

## A Brief, Mostly True History of the Authors of the Flathead

By Debbie Burke

If there are inaccuracies, they spring from my faulty memory and are no one else's responsibility.

Around 1988-89, a group of would-be authors took creative writing classes at FVCC. When the classes ended, some of us decided we wanted to keep fanning the flame of creativity that had been ignited. We continued to write stories, poetry, and memoirs, meeting weekly for critique sessions at various homes or coffee shops, too embarrassed to call ourselves "writers," since none of us had been published. We shared the guilty pleasure of telling stories and delighted in hanging out with like-minded folks. Some of us took the risk of sending our "children" out into the cold cruel world of editors and agents. When one of us received dreaded rejections, the rest of us talked the recipient down off the ledge. From time to time, someone achieved publication with delighted celebration by their peers.

We could have gone on in this haphazard fashion for who knows how long except for several seminal events:

First, a professional magazine writer named Marti Doyle came to town. With her left-brain focus, she decided to structure us disorganized right-brainers into an official group with officers, bylaws, and an actual name, the Authors of the Flathead.

Second, in 1990, founding member Peggy Mathiason decided we should throw a conference. She invited three professional journalists from Washington as speakers and convinced her church to let us meet there on a Saturday. About twenty-five attendees brought brown-bag lunches, learned how to get published, and ended the day bursting with fresh ideas and inspiration. The one-day event energized us so much, we vowed to do it again next year, and next year, and next year....

With each succeeding conference, the program became more refined. After a couple of years, we took a big plunge and invited agents and editors from New York who, to most of us, were Brahman we dared not approach. To our amazement, these professionals not only accepted our invitations, they proved to be remarkably nice human beings who treated writers with respect and freely shared their insights with us, demystifying the publication process.

The conference continued to grow. From brown bag to catered lunches, from the church basement to venues at FVCC and various hotels, the event increased in popularity and size, until we decided to cap attendance at 100 to preserve the intimate, friendly atmosphere relished by both presenters and attendees.

A third seminal event for Authors of the Flathead occurred in 1994 when Dennis Foley moved away from the television and motion picture industry in L.A. and landed in Whitefish. Dennis adopted AOF, raising the group to new level of professionalism and achievement. His craft of writing lectures, similar to classes he taught at UCLA, educated us in sophisticated techniques of story-telling. Thanks to his generous mentoring, more and more members achieved publication and success.

Dennis tells many stories, but my all-time favorite explains why he has been so incredibly generous and supportive of the Authors of the Flathead. When Dennis was a struggling new screenwriter, Oscar- and Emmy-winning author Stirling Silliphant took Dennis under his wing, dispensing advice and rescuing the inexperienced scribe from literary corners he'd painted himself into. After receiving invaluable help, Dennis asked Stirling, "You've done so much for me. How can I ever repay you?" To which Stirling replied, "Pass it on. If you don't, you're an ass\*\*\*\*."

More than twenty years later, Dennis continues to pass it on, to the enduring benefit of AOF.

One of AOF's early success stories was Fred Salter, a snowy-haired gentleman with twinkling blue eyes. He decided to write a memoir for his kids of his experiences in World War II in the horse cavalry and as an Army recon scout. "I ain't no writer," he often said, "not like the rest of you. I don't know them fifty-cent words." But a limited education didn't hamper his gift of storytelling. His compelling combat experiences riveted us, made us laugh and cry.

When he finished his book, we pestered him to get it published. His sons paid for *Recon Scout* to be self-published and he acknowledged Authors of the Flathead in it. In 1991, the beginning year of the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, Fred circulated his book at military gatherings, reunions, and veterans events. It caught on like wildfire among veterans and family members, who often wrote to Fred, with messages like, "My father never talked about his war experiences. I read your book and now I understand." *Recon Scout* wound up as a text in the Army War College.

Impressed with the self-published edition's success, an editor with Random House picked up *Recon Scout* and published it both in hard and soft cover. It became a Military Book of the Month selection.

Fred completed two more books and many poems. Not bad for a guy who "ain't no writer."

Now a significant percentage of our members have achieved publication, either traditionally or online. From time to time, a rumor circulates that one must be published to become a member of AOF. Not true!!! We always welcome and encourage beginning writers because every single one of us, no matter how successful, started out new, inexperienced, and scared. Our mission has always been to offer one hand to those coming after us, while reaching out with the other hand to those ahead of us in experience and knowledge.

When AOF became a non-profit, we connected with the community at large, sponsoring an annual high school writing contest with cash prizes. For several years, we worked with the Gifted and Talented program to put on a one-day event for junior high students with AOF members speaking on various facets of writing, as well as leading workshops to critique the kids' stories and poems. A number of AOF members have been involved with Literacy Volunteers, as well as mentoring young writers.

I've been around since the beginning, which is why I was tasked to record this history. You might say I'm the *oldest* member, which is getting closer to true every year, but to be more accurate, I'm the most tenured member. For over a quarter century, the Authors of the Flathead has been a support system to writers like me, a safety net of reassurance when rejected, a place where I find friends to celebrate success, an encouraging atmosphere to hone craft, a source of education, inspiration, and camaraderie. I feel fortunate to have known so many talented, interesting writers and good friends.