

THE ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE

Concluding installment
of an extract from

THE MIAMI YEARS 1809-1959

Walter Havighurst's narrative history of Miami University which next year celebrates its sesquicentennial.

Publication date has been advanced to October from January, 1959, it is announced by the publishers, *G. P. Putnam's Sons*.

The first installment, in our June issue, told how Edgar Stillman-Kelley, the composer, who was artist-in-residence at Western College in Oxford, had helped Percy MacKaye, the poet, to obtain a similar post at Miami University.

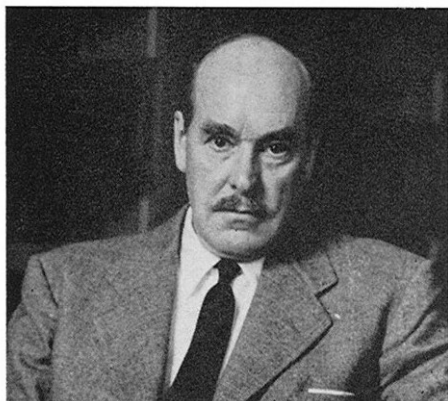
When *Dogtown Common* was finished in March, 1921, MacKaye read it to a group in the Stillman-Kelley studio. He had a cold that evening. Coming in out of the raw night he looked both drawn and swollen. When he took off his coat there was a hot water bottle, slung around his neck. But in the swing of his reading—

the dead—

The houseless homes of Dogtown. Still their souls

Tenant the black doorsteps and the cellar holes—

he forgot his distress. Warmed by his own voice he threw off the hot water bottle and gave himself to the spectral tale of witchcraft in colonial New England. A few nights later he read the poem to an audience of students and faculty in Benton Hall. He was a slender, intense and lonely figure on the wide platform, a hand darting up to push back his loose shock of



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hair, his voice rising and falling like the sea-surge on Cape Ann.

That spring MacKaye wrote an article on "University Fellowships in Creative Art," published in *The Forum*. "Secluded in the quiet of a great grove, my studio . . . has already afforded opportunity for a kind of uninterrupted thought and creative experiment . . . And it has also provided occasion for a kind of informal interchange of ideas and friendship with both faculty and students."

A Basket of Red Apples

Here Percy MacKaye gave himself the benefit of a doubt. A producing poet he was—three books during his three years at Miami—but he was not a magnet to whom students and faculty were drawn. A shy and aloof man, not easily approachable, he kept his colleagues at a distance. His first studio open house brought on a headache, his wife pressing cold cloths to his brow while the students sat stiff and

still in the firelight. Once a week an English class came through the woods, guided by the yellow lamplight in his window. They found the poet distantly friendly, with a basket of red apples on the table. While they munched apples and watched the fire, he read some stanzas from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Some nights his daughter Arvia helped to bridge the gap, passing hot roast chestnuts between the students' halting questions on contemporary poetry.

No doubt MacKaye sighed when the weekly visit ended. He poked up the fire, laid out his books and papers, and happily lost himself in *This Fine Pretty World*, a folk play of the mountain people in the remote hollows of Kentucky. Long after midnight his lantern groped out of the forest path, his shadow scissoring across the college yard. Beyond the fields he saw a light burning in Stillman-Kelley's studio.

If not a lively exchange with the community, there was the example of a man at work in his own way, in the urgency of his imagination. For the academy the artist has a touch of mystery and power. Crossing the quiet campus, passing to the library or the faculty club, he is not bounded there. He belongs also to the arena—the symphony halls, the galleries, the literary supplements. He knows a world beyond the ivy walls.

Just Living, Writing

Occasionally MacKaye left the campus for a lecture trip or a visit to his publishers. During his first Ohio winter he met Robert Frost in New York. Frost: "Percy, where are you living now?" MacKaye: "I'm at a college. In Ohio." Frost: "What are you doing there?" MacKaye: "Just living, writing. Robert, you ought to get

a college to support you." Frost: "How can I get one?" MacKaye: "I'll talk to President Hughes. He'll have an idea." A few months later Robert Frost became poet-in-residence at the University of Michigan.

Meanwhile Frost had written to MacKaye in Oxford: "The arts seem to have to depend on favor more or less. In the old days it was the favor of kings and courts. In our day far better your solution, that it should be on the colleges, if the colleges could be brought to see their responsibility in the matter. We are sure to be great in the world for power and wealth. . . . But someone who has time will have to take thought that we shall be remembered five thousand years from now for more than success in war and trade. Someone will have to feel that it would be the ultimate shame if we were to pass like Carthage (great in war and trade) and leave no trace in the spirit."

In Oxford Percy MacKaye found one friend from past years in New York. Ridgely Torrence had been persuaded to leave the staff of *Cosmopolitan* magazine for a stint of teaching at Miami; in New York he had lived in William Vaughan Moody's apartment, near Washington Square, which had once, also, been the home of the MacKays. Now in the Torrences' second-floor rooms on Campus Avenue the two families met again. One winter afternoon Torrence read the poem he had written years earlier for wide-eyed Arvia MacKaye, now a Miami student.

*Arvia, east of the morning,
Before the daylight grayed
I heard a night-song's warning:
"This bubble-world shall fade". . . .*

In his classroom up the creaking third-floor stairs in the old main building

Ridgely Torrence was miles away from his students. But they remembered something grave and ardent in his presence, and the long hair lightly trained across his fine bald brow.

Poetry Editor

In 1921 Torrence went back to New York, becoming poetry editor of *The New Republic*. Two years later the MacKayes returned to New Hampshire, and the abandoned "poet's shack" in the Miami woods was claimed by squirrels and field mice. It was pulled down before 1941 when Ridgely Torrence came again to Miami, as fellow in creative literature. In the University guest house, next door to his old friend President Upham—alphabetical seating had placed them together in the college chapel forty-five years before—Torrence worked on his biography of the Negro educator John Hope and occasionally met groups of stu-

dents. He had previously, in 1938, been poet-in-residence at Antioch College. It was a familiar appointment then.

Now the artist-in-residence has a definite place in American colleges, a place so definite that a faculty may seem incomplete without him. He contributes something precious to the college, as President Hughes saw a generation ago, and in turn the college sustains him. It gives him a measure of security; it also gives him a community to belong to. Too many claims may be bondage for an artist, but a few claims are vital. Robert Frost has made one poet say to another:

*Don't join too many groups.
Join few if any.
Join the United States and join
the family—
But not much in between unless
a college.*

ENGLISH LESSON

NO good grammarian lived (or lives)
Who split or (splits) infinitives.
'Tis surely wise, since this is true,
To always see you never do.

And **DON'T**, I cannot say too strong,
Use adjectives and adverbs wrong,
Nor say "It's me," which sounds like h--ll
To he who knows his pronouns well.

Do not, I beg you, use clichés;
Express yourself in other ways;
They're stale and very often vague;
Avoid them as you would the plague!

And lastly, one more hint I'll give:
Eschew the double negative.
To write like you was taught in schools,
Don't never break these simple rules.

—JOE NEWMAN

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