

UNIVERSITY MEETS DISNEY

NOT YOUR ORDINARY BOOK REPORT: “MARTY MARKHAM,” BY LAWRENCE WATKIN

By Anne Drake McClung

Marty *Markham* is a children’s book but an enjoyable read for all, if you can find it, especially for those who experienced summer camps in their childhoods and savor their memories of it.

The book is also at the core of a larger story involving the Tilson family and its camp in Rockbridge County as well as the amazing life of the book’s author, Lawrence Wakin, a Washington and Lee University professor, who became a screenwriter for Walt Disney, and other Hollywood screenwriters associated with Washington and Lee. One never knows what interesting things will turn up while doing research, and throughout this “book report” there are little digressions that provide a glimpse into local history.

Watkin begins his book with this acknowledgment:

“My thanks to Tex and Virginia Tilson, whose Broadview Ranch inspired this story. To Coach Jack

Hennemier, who told me camp tales, and to Mayre, who showed me the horses.”

The nitty-gritty of the book goes like this.

Marty Markham was born into a privileged life, with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. Those advantages, however, did not override the facts that his mother died giving birth to him and that his father died soon thereafter. This left Marty’s grandmother to raise him in her Park Avenue apartment in New York. Watkin describes Marty as nevertheless a quite likable boy, spoiled, sheltered and perhaps over-loved and pampered by his dear grandmother.

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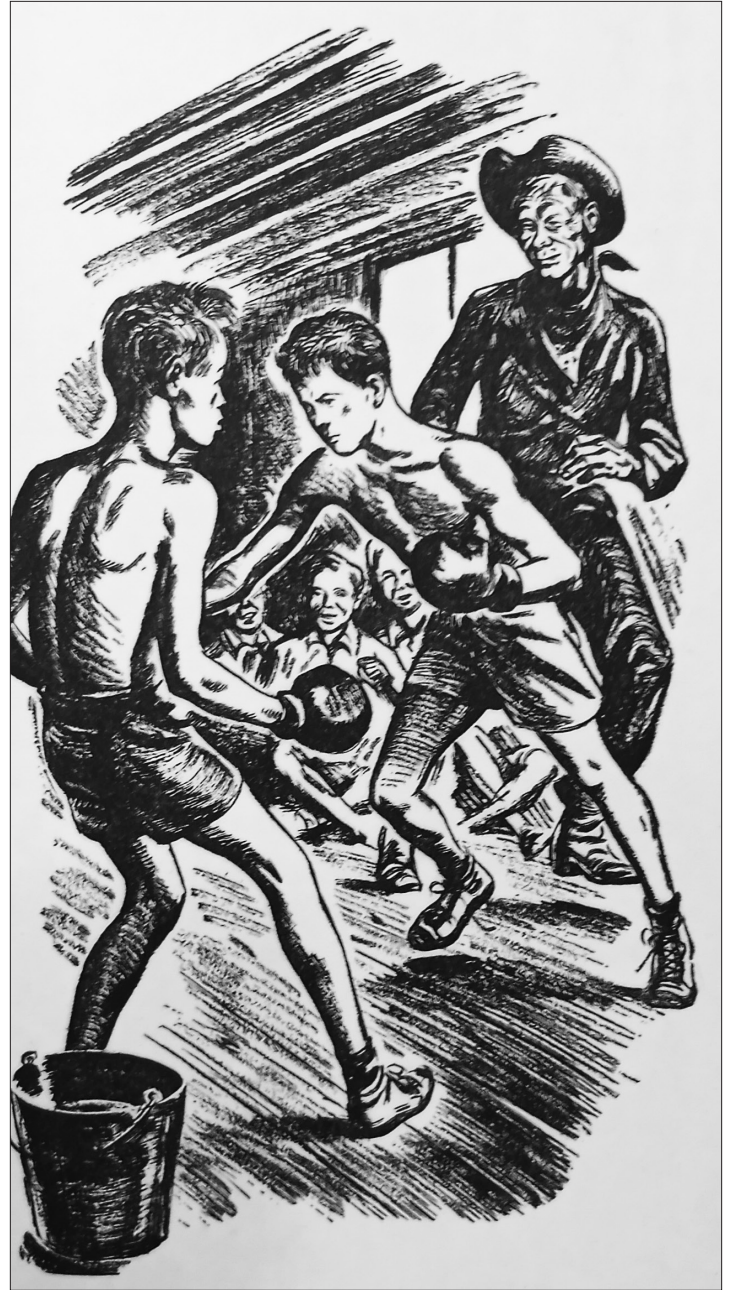


Marty Markham, published by Henry Holt, now owned by Macmillan, had illustrations by Robert F. Kuhn, the pre-eminent illustrator of outdoor scenes of the day. Above, Marty is shocked when he has to carry his own suitcases at Ranch Rough and Ready. Right, Marty and Spin Evans in the boxing ring, where they achieved friendship and mutual respect.

In the summer when he was twelve years old, Marty was sent off to a summer camp — Ranch Rough and Ready, in North Carolina. City life was all he knew, and the idea of going away to this strange environment was unappealing to him. He arrived at the camp, driven by his chauffeur/valet, Perkins, in their Packard, with a matching set of luggage and dressed to the nines, and it's easy to imagine the impression he made with the other campers, who had just been through a typical day of riding horses and hiking. For Marty it was a culture shock, too, and he was not a happy camper.

Perkins had been directed by Marty's grandmother to stay at the camp all summer to look after Marty. This did not go over especially well with the camp owner, Colonel Logan, but he finally gave in, telling Perkins he could bunk with Ollie, the stable boy.

For once in his life, Marty had to make his own bed, sleep in a bunk house with other boys, and pretty much take care of himself. Early on he was dubbed "Polo" because in an effort to try to impress his bunkmates, he told them he played polo. In fact, Marty had never been on a horse in his life. It was a flat-out lie, and it got him in right much trouble.



Other campers had nicknames, too — like "Tall Dark and Lonesome," "Corn Cobb," "Pinky," "Picklepuss," "Russell the Muscle" and the costar of the book, "Spin" Evans. Spin was a rascal and loved by all. But he wasn't afraid to stir up trouble and mischief, and he lit into Marty from Day One. He couldn't resist. Spin sort of bullied Marty, in fact.

Colonel Logan had a way to deal with boys who were at each others' throats. Neither he nor the counselors ever scolded the campers. They sort of showed them that Logan had his own way for the boys to settle their scores. In this instance he put boxing gloves on Marty

and Spin and, in front of the whole camp, told them to go at it. Marty had no clue as to how to defend himself or get an edge, and at first found himself being pummeled. But in the end he surprised everyone and came out on top. Marty won Spin's respect, and they became best friends.

For Marty, Ranch Rough and Ready took a lot of getting used to. Ollie, the cross-eyed stable boy who stuttered, had a heart of gold, and it was he who introduced Marty to the horse that was to be his for the summer. Skyrocket was his name. His to care for, and his to ride. Ollie taught Marty many lessons in horsemanship, including the parts of the bridle and saddle as well as the parts of the horse itself — and how to tack up his horse, how to groom, how to ride and how to post to the trot.

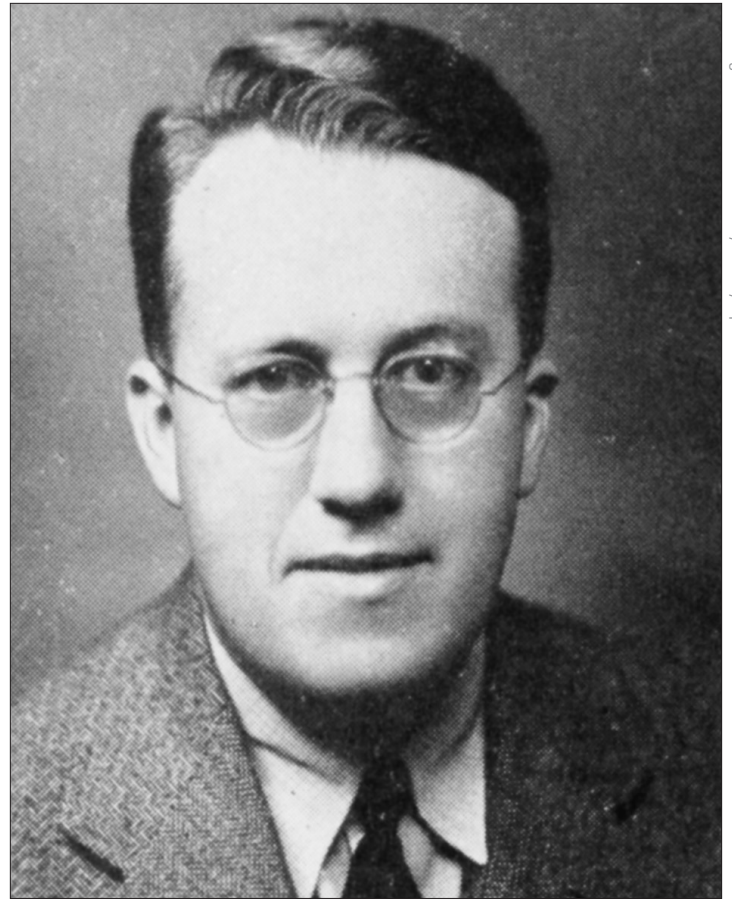
Perkins, always watching from behind the scenes, was proud of Marty and thought this experience was just what he needed. Both Marty and Perkins were amazed at the wonderfully delicious food they were fed at the camp — home-raised and home-cooked, right there.

The campfires at night were especially enjoyable. As one of the counselors said, "City people are likely to get pretty shallow because they are so shut in they never see the grandeur of life. Their moon is electricity and their suntan comes in a bottle, and their God is speed. And they know so much they don't know anything."

While around the campfire, they told stories, sang songs, and cited some old camp favorites. "What did Tennessee, boys, what did Tennessee? She saw what Arkansaw, boys, she saw what Arkansaw. What did Idaho, boys, what did Idaho? She hoed a Maryland, boys, she hoed a Maryland. What did Delaware, boys, what did Delaware? She wore a New Jersey, boys, she wore a New Jersey." And on and on they'd go.

The ending of the book finds Marty to be a changed boy, popular and admired by everyone at the camp. He even won first place at the camp's horse show at the end of the summer.

Sadly, the book is out of print and hard to find. But Special Collections at Washington and Lee does have a copy, although it can't be checked out. There is also quite



Lawrence Watkin, Washington and Lee University professor of English and, later, screenwriter for Walt Disney

a bit of information on the author, Lawrence Edward Watkin, who taught at W&L from 1926 to 1942.

HOW MANY COLLEGE PROFESSORS expect to become Hollywood screenwriters?

Apparently, quite a few from Washington and Lee claimed that distinction. Lawrence Watkin, after sixteen years as a college professor, became renowned as the screenwriter for Disney's technicolor debut, *Treasure Island*, with many credits to follow.

Another screenwriter connected to the university was Jeb Rosebrook, who graduated from W&L in 1957. Around 1967, he began pursuing a career in screenwriting under the tutelage of his friend Earl Hamner Jr. Rosebrook wrote the screenplay for the Western film *Junior Bonner* (1972) for acting legend Steve McQueen. He also wrote some of the episodes for Hamner's highly successful series *The Waltons*, broadcast on television from 1972 to 1981, and received an Emmy nomination



George Harding Foster, another W&L professor of English who went to work for Disney. Foster, however, soon returned in disillusionment.

with co-writer Theodore Strauss for *I Will Fight No More Forever* (1975), the story of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe, in addition to many other credits.

The degrees of separation don't end there. *The Waltons* was based on a 1971 CBS television movie with a screenplay by Hamner, *The Homecoming* — and *The Homecoming* had been directed

by a Washington and Lee graduate, Fielder Cook, of the class of 1947.

Another Washington and Lee screenwriter was George Harding Foster of the class of 1934. According to Tom Camden, head of Special Collections at W&L, Foster taught English at W&L in the 1940s, before leaving in 1952 to work for Disney Studios in Los Angeles. In a letter to one of his former students, Harrison Kinney, of the class of 1947, Foster described life at the Disney Studios. This letter is now located in Special Collections and gives a detailed insight into the life at the studios. It is printed here on pages 4–6, slightly edited.

Foster's only complaint with the studio was that the pay was lacking — \$250 a week. But, he said, "Disney underlings are not here strictly for the money. They take pride in what they do. . . ." He mentions in his letter that Larry Watkin and another fellow worked as a team to

FROM THE WORLD OF DISNEY: GEORGE FOSTER TO HARRISON KINNEY, FEBRUARY 14, 1953

Dear Harrison,

I promised to tell you about life in Disneyland and I would have sent some stuff sooner if I'd known what to say. It's taken about six months to recover from the shock of Los Angeles, go through the usual phase of resenting the place bitterly, find out how they do things at this studio, and so on. What I say applies to the Disney studio; it is not at all typical of the other Hollywood movie foundries, which are much tougher outfits. Or so I am told.

First thing I found out was that Disney was now blowing cold on the idea of making educational films. He had hoped to interest some of the foundations in a deal but I think they smelled too much commercialism. Without foundation help he can't make films for what they call "non-theatrical audiences." So then the problem was what to do with Foster and to explain what happened I think I must describe the place itself.

This is a small studio, though there are about 700 people connected with it. The figure includes all the people who work at the associated commercial enterprises (music publishing, selling Disney labels for dolls, orange juice, toys.) It includes also traffic boys, stenographers, secretaries, the girls who work in Ink and Paint and spend their days coloring the "cels" which are laboriously photographed by young fellows who click cameras all day, cafeteria employees, publicity, Implementers and Expeditors (guys with fresh flowers in their buttonholes who stride around), personnel and

administrative people. Probably not more than forty people in the place have anything constructive to do with the making of movies. You have to keep that relatively small number in mind because it is with those people that Disney works. He spends his days watching what they do, making suggestions, passing on ideas, telling them their stuff is either adequate or lousy. He begins with a general idea for a film, parcels it out among the forty and awaits developments.

The forty or so people are further subdivided. Most of them are old timers, people who have been connected with the conventional Disney pattern for years: that is, they make the animated shorts and features. Many of them are people of great skill — background men, story men, sketch men, gag men, etc. Or there may be a specialist hired for a certain picture. Kay Neilsen [actually Nielsen], a Dane, is now working on background and mood illustrations for *The Sleeping Beauty*. None of his illustrations will show up in the final picture: they are intended to suggest ideas and composition to the more mechanical animators, whose work is naturally cruder and less detailed because of the intricate technical processes of the business. These are the men with whom Disney is most at home. It's instructive to sit in on one of their sessions because their technical skill is impressive. Listening to them talk about pace, musical effects, camera tricks and so on is damned revealing. (I don't have to say anything further about their downright commercial approach. They →

make feature films abroad. Foster said, "Except for the fortunate and gifted Watkin, there is really no person here permanently who can be called a writer."

Foster wrote that all work at the studio was measured by Walt Disney's "spiritual" yardstick. ... Never show blood; always have the little hero animal escape; never let the mean coyote catch the rabbit; hint that nature may be relentless but emphasize benevolence. Don't be arty. Use the simplest possible music. Above all consider carefully what 'Walt' will think."

Foster stayed with the studio for a year or so, then returned to W&L as an associate professor of English. He taught a creative writing class to a handful of students, three of whom became published authors. One of those was Tom Wolfe, of the class of 1951.

Foster and Watkin overlapped a few years at Washington and Lee, and it seems that Foster was

From the
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prompted to go to the Disney Studios by Watkin. It is remarkable that there are at least these four connections of screenwriters of that era to Washington and Lee. There may be even more to be uncovered. But the one who is most germane to this story is Larry Watkin.

Treasure Island (1950) was a historic achievement. It was Disney's first live-action film and the first screen version of the classic novel made in color — and

are "professional entertainers" of course, and direct their stuff to what they like to call a "world audience." It must, they say, be direct, immediately comprehended, and observe as many of the taboos as possible. In other words, most of the criticism of these people is correct and the strongest defense you can make for them is to say that they are a cut or two above the Madison Avenue advertising man.)

Are you with me? The field of cartoon animation is pretty much a closed corporation, then, and a fellow like me has no place in it. So that leaves the narrow field of "live action" films and there are only about ten Disney employees connected with this. Larry Watkin and a fellow named Pearce work as a team to make the feature films abroad: they get a company together in England, shoot the film, and bring it back here only for final editing. Disney will take a month or two abroad to check up on them but actually has little to do with any but the broadest aspects of these pictures like *Robin Hood*, *The Sword and the Rose*, and *Treasure Island*.

Now we have narrowed down the number to about eight permanent employees who work on live action here. They are the ones who do the True-Life Adventures, the nature films Disney has been making for about four years. Perhaps you've seen *Nature's Half-Acre*, *Beaver Valley*, *Bear Country*, and some of the others. I think they're pretty good. These nature films are assembled, not usually plotted in advance. The country is apparently loaded with nature enthusiasts who crawl into canyons, hide behind blinds, or station themselves

in trees with cameras. They send their stuff into the studio by the mile, hoping to sell it to Disney. He or his assistants will look at it and after long hours may come up with an idea or theme for one of the nature films. If a man sends in consistently good stuff, he may be put on a retainer basis and sent out on specific assignments, like the young fellow who made such excellent desert shots that they are being worked into the first feature-length nature film. With enough footage on hand and a general notion of theme, an excellent man named Jim Algar sits for hours in front of a small projector, a Moviola, and tries to find a pattern in the film. He works with a film editor very closely and when he thinks he has some kind of continuity he will write a rough narration and show the raw film to Disney and the others. Suggestions and criticisms follow; perhaps the need for more footage is established and the film is obtained; the narration is rearranged; and so on. These meetings and rearrangings may go on for several months, with Algar working patiently and thoroughly and Disney and the others accepting or rejecting ideas. Disney is the man to be pleased and there is a very subtle relationship between him and the rest. No question at all about whose taste dominates. Along about this stage the music man appears and the fellow who is to create the special animation effects used as a kind of trade mark for these Disney films. These two follow the film from now on, attending the various showings and assimilating theme and action. An important aspect here is to run the still-rough →

its screenplay was written by Watkin. It was his job to abridge the Stevenson novel to a desirable film length and yet "preserve the flavor of the colorful adventure story." Watkin said: "Having taught eighteenth-century drama at W&L helped a great deal when I tackled the England of 1765 for Walt Disney. ... I read Stevenson 15 times before I ever began plotting the script and I supplemented the book by consuming scores of period plays."

Watkin was born in Camden, N.Y., and came to Lexington in 1926, "fresh from three other campuses: Syracuse, Harvard and Columbia." He attributed

much of his success in the motion picture industry to his Southern training and residence. He said, "I was young when I joined the W&L faculty, and my ideas had a chance to crystallize under the healthful influence of the people of Virginia. I gained actual writing experiences by doing student-slanted plays for the college Little Theater group. And I acquired a storehouse of Southern humor." This is evidenced by another faculty member's remembering Watkin's penchant for making up humorous ditties. Here's one that is credited to him. It is about a professor's wife who was thoroughly immersed in the United Daughters of the Confederacy:

film before assorted audiences and note reactions carefully: on the basis of these, sections will be cut, lines in the narration revamped for more punch, and other scenes milked for more laughs. So it goes. When the sequences are in final order and the narration polished off, the whole sound track is made and the trick effects added.

What I'm trying to prove is that this painstaking, laborious business is strictly a cooperative venture. Disney contributes what you might call the "feeling"; Algar does the most work; and everybody adds something along the line.

So except for the fortunate and gifted Watkin, there is really no person here permanently who can be called a writer. Algar composes one of these movies, you might say, but the writing he does for the narration is usually a patchwork of his and other people's ideas. The only outfit into which I could be fitted was the one making nature films; obviously a great deal of technical knowledge is necessary and I arrived without that. And I quickly discovered that I had never really seen a film before, just as the young fellow writing his first story discovers he's never really read one. So I was shuffled around from this office to that, set to doing "creative research" — meaning I was to dig up story ideas, and at last given a screen play to do. The screen play was one that had been kicking around the studio for years; Disney had no serious intentions about it; and it was largely a device to keep me busy while I absorbed a knowledge of the way the studio operates. Nobody told me this was the intention, however, and so it was a trying period, though I did manage to learn a great deal. The way the system here operates, you can see I would be of no use to anybody until I had an idea of how the camera can work, the tricks of dissolving and cross-dissolving, establishing mood, and the rest.

At last it was decided that I might be of some help to Algar, who was in the middle of a film I've already mentioned,

the first full-length nature film, tentatively called *The Living Desert*. The rough editing had already been done and the rough narration written; so my job was to try to polish up lines here and there, suggest others, and to help edit Algar's script. (All the while people were sending in new pieces of film and many of the good scenes had to be added to the picture and new narration written.) I have been on this job about a month. My contributions to the narration have been few indeed, but it has been an interesting time. This kind of writing has to have an immediate impact, must not distract from the picture by being too clever or connotative, and must be crystal clear. And, of course, it must be brief, must concern the picture and yet not explain what the audience can see or imagine for themselves.

I guess I have made my point. After a long indoctrination I have reached the stage where I may be trusted with a few minor aspects of a picture. The more technical knowledge and deftness I acquire, the more likely I am to be given more responsible assignments. (Larry Watkin, already established as a novelist, spent three hungry and miserable years finding out how to write screen plays. He found out, more power to him.) It's a matter of learning the business from these shrewd professionals. Whatever you or I may say about their taste and intellect, they are at least hard-working people; those with responsibility are steady eight-to-five characters on pretty much a six-day week. They take a pride in what they do, many of them, though there is a fair proportion of beat-down hacks, especially in the cartoon division.

Ultimately the problem here is temperamental, possibly spiritual. The yardstick here is Disney's taste. He is everybody's Ideal Reader. The amount of time spent watching to see whether the Disney eyebrow is raised or lowered is beyond computation. So there's the other aspect: you learn the business and you learn Walt Disney.

Courtesy of Susan Brush Croft



The Watkin house on Lexington's Castle Hill was supposedly built with the proceeds from On Borrowed Time. Dr. Ned Brush and his wife, Myra, bought the house from Watkin in 1943, and raised their son and three daughters there. It is now owned by the Waller family.

*"Old lady Moffet sat on her toffet
Under the UDC
From thinkin' how stinkin'
Was Abraham Lincoln
She clean forgot Robert E. Lee!"*

During his tenure at Washington and Lee, he founded W&L's drama organization, the Troubadours. He, of course wanted a building where the plays could be produced. So he and a law student, Lewis McMurrin, decided on an old shell of a building that had been a restaurant and a shoe factory. They went to Charlottesville and found some of Thomas Jefferson's unused plans for Monticello and copied them in hopes of adapting them for their envisioned theater. Watkin said, "We decided if we were going to steal, we might as well steal from the best." The Troubadour Theatre was on the corner of Main and Henry — the building is still there — and served Washington and Lee, as well as the Lexington community, for more than a half a century.

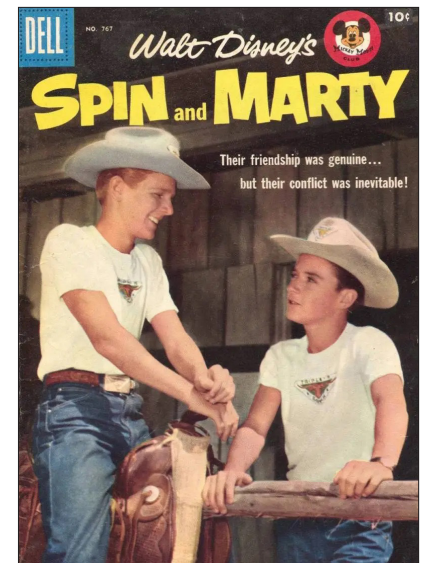
This wasn't the end of Watkin's architectural endeavors. He and a professional architect designed his and Mrs. Watkin's house on Castle Hill, off West Midland Trail. The funds for this house are thought to have been derived from Watkin's first novel, *On Borrowed Time*, published in 1937, so one can infer that the house was

built around that time. It was in this house that the Watkins raised their three children. The lovely brick house, with its squared-off chimneys and white columns, sits on the same property as the DeHart Hotel that had been built in 1891 during an overinflated economic boom and burned in 1922.

Watkin had numerous screenplays and teleplays under his belt other than *Treasure Island*, including *The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men* (1952),

National Velvet: The Desperado (TV, 1961), *The Virginian: Portrait of a Widow* (TV, 1964), and *The Biscuit Eater* (1972), just to name a few. But central to this story is the TV series *Spin and Marty*, based on his book *Marty Markham* — which in turn was based on the summer camp that Tex and Virginia Tilson ran in the 1930s and early '40s.

Spin and Marty (1955-57) aired as a segment of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, produced by Walt Disney and broadcast on ABC. There were three series in all, set at the fictional Triple R Ranch, a boys' western-style summer camp. The first series of twenty-five episodes of eleven minutes each, *The Adventures of Spin and Marty*, was filmed in 1955. Its popularity led to two sequels — *The Further Adventures of Spin and Marty* in 1956 and *The*



Larry Watkin's Marty Markham evolved into Walty Disney's Spin and Marty



Warren E. "Tex" Tilson in a drawing from the 1935 *Washington and Lee Calyx* yearbook, which was dedicated to him

New Adventures of Spin and Marty in 1957. And then *Spin and Marty* comic books came out in the late 1950s. The series was rebroadcast on the Disney Channel until 2002.

The existence of the series, and the book that spawned it, was unknown to the family whose Broadview Ranch in Rockbridge County inspired the fictional Triple R camp — until a man who loved the series got curious, did some research, and made a cold call to the family that ran the real camp.

THE FINAL PART of this "book report" involves interviews with Carol Tilson Atwood, a granddaughter of Tex and Virginia Tilson. The Tilsons' summer camp operated during the late 1930s, and into the early 1940s, when it was closed down because of the polio epidemic. Broadview Ranch, in Rockbridge County, where the summer camp was held, remains in the Tilson family as an active farming operation and hosts horse-centered activities including hunter paces, fox hunting and trail riding. Evident on the farm are reminders of the camp. There are still several log cabins, built using logs recycled from abandoned structures, to house the twenty some campers. One building in particular, the Hunt Lodge, has a huge outside fireplace that the camp used for campfires and the like. It later was home to the hunt breakfasts and today is used for family gatherings, which tend to be quite large, given that there are five generations connected to the farm.

The camp was like something out of the wild west. Boys learned how to brand cattle and took long trail rides, sometimes up to the saddle of House Mountain.



Disney's Triple R Ranch, known in the source novel as *Ranch Rough and Ready*

Virginia Tilson, Tex's wife, was one of the few women involved in the operation of the camp. She was a mother figure to the boys — tending the garden, cooking the meals and caring for them. She was a dietitian, a nurse and a confidant, all in one.

During the years when the boys' camp, a dude ranch of sorts, was in operation, Warren Edward (Tex) Tilson (1902–84) was the football coach at Washington and Lee. In 1934, he coached his team to the Southern Conference Championship and, according to his granddaughters, he picked his best players to be counselors at his summer camp, with the unspoken attempt to hide them from recruiters who might want to offer them better deals.

Tex earned degrees from both the undergraduate and law schools at Washington and Lee. Tex never practiced law but took up coaching, and then later went into the real estate business. He became the college coach and ran his summer camp at the same time Lawrence Watkin was a professor, suggesting how the connection was made and how Watkin came to write *Marty Markham*.

Tex Tilson's achievements were impressive. One might say he began accumulating accomplishments at an early age and continued throughout his life as if preparing for his obituary.

The horses used for the camp came from Southern Seminary, now Southern Virginia University in nearby Buena Vista, and from the Virginia Military Institute's cavalry. Each summer horses would be strung together and walked to Broadview Ranch — more than six miles. Each camper was assigned a horse to be under his care for the summer and to serve as his mount. As in the book *Marty Marham*, the boys were taught horsemanship — not only riding but also responsibility for the horse.

The Tilsons' grandchildren knew a lot about the camp, but not — at first — that Lawrence Watkin had written a book based on it, or that it became a Walt Disney television series. But several years ago, in a chance phone call, out of the blue, a gentleman politely asked Carol Tilson Atwood if she knew of Tex and Virginia Tilson.

"Yes," she said. "They were my grandparents."

The man was so overwhelmed with emotion that he asked her if he could call back in a while. (Carol said, "He really had a fit and fell in it!") She, of course being very curious, agreed.

When he did, he explained that he had been calling people by the name of Tilson everywhere he could find them, looking for some connection to Tex and Virginia. When he found Carol, he couldn't believe his luck. He told Carol he was a Vietnam war veteran who had come home without any memory of his life before joining the Army. He apparently had some sort of amnesia.

At some point he began watching the TV series of *Spin and Marty* with a new friend — one who seemed

new at the time, at any rate — and the show and the boys' experiences somehow triggered something in his brain and returned some of his memory.

He told his friend that he didn't know why he liked the show so much. The friend replied that he liked it because it was what the two of them had grown up watching.

The Vietnam vet became almost obsessed with the show and proceeded to learn everything about it he possibly could. He researched the life of Lawrence Watkin, he knew all the *Spin and Marty* actors, and could recall each episode clearly. But he really wanted to make a connection with Tex and Virginia Tilson.

And he did.

Until that moment, Carol had known nothing about the TV series, and she was thrilled to learn about it. The veteran sent her a DVD of the entire series, and she watched every episode.

Carol Tilson Atwood found *Spin and Marty's* experiences at their camp to be so very similar to the memories passed down to her from her parents and grandparents: Sitting around a campfire at night, which she and her family still do; taking trail rides, which they still do; and raising much of their own food, which they still do.

LARRY WATKIN died in California in 1981 after a long and illustrious career. He was the producer of *The Great Locomotive Chase*, and at one point was hired by Disney Studio to write a biography of Walt. His draft was rejected by the studio.



Broadview Farm as it appears today.