

OBITUARIES

Schmidt's road led to friendship with poet

*I shall be telling this with a
sigh*

*Somewhere ages and ages
hence:*

*Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I —*

*I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the dif-
ference.*

— from "The Road Not Taken"
by Robert Frost

By AMY RABIDEAU SILVERS

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Most of a lifetime ago, an aging Robert Frost copied the words of his famous poem in a first edition owned by a young friend.

The friend was Fred Schmidt.

The words of the poem served as a sort of prophetic anthem for Schmidt. The younger man's real life roads would include everything from publishing the first version of "Milwaukee Magazine" to helping to found the Ice Age Park & Trail Foundation.

Frederick G. Schmidt — also known as "Fritz" — died of cancer Wednesday in hospice care. He was 81. He was first diagnosed with colon cancer 10 years ago.

The seeds of Schmidt's connection to Frost first grew in Shorewood, where he began collecting first editions even before high school graduation.

His next stop was Dartmouth College, where he became acquainted with Harold Rugg, the college's chief librarian and an instructor and book collector. He advised Schmidt to collect more selectively, and Schmidt began focusing on his favorite authors: Frost, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck.

Then came a day that Schmidt would never forget. Rugg told Schmidt to come to his library apartment one day in September 1942.

"I walked up those old wooden steps, knocked at the door," he recounted in a recent interview with Michael Gordon, his

tory professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "Seated about six feet away was this old, white-haired man, sipping a glass of Vermont apple cidah — I love the way those Vermonters pronounce the word *apple cidah*."

"He said, 'Fred, come in. I'd like you to meet my friend, Robert Frost. Robert, this is my young friend, Fred Schmidt.'"

The poet and the student became friends, taking walks on campus. Frost enjoyed talking about horses, current events and, of course, poetry.

After Schmidt entered the military during World War II, Frost sent Christmas cards.

An expert skier, Schmidt was assigned to the elite 10th Mountain Division, known as the Army's "ski troops," training in the mountains of Colorado.

"He also taught rifle practice and got tinnitus — ringing in the ears — and had to be hospitalized," said Sue Riordan, a family friend. As a result, Schmidt missed shipping out with his unit.

In the meantime, Frost contacted Schmidt's parents, asking that they send all of their son's first editions of his work.

"When Fred came back, Frost gave them back with inscriptions," Riordan said. Frost had copied poems in his inscriptions, including the entire text of "The Road Not Taken."

Frost included a copy of a first edition that Schmidt did not have. Even more stunning, Frost informed Schmidt that he had written a poem about Schmidt's training and being unable to join his unit.

"I took undue advantage of you," Frost told him, "but I ain't a gunna take it back."

Frost said he would not discuss the poem, regarding it as Schmidt's personal story.

"No one has really known what that poem meant, except Frost and Fred," said his wife, Joan Schmidt, better known as "Miss Chris" for her maiden name Christopherson.



Schmidt

Schmidt went on to earn a law degree from Yale University, but law was not his true calling.

"He loved books," his wife said. "He loved reading."

He first made his living as a lawyer in labor relations. He decided not to assume presidency of the family business, the E.F. Schmidt printing company, starting "Let's See" magazine in 1955 and did some writing.

"He wanted to go out and create his own business," she said. "He very much believed in Milwaukee and wanted to create something that reflected the best of the city."

The magazine changed his life in one very important way.

"I met him when he was doing a story on me," said his wife, who then taught art, music and drama to blind children at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Schmidt drove to Wisconsin Dells to meet her. He kept drinking the coffee she had made. It turned out, he didn't even like coffee, but they soon liked each other.

They married in 1961.

"Let's See" — which later became "Let's See Milwaukee" and then "Milwaukee Magazine" — was sold about 1965. Sometime later, another publisher began the current version of "Milwaukee Magazine."

"I first knew him in the late 1950s, when he published the magazine about Milwaukee," said Frank Zeidler, former Milwaukee mayor and a friend. "It was a very high-quality magazine. He moved in circles that were a little different than mine. He moved in that cultural element. He was a very nice gentleman, a very genial man."

Schmidt next began working with writer Muriel Anderson, as the Schmidt Anderson Associates public relations firm.

Perhaps more than work or

books, Schmidt was interested in the environment. He fell in love with wild areas as a young man skiing the terrain carved out by the Wisconsin glacier. He bought his first 40 acres near Greenbush on a land contract while in college and taught mountain climbing in the Grand Tetons.

In 1958, Schmidt and James C. Mallen were asked by Raymond T. Zillmer to serve as the rest of the original three-person board for the Ice Age Park & Trail Foundation. Schmidt's land in Greenbush later became part of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail.

In the 1960s, he began buying land in Mississippi's Crawford County, planting thousands of walnut trees there. A total of 370 acres are now part of the Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

In his final weeks, Schmidt decided to buy 60 more acres to help protect a pristine trout stream in the area.

"Now I just have to figure out how to pay for it," he told his wife. "If I sell my books, you won't have to worry about it."

Don't sell your books, and don't worry, his wife told him, promising to make it work. Independent of that issue, the collection has been sent to Chicago for appraisal.

Schmidt was active with the Sierra Club and the Milwaukee Turners.

"What he loved about Frost was that he was his own person, and he wouldn't change with the wind," Chris said. "And that's how Fritz was. He was a visionary. He saw, always, the best. He always encouraged others."

Survivors include daughter Kristin and son Erik.

Visitation will be held at 3 p.m. Monday, followed by a memorial service at 4 p.m. Both will be held at First Unitarian Church, 3342 N. Astor St.

For the full text of Frost's poem about Schmidt, visit

www.jonline.com/links/frost-poem.