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Résumé de l'article

Pendant plus de 50 ans le poète traditionnel Roscoe Solley a puisé dans un corpus de poèmes de circonstance et de famille. Au début du siècle, lorsque Solley était un jeune homme, la récitation de poèmes était une activité villageoise répandue dans tout le centre de la Pennsylvanie. Pour réagir contre le recul de cette activité pendant les années 1970, il renouvela son répertoire, élargit sa sphère d'activité et diversifia ses auditoires, en personnalisant l'acte de communication et en créant des auditoires de circonstance qu'il commémorait ensuite dans ses poèmes.

“MY NAME IS NOTHING EXTRA/ BUT THE TRUTH TO YOU I’LL TELL”: ASSESSING THE PERSONAL USE OF TRADI- TIONAL POETRY

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One of the last recitation performances I shared with traditional poet Roscoe Solley occurred, as had many before, in an intimate, accidental grouping with strangers. As we ate collards, black eyed peas, and country steak in the Farm Fresh supermarket restaurant, one of Great Uncle Roscoe’s favorite places to “put on the feed bag” when he visited me in North Carolina, he patiently listened and cued correction for my halting rehearsal of “The Hermit of Shark Tooth Shoal”. Perhaps it was the cadence which caught the attention of the woman and man in the flanking booth, and after Uncle Roscoe approved my finish with a grin and his usual “Shakespoke!” tag, the woman leaned our way, apologized for “being nose-y”, and asked what we were doing. The conversation quickly turned to Roscoe’s poems, and the woman asked to hear one. Uncle was pleased to oblige, as always, and launched into his 18 stanza “I Am the Great United States”, frequently a first offering in this kind of context. The couple’s admiring responses cued him to follow with “The Bugs Won’t Let Me Be”, a counterpoint to the patriotic piece, featuring the bothersome “Itis boys” — “Burs”, “Arthr”, and “Neur”. “The Bugs...” usually elicited smiles at the start, hefty chortles throughout the poem’s body of complaints, and, at the finish, got audiences to laugh at themselves.¹

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1. My purpose is to profile Roscoe Solley and give a sense of his poetry. Individual poems are, throughout, excerpted with only a few stanzas to indicate the poet’s forms, tone, diction and subjects. This text is the first of many examples herein combining elisions and other features of the recitation performances but following the punctuation and capitalization of the printed versions. I have standardized spellings and capitalizations only when necessary for clarity. In addition, the chapbook version of “The Bugs...” includes a final stanza, identifying literal bugs, which Uncle Roscoe began to omit, based on audience reactions, fairly early on in his recitations of the poem.

Now the combores got into my shoulder
The Bolweavels got into my knee
The wood ticks are bothering my elbows
NO, the bugs won’t let me be [1977: 4, stanza 15].

When I was young I was sporty
 I was happy, go lucky and free
 Now that old age should be golden
 The bugs won't let me be.

I'm frequently seeing my doctor
 And taking a lot of his drugs
 But I just don't seem to be able
 To drive off those pesky old bugs.

Now all you good folks pay attention
 For most of this story is true
 So do what you can while you're able
 'Cause those bugs'll be coming for you [1977: 4, stanzas 1-2, 14].

Uncle Roscoe always packed a satchel of his poetry when he came to visit, copies of his newest compositions and a few of his three privately printed chapbooks, each titled *Poems By Old Man Solley* (1975b, 1977, 1982a). Anywhere we went he was likely to find or create an occasion for reciting a poem or two, and he quickly learned that almost everyone requested written texts of what they'd just heard. The couple in *Farm Fresh* leafed through the pages of the chapbooks Roscoe fetched from the car at their request, decided to buy two for \$3 each, and got his autograph on the title pages before we exchanged goodbyes to end our supermarket supper with poetic cordials.

Roscoe Foster Solley was an attractive man, a person of presence to whom acquaintances of only a few minutes would closely attend, a "character", some would say, a traditional craftsman with words in prose and poetry whose penchant was to be social and communicative. Born April 16, 1899, near the village of Greenville, in Clearfield County, central Pennsylvania, Roscoe Solley lived 87 years, during 50 of which he composed or recreated and recited from a body of about 180 poems whose texts speak eloquently of the traditional foundations for his poemcraft, his individual stylistic manipulations of tradition, and his exceptionally personal senses of audience.

I knew Roscoe Solley as a family man, a prolific versifier and inveterate recitation performer, a traveling companion and soul-mate for the last 16 years of his life. For that period our lives were so closely linked, the sight and sound of his verses were everywhere. He recited over the phone; he folded poems into his letters; occasionally the letters were the poems. Our conversations were filled with his stories, apt stanzas, and full recitations when his wife, Rheva, he, and I drove on "rambles" through the network of flood control dam recreation areas on the West Branch Susquehanna. After Rheva died, he and I took vacation trips down the Blue Ridge Parkway to see again the blooming Rhododendron and wild azalea, and Roscoe poetically and narratively transformed the tedium of long-distance traveling in my "little yellow hack", the van he dubbed the "Golden

Handle".² When we visited back and forth between Grampian and any of the places I lived during Uncle Roscoe's final years, mealtimes, especially, were occasions for telling tales and saying rhymes.

As folklorist, I prompted Roscoe Solley's artistries for the good of my students, and acted as presenter for him in festivals and other formal, hugely public, "non-folk" settings.³ The videotape recordings of his classroom appearances are still used when the subject is family folklore or folk song and poetry. Even now, with only a taped introduction to Roscoe and his recitations, audiences respond personally to the poems they liked best. Recently, a student from Pennsylvania, homesick for his mother's cooking, his grandfather's home-made wine and stories, and for sight of the land rising around him in the rural reaches east of Pittsburgh, encountered Uncle Roscoe's Pennsylvania poems on videotape. This otherwise stoical and reticent young man, a physically imposing defensive lineman on the football team, broke through the shy eddies of students at my desk after class with some personal urgency to know if he could get copies of "My Pennsylvania" and "The Banks of the Old Susquehanna", for these poems "said it all...", he began, then cast his eyes down, trailing off with a slow side-to-side shake of his head.

Great Uncle Roscoe was my maternal grandfather's younger brother, the eighth of ten children born between 1886 and 1904 to Amy Victoria and George Washington Solley, and fourth in the line of six family poets who emerged from that household in the Grampian Hills. That Roscoe was my kinsman elder is, of course, significant to my subjectivity here, but both our kinship and the folk poetic family heritage were obscure to me until 1970 when I "discovered" and wrote about the verse traditions among my mother's father's people (1975), and later described and analyzed the influences which spawned and sustained the Solley rhymers (1976).

Like other poets in his family and in the broader tradition, Roscoe Solley celebrated family and local persons, places, and events. He assessed community values and sentiments, responded in verse to local issues, proffered his opinions about political and social matters. Uncle Roscoe stands apart from the "crowd" of family and community poets from which he sprang, though, not only for the volume of his work and broad range of poem subjects, but also for the skill with which he employed his poemcraft and recitation performance as means to address

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2. There is an elaborate family storytelling frame tale reference in this name (Baldwin 1985: 159-161). Both phrases appear in "My Favorite Niece", in manuscript 25 November 1980 (Solley, Roscoe 1982a: 11-13).
 3. These included the 1976 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, the 1978 North Carolina Folklife Festival, the 1982 City of Rocky Mount (North Carolina) Down East Festival of the Arts, the 1985 Blue Ridge Parkway 50th Anniversary Conference, and Elder Hostel classes at Appalachian State University and ECU.

his audiences personally, directly, with conversational language and tone. Uncle Roscoe communicated articulately, affectively, and frequently in verses composed about and shared with his family, his workmates, his community. But he also moved beyond his groups of cultural reference, risking inappropriateness and censure of his content, style, or choice of performance context, using his poetry *in* conversation and *as* conversation with cultural “others” in strange settings. He successfully appropriated audiences with and for his recitation poems almost wherever he went, with most everyone he met.⁴

Great Uncle Roscoe experienced two distinct periods of production and performance, each closely linked to and expressive of his status and occupation within family and community groups, and both direct functions of the available, appropriate audiences. The title couplet here comes from his first poem, a 1906 come-all-ye in six stanzas about the master’s hickory stick punishment for Roscoe’s pranking disruption in Greenville’s one room schoolhouse. The final stanza addresses audience in traditional fashion.

This flogging did not last long
But boys it made me scratch
So all you kids take warning
And in school don’t light a match [1975b: 17-18].

“I got my mother to write it off for me...”, he remembered. “Took it in the next day and laid it on the teacher’s desk. Ol’ Harold Smith was the master, an’ he was a good guy; I liked him. He had the fifth grade arithmetic class, an’ they were workin’ problems, an’ he looked at that [the poem, “School Days”] and [indicates Smith’s pent up desire to laugh out loud]... called us out for recess. So we got an extra long recess that day.”⁵

The 36 years of his first phase of poem composition and recitation is marked from that “I am a jolly schoolboy...” beginning until the eve of the U. S. involvement in World War II, when he sent his eldest son, Jay, to school with a “26 mile long” composition lamenting the developing war, expressing hope that U.S. soldiers not be called to enter the conflict.⁶ His explanation of the process

4. Pauline Greenhill’s discussion of appropriateness (1989) applies here in most regards. One of her points is that the poem occasions in which this kind of verse is performed are “private” and that the folklorist who doesn’t have ready social access can’t easily observe the performances. Some of Roscoe Solley’s poetry had appropriately restricted contexts and audiences; some of it was used to create appropriateness wherever he was, with whomever would enjoy listening.
5. Roscoe’s sister, Beatrice disputes his date for this incident. In a September 1992 conversation at her home, she recounted for me the pain she felt for her brother’s humiliation in class that day. Because she was in school at the time of Roscoe’s flogging, the date of the poem would more likely be 1910, at the earliest. Her advice, though, was to “Tell it the way he said it happened.”
6. “Worldly Troubles” (1975b: 30-31) is discussed in Baldwin (1976: 227-229).

for the 14 stanza poem was elegantly simple: "You see, it was just 26 mile to where I was workin'. And I had the poem in my head when I got to the job. When I come home, I got it wrote off."

Up until the time he began to lose his recitation audiences and lose touch with the poetic impulse of this early period, Roscoe Solley was primarily a performer and composer at the bridge, road, and dam construction sites where he labored in crews with his brothers and cousins, and at the coal strippings, clay mines, and rock quarries where he also worked to earn "the bacon and the beans". He accounted for 22 different construction and mining jobs between the time he started at 14 until age 75, when he was "working the shovel again" for a coal stripping. "I changed jobs often, because I liked to see how the other fellows was doin' it".

During mid-day dinner breaks at the edges of mines or at the end of a construction day's labors, in the "Black Dog" or another nearby tavern, he recited his own and his workmates' poem favorites: "The Face on the Barroom Floor", "The Shooting of Dan McGrew", "The Cremation of Sam McGee", "The Hermit of Shark Tooth Shoal", "The Blue Velvet Band", and "The Lure of the Tropics". He also composed verses about and on the construction and mining jobs he did, incorporating in each poem the names of his workmates, kin and friend, and in-group references to their habits and shenanigans.⁷ These poems were made up and used up⁸ at sites throughout eastern Pennsylvania, north central New Jersey, and "York State". As best he remembered, "I had a poem for just about every job I's on. I'd wrote them down, when I had them, but now I've lost most of them."

Three complete texts of work poems survive. One is a mock-lament about the dilapidated state of an underground clay mine where he worked "when the weather was bad for construction".⁹ Another foretells his unemployment after Michael Baker's strip mine lost its business "on account of dirty coal" during W. P. A. days ("The Old Strip Mine" 1975a: 30). The third, alternatively referred to as "Railroad Alley", is an elaborately esoteric 15 double stanza narrative about

7. Edward Ives's (1964) description of the all-male after work shanty entertainments of Miramichi loggers and the performance of a new composition by the songmaker, Larry Gorman, is most apt here. Roscoe's occupational poems served to catalogue and celebrate the workers on each job, and in the process, he, like Gorman, would often include details about his workmates they would just as soon have had him forget.

8. As I have discussed (1976: 229-232) the Solley family women poets mainly produced lyric, commemorative verse, composed and performed in writing, meant to be referred to over long periods of time; the men poets were the narrators in ballad form, and their verses were "actively anecdotal and timely". In brief, women's poems were meant to be read; men's poems were made to be said.

9. "Wagner's Mine", as Roscoe subsequently called it, was recited in numerous performances at my request, but he didn't include it in any of his chapbooks, nor is there a manuscript version of it in his unpublished materials. It appears in Baldwin (1976: 229-230).

a large bridge construction job in Pittston, Pennsylvania, where, among other escapades and harassments he catalogued in couplet rhyme, was that the quarters for his “band of yowling Bridgemen” were already occupied.

We had a hotsey, totsie camp
 upon the river bend
 Where the creepers gave no mercy to the
 enemy or friend
 The bedbug gets in my bunk and then
 he starts for yours
 On the floor he meets a cockroach and
 the bedbug he detours [“Tales of a Bridgeman” 1975a: 14-15, stanza 3].

The bulk of Roscoe Solley’s extant verse, 169 poems, comes from a later phase, beginning in 1972, after about a 30 year hiatus, and continuing through to the week he died in 1986.¹⁰ The genesis of Uncle Roscoe’s new period of poetic communication came in family traditional fashion after I’d finished dissertation fieldwork with my Clearfield County kin and moved to Detroit. Too many weeks had passed without word from me; in the mail came the six stanza chastisement dictated by Roscoe, transcribed by Rheva. It begins:

Is your elbow cramped?
 Is your finger stiff?
 I hope they soon get better.
 My eyes are growin’ very dim
 Just lookin’ for that letter.

Has Miss Neglect been hangin’ ‘round?
 I think perhaps you’ve met her.
 Just tell the ol’ girl off for once
 And write to us that letter [Solley and Solley 1972a].

Delighted and duly chagrined, I wrote a letter filling them in on the new job and move and then “lost” it in the piles of papers on my desk. Before I found the first, I wrote another... and two more. Same sorry tale each time. One day, in a fit of housecleaning I found all four and sent them together. Ross and Rheva teamed up again in a seven stanza meter-bound response, starting with:

We just received your letter
 Or letters I should say
 We sat right down and read them
 Without the least delay.

10. Gale David Solley, Roscoe’s younger son, suggested to me in a September 1992 phone conversation that he thinks his father was making poetry again as early as the 1960s, but he doesn’t know of any extant texts from that period.

We had to laugh a little
 When we got them in a group
 To look at all that readin'
 Most knocked us for a loop [Solley and Solley 1972b].

Roscoe's letters in rhyme proved a revival of the poemcraft he'd plied successfully for entertaining his family and workmates from the 1910s through the 30s, and began a period in which he transformed his traditional craft to suit the opportunities, issues, and audiences of the 1970s and 80s. Where once his verses focused on the interests and antics of the male occupational groups of his youth, in the 1970s he revived some old and established many new audiences for recitation, and responsively expanded his array of poem subjects.¹¹

Once he started again, the impulse to communicate in verse came frequently. He was cranked up and humming along, putting together an average of a poem a month, "writing off" the verses in pasteboard cover composition books or enlisting Rheva's help and more legible hand. Rheva's postscript to the second poem letter tells of their teamwork: "I am not the poet but I get to copy the doggerel down" (Solley and Solley 1972b). Rheva was an integral part of this new phase of Roscoe's poem-making; she was often his transcriber, always his first audience and unabashed critic, and the author of the title for "The Gram-Penn Watergate", one of his first rhymed ventures into the public arena in the new phase of his poetry.¹²

In August, 1973, Grampian folks disputed the Penn Township council's proposal to require all property owners to subscribe to a new water system, whether or not the fee payer's house was plumbed. The well and hand pump Ross and Rheva used worked "just fine", and he objected to being forced to "pay extra for somethin' I don't need". Prior to the vote on the matter, he made his poem one day and recited it the next for the fellows at the town gas station, known as "the garage". The final of six stanzas is the call for action:

So let's oppose this ordinance
 Before it is too late,
 Lest we all get washed away
 In the Gram-Penn Watergate [1975b: 17]!

11. I have grouped Roscoe Solley's poems into categories primarily based on their subject matters: work poems (3 + fragments); letter poems (5); family individuals (7); wife (6); commemorations of local individuals, groups, places (20); commemorations of national, larger regional scope (9); commentaries on modern life and calls for action (16); politics and the cost of living (5); Pennsylvania, Grampian, Greenville (9); composite reminiscences with commentary on growing old (16); reminiscences of specific things, occasions (6); local history (2); celebrations of nature, the seasons (6); celebrations of generalized persons (4); narratives, homilies employing fictional personæ (23); love lyrics (2); moralistic, religious advices (12); religious themes, narratives (12); and personal confessions, statements (8).

12. The manuscript version I received from them indicated "title by Rheva Solley".

Uncle Roscoe was a seasoned public official, not merely disgruntled. He had been Grampian's mayor for eight years and, at the time of the local Watergate alarm, he was Commissioner of Streets. The men at the garage approved the poet's point and, at their urging, he dictated the verses to Rheva, photocopies were handed around and posted in town, and Roscoe repeatedly recited his polemic. The part Roscoe's poem played in defeat of the ordinance was held significant, which pleased him and perhaps counteracted the upshot of a similar, subsequent poem. "Old Man Solley" (1975b: 6) appeared in Clearfield's *The Progress* under the headline: "Grampian Street Commissioner Says it in Verse".¹³ Part of what he said was pretty strong.

They call me Old Man Solley
I am a man of no renown
I am just a street commissioner
In a little one horse town.

Where each person thinks this servant
Should be always on the ball
And that he should come a running
At their personal beck and call.

Now I'm right here to tell you
That it would take a champion
To appease the whims and notions
Of the citizens of Grampian [1975b: 6, stanzas 1-2,10].

"Old Man" Solley's atypically strident tone took me aback. Uncle Roscoe and Aunt Rheva both criticized with chiding indirection, usually delivered with a palliative of humor. But I wasn't a bit surprised to read about the poet's comeuppance in the next letter transmitting "The Snowflakes".

How did you like my poem about the street commissioner's job. It got me fired as I had it published in the paper. I am sending you another one I wrote about the snow. I am not much of a letter writer. My spelling is bad, you will have to excuse it. I don't write very much only when I am fixing up a little poetry and then I only make hen tracks [1975a].

With Rheva's helping hand and his own hen tracks across the faint blue lines in \$.99 Super Value writing tablets, Uncle Roscoe rounded up about 40 new compositions in three years. In 1975, the first time Rheva's birthday fell on Easter since the year she was born, Roscoe rented the basement of the Grampian town hall for the party. About 80 family members turned out with macaroni and molded Jell-O salads, baked ham and bean casseroles, chicken and "sad" dumplings,¹⁴

13. The clipping I received did not indicate a date or publication source, but *The Progress* is most likely, since it is the daily newspaper Roscoe and Rheva subscribed to.

14. "Sad" dumplings don't rise; they are floated on the top of a baked casserole.

and sheet cakes decorated for the event. Rheva sported an orchid corsage and posed with Roscoe for pictures next to an Easter egg festooned money tree,¹⁵ set up as centerpiece on the gift table. Roscoe's gift to Rheva on her "first" Easter birthday was his first chapbook collection of *Poems by Old Man Solley*.

The 1975 chapbook holds a riotous variety of Roscoe Solley's new phase poems. Not surprisingly, there are commemorations for family. "Our Jean" and "Our Girl Joanie" compliment twin daughters in the village of Burnside branch of the Solley clan which has been settled through the Grampian Hills since the county was opened for logging in the mid-19th century. Ditchy, the family dog, was named for the place from which he was rescued as a discarded, nearly drowned pup, and his life with Solleys and his death are commemorated in "The Children's Pal". Roscoe and Rheva's courtship, marriage, and parenting life together turn up as elements in "Ramblin' Boy", "Memories of Senior Citizens", and "On the Banks of the Old Susquehanna", the last easily sung to the tune of "The Red River Valley". "My Pennsylvania Girl" is Rheva's own praise poem entirely.

Decidedly local poem topics serve different functions and traditional modes. "A Patient's Comment" was a personally delivered tribute to the DuBois Hospital staff for the "elegant service" and respect they offered. "Grampian's Little Brook That Stinky Little Rill" is a decorous mock etiology for the "slippery old brown trout" one could fish from the town creek which ran behind everybody's outdoor toilet, and another call for action:

Now I've told you all about it
 And I'd like to make my pitch
 Let's get a sewage system
 And clean up our little ditch [1975b: 16-17, stanza 12].

"A Comment" is probably Roscoe's shortest poem, four stanzas thanking the Curwensville Business and Professional Women for his invitation to recite at their monthly meeting. "Business Women" is 12 stanzas, and a more reflective, generalized salute to "The women of our land".

Now we have them in the army
 In the navy and the air
 We have them in the business world
 And sometimes in our hair [1975b: 22, stanza 4].

15. Money trees are customary at important family passage celebrations: silver and golden wedding anniversaries, weddings, "round" birthdays for elders (70th, 80th), etc. A money tree may be table top or floor model, and is made from the highly articulated end branch of a deciduous tree, stripped of leaves, perhaps painted white, and set upright in a base. During the celebration, well-wishers attach bills of various denominations to the tree where the leaves would have been.

In his period of revitalized recitation, Uncle Roscoe put aside the “barroom pieces” of his earlier days, and performed only his own verses, having quickly cultivated steadily appreciative audiences at the Curwensville Senior Citizens’ Club monthly dinner socials where he and Rheva were among peers whose life experiences and sentiments he felt confident to assess and reference in poems of lyric and narrative-descriptive reminiscence woven through with commentaries on growing old and advices for staying cheerful through adversity. Poems for his age mates included generalized sentiments about the course of life, and employed a variety of framing and sustaining images: walking life’s pathways, playing life’s game, and steering life’s course as on a river. Narratives and detailed vignettes of his own and his peers’ youthful experiences were another favorite mode for reminiscences about berry picking, Christmas tree hunts, home talent plays, square dances, steam locomotives, cider making, Model T Fords, finding and imbibing “hootch” on the sly, and courting. His rhymed remembrance of box socials, featured in the 21 stanza “Reminiscence”, tells of the performance process for these community fund-raisers.

The boys bid on these boxes
 And with the maiden shared
 All the food and goodies
 That the maiden had prepared.

Some maidens had a boyfriend
 With whom they’d like to eat
 So in order to accomplish this
 They were inclined to cheat.

She’d wave a hand or nod her head
 Or raise a fluttery lid
 And thus she let her boyfriend know
 Just on which box to bid.

So when he started in to bid
 His features were so grim
 The other fellows would get wise
 And bid it up on him!

He would get so bleak and angry
 Yet he knew that was not nice
 If he wanted that there goodie box
 He would have to pay the price [1975b: 6-7, stanzas 12-16].

Polemical commentaries on national politics and economics figure importantly in the first collection. “The Trouble in the U. S. A.”, “Women’s Lib and Abortion”, “Just a Little Gas”, “Old Glory”, “One Man’s Opinion of Watergate”, and “A Soldier’s Lament”, offer Roscoe’s distillations of what he understood to

be community ideas about oil embargoes and price fixing, abortion and bra burning, disrespect for the flag, domestic hunger and foreign aid, inflation and fixed incomes, pulling out of Vietnam “leaving the job half done”, journalists’ irresponsible reporting, and the empty promises of “baby kissing” politicians. “A Five Cent Nickel and a Ten Cent Dime” is predictably about the effects of inflation, but from the viewpoint of a septuagenarian who prompted his age mates to remember when

We then had five cent ice cream
 And bananas two for a nickel
 Today a nickel will not buy
 A rancid old dill pickle [1975b: 4-5, stanza 5].

The lead poem in the chapbook ultimately became one of Roscoe Solley’s signature poems, one he recited frequently, revised as necessary through the years, and mined as a resource for subsequent compositions. “A Poor Man’s Lament” carries its humorously rueful message through 16 verses about the cost of living... and dying. The first and final stanzas are:

The summer days are over
 And the winter’s coming on
 My heavy clothes is worn out
 And my money’s almost gone.

My bank account’s depleted
 It’s impossible to save
 And so in desperation
 I think about the grave.

But that won’t solve the problem
 And I’d like to tell you why
 For with thousand dollar caskets [With four thousand dollar caskets]¹⁶
 I just can’t afford to die 1975b: 3].

Fast upon the appearance of the 1975 chapbook was a second, in 1977, collecting 40 more poems he’d “fixed up” for family and about local places and events, celebrations of nature and the changing seasons, reveries about the good old days and more complaints against the “Itis boys” and other infirmities of aging. “The Bugs Won’t Let Me Be”, another of his signature poems, appears in the second chapbook, but missed inclusion in the first by only a few months. It arrived with other poems in a September 1975 letter from Roscoe.

Just a few lines to let you know how things are going down here. This leaves us well and kicking. I have still got the bugs in my shoulder as my poetry will reveal, but I guess this is something that us old fogies have to learn to live with. I am sending you three poems

16. The bracketed insertion indicates a variation “update”.

— my latest. The one titled "1776" I wrote for a group of Senior citizens in Phila. Beatrice [his sister, Beatrice Solley McKenrick] got me to write it. They will use it in a play that they are putting on at the bicentennial in that city. Well, I must close for this time. Please excuse all mistakes and write soon. Love from your uncle Roscoe [1975c].

"Bugs" was instantly popular, and its main motif quickly became a family joke. A chatty letter from Aunt Rheva in February 1976 opens with a visual reference which still makes me hoot: "How are you standing this weather? I am pretty tired of the snow and ice. Roscoe's bugs are letting him be just a little. He can put on his coat without help and can get his hand out of his hip pocket without dropping his pants" (1976).

Uncle Roscoe primarily selected and responded to family and local audiences at the annual Grampian Days town festival, the Penn Township schools, the Curwensville Business and Professional Women, the granges in Grampian and Harmony, and the Greenville Church of the Brethren Homecoming, which, for reasons of the congregation's membership, was essentially also an extended Solley family reunion. Always he made poems for recitation, for performance, although he assiduously "copied off" the verses as they sounded in his head, never again to lose the texts. He enjoyed hearing his poems, and he often prompted audiences of one into oral performance with, "Read it out loud. I just like hear how it sounds." But he never performed "readings"; he "studied on" what he might perform, fixing it in memory beforehand for a proper, standing, recitation. He was always prepared to recite —whether he "said" two or three pieces in the afternoon Grampian Days talent show, or "spoke" "Just a Little Gas" to the Curwensville pump attendant filling the tank on "the Golden Handle" as we set out for a ramble, or "shot off his mouth" in a program of five to seven recitations as the featured speaker for the monthly meeting of a local group. When the Harmony United Parent Teacher Organization officers were announced in *The Progress*, the news item also noted: "Poet-Author Roscoe Solley, famous for such poems as 'A Soldier's Lament', 'Old Glory', 'School Days', and 'From the Cradle to the Grave', will speak at the Sept 18 meeting".

In 1976, Uncle Roscoe began to add other dimensions to his poem-making and recitation career, creating performance occasions much further afield and developing community with audiences of strangers. In April, shortly after Rheva's letter reference to Roscoe's "bugs" made me laugh the first time, we arranged for them to visit Amherst, talk to my folklore students about box socials, cider-making, corn huskings, and the like, and "speak some home spun poetry". Aunt Rheva and Uncle Roscoe regaled the "young scholars" with team-told personal experience tales, Uncle gave them "The Bugs..." and a host of other recitations, and once the students discovered that Roscoe's birthday fell two days hence, they insisted we meet again for more poetry, stories, and a party. An elegantly graceful woman student, who had taken up cooking as a hobby after her

left arm was amputated above the elbow, volunteered to make the “cake” we ate with cups of cider from the local mill. A man student who’d made the necklace he was wearing of wooden beads and a goat horn strung on a leather thong offered it as a gift to Roscoe after Uncle admired the student’s handiwork. Another woman student stopped us in the parking lot to say farewell and thanks again to Rheva and Roscoe, whom she addressed as “Aunt” and “Uncle”, for those two days with them had been her “best classes” at the University of Massachusetts. The students’ tributes were genuine and so was Uncle Roscoe’s. “To the Folklore Class at Old UMass” arrived posthaste with copies of the 12 stanzas for all in the “community of the occasion” who were party to the birthday cake joke he rhymes about in stanzas five through seven, and whom he salutes in conclusion.

While there I had a birthday
 And solely for my sake
 They threw a little party
 And brought a birthday cake.

They asked what kind of cake I liked
 To this I did reply
 Any kind of cake is good
 But I like pumpkin pie!

And so they brought a pumpkin pie
 And we had some cider too,
 Thanks to Doctor Baldwin
 My best regards to you.

May their pathway be a smooth one
 And God bless each lad and lass
 That studied good old folklore
 In Doctor Baldwin’s class [1977: 25-26, stanzas 5-7, 12].

The Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife featured the northeast region in the opening week of its summer-long Bicentennial extravaganza, including a program of “Traditional Poetry” in which Roscoe and Beatrice Solley McKenrick,¹⁷ recited family and occasional verses twice daily to shifting stands of total strangers. Roscoe had prepared “I Am the Great United States” especially for the festival, and long before the week was up, the sheaf of copies he brought with him was given away in the numerous conversations and ad hoc recitations

17. Great Aunt Beatrice’s poem composition process has been continuous throughout her life, in part because her main poetic mode is lyric commemoration, performed in writing, and exclusively maintained within family, her Church of the Brethren community, and other groups of intimates. Aunt Bea and her sister, the late Lois Solley Thompson, are the family women poets and, while their oral/aural composition process and traditional background are the same as Roscoe’s, and they could and can, when called upon, recite their verses from memory. their poetry was and is primarily performed in Brethren Church bulletins, in birthday and other greeting cards and letters, in neatly written handscripts on pretty stationary as gifts for family occasions.

he shared with individuals and small groups after each show. The week was a family narrative lode of daily adventures, many of which are included in "A Trip to Washington", the 50 stanza episodic commemoration which recounted our adventures for folks "back home in the hills". We took a "wrong way Corrigan" loop on the Beltway getting in to town, dinner was over by the time we arrived and the little restaurant we found open was so hot in June we nearly went bald when our follicles boiled, my dorm room was flooded, Aunt Rheva lost her purse and we lost Aunt Rheva one day on the Mall,

And then our stay was ended,
And our farewells we did say
We loaded up our baggage
Then we headed for P. A.

We stopped before a local bank
To get our pay checks cashed
There my nerves received a shock —
My spirits, they were dashed.

I laid my check down on the seat
Then the wind came in and blew her
Right out through the open door
And down a G. D. sewer! [1977: 21-24, stanzas 39-41]

Increased notoriety back home came swiftly and in grand style shortly after the trip to Washington. On the front page of *The Progress*, July 3, 1976, the banner above the masthead read, "1776 God Bless America 1976", and under a two color, 7" by 8" American flag was a five column spread of "I Am The Great United States". Inside was a Smithsonian publicity story and a photo of Roscoe, his participant's name tag pinned to his shirt, and the bead and horn necklace from his birthday with the UMass scholars hung around his neck. Newspaper publication of local poets' verse was infrequent, and usually only as memorials or local historical reminiscences. Roscoe and Rheva were both honored. "I have gotten a lot of congratulations from friends and neighbors on the poem", he wrote, "and was invited to recite it at the Burnside Bicentennial celebration which I did" (1976). Rheva assembled a framed montage, the entire front page overlaid with the page six story and photo, and hung it high up on one wall of their living room, right over "Mom's chair", the low-backed rocker where she sat to watch morning game shows or nap or visit with the neighbors.

"I am the Great United States" is the lead poem in the 1977 chapbook and the penultimate is "DREAMING Dedicated to My Wife", composed in late summer of that bicentennial year. It is an exquisitely interpersonal remembrance in narrative kernels of their first meeting and comical courtship adventures, their elopement and wedding in Maryland, and an exultant final tribute to their abiding love.

And boldly we plunged into the waves
 Of the stormy old sea of love
 And many a struggle we had there
 Just to keep our heads above.

For out on that stormy sea of love
 We faced some real tough weather
 But our little craft rode out the storms
 And here we are — still together! [1977: 38-39, stanzas 17-18]

Every month of the following year Roscoe had at least one new poem, sometimes two; first I heard them over the phone and then I'd get the "printed off" versions in the mail. In addition to praise poems for "The Man in the Overalls", "Greenville", and "Grampian in the Hills", he celebrated "Memorial Day", "Our Covered Bridge", "The Senior Years", and "The Making of a River". The weather was severe that year, occasioning first "The Blizzard of 1977" and then "The Johnstown Flood of 1977", a 24 stanza account of the July 20th disaster which echoes broadside tradition and makes oblique reference to both the 1889 Johnstown flood, when the dam on the Conemaugh River above the city burst after heavy rains and more than 2,000 persons drowned, and the 1936 flood, which Roscoe well remembered.¹⁸

Every kind of story "with a point worth tellin'" was suited out in rhyme, from the Johnstown flood to the day he amputated a finger in his woodworking and saw sharpening shed up the hill behind the house, the place Rheva called his "pout house".

Mailed in Grampian, Pennsylvania
 And to be exact on date
 The second month and eleventh day
 In nineteen seventy-eight.

Dear Karen,
 I think I'll take a little time
 And flop down on my setter
 And write to you a few short lines
 In answer to your letter.

My hands are cramped, my writing's bad,
 But I thought I'd let you know
 That I had a little accident
 About a month ago.

I went up to my hobby shop
 A place I love to linger
 While working with a power saw
 I cut off one big finger.

18. The Johnstown flood poem was published in the *Barnesboro Star*, but not included in the 1977 chapbook.

No carelessness, no negligence
 I'd have you understand
 It was my middle finger
 And it was on my left hand.

Now, I did not get excited
 Nor did I go into shock
 The Misses called our neighbor
 And they took me to the Doc.

Now the stump is all healed over
 But it's still a little sore
 Like the monkey with the clipped tail said
 "It won't be long no more."

Now I may have put this crudely,
 For I don't believe in gloss
 So I just tell it as it comes
 Good-by from Uncle Ross [1982a: 11, stanzas 1-2, 5-9, 15. Manuscript 13 February 1978].

In the summer of 1978, after Rheva had pulled through a long winter of illness, the three of us were planning a vacation ramble down the Blue Ridge Parkway. They both talked with me on the phone one night, figuring our plans to get rolling as soon as my classes were finished. The next morning, Rheva suffered an aortic aneurysm, survived the ambulance trip to the Clearfield Hospital and the emergency surgery, and then died. Ross and Rheva had been married 57 years, raised five of seven children, "hung and rattled" through all of that as mates and fishing pals. Roscoe marked one message of his grief on masking tape strips applied to the bottom of an aluminum pie pan he hung on the kitchen wall next to the corner dish cupboard he'd carpentered to Rheva's specifications long years before. "Mom ate her last breakfast from this pan. 6-11-78."

We didn't know if Roscoe would survive his bereavement; his phone conversations and letters were full of mourning.

I thought I would drop you a few lines to let you know that I received your card and letter. ... I am feeling pretty blue. I just cannot get back to my self. Every thing I look at brings memories of her. I did not know there was so many tears in a man. I go to her grave every day that I am at home. I try to keep flowers on her grave, she loved them so much. I am running out of flowers as the moles got into her pansy bed and ruined it. I will have to buy some from the florist I guess [1978].

I figured the first time he could make a poem about Rheva would be a good sign of his recovering from her death. The poems soon came. His 1982 and final chapbook includes "In Loving Memory of My Wife: Rheva Rowles Solley", "I'll Meet Her Over There", "Pure Love", and "Little Darling", and the double headstone he bought for their grave is inscribed with his verse:

We made a vow before our God
 We kept it from the start
 To love, to honor, and cherish
 And only in death to part.

After Rheva's death, there was a marked shift in Roscoe's poem subjects, a response to new audiences in the churches throughout the Grampian Hills. As a boy, Roscoe had been baptized in Bilger's Run near the Greenville Church of the Brethren and raised in the church with his siblings. As a grieving widower, he found comforting community among an ecumenical array of local congregations. Fully 25 of his compositions after Rheva's death either implicitly engage religious themes and Christian moral advices or render Biblical narratives in verse. Among the Bible stories are "The Birth of Christ", "The Birth and Death and Resurrection of Christ", "The Deeds of Daniel", and "Jonah and the Whale". Doctrinal explications include "The Millennial" and "The Rapture". His moralistic advice poems often referenced images he'd developed in earlier, secular compositions, and restructured them in poetic duels of good and evil: "The Games of Life, God's Game and the Devil's Game", "Don't Let your Anchor Drag", and "Satan's Four Lanes". The last begins in stanza eight to develop the image of the "narrow, straight, and true" road to heaven and the fast four lane to perdition.

The road that leads to the fiery lake
 Is four lane all the way
 With halls of lust and dens of sin
 Where Satan holds full sway.

His four lanes are alluring
 They're winding and they're wide
 But old Satan has his pot holes
 And his ruts on either side [1982b: stanzas 11, 14].

Roscoe's church audiences and his religious compositions were additions to his established repertory of recitation opportunities and subjects. When he was at home, he rhymed and recited about "Lovely Old Greenville" and the "Homecoming" there, the "Grampian Days" festivities, "Pennsylvania", and "The United States". He'd lost his fishing pal but not his love for nature, and when he spoke poetry for the Curwensville seniors, he included lyric celebrations of "Autumn", "Where the Clear Waters Flow", "Where the Sunset Turns the Evening Sky to Gold", and "King Winter". Often, for long periods of time, he was not at home, though. He and Rheva had regularly toured central and western Pennsylvania, trailer camping "up on Kettle Creek in the boondocks for sure" (Rheva Solley 1972), ever in search of good fishing holes. Once he was alone, and the "Four Friendly Walls" of home closed in, Uncle Roscoe traveled to visit and find company with his children and their families, his sisters, friends from church,

and me. He recited poetry to make connection with new acquaintances, and, reinforced with pleased responses, he frequently incorporated his audiences as poem subjects. When he lived in Niagara Falls with his son, Jay, he tagged along to the league bowling lanes with his daughter-in-law, Doris. "The Black Horse Nymphs", one of several bowling poems, sets forth his sideliners' observations with fond humor and a heft of bowling lingo.

I am an old arthritis has been
And to forget my aches and pains
I go and watch the women bowl
Down at the Beverly Lanes

I love to watch the expressions
There'll be sour mouths and grins
I love the rumble of the balls
And the rattle of the pins.

When someone gets a perfect strike
They yell and leap and bound
But if they get an open frame
You never hear a sound [1983: stanzas 1-3].

Uncle Roscoe took up airplane travel late in his life, and each time he flew between Niagara Falls and North Carolina, he had another yarn about reception of his recitations at 30,000 feet. In North Carolina he always was glad to say poems to my folklore classes, and, between classes, he created audiences among small groups of students waiting in the halls. While I held office hours he held forth with recitations for the English Department office staff. One of our summer sojourns from Grampian down through the Shenandoah Valley, round trip on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and across North Carolina to the coastal plain is versified in "My Favorite Niece" and features, among the 24 stanzas, comment on a gathering of appreciative Elder Hostellers in Boone, "For they really gave attention/And they seemed to like my line", and students in "the halls of old E. C.", who applauded his "moldy jokes" and "home spun poetry" (1982a: 11-13). Folklorist Tom McGowan and his family were our hosts whenever Uncle and I passed through Boone, and Tom recalled in a letter his experiences with Roscoe's informal poetic interactions.

One afternoon I discovered him reciting from our front steps to a neighbor walking her dog; another afternoon he entertained me after work while he rocked on our porch. He left a typescript of a patriotic poem on my son's bedtable. He declaimed fourteeners in the corridors and at restaurant tables during the [Blue Ridge] Parkway [50th anniversary] conference [1985].

"The Blue Ridge Tour" is a 25 stanza travelogue of the natural and cultural attractions Roscoe knew intimately for all the Parkway trips he and Rheva made.

He'd composed the poem the year before in commemoration, "spruced it up" for the 1985 celebration conference, and, as we sat through the opening speeches when the North Carolina and Virginia governors were introduced, he leaned over to whisper that he "flat forgot" to mention Virginia at all! Before his afternoon recitation of "The Blue Ridge Tour", though, Roscoe had pieced in Virginia verses for the poem's start, not to "insult" then Governor Robb. The McGowan children had been impressed by the poem, their father recalled. "On a family trip along the Parkway, we noticed sights we'd overlooked before; the trigger for our new insight was Roscoe's... poem" (1985). Twelve year old Michael chanted that poem's opening stanza as they started their trip and remarked on how "Uncle" Roscoe had changed it while reciting at their house; six-year-old Elizabeth, in the back seat, reeled off lines she, too, had memorized (McGowan 1985).

By November 1986, when he died suddenly of a heart attack, Uncle Roscoe had produced what would have been another chapbook's worth of poems, including "Just An Old Man", a reflective self assessment; "ERA, Abortion, and the Sexist Bible"; "My Daughter-in-Law"; "The Town That I Used to Call Mine"; a 33 verse tribute to the 1984 Women's International Bowling Congress Tournament in Niagara Falls; "Put Your Little Hand in Mine", another remembrance of Rheva; "The Fate of a Rolling Stone", a lighthearted autobiographical narrative of his youthful travels and his marriage to Rheva; and "The Fate of the Space Ship Challenger".

Progress editor George Scott's column, "The Monday Wash", reported Roscoe's death with one of the last poem stories of his life.

Roscoe F. Solley, the onetime Grampian mayor who died at 87... last Friday, had long ago established a reputation as a poet. But this year has brought him recognition far beyond the borders of Clearfield County. After the tragic explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in January, Mr. Solley wrote and sent to President Reagan a poem on the tragedy. Receiving a thank-you note from the White House, Mr. Solley was encouraged to send another poem he had written some years ago. Titled "I Am the Great United States," the poem was read by Mrs. Reagan at the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty July Fourth [1986]!

Roscoe "Old Man" Solley rhymed until the end. At his funeral, daughter-in-law Doris gave me copies of two poems made the week he died. One was a comical piece centered on Doris's complaints that he only rinsed his dishes clean, he never used soap. Curiously, he cast the poem as Doris's composition, using her first person as the poem's "I", and titling it "My Father-in-Law". One stanza of the family dialogue reads:

I told him "Use a little soap
And try to make them shine."
And then he flatly told me
That his shined as good as mine [1986a: stanza 5].

The other, I am sure, was his farewell.

I'm only a pilgrim
God put on this earth
It's been a long time
Since the day of my birth

Eighty years I have been here
And then seven more
I've partook of the things
The good Lord had in store

I've journeyed this country
From mountain to coast
And I've laid up some treasures
But the thing I want most

Is to be right with God
When I draw my last breath
And take my last journey
Down the valley of death [1986b: stanzas 1-2, 8-9].

Shakespoke!