

Thomas Wolfe

Admirers visit the home that the author could not go back to

By KATHERINE LONG

Between the high-rise hotel, the tall new bank and office buildings and the maze of concrete streets and sidewalks, there is a rambling white Victorian boarding house in the center of Asheville.

The tall buildings cast threatening shadows over the white house and the neat green lawn during the day. But the house is protected from developers and bank presidents by the wooden sign of the State of North Carolina in front. The State owns this house.

Seventy years ago, Julia Wolfe lived in the house with her son Thomas and a number of boarders. Thomas became a great writer, and his most famous book, *Look Homeward, Angel*, is in part the story of his life in the white Victorian house in the center of town. After his death, the book was made into a play; and several other books he wrote mention his youth as well.

Wolfe hated the house. "This is the house in which I have been in exile," he writes. "There is a stranger in the house, and there's a stranger in me."

Admirers of Wolfe make long pilgrimages to this house, to wander through the rooms that are still furnished with the Wolfe family possessions.

On Oct. 3, Thomas Wolfe's birthday, the regular admission charge of \$1 was dropped and about 300 Wolfe fans came to visit — or re-visit — the house. Among Wolfe's admirers in the house that day were three of Wolfe's relatives.

Lounging against the white railing on the wide front porch stood George Gambrell, Wolfe's nephew.

Gambrell, son of Wolfe's oldest sister Effie (known as Daisy in the book), was tall and slim, with thinning white hair, bony hands, and blue eyes set close to each other. He was friendly and talkative. He was also an awkward man, given to expansive and jerky gestures, and bore a slight resemblance to Eugene Gant, Wolfe's acknowledged self-portrait in *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Gambrell stood on the front porch and reminisced. When asked for stories, he laughed loudly and said, "If I tell you anything it will be a story."

Gambrell said he met his famous uncle only about six times, since Gambrell grew up in faraway Anderson, S.C. "He was just my youngest uncle," Gambrell laughed. He called him Tom.

"He was just a loveable, big fellow. He had a deep soft voice, and he didn't talk much. My mother and he were the least eccentric" of the family, he said, and laughed again.

Gambrell walked through the house, over creaking floorboards, pointing out

a picture of his mother to a couple who said they had seen the play *Look Homeward, Angel* seven times.

Gambrell can remember twisting his ankle on the front porch one day, and when he came to visit he stayed in the front bedroom, where the gift shop is located now. But there are other people who know the house as if they had lived there, tour guides said.

"There was a lady who was so overwhelmed when she walked through the door that she started crying," guide Margaret Eller said.

The Wolfe-hounds who come through the house quote passages by memory from *Look Homeward, Angel*, even citing page numbers, Eller said.

But everyone has a mental picture of the house after reading Wolfe's books. "They picture things in their mind, and the house doesn't match up," she said.

"The biggest misconception was, Liza (Wolfe's mother's name in his books was a shrew," Eller said, becoming angry. "That was Thomas Wolfe's version of the truth.

"There was a reason for everything she did. I admire her; she was a shrewd, good businessman." Eller has become a bit of a Wolfe-hound too. She has read a lot about him, especially the published letters to his mother which she called "very revealing."

The house is filled with the little things that his family used every day, and which Wolfe mentioned in his book. The record "Gimme a Little Kiss" sits on the old phonograph in the sunroom. There is worn sheet music on the piano ledge, and piles of Saturday Evening Posts that Julia read in her tiny downstairs bedroom.

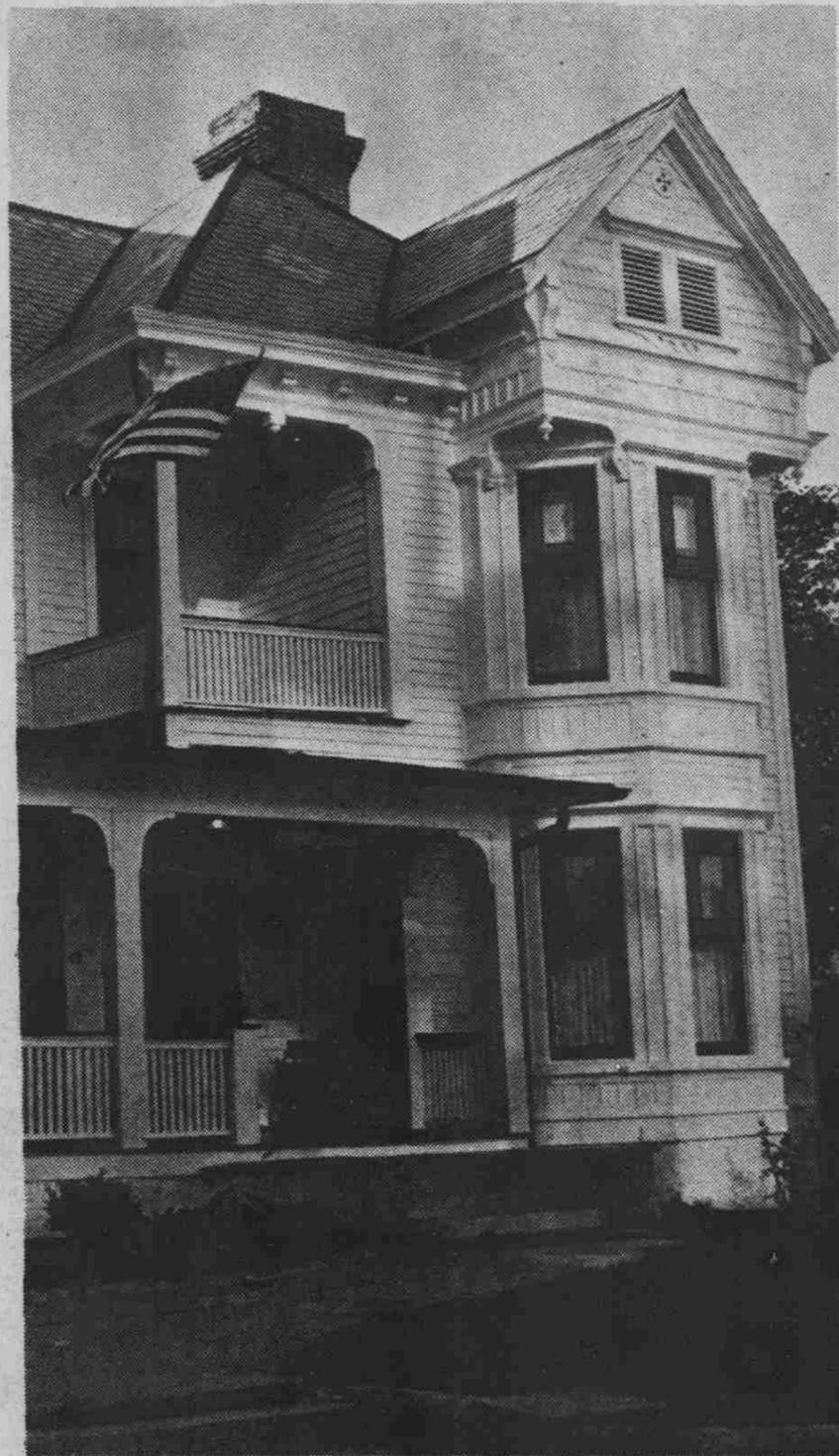
One room holds the transplanted furnishings of Thomas Wolfe's New York apartment. There is the vintage Remington typewriter, the well-traveled leather suitcase. The suitcase still bulges with unpacked clothes; they are the clothes Wolfe was wearing in the West when he contracted fatal pneumonia, and they still sit unpacked in the suitcase.

And then there is Wolfe's bedroom. It is the barest bedroom in the house.

"He did not turn on the light," Wolfe wrote of Eugene entering his room, "because he disliked seeing the raw blistered varnish of the dresser and the bent white iron of the bed. It sagged and the light was dim."

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The Thomas Wolfe Memorial is open Tuesday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 5



DTH/Katherine Long

Thomas Wolfe Memorial

... Asheville home retains atmosphere described in book.

p.m. To get there, take Rt. 54 West out of Chapel Hill. Near Burlington, take I-85 South to Greensboro; then take I-40 West to Asheville. Exit on Rt. 25 North. The Memorial is located in the center

of Asheville in the Thomas Wolfe Plaza, to the right on Rt. 25.

Katherine Long is a staff writer for *The Daily Tar Heel*.

DANCE from page 7

Costumes, printing and advertising, lights and the technicians to operate them are all expenses borne by the company members. Fortunately, a major expense was averted when Durham Academy offered the use of its theater. Some of the Carolina Dancers will teach classes at the school in exchange for use of the space.

While the Carolina Dancers test new waters as a professional company, The Chapel Hill Ballet Company remains basically a pre-professional forum for promising classical dancers.

"We're not supposed to be a professional group," Lester

said. "We try to give kids the experience of a professional company before entering pre-professional training. It's a springboard for young dancers."

But with the likes of Lester, a dancer for 22 years, and M'liss Dorrance, one of the most eminent classical dancers in the area, the company's artistic standards are in good hands.

Barbara Bounds Milone, the company artistic advisor, is another caretaker of those standards. "She's quite outstanding," Lester said. "She approves the artistic quality of everything we do."

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The Chapel Hill Ballet Company will perform "The Little Match Girl" on Dec. 6 in Memorial Hall.

The Carolina Dancers perform at the Durham Academy Upper School Auditorium on Nov. 1 at 8 p.m., and on Nov. 15 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Additional information may be obtained by phoning 966-1268.

Todd Wells is a contributor to *Spotlight*.