

**Susan Glaspell:
Her Life and Times**

LINDA BEN-ZVI

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
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Oxford New York
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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ben-Zvi, Linda.

Susan Glaspell : a life / Linda Ben-Zvi.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-511506-2

ISBN 0-19-511506-6

1. Glaspell, Susan, 1876-1948 2. Authors, American—20th century—
Biography. 3. Women and literature—United States—History—20th century.

4. Women in the theater—United States—History—20th century. I. Title.

PS3513.L35Z595 2005

813'.52—dc22 2004010804

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To Samuel

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Preface: A Pioneering Life

In “Christine’s” the party was in full swing. It was a Saturday night near the end of 1917, one of the coldest periods on record in New York; but those in the overcrowded, third-floor restaurant of the Provincetown Players, at 139 MacDougal Street, were generating their own heat. In the outer room Berenice Abbott, a young visitor, sat silently next to a table quickly filling with discarded coats and hats. In the main room Jig Cook, characteristically twisting a forelock of his white hair, leaned against the central mantelpiece booming out his plans for upcoming productions to no one in particular. In another corner, Eugene O’Neill, dark and brooding, sat at the feet of director Nina Moise, after having—uncharacteristically—perched on a chair to recite a poem. Arriving later than most, two women paused at the entrance to observe the group. One was the beautiful, red-haired Mary Pyne, a leading Players actor. The other was their central playwright, the novelist Susan Glaspell.¹

Agnes Boulton, writing forty years later, could still recall her first impression of Susan that night: those quick, “expressive eyes” that seemed to take in the flowing life around her; the sensitive face; and the “gift of pointed and significant gaiety” that immediately attracted people to her. Susan was neither sensual like Christine nor beautiful like Agnes. Tall and graceful, with large hazel/brown eyes and short, dark hair that curled around her face, she still bore traces of her Midwest past, which made her look more like a sedate, visiting schoolteacher than a Greenwich Village celebrity. “A slight and girlish woman . . . an ethereal being, detached and yet passionate,” Agnes described her.² Susan was, in fact, forty-one, a full decade older than most gathered that evening, but *girlish* was a word used by those who met her well into her fifties. *Ethereal* was another. In

front of strangers and those who bored her, she might be silent, self-contained, seemingly even shy. Surrounded by people she found stimulating, she was witty, self-assured, a woman who “‘kindled’ to ‘Feeling’ when it was ‘sincere.’”³ There was also “a tang of wildness about Susan—something untrammelled, untamable”⁴ that had marked her since her college days in Iowa, a fellow student recalled. A more recent acquaintance, Lawrence Langner, called her “Fragile as old lace, until you talked with her and glimpsed the steel lining beneath the tender surface.”⁵ He knew how Susan and her husband, Jig Cook, had mercilessly parodied the Village’s obsession with Freudianism, in *Suppressed Desires*, a one-act play that Langner’s Washington Square Players had rejected as “too special,” and how she had written that great feminist masterpiece *Trifles*, about which the community was still buzzing. Villagers were surprised by the power of *Trifles* but not by the subject or Susan’s interest in women’s rights. After all, one of her first acts when she arrived in New York in 1913 had been to become a charter member of Heterodoxy, a club of “unorthodox women, that is to say, women who did things and did them openly,” as Mabel Dodge, a fellow Heterodite, defined them.⁶

In her native Iowa Susan had long been used to breaking traditional patterns set for women, and so she fit in perfectly with Village life in that *annus mirabilis* that ushered in the first American avant-garde. After high school she had become a reporter for a local Davenport newspaper, and by twenty she was society editor and columnist, enjoining young women to give as much care to what they put into their heads as what they put on them. At a time when less than 2 percent of American women attended college, she put herself through Drake University in Des Moines, excelled in male-dominated debate tournaments, wrote for the literary magazine, and did freelance work for newspapers in the Iowa state capital, pursuing the same path as her Midwest contemporary Willa Cather. When she graduated, Susan got a permanent position as a reporter, rare for a woman, rarer still because she was assigned to cover the state legislature and murder cases—not the woman’s page. After two years, she had amassed enough material to return home and begin writing fiction, her real calling. Success came quickly; within a year she was placing stories in leading national journals and winning prizes. While most of her Village friends were just embarking on careers, fresh from colleges or small towns, she was well launched in her profession. By the time she moved to New York, she had already published a book of short stories and two novels and was being heralded as a new, original voice in American fiction. She had also spent a year in Paris between 1907 and 1908 and been exposed to the new art, music, dance, and theatre that was only just coming to America in 1913.

Over the next years, Glaspell would solidify her standing as an important fiction writer, critiquing small town midwestern life, much as her friend Sinclair Lewis would do several years later. It was in theatre, however, that she made her greatest mark, heralded along with O’Neill as

the country's most important playwright and credited equally with him for initiating "the entrance of the United States drama into the deeper currents of continental waters,"⁷ as critic Isaac Goldberg described their epochal work with the Provincetown Players, the first indigenous American theatre company, which Susan and Jig founded.⁸ It would be her plays, more than O'Neill's, which introduced this new American drama to Britain, where critics, such as James Agate and R. Ellis Roberts called her a genius and embraced her as heir to Ibsen and Shaw⁹ and where actor Elizabeth Robins argued that "Beyond a doubt, Miss Glaspell is the most original mind" writing for the American theatre.¹⁰ In 1931, her play *Alison's House* would receive the Pulitzer Prize.

The most important woman playwright of her time, a successful novelist, the mainstay of the Provincetown Players, a fine actor in her own works, and a leading writer chronicling feminist struggles of the period: Susan Glaspell was one of the most respected "strange bedfellows," as Steven Watson has called those who brought modernism to America.¹¹ And yet today she is virtually unknown. By the 1950s and early 1960s, when the myths and legends of this magical Greenwich Village period were being shaped, she somehow got lost in the telling. After her death in 1948, her plays and novels were forgotten and allowed to go out of print. In post-war America, works such as hers with strong female personas and feminist agendas were as outmoded as the overalls Rosie the Riveter had worn to work. Rather than a central figure in the Village story, Susan Glaspell became, instead, a bit player, given walk-on parts in other people's lives, usually identified as ". . . and midwestern writer Susan Glaspell." For instance, in Warren Beatty's film *Reds*, she is in crowd scenes, although she was a close friend of Louise Bryant and Jack Reed, and her life and Jig's were as much the stuff of celluloid fantasy as theirs. O'Neill's biographers do accord her one important footnote—the discovery of the playwright. Yet, after that moment, they, too, generally rush her offstage.

It was through O'Neill studies that I first encountered the name Susan Glaspell. Whenever I taught courses on American drama and theatre, I faithfully retold the seemingly magical tale of how young O'Neill had arrived by ferry in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in July 1916, at precisely the moment when a new, struggling theatre group—the yet-to-be-named Provincetown Players—was putting on plays on a fishing wharf and was desperately in need of material. The person credited with bringing the writer and the theatre company together was Susan Glaspell.¹² For several years I repeated the story of the advent of Eugene O'Neill without a thought to the woman who told it. I neither questioned her presence nor her subsequent disappearance from the rest of O'Neill's chronicle. For me, as for other American theatre historians, she simply did not matter. It wasn't until 1979, the year my feminism first intersected with my academic work, that the story suddenly took on new resonance; and I became aware of the disturbingly familiar roles in which Susan Glaspell was cast:

wife of George Cram Cook, nurturer of the Provincetown Players, friend of Eugene O'Neill, all traditional female parts. Knowing nothing more about her than a few references culled from O'Neill biographies, I was filled with curiosity—and questions. Did she willingly play Gabriel at the Annunciation and was she as enamored of the role as her words imply? Was she content to fade into the background? What about her own writing? What had happened to it? And what of her personal life and her relationships with O'Neill and with Cook? These questions converged into two overriding ones: simply put, who was Susan Glaspell and why had I, a professor of English and theatre, no knowledge of her or her work? They became the starting point for my research.

I can still clearly remember my shock and anger when, in the fall of 1980, while on a fellowship at the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C., preparing a book on Samuel Beckett, I wandered over to the stacks that contained Glaspell material and realized for the first time the extent of her writing—over fifty short stories, nine novels, and fourteen plays—and the extent of her erasure from the American dramatic and literary canons. In that heady year of discovery, after reading Beckett in the morning, I would turn to Glaspell in the afternoon, conflating these two seemingly disparate writers into kindred spirits. Over the next several years I periodically returned to Glaspell, thinking I might someday write a critical study of her oeuvre, prefaced by a brief biography, following the signposts already set out by Arthur Waterman, Gerhard Bach, and Marcia Noe who had written about her in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a 1987 symposium in Provincetown called “Beginnings: 1915—the Cultural Moment” that altered my plan. The year 1915 was chosen as the moment when modern theatre blossomed forth in America, and the person pictured in the center of the composite poster marking the event was Susan Glaspell, whose *Suppressed Desires* had started it all.¹³

For the first time, I began to realize her importance to American theatre and the key role she played in the creative revolution that occurred in Greenwich Village in the first decades of the century. I also became aware of the complex social, cultural, political, and artistic forces that shaped her writing and other forms of American modernist experimentation. If I hoped to understand her, I needed to study not only her works but her times. I also needed to strike up a first-name acquaintance with the woman herself. Provincetown gave me the opportunity. Walking “down along” Commercial Street, I visited the house where Susan had lived from 1914 until her death in 1948; O'Neill's apartment in Francis's Flats across the road, which still had the wooden rafters upon which O'Neill or a friend burned a Hindu inscription; the Hapgood/Boyce house overlooking the bay, where the first plays of the Provincetown Players took place in the summer of 1915; and the place where the Wharf Theatre had stood, now a vacant lot bearing a plaque commemorating the spot. I also began to meet people who remembered the writer and told me stories of her life and their own. Eighty-six-year-old Heaton Vorse, a local movie celebrity

after his “testimony” and banjo playing in *Reds*, sang the socialist song he remembered Jig bellowing on visits to Heaton’s mother, Mary, who lived nearby. Seventy-four-year-old Anna Matson Hamburger recounted how, at nineteen, she had fallen in love with forty-year-old Norman Matson, who left Susan to marry her. Anna thought her rival was fifty at the time, but Susan was actually fifty-six (having dropped six years from her birth date, as women in the bohemian community tended to do). This was heady stuff for someone who had assumed that research meant library stacks and archives. The problem was that such material was far too extensive and detailed for the general introduction I had imagined writing, too rich to be condensed into a short essay. Without meaning to do so, I found myself embarked on a biography.

I started my work with a clear scenario for the narrative I was creating. To me, Susan Glaspell was obviously a victim, beset by patriarchal villains (O’Neill and Cook) who were somehow responsible for her erasure; and I was the contemporary savior who would reclaim her. My story line fit perfectly the pattern Bell Gale Chevigny describes: A woman critic consciously trying to resurrect a forgotten woman writer, performing “an act of retrieval that is experienced as rescue.”¹⁴ I soon learned that I was repeating the very error that historian Nancy Cott describes when, in an earlier period, the young women of the 1920s “looked across the generational divide and saw Victorian sensibilities, as though the venturesome Feminists of the 1910s had never existed.”¹⁵ In desperately seeking Susan, I had sought her in my own times not in her own, when she was certainly no victim (and O’Neill and Cook no villains) but rather one of the most “venturesome feminists” of her era. As a corrective, I began studying the periods that influenced her, particularly the Midwest-settlement era in Davenport. The stories her paternal grandmother told her became the mythology that shaped her writing and her life, and she carried it with her when she joined the great reverse migration of writers, artists, and political activists moving from west to east in the early part of the twentieth century.

This research has followed her trail from Davenport, her birthplace, to her adopted homes in Greenwich Village, Delphi, and Provincetown. In each place the houses in which she lived are still standing, relatively unchanged from the time she occupied them. Of the woman herself, the evidence was less tangible and accessible. When her Provincetown neighbor and friend John Dos Passos was told that a certain writer intended to do his biography, he replied, “Someone has to do it.” Susan, more modest, did not assume the necessity. She did not make genealogy charts like her husband Jig, nor mark a box of letters “to my biographer” like Edith Wharton. Not a weaver of her own legend like Katherine Anne Porter and Lillian Hellman, she seemed to assume that no one would come seeking her out and so tended to leave her papers and letters undated and uncollected. While Jig’s and Norman Matson’s correspondence to her survives

(since she obviously kept it), hers—like that of far too many women—for the most part, does not. And while many of her friends wrote autobiographies detailing the events of those first two heady decades of the twentieth century and the roles they played in the period, or imagined they played, Susan Glaspell left only one published document concerning her life, *The Road to the Temple*, her biography of Jig, which she, as a consummate biographer, carefully shaped so that attention is riveted on her subject, a man she knew well and about whom she had no illusions. Her goal was to give him in death what he was never able to achieve in life: success and clarity. Toward that end, she often shifts details and embellishes scenes (as she did with O'Neill's discovery) to achieve her objective, purposely blurring chronology and facts to disguise events she felt were too personal and to provide a more lively, engaging story. She was, after all, a novelist and playwright. Anyone approaching her through this work, as I initially did, finds Susan Glaspell a constructed presence, carefully disguised and muted, certainly not the “venturesome feminist” and pioneer she actually was.

During the many years I worked on this biography, one word has remained constant: *pioneer*. Glaspell pioneered a new type of modern drama, extending the possibilities of what could be seen and discussed on the stage and what forms could be used. Finding few native models from which to draw, she created her own. She also pioneered in her depiction of the lives and struggles of women. Her writing is constantly marked by the presence of strong female characters whose consciousness of themselves and their world shape the works. The plots invariably turn on their experiences, relationships, and attempts to wrest at least a modicum of self-expression and fulfillment in societies that impede, if not prohibit, such possibilities. Cutting across geographic and class lines, Glaspell's women display what Carolyn Heilbrun has noted as “the major, perhaps single, mark of a feminist life: resistance to socialization.”¹⁶ Like all pioneers, they don't stay where they're put; they venture out. *Pioneer* also defines the direction of Glaspell's own life and the ways in which she continually pushed against fixed boundaries, assuming an independence that she saw as her legacy from her ancestors. Unlike O'Neill, who blamed the failure of American society on its inability to set down roots, Glaspell saw roots as marks of fixity and stagnation, choking off the free growth of an individual, institution, or society. The most consistent theme in her writing is the drive of her protagonists to escape the structures holding them in place; their direction is invariably toward some ill-defined but freer “outside” that has yet to be explored. In different ways, these women, like the author herself, are pioneers who come to recognize that the common sign of a society gone rigid or an institution gone cold is the way in which women are expected to hew ever more closely to narrowly defined gender roles and to stay within enclosing circles defined by family and custom.

Their desire to move beyond traditional boundaries becomes a comment on, as much as a rejection of, such rigidity and conformity.

Repeatedly, Glaspell uses pioneering imagery when she describes events in her own life, such as joining the Monist Society, a group of Davenport free-thinkers in 1907 or heading the Midwest Federal Theatre Project's Writing Bureau in the mid-1930s. In a notebook from the 1930s, she jotted down a quotation from the philosopher Whitehead, "the leap of the imagination reaching beyond what is then actual,"¹⁷ and appended her own comment, "Adventure beyond the safety of the present," the motivation which drove her ancestors and would drive her characters and herself. She never defined precisely what she meant by the term *pioneering*. In fact, she steadfastly eschewed all definition. Like Samuel Beckett, who warned, "The danger is in the neatness of identifications,"¹⁸ she was wary of the tendency toward taxonomy, explanation, and closure in writing and life. *Fluidity*, *openness*, and *otherness* are her most often-used words, the dash her most consistent punctuation mark. Although she was aware of the impossibility of keeping life and art free from fixed forms and even parodied fuzzy-headed dreamers in her works, she held to the belief that ideas should not be "shut up in saying,"¹⁹ as her persona Claire Archer realizes in *The Verge*, and that "We need not be held in forms molded for us."²⁰ Like a pioneer, she kept moving forward, breaking with anything that was too comfortable, just as she broke with any writing style that seemed too "patterned" and "predictable." The verge for her was that place separating conformity from discovery, and it was there that she fixed her sights and from there that she sent back her writing.

Unfortunately, this writing is virtually unknown today. In the late 1960s and 1970s, with the reemergence of a feminist movement similar to her own, Glaspell's one-act classic play *Trifles* and its short story offshoot "A Jury of Her Peers" were reprinted and became central texts in gender studies, performed and read around the world.²¹ Yet, for the most part, even those familiar with these works have little idea about the rest of her canon or its originality. This biography attempts to broaden the picture by offering samplings of her writing. They provide important documents of life in America as seen through the eyes of a pioneering woman in the first half of the twentieth century.

While constructing the story of Susan Glaspell, I found that I was simultaneously developing two other, intersecting narratives: the rise and fall of the Provincetown Players and the life of its founder Jig Cook—Susan's husband. Both are part of her story, but can be approached as discrete histories in their own right. The Provincetown chronicle has been told before, usually by biographers of O'Neill. This study seeks to correct the creation myth of American drama that posits it came full-blown from the brow of one creator: Eugene O'Neill. It does not question the greatness of O'Neill but describes the contributions of Glaspell as cofounder and female progenitor of American drama, a story until now written out of

the myth. It also argues for her central role in the Provincetown Players' success and in the introduction of modern drama to America and the world. In addition, the study attempts to correct the errors that have sprung up concerning the company, some emanating from Glaspell's own literary flourishes when telling its story.

This biography also presents a portrait of that complex, brilliant, failed genius Jig Cook, who led the Players. He is one of the great, larger-than-life characters that America has produced. It was Jig in Davenport who sat by the Mississippi dreaming of Greece and died in Greece imagining how he could recreate ancient forms of arts and culture on native soil. For him, the Provincetown Players was his Greek-inspired "beloved community of life givers," amateurs creating through their art a better, more humane world. In 1915, it was a dream that fit the times. By 1922, when the theatre was finally on the verge of succeeding, he felt it had failed and left for Greece with Susan, since success seemed to destroy the communitarian ideal he sought. Naive some called him, crazy, a drunkard; others labeled him a dreamer, an impractical idealist. After carefully reading through his papers and constructing the biography of his life as it relates to Susan's, I have come to have a great appreciation for Jig Cook and his vision. He deserves to be more than a footnote in Eugene O'Neill's story—the surrogate father in decline, denied by the son in ascendancy—or even in Susan Glaspell's life, as her greatest love and the partner in her greatest adventure, the Provincetown Players. In this book, I suggest the outlines of a study someone else may choose to write.

Susan wrote one version in her biography of Jig, *The Road to the Temple*, revolutionary in its form, combining as it does narrative and citation, breaking chronology, shifting perspectives, interlacing Jig's ideas with her observations of them both. The result is finally limited by her wish to burnish the image and by her desire to keep herself from obstructing his story and from telling too much of her own. Yet, in the work, she provides an important example for biographers, which I have tried to follow. She recognized, long before Roland Barthes and others, that the biographical tendency toward coherence can distort the life described in the desire to give it a form that is ultimately a fiction. She writes in her "Foreword": "Perhaps [biography] is a form a little like life itself—rude breakings in, shattered coherence, unexpected pauses and defeated climaxes. Life, too, is combinations that baffle classification."²² Taking my cue from Glaspell, I have also resisted easy explanation and summary—the overarching thesis so often found in contemporary biography—and, instead, have allowed the "rude breakings in" to remain. They are the mark of a pioneering life and of writing set on the verge.

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Susan Glaspell

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Introduction: Blackhawk's Land

There was a deep obligation to make a good life, as a great wrong had been done in getting this land.

—Susan Glaspell, *Judd Rankin's Daughter*

Davenport was draped with lights and colored buntings on the day Susan Glaspell was born, in anticipation of the great event that would occur three days later: the centenary of America. In individual towns and in the official venue in Philadelphia, the country did not turn back to its past, as the bicentennial would do, but used the occasion to proclaim its future. The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition was a celebration of a society coming of age, advertising—as much to its own people as to the world—the technology, produce, inventions, arts, and possibilities of America at the end of its first century. Over a period of 159 days, almost 10 million visitors journeyed to Philadelphia's Fairmount Park to see what was called “the greatest gathering of wonders in the world”: a 284-acre field transformed into a Victorian pleasure park, with elaborate lawns, flower beds, trees, waterfalls, and fountains surrounding the 249 ornate iron and glass buildings that held the exhibits. Machinery Hall contained the leading attraction, the Corliss engine, the biggest steam engine in the world, whose twice-a-day start-up was heralded as a marvel of the coming generation. More specialized exhibits of produce and technology were housed in the 24 state and 9 international venues. In the Iowa building, for instance, the Gaume electro-motor, produced in Davenport, was placed next to a display of Reids Yellow Dent-corn pioneer hybrid.¹

Along with the commercial enterprises, there were buildings dedicated to the arts, the most dominant of which was the huge Memorial Hall,

whose display of European paintings and drawings would not be matched again in America until the Armory Show of 1913. There were also buildings designated as “special interest,” the largest of which was the Women’s Pavilion, devoted to technology, products, and arts, complete with its own, separate steam engine and a printing press that put out *The New Century for Woman*. Over the entrance of the pavilion were the words of Proverbs 31, “Let Her Works Praise Her in the Gates.” Judging from the fair, it would seem that 1876 was a good time for a writer—a woman writer—to be born.

Yet, there was another side of the exposition and of the centenary celebration itself. Like the Vienna Exposition, three years earlier, which had seemed to be the quintessential moment of Hapsburg *Gemütlichkeit*, but had only temporarily masked cracks in a society that would take another forty-two years to collapse, the American celebration also pointed to fissures in societal structures that would widen over the coming years. The same banking failures that marred the Vienna fair had their equivalents in America, the related scandals in the Grant administration causing the president to make a hasty exit at the opening ceremony without taking full advantage of the political opportunities such an event offered. On the Fourth of July, the day that was to be the high point of the entire celebration, Frederick Douglass attempted to speak about the problems of racism in the country and was turned away. So were suffragettes, led by Susan B. Anthony, when they tried to present a petition to President Grant, in which they denounced the separate and not equal Women’s Pavilion and the hypocrisy of the forthcoming Woman’s Day fete, scheduled to occur on November 4, an election day in which they could not participate. Most damaging to the fair’s luster was news that reached Philadelphia on July 5 of an army defeat in a western town with an incongruous name: Little Big Horn.²

Susan Glaspell was born at precisely the time when the United States was rushing determinedly into the next century, banners proclaiming prosperity and power furling out to temporarily block signs of discontent and inequality. So intent was the country on casting its eyes forward that the accomplishments of the preceding century were barely acknowledged at the celebrations. Progress seemed to require jettisoning the history of the past or at least refiguring and domesticating it to fit the patterns imagined for the future. In Davenport the original settlers, among whom were her family members, still received respect, but they had ceased to be figures of emulation. Successful entrepreneurs were the role models now. Business had usurped for itself the word *pioneer* and affixed it to all that was new, modern, and different. The schism between her own pioneer family, economically reduced in subsequent generations, and rising dynasties such as the Deeres of Davenport may help explain in part Susan’s desire to cast her eyes back, not as a conservative who wished to keep progress at bay, but as someone desiring to reconnect with an earlier time and the dynamism and values that had shaped it.

In a period set on fast-forward, her tendency to gaze back to the future placed Glaspell at odds with her Davenport community, where the second generation had already forgotten what had motivated their pioneer parents and were hard at work replacing their families' log cabins with "big square ugly expensive brick houses," just as they were transforming "a society unconscious of social distinctions," into a class system demarcated solely on money.³ This angle of vision also set her apart from her later Greenwich Village friends. While they saw themselves at odds with Progressivism, as Theodore Roosevelt was loudly bellowing it, they also had little interest in, or understanding of, their own pasts, preferring to think of themselves as self-created. The biographer of Susan's close friend, the journalist Jack Reed, could write that for Reed Greenwich Village was a "homeland of the uprooted where everybody you met came from another town and tried to forget it; where nobody seemed to have parents, or a past more distant than last night's swell party."⁴ Susan would never frame her own rebellion in such terms. For her, the life she established in her new home was less a rejection of the past than a reaffirmation of the pioneering thrust that had motivated her antecedents to move west in the first place. She describes her friends in the Village and in Provincetown not as the "Bohemians we have even been called," but rather as "a particularly simple people, who sought to arrange life for the thing we wanted to do, needing each other as protection against complexities, yet living as we did because of an instinct for the old, old things."⁵

Susan never lost her connections with her ancestors or with her birthplace. "The Middle West must have taken strong hold of me in my early years for I've never ceased trying to figure out why it is as it is," she wrote to her Provincetown neighbor and sometime tenant Edmund Wilson in October 1945, three years before her death.⁶ The occasion was the publication of *Judd Rankin's Daughter*, the last of her novels. In it, as in the majority of her writing, she was attempting to explain, as much to herself as to her readers, the powerful influence Iowa still exerted on her, although she had left the region thirty-two years earlier to settle in a far different place. Fellow Iowan Carl Van Vechten could dream of escaping his origins and remaking himself in a new, different world. ("Everything that took Carl farther away from Cedar Rapids was desirable to him at the time," Mabel Dodge wrote.)⁷ Glaspell carried in her luggage the sights, sounds, memories, and myths of her past. And the most powerful myths of all were the ones connected to her pioneer antecedents.

Born only forty years after Davenport was incorporated, thirty years after Iowa became a state, in 1846, Susan grew up on the tales of early settler life told by her grandmother, the first Susan Glaspell, who lived with the family from the time Susan was six. So compelling were these stories that they often overshadowed the actual experiences Susan would have in her own life in Davenport. "My grandmother made the trip from Maine to Iowa in a 'prairie schooner'," she explained. "As a little girl she knew the Indians. With what regret I think that although I used to hang upon

her words when she told of pioneer days and of pioneer upbuilding of a democracy, I did not learn more from her.”⁸ What she did learn were the importance of hard work; the necessity for humor, courage, and tenacity; and the need for community. Women of her grandmother’s time made their own clothes and soap. They also reached out to others, often leaving a light on in their cabins, although it exposed them to Indian attacks, so that passing travelers might know that they were welcome to stop and share an evening meal or rest until daylight.

What fired Susan’s imagination were those stories her grandmother told about the settlers’ relations with the Indians, particularly those concerning Blackhawk, the chief of the Sacs who, with the Fox Indians, held the land that today comprises much of Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. To those who saw him as he was paraded through the cities of the East after his defeat and capture at the end of what became known as the Blackhawk War of 1832, Blackhawk was exotic and regal, his aristocratic face often likened to that of Sir Walter Scott. The Iowa settlers who had direct contact with him and wrote histories of the settlement period described him as far more “promotive” of bravery and fair-mindedness than those who eventually wrested the land from Indian control.⁹ In Blackhawk’s *Autobiography*, written three years after his defeat and dictated to one of the first settlers of Davenport—another larger than life figure, Antoine LeClaire—is found the chief’s unshakable commitment to pacifist means. He also expresses his helplessness against the unstoppable hordes of whites who came and coveted the land where his villages had stood for 150 years, at the junction of the Mississippi and Rock Rivers, at a point below the present site of Davenport, on the Illinois side. “Poor old Blackhawk—what he didn’t know was how many white man [*sic*] there was,”¹⁰ Grandmother Morton says succinctly in Glaspell’s historical drama *Inheritors*, in which Glaspell borrows from the history of her family and of Blackhawk. Blackhawk put it this way: “The white people speak from a paper; but the Indians always speak from the heart.”¹¹ Clearly, the heart was not enough.

By the time Glaspell was born, much frontier experience had already lapsed into set patterns. Indians were depicted as savages intent on killing whites or as simple denizens of an Edenic land displaced by western incursion; settlers were portrayed as valorous, Christ-like figures bringing civilization to depraved heathens or as bloodthirsty pillagers whose sins could only be expiated by sacrifice and death. Iowa for the most part seems to have escaped these rigid dualisms. There was neither “The Indian ambushade, the craft, the fatal environment” nor “the cavalry companies fighting to the last in sternest heroism” that Walt Whitman described in a poem written immediately after Custer’s defeat.¹² There was also none of the “Doom! Doom! Doom! . . . whisper[s] it in the very dark trees of America” that D. H. Lawrence labeled as the American literary legacy of its frontier days.¹³ The stories her grandmother told of the early settlers and of Blackhawk, in addition to her own reading of Blackhawk’s *Autobiography* and the histories that settlers published, pro-

vided Glaspell with different narratives and notions about America. Her settlers are human, neither saints nor sinners, and her Blackhawk, while associated with nature, is also the repository of moral values and intellect, noble but in no way a savage. From her ancestors she gained a sense of adventure and possibility; from Blackhawk, a respect for the sanctity of the land, a reminder of the injustices associated with its acquisition, and a desire to be a worthy inheritor of that which she saw as held in trust from him. It is telling that when Glaspell wrote *Inheritors* in 1920—in a period when America was in the throes of another kind of “Red Scare,” brought on by the excesses of post-World War I fanaticism that spawned the 100 percent American movement—she had a character with her grandfather’s name say, “Sometimes I feel that the land itself has got a mind and that the land would rather have had the Indians.”¹⁴

It is an idea that Susan returns to often. In *Judd Rankin’s Daughter*, written twenty-five years after *Inheritors*, she contrasts a father’s life “out there” in the Iowa of 1945 with his daughter’s life in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Susan’s own home at the time. Again she uses the image of Blackhawk to make the point that the post-World War II society, like the earlier period, needs to consider those values for which wars are fought. Describing Judd Rankin, his daughter Judith says: “He had always liked the feeling that this black and giving earth might pay a debt—debt long deferred, which couldn’t be paid to the ones owed, not Blackhawk, whose heart we broke, but in the long run, long span, might be paid to the distant and unforeseen.”¹⁵ Paying a debt to the “the distant and unforeseen” may sound like a way of morally sidestepping the initial act of settlement; but in the philosophy that Glaspell wove from her Midwest history, Blackhawk becomes not only a symbol of white injustice done to Indians but the standard against which subsequent generations must measure themselves. To stop with the present, to become content, to keep from progressing or moving beyond what others have done, would be a betrayal of all those pioneers who came before as well as a betrayal of the Indians who first held the land. Glaspell’s argument in *Inheritors* takes the form of a kind of American idealism, overt in this play but implicit in many of her other writings. As a true daughter of Iowa, she bases her formulation on corn. Just as its pollen does not “stay at home” but fertilizes neighboring fields, creating better strains, individuals have the responsibility to progress, move on, and better the human and spiritual strain, lest they betray the struggles that brought them to this point.¹⁶ “The world is all a—moving field,” Madeline Morton proclaims at the end of *Inheritors*. “What you are—that doesn’t stay with you. Then . . . be the most you can be, so life will be more because you were.”¹⁷

Like Faulkner’s Bear, Glaspell’s Blackhawk is the embodiment of that which once was and remains unaltered by time, continually growing in stature and symbolic association as society changes and becomes more material and alien to this spirit. Her own commitment to anti-militarism and pacifism in World War I, her struggles for the environment, her

abhorrence of discrimination in any form and her tendency to speak—and see—from the heart and not from the head, have their roots in her Davenport heritage, in her grandmother’s stories, and in the imaginative figure of Blackhawk. “’Twould ’a done something for us to have *been* Indians a little more,” Silas concludes in *Inheritors*, the play in which the two strains—the personal saga of the Glaspell pioneers and the saga of those they displaced—converge in a young woman hero.¹⁸

Midwest Beginnings, 1876-1907



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A Town Springs Up

1

The prairie schooners were ferried across the Mississippi in the spring of 'thirty-six, and that fall hauled corn to crib from virgin soil.

—Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*

When J. M. D. Burrows stepped from “the magnificent steamer *Brazil*” that brought him up the Mississippi River from St. Louis on July 27, 1838, he looked out on a scene that delighted him. “The sloping lawns and wooded bluffs, with the sea of beautiful wild flowers were a picture of loveliness such as I never had beheld before.” After concluding his business in Rock Island, the town originally settled by Colonel George Davenport in 1832, he decided to take one of the wooden flat boats across the Mississippi to the “beautiful little hamlet of fifteen houses, with a population of about one hundred fifty people,” which Antoine LeClaire had first plaited in 1835, called Davenport in honor of the colonel. Recognizing that his enthusiasm might be questioned, Burrows forestalled such criticism: “The natural beauty of the site is not exaggerated by our author.”¹ Like many settlers he had come from Cincinnati to take advantage of public auctions that sold large tracts of land to settlers coming up the river on specially chartered ferries. The brochures for these sales described the virtual paradise Burrows encountered. “We have a pure atmosphere, a salubrious clime, good soil, large potatoes, fat beef, unctuous venison, milk and honey. . . . our country abounds with inexhaustible sources of lead and most excellent springs are seen rippling from the crevices of the rock.”² It is no wonder that among the first buildings to be established were churches in what must have seemed to many like a New Jerusalem.

Davenport today retains little that sets it apart from other midwestern towns; yet, in its early years there seemed to be something about the place that led to hyperbole. Situated in a lush, wide bend of land bordered by high bluffs that sloped down to the shores of the Mississippi—the only spot where the upper river runs from east to west—Davenport in the 1830s was an unspoiled valley. A correspondent from the *New York Star*, seeing the town for the first time, corroborated for his readers the impact of the place: “In the beauty of the scenery . . . I have found imaged all the charms I had pictured in my youthful imagination while reading a description of the Happy Valley in *Rasselas*, but which I never expected to see in the world of reality.”³

Susan’s forbearers may have been moved by a similar, if less rhapsodic, feeling. It was their third, and final, stop on a continuing voyage westward. In the seventeenth century the Rickers, along with the Jewett and Chippman families, antecedents of the first Susan Glaspell, came from various parts of England and settled in and around Boston: the Chippmans tracing their lineage back to four passengers on the *Mayflower*, the Jewetts listing a drummer in the Ninth Massachusetts regiment in the Revolutionary War.⁴ Of the three branches, it was the Chippmans (or Chipmans), particularly great-grandmother Lydia Chippman Ricker, who caught Susan’s imagination. It was through her that Susan could claim to be descended from Pricilla Bradford and thus eligible for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution. Although she never became a “Daughter,” she did use the name Lydia for her protagonist in the novel *The Morning is Near Us*, portraying her as a woman of strength and great determination, who returns after many years to the Iowa of her birth in order to reclaim her ancestral home and discover her history. The name also appears in the novel *Fugitive’s Return*: “Irma remembered that her father’s mother’s people had come from Cape Cod, that Great-grandfather Chippman’s father had gone there in the first days of America.”⁵

That her family roots in America were first planted in Massachusetts gave Susan pleasure when she made the reverse trek across the continent and settled in Provincetown. Taking her paternal grandmother’s spinning wheel from Iowa and placing it in her front room on Commercial Street, overlooking the Provincetown bay, was fitting, she would tell friends—she was merely returning it, as she herself had returned, to the place from which both had started out. Susan saw herself as completing a circle, uniting the two locales of her family past. Her love affair with Provincetown and the entire Cape region stemmed in part from her keen sense of family history, particularly her identification with the lives of the women, embodied in the figure of her great-grandmother Lydia.

Just as there was a certain migration pattern for Glaspell and her literary compeers in the first decade of the twentieth century, traveling from the Midwest through Chicago in its renaissance en route to the East, there was a certain pattern for her ancestors moving westward.

For the Ricker branch of the family, the journey began in Poland, Maine, where in 1815 Lydia Chippman married Rufus Ricker. Two years later, accompanied by Rufus's parents, Susannah Jewett and Samuel Ricker, the couple migrated to Ohio, around Cincinnati, following the trail of others who wished to try their fortunes in a new frontier. Before the Rickers left Maine, Lydia and Rufus's daughter Susan—Glaspell's grandmother—was born, on July 31, 1816. Grandmother and granddaughter would share the same month of birth sixty years apart. The Rickers prospered in their Ohio home, and Rufus was appointed justice of the peace and postmaster. Later he would become judge of the Probate Court of Iowa. What prompted the family's second move after twenty years is unclear. Again, they were following migration patterns of the period: settlers from the Northeast moving first to Ohio and Kentucky, establishing lives there, and then moving further west, this time to the recently opened Blackhawk territory. The Rickers arrived in Davenport in 1836, drawn by the first auctions of land in the area.

The Glaspell family followed a similar route. Enos Glaspell arrived from England or Wales in 1755 and settled in southwestern New Jersey, where the family name appears under the several spellings—Glaspell, Glasby, Gillespie, Glassell—all of which would be adopted as variations in future generations. A family bible describes these first American Glaspells: "Enos had light hair, sandy whiskers and was of fair complexion; his wife Sarah had black hair, dark eyes, dark complexion."⁶ A Glaspell tradition was to identify which members resembled their paternal, which their maternal side. In the case of Susan, the genes seem to have split evenly: her fair, almost white skin was set off by her dark hair, determined in no small part by her own mother's Irish heritage. In April 1789, "The same month that Washington was first inaugurated president," the family bible records, Susan's great-grandfather, James Glaspell, was born in New Jersey.⁷ In 1817, a year after the Rickers, he, too, moved west with his wife, Jane Stathem, and two children, Elizabeth and Silas, first to Hamilton County, Ohio, and then across the Ohio River to nearby Covington, Kentucky, where six more children were born. Family genealogy studies indicate that James was an educated man; he ran one of the first village schools in his home and was said to have compiled "the Glaspell speller." After twenty years the pull westward moved him again, and he and his family headed to Davenport, arriving in August 1839.

Neither the Rickers nor the Glaspells left written accounts of their first years in their new home; however, Burrows's history provides a picture of the period. Life was not easy; 10 percent of the population died in some years, but it was a lively community. Itinerant preachers held forth on Brimstone Corner, so called because of the "hot style of preaching,"⁸ and speakers debated at the Lyceum on topics including "love or revenge?" "general happiness," and "Has the Negro Race Received More Harm From the White Race than from the Indians."⁹ (The consensus was yes.) There was also an active social life, Burrows reporting that it was not

unusual for settlers to drive bobsleds twenty-five miles to spend the day with other pioneer friends. Alcohol was plentiful, with stores keeping barrels of whisky and tin cups under the counter for all to help themselves. Looking back from the vantage point of fifty years, Burrows concludes that “the old settlers were a much more social and liberal community than the population of the present day.”¹⁰

They were also more helpful to each other. One of his examples of generosity has to do with James Glaspell, Susan’s great grandfather, whom Burrows calls “the progenitor of the Glaspell family . . . an excellent man; one of the salt of the earth—a man in whom there was no guile.” Glaspell lived at the time below the Davenport bluffs, and Burrows tells that when he returned briefly to Kentucky, Mr. Glaspell asked if he could get money owed to him for some sales. Burrows reports that the money he collected allowed him to return “with the largest and best selected stock of goods in Davenport,” and begin one of the most successful businesses in the community. Glaspell refused to take interest for the loan “considering that I was doing him a favor.”¹¹ Almost a hundred years later, Susan, refusing interest on a loan, would repeat the act. James, too, initially prospered in his new home. He soon purchased a large tract of land on the scenic bluffs and a portion below for farming. The size of the property is unclear; one account indicates that at his death he held 120 acres, but it originally may have been much larger. The location was in the western part of Davenport, near the end of present-day Harrison Street, on what was known as Telegraph Road, because it was the first spot where the telegraph crossed the Mississippi River. The name Glaspell (spelled Glasspell) still appears on the map given out by the Davenport Chamber of Commerce, indicating a street in front of Fejervary Park.

Since the family home was outside the town limits at the time, roaming Indians would stop by asking for food. One family legend tells of a certain young Indian visiting on Thanksgiving Day, who wanted to buy one of James’s daughters and made an offer of a fine collection of furs. When he saw that James was not interested, he upped the bid; “the final offer was said to have been the furs, plus two squaws, a papoose, and a fine Indian pony,” Susan recorded.¹² Another family story tells of James’s going to his smokehouse for a ham at the same time Indians came for food. That night, he discovered that someone had emptied the smokehouse of all the contents. The Glaspells were not certain if the Indians had taken the hams, but evidently the event was serious enough to be written down in the family Bible. Susan varies the story somewhat in *Inheritors*, stressing cooperation and reciprocity. Grandmother Morton tells of a young Indian who appears at the farm one day, watching her from a bush. She decides to offer him some cookies, and the next day he returns with a fish to trade. In an autobiographical sketch she wrote in 1942, Susan sums up such encounters, “Men of good will on both sides failed to stand off the Blackhawk wars.”¹³

One of the first activities of the Glaspells when they arrived in Davenport was to join the First Christian Church, organized a month earlier by settlers from the Cincinnati area. James became an elder, and the Glaspell family continued their affiliation during the next two generations. It was there that Susan worshipped, sitting between her grandmother and mother. A 1904 article in a local newspaper describes a typical service in which sermons sometimes ranged from forty-five minutes to twice that long, with people “seldom growing tired of listening.”¹⁴ Parishioners were also in the habit of carrying copies of the New Testament and reading it at leisure moments in order to meditate upon the lessons while at work. It was such religious fundamentalism that Susan in later years would throw off, feeling the pressure of its practices.

A year after Iowa became a state, James Glaspell died, and Silas, his eldest son, received forty acres on which he established a fruit farm. It was there that he took his bride, Susan Ricker, in 1841, immediately after their marriage, and it was there that they resided until his death forty-one years later. The farm was known for its produce and Silas for his experimentation with new varieties of fruit. Susan would use the image of the farmer who develops new strains of corn and the biologist who experiments with new types of plant life in *Inheritors* and *The Verge*, perhaps remembering stories of her grandfather and her own childhood visits to the Glaspell farm. In *Inheritors* the homestead stands in contrast to the encroaching town and its changing mores. This conflict was also taken from personal history. Whereas the fruit farm in its first years was like many in the area, except larger, forty years later it had become anachronistic in Davenport’s rapidly expanding economy.

This economic boom was fueled by the second wave of immigrants who began arriving in the late 1840s as a result of the upheavals in Europe. On a map the town of Davenport, situated on the banks of a great river, must have reminded many immigrants of their native cities situated on the Danube, the Rhine, and the Liffey and seemed like a congenial place to settle. It was this immigrant population that provided Davenport with the flavor Floyd Dell noted when he arrived in 1903. Unlike Rock Island or Moline, Illinois, the other tri-cities, Davenport seemed to him “golden,” with “the bravado of an old Mississippi river port and the liberal ‘cosmopolitan’ atmosphere”¹⁵ developed “because it was so largely German and Jewish, with an 1848 European revolutionary foundation and a liberal and Socialist superstructure” and with “some native American mysticism in the picture.”¹⁶ Typical of the settlers from Schleswig-Holstein were the Fickes who arrived in 1851, husband, wife, eight children, and the wife’s piano. Thirty-three years later Arthur Davison Ficke would be born into one of the wealthiest families in the city and become, a poet, critic, and international expert on Japanese art—another writer springing from the rich Davenport soil.¹⁷ When the Fickes arrived, Davenport already had four theaters, two of them exclusively for German-speaking audiences.

In Lahrman's Hall, between imposing busts of Schiller and Goethe, audiences in 1856 could hear a variety of concerts and see plays, some originating in New York and stopping in Davenport en route to Chicago, or vice versa. In 1867 the Burtis Opera House opened, providing an even more elaborate setting for legitimate theatre and opera. With its 1,434-seat auditorium and forty-three-foot ceilings, it was considered one of the three finest opera houses in the United States.¹⁸

By the time of Susan's birth, the cultural life and ethnic mix were even more diversified. Along with Catholic, Protestant, and Unitarian groups of German speakers, came a sizable group of German and Austrian Jews. Facing little of the anti-Semitism that would mark their entrance into other communities, they became part of the cultural mix that Floyd Dell noted. Jewish peddlers were a familiar sight on the streets, and particularly Rabbi William Fineshriber, a friend of Glaspell, Cook, Dell, and Ficke, later became part of the intellectual elite.¹⁹ The revolutions of 1848 in Hungary brought Davenport another wave of immigrants, including Nicholas Fájerváry, a lawyer from Budapest, whose liberal activities had forced him from his homeland. He and his family came to Davenport in May 1853 buying a large tract of early settlement land adjoining the original Glaspell homestead on Telegraph Hill. On his death this land was willed to the city and became known as Fejervary Park, in which the family house still stands.²⁰ In *Inheritors* Glaspell honors him directly (omitting one *r* in his name). It is Fájerváry whom Silas Morton credits with bringing European culture to him and the Iowa farmers. Irish settlers also immigrated to Davenport in this period, including the family of Susan Glaspell's mother, Alice Keating, who arrived in 1854. By 1858, about 12 percent of the town was Irish, a population that was well represented in elected positions and on the city council.²¹ Each of the ethnic groups set up life in its own districts, which remained clearly demarcated through much of Glaspell's early years. Even today some Davenporters still use ethnic designations to describe the sections of the downtown area along the Mississippi.

These different waves of settlers caused Davenport and the entire Blackhawk purchase to grow with amazing speed. Rapid change, however, was not universally applauded or desired. It soon gave rise to a class-based society in the second generation, in which farmers like Silas Glaspell were no longer as relevant to the society as business people and developers and in which the sense of land held in trust from the Indians was a rapidly fading concept. Such changes were noted in one of the first travel accounts of the area, Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes in 1843*. Fuller's eye is sensible to the alterations white settlers had already wrought in the years since settlement began. She writes, "Their progress is Gothic not Roman, and this mode of cultivation will, in the course of twenty or ten years, obliterate the natural expression of the country."²² As in so many other areas, Margaret Fuller proved prophetic.²³

While many old-timers had changed with the times, building thriving businesses and moving from sod and wood houses to large imposing mansions situated on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi, the Glaspell fortunes diminished in subsequent generations. From owning large tracks of land in western Davenport, Susan's family, by her birth in 1876, was reduced to living in a rented house in an area of poor dwellings in "the flats," near the river, which often flooded its banks. These changes in her family's finances and prestige in the community created in Susan contradictory feelings about wealth and status, and the schisms appear when she discusses her youth or that of her protagonists. On the one hand, she is fiercely proud of her ancestors and their pioneering. Theirs are the primary stories of her childhood, which remain potent inspirations throughout her life. In fact, the decline of her family seems to have heightened their mystique and allowed her to interpret their acts as heroic affronts to wealth and position. In *The Road to the Temple*, her biography of her husband George Cram Cook, Glaspell writes, "Iowa went in fifteen years from settlement to statehood, and in about that time from primitive democracy to a class-conscious society with land speculator, banker, legislator at the top and the American farmer at the bottom."²⁴ Among those farmers were her grandparents.

At the same time there are notes of shame and resentment about her family's fallen state that run through *The Road to the Temple* and her other writing, particularly when Susan comments on the class differences that made her an outsider in the very community her ancestors first settled. These sentiments are expressed forcefully in *Fugitive's Return*, one of her most autobiographical novels, written in the late 1920s. In it, Susan describes Irma Lee's embarrassment that her family, who had owned considerable land, had lost it and now lived on a farm out of town, "which would seem desirable, but in this town it was not desired."²⁵ She wants to be friends with the girls from wealthier families but is painfully aware that her family's station precludes such intimacy. She does not dress the way they do, and she cannot offer them the foods they are used to receiving in each other's homes. There is no indoor plumbing, and when her classmates come to visit she is ashamed to tell them that they must go "outside." Irma's family life is similar to the Glaspells' position at the time of Susan's birth. She does not use a fictive surrogate in *The Road to the Temple* when she discusses Cook's wealth, and she clearly expresses her youthful feelings of inferiority because of her family's diminished status in the community. Writing at one point of the pride and confidence displayed by the young Jig, who, when teased by the boys in town for still wearing knickers, retorted that they were "artistic," Glaspell comments: "My own grandfather remained humbly on his fruit-farm—sheltered by no mansard roof, and had my clothes been jeered at on the street, my feelings would have been hurt."²⁶ A few pages later she returns to the same theme: "But George Cram Cook grew

up in a town that had a Cook Memorial Library, the Cook Home, and a Cook Memorial Church. I am constrained to say again—there having been no Glaspell Home for the Friendless—these things are relevant.”²⁷

How relevant is a question that Glaspell would continue to explore in her life and her writing.

Families in Fact and Fiction

2

Yet of all the two hundred and fifty-five matings necessary in these nine generations, if a single one had not taken place, it would not be I who would be here.

—George Cram Cook, quoted in *The Road to the Temple*

Unlike her husband, Susan never formally traced her family's lineage, but its history had a great impact on her. If the first generation provided a reified version of pioneer life, the next generation deconstructed the tale. While her grandfather Silas may have been a fine horticulturist, he was not a good businessman. At his death, little remained of the original family tract, and it was finally disposed of in 1882, when his widow Susan came to live with her younger son Elmer and his family, including six-year-old Susan. In the Glaspell line the men were less physically robust than the women and died sooner. In the case of Silas and Elmer, they also showed signs of mental as well as physical breakdown years before their death. Although depression at the time was deemed a "female ailment"—newspapers running numerous advertisements for remedies to "cure the ladies of their disposition"—it was the Glaspell men who suffered from a mental state far more debilitating than such euphemisms imply. Silas's obituary indicates that after years of "nervous attacks" he was "glad to go, and so he died because he was literally worn out."¹ Elmer Glaspell, Susan's father, was even less of a businessman than his father and seemed less mentally able to withstand the stresses he encountered. He worked at a number of trades—farmer, teamster, contractor, and hay and straw wholesaler—but for the last six years of his life he, too, would be an invalid, after suffering a "severe mental breakdown."² Susan seems to have had her father

in mind when she describes Irma Lee's father in *Fugitive's Return*, a man who worked constantly but never seemed to have any success: when he did get a job as a contractor, he would underbid it and lose money; when he finished the work, someone would find something wrong with the construction, and it would be rejected. Rather than mental collapse, it is a fire that incapacitates Mr. Lee. Even given fictional license, the sense of frustration and lost opportunities Susan describes could well have come from her early family life. The same feelings of failure would color the lives of the two men she loved in later years: Jig Cook and Norman Matson.

While Silas and his son Elmer were physically and mentally unsuited for the demands of life in the societies in which they found themselves, Susan Glaspell, the writer's grandmother and namesake, loomed larger than life. She was a woman of enormous energy and health, who became one model for the powerful women in her granddaughter's writing, a spinner of a mythology of pioneering that these works retell. A niece writing to Mrs. Glaspell in the 1890s observed, "you seem as young at heart as ever to me."³ Elmer agreed with this assessment. When his family was away and he stayed with his mother, he informed his wife: "I never had any idea how strong cheerful and healthy mother is. . . . I wish you and I had as much life and health as she has."⁴ This abiding vitality remained until a day or two before Mrs. Glaspell died, at the age of eighty-nine, of what the obituary listed as "natural causes."⁵

Although it was the Glaspell side of the family that Susan mentioned most often in the biographical essays she provided in later years, the woman who exerted the greatest influence on her, after her grandmother Glaspell, was her own mother, Alice Keating Glaspell. The Keatings, unlike the Glaspells, left no family histories tracing their antecedents. Of her mother's people, the only thing Susan told interviewers was that they came from Dublin. When a critic noted that in one of her books she displayed a clear insight into the Irish, Susan wrote to her mother, pleased to share the appraisal. She often liked to say that she was "one small embodiment of the English Irish question"⁶ but that the battle had little place in her Iowa home, since there were more pressing things to engage the family. Alice Feeney Keating was just barely born in America, arriving in 1849 only a few weeks after her parents landed. Five years later the family moved to Davenport. The city directory, begun the same year, lists several Keatings—the men as masons, laborers, harness makers, the women as laundresses and seamstress—though none reside at the residence that Alice would later share with her mother and at least two sisters, Ellen and Lizzie. The name Alice Keating appears in a separate listing twice: in 1860, when she was eleven, as a servant, and in 1873, a year before her marriage to Elmer, when she is identified as a teacher. After 1874 she is listed, as was the custom, under the general heading of her husband.

Alice's mother, Susan's maternal grandmother, must have been a formidable person. Her letters to Alice indicate her considerable facility

with language, despite grammatical errors. They also testify to the close bond between mother and daughter and the pressure put on the young woman to have a career and “improve yourself” as Mrs. Keating continually reminds Alice. These admonitions were usually followed by vivid descriptions of how much Mrs. Keating has suffered, both financially and emotionally, by sending her daughter away to school in order that she will get “a proper education” and become a teacher, and complaints about being alone, despite the presence of her other two daughters. No mention is made of a Mr. Keating. When Alice and Elmer married, the wedding announcement on the front page of the *Davenport Democrat* describes the ceremony as taking place at the home of the bride’s mother. Whether she was a widow or divorced, it is clear that Mrs. Keating raised her daughters alone and was particularly close to Alice, whom she repeatedly prompted to succeed for them both—a theme that Alice Glaspell would repeat in her own correspondence with her daughter. “To know you are well is all I live for,”⁷ Mrs. Keating writes in one letter, revealing a dependency on her daughter that would also be repeated in the relationship between Alice and Susan. Besides self-improvement and motherly self-sacrifice, three other topics fill Mrs. Keating’s letters: her daughter’s health, future teaching position, and beau, Elmer. She continually chides Alice to conserve her small reserve of strength if she wants to advance in her work. “If you can improve as fast and well as you can I hope there is a bright picture before you.”⁸ Concerning Elmer, rather than push the match, she does her best to discourage it at every turn, reminding her daughter that teaching is prohibited for married women. She also slips in hints that Elmer may be unreliable and seeing other women in her absence. From these letters, it is clear that Mrs. Keating saw marriage as a dead end for her frail, talented daughter and teaching as a more promising future, certainly not a commonly held notion in Davenport nor in the country at large in the 1880s. Alice would also encourage and actively abet Susan in pursuing a career, repeatedly mentioning work but never marriage in their correspondence.

In contrast to the letters of mother and daughter—voluble if awkward—Elmer’s letters to Alice are testaments to the difficulty he had in expressing himself. One begins: “It’s fearful hot today and writing is warm work so you must excuse writing please.” He tries to indicate his devotion to her but is distracted, fearing a member of his family might come in and find him “writing such a note.” The letter is signed “your love Elmer S. Glaspell.”⁹ Elmer retained the formal signature in letters to Alice, even after they were married, only preceding it by “your husband.” Yet despite such epistolary reticence, after a two-year courtship he was able to convince Alice to give up her teaching. They married in February 1874. She was twenty-five, he thirty-six, both considerably older than couples marrying at that time. Because of their ages, they immediately began a family: Charles (known as Ray) born in 1875, Susan in 1876, and Frank in 1879.

The actual date of Susan Glaspell's birth has been in dispute. At the point in her career when she began giving interviews and was asked to write biographical essays, she followed the pattern of women she knew in Greenwich Village including Louise Bryant, Agnes Boulton, Emma Goldman, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Mary Heaton Vorse and subtracted several years from her age. Therefore, all her official biographies up to recently have listed her birth date as July 1, 1882. "Women do sometimes have to lie about their age," she explained when she presented her goddaughter Susan Marie Meyer a silver mug at birth but did not date it.¹⁰ In the matter of ageing as in so many other areas of life, Susan was aware of the societal pressures on women. Although her birth certificate has been lost, there are at least three sources indicating that 1876 is the correct year. First, the Scott County census of 1880 lists a four-year-old Susie, a five-year-old Charles, and a one-year-old Frank living with their parents, Elmer and Alice Keating Glaspell, at 502 Cedar Street, Davenport. Second, her college records, when she entered Drake University in Des Moines in September 1897, indicate her age as twenty-one. Finally, the most reliable evidence available is found in the holograph diary of her great-aunt Lydia Ricker, who lived nearby, saw the Glaspells regularly, and kept a daily list of family activities from January 1, 1882, until her death in July 1888. "Ray sick, Susie said," appears on April 1, 1882. Here Lydia writes "Susie," the name the family used to differentiate the granddaughter from her paternal grandmother of the same name. On April 8, 1882, Lydia reports, "Susan made Susie a bonnet"; in August, "Alice and Susie went with me to the church meeting." On the supposed date of birth, July 1, 1882, Lydia makes only this short note: "Susan quite sick. Maria [her sister] and I worked all forenoon, men came again to settle Mr. Glaspell's affairs," referring to the death of Silas.¹¹

To the interviewers who would query her about her early years, Susan invariably replied that her childhood was a happy one and provided many memories. The most vivid concerned the Mississippi flowing beside Davenport. One evening at a party in New York, when a woman challenged her story that the river would often freeze, making it possible to sled across it, Susan reacted with uncharacteristic vehemence. In a note about the exchange, she writes, "But why wouldn't I have feeling about it? Those are the sparkling memories of my youth . . . why I had skated miles down the Mississippi. You remember the freedom—free as a bird—your blood running swift and your self all fluid and sparkling. . . . The Mississippi was as *I* knew it—anyway it was to me."¹² Judging from the entries in her aunt Lydia's diary, Susan's other activities as a child were dominated by Sunday family dinners, usually prepared by Lydia and her sister; visits to neighbors, accompanied by her grandmother, aunts, and mother; picnics in summer—and church. Given Lydia's own bent, it is not surprising that the diary gives the greatest attention to activities related to

religion. Alice also had a strict religious upbringing that carried over to her adult life. Among Susan's books at her death was a copy of her mother's Bible, inscribed to Alice "as a reward for committing to memory the Book of Matthew."¹³ Besides Sunday services, there were weekly prayer meetings, lectures by visiting missionaries, and the Ladies Lend-a-Hand Club, a social service organization that Alice Glaspell attended until her death. Alice always took her children to church, but Elmer would manage to arrive for Sunday lunch at his aunt's home or his mother's after the women and children had returned. He was attentive to the family, but not to his "religious duties," as Lydia put it. Susan's notes for a biographical sketch indicate that while her father was often dogmatic in his beliefs, he was also something of an iconoclast in his practice, less concerned with communal activities than with charting his own particular course even when it came to prayer. "He prayed and he swore"; he also was "just crazy about racehorses," she wrote.¹⁴

Besides religion, three other themes recur in Lydia's diary: Alice's precarious health, her poor housekeeping skills, and Elmer's precarious financial situation. There are repeated references to Alice's unspecified illnesses and her inability to cope with the demands of home and family. Often Lydia and her sister Susan helped with the house and chores and invited the family for dinner so that Alice need not cook. Their concern was shared by other family members. A letter Mrs. Susan Glaspell received from her nephew dated January 6, 1881, begins: "I am sorry Elmer's family have so much trouble. Oh that they may cast their care on Jesus: He alone can make the dark days bright."¹⁵ The particular nature of the "trouble" is not mentioned, but it seems to have concerned Alice's health. At one point Alice left home, taking Susan and Frank and leaving Ray with Elmer. "I am very sorry you are not feeling any better try and keep up your spirits as best your poor health will permit you," Elmer wrote to her. "I am sure everybody will welcome you back joyfully and that your health and spirits will improve when you are in your own home and with all of your children with you again. For we will try to make it as pleasant for each other as possible."¹⁶ Not strong before marriage, Alice must have suffered physically from the burden of having three children in four years, particularly when the family lived in cramped conditions and there was no money to provide for help. They were only able to purchase a home in a more affluent section of town, on the bluffs, when Mrs. Glaspell came to live with them and provided the money. Alice may have had second thoughts about giving up her teaching career to marry. Elmer's letter seems to suggest that in addition to physical ailments, she was suffering from some form of depression. By the time Lydia Ricker's diary ends, however, most references to Alice's ailments or to the family's problems have disappeared. In her later years Alice Glaspell's health was robust, so much so that during her last illness in the late 1920s, which resembled Alzheimer's, Susan comments on how strange it is to see her

otherwise healthy mother so feeble. Yet in Susan's impressionable early years, her mother's poor health, housekeeping struggles, and low "spirits" must have had an impact on her.

Susan would repeat the same pattern of health problems in her own first years of marriage to Jig and at the beginning of her relationship with Norman Matson. Although her illness, like her mother's, was never clearly diagnosed, Susan, and those who knew her between 1914 and 1918 in Provincetown, spoke of "heart problems," which came and went. So feeble was she in 1914 that she found it difficult to walk up the steep stairs in their home, and Jig built an elevator to transport her. However, four years later, her health, like her mother's, revived, and she was able to make periodic treks over the Provincetown dunes to the coastline fronting the Atlantic. Even for a healthy woman, that walk is not easy; for someone with "heart problems," it would have been a great strain, unless the problems were temporary, or psychological, as may seem to have been the case for Alice and, perhaps, for her daughter. In his unpublished autobiographical novel, Matson also refers to the same problem early in his relationship with Susan that afflicted her surrogate Ruth: "It was dreary in those late afternoons until Ruth was beside him, walking with a strong and happy stride (the heart cured, or forgotten)."¹⁷

If Susan inherited her mother's frail constitution in early marriage, she also inherited her mother's and grandmother's dreams of a career for a woman. Mrs. Keating had encouraged Alice, and Alice, in turn, supported her daughter's ambition, becoming the greatest champion of her writing. She seemed determined that Susan be given the opportunities she did not have to fulfill herself through work. When Susan's first novel, *The Glory of the Conquered*, appeared in 1908, she wrote to her mother thanking her for this unwavering support: "I never could have done it without you—I know that. You have always been wonderfully good to me about my work, made every sacrifice that I might have opportunity for working, and have always sympathized and helped as no one but you could."¹⁸ Alice continued steadfastly to devote herself to Susan's career, as her mother had to her own aborted one. Her obituary notes: "She is credited by a circle of intimate friends with the nursing of her daughter's talents through the years of her adolescence and is regarded as a source of great encouragement in later years."¹⁹

Susan was the middle child, the only girl sandwiched between two boys, and her education might have been considered less important than that of her brothers had her mother been less determined to foster her daughter's talent. School records indicate that of the three Glaspell children, Susan was by far the most gifted and the only one who graduated high school. She opted for Latin, the most rigorous study track, which required courses in Roman history, classical rhetoric and literature, geometry, physical geography, and physics. Registered in 1890 as Susie Glaspell, she compiled only an average record her first year; however, in the next three years she excelled, receiving E+ in literature in her final year, only

one of three in her class to receive such a grade in any subject.²⁰ Of the fifty-three graduates in the Davenport High School class of 1894, she was one of six who gave a commencement address; her subject was “Songs that Live.” By comparison her brothers did not do well. Ray, who failed all his subjects in 1890, dropped out the next year. Frank did satisfactory work in the first year of the commercial track, but he did not return for a second year. By 1905 both held jobs at the Rock Island Arsenal.

While crediting her mother as her chief support, Susan had far less to say in public about her father. She seems to have affixed to Elmer some of those qualities his mother exhibited: tenacity, dreams, and good-natured acceptance of situations. “My father was a rugged man who had imagination. He worked very hard but it rested him to look ahead and dream of what one day might be,” she wrote about him. Elmer would sometimes lease tracts of land and plant hay and grain for shipment to Chicago; and, as one of her most vivid memories of youth, Susan describes traveling to northern Iowa or South Dakota to visit him when he was working. “Sometimes we would stay at a raw little hotel in a town and other times were in tents on the land. The people I knew through that experience have remained very real to me. Their hard work was livened by a dry sly humor. There were the mean and the stubborn and the cranky too, but for the most part they took life as it was for them very good-humoredly; simple and good—very American.”²¹

This description seems to apply to Elmer, at least as his daughter saw him, easy going and hardworking—a contrast to her ambitious, thwarted mother. One of his passions was the airplane, “when a few people were tinkering with it and most people were laughing themselves sick.” This obsession Susan later used in an unpublished play, “Wings [Over Obadiah].”²² In it she shows admiration for the “queer” man who dares to dream what others ridicule. In her life and that of her protagonists, the word *queer* would be a mark of respect. An interest that bound father and daughter was a love for animals. In one letter, written from Provincetown in 1915, Susan commiserates with Elmer on the death of the family dog, Patsey: “I do not suppose anyone but ourselves could understand just what Patsey means to us all, how much—how completely—he was one of us, so that losing him is indeed losing one of us.”²³ Her tendency to rescue stray animals, a trait she seems to have inherited from her father, extended to people as well. A 1932 article printed in the *Davenport Democrat* carries this brief anecdote: “Miss Glaspell’s early connection with Davenport makes her literary achievement and herself the object of unusual interest to old friends in her home town, some of whom recall the precocious, pretty little girl with a penchant for bringing home the ragged and hungry and making such queer friends in odd place.”²⁴ Susan’s first published fiction, a Christmas tale entitled “Tom and Towser,” written when she was just out of high school, tells the story of a stray dog and an orphaned boy, saved from freezing on a busy street corner when a young girl takes pity on them both and gives them shelter.²⁵

When studying the fictive families in Glaspell's short stories, dramas, and novels, it is not surprising to find that grandparents are generally revered, as they were in her own life. They are usually mythic figures who represent an earlier, idyllic time, which the protagonists attempt to recover. More complex is her handling of parents. One of the most significant patterns in Susan Glaspell's writing is the absence of mothers. Male writers may efface or neutralize mothers, the better to demarcate their own maturity and independence. However, in the case of a woman writer who goes to such pains to create strong, independent female figures and who displays such sensitivity to relationships between women characters, the absence of mothers is striking and perplexing. In Glaspell's thirteen produced plays, only three mothers appear: Mrs. Root, a mouthpiece for conformity in the one-act comedy *Close the Book*, Claire Archer, who disowns her daughter in *The Verge*, and Eleanor in *The Comic Artist*, whose baby is never seen. While it is true that there are only three fathers in these dramas—in *Bernice*, *Inheritors*, and *Alison's House*—and that none show particular sensitivity to their daughters or their needs, they are depicted with care and love. It is in Glaspell's nine novels that the absence of mothers and the dominance of fathers is most pronounced. *Judd Rankin's Daughter* and *The Morning Is Near Us* describe a daughter's attempt to come to terms with the father or the father figure she loves but cannot reach. In *Morning*, it is the specter of the absent mother that precludes this bonding; in *Judd Rankin*, the mother's presence is so irrelevant to the daughter that, after a few cursory references to her, she disappears entirely from the novel, her death not even noted by her otherwise sensitive daughter, who in all other aspects of her life is acutely attuned to interpersonal relationships. As the book's title clearly indicates, she is "Judd Rankin's daughter." Usually, the female protagonist does not even mention her mother; neither does the narrator. Glaspell's persona is raised by an aunt and father in *Norma Ashe* and by male figures in *The Visioning*, the novel that Glaspell dedicated to her own mother. When mothers do appear, they tend to be women of conformity, mouthing the values of the society, like the mother in *Ambrose Holt and Family*, a novel in which a father-in-law and mother-in-law become the surrogate parents of the female protagonist.

The most detailed analyses of mother/daughter relations are found in *Fugitive's Return* and *Brook Evans*. In *Fugitive's Return*, Irma resents her mother's smothering need for her, just as she resents the family's poverty. Somehow conflating the two conditions, Irma often focuses on her mother's inability to cope with domestic chores, like Alice Glaspell, and accuses her of being "not a good enough housekeeper to contend with difficulties."²⁶ When Irma matures, her infrequent visits home are difficult for the mother who so clearly adores her:

Each month her mother longed for that time when Irma would come home. She counted the days, the hours. . . . But when her

daughter came, the excitement, the added strain of trying to have things nice for Irma, was too much, so that it would be to her father Irma would go, as for refuge, for quiet visits.

She saw that this was cruel, and she was miserable that some difficulty in expression, some lack of power kept her from putting her arms around her mother, saying: "Mother, I know! I'm sorry. Don't *try* so hard." Mother's whole life had gone into the trying, until she did not have left in her that which could have formed into understanding.

"Soon I can help more," would be the most Irma could say.

"Oh I don't want you to!" her mother would cry. "I don't want it to ruin *your* life." And Irma knew this was her greatest fear, her torment, that the daughter she idolized, for whom she would have worked to the death, might be sucked into a life from which she could not escape.²⁷

The emotions that Irma displays are complex and often contradictory: she understands her mother's predicament, loves her, pities her, but resents her mother's disparagement of her father and her weakness and inability to cope with, or to conquer, what life has given her. These descriptions may well have sprung from Susan's own ambivalent feelings about her mother, who so tenaciously lived through her, and may explain her stronger tie with her father, who asked less and accepted her, no matter what her achievements. Her admiration of men with great imagination and failed promise must also have harkened back to him.

An even more powerful depiction of thwarted mothers whom their daughters cannot embrace, and fathers, shown to be weak but loved because of their vulnerability, is found in *Brook Evans*. In an early scene, Naomi Kellogg, a pregnant young woman, whose lover has been killed, turns to her father for understanding, begging him not to force her to marry a much older man who is willing to claim the child as his. "Her mother," she thinks, "was loving about many things, but she had no courage when it came to what people would say."²⁸ Naomi feels a closer bond to her father and tries to explain to him the great love she has felt for the boy who has died. The scene takes place in the barn, Glaspell introducing a dog, named Patsey, that keeps licking the hands of father and daughter. Near the end of the novel, Brook Evans—the child on whom Naomi has lavished all the love she could not give to the husband whom she had been forced to marry—thinks back on her own betrayal of her mother. Like Irma, Brook describes the responsibility that unconditional love demands, particularly when it comes from a mother who lives so completely through her daughter: "Did she feel herself surrounded with love from too lonely an intensity, and was that why she liked the easier give-and-take with her father and other people?" Brook concludes that "Girls are different now," but still wonders, "Were there daughters now who were at ease with their mothers?"²⁹

For Susan Glaspell—judging from her writing—the answer was no. Too many thwarted dreams seem to have stood between Alice and her daughter, making the relationship tense. Also, Alice hewed closely to strict religious practices and midwestern models of social behavior, which became anathema to Susan, whose own lifestyle extended far beyond anything her mother could have imagined. Yet, like fellow-Davenport Jig, Susan found it difficult to break completely with her parents. Over the years she resolved the problem by compartmentalizing her life. She continued to sign her letters “Susie,” shared her professional successes with her family, but told them only those details of her personal life about which she thought they would approve. In her writing she would continually focus on the schism between those who believed in conformity and those who tried to escape it, those inside the circle and those on the verge struggling to get out. Central to her work is the idea that if women are to progress and find their voices, they must finally overcome or ignore those loving, but constricted, figures who stand most threateningly in their way: their mothers. It was easier for Susan to salvage fathers in her work, since they are usually described as benign and nonthreatening. Virginia Woolf could write that the death of her father Leslie Stephen allowed her, finally, to live. Susan did not have a successful, authoritarian patriarch who overshadowed and silenced his daughter; her father’s shadow did not blot out her own. Her mother, on the other hand, was a constant reminder of how the best of women can be cowed by circumstances, feel weary and defeated, in lives that did not nourish or stimulate them. In her writing, it was the image of the stereotyped mother, wife, and care-giver against which Susan Glaspell struggled and which she effaced from the script of her fictive daughters’ lives.

Society Girls

3

Oh, these Society girls. Primping their way through life. If they only knew how shallow their efforts, how limiting their vision.

—Susie Glaspell, Society Editor, *Weekly Outlook*

In 1891 the Glaspell family moved into the house that was to remain their home throughout Susan's life, and which still stands today, at 317 East 12th Street, on the bluffs of Davenport, a few blocks from the crest. It was a white-wood, two-story, five-room house, set back from the street. The front sitting room was a good size and was heated by a large fireplace; behind it was a combination dining room and kitchen. A steep flight of stairs led to three bedrooms, the back one Susan would later turn into her study, since it afforded a glimpse of the Mississippi. The immediate neighborhood was middle-class, but within walking distance were the large mansions of the Fickes and Frenches, the leading families in town, who would also produce writers. In order for Susan to get to her high school, she would pass by these opulent Victorian homes, taking the same route her protagonist Irma Lee follows to school. As a protection against rejection, Irma immerses herself in the stories of her pioneer grandparents and imagines herself a queen still ruling "all the land between here and Scott Street."¹ Susan may have had many of the same feelings she attributes to Irma; but instead of masking her thoughts, she found an outlet to express them through her writing, positioning herself as the outside observer of Davenport society, able to satirize and expose the foibles of its lifestyle.

In 1894 Charles Eugene Banks, who had recently moved to Davenport from Clinton, Iowa, and would soon make a name for himself in Chicago as a journalist and novelist, started the short-lived *Davenport Morn-*

ing *Republican*, to which Susan, just out of high school, contributed, for \$3.00 a week. Two years later he began another publication, the *Weekly Outlook*.² The paper, published every Saturday, was a blend of society events (the teas, dinner parties, weddings, and charitable affairs of the wealthy), commentary on local news, reviews of the latest performances at Burtis's Opera house and at the many small theatres and amateur dramatic clubs in the tri-cities, human-interest items, occasional fiction, and history of the city. On the masthead next to the names of Banks and his wife, Carrie Wyatt, appears that of their society editor: Susie Glaspell.

Susan's weekly column, under the heading "Social Life," appeared in the first issue on July 11, 1896, and continued through July 1897. "Column" is rather a misnomer for the odd, two-part structure. The first section was a series of paragraphs, sometimes joined to a central theme, but more often separate vignettes on a wide range of issues, similar in format to what the *New Yorker* would popularize in its "Talk of the Town." Sometimes these vignettes focused on contemporary issues such as the debate over euthanasia or the introduction of private kindergartens, the socialist agenda, or even the philosophy of Emerson. More often they described a specific concern of what Susan called Davenport's "upper ten": the rich, famous, and the would-be-so. The tone is usually sarcastic, Susan taking obvious joy in disclosing the silly customs she observes around her, positioning herself outside the circle of Davenport "high society," and lobbing some powerful volleys at the foibles and banalities of the members. If Irma Lee yearns for acceptance by the wealthy, Susie Glaspell in 1897 is generally dismissive of them, making clear that if she had such wealth she would certainly not spend it on the "flim flam" that she reports about in her weekly columns. Immediately following these general topics, however, she was called upon to report on what this same Davenport society actually busied itself with during the past week. A column about parties, where invitation lists were made out, "using the utmost caution in putting down only such as had the money and social position to reciprocate," is followed by a description of the Library Ball, where "all the society people of the three cities were in attendance and it was universally acknowledged one of the greatest social successes of the season."³ A sarcastic description of how young women are expected to be "mechanical dolls" hanging on the conversation of rich, eligible bachelors leads into an engagement announcement of "yet another popular young society lady" to a man who "received the contract for the building of the City Hall."⁴ That Susan was not fired for her parodies of the rich may be explained by the tendency of social leaders to skim through the first part of the column quickly on their way to the second, where their names appeared. In addition, in her parodies, Susan never referred to specific people but types.

Because of its dual mandate, "Social Life" may have been a strange column, but it was also surprisingly effective, considering the age of the writer and her inexperience. Glaspell maintains a strong, consistent voice and a good eye for the concrete details of setting and character that

would later mark her fiction. Certainly, the readership would have been surprised to know that the writer, who in one essay describes herself as “a very commonplace old maid,” “an old woman and maybe an . . . old foggy”⁵ and in another speaks about a time “many years ago when I was young and went to school”⁶ was actually under twenty; that her numerous references to social customs in Paris, New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago were gleaned solely through reading the national papers and magazines; that her unending string of stories and anecdotes beginning, “I know a man who thinks . . .” or “I went to lunch this week with a girl who knows . . .” were mostly inventions, based either on her imagination or on her recent experiences as a young reporter.

Her favorite subject for satire is “the society girl.” Addressing these young women in an informal, conspiratorial style, she inquires: “What think you of the fall styles? . . . Whether McKinley or Bryan be the next occupant of the White House and what the coming financial policy of the country will be are concerns altogether secondary in importance. And rightly is it so, too. For the color of money is not nearly so vital as the color of your gown and the size of the tariff dwindles into insignificance when compared with the size of the winter hat.”⁷ Sometimes to vary the format, she creates stories to make her point. In one issue, she introduces the country girl who comes to “big city” Davenport to “make the rounds.” She follows her through a typical day of parties, gossip, and social conventions, which ends with “her first ball where she was overawed for the first two hours, bored for the third and conscience-smitten for the fourth.” The next night the girl makes a hasty retreat home, where she goes to “a literary society and was the happiest girl the town contained.”⁸ Some of the women she describes are aware that they are playing roles. “I’m tired of pouring tea for dead men, I’m tired of dancing with dead men, of having dead men in our theater boxes and at our table,” one moans.⁹ In another, “a society girl with very pink cheeks and a big plumed hat” seriously attempts to ponder her situation: “I am like the flowers in the hot-house, a forced production. Two-thirds of me has been made to die out, and the other third abnormally developed.”¹⁰ The metaphor of a woman as a cultivated plant shaped by society is one Susan will return to in her most experimental play, *The Verge*, in which her central character is a botanist who attempts to cultivate her own growth.

In many of her columns, the advice is more practical than parodic. In one written around Easter, she suggests that while “taking invoice of your wardrobe so thoroughly, you might look over the stock in trade of your brain and heart a little.” She does not ask for miracles, only small improvements, chiding young women to read more so that they can know more and become “intuitive, penetrating, discerning . . . and self-possessed.” Those qualities Glaspell will later assign to her protagonists.¹¹ Often given to finger wagging, she readily admits that for women life is never easy, so their concern with personal beauty is not necessarily wrong. “Women have such a hard time getting along in the world anyway that if

I had the ordering of things every blessed one of them should be a ravishing beauty . . . because nine-tenths of the difficulties along the way are smoothed out for the woman with the pretty face.”¹²

Although clearly the work of a young, inexperienced writer, these articles already show a facility with language and an ability to uncover those same characteristics of snobbish, small-town life that Sinclair Lewis would point out twenty years later in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*: pseudo-intellectuals, who read only the book reviews not the books; gossips, who make “evident all that is littlest and narrowest and meanest in society”; and those who take pride in their genealogy. “A true aristocrat looks little to the past and much to the future . . . what our fathers did yesterday reflects small credit on us. It is what we ourselves accomplish today that we are going to be marked by.”¹³ For someone like Susan, who had to remake her family through her own efforts and not through inherited fiat, the words are more than passing rhetoric; they are a prescription to follow. Pride in what a family stood for was one thing; pride in what they accumulated in material goods was something else.

Equality among people is an idea that sometimes emerges from the banter of her column. In one issue, she suggests that despite their material possessions, the wealthy and the poor may not be so very different, a fact they would recognize if people could only transcend the things that keep them apart. Anticipating a major theme in *Trifles*, she writes, “The melancholy thing of it all is, when you come to think seriously on this subject, how very slightly we know one another.” She particularly denounces the snobbery that causes the working girl to be excluded by “high society,” since “nobody is supposed to have a soul that works week days.”¹⁴ Susan, unlike most of the women her age in Davenport’s middle and upper classes, did work, and her mind was more concerned with deadlines and paychecks than with dance cards and parties. Her sensitivity about being shunned because of her social class shows through when she writes, “Do not be too pleased with yourself. You are not superior in your individuality. It is only that fortune has favored you with worldly things. Your position gives you so many opportunities and you utilize almost none of them.”¹⁵ Her empathy goes to those who are “outside,” a word she continually uses in her writing to signify both alienation from society and freedom from the restrictions it imposes: “Half of us don’t have to sit back under the galleries and watch the other half fill up the reserved seats in the front row. The whole world is the birthright of everyone and no box parties are allowed.”¹⁶ Her later embracing of socialism must have been informed by these early experiences in class-conscious Davenport.

That she should use imagery connected to the theatre is not surprising, since part of her job on the *Weekly Outlook* was to cover plays. Although today it is hard to think of Davenport, Iowa, as a national center of cultural activity, in the late 1800s it had a reputation as a theatre town. In 1887 Sarah Bernhardt had made Davenport one of the stops in her American tour of the play *Fedora*. A summary article on

the 1896 theatre season, written either by Banks, his wife, or Glaspell, lists thirty-nine plays given at the Burtis theatre alone, including *Hamlet*, *Cymbeline*, a variation of *The Merchant of Venice* entitled *Shylock*, *Rob Roy*, *Charlie's Aunt*, and *The Prisoner of Zenda*. All of these productions were by professional companies and included established actors such as Otis Skinner, Chauncey Alcott, Lillian Russell, and Thomas Keene. So numerous were the productions and the stars that one well-known actor whom Susan would meet twenty years later barely gets more than a passing reference: Mr. James O'Neil (spelled with only one *l*) in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Susan in her writing is able to show the shallowness of life for a "society doll," but is also aware that the alternatives are not clearly defined: "if you're going to give up society you've got to have something right at hand to substitute for it."¹⁷ In one of her more serious columns, she presents a viable alternative to the Society Girl for her readers to consider. She calls her "the New Woman" or "the Bachelor Girl," a woman who has chosen not to marry, but can not be dismissed as the stereotyped "old maid," since she may be "twenty as well as forty."¹⁸ She must have had herself in mind when she described this new type of woman: "First . . . you must be . . . clever; you need not be pretty, but you must be bright, vivacious, interesting. You are not expected to spend your life buried in an encyclopedia or a treatise on the Origin of Man, but . . . be able to talk with intelligence and wit on anything from the penal laws of Russia to the latest production in the farce comedy line. You must have sufficient resources within yourself not to be afflicted with *ennui* every time there is no man in sight, and when the man does come into view, you must stand ready to cope with him on his own grounds rather than docilely and demurely wait for him to fill your ear with pretty nothings."¹⁹ The description illustrates that by this date Susan had already begun to work out for herself qualities she would later develop in her life and give to her female protagonists.

However, while Davenport's elitist ways might be easy to identify in print, they were not that easy to overcome for those born there, whether inside or outside the circle of power. In a June column she indicates some of the problems a bright young woman, like herself, faces when trying to plot an alternative lifestyle: "When you are twenty and graduating with high honors you are very strong and self-sufficient, your ideals tower miles above the earth and you believe implicitly that . . . you are going to rise quickly out of the ranks of mediocrity." However, what the unnamed "you" discovers is that "true intelligence consists in knowing how much you do not know."²⁰ By the summer of 1897, Susan had reached this point. In one of her last columns, she denies the claim that "the new women" who went to college were no longer women but merely "sexless exponents of higher education." She writes, "If I believed this it would make me most unhappy and I would feel compelled to start to-night on a holy pilgrimage to burn all the women's colleges in the land."²¹ Instead she began a different kind of pilgrimage: not to burn colleges that admit-

ted women, but to enroll in one, Drake University, in Des Moines, where she began to study in September, at the age of twenty-one. Although she was to return to Davenport throughout her life, she never again returned as the outsider placed there by circumstances or the attitudes of others; she became an outsider of her own making. At the end of July 1897 her name stopped appearing on the masthead of the *Weekly Outlook*; by November, the paper was writing about her in the social column: "Miss Susie Glaspell, formerly society editor of the *Weekly Outlook* wrote an essay on 'The American Girl,' which was highly complimented by the professors at Des Moines [*sic*] university."²²