

Kent Biffle

1932-2015

By Robert Compton

He was a man with a ton of talent and maybe a gram of ego. When you met Kent Biffle, you liked him right away. He was smart and funny and he knew a lot about everything. Except maybe sports. He could tell you anything about the Texas Rangers — the lawmen, not the baseball team — and cowboys — the horsemen, not the football team. And his talk was always sprinkled with witticisms. He was a special kind of guy.

We got to be close friends after our first handshake in 1961 when he came to the News as a young general assignments reporter from the Fort Worth Press. Rumor had it that he was pretty good. He was that and a lot more and he got better and better. General assignments in those days meant being ready to cover anything from natural disasters to politics, interviews with everyone from statesmen to clowns. And to write CLF's as we called them — Cute Little Features — Kent made CLFs an art form. And he seemed to turn almost any assignment into a front page story.

His subjects liked him, too, sometimes borrowing money.

In 2008 when actor Paul Newman died, Kent sent me a note:

Paul Newman's estate owes me 10 cents (plus interest). I talked with him at Love Field in 1962 as he was returning from finishing up "Hud" in West Texas. He borrowed a dime in order to phone Joanne collect to remind her to bring along his exercise-board to their rendezvous point in California.

I was an assistant city editor when Kent arrived at the News, and we editors used to scramble to pick up his copy when he dropped it into the basket — if you're not of the ancient generation of news folk, you need to know these were the days of typewriters and telephones, paper and pencils — no cellphones and laptops. It was a joy to be entertained by Kent's wonderfully constructed stories that we knew needed little or no editing.

He was an exceptional writer, backgrounded by his wide and deep reading, that included American and world literature, with a particular interest in history, and more particularly in Texas history. He loved crime novels, especially by the masters like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. True crime was a favorite, too. And he loved humorists. We often gifted one another with books; I still re-read and smile at some of the witty stories in one of my favorite Biffle books — Frank Sullivan's "The Night the Old Nostalgia Burned Down."

Kent was somewhat of an expert on the infamous Texas bandits Bonnie and Clyde, and became a good friend of Blanche Barrow, the widow of Buck, Clyde's brother. Before she died a few years ago, Blanche bequeathed him a pistol that she had owned during the Barrow gang's heyday. Kent was a gun collector, who owned quite a few guns or replicas of guns famous in crime history. He was a genuine collector, not a user.

Kent left the News for a time in the late 1960s, but returned in 1975 after a stint with Newsweek and was even more productive. In 1976, he joined the staff of Focus, a news feature and analysis section I edited. I was overjoyed, though there was a proviso — he must be made available to other news departments when they had a major story to assign him. That turned

out to be often.

He produced an amazing number of stories for every news department, including Focus, and virtually all of them warranted major display.

The book review pages were within the Focus section then, and Kent created one of its most popular features, in league with his old East Texas State Professor Dr. Laurence McNamee, a Shakespearean authority and expert on boxing history. It was called *A Few Words* and though ostensibly it was a question and answer column about language, grammar, and usage, it covered almost anything with wit, while offering genuinely helpful information. Dr. McNamee furnished the questions and answers, Kent furnished humor. As a bonus, he added witty line drawings to illustrate the questions, drawings that were as delightful as Thurber's.

Kent really came into his own in 1984, when News management asked him to write a column about Texas. He took it on with gusto, and had never been happier with an assignment. He could roam Texas freely, looking for stories about the state he knew so well and loved and for small forgotten or unknown bits of history which often fueled landmark events. The weekly Sunday column was called Kent Biffle's Texana. It was widely read and praised, especially by Texas historians, who protested almost *en masse* when the column was further reduced to a monthly appearance. It ended with Kent's retirement in 2007.

For the last several years, I've spent most major holidays with Kent and Suzanne and Patrick and Eric, when he was in town, and other Biffle friends who came for a day of conversation, and a bountiful dinner prepared by Suzanne. The finale was always a game of Scrabble. They were a loving family, in spite of all the seeming contradictions — Suzanne, a school teacher, tried to maintain some sense of order in the household and was forever challenged by Kent's Oscar Madison persona. But it worked. And they produced Patrick, who's grown up to be a delightfully smart and free spirited young man.

Suzanne's vital discipline when Kent suffered his first stroke in 2008 probably saved his life, when she quickly summoned help and made tough decisions on treatment. Her loving care helped restore him to his former self after a long period of recovery.

Kent was without a doubt one of Texas' finest journalists. His readers loved him, and his colleagues respected and admired him, envy aside. Kent always gave us his best — and more.

He was that kind of guy.

Dale Walker

1935- 2015

By Clay Reynolds

A generation or two ago it was possible for an individual to become a “person (man or woman) of letters” by virtue of individual passion for the written word and a profound interest in producing writing that mattered. The Texas Institute of Letters was founded and sustained by such. These were not dilettantes or dusty academics, and they weren’t self-appointed writing celebrities, seeking to stun the world with sudden fame that all-too-often proves more meteoric than solar in its quality and consistency. For years, the TIL recognized and franchised writers who were, first and foremost, “people of letters.” Such a man was Dale Walker.

Author of more than twenty books ranging back to his 1967 break-out volume, *The Lost Revolutionary*, a biography of legendary journalist John Reed, on which Walker collaborated with Richard O’Conner, Dale always found inspiration in individuals and subjects forgotten or ignored, often because of their unsavory nature or politically distasteful content. From his earliest days, he was fascinated with Jack London, whose works, read by Dale when he was a boy, inspired him to become a journalist, writer, and historian. Walker wrote passionately about London, who was the most popular and celebrated author of his time, when London was in such political disfavor that his works were expunged from anthologies and classrooms.

Over the years, Dale continued to champion the forgotten and ignored in American culture and history. He wrote of unsolved mysteries and historical figures who either had been utterly neglected or, perhaps, mischaracterized by legend and mythology, sometimes revealing that the true story was more interesting than warped popular perceptions. He studied the truth behind Jane Canary (“Calamity Jane”) and exposed the mysterious death of Merriweather Lewis. He resurrected paperback western author, Will Henry, and wrote stunning accounts of Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, of the rise of the Bear Flag Republic in California, of the Gold Rush, and of the settlement of Oregon Territory, revealing stunning and disremembered facts along the way. He investigated the darker corners of the Old West, shining light on areas that might otherwise have been lost in the fog of history. He brought C. L. Sonnichsen’s work to the public eye, and through his book reviews, he celebrated many writers, myself included, whose work he felt needed to be given broader exposure.

Along the way, Dale contributed mightily to the intellectual and artistic growth of the University of Texas at El Paso, which he served for twenty-seven years. He directed The Texas Western Press, there, establishing it as one of the most productive and respected university presses in the region, among the first to devote itself to Border Studies, well before it was fashionable. He established NOVA, the campus news magazine, and took the initiative in linking UTEP to the Kingdom of Bhutan, all the while continuing to edit, to teach, and, of course, to write. And along the way, he offered his personal help and advice and assistance to countless writers who sought out his wisdom and experience.

The winner of four Spur Awards from the Western Writers’ Association, Dale took prickly pride in living and working in the Texas “outpost” of El Paso. Although he looked back over the geography of Texas with fondness, he found his focus in more western frontier environs. A

friend and chess opponent to Cormac McCarthy, Dale welcomed visitors and friends and loved nothing more than long discussions of literature over good food and drink. He understood that being celebrated was never the same as being well-read and intelligent and that there was more to being a writer than merely publishing a few books.

A meticulous researcher, Dale was punctilious about every fact he wrote. Although he was never himself afforded the respect given to “professional” (academically degreed) historians and literary critics, his works stand as reliable references for students of western history and biography. He accepted criticism eagerly, but he bristled when his critics were inaccurate or incorrect in their factual assessments.

Dale was never afforded much respect by the Texas Institute of Letters. He once said that he stopped attending the annual awards banquet and meeting because he realized that he knew almost no one there, and no one there knew him or his work. Although his writings won awards from other organizations and institutions, he received no significant recognition from the TIL, and he told me he stopped submitting to the annual competitions years ago, realizing that the kind of work he did was not impressive to the organization.

At the same time, and as fractious as Dale could sometimes be when discussing writing, history, or literature, he never expressed any regret about living a life of letters. He offered fair and honest and well-informed opinions and was always eager to discover a writer or subject the world had neglected.

Dale Walker was, then, a true man of letters, and nothing more honorable can be said about him than that he devoted himself to his work and made a significant contribution to the world’s knowledge and art. Along with his large and loving family, his books and other literary efforts will extend his life and memory far beyond the eighty years that he lived and will continue to add to the richness of Texas Letters. I was proud to call him my friend.

Peace, Dale, and rest.

Yours was a life well-lived.

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