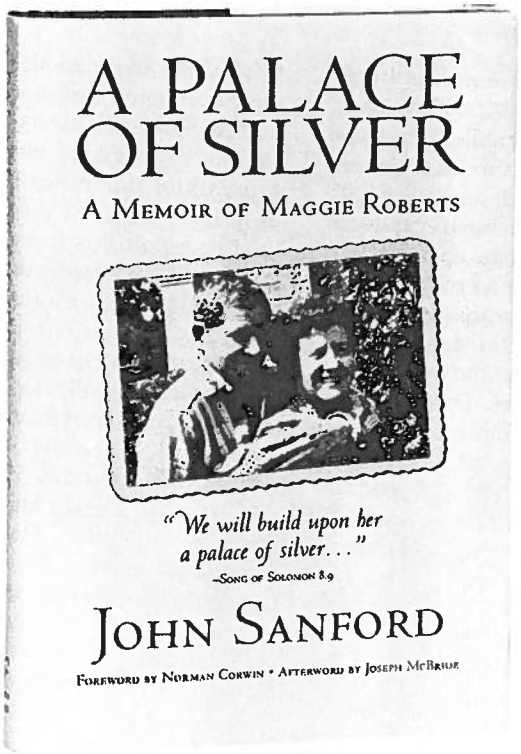
The Complex Legacy of John San

by Jack Mearns

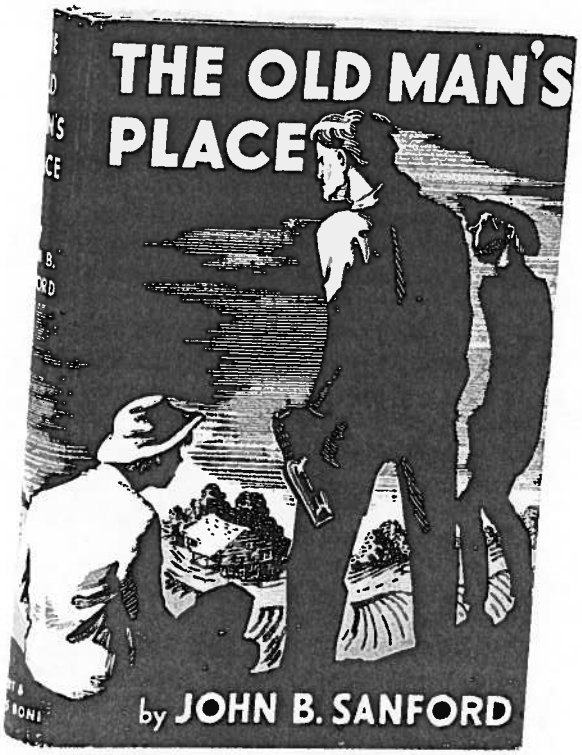


When John Sanford died in March 2003 at the age of 98, he left behind 24 published books, three unpublished manuscripts, and a complex legacy. Sanford's writing career spanned nine decades, culminating with *A Palace of Silver*, a memoir about his late wife, screenwriter Marguerite Roberts, who was best known for scripting John Wayne's Oscar-winner, *True Grit*. Early in Sanford's long career, he was published by America's top firms, and some of our finest critics praised him as a master of English prose. His books are prized by a devoted cadre of collectors. Yet, for much of his career, Sanford struggled to find publishers. His books were issued in small print runs, most recently by university or small-press publishers. And to the larger reading public, Sanford died utterly unknown.

How could so much early promise end in such futility and neglect? The short answer may be that Sanford was his own worst enemy. Throughout the arc of Sanford's career, one can see two opposing forces at work. On the one hand, Sanford displayed a voracious passion to create, one that kept him writing—despite failing eyesight—until just before his death. He showed remarkable scope in his work, publishing novels, short stories and occasional poems. He wrote a five-volume autobiography and several memoirs. And, although he had no formal training as a historian, he published five books of creative interpretations of American history, the first two of which were called masterpieces by Robert Kirsch of *The Los Angeles Times*. The creative variety in Sanford's work is astounding.

On the other hand, however, one detects in Sanford's stewardship of his career an impulse toward self-destruction. He refused nearly all requests to revise his work, feuded with editors, and poisoned his relationships with publishers. He fired off rash, scorching letters that, decades later, haunted him with shame. He refused to undertake anything that smacked of self-promotion: he did not curry favor with reviewers; he gave no readings or public signings. When his first historical book, *A More Goodly Country*, came out in 1975, appearances on radio and television were arranged for Sanford, but he canceled them all. But, perhaps most importantly, Sanford wrote uncompromising prose

about topics many Americans would prefer to ignore—the inhumanity visited on the unfortunate in the name of religion and profit, upon which much of America's greatness was built. However, despite being plagued in his later years by regrets for having squandered opportunities for wider renown, Sanford always stated, "I wouldn't have done it any other way."



JOHN SANFORD was born Julian Lawrence Shapiro on May 31, 1904, to Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. His mother was Harriet Nevins. His father, Philip Shapiro, had worked his way up from a butcher-boy who delivered parcels to New York walk-ups, to a lawyer specializing in work with the burgeoning Jewish building trade. Sanford (in 1941, the author adopted the name he gave to the protagonist of his first novel, more about which later) was born in a beautiful new apartment building, *The Gainsboro*, in the recently developed, fashionable Jewish enclave of Harlem. There, his life was worlds away from the slums of Manhattan's Lower East Side, where newly immigrated Jews teemed. Sanford's early years were ones of luxury and privilege.

The Wall Street panic of 1907, however, wiped out Phil Shapiro, and launched the family on a rootless wandering that would characterize Sanford's life for more than 30 years. The Shapiros moved to a lesser apartment house whose name, *The Cabonak*, Sanford always associated with the embarrassment of the decline in the family's fortunes. In 1908, Sanford's mother gave birth to his sister, Ruth. In 1912, Harriet Shapiro's heart began to fail. Eventually, all Phil's income and everything he could borrow went to doctors and mountain resorts in an attempt to prolong Harriet's life. The family was perpetually on the move between cheap hotels and boarding houses. Despite all efforts to save her, Harriet died in 1914, two months after her son's tenth birthday. She was 33 years old.

Harriet's death dropped a curtain between Sanford and his younger days. Gone was the doting mother who, regardless of the weather, delivered a hot lunch to him at school. Gone was the mother who took him to the library and instilled in him a love of history. (Throughout his life, Sanford treasured the first book his mother gave him, *Patriotic America*.) Gone also was even a temporary home the Shapiros could call their own. Devastated financially by Harriet's illness, Phil moved the family into her parents' apartment, where he and the two children shared a single room. At 10 years old, Sanford began a period of mourning that would set him apart from his peers. He wore torn clothing and a black armband. He was forbidden all enjoyment: he could not see moving pictures or play with other children after school. Twice a day for an entire year, he went to temple and intoned Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for the repose of his mother's soul.

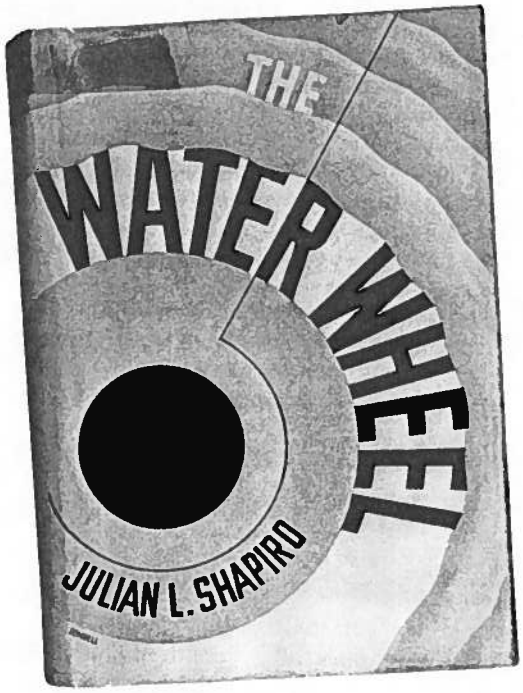
This was a dark, lonely time, instilling in Sanford a sense of separation that would never wholly leave him. He had no mother; he was different. In fact, for years, he could not even say the word "mother." The Nevins household was dominated by Sanford's grandfather, a cold and boorish man whose mistreatment of Sanford's grandmother made a lasting impression on the boy. Sanford's Aunt Rae, whose husband had introduced Sanford's parents to each other, was frequently at the apartment.

In 1920, Sanford's father remarried and moved to a new apartment with his wife and Ruth. Sanford was invited to join them but, in a decision he later rued, refused to go. He had been turned against his father's second wife by his shrewish Aunt Rae's tirades: "the painted woman," "a divorcée," "she's wearing your

ford

mother's diamonds," "your father killed your mother with coldness." Sanford did not set foot in his father's apartment until 1929, when the marriage had failed—in large part because of Sanford's refusal to join the household—and Phil asked his son to retrieve his things.

Whatever dedication Sanford may have had to school died when his mother did. In fact, he did not graduate from Manhattan's DeWitt Clinton High in 1921 with his class—a class that included writers Countee Cullen and Lionel Trilling, as well as CBS's William Paley. In his final semester, Sanford was caught cheating on an English exam; he failed the course. Later, one of Sanford's relatives bribed a state official, and Sanford received his unearned diploma literally out the back door of an Albany office. Sanford spent a year at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, where he attempted unsuccessfully to write for the student newspaper. Lafayette was followed by a month at Northwestern and even less time at Lehigh, before Sanford returned to New York, where he failed to complete a semester at Fordham Law.



The following year, Sanford reentered Fordham, from which he finally earned a degree, and afterwards joined his father's legal practice. During his studies at Fordham, Sanford had a chance encounter that changed his life. In 1925, on a New Jersey golf course, Sanford met a childhood Harlem acquaintance, Nathan Weinstein, who was now going by the name Nathanael West. When West asked Sanford what he was up to, Sanford proudly replied that he was studying law. When Sanford asked in turn what West was doing, West answered, "I'm writing a book." To Sanford that statement was a revelation.

Sanford became West's frequent companion, walking the streets of New York and listening to West discourse on literature and the arts. Sanford learned of Hemingway and Joyce from West. Both these authors influenced Sanford's style, Hemingway with the simple, clean directness of his prose, and Joyce with the experimental form and daring beauty of his language. Sanford helped read proof on West's first book, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell.* And later, the two aspiring writers would spend a summer in a rented hunting shack in the Adirondacks, where West worked on *Miss Lonelyhearts* and Sanford on his first novel.

The years after World War One were flush for the Shapiros, as Phil's law practice prospered with the decade's building boom. Sanford still refused to live with his father, but was able to rent a succession of apartments and rooms in nice hotels. Sanford recalled getting a speeding ticket for going 85 miles per hour in his father's Cadillac while trying to impress a girl. In 1927, Sanford took a trip to Europe in an impulsive and ill-fated attempt to study international law at Oxford.

But it was West's literary example that captured Sanford's imagination. Although he passed the New York bar in 1927, Sanford's attention was focused on writing. In June 1929, Sanford's first published piece appeared in the Parisian little magazine *Tambou.* The work is incomprehensible, as are the two vignettes that followed. Full of bitterness and anger, they are more rants than literary narratives.

While Sanford's ambitions as a writer swelled, the Wall Street crash and its aftermath hacked away at Phil's law practice. Even as late as the summer of 1930, the family still rented a vacation house in New Jersey as they always had. But it became clear the Depression was there to stay. Sanford made a few half-hearted attempts to bring in money by plying the legal profession. But he still chose to spend the first part of 1931 on another trip to Europe and the summer writing in the mountains with West. More accomplished fiction was now starting to appear in the flagship little magazines of the day: *The New Review, Pagany,* and the resurrected *Contact,* which was edited by West and William Carlos Williams.

Through West, Sanford met Angel Flores, a professor at Cornell University. Flores' Dragon Press had published Williams' *The Knife of the Times.* When Flores agreed to publish Sanford's novel, Sanford collected lists of names and addresses from friends and friends of friends, printed and mailed announcements, and collected advance subscriptions for the book. Sanford bragged to *Pagany* editor Richard Johns that the distributor had "made Flores triple the [typical] print order" of 500 copies. Whether or not that was true, Sanford's first novel, *The Water Wheel* (released under the name Julian L. Shapiro), was published in early 1933, during the very depths of the Depression. Sales were poor, the Dragon Press folded, and the book's binder unsuccessfully tried to get

Sanford to cover Flores' unpaid bill. The 28-year-old Sanford lost money on the book: he received no advance, no royalties, and was not even reimbursed for his promotional expenses.

The Water Wheel is an autobiographical novel that follows its protagonist, John Sanford, through his intellectual social milieu in New York, and then across the Atlantic to England and back. Several of the author's friends can be recognized in its characters. In addition, Sanford's lifelong obsession with history is evident in the protagonist's musings about Philip Nolan, the sailor who rejected the United States and became "the Man Without a Country." In style, *The Water Wheel* owes much to Joyce's idiosyncratic punctuation and word play. The book did not receive much critical attention, but its jacket sports a positive blurb by William Carlos Williams. The popular reception was not sympathetic to Sanford's aims. *The New York Times* referred to the book's hero as "an egotist, an unpleasant weakling with a narcissus complex." *The Miami Herald* lamented, "It is a pity God's green trees must be massacred to provide paper for printing this stuff."

It is most likely impossible to know how many copies of *The Water Wheel* were printed, and how many of those were bound. Sanford estimated 600 to 700 copies were sold. Today, the book is hard to find. In addition to its probably small print run, the book was cheaply made and did not wear well. Most copies that turn up are not in collectable condition. A copy with a dust jacket is a true rarity.

Sanford was determined that his followup book be a complete departure in style and content from *The Water Wheel*. *The Old Man's Place* was based on a true story of a trio of soldiers from World War One who return home to wreak havoc on the countryside. Sanford wrote the first draft of *The Old Man's Place* in the fall of 1931, on the roof of New York's Sutton Hotel, where West, in his capacity as manager, allowed an assortment of impoverished writers to stay in empty rooms for free.

By 1932, Sanford had moved in with his sister and his father, who had reconciled with his second wife. They took an apartment on Riverside Drive for $250 a month. Eventually, all they could manage to scrape together for rent was $50 five times a year. Their landlord told them the only reason they were not out on the street was that their upstairs neighbor was a paying tenant, and the heat had to go through the Shapiros' apartment to get to his. During this time, Sanford's father lost a commercial building he owned, in which he had $750,000 invested. What little money dribbled in came from Phil's decimated law practice. Finally, in 1934, Phil and his second wife split for good.

Early in 1935, Phil Shapiro's insults and anguishes over the years took their toll in a massive heart attack. Doctors gave him only a meager chance of surviving, and then two or three years to live, at best. With Phil bedridden in the hospital, there was no breadwinner for the family. Phil's sister implored Sanford to give up his unremunerative writing and dedicate himself to practicing law. Sanford, however, willfully refused. But during his father's hospital stay, *The Old Man's Place* was accepted by Albert and Charles Boni, the surviving half of the once prestigious Boni & Liveright. Sanford received a $100 advance, with the promise of another $100 once he revised the manuscript. It was the first money he had earned as a writer.

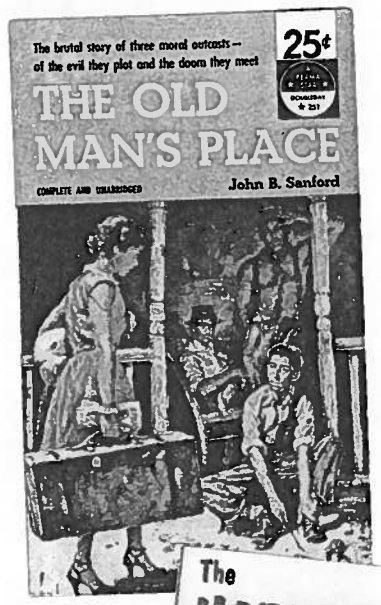
Though by this time alienated from West, Sanford was still influenced by his example. Hoping to boost sales by avoiding anti-Semitic public reaction to his name, he published *The Old Man's Place* under the pseudonym John B. Sanford, the name of the protagonist of *The Water Wheel*. The rear panel of the dust jacket for *The Old Man's Place* furthers this self-transformation by printing a swaggering fictitious letter from "Jack" Sanford, in which he describes his Jack London-esque adventures. Sanford legally adopted the name in 1941.

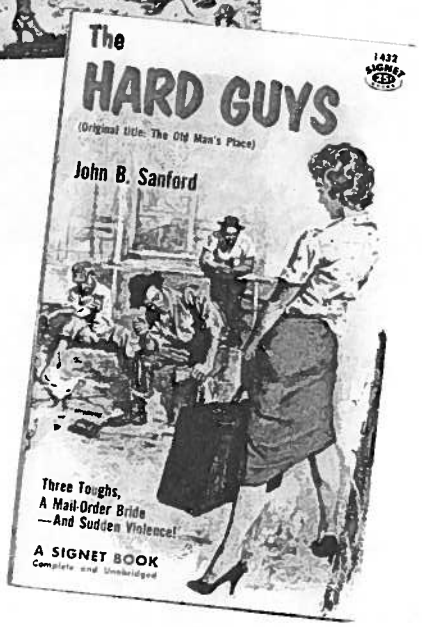
As much as *The Water Wheel's* prose is self-consciously literary, the style of *The Old Man's Place* is straightforward, vigorous and unadorned, owing far more to Hemingway than to Joyce. And the narrative is entirely external and objective, nullifying the egotism of Sanford the character. The book also begins a series of novels set in the Adirondacks. And, though devoid of social commentary, *The Old Man's Place* does probe the violence at the core of the American psyche, a theme that Sanford would return to throughout his career. Sanford's main regret in later years was that the book's violence stemmed from characters who were misfits, rather than from the war's effects on them.

The Water Wheel is not listed in Sanford's second

book as a previous publication, so *The Old Man's Place* is sometimes erroneously described as the author's first book. Reviews were positive, making favorable comparisons to Hemingway and Erskine Caldwell, and to the realism of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. Still, the book did not sell.

The copyright for *The Old Man's Place* was taken out in Boni's name. In 1947, Sanford sought to have the copyright revert to him, but Boni refused because the book was still technically in print. Sanford arranged for a Hollywood bookstore to purchase the remaining 300 copies of the 2,500 print run, and then demanded that Boni either reprint the book or give him the copyright. Under protest, the publisher did the latter. Sanford's 300 copies sat in storage until 1982, when the Black Sparrow Press sold most of them, including 25 that had been numbered and signed by Sanford. For this reason, it is possible to find remarkably well-preserved examples of this book with its striking jacket. *The Old Man's Place* was reprinted twice in the 1950s in paperback, first under its original title, and later as *The Hard Guys*. In 1972, Cinerama produced a film adaptation alternately titled *Glory Boy* and *My Old Man's Place*.





In the months following *The Old Man's Place*'s publication, Sanford was living on 35 cents a day, which his father—now convalescing at home—made sure to leave in his change pocket. Ten cents was for a half-pack of cigarettes, and a nickel was for a towel after a game of handball at the YMCA. One day in late August of 1936, Sanford's handball game was interrupted by a message that he should call home immediately. Sanford feared that his father—who 18 months ago had been given two years to live—had suffered another heart attack. Sanford was forced to borrow a nickel to make the call. To his relief, Phil answered the phone and told Sanford that, on the basis of *The Old Man's Place*, Paramount Studios wanted him as a screenwriter. Paramount offered a six-month contract, with options for the following four-and-a-half years. The man who had been living off 35 cents a day would now be making $350 a week in Hollywood. At the age of 32, Sanford had his first real paying job.

Sanford moved to Los Angeles in August 1936 to begin screenwriting at Paramount. His first assignment was working with playwright Lynn Riggs, whose *Green Grow the Lilacs* was the basis for the musical *Oklahoma*. After a fruitless couple of weeks, Sanford was reassigned to Joseph Moncure March, author of the cult poem *The Wild Party* and the script for Howard Hughes's *Hell's Angels*, which March claimed had ruined him as a writer. None of the scripts the two worked on was ever produced, but Sanford's paycheck enabled him to buy a wardrobe and a car, rent an apartment, send money back to his father, and save several thousand dollars for what would be a few lean years ahead.

Sanford dined at Musso & Franks, the Hollywood writers' hangout, where he came across his old friend Nathanael West, who was now also writing scripts. He was a frequent dinner guest at Joan Crawford's house where, on short notice, he could be counted on to round out uneven parties. He briefly dated starlet Jean Muir. And, in a Paramount hallway, Sanford met fellow screenwriter Marguerite "Maggie" Roberts, who eventually became his wife.

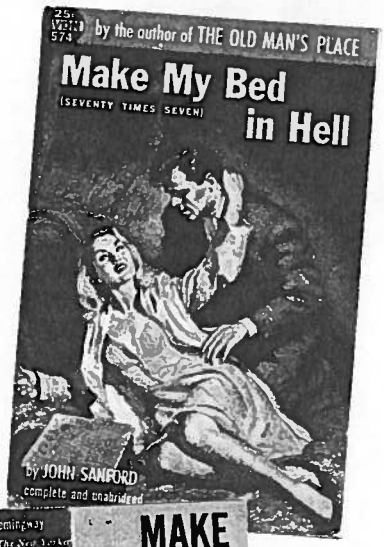
Marguerite Azora Smith was born in a tarpaper shack on November 26, 1905 in Clarks, Nebraska. She grew up on the plains of Colorado and Nebraska, following her father as he sought work, which ranged from town marshal to plasterer. She had a high school education, topped off by two months in business college studying shorthand. She married Leonard Roberts in 1924, and the two of them spent more than a year traveling the West selling imitation pearls, until their supplier more than doubled the price. The couple moved to El Centro, California, where Marguerite got a reporter job at a newspaper. After a year, she abandoned her marriage and moved to Los Angeles, where her older sister lived. Work in Hollywood followed, first as a secretary, then as a reader. In 1933, she and another reader sold an original screenplay. By the time she met Sanford, Roberts had scripted nine films.

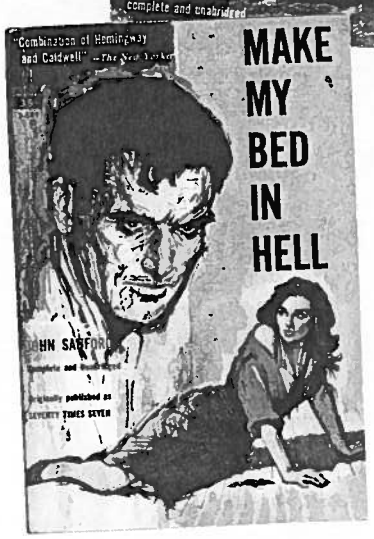
Paramount Studios picked up Sanford's option for a second six months of employment, but it did not renew his contract thereafter. In 1932, Sanford had published a story "I Let Him Die" in *Pagany*. The story concerned a man who allowed another man to freeze to death in his barn without intervening to save

him. Sanford had begun expanding the story while still in New York. But, in spring 1938, he turned in earnest to transforming the tale into a novel.

While writing this novel, Sanford also began attending meetings of the Communist Party, which counted many top Hollywood writers among its members. It is not clear whence Sanford's interest in leftist politics stems. His mother's brother Dave, an inveterate sojourner, was an admirer of Eugene Debs and a spouter of Marxist epigrams. But when Sanford was old enough to vote, he first registered as a Communist, purely as a lark. And, by his own account, despite studying law, he was absolutely ignorant of the Sacco and Vanzetti case, the great liberal *cause célèbre* of the Twenties, until after the pair was executed.

Written mostly in the back yard of the house Maggie shared with her parents, *Seventy Times Seven*, like Sanford's previous novel, is set in the Adirondacks. But *Seventy Times Seven* achieved what *The Old Man's Place* failed to do. It portrayed small-town American violence as springing from a history of violence, in particular slavery and whites' mistreatment of the Indian. This portrayal was made explicit in several pages of blank verse inserted in the narrative. The interpolation of historical material in his fiction became Sanford's signature. *Seventy Times Seven* is Sanford's most accomplished novel, with well-rounded characters and a driving plot. In it, he achieved his mature form.





Sanford and Maggie traveled to New York at the end of 1938, to supervise rehearsals of Maggie's play *Farewell Performance*. On December 30, the couple married at New York's City Hall. *Seventy Times Seven* was published by Alfred Knopf in March 1939. It was to have been issued simultaneously in England by Constable, but Sanford balked at removing the historical blank verse passage and other "objectionable" material, so no English edition appeared. The Knopf edition is a handsome book, printed in sepia ink. All copies have their top edges speckled purple; sometimes this is erroneously described as remainder spray. The critical reception of the novel was positive. William Rose Benet wrote, "Here is a young writer of undeniable talent, the most promising feature of whose work is a superb originality of language." But such praise was not enough to generate sales. The novel would twice be reprinted as a pulp paperback in the 1950s, both times under the title *Make My Bed in Hell*.

On the basis of *Farewell Performance*, Maggie was offered a long-term contract by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She returned to Hollywood. By April, it was clear the play would never survive its trial run in Boston. Sanford returned to California as well. And the next year, Phil Shapiro joined his son out West. From then until his death in 1972, Phil was supported by the son who had refused to give up writing and earn a living. Or rather, he was generously supported by his daughter-in-law, whom his son would never have met if not for a selfish refusal to turn his back on the written word.

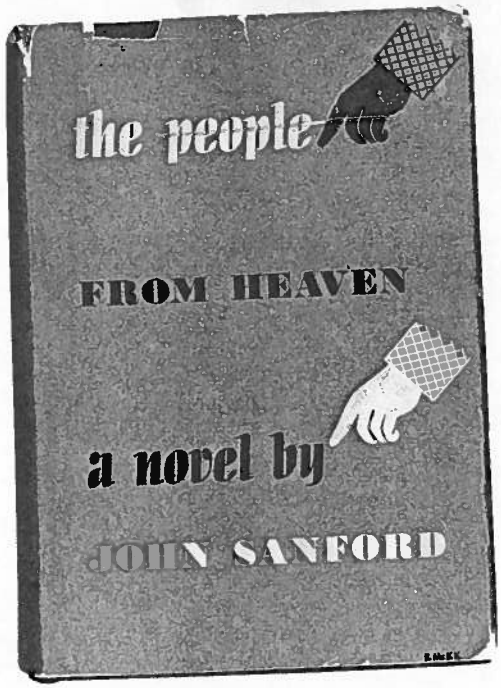
In 1940, Sanford started work on his fourth book, the first one begun after he joined the Communist Party. *The People from Heaven* was also set in the Adirondack region of New York. This novel, however, was not meant merely to tell a story. It was the first of Sanford's books explicitly intended to convey a message. The novel-writing was interrupted, though, when M-G-M assigned Maggie a Clark Gable and Lana Turner Western, *Honky Tonk*. Sanford teamed with Maggie to write this comedy about a lovable con man. M-G-M was so impressed with the script that they offered Sanford a two-year contract at $300 a week. It would have been the first money he had earned since 1937. But Maggie said, "If you stay here, you'll never write those books of yours." Sanford turned down the contract. *Honky Tonk* was his only screen credit.

In *The People from Heaven*, the social fabric of rural Warrensburg is torn by the arrival in the community of a mute black woman. She is raped and later shoots her assailant, revealing America's underlying legacy of racial hatred and violence. Even the Communist Party attempted to suppress the novel as being a too-radical call to violence in response to violence. *People from Heaven's* art came so close to being a literal weapon, the Communists branded it "anti-social." Stylistically as revolutionary as its content, the book baffled readers at Knopf, who turned it down. How can a novel begin with a minister looking out over his congregation and seeing them not as people, but as the stones that will one day stand atop their graves?

During the early years of World War Two, Sanford several times attempted to join Hollywood contingents of the Army Signal Corps. He scripted an

educational film about Russia for Frank Capra for the *Know Your Allies* series. But his promised officer's commission did not come through. Later, work for William Wyler also failed to materialize. Sanford's political affiliations had made him undesirable for the war effort.

The People from Heaven was finally accepted by Harcourt, Brace. Editor John Woodburn fought for its acceptance, largely on the promise of the next novel Sanford proposed to write. *People* was released in October 1943, dedicated to Nathanael West, who had died three years earlier in a car accident. Although Sanford and West had long been estranged, Sanford felt a lifelong debt to West for starting him on the path to becoming a writer. The novel contained several historical poetic pieces interspersed within the narrative.



Reviews of *People* were mixed. Mark Schorer pilloried the book in *The New York Times* under the heading "Assorted White Trash" as "entirely too abstract for the purposes of fiction." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* found it to be "one of the most unconventional works of fiction since James Joyce's *Ulysses*." On the other hand, Carl Sandburg called the novel "a sacred book" and William Carlos Williams said it was "in some ways the most important book of fiction published in the last 20 years." In 1947, the Liberty Book Club reprinted *The People from Heaven* from the Harcourt plates.

In August 1944, Maggie and Sanford bought a house on four acres in Encino, California, the first house Sanford had ever owned. After 30 years of wandering, he finally had a permanent home. The Jew from Harlem now lived on a small farm, complete with fruit orchards and groves of nut trees, stables for Maggie's race horses, a smattering of livestock and all manner of fowl.

Sanford began work on his next novel, *Johnson, Daniel*, which eventually would be called *A Man Without Shoes*. The book proposed to tell Daniel Johnson's story as multitudes of soldiers represented by a single man, following the sequence of questions on the army's Soldier's Qualification Card. Sanford, though, soon discovered the limits of his original plan. The novel was expanded to encompass all of Johnson's development, including his political awakening.

When Sanford submitted the completed work to Harcourt, John Woodburn, his editor, responded with indignation over the book's unexpectedly revolutionary theme. Woodburn offered to accept the novel if Sanford toned down the politics. Sanford refused. In August 1945, *Man* was accepted by Reynal and Hitchcock, politics and all. However, Curtice Hitchcock, the liberal member of the firm, was killed in a car crash. Reynal could not stomach such a leftist book; he terminated the contract.

After Sanford joined the Communist Party, the couple's social life became dominated by this affiliation. But soon Party members told Sanford that his wife, as an outsider, represented a threat. She would either have to join the Party, or be excluded from its events. Maggie, of a liberal mind but apolitical, chose to join the Party, telling her husband, "I want to be with you." Sanford knew this exposed Maggie to danger—while not illegal, the Party was regarded as subversive—but he did not stop her. He felt that if he truly believed in the cause, he should be willing to risk everything for it, including his wife. Maggie stopped attending Party meetings almost as soon as she joined, but it was not until 1947 that, disenchanted with comrades' pettiness and dishonesty, she officially resigned.

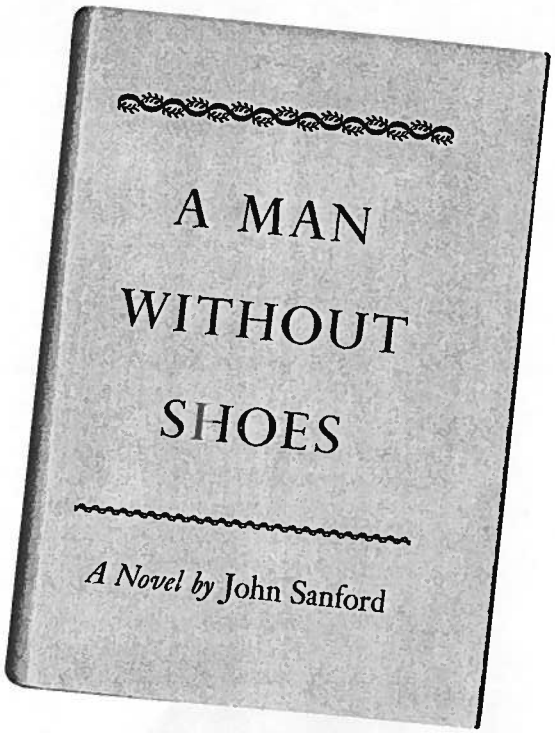
While *A Man Without Shoes* was making the rounds of publishers, Sanford began writing his sixth novel. Originally called *The Bandage*, the book focused on an apparently wounded World War Two soldier who is making his way down the California coast. Later it is revealed that the wound is a sham and the soldier a deserter. In June 1950, after 33 rejections, *A Man Without Shoes* and *The Bandage*—retitled *The Land that Touches Mine*—were accepted by Little, Brown. However, the Korean War broke out days later, and the publisher could no longer expect an audience for one book that espouses Marxist economics and another about a deserter. Little, Brown withdrew the contract.

By September 1950, Sanford had decided to self-publish *A Man Without Shoes*. He contracted with Saul Marks of the esteemed Plantin Press to print 2,000 signed, numbered copies. The novel appeared in spring 1951, while the United States House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was holding hearings in Washington to root out Communists in all areas of American life. Because the book was self-published, Sanford was unable to get it reviewed.

Over the next several years, 382 copies sold. The rest were put in storage until 1982, when Black Sparrow sold approximately 1,500 of them, with a new title page and an introduction by Sanford inserted. Occasionally, the Black Sparrow issue is described as using the Plantin sheets. This is incorrect; all copies were fully bound in 1951. *A Man Without Shoes* has never been reprinted by a commercial press.

Stylistically, *Man* is more fluid than *The People from Heaven*, melding historical material with contemporary narrative. In terms of content, it is Sanford's first explicitly leftist book. This is perhaps the novel's fatal flaw, with Sanford at times sacrificing plot on the altar of his political philosophy, and delivering lectures to the reader, rather than dramatizing the message he wanted to convey. While flawed, the novel still contains many passages of great beauty.

Through the 1940s, Maggie had risen to the top of her field, writing for the biggest stars on M-G-M's lot: Katharine Hepburn, Clark Gable, Lana Turner, James Stewart, Spencer Tracy, Robert Taylor. Early in 1951, the company signed her to a new five-year contract at $2,500 a week. In the late summer of 1951, Sanford and Maggie were subpoenaed to testify at HUAC hearings in Los Angeles. While many of their comrades tried to save their own professional skins by naming names, Sanford took the Fifth Amendment, refusing to testify. Maggie could only say she was not a Communist, but took the Fifth when asked if she ever had been one. That act made her unemployable in Hollywood. Although M-G-M could have terminated her contract without paying her a dime, the studio settled on a plan of payments over the next seven years. In November 1951, Maggie was placed on the Blacklist, losing the job she loved.



Fearing their passports would be seized, the Sanfords embarked for Europe in April 1952. Sanford took several copies of *A Man Without Shoes* with him in hopes of finding an English publisher. Jonathan Cape turned the book down. At Maggie's urging, Sanford submitted the manuscript for *The Land That Touches Mine*, and Cape accepted it. Later, Cape arranged with Doubleday to publish the book in the United States. Thus, *Land* became Sanford's only book published outside the United States. The English edition, which appeared in late spring 1953, is the true first edition. Today, it is particularly uncommon. The Doubleday issue is noteworthy for its jacket art by Ted [Edward] Gorey.

Like *The People from Heaven*, *Land* uses historical pieces to punctuate the action. Centered on man's inhumanity to man, *Land* is another explicitly radical book. On the whole, though, it is a more successful novel than *A Man Without Shoes*, as politics is sublimated to the narrative rather than vice versa. Still, at times Sanford uses his protagonist, a teacher, to lecture his captive reading audience.

Land's theme of exile uncannily anticipated the Sanfords' life to come. Over the next several years, they sold their beloved Encino home, moved to isolated Carmel, in Northern California, then returned south to Montecito, near Santa Barbara. There, in 1957, they bought the home they would live in until their deaths. Being unable to write for film took a tremendous toll on Maggie. Watching her quiet suffering, Sanford—although not directly affected by the Blacklist—was himself unable to write. He occupied his days with woodcarving and building stone walls on their property.

In 1958, the couple traveled again to Europe, where Maggie sought work in England, which had no Blacklist. After weeks of being stonewalled by former comrades who controlled the screenwriting assignments, Maggie finally got a job. However, she was unsatisfied in Europe; the Sanfords returned home.

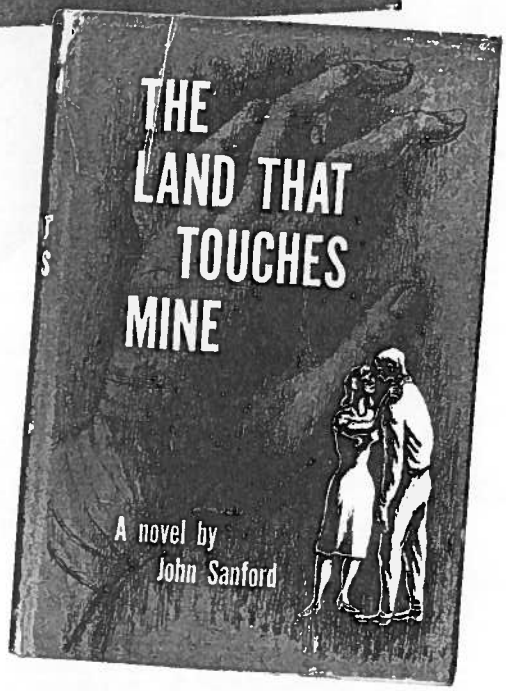
By 1959, the Blacklist had begun to weaken. Maggie peddled an original screenplay about writer Stephen Crane and his wife Cora, *Hotel de Dream*. While the script was never filmed, on its merit Maggie was offered a contract by Columbia to write *Diamond Head*. In July 1960, after nearly 10 years of enforced idleness, Maggie returned to the business of writing movies.

Maggie's reinstatement freed Sanford to take up once again his own writing. His next book was *Every Island Fled Away*, published by Norton in 1964. The bitterness of the Blacklist years is evident in this sequel to *The Land That Touches Mine*. It is a dark, spare book, almost entirely devoid of exposition. It anticipates the social tumult of the 1960s in its story of a small California town divided over a young man's refusal to register for the draft.

In 1967, Prentice-Hall published *The $300 Man*,

about a returned soldier who originally received a fraudulent medical deferment and now seeks to make amends to the man who was drafted in his place. *The $300 Man* is something of a rehash of Sanford's preceding novels, reworking familiar characters and themes. The book was poorly received by critics, and it marked the end of Sanford's career as a writer of fiction. He was 63 years old.

For the next three years, Sanford worked on a new kind of book. At Maggie's suggestion, it would entirely comprise nonfiction historical pieces. Covering the period from Columbus' discovery of America to the end of World War Two, *A More Goodly Country* showed Sanford at the height of his writing skill and creative powers. Still, it was another three years and 231 rejections before Horizon Press agreed to publish the book. When it came out in 1975, just before the country's bicentennial, *Los Angeles Times* critic Robert Kirsch hailed it: "John Sanford's epic, imaginative book of witness, *A More Goodly Country*, is a masterpiece. I do not say this lightly, but with awe and respect, for such an accomplishment is rare....It is a work to be read and reread, daring, eloquent, timeless and deep."



A More Goodly Country allowed Sanford to transcend the limitations imposed on him by the novel form. Varying his narrative voice to match his diverse subjects, he no longer needed teachers and preachers to lecture and sermonize to his readers. He could now instruct by parable, by allegory and by brief dramatic monologue. Columbia University history professor Eric Foner commented, "Sanford possesses qualities unusual even among [professional historians]: an eye for the telling detail or incident that opens up an entire world of meaning, an ability to plumb the inner thoughts and emotions of figures in the past and a genuine concern for society's outcasts and underdogs." At the age of 71, Sanford had embarked on a new career, as a writer of nonfiction. About 1980, Capra Press took over unsold copies of *A More Goodly Country*, issuing them with a new dust jacket. In 1982, Black Sparrow took the remainder and sold them in the original Horizon dust wrapper.

Capra Press published Sanford's *Adirondack Stories* in 1976. This volume contained early short stories that had formed the basis for Sanford's longer fiction, as well as an unpublished story and a new introduction. The book was issued in paperback, but there were also both lettered and numbered signed, limited hardcover editions. In 1977, Sanford's second historical book, *View from This Wilderness, American Literature as History*, appeared. This volume, covering writers from Columbus through John Berryman, was also published by Capra. After 44 years of writing, and 10 books issued by 10 different houses, Sanford finally had a publisher issue a second of his works.

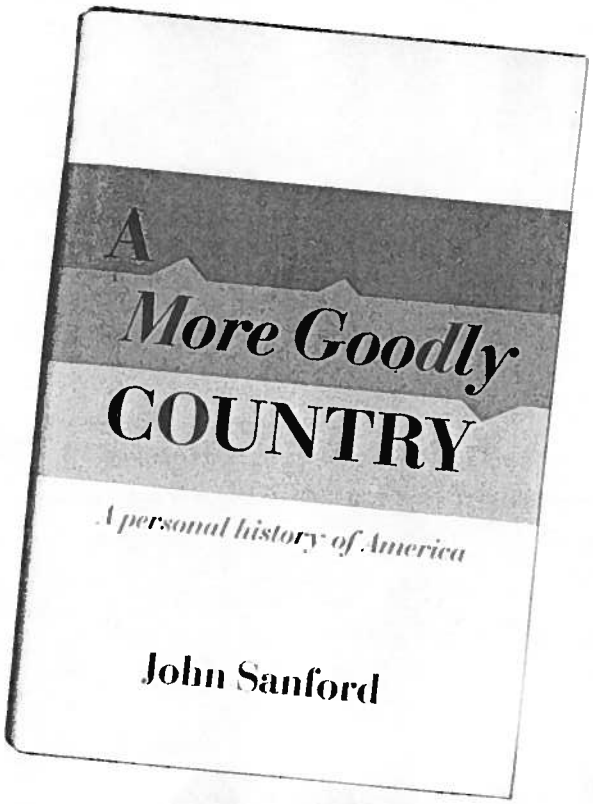
View was followed in 1980 by *To Feed Their Hopes, A Book of American Women*, an entire book of reflections upon women. It reveals Sanford's enduring preoccupation with and empathy for women. Historian Foner wrote, "He has a remarkable ability to illuminate women's place in history and to crystallize their innermost feelings." *Hopes* was later adapted into a stage musical, *An American Cantata*.

In 1984, Oyster Press issued *William Carlos Williams John Sanford: A Correspondence*, printing letters the pair exchanged, with commentary by Sanford. It reveals Sanford's consciousness of his debt to the master. Also in 1984 came the fourth volume of his historical tetralogy. *The Winters of That Country* is as brutal a book as they come, full of lynching, riots, labor unrest, and persecution of the weak and poor by the strong and rich. It is a blistering, ferocious book, yet one of consummate beauty. Published when Sanford was 80 years old, it shows him at the pinnacle of his form. At an age when most writers are retired or dead, Sanford still had half his body of work ahead of him.

Winters began Sanford's long and fruitful

association with John Martin's Black Sparrow Press, which would publish his monumental five-volume autobiography, subtitled *Scenes from the Life of an American Jew*: *The Color of the Air* (1985), *The Waters of Darkness* (1986), *A Very Good Land to Fall With* (1987), *A Walk in the Fire* (1989) and *The Season, It Was Winter* (1991). *The Color of the Air*, covering his youth up until his 1927 departure for England, won Sanford his first literary prize, the PEN award for best nonfiction by a Southern California writer.

Written in the second person—referring to himself as "you"—the autobiography gives the reader an impression of the older Sanford regarding his younger self with consternation. "This cannot have been me," it seems to say. "It must have been *you*." Told with remarkable vividness and punctuated by historical pieces that reflect the social and political climate of the time—"the color of the air"—Sanford's is a life reimagined and dramatized. His virtuosity has often provoked readers to wonder how he managed to remember detailed conversations from decades past. Of course, these are not verbatim transcriptions. Rather, the autobiography represents imaginative reconstructions based on fact, rather than the dry recitation of facts themselves.



In 1967, Maggie wrote the screenplay for *True Grit*, which won John Wayne his only Oscar. (Wayne told his biographer it was the best script he ever read.) In 1971, she retired from films. Screenwriting after the Blacklist had never been the same. In 1989, shortly before *A Walk in the Fire* was published, Maggie died. She was 83 years old. The next 14 years were dark and lonely ones for Sanford. Wracked with guilt for surviving his wife, and plagued by remorse for not protecting her from joining the Party and being Blacklisted, Sanford devoted himself largely to detailing his life with her.

Maggie: A Love Story appeared in 1993 from Barricade Books. Recovering some of the old ground dealt with in the autobiography, this memoir portrays the Sanfords' relationship, from their meeting in the hallway of Paramount Studios, until Maggie's death. *The View from Mt. Morris*, also from Barricade, fills in some of the gaps from Sanford's childhood. Bibliographically, it is noteworthy for the fact that the author's name is missing from the title page.

In *We Have a Little Sister* (Capra, 1995), Sanford imagined what Maggie's life was like before they met. And in the University of Illinois' 1997 *Intruders in Paradise*, Sanford returned to the fertile ground of personal interpretation of American history. He was 93 years old, yet his writing retained amazing vigor and creativity. In 1998, *The Los Angeles Times* gave Sanford its Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement.

Sanford's final book, *A Palace of Silver*, appeared a month before his death on March 5, 2003. It is a memoir of the bleak years after Maggie died. The book is a revealing portrait of the devastation of old age: the loneliness, the physical decline. It is rare to have documentation of aging by one who is truly old. Sanford used to say, "I write in the morning, and spend the rest of the day spending the rest of the day." Life without his beloved Maggie was "an empty room."

Set mostly in the cemetery where Maggie's ashes are buried, *Palace* consists of imaginary dialogues with his dead wife, and recollections of episodes from their life together. Not wholly somber, though, the book recalls Beckett in its literal graveside humor.

Beautiful, loving, haunting, *A Palace of Silver* is a fitting capstone to Sanford's life of the written word. It is dedicated to his wife of more than 50 years, whose support gave him a rare luxury among professional writers: to write what he pleased, without consideration of economic consequences. Sanford was not compelled to sell books to put food on the table. He did not have to look for other writing assignments to pay the bills. Sanford did not do book tours, did not attend signings, did not make public appearances or give lectures. He left the selling of his books to others, as if he believed that seeking the favor of readers would taint his work.

Unlike many writers of his stature, Sanford did not review, did not write articles for magazines, did not have to interrupt the process of writing books that did not sell, so that he could make a living. On the one hand, this lack of economic necessity freed Sanford to pursue his art wherever the muse took him. Without this freedom, his life's work would not exist in its

current form. On the other hand, one wonders what Sanford would have produced if he had been forced by economics to temper his indignation and recast his reforming vision, so that his books would sell.

If he had needed to write to make money, would Sanford have been capable of writing for the popular audience, and what would have been the result? Would his missteps have been fewer? Would he have muted the immoderate politics that flawed his later fiction? Would he have achieved the high splendor of his style under these constraints? Certainly, he would have had to write more and differently to earn a living. But could he have achieved the mass appeal that always eluded him? One wonders whether economic necessity would have improved Sanford's art, or merely blunted his talent.

Nonetheless, despite its excesses and imperfections, John Sanford's writing has achieved a sustained beauty and passion that are rarely seen. Even his less fully realized works have passages of brilliance that commend them. And, in those works where style and content felicitously meet, Sanford is revealed as a master of his craft; his writing sparkles with the clean lines of a gem.

Today, Sanford is mostly out of print. Only *A Palace of Silver*, his Black Sparrow paperbacks, and his volumes from the University of Illinois can be purchased new. Still, Sanford's work continues to evoke fervor among critics and academics, and he has a devoted following of collectors. Sanford is a writer ripe for being discovered. His provocative and lovely work deserves to be known and read.

A John Sanford Checklist

JOHN SANFORD was fond of saying, "All my books are first editions." And that is practically true. Just one book, *The Land That Touches Mine*, was published outside the United States. And none has gone into a second printing. Only his first book, *The Water Wheel*, was published under his birth name. *The Old Man's Place* was published as John B. Sanford; all the other books were published as John Sanford.

This John Sanford should not be confused with John A. Sanford, who writes about psychology and religion, or with John Sandford, who has penned the *Prey* series of mystery novels. It is not uncommon to find Sandford novels listed incorrectly as authored by John Sanford.

The Water Wheel

[by Julian L. Shapiro]
Ithaca, NY: The Dragon Press, 1933
States "First Edition" on copyright page
First edition, $950-$2,000

The Old Man's Place

NY: Albert & Charles Boni, 1935
No statement of printing
First edition, $50-$200

In 1982, 25 copies of the first edition were numbered and signed: $175-$275

Seventy Times Seven

NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939
States "First Edition" on copyright page
First edition, $80-$300

The People from Heaven

NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1943
States "First Edition" on copyright page
First edition, $100-$225

also notable:

NY: Liberty Book Club, [1947]
No statement of printing
Printed from the Harcourt plates
First edition, $35-$75

A Man Without Shoes

L.A.: The Plantin Press, 1951
No statement of printing
382 of an edition of 2,000 numbered and signed copies were sold
First edition, $75-$250

also notable:

Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1982
Black Sparrow issued 1,500 unsold copies of this book, inserting a new title page and introduction by Sanford, and stamping publisher information on the dust jacket
First edition, $45-$115

The Land That Touches Mine

L: Jonathan Cape, 1953
States "First published 1953" on copyright page
First edition, $210-$300

NY: Doubleday & Co., 1953
States "First Edition" on copyright page
First edition, $75-$150

Every Island Fled Away

NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1964
States "First Edition" on copyright page
First edition, $15-$75

The $300 Man

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967
No statement of printing
First edition, $15-$65

A More Goodly Country

NY: Horizon Press, 1975
No statement of printing
First edition, $5-$50

Adirondack Stories

Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1976
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $200-$300
First limited edition, 1/100 signed and numbered copies, $100-$200
First trade edition, in wraps, $20-$40

View from This Wilderness

Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1977
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/100 signed and numbered copies, $75-$150
First trade edition, $5-$50

To Feed Their Hopes

Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1980
No statement of printing
First edition, $5-$20

Winters of That Country

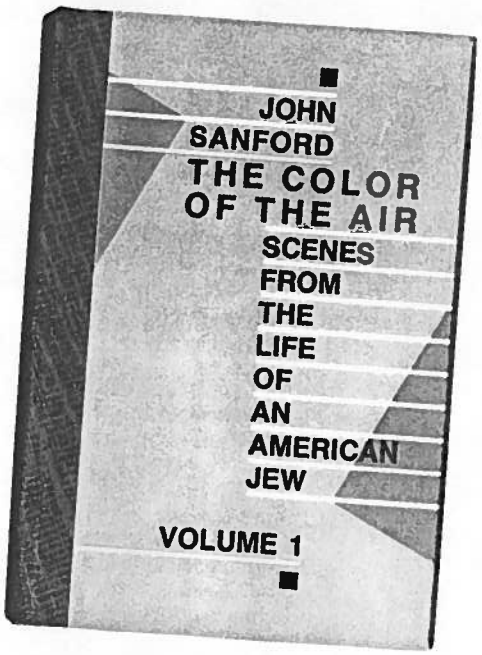
Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $125-$200
First limited edition, 1/200 signed and numbered copies, $50-$75
First trade edition, $20-$35
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15

William Carlos Williams John Sanford: A Correspondence

Santa Barbara, CA: Oyster Press, 1984
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/75 signed and numbered copies, $75-$125
First trade edition, $40-$75
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15

The Color of the Air

Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1985
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $75-$150
First limited edition, 1/150 signed and numbered copies, $30-$75
First trade edition, $30-$50
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15



The Waters of Darkness

Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1986
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $75-$150
First limited edition, 1/150 signed and numbered copies, $40-$75
First trade edition, $20-$40
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15

A Very Good Land to Fall With

Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1987
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $75-$150
First limited edition, 1/150 signed and numbered copies, $30-$75
First trade edition, $20-$40
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15

A Walk in the Fire

Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $75-$150
First limited edition, 1/150 signed and numbered copies, $30-$75
First trade edition, $20-$45
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15

The Season, It Was Winter

Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1991
No statement of printing
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, $75-$150
First limited edition, 1/125 signed and numbered copies, $35-$95
First trade edition, $20-$45
First trade edition, in wraps, $10-$15

Maggie: A Love Story

Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 1993
Number line ending in 1 on copyright page
First edition, $5-$35

The View from Mt. Morris

NY: Barricade Books, 1994
States "First edition" on copyright page
First edition, $10-$20

We Have a Little Sister

Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1995
No statement of printing
First edition, $10-$25

Intruders in Paradise

Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1997
Number line ending in 1 on copyright page
First edition, issued at $26.95

A Palace of Silver

Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 2003
States "First Edition"
First limited edition, 1/26 signed and lettered copies, issued at $85
First limited edition, 1/100 signed and numbered copies, issued at $65
First trade edition, issued at $25.95