

SAM RAGAN

SAM RAGAN

North Carolina's Literary Godfather

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To my wife, Beth

*Journeys together, quiet times, your laughter,
The light in your eyes,
And the pure sounds of a flute—
I carry them all with me.*

To Ollie Lee Bowling IV

*Around the bend in the road,
The next mountain, the next river, the next ocean,
Telling us of the wonders beyond,
Of a man's journey into those wonders.*

To Bonnie

*These are the markings that I make—
The trees now gold that will be green again,
The slope of land to where the willows grow
Along a stream that flows to woods
Where birds now fly.
I make the markings with my eye.
For I have not traveled this road before,
And the markings I make are to remember it by.*

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Acknowledgments

Like Sam Ragan, I am from Granville County, North Carolina. We both grew up in small tobacco farming communities, he in Berea and me in Providence. Berea and Providence are just a few miles apart. For some years now, I have written a history column called *Looking Back* in the *Oxford Public Ledger*. So I have been referring to Sam Ragan, and Thad Stem for that matter, in *Looking Back* with pride, as two writers and poets we are mighty proud to have come from our section of the state. I hope this book does justice to the Berea Bard who did so much for literature in North Carolina.

I would like to thank my wife, Beth Bowling, for her assistance with this book. As with my previous books, she has been my editor, proofreader, sounding board, technology adviser, poem interpreter, and problem solver. Every book I have written, Beth has been right there alongside me. She is the love of my life.

I got my love of reading from my mother, Mary Bowling, who today at the age of 92 can still be seen walking through the aisles of books in the Richard H. Thornton Library in Oxford trying to decide on books to take home. My sister, Bonnie, gives me inspiration every time I see her as she battles a disease that will not let her do some of the things she once did, but she smiles right on through it. My other sisters, Martha and Deborah, and my brother, Lee, have always been there for me also. Two of my sisters, Dale and Phyllis, have passed away but are not forgotten. And my father, O.L. Bowling Jr., was a tobacco farmer just like the Ragan family was in Berea and Johnston County, and although he didn't write poetry, he sure liked to look at "green growing fields."

This is not my first book with Carolina Academic Press, and hopefully not my last. My editor, Ryland Bowman, has guided and helped me all the way through, and I am most appreciative. Linda Lacy at Carolina Academic Press has always been very helpful and encouraging with my books there.

The Sam Ragan Papers are housed in the Southern Historical Collection on the University of North Carolina campus in Chapel Hill, and I want to thank the staff there for their assistance. I also spent time in the Richard H. Thornton Library in Oxford and the Southern Pines Public Library. The Southern Pines Public Library has bound copies of *The Pilot*, which were so useful in seeing Ragan at work as a newspaperman. *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, *The Pilot* in Southern Pines, and the *Oxford Public Ledger* offered many articles about Sam Ragan and articles and columns written by Sam Ragan. In *Pembroke Magazine* and *St. Andrews Review* were many articles and references to Ragan.

I want to thank very sincerely the family of Sam Ragan. Talmadge Ragan and Nancy Ragan, his daughters, and Robin Smith and Eric Smith, his grandchildren, were most helpful. They helped me get to know Ragan as a father, as a grandfather, as a husband, and what he was like away from the office. I turned to them many times, and they always answered me promptly and with informative details. Talmadge even gave me one of Ragan's bow ties, and Nancy and Robin gave me a personal notepad that belonged to Ragan, both gifts I treasure. I also very much enjoyed talking on the phone with Dorothy Ragan Jones, the last surviving sister of Sam Ragan's. What a joy it was to talk with her, and I learned so much more about her beloved brother. Jim Austin and Jerrod Rogers, both family members, were also very helpful.

But to Talmadge, Nancy, and Robin, especially, I could not have written this book without your support and help. You really made me feel like a member of the Ragan family.

Shelby Stephenson, Marsha Warren, and Clyde Edgerton wrote tributes to Ragan for this book. All three of these writers are enshrined in the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, and they wanted to honor Sam Ragan and did so very movingly with their words dedicated to a man they admired so much.

Elizabeth Spencer is a legend in the writing community of North Carolina, just like Sam Ragan. I visited Mrs. Spencer in her home in Chapel Hill on several occasions, and she always greeted me with a warm smile and an outstretched hand. She was glad to talk about Sam Ragan, and would always steer my comments about her work away from the conversation. Mrs. Spencer offered me lots of encouragement on this book. And what a pleasure it was to sit next to someone and listen to stories about

people she knew, such as William Faulkner, Robert Frost, and, of course, Sam Ragan.

Lois Holt shared her thoughts of “Mr. Ragan” with me and allowed me to use both a poem she wrote and an article she wrote about a man she will never forget. Stephen Smith met with me, as did Glenn Sides. They gave me some real insights into Sam Ragan as a poet and as a newspaperman.

Katrina Denza and Dotty Starling at the Weymouth Center for the Arts and Humanities were very helpful, and the archives at Weymouth yielded papers with good information. Weymouth also has copies of *Southern Accent*, Ragan’s longtime literary column, published in *The Pilot* newspaper, and these columns gave me much material for this book. Dotty Starling, Weymouth’s Archivist, arranged extra hours so I could have access to these copies, for which I am very thankful. Weymouth also had pictures.

Other individuals who helped me were Charles Blackburn, Christine Ganis, Alice Osborn, Ed Southern, Ted Wojtasik, Dr. John Dempsey, Rebecca Godwin, Faye Dasen, Alan Butler, June Guralnick, Mae Woods Bell, Charles Fiore, Todd Johnson, Howie DeVane, and Marilyn Bridgeman. Charles Blackburn deserves so much credit for making the copies of *Southern Accent* available with ready access at Weymouth. Charles always answered my emails and encouraged me along the way.

Marguerite “Dety” Stem and I visited quite often in her Raleigh apartment before she passed away in 2012. Mrs. Stem was the wife of the writer Thad Stem, and they were good friends to Sam and Marjorie Ragan, so I heard a lot about Sam Ragan before I started writing this book. Mrs. Stem edited one of my previous books, on Alabama and Duke football coach Wallace Wade. She was a tough editor, but I sure wish she had been around to edit this book on Sam Ragan. I know she would have been pleased to see this book published, as she had told me more than once this was a book long overdue.

Governor Jim Hunt talked with me on the phone about Ragan, and offered a blurb for the book. Governor Hunt gave North Carolina such long and distinguished years of service, and one of his best decisions was to appoint Sam Ragan North Carolina Poet Laureate. But he just might be a nicer man than he was a good politician.

My wife and I once attended a church service in Plains, Georgia, given by President Jimmy Carter, and had a picture taken with him and wife Rosalynn. President Carter answered my letter to him about Sam Ragan, and

I must say it was quite a thrill to receive a letter from a former president, especially a man I admire such as President Carter.

Anne Russell is a lady who really offered much information about Ragan, and was a delight to talk to and write to. There can't be a sweeter lady in all of Southern Pines than Jane McPhaul. I met Jane in her home and she told me many things about Ragan. It was a most enjoyable visit.

David Woronoff as publisher continues today to make *The Pilot* newspaper in Southern Pines one of the absolute best newspapers in North Carolina and the nation. *The Pilot*, under David's leadership, was named in 2015, 2016, and 2017 the best community newspaper in the nation by the National Newspaper Association. I talked to David in his office as he sat behind the desk that once belonged to Sam Ragan. All along the way in writing this book, David offered and gave his support.

I talked with Frank Daniels Jr. on the phone a couple of times and he gave me his remembrances of Ragan and offered his support. Daniels is a former publisher of *The News and Observer* of Raleigh and chairman of *The Pilot*. The Daniels family is legendary in North Carolina journalism.

Mark Pace at the Richard H. Thornton Library in Oxford, North Carolina, has helped me with several of my books, and he did so again. Mark is a treasure to Granville County, just as Sam Ragan from Berea is.

If Jane McPhaul is the nicest lady in Southern Pines, Ron Bayes would get the honor for nicest man in Laurinburg, North Carolina. I met with Ron where he was residing in a retirement village and had a delightful conversation with him about Sam Ragan, a man he knew so well and admired so very much. As founder and director of St. Andrews Press and the *St. Andrews Review*, Bayes worked closely with Ragan for many years. A distinguished poet like Ragan, Ron gave me many insights into what made Ragan North Carolina's Literary Godfather.

Forewords by Shelby Stephenson, Marsha Warren,
Clyde Edgerton, and Lois Holt

Shelby Stephenson

Shelby Stephenson was born in Benson. He spent many years teaching at UNC-Pembroke and served as the editor of *Pembroke Magazine*. Stephenson has written many books of poetry, and was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2014. In 2015 he was chosen as the North Carolina Poet Laureate and served in that role until 2018. Stephenson knew Sam Ragan well as a friend and fellow poet.

Sam Ragan: Granville County to the World

Sam Ragan wore the literary community like a cloak settling comfortably over the whole wide world. Writers and poets live in his occasional poems to Flannery O'Connor, Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Ibsen, Martin Luther King, Randall Jarrell, Paul Green, O. Henry, Thad Stem, Guy Owen, Yevtushenko, Ronald H. Bayes, and scores of others.

His life and writings deal with recurring subjects: the Depression (Sam was born in 1915), poverty, mules, newspapers, politicians, soldiers, historians, poets and writers. His attitude beams onward, as his life and work evoke living history.

He served as Poet Laureate from 1982–1996. His laureateship was a lifetime appointment.

In 2018 Sam Ragan was inducted into the Cleveland High School Hall of Fame. I was asked to help represent him. I read the poem I wrote for him.

Sam Ragan: In Memoriam (December 31, 1915–May 11, 1996)
How glad I am that my high school helped move your hand toward
journalism and poetry and
democracy with a little “d.” Cleveland High School: *This land of ours
is full of schools, schools both*

*great and small; when it comes to praising them, why my school beats
them all.* I’m proud you
graduated from my Johnston County school. I’m sorry your family
lost the farm in Granville, around

Berea, Shake Rag, Stem. You came to Bailey’s Crossroads, lived near
Ebenezer Church, among the
Ogburns; your love of words showered acres, snuffling the burning
crosses. Hope was your story,

lyric, svelte. Poverty? You wrote in “That Summer”: “A wild turkey
flew out of the woods / And
even if it was out of season / He fed a family for two days. / And it
was better than that mud turtle /

That looked like mud and tasted like mud.” I loved to walk into your
office piled high with papers.
You’d peer over them, rise, jingle some change in your pocket and
say, “Well, what do you know?”

“On a scale of one to five, Sam, about minus two,” I’d say. Your
vacations you took in your office,
mostly. Sunday mornings? When I’d drive by, I’d see your Buick
parked beside *The Pilot*.

From his early years in Granville County and in the years afterward,
when he became a public figure, an editor and teacher, and promoter of
the arts, his clarity of passion influenced and inspired generations of writ-
ers. Sam Ragan’s vision for the arts continues to form and shake affir-
mation in a never-ending song which lingers in the hearts and minds of
human beings everywhere. — *Shelby Stephenson*

Marsha Warren

Marsha Warren was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2018. Warren was Executive Director of the North Carolina Writers Network from 1987 to 1996. In 1991 she was named director of the Paul Green Foundation. Warren has won many awards, including the Sam Ragan Award for Contributions to the Fine Arts, the John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities, and the R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for Lifetime Contributions to Literature.

When you're asked to write something about Sam Ragan, how do you begin? And where? I think about Sam a lot—he's been vividly in my consciousness since he left us in 1996—that's 23 years ago now. It seems to me that he hasn't evaporated or even faded—he's as vibrant today as he was when he walked among us bow-tied and smiling in his handsome straw hat. I know that's true of everyone who's ever met him; ever been touched by his kindness; ever been privileged to have his counsel and support.

So where does one begin? Is it with his voluminous outpouring of poems; his fierce dedication to solid, truth-telling journalism at *The News and Observer* as managing editor; then, and I love this image—"taking his 1941 manual Royal typewriter with him to Southern Pines," to be publisher and editor at *The Pilot*. How about as the state's first Secretary of Cultural Resources; the first chairman of the North Carolina Arts Council; or as a teacher at North Carolina State University, Sandhills Community College and St. Andrews College? Those accomplishments are all part of his incredible biography on Wikipedia and in numerous other sources. So, I'll just recall the man I knew as Sam Ragan and the nurturing impact he had on the literary community of writers—all of us—beginners to well-published writers.

Sam was our literary godfather, and everyone knew it and we counted on him. I once referred to him in a talk I gave when St. Andrews Press honored Sam for his "lifelong contributions to the literary magazines and small presses of North Carolina," as North Carolina's "Literary Lion"—that nothing ever got past him that would harm literature and that he had the courage to speak clearly to the

protection and value of literature. We writers rallied-round Sam when he established the annual Poetry Day at Weymouth—he introduced us and made us feel welcomed and accomplished. In Sam’s “Southern Accent” (the nation’s longest running literary column) in *The Pilot* he included poems of new writers he’d recently met; railed against lack of funding for the National Endowment for the Arts; scolded communities that banned books; reported on literary events all over the state and much, much more. In 1982, when Sam was named North Carolina Poet Laureate, he continued doing what he’d always done—even more so—but now it was official. I had the good fortune of working closely with Sam while I was director of the North Carolina Writers’ Network from 1987–1996—Sam served on my Board of Advisers. But I would have met him as early as 1978 when I became acquainted with the North Carolina literary community—first at the Friday Noon Poets’ gatherings at the Red Barron Restaurant in Carrboro and shortly after that at the NC Poetry Society meetings at Weymouth and all over the state and at the North Carolina Writers Conference.

Sam will be remembered for many reasons and one of his most impactful to North Carolina was the support he gave Southern Pines resident Elizabeth “Buffie” Ives (Adlai’s sister and long-time friend of Katharine Boyd) as she worked to raise \$700,000 to purchase Weymouth, the former home of James and Katharine Boyd—a 215-acre estate, and to form The Friends of Weymouth. With the support of many generous people in the Sandhills and around the state, the Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities was incorporated in 1977 and two years later, the Writers-in-Residence program was established. Writers would come to stay in the Boyd’s former home and hear echoes of the many literary voices that resounded in the spacious rooms. Sam told us the stories of these great writers who had come to visit the Boyds and to stay and write—he regaled us with the colorful story of Thomas Wolfe’s late-night entry into the house through a window, having walked up from the train station, only to be discovered the next morning draped across several sofas—all 6’6” of him. Sam told us about the times that James Boyd and his best friend, Paul Green, would take turns writing in his study—one reciting, while pacing the room, and the other sitting on

the couch inscribing and then trading places. He reminded us about the extraordinary literary legacy North Carolina was fortunate to inherit as a result of Jonathan Daniel's declaration that "Weymouth was the site of the Southern Literary Renaissance." So just as Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Paul Green, Maxwell Perkins, Lawrence Stallings and John Galsworthy, and maybe even — Sam was never quite sure — William Faulkner came to write, so writers today come to write. Sam knew that as we celebrated the writers who came before us that now we would be expected and charged to become a legacy for the next generations.

Sometime before 1992, Sam got the notion that North Carolina should have a Center for the Book like some other states had, and, as part of that program, we would establish a literary hall of fame. He had in mind a building in downtown Southern Pines about to be vacated, but the cost to bring it to ADA compliance wasn't feasible so James Boyd's former study at Weymouth was selected, and we began our work. After much deliberation and planning, the North Carolina Writers' Network, with the cooperation of the Weymouth Center, help from many writers in the state and financial support from the Department of Cultural Resources, and with Sam at the helm, we were able to set up the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 1996 — it would be Sam's last and greatest gift to the State. Sam died just one week before the first induction ceremony on May 18, 1996 for 15 deceased writers — our strong literary legacy — hand-picked by Sam Ragan. We were in touch with David Brinkley (who Sam had given his first newspaper job in Wilmington) and he sent a video tribute for that first induction ceremony on the Weymouth grounds beneath the flowering cherry trees. Sam was inducted the next year.

In 2004 a "Bring Sam Home" campaign was launched to purchase the \$25,000 bronze bust of Sam sculpted some years before, in Sam's office at *The Pilot*, by acclaimed sculptor Gretta Bader. In 2005, we celebrated with a "Welcome Sam Home" gala at Weymouth. Sam resides right there in the front entry of Weymouth watching out for all of us — and you can hear him say to us in spirit, as he had in life, "Writing poetry is a journey and the journey counts — not getting there." — *Marsha Warren*

Clyde Edgerton

Clyde Edgerton was born in Durham and graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill. He is a professor at UNC-Wilmington, and wrote his first book, *Raney*, in 1985. Two of his books, *Walking Across Egypt* and *Killer Diller*, have been made into films. Along with being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, Edgerton was selected for the North Carolina Award for Literature. He wrote the following about Sam Ragan.

I lived in Pinehurst across from the harness racing track from about summer of 1985 to the summer of 1986. I'd heard of Sam Ragan because he'd sort of blazed the way as North Carolina's first Cultural Secretary and I knew he was a poet. I think I met him through either Shelby Stephenson or Steve Smith, or both of them. There would be literary gatherings here and there and especially at Weymouth Center. I'd come out with my first novel in the spring of '85, and was writing my second, and looked up to him as a sort of state celebrity and poet at the same time. He had a kind of gentlemanly swash-buckling presence — with an ever-present bow tie and a twinkle in his eye and an almost-smile constantly on his face — waiting to break into a smile. He was always ready to laugh, or patiently listen to a story, or tell a story.

He seemed to have no favorites among younger writers — there was a calmness and steadiness and an almost skinny-tall-man-Buddha-like quality about him. I was always happy to see him and I would pop in occasionally to *The Pilot* newspaper office in Southern Pines to say hello to him and Marjorie. He'd welcome me and I'd marvel at the great pile of books and newspapers and slips of paper (and in my memory, the kitchen sink) on his desk. And I was always impressed by the weight and thickness of each *Pilot* newspaper. He was a kind of guiding, literary spirit of Southern Pines and Pinehurst, totally void of any hint of rancor or ill will.

After leaving Southern Pines, I saw him less, of course, but when we did cross paths I always felt his warmth and good will. And his poetry was steady and matter of fact, and so beautifully and almost-stoically non-academic. — *Clyde Edgerton*

Lois Holt

Lois Holt is an award-winning poet and writer. She is a past President of the North Carolina Poetry Society and past Chair of the North Carolina Writers Conference. Holt received the 2009 Sam Ragan Literary Award. She has written many columns for *The Pilot* newspaper in Southern Pines. The one following was written in 2011 about Sam Ragan. It was titled “The People Who Change Our Lives.”

It may be just my imagination, but I’m beginning to think that more and more of the men in my life are wearing bow ties.

If I tried to pinpoint it, this subconscious observation started in March when the North Carolina Poetry Society held its annual “Sam Ragan Day” at Weymouth Center. I have seldom missed one and always look forward to seeing my poet friends wearing outlandish, homemade paper bow ties in memory of the honoree.

There was a great deal of excitement about on that second Saturday. But the most noticeable difference was that all the men were wearing real bow ties. My mind went into instant replay.

Both of my parents worked in Erwin Cotton Mill, in Durham, during the Great Depression. My father was a loom fixer, my mother, a weaver.

There were no luxuries and little spare time. But they had finished grade school and could read and write, and each had their fair share of common sense.

My father referenced the Bible for encouragement and inspiration and, for knowledge, a set of Funk and Wagnalls encyclopedias, which he read with the same enthusiasm and earnestness.

One other book, *Great English and American Poems*, was treasured by my mother. By the time I was 6 or 7, I could recite her favorites: “Annabel Lee,” Christina Rossetti’s “Sonnet,” and, forever mine, Alfred Noyes’ “The Highwayman.”

Somehow, over the years, the encyclopedias and the book vanished. Still, I thought of my mother as being a poet and believed that I might become one.

It would be the early 1960s before I moved to Raleigh and would read a column in *The News and Observer* called *Southern Accent*. I

followed it and later submitted a poem to a smaller insert, “Today’s N.C. Poem.” Shortly after that, I saw an article about a writers’ workshop being held at North Carolina State College (now the university). All three were identified with the paper’s executive and managing editor, Sam Ragan — someone I had yet to meet.

To this day, I can remember that first evening, my hesitation and then a knowing fascination when I first saw the man sitting at the end of the table. His hair, graying even then, was combed straight back to end at the nape of his neck. And, at his throat, he wore an enormous bow tie.

There were brilliant writers in that class, and all were self-assured and seemed to be old friends. But I wondered how they would call him “Sam” with such familiarity when he was in appearance and manner the embodiment of everything revered as being Southern.

I have never pondered over or questioned the significance of the subsequent events. It was, simply put, a major turning point in my life.

It was with his encouragement that I joined the North Carolina Poetry Society. I accepted his invitation to be a writer-in-residence at Weymouth Center in Southern Pines and membership in the North Carolina Writers Conference.

I became a member of the North Carolina Writers Network and the North Carolina Poetry Council. I went to workshops and countless poetry readings. I studied style and meter. I bought books at book tables. And I read poem after poem.

More than 50 years have passed since that remarkable evening in Raleigh. Have I gone on to achieve fame, fortune and literary acclaim? No. But, I once met a man born with a love for learning and literature who made a mark by knowing his “sense of place.”

In March, the editor of this paper portrayed that same silver-haired man and will repeat the celebrated performance at 5 p.m. Friday, May 13, at Weymouth Center. He was strikingly handsome in a sweater vest, long-sleeved white shirt and, of course, a bow tie. And, for a short while, we were both transformed.

Sam Ragan, a bow tie and fedora hat man who this month, on the 15th anniversary of his death, remains beloved by all who knew and were known by him. — *Lois Holt*

Lois Holt also wrote a poem about Sam Ragan:

For Sam Ragan

He is the South

as it was, is and should be,

mint julips and magnolias

textiles and tobacco.

He leans against the gate at #2 Mill

to watch the change of shifts

and listens to the slappin' of looms

tended by one humped

from years of watching the shuttle;

moves on to the Bull City

and the smell of the Bright Leaf,

swearing and swatting at tobacco bugs

on days when even the church fan

won't stir the air.

A little to the south now,

simmering sawdust

and jigsawed stacks of green lumber

set out to age like good wine.

He is the flaunted flame of azalea

on the sun-white of Southport,

the blushing bloom of dogwood

in my beloved Piedmont.

He is Boone, Little Washington

and Chocowinity,

overalls and chewing tobacco

black tie and tails

the dignity of Biltmore.

He is the South

as it was, is and should be.

Introduction

H. L. Mencken, the famed journalist and cultural critic, didn't like to pull his punches. He would rather give you a punch to the gut with everything he could put behind it. And that is what he gave the South in 1917 with his essay "The Sahara of the Bozart." Bozart was a pun on how he thought Southerners pronounced "beaux-arts." As far as he was concerned, the South was as sterile as the Sahara Desert. Mencken singled out the South as the most intellectually and culturally barren region of the country. He claimed that most Southerners' poetry and prose was not worth the paper it was printed on.

To say the least, Southerners tend to defend themselves when attacked. What is known as the Southern Literary Renaissance was the South's response in part to Mencken's diatribe. The 1920s and 1930s saw an invigoration of Southern literature. William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and many others led the way.

In North Carolina, James Boyd, living in a grand house in Southern Pines called Weymouth, wrote the novel, *Drums*, published in 1925, about the American Revolution. Some look at this book as one of the opening salvos against Mencken, certainly it showed that good literature was being produced in the Tar Heel state. Thomas Wolfe would start to put North Carolina on the literary map even more in 1929 with the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. In 1930, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and other writers, all with roots in the Southern United States, united together to write a pro-Southern book, *I'll Take My Stand*.

But literature was being produced in North Carolina well before the Southern Literary Renaissance. One of the first books of poetry printed in North Carolina, if not the first, was James Gay's *Collection of Various Pieces of Poetry*, in 1810. George Moses Horton, a slave in Chatham County, in 1829 wrote *The Hope of Liberty*, a book of poems that is one of the first books by a black author from the South.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Massachusetts, published a well-known essay in 1844 called “The Poet.” In it Emerson called for America to produce a higher quality poetry than what existed in that time. “The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune.” In 1854, the first anthology of North Carolina poets appeared: *Wood-Notes; or, Carolina Carols: A Collection of North Carolina Poetry*.

Of course, poetry was written in what is now America well before Emerson’s essay. Anne Bradstreet, a member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, came with other English to live in America in 1630. One of Bradstreet’s more endearing poems was “To My Dear and Loving Husband.” It begins, “If ever two were one, then surely we. If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.” Phillis Wheatley, a slave, published her first book of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773.

Perhaps America’s greatest poet, Walt Whitman, published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Whitman wrote that great poets can craft words that will help ease a nation from its troubles and create a better atmosphere for its people.

Even though Sam Ragan used words much more sparingly than Walt Whitman, compared to Whitman’s extravagance of rhetoric, I think the two poets had some of the same philosophy. Of course, neither used rhyme as their style; they both thought that rhyme, as a literary device, could limit the meaning behind poems. As Leonard Wheeler wrote to Whitman, in praise of the free verse of Whitman, “O pure heart singer of the human frame divine, whose poesy disdains control of slavish bonds!” They believed a poet’s style of writing revealed the human condition, and in much of each man’s poetry that was the goal. Like Whitman, Ragan liked to use language that was more open-ended, which both thought would appeal to more people. Ragan believed that a poem should reveal meanings in human experience expressed in precise terms. He thought that too much modern poetry used extravagant and obscure language. Ragan thought poetry reached readers better when concrete words were used instead of abstract words. Using free verse, more like natural speech, Ragan and Whitman thought poetry would be better understood. Ragan believed in writing poetry that was accessible to most readers. He thought poetry should not be a luxury for a privileged few, but a gift for everyone. He once said, “I love the English language too much to waste words.”

Robert Frost once said that he saw in free verse “an excessive glorification of freedom over structure.” And he made the well-known comment that writing with free verse “was like playing tennis without a net.”

Carl Sandburg, in his upper floor study in his majestic home high in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, certainly agreed with Ragan that some poetry was too wordy, too abstract. “I say to hell with the new poetry. They don’t want to say what it means. They have symbols and abstractions and a code amongst themselves—sometimes I think it’s a series of ear wiggings.”

Economy of words would not only be found in Ragan’s poetry, but also would be a trait he would constantly admonish his reporters at *The News and Observer* in Raleigh and *The Pilot* in Southern Pines to be aware of. Ragan told his reporters to get the most news into the fewest possible words. He challenged reporters to “boil down,” to compress their stories.

Sam Ragan’s politics permeated his poetry, the reality of his life forged his words, and his family is found in his gentler lines. Just as Ragan’s poetry came from his life experiences, Carl Sandburg’s did also. Sandburg, whom Ragan knew, once wrote, “Poetry is written out of tumults and paradoxes, terrible reckless struggle and glorious lazy loafing, out of blood, work and war and out of baseball, babies and potato blossoms.”

Sam Ragan felt a writer had an obligation to speak to their times. Ragan certainly did this, in his prose, speeches, and poetry. In his *Southern Accent* newspaper columns Ragan praised and critiqued local and national writers, wrote against censorship, supported humanitarian causes, and promoted the state he lived in and loved with all his heart, North Carolina. And poems such as “Notes on the Margins of Our Times,” “The Day Kennedy was Shot,” “We Shall Overcome,” “My Old Mule Is Dead,” and “The Depression,” among many others, spoke to the times Ragan lived in and experienced.

Economy of words is a constant in a Sam Ragan poem. A book that had a profound effect on Ragan was Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology*, in which Masters used free verse poetry. His study of William Butler Yeats influenced Ragan in this regard also. Yeats advocated stripping artificial things from poetry to form a “style like speech. Poetry that is naturally simple, that might exist as the simplest prose, should have instantaneousness of effect.”

Read the poems of Sam Ragan. You will see the great gift he had to see and then convey the magic in an ordinary moment. With his poetry and prose, Ragan makes the ordinary seem extraordinary.

Whitman once wrote: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” Of course I make no comparison to the country absorbing Whitman as it has to Sam Ragan as a poet, even though two of Ragan’s poetry books were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. But for sure, I can say North Carolina absorbed Sam Ragan as affectionately as he absorbed North Carolina. My goodness, the man loved the Tar Heel state, and his state loved this Southern gentleman.

Betty Smith, a friend of Ragan’s who lived much of her life in Chapel Hill, and author of the bestselling book *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*, once wrote about attributes of writers. What she wrote was a good description of Ragan as a writer, who believed strongly that his prose and poetry came from his experiences from daily living. “A writer is made up of hope, fear, elation, grief, greed, generosity, kindness, cruelty and all the emotions that are common to man. He is by turned bruised and strengthened by the terrific impact of living. But he has that intangible, wonderful something that makes him selectively articulate about all these things and enables him to find the words to write about them and about all the things pulled out of his very life.” As you read this book, I think you will see in so many examples that Ragan’s prose and poetry were related to events and people he experienced in his “very life.”

Slowly in North Carolina a higher quality poetry began to be produced. In 1883, John Henry Boner published *Whispering Pines*. James Boyd, author of *Drums*, also wrote outstanding poetry. John Charles McNeill was a noted poet who was the first winner of the Patterson Cup for Literary Excellence in North Carolina. His book of poems, *Songs Merry and Sad*, was published in 1906. The North Carolina Poetry Society was formed in 1932, and in 1950 the North Carolina Writers Conference was started, in which Ragan played a role in forming. In the 1940s, colleges started to welcome poets to their teaching staffs. Some of these were Randall Jarrell at the Woman’s College at the University of North Carolina, now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Helen Bevington at Duke, and Charles Edward Eaton at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Bernice Kelly Harris, one of the most noted novelists from North Carolina, spoke about the rise of good literature in the state in 1954.

Southerners do write—probably they must write. It is the way they are: born readers and reciters, great document holders, diary keep-

ers, letter exchangers and savers, history tracers—and, outstaying the rest, great talkers. Children who grow up listening through rewarding stretches of unhurried time, reading in big lonely rooms, are naturally more prone than other children to be entertained from the first by life and to feel free, encouraged, and then in no time compelled, to pass their pleasure on.

Place must have something to do with this fury of writing with which the South is charged. If one thing stands out in these writers, all quite different from another, it is that each feels passionately about Place. And not merely in the historical and prideful meaning of the word, but in the sensory meaning, the breathing world of sight and smell and sound, in its earth and water and sky, its time and its seasons. In being so moved, the Southerners—one could almost indisputably say—are unique in America today.

Sam Ragan echoed some of what Harris spoke about when he once commented on writers from the South.

Place is important to me. I think that it's important to most Southern writers. Malcolm Cowley, one of the best of the literary critics, has said there are three distinguishing characteristics about Southern literature that made it dominant over any other literature in the country, a strong sense of place, the strong sense of family, and a strong oral quality. That Southern writers wrote just like they were talking to you on the front porch or around a fireplace on a winter evening.

North Carolina poetry and prose writing started to grow in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Into this era came Sam Ragan, who started his newspaper career in the 1930s. Ragan became very influential in North Carolina journalism in 1941 after being named as state editor of *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, one of the largest and most noted papers in the state. But he really started to influence writing in North Carolina in a big way in 1948 when he first published his *Southern Accent* newspaper column.

Southern Accent would run from 1948 to 1996, 48 years. Ragan's prose was, like his poetry, clear and concise, but also very engaging. Many North Carolina writers had their books publicized by Ragan in this column, and many saw their poems in print for the first time here. Reynolds Price,

while still in high school, stayed up all night he was so excited, because he wanted to get a newspaper the next morning knowing he would be seeing his name in *Southern Accent*. It was a rare column when Ragan didn't mention one of the literary magazines in the state or one of the book publishers. Ragan used *Southern Accent* to praise, and in some instances, criticize, North Carolina authors. Writers from around the state, and indeed the country, knew *Southern Accent* would keep them up-to-date on North Carolina literature. *Southern Accent* included literary criticism and social commentary.

As the Director of the North Carolina Arts Council in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ragan distributed funds to the literary magazines, many of which were getting started and in much need of money. He also doled out money to small presses in the state. During this time, Ragan started the Poetry-in-the-Schools program, which sent writers into public schools for week-long residencies.

While with *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, Ragan published a "poem of the week." Ragan devoted at least two full pages, sometimes more, to literary efforts from around the state each week in *The Pilot*. There would be book reviews, mostly of books of North Carolina authors reviewed by North Carolina authors. Poems, columns, articles, and stories written by North Carolina writers would be on these pages. The book pages in *The Pilot* gave local and state authors a place to publish their poems, to write an article, to get paid for a book review.

Teaching writing was a passion for Ragan, which he did at North Carolina State University, St. Andrews University in Laurinburg, North Carolina, and Sandhills Community College in Pinehurst. Students of Ragan's published more than 50 books of prose and poetry.

For most of his career, Ragan traveled the state, moderating poetry and writing events, such as the annual Writers Roundtable. He made hundreds of speeches about literature and promoted North Carolina literary happenings. He did this in the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s, and even more after being chosen as North Carolina Poet Laureate in 1982, a post he held until his death in 1996. As Secretary of Cultural Resources in the early 1970s, he used the position to promote arts throughout the state. He contributed to the formation of the North Carolina Writers Network in 1985.

Ragan was the prime mover behind the establishment of the James and Katharine Boyd estate into what is today the Weymouth Center for the Arts

and Humanities in Southern Pines. The writers-in-residence program at Weymouth was started by Ragan, offering writers a refuge to pursue their writing projects. The North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, housed in the former study of James Boyd in an upstairs room at Weymouth, was the brainchild of Ragan.

Sam Ragan would light up when you called him a newspaperman, and it was as a journalist, editor, and publisher that he made great contributions also. He once said: "Newspaper work has interested me from way back. In newspaper work, you are an observer, and you are on the scene, and you touch everything that's important." As editor of *The News and Observer* in Raleigh and *The Pilot* in Southern Pines, he made his mark in those fields. Stanley Walker was an editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and in an essay on "A Good Newspaperman" he wrote about qualities Ragan exhibited. "He knows everything. He is not only handsome, but he has the physical strength which enables him to perform great feats of energy. He can go for nights on end without sleep. He dresses well and talks with charm. Men admire him; women adore him. He hates lies, meanness and sham but keeps his temper. He is loyal to his paper and to what he looks upon as his profession; whether it is a profession or merely a craft, he resents attempts to debase it." Walker didn't have Sam Ragan in mind when he wrote this essay, but Ragan sure would qualify as a shining example of what makes a good newspaperman.

But Sam Ragan didn't just lead the way for North Carolina literature, he fought for arts across North Carolina. I will just give two examples here. While serving as Secretary of what is now the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, he convinced the Council of State to pay off a \$60,000 debt the North Carolina Symphony owed. Another example is that he was on the founding commission of the North Carolina School of the Arts and was on the first Board of Trustees for the school, which today is called the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, and is located in Winston-Salem.

Even today, more than twenty years after the passing of Ragan, his name resonates with North Carolina writers. Just read the words of Shelby Stephenson, Marsha Warren, Clyde Edgerton, and Lois Holt in this book, who both wrote moving tributes to a man they consider a mentor. An annual event, Sam Ragan Day, is held at Weymouth to celebrate Ragan's legacy, and another annual event, Walking into April Poetry Day, honoring

Ragan, is held at Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina. The Sam and Marjorie Ragan Writing Center is located on the Barton College campus, where workshops and classes to teach the writing profession are held for students and the public year-round.

Sam Ragan is North Carolina's Literary Godfather. To be honest, this is not a title I came up with on my own. In doing research for this book, I kept coming across so many other writers who called Ragan that. He no doubt deserves the title. Rebecca Godwin, the Director of the Sam and Marjorie Ragan Writing Center at Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina, had this to say: "Nurturing writers and helping to create an atmosphere conducive to the arts, Sam Ragan is largely responsible for the thriving literary community this state currently enjoys."

To borrow a line from a Ragan poem, "Birth and death, and in between a little living." Well, Sam Ragan did a lot of living from his first years in rural Granville County to becoming North Carolina Poet Laureate and North Carolina's Literary Godfather.