Book/Core Themes

When Once Destroyed centers on the life and death of a small town. What first compelled you to tell this particular town's story in the way you did rather than writing a more conventional local history?

The birth of our grandson, Vern, knowing that telling the story of my dad, Vern, would have to include the story of how Dad's community was destroyed… a story that has fascinated me for as long as I can remember. My earliest memory is literally one that occurred on my grandparent's farm

The title suggests both finality and memory. What does "destroyed" mean in the context of this town, and who decides when a place is truly gone?

It's the way of life that was destroyed. It's an example of Wendell Berry's thesis. Usually, towns like this and stories fade away unconsciously, In this case I decided that the place is not gone. , My work has preserved the town. The reaction I've gotten from the people there has confirmed that. The town will live on through the course of my grandson's life, at least, in the sense as I understand it, that our life continues for a long as anyone is alive who remembers us. With the increasing age of the people in the story, there was the increasing risk that the story would never be told. To whatever degree the story makes the people there uncomfortable, the reaction I have gotten is that people are grateful that they and their town are not going to be forgotten.

How does the town function in the book: as a character, a setting, or something closer to a living archive?

Yes, to all three. 1) Alive, conflicted, evolving, 2) rooted in s time and place that are specific, if there is nostalgic

embellishment, it's the responsibility of the reader. I was simply telling my grandson about my dad in the best way I knew how. 3) I like the alive archive concept, which is a conversation starter.

What surprised you most as you reconstructed the town's past, especially moments that complicated nostalgic narratives of small-town life?

The generosity of the people I interviewed. The personalities that shined. All of them. The dimension. The space for diversity. Communists in Somerset. The fun. The joy. The humor. The basketball stories included conflict, a guy was yelling at the refs so hard his teeth flew out. With the same or similar characters, Aunt Janet's description of the new Somerset body shop must mimic the community of great Aunt Vernie's restaurant. Those qualities make the tragedy real. The deaths of Jim Minnick and Omie Sweet are real because we "know" them. They represent the town's people. Pop had the boys throw the couch that Grandma died on into Goose Creek. It's not nostalgia. Why were children told to stay away from Homer Davisson? I did not feel the need to answer the question, but I thought about it. We didn't talk about the game after the game was over. There's something symbolic about that, but I wasn't conscious of that going in. As I mention in my closing note, if there is some intention in the story that was the result of the telling, my only intention was to tell my grandson about Dad and I followed that where it took me.

Many readers will see echoes of their own hometowns in your story. What aspects of this town do you see as uniquely local, and which feel broadly Midwestern or even national?

It's odd, I hadn't thought of this before: I tried to teach Holocaust as a warning, but now it seems too late. "Somerset"

could have been a warning; I'm not sure exactly when that became too late, but for me, at my age, it appears to be… Somerset is specific, but it was also early to a game that we have since seen played out in rural communities and small towns all over the Midwest and I suppose the rest of the country, too, since the end of WW2 in my consciousness but beyond that I suppose, back to Columbus and then back to every other force that has ever tried to impose its will, devouring contented people along the way, wherever it can "Progress" sold as a panacea that turns out to be a curse.

In what ways does the town's story intersect with larger historical forces like deindustrialization, agricultural change, or state and federal policy?

One of the things about the story that was an echo for me was the unanimity of the political parties in supporting the UWVFC project. Vietnam, Afghanistan, the Iraq war. Watch out for consensus! When I go "home" I notice the absence of signs of human and animal life where family farms used to be; Instead, we have industrialized agriculture, farm site employes, and as I mention in the book the same machinery that builds highways that avoid towns and shopping centers in farm fields. The latest trend in the shopping centers that are in farm fields is to make them look like what developers call "walkable villages." Monuments to the conquered, like sports teams with names like Indians and Redskins. State and federal policy follows the money. You can speak to that a lot better than I can.

The community where I taught high school is being threatened by data center development. Adjectives I'd apply to the people of Somerset apply to the people of New Carlisle, Indiana. Perhaps my story could help steel the resolve of the people there fighting to preserve their way of life. It's a cliche but

anyway I believe that learning the lessons of the past provides us with strategies for dealing with the present. It's hard, I know.

The person for whom this book was written, Vern, my grandson, lives in Minneapolis, ten blocks from Portland and 34th, a mile and a half from 26th and Nicolette. Demonization of the "other" is how this shit starts. What remains unresolved is an element of the universality of my story.

My family's story was for me a counterpoint to the larger societal narrative under which both the governmental narrative and Christianity fell. What my father brought to the table was an unspoken legacy of resistance that appears to have a connection to transcendentalism and the abolitionist movement. However, Dad's worldview can also be viewed simply as the perspective of critical thinking. Chicken and the egg: does critical thinking lead one toward social justice or does concern for social justice lead one toward critical thinking? Does it matter? Either way, as the story developed with research and anecdotally, I could see that the plain and simple truth perspective that When Once Destroyed illustrates makes a case for responsibility and accountability as a matter of fact. Obviously, I was on Dad's side, so it was not hard for me to see that responsibility and accountability are not contained within institutions but rather challenge them.

Were there moments when the town resisted decline, and how did those efforts shape its final years?

I'm not sure decline is the right word, here. The town was doing well until the Army invaded. The resistance came when it was too late to stop the forced removal, but it did set the stage for the community to engineer its own relocation.

How did you decide where to begin and end the town's story, given that places often outlive official narratives of closure?

It's definitely a white man's perspective so I started the town's story in time where most white guy perspectives start, with the European settlement and a brief mention of the indigenous presence that preceded it. Before the flood story begins with Roessler's trip to Lake Shafer I cover some of the things that happened in Somerset that showed up in the newspaper to provide some flavoring, the best and most extensive being the park celebration. I ended it with Aunt Janet's account of the new Somerset a few years after the project had been completed, connecting an accounting of economic and flood control benefits and lack of benefits.

Memory/Loss/Meaning

The book is framed as a historical memoir. How did personal memory shape your interpretation of the historical record, and why did you choose that framing?

In telling my grandson about my dad, my intention was to explain how Dad was connected to what happened, but I know he was on the periphery of a lot of it. How did this impact Dad? was the question I set out to answer but I know it went beyond that. My interpretation was shaped by the fact that I knew "these people." I remember the place. When I spoke to people down there, the voices were those of old friends, speaking in a manner of speaking familiar and there fore not forgotten. I was conscious of my Holocaust educator training throughout, wanting to tell the story of something historical from the perspective of the people who were the receivers of the events, not the initiators. The fact that I was talking to my grandson about Dad and his community and how it was destroyed and not creating a scholarly work gave me the freedom to do that. Up front, with the occasional asides reinforcing to the reader my acknowledgement that I'm not objective. However, that approach made verification of my

sources as important to me, with my obligation to the community and its people, as it is to any scholarly work. I gotta get this right. Didn't I say that Francis Roby was one of the people I wanted my account to do justice? I felt that way about everybody down there, but also about Dad and the new Vern.

How do you navigate the tension between remembering a place with affection and confronting its harder truths?

I suppose I didn't see that there was difference between the two. I was born in Marion, Indiana. Google courthouse lawn. When I visited the concentration camp where Anne Frank died I talked to German high school teachers about how they teach the Holocaust. I'm a firm believer in the idea that fixing something starts with knowing that it's broken. The US does a terrible job of that in our teaching of history.

What ethical responsibilities did you feel when writing about a community that can no longer speak for itself?

That's a bit of a combination of the last two answers. As I said before, to get it right, to do right by the people in the community and at the same time be honest in confronting the harder truths. I'm telling the new Vern about the old Vern, through the lens of the powerless in the story so I didn't worry about the powerful. I didn't have to subscribe to their rules. To me "objectivity" contains a lot of telling the story the way the powerful want it told. Social media is breaking that down. I can see Gaza and I can see Minneapolis myself, without the filter of the NY Times.

How do silence and absence function in the book, particularly when sources disappear along with the town?

Directly, the absence of the community in the decision making and the secret silence of the perpetrators made it impossible

for the town to protect itself. Also, silence was Dad's sin, as I see it. It's the sin of the community in the aftermath, as well. Why am I the guy revealing this stuff 60 years later? As soon as I saw the Ralph Roessler papers, I knew I was obligated to reveal what I had discovered.

What role does grief play in the narrative, and can grief itself be a legitimate historical lens?

It begins and ends with my grief for Dad's death and with that naturally my regret at standing between him and his dream. Perhaps I've uncovered some regret at being one of the children for whom his dream was deferred for our benefit. I do think he was happy with the way the three of us turned out, college educated, good citizens. "Legitimate"? That's something I'd love to talk more about (I'm loving answering these questions, by the way). That's a reference to my earlier remark. Who decides what is a "legitimate historical lens?" Is the source of "legitimate historical lens" not similar to the perspective people who imposed this tragedy? Is my difficulty now in getting this story heard beyond my immediate communities not also part of a definition of "legitimate"?

Research/Historical Process

What sources proved most essential to reconstructing the town's life: newspapers, land records, oral histories, photographs, or something else?

The papers of Ralph Roessler, and the papers of Congressman Beamer, and Congressman Roush that included the letters of constituents. Those constituent letters and the witness interviews were essential for facts and flavor. Roessler's diary was like a road map. Newspaper articles

were also essential. Often the witness interviews led me to new sources. I was lucky. For instance, being able to access the Army cemetery removal primary source document through someone that someone else told me was on the cemetery board at the time (who has since died) that gave me precise information about the day my grandmother's grave was moved that my brother described to me because he was there. That sort of thing happened a lot. Forgive me for feeling at times like I was "meant" to tell this story.

Were there moments when the archive pushed back against your assumptions or memories?

In the interviews, sometimes, but not much really in the research. What I found was mostly affirming. I did laugh when Aunt Janet told me that people thought John Huddleston was a communist, only to find evidence it was true. Overall, I'd say the truth of the matter was more damning than I had assumed. To find a letter to a newspaper publisher in which the state commission executive secretary passed along how the army wanted the project to be portrayed before it was made public pushed forward my assumptions about how power works in its oppression of the powerless. Damn, it's worse than I imagined.

How did you evaluate the reliability of oral histories, especially when recollections conflicted with written records?

That's an interesting question that for which I'd like to hear your academic understanding. Eyewitness accounts took priority for me, especially over "official" versions and over the memories of people who were not witnesses. The accounts connected to the moving of the graves was a prime example of how that worked. My brother was there. My cousin, who was not, recounted a version of events that was like what

officials at the time said would happen. I noted, but discounted in my text, an oral interview account from an aide to Congressman Roush that overstated Roush's role in the flood control project. My reliability assessment was based on evidence. I tried to keep the reader in on what was going on as part of my conversation with the new Vern. Did I have an obligation to correct my uncle Wayne's 90 year old memory or simply tell my grandson what he said? He remembers street movies in Red Bridge. Okay. He remembers differently from my sister how long Mom and Dad lived on a rented farm after the war. Do I need to pick a side? I tried not to stand between my sources and my grandson/audience. I'm telling you what they said.

What challenges did you face in writing about people who were family members, neighbors, or acquaintances?

Oddly, I discovered that when I verified with people that I would be using what they had told me, I was overly sensitive. *Are you sure*, I'd say. Kay and Janet Shroyer with the Minnick story, Rose with the tornado story. Transcribing hours of phone and in person recording was not fun but it made me accurate.

How did landscape and geography shape both your research process and your interpretation of the town's decline?

The greatest distance Judy and I had to travel for research was Bloomington, around three hours away from our home in South Bend. Without the availability of online newspapers and documents we would not have been able to do the research. Being able to step into the space enhanced my obligation and my ability to visualize. It's a little town, right? What's the big deal? Walking on the remnants of Somerset and my grandparents' farm while being in the process of creating this

story is profound. In visiting the re-located Pleasant Grove cemetery where my parents and grandparents are buried, I see names on markers that I had not recognized before I started telling my grandson about Dad. I recognize them now. Florence Roby. Omma Sweet. That again speaks to a different obligation than what I would feel in a traditionally academic approach. Did Elie Wiesel need a fact checker?

Writing/Craft

How did you balance narrative momentum with historical explanation, especially for readers outside the Midwest?

I've been writing periodic personal essays connecting the personal to the public for our public radio station for the last ten years and that was how I approached it. Again, the letter to Vern aspect made the accounts of even congressional testimony folksier than a standard historical account and so that made the gap between the history and the people less severe. I'm telling Vern a story, that's all. Somerset is a common town name, that helps and memories of rural communities, though they may be overly romanticized, generations removed, are common, too. I hoped to leave readers between sections with the notion that the story was still alive without them, but that they'd be getting back to it soon.

Were there scenes or stories you found especially difficult to write, either emotionally or structurally?

Mostly, it was easy. I'm talking to my grandson. I gathered information and let the story steer me. But I struggled and I sobbed when I wrote the final two chapters about Dad. For

that, I am glad. Appropriate. I was mostly done with the writing when my sister died two years ago. I had already decided to leave out the piece I wrote for the radio about the significance of her teaching me to read when I was four. The dedication to her was easy but should have left off the last line.

How did your intended audience shape your prose, voice, and general approach to writing this book?

Vern. A letter to my grandson about my dad was precisely what I need to relieve myself of a story I had wanted to tell, in precisely the way I wanted to tell it, for as long as I can remember. It's grass roots history. If someone else wants to read it, that's good. I think it's a good book with some important observations. But it's a letter to Vern. Maybe it's a letter to two Verns. I'm glad I lived long enough to do it.

What role do you see this book playing in conversations about rural history and historical preservation today?

Starting conversations, I'd like that. These lives, and the way of life are important. We need to do a better job of protecting them. Questions for conversation: What attitudes and policies present in the book continue to threaten rural societies? What enabled the absence of Somerset voices in the decision-making process that destroyed the community? In what way is rural culture misunderstood? Marginalized? What problems that plague rural communities are also present in urban communities? To what degree are the sources of those problems alike? What separates them? How might a better focus on rural voices enhance education in rural communities? Combat alienation. As an English teacher I'm drawn to the idea of developing fiction and nonfiction rural voice sources for rural high school students: Wendell Berry, Sarah Smarsh, Barbara Kingsolver, Robert Wuthnow, Grace Olmstead, and

others including those in the folk and rock music genre. Rural kids are bombarded with pop culture images that portray them and their communities in a negative light. I'd add *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer to the reading list if I had the chance. Maybe *Hillbilly Elegy*, too, for the sake of contrast.

The book touches on years from the early 30s to the early 70s and along with the life of my dad's community tells the story of its death in the post WW2 advance of technological and industrial progress, the hubris of the powerful with an eye on rural communities. It's a specific story with broader implications. Wendell Berry, "The Unsetttling of America."

The community where I taught is under assault by the mammoth data centers attacks that are encroaching on farms and rural communities all over the country, but especially in midwestern areas that have a lot of water. Making that connection was not what I set out to do with the book but it's definitely there.

Alienation. Someone publicly please address the connection between the gutting of family farming and rural communities since WW2 and the rise in homelessness, mental illness, depression, drug abuse, violence, and despair. Three and four generations down the line, where are modest self-sufficient independent people like my dad and John Huddleston and other people in communities like Somerset supposed to live and with what kind of work? What becomes of people who could live modestly with pride by the standards connected to self-worth values that are not connected to money? Dad was forced off the farm and into urbanized factory work he despised. His message to me was, *get out of here.* Where,

then, do I belong? Fifty-five years later I returned home in the form of a book that as I wrote it felt like, aside from parenting, the most meaningful thing I'd ever done. Grand-parenting.

After finishing When Once Destroyed, how has your understanding of small towns, your family story, and your own place within them changed?

Writing When Once Destroyed has been a coming home for me. That began a bit before I started writing the book at my brother in laws funeral a few years ago.

I grew up in a place where, as one of the "smart kids," I learned that in my home community, "There is nothing for you here, leave." So, I did. I bought into that idea. My brother-in-law did not. He never left. What I saw that day, his funeral, and what my nephew said about his dad then…. Awakened me to the value of the life I had run away from. John was chief of the Green Twp. Volunteer fire department for 40 years. In uniform, his colleagues sat in front of me. My sister taught third grde in that community for over 40 years. "Dad should not be gone," my nephew said, "and he should not be at some home in the sky. My Dad belongs right here." My sister and her husband had a sense of belonging that I could never achieve, and I think there are lot more people like me than there are like them. That's been destroyed.

I don't know which came first but this was also the approximate time that I picked up The World-Ending Fire, anthology of Wendell Berry essays at the Louise Erdrich Birchbark bookstore in Minneapolis a year and a half before Vern was born.

To some degree, I suppose When Once Destroyed is the story of why… why I've never felt like I totally belonged anywhere. Maybe where I belong was taken away from me a long time ago. Perhaps I'm not alone in that.

Along with the political focus, I believe that "rural-ties" (do we even have a name?) should be making connections to real rural culture issues, not the phony "family values" bullshit, but what is real and especially what our children know is real abut rural culture.

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