



# Poets' Roundtable of Arkansas

<http://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org>

## Year in Review – 2015-2016

**Purpose:** Poets' Roundtable of Arkansas (PRA) is a private, non-profit organization established in 1931 to share the love of poetry, encourage the writing of poetry, and support poets in Arkansas.

**History:** PRA is the oldest poetry organization in the state. Most of Arkansas's Poet Laureates have been members. Among them were Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni of Fayetteville (1953 - 1969) and Dr. Lily Peter of Helena (1971 - 1991), for whom the two annual PRA conferences are named. Current Arkansas Poet Laureate Peggy Vining of Little Rock also is a member. PRA is affiliated with the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (NFSPS), a non-profit entity promoting poetry nationwide. PRA members are also NFSPS members.

**Membership Benefits:** PRA branches are located all over the state for local members to meet monthly. PRA also offers an online group for members with no nearby branches, plus a quarterly newsletter to keep members updated. PRA's two annual conferences provide free educational opportunities to learn more about poetry and meet other poets. Members also may participate in the annual NFSPS conference with poets from other states. PRA's monthly contests and its spring contests are free for members. Winning poems may be published in PRA's anthology, and national winners may be published in the NFSPS anthology. PRA also offers the free service of a state critic for members to help improve their work.

**Contests:** Members may enter 15 free PRA contests throughout the year. PRA's annual Poetry Day Celebration in October sponsors another 25-30 contests, many open to all poets, for a small entry fee. Winners receive monetary prizes of up to \$1,000. Plus, members may enter 50 national contests at discounted rates through NFSPS. PRA also supports a number of student contests annually, including the Sybil Nash Abrams Contest for Arkansas High School and Junior High students, PRA's statewide Collegiate Contest, plus national student contests through NFSPS. Guidelines for all contests are posted on PRA's website, and distributed through branches and educational partners.

**Activities 2015-2016:** PRA poets hosted activities, published books, spoke at events, and promoted poetry in a variety of ways during the year. Many PRA poets also received an impressive number of awards too numerous to name here. Highlights of the year include:

South Arkansas Poets of the Pines (SAPOP) continued to sponsor monthly "Open-Mic Nights" through the year at PJ's Coffee Shop on the Square in El Dorado. All participants were welcomed to share poetry, song, rap, and readings. The event has become popular entertainment in the area. South Arkansas Poets of the Pines (SAPOP) and South Arkansas Writers also were featured in the spring 2016 edition of the *El Dorado Insider's Guide*.

Little Rock's River Market branch hosted PRA's 68<sup>th</sup> annual Poetry Day Celebration in October 2015. The annual conference honors Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni, Arkansas Poet Laureate (1953-1969) who established the first Arkansas Poetry Day on October 15, 1948. Poetry Day Chair Laura Loughridge welcomed guests and introduced PRA's featured speaker, Hope Coulter, award-winning author and professor at Hendrix College in Conway. Coulter spoke on writing, reading and publishing poetry. She also critiqued poems with ample group participation, and autographed her newest book for members. President Dennis Patton read the Governor's Proclamation for Arkansas's 2015 Poetry Day. Then Past PRA President Cathy Moran announced the 2015 Merit Award winner, Dennis Patton of Alexander for his numerous hours of service. President Patton conducted a brief board meeting, and discussed 2 new contests coming in 2016 (collegiate and state fair), PRA's new website, recruitment of new members and branches, plus several other activities underway. Finally Poetry Day Contest Chair Donna Smith announced the 2015 winners. This year's entries were very competitive, up 42% from 2014's level. Winners came from all over Arkansas, 14 states and Canada. Before announcing the Sybil Nash Abrams Awards, PRA Treasurer and NFSPS 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President Jim Barton shared a short biography of Mrs. Abrams (1900-1980).

PRA's board launched several new activities during the year including: a new PRA website started in October 2015 with new webmaster Robin Burrows; posting PRA's yearbook information on the website; a "2015 Year-in-Review" report to be updated annually and posted on the website for new member information; a 2015 Member

Survey that yielded suggestions to help members, encourage sponsorships and improve outreach; a new partnership in May with the Arkansas State Fair to sponsor poetry “Best of Show” winners from across the state in 4 age categories; a new online group started by Kate Lacy for members without branches nearby; and a new statewide Collegiate Poetry Contest. Winners in the latter were: 1<sup>st</sup> Annie Criswell of Hendrix College in Conway; 2<sup>nd</sup> Austin Farrell from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville; and 3<sup>rd</sup> Andrew Newman from the National Park College in Hot Springs. (Andrew is a past winner in PRA’s Sybil Nash Abrams contest for high school and junior high students.)

One of five National Student Poet winners for 2015 was Arkansas’s own David Xiang, 17, of Little Rock. David also won PRA’s Sybil Nash Abrams student contest in 2014 (1<sup>st</sup> place) and 2015 (2<sup>nd</sup> place). First Lady Michelle Obama honored the 5 teens in October at the White House. The program is the nation’s highest honor for youth poets, with over 20,000 entries. Winners came from Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, New Jersey and Ohio.

Siloam Springs Writers’ Branch sponsored their first Poem of the Year Contest in the fall of 2015 for northwest area poets with a grant from the Roy Chesney Foundation. Chesney was a Siloam Springs resident who designated money from his estate to stimulate writing and the arts in the area.

John Crawford (Hot Springs branch) led a free monthly discussion of poetry forms at the Garland County Library each second Monday starting in February 2016. John also read poetry at the Ozark Writers League (OWL) at Branson, Missouri in February, and led a discussion on what makes good poetry.

Pat Laster (Saline County) was interviewed for a podcast on the Ozark Radio Hour while she attended the Lucidity retreat in Eureka Springs during April 2016. It was archived, so it will be available for some time.

The South Arkansas Poets of the Pines (SAPOP) hosted PRA’s Dr. Lily Peter Spring Celebration at El Dorado in April, National Poetry Month. Members enjoyed a Friday night meal at the Laredo Grill, followed by an “Open Mic Night” at PJ’s Coffee Shop. PRA’s own Karen Hayes was “hot” as PJ’s featured performer, reciting 5 series of poems. Several audience members also participated with spirited songs and readings. Then on Saturday the conference was a full day at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church. SAPOP President Donna Henson opened the meeting, welcomed us to historic El Dorado with “spudnuts” and dedicated the conference to departed PRA members Doreen Bailey, Magdalene Collums and Betty Heidelberger. To honor the conference namesake, Jim Barton delivered a poem by Dr. Lily Peter, a past Arkansas Poet Laureate. PRA President Dennis Patton offered tips for critiquing our poetry with humorous examples of a “Poetry Mechanic.” He also read his winning 2015 Sybil Nash Abrams poem, “The Jesse James Shoot-out”. SAPOP Treasurer Jim Barton presented the first Lifetime Achievement Award to Poets of the Pines charter member Mildred McKinney, an honorary lifetime member of PRA in her mid-90s from Camden. She is still able to recite more poems than most of us have read! We congratulate her on her many achievements. Everyone had a wonderful time and returned home with a jar of delicious Mayhaw jelly from El Dorado.

The Hot Springs Branch sponsored 2 poetry contests for adults and youth in the city during the ARTS AND THE PARK event from April 29 to May 8, 2016. Poetry Day Chair John Crawford reported that they also are busy planning to host Poetry Day in Hot Springs on October 22, 2016, with some fun activities on Friday evening, including a read-a-round, an impromptu contest, and a sing-a-long.

PRA’s Jim Barton was elected President of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies at the NFSPS conference in Minnesota during June 2016. We are so proud of Jim! He is a native of Huttig, Arkansas, near El Dorado where he started the South Arkansas Poets of the Pines branch in 2009. Jim is an award-winning poet, published author, popular speaker, PRA’s State Treasurer and SAPOP Treasurer. Last year Jim served as NFSPS 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President and Membership Chair. One of Jim’s “big” goals is to have poetry societies join NFSPS from all 50 states - currently 31 states participate. Jim sincerely hopes more PRA members can attend next year’s conference closer to home at Fort Worth, Texas June 29-July 2, 2017.

NFSPS contest winners announced in June 2016 included 14 PRA members who won 40 national awards: Renee Ramsey, Pat Oplinger, Cathy Moran, Sara Gipson, Don Crowson, Gail Denham, John McBride, Pat Durmon, Dennis Patton, Dena Gorrell, Karen K. Bailey, Barbara Blanks, Jim Barton, and Russell Strauss. PRA also won two prestigious awards for Youth Activities and Poetry Day Celebration. Our thanks to PRA’s Laura Loughridge who did double duty earning these awards as PRA’s Youth Chair and 2015 Poetry Day Chair.

PRA welcomed 2 new PRA branches during the year: Two Rivers Poetry Society of Fort Smith and Gin Creek Poets of Searcy. PRA currently serves 152 members, 12 branches and one online group statewide.