Both Sides of the Border
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Charles Leland Sonnichsen (1901–1991)—TFS president (1937–1938), prolific writer about Texas history and folklore, after-dinner speaker, and “one more hard-workin’ sumbitch”
(Courtesy University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department)

“Leland saw me across the room, began singing ‘Let the Lower Lights Be Burning,’ motioned to you, and we met singing—you bass, me soprano, and Leland the tenor. Nice Memory!” Joyce Roach
(T. I. L. meeting, 1988)
On Sunday, June 2, 1931, a freshly-minted Harvard Ph.D. stepped off the train in the sunbaked border town of El Paso, prepared to assume responsibilities as an assistant professor of English at the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy. The adjective “dapper” might have been coined to describe twenty-nine-year-old Charles Leland Sonnichsen. He was tall and good-looking, with elegant bearing, and trim of both build and mustache. The El Paso assignment would, of course, be temporary; after all, Harvard Ph.D.s surely commanded such status in academia that he would soon be summoned to the ivy-draped colossi of better-watered soil, both literally and figuratively. But a funny thing happened on the road to his destiny. Several funny things, in fact. We’ll get to those shortly.

For one thing, he swam against the current. He made his reputation as a teacher of English and a writer of history. He served at different times as president of the Western Literature Association and then as president of the Western History Association. As an English professor writing history, he learned that nothing so enrages history faculty as a colleague from another department successfully challenging them on their own turf. “Historians don’t like outsiders crowing on their dung-hill,” he once put it.

So, who was this rabble-rousing upstart? His roots were in Minnesota, but he was born in northern Iowa on September 20, 1901, into a family of farmers. Although the name sounds Danish, the immigrating ancestor considered himself German. Leland
Sonnichsen described his mother as a tough-minded, resilient frontierswoman; his father as kind-hearted, patient, and unafraid of hard physical labor. He also made time to tell his grandchildren stories. When Doc was two his family moved to Minnesota, where he grew to maturity. After graduating from high school in Wadena, he headed for the University of Minnesota, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in English in the spring of 1924.

At Minnesota he seemed concentrated on maximizing opportunities to become a well-rounded human being. He supported himself with odd jobs, played tennis, and developed enough proficiency at fencing to become team captain. He did not make the cut for the drama club, but found his métier on the staff of the campus humor magazine. ROTC was compulsory, but he was never tempted by an army career. He developed a love for classical music by attending concerts of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and cultivated an appreciation of art with frequent visits to the Walker Art Gallery. The only reason he didn’t graduate magna cum laude was because he gave an interviewer the wrong answer to a simple question. Asked what was the most vital ingredient of great literature, Sonnichsen foolishly replied that he thought it should be interesting.

He launched his teaching career with a two-year stint at an Episcopalian-sponsored military school in southern Minnesota. Next step: Harvard. En route to an MA, he gained admission to the Harvard Glee Club. He gave himself whole-heartedly to its activities and continued to enjoy that pursuit for the rest of his long life. I recall a TSHA meeting of some twenty years ago when Doc and the irrepressible Joyce Gibson Roach decided to enliven proceedings by staging an impromptu recital of church tunes while standing amidst the book displays. It was a capella, of course. The hymns were all familiar at the Baptist Church in Jacksburrr, Texas. [Does anyone foolishly think it’s pronounced Jacksborough?] Suddenly, Doc hoisted his voice into a falsetto register in order to simulate the effect of a second soprano. This continued until Doc came down with a sore throat.
Meanwhile, back at Harvard, Sonnichsen finished his masters, and then headed to Pittsburgh, where he joined the English faculty at Carnegie Tech. While there, he made the acquaintance of Haniel Long, who would shortly depart for Santa Fe and a glorious Indian summer producing such classics as *Interlinear to Cabeza De Vaca and Piñon Country*. Not satisfied that he had reached his potential, Sonnichsen returned to Harvard in the fall of 1929 to obtain a doctorate in what was then called English philology—according to Webster, “the study of literary texts and of written records.” Samuel Butler was to be his specialty. Parenthetically, philology sits almost adjacent to philogyny, which means “love of or liking for women.” In his three-volume history of the Texas Folklore Society, Ab Abernethy remembers Doc as “being a continual attraction to ladies of all ages.”

While at Harvard the second time around, Sonnichsen was vitally influenced by the legendary George Lyman Kittredge, noted student of English folklore and Shakespearean scholar. Kittredge was also a pillar of the American Folklore Society who had encouraged his disciple, John A. Lomax, to initiate a society that would do the same for Texas folklore. Lomax had done so, with help from Leonidas W. Payne, in 1909. J. Frank Dobie became secretary-editor of the Texas Folklore Society in 1922; it wasn’t long before Dobie parted ways with the academics of the American Folklore Society and became estranged from Kittredge. These undercurrents would be felt for years to come. And Sonnichsen was awash in them.

Sonnichsen seemed oblivious to these strains during his time with Kittredge, and upon graduation from Harvard’s doctoral program in 1931, he departed for the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy in El Paso. Hopes for an ivy-league assignment dwindled as the Depression deepened. But what the heck; in two short years he was chairman of the English Department, where he remained until 1960. Nineteen thirty-three was also the year that the college president, John M. Berry, informed his young Harvard man that beginning that fall, he would be teaching a course in the
Life and Literature of the Southwest, patterned presumably on the one that J. Frank Dobie had crafted at The University of Texas in Austin. One suspects that Sonnichsen might have been laying the groundwork for this assignment because he was spending an increasing amount of time investigating early-day Texas family feuds—a far cry from Samuel Butler. In the summer of 1933, for example, he spent a month researching the Jaybird-Woodpecker affair at Richmond, Texas, southeast of Houston. Relocation to a new environment had compelled him to revise traditional approaches to research—from the intoxicating must of ancient tomes to dusty courthouse documents, tombstone inscriptions, census reports, church and family records, oral interviews, and the like.

So here he was in 1933—a department chairman albeit in a remote location, a new course to organize and teach, and research initiated in a subject that would sustain him for the next three decades. What else? Marriage. To Augusta Jones, by whom he had three children before divorcing in 1950. Six years later he married Carol Wade Sonnichsen, who survives him in Fort Worth.

Meanwhile, Sonnichsen gained wide and favorable response to his course in Life and Literature of the Southwest. So much so that in 1938 and again in 1939, he was invited to pinch-hit for J. Frank himself on the Austin campus. Dobie had the habit of leaving the Austin campus in springtime ostensibly to seek relief from hay fever, leaving his classes to Mrs. Dobie who, by general acknowledgment, was better organized than he. Cynics suspected that he was at work on his next book. Sonnichsen was amenable to a continuation of the arrangement provided it might lead to a permanent position on the Austin campus, but this was not to be, as English department barons made clear their preference for someone with more traditional interests—roughly the same argument that Dobie had encountered years earlier when he had first proposed a course in Life and Literature of the Southwest.

Be that as it may, Dobie’s approval of Sonnichsen opened yet another door. For many years Dobie had made the Texas Folklore Society in his image. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Dobie
and others were seeking a joint meeting with its New Mexican counterpart known, interestingly, as the New Mexico Hispanic Institute, whose luminaries included the likes of Ruth Laughlin Barker, Arthur L. Campa, Gilberto Espinosa, Paul Horgan, Edgar L. Hewitt, Alice Corbin Henderson, Matt Pierce, and Nina Otero-Warren. The meeting was foreordained to happen in El Paso. A local arrangements coordinator was needed, someone who would assume the presidency. That someone proved to be none other than Doc Sonnichsen. As he himself put it many decades later, “as soon as a comparatively sane, able-bodied El Pasoan showed up, he was going to be president, whether he liked it or not.”

That 1938 Texas Folklore Society meeting was held at Hotel Paso del Norte. Doc recalled that Dobie appeared in full glory. Carl Hertzog remembered Dobie attired in a white suit working the crowd. For this occasion Hertzog turned out the handsomest program the Society had had to that date; it was enhanced with a sketch by Tom Lea, whose acquaintance he had made only short months earlier. Sonnichsen thought the $1.10 cost of the banquet ticket was exorbitant, “but it was the best I could do.”

Doc’s first book was obscurely published in 1942 at Caldwell, Idaho, by a most respectable regional publisher, the Caxton Press. *Billy King’s Tombstone* was built around the life and times of a Tombstone, Arizona, bartender cum lawman. Or was it the other way around? Although published sans annotations, bibliography, and index, the book had a good reception. His next was the ever popular biography of *Roy Bean: Law West of the Pecos*, but prior to publication by Macmillan in 1943, it had more rejection slips than any other. Sonnichsen’s immersion in folklore, especially of the Texas variety, was rationalized as “a branch of history,” and, “what people agree to believe about the facts is a fact in itself, often more influential than the reality.” Bean was a case in point. In 1950 came a survey of the mid-twentieth-century cattle industry—*Cowboys and Cattle Kings*. The reception was mixed and J. Frank Dobie was a lump in the batter, but as Dale Walker has observed, “the cattlefolk and their publications loved it.”
Perhaps this is the place at which to talk about the schism between Sonnichsen and Dobie. In brief, Sonnichsen was a George Lyman Kittredge disciple. Kittredge’s shadow had hovered over the 1909 founding of the Texas Folklore Society largely through the influence of John A. Lomax, another former pupil. But after Dobie’s assumption of the secretary-editorship in 1922, relations between the eastern establishment and him grew frosty. Matters were not helped by the condescending review that his first folklore compilation—Legends of Texas—received in the Journal of the American Folklore Society, a review that may have been written by the sainted Kittredge himself. Dobie soon scoffed openly at scientific folklorists and proclaimed himself a storyteller, nothing more, nothing less. “Any tale belongs to whoever can best tell it,” he asserted. And if a story needed embellishing for improvement’s sake, so be it. Sonnichsen, well-grounded in the nationally accepted canons of folklore scholarship, was affronted by Dobie’s attitude. With advancing age and an unassailable reputation as Mr. Texas, Dobie’s position became even more calcified. A quarter century ago Sonnichsen told me that, having read Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver, he confronted Dobie concerning his purported discovery of the Lost Tayopa Mine. Dobie brushed aside the query, asserting, “When you are writing history, you have to stick to the facts, but when you are telling a story you have to make it a good story.” Replied Sonnichsen in disbelief, “In that case somebody will have to do your work over, won’t they?” Sonnichsen’s great gift was his ability to stick to the facts and still tell a good story.

About 1948, as Doc was getting under way with Cowboys and Cattle Kings, J. Evetts Haley, Panhandle rancher and author, while on a trip through El Paso, expressed a desire to meet Sonnichsen in the flesh. Carl Hertzog made the appointment and drove Haley to the Sonnichsens’ residence at the corner of Cincinnati and Piedmont Streets, snug against Mount Franklin. Sonnichsen had been left in charge of the household and its three children. Hertzog and Haley were welcomed at the front door by an apron-clad professor who ushered them past an upright vacuum cleaner whose whining
sound they had heard moments earlier. As Sonnichsen led them to the kitchen, Haley observed paper in the typewriter on the diningroom table and neatly stacked typescript next to it. Lunch was cooking on the stove. The sink was half filled with freshly washed dishes. Even as he paused to wipe a snotty nose, Sonnichsen never missed a beat making his guests feel welcome with animated conversation. After a ten-minute powwow, the visitors returned to their vehicle. Once inside Haley beamed his approval to Hertzog, “That is one more hard-workin’ sumbitch.”

This ability to make every minute count characterized Sonnichsen to the end of his days. His English department colleague, James Day, long ago remembered how Doc, then back to teaching, would peck away at this office typewriter until five minutes before the bell, grab his notes, rush to class, give a fifty-minute lecture, return to the office, then pick up where he had left off at the typewriter. The day before he died at ninety-one he was on the roof of his Tucson home patching tiles.

After *Cowboys and Cattle Kings*, the next book was a sure ‘nuff classic, *I’ll Die Before I’ll Run*, first published in 1951, then revised, expanded, and additionally illustrated by José Cisneros in 1962. This book was my introduction to Doc Sonnichsen; it also answered the childish question that my maternal grandmother had been unable to: why had my great-grandfather left Goliad County in 1875? The Taylor-Sutton Feud had boiled over, creating significant stress for this devout Baptist who wanted only to live at peace with his neighbors. A second feud book was published in 1957, with a rather prosaic title: *Ten Texas Feuds*.

It would be no surprise that Sonnichsen would prepare and periodically update a reading list for his course on Life and Literature. From 1934 to his 1972 departure from El Paso, he wrote endless book reviews for sundry journals and for El Paso newspapers—notably the *Herald-Post*. He resisted importuning to use these writings as the basis of an annotated bibliography of Southwestern Americana. But in 1962 he published an anthology: *The Southwest in Life and Literature*. 
Three years after that he expanded a chapter from *Ten Texas Feuds* into a small book of its own about the Truett-Mitchell flare-up in Hood County in 1874. It was Sonnichsen’s personal favorite of his many books, and one of mine, too. Twenty-five years ago my wife and I drove from a bed-and-breakfast on the courthouse square in Granbury out the Old Mambrino Road toward Mitchell Bend in the Middle Brazos Valley. With Sonnichsen’s book in hand, the setting seemed strangely untouched since the heyday of the feud a century earlier. As the country lane dipped into the bed of wet-weather Contrary Creek, it was easy to visualize exactly where the feudists were positioned as the climatic ambush took place. One could readily imagine the echoing gunfire on the soft breeze that blew that afternoon. In the bend itself we spotted the Mitchell family cemetery and the grave of patriarch Cooney Mitchell himself, whose lynching had set off the deadly aftermath.

Doc used to tell people he knew enough secrets to write a social history of El Paso guaranteed to get him shot within twenty-four hours of publication. When he got around to publishing that El Paso history in 1968, he pulled enough punches to escape retribution. The most excitement occurred when Doc lost his grip on a bundle of galley and page proofs while entering the Texas Western Press building at the west edge of the UT-El Paso campus, where the book was being printed. He retrieved his hat from a gusty March wind all right, but the proofs went flying down a deep arroyo beside the press building and, according to Carl Hertzog’s recollection, some even flew across the Rio Grande below Hart’s Mill, which prompted Hertzog to announce: “Leland, this book of yours is an instant success. Not even published yet, it already has international distribution.”

So much for Sonnichsen and his books. Time is up. When I think of Doc I always recall events at two consecutive meetings of the Western History Association in the early eighties. I asked Jack Rittenhouse at one of these conferences which of his numerous Stagecoach Press publications had been the best seller. Without hesitation he replied, “*Act of Enchantment*, that talk Larry Powell
gave to the Historical Society of New Mexico in 1960. I think everybody in the audience must have bought one.” This was another of Powell’s paeans to the joys of good reading.

The next year I was recounting my conversation with Rittenhouse to Doc. “Act of Enchantment, Act of Enchantment,” he repeated, as if trying to summon up the memory of an elusive title. Suddenly his face brightened and he exclaimed, “Ah yes, a rather thin little book as I recall, but I never read it. I just supposed it was Larry’s attempt at a sex manual.”

Doc had a granddaughter who grew up in Lubbock, became a model, and had considerable success in the Miss USA competition. She later married a Swiss diplomat. You may recall the flap last year when the Swiss ambassador to Germany was briefly recalled because his wife had posed for a German fashion magazine in a skimpy swimsuit. Guess whose granddaughter that was?