

warren

# OATES

a wild Life

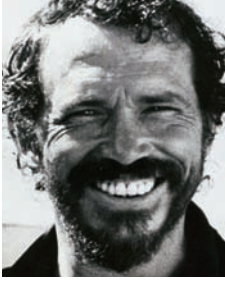
SUSAN COMPO

**Warren Oates**

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Series Editor  
Patrick McGilligan



# Warren Oates

*A Wild Life*

Susan A. Compo

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For Tony Wain, without whose friendship  
I would be entirely stateless.



*Warren Oates looked like he'd had the shit kicked out of him & didn't care. In his persona & characters there existed a brutality, tenderness, complexity & directness that no other actor of his genre could claim.*

*These qualities lived onscreen as compliments, not conflicts. Oates gave his characters a range like that of Charles Bukowski, a poet who could land a straight right in a downtown bar, honky-tonk or Juarez cantina. His stare, which often turned into a glare, came from his gut. It was the look of a shell-shocked soldier, broken lover or desert rat; his eyes focused out on the horizon. He mesmerized the audience in the way that he could pull qualities of the character he was acting up from his depths & then let them sink in or play across his face.*

*You got the feeling that not much scared Warren Oates. He was the guy you knew had your back as the shit started to break loose; he could throw a car into a four-wheel slide & then pull it up within inches of the camera or the cliff. With subtlety in his back pocket, he wasn't afraid to "go big," climbing out of a grave in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* or, in a mostly mute performance, losing his mind in *Cockfighter*.*

*He was the kind of actor who made Jack Nicholson or Harry Dean Stanton come to the set ready to ratchet the heat up a few notches or turn everything upside down. He was a true anti-hero who helped to change & at the same time personified cinema in the '60's & '70's w/ his unflinching brutal honesty.*

*—John Doe, musician/actor  
Bakersfield, Calif.*





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## Population Boom

When the last firework had given up its ghost and the cookout embers had ceased smoldering, the population of a small town in the soft coalfields of Muhlenberg County in western Kentucky welcomed a late reveler. “I was due on the Fourth of July but I arrived a few hours late,” said Warren Oates, who was born the morning after in 1928, in what he would refer to as “the little dirt town of Depoy,” a coal-mining and farming community past its prime. Although Depoy had been through hardship before, this time it seemed a little deeper. The Great Depression was looming.

Depoy is situated some six miles from the Oates Valley, named for Major Jesse Oates, a Revolutionary War soldier of English, Scottish, and Welsh descent. Oates, something of a tearaway, fled North Carolina in 1796 after a duel, and he used his contested fortune to add to a large land grant and other property he had been busily accumulating in the new Commonwealth of Kentucky.

The colorful Jesse Oates was a third-generation New Worlder, born in North Carolina about 1756. By 1775, he had joined the fighting forces, and for a time he served under Colonel Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox of the Revolutionary War. When the battle moved southward, Marion shored up his troops with militiamen like Oates, who rendered such distinctive service that he was awarded the rank of first major.

Once the war was over, men were obliged to attend monthly military musters, and Oates did, despite his having great antipa-

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thy for another soldier in his unit. David Coghill, whom some regional histories identify as Jesse's brother-in-law, consistently attacked Oates, the smaller of the men. Oates grew tired of Coghill's bullying. "I'll kill him," he said to himself. At the next muster, when Coghill gave Oates his customary whipping, Oates threatened to shoot as Coghill begged for his life. Oates allowed Coghill to retrieve the gun he preferred, and then, when Coghill ordered him to fire, he did so, killing Coghill instantly.

Oates headed home, gathered some money and a pocket compass, and rode west. In a Natchez tavern, he saw a newspaper advertisement offering a reward for his capture. He quickly moved on to Kentucky and the Pond River country, where he sent for his family. He never returned to North Carolina; if he had, he would probably have been killed by one of Coghill's friends.

Oates married twice: first to Larahuma Stevens, the daughter of a well-to-do neighbor, on March 3, 1782, and then to Zilpha Mason on April 13, 1789. He fathered five children by Larahuma, including William, and twelve by Zilpha. The family lived on a plantation with thirty slaves at Harpe's Hill near Pond River. Harpe's Hill is high and picturesque, and the valley below is often referred to as Egypt because of its fertile soil and good drainage.

On August 10, 1831, at the grand old age of seventy-five, Jesse Oates died. His body is in an unmarked grave on Harpe's Hill, in a burying ground he set aside for that purpose.

Warren's father, Bayless E. Oates, was born one of six children, on July 16, 1886, in the pioneer house situated on the six-hundred-acre farm built by Warren's great-great-grandfather William Oates. Circumstances called for Bayless to be industrious, and he was that, as well as quiet and studious. In the early 1910s, he bought and began operating a general store located across the street from the farm. He and his brothers also had a gristmill, powered by a gasoline engine, in which they made cornmeal and a coarse animal feed known as chop, and they sharpened plow points for neighbors. His sister Kate helped with cooking and household chores, while another sister, Lillian, handled outside work: feeding horses, milking cows, and tending to sick animals.

In 1920, Bayless Oates married Sarah Alice Mercer, whom he had repeatedly traveled on foot or horseback to visit at the church she attended, two or three miles away. The couple set up house in Depoy on Bards Hill Road. In time she bore a daughter, who died after three days. Two years later, in the middle of a coalfield-wide union strike, towheaded son Gordon was born on March 14, 1924.

Four years later, at the tail end of the Jazz Age, which like a comet passed high over Depoy, a native son appeared who would put the place on the map. If you look up Depoy today, you will find Warren Oates's picture, although this tiny, slapdash town goes on about its existence pretty much oblivious of the connection. Fly into nearby Owensboro–Davies County Regional Airport, and you will see a photo of Oates in the passenger waiting area. “That’s my favorite character actor,” said the airport’s general manager, Tim Bradshaw. “And I didn’t know he was from this area.” Elsewhere in the region and across Green River, residents lay claim to country star Merle Travis, the Everly Brothers, and bluegrass visionary Bill Monroe. Slightly farther afield and further in the future, Paducah would offer up enigmatic actor Johnny Depp, but not before Depoy’s Warren Oates imbued the screen with a talent as deep as Green River, which local legend holds has no perceptible bottom in some parts.

Although Oates left Depoy when he was thirteen, he would return in thought and in deed—once even to marry. And although he would live in the arty atmosphere of New York’s Greenwich Village, the cowboy flats of Southern California’s San Fernando Valley, the faux wilderness of the Hollywood Hills, the faded glamour of Los Angeles’s Los Feliz district, and the dramatic Montana landscape, Warren Oates never really found a home. “I feel always in motion,” he would insist. “You start moving a man around and he doesn’t have time to adjust. It’s ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ all over again.”

Oates described Depoy as simultaneously pastoral—“rolling hills, trees dark in wintertime, filigreed”—and spartan, “strikes and guns in lunchboxes and always some war somewhere coming over our Philco radio, the second radio in town.” He reported its

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population as anywhere from a meager ninety-nine to a handful of hundreds, depending on the effect he sought. At the time of his birth, Depoy held about three hundred families.

The village of Depoy had a circuitous development. In the early 1800s, a log cabin surrounded by a huge grove of oak trees became the area's first dwelling. Known as the Davis House, it was abandoned in the first decade of the next century, to the delight of a generation who used its setting for ice cream suppers and less fulsome outings until 1940, when the structure was torn down and the sheltering oaks were cut.

The town made its first bow as a place called Gordon (after a family who had a small store there) when a post office was established on August 31, 1874. Since the advent of the railroad, the area had had a depot ferrying both passengers and freight, but a post office made existence official.

During this time, the Oates family ran the farm, and Susan Slaton, Warren's Aunt Sis, operated a boardinghouse in a little town nearby. On the night of March 20, 1868, a group of men who stayed over left a ten-dollar gold coin beneath a breakfast plate as a tip. Earlier that day, they had visited the Southern Deposit Bank in Russellville and asked the clerk, Nimrod Long, to cash a bond. When he started to comply, the outlaws jumped over the bank counter. Long ran off, leaving another bank employee to fend for himself and load the sacks with money. Jesse and Frank and the rest of the James-Younger Gang made off with between twelve and fourteen thousand dollars.

In 1917, the town now known as Depoy was about to boom, albeit for a short burst. The Midwest Coal Company, headed by a West Virginian named Lepinsky, had purchased local coal deposits along with a country bank mine and was proceeding to commence operations in Depoy. Midwest Coal was about to rearrange the scenery, and soon, Muhlenberg County would lead the nation in coal production.

Spur track was laid to serve two mines in the number nine vein of coal. The existing mine employed 30 people; a new, larger undertaking would have some 110 employees. The foreman of the smaller opening was Bill Coleman, whose son Bobby would

be a favorite childhood playmate of Warren Oates. Both mines were active until the coalfield-wide union strike of 1924.

The town struggled to recover from the strike and returned to a primarily farming community. Foreman Bill Coleman once again raised cattle and crops on land across the highway from the Davis cabin and near the house and general store owned by Bayless Oates. Times were hard: some parcels of land were offered for only two dollars an acre. Tobacco, corn, and hay could be grown, along with produce destined for the market in Greenville, a larger town four miles east of Depoy. One of Greenville's assets was the Palace Theater, which opened in 1901 and featured vaudeville acts before inevitably transitioning first to silent and then to talking pictures.

Bayless Oates continued to run the concrete block general store (one of five in Depoy), behind which John Spurlin cooked and served hamburgers. Depoy had two doctors, two blacksmiths, and two barbers. All enterprise prospered or stumbled in the shadow of a huge general store run by Adkins Camp and Tucker, a cradle-to-grave establishment so complete it had funeral supplies, including coffins. Their horse-drawn hearse was a regular feature of the community.

In the early morning hours of July 5, 1928, it was the services of Dr. D. G. Argabrite that were required at the Oateses' white weatherboard house on Bards Hill Road, just across the shallow creek from Oak Grove Baptist Church, which the family attended. The emergent baby boy had a set of determinedly kicking feet; a full head of dark, slightly wavy hair; bright, changeable, soon-to-be-hazel eyes; and a scowl that could convey a multitude of expressions even at this most tender age. Wary he was not. Warren Mercer Oates was ready for action, even if only within the confines of a modest home in a tiny western Kentucky town.

Older brother Gordon was transfixed by the new addition to the household, but even adulation has its limits. A few weeks later, Gordon walked with his father to spend the day in the general store, no doubt to relieve Sarah and "Aunt" Evie Bard, who functioned as a nanny, from the pace of life with a newborn and a four-year-old in the home. Father and son turned left from their



house, went down the gravel road, and walked on to the store. The shop sold nearly everything, from groceries to dry goods, from block salt to wagons, but it was into the glass candy counter that Gordon would crawl. That morning, Gordon was at his usual post when his father stepped out for a moment. The little boy emerged when John Brizendene, a local wholesale grocery salesman, walked in. He was a tall man with white hair who often called on Bayless. He asked Gordon how he liked his new baby brother. "OK," Gordon replied.

Brizendene ran his hands through his white hair. "Well, see, I was thinking, I might be willing to trade you something for that new baby. I thought you might be in line for a billy goat and wagon. A white billy goat pulling a red and green wagon, a leather harness with brass rings, brass hubs on the wheels. You sitting up there, high in a decorated seat, the reins in your hands, the billy goat ready to go? You'd be driving this billy goat and red and green wagon all around Depoy."

Gordon raced out of the store and headed home to get Warren. As he hurried in the front door, Sarah asked Gordon what the matter was. He breathlessly explained he was making a trade for his brother. Sarah laughed and even cried a little, but she did not plan on parting with her new baby. Gordon reluctantly went back to the store, on foot, to explain. At day's end he came home on foot, too.

When Warren was old enough to walk, he would also go to the store. His father was usually immersed in a book and would not even bother to look up as customers entered. "My dad was an avid reader," Oates recalled. "He'd always go into Greenville and bring back seven or eight books. He'd read every one of them in the allotted two-week period. I'd go with him sometimes and he really got me interested in reading."

Depoy was for the young man "a splendid place," with "mainly a real community spirit. Sometimes the whole town would get together on a project, like all making mattresses one year, because they were too expensive to buy." Warren would make the rounds of the stores and go on to the post office. "The post office was in J. L. Taggart's store and that's where all the activity was because

the trains would come through. They'd drop the mail off twice a day and the big deal was to go up and watch the train go through and watch the mail bags fly off the end of it."

In the early 1930s, the local mines were winding down, and work was thin both above and below ground. Labor unrest was prevalent, and in Depoy, several miners were killed, which, along with the prospect of work in another location, prompted a good portion of the population to move away. Loss in custom coupled with the fact that he had extended credit to people who could not pay soon meant Bayless had to shut down the store and pick up work when and where he could. Sarah, now suffering complications brought on by diabetes, took in boarders. It is unlikely that any of the boarders were as notorious as Aunt Sis's, but being surrounded by characters could not have failed to make an impression on Warren, who perfected his trademark squint by watching an uncle speak with an ever-present cigarette angling from his mouth.

"Our upbringing was strict and we had to walk the line," said Bobby Coleman. He was a Methodist whereas Oates was a Baptist, one of the few details that separated them. "We grew up rough, and we made do with what we had," Coleman asserted. The rough edges included both boys' taking up smoking well before the age of twelve. "Still, I would have to say no one could have had a better life," Gordon Oates said. "We had values and pride. Sure, there were ragtag kids and troublemakers, but we were told not to associate with them. Of course, when you needed a softball team, you played with them."

A man called Buren Gray had an old, dilapidated garage where he worked on rusted automobiles, most of which were out in the yard on the threadbare grass. As a sideline he sold bootleg whiskey, which he made up in five-gallon jugs. Bootlegging was tiring work—even if you sampled the wares—so for help he turned to the local kids, who would carefully pour the moonshine into pints and half pints. This gave Buren a little more time to sit in the shade and play marbles—he had a wide selection of taws—and hopefully keep his mean streak hidden.

"One day Buren had a little too much of what he sold, and he

decided to get on Speed Bard, a black boy we would play with,” Gordon remembered. Speed’s mother, Aunt Evie Bard, was the Oateses’ nanny. “All of us kids got together and ran Buren off!”

Soon, young Warren was exploring other ways to earn money, working in the fields picking strawberries for two cents a quart, suckering tobacco for twenty-five cents a day, or riding the mule that turned the machine that made the sorghum or ground the wheat. When he was a little older, he assisted highway crews by loading sand onto trucks, a job he claimed created the deep, permanent furrows in his brow. “When I was about eight, in the great road-building era around 19 and -35, -36, -37, a bunch of us kids would pick up 10 cents or 15 cents a day shoveling sand into the big hauler trucks for the guys who drove them at maybe 75 cents a day,” Oates said. The kids would work for the truckers the entire day. The trucks would then haul the sand down to where the road was being built.

The kids would also hop the train to Graham, about four miles away, and play on the tracks in all seasons. “In the wintertime when the rails got cold, we were told never to put our skin on the railroad track because you’d freeze there,” Oates said. “Well a friend of mine stuck his tongue on it one day going to school, just before the train came. His dad ran in and got a kettle of hot water and poured it on the railroad track to unfreeze his tongue.”

As spirited as his friends were, Warren could hold his own against any of them. “Warren learned to paddle his own canoe,” Gordon said, “to the point where if he was confronted, he didn’t let anyone get in his way. If the big kids bullied him too much, he’d hit them with a rock. He was not one to be backed down quickly.” And if there was no one to fight with, he knew he could always turn to his best friend, who lived six hundred feet away.

“I would dread walking home,” Bobby Coleman said, “because I knew I’d have to fight with Warren. And I didn’t want to get in a fight with Warren! One day I found a knife and I ran after him, chased him into his house. His mother screamed, ‘Don’t you cut Warren!’ and I shouted back, ‘I would, if I could catch him.’”

The boys would play, running back and forth between T. D. Clark’s barbershop, Taggart’s wooden store, Cie Shannon’s brick

store, and the Oateses' concrete block structure. One day, when Warren was bringing molasses home, he could not resist galloping with the heavy glass jar brimming with the sweet, sticky substance. He tripped and fell, and the molasses spilled like tar onto the cement steps. He hightailed it away as he yelled to his friends, "'Lasses, boys, 'lasses."

Education took place in a two-room schoolhouse, and his teacher in the primary grades was a relation, Jeanette Earle. Having a family member for a teacher, Oates conceded, "made things much easier for me." A photograph of his class in 1934 shows Warren squinting slightly, hands poised on his thighs near the cuff of his off-white shorts. An errant tuft of hair divides his forehead. Next to him, looking like a perennial tough guy, is little Bobby Coleman. "Warren and I were average students," Coleman said, leaning heavily on the word "average." "We were ordinary kids, healthy. But Warren was the comedian type at an early age."

One afternoon in Earle's classroom, five-year-old Warren sat at his desk, waiting his turn while each of his thirty-odd classmates went through their oral recitals. When his moment came, he walked to the front of the class, turned to face the curious or distracted young faces, and began to recite a poem. "I wish I was a cat I do," he said, and he was hooked on performing.

The Oates Valley's Unity Baptist Cemetery, set on a series of low hills in Graham, holds many Oates and Earle remains as well as a large monument that marks the grave of Everett Green, a miner whose murder in 1936 set off a series of events that had a profound effect on young Warren. On the cold Monday morning of January 14, 1936, a procession of cars crawled through the tiny town of Depoy.

"The most impressive and dramatic thing I've seen in my entire life was the funeral for the first man killed in a strike near Depoy," Oates said. "It was like something out of Steinbeck. The miners drove his coffin on the back of a pickup truck through two counties. With all the traffic it took them three hours to go through my little town. They were going about five, ten miles an hour and that served to heat the miners up enough to declare open war on the strikebreakers. When they buried that man, that