

Portraits & Roots

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A Portrait of Rod Clark, Pacifica's First Poet Laureate

Written by Jean Bartlett
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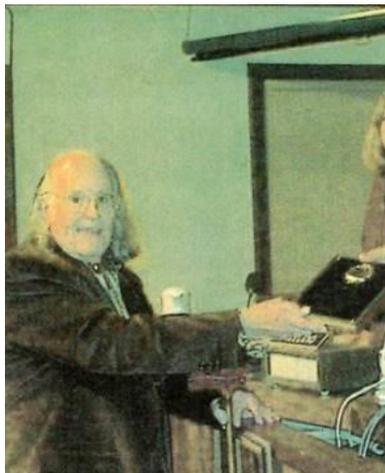
A poet laureate is an advocate for literary arts and is traditionally expected to represent their state, or municipality, by composing poems for special events and occasions. They are officially appointed by a governing body or an advisory institution following a paneled nomination process. In 2003, the members of Pacifica's City Council – Mayor Pete DeJarnatt, Mayor Pro Tem Jim Vreeland and Councilmembers Julie Lancelle, Sue Digre and Cal Hinton – appointed Pacifica's first Poet Laureate, Rod Clark. The appointment is an acknowledgment of artistic excellence. In a later interview with this *Pacifica Tribune* writer, Rod discussed being Pacifica's first Poet Laureate.

"It is a big honor, a challenge and an inspiration," the newly elected Poet Laureate said. "I will continue to do everything I can to foster poetry: write, read, listen and celebrate the written word through invaluable venues such as the Poetry Forum and the *Pacifica Tribune's* poetry page."

Rod Clark served as Pacifica's Poet Laureate from 2003 until his death in April of 2013. For this portrait of Rod, his wife – artist and actress Sydney Clark – and I sat down at Fog City Java on Crespi Drive in Pacifica and focused in on the man and the poet.

Portray something as part of everything
Marvel
A poem is made

Rod Clark



2003. Rod Clark accepts Pacifica's first laureateship from City Councilmember Julie Lancelle.

Rodney Abbott Clark was born on August 18, 1919 in Clinton, Massachusetts. His father, Rolla Clark, was from Missouri and his mother, Nettie Clark, was from Nebraska. Rod was the third of the couple's four sons: Glenn, Ralph, Rod and Hollis. The family's fifth child was a daughter and she along with Mrs. Clark died in childbirth. Rod's father at that point in time was a Methodist minister. He went on to become a chiropractor, but the family is not sure how that evolution came about.

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"After his mother died, Rod's family lived in a lot of places and eventually worked their way down to Texas," Sydney said. Sydney is from Houston and the couple met in college – Southwestern University in Georgetown, TX, in September of Sydney's first year.



← 1920. Portrait of the poet as a very young man.

At Southwestern, Rod studied philosophy and religion and Sydney studied art and drama. Their first date was full of sparks, though some a bit unplanned.

"It was Halloween and on Halloween the boys could take the girls to their dorms and show them their rooms. And to make it an interesting evening, they had this long corridor that everyone was walking through that they decorated with spooky things. Rod's job was to dip chalk into something that made the chalk glow so he could write on the wall. Well he knew everybody and as soon as he saw them, he wrote something about them. But at the end of the evening, his hand was burned from that chalk mixture. So we went to the infirmary and I was late getting back from my first date. But it was love!"

Rod courted Sydney with poems that he had written.

"For Christmas he sent me a poem that was an acrostic."

In an acrostic poem, the first letter of each line spells out a word or a message. In this particular acrostic poem, the message spelled by those first letters was "Sydney Clark." Sydney was just dating Rod and still very much had her maiden name.

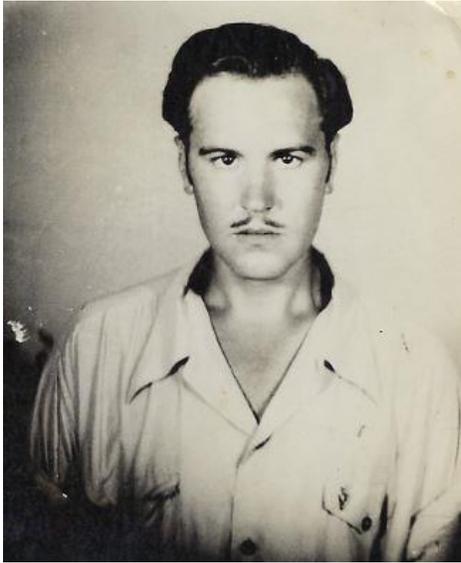
"My mother did not like that acrostic!" Though later, when Sydney's mother met Rod, she definitely approved.

Rod graduated and signed up with the Merchant Marine. It was 1941 and the world was at war.

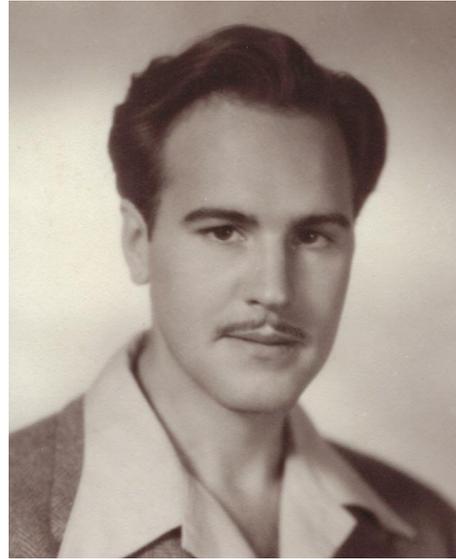
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"He didn't want to kill anybody so he chose the Merchant Marine – which ran its own gauntlet of dangers. I didn't want to get married then. I still had two years of college and I thought I might want to do some additional dating! Right after I graduated we got married. It was 1943 and he was still in the Merchant Marine but he had about a month between his various tours, so we got to see each other every three or four months.



WWII Merchant Mariner Rod Clark.



Rod Clark, 1945.

Rod went on to receive his MA in English and later, a PhD in human development. But early in their marriage both Rod and Sydney were hired to teach at Webster High School, in a town about 25 miles southeast of Galveston, TX. Sydney taught art and drama and in fact, started the school's art and drama department. Rod taught English and at the high school and directed several operettas. The couple taught at Webster for six years.

"Once Rod got his PhD we came to California," Sydney said.

The couple moved to Carmel where Rod went to work at Ford Ord in a unit doing research on the First Republic of Korea. (Following the Second World War and during the Cold War against the Soviet Union, Fort Ord became the home of the 4th Replacement Training Center.) As part of his research, Rod decided on his own to go to Korea to investigate the situation, which Sydney noted she was not happy about.

"We lived in Carmel and he spent Christmas in Korea," she laughed. "I may yet forgive him."

Eventually, Rod left the project and accepted a job teaching philosophy/social studies at San Francisco State University. The couple moved to San Francisco. Rod taught at SFSU from 1956 to 1983. In 1958, the couple moved to Pacifica.

The swollen moon leaped
from the clutch of dark mountains
to flee with the clouds.

Rod Clark, Haiku

The parents of two sons, Rod and Sydney were always engaged in the arts. Sydney taught drama and art throughout her teaching career to all age levels: elementary, middle school, high school and college. Along with her two dear friends, the late Luther Spraker and Bob Southworth, she co-founded the theater group Spindrift, which had a successful run of theater presentations in Pacifica at the library. The Pacifica Players asked the trio to lend their theater group and talent to the Pacifica Players and in 1965, the Pacifica Spindrift Players was born. Sydney directed the new theater group's first play and has remained committed to the Pacifica Spindrift Players for decades. In 2002, the City awarded her with a Lifetime Achievement in the Arts award.

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"But this story is not about me," Sydney laughed.

Like Sydney, Rod was a member of the Pacifica Art Guild, the Pacifica Spindrift Players and Pacifica Performances. In addition he was a member of the Cultural Arts Commission and the Pacifica Chapter of the California Federation of Chaparral Poets. He also directed several plays at the Spindrift. Through the *Pacifica Tribune* Poetry Page, Rod brought more than 100 poets to print.

As Pacifica's Poet Laureate, Rod hosted the monthly Pacifica Poetry Forum, read poems at various civic functions, met with other local poet laureates throughout the Bay Area as well as in Sacramento, served as a judge on numerous poetry contests and presented poetry at ceremonies honoring Pacificans. He was also very involved with the Pacifica Poetry Forum's Annual Poetry Festival, which presented a podium to such honored guests as San Francisco's second Poet Laureate Janice Mirikitani and California Poet Laureate (2005-2008) Al Young.

"For many, many years we had poets meet at our home to read poetry once a month. Rod was very generous with who he invited. He wanted poets to have a voice. I particularly remember two poets, both Pacificans, who really touched us both deeply. One was Paul Strom and the other was Tom Ekkens.

"Rod was a very interesting and interested man. If he found something that interested him, such as poetry, he learned about it. He made my clothes and some of his clothes. He crocheted, he knitted, he made lace, he played the clarinet, he played the piano."

"I don't know if I liked poetry before I met Rod," Sydney smiled. "But I think Rod's poetry is wonderful. I have a book club every month and we decided years ago to open it with a poem. I usually read one of Rod's."

The SFSU Professor Emeritus of Social Studies was a lifelong fan of cats and the following selection of poems, a small representation from his more than six volumes of verse, begins with his expression of love for one of the many felines who shared his journey.

Shan

(By Rod Clark, from *"It Seemed So At Some Time"* ©2002)

The cat and sunshine blend
where noon light dabs the carpet.
And silence guards the comfort of the house
while time breathes somewhere else.
Shan stretches when he's in the sun
so his under-coat gleams bronze;
but he curls around himself
when he's in my lap
and he is black and soft.
I remark how he can spend so much time this way,
Then I remember that I'm here too.

A few things we don't let Shan do —
like walk on the dining table.
Since he does this when he wants
I wonder why we don't let him.
He often tells us what to do
and watches carefully how well we do it.
When I play the piano the best I can,
Shan stomps across the keys
and butts my hands away
to lament my interpretation.



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I've cared for many cats
and admired how gracefully
they went about my life.
But Shan does more than that.
There's something different about his sharing me.
By drawing out all day and night
the holding of responsiveness inside my heart
he makes my need to love have focus.
If I drift
he puts his toy mouse on my foot
and makes me play.
Or he helps me write a poem.
His large sort-of-yellow eyes
tell me that he knows just who I really am.

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### News Release

*(By Rod Clark, from "It Seemed So At Some Time" ©2002)*

The dog  
leaped out the door,  
ran around the house,  
along the fence,  
up the hill,  
sniffing and pawing,  
and marking his path  
from clump, to post, to rock, to tangle.

The cat  
tested the step for dampness,  
sat serenely,  
gazed around the patio,  
leaped the wall gracefully,  
and disappeared.

When they returned  
they seemed equally well informed.

I  
stepped out for the paper.  
I learned the day was cold  
and that I creak more now when I bend.  
I read  
that across the world the earth quaked  
and how I am misused by money-makers.

I haven't the least idea  
what was in my yard last night.

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art by Sydney Clark

Mirror

(By Rod Clark, from "Being Seventy-Seven" ©1997)

I see a soaring hawk reflected here
deep in a puddle from this morning's rain.
The surface barely wets my walking cane
and yet the distant bird and sky are clear.
If I look up where sun flecked clouds appear,
the silent wings against the wind will strain
quite far above the mud low in this lane,
and yet two flights, to me, seem very near.

My eyes make real the hawk and puddle too.
Of course I know both birds do not exist.
So what is this that flies beneath my feet?
All questions in imagination meet
and stretch reality's elusive mist
while we decide ourselves what we find true.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Freedom?

(By Rod Clark, from "It Seemed So At Some Time" ©2002)

"What is freedom?" I have asked the stars.
"Bars of law unbreakable,
an unshakable hand enforces
courses holding us in line.
A mine of space we tunnel through —
You have more freedom," said the stars.

"What is freedom?" then I asked the grass.
A mass of reckless growth was everywhere.
I stared against the hill
until the sky began,
and tangled grass was there.
"Spare yourself to ask me that.
Gathered in for hay,
maybe burned or trampled on;
lawns close-clipped and square
and bare again with every freeze;
trees spread their roots beneath me —
See how they sap my life?
A knife of leaf, no bloom to boast,
almost the least of things. I cover
Mother Nature just where she will.
Still ask me of freedom" sneered the grass.

↓

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"What say you of freedom?" now I asked the wave.
Raving white, it rolled away
saying secret chants against the beach.
"Teach me of freedom. You must know!"
"Blowing winds direct the deep,
keep me tossing when I would rest.
Lest distance tease your hope,
sloping shores of every land teem
with *dreams* of freedom. Know
going, going on is law so strong
long I've wished to stay in peace.
Cease your search from freedom, lad."

But yet I asked the clouds, the wind, the same.
Blame their answers that I failed.

What is freedom? I found none.
I've done with questioning. And yet—

Let questions die?
Why, then there'd be no freedom!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Self Portrait

(By Rod Clark, from "What I Was Thinking" Collected Verse © 2003 to 2010)

My jar of life
retains the pills of goals I didn't reach.
My portrait's framed
in ghostly shades of things I didn't do.

So much of art
gives focused strength by leaving something out.
A sculpture is
composed of rock that is no longer there.
The vacant space
between the threads give lace its frilly form.
Our decimals
would have no useful meaning without "none."
What you perceive
as "me" includes so much you do not see.

So didn't do
– the couldn't, wouldn't shouldn't, haven't yet –
are in the sum of whom I've come to be.

Had I shifted time I wasted on
the "couldn't"
to gaining better understanding of
the "wouldn't"
perhaps the clinging definition of
the "shouldn't"
would stretch the time that's still remaining for
the "haven't tried."

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Activity

(By Rod Clark, from "What I Was Thinking" Collected Verse © 2003 to 2010)

I like the morning light when dawn is crisp
and glides unglaring on the tips of things;
when gold brings bright the blue of seething surf;
and the horizon winks away last night.
But I so seldom wake in time for dawn
and, sleeping, miss the tingle of its charm.

The languid light of afternoon warms all
the much-to-do that's scheduled in the line
of duties I have promised to achieve
so on this couch of clarity, I nap.

The tint of rose that signifies that dusk
will soften what has sharpened through the day
bevels the bending beach against the hills;
stretches what's near, and blurs the far away;
and shades the shadows on the darkened ridge.
It means soon night will fold itself around
all push and shove and driving energy
and I can sleep in peace till dawn is crisp.

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Soft Days

(By Rod Clark, from "It Seemed So At Some Time" ©2002)

As I walk
the air talks to me softly
about sunshine teasing clouds
and making mischief in the leaves.
It holds the scent of flowers to my face.
In slow whispers
the gentle breeze slides
from the bank of lazy fog
sleeping on the rounded hills
and hints of heat from the farther valley.
I bare my being.
I want the gentle kiss,
the cool cleansing of my skin,
the tingling where I'm joining more.
It's just warm enough that I dream awake.



"Gulls" by Sydney Clark.

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Jean Bartlett is a longtime arts and features writer for various print and online publications, which include: *Pacifica Tribune*, *San Jose Mercury*, *Oakland Tribune*, *Marin Independent Journal*, *Bay Area Business Woman*, *Coastal Connections*, *Peninsula Progress*, *Catholic San Francisco*, *Ross Valley Reporter*, *Twin City Times* and *Portraits & Roots*. **Website:** www.bartlettbiographies.com.

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