

Robert E. Gard

“I love the things that are free and wild . . .”

I never used to think of Bob Gard as an outdoors writer. Like everyone else, I used to think of him as a poet and a playwright and a book writer and the founder of the Wisconsin Idea Theatre and the father of all regional writing and the professor who looked like Abraham Lincoln.

In the Olden Days, the Wisconsin Idea Theatre was just Bob Gard and Ed Kamarck and they were stuck away under the east stands at Camp Randall and left alone to work on their projects in peace.

I used to hang out there a lot, and it was not a little exciting to know that while the coaches were yelling and the football players were being yelled at, deep in the bowels of the stadium, *secret work* was going on.

It was like Enrico Fermi and friends at the University of Chicago squash courts developing the A-bomb. It was like Kelly Johnson and his Skunkworks team at Boeing developing the U-2. It was like watching something being born right under your nose.

What was being born of course, was the Wisconsin Idea Theatre, a particular point of view, shaped by the soil here, and the people here, and shaped by Bob Gard as well.

“I love the things that are free and wild,” Bob Gard wrote in *The Only Place We Live*. “I’ve hunted deer. But I never liked it very much when they were slaughtered. I love the wild, free creatures, and think of them as hungry and cold and warm and free and fearful and peaceful: about the same as I myself do and feel.”

It was Bob Gard’s book, *Wild Goose Marsh*, with photographs by Edgar G. Mueller that got me to regarding Bob Gard as an outdoors writer. *Wild Goose Marsh* was published by Wisconsin House and they could bring it out again every November as far as

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I’m concerned. It’s about the world-famous Horicon Marsh and the great goose flights that come through there in the Spring and in the Fall.

We see the Marsh through the eyes of “Joe Malone” and here’s Gard to explain who Joe is:

“When I began to create a character who cared so much about the wetlands that his whole life revolved around them, I found that I was probably thinking about a number of individuals who loved the marsh and lived it every day . . . Joe Malone represents all of them; he is really the essence of men like Bill Field, Bill Roebe, George Hall, Barnie Wanie, Franklin Burrow, Lee Burrow, Willard Firehammer, John Strook, Leo Gehrke, Frank Bossman, Adam Port, Curley Radke, Ed Lechner, Dr. John Karsten, Lester Mieske, George Spettel, Bill Missling and Judge Clarence Traeger.”

Now, here’s Joe Malone to explain who Bob Gard is:

“Among the great flock in fall, Joe felt the poetry overwhelm him, even now. Thrill was too calm a word for what happened. He only knew that once in a while, on a late fall evening before freeze, when the sun is low and seems to be sinking into a misty world of its

own, the marsh is lighted by a wondrous shaft of light which strikes suddenly across the ditches and comes to the very heart of the looker. Then the feeling of the wild all comes back again, and the primitive people are there and the drum of wings in the whole sky is there. It isn’t difficult for the wilderness to be recaptured at evening; it is a question of sky and lighting and the mind of man which expands into eons of past time if the conditions for such expansion are right.

“Thinking of everything that had happened that was seemingly wrong in the crowded white man’s world, Joe wondered what the marsh would be like if the Indians had been able to remain, in an era not at all like the present. He didn’t want to admit it, but maybe things would have gone better. But the Indians were gone forever, though occasionally Joe saw a few up on the highway watching the Canada geese. When he saw them, he wondered what they were thinking — whether they still had a concept of what the great marsh had once meant in the culture of their ancestors. Like the Canada geese who would forget if the traditions of their migration were broken, he guessed the tradition of the Indians was permanently fractured, if not lost . . . Joe wished that the Indians hadn’t gone away, for they belonged in the marsh and were naturally a part of it in the same way the birds and animals were a part of it. There was nothing artificial in the way they reacted, or the needs they fulfilled.

“Joe guessed that the way birds behaved and looked had something to do with the way he felt about a reality of God. He didn’t know for sure that there was a God; about all he knew was that he appreciated the way things were. If the birds didn’t behave the way they did, didn’t look the way they did in flight; if the marsh didn’t appear in its many changing guises; if the sky did not change; if there were not insects

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behaving the way they did; if he could not see the emergence of leaves, of spears of growth through the soil; if he did not sense the rooting of insects and birds and animals to their cycles, and to their homes, their environments, then his view and appreciation of things would be diminished. In the morning he was content to wait and to listen. It was as though there might be a thousand gods, or one. It really didn't matter, since everything was of the same fabric

of being a part of, of liking, of silently accepting.

"Well, the geese were certainly part of the many-sided God that Joe thought he was beginning to understand . . .

"But when Joe was indoors and was asked to put his mind upon a God that existed as an overriding Being above all, apart, and still a part of, determining the way things were and the way birds looked in the sky, he found this hard to understand. He could, as on this

morning, alone, quite well understand the many, many expressions of God, but God to him didn't belong in a human dwelling, or a habitation created for Him . . . Joe guessed that he had created his own church in the marsh, and that by coming out on an early morning, he was, in a way, coming out to worship and to celebrate . . ."

To name a theatre after Bob Gard is no small thing. But Bob Gard truly deserves the whole, big marsh. ■