

Novelist Herbert found his idea in the sands of Florence

Frank Herbert's most famous idea resulted in the novel "Dune," published in 1965.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN FIEDLER
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Penny Herbert Merritt, who spent most of her school-age years in Florence, says that her father, the famous science-fiction writer Frank Herbert, invariably told the same story to people curious about the origins of his ideas.

"He said he always got them from a brown paper bag that was left on the porch every morning," Merritt says with a twinkle in her eye. "Oh, he was a character."

Herbert's most famous idea resulted in the novel "Dune," published in 1965, about a waterless planet where a war is fought over the mining of a drug-like spice. "Dune," which weaves together

religion and scientific themes, became one of the most popular and well-regarded science fiction novels in history—and launched the series of books that became Herbert's life work.

The subject of a 1980s movie and a television mini-series last month, "Dune" may have come from that paper sack. The other possibility, corroborated by Merritt's memories of her father and by the testimony of long-time Florence citizen Wilbur Ternyik, is that Herbert's idea was born in the shifting sand hills of the Oregon dunes.

Ternyik came to Florence in 1947, about a year before Penny Herbert and her mother, Flora, first

arrived. They lived in the neighborhood of Heceta Beach.

"There was very little grass then," Merritt says. "Lots of sand."

Frank Herbert never lived here on a regular basis. He and his first wife, Penny's mother, were divorced when Penny was a year old. Flora Herbert married Lloyd Petersen of Florence, and Penny went to Siuslaw schools from the second grade through her sophomore year in high school, when she moved to Portland.

Frank Herbert, who had been a Navy correspondent and later worked for newspapers in Seattle and San Francisco, was unemployed, his daughter thinks, when he visited

Florence in 1958 as a freelance writer for a story on dune stabilization efforts. He hoped to sell it to a magazine.

It was then that Herbert and Ternyik crossed paths. Ternyik worked for the nursery division of the Soil Conservation Service in the early 1950s and later went into business for himself, contracting with the Forest Service to find ways of controlling wind-blown sand. The experiments of Ternyik and others—especially in planting European beach grass to arrest dune movement—had caught the attention of experts from around the world.

Ternyik, who later became mayor of Florence, says that he doesn't remember much about Herbert personally.

"He was one of absolutely dozens of people from all over the world," Ternyik says of Herbert's arrival amid a wave of interest in the work. Most of the visitors were scientific and government people involved in dunes stabilization projects in their home countries, places like Israel and China.



Frank Herbert's writer's seal.

Herbert

from 1A

Ternyik does remember one of Herbert's requests.

"He wanted to see some deer in the dunes," he says. "Luckily I took him out to the Goosepasture and we saw a doe and a couple of fawns."

This was before the South Jetty Road was built.

"We spent the whole day," Ternyik remembers of his encounter with the future novelist.

"We didn't get into anything about all these fantastic books he was going to write."

According to his daughter, Merritt, Herbert also saw the dunes from the air during his stay in Florence. He rented a small airplane, engaged a pilot and flew over the undulating sand.

"He said he had a vision—he had lots of science-fiction visions—of messianic people, Dune people, fleeing across the desert," Merritt says.

Herbert then wrote the magazine article, titled "They Stopped the Moving Sands," but nobody wanted to buy it. In the meantime, he had become fascinated with desert environments and their history as the testing ground of religious figures. He began to read everything he could get his hands on and he began to write what would become "Dune."

"He wrote on it for five years," Merritt says.

As a teenager, she sometimes visited her father at Brown's Point, near Tacoma, Wash., during the summers. He was remarried, to Beverly

Herbert, who Merritt credits with keeping the household in the black so that the writer could do his work. Herbert often wrote at night, and Merritt remembers the sound of his typewriter.

"About two or three in the morning, he'd be up there pounding the keys," she says.

The novel was published serially in a science-fiction magazine. After



more than 20 rejections from publishers, the book appeared in hard-cover in 1965.

"He never gave up, thank God," Merritt says.

Herbert died in 1986 at the age of 66.

Merritt and her husband, Ron, retired to Florence in 1987.

"You get the sand between your toes," Merritt says, "and you can't get it out."

Florence resident Wilbur Ternyik helped Herbert during the 1950s, when Herbert was researching the dunes for his science fiction novel.

Author's personal library is part of the local collection

In a 1969 interview, Frank Herbert said that he had read more than 200 books as background for his novel, "Dune."

His daughter, Penny Herbert Merritt, believes it.

"He was a speed reader. He would read a book in a matter of hours and zero in on what he was searching for to go with what he was writing."

Many of those books have been part of the Frank Herbert Collection at the Siuslaw Public Library for the last 10 years. Merritt approached Michael Gaston, then library director, soon after the building opened in 1990.

"She came in . . . and said, 'I have his personal library. Would you like it?'" Gaston remembers. "My jaw

just dropped."

Bookcases were built, and the non-circulating collection has been housed in the conference room off the library's reference section ever since. Besides Herbert's reference books and copies of "Dune" in many languages, the collection includes photographs and Xeroxed materials relating to the writer's life and work. On the walls are original etchings inspired by the novel and framed posters from the 1984 movie by Dino DeLaurentis and David Lynch.

Two large art volumes, "The Vatican Frescoes of Michelangelo," were more recently donated by the Herbert family and are now on display. Herbert bought these somewhere in Europe, his daughter says, and sent them home in crates.

Both Merritt and Gaston, the former library director, say that the collection gives insight into Herbert's ideas and into his relationship with the coastal dune landscape.

"It reveals what his thinking was," Gaston says, "all this stuff about deserts, and religious figures coming out of the desert."

"I found a postcard of the dune at Honeyman that he used as a bookmark," he says.

Also in the conference room at the library is a plaque listing Siuslaw High School seniors who have won the \$1,000 Frank Herbert Literary Scholarship, given each year by the Herbert family, which includes Merritt's two brothers.



Penny Merritt and Library Director Steve Skidmore look at a book of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes, part of the Frank Herbert collection.