

Tippet, James Sterling ^[1]

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by Martha K. Tippet, 1996

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James Sterling Tippet, author and educator of English and Scottish ancestry, was born in Memphis, Mo., in the three-room house of his parents, Everett and Mary Montgomery Tippet. Both families were of pre-Revolutionary pioneer stock and pushed westward, settling in Missouri soon after it became a state. Young Tippet's grandfather Montgomery had bought 160 acres of farmland, and he remembered stories his grandmother told of first living in a sod house. When he was five, his father, a blacksmith, moved the family to a sixty-acre farm in [Scotland County](#) ^[2], where young Tippet's formal education began in a country school. He had already learned to read from pages of the *Memphis Reveille* pasted on the wood box in the kitchen. For the rest of his life there was usually a book in his hand or in his pocket.

Tippet loved the country and school and early decided that he wanted to be a teacher. This ambition was realized, when at seventeen, having graduated from the Memphis High School, he was hired to teach all the grades in a country school. From that beginning he progressed to high school teacher, principal, and/or superintendent in Lancaster, Huntsville, Fayette, and Kansas City. In summers he attended [The University of Missouri](#) ^[3], earning a B.S. degree in 1915.

From Kansas City he moved in 1918 to Nashville, Tenn., as principal of the Peabody Demonstration School. Four years later he went to the [Lincoln School of Teachers College](#) ^[4] in New York as teacher and special investigator. Of this experience he wrote: "That was a wonderful school. Teachers and children were painting, modeling, building, acting in plays, doing all sorts of interesting things in connection with their learning, so I did things, too; I began to write for children." Two of his early books, *The Singing Farmer* ^[5] (1927) and *I Live in a City* ^[6] (1927), appeared while he was in New York. He also edited *Curriculum Making in an Elementary School* ^[7], compiled by the Lincoln School staff and published by Ginn and Company. In 1928 he became assistant professor of education at the [University of Pittsburgh](#) ^[8], and from 1930 to 1932 he was dean of the faculty at the Avon School for Boys in Connecticut.

After a year of free-lance writing and lecturing he went as curriculum adviser to the Parker School District in Greenville, S.C. Here he edited *Schools for a Growing Democracy* ^[9], also published by Ginn. In 1939 he moved to Chapel Hill, where he had taught in the summer of 1932 and 1933. He bought four wooded acres from his neighbor and friend, Paul Green, and built the home he lived in the rest of his life.

Tippet had intended to give all his time to writing but was soon pressed into service teaching Saturday classes for teachers, extension and correspondence courses, and summer school classes. When North Carolina schools added the twelfth grade, he headed the committee that worked out the new program. His contribution to education was recognized by the Horace Mann League in 1972, when it added his name to the North Carolina Educational Hall of Fame. From 1939 until his death he was listed in [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[10] catalogue as visiting professor of education, a position that kept him in touch with the profession he loved and left time for the writing he wished to do.

A flexible schedule allowed him to indulge his love of gardening, where he wielded a wicked hoe. In one of his poems he asks: "Who should make a garden? He who loves the soil And outdoor toil. Who does not fear a calloused hand; Who cannot bear To let weeds stand Where plants should be. One like me Should make a garden." There was also time for writing both textbooks and stories and verses for children. His simple poems were widely used in readers, language books, music books, anthologies, and teachers' guides, and in 1973 Harper and Row brought out a selection of over fifty of "The Best Loved Poems of James S. Tippet" under the title *Crickety Cricket* ^[11].

He found Chapel Hill particularly congenial to his interests and once said he liked it because every year it renewed its youth. He died at his home and his ashes, as he had requested, were scattered in his woods.

In 1929 he married Martha Louise Kelly, who had taught with him at Peabody and in Lincoln School and who survived him. A registered [Democrat](#) ^[12] with liberal leanings, he was a member of the Presbyterian church. His other publications included *I Go A-Traveling* ^[13] (1929), *Busy Carpenters* (1929), *I Spend the Summer* ^[14] (1930), *Toys and Toymakers* ^[15] (1931), *A World to Know* (1933), *Henry and the Garden* (1936), *Stories About Henry* ^[16] (1936), *Shadow and the Stocking* ^[17] (1937), *Sniff* ^[18] (1937), *The Picnic* (1938), *Paths to Conservation* ^[19] (1939), *Henry and His Friends* ^[20] (1939), *Counting the Days* ^[21] (1940), *I Know Some Little Animals* ^[22] (1941), *Christmas Magic* ^[23] (1942), *Here and There with Henry* (1944), *Tools for Andy* ^[24] (1951), *Abraham Lincoln* ^[25] (1951), *Jesus Lights the Sabbath Lamp* ^[26] (1953), and *Search for Sammie* (1954).

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