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John Sinclair.
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The Memoirs of John L. Sinclair

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Preface

John L. Sinclair was a wonderful man and a wonderful storyteller. To John and to hear or read his stories was to want to know him better and to want to hear and to read more of those stories to wonder along with him, as was his way.

I met John in 1985, when he was eighty-three years old. He was living simply with his wife, Evelyn, and their dogs and cat in a one-room stone cabin with two chimneys on the Santa Ana Pueblo near Bernalillo, New Mexico.

John's health was failing. His eyesight was going from bad to worse, and his legs weren't "working right" any more. He was spending much less time composing on his old portable Royal typewriter and much more time just quietly cogitating in his "new-fangled" wheelchair.

John became my wonderful friend. Later, I became his literary agent, then the publisher of his last novel, *The Night the Bear Came off the Mountain* (The Rydal Press, 1991), and ultimately, and sadly, the executor for his wife's estate and his.

I hadn't known John long or read or listened to many of his stories before I knew I wanted to know him better and to hear and read more of his stories. I especially wondered about his own life story and knew others did too. So in 1988 we conceived a plan. John would tell his story aloud. It would be tape recorded, transcribed, and edited a long, difficult process that was undertaken by one good friend and eventually completed by another to whom we are all grateful for this book.

The manuscript was finished in 1991. But the health of the Sinclairs was failing. Evelyn fell ill and was hospitalized. Then she was moved into a nursing home. She died in the fall of 1993. A

little over a month later, John followed her. He was ninety-one years old. Although I wish this memoir had been published during his lifetime, to read it now is to be in John's company once again and to hear his voice tell his own story at last. *Hasta la vista, amigo!*

CLARK KIMBALL
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO
OCTOBER 1995

Foreword

I first met John Sinclair about fifty years ago when he came to the White Lakes area as a ranch hand with the Batercell Cattle Company. He was dipping sheep and cattle, and doing other odd jobs that fall to the hands on a ranch. John and I hit it off right away and became lifelong friends. We never ran out of things to talk about because he was one of the most interesting men that I have had the privilege to call my friend and colleague. John authored one of the best articles ever written about my political career almost twenty-five years ago for *The New Mexico Magazine*.

John married a lovely lady by the name of Evelyn Fox. After John and Evelyn moved to Bernalillo, New Mexico, Evelyn and my mother became fast friends. My mother was a friend to everyone for miles around Stanley. She always had coffee on the stove and something good to eat. People would go for miles to visit my mother to share news, ask her advice and share one of her great homecooked meals.. Evelyn would ride the bus to our ranch occasionally and stay a week or so, and then John would drive out to the ranch and take her home to Bernalillo.

Over the years, John and I had many conversations about his life, how he came to New Mexico from Scotland and his early days as a ranch hand working on various ranches all across New Mexico from Roswell to Santa Fe. He told me that it was while riding horseback around New Mexico that he fell in love with the state's unique beauty and culture and decided to write about the people and this place called New Mexico. He loved the magnificence and color of New Mexico sunsets, the clear blue skies of autumn, our warm and friendly people and all the things that make New Mexico the Land of Enchantment.

John captured the beauty and essence of New Mexico through his books, articles and stories. His writings are some of the very

best works about our people, our culture and our history. He wrote about New Mexico from the inside, as a New Mexican, with an in-depth understanding of the complexity of our multi-cultural society its heritage and history with a great sense of humor and with love and respect.

I know you will enjoy *A Cowboy Writer in New Mexico*. It takes me back to the rural days in New Mexico when there were few paved roads and the best transportation to some parts of New Mexico was by horseback or on foot. New Mexico was one of the last frontiers in America. I am fortunate to have grown to young manhood during the time New Mexico was still a rural state and I am proud to have shared part of its past with my lifelong friend, a truly great New Mexican and outstanding author John Sinclair.

GOVERNOR BRUCE KING
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO
MARCH 1994

Introduction

John L. Sinclair and his writings need no introduction to those of us who remember the Land of Enchantment as a whistle-stop between civilized New York and Los Angeles a still open land of sage and sand sparsely dotted with small villages and a few towns with dirt streets when cowboys were working hands hired to herd cows and mend fences instead of playboys decorating the plaza in Santa Fe with their gaudy silk shirts, designer jeans, and lizard-skin boots.

This book by John Sinclair, who worked fourteen years as a cowboy, brings to later arrivals the people, places, tastes, and smells of that time. But it does more than that. It is a moving recollection of his wealthy and aristocratic family in northern Scotland, of his Scottish sea captain father, of his boyhood years in Scotland and England, his years as a young cowboy on the arid plains of southeastern New Mexico, and the writing of his three unique grassroots novels *In Time of Harvest*, *Death in the Claimshack*, and *Cousin Drewey and the Holy Twister*. Through this engrossing narrative runs the thread of his love of the land and his love of simple, earthy people, wherever they are.

I first met John about 1950 at the Coronado State Monument near Bernalillo, where he was serving as its curator. He was a big-boned Scot wearing a large, old Stetson, turquoise bolo, denim jacket, and, of course, cowboy boots. His smile was inviting, his grip firm. We hit it off immediately, having much in common. Both of us had been born in the same year, 1902. Both held salaried jobs, myself at Los Alamos, and were writing meanwhile. He took me to have a cup of coffee and to meet his wife, Evelyn, at their small house adjoining the museum.

In the following years, I saw John often. He was putting the monument in fine shape, arranging the museum's artifacts in display cases, taking visitors to the nearby ruins of the prehistoric Kuaua Pueblo, and explaining the meaning of the painted murals in the ancient kiva. Oc-

asionally he built a big fire in front of the portal, around which Indians and visitors alike sat, listening to him talk.

John was well read in history and anthropology. Before coming to Coronado State Monument, he had worked for three and one-half years as a research assistant at the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe and then another two and one-half years as curator of the Lincoln County Museum, housed in the historic courthouse from which Billy the Kid had made his famous escape after killing his guards. Yet John was far from being a stodgy academic still looked like a cowboy under that old, battered Stetson.

On a summer Sunday, a group of us would have a picnic lunch on a make-do table overlooking the Rio Grande flowing in front of the monument and overlooked by the Sandia Mountains to the east. Every day there were Indians around from nearby Santa Ana and Zia pueblos crowding the museum and the little house. The Zia women loved John and Evelyn, often bringing them beautiful pottery bowls.

John's favorite pueblo, and mine, was Santa Ana, which is on a high bank of the river across from the monument. Years ago, the people had been moved out, because of the danger of flooding, to new homes near Bernalillo. But they still maintained the pueblo, returning to occupy their apartments twice a year: on midsummer Santa Ana Day, July 26, and on Christmas. We went there each year, both times, to watch the gorgeous tribal dances in the sandy plaza.

Our hosts and lifelong friends were Valencio Garcia, a religious leader, and his family. His house was always open to us, providing cool relief from the baking summer heat, or warmth from the freezing cold outside. The meals served to us were traditionally Indian. Homegrown food of every kind covered the long table. We would bring boxes of store-bought groceries to sweeten the larder, always including a pink-iced cake and chocolate cookies for Valencio's old, blind mother.

Evelyn was a slightly built woman about forty years old. When John met her, she was working as a researcher in the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe. She and John saw each other frequently until Evelyn left to teach art in high schools in various towns in Texas and Illinois. At Champaign, she did research for the dean of the fine arts department at the University of Illinois. During this period, they corresponded,

Evelyn writing one day that she was returning to New Mexico. John met her when she arrived by train in Albuquerque. An Indian friend drove them home to John's small house at the monument. They were married in Santa Fe in 1947, just three years before I met them both.

Evelyn fitted in at once. She loved the Zia Indians and wanted to know the Santa Anas as well. After a while, she continued teaching art in Indian schools like the one in Acomita, just below the cliffs on which perched ancient Acoma Pueblo. Also, she began to paint oil landscapes of her own and was quite accomplished with a brush.

How little we ever know about each other! So it was with John and me. He never talked about himself, and I didn't pry. The few facts he occasionally mentioned raised questions in my mind about a number of apparent contradictions in his life and his many personal idiosyncrasies. Why did his wealthy and aristocratic Scottish family exclude him from its fortune? How did the son of a Scottish sea captain, who had sailed clipper ships around the Horn into the South Pacific, come to punch cows on the arid plains of New Mexico?

He didn't hold to the cowboy ways even after being one for fourteen years. John didn't like to be crowded by people and liked mountains only at a distance. After he had quit working as a full-time cowboy, he rode the chuck line from one ranch to another, working for a few days and then leaving for his log cabin on the north slope of the Capitan Mountains. He rented the cabin and its 160-acre fenced pasture for five dollars a month. For supplies, he rode with his pack horses to Capitan. Back in his cabin, he was never lonesome. There was time to think of the country he wanted to write about.

In him was a wide streak of Thoreau's austerity and simplicity. John didn't smoke and seldom drank when he did, it was Scotch, of course. He had not known Indians until he came to the Coronado State Monument. Did his immediate empathy with them stem from his recognition of their own love of the land? From their simplistic, earthy ways? Surely John was an unusual, complex character whom no one really knew. A man who seldom joked but who had written three novels that carried his own indelible brand of high humor.

They tell us much about him. The first one he wrote in the early 1940s while working and living in the Lincoln County Museum. Here,

at night, hearing the sounds made by Billy the Kid's ghost, John finally wrote of the people he had known so well as a cowboy riding the range. They were of Appalachian-Ozarkian stock, people who had settled in Oklahoma and then straggled into southeastern New Mexico as nesters and homesteaders. John admired them for their courage, honesty, and earthy humor. And in his first novel, *In Time of Harvest*, he portrays their lives through the dirt-poor McClung family.

Ma and Pa McClung and their five bedraggled children put up a one-room shack on the barren plains and plant beans. It is hard work uprooting grass and weeds, turning the soil with handmade tools. The backbreaking toil becomes too much for some of the children. Tewp throws down his hoe and runs off to a ranch to become a free-riding cowboy. He is caught helping Scatterwhiskers steal a Hereford cow and is sent to the state prison for five years. Roddy, another son, skips out when he learns he has made a neighbor girl pregnant. He becomes a railroad tramp. And Sudie becomes a prostitute, wandering from town to town, sitting in drab hotel rooms, thinking of the bean field at home. But Pa and Ma persist. The rows of bean plants keep getting longer, and Pa looks at them with pride. "What more can a man want!" And there are always beans on the McClung table, if nothing else bean soup, bean salad, beans boiled, fried, baked, and mashed.

There is pathos here, but viewed with compassionate understanding, written with irresistible humor. The characters are sharply drawn; their vernacular so faultlessly rendered it seems unbelievable that a Scottish ear could have been attuned to it.

Estancia Valley, the central New Mexican setting for this classic novel, was, in the 1920s and 1930s, the producing center for our most cherished fruit of the soil, the pinto bean, and *In Time of Harvest* is its literary monument. It was published in 1943, and for its 1971 reissue I wrote the introduction, recounting the novel's instant and countrywide critical acclaim as "mountain music turned prose and put between bean rows," as the *Chicago Tribune* said in its review. At home in Santa Fe, the perceptive Saul Cohen judged it one of the ten best novels about New Mexico.

Some years later, John followed it with two more novels about the same kind of nesters. The second, *Death in the Claimshack* (1947),

tolls the bell on a serious scene converted into a jovial gathering. The title of the third novel, *Cousin Drewey and the Holy Twister* (1981), itself warns us it's a tall tale of rollicking humor. What a cast of characters! Cousin Drewey, from the Ouachita (pronounced Washtaw) Mountains of Oklahoma, is visiting his kinfolk until a holy twister, a he-man cyclone, comes to carry him back to the Washtaws. And among his neighbors are Fats Recknagel, a no-good millionaire rancher, the mail-order lawyer, Shyster Sam Hawkins, a baby-kissing sheriff, Old Man Puckerdo Kazort, and a bunch of bootleggers operating out of Blaylock's Funeral Parlor. Anything can happen with such an assortment, and everything does. All are caricatures, if you will, of solemn citizens in our communities today. Neither of these last two novels ranks with *In Time of Harvest*, but all three are integrated in a unified narrative which has the curious quality of the folklore of a little-known people that has never been equaled in fiction.

"I love to write fiction," said John. "I never outline a story in advance. Just give rein to my imagination and let it take me wherever it goes.

But novels seldom make much money. John began to turn out some two hundred short stories and magazine articles on the topics he knew so well: ghost towns, old mines, historic places, interesting people.

A long break interrupted our friendship. I worked in a Hollywood movie studio. Following my own deep interest in Indians, I went to Mexico and Guatemala on a Rockefeller Foundation research grant to study Aztec and Mayan life and religion. Later, I lived among the Hopi Indians in Arizona, doing research for a comprehensive book on their creation myths and their esoteric religious ceremonials. When I finally returned to live in my own home in Taos, I drove down to resume my friendship with John.

In 1962, he retired after serving eighteen years as curator of the Coronado State Monument. For a while, he and Evelyn lived in southern New Mexico near the Mexican border. Constant sand and dust storms blew them back to the spot they had loved so long. Here, they found and rented from the Santa Ana Pueblo a small, one-room house on a dirt road a few miles northwest of the monument. It became the home John still lives in today.

Aye de mi! How quickly the years slide by! Every writer has his ups and downs, and John has had his. He has received the Golden Spur award from the Western Writers of America, two Wrangler awards from the Cowboy Hall of Fame, and the one he values most, an Honorary Life Membership in the Cowboy Hall of Fame. The downs he has experienced have resulted from Evelyn's failing health and his decreased income. My wife and I see them infrequently, but John telephones me regularly. Without a car, they depend upon friends in Bernalillo to bring them mail and supplies. Evelyn no longer teaches and now lives in a nursing home. John hasn't changed much in appearance, but time has taken its toll on his eyesight and legs. Using a wheelchair, he seldom goes out, and reading glasses are always kept at the typewriter. For he is still writing with a creative urge, strong as ever. There is so much to write about in the form of long stories and more novels! This, then, is a short sketch of John L. Sinclair as I have known him. A myopic view of a grassroots writer of composite character whose life has spanned horizons beyond my reach. His recollections in these following pages bring it into full focus they answer all the questions about himself that I didn't ask him, in details his readers will find as exciting as any novel.

This is a book to be happily read and long remembered.

FRANK WATERS
TUCSON, ARIZONA
FEBRUARY 1990

My First Years

I was born in New York City, where my father represented the Bucknall Steamship Company, a British line. A lot of the Bucknall trade was with New York, and my father was Marine Superintendent, or port captain, of all the Bucknall routes into New York, although each Bucknall ship had its own captain for its voyages. His job was a very important one, and his position in New York allowed him to have an office in the Maritime Exchange. The Maritime Exchange was on Manhattan Island. From it developed what was called the Bush Terminal down on the harbor in Brooklyn. The Bush Terminal was a tremendous warehouse that contained all the offices and storage areas of the steamship companies that traded out of New York, and in front of it was a great line of piers for all the ships, which would sail to the most exotic places of the Orient, the Mediterranean, and Africa—Calcutta, Bombay, Cairo, Tangier. These were not luxury liners like those of the Cunard Line that ran back and forth between New York and Southampton like ferryboats. These were the "real ships when ships were ships and not tin cans," as the old sailors used to say of the old wooden ships that my father, a former ship commander, had once sailed.

My father's name was John Leslie Sinclair—the same as mine—the "Leslie" coming from the Scottish clan name of my grandmother. My mother, whose maiden name was Gertrude Corbin, was Irish. Her family name in Ireland had been *Coban*, a word derived from the Gaelic name *Cobhan*, which means "people who live in the harbor." When my mother's father came to America from Ireland, he wanted to be so American that he changed his name to Corbin. My father was in his late thirties when he married my mother around the turn of the century, and she was little more than half his age. I was born December 6, 1902.

We lived in Prospect Park West, a very exclusive part of Brooklyn close to the Bush Terminal and facing Prospect Park. It was a beautiful



John Leslie Sinclair, 1902.

place, with stately houses and mansions. I can just remember my earliest days there.

I can't remember going to school in New York. I don't think I did; I guess they didn't have the strict laws they do now. But I seemed to pick up things at an early age. Mother used to get me books to read, and she taught me arithmetic and other essentials.



Gertrude Corbin Sinclair, circa 1904.

What I recall most vividly of my early childhood is being carried down to the ships by my mother to the Bucknall ships and those of the other lines. I didn't have anything to do with other boys or girls at that time. I just felt a strong bond with the ships docked at the piers. I especially remember the Bucknall boats, which had an insignia of nine diamonds around their funnels.