BOOK NOTES

by Archie P. McDonald

The flow of books on Texas continues, thank goodness, and here are some that attracted the editor’s attention.

Leon Hale’s, *Supper Time: Recollections and Recipes* (Winedale Publishing, Box 130220, Houston, TX 77219, $23.95), gives you what you would expect if you happen to be a long-time reader of his columns in the old *Houston Post* and now the *Houston Chronicle*. “Customers,” as Hale calls the faithful readers, who have followed the saga of his life, will not be disappointed in this highly personal love story between the author, four of the women in his life (mother, mother-in-law, and wives), and above all, food. Hale reprises an old argument about “supper” versus “dinner” by way of explanation of his title, then describes the pathos of his life, especially about feeding himself after a divorce. This is followed by reminiscences of eating experiences in other autobiographical chapters titled Early Life, In The Army Now (my favorite part), The Family Table, and Camp Cookery. “The Catfish Chowder Event,” a tribute to a later-in-life Mrs. Hale, is particularly endearing. Hale can turn a phrase that lets the reader follow along as in a conversation; the ease with which he does so masks the hard work required to produce that intimacy but not the talent behind the hard work. Leon Hale was seventy-eight years old when this work was written. May he go on writing.

And one who can not because of his death at age sixty-three, is Jerry Flemmons, noted travel writer, reporter, and columnist for the Fort Worth *Star Telegram*. At hand is the latest collection of Flemmons’ essays, *Curmudgeon In Corduroy: The Best of Jerry Flemmons’ Texas* (TCU Press, P.O. Box 298300, Fort Worth, TX 76129). I do some identifying here, as a self-confessed curmudgeon, and also see similarities between Hale and Flemmons. Hale is East Texas, Flemmons West Texas. Both can look at a situation or a sunset and see a story in it. Flemmons, despite some deliberately fractured grammar, is the more literary of the two. Both essentially write about their lives. Flemmons’ fare is Fort Worth. Herein are essays about the architecture of some of that city’s best known structures, individuals, and institutions presented with an irreverence only curmudgeons can survive. Stories I liked best (and learned from) in this collection concern Flemmons’ coverage of the University of Texas sniper, his association with Marguerite Oswald—mother of Lee Harvey—and attendance at the premier performance of Texas’ first topless band. Flemmons was, simply, a great writer.

Newspaper writing again. Otha C. Spencer sent his two-volume collection, *Cow Hill “Bits & Pieces”: An Irreverent History of Commerce and Its People* (The Country Studio, Campbell, Texas 75422), which contains gleanings from his weekly column in the *Commerce Journal*. The premium is on mentioning as many of Commerce’s citizens, living and dead, as possible, but tucked among them is some thoughtful philosophy. Spencer is proud of
what he calls the smallness of Commerce, where a plumber will come and fix a leak on July 4—that sounds like a life experience to me.

The annual edition of *Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year, 1999 Edition*, edited by Charles Brooks (Pelican Publishing Co., 1000 Burmaster St., Gretna, LA 70053), contains hundreds of examples of what artist-commentators thought about topics of American and Canadian life during 1998. Although the contents page says the collection is divided into eighteen categories as different as The Economy, The Military, and Other Issues, all include something about President Bill Clinton, and nary a bit of it is positive except in an around-the-barn way, such as implying that the booming economy led the sixty-five percent of those polled who approved of the president to do so in spite of accusations, and later a confession, of his moral impropriety. Most editorial cartoons are negative and are supposed to be. About the only exceptions here show the arrival in Heaven of the departed Alan Shepard, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Florence Griffith Joyner. Not even the custom of speaking well of the dead prevails—one cartoon has Alabama Governor George Wallace rolling up to Heaven in his wheel chair and saying that he hoped no one was blocking the door; another showed three KKK and three African American pall bearers looking in surprise at each other across Wallace’s casket. But it is the concentration on charges against President Clinton that pervades the whole, showing as well that he was the dominant newsmaker and chief thorn in the side of so many who will never reconcile to his election victories in 1992 and 1996. Here are some of my favorites on other subjects: a fellow worrying about Y2K and checking his work and home computers, laptop, cell phone, beeper, answering machine, FAX, VCR, digital clocks, etc., and then deciding that going back to 1900 might be a good idea; one fellow about my age decrying the $10 per dose cost of viagra and his sarcastic wife saying so what? “that’s only $40 a year;” and a father telling his kid that he had to walk barefoot in the snow to school and her response that her problems in school included drug dealers, gangs, child molesters, and figuring out how to adjust her bullet-proof vest. Maybe 1900 wasn’t so bad. Don’t read this one while you are depressed. But when you do read it, you will see these cartoonists’ perspective on the year that was.

Larry L. King: *A Writer’s Life In Letters, Or, Reflections In A Bloodshot Eye*, edited by Richard A. Holland (TCU Press, P.O. Box 298300, Fort Worth, TX 76129, $27.50), is composed entirely of King’s correspondence to an eclectic audience commencing in 1954 and ending in March 1999. King has enjoyed a career as varied as serving as an aide to Lyndon Johnson and writing *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas* for Broadway and Hollywood. I first noticed him as the author of *Confessions of a White Racist* (1971) and articles for *Texas Monthly*, and more recently enjoyed *True Facts, Tall Tales & Pure Fiction*, published in 1996. And like everyone else, I viewed the altered Hollywood version of *Whorehouse*. I was taught better than to read other people’s mail, but got over the guilt of it when preparing biographies of Jedediah Hotchkiss and W.B. Travis—I had to read their letters to know what they were doing and why. Both were long deceased; King is still with us, so
that makes this more dicey. But King doesn’t mind. He gave the letters to the
Southwestern Writers Collection at Southwest Texas State University and
assisted Holland, a former curator of the Collection, in the preparation of this
volume—he even wrote the Foreword for it. I enjoyed Jay Milner’s
Confessions Of A MadDog because it enabled a vicarious exposure to the ways
of Texas writers; consider this in the same category. King’s deliberate
misspellings and factured language make reading his letters like
eavesdropping on conversations between the writer and his friends. Such
communications naturally contain references known only to the writer and his
originally intended reader, but editor Holland has done a good job in
identifying many of the persons or events that would have left the reader
wondering. If you like King’s writing, here is a bunch of it.

Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South, by
James C. Cobb (University of Georgia Press, 330 Research Dr, Athens, GA
30602, $40.00) continues and alters interpretations advanced by Cobb in 1982
in The Selling of the South; in other words, it is the latest evolution of his
attempt to understand the South. The argument(?) still revolves around
agrarianism v. industrialization, Old v. New, W.J. Cash v. C. Vann Woodward,
but Cobb also uses country music and the blues and other cultural aspects for
the present examination. He concludes with observations about the South’s
decline of distinctiveness and suggests that future studies should focus more on
its similarities with the rest of the world.

Telling Western Stories From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry, by Richard
W. Etulain (University of New Mexico Press, 1720 Lomas Blvd, NE, Albu­
queraque, NM 87131-1591, $35.00), originated as the Calvin Horn Lectures
delivered in Albuquerque in 1998. Those four lectures form the basis for
chapters titled Creation Stories, Untold Stories, Traditional Stories, and New
Stories, to which has been added a prologue on the Origins of the Western
Story and an epilogue titled Toward a New Gray Story, a response to New
West interpretations. For decades Etulain has been a prominent writer-critic of
the Western. He uses the stories to tell us about changing interpretations of the
West from the Civil War to the present. I like his review in the “Gray” area of
Old Friend Larry McMurtry, whom he credits with inventing a new Gray West
in Lonesome Dove, Anything For Billy, and Buffalo Girls.

Bobby Nieman of Longview sent a copy of Glenn Elliott: A Ranger’s
Ranger (Texian Press, Box 1684, Waco, TX 76703, 1999), that he helped
Ranger Elliott write. It begins with an prologue fitting to the image of our
state’s legendary law enforcement agency: avenging a wrong because it was
the right thing to do. The project began when Elliott asked Nieman to help him
prepare a review of his service for his son and daughter. This was a good
enough reason, but Nieman knew that Elliott’s story had broader implications.
They worked from Elliott’s files with Nieman selecting cases that offered the
full menu of Ranger duties. The product is autobiographical and written in
Elliott’s voice, though Nieman occasionally interjects his own observations.
Briefly, Elliott was born and grew up in Windom, located in extreme northeast
Texas. He served in the Army during WWII, came home and married his longtime sweetheart, and supported his family by working at various jobs until he found his calling in law enforcement. He became a Highway Patrol officer in 1949, a Texas Ranger in 1961, and retired in 1987. The remainder of the volume is an account of Elliott’s dealing with most of the criminal activities in his area until his retirement. Elliott pays tribute to hard work and cooperation among all law enforcement agencies. His book reads like a man talks, and this quality makes it difficult to put down once started.

Landmark Publishing, Inc., (4410 West Vickery, Suite 101, Fort Worth, Texas 76107), has sent along two publications. *Celebrating 150 Years: The Pictorial History of Fort Worth, Texas, 1849-1999*, edited by Paul Oates, with an Introduction by Dr. Richard Seileer and Old Friend Dr. Ben Procter, the sage of Texas Christian University’s Department of History. This one costs $60.00 and will just about cover over your coffee table, but is full of articles by Delbert Bailey, Douglas Harman, Joyce M. Williams, Judy Alter, Hollace Ava Weiner, Ruth Karbach, Quentin McGown, Duane Gage, Jim Noah, Fernando Costa, and Willam Barney. Plus, of course, the pictures, what makes such volumes so worth while to those with a special interest. Articles and photos provide blanket coverage for every institution—human, educational, business, cultural—in Fort Worth. I’ve known Ben Procter long enough, and well enough, to accept his endorsement as gospel.

Landmark’s other offering is, well, a tribute to a real landmark in Texana and Civil War publications: a reprint of Harold B. Simpson’s four-volume celebration of Hood’s Texas Brigade packaged in a handsome box. Titles include *Hood’s Texas Brigade In Poetry And Song* (1968), *Hood’s Texas Brigade: Lee’s Grenadier Guard* (1970), *Hood’s Texas Brigade: In Reunion And Memory* (1974), and *Hood’s Texas Brigade: A Compendium* (1977). I knew Harold when he was still working on his PhD at TCU and establishing himself as THE writer on Hood’s Brigade; met him at an ETHA meeting where he presented a paper on his favorite subject. His monuments are many, but these two stand out: the great Confederate Research Center at Hill College and this four-volume set on our state’s best-known military unit in the Civil War. Original editions of the volumes are rare and expensive, so Landmark’s publishing of a new edition as a set is a considerable contribution to those of us who work in the fields of Texas and/or Civil War history. I know several folks who would like to receive this set for their next birthday present or under their Christmas tree.

Here is one we always anticipate eagerly: the *Texas Almanac, 2000-2001, Millennium Edition*, edited by Mary G. Ramos (The Dallas Morning News, Box 655237, Dallas, Texas 75265). This edition contains the usual (updated) state profile, rankings, county review, population data, election information, etc., and also special histories of the Texas Rangers, oil, and other topics. I am pleased to learn that Nacogdoches County still has its familiar tornado shape on the map printed on page 237, and Stephen F. Austin State University is yet claimed as one of the county’s assets. The *Texas Almanac* started elsewhere
but has been associated with the *Dallas Morning News* so long that Big D holds the paramount association with it, and it is among the *DMN*'s most useful services. It is a reflection of the writer's age that one of the most interesting features is an obituary section covering the period of July 1977-July 1999, wherein we find notices of the departure of such fellow Texans as: Gene Autry and Tom Bradley who went to Los Angeles to find their star; Bob Bullock, who stayed home; James Byrd Jr. of Jasper, who found an unwanted fame; John Denver, on a Rocky Mountain High; James L. Farmer Jr., who got to the CORE of the matter; William Humphrey, who did not come home from the hill; Robert Luby, who founded my favorite cafeteria chain; Lucil Travis Martin, who found fame as Boxcar Willie; Alan Shepherd, though an adopted Texan, the first one of us in real space; Doak Walker, all-everything in football; and too many others.

I had to wait until my birthday to get a copy of Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* (Random House, New York, 10022), because my daughter-in-law laid down the law that *this time* I was not to just go out and buy what I wanted. The wait was worthwhile. It is an excellent book in so many ways and has only one obvious weakness. Excellent in concept of arguing, effectively, that the generation of Americans who experienced the Depression and World War II was "the greatest" because it accomplished so much and expected so little. Maybe that is why this generation accomplished so much. Excellent also in Brokaw's writing, for he found just the right way to express the emotions so many of us feel. My WWII experiences were all "home front" since I was but six years old when it began, but I find resonance in Brokaw's words. The only weakness: none of the examples in this collective biography are Southerners, much less Texans, and our greatest generation did include some who were worthy. Consider this the gripe of a provincial.

*As Noble As It Gets*, by Harry P. Noble, Jr., with illustrations by Richard E. Murphy, printed by Texian Press in Waco, is a second volume of Noble's observations about life in San Augustine, Texas. This one is partially autobiographical. Section titled Growing Up, Korea, NASA, and Family Man contain brief articles on Noble's experiences as a youth in San Augustine, military service, service as a computer operator for our space exploration program, and family life. The style is reminiscent of Lewis Grizzard, Leon Hale, Jerry Flemmons, Roy Blount, Jr., or other "take you into their confidence" writers, and the illustrations are genuinely humorous. Concluding sections titled Redland Folklore—Real, and Not So Real, complete the book, but the first part is much the more interesting. San Augustinians probably read these pieces first in their *Tribune*, and now the rest of us can get a glimpse of life in that unique place.

*Texans Behind The News: Texas Journalists of the 20th Century*, by Dede Weldon Casad (Eakin Press, P.O. Drawer 90159, Austin, TX 78709-0159, $15.95), contains biographical sketches, with photos, of Sarah McClendon, Walter Cronkite, Liz Carpenter, Dan Rather, Jim Lehrer, Linda Ellerbee, Bill Moyers, Sam Donaldson, Bob Schieffer, and Molly Ivans. Most were born in
Texas and all got their start in journalism in our state, so each can be considered "Texan." McClendon, Carpenter, and Ivins remain primarily print journalists, although Ivins has appeared on television, while the remainder are primarily electronic journalists, although all but Donaldson began with newspapers. Moyers was press secretary for LBJ and Carpenter filled that role for Mrs. Johnson, while Donaldson and Rather "covered" presidents on White House assignments for ABC and CBS. McClendon is the "champ" in this category: she has reported on presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt through Bill Clinton. All journalists included cooperated with Casad in the preparation of their biographies.

Pray Without Kidding: More Inspiration, Satire, and Humor from an Educated Baptist, by Jerry F. Dawson (Eakin Press, P.O. Drawer 90159, Austin, TX 78709-0159) does not have an oxymoron in its title. Herein Dawson continues what he began in Elmer and the Peas and Other Dawsonisms (1997), and we have another seventy-three vignettes on his life as a educator at secular (Southwest Texas State University, Texas A&M) and denominational (Wayland Baptist University, East Texas Baptist University) schools, and in Baptist state-level offices. Dawson does not attempt to separate his roles: he is at once an educator and a minister, a preacher and a teacher. He uses his experiences—the mundane as well as the monumental—to teach lessons in living and in serving God. And he proves that a sense of humor is a positive in both.