

# The Journal

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## Exploring 'emotional truth'

New Ulm author Nancy Noyes Silcox brings frontier history to life



Nancy Noyes Silcox signs copies of her second book, "A Place Called Home" for attendees at Turner Hall.

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NEW ULM — Minnesota author, educator and New Ulm native Nancy Noyes Silcox returned to her hometown Wednesday to share the story behind her historical fiction novel "A Place Called Home."

The event at Turner Hall brought a warm group of readers, former classmates and community members eager to hear Silcox discuss the research, family history and personal motivations that shaped her book.

Silcox, who grew up in New Ulm and met her husband, Steve Silcox, in seventh grade, said the project began as a personal quest to understand the German immigrants who left Cincinnati and Chicago to settle on the Minnesota frontier.

“I wanted to know what motivated these people to come to a place that was the farthest west on the frontier,” she said. “I wanted to understand their hopes, fears, and what they believed they might find here.”

Her four-year research journey took her through archives at the Brown County Historical Society, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Cincinnati Public Library and the Cincinnati Historical Society.



Author Nancy Noyes Silcox signs copies of "A Place Called Home" for attendees at Turner Hall.

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She relied heavily on primary sources: memoirs, letters and accounts from descendants of early settlers such as the Pfaenders and Alwins.

“I didn’t want to repeat the graphic stories of the Dakota War,” she said. “I wanted to get into the feelings people had, what it was like to arrive here and see only a few shanties along the river and learn to survive as pioneers.”

Silcox originally planned to write the book as nonfiction, but her husband, whose father, Charlie Silcox, played “big band” music with several regional orchestras before coming to New Ulm to join the Six Fat Dutchmen, encouraged her to approach the story as historical fiction.

“He was very convincing,” she said with a smile. “And he was right. Fiction allowed me to explore the emotional truth of the time.”

The novel follows a fictional German family who leaves Cincinnati in 1856, traveling aboard the Franklin Steele, a shallow-draft ship specially built for the Minnesota River. The Turner group started their month-long journey in the spring of 1857 and arrived in New Ulm on May 7, 1857.



Nancy Noyes Silcox reads from "A Place Called Home."

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The story culminates during the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, including the siege of New Ulm, when 1,500 settlers barricaded themselves into a three-block area.

Silcox said she wrote the book with sixth-grade Minnesota history students in mind but has been surprised by its broader appeal.

“People who are not in sixth grade are finding it very engaging,” she said.

Silcox and her husband were among the first New Ulm couples to join the Peace Corps.

They volunteered in 1968 and served as teachers in Guyana, South America. During their years overseas, Steve did economic development with USAID, and Nancy was a librarian in an international school.



Nancy Noyes Silcox reads and explains a passage from her novel during Wednesday's event at Turner Hall.

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They specifically asked to be placed in South America so they could learn Spanish but instead were assigned to Guyana, “the only English-speaking country in South America,” she said.

Silcox’s lifelong dedication to literacy and education earned her a place in the ISD 88 Hall of Fame in 2014. She was inducted alongside Wanda Gág, and they were the only two women honored that year.

Her longtime friend Joan Berdan nominated her for the recognition.

“It’s such an accomplishment,” Berdan said. “I was fascinated watching the book come together.”

Silcox’s path to authorship began unexpectedly with her first book, a nonfiction biography of Samuel Tucker, who organized the first civil rights sit-in in America in 1939.



From left: Joan Berdan, author Nancy Noyes Silcox and Steve Silcox stand together at Turner Hall, where Silcox discussed her novel, "A Place Called Home."

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As a school librarian in Alexandria, Virginia, she felt his story needed to be told and took on the project herself.

Earlier in the day, Silcox visited Oak Hills, where Sharon Illikman, who works in the activities department, read portions of the book aloud to two groups of residents, approximately 24 during a 2 p.m. session. Silcox spoke with the group afterward, answering questions and hearing residents' memories of New Ulm's early families.

Several former classmates also stopped by Turner Hall to greet the Silcoxes. Steve, who had just turned 81, and Nancy, 80, spent decades teaching abroad in Egypt, Jordan, Belgium and Ukraine before returning to Minnesota in 2021.

They now live in Northfield, where they enjoy the arts communities at St. Olaf and Carleton colleges and appreciate being close to the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport.

Turner Hall's executive director, Andrea Boettger, said the book has been a hit with visitors.

"We've been selling the books so much that we're on our third box already," she said. Boettger described the collaboration with Silcox as a "win-win-win all around" for the author, Turner Hall and the community.

"It's been wonderful for me too," she said. She also emphasized the value of reading for mental well-being:

"Having a book and something that you can immerse yourself into is just something that I think more people need to take advantage of these days... if people would just stop for a minute and immerse themselves in a good book, I think that it would be a great way to give yourself a mental reset."

Silcox spoke about her next book, "More Than a Servant: Sigrid's Story," a nonfiction biography of her Swedish grandmother, who immigrated in 1898 and worked as a domestic in the mansion now known as Fairlawn in Superior, Wisconsin, then the home of lumber baron and three-time Superior mayor Martin Pattison. Fairlawn had that name when it was built in 1891 and when Sigrid worked there.

"Her story is almost finished," Silcox said. "It's a window into the lives of working-class women whose stories are rarely told."

As the event wrapped up, Silcox met with attendees, answered questions, signed books and sold copies to readers eager to continue exploring the history she brings to life.

"History is complicated," she told the audience. "But complexity shouldn't scare us. It should invite us to look closer."

Copies of "A Place Called Home" are sold at the Wanda Gág House, the Brown County Historical Society and through the author. Turner Hall staff described the sales as "a land-office business." The novel is also available on Amazon.

Readers can learn more about Silcox's work, including her books, upcoming events and background, at [www.nancynoyessilcox.com](http://www.nancynoyessilcox.com).

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