Home At River's Edge

By David S. Wiggins

That sense of place has a lot to do with community has become a truism, even if that “place” can become a raging torrent of destruction. As those left homeless in 1997 return to the bed of the former glacial Lake Agassi, the questionable wisdom of rebuilding close to the Red River competes with the close connection their community has formed with those flowing waters. I can understand this. I have the Mississippi River in my blood. Not only do I live and work within an easy walk of the river, so did my parents, and so did my grandparents, and so did my great-grandparents. There is something about this place that makes people stick around.

Not far from our house, we spotted an eagle perched in a tree overlooking the river a hundred feet below. I wonder how many generations of eagles have perched on this bluff, looking down on the same river. Perhaps some of this eagle’s ancestors, thousands of years ago, watched as the falls of St. Anthony eroded past this point.

On a visit to Minnehaha Park, a short walk from our house, it is possible to read the land and understand the erosion of the waterfall around the great island, thousands of years ago, proceeding until the west channel was cut off, leaving the little valley we call the “deer pen”. As I travel up the gorge to where St. Anthony Falls has been temporarily halted, I get a gut sense of geological time. I feel a connection to this special place, because for the moment the enormous time scale of the natural world has been brought home to me, and I am part of it.

In his book The Geography of Nowhere, James Howard Kunstler says, “Our obsession with mobility, the urge to move on every few years, stands at odds with the wish to endure in a beloved place, and no place can be worthy of that kind of deep love if we are willing to abandon it on short notice for a few extra dollars. Rather, we choose to live in Noplace, and our dwellings show

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it.” (Kunstler p. 173.) When a home is defined as the interior of a house, when the ownership of a home is a material relationship to a commodity, the location does not really matter much. Nature itself becomes another commodity, to be owned and appreciated in the context of something like a park, but not to be taken home.

Often I think about the Dakota Indian traditions which held Mendota, the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, to be above the center of the earth and below the center of the heavens. The respect they showed to the spirits of the river, sky, and rocks was based on awe at the power of nature on display here. They humbled themselves before these spirits with thanks, prayers and offerings.

Returning to the 1997 flood of the Red River, I feel sorry for its victims. But I can’t help appreciating how valuable such phenomena are as reminders of our relative place in the natural world. The floods remind us that efforts to control or engineer nature are temporary. Watching the raging river pound through the gorge this spring, I thought of the melting glaciers. I thought of the bigger patterns we are able to see so rarely because of their enormous size and creeping pace.

An awe creeps into people’s voices when they consider the power of rivers. Whatever distance we manage to put between us and the natural world — with our skyways, freeways, and TV ways — can be crossed by these wonders of nature. It is the role of place to make us small, while it remains big in our minds and hearts. Consider this: if all the water in the world filled a bathtub, the freshwater in all the great rivers and lakes of the world, and circulating in the weather, would amount to only a teaspoonful.

During this year’s flood the Stone Arch Bridge was closed because the force of the river had not only eaten away at the sandstone beneath it, but had carried away the boulders put around the base of the piers for rip-rap. The river was strong enough to wash away 700-pound rocks. The replacements they will put in this summer will weigh up to two tons. This may allow the bridge to last another several hundred years, but in geologic time this work of man shall also pass away. The river will eventually change course.

Perhaps some day the Red River of the North will again become the glacial River Warren. Perhaps in time the glaciers will return. For now we have the best of all places — perched on the bluff, high above the river, safe as an eagle.

MISF Board Notes

Increasing the membership and visibility of MISF in the community has been the focus of recent board meetings. Membership has hovered just around the 100 mark for several years, and recently new board members have wondered whether we could increase the size and visibility of the organization.

At the March board meeting, Roger Hammer proposed a demographic survey to discover who the members are. Although the specifics of this questionnaire are still under discussion, Curt Hillstrom is designing a new questionnaire to be sent out with membership renewals. This questionnaire will help the board decide on publicity strategies.

Other board members, Helen Watkins and Lucy Smith, have offered helpful suggestions as to groups we might target in looking for new members: retired college professors and people who have combined disciplines.

Roger Hammer, who has accepted responsibility of communications coordinator, suggested that we contract with a news media group, PRNewswire, to help us publicize our meetings in local newspapers. The board agreed to his suggestion. Most of the attendees at the recent Works-in-Progress meeting indicated that they had heard about the meeting from a notice in the Star Tribune.
The Myth of Historic Preservation

by Tom Abeles

What is the past and why should we preserve it? Edmund Husserl pointed out that we see through the eyes of the present. If we take a step forward in time, both the past and the future are changed, sometimes a little and sometimes dramatically.

What is permanent or stable? When we build a large project such as the Mall of America, we construct temporary scaffolding to support various components. The same holds for building a transportation network. Because the steam engine needed to stop often for refueling, towns proliferated along the miles of track. When the diesel came, the longer hauls eliminated the need for these towns and they died. The same thing happened with roads and interstate highways. Those communities that did not get interchanges often faded into history. The “scaffolding” was in place for only a few years.

In the United States manufactured environments have not existed long enough even to appear stable, except through a very fast lens which creates a stop-motion illusion. What has been preserved? Fort Snelling, Boonesboro, The Alamo and Ford’s Greenfield Village are but icons where we can politely ignore the electric light bulbs hidden in the fireplace or kerosene lamp. The masterful manufacturer of illusion is Walt Disney, whose theme parks create both past and future for a credulous, believing audience. As Umberto Eco points out, the illusion is so “authentic” that we spend real money to buy participation in this fantasy of continuous time. The same holds for “natural” preservation, such as the Boundary Waters, the “rain forest,” and other parks.

The Galapagos tortoise might see the mayfly as an eye-blink in time. With respect to the European exploration of the North American continent, or the migration of humans from Asia over the Alaskan land bridge, or the sailing of the original “Kon Tiki,” the history of the “United States” is but another roadside attraction passed in a blink on the interstate of human life.

William Cronon, in Changes in the Land, has shown cogently that the myths of the American Indian, which are often cited by environmental movements, are often nothing more than tales. What is it that drives us to want to believe in them, as symbolizing something more? As scientists, we know that we can not “preserve” ecosystems, nor ever “restore” them to some pristine past, no matter how long we wait. We know that nature has created such destruction that a large part of the genetic pool of species has been eliminated, more than one time in the history of the earth, over spans of geological time that make human existence look more like the half-life of bacteria. Yet we struggle to preserve an illusion of “history”, knowing that nature operates by a scale of change that makes our impact on the environment irrelevant from any perspective but our own.

What is it that drives us to seek a past that never was? Does Shelley’s anti-hero Ozymandias strike fear in our hearts?

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

In the movie, Zorba the Greek, Zorba asks the English scholar what good were all his books if they could not tell anything about death. The scholar replies that the books tell about the agony of men who have no answers. At one time, historic preservation might have appeared to provide guide posts to the future. Now, in a post-modern, dynamic and complex world, preservation is the illusion which points to a future that never will be. It carries us back full circle. Both past and the future are dynamic and the present is all that we have.
Meditations on the Theme of Place

by Helen Twombly Watkins

In April of this year my husband and I spent a week in Galway, Ireland, where my brother was teaching American literature at the University. Day after day we followed him and my sister-in-law out into the countryside, willing and enthusiastic explorers of all that they had previously discovered.

On one such afternoon we stood dwarfed before the black, burned out stone edifice of the largest “domicile” I had ever seen. It was not Versailles, but then Versailles is not exactly a “home”. This had definitely been someone’s house, once. We clambered down and across a dry moat and entered the structure through one of its twenty-foot windows. Clearly there had been a great fire. But patches of wood lathing remained, and, on top of that, bits of neo-classic plaster molding and pilasters on a grand and opulent scale. Sixty feet above us the ruin opened to a cloudless blue sky. In front of the house stretched what was once an immense “greensward”, large enough for grazing cattle, undulating gently down to a full panoramic view of Galway Bay.

That evening we poured through tour guides and hikers’ maps, trying to identify what we had found, but, for all the evidence available, it simply didn’t exist.

The next day was given to me to determine the locus of our adventure. The choice was easy: Thoor Ballylee, or Yeats’ Tower, where the poet said,

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day’s declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all.

— from “The Tower”

I had always wanted to find what Yeats describes as “My House” in Meditations in Time of Civil War:

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page.

For it was this tower that inspired Yeats with his most important symbol: the “widening gyre”, transformed from the “winding stair”, to express the centrifugal force of civil war that could destroy civilization as people had known it:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

— from “The Second Coming”

The ancient, twelfth-century tower where Yeats spent peace-filled, idyllic summers with his wife and child, writing verse to the sounds of water running past his window, became inverted in his mind, “transformed utterly” once violence and blood and fire had filled the land (“Easter 1916”).

As we stood in the little gift shop next to Thoor Ballylee, my brother once more laid out his maps on the counter. Did the two ladies know of the burned remains of the huge home we had come across the day before? Why, it was only a few miles down the road, just past a little turn here? You couldn’t miss it. Suddenly, familiar waves of embarrassment rose up, flushing my face, as they always did in childhood when my brother’s stubborn attention to factual detail fell away, revealing a different, silent, awkward communication. The ladies’ “ignorance” was in fact a political statement. If anyone was stupidly unprehending, it was we, insensitive Americans, unaware that the history we had come to study still ran in rivers of blood as far as others were concerned.

The huge house we had seen the day before had belonged to the St. George family. St. George was the patron saint of England. The house had been burned, along with all the other homes of the local Anglo-Irish, in the 1920’s. And yet, though they denied its existence, the local people allowed the great wreck to stand, pointing to the sky, dominating the landscape for miles around. In England, all ancient historic structures belong to the Crown. But to whom do they belong in Ireland? If I had fallen crossing the dry moat, or if a piece of molding had hit my head, whom could I have sued? Would I have been injured by a phantasm, or by real property? Does the wreck remain as a symbol of hatred, a reminder lest the Irish should ever forget what their English landlords did to them? Or does it stand simply as an expression of a world view founded in and sustained by an ancient irony, one that accepts all change, even annihilation? Out of revolution and counter-revolution, as Yeats says, “A terrible beauty is born” (“Easter 1916”), even as traditional values are stood on their heads.

If any community testifies to the conflict of irreconcilable values, it is Ireland. Violence based on religious difference is its heritage, and yet it absorbs all and endures. Recalling the contagion of the English revolution almost two centuries before, Yeats in the last years of his life wrote “the Curse of Cromwell,” which ends just after the following lines:

I came on a great house in the middle of the night,
Its open lighted doorway and its windows all aight,
And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;
But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through.
Scholars Make Progress Under MISF Fiscal Agency

The Minnesota Independent Scholars’ Forum is pleased to pass along two reports (below) from independent scholars about their work. Both Jon Holzman and Gloria Morris-Grote are MISF members. Please, if you too are a productive scholar ask to have an update on your efforts printed here in The Forum.

Another special aspect of these two reports is that these projects are the first to be formally associated with MISF through its new activity of being the fiscal agent for members who obtain grants for their independent scholarship. Both Jon and Gloria convinced funders to support their work, but the funder required them to find a not-for-profit organization (with the right kind of tax status) to receive and administer the funds. MISF has situated itself to do just that, with Jon and Gloria being the first two. The scholars are still independent; MISF doesn’t review or in any way meddle with the scholars’ activities. MISF simply receives and disperses funds, and provides organizational support such as sponsoring a public forum about the work. This happened when Jon’s recent Works-in-Progress forum (see below) fulfilled the Minnesota Historical Society’s grant requirement of Jon: that he give a public report on his research.

The board of MISF is pleased that our organization began in 1996 to play this kind of role in the promotion of independent scholarship. We look forward to sponsoring two more projects in 1997. If you would like to explore the option of fiscal sponsorship by MISF write to us at: POB 80235, Lake Street Station, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55408-8235.

JON HOLZMAN:
NEUR JOURNEYS

On Saturday, May 17, Jon Holzman presented a MISF Works-in-Progress program entitled Neur Journeys: Narratives of War, Flight and Resettlement in a Twin Cities Sudanese Refugee Community. Twenty-five people attended, thanks in large part to the successful media publicity by MISF Communications Coordinator Roger Hammer. Most important, substantively, was the effort the program had in bringing together professionals currently working with the same or similar refugee groups in the Twin Cities.

Holzman’s grant is from the Minnesota History Center. His charge is to use his background as an anthropologist studying the Samburu people in Northern Kenya to report on a very similar people — the Nuer from Sudan (new immigrants to the U.S. in 1994 via the U.N. High Commission On Refugees) — as they attempt to assimilate into our community and add a new chapter to Minnesota history.

Holzman is currently in the middle of taping accounts by individual members of the Nuer community that was established in Anoka County in 1995. Through an interpreter, his questions focus on the refugee experience within the context of other major life experiences and cultural events. These include the nature of the conflict between rebel groups and the national government of Sudan in a state of war, reasons for leaving refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia, the effect of flight on the integrity of families, the disruption of marriage procedures and the process of childbirth, and, finally, the changes in the structure of generational role modelling that have come about during resettlement in Minnesota.

Holzman stressed the importance of cattle in the lives of the Nuer. Flight and resettlement has meant a loss of cattle, and this has impacted the whole culture. Cattle were traditionally the basis for all marriage contracts, and therefore critical to the stability of the family. Milk is considered the perfect food in the Nuer culture, and without milk everyone, particularly children, suffered through the long refugee escape and resettlement process. Holzman outlined how many of the cultural changes he’s observed stem from the deprivation of cattle.

Because these refugees are young — either single males or couples with small children — the structure of families has changed drastically. With no grandparent generation present, child-rearing and child care have become newly problematic and gender relations are uncertain.

In spite of the changes, however, Holzman tentatively concludes that the Nuer refugees are neither victims nor childlike. He is struck by the ingenuity they have displayed in forming unexpected strategies to better their lives, and the active role they are taking in shaping their destiny.

GLORIA MORRIS-GROTHE:
DEPRESSION-ERA CULTURE OF RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Gloria Morris-Grote is the second grant recipient for whom the Minnesota Independent Scholars’ Forum is the fiscal agent. Awarded a grant by the Minnesota Humanities Commission, Morris-Grote has recently completed her project. Its title is Songs, Heroes, Legends: The Cultural Side of Rural Public Schools In the Cockato, Minnesota Community During the Depression.

The project explores the relationships among parents and students, community values and school responsibilities assigned by Minnesota statutes dating back to 1852. Research included oral history interviews to determine ways individual students achieved goals, reached aspirations, and developed character traits that prepared them for adulthood. Source materials focused on educational philosophy and teaching methods, particularly as carried out in small communities with one- or two-room country schools.

Gloria Morris-Grote will share her findings with the MISF community as one of the panelists at the public forum to be held in September: The History and Future State of Public Education (time and place to be announced in a separate mailing).
MORGAN GRAYCE WILLOW

Morgan Grayce Willow was recently awarded a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship in Prose for 1997. She describes her proposal and goals as follows:

The changes in American agriculture in the decades since 1962 have had widespread ramifications in American culture and literature. Some of these have been documented in academic scholarship or in journalistic works like Paul Gruchow’s Grass Roots: The Universe of Home. But subjective literary renderings of this American experience are few.

In the prose memoirs I am writing — a series with the working title One of Nine — I am exploring, with a very close focus, the personal experience of living through these sweeping economic and cultural changes. What does it mean to have grown up in an environment where there was no television and very little access to books? What happens in the emotional life of a family when work that once depended on the cooperation of many members of an extended family is now performed by large costly machines, run by one person working long hours all alone? What happens to the meaning of family when, after generations of farming, the family suddenly no longer has a farm? How is our language and world view affected when farming is called ‘agribusiness’ and the farmer is called an ‘operator’? And how is this experience lived from the inside?

I have set out to explore, in creative nonfiction, this juncture of personal and public history in the rural Midwest during the cataclysmic period when the family farm lifestyle is all but disappearing.

The seminal piece from One of Nine has just been published in Queerly Classed: Gay Men and Lesbians Write About Class by South End Press of Boston, under the title “Class Struggles”. In it Willow addresses the theme of the collection as defined by editor Susan Raffo in the introduction: the inability of Americans “to talk about class, even though we all live and experience it.” For Willow, the issue of class is “fraught with rage, grief, and confusion,” and the silence is the result of having too much rather than too little to say about it.

Willow goes on to talk about the ambiguity and, more importantly, the “invisibility” that attaches to farm families when one applies to them the lens of “class”. As she says, work is what her family did, for generations; it defined their lives, gave them meaning, and determined all roles by gender and age. And yet, as non-wage-earners, not evaluated on an hourly basis, they were more managers of a “family busi-

ness” than traditionally “working class.” On the other hand, “we made virtually no profit;” in fact, “we hovered dangerously close to the subsistence level... We, the family, were the workers... this unnamed class... we were born not as children but as farmhands... Even choices about sexuality were somehow reduced to work.”

In the second half of her essay, Willow switches from the farm family as such, to the distrust of outside authority which was her birthright as a farm-bred child. She writes, “In a livelihood where survival depends directly on the forces of nature, the relationship between self and nature is primary.” In the end, Willow concludes that it is not the “middle-class notion that knowledge could make me free,” but the fact that her “first reaction is to question,” which she inherited from her farmer father, that has given her a personal “inner voice of authority.” This voice has enabled her to address the despising classism that surrounds not only her agrarian family background, but also her freedom in choosing her own sexual identity.

LUCY SMITH

Lucy Smith played an important role in the program Holocaust Remembrance, put on by Minnesota Public Radio and the Jungle Theatre. On May 7, at noon and again at 9:00pm, MPR broadcast an interview by Dan Olson, in which Lucy spoke for 30 minutes of her childhood memories of the Holocaust. Lucy also appeared in a live performance at 7:00pm the same night at the Fitzgerald Theatre. Following a documentary film and a theatrical reading from Anne Frank’s diary, Lucy, a living witness/survivor, recounted her own experience as a young girl who was kept hidden during the Holocaust years. The dramatic testimony at the Fitzgerald was the 10th “performance” by Lucy. The other nine occurred during the month of April, before 6,000 school children in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

JILL WATERHOUSE

Inspiration, insight, and invitation to experience something rather incredible are marks of a Jill Waterhouse installation. Inherent is a demand for emotional and visual contact that

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may leave you exhausted, but from which you’ll recover, only to be changed and enriched in ways you never imagined.

This year Waterhouse unveiled three new works:
1) an award-winning piece titled *The Wasteland* that explores the secret and silent, inside and outside devastation of an eating disorder (launched at Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota and later shown at Phipps Gallery in Hudson, Wisconsin);
2) a giant piece called *Sacrifice Zone* that was part of Linda Louise Rother’s *Behind Closed Doors*: a show at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis on domestic abuse; and,
3) an installation with Karla Faith Ness that was part of the show called *Sleeping Beauty — Diverse Realizations of Beauty* at the Nash in May.

What is surprising about the Waterhouse-Ness collaboration is the resulting blend of boldness and strength with intricate delicacy. The two women’s works complement each other in a cohesive whole. They take you through the stages of a woman’s life as the seasons take you through a year. The white walls of the room surround and embrace four Waterhouse plaster body casts and fifteen flowing room-high acrylic-on-fabric transparent paintings by Ness — some blow gently, beckoning you at the entrance of the installation, and some display precise details of each season.

As you enter, you come upon a dried-mint-on-plaster cast of a child, lying nurtured in a nest of woven grapevines, with a Ness fabric garden of tulips in the foreground, and a second fabric goldfish pond behind. From here you move to the season of “summer,” where a pregnant torso cast, seemingly “alive” with activity from a strange multi-colored pastel underpin and border of waxed flowers, stands on a redwood base. Moving on to “fall,” one confronts a smooth, seemingly alabaster torso cast of a Venus-like mature woman, before whom three smooth stones of various sizes lie motionless like eternally preserved eggs. The “winter” scene presents the cast of an old woman, covered with intricate patterns of birch bark, lying among the leaves, spewed from the trees in fall, now collected on the woodland floor — thus echoing the nested child of the first piece. A blackbird watches from Ness’ hanging fabric as the final season goes on.

The artists describe this garden setting as “a metaphor for the stages of life and the changes in a woman’s body — the beauty in each of the phases of a woman’s life.” They see the “continuity of the human body, like the cycle of the seasons, as a reflection of an eternal beauty.”

— submitted by Roger Hammer

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**Exploring Nature and Nurture**

A CALL TO JOIN AN MISF STUDY GROUP

by Dave Junker, MISF President

Over the past few years we have been bludgeoned with warnings of the need to return to family values. Closer examination indicates that the family values in question are a mythological potpourri of desired past values, as opposed to an undesired set of values espoused by someone else. Although many of our society’s rules may prove worthwhile (do unto others as you would have them do unto you, share bounty, walk your talk, work hard, laugh at yourself, hate the act but love the person), other old rules which are equally well remembered, we would just as soon forget. These might include: never do business with a friend, do it yourself if you want it done right, do unto others before they do unto you.

What values can be called “family” values, which are worth retaining, and how can we introduce them to our youth in a way that will make them “stick?” The question is complicated by other questions related to the nature of human behavior. How much is innate, and how much is learned? How much is given, how much acquired? What is changeable or modifiable?

By the mid-1800’s in the United States, people assumed that one of the long list of innate behaviors was the act of pushing worm out of apples with one’s little finger. So prevalent was this behavior that it was linked to human genetics. Now, with mostly worm-free apples, we have not only lost the act but have trouble conceiving that it once existed.

My studies in human physiology have led me to the belief that what we inherit in the behavioral area are mostly increased or decreased capacities, not specific activities. The number of neurons, the breadth of interconnections, the speed of signal transmissions, the extent and thickness of insulation along nerve cells, the relative sizes of parts of the brain: all of these are inheritable in differing amounts. But most, if not all, are also influenced by early use and/or repeated usage.

As we reinvestigate family values in terms of early learning schemes, parental input, public and private schooling, childcare, etc., we will benefit by remembering that although genetics is responsible for slight variations in capacity and speed, it determines very little else. Most behavior is learned.

I hope that this very short and oversimplified introduction will whet the appetites of readers to join the Forum’s Family Values Study Group (see the back page of this newsletter) and/or to attend the MISF symposium this fall: The History and Future State of Public Education.
MISF Study Groups

SCIENCE & HUMANITIES

The Science & Humanities study group meets about every three weeks (date chosen in advance by consensus) at 7:30pm at the home of coordinator Ginny Hansen, 2408 Girard Avenue South, in Minneapolis. Her phone numbers are: 377-5960, work and 374-5505, home.

The general theme is the nature of creativity in both science and the arts. At the meeting on June 24, the group will finish discussing Arthur Miller's The Insights of Genius (1956) and will go on to vote on what book to read next. Possible options include: Private Myths, by Anthony Stevens; The Act of Creation, by Arthur Koestler; The Large, the Small, and the Human Mind, by Roger Penrose; The Man Who Tasted Shapes, by R. Cytowic; and Emotional Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman. You need not be current with a book, or even have it; just come to a meeting to see how you like it (after you call Ginny for date and time).

PHILOSOPHY

The Philosophy group meets every third (sometimes fourth) Monday at 7:00pm at the Chicago Deli, 48th and Chicago in Minneapolis. The next meeting will be on June 30.

The group has been reading Luck, by Nicholas Rescher, along with other readings and ideas contributed by participants concerning the role of chance in life. The reading for June 30 will be Melville's The Confidence Man.

For more information call coordinator Curt Hillstrom at 823-5132.

FAMILY VALUES

The purpose of this newly created group is to look at family values from many perspectives: how they are interpreted differently by different people, how those differences affect us all, and where they might lead us. See page seven of this newsletter for a teaser by Dave Junker about this area of study.

Meetings are held at the home of coordinator Lucy Smith: 1747 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul. Call Lucy at 698-9671 for information on dates and times.