

Salute to Alf Evers

Edward Sanders

It was a life-changing experience for me to work closely with Alf Evers for seven years, typing for him his history of Kingston, and helping with research. He was a beautiful prose stylist. In a few sentences Alf could go to the texture of a time, capture its feel and its currents. He was very adroit in his books at drawing forth the lives of regular folk from the darkness of old letters and documents and let them strut in life again in the lucent glow of his prose. He constantly asked questions of local people to learn their intimate tales of struggle and family history, and they trusted him to hold onto their family albums and scrapbooks.

I had taken part in several of Alf's birthday celebrations, as he entered his 90s. I realized in 1996 that Alf could use some clerical help when I noticed his failing eyesight and increasing frailty. I began by typing an article he was writing on Hudson Valley painters, and then by typing some letters for him. He was having trouble writing his history of Kingston, using a word processor at his home. With such bad eyesight, he couldn't locate the file, for instance, of the chapter he was currently writing on, and therefore would create a new file for the same chapter and try to retype the text. So I started typing his book on Kingston both from his dictation and by adding his hand written inserts, learning to decipher his very difficult handwriting, visiting him sometimes 3 or 4 days a week for the next six years. With his eyesight in such decline, I printed out the manuscript in 18 point bold type, double spaced, which he could read with a hand held magnifier while jotting changes and inserts in between the lines. That made his already lengthy history of Kingston, expand to five three-ring binders of text. During those years, I printed out at least 25,000 pages of drafts of the manuscript, probably more than that.

I worked closely with Alf's friend Fred Steuding. As Alf researched and created new drafts, he made thousands of notes listing sources which Fred dutifully alphabetized and placed in small wooden filing cabinets. Steuding also organized the Kingston book's alphabetical files, and did a good amount of library research, locating many 19th century sources for Alf. Alf's son Kit (Christopher) also found historic material for the Kingston project, as did Ulster County Historian Karlyn Knaust Elia.

During visits to his house on Hutchin Hill Road to work on his book, I discovered Alf's remarkable paintings, many of which were stored in his attic, most of them painted from the 1920s to the 1950s. (Alf had studied at the Art Students League during the mid-1920s) Since he was very low on money, I organized several successful exhibitions of his paintings and drawings and organized a benefit concert to raise money for his expenses. My wife Miriam cleaned the paintings, and Alf signed them on the back of each. Begin

ning in 1997 Alf had a live-in caregiver named Tom O'Brien who tended to his needs around the clock. O'Brien was a godsend, and no doubt extended Alf's life a good number of years.

In 1989, publisher (and Woodstocker) Peter Mayer had suggested that Alf write a history of Kingston. During the early 1990s, Alf was able to pay for the around-the-clock care thanks to an inheritance from his older sister Elizabeth. Finally, however, the money ran out. Both Maurice Hinchey and Kevin Cahill took personal interest in trying to locate ways of helping Alf, but the Medicare system is very imperfect, and things looked terribly bleak. Tom O'Brien was utterly determined that Alf not be moved to a nursing home, an event which Alf dreaded more than dying, and which would have ended his writing.

A nurse who lives in Woodstock, Louanne Macco, helped Alf get enough assistance through Medicaid, with the additional help of Woodstocker Rose Dittus, in order to remain at home with Tom's unceasing care. I won't tarry too long bemoaning the utter injustice of an economic system where a hardworking senior with health problems has to turn over his house to the government for the right to live at home.

During his late 90s Alf completed his book against incredible odds — he had progressive diabetes and shot up insulin. He'd had a colostomy and colon cancer, suffered from congestive heart failure, was blind in one eye, and with very poor hearing, plus during his final years he could get around only with a walker. He took 14 pills a day for his various afflictions, yet kept up his energy and friendly outlook. He was much loved by Woodstockers of all ages and persuasions, who would visit him and savor his brilliant mind and total recall of the previous 70 years of our past. His door was never locked, and hundreds visited his house on Hutchin Hill Road in Shady, just up the road from the barn that once had housed the 1805 glass factory.

Around his desk, the world seemed to swirl. He and Tom would listen to the NPR weekend opera broadcasts and Alf kept abreast of world events. Television crews, reporters, students writing reports, people researching their ancestors, and many others came to Alf. He accommodated them all, even those writing to seek information on "ancestors who lived in Mink Hollow" as one letter stated.

In 2000, Alf placed his archives dealing with the Byrdcliffe Colony with the Woodstock Guild. Then in 2001, he decided to place his entire historical and writing archives, including his remarkable and priceless collection of books on local, county, regional and national history, with the Guild where they will be housed in a special library at White Pines.

Part of the Woodstock Intellectual Milieu, and Awakening to History

As I worked with Alf, I learned more and more about his remarkable life. He was born during a blizzard on February 2, 1905 near the Bronx Zoo, when the Bronx was a lot more rural than it is now. His mother, Ann Lukas Evers, was of Hungarian descent, and his father Ivar was Swedish. He had three sisters, Elizabeth, Barbara and Jeanne.

It was ironic that someone who would live a hundred years (if you count the months inside his mother) was born sick and suffered so many illnesses as a child. In fact, Alf told me several times, “I was born with malaria.” He also said, “I had one ailment after another for years – every childhood ailment known.”

His father was a painter and architect and possessed some of the restless creativity of his son. He designed greenhouses for the White House in D.C., Alf once told me, and designed the curving glass and metal palm house at the Bronx Botanical Garden. Alf recalled that his dad liked to paint in the park near the Bronx Zoo. The family lived in a number of what had once been large old country houses, with their formal gardens faded with age, along the lower Hudson River. “I had one big old house,” he said, “with a tower from which we could look down the river and you got to know all the boats.”

Coming up the River

There was an economic downturn in architectural work, at least for Ivar and Ann Evers, just before World War I, and so the family moved to a farm in Tillson. Alf later recalled “the day in August 1914 when I walked down the gangplank of the Hudson River nightboat, *Benjamin B. O’Dell* and from there was driven in a horse-drawn surrey to the small Ulster County farm near Kingston on which my parents hoped to bring up their children close to nature.” It was his first view of the Rondout, which he would study so closely 80 years later.

Six years after moving to the farm in Tillson, the family moved to New Paltz so that Alf and his older sister Elizabeth could attend high school. “We considered Kingston,” Alf said, “but chose the New Paltz school as somewhat closer, so my parents gave up the farming venture and bought an old stone house on Huguenot Street in New Paltz known then as the Abraham Hasbrouck house, built in the early 1700’s, and began the first stage of its restoration.”

Alf’s father Ivar had an extensive library. “A good deal of his library was in French,” Alf told me in 2004. “I’d sit on his lap and he’d read from these big illustrated French histories. He’d read in French first, then translate, which gave me a start in French.”

Eleanor Roosevelt Visits Alf's Mother in New Paltz

Alf recalled that Franklin Roosevelt once visited his childhood house in New Paltz, and was interested in the kitchen cellar where cock fights were conducted in the 1700s according to local lore, and so made his way down to the cellar to check for himself. When Alf's mother Ann was older, she suffered from diabetes to the point where one of her lower legs had to be removed. This put her into a big depression, and she retired to an upper bedroom at the stone house in New Paltz, refusing to come down, and not wanting to use the prosthetic leg with which she had been outfitted. Eleanor Roosevelt at that time came to visit the famous old house, and inquired of the woman of the house. Roosevelt went up to Ann's room, stayed for about an hour, then came back down the steps. Shortly thereafter Ann Evers, heartened, made her way downstairs. It was an anecdote Alf liked to share.

Thinking of Becoming a Writer at 15

When he was young, he came across the works of Henry James. "I think I read all of Henry James by the time I was fifteen, especially those prefaces, and that made me think of writing. I'd always written verse, from the time I could talk, and made up little jingles and verse." But, reading James' prefaces, "I began to see that writing could be a serious and worthwhile thing."

Hamilton College and the Arts Students League

In 1925, Alf spent a year at Hamilton where he put to use his Hudson Valley skating skills. "I was on the hockey squad. Hockey I loved. I loved to spin along the ice." He also became a close friend of fellow student B. F. Skinner who went on to achieve fame as a behavioral psychologist. Skinner had originally hoped to become a writer, just as Alf was considering becoming a psychologist. A few days before he passed away, while he was writing the acknowledgements for his book on Kingston, Alf told me that "one of Skinner's biographers described him and me as having exchanged ambitions for careers. He became a psychologist and I a writer."

In 1926, Alf left Hamilton to live in New York City to study painting and drawing at the prestigious Art Students League. It was one of the years in which Alexander Calder was also studying at the League. There Alf met Helen Bryant Baker, who was preparing herself to become a commercial artist.

They were married, and then the Great Depression fell with clouds of poverty upon the Nation, and indeed much of the world. For a while Alf worked as a Fuller brush man, selling door to door. More important for his writing, he took a job as an investigator of people doing business with life insurance companies, an occupation in which he learned basic techniques of research. "I would go out in the morning and prowl around

and try to answer questions about people who had illnesses they were trying to hide or people who had something in their lives that led them to think that the insurance underwriters would think they weren't good risks for insurance. I learned how to develop information and how to evaluate it." Digging up secret facts became part of his persona, and of course by then he had to be fully aware of his ability to remember almost everything he experienced.

His wife Helen worked those years as an artist for Norcross greeting cards and Alf helped by composing captions and verses for the cards. They were living in Connecticut, where from around 1929 to '31 he ran for political office. As for politics, his beliefs lay in the democratic left. He had been friends with the Socialist mayor of Schenectady, he once told me.

Coming to Woodstock and their First Children's Story

Alf and Helen would have three children — Jane, Barbara and Christopher (Kit), and so it was a challenge to keep above the economic mire of the Depression when they moved to Woodstock from Connecticut around 1931 with baby Barbara and slightly older Jane. Christopher was born in 1940.

Alf and Helen were living in a studio on Deming Street near the intersection with Sled Hill Road, when, one evening in 1932, Helen Evers said to Alf, "I'd like to illustrate a children's book, why don't you write a story." So he did. It took him about a half hour. "It was a very brief picture story," he later remembered, "called *This Little Pig*, about a pig whose tail was curly, but he wanted a straight tail, and how he got it. It was a humorous story and an immense success.

"My wife had a gift for drawing very charming little animals and people. I wrote the stories and did rough drawings." Helen would then create the illustrations, "and gave them the charm she was able to give them."

It was a very successful charm, and together the husband/wife team published something like 50 books for young children. There are adults all over the region who recall their parents reading to them from the Evers books, a number of which are still in print almost eighty years later. "We'd get out one a year," said Alf, "and they were very profitable for us. I did a lot of lecturing at schools, and on radio programs. This was during the Depression."

Even though it was the impoverished 1930s, the success gave them a chance to live a full middle class lifestyle. They had a living pattern still common in the lower Catskills. They kept an apartment in New York City for the winter months, and came to Woodstock for the warm times of year. They were able spend winters in Bermuda, where Alf painted

some of his most interesting oils. The May 1938 issue of *Children's Life* featured a letter from Helen and Alf Evers on vacation in Bermuda, plus a photo of a spiffily-suited Alf and his wife, and young daughters Jane and Barbara.

In the 1940s the Evers purchased a house on Lewis Hollow Road, the setting for several of his finest paintings. They kept an apartment in the city for the cold months, and continued their collaborations.

In the years after his move to Woodstock, Alf later recalled, "I took up again the interest in the county and the past, which I had felt in my boyhood. I began accumulating files on the past." Wow, did he collect files! Several rooms of his house by the Sawkill are literally packed with them!

Wisteria Party at the Evers Home in Lewis Hollow

There was an article in late May of 1948 titled, "Wisteria Party at Evers Home." The piece began, "Though the day was dull the occasion was brilliant when Mr. and Mrs. Alf Evers held their annual wisteria party last Saturday afternoon. Artists were in the majority, but a fair sprinkling of writers and just plain citizens attended. The piece de resistance display of white wisteria blossoms which almost covers the front of the Evers charming colonial house in Lewis Hollow. The attendance list for the Evers' Wisteria Party reads like a Who's Who of post-war Woodstock.

Alf was very active in 1948 in the campaign of Henry Wallace as an Progressive candidate for president. Wallace, of course, had been FDR's vice-president but was crudely bumped by Democratic party bosses who were worried about FDR's failing health, and prospects of a President Wallace.

In August of 1948, just months after the wisteria party, someone, probably the Ku Klux Klan, burned a cross during a meeting in Woodstock of "Progressive Youth... for a Henry Wallace Rally, about 70 yards from the Woodstock house of Howard Bird. In response the Kingston Freeman for August 31, 1948, published an account with the headline, "Woodstock Agog after Burning of Cross."

By 1951, Alf had become president of the Woodstock Historical Society, which had been founded in 1929. He was president of the Woodstock Library, and served as the Woodstock Town Historian. Alf was also chairman of the steering committee which drew up the plan for the Mid-Hudson Library System and one of its original trustees.

Alf and Helen separated in 1952. His wife moved away, but Alf remained close to Woodstock till the end. After his separation from Helen, Alf became close to educator and folksinger Barbara Moncure. They were companions for many years until her death

in the 1980s. Moncure's 1963 album, recorded with Harry Siemsen, was *Folksongs of the Catskill*. With Moncure, Alf organized a series of three one-day folk festivals called Huckleberry Festivals during the summers. Alf recalled that "they were local people who sang or had something to say about folk matters—mostly singing, and I told folk stories in between. Barbara Moncure sang folk songs." The first Huckleberry Festival was held at the Colony Center, the next year at the Parnassus Square barn, and the third year it was at the Maverick Concert Hall. "It was very successful," said Alf. "I have a poster for it. The performers were almost all local. Holly Cantine's Woodchuck Hollow Band played."

Alf was deeply involved in the many artistic and intellectual currents of the era. He was active, with Pete Seeger and others, as an instructor at the famous left-progressive Camp Woodland in Woodland Valley, Phoenicia. He had many memories of the composer John Cage's visits and performances in Woodstock. Once he took Cage on a mushroom hunt up and down Hutchin Hill Road. He was also close friends with the famous composer Henry Cowell and his wife Sidney, who lived off Route 212 near Reynolds Lane. The Cowells collaborated on a well-known book, *Charles Ives and his Music*, published in 1955. In the introduction the Cowells wrote that "Alf Evers as a Catskill Mountains neighbor of skill and experience, has been generous with the finest possible professional help over stiles, past technical traps, and through mazes and thickets." Alf helped them in the editing and writing of the book.

1955 was also the year that MacMillan published Alf's book, *The Treasure of Watchdog Mountain*, which Alf recalls "was an attempt to teach children what ecology was, about the relationship of man to the land. It was a pioneer book of its kind. I based it on Overlook Mountain, which I saw through my studio window." After Alf had written *The Treasure of Watchdog Mountain*, he had begun "delving into the regional background, with the Catskills as the central thing. I wrote a piece for *The New York Conservationist* on Overlook Mountain, which had an extraordinary reception. They didn't pay. I did it because I wanted to.

"I made up my mind to continue writing about the Catskills, and I did. I wrote for local newspapers, and I gave talks. I was thinking then of a book on the Catskills, in the '50s. These pieces of mine would appear in the Woodstock and Kingston papers on various Catskill mountain subjects."

The House in Shady

After seventeen years, around 1959, Alf sold the house in Lewis Hollow and purchased a white single-story house on Hutchin Hill Road, part of the Vosburgh Mill complex located just up the street along the Sawkill Creek. Alf transformed the property into his own personal ultra-hilly garden. He used to write in a little cabin that he built himself

high on the hill above his house, near which, along the hilltop ridge, he created a labyrinth of shrubs and adorned it with garden furniture he crafted himself. There he would walk, holding his vaunted 3X5 cards, pausing to make some notes for his current projects. “I do a lot of writing while I’m walking,” he once told me. “That helps my rhythm. I try to alternate physical work with writing. When I’ve written something that’s become too complicated, it achieves clarity when I go through it in my mind while I’m walking.”

Attracting the Attention of an Editor at Doubleday

A senior editor at Doubleday named Ellin Roberts (later, when she retired, the Woodstock librarian), wrote Alf a note, saying “I’ve been following the articles that you write. Have you ever thought about writing a book about the Catskills?”

Alf recalled, with a laugh, “Well, I hadn’t thought about anything else for a long time.” Alf signed a contract in 1963 to write a history of the Catskills. He worked on it for eight years, completing it not long after the famous Woodstock Festival, which inspired part of the book’s title. Published in 1972, and dedicated to Barbara Moncure, *The Catskills— from Wilderness to Woodstock* was a brilliant success, and has astounded and thrilled generations of readers since.

Alf Evers was instrumental in getting Byrdcliffe registered as a national historic place. In 1978, he prepared a nomination document, sent to the National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, with the result that the Byrdcliffe Historic District was listed in 1979 on the National Registry. Thank you, o Alf! Alf was also active in 1978 organizing for Woodstock to purchase the Comeau property.

History of Woodstock, published in 1987

Then he began a book on Woodstock. Since Alf was a leading avant-garde intellectual, some assumed his book on Woodstock would be about artists and the Art Colony. Not so, he told them. Instead, as in the Catskills book, he brought forth from the shadows of time a wide assortment of people, places, moods, movements and moments, for the enjoyment of the next centuries. *Woodstock, History of an American Town* was published in 1987, in time for Woodstock’s bicentennial celebration.

In 1989, at the suggestion of publisher Peter Mayer, who had been a neighbor of Alf’s when Alf lived in Lewis Hollow, he began a history of Kingston. At first, it was to be a fairly short book, with many illustrations—easy for a brilliant mind to put together. But as Alf researched more and more, and created draft upon draft, he became absorbed with the interesting stories and fact-chains he was uncovering in dusty old books and public records. The book was to occupy the remaining 15 years of his life, against the panoply of many life-threatening ailments.

He explained once how he perceived the structure of his book on Kingston. “It is a revisionist view of Kingston history,” he said. “All this material was waiting in the old records, and nobody paid any attention. What I’m doing is taking each one of these early people, and assembling all the information I can get about the individual to give an idea of what he was like as a human being. It takes an awful lot of delving..... Being my age, and with my infirmities, I can’t dash around the city the way I used to. It’s one reason the book has taken this turn. I have the printed materials that were not ever used, the court records and that sort of thing.” His book would feature, he told me, “an interpretation of material that was available, but that no one ever thought of in that connection before. It’s really a book about Kingston. It doesn’t purport to be a chronicle.”

The Hervey White project

By around 2003, as work on the Kingston book was coming to a close, Alf and I talked about a new book. I thought it was very important that he have a new project. At first he wanted to write a book on the bluestone and mining industries, with emphasis on the quarry workers, for whom he felt great sympathy. Then one day he said he wanted to write a book on Hervey White. “I want to call it something like *Hervey White — a Maverick Man*,” he told me.

Alf worked with White’s granddaughter, Christine Dauphin, to gather material. The Woodstock Guild bought him a digital tape recorder and Alf was going to be the first 99 year old writer in Western Civilization to have his dictation transcribed by an internet transcription service. He was working on the Hervey project regularly while he was rewriting the final section of *Kingston — City on the Hudson* during his final weeks. Just a few days before he passed away, Alf asked to borrow my copy of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which he said was much discussed among the intellectuals of Woodstock around the time that Hervey White was founding the Maverick Colony.

Meanwhile, by early 2004, I had finished a book, and had a few months of free time, so Alf and I accelerated the pace of working together that summer and fall. I printed out draft after draft of the book, as he perfected it. Finally, in mid-November of 2004, *Kingston — City on the Hudson* was done! I brought the manuscript and discs to a meeting with Peter Mayer and his staff at the Overlook Press offices in New York City. They were excited about it, and decided to publish it in the spring of 2005, around the time that Alf was scheduled to get an honorary degree from Bard College. I’d never seen Alf so happy as when an e-mail arrived from Peter Mayer praising the book.

But that didn’t stop Alf, a famous rewriter, from continuing to work on parts of the manuscript. Of great help during recent years was Alf’s good friend, Karlyn Knaust Elia, then the Ulster County Historian. He was fiercely dedicated to the end. In one of our final conversations he suggested I go up to the State Library in Albany to try to locate a

certain old map of Kingston which clearly listed the location of the Indian Katsbaan, or “Tennis Court,” where the Esopus natives played their version of lacrosse, a place he felt that lay near the intersection of current Pierpont and Hone Streets off Lower Broadway.

The Passing

Just after Christmas day of '04, Alf came down with a cold. I could hear him cough when we talked over the phone. For seven years, on many occasions, I had shouted through the deafness, “Alf! Don’t dare get sick!” I shouted it once again. I came to his house a couple more times to help him make the final additions to the acknowledgements, and to locate some of the images. To my shock, I noticed that, even with his cold, he had made numerous changes to the final part of the book!

On December 29, I called Tom O’Brien in the afternoon. Alf was singing, Tom said, and speaking as if in a dream. Later that afternoon, Tom prepared one of Alf’s favorite meals, a bowl of hot oatmeal, which Alf ate almost entirely. He was quite jovial with Tom, singing and talking in a soft happy voice. “We had a good time over the oatmeal,” Tom told me. Then he went to sleep on his side and passed away. The Rescue Squad was summoned, but could not revive him. Alf’s passing reminded me of the great English poet William Blake’s, who also passed while singing and seeing his dreams before him.

Upon his death, Alf’s archives were turned over to the Woodstock Guild, thanks to a generous grant by Woodstocker A. J. Lederman. His library is housed now on shelves in the Loom Room of White Pines, and his 120 boxes of alphabetized and ordered archive is housed in the offices of the Guild on Tinker Street, with Elia Kokkinen working as a volunteer for the last 9 or 10 years to sort them out. A Finding Aid, listing the components of the Alf Evers Archive, can be located on the Guild’s website.

Richard Heppner, Eila Kokkinen, Glenn Kreisberg and I have taken on the volunteer task of coordinating the scanning of Alf’s excellent collection of photographs and images in the archive, the goal being to place them, available to the public, on the Guild’s website. We need money for scanning equipment and software.

On August 29 at the Kleinert/James Center for the Arts in Woodstock occurred the Alf-Scan Benefit Concert, to raise scanning money. It was a magnificent concert, raising enough money to acquire all the Alf-Scan equipment! Performing were Amy Fradon, Leslie Ritter, Scott Petito, Marc Black, Jules Shear, Tom Pacheco with Brian Hollander, Mikhail Horowitz, Gilles Malkine, Ed Sanders, and Michael Veitch with Julie Last, and others. Wow.

---Edward Sanders, Woodstock, N.Y.

