

Getting Straight On Where It Was

Sac Prairie, Wisconsin
Home of the Mill Creek Irregulars

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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".