Where's My Wandering Boy Tonight?

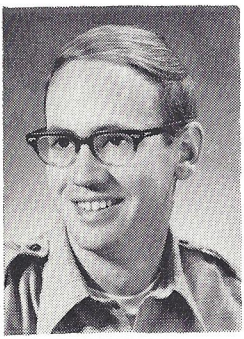
I Was A Drag Racer, A College Drop-Out, A Sawmill Worker, A G.I. In Viet Nam, A Janitor; Then One Day, With A Typewriter . . . .

By Stephen Overholser

(Editor's Note: WWA's Spur winner for Best Western Novel here describes How It All Began — or almost didn't! On opposite page, C. L. Sonnichsen, collector of the Spur for Best Western Non-Fiction Book, tells how he tried to fight off becoming a specialist on the literature of the Southwest — and lost!).

I was born in Bend, Oregon, on June 24, 1944. In 1948 the Overholsers moved to the university town of Boulder, Colorado, and have resided there ever since.

I graduated from Boulder High School in 1962. Afterwards I attended two colleges here in Colorado, as well as the University of Colorado in Boulder.



STEVE OVERHOLSER

Since I was the wandering boy of the family, I must have caused my parents more worry than either of my two brothers. I was the one who, with some high school friends, installed a large engine in a small car and raced the thing every Sunday for a couple of years. I was the one who celebrated my twenty-first birthday by taking a summer's hitchhiking tour of the western United States and southern Canada. I was the one who quit going to college in my senior year, convinced there was more to learn outside of school than inside.

Some of the things I subsequently learned were the most difficult of my life. After leaving college I was drafted into the army. Less than a year later I was shipped to Viet Nam. My memories of that experience still linger in my dreams.

After I was mustered out of the service in 1968 I bought an old red Ford pick-up truck and traveled around the Northwest. When my army money ran out, I drove into Bend, Oregon, the town of my birth. I lived in an old hotel with a bathroom at the end of the hall until I got a job in a sawmill. With a regular paycheck I was able to move into better quarters and eat three times a day. I worked nights in the sawmill, stacking lumber as it came off a resaw. During the days I wrote stories on a portable typewriter that my parents had given me for high school graduation.

As soon as I had accumulated some money from the sawmill job, I quit and drove my red truck out to the Oregon coast where I rented an apartment in the resort town of Seaside. The apartment overlooked the ocean and a long stretch of beach. When I wasn't in the apartment working on my writing, I was out walking along that beach, watching winter storms come in over heavy seas.

I returned to Boulder, broke again, and for the next three years I worked nights as a janitor in elementary schools. During days I toyed with an autobiographical novel that fizzed out. I wrote a series of short stories, too, and in time three of these were sold through the Lenniger Literary Agency. These first sales provided very little money, but had the strange effect of deepening my addiction to writing.

Through some research I conducted at the University of Wyoming in Laramie,

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I came across a shocking incident in Wyoming history that was a sad prelude to the famous Johnson County War of 1892. In Boulder I sat down before my mistress, the portable typewriter, and began work on a novel based upon this historical incident.

I became discouraged with the project and quit once, but after discussing the concept of the novel with August Lenniger in Sheridan, Wyoming, in the summer of 1972, and seeing his interest, I came back home with my enthusiasm rekindled. I finished the book and sent it to Gus in New York. The novel was A HANGING IN SWEETWATER. It was published by *Doubleday* in 1974 and reprinted in paperback by *Pinnacle Books* in 1975.

As the son of a novelist, Wayne D. Overholser, I have benefitted from some insights into the life of a professional writer. I learned early, for example, that writers do not sit back and wait for inspiration; they write daily in search of inspiration. Once in a while a writer finds it. During my boyhood I often accompanied my father on research trips in Colorado, Wyoming and Montana, recording notes in longhand at libraries and various historical sites. Growing up with a working novelist, and growing up in an eminently happy and busy family, was excellent preparation for a writing career of my own.

I was also very fortunate to have close acquaintances with many professional writers like Stephen Payne, Wayne Lee, Lewis Patten and Ray Gaulden. They offered a great deal of encouragement when I needed it most. From them I learned that a writer isn't whipped until he quits writing. And a beginning writer (perhaps experienced ones, too) needs a hundred pounds of encouragement for every ounce of criticism.