

The History Corner
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Remembering Dave Erickson

I first met Dave Erickson in the parking lot of North Shore School fifteen or more years ago now. He was leaning out the window of his pickup truck as I drove by. Exactly how or why I ended striking up a conversation with him is lost to time and memory. It was just a brief encounter but one that would be repeated many times over during the ensuing course of years: he in his pickup, leaning out the window, talking. It is the way I will always remember him.

A number of us gathered a few weeks ago to celebrate Dave's life, to laugh, tell stories and reminisce a little. To those who only knew Dave from a distance he may have seemed pretty rough around the edges, possibly even a little unpleasant. In truth, even to his friends, he at times could be a bit vexing. For certain, he lived a simple and frugal life and the sparseness of it may be the reason many people kept their distance. Conventional he was not. In many ways he was a master of invention and ingenuity but since his interests strongly leaned toward the functional and practical rather than the aesthetic he was often viewed as a little odd.

Take his pickup for example. It was a vehicle held together as much by hope and prayer, bailing wire and rope, as it was by any original bolts or frame. The truck apparently had once been in an accident on the McQuade. The story goes that Dave was parked along side the road reading when someone side swiped him. A good portion of the trucks body was damaged but the working parts still functioned. It still started and stopped and that was the important thing. It may not have looked like much but it still ran, a testament to the gods of whim and fancy much more so than to any laws of physics or principles of mechanical combustion.

His house had certainly seen its better days. It had no running water, no indoor plumbing, hadn't seen a coat of fresh paint in decades. But the miscellaneous pots and barrels and tubs that he would scavenge and scatter around his yard were planted each year in pansies and daisies. There was after all, underneath his soiled and worn clothes, a softness, a gentleness, a mischievousness that simply couldn't be hidden. You could see it in the way he loved Emmett his dog, and in the way he would live trap the squirrels that invaded his house, and release them safely back into the woods.

But most people didn't know that. They only saw the worn man in the worn pickup truck who drove endlessly around our community collecting "junk". They did not see the man who studied architecture at the University of Minnesota, the man who had been invited to work with Frank Lloyd Wright, the man who had written more than half a dozen children's books. Sometimes we are the losers for not digging deep enough, for not knowing our neighbors well enough, for maybe not wanting to know.

To some a life of such promise may have seemed wasted. Dave never married, he never had any children, he never became a famous architect. Instead he decided to collect the things society was throwing away. He saw value and worth in the forgotten, the neglected, the discarded, the abandoned. His house became filled with the items and they spilled over into his yard stretching further and further out until they covered his fields. To anyone passing it appeared to be nothing more than one big junkyard but if you looked close enough, in and amongst all those items, scattered with the scrap metal and tractor wheels were barrels of pansies and washtubs of daisies.