

Celebrating National Poetry Month

featuring Okie Poet

Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel (1918 – 2007)



Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel (1918–2007) was born near Stroud and attended schools in Creek County. Her father, of Cherokee descent, was a sharecropper, and her mother was a homemaker. Wilma was “wrenched” from Oklahoma at 17 years of age when her family migrated to California’s Central Valley in 1936. She began writing poetry at a tender age but did not publish until she was in her 50s, ultimately producing over 50 chapbooks of poetry and prose.

Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel’s free verse poetry is written in everyday language, and her writing is uniquely placed by time and geography. McDaniel’s writings convey the migrant experience of children, youth, and adults, her appreciation of working-class people, perceptions of world events and popular culture, religious beliefs, and cultural and gender differences. Anthologized in American working-class literature, her poetry reveals a deep appreciation for common people and for her Oklahoma roots. McDaniel’s words frequently expressed her feelings about her childhood in Oklahoma, her experiences of leaving and settling in a new place, and her observations of everyday life. Place mattered greatly to her, and even though she left Oklahoma, she proudly identified as an Okie and continued to write about her home state throughout her life. Her love for Oklahoma and its people was unshakable.

Poet Laureate of Tulare County, California, McDaniel was spotlighted in a *National Geographic* magazine article (1984) by William Howarth and Chris Johns. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz shared how McDaniel influenced her in *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* (2006). Academics Gerald Haslam and Janet Zandy included McDaniel’s poetry in several of their books.

McDaniel also was the subject of an award-winning documentary, *Down an Old Road: The Poetic Life of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel* by Chris Simon, Sageland Media LLC (2001). More recently, Jeanie Harris authored a young adult biography of McDaniel, *Chasing Fireflies: The Dust Bowl Childhood of a Poet* (2010).

Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel

“I love my native state of Oklahoma. It took the first seventeen years of my life and molded them for better or worse. My character and attitude toward life was fairly well set by my last birthday in the state before starting the Dust Bowl exodus to California. I regard the experiences of those early years as my precious legacy.” — Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel (1980)

Selected Poems by Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel • • •

An Oklahoma Litany

Top drawers of the memory
never contain
any healing for me
When wounded
I always pull out
the bottom drawer
of my memory
the one marked Oklahoma
It holds a list of old towns
with funny names and touching beauty
which I recite with reverence
Bowlegs
Depew
Pretty Water
Idabel
Lone Star
Gypsy Corner
Broken Arrow
Cloud Chief
until the words
form a prayer
which I do not understand
but I close the drawer
with my own Amen

“An Oklahoma Litany” recording, Stroud Public Library. Printed here courtesy of McDaniel (Wilma E.) Papers, University of California Merced, Library and Special Collections.

Explore Online • • •

Oral Histories and Digital Collection— Learn more about Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel through the Oklahoma State University Library’s oral histories with her family and friends: <https://okla.st/mcdaniel>

Digital Collection— Wilma E. McDaniel Papers available through Calisphere: <https://calisphere.org/collections/14256/>

Call Ahead to Explore In-Person • • •

Oklahoma State University Library Archives in Stillwater has a collection of materials including books, correspondence, clippings, and audio-visual materials.

Stroud Public Library and **Lincoln County Museum of Pioneer History** also have special materials about McDaniel.

“I corresponded with Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel now and then, and I appreciated her plain speak. She spoke poignantly and directly from a world and a time that defined Oklahoma history of the Dust Bowl. She was a natural poet. Her poems will stand the test of time.” — Joy Harjo, award-winning poet and musician, born in Tulsa, OK, and member of the Mvskoke Nation

Buried Treasure

Elbie Hayes ruined his
expensive shoes
squashing around the autumn
desolation
of a sharecrop farm
In Caddo County

Okie boy
turned fifty
searching for anything that
had belonged
to his father
when he was fighting the
Great Depression

Kicked at a lump
behind the caved-in cellar
and uncovered a rusty
Prince Albert tobacco can

Stowed it away
as he would a saint’s bones
in his Lincoln Continental
and headed back to Bakersfield

“Buried Treasure” appeared in *Sister Vayda’s Song*, Hanging Loose Press, 1982. Printed here courtesy of McDaniel (Wilma E.) Papers, University of California Merced, Library and Special Collections. <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/86071/d2px2/>

Changes of 1936

Poor girl
with Oklahoma straw
braided in your hair
forget back there

The dark blue call
of whippoorwills
slow purpling skies
of warning

Here is here
California night falls
instantly
draws a black curtain
over vineyards

not a single firefly
will light your way home

“Changes of 1936” appeared in *Man With a Star Quilt*, Chiron Review Press, 1995. Printed here courtesy of McDaniel (Wilma E.) Papers, University of California Merced, Library and Special Collections.

“It is wrenchingly difficult to be a poet, but there is a joy and magic to compensate.”
— Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel (1984)

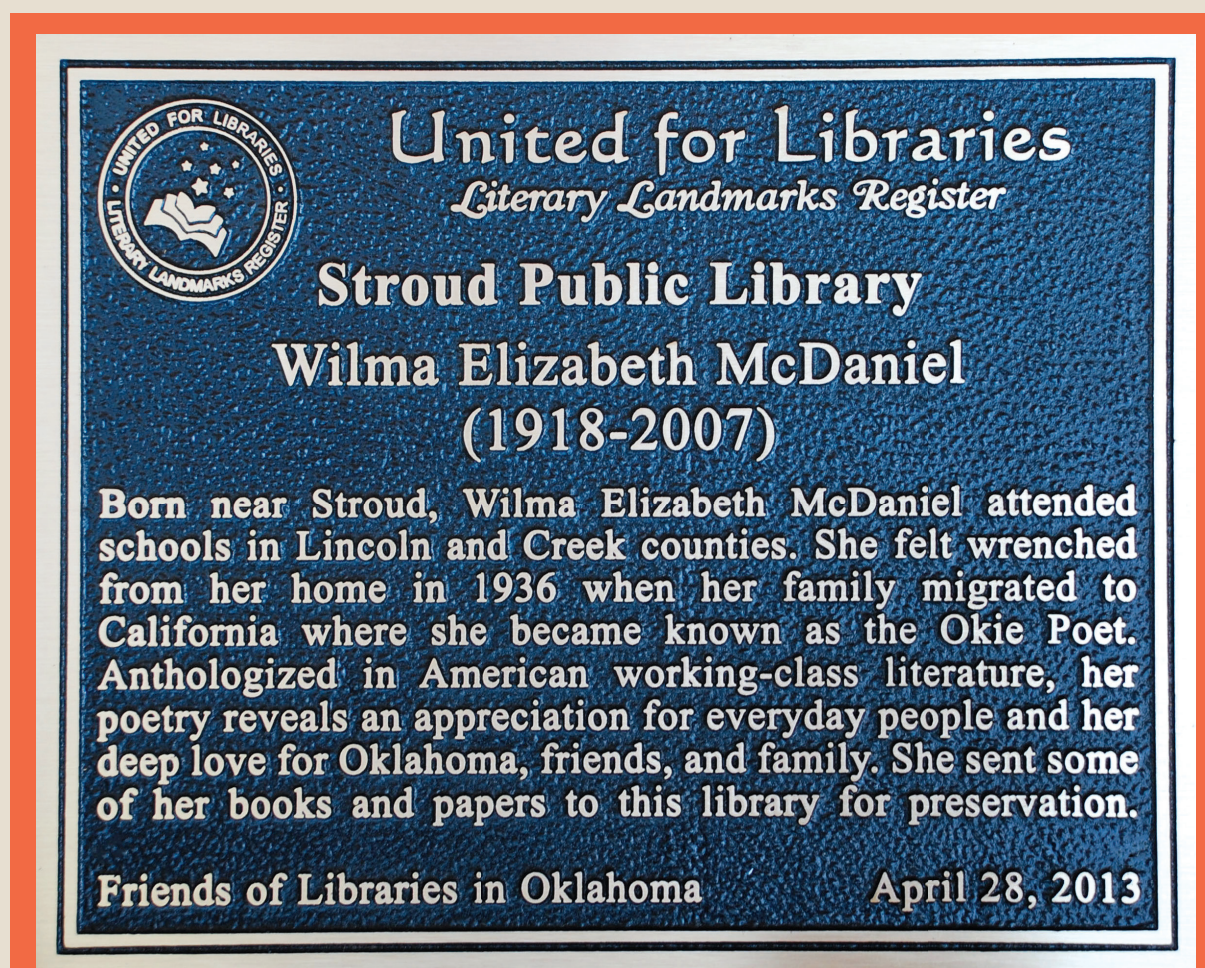
A Pair of Rivers

Everyone should have
a lover
and I had two of them
now locked in memory

At nine
it was the lazy Cimarron
with orange water
and huge catfish
the color of mud

At seventeen
I found an other
in far-off California
a tumbling crystal river
with the holy name Merced

“A Pair of Rivers” appeared in *A River They Call Merced*, Stone Woman Press, 1991. Printed here courtesy of McDaniel (Wilma E.) Papers, University of California Merced, Library and Special Collections. <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/86071/d29q6k/>



In 2013 the Stroud Public Library was designated Oklahoma’s eleventh national Literary Landmark™ in honor of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel.

• • • • • Oklahoma State Poets Laureate • • • • •

2019 (announcement pending)
2017 Jeanetta Calhoun Mish
2015 Benjamin Myers
2013 Nathan Brown

2011 Eddie Wilcoxon
2009 Jim Barnes
2007 N. Scott Momaday
2003 Francine Ringold

2001 Carl Sennhenn
1998 Joe Kreger
1997 Betty Shipley
1995 Carol Hamilton

1977 Maggie Culver Fry
1970 Rudolph N. Hill (Emeritus)
1970 Leslie A. McRill
1966 Rudolph N. Hill

Additional Poets Laureate and Information: <http://bit.ly/artsoklaureate>

• • • • • Oklahoma Book Award Winners — Poetry • • • • •

2018 *Renegade and Other Poems* by Ron Wallace
2017 *Strong Medicine* by Sly Alley
2016 *Places I Was Dreaming* by Loren Graham
2015 *Deep August* by Jessica Isaacs
2014 *Red Dirt Roads* by Yvonne Carpenter, Nancy Goodwin, Catherine McCraw, Clynell Reinschmiedt, and Carol Waters

2013 *Nocturnes and Sometimes, Even I* by Carl Sennhenn
2012 *Leaving Holes and Selected New Writings* by Joe Dale Tate Nevaquaya
2011 *Elegy for Trains* by Benjamin Myers
2010 *Work is Love Made Visible: Poetry and Family Photographs* by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish
2009 *Two Tables Over* by Nathan Brown
2008 *What Trees Know* by Sandra Soli

Additional Winners and Information: <http://bit.ly/libokbookawards>