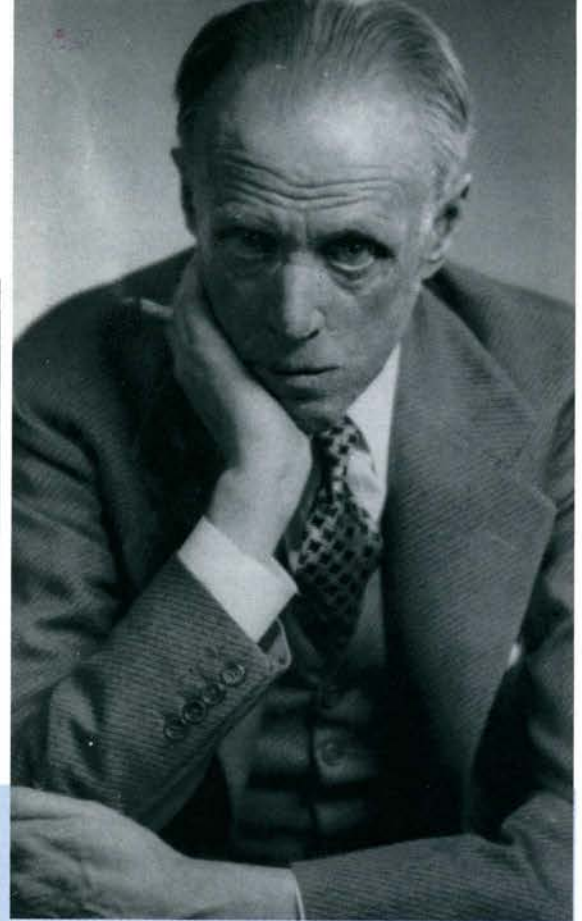


Crossings



Volume 38, Number 3
May 2012



FEATURED ARTICLE:

"Main Street"
See page 3

Stearns
History Museum
& Research Center

Main Street to Eighth Street:

Lewis House and St. Cloud's South Side Neighborhood

By Alex L. Ames, St. Cloud State University Foundation

St. Cloud State University has renamed a historic home located on the university campus and has received funds for its restoration. To celebrate, Stearns History Museum and Research Center and partners have joined to honor the home's original owners, Dr. Claude and Wilhelmina Lewis.

What's in a name? When it comes to honoring the legacy of an important Minnesota family, the name of a historic building can mean everything. St. Cloud State University's decision to rename one of its buildings "Lewis House" has sparked interest in the relationship between a famous Minnesota author and his brother who lived in St. Cloud. The new name also sheds light on the history of St. Cloud's South Side, a residential area next to St. Cloud State University that many college professors and wealthy Protestants once called home.

Dr. Claude B. Lewis (1878–1957) of St. Cloud and his brother, author Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951), shared a close yet complex bond. Many of their adult interactions occurred in Dr. Lewis's historic house now owned by St. Cloud State. This article explores Dr. Claude Lewis's historic home, his civic contributions, his relationship with Sinclair, and the experiences of Lewis family members socializing in the South Side. These stories reveal the importance of small town community spirit to early 20th century life. They also underscore how differently the Lewis brothers reacted to that community spirit. Stable and steady Claude Lewis embraced it, becoming an institution in St. Cloud because of his devotion to civic improvement. The brilliant but unpredictable Sinclair Lewis earned fame by scorning the hum-drum ways of small-town culture. Despite his distaste for provincial communities, however, Sinclair (and his family) spent much time on the South Side, drawn by the kindness of Claude Lewis and the doctor's neighborhood friends.

Who was Claude Lewis, this brother of a

world-famous author? What were his home and the South Side neighborhood really like in the early 20th century? How did the South Side treat Sinclair Lewis, and how did Sinclair Lewis treat the South Side? Most importantly, what significance do Lewis House's new name and historic legacy hold for the community today?

At Home with Dr. Claude and Wilhelmina Lewis

The Dr. Claude and Wilhelmina Lewis residence sits at 724 Fourth Avenue South, on the corner of Fourth Avenue South and Eighth Street. Built in 1926, the house has been a landmark of St. Cloud's South Side for 86 years. The Lewis family figured prominently in the civic and



Claude Lewis, 1929. Photo from Stearns History Museum and Research Center archives.

social life of the city. Dr. Lewis had established a local medical practice in 1905 after graduating from Chicago's prestigious Rush Medical College. His 50-year career earned admiration from patients and the regional medical community alike, in large part because of his efforts to encourage the development of the city's medical institutions. Lewis played a pivotal role in the foundation of the nursing school at St. Raphael's Hospital in 1908. Twenty years later, he worked with the Sisters of Saint Benedict toward the construction of St.

Cloud Hospital's Mississippi River facility.

Mrs. Lewis had her own medical credentials. Trained as a nurse, she worked for several years at Rush Hospital in Chicago, where she first met Claude Lewis. Wilhelmina volunteered with the American Red Cross during the Second World War and held an esteemed position in St. Cloud society. She was a member of St. Cloud's Reading Room Society and hosted many meetings and gatherings at her gracious South Side home.

What impressive gatherings they must have been. The Lewis House's elegant design complemented its location in St. Cloud's premier residential district. Dr. and Mrs. Lewis chose the Tudor Revival style for their residence, modeled on English homes of the 16th and early 17th centuries. This style was popular in the 1920s, when architects and their clients craved fanciful European looks. According to noted architectural historian Dr. William T. Morgan, "Homes built during this era reveal a high degree of craftsmanship and choice of high quality materials."

Dr. Lewis and his wife certainly spared no expense in the construction of their home. Costing an astronomical \$30,000, the new residence was the most expensive house built in St. Cloud in 1926. It was designed by St. Cloud architect Louis Pinault, who was also responsible for St. Cloud State University's Stewart Hall and Bishop Busch's residence (now the diocesan chancery) on Third Avenue South. When the Lewis House was built, a St. Cloud Daily Journal-Press article hailed its "English style" as befitting its location in St. Cloud's traditionally British, Protestant neighborhood.

Literary Connections

Were it only for its association with Dr. and Mrs. Lewis as well as its architectural merit, Lewis House would deserve recognition as a local landmark. But today the house is also an icon because of its connection to Claude Lewis's



Wilhelmina Lewis, 1925. Photo from Stearns History Museum and Research Center archives.

brother Sinclair, Nobel Prize-winning author of *Main Street*. Sinclair Lewis made a name for himself criticizing the close-mindedness that he felt marked American society, especially in small towns.

The author was born on February 7, 1885, to Dr. E.J. and Emma Lewis. Of New England stock, the couple had recently moved to Sauk Centre, Minnesota, a pioneer town with a population of 1,200. Young Sinclair had two elder brothers: Fred, born in 1875, and Claude (eventually of St. Cloud), born in 1878. From an early age, Sinclair showed the signs of great intellect and biting cynicism that became his trademarks. After graduation from high school, Sinclair enrolled at Yale and pursued a career in journalism and publishing. He soon began to write novels that garnered both acclaim and criticism for his portrayal of American culture.

Sinclair, whose bookish nature and cultural interests had set him apart in Sauk Centre, drew on negative childhood memories when writing his novels. Works such as *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Dodsworth*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Elmer Gantry* earned Lewis a reputation as one of the most perceptive social observers of his era. His commentary extended beyond criticism of provincial areas. Various novels addressed issues as wide-ranging as racism and women's rights.

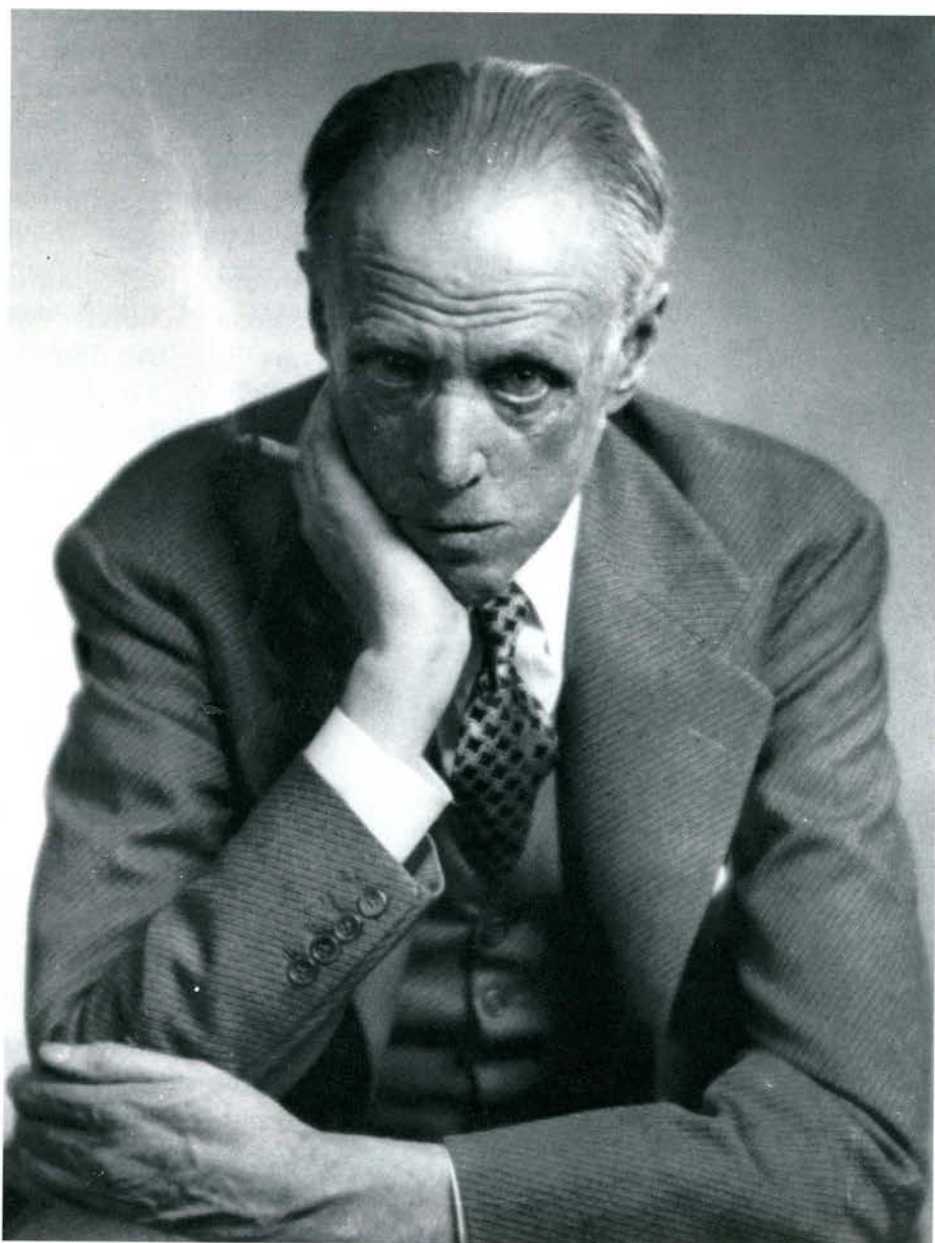
Unable to content himself in any one place for long, Sinclair continually traveled around the country and world. Despite his fame, wealth, and glamorous lifestyle, the author never escaped the disenchantment of

his youth. Most of the acclaim he received was for novels that exposed the shortcomings of American society that he had seen in his early years. Those novels won him international recognitions, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930.

Residents of St. Cloud's stylish South Side were eager to associate themselves with the cultural prominence of Sinclair Lewis and his family. Perhaps they secretly hoped

that connections to the famous author would enhance their own status. Dr. and Mrs. Claude Lewis included their neighbors in social functions held during visits Sinclair and his family made to St. Cloud.

But ingratiating Sinclair Lewis into South Side society posed risks, as his brother and sister-in-law learned on several occasions. Just because Sinclair was well known did not mean he was polite. Wilhelmina Lewis enjoyed bringing the famous



Sinclair Lewis, 1949. Photo courtesy of the Saint Cloud State University archives.

author to St. Cloud to lecture to various social groups, though she always feared what snide comments the cynic might slip into his remarks. If elder brother Claude was the ideal gentleman, younger brother Sinclair's flippancy toward the airs of wealthy small-town residents found expression at South Side social functions.

An intoxicated Sinclair would embarrass his brother with long-winded speeches at the dinner table. On one occasion, a very drunk Sinclair Lewis stumbled in late to a dinner party (thrown in his

honor) at the South Side home of physician C.F. Brigham, Sr. Lewis rested his feet on the dining room table before lashing out at his would-be dinner companions. Astonished guests bid a premature farewell to a disgusted Mrs. Brigham. Lewis never again entered the Brigham house. We may be sure that Dr. Lewis chastised Sinclair for this and other embarrassing incidents. Rational and cool-headed Claude was one of the few people in a position to challenge the world-famous author's unruly behaviors. The Lewis House was the scene of frequent arguments during Sinclair's visits.

Whatever his dinner party antics, Sinclair Lewis was an international celebrity. His cultural prominence meant that many straight-laced South Side ladies (not including Mrs. Brigham) were willing to overlook Lewis's social blunders in order to associate themselves with his fame. This was particularly the case when the author himself was not present to upset South Side social standards.

In 1927, Sinclair Lewis's wife and son, Wells, made a trip from their home in New York to Minnesota. (Sinclair was away in Europe.) Much to the delight of South Side society, the noted

author's family spent several nights with Dr. and Mrs. Lewis at their Fourth Avenue home. A July 8, 1927, St. Cloud Daily Journal-Press article described the reception the Lewises received. "In compliment to Mrs. Sinclair Lewis of New York City, Mrs. C.B. Lewis entertained at an afternoon tea yesterday at her home [at] 724 Fourth avenue south. Hours were from three to six during which time seventy friends called."

Wilhelmina Lewis stationed various society ladies in different rooms of her house, to manage the day's festivities. "Assisting Mrs. Lewis in the parlors were Mrs. J.C. Brown, Mrs. Karl Adams, Mrs. E.C. Biller and Miss Beula Douglas. Mrs. E. Everett Clark was in charge of the dining room. Mesdames C.L. Atwood, E.C. Biller, George Rice, C.F. Brigham, William Freeman and J.C. Brown poured [tea] and were assisted in serving by Mrs. A.C. Frederickson, Mrs. J.C. McCrory, Miss Edna Bunnell, Miss Kate Sheehan and Miss Virginia Lewis." No doubt the friends to whom Wilhelmina Lewis assigned these special duties took it as a mark of honor to assist in welcoming the famous visitors.

It was one thing for the South Side to forgive Sinclair Lewis's personal rudeness. It was quite another for them to honor Lewis and his family despite the salvos he hurled against Midwestern society in his novels. Had the women who attended Wilhelmina Lewis's 1927 tea ever read *Main Street*, Lewis's most famous book? Lewis gave harsh treatment to the main character of that novel, a



Wells Lewis, Sinclair's son, 1927. Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud State University archives.

woman named Carol Kennicott. Wife of an affluent Minnesota doctor, Mrs. Kennicott attempts to bolster her self-importance by bringing high culture to her small-town home of Gopher Prairie. With her social ambitions and civic projects, Kennicott shared much in common with many South Side ladies. Yet those same ladies flocked to Dr. Lewis's house when Sinclair (or, in July 1927, his family) was in town. How could this be?

South Side residents must not have viewed themselves—or their community—as reminiscent of Main Street's Carol Kennicott, or her fictional home of Gopher Prairie. St. Cloud was larger than Gopher Prairie as Sinclair Lewis had portrayed it. Many South Side residents were wealthy, educated, and well traveled. Perhaps Dr. Lewis's South Side neighbors felt they had more in common with glamorous Sinclair Lewis than with residents of the small towns he ridiculed. It seems unlikely, however, that Lewis, who rubbed shoulders with the world's great artists and intellectuals, would have agreed. We can only imagine what Sinclair would have thought of the July 1927 tea party his sister-in-law hosted for his wife and son, had he been present to enjoy the cooing of Dr. Lewis's awe-struck neighbors!

Contrasting Lifestyles: Claude and Sinclair Lewis

It is not surprising that Sinclair failed to join his wife and son on their Minnesota excursion. He frequently spent many years as far away from

Stearns County—the proverbial “Main Street”—as possible before returning to Minnesota with an idea for a story set in his home state. But then he would vanish again as quickly as he had arrived, forever bouncing back and forth between the Midwest and the wider world. Even in Europe's greatest cities, Sinclair was conflicted and lonely.

Dr. Claude Lewis's career lacked the glitz and glamour of his brother's. But the longtime St. Cloud resident possessed some of Sinclair's best characteristics (including bold vision and great intellect), combined with the down-to-earth practicality one might expect from a seasoned medical professional. This meant that Claude Lewis had little trouble carving out a pleasant life for himself, unlike his famous brother.

While Sinclair probably never could have found happiness in small-town St. Cloud, Claude did so quite naturally. Like his brother Sinclair, Claude was able to recognize challenges faced by towns in the Midwest. Unlike his brother, he stayed in the Midwest to address those challenges. The significance of Lewis's efforts at growing St. Cloud's medical institutions to meet the needs of the city and region ought to be appreciated today.

Dr. Lewis's positive spirit and ambitious vision made him a natural leader in trying times. Sister

Julitta Hoppe, O.S.B., served as administrator of St. Raphael's Hospital from 1923 to 1929. For years she had worked closely with Dr. Lewis, whom she respected and admired. Sister Julitta remembered that, in 1905 (very shortly after his arrival in St. Cloud), Dr. Lewis expressed dissatisfaction with the fourth floor of St. Raphael's. While the rest of the hospital was constructed of brick, the fourth floor was made of wood. “The top floor was unusable as it was too cold in winter and too hot in summer,” Sister Julitta explained. Dr. Lewis “made the remark to the Sisters that they should all work together while they were still young to make money to rebuild the top floor of brick so that it could be used.”

On October 10, 1905,



*Sister Julitta Hoppe, O.S.B., ca. 1920.
Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud Hospital
archives.*

not long after Dr. Lewis made this comment, St. Raphael's wooden fourth floor caught fire, destroying the floor and damaging the entire building. Dr. Lewis helped the Sisters keep up their spirits in these difficult times. According to Sister Julitta, "Dr. Lewis ... remarked, 'Well, Sisters, we are still young and we aren't rich yet, but we'll rebuild anyway!' Following the fire, the patients had been taken to St. Joseph's Home for the Aged ... and to private homes in St. Cloud," Sister Julitta continued. "Dr. Lewis and one of the Sisters made rounds to the homes to dress and care for the patients."

Dr. Lewis had been instrumental in founding St.

Raphael's Training School for Nurses, later known as the St. Cloud Hospital School of Nursing. The school educated nearly 2,700 nurses in the 79 years of its operation (between 1908 and 1987). In an era when few career paths were readily available to women, the nursing school provided a local option for female professional education.

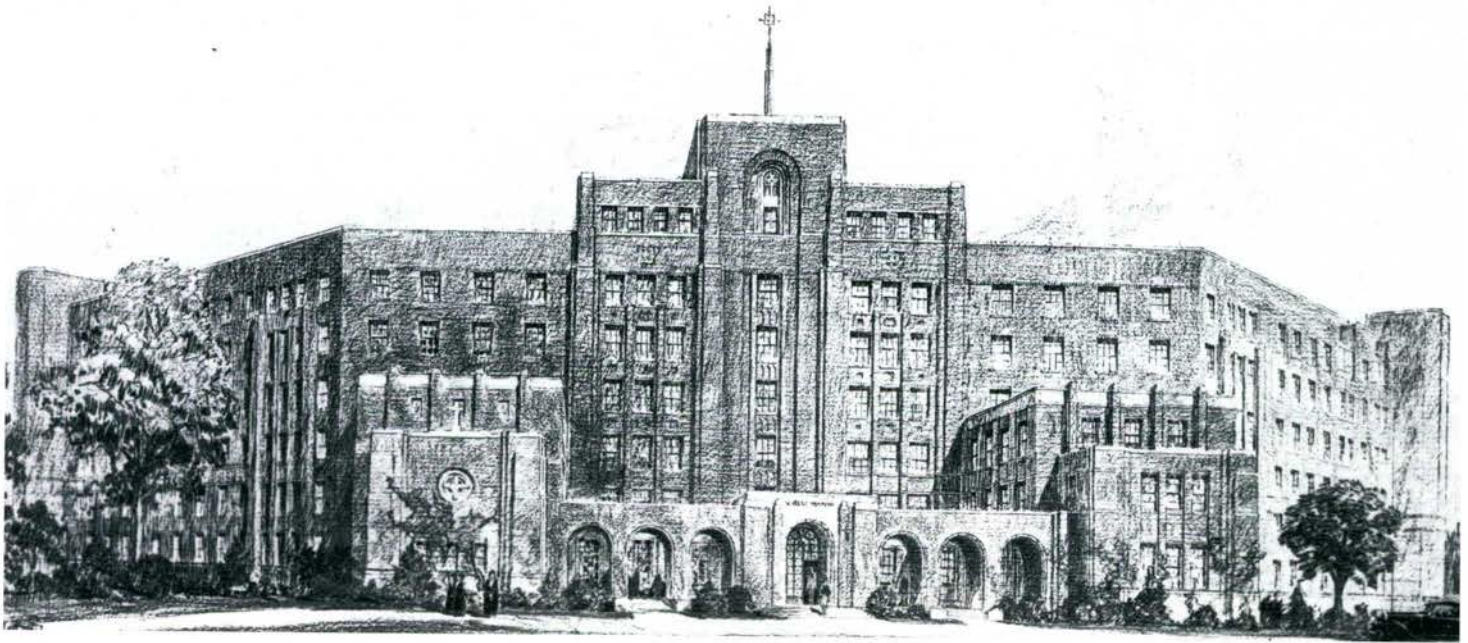
One hundred-five-year-old Lidwina (Laddie) Hennen Kray, now of Sauk Rapids, enrolled at St. Raphael's Training School in 1928. Kray remembers that the hospital's doctors—including Claude Lewis—also taught student nurses as part of their duties. The students, in turn, began work at the hospital

very early in their course of study. While "we student nurses didn't have much to do with the doctors," Kray notes that Dr. Lewis "was very personable. I got along with him fine." Kray became acquainted with Lewis's kind and observant nature. "This one day, there was a snow storm, and my home was in Richmond," Kray recalls. Dr. Lewis was walking down the hallway with a nursing supervisor. "He was saying to her, 'I wonder if that Hennen girl got in from Richmond?'" Kray remembers, "I said, 'Yes doctor, I'm walking right in back of you!' He said, 'I knew you would make it!'"

Dr. Lewis, a Presbyterian, was highly respected by the



St. Raphael's Hospital, ca. 1915. Photo from Stearns History Museum and Research Center archives.



Architectural drawing of Saint Cloud Hospital, 1927. Photo from Stearns History Museum and Research Center archives.

Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict, who owned and operated the hospital in St. Cloud. As a physician who kept abreast of the latest advancements in medical technology and treatment, he could offer the Sisters guidance in their efforts to provide state-of-the-art medical care to the region. It was Claude Lewis, not a Sister, who in 1925 announced plans for construction of the St. Cloud Hospital on the Mississippi River. The large and technologically advanced new hospital established St. Cloud's reputation as the region's medical hub. It has served the area ever since.

Dr. Lewis served as chief of staff at St. Raphael's Hospital from 1921 to 1923. He held the same position at St. Cloud Hospital from 1932 to 1933, and 1938 to 1939. Lewis was respected as an efficient but caring leader, paying attention to large-scale projects as well as minute details of patient comfort

and care.

Dr. and Mrs. Lewis were well known to many important people in the medical community and beyond. But they cultivated friendships with more than just civic leaders and society matrons. Indeed, their sense of community spirit, which shaped Dr. Lewis's lasting professional achievements, embraced even the youngest South Side residents. One might assume that the old-fashioned Lewis House would have seemed scary to kids growing up in the 1940s. But the house was a favorite place for Bill Riggs and his brother, Bob. The two youngsters, who lived next door, got along great with the doctor and his wife. Dr. and Mrs. Lewis went out of their way to make Bill and his brother feel welcome in their home.

Mrs. Lewis, whom Bill remembers as "very motherly," always had home-made cookies for the boys. The observant medical professionals even

made sure the kids stayed hydrated while playing outside. Dr. and Mrs. Lewis "had a Culligan water cooler that [they] could have had in the kitchen, but [they] left it out on the porch, and the Riggs boys could help themselves! We loved Dr. Lewis," Bill Riggs remembers.

Dr. and Mrs. Lewis enjoyed a happy marriage. In 1942, the couple entertained a group of friends in their home to celebrate their 35th wedding anniversary. After dinner, guests were treated to "unique surprise entertainment" organized by Lewis friend Allen Atwood. A prominent St. Cloud attorney, Atwood transformed Lewis House into a courtroom and put the modern condition of marriage on trial. "Couple after couple took the 'witness stand' to be quizzed for some time by Attorney Atwood about their courtship days, whether their marriage was a success or failure, to name the worst fault of their spouse,

what are the requirements for a happy marriage, etc., etc.," a subsequent newspaper article reported. After the trial, the gathering declared unanimously that Dr. and Mrs. Lewis had the best answers to Atwood's interrogations.

Despite differences in their temperaments and lifestyles, not to mention their frequent altercations, Claude and Sinclair Lewis enjoyed a close relationship throughout their lives. Perhaps Claude felt a sense of fraternal responsibility

to rein in his fiery younger brother. As a physician, Claude may very well have looked at Sinclair as one of his neediest "patients," requiring frequent advice and even a stern word or two.

While it would be difficult for many of us to be known as the sibling of a celebrity, Claude was likely familiar enough with Sinclair's personal demons not to envy his brother's lifestyle. What is certain is that Claude cared deeply for Sinclair and, when the author behaved

himself, enjoyed his company. Like his famous brother, Claude relished travel. Their relationship culminated in Claude's partial retirement, when the two adventurers undertook a string of trips together. The pair traveled to Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, and the Mediterranean. "Dr. Lewis wrote extensive descriptions of his travels and gave many colorful lectures about the countries he had visited," reported the St. Cloud Daily Times.

But Dr. Lewis's legacy did not rest on his exotic journeys around the world. Rather, it was his staying power in St. Cloud that made him a community institution by the mid-20th century. The sheer longevity of his local medical practice, combined with his stellar track record, made Dr. Lewis as central a feature of the St. Cloud cityscape as the hospital building he had helped to construct. A newspaper article published after his death in 1957 attested to that. "Not too long ago, Dr. C.B. Lewis died. And with him went an era," the article began. "It was the period of the frank, outspoken, hard working practitioners who [were] unaided by antibiotics, miracle drugs, and modern conveniences." Claude Lewis symbolized a hardy, "pioneer" era in the life of the city, when a doctor's reliability and trustworthiness counted for everything.

Sinclair Lewis had died six years before his elder brother Claude. If Claude's memory inspired feelings of gratitude for the guidance he provided to St. Cloud's medical community, the



Claude and Sinclair Lewis in Amsterdam, 1949. Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud State University archives.



Aerial view of Saint Cloud Hospital, ca. 1965. Photo from the Stearns History Museum and Research Center archives.

passing of Sinclair had sparked international speculation about the author's tumultuous final days. All the complexities that had shaped Sinclair Lewis's greatest works bubbled to the surface in his later years.

"Sinclair Lewis, as I knew him during his last year, was a restless, lonely man, constantly looking for something he couldn't find, or, if he found it, no longer wanting it," wrote a Lewis confidante for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1951. Writing a decade after Sinclair Lewis's death, novelist Sherwood Anderson spelled out a key feature of Lewis's personality: "Here is a man writing who, wanting passionately to love the life about him, cannot bring himself to do so."

Sinclair Lewis's cynicism left the world with novels that shaped perceptions of early 20th century American life. But that same critical nature prevented the author from finding personal happiness. News of Claude Lewis's death may not have made the *Saturday Evening Post*, as had his brother's. But Dr. Lewis enjoyed the inner peace and fulfillment that had always

evaded his brilliant relative. This contentment is indicated by the strong networks of friendship Dr. Lewis and his wife built in the South Side—and in the entire St. Cloud community.

It is little wonder that Sinclair Lewis, who had the world at his feet, felt drawn to the South Side. It was one of the few places where the lonely wanderer could enjoy the comfort of family in a close-knit community. "Sinclair Lewis struggled to turn his back on the Midwest," wrote scholar John Koblas. "Somehow, he always returned to his native soil." It was soil that Claude Lewis never left behind.

A New Name for an Old House

Today, Lewis House stands as a quiet reminder of the influential family who lived in the home and their famous relative who visited them there. The building was one of many historic homes absorbed into the St. Cloud State University campus between the 1940s and 1980s. Since 1972, the structure has been home to the St. Cloud State University Foundation and

Alumni Relations offices.

Craig Wruck, St. Cloud State University Vice President for University Advancement, has an office in the Lewis House sun porch. From there, he enjoys views of the St. Cloud State campus, Barden Park, and the South Side neighborhood.

"From my office I can see the university's library, the park, as well as many historic South Side homes," Wruck commented. "This reminds me every day of the important history in this part of town, and just how deeply rooted the relationships are between the neighborhood's old families, including the Lewises, and the university."

The association that St. Cloud State University shares with the Lewis family is a point of pride for Wruck and for the entire university community. "Dr. and Mrs. Lewis were certainly models of professional commitment, civic responsibility, and South Side hospitality," Wruck noted. "Moreover, we are fortunate to have an historic space associated with the life of Sinclair Lewis on our campus."

Richard Kelly is a South Side resident, St. Cloud State

University Alumni Association board member, president of the St. Cloud Historical and Neighborhood Preservation Association, and chair of the St. Cloud Neighborhood Coalition. He agrees with Wruck about Lewis House's new name. "Renaming Lewis House highlights the historic connections between the campus and the community," Kelly observed. "Higher education, now in the form of St. Cloud State, has been a part of the South Side neighborhood since 1869. The South Side is closely and firmly identified with St. Cloud State. Lewis House's renaming shows that the school is a good neighbor, and appreciates other

good neighbors who created our community, such as the Lewis family."

In September 2011, a St. Cloud State University maintenance worker climbed a tall ladder leaned against Lewis House's façade to dislodge letters that spelled out the word "Alumni" on the front of the building. He replaced them with letters spelling out the surname of the prominent St. Cloud citizens who built the house over eight decades before. Little else changed that day. Business went on as usual for university employees at work inside Lewis House. But with its new name and increasing fame as an important historic site, Dr.

Lewis's front door will surely attract more than a few visitors curious to peek into St. Cloud's medical and literary past.

Special thanks to Patti Lewis, Sinclair Lewis Foundation volunteer and Lewis family member; Mary Mathews, South Side neighborhood resident; Mary Shaffer, St. Cloud Hospital Archivist; and Dr. Sally Parry, Sinclair Lewis scholar and Associate Dean at Illinois State University, for reviewing this article. Their assistance was essential at every step of this project. (Any errors, however, remain my own.)



Lewis House, September 2011. Photo courtesy of Patti Lewis.

AFTERNOON TEA



LECTURE



BOOK SIGNING

MAIN STREET

to Eighth Street

• THE LEWIS FAMILY IN ST. CLOUD •

FRIDAY, JUNE 8, 2012 • 2:30 P.M.

STEARNS HISTORY MUSEUM & RESEARCH CENTER

Learn about famous author Sinclair Lewis's relationship with his brother, St. Cloud physician and South Side resident Dr. Claude Lewis. Uncover the role of family and community in Lewis's life and novels with Dr. Sally Parry, Professor of English and Associate Dean at Illinois State University.

- Light refreshments
- Information on St. Cloud's historic South Side neighborhood
- Keynote lecture and discussion led by Dr. Sally Parry
- Opportunity to purchase *The Minnesota Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, edited by Dr. Parry

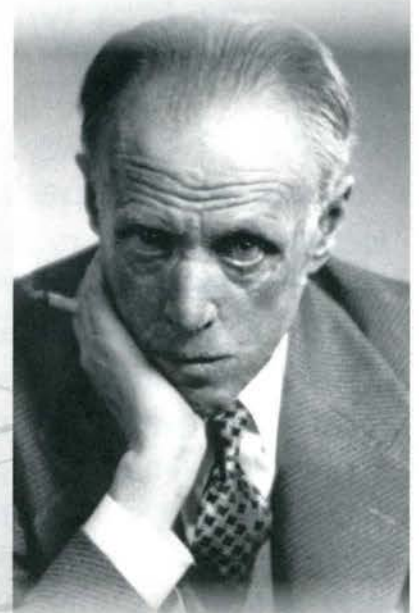
FREE ADMISSION

R.S.V.P. to Stearns History Museum by June 1, 2012
320-253-8424

Limited Space Available



Dr. Claude Lewis, ca. 1925



Sinclair Lewis, 1949

PARTNERS

Stearns History Museum & Research Center, St. Cloud Historical & Neighborhood Preservation Association, Sinclair Lewis Foundation, City of St. Cloud Arts Commission, South Side University Neighborhood Association, St. Cloud Reading Room Society, Paramount Theater, St. Cloud State University Alumni Association, St. Cloud State University Communications Office, St. Cloud State University Archives and Special Collections, St. Cloud State University Foundation, Sinclair Lewis Society, St. Cloud Municipal Band, City of St. Cloud Park and Recreation Department, St. Cloud Hospital Archives

