

Visitors from Far and Near

Remembrances of literary legends, celebrated barflies and Mrs. Vanderbilt's money.

By WALTER SULLIVAN, BA'45, MA'50

WHEN I JOINED THE Vanderbilt faculty in 1949, I was among friends who two years earlier had been my teachers. From almost as far back as I could remember, I had wanted to be a writer; after I entered Vanderbilt, I saw that, in order to write, I would have to teach because, with few exceptions, good writers didn't make much money from their writing.

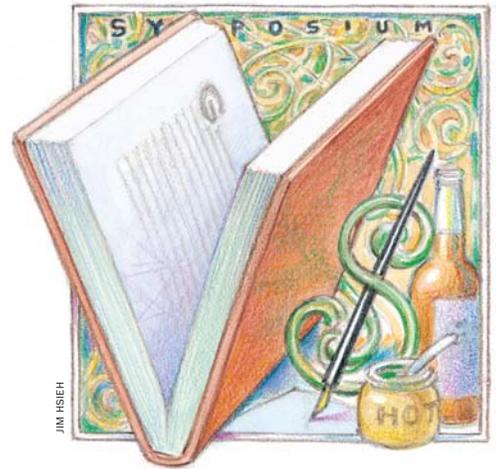
In my judgment we were a good department, and we shared an admiration, almost a veneration, for literature recent and past. We argued sometimes about whether Shakespeare was a greater writer than Chaucer or about whether a poem as hard to fathom as "The Waste Land" could be a great poem, but we never doubted the tradition in which we worked.

Early in his tenure as chancellor, which began in the 1950s, Harvie Branscomb persuaded Harold Vanderbilt, a grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, after whom the university was named, to join the Board of Trust. His wife, Gertrude, took an interest in the English department and promised to give \$5,000 a year, a good sum in those pre-inflationary days, to hold an annual literary symposium. For the first couple years, Randall Stewart organized the symposium; then I succeeded him, and my duties included consulting with Mrs. Vanderbilt, who said that if she liked what we were doing, she would endow the symposium. But she hadn't yet endowed it, so every spring I had to go to her, hat in hand.

She was, in my judgment, a woman of pecu-

liar tastes and sometimes even more curious opinions. Apparently, she thought a good deal about money. She told me once that the "real money" in her and Mr. Vanderbilt's family belonged to Mr. Vanderbilt. She had only \$10 million of her own, this when money was worth much more than it is now. She worried about being cheated. When the grocery bill at her house in Palm Beach seemed too high, she dressed herself as a person of slender means and investigated prices at the grocery stores. Many people, she told me, many of whom did not deserve it, asked her for money. The inference was not lost on me.

The symposium was a rousing success. Not only the university community but also people from all over Nashville came to hear visiting writers, to talk with them after their lectures or readings, and to have books signed. Without Mrs. Vanderbilt's support there would be no symposium, and I was determined to have it continue; I wanted desperately to please Mrs. Vanderbilt, but my job would have been easier if I had known what she wanted me to say. If she had contended that the earth was flat, I would have agreed with alacrity and deplored the fact that everybody did not know this. Consequently, coward that I was, I did not dispute her when she said that it was all right to teach Shakespeare, but only selected passages. A whole play was too much to ask students to read. She told me that one of her prep-school teachers in Philadelphia had asked her to memorize verses by Shelley, which she did, but she had declined to recite them because "wert" was not a word that anybody except Shelley used, and she would not join



him in subverting the English language. I kept remembering Scott Fitzgerald's remark that the rich were different from the rest of us and Hemingway's riposte that they had more money, and I sided with Fitzgerald.

My major problem in dealing with Mrs. Vanderbilt was the difference between the cultures in which we had been bred. She gave money to the *Paris Review*, and she often praised George Plimpton, hoping, I suppose, that I would be more like him, but that was a lost cause. My Southern manners, my Southern accent, were the only ones I had, and it was too late for me to try to change them. But I did what I could. She once reprimanded me for using "school" to refer to a university. "Never do that," she cautioned. "School refers to your prep school. You call your college a college." I didn't make that mistake a second time. On one of her trips, she visited the English department offices, arriving with the thermos of martinis she always seemed to carry

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in lieu of a purse. Randall was still our chairman, and I do not know why I didn't take Mrs. Vanderbilt to his office, but we went to Ed Duncan's more austere quarters, where we were joined by several of my colleagues. We got Mrs. Vanderbilt settled in the best chair available, took our places around her, and waited to try to answer whatever she might ask. To our discomfort, at first she did not ask anything, but it was clear that she wanted something. She looked around, not at us, but at the door and the corners of the room. Finally, she put out her hand as if she expected whatever she needed to be put in it.

"Mrs. Vanderbilt," I said, "what may I get for you?"

"Water," she replied, her tone indicating that I was a fool for having to ask.

All of us scurried to find a glass in which to put the water—sooner said than done in this case, for most of us used the drinking fountains in the building. We got a glass from one of the secretaries, thick and clumsy and, I surmised, not the sort from which Mrs. Van-

derbilt was accustomed to drinking. But she did drink, and then she talked, and we agreed with whatever she said, whatever our thoughts were on the subject under discussion. Mercifully, the interview was soon over. I offered to accompany her to her car. "Well," she said, "you won't have far to go." And I didn't. Our building was in the middle of the campus, but her driver had brought her cross-country, over the lawns and walks and around trees, to park at our front door, which was where I said goodbye to her.

The symposium continued and, ultimately, perhaps in her will, Mrs. Vanderbilt endowed it, but this was after I had turned the program over to someone else. Randall Stewart had invited to the first symposia some of our distinguished alumni, members of the Fugitives and Agrarian groups who had brought notice, if not fame, to Vanderbilt in the late '20s and early '30s. Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Andrew Lytle and Cleanth Brooks appeared on some of the early programs and, when I succeeded Randall, I invited them to come again. Alexander Heard, who had become chancellor when Harvie Branscomb retired, thought we were overdoing the Fugitive-Agrarian connection and said so. From time to time, Alex Heard got a letter from Jim Dickey asking that he be invited to read. Jim had earned [bachelor's and master's degrees] at Vanderbilt shortly after World War II. In his letters to Alex, he always warned that his schedule of readings was filling up. To avoid disappointment we should invite him at once. He added that Vanderbilt ought to be "falling all over itself" to arrange for him to receive an honorary degree. Vanderbilt doesn't give honorary degrees, but frequently, after letters from Dickey, Alex suggested that I invite Jim to appear at a symposium, probably because he was tired of the letters Jim was writing him.

I held my ground. I knew too well Jim and how he behaved for me to take responsibility for him, but the story has a sequel. Dan Young, my successor at running the symposium, in innocence or with guile—for Dan was known as a campus politician and may have wanted to curry favor with Alex Heard—invited Dickey and appointed a graduate student to be Jim's keeper. The student's duties were, first, to get Jim to the auditorium in

time for the reading and, second, to keep Jim sufficiently sober to read his own lines, an assignment that only a policeman, and a tough one at that, could have accomplished. At the hour the program was to begin, students crowded the auditorium. Some were there because they admired Jim's poetry. Many more had read his novel *Deliverance* or had seen the movie based on it. They occupied all the seats, stood at the back and along the walls, sat or sprawled in the aisles, but there was no Dickey. Dan Young hastened to the Holiday Inn where Jim was staying, went immediately to the bar, and found Jim and the graduate student drinking together. I did not see the scene that followed. Later, Dan said the graduate student was drunk beyond taking care of himself, much less seeing that Dickey kept to his schedule. Jim was at first happy, but he soon resented the tone in which Dan spoke to him. He declared that he was not ready to leave the bar and might not leave at all unless Dan addressed him in more conciliatory terms. He agreed to come at once, however, when Dan threatened to withhold his stipend.

In a perfect world, Jim would have paid for his arrogance with a poor reading and a disgusted audience, but no such thing happened. After his introduction he mounted the stage with a firm step. He stood behind the dais silently, allowing his gaze to move from one side of the room to the other, letting the audience wait a moment longer in anticipation. Then in the loudest voice he could muster, he said, "Sh-i-i-t," drawing out the word that, to the best of my recollection, had never before been spoken from a Vanderbilt stage by a visiting writer. He paused for a moment, beaming at the audience. He was having his triumph, congratulating himself for having packed the hall. The delighted students cheered this contravention of protocol. When they quieted down, Jim read and read well.

I brought to Vanderbilt the best writers I could find who would agree to come. Among fiction writers who lectured and read were Anthony Burgess, William Golding, Allen Sil-litoe, Elizabeth Spencer, Eudora Welty, Jean Stafford, Peter Taylor, Mary Lavin, Katherine Anne Porter, J.F. Powers, Flannery O'Connor, Shelby Foote, Walker Percy, Madison

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Jones, Verlin Cassill and Benedict Kiely. Some poets who read at Vanderbilt were Richard Wilbur, Richard Eberhart, W.H. Auden, Louis Coxe, Louis Simpson, Donald Justice, Paul Engle, William Stafford, William Jay Smith, Robert Hollander, and those stalwarts from the Fugitive days, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren.

In spite of legendary toppers such as Dylan Thomas and madmen like Cal Lowell, in my limited experience as a literary impresario I found that, in general, poets, while not abstemious, behaved more prudently than novelists. Allen Tate was an exception. He drank too much and chased too many women and married too many times, but his fellow Fugitives, Mr. Ransom and Red Warren, lived careful lives, husbanding their energy as if, wherever they were and whatever they were doing, a part of their minds was always at work on the poem or novel or essay they were writing. For most of the years that I knew him, Mr. Davidson did not drink at all. His life after the Fugitive movement had been different from those of his colleagues—more difficult, as he saw it, and he seemed to want to separate himself from the loose behavior of other writers, from any suggestion of bohemian excess.

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halfway through high school you switch to French.”

Lawrence isn't content with knowing five languages and is working on her sixth, Spanish. It seems that for Lawrence, speaking several forms of vernacular is second nature. But for those around her, as Richards expressed before, there is something both entertaining and captivating about watching her linguistic fluidity in action.

“I have no idea what she's saying when she talks to her mom,” says Coach Martha Freitag. “She might as well be speaking Japanese, but it's fun to see how easily she jumps between languages. It's fascinating. I can only speak very little Spanish—maybe enough to ask for directions—so to watch her jump between languages shows what a great talent she has.”

Of course, it wasn't her talent with languages that persuaded Freitag to recruit Lawrence. While attending the prestigious

Some writers visited us for entire semesters, but these did not come on Mrs. Vanderbilt's money; they were supported by outside foundations such as the American Council of Learned Societies, or they substituted for Vanderbilt professors who were on leave and were paid out of the department budget.

Over the years our long-term visitors came from various parts of the world, and most of them spoke English fluently. In one spectacular case we were joined for a semester by a Japanese novelist who, we were told, was “the Robert Penn Warren of Japan.” He appeared to be capable of speaking only two English sentences. “Do you know Allen Tate?” he would ask, and when you said that you did, he would smile amiably and say, “Thank you very much.”

His wife knew English quite well, but she would not admit that she knew it when he was close by. She would not translate for him. She would not take messages over the phone. At parties, when he was at one end of the room and she was at the other, she would chat easily, but when he approached, suddenly, with a straight face she would say that she did not speak English. This was trying, but, once, her refusal to translate for her husband brought what some of us considered

just retribution. They were at our house. To go with her food, [my wife] Jane had put out some mild mustard and some that was extremely hot. Our visitor chose the hot and began to pile it on his ham and biscuit.

“Please,” Jane said to his wife, “he is welcome to all he wants of anything, but that mustard is very hot. Please tell him. He will burn himself.”

His wife, giving Jane an innocent smile, said, “No speak.”

The Robert Penn Warren of Japan took a large bite. His eyes filled with tears. His face turned a deep red. He began to gasp. Jane gave him water, which did not immediately cool the fire. Our guest gasped again and coughed and wheezed. No one could help him. We watched while he suffered. But nothing changed. His pain wasn't sufficiently severe for him to allow his wife to translate for him.

Walter Sullivan, Vanderbilt professor of English, emeritus, is the author of three novels, numerous short stories, and three books of criticism. This article is adapted from Nothing Gold Can Stay: a Memoir, published by the University of Missouri Press (2006, www.umssystem.edu/upress).

David Leadbetter Golf Academy in Bradenton, Fla., Lawrence caught the eye of Vanderbilt's coaches with her impressive performances at various national tournaments. After narrowing her school choices down to Vandy and Texas, the decision became clear after talking to Coach Freitag and paying a campus visit.

“It just seemed perfect—the academics, the school itself, the coach—and the team was doing really well that year. It was a no-brainer,” Lawrence says.

Disappointed with her performance as a freshman, Lawrence worked hard over the summer and, in the fall, twice bested her career low from last season with scores of 70 and 68. She also earned her first top-10 finish in the team's opening match at the Cougar Classic in Charleston, S.C.

“This year we're seeing the kind of golf we knew she was capable of,” Freitag says. “I feel like she's just going to get more and more consistent every day.”

Even as Lawrence develops her game, Vanderbilt has changed her perspective on what she wants to achieve in life. When she came to the U.S., Lawrence was intent on pursuing a career in professional golf and had never experienced anything outside of the very golf-centric atmosphere of the academy in Florida. But during these last two years, Lawrence has come to realize that she has opportunities open to her that extend far beyond the realm of golf.

“Before I came here, I was never around so many intellectual people who are interested in so many different things,” she says. “Vanderbilt has given me insights about the entire world and what I might be able to do.”

Majoring in communication studies, Lawrence now knows that if a career in golf does not work out, her language skills can take her places she never dreamed of before.

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