

## Borderland

# Longtime UTEP professor influenced generations

By Ramón Rentería

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EL PASO — John Oliver West, once a beloved professor of English and folklore at the University of Texas at El Paso for 39 years and respected across Texas and the United States as an authority on Mexican-American folklore, died Sunday. He was 85.

An El Paso native, West influenced generations of students at Texas Western College and then UTEP from the early 1960s until he retired as professor emeritus of English in 2002.

His family said he died after a lengthy struggle with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and congestive heart failure.

"I'm a storyteller," West said once in describing his lifelong passion for folklore.

West was inducted as a Fellow of the Texas Folklore Society in 2002 and recognized for his contributions to the society and its publications.

West's former students recall his humor and engaging style of

teaching, which often inspired them to pursue teaching and other service professions.

"He was truly a force of nature in the classroom. He made learning seem like fun," said Richard Southern, an actor-director in New York City, who first met West at Odessa Junior College in the early 1960s and later at Texas Western College.

West encouraged Southern, then a theater major and guitar player, to study American and English ballads and folk songs of the Ozarks. West's positive outlook and respect for different people and cultures most influenced Southern, who became a lifelong friend.

"He was probably the fairest man I ever knew in terms of how people should be treated," Southern said. "He was a great believer in the early 1960s of the civil-rights movement and encouraged all of us to be involved in it in a positive way."

West is credited with hiring Marjorie Lawson, the first African-American faculty member in the University of Texas system, while serving as English department

chairman in 1966.

West is also credited with helping to expose the late El Paso artist José Cisneros to a broader audience.

His notable publications include "Mexican-American Folklore," "Cowboy Folk Humor" and "José Cisneros: An Artist's Journey." He also wrote the introduction to José Cisneros' book "Riders Across the Centuries."

He was inducted into the El Paso Herald-Post Writers Hall of Fame and received many awards through the years for his work, including a finalist Spur Award from the Western Writers of America for Best Western Short Nonfiction in 1985.

Others remember West for his wit and outgoing personality.

"Nobody was a stranger to John West. He was a character with a capital C," said Skip Clark, a friend and former student who worked with West on the Mission Trails Association.

Meredith Abarca, an associate professor of English at UTEP, inherited West's Mexican-American

folklore class, plus his extensive folklore collection.

"He was a man of principles who stood for justice with an innate sense of humor," Abarca said.

"Students often told me Dr. West impacted their lives, taught them to appreciate who they are and to appreciate their culture."

West received a bachelor of arts degree from Mississippi College, a master's from Texas Tech University and a doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin.

He is survived by his wife, Lucy Fischer West; son John Martin West of Albuquerque; daughter Marianne West; granddaughter Juniper Wallace and her husband, Delwin; great-grandchildren Ian and Max Nelson, and Kalen Wallace of Brandon, Miss.; and his sister Bertha Cochran of Abilene. He was preceded in death by sisters Georgia Belle McNeese, Mary Ferro and Virginia Flynt.

A memorial service is scheduled at 10 a.m. Saturday at University Presbyterian Church, 244 N. Resler.

Instead of flowers, contributions



Special to the Times

### John Oliver West

may be made to the John O. West Fund at the El Paso Community Foundation, the Texas Folklore Society or a favorite charity.

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