Folklife Today  
April 2021: Folklife and Poetry  

Announcer:
From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Music clip:
[00:24]

Steve Winick:
Welcome to Folklife Today. I’m Steve Winick, a folklife specialist at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, and the creator of the Folklife Today blog. As usual I’m here with John Fenn, who is the Head of Research and Programs for the Center.

John Fenn:
Hello, everyone. This episode of the Folklife Today podcast celebrates National Poetry Month. Folklorists have long been interested in the various ways that people make meaning through language—whether sung, spoken, or written—and throughout its collections the American Folklife Center has materials documenting a wide range of poetry from all over the world. In this episode we’ll explore several examples of poetry anchored in cultural communities, traditions, and even practices. We’ll be talking about collections as well as projects and public programming coming out of the Library of Congress. And we have some great guests lined up from the Literary Initiatives Office and the Veterans’ History Project, as well as a fellow staffer at the American Folklife Center.

Steve Winick:
And, of course, the Library of Congress is host institution for the position commonly referred to as the “United States Poet Laureate,” but more properly called the “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.” This position has existed since 1937, and appointees are named to an annual term by the Librarian of Congress. Our colleagues in the Library’s Literary Initiatives office support the Poet Laureate, and we have invited one of those colleagues onto the podcast to discuss the current Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo, and her work. So let’s all welcome Anne Holmes!

John Fenn:
Yes, it’s great to have you on the podcast, Anne. Before we get to Joy’s project, tell us a bit about your own work for Literary Initiatives.

[1:57]
Anne Holmes: Sure, and thanks so much for having me! I’ve been at the Library for almost five years now, in the Poetry and Literature Center which very recently became part of a larger Literary Initiatives division, working on all things literary programming. I focus mostly on managing and developing digital programs, like the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature, which is our historic audio archive of poets and writers reading at the Library. It dates back to 1943, and we’ve been digitizing those recordings and releasing 50 additions to the online collection each year for National Poetry Month—we just released those 50 last week, actually.

Steve Winick:

Amazing!

Anne Holmes: Yes, and I also maintain our Poetry and Literature website and our blog, From the Catbird Seat, and I help develop other programs like Poetry 180 and Poetry of America, and with my poetry colleagues I work with the Poet Laureate, helping to develop aspects of their signature projects. Our office also develops year-round literary programming as well as programming for the National Book Festival, which of course for the past year has been all virtual as well.

Steve Winick:

Amazing! And as someone who has worked at the Library for about 15 years, I’ve always admired the work of the Poetry and Literature Center, and I’m sure as part of the new Literary Initiatives Division you’ll continue to do great work! So, Joy Harjo is the 23rd Poet Laureate, and is in her second term---which is not uncommon for Poets Laureate. What should we know about her?

Anne Holmes: Joy Harjo was appointed in 2019, and she’s our first Native American poet laureate—she’s an enrolled member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, and really has dedicated her career not only to writing poetry, but to championing Native poets and voices—so the laureateship offers another extension and platform for her to do that vital work. She’s the author of nine poetry collections—her most recent is *An American Sunrise*—and a memoir, *Crazy Brave*. She’s the co-editor of the new anthology, *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry*, which is the most comprehensive anthology of Native Nations poetry published to date. In addition to her poetry, Joy Harjo is an award-winning musician and she just released her seventh album last month, which is called *I Pray For My Enemies*, last month.

As you mentioned, Joy Harjo is currently serving her second term, but this past fall she was appointed to a very uncommon third term, which will begin in September 2021—she’s only the second poet in the position’s history to serve a third term, and so we’re very fortunate that Joy will continue to do her incredible work and outreach in this role through next spring 2022.
John Fenn: That’s so great to have Joy around a bit longer because she’s such a great artist and impressive person. You’ve had a lot to do with Joy’s signature project at the Library. Can you describe that project and give us a bit of background?

Anne Holmes: Joy’s signature project, “Living Nations, Living Words” launched in November 2020, and it gathers a sampling of work by 47 contemporary Native poets from across the country in two digital components: an interactive Story Map and new online audio collection that features poets reading and discussing an original poem. Poets include Joy Harjo (of course), Louise Erdrich, Natalie Diaz, Ray Young Bear, Craig Santos Perez, Sherwin Bitsui, and Layli Long Soldier.

And a little background: Before Joy actually began her term, just after she was appointed, she immediately started talking about this idea of creating an online map of living Native Nations poets. It was important for her to show, with any project that she took on as laureate, that Native poets and people are real and alive and have undeniable importance and roots in this country.

In the summer before her term started, she came to the Library of Congress and visited a bunch of divisions to explore collections and meet staff, including in the Geography and Map Division and the American Folklife Center. In the Geography and Map Division, she was introduced to the ArcGIS Story Map software, which is geared toward immersive and interactive storytelling. In the American Folklife Center, she listened to a collection of Muscogee Creek field recordings and got really excited about the possibility of a recording component to her laureate project.

So, this all set our team on a path with Joy to really start exploring a lot of exciting options for the project she envisioned. It became clear that Joy not only wanted to feature a number of living Native Nations poets and their poems in her project, but she wanted people to hear their voices, too. So we eventually landed, about a year ago this month, actually—on the “Living Nations, Living Words” final concept—to create a Story Map, with a narrative written by Joy, that introduces the project and integrates an interactive map showing a selection of Native Nations poets from around the country. The map would connect to a newly developed online audio collection, housed in the American Folklife Center.

Last summer, we began inviting poets to contribute their poems and voices to the project—and these were poets carefully chosen by Joy. She asked poets to choose their own poems, while keeping in mind the overarching theme of place and displacement, and four touchpoints within that theme: visibility, persistence, resistance, and acknowledgment. Those were all very important to Joy and to Native American History. She also asked poets to choose where they wished to be placed on the map—either where they currently live, or feel most rooted. Many chose their tribal homelands.

So I got to work learning the Story Map software, and started building with Joy’s narrative and vision as the guide, of course. Colleagues in the Geography and Map Division customized the interactive map and location markers to give them life and
texture, and our friends in the American Folklife Center built this beautiful collection of contemporary Native Nations poets reading and discussing their work. And so “Living Nations, Living Words” came to life. Check it out at loc.gov/poetry.

I also just want to mention, we continue to work with Joy and collaborate with partners inside and outside the Library to create more access points to the project. We didn’t want to just put it up and say “there you go,” because it’s such an important and vital project. In just a couple weeks, in fact, the Living Nations, Living Words companion print anthology will be out, published by W. W. Norton in association with the Library of Congress. We’re also developing an educator toolkit to launch in the fall, and we’re working with Joy and many of the poets who contributed to the project on community outreach during Joy’s third term. So there’s lots to look forward to.

Steve Winick:

Wow, yes, and this is such a rich collection of poetry that Joy has curated. And at the American Folklife Center, we’re proud to have been part of the thought process, at least, that led to the creation of this great project. Do you have a favorite poem that you’d like to share from that collection?

Anne Holmes: This is tough, because of course the whole collection is remarkable. But one poem I love is by M. L. Smoker, and it’s called “The Book of the Missing, Murdered, and Indigenous—Chapter 1.” M. L. Smoker reads this poem from her home in Montana. She is the author of a collection of poetry, Another Attempt at Rescue, has earned an Emmy for her work on the PBS documentary Indian Relay, and she currently serves as one of two poets laureate for the state of Montana.

So she introduces herself a bit before she reads the poem, and then afterward provides some background to the poem, and how it connects to the themes of “Living Nations, Living Words.” And it’s just such a beautiful, moving poem and it so palpably addresses the violence against and erasure of indigenous women.

M.L. Smoker: M.L. Smoker, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux. I am most rooted in my home community on the Miníšoše in northeastern Montana on the Canadian and North Dakota border. I am one of two co-poets laureate for the state of Montana. I am also an Indian education advocate who works around the country for equity and inclusion and better outcomes for our American Indian youth.

The Book of the Missing, Murdered and Indigenous – Chapter 1 —For Natalie Smoker

The winding cord of highways, unkempt gravel roads and the trails of animals – a record of who and what has passed over, an agony of secrets.

In the end, they have all borne witness, eyes like glass beads that can never blink.
The dull light of motel neon shines ominously. 
An engine growls across the landscape.

Brittle men who are splintered like glass 
thrown from a second story window 
and we are the room they leave behind. 
They are pathetic husks, feeble in spirit.

Fragments fall along fields and shallow ditches, 
in overlooked alleyways or underpasses. 
A cold, empty breeze rising from the debris. 
The first and last moment of her.

It is rage that pulls her up from this place. 
She spews out the wretched and miserable 
as particles of dawn-lit soil illuminate her skin. 
Her hair is a two-edged sword.

She stitches together the collective story of origin, 
her body a map: descended from the stars, 
on the backs of animal sisters, 
carried to safety in a bird’s beak.

“The Book of the Missing, Murdered and Indigenous – Chapter 1” was written by M.L. Smoker and read in Helena, Montana, on July 19, 2020. This poem serves as an acknowledgement that we—primarily as Indigenous women—see, feel and long for our stolen sisters, our family members who go missing on dark roads or from their homes, and too many other terrible circumstances. We resist the violence and oppression that we face on a daily basis. We will not be made invisible in this country anymore. We will fight. We will advocate. We will search and we will never give up on those who are missing, who are lost, who have been taken from us. This poem was also inspired by Molly Murphy Adams, Oglala and Lakota, and her art piece entitled Epicenter and Impact. I also dedicate this poem to the memory of my niece, Natalie Smoker.

Steve Winick:

That was M.L. Smoker reading “The Book of the Missing, Murdered and Indigenous – Chapter 1”, as featured in the Living Nations, Living Words project curated by Joy Harjo, the current Poet Laureate. Be sure to visit the full Story Map that places the contributing poets in a geographic context, and we’ll have a link in the blog post that accompanies this episode (found at blogs.loc.gov/folklife). Again, the American Folklife Center is very honored to be the Library unit hosting the full Living Nations, Living Words digital collection. You can find full recordings of the poems, texts, and images by searching for “living nations” at loc.gov/collections. We’ll also include a direct link to the project at the blog. So Anne, Thanks so much for joining us!

John Fenn:
It was great to have you on the show, Anne.

Anne Holmes:

Thank you so much for having me! It was an honor to be here!

John Fenn: The American Folklife Center has worked with the Library’s Literary Initiatives Office on other projects as well, including collaborative events featuring previous Poets Laureate. Our next guest is going to talk with us about an innovative event she helped pull together with support from Literary Initiatives. Michelle Stefano is a Folklife Specialist here at the Library, and a frequent guest on the podcast. Welcome back, Michelle!

Michelle: It’s good to back! Hello!

Steve: Thanks for joining us today, Michelle. Back when we were planning the second round of “summer jams” at the Center, you brought an exciting idea to the table that involved bringing young poets into the AFC to explore our collections as source material for original poems. Tell us a bit more about that.

Michelle: In spring 2019, the AFC teamed up with the Literary Initiatives Office—to host a poetry slam in early June of that year with young members of Split This Rock. Based in Washington, D.C., Split This Rock “cultivates, teaches, and celebrates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes social change. It calls poets to a greater role in public life and fosters a national network of socially engaged poets.” Each year, the organization serves hundreds of young people and the schools they attend by offering opportunities to write, perform, and connect with a diverse community of socially engaged writers.

By the way, the name "Split This Rock" comes from a line in “Big Buddy,” a poem by Langston Hughes:

Don’t you hear this hammer ring?
I’m gonna split this rock
And split it wide!
When I split this rock,
Stand by my side.

As the org notes: “the work of writing the poems that split open the injustices in society is in some ways a solitary act, but it is also an act that requires community. Split This Rock calls all of us to split this rock, and to do it together.”

Steve: That’s a great calling for an organization like that. And I’ll just point out that over at the blog we have a post about Langston Hughes’s folklore work and his correspondence with Alan Lomax—he supplied song lyrics from his collections for a number of Lomax’s books, published a major folklore collection of his own, and used folklore in his own poetry. That particular poem, “Big Buddy” references “Hammer
Ring,” or “Take this Hammer,” which is a traditional work song that turns up quite a bit in AFC collections, and also in Langston Hughes’s.

John: Yeah, that’s a great connection to Langston Hughes’s legacy and the work of his that we have at the Library. As we mentioned, this event was in collaboration with the Library’s Literary Initiatives Office, and Michelle, I recall that staff there helped connect you to the youth poetry organization through which you found the poets. Can you tell us more about the poets who participated, and how you ended up working with them in the AFC Reading Room?

Michelle: Yeah, sure! For the Rhyming the Archives event, we worked with five Split This Rock poets in the weeks leading up to the June performance. At the time, they were mainly juniors and seniors at different high schools around the D.C. region, and very accomplished in writing and reciting their poetry for a number of years. In fact, one of the young poets, Marjan Naderi, is the 2020 D.C. Youth Poet Laureate and a 6-time Poetry Grand Slam Champion. Naderi is an Afghan-American writer and educator based in D.C. and is now pursuing her studies at the U. of Virginia. She has been featured on NowThis News, The Washington Post, National Public Radio, The United Nation’s Girl Up Campaign, among many other news programs and outlets.

The idea behind Rhyming the Archives was that the young poets would perform poems they wrote as inspired by the AFC archives: recordings, photographs, and field notes from the AFC archives. In May 2019, the poets visited the AFC reading room for two consecutive weekends to conduct research into its collections, listening to songs performed by Zora Neale Hurston, as well as oral histories from the AFC collections Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories and the Civil Rights History Project, among other items from the Center’s archives.

Steve: The full webcast of Rhyming the Archive is available on the Library’s website, and we’ll provide a direct link in the blog post accompanying this episode. But is there a particular poem you’d like to share with listeners, Michelle?

Michelle: Yeah! During our time in the AFC reading room, I remember that Marjan Naderi in particular was interested in our collections relating to traditions and music of Afghanistan. And one of the poems she wrote and performed at the Rhyming the Archives event centered on her mother teaching her how to make the traditional Afghan dish, Qabuli Palow, and how that knowledge and history is passed down from her ancestors, to her grandmother, to her mother, and now to her, as “heritage runs down the throat and into the blood”. The poem is very tactile in its descriptions of making the dish, and includes parts of the recipe itself....and it so beautifully stresses how a long legacy of cultural knowledge, stories, and values that the dish represents is embodied and activated by her mother in the actual making of the dish, such as in the line the “stories of ancestors folded in the creases of my mother’s palms”. The poem is called “The Lessons My Mother Taught me while preparing dinner”, and here’s an excerpt of Marjan introducing herself and reading her poem from June 8 2019.
The lessons my mother taught me while preparing dinner.

With salt and pepper hair, my mother tells me to taste my words before I spit them out. Her tongue is seasoned with more spice than her kabobs. Her hands only know the language of making mantu off her mother’s menu. So, heritage runs down the throat and into the bloodline. Her favorite home is the kitchen. The sun melts good morning through blindfolds. Hands craft the creation of food with more than love. They cook with wisdom. She taught me lessons through cooking Kabuli palau, gave me the recipe as she said, "The work of your hands is how you shape the world, and before washing your hands, make wudu." Watch sins run down the drain so they don't end up in other's foods. Make wudu with river water, but swim against the current so Zamzam drips down elbows for ten cups of holy water. The ocean on your tongue is a language. You break the rocks in its path, make it two tablespoons of sea salt. Strain your spine when you stand in something you believe in. If they tug, pull on the roots of your grandfather's string to four carrots. There are borders you cannot cross by foot. Take the grains of desert sand and make it a kilogram of rosewater rice. When carrying the weight of a crumbling country on your shoulders, you do not dust off its foundation. Rather, surrender to its sweetness for five tablespoons of honey, bent elbows, bent knees, but nothing but a prayer and pocket. Pushed, picked, plucked grapes of survival from vines strangling a future worth striving for. Dry up the bittersweet taste of toil for a cup of raisins. Cook all ingredients together for two hours. With stories of ancestors folded in the creases of my mother's palms, she holds a plate of Kabuli palau, fresh off the stove. Steam opening her pores, a mountain of brown rice, glistening sweet carrots and raisins at its peak, she tells me about my grandmothers. How one palm held poetry, the other pomegranates. Said, "This dish echoes fingerprints into the hearts of our ancestors." My mother taught me to create with more than love, to promise a fruitful future of family. She taught me to cook with history, and there's something so emulsifying about a table of food that makes history seem so easy to taste, to touch. Bismillah.

[22:42]

Marjan Naderi:

The lessons my mother taught me while preparing dinner.

With salt and pepper hair, my mother tells me to taste my words before I spit them out. Her tongue is seasoned with more spice than her kabobs. Her hands only know the language of making mantu off her mother’s menu. So, heritage runs down the throat and into the bloodline. Her favorite home is the kitchen. The sun melts good morning through blindfolds. Hands craft the creation of food with more than love. They cook with wisdom. She taught me lessons through cooking Kabuli palau, gave me the recipe as she said, "The work of your hands is how you shape the world, and before washing your hands, make wudu." Watch sins run down the drain so they don't end up in other's foods. Make wudu with river water, but swim against the current so Zamzam drips down elbows for ten cups of holy water. The ocean on your tongue is a language. You break the rocks in its path, make it two tablespoons of sea salt. Strain your spine when you stand in something you believe in. If they tug, pull on the roots of your grandfather's string to four carrots. There are borders you cannot cross by foot. Take the grains of desert sand and make it a kilogram of rosewater rice. When carrying the weight of a crumbling country on your shoulders, you do not dust off its foundation. Rather, surrender to its sweetness for five tablespoons of honey, bent elbows, bent knees, but nothing but a prayer and pocket. Pushed, picked, plucked grapes of survival from vines strangling a future worth striving for. Dry up the bittersweet taste of toil for a cup of raisins. Cook all ingredients together for two hours. With stories of ancestors folded in the creases of my mother's palms, she holds a plate of Kabuli palau, fresh off the stove. Steam opening her pores, a mountain of brown rice, glistening sweet carrots and raisins at its peak, she tells me about my grandmothers. How one palm held poetry, the other pomegranates. Said, "This dish echoes fingerprints into the hearts of our ancestors." My mother taught me to create with more than love, to promise a fruitful future of family. She taught me to cook with history, and there's something so emulsifying about a table of food that makes history seem so easy to taste, to touch. Bismillah.

[25:25]

John: Again, that was Marjan Naderi with her poem “The Lessons My Mother Taught me while preparing dinner,” here on the Folklife Today podcast. Michelle, thanks so much for joining us again!

Steve Winick: Yes, thanks Michelle!

Michelle: Thanks for having me!

Steve Winick: A significant poetic tradition found in the collections of the Center is occupational poetry. Occupational poetry is a form of verbal art anchored in the communities and cultures of work, and historically emerges in the everyday settings of
various occupations. Folklore scholarship and fieldwork has focused on the poetic traditions within a narrow range of occupational roles, including miners, commercial fishers, veterans and cowboys. So on the Library of Congress website, we have lectures and performances of commercial fisher poets—particularly a lecture by Jens Lund. We have performances of cowboy poetry by Wylie Gustafson, Paul Zarzyski, and D.W. Groethe, as well as an article on cowboy poetry by David Stanley. You can find miners’ songs, which include the poetry of the lyrics as an important part of the tradition. And, thanks to the Veterans History Project, we have a couple of collections specifically featuring veterans.

John Fenn: That’s right, in 2019, our colleagues in the Veterans History Project developed a series of programs focusing on a range of arts and the role art plays in veterans’ lives. One of these programs featured occupational poetry, and our next guest was a lead organizer for that event. Kerry Ward is a Liaison Specialist with the VHP, and has joined us today in order to talk a bit about the occupational poetry showcase. Hello, Kerry!

Steve Winick: Thanks for coming, Kerry.

[27:00]

Kerry Ward: Hello, and thanks for having me.

John Fenn: Before we get to the poetry, Kerry, tell us a bit about your work with the Veterans History Project.

Kerry Ward: Sure. The Veterans History Project just celebrated the 20th anniversary since Congress unanimously passed legislation to create a program under the umbrella of the American Folklife Center that gives a platform to veterans and Gold Star family members to share their personal narratives. Everyone out there has a story to tell. Storytelling is central to our human existence. It is common across every culture. And when you share and archive stories, it helps us all not only to preserve our culture but also to better understand our past accounts and perspectives, so that we can better prepare for our future. Working on the communications and outreach side of the Veterans History Project, I have the great privilege of working with individuals and organizations across the country to share about the Project and also to provide some guidance – to give them a subset of tools or skills so that they can sit down with the veteran or Gold Star family member in their lives and communities and really listen and give themselves a chance to understand what those experience were like how it may shape who they are as an individual today. The veterans within our collection may not otherwise appear in the historical record, but through programs like the Veterans History Project, they become a permanent collection at our national Library along with Presidential papers and the Waldseemuller map. Now to date, we have over 111,000 collections of personal narrative. I can personally attest that some of these stories will make you laugh, some may make you cry and others may influence you beyond what you ever thought possible. Our collections span from WWI doughboys who
served the trenches in France to those who flew a desk stateside during our most recent conflicts. Our team works to preserve and archive these materials so that future generations will be able to use this important resource and hear directly from those individuals to better understand the realities of their service. The narratives within our collection are as unique as the individuals who provide them. Some of them are most comfortable sharing through oral tradition or oral history whereas others work a little bit better with photographs, or deeply moving diary entries, perhaps original letters from their time in service or other mediums that we have listed out on our website at loc.gov/vets. Another part of what I get to work on different programs and projects that help to elevate these remarkable stories and the individual veterans. We were quite pleased to learn that many veterans do choose to express themselves artistically. With April being National Poetry Month, we were elated to discover that over 1,000 of the collections including poems written by veterans or Gold Star family members.

Steve Winick: Wow, that’s amazing. You do such an important job, and you do it so well that we’re really happy to have you on the podcast. Now the occupational poetry panel featured four poets from varied occupational backgrounds. What are the connections between them, and to the Veterans History Project?

Kerry Ward: A few years ago, VHP was invited to go out to the Western Folklife annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada. While that may seem a slightly odd connection for some, when you really think about it, veterans are everywhere. They are often hidden in plain sight. Long before Homer’s Iliad, servicemembers and veterans were weaving allegories and rhyming patterns together whether celebrating victories or perhaps to help honor their fallen. I think that anybody out there who is listening who has poured their heart into a poem or ballad really understands the catharsis that can come through this deeply personal form of self-expression. It can help writers articulate a more vivid description of their experiences and even illuminate irreparable harm. The occupational poetry panel from November 2019 helped to kick off our yearlong celebration of the Veterans History Project’s 20th anniversary. In it, we featured Bill Jones who was a Vietnam veteran poet, Vess Quinlan - a cowboy poet, Jerry Brooks (or Brooksy)- a miner poet, and Meezie Hermansen- a fisher poet. One of the poems that Bill Jones had made mention of that served as an inspiration for him to be a veteran poet was by Randall Jarrell. It was a short, but incredibly impactful titled “Death of a Ball Turret Gunner.” Jarrell served during World War II as a tower operator after he had washed out of flight school. Watching so many of his friends and fellow airmen lose their lives, Jarrell was likely grateful, but also likely experienced a significant amount of survivor’s guilt. As a Marine in Vietnam who had a love-hate relationship with the Corps, Bill Jones felt some of the same poignant and unvarnished sentiment about war in general and expressed some of those through his own poetry. I also thought it was pretty interesting that Bill chose that poem as perhaps unbeknownst to him, in the 1950’s Randall Jarrell served as the Library’s 11th Consult in Poetry better known today as the Poet Laureate of the United States.
John Fenn: In full disclosure, VHP invited me to host that panel, so if anyone watches the webcast after listening to this podcast episode they'll see me sitting up there trying to stay out of the way of the four amazing poets you brought together, Kerry. And it was such an honor to be a part of that, Kerry, because the stories were rich, and the poems were amazing. Do you have a favorite poet and poem from that day we can share here?

Kerry Ward: Before we get to that, I do have to say that John you did a wonderful job serving as the moderator. So, thank you very much for doing that. The readings that were presented were all incredibly moving for different reasons. Having to choose a favorite feels a bit like Sophie’s choice over here, but I will share the one I was most surprised by during the panel by Meezie’s “Tools of the Trade.” In attending the Cowboy Poetry gatherings, I had heard Bill, Vess and Brooksy perform different pieces. Although I had read Meezie’s work, I had never had an opportunity to see it performed. One of the things she said during the panel that I was extremely moved by was “Poetry should be out loud.” It is something so simple, but so accurate. When you hear it out loud, you can hear the cadence, you can view the emotional impact and for a brief moment, you get to become a part of their world. “Tools of the Trade” was a poem that captured not only what it was like for Meezie to grow up in Alaska as a fisherman’s daughter, learning the craft, but also discovering who she was and who she wanted to be in this world. It also hit on the fact that life changes and we lose things along the way. Undoubtedly, we lose people. We lose things. Meezie’s poem really stresses the importance of holding dear to those things that help define you—like your family and the talents or gifts that you bring to the world.

[34:30]

Meezie Hermansen:

And so this one is called Tools of the Trade.

Sometime after I was born, I learned to walk. And shortly after I learned to walk, I was given boots that fit and gloves that don’t. This is the world out of which I was grown. When I started off, I was far from swift with a fish pick honed from a piece of drift. A dull bent nail lashed to the whipping and twine, it was carved perfectly fit to fit this hand of mine. The deep red paint matched all those gills, the salmon I’d pick as I picked up skills. Dad made them custom. In my hand it stayed. It became my first tool of the trade. Now I’m all grown and my dad is gone, but in my life he still lives on. Sometimes it’s the little things you miss so much, like the little red pick that you used to clutch. There’s picks at the gear shed. They have them for sale. But you’ll find out quick as one flies over the rail that these factory picks all sink like a stone. They don’t float like the ones dad lovingly honed. Now when you drop one, which you know you’ll do, it’ll sink out of sight down deep in the blue. Each one that goes sailing caught up in the mesh, what’s seven bucks sent to Bangladesh? I look back now on this life I’ve had. Nothing fit better than that pick, carved by my dad. And aren’t we the same when you think it through? I’m carved original and so are you. Though the world tries to make us factory cut, here’s the secret. You know what? Be the best yourself you can be, not just another in the bin you
see. For the world needs your heart as it is made, so do your best with your tools of the trade.

Steve Winick:

Again, that was Meezie Hermansen, as heard during the 2019 occupational poetry panel that was part of the Veterans History Project’s art showcase series. We’ll include a link to the full webcast in the blog affiliated with this podcast episode. So thanks so much for joining us today, Kerry!

John Fenn: Yes, it was great to have you on, Kerry!

Kerry: Thank you both for the opportunity to share and to shine a spotlight on some truly incredible individuals.

Steve: As Kerry said, in that panel the poet Bill Jones recites and mentions being inspired by Randall Jarrell’s Death of the Ball Turret Gunner. Randall Jarrell was our 11th Poet Laureate in the mid 1950s. We have recordings of Jarrell reading in the recording lab in 1948. And on the Library of Congress website we have him interviewing Robert Frost, who was his successor as Poet Laureate. Bill Jones also mentions the ballad “Frankie and Johnny” and of course, we have versions of “Frankie and Johnny” in the archive, mostly under an older title, “Frankie and Albert.” We’ll put links to some of that at the blog, blogs.loc.gov/folklife

[37:35]

John:  Now, Steve, several of the occupational poets in that panel were cowboy poets and you did a feature about a cowboy poem for poetry month back when our blog was first founded so many years ago.

Steve: That’s right! We founded folklife Today at Halloween 2013, so our very first National Poetry Month was April 2014. That month I did a feature about a poem in our collections.

John: All right, tell us the story!

Steve: OK! It’s a ten-minute narrative poem recited by a man named Fred Soule at the Farm Security Administration (FSA) camp in Visalia, California on September 2, 1941. The camp was one of several such migrant worker camps in California, which were established by the government to house refugees from the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression who went west looking for farm work. And the poem was recorded on an instantaneous disc by Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin, two fieldworkers collecting folksongs for the Library of Congress. Todd had become fascinated with the migrant camps in the late 1930s after reading John Steinbeck’s pamphlet of essays Their Blood is Strong, which was about the migrants in the camps, and which had also inspired Steinbeck to write The Grapes of Wrath. So Todd had arranged folksong expeditions for himself and Sonkin in 1940 and 1941. September 2, 1941, was their last day of recording,
and this poem was the very last of over 400 audio titles they captured for the Library, which are online, and you can find that link at the blog. The poem’s title, as given by Soule, is “Colorado Morton’s Last Ride.”

John: So we’ve mentioned that it’s a cowboy poem. Just to provide a little background, cowboy poetry has existed since the cattle drives of the nineteenth century, when wranglers from diverse backgrounds were thrown together on the trail. The riders included Spanish-speaking vaqueros, formerly enslaved African Americans, hardy Texas frontiersmen, migrants from Eastern U.S. cities, and people from as far away as Europe. Cowboys traveled together and camped together for months at a time, and saw few others along the way. As a result, anyone with a good store of songs to sing, tunes to play, or poems to recite found it that much easier to get along. In his lecture here at the Library of Congress, David Stanley called cowboy poetry “a hybrid genre,” and pointed out that it “borrows widely from traditional roots of folk poetry and song, but also incorporates aspects of popular poetry, music, fiction, and historical writing, and has been influenced by academic poetry, country-western music, the Homeric epics, the plays of Shakespeare, and the Bible.”

Steve: Exactly. And this poem is a great example of the genre. In it, Colorado Morton learns that his brother-in-law is slated to be hanged hundreds of miles away for a killing that Morton himself committed. With a local train derailment blocking the rails, he makes a desperate horseback ride to substitute himself for the innocent defendant. The tale has all the hallmarks of a great cowboy poem: its story emphasizes Colorado Morton’s loyalty to his friend, his willingness to sacrifice himself for justice, and (of course) his prowess at riding and wrangling, which are all deeply-held ideals of the cowboy community. After a period of hair-raising suspense, the poem ends with dry humor, which is another frequent feature of cowboy verse.

John: Why don’t we hear a little clip

[asset]:

And there, ‘neath the light of the morning-star
The best horse-wrangler of the Circle-Bar
Caught that bunch in a cotton-wood tangle,
And wrangled the last horse that he’d ever wrangle.
I seed the brute later, and I’ve heard folks tell
That his daddy was a stud-horse in the teams of Hell—
A three-year old stallion gaunt as a crane,
Thin as a spit of Bad Lands rain.
His bones they stood out all over his ribs.
That horse wasn’t nothing but hocks and ribs.
But I know horses, and I’ll tell you this:
A thin devil’s worse than a fat devil is.
He didn’t know nothing but to stand on his ear,
And pitch and sidewind, and buck, and rear.
Colorado Morton got pretty well plastered.
But somehow or other he rode the bastard.

John: That’s pretty cowboy!

Steve: I know, right? And hearing the poem, it just seemed to me that it must have been written by someone with real knowledge. That bit about the thin devil and the fat devil...if you didn't know anything about horses, you wouldn't dare write something like that because a real horseman would see right through you!

John: So, you were interested in finding out more about this poem. What was your next move?

Steve: I talked to colleagues, including our own Stephanie Hall, and other folklorists. Eventually, I was helped out by Steve Green of the Western Folklife Center, which of course runs the annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering which Kerry mentioned early. They’re really the national experts on this genre. And Steve tipped me off to a poem called “Colorado Morton’s Ride,” so almost the same title, published in a book of original poems, *Guinea-Fowl and other Poultry*, by a poet named Leonard Bacon.

John: That could be a cowboy name!

Steve: Yeah, cowboys love their bacon, and I thought that Leonard Bacon and Jack Beans would be great trail buddies. But in fact Leonard Bacon is a surprising author for this poem because he is primarily known as an academic poet, and lived most of his life in Rhode Island. He published well-received translations of El Cid and The Song of Roland, and his books of original poetry have titles like “The Legend of Quincibald.” He even published an original epic called Ulug Beg under the pseudonym “Autolycus,” which he dedicated to Rudyard Kipling. In 1941, the same year in which Fred Soule recited his poem for Todd and Sonkin, Bacon won the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry collection *Sunderland Capture*. He was a Yale graduate and Berkeley professor whose roots were in upstate New York and in Rhode Island, so it didn’t seem on the face of it like he’d be the sort of person who’d know much about Western riding and wrangling.

John: But that wasn’t the end of the story, right? Because Bacon had a co-author.

Steve: Right! In the introduction to *Guinea Fowl and other Poultry*, Bacon explains:

“The two cowboy ballads in this volume are the joint effort of Mr. Rivers Browne and myself. The plots and the local color are his contribution. The working up and the versification are, with the exception of a line or two, my part of the work.”

John: So, could be that Rivers Browne was the real cowboy?

Steve: My thoughts exactly. A search of census records turned up one person named Rivers Browne in the United States named in 1920, 1930, and 1940, living in Sweet Grass County, Montana.

John: Did that area of Montana make sense as a location for the poem?
Steve: It turns out it did. Although many of the poem’s geographical details seem fanciful, the basics are: Morton rides from an unspecified town with a railroad station, somewhere near a “Circle-Bar” ranch in the United States; he winds up in Medicine Hat, Alberta; and the distance is specified to be a little over 200 miles. So I just looked for a circle-bar ranch that might fit the bill, and I found one near Utica, Montana. The nearby railroad town could have been Great Falls, which is just over 200 trail miles from Medicine Hat, or it could have been Utica itself, which is about 250.

John: OK, so, at that point in your research it was looking likely that Leonard Bacon wrote “Colorado Morton’s Ride” in collaboration with a Rivers Browne, a Montana cowboy who knew real details of the landscape and was an expert horseman. But how did this collaboration come about?

Steve: Well, now I knew I was looking specifically for a connection between the Pulitzer Prize winner Leonard Bacon and Montana. And in a book of capsule biographies of Pulitzer Prize winners, I found it: Here’s the quote:

“[Bacon] graduated in 1909 and enrolled at Yale for graduate work in the same year. At that time the poet published his first volume of verses called The Scrannel Pipe. After suffering a nervous breakdown Bacon gave up studies and went to work on a cattle ranch in Montana where he stayed until the spring of 1910.”

John: Ah. A grad school nervous breakdown. Relatable content for some of us! Were you able to find out more?

Steve: Yes, my next step was to scan his poems to see if I could find other references to his time in Montana. And among his poetry collections, I found one book that was actually an autobiography, though shelved with the poetry collections. There was no index, but knowing the year, it was easy to find his time in Montana. Bacon tells us the names of his employers, Harry and Jack Hart, which identifies the ranch as the Eureka Ranch, later the Dot S Dot. And the cool thing is that the Hart family’s papers, including records of the ranch and photos of the employees, are being preserved by archivists at the Montana State University Library. They were even kind enough to let me use some of the images in the blog!

John: and did he say anything about Rivers Browne?

Steve: He did. Here’s the quote: “A man of high breeding and instinctive delicacy, he had been a cowboy for twenty years, and had carried horsemanship to a point where, not merely an art, it was a philosophy. Every bone in his body had been broken by some sixty kicks and other catastrophes. [...] In his youth in the early nineties Browne had been horse-wrangler to many cavallardas coming up from Mexico with the longhorns purchased on the border. The duties of the son of an English general had consisted of breaking wild horses caught on the long march—so that the vaqueros might ride them. With such a job there was no middle way. Either one died or one became an artist.”

John: Wow, the son of an English General?
Steve: Yes, at the time that I wrote the blog I wasn’t able to find out much about that. But there are more documents going onto Genealogy sites all the time! So now, seven years later, I was able to find out that his father was Swinton John Browne, who retired as a Major-General in the India Staff Corps of the British Army in 1897. His mother was born Grace Rivers. He was christened Swinton Rivers Browne in India in 1868, but throughout his time in the U.S. he seems to have gone by the name Rivers Swinton Browne instead. So his chosen name was his mother’s family name, which is nice!

John: Indeed, and this is all becoming quite cosmopolitan! So how exactly did they collaborate on the poem?

Steve: That’s still a little fuzzy. In the autobiography, Bacon just says that “years later” they worked together on “a couple of Western ballads.” Bacon also mentioned that Rivers Browne maintained land in Canada, and border-crossing records confirm that he traveled between Canada and Montana with some frequency. This is interesting since Colorado Morton does the same thing and his sister seems to live in British Columbia. But it also suggests that Browne could have taken a side trip to California, where Bacon lived when they wrote the poem. Or Bacon could have returned to Montana for a visit. It’s still kind of a mystery to me. It’s possible the answer lies among Bacon’s papers, which are preserved at the University of Rhode Island’s library.

John: So maybe some more work to be done here. But, you found out quite a bit about the poets. But folklorists are also usually interested in the performers. So what did you find out about Fred Soule? He’s obviously a talented and expressive speaker with a prodigious memory!

Steve: Yeah, that’s a great question. This is the only recording Todd and Sonkin made of him, and they wrote down nothing about him in their correspondence or notes. And as I said, it’s the very last recording of the entire two trips! So who was he?

Well, searching the Library of Congress website for the name Soule turned up an interesting document that provided the crucial clue: a 1935 letter sent by Roy Stryker, who was head of the Farm Security Administration’s Historical Section, arranging for Dorothea Lange’s photographic expedition, on which she shot, among many others, her iconic image popularly known as “Migrant Mother.” The recipient of the letter was a government official on the other end of Lange’s trip, the regional Information officer of the Farm Security Administration for Northern California, Frederick P. Soule.

John: So he was a government employee?

Steve: Yes, and According to Steinbeck scholar Robert DeMott, Soule and his staff had also worked with John Steinbeck, helping him with information about the FSA and affording him access to the camps, where he had written the newspaper essays which had first caught Charles Todd’s imagination, as well as his great novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. So Fred Soule, as a great Public Information Officer, actually helped inspire the Todd and Sonkin expedition, and can take some credit for the existence of our collection. It kind of explains why it’s the last recording in the collection, too.
John: How so?

Steve: Well, as a folklorist, if I’m out there with funding for recording the songs of migrant workers, and I find out a camp administrator has a folklore item, but I have a limited number of discs, I’m not going to record the administrator while there’s still a chance I’ll need the disc.

John: But on the last day, when you know you’re not getting any more migrant songs, you’re either going home with Fred Soule’s poem or a blank disc side.

Steve: exactly.

John: That’s a great story. A Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet and a Montana cowboy who become unlikely buddies. They worked a ranch together in 1910 and wrote verse together in the 1920s. And it’s also about some Library of Congress folklorists and an unsung government official, working behind the scenes at the tail end of the Great Depression.

Steve: Yeah, it’s about government workers striving to preserve and present folk culture and foster great American writing. That’s the kind of story we love at the American Folklife Center, the Library of Congress’s Literary Initiatives office, and all around the Library of Congress!

John: Well, after all that, we can only imagine that all you listeners are dying to hear the poem. Luckily, Bacon and Browne published it in a magazine which never renewed the copyright, so it has entered the public domain. But since it’s ten minutes long, we’re not going to include it here. We’re going to release it as a bonus episode just a few days after we release this one. But you can also head over to the Folklife Today blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife and hear it or read it there.

Steve: and now, I think it’s time we thank our guests again: Ann Holmes, Kerry Ward, and Michelle Stefano.

John: And let’s thank the poets and readers: M.L. Smoker, Marjan Naderi, Meezie Hermansen, Fred Soule; and Leonard Bacon and Rivers Browne.

Steve: And let’s thank Jon Gold, our engineer, and the colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who help us deploy the podcast. And last but not least, thank YOU, John, for hosting the podcast with me!

John: Thank you too, Steve! And listeners, remember to look for the bonus episode “Colorado Morton’s Ride”

[53:00]

Announcer:

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