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Oregon Trails — Poetry

by Tom Leonhardt (Oregon Institute of Technology) <tleonhardt@oit.edu>

The year was 1954, the place was Big Delta, Territory of Alaska, and the person was **Violet Petrawke**. Poetry was the subject and the two poems were "The Village Blacksmith" by **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** and "Daffodils" by **William Wordsworth**. Alas, I can no longer recite either one from opening line clear through but I still remember the cadences and a few lines.

The Big Delta Territorial School was a small school with barely 100 pupils from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. The Class of '53 saw Big Delta's first high school graduate, a young man whose name escapes me. To economize, there were multiple classes in a single room. In 1954/55, the fifth and sixth grades were together. Miss Petrawke taught the fifth and sixth grades in such a way that we learned more than if each class had had a teacher of its own. I was in the sixth grade and was assigned, with the rest of the class, "Daffodils." If I'd had my way, I would have chosen to memorize and recite the poem about the blacksmith with muscles on his brawny arms, as strong as iron bands. That was something I could imagine without lying in a vacant and pensive mood. As it turned out, I learned both poems, one because I had to recite it and the other because I heard the entire fifth grade class recite it and bring the village smith to life.

Why do I remember those poems and why now? When you move around a lot as I did growing up as an Army brat, people, places, events, songs — they all stand out

in my mind as if part of a printed chronology that tells me more about myself than I understand. Does anyone else in the world, now that **Tennessee Ernie** is no longer with us, remember his rendition of the *Bandit of Brazil*? It was popular in 1954 or 1955 while I was still in Alaska faithfully listening to our one radio station.

Why now? I routinely browse the literary magazine section of our **Barnes and Noble** (a godsend to this town). On one of those occasions my gaze fell on the March, 1997 issue of *Poetry*. The **Rockwell Kent** cover illustration and the logo above cried "Buy me" and even at twice its actual price of \$3.00, it would have been a bargain.

Have you ever seen beauty and wished you could paint? I have seen beauty and wished I could write poetry. I have felt emotions and felt that a poet's soul was trapped inside me with no way to get out, no way to express what was crushing my senses at the time — the unrequited love of a teenager, the loss of a brother, the birth of a child — there is no end.

Poets are valued by society because they can put into words those images that painters paint but that the rest of us can only appreciate when confronted by them.

A personal essay, like a personal letter, generally contains a confession, explicit or implicit in the writing. I will come right out with mine — since those days in Miss Petrawke's classroom, I've read precious little poetry. I've enjoyed what I have read and I have vowed to read more, but I have memorized only a few more verses since the sixth grade and those were in German for specific class assignments.

This March issue of *Poetry* suggests to me that I am missing a lot by not reading poetry regularly, if not every day, at least every week. It would be wasteful to have this poem by **Bert Stern** go unread.

"Oy, God, send me a little poem, you'll never miss it.
Sweet gottenyu!
You know how I could use it.
Not Paradise Lost, noch,
or the Book of Job I'm asking,
only something normal
a little poem proper to me."

Poetry was founded in 1912 by **Harriet Monroe** (1860-1936), a Chicago poet and editor who established in her will, The Harriet Monroe Poetry Award whose winners include **e.e. cummings**, **Robert Lowell**, **Marianne Moore**, **Wallace Stevens**, and **Yvor Winters**.

James D. Hart (*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*) tells us that, "The best magazine devoted exclusively to poetry, and the precursor of many other little magazines, *Poetry* has had an extremely stimulating influence on American literature. Without confining itself to any school or type, it has published the work of such diverse authors as **Sandburg**, **Amy Lowell**, **T.S. Eliot**, **Frost**, **H.D.**, **Ezra Pound** (for a time an editor), **Vachel Lindsey**, and **Hart Crane**, and in many cases first brought them to public attention."

Poetry is published by the **Modern Poetry Association** and supported by many contributors. In ascending order, the ranks of members are Associates (\$50), Patrons (\$100), Sponsors (\$250), Benefactors (\$500), and Guarantors (\$1,000), all of whom are listed in the March, 1997, issue. Scanning the lists, I fail to find anyone I know, but whoever those people are, they are supporting a good cause. You, too, can join the Modern Poetry Association and get two for one -- a tax deduction (minus \$27 for the magazine) and a year's subscription. You can also purchase gift subscriptions that will remind someone twelve times a year that you are thinking poetic thoughts about them and you are expressing them through the noble words of others. We can't all be poets but we can support them. 🌿



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huge difference in Approval Plan expenditures. It is most common to receive only notification slips above a level set, rationally and experientially, for each major subject area. (We often observe that it is the most expensive items which ought to be seen and handled — and returned, but that is not the common practice.)



The \$200+ items are commonly in series and these will be seen to shift, as library policy dictates, between the "serials" and "monographs" budget lines. We see a strong tendency to add expensive proceedings into serials cuts and to pursue them — both comprehensively and selectively — through approval and firm order channels for added

discount and returnability. It is not uncommon now to isolate proceedings as a "book type" and to set approval parameters to accept them — at very high price levels — in sci-tech subjects. More data is there and I'll gladly look further into this very significant subject with anyone who is interested. 🌿