

An era is coming to an end. The founder of O. U.'s world-famous professional writing school is preparing to retire. This is his story.

THE TRIUMPH OF STANLEY VESTAL

By LEN WHITE

FORTY-THREE YEARS AGO a young Oxford graduate came to the University of Oklahoma and became an instructor in the English department. And approximately 23 years later this same man was responsible for starting what is now considered one of the best professional writing schools in the United States.

Hundreds of students have taken advantage of the courses he has taught, and, as a result of their training at O. U., many have become successful writers, bringing recognition not only to themselves but to the University of Oklahoma and to their teacher—Dr. Walter S. Campbell.

Dr. Campbell, who writes under the pen-name Stanley Vestal, is 70 years old, and will retire from the faculty in July, 1958. Whether dictating to a secretary or delivering an informal letter to a group of aspiring writers in his combination office-classroom in Kaufman Hall, the white-haired, thick-moustached,

W. S. Campbell, alias Stanley Vestal, started the University's creative writing curriculum.

deep-voiced professor maintains an ever-present, consistent flair for his work. The secret of perpetual emotion apparently belongs to him.

His office is probably a stereotype of what one would expect a writer's study to look like. The desk is cluttered with letters, notes, textbooks, magazines, and various souvenirs. And the room itself is flanked on either side with a floor-to-ceiling accumulation of books, boxes, and reference materials shelved in complex hideaways which he can find at will.

In an early October interview, Professor Campbell told of his plans after retirement, inserting academic reflections and fragments of the humour and philosophies which have guided him through his many years of writing and teaching.

"I came here on the invitation of President Brooks," Campbell said, "and became an instructor in English in 1915. At that time the University of Oklahoma was a much smaller school than it has been since. The buildings in existence, besides the old wooden Gymnasium which stood where the south wing of the Union is now, were the Administration Building, the old Science Hall on the west side of the north oval, and the Law Barn and Education Building (then the Library) on the east side.

"The student body and the faculty were both of modest size, and I think I knew nearly everyone in both categories by his first name. At that time it was required of the students that when they held a dance they must have at least one married couple and one single man for chaperones. As I was a young fellow and had time on my hands, I often acted as the third chaperone, and so got to know many of the students socially. In fact, a dean was quoted to me as having said that I was 'just a member of the student body.'

"In those days dancing and football were the two main sports on the campus, and rules were not so strict, so that dances could be held morning, afternoon and night on weekends and even in the week, sometimes. We had a very good football team in those days, much better than we had in some years which followed."

Before the second year of his service ended, war was declared on Germany. Campbell immediately enlisted and served with many of the students and faculty men who were sent to the officers' training camp at Fort Logan H. Roots near Little Rock, Arkansas. On being commissioned captain of field artillery there, he was assigned to the 335th field artillery of the 87th division, and trained in Camp Pike, near Lit-

tle Rock, and at Camp Dix, New Jersey. He had six months in France. He had always been a great lover of horse flesh and fond of the saddle, and was happy to be enrolled in the mounted service.

RETURNING TO THE STATES, Campbell taught for a summer in the college at Weatherford (where his stepfather, James R. Campbell, was dean) until the fall term opened and he could return to O. U.

"After the war there was a great upsurge of literary effort in the United States," Campbell pointed out, "and quite a bit was being done on this campus. Among my students was Lynn Riggs, Oklahoma's foremost playwright and one of our best poets, who was then beginning to write for publication. He attended some of my lectures and I saw a good deal of him and other like-minded students on the campus and in my home. In fact, I have a poem he composed during one of my lectures in class. At the bottom he added a postscript to this effect: 'W. S., here's what I wrote in your English class this morning between spells of taking down notes on Dryden—the dry old bird. RLR, March 7, 1922.'

"It was about that time that I began to scribble, and completed a manuscript or two. In those days, in freshman English, instructors were required to have their students write a correct sonnet and a ballad after the Old English fashion. Sonnets were no trouble because they can be written from personal experience, but a ballad has to have a story. And the students were always pestering me for a story to use in their ballads.

"One afternoon while I was concerned with this problem, my eye fell upon a life of Kit Carson which my father had given me as a boy. It occurred to me that Kit's career offered a great many incidents which could be made into heroic ballads in the Old English style. So I ran through the book and marked those pages where such incidents were recorded. Then having gone to all that trouble, it occurred to me that I might as well write the ballads myself.

"I went to the library and got a treatise by a scholar on the ballads which I had used in my classes, noting down all the devices used in the heroic ballad in the old style. This made a two-column list, and a good many more devices, I discovered, than I could use in any one ballad. I chose the best subject of the 25 incidents and set to work to use only those devices which seemed to fit the subject matter. In like manner I wrote the other 24 ballads and soon had a book full.

"Thus I got started to writing, and,

though of course no publisher would take a book of verse from a poet who had never published in a magazine, I did not lose hope, and one day saw a notice that the *Southwest Review* was being founded and wished to publish southwestern material in prose or verse. I sent them some of my ballads and they accepted them. I eagerly awaited their publication.

"I got a letter from H. L. Mencken, then one of the foremost critics in the country and editor of the *American Mercury*, saying, 'I have an advance copy of the *Southwest Review*. If you have any more ballads, or indeed anything else, please send them to me immediately.' At this I floated off the ground, and told all my friends about that, sending off a half-dozen ballads to Mr. Mencken.

"Shortly after, the editor of *Poetry* visited our campus, looking for manuscripts, and hearing that Mr. Mencken liked my stuff, bought up what ballads I had left. I don't know that she knew much about ballads, but she knew who Mr. Mencken was, and thought she could get me into print ahead of him, perhaps, and claim that she had discovered me. This was the beginning of my writing career.

"So I owe it to my freshman class at O. U. that I became a writer. I owe a great many other things to this university. The many satisfactions of teaching in such a friendly and energetic school; the confidence that one sometimes has that one is doing a public service in trying to help others share the values and the knowledge which one has acquired; the satisfactions of familiarity with the classics which one teaches, and the great satisfaction of seeing one's pupils and students progress and succeed and put into practice the principles and techniques which one offers them."

CAMPBELL taught English almost steadily from 1915 until 1938, and, beginning in 1927, he turned out a book practically every year. At present he has published 24 books, edited three books, and contributed to numerous anthologies, magazines, and journals.

"I've found," he said, "that being an Oxford man and having taken a course in English language and literature there, where our teachers, Sir Walter Raleigh and George Gordon, were both writers and encouraged their pupils to write, it was the natural thing to try to share with my readers the stories and the facts that I found interesting and significant in Southwestern and Western life.

"The English department had a course called creative writing, and, after I began

to publish, I was usually assigned to teach this course. Nobody wanted to teach it, for it was a most frustrating experience. It lasted for only one semester, and I would defy anyone to teach even young Shakespeare to write professionally in one semester.

"There was no screening of applicants, anybody could attend, and many of those who did came just for what they supposed to be some cultural advantage to their souls and without any intention of doing any work. All the instructor could do was to collaborate with the few serious students, and if the result was a salable story or article, the student would naturally assume that he had now arrived and was a professional writer.

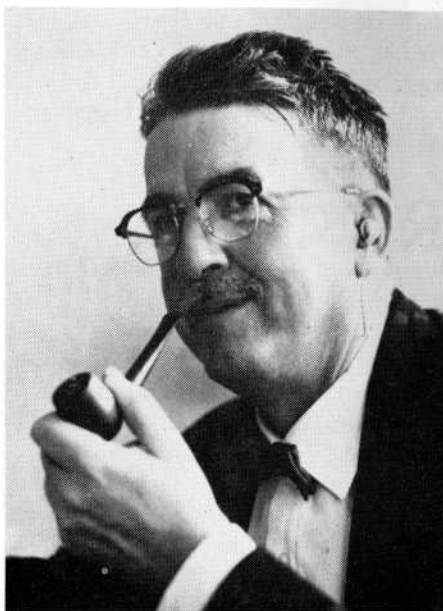
"Then the semester was over, the class was disbanded, and there was no collaborator. All his friends kept asking him, 'When is your next story coming out?' and at length he came to realize that it was never coming out, that he was not yet a writer. As I foresaw all this unhappiness, it was no pleasure for me to teach the course. The University derived no benefit from it so far as I could see, and certainly the students were only rendered unhappy.

"It came to me that the test of a good writing course would be that the student so trained could go off and write alone without a collaborator and publish his work. The problem then was to devise a course which would train him to do that.

"I began to investigate the lives of successful writers, including Nobel Prize winners and other distinguished authors, and found that many of them had spent from 10 to 20 years getting published after they began seriously to write. This seemed an awfully long apprenticeship, and I thought there must be some way of getting around that and of shortening that apprenticeship. I discovered that the reason so many of them were so long in getting published was that there are certain experiences which a writer must go through before he knows what he is about. And that if he is left to his own devices, he will very possibly blunder around for 15 or 20 years before he blunders on to these experiences.

"If, then, I could set up a course in which the student was put through these experiences as fast as he could take them, I hoped to be able to knock five to ten years off his apprenticeship and get him started to publishing that much earlier, and publishing on his own.

"Then I remembered that old Ben Jonson back in Shakespeare's day had trained a flock of poets who called themselves 'The Sons of Ben.' I went to his notebook and



FOSTER HARRIS

found three lines which seemed to indicate that I was on the right track. Then I devised the course and advertised in the student paper for young men who wished to learn to write. From those who applied, I selected four, and worked with them gratis for a year to see what we could do. At the end of that year, three of them had published, and the method seemed to have some merit.

"But I also found that such a practical course was not looked upon with favor by the English Department because, of course, English is a part of the liberal arts program, which is supposed to leave the student or graduate, as some wag has said, 'equally unfit for all occupations.' But I inclined to the opinion of John Milton, that a good education 'fits a man to perform.'

"But I saw that were the department indifferent or hostile to my plan, there would be nothing in it for me in the way of promotion or pay, and only a lot of extra hard work. For it is much easier to grade a freshman theme for punctuation and spelling than to read a story and tell what is wrong with it, how to fix it, and where to sell it. So I decided that as there was no future in teaching professional writing, I would simply embody my method in a textbook and get something for my trouble in that way."

Accordingly, Campbell wrote and published the text, *Professional Writing*, which is used in our professional writing courses today, and indeed in many other colleges. Then he thought he was through with professional writing. But as it happened, Kenneth Kaufman, after whom Kaufman Hall is named, an old friend of Campbell's from

the days when they went to college together in Weatherford, was impatient with him and insisted, saying, "W. S., you have your book, you have your course, you know it's a good one. Why don't you offer a course in professional writing?"

"I explained why," Campbell said, "but Kaufman was not satisfied. And finding a picture in the paper of four O. U. graduates up at Iowa taking writing, Kaufman showed it to President Bizzell, who immediately appointed a committee. They put the finger on me, and I've been teaching professional writing ever since. However, I asked the president that if I agreed to set up these courses, he would agree that no one be allowed to interfere with me, that I could conduct them in my own way. He agreed, and the University ever since has observed that promise."

THE COURSES in professional writing then were set up as undergraduate courses because it was wished to attract people primarily interested in writing for publication, rather than those who were primarily interested in credits and degrees. At first it was proposed that they have their own magazine, but there were plenty of magazines, and the question was, who could edit the magazine. Campbell could not edit the work of his own pupils and would not have the time for it in any case. He was determined that his pupils should write for readers and not for a faculty committee. For the same reason he turned down prizes and a proposed degree in professional writing.

"We wanted our students to have one goal in mind: the best writing of which they were capable, and publication on a national scale," Campbell said.

He persuaded the dean to employ Professor Foster Harris as his assistant, a graduate of this University and a man whom Campbell had known in a writers' club of which he (Campbell) had been sponsor in the earlier days, a man who had made a living writing for some 15 years, and who had had editorial experience.

"This was a very happy choice," Campbell said. "And the University owes much to Professor Harris' excellent instruction and counseling of students. No man on this campus has given himself more freely to his students than Professor Harris. For some years we fought the battle of professional writing together, and later, when the enrollments increased, were lucky enough to have Professor Dwight V. Swain join our staff as a part-time instructor."

In addition to the campus classes—and most of the professional writing students re-

remained with the instructors for four or five semesters—the department offered certain courses by correspondence. The enrollment soon mounted to a very gratifying number.

"The greatest satisfaction we have is in the continual reports we get of publication by our pupils and graduates," said Campbell. "There is scarcely a magazine worth reading in North America in which their work has not appeared. And they have published, to our knowledge, more than 150 books; and the thing we are most proud of is that most of these manuscripts they have published are manuscripts we never saw. Our aim was to train our students to go off and do their writing on their own, and publish on their own.

"So we think we have the most successful writing school in North America, and since such schools have not caught on abroad, that means the world. At any rate, our people publish more, so far as we can learn, than the graduates of most of the other writing schools in the country combined.

"For administrative reasons the president, with my hearty agreement, transferred our courses to journalism some years ago, and the school of journalism has given us every aid and encouragement possible."

Campbell was born in August, 1887, on a claim in Kansas near the little town of Severy, which is on the edge of the Flint Hills east of Wichita, and was christened Walter Stanley Vestal. He was about a year old when his father died, and he grew up in his grandmother's home town, Fredonia, Kansas.

Several years later his mother married James R. Campbell, and the family brought Walter to Oklahoma where he has always been known as Walter Campbell, or W. S. Campbell, or simply "W. S." But needing a pen-name to distinguish his work from that of several other Campbells, he, at his mother's suggestion, chose his own name, Stanley Vestal, as his pen-name.

Campbell will be on the University of Oklahoma campus until July 1, 1958, teaching his courses and conducting the short course in professional writing at the writers conference in June.

The short course started out very modestly with a budget of \$100, and Campbell expressed his gratitude for the many speakers "who have given their services so willingly for little or nothing over the years."

The writers conference is the highlight of the professional writing courses, and it attracts approximately two or three hundred people each year for a three-day session to consider the problems and rewards

of authorship. Editors, publishers, experts in the various kinds of writing are among those who appear on the programs, but, today, it would be possible to staff an entire writers conference with publishing students and graduates of O. U.'s writing school.

"No one of my students has ever been tagged a second Stanley Vestal," Campbell said. "We try to train and encourage each one to be himself and do his work as best he can in his own way, which is the only way to success in literature. The satisfaction of helping men help themselves is very great, and, moreover, of helping them to be themselves."

BESIDES TEACHING, Campbell has done all his writing on the campus at O. U., and, because of his proficiency in these two fields, has received, he says, "every promotion possible to a mere teacher on this campus." He is now a research professor in English and director of the courses in professional writing.

In addition, he put two daughters through O. U., daughters of whom he is very proud and who have provided him with five grandchildren.

"It is a most satisfying life," Campbell said.

He has sat on the committee of selection for Rhodes scholarships for Oklahoma for many years, a committee from which he is now retiring, and is proud of the men the committee have sent to Oxford, some of whom are on this campus now. Campbell was the first Rhodes scholar selected from Oklahoma after statehood.

At Weatherford he played football, and lacrosse at Oxford. And being very fond of the saddle, between the wars he played polo on the University ROTC ponies.

"And now that everything is mechanized, I ride a taxi-cab," Campbell laughed. "When I came here in 1915, there was only one cab in Norman, a black horse-drawn affair which was used only for funerals, and a horse-drawn bus with steps and entrance in the rear and a strap running overhead through slots in the roof so that the driver could release or close the door without leaving his seat in front.

"When a dance was being given for the three fraternities and three sororities in the city, the men of one fraternity would charter the bus, visit the three sororities and pick up their dates. And the second fraternity, in order of seniority, would do the same, the third following. Thus everybody got to the dance on wheels.

"The campus in those days, in many places, was spotted with buffalo wallows, and all of which, of course, have been filled

in and covered over now. As the years passed we saw building after building and larger classes coming in each year, and a greatly increased faculty. It was no longer possible to know everybody by his first name, and I trust that I am no longer considered 'a member of the student body.'

"The people in Oklahoma are friendly. I have lived here since 1899, nearly 60 years, and it has been a heartening and pleasant experience.

"The University has suffered ups and downs, and there were times when the warrants with which we were paid were uncashable. But I think most people who have taught on this campus are loath to leave it, even for better salaries. And I know quite a number who, having left, moved heaven and earth to get back. The University of Oklahoma has so many outstanding departments and enterprises and teams that one can always take pride in its constantly increasing achievements.

"I shall regret retiring from my classroom. But I hope not to sever my relations with the University, but to spend a good deal of my time in Norman and even on the campus, where I have so many friends and can meet so many old students when they come back to visit or to see our football team perform its wonders.

"Of course, in fact, you cannot retire a writer so long as he can hold a pen or dictate something that people would pay to read. And I have numerous projects which I hope to complete when I am relieved of my classes on the campus."

At the same time Campbell does not expect to give up teaching altogether, but to carry on correspondence courses either through the University or on his own. He hopes to have more time to act as a consultant to writers and as a speaker at writers conferences after his retirement.

"That is one of the nice things about being a writer," Campbell said. "He cannot be retired, you cannot freeze his wages, he doesn't require a license or any capital—only a pencil and a piece of paper and a postage stamp, with, of course, something to say."

His interest in the West and western history and literature has by no means diminished but rather grown with the years. Campbell hopes that he will have enough fans and readers of his work to keep him busy and interested as long as he can "wiggle a pen."

"Of course there is always a chance that some emergency might arise, like another war," Campbell said, "in which case they

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CORE OF A PROGRAM

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graduate students. The fine collection of Lyell's works is one example; William Gilbert's book on cosmology is probably a very important book in the development of seventeenth century astronomical theory, and since it has never been subjected to thorough study, a copy was acquired as a deliberate "setting-up" of a thesis problem for a graduate student; a very fine block of works in eighteenth century electricity is being built for the same purpose; dozens of other examples could be cited.

Since the inception of the formal, classroom courses in the history of science three years ago, some 450 students have taken such courses, and the Collection is available for their use. Therein they find those books containing reading assignments in the history of science courses. But they also find biographies of scientists, histories of science, modern English translations of the classics of science, and books with titles reflecting the modern impact of science, such as *Men and Volts*, *The Atomic Submarine*, *Report on the Atom*, *Space Travel*, *American Chemical Industry*, *Science and Social Needs*, *Rats, Lice, and History*, and *Modern Science and Modern Man*.

A common question asked about the DeGolyer Collection is: "How does this compare with other special collections in the

history of science, at other universities?" This is really an unanswerable question, for there is no other collection quite like this, although a number of universities have excellent facilities for research and teaching in the history of science. Probably the best answer is that the University of Oklahoma is acquiring outstanding facilities in this field, matched only by a half dozen or so other institutions in the entire country, and that the continuing growth of the DeGolyer Collection promises to make the University of Oklahoma world-famous in this area of study—a fame that is not transient but that will be with us for as long as the University is here.

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might call me along with a lot of the other retired teachers back in service to replace younger man needed elsewhere. But I hope that no such emergency will arise in my time, though I will be perfectly willing to serve if such a thing should happen.

"One of my old friends, William Henry Jackson, the famous western photographer, published his autobiography called *Time Exposure* at 97 years of age. In that book he had two chapters: one, 'I Retire,' and the one following, 'I Go to Work.' I like that spirit and hope that I share it. And indeed all the men in my family of whom I have any record died in the harness. I cannot

understand how anybody could be so behind-hand with his projects that he could be stopped even by retirement, so long as he retains a measure of health and spirit.

"Some years ago I made an estimate of the number of students who had sat in my classes since I first began to teach. It runs into thousands, and that's a rough estimate. Half of those people have changed their names, and I do not profess to be able to remember the names of all of my pupils, and no doubt many of them have forgotten me. But I think I would recognize most of them if they turned up. And if I have done any of them any good, it is very gratifying, for the teacher's great reward is in the success and affection of his former students.

"Working with writers is a rewarding experience. They are, as a class or as a group, most obliging, friendly, and accessible, willing and eager to help others over the bumps in their own profession, and leading exciting lives themselves of trial and error, triumph and disappointment, as all free-lance writers must. A free-lance writer, a professional writer, watches the postman coming down the street with keen interest. He may bring a contract, a big check, an assignment, or a returned manuscript, a rejection, a disappointment. So you see that my life after retirement will not be dull. Nobody who watches the postman coming in such a spirit will ever be bored."



This room on the first floor of Bizzell Library houses the DeGolyer Collection. Here students can inspect scientific volumes centuries old and extremely rare. The volumes make the University's history of science facilities top-notch and matched by only a few other institutions.