

'Better listen and be awake'

In an interview shortly before his death, poet Jawdat Haydar recalled the undergraduate roots of a distinguished literary career

Rafael McDonnell

Jawdat Haydar, a poet who worked as an educator, an executive with the Iraq Petroleum Company and a farmer, passed away in Beirut earlier this year at age 101 after a final series of interviews, including one with this reporter. The native of Lebanon had recently published a new collection of his poetry, "101 Selected Poems."

Haydar, one of the best-known poets of the Middle East, published his first poem eight decades ago as a student at the University of North Texas. Printed in a newspaper then known as the *Dallas News*, it was about life in Texas: "The skies of Switzerland are clear and blue / The old German castles are pretty, too / France is charming and England not less / But there's no place like dear old Texas."

Many of Haydar's later poems focus on large issues such as injustice, war, peace, life, death and man's interaction with the natural world.

"What first inspired me to write poetry was the beauty of nature and the diversity and mysteries of the world," Haydar said. "Once I started writing, I realized that through my work I could express my deep inner feelings of beauty, love, ambition, passion, pain, despair, loss and worry. In my 100 years I have seen a lot of changes around me in the world, but the elements that inspired me to write remain constant all through my life on this earth."

Haydar said that his poems often carry a message.

"Nature is a gift from God. I hope that through my work I can convey a simple message, saying: 'People of Earth, better listen and be awake, be wise, read the past to make the future. Do not pollute nature, do not destroy it, avoid wars; otherwise, you shall lose the paradise you are living on,'" he said.

Haydar grew up in the Bekaa Valley. He remembered that when he was a young boy he bought candy from British soldiers stationed in the area during the last days of the Ottoman Empire. He describes his homeland as "a dot on the world map" but says it is mentioned in the Bible, a place "where beauty and dreams meet in poetry."



© Courtesy: Jawdat Haydar, 101 Selected Poems
"The skies of Switzerland are clear and blue / The old German castles are pretty, too / France is charming and England not less / But there's no place like dear old Texas."
A poem in the young, a voice that lives
— Jawdat Haydar

In a 2003 interview with *The Daily Star*, Haydar said he got the opportunity to come to the United States and study thanks to a chance encounter at a movie theater in Lyon, France. He assisted a woman who had dropped her handkerchief. She was the wife of the US consul to France. Two weeks later, Haydar was on a boat to the United States and then took a three-day train ride from New York City to Texas. He said to save money, he only ate breakfast cereal on the train.

Haydar said the North Texas campus still holds a warm place in his heart.

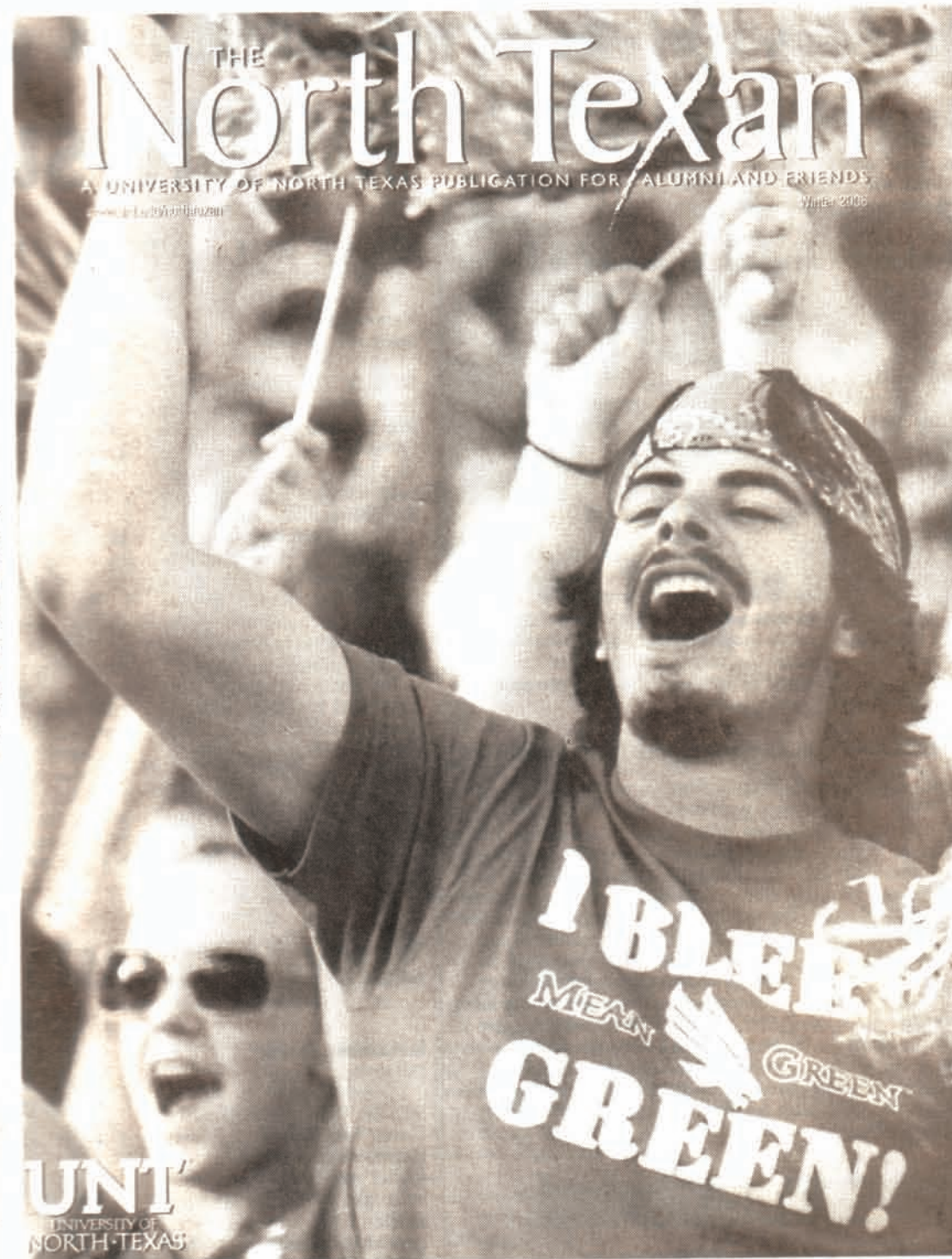
"My years at North Texas are among my cherished days and moments. After all these years I consider it home. "I'll never forget the man in the registrar's office who was generous enough to lend me some money to start my life in the new world and, more importantly, to help me achieve my dream. The last time I was on my campus was when I graduated in 1927-28."

After graduation, Haydar became the principal of a school in Aley, and later in Nablus, on the West Bank. For 25 years, Haydar then worked for the Iraq Petroleum Company as a recruitment executive based in Lebanon. He retired from the company in 1960, worked in the plastics industry and then went into farming. He also ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the Lebanese Parliament.

Haydar is survived by six daughters, 17 grandchildren and 25 great-grandchildren, some of whom live in Europe and the United States. Until the end he would get up early in the morning to write his poems out by hand, and his daughters would type them into a computer. Haydar and his poetry have been honored with the Lebanese Order of the Cedars, the Gold Medal of Lebanese Merit and the Medal La Croix de Grand Officier of France. Haydar has also been honored with other medals, including one from Pope John XXIII for humanitarian work.

He said his philosophy of life was simple and easy: "My secret for long life is always being thankful to God and enjoying every second of it. Life is a gift. Be happy when you can."

Rafael McDonnell wrote this article for the *The North Texan*, where it originally appeared. It is reprinted with permission.



The issue of *The North Texan* in which this article appeared illustrates a current student's enthusiasm for the university, something Haydar carried with him for decades.