

Town and Country Perspectives, Nostalgia and Reverence Prevail at the Twelfth Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading



Student winners above, left to right, Jacob Lambie (4th), Cade Armstrong (3rd), Karla Fuentes (2nd) and Mercedes Collins (1st)

(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

The Twelfth Annual Northeast Texas Poetry Reading at the Whatley Foyer of Northeast Texas Community College on 6 September was marked by the most acute sense of the rural/urban divide in the history of the series. With the awards perhaps aptly sponsored by the sewing circle of the First Methodist Church in Mount Vernon, the winning poems unanimously conveyed a wave of nostalgia and reverence for

regional traditions. Even the speakers, Drs. Jim McCourt, and Tom Seabourne stressed the pleasant harmonies, and plug-in potential of the area's communities. The Reading highlighted recent observations made by authors such as Keven Kruse in *Fault Lines*, and Jonathan Rodden in *Why Cities Lose*. Rural and small-town self-consciousness and nostalgia remain robust and articulate in the twenty-first century.

The entire session can be followed on You Tube at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx_uYE4QXMA> .

In past years, adult poets have tended to monopolize the more nostalgic dimension of our regional scene. Not this year. Texas Heritage National Bank Scholar, and recent Dr. Mary Hood Award winner, Mercedes Collins focused on a long-forsaken meetinghouse between Cass and Morris County. Built by slaves, it still inspires awe, while “wasting away into nothing.” Karla Fuentes’ second place poem was a declaration of small-town amicability and service. Cade Armstrong’s third-place poem contrasted the cities that “run on lightening” with the grass oceans and dark secrets of the hinterlands. Finally, Jacob Lambie, newly acclaimed Pearson Scholar, described a cowboy’s last cigarette. He sighs as the “lights of the city,” disrupt the night’s “tranquility.”



Second Place Adult Winner, Joe Dan Boyd, and First-Place Adult Winner, Angela Wylie

(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

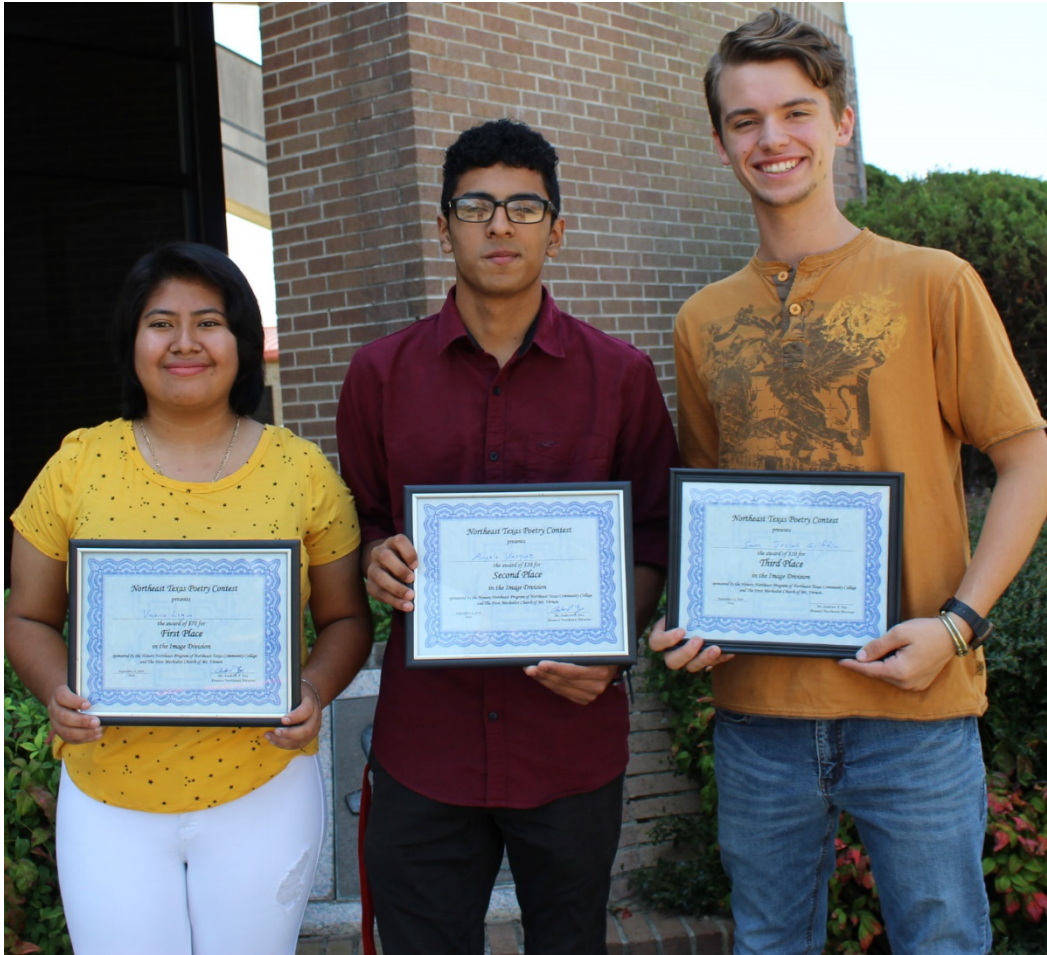
This was the first year that one contestant in the adult division hailed from Europe. But the winners in this division were again very hard to beat as they included the “Poet Laureate” of Northeast Texas, Angela Wylie, from Winnsboro, and the former East Coast journalist from Wood County who now specializes in rural themes, Joe Dan Boyd. If there is someone between the Red and Sabine rivers who believes they can evoke the region poetically, it is about time they challenged Wylie who has now won the adult division in 2009, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and now 2019. But Wylie, and Boyd, both, from Wood County, have not only highlighted rural themes, with remarkable poems in recent years—they have added a good amount of luster to the series with their evocative, professional readings.

This was the second year in a row that the poetry reading included the results of an image contest. In first place, winning \$70, was Verania Leyva Garcia’s *Country Morning*. The radiant sunshine, verdant pastures, abundant livestock, and water-



Verania Leyva Garcia's Country Morning.

nourished green margin of trees added symbolic leverage to the day's proceedings. In second and third place, Sam Griffin, and Angelo Vasquez also pictured elusive rural scenes, one reflected partly by a car mirror, the other in the throes of dusk.



*Verania Leyva-Garcia, Angelo Vasquez, and Sam Griffin
(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)*

The contests of the Reading were again beholden to its long-term judges of twelve years—Professor of English, Dr. Chuck Hamilton; Associate Vice-President of Arts and Sciences, Anna, Ingram; and Division Director of Communication, Jim Swann--and also to Associate Professor of Art, Debbie Strong, and Professor of English, Julie Ratliff.

“This Reading more than ever highlighted an inner enigma and wonder about living in Northeast Texas,” noted Honors Director, Dr. Andrew Yox. “How is it that a place comparatively deficient in income and health, does not even have a historical remembrance of a plague, riot, or battle? In fact, as noted by our two speakers, as well as our best adult and student poets, Northeast Texas continues to possess a

tranquil aspect. The green-pastures-and-still-waters image, reminiscent of Psalm 23, that appeared in Leyva Garcia’s winning photograph, has become a focus of our shared identity.”

The winning poems and pictures of the winning poets are as follows:



(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

Country Churches

Angela Wylie (Winnsboro), First Place Adult

Tucked into hidden corners off of black-topped roads
Some abandoned and pewless
Cracks in the walls
Rain leaking through
Ghost-like quiet but for the windblown leaves
Skidding over tracks of mice across sandy floors
Gone

Others are healthy
Filled on Sundays with laughter and song
Sermons preached to a faithful few
Who come because their families came
Clinging to the last vestiges of tradition
Sitting in self-assigned pews.
There

Small churches line the roads in Northeast Texas
Steeple reach like spears into the sky
Leaf-swept lawns where cars park on grass
Aged pavement lead to open doors.
The small country churches await
Bright Sunday mornings
Alive

Coffee and doughnuts scent the air
People in clean clothes, nice dresses,
Or in jeans with holes in the knees;
Today it hardly matters,
As long as someone arrives
To fill a pew
Present

To sing songs from a well-worn hymnals
Voices strong, some out of tune
Singing the old, old songs

A joyful noise rises through the roofs
Spreads into the sky
Reaches upward
Worship

Pastors peach to dwindling crowds
Competing with large churches
And their rock-star appeal
Huge displays overhead overwhelm
As preachers perform on stage
Spectators watch the show
Glimmering

But in the hidden corners, on black top roads
And farm-to-market highways
The small country church lives on
Attended and tended
Secure in the hearts of a few
Who prefer comfort and tradition
Loyalty

They go to hear the Word preached
They go to visit relatives and friends
They go to be part of the cycle of life
To keep their corner of the world from being abandoned
Remaining a rare remnant
To shelter against the Lost



(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

Northeast Texas Woman with a Hoe¹

Joe Dan Boyd (Wood County), Second Place Adult

Proud Minnie, child of an earlier Century
Daughter of Frank Fowler and feared of no man.
Spinster for her first three decades
Barefoot girl with chubby cheeks of tan.

She viewed the world through narrowed brown eyes
Topped with straight brown, tightly combed hair,
Framing a pleasant, yet unsmiling, countenance
Free of any makeup: No hint of worldly air.

At age 30 she said yes to my Uncle Doc Tinney
Who was himself already into his fourth decade.
For the rest of their lives they tilled the soil,
Wresting a living with mule, Kelly plow and hoe blade.

She bore their children and cooked their meals
And as an equal opportunity wife
Minnie toiled in fields of cotton, corn and grain
Where long-handled hoe technique defined her life.

Minnie's hoe was always the sharpest
She filed it near to a straight razor's edge
Minnie's blade fell heavy, hard and accurately
Within the crop row and along the seedbed ledge

The well-worn oak handle of Minnie's blade
Etched hard callus on the tissue of each hand
It was a badge of honor for her pioneer heritage
Confirming Minnie's mystical reverence for the land

She walked the rows with brisk precision
Expertly thinning seedlings, eliminating grass and weed
Those who tried to match Minnie's furious pace
Were eventually put to shame, forced to concede

Years passed, decades came and went
Proud Minnie's pace began to slow
The day finally came when word passed
That Aunt Minnie had put up the hoe

But her legacy is unmatched in Tinneytown
Her fame still the toast of church and town hall
Sing this song loud and clear for Proud Minnie Tinney
Whose long-handled hoe blade was fastest of them all.



(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

On My Hill

Mercedes Collins (Daingerfield), First Place Student

I stand alone at the top of my hill,
While wasting away into nothing.
No feet walk my floors anymore,
I have been forgotten.

I was built by strong worn hands,
Hands that were forced to build me.
They did not get to choose their own life
Their hands were used only for their masters.

The first to walk my floors came to praise.
They praised with song and sermon.
I welcomed them openly and enjoyed the life
Until those worn hands became free.

I was empty for a time.
Then a man came and saw potential in me.
No longer was I used to teach rules of the divine
Now the rules of man were taught in my walls.

Children came to walk my floors
I was happy to be loved once again.
But my happiness did not last.
Less and less children came until none remained.

My doors were closed.
There were no worn hands to help me stand,
No children come to learn.
Now no more life lingers in my walls.

I stand alone at the top of my hill,
While wasting away into nothing.

No feet walk my floors anymore,
I am forgotten.



(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

This Old Northeast Texas Town

Karla Fuentes (Winnsboro), Second Place Student

To an outsider, this old Northeast Texas town might be nothing more than
a boring scenery,

An inevitable backdrop they must witness on their way to a seemingly
more exciting adventure.

As they scan across the surface of the weathered, brick high school, an
aged grocery store, and tired little church

An outsider must wonder, “Why would anyone ever choose to live here?”

Well, that’s because they see just that—the surface.

This worn out town may seem insignificant to some

To others, it might be what makes their life remarkable.

When a classmate lost her home,

a teacher from that same weathered, brick high school offered her, not a

shelter, but something just as good as what she had lost.

When the people of the tired little church found out that the fire that
engulfed said classmate’s home left her with nothing more than the clothes

on her back,

They united to replace the materialistic with an earnest spirituality.

When an English teacher found a student, one she had never met

before, sobbing alone in a classroom,

she placed her soothing hand on that aching shoulder and prayed over it.

When two classmates lost their father,

that old Northeast Texas town provided them with a support system that
followed them past their college years.

Through small ways like teaching a parentless student how to drive,
to grand gestures such as adopting that student into their family,

This old town provided the true essentials for life.

It served as a savior from isolation and alienation.

It provided a community filled with an overabundance of compassion and
benevolence.

When any of its members crumbled,
broken down by the inescapable foulness that sometimes comes with life,
this community offered hope.

When faith began to fade in some hearts,
this Northeast Texas home managed to ignite a passionate belief from
those fading embers.

When life appeared to be stripped of all its value,

When an agonizing goodbye seemed only moments away,
This community, with all its amity and love, provided a reason to take
another breath.

One not devoid of hope, but bursting with life.

It managed to restore purpose.

Contrary to what an outsider might think, this old Northeast Texas town
is more than a relic,

More than just a community.

This Northeast Texas town is a family.

All enduring, all accepting, all loving.

This old town is my family.



(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

The World Texas

Cade Armstrong (Mount Pleasant), Third-Place Student

Streetlights brighten the path as the road winds into the unknown.

The metropolis slowly fades out as big and tall gives way to small

And quaint. The young life of a city that runs on lightning turns into

The ancient countryside brimming with secrets and reverence. Colorful

And alluring humanity takes its place inside the rearview mirror as front

And center is now ruled by the grass oceans. As I travel on, the darkening

Light of civilization falls away to reveal the heavenly bodies which once
Escaped me. Polar in nature though they are, my solace is that both
The land I leave and the land I come to are yet still
Encompassed by the world
Texas.



(Photo courtesy of NTCC [Eagle](#) and Mandy Smith)

The Day's Last Cigarette

Jacob Lambie (Scroggins), Fourth-Place Student

The house creaked from the movements on the wooden floor
Generations upon generations had walked through this old, creaky door

Quiet and serene a man stepped outside to gaze
At the colony of ants creeping farther every year through underhanded
ways

This colony was lit up by the lights of the city
Which only sought to fight off the night's silent tranquility
Men looked through glass with only one thing on their mind though

Dreaming of climbing higher and leaving others downtrodden below

The man sighed quietly to himself and sat down on the porch
Looking at his own land that may soon be scorched
This old cowboy was the last of his kind to remain
The other around him had been given a price that they could not abstain

Boots marked from cement instead of grass
Jeans pristine instead of worn by time passed
A cry called out from a child inside
One who would never have the chance to ride

The child's ancestors had come to this land

Seeking the opportunity to make their own brand
Decades upon decades had gone into this work
Finally to be torn apart by a single corporate man's smirk

Whether the baby was crying for a lifestyle lost to time
No one would ever notice this horrific crime
His small tear sliding down his face
Mirroring the image of the man outside whose own life was soon to be
erased

A woman was heard singing softly a lullaby
A song that would soon be lost to time
The old cowboy slowly lit the day's last cigarette
And looked around at a world that others would soon forget

¹ *Minnie Francis Fowler Tinney: 1886-1957.*

Married Andrew Glass (Doc) Tinney February 27, 1916.

Children: Millie Lee, Mary Belinda (Pet), Hazel Virginia, Clarence Carl & Bonnie Francis.

THE NORTHEAST TEXAS WOMAN WITH A HOE during my upbringing was Aunt Minnie Fowler Tinney, who lived most of her adult life a few hundred yards from Tinney Chapel Church. When I think of her today, I am usually reminded of the famous painting and poem, each titled *The Man with a Hoe*. Both the painting and the poem, like Aunt Minnie, were products of the 19th Century.

AMONG THE DIFFERENCES were Aunt Minnie's gender and the type of hoe she wielded so fast and furiously. Both Edwin Markham's poem and Jean-Francois Millet's painting paid tribute to a man with a short-handled hoe, which actually resembled what was called, during my childhood in the Tinney Chapel Community, a grubbing hoe, then used primarily for clearing new ground of brush and small trees that interfered with crop cultivation. *AUNT MINNIE'S HOE WAS THE LONG-HANDLED VERSION*, which every farmer in my youth used frequently, and for a very different purpose: to thin newly emerged crop seedlings and to rid the seedbed of bad-acting grasses and weeds that would otherwise sap valuable nutrients and moisture. It was tedious and laborious, but highly essential work, and those who did it well, did it fast, or both, were highly praised and sometimes highly paid by the standards of that era.

FOR ME, THAT ERA WAS THE LATE 1930s, all the 1940s and the very early 1950s, a time that was dominated by the unusual hand-eye coordination of Aunt Minnie, who lived and labored during a time when society honored, even revered, role models of her stripe, those associated with the positive modeling of a hard day's work done well. She was the agricultural equivalent of Annie Oakley: Her long-handled hoe blade was the fastest, and most accurate, of them all.