

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

This damned fool Davis gets my goat. First, he lies about the Minnesota roads. Then, he doesn't appreciate my putting Minnesota on the map. Only writer doing it. Third, reading between the lines of his letter to you, he tries to threaten you with loss of advertising -- Gawd only knows what advertising -- in your state and in the world that however rotten other states may be, this one state is perfect.

“Dear Mr. Lorimer”

Letters from

But in my letter to him, copy of which enclosed, I try not to show my bad temper, without, at the same time, being too meek.

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RICHARD LINGEMAN

The letters below represent part of a larger correspondence between Sinclair Lewis and George Horace Lorimer, the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* from the late 1890s to the mid-1930s. (The letters are now in the Minnesota Historical Society collections.) Lewis's most prolific period with the *Post* ran from 1915 into 1920, during which he contributed 23 stories to the magazine.

By 1915, when he discovered Lewis's story "Nature Inc." in the slush pile, Lorimer was a formidable figure in the magazine world. He had elevated the *Saturday Evening Post* into one of the largest-circulation weeklies in the country, a profitable mass-market magazine with droves of advertisers eager to reach a national market.

Lewis contributed mainly love and business stories to the *Post*, strictly adhering to Lorimer's various taboos, such as no extramarital affairs and no women characters who smoked cigarettes or drank liquor. In 1919 Lewis's serial "Free Air" appeared. A lightweight love story, it contained realistic descriptions of the primitive state of automobile travel



Sinclair Lewis, working in the furnished room in Minneapolis he rented for writing, 1919

in those days. The narrative drew on Lewis's experiences during a 1916 cross-country trip in a Ford Model T with his wife. A scene in the serial describes the heroine's misadventures in Minnesota when her car gets stuck in a large mudhole, a common occurrence for drivers in that era.

This scene drew a critical letter from one Harry G. Davis, secretary of the Minnesota Highway Improvement Association, founded to spearhead the state's Good Roads movement, which aimed to finance paved highways and, as the slogan had it, to "pull Minnesota out of the mud." Davis griped that Lewis's article would discourage tourists from coming to the state. Although Lewis suspected Davis's letter was an attempt to extort a plug in the *Post* for the Minnesota Good Roads amendment, he snapped to when Lorimer asked him to reply. Insisting that he was a staunch supporter of tourism and good roads, he pointed out that he was the only writer contributing stories about his native state to a national magazine. Davis really had no good answer to Lewis's letter and later apologized.

The Sinclair Lewis we see here is always respectful to Lorimer, praising him at every opportunity. He

was grateful to the editor who had launched his career as a free-lance writer and regarded the older man as something of a father figure. The *Post* was his main market for stories, and Lorimer in his ducal way regularly raised Lewis's rates, for which (as is apparent in one letter) Lewis expressed fulsome gratitude.

The letters also mention Lewis's move from St. Paul to Mankato. Previously he had, accompanied by his wife, Gracie, and their son, Wells, moved to St. Paul to research the Minnesota backgrounds of his next novel, for which he already had the title: *Main Street*. In Mankato he started writing the novel that would make his name and completed it in 1920 in Washington, D.C. His letters to Lorimer during this period presage what would be a growing di-

lemma for Lewis. He was burning to write *Main Street* but afraid that he was becoming a well-paid *Saturday Evening Post* hack. Also, Lorimer, whom he liked personally, was an arch reactionary and supported in frothing editorials the postwar crackdown on radicals and aliens. Lewis feared that *Main Street*, as he envisioned it, was too radical, too critical of sacred American institutions. In the conservative postwar climate, Lorimer and other editors would ban him from their pages. Thus the new novel was a big gamble for him.

Nevertheless, in 1920 he ceased contributing to the *Post* in order to devote full time to *Main Street*. Lorimer grew increasingly impatient with his failure to deliver stories and then demanded to see the novel for possible serialization in the *Post*.

That put Lewis in a tough spot: he had promised his publisher that he would not allow serialization, which would cut into sales of the book (as had happened with *Free Air*). Also, he feared that even thinking about Lorimer's censorship would inhibit his telling the truth in his new novel.

In the end, he wrote the book he wanted to write. *Main Street* was a sensation, and Lewis never had to write for Lorimer again, although in the 1930s he contributed a handful of stories to the *Post*.

Richard Lingeman is a senior editor at The Nation. His biography, Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street, is forthcoming in paperback from the Minnesota Historical Society Press (2005). His next book, on literary friendships, will be published by Random House.

Lewis (Minneapolis) to Lorimer (Philadelphia), May 16, 1919

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

Here is a story, THE ENCHANTED HOUR.

June 1st we go down to the country, and from then till September I may be viewed in a flannel shirt washing the car and ardently discussing whether the Dundas road is better than the Watertown pike or not.

Sincerely yours,

Lewis (Mankato) to Lorimer, June 4, 1919

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

A day and a half after I left Wyncote

I was plowing through scores of miles of black-mud roads, oozy with several days of rain, driving much family and luggage down here from Minneapolis; but now I'm settled and ready for work on the new novel, *Main Street*.

It may possibly be because my head is so full of that, but anyway, I couldn't, in all my thinking about it on the train and since, seem to formulate any good stories about the maid business—eight hour day and so on. . . . Hang it, I can't seem to make the story come with any of the zest that satire ought to have—though I do have a million idea [*sic*] for *Main Street*, and shall be actually writing it tomorrow (in my office in the Kruse store, you remember, not Kruse Bros, Klassy Kollege Klothes but Fred Kruse's—the building with a real elevator).

Please thank Mrs. Lorimer for her hospitality. I must say that your peonies and Dutch colonial houses make this land of wheat and red barns seem rather pioneerish by contrast, but I do love it, and I hope to get a good yarn out of it.

Sincerely yours,

H. G. Davis, Secretary, Minnesota Highway Improvement Association (St. Paul), to Lorimer, June 4, 1919

My Dear Mr. Lorimer:

The opening chapter of your current serial entitled "Free Air" by Mr. Sinclair Lewis is creating a great deal of unfavorable comment in Minnesota, owing to the fact that it is appearing at the opening of our tourist season,



Cover of Lewis's Free Air, serialized in the Saturday Evening Post and then published as a book in 1919

picturing the roads in Minnesota as actually impassable. Aside from that, however, the story bids fair to be entertaining.

Minnesota prides itself upon the condition of its highways and is just now in the midst of a campaign for a constitutional amendment which is unique in legislation. In brief, it proposes the adoption of an amendment to the constitution which creates a definitely described system of highways of approximately seven thousand miles in extent, reaching into every part of the state of Minnesota, every mile of which ultimately is to be a paved roadway. There are so many features of the plan which I believe you would find to be well worthy of a special article in the Post.

Minnesota has in this respect taken the lead of all states in the union and is the first one to lay out its main road system in the constitu-

tion of the state so it can never be changed nor can the location of the roads become a matter of political barter.

This Association would be very glad to have you detail a staff man to prepare an article on the proposed constitutional road system or, if you do not find that to be practicable, we would be pleased to have an article on the subject prepared and submit it to you. I think you would find such an article very popular with your advertising clientele especially those advertising road materials, motor cars, motor trucks and accessories.

May I not hear from you on this subject?

Yours very truly,

**Lorimer to Lewis,
June 6, 1919**

My dear Lewis:

Will you write Mr. Davis a soothing letter based on your personal experience? I know nothing, from experience, of the Minnesota roads.

I should like to have Mr. Davis' letter back.

Sincerely yours,

**Lewis to Davis,
June 10, 1919**

Dear Mr. Davis:

Mr. Lorimer, of the Saturday Evening Post, has sent me your letter about my serial "Free Air," and asked me to answer for him, since he knows little, from experience, of Minnesota roads.

First of all please understand that I am a Minnesotan, by birth and present residence; and that I want

tourists to come here, quite as much for their own sake as for Minnesota's sake. And it is my hope—and belief—that Free Air is much more likely to bring them here than to turn them away. Please note the descriptions of scenery—particularly that at the beginning of instalment two. And note that I do not, as you say to Mr. Lorimer, say that the roads are impassable; simply that there is mud after rains—which there is. The fact that Claire finds mud will have far less effect on tourists than the descriptions of the glory of the prairies.

Second, I believe that just because we are campaigning for the better roads amendment, it helps rather than hinders to call attention to the fact that our roads are not perfect. If they are perfect, why spend \$100,000,000 on them? Why spend it if they're anywhere near perfect: And you know and I know that there's a whole lot of opposition to the amendments among the farmers.

Third, as to whether they are especially good, I need not talk to you—you live here. But let me say that I have driven from one end of the state to the other, and do know the roads. The hole which I describe as the one in which Claire was stuck is the actual hole in which I was stuck, with my wife, and the cashier of the First National Bank of Sauk Centre. This hole was near Freeport, and we were stuck in it for four hours, in 1916—which is the exact date of Claire's being stuck there, as I point out in the story (I say that it's the year before America entered the war). It is true that the whole road from Minneapolis to Sauk Centre is better now, but just two weeks ago I drove over it, and I noticed that that same hole had been pretty bad this spring, also that the whole road is rough. Also beyond Sauk Centre is gets bad. Also it is

badly marked—it's extremely easy to get off it at Avon, St. Joseph and just beyond Sauk Centre.

About other roads I've noticed recently. The semi-main highway from Taylor's Falls to St. Cloud is rotten in any weather. The road from Minneapolis here to Mankato (I drove it one week ago) is almost impassable after rains, whether you go by way of Shakopee—which the T.I.B. book gives as a main highway—or by way of Faribault. Between Faribault and here a friend of mine recently was stuck three times and had to hauled out. Then take the Jefferson Highway just south of St. Paul—just after you get off the pavement. Very bad.

A motor salesman friend of mine told me just two days ago that he was out on the Yellowstone Trail between the Twin Cities and Dakota—certainly a main highway—and found it impossible to get out and sell cars because the road was impassable. Another friend has written me from the north of the state that he sat and read *Free Air* aloud—while his car was stuck for keeps!

I could go on for pages, but you would think I was trying to start a controversy, which is exactly the opposite of my purpose. That purpose is to persuade you that I want Minnesota to be helped instead of injured by my story. I want us to be sure that the good roads amendment goes through; I want us to have everywhere such corking roads as that from Sauk Centre to Wadena. Then indeed we shall have our share of the tourist traffic; the tourist will come to appreciate our hills and prairies, lakes and woods, and not be disturbed by *any* bad roads.

How many writers are writing about Minnesota, Mr. Davis? Any one save myself? Any one else

“Another friend has written me from the north of the state that he sat and read *Free Air* aloud—while his car was stuck for keeps!”

boosting our prairies, our lakes, our people? Then why do you want to tie my hands by insisting that I indulge in untrue glorification? Minnesota roads are *not* perfect. Let's make them so, and you'll have me right there boosting them. But today, just eight days after the terrible labor of waddling through the mud from Minneapolis here to these glorious Mankato lakes and the river, you can't expect me meekly to say, “I was wrong—Minnesota highways are as good as the landscape.”

Sincerely yours,

**Lewis to Lorimer,
June 10, 1919**

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

This damned fool Davis gets my goat. First, he lies about the Minnesota roads. Then, he doesn't appreciate my putting Minnesota on the map—and I'm the only writer doing it. Third, reading between the lines of his letter to you, he tries to threaten you with loss of advertising—Gawd only knows what advertising—if you don't come out and inform the world that however rotten other states may be, this one state is perfect.

But in my letter to him, copy of which enclosed, I try not to show any bad temper, without, at the same time, being too meek.

It happens that one of the directors of the association—Hohman

of Mankato—is my banker, and I'm going to show him the letter to Davis before sending it off.

Thank you for sending me Davis's letter, and I do hope I've answered it wisely. Round here, I've been getting more praise about *Free Air* than about almost anything I've ever written, and far from people being sore about the bad roads, they all chuckle, “Golly, that was just my experience last week—glad you wrote it—maybe it will help the good roads amendment through.”

Sincerely yours,

P.S. I showed Davis's letter, and my letter to him, to Hohmann. . . . He thot my letter was all right, and commented, “Davis is foolish. Everybody knows that most Minnesota roads are poor. I can't get out to my own place in the country, eleven miles from here. Davis ought to appreciate the notice you're giving Minnesota, and ought to know that if his letter were quoted publicly, it would hurt instead of help the good roads campaign. Davis is coming down here Thursday, and I'll tell him so.”

Selah! Gawd what a fuss over nothing a man like Davis can start. He is an ex cement salesman. As an advertising man—he's a good authority on cement.

315 South Broad Street,
Mankato, Minnesota.
June 10, 1919.

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

This damned fool Davis gets my goat. First, he lies about the Minnesota roads. Then, he doesn't appreciate my putting Minnesota on the map -- and I'm the only writer doing it. Third, reading between the lines of his letter to you, he tries to threaten you with loss of advertising -- Gawd only knows what advertising -- if you don't come out and inform the world that however rotten other states may be, this one state is perfect.

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Thank you for ~~meek~~ sending me Davis's letter, and I do hope I've answered it wisely. Round here, I've been getting more praise about Free Air than about almost anything I've ever written, and far from people being sore about the bad roads, they all chuckle, "Golly, that was just my experience last week -- glad you wrote it -- maybe it will help the good roads ~~meek~~ amendment through."

Sincerely yours,

Sinclair Lewis

P.S. I showed Davis's letter, and my letter to him, to Hohmann -- whose name I have ringed, at the head of Davis's letter. He thot my letter was all right, and commented, "Davis is foolish. Everybody knows that most Minnesota roads are poor. I can't get out to my own place in the country, eleven miles from here. Davis ought to appreciate the notice you're giving Minnesota, and ought to know that if his letter were quoted publicly, it would hurt instead of help the good roads campaign. Davis is coming down here Thursday, and I'll tell him so."

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**Lorimer to Lewis,
June 12, 1919**

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Your answer to Mr. Davis is neither soft nor scrappy and it covers the ground in exactly the right way, I think. I am very much obliged to you for the trouble that you have gone to in this matter. We try to answer all complaints that come to the Saturday Evening Post, even when the writers of them are unreasonable.

Sincerely yours,

**Lewis to Lorimer,
June 12, 1919**

Dear Mr. Lorimer,

The Davis who wrote to you was in town today to address some bankers; came to see me; was not only placated by my letter but also voluntarily stated that he hadn't meant to suggest, in his letter to you, that I wasn't accurate about Minnesota roads. In fact, he said that he was glad to have them described, as a help to the good roads campaign. What, apparently, he was after in his letter to you was publicity for the Minnesota good roads scheme, which fixes them in an amendment to the constitution. It really seems to be an interesting scheme, and might be worth looking into for an article by Forrest Crissy or some one like that.

Sincerely yours,

**Lorimer to Lewis,
June 16, 1919**

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Mr. Davis came across with a handsome I-didn't-mean-it letter this morning. Quite a little joker!

Sincerely yours,

**Lewis (Washington, D.C.) to
Lorimer, October 3, 1919**

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

I hope you're beating the grippe good and plenty. It's hard for me to imagine you penned up by anything.

Tomorrow I shall send you a love story, of which I'm now making the final draft. The purpose of this letter is to query about the thing I want to do next—I'm planning to start it on Monday, so I'd like, if possible, to hear from you about it.

Unless you call me off, I want to do next a series of two or three—can't tell till I do them how long they'll come out—humorous articles giving my own experiences in Free Air trips. I don't want to overdo the Free Air, motor-touring idea, and I note that Brother Blythe has paid his respects to it, but I think these articles of mine would be quite different from the story, and equally interesting to motorists. And in one of them I want to pay my respects to the garages, etc., who are not courteous to the passing stranger—not namin' no names, but suggesting thoughts for garagemen and restaurantmen who want to succeed.

I've made one trip from Minnesota to San Francisco via Seattle, four trips between New York and Minnesota, and several of seven or eight hundred miles, to draw from.

If this gets to you past the eagle eyes of the office, Smith, the maids, Mrs. Lorimer, the doctor, and Admiral Grayson, I wish you'd let me know—and from your own experience, you might possibly have one or two points of the game you would like to suggest my taking up.

Meekly,

**Lewis to Lorimer,
October 16, 1919**

My dear Lorimer:

You make it so hard for other editors. How do you expect Ray Long or Karl Harriman or this new editor of Collier's, rapidly crawling crabwise on your trail, to catch up when you've invariably grinned and left that trail six months before?

Here you go and give me the extremely appreciated raise on Bronze Bars; and then Danger—Run Slow comes out so beautifully played up. Somehow I'm afraid I shall have difficulty in playing much in the yards of Karl Harriman, Everybody's, and all the other amiable children. Karl has one story of mine yet to publish—the same being one which you rejected many months ago—and after it, I can't see where he's going to publish any large amount of my improving and instructive tales.

The series of motor articles is going swimmingly. For a while I really thought they were going to be humorous—my wife actually was heard to laugh at a phrase in one of them. But she afterwards explained

*“The series of motor articles
is going swimmingly.”*

that she was laughing at a typewriter slip which (Y being next to T on the keyboard) turned out the name of a well-known family journal as The Saturday Evening Posy.

Sincerely yours,

**Lewis to Lorimer,
October 25, 1919**

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

Here is the series on motor touring. Though I have cut them considerably from the first draft, they have come out as three articles of about 12,000, 9,000, and 8,000 words.

I have taken up so many facets of the motor game that it may be desirable to cut out a section here and there. If so, I hope you may care to have Mr. Bigelow wield that able blue pencil of his. In any case, where there

is any criticism of towns or persons, I have concealed their location.

What I have tried to do in this is to interest and amuse every motorist who has ever taken as much as a day's drive out into new country.

My guess is that in your own touring you will have found less discourtesy than I have. That is not only because you are better at putting the fear of God into people than I am, but also because you roll in with a Pierce-Arrow and a chauffeur, while I creak in driving my own Hup.

I am enclosing some pictures taken on my own trips which may or may not be of value. If the articles (if

“Now I’m going to quit writing about these—here motor cars entirely. Done enough of it.”

you take 'em!) should be illustrated with Underwood and Underwood pictures, one or two of mine might be available. Or if you should have them illustrated as Tony Sarg is illustrating Cobb, my pictures might give the artist some ideas. I have captioned them all.

Now I'm going to quit writing about these—here motor cars entirely. Done enough of it. I want next, starting in three or four days, to do a plot story that may be exciting and that I hope may interest you. . . .

Sincerely yours,

Sinclair Lewis □



The motor-touring author with an earlier car at a “flivver camp,” Lake Winnibigoshish, Minnesota, about 1910



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