Lewis Oliver Saum was born on his grandparents’ farm outside Stanley, North Dakota, on December 19, 1933. His birth coincided with an unusually heavy snow storm, even for North Dakota, and the temperature fell below 36 degrees. His parents divorced when he quite young; he and his brother, Estle, were raised by his mother, Elsie Hunter Saum, and helped by relatives, particularly his Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Howard. At school he played sports, loved Latin and greatly admired his school principal.

At 17 he won a scholarship to Minot State College where he played baseball. He was a pitcher. Baseball scouts spotted Lew and signed him to the minor leagues. An old acquaintance wrote that Lew was the youngest player in the league. He played for teams owned by the New York Yankees and the then Washington Senators in small towns across the Midwest and Texas.  After two years Uncle Sam drafted him into the army. Lew served at a radar base in Silver Spring, Maryland, and at a small base near Wiesbaden, Germany.  He remembered not so fondly spending his 21st birthday on guard duty in Germany, matching in heavy snow. By March he was playing baseball for the army, far from the base and Wiesbaden. He enjoyed playing on an army team but said he regretted it left his little time to travel in Europe.  When the season ended, he returned to the U.S. and to Minot State. There he met and married his first wife, Elizabeth. His only daughter, Joanne, was born in Minot in 1957.

After graduation, Lew won a graduate scholarship at the University of Missouri in Columbia to study Intellectual U.S. history.  He received his Ph.D. there.  One of his former professors from University of Missouri wrote that Lew had been one of the History Department’s most gifted students. Lew taught for two years at Missouri State in Springfield before he left the Midwest in 1965 for the University of Washington.  He moved west in body but not completely in spirit. He always remained a country boy from North Dakota.

 In Seattle he began his long (34 years) and distinguished teaching-research-writing career in the History Department at the University of Washington. He published 4 books on topics such as fur traders, Native Americans, everyday folk, newspaper men, actresses, soldiers, and scoundrels. He utilized a combination of letters, government documents, and newspapers as he researched for his books as well as his many, many, scholarly articles. His talents were recognized and he won many major research fellowships.  While he was at the UW, he served as Managing Editor of the Pacific Northwest Quarterly for five years.  Several of his colleagues have written that they thought that Lew’s prose was so “precise,” he always had the “exact word” that “conveyed his meaning.”  Others have written on his unique sense of humor, generous, never sharp. He was “one of a kind.”

At age 65, in 1998, Lew retired from teaching and moved to Chico, California, to be with his wife Judith Raftery, who taught at California State University, Chico. They had met at the Huntington Library in 1983 where he was researching his third book and she was finishing her Ph.D. dissertation, also in U.S. history. They married in 1994. In Chico Lew continued his daily routine of library research and writing. His fourth book and several articles were published while he lived in Chico. Judy and Lew made summerly treks, almost always by car, to libraries in Washington, Missouri, North Dakota, Minnesota, Colorado and places in between They often stopped to see Estle and Shirley, and after Estle’s death, to see Shirley. Lew accompanied Judy to the Philippines, Washington DC, New York, and other places in the east for her research. They tried as often as possible to return to the Huntington Library. Lew found items of interest wherever he went. He never used a computer and continued to rely on his typewriter.  When he finished a manuscript, he sent it to a typist in Seattle who transcribed it on a disk and then sent to an editor.  Unfortunately, as his memory faded, he stopped his scholarly activities.  His last article was published in 2006. He died in Chico on June 23, 2014, after a long illness.

Lew grew up very poor during the Depression and that early poverty affected him greatly.  He was one of those people who never needed anything and he used a credit card only to hold a reservation. He preferred Travelers’ Cheques. Friends have written that they thought that Lew was very courtly, rather formal, with old-fashioned manners or at least manners uncommon in the 21st century.  He was extremely private person who rarely spoke about himself.  He had a wicked sense of humor and a twinkle in his eye when something amused him.  I think Lew would like to be remembered as a kind and loyal man, as a highly regarded historian, a professor, an author, a baseball pitcher, and a football enthusiast from Stanley, North Dakota.