

BALTIMORE MESSENGER



A poet who opened his heart and checkbook to children

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By Larry Perl

The late Frederick Ogden Nash's poetry lives on more than three decades after his death.

*There was a young fellow named Nash,
Whose poetry made quite a splash.
Then he did a good deed,
Helping children in need,
By donating rhymes to raise cash.*

With apologies to the late Ogden Nash, who would have been 105 on Aug. 19. The bestselling writer, lecturer and north Baltimorean, who gave the world verse such as "God in His wisdom made the fly/And then forgot to tell us why," died in 1971 at age 69.

But his legacy of limericks and lighthearted doggerel, 19 books of poetry in all, lives on in published collections, biographies, online sites and university archives.

Several of Nash's original manuscripts can be found in a more unlikely setting, the headquarters of the nonprofit Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland. The agency, at 4623 Falls Road, offers free and reduced-cost programs, ranging from after-school care to family counseling for 9,000 families a year, in 14 locations.

Showing a softer, more serious side, Nash, who lived in Guilford, was a past president and longtime board member of the agency, in its previous incarnation as the Maryland Children's Aid Society. He donated at least three poems to the agency for fundraising purposes in the 1930s and '40s.

Nash mailed one poem, along with a check for an unspecified amount, from the Hotel Tulsa in Oklahoma in November 1942:

*Christmas is coming, the geese are getting fat.
But how about the children, have you taken thought of that?
What about the little boy that lives down the lane,
Ragged in the snowstorm, whistling in the rain?
What about the little girl the other side of town?
There's no one she can run to, and her world is falling down.
Dead father, drunken father, father gone away,
Sick mother, no mother, think of them today.
These are the lost ones, little ones alone.
These too are Maryland, these are our own.
Christmas is coming, and shall they be dismayed?
Send a Merry Christmas check to the Children's Aid.*

The framed poem hangs on one wall of a conference area at Family and Children's Services, next to the cover letter that accompanied it:

"I'm sorry to have taken so long with the Christmas piece, but here it is at last, and I hope it's what you want. It had an effect on me, at least, because it persuaded me to write the enclosed check, but then anybody can convince me of anything. Maybe some public spirited citizen would pay a few dollars for the original manuscript, which I have signed, and swell the coffers still more?" Nash wrote.

The agency has no record of how much money the check was for or if the manuscript was sold, and Nash's family members said they don't know, either.

"I would say the manuscript couldn't have been sold because I have it," said Debbie Jones, public relations manager for Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland. "It's in an old, brown-looking file."

Generation gap?

Jones pitched the story about Nash on the occasion of his birthday, but said she has her doubts about whether it will mean much to younger generations.

"I grew up (reading) Ogden Nash," she said. "I loved Ogden Nash. But, I don't know if people today know him. I'm 52. Do 32-year-olds know Ogden Nash?"

"You'd be surprised," said Linell Smith, a former writer for The Sun and one of Nash's three granddaughters. "Everybody knows:

*Candy
is dandy
but liquor
is quicker"*

Smith's mother, also named Linell, is herself a writer and has kept the memory of her father alive at her home in Sparks.

Smith and her sister, the late Isabel Eberstadt, published a collection of Nash's work in 1973. Now, Smith, 75, is compiling another, to be published in October.

But she said family members are not Nash's only remaining fans.

"There is quite a bit of correspondence on the Internet," she said, most of it requests for permission to reprint poems and for insights into how he came to write them.

"There are several groups of Nash fans out there," she said.

Somewhere out yonder

A cursory Internet search turns up "Fleas," possibly the world's shortest poem:

*Adam
Had'em*

A pithy poem on babies:

*A bit of talcum
Is always walcum.*

One about a perfect husband:

*He tells you when you've got on
Too much lipstick
And helps you with your girdle
When your hips stick.*

And of course, limericks like:

*A jolly young fellow from Yuma
Told an elephant joke to a puma;*

*Now his skeleton lies
Beneath hot western skies --
The puma had no sense of huma.*

And:

*There was a young fellow named Fonda
Who was squeezed by a great anaconda.
Now he's only a smear
A part of him here,
and the rest of him somewhere out yonder.*

Christmas cards

Nash also wrote children's books, movie screenplays for Hollywood and the lyrics to the 1943 Broadway musical "One Touch of Venus."

Less well known, however, are the darker poems that he wrote for the Children's Aid Society. Consider this 1942 fundraising appeal:

*Tonight's December thirty-first
Something is about to burst.
The clock is crouching, dark and small.
Like a time bomb in the wall.
Midnight whistles, loud and clear.
Duck! Here comes another year.
P.S.
It's not their fault, but just their luck,
Some children have no place to duck.
That is why this plea is made;
Remember, please, the Children's Aid.*

"If you weren't on the mailing list of the agency, you would never have seen it," said Jones, of Family and Children's Services.

Nash also penned a Christmas card for the agency, which still has the original:

*God rest you merry, Innocents,
Let nothing you dismay,
Let nothing wound this eager heart
Upon this Christmas Day.
God rest you merry, Innocents,
While innocence endures.
A sweeter Christmas than we to ours
May you bequeath to yours.*

The human condition

In a public letter mourning Nash's death in May 1971, Children's Aid Society president George Stewart said Nash's poems for fundraising purposes "are as appealing today as they were 30 years ago, and are still in use."

"He was quite an observer of politics and the human condition," his daughter said.

Today, the poems, more than 60 years old, are no longer used for fundraising.

"They're just part of our historical files," Jones said. "People take them so for granted."

Smith and her daughters don't observe Nash's birthdays. They just have fond remembrances of "a very private family man," she said.

"Each of us thinks of him."