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**Charlie Chan's Poppa:**

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**Earl Derr Biggers**

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**Barbara Gregorich**

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*For Sharon and Steve,  
“May your entire journey  
be on the sunny side of the road”*

— Charlie Chan, *Keeper of the Keys*

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# Introduction

Ever since I was sixteen years old, I have been a fan of the Charlie Chan novels written by Earl Derr Biggers.. I first read them as well-worn hardback books which I borrowed from the Warren Public Library: Warren was where Biggers was born and raised. Later, I read them again after my first vacation to Hawaii: the paperback books were on sale at the Honolulu International Airport.

Later still, I read each of the six novels a third time, when I was preparing to write an article on Biggers for *Timeline*, the magazine of the Ohio Historical Society. In order to understand Biggers (so that I could write about him and how he came to create Charlie Chan), I also read every book that Biggers had ever written, starting with his first, *Seven Keys to Baldpate*. As a result of reading *all* of Biggers' books in the span of a few months, I came to comprehend how much the character of Chan reflected the character of Earl Derr Biggers. And that made me totally sympathetic to Eleanor Ladd Biggers' refusal to let anybody else attempt to write Charlie Chan after Earl's death.

By the time I was reading the Chan novels for the fourth time, the twenty-first century had arrived, as had blogs. In reading each of the books again, I blogged about them in order to share my love of the Charlie Chan *novels* with people who know nothing about them.

In all places throughout this book, whenever I state anything about Charlie Chan, I am speaking about the character Earl Derr Biggers created and wrote about in six mystery novels: unless I specifically state so, I am not talking about any Hollywood actor or any movie version of Charlie Chan.

# 1 The Life of Earl Derr Biggers

“Success — what is it? A bubble that explodes when touched by human hands.” So says fictional Honolulu Police Detective Charlie Chan in his fourth adventure, *The Black Camel*.

For Chan success was anything but short-lived. Films, plays, radio shows, comics, cartoons, restaurants — these and more featured the Chinese-Hawaiian detective. Although Chan’s peak of fame is past, his name is still recognized.

Not so for his creator, Earl Derr Biggers: few who recognize Chan know the author of the novels on which the first Chan movies were based. Yet during his lifetime Biggers was well-known and widely read at home and abroad. Had he not died as early as he did, the Chan oeuvre would be significantly larger and, as a result, Biggers’ writing better known.

## Early Life

Earl Biggers was born in Warren, Ohio, on August 26, 1884. His fraternal grandparents had emigrated from Ottawa, and his father, Robert, was one of twelve children. His mother, Emma Derr, was born in Pennsylvania. An only child, Earl loved reading the newspaper comic strips. “As soon as I could write connected sentences,” he once related, “I appropriated the characters from Palmer Cox’s Brownie series, and wove about them many startling romances.” These he read aloud to his grandmother. From his earliest days, Earl wanted nothing more than to be a writer. Unlike many, he achieved that goal quickly.

In the fall of 1902, while a senior at Warren High School, Earl helped found the school’s literary journal, *The Cauldron*, and served as its editor-in-chief. “By the time I had reached senior year in high school the need for the glory of print was imperative,” he recounted, “wherefore I founded ... a monthly high school magazine. The first issue led off with a grandiose editorial in which I split three infinitives and used the verb *lay* where I should have used *lie*. I was an author!” Despite his humorous and self-deprecatory remembrance, Biggers stamped the literary journal with his own serious intent, his editorial pieces concerned with living rightly. One could argue that the seeds of Charlie Chan poked their heads above ground in Biggers’ senior year, for Chan himself was deeply concerned with living rightly.

In the last issue of *The Cauldron* the editorial stated: “So we lay down our pen, confident that when we take it up again in greater fields, the experience gained on the *Cauldron* staff will be of great value and aid to us in winning a place for ourselves among those who are foremost in the battle.” Perhaps Earl was thinking of his own future when he wrote these words.

But the last issue, scheduled for June publication, did not appear until July. Apparently there were complaints, and apparently they annoyed Earl, because he pointed out that those who were complaining could have helped but didn’t. Even back in 1903, Biggers sounded a bit like his future creation when he told the complainers: “We shall never offend you again.”

The Warren that nurtured Biggers was a town of mills, carriage factories, and foundries. Its wide elm-lined streets, its public square and courthouse found their way into his short stories. Nearby Akron and Canton made their way into a Chan novel. But Biggers' later surroundings — notably Boston, New York, California, and Hawaii — would make a far greater impact on his writing.

## Harvard

His college education funded by an uncle, Biggers attended Harvard, where he majored in literature. His first year must have been difficult: *The Cauldron* published a letter in which he described what it was like to be a lonely freshman. Such a young person, he argued, is at a crossroads: he must either join the crowd or stay out of things forever.

Taking his own advice, Earl joined various Harvard societies, particularly literary ones. Unlike the tastes of his fellow students, however, his literary tastes leaned strongly toward the popular: he preferred Rudyard Kipling to Fielding or Richardson. On evenings when his classmates would read Keats and Shelley to one another, they jokingly urged Earl to leave the room.

Biggers' position on popular literature was more than just talk. When the *Harvard Advocate* ran a contest for the best "pick-up," story (in which a young man meets a young woman without benefit of a formal introduction), he entered — and won. In an interview years later, he said that for his winning story, "Reformers Three," he received "a copy of the poems of the late Mr. Shelley . . . with the sentiment, *honi suit qui mal y pense* [evil be to him who evil thinks] inscribed on the fly-leaf." If Biggers would have preferred the poetry of Rudyard Kipling, he had the grace to not say so.

Perhaps it was understood by *The Advocate* staff that the winner of the prize would allow the story to be published in, well — *The Advocate*. But that isn't what Biggers did. As he told the *Warren Tribune*, he "thirsted for a wider audience. Off it went to a magazine, and two weeks later I was staring with deep emotion at a letter telling me it was sold, and that I would get twenty-five dollars for it." From that moment on, Earl Derr Biggers was a professional writer. While still in college he sold a story to *Life*, one to *Metropolitan Magazine*, and he also wrote pieces for one of Boston's dailies, *The Traveller*. Thrilled by the thought of making money doing what he loved best, he wrote and sold even more short stories, modeling them on those of popular writers of the times, such as O. Henry.

In several interviews (contained in the Bobbs-Merrill Collection housed in the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington), Biggers was asked how he became a writer. He joked that when he was in high school he had a job with a haberdashery in Warren, and that the store was stocked with inferior goods. When customers asked him about the goods, he told the truth and was fired from his job. When he worked as drama critic for *The Traveller* and told the truth about plays, he was fired from his job. So — because he was fired both times for telling the truth — he decided to become "a Liar on a grand scale" and thus became a writer of fiction.

## Cleveland, Indianapolis, Boston

After graduation from Harvard in 1907 Biggers worked at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* very briefly (ten days, he later recalled) as a night police reporter. It's interesting to speculate whether he encountered police detectives while on this job and whether this was why, when he finally decided to enter the field of mystery writing, he made his protagonist a police detective (instead of an amateur or a private detective).

His next stop was Indianapolis, where he worked as a manuscript reader for Bobbs-Merrill and also wrote for *Reader Magazine*. At Bobbs-Merrill he met David Laurance Chambers, who would go on to direct the publishing house through its most important years. Though it would provide him with a life-long connection to Bobbs-Merrill, Biggers' stay in Indianapolis was short-lived, much as his Cleveland employment had been. In February of 1908 he moved to Boston, where he went to work for *The Boston Traveller*.

For *The Traveller* he wrote a daily column, "The Fact Is." Like many daily columnists of the time, he entertained readers with humor, opinion, and verse. Just as his high school articles had dealt with virtue and vice in daily life, so did some of Biggers' column pieces. His poem "The Rocking Chair Fleet" criticized the habit of gossip, concluding:

Came back at last as these fiction folk do  
Only to look on her dear face again —  
Ah me, the horror that filled him to find  
Her whom he'd known to be pretty and sweet  
Putting all honor and truth far behind —  
Passing her time with the rocking chair fleet!

When the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article on thirteen newspaper poets of the day, Biggers was listed as one of them. The author told the *Tribune* that he wrote the poem "The German Band" because he had heard a German band playing in a narrow alleyway and the sound had made him homesick.

Thankfully for mystery fans (as well as poets), Biggers' employment as a versifier didn't last long. After he had been writing "The Fact Is" column for a year, *The Traveller* made him the paper's drama critic. A life-long lover of theater, Biggers enjoyed the work. Theater owners and producers, on the other hand, did not enjoy his reviews, which were highly critical. They demanded that Biggers be fired. But the editor — for the time being — refused their demands.

Years later Biggers reflected on the experience. "The truth in dramatic criticisms was not popular in those days among theatrical managers," he explained to the *Warren Tribune*, adding that they banded together to drive him from his vantage point. "Large, truculent gentlemen encrusted with diamonds were sent up by the theatrical syndicate from New York to dislodge me. But the owner of the paper was an honest man, he only smiled and sent me word to go on." And so he did.

For a time.



## The Raccoon Coat

During the years that Biggers went to Harvard and then lived in Boston, raccoon coats were all the rage. But they were expensive, and he couldn't afford one. Finally, though, in November of 1911, he visited his tailor, who held up for his inspection an elegant coat. Biggers recalled it as fur-lined, with "a raccoon collar and great frogs [ornamental coat fasteners] on the front." The tailor "intimated that this was all I needed to make my position in the literary world secure — and I thought so, too. But the price — the price was staggering. 'Take it along,' he said. 'That's all right. Pay me any time.'" And so Biggers, goaded perhaps by a sense of fashion, but definitely by a desire to make his position in the literary world secure, bought the raccoon coat on credit.

Among those working alongside Earl on *The Traveller* staff was Massachusetts-born Eleanor Ladd, who wrote columns under the pen name Phoebe Dwight. Eleanor, New England, and journalism would greatly influence his writing — most of his plays and novels contain an independent young woman; a New Englander; and/or a journalist. Eleanor once described Earl as "a Middle West product with a Boston complex. Boston put an awful dint in him."

He would need these inspirations soon. One snowy night in January, 1912, he returned to work after a Warren visit. In his absence, the newspaper had been sold to *The Boston Herald*. The editor handed Biggers a cigar.

"What does this mean?" asked Biggers. "Was I fired last Saturday, or is it next week?"

"It was last Saturday," replied the editor.

Biggers left the newspaper office (without back pay) and walked into a blizzard. Looking back on that night, he reflected: "By the time I reached Boston Common the intensity of the blizzard had increased, the snow swirled madly through the dusk, the lights in the office buildings along Tremont Street showed a dim yellow in the white light. I stood there in that wintry scene, wrapped warmly in my beautiful coat, broke, jobless, but not unhappy. Go back to a newspaper? No, I'd always intended to write a novel. Now was the time."

Losing his job and walking into a blizzard was the first major crossroad in Biggers' life. It stopped him not at all. Combining that wintry night and the symbolic crossroads with an inn situated atop a mountain, he developed a plot and sat down to write his first novel. Unemployed, living entirely off his savings, he saved money by skimping on heat in his rented room. Instead, he wrapped himself in his raccoon coat and pounded away on his typewriter. (His very kind landlady would nonetheless bring him coal for his grate.) When he could afford it, Earl bought peanut brittle and kept it at his side, munching as he wrote.

But writers can't live on peanut brittle alone, and Biggers would venture into the brutal winter to buy as inexpensive a meal as he could find. "I was learning about life," he told the *Warren Tribune*. "Learning, for example, that a large fur coat is very much in the way in one of those dairy lunch rooms where you eat a 15 cent dinner from the arm of your chair."

Perhaps because he had a limited supply of peanut brittle — or money — Biggers wrote his first draft at the blistering pace of a chapter a day through January and February 1912. He finished in twenty-two days. And then he rewrote at the same pace, completing the second draft as spring arrived. This intense concentration of writing the first and then the second draft

would be his lifelong pattern. Dashing off a cover letter, he sent *The Seven Keys to Baldpate* manuscript to Bobbs-Merrill. Very soon thereafter, there arrived "a telegram from the publisher, a fat advance, and a happy ending for all including the landlady on Beacon Hill and the tailor in Cambridge."