

# No Bean Counter

For one former customer, a trip to Robert Borsodi's place was about much more than coffee.

By Robert Kehew



**For Robert Borsodi, reflection and relationships and fun all require adequate investments of time.**

**Editor's note:** *On Oct 25, Robert Borsodi ended his fight with cancer by jumping off the Hale Boggs Bridge into the Mississippi River. Over the years, countless people passed through the doors of Borsodi's coffeehouses. The following appreciation comes from one of his patrons.*

The lingering image is of a man behind a counter, his head wreathed in steam, slowly turning. He would smile with recognition. You would converse -- about art, the neighborhood, an upcoming poetry reading -- with the flow of conversation punctuated by

gnomic aphorisms and Zen-like utterances. Then at some point you would be handed a coffee.

Robert Borsodi was a purveyor of coffee. He owned a succession of coffeehouses, first along Route 1 of Big Sur country in California, and then, for the past quarter century, around Uptown New Orleans. Borsodi's coffeehouse moved from Danneel Street to

Freret Street to, most recently, Soniat Street. Yet to limit our understanding of what he did to a bare transaction of java-for-dollars would be to severely truncate our appreciation of what Bob Borsodi was all about.

Bob's coffeehouses were special places. At the Freret Street establishment where I was once an habitue, everything bore the unmistakable stamp of his personality. Dog-eared chapbooks by obscure poets drooped from the shelves. Whimsical cut-outs from magazines had been laminated to the table-tops (the clown table was much in demand for Sunday brunch). In an amusing touch, someone had painted on the hand-made ladder that led from the public space to Borsodi's private quarters the label "stairway to heaven." Yet in reality there was little distinction between public and private space here, for the coffeehouse was Borsodi's living room -- or more precisely his salon, a welcoming place where you were his guest and friend.

It is also important to note that, at Borsodi's Coffeehouse, no one ever rushed you. My God, no. At Borsodi's, if there was any rushing being done, it was the customer prodding the owner. Bob was not one to be overly concerned with giving you food before change, or to devise ways to speed up the turnover rate of his tables. For one whose name is so inextricably linked in memory with a caffeine-delivery device, Borsodi was surprisingly slow-moving. Yet as one got to know him, one realized that his magisterial pace was not due to a slow body rhythm, but rather to a philosophy of life. He thought people should take time -- in life in general, and over coffee at coffeehouses in particular.

In such an atmosphere, good conversation and even creativity could luxuriate. Borsodi's Coffeehouse was a haven for napkin-scribbling artists. Bob held monthly poetry readings and mounted the occasional theatrical production. On one occasion I played a bit role in a scene from something from Moliere. Borsodi directed this production and played a role himself: that of a none-too-polished fencing instructor. I remember there was a certain dramatic effect that he wanted to bring off when he made his first rapier-swinging entrance. This effect was constantly eluding him throughout rehearsal. But I can recall his smile of satisfaction at the premiere, when he made his

dramatic entrance, and managed to achieve the elusive effect, a very audible burp, at just the right time.

In addition to cultural refreshment, there was also useful advice to be had at Borsodi's. I am thankful to Bob Borsodi for the knowledge that, when hoboing across the country and needing to jump onto a moving train, you must always make sure to run and grab and get a secure grip on the ladder with both hands *before* trying to swing your legs up. Also, a length of two-by-four is good for propping the door open, which prevents the door from slamming shut and condemning the occupant to slow dehydration and death. But in addition to such practical bits of information, there was also wisdom to be had at Borsodi's. By gentle example rather than insistent precept, Borsodi revealed that living a life is more important than making money; that the expression of individuality counts; that reflection and relationships and fun all require adequate investments of time.

Holder of a degree in drama from Yale, Borsodi found his niche in the arts, not in front of the footlights, but rather behind the scenes. His role lay in providing the space within which the strutters and fretters upon the stage could be conceived. Borsodi's Coffeehouse joins the honor roll of the great coffeehouses of the world -- Trieste in San Francisco, Tryst in Washington, D.C., La Luna in San Salvador -- where great, unexpected things can happen. In today's world of mass-produced coffeehouses, this role has become increasingly important and endangered. Robert Borsodi provided the environment within which life and art could flourish. With his loss, the world is left a bit more impoverished.

*Now living in Arlington, Va., Robert Kehew took his coffee at Borsodi's Coffeehouse on Freret Street from 1982 to 1986. He is currently editing an anthology of poems by the medieval troubadours in verse translation, which the University of Chicago Press plans to publish next fall.*