

Biographical Sketch

Sanora Louise Babb was born on April 21, 1907, at a hospital in Leavenworth, Kansas, though her parents Walter Babb and Jeanette “Jennie” (Parks) Babb (later Kempner) lived in Red Rock, in Oklahoma Territory. In 1909, the Babbs had their second daughter, Dorothy, while living in Waynoka, Oklahoma. A baker by trade, but a gambler by profession, Walter Babb had difficulty settling in one place and the family frequently relocated. Walter believed that there was a prosperous future in dry-land farming and in 1913 moved the family in with his father, Alonzo, in a one-room dugout home on a broomcorn farm in Baca County, Colorado. Babb's life on the High Plains influenced her development as a woman and a writer, and she drew from these early experiences in her poems, short stories, the novel *The Lost Traveler* (1958), and her memoir *An Owl on Every Post* (1971). After four years of crop failures, the Babbs moved to Elkhart, Kansas, and eventually to Forgan in the Oklahoma Panhandle. After graduating valedictorian of her high school class, Babb enrolled at the University of Kansas. After one year, she returned home and graduated from the Garden City Junior College in 1926. Soon after, she received a teaching certificate and taught for one year in a one-room school house.

Babb's professional writing career began in earnest after several poems were published in the local newspaper. The *Garden City Herald* offered her a job as a reporter and she soon obtained Associated Press credentials. She aspired to work at a larger newspaper and audaciously moved to Los Angeles, California, in 1929. As the country entered the beginning stages of the Depression, Babb had difficulty finding employment, but was soon hired as a secretary for Warner Brothers and then later as a scriptwriter for KFWB radio station. In 1934, Babb brought her sister Dorothy to California and supported her while she attended The University of California Los Angeles, where Dorothy received a B. A. in English. The Babb sisters enjoyed a close relationship, based on a strong familial bond born out of a difficult childhood as well as a shared interest in writing. Sanora, the stronger and more ambitious of the two, provided Dorothy with continual emotional and financial support for the remainder of Dorothy's life, which at times strained their relationship.

Babb published her poems and short stories in "little magazines" such as *The Midland*, *The Anvil*, *Trend*, and *The Magazine*. During the 1930s and 1940s, Babb came in contact with eminent and struggling artists and writers such as Carlos Bulosan, Ralph Ellison, Henry Koerner, Meridel Le Sueur, Dorothy Parker, Harry Roskolenko, William Saroyan, Genevieve Taggard, B. Traven, Nathanael West, and Chinese-American cinematographer James Wong Howe.

With Europe on the brink of war, Babb joined Howe in England in 1936 while he was on film location. Due to Hollywood's “moral code” and California's miscegenation laws, Babb and Howe married in a civil ceremony in Paris, France, in 1936. The couple later married in California after the repeal of its miscegenation laws in 1948. While in Europe with Howe, Babb traveled throughout England, France, Poland, and enjoyed an extended tour of the Soviet Union to attend a month-long theatre festival. She returned to London in 1937 where she co-edited the political magazine *The Week* with Claud Cockburn.

Always sympathetic to those less fortunate and perhaps inspired by what she observed in communities in Russia, after returning from Europe Babb joined the Farm Security Administration (F. S. A). She worked as an assistant to migrant camp manager Tom Collins, establishing tent camps for dispossessed migrant workers in California's agricultural valleys. During the day, she assisted families with basic needs and supplies, educated workers about labor rights, and helped them organize, while at night she recorded her observations and reflections in field notes she later used in her writings. Dorothy frequently visited Sanora in the field and recorded what she witnessed with her camera. Sanora's essays published in *The Clipper* and *New Masses* and Dorothy's photographs provide an intimate and realistic insight into the impoverished conditions at migrant camps. In 1939, Sanora began writing her first novel based on her F. S. A. experiences and sent several early chapters of *Whose Names Are Unknown* to Random House, which offered her a contract to complete the manuscript. Before she could finish the novel, however, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was published and Random House broke the contract, stating that readers would not be interested in another novel on the same subject. Despite her disappointment, Babb put the manuscript aside and continued writing poems, short stories, and developing ideas for a second novel.

Babb was active in the League of American Writers and served on the editorial board of *The Clipper* and *The California Quarterly* in the 1940s and 1950s. These publications exposed American readers to the work of B. Traven, author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1934), Ray Bradbury, and the French colonial poets Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Jean Joseph Rabéarivélo. In the 1950s and 1960s, Babb met regularly with a writers' group that included Bradbury, Esther McCoy, Sid Stebel, Bonnie Barrett Wolfe, C. Y. Lee, Peg Nixon, Richard Bach, and Dolph Sharp. During the House Un-American Activities Committee's hearings, she grew concerned that her political beliefs were jeopardizing Howe's film career and she moved to Mexico City, where she continued writing short stories and poems and drafted the manuscript for her second novel, *The Lost Traveler* (1958). While in Mexico, Babb became friends with Hal Croves, thought to be the novelist B. Traven; dancer and choreographer Waldeen; and numerous blacklisted Hollywood writers such as Albert Maltz.

After returning to Los Angeles in 1951, Babb continued writing and publishing for the remainder of her life. Decades after submitting the manuscript to Random House, Babb published a re-edited *Whose Names Are Unknown* in 2004 to great critical acclaim. The *Los Angeles Times* stated that Babb's Dust Bowl novel rivaled Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* because of its insider perspective and sensitivity to the subject. It was a finalist for both the 2005 Spur Award and the 2005 PEN Center USA Literary Award.

In addition to numerous poems and short stories, Babb's other publications include two collections of short stories entitled *The Dark Earth and Other Stories of the Depression* (1987) and *The Cry of the Tinamou* (1997) and a collection of poems entitled *Told in the Seed* (1998). Preceded in death by her husband James Wong Howe in 1976 and sister Dorothy in 1995, Babb died at age 98 on December 31, 2005, in Hollywood, California.

Sources:

Sanora Babb:

An Inventory of Her Papers in the Manuscript Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Babb, Sanora, 1907-2005
Title:	Sanora Babb Papers
Dates:	circa 1840s-2006 (bulk 1928-2005)
Extent:	71 document boxes, 12 serial boxes, 5 oversize boxes, 2 note card boxes, 1 galley file, 1 oversize file folder, 2 restricted document boxes (32.84 linear feet)
Abstract:	The Sanora Babb Papers consist of manuscript drafts, galley proofs, correspondence, photographs, publications, topical files, appointment books, notes and reflections, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, artifacts, audio material, and digital material related to the American writer Sanora Babb, her sister, writer-photographer Dorothy Babb, and her husband, cinematographer James Wong Howe.
Language:	English and Spanish
Access:	Open for research
	Condition Note: The Sanora Babb Papers includes numerous documents that were typed or printed on highly acidic paper. Over time, these sheets have deteriorated and are now very fragile. In order to diminish further deterioration caused by frequent handling, some original documents have been removed and restricted and replaced with photocopies or digitized images.

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gifts, 2000-2008 (G11728, G12091, G12496)
Processed by:	Amy E. Armstrong, 2009
Repository:	The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center
