

Surprise discovery brings *True Grit*
Author's Archive to The Wittliff Collections

The Wittliff Collections have acquired the archive of literary legend Charles Portis, whose personal papers were discovered in a hidden cache two years after the author's death.

The self-effacing Portis, an Arkansas native who died in 2020 at age 86, avoided publicity and kept a low profile during his lifetime. Yet his five acclaimed novels, each a luminous masterpiece of sly humor, have evoked comparisons to Mark Twain and other greats.

Bestselling author Donna Tartt, who volunteered to narrate the audiobook for *True Grit*, hailed Portis in 2002 as "the greatest, living, unsung American writer...an incredible, underrated genius." Novelist Sarah Bird, who wrote a screenplay adaptation of Portis's novel *The Dog of the South*, said "Portis is incomparable...There was no one like him before and there has been no one like him since." The writer Roy Blount Jr. once observed, "Charles Portis could be Cormac McCarthy if he wanted to, but he'd rather be funny."

"This is a remarkable acquisition," said Wittliff Director David Coleman. "We've long coveted Charles Portis's papers, but for a long time we – like everyone else – didn't know if they even existed."

Born in 1933, Charles Portis grew up in Southern Arkansas, a region bordering Louisiana and Texas known as ArklaTex. He enlisted in the US Marine Corps at age eighteen and saw combat in Korea. After his discharge, he enrolled at the University of Arkansas. "You had to choose a major, so I put down journalism," he said later. "I must have thought it would be fun and not very hard, something like barber college."

After graduating, Portis rose quickly as a journalist and in 1960 was hired by the venerable *New York Herald Tribune*. In New York he met and dated Nora Ephron, who remained a lifelong friend, praising Portis's "spectacular and entirely eccentric style."

At the *Herald Tribune*, Portis wrote memorable dispatches from the front lines of the civil rights movement. He also covered a massive Klan rally in Mississippi, previewing the evocative deadpan delivery that enlivened his later novels: "A Ku Klux Klan rally, for all its cross-burning and hooded panoply, is a much duller affair than one might expect," he wrote. In his report, he described how, "By 10:30 p.m. one of the crosses had collapsed and the other was just smoldering. Everyone drifted away and the grand dragon of Mississippi disappeared grandly into the Southern night, his car engine hitting on about three cylinders."

In 1964, Portis quit journalism and returned to Arkansas to write novels. In 1966 he published *Norwood*, which tells the story of a wannabe country singer from Texas who travels to New York and falls in with a series of odd characters. The book became an immediate success and was later made into a 1970 film starring Glen Campbell. In 1968 Portis published his second novel, *True Grit*, an American classic that has twice been made into major films. The 1969 movie, starring John Wayne as US Marshall Rooster Cogburn, won the legendary actor his only Academy Award. The 2010 Coen Brothers film was nominated for ten Academy Awards and grossed over \$250 million worldwide.

After *True Grit*, Portis would publish only three more novels: *The Dog of the South*, *Masters of Atlantis*, and *Gringos*. Each is regarded as a brilliant tour de force, but none were bestsellers in the vein of *True Grit*. His sporadic output, combined with his aversion to publicity and his home base in Arkansas, led Portis to become mostly forgotten by the literary establishment. At one point in the 1990s, most of his work fell out of print. Then the reappraisals began. In an influential 1998 *Esquire* essay, critic Ron Rosenbaum extolled Portis as "Perhaps the most original, indescribable sui generis talent overlooked by literary culture in America."

After reading Rosenbaum's essay, Tracy Carns, publications director for Overlook Press, set about acquiring rights to

publish all of the novels. Thus began a wave of recognition for Portis's work that has continued to grow, drawing in new generations of writers, critics, and readers. In 2020, after Portis's death, accolades poured in from *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review* and others, all publishing major retrospectives that championed his work. In 2023, Portis's collected writings were released in the prestigious Library of America series, enshrining him as part of the American canon.

When Portis died, he left no indication that he'd saved any of his manuscripts or letters. It seemed the author intended to remain as low-key in his afterlife as he had been during his lifetime.

Then, in 2022 a remarkable discovery was made in the basement of a Little Rock home. Workers went into a crawl space to do HVAC work and found huge stacks of papers. Portis, as it turned out, had preserved an archive after all.

The recovered materials, which amount to thirteen banker's boxes, include the manuscripts for all his novels. Most notable are the heavily edited drafts of *True Grit* that show just how hard Portis worked to make the voice of his unforgettable narrator, Mattie Ross, pitch perfect for her time and place.

Portis's papers also include photographs, personal materials, and voluminous correspondence with friends, family,

and fellow writers. Also present are extensive research files, screenplays, articles, and nearly 400 typed pages of a final, unfinished novel set in Veracruz.

Demonstrating Portis's writing methodology, the archive also contains many hundreds of the author's hand-written "quarter-notes" – letter-sized pages he folded to fit in his shirt pocket so he could jot down observations or thoughts.

As a coda, the archive holds hundreds of receipts documenting Portis's restless travels through Texas and Mexico. Portis fans will recognize the delicious irony in this. In *The Dog of the South*, Portis's protagonist Ray Midge tracks his fleeing wife and her lover by following their trail of credit card charges through Texas and Mexico. Now it will be possible for Portis biographers and researchers to engage in that very same act, by tracing the elusive author's own journeys through his receipts.

"The Charles Portis Papers stand as a signature acquisition for The Wittliff Collections," says Director David Coleman. "We look forward to facilitating research on this important archive, just as we have with our many distinguished collections, which include the papers of Cormac McCarthy and others."

Jay Jennings, a longtime friend of Portis and the editor of the anthology *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany* and the Library of America volume, said, "He never liked to talk much

about his writing process, but the archive makes clear how thoroughly he researched the topics covered in his books, how diligently he worked on his sentences, and how closely he observed and recorded the world around him. Whether he sought to conjure the fictional Texas town of La Coma on the Gulf of Mexico in *Masters of Atlantis* or create a kind of taxonomy of characters in a bar in Laredo, he drew from a rich supply of notes, penned discreetly and stored in his pocket."

Portis's brother, Jonathan Portis, said, "After the papers were found, we in Charles' family debated the propriety of making them public, given his lifelong insistence on privacy. We decided the papers needed to be preserved and made available to scholars. The Wittliff Collections, with its intense focus on preservation and its large collection of the works of other writers, quickly rose to the top of our preferences."

Austin novelist Elizabeth Crook, whose own literary papers are at The Wittliff and whose acclaimed novels *The Which Way Tree* and *The Madstone* have drawn favorable comparisons to Portis, reacted upon hearing the news of the Portis acquisition:

"I don't think I'd be any more excited if the Wittliff had just received the collected papers of William Shakespeare. My opinion about Portis – as one of his characters says about a writer he reveres – is he 'puts William Shakespeare in the shithouse.' Portis never made a big deal out of shunning the

limelight but he steadfastly made sure he was never standing in it. With these papers, we'll be able to bring him closer into that light and see him better. We'll also get another look at the world through his eyes, which isn't kinder or better than the one we actually live in, it just appears that way. The people in it aren't less selfish or foolish than the rest of the human race, they have simply, as if by some miraculous sleight of hand, been rendered more amusing and more likeable. This collection will help make sure they're around for a long, long time."

The Portis Papers are now cataloged and a complete inventory is available online at The Wittliff's website at:

<https://www.thewittliffcollections.txst.edu/research/a-z/portis.html>

The Wittliff Collections, located at Texas State University, are a research archive and museum gallery that hold more than 500 special collections while staging public programs, publishing three book series, and showcasing literary, photography and music exhibitions. For more information:

www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu

