

## RECOLLECTIONS OF FROST

I first met Robert Frost in Ripton, Vermont in the summer of 1943. I was 13 and had just finished the eighth grade at Walnut Hills High School. My father was 46 and Frost was 69.

I date that meeting by a page from my autograph book upon which Frost wrote a couplet:

“We dance around in a ring and suppose  
But the secret sits in the middle and knows.”

The story of how my parents met Frost is well known. While a student at Smith College in 1926, my mother heard Frost speak. When she learned that Frost was coming to Cincinnati on November 1, 1938 (FN Some say it was 1939) to address the Ohio Valley Poetry Society and “say his poems,” she insisted that my father accompany her to the lecture. Initially my father declined. “Edward Arlington Robinson is my favorite poet,” he responded. “How far can anyone spread his affections. I have no intentions of deserting Robinson,” he said.

According to my mother, she insisted that his position was nonsense, and he was going to hear Frost. She won, of course, and my father sat in the front row at the old Gibson Hotel ballroom so he could study the poet.

As the reading progressed, my father noticed that Frost was studying him. In addition to being a rabbi my father was a poet and a writer. He was a member of The Literary Club. After the lecture, my parents joined a group crowded around Frost. He looked at my father and said “I know all about you; why don’t you come to the Bread Loaf Writers Conference in Middlebury, Vermont?”

Founded in 1926, it is the oldest writers’ conference in the United States. Noted authors who attended in addition to Frost, were John Gardner, Ralph Ellison, John Irving, Saul Bellow, John Ciardi, Toni Morrison, and Norman Mailer.

World War II delayed my parents trip to Vermont until the summer of 1942 or 1943. That first summer, they stayed in a dormitory room on the Bread Loaf campus. Bread Loaf is located half way up the mountain from East Middlebury, about seven or eight miles from Middlebury itself. It is in the mountain town of Ripton which consists of a country store, a small church and a community hall. Founded in 1926 as an inn, Bread Loaf is the summer home of the Middlebury College English school which sponsors the Writers’ Conference. The name Bread Loaf is derived from a loafish-shaped mountain that hovers over the meadow. Upon driving half

way up the mountain, the winding ascending road suddenly bursts onto a vast open plateau-meadow in the mountains where the summer school is located.

Situated over several acres, the inn contains a dormitory, a small theater used for plays and lectures, a library, large barn used as a recreational hall, two clay tennis courts, and an administration building which includes a kitchen and dining hall. Part of the lawn in front of the inn is used as a croquet field. During the latter several weeks of August, the school is the home of the Writers' Conference, to which aspiring writers are invited and, more renowned authors and poets are requested to teach and lecture. The Victorian Inn was willed to Middlebury College in 1915 by Joseph Battell, an heirless Vermonter with literary aspirations.

As a young poet Frost experienced a number of tragedies to his family. His wife, Elinor died of a heart attack in 1938 in Shaftsbury, Vermont where the couple had been living since 1920.

In 1940, to escape the memories of Elinor's death, Frost purchased the Homer Noble farm as a place to stay while summering in Vermont. The farm is located midway between Ripton and the Bread Loaf campus and consists of a large farmhouse and a small cabin. It is a half mile up the mountain from a 100 year old schoolhouse cabin which my parents initially leased for the summer and then purchased in 1949. The farmhouse was occupied by Kathleen Morrison, and her husband Ted, a Harvard professor. Kay became Frost's secretary after the death of his wife. Frost spent the summers in the small log cabin located up the hill from the farmhouse.

I remember in 1945 being with my parents at the Schoolhouse when Frost came to visit. I can date that visit by an inscription in my copy of his Collected Poems in which he wrote "To David, from his friend Robert Frost at Ripton Vermont in 1945". Frost had called my father to tell him he wanted to come over and read something to him. I sat spellbound while Frost read the poem play, "The Masque of Reason".

The poem is about Job and his wife and a dialogue with God. Undoubtedly Frost chose to read the poem to my father prior to its publication because of my father's knowledge of Job, about whom he had written a published commentary. According to my father, when Frost completed his reading, my father suggested that he could end the poem by saying "Here endeth Chapter Forty-Three of Job." When the poem was published, sure enough, his line had been added.

While, as a 15 year old, I did not fully understand Frost's poem, I was in awe of this wonderfully warm man with a gentle and mesmerizing voice. On several occasions I accompanied my father to the Frost cabin. Again I would sit quietly while he read his poems to us.

Clearly, an historic event for my father and his congregation, Rockdale Temple, was in October of 1946, when Frost was a dinner guest in our home prior to speaking at the University of Cincinnati. I was then a senior in high school. The conversation between Frost and my father got around to religion. My father mentioned to Frost that he had to preach the next morning because it was the Feast of Tabernacles, or Succoth. Frost stated that he had once preached in the Unitarian church of a friend. My father replied that Frost had never preached for him. Frost answered, "You never asked me." My father then extended an invitation to Frost to preach the next morning at Rockdale Temple. Frost accepted and requested that we take him to his hotel so he could prepare his text. For his breakfast next morning, he asked my mother for two raw eggs which he put in his briefcase. "He coddled them in warm water," she said.

The next day, Thursday, October 10, 1946, Frost delivered his sermon. Several points remain memorable. First, Frost quoted the Roman poet, Ennius, who "said that courage was not the greatest of all virtues...The greatest virtue was wisdom," because "it was rarer...than courage...Many bad men," he said, "have been brave," but "it is hard to pay tribute to them when they are too bad...But wisdom is better than bravery."

Secondly, some critics questioned whether or not Frost was religious. In his sermon, Frost said, "Now religion always seems to me to come round to something beyond wisdom. It is a straining of the spirit forward to a wisdom beyond wisdom." Unfortunately, Lawrence Thompson's, Frost's biographer, pictured him as a "monster" in his 1966 publication. As my father frequently pointed out, anyone who had experienced the extreme hardships endured by Frost would not have questioned his religiosity as so profoundly expressed in his sermon.

Frost's father died of tuberculosis when the poet was eleven. His first son died of cholera at age three. A daughter, Elinor Bettina, died when she was one day old. Another daughter, Marjorie died in 1934. As stated previously, his wife, also called Elinor, died of a heart attack in 1938. In 1940, his son Carol, committed suicide, and another daughter, Irma was admitted to a State Hospital in Concord, New Hampshire. The parallel to Job is indeed clear.

In August, 1949, after spending eight weeks as a camp counselor in Maine, I joined my parents at the schoolhouse in Ripton. On this occasion Frost wrote in my copy of his Complete Poems, “To David Reichert from another fan who has to spend hours throwing a ball at a wall or on to a roof to satisfy his nature namely Robert Frost”. He appended an asterisk which read, “See page 152”.

The footnote to page 152 directed me to “Birches”, arguably his most well know poem. It states in part:

“I should prefer to have some boy bend them (referring to the birches)  
As he went out and in to fetch the cows-  
Some boy to far from town to learn baseball,  
Whose only play was what he found himself,  
Summer or winter, and could play alone.”

On April, 10, 1959, Miami University conferred on Frost an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. I remember driving to Oxford with my parents to attend the ceremony. Frost was a friend of Walter Havighurst, a nationally known novelist and member of the Miami University faculty. (Havighurst was an occasional guest at The Literary Club). That evening several dozen students crowded into the Havighurst living room to converse with Frost. It seemed that every available space including the floor was occupied. The session lasted late into the evening. Those in attendance were clearly fascinated and charmed by Frost.

My wife and I were married in May, 1959. That summer, after my parents returned to Cincinnati from their vacation in Vermont, my wife and I traveled to Vermont. It was her first trip to the schoolhouse. Having the cottage to ourselves was magical.

Shortly after we arrived we found in our rural mailbox a hand written note addressed to us. It was from Kay Morrison, Frost’s secretary and friend. The note, dated July 7, said, “Can you come for drinks Saturday evening at about six? Mr. Frost would like to take you out for dinner afterwards (in your car.)...Looking forward to seeing you. Sincerely Kathleen Morrison.”

Translated, this meant that Marilyn and I could take Frost out to dinner. That Saturday evening, my wife and I went to the Morrison’s home at the Homer Noble farm. After drinks we escorted Frost to the Brandon Inn, several miles away.

Needless to say just the two of us spent an unforgettable evening with him. Marilyn made notes of our conversation but, unfortunately, those notes have been lost. After dinner we returned to his farm and dropped him at the base of the path that led past an apple orchard to his

cabin. He declined our offer to escort him, and together with only his flashlight, made his way in the darkness up the hill to his cabin. It truly was a night we shall never forget.

While I can not date the following it may have been during that July meeting with Frost that he inscribed in my copy of his Collected Poems the following:

“Robert Frost  
“For David and Marilyn Reichert’s marriage  
with Riptonian blessings”

Then, in his own hand, he copied his 1913 poem entitled “The Pasture”:

“I’m going out to clean the pasture spring  
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away  
And wait to watch the water clear I may.  
I shan’t be gone long. – You come too

“I’m going out to fetch the little calf  
That’s standing by the mother. It’s so young  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I shan’t be long. – You come too.”

Peter J. Stanlis, Distinguished Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Rockford College, asserts, that the metaphysical line “and wait to watch the water clear” refers poetically to humanity’s central question. He also feels that the ending lines “you come to” is an invitation to his wife, friends and the general public to share in his long journey as a poet.

On April 2, 1960 of the following spring, the Hebrew Union College bestowed on Frost the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. My father was his sponsor. I can’t remember for certain, but it seems to me that while in Cincinnati, he was a guest in our home. Following the ceremony during which he was hooded, he read a number of poems from his book of Collected Poems. Frost did not have a copy of his book with him, so he borrowed mine.

Frost tore some blank paper into narrow strips and inserted them into his book as page markers. For many years I maintained my copy of the book with his marking slips intact, but, unfortunately, over the years, the slips have been lost.

Frost did, however inscribe the following in the copy of the book from which he had read:

“Ownership confirmed to David April 2 196(0) day of my honors at Hebrew Union College and renewed friendship with the family.” This was the same book in which in August of

1949 he had inscribed the reference to his poem “Birches” where he alluded to hours spent throwing a ball on to a roof to satisfy one’s nature.

The April 1960 visit to Cincinnati also was memorable because my father invited Frost to attend The Literary Club. In the Club’s guest book Frost wrote:

“I dared not be radical when young  
For fear of becoming conservative when old.”

That was Frost’s last visit to Cincinnati. I can’t remember if I subsequently saw him in Vermont in the summers of 1961 and 1962. He died January 29, 1963 at age 88.

David Reichert ©2011  
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