

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Lone Star laureates pack their poetry to national parks

Karla K. Morton and Alan Birkelbach

Photographs courtesy of the poets



By Johnny D. Boggs

The Channel Islands near Ventura, California, are a long haul from Texas, but Karla K. Morton and Alan Birkelbach have been on a mission. *Roundup* caught up with these Texas poets laureate on a boat bound for that national park as part of their Words of Preservation: a Poets Laureate National Parks Tour.

Last year, these WWA members launched the tour to celebrate the National Park Service's centennial anniversary. Birkelbach, selected poet laureate in 2005, and Morton, chosen poet laureate in 2010, plan to visit 50 or more of the 59 U.S. national parks, documenting their travels with words and poetry.

They were scheduled to visit Florida's Dry Tortugas in February and follow that with trips to Texas's Guadalupe Mountains in April, Michigan's Isle Royale in May, South Dakota's Wind Caves and Badlands in June, Alaska sites in August ... "and on and on," Morton says. "We've got them planned for the next couple of years."

Who wants to take credit for the idea of this tour?

Karla: Well, I was sitting at a gathering for Constituting America, and the speaker mentioned 2016 was the 100th anniversary of the parks. It was that *very* moment when I thought: Something needs to be done to celebrate.

Alan: Karla deserves all the credit for

the idea. When she told me about it, I was impressed with her vision and the noble simplicity of the idea. Two poets laureate celebrating the national parks – what an incredible fit!

So how did it come about?

Karla: I thought seeing 50 of the 59 parks would be a good number. I've always wanted to do this. And, to have two Texas poets laureate would have a greater cultural impact, so I asked Alan if he wanted to do this with me. We have been best friends for years, and our styles are different but very compatible. We began in 2013 trying to obtain grants and funding. We've had no luck, but decided this was too important of a project, so we are doing it on our own nickel. We are celebrating the next 100 years of the parks.

Alan: Karla and I have been poets of place for years. Whether we were celebrating our home state or writing individual books of poetry about our hometowns, we recognized long ago that our environment informs our work. Few places are more inspiring than the national parks.

What was the first park on the tour and what will be the last? And why?

Karla: The first park was Yellowstone, because that was actually the first place declared a national park. We would love to come full circle and actually end up the tour there as well. That's where it all began.

For both of you, do you remember your first visit to a national park? What do you recall about that?

Karla: I took my kids to visit the Grand Canyon about 15 years ago. I could not believe the sheer immensity of it. It was then when I realized exactly what treasures our country had in these parks.

Alan: When I was small, say 9 or 10, my family took a driving tour through Big Bend National Park. We drove through the desert and into the basin. Even then I was impressed with the raw, rugged nature. In that area we also went to Lajitas – before all the tourists found it – and the [McDonald] Observatory [near Fort Davis]. I can't wait to go back.

What has the reaction been like?

Karla: Mine or everyone else's? [Laughs.] Well, everyone we meet wants to do this too. It has been amazing. Along with visiting the parks, we do a lot of public outreach at each one. We started off with an NPR podcast in Wyoming, and we do newspaper interviews, poetry readings at libraries, bookstores, local colleges and universities, and just this past week, we did a fantastic reading at Black Rock Canyon in Joshua Tree and the University of California San Bernardino. Alan is setting up a blog out of pure public demand.

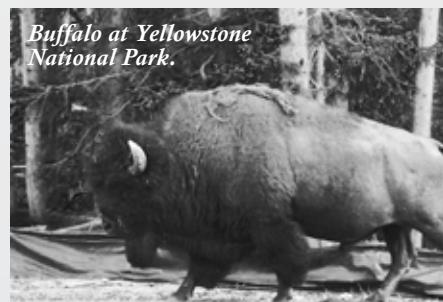
Alan: Almost universally the reaction is three steps: 1: 50 parks? Really? How cool. 2: How do you find the time and money/how are you making it happen? 3: Take me with you.

People look at us like we might be insane – or we might be wonderfully inspired – but either way they wish they were going too. The encouragement has been uplifting.

OK. There has to be a book coming out of this experience. Right?

Karla: Absolutely! And this forthcoming book with poetry and pictures will have a percentage of its sales going back to the national parks system. It's our Little Drummer Boy gift – some small way we can culturally perpetuate and protect our national parks.

Alan: Our goal is to fill a gap. From [Ralph Waldo] Emerson to [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow to [Walt] Whitman, early American poets used images of nature in poetry to describe a great nation. It was an awakening and the building of a sense of pride. We hope that the book we produce will end up in each National Park bookstore – and



will reawaken that sense of pride in the treasure of our national parks.

I remember when I had to present a Spur for poem, I said something like, "How do you write a novel? Simple. You just sit at your computer and cut open a vein. But to write a poem, you have to cut even deeper." So how did both of you turn to poetry?

Karla: I honestly cannot remember a time in my life when I was without paper and pencil. I would sit out in the back pasture and listen. I truly felt like the wind had something, some grand revelation it was trying to tell me, and I could understand if I could only listen close enough. It's still that same way for me. I cannot help but write.

Alan: Interesting. I didn't turn to poetry. I was led there before I was a teenager. I wrote my first poem when I was 12. It has never been work for me. I've never had writer's block. Writing poetry is a natural thing for me. Cutting even deeper? No. I enjoy writing way too much.

Having been to a number of national parks, I have to think you've been inspired to write. So what have you been writing?

Karla: Oh, the poetry. These places are so inspirational.

Alan: Writing poetry about each park is essential to the entire journey – and objective. We keep journals, one each, for each park, where we write poems, capture phrases, keep a rough diary – anything that is part of the experience. Sometimes the poems will happen

that day, that moment, and others have to germinate slowly – but for each park we generate poems.

OK. Let me put both of you on the spot. Favorite national park so far, and why?

Karla: That is so not an easy question! Each park is simply incredible in its own way. And they are so diverse! But I must say, Joshua Tree was amazing, and we were given a gift of time there by the park. It might move into first place for me.

Alan: That is a tough question. I agree with Karla about Joshua Tree. But I have a special attachment for Lamar Valley in Yellowstone. It was a landscape that I have still not entirely processed.

How about explaining to the non-poet members exactly what a poet laureate is and does?

Karla: A poet laureate is the highest rank you can go in a state, or a country, as a poet. Most every state has one, but not all. Texas has had a poet laureate since 1932. We also have a national poet laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera. Most countries also have one. In Texas, it has never been a paid position, like most other places, so we make our own agendas, and we keep the title for life. I do like the way Britain does it – they pay their laureates in half euros *and* a cask of sherry.

Alan: Some laureates are more active than others. Karla and I have accepted that the role has implicit and explicit literary responsibilities. No one asked



Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park.

us to be public figures for poetry – and we certainly don't do it for the fame or money – but we have the ability and determination to use poetry to further a cause that is not politics-based, not race-based and not religious-based. We believe that's what laureates should do.

John Muir ... Henry David Thoreau ... Teddy Roosevelt ... Emerson. You're in pretty good company now. How does it feel?

Karla and Alan: We are so very honored.

What's next for you two?

Alan: Karla had a grand vision. And good planning is essential, all the way down to day-by-day details on each trip. We learn more with each drive, each flight, each hotel. And we talk to people at each park. Karla has been contacting directors and supervisors and rangers and professors and librarians. Each experience is richer than the one before because we try to reach out. In return, we discover more treasure. Right now parks are planned through 2018. We can't wait.



Karla K. Morton poses with an "ancient Puebloan" at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado.



"All Authors Pay Cash." Alan Birkelbach poses at the Country Kitchen near Joshua Tree National Park in California.