

# Something to say

## Former Silicon Valley lawyer turns to a writing career

BY AARON BRAND ■ Texarkana Gazette

**M**arcia Kemp Sterling's high-powered career as a Silicon Valley lawyer may have been shortened by a condition that affects her speech, but this Texarkana native has plenty to say.

She turned to a writing career in retirement, recently penning and publishing a novel, "One Summer in Arkansas."

The 352-page novel, which is self-published by her own Archelaus Press as a handsome trade paperback, concerns a young law school grad who returns home for a fateful summer before starting a law career in the Bay Area.

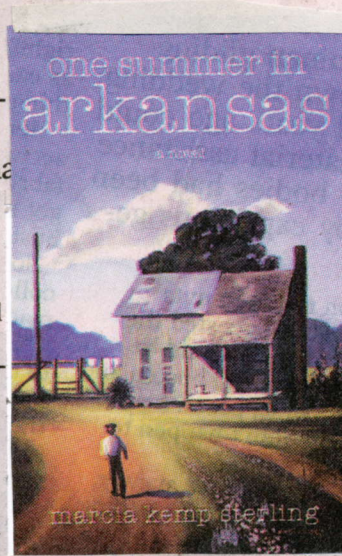
For Sterling, writing is nothing new. It's an essential skill for any lawyer, and Sterling's experience also includes time as a reporter at the Houston

Post, where she once interviewed Gregory Peck, along with other plum assignments.

At Vanderbilt University, she earned a degree in French literature, so she has an ear for the written word, something readily apparent during conversation with her.

For law school, she headed to Stanford, finding herself in the right place at the right time when she graduated just as Silicon Valley began its ascendancy.

"You know most lawyers are writers. When you're an undergraduate, you're



either attracted to physics or math, but if you're a liberal artsy person ... and you want to earn a living, you've got to have some other way, because you sure the heck aren't going to support yourself writing," Sterling said. "So law schools are actually filled with people who love to write but want to make a living at the same time."

Brainy pursuits are also in the blood. Sterling was raised by a well-educated woman, Flora Kemp (maiden name Steel), who served as a society editor for the Texarkana Gazette under editor J.Q. Mahaffey and studied at Northwestern University's journalism school. There she met Sterling's father, Karlton Kemp, a Midwestern preacher's son.

"She brought him back to Texarkana. He fell in love with the country club because he loved to play golf, and he



Staff photo by Adam Sacasa

Texarkana native Marcia Kemp Sterling is pictured at her brother's Texarkana, Ark., home. Sterling, a retired patent lawyer in Silicon Valley, started a new career writing and has published a novel. "One Summer in Arkansas" is based on a fictional town similar to Texarkana.

became kind of an institution in this town. He was that kind of small-town house call doctor who everybody in town knew," she said, noting her dad delivered 5,000 babies as Dr. Kemp.

She describes her parents as people who weren't social snobs, but they were committed intellectuals who believed in education and credentials.

Sterling dove into a career in law

because, well, she had to earn money as a newly-single parent. She'd gone to California during the "heyday of the flower children," but then found herself divorced "without any physical means of support."

Sterling had good grades at Vanderbilt. And she knew she could take a test, so she went for the LSAT and aced it.

After Stanford Law School, she first worked for a top Silicon Valley firm, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, then later joined Autodesk (think AutoCAD), where she became general counsel and senior vice president.

She also served as board chairman for the Business Software Alliance, which has headquarters in Washington, D.C. That work took her overseas to talk copyright protection.

A voice disorder called spasmodic dysphonia led Sterling to retire early.

In some ways, her life and law career out West highlights how she's lived in and danced between two different worlds.

Sterling says she was unable to compete here growing up because Southern women are "so articulate and glib." In contrast, her family is reserved, she says.

"But I moved from this area where the women flirt .... to the Bay Area, in particular the Silicon Valley part of it, where everybody's kind of modestly Asperger's and can't make eye contact," Sterling said.

Compared to them, she was exotic. "Suddenly they think I'm like this articulate, outgoing person." She believes these two cultures have "much to teach each other," despite their differences.

Searching for work after law school, she found herself gravitating to a most fortunate location just before the big Silicon Valley boom. This was 1982.

"They said, well, this guy is starting this firm and there's some of these new high-technology companies. Go talk to them," Sterling said.

Joining the firm, she landed the eventual software design titan Autodesk as part of her work in the first six months. That company was founded in '82, just as her law career was getting going.

"Lucky timing. That's life," Sterling said, adding, "When I started writing, certainly one of the things I was interested in is I just happened to live two chunks of my life in two places that couldn't be more different."

When she grew up here, Texarkana in some ways was a fairly affluent and sophisticated town at the railroad crossroads, she says.

"Railroad and the timber industry drove the economy in a way later manufacturing did and technology did," Sterling said.

Being part of that culture, one with "a little bit of a chip on its shoulder," influenced her life. Texarkana also attracted young people from the surrounding rural areas, she remembers.

"We were the first generation where teenagers had a real identity," Sterling said.

She remembers seeing Elvis perform at the Louisiana Hayride. She was also a member of the Carl "Cheesy" Nelson fan club.

It was a rich and dynamic time here, once again the "right place, right time" in some respects.

She sees a bit of herself in her novel's main character, Lee Addison, but also in his younger, troubled sister and other characters. One of the issues she explores in her book is the troubled legacy of race relations in the South.

"I grew up in a Texarkana that was completely segregated. The only black people I knew were people who helped us in

one way or another," Sterling said. One woman of particular importance was named Odessa and worked in her father's office. She was the inspiration for one of the characters in her novel.

She recently visited this woman, whom she calls "smart and funny and resilient."

As a writer, Sterling understands characters take on a life of their own. She wasn't sure writing down this story would turn it into an actual book, and then she thought it would be the Lee Addison story about "the cool golden boy."

"As you write, you start thinking about your characters as you're falling asleep, and at some point they become who they want to be," Sterling said.

So this novel became more about the sister and an elderly black woman named Etta who befriends Addison.

That character's loose model was Odessa, who, along with Sterling's father, the author says, lived through the changes Texarkana experienced in regards to race since he set up a medical practice here.

"She's an inspiration," Sterling said.

Among the issues explored in her novel, "identity, race, religion and region" are the most apparent, she says. But the novel is not meant to teach a lesson or anything of that sort. It's character-driven.

"When you write fiction, what you really want is to touch somebody's heart in some way, or that they'll love your characters in a way that they will think about your characters when they go to sleep," Sterling said.

Although Sterling's voice remains shaky, writing provides a way to be heard.

"In the build up of my law career I lost my effective speaking voice because I have a neurological problem. I didn't know what it was at first. I was in the middle of this big job, fighting with men around a conference table. My voice started to sound like I was scared ... I didn't know what it was," she recalled.

It's spasmodic dysphonia and affects the muscles around the voice box, she explained. It's not degenerative but "one you've got it, you have it." She has good days and bad ones.

"It caused me to retire from my job earlier than I would have. That was so frustrating. Yet, I have things I want to say," Sterling said.

Sterling came to Arkansas this past week to build a presence for her book. She hopes to line up book readings and signings in the area. In her career as a lawyer, she was in a sense "protected by credentials," she said. "Now I'm an entrepreneur in the book business. Nobody knows who I am and I've just got to be right out there and sell myself. It's a whole different thing."

(On the Net:  
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