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**KARLE WILSON BAKER BRINGS
ROBERT FROST TO NACOGDOCHES**

by Sarah R. Jackson

In 1933, Robert Frost made an eleven-day lecture tour in Texas which included Baylor University, Southern Methodist University, The University of Texas, Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, Sam Houston State Teachers College, and Texas State College for Women. This paper details Frost's visit to Stephen F. Austin State University on April 26, 1933.

Karle Wilson Baker, who was on the English faculty at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, was the initiator and driving force behind the famous poet's visit to Nacogdoches. Baker herself was proclaimed at that time by many as the best poet in Texas.¹ Only a person of such literary stature could have attracted a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning poet to a fledgling college in a rural East Texas community. Unpublished correspondence from the Karle Wilson Baker Papers in the Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University between Baker and the poet's wife, Elinor Frost, yields important details regarding the arrangements that were necessary for the Frost visit before, during, and after his lecture. An interview with Baker's daughter, Charlotte Montgomery, who attended the Frost lecture in Nacogdoches, provided additional insight. Contemporary newspaper coverage and reviews from the *Pine Log* college newspaper and the *Daily Sentinel* of Nacogdoches also supplied essential information for this paper.

Baker had been working during 1932 with Dr. A.J. Armstrong at Baylor University, Dr. Leonidas Payne at the University of Texas, and Earl Huffor at Sam Houston State Teachers College to arrange a lecture tour with Robert Frost giving public readings of his poetry at institutions of higher learning in Texas.

The day after Christmas, December 26, 1932, Baker wrote to Elinor Frost to confirm that the poet would be coming to Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College to give a public reading of his poetry on April 26, 1933:

December 26, 1932

Mrs. Robert Frost
Amherst, Mass.

My dear Mrs. Frost:

It has been arranged, I understand, that we are to have the very great good fortune of having Mr. Frost with us on April 26th, next. Mr. Huffor, when he told me the good news, said that you were coming, too. Maybe that is what has emboldened me to ask if you will be guests in our home during your stay: thinking that, perhaps, you will speak for me!

Maybe "guests" is an unfortunate word. I have done a little of this sort of thing myself (travelling about, I mean, to give readings and make speeches) and I know how it tires and drains one – in spite of its pleasant and rewarding features. ["I have often dodged being a *guest*, in addition to "stuck out] I have sometimes felt that being a *guest*, in addition to being the show, was a little more than mortal frailty could bear. But I would try to give you the quiet and freedom that I long for myself, and would find my abundant reward in having you both under my roof-tree. Also (though I'm

tempted to withhold this) I shall understand if you prefer not to be "entertained" at all, but to take your chances with such hotel facilities as small towns like ours afford.

I met Mr. Frost once, at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, but again my own scant experience instructs me that with the best will in the world, he might ["would probably":struck out] not remember me. But I know him very well; and so do my students. He is always the favorite of the majority of them, among contemporary Americans. Perhaps he would not be especially pleased by that; but he would be, I think, by the reasons that some of them give.

Do you think you might stay at our house?

Karle W. Baker

I am Mrs. Thomas E. Baker at home; and Thomas E. joins me in my petition.²

Mrs. Baker's letter exemplifies her typical modesty. Indeed, as a charter member of the Texas Institute of Letters, she was prominent in Texas literary circles and was sought after for speaking engagements at various colleges and universities. Baker's letter also reveals that she understood Robert Frost well enough to know that he was receptive to teasing and that he would be curious to know the reasons why her students liked his poetry.

Elinor Frost did not reply to Karle Wilson Baker's letter until April 11, 1933, because both Frosts had been ill most of that winter and their plans were uncertain. Elinor Frost felt she might have to stay at home.

15 Sunset Ave.
Amherst, Mass.
April 11th

My dear Mrs. Baker,

I hope you will pardon me for this long delay in answering your letter. Mr. Frost was ill when it came, and it was weeks before he regained his usual strength, and then, later, I was ill. Also, there have been more things to do than usual, here in Amherst.

But now spring is here, and the journey to Texas is soon to be undertaken. My uncertainty about going, myself, has contributed to my delay in writing to you. Even now, I have not *quite* decided, though as I fear the traveling would be a little too hard for me, I think now that I shall stay at home and rest while Robert is away. He will be very pleased to be with you and your husband, while he is in Nacogdoches, and if I come too it will give me much pleasure to meet you. Thank you very much for the kind invitation. I will let you know a few days in advance, if at the last moment, I decide to accompany Robert. It would be very interesting to have a glimpse of Texas; especially at this time of year. I have always been told that spring is very lovely there. We are having a very unsatisfactory spring in New England - very cold and rainy.

Mr. Frost joins me in sending kindest regards.

Sincerely yours,
Elinor Frost³

Baker was not the only one who did not know Mrs. Frost's plans. On February 7, 1933, Dr. A.J. Armstrong, chairman of the Department of English at Baylor University, wrote to Mrs. Baker that Elinor "Would probably join Mr. Frost at my home allowing him to come ahead. I felt a little doubtful of

the arrangement.”⁴ In March 1933, Mrs. Baker received a letter from Earl Huffor at Sam Houston State Teachers College in Huntsville that Mrs. Frost was still undecided, but that she would likely join Mr. Frost in Texas on April 19 and 20.⁵

Robert Frost’s rigorous Lecture Tour of Texas began at Baylor University in Waco Hall on April 18, 1933, where he gave a public address to the state convention of the Sigma Tau Delta honorary English fraternity. The next day he spoke at Southern Methodist University in Dallas at the McFarlin Auditorium, sponsored by the Mortar Board Society and the department of English, Dr. John Beatty, chairman. He returned to Waco on the night of April 20 for another speaking engagement. Elinor Frost joined her husband at that time as a guest in the Armstrong’s home. Frost spoke again at Baylor on April 21 and yet again at a dinner meeting of the Texas Folklore Society in Waco on April 22. The poet had been asked to speak to the Texas Folklore Society at the invitation of Dr. Leonidas Payne who was an officer in the organization. Afterwards, Payne drove the Frosts to Austin where Robert Frost gave lectures to the general public and to the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

On Wednesday, April 26, the Frosts left Austin by train for Jacksonville where they were met at four o’clock in the afternoon by Karle Wilson Baker and her brother, Ben Wilson, who drove them to Nacogdoches. Elinor Frost described the journey:

The drive from there [Jacksonville] to Nacogdoches was through beautiful scenery, but two thirds of the way the road was under construction, and extremely bumpy and slow. However, we finally reached Nacogdoches. Mrs. Baker’s home is very charming. Behind the house it is real woods and fields, with low hills in the distance, and the wood thrush was singing his best.⁶

Frost delivered his address at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College at eight o’clock on the evening of April 26. A reception followed the lecture. Mrs. Frost did not attend either because of fatigue from the journey. However, she mentions an account of the evening in a letter:

There was a fine audience there – over a thousand persons – some of them driving 75 miles to hear Robert. The college gave the money for the lecture, so those who came didn’t have to pay. I thought it was very touching that people should be interested enough to drive such distances. Mrs. Baker is a charming woman.⁷

Karle Wilson Baker’s daughter, Charlotte Montgomery, remembers the Frost visit very well. She attended Robert Frost’s lecture at Aikman Gym that evening. Mrs. Montgomery was teaching at Kilgore Junior College at the time and drove with several friends to the lecture. When she arrived in Nacogdoches, she went first to her mother’s home at 1015 North Street. She entered the house and was surprised to see an unknown woman at the top of the stairs in her robe. It was Elinor Frost. Charlotte, surprised and embarrassed to find anyone home, left quickly with no further ado.

In our interview, Mrs. Montgomery said that Frost’s reading of “The Death of the Hired Man” had impressed her more than any other part of the program. Mrs. Montgomery also confirmed that the audience was large. She

stressed, and accurately so, that it was due to her mother's efforts that such an important person as Robert Frost would come to a young, little-known college to speak.⁸ The Stephen F. Austin student newspaper, the *Pine Log*, reported that over 1200 people attended the lecture in Aikman Gymnasium and listed the poems that Frost read during the lecture:

The first poem read was "Mending Wall," which with "Blueberries," "Just Men," and "The Runaway," was reminiscent of his life as a New England farmer. The speaker gave an instructive and understandable analysis of the art employed in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." He also read "The Road Not Taken," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and "Past Active Shoes." "Death of the Hired Man," a poem in blank verse, was read by request. "Pasture Spring," concluded the evening's entertainment.⁹

It is likely that Karle Wilson Baker was the person who requested the reading of Frost's famous dramatic narrative, "The Death of the Hired Man," and perhaps that is why it was Charlotte's favorite.

Before Frost's arrival in Nacogdoches, the *Pine Log* ran a long article announcing the poet's upcoming visit to the small city. The article praised Frost as "among the three outstanding living American poets" and quoted the poet and critic Louis Untermeyer as saying that Mr. Frost "is the best living American poet."¹⁰ To familiarize the general public with Robert Frost, the article included a short biography of the poet's life, career, and works. The reporter concluded:

Now, even if you did not know it before, you know that we are to have with us one of the foremost living poets. As Mr. Frost has made quite a reputation as an interesting speaker, we certainly have something to look forward to. On Wednesday evening, April 26, we will have the opportunity to hear Mr. Robert Frost.¹¹

Another short biography of Frost appeared in the *Pine Log* on April 22, 1933, just a few days before his arrival. The fact that this article emphasized that Frost was a farmer as well as a poet and teacher was perhaps intended to impress the rural community.¹² The local newspaper, the *Daily Sentinel*, also ran a short article announcing the Frost lecture.¹³ The fact that much longer articles appeared in the student newspaper suggests that Baker had control of the information about Frost and was making sure he received proper publicity on campus.

On Thursday, April 27, Baker and Ben Wilson drove Robert and Elinor Frost to Huntsville, where they were met by Earl Huffor of the department of English at Sam Houston State Teachers College. Frost had been invited to Sam Houston by the Lyceum Committee sponsored by Huffor.¹⁴ Prior to the poet's arrival, Huffor had written to Frost in care of Dr. Armstrong at Baylor explaining the last-minute change in plans delaying the visit to Huntsville due to the Phi Beta Kappa ceremony in Austin. He wanted to assure Frost people at Sam Houston were eager for his visit.¹⁵ Elinor was supposed to take a bus to Waco, but she was too fatigued. Frost had sent word from Nacogdoches to Dr. Armstrong that his wife would come to Waco the next day.¹⁶

In a letter to Baker, Elinor described the visit in Huntsville: "That ride to Huntsville was a great pleasure. Robert's audience at Huntsville was mostly

students – college and High School students, and even some youngsters from the grades. It was an appreciative audience, and we liked young Earl Huffer and his wife very much indeed.”¹⁷

The next morning the Frosts left Huntsville at nine o’clock by bus for Dallas. Frost continued by train to Denton and Texas State College for Women, and Elinor went to Waco. Even though Elinor Frost had not been present for the lecture in Denton, she commented in a letter to Baker that “He [Robert] found an intelligent audience at the Denton Women’s College.”¹⁸

On Saturday, April 29, the Frost’s began their trip home by train from Dallas. According to Elinor Frost in a letter to Karle Wilson Baker, they arrived in Amherst, Massachusetts, on Monday about noon, almost too tired to do anything. In this letter of thanks, she wrote of their visit in Nacogdoches:

15 Sunset Ave.
Amherst, Mass.
May 5th.

Dear Mrs. Baker,

Forgive me for not writing before this. We reached home Monday noon, and found so many things that had to be attended to at once that we have had to keep very busy, though really too tired to do anything.

I have thought often of the pleasure of meeting you and your family – and of the song of the wood thrush in the tall pines.

I believe Robert is intending to send you a book instead of writing a letter, but he joins me in sending greetings and thanks to you and your husband, and to Mr. Wilson, who was such a pleasant companion on the roads.

Yours most sincerely,
Elinor Frost¹⁹

Robert Frost did send a book to Mrs. Baker in gratitude for her hospitality. The wrapping materials for the book postmarked from Frost’s farm at South Shaftsbury, Vermont, on June 22, are among the Karle Wilson Baker Papers. The package was addressed by hand and contains the famous Robert Frost signature in the return address.

Elinor Frost had been so impressed with Karle Wilson Baker as a poet as well as a person that less than a year after the visit she wrote to Baker requesting some of her poetry to present in a program for her study club in Amherst. She also commented that a photograph showing the Stephen F. Austin campus with its tall pine trees would interest the club.²⁰ Baker responded by sending Elinor Frost a book of her poems illustrated with original sketches by Charlotte Montgomery.

When Mrs. Frost wrote to thank Baker for the book and sketches, she mentioned how well the program was received: “They especially liked, I think, my description of Nacogdoches, with its pines and birds, its varied history, and the personal touch of Charlotte’s sketches was welcome.” In a gesture of friendship, Mrs. Frost closed her letter with these words: “I hope you will get some publisher to print your travel history of Texas. I think it would be fascinating. I will try to interest Mr. Thornton, of Henry Holt and Co. in it,

when I see him."²¹ Henry Holt and Company was, of course, the American publisher for all of Robert Frost's poetry.

Karle Wilson Baker continued to work to bring outstanding literary personalities to Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College. During her tenure on the faculty, both students and the Nacogdoches community were exposed to the genius of nationally known men and women of the arts such as Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Louis Untermeyer, and Sara Teasdale.

Robert Frost made other lecture tours in Texas after 1933, but he never returned to Nacogdoches to visit the woman to whom he referred as "a lovely person ... in the so-called pine woods."²²

NOTES

¹*Oldbook Round-Up 1933 Baylor University*, (Dallas: Southwestern Engraving Company, 1933), p. 147.

²Karle Wilson Baker, Letter to Elinor Frost, December 25, 1932, Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, hereafter cited as SLSFA.

³Elinor Frost, Letter to Karle Wilson Baker, April 11, 1933, SLSFA.

⁴A.J. Armstrong, Letter to Karle Wilson Baker, February 7, 1933, SLSFA.

⁵Earl Huffor, Letter to Karle Wilson Baker, March 22, 1933, SLSFA.

⁶Lawrance Thompson, ed., *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, 1964), p. 392.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁸Charlotte Montgomery, telephone interview with author, October 15, 1993.

⁹Stephen F. Austin *Pine Log*, "Robert Frost Here," April 29, 1933, p. 2.

¹⁰Stephen F. Austin *Pine Log*, "Robert Frost, Poet and Professor," April 8, 1933, p. 1-2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹²Stephen F. Austin *Pine Log*, "Robert Frost Will Appear Here," April 22, 1933, p. 1.

¹³Nacogdoches *Daily Sentinel*, "Robert Frost Will Appear at College," April 25, 1933, p. 4.

¹⁴Sam Houston State *Houstonian*, "Foremost Poet of America," April 19, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁵Earl Huffor, Letter to Robert Frost, April 18, 1933, Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

¹⁶Robert Frost, Note to A.J. Armstrong, c. April 27, 1933, SLSFA.

¹⁷Elinor Frost, Letter to Karle Wilson Baker, May 5, 1933, SLSFA.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Elinor Frost, Letter to Karle Wilson Baker, January 17, 1934, SLSFA.

²¹Elinor Frost, Letter to Karle Wilson Baker, February 21, 1934, SLSFA.

²²Louis Untermeyer, ed., *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, 1963), p. 233.