

The Literary Club
Memorial for Irvine H. “Dusty” Anderson
April 30, 2018
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Joe Dehner was the co-conspirator with input and editing on this Memorial for Irvine H. “Dusty” Anderson. What follows is based largely on Dusty’s Literary Club papers that are available on the club web site.

Dusty Anderson was born in 1928 in Natchez, Mississippi, into a family with deep roots in the South. By the time he died in 2018 at age 89, there were still traces of a soft Mississippi accent in his speech, and a clear view of how to behave as a gentleman. He was a member of The Literary Club for over 20 years until disabling diabetes struck. Over two decades he gave seven papers – among the most well researched and annotated of any in the Club.

It is hard to describe Dusty’s career, except that it worked for him. His first paper in 1993 with trademark Anderson literary hyperbole compared his life to the Parsifal myth – man in search of the Holy Grail discovers his true meaning in life. A stretch, but his career took him to Lieutenant Commander in Naval Air Intelligence – three words that don’t seem to go together well, Employee Relations manager at GE, PhD in American Diplomatic History, Professor at the Raymond Walters campus of UC, and author of four books – one nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Woven through this journey was his study for the common thread that connected the world’s major religions. Not sure that Dusty grasped the Holy Grail, but he certainly did search for, and I think discovered, his meaning in life.

Although most of his papers dealt with the complexities of the history, religion, and politics of what we call the Middle East, one paper about his family revealed the kind of moral dilemma that occupied his inquiring mind. The paper focused on his great, great, grandfather – I think I got that right –, David Hunt, who was a very successful business man in Mississippi. By the time of the Civil War, also known in much of the South as “The Lost Cause.” David Hunt had amassed a huge fortune of 26 plantations built on his Presbyterian foundation of self-sufficiency supported by 1,700 slaves. The family also owned large sections of downtown Cincinnati including the blocks containing Christ Church Cathedral, the Queen City Club, and maybe the P&G headquarters. Dusty’s relative was a beneficent master and was reportedly kind to his slaves – but slaves they were, bought and sold. The result of the “Lost Cause” was that the Hunts lost everything due to the collapse of King Cotton and the Union’s seizure of family property in the North. Now comes Dusty’s dilemma. Much of the property claimed by the Union from people living in the South had been found to be illegally obtained and could be reclaimed. He started a rigorous review of courthouse records and, for a time, thought that he was heir to valuable Cincinnati property. The rub is that very likely the property was acquired by profits from the backs of 1,700 slaves. Ruminations about this moral conundrum were ended when more records were found that verified that earlier family members had already cashed out, and the property had been sold decades earlier. He did not elucidate on how he might have handled this wealth, except that the internal debate fit his earlier view of the quest for life answers – Parsifal or Dusty.

How to summarize his other papers is my own dilemma. The papers are rich with the history of a very important region of the world. But how to capture a paper that starts with a quote from the earliest known written literature about 2800 BCE honoring Gilgamesh, King of Uruk? Quotes translated from the original Akkadian language are hard to summarize for you. Or the history of Iran starting with a hero revered even today, Cyrus the Great, the ruler of all of Persia in 550 BCE. Or the history of what is now Saudi Arabia starting with the 18th century leader Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd al-Rahman Al Faisal Al Sa'ud and winding through the oil politics of the 20th century. Or the story of the British officer Charles Gordon, a leader who affected Egyptian affairs in the 19th century well before Lawrence. Yes, Dusty had an eye and a passion for an area shaped by a long history that includes such well known villains as Colonial England, the United States, the oil industry, the CIA, and each tribe or warlord of a heavily contested region. The problem with the complexity of history is it is complex. His plea was always to try to understand the history and motivations of a culture as a way to be informed about how to co-exist with them today.

Dusty considered himself a Presbyterian before Noah but would quote the Gilgamesh saga which included a great flood narrative well before the Noah story was written. During my first shared experience with him on the Session of a local Presbyterian Church, Dusty turned me on to the writings of Thomas Merton – a Roman Catholic theologian and Trappist monk, and he shared his definitive library of books by and about Merton. Up until late in his life, Dusty took annual retreats to Merton's home, the Abbey of Gethsemani near Elizabethtown, KY. He used these days as way to keep himself centered and help to understand where he stood on his quest for what represented the Holy Grail to him.

Perhaps the one theme that I would have you remember about Dusty, his papers, and his life, is that all the world's people have value to each other regardless of religion, economy, or culture. Dusty reminded us that all three religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – worship the same God - Yahweh, Allah, or Lord. All stem from the same root - a man called Abraham, and the stories of God's relationship with man in the Bible and Koran basically start with Abraham. Today, the more extreme views of each religion often dominate headlines, now amplified by the media choices of our day, causing a greater separation and danger to peace. Dusty quoted a Tibetan greeting as a way to start a dialog: "By which of the world's great paths do you find your way to God?" Perhaps he aimed in a final act of his quest to counter the divisions by asking that memorials in his memory go to Oasis of Peace, a group dedicated to Jewish/Palestinian peace.

Dusty is missed by his wife, Donna, and their family. He is certainly missed at The Literary Club where he brought real meaning to being a Literarian.