

“The guys who remember the studio system now remember it all wrong. Actually, it was one of the most pleasant systems in the world.”

—Bill Bowers

William “Bill” Bowers was more than a talented Hollywood screenwriter. With a résumé of over 50 screenplays, along with numerous uncredited rewrites and polish jobs, Bowers wrote stories and composed original dialogue in a style all his own. Although his screenplay of *The Gunfighter* (1950) remains the nominal lede on his career monograph, Bowers’ contributions to film noir were no less exceptional. Like a master chef, his word slinging invariably added precise dashes of wisecrack absurdity to many a dark-hued script.

An only child, Bowers was born in 1916 in Las Cruces, New Mexico. His father was a doctor whose twin brother was a mortician. The younger Bowers observed that his Dad and Uncle had both ends of the mortality business knocked. Less amusing was that the Bowers brothers were afflicted with tuberculosis; they had relocated to the dry environs of New Mexico in a desperate attempt to preserve their health. Dr. Bowers died when Bill was ten years old.

Bill and his mother left New Mexico behind, settling in Long Beach, California. Mrs. Bowers managed an apartment house near the beach while Bill attended Long Beach Polytechnic High School. Future actors Don DeFore and Anthony Caruso were high school pals who remained lifelong friends.

After finishing journalism school at the University of Missouri, Bowers landed a job as a reporter for the *Long Beach Press Telegram*. After attending a local play with a friend, Bowers declared, “I can do that.” He promptly turned out a three-act comedy based on his college fraternity. *Where Do We Go from Here?* was deemed such a surefire hit Oscar Hammerstein II signed on to produce the show. It opened on November 15, 1938, at Broadway’s Vanderbilt Theater. It closed after 15 performances.

Bowers survived by producing radio plays and magazine articles (he wrote for *Life*, among others) while constantly churning out spec scripts. His widow, Marjorie, recalled these lean years: “Bill lived in New York with Don DeFore and his other actor friends. All of them were broke. They shared apartments, clothes, food, everything.” At one point, the youthful ensemble was literally starving. DeFore took matters into his own hands by killing a duck in Central Park so they would have something to eat.¹ Tony Caruso recalled their meager subsistence, waiting to perform in a play Bowers had written for him: “The apartment people were going to kick us out. Bill sat down and wrote a Helen Hayes script and went out and sold it that afternoon. I said, ‘Why not write two, Bill?’ He said, ‘One is all I need right now.’”

Bowers eventually landed an RKO contract on the strength of his rewrite of the Kay Kyser comedy *My*

¹ Years later, Don DeFore replaced the duck with a live one while apologizing to the City of New York during a brief Central Park ceremony.

Bill Bowers

The Court Jester of Film Noir

Alan K. Rode



Favorite Spy. Relocating to Hollywood, his original screenplay for *Seven Days' Leave* became RKO's biggest box-office hit of 1942.

After a stint in the Army Air Corps during World War II, Bowers returned to Hollywood to work on Warner Bros.' ponderous Cole Porter musical biopic *Night and Day* (1946). Despite being selected by a miscast Cary Grant to do a complete rewrite of the script (at RKO, Grant had been enthralled by an unproduced Bowers screenplay), Bowers remembered the picture was "one of those insane things when what I wrote in the morning—I mean this literally—they shot in the afternoon. What I wrote in the afternoon, they shot the next morning." Despite the frenetic nature of the production, characterized by intense acrimony between Grant and director Michael Curtiz, *Night and Day* was a box-office bonanza. Looking back three decades later, Bowers characterized his work on the picture as "the worst thing I've ever done."

His first experience with film noir came at Universal with *The Web* (1947). Bowers' screenplay (Bertram Millhauser is also credited) concerned an attorney (Edmond O'Brien) hired as a bodyguard for a wealthy business-

man (Vincent Price). The job is a set-up for a murder scheme. Screenwriter Malvin Wald remembered director Michael Gordon coming up to him excitedly urging, "You've got to read this script. It's fantastic! It's called *The Web* ... read this line of dialogue." The line Wald always remembered: "A character comes up to Eddie O'Brien and says, 'Do you have any money?' and Eddie says, 'I'm so broke I have to save up to weigh myself.'"

Malvin Wald raved to director Michael Gordon about Bowers' screenplay for *The Web* (1947): "You've got to read this script. It's fantastic!"

Bowers hit his stride with an uncredited rewrite on *Pitfall*, followed by his screenplay for *Larceny* (both 1948), which he adapted from the novel *The Velvet Fleece*. *Pitfall* starred Dick Powell as a bored insurance man whose disastrous extramarital segue into the arms of Elizabeth Scott remains an extraordinary example of postwar realism that somehow made it past the Production Code Administration. *Larceny* offered noir icon Dan Duryea paired with a repurposed John Payne as cagey confidence men. The film is complemented by an over-the-top Shelley Winters, for whom Bowers crafted some deliciously saucy lines. He added his usual bits of business for a diminutive hotel clerk played by marsupial-like Percy Helton, who locates Payne's room key "under my jiu-jitsu manual."



Two 1948 noir classics from Bowers: (from left) *Pitfall*, highlighting Dick Powell's ill-fated cinematic infidelity with Lizabeth Scott, and *Larceny* where con-artist Dan Duryea is two-timed by an impetuous Shelley Winters

Bowers could adapt literary source material, create an original screenplay, or punch up dialogue in an existing script. He contributed an uncredited flourish to *Criss Cross* (1949) and additional dialogue to *Abandoned* (1949). A memorable rejoinder in the latter film has reporter Dennis O'Keefe bracing sleazy private eye Raymond Burr, who argues that his stalking of Gale Storm is totally legitimate. "You going legitimate is like a vulture going vegetarian," sneers O'Keefe. At a screening of *Abandoned* in 2003, veteran director Joseph M. Newman deflected any praise for his work by saying, "Well, you know, I had Bill Bowers on that one and he was the best in the business. Whatever's good in the picture, that was Bill's doing."

Bowers wrote whatever the studios paid for, but he ended up specializing in crime, comedies, and Westerns. Several of his creations exceeded the bounds of Hollywood normalcy. Under the pseudonym "Rodney Carlisle," he wrote the original screenplay for the programmer *Let's Live Again* (1948)—the tale of a man reincarnated as a dog returning to Earth to save his nuclear scientist brother. It displayed the singular Bowers brand of humor, epitomized by the line "If I were you, and I think I am, I wouldn't do that," which eventually became a Bill Bowers family refrain.

There was a rewrite of *Slave Girl* (1947), a Yvonne De Carlo sand-and-sandal specialty, to which he added voiceover commentary delivered by a

talking camel. "Bill and Andy (Bowers' second son) would sit on the couch and scream at those early British comics," said Marjorie Bowers. "He trained Andy early on to have a great sense of humor."

Pitfall had initiated Bowers' collaboration with director André De Toth, which culminated with *The Gunfighter* (1950). In his dotage, De Toth, who reached 96 years of age, assumed credit not only for his deft direction of both pictures but for the creation of the stories and screenplays, as well. Marjorie Bowers recalls it differently. "They were friends. André contributed. Basically, he typed and lived at Bill's house. It [*The Gunfighter*] was Bill's idea, not André's. Bill was almost through writing it when André came to his house, but he was at a slow point. André

was his assistant on the script." Although he called himself "the least likely person to write a Western," Bowers created *The Gunfighter* by envisioning John Wayne as the titular lead. He bridled when the legendary star wanted to purchase his script at a bargain basement price. "I took it to him [Wayne] and he flipped over it and he offered me \$10,000. And I said, 'Oh, come on!' He said, 'Well, you said you wrote it for me. Don't you have any artistic integrity.' I said, 'No.' So I sold it to Fox and I think I got \$70,000 for it."

For the rest of his life, Wayne excoriated Bowers for selling *The Gunfighter* script to Darryl F. Zanuck and "letting that skinny schmuck [Gregory Peck] do it." Bowers' tale depicts a conflicted gunslinger wearily reviewing his wasted life during an afternoon in a New Mexico saloon; he ends up shot down by a wastrel setting off on the same futile career path. It is rightfully acclaimed as





John Wayne never forgave Bowers for selling the script to *The Gunfighter* (1950) to Fox, who cast Gregory Peck in the lead. Bowers didn't care; Darryl F. Zanuck offered Bowers considerably more money for his screenplay than the tight-fisted Wayne

one of the great Hollywood Westerns. Bowers and De Toth shared an Oscar® nomination for Best Motion Picture Story. Hustling for work was a constraint in Bowers' life. He had to support a wife, their son Tony, and a serious drinking problem. "I wasn't making much money then," he remarked to colleague William Froug. "You gotta work all the time because it's a messy life, drinking." His sometime writing partner, Bud Beauchamp, was also a prodigious imbibor, and invariably broke. Desperate to drum up a payday, Beauchamp recalled to Bowers an obscure Montana law: when a man kills another man in a gunfight, he is responsible for all the deceased's debts—and for the deceased's wife and children. "No problem," Bowers crowed. "So we had Jimmy Stewart coming through a town in Montana on his way to a gold field, stops to play a little poker and gets into a thing with the guy who is cheating and there's a gunfight and he kills the other guy and inherits Marjorie Main and thirteen kids. I was under contract to Universal and related the story in the commissary." Producer Bill Dozier bought it for \$2,500 and Bowers

split the money with a grateful Beauchamp. "We'd worked on it for an hour and a half, tops. They [Universal] made *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap* with Abbott and Costello."

Bowers remarking about his original story for *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap* (1947) which he wrote with Bud Beauchamp and sold to Universal: "We'd worked on it for an hour and a half, tops."

After Richard Erdman was signed for *Cry Danger* (1951), its producer and star Dick Powell introduced the actor to Bowers, who, Erdman recalled, "was sitting in a room with a writing pad and a fifth of bourbon." The thespian and the scribe became pals, Bowers having penned what Erdman considers the best role of his 70-year career—a smart-aleck former Marine named DeLong who's got an artificial leg and provides Powell with a phony alibi. DeLong's constant drinking is an intentional allusion to the screenwriter. The humorous ripostes begin with the first scene and never let up. Near the end of the film, DeLong is shot and needs a replacement for his artificial leg. The doctor asks, "What kind of leg would you like?" "I'd like it in knotty

pine," DeLong replies—"to match my den."

Bowers padded his noir résumé with *Convicted* (1950) and *The Mob* (1951), allowing him to craft dialogue for the always bellicose



Snappy dialogue—Left: Hard case Neville Brand with Broderick Crawford in *The Mob* (1951); **Right:** Dick Erdman contemplating the dilemma of an empty shot glass in 1951's *Cry Danger*, with Regis Toomey and star Dick Powell



Broderick Crawford. “A first-year law student could win this case with an IQ of fifty,” snarls Crawford in *Convicted*, playing a district attorney turned prison warden. In *The Mob*, he’s an undercover cop trying to bag a mysterious waterfront crime czar. His jousting with fleabag hotel clerk Jay Adler (black sheep of the famed thespian family) was vintage Bowers:

“Want a room?”
 “No, I just came in to admire the decorations.”
 “Three bucks a day.”
 “What’s that include?”
 “Sheets on the bed.”
 “Got a register?”
 “Don’t be funny.”
 “Hey, take my stuff upstairs.”
 “This ain’t the Waldorf, friend.”
 “How long did you work here before you found that out?”

As the industry’s ardor for noir dissipated, Bowers wrote *Split Second* (1953) for producer and first-time director Dick Powell, followed by a pair for Phil Karlson in 1955: *Tight Spot* and *Five Against the House*. Bowers composed several televised plays for G.E. Theater and Powell’s Four Star Productions while continuing to write big-screen comedies and Westerns.

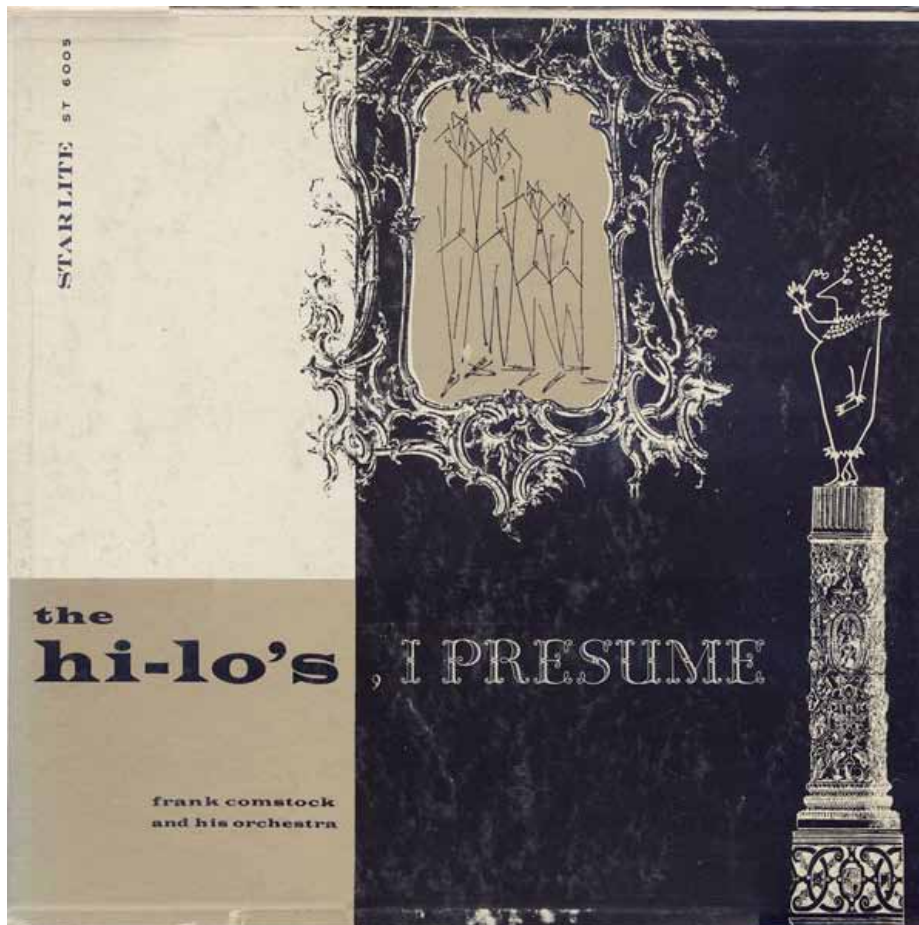
In addition to the comedic stylings of *Imitation General* (1958) and *Alias Jesse James* (1959), Bowers penned a pair of notable

oaters: *The Sheepman* and *The Law and Jake Wade* (both 1958). Bowers repurposed James Edward Grant’s story for *The Sheepman*, adding the satirical humor that made it play—and earning a Oscar® nomination in the process.

During the 1950s, Bowers also enjoyed a brief heyday as a recording impresario. “He had just sold his record companies (Sunset and Starlite) before I met him,” recalled Marjorie Bowers. “The Hi-Lo’s (a popular quartet comprised of statuesque and diminutive male vocalists) were his stars.” Bowers created original lyrics while others composed the music. He continued to dabble as a songsmith, writing Peggy Lee’s 1961 hit “Oh Love Hast Thou Forsaken Me?”

Marjorie Bowers met her future husband through a boyfriend she was dating.

“I had just graduated from UCLA and had been working in a restaurant at Lake Arrowhead with Ellie Neil (later Eleanor Coppola, wife of Francis Ford Coppola). We were waitresses and had been friends since we were eleven years old. My boyfriend, Ron, was the liaison between UCLA and Bill’s record company for concerts and the like. Ron kept telling me, ‘I want you to meet this character.’ I didn’t want to meet a *character*, but he finally prevailed. It turned out that I didn’t have to worry about what to say because Bill never stopped talking. He had just seen the play *Irma la Douce* and acted out all of the songs. At the end of the evening, he asked Ron, ‘Are you going to marry her?’ Ron hesitated and Bill said, ‘You can’t because I’m going to.’” Marjorie had no interest in a man who was twenty years older than she. Although Bowers had taken his



Record impresario and songwriter: Bowers had the Hi-Lo's under contract to his Starlite Records (left); Bowers wrote Peggy Lee's 1961 hit "Oh Love Hast Thou Forsaken Me?"

last drink two years earlier, he was also a single parent raising his seven-year old son of whom he'd assumed custody after his first marriage imploded. Bill phoned Marjorie daily for two weeks before she finally agreed to go out to dinner. A whirlwind courtship—flowers, gifts, romantic Hollywood nightspots—was concluded by Bowers' preordained matrimonial *denouement*.

"He'd made up his mind. He wrote the script of our relationship. I was this cocky young woman who could help him run his life. He needed someone to take over, and I'm a take-charge person and he saw that in me. I ended up running both our lives. Pretty competently, I would say."

Bill and Marjorie had two more children—Andy and Amanda—as they forged a close-knit life. Marjorie remembers her husband as a father who "adored his children even if he wasn't the sort of dad who played baseball or went camping with his kids." Their social circle was comprised mostly of married show business people. Actor Harry Morgan was a close friend. He extolled Bowers at the scribe's 1987 memorial:

"We rented a house which turned out to be across the street from the Bowers' and shortly after we moved in Bill rang the bell. He introduced himself and said, 'Can Harry come out and play?'"

Marjorie smiles when discussing Morgan and her husband. "Harry was hysterical. He was the sweetest, funniest man. He and Bill together

were a riot." Other friends included John Forsythe, composer Jerry Fielding, producer Buck Houghton, Ralph Bellamy and the volatile Red Barry, who came to a tragic end. There was always something going on at the Bowers' Bel-Air house: poker games, swimming pool get-togethers, an annual New Year's Day party, and neighborhood barbecues.

Despite the fun times, life wasn't always easy; Marjorie Bowers spoke of early challenges:

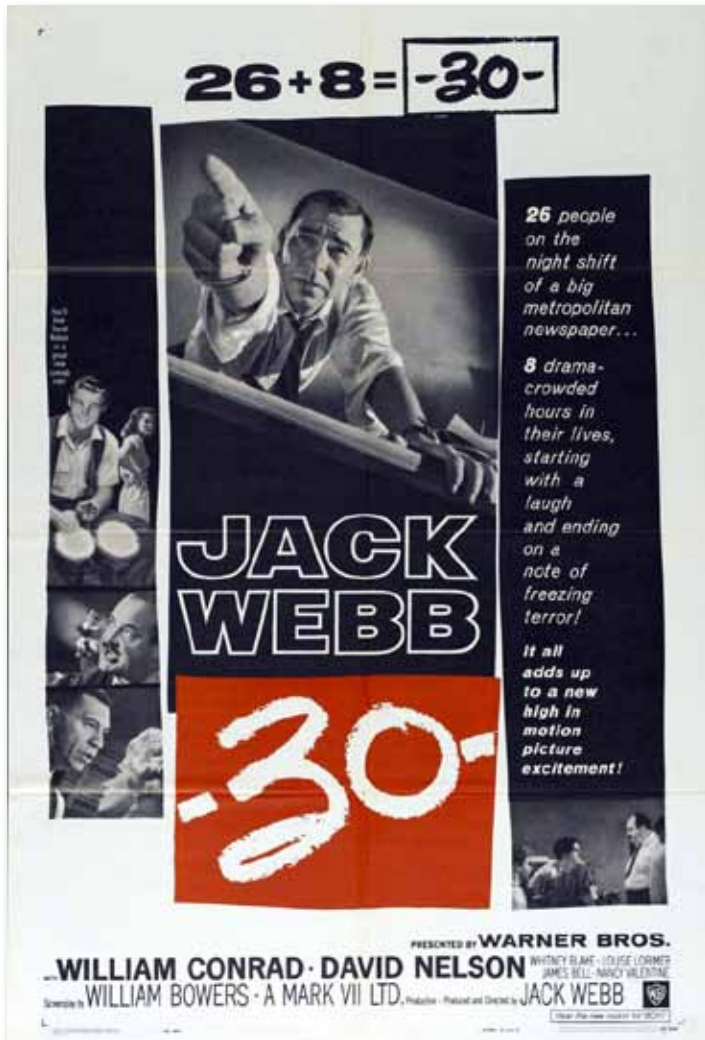
"He (Bowers) wrote the script of our relationship. I was the cocky young woman who could help him run his life."
— Marjorie Bowers

"Right after we got married, there was a writers' strike that went on for 16 weeks. We had no money coming in. Then, our house was completely destroyed by a terrible brushfire. The windows melted and ran down the street. There was nothing left. We had to rebuild the house in 1961."

In addition to being a wife and mother, Marjorie was the secretary. She typed her husband's handwritten pages so he could review and edit his material immediately.

"He knew what he wanted," Marjorie recalled. "He tested out stories by telling portions at parties, like a preview. Bill liked experiences and people. Not the process. It was painful for him to write. His mind worked amazingly well when it was clicking. It was phenomenal to watch. He really thought everything was funny."

Because of his predilection for reciting story notions and industry anecdotes at social gatherings, Bowers became a renowned Hollywood

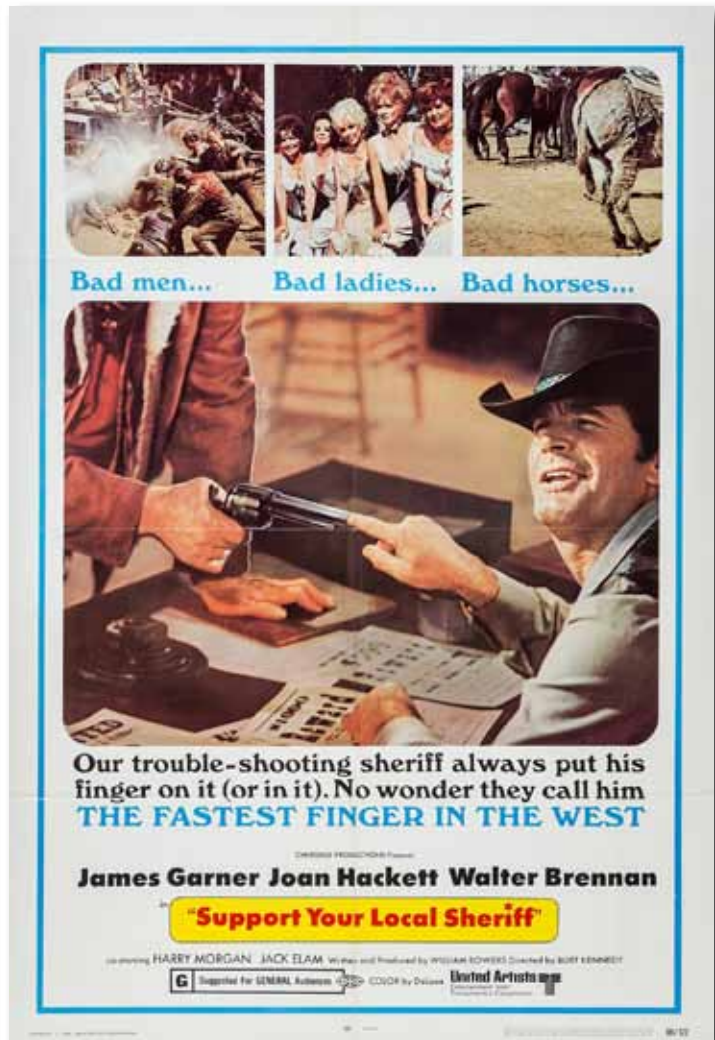


raconteur. Marjorie shared a scene from a faded VHS tape: Bowers at a party, reposed on a couch, relating a story about getting into a fistfight with Columbia mogul Harry Cohn over a screenplay option; as the story gets increasingly uproarious, more and more people join the ever-widening circle around Bowers. The Hollywood Pied Piper is in his element!

Bowers kept to the grindstone, supporting his burgeoning family. There was a two-picture collaboration with Jack Webb, who'd hit the big time with *Dragnet* and ascended into feature film production at Warner Bros.

-30- (1959) was an ostensible day in the life of a harried L.A. metro newspaper editor portrayed by Webb with unusual animation. Part comedy, part drama, the film was a misfire featuring a lot of scenery-chewing wisecracks (particularly by Bowers' pal William Conrad) amid dubious newsroom "realism." Webb was released from his Warner contract after the picture flopped.

Webb purchased Bowers' original script *The Last Time I Saw Archie* (1961) and the pair formed a partnership under the aegis of Webb's Mark VII Limited production company and United Artists. The WWII picture amounted to a series of vignettes about Bowers' con-man pal Archie Hall, who was amusingly portrayed by Robert Mitchum, another Bowers chum from the early days in Long Beach. Webb played Bowers as a straight man, ably supported by Martha Hyer, France Nuyen, Louis Nye, Joe Flynn, Jimmy Lydon, Don Knotts, and the *Stalag 17* duo of Robert Strauss and Harvey Lembeck. Despite the talented cast, the film was more endearing than funny. After a posted loss of \$500,000, United Artists cancelled



its distribution deal with Webb, who returned to television.

Bowers stuck with motion pictures and hit a home run with *Support Your Local Sheriff* (1969). Starring James Garner, Joan Hackett, Walter Brennan, Harry Morgan, and Jack Elam, the picture was a spot-on parody of the town-taming sheriff that had long been a Western cliché. Jointly produced by Garner's Cherokee Productions and Bowers on a miniscule \$750,000 budget, the picture grossed over \$5 million. The glow of success was mitigated when Garner stiff-armed Bowers out of the follow-on, *Support Your Local Gunfighter* (1971), while using the same director (Burt Kennedy) and some of the previous film's cast.

Bowers claimed to Bill Froug that he had a remake clause in his *Support Your Local Sheriff* contract that allowed him to pry some money out of Garner—but his wife insists he received nothing for the rip-off of what was clearly his creation: "He was miffed as hell and didn't get a penny. He was also quite hurt. Why would they do that to him?"

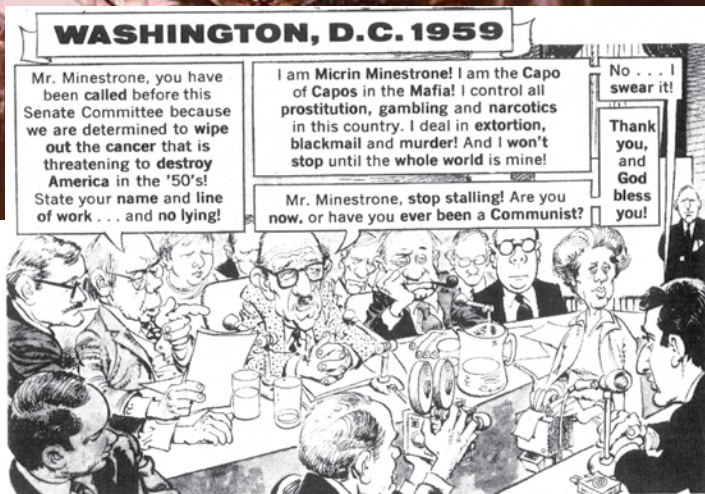
Bowers continued writing Westerns for both movies and television even as the genre, and his health, began to decline. Francis Ford Coppola invited his screenwriting mentor² to play a small part as chairman of the Senate committee investigating Michael Corleone in *The Godfather, Part II* (1974). Bowers declined, but Marjorie remembered that Coppola was insistent.

"Francis said, 'Bill, we just watched the Watergate hearings. They [the Senate committee] don't look like actors. I want people on that

² Bowers had given guidance and counsel to the young UCLA student in the early 1960s and Coppola credited Bowers for his assistance on the Oscar®-winning *Patton* (1970) screenplay.



Francis Ford Coppola prevailed on his friend and mentor to play the Senate Rackets Committee Chairman in *The Godfather, Part II* (1974). Inset right: *Mad Magazine* cartoon parodying Bowers' turn in the film



committee who aren't actors."

The Bowers and the Coppolas were close. In addition to Marjorie's lifelong friendship with Francis' wife, Eleanor, Tony Bowers' work as a production assistant on *The Godfather* (1972) launched him on a two-decade career as a production manager. Bowers finally agreed to play the role, alongside other "amateur" colleagues including director Roger Corman. Having performed most of his life pitching script ideas and holding court at parties, Bowers shined in *The Godfather, Part II* role and savored the experience.

The enjoyment was temporary. Something was seriously amiss with Bowers' health. He suffered severe nausea and periodic seizures. A battalion of doctors couldn't find the root cause. Marjorie believes his medical condition was mismanaged:

"Bill was ill during the last 15 years of our marriage. The doctors said it was psychological. They were wrong. Just before I met him, a car making a U-turn hit him. He was also in an airplane that hit a horse during his war service, and was in another car accident later on."

Bowers eventually couldn't write anymore. To pay the bills, Marjorie began to work as a costume designer, a move that would burgeon into a distinguished quarter-century career. As her husband's health deteriorated, she couldn't provide the necessary round-the-clock care; she arranged for Bill to enter the Motion Picture Home in Woodland Hills, CA. "The last two years were bad," she recalls. "He eventually lost the ability to speak. He couldn't read or watch TV. The worst thing was missing his interaction with people."

Producer Richard E. Lyons worked as a volunteer at the Motion Picture Home and was surprised to discover his old friend among the tenants. He spoke to Bowers without eliciting a response: "Fearing he didn't remember me, I said, 'Bill don't you remember me? I'm Dick Lyons and I produced one of your films.' Without hesitation, Bill responded, 'And badly!'" Bowers maintained his wit right up to the end.

William "Bill" Bowers died on March 27, 1987. Over 200

family members and friends packed the family home for a farewell party filled with laughter and joyous tributes. It was Andy Bowers who related a story that day capturing the essence of his father's humor:

When he was young, Forest Lawn put out these ads with the logo, 'Protect Your Loved Ones from Seepage.' Those of you who knew my father knew he could never leave something like that alone. So, he dressed up and went to Forest Lawn and said, 'I know I'm young for this, but I'd like to make arrangements for myself and my family.' They showed him around and he chose the coffins and the plot, and just before he signed the papers, he said, 'There's just one thing. My family and I will want seepage.' Well, they figured him out and they threw him out. He couldn't leave it at that, so he wrote immediately, saying, "It's very important that I be buried at Forest Lawn, so I've decided that after I'm dead, I'll have my ashes scattered over Forest Lawn." They wrote him back, saying, "Mr. Bowers, it is against Los Angeles Municipal Code for ashes to be spread over a populated area." He again wrote, saying, "It will be the legal battle of this century to determine whether Forest Lawn could be considered a populated area." This past Easter at sunrise, the family scattered the bulk of my father's ashes at Lake Arrowhead—but my brother and I saved a few, and you'll be happy to know that thirty years later my father had the last laugh on Forest Lawn." ■

With love and gratitude to Marjorie Bowers.