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THE RAUCOUS BLUEJAY: CHARLES ERSKINE SCOTT WOOD

by

Joan B. Barriga
21425 Shady Lane
Los Gatos, Ca. 95030
Tele. (408) 353-2546

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Unless I am determinedly myself,
I have taken the great gift and belied it.
I have broken the everlasting chain.
I am a link that has failed.

-- Charles Erskine Scott Wood

The Poet in the Desert

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	iii
The Raucous Bluejay: Charles Erskine Scott Wood	1
Illustrations	25
Footnotes	27
Bibliography	29

INTRODUCTION

On January 22, 1944, the news went out that Colonel Charles Erskine Scott Wood had died at The Cats, his home in Los Gatos, California. The effect of this event could be likened to that of a stone dropped into a quiet pool -- the ripples spread in ever-widening circles and touched distant shores. If the people who had known Col. Wood during his nearly ninety-two year lifespan could have gathered at The Cats for a memorial service (an idea which would have been abhorrent to him), they would probably have been surprised, upon comparing notes, to find that each seemed to know a different person.

Locally, he was known as the bearded patriarch who lived on a vineyard-covered hillside just outside the town. But even this description had its dissenters: some of the townspeople knew him as a radical Socialist, some as a poet and philosopher, and some as a friend and supporter of the working man. The people of Portland, Oregon, upon hearing of his death, would have identified him as a nationally-known corporate lawyer, a civic leader, a politician, a supporter of the arts, and a leader of Portland society. And he was, indeed, all of these things.

At West Point he would be remembered as the Academy's oldest graduate on the West Coast, and there would have been some smiles over his academic record while a cadet. They might have puzzled over his decision to resign his Army commission after fourteen years of service and participation in the Nez Perce and Bannock campaigns during the Indian Wars. When the farthest-

reaching ripple touched Nespelem, Washington, the remnants of the Nez Perce tribe on the desolate Colville reservation would remember a handsome young lieutenant, who accompanied "One-Arm" Howard to the battlefield in Montana's Bear Paw Mountains and stood, notebook in hand, writing down the words of their chief, Joseph, as he surrendered. They would remember his affection for their people and his life-long fight to gain some measure of justice for them. They knew the reason for his resignation from the Army.

Charles Erskine Scott Wood was many things to many people, and those who came into contact with him would remember him as he was at the moment they knew him: a soldier, a lawyer, a philosopher, a poet. But there was one thing they all could probably agree upon about Erskine Wood. He was a fiercely independent man who believed in fighting for his ideals of freedom and justice, even when it meant flying in the face of popular opinion. His unwavering philosophy was to express himself fully and absolutely, and to be determinedly himself.

THE RAUCOUS BLUEJAY: CHARLES ERSKINE SCOTT WOOD

Bitterly cold winds and snow swept down from the nearby Canadian border into Montana's Bear Paw Mountains as the winter of 1877 closed in. Huddled together against the weather was a band of Nez Perce Indians, 87 warriors and 331 women and children, who had reached the end of a 1300 mile flight from the United States Army. Their ancestral homeland, the Wallowa Valley in northeastern Oregon, had been thrown open to white settlers by President Grant's reversal of an 1873 executive order, and they fled, hoping to escape the enforced reservation life ordered by the government. Led by their chief, Joseph, whose Nez Perce name, Heinmot Tooyalaket, meant "Thunder Rolling in the Mountains", they had eluded and fought off one-armed General Oliver Howard's troops from Ft. Vancouver and General Gibbon's Seventh Cavalry, which was once again up to its full strength of 600 troops after the Little Bighorn disaster of the previous year. But unknown to the Nez Perces, General Nelson Miles was hurrying to cut across their route and prevent their escape across the Canadian border, thirty miles away. As the first winter blizzard began, the Nez Perces used knives, cooking pots, and bare hands to scrape out rifle pits and trenches for protection from the gunfire. On October 1, 1877, the siege began; it lasted five days.

Years afterward, one of the Nez Perce chiefs recalled the scene with bitterness: "Children crying with cold... Everywhere the crying, the death wail ... I felt the coming end. All for which we had suffered lost!"¹ Joseph, wanting to prevent the total annihilation of his people, agreed to

surrender after Gen. Miles assured him that the remaining Nez Perces would be sent to the Lapwai reservation in Idaho. The generals and their troops gathered for the surrender on October 5, and the scene was recorded by Gen. Howard's twenty-five year old aide, Lt. Charles Erskine Scott Wood: "...on the evening of a wintry day, the prairie powdered with snow, and a red and stormy sun almost at the horizon, Joseph surrendered, his people coming out of the burrows they had made in the hills, and where they had been living without fires, subsisting on the flesh of dead horses..."²

At the time of the Chief Joseph campaign, Wood, an 1874 graduate of West Point, was assigned to Vancouver Barracks on the Columbia River. He had already spent a year of garrison duty at Ft. Bidwell in northern California, at the end of which time his company was transferred to Vancouver. They spent a month on the way, marching through the Harney Basin of eastern Oregon, and it was during this march that he began to realize the vastness and beauty of western America. When he was twenty-four, he acted as escort on an expedition to Alaska, and became the first white man to descend the Yukon River.³

Despite his fascination with exploration and interest in all aspects of the West -- its wildlife, plants and native people -- he found military life much less to his liking. His father, William Maxwell Wood, was a veteran of the Civil War and a personal friend of Ulysses Grant, who created the post of Surgeon General of the Navy specifically for him. When Wood's son Charles reached the age of eighteen, then-President Grant appointed him to West Point Academy (his older brother, Max, had already received an Annapolis appointment), to carry on the family's military tradition. Erskine (as he was registered at the Academy) did well in military sketching, and in classes of law and ethics, but he spent entirely too much time, to his father's chagrin, reading the classics and romancing Nanny Moale Smith,

a popular and pretty Washington debutante. He would have liked--he thought at that time -- to be a cavalry officer, but his academic record at the Academy was so unimpressive that he was commissioned a First Lieutenant in the 21st Infantry upon graduation. In spite of opposition from Nelly's guardian, she and Erskine were engaged before he left for Ft. Bidwell.

And so it happened that this romanticist, miscast as an officer, found himself in Montana's Bear Paw Mountains two years later, standing at General Howard's side, a witness to one of this country's most touching moments. Joseph and several of his warrior chiefs slowly rode toward Generals Howard and Miles, stopping a short distance away where Joseph dismounted and approached alone. He faced his conquerors and spoke slowly and distinctly, as his words were translated by a Delaware Indian who accompanied the troops, and recorded by Lt. Wood:

...I am tired of fighting.... My people ask me for food and I have none to give. It is cold, and we have no blankets, no wood. My people are starving to death. Where is my little daughter? I do not know. Perhaps, even now, she is freezing to death. Hear me, my chiefs. I have fought; but from where the sun now stands, Joseph will fight no more forever.

4

He handed his rifle to Gen. Howard, who passed it to Miles; then raising one arm and covering his face with his blanket, a sign of mourning, he walked into the enemy camp.

As soon as word of the Nez Perces' surrender reached Washington, Gen. Miles' promise to Joseph was countermanded. The remnants of the tribe were shipped to Kansas where 67 of them died of malaria. From Ft. Leavenworth the survivors were then transferred to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Joseph lost both of his wives, and all of his children, during their eight years of exile. His brother, Ollikut, had been killed during the flight to Canada. While a captive, Joseph was allowed to make a trip to Washington

to plead for the return of his people to their homeland, the Wallowa Valley. "Gen. Miles promised that we might return to our own country", he told the Washington officials. "I believed Gen. Miles, or I never would have surrendered." In 1885 Joseph and 150 "dangerous" Nez Perces were returned to the West, but not to their home in the Wallowa Valley. They were sent to the barren Colville reservation near Nespelem in northeastern Washington.⁵

In Portland, Oregon, thirty-three year old Erskine Wood was practicing law in 1885, after having been admitted to the Oregon bar the year before . He and Nanny, married now for nine years, had a family of four children , Erskine, Nan, Maxwell, and Lisa. They were to have two more children by 1888 -- Berwick Bruce and Katherine Gordon, who died in infancy. Wood obtained his law degree, cum laude, from Columbia University in 1883, while serving as adjutant at West Point. Characteristically, he did not spend all of his time studying. He befriended a group of artists, including Olin Warner, Childe Hassam, and Albert Weir, whose father was Wood's art teacher at West Point. Wood showed considerable talent as a landscape artist, doing sketches and working in oils and watercolors. Today many of these works are in the possession of his grandchildren.⁶ He met Mark Twain, and they enjoyed each other's biting wit. They got together one weekend at West Point and secretly printed 1601, a satire written, but never signed, by Twain because it was considered outside the bounds of good taste at that time.⁷

Once Wood was admitted to the bar and well on his way to becoming an established family man, he resigned his commission in the Army and moved Nanny and the children to Portland. Although he was no longer an officer in the Army, he was asked by the governor of Oregon to organize the Oregon National Guard in 1886, for which work he was given the militia title of Lt. Colonel. He began to specialize in maritime law and soon became the

leading authority on the West Coast. He represented some of Portland's most prominent families in legal matters. Jim Hill, who almost single-handedly created the Great Northern Railroad, retained Wood as his counsel; the French banking firm, Lazard Freres, which had vast land holdings in Oregon, was another client.

In 1887 Wood was invited to become a partner in Portland's oldest law firm, Williams and Ach. He was thirty-five years old, well established financially and socially, and a respected citizen. But he couldn't forget that bleak day on a Montana prairie when an honorable man of peace, who wanted nothing more than the right to live out his life in the country he loved, was stripped of his possessions and sent into exile by those who held power. The news of Joseph's release and relocation to Colville brought that memory back to his mind, and he wrote, "I think that, in his long career, Joseph cannot accuse the Government of the United States of one single act of justice..."⁸ Chief Joseph had become a symbol to Wood of man's dignity and forbearance under adversity. He marked a turning-point in Erskine Wood's life, and the treatment received by Joseph and his people had much to do with Wood's decision to sever his ties with the military.

As his legal prestige grew, Wood became more and more involved in Portland's civic and social affairs. He and Nanny hosted lavish, if somewhat unconventional, parties at their westside Portland home in The Heights. ("Bohemia without shabbiness," one guest described it).⁹ A strikingly handsome man with wide-set eyes and wavy brown hair, it was not unusual for Wood to appear at an evening's entertainment wearing a ruffled white silk shirt, topped off with a black military cape and broad-brimmed Stetson hat.¹⁰ Nanny also enjoyed entertaining, and had, as well, interests.

in gardening and music. They both believed that those possessing wealth had an obligation to help less fortunate people, but Erskine's commitment to this idea of social responsibility began to take on more tangible forms. He took a private office in the Chamber of Commerce building, where he sometimes got away from the press of business to spend Sundays writing or painting. As time went on, he used this private office to meet with some of his more unconventional clients, who might have proved an embarrassment to the dignified firm of Williams, Ach and Wood.

When his oldest son, Erskine, was twelve years old, Wood found a novel way to introduce him to a different culture. For two summers, in 1891 and 1892, he sent young Erskine to live with Chief Joseph and his family at Colville in order to gain an understanding and appreciation of Native American culture. Joseph, in turn, was an invited guest at the Woods' home. During the time Erskine spent with the Nez Perce people he wore buckskins and lived in the same tepee with the old chief. The experience made a lasting impression on the boy. In 1977, when he was an old man of ninety-nine, he spoke to the Oregon Historical Society about the government's mistreatment of the Nez Perce people and Native Americans in general. He was at that time the last living white man to have personally known Chief Joseph.¹¹

During the 1890's Wood's activities expanded. When the city of Portland needed a fund-raiser for a worthy cause or a witty after-dinner speaker, they called on Wood. He was a supporter of the public libraries, the Portland Art Association, and was instrumental in bringing sculptor Olin Warner to Portland to design the Skidmore Fountain, which bears an inscription written by Wood: "Good citizens are the riches of a city."¹² He was, as well, one of the originators of the city's Rose Parade. A frequent speaker at Fourth of July celebrations and political rallies, he was

appropriately patriotic. Twice he was the Oregon representative to the Democratic National Committee meetings in 1893 and 1894. He became more and more involved in politics during the tumultuous times of the early 1900's, finding himself consistently on the side of the workers and the disenfranchised. When his name was proposed as U.S. Senator from Oregon in 1905, he urged that women be given the right to vote (seven years before Oregon granted women's suffrage, and fifteen years before the federal government did). He was defeated, but far from discouraged. Strange as it might seem that a wealthy lawyer, whose clients represented a conservative body of thought, would be involved with radical elements, he nonetheless continued to support them ; and soon his essays and articles began appearing in a number of magazines. Wood must have recognized this contradiction, because he used various pseudonyms when he sent articles on art criticism and book reviews to The Pacific Monthly. Oddly enough, he signed his own name to a monthly column where he aired his increasingly radical views.

The first two decades of the new century were turbulent ones: labor unrest and strikes, attempts to unionize workers, coal miners' strikes, battles between police and labor organizers in Everett, Washington. There were rumblings in Russia, where a thirty year old lawyer named Lenin returned from a five year exile in Siberia to continue preaching his revolutionary politics. The old ways were being swept away by a strong wind of discontent and impatience -- the 20th Century was here, and it was time for new ways and new ideas. Victoria was dead, and so was her era. Disturbing as all this change and turmoil was to the establishment, it was a time of excitement and challenge to radicals and free-thinkers. New political parties were springing up -- Socialists, Communists, Progressives, Populists -- all competed for supporters; writers and artists sought new and different ways to interpret the changing society. Women were becoming increasingly outspoken in their demands for birth-control and the right to vote.

Erskine Wood was forty-eight years old at the turn of the century, and

during the next ten years he reached another turning-point in his life. His experiences during the Chief Joseph campaign caused him to question and eventually reject militarism. The comfortable, well-educated Easterner had come face-to-face with the grim reality of the government's plan to subdue or destroy an entire race of people in its greed for their land. Now he began to question and eventually oppose the exploitation of workers, and what he considered increased government interference in private matters. The social gatherings at the Woods' home had always included an interesting variety of guests: artists, bankers, writers, socially prominent citizens of Portland; now, more and more, the gatherings included political radicals and outspoken supporters of extremist ideas. Young John Reed, a friend of Wood's children, was a frequent guest during his vacations from Harvard. Reed, a Portland native, was a poet and journalist, who, with Max Eastman and other young radicals in the East, put together a monthly magazine, The Masses, in 1911.¹³ Their aim was to shake the establishment out of its comfortable ways by publishing articles that presented fresh -- and often shocking -- social and political viewpoints. Wood's influence on Reed's writings was evident, and he himself frequently contributed "dialogues" to the magazine. These dialogues (satirical conversations between God and prominent figures, living and dead) later became Wood's Heavenly Discourse (1927). Reed later went on to report on the Pancho Villa campaign in Mexico. World War I found him in eastern Europe and Russia, where he was caught up in the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. When he died in 1920 at age thirty-three, he was buried beside the walls of the Kremlin.

Another of Wood's friends was lawyer Clarence Darrow, well-known for his defense of organized labor and civil rights for minorities. In 1911 Darrow and Marion Field, a social worker at Chicago's Hull House, visited Erskine Wood and his wife in Portland. Marion Field's sister, Sara, also lived in Portland. Sara, who had been a missionary in Burma, was married to a Baptist minister, Albert

Erghott, and they were the parents of two young children, Albert and Katherine. The Field sisters had worked in soup kitchens and women's shelters in the Midwest, trying to help destitute people, and were strong advocates of women's rights. When Darrow introduced Marion's sister to Erskine Wood, there was an immediate spark of recognition between two kindred souls.

"I never knew a woman who was so attractive to men," said Sara's daughter in a 1985 interview. "He was just smitten by her, but all men were."¹⁴ The fifty-eight year old lawyer, father of five grown children (the youngest was twenty-three, the oldest thirty-three), married for thirty-five years and considered a pillar of Portland society, was indeed "smitten" by the twenty-eight year old Sara, who used her maiden name --Sara Bard Field -- at a time when this practice was frowned upon. Sara was involved in the women's suffrage movement, and was a journalist and poet-- all matters of considerable interest to Erskine Wood. She was the extremely attractive embodiment of all his political, social, and artistic ideals.

Sara's daughter, Katherine Erghott Caldwell, gave some hint as to the problems between her mother and Albert Erghott:"My father had a great respect for her intellect, but she couldn't bear his fundamentalist Christianity and his bigotry."¹⁵ It appeared that both Sara and Erskine had reached a crisis in their lives, and it was Sara who took the first step on the path that had no turning back. In 1912 she and the children moved to Goldfield, Nevada, where she filed for divorce -- Nevada being one of the few states in the country that granted divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. Katherine, who was six at the time, remembered leaving Portland with her older brother "...in tears...because her mother, who had fallen in love with a married man thirty years her senior, sought a divorce from a Baptist minister."¹⁶ The scandal rocked Portland society

to its foundations. Reverend Erghott was transferred to a church in Berkeley, California, to remove him from the eye of the storm, and when Erskine approached Nanny with the idea of a divorce, he found the door firmly closed. Nanny was a Catholic, and divorce was out of the question.

Not to be deterred, Wood lent support to Sara and her children. He sent gifts and gourmet delicacies to Goldfield and worked out an elaborate system of coded telegrams to keep in touch with her.¹⁷ When the divorce was finally granted Rev. Erghott (who had contested it) received custody of Albert and Katherine; Sara was granted visitation rights. In order to be near the children, she moved to San Francisco. Albert Erghott was extremely bitter about the divorce. Katherine said that he forbade them to mention Wood's name in his house, and he never referred to him by name, only as "that man". She and her brother had to conceal from her father any gifts Wood sent them. Wood made no secret of his relations with Sara, however, and visited her in San Francisco where they lived on Russian Hill, near Broadway and Jones Street, and enjoyed the association with other writers and artists. But these brief times together only made their separations more difficult.

Wood continued his law practice during this period, frequently traveling to Washington, D.C. and New York. His travel also took him out into the Harney Basin country of eastern Oregon --always with notebook in hand to record his impressions and to check on his large land grant. He represented banks, shipping companies, railroads, and public utilities, and was said to have received the first million-dollar legal fee in the United States from the sale of his wagon road grant to a railroad.¹⁸ But his heart was no longer in practicing corporate law; his interest in civil

rights and the reform of political abuses took precedence. In 1912 he resigned from the American Bar Association in a dispute over their refusal to admit a black attorney from Oregon. When England demanded the deportation of a Stanford University Hindu scholar, because he advocated home-rule for his country, Wood protested. Birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger came to speak in Portland in 1916 and Wood defended her right to do so. He was less successful, however, when Emma Goldman, an anarchist, was not permitted to speak publicly. He continued to speak and write in defense of unionized labor, and even when national opinion was against him, he defended members of the I.W.W. who had been arrested during the strike in Everett, Washington. His legal work was not confined just to well-known public figures; he went bail a number of times for a Portland clock shop proprietor, whose radical ideas and activities frequently got him into trouble with the law.

While Wood battled for civil rights in Portland, Sara went on a cross-country speaking tour in 1915 to carry a petition to President Woodrow Wilson for the women's suffrage movement. Wood came to San Francisco to see her off and presented her with a buffalo robe to use in the open Overland automobile. These were exciting times, politically and artistically. Wood wrote:

I come from where we think that
it is the right of every American
to go to hell and be damned
if he wants to.
That is not humor -- it is the truth. 19

He had finally made his decision. The most important thing in his life was to be himself. He became sharply aware that the distance separating Sara from him was a real barrier when there was an emergency. During the summer of 1918 he had been with her and the children in San

Francisco. They planned a picnic with Albert and Katherine, who had come over from Berkeley for the outing. While Sara was driving the car there was an accident, and Albert was killed. Katherine, remembering that awful time, recalled that her mother suffered a nervous breakdown afterwards, and was ill for a year from grief and guilt. She also remembered that Erskine Wood "cared for her so during that terrible, terrible time. He just loved her so very much." 20

The time had come for Wood to close a door on another part of his life. He retired from his law firm (leaving Erskine, now forty-one, to carry on the family name), made a financial settlement on Nanny and the family, and left Portland in 1919. Wood was sixty-seven, an age when many people might consider their careers at an end; but after a full life of military campaigns, civic work, and legal successes, he began a new career. It was a career that he had always longed for, but never had the time to pursue. He planned to devote this remaining time to writing. The time remaining to him was another quarter of a century, and it marked his emergence as a remarkable writer and poet.

At first Erskine and Sara were not sure that they wanted to live in California --or even in the United States. The year 1919 had spawned some contradictions -- Congress had adopted, after many years of wrangling, women's suffrage; but, as if to prove that the fall of this barrier would result in all the grim forecasts made by the suffrage opponents, they also ratified the Eighteenth Amendment --Prohibition. Wood, initially a supporter of Wilson, felt betrayed by him when the United States entered World War I, which he strongly opposed; now, he felt doubly betrayed by what he saw as an unconscionable intrusion by the government into his life as a private citizen. Still uncertain about where they would finally settle, he and Sara found thirty-four acres of wooded property in the Santa

Cruz Mountains, just outside the foothill town of Los Gatos, about fifty miles south of San Francisco. Erskine's first act after buying the property -- a defiant one -- was to plant a vineyard, with the intention of making his own supply of wine. In 1922 they commissioned sculptor Robert Paine to create two eight-foot high concrete statues of cats at the foot of the road leading up to their property. There has always been speculation about the choice of cats for the two statues. Historian George Bruntz suggests that it was because the owners admired the animals' grace and dignity, not because they were near the entrance to a town whose Spanish name meant "the cats". However, Prof. Edwin Bingham of the University of Oregon, after studying a journal kept by Sara and Erskine, came to the conclusion that the statues "passed on the translation of the name of the town, Los Gatos, to the hillside retreat, "The Cats'".²² Whatever the reason for their choice, "The Cats" have become a recognized part of Los Gatos, and figure prominently in the town's logo.

After a trip to Europe, Erskine and Sara returned to San Francisco in December of 1924, having decided to build on the mountain property. They brought San Francisco architect Walter Steilburg to look over the site, and Wood explained to him what he had in mind: seclusion, comfort, and easy upkeep. Steilburg worked out the location and plans for the house; it would be set into the protection of the hillside, and built of natural-colored buff and gray concrete blocks. Down the oak-covered slope fronting the house was a level area that would serve as a natural amphitheater. The house faced north, toward the town and the Santa Clara Valley, but Wood was not particularly interested in a panoramic view; he preferred to concentrate on a protected, secluded atmosphere in the large living room with its shoulder-high fireplace and bookshelves. Glimpses

through the windows of trees and the surrounding hills gave a sheltered feeling, and outside, the view opened to vine-covered hillsides and early spring wildflowers.

The house itself appeared larger when viewed from the outside than it actually was. There was a large living room across the front, and the two wings contained the bedrooms. The roof was flat, so that a solarium could be built above the living room. There was a basement (where Wood could ferment and store his home-made wine) , and a spare bedroom for Sara's daughter Katherine, when she came to visit. But in January, 1925, when construction finally got underway, the only structure on the property was a rough three-room cabin with a fireplace in the kitchen. Erskine and Sara often spent time at the cabin during the construction of the house, watching its progress, reading, writing, and walking around the property.

Since work was begun in the winter, it progressed slowly. In February there was rain damage to the site, but by March the foundation forms were in place and the workmen began pouring concrete. By May the mason was putting up the gray and buff concrete blocks of the walls. Wood enjoyed being around the workers -- many of whom were Italians -- and he and Sara would join them for lunch, sharing coffee and Erskine's special cabbage soup. One of the construction workers, Vincent Marengo, stayed on after completion of the house and lived with his wife Mary for many years at The Cats. Another friend and neighbor was Domenico Tomasco, an elderly man whose vineyard and home adjoined Wood's property.

There was too much excitement during the time that the house was going up and they were traveling between San Francisco and Los Gatos to do any serious writing, but Erskine and Sara shared their impressions in a large cloth-bound journal. They kept notes about the passing seasons, the

blooming orchards, the wildflowers -- everything was a constant delight to them, and they stored away their thoughts and feelings in the journal to ferment like Erskine's wine and be brought out at a later time for the enjoyment of all who shared them.

Originally, the cost of the house was estimated at \$10,000, but as time went on the difficulties of hillside construction and hauling materials up the narrow winding road to the construction site became evident, and the original cost more than doubled.²³ Despite delays and rising costs, the house took shape, and artist Benny Bufano accompanied them to a San Jose tile factory to select ceramic floor tiles. They chose seconds -- not only because of the cost, but because they liked the handmade look of the imperfect tiles. By the end of October the roof was in place and they could wait no longer to move in, although there was still a lot of finishing work to be done on the interior. While workmen finished floors and installed cabinets, Erskine and Sara lived in the cabin, but in December, 1925, they were permanent residents at The Cats.

Once installed in their home, Erskine finally unpacked the trunk filled with notes from the eastern Oregon desert country, from his observations on the Nez Perce and Bannock campaigns, his political satires -- some of which had been published in The Masses, until it was shut down in 1917 for its opposition to the United States' entry into the war -- and the epic poem he had been working on: The Poet in the Desert. It was in his introduction to this work that he set forth his philosophy of the writer's function and purpose in the world: "...I think even more important than being an artist reverent to art, is to be oneself. ...If the urge to preaching interrupts the urge to poetry, still it is myself, and if art be violated I like to think our indulgent old Mother Earth will tread her sunward

path undisturbed." --So much for Art for Art's Sake. Evidently he and Sara had discussed this matter of using poetry as a propaganda vehicle (something that Sara disagreed with), but, as usual, Wood continued to play gadfly to the republic. He respected Sara's belief "that the greatest poets have failed to successfully mix poetry and propaganda", but he had to write honestly. He compared her poetry--"all imagination and song"-- to an oriole, while his --"real argument attacking real error" -- he likened to a blue-jay. "One who squawks raucously as bluejay will be shot -- but better that than try to be an oriole."²⁴

The decade from 1927 to 1937 was one of great productivity; the long-stored observations finally found their way into print. The Poet in the Desert, Wood's tribute to the Nez Perce people, described the cycle of the seasons and the integral role they played in Native American culture, a concept seldom grasped by modern society. Fifty years after that grim day in October, Wood had time to reflect and distill his thoughts about what had happened to "a poor people who asked nothing but the old promises",²⁵ and who were at peace with their world; "...a simple people with no gallows and no jails."²⁶

Wood had thought about writing his autobiography, and did start work on it in 1913; but he gave up the project after getting no further than his years in the military.²⁷ In effect, Wood did write his autobiography; it appears in everything he wrote. His memories of the Harney Basin country are as sharp as if he had been sitting beside the campfire the night before writing "The Cattle Camp at Night" --

Bring sagebrush, bitter smelling sagebrush;
Bitter and spicy sweet:
Desert weed to desert fire,
Flame tongues will twist the higher
As softly the horses' feet
Pound and crush the desert dust. ²⁸

We have a description of him, now in his seventies, enjoying a summer afternoon at The Cats:

I went up into my vineyard and lay down
 Upon the warm, red earth and smelled the sweet scent
 Of the little green flowers that tasselled the vines.
 From the top of the vineyard a cock-quail was crowing 29
 And over my head a white cloud was asleep in the sky.

This was poetry that Sara could admire, and it was as a poet that Charles Erskine Scott Wood wanted to be remembered; but he couldn't resist jabbing his pen into the sensitive parts of government and the self-satisfied, self-appointed arbiters of society.

His jabs were never sharper than in Heavenly Discourse, where he railed against governmental interference, war, prohibition, fundamentalist preachers, and the Ku Klux Klan -- to mention only a partial list of his targets. Wood's God is largely disinterested in, and occasionally irritated by, the antics of the strange earth-inhabitants he created. He is quite selective about who is admitted to Heaven: Mark Twain, Voltaire, Thomas Paine are all welcome; but evangelist Billy Sunday and prohibitionist Carrie Nation are turned away. Satan wanders back and forth between his domain and God's, making suggestions and asking favors. At one point, an obviously irritated God calls St. Peter on the carpet: "Peter, you are the very person I want to see. Who started this habit of praying to me for picnic weather, crop weather, haying weather -- for babies, automobiles, new pants -- successful jelly? Do your people think I have nothing to do but run a department store for their benefit?" 30

It is startling to listen in on a discussion between Abraham Lincoln and the agnostic Robert Ingersoll:

Lincoln: What is the pretext for the United States meddling in
 the affairs of Nicaragua?

Ingersoll: The real reason is imperialism. Property-greed,

lust of control, a fear or a pretense of fear that Russian communism is lodging in these now revolutionary countries.

At this point, God suggests that the common people should speak up: "Let those who go into foreign countries with their money take the risk of their investments or keep out. We refuse to die for anybody's money." ³¹

God admits Lenin to Heaven, and he tries to explain communism to financier J.P. Morgan, who has been admitted on a temporary basis and assigned to one of Heaven's lower planes:

Lenin: The Soviets are not the Russian Revolution. Only one little bud. But we desire to flower and fruit. It is early to judge; the Russian Revolution will surely live, no matter what becomes of the Soviets.

Morgan: You deny free speech and press to whatever attacks the government; attacks your infamous system.

Lenin: So does the United States.

Morgan: Our press and speech are perfectly free unless they attack our government, our systems.

Lenin: So is ours. 32

It is likely that many of these "heavenly discourses" grew out of the stimulating conversations between Wood and his radical friends during the Portland days. After publication of Heavenly Discourse, Wood was branded a Socialist by some, a Communist by others, and certainly a radical who liked to stir up trouble. Four years later, in Too Much Government, he replied to these charges:

I cannot and do not approve the denials of political liberty -- denial of free thought, free speech, free press, with which Soviet Russia seeks to bulwark itself. The Russian Revolution is the first instance on earth of a people attempting the experiment of a government not for the profit of a few, but holding the earth and the valuable utilities of society in trust for the equal benefit of all. I do not know whether communism will succeed. My own theory is not communism. I am an extreme individualist.

Although Erskine and Sara never hid their relationship, he felt it necessary to state his belief in Heavenly Discourse that "If adultery is love open and honest, it is marriage." But he was obviously disturbed that his intention to legally marry Sara was thwarted by Nelly's refusal to give him a divorce. When his Poems of the Ranges was published in 1929, it contained the lines:

Too long she has waited for me -- waiting to be my wife,
And the end of the trail is not so far to go.
We will not want more than the Indians do.
Between the sweet-briar and the stream
I will build a willow-wattled house, a chimneyed house for two,
And a ditch to catch the sky-blue gleam."

Not all the time at The Cats was spent writing poetry and political diatribes. Wood needed to surround himself with other writers, artists, and thinkers. He liked to encourage their creativity by commissioning them to do paintings and sculptures, and to strike sparks from them with the verbal fencing that took place at these gatherings. He was a prodigious letter-writer almost to the end of his life, and his correspondence ranged from the Earl of Huntington to William Allen White to Langston Hughes to Bennett Cerf.

Edwin Bingham called Wood a renaissance man, and he truly was, with his broad-ranging interests and involvement in the arts. But he was also a man of single-minded determination, as he showed in 1933 when Nanny Smith Wood died in Portland. At age eighty-one, twenty-two years after he first met Sara Bard Field, and fourteen years after he put Portland and his family behind him, they were married. The ceremony was performed by Jacob Weinstein, a well-known Chicago rabbi, whom Wood had befriended when he was a newsboy in Portland.³⁴ It was typical of Wood, a direct descendant of the founder of the Free Church of Scotland, and Sara, former wife

of a fundamentalist Baptist minister, to choose to legalize their union in such an ecumenical fashion.

If anything irritated Wood to the point of irrationality, it was the hated Eighteenth Amendment that forced prohibition on the nation from 1920 to 1933. He devoted an entire chapter in Too Much Government to an incident that struck close to home, both literally and figuratively. It concerned his friend and neighbor, Domenico Tomasco. "Dear, gentle old Domenico," Wood described him, "wrinkled and brown as one of his own walnut shells, his bald skull showing through the scant silver fringe like polished bronze, his little grey eyes twinkling in tune with the quizzical merry old lips folded over toothless gums. He cannot read or write, but I wish I knew what he knows -- I never shall."³⁵ Innocent, trusting old Domenico (who probably was not much older than Wood, himself, who was seventy-eight in 1930) was the victim of entrapment by federal agents. He ran a small boarding house in his home where several of Wood's workers stayed and took their meals while construction of The Cats was underway. Wood waxed rhapsodic over Domenico's cooking: "...omelettes, spaghetti, lambstew, roast kid, and a very fine minestrone soup with everything on, in, or above the earth in it, and also macaroni..."³⁶ and wine, of course, with the meals. Since the boarders paid for their meals, Domenico was found to be in violation of the Volstead Act, which prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages. The federal agents planted a fellow-Italian ("a stool pigeon from the Los Angeles district", was Wood's description) in the boarding house, and Domenico gave in to his entreaties to sell him a bottle of wine for a friendly home-party. An hour after the sale, federal agents burst into Domenico's house, ransacked it, and destroyed the wine casks in his cellar. The old man was jailed and fined \$500 and court costs, which resulted in a lien

being placed on his property. "He is now indeed an old man, broken, ruined. His boarders, most of them, have left him for tables further away from the highway...", Wood wrote disgustedly.³⁷ How pleased both he and Domenico would be to know that a tavern now stands by that highway, just below the location of Domenico's home, and two large wine casks from the nearby Novitiate winery flank the entrance to the Wood estate, an appropriate tribute.

Sara's daughter Katherine had grown to love Erskinè, and when she visited The Cats she always found lively entertainment. There were parties, concerts and poetry readings. Carl Sandburg read his poems to her; world-famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin--a neighbor-- picked up a cello, tried to tuck it under his chin, and played it like a violin. Artist Frederick Childe Hassam's impressionist paintings hung in the dining room, and outside, in the tiled courtyard, the massive sculpture of Mother Earth dominated the scene. Benny Bufano's statues stood in shaded parts of the garden. "I never thought of it as anything but a normal life, " remarked Katherine. Even the sight of their host, dressed in a tunic and leggings, calling the guests to dinner with a hunting horn didn't seem out of the ordinary. Senator James Phelan, whose estate, Villa Montalvo, was in nearby Saratoga, sent blossoms from his linden trees for Wood's favorite herbal tea, and when Katherine was married to James Caldwell of San Rafael, Senator Phelan provided the flowers for the wedding from his own gardens.

Wood particularly enjoyed the company of his neighbors, the Menuhins. He and Sara had followed Yehudi's career with great interest, while the violinist, for his part, had read Wood's Poet in the Desert and Heavenly Discourse. Their first meeting, at the Menuhin home in Alma in 1936, was described by Robert Magidoff:

The eighty-two year old poet was an arresting figure, tall, erect, with a magnificent head and flowing white beard. He and Yehudi spent most of the afternoon in quiet conversation, and not even Moshe [Yehudi's father] disturbed their absorption in each other. All the Menuhins accompanied the Woods to their nearby home, "The Cats", high in the hills overlooking the town of Los Gatos and the Santa Clara Valley, where Yehudi, Hephziba, and Yalta [his sisters] were to spend many a cherished hour.

38

Wood still had the charisma that attracted young artists.

Sara wrote her best-known poetry while living at The Cats-- The Pale Woman, Barrabas, and her last work, in 1940, A Darkling Plain. The Commonwealth Club of San Francisco awarded her a gold medal in 1936 for Barrabas. That same year Erskine's daughter, Nan Wood Honeyman, was the first woman from Oregon to be elected to Congress, and his grandson, Erskine B. Wood, joined his father's and grandfather's Portland law firm.

There is no evidence that any of Wood's family in Portland ever visited him at The Cats. While Nanny Smith Wood was living, his children may have stayed away out of consideration for her; after her death they may have considered that a visit would be an affront to her memory. When Wood left Portland in 1919, his youngest son was thirty-three, and Erskine, the oldest, was forty-one; it was not as if he left behind a family of young children. He set up a trust fund for Nanny and the children, dividing his income from the land grant sale into thirds: one-third for his family in Portland, one-third for Sara, and the remaining third for himself.³⁹ He continued to correspond with his children by letter and sent them additional money throughout his life.⁴⁰ Two years after he and Sara were married, Erskine prepared a hand-written will in which he stated: "I feel that my own children have already received from me through the trust I created in their mother's favor other contributions toward their

their welfare which I endeavored to make from time to time according to my ability, some part of my life earnings, certainly until they reached maturity."⁴¹ There does not appear to have been any real estrangement between Wood and his children; daughter Lisa (Mrs. Kirkham Smith) was co-executor with Sara of his will, and in 1977 his son Erskine published a biography of his father.

On his eighty-eighth birthday he was unable to personally reply to the hundreds of congratulatory messages he received from his many friends throughout the world, so he prepared a statement for publication, thanking them for their kind wishes. But he couldn't resist the opportunity to include his pacifist views on the approaching war: "So long as the people settle their differences by war, we are in the Dark Ages. So long as we waste the people's lives and the nation's wealth in war we are barbarians. War leads to war. Nothing was ever settled by war. War is the chief stupidity of man."

This was not a popular view in 1940, but, then, many of Erskine Wood's views -- on civil rights, prohibition, organized religion, women's rights, labor unions -- were unpopular when he wrote them. Wood was more concerned with justice and honesty than he was with popularity -- above all, honesty about his own convictions and the determination to be true to them. Once he decided upon the course his life was to take, he never deviated from it, whether it meant giving up his commission in the Army, resigning from the American Bar Association, leaving his wife and profession to live with the woman he loved, or defending an old man who was a victim of bureaucracy.

When Erskine Wood died at The Cats in 1944, just a month short of his ninety-second birthday, he was eulogized as "one of the last of

early California's great writers";⁴² but he would have been pleased by a line in the local newspaper: "He liked to be known as a friend and neighbor to the people of Los Gatos."⁴³ In accordance with his wish, his ashes were scattered over his mountain property in a simple ceremony attended only by immediate family members. He once gave as the excuse for never finishing his autobiography his belief that he "had brought nothing to the world of mankind."⁴⁴ The many people whose lives he touched during his long life would not agree. A more accurate statement of his purpose in life appeared at the end of Heavenly Discourse:

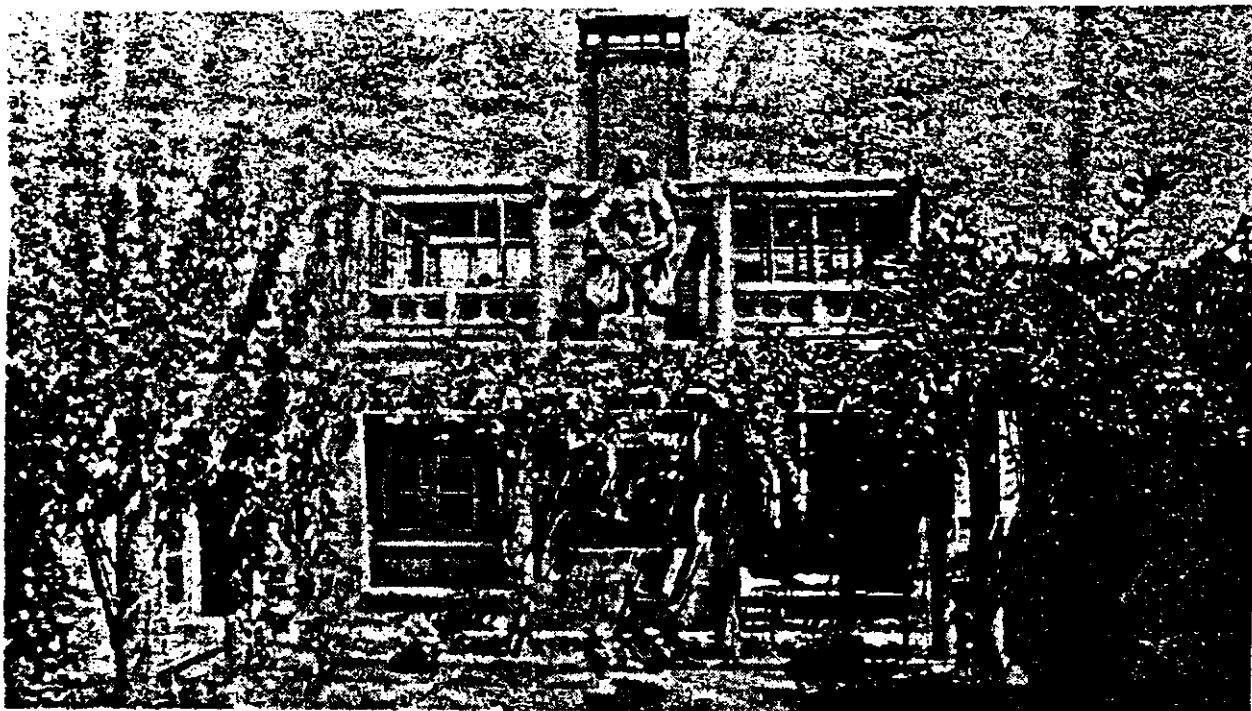
I have written for those few, who not needing any teaching, yet will, I hope, get that sort of comfort a little knot of sheep feels, huddled in the lee of a cliff, and feeling they are not utterly alone. And perhaps it may hand on a torch in a dark night."



Lt. Charles Erskine Scott Wood



Entrance to the Wood estate, "The Cats"



Courtyard of "The Cats", with statue of Mother Earth.



C.E.S. Wood, at home
at "The Cats", Los
Gatos, California.



Sara Bard Field in 1915
with petition for women's
suffrage.

FOOTNOTES

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2. American Heritage Book of Indians, p. 316. From a letter by C.E.S. Wood.
3. John Miller, "Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Soldier, Lawyer, Philosopher".
4. Amer. Herit. Book of Indians, loc. cit.
5. Dee Brown, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, pp. 312-14.
6. Cynthia Matthews, interview.
7. Miller, op. cit.
8. Amer. Herit. Book of Indians, loc. cit.
9. Edwin R. Bingham, "Experiment in Launching a Biography", p.229.
10. Ibid.
11. Los Gatos Times Observer, Dec. 13, 1983. "Wood Learned Indian Culture First Hand", John Baggerly.
12. Bingham, loc. cit.
13. Ibid., p. 228.
14. Portland Oregonian, Jan. 16, 1985. "An Affair to Remember", Holly Danks.
15. Ibid.
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17. Ibid.
18. Los Gatos Times Observer, Oct. 18, 1988. "Local Personality, Radical, Ladies' Man", John Baggerly.
19. C.E.S. Wood, Poems of the Ranges.
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21. George G. Bruntz, History of Los Gatos, p. xi.
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23. Ibid.
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25. Ibid., p. 96.
26. Ibid., p. 140.

27. Bingham, op. cit., p. 222, footnote 4.
28. Ibid. , p.114.
29. Wood, Poems from the Ranges.
30. Wood, Heavenly Discourse, pp. 140-41.
31. Ibid. pp.,210-11.
32. Ibid., pp. 220-21.
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34. Miller, op. cit.
35. Wood, op. cit., p. 259.
36. Ibid. , p. 260.
37. Ibid., p. 265.
38. Robert Magidoff, Yehudi Menuhin , p. 189.
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40. Bingham, op. cit., p. 234, footnote 39.
41. Los Gatos Mail-News, Mar. 30, 1944. "C.E.S. Wood Will Filed".
42. San Francisco Chronicle, Jan. 24, 1944. Wood Obituary.
43. Los Gatos Times, Jan. 28, 1944. Wood Obituary.
44. Miller, op. cit.
45. Wood, Heavenly Discourse, p. 266.

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