

The Nobel Cheese Prize? Sinclair Lewis in Minnesota

The birthday of Sinclair Lewis is now a bit behind us now, but in his honor, I thought I'd sing the glories of a Sinclair Lewis 1/3 pound cheeseburger, served up with pickle and fries at the Palmer House, downtown Sauk Center, an old hotel that's not changed its features for more than a half century and fronts on Sinclair Lewis Street. I'm not kidding. Just down the way a few blocks, you can find the Sinclair Lewis home and on the south side of town, the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center. All true. Google it.

I can't help but think all that glory is a bit ironic. Sauk Center's somewhat favorite son didn't much care for the codgers who peopled his hometown, or any Midwestern small towns, for that matter. The book that shot the moon for him, *Main Street* (1921), sold phenomenally and led, eventually, to Lewis's receiving the Nobel Prize (1930), the first American to win. Nothing to sneeze at.

In high school, I was forced to read *Main Street*. Hated the book. Not even sure I read it. Made no sense to me, largely because the book is acidic satire I wasn't smart enough to see. What I do remember is how much "Red" Lewis despised his own, even people I knew in my own midwestern small town. He had reason, I'm sure: small towns can be death on individuals who are individuals. Lewis was tall, gangly, unathletic, and not much to look at. People say his father, the town doctor, never understood him. Those kinds of ingredients are not a recipe for success.

With weekly visits to a place called Lake Wobegone, Garrison Keillor celebrated his own Minnesota boyhood and Minnesota culture for years, and a audience from across the nation dialed in, belovedly. His 30th anniversary

celebrated with a traveling show held in a bunch of small towns, to which he invited folks to bring picnic baskets and lawn chairs. Minnesota sweetness.

Mr. Keillor sports with his people, Mr. Lewis knifed 'em.

The very idea of lawn chairs and picnic baskets would be anathema to Sinclair Lewis, Minnesota's Nobel Prize winner. He'd rip and tear at the backward souls who showed up.

But today, this lowan believes Minnesota can laugh at itself and love itself, almost simultaneously; and that's why I admire the place. Anyone who can be at home with a place called "the Gopher State" has to have a sense of humor. Minnesotans all buy truly Minnesota-thick winter gear--caps, jackets, vests from Bemidji Woolen Mills. Not only that, but they wear all that Gopher gear with pride, arrogance even, whether or not their names are Olie and Lena. In the movie *Fargo*, the Coen brothers, great Minnesota filmmakers, worked the archetypes lovingly with a small-town cop named Marge Gunderson, who, in a cap with earmuffs, taught the nation how to speak Minnesotan, don't you know?

So you're wondering about that Sinclair Lewis cheeseburger—thumbs up or thumbs down? Listen, it wasn't half bad, served up on a hard roll too yet.

What's more, I can't help but think there's some poetic justice in the fact that Sauk Prairie, Lewis's home town, honors its Nobel Prize-winning novelist with a fat cheeseburger.

That is so Minnesotan. Got to love 'em.