

INTRODUCTION

If I am ever a castaway on a desert island, I'm going to be sure have with me the brand new *Oxford English Dictionary* that I just bought myself. When he spoke at the inauguration of the *OED*, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin of Great Britain said that was what he would do. The *OED* is a fascinating source for all kinds of information, but I went to it recently for a definition of "adventure." The earliest definition listed is, "That which come to us or happens without design," not the "perilous or hazardous enterprise" that most people associate with the word. I think that earlier definition is what Roy Bedichek had in mind when he wrote *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist*, the book from which I stole my title. Bedichek, who began his book at seventy, had spent much of his life wandering the state of Texas and looking at the natural wonders and natural commonplaces, taking what came to him without design. The design came later, when he sat down at Walter Prescott Webb's Friday Mountain Ranch to order his notes and compose his adventures, but his adventures were not hazardous unless he happened to step on a rattlesnake or fall from a cliff.

Nor are my adventures hazardous. Many were conducted from an easy chair with a book in hand, some from wandering the state and observing human nature, some from research and study, and many from remembering the past and projecting the future in my mind. Most of my adventures were without design—at least at the start. As time passed, I became absorbed in the study of Texas literature, and some of the essays here are attempts to make sense of what I read and talked with others about. The original plan of this book was to dust off some old essays and put them in one volume, a common desire

of college professors and newspaper columnists. Such compilations seldom work and should not be encouraged. But most of us who have written a number of essays on this and that hope someone will suggest that we gather them up for book publication. That is what happened here. TCU Press suggested that I dig around in my files and find gems of beauty and wisdom. It didn't work out. I dug around and found very little of either beauty or wisdom. What I found was "a rhapsody," a "literary work consisting of miscellaneous or disconnected pieces"—I just learned this definition of "rhapsody" from my new *OED* too.

My rhapsody, my miscellany, was not really ready for prime time. I knew that if I wanted to produce a book, I needed to make more sense out of my adventures. That realization wrecked the original plan of dusting off the old essays. I set about writing two new chapters to help me organize my thoughts and prejudices. The first two chapters, "The Age of Dobie" and "The Age of McMurtry," are the fruits of my frustration. I decided that in order to understand all I wanted to understand about Texas life and literature, I needed to make some order—in my own mind at least—of the changes and trends that have taken place in this state over almost a century. I decided that the main force in Texas literature and culture for almost the whole first half of the twentieth century was to be found in the influence of J. Frank Dobie. That was hardly a revelation, for the shadow of Dobie hangs over the state in many minds to this very day. So I wrote about what I thought Dobie's influence was and what forces shaped Dobie.

After Dobie's 1964 death, Texas literature saw rapid changes. I decided that the central figure of this new era is Larry McMurtry. There are flaws in this reasoning, for McMurtry was never to Texas what Dobie was. McMurtry never really claimed to speak

for Texas or hold the honorary title of “Mr. Texas,” but he had some definite ideas about Texas life and literature and he presented them in his novels and a few essays. What he did, essentially, is put paid to the old Dobie ethic of Lone Star chauvinism and longhorn worship. I try to show that in the chapter on McMurtry. I wish I had shown it more to my satisfaction. It was a hard chapter to write, for it is hard to tell how much McMurtry was the actor or the acted upon. But I tried, and others will have to decide whether what I wrote makes any sense.

The other essays in the first part of the book are more or less things I dusted off. Mostly they are essays I had published here and there, but I found in the dusting process that some of them needed serious revision, though a couple I didn’t touch at all.

In Part II, the essays on folklore, are hugely re-written versions of things I had published earlier or had read before some organization but had not thought fit to publish—or, more likely, others had not thought fit to publish. “The Uses of Folklore” was written to be read as the banquet speech at the Texas Folklore Society, an organization I have belonged to since 1958. After a few serious papers delivered to the TFS, I began to write essays that I thought were funny. Not everyone in the organization agreed, but enough did that I was encouraged to keep on with stand-up comedy. When I was invited to speak at the banquet, I was so honored that I tried to write a serious speech. I had already established a reputation as the class clown, and the night of the banquet was introduced as such. My serious speech was met by gales of laughter, much to my consternation. I later gave the speech at Eastfield College in Dallas to much less laughter, and then finally wrote a revised version to deliver as the McDermott Lecture at Casper College in Wyoming. The people in Wyoming took it as a serious commentary,

and I felt somewhat vindicated. Now, after another revision, I present it here. At least I won't be able to hear laughter or jeers. I hope.

The other essays in that section are indeed attempts on my part to make sense of some aspects of Texas life and culture. "Texas Sidekicks" was published earlier in "a rhapsody" of mine called *Texas, My Texas*, another stolen title. The essays in *Texas, My Texas* are supposed to be funny, which may account for the large number of remaindered copies lying in my office. I read "Texas Sidekicks" to an audience of Germans interested in the American West, and I noticed that they took notes rather than erupting into laughter. But they were Germans, and Germans are reputed to be more serious-minded than I am. I included it here because Bill Crider, the prolific crime novelist who also happens to have a Ph.D. in English, wrote me that my piece was better than anything he had ever read in *PMLA*, the learned journal of the Modern Language Association. I am not sure exactly what to make of that comment, for I have never managed to make it through but one article in *PMLA*. But then maybe neither did Crider. I did love the compliment.

I can't really defend the inclusion of the last set of essays in this volume. The only thing I can say is that J. Frank Dobie once published a book called *Some Part of Myself*, so I stole his title and included some personal essays. These are what many creative writing schools are pleased to call creative non-fiction. The first one was written when my friend Donna Walker-Nixon wrote to say that her new journal, *Windhover: A Magazine of Christian Literature*, had no creative non-fiction; she wondered if I might supply some. I don't have any serious Christian credentials, but I did attend a church school from 1945 until 1948. Being a person easily flattered, I wrote the piece included

here, and when it was published I sent a copy to my late friend and classmate Hartwell Hooper. Hart did two things with it: he made a tape recording to send to another classmate, Claude Martin, who has gone blind, and he sent a copy to St. Andrew's-Sewanee School, which reprinted it in the school magazine. As you can see, I am a serious proponent of recycling.

I wrote "Boot Camp Days" because Donna Walker-Nixon asked me to write something for a section of *New Texas* called "lagniappe." And I wrote "The Rain in Korea Is Awful Cold and Wet" because Francis Edward Abernethy called me one day. Ab is the finest secretary-editor in the history of the Society (better than his predecessors, J. Frank Dobie, Mody Boatright, or Wilson Hudson—all good men and true). This day he said, "James Ward, we don't have any articles on the Korean War for our Texas Folklore Society volume called *Family Sagas*. Weren't you in the Korean War?" I admitted it and agreed to write something about my heroic adventures. The same thing caused me to write "Hydrogen Bomb Days." Jerry Craven of West Texas A&M called and said, "We don't have any creative non-fiction for *AmarilloBay.Com*, our on-line magazine." Guess what? I sent the bomb story electronically to West Texas and couldn't possibly prevent myself from recycling it here.

Except for the chapter on the poetry of Betsy Colquitt, I have done little with poetry but mention a few names. I am not competent to write a history of Texas poetry. To do so would be to step into a minefield. Texas has thousands of poets, maybe millions, and almost all of them feel neglected. There are many reasons that they feel neglected and put upon, but the chief one is the difficulty of finding a publisher. Hardly anybody will publish a volume of verse. So poets are left to publish individual poems in

little magazines, to gather a few into small, often self-published chapbooks, or to enter one of the contests that charges an entry fee and hope that the book is chosen for a run of five hundred or so copies. I hate to say this, but of the thousands or millions of Texas poets writing today, most are not good—some are incredibly bad. There are a great many good ones, and there must be hundreds who are good, but who never get enough poems in one place for a critic to write an intelligent commentary. Over the years while I was editing and coediting *New Texas*, I had the good fortune to look at and publish many good poems. I sincerely believe that some of the people whose works I published have substantial bodies of work that I would admire and could comment upon. But since most of them are only partially published, I have no opportunity to know. I could make a list of poets whose individual poems I like, but once you start to mention some, you necessarily omit others. So I am leaving this field to Billy Bob Hill, whose two fine anthologies of Texas poems make him much more knowledgeable than I am.

I have also avoided drama. There are not thousands or hundreds of even scores of good playwrights in Texas. Horton Foote always comes to mind, and I admire the plays of his I have seen and read, as well as movies like *On Valentine's Day, 1941*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, and my all-time favorite Texas movie, *Tender Mercies*. I should have written a chapter on Foote, but I didn't, nor do I have much to say about films and filmmakers. I once hired Ken Harrison to teach screenwriting at the University of North Texas, and I got to know the films he wrote and produced, but I think it takes a talent I do not have to talk about filmmakers. Don Graham does that too well for me to try to compete.

Now I am to the part of this introduction where the sensible reader is advised to close the book or go to one of the main chapters. I am at the part where I tell things that

are mostly of interest to me and to the people who influenced me or helped me or encouraged me or at least did nothing to hinder me, If one looks at the dedication page of this book, he or she will see that I dedicated it to Don Graham and Tom Pilkington, “my betters,” I call them. They are. Each of them knows more and has done more reading and writing about Texas life and literature than I have. The three of us have worked together on more than one project, and I have never failed to learn from them. The three of us edited *The Texas Literary Tradition* as a project of the University of Texas Centennial in 1983, and then, from that book we produced a film, “Texas Literature: The Southern Experience,” for the Texas Committee for the Humanities. I have asked many things of my two friends, and I have never been turned down. I like and admire both of them and am sincere when I say they are my betters.

If I weren't dedicating this book to Tom and Don, I would dedicate it to Judy Alter. She has dragged this book kicking and screaming out of me, has read it with care, has found the small errors and the large, and has been of more support than I deserve. But then she has always done things for me beyond the call of duty. It is she who appointed me to the editorship of TCU Press's “Texas Tradition Series” and then to the post which I now hold, acquisitions editor of TCU Press. Actually, that is the position as it appears on my letters to prospective authors and on my business card. On the official TCU faculty and staff rolls, I fill the important post of “Visiting Editor Without Compensation,” and I have a letter from the provost so designating me. I like my TCU Press job because it allows me to have an office and a place to go on most days. I don't have to work too hard, and I get paid travel money when I go to a few select conferences to man the TCU Press booth and talk to all my friends. In the office I have the fellowship and advice of

Judy and the press editor, Susan Petty, who thought up the idea of my doing this book. Judy and I edited a wonderful book, *Literary Fort Worth*, and are in the planning stages of *Literary West Texas*. Judy is the perfect person to work with because she does all the work I am not good at and don't like to do.

Several years ago, Judy developed a vibrant reading group called "Contemporary Classics" that was run through the TCU Division of Extended Education. She used to invite me to lead an occasional discussion, and then about four years ago, she passed the group along to me. It was a part of Extended Education as long as Diane Lovin was coordinator of non-credit courses, and on her leaving that job, I kept the group going and now run it out of the Southwest Regional Library. I thank Judy for giving the group to me, and I especially thank Diane Lovin, my special friend, for nurturing it when I took it over and for being a dedicated reader. She also reads what I write and listens to me when I am at the podium. She goes to events with me even when she would be happier staying at home. I also thank the thirty to fifty participants who meet once a month to talk about books and help me keep current on contemporary literature. My secretary/sergeant-at-arms in the now-named Jim Lee Book Group is Ruth Orren, who keeps all the records and helps in many ways.

I learned about Texas literature and folklore from many people. My parents were southern folk, and they taught me the idiom and the customs and the beliefs and the stories. I did not know that they were giving me an education in folklore until I took a course in folklore from Mary Celestia Parler at the University of Arkansas in the middle 1950s. About a week into the course, I suddenly realized that I already knew all that I was hearing about—the tales and songs and legends and myths and superstitions. But

Mary C. Parler helped me put what I knew in some order and taught me how to collect songs in the Ozark Mountains. She let me work as her assistant for a year and introduced me to Vance Randolph, probably the greatest folksong collector American has produced. Long after I was away from Arkansas, Mary Parler, once safely past seventy, married Vance Randolph, by then in his eighties. Part of their story is told in Donald Harington's novel, *Butterfly Weed*. Randolph once dedicated a book to Agnes Mabel and Becky. I wish I had such nerve.

While I am wandering outside the confines of Texas, I have a few words to say about the greatest repository of folk culture I have ever known. In 1986, Joyce Lee and I bought an 1860 log house deep in the Ouachita National Forest thirteen miles from Mena, Arkansas. Our closest neighbor and most fervent teacher was Edna Lawrence, who, for eighty-odd years had lived within five miles of this hamlet called Shady. Edna's knowledge of the flora and fauna, remedies and beliefs, the wisdom and language of the folk was amazing. She wrapped leftovers in "serene" wrap so they wouldn't "swivel" up, she grew a flower called a "high geranium," and she lamented the people her age who had "old-timers" disease. But despite having heard many things imperfectly, she was an intelligent woman who told a story with clarity and succinctness. Witness the tale of Tootsie Leins, who danced all night one fall, went home and slept "with her head in the window, caught the sinus, and died." My six years of knowing the late "Queen of Shady" was worth a college degree in folklore. Few people have ever had such an impact on my life.

Once I was at North Texas State College, Martin Shockley arranged for me to read a paper at the Texas Folklore Society's 1959 meeting. He shepherded me through

writing the paper and gave me some advice on how one should present a paper. Never deviate from the text with clever asides, or at least not until you are famous. I never deviate from the text I have written, but once I become famous I am sure I will. Or not. Shockley died in 2003 at the age of almost a hundred, and I don't think he ever delivered asides in papers he read. The Texas Folklore Society became my academic mainstay from my first year in Texas until today. Over the years I have read dozens of papers and published many of them in the TFS's annual. The people I have come to know in that organization have helped me in hundreds of ways. Sometime in the 1960's I persuaded the Austin publisher Steck-Vaughn to let me edit a series of pamphlets on southwest literature. I turned to all my folklore society friends to do the work and enlisted some great writers to produce these forty-eight page pamphlets on writers of Texas and the Southwest. Francis Edward Abernethy wrote the first pamphlet, on J. Frank Dobie. In the early years of that series I called upon the late John Q. Anderson, Edwin W. Gaston, Stanley Alexander, Tom Pilkington, James W. Byrd, Jo Lyday, Eleanor James, John O. West, Wilson Hudson, Sam H. Henderson, and forty-odd others to produce some very useful small studies on Texas and southwestern writers. All these writers taught me about Texas, and I am still in their debt. I am especially indebted to R. H., who had once been president of the Steck Company, but who in his final years occupied a corner office at Steck-Vaughn and made all the decisions about *The Southwest Writers Series*. I never knew Mr. Porter well, never even knew what his initials stood for, but I held him in awe. He knew more about Texas than anyone I have ever met.

I have done this before, but once again I would like to dedicate some part of this book to Joyce Glover Lee, who heard some of these chapters as papers and speeches,

criticized and edited others, and kept me from some of my excesses in the pursuit of humor. She was an excellent and devoted wife, and now, even though we are divorced and she has remarried, she remains my best friend. Her book on the novelist Rolando Hinojosa taught me much about Mexican American literature.

My debt to Billy Bob Hill is a large one. We worked together on Texas literature during the time I was a committee member for his dissertation, and since then we have done many projects together. He published my short stories in his several fine Texas short-fiction anthologies, and we have worked together on his two celebrated poetry anthologies, *Texas in Poetry: A 150 Year Anthology* and *Texas in Poetry 2*. Billy Bob Hill has devoted himself to Texas literature for all his working life, and through his own Browder Springs Press has published works by such writers as A. C. Greene, William Barney, and Paul Ruffin. We always promise ourselves we will do a book together before I become even more senile than now, and I would like to renew that promise in these dedicatory pages.

Betsy Colquitt, professor emerita of English at TCU, has been generous in her help with this manuscript. I met Professor Colquitt, founding editor of the literary journal *Descant* and longtime teacher of creative writing at TCU, when I was assigned to edit and write the introduction to her collection *Eve—from the Autobiography and Other Poems*. I had published several of her poems in *New Texas* over the years, but only when I read her entire collection did I realize how great a poet she is—and how good a friend. She is generous with her time and eagerly volunteered to read this manuscript, which she has seen in parts before. We have been close friends since 1996, and I have come to see why

she is revered by many generations of TCU students and admired by hundreds of people in her native Fort Worth.

A year or so ago I met Ruth McAdams, chair of English at Tarrant County College's South Campus. She invited me to talk to her class, and the following semester, she let me be her co-teacher in a class on Texas literature and culture. I was more teacher's aide than co-teacher. I didn't have to take roll or grade papers or discipline students, but I got myself back in the flow of teaching and talking about Texas after I was well into my retirement from the University of North Texas. Her amazing enthusiasm for Texas literature and culture energized me, and though she tells colleagues I am her teacher in matters Texan, I find I rely heavily on her for new ideas about the literature and culture of the Lone Star State. She has criticized several of the essays in this volume and made many useful suggestions.

I need to thank Donna Walker-Nixon and Carolyn Poulter of the University of Mary Hardin Baylor. They took *New Texas* after UNT closed the Center for Texas Studies and let me continue as a co-editor, even though they were doing most of the hard work. They, along with Marilyn Robitaille of Tarleton State University, who came on as a co-editor in the last year of Donna's tenure at UMHB is now co-editor with Donna of a new journal, *The Langton Review*, and they have agreed to let me serve on the board and write some articles—my first one on the noble and frustrating game of bridge. Donna has been a true friend to me. She let me be a pallbearer at the funeral of her late husband, George Nixon, and I take that as a great honor.

Nobody has been a more loyal friend and supporter than Joyce Roach. We have read papers on the same programs, she has let me write introductions to some of her

books, and we have put on two or three joint presentations. We have planned several books together, but my laziness always gets in the way. I value her friendship immensely.

Finally, I want to mention some names of people who have befriended me over the years in the worlds of Texas life, literature, and folklore: Sarah Green of Gilmer; Phillip Fry of Austin; John West of El Paso; Jim and Mary Harris of Hobbs, New Mexico; Fran Vick of Dallas; Tom Dodge of Midlothian; George and Ruth Fortenberry of Arlington; John Graves of Glen Rose; J. T. and Hattie Lee of Powderly, Alabama; John Henry Irsfeld of Las Vegas (who once dedicated a book to me); Shelby Hearon of Burlington, Vermont; Pat and Shay Bennett of Abilene; Jim Sanderson and Jerry Bradley of Beaumont; Paul Ruffin of Huntsville; Gyde C. Martin of Arlington; Jerry and Sherry Craven of Amarillo; Bonnie Lovell of Denton; Bettye Bailey of Birmingham, Alabama; Phyllis Allen of Fort Worth; Wynona Alexander of Harker Heights; Deborah Douglas of San Antonio; Robert and Jean Flynn of San Antonio; Sister Phyllis Bunnell of San Antonio; Terrell Dixon of Houston; Jim and Jane Tanner of Denton; Yvette Blair of Dallas; Rick and Teel Sale of Denton; Elmer Kelton of San Angelo; Lou and Charles Rodenberger of Baird; Jim and Kate Lehrer of Washington, D.C.; Bob Frye of Fort Worth; Jane Roberts Wood of Dallas; Liz and Pete Gunter of Denton; Bill Mercer of Dallas; Sherry McGuire of Lewisville; Margie West of Fort Worth; Carolyn Barnes of Denton; Tom Preston of Winona; David Kesterson of Denton; Jeff Guinn and Mike Cochran and Bud Kennedy of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*; Bob Compton and Kent Biffle and Cheryl Chapman of the *Dallas Morning News*; Clay Reynolds of Dallas; Paul Patterson of Crane; Fred Erisman of Fort Worth; Mark Busby of San Marcos; Rolando Hinojosa of Austin; Terry Dalrymple and Charlie McMurtry of San Angelo; Laurie

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