

Frost, Robert: This Tramp ^[1]

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Robert Frost: This Tramp

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/12/2002. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

In 1961 the great American poet [Robert Frost](#) ^[3] recalled the story of his tramping days along the North Carolina coast. The 87-year-old poet was at a party in his honor in Chapel Hill when playwright Paul Green asked him to tell the story. A tape recorder was on, and decades later folklorist Sally Council discovered the tape in the [Southern Folklife Collection](#) ^[4] at the [University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill](#) ^[5] and gave me a copy. It is a rare firsthand account of life here in the 1890s told by one of the nation's most beloved poets -- and driest wits.

Frost left out a piece of the story, however. Feeling spurned by the girl he loved, he had actually come south to drown himself. He didn't, of course, and he later penned these lines about his trip -- "Ah, when to the heart of man/ Was it ever less than treason/ To go with the drift of things, / To yield will and grace to reason, / And bow and accept the end/ Of a love or a season?"



Robert Frost, second from the right, visits with faculty and students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Photo from [North Carolina Collection](#), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

I came, that would be in 1894 say, 1893 or 1894, sometime like that. I got on board a boat cheap, and I got down as far as Norfolk. From there I had practically a dollar left. Then I set forth on foot. I had a bag with me to begin with, but I saw I went through the Dismal Swamp part of the way. I walked on a high boardwalk that wide, one board wide, lifted up out of the rather dry swamp. I couldn't see much water, but was lifted up on things. I went through there by moonlight all alone. I got to a place on some river down there, but there was a boat tied up. I went up to the captain of it and I asked him if I could help load and go on down the coast. They said I could. Didn't seem to be much work, but they let me come on board. In Elizabeth City I didn't know what to do next. I just stayed all day on the boat. It was going on down further. The men all went off and everybody disappeared, the captain included. There was a Negro [woman] that was cleaning up around, but all of a sudden, there was a noise of a lot of men, and I looked out and here were about 10 men with attendants. There seemed to be purty near 20 of them altogether, and everybody had two demijohns of whiskey and guns. The attendants they included me without noticing me much. I was young, you see. I'd be about 19, I guess. They didn't like me around, some of them, but there was one man that took a shine to me, and his name was Dozier. He was a saloonkeeper. He was a white man. We went out across the sound to Kitty Hawk that night, a rather windy, stormy night. We went out there to an old big summer hotel, a great long thing. They opened that up -- there was no keeper there -- and they started carrying on all night. About midnight, a fine looking fellow, a sturdy figure, walked in on us all. I wish I knew his name. He was captain of a fishing crew, and his camp was down along the coast somewhere and he had seen this excitement. He came up and he said, "The next day we went hunting. I went with them without a gun. They let me come along, and I was afraid for my life all the time! They were just drinking and shooting in all directions. I didn't think I'd ever see my mother again! It was all sort of like that. The saloonkeeper, he took such a shine to me, he said, why don't you stay here to live? And I said, what would I do? And he said, I'll take you to see the editor of the Elizabeth City newspaper. We went to see him, and his name was Mr. Lamson. He said, "Well, we'll go see the head of the girls' school. Why don't you teach?" This tramp! He took me to see the head of the school, and I spent the evening there. His name was Mr. Sheep. I heard later they had a quarrel. They almost shot me. We used to have depressions without too much being said about them. Up and down all the time, you know. I slept out and I did all sorts of things. Then I got hungry and found my way back to home, Massachusetts. I got arrested one night on purpose, because I didn't know how to get rid of the gang I was with. Such a tough lot of fellows, I didn't know what to do. I went to the police station and asked to be shut in. I was in my cell in the prison, and one of these good-doers came in to see me. Nice man, you could just see, a good man, just shining with it. Rotarian fellow. You laugh at virtue, I notice. Must be liberals laughing like that. But this was a fine fellow. And I said, "Little." And he said, "Had anything to eat?" And I said, "Not much, lately." And a beautiful dinner came into me. He just sent up a beautiful dinner, but never came back for thanks. Didn't want to ask for any hard luck story or anything. Just a nice man.

"Robert Frost, second from the right, visits with faculty and students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill." Photo from [North Carolina Collection](#) ^[6], University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Please contact the North Carolina Collection for additional information or permission for further use.

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