

Alumni in The News



Foster Harris (right), '25ba, and Charles Welch, who sells sports and juvenile fiction, read through a manuscript Welch recently completed. Buchanan Hall can be seen through the window of Harris' office, which is located in the Business Administration Building.

Foster Harris--Manuscript Master

By PAUL McCLUNG

Foster Harris, '25ba, although he's the last man in the world to admit it, is already a legend. With Walter S. Campbell, he has developed a school praised by *The Saturday Review of Literature* and described by *Writer's Digest* as the best college residence school for teaching writing in the United States.

Big, red-faced, and black-headed, Foster rumbles when he talks. His students have never seen him without his famous black pipe.

While a student in the University, he wrote for *The Oklahoma Daily*, *The Whirlwind*, humor magazine of the period, and *Sooner Magazine*. He met and married doll-like Jill Pruet, who was also a University student. After receiving a geology degree, Foster went into oil journalism, started a newspaper career on *The Daily Oklahoman*, and soon was graduated into editing oil newspapers. Has he roughnecked in oil fields? He looks the part.

One of his first jobs was in an oil refinery. His father was a pioneer Oklahoma wildcatter. "When you work for oil papers you spend half your time sitting on derrick floors, waiting for something to happen that usually doesn't come off," he recalls.

For 10 years he worked on newspapers and magazines in the daytime and "played with fiction" when he went home at night. He worked on *The Western World*, *The Des Moines Register*, *The Petroleum Daily*, I.N.S., and other publications.

During the time he was on papers and later he continued to sell fiction to two score national magazines. *Star Western*, *Adventure*, *Dime Western*, *Better Living*, *Argosy*, *Western Trails* and others published reams of his copy. Meanwhile, he pursued his hobby of living all over Texas.

Professor Campbell had been one of Foster's English instructors, so in 1938, when President W. B. Bizzell appointed a committee to establish writing courses, Dr. Campbell asked Foster to become his assistant. He's been a campus landmark ever since.

Foster Harris (and he emphatically denies this, too) is almost a human encyclopedia. People telephone him for information about the kind of army uniforms worn by United States soldiers in the War of 1812, what cowboys ate on the Chisolm Trail, or living conditions in Alaska. And Foster usually knows the answers!

He reads manuscript as fast as he can turn the pages, and he can catch a misplaced comma or a left-out quote. He learned this, he says, during his newspaper days.

"Anybody can learn to read rapidly if he'll work at it," he patiently explains. "Try reaching up to a line at a time," he advises. "Anyone can do it. Only a moron reads one word at a time."

Sooner or later, into the Harris home in Norman come the country's writers—"especially tomorrow's best sellers," as Harris explains. His students congregate there, not only in the daytime, but every night, to drink gallons of coffee and to discover literary wisdom. When Foster goes home from his office in the Business Administration Building basement, he finds students waiting in his living room. They stay until all hours.

Next morning, when he gets up, more students are waiting on the front porch to see him. When does the Harris family sleep?

"When we can," is Jill's gracious answer. "These young writers are close to our hearts. We have a

big family of 75!" She pours 10 pounds of coffee every week for the family. At night the Harris living room is smoky as a blast furnace. Each morning several dozen ash trays are emptied. The number of cigarets smoked in the Harris living room every week runs into the hundreds.

Jill, who also cares for the two Harris sons, Austin and Doug, bakes a cake for each member of the "family" when he or she sells a first story. Members of the big "family" gathered last Christmas in the Harris front yard to sing carols and present Jill a silver electric coffee pot. Then they all came in, to try the coffee out of the pot.

Books and souvenirs line the walls from floor to ceiling in the Harris home. Eager embryo scrawlers and accomplished artists sit in the living room, talking about everything from Philippine citrus fruits to the interpretation of dreams.

Through all the nightly discussions, Jill and Foster maintain a good-humored sanity. Foster sits in an armchair by the fireplace, looking like a big Indian chief as he calmly puffs his pipe.

"Tell them he has written 1,000 stories," says Leonard Snyder, Campbell-Harris student and well-known writer of true crime and confession stories.

"That's not true," protests Foster. "I didn't write that many."

"Just say innumerable stories," suggests Sidney Stewart, versatile survivor of the Bataan death march, "or maybe unmentionable." Stewart is completing a volume about his experiences and has also started selling magazine fiction.

Just how many stories has Foster written? Nobody knows, not even Foster. But he admits he has written "several," and "quite a few of them" with an oil background.

He reads at least 12 to 20 manuscripts each day. That means a criticism of up to a hundred thousand words. He can remember characters in nearly every story he has read in his life. His textbook, *The Basic Formulas of Fiction*, published in 1944 by the University of Oklahoma Press, is rated one of the best on the market.

When interviewed for a story concerning himself, Foster Harris fights roughly and bitterly. But he is quietly and deliberately stamping an indelible impression in the lives of young writers.

To the question "Why have you chosen to teach?" there is no tangible answer. He does not have time to write his own stories. Is it true that he may some day quit teaching to devote all his time to his own writing?

"Uh, huh, I'll quit one of these days, all right—when I'm blind, too, I'll quit," he rumbles.

WITT MEMORIAL

Dr. and Mrs. O. S. Witt, Oklahoma City, have made their second annual contribution of \$500 to a memorial collection in the University architectural library honoring their son, Lt. Orville S. Witt, Jr., '38-'41, President Cross has announced.

Lieutenant Witt, a former School of Architecture student, was lost in action on his first mission over France as a B-17 pilot in December, 1942. He left school in 1941 to enlist. He received his wings at Luke Field in February, 1942, and was stationed in England the following October.

Today's women are healthier and more vigorous than their ancestors, Katherine Culbert, professor of physical education, believes. This might be traced, she says, to their "vivacious attitude toward sports."