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Main content

Article Preview :

Elmer Kelton was voted "Great Western Writer of All Time" by the Western Writers of America, a daunting title to work under, though he bears it modestly. There is, after all, that modifying adjective: Western.

Kelton, who turned 80 in April, has his academic champions, but he acknowledges that "the Western field is a literary ghetto. Critics don't read a Western unless the book is contemptuous of its subject matter. If you write out of love for your subject matter they'll dismiss you."

Elmer Kelton loves his subject matter. He was born to it, after all. And if the Western is a ghetto, it is a remarkably rich ghetto populated by the likes of Edward Abbey (The Brave Cowboy), Jack Schaefer (Shane), Larry McMurtry (Lonesome Dove), and other novelists whose mortal sin, it seems, is setting their tales in open spaces rather than in the confines of the faculty lounge or city tenement. Elmer Kelton has an utter mastery of his subject; a distinctive, even arresting, point of view; and a narrative talent honed by writing for the Western pulps. His best work, *The Time It Never Rained* (1973), can be read as character study, regional literature, and philosophical novel: find me a navel-gazing New Yorker writer who has squeezed out a single book as rich, layered, and unsettling.

Following a lunch of--what else?--thick steaks, I spoke with Elmer Kelton in his study in the home he and his wife built half a century ago in the ranching town of San Angelo, Texas. His library overflows with books on Texas, cattle, and the West; his musical tastes run to Bob Wills, Roy Acuff, Willie Nelson, and Bill Monroe. He reels off the original lineup of the "Sons of the Pioneers."

His father, a ranch foreman named Buck Kelton, came from a line of cowboys; his mother, Bea, was a schoolteacher whose male relatives worked as roustabouts in the oil fields. "In an oil-patch town like Crane," where he attended school, recalls Kelton, "a boy who excelled in English and won spelling bees was automatically suspect."

I ask about his youthful cowboying skills. "Pretty inept," Kelton says with a smile. "My three younger brothers were all better cowboys than I was. I got lost a lot--turns out I was nearsighted. We'd go out to gather cattle and if they were 100 yards away I'd miss 'em. Dad told me pretty early I'd better find some other way to make a living."

Being a novelist was not exactly what Dad had in mind. When Elmer, as a senior in high school, told Buck Kelton that he wanted to write, the old cowboy replied, "That's the way it is with you kids nowadays--you all want to make a living without having to work for it."

Buck relented. Elmer went on to the University of Texas and a career as a journalist and novelist. He made his first story sale in 1947 to the pulp magazine *Ranch Romances*; 49 years later, his corpus has...

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This board is about cowboys. Pictures of western men and women past and present. Picturesque scenes of their ranches, livestock and corrals. These include photos of cowboys and their ranches. We love these outdoor pictures of the west, the past and the present. Join us in adding your pictures of western men and woman. Let us know if you would like to be added as a contributor in adding pictures of the west. Follow. [Texas Cowboys](#) [Cowboys And Indians](#) [Cowboys Men](#) [Westerns](#) [Le Far West](#) [Cowboy And Cowgirl](#) [Cowboy Horse](#) [Cowboy Boots](#) [Old West](#). The history of American cowboys tells a fascinating story. The true beginning of the history of American cowboys began immediately after the Civil War. It is from this remarkable group of men that the fine art of breeding and training reining horses and cutting horses have evolved. From 1865 to 1880, at least 3.5 million cattle were driven—in herds of between 1,500 and 3,000—from southern Texas to cattle towns in Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming. The route most frequently used was the Chisholm Trail, which went to Abilene, Kansas— one of the wildest towns in the west. The history of the American cowboy covers a brief, but incredible, span in history. But the true grit, strength of character, and independent nature of the cowboy still lives large today. Stubborn Cowboys: Outdoor Americans as Chronicled by a Man of the Prairie By Kauffman, Bill The American Enterprise, Vol. 17, No. 6, July-August 2006. Read preview [Overview](#). African American Cowboys on the Western Frontier By Hardaway, Roger D. Negro History Bulletin, January-December 2001. PRPEER-REVIEWED PERIODICAL. Peer-reviewed publications on Questia are publications containing articles which were subject to evaluation for accuracy and substance by professional peers of the article's author(s). Read preview [Overview](#). The American cowboy atoned for them by a quarter of a century of faithful labor. The amusements of the cowboy were like the features of his daily surroundings and occupation — they were intense, large, Homeric. Yet, judged at his work, no higher type of employee ever existed, nor one more dependable. He was the soul of honor in all the ways of his calling. The man who brought water upon the arid lands of the West changed the entire complexion of a vast country and with it the industries of that country. Acres redeemed from the desert and added to the realm of the American farmer were taken from the realm of the American cowboy. Bad Hoss – A bucking Bronco. Cattle Trails of the Prairie. Cowboy & Trail Blazer Photo Gallery. List of Trail Blazers, Riders, & Cowboys.