

EXPRESSING HIS IMAGINATION

What cometh in the sky?
but a comet bright and far
huddled between the Big Dipper
and Small Dipper. Visions kept
dancing like a laser beam
touching the recesses of human minds
The small kid with closed eyelids said,
"You know, One-eyed man is King at my house
and I follow the sounds of his footsteps
and listen with bent ear to his luminescent tale.
If celestial beauty is the spoken truth,
then I am his earthling son hoping
to retell the ecstatic event when God
says, 'Open your eyes and wish upon a star.'"

Don Eischen, "Sight Unseen"

Farmer's son proves that poetry is not a lost art

By PEGGY R. TOWNSEND
Sentinel staff writer

DON EISCHEN GREW UP among the grape and cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley.

It was a flat, hard land. Hot in the summer. Thick fog in the winter. A place where men were expected to be men.

So when his farmer father found out one of his six sons wanted to read a poem he had written at his eighth-grade graduation, he was expectedly upset.

His dad called him in after dinner and sat him down.

"Poetry is for sissies," Eischen's father told him.

"I don't want any of my boys writing poetry."

Eischen knew he could read the poem and was even encouraged to do so by the school principal. But he was certain that if he did, his father would never come to his graduation.

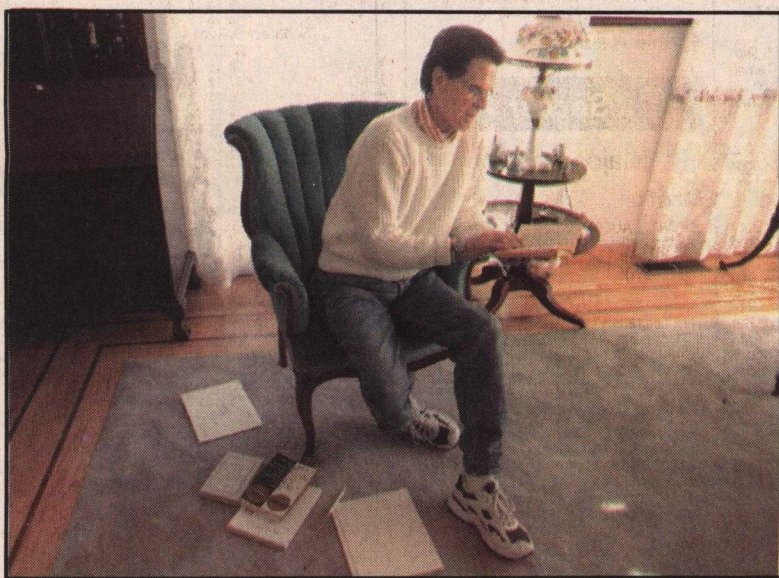
So, Eischen read an essay he had written instead.

One that his father would approve of.

More than four decades later, Eischen found a stage for his poetry.

He was asked to read one of his works during one of the inauguration ceremonies for President Clinton. It was an honor afforded to only four poets in the United States.

What would his dad have



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Don Eischen no longer hides when reading poetry at home.

thought of his son now?

Eischen pondered the question and looked out the lace-curtained windows of his home to the Pacific Ocean beyond.

"He might have been proud," he said finally.

"He might have."

IT'S NOT EASY being poetic, especially when you're a tall, thin boy growing up on a vineyard outside of Fresno.

The middle child of six boys in a strict Catholic family, Eischen

grew up in a rambunctious household where academics came first and sports came second.

They lived in a shack with an outhouse in back and the boys had to walk three miles each way to grammar school.

"But it was fun walking home," said Eischen, a still willow-thin man who wears blue jeans and running shoes and doesn't want to divulge his age.

"It was fun because I used to dream."

And as he walked, the poems

would get inside him; like a song, he said and they would stay there until he could write them down.

He was a loner, a bookish boy taken under the wing of an older brother named Joe, who served as protector against school bullies. And their father.

"Sometimes I would read my poems to Joe, and if he liked it, ohhhhh," said Eischen, leaning back in his chair and lifting his face skyward. "Then I would be proud."

But the rest of the time, he wrote his poems in secret.

"It was very difficult to be a poet," said Eischen. "I was ashamed I was a poet."

"Like my dad said, only sissies wrote poetry."

But the words won out and after Eischen married his sweetheart Jennie Capriola, he got a job teaching English at Fresno City College and Fresno State, where he could talk about poetry and imagination — all the things his father forbade.

He won awards for his poetry and in 1992 met Bill Clinton as he campaigned for the presidency.

Later, he visited the White House as part of the Poetry for Peace program and hit the pavement campaigning for Clinton's re-election.

Still, he was surprised when the invitation to be part of the inaugural ceremonies arrived in the mail.

Surprised and delighted.

Unfortunately, his wife of 40 years was stricken ill, so severely that she was unable to travel to Washington D.C. and he didn't want to go without her.

So he missed his opportunity, but says the White House has asked him to send a taped reading of his poem and he may be called upon to read it at another White House ceremony.

EISCHEN BELIEVES there is a poet in each one of us; that poetry is something that should be allowed to come out.

Each day, he climbs a flight of stairs to his office with the window overlooking West Cliff Drive and sits down to write.

He writes on an old typewriter to get it right, then transcribes it into a computer where he stores all his work.

"The real art of poetry, in a general sense, is the expression of the imagination," said Eischen, sounding very much like the teacher he once was.

"If you have any leanings toward wild thoughts, you can get writing. You won't have any writer's block."

But some people will not let their imagination go, he said.

The secret is to think and to feel.

And then to write.

Those who know Eischen, call him a complex man, a kind man, a "very elegant," man.

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But not everyone is so kind. Some are critical of his poetry.

"I'm not big-headed about my poetry," Eischen said. "I'm very humble."

It bothers him more that few people write poetry.

Still, he is encouraged by the rebirth of poetry among young people: the poetry slams, Beat Week held here.

"We have to motivate the public," he said, in order for poetry to thrive.

"Poetry is not a lost art."

Eischen leafed through his poetry books, reading from Shelley, Dickinson.

His voice grew louder, his words slowed into a rhythm.

"You know," he said, "when I'm writing a poem or thinking a poem, I hum. And my dad used to do that too. 'He'd hum.'"

Eischen pauses. Smiles.

"And now I wonder, I just wonder, if he was thinking a poem and was just too ashamed to admit it."