

Book Discussion Questions for *A Lantern in Her Hand* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen M. Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

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About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her."¹ As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines and some of her serials became books. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3rd, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.

Inspiration Behind a Lantern in Her Hand: "When a statue 'Pioneer Mother' was dedicated in Oklahoma, Bess expressed the wish that someday she could create a monument to the pioneer mother 'not in marble, but through the only medium I could use- the written word.' For Bess, it seemed false to depict the prairie women as gaunt, beaten, quietly going mad with despair. In her rich memories of her Iowa people was the conviction that with their faith and humor 'if they had gone mad, it would have never have been quietly.' The pioneer mother story had been in her mind for many years as she had published three other novels. She wanted her story to face up to the truths of the early pioneer days. She wanted to include the intangibles of spirit that made her own mother say when sympathy for past hardships was offered, "Save your pity, we had the best time in the world."² Many editions of the book contain "The Story Behind a Lantern in Her Hand."

Mrs. Aldrich's explanations about the book can also be read at:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/sites/history.nebraska.gov/files/doc/publications/NH1975AldrichLantern.pdf>



At the Bess Streeter Aldrich House in Elmwood, Nebraska, one of the upstairs bedrooms is decorated in honor of *A Lantern in Her Hand*. Many things on display directly represent items mentioned in this book including this instrument. An organ, similar to this one, plays an important part of the storyline. To take a tour of the house, please check out the current hours at: <https://www.bessstreeteraldrich.org/>

A complimentary *Lantern* novel unit is available for educators upon request. Please visit the website for more information or send an email to aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

¹ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 20)

A Lantern in Her Hand Mackenzie and Deal Family Characters

Family - Abbie Mackenzie	Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie; Parents: Basil & Margaret "Maggie" (O'Conner) Brothers: James, Dennis, Basil Sisters: Mary, Isabelle, Janet (Tom Graves)
Will Deal's Family	Will's Parents: Grandpa and Grandma Deal; Sisters: Regina; Louisa Note: Will had additional siblings and extended family but not mentioned by name
Will and Abbie married and had five surviving children and one stillborn son, Basil (4 th child)	
1. Mackenzie	Banker; Marries Emma Lutz; Children: Donald, Stanley & Katherine (marries Jimmy)
2. Margaret	Marries Dr. Frederick Hamilton Baker; son: Fred Baker Jr. (marries & has son later)
3. John	Lawyer; Marries Eloise Wentworth; Children: Wentworth, Laura and Millard
5. Isabelle	Musician; Marries Harrison Scannell Rhodes; both are musicians; no children
6. Grace	University Professor; Never marries or has any children

A Lantern in Her Hand Neighbors

Oscar Lutz	Has a wife (Martha) and three small children
Henry Lutz	Young bride, Sarah, and nephew, Dan; later Emma
Grandpa Lutz	"mild-mannered, gentle old man"; the Lutz family all came from Michigan
Gus Reinmueller	His "voman, Christine"; 2 kids at first; later a total of 4 boys and 2 girls
Townspople	Rev. Samuel Mowery & wife; Dr. Hornby; Asy Smith (handyman)

A Lantern in Her Hand Discussion Questions

- 1) What dreams does Abbie have when she is young?
- 2) What childhood memories of Abbie's are significant?
- 3) What happens to change Will and Abbie's relationship from childhood friends to sweethearts?
- 4) Who is Ed Matthews? How does he impact the book?
- 5) How does becoming a mother change Abbie?
- 6) Do you think Abbie wanted to move away from Iowa and from her family?
- 7) What would be the hardest part about starting over on the prairie?
- 8) These pioneers face challenging circumstances including drought, grasshoppers and fire. Which one would be most challenging?
- 9) When celebrating Christmas on the prairie, Will and Abbie had to be innovative. Which gift was most significant? Have you ever had to be creative in your gift giving due to a lack of resources?
- 10) Three significant deaths take place during their first decade on the prairie. Which one impacted you the most?
- 11) How do the Deals and their neighbors change over time?
- 12) How does life change for the Deals once the kids grow up and start moving on?
- 13) How does Abbie almost die? Who saves her life? How does John almost die? After these near death experiences, was Will's unexpected death surprising? How does Abbie handle it? How does this mirror Mrs. the life of Mrs. Aldrich?
- 14) When Grandma Deal moves in, how does Abbie treat her? Could you have acted the same way?
- 15) How is Abbie different from her grandchildren?
- 16) How does the painting of Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie reappear again? How does Abbie react?
- 17) What happens during the final Deal gathering?
- 18) What significant events happen in the world over the course of Abbie's life?
- 19) How do Abbie's dreams come true?
- 20) What does Abbie think about during the final chapter of her life?

A Lantern in Her Hand Discussion Questions (Potential Answers)

1) *What dreams does Abbie have when she is young?* She dreams of singing in front of a crowd while wearing a string of pearls. She also longs to paint. She adds more dreams later on.

2) *What childhood memories of Abbie's are significant?* Abbie remembers traveling from Illinois to Iowa in 1854 when she was 8 with her widowed mom and siblings. She also enjoys hearing about her Scottish aristocratic father falls in love with her Irish mother and hearing stories about Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie. Soon after they arrived in Iowa, the townspeople hovered together in the Deals house to avoid hostile Indians. She remembers her baby nephew dying. At a party, she finds out that Ed Matthews has killed Will's "pet" deer. Grandpa Deal enters politics. The war is also significant.

3) *What happens to change Will and Abbie's relationship from childhood friends to sweethearts?* Before going off to war, Will kisses Abbie instead of simply shaking her hand. She longs for him to return home because he was "so steady, so dependable." When he returns, she begs him not to let her marry Ed.

4) *Who is Ed Matthews? How does he impact the book?* Doc pays Will \$500 to fight in his son Ed's place, so he is a bit of a coward. Ed wants to marry Abbie but also takes liberties with her. Later because Ed moves out East, Abbie thinks of him on occasion and wonders what an easy life would have been like.

5) *How does becoming a mother change Abbie?* "Life grew richer, more full. Her voice took on a mellowness." She sang many Irish lullabies. She also began to long for a home of her own.

6) *Do you think Abbie wanted to move away from Iowa and from her family?* Not really as she was nervous about Indians. She wants there to be good schools and doctors for the baby. She worries she will not get to use her voice or her painting. She did not want to go far away from her family. "Only one thing gave her courage to make the long journey to the raw new state. Her love for Will."

7) *What would be the hardest part about starting over on the prairie?* Leaving family behind. Overwhelm. "Silence, grass, stars. The group around the fire seemed suddenly too small to be alone in the still vastness, too inadequate and helpless. What if - ?" There were few trees. They had to start it all.

8) *These pioneers face challenging circumstances including drought, grasshoppers and fire. Which one would be most challenging?* Opinion. All of them would be challenging since starting over was required.

9) *When celebrating Christmas on the prairie, Will and Abbie had to be innovative. Which gift was most significant? Have you ever had to be creative in your gift giving due to a lack of resources?*
Answers may vary. Each of the gifts were significant to the recipient. Both worked for the family.

10) *Three significant deaths take place during their first decade on the prairie. Which one impacted you the most?* Sarah Lutz's nephew, Dan, dies of a snakebite. Grandpa Lutz dies of old age. Basil Deal is born stillborn. Answers will vary, but for most, the death of the children will be harder to take.

11) *How do the Deals and their neighbors change over time?* Church; School; Reading Circle; Henry Lutz – adds to his house and opens a store; buys more land; first to get conveniences Oscar Lutz – builds a blacksmith shop -hires a smithy/preacher; bought several eighties Reinmullers – Dugout replaced by boxy house; Christine continues with German; \$ to land – not house Deals – fence land; after 10+ years build a 3 BR house to replace 2 BR soddie (Lombardy poplars);

12) *How does life change for the Deals once the kids grow up and start moving on?* They seem to have to work harder since the children do not stay. Mack wants to have a white-collar job instead of farm. Margaret goes off to school then marries a doctor. Isabelle starts playing the organ and leaves to pursue music. Later John wants to study law. Grace becomes a professor.

13) *How does Abbie almost die? Who saves her life? How does John almost die? After these near-death experiences, was Will's unexpected death surprising? How does Abbie handle it? How does this mirror the life of Mrs. Aldrich?* Abbie almost dies when a blizzard suddenly comes upon her as she is returning home – childbirth almost kills her. Christine saves her life. John cuts his tendon on barbed wire, and Abbie furiously drives him to town to save his life. Will dies suddenly near the windmill – that is probably surprising. Mr. Aldrich died suddenly of an aneurysm in his 50's, so Mrs. Aldrich also had to deal with early widowhood. *Note: For a more complete biography of Mrs. Aldrich, please request the novel unit from the Aldrich foundation. Ms. Karen Schmidt, an English professor, completed that portion.*

14) *When Grandma Deal moves in, how does Abbie treat her? Could you have acted the same way?* Despite all of Grandma's complaints, Abbie is kind. "Abbie washed for her and ironed for her and cooked as well as she could with a frugal larder, to satisfy her childish cravings." Abbie rarely asked for help.

15) *How is Abbie different from her children and grandchildren?* Abbie is content with little. Emma, her daughter-in-law, leaves the children with others. Isabelle does not want children. Eloise emphasizes procedure over humor. Grace is efficient and quotes statistics – not a companion for Abbie. She chooses not to travel, so she is called "narrow."

16) *How does the painting of Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie reappear again? How does Abbie react?* Kathie was determined her dad, Mack, must find the painting for her wedding gift. Rather than rejoicing, Abbie cries. "When I saw the lovely lady that I used to dream about .. it just came over me in a sort of wave all the wonderful things I planned to do when I was young and never did."

17) *What happens during the final Deal gatherings?* At Christmas, the whole family gathered. The children experience "a flood of reminiscences." Abbie listens and smiles – now a "little old lady who had brought them up with a song upon her lips and a lantern in her hand." Their last gathering was for Kathie's wedding. She looks back on her life. "Bending her back to the toil, hiding her heart's disappointments, giving her all in service, she was like an old mother partridge who had plucked all the feathers from her breast for the nest of her young." She feels that she "did the best I could."

18) *What significant events happen in the world over the course of Abbie's life?* The Civil War. Nebraska is settled.

19) *How do Abbie's dreams come true?* Through her offspring. "Margaret has painted for me and Isabelle has sung for me. Grace has taught for me ... and you, Laura ... you'll write my book for me."

20) *What does Abbie think about during the final chapter of her life?* She tries to hum the song "Lady of the Lea." She ponders the idea of death, then she goes back in her imagination and sees all six of her children when they were young again. She has a pain in her chest. Will is there again.

The title of *A Lantern in Her Hand* was inspired by a poem entitled “Love’s Lantern” by Joyce Kilmer.

(for Aline)

Because the road was steep and long
And through a dark and lonely land,
God set upon my lips a song.
And put a lantern in my hand.

Through miles on weary miles of night
That stretch relentless in my way
My lantern burns serene and white,
An unexhausted cup of day.

O golden lights and lights like wine,
How dim your boasted splendors are.
Behold this little lamp of mine;
It is more starlike than a star!

- 1) Do you think the whole poem connects to the book or only the two lines?
- 2) Do any other lines in this poem stand out to you?
- 3) What do you think is meant by all of the light imagery?
- 4) What message is he trying to portray through “Love’s Lantern?”

Poet Joyce Kilmer was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1886. He graduated from Rutgers University then from Columbia University. When the United States entered World War 1, he joined the New York National Guard. Although he could have stayed back as a family man, he volunteered to go to Europe in the infantry. Then he was in intelligence. In 1918, he was killed by a sniper’s bullet. He left behind a wife and four surviving children. In 1917, his young daughter had died.³



“Love’s Lantern” is now a part of the public domain. He dedicated many of his poems to his wife, Aline. This poem, originally appeared in *Trees & Other Poems*, which was published by Doubleday in 1914. Probably Kilmer’s most well-known poem is “Trees” which includes the lines, “Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.” Kilmer’s Catholic faith was important to him.
Note: this image of Joyce Kilmer from World War 1 is also a part of the public domain.

³ Two websites were consulted to write Kilmer’s biography: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/joyce-kilmer> and <https://www.poemhunter.com/joyce-kilmer/biography/>

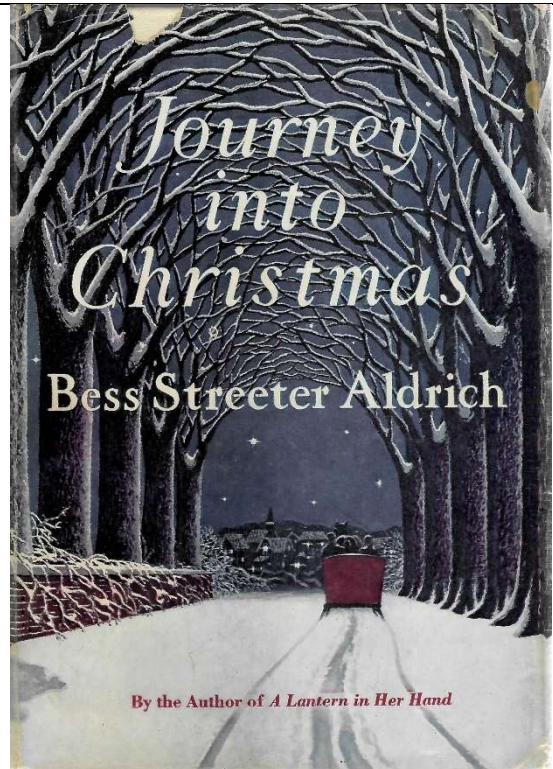
Christmas on the Prairie

Several displayed items at the Aldrich House are replica Christmas gifts from *A Lantern in Her Hand*.



In her book, *A Journey into Christmas*, Mrs. Aldrich includes excerpts about celebrating Christmas on the prairie from two of her novels, *A Lantern in Her Hand* and *A Song of Years*. “Christmas on the Prairie” from *A Lantern in Her Hand* primarily focuses on Christmas preparations with the end of the chapter on Christmas Day celebrations. From *A Song of Years*, “Suzanne’s Own Night” primarily focuses on the Christmas Eve celebration and those who are gathered together.

- 1) Which focus appeals to you more personally – the preparations or the people?
- 2) Some of the gifts given by Suzanne are similar to those mentioned in *Lantern*. Do you think gifts given during the 1800’s were more standard since they were homemade? Or do you think they were more original than today?
- 3) Have you ever made a gift for someone else? Or have you ever given a gift that had a particular meaning or significance?
- 4) What would you appreciate about celebrating a prairie Christmas? What would you miss from today’s more modern Christmas celebrations?
- 5) Would reading an excerpt of a book in a Christmas collection encourage you to want to read the entire book? Or do you wish Mrs. Aldrich had included only original stories in her Christmas collection?



This cover jacket for the original book edition was painted by Mrs. Aldrich’s son, James Aldrich.

Take a tour of Elmwood, Nebraska

Connect to *A Lantern in Her Hand* in a more personal way

Visitors entering Elmwood from the south on Highway 1 (298th Street) pass over Stove Creek right before entering town. This creek is a significant location in *Lantern*. While the book is fictional, the location is a real place.

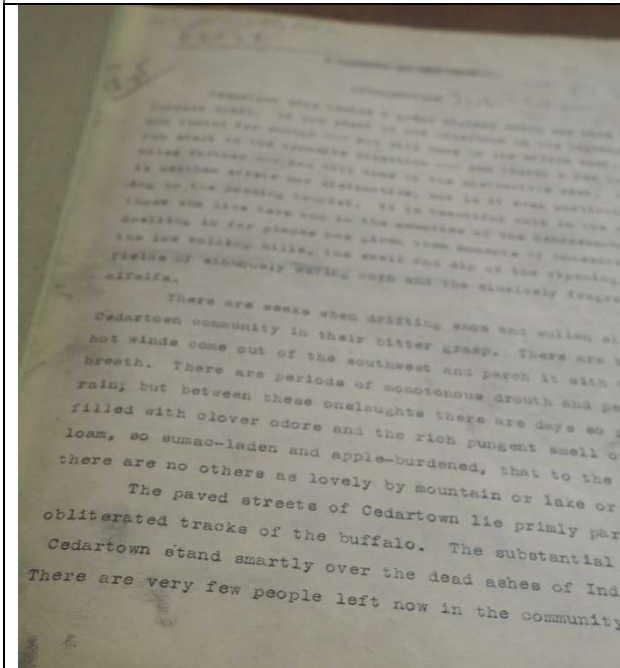


Located at 117 N. 4th St. in Elmwood, a large mural features Bess Streeter Aldrich as well as the history of the town. One of the images does pay direct homage to *Lantern*. This mural was painted by Geoff and Echo Easton back in June 2000 and was funded by Elmwood-Murdock FBLA.



At the Bess Streeter Aldrich Museum, located at 124 West "D" Street, visitors can see displays about Mrs. Aldrich and many of her books. One of the displayed items is the typed manuscript of *A Lantern in Her Hand*. Visitors can also see the lantern that inspired the book title.

Located at 204 East "F" Street, the Bess Streeter Aldrich House has also been turned into a museum that reflects the lives of the Aldriches as well as tributes to Mrs. Aldrich's books. One room is devoted to artifacts that reflect *A Lantern in Her Hand*. To find out the times when the house is open as well as about upcoming exhibits and featured events, please visit <https://www.bessstreeteraldrich.org/>



You are in charge of picking the cover illustration for the next edition of *A Lantern in Her Hand*. Which piece of artwork would you choose? What would be your 2nd and 3rd picks? Why?



Artwork: "The Spirit of the Prairie"
Artist: Elizabeth Dolan
Completed: 1930
Mural painted on plaster
Location: Nebraska State Law Library in the Nebraska State Capitol

Photo Credit:
Gretchen Garrison



Artwork: "The Pioneer Woman"
Sculptor: Ellis Luis Burman
Cast Concrete
Sculpture
Completed: 1935

Location: Park near 33rd & Sheridan Blvd in Lincoln, NE

Photo Credit:
Gretchen Garrison



Artwork: "The Prairie is My Garden"
Artist: Harvey Dunn
Oil on canvas
Completed: 1950
Location: the South Dakota Art Museum at South Dakota State in Brookings, South Dakota

Courtesy Image used with permission:
South Dakota Art Museum
Brookings, SD

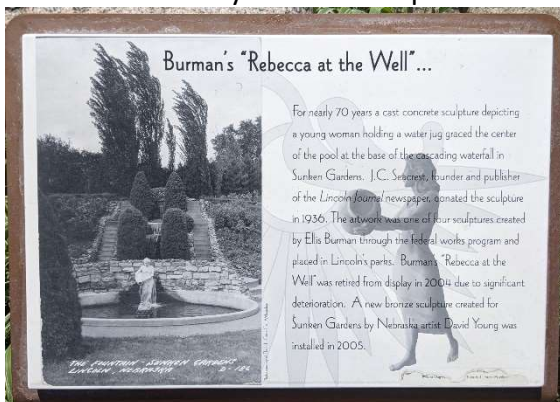
More about the three featured artists above: Elizabeth Dolan, Ellis Luis Burman and Harvey Dunn.

Just like Bess Streeter Aldrich, Elizabeth Dolan was born in Iowa. She moved to Nebraska in 1926 to paint murals at the University of Nebraska State Museum - Morrill Hall. (Natural History)



She ended up staying in Lincoln and primarily painted murals in private homes. In 1930, for the price of paint and her supplies, Dolan painted “The Spirit of the Prairie” at the Nebraska State Capitol. Due to the Great Depression, artwork was not in the budget. So, she donated her time. Her painting would have been created right after Mrs. Aldrich published *A Lantern in Her Hand*, but there is not any documentation that states that Dolan was inspired by the book. Some of Dolan’s murals can still be seen at various places in Lincoln including the triptych, “Three Panels of a Child’s Life” at Bennett Martin library in downtown Lincoln.

To improve his quality of health, Ellis Luis Burman moved to Lincoln, Nebraska. In 1935, he was commissioned by the Lincoln Women’s Club to create a statue entitled “Pioneer Woman” to represent the females who bravely settled the west. Whether or not Mrs. Aldrich’s books inspired this statue is unclear. But Burman’s statue, “Rebecca at the Well” was inspired by *A Lantern in Her Hand*.⁴ This statue was once on display at Lincoln’s Sunken Gardens. A plaque stands in its place since the statue is now in storage for preservation purposes. Although Burman stayed in the community for less than a decade, three of his statues are still around town. “War and Victory” is at Antelope Park.



“The Smoke Signal” is located at Pioneers Park in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Harvey Dunn’s painting is the one featured on the cover of one of the *A Lantern in Her Hand* editions.

⁴ <https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/burman-ellis>

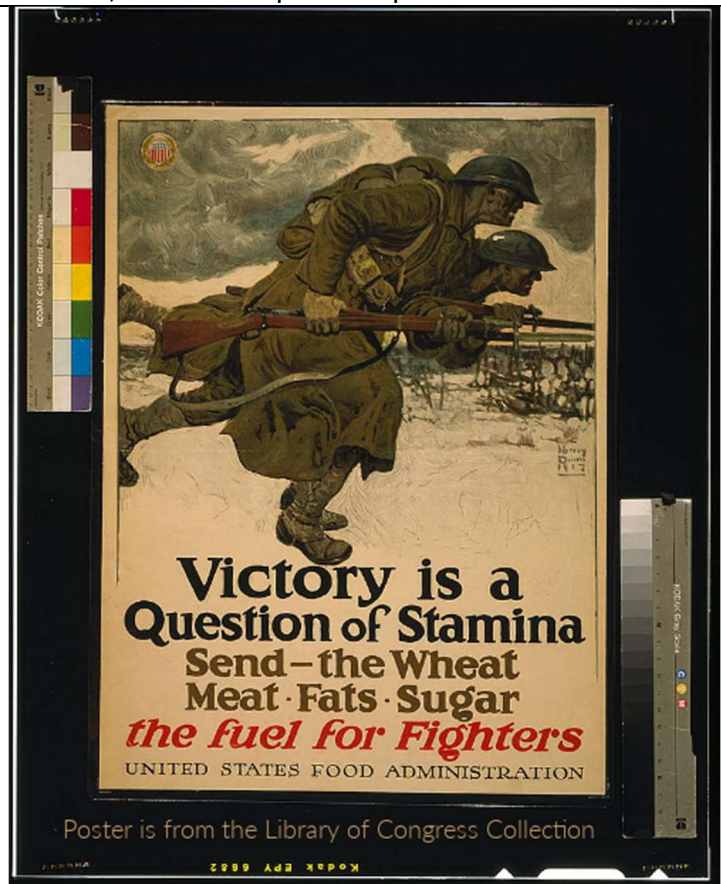
Note: Photo credits: Gretchen Garrison

On March 7, 1884, Harvey Dunn was born near Manchester, South Dakota, on a claim shanty. After attending a one-room school house, he entered the South Dakota Agricultural College in 1901. His art instructor, Ada Caldwell, noticed his talent and encouraged him to pursue further schooling at the Chicago Art Institute, While there, he was able to study with Howard Pyle who was then considered to be one of the nation's top illustrators.

Dunn moved to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1906. There he began work as an official illustrator for magazines including *The Saturday Evening Post*. At their website, they have additional articles about him as well as some of his magazine illustrations. Wanting to inspire others, Dunn set up the Leonia School of Illustration in 1915 along with another artist, Charles Shepard Chapman. Then war came.



Captain Harvey Dunn was an artist for the American Expeditionary Forces. His job was to create art that used for recruitment, propoganda for his historical purposes. Public Domain Photograph.



After the war, he and his family moved to Tenafly, New Jersey. While he continued illustrating, he devoted more of his time to teaching. "All that I am really doing is carrying on the Howard Pyle idea ... Howard Pyle did not teach art. Art cannot be taught, any more than life can be taught. His main purpose was to quicken our souls that we might render service to the majesty of simple things."⁵

Growing up in South Dakota impacted Dunn. He returned there many times to visit, and many of his paintings reflect his time spent there. He died at his New Jersey home on October 29, 1952.

At the South Dakota Art Museum, which is located at South Dakota State Brookings, South Dakota, campus, visitors can see the largest Dunn art collection consisting of 146 paintings, drawings and prints. Their website bio was used for the above bio summary. More information about Dunn can be found on their site: <https://www.sdstate.edu/south-dakota-art-museum/harvey-dunn-collection>

⁵ <https://www.sdstate.edu/south-dakota-art-museum/harvey-dunns-biography>