

Nixon / continued

Nixon interrupts his tale once again and says, "If stories are good, they stay with us, and we remember them as long as we live. We never forget them, we never reject them. They're always part of our lives. This is what fascinates me and delights me — to be involved with something which gives so much pleasure to so many people."

He continues his story of the Finnish-American professor who has touched many lives. *Why, just in his children's literature classes alone, which are a natural for teacher education students, he has shared his talents and his numerous books with in-service teachers, librarians, ministers, retired people and parents. He likes teaching all of them. He says they add richness to a class, and the fact that the classes are not required pleases him because his students come voluntarily.*

With the passing of time, the professor has learned that his storytelling has become legendary, especially here in the Valley. He has received more invitations to attend story hours from librarians and elementary school teachers than he has been able to accept. When he does visit a library or school, he never knows for sure what story he is going to tell until he sees and interacts with the little people. He takes his cues many times from his listeners — their mood or the reflectiveness of their humor, enthusiasm or vibrancy. Other factors he considers are their ages and their "cultural baggage." He suspects that even the kind of day has an effect on the storytelling. . . . He believes that the storyteller must be sensitive to the listeners and hopefully have the resources to make very quick judgments about what is appropriate and most useful for the little people.

Nixon adds that children's stories are the very essence of life. He says they are so rich and so broad and deep in their scope that if a child has access to them, they introduce every aspect of human experience and wisdom to that child.

"There is literally nothing in human experience which isn't explored in children's books — and why shouldn't it be?" Nixon asks. "For instance, children live with the same emotions as adults. They know fear, anger and jealousy. They know love, and they experience joy. So books offer them opportunities to look at themselves through the vicarious experience of relating to characters in those stories."

Back to this story. Today, his challenge is to make sure — through the teachers and students who take his classes — that every child has the opportunity to know books and to appreciate them and to love them. He believes that books are one of the important experiences of childhood and adds that language is what makes us human, and its preservation is in books.

With gray hair and beard now, the storyteller recaptures the treasures of his own youth as he leafs through the pages of his priceless collection of children's books. Many are autographed copies and first editions with mounted personal correspondence from the authors and illustrators. This amazing collection takes up all available wall space in his office and is highlighted with another collection of dolls and puppets from around the world, mostly given to him by former students and friends. Two of the puppet dolls are made in his likeness, although one [the one he holds in the picture on the previous page] reminds him of his grandfather — a storyteller in his own right.

—The End

Discovery . . .

With map in hand, Arne Nixon came to the Valley in 1950. He had never been here before, but he came in search of two landmarks: "First, I noticed that we were right in the vicinity of Mt. Whitney and, secondly, the map showed a large lake called Lake Tulare. So I thought, 'Oh, this must be a wonderfully beautiful place, with the highest mountain in the United States within a stone's throw (which it is) and this great lake.' So I found the mountain and I climbed it, but I never found the lake. It was not there; they had built dams. That has always amused me."