

Appreciation

David McCord captured life's rhythms

By Jack Thomas
GLOBE STAFF

When the telephone rang Sunday night with news that David McCord was dead at 99, I mixed a martini, his favorite drink, to toast one of the great writers of children's verse in 20th-century America, and to enjoy the memory of a lovely afternoon with him two years ago.

Arriving at Goddard House nursing home in Jamaica Plain that summer day, I saw him crumpled in a wheelchair, and as I held his frail hand, I thought — *David McCord!* — for he was poet, essayist, editor, painter, historian, raconteur, one-time critic for the Boston Transcript, editor of Harvard's Alumni Bulletin,

McCORD, Page E5



GLOBE FILE PHOTO

David McCord: With wit and imagination, his phrases refreshed like summer rain.

McCord's rhythms captivated children

■ McCORD

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director of the Harvard Fund Council from 1925 to 1963 and author of 50 books and 500 children's poems, not to mention his having read his poetry to more than a half-million schoolchildren.

"I'm doing fair. I'm just keeping myself alive," he said.

He lived his last years in obscurity. Except for an occasional letter and except for the daily companionship of Harriet Parker, his friend of 70 years, and except for periodic visits by fellow members of the Tavern or St. Botolph clubs, McCord was the forgotten poet.

"I don't see many old friends," he said.

In Room 419, his furnishings were simple: bed, nightstand, chair. On the windowsill, a Swedish ivy struggled. On the bed was a pillow stitched with the word "love." On the wall was the sketch of an 8-foot-long choo-choo train, signed by teachers and given to him when he was 90. "You made so many second graders smile," wrote one.

Asked about his ode to the martini, a parody of John Masefield that hangs over the bar at St. Botolph, he smiled.

"Do you remember it, dearie?" Harriet asked him.

With a wry eye and a smile that beguiled, McCord began to recite the poem he wrote 63 years ago: "I must go down to the bar again, to the only bar in the place. And all I ask is a tall glass and a half congenial face . . ."

Writing with the imagination of Edward Lear and the wit of Ogden Nash, McCord composed not only poetry for children, but also evocative essays, particularly about Boston, in litting phrases as refreshing as summer rain.

I read to him portions of one I admired: "I like the way that Boston leans back in brick and stone, in soot and smoke, against her diminutive hills. I like the white plumes of steam that issue, swirling, from her downtown rooftops on a cold and blowing November afternoon. I like the people of Boston for what they were and are and will be."

He smiled. "It has a nice rhythm, doesn't it?"

He often wrote in restaurants, sometimes driving to a country inn

where he could dine leisurely, observe the interplay of people and pen a verse, among them an inscription for the tombstone of a waiter: "By and by, God caught his eye."

Once, a flash came to him at a traffic light. He scribbled a note. The light turned green. He pulled to the curb and wrote "The Walnut Tree," later changing only one line, and the poem was published on Page 1 of The New York Times Book Review.

Ignoring technology, computers, and even typewriters, McCord composed only in longhand.

We laughed at his verse about a lacquered liquor locker that the liquored lackey locked, and when I mentioned his line, "Deep down, he's very shallow" — he laughed so hard he had a coughing fit.

Working in Wadsworth, the yellow building across from Out of Town News, McCord was a familiar figure for decades around Harvard Square. He favored bow ties, cigars, and camel vests. In retirement, he lived at the Harvard Club.

At age 86, he drove 25,000 miles to 48 schools, reading poems and listening to children read theirs.

"Some children like poetry better than prose because of the rhythms," he said. "It's more like music."

McCord preferred to read to fourth and fifth graders.

"They still have a sense of wonder," he said. "In the sixth grade, they become suspicious. In the seventh, it vanishes because they start to see the world they're living in."

Children named their dogs for him. Referring to a poem about teeth, one boy wrote: "Many of us are losing our teeth, so we liked your poem about tooth trouble."

McCord advised writers to listen to sounds.

"Nature is full of sounds. What frightens me is eternal silence, because we don't understand eternity or infinity."

Are you still frightened by eternal silence, I asked.

"Yes, I am."

And what of death? Where do you think we go after we die?

"Well, there are two or three places I could name," he said, chuckling, "and one of them is not the Harvard Club."

David McCord, poet

David McCord, beloved Boston poet who died Sunday at age 99, was often an Ogden Nash sound-alike. Composing the perfect epitaph for all inattentive waiters, McCord wrote: "By and by, God caught his eye."

His 1996 Halloween offering to the Boston Globe began:

*On Halloween, what bothers some
About these witches is, how come
In sailing through the air like bats
They never seem to lose their hats?*

McCord, who started out as a serious poet, switched gears in the 1930s after learning that he'd lost the Pulitzer Prize by one vote. He devoted himself to children's poetry, winning the first national award in the field from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1977. He was also a Guggenheim fellow, a Benjamin Franklin fellow at the Royal Society of Arts in London, and recipient of a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

In addition to writing and editing more than 50 books, McCord taught poetry at Harvard and trav-

eled to elementary schools to give readings. He did this even as he was nearing 90.

Born in New York City, he was raised in New Jersey and Oregon in pretelevision America. Home entertainment consisted of his grandmother reading from the Bible or sharing funny poems.

"You have to make poetry a part of you," he told the Globe in 1995. "You don't create it with tools, like music and painting. It comes out of your spirit. It must be self-taught and rigidly self-criticized."

A perfectionist who reworked his writing until the presses rolled, McCord wrote everything in longhand, eschewing the computer, and even the typewriter, as devices that got in the way of thought.

Known for his essays as well as his poems, he wrote this about his adopted city: "I like the way that Boston leans back in brick and stone, in soot and smoke, against her diminutive hills."

We like the way he said that and many other things. This treasured writer lives on in his well-chosen words.

Died 13 April

Obituaries

David McCord, 99; poet, teacher, former director of Harvard Fund

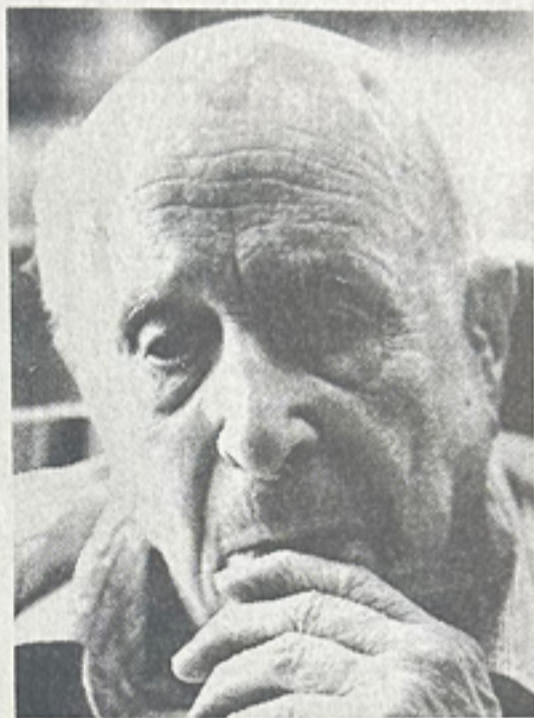
By Kevin Judd
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

David McCord of Boston, a noted poet, author and former director of the Harvard Fund, died Sunday at the Goddard House nursing home in Jamaica Plain. He was 99.

Born in New York City, he spent much of his early boyhood in New Jersey before his family moved to Oregon. He attended Harvard University and graduated in 1921 with a degree in literature. He earned his master's degree in 1922 and also received the first honorary doctorate of humane letters degree granted by the university.

Mr. McCord taught advanced writing courses at Harvard from 1963 to 1966, and was later considered its poet laureate. Among his many writing awards, he was named a National Institute of Arts and Letters grantee in 1961 and won the first national award for excellence in poetry for children from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1977. He was also a Rudyard Kipling fellow at Marlboro College in Vermont, a Benjamin Franklin fellow at the Royal Society of Arts in London and a Guggenheim fellow in 1954.

As head of the Harvard Fund Council for 38 years, his role was to raise money from alumni. He introduced a literary touch to the task and wrote more than a million words in 38 years to alumni from classes that spanned the years from 1853 to 1962.



DAVID MCCORD

As Brooks Atkinson once said in the New York Times, a McCord essay asking for money was written with such a high level of style, thought and erudition that it delighted the giver.

At a bicentennial event in 1976 he read a poem he had written to Queen Elizabeth on the nature of Boston, a favorite topic of his. He once described poetry as "a lonely art." He was a resident at the Harvard Club of Boston for 12 years. His other interests included a great love of the outdoors, which manifested itself in his hobby of fly fishing. He also blended his enchantment with the outdoors into his poetry and water-color drawings.

In 1977 he gathered his poems for children into a volume titled "One at a Time," and by 1980 he had added an additional 40 poems to the collection. At age 86 he drove 25,000 miles a year to lecture at schools, read his poems and listen to children read theirs.

Burial will be private and a memorial service will be held at a later date.

David McCord, Legendary Fundraiser, Prolific Poet, Dies at 99

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Heritage Dictionary. He wrote more than 500 poems and was the author or editor of more than 50 books, including *What Cheer*, *One At A Time*, *An Acre for Education*, and *About Boston*.

As executive director for 38 years of the Harvard College Fund, McCord helped raise millions of dollars.

"He always referred to the Fund as a web of friendships," said Fund Executive Director Richard B. Boardman. "He recognized the loyalty that Harvard men and women feel toward their College, and he recognized what contributing regularly does — not just for the College but also to strengthen those bonds."

McCord brought extraordinary grace and style to fundraising, friends and colleagues said.

"It began with his love for the University, which penetrated everything he did, and poured out through everything he wrote," said John A. Dromey, GSAS '40, who worked with McCord. "He just loved Harvard."

McCord said he didn't plan to do fundraising, it just evolved, according to Bayley F. Mason '51, MPA '89. "But he said it was an opportunity to do what he wanted for Harvard and get paid for it," Mason added.

McCord received honorary degrees from 22 universities. In 1956, he was awarded Harvard's first honorary doctorate of humane letters.

Among his many writing awards were a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant in 1961; and in 1977, the first national award for Excellence in Poetry for Children from the National Council of Teachers of English. He was also a Distinguished Kipling Fellow at Marlboro

Arts in London, and a Guggenheim Fellow.

At Harvard, he was honorary curator of the Farnsworth Room and the George Edward Woodberry Poetry Room in the Harvard College Library, a member of the senior common room at Lowell House, a life associate of Dudley House, a member of the Overseers' Visiting Committee for Astronomy, and an honorary associate of the Signet Society.

McCord was born in New York and spent his early childhood in New Jersey before his family moved to Oregon. He spent most of his childhood in the countryside outside of Portland. It was there McCord said he developed a love of words and a fine sense of rhythm from reading aloud the Bible to his elderly grandmother.

He entered Harvard with the intention of becoming a physicist and concentrated in physics. His love of physics and astronomy stayed with him and found its way into many of his poems.

As World War I wound down, he served briefly in the military. In 1922, he became associate editor of the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, now the *Harvard Magazine*. He was editor of that publication from 1940 to 1946.

In 1925, he brought his abundant writing talents to the Fund. Often working late at night, he wrote personal letters to individual alumni at a rate of some 500,000 words a year, and dispatched open letters such as "The Alewives Are Running," regarded as a classic in fundraising circles. "His literary style was so great that it attracted all sorts of people," said James A. Rousmaniere '40, LLB '43, who succeeded him as director of the Fund.

McCord, an avid fly fisherman, coined the phrase "fishing with a barb" to characterize his preferred

Poems by David McCord

Man from Emmanuel

"Is that you, John Harvard?"
I said to his statue.
"Aye—that's me," said John,
"And after you're gone."

History of Education

The decent docent doesn't
doze:
He teaches standing on his
toes.
His student dassn't doze—
and does,
And that's what teaching is
and was.

Epitaph for a Waiter

Bye and bye
God caught his eye.

Melvin Martin Riley Smith

Melvin Martin Riley Smith
Made do without what we do
with:
For instance, did he have a
kite? He didn't,
But he had the right amount
of string
To make one fly and lots and
lots and lots of sky.

fundraising style — to him the goal was not just raising money but also making friends. He did both with his sense of humor and regard for others as he worked with agents representing classes spanning more than a century.

He created the annual Marion L. Anderson Prize in honor of his veteran assistant to recognize the accomplishments of Harvard fundraising staff members. The David T. W. McCord '21 Award was established in his name to honor longtime achievement in service to the Fund.

On McCord's retirement in 1963,

President Nathan M. Pusey '28, AM '32, PhD '37, LLD '72 (hon.) said, "He has set new standards in fundraising through the quality of his letters, his personal concern for people, and his ability to make — and keep — friends for Harvard, both alumni and non-alumni."

After leaving the Fund, McCord devoted his time to writing verse and essays, and taught advanced writing courses at Harvard. In later years, he visited dozens of schools in eastern Massachusetts where he recited his poems and engaged fourth and fifth graders in the process of writing poetry.



OASIS
Online Archival Search
Information System

McCord, David Thompson Watson, 1897-. Papers: Guide.
(bMS Am 2130)
Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard
University

bMS Am 2130

McCord, David Thompson Watson, 1897-. Papers: Guide.

Houghton Library, Harvard College Library



Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138

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Descriptive Summary

Repository: Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University

Location: b

Call No.: MS Am 2130

Creator: McCord, David Thompson Watson, 1897-.

Title: Papers,

Date(s): 1919-1955.

Quantity: 1 box (.3 linear ft.)

Abstract: Primarily compositions of American poet David Thompson Watson McCord.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: *61M-85F.

Gift of David McCord, '21 310 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts; received: 1961.

Historical Note

McCord was an American poet, Harvard College graduate of the class of 1921, and for 38 years, the executive director of the Harvard College Fund.

Scope and Content

Includes: autograph manuscript poems, galley proofs, clippings, and a photograph of a portrait drawing of McCord.

Container List

- (1) McCord, David, 1897- *Overture: the wrasslers*. A.MS.(unsigned); [n.p.,n.d.] 2s.(2p.)
- (2) McCord, David, 1897-. *Of red in spring*. A.MS.s.; [n.p.] 8 May 1934. 1s.(1p.)
- (3) McCord, David, 1897-. *Simple theology*. A.MS.(unsigned); [n.p.,n.d.] 1s.(1p.)
- (4) McCord, David, 1897-. *Remembrance of things passed*. A.MS.(unsigned); [n.p.,n.d.] 1s.(2p.)
- (5) McCord, David, 1897-. [Galley-proofs with corrections] 3 pieces.
"Four poems," "Copey tercentenary," and "An Address ... 1 June 1955."
- (6) McCord, David, 1897-. [Cuttings and periodical appearances] 3 pieces.
- (7) McCord, David, 1897-. Portrait: pencil drawing by Grace Thayer (Richards) Conant.
Photograph of original; [Cambridge] 1919.