

National Poetry Day: October 15 and National Poetry Month: April

How it All Came About!

By Madelyn Eastlund

Back in the mid 1930s, Ohioan poet, Tessa Sweazy Webb mentioned to many people of her desire for a recognized Ohio Poetry Day. With the support of Ohio Senator Williams, joint resolution S.J.R. No. 39 (*Grubbs-Myers-Marshall Resolution*) was introduced and passed by Ohio's 92nd General Assembly (January 1938), naming the third Friday of October of each year "Ohio Poetry Day" to be set aside to honor Ohio poets with special programs and observances in schools and other public places. Webb organized Ohio Poetry Day Association and, to this day, OPD sponsors an annual contest with winners announced at a special program in Ohio on the third Friday weekend.

Poets in other states picked up the crusade and slowly the day became recognized by state proclamations, but no concerted effort was made for a national poetry day until in 1947. Lucia Trent of Texas spearheaded the movement. However, instead of the third Friday in October, she selected October 15 to honor her husband Ralph Cheney, a noted poet who died on that day in 1941. In 1949, Dr. Etta Josephine Murfey was named National Director of the National Poetry Day Committee and held this position until her death, April 1, 1966 when Dr. Frances Clark Handler became National Director. She had the National Poetry Day Committee incorporated for its protection.

By 1975 the day was celebrated in all 50 states and in 40 foreign countries as International Poetry Day on October 15, the National Poetry Day Committee, Inc. was listed in the encyclopedia of associations and was known throughout the world. State societies appointed annual state Poetry Day chairmen who requested state governors issue an annual Poetry Day proclamation. The goal was recognition by the U. S. government.

Congressman Claude Pepper and Congressman Dante Fascell introduced legislation in the 89th - 90th - 91st - 92nd - 93rd Congress of the United States. Legislation called for mandatory issuance of a *Poetry Day Proclamation* annually by the President of the United States. It never happened.

In 1976, Waunetta Hackleman, chancellor of National Federation of State Poetry Societies (NFSPS) took up the torch with an article in *Strophes* that reminded member states to set time aside for the observance of Poetry Day. In June 1981, as president of NFSPS, she wrote in *Strophes*, "Verna Lee Hinegardner (Chancellor) is working with the states on National Poetry Day. Endeavor to obtain a *Poetry Day Proclamation* from your state governor. Keep the original for your state history and send a copy to Verna as outlined in her letter to all state presidents recently."

Front-page news in the October 1982 issue of *Strophes* read "Senate Passes *National Poetry Day Resolution* by 243 votes yea votes for Senator Dale Bumpers's Joint Resolution 243 declaring October 15 as National Poetry Day." Senator Bumpers said.

"This should set the stage for a quick passage in the House of Representatives." Although it passed in the Senate, the bill received only 50 of the necessary 218 co-sponsors required to introduce a bill on the floor in Congress.

Verna Lee Hinegartner urged NFSPS member states to ask their State Representative to contact Beryl Anthony of Arkansas that he/she would co-sponsor the bill. In *Strophes*, April 1985, Verna Lee Hinegartner had a front-page plea asking if there were 218 poets in the United States with enough clout to convince 218 representatives to co-sponsor October 15 as National Poetry Day.

Strophes, January 1986 front-page headline: *Mule Appreciation Day!*

Seems Rep. Robert Garcia, a Democrat from New York, introduced a bill to honor the mule on October 26; it passed *unanimously!*

Verna Lee asked, "Tell me how we can get 218 Congressmen to honor poets and poetry by supporting House Joint Resolution 311 proclaiming October 15 as National Poetry Day?"

Today states individually continue to support National Poetry Day as October 15th and NFSPS continues to stress such support, but there is no push for national recognition from Congress. The *Mule* evidently took the heart out of those who had worked so diligently for national recognition.

How can poetry compete when Congress (having a choice) chooses a mule?

How, also, to compete with The Academy of American Poets with all their resources?

In 1996 that prestigious organization announced that they were establishing April as the "National Poetry Month." No recognition was paid to October 15 or those organizations that had worked for so many years to establish National Poetry Day.

It was easy for the Academy, with their reputation, to receive support not only from libraries but also from universities, schools and other literary organizations.

Those supporters were able to sponsor readings, festivals and workshops. Chain bookstores immediately took up the banner ---- National Poetry Month: April. Thousands of businesses and nonprofit organizations immediately made plans to take part in the celebration of poetry and "its place in the American culture."

Hence, today our poets celebrate National Poetry Day — October 15 and National Poetry Month — April.

After all isn't it always time to *Celebrate Poetry?*

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