

Pierce, Ovid Williams, Jr. ^[1]

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by W. Keats Sparrow, 1994

1 Oct. 1910–9 Dec. 1989

Ovid Williams Pierce, Jr., author and college teacher, was born in Weldon, the son of Ovid Williams, a well-to-do farmer, and Minnie Deans Pierce, and the grandson of a country doctor. In 1932 he was graduated from [Duke University](#) ^[2], where he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and editor of *The Archive*. Returning home, he lived with his family for a few years before entering Harvard. In Cambridge he studied literature under G. L. Kittridge and J. L. Lowes and creative writing under Robert S. Hillyer, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. Here Pierce wrote some of his first stories and received a master's degree in English in 1936. Returning to Weldon, he worked on a novel for several years before entering the army counterintelligence corps and serving in Latin America. Years later he related that a novel he was writing about his war experiences was stolen while he was in service and never recovered.

After World War II Pierce taught creative writing at Southern Methodist University and wrote several stories for the *Southwest Review*. He accepted a similar post in 1949 at Tulane, where he taught until 1953, the year in which his first novel, *The Plantation*, was published. Afterwards he lived for a time in England, France, and Spain. In 1956 he became writer-in-residence at East Carolina College, in Greenville, and taught courses in creative writing and literature. He also served as faculty adviser to *The Rebel*, the campus literary magazine that he founded in 1957.

Pierce became noted for his cavalier attitude towards teaching. His nonchalance about his classes is suggested by a story he enjoyed telling—that his department chairman "always told me only when and where but never what to teach, knowing full well I'd talk about the Civil War anyhow." When Mac Hyman, author of *No Time for Sergeants*, asked for teaching tips, Pierce gave him instructions on how to "spend the whole . . . hour without even mentioning the subject." His students often were disappointed that an author of such renown offered them so little of substance.

Many students were nevertheless inspired by Pierce's joviality, easy manner, courtliness, and image as the quintessential country gentleman. The deep impression he made resulted in numerous lifelong friendships, especially among his literary magazine and fraternity advisees.

During the twenty years he was on the [East Carolina](#) ^[3] faculty he divided his time between a Greenville apartment and The Plantation, his farm at Pierce's Crossroads near Enfield. In the mid-1950s he completed the restoration of the nineteenth-century two-story house on his farm and furnished it with southern primitive antiques, European objets d'art, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century oil portraits, old engravings and maps, his own watercolors, and books. This rural retreat captured the flavor of the antebellum period of which he was especially fond. Here he entertained countless guests, particularly literary figures, East Carolina College colleagues and students, and his Doubleday editor, LeBaron (Lee) Barker.

Doubleday published three novels completed while he was at East Carolina: *On a Lonesome Porch* (1960), *The Devil's Half* (1968), and *The Wedding Guest* (1974). In 1976 The [University of North Carolina Press](#) ^[4] brought out *Old Man's Gold and Other Stories*, an anthology of stories that had previously appeared in *Southwest Review*. Retiring from East Carolina in 1976, Pierce lived at The Plantation, but after a short time he sold his farm and returned to Greenville, where he completed his last three novels: *Judge Buell's Legacy* (1985), *The Story of Cabbage Green* (1987), and, left in manuscript at his death, "Lost Boy Found."

Pierce's native [Roanoke River](#) ^[5] valley provided inspiration and background for his novels, which together portray the region from the post-Civil War era to the 1950s. His eastern North Carolina landscapes, handling of characters' dialogue and dialects, and prose style won acclaim from major literary critics. Twice he received the [Sir Walter Raleigh Award](#) ^[6] for fiction and in 1969 he won the [North Carolina Award](#) ^[7] for Literature. The O. Max Gardner Award citation that he received in 1973 noted that he had "produced, with artistry and integrity, an authoritative portrait of the South."

Having suffered from declining health for several years, Pierce died of cardiac arrest at Pitt Memorial Hospital. He was buried in Cedarwood Cemetery, Weldon. Portraits hang in the Kappa Alpha fraternity house, in the Manuscript Department of the library, and in the English Department at [East Carolina University](#) ^[8], Greenville.

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Additional Resources:

"William Friday, Ovid Pierce, and Leo Jenkins." Photograph. July 12, 1973. Digital Collections, ECU Libraries. <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/1486#details> ^[8] (accessed August 1, 2014).

"Ovid Pierce." Photograph. December 3, 1975. Digital Collections, ECU Libraries. <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/1072> ^[9] (accessed August 1, 2014).

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