

**McDOUGAL,
OLIVER, YOUNG,
SEMPLÉ, TRUITT**
1923 to 1946



**POET
LAUREATES
FROM 1920s
TO 1940s**

The Greeks introduced recognition of poetic achievement by awarding a laurel wreath to a “poet laureate”. Oklahoma was the seventh state to continue the practice when Governor John Walton appointed Violet McDougal in 1923. Residents thought it important for the young state to be known as a civilized, cultured place. The position has always been honorary, with no expectations upon the poets to compose official poems or perform at state occasions.

Violet McDougal (1923-31), first poet laureate, was born in Tennessee in 1893 and attended the University of Oklahoma, University of Missouri and Columbia University. She published poems in The New York Times as well as in The Daily Oklahoman. Her book “Wandering Fires: Poems” was published in Boston by Stratford in 1925. McDougal died in 1989.

Jennie Harris Oliver (1940-42), third poet laureate, was born in Lowell, Michigan in 1864. Her family moved to Shiloh in 1898. Oliver started her writing career by borrowing a typewriter and typing on wrapping paper that she ironed in order to remove the wrinkles. Her literary pieces first appeared in local newspapers and Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine. In 1908 she sold her first short story to Munsey’s Life Wire Magazine for ten dollars.

She was featured in Good Housekeeping’s March 1931 issue. Her poetry reflected the beauty of Oklahoma’s landscape. Her poetry “Red Earth: Complete Collection of Poems” has had five editions since 1934. Her “Mokey Delano” series (1935) was turned into an MGM movie in 1942 starring Donna Reed and Robert Blake. Oklahoma writers made an annual springtime pilgrimage to Oliver’s home, where she encouraged their work until her death in 1942. In 1935 she was inducted in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

Della Ione Cann Young (1943-44), fourth poet laureate, was nominated by Governor Robert S. Kerr. She was born in Holton, Kansas in 1872. When she was appointed, Young had published only two poems, and never published a volume of poetry. Most of her career was spent as an educator. She wrote “Grass”, short stories about the beginning of the cowboys, ranchers and farmers in Western Oklahoma, shortly before she died in 1945 in Elk City.

Anne Ruth Semple (1944-45), fifth poet laureate, was also nominated by Governor Kerr. Born in 1900 in Caddo, Semple was the great-granddaughter of Choctaw chief Peter Pitchlynn (1860s) and sister to chief William Finley Semple (1918-22). She earned her Ph.D. from Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College with a dissertation on the history of Durant’s Oklahoma Presbyterian College. She was a professor of education at Southeastern State College in Durant from 1947 to 1965. She died in 1987.

Bess Truitt (1945-46) was the sixth poet laureate. Since no one was appointed directly after her, Truitt served as poet laureate emeritus until 1963. She was born in Madison, Iowa in 1884. Her family moved to Enid during the 1893 land run, where she obtained her bachelor’s in 1932 and master’s degrees in 1934 from Phillips University. Before becoming poet laureate, she was a teacher for 30 years, Garfield County Clerk in the 1920s, travel agent, and taught night classes for those obtaining citizenship.

Truitt released one poetry collection “Thistle Down and Prairie Rose” in 1940. For many years she was editor of the Journal of the Sons and Daughters of the Cherokee Strip. In 1959, Truitt was inducted in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. She was a life member of the Poetry Society of Oklahoma. Truitt died in 1972.

The female poet laureates of Oklahoma from the 1920s to 1940s – Violet McDougal, Jennie Oliver, Della Young, Anne Semple and Bess Truitt – each made a unique contribution to Oklahoma literature.