

# The Southerner

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*Special Issue 1999 -A Magazine Online- Vol.1, No.3*

## A TRIBUTE TO WILLIE MORRIS

1935



1999

Linton Weeks • Willie Morris  
Larry L. King • Will Norton  
Curtis Wilkie • Wayne Greenhaw  
Jack Bales • Rick Bragg  
Fred Brown & Jeanne McDonald  
Gay Talese • William Styron

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Willie Morris

# The Southerner

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## Editor's Note

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By Glynn Wilson



Willie Morris holds a special place in the history of Southern writing and American writing. That goes for journalism, essays and literature. In this issue you will hear how he also played a crucial role as an editor in the careers of great writers like Norman Mailer, William Styron and Gay Talese.

Because *The Southerner* also lays claim to a special place in the history of publishing in the American South — as the first online magazine to embrace the full gamut of Southern journalism and literature — we felt a certain responsibility to produce this special issue in tribute to Willie Morris. It came as something of a shock to hear of his untimely death from heart failure at his home in Oxford, Miss. on August 2, since we had hoped to interview him, or perhaps even persuade him to write something for us. It was not to be.

His death was written about in all the great remaining newspapers on the American landscape, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe*, as well as many not-so-great newspapers across the South. Many of the best writers alive today had great things to say about Willie Morris, so we wanted as many of them as possible to tell their stories through us, verbally or in writing. Most were gracious enough to tell us what Willie Morris meant to them and to the literature of the American South. Only author David Halberstam, among those who knew Willie best, declined, pleading: “I’m just too behind on my own stuff.”

In the pages that follow, you will read stories from Linton Weeks of *The Washington Post*, who was editor of *Southern Magazine* in the late 1980s; Winston Groom, of Forrest Gump fame; Fred Brown of the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*; and Curtis Wilkie, who just retired to Louisiana from the *Boston Globe*. His first e-mail message ever was the piece he sent to me on Willie Morris, which goes down as one of the joys of putting a project like this together. For as I was recently quoted in Knoxville’s alternative weekly *Metropulse*, I think this technology is so liberating and so impressive that everybody ought to be getting involved with it.

You will also read stories from the likes of Larry L. King, one of the regulars at Willie’s *Harper’s* magazine in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as such Morris friends as Wayne Greenhaw, Jack Bales and Billy Field. One of the most special stories came from Will Norton, dean of the journalism school at the University of Nebraska. Norton, who headed the Ole Miss journalism department and helped get Morris a position as writer-in-residence there in 1980, tells how Morris was not only a great writer and editor, but also a great teacher who loved helping students.

The main themes that emerge about Willie Morris in these pages are that he was a great writer and editor, a great helper of other writers, and an infamous practical joker, who had his quirks. Another recurring theme is that in spite of the homogenization of American culture in the age of interstate and Internet highways and television, there is still a distinct American South. This emerges in contributions by Linton Weeks, Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald; in the flavor of every piece; and in the words of Willie Morris himself.

We hope you will enjoy this compilation of stories about Willie Morris and the American South, and come back often to our magazine online. We are sure to have missed contacting some important people in the life and times of Willie Morris. For that we apologize. There's always the Reader Forum section for those who want to write us at mail@southerner.net.

For example, I tried to track down Marshall Frady in Sherman Oaks, Calif. as Halberstam suggested, to no avail. I wrote Norman Mailer a letter to Provincetown, Mass., no street address or PO box necessary as William Styron suggested, not expecting a response from the Dean of American writing who has a reputation for NOT granting interviews. At the last minute as we were working on the finishing touches of this issue, his assistant Judith McNally called and read me the following statement: "Willie Morris was the bravest magazine editor I ever worked with." That is the kind of label we at *The Southerner* strive for.

I would like to send a special thanks to JoAnne Prichard Morris, Willie's widow, for permission to run a piece from the defunct *Southern Magazine*.

I also asked Gay Talese and William Styron to tell me what Willie Morris meant to them, as a friend, a colleague and as an editor at important moments in their careers. The following links take you to what they said. Notice that there is a difference of opinion between the two on the contribution of Willie Morris.

Surely this will inspire comment for future issues of *The Southerner*. We're only an e-mail away.



– GW

<p>The <a href="http://www.southerner.net">www.southerner.net</a> <b>Southerner</b> - A Magazine Online -</p>	A black and white portrait of Willie Morris, looking slightly to the left.	<p><b>Read the Willie Morris Tribute In Online Newsstands now Help Us Out With an Editorial Endowment To support great writing</b></p> 
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A photograph showing a group of people sitting around a table, possibly in a restaurant or cafe.	<p><b>The Southerner</b> <b>Thinking Differently. Using Mac.</b></p>	A stylized, abstract face logo with a blue background and white lines.
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<p><b>MUSEKA</b></p>
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## Does the South Still Exist?

By Linton Weeks

Willie Morris had heard I wanted to write for a living. His first words to me: “If there’s ever anything I can do for you, let me know.”

Hollow vow, usually. But not in Willie’s case. He was true to his word.

One night in the mid-1980s several of us — including my friend Alan Leveritt — piled into



a car and headed for Oxford, Miss., to hold him to his promise. We stopped at a small liquor store and bought a big old bottle of Valpolicella. Over dinner, we told Willie what we had in mind. We wanted to start a publication called *Southern Magazine*, a monthly exploration of the region’s complexities.

Willie said he’d be delighted to help us. He reached for the sack the bottle was in and enthusiastically began to sketch out ideas before our very eyes. “Does the South still exist?” he asked in his soft, mellifluous, rhetorical way.

“That’s what your first issue should be about: Is there still a South?”

On the brown paper bag he jotted down names of writers we should enlist, good friends of his, folks who would help us wrestle with the notion. The list was a Who’s Who of contemporary Southern literature. Alan, who became publisher of *Southern Magazine*, still has that sack somewhere.

“Does the South still exist?” Willie, who knew a lot about magazines and a lot more about the South, opened up his mind and his heart that night.

“He was one of the kindest, sweetest, gentlest guys I’ve ever known,” said Charles Henry, who works in the insurance business in Oxford and was a good friend of Willie’s for years. “Mississippi has lost probably its best ambassador.”

“He had one of the biggest hearts,” said Sid Graves, founder of the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Miss. Graves knew and admired Willie for years. Paraphrasing Tennessee Williams, he said that Willie’s heart “was as big as a football.”

“He had an extraordinarily keen mind for literature and ideas. I liked to hear him talk about football,” recalled Sterling Plumpp, a Chicago poet and professor originally from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. “There was a kind of generosity in Willie Morris that I liked.”

“I was always struck,” said William Ferris, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and former head of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, “by his devotion to friends. His relationships with writers like William Styron, James Dickey, Ralph Ellison and Robert Penn Warren were deep and significant friendships.

Many of these writers came to Oxford to honor Willie.”

Willie honored Oxford by moving there in 1980 to become writer in residence at the University of Mississippi. Born in Jackson in 1934, he grew up in Yazoo City (pop. 7,000), a place he immortalized in several of his books, including *Yazoo* and *North Toward Home*. He gloried in small-town life — baseball games, dogs, playing taps for military funerals. He went to the University of Texas on a baseball scholarship and was editor of the campus newspaper, then attended the other Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. He married Celia Buchan from Houston. They had a son, David Rae, in England. Under Britain’s health plan, Willie told his friends, his son’s birth cost him 87 cents. The couple eventually divorced.

In Europe, Willie traveled with fellow Rhodes scholar Edwin Yoder. Yoder, who lives in Alexandria, Va., recalled their many escapades, including the time Willie, on a lark, dangled from the bridge at Avignon.

After England, Willie returned to Austin as editor of the *Texas Observer*. Playwright Larry L. King met Willie at the *Observer* and they became lifelong buds. In fact, almost everyone who met Willie became a friend for life. “I never knew Willie to do anybody harm or to want to,” King said. “He was a helpful fellow to writers. That’s unusual in this business.”

In 1963, Willie went to work for *Harper’s Magazine*; he was named editor in 1967. He called New York City “the Cave.” It was, he said, America’s cultural capital. He opened the magazine up to new writers and longer pieces, said David Halberstam, a contributor to the magazine. Halberstam’s profile of McGeorge Bundy in *Harper’s* became the seed of *The Best and the Brightest*.

Willie had a mischievous mind. When Halberstam’s book was near the top of the bestseller list, he received a phone call one day from a man who said he had written a diet guide that was also very high on the list. “Perhaps we could collaborate on a book that would have stunning success,” the man said to Halberstam, who realized about this time that the caller was Willie. “We could call it ‘The Best and the Fattest.’”

“Willie had the lowest index of malice of anybody I ever met,” Halberstam said. “That probably worked against him as he got up higher in the world of publishing.”

He added: “He was not a great infighter. I don’t think he was great at protecting his flank. There was part of him that was like a little boy.” He resigned from *Harper’s* in 1971.

In 1976, Willie spent some time in Washington, D.C., as writer in residence at the *Washington Star*.

Though he continued to write for a few years in Bridgehampton, N.Y., and loiter with the literati — James Jones, Truman Capote, Irwin Shaw — he longed to see cotton fields instead of potato fields and strawberry patches. In 1980, he moved back to Mississippi for good. He chose Oxford, a college town with a palpable literary history. In Mississippi, he wrote, he found “the sanctuary of my innocence.” He was far from the madding Manhattan crowd.

One of his best friends in Oxford was Dean Faulkner Wells, the niece of William Faulkner, another Oxford favorite son. The morning after Willie died, Dean and her husband, Larry Wells, were sitting at their kitchen table, grieving over the loss of their longtime friend and turning to Willie’s writing and other literature for solace. “Larry and I were looking for the words Willie loved the most,” Dean said, fighting back tears. They read the poetry of Wallace Stevens and A.E. Housman.

“He really took care of the people he loved,” she said.

Oxford, circa 1980, was an exciting swirl of literary activity. Ferris established the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. Richard and Lisa Howorth opened their legendary bookstore, Square Books. Larry and Dean Wells owned Yoknapatawpha Press, which published

Willie's books and reprinted some of Faulkner's.

"It was a great time," Larry Wells recalled. "Willie always said, 'I came home and it was not too late.'"

In Mississippi, Willie gave guidance to young writers in the classroom and out.

"He was very accessible to his students, night and day. He'd sit up all hours and talk philosophy and writing," Wells recalled.

And Willie wrote new books, including *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, about an outstanding football player; *My Dog Skip*, which was made into a movie; *Terrains of the Heart*, a collection of essays; and a number of handsome art books including *Homecomings*, a collaboration with Mississippi painter Bill Dunlap (who now lives in McLean, Va.).

Dunlap remembered all that Willie meant to him and other expatriate Southerners. "He took a bridge out of Mississippi," Dunlap said, "then he took that bridge and came back."

To celebrate the publication of *Homecomings*, Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) threw a big bash on Capitol Hill for Willie and Dunlap in the late 1980s. The painter stood and said a few words of thanks. As for Willie, he climbed up on a table and announced to the world that he was by-God marrying the book's editor, JoAnne Prichard.

It was JoAnne who answered his cry when he collapsed Aug. 2 at his writing table at their home in Jackson. He died in the evening of heart failure.

So, does the South still exist? True to his word, again, in the first issue of *Southern Magazine*, which appeared in October 1986, Willie Morris addressed head-on the question he raised along with a glass of red wine on that long, heady night in Oxford. In the answering, he also spoke of the way he chose to live his own life.

"One has to seek the answer on one's own terms, of course, but to do that I suggest one should spurn the boardrooms and the country clubs and the countless college seminars on the subject and spend a little time at the ball games and the funerals and the bus stations and the courthouses and the bargain-rate beauty parlors and the little churches and the road-houses and the joints near closing hour. . . .

"Perhaps in the end it is the old devil-may-care instinct of the South that remains in the most abundance and will sustain the South in its uncertain future," he wrote. "It is gambling with the heart. It is a glass menagerie. It is something that won't let go."



[Linton Weeks is a staff writer for the Style section of *The Washington Post*, where another version of this appreciation first appeared].

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# Is There A South Anymore?

By Willie Morris

[**Editor's Note:** Some of the economic figures in this article may not be completely accurate, since it was written in 1986 and first published in the premiere issue of *Southern Magazine*, October 1986].

Not too long ago I got a letter from a friend, a fellow of early middle age from the Deep South who had dwelled in the North for many years and had recently returned to live in a big overgrown city of Dixie. Since I had also left and returned, my friend posed a few questions to me that had obviously been bothering him, as if he had made the wrong decision about his own repatriation or, worse, had responded to his spiritual reckoning without regard, as the lawyers say, to the true facts of things.

"I wonder if the South as we once knew it still exists – if there is a South anymore," he said. "This is a question I've been getting from friends of mine. I think that's new. I don't know what the reason is æ maybe those media creations called Sunbelt and the New South &#0151; but I sense that people here are feeling more a part of the wider world than ever before. They profess to feel less a part of that old concept you and I know as 'The South.' "

I could not deny his observations. Once the albatross of race, in its more suffocating aspects, was removed, Southerners became free as never before to feel part of the broader civilization, and that is good. The American South, after all, is merely one region among many on the Lord's Earth as it swirls out at the edge of the universe, sharing immutably in the fears and terrors that haunt the human race. But that change is hard for some of us to appreciate.

"I, too, have been asking myself questions," my friend continued. "Is the idea of 'The South' felt by anyone besides writers and other people who spend too much time thinking about themselves? Is it nothing more than personal nostalgia codified? Are Virginians and Mississippians connected by anything other than the fact that their ancestors lost a war together? What is innately Southern anymore?"

And his concluding observation, which caused me at least one long and sleepless night: "Do you wish you could escape it again?"

There is much of the South, I unhesitatingly confess to him, that I wish I could escape forever. I wish I could escape the smoldering malevolence behind a coed's prolonged racial tirade among students at my house one recent evening. Escape the tenacious righteousness of the "seg academies." Escape the images of the catastrophic destruction, physical and communal, of places like my beloved Austin in Texas. Escape every manifestation of institutionalized, right-wing, fundamentalist religion, richer and more pervasive than it ever was. Escape the ennui of the morgue-like Sundays. Escape the fruitless spleen and irrelevant innuendo of the intellectual discourse.

To escape the South, however æ all of what it was and is æ I would have to escape from



Willie Morris from  
*North Toward Home*

myself.

ONE OF THE central themes in our history as Americans, reflected in our most enduring literature, has been the conflict between country and city, the dichotomy between village and metropolis, with all that that embraces. With the homogeneity engendered by the great television culture, and the growing power of the mighty urban nexus, that gulf remains a profound one.

Nowhere is this more emphatic than in the contemporary South, in which raw old towns have become cities in less than our lifetime, and the countryside and the villages are portrayed as languishing near death. Modern forces seem to have conspired against the small-town South of our memory, just as they have nowadays against the rural Midwest.

There is a price to be paid for that, and it may be entirely more than was bargained for. Big cities are big cities anywhere, and it is the large burgeoning cities of the South that becloud the more pristine consideration of roots, remembrance, and belonging. Does the South any longer exist? I have heard the plaintive cry time without number from the denizens of such cities as Atlanta, Memphis, Birmingham, and Houston, but I think not once in more than five years have I heard it from anyone living in Southern towns, or in their encompassing countryside.

Ironically, the horrendous exodus of Southerners of both races to the cities of the North has been reversed at a time when the rural South is in its bleakest stagnation æ so much so that an artist of my acquaintance is doing paintings of dying Mississippi villages so future generations will know how they looked. Jobs are increasing twice as fast in the urban areas of the South as in small towns. In Georgia, three-fourths of all new employment since 1980 has been in the Atlanta region alone. The same is true in Arkansas, where, in the midst of rural depression, Little Rock's per capita income is above the national average and unemployment is below it. But in the rural South, joblessness is now 37 percent above the American norm.

The decline in the economy is especially difficult, things always are, on the blacks. Those places in the South experiencing the most rapid growth are those whose workers are the best educated. The rural South has always been the least educated region in America. Illiteracy remains common, and only one-fourth of the population 25 or older has high school diplomas. Yet in Mississippi, for example, after sharp decreases in the state budget under a governor who adamantly opposes tax increases of any kind, the eight state universities are eliminating doctoral programs and ordering layoffs as well as reductions and freezes in salaries. Alcorn State University, a black institution, has suffered a 28 percent decrease in its budget. "Hope is not all we need," Faulkner wrote. "It's all we got." I daresay no other region in the United States can still say that with impunity.

I am reminded of a recent conversation I had with an acquaintance of mine, a native of the Midwest, who runs the Atlanta bureau of one of the nation's largest newspapers. He had been doing a story out in the Mississippi Delta, where time has stood still, and he had been touched by the patina of this old, inward South. The Delta had bewildered and intrigued him, for it has always frightened and titillated the outsider.

"It's the other extreme from Atlanta," he said. "Southerners hate to be strangers to each other. That's why Atlanta is so traumatic for Southerners to visit. Southerners like to see you and say, 'Hi, how are you?' And the Yankees in Atlanta just don't respond to that. As for native Atlantans, there's a city they remember that no longer really exists. But they still see it as if it were there æ the gracious cotillions, the old Rich's department store, the old Peachtree Street, the Buckhead Boys." He remembered what one old Atlantan had said to him: "Maybe my city

is only the way I remember it in my mind.”

Yet is it not similarly true that the great Southern cities of the 1980s are like the artistic effect called *pentimento*? To quote Lillian Hellman, who wrote a wonderful book by that name, “Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see original lines: A tree will show through a woman’s dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea.” So beneath the palpable new “sophistication” of these contemporary Southern cities, can one not find the Conroes, Lake Villages, Belzonis, Mebanes, Humboldts, Valdostas, Eufalas, Guthries, Bastrops, and Farmvilles? Nostalgia is not what it used to be, it has been remarked, yet nostalgia is mere saccharin to the Southerner’s power of memory æ for memory is everything.

WALKER PERCY ONCE wrote that at a certain point in his life a man draws strength from living in some authentic relationship with the principal events of his past. I have often pondered what it was that brought me back to stay. I am forever drawn to the textures, the echoes, the way things look and feel, the bittersweet tug of certain phrases: “We crossed the river at Natchez.” The South is a blend of the relentless and the abiding for me, and an accumulation of ironies so acute and impenetrable that my vagabond heart palpitates to make sense of them.

There is indisputably something in the shared topography. But to find it, one must get off the Interstate at every chance, as I always do, and as I did on the early day of homecoming into the Delta. It was a bitterly cold forenoon of January, so cold that huge shards of ice were in the rivers and creeks, and under the somber skies in the seared fields the vacated tenant shacks were ghostly and bereft. There was a black funeral in the graveyard near the road. Amid the homemade tombstones with misspelled inscriptions, the pallbearers were struggling to carry the cheap pine coffin up an incline, and three little children stood crying under a water oak.

Farther on, in a sudden wintry wind, was the little all-black village of Falcon with its brand new water tower, black kids with socks on their hands shooting baskets, and lean-to vistas.

Then the main street of Alligator with its boarded-up storefronts æ had everyone migrated to Greenville or Indianola? Out from town the cotton stubble was gray and frozen, and I knew with the springtime these fields would be worked by the enormous new tractors with air conditioners and stereos in their cabins. I made a side tour to Drew to visit a friend, but she had been out in the swamps most of the night killing bullfrogs with a .22 pistol for a frog-fry and had remained at her girlfriend’s house in the country. Now past the big white houses surrounded by pecans and magnolias with croquet lawns, tennis courts, swimming pools, and a couple of Mercedes and pick-up trucks under the porticoes. South out of the Delta to Raymond, my familial village, founded by my people, suffused with evanescent rustlings for me &#0151; the crumbling cemetery, the railroad bridge on which my grandfather proposed to my grandmother in 1897, my great-grandparents’ house, which ran red with blood when my great-grandmother nursed the wounded of both sides and took down a letter from a dying Illinois boy to his mother and saw that it got through the lines. Then back into America again on Interstate 20 West. At twilight in the bar overlooking the river in Vicksburg a man from Iowa asked me, “Say, wasn’t there some kind of battle here?”

I am afraid that I can answer my original correspondent only elliptically, if indeed at all. At the risk of all generalizations of the spirit, and of incurring the displeasure of some among my fellow Americans, indulge me in this brief catalog &#0151; a few of the qualities that, in my

own, most personal view, still make the South different, or at the least are more characteristic of the South than of other regions. I have been looking around these past years, have kept an eye cocked for the abiding nuance, and if I am wrong, I am not too wrong.

- A heightened sense of community, of mutuality. To this day, when Southerners get together, no matter where, be it Richmond, Washington, New York or London, they do not wish merely to exchange pleasantries or casual information. Listen to them. They are seeking background on families, relatives, friends, events, landmarks, memories. They know somebody who knows somebody. Things are going on at different levels in this sly, subtle premonition of kindredship.

- Manners. They are more carefully, almost cunningly, plotted and handed down, a gentle and genteel response to the complexities of life, an improvisation, a way of keeping the sudden and unexpected and threatening at bay, of coping with pain and the uncharted.

- Ritual. Southerners remain more ritualistic than most other Americans. It is a ritualism that springs from old rhythms and cadences and from the earth, or from one's memory of the earth æ funerals, marriages, baptisms, betrothals, friendships, loyalties, rivalries. They like football in this country, but in the South even football is a folk ritual touching on religiosity, and Saturday is a holy day.

- A stronger feeling of morality. Not the morality of the Falwells and the Helmses, but an inherited incentive that says you are your brother's keeper, that you must try and take care of one another, that you must share a comforting mutual security. And with this comes a crafty and artful sense of sin that in my lifetime has not noticeably softened. Fundamentalism still makes sinning more forbidden, and hence more pleasurable. The liquor signs at the precise county lines of wet precincts are as ubiquitous as ever, as if Satan himself is beckoning the wanderer.

- Whites and blacks trying to live together within a common history. Although many of the changes in the lives of black Southerners have been cosmetic ones, and they remain on the day-to-day level the most impoverished Americans, something meaningful is happening here. Who could have predicted a generation ago, when the Civil Rights Movement was at its crest, that the integration of the public schools would someday work best in the small- to middle-size cities in the South? It is the world of proms and cheerleading and classrooms and ballgames. A black Ole Miss football player, dying of Leukemia, asks to be buried in his letter-sweater. A white and black homecoming court stands at attention to the strains of a high school alma mater. A white high school boy named Jaybird in the town where I live has his mother make him cornbread every day so his jump-shots will be as effective as those of his black teammates. The teammates æ Topcat, Toady, and Weasel æ come to his house to do homework and to eat the cornbread, too.

- Finally, continuity. I passionately believe that there is an ineluctable continuity to Southern experience that still exists; I see it everywhere. It is a matter of the stories passed along, of the music and the speech, of knowing who lives in such-and-such house and who lived there

before, and where the wisteria grows best and the robin eats her first crocus. “If you have one distinguishing ancestor,” Barry Hannah says, “Southerners will never forget it, and you won’t either.” A white father I know wants his son to go north to college, but in his secret heart hopes he will come home someday. A black mayor of a small Mississippi town remembers standing by the roadside as a child, her grandmother waving down a Greyhound to take them north: “And that highway still looks pretty much the same. It was such a thrill because that bus just came out of nowhere, and when you got on it you knew you were going someplace. But now when I go someplace far away, and I’m headed back, I see that road and it looks like home.”

DOES THE SOUTH exist any longer? One has to seek the answer on one’s own terms, of course, but to do that, I suggest, one should spurn the boardrooms and the country clubs and the countless college seminars on the subject and spend a little time at the ball games and the funerals and the bus stations and the courthouses and the bargain-rate beauty parlors and the little churches and the roadhouses and the joints near the closing hour.

I did not judge the South remotely dead in a roadhouse near Vicksburg on a recent Saturday of the full moon. The parking lot was filled with pick-up trucks. That afternoon, only a mile beyond the hill, they had put 20,000 miniature American flags on the Union dead in the battlefield for Memorial Day, and the bar talk was vivid on this and other things. Dozens of couples in all modes of dress gyrated on the dance floor to Willie Nelson tunes, and the unprepossessing interior echoed with wild greetings and indigenous hosannas. There was a pride in this place that I knew in my ancestral soul, a pride not to be unduly tampered with, and if you had had the mettle to ask one of those people if the South still existed on that night, he would have stared you up and down and replied: “Who you, boy?”

I know a black South African student whom the Soviets courted at the University of Moscow before he decided to take a fellowship here. I enjoy watching the South through his eyes. “When I first came, I was afraid I’d made a big mistake,” he says. “But the South grows on you. It seems so removed, but it’s vividly real. I’ll miss it when I go home. I don’t understand why your national media wants a uniform U.S.A.”

Nor, for that matter, do I. But I can testify to the hostility and ambivalence toward the South that still exists in many areas of the nation. Is it the lingering fear of differentness? I testify also to my own self-ironies, for when I dwelled in the North I felt more Southern than I ever had before; back home again to stay, I feel more American.

Perhaps in the end it is the old, inherent, devil-may-care instinct of the South that remains in the most abundance and will sustain the South in its uncertain future. The reckless gambler’s instinct that fought and lost that war. Snake Stabler calling a bootleg play on fourth down, a Texas wildcatter putting his stakes on the one big strike, a black mother working 16 hours a day to educate her children, a genteel matron borrowing from the banker to send her daughter to a university sorority so she can marry well. It is gambling with the heart, it is a glass menagerie, it is something that won’t let go.



<p>The <a href="http://www.southerner.net">www.southerner.net</a> <b>Southerner</b> - A Magazine Online -</p>		<p><b>Read the Willie Morris Tribute In Online Newsstands now Help Us Out With an Editorial Endowment To support great writing</b></p>	
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# The Southerner

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## Growing Up Southern: Willie Morris

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By Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald

Illustrated by  
Christopher Bookout

“My town is the place which shaped me into the creature I am now.”

Willie Morris never really left the South. Forget for the moment that he became a big-league New York magazine editor, or that he mingled metaphors with galactic intellectuals of Oxford, England. Forget that he has befriended and promoted some of the nation’s foremost thinkers and writers. Willie Morris, that good ol’ boy from Mississippi who writes about his native state with tender prosody and vivid imagery, is the quintessential Southern writer. A dyed-in-the-delta Mississippi product, Morris confesses now that he felt like an exile during his New York years. And although he matured to middle age in the East, he eventually decided that a man had best be going back to where his strongest feelings lay.

Willie Morris grew up in the shadow of Faulkner, whose ghost still hovers over Dixie’s literary landscape, the undisputed maven of Southern writing. He understands Faulkner’s Mississippi, has lived among the prototypes of Faulkner’s characters, has for the most of his life heard the languid language of Faulkner’s literary voices. Though Morris’ own writing is more direct and less symbolic, the same aura is there, the same elliptical eloquence that characterizes the best of Southern prose. He has come a long way from the upstart University of Texas freshman who, in an autobiographical essay assigned by his professor, wrote this sentence: “My dog Skip and I wandered the woods and swampland of our Mississippi home shooting

*When one grew up in a place where more specific exercises in intellection -like reading books - were not accepted, one had to work his imagination out on something.*

– Willie Morris

ing rabbits and squirrels.” In reply to which his professor penned the following comment: “Who was the better shot, you or the dog?”

Morris can laugh now about this event, which stung him sorely when it happened, though today he realizes that criticism is a

vital part of education and that writers in particular are especially susceptible to criticism long after they have proved their worth.

Morris’ *New York Days* (1993) elicited a stream of criticism (and praise), most of the criticism from people at *Harper’s* who remembered the rapid rise and fall of the magazine differently than he did.

But Willie Morris has a phenomenal memory for details. Events from his childhood are etched on his mind as surely as the inscriptions on those tombstones in the Yazoo cemetery he roamed as a boy.

Willie Morris is both homefolks and kinfoolks. When he writes about himself, he is writing about the South; and when he writes about the South, he is writing not only about himself, but also about the heart and soul of the region he reveres and understands so well.

Born Nov. 29, 1934, in Jackson, Miss., Morris is as much a part of his native land as the stories he has written. Remove the man, and the stories fall apart. Remove the stories, and the man disappears. Having grown up in the newly reconstructed South, Willie Morris has writ-

ten better than most about just what that means and what responsibilities it brings. The South is not easy turf, intellectually or physically. Its landscape, littered with the ghosts of literary giants, demands a standard of excellence based on the past performance of old, dead masters. Perhaps this phenomenon is responsible for the term Southern writer, an expression that some authors still find derogatory. Morris believes that the South does not have a lock on good writers. It just happens to have had a “gracious plenty” who were awfully good at what they did. “I don’t know what a Southern writer is,” says Morris. “We are not better at our game than others, I wouldn’t say that. We have drawn from different sources, I think, and still to this day do.”

But the South, perhaps more so than any other region, is a microcosm of the nation, especially for Willie Morris. In their introduction to *The Signet Classic Book of Southern Short Stories* (1991), editors Dorothy Abbott and Susan Koppelman suggest that “human beings aren’t emotionally ‘large’ enough to identify with geographical areas as vast as the United States. They need something small to attach themselves to, something that feels like ‘home,’ something more familiar, like neighborhood. And the biggest ‘neighborhood’ people can feel comfortable with is their region.”

Morris has often used his own life as a stepping stone for writing about his Southern roots. In fact, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1980*, critic Joan Bobbitt says that Morris’ life and writing “are inseparable. Not only is most of Morris’ writing about himself, but it is also about how his experience reflects a larger regional and national experience.”

How can such an experience be explained? Small Southern towns, Morris believes, hold their people in a special way that is almost unexplainable. It is just a presence, a thing that is there. There is, in small Southern towns, a feeling that you won’t find in other towns - East, West or North - and it may have everything to do with loyalties, tradition and hardship. Small towns are the corners of the South’s collective soul. To understand the South, you must understand its monuments, its town squares, its courthouses, its women who never surrendered in the Civil War, its men who relish life with a kind of wandering, wanton exuberance that is manifested in the male camaraderie of deer hunting on winter weekends and football as religion.

“There was something in the very atmosphere of a small town in the Deep South,” writes Morris in *North Toward Home*, “something spooked-up and romantic, which did extravagant things to the imagination of its bright and resourceful boys. It had something to do with long and heavy afternoons with nothing doing, with rich slow evenings when the crickets and the frogs scratched their legs and made delta music, with plain boredom, perhaps with an inherited tradition of contriving elaborate plots or one-shot practical jokes. I believe this hidden influence . . . had something to do with the Southern sense of fancy when one grew up in a place where more specific exercises in intellection - like reading books - were not accepted, one had to work his imagination out on something, and the less austere, the better. This quality would stay with one, in only slightly less exaggerated forms, even as a grown man.”

Morris’ childhood seems to have been almost charmed. He grew up in a warm and nurturing environment in the kind of family where youngsters are allowed the time to be young and to investigate the manifold mysteries of life. His father Rae was a companionable man who threw softballs with Willie, took him to ball games, and initiated him into various masculine pursuits. Morris has an extraordinary memory for those childhood events. “My first memory,” he recalls, “when I was younger than five, maybe two or three, was katydids, all over the place. I was born in Jackson, and we moved to Yazoo City when I was an infant. That was the De-

pression. My daddy got the money to build a house, right down the street from where Aunt Tish lived. It must have taken him some time to get the money to build the house. We lived with Aunt Tish because she had a couple of extra rooms. Little ol' house right there on Grand Avenue. She is still a legend in Yazoo City. She wasn't my aunt, but everyone called her Aunt Tish. Anyway, I remember a porch swing breaking, an awful crying, and an old lady picking me up.

"The night was still except for the katydids all around, going 'katy-did, katy-didn't, katy-did, katy-didn't,' and for some reason, this collection of rusty molecules and second-hand corpuscles chose that instant to take notice of the planet," he writes in *North Toward Home*.

Morris' life has been peopled by legends, some famous, some only homespun, but regardless of the credentials, color, or social standing of those he meets, he is a man who loves people. And he is proud of the people he grew up with. "I was interviewed by a reporter on the Washington Post not too long ago. He was doing a piece on Haley Barbour, the (new) chairman of the National Republican Party, who is from Yazoo City. Haley is a little younger than I, but he (the reporter) wanted some stories on Haley.

"I got to thinking. Within a two-block radius around Grand Avenue in Yazoo City, the following people grew up: Haley Barbour, now the National Chairman of the Republican Party; Mike Espy, up until lately U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, a black guy; myself; and have you ever heard of Zig Ziglar?

"Zig was older than I was. He was so poor, his family lived in a shack right next to the Illinois Central Railroad Tracks. That little ol' shack was so close to the railroad tracks, they said when that midnight freight train from Memphis and New Orleans came through town, they had to open the kitchen door to let it through."

Morris thrives on memories from his past - some comic, some poignant. For the most part, though, his was a childhood filled with adventure, boyish shenanigans, stories and music. Just inside Morris' front door is the beautiful old baby grand that his mother, Marion, taught piano on. On late afternoons when the students were gone and the dark was falling, Morris would sit in his room and listen to his mother's playing. But Marion's attempt to bring her son to the keyboard failed. Morris laughs about it today: "My mother was probably the finest piano teacher in Mississippi. She was a graduate of Millsaps and the Chicago Conservatory and was the organist in the Methodist Church in Yazoo City for years. That is her Steinway baby grand in there, with a plaque on it I wrote when she died. I gave it to the Methodist Church and when JoAnne (his present wife) and I moved into this new house, I said, 'God, I'd sure love to get that Steinway back.' JoAnne got it back from the Methodist Church. So there are still Christians over there."

He laughs in a rat-a-tat fashion in his throat. No, he says, Willie still does not play. He stares at the big black piano as it gleams across the dining room in his home in Jackson and hesitates, almost as if he can hear that music, falling softly back across the years. Suddenly he smiles again. "Mama taught me, but she kicked me out when I was about 10. She said, 'Get out of here. Go play baseball.' I was rather relieved."

His mother was a perfectionist, he will tell you, and when a young student played a piece badly, she would see him through it patiently and then say, "Now, I'll play your piece all the way through like Mr. Mozart would want it played." The plaque on the side of the piano reads: "In memory of Marion Weaks Morris, 1904-1977. Organist of this church for 30 years. She taught hundreds of Yazoo's children on this piano."

Hundreds, yes, but Willie Morris could not sit still long enough to practice piano. He was

an adventurer. He recalls how he roamed in cemeteries, not with the usual youthful fear of ghosts and goblins, but with an eye for history and how life had unfolded before he was born. He relished those afternoons among the tombstones, picnicking on ham sandwiches and Nehi strawberry drinks.

In *North Toward Home*, he recalls, “On other days we would come and play until later afternoon, until the lightning bugs came out and the crickets started making their chirping noises. Or in broad daylight we would wander through the Negro graveyard nearby, a rundown, neglected area, fierce with weeds and insects, joined together by a rutted dirt road that ran interminably up another forlorn hill.”



And then there was the noisy and crowded Dixie Theater with the latest silver screen exploits of Roy Rogers and Lash Larue. World War II was at its peak, and Morris followed events through newspapers and war movies, even keeping a dairy on crucial battles. Later, he was involved in a most human way in the nation’s Korean War - he played taps for the returned bodies of dead youths he had known in his childhood.

“One day in the summer, an official in the local American Legion telephoned me. He told me he had heard I could play the trumpet . . . I got my old silver trumpet and shined it up, and practiced taps with the first valve down. The next day the Legion official and I waited at the open grave for the funeral procession to wind up the hill of the town cemetery, and after the guns had been fired I played that mournful tune, nervous as I could be and wobbling seriously on the high F . . . The Legionnaires told me after that first funeral had broken up that it was far from being my last one . . .” But lapses into good deeds and sentimentality were something awkward to explain to one’s friends. The wild, mischievous side of Willie Morris was always battling with the intellectual side.

“Being a ‘good ol boy’ was the hardest priority of all. If you were intelligent and made straight A’s, got along fine with the teachers and occasionally studied your books, it was necessary that all this be performed, among the boys you ‘ran around’ with, with a certain casualness that verged on a kind of cynicism. So you would banter about grades as if they were of no account, curse the teachers, and develop a pose of indifference to ambition in all its forms. And you would speak the grammar of dirt-farmers and Negroes, using aint’s and reckless verb forms with such a natural instinct that the right ones would have sounded high-blown and phony, and pushing the country talk to such limits that making it as flamboyant as possible became an end in itself,” he writes in *North Toward Home*.

But that intelligence was put to use in various crafty ways. The summer he was twelve, the

local radio station started a baseball quiz program.

“A razor blade company offered free blades and the station chipped in a dollar, all of which went to the first listener to telephone with the right answer to the day’s baseball question. If there was no winner, the next day’s pot would go up a dollar. At the end of the month they had to close down the program because I was winning all the money. It got so easy, in fact, that I stopped phoning in the answers some afternoons so that the pot could build up and make my winnings more spectacular. I netted about \$25 and a 10-year supply of double-edged, smooth-contact razor blades before they gave up. One day, when the jackpot was a mere two dollars, the announcer tried to confuse me. ‘Babe Ruth,’ he said, ‘hit sixty home runs in 1927 to set the major-league record. What man had the next highest total?’ I telephoned and said, ‘George Herman Ruth. He hit fifty-nine in another season.’ My adversary, who had developed an acute dislike of me, said that was not the correct answer. He said it should have been Babe Ruth. This incident angered me, and I won for the next four days, just for the hell of it,” he writes in *North Toward Home*,

Peter Schrag says in *The Reporter* that Morris is able to speak so eloquently of his native Mississippi because he talks in the accent of the region and “knows whence he came, and why.” Larry L. King reinforces Schrag’s assessment: “I know of no living American writer who has given more thought to his roots and his place than Willie Morris.”

For Morris, remembering the Old South is, in a sense, a charge. In *Terrains of the Heart* he calls the burden of memory “terrible.” There is, he says, the “urge to dramatize yourself about yourself, which is the beginning of at least part of the urge to create.” But those memories and those childhood experiences have formed the core of Morris’ character. “. . . My town,” he says, “is the place which shaped me into the creature I am now.” Morris’ first 17 years were secure but adventurous.

“I had moved easily among many kinds of people. I had seen something of cruelty and madness, and I had survived fundamentalist religion. My father had taught me the woods; from everyone I had had love. The town in which I had grown up had yet to be touched by the great television culture, or by the hardening emotions and the defensive hostilities unloosed by the Supreme Court in 1954. Something was left, if but an oblique recollection: a Southern driftlessness, a closeness to the earth, a sense of time standing still, a lingering isolation from America’s relentless currents of change and homogeneity. Something else also remained, some innocent and exposed quality that made possible, in the heart of a young and vulnerable boy, an allegiance and a love for a small, inconsequential place. Only retrospect would tell me I was to take something of these things with me forever, through my maturing into my manhood. But then I could connect them, because I had yet to go beyond the most fundamental awareness of myself,” he says in *North Toward Home*.

His departure for the University of Texas in Austin was a turning point in his life. For the first time he was on his own, away from the protection of his family and the familiarity of his childhood turf. But in those sometimes lonely and confusing years in Austin, Willie Morris came of age, finding both a vocation and his future wife. He came to writing, though, in a roundabout way. One evening, he was invited to the apartment of a young graduate student and his wife. Before that fateful visit, Willie Morris might have entertained the idea of being a sportswriter or a sports announcer.

“But when the wife of the student asked him about his future plans, his answer was a surprise even to himself. Morris, stimulated by the book-lined walls, and the intellectual conversation, replied, “I want to be a writer.” He swears that is the first time he had really thought

about it, and that very night he went to the library, vowing to himself to read every important book ever written. He suddenly realized, he says in *North Toward Home*, that books and literature were as “subversive as Socrates and expressions of man’s soul.”

After graduating from the University of Texas with a degree in English in 1956, the boy from Jackson by way of Yazoo City took off to Oxford, England, on a Rhodes Scholarship. He returned to the South to edit the *Texas Observer* from 1960-62. After another year in Oxford to earn a master’s degree, Morris became New York editor of *Harper’s Magazine* in 1963. With his promotion to executive editor and then editor-in-chief, he transformed the periodical into one of the nation’s foremost literary showcases, featuring the work of Norman Mailer, William Styron, Tom Wolfe, John Updike, Gore Vidal, and many other famous or soon-to-be famous writers.

*Harper’s*, ironically bearing the namesake of Morris’ mother’s ancestors, became, under his guidance, a place where writers and journalists found an extraordinary home, a place where they could write freely about almost any subject. Morris understood that the fewer constraints he imposed upon a writer, the greater the finished product, and soon the prose in *Harper’s* began to reflect the best intellectual thought of the nation.

After serving as the majordomo for some of America’s finest literature for six years, Morris left the magazine in a kind of metaphorical transformation. His marriage of eleven years fell apart at about the same time he was fighting with the bean counters who had taken over the magazine, and with Morris sidelined, *Harper’s* became just another voice in that jumbled roar of voices that erupted in the magazine publishing world in the decades between the 1960s and 1980s. The literary revolution had ended.

Morris, looking about, turned in 1980 toward home and Mississippi, the delta with all of its steaming mysteries and political skeletons, its rigid, gumbo-thick traditions. “If it is true that a writer’s world is shaped by the experience of childhood and adolescence,” he says in *Terrains of the Heart*, “then returning. . . gives him the primary pulses and shocks he cannot afford to lose.”

Home offered solace, healing, a soothing and familiar grounding of place and time. Although Morris had already written copiously about his South, being home gave him the strength to rise again. “My neighbor, Truman Capote, always said most Southerners come home sooner or later, even if in a box. I was rather reluctant to wait that long. Also all my people are dead. I just felt it was time to be getting on back and I am glad I did.”

“Getting on back,” as he termed it, licking the

*I know of no living American writer who has given more thought to his roots and his place than Willie Morris.*

*- Larry L. King*



wounds inflicted by his failed marriage of eleven years to Celia Ann Buchanan, “a beauty queen with a Phi Beta Kappa key,” as well as the loss of his magazine, Morris realized that the return was both necessary and symbolic. The breakup of his marriage had stung Morris, deeply, especially since it came in the midst of one earth-shaking event after another: the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, the election of Richard Milhous Nixon as president. To Morris it seemed as if the sky were falling.

As editor of *Harper's*, he had tried to effect “one of the most detailed and insightful looks at the national political processes ever.” He hired Norman Mailer to cover the Chicago convention and put Jules Feiffer to work sketching the pols. David Halberstam was chosen to handle those tough short strokes so necessary to any successful magazine.

“It was the Democrats’ siege in Chicago which marshaled the Mailer skill,” Morris writes in his *New York Days*. “Everything that had been seething in the nation in that decade, the recklessness and commitment, the vengefulness and anarchy, converged in that battleground.”

That battleground also cost him his marriage, which, he writes, had lasted “across many terrains, American and otherwise, in good times and bad, and the denouement was terrible, and more than one would ever have bargained for, and the trauma of the ultimate break lasted longer than its duration. The anger, bafflement, jealousy and sting threatened never to go away, and their scar tissue is probably on my heart forever. “. . . there remains the incontrovertible burden of lost and damaged love. Finally, I have learned how difficult love is, how hard to achieve and sustain, no matter who the person or how felicitous the circumstance. How could I have known then of the psychic hold she (Celia) would have on me for the rest of my life? It was like the psychic hold of the city itself in all its loves and hates and passions and dramas. Across the years, I would think of Celia, and remember her.”

Not only was he a Southerner with a soul, but he was also a native son with new-found vision for a land he loved.

Back home he became a writer-in-residence at the venerable University of Mississippi, an institution that reflects both the best of traditions and the worst of prejudices, a place where old customs and beliefs have died hard on hard ground. “Mississippi,” he says in *Terrains*, is a blend of the “relentless and the abiding.” Despite the economic growth, the pollution of his boyhood lakes and streams, and the physical encroachment of malls and shopping centers, there still remain remnants of the world of his childhood: “Old men in khakis whittling in the shade of a crossroads grocery, a domino game on the back stoop of a service station . . . .”

But he was coming home to a far different Southland than the one he left as a brilliant student heading across the Atlantic to study in the land of Shakespeare. He was coming home to a Mississippi that had struggled through the death throes of Civil Rights, had been the scene of the hot summer killings of the freedom riders and the cowardly murders of black activists. Mississippi was no Alabama, Jackson was no Selma, but both states shared in the shame and blame of the long march forced upon black people in America.

When Byron De La Beckwith, the white supremacist who had shot Medgar Evers 31 years before, was retried in 1994 and ultimately convicted, Morris found some compelling words to express his feelings about his home and the South: “Beckwith’s conviction by a Mississippi jury and his sentencing to life in prison could open up a new era in which unresolved racial murders of a generation ago might come to justice.

“I believe this story to be acutely relevant today. After the passage of 31 years and two

earlier trials, people finally came forward to tell the truth. A cowardly assassin who shot a man in the back in the presence of his wife and children and openly boasted about it for years finally got what he deserved. “. . . I perceive a particular relevance in the outcome to people of my generation, which says something about the impact of history and experience on the individual and society. It was not merely that justice was finally served, although that is a part, it is that this case suggests that prejudices can be examined and reversed, and that people and places can learn from their mistakes.”

Attending the retrial of Beckwith in the Hinds County Courthouse where hung juries had set a killer free three decades earlier, Morris was moved by the irony, the plain sense of justice. “It was one of the most dramatic events I have ever seen as a writer, fraught for me with passion and consequence. I not so much witnessed it as felt it, for it evoked for me my own past as a seventh-generation Mississippian with old serpentine emotion, strange and painful memory, the dark shadows of my past, and my people’s.”

Beckwith’s retrial has made Morris re-examine the turmoil of the South in the ’60s, most of which had surfaced while he was in New York. He had returned to a changed state, a changed South, a changed nation, which had witnessed the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King. Mississippians also had to come to grips with the reality that its own people had killed student volunteers James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who had come to Mississippi to help register blacks to vote. But ignorance and fear had displaced justice in the deep South during those years, when ignorant men had slipped off into dark places to try to slow time and preserve old inequities.

“Back in the 1960s when I would go back to New York, down here everything was so horrifically tense, troubled.” Having had the advantage of viewing the wreckage from a distance, Morris brought home with him a keen eye and perception. Not only was he a Southerner with a soul, but he was also a native son with new-found vision for a land he loved. Observing the struggle from a more objective stance, he witnessed the shifting of power as black men and women began to work from within the system by getting themselves elected to public offices in great numbers in Mississippi. Having been reared in the “old” Mississippi, he had gone through school with the “same white boys and girls,” and in his guarded and insulated life, even in the middle of Mississippi, he had felt isolated and separated from the national impetus.

At the University of Mississippi, a school that still touts the old Southern Colonel as its mascot and still flies the flag of Dixie at its football games, a place that had seen one-armed Governor Ross Barnett standing in the institution’s door to prevent a black man from entering, Morris soon rediscovered and reinvented himself. He arm-wrestled those old ghosts and inspired his students with the zeal to go out and write what they saw and felt. “The literary tradition of Mississippi,” he writes in *Terrains*, “derives from the complexity of a society that had retained much of its communal origins, and along with that a sense of continuity, of the enduring past and the flow of the generations - an awareness . . . of human history.”

When he wrote, he wrote of his return in just about every story he penned, as if he were searching for his own misplaced soul and the soul of his beloved land—It was as if Willie Morris were sifting through the debris not only of his life, but of Mississippi and the South. He analyzed the material from both sides, examined wrongs both black and white, wrote of the evil men do and the good that often stems from sad acts and destruction.

Today, Morris lives with his new wife, JoAnne, in an affluent old neighborhood peopled by some of the state’s former giants from its political past: Governor Ray Winters lives across the

way. His home, a two-story brick, was built in the 1940s by Dennis Murfree, a bitter enemy of Theo Bilbo. The former senator and governor was a hated symbol to the blacks, Morris explains as he shows off the upstairs of the house. “They were trying to work out some kind of political compromise and Bilbo spent two nights in this bedroom up here in my house. I call it the Bilbo bedroom.”

Morris’ days are busy and fulfilling. He seems too concerned with ideas to worry about a pile of unopened mail that lies scattered in the front hall beneath the mail slot. Books are piled casually on tables and shelves, but his huge writing desk is almost bare - all business, ready for work.

*I was an American writer first,  
who happens to be a Southerner.  
- Willie Morris*

He dines regularly with Eudora Welty, who, Morris says, “embodies what I feel about the South.” Journalists seek him out for his views, other writers ask for his support and his words on the backs of their book jackets, young writers come to him for advice. And there must also be time for his love for sports and his need to be a part of the black community because of

the mystery it continues to hold over him. “Southerners of both races,” he says in *Terrains*, “share a rootedness that even in moments of anger and pain we have been unable to repudiate or ignore.” It is that sense of rootedness that still drives his work today.

“I was seized early by Thomas Wolfe,” he says, “and today it is as if I am living my life right out of the pages of his novels.” In the South the factors that create literature are sometimes different from the writing that evolves in other regions. Morris lists them like a litany: stories handed down, the language of music, love of a place (histories, family), perceptions of a common past, and memory.

Willie Morris has always respected his elders, has honored their experience and their roles in the history of his life. In fact, he says, the whole relationship between the old and young in the South was the largest single influence that shaped him.

“I was an American writer first, who happens to be a Southerner, who happens to have been born and raised in the South, the Deep South. A lot of my stuff reflects that, although I branch out a lot. I grew up in a small, deep Southern town before the advent of television. It was also before air conditioning. When you sit down on the front porch on hot summer nights and talk to the old people, you absorb their stories and their language.

“You were sitting out on the porch and they would tell you these stories, wonderfully vivid idiom. What they were really doing were giving us a way to see. The stories from the past - especially from my grandmother, made me feel that the past and the present are so intimately woven together. I have always been taken with that Faulkner phrase: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’ He put that in his frontis matter to *Requiem for a Nun*. His memories are recorded in *North Toward Home*:

“I remember the cold, quiet nights and the stifling hot summers, starched summer suits and the smell of talcum, sweet smelling black people in white dresses who could be adoring and gentle and then impatient and demanding. In growing up in a place like Yazoo City then, the town was right there before you. It was a town of about eight or nine thousand people, half black and half white. Everything was so accessible. It was like a story unfolding every day. You knew everyone and the gossip was florid. It was just all there for you. This was invaluable for a young person who would eventually become a writer. That really shaped me, I suppose.

“We were close to growing plants, to the earth, and to nature’s wilder moods. In the Mississippi delta there was nothing gentle about nature - it came at you violently, or in a rush, by turns disordered and oppressively somnolent. In the spring, when the muddy waters overflowed the Yazoo into the town, and the nigger shacks on stilts in the bottoms were sometimes covered over, we would see the open trucks with the Negro convicts crowded up in the back, their black-and-white stripes somber under the ominous gray sky. Or a tornado would twist down and do strange tricks to the things it hit, carrying someone fifty yards and leaving him barely hurt, or driving straws into car tires like needles, or sending our garage across the alley into a field of weeds. One afternoon a tornado hit while we were watching a movie in the Dixie Theater; we heard the hailstones on the roof, hitting in steady torrents.”

Of course, there were more influences on his life than the lay of the land. His father, mother, grandparents and teachers wielded a powerful influence on his character and ambition. His grandmother Mamie and grandfather Percy figured hugely in their grandson’s development, connecting him with his cultural past in a way few children experience today. During the summer months Morris would often visit his grandparents in their brick home in Jackson, 42 miles away from Yazoo.

His grandmother, the youngest in her family of 16 brothers and sisters, was born in 1878, two years after federal troops left Mississippi. She was a prodigious storyteller. “My grandmother was the repository of all the stories that were handed down. Looking back on it, that whole relationship between the older people and the younger people, the stories on the porch, must have done something. It struck a cord. It also introduced me to the possibilities of words, of the language itself, which was indispensable.”

Grandfather Percy was as much a friend as a grandfather. Morris fondly recalls going with him to the potato chip factory where the old man worked, cutting potatoes into thin slices and placing them in “prodigious black ovens.” The two ate chips all day and drank water all night at home.

“He would do anything I wanted, from climbing the fig trees to marching down the street beating a dime-store drum,” he writes. As a boy, Morris was absolutely convinced that his grandfather would never die.

But there was also man’s best friend. Dogs have always meant a great deal to Willie Morris, and throughout his life he has owned many favorites - Tony, Sam, Jimbo, Sonny and Duke. In fact, he will tell you that in his boyhood he never went more than six months without the friendship of a dog. But it was after the death of one of his great-aunts that for solace Morris got another dog, a most unusual dog. Skip was a purebred English smooth-haired fox terrier. “We got him from a kennel up in Springfield, Missouri. I was an only child, but he was an only dog. He was not my first dog - we had bird dogs when I was real little - he was the third, and I got him in the fourth grade. He was really important to me. He was so smart, he could drive a car. He lived a good long time.”

During his teaching days at Ole Miss in the early ’80s, Morris’ best friend was Pete, a black Labrador retriever. Even though Pete was a Yankee dog - Morris had brought him back to Mississippi from Long Island - he called him “the last, best hope of the South.”

Pete and his owner enjoyed a special, almost filial, bond. Morris’ shambling old faculty home on a tree-studded street on the campus was a gathering place for students, journalists, the affable and lovable Oxford mayor John Leslie, and assorted other wanderers of the night. One frequent visitor was Donna Tartt, a young Southern writer who Morris believes is one of the region’s most brilliant lights.

Pete, the official greeter, inspected all the guests at the door. Upon approval, or after a quick crotch sniff, the venerable old retriever would let the visitor in to see Morris, who could usually be found at a long, black table strewn with note cards and the litter of his latest book or magazine piece.

Pete had the run of the house. He ate with Morris, drank with Morris, and when he wanted, sipped water from Morris' john. The two took walks together, strolling at Rowan Oak, Faulkner's farm on the edge of the campus, or in Oxford's old cemetery, where the Nobel Prize winner rests in generational peace with his forefathers and family.

Pete had showed up during Morris' *New York Days* as editor of *Harper's*. Morris usually left his convertible parked in front of the magazine's headquarters, and one day as he left the office for lunch, he noted that Pete, long a familiar face at a gas station near his Long Island home, had somehow found his car and was riding shotgun.

"Actually, he started driving around with me. He lived in a service station about two blocks from where I lived in Bridgehampton. Then he started visiting me every day. He would stay longer and longer. One day he just wouldn't leave. I said, 'Pete, you better go on back, they're going to miss you.' At that point he had been with me for years. He even came down to Mississippi with me. He started enjoying eating things like collard greens."

Pete and Willie Morris were inseparable until the retriever died in 1984. The event so moved Morris that he has said he will never own another dog. Today five cats have the run of his house. "I wouldn't want to have another dog. Pete's death just about did me in. It was awful. That came out on NBC nightly news, on the Associated Press wire. They wouldn't let me bury him on the Ole Miss campus, though. I called the Mayor, John Leslie. I said, 'Mr. Mayor, Pete just died. He said, 'I know, I just heard it on Tom Brokaw.'

"I said, 'With your authority, can we bury him in the town cemetery?' He said, 'Damn right.' We had an Episcopal service. Pete is now buried in the cemetery up in Oxford, not too far from the Faulkners."

Morris looks off, as if searching the room for his old friend. "Someone recently stole his tombstone," he says finally, his voice wistful. "On the tombstone, it just said, 'Pete, 1970-1984.'"

Like the death of his dog Pete, Morris says there is about the South something that you never quite get beyond. It is a feeling that holds you between finger and thumb. And there are hundreds of places in the South that can grab you. Morris loves his native region with such passion that it would be hard to choose one favorite place.

"Oh, I got quite a few. I love this town. I kind of agree with Walker Percy that for some writers it is important that you live in a certain proximity to principal landmarks of one's past. I was born here and spent all my summers here. I like Jackson a lot. I love cruising through the Delta.

"New Orleans is about a three-hour's drive from here. My son David Rae lives there. But I love places like Lexington, Virginia, with Washington and Lee; Charlottesville, and any place that has a Civil War battlefield. I love Vicksburg and Natchez."

Morris' father, Henry Rae, a bookkeeper, was also interested in the past. "We used to go out to the old, old family cemetery in Raymond, a family village about 10 miles from here when I was little. I just sort of gravitated to the one in Yazoo City because we spent so much time out there when we were kids - having picnics, watching funerals from a distance. The Yazoo Cemetery was the most sensible place in town.

"Then in my high school years, playing taps for the dead brought back from Korea was an



Photo by Jack Bales  
Willie Morris at the  
grave of the Witch of  
Yazoo, a legendary  
character immortalized  
in his 1971 book *Good  
Old Boy*.

indelible memory for me. It was kind of a happy place. We were always playing tricks on each other out there, trying to get each other to walk at dark alone up to the witch's grave and tap on the witch's grave eight times and then come back. Things like that.

“The Yazoo Witch broke out of her chains and burned down the whole town in 1904. You can go there now, and there is the witch's grave and the heavy link chains, and that one link in the chain is missing where she broke out. She was chained up right in the middle of the cemetery. “She predicted she was going to burn it down. She even predicted the date. Twenty years later, lo and behold, it burned down.

As a child, Willie Morris, like most Southerners, felt the irresistible pull of religion. “Before I turned twelve, I had been ‘saved,’ not once, but at least a dozen times. I had played, at various times in church pageants, kings, wisemen, angels, shepherds, camel-drivers, Joseph and Jesus. I had given way enough frankincense and myrrh to stock the cosmetics counter in a modest-sized nickel-and-dime store, and I had tried to get into so many inns where there was no more room that I would have done better to take out a long-term American Express Credit Card acceptable at all hostleries in the Middle East.

“I would remember best of all the revivals, when a visiting preacher and his singers would arrive and hold services for a week or more in the First Methodist Church, twice a day, in the mornings and at night. There would be a restless excitement in the air; the singing would be better than usual, and since the hometown preacher probably had hit the bottom of his repertoire and would be repeating himself in his weekly sermons,

the imported preacher would be sure to bring a new stock of stories, sly jokes about the Baptists, and new and different appeals for getting saved all over. When the were no revivals on, there was regular church, and Vacation Bible School in the summer, and Sunday School every Sunday morning.

“Our brand of fundamentalism was so much a part of us that its very sources, even its most outrageous gyrations and circumlocutions, went unquestioned. It was the faith of our fathers, the rock of ages, the thing that abided with you, the kindly light that led; it involved walks with Jesus in secluded gardens, sweet bliss and tender joys. By turns it could be humble and contrite, and then righteous and terrible, a martial summoning to make life miserable for those who had not heeded the call. In its small-town context it was a middle-class affair, and at least moderately contained,” he says in *North Toward Home*.

But at age thirteen, Morris found himself disenchanted with religion. In fact, he was bored. His favorite grade teacher, Miss Abbott, had introduced him to the Bible, but in an unusual way: Whenever one of her students misquoted an assigned verse, he or she was rapped on the knuckles with a twelve-inch ruler.

Still, Morris found the sound of the words, the poetry and the literature, alluring: “Some pretty good stories in that King James Version,” he says now. “I remember my fourth grade

teacher taught us the Bible. That's all we learned, the Bible. We didn't spend much time on history or math, we were forced to memorize Bible verse. I didn't mind that at all; I just wish it had been done in proportion, and not all the time."

Yet that rhythm, those intonations were highly influential in Morris' style. As Eudora Welty says in *One Writer's Beginnings*, "How many of us, the South's writers-to-be of my generation, were blessed in one way or another, if not blessed alike, in not having gone deprived of the King James Version of the Bible. Its cadence entered into our ears and our memories for good. The evidence, or the ghost of it, lingers in all our books."

There was also another religion of sorts that pulled hard at Willie Morris - sports. He loved baseball. Today, his den is spattered with photographs of sports heroes. Dominating the group is a large photo of Babe Ruth, given to him by former President George Bush.

*The old blatant racism that I grew up with no longer really exists here. It is a much more subtle phenomenon.*

Willie came to sports rather naturally.

While he recalls listening to his mother's music, she remembered hearing him at his typewriter, because by the time he was 12 years old he was a sports writer working for the *Yazoo Herald* and the radio station, WAZF. "I started with the Herald covering baseball," Willie recalls. "The first game I covered, I quoted Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.'

"I ran into the editor of the paper three or four days later. He told me, 'Willie, I really want you to cover some of these ball games for us, now, but, uhh, next time would you, uhh, provide the score?' He said something to the effect that he didn't much like my quoting foreigners like Keats."

But Willie Morris always has an eye open for similes and connections. Some of them, he believes, link the South with other parts of the nation and its writers. "I have always found a close, beguiling parallel between Southern writers and Northern Jewish writers. I spent a lot of years in New York, and living up there, I knew a lot of really fine Jewish writers.

"I always detected a parallel there. In the case of both Southern writers and Jewish writers there is a profound sense of history and of the past and of time passing, a mutual sense of loss and a belief in words. They are flamboyant characters. I also always detected a similarity between Jewish mothers and Southern mothers.

"I once introduced my mother up on East Long Island to Phyllis Newman's mother. You know, the singer who is married to Adolph Green. She was from Jersey City. Phyllis's mother is from Jersey City, and my mother was from Yazoo City. They were so much alike, they practically could not get a word in edgewise.

"The Jews have this same sense of place. Very much so. I have always felt that. I live now in Mississippi and I have told this story: When I was a student at Oxford University, I had to pick up Robert Frost and take him over the Rhodes House to give a reading. This was back in 1957. We were in a cab. Robert Frost, he was old then. He was always a curmudgeon. Brilliant poet. Beautiful poet. He said, 'Where are you from, boy?' I said, 'I'm from Mississippi.' He said, 'Hell, that's the worst state in the Union.' I was rather taken aback by that. I made some comment like, 'Yes, sir, but Mississippi has produced a lot of fine writers.'

"He said, 'Can't anyone down there read them.'

"Later that night, I was at a sherry party. Allen Tate was on a visiting professorship in my college at Oxford. He was standing there with Lord David Sussel, the historian. I walked up to them and told them what Robert Frost had said just that morning about Mississippi writers.

“Allen Tate had a very broad forehead and rather prominent eyes. His eyes lit up and he turned to Lord Sussel and he said, ‘David, I have been trying to tell you that’s the reason the South has produced so many writers. I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.’ “

Remembering the story, Morris smiles. “But I have discovered, having come back home to live, this one thing: It’s an honorable profession to be a writer in Mississippi now. People come up to me in the grocery stores, restaurants and on the streets, lot of kids do. They just come up to you. I have often thought, suspected, that this may be a kind of guilt reaction among Mississippians the way they treated Faulkner in his prime when he was writing his greatest stuff.

Willie Morris “They considered him Count No Count. Then later when he started speaking out on Civil Rights, he’d get hate calls and hate letters. I think most of these Mississippi writers would agree with me on that, that it has kind of changed down here, very much so since I was a boy. It’s a change since my young adulthood.”

The issue of color is one that Southern writers have dealt with for years, with varying degrees of success. It is a problem that Willie Morris has thought about for years, as far back as his childhood. “Just take Mississippi,” he tells you. “It doesn’t have any big cities. You have a continuing, very complicated relationship between whites and blacks here. It is a state with the highest percentage of blacks in the United States.” Some of his introspection about the race issue is reflected in *North Toward Home*:

“For my whole conduct with Negroes as I was growing up in the 1940s was a relationship of great contrasts. On the one hand there was a kind of unconscious affection, touched with a sense of excitement and sometimes pity. On the other hand there were sudden emotional eruptions - of disdain and utter cruelty. My own alternating affections and cruelties were inexplicable to me, but the main thing is that they were largely assumed and only rarely questioned. The broader reality was that the Negroes in the town were there; they were ours, to do with as we wished. I grew up with this consciousness of some tangible possession, it was rooted so



deeply in me by the whole moral atmosphere of the place that my own ambivalence - which would take mysterious shapes as I grew older - was secondary and of little account.”

“I go back to my hometown of Yazoo City and with the exception of the big shopping malls, the four-lane highways and new subdivisions without sidewalks, physically the place has changed remarkably little. You go around to Main Street. It is the way it was 50 years ago. On Main Street, if it’s changed at all physically, the only thing that has changed on the structures are the names of the owners.

“But the race issue is much more subtle than it was. I would think that is true for the whole Southeast. One of our strengths in the relationship is that we have always said who and what we are. The old blatant racism that I grew up with no longer really exists here. It is a much more subtle phenomenon. Gosh, it’s fascinating.

“A friend of mine, might have been Styron, who is my best friend, was asking me to describe race relations in Mississippi now contrasted with a generation or so ago. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

He agrees, though, that racism in the South of his middle age, changed as it is, is still an issue and still exists on far more compelling and perhaps even dangerous levels of the game. Perhaps race is even a little more sinister, a little more behind the scenes than it was when it was flagrant and very much out in the open.

Morris has written about race better than most. One of his 13 books was on the 1980s running sensation, Marcus Dupree, who went off to the University of Oklahoma as one of the most sought-after running backs in U.S. football history. Dupree never fulfilled the promise, sustaining a severe injury that curtailed what everyone had believed was going to be a phenomenally successful career.

Morris has thought more than most about the black and white issue in the South, and how it, too, has shaped not only his own sensibilities, but the region’s as well. “You see, there is so little social contact, even in a town like Jackson, between races, so little. Most social integration that you see is at Democratic Party functions. I think there is less now than 15 years ago. It is socially less integrated. That is the impression I have. They (blacks and whites together) seem friendly, but there is very little social integration.

“I think athletics has been the great expression of integration in the South. Especially football, high school and college. It doesn’t surprise me. We weren’t going to school together in my youth. I was just fascinated by the black high school football teams when I was growing up. They used the discarded uniforms of our high school. They were called the Yazoo Black Panthers.

“I would go over on Friday afternoon. They would play in the black fairgrounds. Sometimes my dog and I would go over. I would carry the first-down markers, things like that. Great athletes. Yazoo City produced four NFL football players, all black.

“Living among the blacks had an impact on me. Oh, yes. The mystery of it when you are young. It was always there, always. It was very exciting and mysterious and I think that has affected every Southern writer.

“I have practically adopted the Alcorn (College) Braves football team. I just love it. Except for NFL Scouts and the national press and three or four cameramen, we are the only white people at the games.

“I love the whole ambiance of going down there. You are the only white people in a crowd of 20,000. God, those bands (whispers). They are just wonderful. And the surrounding countryside. Alcorn is about 30 miles north of Natchez and it’s about seven or eight miles from the Mississippi River, surrounded by ghost towns and crumbling antebellum mansions and the whole Civil War background.

“The land is full of ghosts. That little campus, which was the first black public institution of higher learning in the United States, was founded during reconstruction. It is literally carved out of the earth.

“We had dinner the other night with Myrlie Evers, Medgar Evers’ widow, who was here. Medgar was a running back for Alcorn in the late ’40s. Oh, yes it still intrigues me.

“Race. That is the issue that runs through American life. We, as Southerners, should know more about it than anyone else, but I get saddened by it: We still haven’t overcome it. We have a long way to go, even here in the South. We have come along better than other parts of the country, but we still have a long way to go.”

Willie Morris, the Mississippi boy once exiled to New York, sighs. “But I don’t think anyone is listening to us.”

There are some lost parts of Willie Morris’ life that are irreplaceable his first marriage, the years at *Harper’s*, his dog Pete, his parents and good friends now dead and gone, grandmother Mamie’s fried chicken and meringue pie, his grandfather Percy’s model steamboats. But with his special talent for description and his

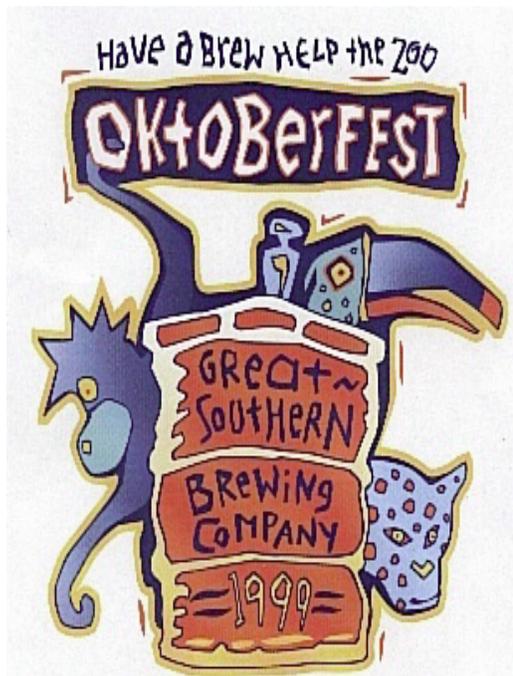


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# The Southerner

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## A Great Teacher

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By **Will Norton**

**A**lthough most of his friends think of Willie Morris as a successful writer and creative editor, to me he was a great teacher.

His journalism classes at The University of Mississippi were not devoted to details of how to write. Rather he read examples of good writing and explained to students why the writing was good. He read samples of writing by students in the class, and his students improved by applying the techniques to their own writing.

In his classroom on the Oxford, Miss., campus, Willie also demonstrated his great ability as an editor. He knew a good story, and he knew whom to assign to each story. So he brought out the best writing in each student. Many of his Ole Miss students have become outstanding writers and reporters. He knew how he wanted each piece written, and he worked with each writer to craft each article.

I was grateful for the attention Willie gave our students in advanced classes. I was the chair of the Department of Journalism at The University of Mississippi, and Willie's teaching brought a measure of excellence to our program that was uncommon on a typical university campus.

During the fall semester of 1980 I learned that faculty in the Ole Miss English Department and Larry and Dean Wells, owners of Yoknapatawpha Press, were trying to make arrangements for Willie to return to Mississippi. Willie had been invited to the campus as a visiting lecturer, teaching a writing course and a course on great 20th century novelists. However, the English Department was several thousand dollars short of the requisite salary.

Our department had enough dollars to complete the deal. So, after I learned about the possibility of bringing Willie to Ole Miss as a writer-in-residence, I called Gerald Walton, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and we worked out a deal. In exchange for a contribution from our department, four journalism students would be enrolled in each of Willie's classes during the spring of 1981.

During the spring semester, Willie told me that the journalism students were among the best in his classes. They had been writing for publications for several years, he said. So they understood what a writer goes through. They knew something about deciding what to write and what not to write. They had experienced the decision-making process.

At the end of that academic year, Willie and the English department could not reach an agreement, and he joined the faculty of the Department of Journalism.

To celebrate, Gale Denley, an associate professor of journalism and one of the

leading weekly editors in the state, hosted a faculty dinner at his house in Bruce, a 45-minute drive south of Oxford on Mississippi Highway 15.

I arranged to drive Willie to Gale's house. I picked him up, and we drove to campus, parking in front of Farley Hall, which had housed the Law School until Journalism moved into the building.

Farley Hall was on the corner of the Grove Loop and Sorority Row. We had stopped to pick up my wife, Susan, who was visiting in the crowd of students who were celebrating on bid night. Sorority Row had been blocked off, and hundreds of coeds and their friends were partying after getting into the sororities of their choice.

My wife is a Phi Mu alumna, and she was interested in who had received Phi Mu bids. I got out of the car and headed for the street in front of the Phi Mu House, across from Farley Hall.

"I'll be right back, Willie," I said. "I'll just let Susan know we're here."

"All right, Mr. Chairman," he said. Willie had been calling me Mr. Chairman ever since he was named a faculty member in our department.

As I looked back, I saw Willie getting out of the car and moving along the edge of the crowd. I tried to keep an eye on him as I looked for Susan.

"We're ready to go," I shouted above the din, after finding her. "Willie and I will be waiting in the car. We're in front of Farley."

I headed over to the east side of Sorority Row where I had last seen Willie. He was standing behind a bush, peering at the dozens and dozens of clusters of students yelling and dancing and jumping into each others' arms.

"I told her to meet us at the car," I told Willie, and we walked slowly away from the celebration.

Willie sat down in the front seat on the passenger side, rolled the window down and closed the door. He took out a cigarette, lit it, took a long draw and slowly exhaled out the window. He seemed deep in thought as he watched the frenzied street party.

"They don't know it," he said quietly, almost to himself, "but this is the best day of their lives."

Despite his idealistic writing, in his heart Willie did not seem to be sure that there are happy endings. Deep down, he seemed convinced that the harsh realities of adulthood can easily shatter the sweet dreams of youth. He was a gentle, sensitive man, and he had endured many tragedies. In some ways he seemed so vulnerable and lonely.

Perhaps it was his understanding of life that drove him to help young people. He was drawn toward bright young people and almost consumed by a desire to help them develop their writing while protecting their innocent goals and dreams. He wanted to try to reassure them that the adult world that he had found so severe was really something with which they could cope.

Similarly, Willie was drawn toward children. He loved to talk to them. He talked to them as equals. He encouraged them and entertained them. He told them stories,

and he always seemed to be teaching them something.

One evening he ate at Taylor's Grocery, a grocery store and restaurant a few miles south of Oxford, where catfish was served several nights a week. We were in a small group, and Willie spent the whole dinner talking to our son, William, who was 2 years old. At the end of the evening, Willie gave William a little note attached to a bag of candy, "To William, from William."

Our son William had been only 13 months old when we took him to a book signing the previous year for Willie's book, *The Courting of Marchus Dupree*. It was at the former location of Square Books on the east side of Oxford Square, upstairs, above Neilsen's, the oldest department store in the deep South.

I held William as we stood in line for more than 30 minutes, waiting for a chance to talk with Willie and get his signature. When we reached the table where he was signing his autograph, Willie looked up at Susan and me. Then he opened our copy of *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* and wrote a brief note, signed it and then closed the book.

We chatted a few more minutes and headed down the stairs for the sidewalk and a short ride home.

Once out of the store, Susan stopped, opened the book and read what Willie had written:

October 7, 1983

To William,

I hope you'll remember the day you were here in the bookstore with your mama and daddy.

I believe in you, William.

Love,  
Willie Morris

I would have loved to have Willie as a teacher. He did not build a course infrastructure for a class with all sorts of hoops for his students to jump through. He designed a course to accomplish a broad objective. He wanted students to become good writers. To do this, he read selections in class, listened to students talk about themselves, became better acquainted with them and made assignments suited to their personalities. His assignments were designed to give students successes, and the assignments became progressively more sophisticated as a student mastered basic techniques.

I think Willie's teaching ability was evident during his years as editor at *Harper's*

magazine. When we talked about specific articles that had appeared in *Harper's* during his years there, he would tell me why he had chosen that particular person to write the piece. He told me the right writer was essential for a piece. He worked very hard at finding the right writer. A writer might be right for one story, but not for several others. Willie knew how he wanted each piece written, and he worked with each writer to tell the story the best way possible. Under his tutelage, many well-respected writers became exceptional, and he helped several become very wealthy.

During the early 1980s Marcus Dupree, a young African-American high-school student, was developing into one of the best football players in America. Because Dupree was in the first racially integrated class to go through 12 years of school together - and because he was the running back at Philadelphia, Miss., where the terrible murders of civil rights workers had occurred in the early 1960s - Willie decided to do a book on the recruiting of Dupree.

For several months Willie made trips to Philadelphia, interviewing the locals. He talked to dozens of Philadelphians before Dupree's senior football season. Then Willie covered the season and talked with Dupree dozens and dozens of times.

On Nov. 13 he asked me to go with him to watch Dupree in the Choctaw Bowl, Dupree's last high school football game. We saw him break Herschel Walker's high-school career touchdown record.

More importantly, Willie learned that Dupree had narrowed his college choices to 12 universities. Ole Miss, which had been trying to recruit him for three years, was not on the list. We talked about the race issue and Ole Miss as we rode home, and we discussed the challenges facing the New South. We agreed that the people of Mississippi had come a long way in a short time and that they deserved a lot more credit than they generally received.

Willie left the department during the mid-1980s, and I did not see him very often, but we kept in touch. We talked several times after I accepted the deanship at the University of Nebraska, and before I left Ole Miss. On one occasion he reminded me that he had been on the field in Memorial Stadium for the Oklahoma game at Nebraska. He was there to see Marcus Dupree, who as a freshman was the star running back for the Sooners.

"It gets cold up there," Willie said. "It gets cold," and then he laughed impishly. He knew how fond I was of the deep South and Ole Miss, and he wanted me to feel the foreboding of living on the cold Northern plains.

At the end of my second year in Lincoln I received a package from Willie. It was a bound volume of *My Two Oxfords* by Willie. Attached was this note:

May 1992

A famous rare book publisher in Iowa printed this limited edition of 210 copies, of

which he gave me 20. I wanted you to have one. Who knows, it may be worth a lot some day. It's chiefly aimed toward the collector's market.

How are things in Nebraska?

Best,  
Willie

The gift reminded me that Willie did not forget his friends.

Our children have read *Good Old Boy* and several other pieces by Willie, so when our daughter, Elaine, heard of Willie's death last month, she asked, "Will they play taps?"

We talked about her question, and about Willie's significance as a writer and editor. Elaine would have learned more if Willie could have been part of the conversation. He knew how to explain things so well, especially to young people.



[Will Norton, Jr., is dean of the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska. One of his great professional rewards was teaching on the faculty of the Ole Miss Department of Journalism with Willie during the early 1980s].

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## The Greatest Editor I Ever Knew

---

By Larry L. King

He was the greatest editor I ever knew, and for many reasons.

The first time Willie Morris edited a piece of mine - in 1964 - so deft was his copy editing that I was ashamed of my indiscriminate wordiness, and I immediately saw he had improved my copy by at least 30 percent. He edited all of the 26 pieces I wrote for *Harper's* magazine between 1964 and 1971, and I think he taught me something every time.

But as good as he was with manuscripts, Morris was even better at matching writers and subjects. He loved to talk and to listen, almost always with a drink in his hand, and one was never quite sure where the conversation might go. The one thing that was a certainty was that when a writer's eyes began to shine, and words poured from him while his hands danced and darted and swooped, Willie Morris at some point would say, "Write that for me." He knew that if a writer was writing about a subject that truly engaged him, then he would likely bring to it his best bells and whistles and buttons and bows. This was particularly true of those of us who, free-lancing for a living with no guaranteed weekly paycheck, often met the rent and paid the utilities through grinding out pieces some editor had suggested and that, frankly, we didn't give a popcorn fart about except for the money. Willie knew how to mine for the true gold.

It was amazing, to some, that Morris could turn out the "hottest book in America" - as *Harper's* was often called during his glory-reign as editor-in-chief from 1967-1971. These likely were anal-retentive types who put great faith in neat desks, long boring staff meetings, blizzards of memos, chair-warming, slavish attention to the telephone, and a grim business "game face" at all times.

Ol' Willie's office - when he was in it - looked and sounded like dorm life among rowdy college football players: jokes, pranks, hoo-hawing and laughter prevailed. The editor-in-chief's desk looked liked a pile where pigs had fornicated, the editor-in-chief's shirt or jacket or sweater or trousers might host the spillage of one or more meals, the editor-in-chief's eyes surely sought out the office clock to see at what moment he dared to call it a day. Some days this might be at noon, or earlier, and other days the editor-in-chief might not even appear in the office until 4 p.m.

"The office is a bad place to get anything done," Willie often complained. "The phones drive me crazy and everybody wants to give me goddamned memos to read." He felt, too, that he was fair game for literary agents when in the office: "Most writers are good talkers, interesting folks. Agents are tongue-tied if they ain't talking money." When he had editing to do, Willie Morris preferred to hide out at home or in a Chinese restaurant a few blocks from *Harper's* on Madison Avenue. It was there that he once set up his good friend, the writer James Jones, by seeing to it that the author of *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line* received a fortune cookie saying, "You made your pile off the misery of others."

Periodically, the money men at *Harper's* and more conventional old editorial heads persuaded young Willie Morris - all of 32 when he became top-dog at the magazine - to hold a

staff meeting. Willie knew that I hated such meetings every bit as much as he did, and pressured me, finally, into attending one. None of my usual excuses or even some inventive new ones got me off the hook. I didn't know why I was so important to that particular meeting until I saw a certain glint in Willie's eye as he called the meeting to order and said, "Our visiting contributing editor, Larry L. King, has requested that he be permitted to open today's proceedings by singing his favorite Southern spiritual, "Jesus On the Five-Yard Line."

I simply could not believe it. It was a song I never before had rendered sober, and always it was performed - usually at Willie's request - at post-midnight concerts while I perched on a tall bar stool or perhaps stood up on a table. But I stood up, said with as much dignity as I could muster, "Thank you, Dr. Morris," and sang in my bar-room baritone - complete with cheer-leader gestures where needed - as follows:

*Oh the game was played on Sunday  
In St. Peter's backyard  
Jesus played right halfback  
And Moses played right guard.  
The Angels on the sideline  
Christ! How they did yell  
When Jesus scored a touchdown  
Against that team from Hell!*

*Stay with Christ! Stay With Christ!  
Jesus on the Five yard-Line  
Moses doing Goddern fine!  
Stay With Christ  
Stay With Christ  
HOKE 'EM POKE 'EM JESUS SOAK 'EM  
Staaaaaaaaay with Christ!*



I nodded at a gaping, silent audience of elders and sat down. Willie began talking about the upcoming issue of the magazine as if I were not in the room or had not made a public fool of myself. For once, the old editors seemed almost speechless. The meeting was mercifully brief.

Outside, as we escaped to that Chinese restaurant Willie loved, he laughed and said, "Now how was that for a good staff meeting?" As we drank a long lunch, he frequently broke into laughter at the expressions on the faces of the older editors. I think before we left, Willie had me rise and sing that song three times more. I should have known right then that, eventually, the money boys and the anal retentives would get Ol' Willie, as the funless and clueless group eventually did. But I will revere my old pal, for as long as I have breath, for putting out the best magazine I ever saw, read or worked on, and for all he did for writers and for writing then and later - while making it fun.

Willie Morris died suddenly in Mississippi - his place - only a few hours before my family and I left for a long-planned vacation in Italy. On the day of his funeral I walked away from everyone else, in the shadow of The Colosseum in Rome. I talked privately to Ol' Willie's spirit for a few moments and then I sang for him - one last time - "Jesus on the Five-Yard Line." I think he would have liked that.

[Larry L. King is the author of 13 books, 7 stage plays, television documenaries, magazine articles and short stories. His most recent book, *A Writer's Life In Letters*, or, *Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye* will be published by TCU Press in October].



# The Southerner

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## A Helper and a Joker

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By **Wayne Greenhaw**

**I**t was three o'clock in the morning. Sitting at the cluttered table in the kitchen at Larry and Dean Wells's house in Oxford, Mississippi, Willie Morris had his elbows anchored on yesterday's *New York Times*, but his mind was on a day years earlier. "I loved him," Willie said. "He was my brother."

He was talking about James Jones, the author of *From Here to Eternity* and other great novels. They had become friends in the 1950s, and in 1978, after Jones died at age 56, Willie wrote *James Jones: A Friendship*, a memoir of sorts, a continuance of his *North Toward Home*, a highly personal, loving tribute to his friend.

When I told Willie about my own time at The Colony in Robinson, Ill., he wanted to know every detail: How many drinks we had together, what Jones said, how his mentor Lowney Handy reacted when she found me passed out the next morning in Jones's living room.

"What'd she say?" he asked, wanting me to repeat how she screamed, "Get your sorry little ass up, you little shit!" Then Willie laughed so hard he almost spilled his drink.

When he'd calmed, he said, "Tell it again," and I did. When I finished the second time, he laughed almost as hard again. Then he said, "Jim would-a loved that story."

Then he told me how he'd known Jones in Manhattan, on Long Island and in the Hamptons, where Jones had lived and where he died at a place called Chateau Spud. "He told me to write a big novel with great themes, then the book-publishing world would take me seriously," Willie said.

At that time, he was deep into his "big novel," which he called Taps, about a young bugler during the Korean War, a young man, like Willie had been, who went from one soldier's funeral to another around the South, playing "Taps." He was not only intense about the details; he assured me and the others sitting around the table that he was tackling big questions, appropriate themes for a "big novel" as well as the panoramic sweep of the South.

As I listened to him and looked into those dark weepy hound-dog eyes, I wondered if his description of his book didn't sound familiar. Did it not resonate a little too much of *James Jones*? Or *From Here to Eternity*? And I wondered if Willie hadn't gotten so close with a love so great that he allowed the memory of Jones to become overwhelming.

But Willie was like that. He gave of himself to the younger writers who came to him for advice and guidance. Once at the round table in the corner of the Holiday Inn at Oxford, where Willie held court every afternoon for years, a young man from the University sat and waited while Willie read every word of an article he had written. The youngster watched while Willie pored over every word, every sentence, and when he finished, he motioned for the student to follow him outside.

Twenty minutes later Willie returned. He shook his head sadly. "I could not berate him in front of y'all," he said. "He needs to take some remedial English courses before he continues." He shook his head again. "What is happening in America when our young people are not learning the basics? Here this guy is: A freshman in college, wants to write, but can't spell and has no idea about subject and verb agreement. It is terribly, terribly sad."

I realized that Willie really did care. When the same young man came back several days

later, Willie spent as much time with him as he had the first time. He was just as gentle, just as discrete, and just as sad.

On another occasion, when I went to Oxford to write an article for the old *Southern Voices* magazine about Faulkner and the Yoknapatawpha Conference at Ole Miss, my wife Sally called me to the phone on Saturday afternoon. She said it was Norman Mailer calling. "Who?" I asked, and she repeated what she'd said.

When I answered with a questioning edge to my voice, this distinctive voice asked, "Greenhaw? This is Norman Mailer. I understand you're going to Oxford tomorrow."

I told him I was, then he said, "Will they have something to drink down there?"

I said that I was not sure, but to be on the safe side I would carry a bottle of bourbon. After all, tomorrow was Sunday and Oxford was in Mississippi.

"Well," he said, "I was told you'd know."

After he told me he would be writing an article on the conference for *Playboy*, he hung up.

I told Sally that the voice sounded like Mailer, whom I had met once years before with movie director Frank Perry, but then I speculated that it was probably Willie Morris, who knew I was going to Oxford and who was famous for his mimicking phone calls.

However, the call did remind me to buy a bottle of bourbon and have it in my car, just in case.

About two hours later, the phone rang again.

This time I answered.

The same voice inquired, "Wayne Greenhaw? This is Mailer again. What I want to know is: Who the hell are you?"

When I got to Oxford the next afternoon I was glad I'd brought along my own bottle. I found Willie and we went to a honky tonk up the road where they sold beer and set-ups. I brought my brown bag and bottle inside. At a table, where we were delivered glasses, ice and a pitcher of water, Willie said Norman Mailer called him the night before.

"He was upset because you told him Oxford was dry," Willie said. I eyed Willie suspiciously. "I didn't tell him that," I said. Then I accused Willie of calling me and pretending he was Mailer. "I did not," he insisted. "Well," I said, shrugging, "if he hadn't called, I wouldn't have remembered to bring the booze."

"Then it was a good call," Willie said. Then we toasted *The Good Life*.

Norman Mailer never showed up at the conference. Halfway through the week I asked Willie again if he had not made the call as Mailer. He denied it but two weeks later, home again in Montgomery, a mutual friend called and said, "That damn Willie's at it again."

"What?" I asked.

"He's called twice as Norman Mailer, then this morning he called as Marshal Frady. I couldn't tell with the first calls, but I know Frady's voice."

When I next called Willie he cackled like a hen. "Y'all got me all wrong. I haven't been Mailer or Frady in ages. During the last year I've been Halberstam and I've got him down flat."

Several years later when David Halberstam did call to ask about happenings in Montgomery for his book *The Fifties*, at first I didn't believe it was he. I questioned him, then I heard this silence on the other end of the phone. Then he said, "Harry Ashmore told me to call you," and I knew it really was Halberstam. But from that time on, whenever some writer called, there would be a hesitation in my thought processes: Is it really Willie?

[**Wayne Greenhaw**, a veteran journalist and Nieman Fellow at Harvard, lives in Montgomery, Ala. His 13th book, *Beyond the Night: A Remembrance*, is being published this fall by Black Belt Press].



# The Southerner

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## Willie Morris: The Prankster

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By Curtis Wilkie

**W**illie Morris died much too young, but he never would have fit into the role of an old man. After his death, many good words were used to describe him: generous, loyal, gentle, brilliant, progressive, kind-hearted. Youthful also applies. Willie had a cherubic face that twinkled with mischief, and he played boyish pranks all his life.

In *North Toward Home*, a seminal book for anyone in his generation who wrestled with Mississippi, Willie wrote about a ruse he conceived 50 years ago after he realized his short-wave radio could pick up a live account of major league baseball games that were being re-created by a phoney named “The Old Scotchman,” whose reports on a Southern network ran an inning or two behind the real thing.

Willie called up the fire station, where a group of Yazoo City men gathered each afternoon to listen to “The Old Scotchman.”

“Hello, Chief, can you tell me the score?”

“The Yanks are ahead, 5-2.”

“This is the Phantom you’re talkin’ with.”

“Who?”

“The Phantom,” Willie said, instructing the chief to listen carefully as he detailed the specific base hits and strike outs that were about to unfold in the game.

“Aw, go to hell,” the chief said, and hung up.

The game, of course, followed the course Willie had outlined, so he called the chief again.

“Say, how’d you know that?” the chief asked.

“Stick with me,” Willie said, “and I’ll feed you predictions. I can predict anything that’s gonna happen anywhere in the next 10 years.”

After a pause, Willie added, “Beware of fire real soon.”

Willie perfected his telephone tomfoolery until the day he died. His victims were always his friends. Posing as an editor, he called writers to make bogus story assignments. As an “AP reporter,” he sought comment from political figures on bizarre events he invented. After Willie had reeled in his quarry, he would laugh and confess, “This is Willie Morris.” He liked the ring of his down-country name, and he always pronounced it with a special inflection.

Willie’s funeral attracted enough literary firepower to light up the skies of the North American continent. The best and the brightest of Mississippi’s politicians were there, too. But hundreds of men and women — whose names might not be known far from Jackson — represented the most touching element of the congregation. They were the proof of Willie’s wide circle of friends.

Nobody outside Willie’s family was more torn up over his death than Jack Stevens, a bartender at one of Willie’s favorite haunts in Jackson, Hal & Mal’s. In *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers*, Willie immortalized “Shoeless Jack” Stevens as a “descendant of a prominent Jackson family, collector of vintage minutiae, actor, bon vivant.” On the day of Willie’s funeral, Jack, still weeping copiously, showed up for the services in a wrinkled suitcoat with the arms out of place. His employer, Malcolm White, shrugged it off. Jack’s appearance was appropriate, Malcolm said. “He looks as disheveled as Willie.”

Willie had great taste in everything but clothes and wine. He favored knit cotton shirts and loose-fitting trousers, and when he and his wife, JoAnne, arrived for dinner at the Mayflower, a brown-bag cafe in downtown Jackson, Willie would invariably come bearing execrable jugs of wine.

Willie was sentimental. Sometimes, usually late in the evening when his stories took on a melancholy air, he would cry gently, swipe at the tears and remark on his own foolishness. So when he died, none of his friends felt embarrassed by their own tears.

During the time between the Monday evening his heart gave out and the Thursday afternoon he was buried, hundreds of people spontaneously collected at Willie and JoAnne's home in Jackson. They didn't come for a brief courtesy call and leave. They stayed for hours and wept and laughed and drank tons of beer and wine and stronger stuff. They were remembering Willie.

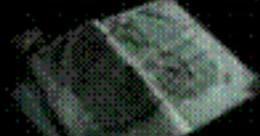
Cats flitted through the house. Willie always had pets, faithful dogs and inscrutable cats. He wrote books about them. *My Dog Skip* has been made into a movie. Willie and JoAnne went to New York to see its preview the week before he died. Willie completed a sequel, *My Cat Spit McGee*, which will be published posthumously. Any man who loves animals is a good man.

Willie had devised his schedule for the week, and JoAnne left it out for his friends to see. At the top of the page for Tuesday, Willie had written: "Vote." A throwback to the days of the "Yellow Dog Democrats," he intended to vote in the Democratic primary; Mississippians were choosing a nominee for governor. There were several other items on the list before Willie listed: "Work." He often put off work for play, but he still managed to put together an impressive body of literature in his lifetime. He wrote eloquently of his distress with his native state in *North Toward Home*. But instead of staying in New York to launch critical lightning bolts from afar, he came home, joined the forces that were changing the state, and wound up writing celebrations of Mississippi. This year, he tackled an ambitious project, a big book about Mississippi that he worked on with his son, David Rae Morris, a photographer. It will be his last.

David, who lives in New Orleans, shares his father's mirthful ways. When they dined together at Galatoire's, a fashionable French Quarter restaurant, either father or son could be counted on to sneak a plastic roach into the other's salad.

On the day that Willie lay in state in the rotunda of the Old State Capitol, David had the last laugh. As a long line of mourners coiled through the Confederate-era chamber to pay condolences to the family and to say goodbye to Willie, many were startled to see a plastic roach, resting on the marbled foot of Jefferson Davis.



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# The Southerner

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## Willie Morris was a Happy Man

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Jack Bales

Willie Morris was a happy man that Sunday night.

I had just finished editing *Conversations with Willie Morris*, a compilation of author interviews and profiles, and on the evening of August 1, 1999, he called to say how much he liked the book's introduction that I had recently sent him. I reminded him that we were going to go on a joint book-signing tour after the University Press of Mississippi published the volume.

"I haven't forgotten," he said. "And believe me, not only are we going to sign a lot of books, but we're going to have a great time together doing it."

After I hung up the phone I remembered how Willie and I first became acquainted. In the summer of 1995 a friend had given me a copy of his *My Dog Skip*. I read the poignant memoir of his youth in one sitting, fell in love with its style and grace, and quickly began seeking out the author's other books. In September of that year I wrote him a letter to say how much I liked his work and to ask a few questions. He wrote back a few weeks later, thus beginning a warm friendship throughout which we exchanged hundreds of letters, numerous phone calls and several visits.

In one of my letters I told him that I had written several works of literary biography, and I asked him if it would be all right if I started researching his life and books. He readily agreed, and told me where his letters and manuscripts were located and whom to contact. I spent parts of two summers poring over his 17,000 papers at the University of Mississippi's library. Of course, the tedium of long days of note-taking was brightened by weekends of spirited conversation with him and his wife, JoAnne, at their lovely home in Jackson.

Each time I visited, he and I would go on his "\$64,000 tour" of Yazoo City, during which he would reminisce about his boyhood as he pointed out the landmarks of his youth. And invariably, as we drove along Broadway down the hill past Miss Sarah Cooper Lear's house, he would pump the brakes of the car and pretend that they had failed, re-creating the actual brake failure of his youth as detailed in *My Dog Skip*. I, of course, was always fooled by his prank, and as he laughed I would sheepishly remember that he often referred to himself as the "oldest living sixth-grader" (an appellation he richly deserved).

Although our visits, letters and conversations meant much to both of us, what I especially valued was the opportunity to help him with his own projects. As Willie's and my friendship grew, I discovered (as have countless others) that he had an unlimited capacity for kindness and generosity. In the course of my research he lent me items from his own library, referred me to others who could aid in my research, and constantly offered advice, cooperation and encouragement. As a reference librarian, I was more than a little familiar with the techniques of literary research, so when he occasionally asked if I could find something he needed for one of his books, I leaped at the chance to assist him. His delight in my finding what he needed was exceeded only by my own pleasure.

While drifting off to sleep that evening of August 1, I remembered that Willie was also

happy with the progress of the motion picture adaptation of *My Dog Skip*. He and JoAnne had just returned from a trip to New York to view a preliminary screening. "It is by any measure an absolute classic," he exuberantly wrote me that night. "I can't wait for you to see it."

Willie faxed me the letter that evening, and I received it the next day. Hours later I received another phone call, this one from my editor at the University Press of Mississippi, who told me of Willie's untimely death. Ironically, Willie's and my friendship began and ended, way too soon, while discussing *My Dog Skip*. When I once again see his beloved Yazoo City in the film, I will remember our own summer meanderings down the streets of his youth, our frequent letters and conversations, and the essential sweetness of a good, good man and friend.



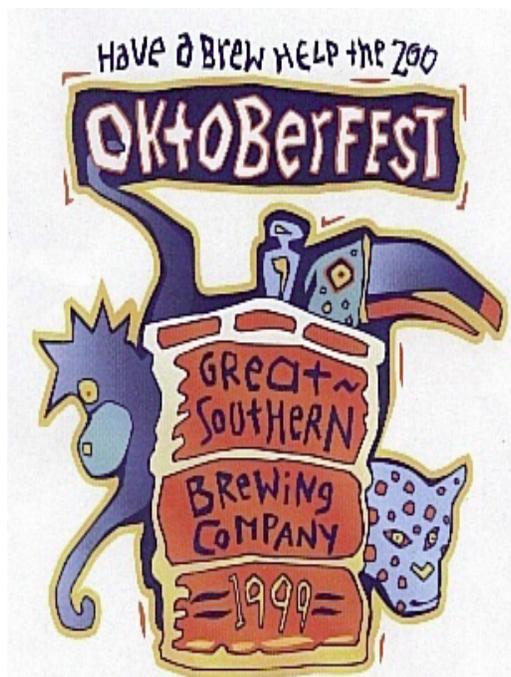
[**Jack Bales** is an Instruction and Humanities Librarian at Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Va.]

## Oktoberfest at the Great Southern Brewing Company

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Admission includes commemorative pint glass and first beer.

# The Southerner

## Willie Morris Remembered

**By Fred Brown**

This was in 1982. I was writing Mid-South features for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* and loving every minute of it. I roamed the country, came to know and understand it in a special way. I relished my trips through the Delta. It was at once mysterious and beguiling.

Faulkner said, “And now they enter the Delta,” which defined my fascination for the hot, humid ground.

It was along about this time, as I was running about fetching features, I bumped into Willie Morris. I had already read most of his stories. They held me like a deer caught in the beams of headlights at night. I could barely breathe when I read his words. They were so great, and so to the point of my existence. They spoke of the South, my home place.

I determined if I could ever meet Willie, I would jump at it. Then my editor, the late Milton Britten, sent me to Oxford to interview him for a feature. I was so eager, I left that moment and wound up on Willie’s doorstep at last light.

He was already in full voice, commiserating with a house full of people. He said just, “come on in, get a beer.” I ambled on into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door for the beer. And just to see if it were true, I also pulled open the stove. And, yep, he hid the phone in the stove, just as everyone said he did.

After a couple of days with Willie, touring Oxford and some of its watering holes, I returned to my newspaper and wrote the following story about the man who over the years



**Photo by: Fred Brown**  
Willie Morris at his writing desk in Oxford, Miss., 1997

became a good friend, who was always willing to help me with a quote, or to find someone for me to quote. Willie was my friend, and I am very sad today that he is gone.

This story is in tribute to the man, who more than anyone in my mind epitomizes the modern South that continues to cling to its taproot.

OXFORD, Miss. - They come up to him during all hours when he's out loose on the town and hang on him. "Willie," they yelp, and he looks majestically toward the caller and smiles. "Hello, dear," he says. And they kiss and hug. Willie Morris is home, among his people.

When toasting a friend's wife on the couple's 27th wedding anniversary, Morris, the writer, is as eloquent in speech as he is in print.

He speaks directly to his friend's wife. To Morris, she represents the draping and enchanting beauty of the Deep South, the traditions of Southern charm, mystery and a kind of characteristic steel imbued in the Southern female.

Morris, who has a slouchy, good-ol'-boy, heel-skidding walk, roams at will in Oxford, uncovering friends.

State Rep. Ed Perry, Oxford city attorney and chairman of the Mississippi House Appropriations Committee, or John Leslie, mayor of Oxford, are his usual companions on forays into Oxford's watering spots, such as The Warehouse, which was once an honest-to-goodness cotton warehouse, The Gin and something called The Hoka, where you bring your own to burnish off the evening after draining the other two.

Morris, born in Yazoo City, returned to Mississippi in 1980 after leaving the editor's chair of *Harper's* magazine, a position in which he worked with and edited some of the finest writers in the nation - Marshal Frady, Larry King, Norman Mailer, John Knowles, William Styron.

He came to teach at the University of Mississippi for one semester that year and now, after something of a rift with the English department, Morris is a writer-in-residence in the journalism department. He teaches a writing workshop, a three-hour credit course and is publisher of *The Ole Miss Magazine*, a product of the workshop.

His students are enraptured with the writer and the shadow he is casting in the larger shade of William Faulkner.

"People have to realize that he is a great journalist and editor and is becoming a great writer," says Rocky Miskelly, one of his students. "He has written about the things he loved and that's the key to Willie. He leaves you with a message without insulting your intelligence.

"He's edited the world's oldest magazine and yet he can come down to your level, whether he is talking to a black sharecropper on 39 acres or a chairman of the House Appropriations Committee," Miskelly said.

Ollie Carruthers slid into The Hoka as Morris toasted his friends. Carruthers isn't a student, but the black Vietnam veteran says he loves Willie like a father.

"Before you know a person you have to understand them. I understand Willie. We go off on conversations together. He has been himself with me, and he explains things to me. He is a straight-up friend and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him."

There is a romance going on here between Morris and his people. He is fetching and they delight in his dominance. It is clear that Morris loves what he is about, a man writing fondly and intellectually of himself and the people.

Morris, who can be found usually in khaki pants, Oxford loafers and an Ole Miss knit T-shirt, sleeps most of the day. He hides his phone in the stove.

He begins writing hard in the afternoons. Or, he might walk his best friend, Pete, a large Labrador retriever, a stately old gentleman who is slightly above the din that normally surrounds Morris. Pete dismisses most of Morris' friends with a sniff, a blink and a snore.

When the two take to the countryside, it is usually near Rowan Oak, Faulkner's home, or in cemeteries where Morris searches for the soul of his South.

At 47, Morris is writing a book on a remarkable athlete, Marcus Dupree of Philadelphia, Miss., in Neshoba County.

This past year, Dupree was the most sought-after high school football player in the country. After the recruiting wars, Dupree decided to attend Oklahoma University. Morris spent the football season in the stands watching Dupree, cataloging his feats, and now he is writing a book on that, and more, for Doubleday.

The book is in bits and pieces in a sea of file folders lapping across the dining room table and coffee table in his modest house on faculty row.

For Morris, the book is something other than just another jock book. It transcends football and reaches the symbolic "elements of the South trying to change."

"I'm obsessed with mortality. I find mortality in the elemental things, such as the South. Mortality pervades everything I see or do. Every time I saw this big black kid with glasses who weighs 225 pounds, I thought of A.E. Housman's poem from A Shropshire Lad called, "To An Athlete Dying Young." Anyway it's all a metaphor, all of it. It's a metaphor for time passing, for living momentarily on the Lord's earth.

"The circumstances of the most highly sought football player is the original thread that holds the book together," Morris said.

But it is about Mississippi, the South and my coming home. I spent about half of my time in Neshoba County. I really got to know the people, both races. I feel real proud of the strides they have made since the terrible days of the '60s."

Morris was referring to the killing of three Civil Rights workers in 1964 in Neshoba County. "What I'm trying to do in this book is explore the complexities of Mississippi over a period of time and coming out of a terrible problem."

In lighter moments at his home, with Mayor Leslie and Rep. Perry, Morris beams when he has the floor, which is much of the time.

"Oxford is the last of the best of the Deep South. I can't conceive of a town having a better mayor or representative. The relationship between the university and the town is most amiable. And the town just looks good. You don't see any black slums," Morris said.

Morris said he intends to remain in Mississippi now. He prefers magnolia to megalomania. "I'm home. A writer goes away from home at his own risk. My people founded this state and now lie in this humming earth in Yazoo City and Raymond.

"This gives me a strange but a strong feeling. I'm going to stay where my people are and not around some cocktail party," he said, glancing over at Mayor Leslie.

Pete is snoozing on the floor at Morris' feet. Morris smiles and swishes his glass a bit. "Pete is the honorary mayor of Bridgehampton, N.Y. I think he will be the first black mayor of Oxford," he says with a laugh that is thin, but there in depth.

Willie Morris is home, and it is time for another night out in Oxford, feeling the vibrations, drinking in the souls that touch him as only they can be touched on a Friday night in Oxford. Loose, on the move. Home.

I wrote that story 17 years ago about my friend Willie Morris. The other day I had to write his obituary for *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*.

It was one of the hardest stories I've ever had to write. It wasn't that the story was long. It wasn't. Newspaper obits aren't ever long. They tend to give you short, brief facts of someone's stay here on earth, and that's it.

I wanted to write a great deal about Willie Morris: The nights out with him, cruising the Delta; talking about writing and writers; discussing race and politics in that rich way of his, tapping into his phenomenal memory and storehouse of experience.



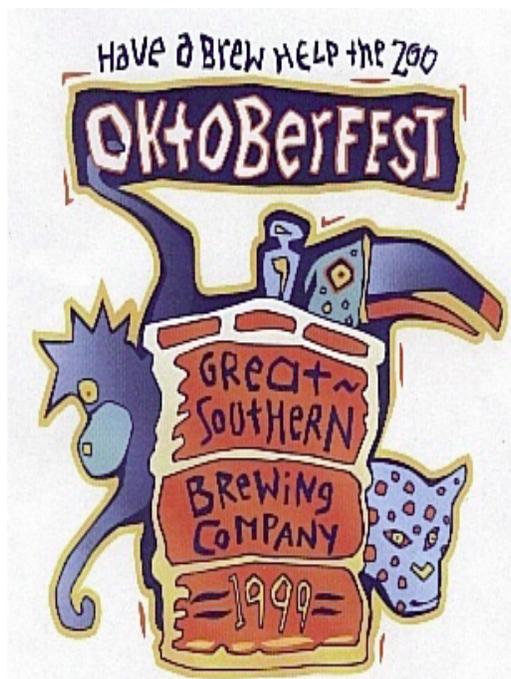
Like many, many more who knew Willie Morris and benefited from his wise counsel, ~~I will miss this man of the sod, this man of the South, who wrote from the terrains of his heart.~~ Ahh, Willie, you will be greatly missed.

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# The Southerner

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## Willie Had His Quirks

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By **Winston Groom**

Willie Morris lived hard, wrote beautifully and went out at the top of his game.

He had been in New York for the press screening of the movie of his book *My Dog Skip*, and phoned me excitedly that the reaction was splendid. A few days later, heart failure struck him down.

Willie was one of the most cultivated people I've ever known. Coming out of Yazoo City, Miss., he became in turn a Rhodes Scholar, editor of *Harper's* magazine in its heyday, and the author of 15 books, including *North Toward Home* and *New York Days*.

His reverence for the craft of writing was almost mystical and his generosity to young writers legendary.

He came to the *Washington Star* in the 1970s as writer-in-residence and, when he learned I was working on a novel about the Vietnam War, he not only demanded that I leave the paper to finish it, but found a literary agent to represent it.

Later, I sent him the manuscript of *Forrest Gump* before anyone else saw it and, instead of his usual blizzard of suggestions and corrections, he wrote back: "Don't touch a word of it!"

But Willie had his quirks: He had a certain fascination with death and could sometimes be found hanging around graveyards, speaking to tombstones as if they were real people; he took the writer William Styron to a cemetery where he had earlier planted Styron's famous book *Lie Down In Darkness* on a grave, open to the epigraph on Death. Also, Willie positively hated the telephone. So as not to hear it ringing, he sometimes put it in the oven. Occasionally he would forget and heat up a pizza or something. He lost a lot of good phones that way.

Mississippi knows how to treat its writers. Willie's remains lay in the rotunda of the Old Capitol Building after he died. The next day he was buried in Yazoo City in the same cemetery where, as a boy, he had played taps for the American Legion at funerals of Korean War soldiers. As the sun set over the vast Mississippi Delta, and many of America's greatest writers stood by in the scorching August heat, the mournful notes of taps resounded over one of this country's finest literary figures.



[**Winston Groom** is a former reporter for the *Washington Star*, author of *Forrest Gump* and other books].

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# The Southerner

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## The Day I Went North Toward Home

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By Billy Field

I was a senior at the University of Alabama, when my father called and said, “There’s this boy from Mississippi, and he can write like hell. He wrote this book called *North Toward Home*, and you need to read it.” I got that book and read it. It changed my life. I will tell you how.

When I was 12 years old, my mother took my sister, my grandfather, a family friend and me on a trip around the country in a 1961 Rambler with a canvas cargo carrier on top. We were driving through Seattle, with our Alabama license plate, when suddenly our car was surrounded by scowly faced protesters, shouting: “Go back where you came from.” I didn’t know why they were angry. Like most kids, my first thought was that it was our fault, as if we had done something wrong. Finally the small mob receded, and we drove away. I asked my mother, who was driving, what they were mad about. Distaught and humiliated, she almost wept, “They’re not yelling at us. They’re yelling because we’re from Alabama - and Alabama has such a horrible reputation.”

That was a profound experience for a 12-year-old. I can still see the hate in those white faces, spewing spit and judgment. During the remainder of our trip, while in the North, I covered our Alabama license plate with mud and cultivated an amazingly believable Yankee accent. I even made up a story that I was from Florida. If any part of my Southern accent snuck through, I figured the Florida angle would explain it. From that traumatic day in Seattle, until my senior year in college, I was ashamed to say, to anyone outside of the South, that I was from the South.

Then I read *North Toward Home*.

It gave me back who I was - and then some. After reading *North Toward Home*, I was proud to say I was from the South. If somebody didn’t like it, to hell with ‘em.

About that time, I got a job offer in Kansas City. I wanted to make films. There was a company in Kansas City that made Industrial Films. I figured it was a good place to learn.

Before leaving home, though, I wanted to pay my respects to the South. I had come to think of Yazoo as the Mecca. I wanted to travel to Yazoo, see it, kiss the ground that it was, then vanish into the North. I packed my car, left my crying family at 5 in the morning and drove from the small town where I grew up, across toward Yazoo.

It was the third of June. Bugs swirled in the Mississippi heat, and the smell of fertilizer was strong in the cotton fields. A politician named Seay was running for Senate, smiling down from billboards. Finally I came to the hill that Willie described in *North Toward Home*, the hill that plummeted down into the Delta. I knew I was in Yazoo.

I stopped downtown and parked the car, alone, except for my copy of *North Toward Home*. I got out of the car and walked around. There was the statue of the Confederate soldier who was taking the gun, but looked “a little like he didn’t want to take it.” I wanted to see the house where Willie had grown up, but I did not want to intrude. People have a right to privacy, even the mothers of heroes. But I had to go. This was the house where Willie had played football with Skip and Benji and Bubba. This was where Willie wrote his first stories, in the back room while his mother taught piano lessons. I was determined to find the house, but was still unsure about knocking on the door.

I got back in the car and drove around town, looking for landmarks, when I saw a postman crossing the street. He was thin and stood straight and tall. I asked if he knew where Willie

Morris grew up. He looked perplexed and said, "Who?" I knew that *North Toward Home* had been controversial in Yazoo, so I didn't want to identify Willie by the book. I was afraid, if the postman didn't like it, he wouldn't give me the address. I repeated that I was looking for where Willie Morris grew up, then added, "His father was named Rae and worked for the gas company. And his mother teaches piano lessons." Suddenly the postman's eyes got big as he rared back and said, "Ohhh! You mean that ol' boy that wrote that book." I nodded. He said, "He grew up right down there on Grand Avenue - 615 Grand. I've been delivering mail there for years." I thanked him and drove to Grand Avenue.

There it was - the house that I had seen in the picture on the dust cover of *North Toward Home* - the picture with the 32 year old Willie leaning against a tree in the front yard. That was Willie's house. That was the front yard where Skip ran the flea flicka. I circled the block. I did not want to intrude, but, finally, I figured the worst that could happen is they'd tell me to leave. I parked the car and walked toward the door.

I knocked. The door cracked open and a woman's round face appeared. This had to be Willie's mother, I thought. Her face was the same shape as Willie's in the photo by the tree. She looked at me curiously then asked, "Yes?" I stammered, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for where Willie Morris grew up." The round face immediately disappeared behind the door and I thought that, surely, I must be the 20th person by here this week and she's about to slam the door. But, then, just as quickly, the door opened wide and Marion Weeks Morris, Willie's mother, smiled big and said, "Come on in."

I went in to visit Willie's mother. She was thrilled that I had come. She said that people came by all the time, and that she loved it. "A nice minister from England came by earlier in the week," she said.

Mrs. Morris showed me Willie's bedroom in the back of the house. She said it still looked much the same. We visited Skip's grave, which is beside the house, between the house and the driveway. The same piano was in the living room, where Willie's Mama continued to teach piano lessons.

We got into Mrs. Morris' car to take a tour. She was proud of the car, most of all because Willie had bought it for her. We drove out to the Yazoo River, toured Willie's school, then climbed Brickyard Hill to visit Viola. Viola wore a purple dress and was excited to see us. Pictures were taken. Stories were told. Here's one I remember: Do you know how Willie got his name? He wasn't always "Willie." His mother called him "William." When Willie was in the seventh grade, he ran for class president. His imaginative campaign manager came up with the slogan, "Don't Be Silly, Vote For Willie." Needless to say, it stuck. Mrs. Morris was furious. "I always wanted him to be 'William,'" she said. "It sounded so much more dignified."

Late that afternoon, the shadows grew dark across the piano in the living room. It was time to go. I got into my car. Mrs. Morris and I said our good-byes.

In *North Toward Home*, Willie described the road between the Delta and Memphis as being so flat and straight you could drive it on automatic pilot. I put my car in automatic pilot and drove north, toward my new home.

Over the years Marion Morris and I would become friends and write many letters. I would also write Willie, and he would write me. In his letters, he would end by saying, "My mother remembers you fondly." I remember her fondly too and that afternoon in Yazoo where, now, Marion Weeks Morris, her husband, Rae, and her son, Willie, rest in peace, on a gentle hillside, overlooking home.



[**Billy Field** is a screenwriter who wrote for the television series *FAME*, *Trapper John, M.D.* and *The Lazarus Man*. He lives in Tuscaloosa, Ala., where he writes screenplays and runs a cyber studio located at [www.makeamovie.net](http://www.makeamovie.net)].

# The Southerner

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## Gay Talese on Willie Morris

Interview by Glynn Wilson

In 1965, I left *The New York Times* and I started writing pieces for magazines, and then long books, beginning with *The Kingdom and the Power*. There was no enthusiasm for this idea. I wanted to write about that awareness I had of the paper, the family and the characters, etc. Nobody in the book publishing industry thought it was a story because, they said, who wants to read about journalism?



Talese 1969

There was no such thing as a media book. The word media wasn't even in the language. So, this would be the first of the media books. But at that time, in 1966-67, there was no attention paid to the media and no interest in this book except by one guy, who gave me a total advance of \$10,000. This was a man who was with a company called World. He read *The New York Times* a lot.

So I started writing this book and it took me four years. After I wrote about half of it in final form, I showed it around and gave it to my publisher, but they wouldn't give me any more money and I couldn't finish it. I had a daughter in 1964, and I had more expenses than I could deal with. I went to Willie Morris who was then editor of *Harper's*, the top of his career as I recall. I showed him part of the book, and he liked it enough to give me \$10,000.

He took what I had written and published two excerpts in *Harper's*. One was the lead piece and the other followed the next month. Only because of the money that Morris gave me was I able to finish the book, which became a big best-selling book. You always hear about what he did for Mailer and Styron and Halberstam and people that knew him really well. He didn't know me that well. He only knew me through Halberstam. David Halberstam and I were very close friends during our *New York Times* years and after, when he quit to work for Harper's and [write] the books that would follow. I did get from Halberstam the introduction, for which I'm grateful on many counts - not the least being the generosity of Willie.

I saw Willie about a year or so ago at Winston Groom's and was able to tell him that. We had a little seminar that Groom oversaw with students in North Carolina. That book launched me. I had written a couple of little books before that didn't go anywhere. I was very much on the margin in terms of money. That book gave me the money to do other books and it was really that important two-part series, each 5,000 words, 10,000 total guaranteed, that in 1970 turned my whole life around.

Now it's almost 30 years since then. I wouldn't have ever done anything else probably if I had not done that book. I don't know what I would've done. It made me able to support myself as a full-time writer. Otherwise, I would've had to look for a job on magazines or do something else.

*The Kingdom and the Power*, which is still in print as a paperback, launched the media books. All the books that would later on be about *The Washington Post*, or about journalism,

or figures in it. Before that, there wasn't much about the world of journalism except biographies. Histories of *The New York Times* had been published, more or less under the auspices of the paper. But mine was the first that was outside the authorized biographies, or institutional books.

I think he respected me as a working writer, but I also don't ever dismiss my Alabama years as having some connection with his true Southern background. Mine was kind of like I got a scholarship to the South. And now, I'm not Mississippi, I'm more Alabama in my sentiments, but I certainly know the South and keep going back to it.

He certainly affected, among the many lives, Mailer's first Pulitzer Prize - it really bailed Mailer out as a novelist. It was in non-fiction through the pages of Morris that Mailer's *Steps of the Pentagon* revived his career. So Morris has been a great force in the future of other people.

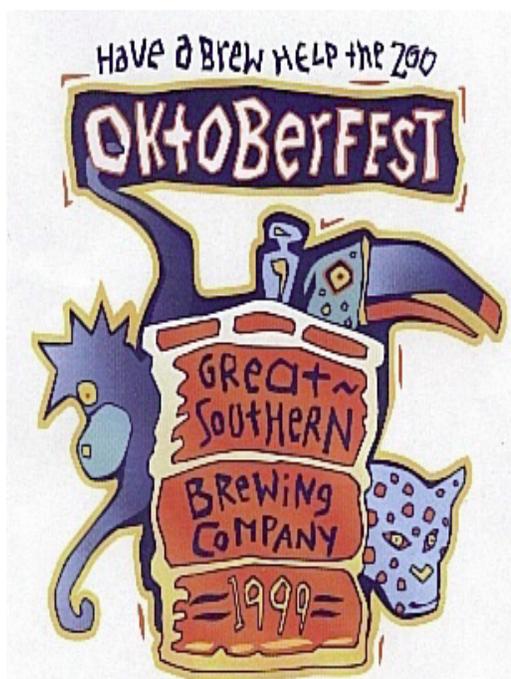


## Oktoberfest at the Great Southern Brewing Company

Saturday, Oct. 16

Get a FREE commemorative pint glass.  
Refills only \$1.50.

Proceeds benefit Knoxville Zoo



2 p.m.-midnight

Downtown Knoxville

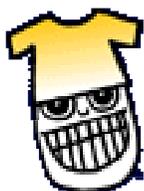
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Come enjoy a day and night of music, food, beer and fun outside the promenade in the rear of the building at 424 S. Gay Street

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Tickets: \$7.50 advance, available at the brewpub downtown, Knoxville Cigar Co., Cat's Music and T-Hed tees;\$10 at the door.

Admission includes commemorative pint glass and first beer.

# The Southerner

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## William Styron

### On Willie Morris and Southern Writing

Interviewed by Glynn Wilson

*TS: Relate the stories of what Willie Morris means to you, how he may have helped you in your career at some point?*

**WS:** He did not help me. I had a pretty good career going, on that level, but I became a good friend of Willie's. This was back in the '60s. I didn't need any help. I was already established. But he did run a large excerpt of my novel *Confessions of Nat Turner*. That was sort of a ground-breaking moment, because I don't think Harper's had run anything quite as long as that ever before, anything as substantial, and it created a great deal of attention for the magazine and for my book. It helped cement our friendship. I was getting to know Willie at that time, and I became a great friend of Willie's.

I don't want to downgrade Willie's contribution. I didn't mean to do that. It's just that I don't think Willie was instrumental in either Mailer's career or mine. We were pretty well established. I think it would be somewhat of an overstatement to say that Willie helped get that Pulitzer Prize, because I think the Pulitzer Prize was really on the basis of the entire book, which came out independent of the excerpt.

But certainly any of these things sort of contributed substantially to the respective successes of our books. And to that extent Willie was very valuable and an extremely important aspect of our careers.

*TS: What did Willie Morris mean to you, then, as a friend, a colleague?*

**WS:** Well I just got along with him fine. We spent many a night together. In those days there was a lot of carousing and partying. He enjoyed, as I did, sitting up late at night telling stories and drinking. We became fast friends. I realized that he had a very interesting and penetrating mind. He knew a lot about a lot of things. He was a very sophisticated man. He had a great

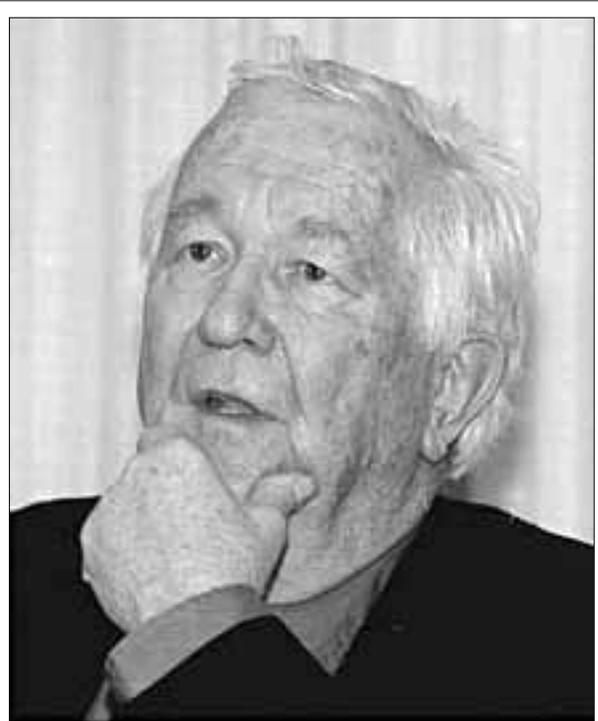


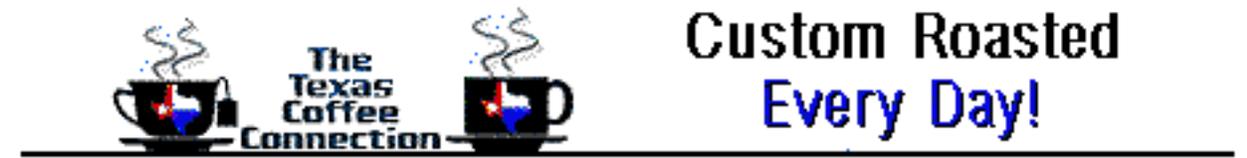
Photo by: N. Alicia Byers  
**William Styron**

sense of Southern history for one thing, and the South as an entity, as an important tradition in America. On all of these things I saw eye-to-eye with him because I too, having been born in the South, and I felt myself somewhat of an exile, like Willie, felt myself in a rather ambiguous situation regarding the South, having one foot in the North physically, and with the memories of the South. So we discussed this at great length, what it meant to be a Southerner living in the North. It evoked a lot of rather comical conclusions. We always felt like fish out of water in many ways.

One of Willie's interesting characteristics was that he was able on a very high level to deal with the intellectuals in New York, the largely Jewish intellectual society, which on one level he felt alien to. On another level he felt very close to them, and they in effect became very close to him. It was an interesting sort of transmutation of roles to see how Willie so readily became so friendly with these sophisticated Jewish intellectuals. They admired him and he admired them. It was a fascinating connection.

TS: *Do you think that Willie Morris was a great writer?*

WS: It depends. You could say that at certain moments he had peaks of greatness as a journalist. I don't think he himself ever considered himself an important fiction writer. But I think his work as a memoirist, his work as an autobiographer, especially in a book like *North Toward Home*, he achieved a kind of status of at least a minor classic if nothing else, and that's no mean feat. And also his other writing, his



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Photo by Fred Brown

Willie Morris at his writing desk, upstairs in the Morris home in Jackson, Mississippi, early spring 1997. We miss you Willie.

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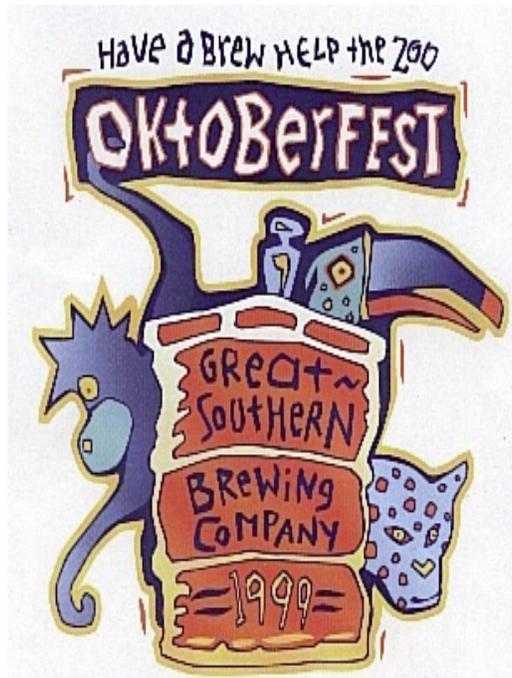
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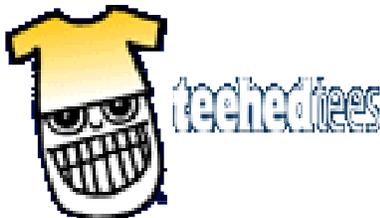
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