

**“The Land and the People Hold Memories”:
An ISHS Memoir Project to Foster Historical Understanding,
Appreciation for Local Experience, and Meaningful Belonging**

This project encourages local historical organizations in Illinois (whether they have a county, community, or more specific focus) to promote the writing of short memoirs—roughly one to three typed pages—by senior citizens, which reflect local Illinois experience in the post-World War II era (the later 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s). A selection of those can then be published, either in a collection devoted to memoirs about that location within the state (which would be locally funded and sold) or in a series for a local newspaper or a society newsletter. The publication arrangement would be indicated in advance to the writers of those submitted memoirs, by the local historical organization that is managing the project in any given area.

Of course, the submitted typescripts would all be donated to, and preserved in, a regional library archives, so that interested readers, including any future historians and genealogical researchers, can benefit from those writings. But some items would be selected for publication. The author of any memoir selected for publication would be notified by letter, from the local historical organization, and that author would then sign and return a “permission to publish” sheet. (Also, if those in the local historical organization want to significantly edit, or shorten, a submitted memoir, that edited text would be sent to the author with the permission slip, so that the author knows in advance that his or her memoir text has been edited for publication.) If the selected memoirs are included in a collection (rather than in a series for a periodical), one or more editors will also write an introduction to the volume, or to separate divisions of the volume. Naturally, historical photographs can be included in such a volume as well.

When a collection of short memoirs devoted to a certain county or community appears, or a series of such writings starts appearing in a local periodical, it will be promoted statewide in *Illinois Heritage* magazine, which will depict the nature of each volume or series.

This memoir writing and publication effort is being promoted through, and advised by, the Illinois State Historical Society for a variety of important reasons:

1. To increase awareness of, and interest in, local history in areas throughout the state.
2. To foster appreciation for older residents (senior citizens) who have experienced so much significant cultural change and can vividly recall an aspect of earlier times—and who often benefit psychologically from the experience of memoir writing.
3. To promote the importance of, as well as memberships in, historical organizations throughout the state.
4. To thereby foster a meaningful sense of belonging among residents of all ages, who
 - a. can read the memoirs about local experience, to learn about ways of life and individuals
 - b. who have vanished from that locale, and to feel a sense of connection to those authors.

5. And of course, to draw public attention to the varied experience of Illinois residents in a remarkable era of cultural change.

The project title, “The Land and the People Hold Memories,” is a line from a poem by Carl Sandburg, titled “Prairie,” which promotes meaningful belonging through remembered experience. It appeared just a little over a century ago, in his second poetry book, *Cornhuskers*. And he was often an advocate of remembered personal experience, as his book-length poem, *The People, Yes*, and many other poems reveal. Also, he wrote his own effective memoir (about growing up in Galesburg), *Always the Young Strangers*, and it appeared on his 75th birthday, January 6, 1953, in the middle of the very era (1946 through the 1960s) that will be the focus of all the short memoirs by older Illinois residents. He was then our first Illinois poet laureate as well (1962-1967). And Sandburg was strongly devoted to appreciating others, of whatever social class, ethnic group, or location, so he is an inspiring icon for this Illinois memoir project.

The Illinois State Historical Society advisor for this statewide effort is the organization’s vice president, John Hallwas, who has written and spoken extensively about Illinois history and literature for half a century. He has discussed book-length memoirs by dozens of Illinois writers, from famous figures like Black Hawk, U. S. Grant, and Jane Addams, to less well-known residents like minister Robert Burdette, educator Albert Britt, and author Ruby Berkley Goodwin. And he also has much experience in developing and editing collections of short memoirs by Illinois residents, including the seven-volume *Tales from Two Rivers* memoir book series, that originated in 1981 and received significant attention. That series includes more than 800 short memoirs by older Illinois residents, who recall their local experience in the western Illinois region from the turn of the century through the World War II era.

As that successful series of Illinois memoir collections also reveals, organizations that plan volumes of locally focused short memoirs would also benefit by indicating a variety of categories that submitted memoirs should fall into. Some of those might be very general, such as Family Life, School Experience, People of the Local Past, Holiday Memories, The Music We Enjoyed, and Early Work Experience. Others might directly reflect the locale, such as Small-Town Life, Good Times and Bad Times on the Farm, Our City Neighborhood, and Growing Up in (Whatever Community or County). By the same token, some locales may have an interest in memoirs about notable local figures or sites, in categories such as Remembering Carl Sandburg and His Family (in Knox County) or The Personal Impact of Edgar Lee Masters’ Poems (in Fulton County), or Enjoying the Lakefront in Chicago, or Exploring Wild Areas in Southern Illinois. So, there is opportunity to both reflect a personal version of human experience in that locale and also convey something that helps to uniquely define life experience there.

Those Illinois locales that do initiate an effort to foster the writing of short memoirs by older residents, for creating a resource of personal experience about the post-war 1940s through the 1960s (when Baby Boomers were young) and for publishing selected submissions in a collection or a periodical, should contact William Furry at the Illinois State Historical Society office, so that participation in this statewide program titled “The Land and the People Hold Memories” can be accurately recorded. Email executivedirector@illinoishistory.org, or phone

217-525-2518. And those who would like advice or promotional assistance from the supervisor of this ISHS effort are invited to contact writer and speaker John Hallwas: je-hallwas@wiu.edu.