

Researching the Texas frontier brought many rewards

MON MAR 21 1988 CT

History is not always rewarding except in the satisfaction the practitioner finds in learning about the past. But Robert Wooster, young assistant professor of history at Corpus Christi State University, has found other rewards.

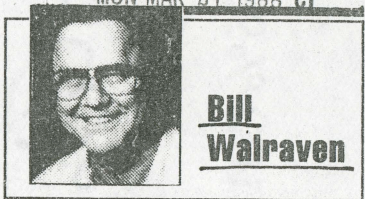


Wooster

He recently won the \$2,000 Kate Brooks Bates Award for Historical Research, which recognized the best historical research in Texas in 1987.

Wooster won the prize for his book, "Soldiers, Sutlers, and Settlers, Garrison Life on the Texas Frontier."

The book chronicles the harsh life in the early Texas forts where officers, sol-



diers and their women were isolated in the vast wilderness, seemingly forgotten by their superiors and often victimized by unscrupulous sutlers and civilians.

Ill equipped and clothed, badly fed and underpaid, the garrison troops had to be inventive to survive and find some comfort in the hostile environment.

Wooster's first book was honored just as his second book was released by Yale University Press. It is "The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903."

This book, he concedes, will likely be of

more interest to academicians than to the reading public. However, it will also be of value to anyone interested in United States military history, for it deals with the period when bureaucrats, politicians and jealous Army officers jockeyed for positions of power while dealings with American Indians were so inconsistent as to constitute no policy at all.

The War and Interior departments were constantly feuding for control of policy. Officers, used to rapid promotion in the Civil War, chafed at having to wait 15 to 20 years between promotions and warred on each other. Reformers back East strongly opposed violence to the Indians, while civilians on the frontier screamed for protection.

"Peaceful coexistence was acceptable to neither whites nor Indians...neither side showed any proclivity to change its perception of how the land should be best used. Few, either in the federal govern-

ment or among the tribes, could conceive of any means other than warfare to resolve the controversies arising along the western frontiers," Wooster writes.

The fiascos of the era point up the complete lack of strategic military planning and the inability of any organization within the Army to correct the situation. It was not until the turn of the century that reform was to occur in the military.

Wooster, a western history specialist, teaches Texas, Civil War, diplomatic and western history. He is working on a book on the history of Fort Davis and another on the biography of General Nelson Miles.

As a graduate student at the University of Texas, Wooster served for three years as a research assistant to James Michener when he worked on his novel "Texas."

"He is terrific to work with," Wooster said. "He does all his own writing. There is no team or ghost writers. He wrote the

first draft and then had us verify that something was right and that it could have happened.

"He taught me a lesson on constructive criticism - if a guy like that can take criticism. He encouraged critical thinking.

"There have been many attacks on 'Texas' that it is not historical. History can be interpreted many different ways. And this was his interpretation. He did not say anything in 'Texas' that couldn't be supported with evidence. He made an incredible effort to be accurate. I think it will stand the test of time.

"Michener was the hardest working person I have ever seen. He has an incredible capacity for work and self discipline. He has opened many doors for me. He is a very generous man. He made sure we were each rewarded. I have greatest admiration for him."

Who says history is dull and unrewarding?