

Dakota Resources:

Researching the Works of Badger Clark

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Charles Badger Clark, Jr. (1883-1957), achieved a degree of recognition as a western poet during his lifetime and earned the title of South Dakota's first poet laureate, but due to his unwillingness to court fame, he was largely unknown outside his home state. Even within South Dakota, Clark was better known as a public speaker than as a writer. The additional fact that his best-known poem, "A Cowboy's Prayer," was widely reprinted as an anonymous composition contributed greatly to his literary obscurity. In an attempt to pierce this obscurity and provide Clark's poetry with the recognition it deserves, research for an annotated bibliography of his written works, to be published by Westerners International, is now in progress. The project is as yet incomplete, but a great deal of material has surfaced, and certain conclusions about the poet and his works can be drawn.

Researching the written works of Badger Clark is a daunting project. Unlike the papers of various political figures or men of letters throughout the country, Clark's papers are not located in any one, or even two or three, repositories. The countless poems and articles he published in sometimes obscure periodicals between 1906 and 1957 were not recorded by the author or by anyone else. Many of his poems were never published at all, but were merely typed for the intended recipient and the original thrown away. Also unpublished were spontaneous lines of verse scribbled on the flyleaves of his books. Often, the poet's only payment for the books he wrote was a supply of copies, which he generous-

ly gave away, each with its own personalization. In addition, during the time he was most active as a speaker (1921-1956), tape recorders were not in common use, and no written transcript of any of his speeches has come to light. Still another difficulty in tracking down Clark's works stems from the fact that, during his final illness, the poet destroyed what few records he possessed, along with bits and scraps of unfinished work that he apparently felt would not leave a proper legacy.

As might be expected, the unpublished poems constitute one of the most difficult bibliographic problems. One example is "The Poet of the Park," written in 1933 in honor of Senator Peter Norbeck and his conservation work in Custer State Park. Happily, in this case more than one copy of the poem was made, and it was later published in the *Custer County Chronicle*. During my research, several members of the Norbeck family showed me their framed copies of the signed poem in the belief that each had the only one in existence. Clark's well-liked poem "New Year's Eve," which is also known under the title "On Reaching Sixty-five," is another work that has mistakenly reached the collectors' market as a "one-of-a-kind." Clark had a photograph of himself seated by the fireplace in his darkened cabin printed up on postcards. He then typed the poem on the back of the cards, signed them, and sent them out to a number of friends and relatives, each of whom evidently believed he was the only recipient.

A true "one-of-a-kind" was the poem "Lead, My America," which was written in 1919. Clark, an intensely patriotic man who was also a pacifist and an outspoken opponent of any form of armed conflict, was inspired by Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations to write this poem to call America to leadership. He sent the only copy of "Lead, My America" to a clergyman in Michigan, who incorporated it into a sermon but made no further use of it.

The poem finally resurfaced in 1952, when it was every bit as relevant as it had been in 1919, and Senator Francis Case suggested that it would make a stirring march. "Lead, My America" was then set to music by Harold M. Dudley and was eventually performed by the United States Marine Band at Fourth of July ceremonies in Washington, D.C., and by the Rapid City high-school choir, among others. It is now included in the record album *Badger Clark Ballads*, released by the Badger Clark Centennial Committee in 1983. Since its reincarnation in 1952, "Lead, My America" has been published in many periodicals. In fact, the poem has become so closely associated with Clark and is consid-



In his darkened cabin, Badger Clark is illuminated by the glow from his fireplace. This photograph was reproduced on postcards, which Clark sent to friends and relatives.

ered to be so characteristic of his writing style, that part of it was reprinted in the poet's obituary on the front page of the *Rapid City Journal* on 29 September 1957.

Within the body of published poems, title changes further complicate the researcher's task. Several poems were published under more than one title. One of Clark's best-known poems, and acknowledged to be his first published effort, was originally printed in the old *Pacific Monthly* as "In Arizony," but it later

became known as "Ridin'." "A Border Affair," written in 1907 and published, as were so many of the early poems, in the *Pacific Monthly*, became "Spanish Is the [or "a"] Lovin' Tongue" when it was set to music. Whether this change was a deliberate ruse to avoid paying royalties to the lyricist or simply a matter of taste, it was a successful ploy. Clark never received compensation for the many versions of this song that were eventually written and recorded. Another musical change was "High Chin Bob," derived from the 1911 poem "The Glory Trail." "The Exile," a nostalgic view of the Black Hills written by Clark during his own exile in Arizona (1906-1910), made its first appearance in the *Pacific Monthly* as "The Exiled Black Hiller." "Myself and I" has appeared nearly as often as "I and Myself"; "Quaking Asp" was also known as "Quaking Aspen"; "A Ranger" was sometimes "The Ranger"; and so on.

In addition to identical poems that appear under different titles, there are also different poems that appear under identical or nearly identical titles. Badger Clark was particularly fond of some topics, and various treatments of these topics show up under similar labels. At least two poems bear the title "Thanksgiving," but, although they express similar sentiments, they were penned in different years. Other examples include "Hometown" and "Smalltown"; "Coyote," "Coyotes," and "The Cowboy and the Coyote"; "The Friendship Trail," "The Long Trail," "The Glory Trail," "Night Trail," "On the Oregon Trail," "The Old Trailer," "The Trail 'O Love," "Trail Song," and "The Trail Blazer."

Clark was also prone to writing poems "to" something or someone. He wrote "To a Pack Rat," "To the Experimenters," "To Her," "To J.C.L. Out There," "To the Custer Fire Department," and "To the 36,000" (those people who died on United States highways in 1934).

The above mentioned poems, of course, are those accurately credited to Badger Clark. Unfortunately, many of Clark's poems were not attributed to him when they were reprinted or changed into other mediums, particularly song lyrics, and "A Cowboy's Prayer" was pirated almost as soon as the ink was dry. At one time, Clark owned a collection of approximately fifty postcards imprinted with his most famous poem, which listed the author as unknown. "Yes," Clark would ruefully say, "unfortunately." He never pursued his copyrights legally, but one longstanding anecdote tells of a Clark fan who attempted to set a publisher straight. For his efforts, the Clark supporter received a most unpleasant letter, which called Badger Clark everything from a pla-

giarist to a charlatan and declared vaguely that "A Cowboy's Prayer" was an old folk tale that had been around since the mid-nineteenth century. Given Badger Clark's innate honesty and integrity, such treatment must have wounded him deeply, but he never became as upset as his supporters.

In recent years, "A Cowboy's Prayer" has received enough recognition to ensure its place in western literature, and the more recent the publication, the more likely Clark's name will appear as the author. The poem has been read into the *Congressional Record* twice, once on 14 April 1982 by Senator Larry Pressler, and once on 21 January 1943 by Representative Robertson of Virginia, who read the poem in its entirety and then proclaimed its author anonymous. This was too much for South Dakota Representative Francis Case, who had known the poet for thirty years and was a close personal friend. On the House floor on 22 February 1943, Case took the opportunity to state publicly the author's identity and to recite Clark's biography and excerpts from half a dozen of his poems.

Fans of Badger Clark may be surprised to learn that his most published poem is not "A Cowboy's Prayer" but "The Glory Trail." "The Legend of Boastful Bill" has probably been heard by as many high-school declam coaches as "Casey at the Bat" or "The Village Blacksmith." "Cottonwood Leaves" and "Pioneers" are also frequent inclusions in poetry anthologies for public speakers.

While Badger Clark entertained a broad range of interests throughout his life, there were certain periods when he became more vocal about one subject or another. His early career, from 1906 to approximately 1920, was devoted almost entirely to the writing of paeans to the Old West. During this time, he spent four years ranching in Arizona, and the experience prompted him to preserve the obviously disappearing way of life in verse. The entirety of his first two volumes of verse (*Sun and Saddle Leather* and *Grass Grown Trails*, later combined under the first name) were written during this period.

In 1921, Clark began traveling, sometimes thousands of miles from his home in Hot Springs, and a nostalgia for the Black Hills and the solid, rural people of South Dakota became apparent in his writing. Clark curtailed his Chautauqua touring in 1924 in order to be nearer his home territory, but poems honoring the area continued to flow from his pen. Clark's conversation always reflected a keen interest in politics and world affairs, and he was likely to fire off a pointed letter-to-the-editor about some inequity at any time after 1925, when he settled permanently in Custer

State Park. His political poems and articles, however, tended to concentrate around war years and cold-war years.

There was also a period in which Clark's writing could be called introspective. As a young man on the range and on the prestigious Chautauqua circuit, Clark had little inclination toward reflection. With "Myself and I" in 1929, however, he began to write on more serious subjects in poems that were often personal and usually involved a spiritual quest of some kind. "I Must Come Back" belongs in this period, as do "An Oldster Muses" and "On Reaching Sixty-five." Oddly enough, this period does not stretch to the end of his life. Around 1947, his output of poetry dropped dramatically as Clark turned to prose, particularly historical writing. His last known poem is called "The Last Divide" (1956), but rather than expressing spiritual feelings about impending death, the poem comments humorously on modern-day contraptions—in this case a tape recorder—that can provide a glimmer of immortality. Although Clark never considered himself a religious man, he was highly spiritual, and enough of his poems reflect this strong faith to make up an entire anthology published in 1981 by the Black Hills United Methodist Historical Society and entitled *God of the Open*. "God Meets Me in the Mountains," "God's Reserve," and "Meditation" are only a few titles included in this grouping.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Clark produced poems on subjects of a topical or local nature. As South Dakota's poet laureate, he was expected to come up with an appropriate verse for numerous civic affairs. Such an event was the dedication of a bridge spanning the Cheyenne River in 1932, for which he wrote "You're Hog-Tied, Old Cheyenne." Other poems were written in response to news events (Clark was not particularly fond of Franklin D. Roosevelt and managed to work criticisms of the prominent Democrat into several poems), in honor of local heroes ("To the Custer Fire Department"), or to poke fun at ungrammatical composers of South Dakota highway signs ("Road Signs" received widespread publicity and prompted a movement to have the signs corrected).

The largest category of Clark's verse, and the one that best characterizes the body of his work, is that of wildlife and nature poems. Many of the works produced in his early career belong in this category. During his thirty-three years in Custer State Park, Clark also came in daily contact with the animals residing in his immediate neighborhood, and he regularly hiked through the forest on his way to chop firewood and fetch water. Thus, during

his later career, he wrote "Badlands," "Birch Fire," "The Buck," "Dancing Pines," "Deer Trails," "The Free Wind," "In the Hills," "Prairie Wind," "Romeo Elk," "The Smoke Blue Plains," "Tiger Lilies," "The Young Land," and "Woodsmoke," among others, to celebrate his life style and his surroundings.

In light of the wide variety of subjects that Clark wrote about, this researcher finds it difficult to sanction the popular descriptions of Clark as "Cowboy Poet" and "Poet Lariat." He was a far more complex individual than we have given him credit for being — or than he himself might have acknowledged — and the body of his work, when examined as a whole for the first time, reveals a many faceted artist who often disguised the depth of his vision in folksy verses about the comfortable Old West. Clark's poetry can be appreciated on two levels: the images and rhythms of the range that invoke a simpler way of life, and the underlying statement, often a warning, that urges us to bring our behavior into line with the traditions and values of earlier peoples who lived close to the earth. In his own lifetime, Clark appeared to be an anachronism. His way of life and his subject matter seemed nostalgically quaint but hopelessly out of step with the emerging twentieth century. Today, some twenty-seven years after his death, his spare images and honest tales seem even further from the world as we know it. Yet, his popularity is growing, not waning, suggesting that there is substance to his writing beyond its chronicling of a place and time in American history.

Though Badger Clark loved his work and called his poems his "children," a researcher soon learns that Clark was none too careful about where his family was going or when it would be back. It has been left to Clark's literary and cultural heirs to pick up the cold trail and locate the wandering offspring of his pen. The annotated bibliography now in preparation is the first step toward gathering Clark's children home and assuring that his literary legacy will be accorded the recognition it deserves.

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