

A Day at Roundwind: Memorializing Frederick Manfred

by Joseph Lawrence Basile

Ernest Hemingway once urged John Dos Passos to "Remember to get the weather in . . ." because "weather is very important" and, fittingly, Frederick Manfred, even in absentia, got it in this one last time. A crisp breeze steadily asserted itself from the top of the hill at his beloved home, Roundwind, no more appropriately named than on this piquant autumn morning. As dozens upon dozens of friends, colleagues, and neighbors came together with family members and relatives to honor Fred's wishes for a memorial service punctuated by wine, food, music, and congeniality, there was no doubt that this would be no mawkish or mundane ritual.

Small groups clustered in conversation near the potluck area. academics chatted with farmers; writers mingled with business people. Over brightly colored salads and steaming casseroles, cold-cuts and desserts, Fred's former students and colleagues spanning several years were reunited. The tone was animated rather than morose, vibrant in a way that could truly be termed Manfredian.

Beyond the food tables, some individuals strolled around Fred's well-worn writing shack. The modest but sturdy structure, having survived gravity-defying moves and the rigors of the Minnesota climate, was now perched solidly atop the hill, already a monument.

A few wind-blown guests could be seen scanning the horizon, seeking out Blue Mound, the site of Fred's former home, in the distance. Like Thoreau, who proudly declared, "I have traveled a good deal in Concord," Manfred had certainly traveled a good deal in Luverne. Judging from the crowd, comprised of people of all ages and many walks in life, he had manifested that rare ability to relate to each person in a distinctive way that, corny as it might seem, made each feel special, exhilarated, enhanced by the connection.

Space does not permit me to record the charming nuances of each tribute, musical or verbal; after all, the groundswell of testimonials made what I expected to be a two-hour commemoration consume an entire afternoon. Even a bracing rain towards mid-afternoon could not stem the zeal of the group. While some of Fred's celebrants had to leave for other commitments, many adjourned to the coziness of his basement fireplace, continuing the process, long cherished by Fred himself, of acknowledging the value and vitality of the literary life.

If one impression could characterize the impact of the day, it would be that of Manfred as the wearer of many hats: Fred the farm boy with dreams expanding to match his growing physical frame; Fred the brotherly experimenter and prankster; Fred the robust baseball player; Fred the colorful and ever-inquisitive collegian; Fred the vibrant husband; Fred the intriguing father; Fred the explorer of landscapes (physical, intellectual, spiritual); Fred the mentor; Fred the inspirer; Fred the Lover of Ice-Cream, if not "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

A former student invoked the image of Fred, stretched out before his fireplace in his red-stockinged feet, comfortably and animatedly chatting with his students. A long-time friend recalled a conversation with Fred about suicide, emphasizing Fred's telling observation that

he was too curious about life to consider such an alternative, the story serving to confirm the abiding image of Fred as a seeker of knowledge on many levels, a bold defier of narrow specialization, a liver and lover of life.

In the course of the day's disclosures, time seemed on many levels, to become meaningless. Images of Fred from decades past blended seamlessly with images mere weeks old. Minutes became hours without fanfare, as the composite construction of the group's essential Manfred gradually emerged. If "Time," as Thoreau asserted, "is but the stream I go a-fishing in," then this group was certain to catch its fill of Fred, with no license required.

As the rain abated and the evening approached, the last of the visitors were invited by the family to walk along some of Fred's favorite paths. His environment--a world of gentle hills, shade and fruit trees, a lush vegetable garden lovingly tended with ruggedly ancient tools--had served him well for many years, just as he had served it well. Now the visitors retracing the steps of Fred's enthusiastic early-morning walks could see for themselves how this setting could be, for Fred, both stimulating and soothing. For such saunterers, as well as those unable to accept the family's gracious invitation, Manfred's books provide an ongoing opportunity to traverse the territory which he majestically called "Siouxland." Like Whitman at the end of "Song of Myself," inviting us to look for him in the grass under our feet, Manfred proffers a world of warmth and wonder, limited only by our imaginations and levels of personal energy. Whitman once excused his self-contradictions by proclaiming, "I am large, I contain multitudes." Frederick Manfred may not be described as terribly self-contradictory, but he decidedly, and on many precious levels, was large and contained multitudes. That fact was never more apparent to me than on one extraordinary autumnal day at Roundwind. Manfred's passing, like Whitman's is by no means permanent.

Notes

Hemingway's remarks are from a letter of 1932, quoted in *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, ed. Larry W. Phillips (New York: Scribner's, 1984) 37. The two well-known passages from Thoreau are in *Walden*, and the line from Whitman appears in "Song of Myself." "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is, of course, the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens.

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