

# *Charles Bowden Comes to the Wittliff Collections*

LAUREN GOODLEY

The Charles “Chuck” Bowden archive in the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos, documents the literary journalist’s prolific career from 1970 to 2014, with a few family items dating back to 1947. Comprising 172 boxes, the collection includes his published writings on the environment, social justice, political corruption, and U.S.-Mexico border violence; correspondence, proposals, research, and financial materials; photographs, electronic media, and artifacts; and Bowden’s library of books, LP records, and cassette tapes. A complete



*A researcher’s dream: manuscripts, notes, photographs, tapes, letters, and memorabilia in the Wittliff’s Charles Bowden Collection, MS 112. (© Katie Salzmann.)*

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finding aid and folder list is on the Wittliff Collections website<sup>1</sup> and on Texas Archival Resources Online.<sup>2</sup>

The materials were given jointly by Bowden and Mary Martha Miles, his longtime companion, literary executor, and co-editor of *The Charles Bowden Reader*, just prior to the book's publication in 2010. In addition to the archival finding aid, researchers have access to Miles's 250-page item-level inventory,<sup>3</sup> which includes descriptions of, and at times contextual and other comments on, the many items in the collection. Miles is currently working to publish Bowden's earlier, unpublished works. These materials, while housed in the archive, are restricted until the time of their publication. Several boxes of materials given to Miles by Bowden's friend and colleague Bill Broyles are also included in the archive.

The following overview is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather is intended to provide an introduction and highlight some interesting items and possible areas of research. The papers are open to researchers. The Wittliff Collections offers funding through the William J. Hill Visiting Researcher Travel Grants.<sup>4</sup>

## THE WITTLIFF COLLECTIONS

It's reasonable to ask why the archive of Chuck Bowden, who primarily lived and worked in Tucson, Arizona, is held in a Texas repository. The answer lies in the Wittliff Collections' commitment "to preserving a creative legacy...[and emphasizing]...the importance of the southwestern and Mexican imagination in the wider world." Bowden was a major southwestern writer whose work extends farther than Tucson and Ciudad Juárez. In fact, Bowden had been on the Wittliff's radar for several years. Founder Bill Wittliff, a photographer and filmmaker himself, took Bowden's portrait on March 2, 2007, remarking that "Bowden would walk right through the gates of hell to report on things that moved him, and to connect and tell the story of ordinary people, as a participant in that story." For Wittliff, Bowden's writing "encompasse[d] the tragedy of losing the beauty of the natural world, and of losing one's soul to the drug business."<sup>5</sup>

From this perspective, Bowden's materials belong in the leading archive devoted to the major writers of the southwestern United States, whose holdings include the literary papers of Cormac McCarthy, Sandra Cisneros, John Graves, and many others. Many Wittliff donors, like Graves in *Goodbye to a River*, write with beauty and passion on the

environment. The Wittliff Collections also houses the papers of other journalists who have written on traumatic or violent events, such as Dick Reavis, whose *Ashes of Waco* chronicles the 1993 FBI Waco siege, and Beverly Lowry, whose book *Who Killed These Girls? Cold Case: The Yogurt Shop Murders* covers a gruesome 1991 Austin crime. Moreover, the Wittliff Collections was able to pay for the archives. Bowden, like many authors in today's literary publishing world, chose to deposit his materials in an archive during his lifetime, partly in order to support his writing.<sup>6</sup>

### INTRODUCTION AND EARLY WORK

Chuck Bowden is perhaps best known for his article "While You Were Sleeping." Appearing in the December 1996 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, it broke in the U.S. English-speaking press the story of violent deaths of women in the border town of Juárez, Mexico. Afterward, Bowden collaborated with several Mexican photographers who were covering crime scenes for daily Juárez newspapers to produce the 1998 book *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*. Over the following years, Bowden made friends and contacts who helped him write about drugs and violence along the U.S.-Mexico border, including photographer Julián Cardona. In the process, he developed a reputation for seeking out danger and tracking down leads, even interviewing narcotraficantes. At a 2013 event at the Wittliff Collections, author and filmmaker John Phillips Santos recalled a moment when he was in San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Chiapas, Mexico, at the time when the Zapatista army took control of the city in response to the NAFTA agreement. Noticing Bowden in a crowd, and knowing his tendency to gravitate toward danger, Santos realized that he quickly needed to "get out of there."<sup>7</sup> In another instance, a friend snapped a photo of Bowden writing in a notebook in a park in Mexico, surrounded by activity and yet in his own world. As a nod to Bowden's dangerous world and the company he kept, the photographer jokingly captioned the image: "Señor Ball, This is my writer Carlito, if he fails at his tasks, I will shoot him. General Francisco Villa, División del Norte."<sup>8</sup> Another photograph in the collection shows a copy of Bowden and Michael Binstein's book, *Trust Me: Charles Keating and the Missing Billions*, displayed at a shrine of Jesus Malverde, patron saint of narcotraficantes, in Culiacan, Sinaloa.<sup>9</sup>

While border events defined Bowden's career and direction going forward, at this point he had been honing his literary skills and developing

a personal philosophy through many years of environmental and autobiographical writing and news reporting. His connection with, and love of, the Southwest led him to champion causes such as the Sonoran Desert Park Project and produced his first major publication, *Killing the Hidden Waters* (1977), followed by *Blue Desert* (1986) and *Frog Mountain Blues* (1987), and essays for several photography books, including *The Sonoran Desert* (1992) and *The Secret Forest* (1993).

Bowden had returned to Tucson in 1973 from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. According to correspondence in the archive, the university had turned down his doctoral dissertation. After working at the University of Arizona's Office of Arid Lands Studies and as a grant writer at the local PBS station, he wanted to move away from academia and into the streets, where he found his home as a writer. Bowden took a job as a reporter at the daily *Tucson Citizen*. As the new hire, he was assigned the "worst" beat, reporting on sex crimes and violence. He approached his subjects with the compassion and literary style that he came to be known for.

Bowden eventually co-founded the progressive monthly *City Magazine*. Although the magazine only ran for about two and a half years (1986–1989), it provided a platform for promoting environmental and other local issues that Bowden was passionate about. Edward Abbey contributed an article during the publication's first six months, and Bowden generally wrote a feature article for each issue. The Bowden archive includes a full run of *City Magazine*, plus some business materials.

Researchers can trace the evolution of Bowden's thoughts about social and environmental issues through these files. As early as 1969, Bowden produced reports on his observations of the civil rights conflict he witnessed in Mississippi, clearly the starting point for the persona as a "redneck for social justice"<sup>10</sup> that he developed over time. It's also easy to see a connection between his mother's work with abused children and Bowden's strong social justice ethic. Berdina "Bo" Bowden's 1991 article on child abuse echoes her son's 1993 "Using Our Children for Sex" special feature for the *Tucson Citizen*.

## MAGAZINE AND FREELANCE WRITING

The twenty boxes of materials in "Series 3: Writings—Magazines and Freelance" (1977–2007) show Bowden coming into his own as a reporter courted by specialized and national magazines such as *Arizona Highways*,

*Harper's*, *GQ*, and *Esquire*. This series also includes articles on the southwestern environment that appeared in Norwegian-, German-, and Spanish-language magazines.

Magazine articles provide insight into various aspects of Bowden's work, for example his collaborations with Mexican photojournalist Julián Cardona. Documentation for their book, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, fills two boxes and includes a notebook, photographs, research materials, a first draft, correspondence, and an exhibition book. The archive also contains correspondence, notes, research, and drafts for Bowden and Cardona collaborations for the photography magazine *Aperture* and for the short-lived Hearst celebrity profile magazine *Talk*, and for their profile of NAFTA truckers for the union magazine *Teamster*. The two also worked together on an article published in *Mother Jones*. Bowden described how the pair met in an article for *Orion*. The archive also contains notes for an unpublished article.

While much of Bowden's environmental writing appeared in small, local, or niche publications such as *Phoenix Magazine*, *Tucson Monthly*, *Nature Conservatory*, and *Wildflower*, he reached larger audiences in *Arizona Highways* and *National Geographic*, where his article "Our Walls, Ourselves" explicitly blurs the line between environmental and political. As Bowden became more recognized in *Mother Jones*, *Penthouse*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, and *Esquire*, he turned away from environmental and personal essays to write prolifically about U.S.-Mexico border violence. "While You Were Sleeping" appeared in *Harper's* during this period. Correspondence, notes, research, photographs, drafts, and reviews give greater depth and context to Bowden's published articles.

## BOOKS

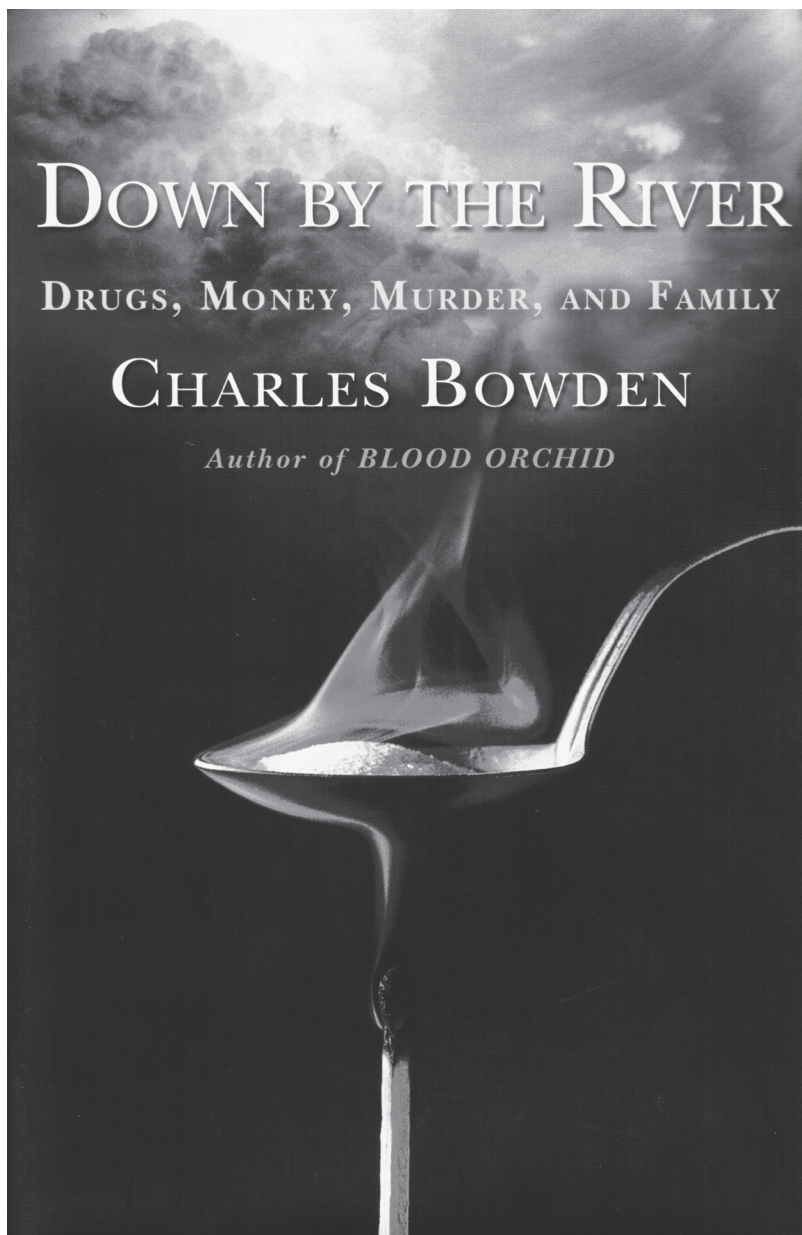
The bulk of materials in the archive document Bowden's published books. Most include drafts that enable a researcher to track Bowden's writing process. Interestingly, *Frog Mountain Blues* was at various points called "Buster's Mountain," "Mountain by the City," and "Santa Catalina." "The Mesquite Manifesto" became "Mesquite: Love after Midnight," "Mesquite: Blues for Cannibals," and "Blues for Cannibals: Lessons of the Mesquite," before finally greeting the world as *Blues for Cannibals: The Notes from Underground*. *Inferno* was at various points entitled "Moonrise in the Inferno" and "Jerusalem Nights." In addition to drafts,

the *Blood Orchid* folders include photographs and a videocassette of Native American activist Robert Sundance's funeral. At least some notebooks, correspondence, drafts, research, and post-publication materials (such as reviews) have been preserved for most of Bowden's books.

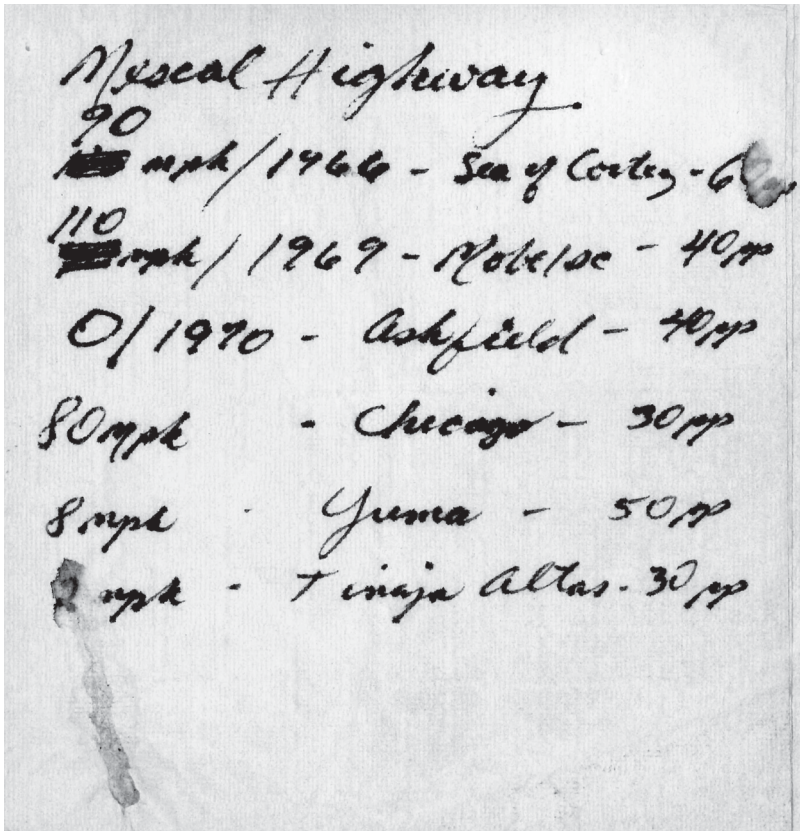
*Trust Me: Charles Keating and the Missing Billions* is an illustrative example. Written by Michael Binstein and Bowden and published in 1993, the book covers Keating's involvement in the Lincoln Savings and Loan bank failure. True to Bowden's journalistic style, *Trust Me* investigates corruption and U.S. banking law through the life experiences of a specific person. Materials in the archive include extensive research and subject files: eight boxes of interviews, clippings, daily logs of Keating's activities, and court transcripts. Interview subjects include Keating and associates Judy and Chip Wischer, as well as several "regular" people identified as "Phoenician Construction Workers/Engineers," "Jim Parker," and "Stan the barber." The Research series also contains an audiocassette with the B-side labeled "Keating"; a VHS tape labeled "Chuck-Keating" is filed in Videocassettes. As for the writing process, consider nineteen notebooks, dated 1980s–1997, plus three book proposals, and correspondence. Bowden published an article entitled "The Nowhere Man" in *Smart* (1990), and "Charlie Keating's Wild and Crazy World" in *Penthouse* (1993). Three corrected drafts bear the working titles "Welcome Home" and "Charlie." Besides reviews and articles, post-publication materials include Bowden interviews with *Phoenix Magazine* and the *Newsweek on Air* radio program, as well as a Binstein interview. For this title alone, researchers have access to more than ten boxes of material in various formats and across several publications.

*Down by the River* (2002), in which Bowden investigates drugs, the DEA, and narcotrafficante violence in Juárez and El Paso through the experiences of DEA agent Phillip (Felipe) Jordan and his family, is similarly well documented. Fourteen boxes of subject files contain articles, correspondence, notes, and photographs. The folder titles are suggestive: "Amado Carrillo," "Chomsky/journalists," "Dead girls Juárez," "Jordan/Carrillo," "NAFTA," and "The Sinaloa Cowboys and Misc Drugs." Ten audiocassettes contain interviews with the Jordan family and other individuals featured in the book. Research photographs show Bowden with the Jordan family and with DEA undercover agent Sal Martinez. Drafts filed in eight boxes include early chapters dated 1995–1996 (eight years prior to publication), and full drafts bearing the early titles "El Niño" and "The Secret Life." Post-publication material includes





*Down by the River* (2002 edition, Simon and Schuster).



Charles Bowden's road map for his book *Mezcal*. (Charles Bowden Papers, Whittliff Collections, Texas State University, San Marcos, box 30, folder 6a. © Charles Clyde Bowden Literary Trust, Mary Martha Miles, Trustee.)

a legal agreement with Phil Jordan, publicity and reviews, articles—including an interview with Phil Jordan—and awards. Two folders house notes, research, drafts, published article, and reprints of “The Killer Across the River,” published in the April 1997 issue of *GQ*. Researchers can trace Bowden’s work on Amado Carrillo, head of the Juárez cartel, about whom Bowden wrote in *Down by the River*, back to this earlier article and to a speech given in 1995 (found under Speaking Engagements).

Although smaller in comparison, coverage of *A Shadow in the City: Confessions of an Undercover Drug Warrior* (2005) is still substantial. Research includes seven notebooks, photographs, correspondence, and



two book proposals. Nine audiocassettes of interviews with Kim Sanders and a box of subject files devoted to Sanders shed light on Bowden's impressions of the book's main character. Drafts include outlines, early chapters, full corrected drafts with notes, and a film treatment. By contrast, documentation for *Mezcal* is sparse, consisting of a few drafts, reviews, and correspondence in two boxes. The drafts include an outline written on three bar napkins.

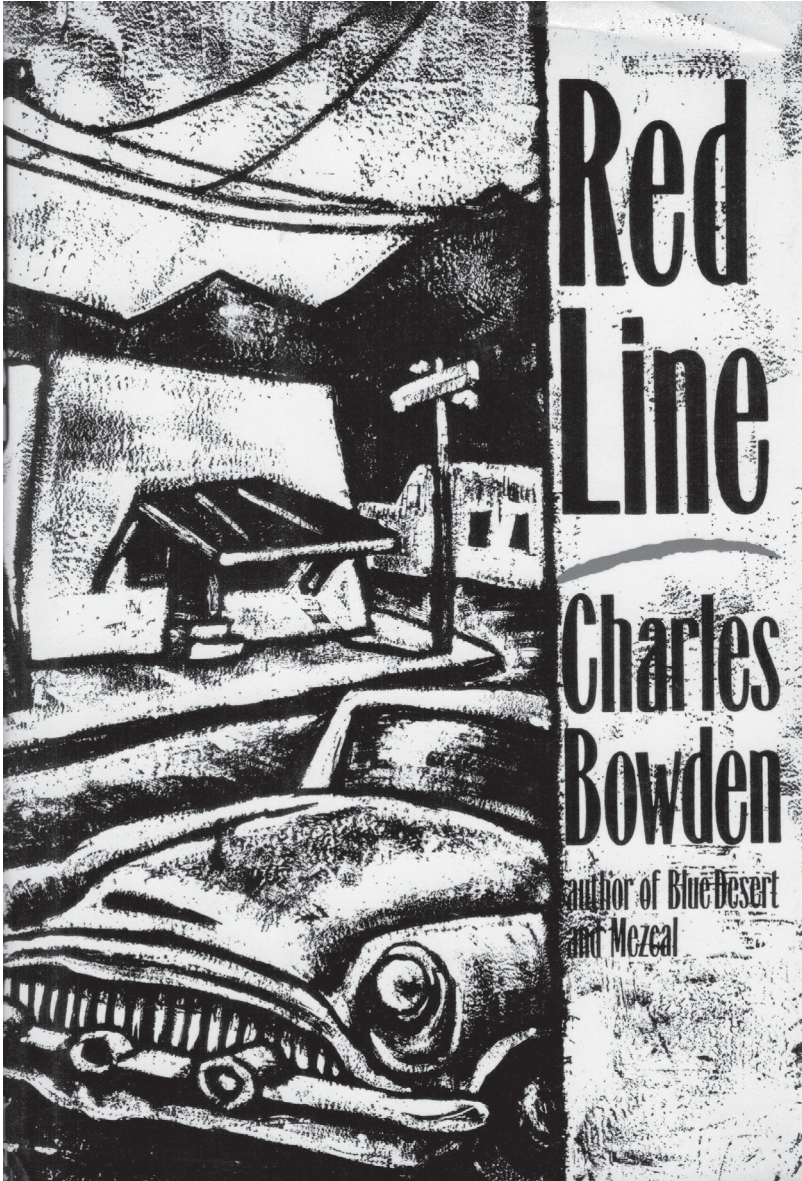
### ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING

Bowden was also an avid environmentalist, collaborating with photographer Jack Dykinga on numerous magazine articles and several books, including *Frog Mountain Blues*, *The Sonoran Desert*, *The Secret Forest*, and *Stone Canyons of the Colorado Plateau*. Dykinga's photographs and a group of projection slides are filed with documentation pertaining to the books. Additional photographs by Dykinga and by Bill Broyles, another of Bowden's friends, show the men traveling in the southwestern deserts. One set documents a trip by Bowden and Broyles down the Colorado River to the Sea of Cortez during a year of unusually heavy rain that enabled them to make the journey by canoe, occasionally slogging through mud. Bowden's description, "Death of the Sea of Cortez," appeared in the *Arizona Republic* in 1995, and was reprinted, in Spanish translation, in *La Onda* the following year. The archive also includes photographs from a second visit to the area and an interview with Bowden.

While Bowden's own *Desierto*, *Red Line*, *Blue Desert*, *Killing the Hidden Waters*, and the meditative *Mezcal* are less well represented in the archive, his connections to the southwestern landscape and the environment in general pop up in several places. For example, in 1990 Bowden and Marc Gaede sailed on board the *Sea Shepherd* with activists working against drift net fishing in the North Pacific. Materials from the several articles Bowden produced from this experience, including "High Seas Avenger" in *Details* and "Sea Shepherd" in the Norwegian magazine *Bellona Magasin*, include photographic prints and slides of the voyage. The archive also includes notebooks and correspondence. Bowden's opposition to the proposed Mt. Lemmon shuttle can be found in the *Frog Mountain Blues* material and under Research.

Other examples of Bowden's environmental activism include

correspondence, notebooks, a speech, and an interview regarding *Sonoran Desert National Park: A Citizen's Proposal*, which Bowden authored. Bowden also wrote a 1999 article on the topic, "Leave Something Behind," which appeared in *Esquire* magazine and was reprinted in



*Red Line* cover (1989 edition, W. W. Norton).

*Wildflower* magazine in 2001. Researchers can also peruse drafts of *Inferno*, a collection of essays (with Michael Berman's photographs) that Bowden wrote while lobbying for the Sonoran Desert National Monument. In contrast to the appealing language of *A Citizen's Proposal*, these essays showcase Bowden's raw and honest writing about his beloved desert.

Edward Abbey took an early interest in Bowden's writing, sending copies of *Red Line* and personal notes to several publishers. Bowden contributed an essay to the *Edward Abbey Western Wilderness Calendar* and Abbey wrote an article for Bowden's *City Magazine*. Most Abbey material in the Bowden archive relates to his passing. "Edward Abbey memorial," box 89, folders 3–4, contains correspondence, clippings, articles by Bowden, and two audiocassettes of the memorial. Other notes and articles about Abbey can be found in Mary Martha Miles's item-level description. Bowden's memoir about Edward Abbey, drafted as "The Red Caddy: A Driving and Maintenance Guide," was published in 2018 as *The Red Caddy: Into the Unknown with Edward Abbey* by the University of Texas Press.

## OTHER FORMATS AND TOPICS

The Bowden archive contains many small, spiral-bound, pocket-sized notebooks preferred by reporters. Most are located with their respective publications. The *Blood Orchid* files include eleven of these notebooks, while the *Desierto* files contain five. Two boxes of notebooks in the Research section are unrelated to particular publications. Some have interesting personal titles, such as "Thoughts on Writing," "Notes to myself," "Books planned to write," "Notes to self in NY," and "Overheard conversation with two businessmen." Others highlight some of Bowden's smaller projects and interests ("Netting and banding Gray Hawks") or pull together his thoughts ("El Paso, Juárez, Oklahoma City").

Correspondence on a variety of topics, or representing more than a single publication, is located in folders labeled with the correspondent's name. Notable correspondents include Scott Carrier, Meg Clark on *Trust Me*, Julián Cardona, and Lawrence Clark Powell. One folder includes correspondence (2001–2007) with novelist, essayist, and poet Jim Harrison. Several folders contain letters to and from Barbara Houlberg-Kreinberg, Lew Kreinberg, and their son Paul Dickerson. More Kreinberg family correspondence is found with the *Street Signs Chicago* (co-authored

by Lew Kreinberg and Charles Bowden) material. Further correspondence with Barbara Houlberg-Kreinberg includes references to Paul Dickerson's art and the memorial art museum his mother founded.

For more insight into Charles Bowden, readers can turn to his eight-page letterpress, limited-edition *Book Collecting: The Last Refuge of the Illiterate*, and two broadsides containing quotes from the pamphlet. Researchers also see another side of Bowden in his *GQ* article, "Coming to My Senses," describing cooking classes he took in Venice, Italy. In addition to related correspondence, notes, photographs, and notebooks, the archive also includes several of Bowden's cookbooks.

The detritus created during the writing process and then cast away, the materials in the Bowden archive await researchers who can give them a second life. We invite you to visit, or contact the archivist at lgoodley@txstate.edu. Chuck Bowden leaves behind a rich legacy for those who share his interests in literary journalism, environmental writing and activism, borderlands history, drug violence, and Tucson's past and future. ♦

## NOTES

1. <http://www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu/research/a-z/bowden.html>.
2. <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/tsusm/00085/tsu-00085.html>.
3. <http://www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu/research/a-z/bowden/bowden-miles.html>.
4. <http://www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu/research/travelgrants.html>.
5. Phone conversation with the author, August 30, 2017.
6. As shown by the Harry Ransom Center's symposium "Creating a Usable Past: Writers, Archives, & Institutions," November 13–15, 2008, in particular comments made by author Amy Tan.
7. Comment about Bowden made by Santos in conversation with the author after the event. The event video is here: <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/4639>.
8. "Writing in a park in Mexico, ca 1980s," Charles Bowden Papers, Wittliff Collections, Texas State University, San Marcos, box 101, folder 7.
9. "Trust Me book at shrine in Sinaloa, 1992," Charles Bowden Papers, Wittliff Collections, Texas State University, San Marcos, box 102, folder 33.
10. Quote taken from Bowden's gimme hat, worn in the author photo on the book jacket for *Red Line*.