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BOOK REVIEW

Elmer Kelton's 'Sandhills Boy'

Western novelist Elmer Kelton's memoir describes his life as a failed cowboy turned writer

By Stayton Bonner SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Unlike the pulp shoot-'em-ups of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour, Elmer Kelton's Westerns tend to be as unpredictable as the West Texas weather they often take place amid. As Kelton states in his new memoir, "Sandhills Boy," "I have often been asked how my characters differ from the traditional larger-than-life heroes of the mythical west. Those, I reply, are seven feet tall and invincible. My characters are five-eight and nervous."

Born April 29, 1926, on the Five Wells Ranch a few miles east of Andrews, Kelton knew the cowboy way of life from the cradle onward. In 1929, his 5-foot-8 father, Buck Kelton, was hired onto the McElroy Ranch, eventually becoming its foreman. Growing up on the ranch around cowboys like Happy Smith, a bootlegger who enjoyed a brief stint as a stunt man in Hollywood's silent film world, and Manerd Galer, a trick roper in the Will Rogers tradition who once toured Europe as part of Tex Austin's rodeo troupe, Kelton was given lifelong fodder for his future stories.

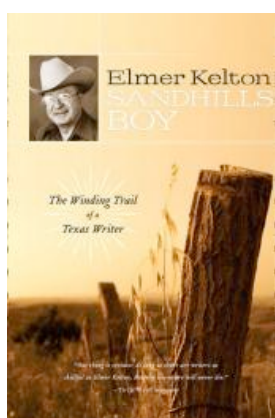
Many of the old cowboys from Kelton's youth fondly recalled the open range days, having reluctantly become accustomed to the world's modern barbed wire environs, for them an unwelcome change. Inspired by their struggles, Kelton has usually written about men who must deal with a world in a constant state of flux. In his signature works "The Time it Never Rained" and "The Good Old Boys," Kelton's protagonists cope with the difficult transitions between drought and flood, open range and fences.

In "Sandhills Boy," Kelton says he simply wrote about what he knew. "Insofar as possible I like to have a story grow out of some historical reality, an event, a situation, a period of change in which an old order is challenged by something new," he writes. "Not all stories have a happy ending. Life is not that kind to us."

Like fellow Texas novelist Larry McMurtry (whose essay collection "Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen" recalls his own ranching heritage), Kelton was inept as a cowboy and regarded literature as an escape from the physical world. An advanced reader, Kelton graduated from high school at the age of 16 and went on to study journalism at the University of Texas, despite his father's protestations that "a pile of papers did not count, as these could not be eaten, worn, ridden, or driven." By challenging the old order of his family's ranching profession, Kelton's own story began to grow.

After a two-year stint at UT (he saw B Westerns at the Ritz on Sixth Street for twenty cents a show), Kelton enlisted in the Army. Arriving in Germany just as the war was ending, Kelton was posted in the mountain town of Ebensee, Austria, where he monitored German prisoners awaiting repatriation in a former Holocaust death camp. Kelton's stories about the war-ravaged remains of Europe are vividly haunting. Describing a group of Ukrainians crying for mercy while being sent back to Russia at gunpoint, where they stood a good chance of being shot as political prisoners, Kelton writes, "With a knot in the pit of my stomach, this powerless pfc watched these unfortunate people being shipped off to a dark fate."

Amid the gloom, however, Kelton met Anni Lipp, a local girl whom he eventually married and



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Sandhills Boy: The Winding Trail of a Texas Writer Elmer Kelton Forge, \$23.95



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Elmer Kelton

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brought back to Texas. Weathered by his experiences overseas, Kelton set to examining his homeland of West Texas with a renewed perspective, finding employment as a farm and ranch reporter for the San Angelo Standard-Times while simultaneously working on his fiction.

At times, Kelton's winding trail as a Texas writer gets a little too winding. The first half of "Sandhills Boy," which deals entirely with Kelton's rural ranch upbringing, seems to include a mention of nearly every old salty cowpoke he can recall. Although most of the anecdotes are interesting, by the time the reader gets to the fifth and sixth competitive roping story from some county fair it starts to chap the hide a bit.

And Kelton's reminiscence of his courtship of Anni, while obviously sincere, gets a little heavy-handed. When he describes his love for her by saying, "I had no need to fear death anymore, because I knew what heaven was like," his writing sounds corny in a way his best novels never do. A brief afterword by Anni also seems largely unnecessary, repeating many facts already covered.

Despite these flaws, "Sandhills Boy" succeeds due to Kelton's talent for surveying his own slice of West Texas' frontier history with the dry humor and unsentimental eye of a rancher. Recalling the cowboys of his youth, Kelton writes, "The first funeral I remember attending was of a neighboring rancher who was said to have hunted buffalo in his youth when Comanche and Kiowa were still a real and present danger That grave, and stories the cowboys told, awakened a wonder that stayed with me."

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