

Results of the 8th Northeast Texas Poetry Contest and Reading



Above, the winners (left to right): Frankie King, Cailee Davidson, Elizabeth Griffin, Emmalea Shaw, Presley McClendon, and Angela Wylie.

Friendship, nostalgia, and natural beauty emerged as dominant themes at the 8th Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Contest and Reading at the Whatley Foyer of NTCC, 4 September. The yearly contest encourages participants to accent or enliven our collective sense of the culture and history of Northeast Texas.

A three-year winner of this contest, Angela Wylie, a teacher of Winnsboro ISD, again defended her crown as the “poet laureate of Northeast Texas.” This year her poem, “Gramp’s Barn” impressed hearers with whispering alliterations that sounded almost like the wind against the desolate edifice she described. Wylie, who specializes in efforts to resurrect abandoned memories, imagined the past of “silvered soft” weathered wood, rusty spiked nails, and stained leather harnesses.

The student winner, Presidential Scholar Cailee Davidson, from Upshur County, condensed ten hours of nocturnal observation into a poignant, 240-word poem. In her work, the “beautiful chaos” of the evening sky--with fabled entrances of gem-like stars and the vertiginous morning sun--provides assurance of the Creator’s infinite wisdom.

Other poems emphasized a quality of friendship that persists in the less haggard culture of our region. Second-place student winner, Elizabeth Griffin, admitted that her love of theatre is causing her to look beyond the area. But she also feels a kinship not only to the people but to the state of Texas, and the creeks and pines of its northeastern corner. An appreciation for nature’s enduring legacy in Northeast Texas also marked the second-place adult poem by Frankie King. Third- and fourth-place student winners Emmalea Shaw, and Presley McClendon, intensified experiences of companionship with references to bridal-white dogwood trees, and the soft inner bark of mimosa.

Two local attorneys enlivened the Reading with observations about the community and its relation to the state. Billy Wayne Flanagan recalled the remarkable support he received from friends in the area in 2002, when the statistical estimates of physicians would have left him dead, twice. Mark Leshner noted that in a day when many fear the encroachments of the American state, that there is a tradition of Supreme Court decisions that still guarantee our liberties.

Professors Chuck Hamilton, Anna Ingram, and Jim Swann from NTCC served as judges for the contest.

Student Winner: Cailee Davidson



Northeast Texas Sky

In the twilight everything begins falling quiet,
Only the croak of a frog slices through the silence,
Trees drooping from exhaustion of a long day,
Sleeping, dreaming, reviving, renewing,
An invisible new moon selfishly guarding its light.

Then, a single pinpoint of light protrudes the darkness,
Shining bright against the endless background.
It seems lonely, one luminous body in the dark abyss.
Suddenly, the one is joined by a twin off in the west.
One by one, slowly, the night sky fills with balls of light.
Gazing through the mighty pines, twinkling stars burn brightly
Like millions of diamonds glistening in the night,
Everyone knowing its rightful place set by our Creator -
Some in patterns telling stories of ancient warriors;
Others, scattered in a beautiful chaos.

As night draws to an end, another miraculous scene appears.
Towards the East, a faint orange glow begins to appear,
No more than a shimmer of light at first,

But within minutes, the shimmer transforms into a breathtaking view.
Color bursts through the clouds and stains the Eastern sky with morning light.
Pink, orange, red, yellow, purple,
Like a child's whimsical brushstroke, hues seem accidental, yet graceful.
Long shadows darken the parched terrain, sprouting as if they were the trees themselves
Inch by inch gently blanketing everything in its path.
The rising sun a cue for all living things,
After a peaceful night at rest,
Time to begin another day.

Student Student Second Place: Elizabeth Griffin



A Letter to East Texas

I know it's sort of odd to write a letter to a State
You're made of lots people - some are small and some are great
Your land is mute and cannot speak, dirt's not gifted in that way
But still let's talk, just you and me - I've got some things to say.

Dear East Texas,

You've known me for a while, we met when I was eight
An Okie girl by birth, you're not my mother state
Of your culture and your accent I wasn't very fond
Not that I disliked you, but we couldn't really bond

As a kid I splashed and frolicked in the coolness of your streams
Explored your rocks and forests (but never rooted for your teams)
But as I grew and met myself our differences grew too
You were bucking broncos' while the theater made me swoon

I understand you usually prefer a football game to plays
If you had the time to watch a musical you'd spend it other ways
As a Texan and an actress I feel I lived two lives
Deep in these Piney Woods is not where theatre thrives.

I hope you can forgive me - I'm not trying to be rude
You of all should understand with your big attitude!
I know you're not offended you're far too tall for that.
Else how could you wear with pride your cowboy boots and hat?

Now let me change my tune and the reason that I say all this
Because throughout this Summer there was something that I missed

I left you for a while as I traveled on my own
From Missouri, London, Africa - there were times I felt alone

And when my travels were over, the longest I'd ever been away
I realized, upon return, how much you mean to me today
"Absence makes the heart grow fonder" is a phrase with much renown
Now I understand the reason- Heck, I almost kissed the ground!

Far away had gone the little pain I'd felt inside
In its place returned the familiar Texas Pride!
Your Texas skies wide open- beauty bright and blue
Your pine tree forests— ever-green and ever-true

The songs of crickets and cicadas once again within my ears,
Your vibrant misty sunrises that could bring a man to tears
The fresh and fragrant smell of earth, the shining stars above,
Have all reminded me of this place I've grown to know and love

East Texas, you were a place to grow, but not a place to stay
You aren't exactly home, I'll probably move away
But even though I say that, I've learned something special too
I think we're kindred spirits, I've learned so much from you.

You and I are loud, opinionated - strong
Nor can we back down when we know right from wrong
Like a Longhorn I've been branded with your name on my heart.
And though I travel far away we'll never be apart.

You've etched your essence into me in a way that won't reverse
And now I know that that's a blessing and not at all curse
There will always be a part of me that loves this land until the end
You're not my mother or my home forever, but you are certainly my friend.

All my love, Elizabeth.

Student Third Place: Emmalea Shaw



In Northeast Texas,
The pace is slower and
The tea is sweeter.
Folks take the time to ask
After “Mama and them”.
They circle the wagons in times
Of need.
A casserole, a pound cake,
A few dollars, a helping hand.
No score is kept,
But neighbors and friends pitch in
To build a barn,
To paint a porch,

To plant a garden,
To offer a prayer.

In Northeast Texas
The people are friendlier.
A bar in Boston is not
The only place where
Everybody knows your name.
In a small Northeast Texas town,
A trip to the store
Becomes a walk
down memory lane.
A favorite class.
The playoff run.
The buzzer shot.
The big one that got away
That day fishing down on
Caddo Lake.

In Northeast Texas,
The pine trees are taller,
The peaches are sweeter,
The watermelons are bigger.
Whether red clay or sandy loam,
The soil is better
And yields native dogwoods
And wildflowers aplenty

During the months of spring.
Each small town has its own celebration
 Showcasing local talent
And crowning beauty queens.
 Antique cars are on display
 Along with quilts, crafts
 And award winning pies.

 In Northeast Texas,
 Ties are stronger
 To family and friends,
 To hometowns,
 To schools.
For years families like mine
 Have earned degrees
 From these hidden gems
 Of higher learning
Nestled in the Piney Woods.
 One need not travel far
 To obtain an education,
To hone a skill or to learn a trade.
Memories are there for the making
 And dreams for the taking
 Right in our backyard.

Student Fourth Place: Presley McClendon



East Texas Grace

Trees loom tall covering vast flat lands
With a quiet melody of croaks and buzzes.
Small hands encircle mine looking around
At the fresh cut grass and pond found in her backyard.
This little girl beside me will flourish
Just as fast as one of the sugar gum trees

And just as sweet as well.

Hot, humid weather greets her in the summer,
Begging the sun kissed girl to jump and splash in a lake

And swim with sun perch, bass and catfish.

Cold, rainy winters look down upon her

When she attends school learning quietly

and as she vocally awaits St. Nick's arrival

For one or two months prior.

Surrounded by people in town who greet by name

Allows the young girl to feel special and loved.

The nature around her, though invites an explorer.

She discovers the softness of a mimosa tree,

The meaning behind a dogwood

And the lessons of wasp and bee stings

Who warned the oblivious girl to not get any closer.

She visits grandparents living on the lake in a cabin,

Teaching the girl how to fish and sew.

The best lemon cake comes from Grandma's table

Because Grandpa allows unlimited desserts!

The older couple smiles when the girl helps clean

And waves goodbye when she leaves

Knowing next time, the growing girl might not be the same.

Having older sisters at home who tease and torment

Teaches the smaller girl to be wary.

Having "sister-friends" who look out for her wellbeing,

Teaches the experience of care and love.

The girl's family eats food grilled outside by Dad

With a dog underneath foot begging for a piece,

Teaches her the right way to spend East Texas nights.

As the little girl crawls into bed

In a house surrounded by tall trees

With longhorns mooing 'goodnight' across the street,

She finds an inner happiness.

The girl's sisters were right, for once,

Growing up in East Texas holds magic,

A spark seeded and kindled in each homegrown heart.

Adult First Place: Angela Wylie



GRAMPS'S BARN

Hidden in sheltered corners,
Or glimpsed afar from a winding road;
A memory of the past
Leans tiredly against Time

Memory

Deep memories,
Grey-washed by the sun.
Smoothed by streaming rain.
Shaken by wind.
Long past care or mind

Abandoned

Alone

All but forgotten...

Nostalgia - hidden in East Texas fields

Antique gems in a forgotten trove

They listen through the years

Remembering what once was

And soon will be no more:

Worn, weathered, wood
The years lay smooth and silvered soft
Upon you
Whispers of time,
Shadowed deep in thy grain.

There you stand
Alone on a weedy pastured knoll
Built near the place
where once a busy homestead stood.

Once you sheltered glossy Black Angus cattle.
Once a reluctant milk cow filled your stall.
Where Grandma taught grandchild
The ancient art of milking

Once an elderly beloved horse

Dozed in your sheltering shade
Flicking flies and waiting,
Yearning for companionship
On the last days of his ebbing time

Here

Bold brothers, dared and undaunted,
Jumped from your singular loft
Tumbling into a stack of dusty golden hay
Shouts and laughter billowing up
Into the heavy East Texas air

Nearby

Harnesses once hung from rusty spiked nails
Hardened, salt-corroded metal
And darkened sweat-stained leather
The scent of horse and dirt still there
Embossed into the stiffened fabric of age

But now

Now there are cobwebs on the nails

And emptiness in the stalls

Mice rustle desolately in the barren bins

And the wind sighs through age-widened cracks

Storms have come and gone against the knoll

Time and life have passed on by

What healthy strong hands built to withstand

Wind and rain have worn down

Yet,

Worn, warm, weathered wood

You stand defiant still.

Patiently you shelter your empty past.

Wearily you hold against each new gale

Time respects not memories

And each season brings new wear.

Each storm bears you one step closer

To the eventual fulfillment of Time.

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In the warm worn wood is beauty.

Deep texture in the sunlit wood

Lying soft and warm beneath ethereal sky

Touched by shadowed clouds' impatient journey

There is depth in the velvety dark shadows

Forgotten places whisper sighs and creaks

Offering hidden secrets,

As a new generation explores the old barn.

Adult Second Place: Frankie King



The Legacy of an Oak

One day while walking across an area of land that I had recently cleared of the timber so I could plant grass to raise beef cattle in Northeast Texas and as I observed the many piles of broken limbs and tree trunks, I began to think about how the trees must have felt about being bulldozed out of the ground, pushed into heaps, and burned into nothing but ashes. We sometimes justify things by calling it progress, whether it is a new highway, school building, convenience store, or in my case, a new hay meadow. Many words have been exchanged and many thoughts and positions debated on the environmental impact of clear cutting a forest but I have never seen anything written from the perspective of the victims of the progress. This poem is my attempt to express how the trees must feel when "progress" strikes close to home.

As it is with all living things
I can't recall the moment I was conceived My friends say it was several years ago At least that's what I have been led to believe

I started out small, not the product of just plain folk My mom and dad was a tall stately Oak
And boy was I proud, just a simple acorn But if I say more, I would be tooting my own horn

Then one day, late in the fall
A soft autumn breeze, for no reason at all Came rustling through the forest, with hardly a sound
It shook me real hard and hurled me to the ground

I landed with a thud and somewhat stunned I felt as though I had been shot from a gun For
weeks I lay still, darned not to move A deer walked by and his hoof left a groove

Not to close but not far behind
a fluffy red squirrel ran down a vine
With hunger in his stomach and me under his thumb I knew this was it, my time had come

But instead of eating me as I thought he would He placed me gently where the deer had
stood And in great haste, he covered me with soil And scampered away to continue his toil

For months I lay there all wet and cold
I didn't think I would ever escape from this dark hole The squirrel came back, again and
again He never found me but he ate some of my kin

Several more weeks came and went

I was certain my time on earth was surely spent But the days became longer and the soil
begin to warm Passing overhead, I could hear a spring thunderstorm

Soon thereafter, my shell got soft and I began to swell I was about to escape from this
darkened hell Pushing through the dirt and leaves and all I wanted be like my dad, all
straight and tall

I had a long way to go, I looked more like a weed But what can you say about a freshly
sprouted seed A simply little twig with one green leaf But I was above ground and what a
relief

The hot dry summer is coming and it won't be easy There's a lot to do so I better get busy I
knew I had to prepare so I sent down my tap If the rains don't come, I can still store some
sap

Many, many years have now gone by
I'm a big tree now and my limbs reach high I made it through the droughts, I withstood the
floods I survived the fire, and like a good Oak, I firmly stood

I've provided food and shelter and I've given shade For all of God's creatures in this forest
glade I've done my best, I've done my part I've served both man and nature, all's well in my
heart

But wait, there's a strange noise and I strain to see It's impossible, my cousins a lot taller, the
old pine tree I look all around and I see concern and fear Written on the faces of the trees
both far and near

What is this beast that is making its' way here What can it be that causes the trees so much
fear We withstood everything that was send by God's hand Only to fall to the desires of a
man

What did we do or what haven't we done
To deserve this destruction or can you say my son Perhaps it is progress, or so they will say
But is it really.... oh go cut and bale your hay

Trees can't hear and trees can't feel
But tell me this if you will
If this be true, why were these words written Could it be that a man was finally smitten

And now as I lay here all broken and torn
As easy as it would be, I feel no scorn
Words
escape me, but this I will say "Vengeance is mine" sayth The Lord, "I shall repay"