

Monday, July 27, 1981

2400 Attend Saroyan Tribute

By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER
Bee staff writer

FRESNO — He said we should live in the time of our life. He said we should laugh; that nobody knows how to laugh. He said we should know love and greatness and have somebody that's right for us.

William Saroyan, a Fresnoan and a writer, said those things to his readers he died May 18 at the age of 72.

Sunday night (July 26), his hometown said back to him, "Thank you."

"In the time of your life, live — so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches."

It was apparent at "A Celebration of the Life & Works of William Saroyan" Sunday night at the Fresno Convention Center Theatre that Saroyan's memory is one of love, laughter and greatness.

Master of ceremonies Leon S. Peters said it is fitting to celebrate, honor and pay tribute to Saroyan. "He brought joy to all walks of life from one end of the world to another," Peters told the audience of 2,400, a mixed, standing-room-only crowd of all ages. Saroyan, he said, provided a diagram for a better understanding of life.

Part of that diagram, perhaps, was the black Jet-Wind bicycle sitting in the theatre lobby. Many in the crowd examining the Saroyan memorabilia — his gray Royal manual typewriter, a worn teapot and ceramic mug, his straw hat, autographed books and scrawling, handwritten letters — before the program remembered the burly man riding his bicycle through the streets of Fresno.

Others like the several Fresno County Free Library employees, remembered his frequent visits to the institution he loved. Still others recalled growing up in "Armenian town" with Bill, going to Sunday school with him.

David Kherdian, a writer and poet who studied at Saroyan's feet, calls Saroyan "a tornado who has been retired; a volcano gone permanently extinct."

"Somehow, being here in this hot Fresno climate brought back fond memories," said the writer, now living in Oregon, as he wandered through the memorabilia. "I can't help but remember sitting in the back yard eating cheese, watermelon and Armenian bread." The two sometimes shared thoughts on being Armenian.

"You're a foreigner and don't ever forget it. A smart foreigner keeps his feelings to himself and his mouth shut . . . You can't change people. You can laugh at them, that's all. Americans make me laugh. I wouldn't fool with them if I were you. I just laugh at them."

Being Armenian was an important part of Saroyan's life, even though he was born in Fresno, said longtime friend Albert Nalbandian of San Francisco. "When you're attracted to your country as I had been and Bill had been all his life, it's another home away from home. We are concerned about the trials and tribulations of our people."

But Fresno was also home, a home Saroyan never forgot. "He told the story of life in Fresno in a way that had universal impact," said Mayor Daniel K. Whitehurst. "He was a citizen of the world and we share his greatness. His place in our living mosaic will never fade."

Vardges Petrosyan, president of the Soviet Armenian Writer's Union, agreed about the universality of Saroyan's writing. "His crazy and vulnerable heroes have brought to the world its most needed quality: kindness." Petrosyan, part of a Soviet Armenian delegation to the tribute, said Saroyan's link to his parents' homeland was strong. "Armenia was the capital on the map of his soul."

Saroyan left Fresno as a young man to find his greatness, but he always came back. His heart was "in the highlands" of perhaps both Fresno and Armenia, as his story and play about a Scotsman hint:

Johnny: Is his heart really in the highlands like he said, Pa?"

Johnny's father: Not exactly.

Do you think he'll ever get home again some day?

He's an old man, Johnny. He will.

You mean he'll take a train and a boat and get back where the highlands are?

Not that, Johnny, it's a little different from that. He'll die.

Is that the only way a man gets home?

That's the only way.

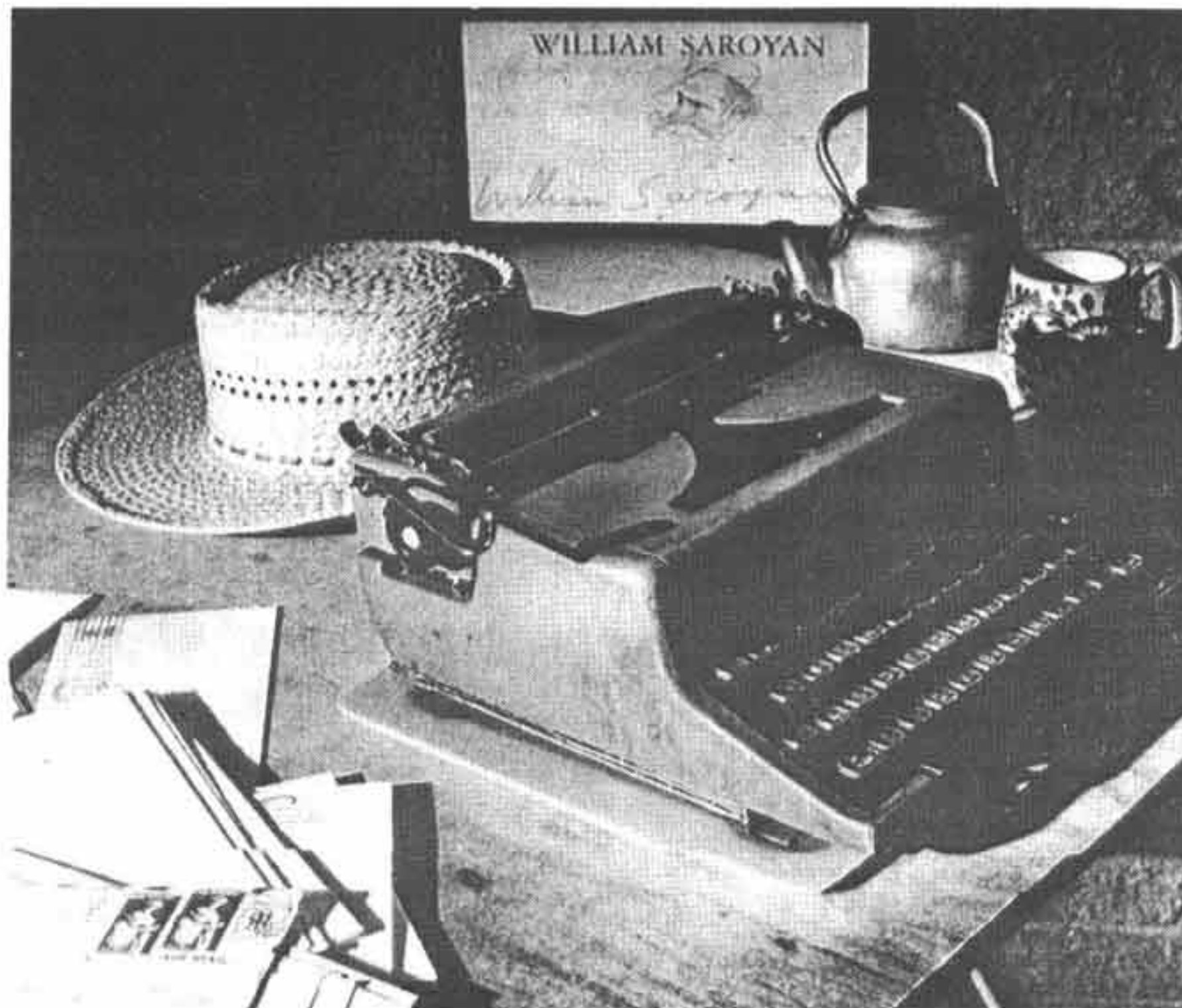
Saroyan did for the Armenians what Shakespeare, Cervantes and Hugo did for their countrymen: he put them into popular literature, said Charles "Gus" Garrigus, California's poet laureate.

His characters all had one message, Garrigus said, "people need people."

Napa Valley author Anita Kornfeld, a recent friend of Saroyan's, said he talked of life and friendships moving in cycles. He was, she had observed, a man who enjoyed life and his friendships.

"Mostly, Bill did the talking. But even if one didn't agree with Bill, it was a learning experience."

Although he shunned honors — most notably the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for his six-



SAROYAN'S TOOLS — The typewriter, desk, hat, tea cup and kettle of author William Saroyan were among the displays at a July 26 celebration of the life and works of the author who died in Fresno May 18. More than 2,400 persons attended the tribute at the Convention Center Theatre. Paul Kalinian's photographs of the author were displayed in the lobby.

-Fresno Bee Photo

day wonder, "The Time of Your Life," — Saroyan was an old-fashioned, sentimental man, according to those who knew him.

I did my best, and let me urge you to do your best, too. Isn't it the least we can do for one another?

He didn't want a funeral or memorial service, but a William Saroyan Tribute Committee sprang up after his death. Manuel Tolegian, a painter, Fresno native and contemporary of Saroyan's who played the harmonica in the original production of "The Time of Your Life," wonders if his friend would approve of the celebration. "He would think it ostentatious," Tolegian decided.

Committee member Gilbert Khachadourian disagreed. "I think Bill would approve," he said. "I think it's being done properly. These are his close friends. If he were here he wouldn't want it, but I would argue with him for it."

"Would you win?" Khachadourian was asked.

"Probably not," he answered.

Saroyan himself spoke to the crowd via tape recording. He said he considered all his works successful, simply because a writer must write and be published, no matter what the result.

What the world does to people is another matter, he wrote in "Highlands."

Ah, you crazy, miserable fools. Go ahead, kill everybody. Declare war on

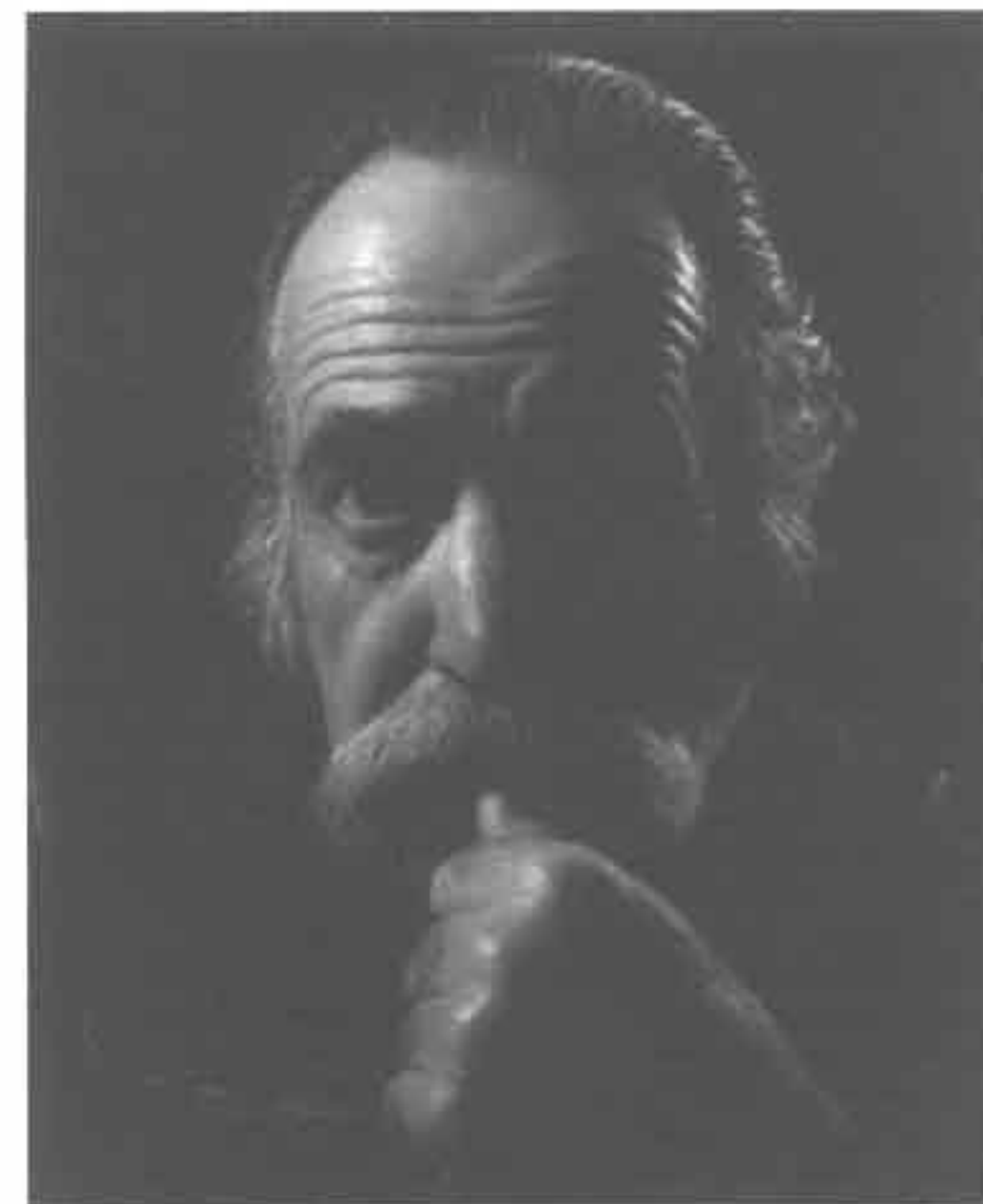
one another. Take the people by the thousands and mangle them. Their poor hearts and their poor spirits and their poor bodies . . . You frauds of the world. You wretched and ungodly. Go ahead. Fire your feeble guns. You won't kill anything. There will always be poets in the world.

Two men who are among Fresno's most successful writers, poet Philip Levine and journalist H. Roger Tatarian, recalled to the audience's

delight, their Saroyan memories. Levine said no one should be asked to evaluate Saroyan's writing.

"If you want to evaluate William Saroyan, read him and your life will be enriched . . ."

Goodbye, my beloved friends. In all the hours of my life, in all the places I have visited, never and nowhere have I had the honor and pleasure to commune with souls loftier, purer, or more delightful than yours. Goodbye.



William Saroyan
Photographed by Paul Kalinian March 26, 1976 c