

George A. West: In Memoriam

George A. West joined the faculty of the English Department at South Dakota State University in 1969 and taught there until his retirement in 2000, serving in his last eleven years as head of the department. He received his B.A. from SDSU and his graduate degrees from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, earning his Ph.D. in Medieval English Literature in 1972. In 1983, George took a year's leave of absence to teach English at King Saud University in Abha, Saudi Arabia, and he also received fellowships and grants to study in the U.S. and Canada. Of special value to him were those summers he took groups of teachers to Sinte Gleske University in Mission, South Dakota to attend seminars in Native American culture.

George graduated from Crosier High School in Onamia, Minnesota in 1954 and was a student at Crosier Seminary for the next two years. He served in the Army from 1958 to 1961 (and in the Reserves until 1964), and in 1958 married Wanda Anderson of Bryant, South Dakota. Together they had five children – four daughters and one son. George was devoted to his family and fond of travel, and, thus, every summer he and Wanda would take their children on long camping trips, visiting 36 states and Canada by the time their youngest child left for college. In retirement, he and Wanda continued to travel, taking trips to England and Ireland, and pursued their interest in genealogy, traveling extensively in the U.S. to research their family histories.

In both his personal and professional lives, George was generous of his time and talents, patient and kind, and possessed of a wry sense of humor. In all regards, he was a loving companion to his family and great company to his friends.

George was born in Milbank, South Dakota on August 9, 1936 and died, while hospitalized, in Omaha, Nebraska on April 22, 2019.

West by George West: A Remembrance

Michael Keller

The first time I met George West, he offered me a job—the only job I've had since. Mid-interview, he tore a sheet from a small notepad, scratched out a number, and slid the sheet toward me across his desk: \$28,133 to teach five classes per year and to coordinate the composition program. I was a little giddy. At the time, I was making \$18,000 to teach eight at Illinois State. Summoning what professional reserve I could, I asked when he would need a decision. "Oh," he said, "how about in a week?"

I flew home that afternoon and the following night celebrated with friends. George called the next morning, far short of a week, saying simply, "Well, we'd like to know." I accepted, happily, though asked whether he might bump the salary some. "How much?" Had I been clear-headed and sober, I would've asked for 30, but said 29 instead. "Let me check with the dean." The call back, in the affirmative, came but minutes later. I could've asked for 30.

Everyone says it of the past, but truly when I joined the faculty in August of 1993, it was a simpler time. The department had no access to internet or email. Texting was not yet a thing. Students and colleagues called on one's office phone or simply dropped by. A job offer could come mid-interview on a scrap of paper. Doubtless the institution's administrative apparatus extended well beyond the man sitting before me, but it didn't seem to. So direct, plain-spoken, genuine, and welcoming was George that he became for me the face of the place. Whatever interview jitters I might have had seemed self-indulgent, even downright silly.

In 1993, I was the youngest faculty member in the department; when other members of the department past and present and I bid George farewell last April, I was the oldest. Hardly could I have known at that first meeting that gentle, gentlemanly George West of Big Stone City, South Dakota would dramatically alter the course of my life. Indeed, George was one of the chief reasons I came; and he and his wife, Wanda, who was my staff assistant for seven years, were chief among the reasons this kid from Chicago stayed.

A month into my first semester, George and I drove to the School of Mines for what was the initial meeting of the English Discipline Council, a gathering of department heads and coordinators of composition from the six regental universities. Literary theory was still news—and not just in the academy. In ways I suspect our students today would find hard to believe, the response to theory, for or against—deconstruction, in particular—caused a stir not just in department meetings but in the culture at large and was widely covered in the mainstream press. Even minor emanations from Jacques Derrida or one of the Yale critics would make waves—and headlines. In grad school, I remember overhearing one of the department's theorists shouting into his phone: "You're wrong. That was *last* week. I have up-to-the-minute news regarding developments in France."

Given those heady but embattled times, is it any wonder that I assumed George would test my knowledge of Derrida, de Man, et al., during our fifteen hours together in the car? A few days before our departure, I wondered: should I be brushing up, dipping into *Of Grammatology* or *Allegories of Reading*—as if these were texts one could simply wade into without suddenly finding oneself out of one's depth, swept out to sea? As we settled in for the long drive, I braced myself. But the questions sounding the depths of my knowledge or ignorance never came. Instead,

George took me to lunch at Al's Oasis in Oacoma; we stopped at a rest area on I-90 and read signs describing the region's geological and social history; we took the Badlands scenic loop; we wandered the aisles of Wall Drug. Hailing from a major city, where typically the object is to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible, I was frankly floored at our leisurely progress along I-90, but increasingly even more so at George's willingness to show me these places, to patiently fill me in.

As someone from the leafy boulevards of the urban midwest, I can't say that I saw then what George saw in those stark, treeless vistas west of the Missouri, the hills seeming as once they did to roll beneath the currents and swells of the sea, but I saw the attentiveness, the reverence in his seeing. And I heard it in the stories he told of the people and geographies of this place.

George didn't teach me how to live—I had parents for that—but he showed me how to live here, to see and hear what those from the madding places, like me, might miss. I still miss plenty, but what I've come to understand about what it means to live on the verge of the great American west—in one of the quiet places—is something I owe George, a man who in word and deed was as decent, honest, and true as they come. For George and Wanda, I have—and always will have—the utmost gratitude and affection.

Home from Vacation: The Last 200 Miles to Brookings

George A. West

It is good to travel East
coming home –
sleepily learning that losing hours
is of no matter.
The unplugged clock
dutifully disconnected,
stopped at 7:00 AM for three weeks
while we gained hours West
to play in the sun,
will hum anytime we get there.

Now Wanda drives her turn –
we go nonstop,
to reach the eastern interchange
before dawn –
night is the time for coming home
with sleepy eyes.
And my daughter and my son,
asleep in my arms,
do not yet know that time
does not tick or hum,
is not gained or lost,
but promises the sun
and makes us sleep.

They've time to learn of time –
that tantalizing cheat
like the gum machine in Wall Drug
with mixed up cogs,
dropping out two gum balls
for a penny,
making my son drool of double pleasure,
but end with sore cheek muscles,
and just a bigger tasteless wad
to spit out in the dust.

Now down on the Missouri
there are reflections of stars.
I will not look but wait
for the eastern interchange,
where, easing down,
around and under,
turning north for home,
I'll see the north star,
drawing the dippers down to the horizon
to pour out summer.

from Oakwood #7, March 1981

What is this Oak Wood

George A. West

What is this oak wood
of northern homesteads,
once less prized than wide grained walnut,
found in mansions and castles
other places, other times?

This wood, hard
reminder of life honed to the truth,
valued for a fine tough grain,
once found rounded in kitchens,
beautifully polished,
mirroring many faces
of those who were before.

from Oakwood #7, March 1981

