A Literary Feast at The Henry Ford: Frost and Food
Robert Frost and Belle at Michigan, Spring 1926

As a trustee of the Henry Ford for 20 years and counting, I am delighted to welcome all of you for the first of what will be many events in the years ahead to transform the Robert Frost House: into a living legacy of the great American poet for the creativity, invention and influence of the next generation of great American poets. That's what The Henry Ford is about in other major areas of American innovation, from transportation to energy, from farming to crafts, from civil rights to the information revolution. Why not poetry, too!

You are also in for a real treat when we finish here and go over to Eagle Tavern: not just a great farm-to-table meal, but also a reading by one of America's best and rising poets, Michigan's own Vievee Francis. I have had the good fortune of sitting next to her father, George Francis, as trustee at our quarterly board meetings for the better part of two. I followed the stories, the trials, the tribulations and triumphs of his daughter all that time. Much like Robert Frost, Vievee worked in relative obscurity for the first 25 years writing poetry. Yet during that period she not only honed her poetic skills, she also started and nurtured the Detroit School of poetry: one of the dozens of her acolytes won the Pulitzer Prize this year. And Vivee – after two years of "exile" in the mountains of western North Carolina and much like Robert Frost after his two-year stint in England in the middle of his career – returns a recognize star: her latest book of poems won two prestigious poetry awards in the world last fall and this spring. Vievee is also now a fully tenured professor of poetry at Dartmouth, where Robert Frost dropped out of college but ended up teaching for decade in the 1940's. You will see and hear for yourself: Vievee deserves to win a Pulitzer, too. Marty and I a lucky we don't have to follow such a tough act!

We are also blessed to have with us this evening Ann Ransford, the President of Ted Roethke House in Saginaw. She has transformed Ted's birthplace and home into a wonderful historic treasure and a vibrant place that hosts more than a dozen events a year. Annie worked at THF before, and we will seek to learn from her as we transform this great house behind me in which Robert Frost spent one of his most productive periods writing new poems.

This evening Marty Buhr Grimes and I hope to make history and Robert Frost live anew for you. We will focus on the stories and poems Frost and the title character of our historical novel, *The Belle of Two Arbors*, shared at Michigan and the Robert Frost House in the spring of 1926. By way of background, Marty and I grew up in Ann Arbor, and both our families

summered up north, mine in the lee of Sleeping Bear Dunes in Glen Arbor, hers in Charlevoix. As our eighth decade flashes by, please forgive Marty and me for reading these poems and stories, as we can no longer remember our lines. No worries though: after we finish here and move over to Eagle Tavern, I will introduce a brief but remarkable documentary covering three capstones from the last two years of Frost's long life, including his triumphant return to Michigan; and JFK paying the ultimate tribute to America's greatest poet at the President's last major address.

In the fall of 1962, I went to college at Amherst, where I majored in history and got lost exploring the archives in the old library. This is also the small town where Emily Dickinson, America's greatest 19th century poet lived; and where Robert Frost always came back to teach, compose and campaign for his poetry in the 20th. At Michigan Law School, I began my study of the history and text of the 14th Amendment, which provides that no "State shall…deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." The meaning and application of this constitutional prohibition against official prejudice has engaged me ever since. After pursing several public and private careers, all involving history and research in original sources, and all with mixed results at best, I turned to fiction to write better endings.

Ten years later, my poet co-author Marty, a teacher and writer of poetry for more than 50 years, and I are here with our Belle. The basic plot: Belle is a poet born in Glen Arbor in December 1899 but so private she refused to allow any poems to be published during her life. Weaned by her invalid mother on Dickinson's wild verse, Belle loses her dear Mama to drowning when a rare natural disaster – a seiche -- breaks the thick ice in January 1913 and the 13-year old daughter has to swim her little brother Pip from their sinking ice-fishing shanty safely to shore. At age 21, Belle fledges home, her teenage brother still in tow, to Ann Arbor to write great poems and meets Robert Frost at Michigan (and soon thereafter Michigan's Ted Roethke and England's Wystan Auden.)

So, let me begin tonight's story at that point in time: Michigan's 47-year-old President, Marion Leroy Burton, found a kindred spirit when he hired Robert Frost at the same age away from Amherst College as a "Creative Fellow" in the fall of 1921 to launch

a revolutionary experiment. As Burton wrote to the donor, former Regent and Governor, Chase Osborn, "A real university should be a patron of art, literature and creative activity. We ought to have on campus [creative artists] who are actually producing the results which influence the thought of nations." In his acceptance letter, Frost embraced the President's vision "for keeping the creative and the erudite together in [higher] education where they belong; and [where we] would also like [the creative] to make its demand on the young student."

In his first year, Frost was a huge hit. His many meetings with the student writers and his cover poems inspired their contributions to four issues of the Whimsies literary magazine. He packed Hill Auditorium six times. And he became the talk of the town: at the soda emporium on North U, a sign in the window advertised a chocolate-coated ice cream confection, "Frost Bite—Ten Cents." Not to be outdone, around the corner on State Street, Wahr's bookstore included in its front window all three of Frost's books of poetry under the sign, "Frost Bark—Very Little Worse than his Bite!"

One evening at a dinner at the President's House on South U, Frost stole the show with his gentle criticism of "Ivory Towers, including this Harvard of the West" during the main course and saying several of his poems after dessert. Burton said, "Our Fellow in Creative Arts once again shows why he's as popular on this campus as Fielding Yost."

"Let's put that to the test," Frost replied. "You schedule a reading for me at Hill Auditorium any Saturday afternoon there's a home game. Ferry Field will be sold out, and no one will be at Hill, not even me, because I'll be at the stadium, cheering for Coach Yost's boys." Frost only proved the President's point: the two men had established a bond that only death would sever. So Burton cobbled together donations to fund a second year for his Creative Fellow to continue the experiment.

Belle grew from Frost's star-struck student acolyte to his star student poet, trusted mentee, welcoming host at her family cottage up north, and typist for his drafts of new poems for his next book, titled *New Hampshire*.

Yet there were rumblings of discontent from the two separate English departments at Michigan: many of the academic snoots housed on the main Diag sneered at the

college drop-out Frost even more than they did at the other rhetoric, creative writing, and journalism instructors housed in the "other" English Department on the "wrong" side of State Street. Many in the two separate faculties appeared to share in common only their objection to Burton paying his "Creative fellow" (who taught no classes) more than they made teaching three or more courses each semester. And Frost didn't cotton to the academic snobs who only revered long dead poets while criticizing him for trying to make history by creating timeless new poems.

On one of the many long walks from their nearby homes on Washtenaw and Cambridge to and from campus, Frost grumped to Belle, "Hope our President Burton finishes Angell Hall before this Creative Fellow gets burned up in that beat up, old firetrap West Hall, where I've been relegated with the rhetoric crowd." One of the academic snobs, Ned Strait, the new Shakespeare scholar from Harvard, did his best to spread rumors under the pseudonym Nym, a conniving tattletale in several of Shakespeare's plays: he claimed Frost was too busy playing favorites with Belle to fulfill the University's obligation to teach all students. In Belle's freshman English class, Prof. Strait also ridiculed most students who dared challenge his rhetorical questions, leered at every girl as he strutted up and down the aisles, and mocked all the student writings. With not a single woman on either English faculty (and none anywhere else in LS & A), Belle knew she was up against the same prejudice at Michigan that her gruff father still displayed up north in asking her to raise her little brother so the boy could take over running the family's stove-works when he grew into a man. You see, Belle wanted to Chair their family Empire as much as she was driven to compose great poems.

Although Burton couldn't raise the funds to keep the poet a third-year, Michigan's President continued to court Frost for a permanent position even after his return to Amherst; and Burton was vindicated when Frost's new book "dedicated to Michigan" won the 1924 Pulitzer Prize. Burton finally rearranged Michigan's Lit School budget to prevail over Amherst in the ongoing battle for Frost, with the offer of lifetime appointment as a "Permanent Fellow in Letters:" at a full professor's salary but with responsibility to host only one small poetry-writing seminar every other semester. The

experiment the two had launched only four years before appeared set to become an integral part of the University.

Alas, before Frost could set foot back in Ann Arbor, Burton died; and Belle fled from Strait's obscene attempt to abuse her to her cottage up north, followed by a transfer from creative writing to Michigan's new Business School.

Frost gave the eulogy for his good friend Burton at a full house at Hill Auditorium in May of 1925. Ned Strait and the other pedants of his ilk still looked down on Frost (all the more because of his high pay and minimal teaching load when he would return in the fall): they said the poet's talk on students learning by doing and the important role of the creative arts in higher education was more Frost's view than that of Burton. Belle instead thought "that was the highest compliment Frost could pay any person, dead or alive, as the two men were remarkably kindred spirits on the subject."

After being absent most of the fall semester, Frost wrote Belle for help in January 1926: *I'm feeling mighty guilty about my duty to our late President to teach one poetry seminar to earn my year's keep….I hope you'll sign up and get the Three Graces* (his favorites among the rest of the women students) *to join us*. Belle couldn't resist helping her old friend. After Frost returned alone to the welcoming clapboard house on Pontiac Trail he rented, Belle arrived every day after her morning of B-school classes: to wake Frost, prepare a hearty lunch, and type his drafts all afternoon so he could compose poems into the wee hours of the morning. The very first afternoon, after Belle finished typing his very first draft, Frost said, "this poem will be my contribution to President Burton's memory. Long before the new Little President raises the money to build a Bell Tower to honor Big Burton, my 'luminary clock' will be published." Now listen to "Acquainted with the Night," as Belle did then at the Robert Frost House:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

When Frost finished saying the poem, he asked Belle, "You going to contribute to the bricks-and-mortar memorial for Burton?" "Don't see the relevance," Belle replied, "since you know your one luminary clock against the sky *at an unearthly height* isn't any bell tower, but the moon." When Frost nodded sheepishly, she added, "I already persuaded other donors to match my gift so Mrs. Burton and the children can live with his memory without having to beg instead."

Yet Belle loved Frost's new short poem, much more than the too-long poem about a clock tower she had typed for him in 1921. She asked, "Why so much more personal about battling the Black Dog here?" Frost answered, "The new book's about the contraries, the small fights we each can make to spark a little life in the inevitable dark."

Later that afternoon, Belle had to address an even more personal subject, the longest by far of the several poems she'd typed, "The Lonely Shall Be Choosers" and the ongoing challenge to see who could write a more evocative elegy to their mother. When she pulled it out of the pile, Frost nodded and said, "At long last, my ode to my Mama, who shares your nickname, Belle. What do you think?" What with its length, invisible voices from the ancient past, and making his mother into a Job-like caricature, she thought it inadequate, but Belle replied only by reciting what he had said to her before about her earlier try at an adequate elegy for her Mama: "You need to hold it awhile," she began, but with a puckish smile, Frost interjected, "and deepen it, deepen it." He added, "Still working on your Goodbye to your Mama?" and Belle nodded.

A few weeks later, outside the room in Angell Hall where Frost led his once-a-week poetry seminar for 12 students, Belle ran into Ned Strait. When he looked down his nose at Belle and told her he was "fixing to monitor" the class, Belle pushed him away hard and said, "Over my dead body." Frost must have heard the commotion for he opened the door to see what was going on. Belle said, "You know Prof. Strait, but he also goes by Nym." That sent Strait into retreat down the hall. After Belle explained what Strait was up to, Frost returned to the class, rambled about the divisions on English faculties and ended the seminar for the year: "Just write one decent poem you treasure enough you want me to give it back to you rather than tear it up. When it's ready, each of you will meet at my house so we can read and discuss it together, one-on-one, okay?"

At the end of the semester, Frost and his wife Elinor hosted a party at their home on Pontiac Trail for the seminar participants and the creative writers from the two student literary magazines. After calling up several others to accept his praise, Frost concluded bestowing his honors by saying, "Miss Belle, would you care to recite *the* best poem from Michigan." Belle was so nervous she confessed to Frost she couldn't remember the words to the poem she'd written for his seminar. "No," Frost said, "this is an older poem, a perfect sonnet." Now hear Marty say one of her up north songs as Belle did that night:

Delight of Life
We walk along the sandy shore among
piles of pale driftwood, carved smooth, bleached white
by decades of nature's slow and steady strum—
fuel perfect for a campfire any night

with you sitting close beside me to share
a rite of passage as old as Eden's vine;
joined by the slap of waves against the pier
a soft *too-loo* echoing through the pine

the whine of wind against a sailboat's mast;
amidst the burning crackle and shifting fire,
the silver crescent moon rising in the east
the flicker of fireflies sparking love's desire

fading like tiny stars to memory, dear—

as soon the imprint of our bodies here.

Frost picked up his ginger ale, raised it high, and said, "A toast to the Belle of two Arbors, Glen and Ann!"

After the party, Frost told Belle he was leaving Michigan for an even better offer at Amherst, closer to his now grown but not yet independent 4 children who lived within an hour's drive of the small men's college. Yet there was much irony in Frost's decision: he and Elinor had come to love as a home the "very charming house" away from the bustle of campus on Pontiac Trail; and that spring his two youngest daughters found an even more welcoming home inside the walnut timbers of its "hen and chicken architecture, a large middle with two wings." Irma, depressed and anxious, found a Michigan man to marry; and Marjorie, the youngest and sickliest, found a healing respite. And on the poet's return to Amherst, the "sickness and scatteration" that haunted his family struck with unremitting vengeance over the next 13 years, with the loss of his wife Elinor to a vicious cancer, daughters Marjorie to puerperal fever after childbirth and Irma to insanity, and his only son to suicide. Yes, Frost was acquainted with the night.

In the last week before heading up north for the summer, Belle stopped by Frost House to say good-bye and to type several more poems. She read the last as his kiss-off describing her and his other student acolytes as irritating "Minor Birds." Belle stomped out to her car. Frost followed with a pamphlet in hand and explained that he wrote the poem for the cover of the student literary magazine. He handed her the final issue of the "The Outlanders," and said, "The Three Graces and their boyfriends take potshots at Nym!" Belle read the lines that Frost had underlined in several of the stories about the snooty, sexist academic dubbed "Nym Sanders." The rest of Frost's student acolytes had indeed outed Ned Strait. Belle couldn't help chuckling and extended her hand to the poet who would remain her close friend, colleague and correspondent for the rest of her life.

Yet who could blame Frost for leaving Michigan? He'd had more than his fill of its two divided English departments, the resentments and rumors of Nym and the other academic snobs, and the new Little President. Now, that Frost's beloved President Burton was no longer there, the poet had lost his vital partner in making the creative arts

an integral part of transforming national universities like Michigan. Before you jump to the conclusion that Frost broke faith with *this* promise he shared with Burton, I ask you to suspend judgment until you see the brief documentary film at Eagle Tavern.

Five years later, Belle shared an elegy for her mother in a letter to Frost: *If it meets your challenge, I hope you'll share with me any better goodbye to your mother you may hereafter compose."* Listen to Belle meet Frost's challenge, "to deepen it:"

Goodbye to Mama

water below ice
spilling from our fishing hole—
sly silence—and then—

one long lonely Crack!
our fishing shanty's heaving sigh—
spinning silver shards—

brother 'neath my arm—
her gloved hand waving toward shore:
Mama's gray goodbye—

frozen arm flailing
reaching for life, pumping hard
through unforgiving gray shock—

now stroking steady
in peaceful rhythmic splendor:
lake lips caressing

the hills and valleys
of my cold suffering soul—
O! Blue Salvation…

At Michigan's first Hopwood Awards ceremony in 1931, Frost honored Belle: her elegy, he said, "won our challenge to write a better remembrance of *her* mother."

In the fall of 1937, Frost shared his poem "The Silken Tent" in a letter to Belle: *Let your old friend know if, at long last, I met your challenge to sing an adequate goodbye to my Mama*. Yet Belle also thought of Frost's wife still bedridden and unlikely to recover from what he described as "the doctors…rip[ping] a vicious cancer from

Elinor's womanhood." Belle wrote back, *Your Silken Tent sings beyond my challenge. Eons from now the elegist will say it as a memorial for a mother or for a similarly selfless wife or woman friend…Indeed,…your perfect sonnet [may also be heard as] a proposal to engage a lover that no woman could ever resist*. Now listen to Frost's love song, the lead poem in his fourth and final Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Witness Tree*:

The Silken Tent

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when the sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

Marty and I like to think that no poet could pay a higher tribute to a close woman friend, colleague and poet than Frost did when he read 'The Silken Tent" many years later at Belle's memorial service at the First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor.

To remember our Belle and Frost, let us close with a pair of their poems. First, another of the poems Belle typed at Robert Frost House in the spring of 1926. It's the lead poem of his 1927 book, *West-Running Brook*:

Spring Pools

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds

To darken nature and be summer woods -
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.

Second, Frost's favorite of Belle's poems, one she shared with him in their time together at Robert Frost House in the spring of 1926. Now hear Marty as Belle sings her rhapsody to her different delight in spring after a long winter:

Up North

My yearning for Leelanau is like a disease--
the sun through my window bids me awake:
a chorus of robins sings from the trees

to return to Her bosom, where She offers ease
from the thorns and the thistly losses that ache--
my yearning for Leelanau is like a disease—

The shoreline's now free from its ice-sculpted frieze,
and frothy white waves roll, tumble, and shake.
Five or six finches peek out through the leaves—

I dream of the pond near our bubbling creek,
the nest of a wood duck and her handsome drake--
my yearning for Leelanau is like a disease—

a riot of flowers--the hum of the bees,
the honeyed fragrance of spring in their wake,
a redheaded woodpecker taps on a tree:

Soon Brown-Eyed Susans will sway in the breeze.
The squawk of the seagulls, the bluest of seas—
My yearning for Leelanau is like a disease:
A chorus of robins sings from the trees.

Thank you.

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Now, please bear witness with me to a short documentary of four historic moments over the final years of Frost's life and death: the first reading ever by a poet for

any President's Inauguration, on January 20,1961; Frost's final encore at Michigan to say thank you and farewell in his 88th and last year in the spring of 1962 before a standing-room-only crowd at Hill Auditorium and before tens of thousands more at Michigan's other Big House, Michigan Stadium; and President Kennedy's fated, final address eulogizing Frost in the fall of 1963 at Amherst College:

[Play Video]

[After screening] Forgive me for being emotional, but I was there, I met him, I shook his hand, and then he was gone. 54 years later, I can still safely say this: No President will ever again so honor a poet for his contributions to American life, higher education, and democracy. [Pause] When all is said and done, I also submit that Robert Frost fulfilled *this* promise he shared with Michigan's Marion Leroy Burton. [Pause]

Thank you.