

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

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A Day with Jim Winters

We were on a plot of land owned by a wonderful woman named Holly, who described herself as an empath right off the bat. Retired, she couldn't have possibly known about the online meme that popped up in recent years. Cam and I looked at each other, giggled and nodded when Jim perked up and agreed that he too had the traits of an empath, and that there were too many similarities between the four of us for something fated to not be taking place. In fact when we had first pulled behind Winter's cream Toyota Corolla, there was a good chunk of time that we gabbed about our similarities, Holly offering Cam work opportunities, and Jim telling a story simultaneously. Holly was single and lived with a moody siamese cat, who hid in a lobster trap behind her one story frame home. She had worked for the Beloit public schooling system and was offering Cam connections to different people as Cam does volunteer work at a local elementary school. Jim and I had the same type and color of car, so we mumbled about that as they spoke. Holly owned a double plot of land with two structures on it, one being her main house, and the other a log cabin that she uses as a storage shed. The cabin was dark stained wood, and she was locked out, so as we started to get to business, she disappeared for a while trying to find a key on a stick. Our mission that day was to find treasure, the first real warm day of the year, a lucky breeze tousled our hair as we got to work.

"Watch out, don't step on that or you will owe me a lot of money". Jim yelled as I put my foot too close to his Detector. With wide eyes I apologize only to be interrupted by a hardy laugh. Jim is crouched near a plug of dirt that he has dug, amused by my unease. He had strategically dug a c shape into Holly's lawn with a four foot skinny shovel, making sure to leave one side attached to the grass so it would continue living. We had heard a ringing from his top of the line metal detector. He explained that the higher it sounds the more rare the metal, and it can even tell you how deep the object is on a little screen near the top. It had a long dark and skinny body with a circle at the bottom. Jim hovered it above the ground until he heard the most promising shrek. Indecipherable to me and Cam, numbers and arrows told him many different things like the type of metal and how far we had to dig. We crouched over the hole, using our hands and a smaller yellow, cone shaped metal detector to locate our treasure. Our fingers were getting dirty, but then Jim's breath hitched, the detector touched something metallic. With his fingers Jim carefully pulled out a very dirty something and started to brush away the debris. With crazed eyes and a smile, he identified the object, a soup can! Winters excitedly theorized that the area we were standing in must have been where the previous family used to dump their trash. This was confirmed when we found more soup cans in the area.



Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

Upon finding the third can Winters said, “They must have liked soup”.

Over the whole endeavor we found three modern pennies, an ant hill, many soup cans, a shingle, and a part of a metal toy gun. Everything that we found, he was able to weave into tail. The nails and shingle were most likely from a long gone structure. From looking at the cans he was able to deduce how previous owners prefer in food but. What was most impressive however was his swift identification of the tiny fragment of a toy gun. When he had finally unearthed it along with a couple pesky nails, he thought it could be the bumper of a toy car. Lincking his finger and smearing some of the dirt off he revealed very small text. Squinting at the tiny, dirty letters he had an epiphany.

“It’s part of a toy gun!” Cam and I were both impressed when, after we left, he found the rest of it, sending me a photo in our extensive Facebook Messenger chat. He was able to discern what we were looking at from fragments of metal, a feat clearly whittled down by a well fed passion.

Jim Winters is also known as the Driftless Digger, a name he earned in Iowa’s driftless region while rekindling a metal detecting in 2019 passion from his youth. He got himself a nice metal detector, and started asking around to search people’s properties to find old objects. He follows the [official code of conduct that a virtuous metal detector must follow](#),

which includes offering the homeowner first pick of what he finds. Jim also chooses to charge no money for his services, as they are simply a passion. After Jim majored in creative writing and minored in journalism at Beloit College, graduating in 1997 he has been a journalist for the DeForest Times and the Monroe Times, and now is working from home as a digital content director for WATT Global since 2019 which gives him ample time to delve into his hobby of, in his own words “Collecting history”. Winter’s has a brochure that advertises his other services such as Bottle digging, Creek Walking, Magnet Fishing, Lost item retrieval, locating property stakes, mentoring new detectorists, and group presentations. All of this information can be found on his facebook, [Facebook.com/driftlessdigger](https://www.facebook.com/driftlessdigger), where we met after I saw him posting an ad for his services after his move back

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jim Winter
THE DRIFTLLESS DIGGER

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SERVICES

- Metal detecting
- Bottle digging
- Creek walking
- Magnet fishing
- Lost item retrieval
- Locate property stakes
- Mentor new detectorists
- Group presentations

SAMPLE FINDS

to Beloit. When I asked him what the most expensive thing he ever found was, he seemed to have a hard time answering. “Well the coolest thing I found were trade coins“. I asked again what they retailed for and he explained that they could sell for a couple hundred dollars, but they are an extremely lucky find.

“Sloppy Sophia” He mocked when I struggled to place back a plug properly. He pointed at Cam and encouraged her to remember the nickname. We had moved to another corner of the property and kept stumbling across nails. Our digging had been slowing down the more we spoke and every time we crouched down to detect, it was nail after nail. He would make a bubbling sound with his mouth every time he unearthed something “lame”, which made Cam and I have a hard time stifling our laughs.

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

While hunched over another hole, he took the dirt and sifted it through his fingers. “The dirt here in Wisconsin is so sandy, you could just eat it”. Jim loves sandy soil, and likes the way that you can dig so easily around these parts, making his recent move in March of 2024 easier. I had stumbled across a post of his in a Beloit Facebook group advertising his services, and introducing himself to the community. He had his arm wrapped around a metal detector like it was his son and without hesitation I sent him a text on Messenger, asking if he would not mind if me and my friend could watch him do his digging thing and if I may write about it. I got an immediate response, and was assured that he would be glad to show us the ropes. We started discussing his recent move and he mentioned that he had attended Beloit college. We talked about boring professors who still linger on campus after all these years for a while. He played baseball throughout college, always having a sport or hobby to do. He told Cam and I that when he went to college he reinvented himself, becoming an outgoing version of highschool Jim Winters. While digging, Cam asked him if he had ever done the bell run and in response to that question, he made a farting sound with his mouth and said yes, implying he was a repeat offender.

“When you asked to interview me I had no clue how you would write about the environment.” Jim said. I then asked him if he felt connected with nature, and if he felt as if his hobbies were not a form of appreciation for his surroundings. Jim’s affection towards metal detecting is a once in a lifetime passion. He craves nothing but finding bits and pieces from times long ago. He has extensive collections of old bottles, keeping what he deems valuable. Profit is not a part of this story whatsoever only coins, bottlecaps, anthills and history are important. He can weave stories with accuracy from the objects he finds, big or small, his immediate environment being extremely important. It is a social task, as he is bonding with landowners such as Holly. Unearthing dirt, patching it back up, looking at grubs and ants, you see how earth has wrapped itself around human history. One day our items will be under the sandy soil and a Jim Winters type will come around with a shovel, and be able to tell your story. Metal detecting is another method of archeology, the only difference is Jim is looking where no one will yet. A beloit Wisconsin indiana Jones, displaying his collections in a nine foot long cabinet that he had custom built for his antique collection.

While getting ready to leave, Cam and I went inside Holly’s house and got a tour, it was tiny but expertly curated. She had all sorts of trinkets nailed to the walls. When we had been on our nail streak, Jim asked me and Cam if we happened to have “a nail fetish” which, if we did, our situation would have been way more exciting.

Standing in Holly’s kitchen after washing dirt off my hands, I can see the slight outline of a particularly large hole from the window. One that I had dug so deep that when it got placed back it looked mangled. There was a piece of metal that we could not find, and never did, but for a while I was frantically digging hoping this was going to be our big break. I was being sloppy Sophia at that moment, as he made sure to remind me I think Cam will remember that.

Holly followed us out so we could all say a proper goodbye. “This must be the best way to live”. Cam said to Holly. Alone and peaceful with a big plot of land that just so happened to have soup cans, nails, toys, and an ant hill buried underneath it.