

WPT films segment on late Fort poet Niedecker

By Alexa Zoellner

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from the Daily Jefferson
County Union

Filming for a segment of *Wisconsin Life*, featuring the life and works of the late poet Lorine Niedecker, took place in the Town of Sumner and Fort Atkinson on Monday.

Wisconsin Life celebrates what makes Wisconsin unique through the diverse stories of its people," the program's website states. "Our award-winning producers travel the state in search of stories that are humorous, surprising, emotional and/or thought-provoking. All of the stories are personal and rich with the personality of the state we call home."

It is a co-production of Wisconsin Public Radio and Wisconsin Public Television.

"Wisconsin Public Television requested ideas for their series, *Wisconsin Life*, and I thought it would be a good idea for them to come and do a segment on Lorine," Ann Engelman, president of the Friends of Lorine Niedecker, said. "So I sent an email ... and they took me up on my offer.

"I just said, 'Lorine Niedecker lived in Fort Atkinson and she was a poet and there's been a lot of things happening with her — the State Historic Register and the resolution of Lorine Niedecker Day, the returned materials to the Hoard Historical Museum — so come on out and let's have a look at Lorine's Wisconsin life.'"

Filming for the Niedecker segment took place at Niedecker's cabin on Blackhawk Island, as well as the Dwight Foster Public Library and Hoard Historical Museum in Fort Atkinson.

Amy Lutzke, library reference/adult services librarian and member of the Friends of Lorine Niedecker, was interviewed for the segment.

"When we heard Lorine's story, it just seemed like a perfect fit for us to tell yet another story of Wisconsin life," *Wisconsin Life* producer Kelly Saran said. "I think what appealed to us about Lorine was that many of us on the staff had never even heard of her. If you're not a history buff, Lorine is kind of someone who flew under the radar for a long time.

"So it was interesting to see this artist who was well-known around the world, but wasn't even known in Wisconsin really at all, and how, at her time, she was a modernist poet doing objectivist poetry," she added. "That wasn't really popular (then), but today, that modern poetry is much more common. So her interest is growing and it's kind of nice to track her interest through the show."

The upcoming season of *Wisconsin Life*, which will premier in early October, will include 13 episodes in 13 locations.

Typically, a full day is spent shooting at each location with a crew of two videographers, an audio-engineer, a host and a producer.

"It's funny because sometimes you think, 'TV, no problem,' but really it takes hours and hours," Saran said. "We usually go on location. We'll do a few stand-ups, we usually do an interview talking to people on-location and then we'll pack it up for the day and take off."

The broadcast date of the Lorine Niedecker segment is yet to be determined, but hopefully will be known by late July or early August.

While known internationally, Niedecker only recently has been more widely recognized within her home state and community. A former Hoard's Dairyman proofreader and Fort Memorial Hospital cleaning lady, she wrote extensively about the area's flora and fauna, her neighbors, family and travel.

Niedecker was born on Blackhawk Island and spent her summers growing up there.

"Ultimately, money got pretty tight — it was just that kind of time — and they moved out to Blackhawk Island permanently," Engelman said of the Niedeckers. "She came into town to go to school, ... and ultimately, she went to Beloit College for two years. But money was really tight and so ultimately, she had to come home and take care of her mother, who was not well."

Around age 32, Niedecker became aware of "Poetry Magazine," an edition of which was edited by Louis Zukofsky, founder of the Objectivist Movement.

"Lorine sort of fits in this movement," Engelman explained. "It's taking a non-sentimental view of the world and putting it in pretty concise terms. She wrote her poetry on her own terms and it's condensed, it's concise and she doesn't ever have an extra word in her poems."

Once correspondence with Zukofsky began in earnest, Niedecker went to New York to visit and the two had a romance that did not work out. Eventually, she returned to Blackhawk Island.

Her father, Henry, had died in 1954 and left her rental properties that provided for her finan-



A film crew with the Wisconsin Public Television show, *Wisconsin Life*, was on location in the area to film a segment about the life and work of the late Fort Atkinson poet Lorine Niedecker.

Photo by Alexa Zoellner

cially. Niedecker married Albert Millen in 1963 and from that point to the time of her death, her work solely was writing her poetry.

Born on May 12, 1903, Niedecker died in 1970 at age 67 following a stroke. Six books of her poetry were published during her lifetime.

During the past two decades, her poetry has become more widely known and has been the focus of several public art efforts within the City of Fort Atkinson.

In 1991, when the Wisconsin State Historical Society erected the historical marker at the site of Niedecker's Blackhawk Island cabin, the Friends of Lorine Niedecker formed to continue to spread the word of her work.

In 2009, local Fort Atkinson artist Jeremy Pinc painted a mural on the wall of a building at the southeast corner of East Sherman Avenue and North Main Street. It showcases a portion of one of her most well-known poems, titled "Pacan to Place," which starts "Fish, fowl, flood ..."

It was the result of develop-

ment of the first Lorine Niedecker Wisconsin Poetry Festival in Fort Atkinson that year.

Also, as part of its 2011 renovation, the Dwight Foster Public Library had a separate space to house the Niedecker Collection, celebrating the late poet's life and works. In addition, the Hoard Historical Museum has the Lorine Niedecker Room dedicated to the late poet.

In the fall of 2014, a project involving digital art, stained glass and metal sculpture was installed in the entryway of Fort Atkinson High School. Its theme: dragonflies. Subsequent artwork promoting Niedecker has been installed at Fort Atkinson Middle School and Barrie Elementary School, with more in the planning stages.

In 2016, a folk art pole carved by L.A. Wilson featuring the Sauk leader Blackhawk and Niedecker was installed in the north side of Lions Park, and most recently, fundraising is under way to purchase, as public art, "Our Poet Lady," a sculpture by local artist Sally Koehler.