

Les Watson (June 3, 1948 – March 1967)

Leslie (Les) Watson grew up near the top of Birmingham Road, In Burbank. Throughout our school years, I lived on Andover Drive, only one block away from him. We both attended Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, John Muir Junior High School and Burbank High School. According to published reports, Les Watson died in an automobile accident less than one year after our high school graduation in June 1966. Les was an adventurous soul, learning that he died while on a surfing safari in Baja California rang true to his nomadic nature.

Although I was not a close friend to Les Watson, we would occasionally end up at the same neighborhood location, sharing some unusual experiences together. I remember three instances quite well.

One day, when we were ten or twelve years old, there was quite a commotion over on Birmingham Road. A friend said, "Les is on the garage roof, and he is going to jump." Quickly a crowd of neighborhood kids gathered in that back yard, amazed by what we saw. With a large black umbrella in his hand, Les was indeed up on the garage roof, threatening to jump. After a few hoots and catcalls from the crowd, Les indeed took flight. Traveling straight down, he landed and rolled on the ground. Uninjured, he declared that he had expected the umbrella to act as a parachute, arresting his fall. No one had yet fully explained aerodynamics and the law of gravity to us in school, so as farfetched as his plan now seems, it had an air of possibility at the time.

A year or two later, some friends and I were hiking in the foothills beyond Bel Aire Drive. In those days, there were no fences and the landfill had not yet subsumed every natural feature in the landscape. Up a small ridge we went, with Les Watson in the lead. The day before, he had discovered a "fort" atop the ridge, including several hay bales, with a machete stuck in each one. One of the machetes had been used to kill a rattlesnake, which lay dead nearby. Ominously, its rattle had been cut off. A few discarded magazines and food wrappers imparted a "Lord of the Flies" feeling to the place. Since any relic discovered in the hills was "finders, keepers", at least two of my fellow hikers took home a machete that afternoon.

In 1934, the American author Henry Miller published his most famous work of fiction, "The Tropic of Cancer". Considered obscene in the United States, it debuted in Paris, France. Not until 1961, did the U.S. Supreme Court declare the book "non-obscene". In 1964, when the book was published in the United States, someone in Les Watson's family was interested enough in the book to purchase a copy.

Soon thereafter, Les had commandeered the book and called the first ever meeting of the "Birmingham Road Book Club". The setting consisted of four or five of us neighborhood kids lounging on comfortable couches and upholstered chairs. There, we listened to Les read selected passages from the once forbidden book. He seemed to know where all the "good parts" were. Although I knew what most of the vocabulary meant, none of us had ever heard so many "dirty words" strung together with such verve and gusto. At this time, I cannot remember if the book club met more than twice, but Les' initial reading was an eye-opening experience.

As with so many of my old friends from Burbank schools, after graduation in 1966, I lost track of Les Watson. When the class roster was updated starting about a decade ago, Les Watson was listed as deceased, but no date or obituary accompanied that information. Now, in 2023, we have learned on

Cathy Emmett Palmer's Burbank High Blog that Leslie Forbes Watson passed away in March 1967. Since there is no known official obituary for him, let this document suffice until someone comes up with more complete information. It is with reverence and awe that I recall these fond memories of my friend and classmate Les Watson.