

The Will Geer I Knew

by Walter Rufus Eagles

The Shakespeare poetry page (on www.eaglesweb.com) to which this short biography is appended is dedicated to the memory of my old friend, the late Shakespearean actor and TV star of *The Waltons*, Will Geer. His participation in, and encouragement of, Shakespeare play production in America was unparalleled in his time. On his Topanga Canyon ranch, not terribly far from Hollywood, Will built an amphitheatre for local dramatic productions of the Bard's plays and those of other playwrights as well.

That amphitheatre, the *Theatricum Botanicum* (www.theatricum.com) exists today because when he died Will left the ranch on which he had built it as a legacy to the County of Los Angeles provided that at least one Shakespeare play be mounted there annually, for which there was to be no admission charged. (Will was a man of the people in a way that is rarely seen.) My wife Marilu and I visited Will and his family at his ranch frequently, and our sons (who are now forty and forty two) swung across the (admittedly narrow) dry gulch when they were young boys on a tire swing Will had built.

He also cultivated a garden there of all the herbs and flowers mentioned in Shakespeare's plays, hence the name of the estate: *Theatricum Botanicum*.

His friend Woodie Guthrie once said of Will's voice that it made the crackling sound of a stick of kindling being flung into the fire. As it happens, that crackling sound was the voice of America singing "their varied carols" (Walt Whitman was also a favorite of his -- and Mark Twain as well), for Will, like Mark Twain, was an American to the core, and heaven forgive those lesser souls who tried to maintain otherwise of this noble giant in order to gain their own short-range political goals.

Unfortunately, Will's career in film was damaged for several years by the effects of his subpoena before the House Unamerican Activities Committee mid-century -- an injustice among injustices, as history has increasingly shown. Subsequently, Will managed to eke out a livelihood with the help of loving and loyal friends of the film industry who had not themselves been blacklisted, who commissioned Will be their gardener during the long dry spell when Will could not get work in Hollywood to support his wife and their children.

But as every child who grew up in the seventies knows who watched *The Waltons* (1972-1978), Will bounced back and became a star in the long-running TV series, and his family was once more financially secure. Woodie would have slapped his thighs and said, "You can't keep a good man down!" Will is gone now, "God rest him all road ever he offended" - and he "hath not left his peer." And he was a good man, my fellow Americans, a man whom any true patriot could and should honestly respect and admire. Pity the limited vision of those Lilliputians who tried in vain to bring this goodman Gulliver down.

Walter Rufus Eagles

Poet

Sun Valley, California

December 24, 2003.

<http://www.eaglesweb.com>

bard@eaglesweb.com