

Elmer Kelton Gets Famous

Profile

by Garner Roberts

"When Noah built his ark, and it rained for 40 days and nights," Elmer Kelton jokes, "West Texas got only a quarter of an inch."

Kelton can tell that joke now, but he and the other residents of West Texas weren't laughing in the 1950s when the famous seven-year drouth drained life from the land and its people. He calls that drouth one of the two most traumatic periods in his life.

"I was an agricultural reporter for the *San Angelo Standard-Times* during the 1950s, and the drouth became my story for that entire period," he remembers. "I watched what was happening to my friends as well as to ranching members of my own family.

"Out of that eventually came the novel whose title will probably be placed on my tombstone, *The Time It Never Rained*," he continued. "Most of the things which happened to characters in that book happened to real-life people I knew or knew about."

Although probably the best-known, *The Time It Never Rained* is just one of 46 books written by Kelton that have been published between 1955 and 1999. It won for him one of his six Spur Awards for novel of the year from Western Writers of America.

Along with those six Spur Awards in his home in San Angelo today are many other honors, including the Tinkle-McCombs Award for continuing excellence in writing from the Texas Institute of Letters. In 1996 Western Writers of America voted him best Western writer of all time ahead of Western literature legends Louis L'Amour, A.B. Guthrie, Zane Grey, Jack Schaefer and Larry McMurtry.

"That's some pretty tall cotton to be picking in," Kelton told *the San Angelo Standard-Times*. Kelton was born April 29, 1926, in a line-camp house on the Five Wells Ranch in Andrews County. His great grandfather Robert F. Kelton had come to West Texas in the 1870s with a covered wagon and a string of horses. "As a boy, I was fortunate that there were still a few old-time cowboys around who in their youth had seen the passing of the open range and had participated in the last trail drives," he said.

"The first funeral I can remember attending was of a neighbor, a rancher who in his youth had hunted buffalo," Kelton added. "I have no idea how many hours I spent listening to cowboy stories told by the men who lived the life. I do not remember the details, but I remember the spirit, the flavor of those stories."

But unlike most other members of his family, Kelton soon discovered ranching and the cowboy life weren't meant for him. "I never could make a rope work for me," he said. "I couldn't drop a rope and make it hit the ground. I was the oldest of four boys and by far the worst cowboy."

His mother Bea, a former schoolteacher, taught him to read by the time he was five years old "so I took a lot of refuge in reading. I certainly got interested in reading very early on. I think one of the things that makes a writer is being a good reader first. By eight or nine, I decided if I couldn't be a cowboy, I would at least write about it."

Kelton was always the runt of his class in school "so I was not a great football star. When they

chose up sides, I was the one some unlucky team had to take. They usually managed to get me out of the way pretty early by running over me. Then I would sit on the sidelines and read a book. That's what got me into this writing mess.

"Somewhere back there - I don't know just when it started, but it started real young - I decided I wanted to write. I loved to read, and the stories I read made me make up stories of my own. There were all these stories running through my head, and I wanted to write them down."

He remembers skipping many of his arithmetic lessons in school to write themes that his teachers had not assigned. "This has never been a great handicap," he says, "because being a writer I have never had to deal in very large figures anyway."

The day finally arrived when Kelton had to tell his father Buck his career plans. "You are about to graduate from high school," Buck said, "and I still don't know what you are going to make out of yourself."

"I finally had to 'fess up," Kelton remembers. "I told him I wanted to go to the University of Texas, study journalism and become a writer.

"He gave me a look that would kill Johnson grass and said, 'That's the way with you kids nowadays. You all want to make a living without having to work for it.' "

Kelton does credit his father with much of his success. "I cultivated the work habit from my Dad," he said. "He had a real strong work ethic. A friend used to say of him that he could stand heat, he could stand cold, he could stand pain, but he never could stand to see a kid idle."

So after graduating from Crane High School in 1942, Kelton enrolled in the University of Texas. His college career was interrupted by service in Europe in World War II (the other most traumatic period in his life), but he returned and completed his journalism degree in 1948.

With his wife Anna, whom he had met while in Austria in 1947 guarding prisoners of war, Kelton moved to San Angelo to start his career as an agriculture journalist. After many unsuccessful attempts, he had sold two stories during his senior year in Austin - one for \$50 to a Western pulp magazine and another for \$40 to a restaurant magazine.

"I had made \$90 out of my chosen profession, and I hadn't even gotten my diploma yet," he remembers. "I knew I was headed for fame and fortune."

He was agriculture editor for the *Standard-Times* from 1948 until 1963 and editor of the *Sheep and Goat Raiser* magazine in 1963-68. Kelton became associate editor of *Livestock Weekly* in 1968 and held that position until his retirement in 1990.

"Fortunately for me, I quickly came to enjoy my career as an ag journalist," Kelton said. "This career kept me in constant contact with ranchers and farmers. If I could not do it myself, at least I could write about others doing it. I was like a would-be ballplayer who cannot throw, catch or hit but finds himself a niche as a sports writer.

"Much of my writing was on economic and political issues affecting the livestock industry, but I was able to meet and write about a lot of interesting people," he continued. "I feel blessed to have been able to know them and document their stories. Sometimes things they told me found their way into my fiction."

Kelton believes the two careers of journalist and fiction writer complemented each other. "My

fiction taught me how to write straight news stories and feature articles with more life and vitality. The discipline of newspaper writing taught me that the writer cannot wait around for the muse to strike him. You write every day whether you feel like it or not, and you meet your deadlines. Inspiration is nice when you can find it, but perspiration is what gets the job done," he added.

Kelton admitted to Patrick Bennett for his book *Talking with Texas Writers* that he started by copying the style of other writers until he developed his own. "I've had people tell me they know my style," Kelton said. "I don't want to find out. I might ruin it if I knew what it was." His writing career also allowed him to study history. "I have used history for the background in the biggest part of my fiction," he said. "I have set most of my books in Texas because I have gotten to know the state pretty well.

"History has been fascinating to me. I don't know how we can understand where we are today, and why we are what we are, if we don't understand where and what we were before and what brought us to this point...I think everybody should be interested in it if for no other reason than to understand ourselves and our place in the world."

With steady paychecks coming in from his newspaper work, Kelton continued to write fiction at home at night. His first full-length piece, *Hot Iron*, "floated around for about a year" before finding a publisher. Ballantine Books, a pioneer of the paperback novel, published it in 1955, and it did so well that Ballantine published another Kelton novel, *Buffalo Wagons*, in 1956. And *Buffalo Wagons* won for Kelton his first Spur Award.

An editor at Doubleday later encouraged him to write a novel based on the 1883 cowboys strike, and that led in 1971 to his first hardback, *The Day the Cowboys Quit*. Inspired by the success of his first hardback - he won his second Spur Award - Kelton approached Doubleday with the third draft of a novel he had originally written in the 1950s.

The Time It Never Rained appeared on bookshelves in 1973, and it produced Kelton's third Spur Award and cemented his reputation as a fine writer. Doubleday published it unedited, seemingly his greatest source of pride. "No one ever changed a word," he said.

Kelton says he wrote the novel to "give urban people a better understanding of hazards the rancher and farmer face in trying to feed and clothe them." His third draft was a complete rewrite. "Perhaps I had become a better writer," he observed. "By this later time I was able also to treat racial problems more frankly, particularly the relationships between ranch workers of Mexican heritage and the Anglos who employed them."

The Time It Never Rained is his favorite because it was deeply personal. He had experienced the drouth and had written about it extensively for the *Standard-Times* (he spent seven years waking up every morning and trying to think of a new way to say "still dry"), and the book was dedicated to his father. The book's feisty protagonist, Charlie Flagg, exhibits characteristics of his father, but facets of the author himself also contributed to this fictional Western hero.

"In an earlier time, we were looking for heroes," Kelton said. "It is a mark of today's deep-seated cynicism that we tend more often now to look for villains...." "I was fortunate to grow up around cowboys who talked constantly about the old days, the range wars and cattle drives, and the struggles of early cowmen who settled West Texas. Ranch cowboys are great storytellers. They have their own tales to tell, and they also have those handed down by their fathers and

grandfathers. I expect in the retelling they are embellished a little, but a germ of truth is still there."

Kelton received his other three Spur Awards for *Eyes of the Hawk* in 1981, *Slaughter* in 1993 and *The Far Canyon* in 1995.

He served as president of Western Writers of America and the West Texas Historical Society. He is a member of the Texas Institute of Letters and has also been honored by the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Kelton, who also used the pen names Alex Hawk, Lee McElroy and Tom Early for several of his books, says he doesn't regret spending his life writing Westerns. "Not all my books fit the classic Western mold," he said. "They haven't all been action, shoot-'em-up stories. But they tend to wind up being classed as Westerns no matter what because they're set in rural Texas.

"The reason I've stuck with writing Westerns is basically the same reason I started. It's something I know. It's something I enjoy working with. It's something I feel strongly about....

"You could take a writer and a basic story line and set it in some other place, Europe or New York, and get real critical attention if it's well done. But take the same writer, that same story line, move it to the West, and critics won't pay any attention. The Western novel fell into sort of a literary ghetto a long time ago, and it's awful hard to get out of it."

He once said to his son Steve, also a writer, "I guess we could write about the 'Ninja Mutant Turtles,' but they're already taken."

Now in retirement, the 74-year-old Kelton still writes and travels to speaking engagements around the country talking about writing and West Texas. Reflecting on his careers as a journalist and novelist, he said, "Many readers who followed me in one field were unaware of my work in the other. A couple of times when I was gathering newspaper stories, I was asked if I knew that somebody with the same name was writing Westerns.

"My reply was, 'Yes, I knew, and I hoped the guy was getting rich. Or at least famous.' " Getting rich? Maybe. Getting famous? For sure.