

The Curator Says... Charles McDonald, an English major in college, tells how in his senior year he became personally and emotionally involved in his academic subject. In the spring, 1963, his adviser asked him to represent the college at the Southern Literary Festival at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. There he came face to face with a veritable "Who's Who" of Southern writers. The experience was unforgettable, the defining moment of his education.

**Cocktails at Eudora's
(And a few other things...)**

Charles Julian McDonald

The year was 1963. I was a senior at Troy ready to graduate. It was a great, sweet time, a time for smiles to appear; a time when parents, students, and girlfriends were excited, a time to throw confetti high in the air and sail the mortar board as far as possible. We might have shot fireworks, if we had any, and my girlfriend (and soon to be fiancé) would have enjoyed watching the bottle rockets go at all trajectories up into the sky. Excitement was a poor choice of words as I was the only member of my family to graduate from college.

But for a moment there was a small problem. This jobless college graduate, a former printer's devil with a degree in English lit from a little Alabama town forty miles away, had no job. You might know that a printer's devil is an apprentice in a newspaper or print shop who (in those days) worked closely with the editor, linotype operator, and others, all feverishly proofing copy; setting up the press, and after wards, cleaning up printing; and setting handset type, then removing the type from the "forms" and "throwing in" type in special drawers. Seems like as quickly as the type was set into the forms, it was time to put it back where it came from. Many famous men served as printers' devils in their youth, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, and Warren Harding. So you see I don't run around with slouches!

In high school I worked on the school paper and yearbook. I earned my apprenticeship working for the *Clayton Record*, the local weekly paper. I became a columnist while working at the paper. My column was named "Knocking Around with Mac." I wrote about places I visited and things I saw two summers while I traveled on my uncle's furniture vans from places such as New Orleans, Boston, and Maine. I had my portable Royal typewriter and it was easy to sit down at night and write my scripts. I recall reading Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*.

I was a correspondent for three Alabama newspapers, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the *Dothan Eagle*, and the *Columbus Ledger/Enquirer*. My mother thought I should be a journalist, and the Columbus papers offered me a job as cub reporter after graduation. I turned down the offer from Columbus because I needed to be in Montgomery, as this was my girlfriend's home.

While I was at Troy my professor asked if I would represent our school at the Southern Literary Festival to be held at Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi. This was a great honor for me, and something I will forever remember.

The Festival

Since 1937 a veritable "Who's Who" of southern writers had given readings, conducted workshops, and participated in panels at member institutions across the South. Among them were John Crowe Ransom, John Gould Fletcher, Jesse Stuart, Elizabeth Spencer, Flannery O'Connor (I heard her speak about her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*), Randall Jarrell, Shelby Foote, Allen Tate, Reynolds Price, and Eudora Welty.

Miss Welty read and conducted workshops at seven different times from 1952 to 1984. In 1963 the festival was again held at Millsaps in Jackson, in honor of Miss Welty's seventy-fifth birthday. Shelby Foote, who had just published the first volume of a trilogy called *The Civil War, A Narrative*, was the second speaker. His topic was William Faulkner, who had died a year earlier in 1962. I don't have to tell you how great these writers were to me.

Miss Welty, a major writer of the twentieth century, was a peer of Faulkner, Woolf, and Joyce. She received a Pulitzer Prize, French Legion of Honor, and many other very important literary awards. The outpouring of praise, continuing to this day, is in part due to Welty's unique vision. She spoke gently about words, about personal experiences, about biographical, archival and historical works. Her works are too remarkable and too many to cover here. I purchased a copy of *The Ponder Heart* that she autographed. Highly recommended Welty reading is her autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings (The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization)*, a series of three Harvard lectures by Miss Welty that all writers should read.

Miss Welty was also an award-winning photographer. During Roosevelt's many "New Deal" programs, she traveled and photographed poor black people in the Delta region of Mississippi. People developed a sorrowful passion for the suffering of these people when they viewed the Welty photography.

Shelby Dade Foote, Jr., (November 17, 1916 – June 27, 2005) was an American historian, newspaper publisher, and novelist. In summer of 1963 Foote had published the first volume of *The Civil War: A Narrative*, a massive three-volume history of the Civil War. With geographical and cultural roots in the Mississippi Delta, Foote's life and writing paralleled the radical shift from the agrarian planter system of the Old South to the Civil Rights era of the New South. Foote was relatively unknown to the general public for most of his life until his appearance in Ken Burns's PBS documentary *The Civil War* in 1990. He introduced a generation of Americans to a war that he believed was "central to all our lives." Foote did all his writing by hand, with an old-fashioned dipped pen, disdaining the typewriter. Foote, a softspoken Southerner, was a brilliant scholar, a wonderful speaker who spoke at the Millsaps gathering as if he personally knew Faulkner. The Southern Literary Festival was a wonderful experience.

Cocktails at Eudora's

Forty-two years later it is amusing to think back about how my group of friends was so influenced by Miss Welty. There were four in this imposing group. Chuck Fester an intelligent, well-read Midwesterner from Chicago; Bob Fulcher of Jackson, Mississippi, extremely well-read, a Belhaven College (Jackson, Mississippi) graduate; Bill Gwin, a professional civil engineer from the University of Alabama; and last but not least, your printer's devil writer.

We originally met in Orange Beach, Alabama. Bill Gwin was our host that year. Chuck Fister was the "engine" behind our group. He composed our topics for discussion. The next meeting was to be held in Jackson in 2005 with Bob Fulcher as host.

In 2005 we had our most exciting meeting because we met at Miss Welty's home! We talked about many things and had great food and fellowship, but the most important part of our meeting was a tour of Eudora Welty's home in Jackson. Bob made arrangements for a personal tour with Mary Ann Welty White, the niece of Miss Welty. It was the best experience for our group, to have a blood kin member of Miss Welty's family to be our marvelous docent.

"Designated a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Eudora Welty House at 1119 Pinehurst Street in Jackson, Mississippi, is of exceptional national significance. It was the home of internationally acclaimed author Eudora Welty from 1925 until her death in 2001, and the home where she wrote almost all of her fiction and essays."

The house is a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A Tudor style design is one of the most intact literary houses in America. In 1986 Miss Welty decided to bequeath the entire house to the State of Mississippi, including paintings, photographs, *objects d'art*, linens, furniture, draperies, rugs, and, above all, thousands of books in their original places. With virtually every wall lined with books, it is evident that this person valued the written word. The library includes works produced by classic writers through the ages and by the best minds of the twentieth century.

The house was left just as Miss Welty wanted it. Soft, comforting books were everywhere, but not in any way distressing. You could sit in the parlor, as I did, and imagine Miss Welty would have a few people over, sometimes persons from Memphis or New York. After drinks were served, she loved her guests to join in, and this would go on for an afternoon. Miss Welty liked good wine and Makers' Mark bourbon and water with a twist of lemon. It was a pleasant spring afternoon. The guests were seated, looking out the window at some fresh-cut flowers and enjoying each other. Miss Welty had taken her special chair, and drinks had been served. I just sat there in my overstuffed chair, quietly observing those present, and taking in every word. It seemed that Miss Welty's guests left politely so as not to "wear out their welcome." I certainly didn't want to stay too long either.

On the way out of the house I couldn't get over how beautiful the flower garden was. Miss Welty's mother started this garden. It reminded me of my grandmother's and aunt's garden over in Louisville, Alabama.

Back in Troy, and after graduation, I loaded my car, took one more look at my apartment on Three Notch Street, and drove out the north end of town and headed up to Montgomery.

Charles McDonald Says... I loved reading and writing about Miss Welty. I give credit to my mother, a schoolteacher, for encouraging me to read and learn about great writers, such as Miss Welty. My father, though not a literary person, taught me values of treating people right, and doing good work. They brought me up in the Baptist church. When I was fourteen I joined the church. My parents are no longer with me, but I think of them every day.

The river had not been tamed with dams, etc., and was considered wild by some in those days. Rivers can be spiritual; when in 1936 it took my brother from the bluff and in that same hospital. It almost destroyed my sweet parents. But I love rivers. It makes me sad rivers such as the mighty Colorado are backed up. A good read about tamed waterways in the U.S. is *Cadillac Desert* by Marc Riesner (1986). We studied water wars etc., in Jim Barber's class last session.

We moved from Eufaula to Clayton, where I grew up; I graduated from high school there. I played high school football in Clayton. It was in Clayton that I started a newspaper working at the *Clayton Record*.

After six months of active duty in the U. S. Army I came home, and, in the spring of 1960, I enrolled at Troy. Many good things happened in 1963. I wrote about these in my essay. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.