

John Charles McNeill

North Carolinians don't much associate John Charles McNeill (1874-1907) with journalism. He is better known as a giant of our state's literature. His collection of verse titled Songs, Merry and Sad was so beloved that he was unofficially proclaimed the poet laureate of North Carolina in 1906, 25 years before there was an official post of that name.

But McNeill spent as much time during his short life as a newspaper writer as he did in his other vocations of teacher and lawyer. And, in fact, much of his poetry and all of his prose, first appeared in newspaper columns, specifically in the Charlotte Observer.

McNeill grew up in the bosom of a large Scotland County family in which writing was revered. The family spent much time at a Lumber River summer place known as Riverton. His father, Duncan McNeill, had been an editor and poet. John Charles was an avid reader of classics and, at Wake Forest College, considered himself a poet and teacher before he acquired a law degree.

McNeill briefly practiced law in Lumberton and Laurinburg and served a term in the General Assembly as representative from Scotland County.

McNeill's poetry about the crisp days of October, the "possum time" of rural North Carolina and days spent with his "sunburnt boys" swimming in the dark waters of the Lumber River (he called it the "Lumbee") were popular in his day, and remain so today, with two editions of his poetry still in print.

But when the Charlotte Observer published some of his many poems in 1900, he found a journalistic connection that would last until the end of his life. Editor Joseph P. Caldwell liked his work so much that, in 1904, he invited McNeill to become a full-time writer.

From then until his short life ended, McNeill turned out scores of columns and dozens of poems for the Observer. His manuscript collection of Songs, Merry and Sad won the first Patterson Cup in 1905, the state's highest literary honor.

A collection of 40 of McNeill's prose pieces in the Observer, clipped and collected many years ago by the late Jasper Memory of Wake Forest College, was published in 1998 by what was then St.

Andrews College Press in Laurinburg under the title Home in the Sandhills. The final piece was a poignant good-bye, titled “Thoughts on Going Home to Riverton.”

John Charles McNeill is buried in the Spring Hill cemetery at Wagram, only a couple of miles from his boyhood haunts on the Lumber.

By Roy Parker Jr.
January 1998