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In Memoriam

CHARLES LEROY KENNER (1933–2011)

Larry D. Ball Sr.

The community of western historians recently lost a highly valued member. On 16 March 2011, Dr. Charles Leroy Kenner passed away at St. Vincent's Hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas, after battling a serious heart condition. A genuine westerner, Charles was born on a small farm near Elk City, Oklahoma, at the edge of the Great Plains in 1933. He took great pride in the fact that his ancestors had been a part of the nation's westward movement in the nineteenth century and that they had voted for Andrew Jackson in his several presidential races in the 1820s and early 1830s.

Charles's parents, Marshall and Hazel Kenner, both born in Texas, were made of equally sturdy frontier stock. On the day before Charles was born, his mother had ridden a horse all over their cotton farm. His parents managed to keep their farm intact during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, and Charles developed habits of thrift, diligence, and devotion while performing the daily and seasonal chores still common to children raised on small farms in the early-to mid-twentieth century. He graduated from Panhandle Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1954 and received his master's degree from Oklahoma State University four years later. He earned his PhD under the direction of Prof. Ernest Wallace, the pre-eminent historian of the southern plains, at Texas Tech University in 1966. After a brief period as an instructor at Angelo State College from 1961 to 1966, he joined the History Department at Arkansas State College in Jonesboro, Arkansas, only one year before this campus received university status. In addition to both halves of the U.S. survey, Charles taught upper-division courses on the American frontier and West and on American Indians. He retired after thirty years of service in 1996.

During those three decades, Charles applied to his college instruction the personal ethics and civic values that his parents had taught him as a boy and young man on their plains farm.

Although carrying a heavy teaching load at Arkansas State, Charles maintained an active research program throughout his career and compiled a highly respectable publication record, which focused generally on the history of frontier Texas and New Mexico. Several articles, beginning with "John Hittson, Cattle King of West Texas," published in the *West Texas Historical Association Year Book* for 1961, broke new ground on the economic and cultural significance of the cattle industry on the Llano Estacado in the nineteenth century. Another article published in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* for 1974 challenged a keystone of Texas history by demonstrating that other cattlemen had driven beeves up the so-called "Goodnight" Trail from Texas to New Mexico some nine months to a year before the legendary Charles Goodnight undertook his drive in June 1866. Charles also reviewed a wide range of books on frontier, western, and American Indian history for academic journals, even in retirement.

In addition to articles, Charles published two significant monographs. The first began as his dissertation under Professor Wallace at Texas Tech University. Charles devoted hour upon hour of research of manuscripts and documents in the state archives of New Mexico to produce what has become a classic work of southern plains history. This text, *A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations*, was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1969. In 1995 the same publisher reissued the text in paper as *The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations*. This monograph explores the economic, political, and military relations between New Mexican settlements and Plains Indian communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular his research on the *comanchero* trade; the exchange of goods and captives between Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo traders; and Comanche and Kiowa Indians on the Llano Estacado, opened topical doors that subsequent historians have walked through in their ethnohistorical research on the southern plains. This monograph remains the historiographical cornerstone on this subject and is routinely cited in notes and bibliographies of articles and books on southern plains and southwestern history.

With time Charles broadened his research interests to include the history of race on the late-nineteenth-century frontier. During his life, he was committed to Civil Rights and social justice, and after relocating to Jonesboro in the late 1960s, he served a term as president of the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. To this end, he focused on the association

of African American enlisted men and white officers in the post-Civil War U.S. Army, an endeavor that required lengthy stretches of research in the National Archives in downtown Washington, D.C. The result of his labor was his second monograph *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867–1898: Black and White Together*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1999. In this work, Charles introduced many scholars to a valuable and rich historical source: the court-martial records of the U.S. Army. To an extent that military historians had not ventured generally to that time, Charles dug into the testimony at the military trials of black enlisted men and white officers to piece together the social and cultural history of a segregated army regiment, the Ninth U.S. Cavalry in this case. Departing from William H. Leckie who pioneered historical research on African American regulars, Charles concluded that the War Department and U.S. Army did not discriminate systematically against black regiments in postings, missions, equipment, and horses. Similarly, he concluded that the white officers were harsh toward their black troopers no more than army officers generally were toward enlisted men in white regiments. Subsequent scholars have taken a cue from his research, following Charles's path into the court-martial records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army). Even after retiring from the classroom in 1996, Charles continued to pursue a research agenda that included the role of army wives on the frontier and the place of African American chaplains in the frontier army.

Charles was ahead of his time in other ways. He had been committed to healthy eating and physical fitness well before they became a mass movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then we may have chortled at his consumption of sesame and flax seeds and granola and protein powder, but all the mirth abruptly evaporated when we stepped on an athletic field and ball court with Charles. Anyone who challenged him to a tennis match was in for an epic contest of physical endurance or for a session of profound frustration. Over the course of two or three sets, Charles ran farther and hit back more balls than could men and boys half his age or more. More often than not, his opponents' games simply imploded under physical exhaustion and mental collapse, but whether he won or lost in three sets, Charles was prepared to play three more. During his professional career, Charles brought that same focus, intensity, intelligence, and perseverance to the classroom, archives, or writing table.

It was an honor and pleasure to be a colleague of Charles Leroy Kenner for some thirty years. During this time, I had occasion to accompany him to historical sites in the West and to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. I regarded him not only as a highly responsible and sensitive colleague

but a good friend on and off the tennis court or the softball field. He will be sorely missed both by the scholarly community and by his many colleagues and friends at Arkansas State University.