

## WOOLSEY WILDFIRE TOWN HALL

Saturday, May 4th @ Four Seasons Westlake Village

Meetings times: **9:00a-11:00a** & **12:00p-3:00p**

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# 97-Year-Old Adventurer and Retired Fire Captain Tells Tales Through Poetry

Last week’s Malibu Rotary Club meeting featured poetry readings and a talk by longtime resident, “The Malibu Poet” Emmett Finch.

By Jimmy Tallal / Special to The Malibu Times Apr 24, 2019 0



Who knew Malibu has its own “Little Big Man”—the movie classic where Dustin Hoffman plays a 121-year-old man telling his unbelievable life story to a historian? Emmett Finch, who turns 98 on May 6, describes himself as “The Malibu Poet”—as well as a World War II veteran, sailor, seafarer, private pilot, adventurer, retired firefighter, yachtsman, traveler and naturalist.

In a 30-minute appearance at the Malibu Rotary Club last week, Finch described an early visit to Malibu that’s one for the history books.

“I first saw Malibu in 1927, when my father drove us there in a new Ford Model T,” he told the group. “We went to Zuma Beach and there were a lot of wooden shacks built along Broad Beach Road.” He next saw the town in 1941, and described Westward Beach Road as “all gravel.”

During World War II, Finch wanted to join the Air Force but, even though he was 6’4”, he was told he was “too skinny” to be a pilot. So, he joined the Coast Guard, which was part of the U.S. Navy. His ham radio skills were useful in long-range navigation, and he served at a “large land station” in the Pacific.

After the war, Finch became somewhat of an adventurer—participating in what today we would call extreme sports.

“I used to have a boat mooring in Avalon (on Catalina Island) and would water ski from Avalon to the mainland,” he said—a distance of about 32 miles. “My friend had a ‘45 Chris-Craft boat and I always used a single ski. Once, a school of porpoises came alongside me for a while and then peeled off.”

“I also took up flying and had two plane crashes and survived; then I quit,” Finch added. “In 1950, I flew over Malibu and could see the few homes that were here, and always respected the people who lived here [because it looked so rustic].”

He joined the City of LA Fire Department (LAFD) in 1951 and worked there until he retired as a captain in 1978.

Finch took up poetry writing relatively late in life, in his mid-40s.

As a member of the LAFD, he was at a big warehouse fire in LA with his crew in 1965, and the fire was so hot the water from the fire hoses just evaporated, he said. A tall burning wall started to topple over onto them, but at the last second, the wall reversed and fell in the other direction.

“The next day, I changed my life and told God I’d work for the Lord, and I asked him to become a poet,” Finch said. “It was August 1 at 8 p.m. in Redondo Beach and I prayed for 10 minutes. The spirit help came to me and I was very grateful. Since then, the poems just come to me and I can write one down in six or seven minutes... It isn’t something I have to ponder over.”

Finch’s only other writing experience was writing a maintenance manual for an LAFD fire boat.

Shortly after he wrote that very first poem, he moved from Redondo Beach to Malibu in 1965. A couple of years later, he bought two acres off PCH about two miles north of Trancas, near El Matador State Beach; he still lives there in a modest house. In fact, Finch’s house survived the Woolsey Fire—the fourth wildfire that just missed his house in his 54 years there.

“When I moved to Malibu, my poetry changed wonderfully and came so easily. It was a blessing to move here and to be here,” Finch said. “I like working with words. It’s beautiful how some words match and fit together, and I liked the way poems can tell a story.”

Finch continued his off-duty adventures by traveling to the French Frigate Shoals—an atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, to assist his friend George Balazs, a sea turtle researcher who initiated the tagging program there in 1973.

Although some of Finch’s poems and writings have a spiritual bent, many tell stories that reflect a world of masculine adventure. “I have a World War II poem about a B-17’s last trip over Germany. I’ve also written poems about cowboys, gunfighters, shady ladies and Roman gladiators,” he said.

According to Finch, *The Malibu Times* used to publish one of his poems every week—back before Malibu became a city.

He is a prolific writer with 6,100 poems to his credit, many not even in print yet. His seven books are

available on Amazon: "Poems of Adventure," "Poems for a Changing World," "The Prophet of Gold," "Poems of the Old West," "Poems from the Unseen," "Poems to Touch the Heart" and "Poems to Remember."

## Tags

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