

An Abridged History of SouthWest Writers
by Larry Greenly
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A detailed history of SouthWest Writers (SWW) would fill several pages, so what follows are just some highlights. Names of individuals who figured in the operation of SWW along the way are omitted except for the founders of the organization.

SouthWest Writers had its beginnings in 1981 when Albuquerque's Georgia McKinney and Michelle Lommason decided to start a romance writing group.

In 1983, RT Book Reviews hosted its second Booklovers' Convention in New York. A group of well-known romance writers hopped aboard a "Love Train" on the West Coast and made a cross-country trek to the New York convention. Their arrival in New York generated a large splash of publicity from national magazines and newspapers.

When the Love Train stopped in Albuquerque, Elsie Kreisler was the only Albuquerque writer who met the train. Romance author Jude Deveraux invited Kreisler to ride to Santa Fe with them to have tea and discuss writing. Unfortunately, she had to demur because she had no transportation back to Albuquerque.

McKinney and Lommason happened to see Kreisler's name in an Albuquerque Journal article about the Love Train and invited her aboard their writing group. Two other local writers, La Vonne Hampton and Eileen Stanton also joined the group. The five writers met at McKinney's house, calling themselves the New Mexico Romance Writers (NMRW).

In 1983, NMRW held its first writers' conference at the Albuquerque Marriott, attracting 30 attendees. The 1984 conference they held at the Albuquerque Civic Center was even more successful, attracting almost 100 writers. A writing contest was also held in conjunction with the conference—the first contest in a long line of contests that still exist today.

Other writers joined NMRW. By 1985, membership had risen to about 150 members. NMRW then voted to change its name to Southwest Writers Workshop and to include writers of *all* genres.

A problem arose. SWW was broke. The \$15 dues paid mostly for paper and stamps for a two-page newsletter. Someone suggested an all-day workshop. A member phoned a New York romance editor to see if she would agree to teach the workshop. She not only agreed, but her company agreed to pay her way to Albuquerque.

To save money, SWW members took a potluck assortment of food to the workshop, which cost only \$15. Attendees learned about writing and selling romances. Sixty-five new members were signed up, earning SWW more than \$1,500 to use as seed money for its next conference.

Meetings soon outgrew living rooms, forcing SWW to meet in a schoolroom. Around the end of the 80s, SWW started meeting at the New Life Presbyterian church, which had a large meeting space. SWW still meets there.

In 1989, Southwest Writers Workshop incorporated as a nonprofit 501c3 corporation. Its mission statement was to teach people how to write and get published. A larger monthly newsletter, *The Southwest Sage*, started printing member successes and marketing news.

The 90s saw SWW rent a small office space on Wyoming Boulevard and later move downstairs to a larger space. SWW hired an office manager and moved to an even larger space near Pennsylvania and Lomas Boulevard. In 2003 the office was moved to Comanche Boulevard and Morris Street NE. After a disaster described below, SWW moved again to an office complex on Carlisle Boulevard near Candelaria Avenue.

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During the 90s, SWW continued holding conferences that morphed into three- and four-day extravaganzas, featuring both national and local speakers. Acquiring editors from major publishing houses and established agents were flown in from all parts of the country as speakers. They also held pitch sessions, in which conference attendees could present their manuscripts in hopes of getting published.

Southwest Writers Workshop eventually dropped “Workshop” from its name and did business as simply Southwest Writers. A little later, the working name was changed slightly to SouthWest Writers, which helped keep the SWW moniker alive.

SWW was making money, but in the late 90s and early 2000s it suffered several financial setbacks, particularly in 2003 when its four-day conference didn’t perform well financially. With only \$1600 left—six weeks of operating capital—the organization moved into a less expensive office at Comanche and Morris. SWW launched an austerity program to cut expenses. Documents were discovered that revealed SWW had overpaid for the lease on its copy machine. After some legal wrangling, SWW received a refund of \$7,000—which became its nest egg.

SWW then pulled itself up by its own bootstraps. Multi-day conferences made way for one-day conferences, which were less risky and less expensive. Annual and quarterly contests brought in more needed cash. Inexpensive workshops and classes brought in even more. It took dogged determination, but SWW finally turned the corner. By 2010, SWW was nearing \$100,000 in capital—its goal for establishing a permanent writing fund.

The community took notice how SWW helped legions of writers and its inspiring survival in an era that was not particularly kind to non-profits. In 2008, the Albuquerque Arts Alliance awarded SWW its prestigious Bravo Award for the Outstanding Arts Organization in Albuquerque.

Unfortunately, catastrophe struck in January 2013 when, on a weekend, a water line burst inside SWW’s office. The massive flood wasn’t discovered until almost two days later. Many books, files, supplies, furniture were destroyed or damaged. Luckily, most of SWW’s computers survived. But after six weeks of being virtually dead in the water (pun intended), SWW was forced to move to its present location on Carlisle Boulevard. During all these events, SWW never missed a beat. Its twice-monthly meetings continued to typically attract 60-100 people. Workshops and classes continued to attract motivated students. And SWW’s annual contest continued to attract writers from around the world.

SWW has proved itself to be resilient. And you can bet on SouthWest Writers being around for many more years doing what it does best: helping writers find their dreams.