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Happy Writers: The Fort San and Sage Hill Experiences

DAVE MARGOSHES

THERE MUST HAVE BEEN HUNDREDS OF CLIMACTIC MOMENTS – *epiphanies*, to use a word writers are fond of – for the thousands of budding artists who passed through the haunted halls and hills of the old tuberculosis sanatorium that came to be known as Fort San – and, by its writers, as Fort Sanity.

For Byrna Barclay, that moment came on a hot August afternoon in 1975, her third time at the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts. Barclay had been making up stories since childhood but only came to writing seriously in her thirties. She was struggling with the first draft of a novel, what would eventually become published as *The Summer of the Hungry Pup*, a story set in the Cree world a hundred years earlier. That morning visiting lecturer Rudy Wiebe had stomped Barclay into the dirt. She vividly recalls that moment in the prose workshop, when the Governor General’s Literary Award-winning novelist smacked her manuscript “with his bearpaw hand. ‘The nerve of her,’ he said. Whap! ‘The gall of her.’ Thwack! ‘To attempt something so ambitious in a first novel.’ Then all morning he tore it apart.” Each time Wiebe hit the manuscript “he smacked my heart.”

When the workshop broke for lunch, Barclay fled “down the pathway along the houses that used to be residences of doctors for the sanatorium, to the schoolhouse where Cree children with TB were taught.” There, in a buffalo wallow, she sat down to cry. Eventually, she headed back to the residence and bumped into Ken Mitchell, the Regina novelist and playwright who was mentor to many Regina writers and ran the summer school’s writing program. They “sat in the ditch, pulling up dandelions,” and she poured her bruised heart out to him.

The harder I bawled the more Ken laughed, rolling over and kicking his heels in the air. Finally, he became deadly serious

and told me that I had come up against the big question: did I want to become a literary writer, and if I did how badly did I want it, and was I willing to take all the rejection that comes with it.

I knew the answer. I pulled myself together, marched back to the residence, banged on Rudy's door, and when he opened it I stuck out my chin and said, "I'm here to take more." He let me in, and we started to work on the manuscript."

The story has the ring of the apocryphal about it, but Barclay – who followed Wiebe back to Edmonton to do graduate work in creative writing with him at the University of Alberta – swears it's true. "I became a writer that day, truly."

Over the twenty-three years that the summer school operated at Fort San, 1967 to 1989, many writers were born, some of them through the harsh crucible of tough love that Barclay endured, others through gentler nurturing.

Saskatoon novelist David Carpenter, for example, recalls some bruising encounters with Bob Kroetsch, another of Fort San's heavy-weight instructors, after Carpenter gave Kroetsch "a hastily written,... ill-conceived story. He picked it up in front of everybody in the class and said, 'Carpenter, that's just not goddamn good enough,' and he throws it on the floor." Carpenter pauses to reflect.

You know, I suppose I could have resented that, but I could see he was doing that out of love, he was really doing his job, he was offering serious criticism, he was taking me seriously, he was expecting a hell of a lot of me.

Finally, when I wrote something he liked, I really knew that he meant it, and I took that encouragement through all the tough years to follow.

Saskatoon poet Liz Philips, who arrived at Fort San as a seventeen-year-old wannabe writer from Winnipeg in 1979, describes the

teaching style she encountered as “not nurturing so much as body checks in hockey. You’re skating badly, wham. So you skate better. But it wasn’t mean-spirited, it was very generous. The whole atmosphere was ‘we’re here for a serious reason, and we’re not mollycoddling anybody just to encourage the notion that they’re a writer.’ A very invigorating atmosphere.”

Of course, not every interaction at Fort San was positive. One well-respected writer recalls being told by an instructor she’d rather not name, who took an aversion to what she was writing, “You must stop writing at once. We don’t need your kind of writing.” Fortunately, she ignored this acerbic advice, though she believes some people in her group, who received similar acid-drenched feedback, did stop writing.



Today the old sanatorium, which opened in 1917, is shuttered and crumbling, invigorating no more.

After the Saskatchewan Arts Board, which ran the increasingly pricey summer school, closed it in 1989, the government operated the facility as a conference centre, but it proved to be a financial vacuum, its ancient buildings rapidly deteriorating.

It was sold in 2006 to a developer who planned to raze the old buildings, their windows broken or boarded, and build a condominium complex on the heavily treed, hilly site overlooking Echo Lake. Those plans didn’t come to fruition, and the site has changed hands more than once. Some of the buildings have been demolished, others, designated as heritage sites (including the rambling main sanatorium, in which hundreds of tuberculosis patients coughed and wheezed, many of them dying), seem untouched except by vandals and weather. A sign proclaiming “No trespassing” stands at the entrance to the sanatorium grounds.

But the torch lit on those rambling, bucolic grounds still burns brightly a hundred kilometres or so west in another part of the scenic Qu’Appelle Valley at the Sage Hill Writing Experience, the now twenty-year-old writing school that rose out of the ashes of the Summer School of the Arts.

Carpenter and Philips are among a handful of writers whose writ-

ing careers started at Fort San and who have been on faculty at Sage Hill, including poetry luminary Lorna Crozier, Giller Prize winner Bonnie Burnard and Bob Currie, a recent Saskatchewan poet laureate. Bob Kroetsch too bridged both schools. Although there are plenty of differences between the arts school at Fort San, with its rich mix of disciplines – dancers, musicians, painters as well as writers – and a wide age range, and Sage Hill’s more tightly focused concentration on writing, Kroetsch, one of the grand old men of Canadian letters, liked to emphasize the similarities: “At Fort San, at Sage Hill, we danced, we talked, we loved, we wrote,” he said in an interview shortly before his death in 2011, with the same twinkle in his eye that beguiled so many young writers – especially young women. “Writing and living came into blissful conjugation. Yes, we became a rarity; we became happy writers.”

Happy writers. What a concept. Aren’t writers supposed to suffer for their art, to create their works of genius out of their own misery?

Well, sometimes. But they have to learn their craft first, and learning it in a supportive environment in which criticism is unvarnished but constructive can make a writer happy. Riotously so sometimes.



Geoffrey Ursell, the novelist and playwright whose career has been inextricably linked with the development of Coteau Books, the publishing company he and others dreamed up at Fort San, puts it succinctly as he recalls his early years at the summer school: “We were exactly where we wanted to be: with writing friends, with a wonderful and exacting teacher, with day after day of productive work, shaping words into stories. It was inspiring and tremendously important to our development as writers.”

Carpenter explains the need and the process. When he started writing in the mid-1970s, soon after arriving in Saskatoon with a freshly minted doctorate to teach English at the University of Saskatchewan, he “began to look around for the kind of support you need as a writer,” which meant getting “criticism from a real pro. I realized I was surrounded by people who did not understand this neurotic need to write, and I wanted to talk to other writers.”

He'd met the poet Anne Szumigalski, who introduced him to a number of other writers who all gave him the same advice: "Go to Fort San.' It sounded like the words of the prophet. The next summer I went to Fort San, and that was the first bit of support I found. I was suddenly surrounded by people... who didn't question what I was doing at all. Suddenly, there was a community there."



It's hard to overestimate the importance of Fort San to the development of what might be called a "Saskatchewan literature." It was the place where a whole generation of writers came of age – almost every Saskatchewan writer of note above the age of fifty attended the summer school – and where writing groups were formed, publishing ventures hatched and plans for the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild first laid. "Essentially, there's no history of writing in Saskatchewan before the establishment of the summer school," says Ken Mitchell. "Before that, all you have is individual writers, isolated writers like Sinclair Ross, W.O. Mitchell [no relation to Ken], who probably never really did much writing in Saskatchewan, Ed McCourt,... people like that. They probably never even knew each other."

Establishment of the Saskatchewan Arts Board in 1949, with a grant of a mere \$2,500 from the government, went a long way toward changing the perception, as Mitchell puts it, "that we lived in a cultural wasteland." Carlyle King, a University of Saskatchewan English professor who was himself a writer, "had a lot to do with initiating writing instruction programs" and preparing little publications on writing that the Arts Board published. Mitchell won an SAB-sponsored story-writing contest in 1967, judged by King, and the story's publication in a chapbook helped to launch his career. "When I started out, there were no publishers here, there were no theatre companies, there was nothing.... Almost all of the infrastructure for the writing community, and the community itself, flowed out of Fort San."



The Saskatchewan Arts Board was conducting creative writing and

drama workshops in Fort Qu'Appelle as early as 1952, just three years after the board was created by Tommy Douglas's CCF government, with a mandate of bringing arts instruction to Saskatchewan residents. The writing workshops were led by W.O. Mitchell, no less, at the Valley Centre, a motley collection of Second World War airplane hangars. The Weyburn native, who caused a sensation with his Saskatchewan-based novel *Who Has Seen the Wind* and his series of radio plays and short stories about *Jake and the Kid*, was touted by the arts board as "one of Canada's outstanding young writers."

In 1953, there was a sweet synergy in the valley, with Mitchell leading fifteen "ardent students," as the arts board's annual report described them, while right next door a high school drama workshop was putting on a play of one of the Jake scripts.

Jean Freeman, a Regina actress and writer who would later work for the arts board, was there, acting in the play. Still attending high school in Weyburn, Freeman was "thrilled" to meet Mitchell, who hailed from her hometown. Taking those classes, acting in the Mitchell play and meeting the great author himself all conspired to cement in her mind the notion that she could be an artist, she recalls. "I could see that I could do it." Freeman was only one of hundreds of young people who would have that experience in the years to come.

In 1966, the arts board consolidated the writing and drama workshops and a summer music camp for kids, added painting and brought some 300 students together for three weeks at the Briercrest Bible Institute in Caronport under the rubric, for the first time, of the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts. Plans were already afoot to move into Fort San the following summer with a four-week program and to both expand the school's range of offerings and grow it into a year-round operation.

What had changed was the election in 1964 of a Liberal government under Ross Thatcher. The following summer the new premier paid a visit to the band camp, eating hot dogs with the students and listening to them perform. On the drive home, according to arts board lore, he turned to a staffer and said, "That's not good enough for our kids."

Within days, apparently, cabinet met and came up with the idea of handing the Fort Qu'Appelle sanatorium, winding down its operations,

over to the arts board to turn it into a school along the lines of what was then developing at the Banff Centre in Alberta. The arts board's budget was more than doubled from about \$141,000 in 1965 to \$332,000, and it would continue to rise rapidly for the next two decades, until the economy turned sour in Saskatchewan. The summer school got the lion's share of the SAB's budget, much of it going into renovation projects at the aging facility.

In its first year at Fort San – the same year Canadians were focused on the 1967 Expo celebrating the nation's centennial – the school offered 500 students four weeks of classes in writing, band, string and choral music, acting, directing, painting, ceramics – and bagpiping. The bands, choral groups, drummers and pipers would provide the soundtrack for the Fort San story.

The following year there were classes for seven weeks, with students from 120 Saskatchewan communities plus communities in Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and several US states. In 1969, the school drew 900 students, and its renovated dormitory and dining hall facilities could handle over 250 at a time.

The school hit its peak in 1974, when 1,350 students attended. The next year some courses were offered in the fall and winter, and the word *summer* was dropped from the school's name. Over the next dozen years or so, attendance went up and down, but the dream of a full-time arts school never came to fruition.

By 1989, with the once-generous Conservative government of Grant Devine tightening its spending, the arts board's budget had mushroomed to \$4.5 million, with a deficit of almost \$1 million. The board announced "it could no longer fund the school, and [it] was regretfully withdrawing its future financial support."

That sent shock waves through the province's tightly knit writing community.



In all the years of the early workshops, with W.O. Mitchell and U of S professors Edward McCourt and Jim MacNeill at the front of the class, and even the first few years at Fort San, with Saskatoon's Glen Sorestad,

few if any students went on to be writers of note.

Sorestad, and Bob Currie after him, taught mostly teenagers in an introductory class. “They were all, as I recall, very nice kids, as teens go, and were generally all the ‘cream of the crop’ academically, very intelligent kids who could write well,” Sorestad says. “But most of them were not driven with any fire or passion to write.”

That all started to change in the early 1970s as the summer school’s writing program, and the Saskatchewan writing community, entered a golden period.

Ken Mitchell, then starting a teaching career at the University of Regina, was a key player. He enjoyed telling his students he’d once been turned down by his namesake, W.O. Mitchell, for a spot in the old writing workshops because he “wasn’t good enough” and had decided to prove him wrong. The younger Mitchell was brought in to lead the creative writing workshop in 1970, and that summer “became a magic time in the valley, where the ‘new generation’ hatched.” It was a summer that lasted two decades, as Fort San was transformed, in Mitchell’s words, into “a prairie legend, a Woodstock on the Qu’Appelle River.” Mitchell directed the expanding program for six years, recruiting first Saskatchewan talents Szumigalski and Currie, later luring bigger names Kroetsch, Wiebe and Eli Mandel to Fort San. Those five and many others left an indelible stamp on the school and the students they worked with.

Szumigalski, in an interview shortly before her death in 1999, reminisced about her first summer at Fort San, when she had only three students. “I was the first to teach only poetry, so it was still a new idea.” She recalled with a laugh how she was introduced at a faculty meeting as “one of the ladies in charge of poetry.” I immediately said that I wasn’t a lady, that I wasn’t in charge of poetry and [that] there was only one of me.”

Among other big-name writers who taught at Fort San over the next two decades were Clark Blaise, Lorna Crozier, Gary Geddes, Robert Harlow, Paul Hiebert, Jack Hodgins, Hugh Hood, Gary Hyland, Paulette Jiles, Patrick Lane, John Newlove, Leon Rooke, Joe Rosenblatt, Andreas Schroeder, Lois Simmie, Robin Skelton, Seán Virgo, Dianne Warren and Gordon Lish, the notorious New

York editor whose career was so closely linked to that of Raymond Carver.

Some of the fledgling writers drawn to Fort San by those names, including several who were later instructors themselves (such as Carpenter, Crozier and Ven Begamudré), were Edna Alford, Sandra Birdsell, Bonnie Burnard, Anne Campbell, Maria Campbell, Warren Cariou, Joanne Gerber, Lee Gowan, Connie Gault, Dennis Gruending, Gary Hyland, Terry Jordan, Barbara Klar, Pat and Judith Krause, Shelley Leedahl, Tim Lilburn, Brenda Niskala, Bruce Rice, Brenda Riches, Barbara Sapergia, Lois Simmie, Gertrude Story and Paul Wilson – all of whom went on to have literary careers and play important roles in the Saskatchewan writing scene. They and many others form a veritable who's who of late-twentieth-century Saskatchewan writing.

Currie, who first went to Fort San to teach an introductory creative writing course in 1972, and later was a student in Kroetsch's prose group, recalls that in his first year he was on his own, teaching in a little red brick schoolhouse on the back meadow of the sanatorium grounds. But by the next year, "all of a sudden all these classes were going on at the same time. I was still doing the intro class, I think someone was doing a poetry class. Ken [Mitchell] was teaching a university credit class in creative writing for high school teachers." That was Crozier's introduction to the summer school. Married and using her husband's last name of Uher then, Crozier was a teacher in Swift Current who'd gone to a workshop of Mitchell's and found encouragement. "I've never seen a person in my life get good as fast as she did," Currie says. "It was a two-week class, I think, and she was ordinary at the start, but by the end she was already wonderful." He loved "the spontaneity of the place." All the adults, students and faculty were in the same residence, and "someone would write a poem, and they'd walk across the hall and get instant feedback."

In 1975, Currie recalls, he and others, Kroetsch and Crozier among them, began meeting in his room. "We were enjoying it so much we wanted more." He remembers Stephen Scriver "reading a poem that used a metaphor of knight in shining armour to describe a hockey player. It was an OK poem, with some good moments, but nothing

memorable. Then Kroetsch asked him why he didn't describe him as a hockey player." It was one of those *ab-ha* moments, an epiphany that led to the series of hockey poems that became Scriver's book *All-Star Poet!*, a best selling Coteau Books title.

Passions seemed always to have been on the boil at Fort San, at least in the memories of those who were there. Passion – and riotous behaviour. "There was a lot of youthful enthusiasm at Fort San," Judith Krause remembers, "a lot of testosterone, a lot of hijinks." Myrna Kostash, the prize-winning non-fiction writer from Edmonton, describes it as having been "pretty wild and woolly." Anne Szumigalski famously led her group of poets – and some hanger-on African drummers – on a skinny-dipping expedition in Echo Lake, shocking the school's administrators.

Pat Krause, who won the new W.O. Mitchell Bursary in her first year, 1975, becoming the first in a long line of "wombats" (W.O. Mitchell Bursary Award Turkey), a tradition continued at Sage Hill – was paid \$200 to be "den mother" to the writers, and later she was the coordinator of the writing program for several years. She loves to tell the story of how she organized a starlight march by the writers from their quarters to the front gate led by a friendly bagpiper. When the noisy march passed by the quarters of youngsters, way past their curfew, Fort San director Jim Ellmers blew his stack. Krause mustered up all her courage and told Ellmers, a large man, "Don't worry, I've got them under control." As for being a "wombat," Krause says "It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I might not have kept writing otherwise."

Currie remembers a talented grade ten kid named Harry in his group who somehow was put into the adult residence. "He hung out with us, we'd take him to the bar, we took him everywhere," Currie recalls. "Kroetsch said to him one night, 'Harry, the rest of your life is going to be anticlimactic.'"

There were love affairs and short-term trysts galore – Carpenter describes the environment as charged: "The whole landscape of Fort San, with all its artists and musicians and poets, was so eroticized, everything was erotic. It was as if the life force was there among us." Reg Silvester recalls typing late at night to the rhythmic accompaniment of

creaking bedsprings from above.

Then there were the ghosts. People heard odd noises, they saw flashes through the corners of their eyes, furniture appeared to have been moved – and in the context of the old sanatorium, where corpses were said to have been trundled down subterranean tunnels to a morgue to avoid upsetting patients, it became easy to believe in ghosts. One famous chilly June evening in 1980, in the writers' lounge in Great Bear Lodge, which had been the nurses' residence, involved a Ouija board and a message from spirits who spelled out the word rage. It scared the wits out of many of the writers, who pulled their mattresses and blankets down to the lounge so they could all sleep together in front of the fireplace. One writer, now dead, told friends of waking up in his room to find “an old crone” sitting beside his bed who asked “Are you warm enough?” “We had to stop the séances because they were creating havoc,” Carpenter remembers.

And there were arguments.

Novelist Wiebe sparked a near riot between the poets (led by Crozier) and the fiction writers – at least that's the way some people remember it – when he proclaimed that “making a poem is like carving a cherry stone, a novel like building a bridge.” It's actually a lovely metaphor, but the thin-skinned poets apparently took umbrage. Another time Wiebe and Kroetsch, who was fond of saying “We are all living a novel here,” were arguing so loudly at a Fort Qu'Appelle bar they were threatened with expulsion.

Softball teams were organized to compete in slo-pitch tournaments along the valley, at nearby Standing Buffalo Reserve and in the village of Lipton. One of those tournaments was immortalized by Currie in his short story “How I Became a Poet” (in *Things You Don't Forget*), a rollicking yarn about a squad of poets who take on a tough team from a nearby Indian reserve. It's not exactly great literature, but Currie sparks a catcher's mitt full of guffaws while poking fun at his former Fort San classmates.

Among the things that made Fort San so memorable for so many writers – beautiful location and relatively cheap cost among them – was the mix of ages (teenagers and adults) and mix of disciplines. In addition to writers, there were painters, singers, musicians, dancers,

photographers, potters and a host of other artists all jostling for space at the dining hall tables.

Currie says the “interaction between the art forms was terrific.” He remembers writers working with a drum group, conducting readings with drumming and writer-photographer collaborations. “People were always talking to each other, it was a creative stew.”

The summer school was obviously of central importance to the development of Saskatchewan writing but also, Mitchell argues, to “the social history of the Qu’Appelle Valley itself.” That sentiment is echoed by Donna Caruso, who, with her husband, ran Spike’s Pizza, a popular hangout for the writers and other students.

A writer, performer and filmmaker who took classes at Fort San in several disciplines, Caruso believes that the writing program benefited greatly from the rich soup of other arts in which it swam.

At Fort San, each of the arts was inspirational to the others, not separated, but part of a glorious artistic mixture beyond just band camp for youth, jazz for the musically hip or bagpipes for the musically hearty. There was writing for stage going on across the lawn from where musical theatre was being taught. Poetry was written alongside youthful ballerinas who practised en pointe. The ages of students and teachers represented a broad spectrum of the populace as well as a broad spectrum of ability. Students could see themselves at another time of their lives in another discipline.

Residents of the town of Fort Qu’Appelle also benefited, Caruso says: “The arts were not contained to Fort San any more than they were contained to their specialized discipline.” Townspeople enjoyed “free poetry, short-story and playwriting readings every week, performances of new musical arrangements, dances, musical theatre. Bagpipers had a yearly summer parade, and tuba concerts were held outdoors on Main Street on Sunday afternoon. It was glorious while it lasted. It was a tragedy when it stopped.”

Although years later Caruso attended writing classes at Sage Hill, her experience there just couldn’t live up to what she’d had at Fort San,

where “we worked hard, but we had a lot more fun, and there was a lot more going on.... It was energizing to be there. Not just because there was serious writing happening, but because so much serious and fabulous work in the arts was happening.”



Flash forward to 2009, and move some 100 kilometres west to Lumsden, northwest of Regina in the Qu'Appelle Valley, where the Sage Hill Writing Experience is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. As usual, there are six programs going on at Sage Hill's home at the St. Michael's Retreat during the last ten days of July, with faculty including David Carpenter, poets Karen Solie and Daphne Marlatt, novelist Catherine Bush and much-lauded young adult writer Arthur Slade. They're joined this year by Richard Ford, the Pulitzer Prize-winning American author with more than a passing interest in Saskatchewan, a special guest to mark the anniversary. More than a few of the writers who come to hear Ford speak are alumni not only of Sage Hill but also of Fort San. This year, 2014, will be Sage Hill's twenty-fifth.

A couple of generations of Saskatchewan writers had cut their teeth at the beloved Fort San and were horrified at the province's loss when it closed. Whenever writers got together that summer of 1989 – before the official announcement of the closure but with rumours flying – the loss of Fort San and the possibility of a new writing school were bandied about. In late fall, Ven Begamudré, a Regina writer who was then president of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, and Pam Bjornson, its executive director at the time, wrote to a couple dozen high-profile writers inviting them to a meeting in Davidson to discuss the possibility of starting a writing school to replace Fort San. A dozen or so people showed up. Begamudré remembers that he opened the meeting by asking if there was in fact any interest in starting a school. “Someone [he can't recall if it was Anne Szumigalski or Gertrude Story]) said, ‘Well, we're here, aren't we?’ And that was that.”

A steering committee was formed, and Saskatoon writer Steven Ross Smith was quickly hired to run the show. A location for the school was found at an abandoned military base, part of the old DEW line of

radar installations, at a place called Sagehill, near Bruno, not too far east of Saskatoon. Poet Gary Hyland suggested the word *experience* be added to the name. After three years, Sage Hill moved into the more modern, and definitely more comfortable, St. Michael's, a former Franciscan monastery, while keeping the military base's name.

Smith recalls that he “had no idea what it would become.” A poet with a background in television and video production, he'd moved from Toronto to Saskatoon a few years earlier after attending a writers' colony and falling in love with Saskatchewan. A stint as writer-in-residence in Weyburn, during which he put together a writers' festival, and some earlier literary event organizing in Toronto gave him the chops for the job. “My normal MO when given a task is to put my nose down and go for it,” Smith says. “The only thing I had in the way of vision was to find some money and make it a national thing. The board wanted to make sure it had more than just a Saskatchewan focus.” Considering that he wasn't hired till late December and the first program was just six months away, he was “surprised by how smoothly things went.”

The SWG gave the new organization a \$3,500 forgivable loan – never repaid – and Fort San scholarships that had been administered by the guild were transferred to Sage Hill. The arts board chipped in a small grant, and altogether it was enough to run a small program for one summer. None of the founders knew if Sage Hill would last longer than that. The first year, 1990, there were three programs, two in fiction and one in poetry, led by Edna Alford, David Arnason and Sharon Thesen, conducted over an intense, heady five days.

“Our plan was to run it just for one year and see what happened,” says Begamudré, who in 1990 became Sage Hill's first president. “And that first year was pretty lean. But it was a success, so we decided to go year by year.”

There was “an obvious hunger” for what Sage Hill was offering, Smith says, and “not a lot of competition in those days.” The arts board, perhaps feeling twinges of guilt over closing the summer school, was keen to see it keep going.

By the second year, with better funding established, the program had been extended to a full week (in another few years, it was stretched to ten days), and two more sessions had been added, including an

introductory workshop. In the years since, over 200 fledgling writers from all over the country have gotten their first real taste of the craft they love in that intro course alone. They've been joined by hundreds of other, more experienced writers, taking more advanced courses in fiction and poetry and rotating workshops in children's writing, non-fiction and drama.

An auxiliary program, the two-week-long spring poetry colloquium, originally held at St. Peter's Monastery near Humboldt, followed the summer program to St. Michael's after several years. Sage Hill organized writing camps for teenagers have been held in libraries in Regina and Saskatoon since the second year, with Moose Jaw and, more recently, La Ronge added as well.

The decision to make Sage Hill a separate entity, rather than an arm of the SWG, was deliberate, Begamudré says. "We didn't want Sage Hill's fortunes tied to the guild's."

Although the tradition at Fort San was one of inclusiveness, in which few applicants were turned away, Sage Hill, Begamudré says, "was never meant to be for the occasional writer. It's elitist in that only the best get in, and I don't apologize for that."

Indeed, right from the start, it was decided that each workshop level would have entrance criteria and that applicants would be screened by independent juries. And, again right from the start, Sage Hill cast a wider net than Fort San's writing program had cast. Although up to a third of every year's crop is from Saskatchewan, and the major funder continues to be the Saskatchewan Arts Board, participants have come from all over Canada, including the territories, and a handful from the United States. As at Fort San, faculty have been recruited from the best writers in Saskatchewan and across the country. Among them have been Governor General's Literary Award winners such as Kroetsch, Crozier and Lane, Guy Vanderhaeghe, Dianne Warren, Jane Urquhart, Tim Lilburn, Erin Mouré, Don McKay, Fred Wah, Art Slade, Nicole Brossard, Colleen Murphy, John Pass, Rosemary Sullivan and George Elliott Clarke. There have been numerous other writers, including Begamudré, Sandra Birdsell, Marilyn Bowering, Di Brandt, Bonnie Burnard, Sharon Butala, Terry Jordan, Janice Kulyk Keefer, John Murrell and John Steffler, who went on to become poet laureate of Canada.

Lisa Moore, a Giller Prize nominee, Griffin Prize-winning poet Sylvia Legris and GG drama-winner Vern Thiessen top the list of students that now numbers in the hundreds. Others include a trio of former poets laureate – Louise Halfe and Bob Currie (Saskatchewan) and Lorri Neilsen Glenn (Halifax) – and a double fistful of Saskatchewan Book Award winners, including Brenda Baker, Sheri Benning, Pam Bustin, Donna Caruso, Hilary Clark, Bernice Friesen, Larry Gasper, Joanne Gerber, Eric Greenway, Trevor Herriot, Gerry Hill, Alice Kuipers, Alison Lohans, Anne McDonald, J. Jill Robinson, Leona Theis, Dan Tysdal and Paul Wilson.

As a relative newcomer to Saskatchewan, Smith had never attended the summer school, “but I’d certainly heard the tales of Fort San. I knew it had kick-started the careers of so many Saskatchewan writers, and I knew its values.”

Judith Krause, who led one of the last intro groups at Fort San and the first at Sage Hill, says she saw little difference in the students she had at the two different schools, though she believes “the calibre of students in general has grown as writing programs in the province and across the country have grown.”

Krause was writing-programs coordinator at Fort San for several years, following in the footsteps of her mother, Pat, as well as being both student and teacher there, and, after teaching at Sage Hill for three years, she was a member of its board. She knows both schools well and has given a lot of thought to what was gained and what was lost in the change from one to the other.

At Fort San, she notes, “we always had to accommodate the needs of other members of the arts community and deal with the distraction they caused, though those distractions were often exciting and enriching. Sage Hill is able to put greater focus on the development of craft and more professionalism.”

Krause, for one, is sanguine about the changeover. By the time Fort San closed, “the writing community had developed a sufficient infrastructure that we felt confident something would come along to replace it. We absorbed it and carried on.” But she agrees with Caruso that something valuable disappeared. “It’s still a shame that that whole rich world was lost. The excitement of Fort San came from being able to

throw yourself into a total world of art, submerge yourself in it. It was important culturally.”

Looking back more than thirty years to when she first attended the summer school as a student, Krause says “Fort San happened at a time when we were still adolescents; the writing community in Saskatchewan was not yet mature.” So many of the people there were so young, in their twenties and thirties, and a lot of money was being put into culture in Saskatchewan and across Canada, she notes. “There was an explosion of Canadian literature. In Saskatchewan, there was a lack of sophistication. We didn’t feel we were in the same league as some of the rest of the country, but we wanted to be. I don’t know how we knew, but we felt we were part of something important.” Sage Hill, she says, is more appropriate to the stage of development Saskatchewan writing is now in. “After the excitement of adolescence, you hunker down to the business of being an adult.”

Krause’s view is shared by Myrna Kostash, who taught at both Fort San – when she was “a newly fledged writer” of only one book – and Sage Hill:

I have the impression now, with a long retrospective view, that Fort San was much more open to beginning or wannabe writers and to inexperienced instructors (perhaps it was the zeitgeist) than has been the case at Sage Hill. The facilities and administrative support at Sage Hill are excellent, but there was something attractively summer-campish about Fort San’s ambience and attitude. But perhaps it could all be explained by the difference between the experience of youth versus middle age.

If Sage Hill isn’t quite the magical place that Fort San was – at least in memory – it certainly has produced its share of magical moments. For Lorri Neilsen Glenn, her experience there was “northern lights, early morning walks in the hayfield, the smell of sage.... Life-changing words from Marilyn Dumont, support from the spirited and generous Betsy Warland and a turn on the dance floor with Robert Kroetsch.” Neilsen Glenn, who grew up in Saskatchewan but had lived elsewhere

for years, felt “in that setting – for the first time in years – a reconnection with the air and the land I’d grown up knowing. Sage Hill was my own particular *Seed Catalogue* [a reference to Kroetsch’s groundbreaking book of poetry], and I’ve drawn from it ever since.”

Michael V. Smith, a poet and novelist now teaching creative writing at the University of British Columbia’s Kelowna campus, was “a twenty-one-year-old homo in love with Lorna Crozier” when he went to Sage Hill in the early 1990s. “Sometimes I get a flash of that place,” he says, “the coyotes at night, the round bubble of the prairie sky, the pitch-darkness of night – because I was never more happy to be somewhere.”

Meals, taken communally in the dining hall, were Smith’s favourite time:

because I could sidle up alongside Guy Vanderhaeghe and listen to him spin out some riotous story. I returned home and found every tale he told was untellable. He’d put a secret nuance in the story, which I could never get right. It was my first time noticing story wasn’t in the plot but the shaded detail. Sage Hill gave me permission to do this crazy thing, because other people were doing it too, and I’d met them.

It’s easy to find testimonials to Sage Hill – the place has just as many fans as Fort San had. The kudos can be simple, like that of Calgary writer Betty Jane Hegerat, who says Sage Hill “was germane to the life” of her published books, a story collection, two novels and a work of creative non-fiction, and has been “enormously important to me as a writer.” Some are near sublime. Winnipeg fiction writer Dave Elias has been to Sage Hill four times, each one memorable, he says.

Sage Hill never got old for me. I remember being excited each time. Arrived with a sense of purpose, with anticipation for the people I would meet, the things I would learn, everything I would take back with me. Maybe it was just because I need a lot of affirmation as a writer that I went so many times, but I like to think it was because I learned so much each time.

Kelly Cooper, now living and writing in New Brunswick, was a young teacher from Turtleford when she took the intro workshop in 1993. “What I remember best is the constant buzz of excitement I felt,” she says.

The desire to write stories didn’t come to me until I was well into my twenties. Until Sage Hill, writing had been for me a completely solitary pursuit. I shared it with no one and felt I didn’t need anyone’s company. There was pleasure enough in writing itself. Sage Hill showed me there could also be pleasure and satisfaction in working with another writer.

Cooper, who published a short-story collection to good reviews a decade later, says she still uses some of “the tricks” she learned at Sage Hill: “I remember I’d created this character, a woman named Irene, who was sitting beside her comatose sister’s hospital bed. I wrote a really long, complex flashback for Irene. I was quite proud of it.” Her workshop leader “read it and said, ‘She needs to get up and go for a cup of coffee.’ With that single sentence, he taught me how to anchor a story in the present. When editing my work today, I always ask myself, ‘Does anyone in this story need to get up and go for a cup of coffee?’”

Susan McMaster, an Ottawa poet with several books published, came to Sage Hill’s fall poetry colloquium to work with GG winner Fred Wah “because I was stuck – stuck in the mud of a hundred-plus poems that just didn’t make it – they weren’t alive. And I didn’t know how to fix them. I knew I’d come to some kind of dead end and had no idea how to go forward.” She asked Wah for the truth and got it, right between the eyes, just as Barclay had got it from Wiebe thirty years earlier: “‘This is boring.’ Ouch! Flinch! But my gut agreed.” With Wah’s help, she shaped a book that was short listed for two good awards and that she believes is her best. “This is what an insightful, attentive teacher, who cares about both poet and poetry, can do,” McMaster says. “Sage Hill came at the right time for me and made all the difference.”

Red Deer poet Kim Beach, who might be the ultimate Sage Hill

groupie, having attended five times and been on faculty as co-leader of the intro group, remembers best her first experience, taking the intro workshop with Bill Robertson and Rosemary Nixon in 1995. But she learned the most from Friar Lucien, a Franciscan living at St. Michael's and an amateur astronomer who invited the writers to visit his hobby observatory. "That first night a couple dozen of us rotated toward the telescope for a few seconds of gazing," Beach remembers. "The second night perhaps a half dozen of us remained. By the third or fourth night, I was the only one hanging about. When Friar Lucien came into my life (or rather when I invaded his), I was beyond ready to learn more about the night sky from someone who only wanted to teach me about it." By day, she "worked hard: writing, critiquing the work of the other participants and soaking up the knowledge of our instructors. I made it to the morning sessions, but sometimes just barely and a bit bleary. Friar Lucien and I were regularly stargazing until 3 a.m." Beach attributes the beginnings of what was to become her first book to "the friar's generosity and my lack of sleep that summer. I was so tired and bent-necked and spaced-out those ten days that I believe I wrote from the foggy, uncensored spot in my mind which allowed me to write whatever I wanted and damn the consequences."

Although alumni of Sage Hill might be just as passionate about their experiences as those of Fort San, there's no denying the old Summer School of the Arts had a more profound effect on some of its graduates – but for reasons that had little to do with the craft of writing. "Fort Sanity is a place in all of our heads," Wiebe once wrote.

Liz Philips points out that Fort San "existed in a pre-AIDs, pre-political correctness era," recalling a drawing Patrick Lane once did "of a heap of nude, intertwined bodies; he called it 'Fort San.'" That apt metaphor wouldn't work for Sage Hill, she believes. "Fort San was an 'anything goes' sort of place." Sage Hill "is much tamer and more regulated."

Maybe, but Sage Hill has a similar magic, Bob Currie says. "People were really on a high" at Fort San in its heyday. "It was something miraculous. But no more so than at Sage Hill." He recalls – twenty years after teaching at Fort San – being in Janice Kulyk Keefer's Sage Hill fiction colloquium, "writing like mad, working all the time. Judy Krause

came up for a reading and commented that I was smiling all the time, and it was true, I was. I think young people at Sage Hill enjoy it just as much as we did at Fort San, get just as much out of it. It's every bit as special."

Recalling the Fort San of thirty-five years ago, Bob Kroetsch – "Old Buffalo," as Byrna Barclay called him – remembered best the dancing.

We danced in circles around Anne Szumigalski, who was a great dancer and a great poet. There at Fort San, in the 1970s, dancing and writing were reflections of each other, and we, the gathered writers, were at once inspired by the dance and doing the dancing, at once inspired by contemporary writing and doing the writing.

Our bodies did a lot of writing, there in those heady days of our youth. We talked and wrote poems and stories. We drank Saskatchewan beers in small Saskatchewan beer parlours. We made stories and made love and hardly seemed to sleep at all and wrote for long hours and shared our writings with each other and laughed and debated and made love in the ways that writers might make love.

As for Sage Hill, where Kroetsch led colloquia in both poetry and fiction years later,

we writers after a hard day's work gathered in the gracious lounge of St. Michael's Retreat and let the peace and stillness of the Qu'Appelle Valley renew our sense of vision. We watched the deer come out of their afternoon shade. We shared our bottles of wine. We shared incredibly delicious meals. We went out together to walk the labyrinth and pick saskatoons. We drove into Lumsden for a beer. Beer and the labyrinth, both inspired us. Steven Ross Smith inspired us into shared readings. We watched the lightning storms that followed on hot days and were inspired. We injured ourselves playing extreme Frisbee and turned that hot tumbling

into a fierce and enduring fellowship. Love sought out its many forms. Away from the world in that retreat, we imagined worlds of our own. We moulded together the imagined and the real, the quiet routine of days and the visions to be found in weather and words.

And, as Kroetsch has been quoted as saying before of both schools, “we danced, we talked, we loved, we wrote. Writing and living came into blissful conjugation. Yes, we became a rarity; we became happy writers.”