

**VISIT BLACKHAWK
ISLAND
FORT ATKINSON,
WISCONSIN**



**HOME OF
AMERICAN POET
LORINE NIEDECKER
1903 - 1970**

Lorine Niedecker



No anthology of 20th century American poetry is complete without some of Lorine Niedecker's work. She wrote in such a way that her poems almost magically communicate a vision of the world that is distinctly her own.

Although most of her poems are short, some of them under twenty words, her art of "condensery" is evocative and powerful. She wrote in rhyme, haiku and prose. Her aim was to use no word that did not contribute to the presentation. She wrote, "I learned / to sit at desk / and condense."

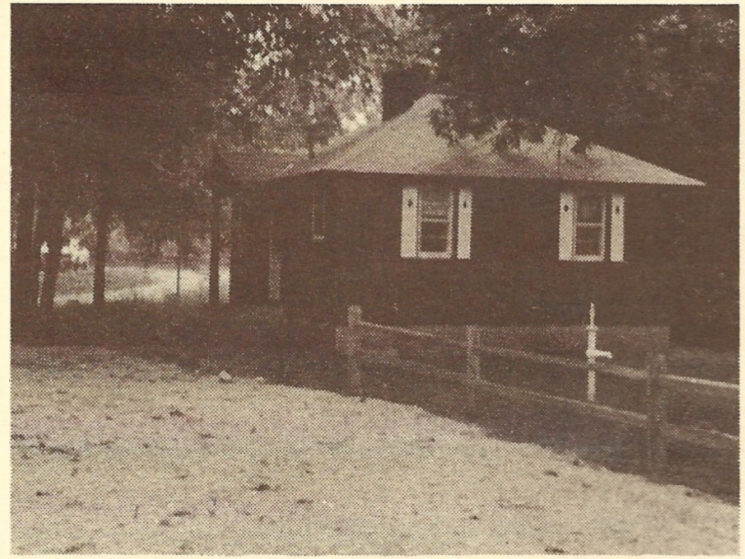
The apparent simplicity of her work gains its power from a wide range of formal resources, including the silences between words indicated by line breaks / and varied spacing on the page. Although her poems possess great visual clarity, they make use of all the senses: the *sound* of her poems is as important as their *images*. She said, "I like planting poems in deep silence; each person gets at the poems for *himself*. He has to come to the poems with an ear for all the music they can give, and he'll hear that as Beethoven heard, tho deaf... ."

Lorine Niedecker was born and spent most of her life on Blackhawk Island near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Blackhawk Island is a low, marshy area, actually a peninsula, along which the Rock River flows before emptying into Lake Koshkonong, one of Wisconsin's largest lakes.

Blackhawk Island Road runs the length of the "island". On either side of the road, running for about three miles, are cottages and houses.

This area has been a haven for hunters and fishermen since prehistoric times. Wildlife was found in abundance around Lake Koshkonong.

Black Hawk, war chief of the Sauk Indians, lived there briefly during the Black Hawk War of 1832. Today, there remain traces of his residence. Groupings of Indian Mounds may also be seen on the bluffs overlooking the lake.



Note: The Lorine Niedecker homes are privately owned and not open to the public.



Life on the river

Shy and introspective, Lorine learned to love the area around her. She wrote, "I spent my childhood outdoors -- redwing blackbirds, willows, maples, boats, fishing (the smell of tarred nets), twittering and squawking noises from the marsh."

when the water receded. During the spring each house had a boat tied near the front door for emergency transportation.

Lorine once wrote to a neighbor, "Early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said, 'I am what I am because of all this -- I am what is around me -- those woods have made me ...'."

When we first come upon the humble little cabin in which Lorine composed most of her early poems, the simplicity of her home elicits a feeling of wonder and the belief that true talent often emerges even without benefit of sympathetic conditions. She was absorbed by the complexity of nature and by the changes in the river, as it varied with the seasons.

Her father Henry made a modest living seining carp from the Rock River, while her mother Daisy attended to the household chores and to raising Lorine, their only child.

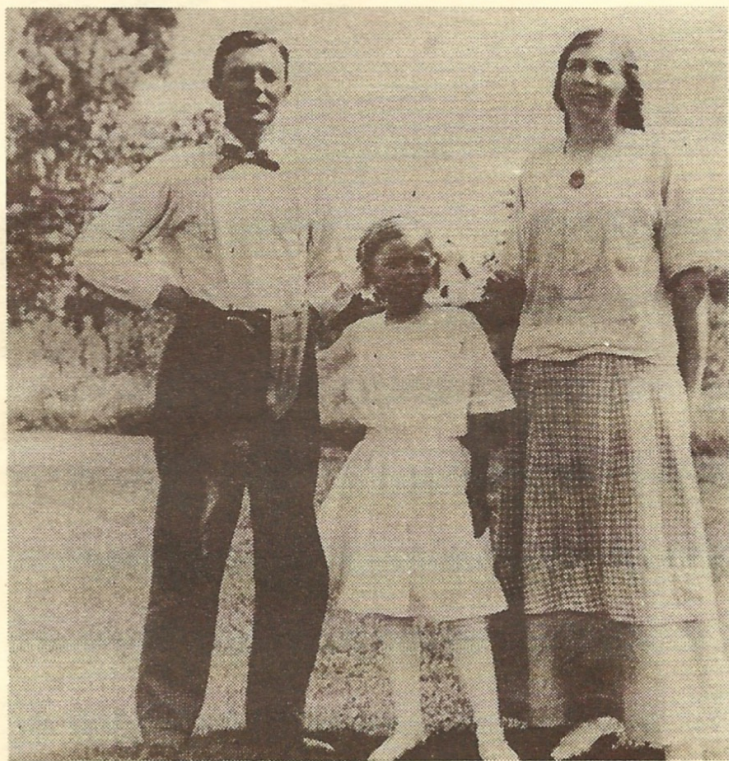
For many years her maternal grandparents owned and operated the Fountain House Hotel at a bend of Blackhawk Island Road, and her father also owned it until 1925.

In 1922 Lorine attended Beloit College, but returned to her home two years later to care for her mother who had become deaf. From 1928 to 1930 she worked as an assistant librarian at the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson and began publishing some of her poems in magazines.

Life as a poet

The turning point in her poetic growth came in 1931 when she read Louis Zukofsky's "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry* magazine. She began corresponding with him and continued to do so for forty years. She felt an affinity with "objectivist" poets who saw the poem as an object, a pure form in which other objects of the world are seen with clarity and precision.

By 1940 Lorine viewed herself primarily as a poet. Her first book, *New Goose*, appeared in 1946. In 1961 her second book, *My Friend Tree*, was published. In 1968 her third book, *North Central*, appeared and was followed the next year by *T & G*, *The Collected Poems (1936-1966)* and, in 1970, by her last book, *My Life By Water*.



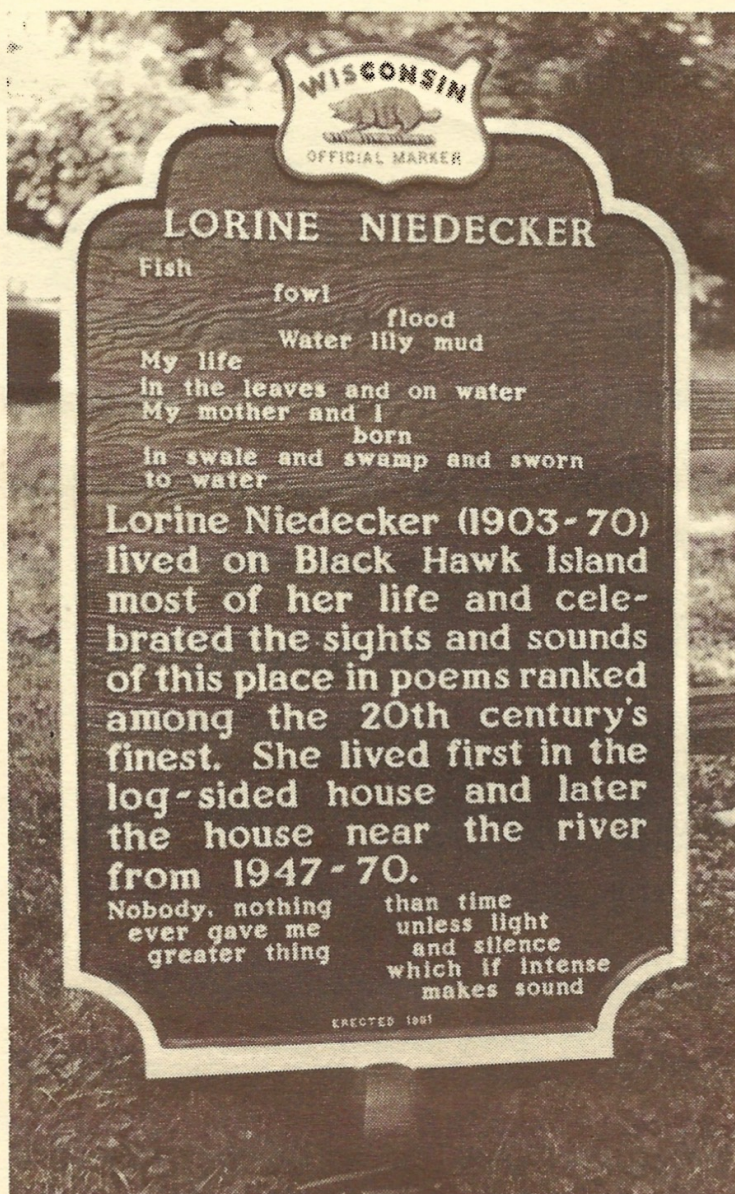
Lorine worked to support herself most of her life. In 1942 she wrote scripts for radio station WHA in Madison. She began working for *Hoard's Dairyman* magazine as a proofreader in 1944.

While working for *Hoard's Dairyman* in Fort Atkinson she wrote a friend, "...and I have to be among 'em to hear 'em talk so I can write some more! Believin' as I do that poetry comes from the folk if it's to be vital and original." She left *Hoard's Dairyman* in 1950, when her eyesight became so poor even glasses could no longer help. When her mother died in 1951 and her father in 1954, leaving

her two small houses on Blackhawk Island, she supplemented her income by cleaning at Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital.

In 1963 Lorine married Albert Millen, a house painter from Milwaukee. The Millens enjoyed driving through the Midwest, and in terms of her writing it was the most prolific time of her career.

Together they planned and built their retirement home on Blackhawk Island between the river and Lorine's little cabin which she built in the 1940s. In 1964 they moved into their new home where they gardened and lived a quiet life by the river.



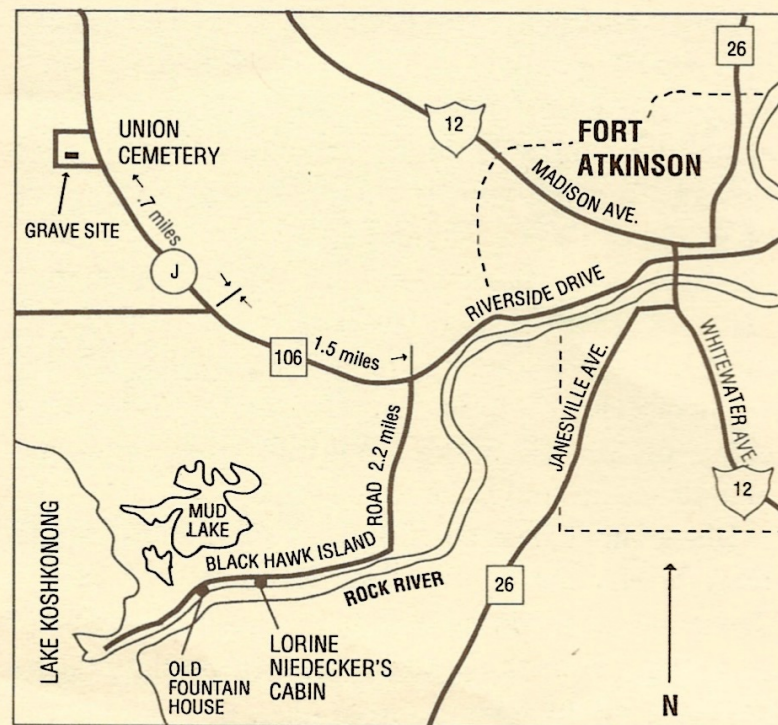
Look for this Wisconsin State Historical Marker at the site of the Lorine Niedecker homes

Lorine became ill during the winter of 1968. On December 1, 1970, she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died on December 31.

The poet was buried in Union Cemetery during a blizzard on January 3, 1971. She lies in the family plot next to her father and mother.

Only a few people were aware of Lorine's poetry -- and fewer still appreciated it. Many of her closest relatives and neighbors were unaware of her writing. She did not seek fame. She felt she needed seclusion, "the deep silences", to carry on her work. Her primary concern was to have her poetry published and read and her reputation as a poet secure.

Although Lorine Niedecker's work was virtually unknown at the time of her death, her esteem as a major American poet continues to grow with each passing year.



Nature on the island

The vegetation of Blackhawk Island is typical of a floodplain. It contains maple, elm, alder, ash, willow, wild calla, cattails, wild flag, arrow-head, reeds, rushes and the equisetum mentioned in Lorine's poem, "I rose from marsh mud..."

The area attracts many birds, such as crows, robins, chickadees, nuthatches, grackles, orioles, redwing blackbirds, blue jays, song sparrows, wrens, marsh and red-tailed hawks and a glorious assortment of migrating warblers, including the prothonotary warbler, "the golden bird of the wooded swamps."

Shore birds include ducks, coots, great blue herons, green herons, egrets, sandhill cranes, Canada geese, swans, bitterns, sandpipers and rails, notably the sora rail celebrated in several of Lorine's poems.

Also seen are frogs, snakes, muskrats and sometimes river otters or mink, along with dragon flies and sundry insects.

The area has been developed along the north bank of the river, while the view across the stream is essentially unchanged since the days of the explorers and the time of the Sauk Indians.

**HIGHWAY 106 WEST
FROM FORT ATKINSON
TURN SOUTH ON BLACKHAWK ISLAND ROAD
DRIVE 2.2 MILES
WATCH FOR HISTORICAL MARKER ON LEFT**

For more information and to sign up for our newsletter "The Solitary Plover" go to:
www.lorineniedecker.org

For additional information, the Dwight Foster Public Library houses many of Lorine Niedecker's books and papers. It is located at 102 E. Milwaukee Ave., Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin 53538.