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Writer Proves Teachers Wrong

Steve Robertson

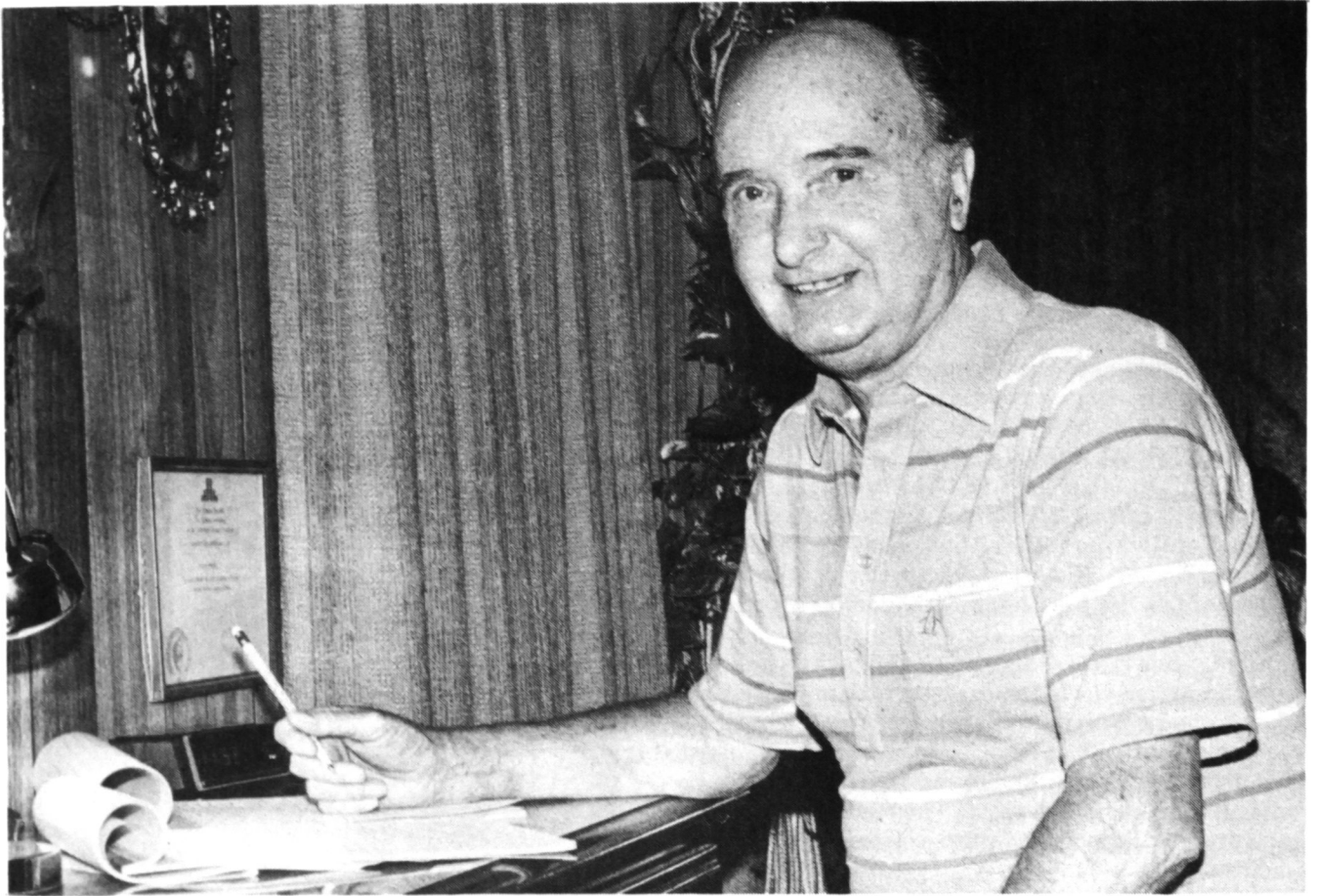
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Travis Anthony composing yet another story.

Writer Proves Teachers Wrong

By Steve Robertson

It took a while, but Rush Springs writer Travis Anthony has finally discarded advice from his teachers who thought his oratorical skills outshone his writing ability.

"I always wanted to write, but my teachers always told me 'Forget it; you're terrible'," he said.

Anthony, now 70, decided to ignore his

former teachers only a few years ago after he retired from teaching.

He mused, "To heck with all of them; I'll write for my own amusement if nothing else." And so far he has produced a flood of materials, including stacks of newspaper columns and two full-length books.

Most of his work is autobiographical. CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN, his first book, deals with his first two years as a teacher in Southwest Oklahoma while SUNSHINE AND SHADOWS, his second book, is his life story from birth until his high-school graduation. He also writes a weekly column for the CHICKASHA EXPRESS called BLACKJACKS, SANDHILLS, AND WATERMELON — which

"I always wanted to write, but my teachers always told me 'Forget it; you're terrible.' " "I decided to ignore my former teachers." "To heck with all of them." Anthony decided. And so far he has produced a flood of material.

covers his teaching career in Lawton and his attempts to farm near Rush Springs. He hopes to whittle the columns into a third book.

He began writing his first book about five years ago and had it finished in two or three months. That was the easy part.

"Getting it written is one thing. Getting it published is a horse of a different color," he said. "I never knew you could say no in so many different ways."

He said one publisher liked his book but said it had three problems — no sex, drugs or violence.

The rejections annoyed him. "I'm not trying to get rich. I've just got the bug, and I want to see a book," he said.

Finally, he decided to publish the book himself, using his own savings. He was delighted when his first book was published and the 1,000 copies were delivered to his door. He stacked them in a closet, and his sales career began when his wife told him to get rid of enough books so she could hang clothes in the closet.

So far he has been a fairly successful salesman; his books are now found in 147 school libraries, as well as college and public libraries in Oklahoma and several other states.

He worked his way through the University of Oklahoma and then began teaching, which he continued with a few breaks until his retirement. He was also a Boy Scout executive and an insurance salesman for a while.

Anthony's experiences are not unusual for people who grew up during the Depression, although they may seem whimsical to younger readers. He believes that readers have responded well to his books because they recognize the situation

he describes as something that could well have come from their own lives. He's often called by readers with whom a story has struck a familiar chord, and they call him to talk about it.

"They say, 'I think you're telling my life,' and they get started and want to tell me their life," Anthony said, adding that he listens as long as the long-distance callers want. "It's their nickel."

Anthony swears that all the stories are true, including those about swimming in the sewer lagoon, using rocks and .22 caliber shells as a gun, and burning down the family's home while trying to get rid of some weeds.

"I didn't have enough sense to be scared of anything," he said.

His beginning as a teacher in 1940 was less than auspicious. He hitchhiked around the state looking for a job and was finally hired as a seventh and eighth grade teacher for \$80 a month (nine months a year) at Bradley, on the condition that he stop smoking. He found, much to his surprise, that he was also high-school girls' basketball coach for a brand-new program.

That job lasted only a year because the school board cleaned house at the end of the year, sending the superintendent and every other employee packing. Later he was rehired at Bradley, and the school had a Travis Anthony Day last year to honor its fired and rehired teacher.

After leaving Bradley, he taught at Stafford and Fairview-Cement; then he became a Boy Scout executive for Tillman and Comanche counties. He liked the job, but it kept him out of town while his daughter was sick, so he moved to Lawton Junior High for four years. He then moved to Cameron Junior College, where he was an English and speech teacher; and he became head of the Speech Department. He also set up the counseling program at Cameron before health problems forced him out of teaching.

He moved to a 160-acre farm northwest of Rush Springs, where he hoped to make a living despite lack of money and equipment.

The farm made an impression on his daughter. There was no indoor plumbing, weeds had grown up around the farm, and city noises were replaced by oil wells booming in the distance.

"It kind of shook her up," Anthony said. "She asked, 'Dad, does the Lord know we're way out here in the middle of these

trees and sandhills?'"

He was trying to burn off a patch of weeds near the house for a garden when the fire got out of control. He called the operator to get help, and within minutes people from miles around were at his place to help him put out the fire. "I met all my neighbors in one afternoon," he said.

He later went back to teaching in Carlsbad, New Mexico, and then in Blanchard. He ended his teaching career as a basketball coach, counselor, and principal at Liberty School.

The teaching profession has changed a great deal since he began. On his first job he was reprimanded for not wearing a tie while shopping on Saturday, and he lost his second job for being out of town too

often on weekends.

One reason for his book is to show teachers as "normal human beings." He said people in his own community, especially older people, still are reserved with him when they find out he was a teacher. "I guess it's a carryover from their own teachers," he said.

Anthony enjoyed teaching, and he found that humor and engaging illustrations can break the tedium of the classroom. That was driven home in his own school days in his memory of one college professor who droned all hour without looking up. "What I learned in that economics class, besides wearing out the seat of my pants, you could fit in one eyeball."

His writing has followed the same logic as he has kept a homey style full of anecdotes and the flavor of the times.

He's thinking about publishing his third book, but he writes other stories and is enjoying his long-running serial in the Chickasha paper, which he is now writing so that readers have to wait for the next installment to find out how the story ends. He said he often gets telephone inquiries about what will happen next in a story. "It's got to be like a soap opera," he said.

To promote his books, he has taken to the road to lecture history classes, review his books for professional organizations, and to conduct writing classes. The lecture circuit has proved to be rewarding both personally and financially, although he has slacked off lately. "It's kept me from realizing that I'm 70 years of age and realizing I'm waiting for the friendly undertaker to haul me off to the boneyard," he quipped. (first published in the LAWTON MORNING PRESS-CONSTITUTION for August 8, 1984)