

# Frances Frost

When a daughter was born to Amos and Susan Keefe Frost on August 3, 1905, they named her Frances Mary and rejoiced at the safe arrival of a healthy child. They certainly had no inkling that she would become one of St. Albans' most illustrious citizens, winning national prominence as a literary figure. Amos was a locomotive engineer for the Central Vermont Railway, the chief industry for that northwestern township of 7,500 people. Frances' early childhood was spent in the home at 10 Stebbins

Street, on the edge of the business district and only a few hundred yards from the network of tracks which stretched over a mile-square area of the "Railroad City." She went to school and roamed the fields and woods; slid, skated, took piano lessons, joined the Camp Fire Girls; and also spent a good many vacation periods at her Grandfather Keefe's farm in the Winooski Valley, near Richmond. There she was free to wander and observe; to enjoy the domestic animals; and to watch the deer, rabbits, woodchucks and birds of the surrounding countryside. Lively and quick, with changeable blue-gray eyes and black braids of hair flying, she was something of a tomboy, and her mother sometimes spanked her for climbing trees—not a lady-like trait and destructive to clothes. She was "daffy about pirates" and planned definitely to be a "lady pirate"; but that ambition disappeared, she said, "in the mists of adolescence."

She loved to draw and began very early to write stories and poems. Her first published poem was in the *St. Nicholas* magazine. Her high school English teacher, Alice Chandler, to whom she would later dedicate a novel, saw the sparks of talent, and gave her special encouragement. In 1923 she graduated from high school and entered Middlebury College.

"This was the beginning, far, far back;  
Wild strawberries by a railroad track. (Ballad of a Beginning)

From the pages of the yearbook of the Class of 1927, Frances looks at us with a rather sober expression—a little-girl look for all the short, crisp hair and the horn-rimmed glasses. The comment calls her a "little person with abounding energy," working enthusiastically for the literary magazine and the college newspaper. She belonged to a sorority but was not inclined to athletic efforts or the social whirl—a little diffident and withdrawn. But she had a steady boy-friend. "She seems a person for whom rules were not made." Under the photograph of her classmate, W. Gordon Blackburn, a boy from Richford, northeast of St. Albans, the final sentence (after citing him as a searcher for truth, debater and lover of argument) runs: "As a lover of 'frosty' days this boy has no equal." And then "the rules" were invoked against these two. Frances became pregnant, and they left college in April of their junior year to marry. No provision was made in those days for such complications as pregnancy. Certainly, there must have been feelings of distress, disruption and disgrace; undoubtedly the parents were not only hurt but very likely distinctly annoyed. Indeed, persons in St. Albans tended to recall Frances as one who had the dubious distinction of being "the first girl in town to smoke cigarettes." Chances are she was not the first, but characteristically she did it openly. The baby, a son named Paul, arrived in November of 1926. The young father returned to Middlebury and graduated in 1928 and that year a daughter, Jean, was born. The young couple lived in South

Burlington, Frances writing for the Burlington *Daily News*, and sending her poems to various magazines. She also enrolled at the University of Vermont.

In 1929 she became a celebrity. Yale University selected her as its "Young Poet of the Year" and published a group of her poems under the title, "Hemlock Wall."

"Grow, white boy! Drink deep of living,  
Deeper yet of mirth,  
For there is nothing better than laughter  
Anywhere on earth! (White Boy)

She was on her way. She taught a course in creative writing at the University and in 1931 received her Bachelor of Philosophy degree. (This was similar to the usual Bachelor of Arts and later dropped). That same year her second volume, *Blue Harvest*, was published by Houghton Mifflin of Boston; then *These Acres* in 1932 and *Pool in the Meadow* in 1933. "Her rise to national prominence was astonishing," commented Arthur Biddle and Paul Eschholz, two university professors who edited a volume called *The Literature of Vermont: A Sampler* in 1973.

But things were not going well in her private life. Frances and Paul separated and divorce followed. In spite of all the complications Frances had presented to them, her parents stood up to their sense of duty and took over the care of the children. Friendship was always maintained with the Blackburns, though the "first fine careless rapture," was gone, to borrow Browning's phrase.

"Love which I thought to bind  
Was a blown thistle on the wind." (Love Song)

For seven summers Frances was the recipient of that splendid opportunity offered to young artists and writers by the McDowell Colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire. Edward MacDowell had fared well with his composition of music and his widow established the Colony as a memorial. There the struggling creative person could work without worries about time or money. Frances also studied at the University of Munich on a Mary Cromwell Fellowship. On September 20, 1933, she took the matrimonial plunge again, becoming Mrs. Samuel S. Stoney and going to Charleston, South Carolina to live. Mr. Stoney bravely took on the two step-children; but this marriage did not turn out even as well as the first, lasting only about a year. Frances set up her home in Greenwich Village and the literary life of that area continued as long as she lived. She made a household with a journalist friend, Norene Carr Grace, and her son, Paul went to live with them; but Jean refused to leave St. Albans.

Her fifth volume of verse, *Woman of This Earth*, came out in 1934 and was called by the *New York Times* reviewer "a most distinguished contribution to American poetry." It treats the six stages of a woman's life, against the background of life among the cycles of the seasons, of seedtime and harvest, of backbreaking labor and of the recognition that the earth does not notice the suffering of mankind.

"What is this life  
but footprints of a faltering brain upon  
a wilderness, but mind that struggles toward  
an incredible end with feet that go nowhere  
and never find the backward why?

What is this earth  
but an inhabited planet lost among the stars?

Then in 1936 *Innocent Summer* was published by Farrar & Rinehart, who claimed it was "the finest novel by a woman since Willa Cather wrote *My Antonia*." It centered around a group of youngsters aged five to sixteen and appealed to a much wider circle of readers than the poetry. The novel made quite a stir. Extremely readable, it portrays the thoughts and feelings of children in a very honest way; "With a delicate understanding of the paradox of adolescence, that its emotions are intense and yet transitory." Three years later, in 1939, she published *Yoke of Stars* which is



regarded as autobiographical. This has the same "locale" and tells of everyday people, a family, the difficulties, the sorrows, the struggles of the central character, who has many responsibilities.

Three other novels followed: *Uncle Snowball*, *Kate Trimmingham*, and then in 1942 a quite different book, *Village of Glass*. This tells of a glass-blower enmeshed in a war quite different from all previous wars in which devotion to the creation of beautiful things has to be put ruthlessly aside. Some reviewers liked it; one called it "ridiculous and inept." As this country launched itself into World War II Frances did several types of what was called "war work." Driving a taxi is a most nerve-racking experience in New York City and was an unusual activity for a woman then.

About this time she was asked by Whittlesey House to put together a book of stories for young people about the United Nations, "to give a conception of the essential spirit of the countries allied with us in the fight for freedom." She reworked the old legends and folk-tales of seventeen countries; and *Legends of the United Nations* was a very successful book and a very attractive one. It went through at least nine printings and set her in a third direction as a writer, leading to more than a dozen books for children: *The Cat That Went to College*, *American Caravan*, *The Little Whistler*, a volume of verses, and the *Windy Foot* series. This last went through several titles, each about a pony by that name. Several of these titles are still in print, and librarians of children's collections all testify to their worth and charm. Poetic imagination led her to portray families of children in simple country-life situations.

"A country of little rivers . . . a slow country of white-spired villages between two hills . . . And of men who ask no questions of the earth, knowing earth will not answer." (*Language Legends*) was dedicated to her young son, Paul, who grew up to be a poet, a Fulbright scholar, and a student of French Provencale poetry. Her daughter, Jean, entered a Catholic teaching order after graduation from high school and has spent her life as a sister of the Order of St. Joseph, working mainly with young children. She has remained in the state of Vermont.

Frances published another volume of verse in 1946 called *Mid-Century* and did some translating and adaptations, such as the familiar *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. She died in Greenwich Village on February 11, 1959, of cancer. Her body was cremated and her ashes scattered over New York harbor. Paul was an associate professor of English at the State University of New York at Cortland when he died in 1971, leaving his wife, Joan, and a son, Carlos.

Whenever Frances is mentioned to people who have not heard of her, the immediate inquiry is whether she was of the same family as Robert Frost; but there was no relationship, "no kinship save that of poetry," as Biddle and Eschholz put it. These two men cite her as one of five Vermont writers "who have received national notice as representatives of the best of Vermont literary tradition." (The others they say, are Royall Tyler, Rowland Evans Robinson, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and Robert Frost.)

"What shall we leave that still may flourish, harsh  
and lovely, beyond our fainting, faulty hour?" (*The Challenge*)