

Greatest work of local fiction, 'American Years' turns 75 this month



Harold Sinclair at work on his second novel, "American Years," ca. 1938. Sinclair wrote the entire novel long hand, using an old letter copybook (seen here) before completing a typed manuscript.

This month marks the 75th anniversary of Harold Sinclair's "American Years," a novel in which the City of Bloomington serves as the central character.

As with much of Sinclair's literary career, this 1938 work met with strong critical reception and less-than-stellar sales. The New York Times praised "American Years" as "an unpretentious piece of genuine native literature," with a humor "sly and right and colloquial." And Newsweek mentioned Sinclair in the same breath as John Steinbeck in a discussion of up-and-coming literary lights.

Sinclair, arguably Bloomington's greatest writer, and "American Years," arguably his greatest work, both held great promise that fell short of expectations. Published by Doubleday, Doran & Co., the novel was the June selection of the Literary Guild, which helped to boost sales, though the hoped-for national bestseller never materialized.

Born in 1907 in Chicago, Sinclair's father left the family when he was three years old, and Harold and his younger sister Elizabeth were eventually dispatched to Bloomington and raised by an aunt and uncle.

Never one for education of the formal kind, Sinclair dropped out of Bloomington High School to work fulltime for Western Union. Later he found employment with Holder Hardware Co., and then played coronet in his own dance band in Ocala, Florida. After

stops in Chicago (halfheartedly playing the part of a bohemian) and Fort Worth, Tex., he returned to Bloomington in the early 1930s, this time for good.

In 1933 he married area schoolteacher Ethel Louise Moran, and the couple would have six children (two sons and four daughters). As Harold struggled to support a large family and increasingly turned to alcohol, Ethel became the breadwinner as The Pantagraph's longtime librarian.

For much of the 1930s, Sinclair worked for Sears, Roebuck & Co. then located downtown. After a long day selling hardware, he would write late into the night, aided and abetted by strong drink and Dixieland jazz. Sinclair's first novel, "Journey Home" (1936), received good notices but garnered unimpressive sales.

"American Years" debuted in May 1938. In it, Sinclair traces rise of "Everton" from its establishment in the pioneer era to the Civil War. Although it's a fictional place, there's no mistaking Everton (short for "Every and Any Town") as a stand-in for Bloomington.

Sinclair made expert use of a treasure trove of local pioneer reminiscence (he was a well-known denizen of old Withers Library, the staff accustomed to his odd research requests and breath smelling of liquor), so it's not surprising to learn that the individuals populating Everton are based on real people. Sometimes he kept the actual names, as in the case of Bloomington founder James Allin and frequent visitor Abraham Lincoln. Other times he employed pseudonyms, such as "Ike Frink" for real life Isaac Funk.

Yet unlike most historical novels of the era, Sinclair's was neither a romance nor multigenerational soap opera. Rather, "American Years" was an unusual tale in that the community served as protagonist. "His artistry pushed point of view beyond third-person omniscient; at its best 'American Years' sounded like history talking," noted Illinois Wesleyan University's Robert Bray in his introduction to the novel's 1988 University of Illinois Press reprint.

After the publication of "American Years," Sinclair left Sears and the hardware trade hoping to earn a living as a writer. His subsequent works included "Years of Growth" (1940) and "Years of Illusion" (1941), the final two books of his Everton trilogy.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Harold and Ethel Sinclair lived at 709 E. Taylor St., just east of what's now the Vrooman Mansion bed and breakfast. In 1956, he finally enjoyed commercial success with the publication of his artful Civil War novel "The Horse Soldiers," adapted three years later as the John Ford-directed vehicle for John Wayne and William Holden. Yet only one more novel (the 1958 sequel "The Cavalryman") would see the light of day.

"He never owned property, only once and briefly held a mortgage, and usually had not enough income to keep a wife and children above what is today called the poverty line," recalled his son Ward Sinclair. "In the later years, the occasional royalty checks and book

advances went more often than not for alcohol or personal acquisitions”—ranging from a sports car to a new stereo.

Ward Sinclair wrote of his father “unrelenting” despondency and melancholy, recalling an incident in which Harold set fire to a stack of manuscripts of rejected novels in the family’s backyard.

A 59-year-old Harold Sinclair passed away on May 24, 1966, following surgery at Brokaw Hospital. He was laid to rest at Park Hill Cemetery on the city’s west side.