

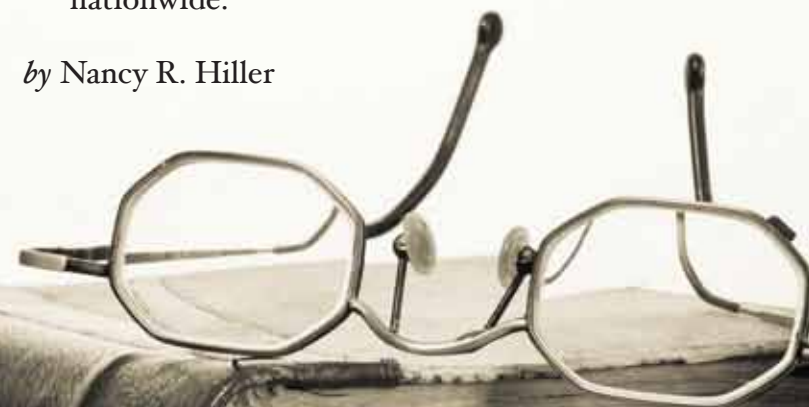


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MARGARET
WEYMOUTH
Jackson

THE *Sage* OF
SPENCER, INDIANA

Her short stories and novels about small town life found an avid readership in the leading magazines of her day and in bookshops nationwide.

by Nancy R. Hiller



In Hilltown doors were seldom locked, thieving practically unknown. There was, of course, the inevitable evil, which forgathers with the sons of men, but it was sporadic, unorganized, individual. Crimes of passion startled the community at rare intervals. Small gossip dealt with offenders against the moral code. But there was, or had been, no commercialized vice. The town marshal, Cap, was a combination sanitary inspector, traffic officer, and patrolman, scolding youngsters out after the curfew and corralling stray dogs or cattle. The sheriff, of course, was a grimmer figure, but concerned, for weeks on end, with nothing more serious than chicken thieves.



—Margaret Weymouth Jackson,
“The Young Tree,”
The Saturday Evening Post,
March 31, 1934

Margaret Weymouth Jackson in a 1948 photograph. Jackson, a member of the Owen County Hall of Fame, was posthumously elected to the Indiana Journalism Hall of Fame in 1996. Photograph courtesy of Owen County Public Library



(above) The Queen Anne house at 207 W. Hillside Ave. in Spencer was home to Margaret Weymouth Jackson's family at the height of her career. Another celebrated Hoosier author, James Alexander Thom, lived there during his childhood. Photo by Adam Kent-Isaac (right) Margaret Weymouth Jackson holds her granddaughter, Jane DuComb, in 1944. Jane and her mother spent a lot of time at the Jackson home in Spencer while Jane's father was off at war. Courtesy photo

From the front porch of her house perched partway up Rocky Hill, Margaret Weymouth Jackson had a bird's-eye view across the neighborhoods of Spencer, Indiana, stretching all the way to the courthouse square, a fitting prospect for a writer acutely attuned to the lives of her fellow townspeople, whose stories she elevated to the national stage.

"She was a small-town girl with a mind and writing skill that took her everywhere," says her granddaughter, Jane DuComb, who visited every weekend during her childhood. Later, when DuComb became a schoolteacher in Spencer, Jackson's house became her second home.

For more than two decades, spanning from the '30s to the '50s, Jackson was one of the nation's most beloved writers of fiction. Her short stories and articles, which numbered well over 200, appeared regularly in popular periodicals such as *Country Gentleman*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Woman's Day*, and

Good Housekeeping. So prolific were her contributions to *The Saturday Evening Post* that she earned admission to the prestigious "Fifty Club" of authors who had 50 or more stories in the magazine. Her reputation as a writer and speaker earned her an invitation from Edward R. Murrow to read an essay for the original This I Believe radio series during the 1950s. In addition to her short stories, she wrote six novels, all published by Bobbs-Merrill Company. But as modern tastes displaced Edwardian mores, and TV usurped the popularity of reading, Jackson's fortunes changed. She and her husband moved out of the grand house on the hill to a small house in town. Today, few people recognize her name.

A writer by destiny

Born in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, in 1895, Jackson grew up in a household supported by the publishing industry. When she was two, her father, George Weymouth, moved the



family to Richill, Missouri, where he operated a daily newspaper and printing shop. The family moved next to Chicago, where Weymouth was editor of *Woman's World* magazine, and in 1914 relocated once more, this time to Spencer, about 18 miles northwest of Bloomington. There Weymouth became editor of a farming publication known as *The Agricultural Epitomist*.

A substantial percentage of the American population still farmed in the 1910s, whether full time or to provide staples such as pork and vegetables for home consumption, perhaps with enough left over to trade for dry goods or sell in town. Agricultural publications provided

Love and marriage

Like many young professionals of the time, Jackson lived in a boarding house, and it was there that a fellow resident, Charles Carter Jackson, caught her eye.



(left) Beginning in the 1920s, Jackson was a prolific writer of short stories who worked from home. She also wrote six novels, all published by Bobbs-Merrill Company. Courtesy photo

(above) Charles Carter Jackson and Margaret Weymouth Jackson early in their marriage. Courtesy photo



invaluable instruction and advice, in addition to information about the latest equipment. Under Weymouth's direction the publication was renamed *Farm Life* and grew from a circulation of 400,000 to more than 1,000,000.

Jackson worked in her father's office while still in her teens. According to DuComb, "She'd been raised in a big, rambunctious household, and many [of her siblings] were confident, but she was the sparkling intellect... and probably her father's favorite because of that. At a very young age she weighed close to 300 pounds, so I'm sure she was fighting that all the time. She got diabetes in her old age and lost a lot of weight, and she used to make the most incredible jokes—"If only I'd been like this when I was twenty-seven!"

Jackson went on to study at Hillsdale College in Michigan for two years, then found her way back to Chicago, where she became associate editor of *Better Farming* magazine at the age of 23.

Though American by birth, he had been raised in England, then returned to the United States as a young man, only to emigrate to Canada during World War I so that he could enlist in the Canadian forces, using his English passport. He was handsome, cosmopolitan, principled, and swept Jackson off her feet. They were married in 1920.

In return for his military service, Carter Jackson was granted 300 acres of land in the Canadian province of Manitoba. Hoping to capitalize on the gift, he and Margaret moved to the small town of Brandon, where their two daughters, Martha and Ann, were born. Although a profile of Jackson in *Country Magazine* would later claim that "a home, husband, and family seemed fair exchange... for a career in journalism," Jackson never abandoned her writing. In 1922 she bought a typewriter and arranged to cover Manitoba's provincial fair for her local newspaper. Even before the weeklong event was over, she had begun her shift from basic reporting toward fiction, unable to resist the pathos in the story of a boy who had lost the winning bid at one of the fair's auctions.

Finding the Canadian winters more than they could bear, the family abandoned the 300 acres and relocated to a small house on West Hillside Avenue in Spencer, where their third child, Charles, was born in 1924. The household was also occasionally augmented by extended visits from Jackson's nephew, Weymouth Fogelberg, the first in 1928 when Fogelberg was about nine. His family lived in Chicago; his mother, Jackson's sister, was ill, and his father had three other children to look after. The Jacksons were delighted to take him in. Five years later, when Fogelberg's mother died, he returned to Spencer for good, riding his bicycle the entire way.



(above) A large crowd gathers at the Spencer town square in this photograph from 1923.

Courtesy of the Owen County Historical & Genealogical Society

(opposite) This portrait of Jackson in pearls often appeared as a contributor photo in *Ladies' Home Journal*. Courtesy of The Lilly Library

Spencer then and now

Drive through Spencer on Ind. 46 today and you may think of the town as little more than a thoroughfare between Terre Haute and Bloomington—a narrow strip characterized by fast-food restaurants, a couple of banks, used car dealers, and the like. But venture a couple of blocks south, and you'll find the handsome Owen County Courthouse, built from limestone in 1911, still anchoring a classic Midwestern square. Though many of the storefronts are vacant and boarded up, they were once bursting with activity; in Margaret Jackson's day, there were restaurants, a hotel, two department stores, a soda fountain, and stores selling jewelry, clothing, and shoes. Radiating out from the square were blocks of quiet residential neighborhoods. Many of those that would later fall within Jackson's front-porch view date back to the 1880s—dignified Queen Anne houses and exuberant Carpenter Gothic cottages interspersed with brick and wood-sided bungalows, a couple of churches situated in their midst.

Although Spencer was a typical small-town center of Midwestern life in the early 20th century, many of its people bucked the provincial stereotype. "There was a high degree

of intellectual curiosity, and lots of clubs and lodges to join," says Laura Wilkerson, genealogy specialist at the Owen County Public Library. Many county residents had college degrees, whether from Purdue University, known as "the agricultural college," Indiana State University, considered "the teacher's college," or Indiana University, "the professional/liberal arts college." The town has had a public library since 1906 and received a grant to build a Carnegie Library in 1911.

Despite Spencer's distance from the European front during World War I, its citizens took a vital interest in the action; members of the Bounce Euchre Club pooled their dollars to sponsor two war orphans in France, and local sculptor Ernest Moore Viquesney designed the *Spirit of the American Doughboy* statue that graces city halls and courthouse lawns across the nation. From the 1920s into the '40s, the town of about 2,100 had three newspapers. The Tivoli Theatre, built in 1927, showed the latest movies. And like larger cities, Spencer had its share of brothels, speakeasies, and illegal gambling dens during Prohibition, as well as murders and arson attacks by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Stories of small town life

In her stories, Spencer became "Hilltown," and Bloomington, "University Town." Bedford was "Stone City," the farthest away, which is why she may have used it in some stories as a location for dark secrets.

These vibrant burgs provided Jackson with more than enough characters, settings, and plot potential to satisfy a national readership. "She could see the story in every situation," her granddaughter, Jane DuComb, says—whether it was the college freshman in "Goon Castle" (a pseudonym for IU's Wells Quad) mortified about being rejected by her chosen sorority; the father in "The Hero," who wrestles against the urge to overprotect his 16-year-old basketball-

player son; or the idealistic young man in "The Young Tree," fighting to claim a voice of his own in the shadow of his powerful grandfather.

Jackson was fascinated by such struggles. The circumstances that generated them were often inherently dramatic: society girls flagrantly necking with beaus on the steps of a sorority house, or cruelly excluding lesser mortals from fancy dinners and dances; brawling at Joe's barbecue joint between a righteous would-be social reformer and the corrupt owner of Fleagle's pool hall who profited by enticing poverty-stricken workers to gamble. But she was not content merely to chronicle such events as a bystander nor was she interested in giving witness to tragedy and injustice without

had access to in a town whose respectable citizens shunned them. Similarly, Jackson championed marriage and motherhood, seeing the relevance of even the most mundane housework to the nation's wellbeing. "She absolutely believed that the people who got up every day and did the work that had to be done were keeping the country going," says DuComb. "She recognized the small, ordinary acts that make a lifetime, a community, and a state." Yet at the same time, she understood that women need some kind of work for themselves, as well as space and time to be alone. Many of her female characters have jobs outside of the home as teachers or clerical workers; at least one character, Jenny Fowler, becomes an investment

SPENCER BECAME 'Hilltown,' AND BLOOMINGTON, 'University Town.' BEDFORD WAS 'Stone City,' THE FARTHEST AWAY, WHICH IS WHY SHE MAY HAVE USED IT IN SOME STORIES AS A LOCATION FOR DARK SECRETS.



providing readers some means to face them constructively. Instead, many of her characters were moral exemplars. A pre-modernist through and through, she aimed to help her readers find the conviction that would allow them to nobly face their own challenges. Yet her characters were anything but ciphers expressing pure good or evil; they were all imperfect, and so, believable. She understood that true courage, for example, can only exist in those who feel fear in its fullness yet summon the resources to face their circumstances.

In many ways Jackson's writing defies categorization. While she focused on topics of deep moral import, she was not judgmental; rather, she strove to understand what motivated people to behave in ways that were less than admirable. In "The Young Tree," for instance, the young Civilian Conservation Corps workers who patronized Fleagle's pool room drank and gambled not because they were irredeemable lowlifes, but because these were the only pleasures they

adviser who specializes in helping women.

Jackson wrote about rich and poor with equal compassion and nuance, though her stories are full of caveats regarding the perils of wealth. She encouraged readers to shun sensuousness, materialism, and the pressure to keep up with the Joneses. In this there is delightful irony; her stories were published by magazines supported by advertisements for such products as hair tonic and tobacco, stylish sunglasses, shaving cream that would make wives want to kiss their husbands, and America's No. 1 Movie Camera: the favorite of the movie stars, making her income effectively dependent on the sale of products she told readers they did not need.

Some wealthy people earned Jackson's admiration for their generosity and ability to avoid the corrupting influence of riches. One of these was Jackson's friend Nina Laymon, whose husband's success in business had made them the wealthiest family in town. Laymon gave birth to one of her children during the Depression. When the time came to wean the baby, her physician, aware that infant mortality had skyrocketed due to malnourished mothers, asked whether she would consider breast-feeding endangered babies. "Life was so different for those women," says DuComb. "They played bridge and had luncheons, then my grandmother



(above) Jackson in the 1930s with Pom, one of the family's French shepherds. Jane DuComb says that her grandparents always had at least one dog while their children were growing up. Courtesy photo

would go home and write, and Nina would go out with her chauffeur—to act as a wet nurse for Owen County's needy babies. Jackson based one of her stories on this special act of generosity.

A political activist

Jackson was an avid reader, extremely active in her community, and well informed about

current events. Not surprisingly, then, she was also quite political—a Roosevelt Democrat, according to DuComb. Long before it was acceptable for a female writer to broach the possibility that the United States might be drawn into World War II, she began talking about the pros and cons of war in her public addresses. She used her familiarity with everyday small-

town realities to earn her audience's trust, then used that moment of intimacy to request that they consider the effects of decisions made in high places on people whose lives were not so unlike their own. DuComb recalls one particular occasion when Jackson was invited to give a talk in New York City. She opened her talk this way:

Ladies and gentlemen, I have just received a telegram from my daughter Ann. 'Martha baked cookies and burned them in the oven. Then she baked a pie and burned it in the oven. We would like her to quit cooking. Charles played softball at school yesterday and accidentally hit Timmy Brown in the head. And someone carelessly left my glasses in the driveway, and someone drove over them.'

'THERE ARE ACCOUNTS OF HER MAKING PEOPLE *furiosus*, HER AGENT TELLING HER TO *shut up*, AND HER EDITORS TELLING HER TO *shut up*, AND SHE WOULD NOT *shut up*.'

"The audience was totally hers," laughs DuComb. "And then she probably went on to talk about the starving Armenians and the impending war. She was always a prognosticator of what was to come." With a husband who had fought in World War I, Jackson knew better than to view war in terms of honor and glory. War was about killing, and the politicians urging Americans to become actively involved in World War II were not the ones who would bear the brunt. Deeply cognizant that war offered the prospect of serious financial profit to many businesses, she used her story "The Silk Shirt" to convey her disgust at the exploitation of ordinary citizens—especially in the wake of the Depression, which had left so many foundering.

Jackson felt a duty to speak out on pressing issues of the day, even if it meant imperiling her own livelihood. DuComb remembers, "There are accounts of her making people furious, her agent telling her to shut up, and her editors telling her to shut up, and she would not shut up. She used to say, 'When I get a phone call from Mr. Roosevelt and he tells me to stop talking about [war], maybe I'll stop talking about it. But he knows as well as I do what's coming.'"

The matriarch of Spencer

Charles Carter Jackson engaged in various business enterprises, but he was never as successful as his wife. "Ultimately, her light so outshone his," says DuComb. "She was the breadwinner. She was the powerful personality. She was the matriarch—not just of our family but of Spencer. It came to her by the force of her personality and the nature of her work. From the Depression-era years until the war years, she was a real big shot." By all accounts, this domestic arrangement was perfectly agreeable to both Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. Weymouth Fogelberg, the nephew who grew up in the Jackson household, had fond memories of his uncle proofreading and editing his wife's stories. "There were sometimes intense battles between them," he recalled—especially over what Charles called her "purple passages."

Magazine, Jackson spent her mornings "at her typewriter." She walked to the square at noon and met her husband for lunch at the hotel dining room, then spent the afternoon working in the store.

Despite this change in fortune, Jackson never lost her spirit of generosity or her sense of humor. DuComb remembers that later in life, when she could not afford to make financial donations to community fundraising efforts, she would donate a reading, and the venue would be filled with paying audience members. "She would say, 'I was lucky to have my career at a time when people just liked a good story. And if liking a good story includes taking some instruction in common-sense values, good!'"

After Charles died in 1969, Margaret Jackson moved to a nursing home in Indianapolis, where she died at age 79 in 1974. ✧

By 1935, when Jackson was forty, her income from short stories, along with royalties from her six books, enabled the family to buy one of the grand houses across the street from where they had been living on West Hillside Avenue, the one with the view overlooking downtown. The Queen Anne-style house was the same age as Jackson herself. It had been built for Inman Fowler, an attorney who later became a state senator. His career inspired one of the lead characters in her third novel, *Jenny Fowler*.

Changing times

After World War II, reader interest shifted from small towns to big cities and from nuanced emotional observation to fast-paced action. Editors of periodicals were no longer willing to buy Jackson's stories, and her income dropped precipitously. By 1955, she and Charles had sold the house on the hill and moved to a 1,000-square-foot bungalow at 374 W. Indiana St., a few blocks east of the square. They opened a small business, Jackson's Gift Shop, at 65 S. Main St. According to an article published around that time in the *Indianapolis Star*

I'm convinced that a good national or international guffaw might lessen some of our fears. Young people aren't taught sufficiently what fun children and family life can be. When my small grandsons tell me with gales of laughter their terrible little moron jokes, I am convulsed—not at their wit but at them. And when the family baby wads up her fat hands before her and solemnly practices her 10-month-old trills, and crows with laughter afterwards, my soul is filled with delight, a delight which need never fail us as long as there are children—anybody's children—in the world.

—Margaret Weymouth Jackson, *This I Believe*