Rhyme and Reason

By Sara Crawford-Young, Tullahoma, Tennessee

To finish poetic proposal, Dad got help from a rare acquaintance.

THE SUMMER of 1942 was the time of my parents' courtship. They swam in Lake Michigan and fished the clear, clean lakes of Berrien County, Michigan.

My mother, then Elizabeth Lewis, was a beauty of 17, and my father, Fred Marrs, was a handsome 23.

Dad, whom everyone called Bill, worked for the Indiana and Michigan Electric Company and read electric meters throughout the county. His route took him to the shores of Lake Michigan and the homes and cottages built there by many prominent people. Among them was Al Capone, who had a gated residence.

One day, as Dad was walking along the shoreline near the town of Harbert, he met a man who was rather stooped and quietly intense. The man recognized my father as the meter reader, and they stopped to chat.

While conversing, the man asked Dad if he had a girl.

"Of course," Dad said.

"Bring her to the house sometime," the man said. "Do you play tennis?"

Dad said that tennis was one of his favorite pastimes, and they set a day when he and his girl would visit.

On the appointed day, the couple went to the house, situated in the

dunes of the Lake Michigan shoreline. Although no one was home, they played tennis all afternoon. They left a note thanking the absent host for his hospitality.

Later the same month, Dad was covering his route and again encountered the man, who asked how the tennis went and if he and his girl enjoyed themselves. Dad said they did and thanked the man again.

“Are you going to marry that girl?” the man asked.

“Yes, I am,” Dad said. “I haven’t proposed yet, but I’m going to soon. I’ve written her a poem, but can’t seem to finish it.”

The man asked to see it, and Dad fished the folded paper out of his pocket and handed the poem to him.

“Give me a minute,” the man said. They sat down in the sand and the man penciled a few lines, then handed the paper back to my father. Dad took it and read it, said it was fine, thanked the man and left.

Many years later, after Dad died, Mother shared the story and the poem with the family. It turned out that the man who had finished the last six lines of my father’s proposal poem was noted poet Carl Sandburg.

After Mother died, in 2003, I found the original penciled poem in her private autograph book. It read:

What do I want for Christmas?
Last summer’s moon will do.
Stars that we’ve plucked together;
Maybe a kiss or two.
Rain on my cheek in autumn
When all the trees are bare

Brush of your lips against my cheek
Wind blowing through my hair
Tape for the hurt of broken rhymes
Pink lemonade with straws
Maybe another date
with you.
Is there a Santa Claus?