

Some friends of Augie Derleth got together the other day in Sauk City to mark the 10th anniversary of his death, and everybody who was there loved it.

Including Augie.

He was there, all right: bigger than life, bigger than death, his presence in the village, in the countryside, as real as the living river that moves like time itself through this timeless country.

They're calling it "Derleth Country" now. Not just the scholars from the universities, but the shopkeepers, too. Augie is the local boy who made good by never leaving the locality. His writing is being "discovered" and "rediscovered." His book *Walden West* is being hailed as "great"—"an American classic"—vindicating the *New York Times*, which said as much when the book first appeared.

Time is not only vindicating but making a prophet of Sinclair Lewis, who predicted almost 50 years ago that one day people would come visiting August Derleth's Sauk City in the same way people go visiting Charles Dicken's London and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Salem.

"I felt," Lewis said of Augie's *Sac Prairie Saga*, "something pretty important in the wind, something that will go far beyond Wisconsin, and I thought how important it would be for Wisconsin to discover its own young man before the rest of the world discovers him and asks Wisconsin why they had not!"

Professor Emeritus Bob Gard was saying pretty much the same thing when he observed in that laconic way of his that it was just too bad the University of Wisconsin had never seen fit to acknowledge Augie with an honorary doctorate, and maybe the school would get around to it now.

"The University treated Frank Lloyd Wright the same way," Prof. Gard said, "so that's pretty good company."

Edna Meudt, who has written so many beautiful things for August, chose instead to read Jesse Stuart's "Letter to August Derleth".

"Dear Augie," Jesse Stuart had begun.

"Since you have gone on a long journey, I don't have your new address.

It's not like you not to send it to me.

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

But this is like old times when I used to write to you,

To your favorite place on earth, Sauk City, Wisconsin.

Augie, where are you now? What is your new address?

And what are you doing? You must be doing something.

I know you could never sit still...

Edna paused, because no one who knew August Derleth can hear Jesse Stuart's letter read aloud and not have something happen inside. Deep. Buried. In the Beginning was the Word. And in the Ending, also. Because Jesse's words captured Augie, they captured us.

"You were Wisconsin," Jesse continued, "two yards wide,

A block of a man, two-hundred-fifty pounder,

Barrel-chested, protruding chin and jutted jaw...

And books, you were one hundred-fifty plus

And Nature's walking Encyclopedia.

Hell, how can a grave hold you?

You were a voice, Wisconsin's voice,

You were a personality; you were everything

Of man, all together at once,

Unforgettable, genius extraordinary.

You never created a character to equal you.

Bill Dyke, former mayor of Madison and now a director of the August Derleth Society, said that while he never met Augie, he has been deeply moved by his writings, which he said were right in the mainstream "along with people like Mark Twain."

Dyke said that because Augie went around in sandals, a lot of people perceived him as a rebel, but his writings honored "tradition, traditional values." Like Mark Twain. Like Thoreau.

From my post in Sac Prairie, Augie wrote in *Walden West*, I fished in the

wider stream that flowed past my private Walden and eddied outward to the stars.

"Augie once observed," Dyke told the assemblage, "that if a murderer freed on the testimony of a psychiatrist murdered a second time, not only he, but the psychiatrist as well, should be executed."

This pronouncement from the gentle giant, described by his lifelong friend Pete Blankenheim as "a big burly-chested man sitting by the brook trestle with his head cocked to the side, listening for the sound of birds," illustrates the problem facing the biographers of August Derleth: He wasn't just a simple country boy.

"He was a complex man," his friend from boyhood George Marx says. "Lots of sides to him."

"He knew all about the plants and

birds," Hugo Schwenker says. "And he knew all about the people, too."

At the cemetery, before the graveside service, George Marx cheerfully took me on a tour.

"These are all Aug's friends and neighbors buried here," he said. "All the people he wrote about. We're buried over here."

He led the way to the Marx family area, and sure enough there was George's headstone, the date of death left blank.

The sense of community is strong here. These people were together in classroom, church services, freethinker meetings. And here they are, together again. The author and the characters. And then the realization comes like a bolt: *They were all the authors: Augie just happened to write it down.*

At the end of services, everybody bowed his or her head and I watched the blue sky for hawks. When one appeared, I nudged Hugo Schwenker. He didn't seem surprised—not even when a second hawk appeared. And then a third. High up. Circling, circling. •