

THE MEMOIRS OF CHARLOTTE PAUL

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

Admit it. We've all dreamt of ditching our nine-to-five jobs, selling the house in the city, and moving to some remote locale to start anew. Few of us dare to pursue the dream, yet those who do often wind up with a tale to tell.

In 1949 Charlotte Paul and her husband Ed Groshell dared. With two small boys in tow, they left their jobs at a Chicago newspaper, sold their house, gathered their small savings, and moved to Washington to operate the Snoqualmie Valley *Record*, a weekly community newspaper. "Security," as Paul attests, "is what you carry around in your head, and the heart you put into using it." Several years later she chronicled her family's trek into independence in her bestselling memoir, *Minding Our Own Business*, (1955) and its follow-up, *And Four to Grow* (1961).

In this era of lurid sagas based on childhood trauma and adult misbehavior, it's refreshing to read a first-person account that is neither. Charlotte Paul offers a sincere, often humorous retelling of the daily

struggle she and her husband faced running their own business, rearing two boys, and fitting into the then-remote Snoqualmie Valley community. Throughout each volume Paul evokes life in rural western Washington in the 1950s with anecdotal verve. Colorful characters abound—the crotchety printer, the drunken Linotype operator, the trapper for the state game department, the chief of the Snoqualmie Indians, the "lady correspondents" scattered from Duval to North Bend, the fussy subscribers—all of whom prove both wary of and welcoming to newcomers.

Charlotte Paul depicts a community quite different from the suburban sprawl served by Metro Transit and Interstate 90 that today is creeping into Snoqualmie Valley. In the 1950s the economy depended squarely on logging. When a strike occurred every small business felt it, including the Falls Printing Company. Though the "big transcontinental highway" cut through the valley, Charlotte and Ed ventured into Seattle rarely: to buy a replacement part for the press, see a medical specialist, or attend a Seattle Rainiers baseball game at Sick's Stadium. Otherwise, the family worked ceaselessly to keep creditors at bay and the small printing company alive.

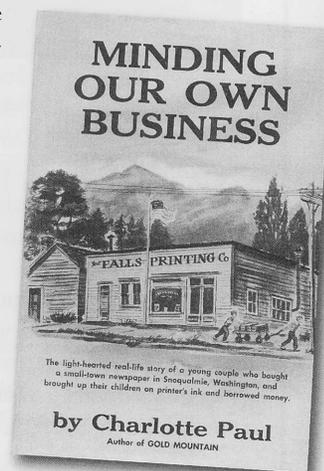
Unlike the twisted realm of David Lynch's television series, *Twin Peaks*, Paul presents a Snoqualmie Valley ideal for raising children. Young Hiram and Johnny take the school bus, ride their bikes, deliver newspapers, play in the church baseball league, tromp about the hills, and, despite a bout with polio, grow up healthy and happy. They even write their own columns for the family-owned newspaper.

Many aspects of Charlotte Paul's Snoqualmie Valley remain unchanged: Mount Si looms above, the Snoqualmie River still floods, snow closes the pass, and Johnny

eats the immortal cherry pie at the Mar-T Cafe (now Twede's) in North Bend. Yet, then as now, valley residents feel Seattle's encroachment into their small-town life. "The first visible changes were to be expected, and only a few die-hard Seattlephobes resented them," Paul observes, but adds with a note of worry, "The modest signs [of the local bank] . . . were replaced by mammoth, brilliantly lighted insignia of the Seattle chain."

Paul also gives insightful testimony on the challenges of producing a community newspaper. The journalistic imperatives differ from those of a big-city daily. "Our job," says Paul, "was to build, not to destroy, even if it meant telling less than the full truth about some of our citizens." A community newspaper has close ties to its readers. "The publishers of large metropolitan dailies, like the czars of big business, keep a comfortable distance between themselves and their customers," she remarks, but the owners of "Valley Blab," as she dubs their paper, cannot afford such aloofness.

Charlotte Paul recognizes, too, the challenges of being a writer. During the 10-year span of the memoirs, she published three novels and numerous articles and short stories in national magazines, in addition to writing for the *Record*. She disciplines herself to write every morning, even though "Writing, like rheumatism, hurts more some days than it does others." Unlike her duties as wife, mother,



Charlotte Paul and friend.

and business owner, she writes solely for herself. "That's the only part of my life in which I am purely, completely, myself. Me," she exclaims one day to Ed.

While *Minding Our Own Business* recounts the early years of the family venture, its sequel, *And Four to Grow*, focuses on the trials of rearing two teenage boys who opt not to follow in their parents' footsteps—except as it means to venture out on their own. Hiram, who at age 14 served as a legislative page in Olympia, eventually became a defense attorney in Tacoma while Johnny, who at one point declares, "I like sports. Someday I might even make sports my career," is today owner of the Snoqualmie Falls Golf Course.

As one reviewer rightly noted, Charlotte Paul avoids writing "those sticky little happy-in-adversity gems that make you want to choke the writer with his own cheerful words." *And Four to Grow*, which forecasts the eventual sale of the printing company, makes clear the marital strain of running the business. Indeed, soon after its sale, Charlotte and Ed divorced. Ed Groshell went on to write for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* for many years and died in 1996. Charlotte Paul, who remarried, published four more novels for a total of nine. Today the University of Washington English Department annually bestows the Charlotte Paul Reese Award to a worthy undergraduate writer. In 1969 Paul and her new husband moved to Lopez Island, where she lived until her death in 1989.

Women memoirists hold a prominent place in the annals of Washington literature, from Emily Inez Denny (*Blazing the Way*, 1909) and Roberta Frye Watt (*Four Wagons West*, 1916) to June Burns (*Living High*, 1941) and Betty MacDonald (*The Egg and I*, 1945). With *Minding Our Own Business* and *And Four to Grow*, Charlotte Paul made a valuable contribution to this standing—and put Snoqualmie Valley on the literary map.

Peter Donahue is author of the novel Madison House, which won the 2005 Langum Prize for Historical Fiction, and the short story collection The Cornelius Arms. He is also coeditor of Reading Seattle: The City in Prose.



Additional Reading

Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this issue? The sources listed here will get you started.

Illustrating Lewis and Clark

The Literature of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: A Bibliography and Essays, by Stephen Dow Beckham, Doug Erickson, Jeremy Skinner, and Paul Merchant. Portland: Lewis and Clark College, 2003.

"The 1807 Plan for an Illustrated Edition of Lewis and Clark," by George Ehrlich. *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 109 (1985), 43-58.

A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals, by Paul Russell Cutright. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976.

John Ford Clymer

"John Clymer: Bridging Our Collective Past," by Susan Hallsten McGarry. *Southwest Art*, May 1991, 72-79.

John Clymer: An Artist's Rendezvous with the Frontier West, by Walt Reed. Flagstaff: Northland Publishing, 1976.

The Brown Castle

For the Record: A History of the Tacoma Public Schools, 1869-1984, by Winnifred L. Olsen. Tacoma School District, 1985.

History of Tacoma School District No. 10, 1869-1940. Tacoma Public Schools, District No. 10, 1941.

A Castle Overlooking the Sound: 115 Years of Building History: The Centennial Restoration of Stadium High School, by Jeffrey J. Ryan. Tacoma: Ryan Architecture, 2006.

The City of Destiny and the South Sound: An Illustrated History of Tacoma and Pierce County, by Caroline Denyer Gallacci. Carlsbad, Cal.: Heritage Media Corp., 2001.

Crisis and Christmas Seals

Contagion and Confinement, Controlling Tuberculosis along the Skid Road, by Barron H. Lerner. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

The Plague and I, by Betty MacDonald. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1948.

Fevered Lives, Tuberculosis in American Culture since 1870, by Katherine Ott. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Division of Science, Medicine, and Society, National Museum of American History, 1999.

Revolution on a Dare

"'Iron Chink' a Notable Factor in the Advancement of the Salmon Industry." *Pacific Fisherman*, January 1927, 112-113.

Pacific American Fisheries, Inc. by August Radke. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002.

"The Impact of the 'Iron Chink' on the Chinese Salmon Cannery Workers of Puget Sound," by Margaret Willson, & Jeffery L. MacDonald. *Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest*, 1984, 79-89.