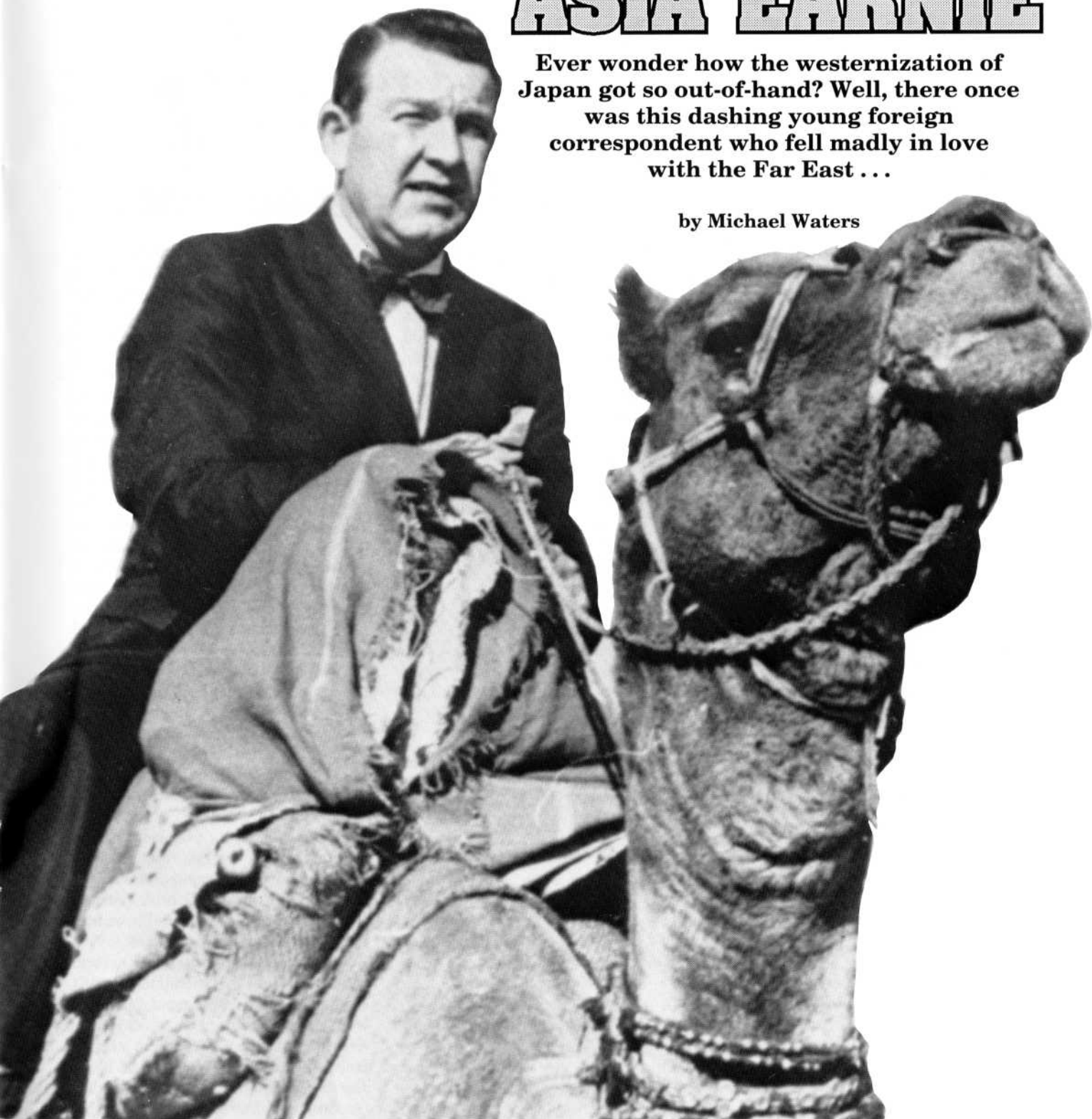


The Excellent Adventures of "ASIA EARNIE"

Ever wonder how the westernization of Japan got so out-of-hand? Well, there once was this dashing young foreign correspondent who fell madly in love with the Far East . . .

by Michael Waters



Continued

Y

ou could have come across him at almost any time, had you strolled through the war-scarred

heart of downtown Tokyo in those first few hectic years following the end of World War II. Chances were best, however, on the narrow street known informally to foreign journalists as “Shimbun Alley,” a short distance from the central train station.

He would have been leaving the Correspondents’ Club, a five-story residence and/or social hangout for about 90 often-sober Allied reporters whose job it was to cover the Occupation. He was a dapper man, a young thirtysomething, sandy-haired, smooth-faced; the trademark mustache would come later.

If you had followed him down the street, you eventually would have encountered a bevy of teenaged Japanese girls, giggling and whispering excitedly to each other, “Hoberecht-san! Hoberecht-san!” They knew his face well; it stared at them from the fan club cards they carried, pledging them to “read all Hoberecht books and sing all Hoberecht songs.”

You might have seen him exchange greetings with an Associated Press newsman, who knew Hoberecht as a tough competitor from the rival United Press. The newsman might have grinned slightly as he recalled the sing-song rhyme making the rounds: “AP be nimble / AP be quick / ‘Cause Earnie Hoberecht / Is mighty slick.”

Later in the day, you might have arrived at Allied General Headquarters, where Hoberecht often stopped to trade tidbits of news with his friend, General Douglas MacArthur.

And if you had dogged Hoberecht’s footsteps long enough, you would have slogged through the mud and muck of

Korean battlefields (where a sergeant once said after observing the flamboyant young reporter groping his way up a hillside toward American troops in the midst of furious fighting, “My God . . . it’s that guy Hoberecht again!”).

You could have watched him interview dignitaries such as Chiang Kai-shek or Jawaharlal Nehru, or talk man-talk in a Far East watering hole with his buddy James A. Michener.

And if you had tracked Hoberecht all through the years, across a continent and back over the Pacific, you would have wound up, perhaps to your surprise, witnessing Earnest Hoberecht’s return to his hometown roots in Watonga, Oklahoma. Here the alumnus who represents one of the OU journalism school’s most unusual success stories has traded his celebrity for the relatively staid life of businessman, father and grandfather.

★ ★ ★

Born in Watonga on New Year’s Day, 1918, Hoberecht graduated from high school in the midst of the Great Depression and began working dollar-a-day jobs. His father’s bank had folded in 1933, but neither father nor son was the type to wait passively for favorable winds. Hoberecht remembers his father as someone who later would, as a successful businessman, “circle his birthday on the calendar in his office, so that the office girls would remember when to throw him a surprise party.”

The young Hoberecht wrote stories voluminously, and, being rejected by the big market, started a countywide magazine of his own. In the meantime, he tried to sell news items to the United Press bureau in Oklahoma City.

“United Press offered me half of their stringer budget each month, about \$30, if I’d go on to college and study journalism,” Hoberecht recalls. So he headed to OU and over the next four years lived up to the old dictum that “writers write.”

Under the tutelage of OU professional writing instructors Stanley Vestal and W. Foster-Harris, Hoberecht completed a novel and a slew of Western short stories, several of which he sold. Meanwhile, he sharpened his newswriting skills, blazed through his general education requirements, covered sports for the campus newspaper and worked as stringer for *The Daily Oklahoman*, the *Oklahoma City News* and the United Press bureau.

Chosen by his instructors as OU’s outstanding journalism graduate for 1941, Hoberecht cut short a stint on the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He took on laborer’s work at the Pearl Harbor Naval Yard in an attempt to get closer to the action.

But he was drawn back into what became his life’s work—first as editor of the naval yard newspaper, then a job on the night desk at United Press in Honolulu and finally, in 1945, as a full-fledged UP war correspondent.

His vivid reporting of the final months of the Pacific Theater conflict led one colleague to suggest, “If you’re ever going to bomb anything, let Earnie describe it.” One of Hoberecht’s favorite memories of the period was being the first Allied correspondent to reach Japan after the surrender, beating MacArthur’s own arrival by two days.

Hoberecht was stationed with the U.S. Third Fleet, which was chafing under an order from MacArthur that none of the naval personnel be allowed to set foot on Japanese soil ahead of MacArthur's team coming up from Manila. However, Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, the fleet commander, could okay a fly-over of conquered Japan by naval dive-bombers.

Hoberecht recalls Halsey giving a verbal wink over the ship radio: "Some of those dive bombers have bad engines. They might have to land for a minute or two if they flew over Japan, wouldn't they?"

"So we went up in the dive bombers," Hoberecht remembers, "and we landed at Atusgi airfield near Tokyo two days before MacArthur came in. We got out, grabbed some green grass to prove we'd been on the ground and flew back."

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship between Hoberecht and Japan.

One would be hard-pressed to say which of the two—Hoberecht or Japan—had the bigger effect on the other. In the early going, Japan probably was altered more. For example, prior to those postwar days, kissing was not something that, in one observer's words, "unmarried, respectable Japanese girls knew much about."

But that was pre-Earnie.

Lest one draw the wrong impression, let it hurriedly be noted that it was Hoberecht's literary rather than romantic prowess that deserves credit for this aspect of postwar liberalization. Further, the presence of so many young, healthy American GIs probably had something to do with the trend as well.

Yet Hoberecht's writing career in the late 1940s was the beneficiary of fortunate timing in this and a few other important respects.

For the first few years of the Occupation, U.S. military authorities forbade Japanese publication of all books by American authors; the brass did not have the time or desire to censor books on a case-by-case basis. On the other

hand, the ordinary Japanese had become maddeningly curious for stories about these energetic, practical-minded foreigners.

Hoberecht recalls that a Japanese publisher, Zenkichi Masunaga, had told him previously that there was much money to be made if someone could just get the rights to publish American books. Now Hoberecht approached Masunaga with an idea to get around the literary ban by producing a home-grown book written by an American, then translated into Japanese.

Four weeks later Hoberecht had produced *Tokyo Diary*, a straight-ahead account of his arrival, his travels in Japan and the Japanese from an American's point of view. Masunaga urged Hoberecht to write a romantic novel set in postwar Japan.

Soon the American author was se-

questered with an efficient, pretty Japanese secretary and a brilliant, young translator, who, Hoberecht notes wryly, had plagiarized the whole of *Gone with the Wind* into his native language. After 27 days of writing and absolutely no editing, Hoberecht finished *Tokyo Romance*.

It sold like rice cakes, becoming one of the biggest sensations in Japanese publishing history.

"It just swept the country," Hoberecht says. In spite of strict paper rationing, the book managed to sell 300,000 copies. Lines formed outside stores the minute fresh copies arrived. Literary societies gave approving scrutiny to Hoberecht's work, and the book's kissing scenes drew particular attention (although the fictional lovers had to wait 150 pages before their first smooch). *Continued*

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General Mark W. Clark, commander in chief of the Far East, entertains the press—including Earnie—at his Tokyo home on July 30, 1952. From left, K. Sheba, Tokyo Evening News; UP's Hoberecht; S. Kudo, Mainichi newspaper; Clark; Eleanor McClatchy, McClatchy newspapers of California; and S. Okuyama, Tokyo Evening News.

Tokyo Romance: “possibly the worst novel of modern times.” “Near-libelous,” responded the author, “in view of the fact that I have written worse myself.”

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Defense Secretary John Tower, left, is pictured with Hoberecht outside the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo.

Tokyo Romance was a concise, by-the-numbers soap opera about a love affair involving, not surprisingly, a daring young American correspondent

and a ravishing Japanese starlet. Along with its love scenes and intrigue, the author served up some good-natured democratic preaching. In one such outburst, the heroine proclaimed, “It is time the Japanese and the rest of the people in the world forget all about racial prejudices and treat all human beings as equal individuals.”

(And let it be said that Hoberecht practiced what he preached; he lobbied successfully to overturn the rule that barred Japanese from the Correspondents' Club.)

Hoberecht suddenly found himself with a fan club over a quarter-of-a-million members strong. Japanese readers regarded him as a literary lion somewhere in the same neighborhood as Hemingway and Faulkner. James Michener, in a 1957 *Newsday* piece on Hoberecht, recounted his puzzlement while addressing Japanese literary forums at being hit with questions about this unknown whom the Japanese were touting as “America’s greatest writer.”

Hoberecht also became one of the richest Americans in Japan. Royalties brought in the equivalent of roughly \$80,000 (a fortune in postwar Japan), but currency restrictions forbade him from sending any of it out of the country.

“The first thing I knew,” he says, “I was walking up and down the street with a suitcase full of yen, looking all over for things I could spend it on.”

In America, where kisses and American-penned books were more abundant, reaction to an English-language edition of *Tokyo Romance* was cooler. *The New Yorker* sniffed, “The story ought to make the Japanese think very highly of American war correspondents, but what it will make them think of our fiction writers, one would rather not consider.”

Life magazine saluted the author’s success with a five-page photo spread showing scenes from the novel as depicted by fellow war correspondents but described the book in by-the-way fashion as “possibly the worst novel of modern times.” This was plainly going too far; Hoberecht promptly wired *Life* that their description was “near libelous, in view of the fact that I have written worse myself.”

Yet whatever the literary merits of *Tokyo Romance* (and Hoberecht, who cannot read Japanese, professes the inability to judge the work himself),

the Watonga lad's newfound celebrity prompted a cable to his father back home. It began, "Have struck oil . . ." and concluded with a request that all his old writings be bundled up, insured and shipped to Japan, pronto.

Several of his unsold Western stories, penned back at OU, were translated and published—again, successfully—as *The Hitherto Unpublished Short Stories of Earnest Hoberecht*. The book was padded by inclusion of a few of Hoberecht's old philosophy themes (perhaps being one of the most profitable uses any alumnus has ever made of undergraduate term papers).

Four other books were published in the late 1940s for Japanese consumption, including the novel written as classwork in OU's professional writing program. Titled *Shears of Destiny*, it was an answer of sorts to *The Grapes of Wrath* and set forth the thesis that Steinbeck's "Okies" weren't really Oklahomans but merely low-life passers-through.

He wrote two new books in short order. *Democratic Etiquette* introduced the Japanese to American mores and manners, and *Fifty Famous Americans* was put together (with the help of clips from the OU Extension Service) as another pro-democracy reader.

Then there was the song he wrote, a logical step in what had become a one-man effort to westernize an entire culture. Noting once that Japanese love songs did not have rhyming lyrics, Hoberecht contributed a modest set of lyrics himself for a tune not-so-coincidentally titled "Tokyo Romance."

The English rhymes were translated into Japanese, and local musicians provided the music. The whole thing was unveiled at a public event that Hoberecht proudly described later as "the first authentic bobbysox jazz program in Asia."

Let it be said again that Hoberecht practiced what he preached. Not only did he treat the Japanese to fictional descriptions of kissing, he also gave at least one well-documented, first-hand

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Then-United Press general manager for Asia and a veteran war correspondent, Earnie Hoberecht sits on a pile of sandbags near a bombed-out railway bridge at the Korean front.

demonstration. About the time *Tokyo Romance* was published, he bestowed what one correspondent's account called a "prairie-twister" of a kiss on a real-life Japanese actress.

Hideko Mimura, who never had been kissed in all her 26 years, was rehearsing a script that called for a big-time kiss from the hero. Naturally the actress was nervous and apprehensive. Hoberecht, who happened to be visiting the movie set, offered to assist. He explained that movie kisses would help speed the nation's transition to democracy. Then, upon obtaining her permission, he puckered up and demonstrated as best he knew how.

Press accounts differ as to whether Miss Mimura actually fainted.

★ ★ ★

The lifting of the American book ban, the Korean War and the increased demands of the news desk all but

brought Hoberecht's literary career to an end after the late 1940s. Yet, however intriguing, his renown in Japan as an author and songwriter should not obscure his achievements in 21 years as the foreign correspondent whose continent-wide travels led his colleagues to dub him "Asia Earnie."

Today the walls of his Watonga home bear artifacts and souvenirs from all over the Pacific Rim. Displayed are dolls, decorative plates, swords, vases, wall hangings and paintings from Japan, Vietnam, China, Thailand and elsewhere.

One painting, an oil by a Nationalist Chinese general, revives memories of Hoberecht's biggest journalistic scoop. Some credited the 1950 story with rescuing Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese regime on Formosa.

"I got ahold of and wrote about a position paper that the State Depart-

James Michener noted in his 1957 article on Hoberecht that the newsman's "three great enthusiasms are the United Press, General MacArthur and Oklahoma."

ment had distributed," Hoberecht recalls. "What they were planning to do was to write off Chiang Kai-shek and Formosa to the Communists." The story, Hoberecht claims, touched off a storm of criticism in Congress, sparked a number of angry editorials and caused an intelligence officer at MacArthur's headquarters to tell him, "It looks like you saved Formosa."

"Chiang never forgot that," Hoberecht says. "Anytime I wanted to see him, he made himself available." Hoberecht similarly charmed the first president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, and the president of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee, who had started out in Hoberecht's employ in the Singapore bureau of United Press.

Near the top of his own list of admired figures was MacArthur, a friend with whom Hoberecht hobnobbed frequently in the Occupation and Korean War days. (One Pulitzer Prize-winning newsman once commented the two men "travel around like two peas in a pod.") Hoberecht flew to and from Korea a number of times with the general and used his status as an insider to repeatedly scoop his AP arch-rivals.

Hoberecht's honesty, much praised by his colleagues, was valued highly by MacArthur. The correspondent himself recalls that "we used to meet one night a month to talk about things; he wanted to hear news that wasn't sweetened up for his ears."

United Press valued Hoberecht, too, naming him Tokyo bureau chief in 1948, general manager for Asia in 1951 and a vice president of the company in 1953. Hoberecht's retirement in 1966 slowed down his globetrotting but has not subdued his penchant for quips.

ABOVE: Hoberecht types as General Douglas MacArthur reads from handwritten notes after a trip to the front. BELOW: A foreign correspondent's life isn't all work. Here Earnie Hoberecht and British information officer Nigel Watt go boating on the bay at Hong Kong.

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TOP: Hoberecht visits the Seoul home of Korea's President Syngman Rhee in 1953.

BOTTOM: At a Far East airfield during the Korean War, Hoberecht, second from left, and fellow correspondents flank General Douglas MacArthur, center.

Showing off an ornamental brass vase in his home, Hoberecht describes it as "a gift a Mongolian chieftain gave me for rescuing his son from kidnapers." A visitor, having just heard an hour's worth of Hoberecht's stranger-than-fiction tales, waits to hear more.

A pause and a shrug. "Actually, I bought it in Oklahoma City."

The house is at times filled with more than the artifacts. Hoberecht brought four children to his current

marriage (his fourth), his wife having four children of her own. This Brady Bunch-style union now boasts 13 young grandchildren, making family get-togethers noisy enough to rival some of the wars Hoberecht has covered.

So why did Hoberecht bring his colorful career full-circle, back at last to Watonga? Part of the answer lies in the strength of his roots. Michener noted in his 1957 biographical article that Hoberecht's "three great enthusi-

asms are the United Press, General MacArthur and Oklahoma." In addition, Hoberecht, who presumably has observed more than an average share of worldly vice, says he wanted to raise his children in the safety and security of a small town.

Oklahomans rewarded his loyalty in 1977 by naming him to the state's Hall of Fame, five years after he was named to the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame. OU gave Hoberecht the 1989 Distinguished Service Citation.

Meanwhile, a new generation of Hoberechts have followed in their father's footsteps to OU. Three children—Earnest III, Nathalie and Shelly—completed undergraduate degrees at OU, while Hoberecht's eldest child, Antonia, who now lives in Tulsa, came to the University after finishing her master's in Syracuse to work for *World Literature Today*.

Hoberecht shows no sign of missing the excitement and danger of his old job. "I am 74 years old," he wrote recently, "and I may have used up all my luck." Also, he has plenty to keep himself busy, being the owner of two abstract companies, an insurance agency and 1,500 acres of wheat and pasture land.

He admits, however, to missing the writing opportunities that his work provided. He recalls that his biggest hope during his student days was to "be like Louis L'Amour, writing novel after novel . . . but then I got mixed up in the news business, and they kept promoting me."

Still, Hoberecht says with a grin that "nobody could have had a better life;" the souvenirs of that life that surround him seem to bear him out.

Inside the four walls of his home are reminders of his ongoing romance with Asia. Outside those walls, in the wheat fields to the north, in the old brick buildings of his hometown to the south, and in the homes of friends in all directions, are the reminders of Hoberecht's life-long, and ongoing, romance with the Sooner state. 