



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: John G Neihardt: Anniversary Tributes to Nebraska's Poet Laureate

Full Citation: "John G Neihardt: Anniversary Tributes to Nebraska's Poet Laureate," *Nebraska History* 62 (1981): 244-256

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1981Neihardt.pdf>

Date: 8/04/2014

Article Summary: A dinner in the State Capitol in Lincoln in 1981 marked the beginning of a year-long observance of the centennial of Neihardt's birth. Governor Charles Thone; Neihardt biographer Lucile F Aly; and Hilda Neihardt Petri, the poet's daughter, presented the tributes reprinted in this article.

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: Neihardt with daughter Enid in Bancroft about 1912; Hilda and Alice Neihardt, 1934; Governor Charles Thone; Neihardt in Sioux Prayer Garden of Neihardt Center, Bancroft



John G. Neihardt with daughter Enid about 1912, Bancroft.



Hilda (right) and Alice Neihardt, 1934.

John G. Neihardt: Centennial Anniversary Tributes To Nebraska's Poet Laureate

(The following three addresses were given at the January 8, 1981, Neihardt centennial dinner in the rotunda of the State Capitol in Lincoln by Nebraska Governor Charles Thone; Neihardt's daughter, Hilda Neihardt Petri; and Lucile F. Aly, University of Oregon professor and official Neihardt biographer. The dinner, honoring Nebraska Poet Laureate John G. Neihardt, who died in 1973, marked the beginning of 1981 observances of the 100th anniversary of Neihardt's birth.)

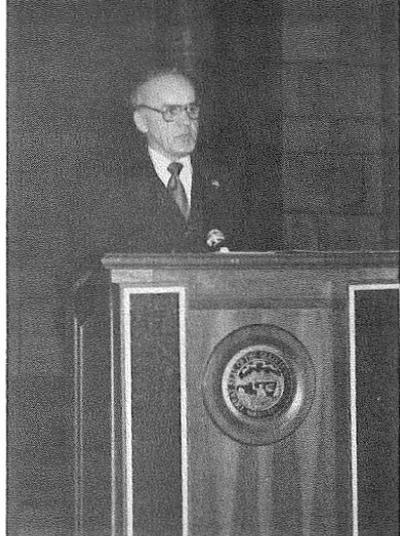
"THIS WAS NO ORDINARY MAN"

BY GOVERNOR CHARLES THONE

Most of us have gathered together many times at the feet of the literary giant whom we eulogize tonight. In the never-ending circle at Bancroft we have heard his voice sing and watched the expressions on his craggy face. It is no coincidence that we rendezvous again to share our personal recollections of John Gneisenau Neihardt on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

We are drawn to each other by the awesome experience of having known this man of great wisdom and love, philosopher, teacher, historian, dreamer, visionary, poet. He touched our lives. We have read and listened to his spellbinding words, words filled with wonder and insight, transforming the ordinary experiences of past, present, and future into the mystical. We have enjoyed the rare experience of walking beside this lover of the earth.

We recall his own words, expressing oneness with things of the earth: "I would sing as the prairie, as the prairie droning in the heat, satisfied, drowsy and mystical for I am part of the prairie kin to the wind and lightning." He was kin to the earth, yet his prose and poetry expressed mysterious sensitivity and universal wisdom. Hear his spirit sing: "O, I know in my heart in the sun



Governor Charles Thone

quicken'd blossoming soul of me. This something called self is a part, But the world is the whole of me.”

John Neihardt lived on the threshold between life as we know it and another much greater experience. “Death,” he said, “cannot rob me of life, I’ve already lived it. To grow old is the feeling you have been fulfilled. You need not be afraid of death. I believe it’s the most wonderful experience of life.”

This was no ordinary man. He secretly cherished the praise of a critic who called him the American Homer. Have we indeed heard the voice of an infinite Homer or Aeschylus? Yet he was a child of the prairies . . . close to the earth, joyful in rigorous activity. He wrote of toiling with hoe and rake in his garden: “Being in perfect physical condition, I enjoyed swinging the heavy hoe in the wilting heat of the afternoon under the white-hot glare of the sun. The good old biblical ‘sweat’ made me feel like a well-oiled engine, all steamed up and champing at the throttle.” With his remarkable vigor and brisk energy John Neihardt released his thoughts to higher plains. “Over-coming difficulties in one field of effort,” he explained, “releases power in another field. I could not have stood the hard work of my cycle of the west for 18 of the past 20 years, without the work in the soil. . . . It is a trick worth knowing.”

While a citizen of Nebraska he undertook his masterwork, *The Cycle of Epics*, to preserve for generations the mood of courage of the whole westward movement. He transferred its moments of sorrow, pain, beauty, happiness, and glories into epic adventure.

Proclaiming him Poet Laureate of Nebraska in 1921 the Nebraska Legislature recognized the great significance of this national epic saga. Legislative Resolution 36 of the 72nd Session of the Nebraska Unicameral declared:

John Neihardt has had a close connection with the growth and development of civilization and the development of literature. . . . [He] wrote a national epic wherein he developed the mood of courage with which our pioneers explored and subdued our plains, and thus inspired in Americans that love of the land and its heroes whereby great national traditions are built and perpetuated.

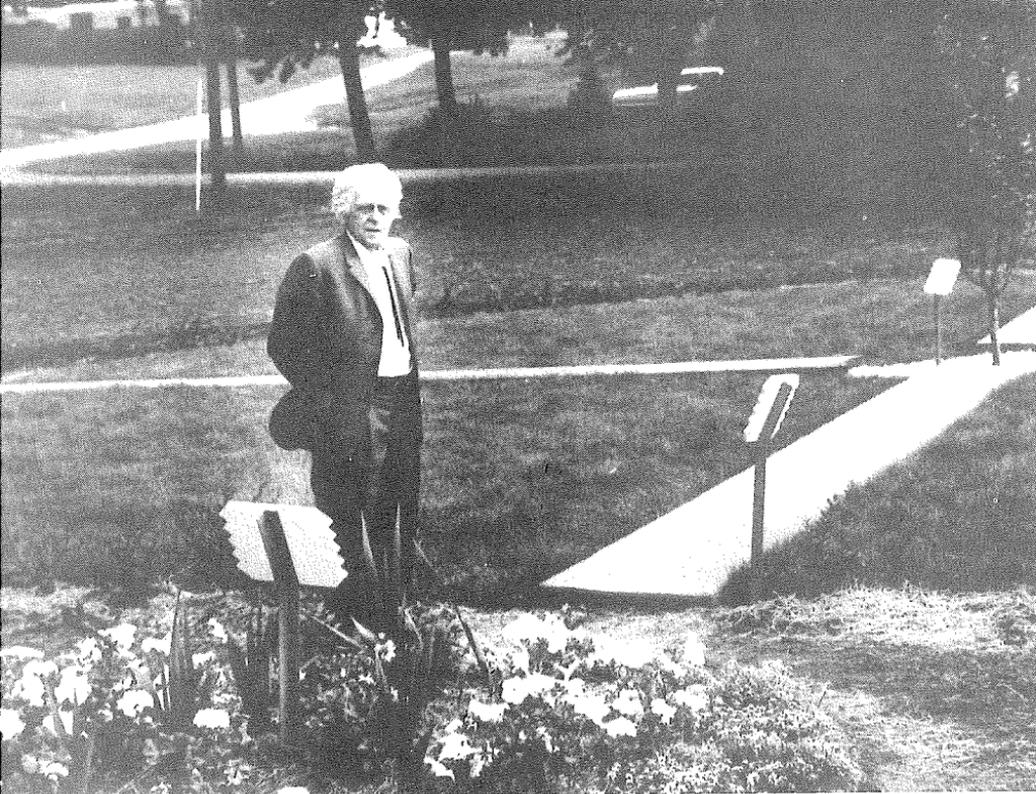
At the celebration of the 50th anniversary of his appointment as Poet Laureate our beloved friend, then 90 years old, told the Legislature. . . and the people of Nebraska: "When I was a youngster I became indebted to the world for the privilege of living in it. I felt I should give it more than it gave me. I became deeper in debt to the world all the time. . . And if there are any more turnouts like this one today, I think I would end up in joyous bankruptcy. The heart in me today is like a singing bird." His thoughts continue to sing to us. He is present in his words.

Long ago in an essay on John Neihardt's book of poems, Gerald Stanley Lee reflected on the timeless and classic nature of those words:

That first morning when the poems came I did not read them through. I was too happy in the middle of the book and in the middle of the idea that there could be such a book, not to go outdoors on the meadow and think about it. Think how there really was such a man, a latent, big contemporary, a possible classic, a man singing as if he were singing three thousand years ago or a thousand years on from today. . . And Think. . . There was a man like this in (the world). . . Not under a headstone visited by pilgrims and young ladies or in a classical dictionary, but walking about this minute, in the town of Bancroft, Nebraska.

In both word and deed Dr. Neihardt enriched our lives with love, warmth, faith, and courage. His work has brought meaning to many people. . . . Those at Bancroft who watched him in his early, highly-productive years and whose children and grandchildren keep alive and preserve those places in which he worked. Those old friends who loved his work and sustained him until his "Great Adventure" began. . . Those thousands of people to whom his great works have communicated that spirit and beauty of his vision. Those of us who have been honored to know him ever so slightly, to share his beautiful work and to occasionally see and feel the spark of eternity burning in this special man of God.

We shall rendezvous again to recite his poems, to speak of his wisdom, tender love, and to delight in his wit. We dare not forget him because he has so instructed:



John G. Neihardt in Sioux Prayer Garden of Neihardt Center, Bancroft.

When I am dead, and nervous hands have thrust
My body downward into careless dust:
I think the grave cannot suffice to hold
My spirit 'prisoned in the sunless mould!
Some subtle memory of you shall be
A resurrection of the life of me.
Yea, I shall be, because I love you so,
The speechless spirit of all things that grow. . .
You shall not touch a flower but it shall be
Like a caress upon the cheek of me.
I shall be patient in the common grass
that I may feel your footfall when you pass.
I shall be kind as rain and pure as dew,
A loving spirit 'round the life of you.
When your soft cheeks by odorous winds are fanned,
'Twill be my kiss—and you must understand.
But when some sultry, storm-bleared sun has set,
I will be lightning if you dare forget.

GIFTS FROM A MAGI

BY LUCILE F. ALY

In our tradition the Magi are the most famous bearers of gifts. We know little about the Magi, but we know that they were wise men who gained their wisdom by study, that they came a long hard way to present their gifts, and that the gifts they brought were of great value. We can be proud tonight—and grateful—to have come together to appreciate the gifts our Nebraska Magi has given us from his wisdom. He too came a long hard way.

One of Neihardt's gifts to us is history brought to life, so that we seem to be there at the scene, watching it happen. Historians have said this of Neihardt, as when Frederick Jackson Turner told two of his students, "The poet is the best historian." Neihardt shakes the dry dust out of history. His picture of Jed Smith and his men crossing South Pass, for example, one writer said was more real than the facts. We can *see* the men pause on their horses, not quite knowing why, and we share their feeling when:

Things got still
And sort of strange. The others, gathered round
Quit talking, and there wasn't any sound.

They had a sense of being on the "other side of things." Actually, it didn't happen like that. The men were tired and hungry; they had been out of food for several days, and one of the men had just shot a buffalo. Their minds were entirely on food, not on a significant moment of history; they did not know they had crossed the pass until afterward. But perhaps Neihardt's picture is truer, as Wallace Stegner thought, for crossing the pass was important, whether they were aware of it or not.

Neihardt makes us feel present at many moments: when Fetterman rides out with his men, and children watch wide-eyed, or when Colonel Forsyth at Beecher's Island, wounded, leans over to reassure a young soldier, "Son, you're doing well!" We see Indian women, "thrifty wives," after the destruction of Crazy Horse's village. . . .

Descending in a rage of common sense
Upon the wreck, collecting what would do
To fend the cold.

Neihardt makes us feel the terrible thirst of men who have gone

for days without water, the burning heat of the sun, the exhaustion of horses that collapse and die on the desert. We share the excitement of the men when they set out from St. Louis, singing as the boats start upriver; we share too their sober silence when they bury their first dead. Neihardt creates the background of events for us—the scenery. We can see the dazzle of mountains, the glitter of a full moon on rocky peaks; we feel the icy sting of blizzards, the soft air of spring in balmy weather. He gives us a new appreciation of the world we too often walk through without noticing.

Neihardt has given us another important gift in the new respect for our fellow-Americans, the Indians. In *The Song of the Indian Wars* they are fearsome fighters in their tossing war bonnets, but they are also men, fighting for the same ends as the white man's. We suffer with their women too, supporting their warriors but dreading war because to them it means children crying in the night. In his short stories and in the prose books, *Black Elk Speaks* and *When the Tree Flowered*, Neihardt shows us a culture in some ways more enlightened than our own. Among the Sioux, generosity was the way to status; young men coveted the honor of being selected to hunt for the poor; when a man had smoked the peace pipe he could not lie. The delightful humor in the story of Rain Walker, for example, shows us how much we have missed by stereotyping Indians, for this spirited youth, like any young man in our neighborhoods, outraged by injustice, takes matters into his own hands. When he cannot persuade the tribe to take the war path to rescue his stolen sweetheart, he declares himself The Tribe Who Walks Alone and goes on the war path by himself—quite successfully. The beautiful myths and legends, and the tales of young romance revise any lingering impressions of Indians as fiendish savages. *Black Elk Speaks*, with its elaboration of the remarkable vision, has probably done more than any other book to bring white men to a new understanding of Indians.

A significant gift from Neihardt is a new regard for our own human potential. We live in an age of disillusionment and cynicism. We have no heroes; our literature is full of the anti-hero, the loser, who says with Prufrock, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." We attack and badger our leaders; we are afraid to believe in anything or anyone; we are overwhelmed by the odds against us. We have almost ceased to believe in the

possibility of human achievement, certainly of individual achievement. But Neihardt refused to accept the decline of man. He insisted that we all have the potential for heroism; we are descended from heroes, and he thought Americans should remember who they are. He assures us that we do not have to be perfect—we just have to be courageous. He shows us heroes—real men who were not supermen or demigods, but they moved into unknown country, did what they had to do to survive, and learned the “eager joy of striving.” Neihardt like strivers. In one of his lyrics he cheered a little weed that poked itself up through a crack in the floor and, as he said,

Cleft the mud and took its light and dew,
Looked up, reached out, believed in life—and grew.

If a little weed could do it, he knew men could do it. Believing in life, realizing the “ineffably glorious privilege of being,” was essential to Neihardt, and striving was more important than the goal attained; what mattered was “the light upon your back.”

Perhaps the gift of greatest value we have received from Neihardt is the sense of wonder and miracle in nature and life. One of his own lines was frequently applied to him: “He had the simple wisdom that is wonder.” In *The Song of Jed Smith*, when Evans speaks of the “still, enchanted way” trees grow, or Squire mentions:

A feel of something you could never know,
Except that it was big and still and dim
And had a secret,

Neihardt was expressing the sense of the marvelous, the times when “all the world turned spirit.” He had no trouble believing in miracles. As he once said, “Look around you—look anywhere. What is there but miracle? It’s all miracle.” The words of Yellow Breast in *The Song of the Messiah* crystallize the same idea:

How can I know that I know anything?
The coming of the grasses in the spring—
Is it not strange so wonderful a tale
Is really true? Did mornings ever fail,
Or sleeping earth forget the time to grow?
How do the generations come and go?
They are, and are not. I am half afraid
To think of what strange wonders all is made!
And shall I doubt another if I see?

The most compelling expression of the sense of miracle is given

in *The Song of the Messiah*, when Good Thunder describes his vision:

eyes have never seen
 The green with which that living land was green,
 The day that made the sunlight of our days
 Like moonlight when the bitten moon delays
 And shadows are afraid. It did not fall
 From heaven, blinding; but it glowed from all
 The living things together. Every blade
 Of grass was holy with the light it made,
 And trees breathed day and blooms were little suns.

To Neihardt that vision was real—the world as it was meant to be.

The essential concept in these passages is a universe connected in all its atoms—trees, grass, earth, sky, people, animals—all are part of one integrated whole. Neihardt's mysticism embraced all religions, and its implications seemed clear: the same mystic power that helped him in his writing of poetry, the source he called "Otherness," was available to anyone willing to expand his awareness to receive it. The integration, moreover, assures us of our security in the cosmos, as Neihardt explains in *The Song of Jed Smith* when he says:

With this and only this to die into,
 How can it matter what becomes of you,
 Or when, or where?

The end effect would be to join man with all living creatures and with the living earth in full understanding and sympathy. The power of this idea touches one of Jed's men when he recognizes in a rattlesnake the "fangs of fear" to

guard some good
 Against a strange world neither understood
 Nor understanding,

and he watches the snake crawl away,

Still beautiful with what he couldn't say,
 And scared because it never could be said.

To see a rattlesnake with compassion is the essence of Neihardt's point. The understanding that results from this sense of kinship teaches Hugh Glass to forgive the faithless Jamie, shows Talbeau

that he has no right to play God, persuades the chief in *When the Tree Flowered* to lie about the sacred bundle, even though he has smoked the peace pipe, because a lie will save his people, and the people are more important than his personal honor.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Neihardt's gifts to us is that he bestows them not only in what he has written, but in the example of his own life. He lived his philosophy. He did not believe in ivory towers or subsidies for poets; he once told me, "You don't need a year in Paris to write a great book. If you have a great book in you, you can write it on the kitchen table." If a poet could not earn his own living by toil like other men, if he had no experience with hard work or the problems that beset ordinary people, he could tell them nothing worth their time to hear. Nor did he want to be spared pain. One of his poems begins: "I do not pray for peace nor ease, / Nor truce from sorrow." He knew that pain is the great syllogist, necessary to understanding, for, as he once wrote George Sterling, pain seemed to be the only way to refine the spirit. He knew that literature must be grounded in human experience, and that much experience meant work, hard work, all kinds of work, for each kind added to knowledge and wisdom. He could dig a cellar. He could hoe a beet field. He could paint a house. He could make beautiful jewelry. In his sixties he could supervise a YMCA outpost for young toughs in Chicago. He could teach overflow university classes and advise students on the side with rigorous comments like: "Think selectively"; "Lick what's ahead of you—don't waste time dreading future problems"; "Look for patterns." He could also enthral audiences of all ages and descriptions. He believed in accomplishment, and he could do what he set out to do. He intended to write an epic, and it took him 28 years, but he did it. He never stopped embarking on projects; when he died at 92, he was halfway through the second volume of his autobiography.

He was never interested in getting. Those of us who were privileged to meet and know him are keenly aware of how lavishly he gave of his personality and spirit, his wisdom and his love, to everyone he met. His mission in life was to give.

His gifts have enriched us all immeasurably. They enable us to share a poet's conception of a marvelous universe, and they make us, as one critic said, feel taller and braver. Most of all, they fulfill the proper function of literature as Neihardt defined it: they teach us how to "live together decently on this planet."

MEMORIES OF MY FATHER

BY HILDA NEIHARDT PETRI

Before I begin my remarks on my assigned topic, "Neihardt the Father," I want to express to all who participated in the planning of this dinner the very real appreciation we in the Neihardt family feel for this most impressive event. What a magnificent way to "kick off" the Centennial year of Neihardt's birth!

I bring warmest regards from my sisters, Enid and Alice, and all the others in the extended Neihardt family who for one valid reason or another could not be here. Several of us—happily—are here. And someone else is here, too. Let me borrow a phrase from the *Song of the Indian Wars* which refers to the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of the great Sioux leader Crazy Horse and the author's belief that the hero's death would not be the end: "If the better hope be true . . ." If the better hope be true, and I am among the many who believe it is so, then John Neihardt is "splendidly alive" in some fashion we are not yet quite able to understand, and he is here tonight in some meaningful way. You are doing what he would want most: you are remembering and caring. And we all thank you for your love and faith in Neihardt and his works.

But I was asked to talk on "Neihardt the Father," a subject on which I unblushingly claim to be a great authority. Now, I am sure you will expect me to say that he was a great father—kind, loving, always ready to help his children with algebra, English, and other school studies, full of ideas for having fun with his family. Is not this what you would expect me to say? Well, it's quite true; he was! So, let me share with you a few memories of my childhood with Neihardt the father.

How to begin? So many thoughts! He was so many kinds of a person. Always handy with tools and inventive, he seemed never too busy to repair a toy, or to make one. I remember the coaster wagon completely hand-made, including the wheels. And the darts he fashioned from wooden shingles. We would have make-believe battles and attach important diplomatic messages to the darts, which, well-aimed, went over the house to inform "troops" on the other side.

We camped and we hunted, in those lovely unspoiled days

when one could go anywhere in the woods and spend the night. We always "travelled light." Instead of a tent, we had a tarpaulin, which was tied slantwise to trees in front of a roaring fire. No matter what happened, we had to be cheerful. Daddy despised a complainer. Not that we felt any other way, for it was the treat of treats to go with Daddy, anywhere. We laughed a lot, for Neihardt was a great joker. Almost too much so at times. Tramping through the woods, weighted down with rifle, shotgun, pistol, hunting knives and other gear, he often remarked that we "were a downright arsenal." And how he rode a horse! Fast, that's how. My sister Alice and I remember hanging on tightly to keep from sliding off as we rode behind him on his pacing mare, Ribbon, a former racer.

When I told one of my daughters I had been asked to talk about Neihardt as a father, she added: "And Grandfather, too. He taught us to swim in the pond, and I remember how he floated with his toes sticking up." My son, Robin, is here, and he recalls the great rides around Skyrim Farm on what "Gaki" called El Capitan. You will remember the famous streamliner train. Well, this "El Capitan" was a garden tractor with a wagon full of grandchildren hitched on behind, and Neihardt in his seventies was quite a dashing engineer!

Back again to our childhood, I remember the hilariously funny, slightly naughty lyrics he created to entertain us. Perhaps sometime a program should be given on Neihardt's "less than lofty" lyrics.

The fun times, the joking times were great, but my most vivid memory is more inspirational in tone. On a cold winter's evening, Daddy would come into the warm living room and ask "Who wants to go for a walk?" Well, I did, and my sister Alice did, and we bundled up for the adventure. Not down the road or a path—no, that would be too easy—but right through the woods we went! I remember the bright stars, the cold air; I remember grasping for the branches that flew back as our Dad strode through the brush ahead of us.

But most of all I remember the poetry—Tennyson, Byron, Noyes, Aeschylus, Vergil—that he recited. No, *declaimed* into the bright stillness. It was an introduction to greatness of thought and feeling which we never forgot.

But there was a sterner side, too, to Neihardt the father. We always had to share him with his great work. Our mother taught

us this. One cannot even begin properly to talk about Neihardt or his greatest works without speaking of Mona Martinsen Neihardt. Daddy recognized this fact and often remarked: "She has built herself into the walls of my world." Mother encouraged the happy excursions we had with our Dad, but she was a watchdog when he needed quiet for his writing. I remember how, when he was concentrating in his intense way, he seemed to look right through us. He did not hear what we tried to say to him, and dinner waited often until he could come out of his creative dream and see the child sent to fetch him.

My mother and father arose early, so that they might have some quiet time without the presence of four active youngsters. I found out that if I got quietly out of bed in the chilly dark and stole ever so softly down the stairs to the dining room, I could sit—very quietly, of course—and listen to the most wonderful conversations. Not about the cost of this and that did they talk, but about huge thoughts I could not understand. Discussions of Art and Beauty and Meaning, and all such exciting things. I listened, full of wonder.

And speaking of the cost of this and that, I am sure that I must have known money was scarce in the Neihardt household. In spite of that, can you believe I always thought we were rich? Someone told me recently: "You were rich, in the ways that matter."

Yes, John Neihardt promised in his early lyrics that he would be a good father. And he was. And how he was loved!

Let me close with one more reminiscence. When we were hiking, or camping, or hunting with our Dad, if he sensed that we were tired, or hungry, or cold, he would say, with Vergil: "One day we shall rejoice to remember this." And we did. And we do rejoice. And one day we here shall all rejoice to remember this lovely evening with so many friends of John Neihardt. I thank you all.