

Hearst, James Schell

(August 8, 1900-July 27, 1983)

—farmer, poet, memoirist—was a native son whose poetry, rooted in the farms of Iowa, brought distinction not only to himself but also to the community where he worked and lived.

James Schell Hearst was the eldest of four children born to Katherine and **Charles Hearst** on Maplehearst Farm in Black Hawk County. His grandparents had settled on the far in 1853, and his father was a farmer and a state leader in the field of agriculture, serving 13 years as president of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation.

As a teenager, “Jim” worked hard on the family farm. He was also known as an outstanding athlete. As a teenager, he played semipro baseball under an assumed name in northeast Iowa.

Hearst attended District No. 7 country school, four miles west of Cedar Falls. He traveled to Cedar Falls and attended high school at the Training School of Iowa State Teachers College. When he turned 18 in August 1918, he enlisted in the army. He was called to service in September, shortly before World War I ended, and was discharged four months later in time for Christmas. Later that same year he enrolled in Iowa State Teachers College.

At the end of his first full year, 19-year-old Jim Hearst broke his neck in a swimming accident. He spent the next 64 years as a paraplegic. After spending almost two years in Iowa City undergoing physiotherapy, Hearst was able to recover the use of his arms. Dr. **Arthur Sreindler** was one of the many doctors who took care of Jim after his accident. The two remained good friends throughout their lives. James once said, “we talked about books, music, politics, humanity—everything but medicine. I learned from him. I learned to be ashamed of myself only if I did not live up to my ability”

Although greatly restricted, James was active in the operation of the family farm with his brother Charles Hearst. “Chuck” was Jim’s constant companion. His assistance made it possible for Jim to attend social functions and weekly meetings of the Rotary Club.

After the accident, Hearst did not go back to college. Instead, he designed a program for his own education. He decided to read all of the books he could get his hands on from one country, and when those were exhausted, he would shift his attention to books from another, Hearst gradually moved from reading to writing. He wrote poems and stories in the winter during his idle time as a farmer. Jim was first paid for his writing when, in his mid 20s, he published articles encouraged him to continue writing, and through the years Hearst became a prominent voice of mid-western farmers.

The farmer-poet wrote more than 600 poems during his life. His poems present a realistic picture of life on an Iowa farm. He wrote 12 books of poetry, several books of prose, and an autobiography. His work appeared in hundreds of periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Robert Frost encouraged Hearst to write and offered to take on of his manuscripts to his publisher in New York. Hearst, however, did not accept the offer because he wanted his poetry to be published in the Midwest.

In 1941 H. W. Reninger, head of the English Department at ISTC, invited Hearst to teach creative writing classes for the college. Reninger arranged for students to come to Hearst’s house for class. In 1953 Hearst and his wife, Meryl, moved into their home at 304 West Seerley Boulevard. Students continued to attend classes on the lower level of the house for the next 21 years.

In 1963 Jim was invited to be the poet-in-residence at the Summer Arts and Performing Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado. He was invited to return each summer for the following 13 years. Hearst earned several other honors during his lifetime and was widely regarded as a distinguished writer. In 1975 the University of Northern Iowa conferred an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature on James Schell Hearst, and in 1981 a "Tribute to James Hearst" was presented in Russell Hall on the university campus. Iowa Governor Robert Ray presented Hearst with the State of Iowa Arts and Humanities Honor for Outstanding Service on December 15, 1982. Hearst died in 1983. His poetry remains in print today.

SOURCES Hearst's papers are housed, along with his father's, at the University of Northern Iowa Library, Cedar Falls. His autobiography is *My Shadow below me* (1981). He also reminisced about his childhood and youth on the family farm in *Time Like a Furrow: Essays* (1981) and in several articles in the *Palimpsest* and elsewhere. See also "Prairie Poet." *Iowan* 12 (Fall 1963), 11-13; and Bill Witt, "A conversation with James Hearst," *Iowan* 27 (Spring 1979), 14-22. Hearst has been the subject of at least two master's theses.

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