The Call of Kansas

Seized here with beauty, and the sensuous-sweet perfume
Borne in from a thousand gardens and orchards of orange bloom:
A wed by the silent mountains, stunned by the breakers' roar—
The restless ocean pounding and tugging away at the shore—
I lie on the warm sand beach and hear, above the cry of the sea,
The voice of the prairie, calling, calling me.

Sweeter to me than the salt sea spray, the fragrance of summer rains;
Nearer my heart than these mighty hills are the windswept Kansas plains:
Dearest the sight of a shy, wild rose by the roadside's dusty way
Than all the splendor of poppy-delds, ablaze in the sun of May;
Gay as the bold poinsettia is, and the burden of pepper trees,
The sunflower, tawny and gold and brown, is richer, to me, than these.
And rising ever above the song of the hourse, insistent sea,
The voice of the prairie, calling, calling me.

Kansas, beloved Mother, today in an alien land,
Yours is the name I have idly traced with a bit of wood in the sand.
The name that, sprung from a scornful lip, will make my hot blood start:
The name that is graven, hard and deep, on the core of my loyal heart.
O higher, cleaner and stronger yet, than the boom of the savage sea,
The voice of the prairie, calling, calling me.

Postcard presentation of Esther Clark’s popular 1907 poem, courtesy of M.H. Hoeflich.
“The Call of Kansas” Controversy after One Hundred Years

by M. H. Hoeflich

Normally, when one thinks of Kansas, one does not think of literary battles that attract national attention. When one thinks of Kansas poets, one tends to think of Eugene Ware, “Ironquill,” the lawyer-poet of southeast Kansas whose poems became the mainstay of Kansas poetry textbooks. And yet a century ago a literary controversy began in Kansas that shocked the state’s educational and journalistic communities. It became a cause célèbre throughout the nation and brought Kansas to the front pages of major national daily newspapers. The controversy did not involve a well-known figure such as Ironquill, but it did include a host of important Kansas figures and institutions, including a naïve small-town poet; a well-known southeast Kansas lawyer’s wife with literary ambitions the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) and its renowned and respected secretary, William E. Connelley; two Kansas District Court judges; numerous lawyers; the Kansas Authors Club; and the editors of several prominent Kansas newspapers, including William Allen White. At the heart of the controversy was a short poem that had, in the seven years since its first publication, become the favorite of Kansans across the state and nation. The controversy over the authorship of “The Call of Kansas” highlighted how much literature and poetry, in particular, meant to the small, sparsely populated state. At a time when New York and the coastal states were working hard to establish themselves as literary and publishing centers of the world, Kansas and Kansans were battling over a short poem that had first been brought to light in a small-town newspaper.

Today very few Kansans, let alone Americans in general, have ever heard of the poem “The Call of Kansas” or the author, Esther Clark. Clark was one of those authors who were known in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as “newspaper poets.” In this period, poetry was both a national obsession and a pastime that anyone could take up as a hobby. This was the period in which every town of any size had multiple newspapers competing with

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1. On Eugene Ware, his poetry, and his professional career, see Brian Moline and M. H. Hoeflich, “Some Kansas Lawyer-Poets,” University of Kansas Law Review 55, no. 4 (2006–2007), 971–84.
each other both for readers and for content. In most towns the amount of “hard” news was nowhere near enough to fill the standard four to eight pages each paper churned out on a daily basis. Thus newspaper editors were always on the lookout for material that they could publish and that their readers would enjoy. Poems both by the national great poets such as Longfellow, Bryant, and Field and by regional poets such as Ironquill were printed and reprinted in newspapers across the nation. But there simply were not enough poems by these stars in the poetic firmament to satisfy the needs of the thousands of newspapers published each day in the United States. As a result, ordinary people, such as Esther Clark, the author of “The Call of Kansas,” would often compose poems to express their feelings and send them off to local newspapers. The newspapers loved to receive such poems because they both filled column space and helped to sell copies to the poet, the poet’s family, and all of the poet’s friends.

“The Call of Kansas” had by 1914, when the controversy over its authorship occurred, become well known across the state:

Surfeited here with beauty, and the sensuous-sweet perfume
Borne in from a thousand gardens and orchards of orange-bloom;
Awed by the silent mountains, stunned by the breakers’ roar—
The restless ocean pounding and tugging away at the shore,—
I lie on the warm sand beach and hear, above the cry of the sea,
The voice of the prairie calling,
Calling me.
Sweeter to me than the salt sea spray, the fragrance of summer rains;
Nearer my heart than these mighty hills are the wind-swept Kansas plains.
Dearer the sight of a shy, wild rose by the roadside’s dusty way,
Than all the splendor of poppy-fields, ablaze in the sun of May.
Gay as the bold poinsettia is, and the burden of pepper trees,
The sunflower, tawny and gold and brown, is richer to me than these.
And rising ever above the song of the hoarse, insistent sea,
The voice of the prairie calling,
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Kansas, beloved Mother, today in an alien land,
Yours is the name I have idly traced with a bit of wood in the sand.
The name that, flung from a scornful lip, will make the hot blood start;
The name that is graven, hard and deep, on the core of my loyal heart.
O higher, clearer, and stronger yet, than the boom of the savage sea,
The voice of the prairie calling,
Calling me.3

3. An easily available version of the poem is to be found in Esther Clark Hill, The Call of Kansas and Later Verse (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, n.d.).

Esther Clark’s narrative of how she wrote “The Call of Kansas” was straightforward and detailed when she presented it in the midst of the controversy initiated by T. J and Emma Karr’s claims.4 In May 1907 Clark was working as a proofreader in Los Angeles, California. She had recently graduated from the University of Kansas, where she had studied journalism. According to Clark, one night she suffered “the most severe attack of homesickness” that she “had ever experienced.” It was during this sleepless night that the line “the voice of the prairie calling me” came to her. Within a few days she had finished the poem in its entirety. Soon thereafter she sent it to the editor of the Lawrence Daily Journal, John L. Brady, because she had interned there while a student at the university. Brady liked the poem, and it was published in the Journal on May 14, 1907. The title for the poem was not Clark’s but Brady’s, and it stuck. Within days the poem’s fame spread. In modern terms, it “went viral” across Kansas.5 Before Clark returned to her home in Chanute, Kansas, at the end of May 1907, Brady had already forwarded three fan letters to her in California, including one from William Allen White, the distinguished editor of the Emporia Gazette. Week after week, month after month, the letters continued. Esther


5. This narrative comes from Esther Clark’s affidavit published in Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 11–19.
Clark’s brief poem had captured the hearts of Kansans everywhere. The dozens of admiring letters from across Kansas and, eventually, the nation sent to Clark after the first publication of the poem, letters that now reside in the archives at the KSHS and the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, attest to the immediate and widespread attention her poem garnered within a matter of months.6

The popularity of the poem encouraged Clark to publish it separately. Her first effort in this direction was the publication of the poem in “a folder with a sunflower on the front.” Then she had a postcard printed with her portrait “set in the heart of a sunflower” on one side and the poem on the other. This proved quite popular, and the Fred Harvey Company purchased 700 cards, presumably to sell as souvenirs at their rail-side restaurants.7 In 1910 Clark published the poem as the centerpiece of a small book titled The Call of Kansas and Other Verses.8 The poem was also included in collections published by Crane and Company, a publishing house in Topeka known for its schoolbooks. More books and pamphlets including the poem followed one after the other. The poem was even printed on the place cards set out at the 1909 banquet of the Kansas Day Club in Chicago. The poem’s fame—and Clark’s with it—was assured within a very short time. But it is important to this discussion of the poem’s authorship to note that the records do not indicate that Clark became wealthy as a result of her poem’s wide success.7 Indeed, it would appear that any financial reward that she achieved was quite modest.

For seven years Clark enjoyed the fame that her poem had provided her without any disturbance or challenge. But in May 1914 the secretary of the KSHS, William Connelley, contacted Clark and informed her that a lawyer from Girard, Kansas, T. J. Karr, had sent him a letter claiming that Esther Clark was not the author of “The Call of Kansas.”10 In the letter, Karr claimed that his wife, Emma Clark Karr, was the true author and that Esther Clark had plagiarized the poem. The reasons for the Karrs’ challenge to Clark’s authorship remain obscure to this day. Perhaps, naively, they believed that the poem was actually providing Clark with a growing fortune. Perhaps, for personal reasons, Emma Karr led her husband to believe that she was the true author of “The Call of Kansas” and he simply felt that it was his obligation as her husband to vindicate her authorial rights. Karr was a poet, but, at least in the judgment of those who evaluated her poems and compared them to “The Call of Kansas,” there was little reason to think that she was capable of writing “The Call of Kansas” since all of her other poetry was greatly inferior to it in quality.11 Whatever the Karrs’ reasons for initiating the controversy, they will remain hidden forever.

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6. These letters are to be found in the Esther Clark Hill Collections at the Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence, and the Esther Clark Hill Collection, State Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka (hereafter Hill Collection, KSHS).
7. Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 16 (see illustration).
8. Esther Mary Clark, The Call of Kansas and Other Verses (Lawrence, KS: Chas. C. Seevir, Windmill Press, 1910); subsequently published as Hill, The Call of Kansas and Later Verses.
9. See the letter of G. E. Cory, a lawyer in Fort Scott, to S. W. Brewster, December 2, 1914, in the Hill Collection, KSHS, in which Cory noted that Emma Clark only “received modest emoluments” from writing “The Call of Kansas.”
10. Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 24. The original of Karr’s letter is to be found in the Hill Collection, KSHS.
11. See Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 40–44, for a comparison of Emma Clark Karr’s poetry to that of “The Call of Kansas.”
several business pursuits, none of them successful. By the 1890s, however, his true passion, history, took over, and he began to write and publish a number of historical studies on the history of Kansas, Nebraska, and Kentucky, an activity he would carry on until his death in 1930. His historical writing quickly brought him a reputation as a fine regional historian, a reputation that led to his being appointed the secretary of the KSHS in 1914. Connelley followed two distinguished predecessors, Franklin G. Adams and George W. Martin, in the secretary’s position. At the time that he took over, the society was in a strong position. In 1905 the Kansas Legislature had enacted that the KSHS would house the state archives, and in 1914 the society moved into a new home that had been specially built for it. As the secretary of the society, Connelley was, in effect, the historian of Kansas and principal keeper of its archives and therefore its literary heritage. The society was also virtually unique among American state historical societies in that it had the most extensive collection of Kansas newspapers anywhere in the world, a direct result of the fact that it had been founded in 1875 by Kansas newspaper editors and that its earliest collecting imperative had been Kansas newspapers. Indeed, one of Connelley’s most important publications was an annotated list of all of the Kansas newspapers in the KSHS’s collections. That list established the reputation of the society as the principal repository of Kansas history and of its executive director as the keeper of that collection.

Karr’s initial correspondence with Connelley was apparently prompted by the society’s newspaper holdings and Connelley’s expertise in that collection. Karr claimed that his wife, Emma Clark Karr, had written “The Call of Kansas” while she was on a trip to Los Angeles, California, in July 1899 and that she had sent them (poems including “The Call of Kansas”) as part of a letter to her mother, who lived in the city of Hutchinson, Kansas. Her mother had handed them to a friend, and through that channel the poems had found their way into print.

According to Karr, two people had seen his wife’s original manuscript, and one of them “was sure that

14. William E. Connelley, A History of Kansas Newspapers (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1916). Even before this publication, the role of the KSHS as the official repository of “last resort” for Kansas newspapers was well known and of significance to “The Call of Kansas” controversy; see Browster, Esther M. Clark, 31.
15. T. J. Karr to W. E. Connelley and Connelley to Karr, May 15, 1914, through August 31, 1914, Hill Collection, KSHS; see also Browster, Esther M. Clark, 22–27.
it had been printed in the Hutchinson Gazette in July or August, 1899. Of course, if Karr's claim was true, then Emma Karr's publication of the poem predated that of Esther Clark by more than seven years, and Esther Clark's publication of the poem in 1907 was an act of blatant plagiarism. Since the society had the most extensive collection of Kansas newspapers then extant, presumably it would have been simple for Connelley to check through the July and August 1899 issues of the Hutchinson Gazette, find the poem printed therein, and vindicate Emma Clark Karr's claims against Esther Clark. Karr also mentioned in his initial correspondence with Connelley that his wife "had more proof of authorship than Miss Clark," including an unimpeachable witness. 16

Connelley could have just refused Karr's request. One would not normally expect the director of the state historical society to personally search the collections. Indeed, Connelley did suggest that Karr come to Topeka and search the newspaper files himself, but Karr demurred for reasons unknown. At this point Connelley decided that he would do the search for Karr, and in so doing, he set the stage for the society to become embroiled in what would become one of the greatest and most heated literary controversies in Kansas history. Why Connelley decided to become involved is a mystery. It is likely that he believed that the matter was of little importance and that doing such a small service for a fellow Kansan and prominent lawyer could do no harm nor take a great deal of time. How wrong he was!

Connelley's initial search of the newspaper archives proved frustrating. The society's holdings of Hutchinson newspaper files for the period identified by Karr as likely to contain his wife's poem were incomplete, according to Connelley. 17 Having no success in his search in the historical society's archives, Connelley contacted "one of the editors of the Hutchinson Gazette," Katherine Lasley, and requested that she check in the newspaper's own archives. This search, too, failed. Lasley swore in an affidavit that she had examined her newspapers' files, which were complete, and that there was "no poem or poems written by Miss Emma Clark" printed in any issue of the Gazette or its predecessor, the Weekly Bee. 18 The absence of any sign of the poem in the Hutchinson Gazette did not end the growing controversy. Instead, during the next few months, through the fall of 1914, both sides continued to attempt to bolster their cases. Supporters of Esther Clark systematically examined other newspapers that might have printed Emma Clark Karr's alleged work at the time that T. J. Karr claimed it had been printed. They found nothing.

Since no copy of the poem attributed to Emma Clark Karr could be found in a Kansas newspaper or any appearance of the poem published prior to Esther Clark's

17. W. E. Connelley to T. J. Karr, August 31, 1914. The files might have been incomplete in 1914, but the 1899 weekly Hutchinson Gazette appears complete today; in fact, the "Official Organ of the People's Party of Reno County" has been digitized and is available online through Chronicling America at http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85030687/issues/1899.
18. Affidavit of Katherine Lasley, October 24, 1914, Hill Collection, KSHS; see also Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 8, 30.
in the *Lawrence Journal* in 1907, the primary evidence for Karr’s authorship was the testimony of Insley L. Dayhoff. According to Dayhoff, who served as Kansas state superintendent of public instruction from 1903 to 1907, he had seen the manuscript of “The Call of Kansas” written, according to him, by Karr in 1899, years before it had been published in the *Lawrence Journal*. In fact, Dayhoff claimed that he had quoted the poem in several speeches he had given at the time. In the absence of any published evidence of Karr’s authorship, public attention turned to Dayhoff’s claims, and these came under intense scrutiny.\(^\text{19}\)

It soon became clear that there were significant problems with Dayhoff’s testimony.

The first and greatest problem was Karr’s refusal to reveal the sworn affidavit that he claimed to possess. According to Karr, this document laid out Dayhoff’s evidence in clear and convincing terms, but he refused to turn over a copy to Connelley and the KSHS.\(^\text{20}\) In response to Karr’s claim that he had sworn testimony, Connelley sent a request both to Esther Clark and to T. J. Karr that they turn over any documentation they might have to support their claims. Clark swore out a detailed affidavit outlining her account of authoring the poem and delivered it with accompanying documentation to Connelley almost immediately. Karr, however, refused to turn over anything, not even the Dayhoff affidavit supporting his wife’s claim to authorship. Further, to the fury of Connelley and Clark’s supporters, the *Girard Press*, Karr’s hometown newspaper, published what it claimed was Dayhoff’s affidavit, but it was an incomplete, paraphrased version that lacked the authentication provisions (that is, a signed perjury oath and the notary’s seal affixed to the end of an affidavit). The appearance of this truncated affidavit without authentication was a clear escalation of the battle over the authorship of “The Call of Kansas.” It was Karr who had involved Connelley and the historical society in the first place. It was Karr who had insisted that the secretary search the society’s archives rather than do the search himself. Up to this point Connelley had refrained from taking sides and had done all he could to serve as an impartial arbiter. But now the Karrs had chosen to sidestep Connelley’s efforts and, instead of providing him with a copy of a sworn affidavit of key testimony that might have resolved the dispute, taken the conflict to the press. We can easily imagine that the Karrs’ actions at this point likely enraged Connelley, who with good reason probably believed that his integrity and the integrity of the KSHS were being impugned. The Karrs’ lack of cooperation in the investigation they had initiated could be taken to mean that they no longer believed that Connelley and the society were acting fairly.\(^\text{21}\)

Although Dayhoff claimed to have seen and heard a version of “The Call of Kansas” attributed to Emma Clark Karr in 1899 and to have quoted it in speeches he gave soon thereafter, no independent evidence of these claims, documentary or otherwise, could be found, and none was ever produced by the Karrs or their supporters.\(^\text{22}\)

More damning, perhaps, was Dayhoff’s connection to the Karrs and his personal reputation. Prior to his election to state office in 1902, Dayhoff had served as the elected superintendent of public instruction for Reno County. It was as superintendent that he claimed to have met Emma Clark, who was then teaching in south Hutchinson.\(^\text{23}\)

According to Dayhoff and the Karrs, Emma had joined a party led by County Superintendent Dayhoff that had traveled to Los Angeles in the summer of 1899. It was during this trip that Emma Clark claimed to have shown a manuscript copy of “The Call of Kansas” to Dayhoff. Emma Clark and her husband, T. J. Karr, had been friends of Dayhoff since that 1899 trip. Thus, Dayhoff was hardly an objective witness.

In addition to the long-standing friendship between Dayhoff and the Karrs pointed to by Esther Clark’s supporters as evidence of Dayhoff’s weakness as a witness, there was also the matter of Dayhoff’s public reputation. It was, to put it mildly, less than stellar. In 1908 state superintendent of public instruction Dayhoff had been sued in Shawnee County District Court for defamation by Ella S. Burton, a prominent resident of Topeka. The jury had found against Dayhoff and required him to pay Burton the sum of $3,000, a large amount in 1908.\(^\text{24}\)

Further, the *Hutchinson Gazette* had published an article


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 26; and see W. E. Connelley to T. J. Karr, August 31, 1914, Hill Collection, KSHS.


\(^{22}\) See letters of W. E. Connelley to T. J. Karr, Hill Collection, KSHS, June 11, 1914, and August 31, 1914, reporting that nothing relating to “The Call of Kansas” could be found in the Dayhoff papers at the Kansas State Historical Society.


on September 30, 1914, not only refuting Karr’s claim that the newspaper had printed a version of the “The Call of Kansas” by Emma Clark but also casting Dayhoff’s honesty into question: “What the Gazette is concerned about is the testimony of a certain former citizen of Hutchinson who has arisen from his political grave, discarded his shroud and burst into this controversy. The individual referred to is Inley L. Dayhoff, one-time County Superintendent of Reno County and later State Superintendent of Kansas, but now happily resident in another state. . . . The Gazette knows Dayhoff and in common with other Hutchinson acquaintances of his marvels that anything he might say should be considered as evidence.” 25 The suggestion that Dayhoff was known for dishonesty was particularly significant in light of the facts that the Karrs were never willing to turn over the sworn affidavit they claimed Dayhoff had made and that the so-called extracts from this deposition that had appeared in the Girard Press did not include any of the authentication language that would have been present in a sworn affidavit. 26 This absence of proof that Dayhoff’s testimony had been given under oath was of immense importance. On the one hand, had he given false testimony under oath, Dayhoff would have been liable to prosecution for perjury. On the other hand, without having been under oath, Dayhoff could have said anything without fear of prosecution. Even a known liar would be reluctant to give false testimony under oath. Thus, the implication to be drawn was that Dayhoff and the Karrs likely knew that the testimony was false.

By the late fall of 1914, the controversy had spread across Kansas and gained national attention. Connelley’s investigation seemed to be at a critical juncture. Without cooperation by the Karrs, there was little hope that he would be able to put an end to the dispute that was now being fought in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Unwilling to accept this state of affairs, Connelley decided to expand his investigation into what may be called a “quasi-judicial” process. He solicited “opinions” from various people around the state, including judges. At the same time, the Kansas Authors Club appointed a formal committee of inquiry into the disputed authorship. 27 What had seemed at first to be a minor dispute that could be quickly and easily resolved had become a major scandal. Some of the most celebrated Kansas literary personalities, including William Allen White and “Uncle” Walt Mason, weighed in. Newspapers around the state and the nation ran articles about the controversy. A proponent of Esther Clark’s authorship, W. S. Brewster, a Topeka attorney, decided to gather all of the evidence in her favor, including her sworn affidavit and accompanying documents, and publish these in a book to ensure that they were widely available. 28 The Karrs, on the other hand, adopted a very different strategy. They continued to refuse to publish any documents themselves or produce any further proof of their claim.

On October 29, 1914, the Norton Champion published an article that infuriated Secretary Connelley and other supporters of Esther Clark’s authorship. This article made a number of claims that were, according to Connelley, pure fiction. First, it impugned Connelley’s neutrality and integrity by stating that Esther Clark had worked for him at the historical society and suggesting that he was therefore biased in his support of her claims. It also stated that Connelley had certified that the society’s files of the Hutchinson Gazette were complete. 29 Why did the Norton Champion publish this article attacking Connelley? The answer is obvious. By the end of October 1914 the tide had turned strongly against the Karrs’ claims. Further, Secretary Connelley had finally come to be firmly in the Esther Clark camp based on the Karrs’ refusal to cooperate in the investigation they had asked him to initiate, their refusal to produce Dayhoff’s sworn affidavit (if it actually existed), and the Karrs’ involvement in the publication of the so-called extracts from Dayhoff’s affidavit in the Girard Press. One might guess that the Norton Champion article had been influenced, if not placed, by the Karrs and their supporters and that it reflected a typical lawyer’s tactic of impeaching the integrity of a key witness or impugning the neutrality of a judge. However, this tactic clearly backfired because the challenges made in the article to Secretary Connelley’s neutrality were easily disproved and put Connelley even more firmly in Esther Clark’s camp. It also showed that the Karr camp was capable of publishing outright lies.

Secretary Connelley early on made the fascinating and unusual decision to begin quasi-judicial proceedings to

25. Hutchinson Gazette, September 30, 1914; Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 27.
26. See Brewster, Esther M. Clark, 24–26, on this legal defect.
27. See W. E. Connelley to Esther Clark, December 3, 1914, and S. F. Woolard to Esther Clark, December 14, 1914, Hill Collection, KSHS; Articles in Kansas City Star, December 18, 1914 and January 7, 1915, Hill Collection, KSHS.
29. See the letter of W. E. Connelley printed in the Norton Champion, November 18, 1914, copy in Hill Collection, KSHS.
The fact that the Karrs had not made any claim of Emma Karr’s authorship for seven years after “The Call of Kansas” first appeared in print created an almost unrebutable presumption that she was not the true author. Additionally, a careful comparison of examples of Esther Clark’s other poetry, as well as Emma Karr’s verse, with “The Call of Kansas” found Karr’s poetry far inferior to Clark’s The Call to Kansas and Later Verse was published in the early 1920s.

determine the validity of the Karrs’ claims. In addition to the evidence of the claims against Esther Clark and her submission of a sworn affidavit to the KSHS, Connelley strongly supported the “brief” in her favor by Brewster, which, as noted earlier, was published in book form in November 1914.30 The brief contained the text of Esther Clark’s affidavit; the text of a letter from J. L. Brady, the editor of the Lawrence Journal, who had first published the poem and given it the title “The Call of Kansas”;

the text of a number of supporting letters from Kansas literary figures, including William A. White and Eugene Ware; and an argument for Esther Clark’s authorship by Brewster. This publication by a well-known lawyer added further to the public impression that the controversy was now in a “judicial” phase.

In the course of his argument, Brewster offered an explanation of the role of the Historical Society in the dispute: “If this case were one in Court the burden of proof would rest wholly upon Mrs. Karr, but her allegations, as set forth in certain newspapers, are so void of truth, and so reprehensible, that Miss Clark cannot be blamed for sending to the Historical Society volumes of the most convincing proof of her authorship immediately following the demand of the Secretary of the Historical Society that both parties send in their proofs of authorship at once.”31 Of course, Brewster’s statement did not explain why the society had been willing to become embroiled in the dispute to the extent it did. The explanation for this may lie partially in Connelley’s reaction to what he considered to be untrue and defamatory statements made about him in the Norton Champion articles.

Another potential explanation of the historical society’s extensive involvement in the dispute may well have been Connelley’s perception that the poem had, in a short time, become a national literary icon forever to be associated with Kansas. Thus, any scandal involving its authorship would reflect badly on the state as a whole. The historical society was very much the repository of Kansas history, the archive of Kansas newspapers and books. It was natural for its secretary to be concerned about the state’s reputation as affected by its printed productions. Confronted with the possibility of a scandal about the poem and having been drawn into the dispute by the Karrs, Connelley may well have decided that he had no choice but to see the dispute ended one way or another. Indeed, as noted earlier, the Kansas Authors Club, the primary professional association of Kansas authors, also appointed a committee to investigate the disputed facts for much the same reasons. In his brief, Brewster wrote, “The State of Kansas has had, has now and, likely, always will have, famous authors in both prose and poetry, but never more than one whose poetic soul could give so full expression to the deep, inspirational and loyal sentiment of the true Kansan as in ‘The Call of Kansas’; and this State has only one Esther M. Clark.”32

30. W. E. Connelley to Esther Clark, letter dated December 3, 1914, Hill Collection, KSHS.
32. Ibid., 36.
In his brief, Brewster rested his argument for Clark’s authorship on three central points. First, he argued that the fact that the Karrs had not made any claim of Emma Karr’s authorship for seven years after “The Call of Kansas” first appeared in print created an almost unrebuttable presumption that she was not the true author. This argument is related to the legal doctrines of laches and statutes of limitation, doctrines designed to prevent the risk of perpetual litigation over claims against an individual or his property. Second, Brewster compared examples of Esther Clark’s other poetry and examples of Emma Karr’s poetry with “The Call of Kansas” and found Karr’s poetry to be far inferior both to “The Call of Kansas” and to Clark’s other poems. Stylistically, Brewster argued, there could be little support for attributing the poem to Karr. Finally, Brewster asked why the Karrs had refused to offer documentary proof of their claim and why they had failed to provide the historical society with the sworn affidavit in which Insley Dayhoff supposedly swore under oath that he had personally seen the poem before its 1907 publication and attribution to Esther Clark, particularly since Esther Clark had provided a sworn affidavit putting forth her claim of authorship. On these grounds, Brewster concluded that the “jury” in this case, that is, the public, should conclude that Esther Clark was the true and sole author of “The Call of Kansas” and that Emma Clark Karr’s claim of authorship was false. Not surprisingly, the committee organized to look into the matter by the Kansas Authors Club came to precisely the same conclusion.

Brewster, as a practicing lawyer, was also troubled by T. J. Karr’s role in the dispute. “The legal profession,” he wrote, “always has been disgraced at times by some member of the fraternity, who, disregarding truth, attempts to make a case where only possible coincidences exist, putting all effort on the framing of falsehoods for material purposes, so as to present the most plausibly possible. These dishonorable frauds eventually become well known to their legal associates and are finally dropped out forever by the fraternity.”

Brewster’s brief is followed in his published volume by the opinions of two Kansas judges on the dispute. The first judge, James W. Finley, was, in 1914, a judge in the Seventh Judicial District of Kansas in Chanute, Wilson County, Esther Clark’s home. The second judge was Leander Stillwell, a retired Seventh District judge from Erie, Neosho County. Both judges, in what may only be termed “quasi-judicial” opinions, found firmly in favor of Esther Clark’s authorship. Judge Finley concluded his closely reasoned opinion forcefully:

Who wrote “The Call of Kansas”? Let us examine the question by a process of elimination. It was written by Esther M. Clark or by Emma Clark Karr. A great many poems have been written by Miss Clark, some of them equal to “The Call of Kansas” so far as rhythm, imagery, beauty, and that indefinable something that marks the difference between rhyme and poetry are concerned. Mrs. Karr has written some verse, but not a single line inspired at the Muses’ flame. It follows that her claim to the authorship of “The Call of Kansas” must be regarded as spurious.

Judge Stillwell was equally definite in his opinion: “All fair minded and disinterested people, in the light of the undisputed facts, will be constrained to regard this literary claim of Mrs. Karr’s as unreasonable and repugnant.” Anyone who read Brewster’s brief and the two opinions by Kansas judges with an open mind would have decided that the “case” should be decided in favor of Esther Clark.

The publication of Brewster’s volume of documentation in the case and the rendering of a decision in Esther Clark’s favor by the Kansas Authors Club seem to have put the controversy to rest at last. Public opinion was almost exclusively on Clark’s side. Indeed, once the active dispute ended, there was literally no further debate about her authorship. T. J. and Emma Clark Karr virtually disappeared from public view, as did Insley Dayhoff. Free at last of any taint of wrongdoing, Esther Clark filed for and received copyright for “The Call of Kansas” in 1916. This act is also somewhat puzzling since the Lawrence Journal had already copyrighted the poem in 1910. In

33. Ibid., 33–35, 40–49.
34. Ibid., 46.
35. See the Chanute Daily Tribune, August 31, 1907, Hill Collection, KSHS, for notice of Judge Finley’s appointment to the bench; for Judge Stillwell, see State of Kansas, Official Directory, July 1, 1891, http://genealogytrails.com/kan/stks1891jud.html, which lists him as a judge in Erie, Neosho County, Kansas, part of the Seventh Judicial District. Interestingly, both judges sat in the same judicial district where Esther Clark’s hometown, Chanute, was located. See also “Official Roster of Kansas, 1854–1925,” Kansas Historical Collections, 1923–1925 16 (1925): 667.
37. Ibid., 56.
Esther Clark Hill’s greatest poem, and the subject of considerable controversy, “The Call of Kansas,” was put to music by several composers and published three times. After her husband’s death, she continued writing, worked briefly for the KSHS, and published two articles on early Baptist missions in the Kansas Historical Quarterly. Hill (second from the right) is pictured here with a group of friends, likely at the home of Mrs. Grubbs.

1916 Crane and Company, Kansas’s premier literary and schoolbook publisher, brought out an edition of the “The Call of Kansas.” Publication of the poem by Crane and Company under Esther Clark’s name may be seen as the final public declaration that the dispute was over. Clark emerged from the conflict to have a long career, continuing to write and publish poetry as well as articles on Kansas history. Her greatest poem, and the subject of this controversy, “The Call of Kansas,” was put to music by several composers and published three times.

Indeed, the Kansas Authors Club in 1930 proposed to the legislature that it officially adopt “The Call of Kansas,” as set to music by C. S. Skilton, as the Kansas state song. Alas, the legislature declined.

Esther Clark also found personal happiness, albeit briefly, when she married journalist Joseph Edmund Hill in 1918. He died just one year later, but she went on to write and publish several pieces for the KSHS, where she worked briefly. In spite of the popularity of “The Call of Kansas” and her other poetry, Esther Clark Hill never

became wealthy. Indeed, in 1931 the Kansas Women’s Club gave her a check for $400 to prevent her from losing her home in Chanute. A year later, at age fifty-five, Esther Clark Hill died in Topeka.

The controversy over the authorship after a century still elicits many unanswered questions. Why did T. J and Emma Clark Karr challenge Esther Clark’s authorship in the first place? Were they under the mistaken belief that ownership of the poem would lead to wealth? Why did Esther Clark testify under oath in her affidavit that she had not copyrighted the poem, and why, apparently, did any of the parties to the controversy not know that the poem had been copyrighted by the Lawrence Journal in 1910, a fact in itself that could have ended the dispute? Again, why was Esther Clark’s 1916 application for copyright of the poem under her name accepted by the U.S. Copyright Office when the poem had, in fact, already been copyrighted six years earlier?

The controversy that first engaged the literary community in Kansas and the whole nation in 1914 and then spread to the general public nationwide has, with the passage of time, almost completely faded from the public memory. Yet it is worthwhile for us to be reminded of it, for the controversy, like the poem itself, will forever be a fascinating part of Kansas literary and legal history. Although Esther Clark Hill has been dead for eighty-five years, and the controversy over her authorship has been forgotten for even longer, the poem at the center of it all, “The Call of Kansas,” will never die.


“The Call of Kansas” Controversy