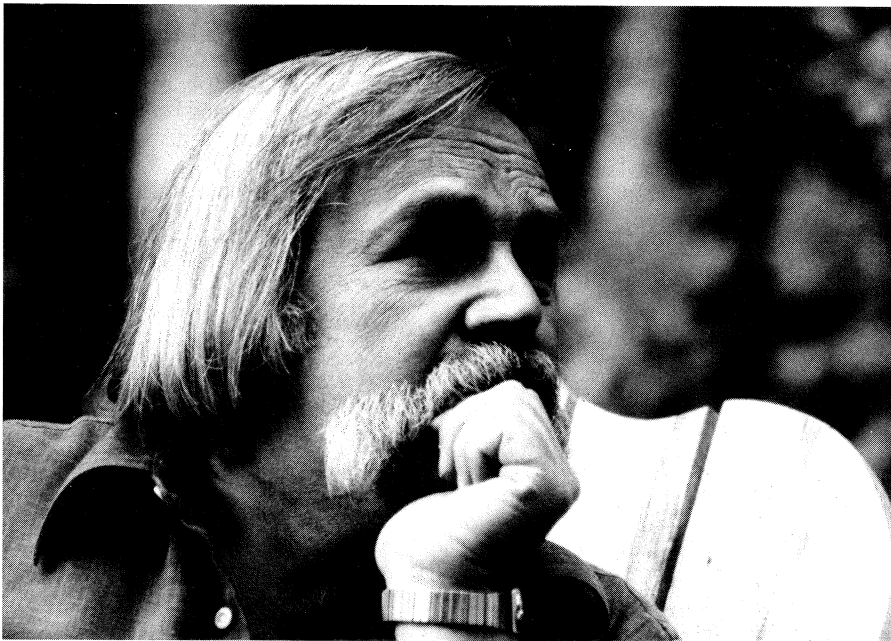


Door Ajar

Door County is changing, and writer Norbert Blei is furious



Prophesying doom: Door County writer Norbert Blei

“I started out as a teacher,” Norbert Blei says, “with a great desire to write. I tried to figure out how I could do both and eventually figured out that I couldn’t do both.”

Blei was born and raised on Chicago’s West Side and earned his master’s degree in English from the University of Chicago. He taught English in high school and junior college until 1969.

“I loved teaching,” he insists, “until I burned out on it — and on the city.”

In 1969, he moved with his wife, Barbara, and their children, Christopher and Bridget, to Door County — “to an old place outside Ellison Bay.” In the subsequent years, he has immortalized the peninsula and its people in

a remarkable trio of books titled: *Door Way*, *Door Steps*, and *Door to Door*.

“He’s different,” a Blei aficionado warns. “It’s like a mixture of Studs Terkel and Henry David Thoreau.”

Despite years now as a property-owning, tax-paying, year-round resident of “the Door,” Blei is still regarded by many local people as an outsider, and by some as a troublemaker. “I’m always flirting with the idea,” he admits, “of just plain getting the hell out of here.”

He does “get out” for short visits back to the old Chicago neighborhood to charge himself with Chicago talk, theaters, restaurants. He also takes more flying trips to Santa Fe, where he has many friends who are writers

and artists — whom he hopes one day to join.

His last book in the Door County trilogy — *Door to Door* — reflects this restlessness. There’s still a heavy Door County segment, but there’s also a segment devoted to Chicago and one on Santa Fe. “A writer needs to expand,” he says, “and not become too provincial in your thinking.”

His refusal to think or write provincially cost him in 1981 the regular newspaper column he had been writing for the Door County Advocate. “I’m sure that running a newspaper,” he says of Editor Chan Harris, “is pretty much like being a good bartender. You don’t want to alienate anybody.” Blei admits his columns alienated people.

“Door County is changing. Big money investors are coming in from Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis. Early on, I was aware of the negative aspects of tourism. I thought there were a lot of things we should be looking at. The feeling was that I was no longer writing about ‘the colorful characters’ of the county and the column ended.”

It was a watershed.

“Sure,” he acknowledges, “because of my attitude, it was partially my fault, but it’s like you’re told, ‘You’re not going to be part of the community anymore. You’re not part of what’s going on here.’”

“People didn’t like it when I wrote that we have a creeping urban culture up here. Door County is becoming suburbia.

“We have fire numbers now. I buried mine under the deck somewhere. I hate numbers. I made fun of that and people said, ‘I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes if your house ever catches on fire. How will they ever find your house if you don’t have number 654?’”

“Then they didn’t like the fact that I made fun of naming the roads in the country — the back roads. They used to be named after local people. This used to be Daubner Road.

“Daubner was one of the first settlers here. My house belonged to Elmer Daubner. Matt Daubner lived over there and Joe Daubner farther down. This road was Daubner Road. Now suddenly it’s Timberline. What the hell? Where they came up with that, I don’t know.

“But, of course, these are just the symptoms. The problem up here is that the landscape is being destroyed. People leave the suburbs of Chicago and of Milwaukee and they bring all the shit with them up here. They bring their pink flamingos. They bring their yard lights. And as this place becomes the same as the rest of the suburban landscape, the people are becoming the same, too.

"As a writer, that bothers me because these people are not very interesting. I mean I would rather have one Charley Root than a thousand people living in The Harbors condominium. There probably isn't one person in the whole damn condo who interests me as much as one local person.

"And as the local people die off, as this land is rezoned, as they begin to put up the steel buildings and the steel garages, all of this sameness develops — a deadness develops — and I can't tell you how boring some of these people moving in are. Now, not all of them, but most of them. And there's a real class consciousness developing, too. The people are well-heeled and the landscape is getting cluttered with the gift shops and the malls and all that crap.

"I know, I know. The constant refrain is: 'Blei, if you don't like it here, get the hell out. Go back to Chicago.' That started fairly early on when my first conflict with life up here was The Winter — just living through The Winter.

"I spent a lot of time back then commuting between here and Chicago because Chicago was where I had to go in order to write and put food on the table. I had no markets in Wisconsin. My markets were the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Magazine* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

"I wrote about Chicago for them even though I lived up here — and then, that

began to change. I became more rooted here and I was losing touch with what was going on in the city. For a freelance writer, I was making a good piece of change and I was losing those Chicago markets. So I had to establish myself in Door County. I had to

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make this my neighborhood. In doing that, I stayed true to myself as a writer. I never tried to market schlock. I was finding out about myself even as I was finding out about this country.

"The Winter up here taught me a lot, too. It taught me about self-discipline. It used to make me feel isolated. I could hardly work. Now I can easily block out most of The Winter by being engrossed in a book. Writing a book can take me right into the spring.

"When I first came here, I became aware that this was a very different landscape and

that there were lives being lived here that were very different from anything I had experienced in the Chicago area.

"I had done profiles of people in the city, in the neighborhoods, and the natives of Door County were just a different type. Two of them, Chester Elquist and Charley Root, gave me my introduction into the Door County 'mystique.'

"Chester Elquist lived in Ephraim — he was our landlord for many summers before we bought our own place — and Charley Root was the little guy next door, my neighbor.

"It was fascinating to know them, to participate in some of the things that made sense and meaning in their lives, to sit back and reflect on it and then, to record it.

"Both Chester and Charley became chapters in the first Door County book — *Door Way* — and each man, in my estimation, represented a way of life that was simple, that was unique, that was satisfying.

"And what has become more and more important to me now — each man's life in no way demeaned this landscape.

"Chester would fish day after day and he would never take fish in excess. Charley was a simple farmer and I couldn't imagine him doing anything to demean the landscape or his neighbor.

"It's interesting, too, that neither was

very religious. That always fascinated me because as I moved around in the county, I became more and more aware of the phony Christian virtues around and what one was expected to do on Sundays.

"I was an outsider. I didn't attend church.

"The county is going. And it's an incredible irony that my Door County books have helped promote tourism."

I was a suspect, so the religion of this culture always fascinated me — and still does to this day. I'm always mining this culture for what a good person really is, you know?

"Charley had virtually no religion and yet was as kind and good a man as I can imagine. Chester might show pretenses of attending church but his real church was the lake and his boat and going to fish — with a friend or alone.

"They intrigued me tremendously — Charley and Chester — and they influenced me, too. They gave me a little more structure as to what makes this county tick.

"And of course, merchants make it tick, too. I got to know a lot of them. I think I'm suspect to a lot of them because I just don't like their kind of business moving into the county.

"But I have centered on one merchant here, an 'outsider,' Al Johnson, the restaurateur in Sister Bay. Al has become a friend and his place has become my 'Chicago-type' coffee shop, where I can go every morning and read the paper and meet friends. Coffee and gossip, the whole thing. I can visit Al's every morning and have an identity with 'city life.'

"Al Johnson fascinated me because he was a businessman well aware of the profit motive, well aware of what his product was — and this goes for his wife, Ingrid, too — yet with a fine sense of limits.

"Filling the country with ugly billboards, no. That was wrong and Al was well aware of that. His Scandinavian design is in keeping with the north woods. He continues to renovate and there isn't a hint of ugliness in any of the structures he has built.

"Granted, some people take him to task for putting live goats up on the sod roof and I'm sure that had a profit angle to it. After all, they did it in the Scandinavian countries and he knew it would attract people here, and it has. But I'd certainly rather have a goat on the roof in Sister Bay than another condo in Egg Harbor.

"The county is changing, the county is going. I haven't sold any land to the devel-

opers but I'm aware — and it's an incredible irony — that my Door books have helped promote tourism. I'm guilty, too, because a lot of the Door books are bought by a lot of people who want to come in here and screw the thing up.

"I even got a call from a guy putting up a condo who said, 'How are you, blah, blah, blah, and, you know, I put a copy of your book in every condo!'

"I think you have to love this landscape if

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you want to save it. Otherwise, you are going to lose it. More and more now, you have the feeling up here that the average native, the local, will cash in on the land. It's already happening and in some ways, you can't deny it to them. They've had it rough all their lives. They've got 40 acres of cherries that they've never been able to make a dollar on and if they can sell off that land at so much an acre for 5-acre lots — well, they would do it now. They could sell and then they, too, could spend their winters in Florida.

"How do you talk to people? 'Hey! The county is going. What are we going to keep? Do we keep anything?'

"I'm afraid that for the overwhelming majority it's, 'Let's cash it in because even if I cash mine in, there's going to be enough here, enough left.'

"But of course there won't be. If everybody thinks that way, there won't be. That's what the role of the writer is: to point that out, to keep your eyes open and to point out what's happening.

"I guess what continues to fascinate me about this place — and I'm speaking now as a writer who lives here — is that after three books and all the years of living in it, I'm still not able to really define the place. Water defines some of it, but not all. The light here is different because of the water that surrounds everything, but that's not all of it either.

"There is a spiritual aspect to Door County. When you try to write what Door County is about, it's about that — a spiritual aspect.

"It's that mystery which is all-compelling and if anything holds me here — and could continue to hold me here — it would be that.

"But what is happening out there right now is destroying that mystery." ■