SOONER MAGAZINE

Volume 23 Number 1 FALL 2002

TULSA TIME

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SOONER MAGAZINE

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Fall 2002

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ON THE COVER • Framed in the window overlooking the Schusterman Center's main entrance, OU sculptor Paul Moore's "The Seed Sower" stands watch over the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa campus. **Story on Page 4.**
Photo by Robert Taylor

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Sooner Magazine is published quarterly by the University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc. with private funds at no cost to the taxpayers of the State of Oklahoma. The magazine is printed by the Transcript Press, Norman, Oklahoma, and is intended primarily for private donors to the University of Oklahoma and members of the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association.

Opinions expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the University of Oklahoma or the University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc.

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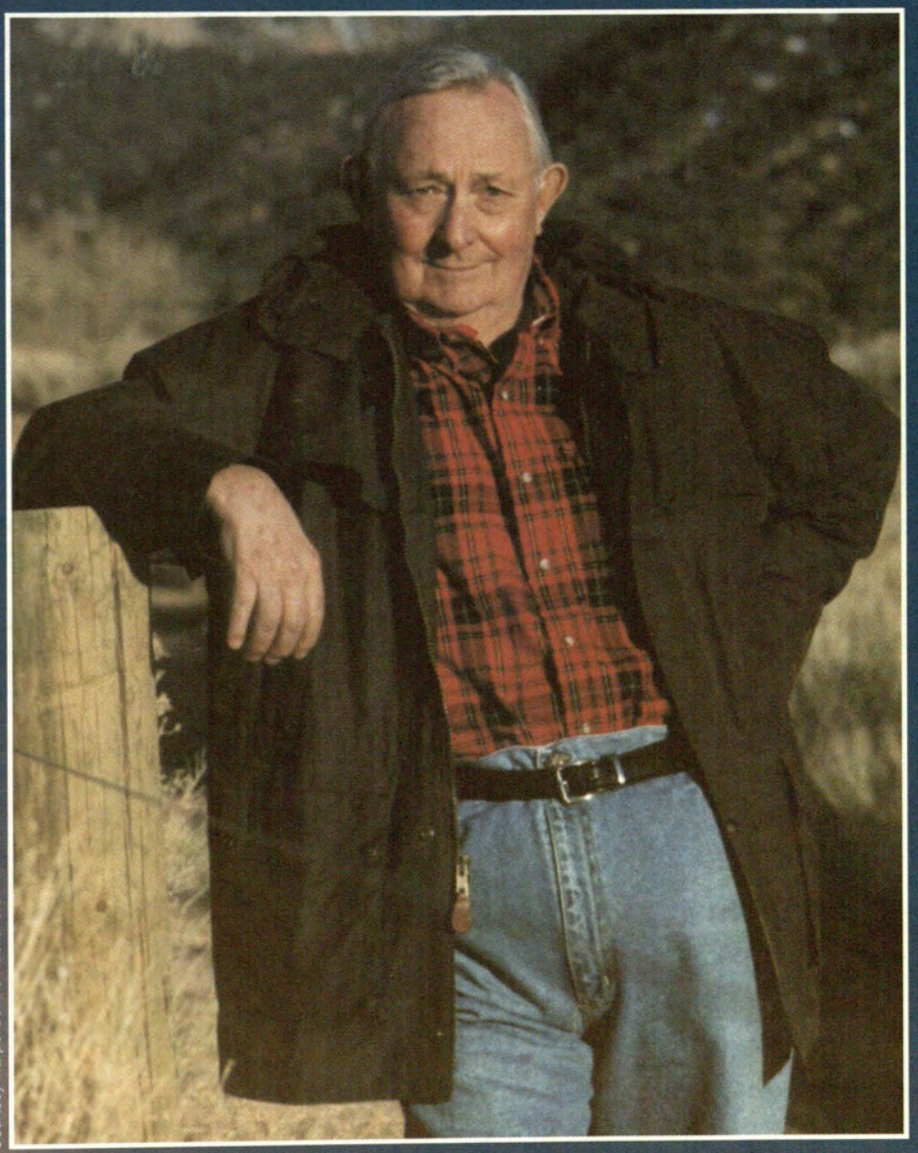
Seldom Disappointed

By Debra Levy Martinelli



Courtesy HarperCollins Publishers

From decorated soldier to bestselling author, Tony Hillerman is still the unpretentious farm boy from Sacred Heart, Oklahoma.

When he was a 17-year-old college freshman in 1942, Tony Hillerman told his academic counselor he wanted to major in chemical engineering. "I didn't really know what I wanted to do," says Hillerman, who later graduated from the University of Oklahoma and became one of America's best-loved mystery writers. "I just knew a negative: I didn't want to be a farmer because you couldn't make a living at it." *continued*

That much he knew from growing up the youngest of three children in the tiny farming community of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. His family was one of farmers and shopkeepers who never made much money at either. When his father died the same year he graduated from high school, there was only enough money to send Hillerman to Oklahoma A&M College (now Oklahoma State University)—chosen because it was the least expensive alternative—for one semester.

He immediately sought part-time employment to help make ends meet, working variously as a dishwasher in a boarding house, a janitor in a dentist's office, in the university's ROTC unit where he stored equipment after drills, and in the College of Agriculture where he earned the fantastic wage—for the time—of 35 cents an hour.

Still, his earnings were not enough to cover the costs of tuition, books, room and board, and he returned to Sacred Heart. "My brother was in the Air Force, leaving me the last son who could run the family business, so I went home and tried to be a farmer," he recalls. "I raised cattle and did about as well as anybody else, but there wasn't any rain."

Besides, the war was raging in Europe and Asia, and Hillerman was eager to join up. "It was a patriotic war," he says, "and I was so afraid it would be over before I could get in it. My mother was a very understanding woman, and she signed the papers to permit me to enlist."

He saw combat in Europe and was seriously wounded near the end of the war when an explosion left him with two broken legs, a mangled foot and ankle, facial burns and temporary blindness. Discharged with the Silver Star, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster and Purple Heart, the young soldier still was not quite sure what to do with the rest of his life.

As providence would have it, when *The Daily Oklahoman*—the newspaper in Oklahoma City where his mother, Lucy, then lived—was notified by the Army about his medals of valor, a reporter contacted her. One thing led to another, and Lucy shared with the reporter, Beatrice Stahl, some of the letters her son had written from France and Italy. When he arrived home, he paid a visit to Stahl, who suggested he become a writer. Shortly thereafter, he visited Larry Grove, his cousin and best friend, who was recuperating from war injuries in the Navy hospital in nearby Norman.

"Larry wanted to be a surgeon," Hillerman explains, "but he got one hand pretty shot up in the war and had only part of it left. So we both decided to become writers and thought we'd go to the University of Oklahoma."

"It was a patriotic war, and I was so afraid it would be over before I could get in it."

As with most members of "the greatest generation," military service ended Tony Hillerman's youth and profoundly influenced the rest of his life. Shown in a French village with part of Fourth Platoon, C Company, 410th Infantry, looking uncharacteristically tidy, Tony (grenade in lapel) is on the jeep hood at center.

Photos courtesy Tony Hillerman

At OU, his journey to becoming a writer began in earnest. He was influenced particularly by H. H. Herbert, from whom he took an ethics class. "No one made the impression on me professionally that Herbert did," Hillerman says of the man for whom the School of Journalism was later named. "He taught me that a community newspaper's news side preempted its advertising revenue—the paper had a responsibility to the community; it had to be the watchdog. 'Look at the police blotter,' Herbert told us, 'and always know who's in jail because it might be someone you don't expect, and you'll have to tell the community about it.' "

Those lessons carried Hillerman through his years as a reporter and editor at small and medium-sized newspapers throughout the Southwest, beginning with the *Borger* (Texas) *News-Herald*, and ending with *The New Mexican* in Santa Fe, where he was a general assignment and statehouse reporter. Years later, as a professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, he, too, taught ethics. "I only repeated to my students the lessons I learned from Herbert," he says.

In 1963, Hillerman deserted journalism for academia when the chairman of the UNM journalism department, who was planning to retire, suggested he earn a master's degree and eventually take over the department. At the same time, Hillerman's itch to write novels was growing. With a family to support, however, he needed a source of income while he pursued his studies and his writing. He landed a job as an assistant to UNM's president, Tom Popejoy, where he discovered just how different academia was from the newspaper business.

Returning from World War II, Tony enrolled in the University of Oklahoma. Here he assumes the role of the caddy in photojournalism class. The golfer at left is Dick Wharton, and at right, surreptitiously improving his lie, is Bill Shelton.

"It was like stepping into a different world," he says. "I went from a six-day workweek and getting a story written every minute to an environment of thinkers. Time no longer mattered. I was both impressed and horrified."

On one occasion, he was handed an inch-thick stack of proposals written by various UNM science departments that wanted a few thousand acres owned by the university to conduct research. He was asked to condense the proposals, which explained why each department felt it should get the land, into a short report.

"I figured I'd review the proposals that night and write something the next day," Hillerman recalls. "I asked the administrator overseeing the project when it needed to be completed. He said on the 17th. I thought he either had a bad calendar or didn't know what day it was. It was already the 19th. I asked him if he wanted it the 17th of the following month, and he said, 'If you can have it finished by then.' "

Two of his graduate school courses—literary criticism and American humor—whetted his appetite for writing fiction. "In the humor course, we were taught that there was absolutely nothing funny about humor, but we were shown how a writer could get a chuckle through skillful writing. In the literary criticism course, for first time I understood Shakespeare as a practical, ink-stained wretch trying to make a living," he says.

The Bard's work made such an impact that themes of *Othello* are woven throughout Hillerman's latest novel, *The Wailing Wind*. Released in May 2002, it reached the No. 3 spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list and No. 8 on *The International Herald Tribune* bestseller list.

After earning his master's degree in 1966, Hillerman made good on his promise to take on the UNM chairmanship. He taught there until 1987.

During those years, he wrote a slew of well-received mystery novels—among them *Listening Woman, Dance Hall of the Dead, The Fly on the Wall, The Blessing Way, The Dark Wind* and *Skinwalkers*—many of which revolved around Navajo Tribal Police detectives Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. Some years back, *The Dark Wind* was made into a film that Hillerman says did better in Europe than in the United States. An adaptation of *Skinwalkers*, produced by Robert Redford, aired on the PBS series "Mystery!" in November.

He is comfortable writing about Native American culture, he says, because most of his friends and classmates back home in Sacred Heart were Pottawatomie and Seminole Indians.

"The first time I pulled up to an old trading post [in New Mexico] and saw a few elderly Navajos sitting on a bench, I felt right at home," he says. "It was like a time warp taking me back to Sacred Heart."

He greatly admires the practical values of the Navajos and Hopis, who, he says, are much closer to true Christianity than the average American Christian. "They believe in strong family values, respect for women, and that wealth equals profound

evil—if you have more than you need, you must be bad. The ultimate responsibility is to the community, not to oneself."

Hillerman, who still lives in Albuquerque, also has written non-fiction, including *The Great Taos Bank Robbery, The Spell of New Mexico* and *Indian Country* and a children's book, *The Boy Who Made Dragonfly*. His numerous writing awards include the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar and Grand Master Awards, the Nero Wolfe Award, the Center for the American Indian's Ambassador Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book, the Silver Spur Award for the best novel set in the West, the Navajo Tribe's Special Friend Award, the National Media Award from the American Anthropological Association, the Public Service Award from the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière.

His most recent body of work is a three-book deal that includes his 2001 memoir, *Seldom Disappointed,* for which he won the Agatha Award for Best Non-Fiction, *The Wailing Wind* and a work in progress titled *The Sinister Pig.* "The book is about what pig launchers—the tools that are used to clean out and check pipelines—are used for when the pipelines have been abandoned when, say, a copper smelter shuts down or the company gets gobbled up by another company. That's all I can tell you," he says, examining a map on his desk of Mexico and southwestern New Mexico, where *The Sinister Pig* takes place. "It's not just Joe Leaphorn who's always studying maps—it's me, too. For this new book, I have to go back down there and look at the landscape. I need to have the landscape in mind when I'm writing."

Tony Hillerman and Marie Unzer met as seniors at OU. Tony describes his marriage to Marie on August 16, 1948, as "the greatest coup of his life." The Hillermans' daughter Anne was born in Lawton; after moving to New Mexico, they adopted two more daughters and three sons and now have 10 grandchildren.

His landscapes also come from his life experiences, as do many of the characters and story lines that make his novels uniquely Hillerman. "Yesterday, I was on the elevator to go see a doctor about getting my cataracts removed," he says. "I met a couple: a thin, well-dressed black woman, about 5 feet 4 inches, with a man of about the same height who, if you were casting a movie, would be the tugboat skipper—ruddy skin, bright blue eyes, well-trimmed beard and hair and a cap that had to be European. I chatted with them—I talk to everybody, you know—and thought, 'I'll remember them when describing characters in a future book.' "

He also gets ideas for characters from readers. "One woman who worked for the Customs Service and the Treasury Department suggested I get one of my Navajo characters into the Border Patrol as a tracker known as a Shadow Wolf. I'm going to use that in my new book."

He claims he never really wanted to write a memoir and certainly never had entertained the prospect of writing one as part of a multi-book contract. "Usually I just write books and send them off," he says. "But another publisher had approached me, and my publisher wanted me to sign the deal for three books. He said he would pay me [well] to do it. So I said, 'OK.'"

The title of the memoir comes from words often spoken by his mother: "Blessed are those who expect little; they are seldom disappointed." The first time he recalled hearing them was when one hot summer day his father was lugging an enormous, luscious Black Diamond watermelon to the house. But in the intense heat and humidity, the melon slipped from his grasp as he tried to open the gate latch. "At some level in my psyche, I must have sensed that this Black Diamond was too good to be true," he wrote more than 70 years later. "I must have mentioned this to Mama when she was comforting us kids, because it's the first time I recall hearing her favorite aphorism. . . . Looking back at life, I find I have often received more than I ever expected and suffered less than my share of disappointments."

After all his success, fame and even a bit of fortune, Hillerman still does not have high expectations. And, despite suffering from arthritis, cataracts and nagging war injuries, and with a bout with cancer behind him, he is not disappointed all that often. At age 77, he continues to do what he loves best—write. "How can you stop writing?" he asks.

Fans all over the world must be glad he feels that way.

Tony Hillerman, center, joins fellow authors Studs Terkel, left, and Scott Turow, laughing at their own witticisms at a library fund-raising event.

OU Western History Collections

A Word to Worried Parents

January 1, 1985. The Sooner kicker split the uprights for 3 points and a 20-14 fourth-quarter lead over Washington. The Orange Bowl crowd roared, the Ruf/Nek covered wagon—without the officials' permission—bolted onto the gridiron in celebration. Then a whistle, the yellow flag flew, the field goal became a 15-yard penalty, and the momentum shifted dramatically. Washington came back to win, costing the Sooners a potential national championship.

I don't know the name of the Ruf/Nek who drove the wagon onto the gridiron a millisecond too early, but if this dismal scene had occurred 40 years earlier, I guarantee that the driver would have been a fellow member of my class of '48, Lew Thompson.

Thompson's connection with the Ruf/Neks originated in his first enrollment at

So you think obtaining a college education is difficult today? You should have been at OU in the topsy-turvy '40s.

BY TONY HILLERMAN

OU in 1941, and as a result of another interesting football game. On a cold, rainy October Saturday, the Sooners upset heavily favored Santa Clara, the West Coast powerhouse. Students were in a raucous mood, and the Ruf/Neks were organizing a demonstration on the North Oval, encouraging a celebratory classroom walkout.

Thompson, a freshman since September, was supporting himself with various part-time jobs and passed by en route to deliver sacks of snack food to a sorority party. He stopped, told the organizers another of his part-time jobs was freelancing photographs for *The Daily Oklahoman*. If the Ruf/Neks would move their rally over to the Presidential lawn, he'd get a picture of President Joe Brandt talking to them. That certainly would make the paper.

They went for it. Thompson, camera equipment in hand, knocks on Brandt's door. Brandt is absent but expected momentarily. Thompson explains what's afoot, gets access to the balcony and leaves word that the students want Brandt to speak to them. Brandt arrives, tells the students he'll make their walkout an offi-

Courtesy Lew Thompson

Recalled to active duty during the Korean conflict, Thompson goes on maneuvers in North Carolina as information officer for the aggressor forces.

cial Monday holiday. Thompson's photos make a spread in *The Oklahoman*.

If my memory serves me, it was the first sanctioned student walkout—but to get to the useful part of this tale, we must skip back a few months.

Thompson arrived at the OU campus from Shawnee with the $50 required in those Depression times to pay his admission fee, plus $18 to sustain him until he found work. He had helped a friend milk the family's cows, in exchange for a ride in the friend's truck to Norman for himself and a trunk containing all of his worldly belongings.

Lew left the trunk on the sidewalk near Campus Drug, went in and asked for a job. He cited experience at Coffey Drug Store in Shawnee and was hired on a trial basis. He carried his trunk to a rooming house the manager recommended. But this is not where the story started.

In Hollis in 1939, the bleak bottom of The Great Depression, Thompson's mother was losing her struggle to provide for her children, had found better paying work in California and would move the family there. Lew asked to stay behind. He felt he could find a job and support himself. He found it at Tom Coffey's drug store in Shawnee.

Coffey needed a night watchman (as drug stores did even in those days). He could use Lew, 16 and big for his age, as delivery boy, janitor and helper in the photo studio Coffey also ran. Thompson enrolled at Shawnee High, slept in the drug store and began learning photography in the darkroom.

This paid off at OU. In his search for a second job, he found that the Athletic Department could use a photographer, and Snorter Luster, then an assistant coach, provided him a free place to sleep and park his trunk (a going-away present from Coffey). The arrangement left scant time for class work, but it didn't matter. Before final exam time that winter, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

That Day of Infamy was Sunday, December 7. On Monday, December 8, Thompson enlisted. He didn't get back to the campus until 1946.

The second enrollment was totally different. Now he was a retired Army captain, having gone into the newly forming Rangers, survived the bloody battle of Guadalcanal, other island campaigns and the reconquest of the Philippines, earning battlefield promotions on the way.

Now he had retirement money, his tuition and fees paid by the G.I. Bill of Rights and a monthly paycheck. He and other returning veterans took over fraternity houses and changed a lot of things about campus life. But the connections Thompson had made with OU athletics were still alive. He noticed the male pep squad that enlivened events before the war wasn't active.

The manager of Rickner's Book Store found the old Ruf/Neks records in storage there. A meeting was held, the club was revived and lives on today to help celebrate Sooner victories.

Ruf/Neks aside, those from the Class of '48 may recall Thompson as the fellow who revived *The Covered Wagon*—the monthly campus magazine. It lived on a subsidy from student activity funds, had a tiny readership and offered little to read except the sort of jokes that were popular with college mags in the 1940s. By now Thompson was a journalism major. The Board of Student Publications picked him as *Wagon* editor. He collected a staff of writers, cartoonists and photographers, including me as assistant editor. We were to convert a prewar magazine into a postwar magazine appealing to a campus swarming with mostly males just out of

OU Western History Collections

As editor of the 1947 *Covered Wagon*, Thompson was determined to convert a stale prewar humor magazine into a postwar publication appealing to a male-dominated campus swarming with veterans. An early venture was an illustrated "shocking exposé" on Oklahoma's first strip tease joint.

the Army, Navy or Marines.

The problem was to inform this new student that a new era had begun. For the magazine, we advertised that next month we would feature a shocking exposé, written by me and entitled "Culture Comes to Oklahoma." It would be an illustrated report on Oklahoma's first strip tease joint. The staff spread the word around campus. It reached the office of President George Cross. An inquiry came from the President's office. Would the fellow writing this drop in for a chat? Thompson by then was campus stringer for *The Daily Oklahoman*. He tipped off his editor there. The resulting headline said "OU Magazine Editor Called on Carpet," and the story suggested Cross was uneasy about the magazine going raunchy.

The culture story was mild, as was the chat with President Cross, but readership soared. It remained high because Thompson had collected a gang of talented workers. In fact, *The Harvard Lampoon* declared it the country's top campus humor magazine.

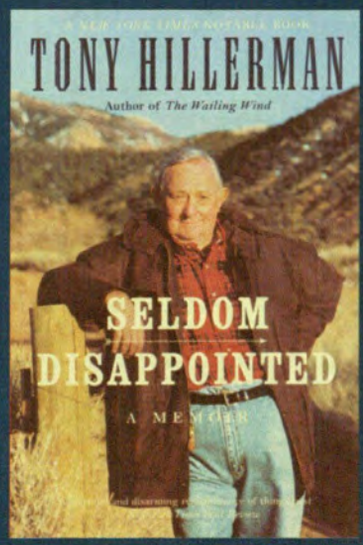
Thompson is 80 now, has gone through a career as short story writer, advertising man, documentary filmmaker and consultant to two governors (one DEM, one GOP). He lives in a small adobe house he built himself in the hills outside Santa Fe and drives into town to work with a son at the agency—but no more consulting with governors nor representing oil and mining corporations. His spare time goes into a multitude of charities and his efforts to grow plants from seeds archaeologists find in prehistoric sites. But I have neglected to explain why he sleeps under the tree.

He started that while building the house, preferring his sleeping bag under the piñon to driving into Santa Fe. When the house was finished, he found his bedroom claustrophobic—missing the fresh air, the night sounds, the stars overhead. So he moved back under the tree, adding a tarp cover for nights when it snows.

I asked him what he would tell his fellow grandparents in the Class of '48 that they should tell offspring worried about financing grandkids in college. He had a short answer.

"Tell 'em not to worry. Kids who really want an education will get one."

Life according to Hillerman



For more than 30 years, novelist Tony Hillerman has followed one best-selling mystery with another, taking his devoted following into the intriguing, mystifying and starkly beautiful world of the Navajo, establishing his protagonists Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee as two of the best-known contemporary detectives of the genre. With his autobiography, *Seldom Disappointed*, Hillerman steps out from behind Leaphorn and Chee to reveal a character every bit as fascinating as his fictional creations—himself.

Hillerman looks at his own life with startling clarity and warmth, turning his keen insight and wry, self-deprecating humor on a life lived with modest expectations colored by an optimism destined to carry him through life's many challenges. Growing up in tiny, Depression-fraught Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, he never realized he was poor until he left for college, able to afford only one semester before following his brother into the Army, a teenage infantryman coming of age in the mud and madness of World War II.

Recovering from serious war wounds, he returned with the veterans to the University of Oklahoma, where he chose journalism, then became a reporter, United Press bureau chief and journalism department chair at the University of New Mexico. At OU he met and later married the girl of his dreams, Marie, with whom he had one child and adopted five more. His enormous success as a writer, while greatly satisfying, seems still to surprise him.

Unlike Hillerman's carefully plotted mysteries, readers know from the beginning how this book ends; the treat is in the storytelling. Hillerman fans probably grabbed hardcover copies off the bookshelves last year. Publication of the paperback edition in October 2002 is destined to broaden the readership. For anyone who ever grew up in small-town Oklahoma, lived through a war or attended OU, this memoir should be required reading. For everyone else, to miss what the *New York Times Book Review* called a "splendid and disarming remembrance of things past," would be a downright shame.

—Carol J. Burr

Seldom Disappointed
By Tony Hillerman

Perennial, an imprint of
HarperCollins Publishers
Hardcover $26.00
Paperback $13.95

Also available on audio:
12 Hours / 8 cassettes
Unabridged / Read by the Author
$39.95