

PineStraw

The Art & Soul of the Sandhills

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Summer Shorts

Our Annual Reading Issue

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A Room of Their Own

In the stately Writer's Room at Weymouth, home to the N.C. Literary Hall of Fame, words and history are still alive and flowing

BY GAYVIN POWERS

Words

*It begins with the word,
With word following
word*

Music is made

Words make music all their own,

And sometimes there is nothing

More beautiful than words

Marching down a page,

... Words marching

Sometimes they dance.

— Sam Ragan, *Listening for the Wind*

The soul of a writer longs for a sacred space. A space where it can imagine heroic battles in ancient Egypt. Or can overcome a life of being bought and sold in slavery. Perhaps even weave childhood tales of fishing along reed-filled riverbanks.

Such a space exists.

With a history suited for a Southern retelling of Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, at Weymouth Center in Southern Pines, is known by locals as the "writer's room" and has a soul of its own.

When visiting a historical site, one may wonder about the conversations and personalities that shaped a residence or simple room over the decades. Serenity prevails when stepping inside the writer's room at Weymouth. Built in the mid-1920s, the study welcomes writers: Dark bookcases are filled with publications and couches flank a large Oriental rug that undoubtedly carries countless writers' secrets. In the window, the mid-morning sun streams across Glen Rounds' typewriter and hovers nearby on a bronze bust of Sam Ragan, North Carolina's poet laureate. Photos of the fifty-three Literary Hall of Fame



award-winning writers cover the walls, including Maya Angelou, John Ehle and O. Henry; their encouraging eyes watch, cocooning a writer in their space. The space of writing.

Prior to becoming a sanctuary for writers, Weymouth Center was the residence of James Boyd and Katharine Lamont Boyd, his wife. James Boyd, who sought refuge in the pines for his health and writing, wrote his first book, *Drums* (1925), at Weymouth and received praise from the *New York Evening Post*, saying that the book was "the finest novel of the American Revolution which has yet been written." Boyd's later novels, *Marching On* (1927), *Long Hunt* (1930), *Roll River* (1935) and *Bitter Creek* (1939), which were met with mixed reviews, were written in his study, which now houses the N.C. Literary Hall of Fame.

During the 1920s and 1930s, James and Katharine Boyd frequently entertained literary friends, some of whom included F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Paul Green and Sherwood Anderson. The Boyds and their guest authors indulged in Weymouth's pine walks, lending inspiration to the works they were writing at the time.

From 1940-1941, James Boyd spent days writing a series of radio plays along with Paul Green, Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Struthers Burt and John Galsworthy for the Free Company of Players, a group of American writers dedicated to presenting what they perceived as more positive democratic attitudes toward the war in Europe. That came to an end when James Boyd bought *The Pilot* in 1941, becoming publisher and editor. After his death in 1944, Katharine Lamont Boyd succeeded him as publisher and editor of the newspaper until she sold it in 1968 to Sam Ragan.

After the passing of Katharine Boyd, special emphasis was put in place to ensure the long literary tradition was maintained at Weymouth. In 1974, Weymouth was gifted to Sandhills Community College, which continues the writing tradition, expanding it to include writer's conferences, the Sam Ragan series and providing temporary writers-in-residency appointments.

In 1996, Ragan succeeded in championing North Carolina to become the first state to create a Literary Hall of Fame, honoring the rich tradition of the state's writers. Ragan was not only a son of North Carolina, whom locals cherish as their own, but he was also a journalist, author, teacher, publisher and editor of *The Pilot*, board member of Weymouth, poet laureate, father and husband.

Ragan understood the importance of routine, ritual and space, and the N.C. Literary Hall of Fame recognizes all of the solitary work that each award recipient



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dedicated to the craft. Ragan was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1997, and Talmadge Ragan, his daughter, recently talked of her father's commitment to the written word and his personal writing space.

"He wrote in his study, a small room lined with bookshelves stuffed with a variety of books, with his typewriter on a very old desk — it was actually made by my mother's grandfather. The desk always faced a window, and my mother said she always knew my father was working when he sat quietly looking out the window," she says. "In the three houses we lived in, all overlooked trees."

It was common, Talmadge Ragan says, that "having worked all day at the newspaper, my father would come home, eat dinner, take about a half-hour nap and then go to his study to write . . . He generally wrote his column *Southern Accent* on Monday nights after dinner and his editorials, I think, on Sunday afternoons. I remember somehow he'd always be able to write whatever he needed to make it downstairs in time to watch *The Rockford Files*."

There were two meaningful writing rituals that Talmadge Ragan also remembers about her father. "When I was a little kid, starting about 7 or so, he used to take me down to his office at *The Raleigh News and Observer* on the weekends, so I'd see him work there, checking in with people. Then [he'd be] at his typewriter for a while, and I'd amuse myself reading or talking to people at the paper," she says.

Thinking back even further, she adds, "My first memory of him writing, I think, is probably a poem for my mother. He always wrote a poem for her for her birthday."

It's easy to imagine Sam Ragan writing when viewing his bronze bust near Glen Rounds' typewriter resting in the sunny window of Boyd's study — the typewriter keys beg for fingers to tap them as the mind strolls through the trees outside.

Sam Ragan passed away one week prior to the opening of the N.C. Literary Hall of Fame and was honored in a tribute, including a special video by David Brinkley, who got his first reporting job from the elder Ragan at the *Wilmington Star*. Sam Ragan may not have been present at the ceremony, but people, including Talmadge Ragan, agree that they could feel him there that day.

The same is true about the N.C. Literary Hall of Fame writer's room which now graces visits from authors such as Mary Kay Andrews, Alexandra Sokoloff and Diane Chamberlain. Almost every writer claims to feel a welcoming presence. Perhaps it's Sam Ragan or James Boyd. Perhaps it's the history of the room. Perhaps it's the spirit of all the writers that have come before and are now honored there. In any case, it's enough to call it sacred, enough to capture the soul of a writer. **PS**

Gayvin Powers teaches writing and is a frequent contributor to PineStraw.

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Jane Marr
 Listing Agent
 910.231.3343
JMarr@IntracoastalRealty.com



Elizabeth King
 Listing Agent
 910.470.1260
EKing@IntracoastalRealty.com

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