

THE HISTORY OF SOUTHWEST WRITERS

By Kay Lewis “Happy” Shaw, Paula Paul, Larry Greenly and Rose Marie Kern

SouthWest Writers (SWW) is rich with the experience of many outstanding authors, but at one time the organization’s office was accidentally flooded, destroying many documents. Partly due to this incident, and partly because most of what the current leaders only know through information passed verbally, the origins of Southwest Writers Workshop have often been misrepresented.

Luckily, we have charter members who can attest to the dynamics of how SWW was created. Below is part one of a four- part historical report compiled by SWW Charter Members Paula Paul and Happy Shaw with further contributions by long- time SWW office manager Larry Greenly and current SWW President, Rose Marie Kern.

Part One Blast from the Past: Metamorphosis

In 1983, the *Romantic Times* magazine hosted a Book-lovers’ Convention on the East Coast. A group of well-known romance writers hopped aboard a “Love Train” on the West Coast and made a cross-country trek to NYC. This was a PR stunt to gain readership for the romance market, which had started blossoming into full-length contemporary and historical novels produced by New York publishers. Their arrival in NYC generated a large splash of publicity from national magazines and newspapers.

Albuquerque author Elsie Kreischer greeted the train, Romance author Jude Deveraux had invited Kreischer to ride to Santa Fe with them to have tea and to discuss writing. Unfortunately, she had to demur because she had no transportation back to Albuquerque.

When an article about this came out in the Albuquerque Journal, local artist Poteet (aka Georgia McKinney) and author Michele Lommasson, invited Elsie to join their writing group. [Georgia McKinney, *SWW Historical Perspective: A Room Full of Books*, SWW Newsletter, July 1988, alludes to this 1983 three-person meeting.] Shortly thereafter, two other 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)**.

After that, a notice appeared at a bookstore (most likely the Little Professor Bookstore owned by Norman Zollinger, located on Lomas and San Pedro Boulevards in 1983) about a writers’ group forming in Albuquerque. After Happy Shaw asked about the group, the bookstore cashier gave her a phone number to call for more information.

The purpose of the first gathering at Eileen Stanton’s house was to decide whether to form a critique group for those interested in the romance genre. As well as Georgia, Happy, Elsie and Michele, the first attendees included: Paula Paul, Madge Harrah, Jude White (aka Jude Deveraux, a NY Times Best Selling author), and Lavonne Hampton. (Various recollection stories of this gathering were published in *The Sage*, December 1997 by some of the attendees.)

At the time, Georgia and Michele were in contact with author Parris Afton Bonds, a co-founder of **Romance Writers of America (RWA)**. Parris, who lived in Hobbs, NM at that time, had already planned to visit Albuquerque. This prompted the first NMRW’s conference at the Albuquerque Marriott Hotel, on Louisiana Boulevard, which attracted 30 attendees. This first

conference was held in a single room at the Marriott. Parris Afton Bonds and Jude Deveraux were the only two speakers.

The original group of women then decided to become a chapter of RWA. Georgia McKinney was the first president of the NMRA chapter (1983-84). After the group met in private homes for a time to read their work, Happy Shaw, then a member of New Life Presbyterian Church on Eubank Boulevard, arranged for the group to meet there, instead. In the new venue, the group began to expand, because no other established writer organization in Albuquerque would allow unpublished people to attend.

However, multi-published authors, such as Lois Duncan, also wanted to meet with the NMRA group, along with other female and male unpublished people who weren't necessarily interested in writing romance.

Multi-published author Mary E. Lynn became the second president of NMRA (September 1984 to September 1985). The 1984 NMRA conference 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 continue today. LaVryle Spencer (NY Times Best Selling author) helped judge that contest and was the main conference speaker. The list of contest winners was published in *The Albuquerque Journal* on Monday, October 8, 1984.

By 1985, membership had risen to about 150 members. NMRW then voted to change its name to **Southwest Writers Workshop** (SWW) and to include writers of all genres, not just romance. But a problem arose. SWW was broke.

The \$15 dues paid mostly for paper and stamps for a two-page newsletter. Then 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 held a potluck at the workshop, which cost only \$15 to attend. At the workshop, attendees learned about writing and selling romances. And 65 new members joined, earning SWW more than \$1,500 to use as seed money.

At the two regular monthly meetings, guest speakers were scheduled for the first Saturday morning of the month, and the critique session was moved to the third Tuesday night. Later on, guest speakers were also scheduled for the Tuesday night meeting, and individual critique groups focusing on different genres met at other places. The "Successes" column for members appeared in the NMRW newsletter as early as July 1985.

The nation-wide organization, RWA, began to insist that chapter members pay their local dues plus annual dues to the national RWA. The approximately 35 charter members of NMRW then met and decided not to force anyone to join both the local chapter of NMRW *and* the national membership of RWA. It was felt no writer should be turned away from its local meetings. Thus, the charter members of NMRW voted that anyone who wished to join NMRW would pay its required dues, but people who did not want to become romance writers could attend its meetings under the flag of SWW and not pay dues to the RWA. However, there would be only one president and board, elected annually, for both local organizations.

The combination of NMRW/SWW was printed on the conference brochure that year (and possibly one more year). Eileen Stanton was president from September 1985 to September 1986. Elana Willey succeeded her from September 1986 to September 1987.

Finally, the charter members of New Mexico Romance Writers voted to dissolve its charter and end any affiliation with Romance Writers of America. From that point on, the organization operated solely as **Southwest Writers Workshop**, keeping all dues in house. In 1989, SWW

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. SWW's original non-profit status documents were likely destroyed in the flood, for the current IRS papers list SWW's origin as 1989—even though Eileen Stanton's and Elana Willey's administrations existed before Happy Shaw became president of SWW (September 1987 to September 1988).

During Happy Shaw's administration the Board passed a declaration that no person could claim or be designated as "founder" or "co-founder" of SWW. The 1987-88 Board also declared that original members would be referred to as "charter members" of SWW.

Note: A different chapter of Romance Writers of America was formed years later under the name *Land of Enchantment Romance Authors (LERA)*, with no connection or legal ties to SWW.

The History of SouthWest Writers

Part Two

From the Ashes

During the 1990s, 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.

The Storyteller Award was created as the top prize in the annual writing contest and was originally a small pottery "Storyteller" sculpture made by indigenous potters. However, those items became too expensive, were fragile to ship, and did not carry any notation about SWW. The current Storyteller plaque was designed by Happy Shaw with input from others.

The '90s saw SWW rent an office at Wyoming and Constitution Avenue and hire an office manager. The organization then grew large enough to move to a larger space near Pennsylvania Avenue and Lomas Boulevard.

To continue to expand, SWW needed the assistance of published authors. Parris Afton Bonds had already devoted her time to speak at conferences and general meetings, had judged contest entries, and connected SWW with other published authors who later became conference speakers, etc. As a result, **The Parris Award** was created to honor Parris, who was awarded the first one, but also as an incentive for other published authors to support SWW. The Parris Award began as a piece of Nambé Ware. Happy created the original design of a simplified Eiffel Tower that was professionally engraved on it.

Before every conference, the current Board listed name(s) of deserving published authors. Then the final recipient was chosen by the board and Parris, each person having one vote. The Parris Award was later presented at the annual conference banquet. Tony Hillerman and Paula Paul were among the earliest recipients.

During Happy's term as president, Slim Randles wrote an article about her in *The Albuquerque Journal*, and he mentioned SWW had 500 members (*The Albuquerque Journal, Bosque Beat section*, Thursday, January 14, 1988). A few years later, membership reached over a thousand. SWW's conference for writers was considered one of the top three in the United

States, and many attendees joined the organization to receive the lower conference membership rate. During this time, SWW also acquired members who lived in other countries.

Due to SWW's gracious southern and southwestern hospitality, the conference attracted top New York editors and agents, including those who reviewed movie treatments and screenplays, and other notable guest speakers such as: Mary Higgins Clark, Sandra Brown, David Morrell, Ann Rule, Lawrence Block, Alice Walker, *et al.* Hundreds of people were drawn to three or four tracks of individual speakers or panels scheduled in up to 12 separate rooms over the weekend.

Even now, it is hard to describe how extraordinary this annual event was, which was held every September from 1983 into the 2000s, despite times a hurricane would hit New York or conference committee members would fall ill or become seriously injured shortly before the scheduled dates. But devoted members always stepped up to cover the absences. Even guest speakers did extra sessions when others bailed out at the last minute.

SWW was making money, but in the late '90s and early 2000s it suffered several financial setbacks. The tragic event of 9/11 occurred about a week before the 2001 conference. Some editors, speakers, and attendees no longer wished to fly, leaving SWW in a perilous financial situation. Hefty hotel and food deposits had already been paid so the conference could not be cancelled. Once again, SWW members and the speakers who did arrive pulled it together, despite the gloom hanging over the nation.

By 2003 finances reached a crisis level when SWW's four-day conference didn't perform well financially. SWW launched an austerity program to cut expenses. With only \$1600 left—six weeks of operating capital—the then president Larry Greenly extricated SWW from the following year's hotel contractual obligation of about \$35,000. He then found a less-expensive office at Comanche Boulevard and Morris Street. Treasurer Edith Greenly discovered documents that revealed SWW had vastly overpaid for the lease on its copy machine over the years. After some legal wrangling, SWW received a refund of \$7,000—which then became its nest egg to survive.

SWW then pulled itself up by its own bootstraps. Multi-day conferences made way to 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 many years and many people to turn SWW's financial situation around. Some members served multiple terms as officers and on the board to ensure SWW survived. So today, even after a world-wide pandemic, the mission of SouthWest Writers Workshop is still to educate and promote writers. Over the last four decades, SWW members have reached the milestone of being published in their respective genres, have become best-selling authors, and have seen their work made into movies and documentaries.

Not bad for something that started in Eileen Stanton's living room.

The History of SouthWest Writers

Part Three

SWW in the 21st Century

Things started to run smoothly during the early-2000's. Twice monthly meetings continued in person at the New Life Presbyterian Church building in northeast Albuquerque under the leadership of President Rob Spiegel. As technology was leaping throughout the U.S., paper notebooks, and typewriters were slowly giving way to computers as the most popular writing tools. Meeting topics began to include experts on blogging and social media while SWW rolled with the change.

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

By 2010, SWW was nearing \$100,000 in capital—its goal for establishing a permanent writing fund. Although the meetings and office are headquartered in Albuquerque, the annual book writing contest entry fees included a one-year membership in the organization, which attracted a worldwide audience. As a result the membership rolls neared a thousand for a few years.

At the time of SWW's annual book awards, SWW was one of only a few groups nationwide that offered a book-writing opportunity to new authors. There were very few book award contests, and authors were eager to append the title "award winning" to their bio. Since then, literally hundreds of writing organizations and other professional writing companies caught on and now offer this opportunity to make money.

The contest required a great deal of hands-on work by long-time office manager, Larry Greenly, and those members who agreed to be judges. Income from the book contest eventually declined and was discontinued, which meant that membership levels and income also fell drastically..

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.

SWW's expenses from the flood and the resulting move caused an operating cash shortfall. Over the next decade the paying membership went down about to 300. We had one part-time person working in the office and only about eight total active volunteers, just keeping the office open was a challenge.

Late in 2013, Peggy Herrington came up with the idea of creating an anthology and publishing it to raise money for the group and increase SWW's exposure. *The Storyteller's Anthology* featured short stories by some of SWW's more famous members. A committee led by Peggy, defined the parameters of the anthology.

All SWW members were invited to submit up to 4,000 words on any family-friendly topic – fiction or nonfiction, previously published or not – for possible publication in this anthology. The goal was to make both the printed anthology and eBook version available before the winter holidays. All funds raised by this project, including royalties, went directly to SWW.

In 2018, another anthology was created using prose and poetry drawn from the *Sage* newsletter. The *Sage Anthology* was crafted by a committee of members chaired by Rose Marie Kern.

In 2019, with a grant from the City of Albuquerque's Cultural Affairs office, SWW created and published *Kimo Theater: Fact & Folklore*. Creation and editing of this important historical work was by Jacqueline Murray Loring, and garnered several awards. The chapters were written by SWW members and key historical figures connected with the iconic theater.

The big, annual conferences were reduced to one-day events – until they ceased entirely due to the Covid epidemic in 2020. During all this time, SWW never missed a beat. Its twice-monthly meetings with speakers, who were experts in various facets of writing, continued to typically attract 60-100 people per meeting. Workshops and classes taught by writing professionals continue to attract motivated students.

The History of SouthWest Writers

Part Four

SWW Moves into the Future

Covid was both a nationwide curse...and an unexpected blessing. Because people were required to shelter in place, they became frustrated and restless. Luckily, technology had evolved so that large groups could “meet” virtually through their computers. SouthWest Writers was the only writing group in the southwest to take advantage of that situation in 2020.

SWW opened all its meetings via Zoom to the general public. As word that we were doing this went out, a number of authors and others in the publishing industry contacted us about giving presentations – free of charge – to help them with marketing their own work. SWW enhanced its visibility by scheduling special zoom events with authors from around the country and beyond.

President Sarah Baker, herself a Harlequin romance author, had broad connections across the nation and beyond. When we held a zoom poetry reading by five distinguished Irish authors from their homes in Galway, we had over a hundred people online.

The beauty of SWW is that its focus is on writers from across all aspects of the literary spectrum. Poetry, memoirs, journalism, and short stories in every genre are represented in the SWW membership. When SWW stopped focusing its attention on book writing, it opened up doorways for writers of shorter works.

SWW initiated an annual short story and poetry contest that has proved popular – the winning entries are bound into both print and paperback book formats. At this time, SWW has seven anthologies bringing some income to the group and it will have two more by the end of 2023.

As of the end of 2021, SWW grew back to over 400 members. About 85% still live in New Mexico, but the other 15% comes from all over the world, including Germany, England, Ireland, Canada, and Australia. SWW began holding in-person meetings and workshops again in 2022, but set them up to always include a zoom component to accommodate those who want to continue to socially isolate or to participate from across the globe.

As SWW navigates 2023, it's expanding its options once again. Most of SWW's operating income is through membership and event fees, along with some local grants. Volunteers do most of the work, with the assistance of one contracted part-time (and amazing) office manager, ReVaH Loring.

Since the inception of SWW there have been hundreds of individuals who have worked with and inspired people who are hungry to express their thoughts in writing, but need direction beyond academic limitations. This article does not give recognition to all those who deserve it, but SWW is grateful for the many hours donated by its boards of directors and many other volunteers.

Over time SWW's membership has grown well beyond its romantic roots. Genres now represented include mystery, western, science fiction, memoir, and all kinds of adventure. Styles and forms include poetry, non-fiction, songwriting, playwrighting—and with the rise of the film industry in New Mexico—SWW sees a rise in scriptwriting. SWW's speakers vary from genre-

specific topics to experts in the legal and publishing aspects of a writing career. Social media and SWW's website provide its members with necessary information and resources.

Plans are unfolding to reinstitute SWW's annual writers' conference and SWW is in the process of revising its bylaws and procedures manual to reflect today's world. SouthWest Writers continues to move forward in its mission of "Writers Helping Writers Succeed."

The History of SouthWest Writers Author Team

Kay Lewis "Happy" Shaw writes the *Cookie Baker Mystery* series under her penname Joanna Blalock. Her fourth novel, *A Sandwich Cookie*, comes out in summer 2023. Happy co-wrote the Christmas picture book, *Sarah's Bead*, with its illustrator Caroline S. Garrett. An award-winning writer, artist, and teacher, Happy was a former literary agent and small publisher, who contributed articles to writers' guides to the publishing industry.

Paula Paul is the award-winning author of 32 published novels. Her newest, *The Last of the Baileys*, loosely based on events in her family, was released in March 2023. Paula is also a former national award-winning newspaper reporter and has published a countless number of magazine articles as a freelance writer. She was born and grew up in West Texas and graduated from Eastern New Mexico University and was named an Outstanding Alumni of that university.

Larry Greenly was the office manager for SWW for over 15 years and has held every position on the board except treasurer. Armed with degrees in physics/math, architecture, civil engineering and chiropractic, Larry Greenly has led a multi-faceted life as a teacher, engineer and doctor of chiropractic. His career as a freelance writer/editor of myriad non-fiction articles began over 25 years ago. He is the author of the award-winning "Eugene Bullard: World's First Black Fighter Pilot."

Rose Marie Kern is the current president of SWW and the owner of RMK Publications. She's written seven books and has had over a thousand articles published across the U.S. An Arts Administration graduate of Butler University and UNM, Rose writes on a diverse palette of topics from aviation to high desert gardening, and enjoys mentoring others on their literary journeys.