

# Across the Net from Ted Roethke

## *An Interview with Junius Rochester*



*If you want to know the history of Seattle and its people, Junius Rochester is your man.*

*His grandparents were Pacific Northwest pioneers and his family has been central to Seattle politics and culture for more than a century. He has spent his adult life as both a successful international businessman and local historian. In 2006 he received the prestigious award of merit from the American Association for State and Local History for his work as champion of local history in the Northwest and Seattle area. Earlier this year The Historians Guild gave Junius its lifetime achievement award for work in the field of history.*

*He is the rare species of historian who has in many cases lived the history he writes about. As a young man, Rochester had the chance to encounter the great poet Ted Roethke in a way few have: on the field of athletic competition. In this edition of *Roethke Recollections*, he shares his memories and perspectives on that series of encounters during the summer of 1960.*

**Friends of Theodore Roethke (FOTR):** How did you first meet Ted Roethke?

**Junius Rochester (JR)** – I had just returned to Seattle from teaching school in the Dominican Republic, 1959-1960. I was about 26 years old. It was during that time I met Ted. We met at my parent’s house. The Roethkes also lived in the Denny-Blaine neighborhood. Ted and Beatrice were frequently invited to events and social gatherings in that area, which was near the University of Washington. I remember my father – who was a city councilman at the time and a founder of the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair – telling me that the famous poet Ted Roethke would be visiting. He was a very popular figure in the neighborhood and among University of Washington people.

**FOTR:** Did you know his work at the time?

**JR:** Yes, I was familiar with his work. He was the talk of the English Department of the University of Washington. I took a few graduate courses there, although I had a degree from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. I did not audit any of Roethke’s classes but I did take a course from one of his disciples, Nelson Bentley, who was very much affected by Roethke. Roethke had a great impact on other poets in the region like David Wagoner, Carolyn Kizer, Richard Hugo and others. Roethke was extremely popular with his students. So I knew about him from my course with Bentley, reading poetry, and mixing with University of Washington students and faculty.

**FOTR:** You really got to know Ted on the Badminton court. How did that come about?

**JR:** During the course of a conversation I mentioned that I was an avid tennis player and at one time had played a lot of badminton. He described a kind of gerrymandered badminton net and court that he had in his yard. I knew the house he was living in and its yard very well from when I was a kid. He asked me to come down and play a game. So I called him and it led to I’d guess 10 to 15 informal matches that summer. And of course we had a lot of discussions along the way. I was surprised and intrigued when he first asked if I wanted a “wee-tiddly” to cool off after a game. He came out with a full – and I mean full –

glass of whiskey. Here I was thinking we were going to cool off with a nice glass of beer. But being a guest of the house I did what I was told and drank the whiskey down. He did as well, of course.

**FOTR:** By all accounts that would not have been uncharacteristic post-game refreshment for Ted! He was known for being a very competitive tennis player. In fact he coached the Penn State tennis team. He is also known for writing poetry like he played tennis – with a fierce competitive streak. What was he like as a foe on the court?

**JR:** I was an athletic person – a good tennis player and runner in college -- and you could tell he was an athlete as well. He worked very hard. He was a little overweight at that time so there was a lot of huffing and puffing going on but he wouldn't give me anything. He was a good competitor. I think I won most of the games because I was quite a bit younger. Still, they were all good matches. He was ready to go.

**FOTR:** Why did your matches come to end?

**JR:** They ended about the time I took an overseas job, then taught school, and at the urging of my father, later managed an exhibit at the Seattle World's Fair. Our lives diverged. Ted died in 1963.

**FOTR:** It's important for readers to understand that your interaction with Roethke on the badminton court is especially resonant because you are also one of the leading historians of the Northwest region. As such you are uniquely qualified to put his regional legacy into perspective. What are your thoughts on that?

**JR:** There is a tavern about four blocks from the University of Washington campus called the Blue Moon. It's very famous. A lot great writers – Dylan Thomas when he was in town, Roethke and others -- frequented the place. Right behind that tavern is an alley leading to buildings that have been renamed Roethke Mews. So he is a physical presence in that sense.

His name is known and respected, but not everyone knows who he is unless they are taking poetry and literature classes. Historically, he is very important as part of the culture of the area. But his name is probably not as widely known as it should be, in my opinion.

**FOTR:** Not to the extent of say, Kurt Cobain (*jokingly*)?

**JR:** Well it's interesting you should say that. Kurt Cobain took his life about six blocks from where I am sitting today in a garage literally across the street from where Ted and Beatrice lived in the Denny-Blaine neighborhood.

**FOTR:** Interesting. And there is another Roethke Nirvana connection. Nirvana bassist and Seattle native, Krist Novoselic, named one of his later bands, *Sweet 75*, which was inspired by a line from a Roethke poem called, *Reply to a Lady Editor*. So we suspect he may be a Roethke fan. We've tried but haven't been able to get him on the phone for an interview yet.

**FOTR:** Junius, thank you for your time.

**JR:** Happy to talk about Ted. He was a great poet and an important figure in Seattle. We need to record this type of information for posterity before it fades away. History lives!

*Rochester is the author of nine books and was a columnist for Seattle Weekly ("Eminent Seattleites"). He has written numerous articles and over 100 historical vignettes which for seven years he read weekly on KUOW-FM, a National Public Radio (NPR) outlet. Junius gives presentations to civic, educational and historical organizations and aboard cruise ships.*