

Henry Joseph Nuwer

**An Interview with
Jack Schaefer:
May 1972.**

NUWER: I understand that you were born in Cleveland and attended eastern colleges at Oberlin and Columbia University. Were your initial interests in literature in other areas than that of Western writing?

SCHAEFER: Well, when I was a kid I read more Tarzan stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs than anything else. Later I read Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope. I guess I used to read everything. I started with the classics, both Greek and Latin writers. Before I was through with college though, I had more than enough of Greek. I loved and still enjoy Latin though.

I switched to English literature while at Columbia doing graduate work. I specialized in eighteenth-century literature of the Johnsonian period.

NUWER: Who were you particularly interested in?

SCHAEFER: Arthur Murphy. Are you familiar with him?

NUWER: No, I'm afraid not. Who was he?

SCHAEFER: Well, actually, he was perhaps best known as an actor. He was a player well known to Johnson and Goldsmith. But I soon got off of that. Scholarship strikes me as a

dull and stupid waste of time. All that piling up of detail! And for what purpose? While I was at Columbia I had what I thought was a bright idea for my thesis. I wanted to do research on the development of motion pictures. At that time I had an aunt who reviewed films ready to assist me. Besides that I had a tremendous interest in films. The thesis committee at Columbia just laughed at me. They said that movies were merely cheap reproductions of stage plays. After that I left Columbia. I have never been back and have never regretted leaving at all.

NUWER: How did you acquire such an interest in Westerns?

SCHAEFER: My first book, *Shane*, was written in Norfolk, Virginia. I had never been west of Toledo, Ohio, at that time. Those were Depression years. I worked the equivalent of two full-time jobs. I taught nights in a prison; mornings and afternoons I worked for a newspaper and edited a small weekly magazine. Sixteen hours a day! Anyway, when I was through working I read books on American history to relax. You know, nothing that I took in college ever helped me with my work. I'd say that the value of a college education is that it teaches one *how* to learn. My readings in American history were chronological ones. I was getting books to review, and I was happiest and felt most at home west of the Mississippi River. Out here it is so neglected—one of the greatest periods in history—neglected by historians and by writers alike. It is neglected despite its being a distinctive era in history.

I was not reading Western stories then. I read history. I only read a few of the better Westerns. In fact, if I had known of the tremendous amount of bad Western writings that was flooding the market I wouldn't have written anything. This was 1945; I was acting editor of the Norfolk paper. I'd come home very late at night. We had a problem getting any kind of men to staff the paper at that time.

Primarily as a means of relaxation I started writing fiction late at night. I began writing a short story about the basic legend of the West. It kept growing and wound up being a novella. I didn't know what to do with it. Finally I sent it to *Argosy*. This is a story in itself. I didn't know anything about markets and selling a manuscript. I had only one copy of this Western novella and that was single-spaced. I didn't even include a return envelope. Nowadays if there's no return envelope it means the wastebasket for a story. Months passed without a word from *Argosy* but I was pretty busy during those years and just forgot about it. It wasn't until a long time later that Rogers Terrill, the publisher of publishers, told me what a damn fool I had been.

When the manuscript for *Shane* came in, it was just tossed on a desk. One weekend, however, heading out for some relaxation in Connecticut, the editor put some stuff in his briefcase and somehow my manuscript slipped in also. I was lucky. I've always been fortunate with my writing. Instead of being tossed into a wastebasket as it would have been back in the office, *Shane* was given a look. He kept on reading and decided *Argosy* would use it. It first appeared as a three-part serial. They put my name on the cover of the first issue—with my name misspelled! It's been my curse to have people add another "f" to Schaefer when they spell it.

In 1946 they used it. I went on being a newspaper editor. In 1949, after talking it over with my wife Louise, I quit newspaper work. We were in New York without a cent with me selling a pint of blood every now and then. Went into the stumping business with *Shane*. This is the addition which really made *Shane* into a novel. I took it to four different publishing houses. It came back unsold two weeks later.

Knew the name of one literary agent. He had to get suckers. He had William Somerset Maugham and Sinclair

Lewis leave him because of his selling them down the river. Anyway, it was one week later when he called and said *Shane* was sold. Later I was lucky enough to get Don Congdon, the best agent in the business, from the Harold Matson Company. He is thorough, honest, and competent. He likes to comb the small publications as much as the top-paying ones. It was funny one time. I took the only short-short I ever wrote and sent it to Don Congdon. He sent it to a newspaper in Canada. They called him from Vancouver and said that they would have loved to use it, but they couldn't for one reason. They had already published it eighteen months before when my old agent had sent it in to them. I had to call him to get my money. In fact, once I called him up after being away from him for ten years and asked him, just for the fun of it, to send me the money he had gotten for a piece in that foreign magazine. The next thing I know, a check for \$72 is in my hands. He was honest and always paid his debts—if you caught him and asked him hard enough.

Don Congdon was different. He never presses a writer to change a word. He is actually interested in his writers as friends, not just as clients. He gets as much a kick out of selling a poem for fifteen dollars as in selling movie rights for one hundred thousand dollars. Once when he needed a quiet place to stay, he came over by me. While he was visiting he sold two things over the phone. One was a little piece by some young writer for twenty-five dollars; the other was William Styron's *Nat Turner* to Wolper Productions. He spent more on the phone calls than the young writer made, but he got more out of a thrill from selling that than he did from selling the movie rights.

NUWER: Would you suggest then that a young writer send his material directly to an agent? Or, would it be better if he sent a book-length manuscript on to the publisher for the very first time?

SCHAEFFER: That is a tough question. A good agent is thinking of cutting down, not adding. One thing I know. If there is a reading fee, shy away. The good ones don't charge. They don't have to. They get their ten percent. I guess I'd say it is best for a young writer to get started on his own. With a first novel, one should first try to get a publisher interested. Then the author can write to an agent who can get him a better deal. You must almost always get published first. Then you can get an agent. Here again I was lucky. In fact, other writers envy me when I tell them who my agent is.

NUWER: All right. May I ask how your early life prepared you for the writing profession? Did your parents encourage you? In other words, what forces or people moved you enough to take up writing?

SCHAEFER: My parents were both readers. There was always a house full of books. They didn't stop me or try to check my reading habits. I just read everything in sight. Today I would hope that every household might have a *Shane* to interest youngsters in reading. I always had Alexandre Dumas's works around. My dad in particular was a reader. I guess you might call him a Lincoln nut. He was a friend of Carl Sandburg.

NUWER: I assume then that you had *The Prairie Years* handy as reference material.

SCHAEFER: Yes. It was interesting. Father became a lawyer because Lincoln was a lawyer. But, back to the first question. I always had scribbled things down. I was the editor of the high school literary magazine. My sister was also a literary nut and editor of the same magazine before me. When she needed to fill space I would crank out articles for her. In college I was interested in creative writing and debating.

My first real decision came after *Shane* was published. It was not a question of whether or not I wanted to become a

professional writer, but rather a question of what direction it was in that I wanted to go. Most people ask, "Why write Westerns. They're one step above comic books." I agreed for a time. I said good-bye to Westerns and started to write an Eastern. It was all it needed to be in form, heavily laden with symbolism, for example. I didn't like it, though. It was just hard work. Somewhere in the middle of writing it I took a week off and wrote a short story about a shepherd which just came to me. I sent it off to my agent. Then I went back to finish my Easterner, and found out shortly thereafter that the *Saturday Evening Post* had taken the short story. I finished the Easterner, but you know, it has never been published.

NUWER: What was the name of the Easterner? I'm curious.

SCHAEFER: Oh, let me see now. What was her name? It was *Elsa Eberle*. Yes, it has never been published. Been buried for years. I don't even know if it is here in the house. I said the hell with it and began concentrating on markets like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers*. *Colliers*, incidentally, used to be a pretty fair magazine in its day.

NUWER: Have you ever regretted writing Westerns?

SCHAEFER: No. In fact, I developed a question that I always ask. I'll go into that in a minute. I started going to a lot of those literary affairs. Inevitably someone would come up to me and ask me what it was that I did for a living. Then I would begin to stare intently at my questioner, and with a glazed look in my eye I would shout out, "*I write Westerns!*" Then, in self defense, I would ask the listener a question of my own. I would ask, "Can you give me one good reason why a writer cannot 'write' good literature about the west the same as he could about the east or anywhere else?" And do you know, no one has yet been able to answer me.

NUWER: You echo this viewpoint in your introduction

to *Out West*, a collection of short stories by other writers that you edited. You said that "the writer who has anything to say to his fellow men can say it as effectively in the western story as in any other form of fiction." I had jotted the quote down here in my notes to discuss with you, but you've anticipated my line of questioning. I did want to ask you to name a couple of writers that you believe have exhibited a high degree of skill in Western writing and story telling.

SCHAEFER: I think I would select Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Dorothy Johnson, H. L. Davis, Oliver La Farge—who wrote about Indians and thus may not be considered a "Western" writer by some people—and Mary Austin.

NUWER: Oh yes. Were you very interested in Mary Austin's work?

SCHAEFER: I had perhaps the only complete collection of Mary Austin's works. I gave them intact to the University of New Mexico's library. I think she is great. Up and away she's the best woman writer and equally as good as any man, too. She did write some potboilers, it is true, that are dated, but several other things are perfectly literary.

NUWER: Going back to your own work: how long before you finally got out West?

SCHAEFER: I had written four books about the West and still I had not been out here. Well, one day my agent and Harry Synos, the senior editor up at *Holiday Magazine*, were having lunch. Don told Harry I had never been west and Harry said it was time that I went and *Holiday* would foot the bill. The first piece was on the Dakotas and I still have a blown-up photo of a buffalo that appeared in the first article. *Holiday* used the pieces with a slant on a series of old-time cowtowns as compared with today, such as Abilene and Dodge City.

When I was finished and headed back out to Connec-

ticut, Louise asked "How soon can we move?" In just two weeks we had a trailer and truck ready. That truck is still around someplace today. We picked Gunnison in Colorado for our first home. I'm glad we're not living there now though because Colorado is becoming too much like the east. Anyway, this was the time of the great floods. In two weeks we had a trailer and a truck ready. Those '55s were solid vehicles. Like I said, that truck is still being driven today. We decided on Gunnison, Colorado, to make our home. I'm kind of glad it didn't work out there as you will see. I've never liked Colorado as much as New Mexico because it tries too hard to be just like the East. Anyway, we got as far as Salida and the Monarch Pass and the weather reports said it was blizzarding up ahead. We wouldn't attempt to drive the car over the pass. In a way though it was exciting to see the West that I had written about all these years explode before me.

NUWER: What did you do then?

SCHAEFER: I knew that in Salida there was a Western writer named Steve Frazee. I called him and told him who I was. Asked him if he could put us in touch with someone who could help us get over the pass. He said "Stay right there!" Fifteen minutes later there came Steve and a neighbor with a jeep. It was a marvelous introduction to the West. Well, they got us over Monarch Pass, waved goodbye, and went back home. We drove on and found out that the town was closed up for the winter. Two motels there had been shut down too; we couldn't find a place to stay. Luckily we were able to contact one of the motel owners and persuade him to give us a cabin. Then my wife had an idea. "Let's go to Santa Fe for the winter." We landed by Cerillos, built a ranch, and have been located here in New Mexico ever since.

NUWER: Thank you. To get back to your writing

now—I wonder if you can recall what was the first item you published?

SCHAEFER: Well, I had published over a million words in various book reviews and newspaper editorials and articles before I sent out any creative writing. *Shane* was the first serious piece I wrote.

NUWER: What about journalistic writing? Does it help or hinder a writer?

SCHAEFER: That depends on what kind of a writer you are talking about. It doesn't hurt an academic writer or one whose books are pure research. With short stories or novels though I think it might hurt. Although I don't think journalistic writing would always have hurt a writer. In the past, it didn't have to be such slapdash work.

NUWER: I guess today's reporter has to worry about spewing out his required quota of inches.

SCHAEFER: Yes. I think there should be certain qualifications for reporters. Today, there seems to be an absolute disregard for grammar. Reporters have no ability to spell and seem to possess an illogical mind. I don't know if I can put the blame entirely upon the reporters though. They have to write their articles with the knowledge that some editor is going to mangle and cut whatever they turn in.

Writing short stories is a craft. Words are beautiful things. The best short story writer there has ever been was Wilbur Daniel Steele. In fact, in the twenties or thirties they wouldn't let him in the O. Henry contests because he always won. His novels were only fair. They were not too good.

When I was living in Connecticut I found out where Steele's house was located. I drove out there and saw an old man in tennis shoes and a sweater. I introduced myself and said something about two of his stories, "Thirst" and *The Man Who Saw Through Heaven*. He got down on the grass and started to cry. Said he didn't

know that others still read his work. He said that he was someone else now and asked me to please go away and come back at some later date.

I got to know him. He was the kind of writer who would sit in front of a typewriter and sweat blood. Every day he would write. Sometimes, a day's work would produce only a paragraph; some days he would write 2,000 words. He was a true innovator and a user of words beyond that of any writer. Faulkner, though he was a genius in his way, reached success with his twisting of words. He was a trickster with syntax. I would rate Steele with Faulkner's genius.

Wilbur Daniel Steele! The leaps that man would take. He used to say when I first started visiting him: "I got one book left in me." He did, too. It was his *The Weight of the Gold*. He always claimed that I helped him with it. Some time afterwards Steele remarked to our mutual friend Harold Matson that he wished he could have written that book like Jack Schaefer. Imagine that? He gave me credit for the book when actually he did all the work. I used to visit him and he would talk and tell me about his book. In fact, that book was actually being born while he talked.

One of his greatest technical feats was "Blue Murder." You don't know the answer and key to the whole story until the last sentence—no, until the last word in the last sentence. He was the greatest of the short story masters.

NUWER: Have you ever taken a man like Steele or anyone else that you have met and put this man into the Old West in one of your own stories?

SCHAEFER: Never consciously or deliberately. I'm sure that it must happen though—perhaps as one aspect of a character's personality. Shane has a great deal of my father in him, but he was just that kind of a man.

NUWER: How do you create your characters?

SCHAEFER: Well, I guess they must become real people to me or I can't write about them. I always begin with some little idea. A character begins to be tied in with an event and when a character begins talking to me, the book starts to go.

I have to know what the ending is going to be when I start. I must know where I'm going and in what direction I am going before I even start.

NUWER: Okay. Next question. Most of your novels are short. How do you explain such a prodigious effort as your *Monte Walsh*?

SCHAEFFER: I used to say and still say that the best books are short. The best books can be read in one sitting and at one time. For instance, I think *War and Peace* could be cut by a third without any loss to the book.

NUWER: By cutting out the historical data?

SCHAEFER: Exactly. At any rate, *Monte Walsh* was never conceived as a novel first. It was published in sections. "In Harmony" was the first in print. The jail-keeper's daughter episode was written back East before I came out West. I sent it to my agent. He took it to the *Post*. They didn't like it. A year later my agent put a new title on it and sent it back without a single change. They called Don and told him that they would take Schaefer's new story, but that their editor was worried. Seems he recalled reading something remotely like it somewhere and was worried about possible plagiarism. Don, my agent, reassured them. Told them that the story was all mine, but that I had sent it a year before and it was rejected so I had done a massive rewrite job on it. They bought it and I hadn't even changed a word. That should tell you something. Never be discouraged by rejection slips.

Monte Walsh kept getting published in sections. Finally, I lumped them together, added a bit, and got it published as a novel. Yes, I still contend that *Monte Walsh* just happened.

NUWER: What about future books? What goals remain for you as a writer?

SCHAEFER: I've kind of signed off. One reason is that I've pretty well covered everything in the field of Western writing. I've written stories on sheep herding, rustling, homesteading, even mustangs. In a sense, you might say that I am written out. I guess you sort of lose your innocence. Like today with the ecological problems—I know that everything was building toward this way back then.

I am interested in beasts, especially the idea of an all New Mexico bestiary. I did write that book on mustangs entitled *Mavericks*. I was sort of signing off with that book though I didn't know it at the time. It has Old Jake as a character in it who has helped destroy what he most liked and loved. You might say that is sort of an epitaph for me too.

SHANE

The Critical Edition

Jack Schaefer

Edited by James C. Work
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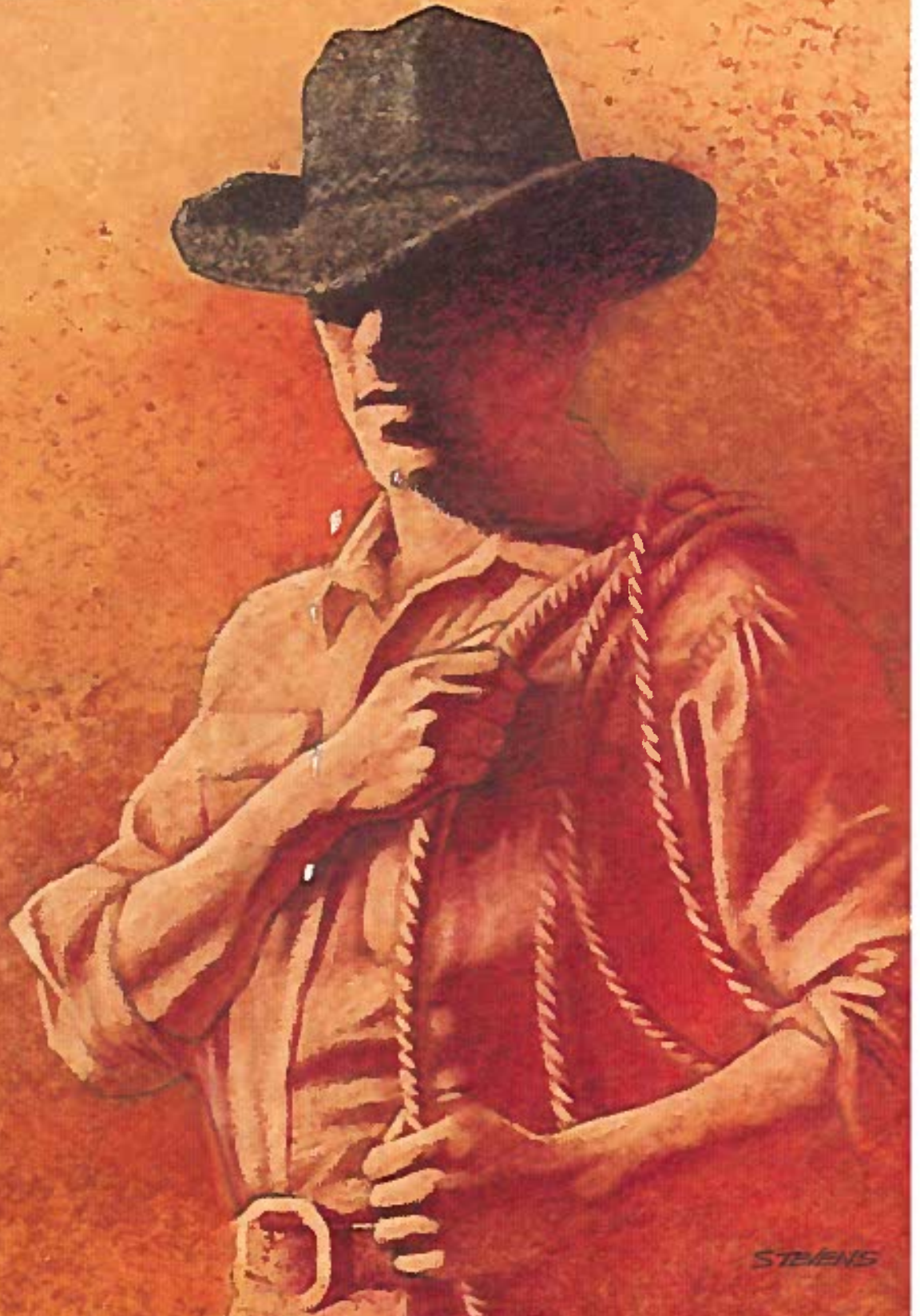
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