

William Stafford

1914 - 1993



William Edgar Stafford was born in Hutchinson, Kansas on January 17, 1914. He was the oldest of three children born to Earl Ingersoll and Ruby Mayher Stafford. His was a highly literate family, with a shared appreciation for nature and books.

Professor of English and one of the most widely recognized and admired of American poets, William lived an ordinary life, he collected poems and a journal of daily concerns.

While in El Dorado, the Staffords lived first at 1125 W. 3rd Avenue, and later moved to 603 N. Topeka. William at this time attended the junior college in El Dorado, having transferred from a junior college in Garden City, Kansas. He had graduated from high school in Liberal, Kansas in 1933.

In 1937, he earned a Bachelor of Art degree in English at the University of Kansas. He began graduate studies in 1939 at the University of Wisconsin in Economics, but returned to KU the following year to work towards a master's in English.

Stafford was drafted into the United States armed forces in 1941, before he could obtain his degree. Because of strongly felt religious beliefs, he became a conscientious objector. As a registered pacifist, he was required to perform alternative service from 1942 to 1946 in the Civilian Public Service camps, consisting of forestry work, soil conservation, and road construction in Arkansas, California and Illinois for \$2.50 per month.

Time in CPS camps was traumatic, generative and crucial to his development. On the one hand, William found himself separated even from his neighbors and friends by his refusal to fight in a popular war. He reflected years later on the distance his choice forced upon him: "My friends were... more antagonistic to my position (as a conscientious objector) than the general populace was... They knew me, and I had done this, and it was kind of an affront."

Yet CPS also placed Stafford in the company of like-minded though quite diverse young men. Separated from the militaristic fervor of their contemporaries in uniform, but isolated also from

domestic life on the home front, they were free to think bold thoughts, and they schooled one another in new ways to see history and practice human behavior.

Stafford's sense of his vocation as a poet grew directly from this experience. He learned to rise before the sun; a lifelong habit that yielded both a remarkable number of fine poems and that strangely blended sense of independence and engagement so characteristic of his work.

While working in California in 1944, he met and married Dorothy Hope Frantz, daughter of a minister of the Church of the Brethren. They later had four children: Nancy, Kim Robert, Kris and Tommy. Kim, a poet and essayist, is today the Literary Executor for the William Stafford Archive housed at Lewis & Clark College in Oregon.

Remembered by his children as able to fix anything – often with a rubber band – he would tune his old guitar with great ceremony, make undrinkable dandelion and blackberry wine labeled “Yum,” sneak raw garlic into food, and forever stretch and re-stretch his beloved, slouchy brown hat over a mixing bowl. He taught his children to seek out what is unknown to them and then learn about it.

Following the war, Stafford taught one year at a high school and spent a year working for a relief organization, Church World Service. He also finished his master's degree at the University of Kansas in 1947. His master's thesis, memoirs of his time spent as a conscientious objector, was published as a book of prose, *Down in My Heart*, in 1948. That same year, he moved to Oregon to teach at Lewis & Clark College. Later, in 1954, he received a Ph.D from the University of Iowa.

A lifelong pacifist, Robert was prominent in his work with such poets as Robert Bly in protesting America's involvement in the Viet Nam War.

At the core, Dr. Stafford remained humble and gentle, unimpressed with the various awards and recognitions he later received as a poet. He was a man whose thoughts were of the spirit but whose feet were firmly on the ground.

He once said, “Reverberations of poetic response often come from many things. All of life is very dramatic, and writing is so free. It is bigger than the world.” Stafford urged freedom of expression – the willingness to “let the mind enter intonowness – things that never happened and never will be again.”

William Stafford died in Lake Oswego, Oregon on August 28, 1993, at the age of 79. That morning he had written a poem titled “Are You Mr. William Stafford?” It seems to offer a fitting coda to his life's work:

You can't tell when strange things with meaning will happen. I'm [still] here writing it down just the way it was. “You don't have to prove anything,” my mother said. “Just be ready for what God sends.” I listened and put my hand out in the sun again. It was easy.

Well, it was yesterday. And the sun came,

Why

It came.

His granddaughter, Rosemary, talking with her father following Stafford's death, said, "I don't have to hold onto Bill and I don't have to let him go. He's part of me."

William Stafford belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Modern Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the American Association of University Professors. He was a member of the Church of the Brethren, and a lecturer on literature for the United States Information Agency in many foreign countries. He was also a biker and photographer. His close friend and collaborator was poet Robert Bly.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Growing up in a series of small towns in Kansas, each considered one of his "hometowns," Stafford later recalled it being difficult for the children to leave friends and schools. But there was always the local library with friends waiting in the shelves. He described how his family made weekly trips to the library, coming home laden with books to be exchanged with each other before the next trip.

During the Great Depression, the Stafford family moved from town to town in an effort to find work. Stafford helped contribute to family income by delivering newspapers, working in sugar beet fields and oil fields, raising vegetables and working as an electrician's helper.

He spent several years of his youth in El Dorado, where his father, E. I. Stafford, was assistant sales manager for the El Dorado Refining Company. The senior Stafford at first worked in the credit dept., working his way up to the management position.

William graduated from Butler County Community College in 1935.

COMING TO / LEAVING THE AREA

Stafford's family lived in El Dorado from before 1935 to 1941. For Butler County, it was near the end of a time of great building, a growing familiarity with large sums of money, and a mighty spread of commercialism. Though widely exposed to the spirit of that day, none of it stirred Stafford's impulses.

William left El Dorado before his family moved on, to attend the University of Kansas. His family left the area sometime after 1941.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A much beloved author, Stafford is best known for his books of poetry, including *West of Your City*, *Traveling Through the Dark*, *The Rescued Year*, and *Allegiances*. James Dickey called Stafford one of those poets “who pour out rivers of ink, all on good poems.” He also published three books of prose, two of them in the Poets on Poetry Series for the University of Michigan Press.

His poetry was strongly influenced by both the people and the plains region of his youth and young adulthood. An innovative poet, he managed to bring his life and his writing together into a seamless, striking witness to nonviolence and poetic freedom. His poems had wide range, taking readers on un-dogmatic, even playful, yet deeply engaging adventures in language.

Understatement was one of Bill Stafford’s strengths. Part of his belief was that poetry should be a normal human utterance. His famous, and sometimes criticized, injunction to “lower one’s standards and keep writing” came out of his unequivocal belief that the poet was not necessarily a genius or prophet.

His advice about writing has been extremely influential, especially his insistence that in the early phases of composition too much concern about quality is merely inhibiting. Writers should “lower the standards” and simply accept what comes, he argued in books such as *Writing the Australian Crawl* and *You Must Revise Your Life*. As many teachers and writers would testify, this approach is invaluable in overcoming writer’s block and anxiety, as well as encouraging beginning writers.

Throughout his career, Stafford insisted that writing is what matters, not writers. His essays on a way of writing in which the process is significant even when the product is expendable have influenced a whole generation of writing teachers, and through them many more students. The best advice he followed was to send more material in the mail than anyone could possibly imagine. He dryly suggested that he’d flooded the market. As a result, his writing appeared in an astounding number of magazines and anthologies, including *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, *American Poetry Review* and *The Nation*.

Though he would author fifty-seven volumes of poetry, Stafford’s first book of poems, *West of Your City*, was not published until 1960 when the poet was 46 years old. A prolific writer, Stafford maintained a steady habit of writing before dawn each morning.

Stafford’s poems are often deceptively simple, focusing on the ordinary. As in works of celebrated poet Robert Frost, however, they reveal a distinctive and complex vision upon closer examination. In a 1971 interview, Stafford said: “I keep following this sort of hidden river of my life, you know, whatever the topic or impulse which comes, I follow it along trustingly. And I don’t have any sense of its coming to a kind of crescendo, or of its petering out either. It is just going steadily along.”

Almost never viewing his poems as finished, he once remarked, “A writer is not trying for a product, but accepting sequential signals toward an always-arriving present.” He admitted that he almost flaunts non-sophistication in his work.

Though living most of his adult life on the west coast, Stafford’s books carried a Kansan’s sensibilities, registering the slivers that make up a life as a plainsman might. In the austere Kansas landscape, Stafford learned through writing that the prairie contains lessons for us all.

In 1970, he was named as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a position that is now known as Poet Laureate.

In an article appearing in the Kansas City Star on March 7, 1971, Virginia Scott Miner wrote: “In 1953 William Stafford won the National Book Award with his second collection of poems, *Traveling Through the Dark*, and followed it in 1956 with *The Rescued Year*. In the intervening years he has become one of the country’s most beloved and highly regarded poets.”

The article went on to say that Stafford “resembles no stereotype of poet in any way, old or new. He simply is a poet, and it is impossible to read his work without feeling both for the gifts of the poet and the integrity of the man.”

“Writing is like talking,” Stafford said during an address at Butler County Community College in 1971. “Poetry is a language we all talk. But we need the friendship of the reader. The poet seeks a trance-like state in which he goes forward trustfully, so that each step leads to a new signal – ‘a golden string,’ as William Blake put it.”

One of three distinguished writers for 1973’s El Dorado High School Creative Writing Workshop, Stafford interspersed readings of his poetry with down to earth “how-to-do-it” hints. “Be as direct as possible,” he cautioned. “Avoid metaphors and symbols.” He also urged his hearers to be aware, to observe.

In 1975, he was honored as the Poet Laureate of Oregon. He retired from Lewis & Clark College in 1980 but continued to travel extensively, giving public readings of his poetry and encouraging young writers throughout the United States, Germany, Poland, Egypt, Pakistan and many other nations.

Speaking of Iran, where writing is not free, Stafford said: “Most of the best poets in Iran are in prison,” he said. “In America, poets say what they wish to say.”

Writer Naomi Shihab Nye, when visiting Pakistan, told in an article in *Hungry Mind Review*, that when Stafford was mentioned, the room perked up. She asked, “You know his work?” “We know HIM,” was the answer. “He’s a good American. He’s not puffed. Are there others like him?”

Robert Frost broke new ground by struggling with what seems now a simple-sounding notion: Observe nature with patience and without preconception to harvest its intricacies. William

Stafford, so thoroughly weaned on the plains, made a similar move. His naturalistic style intended for everyone illuminated the reader's way.

His works are archived at the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College. The Carter Burden collection of William Stafford publications, purchased in 1999 by the college, includes the majority of his publications up to 1988, usually first printings with most items signed. The collection also includes a representative selection of Stafford's broadsides and some of his teaching materials from the college.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

Stafford was recipient of the National Book Award in 1963 for his second poetry collection, *Traveling Through the Dark*. Other honors include the Shelley Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America in 1964, a Guggenheim Fellowship for the academic year 1966-67, the Melville Cane Award, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Special appointments included the Poetry Consultant for the Library of Congress in 1970 and Oregon's Poet Laureate in 1975. In May of 1973, Dr. Stafford received an honorary doctor of letters during graduation exercises at Sterling College.

Upon his retirement in 1990, he was given the title of poet laureate emeritus. In 1992, he was awarded the Western States Lifetime Achievement Award in Poetry. In June of 1993, he received the Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America.

BIBLIOGRAPHY / SOURCE LIST

Family files, Clymer Research Library; Butler County History Center, El Dorado, KS – ORIGINALS IN ARCHIVES