

KANSAS
CITY
VOICES

10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE — TABLE OF CONTENTS

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KANSAS CITY VOICES

VOLUME 10

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THE HEROES OF WHISPERING PRAIRIE PRESS

Whispering Prairie Press was founded in 1991. Deborah Shouse and Carolyn Riddle, co-leaders of the Kansas City Writers Group (KCWG) at the time, wanted to publish an anthology of writing by group members. They asked Sally Whitney to be in charge of the project.

Several members of KCWG volunteered to be on the anthology planning committee, and they met for lunch following each KCWG session. The meetings evolved from lunch time meetings at PoPo's, a small café, to more formal meetings at the Plaza Library in Kansas City, Missouri.

Judith Bader Jones, currently a KCWG member and a former, long-time board member of Whispering Prairie Press, was part of that first planning group. She described Sally Whitney as "a soft-spoken woman from North Carolina with a degree from Duke University. We lost her to New Jersey in 1994 when she became director of *Best Review*, a magazine for the insurance industry."

When the production cost for the first anthology was determined, Sally Whitney applied for 501(c)(3) status for the fledgling publishing house. Chalise Miner, a KCWG and WPP member and volunteer until 2008 when she moved to Florida, suggested the name "Whispering Prairie Press."

The planning committee thought that, as a not-for-profit organization, Whispering Prairie Press would be able to raise seed money for the project through donations. As it turned out, the board raised most of the money through fundraisers. Judith said of these early fundraising efforts: "I suggested we clean houses to make money, but this was immediately voted down! What was I thinking? Money raised from a dinner reading at PoPo's, a writer's retreat at Cado Creek Cabin, two used book sales, a garage sale, and manuscript critiques paid for the first anthology. The used book sales alone raised more than \$750."

Judith laughed as she told a charming story about the garage sale. "Marian Godfrey, an early board member, brought a 1950s bathing suit to the garage sale at Phyllis Westover's house. I told her no one would want an old bathing suit! But it was the first thing to sell."

The early publications of Whispering Prairie Press were three anthologies of work by KCWG members. Earnings from each publication paid for publication of the subsequent issue.

The first anthology, *Beginning from the Middle*, was published in 1994. The blurb read, "Every piece in this book is a commitment from people who love words and love to write."

In 1997, the second anthology, *Handprint in the Woods*, was published under the editing leadership of Mary-Lane Kamberg and Terry Hoyland. "As these authors explored their environment, their work became unquestionably linked with people who live on the land." By then, Mary-Lane had also become co-leader of KCWG with Deborah Shouse.

In 2001, Larry and Suella Walsh edited *Season of Light*, a third anthology. Rex Rogers offered his expertise for the layout. According to the foreword in this volume, "This anthology lingers within the season framed by light: candles, hearth, moon, sun."

In the months between publication of the anthologies, Whispering Prairie Press offered programs in "Writing for Publication" at libraries all over the metropolitan area and as distant as Lone Jack, Missouri. People came out in large numbers for these classes and the Q&A sessions often continued until the libraries closed for the evening, according to Alberta James Daw, a long-time board member and historian of Whispering Prairie Press.

The Heroes of Whispering Prairie Press continued

In 2003, the board, under the leadership of Larry and Suella Walsh, undertook a new challenge. Larry envisioned a high quality annual literary magazine dedicated to Kansas City and environs, and Suella suggested the name, *Kansas City Voices*.

As Managing Editor, Larry suggested and the board voted to approve a layout of 10 poems, 10 fiction, 10 nonfiction, and 10 art pieces. Variations on that format have continued throughout ten years of *Kansas City Voices* publication, which still publishes high quality poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and art.

In reminiscing about the first issues of *Kansas City Voices*, Larry said, "The best part was finding great writers. Tim Todd, Brian Daldorph, Phil Miller, and Lenore Carroll were all published in the early years." Other recognized writers published in *Kansas City Voices* included Stanley Banks, Nancy Pickard, Steve Shapiro, Maril Crabtree, and, of course, Judith Bader Jones. All of these writers have published books.

Larry said that critiquing others' writing also helped his own. "You can pick up things as an editor that helps you practice as a writer and bleeds over into your own creative process." Larry and Suella, along with being successful writers, find teaching to be rewarding. "Everyone is creative, themselves, somehow," Larry said. "But people don't realize they are, whether they're writing or tying fishing flies."

After Larry and Suella Walsh stepped down, Rex Rogers held the job of Managing Editor until his death in 2010. At the time of his death, Volume 8 of *Kansas City Voices* was halfway completed and needed leadership to bring to fruition. Mary-Lane Kamberg stepped into the breach, led Volume 8 through to publication, and rebuilt the Board of Whispering Prairie Press. A tribute to Rex was included in the magazine. Following Mary-Lane, Theresa Hupp took over as Board President for Volume 9, and instituted a successful donation drive.

Kansas City Voices is now publishing its tenth volume under the leadership of Jessica Conoley, Board President and Managing Editor. The magazine solicits writers and artists worldwide. In recent years, twenty to thirty volunteers have selected material to publish from hundreds of submissions, edited the work and worked with local design professionals to lay out a professional magazine. Other volunteers have organized readings where artists read and/or show their work to audiences in Missouri and Kansas. Under Jessica Conoley's leadership, WPP also developed a new web site with online ordering.

Each year, the Board raises money through magazine sales, a writing conference, a writing contest, and a donation drive, as well as through grants from the Missouri Arts Council. These funds have paid for professional layout of the magazine, printing the magazine at a long-time Missouri publisher (Walsworth Publishing in Marceline, Missouri), and for promotional events and media publicity.

Whispering Prairie Press is in its twenty-first year and has published a hard-copy edition of *Kansas City Voices* every year for the past ten years. In the current publishing environment, that alone is worth celebrating. But the real heroes are the literally hundreds of volunteers who have committed their time, resources, and talent to making *Kansas City Voices* a nationally recognized arts and literary magazine, and, in the process, developed their own skills and knowledge about the publishing side of writing. Recently, *Poets and Writers* added *Kansas City Voices* to their list of magazines worthy of professional recognition.

The board is looking at the possibilities for expanding publication into e-books and adding a contest for chapbooks. The work is never finished.

SUCH A SOUND

Thomas Fox Averill

One summer, some nights, after a rain, the night still and soft, the windows open for what was always a cool breeze, if I awoke in pre-dawn light, I heard a sigh, a shudder, a soft moan just outside my bedroom window, coming, I thought, from my garden. Was it an animal, stretching itself after nocturnal prowling, readying itself for a daytime burrow?

Sometimes the sound was slick, like running a finger down a sweating glass, making me think of a cat, licking dew from the grass. When I sneaked to the windows, though, I saw no cat, dog, possum or raccoon. Was an earthworm turning in the newly wet soil? A caterpillar crawling on a cabbage leaf, soon to cocoon? A bird sharpening its beak on a fence post? Rain, sound, fruitless investigation, until the summer wore its way into fall, and I harvested the garden and, though rain continued, the sound stopped.

The next year, my grandfather came for a visit. An old farmer, he had to undergo some medical tests, so he stayed with me for a week. My garden was just coming along, tomatoes setting, beans forming at the ends of their vines, corn rising, young beets ready to boil. The rain came down hard one day, and that night I heard the sounds from the summer before.

I described what I was hearing to my grandfather, asked him to solve the mystery. He smiled. That day he drove a stake into the garden, and late afternoon we watered well. Same sounds that night.

“Go look at the stake,” he said in the morning.

The stake was just as he’d driven it in the day before.

“What do you notice?” he asked.

Nothing, I told him.

“And the corn?” he asked.

The sweet corn, young and thriving, had outgrown the stake driven to its height, all in one night.

“Some nights,” said my grandfather, “out on the farm, next to a field of corn, I can hardly sleep for listening to it grow. Such a sound.”

The Bad Seed

Ron Pruitt

Granny died on a Thursday toward the end of January. I'm sorry to say I didn't mark the exact day in the panic that followed. Granny died alone, in her bed. Peacefully, I hope. I found her when I came home from school and checked on her. My first thought was to call an ambulance, but when I touched her, she was cold, the warmth of life long gone.

I was stunned, shocked, and scared. I should have felt sorrow and guilt, but what I felt was trapped, like a giant weight was pressing down, keeping me from breathing. I had to get out of that house. I went into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of matches and walked off up the road, lighting the kitchen matches one by one with my thumbnail and flicking them onto the roadside. Most of them just fizzled, but sometimes one would land among dry grasses and flame up. I walked until I ran out of matches, and then I turned back and stood and watched crescents of grassfires crawl across the fields. Somehow, the fires made me feel better, calmer, more in control.

I was too upset to eat supper. I wandered around Granny's old house until late that night, numb and dazed. Exhaustion finally brought sleep and the next morning I went off to school and tried not to think about it. I'm ashamed to say I left her lying there under a quilt for two days before I did anything, but then this whole story is filled up with regret.

After two days, I rolled Granny up in her quilt and put her out in the smokehouse. Winter's deep freeze would preserve her until spring, giving me time to figure things out. It sounds horrible and morbid, but I had my reasons. I was sixteen, a sophomore in high school, and if Granny was dead, I'd be going to live with Uncle Fred. I'd do just about anything to keep that from happening.

I put a padlock on the smokehouse door just in case anyone came snooping around. It was mostly precautionary because Granny and I never had visitors. She lived so far out in the country, at the dead end of a dirt road, just a little south of the back of beyond. The only people we ever saw were Jehovah's Witnesses who came and knocked on her door and when nobody answered, left copies of the Watchtower on the porch before they went away. Persistent people, those Witnesses.

Granny had been bedfast for years, so she didn't go anywhere. Dad took care of her until I was fourteen, but then he was sent off to the state pen for killing a man in a knife fight at a beer joint. He started doing a twenty-year stretch and I took over everything with Granny, her feeding, medicine, even bathing her. I took care of her as best I could, did the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning, saw to her animals. I paid the bills out of Granny's social security check, and we somehow scraped by on the little that was left. I knew if I reported Granny's death, those checks would stop coming.

I guess you could say things went along OK until spring came in. There was a warm spell in late March and I knew I had to get Granny out of the smokehouse. I gave her a nice burial out in the meadow under a sassafras tree, read some scripture over her and tried to think on her good points. Which was hard, because she was really a mean old woman who never thanked me once for helping her and continually threatened to whip my butt first chance she got. I guess meanness just runs in my family, and I guess I'm a bad seed too, but you can't choose your family so I don't see how I'm to blame.

Granny hadn't been in the ground a week when Uncle Fred showed up. It was a Saturday afternoon when I heard his big Cadillac crunch down the gravel drive. I rushed around locked the doors, turned out all the lights and went and hid in the bathroom. He pounded hard on the front door for a while and shouted our names, but he gave up after a while and left, just like the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I finished my sophomore year and school let out for the summer. A nice blanket of grass had grown up on Granny's grave. It sounds bad to admit it, but life was pretty good. I lazed around the farm and spent a lot of my free time reading or listening to music. I did whatever I felt like doing, sleeping late, eating what I liked, and going for long drives in Grandpa's old pick-up. I had more money to spend too, because I didn't have to buy food and meds for Granny. It was a solitary life, but I didn't mind that. The people I'd lived around all my life had pretty much soured me on humans entirely.

Most of the time I felt happy, but sometimes a feeling of doom crept in and ruined it. I'm not stupid. I knew my vacation couldn't last forever, but I was determined to make it last as long as I could.

I was out mowing the lawn the next time Uncle Fred came over. He looked really small when he climbed out of that giant Cadillac of his. I swear he'd shrunk some since the last time I saw him. He walked kind of bent over, and to see him shuffle along, you wouldn't think he was much of anything. But if you knew him, you kept your distance, because Uncle Fred would slap you across the face quicker than a scalded cat if you so much as held your mouth wrong.

He headed for the porch, ignoring me. I shut off the mower and hustled over and put myself in his path.

"What do you want, you little pissant?" he spat out at me, which was kind of funny because he never came over unless he wanted something himself.

"Granny's asleep. Just leave her alone."

"Get out of my way boy," he said, and reared back and socked me in the mouth. I stumbled back and tasted coppery blood filling my mouth.

He walked slowly by me before I could recover and started climbing the porch steps. I grabbed up an old shovel and ran over and caught up to him on the porch. He heard me coming and turned his head around to look at me. I saw fear in his eyes just before the shovel hit him hard, full in the face. He fell like a stalk of grain being scythed and lay there on the porch knocked out. I don't how many times I hit him after that. I lost count. But it was more than enough to kill him.

I threw my uncle over my shoulder and carried him down to the meadow and dug a big hole with the same shovel. I put him a good distance from Granny. I didn't think she'd want him very close, even in death.

By the time I had Uncle Fred under ground, I was dirty and tired. I also felt shaken, all quivery inside. I'd killed animals, chickens, squirrels, rabbits, deer, a hog, and even though the world was a better place without my uncle, I didn't feel right about it. I took a long, hot bath with lots of soap, but I still didn't feel clean. After dark, I drove Uncle Fred's Cadillac over to his place. My uncle was too ornery to keep a woman or kids, so he lived alone in a nice, new trailer-house that perched on the rim of a draw.

I torched his place. I squirted out a can of lighter fluid on his couch and set it afire. Then I went out and stood in the yard and watched the windows light up with yellow flames licking at the walls and ceiling. I watched it burn until I could hear the distant sirens of the fire trucks. It was easy enough to slip off into the darkness and by the time I walked back to Granny's house, I was feeling all right again. I slept in the next morning and I was still drinking coffee when the sheriff came with a big burly deputy. They arrested me and cuffed my hands behind my back and hauled me off to jail. The danged Jehovah's Witnesses had seen me putting Uncle Fred in the ground and called the law. They had me cold, so I confessed, but that wasn't enough for them. They'd realized by then that Granny was missing, so I told them what had happened and helped them find her body, but that just made them believe I'd killed her too.

They grilled me hard, but I held out and stuck to my story. The big deputy got mad and backhanded me across the face. He put a gun to my head and said he was going to kill me. Sometime in the early hours of the next morning, I broke and told them what they wanted to hear. They wrote it up, I signed it, and they put me in a cell and left me alone after that.

The public defender got me a deal, a life sentence for saying I was guilty of both killings, and they stuck me in the same prison as Dad. Sometimes I see him in the chow hall, or he'll walk shackled past my cell, and he always grins real wide like it's all a big joke.

The pen is a stinky, noisy and dangerous hole, but you have a lot of time to think things over. I started writing to pass the time. I'm working on my GED. I'll say one thing about being in jail, there's no place left to go but up. I'll be out when I'm in my thirties and when they finally turn me loose, I'm going to go out and set the whole world on fire.

MAP READING

"This is where we started from," you say.
A feeble line, on uncertain ground,
Wispy as your hair once on my coat.
"This is where we think we went," you say.
A wavering contour took us round
And back – though no higher, yet so close.
"This is where we meet again," you say.
Looking for pointers is how we found
Each other when thinking we were lost.

Stuart Lerner