

OPUNTIA 477



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Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

THE FLOWERS OF CHEZ OPUNTIA

photos by Dale Speirs

We had a late spring this year and many flowers were a couple of weeks behind, not opening until the third week of June. The cover and at right are *Clematis tangutica* growing up the side of my house.

Below is a mutant form of *Gaillardia aristata*. The normal flower is supposed to look like a daisy. Both these species are native to southern Alberta.



Vicia americana, a native legume commonly known as purple vetch.



Rosa acicularis
is the official
floral emblem
of Alberta. I
have a hedge of
them along my
front sidewalk.



AROUND ALBERTA
photos by Dale Speirs

I'm still publishing JOURNAL OF ALBERTA POSTAL HISTORY, available as free pdfs from www.academia.edu. Think of it as my other zine. On June 24, I drove about an hour northeast of Calgary to the Torrington-Wimborne district, about which I am currently working on their postal history. More about Torrington in a future issue, but I'll show the hamlet of Wimborne here, as well as the completely extinct settlement of Mayton, which was about 10 km to the west of Wimborne.

At right is all that remains of Mayton, an historical marker on a side road out in the country. Below is the main street of Wimborne, actually Highway 805.



Looking east from Highway 805 just south of Wimborne. Beautiful country.



SPAGHETTI SCI-FI

by Dale Speirs

Among other activities to keep myself busy during the pandemic shutdown, I watched a lot of movies on DVD boxed sets. Can't go out walking all the time, or read continuously, or get sore ears listening on a headset to old-time radio shows. The boxed sets of 20 or 50 movies have a few good ones, many average ones, and some terrible films.

Once the first two categories were taken care of, that left the ones that probably don't even air on cable television anymore, if they ever did. As I went through them, I sorted them out by groups, one of which I present herewith, the Italian science fiction movies. They were pale imitations of American movies, with a surge of Star Wars copycats near the end.

Particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a flood of Italian science fiction movies churned out for the international television market. They were performed in Italian, then dubbed into other languages. Quality was an option with these movies, which by and large are preserved only in 50-movie DVD boxed sets.

The 1960s.

ATOM AGE VAMPIRE was a 1960 black-and-white movie written by Gino De Santis, Alberto Bevilacqua, and Anton Giulio Majano. My copy is on the 50-movie DVD boxed set "Horror Classics" from Mill Creek Entertainment. It ranked with the better B-movies of the 1950s in the USA, with a reasonably logical story played well. The actors did tend to over-emote.

Dr Alberto Levin was the mad scientist in question. He had an interest in radiation burns and was working on serums to restore scarred skin. His serum required an extract from young women who were understandably reluctant to supply samples.

He had two lab assistants. Sascha was a mute who had no hunchback but certainly fulfilled the role of an Igor. Levin frequently beat him but Sascha had no place else to live so he had to suffer. The other lab assistant was Monique Riviere, good looking and in unrequited love with Levin. She was insecure because she had reached the time of life when people referred to her as a woman of a certain age.

A once beautiful stripper Jeanette Moreneau, whose face was scarred in a car crash, was brought to him for treatment. The first dose of serum, from a small aliquot donated by Riviere, worked briefly before reverting. Levin had obviously fallen in love with Moreneau, which was much resented by Riviere, who refused to donate more extract for a fresh batch of serum.

Levin took it anyway, killing her in the process. After that, he had to go out and find more women to maintain the supply. He could not get the serum to stabilize. The police were soon involved as dead women littered the streets. Levin could not kill in his normal condition, so he shot himself full of serum to turn into a grotesque monster hard-hearted enough to kill. Afterwards he reverted back into his normal self.

Levin and Moreneau were opposites in their response to the serum. He began having problems after several injections when it took longer and longer to revert to his human self. She spurned his love, which angered him because he had done it all for her.

The police kept poking around and dropping by for social calls that were obviously reconnaissance, so he could see the walls closing in on him. The ending was predictable. Levin's final run-amok went poorly and stirred up a hue-and-cry. In the final confrontation, he abused Sascha once too often, who stabbed him in the back.

It wasn't a bad movie in the sense of a 1950s quickie with poor writing and worse SFX. The movie was middle of the road, not to be made fun of but neither rising above the herd. It was certainly better than many of its Italian successors.

ASSIGNMENT: OUTER SPACE was a 1960 movie written by Vassilij Petrov, available on the 50-movie DVD boxed set "Sci-Fi Classics" from Mill Creek Entertainment. In the year 2116, ace reporter Ray Peterson was assigned aboard a space station.

He and The Commander (no name given) got into a testosterone fueled feud over Lucy, the station's botanist and navigator. An odd combination, but since the space station was in a stable orbit there wouldn't be much work for a navigator to do, while the plants, a rack of African violets, provided the station with its oxygen. As a professional horticulturist, I can assure you that the tray of plants shown wouldn't generate enough oxygen to keep a mouse alive.

Continuing with the oddities, Peterson worked for a newspaper. Yes, a newspaper in 2116, and had been assigned a breaking scoop about “*infra-radiation flux in Galaxy M12*”. Why this would require him to travel up to a space station instead of just doing a telephone interview with an astronomer was never explained. Somehow this didn’t seem to be a translation error from the original Italian dialogue.

Stranger yet, all those launched from Earth, including Peterson, were first placed into hibernation until they made orbit. The suspended animation was said to be necessary because of Earth’s gravity, a nonsense phrase. Nor did they dock with the space station. Instead, the shuttle parked 2,000 feet away (as stated by Peterson). The crew spacewalked to the station “*in order not to disturb its calculated orbit*”.

Peterson narrated more than he spoke dialogue with the crew. Presumably it was cheaper than trying to synchronize dubbed English with lip movements. He described a refueling accident of a Mars ship, involving a flaming meteorite and a broken fuel line that cost the ship 500 gallons of hydrogen, not the normal way of describing rocket fuel quantities.

Peterson and the other lead characters transferred to the Mars spaceship, which went roaring out into space. Its engines burned continuously with the tips of the flames going sideways, indicating the SFX technicians who filmed it suspended the model on its side. In other movies with smarter techies, rockets in space would be filmed upside-down to keep a straight exhaust flame, with the camera turned 90° to make them look horizontal.

Peterson whined that the crew made him feel like an outsider. Since he served no useful purpose and was only taking up room, air, and delta vector fuel, they had good reason to think so. En route to Mars, they met a derelict spaceship, its fuel tanks ruptured and out of control. Efforts to save them failed and those doomed astronauts smashed into Mars.

The Mars impact SFX consisted of, in quick flashes that the producer obviously hoped the audience wouldn’t see too well:

- 1) a gasoline fireball in a parking lot, with a parked car at right of screen and a warehouse at left. This quick flash wasn’t quick enough; the car could be seen.
- 2) a camera zoom into a mud puddle
- 3) coal pouring out of a chute, inverted and played backward to look as if it was exploding upward.

I think this was the worst SFX of all time in motion picture history. Ed Wood was never as bad as that.

Landing on Mars, the other spaceship sat down in a boiling mud pit. The spaceship settled at an angle but The Commander wasn’t worried. He said the gyroscopes would compensate. He was correct, since they launched back up into space in a straight vertical line even though the spaceship went up at an angle. However, since the flames were still shooting out at an angle they apparently counter-thrust enough to lift the ship straight up.

All that was the prelude. The real excitement began when Spaceship Alpha Two entered the inner solar system out of control, its crew dead, and its photon generators stuck on full blast. The ship was bound for Earth and generating enough heat to cook the planet, so the Mars ship was tasked to intercept it.

Attempts to destroy Alpha Two with missiles failed because the heat fried them before they could detonate. Therefore human astronauts were sent. Why not? With a bit of technical mumbo-jumbo they had a plan that just might work. The supporting characters didn’t survive. Peterson, being the hero, almost didn’t make it but was rescued in the nick of time by Lucy and The Commander.

STAR PILOT was a 1966 colour movie written by Pietro Francisci, available on the 50-movie DVD boxed set “Sci-Fi Invasion” from Mill Creek Entertainment.

The plot began with the alien Chaena crashing her spaceship on the island of Sardinia a couple of centuries ago. With no way of repairing it, she and her crew camouflaged the ship and put themselves into suspended animation, waiting for the planet’s technology to catch up so they could make repairs to the ship.

Jumping ahead to 1966, a professor, his beautiful daughter, and three handsome muscular laboratory assistants explored the site. They found the spaceship via a cave, buried under rock. They entered and found themselves in a cavernous control room, unaware they were being watched from elsewhere by Chaena, a beautiful redhead.

After poking around for a while, they went back to their base camp. As soon as they were gone, Chaena revived her fellow crew members. The Professor and his group had trouble at their camp. They were accosted at gunpoint by

Chinese agents. This provided priceless dubbing as the Italian translator tried to imitate a Chinaman speaking English with a Chinese accent.

Some of the alien crew went out to the camp. A three-way battle erupted between the groups. The academics were unarmed, the Chinese had pistols, and the aliens had ray guns. The battle concluded as might be expected. The survivors were rounded up and taken to the spaceship.

Chaena gave them a lecture, which I doubt the men paid full attention to because she was wearing a one-piece suit that covered little of her. She asked for help repairing the ship and got it. So it was that repairs were made and off to space they went. The aliens took both the academics and the Chinese as captives, which forced the two groups into a truce.

Some ridiculous SFX followed, such as a space walk by an alien to repair a broken antenna. He did gymnastics in lieu of weightlessness and without a helmet, although he did have an oxygen tube. His eyes would have frozen shut without a helmet.

Meanwhile the Chinese government sent a rocketship in pursuit, which allowed the insertion of stock shots from Japanese movies. Somewhere along the line, the pursuing Chinese spaceship dropped out of the plot with no explanation, and was never referred to again. Must have run out of stock shots.

A fight broke out on board the alien spaceship, which allowed the two women to stand about barely dressed, while the Italian, Chinese, and alien men brawled. In the confusion, the spaceship veered toward a planet for a rough landing. The view of the planet was a stock shot of the far side of the Moon. Once the ship landed, everyone stepped out onto an oxygenated planet.

The Professor's daughter changed into a fishnet body stocking with a few strategically placed feathers to appease the censor. She put the make on one of the aliens but didn't have a chance to start anything. A swarm of apemen attacked. After zapping them with ray guns, the assorted crew took the ship back into space.

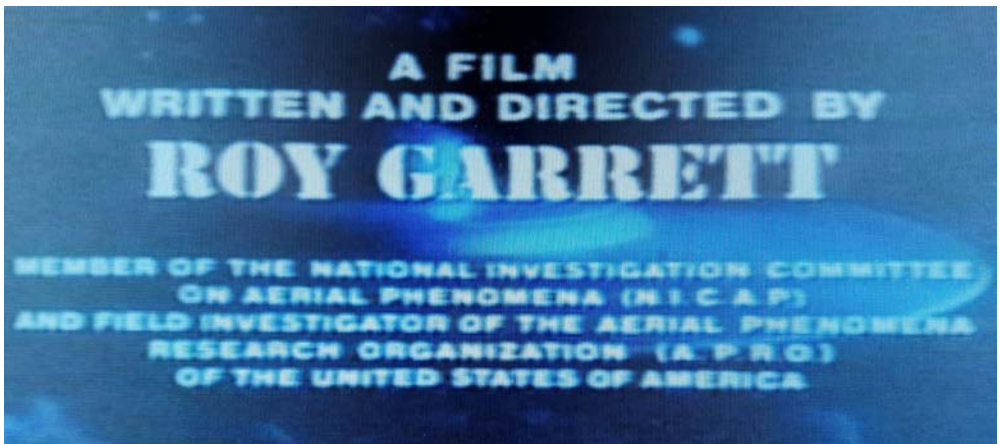
The next alarum was an encounter with a derelict spacecraft. The flight crew were skeletons still inside their spacesuits. Not much came of that but it did give Chaena a chance to show how she looked in tight leather as she made a space walk sans helmet.

Nearing the aliens' home planet, they intercepted views of tsunamis sweeping over their cities. The waves plastering the planet were stock shots from Japanese disaster movies. Upon landing, they found the planet ruined and lifeless from atomic war.

The End. An abrupt finish, the plot crashing into a wall. Chaena sat on the lifeless beach and wailed. Not much more to be said.

UFO Conspiracy Theory.

EYES BEHIND THE STARS was a 1978 movie written by Mario Gariazzo, credited as Ray Garrett. He was evidently a UFO nut as shown by his opening credit. My copy is on the "Sci-Fi Invasion" boxed set.



The dubbing from Italian into English was terrible. Lips continued to move a second or two after the character finished talking. The sound effects were even worse. There were many scenes where characters walked across lawns or natural turf making sounds like they were crunching their way through deep gravel. What was hilarious were the Italian subtitles over English language text of newspaper reports, even though the movie was dubbed into English.

The movie began with a photographer Peter Collins and a model on a photo shoot out in the countryside. Their watches and a portable radio stopped working but they continued nevertheless. Upon returning to his darkroom, the developed photos revealed aliens in the background hiding in the shrubbery.

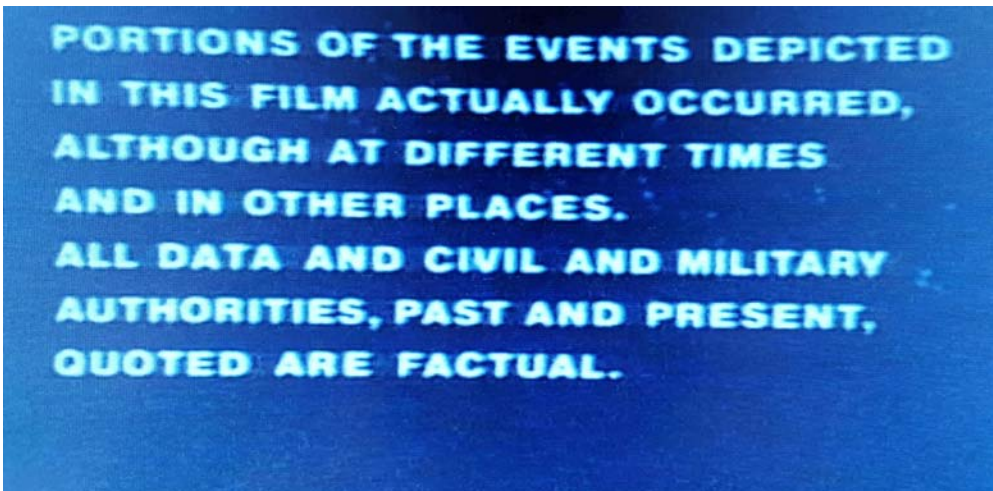
Collins went back to the site that evening and began taking flash photos in the dark. The camera battery failed and his vehicle wouldn't start. He ran to a nearby farmhouse but the telephone stopped working and the electricity failed. He was kidnapped by aliens and taken to their nearby saucer, and it was a saucer, where he was bug-eyed horrified. Then he was laid out on a table and really, really horrified.

The aliens wore heavy flannel suits and domed helmets covered in wool, with smoked glass. This may have been the first science fiction movie to have aliens in woolies, and I mean the kind your auntie knitted for your birthday when you were young.

The model visited Collins' apartment. She had a key, so she let herself in and looked about, finding the photos he had taken. She called a newspaper reporter friend who came out, took the photos, reassured her that everything was under control, and left. Immediately he was out the door, an alien arrived to scoop up the evidence, including her.

Government agents and news reporters swarmed the area. Agents trudged about investigating, while reporters slunk about snooping. The aliens [insert theremin sounds here] back and forth, eradicating all the evidence. Interspersed were infodumps as people lectured each other on the history of UFOs since 1947.

The agents and reporters went to war with each other, while the aliens dropped out of sight. They were most efficient and left nothing behind. The saucer zipped away to wherever it came from. From there to the end credits, including this one:



THE WAR OF THE ROBOTS was a 1978 movie written by Alfonso Brescia and Aldo Crudo, available on the "Sci-Fi Invasion" boxed set. An alien civilization was short of good DNA, so they sent some cyborgs to kidnap top Earth geneticists to help save their species.

The cyborgs wore silver ski suits and identical blond page-boy wigs. On women, page boy haircuts look attractive, but as the cyborgs were all swarthy heavy-set Italian men, they looked silly.

Much talk followed on Earth about the dastardly deed but eventually they sent a warship out after the aliens. En route they had to make an emergency landing on another planet. An away party went out walking into a false-colour forest and thence into a spraycrete cave.

They were quickly kidnapped by barbarian aliens, who in turn were soon disciplined by the page boy aliens. The Earthlings escaped after a ray gun fight with the page boys, which made them friends with the barbarians. The two allies made their way to the page boy planet. This time they fought with flat-bladed light sabres and lost.

They found the geneticists, who had been brainwashed into becoming traitors. The scientists planned to use the Earthlings for experiments. There followed more alarums, excursions, ray gun fights, and the occasional light sabre. Eventually the heroes fought their way back to Earth and more trouble.

The page boys followed, hijacked their ship, more alarums, etcetera. An armada of flying saucers arrived and Earth fighters were busy trying to blow them up. Earth's command-and-control followed them on tactical screens which were obvious video game machines.

Even at 8X fast-forward, the space battle was interminable. Finally a victory. As both the C-and-C and the viewer celebrated, the end credits rolled, and not a moment too soon.

STAR ODYSSEY was a 1979 film written by Alfonso Brescia, Massino Lo Jacona, and Giacomo Mazzocchi. I have it on the Mill Creek Entertainment 20-movie boxed set "Sci Fi Fever". This was a sequel to the robots movie which re-used most of the special effects.

The basic plot was the alien overlord Kress and his merry band of page boy cyborgs trying to kidnap humans to sell as slaves to other aliens. The economics of interstellar slavery are not believable. Any civilization with robots and starships does not need human slaves to do any manual labour.

When Kress' ship attacked Earth, the stock shots of exploding buildings were in black-and-white, despite the movie being colour. The explosions were obviously clipped from World War Two newsreel footage. For its defence, Earth relied on a mad scientist who had a beautiful niece (not daughter). As mad scientists went, he was nuttier than most. He was assisted by a mobile garbage bin dressed up as a poor man's R2-D2.

Much talking and little action dominated the movie. Occasionally Kress showed up but he did little except gloat in the manner that evil overlords so often do. For no reason whatsoever, a boxing match between a human and a robot was inserted. It was played for comedy, the main element being that the referee was frequently and accidentally slugged by both combatants.

Serious battle was finally joined in a dark forest near the mad scientist's laboratory. The cyborgs fought with flat-bladed light sabres and sparkly phasers. Kress got huffy and went back to his flying saucer parked nearby. The Earthlings attacked the spaceship with the most inept swordplay ever screened but made it inside. Kress managed to evict them and took off for Earth orbit.

That set the stage for a space battle between plastic models. The Earth fighters moved slowly in straight lines and were easily vapourized by the aliens. Evasive maneuvers were apparently not remembered from the previous movie. After all the supporting actors and extras were blown up, the leading man got in a lucky shot and blew up Kress' saucer. Once more Italy, and the world, were made safe.

Then Came Star Wars.

WAR OF THE PLANETS was a 1977 movie written by Alfonso Brescia and Aldo Crudo, available on the "Sci-Fi Classics" boxed set. The title is usually prefixed with COSMOS: in most references but this was not in the opening credits of the movie. The Italian title was ANNO ZERO: GUERRA NELLO SPAZIO. You don't have to know Italian to figure out the direct translation was "Year Zero: War In Space". The SFX and stage sets were recycled many times in future Italian sci-fi flicks.

The movie opened with a spacecraft buzzing about. The crew monitored a massive explosion and flurry of asteroids aimed directly at the ship. They panicked but the SFX proved to be optical illusions. The ship's computer, an artificial intelligence named Wiz, told them the explosion happened 10 million years ago. On that puzzling note, the ship returned to Earth.

The movie jumped about with no logical pattern. The captain of the ship, Mike Hamilton, reported to the command-and-control centre where he punched a fellow officer. His disciplinary trial let him off on a technicality and he resumed his command. The ship went back out into space.

Their first task was to repair a broken satellite, which was good for a dramatic rescue of an astronaut who botched the job. An abrupt change followed as futuristic romance was depicted with mind melding. This disgusted Hamilton, who preferred his sex the old-fashioned way.

Next up was a visit to an alien planet where they got into a fight with two flying saucers. After disposing of them, they made a bad landing on the planet. They were not alone, as underground there was a humanoid society enslaved by an evil computer. It was easy to tell the aliens because they had steel blue or metallic bronze skins.

This set the stage for running battles against the evil computer, culminating with an explosion that destroyed the planet and the aliens. As a man said decades ago, we had to destroy the village to save it.

The Earth ship headed for home. All was well, except that Wiz suddenly began using the voice of the evil computer. "*Estimated time of touchdown is 30 hours, Earthling*", it sneered just as the end credits began to roll.

STARCRAASH was a 1979 movie written and directed by Luigi Cozzi, who used Lewis Coates as his English pseudonym. I picked up this movie in the bargain bin as a DVD single. It was part of a series called "Roger Corman's Cult Classics" but he had nothing to do with producing it. Considering the movies he made, his recommendations weren't worth much.

The main attraction of this movie was the beautiful Caroline Munro playing the heroine Stella Star, who spent most of the film in a battle bikini. She couldn't act in amateur dramatics at a village fete, but this didn't matter with her spectacular body in bikinis throughout the movie.

In a supporting role was an up-and-coming young actor named David Hasselhoff. In the 1978 December issue of STARLOG magazine about the movie, he mentioned the problems of doing an Italian movie where only the director and a few actors spoke English, labour strife was everywhere, and he had two attacks of food poisoning. He said Munro had to be taught how to stage fight but she learned so well that she rendered two stuntmen *hors de combat* during the filming.

Half the SFX were reasonably good for the 1970s but the space scenes were from the 1950s, except they were in bright primary colours instead of black-and-white. Some of the robot warriors were low resolution stop-motion effects.

The dubbing left much to be desired. Munro's British accent was replaced by an American woman's harsh flat voice, even though they were both speaking English. The captain of the stormtroopers spoke like Goober Pyle, which robbed him of any air of authority he may have had. It would be like Darth Vader speaking with Elmer Fudd's voice.

The opening scene showed a giant warship cruising in space. As it went past the camera its name was shown, the Murray Leinster. (This was the *nom de plume* of science fiction writer William Fitzgerald Jenkins.) One of the characters was Major Bradbury, and there were other subtle fannish jests in the movie. Evidently someone on the production crew was a fan having his little inside jokes.

The warship approached a planet and was attacked by ball lightning as it made orbit. It crashed but three lifeboats escaped. Jump cut to smugglers Stella Star and her sidekick Akton, who were run in by the Imperial Space Police and later sentenced to life at hard labour.

They were offered clemency by the Emperor if they helped him bring the evil Count Zarth Arn to heel. You could tell this was a Star Wars ripoff because while the Count looked like Mephistopheles, he also had Princess Leia buns.

There followed three bouts of collecting plot coupons, with many alarums, excursions to different planets, and assorted space battles. Mostly I ran this movie at 8X fast-forwardi. Her first stop was to a planet of Amazon women in league with the Count. Star got into a martial arts fight with a batch of them. The fight choreography was terrible.

After escaping the planet, Star went on to a snow-covered planet, like none you've ever seen except in a Star Wars movie. Back up into space to visit more planets and more space battles.. One battle inside a cave was illuminated by light sabres. Nothing to do with that other movie. These sabres didn't have a deep hum. When they clashed, they went 'patooie' and 'ding-ding'.

One final battle in space, with everything in primary colours. She helped save the Empire and the Count was dispatched. All hail the Emperor! That proved this movie wasn't a Star Wars copy.

Going back to the "Sci-Fi Invasion" boxed set, we find ESCAPE FROM GALAXY 3, written by John Thomas and produced in Italy. All of the space scenes and not a few other SFX were stock shots taken from STARCRAH. The women didn't wear bikinis but preferred one-piece suits cut very salaciously. However there were nude love scenes for the voyeur.

The plot was one king invading another king's galaxy. Neither Thomas nor the production staff understood what a galaxy is, and probably presumed neither did their audience know. From the various kings roaming about, what was meant were star systems.

The good king Ceylon had his empire attacked by the bad king Oraclon. Princess Belle Star, the beautiful daughter of Ceylon (as usual, no sign of her mother), fell in love with Capt. Lithan of the Space Guard. Oraclon was successful in the early stages of the war, so the young couple fled to what was eventually determined to be a post-atomic war Earth sunk into savagery.

Most of the action took place on Earth, it being cheaper for stage sets. Numerous back-and-forth alarums, culminating in the natives recognizing that perhaps Lithan and Belle weren't such bad folk after all. Oraclon was still lurking about, so the action went back into space for more stock shots.

Oraclon was momentarily successful and began bwah-ha!-ha!-ing after he captured the couple. He also had quite the collection of kings, held as hostages. He bwahed too soon. Lithan vapourized him and freed all the prisoners.

The evil empire fell and the good empire triumphed. Nothing was said about the possibility of a democratic republic with an elected government. The happy couple decided to honeymoon on Earth.

Rather boring. There was no indication about the relationship between Stella Star and Belle Star. Belle was younger than Stella, so she might have been a niece.

On the “Sci-Fi Invasion” boxed set from Mill Creek Entertainment was a 1988 movie TOP LINE, written by Roberto Gianviti and Nello Rossati and dubbed into English slightly better than usual. The protagonist was an author Ted Angelo, who found an alien spacecraft in the jungles of Columbia.

Angelo wanted the world to know of his great discovery and realized too late that the wrong kind of people had become interested in him. He was soon on the run from government agencies, drug lords, ordinary gangsters, conspiracy theorists, Indiana Jones-type archaeologists, guerilla fighters, Nazi war criminals, his publisher, and other unfriendly people.

The movie took quite some time to get going but eventually arrived in the jungle and thence inside a cave where the aliens had parked their saucer. How it got inside was a mystery, but the batteries were still good because wires sparked when Angelo bumped against them.

Returning to the city, where he blabbed all, many alarums and excursions followed. Most of them involved Angelo fleeing on foot from the aforesaid unfriendly people. You can fast-forward those scenes at 32X.

More interesting was a truck chase down a mountain road. Angelo had hitched a ride on a farm truck carrying chickens and eggs to market when one of the unfriendly men came after him in a bigger truck. After much fender banging and close calls, Angelo used his wits and threw a box of eggs onto the windshield of the pursuer just as they turned a sharp curve along a deep cliff.

The aliens arrived, having resented Angelo’s tomfoolery. They sent a humanoid robot after him, a clear theft from the Terminator series. This led to another fast-forward foot chase which ended in a bullfighting arena. The robot crossed paths with a bull and learned that four-legged beasts are stronger than humans or robots. Then another robot, which Angelo disposed of with a fire axe.

Finally a real alien had a chat with him. It was nasty and slimy with surprisingly good SFX. I didn’t know Italian film makers had it in them. The alien spoke a long infodump before trying to kill Angelo. His girlfriend of the moment shot

the being with a spear gun. All was well, and ended well in the jungle, where Angelo was typing up his adventures for his next bestseller. A happy ending for the survivors, if not for the aliens. A fair to middling movie, copied from a mediocre videotape.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

by Dale Speirs

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2020 was the 27th year of the WWP. Not quite as joyful as previous years, but still possible to celebrate.

At 21h00 Mountain Daylight Time, I faced to the east and toasted those in fandom and zinedom who had already celebrated. Then north and south to those in my time zone. Finally I faced to the west to toast those who would celebrate in an hour.

Certainly a different time to be celebrating the World Wide Party. The Year of the Virus was an opportunity to catch up on all those books, DVDs, and downloads, publish zines, and reflect on what a science fictional world we live in. We’ll meet again some sunny day.

SERIES DETECTIVES: PART 8

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #402, 406, 425, 448, 459, 467, and 472.]

The old-time radio series mentioned here are available as free mp3 downloads from www.otrrlibrary.org or www.archive.org. I've been listening to a lot of these during the pandemic.

Nick Carter.

NICK CARTER, MASTER DETECTIVE aired on old-time radio from 1943 to 1955. The detective first appeared in print in 1886, predating Sherlock Holmes, and often appeared on stage and in movies. Nick Carter appeared in his own pulp magazines and dime novels.

The police seldom appeared in the series. Carter had boundless confidence in his ability and came across as arrogant to all, including his secretary/girlfriend Patsy Bowen. He had his own laboratory, a huge library, and kept better files than the FBI.

"The Echo Of Death" was a 1943 episode. Credits were given to everyone but the writer. The locale was Echo Valley, the private playground of millionaire Howard Mansted. He flew Nick Carter and Patsy Bowen to his lair to investigate the disappearance of a financial reporter named Jim Furlow, who had been on the trail of a scandal.

As they arrived, they saw another airplane. It commenced evasive maneuvers and tried to elude them. They gave chase, causing it to crash. The pilot bailed out into the woods. They landed and pursued on foot, and found him dangling dead from his parachute. Strangely, he had been murdered. Someone else on the ground reached him first. Mansted said he had no idea who the pilot was or why he had been flying in the valley. Mrs Furlow was at the lodge and under sedation.

Furlow's hat was found in the bush. His footprints were found leading to an abandoned cabin. The cabin was sealed but Carter and Mansted managed to force the door with an axe. Furlow's body was inside, apparently a suicide with a revolver. It was a locked room mystery of the wilderness. There was a cryptic note but no one could read it.

Mansted had said he hadn't flown in until after Furlow disappeared. Carter was later told by Mrs Furlow that Mansted had actually arrived earlier by train to the village, then telephoned the lodge for his groundskeeper Johnny to pick him up. She had also heard a hammering noise but couldn't localize it.

Much running about the valley by Carter, while Bowen and Mrs Furlow tried to decipher Jim's notes. The women decided to visit the cabin for more clues and therefore more easily endanger themselves when the murderer trapped them there.

Mansted was the killer. For a change of scenery, he told them he was going to throw them down an old abandoned mineshaft and make their deaths look like hiking accidents. Carter showed up just in time to shoot Mansted dead and save the prosecutor the cost of a trial.

The last six minutes were a litany of explanations and tying off loose threads. The dead pilot had been working for Mansted and was silenced by Johnny. The hammering noise was actually Mansted sealing up the cabin after staging Furlow's suicide. The sound echoed all the way down the valley to the lodge.

After everyone explained the plot to each other, it was on to the organ music and the end credits.

"A Cat Brings Death" was a 1944 episode written by Jock Macgregor. It began loudly as NYPD Lieutenant Riley ranted to Nick Carter about having to release a prisoner named Scully due to lack of admissible evidence for a string of jewelry thefts.

Riley's rants were doubly annoying because they were not only loud but in a stage Irish accent that even back then was too, too phony. He mentioned in passing that another suspect was Reba Dodge. The Commissioner was giving Riley a hard time because of the lack of progress in the investigation. The former's aunt Mrs Dudley Banks next arrived to inform Riley that her prize Persian cat Fluffy had been stolen.

She expected immediate action by the full resources of the NYPD. Stage accent or no, the listener will sympathize with Riley. Carter sympathized and volunteered to take the catnapping case. At the Banks mansion, the butler Carrington introduced Carter as "*A police person, Madam*". The interview was as hilarious as it was unproductive.

However Carter did learn that a young woman Miss Conroy had visited the house just before the feline snatch. He tracked her address but it was a vacant lot. Failing that, he went to a restaurant.

In an improbable coincidence, the waitress Katie told Carter of a physical fight she had in a butcher's shop with another woman, who happened to match Conroy's description. This was in the midst of wartime rationing, and meat was scarcer than toilet paper in a coronavirus pandemic, hence the struggle.

Katie knew the woman lived in the Mecca Apartments nearby. Away Carter went, and discovered the woman's name was Reba Dodge. He barged his way in and found her and Fluffy. A moment later her boyfriend Scully arrived. It turned out that she had been casing the Banks mansion for him to later rob. He blabbed to her how the robbery succeeded but they had to shoot Carrington. Carter stepped forward and tried to detain Scully but lost the fight.

They took him hostage at gunpoint using Carter's gun and prepared to depart. Dodge picked up Fluffy on the way out. No one was more surprised than Scully to see that she had a cat, as he hadn't been to her apartment since before the robbery. But he put up with the critter. Their partner in crime Jake was waiting at the curb in the getaway car.

The next stop was the hideout of another robber Sabin. The gang were nonplussed at how calm Carter was. He should be, as when he was left alone a moment with Jake he quickly neutralized him and got his gun back. As the listener would have already guessed from Carter's demeanor, he knew the gun was unloaded and was just playing along.

The rest was details. Patsy Bowen had been completely absent from the episode until the last five minutes. She then assumed her standard "*And then what happened?*" role as Carter explained everything.

Barrie Craig.

BARRIE CRAIG, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATOR was probably the only private detective series whose star had actually been a private detective in real life. William Gargan had worked in an investigator's office as a young man, and professed amusement at how script writers depicted private detectives at variance with the real ones.

This series aired from 1951 to 1955. Craig narrated most of each episode. The plots often tangled up, but there were several summations during each episode so the listener wouldn't get lost. The episodes are worth listening to once, and the series grows on the listener.

"Mid-Summer Lunacy" was a 1954 episode written by John Roeburt. Linda Paris hired Craig to investigate her boyfriend Stewart Stoner, whom she thought was after her money. They were both staying at a resort hotel. Stoner was allegedly of Milwaukee society, so Craig went off to that fair city to verify the facts.

The news was the Stoner family did not exist, so Stewart was a masquerader. However Craig was thorough, and checked out Paris' credentials as well. She was equally a fake. She sadly admitted she was a manicurist named Mary Ranfurel. They were both fortune hunters.

At her request, Craig surveilled Stoner, a big spender who lost \$6,000 gambling with Lou Latimer, a man Craig recognized as a professional card shark. Stoner was beyond his depth. What puzzled Craig was why Latimer was accepting IOUs from his mark. Latimer screened his prey and had to know that Stoner was a paper hanger.

Craig talked with Stoner. The conversation didn't go well, and went worse when Stoner had some sort of seizure. After he came out of it, a woman named Margo Swift arrived to help him, obviously romantically involved.

Back in his hotel room, Craig found an eviction notice from the hotel management which he ignored. Someone slugged him while he was sleeping and then threw him in a nearby slough. The hotel manager was unfriendly and uncooperative after Craig made his way back to the hotel.

The next morning Craig had another conversation, this time with Latimer. The conversation didn't go well, this time ending when Craig accused Latimer of attempted murder and slugged him.

Ranfurel prepared to leave after talking with Stoner. She told Craig that she knew Latimer and Swift were connected and were working a con on Stoner. A bit of burglary in Stoner's room suggested that he was a serial killer, but Craig figured the evidence was planted. Stoner was evidently a faker but apparently a rich faker.

The denouement was a wedding ceremony between Swift and Stoner. The preacher got a shock when he reached the traditional request of the congregation that if anyone should know why this union should not take place, speak now or forever hold your peace. Craig stood up and loudly did not hold his peace.

There was a sudden jump cut to Craig and Ranfurel driving back to the city. They chatted about the final details. Stoner was really the missing heir Fabian Carlisle, who didn't know the danger he had been in. His seizures were a byproduct of amnesia. Latimer and Swift had found out and were exploiting him.

Various other loose threads in the plot were simply ignored. Craig advised Ranfurel to find a nice man and have eight children. Such a brood would keep her too busy to worry about what might have been. Not politically correct today of course.

“Rich Ritchie” was a 1955 episode, no writer credited. Barrie Craig was paid \$1,000 by wealthy Natalie Simpson for helping out her husband Ritchie, who seemed accident prone. For \$4,000 more, he agreed to act as Ritchie's companion and guardian. Ritchie was a handful. Craig consulted with a doctor about Ritchie's physical clumsiness, with a brother who insisted Ritchie was strong as an ox but always conniving, and a father-in-law whose veracity Craig doubted.

Craig returned to the Simpson penthouse to find that Ritchie had taken an 18-story dive. Supposedly he had stumbled over a balcony railing. The death wasn't suicide or accidental. Someone had been feeding him drugs to destabilize him. Natalie was not a grieving widow.

The marriage had been arranged by Ritchie using blackmail against both Natalie and her father over some sharp practices they had indulged in. Blackmailers have a high mortality rate caused by their victims, and this was no exception. The ending seemed rushed, as Craig reached all his conclusions in a bunch.

Boston Blackie.

BOSTON BLACKIE aired on old-time radio from 1944 to 1950, and was also a series of 14 movies. His real name was Horatio Black but everyone, including his girlfriend Mary Wesley, called him Blackie. The radio shows are leavened with humour and quips. Writers were not credited, although the actors were.

Blackie had been a jewel thief in Boston and was supposedly reformed now that he lived in New York City. Supposedly, because he had no day job and took no fees as an amateur detective, yet lived well in a nice apartment and squired Wesley around to the fanciest nightclubs.

Blackie's nemesis was NYPD Homicide Inspector Farraday. The name was originally spelt in the usual way with one 'r' but after the series got going for some reason the extra letter was added.

In the early episodes of the series, Farraday would arrest Blackie on sight, then gather evidence to fit him. Over time their relationship moderated to being sparring partners. Blackie liked to barge into hot cases and race Farraday to the solution, while Farraday always had the snappiest lines.

One amusing aspect of the series was the berserk organist who provided all the music. Scenes were punctuated, and that is the correct word, by abrupt chords on the organ. Dramatic lines spoken by the cast were followed by crescendos, although the opening and closing themes were more sedate.

“The Caretaker Of The Devon Estate” was a 1944 episode, with no writer credited. It began in the traditional manner of the early series with Farraday arresting Boston Blackie for the murder of the aforesaid caretaker. Blackie was framed by falsified evidence, one piece of which was blood stains on his coat. At that point there was a pause for a commercial extolling the virtues of Rinso detergent, guaranteed to make your clothes fresh as new.

Coming back to the script, it was fortunate no one could see the faces of the actors. It must have been difficult keeping a straight face after listening to the commercial. Everyone waited for the lab tests, no Rinso having been used. The results matched the stains to the dead caretaker. Blackie made a run for it and began investigating to clear his name.

His coat had been in the care of a hat-check girl named Marian Mason at the nightclub where he had been just before his arrest. Arriving at her apartment, he found her body. His next stop was the Devon Estate, where he chatted with Polly Morrison, who had recently bought the estate from the late John Devon.

She mentioned that since she bought the property, unknown intruders had been ransacking various rooms as if looking for something. The caretaker had slept in the living room while on guard and been murdered. Morrison said she had

received a preemptive offer from another buyer for both the estate and a gun collection that Devon had owned and which had been hidden in the house.

The intruders returned, rendering the guards unconscious and drugging Morrison. Farraday arrived to arrest Blackie (again) for the murder of Mason. However Blackie was vindicated when the intruders entered the room and held up Farraday.

Several alarms later, Blackie was on the trail of the real estate agent who had handled the estate sale. That man claimed it was a client named Parker Adams who was the other buyer, who had suddenly emigrated to South America five years previously due to a misunderstanding with local law about a murder.

Blackie pieced things together. Devon had the gun Adams used in the murder and was blackmailing him. There was no better place to hide a gun than in a gun collection. Parker Adams had returned in person.

The final confrontation between the two men was a lengthy dialogue during which all the loose threads were tied off and an infodump took care of the background details. Once all the details were expounded, a few fisticuffs and gunshots concluded the action. A rather talkative ending.

“Murder In The Music Room” was a 1945 episode set in Tin Pan Alley. Two songwriters Dick Alten and Bill Rutley were squabbling after a long string of failed songs.

Jump cut to Boston Blackie telling his girlfriend Mary Wesley he was reluctant to take her cousin’s song to music publisher Joe Hendricks for fear of losing his friendship. Since Blackie hoped for more from her, he reluctantly agreed, which gave him an opportunity to sing (badly) as he tried out the song.

Their visit to Hendricks was marred by Alten’s murder in a rehearsal room next door. Inspector Farraday followed his standard procedure of picking a suspect and then gathering evidence to fit her, in this case, Mrs Rutley. Blackie went sleuthing. He learned from Rutley that the two songwriters had \$100,000 life insurance on each other since they operated as a legal partnership. Rutley mentioned a bit of gossip about Alten and Hendricks’ wife.

Farraday and Blackie tangled, mostly trading barbed comments and quips. Their conversation began with Blackie barging into the police station and saying

he’d like Farraday to listen to him. Farraday replied “*I don't even want to look at you*”. The conversation went downhill from there.

Blackie visited Rutley’s bank. Posing as Farraday, he got a look at the Rutley joint chequing account and learned that the Mrs had drawn it down in regular large amounts. Possible blackmail? The cheques were paid to a nightclub owner. Blackie then posed as the bank manager and telephoned the owner, who verified that Mrs Rutley was a regular in his casino.

A J’accuse! meeting was staged, at which point Blackie pulled a rabbit out of a hat. He introduced new evidence, a scrap of paper upon which the dying man had written Mrs Rutley's name in musical code. She gasped, tried to run, then confessed all.

A cheat ending with nothing left but tying up the loose ends. Alten had seen the Mrs gambling in a cheap nightclub and threatened to expose her. After Farraday took her away, Blackie made his own confession, that the scrap of paper was a fake to bluff Mrs Rutley.

Bulldog Drummond.

BULLDOG DRUMMOND was based on the novels by H.C. McNeile and aired on old-time radio from 1941 to 1949, with a brief revival in 1954. Drummond was a British detective, but the radio series soon moved to America. At that point he seemed to become a paladin, occasionally taking fees as a private detective but often working pro bono. In America he had an assistant named Denny, a blithering idiot Englishman. What they lived on, or why Drummond could act with police powers was never properly explained.

The episodes opened with the sound of footsteps on the waterfront, with the constant boom of fog horns. This was incongruous since most episodes were set inland. The series was generally B-level, worth listening to once. Writers generally were not credited.

“A Study In Mink” was a 1942 episode, no writer credited. Anthony Wynn, an old friend of Bulldog Drummond, opened an amusement park somewhere on the eastern seaboard. Unfortunately he finished a roller coaster ride dead while testing it. His daughter Isabel called Capt. Drummond because she didn’t accept the police verdict that he’d died of a heart attack. One suspect mentioned by Isabel was Carlson, the operator of a nearby oyster bar. Take note of that.

Miller, the carnival barker, found the body. Take note of him. Drummond and his assistant Denny determined that Wynn had been forced onto the ride at the time he died. With Isabel, the two men rode a tunnel of love. Inside the tunnel, someone took shots at them. They noticed two peculiarities. The boats were seaworthy, and Carlson's yacht offshore was flashing lights in an obvious code.

Further investigation revealed some of Carlson's oysters were sold with the shells intact to preferred buyers, that is, drug addicts. Inside each oyster was a small packet of narcotic. Carlson took the men and Isabel captive on board the yacht. Miller was his accomplice.

Carlson decided to kill Drummond and Denny with an elaborate method involving anchor chains on his ship. He wanted their deaths to look accidental, as if they had been caught by the chains as the yacht raised anchor.

Isabel bashed Carlson's head in and freed the two men. A refreshing change from the usual heroine screaming helplessly. The epilogue explained all the loose threads, except why Isabel spoke with an English accent even though she was American born and raised.

"Death On The Diamond" was a 1945 episode which began at a minor league baseball game between the hometown Green Wings and the visiting Blue Jays, part of a three-game championship series. Drummond and Denny were in the stands, with Drummond patiently explaining the game to Denny.

The Blue Jays were at bat and had loaded the bases. The Green Wings substituted their pitcher by taking out Roberts and putting in Johnson to try and stop the rally. Instead, a sniper stopped Johnson with a rifle shot.

No police detectives around, so Drummond went into the locker room and grilled everyone. The team manager Benson didn't know of a reason why Johnson should have been targeted. Motive was the main problem because Johnson was well liked. Drummond thought betting might have been the reason but his underworld contacts didn't know of any gangsters who bothered with minor league baseball.

Johnson's best friend was Peavey, with whom Drummond set up an appointment to meet at the ball park in the dark. While staging a re-enactment, someone opened fire on Drummond. He and Denny searched the grandstand rooftop and found a remotely controlled rifle with wires down into the building.

The next game was an away game in Centerville, the Blue Jays home. The train left that night. Leaving the remote-control rifle for someone else to clean up, Drummond and Denny hopped aboard the train and accompanied the team.

Benson told them that Ted Wilson would be the starting pitcher, so they visited him and his wife Rita in their compartment. Wilson was rather nasty to them and nothing was accomplished. No sooner had they left the compartment than Wilson was stabbed to death.

Jump cut to the next game. Another player went down. The doctor said it was heat prostration but Drummond thought otherwise. He and Denny went into the Green Wings locker room and found that the rubbing alcohol had been poisoned. Before they could leave, someone began firing at them. They trapped him inside the locker room after he ran out of ammunition.

It was Peavey. Rita Wilson was escorted into the locker room and between those two, they blabbed everything. They and Ted had put up a big wager on the championship. Ted was willing to throw a game but balked at murder, and so was eliminated by Peavey. Rita was not a bereaved widow.

Another successful case solved. Presumably the Green Wings won the championship but it was never stated thus, so that will be the real mystery.

Rex Saunders.

THE PRIVATE FILES OF REX SAUNDERS aired briefly on radio in 1951, with episodes written by Edward Adamson. It was a successor to the Bulldog Drummond series, with Rex Harrison playing the title role. The theme music was identical. The opening sequence was absolutely the same, with the sound of footsteps, apparently by a man walking in tapshoes, followed by a foghorn.

"A Shocking Still Life" began with Saunders strolling past an art shop and noticing a portrait of a beautiful woman. The artist titled it "The Passing Over". As Saunders admired the painting, a woman accosted him. She was young but had an acid-scarred face. She told him the portrait was her before the incident, then rushed away. Saunders followed her and saw her killed by a hit-and-run driver. The police said her name was Betty Stark.

The veddy English accent of Saunders conflicted with the Greenwich Village environment of New York City. He seemed to be on staff with the police or

acting as a consultant. It was difficult to tell. The artist’s body had been found the previous day floating in the East River. Evidently someone was cleaning out loose ends.

Saunders went back to the art shop but the portrait was gone. The shopkeeper denied it had ever been there. Rather than make a scene, Saunders lurked nearby until the shop closed. The owner came out with a large package, and the pursuit was on.

The pursuit ended at the end of a pier on the waterfront. Saunders and his police driver clattered down the pier talking in normal voices. I write ‘clattered’ because like all characters in all old-time radio shows, they wore tap shoes and their footsteps echoed down the waterfront. Shots were fired but not at them. The art dealer was the target and the perpetrator did not miss. Inside the package was a cheap copy of the Mona Lisa.

Saunders went no further, as he was slugged unconscious. He awoke in the custody of a man who identified himself as a member of the French Sureté, looking for stolen Renoirs. He was definitely out of his jurisdiction but this issue was never addressed.

The chase spread to a Brooklyn warehouse, where a Noo Yawk accented henchman trapped them and then set the warehouse on fire. They got out with a single bound. A bit later they found the painting in another art gallery and confronted the dealer.

She turned out to be the one the henchman worked for. He wasn’t around but she had a gun. The Frenchman arrived and saved them. The Renoir had been painted over with Stark’s portrait so it could be smuggled. After a few but not all loose ends were explained, the orchestra went into a crescendo and the city was once more safe for its citizens.

“Done To Death” began with a woman named Allison asking Rex Saunders for protection against diamond thieves. She was carrying \$200,000 in diamonds, say about \$2,000,000 in today’s depreciated currency. She said she was a courier for a South African mine, bound for a New York City broker. It wasn’t explained why they didn’t provide their own security agents to protect her.

Saunders took her valise, sent her ahead in a taxi as a decoy, and then told his aide Alex to find out what happened to the real Allison. He then tried to shadow

her but a goon interrupted him and stole the valise. What neither the thief or Saunders knew was that it was empty.

Alex reported back that the real Allison was a man who had taken ill during the voyage. His only visitor was the woman, real name Vivian Sears. Saunders had taken the licence plate of her cab and thus found out where she and the diamonds likely were.

It was a rooming house with no diamonds but the body of Steven Allison. Saunders called in Homicide, then resumed investigating with Alex. The chase after Sear soon terminated. She was killed in a serious car accident and the police found the diamonds in the wreckage.

Saunders discarded the diamonds as the motive. A check of records indicated Steven Allison was an engraver by trade. Specifically, printing plates. Following assorted clues, Saunders visited a rural roadside where the goon reappeared and rendered him unconscious. He regained consciousness in time to foil the goon. They were in a fast-moving car which crashed. Guess who the sole survivor was.

A jump cut to the masterminds, who were celebrating the elimination of everyone else, leaving them free to circulate counterfeit pound notes produced from Allison’s plate. They printed the counterfeits in New York City, then packed them into the tires of their car they were shipping over to England. Never celebrate too early, for Saunders survived and ran them in.

Candy Matson.

CANDY MATSON aired from 1949 to 1951, written and produced by Monte Masters. His wife Natalie Park played the title role as a private detective. Candy Matson lived in a penthouse apartment on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco.

She worked alone but was dating SFPD Lieutenant Ray Mallard, whom she married in the final episode. Her sidekick was Rembrandt Watson, a flaming poofter whose role was played seriously. That was unusual for the times. Back then, homosexuality wasn’t just a sin but a felony offense.

“San Juan Bautista” was a 1950 episode set in a mission village. Matson, Watson, and Mallard were enjoying a trip out in the country. Watson provided

an infodump, mentioning the mission was founded in 1797 by the Franciscan Order. To which Mallard sarcastically replied: “*I remember it as though it were yesterday.*”

Upon arrival, they stopped to tour the mission, which was still in use. They hadn’t been there two minutes before the first body was discovered. A young Mexican man was the victim. The priest was shocked. Between the clichéd script and the overacting, the discovery scene was excessively melodramatic. The Mexicans were all “Si, Señor” types, and no middle-aged priest could be that naive.

Mallard was out of his jurisdiction, so the local Deppity Dawgs were called in. Matson was in her jurisdiction, since her private detective licence was good for the entire state. She went snooping.

One of the mission helpers was Miguel Torres. The name Rose Taylor suddenly came up. A newcomer to the village, she had stirred up romantic entanglements with the dead man, Torres, and others. Her actions were suspicious in every way, which led the listener to suspect that she wasn’t the killer.

Every bit of evidence dredged up by Matson pointed to Taylor. After the commercial, Matson accused Torres in a confrontation, who then jumped out a window to his death. A right-angle turn in the plot. The mission priest accused Taylor of being a hussy who caused both deaths. There followed one of the soppiest endings I’ve ever heard. It plumbed pathos to new depths. Skip the last four minutes if you just ate.

“Candy’s Last Case” aired on 1951-04-29. She was perturbed because Ray Mallard had been avoiding her the last few days. Matson began shadowing Mallard. She was accompanied by Watson, who said “*Rather delicious, isn’t it. Ooh, I squirm with intrigue.*”

They shadowed Mallard to a building where he went inside and then came back out with a small box he put in his pocket. After he left, they went into the building to see where he had been. They found a dead man, later identified as Everett Stone.

It wasn’t Mallard’s fault. He refused to elaborate what he was up to and challenged Matson to solve the case. She barged hither and yon. Stone had been a gem dealer. His associate Jennifer Shirley gave Matson some details.

Mallard was somehow connected but he seemed rather jovial about the whole thing, which made Matson angrier and angrier. His good humour suddenly changed when the radio room notified him that Shirley had been murdered.

There was a big diamond in circulation which several people wanted. Matson found a suspect named Finch and herded him into the police station. It was an open-and-shut case. Mallard had two surprises for her. He had just been promoted to Captain. He also had an engagement ring for her and a marriage proposal. She said yes.

“The Fortune Teller” was an audition episode for a revival of the series, aired in 1952. It opened with Candy Matson answering her telephone in what the usual intro for each episode.

The client was the wife of businessman Allison Gray. She said he had been of disturbed mind over the past month and had now gone missing. He had been a rough competitor who had made many enemies, and his wife was afraid it got to him. There was a nephew (hers) named Robert Warnakee. He immediately put the moves on Matson, which she brushed off. Once Matson got her advance payment from Mrs Gray, she went to visit Rembrandt Watson, who had recommended Gray to her.

Watson gave Matson a business card he had glommed from Gray, which was for a palm reader and psychic Madame Natasha. Before going there, Matson visited Ray Mallard, who complained there was a lull in crime and he had nothing to do. San Francisco in 1952, when this episode was recorded, was obviously different from today. On the other hand, Sam Spade had just finished his run and he might have cleaned up the city so well there was nothing for the police to do.

Carrying on, Matson and Watson visited Madame Natasha in disguise. They were greeted by a Peter Lorre lookalike (Matson’s description) who brought them to Madame’s parlour. The seance, conducted in an echo chamber, was a failure that concluded with a woman screaming backstage.

The next day Matson went to visit Mrs Gray, who wasn’t home but her nephew was. He tried for a kiss and got a slug, plus a message for his aunt that the groping would cost her another \$100. Back to Madame’s, this time as herself, but not for a seance.

Snooping about, Matson found the bodies of Mr and Mrs Gray. Peter Lorre and Madame Natasha were revealed to be Warnakee in disguise. Shots were fired, Watson arrived as backup, and justice was served to the murderers.

Warnakee had convinced his uncle to repent and give his money to charities, all of which were fronts set up by the nephew. The uncle found out and had to be eliminated. The final four minutes were a lengthy exposition as Matson wrapped up the details for Mallard.

Casey.

CASEY, CRIME PHOTOGRAPHER aired on radio from 1943 to 1955. The series title varied several times but is generally remembered by this one. The series was based on novels by George Harmon Coxe. The hero was Casey, first name never given, who was a newspaper photographer for the MORNING EXPRESS. He was accompanied by reporter and girlfriend Ann Williams.

“The Clue In The Clouds” was a 1944 episode, written by Charles Holden. A helicopter was observed out of control over the city before heading out over the ocean and plunging into the water. Casey and Ann Williams rushed to the Coast Guard dock for the story.

The chopper was registered to millionaire John Hampton. He and his wife were subsequently reported missing. Casey was suspicious. He began by talking to Hampton’s secretary Matilda Gray. She dished on the family, including a black sheep uncle Robert, who had lived in Borneo before the Japanese invaded. John’s will named Robert as his sole heir.

Casey and Williams adjourned to the Blue Note jazz club. The episode was padded out with Ethelbert the bartender speculating on the crime at length without any facts in hand, followed by Ernie the piano player speculating without any facts in hand. However, Ernie gave Casey an idea about the deaths when he mentioned he’d like to get away from an uncle with eight children, who was a frequent visitor to his house.

The reporters went back to talk to Robert Hampton and were struck by how much he resembled his nephew. The only difference seemed to be the uncle’s grey hair. Casey got a sample of that hair by trickery, then photographed Robert and Matilda.

Robert then loaned Casey two self-portraits supposedly taken at his Borneo estate, one in his front yard and the other in the back yard. After the reporters left, Robert and Matilda talked privately, revealing themselves to be conspirators.

Meanwhile, back at the newspaper office, Casey noticed that both photos had identical cloud formations in the sky. This was an impossibility if the camera had been pointed in different directions. After that, only the details remained to be excavated.

The grey hair sample proved to be real. A break-and-enter at John Hampton’s place revealed the fake background. As they snooped, Hampton arrived and pointed a gun at them. John, not Robert. There never was an Uncle Robert from Borneo.

John had been dyeing his hair to look young, then washed it out to assume the look of an uncle, also shaving off his mustache. He drugged his wife, put her in the helicopter, then set the autopilot with just enough fuel to get out to the ocean. After that, he would begin a new life as his own uncle, with secretary Matilda to comfort him.

Once everything was explained, Williams dropped the fake background on Hampton, enabling Casey to get the gun away from him. Another scoop for the newspaper.

“Fog” was a 1948 episode, written by Alonzo Deen Cole. Ann Williams received a tipoff letter that something was going to happen at the Willis J. Baldwin estate. A high society ball was being held in his 50-room cottage. Helen Baldwin was expected to wear her fabulous million-dollar diamond necklace.

Casey was miffed that a tipoff would be sent to a female reporter, but that’s how it was and Ann had the story. They discussed the Count Regan de la Faire, a professional houseguest and sycophant who was staying with the Baldwins. Casey and Williams, in their professional capacities as reporters, motored off to the event. They were late getting there because of heavy fog, which also shrouded the Baldwin estate.

The butler Fleming was a new employee and rather incompetent. Williams thought she had seen him before. Before the party began, Casey and Williams

were given a chance to photograph the necklace, with the Balwins' bodyguard Tim Blake standing by. Before Casey could do so, the lights were suddenly snapped off and the diamonds stolen.

When the lights came back on, Williams suddenly remembered who Fleming was, a jewel thief named Chris Masters. "*You're not gonna rap me for this!*" he shouted, and dived out a window without opening it first.

Many alarums, excursions, and gunshots immediately followed. Everyone except Casey and Williams went chasing out into the fog after Masters. Casey figured the narrative was too pat. After some chitchat about all the suspects, Casey revealed that he had grabbed the necklace in the dark before the thief could, and had it in his pocket.

He and Williams then sat and waited for everyone else to return. Finally the crowd returned from the hunt amidst much shouting and gunfire, all except Masters. He had been murdered by the would-be thief who resented the competition and then unsuccessfully searched the body for the necklace.

Casey and Williams sat back and enjoyed the recriminations as the rest accused each other. Willis Baldwin declared the Count was guilty but gave himself away with certain details. There was no way to prove Willis was the murderer so Casey planted the necklace on Willis.

"One good frame deserves another", said Casey as the orchestra burst into a crescendo for the closing credits. Not only that, but the fog lifted and it was a beautiful starry night for a party. In the epilogue, it was explained that Baldwin was deep in debt from bad investments and his estate was mortgaged to the rafters. He sent the letter to lay the blame on the Count and planned the theft to sell the necklace and pay his debts.

What was almost as interesting as the episode was the final commercial wherein the sponsor bragged about a new type of glass bottle for beer and ale that did not require a deposit. Yes, for your convenience, the new bottle was non-refundable. Just use it once and then toss it away. No fuss or bother about returning the bottle. Throw it in the trash and be done with it. What goes around ...

Richard Diamond.

RICHARD DIAMOND, PRIVATE DETECTIVE aired on radio from 1949 to 1952 as a star vehicle for singer Dick Powell, who was trying to make a transition from crooner to actor. Private detective Richard Diamond, supported by his rich girlfriend Helen Asher, was an average investigator.

His gimmick was that at the end of each episode he would serenade Asher with a romantic ballad in his rich voice. If they were in his apartment, the next-door neighbour would complain in loud counterpoint to Diamond's singing, a very funny running gag through the series. Diamond and Asher were night people, so they constantly woke up the neighbour out of his sleep.

The dialogue attempted to be snappy and witty but generally came off as smarmy. Diamond was played as a happy-go-lucky detective who got on well with the police. Noir, it wasn't.

"The Misplaced Laundry Case" was a 1950 episode written by Blake Edwards, best remembered today for his Pink Panther movies. As the title suggested, it began with Richard Diamond arriving home from the laundry and discovering they had given him the wrong bundle.

He had a dinner date with Helen Asher and her mother, so he took a shirt from the bundle and made it do. Returning home at 02h00, he found a nasty man with a gun wanting to trade laundry bundles. Diamond was too tired to dispute the issue. They swapped bundles, the gunman left, and Diamond went to bed.

No rest for the wicked, for just as Diamond was about to drift off to sleep, the laundry owner Mr Green telephoned. He was hysterical that someone was going to kill him. Diamond hadn't had a case for two weeks, so he went over to Green's apartment. Green answered the door and that was the last thing he did, falling over dead. He had just been shot. Diamond and the police went over to the laundry shop. Nothing there but they checked the shirt Diamond was wearing and found the code 86A46L inside the collar.

Assorted alarums and excursions followed, the laundry bundle man was killed, and they learned the laundry was being used to ship narcotics. From there they had to trace the operation back to Mr Big and prove the case. Assorted gunshots followed, and a different laundry owner was nailed with the drugs in his house.

No serenade with Asher at the end, just a quick cut to the end music and credits. Not the first time the laundry mixup plot had been used. PAT NOVAK, FOR HIRE had used it the year before (see OPUNTIA #459, page 7).

“The Carnival” was a 1951 episode, written by Blake Edwards. Helen Asher was not in this episode, nor did Diamond croon a song to anyone. Adam Rayburn, billed in the carnival as the thinnest man in the world, hired Richard Diamond. His girlfriend Loreena, a hootchy-kootchy dancer, was in some kind of trouble but wouldn’t tell him what, so he was hoping Diamond could without letting her know.

Diamond approached Loreena after her act, and by flashing a bankroll got her attention. A night out with her didn’t amount to much, excepting that she didn’t consider herself as Rayburn’s girlfriend, regardless of what he might think. She dressed in mink and jewels far beyond what she could afford on her salary, so she must have had a sugar daddy somewhere.

The excitement came after Diamond returned her home, which was a tent. Someone set it on fire. A burned woman’s body was found inside after the flames were extinguished, but it was identified as Dixie Jones, Loreena’s roommate. The fire was determined to be arson.

David and Paula Sylvester, the owners of the carnival, made Diamond suspicious. He did some research into old newspapers and found Loreena also had a past history. She had a previous husband who disappeared a decade ago rather than answer questions about a forgery operation.

Diamond hypothesized that David Sylvester was her missing husband and he was keeping Loreena in mink and jewels due to her blackmail. She was shot dead by Sylvester before she could name names to Diamond.

A running gun battle across the carnival ended in the House of Mirrors. Diamond and Sylvester shot out most of the mirrors before Diamond got lucky first and finally hit the real Sylvester. The dying man’s last request was to clear away some of the mirror fragments: *“I don’t mind dying but I hate to watch myself do it.”*

Johnny Dollar.

YOURS TRULY, JOHNNY DOLLAR was the last of the old-time radio series, airing from 1949 to 1962. Almost all the OTR shows had died off by 1955. The episodes were standard half-hour weekly shows except for a year starting in 1955 October, when it aired as daily 15-minute installments comprising one complete episode each week, or in other words, 75-minute episodes.

Johnny Dollar was an insurance investigator based in Hartford, Connecticut. Each episode began with a claims adjustor from an insurance company ringing him up and asking him to take on a case. The running joke of this series was that Dollar shamelessly padded his expense account. Each scene was introduced by Dollar reciting a line item from his expense report, followed by a segue to the action.

“The Suntan Oil Matter” was a 1957 episode, written by Jack Johnstone. It was winter, so Dollar was delighted to take a case in Palm Springs, California. The story began with the first expense item, \$197.40 for first-class airfare.

A claim had been sent in for a \$75,000 bracelet belonging to Roberta Galloway, a young Texas gal who was the trophy wife of a middle-aged oilman. She said it had been stolen. Upon arrival in Palm Springs, Dollar talked to the Deppity Dawg, who believed it had been lost. Either way, the insurance company was on the hook for the claim.

After talking with Roberta, who said her husband Dan was drilling down in the Salton Sea, Dollar went to the jeweler Wilhelm Van Hook, who confirmed the sale was legitimate. He mentioned that Dan’s oil business was shaky. Another person to talk to was Sonny Wyeman, a dashing young man about town who sold expensive Italian sports cars.

Wyeman and Roberta spent much time together, seeing as how Dan was usually out at the rig. There was gossip. Suspicion was added when both Roberta and Wyeman separately asked Dollar how much of a reward there was for finding the missing bracelet.

Dollar wanted to talk to Dan, so Wyeman offered to drive him out to the drilling site. Upon arrival, Dan wasn’t around, but the first Mrs Galloway awaited him. She was bitter about the back alimony and royalties from her share of the oil.

Having set up the subplots and provided motives for suspects, Dollar went over to the rig but never reached it. En route, he found Dan's body lying in the road. The deceased had been run over many times by a vehicle, so it wasn't an accident. Wyeman immediately became the obvious suspect. He soon after became the second victim, run off the road over a cliff by an unknown person.

Further investigation by Dollar revealed that Van Hook had a day or two before returned the bracelet to the wholesaler, saying nothing about it to anyone else. Dollar and the police went to visit him but found themselves chasing him down the crowded highway. The guilty flee when someone pursues. It was a short-lived car chase, as Van Hook had a fatal encounter with a semi-trailer on the highway. That's all there was to it, except, of course, for Dollar to submit his expenses report, by now over \$400.

"The Templeton Matter" was a 1957 episode, no writer credited. Dollar was hired to investigate a safe cracking that took \$100,000 in jewels from the Templeton jewelers. A patrolman was shot when he surprised the burglars in the midst of the job. The safe hadn't been blown but was opened with the combination.

The police set up a dragnet for safecrackers. The janitor John Taber had a criminal record for car theft so they arrested him for want of anything better to do. They didn't think he did it but he might have tipped off friends who could.

An audit showed Templeton House was in good financial condition, so fraud wasn't likely. The break came when police found a body on the waterfront, shot dead by the same gun that killed the policeman.

Dollar visited the safe manufacturer, named Grantland, who told him the company and Templeton were the only ones who had the safe combination. A short while later, Templeton said he had spotted a woman with a stolen item. She was Helen Taber, daughter of the janitor. Her father said it had just been borrowed and was returned. He did identify the dead man as Billy Kylie.

While searching Kylie's apartment, a telephone call came in. Dollar recognized the voice as Grantland and went back to the factory for the final confrontation. Grantland, only a bit player, lost the exchange of gunfire. There was one final neat twist as to what he did with the jewels. The plot had several twists, some predictable and the final one a forehead slapper. An interesting episode.

The Falcon.

THE ADVENTURES OF THE FALCON aired on radio from 1943 to 1954. It was based on a popular series of movies which in turn were based on a story by Michael Arlen. As with The Shadow series, there was no continuity between the different media appearances.

The Falcon was Gay Lawrence in the movies, then later Lawrence's brother, and for radio he became Michael Waring. Why he was called The Falcon was one of the mysteries, since he never operated in disguise and was otherwise just a regular private investigator. In the later part of the series he suddenly turned into a counterspy for the U.S. Army Intelligence overseas.

"The Case Of The Perfect Crime" is an undated episode, no writer credited. The broadcast date was not recorded and I couldn't find it on the Internet. The mp3 had a muddy sound that indicated it was converted from an aircheck tape recording at the wrong speed.

Be that as it may, it began with a U.S. Treasury agent named Keith Mason paying a call on a business run by the Rausch family, father Adolph and son Willy. There was a contretemps and Willy was shot dead in his office. Adolph was arrested for tax evasion but made bail in time for his son's funeral.

Adolph didn't blame Mason, who was only doing his job, but did set a flunky named Paul Elliott to work trying to identify who tipped the Feds to the tax fraud. Elliott fingered a Rausch company secretary Sheila Talbot, but Adolph refused to accept that without further proof.

Sheila fled to her boyfriend Marty Walsh, who had put her up to the snitch. Walsh and his partner George Link were private detectives, hoping to snag the reward money on the tax squeal. Walsh decided to frame a private detective to avoid the wrath of Adolph. He chose Michael Waring and set to work forging letters and documents with Waring's signature.

The rest of the plot involved various people pointing guns at other people. Adolph visited the Falcon intending to shoot him. It didn't work and Waring quickly got the gun away from him. The misunderstanding was straightened out and Waring went on the hunt for whomever framed him.

Waring's first stop was Talbot's apartment. He gave her the third degree and soon learned who Walsh was. That set off predictable alarums and excursions across the city. The body count rose, with Walsh as the next victim. Mason reappeared, as did Adolph, both threatening Waring for different reasons. Link showed up for the party, as did Talbot.

With the entire cast assembled in Waring's apartment, the J'accuse! meeting was a real barnburner. Everyone managed to get off some shots. Waring told Adolph not to worry about serving time for tax evasion because he was going to fry in the electric chair instead for the murder of Walsh. Talbot got the reward money.

I had my doubts. Adolph didn't confess his guilt and the crime scene at the Walsh murder was badly contaminated by characters wandering in and out, even for the lower standards of forensics in those days. Supposing a conviction was rendered, it wouldn't mean a death sentence since Adolph was an old man and the evidence was not absolute.

"Murder Is A Bad Bluff" was a 1948 episode written by Jerome Epstein. Gloria Case was a young woman who wanted Michael Waring to find out what her boyfriend Bud Bartley did for a living. He was evasive about his source of income, with good reason as he was a jewel thief. He found out she had hired Waring and that ended the romance.

Bartley didn't make it to the halfway commercial. His partner in the robberies, the getaway driver Greg Rickard, was the main suspect, although it could have been Case in her role as a woman scorned. Waring went about trying to bluff everyone and failing that, beat the truth out of them. Because he was only a private detective, that should have earned him several indictments for aggravated assault, but since he was the good guy, it was allowed.

There was a falling out between the bad guys. Rickard thinned out his competition but unfortunately one of the gang survived his gunshot wounds. Bartley's murderer was a different man but Waring charged him with no evidence that would stand up in court. He was too busy courting Case to bother about fussy details such as admissible evidence.

Philip Marlowe.

THE ADVENTURES OF PHILIP MARLOWE was based on the character created by Raymond Chandler. It aired on radio from 1947 to 1951, changing networks in midstream. The series was slightly darker than most mystery shows, although never as dark as the noir novels upon which it was based.

"The Black Halo" was a 1949 episode, written by Mel Dinelli, Robert Mitchell, and Gene Levitt. It opened with Philip Marlowe arriving in Santa Barbara, California, during a rainstorm to meet a wheelchair-bound client Felix Drum, a perfume importer.

Julia Perry, an assistant, had gone missing three days ago on a business trip to Los Angeles. The only clue was a postcard from Anne, an old friend from Kansas. Drum's other assistant was Ruby, a man whom Marlowe immediately antagonized with unnecessary nasty remarks. Having stirred that pot, Marlowe went to Los Angeles to pick up Perry's trail. It was raining there.

The next character introduced was Eve Bentley, a wealthy socialite who had connections with Perry. She was too clever by half. Her fiancé Martin Whittaker, a drinking man and horse player, said he knew Perry and told Marlowe she had called that morning and postponed a meeting. He gave Marlowe an address for a rooming house.

Upon arrival, the cleaning lady told Marlowe she had just heard a gunshot a moment ago and seen Perry running away. The body in Perry's room was Ruby, who must have made very good time driving down from Santa Barbara to beat Marlowe into town. Perry was the second victim, taking a dive out an 8th-floor window, supposedly despondent because she had been stealing half of Drum's business.

Various excursions about the City of Angels filled in the time. Whittaker was a prodigious liar who resented being questioned and actually horsewhipped him, not just as a figure of speech. The plot took a twist when Perry's body turned out to be Anne, who never had a speaking part. Bentley was Perry's secret identity, part of a plan to run with the money.

Perry qua Bentley blabbed all. During the last five minutes, everyone explained the plot to each other. After tying up all the loose threads, the survivors dispersed. It was still raining.

“The Orange Dog” was a 1949 episode written by Mel Dinelli, Robert Mitchell, and Gene Levitt. Philip Marlowe’s client was Shelley Martin, who told him her sister Marion was in a tight spot with a broker named Lou Horner.

Marlowe met Martin at Horner’s residence. A dead man was lying behind the couch and Marion was missing. On the body was a piece of paper with a cryptic phrase about an orange dog and Marion. The police were called and Marlowe went to Chinatown in a leap of logic that was not clearly explained.

A shopkeeper who spoke in Hollywood’s idea of a Chinese accent told Marlowe that what occidental collectors referred to as an orange dog was actually the Chinese lion, popular as a ceramic decoration. Marlowe made the rounds of dealers with no results. He encountered a long-haired goon Henry Peel who was a competitor. Long hair on men in those days meant they were on the wrong side of the law. They discussed, while Peel held a gun in Marlowe’s kidney, who was who among their mutual acquaintances.

Peel said Shelley didn’t have a sister and the dead man was not Horner. He said he was looking for engraved plates, then rendered Marlowe unconscious in the usual style of OTR detectives. The police were more informative. The dead man was a Treasury agent tracking Horner, who was a counterfeiter. The currency printing plates were the MacGuffin of the story.

Marlowe snuck back to Martin’s apartment and eavesdropped on her talking to Horner. She asked Horner who Marion was and what her part in the operation was. The conversation was abruptly terminated when Horner was shot dead. Peel had been lurking at a window and killed him. Back to one of the dealers, named Clay Saxon, who did have the orange dog. Saxon pointed a gun at Marlowe with ill intent. Peel arrived and pointed his gun at Saxon with even more ill intent. The orange dog was smashed but did not contain the plates.

The twist was that Horner had not been dealing in plates but high-quality currency paper. Saxon was shipping it as wrapping paper while everyone else hared off after the orange dog. Shots were fired and alarums were sounded.

The bad guys still living were hauled in, the dead went to the morgue, and Marlowe tied up the loose ends in a final monologue. There was a twist ending for Marion, who didn’t exist but was a telephone number in code. Marlowe then took Shelley to a Chinese restaurant but the relationship didn’t work out. She preferred a steak-and-potatoes man.

The Saint.

Leslie Charteris had a long series of novels about Simon Templar, alias The Saint, an amateur detective with no visible means of support who traveled the world and lived well. From 1945 to 1951, THE SAINT was an old-time radio series.

Several actors played the role. It is agreed that Vincent Price was the best, with snappy quips and flashes of wit that elevated the routine plots into something better. There was a running gag through the Price series where gangsters wanted to kill him not so much because he was disrupting their operations but because they couldn’t stand the constant flow of one-liners.

“The Birds And Bees Of East Orange” was a 1951 episode, written by Louis Vittes. After the opening murder, the jump cut went to Simon Templar's apartment. A distressed young woman May Owen, proprietor of a private circulating library, arrived and asked him for help.

One wonders how it was that people knew of Simon Templar the amateur detective. Amateur, because he never took fees. It is doubtful that he advertised in the Yellow Pages as a detective, so the question was how anyone would know his address and go straight to him for assistance pro bono. Many of his adventures began inadvertently but nonetheless the general public seemed well aware of who he was.

Be that as it may, Owen asked The Saint if he had heard of a book called THE BIRDS AND BEES OF EAST ORANGE, to which he replied no, adding “*I’ve been a luckier man than I realized*”. She told him that it was her most popular circulating title, constantly in demand with a waiting list. What she noticed was that the same few people were checking out the book in rotating sequence.

They went to her bookstore, driven by Louie the cabby, so The Saint could inspect the book. They found a warm corpse with a knife in him and the book missing. Owen didn’t recognize the dead man, but he was subsequently identified as a gambler named Dougan. Her files identifying patrons had been stolen. She remembered one name and address that of Beeber. Templar warned her not to tell the police about the book and then went looking for Beeber.

Instead he crossed paths with another book patron, Wendy Wilkins, who denied ever having read a book. Somehow we believed her. Another man appeared,

alias Peter Piper, also looking for Beeber. Before the gunfight could get going, Louie showed up and warned everyone the police were on the way. It was a bluff but Wilkins and Piper ran for it. The Saint told Louie to take him home on account there would probably be someone waiting for him.

A good prediction, as Beeber had made himself at home. Nothing much happened and Beeber let himself out. He had been searching for the book in Templar's apartment, but of course it wasn't there. Louie was sent out to procure a copy of the book.

Templar used the book as a lure. Many excursions back and forth across the city. He succeeded in flushing out the cast of characters. Beeber's body appeared in Templar's apartment. From there, back into Louie's cab, with Wilkins along for the ride. To fill the time during the long drive, Templar supplied a long infodump.

Beeber, Wilkins, and Piper were part of a gambling ring who used the book to communicate with each other. They chose a title that no one else would be interested in. They knew they were being watched by police and therefore couldn't meet in person or telephone each other for fear of the police listening in on their conversations. Dougan had apparently found out and was trying to cut himself a piece of the action.

Upon arrival at their destination, they found Owen holding Piper at gunpoint. She had figured out who was who. There was a brief alarm followed by a longer denouement as Templar explained all the details. Piper was the murderer, wanting to cut himself in on the laundered gambling money.

It was never explained if the book was a factual account of the natural history of East Orange or a novel using the title as some sort of theme. That was the real mystery.

Michael Shayne.

Michael Shayne began as a series of novels by Davis Dresser, writing under the pseudonym of Brett Halliday. As a fictional detective, Shayne appeared not only in print but as an old-time radio series, movies, television, and a mystery fiction digest. Dresser quit writing Shayne stories after 1958 but farmed out the Halliday pseudonym as a house name to other writers, so the stories continued to appear for decades afterwards.

THE NEW ADVENTURES OF MICHAEL SHAYNE aired on old-time radio from 1944 to 1953. The series was based on the novels by Brett Halliday, although the episodes were pastiches.

From 1944 to 1948, Shayne was located in San Francisco and had a pretty secretary named Phyllis Knight. Wally Maher voiced Shayne as a relatively sedate and average detective. From 1948 to 1950, Shayne lived in New Orleans without a secretary. He was voiced by Jeff Chandler, who narrated the show in tones of rising hysteria, even if he was just crossing the street. That period could best be described as frenetic. Thereafter a variety of forgettable actors portrayed him.

"Gossip Writer" was a 1945 episode written by Tom Petty, concerning the difficulties of Winifred Spencer, a society editor. She had received a threatening letter over her gossip column. It wasn't a complete surprise given the stuff she had been broadcasting. There was never any surprise in recycling plots in old-time radio either.

Spencer asked Michael Shayne and Phyllis Knight to attend a dinner party she was giving which she believed the letter writer would attend. Upon arrival at the Spencer mansion, Shayne and Knight made a point of discussing at length an iron deer on the front lawn.

Inside the big house, additional characters were introduced. They included Spencer's ne'er-do-well brother Steward, who sponged off her, and his latest bimbo Miss Merl Melody, who sponged off him. Another guest was a banker Hugh Davis. The butler was Henry. He didn't do it.

The highlight of the party was listening to the radio, when all present heard a transcription (gramophone disk) of her show, which she had recorded that afternoon. Winifred did not survive the broadcast, having been stabbed in the back while sitting in a chair next to the radio.

Davis told Shayne and the police that the estate had been looted and little remained. Steward was the prime suspect but the others had some suspicion sprinkled on them. Davis tried a couple of tricks to frame Steward but it was he who had looted the estate and killed Winifred.

The method of murder was elaborate and implausible. So much so, that this listener was not able to maintain his suspension of disbelief. Also, how do you

stab in the back someone sitting in a chair? And the iron deer? Nothing more had been said about it, in which case it should not have been mentioned at all.

“The Man Who Lived Forever” was a 1949 episode, no writer credited. Michael Shayne was now in New Orleans and on a 60-day suspension of his private detective licence for sufficient cause. Maria LaRue hired him because her father had barricaded himself into his house and told her he was waiting for death. Her Cajun accent was phony as all get out but that’s Hollywood for you.

Shayne took the case despite his suspension because he had only a one-dollar bill in his pocket. Even in 1949 that wouldn’t feed him for long. He accompanied LaRue to her father’s house. It was locked up tight so he let himself into the house with a brick through the window. Papa was found swinging from a chandelier with a rope necklace. Someone had branded his forehead with a snake logo. The name Anthony Corelle was mentioned, a underworld kingfish who supposedly would live forever and who had been bothering Papa.

The death count increased. Shayne was almost run over by a car and it became evident that someone did not want him to live forever. The police didn’t believe Corelle was still alive and branding his victims with a snake logo. The lower classes feared voodoo. A Peter Lorre impersonator threatened Shayne and shots were fired. A car chase into the bayous was the excursion that went along with the alarums.

There were three separate gunfights across southern Louisiana until the episode ran out of time. Shayne fought his way into a room where Corelle supposedly reigned from his throne. The Peter Lorre impersonator died defending the door to the room. It was empty. Corelle had lived and died long ago but his family kept his legend alive so they could keep their grip on the voodoo underworld.

Shayne concluded with unusual wisdom: *“I wonder how many people go through life being afraid of empty rooms.”*

Sam Spade.

THE ADVENTURES OF SAM SPADE, based on the character created by Dashiell Hammett, aired from 1946 to 1951. It went off the air shortly after both Hammett and Howard Duff, the actor who played Sam Spade, were named as Communist sympathizers during the Red Scare.

The series struggled on for a few more episodes as a sustained show with no advertisers. No corporation dared to be associated with it. The replacement actor couldn’t live up to Duff’s characterization.

“The Bouncing Betty Caper” was a 1948 episode, no writer credited. Randall Carruthers was a butler in the house of Dr Anthony MacGraw, who was step-father to Mark, an insane man who was under Anthony's care.

Carruthers was concerned because Kathy, sister of Mark, had been the target of several murder attempts. She and Mark were the heirs to the family fortune, while Anthony had been cut out of the will by their mother. Carruthers hired Spade to investigate. Spade was infiltrated into the household as their new chauffeur.

Many alarums, such as a maniac brother dashing about waving a meat cleaver, and a mad doctor waving hypodermic needles. Kathy was convinced Anthony was the dangerous one to her, not Mark. She had a hideaway cottage at the bottom of a steep cliff, accessible only by a rickety stair. There was method in her madness since Anthony suffered from vertigo, which made her home safe.

Spade snooped about the big house and found assorted World War Two souvenirs in Kathy’s bedroom. Remember that the war had only just concluded three years prior at the time this episode was aired, so it wasn’t old history. He confronted Anthony and accused him of trying to use Mark to kill Kathy. Anthony took offence at that and pressed a buzzer to summon his security staff.

Instead, an anti-personnel mine killed him at his desk. The explosive was a German WW2 device commonly known as the Bouncing Betty, hooked up to the buzzer. Kathy had analyzed such devices during the war a few years prior when she was a WAAC, so she became the prime suspect.

She confessed that she had set the booby trap. Spade had his doubts for logical reasons set up earlier in the episode. After the police took her away, he had a meeting with Carruthers in his office. The butler confessed that he had set the device. Yes, the butler did it. Kathy’s confession for a bomb she did not set was never explained.

“The Overjord Caper” was a 1949 episode written by Robert Tallman and Gil Doud. The title is one that gave Google a tough time as it insisted on reading it as ‘Overlord’ but the name was Norwegian.

It also confused Sam Spade’s secretary Effie Perrine. Each episode of this series opened with him dictating a report of the current caper which segued into the live action. In this case, he had to spend a couple of minutes trying to get her to spell Overjord correctly. I know how the Overjords felt, having spent my life telling people Speirs with an ‘ei’ and having them mis-spell it Spiers. But I digress.

The lady of that name, Joy Overjord, said she had a \$30,000 necklace stolen at a hotel. Her husband George had given her the money to insure it but she never got the policy. After first spelling out her name carefully, she hired Spade to recover the necklace before George found out.

Joy was a maneater, a Southern gal, who habitually spoke in double entendres, making it difficult for Spade to keep his mind on the job. She mentioned George was the richest man in Wisconsin but he would nonetheless kick up a fuss about a paltry \$30,000. After sandwiches and a pitcher of martinis from room service, Spade finally made it out of her hotel room.

He was sidetracked by a con man named Steffy, an old and unwelcome acquaintance who was staying at the hotel. The grifter had a complaint about noisy Norwegians in the room next to his, so Spade went along to check. In the room he let down a Murphy bed and found the corpse of a well dressed man. Steffy fainted.

The episode then paused for a commercial from Wildroot Cream Oil, the hair tonic that makes you look your best. Presumably while you were still living. Nothing was said of it being used by the dead man.

The story resumed with Steffy frantic with worry. In his profession he tried to avoid meeting any constabulary, so he began packing at once. Tied up in the closet he found Mr and Mrs Overjord, apparently the real ones with thick Norwegian accents.

Going back upstairs, Spade had a chat with Joy. She blamed everything on Steffy. Her explanation was convoluted and unbelievable, especially the part about the corpse. The couple in the closet were not the Overjords, much to the disappointment of Joy and Steffy, who were hoping for jewelry. The corpse disappeared with no explanation.

In the epilogue, Spade mentioned that Joy had stolen the jewelry from the real Overjords back east, who were on a month-long vacation and didn’t know their jewelry was gone. There were therefore two couples masquerading as the Overjords, the original thieves and the closet-bound thieves who were hoping to steal the jewelry from the first ones.

The tables had been turned, so Joy had hired Spade in the hopes he could get the jewels back for her and Steffy. He got the jewelry but sent it to Wisconsin with his report and invoice.

George Valentine.

LET GEORGE DO IT aired on radio from 1946 to 1954, sponsored by Standard Oil. The series was about George Valentine, a private investigator. He solicited clients with a running newspaper classified advertisement in the Personals column that he cited in the opening credits: *Danger’s my stock in trade. If the job’s too tough for you to handle, you’ve got a job for me. Write full details.*

Valentine’s secretary/girlfriend was Claire Brooks, whom everyone called Brooksie. Her main function was to act as a sounding board for Valentine and have the plot explained to her at intervals.

“The Penthouse Roof” was a 1948 episode written by David Victor and Herbert Little Jr. The opening letter was from a birdwatcher named Elliott Wormsley. George Valentine remarked the name sounded like something out of Dickens.

Wormsley wrote that he had witnessed an outrageous crime and wanted to talk in person with Valentine. At the Wormsley apartment, Valentine and Claire Brooks learned that while birdwatching, he could see down onto a penthouse terrace three blocks away with his binoculars.

Wormsley thought he saw a man deliberately pushed off the far side of the terrace by someone else. He didn’t want to go to the police for fear of the publicity. Nor had he seen anything in the newspapers about a fatal fall.

Valentine was hired to check the penthouse, part of the River House apartments. In the guise of a prospective tenant, he learned there were two penthouses sharing the terrace, one vacant and the other occupied by Philip and Paula Dunlap.

Valentine went over to introduce himself as a new neighbour. He was told that Philip hadn't been seen in a couple of days. The wife seemed blasé about his disappearance.

They were briefly interrupted by Hal Stairett, Philip's secretary, who was looking for the man, apparently the only person doing so. From there, Valentine, Wormsley, and Brooksie checked out a vacant lot adjacent to River House. Thus they found what was left of Philip Dunlap.

NYPD Homicide was grateful that Valentine was thoughtful enough to report the murder. The police learned Stairett was fired by Philip for canoodling with Paula. The evidence pointed to Stairett as the murderer so they arrested him.

Philip had cut Paula out of his will but deliberately left her as beneficiary of a sizable life insurance policy. Valentine revisited Paula, who was not a grieving widow. She resented his questions, and brought out her handgun to emphasize the point. Brooksie came in through the common terrace and saved Valentine's life. However, none of that would be admissible evidence in court to convict Paula of Philip's murder.

Valentine let that go but asked the police for a toxicology test on the deceased. The results showed that Philip was dead from a massive poison dose before he toppled off the roof. Paula confessed that Philip had committed suicide. Since the life insurance policy wouldn't pay off for suicide, she would be penniless. She staged the suicide to look like murder and tried to fix it on Stairett so the policy would pay out. It didn't work and the penthouse was soon vacant.

I had to wonder though. I'm not a legal expert but I doubt that a husband could cut his wife completely out of his will. She probably could have contested the probate and won.

"The Eight Ball" was a 1951 episode written by David Victor and Jackson Gillis. The mayor of Summer Springs and his cohort were squabbling about charges they were lax in allowing criminal rackets to use the town as a home away from home.

Fearing retribution from a grand jury, they decided to hire an impartial outlander to investigate, namely George Valentine. Even before boarding the train to Summer Springs, Valentine was offered \$1,000 by a gangster to drop the case.

Upon arrival, Valentine found an imposter had preceded him and taken his hotel reservation. He never had a chance to discuss the matter, for upon going up to the room he found the faker shot dead. The wallet identified the dead man as Harold Stark of Salt Lake City. Valentine swapped wallets so he could work freely and the killer would relax.

It backfired rapidly. As Stark, he was now wanted for the murder of Valentine. Many alarums and excursions followed, mostly stirred up by Valentine qua Stark as he tried to get out of the hole he had dug for himself. The death toll climbed, and Valentine got himself slugged unconscious in the traditional manner.

No one was who he appeared to be. The hotel desk clerk wasn't as meek as he looked. He was in fact the kingpin. No better place than a hotel where strangers come and go without being noticed.

Philo Vance.

The PHILO VANCE series aired on old-time radio from 1945 to 1950, based on the novels by S.S. Van Dine. The detective was also found in a series of movies. Philo Vance was a know-it-all amateur sleuth, a wealthy man who moved in high society. In the radio series he was usually asked by District Attorney John Markham to investigate, as apparently the local police could not be trusted to find the killer.

"The Girl Who Came Back", written by Bob Shaw, was a 1945 episode with a couple of good twists. John Martin was a wealthy man whose 11-year-old daughter Jean had drowned in an accident nine years previous. A woman came forward claiming to be her. Martin had his doubts so he went to Philo Vance and his assistant Miss Randall.

Martin said he had been swimming with Jean when she was pulled out to sea by a rip tide. Her body was never found. The imposter said she had washed ashore and suffered amnesia, from which she had only recovered recently. When she recovered her prior life, she said she forgot where she had been the previous nine years. She knew the manor house and had lots of details.

Vance and Randall talked with her. She was demanding her share of the wealth. Vance caught the chauffeur Bill eavesdropping, who said she wasn't the real Jean. More contretemps followed, including an attempted poisoning.

Vance, Randall, Jean, and Bill adjourned to Vance's apartment. The twist was revealed, when Vance proved Jean really was the daughter. Bill now vouched for her. She had been in an orphanage in the interval.

Jean said there was no rip tide. Her father had tried to drown her because the family fortune had gone directly to her. The four of them hatched a plot to expose father Martin. They employed psychological warfare to break him and make him confess. It worked.

Another twist in the ending was explained by Vance. It involved a clue about the attempted poisoning that a close listener could have gotten, although I have to confess that I missed it.

"The Mistletoe Murder Case", no writer credited, was aired on 1949-06-07, so it had nothing to do with Christmas. The murder was committed on Mistletoe Road, where a millionaire Simon Joyce was run over by a car while walking along the shoulder. The vehicle fled.

The death took place where the road crossed a state line, and since the vehicle had to have come from one to the other, that brought in the FBI. Simon had been walking on the left side of the road facing oncoming traffic.

Vance noticed a tree had a scrape mark of green paint, obviously from the hit-and-run car. One can understand why D.A. Markham preferred to use Vance instead of the local police, considering how they regularly missed clues such as this. Vance buttered up the FBI agent to have their laboratory test the paint for determination of what make and model of car.

The next stop was the mansion of the deceased, where his nephew and niece James and Sally Evans were staying. They had been cut out of the will long ago, while the dead man's brother Bernard stood to inherit.

Someone tried unsuccessfully to smother James while he was sleeping. Vance said a woman did it, so the police arrested Sally. She admitted it to Vance, certain that her brother had killed their uncle. Talk about sibling rivalry.

The FBI made her car as the murder vehicle, but that would be too easy, so Vance turned his attention to Bernard. The suspicion was Bernard had fiddled the books of the business he and Simon owned.

James and Sally got into a physical altercation, during which she rendered him unconscious with a table lamp. Meanwhile Vance and Markham were out in the garage inspecting the cars. Everyone in the family drove the same kind and colour of car. They probably got a quantity discount. Each car had a scratch freshly painted over. Obviously the murderer scratched and painted the other two cars to confuse the issue.

The FBI agent was shot dead in the mansion. The plot suddenly hit a brick wall as it abruptly stopped for an infodump on how the FBI analyzed fingerprints. Then another slam when the FBI agent was exposed by Vance as an imposter. If he was an imposter, how then did he get the paint sample to their laboratory? That was never explained.

James Evans was arrested for the murder. While it was true that he wasn't in Uncle Simon's will, he was mentioned in Uncle Bernard's will. Bernard inherited Simon's estate but there was no doubt that he would not long survive his brother, sending the family fortune to James.

The epilogue was a long-winded explanation by Vance. Far too elaborate, as he explained how he knew the agent was a fake, then an even more convoluted explanation about how he knew James was the culprit. Although the explanations tied everything together, they relied on knowledge held back from the listener until the denouement.

Mr Keen.

MR KEEN, TRACER OF LOST PERSONS aired on old-time radio from 1937 to 1955. It was a soap opera style mystery show, produced by Frank and Anne Hummert, who at one time owned 40% of all radio series being aired during the Golden Age of radio. They were all soap operas except for MR KEEN.

The series was credited as written by Frank Hummert but actually done by a stable of house writers. The series was so over the top that for years afterwards Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding on their comedy show did a parody titled "Mr Trace, Keener Than Most Persons".

As the series progressed, Keen did fewer missing persons cases and more just plain murders. Mike Clancy was added as his assistant, with a phony stage Irish accent straight out of vaudeville. By the series demise in 1955, it was a straightforward mystery series.

“The Case Of The Girl Who Sang Too Well” was a 1944 episode about a Broadway singer who finished her routine on stage, walked back to her dressing room, and vanished into thin air.

Although she seemed a nice enough woman, she had a knack of collecting men about her who became angry when they were jilted. There was the playboy millionaire who wanted her as his next wife, a saxophone player in her band who thought he had the inside track, and her ex-husband, a vaudeville performer who never made the big time while she played the Palladium.

Mr Keen wandered about exposing past histories and filling up the time. He learned there had been two steamer trunks in her dressing room, where now there was one. He got back the other and found her body within.

Her ex-husband had killed her the moment she stepped back into the room, then called a delivery company to take the trunk elsewhere. No one paid any attention backstage to burly deliverymen hauling a heavy trunk. Mr Keen, all knowing and all observant, did.

“The Case Of The Girl Who Flirted” was a 1944 episode set in a Manhattan art museum. Betty Morrick was a young art student who frequented the museum to copy a painting. She had noticed a man often lurking nearby at another painting, copying it in tempera pigments.

When the painting went missing, so did she. The thief had noticed her in return. He and his gang didn’t want her to identify them to police. Mr Keen was called, as apparently everyone over at NYPD were at the Policeman's Ball that weekend.

There were two questions to be answered, the whereabouts of the woman and the whereabouts of the painting. She had been kidnapped and undoubtedly would wind up in the East River before long. The painting was too large to be easily smuggled out of the museum, so Keen's conclusion was that it had been hidden somewhere inside the display areas.

A watch was set up and an intruder surprised in the Egyptology room. He got away but it was obvious he had been about to retrieve the painting. Searching the room suggested an obvious location and indeed the stolen painting was retrieved from inside a sarcophagus. That solved one question.

The more serious question was locating Morrick before she was disposed into the river. Keen had the museum curator go through exhibition catalogues to find artists who worked in tempera, not that common then or now. The list was narrowed down to a couple of suspects, one of whom lived along the East River.

The rest was obvious. The damsel in distress was saved from the river. The culprits would have plenty of time to paint in Sing Sing. The episode had two threads of detection, by which both the woman and the painting were logically located. Not like a lot of mystery shows that relied on wild surmise and improbable coincidence.

“The Case Of The Strange Display” was a 1944 episode. It opened on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan where two women were admiring a new window display. One of them, Sally Wilson, told the other that her boyfriend Jefferson Jones had prepared it, a tableaux of a family sitting about a room.

Unfortunately one of the figures was a dead man. The deceased was Wendell Barton, the supervisor Jones reported to. The police sought Jones, and Wilson sought Mr Keen. She sobbed out her story. Barton was a sarcastic man, verbally abusive, took credit for Jones’ work, and put moves on Wilson.

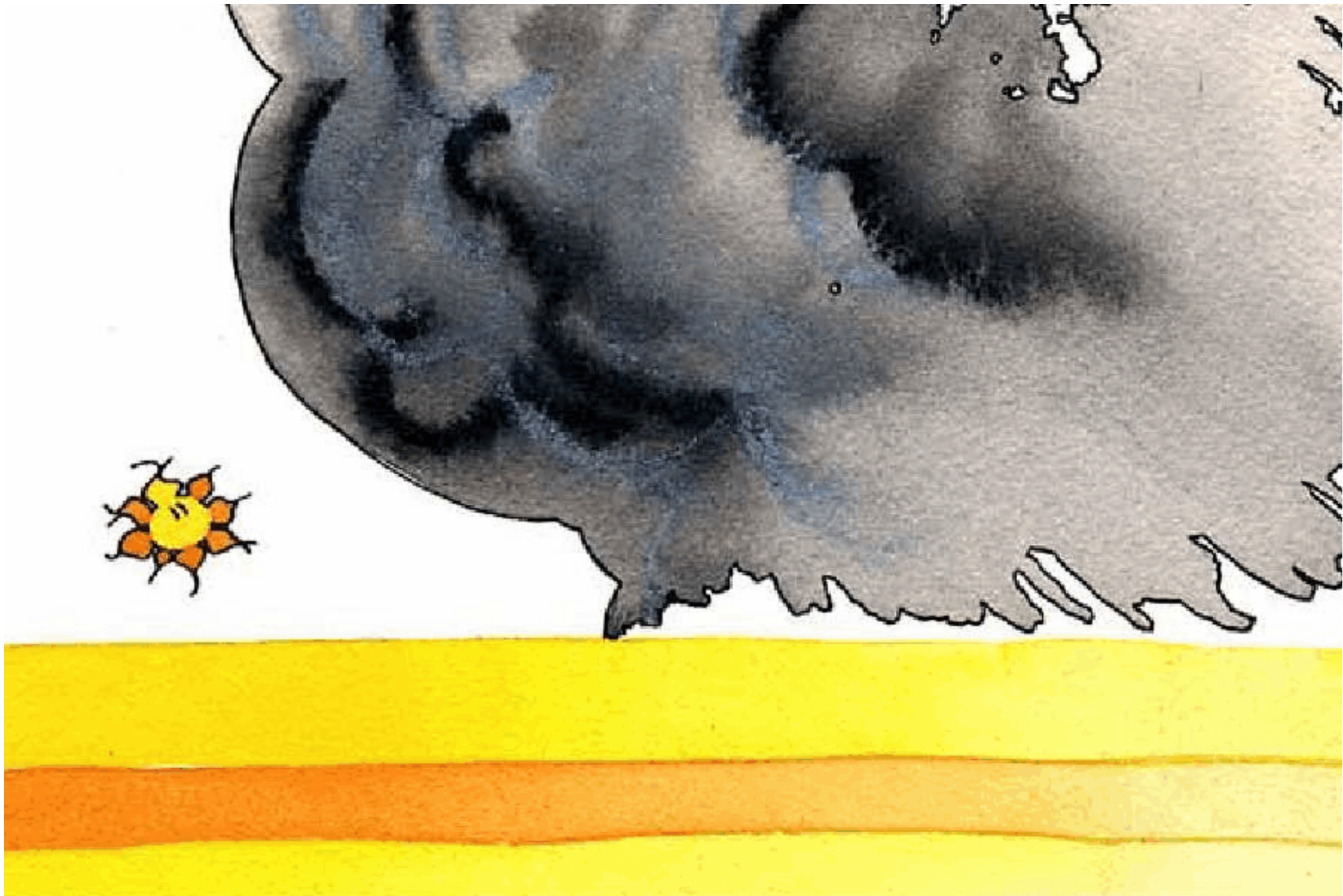
Keen went to the morgue to look at Barton’s body, then to the department store. He talked to sales clerk Irene Harvey and the night watchman Bill Henkey. Neither had anything nice to say about Barton. She said Barton chased every good looking woman in the store and had harassed her. The truth, as Keen soon learned, was that Barton had an affair with her and then dumped her. She admitted it but said she didn’t kill him but did see him a short while later scuffling with Barton. Jones knocked him down.

Keen talked with previous employers who confirmed the general opinion of Barton. However, and this was where some cheating began, Keen let it be known he had some other information which was not revealed to the listener.

Jones finally made an appearance. Keen staged a J’accuse! meeting at the police station. Henkey did it, because years ago at a previous store Barton had run away with his wife, then abandoned her. She committed suicide. As usual in private investigator stories, there was no proof but the guilty man confessed all.

[Editor’s remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

[His quarterly mail art postcard for the solstices and equinoxes.]



tnelson@bexx.com

"Seasonal
Greetings!"

Linear Prairie, Cloud, Quizzie

Solstice is Summer,
Solstice is not.
Winter is cold
And Summer is hot.
Our journey around
The great solar globe,
Brings us the seasons and
The weather that unfolds.
Here in the north
The warmth's been a-building,
Southern climes see
The weather a-chilling.
The hemispheres swap
In a seasonal tide,
The weathers we have
That we must abide.

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To:

Date -

Be smart, be safe.

Handwritten signature

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2020-06-26

OPUNTIA #475: Yes, it is all gone, everywhere, all functions of any interest, because of the pandemic. 2020 may indeed be the Year Where Nothing Happened, especially after St. Patrick's Day.

[Everyone is waiting for the vaccine. Then there will be an explosion of events. What we are learning is that social media isn't, and video conferencing is a poor substitute for face-to-face gatherings.]

All I can say is that applying for and getting the CERB [emergency income benefit] has certainly helped us out. I won't say that I gave up on finding work, but about all the fruit my search bore was a single phone interview that got me nowhere. However, I plan to accelerate my search. I do not plan to let this virus defeat me.

Many of the writings of past pandemics tell of a second wave of illnesses and deaths after the initial wave, especially with the Spanish flu of just over a hundred years ago. We are making tentative plans of what to do and buy should the COVID-19 second wave happen. We are trying to be ready, just in case.

[I had always stockpiled food and supplies even before the pandemic, and will maintain them in anticipation of a second wave. I suspect the second wave won't be as bad as the 1918 influenza pandemic because our knowledge of health care has made immense strides since then.]

There are far too many who will not wear a mask or self-isolate, and they seem to be the ones who will probably contract the disease and spread it around unwittingly. Yvonne has made us and some friends homemade masks, and while they may not be N95s, they seem to serve the purpose. We wear them whenever we go out, especially at the local grocery store earlier this morning.

[I have my bandana on standby but do not wear a mask about town, nor do the majority of Calgarians. On the other hand, I haven't gone anywhere there are crowds. The Ministry of Health recently said the majority of new cases are now among younger people who attended house parties.]

OPUNTIA #476: At least nature hasn't been cancelled. Flowering trees are everywhere in Etobicoke, and we have our share here.

[Calgary flowers were late this year but on the other hand especially abundant.]

We've got plenty of vanity plates here, too, and I remember Alan White putting together a zine years ago, just to show all the vanity plates he'd found in hotel parking lots during Los Angeles cons. I suspect the plate BUGLUGS may be a Murdoch Mysteries fan.

Re: my previous letter: The ban on various events may yet be extended, depending on the selfish jerks who will still gather for lakeside or in-park parties, perfect for spreading more coronavirus around. In Ontario, Premier Doug Ford has opened some shops, and I could get my hair cut now, if my regular stylist was around, which she isn't. I have called my MP to see if I really do qualify for the CERB, and no real response yet. I have identification cards that have expired, but I suspect I won't be able to renew them until the pandemic is finally done.

And, the World Wide Party has come and gone. On the evening of the 21st, Yvonne and I observed the Solstice, and also the World Wide Party. We would often have a soft drink to mark the occasion, or even a cold hard apple cider, but we did something a little different this past evening. When this pandemic started, we cracked open a bottle of something special we'd been hanging onto for many years, a bottle of Gallwey's Original Coffee Liqueur, product of Ireland, given to us by close and good friends long ago.

We broke the seal, and we each had two ounces over ice. We toasted all the fans we know locally, to the fans west and east, north and south, past and present. Two ounces was probably enough for us to sleep soundly that evening; we know our limits.

[I toasted with Coke Zero, being a teetotaler and at the age when sugared drinks are not permissible for me.]

We know that fanzines are a part of vintage fandom, from a past era, but even after times where I had thought to give the whole thing up, I suspect that I will be around until the final zine is composed and scanned, and the final loc written. May we all continue to communicate and enjoy the act, in whatever medium we choose.

[I hope that zinedom will outlive me but I sometimes wonder.]