not as a thing in itself, but rather as one phase of the whole race life from the beginning, indeed, the final link in that long chain of heroic periods stretching from the region of the Euphrates eastward into India and westward into our own Pacific Coast."

Out of this study of the advance of the pioneers, the establishment of trading posts, the rise and decline of the fur trade, the depredation of Indians, the founding of military camps, and the picture of the plains has come the epic poem, "The Song of Hugh Glass." It is the story of a pioneer trapper who enters the West and who in searching for food is caught by a grizzly and left prostrate on the plain. His friends discover him, but after two days of watching, the unconscious man was left alone to die. But Hugh Glass, a mountain of a man, the embodiment of sinew and brawn and adventure, revives, and crawls a hundred miles back to civilization, subsisting on berries and the fruits of brush and thicket the while.

Founded on historic facts, this poem is not a story of colorless and naked straight lines, but is a rich mosaic made up of a thousand historic incidents, pictures of shades and light, of waste changing every hour from dawn to midnight, the odor of ozone of rain-drenched land, the sighing of the winds in the cottonwoods, the nickering of horses in the corral, the disturbing voices of wild life, the blistering heat of summer, the blinding snow of the blizzard and the loneliness and solitude under the judgment of stars twinkling in the night.

Deserted by friends in the drear and waste of a land then desolate, Hugh's memory paints the picture of days at home, the twilight and evening:

It was the hour when cattle straggle home.
Across the clearing in a hush of sleep
They saunter, lowing; loiter belly-deep
Amid the lush grass by the meadow stream.
How like the sound of water in a dream
The intermittent tinkle of yon bell.
A windlass creaks contentment from a well;
And cool deeps gurgle as the bucket sinks.
Now blowing at the trough the plow team drinks;
The shaken harness rattles. Sleepy quails
Call far. The warm milk hisses in the pails
There in the dusky barn lot. Crickets cry.
One hears the horses munching at their oats.
The green grows black. A veil of slumber floats
Across the haunts of home-enamored men.

It is not alone the colorific portrayal of Hugh Glass which the Poet Neihardt would canvass, but it is the story of that body of adventurers, their characteristics and their aspirations, who from 1822 to 1829 opened a way of expansion of the nation beyond the Missouri, found the southern pass through the mountains and the overland route to California, which thousands were to travel in a mad rush to the gold fields 20 years later. It is the story of westward expansion in America told in its relation to the whole race movement from the beginning. It is the humble achievements of ordinary men, not the official leaders.

"History as written in the past, has been too much a chronological record of official governmental acts, too little an intimate account of the lives of the people themselves," said Mr. Neihardt in explaining the basic inspiration back of this poem. "Doubtless, the democratic spirit that now seems to be sweeping the world will, if it continues to spread, revolutionize our whole conception of history, bringing us to realize that the glory of the race is not the glory of a chosen few, but that it radiates from the precious heroic stuff of common

human lives. And that view, I am proud to say, is in keeping with our dearest national traditions.

"I dreamed of making those men live again for the young men and women of my country. The tremendous mood of heroism that was developed in our American West during that period is properly a part of your racial inheritance; and certainly no less important a part than the memory of ancient heroes. Indeed, it can be shown that these men—Kentuckians, Virginians, Pennsylvanians, Ohioans—were direct descendants, in the epic line, of all the heroes of our Aryan race that have been celebrated by the poets of the Past; descendants of Achilles and Hector; of Aeneas; of Roland; of Sigurd, and of the Knights of Arthur's Court. They went as torch bearers in the van of our westerly civilization. Your Present is, in a great measure, a heritage from their Past."

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JOHN G. NEIHARDT



A SNAPSHOT OF MR. NEIHARDT