

E. THOMAS WOOD

## In Guthrie, no sign will indicate birthplace of U.S. poet laureate

IN the days before interstates, you took Highway 41 to Hopkinsville. Along the way, a little past Springfield, you went down the Main Street of Guthrie, Ky.

Main Street is quiet today. Sheet metal covers one old storefront, an auction notice stands in the window of another. A fading advertisement painted on the side of a building extols the stimulant effect of Coca-Cola — 5 cents a bottle.

A block off Main, at the corner of Third and Cherry streets, across from a turquoise-and-white mobile home with matching canopies, sits a modest 1880's red-brick house. Green masking tape holds together the plate-glass of a Victorian front window. A for-sale sign stands in the tiny yard. There is no sign to indi-



cate that this is the birthplace of Robert Penn Warren, Poet Laureate of the United States.

A few yards out of Guthrie's city limits, just inside the Tennessee border, the Miami Gardens Pub beckons Guthrians from dry Todd County. The people I meet in the bar are friendly and talkative. The bartender slides me a free beer and introduces me to her mother. The

mother wonders why on earth I should care about Guthrie.

"This was a hoppin' town, 30 or 40 years ago," she says. "They used to call it 'Little Chicago.' But this place is dead now."

Three people in the pub have heard Warren's name, but little else. Somehow it seems futile to contemplate explaining that Warren, 81, is the only writer to have won Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and poetry, or that he is long since due for a Nobel.

In his 1946 novel *All the King's Men*, Warren pillories the grasping-after-fame of Gov. Willie Stark, who names a state hospital after himself. The author could not fail to perceive the irony in a reversed situation. At a celebration of Guthrie's

centenary held in the mid-1970's, a group of the town's distinguished natives from the past 100 years was recognized. Robert Penn Warren's name was not on the list.

"As a schoolboy in Guthrie, Warren endured the trials of the damned," writes Floyd Watkins of Emory University in a recent study of Warren's poetry. Watkins interviewed residents who knew the poet and novelist in his youth. Many revealed hostile envy of Warren's intellectual capabilities, 60 years or more after they were classmates. Some related with undisguised relish tales of the taunts inflicted on the shy, red-headed "know-it-all."

In some senses it's a long way from Guthrie's Main Street to Benson Hall on the Vanderbilt campus,

but at the English department of Warren's alma mater, ignorance and hostility of another variety have affected his reputation.

Certain younger members of the department have developed a natural revulsion to the quixotic traditionalism and racism of many Southern writers from Warren's era. But in the process they have labeled Warren by the company that he kept — disregarding both the maturity of his later poetry and the importance of his writings in the 1960's in fostering understanding between the races.

The Vanderbilt English department bears only a little of the blame for this community's failure to accord due respect to Warren, who still calls himself a native of Middle

Tennessee although he now lives in Connecticut.

On the hill below our State Capitol is a statue of Andrew Jackson, who perpetrated genocide against the Cherokee Nation. No statues of poets. On the Vanderbilt campus are buildings named for administrators and benefactors. Do they stand as mute testimonial to the value that our society places on bureaucrats and moneyed men, at the expense of individuals whose contributions are less tangible?

Maybe somebody ought to buy that house in Guthrie, before another mobile home takes its place. Maybe that would be a step toward decency. ■

(Wood is a recent graduate of Vanderbilt University.)