Inside the Classroom (And Out)

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Paul Patterson, Master Teacher

by Evelyn Stroder
Soon after I retired from teaching, Paul Patterson gave me my first membership in the Texas Folklore Society, with the admonition that he wanted me to “write something” for the Society. He knows I love to write, and I love history and folklore. But, much as I like to do research and be around other writers, I seldom go much farther than a news story or a newspaper feature with those loves. But Paul, who has a wonderful way of encouraging and motivating his friends just as he did his students, has perennially questioned me about whether I’m working on anything.

Now it serves you right, Paul, that I get to write about you. I know I’m speaking to folks who already know about, and have often shown appreciation for, Paul Patterson the writer, the humorist, the storyteller. So how do I, having known him for only about half his life, have the audacity to tell this group anything about Paul Patterson? Simply by being one of the fortunate few having taught school with him, and the only person to succeed Paul in the journalism classroom.

We’ve spent some wonderful hours in what Paul calls the “clearing house”—the teachers’ lounge. We’ve swapped tales over the copy machine and the coffee cups, discussing everything from education (on which we mostly agree) to politics (on which we mostly don’t), and I was a better teacher for that, as well as for other, more specific helps which I will tell later.

But though I have learned a great deal from Mr. Pat, the school teacher, I never sat in his classroom. So for this research I got to do something I love best—talking with some of our old (well, former, but they’re getting old fast) students and fellow teachers.

Call this an exposé, Paul, of your day job.
From those former students and fellow teachers I learned that his writing and storytelling skills—sense of humor, feel for drama, gift of words, understanding of people, and the like—served as well in teaching. And his good citizenship, love of country, and empathy for fellow man were conveyed to, and remain in, the hearts of his students.

That sense of humor was often self-effacing. Early in the year in Spanish class, according to K. V. Murphy, “Mr. Pat” referred to his “gotch-eye” and said the students would never know for sure when he was looking at them. Then he told a story from his army days, about a sergeant who was also gotch-eyed and how Paul and that sergeant were never sure when each other was looking. “He made us laugh,” K. V. said, “put us at ease, and made a good point, too.”

In another jibe at himself, Paul made a point about honest decision-making. This story was relayed by Gary Edmiston: Lawrence Welk, on concert tour, hired Paul to haul a piano to the Rankin Hotel and paid him in concert tickets for all three nights. The third night was Sunday, and Paul had enjoyed the first two so much that he decided to flip a coin to decide whether to go to church or the concert. “I had to flip several times before I could attend the concert,” he said.

Fun and dramatics were often a classroom element. In journalism class, tests were in the form of contests, and students wrote and produced occasional plays relating to issues of the school paper, with their teacher giving enough leeway for all kinds of creativity to surface.

Word choices were made important to his students. Eddy Smith tells that he will always remember not to use the word *cabron* carelessly, as he learned in Spanish class that this word for “old goat” could get one into trouble. This use of humor to make lessons stick in students’ minds was reported to me many times over. Marva Lee Taylor Hughes said that she wishes she had taken better notes.
“The wit and tall tales would have made a wonderful souvenir,” she said. “What could easily have been a boring lesson on verb conjugation became fun and therefore memorable.” She hasn’t had much occasion to use her Spanish these last thirty years, but said, “I still can say the Pledge of Allegiance in Spanish—and remember Mr. Pat with it.”

The Pledge of Allegiance. Of course. Citizenship and love of country are themes flowing through any subject taught by Mr. Pat.

Crane’s loss was Sierra Blanca’s gain when he and Marge moved down there for the last nine years of their teaching careers. His writing skills were of direct value to fifth through eighth graders there, as he wrote plays for the students to present. Students portrayed historical figures in the Bicentennial play, *In the Land of the Free Include Me*, in which historical truths are interwoven with modern democratic concepts. Here is a portion of the Molly Pitcher monologue, and I’m sure student participants, as well as the audience, learned some history, plus—well, just listen for the subtle acknowledgment of an equal rights principle:

I was born in a period way back when
The breaks, the honors all went to men.
We realize now that it wasn’t fair,
Which didn’t keep me from doing my share—

Is that not a teacher for you—building character with the implication that having things “not fair” shouldn’t keep one from doing her share?

And this couplet from the same play conveys the poignancy of our continuing emigration enigma. Kids at Sierra Blanca would understand this:

It takes the U.S. Border Patrol to know what America is all about
They catch thousands slipping in but not one slipping out.
Another value along with subject matter was the importance of education. Martha Bullock said she knew education was important to the Pattersons when Mr. Pat told the class how he and Marge put aside twenty-five cents a day (the price of a pack of cigarettes then, though they didn’t smoke) for travel. “They went to Europe and all over with the money,” she said. “When he taught us world history, we felt as though we had been to those same places.”

I heard but ONE negative comment about Paul Patterson; ironically, it was passed on to me by Paul himself with, as you might know, a chuckle. The comment did not apply to his mistakes, or even to faulty techniques, and I tell it here only because it is ludicrous beyond insulting.

“To Paul Patterson, the person who inspired me to write,” was inscribed in the front of the self-published, spiral-bound book. Then, in the text, the author said the fact that his journalism teacher, Paul Patterson, had published two “not very good” books had inspired this person—whom I will not name here—to try to have a book published, also! The former student also said that he doubted Paul’s books sold many copies. I wonder whether he knows that my copy of one of them is now valued at $250. And I was of course reminded of several successful writers who give Paul credit for inspiring/leading them into the field.

People like Jeff Henderson, assistant dean at Southwest Texas State College at San Marcos, who is the author of many magazine articles. Jeff still remembers Paul’s remark in the cafeteria line at Crane High School: “Jeff, I’ll make a writer out of you yet.”

And Elmer Kelton, who says Paul was a primary influence on him. “I had always wanted to be a writer from age eight or nine. Paul gave me the idea that a practical way to get into it was through journalism,” Elmer said. He recalls that Paul was always gentle natured and easy to get along with, but was no “snap” teacher.

“At the University of Texas I found much the same style in journalism prof DeWitt Reddick,” Kelton said. “But he did not give away good grades, either. You had to work for them.” No coincidence. Just another of life’s interesting cycles. Soon after
Paul had begun teaching in Crane, feeling himself underqualified, he set about studying in the summer—in Austin—with Dr. Reddick, whom he greatly respected. Takes one to know one, wouldn’t you say?

It is significant that these examples, fresh and clear as they sound, are coming from years after the fact. Some of the folks who talk with animation about what Mr. Pat meant to them are grandparents themselves now (Paul, remember, left the regular classroom in 1977), but the effectiveness of a good teacher remains forever in one’s makeup.

I had some good teachers in college, and other good teachers/mentors on the job. Paul was one of those. In forty-seven years, Crane had two journalism teachers. Paul Patterson led the program beginning in 1940, when he and Clint Carroll showed up looking for jobs in the oil field town where all the teachers except two had been fired—for being seen at a bar in town.

That’s another story one of us needs to research some time, Paul.

When L. L. Martin, superintendent, mentioned that a journalism teacher was needed, Clint said, “Paul’s a writer. He can handle that without any trouble.” Handle it he did, but Paul says it was only with the help of the students, who gave him “on-the-job training,” beginning with headline writing. The next summer found Paul in Austin, in that workshop I mentioned earlier.

When Paul eased out of the job in 1962 and 1963, I moved into it with mixed feelings. I was excited to be teaching my first love, but I knew I could not measure up to such a beloved institution as he already was. And I had known what it was like to follow a great teacher, especially when that teacher was going to stay around. I had seen disappointment and maybe belligerence in the question, “Why is Mr. Pat quitting?” So I explained that he was needed in the same school for an unusually high enrollment in Spanish and Texas history.

Oh well, I was already fond of Mr. Pat and, knowing he would not deliberately discourage or undermine me, I simply hoped for
the best. I didn’t know how lucky I was. Some students who had worked on the yearbook the year before were quite proprietary of their project and did not like for the new teacher to make ANY changes, however small. In fact, a few even went to their old sponsor to talk about me—just once. I don’t know what he said, but those students found that, while he still loved them—in fact, because he still loved them—he would have nothing but support for their new teacher. Whatever I was able to accomplish in that position for the next twenty-six years got its jump-start from Paul Patterson, his presence and his precedents.

From the first day I appreciated his presence, and not only because of his confidence in my abilities. He was just down the hall, physically and mentally, whenever I had a question to ask or a woe to express. And his precedents—ah, he left such a trail of tradition that was not stick-in-the-mud, fun that provided for serious accomplishment, and a lightheartedness that still demanded student accountability!

For that trail he also left a guidebook and a map. The guidebook was Dr. DeWitt Reddick’s *Journalism and the High School Paper*, autographed by Dr. Reddick and annotated by Paul Patterson, from those summer workshops. The map was in the form of highly detailed lesson plans—meticulously choreographed, step-by-step—for the first six weeks of Journalism I, the only “J” course offered in Crane then, with word-by-word scripting, even for lectures.

Those Patterson notes did wonders for a too-stiff, too-prim, green young teacher. The witticisms in his clever illustrations were such that I could, with a few adjustments such as changing of names in the examples, come out with some successful class lectures and illustrations. These were first-year journalism students, thank goodness, and if they thought I was very clever as I introduced them to the world of newspapering, well—how were they to know my lively wordage had come from the master teacher?

For example, focusing on thoroughness as a quality of a good reporter, the notes would say: “Mary Anne [I would fill in a name
in my class] here is going to make her first parachute jump. Does she care whether the person who packed her ‘chute had skipped only one part of the directions?’ Or, in presenting elements of news value, the notes would say, with regard to nearness: “Which story would you read first—‘1,000 in Asia on verge of starvation,’ or ‘Mike Jones and Martha Smith faint in cafeteria line?’”

Paul, you do forgive me for plagiarizing, don’t you?

Journalism isn’t the only one of my classes to benefit from Paul. For a few years during which I taught world history, he was one of four wonderful resource persons, all high school teachers who had been in service during World War II. Those four days of presentations, with questions-and-answers between the students and the former servicemen, were some of my most inspired teaching days. Each one—all great teachers themselves—observed a particular theme in his experiences.

Paul, do you remember that your theme was “getting the big picture,” the concept that, no matter how pointless any particular mission or activity seemed at the time, the day came when you saw that the activity had its part in ending the war?

And I am not the only fellow teacher Paul helped along the way. His “Timely Tips for Teachers” presentation at the meeting of the Texas Joint Council of Teachers of English inspired hundreds of us to love our students one by one, to encourage them, and to believe in and demand the best from each one.

Retirement or not, Paul has never quit teaching. His storytelling captivates audiences of all ages in many places; and, as we all know, to hear a well-crafted story is to learn—in the most painless way possible—about human nature, about words, and about the world. Mary Anne Bullard Reed, Paul’s student in Crane some fifty-five years ago, often attended the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio to hear his Old West tales. This is her account of one scene:

The temperature in San Antonio in August was over 100 degrees, there was very little breeze stirring, and shade was
sparse. This didn’t seem to affect Mr. Patterson or his listeners. Seated in a large wooden rocker, he spun story after story to a gathering crowd of all ages. Children in particular were mesmerized and let their ice cream melt while they watched him like Saturday morning cartoons. I stood back under a shade tree and held back tears. I couldn’t help wondering who will be the storyteller when people like Paul Patterson are gone. It’s scary to think that, by his own declaration, Paul might never have made it to the classroom except for the relentless pursuit by his high school principal/coach/teacher, whom he calls “Old Prof.”

Soon after graduation from Rankin High School, Paul—“vowing never to look another schoolhouse in the door”—took a job forty miles from town, cowboying. But Old Prof hunted him down to coax and help Paul go to Alpine to work AND go to college. Who knows the long-reaching effects of Old Prof’s diligence? I think there must be many of us who would like to thank him for that. I wonder who gave “Old Prof” his nudge into education. Teachers really do, as astronaut Christa McAuliffe said, “touch the future.” The chain of a teacher’s influence is the original “never ending story.” Just as it has no identifiable beginning, it has no end while this earth lasts. We are privileged to know one of its most sparkling links.

Not that Paul wouldn’t have been a good cowboy. John Webb tells that one thing his father, “a cowboy’s cowboy,” had in common with the others was their admiration for Paul Patterson. As a child John always looked forward to the Sunday ropings, where Paul the announcer “added a great deal of class with his quick wit and good sense of humor.”

But in high school John found Paul a different type teacher who treated the students as if they were equals, and—well, in John’s own words: “He was much more athletic than I had imagined. He could walk on his hands better than any of my classmates and was one of only two people I have ever known who could lie
flat on his back and jump to his feet without using his hands or a rocking motion, in a movement we called a ‘kip.’”

Later, John had Paul in to participate in a special program for former POW’s at the VA medical center where John works. He told them that when he had been cowboying, friends said, “Paul, you ought to be a teacher.” Then, when he became a teacher, some of the same people said, “Paul, maybe you ought to be a cowboy.”

And I’m glad Paul Patterson never quit being either one.

**Endnotes**

1. This paper was presented at the 2001 meeting in San Angelo; Paul Patterson was in attendance. It also appeared previously as “Paul Patterson, My Master Teacher” in the *Permian Historical Annual*, Vol. XLI (December 2001).