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Managing Editors

Robert Nieman 2000-2009; (b.1947-d.2009)

Byron A. Johnson 2009-2011

Publisher & Website Administrator

Byron A. Johnson 2000-2011

Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame

Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

Pam S. Baird



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The Rangers and the Writer (middle) Walter Prescott Webb, with (top) Texas Rangers Frank Hamer, (bottom) Manny Gault

Walter Prescott Webb
1888-1963

by David Stroud

It was difficult to know what to say.

After all, there had already been seventy-two other presidential addresses to the American Historical Association, and just because Walter Prescott Webb was president now (1958),^[1] the choice of a subject did not come easy.^[2] He decided to use his own experience as a warning to the young historians present: "Listen to my story, make notes on my education, graduate record, and college career, and then be extremely careful to avoid following the example of one who has done nearly everything wrong. Seeing what I have done, they will know what not to do."^[3] The story of the man who spoke these words is the narrative of a man who combined only a little formal education with a stroke of luck to produce "his generation's foremost philosopher of the frontier, and the leading historian of the American West."^[4]

Dr. Walter P. Webb is conceivably the finest historian Texas has ever produced. Not only did he give us the definitive history of the Texas Rangers, but he also wrote or edited more than twenty books before his death in an auto accident. However, this paper is not a review of those works, but more a narrative of the man behind the pen. The story of how a young farm boy from Panola County achieved an education is more fascinating than most novels, and what Webb accomplished with that education should serve as a guiding light for all historians.

Casner P. Webb and his wife Mary Kyle^[5] moved from Mississippi to East Texas in 1884 in search of opportunity and a new life.^[6] Their son Walter Prescott Webb was born in Panola County on April 3, 1888.^[7] The family then moved to the German settlements of South Texas, where they had relatives.^[8] In 1892 the Webbs moved again, this time to Stephens County in West Texas because there were large amounts of cheap land there.^[9] Casner homesteaded a quarter section.^[10] Walter's father was not only a farmer, but also a self-educated schoolteacher who never held more than a second-grade teaching certificate. He received between \$250 and \$300 a year for teaching a five-month term.^[11] Here in the dry land of West Texas, Walter began his education on the frontier by the direct method that enabled him to understand much of what he read and to "see beyond some of it".^[12]

Young Walter began his formal education at the age of five because the local teacher, Melissa Gatewood Jones, recognized that he had an unusual mind. She obtained permission to let him attend the one-room school. Walter was a good student and listened to each lesson. His favorite subject was geography,[13] and geography would play an important role in the books that he would later write. One day Walter was sitting in class when the teacher selected a student and asked, "Where do you live?" The student answered, "Texas," and was instructed to point out Texas on the large wall map. The student pointed to South America. Walter's hand shot into the air as he said, "He comes a long way to school." [14]

By the time Walter was ten, reading had become a passion. He would read anything he could find and hoped one day to have a book of his own. His family bought coffee and beans that were produced by "Arbuckle's Brothers" and the bean bags came complete with Mr. Arbuckle's signature on them. If a person saved enough of the signatures, he received a premium. Walter saved these signatures and when he had ten of them, he used them to get the first book he ever acquired, *Jack the Giant Killer*. [15] Later he received a file of Tip Top Weekly that dealt with the doings of Frank Merriwell of Yale University, and from Merriwell he got the first faint desire to go to college. [16]

Because Walter was the man of the house while his father taught school, there was very little time for formal education. But his father often told him that there was a better life than the one they were leading. "The best life belongs to the professional man," Casner told him. [17] One day when Walter was fourteen years old, his father made a casual remark that would have enormous influence on his life. Casner told Walter that he should become an editor when he grew up. The young man did not tell his father that he had no idea what an editor was. He found out on his own, and later went to watch one in action. The nearest editor was in the town of Ranger; his name was Williams and he worked for the *Record*. [18] Webb saddled his horse and rode to Ranger, nine miles from his home. After finding the office of the *Record*, he worked up his courage, then opened the door and walked in. Williams was busy pecking out a letter on an old Oliver, the first typewriter Walter had ever seen. The young boy just stood there staring as Williams pecked away. After a while Williams looked up and asked, "What do you want?" Walter told him that he wanted to see an editor. "You've seen one," said Williams as he went back to pecking on the Oliver. Walter just stood there looking around the office as Williams pecked. He noticed a wastepaper basket stuffed full of exchanges, with others piled on the floor around it. Again the boy worked up his courage and asked if he could have a few of the old exchanges. Williams said yes. Walter picked up as many as he thought he could take out of the office.

One of the papers Walter had taken from the *Record's* office was the *Sunny South*, a pro-Confederate weekly that was edited by Joel Chandler Harris in Atlanta, Georgia. [19] Walter read the paper and discovered that he could subscribe for three months if he sent in ten cents. But ten cents was a lot of money and very hard to get. For this kind of money he would have to go to his parents. One night his father was out so Walter asked his mother for the dime. After he explained why he wanted it, she sat for a while to think it over. Soon she got up and walked to a secret hiding place. She got a dime and handed it to Walter. No one would ever give him a more important coin. [20]

The family became regular subscribers of the *Sunny South* and enjoyed reading it. One of the features of the paper was a little column presided over by Mrs. Mary E. Bryan. [21] Walter wrote her that he was a country farm boy with very little education, but he wanted to become a writer. He also mentioned that he was the son of a country schoolteacher who had been crippled in an accident. Could someone tell him how he could become a writer and get an education? Walter signed the letter "Prescott" because it seemed "high-sounding" to him-about as "high-sounding" as a boy in Stephens County would hear. [22] "For some reason,

probably because it was so recognizable as a youth's clumsily honest appeal for advice,"[23] the letter was published. It appears in the May 14, 1904, issue of the *Sunny South*.^[24]

Young Webb was plowing the new-cleared land when his sister returned from the mailbox with a letter for him. "It was the most marvelous letter he had ever seen; the envelope was of the finest paper, the handwriting bold and black on the glossy surface."^[25] The back of the envelope was sealed with red wax stamped with the letter H.^[26] The address on the front was so general that it is a wonder that the letter found its way to Webb.^[27] To help it on its way, the sender had added an additional clue on the bottom left-hand corner: "C/O Lame Teacher."^[28] The letter still may never have reached Walter had the Postmaster not been a Confederate veteran who read Webb's issues of the *Sunny South* before delivering them. He had remembered Walter's letter.^[29] The young boy opened the letter and read:

Dear Junior-I am a reader of the *Sunny South* and noticed your letter in the "Gossip Corner"-I trust you will not get discouraged in your aspirations for higher things, as you know there is no such word as failure in the lexicon of youth; so keep your mind fixed on a lofty purpose and your hopes will be realized, I am sure,-though it will take time and work-I will be glad to send you some books or magazines, (if you will allow me to) if you will let me know what you like-

Yrs truly
Wm. E. Hinds
489 Classon Ave.
May 19/04 Brooklyn, New York^[30]

Hinds meant what he said. Soon he was sending the boy a steady flow of the best magazines and books on writing. The *American Boy*, *National*, *The Outlook* and other publications joined with personal letters from Hinds to encourage Walter to write his own letters of description and narrative.^[31] Each Christmas, Hinds sent Walter a tie that "was in a class by itself in Stephens County."^[32] The books and magazines fired his desire for an education. Walter's father wanted to help, so he made a deal with his son: if Walter believed he could pass the teaching examination after one year of local school, the family would move to Ranger so he could attend school there. Walter sold his horse for sixty dollars and used the money for books. He swept the floor of the school to pay for his tuition.^[33] At the end of the school year he passed the examination and received his second-grade certificate permitting him to teach in rural schools. During his lifetime Webb received many certificates, but he always thought that one outranked all the others.^[34]

Walter took a job teaching in a one-room school in East Texas. He taught all grades and did the school chores as well. One of his pupils was a ten-year-old half-breed Indian named Henry Woods. Each morning Henry came to school early to help Walter with the chores. One morning the twenty-year-old teacher arrived at school well ahead of his usual schedule. Instead of going about his chores, he sat down and began writing. He was writing a word sketch of the young student who helped with the chores. About half an hour later, Henry came in and Webb told him to be seated. Walter read while Henry listened. When the reading was finished Henry looked up and said, "Professor, that was purdy."^[35] Fifty years later Webb told a friend, "He was my first audience, I've been writing ever since."^[36]

Walter saved his money. After another year of school, he passed the examination for a first-grade certificate. Walter was as happy as any man could be. He was making good money and enjoyed his job. But he felt a little guilty quitting each day at four o'clock while the farmers were still in the fields. Then in 1909, there

came a letter from Hinds asking Walter what his plans were. Was he going to college? If so, what college? The question caused Walter to see that his teaching was merely a means rather than an end. There was more in the letter and he never forgot what he read: "The best thing in life is to help someone, if we can. . . . and perhaps I can say, 'Why, I helped J. Prescott Webb when he was a young man'." (For years Hinds never got Walter's first initial right.)[37]

In September 1909, Walter Webb enrolled at the University of Texas with two hundred dollars and an agreement that he was to notify Hinds when the money ran out.[38] He planned to write fiction but he had so much trouble with the English courses that he became discouraged.[39] After two years at the University, the bill to Hinds amounted to five hundred dollars and Webb dropped out of college to earn some money. Hinds was not a rich man, so Walter alternated between studying and teaching. But Hinds always made it possible for Walter to finish each year he had started at the university.

During Webb's junior year at the University of Texas, he enrolled in a course called "Institutional History" taught by Lindley Miller Keasbey.[40] The course was not "history, or economics, or anthropology, or philosophy, or a good deal of all these and more." [41] The teacher was fascinating and gave Walter a "method of thinking and a point of view"[42] which entered into everything that he ever did.[43] The young historian took all of Keasbey's courses and decided to become a teacher of institutional history. Yet when he investigated, he found there was no such thing as institutional history and Keasbey himself was finally fired. But "Institutional History" looked enough like history on the surface to bring Walter a job teaching history in a public school. Since he was a history teacher with only two elementary courses in history, he decided he would learn something about history and began taking courses in the subject[44]

William E. Hinds changed Webb's life. Whenever he became discouraged and wanted to quit or to go out with his friends and spend money foolishly, Webb would remember that mysterious stranger in New York who trusted him-that man who never asked about grades or refused a request. Each month a check came from Hinds.[45] The team of Hinds and Webb graduated from the University of Texas in 1915 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Ironically, the two men would never see each other. In 1916, William Ellory Hinds died before the young Webb could repay him or present him with a return on his investment.[46]

The next winter, William Hinds' sister came to San Antonio and told Walter all he would ever learn about his benefactor. Walter was not the first young man to receive aid from her brother. She also told Walter that Hinds was an import dealer by trade and a life-long bachelor by choice.[47] Webb never understood how a man in New York could reach down to Texas and "pluck a tired kid off a Georgia stock and stay with him without asking questions for eleven years, until death dissolved the relationship." [48] Walter still owed Hinds seventy-five dollars and there are two different stories about what happened with that debt. One of the stories relates that Hinds' sister wrote that the family had found the notes "from Walter Prescott Webb, each marked 'Paid in Full.'" [49] According to the other story (written by Webb), Walter stated he would pay the money to the sister. After her death, he received a letter instructing him not to pay the seventy-five dollars because there was no one else interested in it.[50] Whichever story is true, Webb would repay the debt of seventy-five dollars many times over by helping other students as Hinds had helped him because " . . . Hinds would have wanted it." [51]

By the time Walter graduated from the University of Texas, he had quite a few years of teaching experience. In 1918, the University of Texas was looking for someone to teach future history teachers how to teach history. Walter had appeared on a program of the Texas State Teachers Association and had given a speech dealing with the teaching of history in the public schools. One of the members who heard him was a teacher from the University of Texas named

Frederic Duncalf. Dr. Duncalf was looking for someone like Webb because none of the history teachers at the university wanted to leave their fields to instruct students on the teaching of history in the public school. When the university heard Dr. Duncalf's report on Webb, they believed that the young graduate was their man. He had written a paper on the subject; had over ten years' experience; and, if his grades were not the best, he still was a graduate of their university. On November 11, 1918, Walter P. Webb became a faculty member of the University of Texas.[52] Forty years later that university would name him as one of its four "most significant living alumni." [53]

Now the time had come for Walter to start working on his Master of Arts degree. He chose the field of history. A series of Mexican revolutions endangered the Texas border and Governor James E. Ferguson increased the size of the Texas Rangers. After the Rangers reached the border, they committed crimes that were exposed by many newspapers. Walter read these headlines and asked himself an important question: "Had anyone written the history of these Rangers?" The answer was no, and he selected these Rangers as his subject. Walter headed west to write the story. He did not know it at the time, but he had found his field. [54]

Writing the story of the Rangers would be Webb's first work with sources. Many of the references were written by "men better with a gun than with a pen," [55] but Walter did not stop with the records. He "went to the places where things had happened" and "sought out the old men, still living then, who had fought Comanches and Apaches, killed Sam Bass at Round Rock, and broken up feuds inherited from the more deadly reconstruction." [56] The historian strapped on a Colt revolver and wore it in places that were so dangerous, people found weapons commonplace. With a captain and a private, Webb visited every Ranger camp on the border. [57] At night he sat around the campfires and "listened to the tales told by men who could talk without notes." [58]

Walter did more than just listen to Rangers tell of fights. In December 1922, he went with Captain Wright and a few other Rangers in search of Mexican smugglers. The little band followed a trail while Webb tried to act brave. After all, he did hold a commission as a Ranger. When the smugglers were found, they resisted the Rangers but lost the quick battle that left three Mexicans dead. [59] In 1920, Walter had written an unpublished master's thesis on the Rangers during the Mexican War. [60] Now he would get an article published. The article was a sketch of the early history of the Rangers. When he received his first check from a publisher, he wondered what had enabled him to "break the barrier separating academic people from paying editors." [61] The difference was that now he had something to say about a subject that he could understand in a way that he could never understand things like the French Revolution or the Renaissance. [62] His subject was the West.

In the spring of 1922, Webb was an instructor in history and working toward an advanced degree at the university. He was in the history class of Eugene C. Barker and the subject of Western expansion was being discussed. [63] Mr. Barker pointed to the Great Plains on the wall map and said; "Here this advance stopped, or moved very slowly for several decades. I am not certain why. Does anyone have a reason to suggest?" [64] After a few facts were mentioned, Walter spoke an answer that would be the central theme of one of his greatest books:

These people came from a timbered country and had developed a timber civilization; when they reached the land where forests ceased, they were confused and did not know what to do. Before they could occupy the country, they had to develop a new way of life, and it took them decades to do it. [65]

This was not the first time that Webb had thought about the people from the east and their encounter with the Great Plains. During the winter of 1922, he had been

working on an article about the Texas Rangers cleaning up oil field towns.[66] One night he read *The Way to the West* by Emerson Hough.[67] Walter disagreed with the list that Hough had given naming the agents used to conquer the frontier. The items on that list did not apply to the Great Plains.[68] The book caused his thoughts to turn to the colonists that had come to Texas with Stephen F. Austin. He thought of the colonists who had settled along the Eastern Woodland on the edge of a new environment, of Indian weapons used by men on horses, and of the invention of the Colt revolver. The revolver had not been with Austin when his settlers first entered Texas, and the pioneers were forced to wait for this "horseman's" weapon. Walter "sensed that something very important happened when the American people emerged from the woodland and undertook to live on the plains." [69] In 1958 he said, "The excitement of that moment was probably the greatest creative sensation I have ever known." [70] He asked himself what else had happened, and the answers he found became a book entitled *The Great Plains*. It was published in 1931.

Once Walter had received his Master of Arts degree, there was gentle pressure for him to get his Doctor of Philosophy. He was advised to go elsewhere to get it. Walter took the advice and entered the University of Chicago. During his oral examination, he "froze" when the first question was asked. They asked him another, but still he was unable to speak. He left the room and went straight to his apartment and told his wife to pack. They were out of Chicago before the sun had set.[71] When he arrived in Texas he made some stout resolutions: he would follow his own intellectual interests and he would stay in Texas to write history as he saw it.[72] Walter received his degree from the University of Texas after Dr. Barker asked Webb for two copies of *The Great Plains* as his dissertation.[73]

When Webb wrote history, he did not write for the critic or the historian who was a specialist in a given field. He wrote to explain something to someone who might know less about the subject than he did. He never considered himself as a western historian, but a historian that just happened to write more about the American West than other subjects. He wrote mainly for one person: an imaginary Bostonian who was not a historian or a teacher, but someone who could be interested in something other than Bostonian history. After he finished writing, he would read it and ask himself if that Bostonian could understand what he was trying to say. If the answer was "no," he would rewrite it until the answer was "yes." [74] Walter was more interested in ideas than facts. Facts were of no use unless he could discover their meanings and could develop ideas from their meanings as few others could.[75] Frank Dobie once said, "Webb could see meaning behind facts." [76] Webb retorted that the reason he saw meanings was because he had to—he never could remember facts. Walter approached historical problems much as a lawyer would. He had his judge and jury in that imaginary Bostonian. He then set out to gather the facts that would support the verdict that he wanted. As he gathered the facts, he would ignore "contrary evidence." [77] Dobie once commented, "Webb never lets facts stand in the way of truth." [78]

As Webb taught and wrote, he was always conscious of that \$75 he owed Hinds. When John Haller enrolled in Walter's graduate course on the American Frontier, Haller had formed a small organization that worked on the trees in the Austin area. He soon found that his organization needed a truck. He decided to approach Dr. Webb with the problem. Webb knew that trucks were very expensive and told Haller that he had one that was not being used. Haller asked if he could rent the truck or buy it. Walter would not consider that but added, "I'll let you use it as long as you want to." [79] Not long after this, Haller decided to buy a chain saw but found himself short of money. He again went to see if Dr. Webb could help. He told Walter that he needed \$150. Webb was silent and looked around the room before he spoke. After losing quite a bit of money on notes, he had sworn never to cosign one again. Nevertheless, he took Haller to meet the president of the bank and cosigned the note. [80]

In 1930, Wilson M. Hudson found himself in need of help. He was to receive his Master of Arts degree the following day, but had no job waiting. He walked along Congress Avenue as he thought of the future. Suddenly someone called to him from a car in the middle of the street. He turned to see Webb and another man. [81] Webb introduced his passenger, "This is Mr. Ferguson, Dean at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College in Nacogdoches. He is taking his doctor's tomorrow. Meet him after the ceremony and he will tell you how to get to Nacogdoches and when to be there." [82]

That seventy-five dollars that William Hines gave was paid back by Walter for the rest of his life. "No one knows how many students he has put through school or helped set up in business." [83] Once a young history teacher was having a trouble with his house and finances. Webb and Dr. Barker, Webb's history professor, bought the young man a house so that he would not have to worry with these problems while beginning his career. Walter always thought this was funny because the next fall the man repaid him by moving to a better job. [84]

In 1961, Webb wrote an article entitled "The Search for William E. Hinds," which was published in *Harper's*. In the article, Webb told how Hinds had helped him. This was his way of creating a literary memorial to his friend and of inspiring others to help people the way Hinds had helped him. After the article was reprinted in *Reader's Digest*, the letters to Webb doubled. Many contained checks for the Hinds Fund he had established to help students. [85] In the last conversation with John Fischer, editor of *Harper's*, Walter said that he "was as proud of that article as anything he [Webb] had ever written because it moved so many people to do something worthwhile." [86]

Walter was a Democrat and never attempted to conceal it. Once he said, "I believe in a strong Republican Party, but not strong enough to win-only to keep the Democrats honest." [87] In 1949, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* entitled "Does the Republican Party have a Future?" Webb answered with an article in the *Southwest Review* entitled "How the Republican Party Lost Its Future." [88] Walter also touched lightly upon the racial issue and sometimes made people mad at him. Once he told the students at the University of Mississippi that they could handle the racial question by simply getting rich and letting the Negro get rich alongside them. He almost got run out of the state. [89] Shortly before his death he wrote, "The Southerner is so concerned with the racial issue that he has no time for anything else. . . . the issue is too heavy to move; too green to burn; the best we can do for the present is to plow around it and cultivate the rest of the field." [90]

When Walter sat down to write, regardless of the subject, he did it for three reasons: he believed that he had something to say, he believed it was worth saying, and he believed that he could say it better than anyone else. [91] For these reasons he put pen to paper. If he got any money from the writing, that was incidental. [92]

Webb's first major work was *The Great Plains*, published in 1931. In it Walter answers the question: "What happened in America civilization when in its westward progress it emerged from the woods and essayed life on the Plains?" [93] In *The Way to the West*, Emerson Hough points out that the American frontier was conquered by men using the horse, rifle, ax, and boat. Walter did not believe that these were the tools used on the plains. The key to the answer he was seeking lay in the invention of the revolver by Sam Colt in 1836. Walter agrees that the horse was one of the tools used; but as far as weapons, he says that the favorite of the horseman was the revolver and not the long rifle of the woodland Americans. The role of the revolver with the horsemen of the plains was no accident. Webb wrote an article that was published in the February 1927 issue of *Scribner's Magazine* entitled "The American Revolver and the West." [94] In it he tells how and why the plainsmen adopted the revolver. [95] Now that he

understood how the weapons changed, he researched and discovered that the "story of the weapons repeated itself, with modifications, in that of fences and water supply." [96] Then he followed each of the culture complexes to see if they also changed or were modified and if so, where and how. From the study, Walter discovered that the institutions were changed and the result was a new phase of civilization. He explains that the plains environment presented three distinguishing characteristics:

1. It exhibits a comparatively level surface of great extent.
2. It is a treeless land and an unforested area.
3. It is a region where rainfall is insufficient for the ordinary intensive agriculture common to lands of a humid climate. The climate is sub-humid. [97]

There was only one part of the Great Plains containing all three of these characteristics: the area known as the High Plains. This area was in the heart of what Webb called the Great Plains. The Great Plains area extended both to the east and west of the High Plains, and two of the three characteristics were present. [98] As the easterner moved west, he crossed an "institutional fault line" that followed roughly the ninety-eighth meridian. When he crossed this "fault," changes had to be made in order to survive. East of the Mississippi River, life and civilization had rested on the three legs of water, land, and timber. West of the Mississippi, two of the three legs were pulled from under them and civilization was left standing on the one leg of land. [99] To Walter, it was no wonder that civilization "toppled over in temporary failure." [100] It took time to settle the plains because when the easterner crossed this "fault," he was not immediately aware of the changes. After becoming aware of the changes, he was forced to wait for the modification in tools, weapons, and law. [101]

But while the easterner waited, he had to face the Plains Indians. These warriors were as different from the Woodland Indians as the plains from the timber. This tribe was the most effective barrier met by European invaders because they were the only Indians who came into battle mounted. [102] Since their weapons were those of mounted fighters, they enjoyed a distinct advantage over the invaders who used rifles unsuitable for mounted combat. [103] The Plains tribes continued as "lords of the plains" until a modification in weapons appeared in 1836—the Colt revolver. The first of these revolvers was the five-shot "Paterson." [104] The Texans used it so much that it became known as the "Texas" Colt. [105]

The lack of timber was a problem that would be solved by the Industrial Revolution. Without timber in abundant supply, there was no economical way to fence cattle in or keep them out, whichever was preferred by the land owner. The answer came with the invention of barbed wire. Webb explains that the man given credit for the invention of a practical means of fencing was Joseph F. Gidden. Gidden invented the wire in 1873 and sold his first piece in 1874. [106] Barbed wire was used before Gidden's invention, but he was the man that "gave to it the final touch of commercial practicability." [107] Gidden's wire caused changes in both the farming and cattle industry. Instead of using the open range, ranchers began to fence pastures and isolate their cattle, and "through segregation, could introduce blooded stock." [108] The long cattle drives ended and stock farming became the chief occupation on the Great Plains in place of ranching. [109]

Behind the cattlemen came the farmers. The revolver and the fencing were answers to only two of the problems faced on the plains. As stated earlier, one of the characteristics of the plains was the lack of water. Without water, the area would have remained a grazing country. This problem was also solved as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Windmills were improved and put to new uses on the plains. [110] The development of the windmill was an important agent in transforming the so-called Great American Desert into a land of homes. [111] At

first the plainsmen were restricted by the lack of water, but through the utilization of the windmill, they were able to move into the arid regions. The windmill met the requirements of the plains. It was cheap and would deliver a small amount of water as long as the wind blew.[112]

The Great Plains reveals "a basic element in Webb's approach to history: Environment comes first and strongly influences human institutions." [113] Reading the book, one can see the strong influence of the "Institutional History" course that Webb had taken under Keasbey [114] and can understand why he had said that he began working on the book at the age of four. [115]

Most of the reviewers praised *The Great Plains*. *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* states, "The style is marred by unnecessary summaries which lead to repetition of ideas already clear;" [116] but continues, "The result is a book which no student of American social history, at any stage, can afford to overlook." [117] The most severe critic of *The Great Plains* was Fred A. Shannon. He wrote a book denouncing Webb's thesis, his historical method, and his accuracy." [118] Page after page of Shannon's appraisal is dedicated to the destruction of everything Walter had written, from the importance of the Colt revolver in the hands of the Plainsmen [119] to the importance of the horse. [120] Regardless of Shannon's review, *The Great Plains* was the most successful of Webb's books. It was recognized as a landmark in frontier history and won the Loubat Prize in 1931. It finished second for the Pulitzer award for history. [121] Whether Webb was right or wrong in his book hardly seems important, the important thing is that he forced men to look anew at a part of the story of how we came to be where we are and what we are today. [122]

The next of Walter's important works was *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*. Published in 1935, it is considered a definitive of that law-enforcement body. Webb's view of the Rangers is made clear in the preface as he reminds the reader that "the Ranger is no more or less than a human being who stood alone between society and its enemies." [123] The Texas Ranger was not allowed to choose either the weapons or the rules. [124] The book traces the one-hundred-year history of the Rangers from 1823 to 1935, and Walter never permits his reader to forget that the Ranger was a man "who could ride straight up to death." [125] Rupert N. Richardson, of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, reviewed the book and comments, "A Texas Ranger could ride like a Mexican, trail like an Indian, shoot like a Tennessean, and fight like a devil." [126] This is the central theme of Webb's book. "With his skill at simplification he [Webb] shows these traits were evolved in the clash in Texas between and the Anglo-American and the Mexican and Indians whom they sought to overcome or displace. . . . There are passages . . . that might well serve as models of narrative and description . . . history writing that is both a science and art. . . . The book is a fitting monument to a great institution." [127] Mr. Richardson's major criticism of Webb is that he overlooked the Federal forces and selected only the most significant details. [128]

Although seventeen years went into the writing of *The Texas Rangers*, [129] it was not a favorite with Webb. He later wrote a book for young adolescents entitled *The Story of the Texas Rangers*. He was more satisfied with this work because he "left out all of deadening facts." [130]

In 1858 when Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," [131] he was speaking of the slavery issue. In 1937 Webb published *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* to show that the "house" was once again divided and, as before, by sections. In presenting his thesis, Walter again uses the term "fault lines" as dividing lines. He says that these lines represent three fairly distinct cultures: the North, the South, and the West. The "economic imperial control by the North over the South and the West" [132] is the theme of the book. Webb insists that if the frontier was a dominant force, then the absence

of the frontier is also a dominant force. He also states that if the frontier, by giving rise to the concepts of individualism, equality, and self-reliance, had helped in the shaping of democracy in America as historians say it did, then the absence of the frontier would destroy these concepts.[133] The closing of the frontier left people standing in confusion with no sure place to go. But as the frontier closed, then began the rise of corporations. As these corporations grew, the principle of "laissez faire" began to pass away, aided by politicians. When the book was written, there were 180 chartered corporations in the North and 20 in the South and West.[134] The wealth of America, as well as political control, was in the North. Webb states that if America does not get the "house" all one again, there will be a crisis greater than that of 1860. The last chapter of the book is entitled "Is There a Way Out?" Walter says there is-by "the application of the 'good neighbor' policy at home-between the North, South, and West." [135]

In Booklist, H. S. Commage reviews *Divided We Stand*. He says, "Webb's own contribution is in the skillful popularization of the findings of others. . . . His book is meant for the layman, not the scholar." [136] But Commage also states that the "argument is of the utmost significance to the future of American democracy." [137] The *Saturday Review of Literature* mentions that "Webb's argument is realistic and valid. . . ." [138] Walter's "argument" was seen as "invalid" by many who were not the reviewers of books, one of whom was President Franklin D. Roosevelt. *Divided We Stand* was a factor in the president's letter of 1938. The letter declares the South as the number-one economic problem of the nation and expresses "the determination to do something about what he called the imbalance." [139]

After *Divided We Stand*, Webb did not publish another major work until 1952. But these years were not spent resting on past accomplishments. In 1937 he became the director of the Texas State Historical Association, and while he was director, he doubled the size of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. [140] The next year was spent in England as Harkness Lecturer in American History at the University of London. [141] Walter also believed that many young people of high-school age were interested in history. The result was the creation of the first five chapters of the *Junior Historian* in 1940. [142] In 1942 J. Frank Dobie said that when Walter got to St. Peter, he would receive more credit for the *Junior Historians* than all of the books that he [Webb] ever wrote. [143]

The Handbook of Texas was also one of Webb's ideas. It had its beginning in 1939 and became reality in 1952. Although he stepped down as director of the Texas State Historical Association in 1943, Webb remained close to the project. Walter considered the Handbook the "greatest and most useful piece of scholarship . . . ever issued" [144] from the state of Texas. During the Second World War he traveled to Oxford University as a wartime Harmsworth Professor. When he returned to the United States he helped Eugene Barker with a series of test books on American History. [145]

After a non-publishing period of over ten years, Webb produced his best major work, *The Great Frontier*. Webb defines *The Great Frontier* as all the new land that had been discovered by the year 1500. Most of the book deals with this frontier and its relationship with the Metropolis, which Walter defines as the community of Western Europe. From this relationship came the boom hypothesis. This "boom" resulted in the discovery of a land mass that was five to six times larger than Western Europe. The "new" land contained sources of wealth that had not been tapped. This sudden flood of wealth was ever-increasing and created a business boom on the Metropolis "such as the world had never known before and probably never can know again." [146] The boom lasted about 400 years. The results created an abnormal age that the world would have never known had there been no frontier. During the boom the ideas about man, government, and economics became very specialized in order to meet the needs created by the boom. With the passing of the boom, Webb states, the ideals will have to undergo

change.[147] Even if another type of boom comes, he says, changes will still occur because the frontier was unique and its results were unique. Another boom will bring different needs and it will be necessary to specialize in another direction. But the most radical changes will come if there is no substitute boom. [148]

The Great Frontier was considered by Webb as the most important of his works. But when it was ready to mail, he had a moment of self-doubt. He asked himself how the historians and critics would receive such a controversial book. After he thought for a moment he said, "Well, if all you write is what everybody agrees with, you haven't said much." [149] The book had been written with the desire that when the reader completed it, he would feel that the book was without completeness and that it fell short of its possibilities. Walter explained that this had to be the case. As much as he would have liked to have written the complete story, all that was possible was its beginning. Then he gave a warning: He who explores *The Great Frontier* intellectually is subject to the same errors as those who explored it physically. Those who wish to avoid such a risk should never invade any frontier, but should remain close at home. . . ." [150] Doctor Webb believed that the public would not acclaim his boom hypothesis until 1990, but reaction to the book came much sooner.

In 1953, *The Great Frontier* received the Texas Institute of Letters Carr P. Collins Award of one thousand dollars as the best Texas book of the year. [151] It also became Clifton Fadiman's nominee for the Pulitzer Prize. According to H. McWhiney, it was the "most important book written anywhere in the world during this century." [152] Edity Parker reviewed the book for the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* and states, "with the appearance of *The Great Frontier*, Webb takes his place beside the European historians, Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee, in their judgment that significant changes are taking place in the pattern of Western institutions." [153] Parker goes on to compare the frontier thesis of Fredrick Jackson Turner with the boom thesis. "The difference between the two frontier hypotheses is the difference between an easel painting and a mural on the same theme. . . . Webb laid out his mural on the grand scale of Western civilization, painting in his central and controlling design and indicating the spaces to be developed by future painters of the historical scene." [154] But not all of the reactions were as good. Many people demanded that Walter be dismissed from the University of Texas. [155] *The Great Frontier* was published during the McCarthy era and some "fanatics, without reading the book, slammed it as an 'un-American' rebuke to 'free enterprise'." [156]

While President of the American Historical Association, Walter told a story comparing the research of a book to two young boys who had been hired to drive a herd of goats through 150 miles of Texas hill country. After the drive started, everything seemed to go wrong. But the boys had gone so far that they did not know where they were. One day the boss lost his temper and took it out on one of the boys. When the boss was out of earshot, one boy said, "Dammit, Fred, if I knew the way home, I'd quit." [157] Walter went on to say that "the journey through *The Great Frontier* was a mental adventure of the first magnitude. . . . It was lonely there, many times I did not know which way to go, and I, like the boy driving the goats, would have been glad to go home." [158]

Doctor Webb seemed to have a solution for most anything that came up. Whenever he began to feel like he was "somebody," he would travel to San Antonio and stand on the corner outside the Gunter Hotel. For an hour he would stand there and watch the people pass. Then he would ask himself how many of those people ever heard of Walter Webb. That put things back into perspective. [159] He also made an agreement with Roy Bedichek to commit one foolish act a year to ward off old age. To fulfill his agreement, he bought an old log cabin for no good reason. The next year he wrote a friend that he had bought a Plymouth and another log cabin. "The car was reasonable but the cabin was

outrageous." [160]

Webb taught in the classroom just as well as he taught through his writing. He had the ability of stirring his students and making them think. He was not a polished lecturer. Many times he would begin a sentence and never finish it. But his seminars were famous and no graduate student in history would think of finishing without being exposed to one. Webb would give his students a problem and then sit back and see where the research fell.[161] He would lose his patience with anyone who had nothing to say. On several occasions he startled university deans and even presidents by putting on his hat and walking out in the middle of a sentence. He was not being rude; he had finished what he had come for, so he left.[162]

When looking at the writings of Walter Webb, some may assume that he is of the Turner School. If *The Great Plains* and *The Great Frontier* are used as examples, then one must listen. But Turner looked at a fragment of the frontier while Webb looked at the entire frontier. If Turner's thesis is true, then Webb's is also true. Webb said in 1958 that he was in the frontier school because of Keasbey. He believed that Keasbey was there because of an Italian named Achille Loria (1857-1943), not because of Turner.[163] If Walter was forced to give an explanation of how he got into the school of the frontier, this was the line of descent that he preferred.



Walter Prescott Webb was killed in a car accident on the night of March 8, 1963. The young man whom a mysterious stranger "plucked . . . off a Georgia stock" had come a long way from Stephens County. Webb was a scout on the frontiers of history. He explored the terrain and spotted the large ideas of the mind. It is up to the ones who follow to document his findings and stake out the section lines with accuracy. His main ambition had been to found a school of

historians who could grasp his main ideas and develop them in a series of books to be written over a long period of time.[164] This school never came into being. But what Webb has done can best be stated with the words he uses in the forward of *The Great Frontier*: "Many explorers made mistakes in the American wilderness, but nevertheless came back with or sent back valuable information." [165]

§

David Stroud was born in Tyler, Texas, and graduated from Henderson (Texas) High School in 1963. He enlisted in the Marines the following year, served a tour in Vietnam, and spent two years as a Drill Instructor at Parris Island, South Carolina. He earned his B.S. and M.A. degrees in history at Stephen F. Austin State University and is a history instructor at Kilgore (Texas) College. He has written seven books, along with fifteen articles and book reviews.



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[147] *Ibid.*, p. flysheet.

[148] Jacobs, Caughey, and Frantz, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

[149] Dugger, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[150] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[151] Edith Parker (ed.), "The Great Frontier," *Southwest Historical Quarterly*, LVII (July 1953), 138.

[152] Walter Prescott Webb, *An Honest Preface and Other Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

[153] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[154] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[155] Edith Parker (ed.), "The Great Frontier," *Southwest Historical Quarterly*, LVII (July 1953), *op. cit.*, p. 138.

[156] Walter Prescott Webb, *An Honest Preface and Other Essays*, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.

[157] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[158] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[159] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[160] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[161] Dugger, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

[162] Walter Prescott Webb, *An Honest Preface and Other Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

[163] *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.



[164] Dugger, op. cit., p. 112.

[165] Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier*, op. cit., p. ix. - *Who Was Who*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972) Vol. VI, p. 1179.

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