

Chicago History

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A Literary Editor Reminisces: Henry Blackman Sell

BY VIRGINIA GARDNER

*Newspaper publishers still worry about how to make book reviews pay,
but in 1916 a brash young man, a preacher's son,
showed the country that it could be done.*

FEW ENOUGH NEWSPAPERS even now are convinced that books are news and that book supplements are worth the money or the space they require, so it was not surprising that the Chicago *Daily News*, even at the zenith of the Chicago Renaissance, had no book page worthy of the name. It had a superb staff of foreign correspondents, and its city editor Henry Justin Smith always looked over the shoulder of a new reporter between editions to see what book he was reading; if the author impressed him he might give the man better assignments. But the fact remained that a book review might land among the obituaries or be slashed to a paragraph and used as filler on the automobile page. All of this was painful to a city staff "half daft with literary dreams," as Ben Hecht later wrote.

Nor was it changed, as has been suggested by cultural historians, because the *News* suddenly became aware of the flood of poetry and tradition-breaking literature swirling through Chicago, challenging Boston and New York as poetry centers, and decided to take a plunge. No, it was changed overnight in 1916 by a young man, Henry B. Sell, who knew how to make money talk.

Not that Sell had any money, but he was a bright young man, full of ideas and, at the age of 21, already something of a promoter. And he was, to use his own word, "awe-struck" by creative talent. Ben Hecht and Carl Sandburg were *News* reporters, and it was Sell's burning desire to be taken on by the paper and become

their colleague. Ironically, although he transformed the paper's reputation and made its book-review section internationally famous, he never got the job he wanted so badly. After he achieved the "partial compensation" of becoming the *News*' literary editor, he told this interviewer, "I was very much surprised to discover that it was important."

Young Sell had had some small-town experience as a reporter in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where his father was a pastor at the time. Leaving home, he landed a job on the *Star* in Indianapolis, but along with his assignments as reporter he had to sell advertising for the paper. He soon quit, joining his parents, in 1913, in Chicago where his father had taken a pastorate. There he studied at the Art Institute and drank in the rich cultural life Chicago offered. By 1916, when he was unsuccessfully trying to get inside the *News*' city room so he could apply for a job, he had tried his hand at several other jobs.

Sell's first job in Chicago was to act as a sort of press agent, for pennies, to the Fine Arts Building and every fascinating thing it held—the "fourth floor back" where Maurice Browne and Ellen Volkenburg Browne produced Euripides, Yeats, Strindberg, and Lord Dunsany; the main floor theater; and various restaurants and tea-rooms and studios, including the Little Room, presided over by Hamlin Garland and Henry Fuller. Sell was surprised to find Garland still alive, and was chiefly interested in Fuller's "beautiful long white beard." Like so many others he was drawn to Browne's pioneering Chicago Little Theatre, and he wrote a pamphlet explaining *What It's All About*; only recently "someone at the Library of Congress wrote that he had turned up two copies of it in the archives, and did I want one? So now I have it," said Sell.

Virginia Gardner, a former reporter, is now a freelance living in New York City. She is currently writing a biography of Louise Bryant.

"The thing that fascinated me most of all was the group of Abbey Players from Ireland. They were a strange people. I got to know the actors well. They had the main floor theater, and some of the actors delighted in selling tickets, and in escorting a customer inside the theater and saying grandly, 'Now which seat do you prefer?' They made of everything connected with the theater a personal matter. Lady Gregory was there to see that all went according to her instructions. We became friends and I would do anything for her. She dressed with great elegance. It was all exciting."

In this period, before the *Daily News* venture, Sell wrote an article a month for *International Studio*; assigned to interview Frank Lloyd Wright, he did, and they became warm friends. It was just after Wright had walked away from his wife and children in Oak Park for another woman—"a terrific thing in Chicago, so that he was a controversial figure." At the time Wright was building the Midway Gardens in Chicago.

Sell had also clerked at Marshall Field's and, while there, devised a plan for selling furniture. Newly married and broke, he and Mrs. Sell redecorated their flat on Wayne Avenue on the North Side once a month and photographed it, tying it in with the store and writing a book about it. He also put out a brochure, "Fashions of the Hour," and helped Marcella Burns of the book department get out the store's first book catalog. It was Marcella Burns who urged him to figure out a way of publicizing books and thus promote their sale. Dale Kramer, in *Chicago Renaissance*, describes the man who launched the *Daily News* book pages as a "personable, somewhat brash young man named Henry Blackman Sell, an ex-furniture promoter"—all true, especially if one understands by "personable" that he was not only good-looking but a very stylish dresser (he is still, at 84, impeccable) and by "brash" that he was also diffident with the creative artists who soon became his friends.

Failing to get his foot inside the swinging doors of the *News*' city room, Sell took a job in the

advertising department, made whatever friends he could by hanging around *outside* the doors, and conceived a series of feature stories. His idea was to interview leaders of the city's various ethnic groups about the aspirations of the groups and how to make a better Chicago. He asked Molly Mann, the woman's page editor, what she thought of it. She approved, and spoke to Charles H. Dennis, the editor, saying there was a young fellow "who wants in the worst way to get on the paper." Dennis couldn't put him on the staff—it was Henry Justin Smith's province to hire and fire in the city room—but he would see him. How much money should Sell ask? Here again, Molly Mann was able to provide guidance. Ben Hecht was making \$38 a week and Carl Sandburg had only gotten up to \$35, so she advised him to be conservative when he talked to Dennis.

"He liked my idea," said Sell. "The articles could run Monday, Wednesday and Friday on the editorial page. Could I do three a week? I could. I remember how he rubbed his knees and looked at the ceiling then, and asked how much it would cost him. I was going to say \$20, but decided to be bold. 'Twenty-five,' I said—meaning \$25 a week. Still looking at the ceiling he figured aloud, 'Three times 25—\$75 a week, yes, that's OK.'" Young Sell walked out of the office bewildered, but he was on his way.

Before the series was over, he had laid plans for his next move. By then he knew a few more people on the paper, and it seemed as if everyone was talking about books. He went to Dennis and offered to get enough ads from publishers in the East to pay for it if he could edit a Wednesday book page. He was told he could try. But there was another matter Sell broached—would the *News* foot the bill if he paid every man he got to review a book a free lunch? With Dennis' OK on that important item, Sell jubilantly left Chicago for Boston and New York. He returned with enough space sold to support the first few Wednesday book pages, and found that books already had begun to arrive. He assigned the



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books for review and began looking about for a place which served a good lunch for 35 cents.

The *Chicago Daily News* at the time was housed in a building constructed not long after the great Chicago fire—a four-story building on Wells Street, bursting at the seams, to which buildings on each side had been added and joined to it after a fashion. Next to the *News* was an alley, and then a cigar store; next to the cigar store was Schlogl's saloon. After investigating, Sell decided it was a good enough meeting and eating place.

This then was the origin of Schlogl's fame. By now it is mentioned in every history of Bohemia in America, in all the accounts of the rebel years before World War I, and in memoirs of the intellectuals of the second decade of the century, for even New Yorkers occasionally traveled westward, and all stopped in Chicago and many visited Schlogl's.

"By the end of my period—I left Chicago in December 1919—our Friday luncheon at Schlogl's was quite an affair. But in the beginning it was just the three or four of us who got a

The city room of the *Chicago Daily News*. They wouldn't let Henry Sell set foot in it. He had to start in the advertising department.

free meal on Friday because we'd each had a review in the Wednesday book page."

In the beginning the regulars included Ben Hecht, Carl Sandburg, and Sell from the *News*, as well as Sell's protégé, Johnnie V. A. Weaver, a poet who celebrated the American language and was to sell to the *Smart Set* after H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan took it over; and almost always Eunice Tietjens, their only regular woman contributor. "Eunice was a very intellectual woman, a fine poet. She was difficult to get along with if she didn't like you—but she liked me. We were the best of friends." Eunice, who had spent years in the Orient and whose Oriental dances were much in demand at parties in Chicago studios, told Sell that he was writing about tomorrow and everyone else she knew was writing about today and yesterday.

In a series of interviews for *Chicago History*, Sell recalled those halcyon days. "Sandburg was



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Newsprint—even then it came in rolls—being delivered to the old Chicago *Daily News* Building in the Twenties. Notice the customers on the right, reading the latest edition.

then a reporter. Henry Justin Smith thought he was wonderful and kept trying to find the right job for him. He was sent out of town to cover a big labor convention, spent a lot of money getting there—but he never filed a story. Finally a postcard came for Smith, saying, ‘You’d never believe what’s going on here.’

“Carl had a desk near a window. He could look out that window for two days running and no one dared ask him to get out some copy. He was sacred. He was a strange man. You could walk with him for twenty blocks and at one point he would say, ‘No, it’s not possible.’ You never learned what wasn’t possible. Or he might say nothing at all. I knew Carl very well. I married the woman he was engaged to some years earlier. She didn’t know of another girl—until she picked up the paper one day and saw he was married. He’d just forgotten to tell her. The Steichen family had taken Carl into the family—and he found himself married to Lillian, the sister of the photographer Edward. Often I took Carl home with me, and my wife—Maud Ann O’Harrow, a ‘Lucy Stoner’ as all women were then—was always pleased to see him. Neither one felt any constraint with the other.”

For the book pages—which at times totaled ten—Ben Hecht wrote columns on writers as

unfamiliar to *Daily News* readers as Verlaine, Dostoevski, Huysman, and Nietzsche, all inspired by solid reading. But he also wrote interviews with famous writers by repairing to the cigar store next door, “where he sat alone in a corner and did his interview with the subject”—and it was printed as written. “Ben maintained he didn’t have to see anyone to interview him.”

In 1964, a week before he died, and long after Sell began editing *Harper’s Bazaar*, Hecht wrote Sell a letter. “He said he’d been reading *Harper’s Bazaar* and was thrilled to see I used a crossword puzzle with every issue. He said never to stop using the puzzle—it was the only thing he ever read any more.”

Looking back on those days of ferment and rebellion against the puritanism of the past, when Chicago’s Bohemia rivaled New York’s Greenwich Village, and for a time surpassed it in poetry, Sell said, “It was a wonderful period.” Chicago’s Bohemia was concentrated in the little two-story store fronts left on the edges of the old World’s Fair Grounds after the glories

of the 1893 fair departed. Rents were cheap and talk was lofty, just as in the Greenwich Village brownstones with their fireplaces; each was a far cry from the literary world of today, when writers receive large advance payments. "Writers lived very differently then. What was paramount was to have the freedom of personal expression. We gave them that, and lots of space and by-lines. We were the first to run reviews emphasizing the people who wrote them—I'm quoting Alfred Knopf."

Seated around the table in Schlogl's, with the roar of the elevated overhead unnoticed, "in addition to the original regulars, might be Keith Preston—a darling, everyone's favorite: a Northwestern University professor, his chief occupation was translating poems of the old Romans and they were dirty, which he enjoyed very much; and Burton Rascoe of the *Tribune*; and Harry Hansen, if it was after Harry returned from the war. I broke him in to take my job when I left Chicago. Lew Starrett might be one, or Sherwood Anderson, or Edgar Lee Masters. Lee Masters could be a little stiff with the newspaper people, but we got to be good friends and remained so. I never remember seeing Maxwell Bodenheim in Schlogl's. Gene Markey, the talented illustrator, came; he was a rich Bohemian who became richer when he married the heiress to the Calumet stables. Gene was difficult to work with, he was such a perfectionist. Henry Justin Smith always looked in on us briefly. Most of them were odd, poetic people."

A few men from other newspapers occasionally joined the Friday regulars at Schlogl's—cartoonist John T. McCutcheon, of the *Tribune*; Charlie Collins, later a drama critic for the *Tribune* and then a *Post* reporter. Even Percy Hammond, the drama critic, came around once or twice.

Margaret Anderson was too preoccupied with keeping her *Little Review* afloat to join the Sell table at Schlogl's, nor did he ask her to contribute to his pages. Often, however, he would pick up a column of excerpts from her maga-

zine to shock his *News* readers. "And I think," he added, "I was the only person Margaret ever paid for a piece she ran in *Little Review*. Wish I could remember what it was about."

An unreconstructed anarchist by principle, Margaret once received a note from Upton Sinclair asking her to please stop sending him the *Little Review*, that he no longer understood anything in it so it failed to interest him. To this she promptly replied, "Please cease sending me your Socialist paper. I understand everything in it, therefore it no longer interests me."

At times Ben Hecht played practical jokes on unsuspecting guests at Schlogl's. Hugh Walpole, homeward bound after a lecture tour of the country, was considered pompous. He had a habit of tipping back his chair against the wall and expounding on the frailties of American culture. Moreover, Walpole, interviewed in his hotel room, had ordered whiskey for himself and had let the reporters go away thirsty. He was inveigled into coming for a Friday luncheon at Schlogl's. As he tipped his chair back expansively, the crash came. Sell recalled that the chair's back legs "had been treated by Ben with a saw."

"Carl Sandburg, who was sitting next to the guest and knew nothing of the trick, apologized all over the place, picked Walpole up, and dusted him off. Ben just laughed and joyously acknowledged responsibility. Later a long article in *Vanity Fair* by Walpole told of his impressions of this country. His closing words were of his two most trenchant memories of America—Ben Hecht's rudeness and, on the same occasion, Carl Sandburg's kindness." Sell, the host, had remained silent.

Sell's serene self-confidence stood him in good stead when, shortly after he became literary editor of the *Daily News*, he was traveling on the Twentieth Century to New York and the dining car steward seated him at a table opposite a man whom he recognized as Victor Lawson, the *Daily News* publisher. The publisher, who had never met his book editor,



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Charles H. Dennis, editor of the *News*, in his almost inaccessible office. He broke a time-honored newspaper tradition by offering Sell triple the salary he was really asking.

acknowledged his "Good evening" with a nod and a cursory "Evening." The younger man looked out the window and remarked it was a nice day. "I ordered my dinner," Sell recalled, "and Mr. Lawson didn't say another word—until he ordered his dessert and inquired of me, 'Do you go to New York often?' I said, 'Two or three times a year.' And when his dessert came I said, 'As a matter of fact, Mr. Lawson, I'm Henry Sell, and I run the book page at the *Daily News*.' He said, 'Oh? Well, there must be some mistake. Members of the *Daily News* editorial staff do not ride the Twentieth Century.' The Twentieth Century cost \$25 more than the other trains. I said nothing at all, but applied myself to my figs. He said the figs were too sweet; I agreed. And as he left the car he told me where I might find him. I dropped by his drawing room and we talked about the *Daily News*—and that's the first and last time I talked to Victor Lawson in the flesh."

It was many years later that Sell learned that Lawson had in fact played a role in his career. Before he applied to Dennis for a chance to write his series on ethnic groups, Sell's father

had spoken to Lawson, and the publisher had spoken to Dennis.

"Mr. Lawson liked my father as a preacher," Sell confided, "and had wanted him to be the pastor of his church, but there was a condition attached. Just as he always read all the editorials before they were published in the *News*, he would have to see the sermons before they were preached. But Father didn't have that idea at all. So they never got together, but remained friends."

Henry Sell's father was the Rev. Henry Thorne Sell, a preacher and editor of the Congregational Sunday School & Publishers Society of Chicago. The son remembers him as continually writing updated editions of his *Bible Studies*, which remained in print long after his death or, as the son said, "about as long as the Bible was read widely."

Sell's own pages in the newspaper were not subjected to Lawson's censorship. He alone passed on book reviews—with one exception: "Mr. Lawson was thoroughly religious, as everyone knew. And he had helped in building up the evangelist, Billy Sunday. I guess the religious editor had worked hard on it when Sunday held meetings in Chicago. Now Billy Sunday had written a book, in which he used, as I recall it, excerpts from his sermons—sermonettes, as he termed them. We received a copy and I turned it over to Ben Hecht. In a day or so, Ben handed me his review. He had about this time been reviewing a book by George Ade. And he wrote that Billy Sunday's humor, compared to George Ade's, was as a sewer to a sparkling brook. We published it. Mr. Lawson never mentioned it to me or to Ben. He let it run through two editions and then killed it."

Sell's book emporium was on the third floor. "That is," he explained, "the third floor up and down. For with the spread to two buildings, one on either side, every floor had about three levels. On the same floor was the city room—a large room, also of several levels. Ben's desk was here [drawing on the tablecloth] and Carl's here by the window. A copy boy sat just outside and would come running at the word 'Copy!' My book place was on another level, a lower level, near Mr. Dennis' office. I had a roll-top desk with cubicles. And T. K. Hedrick, who did a column, 'A Hit or Miss or Two,' had a desk like mine nearby. It had been used by Eugene Field and Hedrick was always finding something of Field's tucked in a cubicle or way back in a drawer. There were a lot of ghosts around the *News* building."

Into this less than posh interior wandered a number of distinguished visitors. The poet Conrad Aiken, whom Sell had met in Boston, stopped in one day, and that night Aiken, whom Sell describes as "a sweet and lovely man, and a fine critic," and Vachel Lindsay spent long hours at Sell's house in Ravinia. Sell often saw Aiken in Boston and he recalls

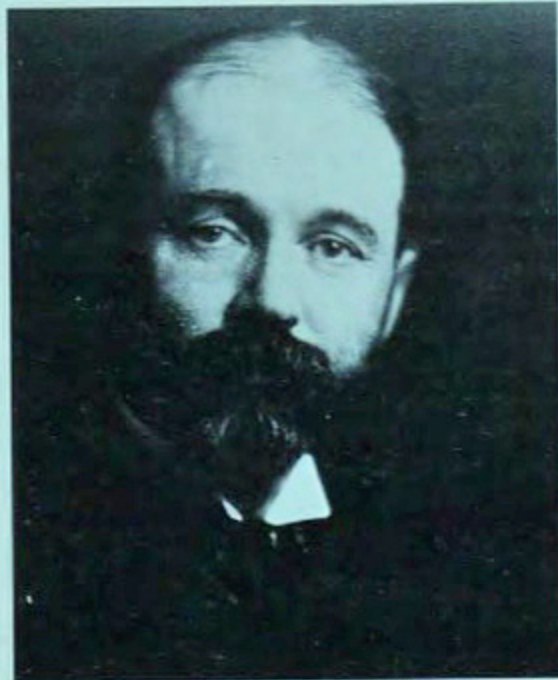
a day when they and a publisher friend were seated on a bench on the Boston Common talking of poetry. Harriet Monroe had rejected every poem Conrad had sent her—not modern enough. So now Aiken said to his friends, "I could write a poem she'd take," and fishing an envelope out of his pocket, wrote on the back of it a poem that began "Red petals in the dust." The next time Sell saw Aiken, the poet reported, "Sure enough, Harriet sent me a check at once."

It was through Aiken that Sell learned that Mencken was an enthusiastic reader of his book pages. Aiken had contributed a review at Sell's request and, shortly after it appeared, a letter from Mencken, addressed to Aiken, arrived at

Carl Sandburg as a young man. Even in those days on the *News*, when he might or might not file an assigned story and write book reviews for a 35¢ lunch, he was considered "sacred."

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Victor F. Lawson, publisher of the *Daily News*, who did not expect to meet his employees on the swank Twentieth Century.

the *Daily News*. Sell long had admired the cantankerous sage of Baltimore, and just seeing the envelope was "a very emotional moment." At first "I hardly dared open it"—not from ethical considerations, it turned out, but from excitement. Open it he did, however. "This is what Mencken wrote to Conrad—who wasn't famous at all at the time except among a very small and discriminating group.

"What are you doing writing for the only civilized book page in this Presbyterian satrapy?" (Wilson, a Presbyterian, was President.) I wrote Mencken and said I was honored, and Aiken wrote him that he was honored, and we arranged to meet in Baltimore, the three of us. And I well remember not being able to sleep for a week before that meeting." In 1920, shortly after Sell left Chicago, Mencken proclaimed it "the literary capital of the world."

The *Daily News* was not the first Chicago newspaper to feature brilliant reviews. Floyd Dell had earlier edited the Literary Supplement of the *Chicago Evening Post*, which had won him distinction, but he left in 1912 and, by 1916, was in New York assisting Max Eastman edit the *Masses*. After Dell's departure, Henry F. May says in *The End of American Innocence*, the *Post's* book supplement "veered back toward conservatism, its place . . . taken by the *Chicago Daily News*." The *Post's* reviews had become innocuous.

"Dell was a critic and an editor, and I ran a circus. Dell was serious, I just had fun," said Sell, who is still active as editor-at-large of *Harper's Bazaar*, with which he has been associated ever since he left Chicago. "Ben Hecht always referred to our group as my menagerie. Beginning my third year, our book pages were quite well known everywhere. Our pages got very famous very fast, simply because the others were so dull."

In our interviews, Mr. Sell repeatedly made the point that he was not "a literary man," but merely an "awestruck observer." He conceded, however, that in the midst of the rich flowering of poetry and fiction in Chicago that marked the years 1910-1920, he served as an instrument of the Renaissance.

And while he passed out review copies of books to his varied and talented writer friends, he never gave them instructions. Could it be said his policy was to let everyone "do his own thing," a life style prescribed by the young in the 1960s? He replied, "It was literally, actually, fundamentally, basically, totally that. Everybody did his own thing—and I would say that in a sense we were the first crowd to adopt that idea. We gathered together, we did what interested us, we enjoyed ourselves. And as a matter of fact, that is—me. That's my life."

One of Sell's innovations was the multiple review. If the Friday luncheon discussion at Schlogl's rated a book highly, not one but several reviews would follow, each with a different

Billy Sunday. Ben Hecht's review of his book was the only one the *News* censored while Sell was literary editor.

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by-line. Ring Lardner's *You Know Me, Al* was reviewed four times. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Mencken's *The American Language* each scored seven reviews. "When Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* came out in England there was no plan to produce it here, but we kept reviewing it until there was such a demand *Putnam's* brought it out in 1918. Another book we reviewed almost as many times was Frederick O'Brien's *White Shadows of the South Seas*. We also were the first to let authors review their own works; at times this was done with great success and quite impersonally. Fannie Hurst and Edna Ferber both were successful in reviewing their own books. But without pay—and they were too distant for our free lunch—we had a review (not of their own books) from such great foreign writers as Bernard Shaw and Romaine Rolland."

But for all the emphasis on freedom and fun, Sell himself followed certain rigorous disciplines. Every Wednesday, and occasionally twice a week if the ads from publishers justified additional review pages, he made a ritual of catching the 5 A.M. train from Ravinia. This put him on the floor of the *Daily News* composing room at 6 A.M. "So long as I was standing by the stone no one could steal my space." He was accepted as a Wednesday fixture by the printers, with whom he got on so well that he was made a member of their union; Sell believes it is the only time in history that someone from the editorial side was taken into their "chapel." In lulls between editions, he and the head of the chapel had long passionate discussions on growing peonies.

Under Sell, as Hecht later wrote, the book section of the *Daily News* became as large and prosperous as the real-estate section. And however wistfully Sell regarded Hecht and the other reporters, when the stock market crashed in October 1929 no working reporter is known to have lost a million dollars in a day, as Henry Sell did. Over the years he has put vitamins and liver paté and a special diet on the market,

had his own advertising agency for some years, and has been a Hearst editor for fifty-three years. He is the author, with Victor Weybright, of *Buffalo Bill of the Wild West* (his grandmother's grandmother was Cody's cousin).

By the time Sell left Chicago at the end of 1919, some of the luminaries had already begun going to New York, and others followed. The Chicago Renaissance had come to an end. And in New York's Bohemia, much had altered. By 1920, the banners of political revolt raised by the intellectuals over the last decade were furled. The remarkable outpouring of talent and political ferment that had erupted in many centers over the nation in the 1910s had shrunk to a trickle. When new talents emerged in the next few years, it would be in a different milieu: the disillusion of the postwar years.

In his day in Chicago Henry Sell knew all the famous dissenters, the movers and shakers, the rich and original talents, those who wrote reviews for him and those who didn't. He knew Clarence Darrow, Theodore Dreiser, Ring Lardner ("one of the greats"), and George Cram ("Jig") Cook, both as assistant to Floyd Dell on the Chicago *Evening Post* and later as ringmaster of the Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village.

Asked if he ever had regrets that he left Chicago, he replied, "I was born in Wisconsin on the Illinois border and it was a lovely place. I came to Chicago and the buffalo grass was good and long in Chicago—and it's still there. Then there's the lake—a wild, strong thing. The streets are a little wider in Chicago, the atmosphere a little bit more free. And the museums are superb. There is an interest in reading, an interest in writing, and it has the atmosphere of a free-thinking town. Of all the cities I ever lived in, and they are many, I'd rather be in Chicago."



Henry Blackman Sell, ca. 1922.

Courtesy Henry B. Sell