Foster Harris--Manuscript Master

By Paul McClung

Foster Harris, '25ba, although he's the last man in the world to admit it, is already a legend. With Walter S. Campbell, he has developed a school praised by The Saturday Review of Literature and described by Writer's Digest as the best college residence school for teaching writing in the United States.

Big, red-faced, and black-headed, Foster rumbles when he talks. His students have never seen him without his famous black pipe.

While a student in the University, he wrote for The Oklahoma Daily, The Whirlwind, humor magazine of the period, and Sooner Magazine. He met and married doll-like Jill Pruett, who was also a University student. After receiving a geology degree, Foster went into oil journalism, started a newspaper career on The Daily Oklahoman, and soon was graduated into editing oil newspapers.

Foster Harris (and he emphatically denies this, too) is almost a human encyclopedia. People telephone him for information about the kind of army uniforms worn by United States soldiers in the War of 1812, what cowboys ate on the Chisolm Trail, or living conditions in Alaska. And Foster usually knows the answers!

He reads manuscript as fast as he can turn the pages, and he can catch a misplaced comma or a left-out quote. He learned this, he says, during his newspaper days.

"Anybody can learn to read rapidly if he'll work at it," he patiently explains. "Try reaching up to a line at a time," he advises. "Anymorereads one word at a time."

Sooner or later, into the Harris home in Norman come the country's writers—"especially tomorrow's best sellers," as Harris explains. His students congregate there, not only in the daytime, but every night, to drink gallons of coffee and to discover literary wisdom. When Foster goes home from his office in the Business Administration Building, he finds students waiting in his living room. They stay until all hours.

Next morning, when he gets up, more students are waiting on the front porch to see him. When does the Harris family sleep?

"When we can," is Jill's gracious answer. "These young writers are close to our hearts. We have a big family of 75!" She pours 10 pounds of coffee every week for the family. At night the Harris living room is smoky as a blast furnace. Each morning several dozen ash trays are emptied. The number of cigarettes smoked in the Harris living room every week runs into the hundreds.

Jill, who also cares for the two Harris sons, Austin and Doug, bakes a cake for each member of the "family" when he or she sells a first story. Members of the big "family" gathered last Christmas in the Harris front yard to sing carols and present Jill a silver electric coffee pot. Then they all came in, to try the coffee out of the pot.

Books and souvenirs line the walls from floor to ceiling in the Harris home. Eager embryoowls and accomplished artists sit in the living room, talking about everything from Philippine citrus fruits to the interpretation of dreams.

Through all the nightly discussions, Jill and Foster maintain a good-humored sanity. Foster sits in an armchair by the fireplace, looking like a big Indian chief as he calmly puffs his pipe.

"Tell them he has written 1,000 stories," says Leonard Snyder, Campbell-Harris student and well-known writer of true crime and confession stories.

"That's not true," protests Foster. "I didn't write that many."

"Just say innumerable stories," suggests Sidney Stewart, versatile survivor of the Bataan death march, "or maybe unmentionable." Stewart is completing a volume about his experiences and has also started selling magazine fiction.

Just how many stories has Foster written? Nobody knows, not even Foster. But he admits he has written "several," and "quite a few of them" with an oil background.

He reads at least 20 manuscripts each day. That means a criticism of up to a hundred thousand words. He can remember characters in nearly every story he has read in his life. His textbook, The Basic Formulas of Fiction, published in 1944 by the University of Oklahoma Press, is rated one of the best on the market.

When interviewed for a story concerning himself, Foster Harris fights roughly and bitterly. But he is quietly and deliberately stamping an indelible impression in the lives of young writers.

To the question "Why have you chosen to teach?" there is no tangible answer. He does not have time to write his own stories. Is it true that he may some day quit teaching to devote all his time to his own writing?

"Uh, huh, I'll quit one of these days, all right—when I'm blind, too, I'll quit," he rumbles.

WITT MEMORIAL

Dr. and Mrs. O. S. Witt, Oklahoma City, have made their second annual contribution of $500 to a memorial collection in the University architectural library honoring their son, Lt. Orville S. Witt, Jr., '38-41, President Cross has announced.

"Lieutenant Witt, a former School of Architecture student, was lost in action on his first mission over France as a B-17 pilot in December, 1942. He left school in 1941 to enlist. He received his wings at Kelly Field in February, 1942, and was stationed in England the following October.

Today's women are healthier and more vigorous than their ancestors, Katherine Culbert, professor of physical education, believes. This might be traced, she says, to their "vivacious attitude toward sports."