

## Sherwood Anderson Biography

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Sherwood Berton Anderson was born on September 13, 1876, in Camden, Ohio, a farming town with an 1870s population of around 650. He was the third of seven children born to Emma Jane (née Smith) and former Union soldier and harness-maker Irwin McLain Anderson. Although reasonably well-off financially, the family left town just before Sherwood's first birthday. The Andersons moved to Caledonia, Ohio for four or five years. These were the years that formed Anderson's earliest memories and later inspired his semi-autobiographical novel, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood* (1926). In Caledonia, Anderson's father began drinking excessively, which led to financial difficulties, eventually causing the family to leave.

With each move, Irwin Anderson's prospects dimmed. The Andersons finally settled down in Clyde, Ohio (79 miles west of Cleveland) in 1884, but Irwin could only get work as a hired man to harness manufacturers. That job was short-lived and for the rest of Sherwood Anderson's childhood, his father barely supported the family as an occasional sign-painter and paperhanger, while his mother took in washing to make ends meet. As a result of these circumstances, young Sherwood became adept at finding various odd jobs to help his family.

Though he was a decent student, Anderson's attendance at school faltered as he began picking up work. He left school at age 14 after finishing nine months of high school. Anderson worked at a series of odd jobs in addition to assembling bicycles for the Elmore Manufacturing Company. Even in his teens, Anderson showed a talent for selling, which eventually led to success at his early careers in advertising and sales.

Anderson was a voracious reader. There were only a few books in his family's home, but he read widely by borrowing from the school library and the personal libraries of a school superintendent and a local artist, both of whom supported Anderson's interest.

By the time Anderson turned 18, his family was on shaky ground. His father started to disappear for weeks. In May 1895, his mother died of tuberculosis. Now essentially on his own, Sherwood boarded at a livery stable where he worked as a groom—an experience that would translate into several of his best-known stories. His father, Irwin Anderson, died in 1919 after having been estranged from his son for two decades. Two months before his mother's death, Anderson signed up with the Ohio National Guard for a five-year stint while he was going steady with Bertha Baynes, an attractive girl and possibly the inspiration for Helen White in *Winesburg, Ohio*. After his mother's death, Anderson left Clyde for Chicago where his older brother Karl had settled.

Anderson moved in with his brother Karl and found a job at a cold-storage plant. In late 1897, Karl moved away, and Anderson relocated to a two-room flat with his sister and two younger brothers, newly arrived from Clyde. Anderson enrolled in night school at the Lewis Institute (now ITT). In addition to business classes, Anderson attended lectures on literature and poetry.

As the United States prepared to enter the Spanish-American War, Anderson returned to Clyde to join the military. In 1899 his company shipped out to Cuba, but fighting had already ceased and the unit left Cuba on April 21, 1899 having seen no combat. After the war, Anderson lived briefly in Clyde performing agricultural work before deciding to return to school. In September 1899, Anderson joined his siblings Karl and Stella in Springfield, Ohio, where, at the age of twenty-three, he enrolled for his senior year of preparatory school at the Wittenberg Academy, on the campus of Wittenberg University.

During his time in Springfield, Anderson stayed and worked as a "chore boy" at The Oaks, a boardinghouse where he became friendly with a group of businessmen and educators. In particular, a high school teacher, Trillena White, and a businessman, Harry Simmons, influenced Anderson. White was ten years Anderson's senior and would walk with Anderson in the evenings, introducing him to fine literature. She later served as inspiration for a number of his characters including the teacher Kate Swift in *Winesburg, Ohio*. For his part, Simmons offered Anderson a job as an advertising agent at his company's Chicago office. Thus, in the summer of 1900, Anderson returned to Chicago where most of his siblings were now living, intent on achieving success in his new white-collar occupation.

By 1901, Anderson left his job with Simmons for a new position with the Frank B. White Advertising Company where he wrote advertising copy for manufacturers of farm implements and articles for the trade journal, *Agricultural Advertising*. Here, Anderson published his first professional work, a February 1902 piece called "The Farmer Wears Clothes." He wrote 29 articles and essays for the magazine. He wrote two monthly columns, "Rot and Reason" and "Business Types," for *Agricultural Advertising*. These exemplified the "character writing" that would later become emblematic of his approach in *Winesburg, Ohio* and other works.

On a trip to solicit potential clients May 1903, he stopped in the home of a friend from Clyde, where he met Cornelia Pratt Lane (1877–1967), the daughter of wealthy Ohio businessman Robert Lane. The two married a year later. The couple moved to Chicago first but left for Cleveland after two years where Anderson became president of United Factories Company, a mail-order firm selling various items from surrounding firms. The couple had three children together.

In Cleveland, things went well for a time until one of the manufacturers represented by United Factories produced a large batch of defective products. Anderson personally guaranteed everything he sold and as hundreds of letters poured in demanding recourse, Anderson suffered his first nervous breakdown in the summer of 1907.

By September 1907, however, the Andersons moved to Elyria, Ohio, where he rented a warehouse and began a mail-order business selling a preservative paint called "Roof-Fix" at a markup of 500%. The new business was a success and Anderson was able to purchase and absorb several similar businesses and expand his firm's product-lines under the name Anderson Paint Company. By late 1911, Anderson merged his companies into the American Merchants Company, a profit-sharing/investment firm operating in part on a scheme he developed around that time called "Commercial Democracy."

Then, at what seemed the height of his business achievements, Anderson suffered the breakdown that has remained paramount in the "myth" or "legend" of Sherwood Anderson's life.

On Thursday, November 28, 1912, Anderson came to his office in a nervous state. According to his secretary, he opened some mail, and in the course of dictating a business letter became distracted. After writing a note to his wife, he murmured something along the lines of "I've been wading in a long river and my feet are wet" and left the office. Four days later, on Sunday, December 1, a disoriented Anderson entered a drug store on East 152nd Street in Cleveland and asked the pharmacist to help figure out his identity. Unable to make out what the incoherent Anderson was saying, the pharmacist discovered a phone book on his person and called the number of Edwin Baxter, a member of the Elyria Chamber of Commerce. Baxter came, recognized Anderson, and promptly had him checked into Huron Road Hospital in Cleveland, where Anderson's wife, whom he hardly recognized, went to meet him.

Even before returning home, Anderson began his lifelong practice of reinterpreting the story of his breakdown. As Malcolm Cowley writes in his introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson's "three personal narratives are entertainingly inaccurate; indeed, they are almost as fictional as the novels." Biographers have reconstructed what happened that day from other sources. Anderson had been struggling under an accumulation of marital, artistic, and business worries and medical records showed that Anderson was on the brink of nervous collapse. Much later, in Anderson's telling, he offered his flight as an example for others to follow. The subsequent generation of writers and readers of Anderson would view his flight from the paint factory as an heroic move. For Anderson, it was the central moment of his career.

Anderson moved back to Chicago and after two years writing for his previous advertising agency, he divorced Cornelia. Later, he married his mistress, the sculptor Tennessee Claflin Mitchell (1874–1929). In 1924, Anderson traveled to Reno, Nevada to secure a divorce from Mitchell. He then, within months, married his third wife, Elizabeth Prall, a woman with whom he was already involved before the divorce. Prall was a friend of William Faulkner's whom he had met in New York. That marriage also failed. They divorced in 1932. While married to Prall, Anderson became involved with Eleanor Gladys Copenhaver (1896–1985) and they married in 1933. She was the last of his wives.

Anderson's first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*, was published in 1916 as part of a three-book deal with John Lane, a British publisher. His second novel, *Marching Men*, was published in 1917. Anderson's most notable work is his collection of interrelated short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), based in part on his early years growing up in Clyde, Ohio. In his memoir, he wrote that "Hands", the opening story, was the first "real" story he ever wrote. Instead of emphasizing plot and action, Anderson used a simple unsentimental style to reveal the frustration, loneliness, and longing in the lives of his characters. These characters are stunted by the narrowness of Midwestern small-town life and by their own limitations.

After the success of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson published six novels, several short story collections, two memoirs, many essay collections, and a smattering of poetry and plays. *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*, published in 1926, was a semi-autobiographical novel. He frequently

contributed to newspapers. His 1925 novel *Dark Laughter* (1925) drew from his New Orleans experiences with his third wife, Edith Prall, and explored the sexual freedoms of the 1920s. *Dark Laughter* was the only book to become a bestseller during Anderson's lifetime. A long list of stories, correspondence, love letters, unpublished articles, diaries, and other writings were published posthumously beginning in 1942 and as recently as 2012.

In his later years, Anderson and Copenhaver lived on his Ripshin Farm in Troutdale, Virginia, which he purchased in 1927 as a summer home. Anderson died on March 8, 1941, at the age of 64, having taken ill during a cruise to South America. He had been feeling abdominal discomfort for a few days, which was later diagnosed as peritonitis. Anderson and his wife disembarked from the cruise liner in Colón, Panama, where, after being admitted to the hospital, he subsequently died. An autopsy revealed that a swallowed toothpick had done internal damage resulting in peritonitis. Anderson's body was returned to the United States, where he was buried at Round Hill Cemetery in Marion, Virginia. His epitaph reads, "Life, Not Death, Is the Great Adventure."