



Topeka Capital Journal Closing the book on one of Topeka's famous authors

Wednesday, May 11, 2001

By Dick Snider *The Capital-Journal*

This all started with an e-mail from Charles Crawford of New York City, a KU graduate, a faithful reader and a prolific communicator. He said that with "Nero Wolfe" being resurrected for television, now is the time to write something about Rex Stout, once a Topekan and the author who created the heavyweight detective character.

Crawford also offered some items from Stout's 1975 obituary in the New York Times, and he ended his message with the comment, "Sounds like a dream life to me." If it wasn't, it was close, and it bolsters the idea you should keep trying until you get it right.

Stout was famous a couple of times before he gained permanent all-star status by writing 78 detective novels, 46 of them featuring Wolfe, "an eccentric, chubby, beer-drinking gourmet sleuth, whose wisecracking aide and companion in crime solving was Archie Goodwin."

In the books, Wolfe weighed 286 pounds and made fat fashionable. I think I read every one of the Wolfe-Goodwin stories, in book form or in American magazine or the Saturday Evening Post. I was as addicted to them early in life as I was later to John D. McDonald and his Travis McGee.

Rex Todhunter Stout was born in Noblesville, Ind., in 1886, and a few months later the family moved to Wakarusa. He was like Dwight D. Eisenhower in that he came so close to being born in Kansas the state can claim him as one of its own.

By the time Stout was 9, he was recognized throughout the state as a mathematical prodigy. This biographical information, from the cover of one of his books, doesn't say what he did to become famous all over Kansas, but Crawford says it happened when Stout went on the county fair circuit, adding three-digit figures instantly in his head.

That story ends with truant officers ordering Stout to stay in school. If it's all true, it proves that at the turn of the century county fairs were hard up for entertainment.

We know for sure Stout graduated from Topeka High two years ahead of schedule and attended KU for a year, or part of a year, leaving to join the Navy. He served on President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht, but what he did aboard depends on which biography you read. You have the choice of Stout as a warrant officer, a yeoman, a "record keeper" or a simple sailor.

He bought his way out of the Navy in 1908 and over the next few years was an office boy, store clerk, hotel manager, bookkeeper and a sightseeing guide. He married Fay Kennedy of Topeka in 1916, and they were divorced in 1933. But before the divorce, Stout became not only famous again, but also rich.

Maybe he combined his math skills with his bookkeeping experience, or maybe he just had an inspiration. However it happened, he created some kind of school banking plan that was adopted by more than 400 school systems across the country. He sold out in 1927 and retired from the world of finance, and he was loaded.

He went to Paris and became serious about writing novels. Some early ones received favorable reviews, and his first Nero Wolfe-Archie Goodwin book was published in 1934.

Back in the States, living a few miles north of New York City, he went on to write better than a book a year for the next 41 years. One was published a month before his death in 1975 at age 89, and the last one was discovered and published 10 years later.

Crawford says Stout made about \$100,000 per book, and that he kept writing because he liked to live well. Every few months, when Stout figured it was time, he'd go on the wagon for as long as it took to write another book, which usually was about six weeks. It's a schedule the Kansas Legislature would understand.

Stout cut short his writing in World War II to coordinate efforts of American writers to help the war effort, and to host a radio show. He later served as president of the Authors Guild, and the Mystery Writers of America, which in 1959 presented him its Grand Master Award.

He was active in liberal causes, ignoring a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee at the height of the McCarthy era. Later, he alienated the liberals by taking a hawkish stance on Vietnam. His contempt for communism came through in many of his books.

Stout's first Nero Wolfe novel was titled "Fer-de-lance" and the last one, not counting the late discoveries, was "A Family Affair." Over a period of four decades you might think a string of books featuring the same two men eventually would wear out their welcome, especially if they had no profanity or undercover action. But believe me, they didn't.