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Interview no. 44

Mrs. Tommy Powers Stamper

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Tommy Powers Stamper
INTERVIEWER: Leon C. Metz
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 10, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Daughter of Tom Powers, owner of the Coney Island Saloon in early El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Early El Paso, including the history of her family; Billy the Kid; Pat Garrett's family; personalities and events of early El Paso.

15 pages

Mrs. Tommy Powers Stamper
by Leon Metz
Virden, New Mexico
July 10, 1968

M: Were you named for your father?

S: No, he was Michael Thomas. He was a real Irishman. They were immigrants. He came out of Ireland because he was born about a week after his mother landed in New York. He was the first Irishman from the old Powers family to be a natural citizen.

M: When was he born?

S: September 18, 1860.

M: Did his entire family come at the same time?

S: Yes. There were about twenty of them.

M: From where in Ireland did they come?

S: They came from County Cork, he was a farmer--a little red-headed, freckled faced Irishman. This was my grandfather. Their name was O'Powers and they dropped the "O".

M: Do you remember your grandfather?

S: I never saw him. My father left home when he was sixteen.

M: Did they stay in New York?

S: No, they went to Wisconsin to farm. It was in a rural district.

M: What were you saying about your father beating up his father?

S: Yes. For seventeen years he had watched his father beat his mother and he promised himself when he was big enough he'd beat him. And he did, then he left. My father never told me this, one of my cousins told me. My father never talked about his father. That was an old Irish custom, to beat your wife, but my father didn't like that because he knew his mother didn't

deserve being treated that way. My father said that anyone was a goddamn son of a bitch who hit a woman, because there was no reason for anyone to hit a woman, no matter what.

M: Do you know when your grandparents died?

S: I know when my grandmother died, because that was when I knew that I was able to see things.

M: That you could see things?

S: I know things that are going to happen. I was sick a lot when I was a child. I had all these diseases and I spent every summer in bed. I had all those things like measles four or five times, but this time I think it was diphtheria or something like that. They thought I was having hallucinations. The nurse was told not to leave the room. It was the front room and we were under quarantine. There was a big window and I was lying there looking out the window. This was at 1127 Wyoming, around 1907. I called to my mother and asked her who died. She didn't know what I was talking about. I said that the telegram boy brought a death message with a black border. It said, "Your mother died yesterday at 2:30." I wanted to know whose mother died. She went screaming from the room for the nurse and called the doctor. He came and was very angry at the nurse for leaving me alone. He said that I had gotten up and walked the floor, and I couldn't even raise myself up. I couldn't get out of the bed. I told the doctor and Papa that I didn't get up. So, they thought I was delirious and fired the nurse. They got another one who wouldn't leave the room unless she called my mother to come sit with me. The next day, I yelled and screamed to my mother, "Mother there's that boy again! He's putting his bicycle in the same place." And that was the telegram that she got. It was my father's mother who died.

M: Did she die in Wisconsin?

S: Either in Wisconsin or Iowa; they were all Yankees.

M: Where did your father go when he left home?

S: He worked his way down from Wisconsin to a place where he knew his feet would be warm. His feet were always cold up there and he wanted to get someplace where there wasn't so much snow. So, he lived with five tribes of Indians on his way down to Texas.

M: When did he leave there?

S: I guess it was 1877 if he left when he was 17. He lived with the Blackfeet and the Sioux and I don't know who else, but they made him a blood brother.

M: How did he get to El Paso?

S: He was working in New Mexico as a cowboy getting \$3 a month. He had come from Dodge City, Kansas. That was when the government was giving beef to the reservations and he was with those men who were driving the cattle. He was a true cowboy who learned it from the ground up. They came down into Texas and New Mexico to gather up these cattle that the government bought from the cattlemen around here. He saw Billy the Kid. He was working for one of those drives and he had finished his job, and no one had to tell them to come in to camp. He had come in and he turned his horse out to graze and he took off his pistol and gunbelt. He was lying down with his hands behind his head resting when this young man rode up and asked, "Where's the boss of this outfit?" Papa didn't even have a chance to answer when the Kid drew his gun and said, "You goddamn son of a bitch, I'd just as soon shoot your goddamn head off as to look at you." Papa said that was one of his close calls. He thought that his time had come because he didn't dare reach for his pistol. He said to himself, "That goddamn yellow-bellied, -----coward."

The only thing that saved him was the other cowboys came loping into camp and Billy the Kid put his gun back in his holster and rode off. My papa swore that if he ever got out of that alive he'd never take his gun off again. He worked in the camp for three days and papa stayed awake for three nights watching that son of a bitch. See, he hired on to work, but he didn't give his name. It wasn't anybody's business what his name was, but everybody called him "Kid".

M: Did your father meet Pat Garrett up there about this time?

S: He met him by chance, I'm sure, but they were great friends. They were the same kind of men.

M: What did your father do then? Did he leave?

S: Well, he didn't leave, he stayed with the outfit. Billy the Kid left. My father didn't get a wink of sleep because he was watching that SOB all night. But one night, Billy packed his roll and rode out. Papa was the only one who saw him because everyone else was asleep. He hadn't told anyone else about his encounter with Billy the Kid. The morning that he left, Papa tried to get some sleep but he was a very light sleeper and the sheriff and the posse rode in and asked everybody if they had seen anybody of this description. He'd been working for them and they said, "Why, he's that man we've been looking for." He had shot someone over in some town in New Mexico. They all didn't know that he had left, men didn't talk; but when Papa found out who he was, the sheriff and the posse were very quick in telling them what he had done. He told them that he had seen him pack up his roll. They asked him what way he had gone, and Papa just said, "He went that-a-way, over the hill." Papa told the sheriff that and he said he drew a deep long breath because he knew that the Kid would know the posse was after him, too.

That was the reason that he left out of places so fast. He'd get just enough money to stake him to the next place. I don't suppose it would have bothered him to rob somebody, he got along just fine. But it was hard to live off the land and it was a long way between those round-ups. Papa said, "You can make a hero out of that son of a bitch if you want to, but he wasn't when I met him. He was a low-down____," all of those names. When Papa called you all those names, you usually were one.

M: About when did your father find his way to El Paso?

S: He didn't find his way, he just came straight down. I don't know about his romantic life, but he met this rich widow and married her. I don't know her name. I met her under peculiar circumstances much later in life. My life has always been odd. When I met this woman I thought it was sort of queer that she wanted to see me so bad and wanted to look at me and the questions she asked me. My father had given me consent to go to Mineral Wells to visit a girl friend when I was a University of Texas student. And I went to visit Helen Wallace, Helen told me that this old lady was so anxious to meet me. It seemed odd. So Helen Wallace took me to this lady's house and that was my father's first wife. Papa always had spies all over the place; he always knew every breath I took. He had many friends all over Texas, not just El Paso. He got to El Paso last. He ended there, he didn't just drift there. She had asked me if I looked like my father and if my mother was still living, and what did she look like. When we got back to Helen's home I said that I wondered how she got all these questions to ask me. "I'll always be amazed why this woman, who has been a life-long friend of your family, was interested in me. You didn't know any of those questions to tell her. Oh, well, she

just wanted to meet a girl friend of yours, I'll laugh that off later."

So when I got home, my father sat me down and said, "You went over to a certain Mrs. Somebody's house while you were in Mineral Wells, didn't you?" I said, "Well, how in the world did you know, Papa? Yes, I did." He said, "Didn't you think there was anything queer about that visit?" I said that I did, but I was still amazed and still in the dark as to how he knew it. He told me that he was in touch with people. So maybe he corresponded or maybe Pauline, his stepdaughter, always kept in contact with him. She loved him very much, he raised her. He didn't tell me because he didn't think it was any of my business. He just told me that he had promised my mother that he'd never tell me, but he said, "I must. Surely you thought that visit odd? That was my first wife." I almost fainted. "Well, Papa," I said, "no wonder Mama always gets furious when people ask us if we're the real children." I'd always say my father never had been married before, "we're the only children he has." Papa regretted that he had promised Mama that he would lie to his own children.

M: How long was he married to this other woman?

S: I don't know, but it must have been a long marriage because he raised her daughter; he called her his daughter. He had many reasons for not labelling anything; he has a whole album of his life before he met my mother. I don't think it made any difference to her, but it might have because Papa was raised in the Catholic faith and Papa had a saloon. His first wife put him in that business. I'm trying to think of the name; it's down somewhere between here and Austin, Texas. He was the sheriff of that town too. It was famous for it's roughness. He didn't marry my mother until 1900, so he was old.

He came to El Paso shortly before he met my mother. Her mother had lived in Midland and had moved up to Ysleta. That was the county seat of El Paso County. You had to cross the river to get to El Paso. That land always did belong to Old México. Our farm was down in the old river bed that was three and a half miles north of Ysleta. As a child I rode all over that area on horseback. So, to my grandmother, Ysleta was the big town. When the train first came to El Paso my grandmother saw it. Shortly after that everybody in Ysleta moved to El Paso because it was the place that the railroad stopped. That was a day's trip in a horse and a buggy. When I would go to the ranch with my father, we'd have to get up very early to go with him and we would get to our place about noon. He had to stop down on Alameda first. The roads were just dirt and had ruts in them. It always rained more in Ysleta than it did in El Paso. I was the opener and the shutter of the gates; we would go through people's property. We had to go around by the church at San Elizario and come back because that was the way the road wound. So you can imagine if you lived in Ysleta and had to go to El Paso. They had to get up at five o'clock in the morning and then they would be weary when they got to El Paso.

M: So the first thing he did was buy a farm when he got here?

S: Oh, no, he had the saloon. He had a silent partner named W.E. Truesdell, who put up the money. My father ran the place and they split 50-50 on the profit. Mr. Truesdell had retired but he had his money in other ways. He was a friend of my father, so he put Papa up in the saloon, the Coney Island. It was on Oregon; it was an alley then. They had those big horses to bring the beer, and they would completely fill the street because it was just an alley between there and the old Sheldon Hotel going north. The address was

111 Oregon. Across the street was the Kelly & Pollard drug store. The saloon didn't open up there. We would always go into Kelly & Pollard or the candy store next door or the post office. Mama would have Papa meet us there. The post office was where Kress's is now. He had that saloon in the same place until Prohibition.

M: Do you recall Pat Garrett?

S: No, I was only five when he was killed. Papa never brought him to the house. My father was very particular who we associated with and we associated with the elite of the town. C.E. Kelly, who was the mayor for so many times, was my godfather and his wife was my godmother. Mayor Robinson that was there, I associated with Louise Robinson, Mary Frances, who is Mrs. de la M. Allen; his mother was a Mexican. And I went to the wedding. Papa would not have let me associate with any of the Garretts, not at all. They lived in Las Cruces and he was married to a Mexican; Papa wouldn't have let us associate with any of his children. Men can have friends apart from their family. My Papa always told me that he raised us to be ladies and we didn't associate with anyone but the elite of El Paso. We went to all the parties. The reason he bought the farm was because of my mother. She said, "I will not have my children put down because their father is a saloon keeper; you can do something else." So, that was why the farm was bought. It was a hundred acres fenced in. It was where the Black nursery is.

M: Did you raise cotton there?

S: Oh, no! You say cotton to Papa and he'd froth at the mouth. Papa had learned farming from his father, but he just didn't talk about it much. He did tell us about going out to tap the maple trees and how to make the maple sugar. He told me once that his father worked them harder than his mules and he

didn't have any consideration for them either. My Papa believed that if you were a farmer, a real farmer, you raised everything you used, except of course, the things that you couldn't. So when he took supplies to the farm he took flour, salt, and sugar; everything else was raised. He said that if those farmers went to cotton they needn't call themselves farmers anymore, and it would be the ruin of them. He said that cotton ruined the land.

M: What was your mother's maiden name?

S: Pipkin, Kathleen; but she was always Miss Kate. I don't know where she was born. There were a lot of family skeletons. I used to ask my Papa what my grandmother looked like and he'd tell me to look in the mirror sometime. He showed me a picture once of some of his sister's children and I was laughing at it, and he told me to laugh real loud because I was the spittin' image of her. Papa was the next to the youngest child; there were twenty-four. That was why they didn't get out of Ireland any sooner. My grandfather had to get fare for all the children, and by the time he'd get that there would be two more in the family.

M: What did your mother look like?

S: She was the most beautiful thing you ever looked at. She was so pretty that people would just gasp and follow her with their eyes. Absolutely flawless; she had a beautiful figure, beautiful feet and legs, she had the most beautiful face and gorgeous teeth, and bow mouth, her eyebrows were arched without plucking, and she had the darkest brown hair, and her eyes were so dark that they looked black but they were dark brown. She had the most beautiful ears. And there was never a person in El Paso or a movie star that could hold a candle to her. She wasn't even five feet tall, except when she wore high heels,

which she wore very beautifully. She was tiny. In later years she became a compulsive eater and became very fat after my little sister died. My mother made herself into a neurotic after the death of that little girl.

M: How many children were there?

S: She was the third child. Her name was Margaret Euphrasia. She was named for the famous Sweeney family, Euphrasia Sweeney, who were great friends of the family. Judge J.U. Sweeney's mother and sister were Euphrasia. They called her "Freshy" because it was such a bad name. She died on July 4, 1912. There were three children in all.

M: What did your father look like?

S: He was a tall man but he didn't look it; he was just under six feet but nobody ever believed it. He weighed the same weight all his adult life. He wore the same size belt all the time because he said he had sense enough to push himself away from the table. It was an elementary thing to know when your stomach was full. He was just square, all muscles. Papa was tried for murder one time. Papa had killed the man, but it had been self-defense. He was very honest. He had a horse waiting for him outside left by some friends of his, and if he had been convicted he would have ridden out to town. There were 11 bullets in the man but the three that Papa put in him were the ones that would have killed him. Papa could shoot; the rest were just emptying their guns. Papa was walking down the street with the day's receipts and he thought someone was trying to rob him. This was in 1886. He was still married to that other woman at that time. He heard a bullet whiz by his head. He always wore a three and one half carat diamond on his right hand. Papa had his six-shooter on and just pulled it out and he saw that man's body and

one of those guys fell. When the man came from behind the tree Papa shot him again and again. He was the famous doctor of the town, and he was shooting at another man on the other side of my father, because they were both after the same bitch. That didn't come out in the trial. He wasn't visiting her but it did come out in the trial that these two men had been feuding for some time and each had promised to shoot the other one on sight. Papa was just shooting to protect himself. But he was tried for murder. I have the transcript of the trial.

Papa was a dead shot. You talk about fist fights, it was most generally over women. You know, I used to tell people that I saw men drop dead everyday. Just to show you how well known my father was, one day my mother was going to town to buy a new hat; she might have just bought two fifty-dollar hats yesterday but she was going again. She was a very old-fashioned lady in her morals. We were walking to the hat place and this man, just a cow puncher, he tipped his hat to my mother. That was not done. Strange men did not talk to ladies. He said, "How are you, kid?" And she had her two little girls with her. She turned to that guy and she said, "I'll have you know that I'm Tom Powers' wife!" That man broke and ran. You'd thought she had shot him. You see, he'd be scared that she'd tell Papa and describe him. Papa wouldn't have shot him but it would have been rough. I asked her if she was going to tell Papa. She didn't need to, she had handled it well. He was her protection. That guy would have been pulverized, beaten within an inch of life. You'd never know why Pat Garrett mutilated that man, but it was probably along the same lines.

I saw a murder one time when I was about seven. We were going to town

one day and we had Billy, our little half Shetland pony, and the carriage. Mama had some business at the post office. I was what Mama called the cow tail, because I would lag behind. I didn't want to miss anything. I was looking all around and I was going up the steps of the post office because she had said for me to come. Mama and my sister were already in the post office. Then the shot rang out. I was almost to the top of the stairs when the shot was fired. I turned and saw one of my father's friends coming across the street. I thought he was coming to give me a box of candy because my father's friends wanted to give us children favors. Well, it all happened so fast and he just pulled his six-shooter out and then the shot rang out. And that man who was walking up the steps beside me turned and he didn't get shot in the back, he got shot looking right at the man. Mama heard the shot too, and, you know, you don't move. And Mama screamed, "Tommy!" and I ran up the steps and she grabbed hold of me and we ran out the front door--this was at the side door--and we got in that buggy and Billy never went so fast; Mama was whipping him all the way. And when she got home, she called Papa (the number was 888) and she said, "Tom, come home! Now!"

The phone was hung up and Papa was there in five minutes. He said, "What is it, Kate?" She said, "Tommy just witnessed that killing." He said, "My God." He asked if I did and I told him that I had. He said, "Kate, I'll think of something. Billy's out in front. Tommy, you have a good memory but you better forget this fast. Don't you remember a thing that happened today. Do you think I want my little girl to be on the witness stand? I've never taught you to lie, but you can keep your mouth shut. Don't you ever breathe a word of this. Do you hear me? You know

better, don't you?" I said that I did. I told him that I wouldn't say anything about it. He told my mother to set her watch (it had over a hundred diamonds in it) back an hour, and to go to Mrs. Devore's house. He told her, "Do exactly what I tell you. You tell Mrs. Devore how long it took you to dress." He said to tell her what time it was by her watch and "She'll never know the difference, she's got all those kids; people don't pay that much attention to the time." He said for us to stay out there all day and to keep looking at her watch and keep mentioning the time. "Don't you dare tell anybody you were in town today. Did anybody see you?" Mama didn't know, but people usually noticed us. He said he hoped to God that no one saw us and he said he would handle it from there on out. So, no one must have seen us. I know who shot him, it was one of my father's best friends, but the other man wasn't important. They were fighting over the same woman, as usual. My father didn't want me dragged into a murder trial. I was a very smart little girl; I had to be smart because I wasn't beautiful like my mother or my aunts.

If you want to know a beautiful woman, it was my aunt. She was the girlfriend of Bill Banner. That's why my mother wouldn't have anything to do with her. He was the man who left six million in cash and owned the Banner Building. She divorced her last husband; she was the disgrace of the family--that is, as far as my mother was concerned. She had a big apartment house and she was self-sufficient and self-supporting, but Bill Banner was her boyfriend. I went to see Bill Banner after my aunt died. She died in 1947. She was never allowed to come in our house, not as long as my mother was alive, and she asked my father not to let my mother come to

her funeral. Papa thought that was a little far fetched, so she went. Bill Banner was an old cowboy, by the way, and he was crazy about my father. I went out to see him. He said, "Tommy, if I had my life to live again, I'd marry Susie had I known that I would have outlived her." I said, "Well, I'll be damned!" He said, "Yep, always did say no woman was going to get my money. I know that no one would have wanted me, they'd just want my money." That was the truth because he was the ugliest thing on earth. He said that he would have traveled and spent some of his money. He was in a wheel chair by then. That was my aunt. When she was a decent woman she was allowed in the house. She used to come daily and she'd say, "Kate, how in the world did you have two such ugly things? Tommy, come here, don't ever grin, that mouth would stop a clock, just like that nasty stinking Tom Powers." Finally I got tired of listening to that. The family had one thing, beauty; the girls were beautiful and so were the boys, and that grandmother had twelve! One day my mother said that she wished that I would say something to Sue to shut her up because it was getting gruesome to hear her say that she had two ugly children. We were both ugly Irishmen. So, I said I would if she promised not to punish me or tell Papa. She said that she would give me a prize if I would. So when she came, she started in on me. I said, "Well, Sue, I will always be glad that I wasn't born with the Pipkin beauty and that I had the Powers brains. Beauty soon fades but brains don't." Then Mother told me to leave the room.

I got my brains from my papa. He never spent but one day in school. I got my memory from him; I always remember. He worked in the grocery store and filled orders all day long without ever writing it down. I couldn't read print and I went all the way through school without reading a book.

I made straight A's. I never turned in a paper and since I always made 100's on the tests they couldn't fail me. I went through college like that. I had to get glasses because I couldn't see mold on bananas. My Papa told me it was good to be smart, but let others find out without telling them. I have a degree. I graduated cum laude and never read a book. My father did my sister's geometry without ever knowing how. The teachers had never seen that formula and haven't seen it since, but it worked, and my sister got the credit for it. I graduated in three years. He never looked at our grades, he looked at our department grades.