

Preface: Another Backward Look

*Sing me a song of a lad that is gone
Say, could that lad be I? . . .
All that was good, all that was fair,
All that was me is gone.*

Robert Louis Stevenson

Much of *Old Tom* — the second half, mostly — hangs upon a framework of letters written by a wide-eyed young man who, in the mid-Fifties, ventured into that wondrous world which lasts only a few years beyond boyhood. Everything was fresh and vibrant; post-adolescent juices were flowing, and all too soon, as jaded maturity encroached, it could never be that way again. This book, like its predecessor, *The Original Tomcat*, delves into times long before the letters were written. But the genesis, the seed for both books, can be found in the young man's very first "Dear Folks" letter, typed neatly in October 1954 on stationery provided by William Sloane House, "New York City's YMCA for Transient Young Men and Men of the Armed Forces."

Jack Sellers was still moist behind the ears, like all twenty-two-year-old college graduates of that innocent decade. He was enjoying his first visit to New York, a thousand miles from his home in Evansville, Indiana, and even farther, figuratively speaking, from the hills of Kentucky where he was born. Jack had seldom traveled more than a hundred and ten miles from home, the distance from Evansville to Indiana University's Bloomington campus. Within three days he would report to the United States Naval Schools in Newport, Rhode Island, where he would undergo Navy officer training. But today he was here in the biggest, most exciting city in America, over which the Empire State Building towered, and he thought everything was marvelous, even perfect.

In that first letter to his parents, Jack asked his mother to save the scribbles he would send them over the next three years. "Get a box to keep them in," he suggested. It had occurred to him that he could kill two literary birds with one stone. The letters he wrote during his tour in the Navy would serve as obligatory correspondence, missives to Mother and Dad and sister Faye, but they also

would constitute a personal chronicle of the adventures that awaited beyond wide horizons.

Jack's letters, saved faithfully for the most part, lay in a musty cardboard box in his mother's basement for well more than thirty years, quickly forgotten by the young man who wrote them, never recalled by me, into whom Jack's personality, pretensions and ambitions eventually dissolved, becoming mere synapses of fading memory. If the letters had not been saved, if they had no longer existed to awaken an aging and nodding Jackson, this two-volume history of the *USS Colahan (DD-658)* would never have been written.

The box came into my hands during a 1990 visit to my Midwestern roots. For a quarter of a century I had been Jackson Sellers, newspaperman, a writer and editor for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and other publications in the United States and Japan, now a system editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, involved in data communications and editorial technology. Following a business trip to Milwaukee, where I represented *The Times* at a convention of system editors, I flew to Evansville for a four-day mini-vacation. My mother, only forty years old when she began putting Jack's letters into the box, was now seventy-six, widowed for fifteen years, while I, a mere eighteen years younger, was fifty-eight, nearly fifty-nine, pushing sixty. Two senior citizens, mother and son, talked about the family's unwritten past — for the very last time as it turned out. Shirley Sellers, widow of Claude, mother of Jack, died two years later, before I could visit her again.

"I wish I had saved some of my letters," I said wistfully. My mother brightened, as she always did when it was possible to give me what I wanted. She went down into the basement and brought up the cardboard box containing eighty-three of Jack's Navy letters — twenty-one from 1954, forty from 1955, fifteen from 1956 and seven from 1957. Many of them were long ones, since Jack, whatever his faults, was a prolific letter writer, a dutiful son. I was pleased that she kept them for me. It was like finding a long-lost journal at a time when I was looking back more than ahead.

"Let's go to Beech Grove," I said impulsively, referring to the Kentucky village that provided an even earlier link to Jack's past. Together we drove across the Ohio River bridge at Henderson and entered the Western Kentucky hills where the Sellerses, the Farmers, the Suttons, the Lucks, the Millers, the Moores, the Hancocks, the Ashbys, all the limbs of Jack's family tree, had lived and died for generations, mostly as dirt farmers. In McLean County, on black-topped Kentucky 136, sat Beech Grove, a wide spot in the road, population 150 for as long as anybody could remember. An even narrower road, paved now but

merely graveled in Jack's day, ran south toward Wrightsburg Hill, past a couple of barns stuffed from top to bottom, at this time of year, with golden tobacco. The road climbed to the top of the steep hill, then gradually descended for a mile or so, dead-ending at the Wrightsburg ferry landing on Green River, where the ferry, long operated by Uncle Charley Luck, went out of business decades ago. The ferry was not missed much. Nobody except a few locals in rowboats crossed there anymore. Bridges could be found within comfortable driving distance upstream and down. The place had been bypassed by progress.

But my mother and I, on that day, did not go all the way to the Wrightsburg hamlet. We turned off at a single-lane, graveled road at the crest of Wrightsburg Hill. It was a dirt road when Jack was a boy, good enough for old Johnny and Maude harnessed to his grandfather's wagon, and passable even then for a careful motorist in dry weather. In those long-ago summers, dust generated by the wheels of horse-drawn wagons and occasional automobiles lay in the road's parallel ruts, providing silky pathways for a boy's bare feet. Nameless then, the road now boasted a title to go with its graveled status. "Denhardt" said a signpost as we made the turn.

A half mile farther, around a bend, the ruins of my grandparents' farmhouse and barn, sitting off among the weeds, lay before me like a scene from a distant dream. It was still there! Mama and Papa Dunn's farm . . . Jack's playground during barefoot vacations . . . *my* farm of boyhood memories. We stopped and stared. The old house, long abandoned, stared back. The enclosed rear porch — a place where meals were eaten in the summers, a place associated in my mind with biscuits and gravy, crackling cornbread, salty cured ham from the smoke house, foamy milk still warm from the cow — had partially collapsed. The hewed logs that formed the walls of the house were weatherboarded on the outside. Inside, now, they were exposed in the hallway where Papa Dunn, after a morning in the fields, took a noontime nap, lying on the floor in his dirty overalls with his head propped against the baseboard.

The front porch was completely gone, rotted away, never replaced by subsequent occupants of the farmhouse. In Jack's lazy summertimes, everybody gathered on that porch, after supper, to watch the day fade away, to listen to the whippoorwills in the surrounding woods. Papa Dunn smoked his pipe, crumbling tobacco for it in the palm of his hand, tobacco he had grown and cured himself. As the moonless night grew spooky dark, the glow from that pipe, as he puffed, became the only light in the universe, until Mama Dunn felt her way into the house to light the coal oil lamp and fetch a pan of water so Jack could wash his dirty feet before crawling into bed.

A little farther along Denhardt Road was the barely detectable remains of a rustic intersection. What had once been a dirt road ran up a ridge to the left and disappeared into brush and trees. It was just a slight depression in the weeds. You had to know it was there, or that it once was there; otherwise you would see nothing. This dead lane, we knew, ran to the “Old Sellers Place,” the farm that had been tilled by Wesley Columbus Sellers, Jack’s great-grandfather. This was the pathway to the birthplace of Jack’s father and Jack himself.

My mother and I hiked up the ridge and climbed through a barbed-wire fence. We reached rolling pastureland. There was nothing manmade in sight except a few fences and a distant barn. A lonely cow grazed on an opposite hill, a half mile away. The Sellers farmhouse, built of logs and encased in weatherboards, like Mama and Papa Dunn’s old house, had stood somewhere around here, but we found no sign of it. Decades earlier, when I was a very young man named Jack, I had seen a shallow depression where the cellar had been, and also the remnants of a grape orchard. Now there was nothing, not a stone that we could find.

My mother, just a girl of fifteen when my father brought her here, hated the place, and she rejoiced when it burned down several years later, when I was just a baby and we were living in Beech Grove itself, a few miles away. It meant she would never have to live there again, never have to tote water from a spring a quarter of a mile behind the house, never have to walk the considerable distance to the Wrightsburg hilltop farm where Mama and Papa Dunn lived before they moved to *my* farm within a mile or so of the Old Sellers Place.

When we returned to Evansville — the big city in those parts — I packed Jack’s Navy letters into my suitcase and carried them to my Saddleback Valley home in Southern California. There I began reading them, transcribing them, inserting comments of an often caustic nature, and editing them to some degree, since Jack was an atrocious speller and less of a grammarian than he believed himself to be. Young people, who think they know everything, never know much. And after writing introductions for each of the four calendar years, I could not stop. I wanted to complete the history of Jack’s life, which stretched well beyond his Navy years. His last letter was written shortly before his discharge from the Navy in 1957, and at that point I was still a half-dozen chapters away from the day in 1965 when Jack became Jackson. So I carried on, enjoying myself mostly, remembering things that had lain dormant for years.

It was a peculiar experience, reading those letters of thirty-something years ago. Jack was I, and I was Jack, no doubt about it, but the details of his life, chronicled in his time, were so rich, so far removed from my remembrance of

things past, that I decided to deal with him in the third person, to step back into my proper place as the only living authority on this young man who was not me at all. In my mind he would always be Jack, while I remained somebody else, somebody older, somebody wiser.

My daughter, Keiko Sellers, was my primary audience in those days. In the land of her maternal Japanese ancestors, her given name meant “Blessed Child,” and she was interested in her family history on both sides of the Pacific. By this time she was a year older than Jack had been, back in 1954, when he joined the Navy, when he wrote that first far-from-home letter on a YMCA typewriter. A book entitled *Dear Jack*, written for her alone, told the story of her father as a young naval officer and newspaperman, with flashbacks to eighteenth-century Virginia, from which family gentility transmogrified into Kentucky hardscrabble. Kei’s seventh great-grandfather, Arthur Jackson Slayton, a recognized patriot of the American Revolution, sired a large family in “Old Virginny,” and one of his grandsons eventually migrated west into the Indian-infested wilderness known as “The Bloody Ground.” Jennye Sellers, Jack’s “Mama Dunn,” was born a century later. Kei, despite her Asian blood, bore a striking resemblance to the young Jennye, and she treasured a small oval portrait of her American great-grandmother, an ancestor she never met.

Dear Jack, a memoir in which nobody except family could possibly be interested, inspired a spinoff, a history of the obscure *Fletcher*-class destroyer on which Jack sailed, a chronicle of the ship of Jackson’s youth. A couple of hundred ex-sailors across the country wanted to read that book, and they put up more than a thousand dollars to finance it. They were like me. They couldn’t find a book about their old ship because there wasn’t any. And here was one being written by a former *Colahan* officer. Considering the high costs of printing, binding and distribution, the privately published book was a bargain at twenty-five dollars.

A single volume was envisioned at first, naively perhaps. In three hundred pages or so, the book would tell the story of the *USS Colahan*’s twenty-three years of service to her country. The trouble was, one book turned out to be not nearly enough. The *Colahan*’s Pacific War adventures, representing only three years of her eventful life, easily filled a 382-page trade paperback entitled *The Original Tomcat: A Fletcher Destroyer Goes to War*. The second book, this one, which is called *Old Tom: A Fletcher Destroyer in War and Peace*, tells the rest of the story.

My wife Yoshiko thinks I am crazy. She knows that in our thirty-odd years of marriage I never wrote anything, except personal letters and business-related

writings, that failed to find profitable publication somewhere. And here I am, in the twilight of my productive life, spending huge gobs of time on a obscure subject, writing and thinking about an old warship in which nobody is interested — nobody, that is, except the relative few who served aboard her. As a full-time employee of a parsimonious publisher, I should know better, she says; I should be doing something to make money for our nearing retirement, and I reluctantly agree. Yes, I write about something else, something more marketable. Hell, I could even work weekends in a local hardware store, making more money than parttime writing could ever produce. But dammit, the *Colahan* was *my* ship, just as that acreage outside Beech Grove was *my* farm. Yes, if I felt compelled to write about an old warship, I could have chosen a more famous one. There are several good candidates among the *Colahan*'s large family of *Fletcher*-class sisters. But at this stage of my decades on this earth, the *Colahan* is the only ship in which I am truly interested. I am stuck with her, money or no money, more or less as I am stuck, however willingly, with my lovely but annoyed wife.

Jackson Sellers
Lake Forest, California