

west view

The life of Dreiser's last party

by ESTHER McCOY

The strong smell of amaryllis blooming in August reminds me that Theodore Dreiser's birthday is approaching . . . Aug. 27. He was fond of these flowers which used to grow almost wild, and the day before his birthday I often sent over a deep copper bowl filled with them. There was a party for him almost every year while he lived on Kings Road in West Hollywood.

He had moved to Los Angeles in 1938 when he was 67, and by then he had published 13 books, six of them novels, two of these famous. The most famous was his 1925 "An American Tragedy," which was filmed twice, the second version called "A Place in the Sun." Most of the small fortune he had made from the book was gone by 1938 and he looked forward to a quiet life in Los Angeles finishing two half-written novels and a book of philosophy.

It didn't work out that way. His timeless restlessness only increased. He was no more able to resist a humanitarian cause or a bright pretty woman in California than New York. Nothing he wrote here even touched his first book, "Sister Carrie," written in four months when he was only 26. The story concerned a kept woman whose path led not to suicide or repentance but stardom on Broadway, a theme so shocking that the book was no sooner printed than it was withdrawn by the publisher. By the time he wrote "An American Tragedy" (four novels later) the mood of the country had changed and he was acclaimed one of America's great. He had pioneered in this country (along with Frank Norris) the naturalist tradition of Emile Zola.

He was cited in 1944 by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for "breaking trail as a pioneer in the presentation in fiction of real human beings and a real America." The wording of the citation was by Sinclair Lewis, an old friend.

Dreiser bought the house on Kings Road after he had sold "Sister Carrie" to RKO in 1940. His fortunes had also risen when the Soviet Union had paid him a staggering sum in back royalties. The works of many American writers had been pirated there but Dreiser was the first to appeal directly to Stalin for an accounting.

Kings Road in the 1940s was lined with old live oaks, and the big houses on their acre or so lots were set well back from the street. Now it is mostly apartment houses, the most pretentious one on the Dreiser site.

Not that the Dreiser house was distinguished. It was one of several Spanish Colonial houses, one of these occupied by Aldous Huxley for a while. To the north of Dreiser, in a steep-gabled house, lived Jane Wyatt. Across the street was at that time a classic example of early modern, the 1916 Dodge house designed by Irving Gill. Dreiser liked to walk in the park surrounding the house, and the choked trellises and disintegrating garden structures among overgrown paths became a setting for an early scene in his last novel, "The Bulwark," published in 1946, a year after his death.

The front door of the Dreiser house opened directly into the living room and although he had added a big new study, he often worked at a long table in the living room facing the door. I saw him there many times when I went to deliver reports on books or manuscripts I had read for him or research jobs. One of the latter was on a murder in (I believe) Laurel Canyon, and the trial of the accused, Madalynne Obenchain. He never wrote about it; not did he write about the very first subject of research I had done for him in New York—Emma Goldman. But he was always in a hurry for it, and one stipulation was that I retain no carbon copy.

He sat in a rocking chair to write. It was one of two he had bought from the Ansonia Hotel when they were getting rid of them; this one was reupholstered in lemon yellow and had rosewood arms. He wrote with a fountain pen on a thick stack of onionskin, and at hand was a penknife for making erasures. He would look up and greet me, then take a deck of cards from his pocket and lay out a hand of Canfield.

We talked as he played. Sometimes without interrupting the turn of a card, he would call out to his wife for something. Wherever Helen was, she came running. She was that rare woman fitted by nature to live with a

famous man—a type more prevalent in the 19th than 20th century. It requires both an iron discipline and a grace of spirit that heaven has stopped combining. Her old stiffs showed her as once a great beauty; the captions for them might have read, and did, "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Helen left of Valentino." Or "The Flame of Youth," Helen in center." She had a hard-earned late beauty that was mostly centered in the eyes, and when she turned the warmth of them on you and patted your face, you felt blessed.

The long table, made by Wharton Esherick, separated the living from the music room—so called because it had a grand piano. It also had French doors to the back garden where the birthday parties were held. One feature of the party was a punch bowl filled with a wondrous concoction, Helen's Orange Ice Punch. Whatever it contained—probably rum, sauterne, ginger ale and fruit juice—nothing stood up against the overpowering flavor of orange juice.

There were always two or three who searched the kitchen and dining room for the liquor cabinet and a straight shot. One was Donald Friede, a New York publisher. As my husband and I arrived at one party, Friede appealed for our help. Berk found the cabinet for him but it held only cordials. Berk said he thought Dreiser kept a bottle in his desk and nipped from it afternoons to bring up his blood sugar. As we went to join the party, Friede was off to bring up his blood sugar in Dreiser's desk—a piece of furniture fashioned from an old square rosewood grand piano.

There was no one at the birthday parties who had a name to drop except the host. Unless it was Will and Ariel Durant, but at that time I don't think they had yet reached the birth of Christ in their "History of Civilization." Helen, a lifelong voice student, invited her teachers; there were also two dear friends who had once composed popular songs, the compositions so long forgotten that only Helen could have hummed them. Dreiser's oldest brother, Paul Dresser, was himself a songwriter ("My Gal Sal" and "Moonlight on the Wabash"). At the appropriate moment one of the musical guests would render "Happy Birthday," and Dreiser would lower his eyes with embarrassment and pleasure.

The day was usually warm and men were without jackets. Dreiser was a Mr. Kleen with his long, scrubbed and polished face, his perpetually fresh shirt with the gold links at the cuffs. He was over six feet, with long loose arms and legs and a loose mouth that when open (it usually was) gave him an expression of wonder. The total picture was of a gangling youth awestruck by figures in a wax museum.

We were in a way figures of wax to him, to be scrutinized, reflected upon, worried about, judged. He had quick sympathy for ones in some sort of trouble; he sat with them like one of Job's friends and mourned. When someone became successful, his interest slackened. He was more sensitive to tragedy; it touched his imagination instantaneously.

The friends who warmed him most were those who made him laugh. At his last birthday party there was Dorian Otvos, the agent who had sold "Sister Carrie" and had an accomplished one-liner wit; and Berk, who could build up a comic situation or character. The painter was missing, the one who was welcomed until he once pilfered the women's purses, thus robbing Dreiser of the company of a wild and unpredictable wit. He could laugh when he told the story of the pilfering, but his dark moods had deepened in his last years and he could have used the painter. He looked gloomy that last birthday.

Berk cheered him with a story that came out of the public chess club in Palisades Park; the character was a blind man who came into the club drunk, swung his white cane maniacally and whipped all the chessmen off the boards. The players scurried for shelter. When the police came they were inordinately polite, considering that the blind man gave them a few whacks before they carted him off.

Dreiser groaned with laughter. He held his ribs, he slapped his thigh, he wiped away tears, he coughed asthmatically. Then he restrained himself to ask the outcome. Berk had gotten it from one of the officers the



Theodore Dreiser

next day: The blind man had caught a beating. That ruined the story for Helen and me. Not for Dreiser. He liked stories of melees started by someone who didn't have a ghost of a chance. Intellectual as well as physical melees. It was why he enjoyed stories about Upton Sinclair pitting himself against Standard Oil.

Everyone at his last birthday party had a ghost of a chance. He dwelt fondly on the blind man who hadn't. But Dreiser could start at any point and his mystical nature carried him inevitably to the contemplation of the life force (his words) which had the magical ability to diversify itself endlessly. No matter how gloomy, he could marvel at the variations wrought on the human theme.

He liked the misfits, but the misfits who could laugh at themselves he adored. John Cowper Powys was the dearest. Dreiser would howl over Powys's painful and funny stories on himself in and out of print.

Dreiser's novels were turgid with peans to life. What was wrong with his last novel was that someone had edited out all the connective tissue of lumbering sorrow over his characters. Yet he had felt the main character deeply, a rigid Quaker who watches the moral decline of his family and reaches an understanding and sympathy for human frailty. Writing the book stirred religious feelings in Dreiser, and once when he and Helen came to stay with us in Ensenada, he was so under the spell of the Quaker patriarch that he discoursed on the Psalms. He had a certain pride in his agnosticism, also in never joining organizations. His decision, a few months before his death, to join the Communist Party may have come out of the same religious stirrings. The unofficial reason he gave was that they were the only ones doing anything about the uneven distribution of wealth; nor did he want profits destroyed, only distributed justly. It was not a happy union; conflicts began at once. Pressure was put on him not to speak before a group headed by an old friend. Dreiser spoke. His death saved the Communist Party from further embarrassment.

Wealth was Dreiser's preoccupation and the theme of his best novels. He had cut his literary teeth in the push and shove of the Chicago of the 1890s, which produced the greatest instant culture in the nation's history—Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Dreiser. The enormous wealth, the enormous poverty and the towering ambitions of Chicago are strongly felt in his characters as they struggle to rise to a place in the sun.

McCoy is the author of "Five California Architects," and her book, "Case Study Houses," is being reissued in November by Hennessey and Ingalls. She has been a contributing editor to architectural magazines here and in Europe.