

Oregon's Dean of Letters

Walt Curtis © 2002

*"I, a stranger, choose to lie among you amidst
God's three symbols of eternity, Mount Hood,
Memaloose Island, and the great river Columbia
which flows between."*

– epitaph on Alfred Powers' grave



Alfred J. Powers is Oregon's most distinguished literary historian. He is the author of *History of Oregon Literature* and many other books. He was an editor, writer, and educator in the state of Oregon's public schools. His career marries Oregon history and literature in a populist and engaging manner. Powers must finally be considered a historian, of some consequence, and a Renaissance man in the league of C.E.S. Wood.

Consider the evidence. The *Junior Historical Journal*, edited by Alfred Powers in the early 1940s is a wonderful magazine of Pacific Northwest and world history. Apparently it reached 25,000 eighth and ninth grade students in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, British Columbia, and Alaska. The illustrations and articles are both lively and informative. The best of this effort should be reprinted and used again in Oregon's educational system. The theme in the March 1945 issue is "How the Pioneers Lived." Powers has excerpted – he must have had a far-reaching, omnivorous mind – passages, articles, anecdotes, recipes, and tales from everywhere... from milking Spanish cattle to the pie plant to furniture making.

Alfred Powers makes the writing come alive. A student or adult living in this region suddenly becomes curious. He or she is rewarded with the humanist story or succinct observation. He took this Brobdingnagian¹ consciousness into every endeavor. Besides stimulating Northwest school children to the wonders of their region, he turned hack journalists and night-school students into best-selling authors. After shining his mental light onto school kids' minds, Powers reshaped adult writing classes in Portland. No one in Oregon's brief intellectual and literary history has ever been so seminal, instructive, and sorely missed. We need, in this state of mind called Oregon, to honor and return to the man's legacy.

Born on a cattle ranch near Delana, Arkansas, Alfred Powers studied at the University of Oklahoma after youthful days as a cowboy. In 1910, he graduated –Phi Beta Kappa – from the University of Oregon. Education became his first love, literature his ultimate one. Teaching, combined with journalism, publishing, and creative writing drove his considerable energies for the rest of his life. Only interrupted by a stint in the American Red Cross during World War I.

Returning to the U of O as a journalism professor, he researched the university archives. What he discovered, reading extensively from old manuscripts, became an 809-page magnum opus. This one volume, by itself, distinguishes him as our indispensable literary historian.



¹ Gigantic, from *Gulliver's Travels*

Powers at his height
Photo by Boychuk Studio

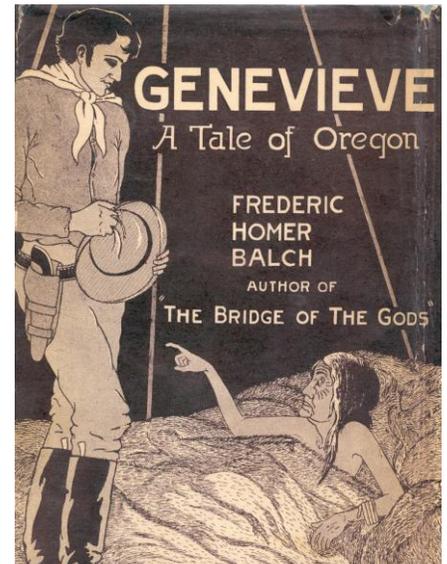
History of Oregon Literature, published by Metropolitan Press in 1935, begs to be updated and reprinted. Copies are now hard-to-find. At the time, editor Powers gathered together the entire state's literary history, including Indian myths, Chinook jargon, fur trappers' accounts, missionary prayers, pioneer diaries, stories from early newspapers that compete with chapters devoted to early novelists. Powers overriding love of the subject shaped the compendium into a useful, accessible resource. It's still a valuable resource to find a date or a name. The volume brought him great recognition at the age of 37 or 38. Howard McKinley Corning's *Dictionary of Oregon History* (1956) is a similar effort, containing too many omissions and errors. Were they rivals?

During his lifetime Powers authored at least 18 books, all listed on the back of his Lyle gravestone. Most had historical themes and aimed for a youthful audience. *Hannibal's Elephants* and *Alexander's Horses* are two fine examples. The Boys Club of America gave him awards for *A Long Way to Frisco* and *Chains For Columbus*. His masterpiece, *Marooned in Crater Lake*, written for his two children, ought to be sold in the WPA lodge in the National Park. During retirement, Powers penned *Animals of the Arctic* and co-authored *Homer Davenport of Silverton* with Leland Huot, the definitive biography of the Oregon-born-and-raised national cartoonist, a protégé of the muckraking William Randolph Hearst who later helped win the presidency for Teddy Roosevelt.

We owe a strong debt to Powers for his work with the writings of Frederic Homer Balch. Alfred edited and published *Genevieve: A Tale of Oregon*, working with the original manuscript, and also researching Balch's short and tragic life. He died of T.B. at 29. Powers was excited by the young minister's ecumenical vision and felt Balch to be a genius. He loved him so much, that, after his own death, he was interred at the Lyle-Balch cemetery. I've taken numerous groups to that desolate yet beautiful landscape in Washington just east of Hood River above the Columbia to see their mutual graves. Molly Powers [Dusenbery], his second wife, had Alfred's complete publishing history inscribed on the gravestone. *The Bridge of the Gods* and *Genevieve* are a core body of work in Oregon's literary heritage.

During his mid-40s, Powers had two or three careers going. Corning mentions Powers "good counsel" for being involved with numerous others in the WPA Oregon Writers Project, including state archivist David Duniway and poet Verne Bright. Corning made the final decisions while Powers oversaw the Binfords & Mort input. Powers served as dean of literature at the University of Oregon and as chief editor of Metropolitan Press. Surely he commuted often to Portland from Eugene. In 1942 he moved to the Rose City, becoming dean of the Division of Continuing Education, while continuing both his teaching and editing.

In Portland, Walt Morey claims the charismatic teacher's students numbered in the thousands. They included many big names of the '50s, '40s, and '50s. Unfortunately Edison Marshall and Robert Ormond Case are scarcely known today. Powers was on collegial terms with Stewart Holbrook and Ernest Haycox. So many of his students went on to publication that they were nicknamed "Powers' Models." He was the West Coast scout for East Coast publishers, including E.P. Dutton and Doubleday. Morey notes: "Many a script from some struggling author saw the light of day only because Alfred helped revise it. To him, a well-written book was one of the grandest things a man could produce. He lived to write and to teach writing."



Cover illustration by Louise Hosch

Powers, as dean of the Oregon Division of Continuing Education, inspired a lot of writers. According to Walt Morey, author of *Gentle Ben* and other best-selling juveniles, more than half the journalists writing for Portland newspapers in the period were his students. Morey, a fledgling author, enrolled in the writing class to brush up on his skills.

“The room was packed,” Morey recalled. “I could not understand such a crowd for a one-night-a-week class. Then Alfred walked in. He was big in those days, close to 6 feet, with a logger’s chest and shoulders. Then he began to talk. He was the professional, the doer. He gave it to us straight: ‘You can become writers, you can sell, if you do certain things and do them well, if you become craftsmen.’”

“That roomful of students ate it up. I, too, became a disciple.”

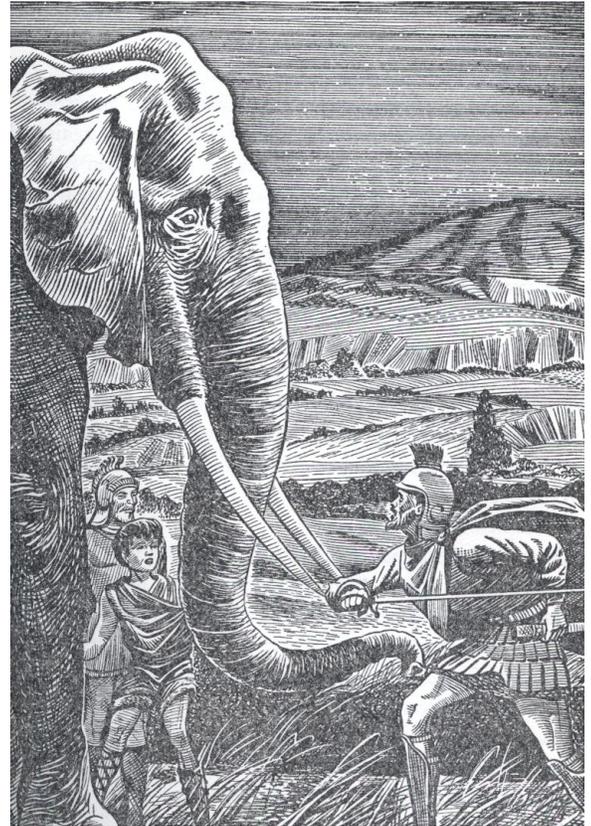
Walt Morey affirmatively describes Powers’ decline: “Years bent his shoulders, took the spring from his step. He was no longer the big, husky man he once was. But mention some old-time writers such as Jack London or H.G. Wells, and those brown eyes would begin to sparkle and he’d be off, quoting whole passages of their work from memory.”

In 1978, poet Penny Avila, then poetry editor for *The Oregonian*, interviewed Powers at his home. They were Lake Oswego neighbors. Past 90, he was mentally spry and intelligently opinionated, as they conversed about the power of poetry. “I have never been convinced that there is any expression in the world that can equal the expression of poetry,” Alfred told her. “It is still, and ever will be, the utmost reach of human expression.” Avila followed up: “Does Oregon have a special climate, an elixir or something, which causes people to be creative with words?”

Waxing eloquently Powers stated: “I think it is a nursery of a certain creative production we have here. I’ve never been able to analyze it. Whether it’s a mixture of sunshine and gloom, whether it’s the peculiarity of gorgeousness in our herbiage – the riotous show of nature really is a product of the rain. I really believe that same kind of germ exists here in Oregon that leads to the creative kind of thing.” He ought to have known, having birthed into print so many Oregon books. I’m sorry I never got to meet the Dean in person.

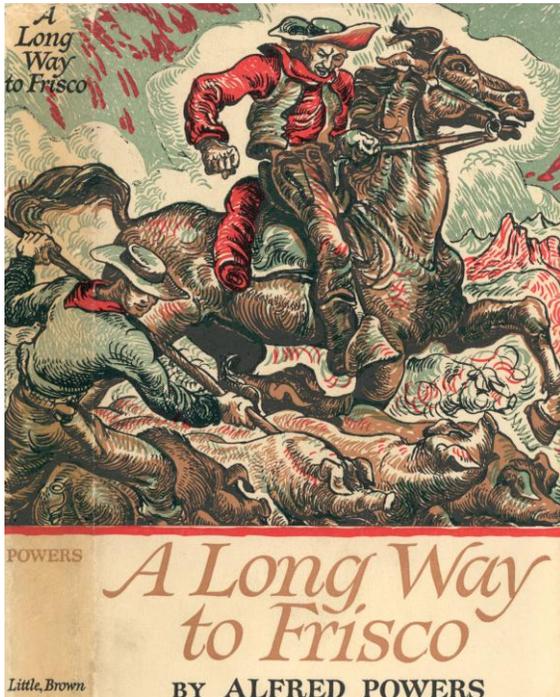
When Powers died at the age of 96, he was known throughout the state – and beyond its borders – as the dean of Oregon literature. In fact, old timers often referred to him simply as Dean Powers. They thought that was his given name. Who was this man of letters whose life spanned nearly a century? Yes, he was an educator, writer, scholar and historian, but he was more than that. He was a visionary who decided to codify a region’s literature and place it in one volume. Was Powers big book another Oregon first? Yes, there would be other WPA volumes of state literature, but Powers was indeed the pioneer.

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I thought he would cut off the elephant’s trunk
Illustration by James Reid from *Hannibal’s Elephants*

Powers advocated that regionalism is the way literature should be organized and centered. Why should students in the Pacific Northwest focus on the literature of New England and the South, when we have our own splendid literature of place? H. L. Davis and Frederic Homer Balch wrote eloquently of life in the Columbia River Gorge. As a fitting legacy to Power's visionary efforts, a curriculum of Oregon literature belongs in our schools and colleges.



Cover illustration by James Daugherty

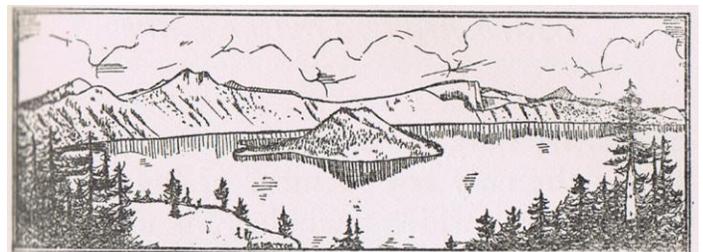
Alfred Powers deserves to be memorialized. How? Several of his works are primed to be reprinted. However, it's more important that we follow his early direction and vision. Literature is a living thing, and its enjoyment needs to be fostered. Our state's writers and poets work should be rediscovered and read today. Why shouldn't literature and history be cross-disciplined? Sacajawea is a figure Eva Emery Dye revived in her 1902 bestseller *The Conquest*, a feminist heroine, to go along with the guys on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Sacajawea, now on our shiny \$1 coin, has become the most famous Native American woman in national history.

What other figures and narratives embody and illumine the place we live called Oregon? Dean Powers inspires us to do our homework. He would be pleased with the recent anthologies published by the Oregon Council of the Teachers of English and OSU Press. Did he help compile material included in *The Stories We Tell*, an anthology of folk literature, edited by Suzi Jones and Jarold Ramsey? It's a peach! Oregon State University Press is doing a great job of

bringing numerous regional books back into print. Literary Arts' annual book award event is a celebration of Oregon writers and our literary community.

Oregon needs a creative curriculum to teach our state's history, literature, ecology, and geology in our public schools, just as it did in the 1940s with the *Junior Historical Journal*. Wouldn't the million or so tourists visiting the blue gem of Crater Lake every summer enjoy the thrilling story of the kid who got stranded there in 1910? Powers could become a best-seller again. A book of one-cent Ben Franklin postage stamps saved the boy's life. Good books inspire young minds. Besides, it's fun to read stories about where you live.

Say, how the heck did that youngster get out of the Crater Lake caldera? Read Jack London's survival tale "To Build A Fire" and ponder your own escape strategy.



Elizabeth Patton image for Power's story "Marooned in Crater Lake"

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Alfred Powers – Selected Booklist as Author and Editor

Books in bold written or co-written by Powers

Marooned in Crater Lake, Metropolitan Press, 1930
Genevieve: a Tale of Oregon, Metropolitan Press, 1932
(by Frederic Homer Balch, Powers editor/introduction)
Royal Highway to the World, Metropolitan Press, 1932
(by Joaquin Miller, Powers editor/additional author)

Early Printing in the Oregon Country,
The Portland Club of Printing House Craftsmen, 1933

Memaloose: Three Poems and Two Prose Sketches,
Myron Ricketts and Thomas Binford, 1934 (by Frederic Homer Balch, Powers editor)

History of Oregon Literature, Metropolitan Press, 1935
History of Education in Portland, Work Projects Administration, 1937
(editor with Howard McKinley Corning)

Junior Historical Journal, Division of Creative Writing and Publishing, Oregon State System
of Higher Education, September 1940–March 1946 (editor)

Hannibal's Elephants, Longmans, Green and Co. 1944

Buffalo Adventures on the Western Plains,
Binfords and Mort, 1945 (editor)

Poems of the Covered Wagons,
Pacific Publishing House, 1947 (editor)

Chains for Columbus, The Westminster Press, 1948

Prisoners of the Redwoods, Coward-McCann, 1948

Redwood Country, Buell, Sloan and Pierce, 1949
(American Folkways series, Erskine Caldwell editor)

Long Way to Frisco, Little Brown & Company, 1951

A Century of Coos & Curry – A History of SW Oregon,
Binfords and Mort, 1952 (written with Emil R. Peterson)

True Adventures on Westward Trails,
Little Brown & Company, 1954

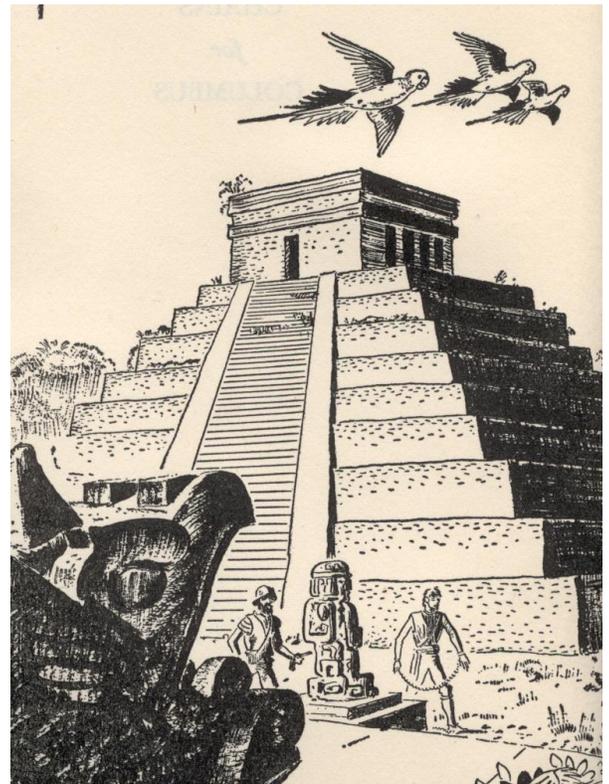
Alexander's Horses, Longmans, Green and Co. 1959

Animals of the Arctic in Action and Adventure,
David McKay, 1965

Homer Davenport of Silverton, West Shore Press, 1973
(written with Leland Huot)



Powers' *Marooned in Crater Lake* consists of seven short pieces, this image by Elizabeth Patton for his story "The Blue Bucket Mine."



Much of Powers' *Chains for Columbus* is set in Mexico's Yucatan. Illustration un-credited