Likely Friends in Unlikely Places

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That two hard-headed, unconventional artists from the East coast (one a composer and conductor, the other an architect, painter, and draughtsman) happened to be in Winona, Minnesota in 1912-13, is surprising enough. That they met one another on a June afternoon in the Winona Public Library and felt an immediate spark of inspiration and friendship that would last a lifetime is even more improbable. Yet this chance meeting under unexpected circumstances would foster fundamental choices that would shape the lives and influence the art of Rockwell Kent and Carl Ruggles forever.

First, a necessary diversion to set the stage for the Winona Kent and Ruggles experienced in 1912. Winona's history dates from 1851, when a steamboat captain from Galena, Illinois, deposited three men on a Mississippi River sandbar and told them to claim the land – land on which Winona would later be built. It was a strategic location, since it served as a point of assembly for harvested lumber that was floated down the St. Croix, the Chippewa, and the Mississippi rivers. According to historian Henry A. Castle, "Everything was of wood and nearly every stick had to be imported. It is difficult to imagine the amount of wood necessary to settle and develop the Midwest, but not hard at all to see why Mississippi River towns thrived with the growth of the Midwestern plains."

Winona quickly grew into one of the largest and most prosperous cities in Minnesota. From a population of 2,464 in 1860 (a year when only 11 towns in Minnesota had a population of over 100!), Winona grew to almost 20,000 inhabitants in 1900. By 1910, Winona's population had established itself at a relatively steady 18,583 people. It was the fourth largest city in Minnesota, behind Minneapolis (301,408), St. Paul (214,744) and Duluth (76,466). (By comparison, New York had more than 4 million inhabitants, and Chicago more than 2 million.)

In order to support the lumber trade, "massive immigrations" of laborers came to Winona to work for meager wages. In 1900 the county employed more than 1500 "skilled and common laborers" compared to just 79 "professional men" and 106 "capitalist and retired" persons. The two largest immigrant groups were Germans and Poles – Germans comprised 29 percent of the population, and Poles 11 percent. While the owners of the lumber companies were quickly becoming millionaires, the wages of the laborers remained low. A worker in the saw mills could put in 11 hours a day, six days a week, and earn only $1.50 a day. This caused an economic and cultural divide that would have an impact on both Kent and Ruggles.

Although Winona was relatively small in comparison to metropolises such as Chicago and New York, it boasted a number of important economic and cultural developments. The Winona Normal School, opened in 1860, was the first teacher's college west of the Mississippi; Winona had a telephone exchange in operation in 1880, just four years after Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone; and, by 1889, Winona had an opera house, managed by O.F. Burlingame. The *Winona Daily News* later reported, "From the moment that O.F. Burlingame stepped within the wide double doors beneath the marquee of the

Winona Opera House, the Chicago-Minneapolis circuit was broken and a Winona stop became a 'must' with the shining lights of the theater world." Sara Bernhart came in 1910, John Philip Sousa in 1911, Ernestine Schumann-Heink in 1914. Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Ethel Barrymore, and Lillan Russell also appeared. This was the atmosphere into which Kent and Ruggles came.

Interestingly, both Ruggles's and Kent's ancestors immigrated from England to Massachusetts within about a decade of one another (in the 1630s) and settled in close proximity within the Boston area. Charles Ruggles (who later called himself Carl because he liked Germans), was born in 1876, and grew up in Marion, Mass. (near Cape Cod); Rockwell Kent, born 6 years later, grew up 203 miles away in Tarrytown, New York. That both men journeyed over thirteen hundred miles to Winona, MN, for work and briefly met one another would prove both unlikely and providential.

Ruggles began his musical career at the ripe age of six by playing a violin he had fashioned from a cigar box. His family moved closer to Boston when Carl was 13, and he was able to get some more formal music training in not only violin but also counterpoint and composition. Ruggles studied privately with, among others, John Knowles Paine, a composer who taught at Harvard (Ruggles later liked to boast that he had gone to Harvard), and he spent his evenings soaking up performances by the Boston Symphony. His was a fully American brand of music education, in contrast to that of many of his contemporaries, who studied in Europe (Aaron Copland, for example, was one of many American students who studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger).

Kent also began his interest in art at a young age, stating, "From as early as I can remember, I drew pictures." He enrolled at Columbia University in 1900 to study architecture but spent his summers studying painting and drawing at the seasonal art program established by William Chase. It wasn't long before he was lured away from architecture to study with Robert Henri at the New York School of Art, or Chase School. Henri had an enormous impact on Kent – an impact that went well beyond art. He introduced Kent to the writings of Darwin and Tolstoy, to summers on Monhegan Island, and to the enormous economic disparity in New York and beyond. The seeds of socialism were sown.

Kent learned skills as a carpenter and soon built his own home on Monhegan. He also painted and drew at every chance he got, and in 1911 was part of a group show of 15 artists that also included George Luks, John Marin, Guy Pene du Bois, Maurice Prendergast, Arthur Davies, and Marsden Hartley. It was the combination of drafting and carpentry ability, and not his work as an artist, however, that brought Kent to Winona in 1912. He had been hired to supervise the building of two large homes, joined by a walkway, for Mr. Prentiss and Mr. Bell (whose wives were sisters).

Ruggles was already in Winona at this time, having come here five years earlier (in January of 1907) to teach at the Mar d'Mar School of Music. He was connected to the school through friends of his fiancée, Charlotte Snell, a contralto. It is interesting to read the letters Carl wrote to Charlotte during his first few months in Winona, describing local flavors in every respect. He even enclosed a piece of cheese in a letter written on January 31 -- (and the grease stain on the stationery attests to its presence in the envelope) --

describing it as “a fragment of cheese which will, if given time, banish most anything, but it is great dearie, a product of the West. I don’t remember having eaten anything like it before.” Charlotte joined Carl in April of 1907, and was installed as head of the vocal department at the Mar d’ Mar School.

The two musicians spent the summer of 1907 in the East and, when they returned to Winona in the fall, found that their jobs had been eliminated. While the eventual demise of the Mar d’Mar school remains a mystery, newspaper accounts published that autumn stated that the violin and vocal departments had been dropped because they weren’t profitable. The two nonetheless decided to stay in Winona: Charlotte became involved in a variety of church and community organizations, and she developed a large private vocal studio. In October, Carl was asked to conduct the YMCA Orchestra for $14 a month, and in late January, the Musical-Literary Society approached him about establishing an orchestra – the Winona Symphony Orchestra was born. The two musicians married in April, and together they fostered a growing enthusiasm for music in the community. During the 1912 music season -- the year Rockwell Kent arrived in town -- the Winona Opera House, which seated 1,200 people, was sold out for every performance by the orchestra.

Arriving in spring of that year, it would have been possible for Kent to have heard Ruggles’s orchestra. But he didn’t. Rather than be welcomed into the community by Winona’s wealthiest society (lawyers and merchants), Kent clearly felt like a paid employee of the Prentiss’s and Bell’s. He, his wife Kathleen, and their two young children settled into an abandoned schoolhouse near the construction site, and Rockwell fixed it up enough to be habitable. He was infinitely more at ease with the construction workers than with the management, and he reveled in speaking German every chance he could get. When the carpenters threatened to strike, Kent was questioned about his dual position (both supervisor and carpenter on the job). He later recounted:

> That they should ask me, considering my dual position on the job, was not to be wondered at; yet my position was quite simple: as superintendent it was my duty to see that the buildings were erected in accordance with the specifications and the terms of the contract. …. As a member of the union, the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, I was technically and morally bound to support the men, my Brothers. And so I told them. Good.

The building project proceeded relatively smoothly, and Kent worked hard in his dual role. When Kathleen became pregnant in the spring of 1913, the Kents decided that – “not having gotten to like Winona well enough to stay” – Kathleen would return East and wait for Rockwell to join her when he had finished the job. Kent remembered the remaining months in Winona as his best, and his correspondence with Kathleen provides an intriguing glimpse into his life and activities during that time. Among other things, he developed a close friendship with the German Alex Geckler and his family – the subject of last night’s delightful play.

In addition to his hard work at the building site, Kent organized two events during his last weeks in Minnesota. With Samuel Prentiss’s help, he planned an exhibition of paintings at the Winona Public Library during the first week of June. He also organized a grand picnic for the site workers, which was titled, “The Grand International Workingmen’s

Anti-Boss Convention" and was a big success. Kent wrote to Kathleen with at least as much enthusiasm about the picnic as the upcoming art exhibit:

> It is the morning before our great day. Last night I worked very late – So late that I simply couldn't get to bed. We made a beautiful poster that we will hang up out there today. It is headed, 'Grand International Workingmen's Anti-Boss Convention' ...

One can easily glimpse why his presence would have been a bit disconcerting among the "bosses"!

Of the art exhibit, Kent later described the show: "all of the almost countless pictured I had painted were with me in Winona. So the exhibition that I staged in the library could well be, as it was, a fairly large one and, I may say without affecting modesty, a good one." There is no list of exactly what was exhibited, but a newspaper account mentioned *Toilers of the Sea* as one of the works displayed. Rockwell sent Kathleen progress reports about his plans for the show throughout the month of May, and, from them, we know that he was disappointed with the library's lighting (which he deemed "very dark and full of shadows") as well as his inability to fit all of his paintings into the space. Despite these shortcomings, Kent thought the show looked "pretty well."

And he was disappointed that Winona didn't agree more enthusiastically. Although he was the subject of a large article in the newspaper, Kent remembered that Winonans "just thought the show funny," and he credited Carl Ruggles – whom he met for the first time at the exhibition – with offering "the only heartening words about my work that I received from anyone." Here is how he later described Ruggles at that first meeting:

> A strange, intense little man, a bald, egg-headed little man, with eyes that were alight with fervor, and a protruding lower lip that could betoken such conceit and arrogance as might defy the world, or tremble with emotion close to tears. He was alone in the rotunda of the library when I entered. He walked straight over to me and reached out his hand. 'You,' he said, 'are a *great* painter.' For those words of recognition, there in the cultural no man's land of Winona, I have been ever grateful. This little man, this man so strange as to have thought me great, was a struggling music teacher and conductor of the Winona Symphony. … He was the Carl Ruggles so widely know in the music world today.

Kent and Ruggles felt an immediate rapport, and Carl and Charlotte invited Rockwell to dinner before the artist left for the East in mid-June. Rockwell wrote to Kathleen that he found them to be:

> … first-rate people and genuine musicians. [Ruggles] makes no pretense as a performer but is a serious composer. He played many parts of his opera and they were splendid. The text is *The Sunken Bell* of Hauptmann. That must be a wonderful process. He played much from *Tristan* … but gave it the volume of an orchestra. And they so detest Minnestoa. Phew! You never heard such an outpouring!

This chance meeting and the subsequent dinner fostered an enduring relationship between the two men. They saw each other the following September in New York City, where Kent had resumed his work with the architectural firm. They spent an evening together (Kent recounted, "staying there til late"), and the next day Ruggles introduced Kent to the artist Boardman Robinson.

Carl and Charlotte returned to Winona that autumn with the hope of owning one of Kent's paintings. Ruggles wrote to Kent in October and November, referring to the artist's seascapes and declaring that he was "hungry for a sight of the sea." He poignantly signed his letters, "Your in exile." Ruggles also wrote about his progress on the opera, and he encouraged Kent to see the artwork of Arthur Davies. Thus began an important pattern in their correspondence – each man was interested in and encouraged the other's art form.

Just before Christmas of 1913, Carl and Charlotte received Kent's painting, *The Seiners* -- a work that Ruggles may very well have seen at the Winona Public Library. Ruggles sent Kent an enthusiastic letter that described his work on *The Sunken Bell* (he included musical motives and declared that people in New York thought it "very advanced") as well as his reaction to Kent's art:

> My dear Rockwell,
> The *Seiners* came Wednesday, and the magic of it has held us enthralled ever since. It is a glory. Every time we look at it we discover something new to marvel at. Robinson thought it one of the finest marines he had ever seen. I see many new touches, in fact the whole picture has taken on a heightened eloquence. What I admire so intensely about all your work is its absolute freedom from conventions. You certainly sail uncharted seas. To hell with those who piddle around creeks, I say. The word freedom, I think, expresses the basic quality of your work. I feel it surging through everything I have seen."
> (And he enclosed some of the motives he was working on for the opera.)

Carl wrote again in January, telling Kent about how well the progress on his opera was being received in New York and complimenting the artist on the "mystery" in the foreground of his painting. "Indeed, there can be no art without an element of mystery, I think." Unfortunately, the Ruggles's were unable to keep the painting. Although Kent later recalled that he had charged them just $100, letters during this time contain repeated apologies from Ruggles for not being able to make payments. Kent eventually reclaimed the work, which, in 1918, was sold to Henry Clay Frick for $1500 and now resides at the Hirschorn Museum.

Ruggles continued to send Kent regular updates on the opera, which reveal that the two discussed the work's visual setting. In 1915, Ruggles wrote to Kent (who was then in Newfoundland): "I hope I can manage to have you design the scenes, provided you would dare to bother with it, but of course that is all up to Meltzer. Your ideas are wonderfully original, and would lend much to the success of the opera."

Ruggles moved to New York to work on *The Sunken Bell* full-time in 1917 (leaving Charlotte with their young son Micah in Winona to earn money) – but the opera was never completed and Ruggles eventually destroyed it. Kent encouraged him to produce work

during this time in a manner that shows in vivid contrast the difference between the two men. (Kent was unfettered and produced work freely, whereas Ruggles was almost paralyzed by the enormity of the task -- he often wrote of how tiring he found the process.) Kent wrote:

> Get to work and make another great opera, Carl, for heaven's sake begin the new great work. I don't believe you'll hear your *Sunken Bell* for thirty years! You're one of the few great men I've ever met or seen.
>
> Do a thousand things – pile up those beautiful manuscripts of yours; -- what if they don't get played yet. They will and then you'll laugh and think of the great pile of treasures that you have.

Carl and Charlotte were reunited in New York City in 1918, never to return to Winona. Carl abandoned the opera and began to work on smaller compositions.

In 1919 Ruggles wrote a short song, entitled "Toys" for his son's fourth birthday, and Kent provided advice on the title as well as art work for the score's cover. The finished product was published in 1920. It was obviously very important to Ruggles that the public know that Kent had designed the cover and was concerned that Kent hadn't signed the design. Kent replied:

> What in the world do you think I care so much about a signature for. I'm being continually pestered by owners of my paintings who suddenly discover that the thing is *not signed!!!* What magic there is in the signature I don't know. Anybody that knows anything knows who did a thing – and what if they don't. If you think my name should be on that drawing put it in type or lettering (your own lettering will do.)

This interaction is a good example of Ruggles's need for other's approval, and for Kent's lack of that need. (Incidentally, the work was published unsigned.)

The two men corresponded about authors they were reading – a favorite for Ruggles was Whitman. In words that must have echoed advice Kent had heard from his teacher Robert Henri, Ruggles told Kent, "When you are blue read Walt Whitman. Yes, read Whitman, he is superb. You have many things in common with Whitman."

The two men also corresponded about their work, with Ruggles visiting art galleries in New York to view Kent's most recent work. Their letters during this time reveal the difference in artistic energy that working in isolation engendered. Kent's correspondence is infused with his passion for painting and the energy it brought him, while Ruggles letters reveal that the act of composing music, especially in isolation, was draining and exhausting.

Kent moved to a farm just outside Arlington, Vermont, in 1919, and he encouraged Carl and Charlotte to visit. He even tried to arrange to bring Carl to Vermont as a lecturer for the Arlington Poetry Club (but – due to a misunderstanding about Ruggles's involvement with the socialist Rand School in New York – he was not invited). He finally lured Carl to Arlington with the promise of including a sample of his music manuscript as well as an

essay on modern music for an issue of *Playboy* (not Hugh Hefner's magazine, but rather an art and literary magazine produced in Greenwich Village).

Although the article never materialized, Ruggles finally visited Kent in Arlington during the fall of 1921. The visit marked an important development in Ruggles's life; he later recalled:

> One time [Kent] had to go to New York and suggested that, while he was away, I try painting a picture and he would compose a piece of music. I made a drawing of Mt. Anthony, but when he came back he hadn't done any music. But he was impressed with my drawing.

That drawing of Mt. Anthony launched an important second outlet for Ruggles's artistic talent – an outlet in which he was able to shed his inhibitions and the constraints of perfectionism that pervaded his work as a composer. Ruggles became successful as a visual artist, mounting shows at the Arts Club of Chicago and the Detroit Institute of Arts. His paintings are housed in the permanent collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Whitney Museum in New York.

And his correspondence from this time forward is filled with drawings and illustrations.

And even though Kent didn't compose music, he, Carl, and Charlotte shared many musical moments. He later recalled:

> The three of us – Carl at the piano, Charlotte as a contralto, and I on my flute – had many pleasant musical evenings together, Carl composing flute obligatos for the German lieder that we performed.

During this time Kent designed the cover for a symphonic suite that Ruggles had entitled, "Men and Angels." And this time it was signed! Ruggles felt that the design captured the "transcendental essence" implicit in his music. Unfortunately the work was never completed in this form – so the cover illustration was never used.

The first movement, *Angels*, was re-written as a hymn for six muted trumpets – and another movement was transformed into the first movement of his orchestral work, *Men and Mountains.* Let's listen to a bit of each of these musical selections. (A word of warning: Ruggles's music uses a technique he called "chromatic dissonance". He liked to use as many notes as before repeating them, which is hardly the stuff of melodies we like to hum!)

The fact that Ruggles chose the title *Men and Mountains* reveals another interesting tie to Kent, who suggested it – and had used the same title for both a painting dating from 1909 and a published account of his European travels following his highly publicized passport denial. The words were inspired by the Blake quote: "Great things are done when men and mountains meet. This is not done by jostling in the street." Kent's painting depicts nude men wrestling at the base of mountains, and caused such a scandal when it was exhibited in Columbus, Ohio, in 1910 that it was placed in a separate room marked, "Men only."

Carl and Charlotte moved back to New York in 1922 – a period that became Carl's most productive as a composer. He became increasingly involved with the contemporary music scene, and, with Edgard Varèse, became a founding member of the group of ultra-modern composers called the International Composer's Guild. The group provided not only an outlet for performance, but also a schedule that demanded that Ruggles produce on a regular basis. That spring, Ruggles also gave three lectures at the Whitney Studio Club – and it had been Kent who had introduced his "dear friend" Carl Ruggles, to the influential Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

The Ruggles family spent the summer of 1923 in Arlington with Kent's friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher. They liked the area well enough to want to settle permanently, and – in a move that mirrors Kent's first residence in Winona – purchased an old schoolhouse that they made into a warm and welcoming home. Ironically, even though Ruggles had settled in Kent's hometown, the two saw less of each other after this time. Kent's marriage to Kathleen ended in divorce in 1925, he married Frances Lee in 1926, and he traveled extensively during this time, eventually settling on land in upstate New York.

Neither man was on sound financial footing, and correspondence reveals their attempts to help one another find gainful employment. Ruggles encouraged his most prominent student in New York, Mrs. Joseph Grace, to consider purchasing a painting of Kent's.

> Has the *North Wind* been sold? I ask, because yesterday I gave Mrs. Grace her first lesson and during the session I illustrated some point with 'Toys." She immediately was struck by the title page, thought it 'extremely beautiful.' All of which gave me a fine opportunity to launch forth on your behalf. I told her about the *North Wind*, and I'm sure I can manage to take her to see it, perhaps after her lesson. How about *Bear Glacier*? Is that still at Knoelder's?

To which Kent responded: "I *need* to sell a picture. Sell it for us!"

Less than a year later, it was Kent who interceded with Mrs. Grace, who had terminated her lessons with Carl. (Kent worried that it was because Ruggles had moved to Arlington.) He went to see her in her rose garden and relayed the following information to Carl:

> Here's what's settled with Mrs. Grace. … I called her up immediately on my arrival in the city and was asked out for dinner on the night of the next day. I had a talk with Dr. Bartlett before I went, and, fully armed, launched an overpowering gas attack. But, by God, it had to be overwhelming to get by with her! She is HARD. However, you get $100 a month for six months. You're to live with me in Arlington and Charlotte to settle where she can get pupils – *students*—I mean. You're to give Mrs. G. 2 lessons a month and are to be paid your round trip fare each time from Arlington. If things go well this is likely to be continued.

Kent also introduced Ruggles to several other important benefactors, including Harriet Bingham, to whom his orchestral work *Portals* is dedicated. He was to rely on the support of wealthy donors for most of the rest of his life.

In addition to his painting and travels, Kent worked as an illustrator for both the socialist periodical *The Masses* and for *Vanity Fair* as well as numerous books (including *Moby Dick*, about which we will hear later today). These jobs obviously paid the bills – but they also provided Kent with a subtle vehicle for his message. As an author and artist, Kent employed the pseudonym "Hogarth Jr." in *Vanity Fair*, and used Ruggles as a model for one of four caricatures which he entitled "Tragedies of the Self and the Anti-Self: Hogarth Jr. Shows the Conflict Between What the Neighbors See and What Dr. Freud Would Guess." He presented Ruggles as "The Great-of-Soul" and characterized him thusly:

> How often we see great genius encased in narrow physical accommodations. The sample below is one of those. The field of his art is that of the universal. He, according to his story, is Man dominating the Cosmic All. As if to symbolize his ambitions, his clothes, hat, cigar, etc. are all too big for him. So are his ideas. Perhaps he will grow up to them some day.

Correspondence between Ruggles and Kent dwindled in the 1930s, but they continued to remember one another and followed each other's careers. Kent attended the premiere of Ruggles's *Men and Mountains* in New York and, although not present, received a detailed description from his daughter of the premiere of Ruggles's masterpiece *Sun-Treader* in 1966. Both men were honored by Bowdoin College in the 1960s (Bowdoin had a two-day festival in Ruggles's honor in 1966, and an exhibition entitled, "Rockwell Kent: The Early Years" was mounted at Bowdoin in 1969.) Both men died in the same year, 1971.

That each man had an influence upon each other and his creative process is without question. As lovers of German culture, they paid the highest compliments to one another -- Kent comparing Ruggles to Beethoven and Ruggles, in turn, comparing Kent to Wagner. They helped each other find ways to survive, being -- first and foremost – artists during especially difficult economic trials in the United States.

In 1926, Kent wrote to Ruggles from Ireland, confessing: "that among all the men that I have ever known you're the only one who has contributed to me anything of value in Art. Yours is the only intelligence or spirit that has impressed me."

Had the two men met in the East, their impact on one another might not have been as profound. Meeting, instead, in this Minnesota town in 1913 provided a bond that seemingly endured throughout their lifetimes. As men of both great similarities and great differences, the convergence of these two lives in Winona, Minnesota -- be it considered a "must stop" for the theatrical world, a forward-looking educational center, or "exile" – there is no doubt that both men began a bond formed by a sort of expatriate experience here in Winona. An experience that did – that does – and that will continue to – enrich us all.