

It all began in the early 1950s with a letter between two masters of the Western who knew each other only by reputation, having read and admired the other's Old West fiction over the years. In his letter to Nelson C. "Nels" Nye, a concerned Thomas "Tommy" Thompson bemoaned the sad state of Westerns and their prospects for future markets, especially as the pulp magazines were folding one by one. Without the Western pulps, young writers would have fewer markets to learn the ropes and move on to write frontier novels.

By comparison to their favorite genre, mysteries and detective yarns were growing in popularity. In their subsequent discussions, Thompson and Nye realized the Western needed an organization like Mystery Writers of America, which had been founded in 1945, to promote and honor their genre.

At that point, Thompson and Nye decided to create a similar association for writers of Westerns. The organization would not only promote and honor outstanding the genre but also help writers adjust to changing conditions in the marketplace and ever-evolving tastes in American culture.

The two men broadened their discussions to include Harry Sinclair Drago, Norman A. Fox, D.B. Newton and Wayne D. Overholser. Those six accomplished authors formed Western Writers of America in 1953, adopting a constitution, electing officers with Nelson Nye as the first president, and collecting dues for active and associate members.

Applicants for active membership needed a minimum of three published novels with an established publishing house rather than a vanity press or thirty published short stories. Associate members would qualify with a single novel or connections to the publishing industry.

In addition to the founders members, the charter members were Frank Bonham, Giff Cheshire, Dan Cushman, Leslie Ernenwein, Steve Frazee, Luke Short, Bill Gulick, Roe Richmond, Chuck Martin, Charles L. Heckelman, Garland Roark, Noel M. Loomis, Frank C. Robertson, L.P. Homes, Lewis B. Patten, John L. Sinclair, and Walker Thompkins.

Initial associate members from Publishers Row were Ian Ballantine, Raymond Bond, Clarkson Potter, William Clifford, W. Hughes Hanna, Bernie Shiri-Cliff, and Don Ward.

Immediately upon establishing the organization, the charter members began publishing *The Roundup* to keep members informed of industry trends and issues. In Vol 1, No. 1 *Roundup* Editor and President Nye wrote, "With each member working for the greater good of all, we can bring to Western novels the due so long denied them."

To further that aim and recognize quality writing, the organizers established an award program after debating what to call the presentation piece. Some suggested calling the

award “Ernies” in honor of Ernest Haycox, just as the Mystery Writers of America had their “Edgars” and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had their “Oscars.” A Charles Russell bucking horse was suggested for the award’s physical manifestation.

As founder D.B. Newton remembered the heated discussion, “Finally, Tommy Thompson remarked, rather apologetically, that in his opinion the award should be a plain, old, ordinary spur—and this was so obviously right that [that] one question, at least, never had to be argued again.” The first Spurs for works published in 1953, WWA’s founding year, were presented the next year in five categories at the organization’s inaugural annual convention in Denver in 1954.

Spur recipients were *Lawman* by Lee Leighton (Wayne D. Overholser) for novel; *The Wheel and the Hearth* by Lucia Moore for historical novel; and *Sagebrush Sorrel* by Frank C. Robertson for juvenile novel. Appropriately for the man who named the award, Tommy Thompson took home the first Spur for a short story for “Gun Job” in *Collier’s*. A fifth Spur was awarded to Hoffman Birney of the *New York Times* as the best reviewer.

At the 1955 convention in Santa Rosa, California, Nelson Nye won a Spur for best reviewer for his reviews in *Hoof & Horns*. That was the last year a Spur went to a reviewer and the first year that WWA recognized nonfiction works. David Lavender won the inaugural nonfiction Spur for *Bent’s Fort*.

Over the years additional Spur categories have been added to recognize exceptional work in the literature, film and music of the West. Today the Spur Award is considered the pinnacle of recognition for works on the American West.

In 1961 WWA established a Saddleman Award, sponsored by Levi Strauss. For the first six years of the Saddleman, it went to one of that year’s Spur Award recipients who was a WWA member. In 1967 the Saddleman was re-purposed to recognize outstanding contributions to the American West regardless of any affiliation with the organization. The initial recipient of the new Saddleman was S. Omar Barker. Subsequent recipients have included such westerners as John Wayne, John Ford, Dorothy Johnson, A.B. Guthrie Jr., Louis L’Amour, Eve Ball, Elmer Kelton, and Clint Eastwood.

After Levi’s dropped sponsorship, subsequent recipients starting in 1991 received the Owen Wister Award, recognizing the author of the 1902 novel *The Virginian*, a pivotal novel in establishing the Western genre as literature and creating the cowboy as an American icon. Wister Award recipients have included Glendon Swarthout, Gordon D. Shirreffs, Don Coldsmith, Matt Braun, John Jakes, Tony Hillerman, José Cisneros, N. Scott Momaday, Richard Wheeler, and Win Blevins, among others.

The irony of WWA’s founding in the 1950s was that the nation was entering an era where Westerns were a dominant feature in the culture. While the pulp magazines were

shutting down, the market for paperback westerns was expanding. Western movies remained popular, and as network television evolved during the decade Westerns became a staple of network programming. By the end of the decade, some estimates claimed that WWA members were responsible for writing more than 90 percent of the Western fiction, movies, and television episodes.

Though originally focused on fiction works, WWA gradually expanded its vision to encompass nonfiction works as well. Some of its leading historian members have included Robert M. Utley, C.L. Sonnichsen, Dee Brown, David Dary, and Leon Metz. Later poetry and western music were added to the Spur categories.

In the decades since its founding, WWA has celebrated the legacy and values of the American West through quality writing while at the same time adapting to changing industry trends and evolving cultural tastes. Western Writers of America may not have won the West, but over the last three-quarters of a century its members have certainly made it fun and educational for millions of people around the world.