

1920s Wisconsin

The Mill Creek Irregulars

by David Baumann

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Another Fortuitous Discovery

After the terrific good fortune to have been alerted by Fred Woodworth (who had been enlightened himself by Steve Romberger) to the Ted Wilford series back in aught five, I hardly imagined that another sleeper series like that one would come along. Thankfully, I was wrong! George Beatty recommended the Mill Creek Irregulars to me, which he'd had recommended to him by Jim Towey.

There are ten books in the series, which was written by August Derleth (February 24, 1909-July 4, 1971) and published from 1958 to 1970.

The titles in the series are:

1. The Moon Tenders
2. The Mill Creek Irregulars, Special Detectives
3. The Pinkertons Ride Again
4. The Ghost of Black Hawk Island
5. The Tent Show Summer
6. The Irregulars Strike Again
7. The House by the River
8. The Watcher on the Heights
9. The Prince Goes West
10. The Three Straw Men

What It's About

The Mill Creek series is written in the first person by one of the two boys in the series; Steve Grendon. Steve and Sim live in Sac Prairie in Wisconsin. Their adventures have been measured up to those of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, and the comparison is apt. One book jacket says, "Steve and Sim, the major characters, are twentieth-century cousins of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer... the author's gift for capturing summertime in the country, along with his superior characterizations, lifts this novel way above the standard juvenile."

In its genre, this is some of the best juvenile writing I've ever run across. It's a joy just to read the text slowly and savor the words and images and sensations Derleth puts together. You don't want to read too fast, just as you don't want to gulp good wine. In addition to the comparison with Tom Sawyer, the Mill Creek series is like Ken Holt (for its occasional intricacy of mystery), Jerry Todd/Poppy Ott (for portraying the joys, adventures, and humor of small town life), the early Hardys (again for depicting 1920s

small town life and boyhood escapades), Capwell Wyckoff (for capturing the feel of an era in words), Tom Quest (for connecting terrain and weather to events), and Troy Nesbit (for how Derleth brings in the remarkable beauty of the land into the story—although in this case woods and rivers and farms rather than the desertic southwest). And more. In the Mill Creek Irregulars there is the uniqueness that comes from August Derleth. More about him later.

The Two (Sometimes Three) Heroes

The protagonists are the above-named Steve Grendon and Sim (for Simoleon) Jones. Those who know affirm that Steve is a thinly-disguised August Derleth himself, and Sim is based firmly on his lifelong friend Hugo Schwenker.

The relationship between the boys is curious and unlike any other in any series I'm familiar with. It's pretty rocky much of the time; you have to look deep below the surface to see the affection and friendship that're there. Sim, frankly, in my opinion, comes across as rather unattractive—self-protective, sometimes snide and demeaning to Steve (who is easy-going), dull, often complaining, suspicious, and not a lot of fun to be with. After the first two or three books, each one begins with a chapter in which Steve has to go through an elaborate manipulation to get Sim just to go on an outing. Sim is either afraid that the adventure won't be fun or will turn into something dangerous or humiliating. Steve has to work him until he is backed into a corner and grudgingly accepts. These passages are particularly well written and enjoyable to read; it's just that Sim comes off pretty poorly in them.

Even in a scene that sounds rapturous to me, when the boys are in a small cabin all to themselves during the Christmas holidays, in a day described as “wonderful, the air fresh and just a little sweet from the smell of snow thawing up against tree trunks in the sun”, with a fire going in a cast iron pot-bellied stove, and the prospect of ice fishing (which Sim loves!) a few steps away, and a larder full of mouthwatering edibles packed by the most accomplished of cooks in Steve's family, Sim says, “I don't know, but I still ain't sure about this. I don't know why I let you talk me into it.” *Consarn* it, Sim! Loosen up and have fun!

Of course, to be fair, it must be said that Sim's fears are *always* realized. Steve always does lead the two of them into some pretty hair-raising adventures, sometimes by being a foolhardy, not-thinking-beyond-the-end-of-his-nose jackass. So the unusual chemistry between the boys works very well. In most other series, whenever it becomes necessary to sneak up on an old building in the dark of night, one says, “Let's go,” and they go. Only in the Mill Creeks do we find that every instance of such a draw involves an argument. Sim holds back every time; he just doesn't want to get involved. And yet he *does* want to get involved, too. It's not only the argument between Steve and Sim—it's the argument that rages within Sim himself, too. These characters are assuredly not the cardboard heroes common in a few other series. These personalities are carefully drawn, consistently presented, and true-to-life. Their repartee adds enormously to the enjoyment of the stories.

It's put succinctly and accurately in *The Prince Goes West*. Sim says, "[Steve's] like a trouble magnet—he attracts it... I never yet knew him to be satisfied just looking." And Steve says, "The trouble with [Sim] was he couldn't just sit tight. Whenever anything came up that touched his curiosity he was both afraid to give in to it and afraid not to. He might miss something. Either way, it was a soul struggle for him."

In the words of *The Mill Creek Irregulars: Special Detectives*, p. 77:

I knew if I stood there listening, Sim would dredge up a hundred good reasons why we shouldn't go down near Jake Riley's house. He was the practical one. He always had logic on his side. All I had was imagination. But when it came to talking, it was a draw, and I knew more words than he did.

"Come on," I said.

Pete Bandheim is Steve and Sim's occasional third partner. He is described as being extremely intelligent but able to appear as stupid as a carp. He can bamboozle adults, both friends and foes, to good effect with that particular ability. Sometimes he draws adults into labyrinthine discussions just for the fun of it—appearing dumb and guileless for the pleasure of showing up the illogicalities in facile-thinking adults. More than once he proves his mettle by assuring the boys' rescue from some dire situation.

We are never told precisely how old the boys are, but in the first story, which is set in the early summer of 1922, they're probably young teens—old enough to be trusted with a lot of responsibility but young enough to need permission and guidance for a lot of things. Early in the series, Steve says, "Though we weren't kids any more, Mike [the town marshal] probably thought we were." They age during the ten books, which have a consistent internal chronology. The last book takes place in the late summer of 1925, so the ten books cover a little more than three years. That would bring them to maybe sixteen or seventeen years of age when the curtain drops. Derleth himself was born in 1909, so if Steve is patterned on him very closely, the Mill Creek adventures take place when Steve is between the ages of 13 and 16. Sim is identified in another book (see the notes on *Evening in Spring* below) as being "a year younger" than Steve.



The Author and His Hometown

Now when George Beatty related to me how first-rate these books are and told me who had written them, I was intrigued because I already knew the name August Derleth; I had read his Solar Pons stories—pastiche of Sherlock Holmes and, in my opinion, the most successful. It was on the strength of that reputation that I found and bought the entire Mill Creek series before turning a single page. The books were not hard to find, though one was a bit pricey—only a bit.

The blurb on one book jacket says, "August Derleth is a

fourth-generation citizen of Sauk City, a village on the great bend of the Wisconsin River, twenty-five miles northwest of Madison.” Even apart from the identification of Steve Grendon with the author, one doesn’t need a high IQ to conclude that the Mill Creek series is autobiographical at least to some extent since the location of Sac Prairie is about the same as Sauk City, and that Stephen Grendon is one of the pseudonyms Derleth used for some of his other writing. Moreover, the author himself declared that Sauk City was indeed the reality behind Sac Prairie. Any lingering doubts can be resolved once one reads further in the dust jacket, since it goes on to say, “Mr. Derleth elected to cultivate the home soil, to write about the land and the people he lived with and knew. As a result, his roots are deep and his books are real and lasting portraits of mid-America.” So the author is remembering as well as creating. He does both very well. Sauk City, Derleth’s hometown with population a little more than 3,000 people in 2000, is adjacent to the village of Prairie du Sac, which is only slightly larger.

Without a doubt, there is a lot of reality in the Steve and Sim stories. The depictions of the lay of the land are so detailed, far more than in any other series fiction I’ve ever read, that the reader must conclude that the author is describing real places. Likewise, the names of the characters, if not actual people known to the author, are so unusual and fitting that the reader concludes that they are drawn from real life in some way.

Conclusively, the “old harness shop” that plays such a prominent role in the adventures of Steve and Sim is a real place on Water Street in Sauk City. It was the place of business of Sim’s father, Fred, where Sim spent a lot of his time. Information provided by the August Derleth Society reveals that Derleth visited this historic building daily, and it was often mentioned in detail in his writings. When Derleth’s friend Hugo Schwenker died in 2001 he left the harness shop to the August Derleth Society. Hugo worked closely with the Society to support its many efforts. It was information provided by the Society that avers that Steve was Derleth, and that Schwenker “was a thinly disguised ‘Sim Jones’”.

The Author’s Skill

Derleth’s talent for description is breathtaking. Well, actually that modifier is singularly inapt because he describes scents with skillful effectiveness.

The Pinkertons Ride Again, p. 27

The smell of the night air! The smell, the wonderful smell of leaves opening and the ground fresh again after the long winter, the musk of watery places and old logs decaying there, the pungence of young shoots pushing out of the thin loam over the sand along the river, the medicine smell of willows, and the perfume of alder catkins and willow catkins and poplar catkins in full bloom.

The Mill Creek Irregulars: Special Detectives, pp. 72-73

We went on along the ridge. Up here, we were on top of the world. The sun hanging over the western rim filled the valleys with the soft rose light of the ending day.

East of us, the great shadows of the hills stretched out on the fields and pastures that made a patchquilt of greens and tans all the way to Sac Prairie, which gleamed and shone in the late sunlight over toward the eastern horizon, set against the hills rising across the Wisconsin River east of town. High overhead a pair of redtail hawks wheeled and soared, moving up, up with the currents of air, sometimes screaming. In the south, a long, disorderly file of crows was heading in toward the river bottoms, cawing to one another in that kind of talk crows always make. Ovenbirds sang in the deep woods, and veeries, and a wood thrush was beginning to spill his lyric songs in the shadowed places deep in the wooded valleys. A south wind kept the insects away, and the smell of the woods, rising coolly now after the hot day was almost done, filled all the air with the wild sweetness and pungence of place where men seldom walked and the trees were left to grow undisturbed for scores of years. Oh, but it was good to be there! Walking the ridge was like flying, almost, and it made me feel cut away and freed from everything except what I wanted to be tied to like home and Mother and Father and Grandfather Adams and all the rest.

The descriptions of home life are matter-of-fact, and prove the author's proficiency in putting the reader into the time in which the book is set.

The Irregulars Strike Again, p. 16, 18-21

Great-uncle Joe Stoll came into Sac Prairie early the day after Christmas... He had the sleigh and two of his horses... Great-uncle's horses wore bells. You could hear them coming for blocks... the jingling of the little bells on the harnesses echoed in the still air... We rode along in silence until Great-uncle Joe gave me the reins to hold while he lit a cigar... We turned into the long driveway to the farm, and in a few minutes we were jumping from the sleigh before the house. The jingling of the harness bells had announced our coming.

Throughout all the books there are plenty of fields, woods, farmhouses, and always the river. There are stars, fogs, streetlamps, mosquitoes, the old swimmin' hole, the harness shop, the homes with their screened-in porches, and the corner house no one will live in because "too many people died or killed themselves there". There's a lot of fishing. The author clearly describes what he knows, does it well, does it entertainingly, and uses what he knows to provide detail and set a mood.

Some readers may think the stories move a little slowly. There're a lot of simple boyhood pastimes put in there that don't add to the storyline—at least the adventure part of it. The stories are well seasoned with accounts of Fourth of July picnics, raft building, doing chores at home (not just the expected lawn mowing but also unusual unpleasant tasks like taking potato bugs out of the garden), etc. Other readers may think that's part of the charm of the story. There is a lot of stuff that the people who rewrote the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew would have redlined with ruthless zeal. I think this is the kind of really good stuff that's hard to find in any juvenile, and in today's writings probably just about impossible.

The folks in the town are just on the believable side of characterization. There is the town bum, the pompous storeowner, the ever-hopeful proprietor of a small shop just off the main street, the eager and excitable but two-cylinder-brained town marshal, the justice-of-the-peace whom nobody but himself takes seriously, the dressmaker who's always got a plate of cookies hot out of the oven, ... Three different characters are called Mr. Elgy, Mr. Elky, and Mr. Elzy. I'm pretty sure there is a Mr. Elpy too. They aren't partners or kin, and they don't have a vaudeville act. Those are just their names. Sac Prairie is a small town, and all its citizens seem to enjoy life in it. It's got its heartbreaking charm, and it's got its poisonous narrow-mindedness too.

Family Life, Small Town Life

Family life, including its warts, is beautifully presented. Two sets of grandparents and the great uncle and great aunt are closely bound up to Steve's own family circle, which includes not only a father and mother but a younger sister. Each plays a particular role. Mother worries, father decides, and sister crabs and teases. Sadly, Steve's immediate family, while not actually abusive, is notably dysfunctional. The grandparents and the great aunt and uncle provide not only humorous relief but also powerful wisdom born of years of living and practicing basic virtue without being cloying in the least. They are really the redeeming family for Steve.

The immediate family relationships, close as they are, are characterized by a lot of sniping. There are little overt signs of real affection or encouragement or support except for maternal Grandfather Adams' wisdom conveyed to Steve. Great-uncle Joe and Great-aunt Lou Stoll are always scoring off one another, Steve's mother is constantly nagging, Steve's father says nothing whenever there is a spat, but when he's had enough he ends it with a fiat pronounced from behind his newspaper: "Enough!" and his hand slams onto the tabletop. Steve's sister, who is never named, is always teasing.

But in this context there is a rich amount of humor too. The conversations are spiced with wordplay that is witty and unique. Several times I found myself laughing out loud. When Great-uncle Joe arrived for a visit, Grandfather Adams asked with tongue-in-cheek incredulity, "Nobody shot at you down town?"

Sim's father constantly "pours oil"—which is Sim's term for teasing with humor. As mentioned above, even Steve and Sim have a rocky friendship. Yet underneath one can discern genuine affection in all of these connections. It has to be looked for, but it's there.

It's hardest to find, maybe, in Steve's mother, who comes across gangbusters as really critical of her son and as much of a hand-wringing worry-wart as Don Sturdy's mother—except that Steve's mother is a dynamo where Don's is a cipher. Still, at the beginning of *The Irregulars Strike Again*, Steve says, "It's only that they don't want anything to happen to us." He frequently excuses her, which is sadly often the case in real life when children are treated poorly. More often than excusing her, however, Steve gives as good as he gets.

I find Steve's mother to be a decidedly unattractive character. Her worst moment, but an unfortunately typical one, is when Steve calls home when he's out visiting the Stolls' farm, and the instant she learns it's Steve calling, asks, "What've you done now? What kind of trouble are you in?" It's no wonder that Steve stonewalls her and asks to speak to Grandfather Adams. Steve is quite obviously a good boy and a smart one, but his mother has alienated him. Her loss. And unfortunately his, too. It's a wonder how she turned out to be such a shrew when her father is such a rare, even-tempered, cool guy. Really, this mother is one of the most repellent, angrifying characters in juvenile fiction—endlessly accusing Steve, without any evidence, of terrible but never-specified wrongdoing. No wonder Steve wants to go camping, fishing, and visiting a lot. Whenever he stands up for himself, he mother takes it as "being sassy" and turns it back into another accusation: "Some day that chip on your shoulder'll fracture your collar bone."

She just can't believe, to the point that the reader concludes that she doesn't *want* to believe, that Steve is a good boy. In her eyes, he can do no right. When he goes off for a visit to Great-uncle Joe, Steve's mother says, "Behave now, Stephen. Do what Aunt Lou says. And you send him right home if he doesn't, Uncle," she said.

"Why, Rosie, he's as good as gold," said Great-uncle Joe.

"I want to live to see that day," said Mother fervently.

It's a puzzle why Steve stays at home and uncomplainingly does his chores as much as he does. Fortunately, Grandfather Adams makes his home life a little more bearable. The only really solid, dependable, consistently admirable character who provides an adult influence is Grandfather Adams. He is wise, patient, teaches by questioning, and is invariably supportive of Steve. Most importantly of all, maybe, is that he lets Steve be a boy. Many times he exclaims to his daughter, Steve's mother, "Rosie, let the boy be a boy!"

Best of all is the episode in *The Prince Goes West* when Steve's mother is thoroughly grinding him down and threatening him, and Grandfather Adams, who's been listening patiently, interjects,

"A double sailor knot."

"What was that?" demanded mother.

"I said those double sailor knots will do the job every time," answered Grandfather. "The only trouble is that when the time comes for him to untie them, you'll find him at the end of your apron strings for a longer time than will be good for him—or you."

"Pa, it's my job to raise my children as I see fit."

"Sure, sure. But if your mother'd tied you up so tight, you still wouldn't have any children to raise. You wouldn't even be married."

"Pa, you're just making my job harder."

"I meant to."

It's a sure-fire case of the long-suffering, manipulative, pseudo-sacrificial, what-have-I-done-to-deserve-this mother who drives her children away from her, thinking them outrageously ungrateful all the while. She just never gets it. Sadly, in the very few occasions when Steve's younger sister is mentioned, it doesn't take much imagination to see that this little vinegar-drinker will turn out the same way.

How autobiographical is this depiction? Who knows? But the author's mother's name was also Rose, the same as Steve Grendon's. Maybe that doesn't mean anything.

And yet ... running underneath the intrafamilial tensions there is indeed a deep current of affection, worthiness, virtue, and commitment to doing what is right. In none of these people do you find anyone who's just "in it for himself". Whenever there is need to do something for right to prevail, they don't shrink back.

In the second book, when Great-aunt Lou tries to convince her husband Joe to interfere with a teen-age girl's predicament with her exploitative stepfather, Joe says,

"If it comes right down to it," said Great-uncle, "'tain't our business."

"We're neighbors, ain't we?" demanded Great-aunt Lou, her eyes flashing behind her spectacles. "You don't sit here if Ed Burke's granary catches fire, do you?"

"That's different."

"How so? I declare to goodness I don't see the difference. If Ed's granary is afire, we all help to put it out. If somebody broke in and robbed Molly's place, we'd all try to catch him."

The Mill Creek Irregulars: Special Detectives, p. 140

The Villains

One thing about the Mill Creek Irregulars—some of their villains, when they are bad, are really, really bad. Not just bad guys who get angry and tie you up. Some of these are murderers—rotten to the core. They shoot, and they shoot to kill. They are not about to be crossed or outsmarted by some kids. The threat is real. This is not common in series books, even the best of them in which real evil is often off camera or left to the imagination. The very bad guys in Ken Holt almost always find some reason not simply to shoot our heroes; they tie them up, leave them in caverns, etc. Doing them in is always a complicated matter. But more than once, Steve and Sim get shot at with intent to kill. The bad guys don't have any reservations about shooting kids if that's what it takes.

The Moral

The Ted Wilfords included social commentary regularly in unfolding great tales. Similarly, in the Mill Creeks a moral theme can be put forth as well as any juvenile writing in my experience, and far better than most. In *The Moon Tenders*, Steve has to make a difficult moral decision. The keeping of promises is taken as a matter of extreme seriousness, but, as in the Ted Wilford series, it is quickly shown that real life situations sometimes put promises, even those made “on my honor”, to the test. What is truly honorable? Where is honesty to be found? Without disregarding the intent of the words of the promises themselves, there is the matter that honor and honesty are found deeper than the words in which they are expressed. To Grandfather Adams, Steve moans, “It’s just that I promised on my honor, and you tell me now I can’t have my honor anyway if this is about something dishonest.” The boy is put into a serious moral dilemma.

Matters of justice are taught by the superb grandfather figure: “No, boy, you don’t have a rule for different economic levels, but one which applies to everyone, regardless of whether he’s white or yellow or black, Catholic or Protestant, rich or poor.” But grandfather does not tell the boy what to do. Grandfather does tell the boy what is right and explains the consequences to a number of possibilities the boy might choose, but he does not tell him what to do.

“Why don’t you tell the marshal?” I asked.

“Because it’s your job, your obligation. Besides, all I know is hearsay.”

“That’s right,” I agreed. . . . I still didn’t know about telling anyone, least of all the village marshal.

“Will you tell it now?” asked Grandfather.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I have to think it over.”

“Take your time.”

A little later on, Steve reflects, *If Grandfather Adams was disappointed in me even for a little while, I’d end up being disappointed in myself.*

Sim has some cogent observations too: “Looks to me like an honest man suffers more than the crook,” and “I say a man who steals a fish when he ain’t supposed to have it can talk himself into stealing a dollar, and a man who steals a dollar can talk himself into stealing a hundred. That’s what I say.”

Grandfather Adams’ wisdom is worth its weight in ultra-scarce series books:

“You’ll soon be old enough to know that a great many people hate to be forced to take any kind of action that may be unpleasant. It takes strength to stand up for principles. It always did, and it always will. The mass of people turn down the easy path—they don’t stand on principle. They follow the way of least resistance, and they find it pretty easy to drop principles on the way.”

and

"Remember, boy, you have to put something into living in order to get something out of it."

"Grandpa," I said earnestly, "I put a lot into life."

"Yes, you do—but you try to hang on to all of it. And you can't do it. Because little by little everything changes in this life, everything passes away, until, in the end, life does, too. The sooner you begin to understand that, the happier you'll be. You won't fight against what you can't help. You'll learn to enjoy what life brings you."

and

"Life isn't meant to be all laughter or all tears," said Grandfather. "We get a little of both. It makes for balance. It tempers a man. Do you understand?"

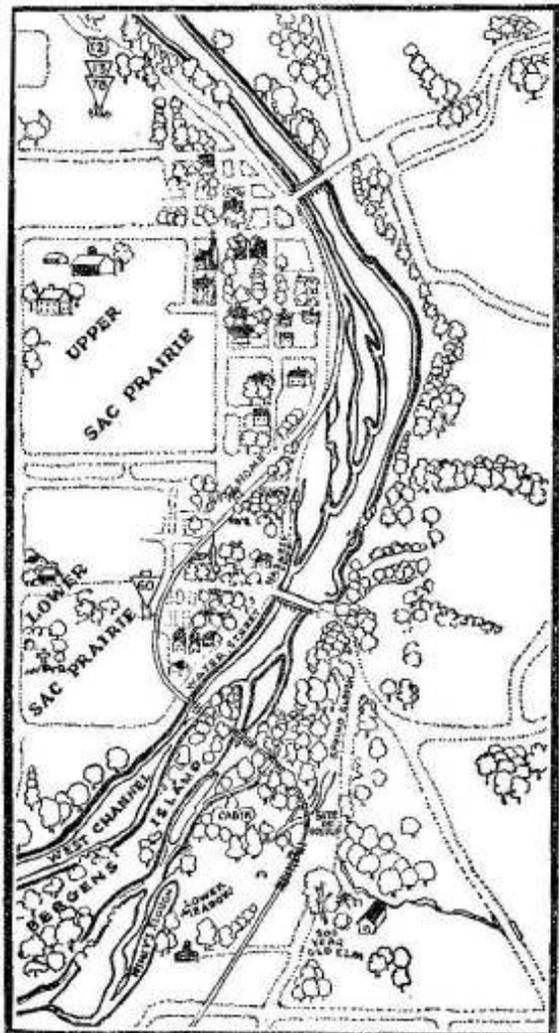
Artwork

The artwork is nothing to sit up and take notice of. There are no internals but a couple of the books have frontispieces. Some of the covers are okay but most are only minimally attractive. This may contribute to the series' very low profile.

There are also two well-drawn but irritatingly inadequate maps. The print is 'way too small on one (and not just because I'm 59, either, dagnabbit!), and another doesn't show some of the most important features in the story.



Derleth includes such detailed descriptions of place that good maps would have been a real boost for all of the stories. The locations of farms, inlets,



bluffs, rivers, streams, villages, islands, railroads, meadows, bridges, pools, wooded ridges, roads, paths, cliffs, sloughs, marshes, bottoms, brush, valleys, defiles, forested areas, standing stones, points, cabins, and the layout of towns all play important parts in the way the stories flow and how sites interrelate. One can certainly read the stories without maps, but doing so leaves the reader with a feeling of being an “outsider”—he doesn’t know the territory as well as the natives, and he gets lost.

This series *begs* to be featured in “Getting it straight on where it was” columns that frequent the pages of this magazine. Checking a map of central Wisconsin was helpful, but there is much more detail in the stories than any but a local map can show, and I expect that finding such a map from the 1920s would take a bit of effort today.

Getting Hold of the Mill Creek Books

The publisher of the first eight volumes was Duell, Sloan, and Pearce; the ninth was published by Meredith Press; and the tenth by Candlelight Press. All publishers were in New York. I suspect that Candlelight was a little lower quality than the others. The book looks pretty good—sharp, actually—but the text has about a dozen typographical errors in it, some of them glaring; the others had none that I noticed. Anyway, all the books are about the same format and size, although the fourth is slightly smaller. For some reason, it is also the scarcest. Other than this one, the books are not too difficult to find, nor too expensive. Curiously, though, half of the ones I found are ex-library.

There is a Derleth fan who has all ten books available in paperback for \$10 each, \$100 for the set. He is a member of the August Derleth Society.

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or in Canada,
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Summaries of the Books

In articles like this I do my best to intrigue the reader with summaries of the books but without providing any momentous spoilers. Here goes:

1. The Moon Tenders (1958)

The first story is set at the beginning of the summer of 1922. In this story, Steve and Sim build a raft with a plan to take it forty miles down the Wisconsin River to Bogus Bluff to look for a lost cache of gold coins. The title of the book, *The Moon Tenders*, comes from the observation of Grandfather Adams. When the boys tell him their plan to build a raft and float it down the river on an adventure to look for gold, he tells them that they are “tending the moon”—i.e., out to have fun, as young boys do, while following a dream. In his own words, “Moon tenders—with nothing to do but tend the moon and the stars. I guess that’s what it is to be a boy.”

A young teen is assuredly drawn to the quest of looking for a treasure of gold on a trip like this one, but Steve and Sim find that the real adventure will be quite different. This inaugural story for the Mill Creek Irregulars is the one most like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

2. The Mill Creek Irregulars, Special Detectives (1959)

This tale is set two months after the previous book. Steve and Sim are invited to spend two weeks at the end of summer with Great-uncle Joe and Great-aunt Lou Stoll, fishing. While there, their neighbor Gus Elker who has been appointed a “justice a the peace” expresses concern about odd goings-on at a neighboring farm where soon-to-come-of-legal-age Molly appears to be a virtual prisoner of her cruel stepfather Jake. Gus, Joe, and Lou gradually come to agree that there is something terribly wrong, and Steve and Sim form the “Mill Creek Irregulars” detective agency to take part in finding out what’s amiss and righting it. They are the only ones who figure out that there is more going on than a cruel and controlling stepfather.

The second entry in this series proves again that these tales are beautifully written, but seem to move rather slowly. *Special Detectives* was actually a very simple plot without much real action. It’s filled out with a lot of description and detail, but the descriptions and dialogue are remarkably fine, and the characters beautifully drawn. It’s not quite as exciting as a Ted Wilford. I had the impression that *Moon Tenders* was first written as a single story, and only in *Special Detectives* do we have the author showing that he’s decided to write a series. It’s in this book that the boys decide to form their amateur detective agency, and at the end of this story there is a promise of more to come.

3. The Pinkertons Ride Again (1960)

The third entry in the Mill Creek Irregulars series takes place the following spring. Its opening day is April 14, 1923. Once again the story moves slowly—a rather simple plot drawn out with a lot of time in which the boys meet, fish, talk, plan, reason, and finally act. Steve and Sim take a stroll through the woods south of town, returning home after a leisurely day of fishing. Seeing a light in an abandoned cabin, they check it out and overhear two rough-looking men planning a train robbery. All the grownups they tell don’t believe them—just think their imagination is running wild. The boys try several times, but get joshed, humored, criticized, or sent away. They realize that they are on their own if the robbery is to be foiled. But what can boys do against grown men?

Sim’s practical, logical, even dour approach to life is contrasted with Steve’s fertile imagination. The book brings out the ingenuity of teenage boys, realistically presented. The ending, though of course triumphant, catches the reader looking and is most satisfactory.

4. The Ghost of Black Hawk Island (1961)

The fourth entry in this series is set two months later, in June 1923. With this volume, the Mill Creek Irregulars series hits its stride. This is a compelling story. Steve talks Sim into going on a two-week camping and fishing trip on Black Hawk Island, a 420-acre spot

positioned in the Wisconsin River 32 miles north of Sac Prairie. It's dense with trees and shrubbery, but includes a spring of deliciously sweet and pure water and sandy beaches at the north and south ends.

The boys enjoy a delightful day or two before the "ghost" of an Indian chief awakens them during the night. The apparition sings old chants and appears to be made of glowing bones. When the "ghost" realizes that he's been spotted by the boys, he disappears. After the initial shock, with admirable logic Steve and Sim deduce that some flesh and blood malefactor is doing his best to scare them off and decide to find out why. When their research leads them to infer that there has been a serious theft from a commercial establishment in the nearby town of Kilbourn and that the purloining has not been publicized, it is not hard for them to conclude that something valuable has been secreted somewhere on the island.

A Winnebago Indian boy named Fire Bear (also known as "Jim") and an obtuse and portly local marshal are two well-drawn characters who contribute to the story. Rain, wan moonlight, and fog provide marvelous atmosphere. A desperate chase through the clinging woods of the island provides terrific tension before the story comes to an agreeable conclusion.

5. The Tent Show Summer (1963)

This adventure takes place later that same summer. By this time, whenever Steve suggests some sort of adventure to Sim, Sim is so disgusted at how each time some sort of disaster has occurred that he is beyond reluctant to embark on the new escapade. He always gives in, albeit grudgingly. After all, how could merely going to the traveling circus lead the boys into trouble when the Brooks' Stock Company comes to Sac Prairie for its annual week-long stay?

From the first night, however, the boys are in trouble as circumstances beyond their understanding unroll before them. It begins when Mike, the duty-bound but uninformed, somewhat dense village marshal, runs up to the ticket-taker screaming, "Stop the show!"

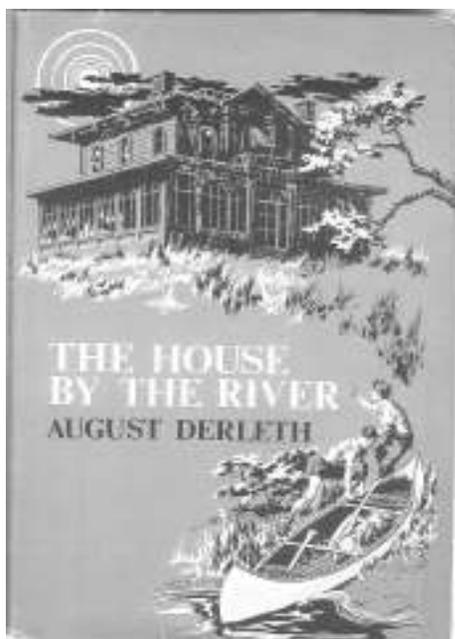
Steve's imagination and Sim's logical approach to everything are both taxed to the utmost as one strange event after another takes place, beginning with the unscrupulous attempt to shut the show down and going on to nefarious midnight skulkings for an unknown motive. Village officials don't seem to see very much that's sinister, but it becomes evident that someone believes that the boys are a major stumbling block to some weighty plan.

6. The Irregulars Strike Again (1964)

The series gets better and better. This book is one of the finest "winter" stories in series bookdom. Steve and Sim decide to spend a few days in a cabin not far from Steve's Great-uncle's and Great-aunt's farm—the locale of the second book in this series. It's far out in the woods, with bluffs, defiles, thick stands of several kinds of tree, and a frozen river at hand.

This time it's the week after Christmas, presumably 1923. Some highly entertaining banter is found in the story of how the boys gradually become aware that some disreputable doings are going on in the snowy woods. They first become curious when they find the town ne'er-do-well, Sepple Bollinger, ostensibly ice fishing but preoccupied while engaged in the simple pastime. The boys'd only planned on doing some ice fishing themselves, but have to ask themselves what's going on when some hunters come along with a hearse, dogs, and a string of rabbits that have been dead for days.

As a genuine addition to the article, "A Quick Look at Cussin' in Series Books", written by the worthy editor of this unsurpassed magazine and featured in the 2002 issue, *The Irregulars Strike Again* has the distinction of featuring the only real swearing I've ever run across in a juvenile book: "What in hell was that?" is actually said by one of the bad guys when the tables begin to turn against them.



7. The House by the River (1965)

A year and a half has passed. It's June 1925 when this book opens. Derleth twists things around from his formula of beginning each story with Steve finagling Sim into going on an adventure with him; this time, it's Sim who suggests an outing—a canoe trip down the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi for some camping and fishing. When the boys arrive at their destination, Steve becomes intrigued with an old mansion near their camping spot, not far from the (real) town of Prairie du Chien. In spite of Sim's customary hesitation, Steve decides to explore the house after they go to the pump for a drink of water and then find that the cellar door has been left unlocked.

In this tale, the reader may sympathize with Sim's usual caution since Steve acts like a nonsensical jerk in getting the boys into some serious trouble through crass boyish stupidity which nonetheless rings true. At least I was as brainless as Steve when I was a boy, on occasion. The usual highly enjoyable word jousting is present throughout this book. This entry into the genre of boys exploring a crumbling old house with lots of rooms, stairways, corridors, and attics ranks high on the list of such stories offered in the series book world.

8. The Watcher on the Heights (1966)

I can't think of a way to give this superior book a fitting summary without injecting a small spoiler. It's June again—and still 1925. Steve and Sim, on an adventure, go to one of the highest places in the area with a spectacular view of the surroundings, and discover that someone had lain in wait there for a long, long time. When they learn who the "watcher" is, and that he has a telescope and a high powered rifle with a scope, and that he overlooks a popular fishing spot which is occasionally attended by a man whose

testimony had put the watcher in prison, it does not take long for the boys to research the facts of a tragic incident that had taken place when they were small children.

This is an incredible story, with a love interest and political and prejudicial overtones. It is another installment in the genre of an innocent man accused and found guilty, in the same category as Ken Holt's *The Black Thumb Mystery*; Ted Wilford's *The Locked Safe Mystery*; Tom Slade's *Tom Slade, Forest Ranger*; and The Hardy Boys' *The Tower Treasure*. (I won't include the Tom Corbett adventures in which the three heroes repeatedly save the entire solar system from dastardly psychopaths at the risk of their own lives and for no reward, and in the very next book are heatedly accused of stealing candy from babies and are assumed guilty from the get-go by people who always knew that "those boys would never come to any good.")

What makes the Steve and Sim entry unique in my experience is that the story takes place *after the innocent man has done his term in prison*, and is now apparently out for revenge. Enormous questions of justice are raised that even careful adults in the story have a hard time answering, not to mention the juvenile audience for whom this book was written.

The theme is set early in the book:

"What are you after now?" Grandfather said.
"I don't know," I said, "but I think justice."
"Another of man's most cherished delusions," he said.
"There's seldom any such thing. And if there were, the mass of men couldn't stand it."
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Just past halfway through, the question becomes critical:

"So the real bad man wasn't [X]—it was [Y]," I said.
"He ought to be brought to justice."
Grandfather Adams smiled. "It seems to me that's what [X]'s after now, isn't it? Only he sees it differently. That ought to give you pause."
"Why?"
"How can you be sure what justice is?" he asked.
"[Y] ought to go to jail," I said. "And [X] should be exonerated—and maybe paid for the years he spent in jail."
"But justice to that young man—according to what you tell me—means something else again. He lost five years or less—but he wants [Y]'s life in exchange. Would you call that a fair exchange?"
Put that way, it didn't sound like it.
"But he lost a lot more," I protested. "His good name—maybe his girl."

"Not enough to justify his taking a life in return. Even one so far gone as [Y]'s."

"No, I guess not."

Grandfather Adams looked me thoughtfully. "You see, Old Timer, the justice business is pretty complicated. It isn't as simple as it looks. You've been mixed up in it at the sleuthing end, but up to now you haven't got mixed up in the dispensing of justice. It's something better left to the authorities who have at least a little training in it."

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Problem is that it was the authorities that bungled it in the first place. The wise grandfather has impressed upon his grandson that matters of justice can be extremely complicated but as usual he does not make any decisions for him. Fortunately, the youthful, idealistic, imaginative, and tenacious Steve does not leave it "to the authorities".

The story ends with loose threads, but still with powerful satisfaction. One's own hankering for justice is left expanded if not completely satisfied.

"My boy," said Grandfather, "always remember that Justice has many faces—and one of them is charity."

I can live with that. This is one of the finest, most skillfully written juveniles I've ever run across.

9. The Prince Goes West (1968)

It's June yet again—and still 1925. That was a busy month for the Mill Creek Irregulars, especially after a year and a half hiatus. In this installment, Steve and Sim, along with their occasional third partner, Pete Bandheim, go camping and fishing on Andy's Island in the Wisconsin River. Steve comes late and had borrowed some binoculars to find his pals. After he finds them, the three use the binocs to scan the countryside. They become intrigued when they spot two men in business suits with shoulder holsters across the river near an abandoned lath mill. After one of them goes off in his large black car and the other is snoring away around midnight, the boys allow their curiosity to lead them to peek into the lath mill. Needless to say, what they see there hurtles them into a remarkable adventure. If there's ever a time when the boys tell a tale that adults won't believe, this is it.

The plot has a couple of coincidences almost as far-fetched as those in a Nancy Drew. And yet, as we accept the coincidence in Ken Holt's *The Mystery of the Galloping Horse* in which Ken and Sandy flee the bad guys only to take refuge in the very spot where those same bad guys have holed up, we know that real life does have coincidences in it. Those in the ninth Mill Creek book didn't spoil the story. They kept it going where, without them, the story would have dragged and needed fillers.

The dénouement is both exciting and humorous but rather implausible, making this entry perhaps the least believable of the ten but still enjoyable.

10. The Three Straw Men (1970)

It's August 1925. In this tale, Steve notices that a load of hundred-pound bags of sugar is taken out of the freight train where it is destined for the local corn cannery, and removed to an outdoor storage shed at Folsom's, the largest department store and business of any kind in Sac Prairie. Made curious as usual, Steve wrinkles his brow and tries to find out why, especially when it turns out that the bags are disappearing, ten or twenty at a time, in the darkness long after closing hours. A convoluted tale of questionable business practices coupled with the abuse of influence by the wealthy and influential makes the final entry in the Mill Creek Irregulars highly intriguing if not particularly adventuresome.

There are inspired scenes in which the local police officer followed by the justice-of-the-peace try hard to intimidate the boys at the behest of the powerful but shady Folsom family that "runs" Sac Prairie, and over whom the local officialdom faun. Sim is immediately cowed, but Steve relishes the confrontations. He says most skillfully and entertainingly what every boy who's ever been hassled and bullied by "authority" wishes he'd thought of and said when he was in the right and knew it.

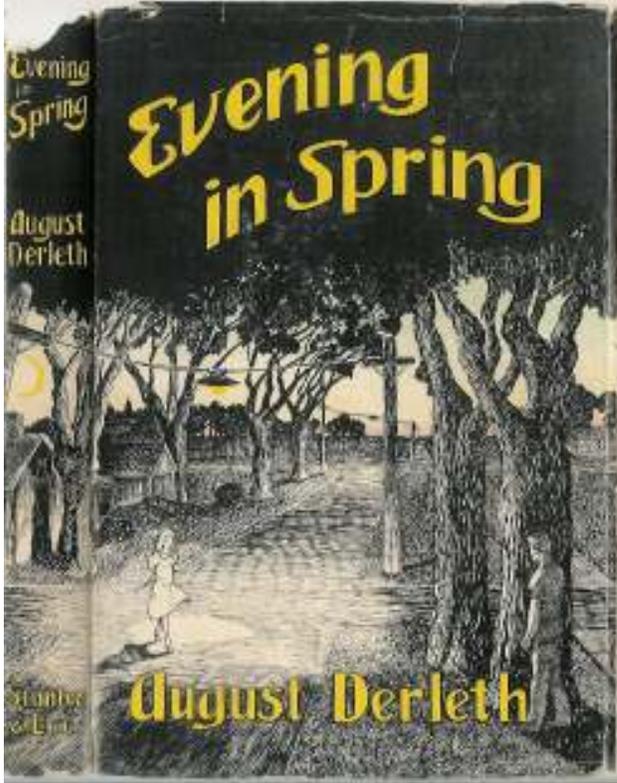
And Now Something Unique in Series Books

Derleth wrote a lot of other books, fiction and non-fiction, that are set in Wisconsin. One blurb on one of the Mill Creek dust jackets touted a book called *Evening in Spring*, first published in 1941, seventeen years before the first Mill Creek adventure rolled off the presses. It sounded interesting, so I found it. After I'd finished reading all of the Mill Creeks, I opened this one, and was fascinated with what I found. It is, in fact, a Steve and Sim book, but with an *enormous* difference! The same characters are there—Steve, his mother, father, the grandparents, Sim and his father Fred, and some crazy aunts who appear here for the first time—but *Evening in Spring* was written for adults, and is over 300 pages long.

Internal evidence shows that *Evening in Spring* begins in the spring of 1924 and concludes at the end of the summer of 1925, thereby overlapping the last four of the books in the Mill Creek Irregulars. The book is about the romance between Steve Grendon and Margery Estabrook. In the later Mill Creek books, Margery is mentioned rarely and only in passing as Steve's girlfriend. We hardly ever see her and she never takes part in any of the mysteries. But in *Evening in Spring*, we are suddenly plunged headlong into the story of "first love". A completely "other" side of Steve Grendon is thoroughly revealed. It's as intriguing as if Bruce Campbell had written a mature, adult-length novel outside of the Ken Holts in which he develops Ken's relationship with a girlfriend.

The author's son later explained that "Margery" was one of Derleth's girlfriends. Determining how much of a book is true history and how much is fiction is always a fruitless task. There is a strong helping of both in most of the best writing, but Derleth

himself unabashedly declared this book to be autobiographical and in the introduction he confessed that it was his favorite novel. In fact, my copy turned out to be signed by the author. The inscription reads, “for ‘Petey’ Ernest, my favorite novel, for obvious reasons. Sincerely, August Derleth.”



In the story, like the Mill Creeks, Steve writes in the first person. Several times he describes how the trees and streetlamps make him feel lonely as he experiences the pangs of love in a beautifully-described relationship that is bitterly and angrily opposed by members of both families because of bigotry. In my opinion, the cover does a near-perfect job of representing the tone of the story inside. It’s a shame that the artist for this book was not used for the ten Mill Creeks.

Footnote: an Extra Treat

One may be forgiven, one hopes, for adding one more entry to the list. In 1968, *The Beast in Holger’s Wood* was published. Although it is not a “Steve and Sim” book, it is very like one—so much so that I think that it has a place in this article. Two boys, Rick and

Banny go hiking and camping in the dense woods called Holger’s, located near the Wisconsin town of Rhinelander. One of the town’s “characters” had reported seeing a huge beast there that frightened him acutely. Normally this would not elicit much excitement in Rhinelander except that there is a legend in the town about a fierce creature named a “hodag” that had appeared more than half a century earlier. The fact that the “hodag” was shown to be a fraud put over on the town by a notorious prankster does not deter the two boys from trying to track it down in their own day. Surprisingly, they find lots of evidence that the creature exists. *The Beast in Holger’s Wood* has a number of plot elements in common with several of the Steve and Sim stories, but this does not detract from its appeal. An old Indian woman who lives in a cabin the woods, a spirited and resourceful girl named Dody, and a sheriff who has better things to do than listen to kids all add to the story. Along with *Evening in Spring*, I’ve set this book alongside the ten in my Mill Creek Irregulars section. It fits.

Getting Straight On Where It Was

Sac Prairie, Wisconsin
Home of the Mill Creek Irregulars

By David Baumann

551 words October 11, 2007

Bayport doesn't exist though debates occasionally arise among the fans about where it might have been located. Though less frequently, the location of Shopton has also been debated. There is no Spindrift Island. Although the location of Brentwood has been pretty well pinpointed by Ken Holt fan Steve Servello, there is no real "city" there.

It is, however, known that Tutter, Illinois, the home of Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott, is really Utica. Likewise, Sac Prairie, Wisconsin is a real place, and I had the good fortune to be there last summer.

I wrote the article on the Mill Creek Irregulars that appears elsewhere in this magazine in the spring of 2007. In late September, I was in Wisconsin on a business trip. I took the opportunity to spend a couple of hours in Sauk City, located roughly thirty miles northwest of Madison, the state capital. I learned that Sac Prairie was the original name of what are now the two adjacent towns of Prairie du Sac to the north and Sauk City to the south. The name comes from the Sac or Sauk Indians who lived there before Europeans came. The U.S. government obtained the land from the Winnebago Indian Nation in 1837, at which time white settlers began to build.

The public library in Sauk City, where I went first, has an August Derleth Room, as does one of the local restaurants. Both feature artifacts and memorabilia. The Chamber of Commerce provides a pamphlet called "Walking Tour of Historic San Prairie, Home of August Derleth". I acquired one at the library and set out on foot.

The significant sites are located within a square half mile or so; I was able to get to all of them within an hour. These included Derleth's childhood home, the old harness shop (both of which are unfortunately misplaced on the map but which I located anyway), and the old railway bridge that features so prominently in the Steve and Sim stories. Sadly, the railway bridge is no longer used. There is a span missing from the middle, and the ends are fenced off. Nevertheless, this is the true site where Steve and Sim met so frequently. The often-mentioned woods and swampland are on the opposite end of the bridge from the city.

To the east of Sauk City is the Wisconsin River that almost has its own personality in the books. It showed an attractive, calm flow of dark water, and I could easily imagine generations of people fishing, swimming, rafting, and boating on its surface. Islands dotted it here and there.

While it was evident that the town had the amenities of modern life, it was clearly also a place that knew and valued its history. Most of the homes were a century or more old but kept up, and the trees around them were large and settled; the main street could have been a movie set for almost any era in the twentieth century. Though Steve and Sim hadn't had their adventures there for eighty-five years, it needed only a little effort to picture them fast-walking down the street. I

like it very much when an author uses a real place for his stories. When I read the Mill Creek Irregulars again, I will have a strong “sense of place”.