Some say it is all an illusion, this world of memory, of imagination, but to me the remembered past is more and more a reality, a joyous, secure reality. Rejoicing in the mental law which softens outlines and heightens colors, I have written faithfully, in the hope of adding my small part to the ever-increasing wealth of our home-spun national history.

— Hamlin Garland, Back-Trailers from the Middle Border

It was in Dakota Territory in the 1880s that Hamlin Garland became a writer. It was in and about Dakota that he first seriously wrote, evolving an image and identification of himself as a "son of the middle border." In his writings, Dakota becomes symbolic of Garland's ambivalent love-hate relationship with the American West. A consideration of the relationships between history and story, autobiography and novel, in Garland's Dakota writings demonstrates the importance of South Dakota to Garland and, reciprocally, the importance of Garland to South Dakota.

A thorough consideration of all Garland's Dakota writings is beyond the scope of this study. Consequently, I limit my discussion predominately to A Son of the Middle Border, representative of autobiography and "history," and "The Rise of
Boomtown," a novel representative of a greater degree of "story" and also the basis for most of Garland’s Dakota writings. Both Son and "Boomtown" demonstrate that history and story, fact and fiction, are interdependent and, at times, indistinguishable in Garland’s work.

Son (1917) provides an ostensibly factual, retrospective look at Garland’s early days in Dakota Territory. In keeping with the conventions of most American autobiography, as inaugurated by the likes of Benjamin Franklin, it is the story of making it—of finding a home and a sense of self and purpose. Not surprisingly, it reads like a bildungsroman, a novel of maturation, and the reader senses strongly the influence of illusion, memory, and imagination on historical fact. Garland’s autobiography gives us the story of his trailing West to the “sunset regions,” so idealized by his McClintock-Garland heritage, and the story of his back-trailing East to the more cultured literary life, which amounts, in


3. The phrase “sunset regions” comes, perhaps most directly for Garland, from a song quoted in A Son of the Middle Border on page 45:

Cheer up, brothers, as we go
O’er the mountains, westward ho,
Where herds of deer and buffalo
Furnish the fare.

Then o’er the hills in legions, boys.
Fair freedom’s star
Points to the sunset regions, boys.
Ha, ha, ha-ha!

Garland says that “the significance of this song in the lives of the McClintocks [Garland’s mother was Isabel McClintock Garland] and the Garlands cannot be
Hamlin Garland as a young man, circa 1892.

effect, to an escape from the disillusioning "reality" of the West. Countless trips, coupled with his mythologizing and then demythologizing of the West, seem to account for all of Garland's life and art.

The West was constantly shifting, of course, for the nation, for the individual, and for Garland. But for the period covered by *Son* (1865-1892), much of what the yeoman settler thought of as the West was represented by Dakota Territory, which was idealized and made more alluring by the Pre-emption, Homestead, and Timber laws of 1841, 1862, and 1873, respectively. This dream, measured. It was the marching song of my Grandfather's generation and undoubtedly profoundly influenced my father and my uncles in all that they did. . . . It voiced as no other song did, the pioneer impulse throbbing deep in my father's blood. . . . Unquestionably it was a directing force in the lives of at least three generations of my pioneering race" (*Son*, p. 46).

however, involved work, and pain. In Son, Garland's Quixote-like change from ideal to real and positive to negative feelings about the Dakota dream becomes the major narrative progression of the book. The dream of Boston ultimately replaces the dream of Dakota; that sums up the "plot" of the autobiography.

For the Garland family, Dakota became a magic word in the years of 1879 and 1880. The chinch-bug had destroyed the crops around their northeastern Iowa home, and in May of 1880, Garland's father set out by train "to explore the Land of the Dakotas which had but recently been wrested from the control of Sitting Bull" (Son, p. 229). Ordway, Brown County, Dakota Territory, was the place taken up for homesteading by the old soldier Richard Garland at the same time young Hamlin was offering his graduation oration, appropriately entitled "Going West," at Cedar Valley Seminary in Osage, Iowa. Both father and son initially associated Dakota with ideas of success, independence, and a new start—the American dream out West. Chapters 20, "The Land of the Dakotas," 26, "The Land of the Straddle-Bug," and 28, "A Visit to the West," all deal with Garland in Dakota Territory in the eighties, the decade in national history just before Omnibus statehood in 1889.

Read as social and political history, these chapters in Son are Garland's account of the second Dakota land boom, which began in 1878 and was promoted by the entry of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads into the territory. Garland's youth is thus set against the youth of the Dakotas. His role in life at that point was uncertain, but it involved a choice among farmer/homesteader (like his father), teacher (a more likely choice), and writer (a less likely choice).

When his family moved to Ordway in 1881, Garland traveled instead to Minnesota in futile search of employment as a teacher. In the boom town of Farmington, Minnesota, he encountered the Dakota branch of the Milwaukee railroad and was caught up in the excitement of immigration surging west. He consequently bought a ticket for Aberdeen and "entered the train crammed with movers who had found the 'prairie schooner' all too slow. The epoch of the canvas-covered wagon had passed. The era of the locomotive, the day of the chartered car, had arrived. Free

5. Richard B. Morris, ed., Encyclopedia of American History (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953), p. 438. The Encyclopedia notes that the "peak in homestead grants in the Dakotas was reached in 1884 when 11,083,000 acres were granted to settlers." The 1890 population of the Dakotas was 539,583.
land was receding at railroad speed, the borderline could be overtaken only by steam and every man was in haste to arrive” (Son, p. 244).

At the end of a three-day’s ride, but with the world all before him, he arrived at another boom town, Milbank, where, he says, “the flock of shining yellow pine shanties strewn upon the sod, gave me an illogical delight, but then I was twenty-one—and it was sunset in the Land of the Dakotas!” (Son, p. 244). During the fourth day of travel, he approached the Sisseton Reservation, “where only the coyote ranged and the Sioux made residence,” and he saw the James River Valley for the first time, “as illimitable as the ocean and as level as a floor” (Son, p. 245). That night he reached Aberdeen, the end of the line. From there, Garland walked twelve miles over the treeless plain, watching gulls gather morning locusts. His first impressions upon reaching Ordway are worth quoting at length:

There was beauty in this plain, delicate beauty and a weird charm, despite its lack of undulation. Its lonely unplowed sweep gave me the satisfying sensation of being at last among the men who held the outposts—sentinels for the marching millions who were approaching from the east. For two hours I walked, seeing Aberdeen fade to a series of wavering, grotesque

*Artist's drawing of Aberdeen, Dakota Territory, 1881. “Aberdeen was the end of the line, and when we came into it that night it seemed a near neighbor to Sitting Bull and the bison” (Son, p. 246).*
notches on the southern horizon line, while to the north an equally irregular and insubstantial line of shadows gradually took on weight and color until it became the village in which my father was at this very moment busy in founding his new home. [Son, p. 246]

Two miles beyond Ordway, Garland joined with his father and grandfather in working on their claims, accepting wages from his father at the rate of two dollars per day. But after two weeks, he left in search of a teaching job again, starting with a trip back to his childhood home in Wisconsin for a two-month stay with relatives. Then clerking, carpentering, and even teaching for a time, he went on to Rockford, Illinois, Springfield, Massachusetts, Boston, New York, Washington, and Chicago.

In the spring of 1883, Garland returned to Dakota Territory at the height of the boom, with the determination to secure a claim of his own but with no real intention of permanently staying. He decided on proving up in McPherson County, to the west of Brown County. Richard Garland's preemption claim was thirty miles west of Ordway, and young Hamlin (now twenty-three years old) erected his straddle-bug sign of ownership six miles beyond that.

He helped his father establish a store that served as the post office and social center of the town. Spending a part of each month in Ordway, Garland began to brood more and more about the land, the weather, and his future:

Winter! No man knows what winter means until he has lived through one in a pine-board shanty on a Dakota plain with only buffalo bones for fuel. There were those who had settled upon this land, not as I had done with intent to prove up and sell, but with plans to make a home, and many of these, having toiled all the early spring in hope of a crop, now at the beginning of winter found themselves with little money and no coal. Many of them would have starved and frozen had it not been for the buffalo skeletons which lay scattered over the sod, and for which a sudden market developed. . . . Thus "the herds of deer and buffalo" did indeed strangely "furnish the cheer." [Son, p. 309]

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6. Garland gives an explanation of the straddle-bug in many of his books; the following is from Son: "The straddle-bug, I should explain, was composed of three boards set together in tripod form and was used as a monument, a sign of occupancy. Its presence defended a claim against the next comer. . . . For several weeks these signs took the place of 'improvements' and were fully respected. No one could honorably jump these claims within thirty days and no one did" (p. 303). See also "Boomtown," pp. 376, 378; and The Moccasin Ranch, p. 5.

7. This store is described in fictionalized detail in Garland's The Moccasin Ranch. For fuller information on such "ranches" as the Garland's store, see Everett Dick, The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890 (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1937), pp. 102-9.
The conditions of preemption demanded a visit to one's claim every thirty days, and such trips out to McPherson County were especially menacing amidst February and March blizzards: "No sooner was the snow laid by a north wind than it took wing above a southern blast and returned upon us sifting to and fro until at last its crystals were as fine as flour, so triturated that it seemed to drive through an inch board. Often it filled the air for hundreds of feet above the earth like a mist, and lay in long ridges behind every bush or weed. Nothing lived on these desolate uplands but the white owl and the wolf" (Son, p. 310).

Three successive blizzards convinced Garland to seek "other work in other airs" (Son, p. 312). His description of a night alone in a shanty besieged by seventy-mile-an-hour winds and waking up to forty degrees below zero seems to more than justify his decision. These blizzards (along with hail storms and cyclones), which are ambivalently traumatic and sublime, occur again and again in Garland's Dakota writings. No doubt he fictionalized a fact or two for effect, just as his fictional settler named Moore tells his friends his story of holding down a claim in a blizzard "with trimmings," for which Garland's narrator apologizes to the reader, saying "Moore is a good fellow, and undoubtedly regrets the exaggerations which the enthusiasm of the moment induced" ("Holding Down a Claim in a Blizzard," p. 67). The poem "Lost in the Norther" is Garland's most extreme statement of the terrors of a Dakota snow storm:

Lost on the prairie! All day alone,  
Save my boyish pride, my swift Ladrone,  
And the shapes on the shadow my startled brain cast.  
Which way is north? which way is west?  
I ask Ladrone, for he knows best,  
And he turns his head to the blast.  

["Lost in the Norther," p. 883]

During such tough winter circumstances, complicated by growing guilt and pity for his mother's hardships, Garland discovered Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879) and was convinced of George's thesis: "Unrestricted individual ownership of the earth I acknowledged to be wrong and I caught some glimpse of the radiant plenty of George's ideal Commonwealth. The trumpet call of the closing pages filled me with a desire to battle for the right. Here was a theme for the great orator. Here was opportunity for the most devoted evangel" (Son, pp. 313-14). It was a book, read at a time and in a place, that changed Garland's outlook on the world "and led to far-reaching complications" in his life (Son,
p. 313). In this mood, the chance suggestion from a visiting minister and speculator in land, Mr. Bashford, to enroll in the Boston School of Oratory prompted Garland's second "escape" from Dakota, and in 1884, with $200 in pocket from the sale of his claim, he sought greater fortunes in the East. Fundamentally, this recital of romanticized hopes followed by disillusionment and escape is the story Garland tells again and again in all his Dakota writings.

Although decisive, Garland's move to Boston was not his final break with the Dakotas. He was haunted somehow by the thought that his mother deserved a much better life, and he hoped in Oedipal fashion, or so it seems, that through his efforts, he might rescue her from both the land and his father. This "rescue" motif permeates much of his writing.8 The feeling might also have given impetus to many of his later actions, including the recreation of a family homestead in Wisconsin and his marriage to Zulime Taft in 1899.9

Garland's return visit to Ordway in 1887 confirmed his role as a militant single-tax reformer and his bitterness against a land and situation that imprisoned his mother.10 By this time, the railroad had reached Ordway, a town Garland describes as "a sparse collection of weatherbeaten wooden homes, without shade of trees or grass of lawns, a desolate, drab little town." (Son, p. 368). In 1886, while at the Boston School of Oratory, Garland had received twenty-five dollars, his first literary wage, for "Lost in the Norther," published in Harper's Weekly.11 Working on the farm now took on "literary significance" for Garland, and with the


10. Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration in South Dakota, Hamlin Garland Memorial, 2nd ed., American Guide Series (Mitchell: South Dakota Writers' League, 1939), pp. 15-16; Donald Pizer, Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career, University of California Publications, English Studies, no. 22 (Berkeley, 1960), pp. 31-59. The single tax reformers supported a tax system, designed by Henry George, wherein "Land would be taxed, not in ratio to improvements, but according to the average value of the land around it. Not only would this eliminate land speculation, but it would also, because of the greatly increased land tax, free both industry and the public from all other forms of rent and taxation" (Pizer, Garland's Early Work and Career, p. 38).

11. In addition to Son, see Federal Writers' Project, Hamlin Garland Memorial, p. 15.
words of his friend Joseph Kirkland in his mind, he wrote his first story: "You're the first actual farmer in American fiction [Kirkland had said]—now tell the truth about it" (Son, p. 371).

This story, "Mrs. Ripley's Trip," he sold to Harper's Weekly for seventy-five dollars, and it proved to be the beginning of perhaps his most-read work, Main-Travelled Roads. Published in 1891, the book also included "Among the Corn-Rows," a relatively cheerful Dakota story. Thus it was in Dakota Territory, on his parent's homestead in what was soon to become South Dakota, that Hamlin Garland really began his career as a writer. And it was in South Dakota that his subject of a democratic Middle-west (so extolled by the fictional Albert Seagraves in "Among the Corn-Rows") and his aesthetic of Veritism were formulated. In Garland's words: "Obscurely forming in my mind were two great literary concepts—that truth was a higher quality than beauty, and that to spread the reign of justice should everywhere be the design and intent of the artist. The merely beautiful in art seemed petty, and success at the cost of the happiness of others a monstrous egotism" (Son, p. 374).

Other trips to the Dakotas continued to heighten Garland's despair at the plight of settlers like his parents. When his mother suffered a stroke, leaving Garland feeling even more guilty, he traveled to Ordway in 1889. He visited his parents in 1892 in Columbia, South Dakota, a town damaged by the shift in 1890 of the Brown County seat to Aberdeen. In 1897 and 1900, he traveled to Bismarck, North Dakota, and to the Standing Rock Reservation, where he gathered material for his Book of the American Indian and other Indian writings. He was in Aber-

12. See John R. Milton, ed., The Literature of South Dakota (Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 1976), pp. 113-32. Milton says, "Some of Garland's bleakest comments have been made about eastern South Dakota, but 'Among the Corn-Rows' offers some relief from Garland's frequent grimness" (p. 113).


14. The Hamlin Garland Memorial explains, "Columbia had been the county seat of Brown County, and a lively town until 1890 when Aberdeen won the county seat election" (p. 22). Garland also relates that "Business ... had not been going well on the border during my absence. None of the towns had improved. On the contrary, all had lost ground" (Son, p. 398). See also Howard Roberts Lamar, Dakota Territory, 1861-1889: A Study of Frontier Politics (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 208-43; and Robert R. Karolevitz, Challenge: The South Dakota Story (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Brevet Press, 1975), pp. 165-84.

15. On Garland and Indians, see Garland, A Daughter of the Middle Border, pp.
deen in 1911 and 1915 and Valley City, North Dakota, in 1923 for speaking engagements.\textsuperscript{16}

Exemplifying Garland's continuing despair with the travails of Dakota are his words about Aberdeen in July of 1911:

The flat expanse was depressing. The town was ugly and the little park along the muddy “Jim” pathetic, with its tiny unkempt grove of water elms and box alders [sic] filled with flimsy cabins and huts... It makes me wonder at human patience. \textit{[Hamlin Garland's Diaries, p. 260]}

And in November 1923, he compares Valley City, North Dakota, with the Ordway of forty years past:

Valley City possesses a wooden hotel, a small college and many high-minded, aspiring citizens, but after fifty years of hopeful struggle, it is still a village on the edge of civilization. It is precisely such a "city" as I left behind me in South Dakota when I went to Boston in 1884. In those days I shared the belief that forty years would make my father's town a place of vines and trees, and that its homes would take on dignity and grace. What do I find forty years later? Only flimsiness desolately weather-worn, poverty grown dim-eyed and hopeless!

[Afternoon Neighbors, pp. 124-25]

Finally, in 1936, four years before his death, when a twelve-ton boulder was moved to the South Dakota homestead site and a dedicatory program was held in his honor, Garland, age seventy-six, was unable to attend. In view of his journal and diary comments, Garland's reported words at the close of the Hamlin Garland Memorial sound evasive:

[Garland] said in 1938 that he intends to come again to South Dakota, to see the changes that have taken place, the prosperous farms in the area where he and his father toiled fruitlessly, the modern towns with shaded streets and parks, and the people who acclaim and honor him after fifty-odd years. 17

Whatever his intentions, Garland did not make it back to Dakota. He died on 4 March 1940 in California.

Such was the personal history of Garland in Dakota. His autobiography shows a picture of Dakota recreated in memory and imagination, a "reality" not entirely softened in outline but surely heightened in color. In his autobiographical portraits of Dakota, Garland gives us a place at first symbolic of young manhood, of making it, of becoming a writer, of growth and expectation, and of idealized hopes. But soon the hopes become only partially realized, and the dreams become damaged like the scorched wheat fields.

Turning to Garland's Dakota fiction, one finds it almost as "historical" and "autobiographical" as A Son of the Middle Border. Despite changes, the names and places are recognizably parallel with those more factually mentioned in the autobiography. Garland is easily recognizable in his fiction. His fictive counterpart is usually a writer-journalist just sojourning in Dakota, who, although enjoying the romance temporarily, soon becomes disillusioned and cannot wait to head east. Thus, to reiterate, in both his autobiography and his fiction, history

becomes story and story becomes history—or said another way, Garland’s autobiography, although history, is fictionalized; and his fiction, although story, is historical.

In Garland’s fiction about Dakota, Ordway becomes a more generalized and symbolic place called Boomtown, and Garland becomes, variously, a character called Seagraves, or Reeves, or some equivalent “observer” who is soon to leave. His voice becomes theirs. They are his spokesmen, and his story is one not of settlement but of escape.

Garland’s Dakota novel “The Rise of Boomtown” provides a prime example for considering story-history. Soon after leaving his Dakota claim, Garland began the novel in 1886 and finished it after his 1887 trip home. As Donald Pizer explains in his introduction to “Boomtown,” this novel was never published (except for the excerpted “Holding Down a Claim in a Blizzard”), but it became the basis for other Dakota fictions and, one can safely assume, much of the “fact” in Son. Pizer notes the obvious parallels between Garland and his narrator Seagraves and sorts out the Boomtown and South Dakota historical correspondences in this way:

Garland seems to have derived most of his impressions of Boomtown from what he has seen and been told of Ordway... But... he added characteristics of the neighboring town [sic] of Aberdeen and Columbia. So Boomtown is placed on the James (Columbia), given the first artesian well in the area (Aberdeen), and made both the county seat (Columbia) and district land office (Aberdeen). In short, though Ordway seems to have served as the basic source of information for Garland’s portrait of Boomtown, he did not hesitate to introduce details familiar to him from his knowledge of Aberdeen and Columbia.

In Garland’s preface to his readers, he, speaking as Seagraves, describes the work as neither a novel or a history. It is, he says, a record of the social movement of the railway settlement of the prairie West, recorded in such a way “that the interest of fiction may make the fact lighter and the fact lend dignity to the fiction” (“Boomtown,” p. 352). Intriguingly, Seagraves, the fictive voice of the real author, then gets rather humorously caught up in the confusion of just what it is that he has written. He then relies for testimony of his reportorial credibility on his senior editor’s advice about writing: “As the Major said, ‘Tell it as it is, Seagraves, and it’ll be read’ ” (“Boomtown,” p. 352). Here we see two fictional characters, Seagraves and the Major, giving credence to the truth of history and story—a salient prefatory note not just to “Boomtown” but to Garland’s other Dakota writings as well.

19. Ibid., p. 349.
In this novel, Garland makes his role in the history of Dakota considerably more heroic than it was, for the story-history of Seagraves is the story-history of Boomtown. When he comes, it is born; when he leaves, it is no longer booming. Only two years old at the time of Seagraves’s arrival, Boomtown has no real past. It is all future. What he finds on his arrival from Iowa is a town like a hundred other towns on the prairie: “At one end of the street was the railway station, the coal houses, the watertank, together with the ubiquitous and notoriously ugly grain elevator. The other end of the street opened upon the wide and solemn prairie, whose absolute level was bounded only by the horizon and the imagination” (“Boomtown,” p. 353). In the street, he notices only the huge battlements and signboards on the buildings, particularly the sign of the land agent. The hope of the townspeople, and the basis for the boom, is “that Boomtown must ultimately become the great railroad center of southern Dakota” (“Boomtown,” p. 354).

Garland, through Seagraves, indulges in some “historical” romanticizing about the original railroad surveying party that plotted Boomtown in the late seventies and enthuses, “A golden day! A mist lay on the wide expanse of russet, grassy plain, stretching away until lost in the fiery haze of cloudless sunset” (“Boomtown,” p. 355). And he regards himself, all in all, as important as the surveyors with whom he has imaginatively projected himself back in time—because Seagraves equates the real founding of Boomtown with the first edition of the Spike: “Boomtown as an identity was really born with the first edition of the Spike, consequent upon the advent of Major Mullins and myself, seeing that we, as joint editors of the Spike, gave voice, soul, and personality to the latest-born child of American civilization” (“Boomtown,” p. 357). Embedded in such hyperbole is Garland’s projection of his professional historical self, which is rendered in Son as the idealized writer-hero he aspired to become when he left Dakota and, in fact, did become to some degree by the time Son was written.

Boomtown contains two individuals who are inextricably mixed with the railroad hopes of the community. Judge Sid Balser is one of the promoters of the town’s future, as is Major Mullins, editor of the Spike. Garland portrays the Major favorably in “Boomtown,” while Judge Balser suffers from a bad reputation. Historically, these two names are identified with Judge James Barnes and Major William A. Moore, who, along with L. G. (“Ordway”) Johnson, comprised the Ordway
triumverate seeking to make Ordway the capital of Dakota Territory.  

Seagraves relates the aggressiveness of the Major’s editorials, in which he praised the fertile farming land, told how inexpensive it was to cultivate, and even explained how to obtain the free land from the government. The town, to the Major, promised to be the commercial center of Buster County (Brown County), and in the *Spike*, he argued the inevitability of this by way of an eight-point “spider map” of railway connections converging on Boomtown. As an insight into territorial journalistic practices, Seagraves relates how, as soon as it is printed, three other “unscrupulous” editors run the Major’s map as their own and apply his very same reasoning to their towns.

The Belleplain Argus is the Spike’s worst enemy and rival; however, the Heron Leader and the Yankton Pulverizer also vie with Boomtown and the Spike for the railroad’s favor, county seats, and the location of the capital. Since Heron already has a junction, the Leader’s campaign is patronizing. The Pulverizer, meanwhile, refutes points in favor of moving the capital to “the geographical center of the territory” (“Boomtown,” p. 365) and discounts any report of increasing northern settlement, which would discredit Yankton’s continued holding of the capital. Seagraves recalls that with competition underway, the Belleplain Argus described Boomtown as outright unhealthy: “…full of alkali and… malarial in the spring. The water was an active

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purge, and no settler with an atom of common sense would think of settling in a town which was overflowed half the summer” (“Boomtown,” p. 366).

Victory temporarily comes to the *Spike* when the “C & P” railroad makes Boomtown its terminus for two years, bringing “food, fuel, clothing, the news and the comforts even luxuries, of life to the settler’s door” (“Boomtown,” p. 367). But the railroad also brings corruption, for in Garland’s demythologizing, zealous enthusiasm and newfound luxury cannot last:

But the changes came, and the stern realities began to press once more upon the gates of life. The saloons came, those facts typical of human degradation and greed. The wheels of society began to grind. Officers were elected to keep the peace and to settle differences. Sneak thieves came with the saloons, and hoodlums made their noisy carousals through the hitherto quiet streets. Storekeepers were no longer able to leave articles of value lying overnight in the open air, and fights were to be heard occasionally.

A man was killed in the saloon during the seventh month the first death [sic], and it came like a rude shock to a sleeper in easeful dreamings. [“Boomtown,” p. 368]
In keeping with such a return to reality, Seagraves introduces the inevitable prairie weather, telling about the hazards of winter to a claim holder, and describes the places and objects of a settler's life: the shanty, the bed, the "bach's stove," the table, the cupboard, the crude "grub," the loneliness of the men, and the glory of glimpsing a woman. ("Among the Corn-Rows" more fully dramatizes this theme.) Notwithstanding such hard facts, Seagraves sets up his claim in Emmons County (McPherson) because Buster County has filled its land claims. The legal claim reproduced on pages 376-78 of Pizer's editing of the novel is, interestingly, Garland's. With the promise of "B.B.&Q." railroad connections, Emmons County booms, and hope climbs that Buster County will become the central distributing point in the valley.

Hope falters, however, when Belleplain grades a road to allow the running of rails on to that town in order to make a terminus there. But, in turn, Boomtown is awarded the land office and business surges up again. In addition, wheat harvests are superb during the second summer of Seagraves's residence, and as a bonus, the Major leads Boomtown to success in the county seat election. Nevertheless, Boomtown is on the line where Dakota Territory must inevitably divide, and it is forced to give up its expectations of becoming the capital as it watches the railroad extend its grades and leave the town. Finally, it tries to adjust to the decline in land seekers and make the best of those remaining individuals coming to Boomtown to make final proof of their claims.

At this point, Seagraves has had enough and decides to leave, saying "I was tired of it all. The russet plain, the miserable wooden buildings, the wretched little houses, the terrible sweep of space, and the waterless, treeless, songless plain" ("Boomtown," p. 386). The "golden day" of his earlier romantic thoughts is gone as he remembers:

I think I first entertained the idea of giving up the Spike the second winter. That second winter may be said to have taken the romance and some of the buoyancy out of the settler's life. It was not only cold and stormy, but the settler found himself alone, without near neighbors to cooperate with him in the building of schools and the formation of societies for mutual help. ["Boomtown," p. 387]

The romance had disappeared for Seagraves as it had for Garland: "The old pioneer days were gone.... The whole atmosphere had changed to the commonplace of the ordinary western town of two or three thousand inhabitants" ("Boomtown," p. 388). Heading east by train for a literary life of
more excitement, Seagraves says “I looked back upon Boomtown after a few moments and watched it grow smaller and smaller and more insubstantial. The dun elevators became slender and wavering columns of blue haze; ... Now the two lines which marked the elevators faded out, and Boomtown melted into the all-engulfing plain” (“Boomtown,” p. 388). Due to the retrospective point of view, the implication is that Seagraves (like Garland) is, at the time of writing, in the East, content with his decision to leave Dakota and to visit it in memory.

Ultimately, Garland had but one story to tell, regardless of voice or persona, and that was the story of his personal history: the story of his dreams of romance in the West and the passing of those dreams with the passing of youth and the old West. This story is evidenced in both his autobiography A Son of the Middle Border and in his Dakota fiction, of which “The Rise of Boomtown” is representative. Together these factual and fictional retellings of his hopes and disappointments in the West make up what he calls a “home-spun national history.”

Having elements of both romance and reality, Garland’s version of a home-spun history allowed him to use fact and fiction interchangeably to give the reader not only chronology but also the motives, moods, illusions, and imaginings of a participant of the time. Had Garland stayed on the border—had the farmer not gone to the city to write about the farmer—he might have become a sentinel on the advancing edge of the West and written an even more authentic picture of its passing. But as the Dakota-Middle Border frontier passed into national history, Garland’s disillusionment with the area grew and would continue to grow throughout his life, and his later “memories” took the shape of Far Western and Rocky Mountain idylls told with genteel flourish and fastidiousness.22 Nonetheless, Hamlin Garland’s Dakota writings, based on the harsh facts, shattered illusions, and remembered hopes of the time, give us a picture of Dakota Territory in the 1880s that is as close as we can probably come to what it was “really” like back then.

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