

The Grinnell Magazine

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PAGE TWO / 2

THROUGH CAMPUS WAYS / 3

RUTH SUCKOW'S GRINNELL / 7

PEOPLE YOU KNOW / 11

DOWN AT THE DEPOT / 17

COVERS. *Front:* Ruth Suckow, '14, played the Fairy Child in a 1913 campus production of *The Land of Heart's Desire*. Margaret Matlack Kiesel, '30, explores "the Grinnell Ruth Suckow knew," beginning on page 7. *Inside front:* "The campus," wrote Suckow, describing fictional "Adams College," which bore a marked resemblance to the Grinnell she knew, "had lost its old raw prairie look. The five buildings — Moorish and classic and conglomerate — were softened by ivy." Here is Goodnow Hall, with its original tower and the softening ivy on its walls. (Front-cover photograph courtesy of Ferner Nuhn)

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Contents of this magazine are selected to stimulate thought and discussion, to demonstrate the range of ideas and activities prevalent at the college and in its broader community, and to provide news about the college and its alumni. No attempt is made to formulate an identity of views. Letters addressed to the editor are invited and may be published as *Comment*. Such letters will be used with the name of the writer, unless the writer requests that the name be withheld. Letters are subject to shortening in order that as many as possible may be used.

Ruth Suckow's Grinnell

By MARGARET MATLACK KIESEL, '30



Roger W. McMullin

Margaret Kiesel finds writing for a Grinnell alumni publication nothing new — she began writing for the former Grinnell and You while a freshman, continuing during her four years in college. She was also on the staffs of the *Scarlet* and *Black*, *Cyclone*, and *Malteaser* and was a member of *Theta Sigma Phi* (now *Women in Communications, Inc.*), as well as *Phi Beta Kappa*. Since graduation from Grinnell she has earned the M.A. degree (Oberlin, 1932); held various jobs, some of them connected with writing and editing; and taught for 10 years in the English department of Hamline University (1954-64). Now involved in the women's movement, she is president of the Grinnell League of Women Voters and a member of the Iowa Women's Political Caucus. An early admirer of Ruth Suckow, she remembers staying home from a college basketball game to read a Suckow novel, hot off the press, which had been sent to Grinnell and You for review.

"All through my childhood, there was a glamour about the name Grinnell. My older sister went there and came back with 'the Grinnell fever.' For three summers we washed and wiped dishes to the tune of 'Come Ye Back to Old Grinnell.' College girls visited us, and once the Glee Club came to town. They all talked about nothing but Grinnell . . ." — Ruth Suckow, in *College Humor*, 1930.

At the 1975 Grinnell College Writers' Conference, Curtis Harnack, '49, himself a writer who is winning critical acclaim for his books, mentioned the name of Ruth Suckow, '14, another Grinnell writer who had a long and distinguished career in the field of realistic American fiction. Harnack's connecting of Ruth Suckow with the awarding of the annual Steiner prizes for creative writing was not only appropriate but timely. Grinnell has for too long neglected this outstanding woman writer — especially in the light of recent interest in Grinnell women of distinction.

There is yet another reason why we should take a new look at Ruth Suckow: She used Grinnell as material in her fiction (as does Harnack). She also wrote about the college (and her experiences as a student) in magazine articles, of which the most famous is the *College Humor* article quoted above. Both that article and her short novel, *A Part of the Institution* (which appeared in H. L. Mencken's *Smart Set* in 1923), stirred up a bit of dust on the campus. (Although Grinnell liked to bask in the reflected glory of Ruth Suckow's fame, it wasn't quite so happy when she cast a critical and irreverent eye on her *alma mater*.) Her novel, *The Bonney Family*, published by Knopf in 1928, is also obviously in a Grinnell setting, with thinly disguised

faculty members, students, and even alumni, readily identifiable to Grinnell readers — not always to their pleasure.

What is apparent, looking at her from the perspective of 1975, is that Ruth Suckow was a generation or two ahead of her time (she was a student from 1910 to 1913). In spirit she was much closer to today's campus than she was to the college she found when she returned for a visit in the 1920's, when the men's Dormitory and the women's Quadrangle set a rigid pattern — not only of segregation of the sexes, but of the entire social life of the campus. Looking back with nostalgia from 1930 (when she wrote the *Campus Humor* article), she wrote:

"The college [in 1910] was almost unaware of rules. The students were so engrossed in its zealous, secluded life, so satisfied and in general so happy in it, that they did not think of doing any yearning. Within its small boundaries, it offered a life of innocent freedom that could scarcely be matched anywhere."

In other ways, Ruth Suckow would fit into today's campus. She had a deep and unending belief in the right of an individual (especially a woman) to freedom of choice. It was the vaunted "Grinnell Spirit" which she deplored — the "service to mankind" which was constantly preached from the chapel platform. Many of Grinnell's graduates of the 1910 era became missionaries, social workers, ministers; many of the women became teachers or wives. And they all remained loyal alumni, coming back for class reunion after class reunion (this is what she satirized in *A Part of the Institution*, which covers the Class of 1903 from its inception to its 25th class reunion).

Ruth Suckow did not follow

tradition. She left Grinnell at the end of her junior year, not necessarily because she was unhappy, but because she wanted to become a dramatic star, and Grinnell offered no training in the "expression" much in fashion at the time.

Nor did she become a loyal alumna. In fact, her classmates cannot remember her attending any reunions. She did write a letter to the 25th reunion of the Class of '14 in 1939, but even at that late date she begged off writing at greater length because she was "an ex-'14."

After graduating from the Curry School in 1915, she tried operating a "school of expression" in Manchester, Iowa, and then went on to earn her B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Denver. It was then that she decided she must write, and in order to earn her living she studied bee-keeping in Denver and returned to Iowa to set up her own Orchard Apiary at Earlville, where she worked hard to earn a meager living and where she began her writing career.

The next Grinnell heard of her was when *A Part of the Institution* appeared in 1923. This jolted the campus.

"It was a sharp piece of satire on small-college smugness," wrote English instructor Arthur C. Kemble in the short-lived literary magazine, *Junto*. "The aim was obviously directed at Grinnell, with what justice it is not for us to decide." He could not agree with Mencken, who was proclaiming Suckow as "the most promising young writer of fiction, man or woman, now visibly at work in America."

Mencken, not Kemble, was to prevail, and Ruth Suckow went on to write more and more short stories for *Smart Set* and later for *The American Mercury*, when Mencken and George Jean Nathan founded that magazine of social criticism.



In the Dramatic Club's 1911 production of *Merely Mary Ann*, Ruth Suckow (left) played the role of the haughty daughter of a lodging-house keeper to Pearl Neel Fellows' portrayal of the put-upon servant girl, Mary Ann.

Photograph courtesy of Pearl Neel Fellows, '14

Her novels and collections of short stories followed one another in rapid succession, from *Country People* in 1924 to *The John Wood Case* in 1959 (she died in 1960). Her greatest success was *The Folks*, a Literary Guild selection in 1934.

Some Others and Myself, Rinehart and Company, 1952, contains "A Memoir" which is mostly about her early life and her father's career in the ministry, but also has some memories of Grinnell.

What then of this writer of and about Grinnell? What was her life like as a student?

She was no stranger either to the college or to the town when she enrolled as a freshman in September, 1910 (hard on the heels of Grinnell's other "famous author," James Norman Hall, who had graduated the June before). The Suckow family had moved to Grinnell in 1907, when her father, the Rev. W. J. Suckow, accepted a position as field secretary (euphemism for money raiser) for the college. It was his job to go around to all the Congregational churches in Iowa (for which he was well fitted, having been minister in a number of them) to raise funds for the endowment campaign in progress under President J. H. T. Main. (It was this endowment which helped get the building fund started for the dormitories Ruth would deplore in later years.)

More importantly, Emma Suckow, Ruth's older sister, had come to Grinnell as a student three years before and was a senior when the family settled into a house at 1208 Main Street. Not only had Ruth washed and wiped dishes to "Come Ye Back to Old Grinnell," she had come with her parents to see Emma perform in the annual Chresto-Ellis play in the Colonial Theatre.

Emma Suckow was pretty, popular, and a talented actress and singer. She also did what the model



Ruth Suckow (center) with Emma (left) and their mother, in front of the house at 1208 Main Street in Grinnell

Grinnell woman was supposed to do — taught a year or so after graduation and then married a classmate (Ed O. Hunting, '08).

Both Emma and Ruth had all the proper credentials after their names in the *Cyclones* of 1908 and 1914, their respective years, and both were on the Annual Board (Ruth was one of three editors). Other activities were Y.W.C.A., the Ellis literary society, the *Unit* literary magazine, and the newly formed Dramatic Club. All of these were prestigious, but neither girl could belong to the "most glorious" of all, the Men's Glee Club — and the Girls' Glee Club was comparatively new and unimportant.

Students entered all of these activities because of the "Grinnell Spirit," Ruth was later to write. "The zeal in their pursuit was highly religious. 'Pep' was entirely too small a word for this holy enthusiasm." *Not* to be overworked in the

junior year was considered a sign of selfishness, she found, and was regarded as a "lack of enthusiasm and lack of ideals."

In the programs of the Ellis literary society printed in the *Scarlet and Black* for the years Ruth was a student, her name appears frequently as speaker or as taking part in plays and skits. She wanted desperately to follow in Emma's footsteps as an actress and was in the Chresto-Ellis production of W. B. Yeats' *The Land of Heart's Desire*, in the role of the Fairy Child. The *Scarlet and Black* praised her for "bringing an impossible personage into being through faultless poetic appreciation and precise interpretation."

The role for which her classmates still remember her was as the monkey, "Carlotto," in a college skit. She was a tiny person (just over five feet tall) with delicate features, and she played the monkey so real-

istically that the effect startled her audience. This ability to mimic, to perfect every detail, was a talent she later used in creating her fictional characters, for which she was likened to Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov.

Although dramatics absorbed her interest in college and influenced her to leave at the end of her junior year, she continued to write (as she recounts that she began doing in childhood).

Her first published short story was not in the University of Iowa's *Midland*, as is commonly stated, but in Grinnell's *Unit*. It was "The Joke," appearing in the January, 1911, issue when she was a freshman. Later pieces in the *Unit* were a humorous dramatic monologue, "Before the Tryout," about a girl preparing for the ordeal of trying out for the Dramatic Club, and a short play, "Miss Warrington's Burglar," with a clearly Grinnell setting. The college archives contain a manuscript, given by her husband, Ferner Nuhn, which is a theme written in college about a country church supper, anticipating some of her later writing about the Iowa country folk she admired so much.

The most significant course she took at Grinnell was undoubtedly Eng. Lit. 13 and 14, Lyric Poetry, taught by Joseph G. Walleser, '03, who had come back to teach after being at Oxford University as Grinnell's first Rhodes Scholar. Among her books, still in the possession of her husband, is a well-read ("It was her Bible," remembers a friend) and rebound copy of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. The fly-leaf bears the inscription: "Miss Ruth Suckow: To recall some of the classroom hours in Lyric Poetry, 1912-13, J. G. Walleser."

She won prizes in the Mrs. Spaulding Reading Contest and the

Hill Contest for Women in June, 1913, and won her own Steiner prize for her college song. Altogether, she was a talented student, and, even though a critic of the "Grinnell Spirit," she outwardly lived up to its expectations. But her difficulty was the one which all writers experience.

"I saw things from the inside and outside both," she recalls in "A Memoir." And, later, in the *College Humor* article:

SOURCES

The following persons have been interested and helpful in putting together this all-too-brief account of the Grinnell Ruth Suckow knew:

Judith Hunting Barnett, '38, daughter of Emma Suckow Hunting. (Emma died in 1923.)

Ferner Nuhn, husband of Ruth Suckow, who has furnished many insights into Ruth's work and her Grinnell experience.

Pearl Neel Fellows, '14, classmate of Ruth's, who was most helpful in getting this study started — not only with her own memories but with mementos from her scrapbook and leads to others who knew Ruth at Grinnell.

Ruth Smith Johnson, '14, Ruth's roommate in their junior year. They spent the following summer in Yellowstone Park, where their reward for a summer's work was a free trip around the park at the end of the season. She has given a collection of her clippings about Ruth to the college archives.

Edith Tuttle Ellsworth, '17, whose father was field secretary for the college before the Rev. Mr. Suckow came. Edith remembers going to the Suckow house to play with the wonderful collection of German stone blocks (which Ruth also mentions in her memoir).

Mary Porter Wyly, '62, associate librarian at Grinnell, who has been of invaluable assistance during the summer in the college archives and who is responsible for obtaining a copy of the *College Humor* article from the Library of Congress. — M.M.K.

"About the greatest task which confronts the Grinnell graduate when he steps out into that larger arena described by the Commencement speaker is the necessity of getting over Grinnell."

James Norman Hall never succeeded in "getting over Grinnell." He was the heroic, romantic figure, and he wrote adventure tales and "Sons of Old Grinnell."

Ruth Suckow chose the harder but more enduring way — as she wrote in that 25th-reunion letter to her classmates:

"This gives me a chance to say what I want to: that I have liked traveling around since my non-graduation; that I always like to get back to Iowa; and that I have had various jobs, of which I have got the most out of bee-keeping, writing, and housewifery."

She wrote about Iowa, the people and places she knew so well. If, because of her cool, realistic assessments, she sometimes seemed too solemn, even cynical, to her college classmates and too critical in some of her writing about them and about Grinnell, that is what makes a writer of distinction.

Ruth Suckow falls within the stream of serious American women writers, which Sinclair Lewis recognized in the introduction he wrote for an edition of *Country People*. Lewis equated her with Edith Wharton, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Willa Cather as excelling in the form of the short novel.

Yet, when she died in 1960, the college took slight notice of her courageous and significant life. It's high time to give Ruth Suckow the recognition she deserves.