

Seventy-nine Years of Tradition The Writers Conference at Ocean Park by Dr. Jim Brosnan



Adelbert M. Jakeman, Sr.
Photo courtesy of the Jakeman family

The Writers Conference was founded by Adelbert M. Jakeman, Sr. of Westfield, Massachusetts and Loring Eugene Williams of Cleveland, Ohio. Jakeman was at one time head of the English department at Westfield High School and was Assembly Superintendent at Ocean Park for 31 years. He became a permanent resident of Ocean Park in 1946. Jakeman conceived the idea of the conference as a late season activity to flesh out the summer program which he took over in 1939. He met the older Loring through entering poems in *American Weave* and they became longtime friends. Williams role with the conference became advisory as senior co-founder.

On Friday, August 15, the first State of Maine Writers Conference was planned. (State law forbids the use of the state seal. Eventually the conference became the Writers Conference at Ocean Park.) The first conference was held that Friday in the afternoon and evening as part of Chautauqua week. The summer program in 1941 described the ten-day period from August 7-16 as a “period of superior entertainment and other educational features”. The founders of the Writers Conference capitalized on other literary events already planned such as three days of book reviews and an annual banquet. The banquet which included an appetizer, chicken pie, and dessert cost 85 cents. Robert P. Tristram Coffin, lecturer, novelist, Pulitzer Prize poet, and Pierce Professor of English at Bowdoin College presented an after-dinner talk entitled, “Where Poems Are Found”.

Other cultural events that week related to reading and writing including a lecture by Louis Lyons, feature writer for the *Boston Globe* and curator of the Neiman Foundation for journalism at Harvard University. The original half-day conference cost 25 cents (which did not include the banquet cost) and evolved into a full-day conference in the second year of its existence. That format gradually changed into a Tuesday evening through Friday noon format. In 2003 under Dr. Jim Brosnan’s leadership, the conference was lengthened by an additional day to begin on late Monday afternoon.

Some of the prominent authors who presented in the first sixty-five years of the conference included: Eric Philbrook Kelly, Dartmouth College professor and 1929 Newberry Medal winner; John N. Cole, founder of *The Maine Times*; Robb Sagendorph, founder of *Yankee*

Magazine; A.S. Burack, editor of *The Writer* for many years; David McCord, Boston poet and children's author; Lois Lowry, 1990 Newbury Medal winner; Louis Turco, SUNY–Oswego writing professor, poet, and author of *The New Book of Forms*; Michael C. White, Fairfield University (CT) professor and author of four novels; Susanne Strempek Shea, prolific author of fiction and non-fiction works; and Wesley McNair, poet and director of the University of Maine—Farmington creative writing program; Betsy Sholl, Maine poet; Michelle Dionetti, children's author; and John Perrault, Portsmouth, NH's poet laureate.

In the last fourteen years many professional writers have joined this impressive list. Anita Shreve, author of eighteen novels, read from her yet to be released novel, *Body Surfing*. The late Donald Murray, Boston *Globe* columnist, memoirist and poet, taught the art of memoir by writing a *Boston Globe* column with conference attendees. The 66th annual conference also had additional workshops given by Maren Tirabassi, former poet laureate of Portsmouth, NH and former preacher at Ocean Park; Shelley Girdner, UNH faculty-non-fiction; Elizabeth Peavey, Down East columnist; Kimberly Green, UNH poetry faculty; Kate Chadbourne, singer, songwriter, & poet; and Clark Knowles, UNH fiction faculty.

The 67th Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured Chuck Sambuchino, assistant editor of the *2008 Writers Market* and editor of the *2008 Guide to Literary Agents* (Writers Market, Cincinnati, OH); Masha Hamilton, author of five novels (*The Camel Bookmobile*—April 2007) and a faculty member at the Gotham Writers Workshop in NYC; and Michael C. White, author of six novels (*Soul Catcher*—September 2007) and professor of English at Fairfield University. Additional workshops were taught by Tom Maguire, Irish playwright and musician; Kimberly Green, poet and non-fiction instructor at UNH; Carolyn Megan, memoir and poetry instructor at Colby College; and Michelle Dionetti, author of children's storybooks.

The 68th Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured Bruce Pratt (Pushcart nominee for fiction), Diane Les Becquets, creative writing director at Southern New Hampshire University; Aine Greaney, Irish born memoirist; Moira Linehan, Massachusetts poet and two-time nominee for a poetry Pushcart award; Mike Kimball, Maine screenwriter whose work is staged in Manhattan; Betsy Sholl, Maine Poet Laureate; and Jennifer Jacobson, children's writer.

The 69th Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured Colin Sargent, editor of *Portland* magazine, poet, novelist and screenwriter; Jaed Coffin, memoirist and author of *A Chant to Soothe Wild Elephants*; Martha Carlson-Bradley, NH poet and former publication director for the NH Writers Project; Clark Knowles, fiction writer and UNH instructor; Elise Juska, instructor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and author of three young adult novels; Aine Greaney, Irish short story writer; and Alice Fogel, NH poet and adjunct instructor at Colby-Sawyer College.

The 70th Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured Joshua Bodwell, director of the Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance; Sandell Morse, memoirist; Paul Doiron, Maine novelist and editor of *Down East* magazine; Charlotte Agell, Swedish-born children's author; Chard deNiord, Vermont poet; Jennifer Militello, New Hampshire poet; and Colin Sargent, novelist and poet.

The 71st Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured Chuck Sambuchino, editor of *Writer's Digest Guide to Literary Agents*; Steve Littrell, editor of the *Café Review*; Kate Flora, mystery writer; Jennifer Lunden, memoirist; Kerrin McCadden, Vermont poet; Maria Padian, young adult novelist; Caitlin Shetterly, novelist, and Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, poet.

The 72nd Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured Don Snyder, author of ten books one of which became Hallmark's film *Fallen Angel*; Elizabeth Peavey, a creative non-fiction writer; Betsy Sholl former Maine poet laureate; Alfred Nicol, Massachusetts poet; Aine Greaney, Irish novelist and non-fiction writer; Brock Clarke, author of five books of fiction; and Sarah Braunstein, Maine novelist.

The 73rd Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured keynoter Sarah Braunstein, fiction writer; Gary Lawless, author of sixteen collections of poetry; Jim Brosnan, poet, fiction writer and editor of *The Teacher As Writer*; Mary Carroll Moore, a writer who focuses on the craft of writing; Dawn Potter, poet and director of the Frost Place Conference on Poetry & Teaching; Robert Macadaeg, NH playwright; Jacqueline Sheehan, fiction writer and essayist; Alice Fogel, NH poet laureate; and Matt Tavares, author and illustrator of children's books.

The 74th Writers Conference at Ocean Park featured keynoter Brock Clarke, fiction writer; Susan Conley, novelist; Patrice Pinette, Vermont poet; Helen Peppe, fiction writer; Arielle Greenberg, Maine poet; Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, Portland poet; Pope Brock, novelist; and Sandell Morse, essayist.

The 75th Writers Conference featured keynoter Libby Margolis-Pineo, food and travel writer; Cynthia Anderson, Maine short story writer; Alfred Nicol, Massachusetts poet; Linda Aldrich, Maine poet; Charlotte Agell, children / young adult writer; Michele Cacho-Negrete, essayist; Elizabeth Kirschner, memoirist and poet; Kerrin McCadden, Vermont poet and Betsy Sholl, former Maine poet laureate.

The 76th Writers Conference featured keynoter Erin E. Moulton, young adult writer; Jennifer Dupree, fiction writer; Stu Kestenbaum, current Mainer poet laureate; Carla Maria Verdino-Sullwold, fiction writer and screenwriter; Megan Grumbling, Maine poet; Annie Finch, poet and former Director of the MFA program at Stonecoast; Ann Joslin Williams, short story writer and Director of the MFA program in Writing at UNH; and Megan Frazer Blakemore, children and young adult writer.

The 77th Writers Conference featured keynoter Bruce Pratt, Maine fiction writer; Betsy Sholl, former Maine poet laureate; Erin Moulton, YA writer; Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, Portland poet laureate; Jensen Beach, Vermont short story writer; Patricia O'Donnell, fiction writer; Stu Kestenbaum, Maine poet laureate; and David Blair, MA poet.

The 78th Writers Conference featured keynoter Bruce Robert Coffin, mystery writer and relative of the after-dinner speaker in 1941; Tom Paine, NH short story writer; Melanie Brooks, memoirist; Ryan Flaherty, NH poet; Teri Grimm, FL poet; Bruce Pratt, Maine fiction writer; Jim Brosnan, MA poet; and Jane Karker, indie publisher.

The 79th Writers Conference features Jodi Paloni, short story writer; Catharine Murray, memoirist; David Stankiewicz, Maine poet; Brian Kevin, editor of *Down East* magazine; Michelle Menting, Maine poet; Melanie Brooks, NH memoirist; Linda Aldrich, Portland's poet laureate; Bruce Robert Coffin, mystery writer; and Jim Brosnan, MA poet.

Several events continue to be features of the conference including the "Inspirational Beach Poetry" contest which began in 1948 with Loring Williams as its first leader. Another event that continues is "Poems on Trees" which is reminiscent of Robert Frost who had roots in Ocean Park. Music was first introduced in 1947 when a "special musical prelude" was performed before Gladys Hasty Carroll read from her work, *As the World Turns*.

In 1974 Dick Burns assumed the leadership of the Writers Conference and led the events and program until his death in 1999. Dick was a professor at Western New England College and the Assembly Superintendent of the Ocean Park Association for 23 years. June Knowles, a poet and non-fiction writer co-chaired the conference from 1999 through 2001 with Mary Pitts, a poet and author of three non-fiction books. In 2002 Dr. Jim Brosnan, English professor and past Honors Program Director at Johnson & Wales University began co-chairing the conference with a Maine artist and writer who relocated to Florida.

Beginning with the 2005 Writers Conference at Ocean Park, Jim has co-chaired the conference with his wife Donna who taught elementary school for 35 years and has successfully marketed over 500 of Jim's poems in literary magazines throughout the country. Jim, the author of *Nameless Roads* (Moon Pie Press, 2019), four other books of poetry and several short stories, has given writing workshops in New England, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He is a member of the Nomad Writers in Rehoboth, MA, the Maine Poets Society, the Lakeville MA Writers Group, and the Tidepool Poets in Plymouth, MA.

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