

[Victor Campbell]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, New York City

DATE Nov. 14, 1938

SUBJECT NEW YORK WATERSHORE STORIES: (WORK POEMS AND STORIES AMONG [SEAMEN?] VICTOR CAMPBELL

1. Date and time of interview Nov. 4
2. Place of interview Greek Coffeepot, 23rd St and 7th Avenue
3. Name and address of informant Victor Campbell, 25 South Street, N. Y. C. (Known as "Forty Fathoms,")
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

David Silver, James Allen

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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X

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

X

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt.

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, N. Y. C.

DATE Nov. 7, 1938

SUBJECT NEW YORK WATERSHORE STORIES: (WORK POEMS AND STORIES
AMONG SEAMEN VICTOR CAMPBELL

1. Ancestry

Scotch-Irish

2. Place and date of birth Nova Scotia

3. Family ?

4. Places lived in, with dates Nova Scotia, New York City, was seaman for long period.

5. Education with dates

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very little formal education; has acquired education reading, novels, economics, etc.

6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates Sailork a writer of poems and stories on the lives of seamen, and on the fight of the seamen to organize. Began writing in 1934; "I wrote my first poem while sitting on a bench in Battery Park without a job. "I felt that the seamen needed a message to get them started fighting against the reactionary leaders of the International Seaman's Union. I don't want to write any of this highbrow stuff, just a message to seamen." One time editor "The Pilot" Union publication.

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant Husky man of middle height, blue-eyes, bristles up when he talks of ivory-tower writers, long hairs, does not regard himself a writer, but indicated inferiority attitude to some extent about writers. "The teachers invited me up to Mecca Temple to address them and when they saw me one of them said 'Oh, you're Forty Fathoms.' They [t?] thought I ought to be six feet tall with my muscles bulging out of my shirt. I'm through with those intellectuals, they didn't even have the curtesy to listen to me. I'm just a seaman who writes his stuff for seamen; just a message to seamen.

10. Other Points gained in interview

He has a deep and permanent relationship to sailors and the lives of sailors; they are, without Forty Fathoms putting it that way, the aristocrats of labor, they cannot be put away in shops and factories like other groups. This affection is not uttered or declaimed in any way; it rolls through everything he says; and his poems are warning, prayer, song, recollection, admonition — all the attitudes of the father and brother.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt.

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE Nov. 7, 1938

SUBJECT NEW YORK WATERSHORE STORIES: (WORK POEMS AND STORIES
AMONG SEAMEN) VICTOR CAMPBELL

(All poems submitted have been printed in the "Pilot", with the exception of one or two which appeared in other union publications, where publication in other than "Pilot" will be indicated." ALL HANDS ON DECK. When stress and storm Upon us blow Stand together. That's how N M U was born Standing together. Breezes into typhoons grow All hands on deck All gear astow That's how storms are weathered, So Stand together. Real seamen know Our greatest need Stand together. 2 No fair weather sailors In the breed Standing together. A tight ship And a gallant crew An eye to windward Will see us through This is the symbol N M U ALL TOGETHER!

***** JOHNNY KANE

TUNE: THE BUTCHER BOY In Houston City Down Texas way That's where I died And in blood I lay; That's where I died By a wretch shot down In Houston City — A Texas Town. So dig my grave Both wide and deep, Place a Union banner At my head and feet And on my heart Let my strike card rest 3 To show my mates That I did my best. No gold or silver Had I in store To aid my mates Who, like me, were poor, But I gave the life That was mine to give For Union freedom That my mates might live. So dig my grave Both wide and deep

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And bid my mates Not to wail or weep But to raise the torch From my stricken hand To light the [patah?] To a workers' land. In Houston City Down Texas way That's where I died And in blood I lay With a judge's order In my right hand, Shot by Wilber Dickey Of Hunters' band. 4 So dig my grave And let me lie Where the deep sea breeze Will o'er me sigh And on my heart Let my strike card rest To tell my mates That I did my best. Johnny Kane, a sailor, was killed in the fall of 1937 in the Intern'tl Seamen's Union Hall in Houston. The union rank and file had obtained an injunction to take over hall from the AFL union heads. Kane was killed by Wilbur Dickey, a delegate of the ISU not at large. Union seamen raised \$500 and purchased a gravestone. Kane is buried in Houston. (Informant sang Butcher Boy refrain, a ballad, which, he says, goes well on a banjo. Interviewer will endeavor to obtain written musical transcription of melody.) ***** "BALING HOOK" ROARS. Shipowners, Goons, And Joseph P. Ryan, Once every year Foregather to dine. 5 There's profits And dividends, Then "Labor" comes in Between the champagne And the terrapin. But the ones who must pay For the speeches and wine Are not on the scene, And they own not a dime They own dungarees and are all on the docks, A-humping the slings On the shipowners' docks. Not a cent in the world do the slaves ever own And that is the reason CIO has grown. For with decent wages and a CIO deal The duck will be missing From the Ryan-Owners meal.

Printed in Shapeup, Longshore union paper. Joseph P. Ryan, head of the International Longshoremen's Union, powerful in Central Trades and Labor Council of New York City, associated with Tammany politics is regarded as a drag on the progressive union and political movement in New York City by rank and file shore workers and seamen. This poem was written following one of Ryan's banquets with shipowners at the St. George Hotel.

***** 6 SAILORTOWN

BY SCUPERR SAM. In Sailor Town, in Sailor Town Besides the Windswept Sea The Seamen walk, and Seamen Talk Of what fools Sailors be Of ships that sank Of man

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who drank And strange ports of the Sea. In Sailor Town, in Sailor Town Thrive dens of disrepute The Crimps and sharks, and [?] Holy Men Who run the Institute Seamen are sad And none are glad All would give thieves the boot. In Sailor Town, in Sailor Town Beside the rolling Sea Now Seamen walk and Seamen talk Of seamen's Unity Now seamen fight For seamen's right And freedom on the sea. Written in 1934 and published in Doghouse News which preceded the Pilot as the union paper. The Doghouse News was a rank and file 7 publication of seamen in International Union who were getting the insurgent movement under way. Informant changed name from Scupper Sam to Forty Fathoms after this appearance in Doghouse News. The poem refers to this rank and file movement which finally took over the Union. Seamen's Institute — considered anti-labor and anti-union by union seamen. An endowed institution for seamen founded on a bequest in 1801 and now very wealthy. But for the seamen say they are mistreated and have contempt for the Salvation Army character of the Institute Administrators and its benefits.

***** SHIPOWNERS DAYS The wooden ships And iron men Will those days E'er come back again? The days of toil for little pay When sailors had no word to say The days when men who sailed the sea Took no heed of their misery Those were the days. The wooden ships And iron men Who questioned not May heaven send Men's minds were then on wind and sail On storm and calm or winter hail 8 On canvas drawing up aloft Our profits rose with pickings soft Those were the days. Those were the days Of sailor men Whose only thought Was Sea again The long wild passage of the Horn That made them wish they ne'er were born The days of hardtack and salt horse The maggots, weavils, shout and curse Those were the days. The good old days Of docile men Whose cans mates kicked In shape again Who bent their baks o'er icy yards Whose deeds are sung by crackpot bards Who fought with death for little pay Earned all our gold, had nought to say **THOSE WERE THE DAYS.**

***** THE CALL Hoarse the Call of the Western Coast Brothers! Stand at our back! ALL FOR ONE, AND ONE FOR ALL! East and Gulf X - ATTACK! Tie the ships up, hang the hook! 9 You but back your OWN The Bosses shall feel our Union

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strength And reap what they have sown. Let it be said, when the fight is done, That our colors still fly high, That we stood as ONE till the day was won And heeded a Brothers' cry. Throw Labor fakers into discard, Bankrupt their words and deed, Brother to Brother let us march on This in our only creed. Hoarse the cry of the Western Coast. Brothers, stand at our back! Our lives are placed within your hands East and Gulf - ATTACK! Stand by the Union lest we fall, Let no Union man say "Nay" United strength in the bitter fight Shall win a better day.

Written during Fall '36 strike of the West Coast seamen.

***** 10 STRIKE MEMORIES. Do you remember the picketline And the sting of the driving snow? When you marched in the cold by the Chelsea docks Not very long ago? Thru the dreary hours of the long night watch You shivered in the cold, An you fought for the life and a bit of bread As a member of the fold. Do you remember the welcome stews When you came from the picketline And you managed to grin Though the stews were thin And swore that you felt fine? When the strikers black and the strikers white All shared and shared alike, The grief was theirs and the pain was theirs All equal in the strike. Do you remember the policemen's clubs That we suffered and bore together? The jail and the bail and the iron grail Oak sticks and blackjacks leather Seen with burning heart our ship set sail With scabs and finks upon her, Yet we trudged right on thru the now and rain And we fought with our leaders together. We were BROTHERS ALL on the picketline And we hungered and wanted United, Whether black or white or yellow or brown, We fought that wrongs be righted. To politics - creed-we paid no heed, Great faith was all that mattered, As we trudged side by side on the picket line, We built what must not be shattered.

"Written to defend colored brothers in ISU against reactionaries trying to split the rank and file movement which culminated in NMU."

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11 CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION. A blazing meteor's path Charting the course Guiding the lives of men Across the trackless seas To the future; Raining high the torch Of Liberty; Proclaiming Union Of self-governed men The Masters of their Destiny; The cornerstone Built by flesh and blood And dreams; The bridge from Past to Present And Beyond; Consecrated On the picketlines With torch of Freedom lighted; Our heritage to those That are to come The flame of our Inheritance; Our Constitution.

Written for the First Convention of the NMU.

***** 12 THE BOSSES SONG. Sweat o'er your heavy sling loads Bend your backs like the slaves of old For the pace is all that matters That earns our yellow gold; To hell with your lives, there's plenty To take your place if you fall More speed is the song of the Bosses And bigger and faster the haul. For the end in all that matters We've no time for the human need For gold hangs in the balance And this in our only creed; What care WE for Pickups or Speedup Or how your work is planned We don't care a damm what happens As long as our purse is crammed. We hire the hangsters "Your Leaders" And make YOU pay the bill In dues that defeat your own purpose While your sweat our coffers fill; So what care we for the speedup Or the death laden heavy sling They speak to US of Profits And this is the Song we sing,

COTTON HOOK " Originally printed in Boston Cargo Paper of Boston Rank and File ILA - Internat'l Long shoreman's Union — also in Philadelphia Shapeup Union Paper of Philadelphia longshore workers — Was written at time of signing of new agreement with employers and was calculated "to exert pressure against Ryan, head of the ILA so that better terms might be gotten for longshoremen."

(Interviewer's Note:)

Every Second stanza in printed in a heavier type than other stanzas; apparently for chorus but will check with informant. 13 SAILOR SONG. Sing me a song of Scattaree And the

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icy racing seas The Canvas drawing up aloft With water to our knees Or sing me a song of Hatteras And of a winter gale Of sailors with their horny hands Who passing ships would hail. Those were the days of Canvas Before the age of steam The days of the Yankee Clippers The greyhounds lean of beam Those were the days of the bucko Mate Of hardtack and salt horse Those were the days of tarring down And the skippers lusty curse. Sing me a song of old Cape Horn Of Iceland's rocky shore Sing me about the Behring sea Or stormy Labrador Sing of the far off China seas And of the doldrums drear With canvas listless against the spare That homebound seamen fear. Or sing me the song of scurvy Of our privation grim 14 The Owners growing so rich and fat While We grew poor and thin Sing me a song of great denial Of Country, Hearth and Home The outcasts of the stormy mists Which sailors call their own.

UNPUBLISHED

*** ***** 15 VOICE OF THE RANK AND FILE. Thus spake the Rand and File Spirit "Let this by all men be heard We are brothers all in a common cause And speaking a common word. "To the enemies of the workers Breeders of discontent Anarchy of disunity With minds destruction bent Who would replace Good by Evil Tear down what We have built Forging the chains for All to bear Hands steeped in treachery's guilt. "Life will ferret you out and destroy you Who would raid the workers fold And drive you back to your Masters Who bought your souls for gold. "Though you sit in our ranks to betray us Abusing the Power We gave Know — we jealously guard our Freedom And scorn the mark of the Slave. "For the heart of the rank and file watches We know all the rules of your game For we rose to our strength thru oppression To the height of our far flung fame. "The wrath of Men shall be on you The Judgement of shore and tide Shall cast you aside and spurn you With the brand that you cannot hide.

PUBLISHED IN THE PILOT, UNION PUBLICATION

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***** 16 HE'S JUST THE SAME STAUNCH FRIEND. When men neglect To call men Brother Or be a friend to one another Who met upon the picket line With courage strong and ideals fine There's something wrong. When men forget They're all together In Union cause whate'er the weather Whose hands have dipped in common bowl In times that tried their common soul There's something wrong. Let each man pause And think awhile Then greet your Brother with a smile Recall how stalwart, strong and fine You thought him on the picket line He's just the same strong friend and true And this is what He thinks of You You'll be amazed and sing a song Discover there is Nothing Wrong.

Published (Pilot), Union Publication.

Written to discourage splitting tactics in National Maritime Union.

***** 17 THE BLACKBOARD

As told to Saul Levitt by Forty Fathoms.

The point of attention was the blackboard. Just like a schoolhouse. The hall looked like a barracks, small jammed with seamen. As the ships, struck, the men jammed into the hall until it was so full it ran over into the street like Niagara Falls, bejeeus. You can just picture this. Most of the men in dungarees, sou-westerns, oil-skins, rubber boots; in jerseys, and every motley gear that seamen have aboard ships. The Strike Strategy Committee was working its head off in one corner, trying to arrange for soup kitchens, seeing reporters, doing the best to get picket lines started and keep them going. What was holding the attention of the seamen was the progress. And the blackboard was the in-dee-ca-toor of the progress of the strike. Havin' left their ships to a man, with not a damn thing aboard — even the officers walked out in a lot of cases—each ship comin' in was a life and death matter to 'em. Each ship comin' in didn't know what the others were going to do. It was a great gamble. The men took their chances, and they were watching that blackboard the way a mother watches a child. They were thinking of the strike, whether they were going

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to be hung, blackballed, driven out of the industry, or were going to win. The first ship to strike was the [California ?]. The strike was started in the Panama-Pacific Restaurant on West 21st Street. The committee was set up. The next out was the [American Trader ?] in support of the [California ?]. Then the strike began to spread. And as the ships' names began appearing on the board the crowd of seamen would raise the roof. It was very inspirin'. It put heart into everyone. The seamen 'd know 18 which ships were comin' in from the sailing lists. And they'd say, "Jesus Christ, the Oriente's comin' in, Bill's aboard! He ought to pull it out." or "George is on the American Trader; he'll put it out." It was George on the ship, or Bill, or Joe, and that meant the ship would strike. This went on until 145 ships' names were on the blackboard. The board wouldn't hold anymore so we discontinued the blackboard.

While that board was filling up there was other things happening. Take the feeding question. Ferdinand Smith started the job of feeding [11,000?] men with a five dollar bill, which he gave himself. He was a colored member of the Strike Strategy Committee. With odds and ends of lumber, he managed to set up tables and benches—nobody knows where he got 'em—he managed to get a hall without a down payment.

There was a mystery as to how it was done, but Ferdinand Smith did it.

He went up to Harlem for support.

Ferdinand Smith, now had the biggest job that any man ever faced, for any strike or anything else can go to hell if men are not fed, no matter what their plans are. It had to be continuous feeding.

It was a mystery, bejeesus, how it got organized but Ferdinand Smith got it started.

It was a pleasure to see the young girls from uptown who came down to get these relief cans and fill them up, and it made a man think on a winter day it was quite a sacrifice—the average girl being in dancing places and the shelter of their houses, and you didn't expect

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to see these girls in little short jackets out in front of thee—ay-ters- 19 And I must say a great deal of success was due to them.

There was a ladies' committee of notables led by Mrs. Smith, wife of a Dr. Smith, head of the Disaster Committee of the Morro Castle, who was interested in seamen because of the disaster.

There were more cops on the front than you'd ever imagine in the City of New York. It burned your bloody heart out to see the ships you struck sailin' with scabs, while half the police force was standing in the gates of the piers.

There wasn't a night passed when the picketlines weren't attacked somewhere along the harbor and some slugged, stabbed, blackjacked — the jails were full of them.

We were hungry. We had a mascot named "Maggie." A turkey mascot. As it was near the hol-ee-days we had a committee go out to raffle Maggie. Maggie was always good for 10 or 12 dollars. This kept the soup pot boiling. But another committee followed and pleaded for Maggie's life whenever she was won. She was always brought back. When the plate was empty we'd always look at Maggie, and the chief cook of the Oriente who was in the strike kitchen would whet his butcher knife and look at Maggie. At last, times got so hard and food so scarce that Maggie had to go—we couldn't raffle her forever.

"Sail the Ships Baker" claimed that all ships were sailing. He wasn't fooling the public. He was counting the rowboats runnin' around the harbor. And the ferryboats. A few ships sailed because the shipowners concentrated on sailing 'em, come hell or high water. A bunch of farmers on 'em! Clodhoppers! Sent in by plane from all over the U. S.

It took three months, and then we didn't win. At last we seen that we weren't winning the strike on the East and Gulf, but the 20 West Coast had won and gone back to work. We had saved the West Coast. We had more than 145 ships out; out we didn't win that time

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on the Gulf and East but we won on the West Coast. We had so many ships out it took up more'n the blackboard. And then the blackboard came down.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace New York City

DATE Nov. 7, 1938

SUBJECT NEW YORK WATERSHORE STORIES: (WORK POEMS AND STORIES AMONG SEAMAN VICTOR CAMPBELL

“Forty Fathoms,” ex-sailor and now poet, union organizer and sometime editor of the Pilot, the National Maritime Union newspaper in New York City is an urban, water-front equivalent of folk story tellers and singers of inner America. This is not to say that he represents a mechanical equivalent. Since he began writing verses and stories he has tended to acquire a polish which clouds many of his contributions; they are not made better by the polish, they do not become in any sense good literature; and they lose the several virtues that his early stuff had, and in most cases what it still has; an artlessness, a tendency to create symbolic figures, (in several stories), and a genuine unforced desire to write, as he puts it: “a message to the seamen that will help in organizing them.” The configurations of the folk-poet are very difficult to discover in New York, and Forty

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Fathoms comes about as near to that kind of poet as anyone in New York City. The watershore of New York around the Battery is a region in a cohesive sense like areas of New York such as Brownsville and Yorkville Coney Island, the Needle Trades Area etc. It is one of the great coming-home points of the world for seamen; it is one of their important economic centers, where so many of the great freight and passenger lines tie up; in other words, the economic-social community is a reality around the Battery. Here they obtain their jobs, and here, when on shore, most of them live. In boarding houses on Tenth Avenue and around Battery Park, and on Staten Island across the Bay. They frequent the bars around this neighborhood. These, then are the general factors which make possible the dim outlines of a folk poet among the seamen. And, with partial clouding over, that is what Forty Fathoms represents.

The acceptance of Forty Fathoms by the seamen as a factory in the Union directly through his verses is clear. He is not, for them, an addition to the Union like a publicity man or an educational director. He is a seaman who performs work, he inspires them directly, there in a casual pride in Forty. And you get hold of this feeling for him in the Union when you watch seamen who have just come off ship dropping into the union office and Forty talking to them. He knows them all and they all know him and he is not a writer but a seaman who expresses for them directly and simply what they feel. When he reads his stuff at strike meetings or on other occasions on the Union floor there is a kind of "amen" approval of the stuff. This reputation has sifted through the Union to other groups in the City so that the interviewer was able to learn of Forty very indirectly.

Forty explains how he began to write poetry in this way: "I was sitting in Battery Park in 1934 and I was thinking of the seamen and how they take it on the chin. They get mistreated at the Institute (Seamen's Institute), and this guy David Grange, [?] one-time Union leader in I S U), who pockets their dues. So I wrote my first poem and it was called South Street. I was trying to appeal to the seamen for unity." I joined the British Navy at Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1916 when I was 16 years old. My father was a marine engineer on tugboats at Halifax. My family has been Arcadian for 7 generations. My grandfather

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was of the old Arcadian French — the original settlers of Novia Scotia. I was born on the Island of Cape Breton where my people followed the fishing trade. After I came back from the Navy I also followed the fishing trade out of the fishing ports of Lunenburg— that's the home of the schooner Bluenose, North Sidney and other ports. Then I spent considerable time rum-running in the days of Prohibition when the fishing trade declined because of American embargoes against Canadian fish — but not against Canadian rum, no. We used to load up at St. Pierre and run along the American coast and sometimes the Canadian coast. There was Prohibition in the Eastern — the Maritime provinces of Canada as well. This was changed around 1930 and afterward which saw the decline of the rum-running business. Seamen must live you know. I was educated by the Christian Brothers. I left school at 11. After that Catholic Church libraries. I'm only interested in the bettering of conditions on the sea. Sailed in the Canadian Merchant Marine too. Was an A. B. and Quartermaster — and had to do both jobs on Canadian government merchant marine ships. Sailed out of Halifax, Montreal for Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, South Sea ports and home. Crews were mostly British. Straw mattresses. The first thing that confronted you when you shipped was a bale of hay. “Four on and four off.” On long trips this took its toll. No ice. “Limejuice and curry and rice.” On one run I seen my first egg on Christmas morning in Sydney, Australia, 1922 after a seven months trip. The skipper got kind-hearted I guess. This book, (fink book) shackled the seaman to the ship. If deserted he was through. The book stayed with the skipper and was returned to the Board of Trade at Montreal. The only way to beat the game when life became unbearable was to become sick and that was easy because we were nearly all sick because of the heat during the equatorial run from Balboa to Brisbane. No fans in the quarters — seamen slept with their face up against the windshield and insufficient water tanks in reserves for the crew — we were on water rations. In spite of this, (the fink book), many man deserted. In Australia they were caught and brought back to the ships. When I was at school I used to like poetry. For punishment the Christian Brothers used to make me read long reams of stuff, Scott's Lady of the Lake and other long poems. Yes, the songs of Robert Burns are widely sung back home. On my father's side we have some Gaelic in us. And on the Scotch

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side they dote on Robert Burns but don't know much about him. The country has been settled by the Irish, Scotch and French. You'll even hear Frenchmen singing Gaelic songs whereas you'll hear Scotch and Irish singing French songs. Burns was almost a family matter among the Scotch. In most of the cities of the world you'll find a statue of Robert Burns. In Sydney Australia there's a statue in the Domain at (Woolamaloo?) of Burns straddling a plow. This fired my imagination and I bought the books of Burns, Longfellow, Tennyson, Moore. I used to study and compare 'em on the long trips.