

Oral History Interview
with
Gerald Haslam

Interview Conducted by
Karen Neurohr
June 8, 2009

Remembering Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel: Poet and Oklahoma Dust Bowl Emigrant
Oral History Project

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Remembering Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel: Poet and Oklahoma Dust Bowl Emigrant Oral History Project

Interview History

Interviewer: Karen Neurohr
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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of the project is to gather and preserve memories and historical documents from friends and family of the late Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on September 4, 2007.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Gerald Haslam is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 8, 2009.

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About Gerald Haslam...

Gerald Haslam, Ph.D., was raised in Oildale, California. He is an award-winning author whose works include 13 fiction books, 6 non-fiction books, 7 anthologies, and 2 films. He taught English at Sonoma State University for thirty years where he was awarded professor emeritus status. He believes that “No writer has more powerfully or more originally captured the lives of California’s Okies than Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel.” Haslam included writings by Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel in all of his anthologies and in the classes he taught. His friendship with Miss McDaniel began around 1978 and lasted until her passing in 2007. Dr. Haslam’s archives, including letters from McDaniel, are located at the California State Library.

The following notes are from Dr. Haslam’s email communication with Karen Neurohr, librarian and researcher at Oklahoma State University prior to her oral history interview with him for “Remembering Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel: Poet and Oklahoma Dust Bowl Emigrant” a project of the Oklahoma State University Library:

6.21.2008 “although born in California, I’m a proud, honorary Okie, according to certificate sent to me 30 years ago by Senator Dewey Bartlett after my books "Okies" and "Masks" were published. I received no pin, but a wonderful, framed certificate. My dad was from Texas, and in Californian then any southwesterner was an Okie. Like my old classmate Merle Haggard, I’ve enjoyed the "dual citizenship."

2.27.09 “I think it’s fair to say that in much of California, "Okie" (as a generalization for all migrant southwesterners) has become a term of honor...poached by non-Okies. I just gave a talk at the centennial of Oildale (near Bakersfield), and "Oildale Okie" was the claim of everyone.”

5.30.09 “Of course, I’ll be glad to meet with you while you’re here (what else could an official OKIE [thanks to Dewey E, Bartlett] do?). As I’m sure you recognize, Wilma was a special favorite of mine--as a person and as a poet. Acting as one of her pallbearers was one of my life’s great honors.”

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Gerald Haslam

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Karen Neurohr
June 8, 2009
Rohnert Park, California



Neurohr

Today is Monday, June 8, 2009. My name is Karen Neurohr. I'm a librarian at the Oklahoma State University. I'm here today at Sonoma State University Library to interview Dr. Gerald Haslam. This is for a project titled "Remembering Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel: Poet and Oklahoma Dust Bowl Emigrant," an oral history project of the OSU Library. Thank you, Dr. Haslam, for coming today and letting me interview you for this project. I really appreciate it. How did you first learn about Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel?

Haslam

In the mid-1970s, Eddie Lopez, who was the book editor of the *Fresno Bee* sent me a book called *The Red Coffee Can*. He had read it and he liked it; he thought it was different. He knew my taste in matters dealing with the Central Valley of California. I was at the point then of beginning to do an anthology of literature—literary writing from the Central Valley. He thought I would be interested in this particular author. He was right. I was amazed; I thought that it was some of the most wonderful stuff that I had read. It was totally unexpected. So I viewed Wilma from the start as sort of representative of the place where I had been born and raised, down there in the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley where the style, the culture, was very much southwestern. I used to tell folks that when I visited my dad's family in Texas, I felt like I'd walked across the street. When I visited my mother's family in San Francisco, I thought I was in Europe.

The region was not like much of the rest of California and Wilma expressed that extremely well. So the introduction to her was reading that book. I then tried to get in touch with her and ultimately did, because I was putting together a book called *California Heartland: Writing from the Great Central Valley*, and talked to her indirectly really. I think at that point it was still just correspondence, but in any case, I selected some pieces from the book and asked her if I could use

them. She sent me some self-published material and the poetry in particular just amazed me. It seemed to me to be so honest and yet there was that magical ability to make more of something that it seemed to be in itself. There was a suggestion of something more and I don't know how else to put it. I guess I could read an example, something like "Clothes Dryer." The sort of magical way in which Ardella Pitts hung her husband out to dry while hanging his clothes, the widow's hanging her husband's clothes. But the way Wilma phrased that took it to an entirely different level. So I could just see that this was a person of exceptional ability.

Neurohr

So that was when you first heard about her. When did you first meet her then?

Haslam

When *California Heartland* was published, the initial reading by contributors was held at Upstart Crow Books in Fresno in 1978. Upstart Crow was a bookstore that served wine and beer and had lots and lots of readings from folks from the Fresno State poetry group, which at that point was beginning to be recognized as nationally and internationally renowned. So in any case, the first presentation of the book was at Upstart Crow and I wrote to Wilma and invited her. My co-editor, Jim Houston, wrote and invited her. She was pretty reluctant. She was not doing any public engagements at that point; she wasn't used to being invited. In fact, I think this was the first material of hers that was ever anthologized. I'm pretty sure it was, from what she told us. Well, she finally talked someone, I don't recall whether it was Roy or Opal, but someone into bringing her up to Fresno from Tulare for that evening reading and that's where we met. It was interesting because there was a certain reserve about her. She was a little bit reluctant to open up, so she joined us and there were some fairly well-known writers there and she seemed somewhat intimidated by the whole setting.

And so just before it would've been her turn to read, she came to me and said, "I can't get up there and read in front of those people," and I said, "Well, what do you want to do? You can do anything you want to do." She said, "You read it and I'll sit up there." So we walked up onto this platform, it really was not a stage, and there was a good-sized audience, because this was the first book of its kind that had ever been done about that region. She sat in a straight-back chair next to me and I stood at the microphone and read her three selections from *California Heartland* and then she acknowledged, kind of a nod of her head (laughs) considerable applause. We talked a good deal afterwards, my co-editor Jim Houston and Wilma and I, because we really liked her. From that point on, there was a steady stream of correspondence and if I was doing a reading for one of my books anywhere in the area where she could get there, she would always show up and I tried to attend as many of hers as I could.

Very likeable person, extremely likeable.

Neurohr

Could you talk a little bit about her Okie roots in relation to her writing?

Haslam

When I read her work originally, I didn't even think of Oklahoma. I thought about the California version of Okie, the South Central Valley: folks from all over the southwest who came there and for awhile were largely poor, were largely doing day labor, anything to survive. Out of that grew a culture or a sub-culture that she seemed to represent for me. In her poems you read about people who were at K-Mart, you read about a black lady in a huge muumuu trying to make her way to a bargain table, things of that kind. That's where I came from, that's the world that I grew up in and knew well. And that's why I could see how genuine it was. I don't think I even thought much about the Oklahoma part of it until she brought it to my attention. Like most people who as kids who are raised in a world, that becomes the virtual world, the whole world you know. The one that I was raised in, the Southern Central Valley, the San Joaquin Valley, was a world in itself to me. And so everything I judged was on that basis. She was absolutely true to the place. She was absolutely true to the class of people. She was smart enough to understand that the so-called Dust Bowl or Okie Migrants to California were not all white. A lot of people don't know that—they think everybody was white. There was a truth in what she was doing about the region that made it possible for other writers to open up.

One of the things that she did that was new to me was she avoided the trap of becoming militantly angry about the way Southwesterners had been treated or the trap of becoming placating, you say, "Oh you know, well, of course, we're inferior, but give us a chance," none of that—either of those extremes. She just presented people as people with dignity. They might not have money—but they always had dignity in her stories. And if she presented a rat, you knew it was a rat on purpose. You knew she was talking about some villain, some poltroon. Only later, when she began to show me work that dealt with her youth did I get any glimpses of the world that she had come from. What I got from that primarily was the strength of family, that no matter what the economic circumstances were, there was strength of unity in her family. Wherever they were, they were going to be strong; they were going to support one another. Of course, I later saw that when I got to know her brother and sister and saw them together more than once.

Neurohr

So does anything come to your mind, any particular time when you saw the three of them together, when you think of that? What was Opal like?

Haslam

Opal was funny. Opal was more expressive than Wilma. Let me tell you

a story about (laughs) Wilma and Opal. I was doing a lecture at Modesto Junior College; I think it was a faculty convocation. I'd just published a book about the Central Valley so they'd invited me over to give a kind of overview to the assembled faculty. Well, Wilma was living in Modesto at that time so she and Opal were invited over I think by Lillian Valle, and they showed up. I was there early and so we communicated for awhile, talked for awhile, joked for awhile. And then I excused myself and said, "I've got to run to the restroom because I'm going to have to give a talk here in a moment," and so they said, "Bye bye" and I walked in the restroom. Well, my wife had said to me when I left home that morning, "You're not wearing those trousers, are you?" (Laughs) I was dressed in my cowboy best, had my boots on, had some nice western cut slacks, nice western shirt. And (laughs) my wife said, "You're getting too big for those." [I said] "No, no, they feel just fine."

So I walked into the restroom, stood before the urinal and I heard 'pop' and the zipper popped out of the trousers and all of a sudden I saw I had this big gap in the front of my trousers. (Laughter) This was just before I was supposed to go on. I thought, "Oh boy," so I walked back holding my speech in a folder in front of me, to Wilma and Opal and I said, "Do you guys have a safety pin?" (Laughter) And they said, "What for?" I went (indicates) and flashed them. They started laughing and carrying on, and Opal got out a safety pin that must've been *that* long and so I went back in the men's room and there was no way I could hide it, it was just so big and the disaster was so great, so I just put it on the outside and walked up and I thanked them. And they were just carrying on. Nobody could figure out why they were laughing. After an excessively fulsome introduction—you'd think it was either Gandhi or Mother Teresa or somebody was actually speaking. And so I got there and I thanked the person who introduced me and I said, "I want you folks, faculty members, all to know what a brilliant person they have actually brought in here today," and then I moved my manila folder and the whole place just absolutely broke up. Opal never forgot that. Every time I saw her after that, she said she had a safety pin for me and, "Had I yet learned to listen to my wife?" (Laughter) And Wilma loved that too, but Opal was just a little more expressive as a speaker and a little more apt to put her arm on your back and pat you a little bit. Wilma wasn't reserved in a negative sense, but she wasn't quite as expressive. Both of them were quite warm though, as is Roy. They were all nice people, good people to be around. Always enjoyable, always something to laugh about.

Neurohr

Did you meet their mother?

Haslam

I never did. I knew about her because I was corresponding with Wilma while Mama was still alive, but I never did meet her.

Neurohr *They called her Mama?*

Haslam That's what they called her in my presence, yes.

Neurohr *Do you know anything about different jobs that she held over the years?*

Haslam I really don't. I mean I never really talked to her about that. I knew she held various jobs, but it just never came up to any extent. I know she did some of the same kind of field work that I did because we talked a little about that at one point. But she had a varied career I know. I'm just not up on that at all.

Neurohr *What about different places that she lived?*

Haslam I knew about a number of those because I would see her in places like Bakersfield when she lived there and Modesto when she lived there. Also Merced.

Neurohr *Can you go through the different places [she lived that] you're aware of?*

Haslam The places, that I'm aware of, were Bakersfield, on the southern end of the Central Valley. Then up 99 about 70 miles is Tulare, which is where she was primarily located. Visalia is just about 13 or 14 miles east of that. I think she was very briefly in Visalia or one of the little towns around Visalia. And then Modesto, which is another 120 miles north of Tulare. And in Merced, 30 miles south of Modesto. The Central Valley has a road that runs right through the middle of it basically, Highway 99, and these little towns that I'm talking about are like beads in that chain, they just move up and down that. So she was [on] what a lot of folks like to call the Okie Main Line in California because when folks came in from the southwest, they would come up over the Tehachapi Pass usually, although you can also do this through Los Angeles to Highway 99. Then Highway 99 took you right into the agricultural heart of California where there was seasonal work. You might not be right on Highway 99, but that was the way that you got into the region for any of these little towns off to the side where someone might pick or drive a tractor or something of that kind. So during my period of friendship with her, she always lived in that along that line and this is why she knew so many people who did seasonal work and suffered seasonal poverty, but kept their dignity.

Neurohr *Was she still working when you knew her?*

Haslam I think she was, but I don't know what exactly. Because when we originally began corresponding for a long time all we talked about was

writing. We were both writers and I was very interested in her work. I could see—I felt in my heart when I read it that it was true. There was every indication that it wasn't something that she was contriving. I don't think you could contrive the kind of characters that she wrote about. She was observing. But I just don't recall that we ever sat and discussed that sort of thing. A lot of talk about writing though.

Neurohr *I find it interesting that she was moving around like that during the '70s and perhaps the '80s, too.*

Haslam That may've had more to do with the job that one of the other family members had. They're a very close family, very tightly knit. But I just don't remember ever talking about work. I always thought of her, and do to this day, as primarily just being someone from Tulare who just happened to stumble out of town periodically for one reason or another.

Neurohr *After your initial meeting and the developing friendship, did she ever ask for your advice on writing or publishing?*

Haslam Not really. She was pretty much self-contained, I thought. I think she knew that I was really just a fellow writer rather than a publisher. But I think she also knew that any of the situations that I was in where I could get her work published, I would. I edited three anthologies for example and her work is in all of them.

Neurohr *What are the titles?*

Haslam Well, the first was *California Heartland: Writing from Great Central Valley* and then the first edition of *Many Californias: Writing from the Golden State* and then I used another set of poems for the second edition that was published ten years later. Also, *Where Coyotes Howl* and *Wind Blows Free*. What I was trying to do was get her the widest possible exposure. In fact, the other things I would do is when, for example, *Poets and Writers* would contact me or *Contemporary Authors* or any of these books that do capsule biographies of writers, then ask them a few questions about their tastes, I would always list her as one of my favorite writers. Which is true, but I knew that most people were not going to have heard of her; they're going to know who the *New York Times* recommends, and you don't want to pay any attention to New York's version of California's best writers. Nevertheless, people do. So I always made sure that I mentioned her and I used her work in my classes. In recent years, I've been teaching in lifelong learning since I retired and one or two courses a year here [at Sonoma State University] and at the University of San Francisco and I have shown *Down an Old Road* over and over again. People are just amazed; they didn't know Wilma was around because they're mostly city folks I'm teaching.

Neurohr *How did students respond to her when you started teaching about her in classes?*

Haslam They liked her first of all with no exception. I can't remember anybody getting offended or being negative. The thing is, so much of poetry is self-conscious and pretentious and then you get somebody who is not self-conscious and is not pretentious, who is down to earth, who's using language that you can understand and yet is doing things with it that is just not common to see done.... I mean that's—I used to always say and I still tell my students this, "Every poet of quality re-invents poetry. You know, it's too late to be e.e. cummings because somebody already did that, already played that role." And Wilma was not like anybody else. I use that even with my writing students. When I taught writing, prose writing, I would always say, "Seek your original voice," and you do that by looking past expectation. Here's somebody who just sat down and observed the world around her and used the language she heard in the world around her and did something quite magical as a result of that. Because she understood that things are not only what they are; it's what you, the creative person, can do with them that makes them something special. And she really understood that. She was an innately creative person. And so students, as I recall, always really liked her work. I would frequently hear—in fact more so now in lifelong learning where folks are over 50— "Why haven't we heard of her before?" And I say, "Well, don't blame me." (Laughter) "I've put her in every anthology I've edited." And a lot of them kind of regret that they didn't know her because there's something personal about her work. Hers is a personality you would like to touch.

Neurohr *Which of her works in particular would you go back to over and over again when you were teaching as far as introducing people to her? Maybe then and even now? Maybe it's the same, I don't know.*

Haslam Well, if I used a book, it would be *Sister Vayda's Song*, but one of the things that I tried to do was show how she had grown and changed as a writer. You can't just do the same thing over and over again. So I would take the examples from *California Heartland* and then the examples from the first edition and then the second edition of *Many Californias* and they would see some distinct changes going on there. I would tell them that one of the dangers for poets, and for any writer for that matter— and I was always worried about it with Wilma— is when people start taking you seriously, you start taking yourself too seriously. And you might find yourself becoming a self-conscious writer, at which point the spontaneity and the beauty can be lost. I think she did that, by the way, toward the end just a little bit.

Neurohr *Oh, you do?*

Haslam

Oh, I don't mean everything she did, but there are examples that strike me as being poetry about poetry. When that happens, it doesn't reach the same level. I think it's a danger by the way, not just for poets. I think you see it more profoundly in poets because of the tightness of their work. But if I'm writing—like the manuscript that I'm proofreading now is 130,000 words. I've got a lot of room there to cheat without anybody noticing. (Laughter) That's if they read it at all, of course. With Wilma, she's got twelve lines of five or six words each—you're going to notice something. But that, by and large, was not a problem with her. Right at the very end maybe [that was] beginning because there were starting to be things written about her.

And I, just to say something about myself for a second, I don't read book reviews of my books. I don't care about them. I write books and do the best I can and then move on to the next one. Because I don't want to try to please a reviewer. And I think that would be if somebody in *Publisher's Weekly* or *L.A. Times* says, "If so and so had only done this, he'd be a good writer." Well, I'm not worried about what they think would make a good writer. And I don't think Wilma was either. I think she was a little astonished when people began writing articles about her. In fact, I think I published the first article about her in *Western American Literature* maybe about 1980 at the latest. But she—I mean she did read the stuff about her. (Laughs)

Neurohr

She sent copies of reviews to people in Oklahoma that she corresponded with.

Haslam

(Laughs) I can understand that though, she was in a sense so isolated for so long, and she was fully middle-aged when she walked into the *Tulare Record* and showed Tom that box of anecdotes and poems and things. So that, when all of a sudden the interactive world took notice of her, I think it's only human nature that you would say, "Oh, my gosh, look at this, they like it! I couldn't even give these away." (Laughs)

Neurohr

Talk about the fact that she really didn't start publishing until she was middle-aged and I'm not exactly sure how her mother's death might have fit into that with her and probably that's not something we would want to go into anyway. But is that unusual? What do you think?

Haslam

Well, when she became known in the Central Valley where her first fame arose, people were calling her the Grandma Moses of poetry. But I thought she was more like Emily Dickinson if you were going to name a writer in the American literary past. Because just like Emily Dickinson, she was an acute observer of the world around her. And she clearly—I mean she had her areas of illusion and so on—but nevertheless she seemed to have a real understanding of the dynamic of people

interacting with people or interacting with place. Of the power of memory, of how time itself can be transcended by memory, and when she wrote she drew from a great storehouse of memory.

I think a lot of the things that she wrote, the little vignettes that she wrote, were probably like the kind of prose notes I make, except that she would put them in little chunks of verse. I can't tell you how many letters she sent me, sometimes two or three a week for awhile. But they would just be on pieces of paper this big and there would often be just a 'hello' and then a little verse or a little observation in longhand. I noticed that sometimes she would mention seeing a man wearing two different kinds of cowboy boots at the stock auction, a brown one and a black one or something. (Laughs) But the last line would be something often that made it a little poetic, made it so you could see the possibility of a poem coming out of it. So I think she was watching the world around her intently and because so much of her life was constrained, an awful lot of energy was going into saying, "What's possible? Where might these people go? What might they do?"

And she was actually a fairly—in talking with her at least— she was a fairly innocent person. Or maybe I know a lot of people who are not very innocent so thus she seems innocent. But there was a kind of innocence and it showed I think in her power of observation. And in the fact that she wasn't taking things for granted. Henry James is not my favorite writer, but Henry James once said, "Become one of those upon whom nothing is lost," which I think is one of the great bits of advice for any writer.

I think Wilma was one of those upon whom nothing was lost, or very little at least was lost. I can remember when I was a kid driving by a tractor outlet outside of Bakersfield and noticing that they had red tractors and green tractors and yellow tractors and thinking somehow about the rainbow. And so I said something to my uncle who was driving; he was a farmer, and he said, "Yeah." (Laughter) There was no wonder and awe in his observation.

Wilma retained the wonder and awe. And that gave her material that was there for anybody. But she could see that significance. A poem like "Clothes Dryer," just thinking about what she actually says in that poem is rather interesting. There was her interaction, her participation in the world around her gave her a storehouse of material that others just didn't recognize. I think some do now; there are young writers who are reading Wilma McDaniel and beginning to look around their own worlds a little more closely.

Neurohr

When you first met her, did she seem confident about her writing?

Haslam

She seemed satisfied, I think I would say. She knew she had done what she could; she was not embarrassed by it. I think that her great crisis came when she dropped that box of papers off at Tom Hennion's office—that was the hard thing, taking that box in there. And you think about it, 99 times out of 100 if you did that, somebody would hand you your box back. I've lived in the literary world now myself for almost five decades and that's how I understand it works very often. She found the right person at the right time and it was just pure happenstance as near as I can tell. But the fact that she began to self-publish tells you she had some confidence. She wanted people to see them [her works], she wasn't just writing for herself. And so I think that maybe confidence is too strong a word but there was certainly hope. Very often with a writer, what you need is hope and a certain grit. Because you're going to have negative responses no matter who you are and no matter how well you write. You can't let it crush you, you just have to say, "Well, to hell with them," and to just keep on.

Neurohr

Are you aware of whether she took any college classes at all? It's my understanding that she left Oklahoma when she was 17 and she wasn't able to finish high school in Oklahoma but then when she came to California, she did complete her high school degree. And I've heard bits and pieces that perhaps maybe she did take some classes later.

Haslam

She never talked to me about classes. I would've thought she would because she knew that I was supporting my writing habit by teaching at a university. There was a very good community college where she lived, [the] College of the Sequoias, which is really one of the better junior colleges in California. I'm sure that there were plenty of courses available to her, but she no, she didn't ever mention that.

Neurohr

What was her view of academics?

Haslam

I think that she was quite positive about it. Of course, again because I was making my living at it, maybe she wouldn't say anything to me if it was negative. (Laughter) I had some negative views about it as anyone does who works in a field. But I think she was very grateful for the attention that she got from academics and we did talk about just the fact that when one or two of these professors in professional journals writes something about you, it really does open doors. She understood that very well indeed and was extremely cooperative. I once sent her a series of questions, like an interview, except she could write her answers. I figured people can correct their mistakes more easily that way and not doublespeak or something. And told her I was going to publish it in an academic journal and she was quite happy about that. But I think when you haven't had any attention at all for a long time—any literary attention I mean, of course—the very first thing you see about your work

is going to be a little daunting because you're going to wonder what they say about you. She was not a control freak. She was not somebody who wanted to control how people thought about her. But she nevertheless had some trepidation, but in general I think she was quite pleased.

Neurohr

What about views of your contemporaries and her writing? Did you see any or could you talk about that at all?

Haslam

You mean what they thought about it? Most of the people who were close to me, and I'm thinking of people like Jim Houston, really liked her work. And if they had any southwestern connection at all, they really liked her work. I was at the Crystal Palace, Buck Owens's nightclub in Bakersfield one night and it was just serendipitous. I had actually taken the train down because I was going to give a talk at the community college there the next day. So my old buddies came and picked me up and we all went over there to eat dinner and drink some beer and watch Buck perform because he performed there on the weekends. Well, while we were sitting there, Buck between songs said—and he had a very unique way of presenting himself — “You know,” (he almost always started with ‘you know’) “You know, there's a lady sitting up in there in the audience that wrote a poem about me and I'm going to read it to you.” And I thought, “There's only one lady in the world that I know of who's ever written a poem about Buck.” (Laughter) Wilma was in the audience and I didn't know it at the time. And so he read “K-Mart Sage,” you remember that one?

Neurohr

Yes.

Haslam

“Put that head on a woman and they'd run her out of town.” And, of course, the audience just roared and Buck just roared. (Laughter) I think that was representative of the way in which folks with some southwestern roots, like me, like Buck, felt about her. She was one of us. She was an insider.

Others I think were more troubled. I talked to some folks who were part of the Fresno Poet Group because when I did the California anthology I included a number of these award-winning poets from Fresno State. Phillip Levine is one of the wonderful poets, a wonderful teacher, but some of them were a little suspect because this was not the kind of poetry that they saw as being modern, or post-modern, or sub-modern, or any kind of modern. They had become a little, too, quote—unquote, “sophisticated” to appreciate it. I mean it depends on how you look at it, if you can look at Wilma's work and you can see it as kind of the lyrics to bad country songs without the music. I mean there are people who see it that way, that's kind of the way they were looking at it. I don't see that. You know, I can look at these poems; even the simplest of these in

California Heartland, “Letter to Cleotis,” “Clothes Dryer,” “Leftovers” have, to me, got the kind of twist—may I read one, would that be appropriate?

Neurohr

Yes, please.

Haslam

I’ll just read “Leftovers” since I’ve already talked about “Clothes Dryer.”

Leftovers

Table scraps are useful
and prophets
there is one in my family
who noticed a half jar of jelly
left on the table
after a tornado felled Clifford
on a day so quiet
we could hear him breathing happily
about a girl
who lived down in Bowlegs

The prophet said
a half jar of jelly
is only a life half spent
there will be other loaves of bread
other knives as sharp as Clifford’s
that will slice
the days as thick
and spread the nights as lavishly
until we reach the sugar crystals
in the bottom of the jar

—from *California Heartland, Writing from the Great Central Valley*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1978.

Haslam

I mean she’s taken a mundane thing and it’s become magical. It’s opened in ways that I think only really wonderful writers can do. I’ve seen an awful lot of people with Creative Writing degrees who can’t do that. They can tell you everything there is about a sonnet and they can talk about alliteration and consonance, but they can’t do that. That’s the magic that we call talent. And she did it again and again and again. Almost always drawing on the simple, humble observations, the simple, humble sketches, and then *boom!* they opened up. They don’t always boom and open up of course. (Laughs) She writes some lousy stuff, too. But you have to be willing to do that.

I used to always tell my writing students, “If you’re unwilling to fail, if you’re unwilling to make a mistake, find another profession. Because you’re never going to be any good at this. You have to try new things and sometimes when you try new things, you fail. Sometimes you have to try them twenty times before you do them as well as you’d like to. Or 200 times.” I think she understood all of that. I think early in her career, she published things that were as wonderful as this and others absolutely lousy because she couldn’t tell the difference. And that’s one of the hard skills to learn for anybody. Many of us who’ve been publishing books for years and years and years will all of a sudden come out with a clunker because we’ve fallen so in love with whatever it is we’re writing, the story, that we no longer see it objectively and understand that it’s really not as good as we think it is. She had that problem, too. But the problem is worth the price. If there’s one pearl among the peas, I’ll take the pearl.

Neurohr

Have to work through that.

Haslam

I’m perfectly willing to sift the peas to get the pearl. She had more pearls than peas I think. (Laughter)

Neurohr

What influences do you see in her writing? I know that can be pretty broad. What do you think about that?

Haslam

Well, I’m probably a terrible literary scholar because I never really thought of her in those terms. I know that’s exactly what you’re supposed to do when you teach literature, but I would say, as I said, Emily Dickinson may or may not have been an influence but there’s certainly a powerful similarity there. I like the barren language you see in much of her work that is like William Carlos Williams, but I don’t think that she necessarily read William Carlos Williams. And you can go down this long list of things like that. There’s a certain quality that’s like the *Spoon River Anthology* in this, but I would think, as I’ve said in print, she was as much influenced by the oral tale-tellers of her family and of her culture, by the bards such as Woody Guthrie and commercial country singers and by the Bible, which I think had a very big influence on her. She was religious without being heavy-handed about it. She carried it lightly. It was her surcease, it was her relief from life and you could just see it in her. There was a certain placidness about her when things seemed to be going haywire that I really admired.

So I find it hard to think of any direct literary influences. I can look at Gary Soto and I can see Phillip Levine, for example, two of my favorite poets. But I can’t do that with Wilma. I can as they say allude to someone like Emily Dickinson, but I’m not sure I believe there’s any direct lineage, I think she was perhaps drawing in the way, for example,

Walt Whitman draws from the vernacular language of the Nineteenth century. That's what Wilma's doing in the Twentieth. Did she read Walt Whitman? I have no idea. I don't think she had to because all she had to do was listen and I think that's what she was best at, was capturing these voices.

And often it's the rhythm. She doesn't use a lot of "I" dialogue as we call it, she doesn't use a lot of words with missing letters and things of that kind. She does occasionally but that's not common. Rather, it is capturing the rhythm and the vocabulary. What's the one about old Jarlath is in the hospital and he says, "They taken my trousers and left me a prisoner." I can remember the first summer I worked in the oil fields when I was a kid. An old man who was a driller came to me and he says, "Well, hell, they taken away the 'ceegars' and I never even got one." My dad didn't have a heavy drawl like that, and I thought, "That was beautiful." It's an old English form, it's an older and more traditional form actually than so called standard English. The standard English has changed more rapidly. Wilma heard those sayings and she knew that—you hear that word, you see that word used, and [you knew] the kind of characters you're dealing with. You know something about them. They may just be assumptions, but we do have assumptions, we have connotations for these things. And she understood that.

So while I don't think she studied linguistics, I think she was a linguist. I don't think she really studied poetry in the sense that people would in a creative writing program today. That's why I think she was a poet. I've often said that the best that could happen to you is not be admitted to a creative writing program. Not because there's anything wrong with them, but because people get ahead of their experience. You get twenty-year-olds with wonderful skills and no life experience. Wilma had a lot of life experience and she borrowed other people's life experiences as you should. I'm trying to think of who said this, I think it was Maya Angelou who said, "Don't ever say anything around a writer that you don't want to see in print."

Neurohr

Yeah.

Haslam

And she told me a long story about that that I won't go into today but it's a fun story. I think Wilma was like that, I think she was listening all the time. I used to always tell my students, "Wherever you go, you always carry your palm pilot." And this is as close to a palm pilot as I've ever carried [holds pocket notebook] but in here are just things I observe, little notes. And she did the same thing.

Neurohr

Did she do that, too?

Haslam

She did not use a notebook I don't think, she had scraps of paper—shards of paper. But you don't know from moment to moment what you're going to see that might not be exactly what will make your next novel, your next poem, your next play memorable. It's all out there, where there are human beings is where the real material lies.

Neurohr

We talked about this in our phone conversation earlier, and it has to do with perspectives of her writing—ways that people look at someone's writing and what kinds of lens they can view a person's writing through. And there are, of course, many ways to look at that, like I mean looking at things with a social lens or maybe—and really I guess it has to do with classification in a way, like folklore, a social perspective, culture, class, feminist, historical. Could you talk about that? Just anything, like what's your viewpoint on that?

Haslam

I think one of the most interesting things about particularly the kind of poetry Wilma writes that is fairly bare and fairly brief, is that five people can read it and it can be five different poems. I think that's kind of what you want because I think the function of the writer is to stimulate the creativity in the reader. This is again what I used to teach my writing students, that we write the book, we write the poem, we write the song lyric, but the editor or the reader completes it. One of the great fallacies I used to encounter—and I still encounter by the way, in the lifelong learning program—because people have been told this is that if you want to know what something really means, ask the writer. That's absolute nonsense. The writer doesn't know, the writer doesn't know what he or she has accomplished. They know what they intended to accomplish.

So just to pick an example, I was giving a talk down at the Steinbeck Center in Salinas and someone asked, "What is John Steinbeck's finest novel?" And I said, "I'd have to think about it. For me, it would be either the *Grapes of Wrath* or *In Dubious Battle*." And the lady in the audience said, "Well, he said it was *East of Eden*." And I said, "Well, he didn't know what he was talking about." Dead silence, and then, "How can you say that?" And I said, "I'll tell you what, he knew what he wanted to be his greatest novel, he knew where his hopes lie. But he didn't know what he had accomplished. No writer knows, no artist knows. You just know what you put into it." I think that when a writer writes in such a way as to allow readers to be co-creators, then there is a feeling in the heart of the reader that is much deeper than any sort of intellectual experience could possibly give you. And I think Wilma did that. I've tried to do it. I don't know that I've done as well as she has, but that's really the goal.

So for me, that's where I start. I start with this, whether somebody is going to bring a feminist approach or a regionalist approach or whatever

approach—every one of those brings their own potential for assessment. Which one is right? Well, they all are or none of them are is the answer. It depends on the particular assessor and the particular moment in time. And I think that's true of all art. That's as true of Shakespeare as it is of Wilma McDaniel. I guess I just start with that premise. I know Wilma felt in a very similar way; we didn't talk about this explicitly. But you start with a premise that what a writer like Wilma does is simply take normal human characteristics to a more intense or elevated degree. And that means that other people can share that. There are people who are wonderful readers but are not good writers. Many of them are called professors. (Laughter) They read literature and they can explain it and they are wonderful readers, but they're not successful when it comes to doing it themselves. And that's not, to fault them, it's just a fact. Everybody is not going to be an outstanding writer, just as everybody is not going to be an outstanding reader or a fast runner or a this or a that or the other.

So even though I may disagree with what they say, I like the fact that people will bring their agendas and try to take a look at Wilma (or anyone else, by the way) from those perspectives. What I don't like is when they're dishonest about it; that is, when they begin starting to force stuff because that's what they want the writer to have said. And that's easy to do; I know in student papers I've seen this a lot. I'm sure I've been guilty of it too, because, Lord knows, I had to write a lot of papers to get the degrees that got me the job here at the university. But I think Wilma is, as is true of most writers of quality, open to various kinds of interpretations. As long as someone is honest and really deals with her text, then they can do a good job.

I think, however, they'll do a better job if they also understand the context of the text. That is, she was writing in a particular time and a particular place and I don't think that—speaking personally now—I don't think that the interpretation should be limited to that. That is, people who won't know a cotton boll from a cotton shirt fifty years from now, who will have never done the kind of work that she did, can read her poetry and be inspired by it. And that's perfectly legitimate. The reason that we have courses in people like Shakespeare, who was readily understood by the populace of his time, is that the context has changed. In order to understand what he was about, we study. We try to explain as best we can and people may or may not be doing that with Wilma's poetry a hundred years from now. I hope they are but if they aren't, so be it. But as long as something innovative and inspirational can come from it, I think that's okay. It may not be exactly what she intended, but her intent is not the end of it; it's only her intent. Anyway, I got going in a sermon there and I have to stop.

Neurohr *No, that's good. (Laughter) We've gone through a lot of these things, which is good. Do you know anything about her particular writing habits?*

Haslam Well, if you mean, did she get up and write first thing in the morning, something like that, I honestly don't. I know as I said, that she made notes and I was led to believe that basically when something grabbed her, at any time of the day or night, she would write. That was what I was led to believe. It sure looked that way, some of the things she sent me, would be all catawampus, looked like they were written in the dark occasionally. (Laughs) I mean it was great fun to receive correspondence from her because oftentimes you would have a letter, a two or three paragraph letter, and then on the other side would be a poem. Sometimes it would be an old poem, sometimes it would be an attempt at a new poem. I once asked her, "Listen, when you send me those poems, you've got copies of them don't you?" She said, "Oh yes, oh yes." And she did, I'm sure. I used to tell her that my mode of work was to get up first thing in the morning, at about five, and write until I had to come to the University. But she said, "Well, I don't have a university I have to go to." (Laughter) Which tells me that she could write anytime in the day.

Neurohr *Right.*

Haslam And I think she did. I think she was not quite as casual as a lot of people like to think she was. I mean I think she was pretty careful about what she said. I think she went over things pretty carefully and used the words she wanted as she wanted them used. It doesn't mean she didn't make mistakes, but it just means that this wasn't something she just dashed off the way some people seem to think. I've often said that the most difficult kind of writing is that which appears to be least crafted. Because you've taken out all of the stuff that would—the signs, the signals that would allow people to see the route of your craft. I think she was in that "school," I suppose is the right word.

Neurohr *What do you think are her best works? Of course, she wrote the poems, she wrote columns for the South Valley Arts Paper, vignettes they've termed her stories, vignettes and then even some longer stories. Which of those types of things that she wrote do you think sort of come to the top?*

Haslam I think the poetry's by far the best, to speak for myself, because it's better edited. I don't think that (laughs) when she was writing prose, I think she was much less conscious of her editing. I think she felt, as a lot of people do, by the way, who are poets, that when you get to prose, it's more like no holds barred. Although there are wonderful images and observations, some wonderful scenes and stretches of dialogues and

things in all the prose. I actually like the vignettes, too, because they're like prose versions of the poems. Many of the poems I would bet started as vignettes and then she rearranged them. You know one of the ways to define poetry relative to prose is simply to ask, "Where does the line end on the right side"? If the poet decides where the line ends, then it's poetry. If the writer allows the printer to fold the lines, then it's prose. Again, it's pretty bare-knuckle to come up with those two, but I think that's just about what it was. So when you see somebody actually telling you what the lines are and where they break, that's poetry. And that's why I think she's better at poetry because when you do that, you have to make some self-conscious decisions about the material. You might find three or four lines of eight or nine beats and all of a sudden you just have a name for a line; well, you know then that name is important. If it's in prose I suppose you could underline it and do the same kind of thing, or italicize it. So I prefer the poetry, I think she was at her best in the poetry. But I mean she was a good writer, she could write anything. Anything that I read anyway. I thought some of the stuff in the *South Valley News* or whatever it was that she would send me was pretty darn good too. But if I had to choose, I would always pick poetry.

Neurohr

One of the things that I would like to ask you about has to do with labels that people put on other people when they write about them or they talk about them. Could you talk about that a little bit with Wilma? What types of labels were put on her?

Haslam

I think the most limiting label she probably ever had was that she was a San Joaquin Valley writer in California where everybody thinks culture exists only in L.A. and the Bay Area. And there really was in those years a Renaissance that was beginning to occur that made people aware that the region she comes from is actually quite an active literary realm. I mean she was writing about forty miles up the road from where Luis Valdez, the great Chicano playwright was raised. She was writing about 100 miles south of where Maxine Hong Kingston and Richard Rodriguez and Joan Didion were from. About 70 miles north of where Frank Bidart and Robert Duncan are from. Yet people in California didn't see that part of the state as being literary or having literary potential. They thought of, as I say, the quote—unquote "cultural centers" being southern California and northern California, although being taken seriously as a writer from those regions was difficult at first.

Wilma came along at the right time for the label "Okie" to take on real importance. When I was a kid, you didn't want to call somebody an Okie unless you wanted to fight because it was used negatively. I mean there was nothing inherently wrong with the label itself, but of course, people were using it as a negative term. And I saw more than one fistfight settle that issue in a hurry. By the time Wilma came along,

something important had happened. When I say came along, I mean she began publishing. She had lived long enough so that the first generation after World War II, the children of the Dust Bowl migrants, had been able to take advantage of the educational system in California, the promise of California. And suddenly you had their progeny becoming professionals, suddenly you had their progeny beginning to run towns, beginning to run major corporations, becoming famous authors and becoming this, that and the other. What that did was create an interest and it opened up the possibility of a more honest expression of the experience that people had had when they came during the migration. We all know the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*, that it was banned in Kern County and that it was much criticized on both sides of the country. That is, both in Oklahoma and California. Usually for the wrong reasons. People didn't really understand what they were talking about. Well, all of a sudden, that was going by the wayside.

Here comes someone like Wilma who becomes the spokesperson for things as they really are in the Central Valley, for migrants in some cases who haven't made it or for the earlier generation of migrants. But there is in her works such an essential appeal to humanity, the shared humanity of her characters, that it's difficult not to be moved by them. And so when she begins referring to herself as an Okie, she does it in basically two ways. One is, of course, as a one-time resident and native of Oklahoma, of which she's quite proud. The other is the California sense of Okie, which is poor from the southwest, even though many of the migrants were not white and there were both Southerners and Southwesterners, even some Midwesterners who got caught up in that stereotype. She accepts both and says, "I'll show you what's best in this conflict," and she turns the negative use of that term over. She turns it on itself and makes it a positive and, indeed, an admirable term.

I remember she and I laughing one time about—and I don't recall where we were, maybe it was at Lamont Dust Bowl Days—about all the people who were showing up, who were wearing jeans and cowboy boots who'd just gone out and bought them the day before because suddenly to be a California Okie was good. Suddenly, Merle Haggard and Buck Owens had made it a positive thing. Suddenly, James D. Houston winning major awards as a novelist made it a positive thing. We were kind of chuckling at that. Who would have thought this thirty years ago? She worked within those labels and she was able to change the labels. There were certainly people who just turned their noses up even then, but they were a small minority.

The other label that I've always found interesting was the one that Eddie Lopez gave Wilma. Lopez the book editor of *The Fresno Bee*, who referred to her as the "biscuits and gravy poet." Eddie meant that in the

kindest possible way. Because I've talked to him about this, I know that he meant basically that she could take elements that people did not think of as poetic and turn them into something special. Wilma apparently didn't take it that way because (laughs) when I used that, when I repeated that expression in something I wrote about her, she chewed me out. She didn't get red-faced angry, but she chewed me out. She let me know she didn't like it and she felt as though it was in some sense limiting. I was too smart to argue with her. It was her business, it was her name, if she didn't want me to use it then I wouldn't use it. Not that big a deal. But Lopez really and truly thought of that as a positive thing. And he and I are still friends, and he still feels that way. Once in a great while I'll tease him a little bit about it. "Found any more gravy poets, Eddie?" (Laughter) And he says, "Just get out of here!"

One of the problems with California as a whole, and this is something she recognized, is that the image of the state as this wealthy, glitzy place simply ignores reality. This is the richest agricultural state in the nation, the richest agricultural region in the history of the world. Somebody has to get dirty to do that work. This is one of the two or three richest petroleum producers in the United States. Somebody has to get a little oil on them now and again. People don't know the real state. She did. She was not worried about who was driving a Mercedes convertible in Beverly Hills; she was worried about who was driving a pick-up in Tulare. Tulare has the largest tractor show in the world every year. And so she was content with being a Californian in the sense of the real California. Not disdaining or tossing out the swishy stuff that's going on in San Francisco, but just saying, "This is California, too. We have as much right to claim that title as anyone does, perhaps more. Because these are people who are driving one of the great economic engines, not only of California but of the nation." That was a sense in which Wilma would use all of those terms.

To go back to what started this, I think she was always proud to be of the San Joaquin Valley [which], if there is such a thing, is California's Southwest. Where a high percent of the population, of all colors, has come from Texas and Oklahoma and Arkansas and Missouri, Nebraska, southern Colorado. And I was raised in a little town, we used to laugh about this because both Wilma and I were Catholics, which is not that common for Southwesterners in this state at least. But I told her that in Oildale, where I was raised, there were sixteen churches, all of them Pentecostal; there was no Catholic church. So I grew up thinking that Catholicism was a little splinter sect next to the Assembly of God and the Church of the Nazarene, the Foursquare Gospel, and on and on and on. And she laughed at that, she thought that was absolutely hilarious. But that was just something about where we were from. There's a degree in which place helps write your work for you if you're open to it,

because place brings with it qualities and habits that can be employed in literature quite meaningfully. She understood all of that, she knew what she was reflecting. So I'll stop, I was getting off into a sermon there. (Laughter)

Neurohr *What about music? She writes about music, she sometimes talks about hearing music at the fair, which was across the street from her apartment.*

Haslam Yeah.

Neurohr *And you've talked a little bit about the Crystal Palace and the poem that she wrote about Buck and you were there when he read that. Did you look at her when he was...*

Haslam I couldn't see her. I was trying to because he pointed—she was up on a level above the dance floor. And he pointed but the dance floor was illuminated and the bandstand was illuminated but where we were all sitting was not illuminated. I could not see her for the world. (Laughs) I would love to have. I think, knowing her, she was just chuckling.

Neurohr *Did you ever talk with her about it?*

Haslam Oh yeah, absolutely I did.

Neurohr *What did she say?*

Haslam Oh, she just thought that was wonderful. She laughed and she told everybody about it. I mean everybody. I can't think of when—I was in Tulare, but I can't think of—no, I was in Visalia, I was doing a reading at a bookstore there and she and Betty showed up. The store had mis-advertised the reading; they'd advertised it for 1 o'clock and told me it was at 11. So we had a couple hours to kill. (Laughs) So we sat there and that's where we talked about it. She just got the biggest kick out of that. She loved Buck Owens and she loved music to begin with. She also understood that music had been in fact the sung poetry of the migration. That at a time when there were not people like Wilma McDaniel publishing books, you still had a Woody Guthrie or you still had a Fred Maddox or someone, Bill Woods, who was writing songs with lyrics that were true, that you felt were important. And we used to laugh about some of the songs. There was one old song, "Hey Okie, have you seen Arkie? Tell him Tex has found a job out in California picking up prunes, squeezing oil out of olives." We'd laugh at that. I don't remember who sang that but I grew up with that as a kid and I thought it was a wonderful song.

And there was another famous song called “Okie Boogie” and again these songs, what I loved about them was that they were spitting in the eye of California, the people who were bigoted against Southwesterners were getting it right back. There was just a whole series of them. Bob Wills was a big favorite. He came out and he lived in Fresno for a long time, then lived in Sacramento. I was born in '37 and for many in my generation he was probably the most important performer from the southwest. My folks would go to the Bakersfield Barn to dance and hear him play. There was also Fresno Barn, there was a Sacramento Barn, and if you didn't like Dust Bowlers, you better stay the hell out of those places. (Laughs) Because they were not going to listen to any stuff. And she and I talked about that, how important this was. And [about] people like Smiley Maxedon who nobody ever heard of unless they lived in Tulare. But Smiley was very important to Tulare.

Then, the people who made it big like Jean Shepherd, who was a girl from the Tulare/Visalia area who became a *Grand Ole Opry* performer and we saw these people, I mean I was just a kid and she was, Wilma was an adult by then of course, but we saw them. They performed at the county fairs, they were just getting started. So the music represented a sort of respected area of cultural continuity. It was a place where you could go and you could experience the old country in the same way that an Italian or an Irishman might do the same thing. Again, it was not just whites. I mean there were a lot of black musicians profoundly influenced by the southwest who were performing in those days. And Indian mixes and Black-Indian mixes and White-Indian-Black mixes and so on and so forth.

The music and the lyrics transcended where you were very often for people. I think it gives a certain freedom to someone who's a writer to listen to music being sung because it is lyrics being sung. Because what you've got to do then if you're Wilma McDaniel is you've got to provide the music without an instrument other than your pencil. A really fine poet can do that. You notice I write prose, that's because I can't do it. (Laughs) She could and did. So I think she was very much influenced.

I mean I can remember talking about the Maddox Brothers and Rose because this was a southwestern group or actually a southern group who were seen as southwestern who were based in Modesto, but played the *Louisiana Hay Ride* and the *Grand Ole Opry* and became a major group. But they were absolutely hilarious and everybody loved them. When they performed, you never knew what was going to happen. I mean they would be off the bandstand. There was one who frequently got in fights with the audience, called Friendly Henry. We would laugh about this and Fred Maddox, who was the real clown in the group, last time I saw them perform, I was a kid, I saw Rose Maddox perform as an adult, but

when I was a kid they were on the back of a hay trailer in a park in Bakersfield and hundreds of people were just all in a big circle around there. Wilma saw them in those kinds of situations. So you know when you come from an area that has produced the Jean Shepherds and the Ferlin Huskys and the Buck Owens and the Merle Haggards and the Maddox Brothers and Rose, music is very important to you. It can't help but be.

Oh she, by the way, really admired the lyrics of Merle Haggard, she could see the poetry in his lyrics and I know she did in Woody Guthrie as well. I know that I used to tell her that I thought that Haggard was the best contemporary, in my generation, the best bard, the best singing poet in any form. She pretty well agreed with me on that because he does just what she does. He writes a lyrics like "I'm shopping for dresses with no one to wear them." I mean that's not a common perspective, and he touches the same kind of things that she touches on, the same kind of hard-scrambled life lived with dignity. So, yeah, I think it's hard to understand these people if you don't understand something about the music.

Neurohr

Did she talk about Woody Guthrie? Did you have conversations about Woody?

Haslam

We talked about him only briefly to be honest with you. Woody Guthrie is in an interesting situation. He is in some ways overestimated for his impact on California. That is, Woody was always far more famous in the salons of Berkeley than in the saloons of Bakersfield. His cousin Jack Guthrie was very well known. He sang, "Oklahoma Hills Where I Was Born" and others. But Woody became very, very famous because he had gotten adopted by the academia for his political songs in the late thirties and early forties. But what I asked her about, I remember asking this because when I was writing about country music, I wondered if she had heard the old [Maxine] "Lefty Lou" Crissman and Woody Guthrie radio programs from L.A. in the late thirties, early forties. She had not, but she certainly knew who he was. As I recall she had not heard of Lefty Lou Crissman.

And my view of this may be distorted because I'm of a different generation. I don't remember anybody ever even talking about Woody Guthrie in my family. I do remember Jack Guthrie. But then when I got to college, suddenly Woody was the only person they were talking about. So whereas Wilma, who was actually there because she was an adult when this was going on, might have had vivid memories of him, we never talked about that. We both admired his songs and both thought "This Land is Your Land" should be the national anthem. We agreed on that.

Neurohr *Did she ever talk about the Red Dirt Rangers? She corresponded with a couple of those guys.*

Haslam She mentioned them, but she didn't ever pursue it to any extent. I don't recall other than just one or two times talking about that.

Let me tell you a story that just pops in my mind that I would've forgotten to tell you that I think is really funny. I have a buddy who was a Dust Bowl migrant—well, I have many buddies who are Dust Bowl migrants, but I have one in particular. One of my best friends, Kenny Byrum. Ken is an attorney in Bakersfield and his family actually had taken the Texas to Arizona to California journey, kind of one of the classic routes. Same thing Buck Owens did exactly. But Kenny fell in love with Wilma—I was giving out Wilma McDaniel books to all of my friends, in fact I did that through most of the last half of my life. But I gave one to Ken and he read the poem about the egg-sucking dog. And I can't remember, I wish I could give it to you verbatim but I can't. But he loved the whole thing and that got him going. So we were out at the Dust Bowl Days and Ken and Pam and my wife, Jan, went out. And Wilma was there so I said, "Come on, I'm going to introduce you to Wilma." Because he really wanted to meet her. Ken is as bold as a gopher snake, that's probably why he's such a successful attorney. Before I can introduce him, he puts his arm around Wilma and says, "You old egg-sucking dog. What are you doing here?" (Laughter) She looked at him and I introduced him and then they both started laughing. Well, from that point on, every time he'd see her or vice versa, the egg-sucking dog would come up. And the last time I talked to her, and I can't even remember where I was now, I think it was in Visalia when I was doing that reading. She would say to me every time, "Have you seen that old egg-sucking dog?" (Laughter)

Neurohr *That was pretty good. Another writer who was a Dust Bowl poet is Dorothy Rose. Could you just maybe compare Dorothy with Wilma just a bit?*

Haslam I don't think Dorothy had the, what's the word, the genius, that Wilma had. She was and is a good poet, a solid poet. But for me her poetry lacked the magic. There's no other way for me to say it and I don't want to be insulting her because I admire her. Anybody who gets in those trenches and does the work I admire period, because I've been there myself. But if I had to characterize the difference, it would be that there was almost something predictable in the structures and the observations. She was a little more sentimental. But she was not a bad poet, I sure don't mean that. It's hard to talk about because you're talking about degrees here, but there was something in Wilma's work that was totally unlike anyone else's. I didn't feel that way about Dorothy's. Dorothy's

content was often different, but the structure is what I'm referring to here. Dorothy tended to be closer to conventional, let's put it that way, than Wilma's. Wilma was often just totally off the wall, which is exactly why I liked it so well. But I think Dorothy is, was, a good solid writer and I'm glad she wrote. I wish there were more people doing it. Because I think the more voices there are, the closer you are to the reality that produced all of them. Because finally, Wilma's view is just Wilma's view. You get down to that, there's a degree of universality but it's still one writer's view. So if you've got a hundred writers, each with one writer's view, then you have a better possibility of understanding the complexity and the tone and texture of that life and time.

I think my favorite writer, whose family could be called Dust Bowl, would be the novelist James D. Houston who is best known to a lot of people for writing *Farewell to Manzanar* with his wife Jeanne. But Jim is a wonderful novelist and essayist. If you read a book like *The Men in My Life* or *Three Songs for My Father*, this is right out of the roots of the south, in his case Texas, family transplanted to California and what they've had to do and the values they keep. He talks about how he loved music and his family went to the Church of Christ and so he went to his uncle who was the deacon and he asked if he could bring a guitar or something to church and his uncle said—no, I beg your pardon, he wanted to play a piano in church, that's what it was. The guitar is another story. And he said his uncle looked at him and said, "Jimmy, if you can show me in the Bible where they mention the piano we'll sure have one, but if you can't, don't bring no piano in this church." (Laughter) Wilma loved that story. He and Wilma really hit it off. When they were together it was fun to listen to. Even a motor mouth like me would shut up because I just wanted to hear those two together. They both were anecdotal and each could see the humor in one another's lives. And it was fun. It was great fun to be with them.

Neurohr

Could you tell me a little bit about the memorial service that was given for Wilma?

Haslam

Wilma's funeral, interment, and memorial was very moving and I think appropriately satisfying. She was buried out of a Catholic church, a little mission church in Tulare. In the Central Valley, during the time of racial segregation, which was until after World War II, sometimes the Catholic parishes would not welcome the Latinos into the church. What they would do is build little missions in the Latino district so it would be like a mini-church controlled by the Catholic parish in which sometimes the masses were done in Spanish, but always it was where the Latinos were more welcome than they would be with the burghers. People forget California has its racist history, too.

She was buried out of a little mission church and she was wearing her Franciscan robes in the coffin. She was a lay nun in the Franciscan order. A mass was done and for folks who are members of that faith, such as I, it's inherently comforting to know that someone has joined their savior. Well, then we proceeded to the cemetery and again, it ends there with the interment and all of us putting a handful of earth on the coffin. By this time a lot of us were pretty low and semi-weepee because we knew we weren't going to see her anymore, although we felt good about the way she was being laid to rest.

We repaired to the museum and at the museum there were snacks and people got up and gave testimonials, anecdotes. I thought it was really very interesting because even though I had known her by that time for oh, over thirty years and we had had some wonderful times together, I really didn't know the totality of her life. And I was sitting with the people I know pretty well, and I think that most of us had that same sensation that there were dimensions to her, parts of her life, we didn't know—like what I was just talking about, her faith in the Catholic church and how actively she pursued it... that she was actually a lay nun. She wrote a lot of religious poetry and the Bible was a major source of her inspiration. But as people got up and they began to talk and often laugh, occasionally weep, I began to see a far more complete picture of her. I think the fact that she was remarkable—everybody's remarkable but not everybody is noticed as being remarkable. The fact that she was remarkable, that you could see that as these presentations were going on, was very, very comforting to most of us who were there.

There were some funny things said, there were some not so funny things said. I know I was sitting with the librarian from South Pasadena, Steve Fjeldsted, and he would poke me every once in a while and say, "Did you know that? Did you know that?" And the answer was I usually did not know that. So anyway, I found it comforting because it was a community saying goodbye to somebody who had been special to it, somebody who had shown the community as a special place. Tulare is an interesting town in that it had produced some unusual people. It has produced a double Olympic champion, for example, in track and field, and it's produced some very interesting entertainers, but writers are not something you've seen a lot from that particular area so far. Wilma is the *crème de la crème* and the community knew that. There were dignitaries there and I know when we drove away, and I walked out to the car with Steve and I think Trudy, we all felt as though it had been a good send-off. All of us are going to be gone sometime and this was as good a send-off as we could have imagined. I think she would have been happy with it. She probably would've been embarrassed about some of the stories we told. (Laughter) But that's okay, that's what it's about. She was a wonderfully candid person and could crack a grin with the

best of them.

Neurohr *You talked about her influence in Tulare and I know that she didn't write to receive awards or honors or anything, but are you aware of any that she did receive in particular?*

Haslam I'm really not. I know she had some certificates of appreciation from [places] like Tulare County. There's a lot of things like Pushcart Prizes, as they're called, where a poem is nominated and can be selected and put in this anthology of small press work every year and I think she had a couple of those if I'm not mistaken and I could be mistaken. But she didn't talk about this; it wasn't anything anybody talked about. I think in the writing world, awards are good to the extent that they get your books into circulation, that they prompt readers to pick them up. But beyond that they don't mean much because they're all arbitrary. And all of us know that. I remember Gary Soto talking about being a National Book Award finalist—I think the National Book Award is the highest literary award in the United States—and him saying, “Yeah, it was really a great honor, but how do you really know that these are the four top?” And that's true, you don't. You know it's pretty arbitrary. Your chances are a whole lot better if they're published in New York than if they're published in Bakersfield or Tulare, I can guarantee you.

Neurohr *And if you really want to sell books you need to go on a tour, right?*
(Laughs)

Haslam Yeah, that's about the best way to do it. You know, it's funny, when she did do a few readings, the ones where I was in attendance, she was wonderful. It wasn't that she was expressive; it wasn't that she performed the way a lot of folks do. You know, [David] Mas Masumoto is one of the most interesting poets to see reading because he performs and he's good, he's very good, he's a good writer. Whereas Wilma would just read. But there was something about her, the austerity, except there was the edge of impishness all the time in the austerity. And you didn't have to know her very well to recognize that. The twinkle in the eye. I wish she'd have done more reading because I think places like universities would have been just bowled over by her. Kids would not know what to think about someone who looks like a Grant Wood character standing there reading these outrageous poems. Because of where I live and what I do, I run into all kinds of poets. I find that there are far more of them who were outrageous in their behavior and in their appearance than they are in their writing. Their writing just doesn't go anywhere, (laughs) whereas she was the opposite. Her writing was out there.

Neurohr *When she read, did she comment on the poems before she read them or*

afterward or did she just read?

Haslam From what I saw she did not do much commentary. And someone like Lillian [Vallee] or Trudy [Wischemann] or whomever might be able to give you a better answer for that because I only saw her read a couple of times, simply because I'm in another part of the state. But often there's a question and answer period that follows the reading and then she would comment. But I don't recall her explaining—I remember talking to her about this, one of my premises is if you have to explain a work, you haven't finished writing it. You better go back and work on it some more. It doesn't mean they're going to understand every little nuance, it just means that the work better stand by itself. You can't be with it every place it goes. And she was in full agreement with that, she laughed about it.

Neurohr *Were there types of questions that she resented in any capacity in particular?*

Haslam I never heard that, but again I'm sure you can always come up with something. Maybe if somebody called her the gravy—"are you really the gravy poet? The biscuits and gravy [poet]?" (Laughter) She narrowed it down to the gravy poet. It started as the biscuits and gravy poet, but by the end when she would mention it, it would be the gravy poet. I still don't know what that's all about.

Neurohr *I've seen a copy of that article by the way. She actually sent a copy of that article to Oklahoma. (Laughs)*

Haslam Did she?

Neurohr *Yeah, to one of her correspondences in Oklahoma. But I've read that she sent that but then she also said, "Don't call me the gravy poet." You know, here's this article about me, but don't call me this. (Laughter)*

Haslam Yeah, don't quote it. (Laughs) Well, as I said, I know the guy who wrote it and I know what his intent was. But any of us who do any writing know that your intent is not always your accomplishment so it's just what happens in life.

Neurohr *Did you bring any of her works that you would like to read?*

Haslam I have a couple here that I like. These are just—I tend to actually like her earlier work rather than her later work. I think I alluded to that earlier, because I don't think she had come to think of her[self] quite as a poet in a professional sense so she got closer to the bone.

Visiting a Neighbor in Hospital

We found old Jarlath lying
in bed with tubes
in both his skinny arms
The first thing he said was
I know how them
poor boys feels
when they get locked up in jail
When I come in here yesterday
the nurses taken my temperature
then they drewed some blood
then they taken my pants away
and left me a prisoner

—from *Sister Vayda's Song*. Brooklyn,
NY: *Hanging Loose Press*, 1982.

Haslam

Now I like that. I used to sit around and listen to my grandfather and these other old guys talk and that's exactly the way they talk. It captures the sense of those conversations.

Young Widow

Bonnie came home
from Dub's funeral

put his memory book
on the television set

and started making
ice cream

none of the mourners
could stop her

she stood at the sink
in high heels

beating eggs with
milk and sugar

measured vanilla
without

a spoon

never spattered

one drop on her black
dress

—from *Sister Vayda's Song. Brooklyn,*
NY: Hanging Loose Press, 1982.

Haslam

You know, how do I even top that? It's just, everything is there that needs to be there and nothing's there that doesn't need to be there. And so I think of that as being poetry of a very high level.

Revival

Blue bib overalls
are passing away

except on Tuesdays
plugged by tobacco

starched with sweat
they revive in Tulare

and make a stand
at the public auction

walking stiffly
they prod bull calves
with arthritic canes.

—*The Carousel Would Haunt Me.* Tulare, CA: self-
published, 1973.

Haslam

But I guess my favorite one because it links California and Oklahoma in such a visceral way is “Buried Treasure,” which is one that gets reprinted a lot.

Buried Treasure

Elbie Hayes ruined his
expensive shoes
squashing around the autumn
desolation
of a sharecrop farm
In Caddo County

Okie boy

turned fifty
searching for anything that
had belonged
to his father
when he was fighting the
Great Depression

Kicked at a lump
behind the caved-in cellar
and uncovered a rusty
Prince Albert tobacco can

Stowed it away
as he would a saint's bones
in his Lincoln Continental
and headed back to Bakersfield

—from *Sister Vayda's Song. Brooklyn,*
NY: Hanging Loose Press, 1982.

Haslam

I love all that's been done with that Lincoln Continental! (Laughter) So those are just a few of them that I really like. And see I tend to like the ones that are almost like sketches of characters, just tends to be my taste. And some of the very early ones I like a lot, the ones where everything turns and all of a sudden you're in a different dimension. These three in here [*California Heartland: Writing from the Great Central Valley*] are "Leftovers," "Letter to Cleotis," (which is one of the first ones that I ever read) and "Clothes Dryer." They kind of turn and all of a sudden the meaning is not quite what you thought it was. I think that's a real mark of her skill.

I don't think you can teach people to make those kinds of observations. I don't think a Creative Writing class could teach that. I think you could hope that people would develop it by reading this. They'll start hearing it. You can teach them how to use a semi-colon, but that's not the same thing. That's easy.

Neurohr

How has her writing influenced you?

Haslam

I think it freed me. Before I ever met her, I published *Okies*, which is a collection of stories about California Okies, Dust Bowl migrants in California. Actually there's one that's set before World War II. All the other stories are set after World War II at the time when things were changing and getting better. I used a lot of dialect, dialectic prose and got some criticism for it. People who said, "Well, that's not a Californian's talk, that's a southerner's talk." I thought, "You don't

know the California that I'm from." And when I started reading Wilma and I realized she was doing the same thing, maybe doing it better, it really freed me. I just thought, "What the heck, pooh on these people. I'll do what I please." I actually started writing and after that book I started putting dialect in every collection I wrote, no matter what the source of the stories, I published eight short-story collections after that.

And there's a Tejon Club gang stories. The Tejon club gang are a bunch of guys who hang out at a bar in Oildale, which is my real hometown. And they use the name of the real bar, the Tejon Club, because it's where my dad and his buddies met after work and I created this cast of characters that are like the characters in her poems. She got the biggest kick out of that. The first one, for example, is called the *Great Kern County Gator Hunt* and it's about a guy, an old Arkie, who tricks these beer-swilling he-men into thinking there's a wild alligator in the Kern River. They go out hunting for it in the middle of the night, three sheets to the wind. And all of the stories are like that, they're kind of nonsense stories. She loved those because she drew on the same kind of thing, but she did it far more in a far more concise and probably far more effective way. But just seeing somebody using the materials as well as she used it made me think it was well worth staying with it. There was no point in abandoning it no matter what the critics said. Because by then I was starting to get stuff written about my work, too. And occasionally you'd hear, "If this guy would write about important things like New York this would be fine." Middle-class angst. Well I was more interested in blue-collar angst and she was, too. I don't think there's any big influence because by the time we got to know one another, we were both already into our careers I guess is what you'd have to say. I was already about three books in and I knew the direction I wanted to go. But she certainly reinforced impulses that I had. I think I tried to listen more closely because she clearly had that ear. And I thought [that] you need that ear to make characters sound the way they actually sound, make it appear to the reader that they're dealing with the genuine language of these folks.

Neurohr *Did you purposely try to help promote Wilma? Her writing?*

Haslam Sure. Yeah, I definitely did.

Neurohr *What were the ways you did that?*

Haslam I wrote about her and I talked about her. I used her work in classes, included it in anthologies that I edited, I recommended it to other writers. As a matter of fact a couple weeks ago, in my listing in *Poets and Writers: Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers*, they added some questions "Who are your favorite writers?" or your this or your that. Well, she's listed as one of my favorite writers. Because she

was. I didn't have to contrive that, I thought of her as being someone really different, really special. I think young writers in particular could learn a lot from her, for instance, to be genuine; you don't have to be contrived. I think when you start off to be a writer, there's a real tendency to imitate and be quite contrived. If you're going the normal literary pattern, you'll read all your Hemingway, you'll read all your Faulkner, you'll read all your Fitzgerald, then you move up to the next generation and on and on and on. Someone like her who didn't do that, and was able to draw the stuff of literature just from her surroundings, is an eye-opener I think for young writers.

So, yeah, absolutely, any time I had a chance to recommend her I did. And that wasn't just me, by the way. There was sort of a group of us, and again I mentioned Houston, there's Paul Foreman down in Texas would be another one who tried to help one another out. Because each of us had somewhat different audiences. And I could mention Wilma's work to people, some of whom wouldn't have heard of her, and Houston could mention, that would be another somewhat different group. And the circles would come together in certain areas, but out in the periphery there were readers who would be new to each of these other writers. Art Cuelho was one of those folks who was involved in that. There was a real sense of loyalty among the alternative press writers. Most of my books had been published by university presses, not all but most. The alternative press writers, you have to help one another because no one's going to help you; there is no publicity machine, Wilma didn't have a publicity machine. But what she had were some people who loved her work and were fond of her. So it was the least you could do. As they say, it's no skin off anybody's nose.

Neurohr

Because I think that she's much more well-known in California than in Oklahoma, what do you think people in Oklahoma need to know about her?

Haslam

She was an absolute straightforward honest writer who was proud of her Oklahoma roots and who often mingled the two as she did in "Buried Treasure." She's a good model for writers who think that they're going to have to conform to the style that they see in books coming from this major capital or that major capital. One of the things that she provides—I remember talking to a kid when I was visiting a community college back in Bakersfield fifty years ago. There was a student there who was thought to be very bright and very promising. And she kept saying, "If I could just get to San Francisco, I know I could write a novel." Well, what Wilma proved is you don't have to go to San Francisco, or Paris, or London, or New York. All you have to do is be observant and develop some work habits. And she did both. She found the time to write every single day, that's what she told me. And she found the material right

there in Tulare.

In fact, one of the things that some of us have done—Wilma did, I did, Jim did, is to contrast “the Californias” in a way, use that as a source of humor or tension in the work. And so one of the things that a young writer in Oklahoma could do is talk about the difference between living in the rural part of the state in small-town, farm town, and somebody “intellectual” in Norman or Stillwater. There’s going to be a difference; there’s going to be a big difference. One of the things you’re going to have at the university is people who don’t want to be there, who are hoping that Columbia will call tomorrow or Cal will call tomorrow. Then that tension, people whose blood and bones are invested in the land and who would no more think of leaving the land short of death than anything, there you go. So I would think that what Wilma says to a good young writer—to a new writer, not a young writer,—is look around you. Find out what’s really there and trust that, trust yourself, trust your judgment about these things. I think that would be a message for any writer anywhere. But since she has drawn on that material herself, has already knocked down a few fences, I would think that would be a place to go.

Neurohr

How should she be remembered? If you had to try to sum that up?

Haslam

I think she was an original, honest writer who brought us a vision that we did not have in American literature. As a result of that, she’s expanded everybody else’s possibilities. That’s what every writer of significance does as far as I’m concerned. I think she’s actually done that. I think, too, she’s underappreciated, under-read at this point, but I’m not sure that’s always going to be the case. She’s also a product of something else that goes on in all American literature, the ongoing tension between urban and rural. She’s really in kind of the mid-ground there. Tulare is not really urban in the sense that a major city is, and yet it’s also not rural.

Neurohr

It isn’t Stroud, Oklahoma.

Haslam

It’s adjacent to rural and its raison d’être is rural. It’s the second most productive agricultural county in the United States. Fresno County is the most. So I mean you’re dealing with something that’s very special. But there’s that tension and there’s another kind of tension that seems to me is there for the reader, she’s writing about people and places and times many of which are going to be unfamiliar. So the challenge for her as a writer is to make it interesting to people who don’t have roots in Oklahoma or California or the rural or the city, people who are a generation past that. I used to tell people that when I retired from the university here, the reason that I retired was that not only did students

not know what World War II was, they didn't know what Vietnam was either. At that point it was time for me to get out. (Laughter) Because my frames of reference were no longer appropriate. She has to stride through that garden herself but she does it. The way a writer does that I think is to write so well about what they do know, that they compel the reader to come and challenge it, to take it on. I think she's good enough and original enough that she accomplishes that at her best.

Neurohr *Is there anything you want to add?*

Haslam I hope anybody who observes this interview and hasn't read Wilma McDaniel will at least pick up one book, just one, and then make a decision. I think I know what the decision will be.

Neurohr *How do we get the word out more about her?*

Haslam I think doing what you're doing. But I think publication. You know, for example I'm sure you must have a university magazine. The way I would do it for that (because they're going to have to have some university connection) is I would talk about this project. But I would make sure there were two or three samples of her poems there that people would see so they could actually read the poems. And then maybe one or two quotes from people like Robert Peters or whomever, Jim Houston had a couple good quotes about her. Just say, "Hey, this is something special, don't miss it." And you can quote me, "This is something special, don't miss it." It's not like Oklahoma has major poets dropping off the trees in there—or California or—and so when you get someone like this, you want to take advantage of it. And then find out where the next young poet goes. One thing I might do if I were a wealthy man or a rich man (laughs) is put together a Wilma McDaniel Prize for Poetry for young Oklahoma writers—or they wouldn't have to be young, just be people who have not had a volume of poetry published.

Neurohr *Are you familiar with the Literary Landmarks project?*

Haslam No, I'm not.

Neurohr *We'll have to talk about that. I think that might be another thing that we need to look at in doing for her. As far as the website goes that we've created at the library to try to help preserve her legacy, have you taken a look at that?*

Haslam I looked at it. I have not dug through it.

Neurohr *Okay. Well there's still much more content to add to that of course. But*

for one thing, I want to honor her memory with that and be respectful of her and what she did and also introduce people to her, help preserve her legacy, let it be a place that people can go to learn more about her or they can learn where things are about her. So we want to collaborate with a lot of other places that have collections and maybe we can put their guide to their collections up, that kind of thing. But for people who are doing research about her, what is important to include in this type of project, this website that can help researchers?

Haslam

Well, obviously you've got the biographical material, you've got the bibliography. As to the extent that you can have it, I would make it as extensive as I could. In fact I might even use her as a way to talk about the alternative press movement in the United States, which has produced everybody from Walt Whitman to Wilma McDaniel. Some people forget about that, they just think about New York. Look at the *International Directory of Small Presses and Little Magazines*, you'll find hundreds of different listings. A bibliography of works about her of course, the secondary, what they call secondary bibliography. I think you've already touched on this, maybe this is what the Literary Landmarks is about, but something about the places she wrote about and wrote from. I would do something about the link between Oklahoma, the culture of Oklahoma, and the culture of California, particularly the San Joaquin Valley. I mean it's interesting, if you ask in the world of country music the best non-Okie, it would be Merle Haggard by far, it wouldn't be even close, and he was born in California.

Neurohr

You know, that's interesting.

Haslam

In country music I think that that would be true because I did this in places when I was in Nashville and places and I would have to say, "Wait a minute, he's not from Oklahoma" and they would be kind of shocked. (Laughs)

Neurohr

A lot of people my age that are playing Oklahoma regional music now are tracing their music directly to Woody Guthrie because of some of their social beliefs—their sharing and their freely giving and their writing about place and that kind of thing.

Haslam

Just as a quick aside, you mentioned social beliefs. That's an interesting area. Wilma was profoundly egalitarian it has always seemed to me. But not egalitarian in the way in which the campus egalitarians would be, you know the SDS [Students for Democratic Society] or whomever, the groups that protested for ethnic studies say and things of that kind. There wasn't that edge to it, but she was egalitarian in the sense that she respected—really and truly did—all people. She understood that people were going through the same things. What I would call a mature kind of

egalitarianism. You remember the old expression “power to the people?” Well, it only referred to the people that you agreed with if you were on campus. Wilma wasn’t that way, she didn’t have that notion. She was just a more open person—she found some people not to like, though don’t misunderstand me. But I hadn’t even thought much about that. We never really talked about social consciousness in the Woody Guthrie sense of that word. I don’t remember ever having a conversation with her about that. That would be kind of interesting in it itself. I know she knew, I mean she read, but I don’t know her thoughts.

But, as I mentioned earlier about Guthrie, out here he’s strictly kind of a college phenomenon. Not that people don’t admire him, they do. But his reputation has been—well, that gets back in the history of country music, where a leftist kind of country of music suddenly becomes what’s called folk music and that’s the very same stuff that was country music five years before. It’s just that suddenly the political break occurs and the current events singers become folk singers instead of country western singers, although many start as country western singers, and things of that kind. When I teach the course on country music in California, I always make it clear that to me, folk and country rock and western swing and on and on, cow punk, that’s all country as far as I’m concerned. It all comes from the same source and people can hang all the labels we want on it, but I’m not kicking anything out; I don’t feel like it’s my role to do that. There are people that do it. So Guthrie is very much in that scene.

Neurohr *The Woody Guthrie Festival is held in Okemah, Oklahoma, in July every year.*

Haslam I did know about that; I know about that.

Neurohr *And it’s just hotter than heck in July in Okemah.*

Haslam Yeah. You know, it’s even that way in October when they do the Dust Bowl Days festival in Lamont—or in Weedpatch, I should say. It can be very hot and the air quality down there is horrible now. My wife and I were driving over from the coast for that festival one year, about three years ago I guess it was, and you drop over the coast range and you get over and there’s a grade called Grocer Grade and then you drop down into the Valley near a town called Maricopa. We got at the top of that grade and it looked like we were driving into a bowl of stew. I mean I can’t tell you how awful it was. We were going to spend a couple days there and visit old friends, and as soon as we finished the Dust Bowl Festival (laughs) we went right back to the coast.

Well, what happened in that Bakersfield area, a social revolution really

followed from air conditioners and television. Because prior to that time in the evenings in working class neighborhoods, people would gather. They'd go outside and water their lawns and the kids would be riding skates and scooters and things up and down the street. People would be talking across the lawn to one another. And oftentimes it was about the only time the men folk would get together because they'd been working all day. That's when you'd start to hear music, by the way. That's when somebody might have a folding chair and be sitting on the porch with a guitar and maybe somebody else would walk over with a fiddle. It was wonderful, I loved it. It was my favorite time of the day. I went to the Army in 1958, came back in 1960, at the end of 1960, and in that period my parents had acquired a television set which they'd never had before. The neighborhood had acquired television sets. I mean there were a few before I left, but basically the whole neighborhood then had television sets and lots of air conditioners were on windows. In those days they were actually just one-room air conditioners. And nobody was going out in the evening any more. I didn't observe the change; I just came home and there it was.

Actually, one other thing, north of Bakersfield, northeast of Bakersfield is the Kern River Oilfield, one of the larger oilfields in California, and it's built on rolling hills, kind of tan hills above the Kern River. When I went in the Army it had hundreds, probably even thousands, of old cable tool drilling rigs, the frames were all still up. And when I came back they had taken them all down. It was like I'd come to a different town because my whole life, they'd been there.

Neurohr

I had asked you about the website and types of content to put on there for researchers. Some of the things that you mentioned that I made notes of and we have them in the interview of course would be biographical information, a bibliography of her works, which Jim (Chlebda) has been very helpful with, then a secondary bibliography, which I've started trying to do, the alternative press movement in the U.S., places she wrote about and wrote from, and the link between cultures of Oklahoma and California. Is there anything else as far as the content? What do you think about her correspondence and the value of that for researchers?

Haslam

Oh, I think it's invaluable because of how she did it, that she used the backs of things, the backs of envelopes, the backs of bills. You would actually sometimes get letters that she had received (laughs) which I had never seen before, but they were innocuous things. No, I think that'll tell you more about her. And she very frequently handwrote a poem or some part of a poem on the letters. I think people would really get some sense of her as a person if they saw that material. I definitely would do that.

Neurohr

Photos?

- Haslam** I don't know much about photos. I know that when I first began seeing the photos of her that were taken when she was young I didn't recognize her because she had already been in her fifties by the time that I got to know her. But I think that would be very important because I know now that there are photos that basically trace her whole life from the time she was an infant basically until she was an old lady. She died with dark hair. (Laughs) But no, I think, photos would be interesting. One of the things about this whole question of the migration of the '30s is there are a lot of stereotypes about the migrants. She's counter-stereotypical, but only largely because she's just a unique human being—her family came out in a fancy car from Oklahoma, for example, that her dad traded for.
- Neurohr** *A Pierce Arrow.*
- Haslam** Yeah. I think that kind of thing needs to be stressed a little bit just to break down the stereotype. I suppose I have to say bless his heart, but John Steinbeck unintentionally created a prism through which this is all viewed. And I don't...
- Neurohr** *Yeah. In Oklahoma, everyone is extremely conscious of the geography of the state and where the actual Dust Bowl occurred. People resent the lumping together of this notion which Steinbeck did, that all of Oklahoma was one great big Dust Bowl.*
- Haslam** Yeah, or that all the Dust Bowl was in Oklahoma, the other extreme.
- Neurohr** *Yeah. It hasn't been written about enough or recognized enough that it was the economic conditions. But I mean it kind of came under that label or that term.*
- Haslam** I wrote a piece for *The Nation* about forty years ago, and mentioned that you were as apt to be from southeast Colorado as you were from any part of Oklahoma if you were in the actual Dust Bowl. That it wasn't the Dust Bowl really, it was the Great Depression primarily.
- Neurohr** *Oh yeah, it was a huge swath of multiple states where it actually occurred. Of course, a lot of people from Arkansas came through Oklahoma and migrated. Texas.*
- Haslam** Well, the part of California I was from was very interesting because of that. But with a lot of old wounds, I guess. Steinbeck was a wonderful writer, he was truly a great writer. But he didn't know agriculture very well. But I don't fault him in the way that some folks do, simply because I understand what it is to be a writer and you do the best you can with what you've got. Have you read *Obscene in the Extreme* by Rick Wartzman?

Neurohr

No.

Haslam

That's a book about the reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* in California, just published in 2008. Rick was actually—when I was a staff writer for the *LA Times*, he was my editor. It's a good book and it gives you some differing perspectives. It starts by dealing with the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Kern County. But it got banned not for the reasons they say it was banned; it got banned because it exposed the corporate agriculture's exploitation of migrants. But the supervisor claimed, "Well it's a dirty book, that's why we're banning it." Well they had been exposed; they'd been busted as they say. And Rick writes about that and some of these folks.

I'll tell you, here's another little story that you probably won't find in any book, but in the late 1940s, this little town Oildale where I was raised is unincorporated but it's been there for a long, long time, over a hundred years, and it had grown to the point where it was 15,000 or 20,000 people. So the Board of Supervisors instructed the Department of Education to put a high school out there and so they decided they were going to build a high school and they were going to name it after the publisher of the *Bakersfield, California* and his name will pop into my mind. The problem was that here's an area of town that is primarily Southwesterners and primarily the blue collar, and the publisher of *California* was one of the people who started the anti-migrant or anti-Okie movement in California. He was a founder of the California Citizen's Association that wanted to deport migrants.

He got all kinds of corporations involved in it—there were almost no citizens involved in the California Citizens Association, it was high-rollers who realized that they were being exposed, that suddenly their own system was suddenly backfiring on them. And so my dad and some other men went to a school board meeting and said, "If you build a school named after that sucker," (that isn't what they said) "Nobody will ever attend it. Because you're going to be building it and re-building it, it's not going to stay up." (Laughter) And I guess they took the men seriously, I don't know how long all this took or anything, because ultimately they withdrew the name—Alfred Harrell High School. Ultimately the school board withdrew that name, but as punishment, I guess, they refused to name it Oildale High School. They named it North of the River High School, which has now been called simply North High for years.

My dad, and again, his generation of those folks he worked with were not happy about the name North of the River High School, but they had been very unhappy about Alfred Harrell High School. But people today aren't even aware of the organizations like the California Cavaliers, the

Committee of 60, California Citizens Associations, I mean these were guys who were doing everything they could to hurt the migrants who were already in desperate shape. This is the stuff that got Steinbeck mad and that's what he was writing about. Wartzman writes about this, he gives you an overview of it. I think his book is pretty good, Rick's a fine writer.

Neurohr

I'll have to read that.

Haslam

Yeah, I think your library ought to have that.

Neurohr

Yeah, we should.

Haslam

Because if someone reviewed it locally I bet people would pick it up.

Neurohr

There's a lot of interest in Steinbeck in Oklahoma still. In 2007, we had our centennial year in Oklahoma and our community, which was a collaborative project with the OSU Library and Stillwater Public Library, and then the Pioneer Library System down around Norman, we both applied for the Big Read Grants from the NEA, which are to do community-wide reading projects. They just started this a couple of years ago, and we both were selected and we both chose "The Grapes of Wrath." (Laughter) Reading classical literature is what it's all about. We did it because of the centennial year, but we also knew that there were still some strong feelings in the state and we thought, "What better book to read than this one in our centennial year?"

Haslam

Yeah, I think it's a good idea.

Neurohr

And we had great [participation], we did six weeks of programming in Stillwater. A lot of interest, a lot of participation, a lot of interest in the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma. A lot still. Timothy Egan just happened to be coming that spring and spoke and people remember it and have heard stories about it or they remember it or they remember their parents' or grandparents' [stories]. And it's still very strong.

Haslam

Well, I wrote an essay some years ago—it was at the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*—based on a presentation I made at the Steinbeck Center; it was called "A Book That Stretched My Soul." It's in my book *The Other California*, but it's about reading *The Grapes of Wrath* when I was in high school. And what I point out in there is the trick among the powers that be, the Alfred Harrells of this world, was to get people who hadn't read the book to condemn it. Thus, nobody would read the book and they didn't want people to read it and make their own minds up about it. And to a degree they succeeded. But as Rick Wartzman's book shows, they didn't succeed entirely. But I can

remember as a kid hearing people—even kinfolk who would simply say, “You’re not going to let your boy read that book are you?” And, of course, I read it immediately since I heard that. (Laughter)

Neurohr *Yeah, there are stories like that in Oklahoma, too. One woman came to our programs and she said that her mother forbid her to read it when she was growing up. You know but by and far, everyone was glad that they read it finally. They’d always heard about it and they finally read it and they were so glad they did and they couldn’t believe what all the fuss was about.*

Haslam Yeah. You know one of the things that I’ve always thought was that the final scene where Rosasharn presents her breast to the starving man is a great scene. A lot of people don’t like it, but it’s sacramental to me, the way I read it. I think it was one of the great scenes in American literature. But I can still rouse some of my kinfolk, some of my friends over that because they were trained to say, “No, just a dirty sex scene.” I thought, “Man, if you think that’s a dirty sex scene, I’d hate to think what your sex life is like.” (Laughter) No, that’s a wonderful book. I used it in a class I taught in Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco a couple of years ago. Now these are people my age and older by and large—I’m in my seventies now—so a lot of really older people. Many said to me, in variations of this, when you begin reading that first chapter, you realize this guy can really write. And they would come and they would say, “You know I don’t remember it being this good.” Now they’re not making any social judgments because they don’t have Okie backgrounds. These are mostly well-to-do burghers in San Francisco, but they really got taken with how good he was. That’s part of the problem of course if you don’t like what he’s doing, because he writes so well that he’s going to carry that message. I’ve always liked *In Dubious Battle* a lot. Have you read that one? It’s about a fruit strike actually in Salinas Valley but it’s stripped pretty bare and it’s not as lush a book. The action is more immediate and it doesn’t have those reflective chapters. It’s a real indictment of the way workers are exploited by both sides.

Neurohr *Did he write that before “The Grapes of Wrath”?*

Haslam Yes. Actually that whole series he did in the ’30s, starting with in the ’20s to *A God Unknown*, which I don’t think is a particularly good book but I think is as close to a skeleton key to understanding what follows. Because you realize the guy is not writing one-to-one realism, he’s writing allegorically to some extent and it shows. And then down the road, *Tortilla Flat* and so on. No, I think he was a wonderful writer. I was amazed at the end of the twentieth century, the *San Francisco Chronicle* had a poll about the 100 most important non-fiction, 100 most

important fiction books from the west in the twentieth century. I voted for *The Grapes of Wrath*, but the winning book was *Angle of Repose* by Wallace Stegner, which is very much a California book. I knew Wallace Stegner and much admired him as a man, but I would never have voted for that book ahead of the *Grapes of Wrath* and didn't. But I think there's still in California some controversy about it, mostly from people who haven't read it.

Neurohr

Wilma wrote a poem or two and referred to Steinbeck.

Haslam

Yeah. Over the years I've had a lot of students who write papers and things whose families had been part of the migration and he's a recurrent theme. And then some of them take people like Tom Joad—well, Woody Guthrie does this too, take people like Tom Joad as though they're real people—and I guess in a sense they *are* real people. That's one more major link between Oklahoma and California culturally. Wilma's a shining jewel in that.

Neurohr

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for the interview. I really appreciate it. It's really been a privilege to be able to talk to you today.

----- End of interview -----