

# A Fording Place

By Jane Carroll McRae

A first grade boy in high top shoes made by the shoemaker and bib overalls made by his Aunt Tabitha clumped up on the platform among the graduates in their caps and gowns to receive his award.

It was a book of poetry which included a poem that he had written. He quoted his poem, made a bow and received the applause of the people of his Blue Ridge Mountain home who gathered in the schoolhouse for the occasion.

Eight other young poets were also honored, and took their places on the platform at the graduation exercises.

All over the four counties served by the Northwestern Regional Library System based in Elkin, North Carolina, this scene was repeated by two hundred and fifty children whose poems appeared in the library's annual book of children's poetry, written and illustrated by the children of the region.

Each year more than five thousand children in kindergarten through grade eight submit their poetry to a library committee for possible inclusion in the book. Many of those whose poems are not included in the book appear in the newspaper column, "The Poet's Corner", which is edited by a committee from the library. Others read their poetry on radio programs throughout the year. Always there are grandparents, doting aunts and nearby neighbors to give ear to the children in their lives.

It started as an adult project, with Sunday afternoon Read-Ins at the Elkin Public Library, which sits on pillars reaching out over a waterfall in a mountain creek where mallard ducks and groundhogs play in the old fording place.

Mountain talk is distinctive. Some have mocked it and caricatured it until children sometimes grow up with a speech problem. The librarians believe that it is a beautiful, authentic speech pattern of Scottish Highland origin, more pure in form than any other.

Of course, it does cause a problem if the secretary answers the library phone with, "I knowed who you wuz by the way ya talked."

Instead of calling for special speech correction classes for staff and the public in general, the poetry Read-Ins were begun to call attention to "words well said."

It helps.

As many as seventy-five people of all ages have left their tobacco farms and sheep pastures to bring poems to the library to read on a Sunday afternoon. Books of poetry have better circulation in this section of the mountains of North Carolina than almost anywhere else on earth.

The first book of poetry to be published by the library was a collection from the Sunday afternoon readers, entitled "Patchwork Poetry", complete with a quilt pattern cover.

Said Sam Ragan, noted North Carolina poet, upon reading the book, "Keep up the good work. This is something all libraries should try to do. The

work of your 'grassroots people' is as good as many of the university poetry journals."

Even the government has entered into the field of poetry. The library asked the County Commissioners of each county to select a County Poet Laureate to write about local life, to present poems for special occasions, to put into poetry some of the history of the area as a part of the Bicentennial Celebration.

Yadkin County was the first to respond, with the appointment of Grady Burgiss, who now has four volumes of verse published, all about life in Yadkin County. He has published in "The Progressive Farmer", in "Ideals", and by Broadman Press. One of his books was printed by the library. It is the history in poetry of an old law school in the county which graduated more than a thousand lawyers in its day, including six governors.

A group called "Patchwork Poets" has been formed by the library for presenting programs before other groups. One of the performances was at Reynolda House, Winston-Salem. A letter from the director of the house states, "Thank you indeed for a fine evening of Elkin poetry. I am not a poet, and therefore I don't always respond to poetry and usually expect very little enjoyment from such occasions. However, the beauty of the people who read for us as they shared their feelings was an emotional experience for me. I envy the community of poets that you obviously enjoy in Elkin. I hope our poets can achieve some of this warmth and feeling together which I believe they already have individually."

And what do mountain people write about? They write about how it would feel to be the grouse that is hunted instead of the hunter. They write about how a boy feels the first time he shoots a rabbit. They write about the Yadkin River and all the evidence of Indian living on its banks. They write about the silence of the hills, about loneliness that is gentle and painless, about the taste of mountain mist on the tongue when you go out to milk the cows. They write about clumsy newborn colts that chase butterflies and baby skunks that steal all the honey from the hives. They sometimes write about moonshine stills and freedom to live as you please.

And in the writing there is a growing sense of pride—pride in self, pride in the world and way of life, pride in neighbors. Then there is pride in language, the way of saying things.

The goals of the Project in Poetry have not been just to single out the exceptionally gifted, but to create a general interest in the art and to build out of it a fellowship in understanding that perhaps could not be gained any other way. More than one Blue Ridge teenager at outs with his parents has said, "Mama left a poem for me on the table, and you know, it says something. I see her point."

Out of the project has come the library's sense of its role in language appreciation. And who knows, the next great American poet may join Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg in coming out of the mountains of North Carolina, complete with homemade shoes and overalls.

Maybe poetry makes a good fording place.

*Jane Carroll McRae is at Northwestern Regional Library, Elkin.*