

Poetry in Reno: The Brautigan Days

by guest blogger Bernard Mergen

I want to begin by thanking Donnie Curtis for inviting me to contribute to the University of Nevada Reno Special Collections' blog and Anthony Lucero and Paul Swenson who are in the process of making a documentary film on the life of Richard Brautigan, for stimulating my memories of Richard's visit to Reno in the summer of 1956.

Seldom remembered today, Brautigan emerged as one of the most popular poets and fiction writers of the 1960s and 70s, especially on the West Coast, in Japan, and many European countries. In September 1984, after bouts of drinking and depression, Richard died of a self-inflicted gunshot.

Most of my memories of my meeting with Richard may be found in a piece, "Strange Boy," I wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle, January 20, 1985 ("This World," p.20), and I won't repeat much of that article here. A somewhat longer account of Richard in Reno may be found in William "Gatz" Hjortsberg's detailed biography, *Jubilee Hitchhiker: The Life and Times of Richard Brautigan* (Counterpoint, 2012).

My meeting with Richard was the result of his discovery of the University's literary magazine, *Brushfire*, in a bookstore. Although I was only a freshman in 1955-56, I had somehow talked my way into co-editorship with Sandra "Sandy" Newell, UNR's Dorothy Parker. The 1956 volume also included two embarrassingly immature poems by me. This was the 7th year of the magazine's existence and it was struggling. That it still exists I consider a minor miracle and I give my profound thanks to all the editors and contributors who came before and after me.

I guess Richard looked in a phone book to find my address, but he could have found some of the other poets who had work in that issue including Joanne de Longchamps, who remains one of Nevada's most skillful and interesting poets, or William Halberstadt, a young professor of philosophy and talented harpsichordist. More easily he might have contacted other student contributors of stories and poems whose names may still be remembered by some in Reno and the university community: Bruce Bledsoe, Ev Titus, George Mross, and Bill Eaton.

The point is that Reno in 1956 wasn't the "Sahara of the Bozart," to use H.L. Menken's famous put-down of the South. It had a small, but strong, community of publishing poets that included Margaret "Monte" Thornton (the daughter of Reno's famous divorce judge, George Bartlett), Irene Bruce, Dorothy Caffrey, Robert Hume, Gus Bundy, and Harold Witt. I like to imagine how Richard's poetry might have developed if he had stayed in Reno longer and met and talked with some of these wonderful people, and, more importantly responded in his work to the mountains and deserts. I regret not asking for some of his poems to publish in *Brushfire*.

We passed our evenings ducking in and out of the casinos. Underage, I was automatically ejected, while Richard, just 21, was often asked to leave, because, with his long blond hair and bangs, he looked suspicious to the security guards. So we walked and discussed poetry, our mutual admiration of Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and e.e. cummings. Richard opened one of his small cardboard boxes and showed me some of his poems and stories. They were like coded messages, cryptic, mysterious, and engaging.

He left for San Francisco and the struggle to become a writer of note. I returned to the classroom and *Brushfire*, where I learned how to write better poems, how hard it is to be a good editor, and how to sell ads. The Reno business community was incredibly generous. We sold ads to Gray Reid Wright department store, Morrill and Machabee office supplies, The Wolf Den, "The Famous Old Little Waldorf," and many other local businesses. Local attorneys

Clark Guild, Jr., Al Hillard, Nada Novakovich, and Bruce Thompson were regular donors.

Some lessons were painful. In the 1957 issue I allowed an upper-classman I knew to publish a poem that I later learned he plagiarized from Edna St. Vincent Millay. He titled his verse "Cameo Two," and changed "day" to "night," "boat" to "Jag," and "long skirt" to "leather jacket," but most of the 16 lines were identical to Millay's "The Cameo." I was embarrassed, but learned that as editor you need to have read widely and be alert.

George Mross and Dave Lowe took over the editorship in 1958. The prose and poetry got better, more diverse and relevant to place and time. The 1959 issue was larger in size, contained a letter of support from Governor Grant Sawyer, an op-ed by Lucius Beebe on Virginia City, and an appealing mix of serious and humorous writing. Seniors, Bob Morrill and Jim Santini contributed thoughtful essays.

Brushfire in the Brautigan days and those that followed is a kind of time capsule that offers a glimpse of the University evolving from the troubled years of the administration of Minard Stout (1952-57), as revealed in J. Dee Kille's *Academic Freedom Imperiled: The McCarthy Era at the University of Nevada* (University of Nevada Press, 2004), to the joyful, if turbulent, decade of the 1960s. Richard passed through Reno like John the Baptist announcing coming messiahs. When I heard him ask a tired and underpaid waitress at the Mapes Hotel coffee shop for a "Watermelon Milkshake," and saw her scornful glance, I glimpsed the future with its saints and martyrs.