

August Derleth Remembered

He captured Wisconsin as few others have

It's almost 10 years since August Derleth died, and to mark the occasion, the University of Wisconsin-Baraboo is putting on a two-day program, October 10 and 11, at the Madison Street School in Sauk City.

The program is called "August Derleth Remembered," and taking part will be such Derleth fans and friends as poet Edna Meudt; Professor Robert E. Gard; Robert Weinberg, the associate publisher of *Weird Tales Magazine* and former Madison Mayor Bill Dyke.

August Derleth noted in his book *Walden West* that quite early in life, he fell into the habit of making a daily excursion each evening into the bottomlands of the Wisconsin River — "the marshes" — walking along the tracks of the Milwaukee Road toward Mazomanie for a distance of two miles or so and back. Sometimes he walked by way of the bridges over the west channel and the back river or dwindling east channel of the Wisconsin, sometimes by way of the highway nearby, sometimes following the east shore of the Wisconsin to the railroad embankment at the east end of the back river bridge. The tracks led through lowland areas for some miles east of the Wisconsin, lowland that was a rewarding diversity of woods, sloughs, meadows and marshland . . .

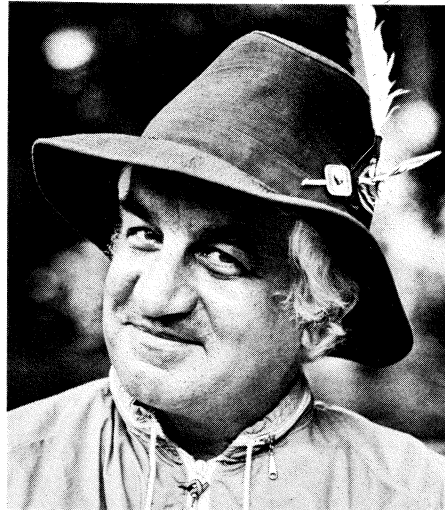
"It was a country teeming with wild-life," he wrote. "When first I walked there, I had little conception of the vast diversity of nature. I went at first to get a little away from myself and the occupations of the day; but soon a normal curiosity got the better of me, and I went quite frankly to learn, a slow process by the method of trial and error."

There were errors, he admitted, many of them.

The first time he heard spring peepers, he thought birds made "that fluted choir."

He originally identified the song sparrow as the vesper sparrow; it was not

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until years later that he learned how similar their songs might be. For an even longer time, he made the "absurd error — for lack of seeing them and of any other method of identification" — of thinking the trilling of the toad the voice of the tree frog. And for a little while after getting a glimpse of the first beaver to invade the Sac Prairie country in over six decades, he thought it was an overgrown muskrat; its tail, however, was not visible during that time and the hour was dusk.

"In this haven of birds and frogs and lesser beasts," he confessed, "I walked the evenings away, year on year, except when mosquitoes plagued me too much or if the cold became too intense."

In the process, he captured a Wisconsin caught only by the likes of Sigurd Olson, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Gordon MacQuarrie, Mel Ellis and Robert E. Gard. Indeed, August Derleth captured nature in a way that would have been pleasing to Henry David Thoreau himself, preeminent in the Derleth pantheon of patron saints.

"I wished to live deliberately," Thoreau set down in *Walden*, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover

that I had not lived."

To sample the seasons with Derleth is to taste Wisconsin:

- It begins with one chill, uncertain note, a hesitant fluting on some chill, uncertain night in March or April, followed by another note, and another, until at least a hundred invisible throats are pulsing with the piping of peepers or the grating rattle of cricket frogs praising the spring evenings from a hundred tussocks of grass, from scores of hidden pools.

- Nothing more arresting comes out of the woods of a summer night than the song of the peewee . . . it speaks for the woods, it speaks for all the wild earth, asking over and over for man to come in, to come back to that primitive intimacy with the earth and the sky, with brooks and trees and hills . . . Peewee, pe-wee . . . Come in, come in, it says. Be not afraid . . .

- The essence of autumn is in the soft October evenings . . . echoing with the honking of geese flying south, following the great bend of the Wisconsin at Sac Prairie . . . Something is in such evenings that reaches far back into the ancestry of mankind and forges a link to today and tomorrow . . .

- If there is one winter voice informed with wildness, it is the crow's . . . it is as if this proof of the essential wildness were an immutable assurance of life itself, for there is never any dearth of crows — they survive every season, they escape the most dedicated hunter, they return as inevitably as the seasons themselves.

If you plan to attend "August Derleth Remembered," you must pre-register with:

University of Wisconsin-Baraboo
P.O. Box 320
Baraboo, WI 53913

Do attend. Any gathering that gets Bill Dyke and Papa Hambone together on the same program is going to swing a little. ■