

## JOHN HILER

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John Hiler is a Mountain Home businessman and history scientist. He has published many works on local, Idaho and western history. He and his Wyoming Cowgirl, Merrilee, have a large, blended family that have many different avocations. He is well steeped in western history, his mother's family came to the Idaho Territory in 1863, to Boise, and then were the first settlers in Bruneau Valley, "The Valley of the Tall Grass." His father's family came across the continent on the new railroad to Susanville, California, in the 1875 and by 1880 were in Vienna, Idaho Territory, later in Bellevue, Idaho. Hiler was born and raised in Glens Ferry, Idaho, and grew up listening to all the stories from not only his family, but also from many old-timers, including Charlie Glenn of the Glenn family. He and Merrilee spend their time between Mountain Home, Prairie, Idaho, and Surprise, Arizona.

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### *A Small Remembrance of Richard McKenna*

"...I was in either the third or fourth grade when someone finally told me about the existence of the Library." –December 17, 1962, from a letter written by Richard McKenna, Mountain Home native son who had published his famous book, "The Sand Pebbles." He continues, "I went there with much trepidation one afternoon after school. Just inside the outer door I encountered a strange smell compounded of rubber matting, books and possibly some sort of floor wax. That odor was distinctive of the library as long as I knew it, and to me a most pleasant one, associated with the greatest pleasurable excitement the world had to offer me. I know now why incense burns in temples. I stood there sniffing it and reading a marble plaque engraved with the names of the women's club's instrumental in founding the library. Finally, I summoned my courage and went through the inner doors."

“...and went through the inner doors.” Through those inner doors into another world that he didn’t realize existed. He continues: “The librarian was Mrs. Sessions, a pleasant and kindly woman. I told her my name and asked her permission to read one of the books. I could not take my eyes off the books. They were all around the big room and much higher than my head. I had not realized that so many books existed in the world.”

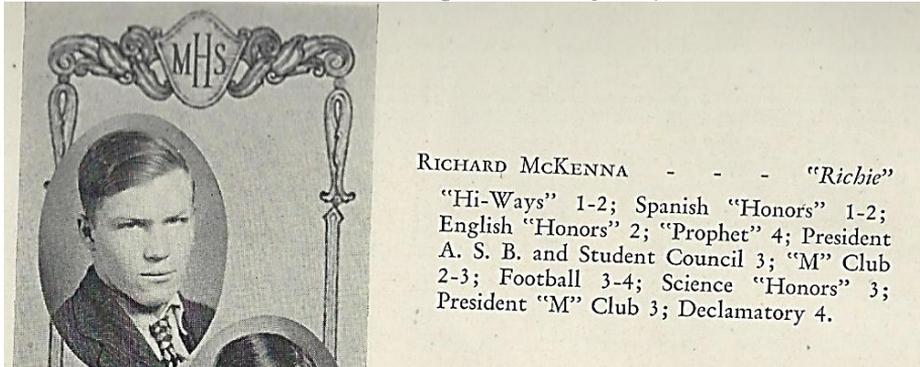
Richard McKenna was born in Mountain Home, Idaho, May 8, 1913. He was the oldest of four boys of Milton and Ertz McKenna. The family was poor, and his early years were difficult, including the family being evicted from their home one Christmas Eve. Richard was well liked by the kids in town although he was a bit shy, part of which may have been his bent toward reading. He was just another boy, growing up in a small town that was caught in the throes of the agricultural depression that followed the First World War.

Up until that time, Mountain Home had been one of the more prosperous communities in the west. On the Oregon Short Line railroad, it was a crossroads of commerce both north and south to the ranches and mining camps of those days. During the war it was a major shipping point for wool for military uniforms and horses for the war in Europe. When the war ended, commerce did a major contraction and money was dear and work was sparse.

The young man went to high school, played football and was president of the “M” club, was Student Body President and won scholastic honors in Spanish, English and Science all of which give a picture of a fellow well-liked and respected. He went to Caldwell, to College of Idaho but did not stay. He enlisted in the Navy in 1931,

because according to local lore, “He could send home an allotment to his mother, who by that time was living in Caldwell.

*Richard McKenna in the Mountain Home High School “Prophet” yearbook*



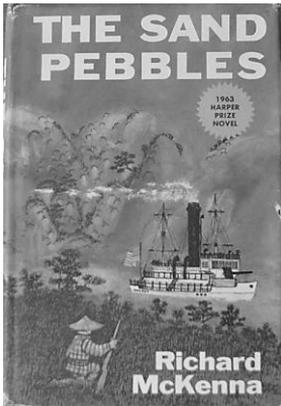
Richard served in the navy for twenty-two years, before and during World War 2 and into the Korean war. He became a Chief Machinist Mate, high ranking enlisted man, serving on a variety of ships in many ports of call.



*McKenna as a Navy Chief.*

He read widely, was a keen observer of life and collected a dossier of navy life, particularly in China and Japan. Leaving the Navy, he was thirty-six years old and decided he would become a writer. Under the G.I. Bill he enrolled at the University of North Carolina, and was elected Phi Beta Kappa, graduating in three years in 1956 with a B.A. in English and the day after graduation married Eva Marie Grice, a librarian at the University and set out on his writing career that led him to fame.

## “The Sand Pebbles” by Richard McKenna



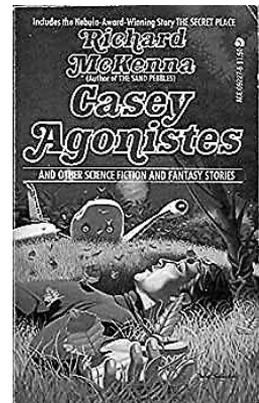
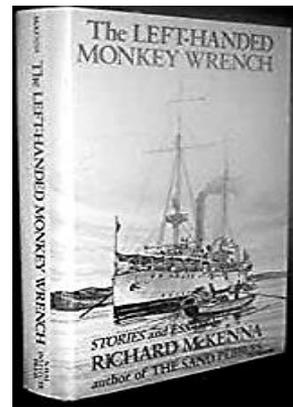
At forty-four he published his first work, a fantasy “Casey Agonistes.” He became a writer of science fiction publishing many science fiction works that earned him the Nebula Award. Then in 1962 when he was forty-nine, he published his master work, “The Sand Pebbles,” the book that was the result of his years of notes while serving in the navy.



The “Sand Pebbles is a tale rich in history and human drama, drawn much on what McKenna saw and heard during his tours of duty in China and Southeast Asia. Little is known about the technical aspects of his putting the book together, but it is obvious that he had extensive

documentation to work from. His dramatic fictional account of the gunboat the San Pablo, the name of the novel being a pun on the boat name. Although he served aboard a Yangtze River gunboat in 1936 the story is set a decade

earlier during the Nationalist Northern Expedition. The novel tells of



the boredom of navy life aboard a boat that was a left over from the Spanish American war, the rush of battle stations and the conflict between traditional Chinese imperialism and the drive for a more open nationalism of modernizing China, the conflict between Asian religious beliefs and Christianity, between the treating people as slaves and defending the honor of the human worth.

The book became a movie at the direction of Robert Wise.



He'd wanted to make the film for several years, but the studios were financially reluctant to finance it because of the extensive foreign locations that would be necessary. Finally, they agreed to produce it if Wise would accept another film before beginning, he did and directed "The Sound of Music."

*Figure 1 The 20th Century Fox movie, "The Sand Pebbles." By Richard McKenna.*

The Sand Pebbles movie is considered to be an American Epic War film in Panavision it is the story of Jake Holeman an independent and rebellious U.S. Navy machinists' mate, first class aboard the boat on the Yangtze River Patrol in 1920's China. The film company built a river gunboat for \$250,000 to use in the filming, a huge sum of money for a set, a set that was actually sailed on the ocean to Taiwan and then to Hong Kong. There were many adventures in the filming, the loss of a camera and film in a river, a typhoon, the Taiwan government impounding the film, sickness

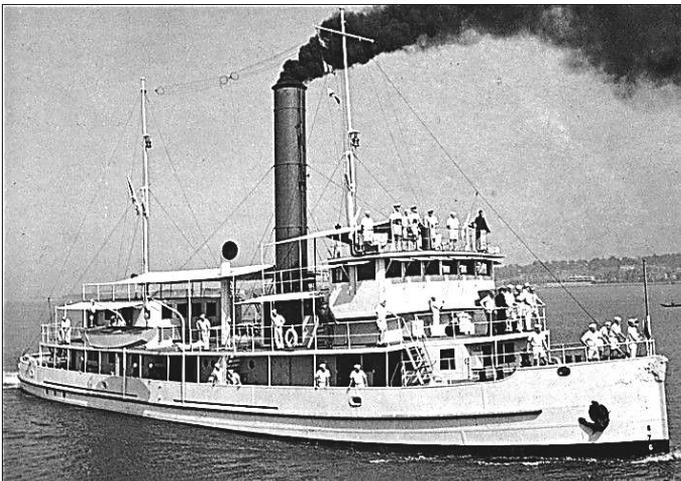
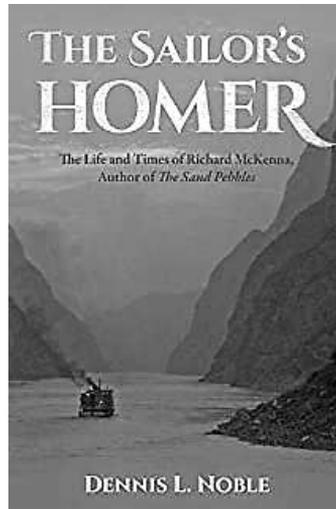
among the crew and labor unrest. The filming was supposed to take nine weeks but took seven months. When the filming was finally completed in Taiwan, the government held several members of the crew hostage for supposed unpaid taxes including Steve McQueen and his family. McQueen arrived back in California with a badly abscessed tooth that was bad enough that his doctor ordered him to rest for some time to regain his strength, which again held up final completion.

The Twentieth Century Fox film premiered in New York on December 20, 1966 and was received with mostly good reviews. The film cost over \$21 million to make and the studio said that in the end it lost \$895K, having been substantially over budget. The principal actors in the film are: Steve McQueen, as Holman; Richard Attenborough; Richard Crenna; Candice Bergen. The picture was nominated for eight Academy Awards with McQueen getting the only Academy nomination in his career. Attenborough won a Gold Globe for his portrayal. Recently, twelve minutes of the original film have been added to the current reissue.

Richard McKenna won out of 544 applicants, the coveted Harper Prize of \$10K for the book that was first serialized in the Saturday Evening Post, then published by Harper and Row and then selected as a Book of the Month Club publication. It was then and has remained an icon of American Literature. Richard McKenna didn't live to see his master work in film. He died on November 1, 1964; a life too short. In his letter as first quoted the ending paragraph is a poignant western reminiscence: "A lady in Boise recently sent me a sprig of sagebrush, it is here on my desk as I write and the fragrance of it

brings back powerfully the memory of forty years ago. Similarly, writing the foregoing has revived strongly the special feelings I had for the Library as a boy.”

There are some interesting notes to this story: Steve McQueen famously said, “Whatever sins I have committed in my life have been paid for in filming the Sand Pebbles.” Sick and exhausted, he did not work again for two years. Another side light is that Ford Rainey, cousin to Janet Jo Rainey-Davison was an actor in the movie, he was born in Mountain Home, Idaho. The two schools in town, the remembrance room at the McKenna High School, and the grade school, the bust on the grounds of the Carnegie Library, now museum and a street are all named after McKenna. There is a new biography out about Richard McKenna, “The Sailors Homer,” a well-deserved tribute to him, A Native Son.



*The “USS San Pablo,” the gunboat that was the basis for the movie.*