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Kansas Memories

WILFRED MARTENS

My family roots are in Europe; my roots in the United States are in Kansas. When Grandfather immigrated to America he chose Kansas as his new home and joined other immigrant families in learning how to tame the prairies for farming. At age sixty three his final temporal resting place is in the Kansas earth of the Buhler Cemetery.

My father was born in a sod house on the prairie and spent his boyhood years in the sunflower state. He left as a young man to seek his fortune in the west.

In my teen years while growing up on a farm in Central California I often heard my father tell stories of the waves of buffalo grass, of the ubiquitous clusters of sunflowers, of those terrifying storms (never referred to as merely “rain” or “snow”), of the state motto and seal, of the flint hills, of the Turkey Red wheat. When I left home to attend college it seemed predetermined that I would end up in Kansas. When I first arrived at Tabor College in Hillsboro it was like reuniting with an old friend, as if I had already been introduced to the Midwest culture.

It may seem inappropriate to express these memories of Kansas in a “foreign” form such as haiku. After all, Kansas is the heartbeat of America, its roots reaching deep in patriotism and religious faith—God and country—endless prairies where buffalo roamed freely. In contrast, haiku is an ancient, tightly-woven, “imported” fixed form of 17 syllables arranged in three lines of 5-7-5, borrowed from Japan.

The power and energy of a poem is not determined by its length or number of words. Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that “poetry teaches the enormous force of a few words.” In the mists of antiquity, Japanese poets recognized the power of emotion, the fragility of memory, and the delight of understatement. From these qualities emerged the haiku.

Aspects of haiku may prove its relevance as a container for these Kansas memories. Traditional haiku expresses an emotion associated with a

season, either explicitly or implicitly. Similarly, a true Kansan recognizes how dependent life is upon the seasons, and will introduce most conversations with comments about the weather. The variety of weather patterns of the central states is fertile soil for poets.

The immigrant Mennonite lived in a concrete world—horse and plow, butter and cheese, hammer and nail, borscht and zwiebach—but was always aware of the mystery of the spiritual—Bible and church, prayer and fasting, faith and piety. The concrete and the spiritual were an integral part of daily life, side by side. Traditional haiku usually includes two concrete objects or images, often in the first and third lines, which prompt an emotion associated with that season. The best haiku moves the reader from emotion to reflection to spiritual insight. It is a key which unlocks memory. Like the ripples of a stone cast into a pond, it initiates a series of thoughts which expand to give the reader greater insights into self and the world. Such a tiny structure with such ambitious intentions!

Territory

Parched buffalo grass,
Cottonwoods in dry creek beds,
Road signs for travelers.

Sunflower

Dancer of prairies,
Yellow rays touched by breezes,
Golden sunflower.

Turkey Red Wheat

Each grain picked with care,
Seeds of gold on a journey,
Hard Turkey Red wheat.

Wind

Capricious movement,
Fickle puff of Kansas air,
Breeze, gust, gale, twister.

Great Seal

Settlers search for stars,
Ad Astra per Aspera.*
Sun bakes the black earth.

*Kansas state motto: To the stars through difficulty.

My years as a student at Tabor College were enriched by a faculty member who served as my adviser, or more significantly, as my mentor. Wesley Prieb was an English professor who was an ideal example of a Midwesterner. Born, educated, baptized, and married in Kansas, he served as a model for many students, particularly his English majors.

At a time when the church had a “vertical” career scale for students with Bible majors, prospective pastors, and future missionaries at the top, Professor Prieb preached a “horizontal” scale which minimized career choice and placed an emphasis on lifestyle and values. Thus, he gave future English teachers (as well as future sociologists, psychologists, physicians, and others) incentive to teach as mission, as service and ministry, and as God’s messenger who brings good news, hope, and encouragement to students.

He was also a strong example of integrating faith and learning. He loved good literature and was energized as he taught the novels of Hawthorne and Melville, the poetry of Sandburg and Whitman, the short stories of Crane and Hemingway, and the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. To understand God’s world one gains from the insights provided by music, literature, paintings, poetry, the arts.

When Professor Prieb retired in 1990, a celebration was held to honor his forty-some years with Tabor. As my personal tribute to my former

mentor, and later colleague when we both were English professors at M.B. colleges, I wrote a poem and sent it to the dean of the faculty, Dr Stanley Clark, who read it at the May 3, 1991, event. A few days later I received a letter from Wes expressing appreciation for the gesture.

Last Friday, May 3, 1991, Dean Clark read a poem, written by you, at the annual retirement dinner, in my honor. What a surprise. Your memories triggered a lot of flashbacks as we reminisced about the ancient history of Tabor College. My pilgrimage in this world started just 14 years after the college was founded in 1908. I was born on a farm about five miles southwest of Hillsboro in 1922. The hard reality is that my lifespan is nearly as close to the beginnings of Tabor as it is to the present institution. Sitting in the retirement rocking chair—a gift from the college—I find myself reflecting much about the early years. Somehow I remember the first ten years of teaching more clearly than the last thirty. I can still remember you sitting in a literature class, always ready to respond to questions I raised.

Wilfred, thanks for the poetic masterpiece. It was clearly the winning commentary during the evening. Everybody seemed to identify with your clever analysis of my teaching style. You really helped me enjoy the evening. Too often tributes sound like obituaries. I had a fear that I might get pushed too close to the edge of the grave. You gave us a chance to breathe the fresh air of life—with its tears and laughter—with your charming poetic style. I cherish your tribute in a special way because we have traveled a common road. Working with you on the M.B. Publications Committee was a good experience. And I remember the good times we spent together in your home visiting and discussing world wide issues

Thanks again for enriching my life.

Sincerely,

Wes

Wesley Prieb died on October 8, 1997. The stroke that was to take his life happened as he was still serving the college he loved, unlocking doors early in the morning.

Literature Class

(For Wes Prieb on his retirement, May 1991)

Those winter mornings
we'd grab our red American lit books
(mine was badly warped from rain damage),
shuffle up the worn stairs to the second floor
and enter the drab classroom; often
a cold rain pelted the windows.
The top branches of the elms
were rigid against the gray sky;
we could never see the whole tree
from our desks rooted to the floor.

The lesson began, subdued and calm,
like the first raindrops of a storm.
Then the images appeared
like clouds blown by the wind.
They tumbled from our textbooks and
filled the bare room.
We looked beyond the windows
to the world outside—
Thoreau gazing across Walden Pond,
Melville's white whale breaching the waves,
Bryant's waterfowl, darting, soaring,
Hawthorne's grim preacher, bowed with guilt,
Whitman's lilacs, bent with grief,
Dickinson's buzzing fly,
Frost's snowy woods and stone fences—
we saw them all, heard them all.
He gave breath to dormant words,
wings to sonnets,
life to flat characters.

When class ended
 it seemed as if a rainbow
 had broken through the clouds.
 Like drops of rain melted together
 we flowed down the stairs to our lockers.
 Things could fit together, we discovered,
 faith and firefly,
 God and goldenrod,
 church and chestnut—
 He helped us see life whole.

For a number of years during the 1970s and 1980s I served on the United States Mennonite Brethren Board of Publications. The board usually met twice each year; most of the meetings were in Hillsboro. Three of us normally set the agenda and occasionally met between sessions. Wesley Prieb served as chair, I was vice chair, and Warren Deckert was secretary. The trio had something in common. We taught at denominationally—supported colleges: Wes at Tabor and I at Pacific. Warren was a faculty member of the journalism department at Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas, a Methodist institution. Our exec sessions were always filled with animated conversation that roamed widely; however, we always managed to prepare the agenda and complete the business at hand.

On one occasion Warren encouraged me to come a couple of days prior to the board meeting and stay with him at his home in Baldwin City. During that time I experienced his passion for history, particularly of the area where he lived and taught. His training in journalism and his skill of turning historical data into a vibrant story made him the ideal guide as we toured eastern Kansas.

A few weeks later I was shocked to receive the news that on February 21, 1981, Warren was killed in a head-on collision on US 56 south of Olathe. He was 32 years old.

Warren

(1949-1981)

At the top of each rise
we watched the flint hills nudge the horizon;
the dry bluestem grasses stirred listlessly
in the heatwaves of July,
the only respite an occasional pond
lined with thirsty cottonwoods.
Lots of history here, you declared,
Santa Fe trail, Osage Indians, pioneers,
ancient skirmishes marked
by a bronze plaque.

Like a miner unearthing precious nuggets
you discovered treasures in each village
on our tour—
an 1889 courthouse, aging with dignity;
a local drug store serving soft drinks
with a straw in the bottle;
John Brown's creek
a muddy trickle,
nothing like T.S. Eliot's "strong brown god."
Like an old veteran in a tattered uniform
the house which served as your Kansas home
leaned against the fence
of the village cemetery.
We strolled among the headstones
which became our books for the day
as we compared the old volumes with the new editions.

Your village too leaned on history.
 At twilight we stood at Pottawatomie Creek
 while the cicadas buzzed in the elms
 which framed the stone marker.
 It's a historian's eye that captures
 the images of the past,
 but it's a journalist's heart that feels
 the pulse of the present.

Earth, soil, dirt, *terra firma*, sod, land It comes with many names, characteristics, and features. Whatever we call it, soil has been an integral part of Mennonite identity. Originally they were known as land-reclaimers, then landowners, farmers. Even today, when few are farmers and many are city dwellers, when concrete and asphalt define out boundaries, Mennonite physicians, lawyers, professors, business people, health workers, pastors, teachers still seek that mystical union with soil. For some it is a garden plot or a window box; for others it is a potted plant or a sandbox.

The ruts of wagon wheels are imprinted on the Santa Fe Trail; the outlines of fossils are imprinted in the Chalk Beds of northwestern Kansas; and the dreams of Mennonite immigrants are imprinted in the soils throughout the state, in the adobe, alluvials, clay, loam, and sand; on the hills, prairies, river valleys, and plains.

My first experience with Kansas soil was with Hillsboro clay after a rain. The gumbo turned into adhesive, sticking to shoes, tires, everything. It was a good reminder of the close relationship between soil and human.

Our ancestors turned the soil with horse and plow. Today it is turned with tractor and implement. Although different, it is still an iconic image.

Plowing

He turned and looked down,
watching the plowshare
roll the dark soil
into a furrow
long and deep.

The hard steel
pushed forward,
its face a mirror
polished
by the abrasive earth.

Its face edge
caught the sun's rays
and scattered them
brilliantly
everywhere.

The new furrow
created by the blade
now lay ready
and waiting.

Then, satisfied
that his plow pulled deep
and his furrow lay straight,
he inhaled deeply
the aroma of fresh turned soil,
squinted ahead,
and the sun
touched his leather face.

Many immigrants left their home countries in haste, carrying few possessions. By ship and train they came to the Midwest. They brought with them samovar, mangle, teapot, family Bible, photographs, Kroeger clock—artifacts of immigration. Artifacts are security blankets which dispel the terror of darkness and the unknown. They are the concrete evidence of dreams, of persons and places and events. They link generations. More than antiques, they are reminders of personal relationships and family identity, and also of God's grace and mercy.

Grandmother's Kerosene Lamp

Grandmother's kerosene lamp
stands on my mantel
between an oil painting and a potted plant.
Its chimney, chipped by grandchildren
who love to exchange antiques,
reflects the light from our livingroom lamps.
Its black-tongued wick
curls down into an empty glass bowl
which once provided fuel.

On those occasional stormy evenings
when we sit before our fireplace,
it stares at us with nostalgia;
we wish for a lamp that would spread a warm glow
around the room, night after night.

But we know instead
that when it once provided light
on that Kansas farm
it left an oily film
and the dim flame finally ruined Grandfather's eyes
as he strained to read Scripture
night after night.

It is only important now as a reminder,
not as a source of light.
When a thunderstorm rips off our power,
I reach conveniently for a 6-volt lantern
which responds quickly with white light.
Although it parts the darkness
only where I point,
it is a source of instant incandescence.

As an emergency light
Grandmother's lamp is just too much trouble:
one must remove the chimney,
unscrew the top, fill the bowl with fuel,
light the wick, and replace the chimney.
It is a good symbol, but not a good light.

But then, never once
did those terrible Kansas storms
ever cut off the power
to that kerosene lamp.
It always kept the whole room lighted,
even though dimly.