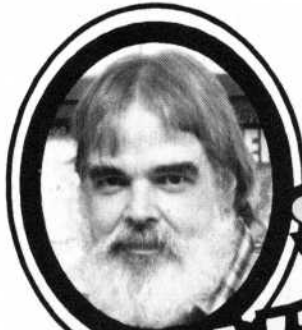


STRANGER THAN FICTION

*THE UNUSUAL HISTORICAL PROWLS
OF WILLIAM W. SAVAGE !*



**Bill
Savage**



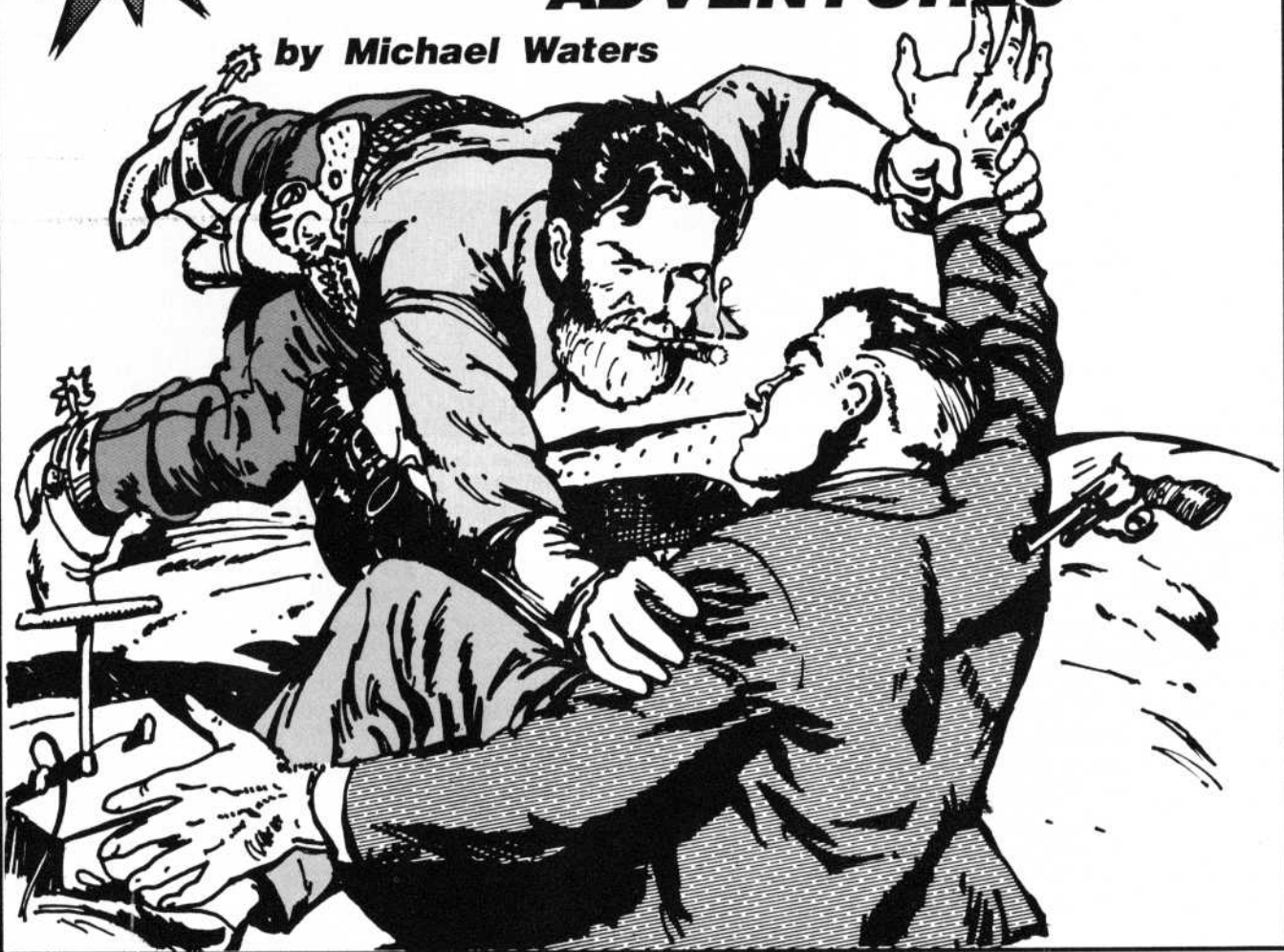
COWBOY SONGS COMIC BOOKS

10¢



TRUE ADVENTURES

by Michael Waters



William W. Savage Jr. loves to laugh. One wouldn't expect a historian who applies his analytical tools to such topics as cowboy music and comic books to be *too* somber, and, true to expectation, Savage punctuates his academic observations with plenty of chuckles and guffaws.

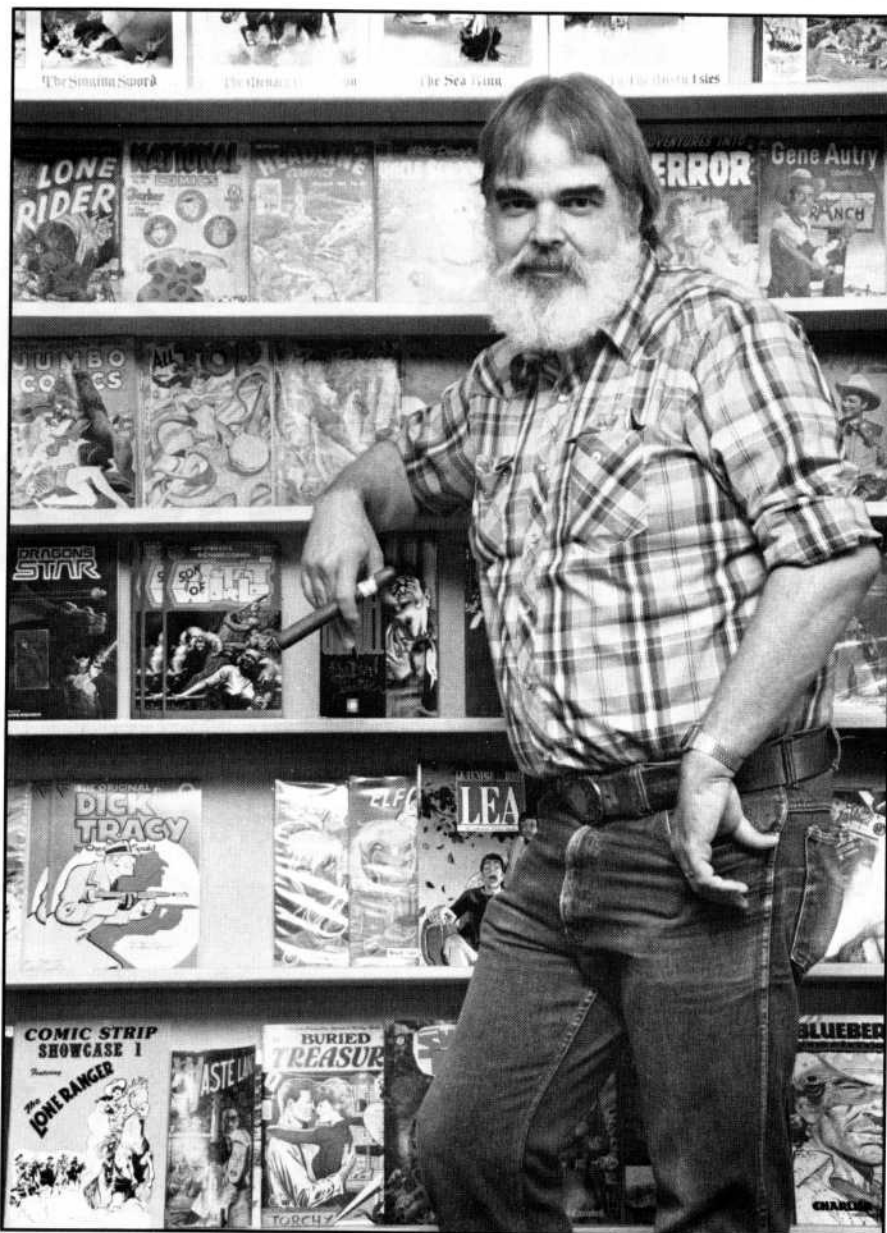
His eyes twinkle a bit as he recalls one of his mentors, Professor Richard H. Chownen of the University of South Carolina. "He would ask absurd questions on quizzes such as, 'Who built the Acropolis?' These students would name every Greek architect and sculptor they'd ever heard of in their lives. And Chownen would shout at them, 'No! God built the Acropolis! It's the *hill* that everything else *stands* on!'"

Then Savage laughs, a full-throated roar reflecting some of the salty irreverence he brings to his work. A faculty member in OU's history department since 1973 and a specialist in Western history, Savage radiates the Old West's fabled I-do-as-I-please spirit and disdain for pretension—not to mention such frontier days visual cues as a grey-flecked beard and a big, omnipresent cigar.

The 47-year-old professor might well have the last laugh on his peers who frown on pop-culture historical studies. His latest book, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, comes at a time when professors are starting to look on comics as something other than an awfully low form of low culture. A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that comic books are "attracting the attention of an increasing number of academic researchers, who regard the crudely drawn characters who speak with the aid of white balloons as serious forms of art, narrative and cultural expression."

Published by the University of Oklahoma Press last fall, Savage's book probes the ways in which old-fashioned adventure comic books reflected the beliefs and fears of Americans in the post-World War II decade. Savage contributes thoughtful essays on comic-book subgenres, interspersing prose with reproductions of stories from the era.

The words and illustrations record



As a historian, Bill Savage relishes his academic labors in deep left field, such as indulging his passion for comic books, above, or participating in the Museum of Natural History's Centennial "living history" exhibit on the opposite page.

what the comics had to say about the threat of communism, atomic weaponry, the Korean War and the status of women and racial minorities.

Moreover, Savage describes how some of the more graphically violent horror comics of the era led to condemnation by society's do-gooders and an attempt at industry self-censorship that brought the comics' "golden age" to an abrupt halt. Ironically, these works command a high price from today's collectors, while anti-comic

diatribes, such as Dr. Fredric Wertham's 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, are largely forgotten.

Comic Books in America reports that adults and children purchased 60 million copies of these comics per month. The comic books "revealed an America in the shadow of the Bomb, beset by enemies with antithetical philosophies, and learning to deal with the several dissatisfactions of limited war . . . [The comics] told some truths and a great many lies."



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lthough most of the comic books in his study were fully in tune with the racism and sexism of the era, Savage's years of research turned up some surprises. He discovered, for instance, that Korean War comics "constitute an impressive body of antiwar literature. It's really grim, fatalistic material that says 'if you go off to war, you're probably gonna get killed.'"

A story Savage reprints in the book, "The Slaughter on Suicide Hill," shows a company of weary Marines marching through Korean mud to be gunned down before a barely-glimpsed enemy. A chilling circular ending suggests that the killing continues unabated, without reward or motive.

"I read those comics as a child when the war was going on, without really understanding what I was reading," Savage recalls. "As I look at them now, they really were antiwar tracts.

"You see a remarkable distinction between the upbeat comic books of World War II and those of the Korean War . . . I suspect what happened is that the people who wrote and illustrated the Korean War stuff were combat veterans from World War II — and they knew what they were talking about. [The war comics] turned from fantasy to reality."

Despite insights such as these, the majority of professional historians have trouble accepting comics as meaningful source material. After all, a large part of what Savage analyzes is a literature meant for children. Scowling commies toss hydrogen-bomb hand grenades at American commandos, and milk-skinned jungle princesses rescue African tribesmen from murderous treasure hunters. The level of dialogue often remains below-ground, and characters are prone to shout lines such as "I'd shoot myself rather than surrender to you dogs!"

"But the silly thing is that historians don't have a problem going to the library and digging out old magazines that may have been less accurate reflections of their times than comic books were," Savage says. "One of the things I was trying to do in the book was to suggest, 'Look, so much of this stuff exists — why don't you use it? See what you can find out.'"

This attitude puts Savage somewhere in deep left field professionally, and he seems to relish playing that position. Two earlier books, *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (1979), and *Singing Cowboys and All That Jazz* (1983), took

And I said, 'Well, I'm not surprised.' And he said, 'Do you want to know why?' And I said, 'Well, I can imagine.' And he said, 'Well, the boys say you publish —. And if you're going to get promoted for publishing —, you have to publish more — than the — you publish.'"

And he laughs.

On the other hand, it could be argued that some of Savage's published work — at least the treatise on comic books — embodies over four decades of first-hand research. In addition to 10 years of serious comic collecting, Savage read the late-1940s and early-1950s comics avidly during his childhood. Born in Richmond, Virginia, he spent growing-up years first in Farmville, Virginia, and then the south side of Chicago, where he lived in an apartment high-rise just a knife's throw away from gang turf.

"There were several kids in the building," he remembers, "and every once in a while we would get together in the yard with massive stacks of comics and trade them. So, we wound up reading just about everything except, as you can imagine, the romance comics."

Whether or not it was due to the

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the same analytical approach to cowboy culture and Oklahoma popular music that he now brings to comics. He has edited several other works on Old West life and culture and written over a dozen-and-a-half articles on frontier-related topics.

"You have to understand that I warmed up to this current book by writing about cowboys," he chuckles. "That's not going to earn you a great deal of respect.

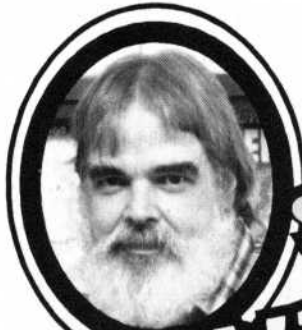
"I was once told early in my career as a faculty member here, by a former chair of the department, 'Well, you're not going to be promoted this year.'

pernicious influence of comic books, Savage's inquisitiveness took him in some unusual directions even back then.

"Every year when they'd bring out the new Chicago phone book, they'd stick the old ones in the incinerator room of each floor of the apartment building. The freight elevator was conveniently located right by the incinerator room door on each floor. So we'd load up the freight elevator with last year's phone books, go up to the roof, and chuck 'em off!" *Continued*

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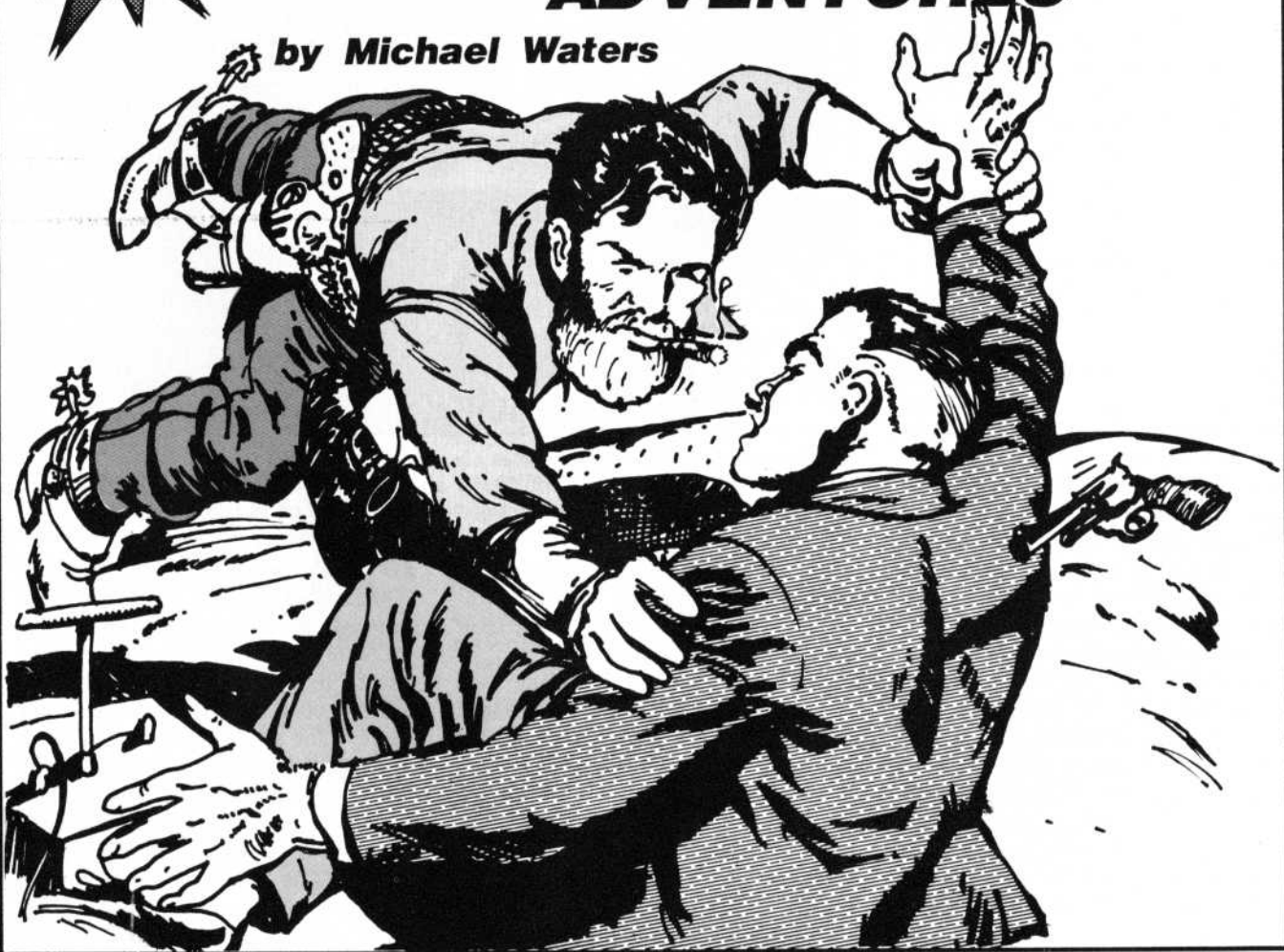


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He smiles broadly. “And they were *great* because the covers of these big phone books would peel back, the pages would flare out, and they’d ripple, and the things would drift for two or three blocks, making the most *gawdawful* racket. I mean, if Irishmen were walking down the street, they were sure the banshees were after them!”

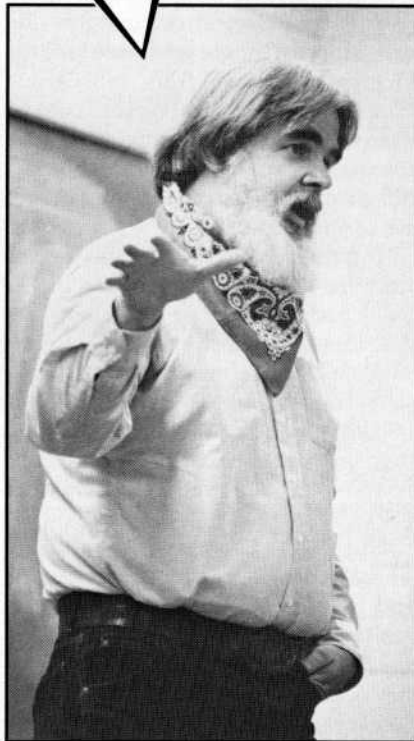
The son of a college dean, Savage spent his adolescent years in South Carolina and studied journalism at the University of South Carolina. He finished his B.A. in 1964 and nursed ambitions of becoming a writer. The study of history had been a “thoroughly unpleasant experience” for Savage in high school. During his college years, however, the influence of Professor Chowen and two of his colleagues—Wilfrid H. Callcott and William Foran—opened his mind to the notion that history “could be fun, it could be meaningful, and it could be important to know.”

He is full of stories on his mentors: Chowen, announcing that the one freshman who came closest to correctly answering the question “Who’s buried in the Holy Sepulchre?” had written “J-E-A-Z-U-S”; Foran, provoking his deep-South classes in the 1960s with lectures such as “The Natural Superiority of the Negro”; and going from row to row with questions such as “Name three kinds of cattle,” reminding his students how little many of them knew about everyday things.

“And I thought to myself,” Savage says, “My *gawd*, do you mean you can get paid to stand up and insult people?” This was pre-Don Rickles — and it fascinated me so much I started taking more history courses.”

Savage soon chucked his job as a police reporter, which he saw as “an apprenticeship for becoming an alcoholic.” Having double-majored in journalism and history, he shifted his graduate work to the master’s program in history. A childhood love of watching 1930s grade-B Westerns on TV had left him with a latent curiosity for what the real frontier was like, and so his studies turned toward the American West. He completed his M.A. in 1966.

IF I WENT SOMEWHERE ELSE, I'D HAVE TO BUY A TIE



While still at South Carolina, Savage viewed OU as a natural choice for his doctoral work. “Every book in the library there that had anything to do with Western history was published by the University of Oklahoma Press.”

Savage finished his doctorate in 1972, did a three-year stint as an assistant editor at the OU Press, then made the transition to full-time teaching. He was named assistant professor in OU’s department of history in 1974 and full professor in 1989. A hallmark of Savage’s tenure at OU has been a desire to “shake people up and make them use their brains,” just as his favorite teachers had done.

One of his unconventional teaching methods became the genesis of *Singing Cowboys and All That Jazz*.

“When I was handed the Oklahoma History course, one of the things I tried to do was adjust the way people viewed Oklahoma history. Most students had taken it in high school from some guy

named ‘Coach,’ who was one chapter ahead of the class in the textbook. And the class would spend every Thursday looking at game films.

“So I tried introducing some popular culture into the class, and music seemed to be the way to go. I knew of some musicians who were from Oklahoma, and I started playing their stuff before class.” Before long, Savage had collected a generous amount of popular song material from Oklahoma’s first decades. Since the standard textbooks, biased toward the fine arts, didn’t touch upon the music of the saloons and county fairs, Savage sought to fill the gap.

Savage plays some music himself, being a skilled guitarist and a proficient banjo and mandolin player. He stepped in front of a local television camera two years ago to create Stangley Pugh of Blanco, Texas, a country-music veejay whose sometimes-ribald wisecracks made him the most-watched show on local cable television during its one-year run. He quit the show in protest when the local cable operator blacked out a cable-network showing of *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Nowadays, Savage shows only a passing interest in his sidelines and seems content to continue plugging away at his chosen profession in his adopted home state. Living in Oklahoma coincides perfectly with his disdain for “the pretentiousness of the academy.”

“If I went somewhere else,” he explains, “I’d have to buy a tie.”

He lauds Oklahoma as “the greatest place to live in the world,” a land where people look beyond appearance and affectations in judging a person’s worth. He calls his book on Oklahoma music an attempt to reimburse the Sooner state for giving him the elbow room to teach and write what he wants, the way he wants.

“In terms of prestige and tradition, the University of Oklahoma has no equal in the field of Western History,” Savage contends. “Also, despite the opinions people might express about *what* you do, there’s certainly a freedom to *do* the things you want to do. I hope that doesn’t change.”

