

Say It Pretty

by Jane Carroll McRae
Northwestern Regional Library

Everybody is writing poetry in the Northwestern Region. Kindergartners dictate their lines to teachers. Senior Citizens read their lines to each other. Busy men hunt and peck their lines out. Then the regional library system puts it all together in little books published on offset press.

It started with Sunday Afternoon Read Ins at the library with everybody invited to bring their original work and read it to each other. It proved to be a popular gathering, with all ages communicating their deepest thoughts across the gaps of the generations. As many as seventy-five and eighty aspiring poets began to attend.

Some of the work seemed worth sharing with a wider audience, so the library began a column in the newspaper, "The Poets' Corner," featuring the work of local people of all ages and interests.

Because some of the poetry is enjoyed more when it is read aloud, the weekly radio show on the various stations, "Voice of the Library," began to devote time to the reading of original poetry. A large bulletin board was placed in the lobby of the library for the more timid to pin their lines on to share with others. Workshops were held on the writing of poetry and North Carolina's leading poets. Men of the caliber of Guy Owen, Thad Stem, and Richard Walser were invited for banquets by Friends of the Library.

Out of this effort came the first book, *Patchwork*, containing the work of sixty local people. Though the work was not expected to have wide appeal, comments began to come in from people like Sam Ragan, who wrote, "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."

Local writers were encouraged to attend workshops such as The Tar Heel Writers' Round Table in Raleigh. Two local writers won silver cups there. Mrs. Patricia Bryan, Elkin Public Librarian, won first place in poetry and Mrs. Patsy Ginns of King won first place in short story and placed also in poetry.

With this encouragement, people who had never dreamed of being published began to be brave enough to send their work to magazines for publication. Grady Burgiss was one of the most successful, with work bought by "The Progressive Farmer," by "Ideals," and by Broadman Press. A worker in a blanket factory, Dan Norman, became so engrossed in seeing the acceptance of his "beautiful words" that he went back to school and received not only his high school diploma, but two years of college as well.

In order to get more people involved in the venture, the county commissioners were asked by the library to appoint a poet laureate for each county. Yadkin was the first to comply, with the appointment of Grady Burgiss, who has now had four small books of poetry published, most of it rich in Yadkin County lore.

One of the books was printed by the library, for it was a story of local interest; the history of an old law school in the county which had graduated more than a thousand lawyers in its day, including six governors. Not many history books have been written in poetry, but Yadkin County's poet laureate did a beautiful job of telling the story of Richmond Hill.

Because so many children became interested in "seeing themselves in print," the library worked out a plan with the various school systems to publish a book just of the work of children. Letters with rules for the project were sent to all schools in the early fall, with a deadline for entries on March 1. Children were invited to illustrate their own poems with black and white drawings or to have a fellow student do it. Thousands of pages of original work were submitted and the first book was published with the title *Come Squish With Me*, taken from the title of one of the poems. The poem refers to the fun of walking barefoot in mud and invites the reader on a jaunt to "feel of life."

The book was a revelation. "This is the best insight into the thinking and feeling of children that I have found," said one teacher. Ministers preached sermons based on lines from the children's poems. Parents chuckled at their children's efforts, but also found a much closer understanding. Entries are now in for a second publication of children's poetry.

A group called "Patchwork Poets" has been formed by the library for presenting programs before other groups. The first performance was at Reynolda House in

Winston-Salem, with the Tenth Muse as sponsors. A letter from the director of Reynolda 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 that read for us as they shared their feelings was an emotional experience for me. I envy the community of poets that you obviously enjoy at Elkin. I hope our poets can achieve some of this warmth and feeling together which I believe they already have individually."

The goals of this 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. The zooming of the circulation of books of poetry has been only a sideline for all the other benefits of this program.

From a mountainous section of the state branded as "culturally deprived" in many recent surveys, perhaps there is something worth sharing with the rest of the world. Whenever there is something to say, there is the tug to "say it pretty."



Carolyn Couch, Elkin fifth grader, holds a copy of the library's book of children's poetry, *COME SQUISH WITH ME*, which invites the reader to feel the squish of mud on bare feet in a jaunt to get the "feel of life."