

A Visionary and His Vision

STORY BY JOHN BEHLER



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FOR JOHN NEIHARDT, THE MISSOURI River was a path that led him on the adventure that was his life.

After his death in 1973, that remarkable life came full circle. A small plane dropped low over a wide bend in the river near Columbia, and friends and family members scattered his ashes over the Missouri.

The river was really where it all began for Neihardt. Long before the famous writer became a lecturer and poet-in-residence at MU, the river watered his little-boy dreams about the fantastic country to the west and the tide of settlement that washed up on a new land.

Neihardt was 6 years old when his father introduced him to the river from a bluff top in Kansas City. The Missouri was flooding, and he watched as the boiling brown water washed away a riverbank settlement.

"But the first sight of the Missouri River was not enough for me," Neihardt later wrote. "There was a dreadful fascination about it — the fascination of all huge and irresistible things. I had caught my first wee glimpse into the infinite. . . ."

The Missouri was irresistible to Neihardt. Years later, as a young poet and writer, he built a wooden canoe in 1908 on the riverbank up in Montana, then took a 1,500-mile voyage downriver and wrote about it in *The River and I*.

"He always said the Missouri was his river," says Alice Thompson, BS Ag '54, Neihardt's youngest daughter. "It was where the adventure started."

At MU, Neihardt introduced his students to the river he called "my brother."

Back in the 1960s, the mantra of the counterculture was "never trust anyone over 30." Here at Mizzou, John Neihardt

Poet John Neihardt, left, cast his gentle spell over thousands of MU students who filled his classes from 1948 to 1966.

Neihardt was perhaps best known for Black Elk Speaks, his book that explored the spiritual vision of an Oglala Sioux holy man. That vision is depicted in the painting, Black Elk at the Center of the Earth, above right, by his friend Standing Bear.

was an uplifting exception to that sentiment. Born in 1881, the poet and lecturer was in his 80s then, but he had been filling classrooms here with spellbound students for nearly two decades.

Some of them may have been drawn at first by his celebrity. After all, Neihardt was the author of *Black Elk Speaks*, a best seller about a Native American holy man's vision and his religious journey. First published in 1932, *Black Elk Speaks* was reprinted in the '50s and caught the imagination of a new generation of readers searching for spiritual alternatives.

It was more than fame that made Neihardt an academic pied piper on campus. He was a tiny man, but somehow people never noticed his size because his spirit was as big as the American West that he wrote about. He was unusual, no doubt about that, maybe even a bit eccentric. Neihardt was not a button-down scholar, but a passionate intellectual.

Friends say that he always wore a heavy wool suit, whether it was 5 degrees or 95 degrees outside. You might come across him on campus with a flintlock rifle slung over his shoulder — a prop for an upcoming class. Students remember his shock of white hair, his eagle's eyes and an orator's silky voice. Neihardt would perch on a desk in the lecture hall, legs dangling, and take his classes on a sojourn up the Missouri River and back into the past along with keelboat men and fur trappers and Indian bison hunters.

That was another thing about Neihardt that fascinated his students — he was authentic. His life's work was *A Cycle of the West*, a series of epic poems about the settlement of the American West and the death knell of Native



American cultures.

The Missouri River flowed through those poems in much the same way the river was at the center of his own universe. It was almost as if he had a vision of that river the way it was more than 100 years earlier.

In "The Song of Three Friends," the first poem of the cycle, Neihardt described the magic of those earlier times:

"And now no more the mackinaws come down,

Their gunwales low with costly packs and bales,

A wind of wonder in their shabby sails,

Their homing oars flung rhythmic to the tide;

And nevermore the masted keelboats ride

Missouri's stubborn waters on the lone Long zigzag journey to the Yellowstone."

He had seen that history himself firsthand, living as a boy in a sod cabin on the prairie. He had worked for an Indian trader at the nearby Omaha reservation, edited a frontier newspaper, and talked with the soldiers and Native American warriors who had been bloody adversaries in battles on the High Plains. He even worked briefly as a deckhand for Captain Grant Marsh, the legendary pilot whose steamboat carried wounded soldiers down the Yellowstone River from

Neihardt grew up on the Kansas and Nebraska prairies. This cabin, his writing retreat, is preserved at the John Neihardt State Historic Site in Bancroft, Neb.

the Battle of Little Big Horn.

"My father said he was born on a watershed in history when it was still possible to know these people who had formed the history of our Western migration," says Hilda Neihardt, JD '63, the poet's middle daughter. "He had such a background. He hadn't just read about this in books; he knew the people firsthand, the Indians and the white people, the men and the women. There was something authentic that came through."

It was by chance that Neihardt met Black Elk while he was researching his *Cycle of the West*. The last poem in that cycle is "The Song of the Messiah," about the ghost dance religion that spread like a prairie fire in the 1880s among defeated tribes living on reservations.

"When my father first went to see him, it wasn't to write a book about Black Elk at all," Hilda Neihardt says. "He just wanted to meet a holy man who had taken part in the ghost dance religion." She and her older sister, Enid, went along with their father when he interviewed Black Elk for several weeks during the summer of 1931 on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

"He was absolutely overwhelmed by his meeting with Black Elk. There was something very special there," she says. "They would just visit, often sitting on a blanket talking, and my father said it was amazing how they understood each other or would think the same thing.

"Black Elk was almost totally blind, and he just announced out to the world, 'I feel in this man beside me a great desire to know the things of the other world. He has been sent, so I will teach him.' You couldn't say anything more true of my father than that."

There was also something joyful about Neihardt that he shared with others. When William "Mack" Jones came to Mizzou to teach English in the late 1950s,



PHOTO BY ROW HILL

he shared an office with Neihardt in Jesse Hall. Jones quickly discovered that his long conversations with Neihardt were something of an individual seminar in literature and history.

"He was the most enthusiastic man I have ever known," Jones says. "Every-

thing Neihardt looked at he put kind of a glow on. We had big rooms on the second floor of Jesse Hall. I'll never forget; every day he would rush in and say, 'Isn't this the most wonderful day you've ever seen?' He would stand and look down toward the Columns and say, 'Look at that green.

Isn't that the most amazing green you've ever seen?"

"One day there was a terrible fog. I could hardly see to get to work, and I knew he had to drive in from the country. I thought, well, he certainly won't have anything good to say today. Then he rushed into the office — he was always just bouncing — and said, 'Have you ever seen such a day? Usually you can't see the air, but today you can really see the air.' I just thought, you'll never get him down."

Jones also remembers the elderly poet's rapport with students. During his office hours, students filled the room. Neihardt sat cross-legged on top of an old, flattop desk while a crowd of students sat on the floor enthralled.

"John was unique. He had a strong life-loving power, and he had a way of expressing it that just made you want to live. He had this absolutely vital life force in him," Jones says. "He did have quite an influence on my teaching, because I realized I was more interested in transmitting information the way he did, rather than being a library hound."

Neihardt's students also flocked to Sky Rim Farm, his country retreat north of Columbia. Neihardt's daughter Alice Thompson still lives in the family home, and she remembers how those students always made a dent in her mother's supply of homemade wine. "Mom always wanted to age the wine, but it never got a chance to age because the students were always sampling it," Thompson says.

Failing eyesight and ill health prompted Neihardt to retire from MU in 1966, but another generation of MU students was introduced to his vision and his passion through televised offerings of the Epic America course. Until the early 1980s it was broadcast to an auditorium filled with students each semester.

As a doctoral student at MU during the late 1970s, Terry Lass helped teach Epic America. Even on film, he says, Neihardt's personality and spirit came through. Students might enroll for what they thought would be a snap course,

"But after a few weeks, if they were paying any attention, Neihardt started to convert them," says Lass, AB '74, MA '75, PhD '86, who now teaches English across town at Columbia College.

Neihardt continues to convert new generations of readers. *Black Elk Speaks* has gone through a number of reprintings, most recently in 2000 by the University of Nebraska Press. Lass points to a prophecy that Neihardt made when the second edition of his book came out in the 1950s: Every generation will find its need for Black Elk.



PHOTO BY BOB HILL

More than 60 years ago, Hilda Neihardt camped for several weeks with her father at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota while the poet interviewed Black Elk.

"And sure enough," Lass says, "it came around in the '60s and '70s and here it comes around again." Bob Dyer, AB '61, MA '66, recalls a poetry writing course that he took from Neihardt. At the time, Dyer was under the sway of beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. "I recognized later that that style was so foreign to him, but he never really came down hard on me," Dyer says. "Neihardt didn't let you get away with sloppiness in writing. He was a stickler for precision, but his manner of criticism was not destructive or damaging to the ego.

"He introduced me to a whole world of poetry out there that I didn't know much about," Dyer says. "He taught me that before you can fly freely, you have to learn the basics of the form."

The experience of that first poetry class grew into a deep friendship over the years between Neihardt and Dyer. He was in the plane when Neihardt's ashes were sprinkled over the Missouri River, and Dyer often sat with the poet at the end of his life when even Neihardt's tremendous energy finally was fading.

In spite of his frail health, Neihardt agreed to help Dyer complete a documentary about his life and literary work. He was determined to finish the film project, even though Dyer and others sometimes had to carry him from place to place when his legs gave out. "He would say, 'Isn't this a hell of a note?' He was well aware of the irony of the whole thing."

Neihardt wasn't some stodgy academic who shut himself away in an ivory tower. Dyer still remembers his accessibility. "He wasn't a man for jawing away with a lot of small talk," he says. "But if you wanted to sit down and talk about big subjects, you were his friend. He always left you with something to think about. You could talk with him and then maybe an hour later you'd remember something he had said and you'd have to sit and ponder it and think about it."

Daughter Alice Thompson remembers her father as "our scoutmaster." As his kids were growing up Neihardt spent the mornings laboring in his study and was happy to produce five lines of good poetry in a day. "He wrote four to five lines a day at what he called 'white hot heat,'" Thompson says. "If it didn't come, he'd put it aside and play with us kids."

That might mean swimming in a creek when they lived in Branson, Mo. Or he would take his daughters horseback riding or on winter hikes in the Ozarks where they'd camp under a tarp roof on a bed of cedar boughs.

"He said no artist has a right to be an artist; first he has to live up to his responsibilities as a man," daughter Hilda Neihardt recalls. "I think his work is among the greatest literature — that's my opinion — but I think almost his greatest achievement was his life." ❁