

# Life's "Powerful" Adventure

~ An Interview with Paul Power ~

by Stephanie Jobbitt

**"We wouldn't dare be caught drinkin' 'cause you didn't know when [Mother] was goin' to call an inspection. I'd open the door and there she was, and she'd give you a breathalyzer test."**

*Mr. Paul Power was a man whom I met when I went to church with a friend. He was there for Sunday service, but he was staying after just to see who was there and to talk to the people—he's like that. We sat down together and had a conversation on how he began attending church, and I was charmed by his warm personality. After we talked, I went home and forgot the day until I began considering a contact for my next interview for my Foxfire Magazine class. I had already had that after-church tete-a-tete with Mr. Power, so I was aware that he, having already lived for ninety-eight years, would have so many stories to tell.*

*Mr. Paul regaled me with hilarious tales of his childhood—riding in a wagon pulled by a goat, "borrowing" a dump car, blowing up a coal-burning stove, and other predicaments he "got into." He also told me about his long, happy marriage to a good woman who he says "turned me around one hundred and eighty degrees." Although Mr. Power has had his share of trials and troubles, he has overcome adversity. I am certain, that you, too, will succumb to his charm.*

—Stephanie Jobbitt

Hello, my name is Paul Power, and my age is ninety-eight. On June fifteenth I'll be ninety-nine. I was born down in Buford, Georgia. It's about fifteen miles below Gainesville—just south of it—on the road to Atlanta. I left home at seventeen and went to Atlanta to work. Then, in 1929, I moved to Florida full-time. Altogether, I spent half my life in Florida—forty-nine years. Then I moved



Mr. Power telling his stories to me

here in 1975. We bought a place over in Rabun Gap in Wolfork Valley. It's over there next to the mill. It's a little cottage right next to the textile mill. I got to where I could not take care of it—I couldn't cut the grass and could not do anything, so I sold it. I found this spot and moved down here.

Well, I was always in trouble as a child. Always, I could get in trouble. I guess it's just like a magnet to me. I do not think my mother felt concerned with me because after she

got the two older children, my sister and brother, off to school, why she'd dress me up and turn me loose. She'd just let me go anywhere I wanted to

go. Cousin Addie—that was mother's cousin and my father's cousin, cousins on both sides—she has six boys. I would always be getting mixed up with those boys. Cousin Addie would not always have time to call my mother and say, "Paul needs a little switchin'," so she'd

go ahead and give it to me. Then when I got home that night, I would get another switchin'.

When I was a year old, I fell in the fire. It burnt my head and face, so my

mother let my hair grow long to cover the scar. When I was a little toddler, I was wanderin' downtown, and my bigger brother took me to the

barbershop and cut off my hair. Mother did not like that too good.

My earliest memory was, I reckon, when I was about three years old. My

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**"[W]hen he turned the goat, I fell out. So Dad took the goat back that night to where he got it."**

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father bought me a goat, a wagon, and a little goat harness to pull the wagon. My older brother, he got it to the top of the hill, and he went down the hill just as fast as he could. When we got to the end, we had to stop really quick, and when he turned the goat, I fell out. So Dad took the goat back that night to where he had got it. Let's see what else I got into....

the trains goin' by; then the teacher would call on me, but I didn't know what she was talkin' about. Back then, on the report cards, any grade below seventy would be in red, so I'd have lots of red on my report card.

We didn't have all those books and stuff like they have now. All we had was the basics. The brick schoolhouse that I went to had four rooms

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## **“We'd take a fork and ram it up the air holes and break up the coal, and the stove would explode.”**

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One time when I was messin' around at the tannery—like I had no business there, but I was anyway—they had this narrow-grade railroad that hauled stuff from where they tanned the leather up to the big building at the top of the hill where they finished it all. The boiler room where they made the steam to heat the whole building used coal that they brought down in a little dump car. There was this dump car sittin' there empty with the brakes on to keep it from movin', and it had what is called a “dogit” to keep it tight. Well, what I did was I knocked the dog off, and the car started goin' down the road. I started headin' for home. My brother worked down there, and he was chasing me. He was just laughin'. He thought it was the funniest thing.

I wasn't good in school. I was always lookin' out the window at the trains 'cause I always wanted to work on the railroad. I'd look out and see

upstairs and four rooms downstairs with a hall down the middle. Then the stair went from the bottom floor up to the next floor which had a piano where they could give you piano lessons if you wanted 'em. The classes had one coal burnin' stove up in the corner. The parts weren't even bolted together. The top was just laid into the bottom section with a rim to keep it from fallin' apart. The stovepipe went up and then out to the outside wall where the chimney was. They'd send us boys down into the basement to get the coal dust they were usin' for coal, the cheapest stuff they could get. We'd come back and dump a scuttle of that coal down on the hot coals. I'd start pourin', and a green gas would come up—dangerous. We'd take a fork and ram it up the air holes and break up the coals, and the stove would explode. The stove would fall apart, and the stovepipe would come down. The room would

be full of smoke, ashes, soot, and everything. What we got by with! So that's the way I got out of high school.

I did graduate from high school, but, believe me, I wasn't no good. The teacher was a young college graduate, and I was failing Latin. Back then, they didn't let you take what you wanted to take. They'd just tell you what you was going to take: Latin, geometry, trigonometry, French—stuff that we would never use. I was failing Latin with Ms. Coker. She was a nice, young lady just out of college, and she said, "Paul, we got to do something about this. We've got these diplomas all printed and the names all stenciled so you can read 'em, and we got to get you outta here." Nowadays, they wouldn't use that language: it would be a little rougher. They'd say, "Paul, we got to get you the hell outta here." Anyway, then Ms. Coker got a big sheet of paper and says, "What I'm going to do is...on this side I'm going to write the questions, and this side I'm going to write the answers; now let's see if you can copy 'em down." That's the way I got out of high school. I got that diploma here now.

My brother got kicked out of high school. He never graduated. In school the coal burnin' stoves was up in the corner so as to keep the teacher warm,

and the girls and boys in the back were freezing to death. So the girls that had 'em wore their overcoats. Well, somebody pinned a bundle of cotton on a girl to make her look like a bunny. The teacher didn't like it, so they blamed it on my brother. Well, I don't know if he did it or not—I never asked him—but he was kicked out of high school for it. Back then, they had no appeals. They'd say, "You're outta

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here. You get your books and go." So he stayed around Buford there workin' jobs, but then he saw there was no future there. So he got my father to get him an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. He had no high school graduation, hadn't been to college or nothin', so he failed the test. He came back home and got my father to cash two life insurance policies, and he went back to a tutoring school in 'Napolis where

the retired officers knew what the questions was going to be. Then he passed it, and he was in the class of 1916. That's when World War I was goin' on, so they run 'em through in three years instead of four, so he graduated in 1919. He stayed in the service for the next thirty years, and he retired as a rear admiral.

My older sister, she had gland trouble when she was growin' up. She had two surgeries on her throat,



but that don't do much good. So that was all the operatin' she had. When she graduated from high school, she got a job goin' to department stores over the southeast United States to sell magazines. She married, but they never had any children.

I was allowed to date, but I didn't worry with no girls. I ran with the boys. When I was old enough to take a girl to a party or somethin', they'd say, "Paul, you take so-and-so," and I'd say, "I ain't takin' her." Me being all bull-headed, I didn't take no girl to no party either. It was the same way when I went to Atlanta.

Before I went to Atlanta, my mother ran a tight ship. Her father was a drunkard, and after ten children, when grandmother divorced him, Mom would not allow no liquor or smokin' in the house.

My mother wouldn't argue with you. She just said curfew was eleven o'clock. She didn't say no drinkin' or anything, but we knew. Me and the rest of the boys would be down someplace where they had a coal burnin' stove, and we'd be playin' card games. We wouldn't be gamblin' or nothin', just passin' the time with the stove there and everything. In fact, the policeman, he'd come in and get warm 'cause he knew there wasn't

nothin' goin' on. We wouldn't dare be caught drinkin' 'cause you didn't ever know when she was goin' to call an inspection. I'd open the door and there she was, and she'd give you a breathalyzer test. That's a long time before they had it like they do now. She didn't nag you. That was just the rule. When I went to Atlanta, I was on cruise control. I was havin' fun. I started smokin', but no girls—only boys. We'd take in all the movie houses, all the vaudeville shows. They had two vaudeville houses that opened up on the side street. Then they had another place where there was traveling musical shows. Then later on they opened up the Paramount Theater; that was a big first-class movie house. They had seven shows that would come by every week. That's where I first



Mr. Power's contact with the world

saw Ginger Rogers. We'd go and see all those traveling musicals; they'd travel the country. They put on some good musicals. Lordy, they were good.

My father, I reckon, thought I was the best thing since sliced bread. When I was real young, he would take me rabbit huntin' on Saturdays, and he would never take a lunch with him. He would always want to be eatin' off the land. He'd find an old

apple tree, and we'd eat apples or whatever. I didn't want to go, but he would make me go anyway. He'd take me 'possum huntin' at night. We'd go out and find a 'possum up a tree and then cut the tree down to catch the 'possum. Then we'd put the 'possum up and let him stay away from the impurities he'd been eating. When it got rid of all the impurities, we'd cook 'possum and sweet potatoes. 'Possum is very fat, very fat.

When my baby sister was born, my father would take us to the skatin' rink on Saturday night to watch the people skate. My mother's brother had this huge skatin' rink where we would watch the people skate. It was way down at the bottom of a hill. It was real late on Saturday night, and he'd tote both of us back up that hill.

He was a harness cutter. Back in those days they used harnesses for buggies and wagons. Also, they used cheap harness for the mules that was used to plow on the cotton down in the Mississippi Delta and all. They'd plow

first and then plant the seed.

Then they'd send salesmen out with catalogs and samples. They'd mail the orders back in, and they'd make the orders for a certain catalog number. They'd determine how many of everything they would need. When they got the work order, they would hand them out, and my father would take his work orders and see what he



Paul and his wife, Bernice, on their last trip to Florida

needed. Then he'd put the pieces of harness leather on his bench and he'd start cutting straps. He had a knife with a pistol grip and it had a gauge on it that would measure the width of the strap. Then he had this other knife in the shape of a moon to cut a straight length of the hide, and he'd cut as many straps of that size as he wanted and then change it to the other size. When he had the whole order finished, they'd give it to

the harness makers and they'd put it all together, you know sewing the straps on and riveting the buckles on. The heavy wagon straps, they had to have support because you couldn't depend on the leather. It



wasn't strong enough, so they put a steel plate between two pieces of leather and sewed it on each side. My father's cousin ran that machine. It was a huge machine. It would sew each side and put the metal in the middle. Buford had big leather works—tens of thousands of hides a day to make leather. My brother got out of it because he saw no future in it.

Our uncle was the superintendent of the tannery, but there was no jobs to be filled. Most everybody was just makin' laborers' pay, so he got out of it. My uncle, he must have thought that I

was the best thing that had come down the pipe. He never told me to stay away from the factory because it was dangerous. He would let me roam anywhere I wanted to, and when I was old enough to fill a water bucket, he made me a waterboy in the summertimes. I would go to the spring and dip my two pails in there. They had a big, ol' pipe where the water spit up. I would reach down there and fill one bucket and then the other bucket. Then I'd take 'em back to the factory, and the men would always tease me. They'd say, "Waterboy, waterboy, let your name be found. If you don't like the job, just throw your bucket down." They would tease me all the time, so the next year Uncle gave me and a bunch of us kids jobs. They got their tannin'

bark from Rabun County. It was red oak and chestnut bark they get off the trees here in the summertime. They would ship it down to Buford, and us kids would unload it. I was makin' twenty-five cents a day for ten hours, and the rest of 'em was makin' ten cents a day. We'd unload the cars and stack the bark where they would have a year-round supply. You seen these chippers on the road chippin' up trees. Well, they

had these huge chippers, and they'd feed the bark down a wooden shoot. It'd hit the chippers, and they'd grind it up fine. Then they'd put that in a huge

cedar vat with hot water and make liquor to tan the hide with.

That was the second job Uncle had for me. The third job he had for me was to deliver messages. They had no radio communication in the office on the north end and the south end of Buford, so a man on a bicycle would get orders for the shops in downtown Buford and take them to the tannery in the north end of Buford. They'd ride from the office down there and take the order to the harness factory, the tannery, and bring the products back. He decided he would give me a job, so he bought me a bicycle. I would do the same thing they was paying another man to do, but he never complained. He never said, "Paul, get out of here. This is a dangerous place. You're going to get

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**"It's just money. It don't matter—just spend it."**

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hurt." I'd walk up and down the busy aisles talking to the men as they worked. He never criticized me a bit as long as he lived.

Everybody back then that made shoes used leather. The leather would have to be real thick for the soles. Nowadays, a shoe has rubber or whatever, and they never wear out. Back then, the leather wore out, and they were always tannin' leather. First,

flesh, get it all off. Next, it would get put into a vat of lime, and that would loosen the hairs. Then you'd put the hide in a de-hairin' machine that would pull all the hairs out. Now you had a hide that was white as snow, and it was ready to put in the tanning extract to make it look tan. That is what they made shoe leather out of; then if they wanted to make saddle leather or harness leather, they would



The Power family at a reunion

they were gettin' hides from Argentina—big steer hides—and down there they would cure 'em in the sun and fold 'em over at the back. When they got to Buford, they'd be flat as a board, and what they'd do is throw 'em in a vat of water to get 'em soft. Then they'd put the hide over what they called "the beam"; it was like a half-barrel. They would put the hides over that with the insides up, and they would scrape off all the leftover

put it in black. Harness leather is mostly black, and saddle leather was kind of lemon color. They also made mailbags back then out of that bare leather. Back then, all the mailmen had a bag on their shoulder. They didn't have no car, bicycle, or anything. They just walked their routes. In a city like Atlanta, they'd get their bags full of mail, get on a streetcar, and go to where their route started; then they'd have boxes there where

the truck had brought more mail and put it in lock boxes. They'd deliver the mail in their bags and then get some more out of the lockboxes and deliver it 'til they finished up their routes.

Every Sunday morning, we'd go down to the post office. Back then, you had to go to the post office to get your mail. My uncle was a doctor, and he was always gettin' samples of medicines. My older cousins would

I was in trouble all the time.

My brother taught me the express business. In 1916, he was workin' at the Southern Express Company. I got into the express business for forty-four years. I got in a real rut, oh Lordy, but I enjoyed it. In 1918, at the tail end of World War I, I was workin' part-time helpin' with the records and reports and everything because the man they had could hardly write his name, and he had no idea what was

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**“If you lie, you have to tell more lies to cover up the first thing, and then it's out of control.”**

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be there, and they'd say, “Paul, you wanna try this.” I would, and it'd be some laxative or somethin'. They played tricks on me a lot.

Mother was a housewife. She raised us kids; she raised us all. I'm afraid my father was the one who disciplined us. He had a short fuse; you did your best not to excite him. I remember that in the summertime we had no shoes. We went barefooted, and in the wintertime you'd buy you a new pair of shoes. When all the streets were muddy with that red mud, you'd put on your overshoes to cross the street, and the mud would suck your overshoes off. Then your overshoes would get muddy. This happened once, and I got my shoes muddy. I'd try to wash 'em off by putting water on 'em. Then I put 'em in the stove to dry 'em, but I'd burn 'em up. Then I really did get it. Lordy!

goin' on. When I graduated in 1919, I went to work full-time for seven dollars a week. We worked from eight to five, six days a week, and we'd come down on Sunday mornin' when the train from Atlanta came with ice cream, bread, flowers, livestock, and whatever. If you wanted to send anything to Atlanta on the train, you had to go down to the train early because it left Toccoa at about five a.m. So it was a full-time job for seven dollars a week. I quit in 1920.

My brother, he had a son who was adopted. He and his wife had an older son, a younger son, and one daughter. They lived in California most of their lives.

In the fall of 1934, I met my wife, Bernice, when she came to work at the express company where I worked. She wasn't working with me. She was workin' in the office. We met and

dated, and then we fell in love. We married on December 8, a real quick marriage. She worked there until July 23, 1943, when the last baby girl was born. I had to sell the old Plymouth car to get her out of the hospital because they wouldn't let her go until the hospital bill was paid. After that, she was home with three young children. She would call the corner grocery man, and he would take the order over the phone, fill it, deliver it, and charge it. I was the only one workin' then. I don't know how long it took me to get the bill paid, but it took quite a while, I know.

In 1946, I was transferred to Miami, and she stayed home to sell the house in



Mr. Power's house in Tiger, Georgia

the Christmas season. There was a doctor from New York State who couldn't find any place to stay, so he just bought the house. He only stayed about a month. He couldn't find a place to rent, so he bought the house.

We had a long and happy marriage. We never argued, never. One reason people don't get along nowadays is the wife is makin' more than the husband is makin', and she wants to keep her money separate. When we started out, we had nothin.' In fact, I borrowed the money from her to get the marriage license. We rented a furnished apartment 'cause we

didn't have any things to go in it. The other employees gave us things we could use like toasters, skillets and things like that, and we got by. We never wanted for a thing. If people would do that today, they would get along better. My oldest boy has been married two times, and that happened both times. She wanted to keep her money separate, and you can't do that. If you go to the grocery store, are you going to keep books on what

belongs to who? It's just money. It don't matter—just spend it. We always had what we needed.

My wife died in 1982. She had to be operated on for cancer on December 8, 1981, our anniversary. She recovered fast,

but then she started taking radiation treatments in the spring of 1982. Then the day before Labor Day, she and her niece stopped by at the Log Cabin Craft Fair in Mountain City, right across the street from the Foxfire place. It was on the Sunday before Labor Day, and I noticed she couldn't remember customers' names that she had been serving for years. I called the doctor the next morning, and he said to take her to Gainesville to let them run some tests. We found out that it had already spread to her brain, and she didn't last very much longer: November 26. She wasn't suffer-

ing any: they had her sedated, so she wasn't sufferin' a bit. God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.

We had two boys and one girl. One boy died two years ago on March 1. He lived in Highpoint, North Carolina. I have a health problem: I'm a carrier of MD, muscular dystrophy. It does not affect me, but it affects both of my sons. That's what contributed to my youngest son's death. He got to where he could not work. He was on disability, and to open his car door, he had to use two hands to twist it. He just finally got all stopped up, and we took him to the hospital. He was there for a month, and then we brought him home to recuperate. They had been feedin' him through a stomach tube, and one night it pulled loose. After they took him back to the hospital, he lasted a day—one day—and he was gone. The younger boy that died, he had a son with it, and his wife had problems. Right now they're back together. I hope they make it. The older boy had a daughter with it and one daughter without it. My brother's oldest boy had three daughters with it, and his oldest boy had it. My brother's daughter, she died with it. It my have contributed to his death because he died fairly young.

Our daughter lives in Ft. Myers, Florida. My oldest son, John, wanted to be an artist in his younger days. He was a real good artist. Then when we moved back to West Palm Beach in 1949, the marching bandleader

wanted him in the band. He didn't know a thing about music, but he got into band there. He thought he wanted to be in music. We sent him to the University of Florida to be a mechanical engineer, but then the draft got him. He served either two or three years in the Washington area. When he come back, he said, "I want to go to school, Dad"; and I said, "Okay, go ahead." So we sent him to school again, and he graduated at Christmastime. He went into servicing equipment to remove things from the air in the coal factories. He was in that for quite a few years. In fact, he worked for several companies. His first marriage broke up partly because he was gone all the time. I imagine that was the problem. That was how he got his two daughters. He met this girl from Texas, and they'd spend hours on the phone. He was in Dallas, calling on a customer, and they hired him. Then he met this lady, and she had a little girl. He married her, and they ended up getting divorced. In that case, I think the money interfered.

Me and my wife moved to Rabun Gap in 1975. When I got to where I couldn't take care of our home anymore, I found this spot and came down here. I just walked away from everything we had there. I brought that bed, the chair, the lamp, the chest of drawers, a rocker, bedding, and my clothes. That was all I brought. I walked away and left everything. We had an apartment and that house. I told the man that bought it that he

could straighten out my mess. The lot had frontage on Taylor's Chapel Road. It went way back up to a point, and then we bought all the other unoccupied property along Moses Road. The land went around to a little street

in West Palm Beach when he was preacher there. Then he went to Riverside Baptist Church in Miami where he baptized me.

I would tell children of today not to lie. Of all the trouble I ever got

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**“[D]o not be afraid to work. I always had a job in the summertime. Even though it didn't pay much, at least it kept me off the streets.”**

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above us with three houses on it, but I couldn't do anything with it anymore. So I have been here since about 1997.

I didn't really go to church when I was young, but I was supposed to. What I did was go downtown and hang out with the boys durin' church hours, but when I met my wife, she turned me around one hundred and eighty degrees. She had been a Baptist since she was a baby. Every time the church was in, we were there. I'd go with her. So people thought I was a member there, but I wasn't even baptized until 1947. My oldest boy was getting baptized, so I thought it was time for me to get baptized. That was in Miami by the preacher that married us: Dr. Bolten. He married us

into, I wouldn't lie. The school even said that to my mother once: "Paul will not lie." If you lie, you have to tell more lies to cover up the first thing, and then it's out of control. Another thing I'd tell them is not to gossip. If you tell things that you hear other people say, and you don't know for a fact that they are true, then it gets spread further and further. I'll tell you, you'll tell your friend, and it'll just spread, spread. The bad thing about that is you can't put it back in the bottle. Do not gossip, do not lie, and do not be afraid to work. I always had a job in the summertime. Even though it didn't pay much, it at least kept me off the streets.

