

Interview w/Millie re Bert (5/17/75)

He told me one day you'll have a shrine to me, with your shells and rocks and my picture above them. And he was right. On a street in S.L.O., On opposite corners catycorner to each other, live two people who knew Bert and made the trek into the dunes to see him, but they do not know each other. Both went to the hospital to see him. (Tina Nelson and Mary Covington)

Millie: I had heard about him from Louise (who lived next door to me) and of course I was very curious. We had been walking along the beach (and we sent you back because of your bronchitis) and we saw Bert struggling with potatoes. He had other things there, too, groceries. But it was obvious he was worried about his 100 lbs of potatoes since it was summer and there were tourists there. He'd had them dropped off, probably by a ranger or something. He was trying to get them back into the dunes without their being stolen, so at first we thought we'd watch them for him. Then we hit upon the idea that we would drag them over the dunes for him, each of us taking as much as we could carry. It was quite a struggle, I'll tell you. I think I had about 20 lbs of potatoes I was dragging along because he had them in several bags. But we were-dragged them clear into the dunes for him and he was very grateful and pleased to have the help. I think it was in the summer of '64 or '65. So we sat and talked with him for awhile and I was really pleased to have sort of earned this right to get to know him. I was curious about what kind of a person could isolate himself like that. He took us in and showed us his shack and his books and talked about astrology.

About his childhood: Only that he had come over here about age 12. He had been very fond of some woman there in the area (Oceanside), but had been sorely disappointed. This added to his wish to isolate himself. He didn't talk to me about his family. (It is my understanding he worked long, hard hours ever as a little kid. J) He certainly didn't hate women, but this I have just related is all that I know about any kind of romantic interest. (J. I asked him if he believed in fortune telling and psychic phenomena. He said, this fortune teller had come to see him and said a blond woman would come into the dunes and tell him she loved him. She hasn't done it so I don't believe in it anymore. (J- Now were the blond

woman, of course. That's pretty obvious, Jane, that he really cared a lot about you. This is not something you seek to hear from me, but I KNOW that Bert was really very rueful that he had not met you a lot sooner. Because I saw him often that year that we lived in S.C. You were very much in his mind. He was very fond of you. He would kid about you, but it is a reality to me that he wished he had met you a lot sooner. When you were not there he often talked about you. That you were sympathetic person, a lovely woman and perhaps your husband wouldn't like for you to see much of him. I know it must have been why he was sometimes cruel to you when Gene was there. The thing is, people don't grow old in that way and he certainly was not a person who ever grew old (mentally) and to me this is perhaps the most real thing I know about him. He was lonely for real love and human companionship. He really loved you. I think he thought it was a rather nasty trick of fate he didn't find you earlier in his life.

That's one reason Bert didn't feel like he could talk to me as freely as maybe he would have otherwise because I think he knew that I knew because I watched him and he would catch me watching him when you were around. He knew that I knew a lot more about him than he wanted me to know. That's why I got that feeling.

(If I'd only known how much our visiting meant to him) I didn't know it either. I felt sometimes like we were invading his privacy. (I know. So many people have told me they had that same feeling.) I never thought of a hermit as someone who would feel that need. That was some sort of illusion I had. There're there because they don't want to see you. (He was there because there was much he did not want to see; much he chose not to see, but if someone he valued promised to go see him -- several have told me this -- and didn't-make-it by some quirk of fate or some responsibility that came up, he was very upset. In fact, Harriet thinks that's why he didn't write her out of his will. He had told her she was in his will. I never felt I was very important to Bert. I realize now I probably was.

I felt he was important to me and in a way I felt I was imposing on him. (I think we all did) (You were important to him because he kept asking me over and over, when is Millie coming? and I assured him you would be there.) (Kept saying Labor Day, Bert, it's only $2\frac{1}{2}$ wks. And he said, then it will be too late.) I felt bad about that. I'm such a chicken when it comes to somebody dying that I just didn't want to believe it. (I didn't either; I had never been through that slow, agonizing death before.) I hate to think of you going through it by yourself. (I didn't. Gene was a tremendous help to me. Bert was so funny. Gene walked in one night with a coaches jacket on that had a big CIF basketball championship patch on it. Bert took a look at him and said, "What's that, something for your ego?" He pointed to the patch. Gene looked at him kind of startled and said, "Well, yes, I guess it is, come to think of it." But it's also my warmest jacket.")

He was such a tease and there were times when I could see him teasing you and trying to get a rise out of you and you didn't know he was teasing. (Really?) Yeah. I'd watch him and he'd throw out these outrageous statements and have you protesting and almost upset and he was teasing. It was obvious he was teasing. (What kind of outrageous statements? I can't remember.) Well, I don't know: the state of the world or I can't recall, Jane, but something that would -- like Buddha and I don't know what all -- something very straight and intolerant and then he'd get such a kick out of it when you would come back at him and protest. I sometimes think I was onto him a little too much for his comfort.

Maybe that's just my vanity or ego speaking; I found him someone I wanted to study and I think he sensed that and he really didn't like it very well although he liked me. But I couldn't help being that way since I'm interested in all sorts of ideas and people and why people do things -- to get into the whys and how people's minds work. I was curious about a man who could isolate himself like that.

To me he was fun and I loved him, but, also, it was kind of a clinical study and I think he resented that in some way. That's legitimate. (I was tuned into him so well in some ways; in others I was blind because I was so fearful of imposing on him. That's why I didn't push it with the tape recorder after I got it and he was uncomfortable with it. It wasn't until I took Donn Clickard and Chris Roberts out there that he asked me, "Did you bring the tape recorder?" I said, No and he really wanted me to bring it and) (This is something, I sensed about him, Jane, that he wanted to make his mark and he wanted to leave something for posterity even tho he was a hermit and I found this a little ambivalent, but I recognized it in him, too. (I know. He asked me over and over if I was really going to write the book, and I said, yes, I promised him I would.) You know, at first he acted like he didn't want us to think about that and almost repulsed the idea a time or two and I felt strange about it. I'm glad he finally came around to it. (He's the one that finally kept bringing it up. I'd given up on it.) I think when he realized his time was up -- in 72 when we were there, 71, 71, I would go take astrology lessons from him and he found me an unfortunate pupil because I didn't have the time to spend, but I wasn't serious about it. Besides, I argued with him about it and he never appreciated that. But he mentioned, when I'd go see him at Crites, that he didn't feel so good; he had trouble catching his breath. It was when we got the English Lavendar from him. He would have to sit and rest and it was very much unlike him. I was afraid it was his heart. I think it must have been this cancer that was getting to him even then. (Do you know how he came to come to Oceano?) Only that -- I think he came there accidentally -- then got in with the people. (He told Tina that he came seeking this group -- I didn't know that for sure either -- but when he got there he found out things about them he didn't like. Therefore, he maintained his distance. Remained on the fringe of it.) I never knew where he came from or anything. (He had been bumming around up by the Salinas River in Northern California. How do you think he came to choose that lifestyle?) I've heard him say he decided he'd had enough of trying to deal with people

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because he'd been hurt so much. (Also, he talked about the noise, the frantic rush bothered him. I noticed at the hospital he was super sensitive about those things. What do you think his basic philosophy was?) I think he was eclectic. He had a very strong faith in something, but I think that he looked at all religions as ^{idea} more or less one and the same. / Of man trying to ^{infinity of} relate to some higher power. I had the feeling he chose one, / ^{found things he} really admired one and another, Christianity, and so forth. That's as near as I could tell. I don't think he espoused anything totally in the way of philosophy or religion. (I think he came closest to espousing Buddhism.) Probably, because that's the one he seemed to dwell on the most. (Gene and I started reading the Buddhist Bible that he left us -- Gene's gotten farther into it than I have -- he was pointing out to me the other day that the precepts of Buddhism, the things they value are very much like the things valued in the Christian faith. Such as man's treatment of man and moral obligations, etc. Gene was pointing out the primary difference in the two religions is that in Christianity you are saved by something outside yourself, by Christ dying for your sins and being redeemed. Buddhism is based on the concept of inner discipline, where when something happens to test you, you don't pray for help from someone else, an outside source, but you use all the power power at your disposal to give yourself the inner strength to accomplish it on your own.) (He said it's incredible how clearly he sees Bert in it.) I think you're right because I can see Bert more and more related to Buddhism. (Before he died he said, Soon it will be over. There will be nothing left, but for Christ and Buddha to fight over my soul.) Sounds like he had some ambivalence there. (Donn Williams wife was there the Monday before he died. She said that he was in agony. While she was there the doctor came in to see him and Bert asked him for a little black pill and the doctor said, "Bert, you know I can't give you that; ;you don't want to die; you've got a couple more good years. and Bert Said I don't want to live like this. If you do have a little black pill you could give me, what difference does it make if my headstone reads Died at the age of 70 or at the age of 72? The doctor tried to placate him, but he finally did say, "Well, it is time that you

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that you made things right with your master or with your maker, or whatever. Bert became very vehement and said, "I have no need for that; I have spent my whole life making things right with my maker.) Revealing. (Yes, it is as though he had a plan) He was more of an ascetic than he showed right on the surface. (What do you think about his interest in politics? I was always so amazed at how incisive he was.) He was vitally interested in the happenings of this world. even tho he chose that kind of life. (He seemed to have so much insight into why things were happening they way they were.) Yes, I think he saw things with more of a world view rather than (unintelligible here).

(What about his temperament?) (I heard a story from one person that they said had become almost a legend in Ocean area. There was a man who would come out and exchange haircuts with Bert. One day, he accidentally nicked Bert's ear and it started to bleed and Bert grabbed the scissors and started him shouting all over the dunes. People saw it and thought he was crazy.) I've never heard that story. It sounds like it might have been more in fun than not. (Evidently, the man thought not.) I'd like to have seen that. (Screaming at the top of his voice the whole time, "You tried to kill me; you tried to kill me.) Well, it stands to reason that someone who isolates himself and then the remarks he had made once or twice that he had suffered at the hands of man, you know, and that was one reason he was not living among men, would indicate some feelings of paranoia on his part.

(Can you remember any examples of his sense of humor?) When I think of him, I think of him joking and laughing, although I can't remember any specific things except his teasing. (He was rather a performer, wasn't he?) Oh yes, he liked to be the center of attention. He liked being a curiosity. I was amazed that he kept as clean as he did. His clothes were always rather lackadaisical and makeshift, but they were always clean. (And do you know he had a whole barrel of new, beautiful clothes?) Oh, I 'm not surprised.

But he wouldn't wear them. That goes along w/ Bert's philosophy, too.

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With Bert I never noticed his clothes very much. They seemed so much in keeping with where he lived and how he lived. I never felt sorry for him about his ragged clothes or his pants held up with string. (What do you think he valued most of all?) I think he valued GOOD human relationships. He felt he had that with us. I think he valued being able to be with his friends. Of course, he valued his thinking and his freedom from the ratrace perhaps more than anything else. (So often in the past few years he referred to my status as that of a wage slave.) He never made that remark to me. You know, I kidded him and told him if he got to feeling not good enough to stay at home he could come and stay at our rest home and he said, "NEVER." It would have given me some satisfaction to have him there and help him if he needed it. But I appreciated his point of view. (Do you remember any people that he looked up to?) No. (I don't either, though I thought surely there must have been someone.) I did gather that he thought highly of the Crites. (Oh, he did, I meant in an idealistic way.) No, I never heard him refer to a personage. (Beethoven and Brahms were his favorite music.) He was a very learned man. (He was a self-educated man. (Do you know anything about his favorite foods?) No. I never heard him talk very much about food. (What do you think bothered him the most? the kinds of things?) I seem to recall his being angry at political happenings. The wars and political happenings that were bad. And the state of the economy when it wasn't beneficial to the common man. (Did you ever hear him talk about the stock market or anything that would indicate he had stock?) Oh yes, I don't recall that he talked like he had invested in it, but he was very much aware of it. He mentioned it as an indication of the economy. He seemed fairly knowledgeable. (Do you think he was very lonely?) I wasn't aware that he was. He hid that, if he felt it. (He hid it less and less during that last year or so.) Don't you think that might be because he felt his health was failing? I didn't get the feeling when I first knew him -- ten years ago -- that he felt lonely at all.

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(Toward the end I think he had a lot of fear, and he was lonely.) (And I had no idea he had as much fear as he did.) You mean being alone when he needed people? (Yes, especially for his health. as it became worse. Being there where he had no one to help him.) I didn't get the feeling when I first knew him fourteen years ago that he felt lonely at all. I'm inclined to think it happened as his health failed. Then we have the need for ties, friendship, having someone to depend upon. (During the time you knew him did he change in any significant ways?) No. He did become more open, but I think that was because I got to know him better. (What are your recollections of his telling about his stowaway episode?) Just that he thought it was a lark. And he seemed to be pleased for having done that. I don't recall him alluding to his family. (He told me one of the reasons he went back was to see if his family was as bad as he remembere them to be. He hoped they weren't, but when he got there he found out they were. (Do you feel that he valued nature highly?) Oh, yes. That seems to be one of the pleasures that he enjoyed. His place in that natural setting. (I understand he used to have cats out there, but by the time I knew him, I don't remember his having any.) (In the time you knew him was gardening all he did for a living?) Yes. (With him it was an art.) I'll say. He seemed to take it very seriously and to enjoy it. (Do you remember any personal anecdotes about him?) No, except that he chided me when I didn't pay as much attention to the astrology as he wanted me to and he indicated that so many people wanted to learn astrology, but so few would stick to it, would really study. And, of course, at that time I was so pressured I became one of those. I remember that I got a book & began reading about a new planet that had not been discovered until just recently -- or a new celestial body that, if you take astrology seriously, probably had some bearing on human beings and I brought this up with him and he was irate with me that I questioned him like that at all. And I think I lost face with him over that (laughter). He liked being a teacher and he liked having good students. He DID NOT like having anyone question his curriclum, so to speak.

(If you were to describe him to someone who had never seen him or heard of him, how would you do it?) I would say that he was a very intelligent and aware person with a strong personality, PUCKISH sense of humor, teasing, (He really blended a unique combination of arrogance and humility) and he didn't take himself TOO seriously and yet in some ways he was very solemn. He laughed at himself more than he laughed at anyone else.

I never heard him speak a disparaging word of anyone, except that some people were not -- he didn't like to have them around too long because their troubles put a burden on him.

(What did you value most about Bert?) His integrity and his completeness as a human being. And his awareness and knowledge of himself. And his place to come to. It was such a unique place in the world that I found it fascinating. (It was a respite, it was for me) Yes, and a view -- his view was from a place where I couldn't be and I think I valued it because he didn't have things encroaching on it. So I enjoyed finding out what he thought. Also he studied a great deal more about philosophical and aesthetic issues than I did.

I was glad to pick up insight from him. (Why was he important to you?) Because he was such an alive, warm human being.

And a person that had the courage to do what he wanted to do. To give up most of what you and I spend our time trying to get, or acquire. (What kind of effect did he have on your life?)

I think he gave me some reassurance that the life of meditation and loneliness could be worthwhile and enriching. I felt some sort of connection with the mystic and the other world that is not very much a part of this world, a fascinating thing, and it just sort of opened up a new world to me.

(He was so very much of this world, yet apart from it.) Right. And that rested my head. It gave me a place to go mentally.

(Did he affect your values at all?) I suppose everything does.

Perhaps, because he was certainly not a fully productive member of society, and yet he was productive, I think that gives some food for thought. (Think how many people he offered that respite to who are caught up in what sometimes appears insanity.)

Right. (The squirrel cage, treadmill kind of thing.)

I often envied the fact that he didn't pay any rent. (Laughter)
How Neat! (Did he affect your philosophy, then, in any way?)
I think I began to take the idea of Buddhism and other philosophies more seriously. It's rather amazing when you get into other philosophies. And I became curious. about all kinds of ideas. (Do you think your life was changed in any way by his friendship?) Oh, I'm sure it was. I felt that he was a part of the dunes and in a way, kind of the spirit of the dunes. When I thought of the dunes, I always thought of Bert there. (I often think his moving to the dunes wasn't only a calculated retreat from society, but a deliberate move that forced him to confront himself.) I think he had a lot of ambivalent feelings within himself/ I know that he found some measure of peace there that couldn't be found anywhere else. And in a way I think he enjoyed proving man ^{really} ^{so} did not/need to be/involvement in the economic in order to be a person and to be able to communicate with others. (He delighted in showing how with it and knowledgeable he was.) He was just there and I was very much aware of his being there, but I didn't try to analyze him too much. I simply enjoyed him.