

Springfield's • Big Horn • Wrangler of Words

By Todd Peterson

"I've always said my bones are made of Big Horn granite," Milt Cunningham declared with a lilt in his voice. The 85-year old native of Wyoming grew up in the Big Horn country where he worked as a ranch hand and logged in the mountains with horses.

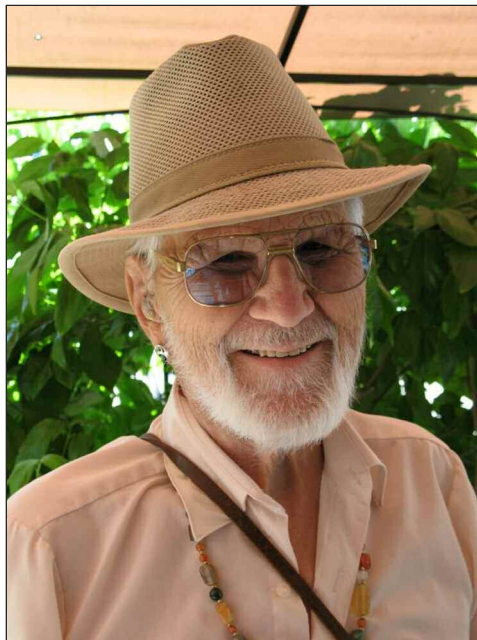
"Way back...when I was ten years old...I recall playing with language, making sounds with words like playing scales on a piano," Milt said. "I wrote lots of doggerel and limericks."

Over the years, Milt Cunningham has written over fifty short stories, many more limericks, and a novel. Most people in Springfield know him from his 16 years of writing feature stories and op-ed columns for the now defunct Springfield News.

Milt and his wife Kathleen moved to Oregon in 1955 to go to college. At the time, they decided to buy a temporary home while completing their Master's degrees at the University of Oregon. Today, fifty-three years later, the couple is still living in that "temporary" home in Springfield.

Both Milt and Kathleen became teachers of language arts. Milt first taught at the old Coburg School and then moved on to Thurston for 22 years. He retired from teaching in 1985 and has focused on his writing ever since. Kathleen became a college teacher, an artist, and a poet as well as the "best and severest critic" of her husband's writing.

Of his years of writing for the Springfield Newspaper, Milt says "I morphed from a



Milt Cunningham - Photo by Todd Peterson

feature writer to doing mostly political writing. The editorial page became my bully pulpit (like Teddy Roosevelt) where I could reach lots of readers and hopefully change some minds."

Milt spent about ten years writing his novel, *Where Trails Cross*, published in November of 2007. The book is a 512-page tale of life in the Big Horn Mountain area of Wyoming in the 1850's.

In the "Afterword" of his novel, Milt notes the impetus for his story: "For many years I have thought about the men who decided to move their families to Oregon or California against the wishes of their wives, and because of that decision lost them all on the way. Often they all died in the same catastrophe: from drowning or the ravages of cholera, small pox, or some other illness. Usually the men married again, often very quickly by our modern thinking. Part of the reason is that people needed each other to survive."

Milt goes on to say "But I always wondered how a man could live with himself, knowing that his wife and children had all perished specifically because of his decision."

After several years of dealing with health issues, Milt Cunningham characterizes the "golden years" of his life as the "rusted years." Married nearly 60 years to Kathleen, he says "that's a long time to live with a man like me!" And a long time for Springfield readers to enjoy the prose and poetry of the man from Big Horn country.

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For a copy of Milt Cunningham's novel, *Where Trails Cross*, please call him at 746-4185.

