Q&A

**What writers influenced you growing up?**

There were three. First, Mark Twain as he wrote entertaining novels like *Tom Sawyer* that appealed to youngsters and complex novels like *Huckleberry Finn* that could be read on several levels. The second was Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie, whose book *The Longhorns* was the most riveting I ever read as a child on the Old West. Third came Pulitzer Prize-winning World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle, a columnist for the Scripps-Howard Syndicate. What I loved about Pyle was he was a great storyteller who chronicled the GIs that did the fighting during World War II. The lessons I learned from him were the importance of story and that a person could make a living writing for newspapers. That influenced me to study journalism in college and begin my professional career at four Texas newspapers.

One odd fact about that trio is I have visited the graves of two of them, Mark Twain in Elmira, N.Y., and Ernie Pyle in Honolulu. Even though J. Frank Dobie is buried in Austin, which I’ve visited dozens of times, I have yet to pay my respects to him, though that is on my bucket list.

**What writers did you enjoy after you matured?**

There are too many to name them all, but I will recognize a handful starting with novelists. First, Elmer Kelton and Jeanne Williams, who I considered as my Western writing mentors. Their support and encouragement helped so much when I was just getting started. Among Western writers, I think Douglas C. Jones and Loren D. Estleman, were great storytellers and beautiful stylists, though sometimes I found them slow reading because I’d stop after every other sentence and think why can’t I write a sentence as melodic as theirs. Outside the Western realm, I loved Donald E. Westlake, especially his comic Dortmunder series, and Max Alan Collins, especially his historical novels and mysteries.

As for nonfiction writers, Leon Metz was special. Because of my fascination with Billy the Kid, I devoured his biography *Pat Garrett: The Story of a Western Lawman*. When I went to my first Western Writers of America meeting in 1982 in Santa Fe, the only book I took to get autographed was his Garrett bio. At our very first WWA function the opening breakfast, Harriet and I knew virtually no one and Cheryl Metz came up and asked if we would like to sit with them and Don and Edna Coldsmith. I couldn’t believe I was sitting with THE Leon Metz. He was a wonderful person and a great story teller. Other nonfiction authors I have enjoyed are Chris Enss with her prolific output on women of the West and Mike Cox for his Texas Rangers and Texana writings. David Dary was another fine historian whose books I scoured.

As for historians out of the Western field, I’ve enjoyed Daniel C. Boorstin, David McCullough, Daniel Yergen, Stephen Ambrose, Walter Lord, Cornelius Ryan, Barbara Tuchman, Bruce Catton and Shelby Foote.

**You speak often of the value of story in writing. Why?**

Because if you don’t have a good story, nothing else matters, whether characterization, style, plot, or viewpoint. At family reunions while my cousins were outside playing, I used to sit on the floor and listen to my father and his siblings talk about growing up in the Great Depression. I loved their stories. Only three of the eight siblings acquired a high school diploma, so they were not a highly educated clan, but they were great storytellers, always finding humor in their tough economic circumstances. Their lives—my grandmother never lived in a house with running water and electricity—seemed more akin to those of the pioneers than they did to my life growing up in the 1950s. From them, I got my appreciation of frontier life, my sense of story and my sense of humor.

**Your body of work is varied and hard to categorize. How come?**

I’m easily bored so I gravitate to what interests me at the time. I started out doing traditional Westerns, then moved on to historical novels and humor, then into nonfiction works. Of the nonfiction works, I’m proudest of the award-winning *Pintsized Pioneers: Taming the Frontier, One Chore at a Time*, but the two that are dearest to my heart are *Cotton-Picking Folks* and *To War and Back*. After I graduated from Baylor University in 1972, I asked Dad and his siblings to write down their recollections of their childhoods on a West Texas tenant farm so I would have a record of the stories I enjoyed so growing up. After they all passed, I published the books as a memorial to their lives. *Cotton-Picking Folks* documents their childhood experiences while *To War and Back* chronicles my father’s and uncle’s World War II experiences.

**What prompted your first nonfiction, young adult book in *Pintsized Pioneers*?**

Oddly enough it was some TikTok videos by Generation Z cohorts complaining about having to work or adjust their schedules to that of their workplace. That was so foreign to my upbringing, I couldn’t believe it as my parents, my father especially, instilled in my brother and me a work ethic whether we wanted it or not. That work ethic has served both of us well in our careers. So, I discussed my bewilderment with Harriet, and we decided to look at the lives of frontier children and their workload. It was overwhelming. Our son and daughter used to complain about having to take out the trash or load the dishwasher. But that was nothing compared to the tasks frontier children handled. *Pintsized Pioneers* was so well received, we’ve decided to do a sequel: *Pintsized Pioneers at Play: Homemade Frontier Fun and Danger*.

**What’s next for you?**

My Civil War historical novel *Too Much the Lion* comes out in May 2025 and then in the fall we will release *Pintsized Pioneers at Play*. I’ve had some feelers on movie possibilities so we will see how that goes. After that, it’ll just be whatever intriguing story I run across in my research and reading or whatever new rabbit hole piques my interest.