

## **First U.S. Poet Laureate, Robert Penn Warren, and Todd County Roots**

Robert Penn Warren, born in Guthrie, Ky., was an American poet, novelist and literary critic who is the only person to have won the Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction (for “All the King’s Men” in 1946) and poetry (in 1958 and 1979) and was also the first U.S. Poet Laureate (1986-1988).

Penn Warren’s early life in Kentucky visibly influenced his work, exemplified in an early novel “Night Riders,” which focused on the early 20th century Kentucky tobacco war and the novella “Circus in the Attic” which drew character attributes from individuals in his Kentucky past, most notably Christian County native John Wesley Venable Jr.



While his views on social constructs changed over the course of his lifetime, especially focusing on African American civil rights, Penn Warren was known for his societal criticism. One notable piece, “Who Speaks for the Negro,” describes interviews he conducted with civil rights leaders, including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the recordings of which were donated to a Kentucky institution.

Oral history interviews with and about Robert Penn Warren can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.

“Pass the Word” is a discovery tool for oral histories throughout the state of Kentucky. To learn more about this topic, visit <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.