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Looking Back to Look Forward: The Wisconsin Idea in the Arts



Robert Gard visits with farmers on May 9, 1955. Gard traveled across the state (note the Wisconsin Idea Theater logo painted on the side of his truck) to promote and cultivate the theatrical arts in rural communities. Gard was a well-known figure in Wisconsin through his travels as well as his WHA-Radio program, and later WHA-TV program, "Wisconsin Is My Doorstep." UW Digital Collections/ID S15183

On October 3, 1914, over 4,000 people gathered in rural Sauk City to attend the opening of a play. Written, organized, and directed by Ethel Rockwell, the University of Wisconsin Extension's director of community drama, *A Social Center Pageant* promised attendees a day-long exploration

of “a new movement in democracy” and a celebration of the city’s decision to adopt the local school as its social and cultural center.

Pageants featuring large numbers of costumed actors portraying historic moments, acting out morality tales, or even serving as a tool in city planning, were common at the time. Held outdoors, *A Social Center Pageant* included scores of local actors dedicated to the lofty principles articulated in the program. Foremost among them was the notion that government should no longer be “merely the selection of agents for repression, but ... the all-inclusive and living fellowship of citizens in a creative process of self-education.”

A rapt audience followed the cast across town for scenes that took place in several different locations, culminating in a final act in which participants removed the community’s ballot box from the town hall and led a triumphant procession to the school house where it was installed. The interpretation of this symbolic gesture, according to a Sauk City resident who was there, was that the school would become the true “seat of continual learning and open inquiry.”

Then, as now, the country was roiling with cultural and political changes. W.E.B. DuBois was writing articles and books that probed the ways in which Black citizens were treated unfairly by American systems and structures. The Settlement House movement was addressing ways that immigrants could be better assimilated into American culture. Congress had created the Cooperative Extension Service to work with state universities to improve the quality of rural life and economics. Meanwhile, urban officials were engaged in conversations about education reform, the condition of prisons, fair labor practices, and the roots of poverty. At the same time, large-scale industrial and technological advances, such as the automobile and electricity, began to widen the gap between “haves” and “have nots” and between urban and rural life. People were discussing what “democracy” meant in this new reality, and for the people gathered in Sauk City that day the question of the ballot box was not a trivial one.



A crowd gathers around Sauk City High School as participants in Ethel Rockwell's A Social Center Pageant move the town ballot box from City Hall to the high school in a gesture that represents the convergence of citizenship and education. Courtesy of the Sauk Prairie Area Historical Society.

A reporter from *Harper's Weekly*, who traveled all the way from New York to cover the play, noted that its theme dealt with "the new theory that the business of citizenship and the business of education constitute one process." That this event occurred in a tiny Wisconsin town was "as richly significant as the rifle shot at Concord or the signing of the Declaration of Independence."

The play was truly an example of creativity in the service of big ideas. *A Social Center Pageant* also ushered in an era in which a set of beliefs shared by Governor Robert M. LaFollette and University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise would forever alter the artistic and cultural life of our state. These beliefs, collectively known as "the Wisconsin Idea," were founded in a deep humanism and preached a gospel of the university as a body in service to the entire state. According to the Wisconsin Idea, innovation in sciences, arts, and letters was to be made available for use by all, and residents were encouraged to cultivate their special interests and latent artistic talents in pursuit of building better lives, and stronger communities. The ultimate purpose of all of this activity was the

establishment of a high-functioning democracy that viewed “the state as an instrument for the well-being of all people” rather than just the privileged few.

A very big idea, indeed.



Ethel Rockwell’s pageant was a foundational moment within a larger movement to apply the central tenets of the Wisconsin Idea to the arts. Her Bureau of Dramatic Activities, within UW Extension, freely loaned scripts to anyone in Wisconsin wanting to present a show, and Rockwell frequently made herself available to advise fledgling theatrical endeavors. Her colleague Thomas Dickinson, a professor in the University of Wisconsin English Department, was at the same time encouraging the writing and production of locally themed plays. Dickinson considered theater to be “the workshop of democracy” and drew on the spirit of LaFollette-style Progressivism to establish the Wisconsin Dramatic Society to ensure the proliferation of locally produced theater throughout the state. Zona Gale, a Pulitzer prize-winning playwright from Portage, was among the many playwrights whom Dickinson nurtured through his work.

But it wasn’t just theater. The influence of the Wisconsin Idea in the arts could be felt—and heard—by the thousands of rural residents who participated in singing societies inspired by Professor Edgar “Pop” Gordon. Gordon had begun his career at Hull House in Chicago and was deeply influenced by founder Jane Addams’ belief that arts are “a potent agent for making the universal appeal, and inducing men to forget their differences.” Like Addams, Gordon found that singing, in particular, could help build strong communities. He put this theory to practice in places like De Pere, where he created an ecumenical choral society to help bridge social distinctions. After years of criss-crossing Wisconsin by train to coordinate the creation of choral groups, Gordon took his ideas to the producers of the newly established WHA radio. Developed to help deliver ideas and learning to the rural communities of the state, WHA eventually became home to

Gordon's immensely popular "Journeys in Musicland" and "Let's Sing!" broadcasts, which were aimed largely at schoolchildren and heard in hundreds of classrooms from 1931 to 1955.



Edgar "Pop" Gordon hosted *Let's Sing* and *Journeys in Music Land*, serving thousands of schools around the state. Credit:

UW Archives, image S08696

Many in Wisconsin were beginning to see how the arts could improve the cultural fabric of their state, but few understood the role the arts and creativity could play in Wisconsin's economic development. In an article titled "What the University Can Do for the Business Man," in the *Bulletin of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association of Milwaukee* (May 1908), Charles Van Hise wrote, "I would have everybody who has a talent have an opportunity to find his way so far as his talent will carry him, ... and that is only possible through university extension supplementing the schools and colleges."

The tools the university had at its disposal— correspondence courses, farm short courses, visiting professors, WHA Radio—if used correctly could extend education opportunities to all. These tools were made even more

effective through collaboration with agents of the federal Cooperative Extension program, who were broadly charged with the improvement of rural life. In addition to sharing best practices around agriculture, home economics, and other important subjects, Cooperative Extension agents often encouraged “home talent” plays at county fairs, the first being in Vernon County in 1925.

By 1932, 40 of Wisconsin’s then 71 counties (Menominee County was added in 1959) had held at least one drama event, leading to a statewide drama festival in Madison, hosted by Cooperative Extension and the College of Agriculture, with judges from the Speech Department. Audiences there might have seen a production of the comedy *Goose Money*, by Marion Lucy Felton, the script for which was published by University Extension in 1928. The play is especially notable in that it includes a preface on the importance of rural arts—“there is poetry as well as production on a farm”—by then University of Wisconsin President Glenn Frank. Moreover, it is likely that this play was chosen for publication because Mrs. Felton, describing herself as “just an ordinary farm woman,” had created an authentic portrayal of farm life that could “tempt other farm men and women to try their hand at developing real rural folk drama.” In a sweeping study titled *The Arts Workshop of Rural America* (1938), sociologist Marjorie Patten described the impact of the work of Cooperative Extension agents in the arts:

The fact that plays are produced in addition to discussions of problems such as dairy marketing, the financing of rural education, ... taxation, and so forth, and that these interests are supplemented by music festivals and folk-dancing events, have proved that farmers are thinking of the drama not as an end in itself but as a normal part of a program that meets the needs of whole communities.

The *Milwaukee Journal* at the time noted the Patten study and summarized the importance of its findings, stating in an editorial, “When rural

communities reveal such a hunger for plays, it means something—something big.”

But it wasn't just a hunger for plays that was growing across the state. A new movement to meet the demand for more opportunity in the visual arts was also underway.



Inspired by the Danish Folk School movement, in which cultural learning was integral to learning the skills of farming, UW College of Agriculture Dean Chris Christensen asked John Barton of the Rural Sociology Department to help develop a visual arts program for rural communities. In 1936, the two men struck upon the idea of inviting landscape painter John Steuart Curry to the University of Wisconsin for a rural artist residency, the first of its kind in the United States.

Under the banner of the Wisconsin Regional Art Program, Curry traveled across the state to inspire Wisconsin farmers and their family members to paint, carve, sculpt—to find the “culture in agriculture.” On his visits, Curry would encourage the formation of local artist clubs, the first being the Rural Rembrandts of Wautoma. Curry's colleague James Schwalbach complemented this outreach work in the visual arts through his “Let's Draw!” radio program, which ran on WHA and later Wisconsin Public Radio from 1936 to 1970. Because many rural schools had only one room and few faculty with any inkling about art, for over thirty years Schwalbach became *the* de facto art teacher for hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin students.

Because of the boom in painting, drawing, and sculpture during the years immediately following World War II, the university hired Robert E. Gard in 1945 to do for theater and writing what Curry and Schwalbach were doing for the visual arts. Established that same year, Gard's Wisconsin Idea Theater nurtured scores of new community theater groups and encouraged local writers to pen their own shows. A few years later, Gard brought

together the first meeting of the Wisconsin Regional Writers Association to decide how “to best further the native literature and lore of Wisconsin.”



University of Wisconsin faculty and artist in residence John Steuart Curry (right) speaks with three onlookers about the mural

he's at work on. UW Digital Collections/ID S10117

Like Ethel Rockwell and John Steuart Curry, Gard and his staff offered nearly unlimited advice and support to grassroots theater and writing groups (indeed Gard's family often complained that he was seldom home). In addition, Gard and his colleague David Peterson traveled across the state with a theater troupe to stage plays as well as Peterson's original musicals about Wisconsin history, stories, and issues. These shows were performed everywhere, from community centers and school gyms to county fairs and state parks.

A 1949 article in the *New York Times* neatly articulated the relationship between the Wisconsin Idea and the out-pouring of drama in rural Wisconsin:

It is a theatre whose walls are the boundaries of the State of Wisconsin, whose stage is as large as all the stages in the state put together, whose

audience numbers in the millions and whose participants are the thousands of actors, directors, technicians, and playwrights within the boundaries of the state.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, key members of UW Extension's faculty continued to champion the arts and support grassroots endeavors, including Karen Cowan, a former cheerleader with the Green Bay Packers who traveled the state offering dance and choreography workshops. County Extension agents were central in the creation of a crafts guild to help guide marketing of home products such as placemats and glassware made by rural artists.

It was during this time that Wisconsin's best-known historian, former County Extension agent Jerry Apps, got his start as a writer with a weekly column titled "Outdoor Notebook" for the Waushara *Argus*. Clutching a fistful of his collected columns, Apps visited Robert Gard's office in Madison to see if Gard could help turn them into a book. With Gard's encouragement and under his publishing imprimatur, Apps created *The Land Still Lives* in 1970, thereby launching one of the greatest literary careers in Wisconsin history. (In 2019, the Wisconsin Historical Society Press published a 50th anniversary edition of the book.)

By 1965, Gard had set his sights on cultivating creativity at the community level in new ways. As director of the Office of Community Arts Development in the UW–Madison College of Agriculture, he began working with communities to establish arts councils to better serve local needs. He and his colleagues distributed over 20,000 copies of their seminal book, *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan*, which sought to re-establish the economic and cultural vitality of America's faltering towns and rural areas through the incorporation of and participation in the arts.

"In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy, or for the well-endowed museum, the gallery, or the ever-subsidized regional professional theater," wrote Gard in the introduction to the book. "As America emerges into a different

understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and in the places where the people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves.”



The reverberations of the Gard plan and the indefatigable contributions of those others who for more than a hundred years have worked to apply the Wisconsin Idea to the arts are still felt today. The Wisconsin Regional Writers Association continues today as the Wisconsin Writers Association to encourage, educate, support, and promote Wisconsin writers. John Steuart Curry’s art program is still going strong, too. Today’s Wisconsin Regional Art Program (WRAP), which is managed through the University of Wisconsin–Madison Department of Continuing Studies, holds twenty regional workshops and exhibitions statewide every year. The Association of Wisconsin Artists, a nonprofit group of more than five hundred artists—including that first group, the Rural Rembrandts—supports WRAP’s work in multiple ways and also sponsors a mentorship program for teens and an annual exhibit event for the elementary-age children.

The early work of the Wisconsin Idea Theater is reflected in today’s Northern Sky Theater, which got its start through an incredibly successful David Peterson production of *Song of the Inland Seas* at Peninsula State Park. According to Northern Sky’s artistic advisor Doc Heide, the endeavor “seemed to grow from the soil of the Wisconsin woodlands.” A former student of Peterson, Heide remarks that the Northern Sky is “a true theatre of the folk, carrying forth songs and themes that had found their way here in the canoes of French voyageurs or the holds of iron ore ships. To offer these gems under a swirl of stars with the smell of campfires warming your soul—priced so that anyone who hankered to could come—was the [Wisconsin Idea Theatre] vision indeed.”



Watching a night performance under a canopy of stars at Northern Sky Theatre in Door County is a one-of-a-kind experience.

The theater has its roots in the Peninsula State Park-based Heritage Ensemble, founded in the early 1970s by Wisconsin Idea

Theatre stalwart David Peterson. Photo credit: Len Villano.

The impact of Gard's report, *The Arts in the Small Community*, can be seen today in direct and indirect ways. Melinda Childs, Community Cultural Development Director at ArtStart in Rhinelander, says that "the spirit of [the former Rhinelander] School of the Arts has long been infused" in ArtStart programs as well as in the Northern National Art Competition and Northern Arts Council support of cultural activity throughout the region. Childs notes that "more recently new generations have embraced that same spirit and infused it into Project North," a music, art, and environmental sustainability festival.

On her travels across the state, Executive Director of Arts Wisconsin Ann Katz finds herself reminding people that "Wisconsin is an especially creative place with a long history of encouraging the arts from the grassroots on up." While the University of Wisconsin was indeed important to the movement to make arts a centerpiece of rural communities, she notes that statewide arts groups such as the Wisconsin Arts Board,

municipal governments, and countless local creative endeavors have been and continue to be central to creative expression in our state.

Once you see this creative expression, you realize it is everywhere. It's in the exhibition of works by six contemporary Black female artists from Milwaukee currently on view at the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend. It's in the powerful murals painted in downtown Madison and Milwaukee in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Maybe you've noticed it in industrial-themed murals on factory walls in Beloit or in the Art D'Tour installations that dot the green hills of Sauk County or in the songs of Maa Vue of Wausau, who draws on her Hmong roots to create contemporary pop music.

For some it is easier to grasp the impact of the arts on our communities when it is represented in dollars and cents. According to research released in March 2020 by the U.S. Department of Commerce and National Endowment for the Arts, Wisconsin's creative sector in 2017 provided a \$10.1 billion economic benefit—3.1% percent of the state's gross domestic product—and employed over 96,651 people. "That's more jobs than the state's beer, biotech, and papermaking industries" combined, notes Arts Wisconsin's Katz.



Wisconsin is, indeed, a state of creativity, born of a vision crafted more than a century ago and cultivated through a partnership between our citizens, communities, and university and extension systems.

In 1997, at end of her ten-year term as the dean and director of University Cooperative Extension, Ayse Somersan published a series of case studies on the businesses, nonprofits, cultural organizations, and other groups and associations in Wisconsin that have benefitted greatly from UW faculty support.

In *Distinguished Service: University of Wisconsin Faculty and Staff Helping to Build Organizations in the State*, Somersan observes, “There were [those] who spent a lifetime helping Wisconsin people lead creative and satisfying lives through involvement in the arts. They were University of Wisconsin professors with vision and energy. They partnered with community leaders and artists around the state and institutionalized the idea that the arts are for everyone. This was the University at its best. It was a shining example of the Wisconsin Idea.”

SUBJECT TAGS:

[*The Wisconsin Idea*](#)

CONTRIBUTORS



Maryo Gard Ewell

Maryo Gard Ewell is both literally and figuratively a child of the Wisconsin Idea. Her father, Robert E. Gard, who created the Wisconsin Idea Theater, inspired her work in community arts development.