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## “The Spirit of Our Rural Countryside”: Toward an Extracurricular Pedagogy of Place

*Nancy Reddy*

### *Abstract*

While place-based pedagogies and place-conscious education have received a great deal of attention in community literacy, these studies have often focused on classroom efforts at engaging students in their communities. This article articulates an extracurricular pedagogy of place through a historical study of a network of creative writing groups in mid-century rural Wisconsin. Rather than thinking of place-conscious education as something that emerges from the classroom, the work of these writers suggests that scholars and educators in community literacy look instead for place-based literacies already at work in our communities.

The Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association (WRWA) was founded in 1948 at the University of Wisconsin in Madison to encourage rural people across the state to use creative writing to record and preserve the history, culture, and folklore of a rural way of life thought then to be vanishing. The opening article of the organization's first newsletter defined the WRWA's work as centrally focused on everyday rural life and especially rural places, noting that they were “particularly interested in the literary interpretation of the country and farm life” (“What is the Rural Writers' Association?”). This first invitation into the organization explained that members need not have formal education or previous experience with writing. In fact, it suggested that knowledge of rural place and culture would be a more important qualification for membership than writing expertise. The very first sentence of the article specified that the organization was open to “all the folks in rural areas of the State who have written, or would like to try writing, a play, a story or a poem” (“What is the Rural Writers' Association?”). The inclusive spirit here is worth noting, as membership was explicitly offered even to those who had not actually written anything yet, but merely desired to write. Rural knowledge and attention to community activities were, in fact, emphasized as more essential traits for membership than prior writing experience. The article asserts that “if you are conscious of your local history, or of the good neighborhood tales you hear and repeat and maybe try to write down, you will be an exceptionally good member of the Association” (“What is the Rural Writers' Association?”). For the rural people of the WRWA, rural identity and knowledge of local history and culture were essential components of becoming a writer.

Rural people around the state took up the call to write with a speed and enthusiasm that surprised even the group's founders. Although WRWA founder and University of Wisconsin Extension Professor Robert Gard noted later that he had initial-

ly anticipated at most fifty or sixty members, the organization quickly exceeded his hopes, with membership topping one thousand within the first year alone with local clubs established in eight counties spanning from Marathon County in northern Wisconsin to Manitowoc County on the shore of Lake Michigan in the east and Janesville in south central Wisconsin (Newhouse; Kamarck, "Formation"). An article written in the Madison-based *State Journal* about the group's first two years attributes this success to its ability to satisfy "a basic need for expression of hundreds of farm folk throughout the state" (Newhouse). Moreover, in addition to composing poems, plays, essays, and stories, these members also shared their writing via publication and performance. They published in venues as various as farm journals like *The Furrow* and *Hoard's Dairyman*, small literary magazines, and local and state newspapers including the *Milwaukee Journal*, the *Waukesha Freeman*, and the *Portage Daily Register*, and they performed the plays they'd written at the Farmers' Bureau, 4-H, and Homemakers' clubs. As a result, large numbers of rural people not only engaged in writing, but also made themselves visible as writers in rural community spaces and publications.

The WRWA's work with rural writers is recorded primarily through the Robert E. Gard Papers, housed at the University of Wisconsin's archives. Because Robert Gard was a professor in the University's Extension Division, the university archives hold his papers, which include records not only of the WRWA, but also of the many other cultural activities he supported during his long career, including the Wisconsin Idea Theater and the Arts in the Small Community program, both of which continue today. The Gard Papers consist of a wide range of materials, including handwritten notes and typed minutes from early board meetings, newsletters, letters between board members and members, and histories written by several different local clubs on the ten-year anniversary of the organization. Because I am largely interested in how ordinary people experience the practice of creative writing and how they articulate its value, my analysis draws primarily on materials written by members, such as portions of the newsletter reporting on member communication or featuring member writing and club histories that describe the work of local writing groups. It is possible that materials that challenge the organization's official narrative, such as reports from members who felt constrained or excluded by the practices of the state-wide leadership, were not included in the archive, which is a necessary limitation of any institutionally-held archive. I have attempted to validate the materials in the archive through reading contemporaneous newspaper accounts; I have not been able to locate any WRWA-related materials held by individuals or in local historical societies.

The work of the WRWA—and particularly its members' practice of writing in and about rural places and using writing to engage members of their rural communities—demonstrates the powerful role of place and community engagement in sustaining extracurricular literacies. The WRWA's focus on the rural as a source of writing meant that rural identity and knowledge was an asset for the aspiring writer. Because rural places and people have often been treated as essentially a-literate (see, e.g., Danbom; Fuller; and Kline for histories of efforts to reform and modernize rural America; see also Donehower et al., "Preface" on the dearth of studies of rural places in literacy studies), this valorization of the rural played an essential role in invit-

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ing rural people into writing. Even more significant, however, is the way that rural people themselves took up creative writing and folded the work of writing into existing practices of rural civic engagement. Many of the members of the WRWA noted that their interest in writing had previously marked them as odd in their communities, and female members in particular frequently observed that their desire to write conflicted with the domestic and community work expected of them. These writers managed the tension between writing and rural community life by entwining writing with conventional forms of rural civic engagement, like participation in 4-H and Homemakers' clubs and volunteer work at school and nursing homes. This entwining of literacy and rural community life was studied as well by anthropologist Anita Puckett, whose examination of the gendered division of reading and writing in rural Appalachia found that women were most likely to take up those literacy practices that aligned with existing attitudes about appropriate women's community activities and cultural identities. While the community work of these writing groups certainly resonates with the traditions of civic clubs or women's clubs, particularly as described by Anne Ruggles Gere's *Intimate Practices*, it also bears a striking similarity to the rural tradition of "neighborliness." As studied by Jane Greer, this neighborliness, an important trait of rural culture, is "an informal but important alternative form of civic engagement" (103). In the WRWA, this neighborliness took the form of interweaving writing and community work. As a result, the rural writers of the WRWA were able to not only have rich and productive writing lives, but to also move that writing through community spaces.

These writers' practices of interweaving rural place, community engagement, and creative writing are particularly relevant for educators and researchers interested in place-based literacies and place-based pedagogies. Rather than thinking of place-conscious education as something that emerges from the classroom—a way that educators move students into their communities—the work of these writers suggests that we look instead for place-based literacies already at work in our communities. This article articulates the work of the WRWA as a significant extracurricular pedagogy of place. I begin by tracing the significance of the rural through scholarship on place-conscious education and place-based literacies. I then place the WRWA's use of creative writing to preserve and celebrate rural Wisconsin history and culture in the context of longstanding negative stereotypes about rural people and places. Then I turn to the WRWA, examining how the rural writers of the WRWA took up the rural as content for their writing, and how they then used writing to engage their communities.

The work of these rural writers matters because it demonstrates how ordinary people took up and maintained a writing practice and how this writing was made possible through its close relationship to rural place and rural community life. In the midst of the many obligations of daily life, and in the face of disinterest and sometimes even scorn from communities who were inclined to view creative writing as suspect or odd, these writers developed a specifically rural literacy practice—an extracurricular pedagogy of place—in which writing was intertwined with existing practices of rural community life.

In this way, the rural writers of the WRWA also shed light on a problem articulated by writers of all kinds today: how to maintain a writing practice in the midst of the many obligations of daily life, many of which feel more urgent than the production of creative work. This challenge is especially difficult for writers engaged in self-sponsored creative writing; without an obligation to keep up a writing practice for either school or work, without much hope of a large return on the labor of writing in terms of either money or large-scale recognition, it's easy for such writing to fall by the wayside. In other words, when faced, as the writers of the WRWA were and as writers today of course are, with deadlines at work, children requiring care, meals to be cooked, and other endless demands of daily life, the writing of a poem or short story can seem like a small thing, hardly worth the time. And yet, the writers of the WRWA doggedly made space for writing in their lives, and, through sponsoring writing contests and holding writing workshops and readings, they encouraged others—the elderly at nursing homes, patients at a sanitarium, schoolchildren—to do the same. Their persistent labor in making their own writing practice sustainable and their success at making creative writing legible to the members of their rural communities can help us understand how extracurricular writers today take up and maintain a writing practice outside the boundaries of school and work.

### *Place-Conscious Education as a Curricular and Extracurricular Pursuit*

The work of the writers of the WRWA illuminates an *extracurricular* pedagogy of place whereby writing is made possible and sustainable through its intertwining with rural community life. Although place-conscious education has received a great deal of attention in recent scholarship—Rosanne Carlo's keyword essay asserts that place-based literacies have become “a dominant theme in pedagogy, community work, and scholarship” (60)—this research has tended to assume that this work originates in the classroom, with educators urging their students to go out into their communities, rather than considering the place-based extracurricular literacies already at work in the communities they hope to impact. Gruenewald and Smith, for example, argue that “place-based or place-conscious education introduces youth and children to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities” (xvi). While this kind of work is certainly valuable, it neglects attention to the extracurricular literacies already underway. This section aims to articulate a framework for an *extracurricular* pedagogy of place by considering the relationship between place-based literacies, extracurricular literacies, and the sustainability of rural communities.

Place-based pedagogies have often been used by educators who hope to help their students connect more deeply with the places around them. This approach has been frequently taken up by educators and researchers working with students in rural schools (Brooke and McIntosh; Azano; Hodges). Speaking specifically of her work with what she calls “at-risk rural students,” Hodges argues that place-based pedagogy “provides an opportunity to help them develop pride in their surroundings, an awareness of who they are and the place they hold in their community, as well as providing opportunities for developing reading, writing, and speaking skills” (27-28). The

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ecological impulse that frequently undergirds place-based pedagogies makes them an especially good fit for the sciences, and they've been used in science classes in a rural high school (Huffling et al.; Zimmerman and Weible) and in an outdoor learning context (Keller). This pedagogy has also made its way into the college classroom, both in the context of composition (Brooke and McIntosh; Rivers) and, more recently, creative writing (Case). Taken together, this research suggests a deep desire on the part of instructors and their students to connect more deeply with the places in which learning happens. It also reveals the breadth of kinds of places where learning happens, including remembered place, such as the "deep mapping" that Brooke and McIntosh assign their composition students as an invention exercise, and the local community of the college campus, as in Rivers's work with geocomposition, which moves his students through their new campus community and the surrounding city.

In response to the difficulties associated with attracting and retaining teachers in rural areas, many teacher education and teacher preparation programs have taken up place-based pedagogies as a means of not just "exposing" teacher candidates to rural areas but of also helping them to more deeply understand the challenges and opportunities of teaching and living in a rural area (Ajayi; Azano and Stewart; Eppley; Lesley and Matthews; White and Reid). Writing of their work with pre-service teachers in Australia, White and Reid argue that "rural children deserve high-quality teachers who understand the importance of place, value their lifeworlds, and build appropriate teaching and learning opportunities" (9). Many in teacher education see place-based pedagogies as a way to develop future teachers' abilities to engage their students and make connections between the classroom and students' communities.

Although it is not explicitly stated in the literature, I suspect that rural place is a frequent connecting thread in the literature on place-based education because we're inclined to see rural places as vulnerable, whether they're subject to ecological destruction or economic decline. Educators and researchers using place-conscious education in rural places often hope to reverse this decline through empowering students to act in their communities. David Gruenewald has used the concept of a critical pedagogy of place to explore how this kind of pedagogy can positively impact vulnerable places. As Gruenewald defines it, "a critical pedagogy of place challenges all educators to reflect on the relationship between the kind of education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations" (3). In Gruenewald's view, then, a critical pedagogy of place is something teachers can practice in order to help their students develop a stronger bond with their own community and to positively impact that community going forward.

In contrast with Gruenewald's emphasis on teachers' practice, several studies in rural literacies have illustrated how existing rural literate practice—that is, the way rural people already use literacy, before intervention from some well-intentioned educator—supports community sustainability. Charlotte Hogg's *From the Garden Club* investigates the literacy work done by rural women in a small town in Nebraska, finding that they are often involved in crafting histories and other texts that will shape how people within and beyond their community will understand the town. Jacqueline Edmondson's *Prairie Town* tracks the emergence of what she calls "a new agrari-

an literacy” in the upper Midwestern town of her study. This literacy, which emerged in part through Public Forums at which attempts to reinvigorate the town through a Prairie Renaissance were discussed, is necessarily linked with the economic and cultural future of the town. Two studies of public debate reveal the crucial power of discourse in shaping how communities are seen and who gets a stake in shaping that understanding of community. Marcia Kmetz’s study of the debate around rural water use in Wyoming’s Wind River Valley argues for a “rural civic ethos,” which she defines as “an ethos centered on the community and the place rather than on the neoliberal individual” (30). Emily Cooney’s examination of the debate around the extension of a runway on Hilton Head, South Carolina, shows that the value of place is articulated in widely divergent ways by different stakeholders. These studies highlight the way that distinctively rural literate and rhetorical practices play a powerful role in determining how rural communities are seen, how they will develop, and who is perceived as having a stake in deciding this future. Further, much of the scholarship from rural literacies points toward a way of seeing literate and rhetorical work not as additive—not as something that people have to be encouraged to take up or prodded into valuing—but as instead necessarily interwoven with daily life.

The work of the WRWA, and particularly the way rural people took up the writing practices advocated by the organization’s leadership, points to a vibrant extracurricular pedagogy of place at work in rural Wisconsin. I use *pedagogy* of place here, rather than simply place-based literacies, because these writers had a deliberate practice whereby they used writing to engage each other and their communities. Although the founders of the WRWA originally envisioned the creation of local groups where aspiring writers would meet to share their drafts and offer critique, the organization evolved in response to members’ interests and practices so that the work of writing groups included not only writing and sharing that writing but also moving that writing through rural community spaces and encouraging others to take up writing. This extracurricular pedagogy of rural space was able to evolve because the rural writers of the WRWA practiced writing as something that necessarily belonged in rural spaces and believed that their writing identities could work alongside their identities as rural people.

The founders of the WRWA initially envisioned a state-wide organization that could assist interested rural people in forming local writing groups. They believed that these writing groups could serve not only to encourage writing but also to improve members’ writing. In a February 1949 newsletter article giving interested writers guidance about how to form their own writing group, founder and Extension professor Edward Kamarck argued that a writers’ group should be presented as “an opportunity for exchange of ideas and common growth as writers” as well as a way to get “constructive criticism” on writing in progress (“Formation of Other Local Writing Groups” 47). This view of writing groups as a place where inexperienced writers might work together toward self-improvement and self-education sounds remarkably modern, pre-dating as it does Peter Elbow’s teacherless classroom by several decades. This practice has a great deal in common with the lineage of writing groups described in Anne Ruggles Gere’s *Writing Groups*, though it is remarkable that these groups

consisted of aspiring writers with little formal education in creative writing; even without college degrees, without a pre-existing literary community, these rural people were assumed to be capable not only of writing but of helping each other to grow and develop as writers.

The leadership of the WRWA decided to supplement the work of local writing groups with writing instruction delivered through instructional columns in the monthly newsletter, staff visits to meetings of local clubs, and University Extension courses developed specifically for local clubs. Genre columns in newsletters provided both literacy instruction, as in the regular short story column written by member Alice Kelly asserting that “a good main character is one who knows what he wants and goes after it,” and practical advice for pursuing publication, such as how to learn about the target audience for magazines publishing juvenilia. The WRWA also worked with University Extension to develop a series of correspondence courses specifically for members. The December 1949 newsletter advertised courses in Short Story, Article Writing, and Poetry, consisting of sixteen assignments each, available for \$15 (Kamarck, “Correspondence Courses”). Because the organization’s aim was not only to get rural people writing but also to have them share their writing, they soon decided to expand these original objectives and worked to provide “a publication outlet, so that rural writers may find as widespread an expression as possible” (Kamarck, “The Year Ahead”). In addition to helping members develop writing skills, the leadership sought to develop in members a *disposition* toward writing—specifically to inculcate the belief that writing is a tool for recording and preserving rural life. The leadership of the WRWA, then, saw its purpose as primarily the encouragement of creative writing among rural people and delivering instruction that would allow members to improve and publish their writing.

Local clubs eagerly picked up these practices, enrolling in correspondence courses and Extension courses offered at local Extension offices and vocational schools and inviting WRWA leadership to visit their meetings. What’s more interesting, though, is how the writing practices that emerged from the rural writers of the WRWA evolved beyond what the leadership had envisioned: in addition to writing about rural communities, these rural writers used writing to shape how they understood their communities and how the community saw itself, and they also worked to engage other members of their communities in writing. They shared their writing through publication and performance, and they also sponsored writing contests designed to encourage others in taking up creative writing. For example, the Lakeshore Writers noted in their ten-year history that “our interest in people prompted us to present a program to the patients at Maple Crest Sanatorium on February 16, 1952 and another one to the guests at Shady Lane Home in Manitowoc on February 23 of that year”; a later newsletter report notes that this program at Shady Lane was repeated once or twice a year (“During Ten Years”). At the request of the Waukesha Women’s Club, the WRWA club in Waukesha presented a program entitled “The Waukesha Writer’s Workshop Speaks.”

In this way, the impact of the WRWA spread farther than even the most ambitious founders of the organization had imagined. When the group first met in the



summer of 1948, the founding members of the WRWA claimed that there were “hundreds of farm men and women scattered across and up and down the state from Manitowoc to LaCrosse and from Walworth to Superior who were eager to write poems and stories and plays,” and the rapid founding of local clubs across the state seemed to prove that assertion correct (Gard 2). Moreover, these rural writers then reached out to support the writing of others around them. Ultimately, this extracurricular pedagogy of place allowed rural people to not only take up writing themselves but also share that writing and encourage others in taking up writing.

### *“Only one of many such peculiar folk”: Rural Communities and the “Oddity” of Creative Writing*

Many of the rural writers of the WRWA described material and cultural barriers that had—particularly before joining the WRWA—made taking up writing difficult for them. In addition to the challenge of finding time for writing in lives full of family, domestic, and community obligations that all writers face, these rural people also faced pervasive stereotyping about rural people’s lack of education and lack of interest in literacy, as well as suspicion of creative writing from within rural communities. As a result, many of the members of the WRWA remarked that, prior to joining the WRWA, a statewide organization whose association with the flagship state university seemed for many to legitimize writing, they’d hidden their interest in writing or been seen as odd for partaking in a hobby many viewed as purposeless. In this section I connect a long national history of deficit narratives about rural people’s aptitude for and interest in literacy with turn of the twentieth century rural reform movements’ uses of literacy as a means of modernizing rural people and places. Although creative writing had been seen as suspect in many rural communities, WRWA members entwined creative writing with existing patterns of rural civic engagement, and this made creative writing legible and acceptable in rural communities.

The story of Helen R. Stieve, a mother and farmwife on a family farm in a rural area north of the small town of Baraboo in south central Wisconsin, captures the difficulties faced by rural writers, as well as how the WRWA helped writers overcome these difficulties. A profile in the *State Journal* described Stieve’s longstanding but previously unfulfilled desire to become a writer and quoted her as saying that “all my life I’ve wanted to write. But it was hard to get started.” This difficulty in getting started was likely shaped both by broad assumptions about rural people’s poor education and by her community and family’s attitude about creative writing. And yet, with the support of the WRWA and her local club, Stieve was able to attain a significant measure of success quite quickly. In the fewer than two years following the founding of the WRWA, Stieve moved from simply *wanting* to write to being actively and publicly engaged in writing. In addition to being featured in the *State Journal* article, her name also appeared in papers across the state as they reported on the work of the WRWA. She won honorable mention for a short story in the first state-wide writing contest run by the WRWA; that story was subsequently included in *Pen & Plow*, an anthology published and distributed by the University of Wisconsin. In a column in Madison’s

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*Capital Times*, prominent regional poet August Derleth called this story “promising.” Stieve also rose to a leadership role within the WRWA as she was appointed to the WRWA Advisory Board and invited to speak alongside professional writers on a panel discussion at the WRWA’s 1952 Green Lake Conference. Further, Stieve noted that writing has changed how she sees her own community, as it has “focused my attention on the rural life I know best” and “helped me to realize the wealth of material right here in my community.” Stieve notes that she’s also had personal benefits from her writing, which has made her “a more interesting and certainly more contented person.” She did all of this despite her own difficulty with writing and an initial lack of support from her family and community.

This difficulty with writing can be understood in light of the way that rural places have long been portrayed as culturally backward, with rural schools often derided as old-fashioned and inferior in comparison with schools in towns and cities. These stereotypes are rooted, rather ironically, in urban-based rural reform efforts, beginning around the turn of the twentieth century with the Country Life Movement commissioned by President Theodore Roosevelt. The major aims of the Country Life Movement and the reformers it inspired were the modernizing of rural life through the introduction of technologies such as electricity, telephones, and automobiles and the improvement of rural schools, often through school consolidation and curricular reforms that included a broader array of subjects, such as music and art, as well as more direct vocational material in agriculture and home economics or domestic science (.g., Fuller; Kline; Danbom). The Report of the Country Life Commission claimed to reveal high rates of rural dissatisfaction and a desire for outside assistance, but these claims have been proven largely inaccurate; data from surveys of rural families were not analyzed or included in the report, and “a recent analysis of its replies shows that, contrary to the commission’s report, ‘a *majority* of the total sample and of the farmers were *unqualifiedly satisfied*’ with the conditions of their homes, rural sanitation, and communications services” (Kline 14).

Even those rural reformers ostensibly aimed at improving rural life typically discussed rural schools and people as backwards and lacking. In his book *Rural Education: Community Backgrounds*, Burton Kreitlow, Associate Professor of Rural Education at the University of Wisconsin, described rural education as “the process of producing change in people living in a rural environment” (3). Kreitlow, a self-professed “farm boy,” went on to detail the problems of rural education, including an inadequate financial base, an antiquated administrative structure, rural provincialism, and low levels of formal education among adults. Others were more straightforwardly harsh in their critique of rural schools, as in the case of Professor Francis M. Stalker, Professor Emeritus of Education at Indiana State Teachers College, who claimed, “Nobody is preparing to be a rural teacher, certainly not in a one-teacher school” before elaborating the various deterrents to this career path: “There are no incentives looking toward happy home life, or professional development or growth of salary.” These negative attitudes toward rural schools were also sometimes shared by those charged with teaching rural schoolchildren. Writing in the journal *Education* in 1947, Charis S. Frier, a rural teacher who began her article by noting that she herself is a

product of rural schools, was particularly downcast about her students' aptitude and interest in literature. She observed that "these rural youngsters show a marked lack of interest in words, their meaning and uses" (312). This frequent characterization of rural schools as a "problem" in need of expert remedy was at odds with the reality of fairly high performance in rural schools in the upper Midwest. A study in Wisconsin from 1920-1922, for example, showed that in reading, the top ten percent of students in rural schools outperformed the top students in all other schools (Fuller 241). Stieve seems to have been impacted by these negative portrayals of rural education, and in a report to the WRWA's Advisory Board she mentions "the inferiority I felt, arising from my limited education" as an obstacle that membership in the WRWA has allowed her to overcome.

Despite the persistence of these stereotypes about rural illiteracy, by the founding of the WRWA in 1948, rural people in the upper Midwest were engaged in a wide range of extracurricular writing and rhetorical activities. Rural reform movements in particular worked to recruit rural people into writing. The Grange and 4-H both encouraged members to take up complex literacy practices (McCracken; Ostrander) and farm journals encouraged farmers to take up new scientific farming methods and then write as lay experts sharing their new methods with other farmers (Brazeau). Farm journal articles from the time frequently used the term "book farmers" approvingly to denote farmers who read and contributed through writing to the agricultural press, in comparison with older farmers whose refusal to write meant also a refusal to teach others or participate in the professionalization of farming (Brazeau 411). Thus, these rural literacy practices were a matter not only of gaining and disseminating information, but also of performing an identity as a modern, scientific farmer whose agricultural practices kept pace with expert recommendations. Like the farm journals in Brazeau's study, the WRWA offered a site-specific form of writing instruction, encouraging members to take up the identity of writer as rural sociologist and to engage in recording and preserving rural life. Rural reform efforts placed a high value on literacy, and so, by the time the WRWA appealed to rural people to begin crafting a written record of rural Wisconsin, rural people were already widely encouraged to think of rural identity as compatible with writing—or at least writing that was related to community or agricultural work.

Although rural people were engaging in many forms of literate and rhetorical practice in the rural upper Midwest by mid-century, writing for its own sake—particularly in the genres of creative writing—was still viewed with a fair amount of suspicion. Jerry Apps, a professor emeritus of Wisconsin's College for Agriculture and Life Sciences and former County Extension Agent and 4-H specialist, described this rural suspicion of creative writing. Discussing the influence of Robert Gard, founder and early leader of the WRWA, Apps explains that "what Gard managed to do was bring rural poets out of the closet. Because if you were a farmer in Oneida County in 1950, you didn't want anyone to know you were writing poetry. Gard made it okay" (Smith).

Essays by several members confirm Apps' assertion that rural Wisconsin communities often seemed to see creative writing in particular as frivolous, odd, or a

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waste of time. In an article titled “What the Wisconsin Rural Writers Association Can Mean To A Farm Woman,” Wilhelmina Guerink, a farm woman in Ringle in Marathon County in northern Wisconsin, explained that before she’d become a member of the WRWA and gotten to know other rural writers, she’d felt like “an oddity who, instead of knitting or crocheting like normal folk, spent her spare time, yes, worse than that, time she should have spent at her chores, writing letters, poems, and songs!” It’s notable here that Guerink reported having felt judged for how she was using spare time, suggesting that knitting and crocheting would be acceptable hobbies for a farm woman, but choosing to spend that free time writing would attract mistrust, even before her passion for writing began infringing on time required for chores. However, after she joined the WRWA and met other rural writers through her local club, the annual conference, and correspondence, Guerink observed that “Now I know I am only one of many such peculiar folk, and I no longer mind being what I am.” Further, she hoped that sharing her story would help others find their way into writing and collegial relationship with other writers: “Perhaps I, by being articulate, may serve those who are not yet so” (14).

This suspicion of writing from inside rural communities seems to have been another factor in Stieve’s difficulty with becoming a writer. In addition to her sense of herself as having an “inferior education,” Stieve also alluded to mistrust of creative writing as a practice when she explained, in her report to the WRWA’s Advisory Board, that “being a member of a state-wide organization has removed some of the stigma of eccentricity from writing as a hobby, making it at least as respectable a pastime [sic] as crocheting bedspreads or hooking rugs.” Stieve’s story points in particular to the difficulties that women had taking up creative writing; though she was the full-time mother of school-age children and so had at least some measure of available time, it seems, as Guerink describes, there were also firm ideas about acceptable and unacceptable uses of that time. The *State Journal* article specified that “she likes to spend an hour or so a day at her writing, making sure that it doesn’t interfere with her housework and meals for her husband and their two children.” Her husband’s judgment of her writing looms large in the article, and Stieve notes that prior to her membership in the WRWA, her husband “didn’t take my hobby too seriously.” However, now that she’s “part of a statewide organization and with our own county club,” he’s come around to writing, and Stieve proudly gestured at her writing desk, noting for the reporter that “he gave me this desk for Christmas, so you can draw your own conclusions.” For Stieve, the desk itself, particularly given to her by her previously suspicious husband, presents a tangible argument for the value of her writing.

Although many of the writers of the WRWA lived in communities where writers and writing were initially viewed with suspicion, they were able to take up and maintain a writing practice that worked in concert with other habits of community life. They wrote, performed, and published poems, stories, and plays devoted to recording and celebrating the histories, culture, and folklore of their own communities. The writing they produced shaped the way that they viewed and engaged with their communities, and because it circulated publicly through a range of rural civic and commercial spaces, this writing also shaped the way other rural people saw their com-

munities. For these writers, writing was not only a private practice, but also became a means of community engagement. Further, they saw themselves as advocates for writing and frequently used their writing in the context of volunteer and civic work.

The WRWA is an excellent site for examining how place, sustainability, and civic engagement inform literacy because members took up new writing practices and folded them in to existing patterns of civic engagement, such as volunteering and women's and civic clubs. I suggest that this group can help us to better appreciate the sophisticated pedagogies of place already at work in the communities where we work and to look for additional ways to combine pre-existing modes of civic engagement with new or renewed literate practice.

### *Writing Rural Wisconsin Prose and Verse*

Rural writers in mid-century Wisconsin faced negative stereotypes about rural people's aptitude for and interest in reading and writing, and these stereotypes had emerged through decades of urban-based efforts at rural reform. Despite these stereotypes, and in the face of suspicion of creative writing from within their own communities, rural people in Wisconsin were engaged in a wide variety of writing practices. Rural people's eagerness to write and share poems, stories, and plays is shown by the outpouring of response to the WRWA's annual contest. The contest received hundreds of entries in the first year alone, and this increased to over one thousand entries by the second annual contest in 1950. It seems that for some writers, the contest provided an opportunity to share writing they'd been doing but not circulating, often times for years. The 1951 contest included a rule change so that each member was allowed to submit only once in each category, which resulted in many fewer entries. The Spring 1952 report of contest winners notes that this rule apparently "somewhat deterred some of our more prolific writers who in the past had sent us their lifetime work as an entry" ("Contest Winners"). This outpouring of writing aligns with the leadership's argument that there is "a vast amount of writing going on in the farm kitchens and parlors of Wisconsin" ("Contest Winners"). The WRWA's leadership argued that this member writing manifested an authentic vision of the rural, and in the foreword to the first issue of *Pen & Plow*, an anthology of member writing, Robert Gard asserted that "Here is rural Wisconsin – the land, the wind, the rain, the faiths. This is Wisconsin in terms of people who live on the land and love it – people who understand the true meaning of the seasons."

Member writing—both their poems, stories, and plays, and the essays, letters, and other artifacts that provide a glimpse into what this creative work meant to them—suggests that these rural writers also saw creative writing as a way of understanding their rural communities. To further demonstrate the extracurricular pedagogy of place practiced by these writers, this section presents member writing and club activities that show how WRWA members engaged rural Wisconsin through their writing. I'll discuss first how they used writing to try to capture a vision of rural life that many worried was fading, particularly in light of postwar demographic shifts away from farms and small towns. I'll then show some of the ways in which local

clubs of the WRWA developed their own methods for writing as community engagement in their own local areas. Together, this section argues that the rural writers went beyond the leadership's vision of supporting rural writers who would use writing as a means of preserving a written record of rural Wisconsin; the practice of writing also shaped how these writers experienced their communities, and in many cases they also used writing as a form of community engagement.

### *Writing as a Means of Recording, Revealing, and Celebrating Rural Life*

The WRWA's early newsletters encouraged members to create a "creative interpretation of the state and region," and many groups took up this encouragement to preserve rural spaces through writing. Rural landscape and landmarks were a frequent topic in member writing, and prompts given at meetings of local writing groups often encouraged members to take up rural place in their writing. The Lakeshore Writers made writing about rural place an explicit part of their purpose in the constitution for their club, which explained that they aimed to "encourage the literary interpretation of the life in this area through creative writing of plays" and "preserve for posterity the spirit and story of this area." In Door County, the Ephraim club, named "It Happened in Ephraim," formed specifically around the goal of "working toward a preservation of the rich lore of the peninsula" ("Report on the Tour of the Writers' Groups").

The writing of local history was another way that clubs and individuals took up the writing of rural place. Some clubs partnered with libraries or historical societies to research and distribute the local histories they produced. In several clubs the writing of local history was a collective project, as a "Club Histories" feature published in the WRWA's 25 Year celebration notes. The Indianhead Area Writers interviewed early settlers for the Washburn County Historical Society ("Club Histories" 30). The twenty-two members of the Washington Writers, a group of Senior Citizens from the Washington Park Senior Center in Milwaukee, were described as "enthusiastic historians." Their ongoing project was the "Washington Writers Patchwork," which they described as "a booklet of articles by members relating their experiences and encounters in life in and around Wisconsin" ("Club Histories" 28).

The leadership of the WRWA signaled its support for the writing of local history through frequently publishing this work in the WRWA newsletter and anthologies. Poet Louise Leighton published a poem, "From Radisson's Journal, 1658," in the Winter 1951 newsletter that portrays French fur trader and explorer Pierre-Esprit Radisson musing on the beauty of Wisconsin landscape:

"This is a green, enticing land  
Where forests flower and rivers flow,  
Men could live in happiness here,"  
He wrote, three centuries ago,  
In the spring, in the morning of Wisconsin.

A brief essay by member William E. Morton, titled "Our Earliest Settlers" and published in the Spring 1957 newsletter, also details a very early history of Wisconsin,

explaining that “no ethnic group has lived longer in the State of Wisconsin than the Menomoni Indians.” In the Summer 1957 newsletter another writer, Anne C. Rose, used the Beef River in her Buffalo County to not only show the natural beauty of her part of the state, writing that “it is a quiet stream, flowing so even with the pastures in places that it seems but a crystal parting of the sod.” The poem also draws on local history and shows how this river facilitated westward settlement in the nineteenth century, when farmers and traders used the river valley as a route toward the Mississippi.

It’s especially worth noting how these histories push against the common misperception of the rural as an essentially white space; though the writers of the WRWA were largely white themselves, their writing shows that they were conscious of the native American tribes that had lived in Wisconsin long before their own ancestors had arrived as settlers. Several clubs carefully sought out the native perspective on their state. The Lakeshore Writers invited Mrs. Angus Lookaround, a Menominee writer who is described in the club’s history as “a well-known writer of the middle west” whose stories include “Sunrise of the Menominees” and “Tales From An Indian Lodge,” to a club meeting to share her writing. Following this visit, Lookaround was invited to speak at a statewide gathering of the poets in Baraboo on the topic of “Our Indian Heritage.” The Lakeshore Writers went on several shared trips as a way of increasing their knowledge about the rural places they wanted to describe in writing, and they drew again on Lookaround’s expertise in a visit to Keshena, the home of the Menominee nation. Their ten-year history notes that

our interest in writing also called for sightseeing tours to increase our knowledge of other places, so we visited at Keshena with Mrs. Angus Lookaround as our guide. The tour led us to Rainbow Falls, Keshena Falls, Bear Trap Falls, Soman Rapids, Spirit Rock and the sawmills at Neopit. (“During Ten Years” 4)

The Lakeshore Writers’ other trips included a visit to a ninety-year-old Norwegian Lutheran Church in the town of Franklin, guided by member Mrs. Orin Olsen. These field trips, which go beyond the typical work of writing groups, suggest that, for these writers at least, becoming a good rural writer required not only the drafting and sharing of writing, but also firsthand knowledge of rural place. In this way, their work together shaped not only what they wrote, but also what parts of their state they saw and how they understood Wisconsin’s landscape and history.

### *Writing as a Means of Rural Civic Engagement*

Local clubs across the state used writing as a way to connect with other community groups. In particular, these clubs reached out to sites of rural civic life, including libraries and schools. Much of this work is recorded in the “Club Histories” section of the program for a celebration of the WRWA’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1973. The Wausau Writers’ history reported that “members are active in the Wausau Festival of Arts, and many are asked to speak for civic organizations and schools” (“Club Histories” 28). Several clubs, including the Beaver Dam Writers and the Door County Writers, worked with their local libraries. The Door County Writers had a particularly strong link to their library:

The club donated to and did publicity for a drive for a new library, judged essays for a student contest on the need for a new library, and also judged a contest on litterbugging. They presented books to the library in the name of members who have died. (“Club Histories” 21)

Many groups sponsored or judged writing contests, particularly for young people. The Rhinelander Rustic Writers “persuaded the mayor to proclaim the third week in November as creative writing week” (“Club Histories” 30).

Several groups also began recruiting other rural people into writing through hosting writing groups in a variety of locations in their community. The Lakeshore Writers presented their writing on several occasions to patients at Maple Creek Sanatorium and the guests of the Shady Lane Home. The Fond du Lac Writers Workshop “organized a Writers Club at Waupun and started writing classes at the Senior Center and at Rosalind Apartments, and judged a contest held there, as well as at the institutions” (“Club Histories” 21). In addition to this work of writing and community service, some groups even included community engagement as an explicit part of their aim. Shawano Area Writers worked “for the betterment of the community in publicity” (“Club Histories” 26). The history reported that “they started a newsletter, ‘See-Sow Slivers,’ in 1968, have a radio program sponsored by the library, contribute books to the library, cooperate with work and publicity for Shawano Menominee Arts Fair and are currently working with the Shawano Centennial Committee on 1974 plans” (“Club Histories” 26). St. Croix Valley Writers listed, alongside the promotion of journalistic and literary writing, the goal of being “mindful of community welfare” (“Club Histories” 26).

These accounts of writing used as community engagement show how the rural writers of the WRWA used creative writing, sometimes viewed as suspect in rural communities, in the service of more conventional forms of rural civic life. The activity of many local clubs of the WRWA looks very much like the work undertaken by other community groups, including women’s civic clubs and homemakers’ clubs. In addition to allowing members to share their interest in writing with those around them, this civic work also helped make the work of writing less opaque and frivolous-seeming to other members of their communities. Newspaper coverage of club activities at the time shows highlights of local WRWA club activities on the same pages as 4-H, Homemakers’ Clubs, and church groups, suggesting that the community work performed by local WRWA chapters allowed rural people to see writing as one more form of rural civic engagement. This community work shaped how rural people saw writing and writers; no longer were writers “an oddity,” as Guerink put it, nor was writing a hobby deserving of the “stigma of eccentricity,” as Stieve described it. Instead, writing was another way that rural people could work to improve their communities.

### *Conclusion: The Sustainability of Rural Communities and Extracurricular Literacies*

Through entwining the writing of poems, essays, stories, and plays with conventional forms of rural civic engagement, like 4-H and Homemakers’ clubs and volunteer



work at schools and nursing homes, these rural writers were able to make the work of writing, often seen as “odd” or suspect, intelligible and even acceptable to their communities. Moreover, they were able to make writing sustainable for themselves. In fact, for many of these writers, much of their identities and meaning as writers seemed to arise from how thoroughly their writing linked them to their communities. The writers of the WRWA provide a compelling case of extracurricular writing made possible through rich connections to public and civic places. Moreover, this work highlights the public and civic dimensions of creative writing; rather than being simply a personal or expressive act, writing brought these writers into contact with a variety of people in their communities, including students and the elderly.

This use of writing as a means of community engagement is particularly notable for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that in addition to taking up the literacy practices promoted by the leadership of the WRWA, such as sharing drafts, revising based on feedback, and submitting work for publication, these writers were also drawing on rural traditions and culture. In addition to their formal volunteer work and partnerships with other civic groups, these groups also demonstrated the “neighborliness” Jane Greer describes.

Second, this integration of writing and community engagement suggests one strategy for addressing a persistent problem faced by extracurricular writers: how to incorporate an ongoing writing practice into a daily life already full of other obligations. Many extracurricular writers discuss writing and ordinary life as in tension with each other, but these writers reveal that place can be a powerful tool for weaving writing and life together. Rather than experiencing a conflict between writing and ordinary life or feeling like those identities needed to be performed separately in distinct places, these writers managed to incorporate the two, bringing their writing lives and writing practices to bear in community spaces. For the writers of the WRWA, then, merging community engagement with writing made their writing lives sustainable, and this practice also added to the well-being and vitality of their communities.

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