

Oklahoma Writers' Federation, Inc., the First 20 Years

By Ernestine Gravley

May, 1988. Celebrate!

Oklahoma Writers Federation, Inc. has this year reached the age of twenty, a proud milestone for remaining founders and newer members alike. Ours is an organization unique in the nation, a federation of writers' clubs comprising some 600 creative individuals.

Spread out on this charter officer's desk, taken from my overstuffed files, is the two-decade accumulation of OWFI conference programs, press releases, newsletters, correspondence, membership directories, minutes of board meetings, treasurer's reports, copies of several constitutions, State of the Federation speeches from my two terms as OWFI president. This mass of material from early 1968 is a profile of what we have done and who we are.

OWFI is a realized ideal, the latter version of Oklahoma Writers Association, as we were named in the beginning. In fact, a local Oklahoma City club, organized about 1914 with early literary pioneer Henry Carlton Jones, was called OWA. It had some 150 members, many from other parts of the state. This club, along with Enid Writers Club, which observed its 50th anniversary several years ago, gave us a head start on members.

Before our formal organization at Stillwater in September, 1968, we had traveled the state helping other groups to organize, each with its own charter and slate of officers. It would be several years before incorporation, but OWA did fine from the start. The only constant is change, of course, and some of our strongest clubs in the early days faded away — Okmulgee, Ardmore, El Reno, Altus, others. Yet, their input is a part of our strength today.

In the preparation of this paper, I see faces and hear voices of many early "movers and shakers," now deceased. Charles C. Campbell, Mr. OWA himself, the "spittin' image" of Col. Sanders of fried chicken fame, dreamed it up in Little Rock June 7, 1968 on the upper deck of the home of Ruth Leveck. It was the eve of that year's Arkansas Writers Conference. The occasion was a reception for the speakers, including Charles and myself. He was impressed with our

The Lord's Prayer in Indian sign language, the first OWF autograph party, a rare books display, scheduled tours and a television-covered Awards Banquet were features of this event. Grants and contributions were from Oklahoma Arts and Humanities Council, National Endowment for the Arts, Aladdin Book Shop, Lucille Bradshaw, Philco Ford, Lawton Chamber of Commerce, Shawnee Writers, Writers Digest, Oklahoma Library Association and Great Plains Writers.

The year 1974 saw our return to Oklahoma City, where the annual conference has remained centrally located to date. KOCO-TV, *Oklahoma Today* magazine, Oklahoma Publishing Co., the *Oklahoma Journal* and Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce were added to the previous year's contributors. The meet was at Holiday Inn South. KOCO, Channel 5, invited Ernestine Gravley and Alta Ingram to appear on TV and talk about the upcoming conference.

Ernestine Gravley, OWF president, introduced Harold M. Sherman, internationally-known author and playwright, the keynote speaker. Others on the platform included Mozelle Richardson, Gothic novelist, Helen Reagan Smith, author, creative writing teacher, director Extension Division, OU journalism department; Mary Neely Capps and Vera Holding, both poets.

Officers in 1975 were Col. Charles Mooney, Oklahoma City, president; Opal Hartsell Brown, Lawton, vice-president; Raymona Anderson, Laverne, secretary and Mazie Cox Read, Cushing, treasurer. Delegates from Red River Writers and Shattuck Writers were added to the Board of Directors.

The conference at Holiday Inn South featured Dr. Robert G. Meredith, Chicago author, lecturer, professor of English at Chicago State University. Val Thiessen, professor of creative writing at OCU outlined the easiest way to write a novel. Heb Karner, Tulsa editor, *Ranch and Farm World*, Dr. Ray Tassin, chairman of journalism, CSU, Edmond, and Marj Bennett, poet, were others on the program.

Individual clubs across the state continued their own monthly or bi-monthly programs and looked forward to the one time of the year when conference brought everyone together to meet editors, authors and agents, and to fellowship and share with one another. By now, buzz sessions after the Friday evening dinner and program had been made a part of the informal sharing and remains popular to the present.

Edna Mae Couch, historian from the Norman Galaxy, conducted a genealogy workshop at the 1976 conference, while Vera Holding presided at an articles workshop. President Charles Mooney

introduced the Friday evening speaker, Jack Bickham, who spoke on "Ten Pages at a Time." Early risers Saturday heard Louise Dale Nelson (poetry) and Barbara Andre (confessions). Later, Dr. Arrell M. Gibson, OU research professor of history and author of 18 books, was followed by a slide show "Wildflowers of Oklahoma" with Alta M. Ingram, public information officer, Oklahoma Department of Highways, and by Steve Wilson, director, Great Plains Museum, Lawton, and editor of its magazine.

Still at Holiday Inn South, the 9th conference, 1977, featured Pat McKissack, a Concordia House editor and Joe Holmes, representative from Doubleday. Other notables on the program included Tony Hillerman, author and University of New Mexico faculty member; Ralph Martin, Norman; Sally McCluskey, Rogers, Arkansas, speaking on "The Creative Process," Lyda Pyles, Carthage, Missouri and Dr. George Stanley, children's book author from Cameron University, Lawton.

Officers of OWFI, now a non-profit corporation, were Opal Hartsell Brown, Lawton, president; Mazie Cox Read, Cushing, vice-president; H. Dick Clarke, Norman, secretary; Tom Keister, Oklahoma City, treasurer and Bessie Heck, Tulsa, newsletter editor.

Ramada Inn North was the conference site May 5-6, 1978. How it rained! Mazie Cox Read moved up to president. Bob Kerl, McAlester, was elected vice-president, and the other three officers remained the same as last year. Jory Sherman ("My Poetic License" and "Poetry is Writing, Too"), Dwight Swain ("State of the Art in Oklahoma"), C.J. Cherryh ("My Science Fiction World"), Dr. Odie Faulk ("Dodge City - an Example of Regional History") and Dr. Angie Debo ("Historically Speaking") filled the program. A panel discussion was led by Steve Kimmel, Rita Moscovitz and Michael Starr, Tulsa.

At that conference, Presidential Life Members listed were Glenn Shirley, Col. Charles Mooney, Ernestine Gravley and Charles C. Campbell.

In 1979, the OWFI conference at Holiday Inn South offered an outstanding list of speakers, including S.E. (Susie) Hinton, young adult books; Marilyn Harris, bestselling novelist; Glenn Shirley, western history author; Mark Elder, author; Debby Camp, romance novels; Joyce Hifler, columnist; Florence Feiler, agent; Orville Hancock, humorist and staff writer for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, who spoke on "It's Okay to Sit on a Cold Stove Lid"; Ernie Deane, editorial staff, *Arkansas Gazette*; and Lance Henson, poet.

Officers were: Mazie Cox Read, president; Mary Alexander, vice-president; Warren Shull, secretary; Bob Spraker, treasurer. They

were from, in order: Cushing, Tulsa, Stillwater and Tulsa.

New writers' clubs affiliates added were: Canadian Valley Writers, Eastern Oklahoma State College Writers, Southeastern Oklahoma Writers Guild, Muskogee Writers Guild and Weatherford Wordhandlers.

Bob Kerl, McAlester, took the reins in 1980, along with Jean Hager, Tulsa, vice-president; Warren Shull, Stillwater, secretary; Clarence Christian, Ada, treasurer; and *OWFI Blueprint* editor, Dr. Leroy Thomas. Previous newsletter editors included Lucylle Lamb, Opal Brown and Bessie Heck. Conference speakers, covering many genres of writing were Dr. Randall Chambers, Lawton; Dr. Ann Carlton, OCU; Sarah Orwig, Oklahoma City novelist; Leland Griffin, Muskogee confessions writer; William MacGalliard, Ardmore journalist; Randy White, Lynette Wert and Dr. Lewis Jordan, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Romance novels had come into their own in a big way, and Jean Hager was a dinner speaker on writing this form when OWFI met at Holiday Inn South, May 1-2, 1981. C.J. Cherryh, science fiction novelist, spoke at the awards banquet. Other program standouts included Skip Largent, poet; Dr. Val Thiessen, OCU writing instructor; Helen Sattler, children's book writer; F. Lee Bollinger, book seller and Robert Elman, editor.

The 14th conference, 1982, saw Bob Spraker as president; Jean Hager, vice-president; Leon Beall, secretary; and Rev. Lowell Long, treasurer. Principal speakers were Janet Hoover Thoma, an editor of David C. Cook Publishing company. Others on the staff were Oneta Ryan, young adult novelist; Kenneth Rose, poet; Ernestine Gravley, author; Dixie Lee Davidson, agent; Mike McQuay, writer; Dr. Odie B. Faulk, author and OSU professor; and Dr. Clif Warren, CSU. Buzz sessions were led by speakers and by Mary Alexander, Debby Camp, Linda Christie, Nina Downey, Jheri Fleet, Stoney Hardcastle and Jesse Osburn. The *OWFI Blueprint* continued to expand and aim for excellence under Dr. Leroy Thomas. Honorary Life members increased to 12. (All to date will be listed later.)

Pretty, youthful Karen Solem, editor-in-chief of Silhouette Books, came to us in 1983, the 15th annual conference, at Holiday Inn South. Leon Beall served as president (one of several hats Leon has worn on the executive slate). Serving with him were Oneta Ryan, vice-president; Sheryl Nelms, secretary; Lowell Long, treasurer; and Dr. Leroy Thomas, *Blueprint* editor.

With Solem, additional speakers were Clovita Rice, poet from Little Rock; Mary Brite, Christian writer; Jean Hager, Lee Head, Albert Zuckerman, Hansford Martin and Larry V. Davis, a Mark

Twain impersonator from Dallas.

We moved to the Lincoln Plaza Hotel in 1984 for the 16th annual event. Oneta Ryan became president. Working with her were Lu Tehee, vice-president; Sheryl Nelms, secretary; Glenn Shirley, treasurer; Dr. Leroy Thomas, editor of the now-renamed *OWFI Report* and Edna Mae Couch, historian.

The conference featured a fine array of speakers: Mary Alexander, weekly newspaper editor; Hilari Cohen, senior editor, Harlequin Books; Anita Diamant, New York literary agent; Anne Elver, Christian writer; Bob Evans, publisher and western magazines editor; Verna Lee Hinegardner, poet; Louise James, journalist; Janet Kronstadt, an editor with Berkley /Jove publishers; Tom Kuncl, senior editor *Woman's World* magazine; Sheryl Nelms, poet extraordinaire; Sara Orwig, novelist; Edward Shaw with the University of Oklahoma Press; Jory Sherman, series novelist and George E. Stanley, children's book writer.

The annual contests, a popular feature since the beginning in 1968, this year attracted 1,195 entries by 268 writers. The Creme de la Creme award remained, despite some conflict of opinion as to its viability. This single award, selected from all first place category winners, was first in the amount of \$1,000, later reduced to \$500.

Autograph sessions continued through the years, as have the book room and the buzz sessions. By now, some local club affiliates over the state fell away, and more were added. Membership rolls in all the clubs reflected the same trend. At one time, there were some 850 members.

Again in 1985, the 17th annual conference moved, this time to Hilton Inn West, where the quarterly board meetings were also held. Board meetings have always been held year'round at the current host motel, except for two or three years when we were hosted by the Moose Lodge, Midwest City, courtesy Charles Mooney, and a brief time in an Oklahoma City church. And in the very early years, in homes of officers.

Lowell Long was now president, Nelms remained as vice-president, Bernadine Wells became secretary, Leon Beall took the treasurer's post when pressing business caused Glenn Shirley to resign. Speakers this year were Barbara Bartholomew, author and teacher; Billie Lou Cantwell, writer and instructor; Kevin Stoner, state editor, *Daily Oklahoman*; Dwight Swain, former OU professor and author; Sandi Gelles-Cole, former Dell editor; Charles E. Spicer, New York senior editor of Delacourte Press; Francine Ringold, editor, *Nimrod*; Glenn Titus, outdoor writer for *Oklahoma Today*; and Bob Duncan, novelist and scriptwriter.

Came 1986. Lowell Long, president, headed a slate of officers as follows: Sheryl Nelms, vice-president; Marcia Peterson, secretary; Wilma Price, treasurer, with Thomas and Couch still on board.

This 18th annual conference, May 2-3, 1986 went to the nearly new Saddleback Inn, Oklahoma City, and enjoyed a large attendance, some 300, an impressive parade of speakers: Judson Jerome, poet and poetry columnist of *Writer's Digest*; Elinor Nauen, fiction editor, *Woman's World*; Dorothy Harvey, editor, *Capper's Weekly*; Andre Hinds, editor of several outdoor magazines; Michael Seidman, editor Tor Books; Judith H. Wall, romance novelist; Wayne Robinson, author; Jesse Osburn, author; Stoney Hardcastle, novelist and faculty of Eastern Oklahoma State College; Jon Guthrie, author and photographer; Charles Grant, writer of fantasy; and Bob Duncan, novelist. Cheri Potter took over the book room duties, following a long line of persons who did this chore over the years from the beginning.

At the close of this conference, Dr. Ray Tassin, a faithful OWFI member from the first year, consented to take over as president and in the upcoming Board meetings that year quickly streamlined Board of Directors procedures, which every previous president, including this writer, had all too often permitted to drag out, ad nauseum. It was Dr. Tassin who said (*OWFI Report*, July 21) regarding a Board meeting: "There was probably no one in attendance who wouldn't have preferred napping at home or enjoying family times. But someone must do the work. As in churches today, so it is in OWFI: 90% of the work is done by 10% of the membership." Which reminded me of a recent period of years when a handful of us, myself included, were described by Leroy Thomas when he wrote:

"A small clique of us runs the OWFI
We didn't intend it this way, we cry,
But we're the only ones willing to try."

Serving with Ray Tassin were: Lu Tehee, vice-president; Judi Haller, secretary; Wilma Price, treasurer; Leroy Thomas, editor; and Edna Mae Couch, historian.

Again, quoting President Tassin from the above issue: "I hope we can soften the guidelines under which the editor must work. They are extremely restrictive right now." Most seem to prefer the format of the former *Blueprint*. Circulation chores, after long being the burden of the editor, were accepted by clubs several years ago. Leon Beall and Writers of the Purple Sage took a turn. Oklahoma City Writers with Linda Steele undertook the duty, followed by Stillwater Writers and Jene Friedemann, and next by John McCord

and the Dallas-Fort Worth Writers Workshop.

President Tassin presided at his first annual conference as prexy May 1-2, 1987 at Saddleback Inn. Speakers were Robert Newton Peck, writer of books for young people and comic entertainer; Carolyn Nichols, Bantam Books publisher; Otto Penzler, publisher of mysteries; Stephanie Laidman, literary agent; Ron Wolfe, writer and columnist; Dr. Stan Hoig, author and professor at CSU; Kathryn Fanning, managing editor of *Byline*; Dr. Christopher Givan, faculty CSU; Tom and Marilyn Ross, authors of books on self-publishing; and Joan Shaddox Isom, author and poet.

Elected to serve on the Executive Committee with President Tassin were Lowell Long, vice-president; Judi Haller, secretary; Thelma Long, treasurer. At the Board meeting in December, 1987, Linda Steele was accepted to assist Lowell Long in the capacity of Contest Chair.

For the first time at the 1987 19th annual conference of OWFI, leaders and honorees could be identified at a glance by the ribbons they wore: speakers wore red, Honorary Life members wore green, then-current officers' ribbons were white, OWFI past presidents stood out in yellow ribbons, and the true blue judges of contests wore that color, judging and commenting on 1,154 manuscript entries. Another first was a list in the program of deceased members. Category sponsors (prize money donors) lacked the impressive listing of the contributors of the early years, with only seven OWFI club affiliates contributing: Bartlesville, DFW, Shawnee, Oklahoma City, Purple Sage and two Tulsa groups.

Following, in a nutshell, are four vital lists that say conclusively: *Oklahoma Writers Federation, Inc.* to this date: May 1, 1988:

1) Honorary Life Members to date are: Foster Harris, Ernestine Gravley, Glenn Shirley, Grace Slaughter, Dr. Ray Tassin, Dr. Arrell M. Gibson, Charles C. Campbell, Vera Holding, Dr. Angie Debo, William Burkhardt, Dr. Val Thiessen, Bessie Heck, Opal Hartsell Brown, William MacGalliard, Dr. Leroy Thomas, Jean Hager, Dwight Swain and Maj. Charles Dutreau.

2) OWFI Past Presidents are: Charles C. Campbell, Glenn Shirley, Ernestine Gravley, Col. Charles Mooney, Opal Hartsell Brown, Mazie Cox Read, Bob Kerl, Bob Spraker, Leon Beall, Oneta Ryan, Lowell Long and current President Ray Tassin.

3) Creme de la Creme winners are: 1980: Maureen Temple, Tulsa Nightwriters, science fiction story; 1981: Joan Shaddox Isom, Tulsa Nightwriters, unrhymed poem; 1982: Betty Ann Ramming, SOSU student, essay; 1983: Bette Ward Widney, Oklahoma City Writers, juvenile Book; 1984: Margaret Dobson, Tulsa Nightwriters, science

fiction /fantasy /occult short story; 1985: Helen Butler, Tulsa Nightwriters, Western article; 1986: Blanche A. Bell, Tulsa Nightwriters, feature article; and 1987: Deborah Camp, Tulsa Nightwriters, romance novel.

Note: It was Bob Spraker, Tulsa Nightwriter at the time, who contributed \$1,000 for the first Creme de la Creme Award. OWFI provided this funding thereafter, with one or more individuals and a romance writer's organization contributing.

4) Local Oklahoma and border city clubs currently affiliated with OWFI to form the Federation are: Ada Writers, Bartlesville Wordweavers, The Texas Bunch, Enid Writers, Great Plains Writers, Green Country Ruff Rriters, Little Dixie Writers Guild, McAlester Writers Guild, Mid-Oklahma Writers, Norman Galaxy, Oilpatch Inkwellers, Oklahoma City Writers, Inc. Pahandle Writers, Cushing Writers, Red River Writers, Shawnee Writers, Stillwater Writers, Texas Tale Twisters, Tulsa Nightwriters, Tulsa Tuesday Writers, Weatherford Wordhandlers, Western Arkansas Creative Writers, Word Wranglers Workshop, Writers of the Purple Sage and Members at Large.

Two decades of planning, work, enthusiasm, struggle, accomplishment, disagreement, high goals attained, personality clashes, fellowship with and generosity toward fellow members, describe the human history of Oklahoma Writers Federation, Inc.

We founders could not have guessed how far we would come in 20 years. And now, for the next twenty ...

Epilogue

By Dr. Ray Tassin
OWFI President, 1986-8

This history of the Oklahoma Writers Federation is one of the results of my notion that we should do something special to observe the federation's 20th anniversary in 1988. Other "specials" are planned for the annual conference May 6-7, 1988, at the Saddleback Inn, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Ernestine Gravley, a founding member, volunteered to research and write this history. A copy will be placed in each registration packet for the 1988 conference.

I was not part of the group that planned the federation in 1968, but I did become a founding member at the organizational meeting in 1969. I have remained active in the group for several reasons, not the least of which is the fellowship with other writers.

From novice to old pro, OWFI members share ideas and techniques in the eternal search for improvement in this splendid misery we call professional writing.

The idea behind the founding of OWFI has never changed. The federation is made up of local writers' clubs which retain their autonomy while participating in the state program. Ten or more members must join OWFI for a local club to qualify for membership. The annual conference is the highlight of the federation's year.

Some of the founding local clubs have dropped out though the years, and new clubs have affiliated. In recent years OWFI voted: "Writers groups from bordering states may be accepted for affiliation by the Board of Directors if their participation will contribute to the goals set forth in the preamble and Article II of the Federation's Constitution." One Arkansas and three Texas clubs now affiliate.

The goals mentioned above are: To assist in forming and encouraging local writers groups, to raise the standards of the writing craft through annual awards, and to prepare and distribute a newsletter designed to communicate matters of mutual interest to professional writers.

Oklahoma is nationally known for producing an abundance of professional writers, far more than its size justifies. Part of this likely is due to the outstanding writing programs in several universities. Most of the best known state writers have shared their skills through the OWFI programs.

Where do we go from here?

OWFI will remain an effective organization as long as it continues to draw writers looking for fellowship and better ways to polish their ability to express themselves with the written word.