

Prairieblog

Politics and Prairie Literature

Thursday, June 17, 2010

The Poetry of Paul Southworth Bliss

Today I want to give you another taste of the great prairie poet Paul Southworth Bliss. Largely unknown to North Dakotans, Bliss led a remarkably interesting life, the highlight of which seems to be the years he spent in North Dakota in the 1930's, if you can judge the quality of his life by the quality of the poetry he published here between 1933 and 1937.



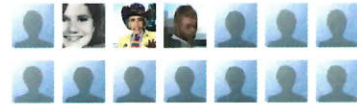
Born in Wisconsin in 1889, his family later moved to Minnesota. Bliss attended Hamline College, where he was a star track athlete, once setting both half mile and mile run records within the same half hour one afternoon (at least that's what the bio inside one of his book jackets says). He transferred to, and graduated from, Harvard, where he also did post-graduate work. He worked at newspapers in New York, Boston and Minnesota, and served overseas in World War I, where he earned the commission of colonel in the Officers' Reserve Corps. He came to North Dakota as Field Director for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and later worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Those jobs took him to every corner of the state, and his poetry reflects his travels in, and his love for, North Dakota.

As best I can tell he published ten books of poetry, three of them in North Dakota, and each poem is labeled at the end as to the date he wrote it and the location in which he wrote it. It's **some of the best North Dakota poetry** I've come across. I've become a big fan, and am still in the process of trying to collect all his books—I do have his North Dakota books, and it is from those I share the pieces below.

There's a mystery or two surrounding Bliss. For some unknown reason, his mother had purchased a quarter section of land east of Hettinger, in eastern Adams County. In 1935, while still employed by the federal government, Bliss bought an adjacent quarter and built what is believed to be the first "rammed earth" house in North Dakota. Rammed earth is a process of making mud from prairie dirt and pressing it into wooden frames for drying, and when it dries hard like concrete, it is used as a brick would be to build a house. The house and garage he built in Adams County, both substantial structures that must have taken a very long time to construct, are still standing, although one wall of the house has collapsed. Still, much of the rest of the house and the garage are intact, and I've been trying to get the Adams County Historical Society to get involved in at least saving them, if not restoring them, to no avail. Bliss sold the place to local ranchers, and I went to church with their kids as a youngster, but that family is gone and the neighbor who bought the pasture in which it sits doesn't seem interested in it at all. The picture above shows the house and the immense rock--actually clinker--wall he built atop a knoll on the prairie, giving the place a bit of a castle look. Lillian is standing in front of the wall

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to provide scale. The wall itself was a tremendous undertaking. If you're interested in seeing it yourself, let me know and I'll provide directions. Maybe if enough "tourists" show up somebody will do something about preserving it.

► January (6)

Oh, well, enough history and whining. At least we still have his poetry. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do, especially the way, in many of his poems that he manages to provide a bit of a surprise ending, making them more story-like than you might expect from someone who seems to be at best a dreamer about the romanticism of the prairie. Occasionally you can find his books for sale on ABE or Alibris websites. I was able to buy signed copies of his North Dakota books for very little money. Oh, yes, one more mystery: Bliss' life ended on New Year's Eve 1940, when he put his army pistol to his head in a YMCA room in Kansas City, leaving the end of his own life story untold.

GREAT PROPERTY MAN

The Great Property Man
Toils under heaven's proscenium.
One wall he hangs
With enormous murals
Of pink cirro-stratus,
Another
He fences with bars of lilac.

At stage left
He unfurls crisp banners of pink-blue;
Upstage
He lights a fireplace,
Red as an Argonne barrage;
In the wings
He tacks a silver slit for New Moon,
And
A jeweled sparkler, Venus,
For Evening Star.

The stage is set . . .
But no actors take the boards;
The Great Property Man
Has stolen the show
Himself.

*October 17, 1936
En route, Bismarck to Hettinger, N.D., Highway No. 21*

BADLANDS SAGA

A magpie's black and white,
Shrieks against the dun
Of the clay domes;
Rabbit brush blooms yellowy
In the windows
Of the buttes;
A steer gazes at the edge
Of a chimneyed precipice . . .
A road sign reads:
"Use Chains in Wet Weather."

Something seems to change in the sky,
Something seems to change in the soil,
Something seems to change in me:
It is the Badlands!

The road drops stickily

Around a plastic-blue wall;
The valley of the Little Missouri
Comes slowly into focus.

Reds, blues, grays, yellows,
Band themselves in mighty onslaught;
I am overwhelmed by the color-marksmen
That I cannot see.

In the ledges of gravel
And blue clay and coal,
And gray shale,
And sandstone.
I read the chaptered saga
Of a million years. . .

But the trickle of the river,
Writes on the floor of the valley
Nature's tantalizing legend:
To Be Continued!

September 25, 1934. Minot, N.D.

Author's note: When I came northward on Highway No. 85 from Dickinson to Williston, N.D., ten days ago, the Little Missouri seemed to be resting before taking up again the mighty saga of the Badlands.

PRAIRIE SUNSET

A sunset in a prairie sky—
You have not seen one then? . . .
Where coursing colors leap and die,
And leap up yet again . . .

The sun from out his treasure chest
Brings heaps of amber gold,
And spreads them out upon the west
With lavishness untold.

He adds, flame-red, and tints emerge,
The spectrum never knew;
Like billows in the sky they surge,
And all alone stand you.

Stand you, upon your lips a seal,
Too much a single word;
And what it is within you feel
Feels every beast and bird.

Then when the color-stripe is drawn,
The sun brings out the rose
That he has gathered from the dawn;
And now the whole sky glows.

You hill men! You in cities bound,
You seek the sunset, west;
The prairie men look all around,
Oft eastward see it best . . .

So may the ranking gods be kind,
And bring you 'ere life's done,

To see a prairie sunset bind
The east and west in one.

February 14, 1934

Author's note: The mightiest sunset I have seen in my lifetime occurred on Lincoln's birthday anniversary, February 12, 1934. On a cold late-afternoon I left Williston in western North Dakota and drove 90 miles on Highway No. 85 over bare prairies to Crosby, near the Canadian boundary. The sunset began as I left and continued for about an hour and one-half; it was dark as I reach Crosby. The beauty and variety of the color pageant, ranging from fire to tints of the most delicate dawn, can be but inadequately suggested. It covered the entire sky; the east view was even more fascinating than the west.

Posted by **Jim Fuglie** at **4:19 PM**



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4 comments:



Tom Isern said...

Hey Jim, have to talk with you sometime about this place, the Scoria Lily Ranch, and Col. Bliss, its builder. Its on the itinerary for the field school on historic earth buildings that Suzzanne and I teach in summer. The house has deteriorated a bit since your photo was taken -

<http://travel.webshots.com/album/569699207IAFQhl>

7:19 PM



Jim Fuglie said...

Well, Tom, I did not know anyone else in ND had even heard of this guy. You're the first I've run into. Maybe between us we could convince the Hettinger folks to get to work on this.

10:26 AM



Holly said...

I just learned that my grandfather allegedly built this house for Paul Bliss. I have a copy of the signed postcard showing the ranch house that he sent to my grandfather. Never knew anything about this before, much less heard of rammed earth houses. Would love to know more; grandfather's name was Paul Silsand (Selsand)

2:41 PM



Center for Heritage Renewal said...

Holly, I've also heard from B. Ekstrom about your grandfather building the house for Col. Bliss. Don't know the relationship between the two of you. Would love to chat about the story. I'm best reached via isern@plainsfolk.com.

Tom Isern

5:33 PM

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