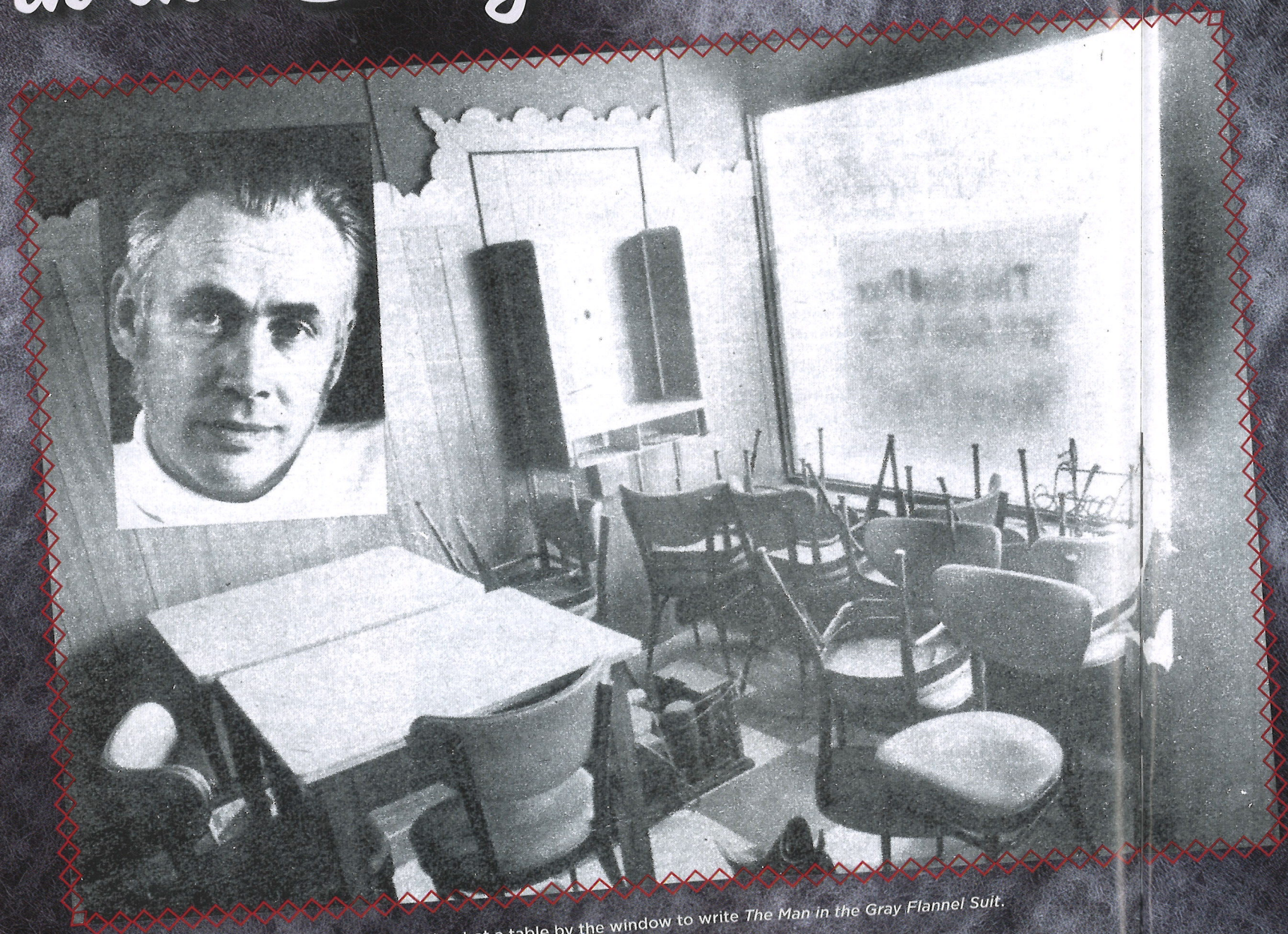


Sloan Wilson: Buffalo's Own Man in the Gray Flannel Suit



Bitterman's Grill, where Sloan Wilson (inset) sat at a table by the window to write *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.
SUNY Buffalo State Archives, Courier-Express collection

By Tom Reigstad

NOONTIME ON A SPRING WEEKDAY IN 1953: A tall, sturdily built 33-year-old man with tousled hair scoops up a sheaf of typewritten pages from his desk and packs them into a thin valise. He nods to his two secretaries as he leaves his office in 212 Hayes Hall at the University of Buffalo and lopes down the meticulously mowed, gracefully sloping, deep-green tree-lined lawn at a southwest angle toward Main Street. He crosses the street and enters Bitterman's Grill, a cozy neighborhood tavern. The bartender greets him, and he settles in at his customary front table at one of the large plate-glass windows facing Main Street and the campus he just departed. The man orders a beer and a sandwich, lights his pipe, spreads out his typewritten papers and begins scribbling on them with pencil and blue ink.

Author Sloan Wilson followed this lunchtime routine for two years as he composed his 1955 bestselling novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, while working at the University of Buffalo. The novel was followed one year later by a blockbuster movie starring Gregory Peck and Jennifer Jones. As the 70th anniversary of the book's release approaches, it is an ideal time to tell the little-known story of Wilson's writerly life in Buffalo and his longtime affection for the city that shaped his career.



The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit chronicles the struggles of an American couple, Tom and Betsy Rath, as they navigate post-World War II suburban angst and the jaded corporate culture that fueled it. The novel quickly sold two million copies, and its title became a catchphrase to describe the conformity required to succeed in big business and the elusiveness of the American Dream. The novel's lasting influence is evident. In season two of the long-running television series *Mad Men* (2007–2015), for example, Don Draper is addressed as “the man in the gray flannel suit,” emphasizing the enduring cultural impact of Wilson’s novel.

Sloan Wilson was born to privilege in Norwalk, CT, in 1920, seemingly destined to become a writer. His mother, Ruth, was an author and magazine writer. His father, Albert, was also an author as well as an editor and a professor of journalism at New York University. Young Wilson attended Harvard University until World War II broke out, whereupon he joined the U.S. Navy. After the war, he and his wife, Elise, lived in a one-room apartment near Harvard Square while he finished his degree and tried to write.

After publishing a few stories in the *New Yorker* and *Harper’s* magazines and a stint at the *Providence Journal*, Wilson was hired in the late 1940s to write for *Time Inc.*, headquartered in New York City. When he started there, a colleague advised him that “people here are pretty careful about the clothes they wear,” and that he should buy himself a gray flannel suit at Brooks Brothers. During his tenure at *Time*, Wilson covered education, and was befriended by Richard L. Simon, co-founder of Simon and Schuster publishing (and incidentally, father of singer-songwriter Carly Simon). Simon encouraged Wilson’s dream of being a novelist.

After leaving *Time*, Wilson became assistant director of the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools. At a national conference on education in the early 1950s, he met G. Lester Anderson, a dean at the University of Buffalo. Anderson offered him a job at the university—at \$12,000 less than his former job. Despite his wife’s objections, Wilson accepted the position as director of information services (head of public relations

and part-time creative writing teacher. He bought a house in Eggertsville, at 204 Burbank Drive, which Anderson had found for him. It was a handsome three-bedroom, 1,516-square-foot home built in 1939, with an attached garage. Wilson thought the house was ideally located, just minutes from the campus at Main Street and Bailey Avenue. In his 1976 memoir, *What Shall We Wear to This Party? The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit Twenty Years Before & After*, he described it as big enough and in a suitable neighborhood to raise his three children, all under the age of 10: “With the bottom half built of granite blocks and the top half of brown clapboards, it stood on a spacious lot on a quiet street of substantial homes. Most of the interior was nicely paneled.”



Burbank Drive in Eggertsville, where Sloan Wilson and his family lived in the early 1950s. Author’s photograph

Reporting to work on April 17, 1953, Sloan Wilson tackled his public relations duties with gusto. The University of Buffalo was then a private university of about 11,000 students, still 10 years from being incorporated into the SUNY system. There he advised the chancellor, Raymond McDonnell. He handled delicate campus issues that flared up, such as freedom of the press for the student newspaper, the *Spectrum* (for which he was the advisor), and accusations of communism against a tenured professor. He worked 9:00 to 5:00 writing news releases promoting the university, assisting with fundraising, editing the academic catalogs of the university’s 14 colleges (which he said was “certainly one of the dullest

jobs in the world”) and teaching a creative writing class.

Wilson fully involved himself in the life of the university. He was a judge at Stunt Night trials, called the highlight of the year, held before a crowd of 1,000 in Norton Hall, and was one of the judges who selected the Inter-Fraternity Council queen at the annual dance at Kleinhans Music Hall. In addition to serving as *Spectrum* advisor, he was one of seven members of the Student Publication committee. He also spoke as part of a faculty-author luncheon series.

He enjoyed teaching creative writing, which typically enrolled 20 students. One of his prize writers, Gerda Weissmann Klein, audited one of his classes and became an award-winning author and lifelong friend. Klein, a

pitched in to run the household, shovel snow, rake leaves and tend the garden so that Wilson could use his spare time to write a novel. “You stick to your typewriter. I will put up with anything if it helps us get out of Buffalo,” she said.

Working—and Writing

And so, Sloan Wilson did write—feverishly. With his wife’s domestic support and an advance and continued encouragement from Richard Simon, he routinely went to the typewriter at his upstairs writing den in an extra bedroom at 5:30 a.m. before starting his day at the university at 9:00. After work he’d wolf down supper and type until 1:00 a.m. Becky, his oldest daughter, who was about eight at the time, said in an email that she has



SUNY Buffalo’s Hayes Hall and the sloping lawn that Wilson walked down en route to Bitterman’s Grill. Author’s photograph

Jewish survivor of World War II Nazi concentration camps, began writing an account of her wartime ordeal under Wilson’s tutelage. Her acclaimed memoir, *All But My Life*, was published in 1957. Klein, a longtime resident of Kenmore, once told a *Buffalo Evening News* reporter that she credited Wilson “with helping me break out of my shell of self-doubt.”

Wilson was also active in Buffalo’s cultural community, as a member of the prestigious Thursday Club and as an avid supporter of city and suburban libraries. By contrast, his wife disliked socializing at campus events, and hated Buffalo as a place “where the skies were almost always gray, where fall came early and spring came late.” Yet, she gamely

“strong memories of going to sleep many nights listening to the sound of his typing.”

In two weeks, he produced the first 100 pages of his novel, then retyped and edited the pages before sending them to Simon. After Simon assured him that the book would be a bestseller, Wilson returned to his typewriter at home at night and “pounded the keys so hard that one night the letter ‘e’ flew off the keyboard.” A neighbor tried soldering the key back on, but Wilson wound up spending money he didn’t have to buy a new typewriter. He averaged 3,000 words a day and after another two weeks completed 100 additional pages. After meeting with Simon in Manhattan, Wilson returned to Buffalo and

finished his first draft of the novel during the next six months.

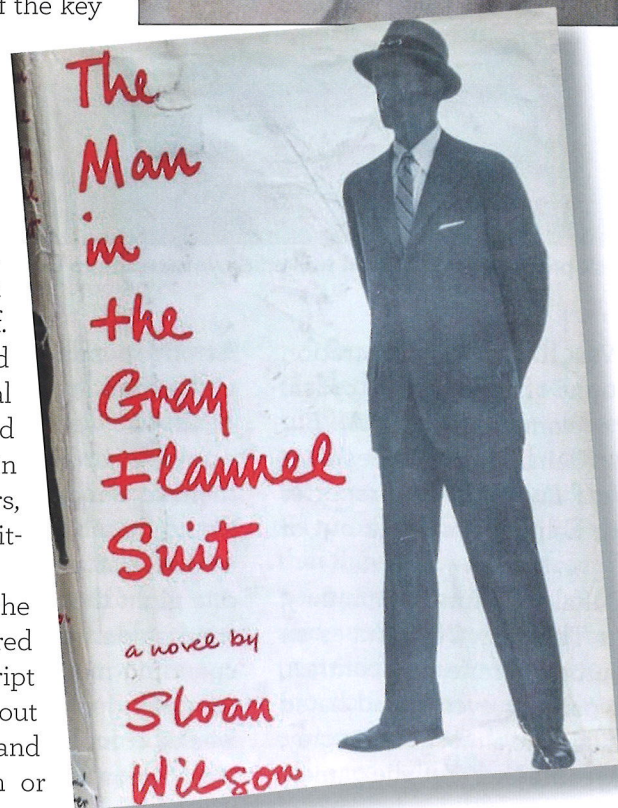
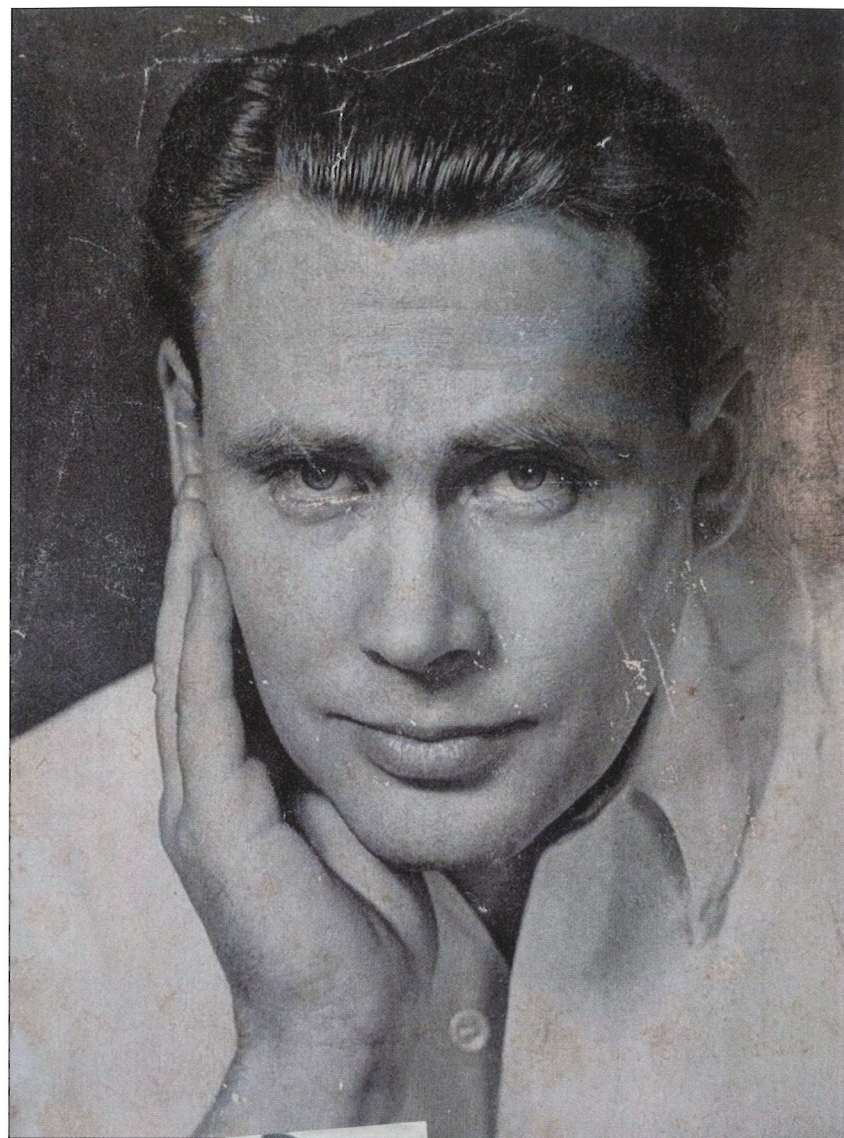
When further revisions of the draft were required, he moved his typewriter to the cellar at 204 Burbank Drive, and again worked at the University of Buffalo all day and typed at home, now sometimes until 2:00 in the morning. He had to relinquish his upstairs bedroom den to a visiting Nigerian graduate student, whom the Wilsons were hosting. The student's bedroom was directly above the new cellar typewriting space, so the visitor, like Becky, heard Wilson typing into the wee hours. The switch to a basement writing space jibes with the recollection of Wilson's son, David. "The lore passed down to me was that he wrote *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* at night in a coal bin in the basement that had been converted into a tiny office," he wrote in an email.

As the novel's homestretch approached, Elise and Sloan Wilson met with Richard Simon at Simon and Schuster's office on Park Avenue's "Publisher's Row." They wrestled over the book's title. Wilson had come up with 20 possibilities. Elise preferred *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, a title that Simon thought was too long. Wilson wanted *A Candle in the Night*. Elise prevailed.

The Bitterman's Connection

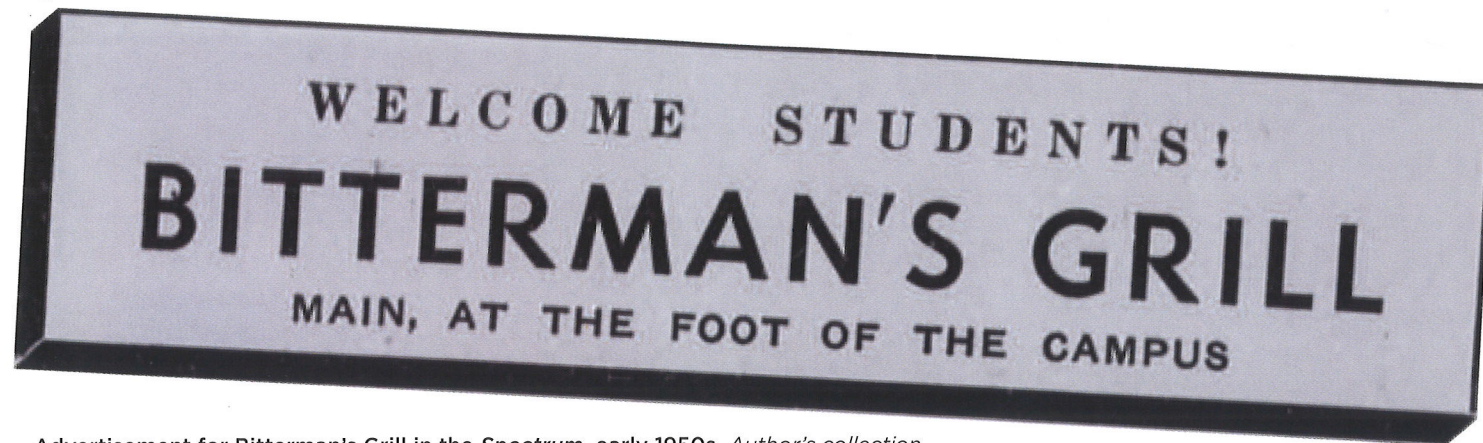
Until my communications with Wilson's children in 2022, they were unaware of the key role that Bitterman's Grill played in their father's composing process. From 1937 until 1971, Bitterman's was a neighborhood institution at 3264 Main Street, midway between Englewood Avenue and Heath Street. Because of its location across from campus, it was a popular hangout with University of Buffalo students and staff. After exams, students often gathered there for "a bracer," and student political organizations met there. It was founded by Edward W. Bitterman and stayed in the family for all but its last two years, when Catherine Koehler, a former waitress there, bought and operated it.

As a waitress at Bitterman's in the early 1950s, Koehler vividly remembered Wilson bringing typed manuscript pages there at lunchtime; crossing out words, phrases, passages and pages; and inserting equal doses of text in pen or



This photo of Sloan Wilson appeared on the back jacket cover of the first edition of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (shown inset). Private collection

pencil as he sat at his table to the left of the entrance, bathed in the sunlight that poured through the large front windows. According to Koehler, Wilson would "write, write, write." It is likely that Wilson extended his working lunch breaks at Bitterman's well into the afternoon.



Advertisement for Bitterman's Grill in the *Spectrum*, early 1950s. Author's collection

In his 1976 memoir, *What Shall We Wear to This Party? The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit Twenty Years Before & After*, Wilson recounts a dramatic moment at Bitterman's in early 1955, witnessed by Koehler:

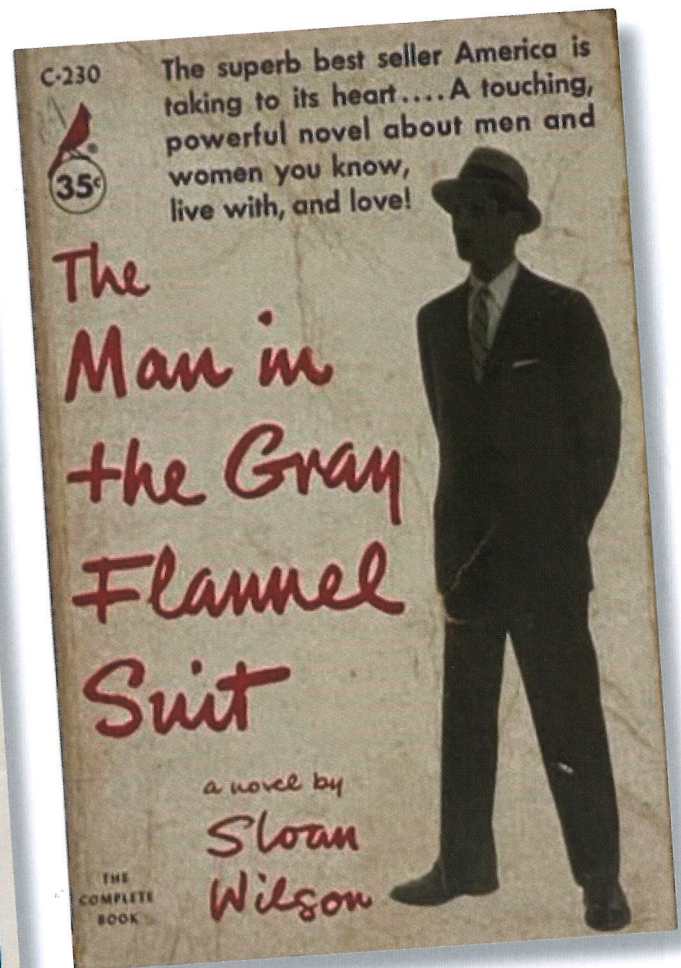
I usually ate lunch at a workingman's bar named Bitterman's which was just across the street from campus. One cold afternoon I was drinking beer there when the bartender said there was a telephone call for me. It was my secretary. A man named Richard Simon had called, she said, and he wanted me to call him right back. There was only a pay phone at Bitterman's and I didn't have enough

money with me to call New York. I ran all the way back to my office, and when I had recovered my breath, I called Dick.

In the phone call, Simon shared the good news that Simon and Schuster had accepted *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The Literary Guild had taken the novel, too, and Simon was already besieged for copies of galleys by magazine and movie people. Wilson ran to his battered old Jeep station wagon in the university parking lot and raced home to tell Elise. He found her washing dishes in the kitchen. Her response? "Thank God! When can we leave Buffalo?"

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The year 1956 brought both a hit movie (left) and mass marketed paperback copies (right) of Wilson's book. Private collection

Wilson immediately requested a leave of absence from the University of Buffalo and moved his family to West Newton, MA. The leave lasted nearly a year. During the time in his New England home, he soaked up the praise, outstanding sales reports and lucrative movie rights coming in for *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The university, however, had not forgotten him. In his absence, they elevated Wilson's position from instructor of English to assistant professor. University dean G. Lester Anderson and the new chancellor, Clifford C. Furnas, even offered him the chairmanship of a new writing department. Despite the temptation of becoming a full-time academic and part-time author, Wilson respectfully rejected the University of Buffalo's offers to stay, and resigned in April 1956.

Yet, hot on the heels of the release of his bestselling novel and the near-instant hit movie adaptation, he returned to Buffalo for the first of several visits over the ensuing years. The 35-year-old Wilson took time on April 26, 1956, to speak and sign books at a joint meeting of the Eggertsville-Snyder branch library (in his former neighborhood) and the Friends of the Williamsville Free Library. During his talk, Wilson mentioned that he was already working on a new book, which turned out to be

A Summer Place, another hot-selling novel published in 1958 (with an equally popular movie version in 1959) loaded with allusions to Buffalo.

While in Buffalo that April, he also inscribed a copy of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to the Grosvenor Library thus: "To the most convivial library of all—Grosvenor." And he told *Buffalo Evening News* and *Buffalo Courier-Express* reporters that he had been treated well at the university: "They encouraged my work and gave me time to work on the book while holding a full-time job." Indeed, in his acknowledgments to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Wilson thanks Lester Anderson for his help and expresses his gratitude "to the many people in my office at the University of Buffalo. They did much of my University work while I was otherwise occupied."

In January 1961, Jane Van Arsdale, legendary rare books curator at the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, embarked on a project that immortalized Sloan Wilson's Buffalo literary legacy. She asked several authors with Buffalo ties for their original manuscripts, including Wilson. Sloan replied that he was "flattered," and he donated the three surviving working drafts of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Although his novel had been

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rewritten 12 times, he had thrown away all but these three revised manuscripts. They are all typed and bound in spiral notebooks.

The first manuscript is an early rough draft, nearly three inches thick, that he likely banged out at home. The 478 pages are clearly typed on different typewriters (perhaps before and after the “e” key projectile) and on different kinds of paper, sometimes onion skin. They show numerous revisions in pencil and blue pen, conceivably made while he was sitting at Bitterman’s. Many fixes are major edits—deleting half a page of typed text, or adding significant handwritten passages, often expanding on the war flashback segment of the novel, or the “mandolin” plotline—while others are simple hand corrections of his own typographical errors.

The second manuscript is in two volumes, the first labeled in blue ink as “Rewrite Copy,” with a cover page containing 20 hand-scribbled options for the novel’s title. These manuscript volumes seem to be professionally typed, perhaps by one of Wilson’s university secretaries. Here, Wilson crossed out epigraphs by Gertrude Stein and Francis Bacon that he had originally planned for page 8. The second volume contains many pen and pencil reworkings, including extensive reshuffling of page sequences for the final 100 or so pages.

The third manuscript also appears to have been professionally typed. This more polished version of 515 pages has selective, minor edits entered by Wilson, again mostly in blue ink. He even jots down specific layout instructions to the printer for adding space between changes of scene.

In 2001, shortly after Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* manuscript sold for \$2.4 million, Wilson’s second wife, Betty, phoned the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library and asked that her husband’s manuscripts be returned to the Wilson family. The library declined. (All three manuscripts are currently available by appointment in the Grovesnor Room at the Buffalo and Erie County Central Library.)

Eight years after his generous manuscript donation, Wilson visited Buffalo again, to do a book signing at Ulbrich’s downtown store for his newest book, *Away From it All*, a nonfiction work on sailing. While in town, he toured his old haunts at the University of Buffalo, where he met President Martin Meyerson and Charles Dick, his replacement in the public relations office. He was also guest of honor at a large party at the Kenmore home of his former student Gerda Klein.

Sloan Wilson’s final trip to Buffalo was in 1975, 20 years after *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* became a bestseller.



Eagle Street, downtown Buffalo, looking west from Main Street, ca. 1964. An entrance to Ulbrich’s downtown location, where Wilson held a book signing for *Away From it All* in 1969, is visible part way down the block at right. Department of Urban Renewal

He was 55 years old and stockier than the young man who once strode down the university lawn to Bitterman’s. Once again, his friend Gerda Klein sponsored “A Salute to Sloan Wilson” evening at Rosary Hill College (now Daemen University), a mere six blocks south of his former Burbank Avenue address in Eggertsville. The proceeds of the Rosary Hill reception, which cost \$2 per person, went—appropriately enough—to the college library. During this visit, the owners of his former Burbank Drive home graciously invited him and his son, David, inside for a tour.

Wilson never recaptured the wild success of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. He wrote 15 books of varying quality and lived for many years in Florida, where he was a writer-in-residence at Rollins College. He died in 2003 at the age of 83.

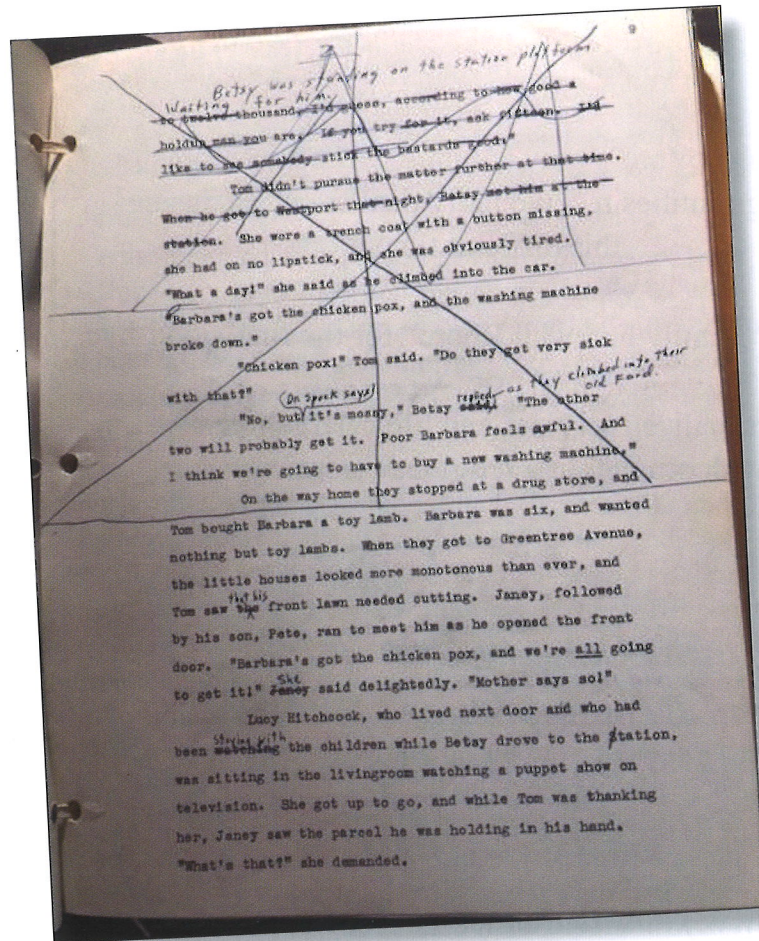
Today, the site of Bitterman’s has a fresh facade and houses a restaurant with a Mediterranean-Afghan fusion menu. SUNY Buffalo is a booming state institution with over 30,000 students and a sprawling second campus in suburban Amherst. The interior of historic Hayes Hall is remodeled, and Wilson’s old 212 office has a new look. And among the 36 branches of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, only two house circulating copies of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

Yet, 70 years after Sloan Wilson wrote his bestselling novel in Buffalo, the gracefully inclined university

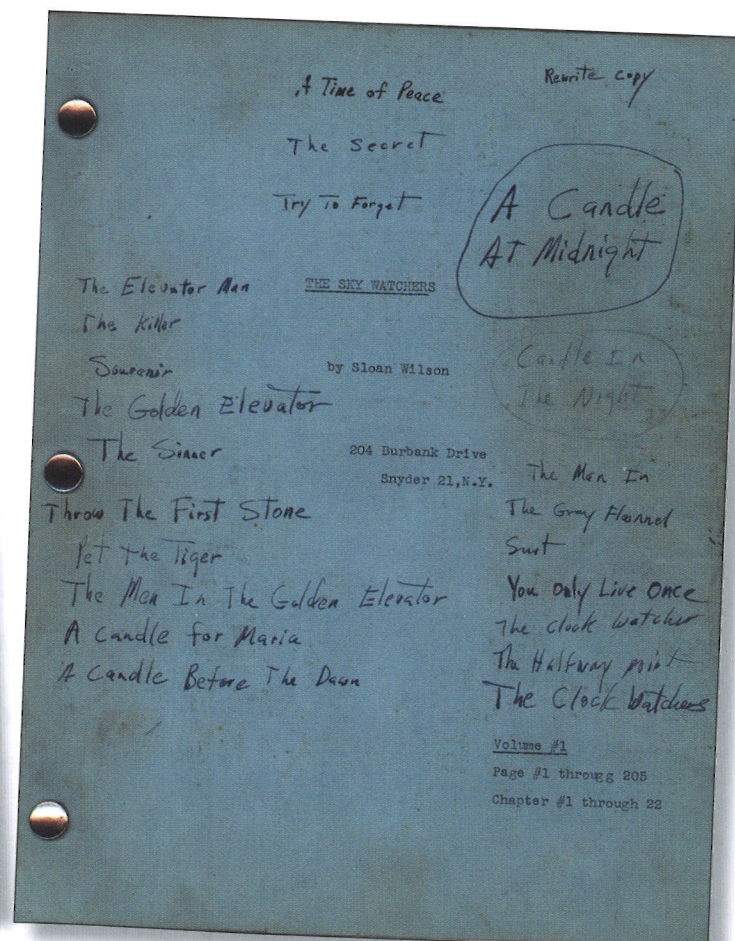
lawn and the manuscript he labored over just steps away at Bitterman’s are preserved as an important part of his place in local literary lore. [1]



Site of the former Bitterman’s Grill at 3264 Main Street, as it appears today. Author’s photograph



Page from the first, “rough draft” manuscript of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, showing insertions and a half-page deletion. Buffalo and Erie County Public Library



Volume one of the second, two-volume “rewrite copy” manuscript of Wilson’s book, including numerous ideas for book titles scribbled on the cover. Buffalo and Erie County Public Library



Sloan Wilson (right) visiting 204 Burbank Drive and its new owner, John Greenan, in 1975. SUNY Buffalo State Archives, Courier-Express collection

Tom Reigstad is professor emeritus of English at SUNY Buffalo State and the author of 'Scribblin' for a Livin'—Mark Twain's Pivotal Period in Buffalo and The Illustrated Mark Twain and the Buffalo Express. The author wishes to thank the following for their contributions: SUNY Buffalo State Archives and Special Collections, Courier-Express Collection; the Special Collections department of the Buffalo & Erie County Central Library; the University Archives at SUNY Buffalo; Jessica Green; Rebecca Moldover; David Sloan Wilson; and Nancy Paschke.