

# ARTISTS OF CHICAGO

Past and Present by C. J. Bulliet

"And Others . . .!"—John T. Nolf

Chicago Daily News, 9-14-1935

"ASTORIA BILL," they used to call John T. Nolf out west. It was in the days before the movies, nor was Nolf a scout or an Indian fighter. He was a "tramp printer."

**No. 29**  
**John Thomas Nolf**

But even so, few of the printers had wandered as widely as he. There were natives of Seattle who had never taken a boat down the coast to the old town at the edge of the wilderness that John Jacob Astor, fur trader, had founded—a town perched on piles and stilts that needed no sewers—the tides of the Pacific twice a day washed the streets and the back yards. Nor had "tramp printers" gone there from Portland. "Tramp printers" were in the habit of hitch-hiking in the boxcars, and in those days no railroad ran into Astoria.

John T. Nolf had got there on a wood-burning freighter. He had stoked the furnace with logs nearly as big as himself, cut from the billions of feet of timber that still isolate Astoria from Portland and points inland. He had stayed there, working in a print shop for about six months. When other printers had tall tales to tell of their wanderings, John Nolf had a taller. He had worked in mythical Astoria. So often did he boast, that they got to calling him "Astoria Bill."

Nolf lost the name in the discard when he came to Chicago from Spokane. But he had had foresight not to discard any one of his three kings in the poker game that won him his railroad fare. For, this time, he didn't ride the box cars. He had stipulated in his bet a "first-class passage to Chicago," and the three kings he drew were better than anything his opponent had except the money to pay off.

But, it was a one-way fare. John Nolf hadn't the money to get back to Spokane, so he went to work in Chicago on the old Record.

Besides, a part of his desire to come east, which led to the poker wager, was to see "real paintings" that he had heard about. When he saw them at the Art Institute of Chicago, he got the urge to make some himself. So, he entered night and Saturday classes at the institute, and, under instruction of Vanderpoel, developed an interest that gradually supplanted his wanderlust. He was 22 or 23 at the time.

Then, one day he submitted a painting to a jury for an Institute show.

"It was accepted," John Thomas Nolf says plaintively, "and I was out!"

Presently he became a prize winner, and he knew then, for sure, that his days as a "tramp printer" were over forever.

Now he lives over at Grand Detour, the little old village in the Rock River valley where old John Nolf forged his first plow in his blacksmith shop in the days when Grand Detour was a stage-coach station. John Deere's name still ornaments the place—the splendorous estate he ultimately fitted out

from his invention is now a park. John Nolf lives in a cottage, on whose front porch he sits and gossips with his neighbors and with friends from the city, watching the river ripple by. Out there they call him not "Astoria Bill" but "Mayor of Grand Detour."

He is on familiar terms with all his neighbors, witty and full of homespun philosophy, a sort of local Will Rogers without the chewing gum or the larrikin. He paints their portraits and he uses them for models for his rural pictures, honest and sincere, which put to shame the pseudo-rusticity of painters better publicized.

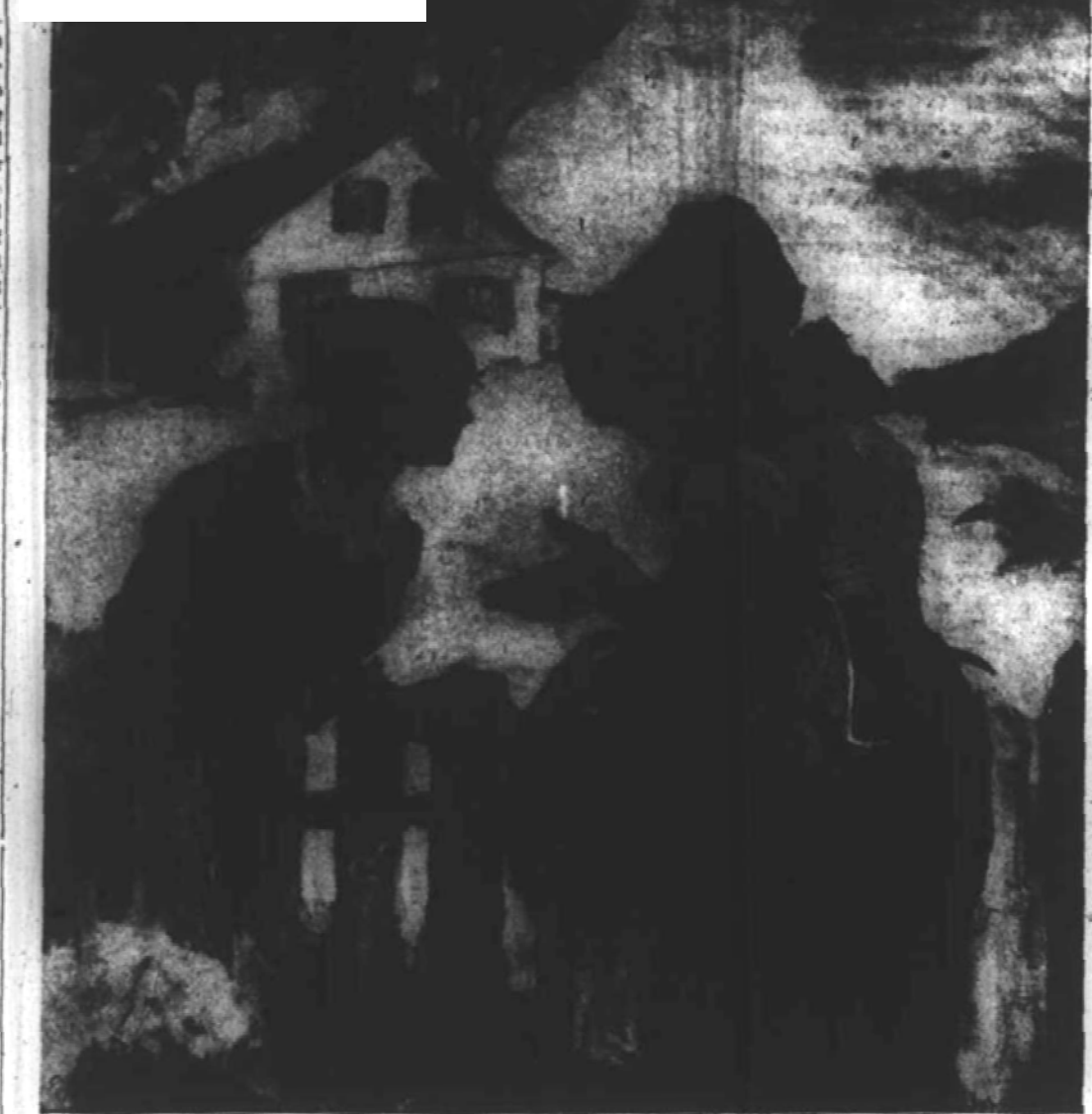
There is still a thin thread that hitches him to his old printshop days. He is a regular contributor to the "trade paper," the Inland Printer—character sketches of printers of the old times when printing was a "romance" and not just a "trade." Not long ago the publisher of Inland Printer got a request from a hospital in the far west for a couple of the Nolf sketches to hang on the walls of a room where an old-time printer was slowly dying. The invalid had seen the reproductions and thought he'd like the sketches, if possible, to cheer his last days. They were sent and the old man died happier. Nolf considers this the finest tribute that has been paid him.

Nolf was a printer on the old Chicago Record in the days when Eugene Field was at his height. Real writers scorned the new-fangled writing machines and wrote their copy in longhand. Nolf was often given Field's copy to set, for the poet wrote a microscopic hand and the eyes of the young printers were sharper and better able to follow copy than those of the veterans.

After a while, being ambitious to draw and even to write, Nolf gave up setting type and went to work for the Long-Critchfield advertising agency. The agency specialized in farm advertising. His "boss" was Marco Morrow, now head of the Capper publications. A fellow worker was Sherwood Anderson, who was spending his nights writing stories, sending them out and getting them back with printed rejection slips. Anderson was writing advertising copy for farm pamphlets and Nolf was drawing the pictures. Nolf "made good" with Morrow by sketching a man holding a plow. Later Sherwood Anderson complimented him for a melodramatic sketch of a man holding aloft a bag of money—a favorite advertising symbol with Anderson.

From Long-Critchfield young John Nolf went to the Stanley Clague agency. Clague, a Manxman of intellectual resources, had managed to corral such accounts as Old Dutch Cleanser, Kellogg's health foods, Pabst beer and Calumet baking powder. Nolf did "art work" for all these advertisers—Kellogg's corn flakes still use a design, with slight variations, which he originated.

However, "ethical art" gradually crowded the "commercial" accounts



Illustrative of Nolf's treatment of his neighbors out at Grand Detour.

out of Nolf's studio, and over at Grand Detour his canvases have long since ceased to be beholden to the great corporations.

"Nolf, while "Astoria Bill" to the printers all up and down the Pacific coast and as far inland as Denver, is no westerner by birth, any more than are the movie cowboys. The place of his nativity is Allentown, Pa. He is of Dutch stock, though remote, his ancestors on both sides having fought in the American revolution. His father was a soldier at Gettysburg.

Nolf Sr. was a mining engineer—not of the stripe of Herbert Hoover—but a practical workman who ran an engine in the mines.

When John Nolf was about 10 years old the family left Allentown for the newer mines at Joplin, Mo. There John got his first taste of printer's ink, though a little stale—after it reached the street—as a newsboy.

The family soon moved on to Pendleton, Ore., scene of the famous annual "roundup." John Nolf, curiously enough, escaped the temptation of most youths on the grounds to be a cowboy, and at 13 became

an apprentice in a Pendleton printing shop.

At 16 he moved on to Seattle, where, a little later, he got his union card.

It was then, armed with the card that insured him a job, at that time, in whatever town he might decide to pull off his coat and go to work—for experienced printers were scarce—he began to indulge the wanderlust, inherited from his father.

Victoria, B. C.; Butte, Mont.; Denver, San Francisco, Salt Lake, the fabulous Astoria and innumerable other cities and towns saw him until he got into the poker game at Spokane and won his fare to Chicago. "The east," romantically remembered from his boyhood, was as tempting to him as "the west" was to the young men trying to raise the money to follow Horace Greeley's advice.

Nolf has no particular heritage of "art," and it was not until he came to Chicago and saw the pictures at the Art Institute that he felt any great desire to be anything other than a "tramp printer."

He could draw from babyhood and occasionally he turned an untutored skill to account. Once as a

printer in Seattle, he remembers, the newspaper on which he was working developed a morbid desire for a sketch of a man mysteriously dead, lying in the city's morgue. Nolf volunteered and his greswome drawing, produced by the old "chalk plate" process, found its way into the columns of the paper.

Occasionally, too, he would do a cartoon or a caricature of something or somebody that struck his fancy and contribute it to the paper on which he happened to be working. But printing, not "art," was his vocation, really and by choice.

Throughout his wanderings and to this day Nolf has been interested in people rather than places. And it is people and not landscapes that he paints. His neighbors at Grand Detour interest him more than the John Deere park or even Rock river. He feels no need of going to Europe to paint quaint French or mid-European peasants, nor to Mexico to search out rare mountain Indian types. Grand Detour folks fill his imagination to the brim.

Two years of intensive poker playing, culminating in the Spokane game, taught him to size up a face.

Next week—Edgar S. Cameron.