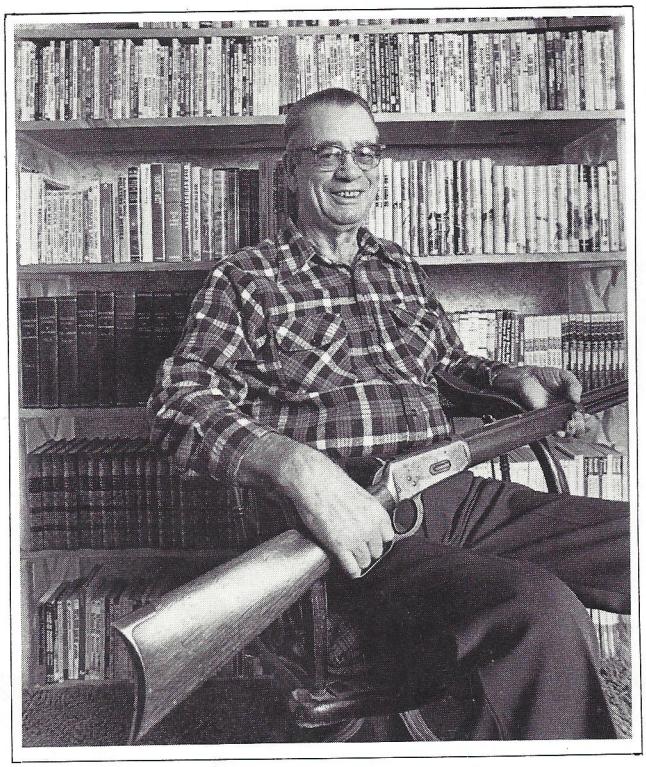

Wayne Overholser

Who's the most prolific author in Boulder?

Wayne Overholser may not be a name that immediately rings a bell for most readers, but to fans of Western fiction few monikers are held in higher regard. If you've read any Westerns at all, chances are at some time you've read something of Overholser's — whether written under his own name or one of his diverse pseudonyms, like John S. Daniels, or Lee Leighton, or Wayne Roberts, or Daniel J. Stevens, or Joseph Wayne. Wayne Overholser of Boulder has written and published 97 Western novels, no less, and some 400 short stories and novelettes. Of this staggering output, only a fraction has appeared under his own name, which is the main reason why it's an unfamiliar one to most people.

Wayne Overholser's publishing history and biography are as fascinating and various as two or three dozen ordinary writers' combined. His story begins in Pomeroy, Washington, where he was born in 1906. When young Wayne was six his family moved to Oregon, where he grew up, attended college and later worked for 19 years as a teacher and school principal.

"It was my lifetime goal since high school to be a writer," Overholser told *Boulder Monthly* from his Boulder apartment. "When I was teaching school in Oregon in the 30s and 40s, I was also writing part time. All kinds of things — detective stories, science fiction, love stories, Westerns. It was the Westerns I had the best luck with, so I went on with them.

"My favorite Western writer is the late Ernest Haycock, who came from Oregon. We had the same professor at the University of Oregon, W.F.G. Thatcher. I took Thatcher's short story writing classes both by correspondence and in person. Thatcher had been Ernest Haycock's teacher, so naturally he held Haycock's work in high regard. Haycock had made a great break from the old style of Western story, from the Zane Grey purple passage to the modern realistic Western novel. Luke Short, by the way, a Colorado man whose work I admire, is also an imitator of Haycock. It was these classes at Oregon in which we studied Haycock's work that really got me interested in Western writing. They started me on the road.

"My first short story sale came in 1936. There was no book sale until ten years later, when an agent in New York sold *Buckaroo's Code*. For twenty years after that I sold books to Macmillan, which published them in hard cover while Dell brought out the paper editions. In those days I was trying to make a full time living out of writing, and Macmillan only wanted one book a year. I couldn't make a living that way. The agent suggested I use a pseudonym.

"I've sold a number of books to movies, but only two of them have been produced. *Lawman,* which was made into *Star in the Dust,* with John Agar, and *Cast A Long Shadow,* with Audie Murphy. Neither movie was very successful, although you do see them now and then on tv. The best book I ever wrote was *The Violent Land,* which was voted the best Western novel of the year for 1954 by the Western Writers of America. Warner Brothers bought it as a vehicle for James Dean, but he was killed before the picture went into production. Dean was not my favorite actor, but yes, he would have been all right for my story. After his death, however, it was never produced. Did that hurt me? Yes, I'd have to say it did.

"I make a point of being authentic. The earliest reviewers of my work always noticed that — that it was authentic, that I laid emphasis on the historical background. For example, I've written a lot about the Ute Indians, who were driven out of Colorado in the 1870s and 80s. I collaborated on a juvenile book called *The Meeker Massacre,* about the massacre of Utes at Thornburg, and I also wrote about the Utes in *The Land of Promises* and *The War Party.*

"The market for Westerns isn't as active as it once was. The only company that publishes Westerns in hard cover now is Doubleday, and ironically, although my son (Stephen Overholser) has sold four Western novels to Doubleday, I'm not at present able to do so. I have in the past sold novels to Bantam, but not for quite a while. I've sold novels in the past few years to Dale and Ballantine, but now Ballantine has also quit publishing Westerns. There hasn't been a very active market for Westerns of late. I'd say there are two reasons. First, the old generation of readers of Westerns is dying out, and second, science fiction has moved in and captured the audience. Twenty years ago a lot of companies were publishing Westerns, but nowadays there's a slim market, and the competition is terrific. Ace Books is the only paperback company which is consistently buying, Doubleday the only hard back company, and therefore just about every manuscript that's written goes to them. Right now there's a slight upsurge, Bantam is beginning to buy again — Louis L'Amour is now their pet author. I've had two novels published this year, *The Trouble Kid* from Ace and *The Diablo Ghost* from Dale Books, the first Western they've ever published. And just a few days ago I got a letter from my agent saying he's sold another book *Death of A Cattle Queen.*"

That sale leaves Wayne Overholser only three books short of a hundred. The bet here is that he makes it to the century mark before you can turn north, reach the clearing, ride across to the far end, dismount, build a fire, strip the gear from the sorrel, tie him in the quaking asps so he cannot be seen by anyone entering the clearing, and sit down beside the fire to wait.

Tom Clark

Photo by Joe Daniel