



a sunflower state

LITERARY PILGRIMAGE

Three contemporary Kansas writers visit locations associated with historic Kansas authors



Annette Hope Billings



During a recent visit to Fort Scott, Kansas, I learned the multi-talented, award-winning Kansan whom I thought was named Gordon Parks was actually named Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks. It seems fitting that a man of many talents would have many names, and nothing but an impressive name suited such an impressive person. (And speaking of impressive, I smile to think that his mother—who had already named his 14 older siblings—still had such a stock of names left.)

Parks was born into that large family in Fort Scott in 1912. Given the era, I wonder if his mother gave him extra names to offset the things she knew the world would attempt to deny him. He was a black boy born less than five decades after the Civil War. One biographer wrote that Parks “faced aggressive discrimination as a child,” which seems to be a polite way of saying “as a black child he feared for his well-being every minute of every day.”

It was Parks’ photography for *Life* magazine I recall first learning about in school. I later discovered he was also a writer, composer, poet, photojournalist, film director, producer, and screenwriter. The 1969 film, *The Learning Tree* (based on his 1963 semi-autobiographical novel), remains a favorite. Parks wrote, directed, and produced the film, which was shot in Fort Scott. Equally memorable was the debut of his 1971 film, *Shaft*. It was released my freshman year of high school. Seeing the movie was a non-negotiable prerequisite for being considered cool in my circle. Both *The Learning Tree* and *Shaft* bolstered my determination to be a writer.

My recent trip to Fort Scott was my first visit, and I wondered how experiencing Parks’ hometown would affect me as a fellow writer and Kansan. I was not disappointed. My first stop was the Gordon Parks Museum, and it should be on every Kansan’s “must see” list. I left the museum richer just for having been there and

having listened to everything the expert curator had to say about Parks. The museum itself does an excellent job of presenting both the breadth and depth of his life, and much of what is displayed speaks to Parks’ commitment to documenting racism and poverty. It was clear his fame never diminished his passion for social justice. The museum experience reminded me of the power of arts and artists to effect change. There is no shortage of poems about the pretty aspects of life, but the presentation of Parks’ life affirmed my desire to write about the hard truths—those truths that remind us social justice is not just desirable, but mandatory.

After leaving the museum, I drove through parts of Fort Scott, including neighborhoods, Main Street, historic Fort Scott and, finally, the cemetery that holds Parks’ grave. I found his headstone, distinct but not monumental. A person unfamiliar with Parks wouldn’t know an important person was buried there.

I left Fort Scott feeling more deeply connected and committed to writing. I reveled in knowing the people, the air and the buildings were not unlike what Gordon Parks knew. Certainly there were different

people and buildings that had come after him, but my sense was the feel of the town that Parks had described and conveyed in his work had not changed.

I loved that Parks was a self-taught artist who did not allow difficult circumstances to stifle him. He was fearless in his willingness to head toward new horizons. In his words, “There’s another horizon out there, one more horizon that you have to make for yourself and let other people discover it, and someone else will take it further on, you know.”

Leaving Fort Scott on an unusually warm winter day, I felt hopeful as I headed toward my next horizon.

—Annette Hope Billings

ANNETTE HOPE BILLINGS is an award-winning writer and actress who has called Topeka home since early childhood. Prior to becoming a full-time writer in 2015, she was a registered nurse for decades. She considers writing a way to continue to care for Kansans.

GORDON PARKS MUSEUM
2108 S Horton St, Fort Scott Community College
Fort Scott | (800) 874-3722

Iconic photographs, personal artifacts and exhibits in this museum focus on the life and work of this internationally known, self-taught photographer, filmmaker, author and composer. The museum hosts a Gordon Parks Celebration each fall.

GORDON PARKS GRAVESITE
914 215th St, Evergreen Cemetery
Fort Scott | (620) 223-2879

A formerly segregated cemetery that held the graves of Parks’ parents, Evergreen was revitalized in part because of communication between Parks and the city’s then-mayor before Parks died in 2004. A monument with a poem by Parks was added in 2007.

Two Essential
Gordon Parks
Destinations in Fort Scott

When Elizabeth “Libbie” Bacon Custer accompanied her husband, George Armstrong Custer, to his new quarters on the perimeter of the Fort Riley parade grounds in October 1866, she was still very much a 24-year-old privileged daughter from a well-established East Coast family who had several misconceptions about her new life in the West.

“There’s a great story about when she came here,” says Robert Smith, director of the Fort Riley Museum Complex. “She wrote about how she imagined that a frontier fort would have massive masonry walls around it like Fortress Monroe in Virginia that she was acquainted with, and she sees that it’s four sets of officers’ quarters set around a parade field with barracks on either side, a hospital and stables behind that and no walls. You can almost imagine her saying, ‘George, what have you done to me?’ But a big stockade fence was never a part of this, and really most posts were built like this.”

In the years to come, this sprawling, fenceless land, on what was then the edge of the frontier, would host the beginning of the young couple’s life of adventure, hardship, merriment, tragedy, and notoriety in the West. And this same land—and events around it—would shape Custer into a national figure as an author and promoter of her husband’s legacy.

Elizabeth Custer chronicled her life in Kansas and on the Western frontier accompanying her husband’s army in a series of personal letters that have since been published and in three books: *Boots and Saddles* (1885), *Tenting on the Plains* (1887), and *Following the Guidon* (1890). Writing was a natural outlet for Custer, who had grown up in an educated family and graduated first in her class. But Custer began publishing only after her husband’s death, fighting against a united force of four Native nations in the 1876 Battle of the Greasy Grass/Battle of Little Bighorn. Her books had a dual purpose, in part to defend her husband’s legacy, and also as a means of desperately needed income. Proving to be immensely popular, her writing and subsequent lecture tours not only helped create and glorify the legend of Custer and his “last stand” but also afforded her financial security and prosperity, comforts that had been sorely lacking in the years after her husband’s death.

Thanks to these books and letters, Custer’s impressions and memories of her life on the frontier provide a detailed perspective of the post-Civil War era in the West, including her time in Kansas, an area she seemed to feel was both surprisingly comfortable, but still quite rough. When the Custers first came to Fort Riley, for example, they traveled by wagon (the Union Pacific Railroad would not reach Junction City until later that year), yet arrived in an area that Custer described as being filled with multiple buildings and amenities that “give the post the appearance of a little city.” And yet, despite the comforts of her sturdy living quarters built of native limestone, Elizabeth Custer wasn’t convinced it was entirely safe.

Today, at Fort Riley, Smith and museum specialist Debbie Clark conduct tours for the public at the historic Custer house. Clark

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often dresses in period clothing to set the scene. For our tour, she wore a silky dark taupe hoop-skirt dress with a train, and spoke about the day-to-day life the Custers would have experienced at the fort. Clark says, “I think this was actually the nicest place” the Custers ever lived during their time together.

Indeed, the type of spacious officer’s quarters assigned to the Custers, with its gracious front porch, charming formal parlor, dining room and upstairs bedrooms, was a big step up from the postings and tent camps Elizabeth had eagerly followed her husband to during and after the war. In a December 1866 letter, she states, “We are living almost in luxury . . . Our large kitchen and dining room are quite the pride of my life.” The historic house has large windows, high ceilings, servant’s quarters, and a second bedroom as well as an informal family parlor.

That parlor, with formal silver and china added, frequently hosted the Custers’ guests.

“There was lots of social life here,” Smith adds, “especially when patrols wound down during the winter months. The Custers loved to entertain, and they were really big on theatrics. So they would create plays and perform them for the other officers. They had charades and musical instruments and the stereoscope.”

A stereoscope displayed on a side table in the formal parlor is an original from the mid-19th century. A stately grandfather clock gracing one wall of the parlor has original wooden gears and is from the 1830s, but most of the other furnishings in the home date from the 1870s to around 1910, including the full size grand piano that, with legs removed, would have fit nicely into a wagon.

But there is an additional, unseen story behind the Custer house. It’s a historical revision that perhaps characterizes the home and the career of Elizabeth Custer as clearly as any artifact in the museum complex.

The charming native limestone house built in 1855 gained stature as the Custer home when a letter written by George was found there. “And that,” Smith says, “started the mythology that he lived here.” Later, Smith explains, “deep-dive research” uncovered that the precise location of the house where George and Elizabeth lived was in fact a few doors down, but unfortunately it had been destroyed in a kitchen fire in the 1930s.

Although the Custers didn’t live in the particular house now open to tours, the close proximity of it to the original location allows visitors to easily imagine the couple’s daily life. And this layering of historical myth upon historical reality is particularly appropriate for the legacy of Elizabeth Custer, an original “image-maker” of the Wild West if you will, a writer who shaped a nation’s understanding of one particular golden-haired general.

“She burnished her husband’s image, and she would approve of the Custer legacy and lessons that we curate through the home,” says Smith.

—Mary Gage

Visiting the Custers

FORT RILEY
Henry Dr | Junction City | (785) 239-2982

The “Custer House” from 1855 is the only remaining officer’s quarters dating from the establishment of the fort. It is open daily, from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Also at the base is the U.S. Cavalry Museum that includes artifacts such as Custer’s rain hat.



PHOTOGRAPHS Nicolette Sassin

Rex Stout was at one time the most widely read author in America, which is something every author aspires to, but for me, the accomplishments of this fellow Kansan hit a little closer to home.

A staggeringly prolific writer, Stout produced hundreds of short stories and novels at a rate that makes other writers blanch. He rarely spent much more than a month working on a book, and he never revised his manuscripts. (By contrast, I've sometimes spent as much as a year on a novel and gone through three or four drafts.) He effortlessly churned out as many as four books a year, then spent the other half of his year traveling, dining with the likes of Mark Twain, and working to benefit his favorite causes.

His greatest achievement came relatively late in his life, with the creation of his most famous characters: Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. They are arguably the most important pair of literary detectives since Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Wolfe (in case you haven't yet read one of the 72 stories that feature him or seen any of the numerous TV series based on his character) famously weighs a seventh of a ton, favors the color yellow, and spends most of his time cultivating orchids in the rooftop greenhouse of his New York brownstone. Archie is his right-hand man, a wisecracking, steadfast, top-notch investigator in his own right. Wolfe rarely leaves his home, so most of the legwork is left to Archie, who also narrates the mysteries. They are aided—not in their detective work, but in their daily lives—by Theodore Horstmann, who tends the orchids, and Fritz Brenner, the master chef who tends Wolfe's prominent stomach.

I first encountered Nero Wolfe at the Topeka Bookmobile, which parked at the curb outside my elementary school every Friday afternoon, just before the last bell. As I recall, there was a shelf of children's books on one wall of the converted bus, but they never interested me. My tastes ran more toward the horror anthologies, with their lurid jacket art, and the many volumes of Alfred Hitchcock's mystery series. But when I exhausted Sir Alfred's series and ventured farther along the shelf, just beyond works by Ed McBain and Ellery Queen, I eventually found Rex Stout's books waiting for me.

I don't remember which of Stout's novels I read first. It might have been the Nero Wolfe series debut, *Fer-de-Lance*, but I doubt it. It's more likely I picked up one of the many collections. (The books were endlessly repackaged and reissued.) I only know that I was hooked from the start. I kept reading until I had read them all, then I went back and began again. Even now I start the series over again every few years, devouring Rex Stout's confections the way

Nero Wolfe digs into Fritz's pork cutlets and onion soup. They are comfort food.

At some point I discovered Rex Stout had grown up near me in Topeka, Kansas, and my career goals snapped into focus with sudden clarity. I had thought I might like to be an author someday, but since I didn't (and don't) live in New York, where so many of my favorite authors worked, that seemed an unlikely prospect.

It must have seemed unlikely for Stout, too. His family bought a farm in Wakarusa when he was two years old and he grew up there, showing signs of his prodigious talent at an early age. Stout claimed to have read the Bible from cover to cover twice before he was four, and his mother caught him making marginal notes in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* before he was old enough to attend school. Eventually, Stout would graduate from Topeka High School, attend the University of Kansas and move to the East Coast, leaving Wakarusa behind.

There isn't much left to connect young Rex with his childhood home. In preparing for this essay, I visited Wakarusa to scout the site of the old Stout farm, hoping to catch some glimpse of literary history. But it was late in the season. Crops had been harvested, fields were barren, and the Stout family's home was long gone, including his father's vast personal library and the warm kitchen, where Rex spent most of his days reading.

As I walked through Wakarusa, brown husks crunched underfoot and I was reminded of Wolfe's famous lecture on the versatility of sweet corn, ending with "No chef's ingenuity and imagination have ever created a finer dish."

There are traces of Stout's Kansas upbringing sprinkled throughout his work. I can clearly see his parents' devotion to education and books and family—and his desire to pass those values along to millions of readers around the world.

Back home, I've just picked up one of my favorite Wolfe novels (*The Doorbell Rang*. Wolfe tangles with J. Edgar Hoover himself!), and it's whet my appetite for more. I'm pulling other books off my shelf, setting them aside to read next, the stack growing as I thumb through them and remember. (Here's *And Be a Villain*, in which Wolfe first encounters his nemesis Albert Zeck, and here's *Some Buried Caesar*, in which Archie has a close encounter with a bull and meets his longtime girlfriend, Lily Rowan. They go on the pile.)

Rex Stout's word choices are precise and witty, and his plots are clever. Yet I don't read his books for the plot or for the language. Not really. I read them so I can spend a little more time with two of my all-time favorite characters.

There's no "finer dish" than comfort food.

—Alex Grecian

Kansas-based **ALEX GRECIAN** is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Scotland Yard Murder Squad series. His latest book, *The Saint of Wolves and Butchers*, releases this spring and follows the dangerous path of a rookie Kansas Highway Patrol officer confronting a neo-Nazi cult.

There are neither memorials nor museums to Rex Stout in Kansas. But, as Alex Grecian suggests, the best tributes to Rex Stout can be found in your local library, bookstore or electronic reading device. You can also celebrate good reads and Kansas authors at the annual Kansas Book Festival, held each fall in Topeka. Go online at kansasbookfestival.com for the latest event dates and information. **KM**

Where to Find the Ghost of Rex Stout

PHOTOGRAPH Michael C. Snell



Alex Grecian