

## George Scarbrough

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 6, 2021)

Mike Stallo, reference librarian and local history specialist at the Oak Ridge Public Library provides us this insightful story about a local poet, George Scarbrough.

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*"...This is the tender land,*

*The indiscriminate land, green as corn,*

*Ripe as plums, that makes no choice among*

*It's people. All who are here*

*And are the children. It makes no compromise,*

*Deals impartially in indistinctions,*

*And is kind and open to interpretations*

*Various as men who love it.*

Those words were written by George Scarbrough, a poet, a virtuoso of English language, who lived the last 45 years of his life in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Scarborough had the ability to create vivid imagery of nature and the scenic landscape of his surroundings. His poems are both earthy and highly sophisticated. He takes you with him as he escapes from the mundane, shining a light, and nudging you to come along with him on his journey. You might want to take a dictionary though; George will stretch your vocabulary in a good way.

George Scarbrough was born in Polk County Tennessee in 1915. His father, William Oscar Scarbrough, was an itinerant sharecropper. As you might imagine, raising seven children as a sharecropper meant an immensely difficult life. By the time George was 20 years old, his family had moved more than a dozen times.

George was an early reader and was drawn to words and language as a young child. The cracks in the walls of the family home were filled in with old newspapers to serve as insulation. His mother, Louise McDowell Scarbrough was an avid reader and used these old newspapers (often with Word War I headlines) to teach him the words. He was able to read before he started grammar school.

From a young age George was often at odds with his father. He was not interested in farming for a living. Reading was a welcome escape for him. Reading and writing became his love. George wanted to go to college and to be a writer. His father was harsh in his judgements and opinions regarding his son's preoccupation with reading and writing, telling him that he would be going to the poorhouse if he didn't learn more about farming instead.

George's love of books and words also created a barrier between him and his siblings and his peers. While many of them were playing and pursuing more ordinary childhood activities, George spent his spare time in a more solitary fashion, reading and writing.

The frequent moves of a sharecropper family meant George finished high school a bit later than he normally would have. Despite this, and his father's negative attitude about college, he was determined to continue his education.

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Using borrowed money, George attended the University of Tennessee in 1935. However, he still struggled financially and had to drop out after only a year. Aided by some influential people who recognized his talent, he secured a literary fellowship to attend Sewanee-University of the South. His time there was not easy. Scarbrough felt out of place, as most of the other students were from more cultured and well-to-do backgrounds. He did sell three of his poems to a magazine while still at Sewanee but he left school near the end of his second year.

Ultimately, due to financial struggles, and having several disruptions in attendance, his time in college would be spread out over many years. Eventually he earned his bachelor's degree in 1947 from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate Tennessee. Fourteen years after first starting college, he completed his master's degree from The University of Tennessee in 1954. He started working toward a Doctorate but never finished. Through all his time in college he continued to write and publish poetry.

Although Scarbrough felt at home in the academic setting, socially he often felt like an outsider. Not only was he the son of a poor tenant farmer, but he was also a gay man at a time when it was not something one could safely speak about. This added to his difficulties as both a student and a teacher. Later in his career he was much more comfortable with both of these aspects of his identity.

In 1948, shortly after earning his degree, George Scarbrough taught at Jefferson Junior High School in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. In the mid 1960's he taught at Clinton High School. He went on to teach at Hiwassee College in Madisonville TN from 1965-67, and Chattanooga College in 1968. He taught at several other schools over his long career.

In 1949, a year after earning his bachelor's degree, his first book was published. It was a collection of poems called *Tellico Blue*. Over the span of more than seventy years, hundreds of his poems were published in various poetry and literary magazines. He also produced five books of poetry collections, and one novel. He was well respected by his literary peers. However, as with many creators of art and literature, George Scarbrough's work was not fully appreciated by the public until later in his life. His deep appreciation for words and creative use of language shines brightly in his poetry.

Author James Dickey wrote: "George Scarbrough's poems have carried him deep into the very heart of the Southern land. The medium is words, and on the superbly imaginative use of these, he has arrived at the deepest roots, beyond what could be imagined by anyone else less than a true poet. Anyone who gives himself without reserve to Scarbrough's poems will find his life renewed."

In addition to James Dickey, writers Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O' Connor, Andrew Lytle were among Scarbrough's circle of literary friends.

George Scarbrough was an Oak Ridger for nearly half a century. He moved to Oak Ridge in 1963 with his mother and lived at 100 Darwin Road for the next 45 years. Although a private person, he could often be seen around town and had no shortage of friends and admirers. I met George in 1987 while working at Watson's Department store in Jackson Square Shopping Center. George came into the store often, and I found him to be very down to earth and likable.

If you are interested in learning more about George Scarbrough or reading some of his poetry, the Oak Ridge Public Library has copies of the following books available to check out. *Tellico Blue* (1949), *New and Selected Poems* (1977), *A Summer Ago* (1986), *Invitation to Kim* (1989), and *Under the Lemon Tree* (2011). We also have additional titles for viewing in the Oak Ridge Room.

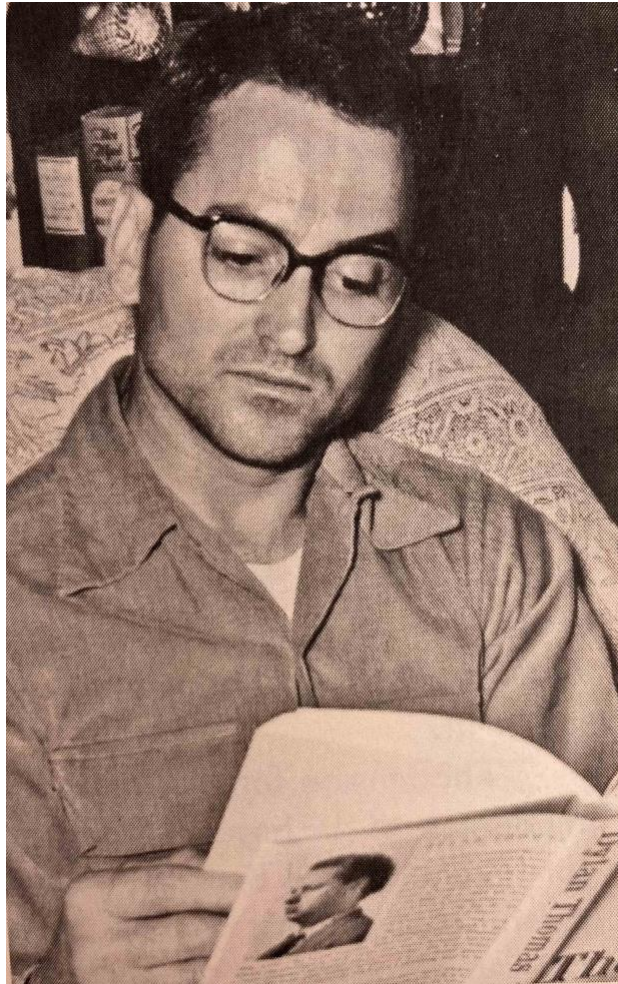
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Thank you, Mike, for bringing us the story of George Scarbrough, a local poet. Mike is a resource I use frequently at the Oak Ridge Public Library. I find him to be able to quickly research information for many

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of my Historically Speaking columns. His knowledge of who lived where in Oak Ridge is amazing. His constant use of phone books and old newspaper articles as well as other reference materials in the Oak Ridge Room of the library, an amazing collection of historical documents, makes him a most valuable contributor to the history of our city.



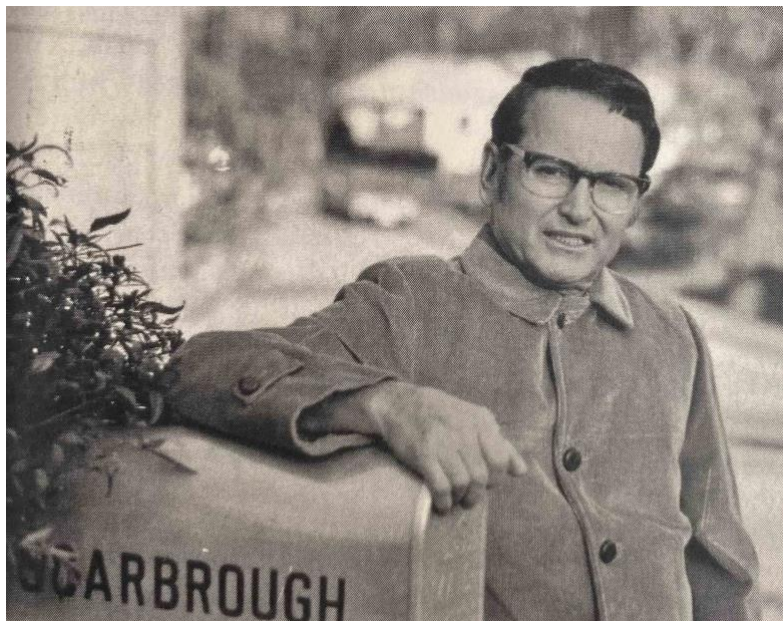
George Scarbrough reading Dylan Thomas

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George Scarborough sitting on his porch in 1989



George Scarbrough in 1970, a few years after arriving in Oak Ridge