

HOWARD MCKINLEY CORNING ADVOCATED FOR POETRY

By Virginia Corrie-Cozart

Howard McKinley Corning, poet and historian, lived from 1896 to 1977. Moving to Oregon from the midwest in his early twenties, he bonded to and was inspired by the landscape, more rugged and green than his native Nebraska.

After his family settled in Portland, his grandfather's library, along with the Multnomah County Library, became the main source of his education.

In the 1920s he began to find a steady market for his poetry, appearing in such prestigious publications as *The Saturday Review*, Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine, and *The New York Times*. His first book of poetry, *These People*, was published in 1926. Four years later it was followed by *The Mountain in the Sky: A Book of Oregon Poems*.

Later in his life, Corning's accomplishments in poetry received substantial recognition. In 1965 his poem "Wild Horse Country" won an award from the Poetry Society of America. This poem reflects his connection to the rugged western landscape, as its final stanza clearly shows:

Standing
On this harsh rock amid serviceberry,
Clumped and bristled, I trace
The Indian trail over the fissured rim rock
The wild horses found. Hard-beaten and stony, it flows
Out on the vanishing plain somewhere south
Toward Winnemucca and a youth
That ran away into yesterday.

The same year he received the PSA award, Corning was appointed poetry editor for *The Oregonian*, a position he held until his death. He also served as president of the Oregon State Poetry Association. In 1969, a book of his new and selected poems was published under the title *This Earth and Another Country*. This book and Corning's two early collections are all available in the Oregon Poetry Collection at the State Library.

Although “Wild Horse Country” doesn’t reveal it, Corning was a master of traditional verse forms, including the sonnet. His preference for such forms was a difference between him and William Stafford, Oregon Poet Laureate for 15 years. The two poets were friends. Stafford told a story of a conversation with Corning in which the older poet had rebuked him, “You know, Bill, there is such a thing as form, too.”

For many years, Corning was in a position to encourage other Oregon poets, new as well as established. This he did with generosity and attempts at direction. My own connection to Corning began in 1972 when a poem I’d submitted to *The Oregonian* was accepted and then was given the Ben Hur Lampman award, co-sponsored by *The Oregonian* and the Oregon State Poetry Association. Corning was not only the poetry editor for the newspaper but the judge for the contest.

The award was a great honor and included \$100 cash, but I was in the middle of a divorce, got busy with survival, and didn’t submit any more poems. In April of 1973, I received a letter from Corning in which he wrote, “Now and again I open my mail, expecting poems from you: they never come. Maybe you are enjoying life too well. You have to hunger to write poetry—so you never write it. This disappoints me, for you have talent and should be using it, before you harden into arbitrary life patterns.”

Howard McKinley Corning has an enduring spot in Oregon poetry, both as a poet himself and as a supporter of the poetry community in this state.