

Joyce Kilmer biographer, John Covell, speaks at July 2010 Advisors' meeting

"I think that I should never see, a poem as lovely as a tree." In the early 1900s, Joyce Kilmer was a famous and respected poet, writer, editor, and lecturer. But, other than the first line of his poem "Trees," few people today know anything about Kilmer's work or know there is a memorial dedicated to him in Como Park.

In the spring of 1936, the WPA built a memorial fireplace with funds donated by the Joyce Kilmer American Legion Post. Over time, the fireplace fell into disrepair. Its true name was largely forgotten and the fireplace became known locally as the "Dutch Oven." But Kilmer's name is being restored along with the fireplace.



On July 12, 2010, John Covell, Joyce Kilmer biographer, visited the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Fireplace. Covell had traveled from Texas to the Como Streetcar Station as the guest speaker for the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom Advisory meeting.

Drawing from his extensive research and interviews with Kilmer's family members, Covell was able to illuminate Kilmer's life and significance not only as a poet, but also as a devoted family man and decorated WW1 soldier (killed in action at the age of 31). Covell recited several of Kilmer's lesser-known poems, and spoke in detail of Kilmer's life and works for over an hour. Como Woodland advisors asked questions for another 30 minutes.

Within 9 months of his arrival in France, and only 3 months after his requested transfer to the Regimental Intelligence Section, Kilmer was killed while doing reconnaissance in enemy territory. One question has reoccurred among History Subcommittee members (as a result of researching the rededication book): What was Kilmer's state of mind and reasons for volunteering for more and more dangerous assignments while he was a soldier in World War 1?

Obviously, Kilmer's death was a huge blow to his beloved wife and young children, but his death also cut short his service to his country. Was Kilmer looking for "a double share of glory and thrills" to provide stories for a book he planned to write after the war? Was he motivated by an extreme form of patriotism that many modern Americans have difficulty understanding today? Was he fatalistic about death as a result of his deep religious faith or his



devotion to his fellow foot soldiers? Kilmer's letters point in many directions, but, of course, we will never know for sure, just as we will never know what kind of written works Kilmer might have produced if he had lived a longer life. However, to put Kilmer's death into wider perspective, it's estimated that over 37 million soldiers and civilians, were killed or wounded in WW1 – grief, suffering, and loss were pandemic.

Covell said, "It will be his [Kilmer's] poetry and his other works, his devotion to friends and family and his sense of honor that paint a portrait of an honest critic, a wholesome poet, a loving husband and father, and a heroic soldier." That statement can only remain true when contemporary authors like Covell keep Joyce Kilmer's memory alive, and when memorials like the Joyce Kilmer Fireplace are restored and put back to use for a new generation.

The Joyce Kilmer Memorial Fireplace is located in the heart of the Como Woodland Outdoor Classroom site. Half hidden in the woods, this special memorial is only visible from Como Avenue across from McMurry Fields. As a result of years of abuse, the structure is crumbling and in danger of collapse. Thankfully, the structure is scheduled for a complete restoration later this summer (2010).

To help celebrate the restoration of the Joyce Kilmer Fireplace and the value of trees, the District 10 Environment Committee and Como Woodland Advisory Committee are sponsoring up to six poetry workshops this autumn at Chelsea Heights and Como Park elementaries. The student poems will be published in a rededication booklet in 2011 in time for the 75th anniversary of the fireplace's original dedication next spring.

Donations to help pay for the professional poetry teacher are being accepted by District 10 Community Council for this project.

John Covell has donated six copies of his book "Joyce Kilmer - A Literary Biography" as an incentive for the first six donations in August (of \$50 or more) to the Poet-tree Workshops.

If you would like to support this effort, please send your check (with "Poet-tree" added to the memo line) to the District 10 office at 1224 Lexington Pkwy N. St. Paul, 55103. Or donate online at the District 10 website via PayPal: www.district10comopark.org.