

Our Town Selected Glossary

Latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes, longitude 72 degrees 37 minutes (p. 6) – Look for this on a map and you will find yourself happily in Massachusetts just off of Interstate 91.



May 7, 1901 (p. 6) – A Tuesday and the birthday of actor Gary Cooper. On this day, two theatre legends were born, as well: Rabindranath Tagore in 1861 and Archibald MacLeish in 1892. Ishirō Honda, who created Godzilla (born in 1911), and Argentinean politician Eva Perón (born in 1919) also share this birthday.

The morning star (p. 6) – The morning star is the planet Venus. It sometimes appears in the east before sunrise. See the end of this glossary for the play's emphasis on stars.

Polish Town (p. 6) – Wilder is doing an interesting thing here. The Polish state did not exist between 1795 and 1918, and this was further complicated by

World War I. Polish as a language and a national identity still existed, of course. Wilder's little nod to the Polish Diaspora is further fascinating because most Polish communities existed in industrial cities like Chicago and not small towns like Grover's Corners. Perhaps they work at the Cartwright's factory. The Polish population would have been primarily Catholic – it is they who attend the church "beyond the tracks".

Canuck (p. 6) – This is an inoffensive term for Canadians dating from the early nineteenth century. It would originally have referred to French Canadians only, but by the time of the play indicated any Canadians. New Hampshire borders Canada, though Grover's Corners is quite far from the border, even by car-ride it takes at least 2 hours.

Congregational Church (p. 6) – This is a very sort of general term, and in this way Wilder makes the families in his play vaguely protestant but non-denominational. George and Emily's wedding will be held at the Congregational church that the stage-manager identifies in these early pages.

William Jennings Bryan (p. 7) – At the turn of the century, Bryan (who was a Democrat) was enormously popular. He lost the elections in 1896 and in 1900 (both times to William McKinley). He would remain a very important national figure and ran again for president in 1908 (he lost to Taft). Bryan basically invented the notion of the "stump speech", touring the country, especially the South, where most of his political support was. In other words, Bryan and giving speeches were two things that went together quite naturally, so it makes sense that the stage manager would couple the

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two. I should mention one other thing about speeches: Wilder himself toured the country for five years giving talks about his work. He was in high demand as a very popular author who had won the Pulitzer Prize (for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*), and so this kind of thing was definitely in his mind. He was, in fact, only able to begin work on *Our Town* when he got out of his lecture contract. The image of Bryan dates from around 1896.



First automobile's going to come along in about five years (p. 7) – Various versions of the automobile were invented in the late nineteenth century. In the United States, Studebaker was selling vehicles as early as 1902. Ford's famous assembly line wouldn't be implemented until around 1913.

There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery (p. 7) – In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), Henry David Thoreau puts all of his furniture outside in order to clean his floor. He reports the following:

It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. [...] It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads, – because they once stood in their midst. (p. 413)



All citations from *Walden* in this document are from the Library of America edition.

Hollyhocks (p. 7) – They grow quite tall, as you can see from the image to the right, and so work quite nicely as a covering for an empty wall.

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Heliotrope (p. 7) – Apparently, the name of the flower comes from the idea that the bunches of flowers turned their blossoms toward the sun. They have a unique smell and a unique color. The name *heliotrope* is used to describe both. An image of the flower is on the following page.

Burdock (p. 7) – The roots of this plant are edible, and are rather widely available



(they have them at my grocery store in Tallahassee), but were likely not part of the Gibbs' diet, as they tend to be more a part of Asian cuisines than European ones. The image to the left is heliotrope; the one to the right burdock.

Grover's Corners Sentinel (p. 7) – *The Staffordshire Sentinel and Commercial and General Advertiser* in the UK was circulating as early as 1854. In the U.S. there was a *Sentinel* in Fort Wayne, Indiana (founded in 1833), a *Milwaukee Sentinel* (1837), a *Santa Cruz Sentinel* (1856), an *Orlando Sentinel* (1876), a *Knoxville Sentinel* (1886), Scottsboro, Alabama's *Daily Sentinel* (1887), Grand Junction, Colorado's *Daily Sentinel* (1893), the *Holland Daily Sentinel* of Southwest Michigan (1896), the Nacogdoches, Texas *Daily Sentinel* (1899), the Los Angeles-based African-American newspaper *The Sentinel* (1933), and in 1925 the *Fort Lauderdale Weekly Herald* (founded in 1910) changed its name to the *Daily News and Evening Sentinel*. A sentinel is, more generally, someone who watches, usually a guard.

Butternut tree (p. 8) – This is a white walnut tree. It is completely unrelated to the Butternut squash. The tree is very common in the Northeastern United States.



The earliest tombstones / 1670-1680 (p. 8) – New Hampshire was settled by Europeans in 1622. New Hampshire cemeteries are rather extraordinary, and many small towns have very old graves with *fascinatingly* odd names. I have come across stones with names (for women) like Submit, Sophronia, Marthia, Lodice, Jemima, Exsperience, Zurviah, Ethalinda.

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5:45 for Boston (p. 8) – For reference to Wilder’s fascination with trains and timetables, it might be helpful to read Wilder’s beautiful short play *The Wreck on the Five-twenty-five*, part of his series of plays on the Seven Deadly Sins. *The Wreck on the Five-twenty-five* is his play about sloth, and it is about grasping the beauty of the lives we already have.

Another day’s begun (p. 8) – From *Walden*: “The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?” (p. 394)

Joe Crowell’s knee (p. 11) – This is not a myth! Decreases in barometric pressure can cause aches or pains for people with chronic knee pain. As young as Joe is, there is no reason to doubt that he can predict whether or not it will rain fairly accurately.

Massachusetts Tech. (p. 11) – We call this MIT. It’s in Cambridge, Mass. (i.e. just outside of Boston). It was founded in 1861 and is one of the top schools in the nation.

Boston paper (p. 11) – In 1901 there would have been the *Boston Herald* (founded in 1846), the *Boston Journal* (founded in 1833), the *Boston Globe* (founded in 1872), and the *Boston Evening Transcript* (founded in 1830), as well as several others.

The War (p. 11) – The stage-manager refers to World War I (1914-1918). The play was written before the Second World War. The Great War was one of the deadliest conflicts in human history, claiming the lives of more than 9 million people.

Mrs. Goruslawski (p. 12) – Pronounced gor-us-LAHV-ski.

Bessie’s all mixed up about the route (p. 13) – Bessie seems haunted by the memory of the way things used to be. The horse’s inability to forget – or inability to adjust – seems to echo many of the themes of the play. She refuses to change with the times, but wants things to stay the same.

Separator (p. 13) – A milk separator separates the cream from the milk. It *skims* the milk, in other words. The separator is cranked by hand, as you can see at right.



Easy as kittens (p. 14) – The expression is fairly common, but as far as I can tell it isn’t about cats *giving birth* to kittens. Kittens are easy to take care of, and the expression likely refers to the ease with which one can handle them.

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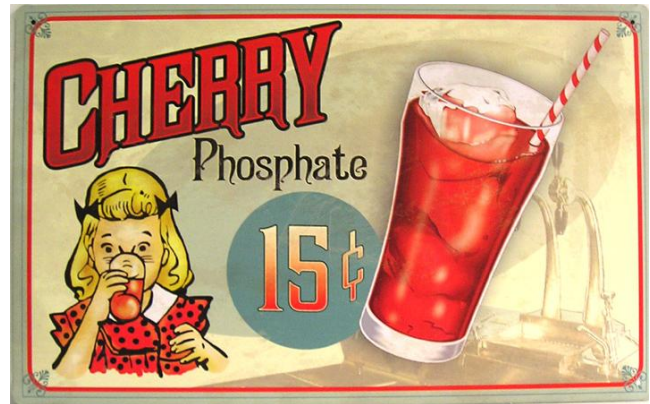
Mrs. Wentworth (p. 14) – Strangely, this name is repeated (see p. 21, when Mrs. Gibbs refers to Grandmother Wentworth’s highboy), but the repetition surely is indicative of the complex family tree in Grover’s Corners.

Blankets (p. 17) – For information on the textile industry in the Northeast, it might be of worth to visit www.textilehistory.org.

It’ll stunt your growth, —that’s a fact (p. 17) – *Is it a fact, though?* (Despite Mrs. Webb’s threats, no. No, it’s not.)

Twenty-five cents a week (p. 17) – With inflation, \$0.25 in 1900 was worth about \$6.60 in 2010.

Strawberry phosphates (p. 18) – These are soda drinks served at soda fountains that were popular in the first three decades of the twentieth century. You can still get them in some specialty shops. Ice cream sodas gained more popularity in the 1930s.



\$350 (p. 21) – Over \$9,000 with inflation. That is no joke for a piece of furniture, and certainly enough for a delightful vacation in Paris, but it does seem like rather a lot to spend on a drinking trough for the Webbs’ cows.



Highboy (p. 21) – A highboy is a tall chest of drawers. A *tallboy*, which is not the same thing, has drawers on the bottom half and then a wardrobe on the top (rather like the talking wardrobe in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*).

Traipsin’ about Europe (p. 22) – Wilder went traipsin’ about Europe himself, writing much of *Our Town* while in Zürich, in fact, and only the last act while back in New York. As for Paris, Wilder hated it, noting in July of 1937: “I never have been able to sleep well in the great city of Paris anyway – I who sleep well perfectly everywhere else in the world.”

Napoleon (p. 22) – The Emperor of the French and the King of Italy in the early decades of the 19th century, Napoléon Bonaparte conquered much of Europe.

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Antietam (p. 22) – The Battle of Antietam (ant-EE-dum), or as it is known in much of the South, the Battle of Sharpsburg, took place on September 17, 1862 near Sharpsburg MD (just over 400 miles from where Grover’s Corners is supposed to be). It is the single bloodiest day in US American history, with a death toll of nearly 23,000. It was also the first battle of the U.S. Civil War to take place on Union soil.

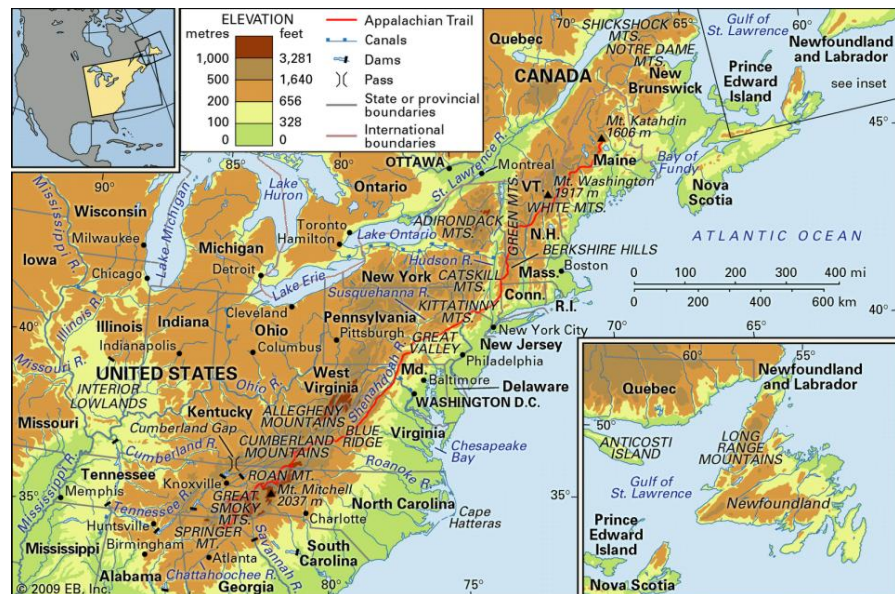
Gettysburg (p. 22) – This Battle took place in the first three days of July, 1863. General Lee’s Northern Virginia army marched through the Shenandoah Valley to attack the Union forces at Gettysburg in Pennsylvania.

A Country Where They Don’t Talk in English (p. 23) – Wilder was proficient in German and French both, and then toured South America during WWII, apparently speaking Spanish quite well.

Pleistocene (p. 23) – The Pleistocene (PLY-stu-seen) Era dates from 2.588 million ($\pm 5,000$) to 11,700 years before the present. It is the period of the world’s most recent glaciation.

The Appalachian Mountains (p. 23) –

The range stretches from Newfoundland in the North to central Alabama and Georgia in the South. The Blue Ridge Mountains form the central section of the range, with those in Grover’s Corners forming a section much further north.



Devonian Basalt (p. 24) –

Basalt is an igneous rock that forms when magma cools rapidly in the atmosphere. The Devonian Period is another enormous Era dating from about 420 to 360 million years ago. The word *basalt* is pronounced any number of ways: the first *a* can be short (BAA-zalt) or long (BAY-salt).

Mesozoic Shale (p. 24) – The Mesozoic (mez-uh-ZO-ic) ranges from about 252 to 66 million years ago. This was the period of the dinosaurs. Shale is a sedimentary rock formed from fragments of other rocks.

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Amerindian / Cotahtatchee (p. 24) – This Native American (or as he would have it, Amerindian [aam-er-IND-ee-in]) tribe appears to be Wilder’s own invention. The tribe in the area where Grover’s Corners is set would have been the Missiquoi or the Abenaki people. These tribes have many names and many pronunciations. The closest to *Cotahtatchee* is, perhaps, *Sokoki* or *Socoquius*. Okay, those are not very close, but I’m doing my best here.

Brachiocephalic (p. 24) – It occurs to me that Wilder means *brachycephalic*, referring to the shape of the heads of white people (with, one assumes, small noses).

MacPherson’s Gauge: 6.032 (p. 25) – According to J.D. McClatchy’s notes on *Our Town* in the Library of America edition, Logan Grant MacPherson (1863-1925) was “an authority on population figures”. MacPherson “was employed by American railroads as a statistician, and his computations were used by government and commercial agencies.” Presumably 6.032 people die each year in Grover’s Corners? The birth and mortality rates are constant, so the same number of people is born each year as dies.

Board of selectmen (p. 26) – Historically, in most New England towns, the adult voting population gathered annually in a town meeting to act as the local legislature, approving budgets and laws. Day-to-day operations were originally left to individual oversight, but when towns became too large for individuals to handle such workloads, they would elect an executive board of, literally, select(ed) men to run things for them. Typically there are three men who are selectmen and, basically, they comprise the executive branch of the town’s government.

All Males Vote at Age Twenty-one (p. 26) – The federal voting age was not lowered to 18 until July of 1971 under the Twenty-sixth Amendment. (Absurdly, the legal drinking age is still 21 in most states.) Black men gained the right to vote in 1870 under the Fifteenth Amendment. Women would not gain the right to vote until 1920 under the Nineteenth Amendment, so women in Grover’s Corners still vote “indirect”.

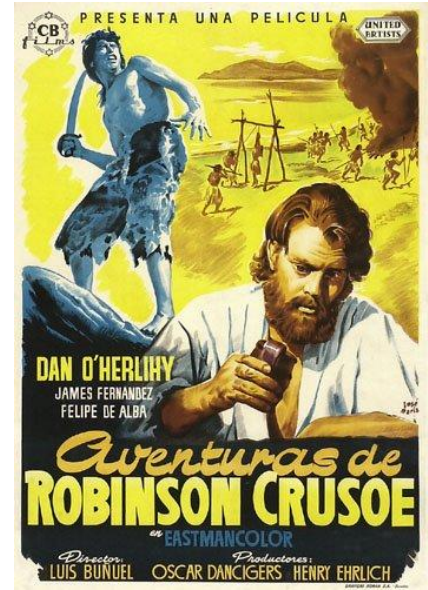
Ellery Greenough (p. 27) – Ellery’s last name is an old one in New England. The Nobles & Greenough school pronounces the name GREEN-oh.

Evangelist (p. 27) – An evangelist is a (usually) itinerant preacher who seeks to convert people to his or her religion. The word is used almost exclusively for members of Christian faiths.

Right good for a snake bite (p. 27) – This treatment is no longer recommended by any experts at all. In addition, sucking out the venom (like you see in the movies), applying a tourniquet, cutting the skin around the bite, and soaking the bite in water are all discouraged by current medical authorities.

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Robinson Crusoe (p. 28) – *Crusoe* is the name of a novel by Daniel Defoe dating from 1719. It is an adventure novel about a man shipwrecked on an island alone (at least for a while). In a letter from June 1936, Wilder writes, “Without tears I say it human nature is not interesting only Robinson Crusoe is interesting.” Crusoe is interesting to Wilder because of his solitude. Wilder spent long stretches of time where his introversion took over. He often longed to be alone and away from the “gossip of human nature”. Cf. also the last paragraph of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Stein writes, “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do, I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it.” The image is the poster for Luis Buñuel’s 1954 film *Las Aventuras de Robinson Crusoe*.



Handel’s Largo (p. 28) – The *Largo* is an oratorio written by Handel for his opera *Xerxes* (1738). The libretto is unattributed. The *Largo* is about four minutes long. Wilder called the *Largo* “the most loved melody in the world” in an interview promoting a 1935 production of *Xerxes* for which he served as stage director (in a production aimed to coincide with the composer’s 250th birthday). According to the music director Wilder himself “re-worked at least one complete aria, and a number of the recitatives”. An article in the 25 Feb 1935 *Time* prints a photograph of Wilder in costume and reported that Wilder “put himself in the chorus to sing a few notes. Wilder’s part came in the second act for which he discarded his spectacles, donned baggy blue trousers, black top boots, a silver-trimmed cape and a pancake hat. Thus disguised as a soldier, he proved an able baritone”!



Whistler’s Mother (p. 28) – After two British artists (Defoe and Handel), Wilder finally mentions a USAmerican-born one, although he was living in London when he painted his mother. The painter is James Abbot McNeill Whistler. The *Mother* is properly titled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* (1871), and it is one of the most famous of all USAmerican paintings.

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Push His Own Lawn Mower (p. 29) – The lawn mower would've looked something like the image at right.



Monroe Doctrine (p. 30) – The Monroe Doctrine is a piece of U.S. foreign policy dating from 1823. At a time when many South American nations were gaining independence from Spain and Portugal, the Monroe Doctrine held that any European intervention in North or South America would be considered an act of aggression against the United States. This was not United States law *per se* but rather Executive policy.

Louisiana Purchase (p. 30) – The Louisiana Purchase is older than the Monroe Doctrine, dating from 1803. The Louisiana Territory was purchased from France under the presidency of Thomas Jefferson. The purchase was of 828,000 square miles. In 2013 dollars, the cost was less than 42¢ an acre!



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Telegraph (p. 31) –The electric telegraph was developed earlier but really became a technology in common use in the 1830s. It sent electric currents along wires in order to relay messages. Needles could point to specific letters and could be interpreted by operators. With Morse code, this could work faster, but it was still dependent on operators. By the turn of the century, electric telegraphs were able to work at speeds of (a very fast) 70 words a minute. Wilder was still sending telegraph messages in the late 1930s. For the record, India's state-owned telecom company, BSNL, finally ended its telegraph service on 14 July 2013. It was reportedly the world's last existing true electric telegraph system. The name manages to live on in the name American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T).

String These Beans (p. 32) – To string (or rather to *de-string*) a string-bean, you snap off one end and then pull the string out with one motion. Mrs. Webb has to tell Emily to make them a little bigger because she is (carelessly) snapping off too much of the end and wasting some of the good bean.



Vermont Marble (p. 35) – New Hampshire does actually have plenty of marble, but the good marble is always thought to come from Vermont. It is a bit of a point of pride for Vermonters and a source of irritation for any resident of New Hampshire, thus the stage-manager's "sorry to say".

The New York Times (p. 35) – The Gray Lady was founded in 1851.

Silicate Glue (p. 35) – They are covering the reading material in sodium silicate in order to keep out air and other things that will rot the paper.

William Shakespeare's plays (p. 35) – Mr. Shakespeare's inclusion seems odd, frankly, but he was, by this point, very, very popular, especially on USAmerican stages and on the vaudeville circuit.

Babylonian Wheat Contracts (p. 35) – the stage manager exaggerates a bit. We have slightly more than wheat contracts, but we *do* mostly have contracts from ancient Mesopotamia. Here's an example from the [Fordham University collection](#) of documents:

From a cultivated field which is situated on the alley of Li'u-Bel, Itti-Marduk-balatu, the son of Nabu-akhi-iddin, the son of Egibi, has made a purchase from Tashmitum-damqat, daughter of Shuzubu, son of Shigua, and Nadin-aplu, the son of Rimut, son of Epish-Ilu. Itti-Marduk-balatu has counted the money, the price of the crop of that field for the seventh year of Cyrus, King of Babylon, king of countries, into the hands of Tashmitum-

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damqat and Nadin-aplu. (The names of two witnesses and a scribe then follow) Babylon, Ululu thirteenth, the seventh year of Cyrus.

This mention of wheat contracts always makes me think of a poem by Jack Gilbert from his book *The Great Fires* called “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart”:

*How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,
and frightening that it does not quite. Love, we say,
God, we say, Rome and Michiko, we write, and the words
Get it wrong. We say bread and it means according
to which nation. French has no word for home,
and we have no word for strict pleasure. A people
in northern India is dying out because their ancient
tongue has no words for endearment. I dream of lost
vocabularies that might express some of what
we no longer can. Maybe the Etruscan texts would
finally explain why the couples on their tombs
are smiling. And maybe not. When the thousands
of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated,
they seemed to be business records. But what if they
are poems or psalms? My joy is the same as twelve
Ethiopian goats standing silent in the morning light.
O Lord, thou art slabs of salt and ingots of copper,
as grand as ripe barley lithe under the wind's labor.
Her breasts are six white oxen loaded with bolts
of long-fibered Egyptian cotton. My love is a hundred
pitchers of honey. Shiploads of thuya are what
my body wants to say to your body. Giraffes are this
desire in the dark. Perhaps the spiral Minoan script
is not a language but a map. What we feel most has
no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses and birds.*

Greek and Roman comedies and joking poems (p. 35) – Tragedies, of course, are traditionally about the nobility. Greek and Roman tragedies treat old mythologies and noble houses. The comedies, on the other hand, describe untitled people – merchants, seamen, traders, fisherman, prostitutes, etc. Wilder is making a comparison with *specific* Greek and Roman theatre, that is, theatre about real people.

Treaty of Versailles (p. 35) – The *Treaty of Versailles* (pronounced vair-SY) was one of the treaties that ended World War I. You will notice the anachronism here. This part of the play takes place in 1901, but the treaty was signed in June of 1919 in the Palace at Versailles, outside of (here it is again) Paris, France.

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Lindbergh Flight (p. 35) – Charles Lindbergh, a 25-year-old U.S. Air Mail pilot, emerged suddenly from virtual obscurity to instantaneous world fame as the result of his solo, non-stop flight on May 20–21, 1927 from Roosevelt Field in Garden City, Long Island to Le Bourget Field in (here it is again) Paris, France. The flight was a distance of nearly 3,600 statute miles; Lindbergh flew in a single-seat, single-engine plane called the *Spirit of St. Louis*. As a result of this flight, Lindbergh was the first person in history to be in New York one day and Paris the next. Lindbergh, a U.S. Army Air Corps Reserve officer, was also awarded the nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, for this historic exploit. Again note the anachronism. When are we?

“Blessed Be the Tie that Binds” (p. 36) – The lyrics were originally a poem entitled “Brotherly Love” written by British Baptist theologian John Fawcett in 1772. The music is by Hans Nageli and dates from the mid-nineteenth century. The hymn speaks of community and the mutual care that attends such community:

*Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.*

*Before our Father's throne,
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
Our comforts, and our cares.*

*We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.*

*When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.*

Tired Clock (p. 36) – It is sort of a bizarre concept now, but clocks used to need *winding*. And when they needed to be wound, they began to move more slowly, thus: the tired clock.

Leave Loudness to the Methodists (p. 36) – Simon Stimson is unkind, and in fact the choir will later sing a Methodist hymn (“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”). Many of the most popular hymns were written by Charles Wesley, one of the founding members of the Methodist movement. They do tend to be just a little louder, a little more akin to marches than other hymns, perhaps.

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Yards (p. 37) – The metric system, as you might know, is the system of measurement in use in almost every country in the world. The United States still uses measurements like yards.

Contoocook (p. 38) – is North of Grover's Corners, apparently, although Contoocook (pronounced cun-TOO-cuck) is a real place and Grover's Corners is not.

Potato weather (p. 41) – It is May: high time they were already planting potatoes in New Hampshire. My assumption is that Mrs. Gibbs is thinking it is time they started digging up the potatoes that they planted as soon as the ground thawed out.

Gossip with a lot of hens (p. 43) – One is reminded of the song "Pickalittle (Talk-a-Little)" from Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, which contains the lyrics "Pick a little, talk a little, pick a little, talk a little / Cheep cheep cheep, talk a lot, pick a little more". But we might also consider Eve Sedgwick's argument about gossip from *Epistemology of the Closet*:

I take the precious, devalued arts of gossip, immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women, to have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, resting, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one's world. The writing of a Proust or a James would be exemplary here: projects precisely of *nonce* taxonomy, of the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world. (p. 23)

This is, of course, precisely what the women have been doing.

The moon's getting nearer and nearer (p. 45) – The "moon illusion", whereby the moon appears larger and closer to the Earth when it is closer to the horizon has been known since ancient times, but no adequate and definitive explanation has been agreed upon by scientists. George's dismissal of his sister's theory is precipitate.

Peck of trouble (p. 47) – A peck is an actual term of volume, equivalent to eight dry quarts. In the expression "peck of trouble" it means simply a large amount.

Cigarettes (p. 47) – It might seem surprising to think that a small boy such as Wally might be smoking cigarettes, but remember that this is the early twentieth century. Cigarettes had become quite common; some brands were sold with baseball cards or other enticements for children.



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Sutton County (p. 48) – There is no Sutton County in New Hampshire, but Mt. Monadnock, which is indeed a real location, is in *Cheshire County*, the Southwestern-most of New Hampshire's counties.

The Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God (p. 48) – A charming end to the play's first act, but also Wilder says (jokingly) in a letter to Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas that “no one, no one can address an envelope as well as I can. Postmen get dizzy as they view such coöperation and consideration.” And refers to himself as the “Champion envelope addresser in the wide WORLD” in a letter to Stein and Toklas dated 24 June 1939. Such things are important, and locations matter. *Where one is, where one finds oneself, and where one ought to be*, to borrow a phrase from Una Chaudhuri, matter a lot to Wilder, and such ideas are central to the play's first act, if not the play in its entirety.

Another note from *Walden*:

“This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? [...] What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another.” (p. 428)

Talking regular sentences already (p. 49) – Toddlers usually begin forming (relatively regular) sentences around age two.

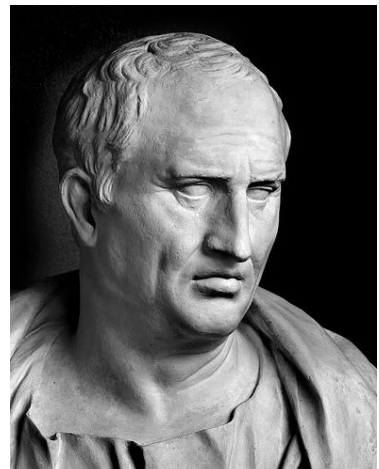
All that can happen in a thousand days (p. 49) – Indeed, as *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969) reminds us, a queen could rise and fall in the same amount of time.

Almost everybody in the world gets married (p. 50) – Unmarried himself, Wilder was keenly aware of his qualification *almost*. In any case, the phrase “climbs into their graves married” makes the sentiment much more about death than marriage.

July 7, 1904 (p. 50) – A Thursday.

Solid geometry (p. 50) – As opposed to plane geometry, solid geometry deals with three-dimensional objects such as pyramids, prisms, cones, and cylinders.

Cicero's orations (p. 50) – *O tempora, O mores!* The Catiline Orations, as they are now known, were speeches given in 63 BCE by Marcus Tullius Cicero, the consul of Rome, exposing to the Roman Senate the plot of Lucius Sergius Catilina and his allies to overthrow the government. The



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famous opening lines are:

*How long, O Catiline, will you abuse our patience?
And for how long will that madness of yours mock us?
To what end will your unbridled audacity hurl itself?*

... except they were in Latin so:

*Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?
Quam diu etiam furor iste tuus nos eludet? Quem ad
finem sese effrenata iactabit audacia?*

Bean poles (p. 50) – A beanpole is a support system for *growing* beans, not a natural part of the bean itself. A beanpole is also a colloquial term for a very skinny person.

Pea vines (p. 50) – An old adage says that if a girl finds nine peas in a pod, the next bachelor she meets will become her husband.

Nervous Breakdown (p. 51) – Nervous breakdowns and the medicalization of problems such as boredom, anxiety, etc. happened in the 19th century as psychiatry became more widespread, and as (as Michel Foucault's *Histoire de Folie* notes) juridical power demanded that psychiatry create syndromes and conditions that could be used to explain criminal activities.

You've Got to Love Life to Have Life (p. 51) – Wilder cites the great Edgar Lee Masters. His reference is to the *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) from a poem called "Lucinda Matlock".

*I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.*

*We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
And many a flower and medicinal weed –
Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.*

*At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.*

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*What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you –
It takes life to love Life.*

Vicious circle (p. 51) – This is a strange phrase for this section of the play. The stage manager refers to having life in order to love it and living life to the fullest. Vicious circles usually refer to downward spirals and increasing difficulty. That would seem to be the opposite of what the stage manager is discussing. But perhaps Wilder purposefully means to complicate his philosophizing here.

Bessie (p. 51) – In act two the horse is apparently twenty years old. This isn't so old nowadays, but in 1904, perhaps so. The average age of a horse in 2014 is 25-30 years.

Si Crowell (p. 51) – *Si* is probably short for *Simon* and pronounced accordingly.

Hank Todd (p. 52) – This moment functions in a fascinating way. Hank Todd gets a rather long discussion for someone whom we never meet or hear about again. We might note, here, that the men gossip as much as the women, and that people leave town for all sorts of reasons. Becoming a parson, too, is a life-path that seems to *avoid* the apparent truism that “almost everybody in the world gets married”.

Howie Newsome's Wife (p. 53) – Howie's wife is either quite sick or very busy. Mrs. Gibbs assumes that Howie's wife might not make it to the wedding, and Howie responds that she'll be there if she can. Interesting room for backstory/subtext here, for both Mrs. Gibbs and Mr. Newsome.

Weddings are Perfectly Awful Things (p. 55) – When his brother Amos was to be married in September of 1935, Wilder wrote to Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas (in a letter dated 26 May 1935):

*I played the Languid. I'm not well, no, – I certainly hope I can be at the wedding,
but I'm really not well. I have funny moods. I have to withdraw when there are
large groups of people, etc.
What fetishes there are about us. This notion that one must be present at
weddings and funerals.
Gr – r – r – r.*

It would seem from this letter that when Simon Stimson asks the choir to sing “Art Thou Weary; Art Thou Languid?” for Fred Hersey's Wedding (p. 38), Wilder is making a tongue-in-cheek joke. One does get weary of going to weddings, I suppose.

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The Relation of a Father and Son Is the Darndest, Awkwardest (p. 56) – Gertrude Stein to Wilder, 10 October 1936: “they are all sad because everybody wants to be a father and being a father is depressing, and having a father is depressing and everybody has a father just now only the English, they have no father and so they are all cheerful”.

Everybody Has a Right to Their Own Problems (p. 56) – Not quite “Live Free or Die”, but pretty close. *Live Free or Die* is worth mentioning because it is New Hampshire’s state motto, adopted in 1945. The phrase itself is rather older, coming from the early nineteenth century and New Hampshire’s most famous soldier in the Revolutionary War (General John Stark). Stark proposed the toast “Live free or die: death is not the worst of evils”. The phrase was also in common use during the French Revolution at least twenty years before Stark used it: viz. *Vivre libre ou mourir!*

The Groom Can’t See His Bride on the Wedding Day (p. 59) – This is a very old custom; it is supposed to keep the groom from changing his mind. If he doesn’t see her until the last minute, he is more likely to go through with the wedding.

Tying the Knot (p. 61) – No one has a satisfactory answer for the origin of this phrase. And though there are many contenders, none of them is very interesting.

Alacrity (p. 61) – Eagerness, liveliness, enthusiasm, but also speed.

Philo System (p. 63) – Edgar W. Philo’s “Philo System of Progressive Poultry” explained to the prospective raiser of chickens the best ways to go about beginning his or her chicken farm: which eggs to buy, how many chicken to keep at once, how much heat chickens needed, what to feed the chickens, etc. The book was a bestseller: I can’t find an edition before 1907, but it was in its *sixteenth* edition by 1910.

Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil (p. 67) – The phrase is older than Shakespeare’s play, but it appears in *1 Henry IV*, act three:

*And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil
By telling truth: tell truth and shame the devil.
If thou have power to raise him, bring him hither,
And I’ll be sworn I have power to shame him hence.
O, while you live, tell truth and shame the devil!*

But the phrase is merely an expression and oughtn’t to be thought of as remarkable or given special weight in the context of the play.

State Agriculture College (p. 71) – Now called the University of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts was originally attached to Dartmouth College and was housed in Hanover NH. In 1893 it moved to Durham,

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where it would have been at the time of the play. The name of the school was finally changed to UNH in 1923.



People Were Made to Live Two-by-Two (p. 77) – Two by two is a (now common) reference to the Biblical story of Noah from Genesis 7: “Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the

male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female.” But note the gender neutrality of Wilder’s phrase here. Perhaps he was thinking of his dear friends Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, who lived two by two (with their dogs P  p   and Basket)... or indeed of himself.

One of those European fellas / every child born into the world is nature’s attempt to make a perfect human being (p. 77) – Wilder is probably thinking about Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, but teleological theories of human evolution go back at least to Aristotle.

Ancestors (p. 77) – Again Wilder emphasizes the *historicity* of the wedding in Act II.

Weddings in the old days / Rome (p. 79) – the stage manager assumes licentiousness and indecorous behavior in ancient Rome. This all seems quite probable, but ancient Roman customs varied widely across time and location. Perhaps the stage manager simply refers in general to the decadence of ancient Rome, associating frankness about sex with the Roman decadence of Caligula and Heliogabulus.

“Love Divine, All Love Excelling” (p. 79) – The words to this hymn are by the great hymn-writer (and Methodist) Charles Wesley, dating from the 1740s:

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.*

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*Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit;
Let us find that second rest.
Take away our bent to sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its Beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.*

*Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy life receive;
Suddenly return and never,
Never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.*

*Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

I don't want to grow old (p. 79) – “To die will be an awfully big adventure”: cf. J.M. Barrie's now-legendary play *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1907).

Rheumatism (p. 84) – This is a vague medical term referring to swelling in the joints or joint pain more generally.

March from Lohengrin (p. 82) – Actually called the “Bridal Chorus”, this is the most famous wedding march ever. It is from Richard Wagner's 1850 opera *Lohengrin*.

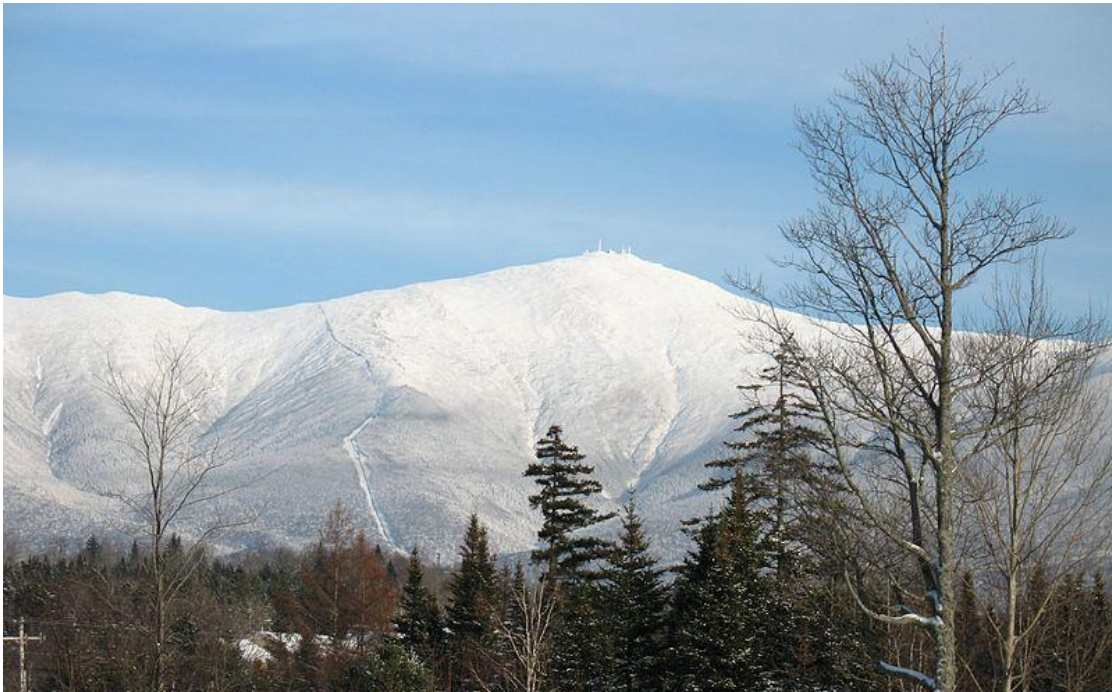
Mendelssohn's “Wedding March” (p. 84) – This piece of music was originally written (in 1842) by Felix Mendelssohn as incidental music for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It became a popular tune for weddings after it was selected by Queen Victoria's daughter the Princess Victoria for her marriage to Prince Frederick William of Prussia on 25 January 1858.

Summer, 1913 (p. 87) – Wilder purposefully dates the play *before* the Great War.

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Lake Sunapee (p. 88) – Lake Sunapee (SUN-uh-pee) is in West Central New Hampshire. North of Grover’s Corners and perhaps a bit west of it. On the mountain or hill where they are at the moment, the stage manager looks north, but all throughout New Hampshire you can stand on top of mountains and see for many miles. The image at right is Loon Lighthouse on Lake Sunapee.

Lake Winnepesaukee (p. 88) – Lake Winnepesaukee (winnipuh-SAW-kee) is *much* farther north of Sunapee and farther east in the true center of the state. It is also much bigger, so if it is farther away it still might be visible.



White Mountains (p. 88) – The White Mountains cover most of New Hampshire beginning in the south from around Lake Sunapee and curving north of Lake Winnepesaukee. They are a part of the Appalachian Range. These mountains are a very big deal in New Hampshire, and tourists come from miles away to see the leaves turn color in the autumn.

Mt. Washington (p. 88) – Mt. Washington is the highest peak in the Northeastern United States and is (of course) a part of the White Mountains. It is, it must be noted, *extremely* far from where Grover’s Corners is supposed to be near the Massachusetts/New Hampshire border. To the right is Mt. Washington’s location. The image above on this page is Mt. Washington seen from the woods below.



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North Conway and Conway (p. 88) – Towns far to the east in New Hampshire. Conway and North Conway lie close to the Maine border just south of Mount Washington in the map to the right.

Mt. Monadnock (p. 88) – Mt. Monadnock (muh-NAD-nock) is famous for appearing in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. This mountain is surrounded by the towns mentioned in the play (Jaffrey, East Jaffrey, Peterborough, Dublin), as well as by Troy and Malborough. All of this area of New Hampshire is much closer to the Massachusetts border, much closer to where the play itself takes place.

Side note on Emerson: Wilder writes in a letter dated 10 August 1935:

I don't see Eye to Eye with the rest of the world on this matter of Nature. Nature doesn't speak to me. No'm'm. I can take it or leave it. [...] In fact, I grew so startled at my own complacency about Nature that I bought a little book called Emerson's Essays on Nature. Well, Emerson feels just the opposite from me and expresses himself with so revolting a coyness that I feel absolutely corroborated in my opinion.

But Nature can be nice. This Minit [i.e. this minute] under my window a cataract [i.e. a rock warbler] is making a noise that no manipulation of sandpaper could quite reproduce, and to that voice I shall fall lyrically asleep. The mountains around here are pretty fine, though I can't imagine how they [the mountains] passed their time previous to the invention of the camera.

Mountain laurel (p. 88) – Mountain laurel is the state flower of both Connecticut and Pennsylvania. It is actually more of a tree than a shrub and can grow from 10 to 30 feet high. All parts of the plants are poisonous. The plant is also called *spoonwood*. Apparently, Native peoples in the U.S. used to make spoons out of the branches.



Woodlawn (p. 88) – The Woodlawn to which Wilder refers is in the Bronx and was established in 1863. There is also a famous Woodlawn cemetery in Santa Monica CA. Wilder *hated* Southern California more than any other place in the country. In fact, he loved the entirety of the United States *except* for Southern California.

Brooklyn (p. 88) – Most likely a reference to the Cemetery of the Evergreens in Brooklyn and Queens. In the late 1920s it was the busiest cemetery in New York City.

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Daughters of the American Revolution (p. 89) – “God, Home, and Country”. The DAR was founded in 1890 and is a lineage-based organization. In other words, to be a Daughter of the American Revolution one needs to be directly descended from someone involved in the US American Revolutionary struggle.

Mayflower (p. 89) – The *Mayflower* was the Pilgrim ship that in 1620 made the historic voyage from England to the New World. The ship carried 102 passengers in two core groups – religious Separatists coming from Holland and a largely non-religious settler group from London. Wilder emphasizes the United States as a location that existed prior to European settlement, but also, once again sees the land as transitory, as something one passes *across*, or that time passes by.

Civil War (p. 89) – New Hampshire provided 18 infantry regiments, two cavalry regiments, three artillery companies, and three sharpshooter companies. The 5th Infantry became one of the most celebrated units in the war, losing 477 men total of the 1051 who were mustered into service in October 1861.

Boy Scouts (p. 89) – Act III takes place in 1913 and Wally Webb must just recently have died. The Boy Scouts of America were founded in 1910 as a part of the international Scout Movement.



Crawford Notch (p. 89) – An area in the White Mountains far north of Grover’s Corners but in New Hampshire. The painting above is *The Notch of the White Mountains* (1839) by Thomas Cole.

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Lumbago (p. 92) – Lumbago (lum-BAY-go) is simply lower back pain or pain in the lumbar region of the spine.

Sister Carey (p. 92) – A festive nod to Theodore Dreiser’s USAmerican novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) about a young woman who moves to the city to follow her own “American Dream”.

Livery stable (p. 102) – A livery stable was a stable where horses, teams, and wagons were for hire, but also where privately owned horses could be boarded for a short time, often attached to a hotel or boarding house. The livery stable was a necessary institution of every USAmerican town. In addition to providing vital transportation service, the livery was the source of hay, grain, coal, and wood. Because of the stench, noise, and vermin that surrounded the livery, cities and towns attempted to control their locations and activities. Because of their location on a town’s outskirts, livery stables were often the scene of gambling and cockfighting, and they were often condemned as sources of vice. With the advent of the automobile after 1910, livery stables all over the country quietly disappeared.

Clinton, New York (p. 103) – There are five Clintons in New York, actually. (Indeed, there has been a *Senator* Clinton.) But Mr. Webb went down to the *Village* of Clinton in Oneida County in central New York: the site of Hamilton College.

If It Were a Snake It Would Bite You (p. 105) – In truth this just means that whatever one is looking at is quite close by. So close, in fact, that if it had been a snake, it would’ve bitten you. But this expression often means that one is missing something right in front of one’s face. It is obvious to everyone else, but the one person who ought to see it is oblivious.

It Ain’t Christian (p. 106) – “It just isn’t right!”

Manual-training Class (p. 109) – The Manual Training movement was the precursor to the vocational training programs in our schools today. First used in the U.S. in the 1870s in the training of engineers, the movement spread rapidly to general public education. Manual training emphasized the intellectual and social development associated with the practical training of the hand and the eye. In its most basic sense, manual training was the teaching of both wood- and metal-working, with the accompanying argument that this teaching improved perception, observation, practical judgment, visual accuracy, manual dexterity and taught students the power of doing things instead of merely thinking about them, talking about them, and writing about them. Manual training was not, however, intended to teach a specific trade. It was intended to be an enhancement to traditional curriculum not a replacement, and thereby was intended to help achieve the full development and potential of the individual.

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Concord (p. 109) – The capital of New Hampshire (pron. CON-curd): in the Southern third of the state but about halfway between the eastern and western borders. The image to the right is City Hall in 1913, when Act III takes place.

The saints and poets, maybe (p. 110) – Note the *saints* and the *poets* in this selection from *Walden*: “It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, if the poet did not speak so much from under a roof, or the saint dwell there so long. Birds do not sing in caves, nor do doves cherish their innocence in dovecots.” (p. 345)

A Star’s Mighty Good Company (p. 112) – From *Walden*: “The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to one another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology! – I know of no reading of another’s experience so startling and informing as this would be.” (p. 331)

In the *Consolation to Helvia*, my favorite philosopher Seneca offers us the following thought in relation to his exile from Rome to the island of Corsica:

So long as I may observe so many stars gleaming through the night – some fixed, others not voyaging forth over a great distance but circling around their own given area, some suddenly bursting forth, others dazzling our eyes with spreading fire as if they were falling, or flying by with a long trail of brilliant light; so long as I may commune with these and, so far as a human can, mingle with things divine, and so long as I may keep my mind always striving to contemplate the kindred objects on high – what difference does it make to me what ground I tread?
(8.6)

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An additional thought from Mary Oliver's *West Wind* (1998):

"Stars"

Here in my head, language
keeps making its tiny noises.

How can I hope to be friends
with the hard white stars

whose flaring and hissing are not speech
but pure radiance?

How can I hope to be friends
with the yawning spaces between them

where nothing, ever, is spoken?
Tonight, at the edge of the field,

I stood very still, and looked up,
and tried to be empty of words.

What joy was it, that almost found me?
What amiable peace?

Then it was over, the wind
roused up in the oak trees behind me

and I fell back, easily.
Earth has a hundred thousand pure contraltos —

even the distant night bird
as it talks threat, as it talks love

over the cold, black fields.
Once, deep in the woods,

I found the white skull of a bear
and it was utterly silent —

and once a river otter, in a steel trap,
and it too was utterly silent.

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What can we do
but keep on breathing in and out,

modest and willing, and in our places?
Listen, listen, I'm forever saying,

*Listen to the river, to the hawk, to the hoof,
to the mockingbird, to the jack-in-the-pulpit —*

then I come up with a few words, like a gift.
Even as now.

Even as the darkness has remained the pure, deep darkness.
Even as the stars have twirled a little, while I stood here,

looking up,
one hot sentence after another.

And one more thought about stars. This from Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005):

*What is it that you contain?
The dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia opening in your gut.
Your first parent was a star.*

*I know nothing of my biological parents. They live on a lost continent of DNA.
Like Atlantis, all record of them is sunk. They are guesswork, speculation,
mythology.
The only proof I have of them is myself, and what proof is that, so many times
written over? Written on the body is a secret code, only visible in certain lights.
I do not know my time of birth. I am not entirely sure of the date. Having brought
no world with me, I made one.*

What am I? *Atoms.*
What are atoms? *Empty space and points of light.*
What is the speed of light? *300,000 kilometres per second.*
What is a second? *That depends where in the Universe you set your watch.*