Chapter 13. Paul Patterson

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Paul Patterson

by Elmer Kelton
am pleased to have a part in a well-justified tribute to Paul Patterson. My friendship with him goes back more than sixty years, to his arrival in my hometown, Crane, Texas.

I grew up on the McElroy Ranch near Crane. My father, Buck Kelton, was the foreman, and Paul’s brother John was a cowboy there. Paul had been teaching school in Sanderson and signed up to teach in the Crane school system beginning in the fall of 1939. He came a bit early, so to earn a little extra money, and to while away the time, he day-worked for Dad until school started.

It was at the time of the late-summer roundup. Dad always timed the branding for the last week or so of August to get the free use of us kids just before school closed in on us. I had known John for a long time, so I felt comfortable with his younger brother. I knew him first as Paul the cowboy, just one of the bunch. That lasted perhaps two weeks.

Then suddenly, he was Mr. Patterson, one of my teachers. His clothes and his situation made a drastic change. So did my attitude, out of necessity.

It was not that Paul was a formidable presence in the classroom; he never was. He was always a friend to the students, and if you ask anyone who studied under him who was his favorite teacher, the answer would usually be Paul Patterson. It was certainly so with my class, which was graduated in 1942. Paul has been a fixture at our class reunions ever since.

I would not want to give the impression that he was easy. He did not award grades that had not been earned. In that respect, he reminded me a great deal of Dr. DeWitt Reddick, of the school of journalism at the University of Texas. They were both likeable teachers. They smiled a lot and never raised their voices in anger in the classroom, though God knows they had reason
enough at times. To get an A from DeWitt Reddick was like pulling your own teeth. Paul was no pushover, either.

In my case, he taught me Spanish and journalism. Paul is bilingual. He studied in Mexico and Spain. I say he taught me Spanish. Let me recant. He tried to teach me Spanish. I learned just enough to get me in some embarrassing situations whenever I have tried to use what little residue of it remained.

But the journalism took root.

J. Evetts Haley said once that a grandson asked him if he knew the difference between a fairy tale and a Texas tale. He said a fairy tale starts, “Once upon a time . . .” A Texas tale starts, “Now, I know you s.o.b.’s ain’t goin’ to believe this, but . . .”

I know you folks won’t believe this, but I was ashamed of my writing ambitions in those days. It did not seem a respectable thing for a boy to be doing in the environment in which I grew up. I was winning spelling bees and making A’s in English when other red-blooded boys my age were trying to break arms and legs playing football or roping and riding calves. In an oil-patch town like Crane, a boy who was good in English class and even beat the girls at spelling bees was automatically suspect.

I hid my writing from public view and hoped no one would ever find out until the day I burst upon the literary world with a best-selling novel better even than *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*. I figured that was unlikely to happen until I was at least eighteen or nineteen years old.

But here was Paul Patterson, a certified cowboy, teaching us how to write. It gradually dawned on me that I might not be such a square peg as I had thought. It might be at least half respectable to admit that I wanted to become a writer someday.

Paul helped open that door for me, and he gave me the idea of going into it through journalism. He supervised the school newspaper. I found that working on it was a lot of fun. I began to feel that working on a newspaper, and being paid for it, would almost be like having a license to steal.
I have always felt that had it not been for Paul Patterson, my professional life might have taken a much different turn. My father was not keen on the idea. He had given up on trying to make a good cowboy of me, but he thought I might become a lawyer. He said I always talked too much, so I ought to be a good one.

But there was Paul, quietly encouraging, and I stuck by my original ambition to become a writer. I had another ambition in those days, too: to become an artist. Paul encouraged me in that, as well. I drew cartoons for the school paper as well as writing for it.

When we both got home after World War II, Paul wrote a couple of books and asked me to illustrate them. He published *Sam McGoo and Texas Too* in 1947. Doing the cartoons for that book took up a lot of my spare time that first summer I was home from the service.

Paul wrote another, a sort of fictionalized autobiography. I drew a set of illustrations for that one too, and I suspect it was those that prevented the book from being published in its original form. Paul rewrote the book some years later, removing the fiction. Published by the University of Oklahoma Press, it bore the title *Crazy Women in the Rafters*. My pictures did not make the cut.

Despite Paul’s good intentions and encouragement, my art career went the way of my Spanish. My entire career earnings totaled $205. Of that, $200 came from Paul for *Sam McGoo*. The other five dollars came from a magazine that bought one cartoon out of a batch I sent them.

Ace Reid, the cowboy cartoonist, said when he was just getting started he used to draw up a dozen or so roughs and drive all the way from his home in Electra to Fort Worth to show them to Ed Bateman for his horse magazine. Bateman would pick out perhaps one. Ace would drive back to Electra, ink it in, then drive to Fort Worth again and deliver it for five dollars. That easy money almost killed him, he said.

It killed my art career. I gave up the drawing board for the typewriter. And there, always, was Paul Patterson, helping, encouraging,
telling me to stay with it despite the many, many rejections I received.

Teachers have a special kind of immortality, for the work they do lives on in their students and in later generations influenced by those students. Even Paul probably does not know how many students he taught during all his years in Sanderson, Crane, and finally in Sierra Blanca. They must run into many thousands. If he touched their lives a fraction as much as he touched mine, he has left a legacy beyond price. No amount of money could ever buy it.

He has been my teacher, my mentor, and best of all, always, my friend.

I thank you, Paul Patterson.

ENDNOTES

1. This paper was presented as part of a special session dedicated to honoring Paul at the 1990 meeting in Kingsville.
Elmer Kelton, Evelyn Stroder, and Paul Patterson at Horsehead Crossing, February 1995. (Photo by Joe Allen)