

CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>A Note on the Text</i>	ix
Discovering <i>Pulp Writer</i>	1
PULP WRITER	
<i>Twenty Years in the American Grub Street</i>	
1 I'd Write a Mile	53
2 King of the Photoplay; And I Write a Joke	67
3 Art for the Artless	81
4 For Whom the Bellboy Toils	97
5 Darl and Heart	109
6 Ad Astra Per Aspera, Add Aspirin	117
7 A Novel, and What Didn't Come of It	131
8 General Grant Slept Here	145
9 Enter Mr. Oliphant	159
10 Tricks of the Trade	171
11 Tumbleweed in Arizona	185
12 Pilgrim in Santa Fe	201
13 A Pulp Writer's Problems	211
Life after the Pulps	223
<i>Afterword</i>	253
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	257
<i>Notes</i>	259
<i>Bibliography</i>	265
<i>Index</i>	269

ILLUSTRATIONS

1 Paul Powers and his cocker spaniel, Mike	1
2 The Powers girls	2
3 Paul during his early pulp-writing days	53
4 Paul as a young boy with his family	67
5 Little River, Kansas, Paul's childhood home	81
6 Paul with his sister Nell	97
7 Paul wearing chaps	109
8 Paul with son Jack as a baby	117
9 Four generations of the Powers family	131
10 Blackhawk, Colorado, where Paul lived as a young man	145
11 The pulp writer	159
12 The Cadillac that carried Paul from Kansas to Tucson	171
13 Bisbee, Arizona	185
14 Mary Powers, Paul's second wife	201
15 Two pulp writers having a conference	211
16 Paul, Pat, and Tom Powers	223
17 Jack and his bride-to-be, Ruth Selton	236
18 Mary in one of the bookstores in Berkeley	240
19 Pat and Tom at the family reunion	247

One day in June 1999, I drove to Garden Grove, California, to visit an aunt I hadn't seen in thirty-five years. She had some papers for me, she said: two boxes of personal papers that had belonged to my grandfather.

When I arrived, two blue plastic containers were perched on her kitchen table. They were those sturdy plastic numbers you can find at any hardware store, the perfect size for packing and storing items that are difficult to pack: old blankets, power tools, outgrown toys. Or, in this case, what was left of Grandpa's life. Sixty-six years of life shoved into two Easy Totes.

Pat assigned herself to one box, and I took command of the other. We cautiously opened them, and the musty smell of old paper drifted out. The boxes were packed to the brim with heaps of crumbling and fragile papers thrown in haphazardly. A disheveled mess.

"I just haven't had time to go through this stuff," Pat said. She gazed at her pile. She had a serenity and an overall air of bemusement that I assumed she inherited from her mother. From what I'd heard about my grandfather over the years, I couldn't imagine him possessing such mildness.

I looked at my box. This would take weeks, not hours.

Pat had mentioned in an earlier phone conversation that she thought her father had written a memoir, but she wasn't sure.

Careful, I thought. Don't get your hopes up. This might be nothing but junk.

Finding these documents was the culmination of ten months of investigating, interviewing, and traveling from Massachusetts, to Arizona, and finally to California to discover my real grandfather, rather than the image I'd had of him for most of my life. This image was like an old film reel stuck in a projector in my mind, unable to move beyond a few poorly-lit pictures that summed up his identity into exactly two categories. He was an alcoholic, a binge drinker who terrorized his family and disappeared from our lives when I was a little girl, leaving behind a memory full of confusion and contempt. But he was also a writer, an attribute that had always tempered my somewhat hostile memory of him. Yes, he was a drunk, but he had written a *novel*. It was, as I thought of it for most of my life, a silly little Western that was not a bestseller. But it had been *published*. Which was more than I, forty-two years old and still an unpublished writer, had accomplished. I'd always been slightly envious of my grandfather for that.

There are good reasons why my memory of my grandfather is so one-dimensional. Until a few years ago, the basic facts I knew about him made up a very short list. Some were drawn from sparse stories told by my mother and sisters. The rest were gleaned from the few documents, such as his death certificate, that I had collected over the years. Paul Sylvester Powers. My paternal grandfather. Known simply as Grandpa, not Grandpa Paul or Grandpa Powers. Born in 1905 in Little River, Kansas. Died in 1971 in Berkeley. His father was a physician. Fathered three children of his own: my father, John; a younger son, Tom; and a daughter, Pat. His novel *Doc Dillahay* was published in 1949. It didn't sell well. I didn't read the book until I was thirty-seven; when I did get around to reading it, it struck me as being a pleasant yet unimpressive story with snappy dialogue and a typical Western ending. And all of the characters grinned—all the time.

Grandpa's physical appearance is best portrayed by the portrait on the back of the *Doc Dillahay* dust jacket. Grandpa

looks intellectual and intimidating in a wide-lapel suit, a broad chest, silvery hair just starting to recede. He wears glasses and looks stiffly off into the distance. He looks somewhat like Teddy Roosevelt, but without the toothy grin. I don't remember seeing my grandfather smile in any photograph.

I don't remember his looks at all, only where he worked and lived, which was a dark and dingy bookstore in Berkeley with new, used, disheveled, and stacked-to-the-ceiling books. An apartment somewhere. Light streaming through a window into an otherwise dreary room. I don't remember his face, what he said, what he did. I do remember a vague presence sitting in a chair next to the door like a sentry, saying good-bye. I was afraid of him; he was a stranger and hadn't really tried to talk to me that day. There was a feeling of suffocation in the apartment, and a sense of, well, failure.

When I was young, my sisters or my mother told me that he wrote what I thought were called "dime-store Westerns" under the pseudonym Ward Stevens. My mother mentioned when I was young that he wrote for obscure Western magazines. She didn't offer any more information, and I had the impression that the Western magazines hadn't amounted to much, so I assumed that what he wrote for them was insignificant. Where he lived while he dabbled in these frivolous endeavors, I had no idea.

When I was six or seven, I was cleaning out the bedroom I shared with my sister Becky. Crawling through piles of broken toys, plastic horses, and well-worn copies of *King of the Wind* and *Ramona*, I found a book—nothing new to me, since we had a lot of books scattered about the house, but this one was different. It was so small that it fit in the palm of my hand. The cover was cardboard, the illustration a crude watercolor of a cowboy on a galloping horse. The title, *Spook Riders on the Overland*, was emblazoned across the front, and the binding was crumbling so much that the whole sorry thing was held together with a rubber band. Ward M. Stevens was the

author. “That’s Grandpa,” my sister told me. “He wrote it.” But why was it so small, I wondered, and why didn’t he use his real name?

During the 1960s, Grandpa and his second wife, Mary, worked at a used bookstore in Berkeley. My mother, my sisters, and I lived about thirty miles east in the small town of Livermore. Despite being home to the atomic-age Lawrence Radiation Laboratory and quickly growing with tract homes, Livermore was still a country town. I could walk to school and pass by the occasional farmhouse huddled in the middle of a block, peek through a hole in the fence and see the chicken coops and the weed-infested side yard, and feel the crunch of peppercorns fallen from the huge pepper trees rooted in front yards.

A bucolic setting, but one always blanketed by an unexplained layer of absence. My father, Grandpa’s firstborn, had earned a Bronze Star in World War II and then had graduated with honors from the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California Medical School at San Francisco. But something tripped up afterward. Jack started to drink heavily during medical school. He and my mother divorced in 1958, a year after I was born. He drifted in and out of our lives afterward, marrying three more women but always managing to look homeless whenever he appeared at our front door. From 1960 to 1964 his life was a cycle of drinking, checking into sanitariums, drying out, and checking out—only to have it start all over again.

In 1964 my father died from cirrhosis; his liver was already weakened by hepatitis contracted from a patient years before, and the drinking accelerated his demise. He was thirty-nine years old. His death was the beginning of the disappearance of the rest of the Powers family.

My mother tried to keep in touch with Grandpa and Mary for a while, and we trooped over to Berkeley to visit them—at least once—and Grandpa loyally drove out to visit us during

that period. But my mother remarried, and my stepfather didn't particularly care much for any of the Powers clan, especially my grandfather. Five years after my father's death, my family had shrunk from a family consisting of my mother's and father's families, totaling roughly twenty-five people, to only six: my mother, my stepfather, my three sisters, and myself. An island unto ourselves.

Occasionally the topic of Grandpa would arise, but I never had the courage to ask the hard questions. Instead, I waited for my sisters or my mother to volunteer information. Linda, the oldest, knew more about the family than the rest of us, and her memory eventually became the authoritative voice for my family history. Sometimes Grandpa would come up in conversation, and only then would I learn about him. He had a full sister, Nell; a half brother, George; and a half sister, Phyllis. With Mary, his second wife, he had two children: a son named Tom and a daughter named Pat. *I had an aunt and an uncle somewhere. I had cousins.* I hung onto these pieces of information as if I were holding small jewels in my hand.

Linda framed a newspaper article that ran in the *Orange County Register* that announced the publication of *Doc Dillahay* and hung it on a wall in her family room. Over the years I surreptitiously peered at the print. As I read the article, Grandpa's world seemed as distant and foreign as a celebrity's. I never read it completely; the pain was too great, and I was felt a little embarrassed by my curiosity. My sisters seemed to have moved on. Why couldn't I?

If I had read it, I would have found information about my grandfather that took me another twenty years to find.

My sisters coped, moved out of the house, got jobs, and got married. I had a harder time. In high school I dreamed of being a writer, but it felt like something fantastic and unattainable. After all, I was born in 1957, and I was my mother's daughter. I saw what she had grown to believe, and I believed

it too: women of my generation were destined to be typists, but for others' words, not our own. We were supposed to become secretaries, not executives.

So I became an escrow officer and typed other people's words. I hated it from the second week but stayed at it for thirteen years. I picked up an occasional glass of wine, which sometimes turned into two or three. At twenty-four I got married, and the accoutrements that come with married life soon followed: the new cars, the furniture, and a brand-new tract home in a dusty, windy San Joaquin County town. After all my years of thinking this would be the answer to all that remained unanswered in my unhappy life, I felt like I was suffocating. In 1986, I left my husband, blindsided, in our new home with the tile roof and ran away to Los Angeles. I didn't think about my life, where I was going, or what I really wanted to do.

Three months after I moved to Los Angeles, my second-oldest sister, Patty, died in an accident. She had been the final connection to the Powers family, if only in looks and temperament. She had our father's looks, his devil-may-care lifestyle. When Dad died and Grandpa disappeared, she was like a woman in exile, wondering where her fellow expatriates had wandered off to, and she eventually battled her own addictions to drugs and alcohol. She drifted from job to job, from man to man. I felt we were a lot alike: birds trapped in a room, fluttering from corner to corner, not seeing the open window. When she died, a vault door slammed shut on the Powers side of the family.

Five years later, I was doing the same work, living the same lifestyle, but the pace had become manic and my unhappiness more desperate. And even though I knew my family history, I drank every day.

In 1995, I decided to go back to school. I also decided that I had to quit drinking. I enrolled in junior college and got a job as an assistant to a real estate agent. I started going to

Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, where I listened and frequently thought of my father and grandfather. Sitting captive in those meetings, I struggled to understand.

I began to write. Then, one day, I pulled *Doc Dillahay* out of the storage trunk and started to read:

I was worried that September Sunday afternoon. Ma was basting the wild turkey that I'd knocked over for dinner, and every time she opened the cookstove oven I'd get a whiff of the sage dressing and my mouth would water. Then I would think about Monday and what I'd have to face at Tecolote and my tongue would go dry and leathery again. Nervousness would make my stomach squirm.¹

Doc Dillahay is about John Dillahay, a young man who learns the medical trade in an Arizona town in the 1880s, mentored by the town doctor and town drunk, Dr. Ledinger. There are cattle wars, a brief romance with a pretty girl, redemption with the girl next door, and a shoot-out climax that begins in the town saloon.

All in all, I was rather surprised after reading *Doc Dillahay*. It certainly read well and kept my interest. Of course there were the aggravating modifiers ("he said challengingly"?), but Grandpa's knowledge of frontier medicine was quite impressive, and the story clipped along quite briskly. It definitely didn't follow the standard Western formula I knew from the old movies. With a genre as old-fashioned as the Western, Grandpa dared to write about controversial topics like venereal disease. I would later find out that John Dillahay was modeled after his own father.

Maybe, just maybe, I had underestimated the man.

In 1998 I was a college student at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. I was forty years old and determined to

get a bachelor's degree, but I had no idea what I would do with it once I earned it. In my second year I had to decide on a book for an American studies class paper. Sitting in class, I thought of using *Doc Dillahay* as my subject. What a joke, I thought. But the more I thought about it, the more appealing it sounded. At least it wouldn't be a boring paper. After being immersed in Massachusetts academia for over a year, listening to endless pontifications from both students and faculty and drowning in an ocean of political correctness, researching a Western, *his* Western, was the medicine for what ailed me.

Cool. A paper with attitude.

I interviewed my sisters and my mother by phone. I needed to know more about Grandpa. Give me everything you know, I told them. To my frustration, their memories were fragmentary or merely repeated what I already knew. It wasn't a happy picture. According to my mother, Grandpa was irresponsible, a drifter, a periodic drinker.

"You know," she added, "he was a *writer*," emphasizing "writer" as if that explained everything. Her specific memories of her former father-in-law were fragmentary and mysterious: when she met my father, the family was living in luxury one day and in a hovel only a few months later.

But my sister Becky recalled a gentle, benevolent man who took her by the hand whenever we visited the bookstore. She could take home a book, any book, he told her. But inevitably Grandpa would take her by the hand and steer her toward the art section, because he knew she was a budding artist.

But his behavior could be bizarre, she remembered. He would sit up in his bed and announce, "I am going to die in exactly ten seconds. Ten, nine, eight . . ." When he reached "one," he would simply lie down again without another word, his precious books piled around him like subjects of a royal court.

I knew if anyone had answers, it would be my oldest sis-

ter, Linda. She had lived with Grandpa and Mary for a brief period during 1966 when she had a job across the bay in San Francisco. When he was sober, he was quiet, serious, and intellectual, she said. As Berkeley exploded outside into a centerpiece of the free-speech movement and Vietnam War protests, Grandpa sat for hours in his apartment and listened to talk radio. But when he drank, he mutated into a venomous bomb that exploded without warning. He drifted into suicidal behavior, scaring the hell out of his wife and granddaughter.

“I’m going to jump out of the window!” he’d yell, sprinting across the room only to stop at the windowsill, just before he would have had to make good on his threat.

One day, Linda came home and Grandpa was perched next to his radio next to the window. It was the time of the sexual revolution in Berkeley, and the radio talk shows were full of it.

“What do you think of this free love business?” Grandpa asked Linda as she opened up a can of soup. She replied in some general, noncommittal manner, trying to keep things peaceful.

“Well,” he finished, “when you’re done with your chores, you can jump into bed with me.”

He might have been kidding. But he might have been serious. More than likely he was drunk. Linda, in retrospect, admits that as a nineteen-year-old with limited exposure to the adult world, and especially men, she might have overreacted. In any event, it took her only a few seconds to leave the house and flee to Mom and the rest of us in the safety of Livermore.

Mom called Mary and told her. She refused to let us see Grandpa again. Linda went back to get her clothes. When she entered the apartment, Grandpa was sitting on the bed, quite upset. She had taken it the wrong way, he said.

As Linda told me this story, I stopped taking notes, trying

to digest the significance of what she was telling me. Was this why we never saw Grandpa again?

As I finished my paper on *Doc Dillahay*, I couldn't stop thinking of Grandpa sitting on that bed, alone, after Linda left.

I turned the paper in on a cold day in December, the Smith campus darkening under winter clouds. But I knew I wasn't finished. I felt cheated somehow, disbelieving that so little could remain from a person's life. Grandpa still felt distant and unreal to me, and still something of a jerk.

Back in my room, I looked at *Doc Dillahay's* dust jacket again. I read every word. It was as if I'd gained my eyesight after being blind for forty years.

"Born in 1905 in Little River, Kansas . . ."

"All in all Mr. Powers has published, he figures, some 10,000,000 words of fiction."

Ten million words? He must have been drunk when he told them that one, I thought.

"A good bit of it appeared in Street and Smith's old *Wild West Weekly*, where he originated such two-gun characters as 'Kid Wolf,' 'Sonny Tabor,' and 'Johnny Forty-Five'—'all under pen names, thank heavens,' he adds."

I thought of his pen name, Ward Stevens, from the little book *Spook Riders on the Overland*.

"Have you tried to research his pen name?" my friend Lisa Johnson had asked me once when I'd complained about the lack of information. No, I'd answered, confident that it would be a waste of time. The only book he'd written under the name Ward Stevens was that Big Little Book, and that wasn't a *real* book—more like something you'd find in a toy store. It would never show up on an Internet search.

I threw on my coat and headed down the hill to the school library.

The early afternoon light filtered in through the venetian blinds in the computer room. The semester was over, so the

room was deserted except for a lone man, probably a graduate student from another college, sitting three chairs down. Tall cabinets holding the old card catalog hovered behind my chair, like mute sentinels observing every word I typed into the computer.

I typed in “Stevens, Ward.”

Up popped a book title and the description “A New Little Big Book.”

Spook Riders on the Overland, a *Freckles Malone* story. The book I had seen when I was a child.

In shock, I scrolled down.

Wanted—Sonny Tabor: A Western Story. Copyright: 1931. Chelsea House.

Buckskin and Bullets: A Western Story.

Kid Wolf: A Western Story.

Little Big Books, I found out, were children’s books popular during the Great Depression. The originating series was called Big Little Books and was started in 1932 by the Whitman Publishing Company. These were of the same physical format as *Spook Riders on the Overland*: usually three and a half by four and a half inches, and because there was a black-and-white illustration opposite each page of text, they were quite thick at about four hundred pages. Most featured radio program and movie characters, comic book heroes—Dick Tracy, Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Flash Gordon, Little Orphan Annie, Mickey Mouse—and most of them were written in-house by authors hired by the publisher. Other books were reprints of pulp stories. Eventually other companies put out their own version of the Big Little Book. *Spook Riders on the Overland*, *Buckskin and Bullets*, and *Johnny Forty-five* were published by the Saalfield Company, who coined their “Little Big Books.” As for Chelsea House, which published *Wanted—Sonny Tabor* and *Kid Wolf*, I assumed it was a similar publisher.

Grandpa’s Little Big Books were locked up tight in unlikely

places like Bowling Green University and Wellesley College, thousands of miles from the dusty drugstore stands in my imagination. I tried to check them out via the Smith inter-library service, but these little tomes were too fragile to be checked out and were kept in their respective libraries' special collections, next to volumes of Shakespeare and rare first editions. But there was one exception: *Wanted—Sonny Tabor*. There was one copy in a library in Flagstaff, Arizona. When it arrived at Smith, I hurriedly walked down to the library to pick it up.

The student behind the circulation desk placed a gray book on the counter. But it looked like a regular book, of normal size and proportion. This wasn't a Little Big Book. There was no clumsy watercolor of cowboys adorning the cover, only the title: *Wanted—Sonny Tabor* in bright red. This can't be Grandpa's, I thought. He didn't write any regular novels other than *Doc Dillahay*. What if Ward Stevens was someone else?

"Wait a minute," I said to the student, who was about to scan the book. "This might not be what I'm looking for." I opened the book to the middle: "'We shore will. But dog-gone me if yuh don't seem might cocksure about givin' me the slip.' The sheriff grinned at Sonny."²

I shut the book. Definitely Grandpa's.

Every one of the six, with the exception of young Moffitt, had heard much of "Sonny" Tabor—one of the most-feared desperadoes of the Southwest. The very name was enough to chill the hearts of those who had heard of his deeds. "Sonny" sounded mild enough, but no one along the border was so fast and sure with a six-shooter, or so fearless in fight. He was the thorn in the sides of all law officers from Yuma to El Paso.³

Sonny is a “young hombre,” perpetually nineteen with a youthful face and frank blue eyes, who was wrongfully accused of cold-blooded murder and has been on the lam ever since. Despite being a fugitive, he manages to fight for what’s right and turn in all those in black hats who dare to cross his path. It helps that he is the swiftest, most accurate gunman in the West and has Houdini-like talents when it comes to escaping the law—usually just before he gets to the gallows—or surviving multiple gunshot wounds.

There’s plenty about Sonny to tell the reader that he is not what the law thinks he is. He has what appears to be a dimple in his cheek, which is really a bullet scar. The dimple and his easy smile and boyish looks tell the reader he’s an all-around guy. He’s not tall or imposing, but small and catlike. He wears a blue-and-white checked shirt, a cream-colored Stetson, and well-worn brown chapajaros and two Colt .45s with smooth pearl handles that hang low on his thighs. His clothes are dusty and threadbare from his years as a fugitive.

In the first chapter of *Wanted—Sonny Tabor*, a posse of men headed by rancher Ed Stewart ambushes Sonny and shoots enough lead into him to kill ten men. Stewart is stunned to find the outlaw still breathing. He hauls Sonny up onto a horse and takes the boy back to his ranch to recuperate before turning him over to the sheriff. Stewart’s wife, Ma, who instinctively knows that Sonny is innocent, tends to Sonny’s wounds. As Sonny heals he learns to trust Ma, and eventually he tells her how he became a outlaw.

“I killed a man,” Sonny confessed, in a hushed voice. “I shot a man when I was a kid—about fourteen years old. It was this way, Ma: I didn’t have any folks, any mother, like you, or maybe it wouldn’t have happened. I had to shine boots for a living—had to drift from saloon to saloon. Well, one day a man tried to make me take a drink.”