

Beat Generation icon had S. Texas roots

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For four years of his nomadic life, William S. Burroughs, lyric member of the Beat Generation and notorious junkie, adopted an identity barely referenced in most history books: South Texas cotton and vegetable farmer.

Until now, South Texas has given little recognition to its literary son, arguably the only world-renowned writer ever to make his home in the fertile farmlands alongside the Rio Grande at Texas' southern tip. But after studying Burroughs' writings and letters, Rob Johnson, an assistant professor of English at the University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg, believes the writer's farming adventures in the Rio Grande Valley - which, in part, drove him to leave the United States for Mexico - were highly influential in the development of his political philosophies.

"It was here in South Texas that Burroughs had experiences that led him to articulate, for the first time, many of his most important views - that of America as a police state and of bureaucracies as cancers," Johnson said at a talk last month at the Hidalgo County Historical Museum in Edinburg.

In his many novels, including "Naked Lunch," "The Soft Machine" and "The Wild Boys: Three Novels," Burroughs critically examines systems of control in society - many of which took on a harsh reality during his Valley stint.

Before heading south, the Harvard graduate with aspirations of being a doctor became addicted to opiates in the early 1940s and landed in the midst of the "Benzedrine-fueled hipster scene around Times Square," which included Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg, Johnson said.

After being busted for faking a doctor's prescription in 1946, Burroughs, then 30, managed to convince his parents to finance a farming venture with his childhood friend, Kells Elvins, in the Rio Grande Valley.

Johnson, who has gotten no response from Valley residents to his appeals for Burroughs memorabilia, believes the writer, along with his wife, Joan Vollmer, and her 1-year-old daughter, stayed in the home of Elvins' parents in Pharr, Texas, until the beginning of 1947.

At that time, Burroughs and Vollmer bought land in New Waverly, outside Houston, and attempted to grow marijuana. They still made trips to the Valley; on a May 1948 jaunt, they were arrested outside Beeville for having sex in their car.

Shortly after that, Burroughs bought 50 acres of land northeast of Edinburg near several Tex-Mex Railroad survey sites that became the setting for the improvisational "Texas oil man" sketch in his novel "Queer," written in the early 1950s, Johnson said.

That routine, rich in regional dialects and satiric overtones, was the first of many that came to mark Burroughs' comic style. He wrote several comic sketches with Elvins, including the Dr. Benway sketches, versions of which appear in "Naked Lunch" and other novels.

Burroughs decided to abandon the farmland and move his family to New Orleans in June 1948, calling Texas "very uncool" after he lost his driver's license for driving while drunk and for public indecency.

Still he continued to visit the Valley and in May 1949 moved his family to Pharr, most likely into a house on Cherokee Street that Johnson believes still may be standing. He remained there until the fall of that year, when he left permanently for Mexico City - though his farming venture wasn't completely ruined until the freeze of 1951, according to Kells Elvins' son, Peter Elvins.

Indeed, the former junk dealer's entire attempt at an honest farming career was marked by failure, detailed in numerous letters to Ginsberg and Kerouac. He poured out his bitterness with the South Texas experience in a chapter later cut from "Junky," also written in the early 1950s.

"A premonition of doom hangs over the Valley," he wrote. "You have to make it now before something happens, before the black fly ruins the citrus, before support prices are taken off the cotton, before the flood, the hurricane, the freeze, the long dry spell when there is no water to irrigate, before the Border Patrol shuts off your wetbacks...."

"Death hangs over the Valley like an invisible smog. The place exerts a curious magnetism on the moribund. The dying cell gravitates to the Valley."

Since Burroughs often used his visits to South Texas to "clean up" his drug habit, the chapter doesn't refer to opiates and was determined to be too "literary" to be retained in "Junky," according to a forward by Ginsberg, who was responsible for getting much of the writer's work published.

Johnson maintains that it was in the Valley that Burroughs began charting a postwar moral relativism in society, complaining in numerous letters at the impossibility of being a legitimate farmer when the economics of the business forced one to use cheap and illegal Mexican laborers.

In the Valley, Burroughs also gently chided Ginsberg - who had dreams of being a labor organizer - for his naive idealism, all the while developing a philosophy of "factualism" - looking at things as they are, not as they should be.

"There is more lying in the course of a 'regular job,' most of which require a constant state of pretense and dissimulation," he wrote to Ginsberg in November 1948. "Personally, I find pushing junk a great deal more restful and less compromising from an ethical standpoint."

The death that Burroughs saw in the Valley - from the loss of his crops to the shootings of recalcitrant Mexican laborers - struck him so vividly that he latched onto studies such as writer Wilhelm Reich's, which theorized that the fundamental basis of life was the "orgone."

While in the Valley, Burroughs built himself an "orgone accumulator," a metal box plastered with organic material intended to catch "orgones" while the patient sat inside. Burroughs swore by it, though it was later discredited by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as a gimmick.

Burroughs also was drawn to Reich's theories about the nature of the cancer process, which the writer soon began to associate with the bureaucratization of the United States, a country he believed was being corrupted by socialism and communism, "both unmitigated evil."

After Ginsberg considered coming to South Texas to organize a labor movement, Burroughs wrote his longest letter to date on May 1, 1950, one important for historians.

In it, he elaborated his theory that the existing economic structures in South Texas - which had no basis in supply and demand and were enforced by bureaucracies such as the Border Patrol and Department of Agriculture - had been created to benefit "a few big rich in Texas and Mexico."

"The Welfare Gov. sets a minimum wage you say? Yes," he wrote. "But farmers, unlike the Gov., cannot print new money when they run short. You can only pay a certain wage and make money. If you don't make money, you can't hire anybody at any wage."

"Then the bank takes your land. And who is the bank? In the Valley, the bank is the Benson (sic) Brothers...In a few years, they will own the whole Valley. They are the final beneficiaries of the U.S. wetback policy."

The Bentsens were Lloyd and Elmer Bentsen, whose family first came to the Valley in 1918 and worked as land agents for John Shary. In the letter, Burroughs didn't just rail against the bureaucracy that benefited the few rich; he suggested the only possible solution was a cooperative system - which was being blocked by the manufacturers and unions, he added.

"This is the last letter on South Texas Burroughs wrote," Johnson said. "This is very much William Burroughs' worldview for the rest of his life."

So while Burroughs didn't remember South Texas fondly, his stint there was a time when his ideas first coalesced and matured. But Johnson has his own views on that.

"William S. Burroughs thought he understood every con in the world, and that no one could beat him," Johnson said. "In the Valley, he was beaten, beaten at trying to play the game honestly."

Though Burroughs moved to Mexico City next, believing he'd found the lost frontier and freedom he longed for, it wasn't long before he was beaten again. In September 1951, he attempted to shoot a glass off his wife's head.

He shot her between the eyes instead.

In an article in the New York Daily News, which picked up the murder story for the William Tell angle, Burroughs was identified as "a wealthy cotton planter from Pharr, Texas."

It remains to be seen whether South Texas will ever claim this polemical counterculture writer considered an outrage by some, a genius by others.

Caption: Controversial writer William S. Burroughs had a critical view of systems of control.