

On the Town



Ready to play a pickup game on the rink at the St. Paul Tennis Club on Osceola Avenue circa 1948, from left, are future Wimbledon doubles champion Jeanne Arth, Gus Metzger, Bill Hunt, Louie Peterson, Mike Keenan, Mr. Aaron Lipschultz, an unidentified boy and Lipschultz' son.



"Songs of Crocus Hill" author Michael E. Murphy feeling right at home. He will read from and discuss his book of poems at 5 p.m. Tuesday, June 27, at the Commodore, 79 N. Western Ave. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

Lyrical recollection Murphy's poems pay tribute to growing up in Crocus Hill

BY JAMES MCKENZIE

Poet Michael E. Murphy considers the title section of his recently published *Songs of Crocus Hill* to be its heart and soul. Born and raised in the St. Paul neighborhood of that name, where wild crocuses still bloom on its steep slopes every spring, Murphy's poems connect readers to an inner place of flowering beauty and familial memory. The collection's back cover invites readers to "discover the Crocus Hill in your own life."

Readers are doing just that. Sue Zumberge, owner of Subtext Books, has sold nearly two dozen copies of *Songs of Crocus Hill*, including to out-of-town visitors wanting something to remember from St. Paul. She also reported several purchases of a hundred or more copies from Oregon, London and elsewhere since the book's publication last fall by Archway, the self-publishing, print-on-demand division of Simon & Schuster.

Zumberge is part of a large group of friends and family who urged Murphy to publish his growing body of work. *Songs of Crocus Hill* is now available in bookstores around the Twin Cities and at Amazon.com, but neither Zumberge nor Murphy know how many other stores in other places have reprinted it and are selling his poetry. "You never know," Zumberge said, "sometimes regular publishing houses eventually notice and pick up a book like Michael's."

The book contains 51 poems, about half of which reference people and places in Crocus Hill from 1941-76. There is also a section of

The Little Sisters of the Poor

will demur and tell you that anyone could change out the old men's linens, wash, towel and salve their bed-sore limbs all in a wordless motion; that anyone with a sturdy pair of oxfords and a wool shawl to shoulder through December's snow could take the Sisters' beggar steps to the shops along West Seventh.

—Michael E. Murphy
from *Songs of Crocus Hill*

elegies to loved ones and a concluding group of Murphy's other poems.

A moving elegy about his father, Minnesota Supreme Court Justice William Patrick Murphy, presents young Michael and his brother playing baseball as his father, with his familiar briefcase, comes "around the corner/and down Fairmount at the end of his day."

Readers who recognize Fairmount and references to Radisky's store and Kellogg Square will feel a special sense of nostalgia. But like all well-wrought poems, they are also universal.

So it is throughout *Songs of Crocus Hill*. The book contains many specific, local references that radiate, seemingly without effort, much wider appeal. There is a reference to Nook burgers after a baseball game opposite a photo of what some readers

will recognize as Cretin-Derham Hall's baseball field. There is a tailor named Carl Wolf at Grand and Oxford, across from Vince's Pure Oil, who clings to a psalm when he recalls "screaming dreams of crematoria" and "ashes of his house in Dresden."

The black-and-white photo opposite "Carl Wolf" is no doubt Vince's in winter, but readers in Crocus Hill, in Dresden and everywhere in between can be readily stirred by the poem without ever having seen or known Wolf or Vince's.

Murphy, who has now lived on Holly Avenue for the past 15 years, wants his poetry to be accessible. "I don't play hide the ball with the reader," he said.

A 1957 graduate of Cretin High School, Murphy earned an undergraduate degree in English from St. John's University, followed by a master's degree from the University of Minnesota, where one of mid-century America's most renowned poets and critics, Allen Tate, shocked his young student once with a phone call to praise Murphy's six-stanza sestina titled "Peto," which is the earliest written poem in *Songs of Crocus Hill*.

After teaching English for a year at St. Olaf College, and then a semester at Macalester College while he began night school to earn a law degree at William Mitchell, Murphy turned his attention more fully to the law. He had a long career in international business law with Medtronic and the Faegre law firm in Minneapolis. But even before retiring as a partner in 2004, he began teaching a course on the law in literature at the University of St.

Thomas Law School, a course he continues to teach.

Retiring from his professional work in law brought Murphy back to his deep love of poetry from his early years. "I have a lot of unfinished poems," he said.

His steadiest writing these days grows out of annual poetry workshops with Dorothea Bisbas, poet laureate of the city of Rancho Mirage's Public Library in California. Important as those classes are for Murphy, it is also clear that his wife of 52 years, Jane Randolph Murphy, is his first reader.

"She has a great ear for the music of language," Murphy said. "She gives me encouragement, but with brutal honesty."

Zumberge, who calls herself "a readaholic" and keeps a collection of poetry in her car at all times, has arranged a public reading, discussion and book signing for Murphy at 5 p.m. Tuesday, June 27, at the Commodore, 79 N. Western Ave. That Ramsey Hill landmark has agreed to host the occasion in exchange for a framed, signed copy of Murphy's poem "The Commodore."

*I reach to touch his arm
as you would a forgotten friend.
The touch is hard, like the mirror's,
this reminder of why we return.*

In that last stanza of "The Commodore," the speaker encounters his own reflection in a familiar mirror, not recognizing at first that the "elderly man" he is trying to avoid is himself.

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