

FRIENDS REMEMBER FRIENDS

Penland lost three neighbors this winter and spring. Each of them had a significant role in the history of the school and the community which surrounds it. The remembrances shared here by their friends touch on many things which are woven into the tapestry that is Penland.

Jack Neff was a Penland Clay Resident from 1972 to 1976 and then made his home nearby in Bakersville. He supported himself with landscape work and continued with painting and drawing, which replaced clay as his artistic expression. Jack remained a part of the Penland community, drawing his friendships equally from his mountain neighbors and from the increasing number of Penland artists who settled here. Douglass Rankin, whose time as a Penland student overlapped with Jack's residency, was back at Penland teaching Concentration with her husband Will Ruggles when Jack died this spring. As their friendship came full circle, Douglass shared this remembrance.

REMEMBERING JACK NEFF

Penland can make you kind of crazy. But usually it's a good form of insanity. The kind where you drop all your habit energy from the daily realm and totally merge—with wood, with steel, with melted silica, with mountains, people, clay, starlight.

I think we both began to lose ourselves at the same time, twenty years ago when I came for Cynthia Bringle's clay concentration, and you were a pottery resident. The world for us both was glowing with the white radiant light of total immersion, as dense as swimming underwater surrounds your whole body.

We took a lot of "ten-minute Zen walks" when you'd stop by the pottery and find me and show me something—a vine of blood-red Virginia creeper—and we'd sit quietly with it for ten minutes.

We buried pots; remember the raku covered jar under the holly tree near the bamboo grove? I can't even dredge up the logic on that one now, but it made perfect sense then.

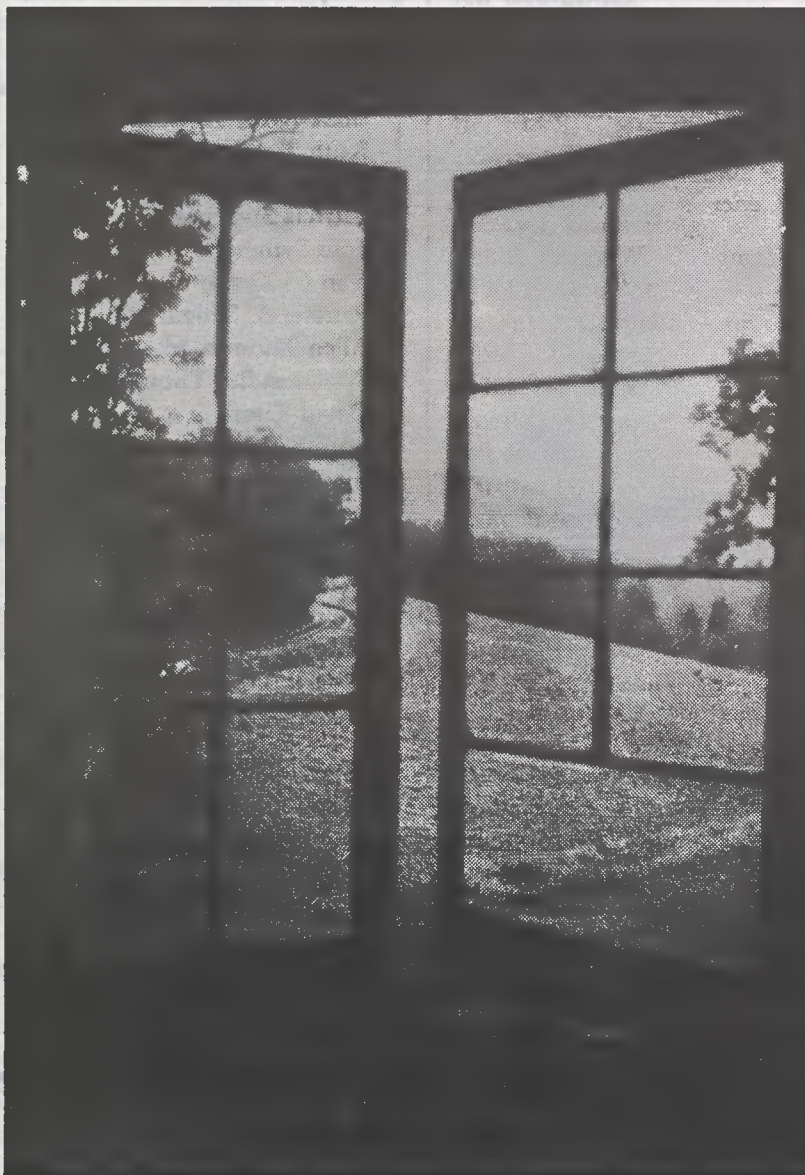
The church bell rang a lot back then, your announcement of celebration. You made the plates for the first Mexican dinner and everybody from the school came down to the barns and decorated them. Somebody loaded the kiln, and it was firing when you woke up. The cooks made a big Mexican feed, and everyone took home a cup and plate. With the donations you bought a telescope for the school.

One August you organized stargazing for the Perseid meteor shower, and a dozen of us lay watching falling stars on the knoll. Everything back then had a preciousness that exploded the ordinary.

Eventually we both ended up as residents of Mitchell County, sometimes hard-pressed to see the wild glory of those years as we figured out how to return to the daily. Sometimes you worked for us: the steps we walk up to our house; the crocus that line the path and pop up first thing in stripes of purple and gold; the dent in the pickup where you slipped into that white pine; iris by the stream; you on the bank taking a break with your cherry blend; and the Roan.

The cancer part was hard. Hospitals, needles, treatments were some part of life we hadn't bargained on. But when we came to visit you and spend the evenings together, once again you let me into another world. Conversations about paintings—yours and other masters—Plains Indians and their slant on the cosmos, regrets and changes we would make: always we came away bigger and enriched.

So this year when Will and I came again to Penland to teach Concentration we left you on Cane Creek. And you died and returned again to Penland, and we spent spring together. As I watched, the crazy bright light was back in full force making the knoll glow and the copper green church roof shine like neon and the church bell ring clear.



As I walked to sit in meditation at six-thirty in the drawing studio, a crow would fly up with me or be sitting in the dead tree outside Northlight. I think you were out checking around, letting me know Penland was a place where you could live, but also die, in brightness.

Adelaide Beck Chase was born in 1911, grew up in Chattanooga, came to Penland to study pottery when she was about 40, and stayed on to teach. She met and married photographer Harvey Chase, who was also a Penland instructor. They built a home close to the school and remained for the rest of their lives. Adelaide continued teaching until 1963. Her cousin Olivia Snider and close friend Katherine Califf chatted about her with me one day this spring.

REMEMBERING ADELAIDE CHASE

Olivia recalled that Adelaide exhibited, demonstrated, and taught pottery for many years and made a specialty of glazes. Her connection to Penland was through her pottery, but that was not the only artistic expression she

pursued. She was a seamstress of some repute who made all her own clothes; she made Battenburg lace and other hand work. She loved to cook and developed a reputation as a gourmet in the kitchen. Although not an especially social person, she often invited close friends for an excellent meal served on handmade pottery set on a handmade cloth.

After her husband's death, Adelaide made a home for her brother-in-law, who had been a farm hand before he retired. She taught him to embroider, for which he had quite a talent. Adelaide finished off the pieces and prepared them for sale.

Katherine and Olivia described her as shy, self-contained, generous with her friends, a good bridge player—and they added with an affectionate chuckle, very hard to please.

Sculptor Al Vrana lived near Penland and was associated with the school from 1963 to 1985 as an instructor, mentor, and champion of the sculpture program. Bill Brown Jr. was a child when he first got to know Al. He writes about him from the vantage point of one who followed in his footsteps. Bill returned to Penland last summer to teach sculpture in the forge.

REMEMBERING AL VRANA

Al Vrana was a sculptor, extremely powerful in spirit, body, and action and this was reflected in his approach to sculpture. He did huge concrete architectural pieces working directly on the structure's facades. Al also worked in bronze, steel, stone, aluminum—just about any medium which served his artistic needs and expression. I quickly got the impression that, in whatever he attempted, he believed in doing it right or not doing it at all.

He believed that there was a true need for sculpture. When he came to Penland he knew that it belonged here. He saw Penland's need for a studio which focused on sculpture where the technical craft of the making could be taught and the art of sculpture could be properly nurtured. Al felt that it was important to know the fundamentals before moving into more abstract work. One of his earlier classes created concrete relief panels for the walls of the old sculpture studio. That building has long since been torn down, but the fundamental need for sculpture still remains. The foundation for sculpture at Penland was built by Al Vrana and other sculptors who came to share their art. Their spirit and energy for sculpture at Penland is just waiting to be rekindled and rebuilt.

On the personal side, I knew Al when I was just a boy in the sixties. He had the most massive hands of any person I had ever known. His manner showed a sense of purpose and determination, and when he spoke, people listened or got the hell out of the way. In his later years, with graying hair and beard, I thought that if there was a Noah, he would look like Al Vrana. He had a look of confidence and knowledge that was shaped by many life experiences. His family and those privileged to have known him, such as myself, must continue our own journey, but we will surely all have been shaped by having shared a part of Al's.