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WESTERCON

REPORT

by BILL BLACKBEARD

LOS ANGELES, 1 July, (CNS) - The Alexandria Hotel, site of the 15th WESTERCON, is a shabby, threadbare hostelry, due to be tore down within months; its rates are correspondingly reasonable, its location satisfactorily central, its rooms at least reasonably comfortable and its halls large and adaptable to convention needs. Management offered a good deal: if fifty rooms were rented for the convention weekend, halls and services would be granted convention committee free. The required total of rooms was reached and passed shortly after convention opening time, noon, Saturday, June 30th.

Visible attendance in the ballroom and lounge at any one time during the convention never seemed large; rarely were more than a scant hundred in evidence for any one event, except, of course, for the fanquet in the Palm Room, where the full attendance of over 250 turned out, either to eat or to listen to the speakers. There was the usual concentration of pros, Big-Name fans, and stews at the bar and in the private rooms; event-viewing was regarded as nominal and largely for the neo-fans and

casual visitors.

The tone of the meet was dull and listless. Attendees found their own fun with old friends, new acquaintances, in talk for the most part. The events were not sparked with imagination or much audience response; the fan-art display was of high quality but went unnoticed or unappreciated by most of those present; the auction material was the worst this correspondent has ever seen at any size convention on either east or west coast, but somehow fetched good prices from neo-fans and a few old-timers determined to drop some money for the hell of it.

So much for generalities. To the course of the convention itself, event by event.....

The California Room, where registration of arrivals was initially and haphazardly handled, featured two or three tables of dealer displays of books and magazines --- mostly material from the fifties --- of which Dave Fox's and Ben Stark's were the most active. Two or three fan

BILL BLACKBEARD, author of a yarn in Weird Tales, was one of our most interesting Assistant Editors about nine years ago when he was living in New York. From time to time since he left our side of the United States and returned to his home in Los Angeles, he has been of great help in supplying us with news coverage and other most unusual items. This time he covers the Westercon, a West Coast regional convention that has become of interest to all followers of s-f in the United States.

Bill's report came in first and we're running it complete in this issue. We had two other reporters there, and we expect their reports in shortly. You'll read them in the following issues.

Oh yes, you'll have a chance to read some of Blackbeard's excellent fiction in our SCIENCE FICTION STORIES. Editor Van Houten of SFS has informed us that he's accepted a short by Bill.

mags were on sale; the revived Rhodomagnetic Digest in its first issue; Shangri-La; The Willis Papers (Vol. 1), and Vorpall Glass (#3 & #4). Fan Art in widely variant media was displayed on screens around the walls, including spray-painted silhouettes of outre scenes by Fritz Leiber. Easily the most outstanding artist represented, and the one eliciting the most favorable and excited comments, was Mrs Goldstone, wife of the well-known fan-artist, Lou Goldstone. Her work was done in oil for the most part, and was represented by several canvases, each delineating in fey, aether-eal colors lean, spectrally cheerful creatures of night and mystery with vaguely (and in one case, overtly) feline countenances. The prices, in view of the quality of the work, were extraordinarily reasonable; between \$15.00 and \$40.00 per canvas. Her drawings, also excellent and similar in execution and subject to the paintings, went for as low as \$5.00 each. All the art work shown, however, was exceptionally good. A table was strewn with pencil and ink-drawings for 15¢ to \$2.00 apiece, and many of these, particularly the striking work by now well-known fan-artist Sam

Prosser, was vastly superior to nearly all the auction material by "name" artists, some of which was gavelled off at \$5.00 and \$10.00 an item. Taste and judgement in art is not a notable quality in most fans, alas.....

The first event on the program was Tony Boucher's discussion of "The Past Year in Books"; scheduled for 1:00 P.M., but, of course, fifteen minutes late. Tony's address was largely an elaboration of his report already written on '61 books for Judy Merril's annual anthology, and pre-printed in Rhodomagnetic Digest for July, '62. Like Alfred Bester, who resigned as reviewer for F&SF because of the continuing low quality of the majority of books he was asked to review, Boucher deplored the high yield of mediocrity in contemporary book s-f, stating that s-f is one genre which cannot long endure merely routine, competent work from its writers. "S-F...should and must be a literature of stimulus and fresh horizons." He cited, however, as outstanding --- if lonely in the wasteland --- Clarke's "A Fall of Moondust", Galouye's "Dark Universe", Poul Anderson's "Three Hearts & Three Lions", Leiber's "The Big Time", Norton's "Star Hunter", Aldiss' "The Primal Urge", Wyndham's "Trouble With Lichen", Clingerman's "A Cupful of Space", Fred Brown's "Nightmares and Geeznstacks", and --- most notable --- Nikolai Leskov's "Selected Rales". He felt Heinlein's "Stranger in A Strange Land" fatally attempted to be a tract and was the major disappointment of the year.

The first panel event followed, a discussion between Poul Anderson, Mark Clifton, and van Vogt, moderated by Ed M. Clinton, Jr., on "What Science Fiction Market?" The debate was dull, listless, and marked by a gradual exodus of the audience for more springtly pastures. Neither Clifton nor van Vogt had much knowledge or consequent information to import about the current market, and Anderson, who has had relatively facile success in all marts, did not find much difference between them as areas of sale or publication. No real controversy developed, and such criticism of editors or markets as was voiced was done with

discretion so that the mildly rapped offender remained veiled in anonymity. It was simply a case of the 'wrong panel discussing the wrong subject.

What remained of the audience decamped from the ballroom to the hotel lounge for a "Meet Your Favorite Author" session. I have no idea what occurred at this event; I was in the bar with all the favorite authors.

Next, at four P.M., again in the ballroom, Ray Bradbury was introduced by Al Lewis, chairman of the Westercón, who MCed most of the scheduled events. Bradbury discussed his work at the present time, stating that at long last much of his best work seems definitely and irrevocably slated for screen presentation: Jean Louis Barrault, of France, is filming "The Martian Chronicles" with puppets and live action; Jacques Trauffaut, also of France, is making "Fahrenheit 451" with all live actors; MGM has bought a screenplay from Ray amalgamating a number of stories from "Dark Carnival" and "The Illustrated Man" into a single story and while declining production at this time, may very well be sparked into making the picture by the impact of the French films --- if successful. Ray also has written four one-act fantasy plays to be performed at the Earl's Court Theatre in London this Fall, and looks forward to work in ballet and opera. He mentioned, in passing, that the monster-making protagonist of his current SEP story is based on Ray Harryhausen of Hollywood...

His current prose undertaking, a 100,000 word novel, is based loosely on his short story for Weird Tales of fifteen years ago -- a story never reprinted in any of Ray's book collections and rarely, if ever, anthologized --- "Black Ferris", which has a theme that continued to provoke him into expansion of one kind or another, including a screenplay, none satisfactory, over the years. The novel --- written in what Ray termed the "Dark Carnival" tradition --- is to be at once a book for boys and adults, to reflect "light and dark worlds". At the beginning of the novel, an "evil carnival" comes to a small Illinois town with the purpose of garnering souls from

willing townsfolk. To tempt the local marks, a merry-go-round is set up which will either add or subtract years of life --- each revolution of the carousel takes or gives a year, in accordance with the riders. Two boys uncover the dreadful truth of the carnival and provoke the wrath of its demonic proprietors, who unleash a dust witch in a balloon to pursue them. Ray read the scene of the pursuit, which I deliberately did not listen to, inasmuch as Ray's reading style is uninspired and I much prefer to read the excerpt in its proper place when the book is published. Those that stayed said, however, that the selection, as read, augers well for the book. Everyone at all interested in Bradbury of the Weird Tales era seemed sparked to genuine enthusiasm, and this reading was undoubtedly one of the best-received parts of the program. (A Bradbury reading, of course, has become tradition at any major fan gathering in L. A.; and widely looked forward to with gusto.)

Next was the auction. Walter J. Daughtery, a fan of local note, pushed the professional items; books, mags, manuscripts and pix; Bruce Pelz, director of LASFS, hawked the fan material: mags and originals. Prices were surprisingly high in view of the very routine nature of the material, but bidding was limited to a handful of individuals and was never spirited at any point. Highest price bid was for a novel of 1949 that has aroused much interest and enthusiasm in fan circles of late, John Myers Myers' "Silverlock", which stuffed one fan's eagerly-paid thirty dollars into convention coffers. Nothing of any note whatsoever came up for auction, and the session was meagerly attended.

A ghostly "social hour" in the Palm Room followed at 6:30, which led to confusion in seating at the immediately subsequent 7:30 Fanquet, since a number of people without banquet reservations could not be winnowed out. Tables seating about twenty each were arrayed at right angles to the speakers and celebrities' platform; a \$1.50 Chicken Dinner was served for the \$4.00 fanquet fee. On the platform sat most of the Westercón Committee: Al Lewis, chairman; John Trimble, secre-

tary; Bjo Trimble, Art & Display; Bill Ellern, Treasurer; Ron Ellik, fan publicity; Forrie Ackerman, Pro Publicity; and Bruce Henstell, Information Booklet; with Jack Vance, Pro Guest of Honor; Alva Rogers, Fan Guest of Honor; Al HaLevy editor of Rhodomagnetic Digest; Thelma Evans, in charge of the upcoming fashion show; Anthony Boucher; and unexpected latecomers Harlan Ellison & juicy wife. Mrs. Evans' futuristically-attired fans --- male and female --- in outfits designed by Bjo and others paraded to the stand in a splash of color and restrained ingenuity. Reception was not overly enthusiastic, but this was in great part the result of the temporary ill-humor of hungry fans at the slow service of the dinner.

Al HaLevy presented the "Invisible Little Man Award" of the Elves' Gnomes, and Little Men's Science Fiction, Chowder, and Marching Society for 1962 to Hal Clement, an award that was obviously a sensible and deserving one. The award, an impressive, gold-plaquet base only, was accepted by Poul Anderson, who will transfer it to Clement at the Chicon.

Boucher was Master of Ceremonies at the Fanquet, and made the appropriate keynote address, stating that the present state of s-f was in reality very good for fandom, citing the instances of Dickens, Sherlock Holmes, Robert E. Howard; etc., all creators of now complete bodies of works which can be, and are, discussed at comfortable length without tension by bodies of devotees--after-the-fact, said bodies enjoying themselves immensely at conventions and private meets much in the way of s-f fandom today. Once s-f is laid away, he pointed out, fans and authors can forget its relation to their livelihood and view it as a thing to be assessed interminably and pleasurably over the years, being able to devote their full time to fanning when not gainfully employed elsewhere. In the name of undiluted fandom, then, Boucher proposed the keynote of the convention: "The death of Science Fiction!"

Alva Rogers, Fan Guest of Honor then spoke on the question, "Is Fandom a Way of Life, or is it just a G---m Hobby". He gave a general, humorous summary of fan history, touching on such

lurid points as Degler & Cosmic Circle, the IASFS schism, etc., which was well received.

Harlan Ellison, who turned up at the Westercon without advance heralding, was called on for impromptu remarks, and proved to be the big hit of the evening with his near-professionally-turned monologues and dialect comedy. He wowed everybody and established a universal sense of shared enjoyment which pitched the audience's receptivity to a rare peak for the major address of the evening by the Pro Guest of Honor.

Jack Vance, who resembles an engaging physical amalgam of Robert Bloch and John W. Campbell, Jr., was introduced with gusto by Boucher as the master of many types of s-f and fantasy, from the yellow-brick-road variety as exemplified in "Big Planet" to the Hal Clement antitypical order; as demonstrated in "To Live Forever". Kit Marlowe, Boucher concluded, would have greatly enjoyed Vance's company at the Mermaid Tavern...

Vance, a very soft-spoken, shy individual of unusual height and some portliness, never got around to naming his address, but simply stated he would like to report on and discuss certain scientific advances. He cited W. Gray Walter's book, "The Living Brain", to refer to the deleterious effect of flashing lights on human attentiveness, and quoted Walter's theory that light broken by passing trees or buildings or telephone poles might impinge in a hypnotic fashion on the senses of certain drivers, thus causing otherwise inexplicable accidents. This seemed to Vance to typify the mental distress and neurosis found in so many modern city dwellers; he believes that mankind is still by basic nature adapted to natural surroundings and goes mildly or dangerously amok depending on the individual in artificial urban surroundings. For that reason, he regards modern architects as the real mad scientists of our society, enclosing men in windowless, artificially air-conditioned buildings in which they are subconsciously ill at ease and irritated. Dwellers in modern cities are already on alien planets, and possibly scientists should study city dwellers to determine probable long-range effects of actual colonization of other

worlds on humans. The talk was marked by sanity and good humor and was greatly enjoyed; Vance's first emergence at a major convention was a decided pleasure for all concerned. He alone would have made the Fanquet worthwhile, it was felt.

At the close of the Fanquet, the usual room parties got under way, as they had Friday night --- with the usual effect on initial program activities the following day of delay and spotty attendance. At 12:30 or thereabouts, Al Hallevy spoke on "The Mythological and Romantic Elements of Modern Fantasy", which was simply grounded in such obscure data and involved such antiquated subject matter that it would better have been reserved for a classroom of specialists. It was the one absolute crushing bore of the program --- none of which was precisely Hallevy's fault.

The program was so late in getting under way Sunday that the next event, Ackerman's "Forest Murmurings" had to be cancelled, but Forrie turned up on the panel of the ensuing scheduled item, a debate about s-f film making entitled, "Spaceship with a Celluloid Collar", moderated by Walter W. Lee, Jr., and held between Forrie, Robert Bloch, and a producer (most recently noted for "The Magic Sword"), Bert Gordon --- no relation to the "Mad Russian" of Eddie Cantor broadcasting infamy. This debate involved material which really should be reported in Monster-Times, and will be covered in a separate article for that publication. Horror movies were the subject of discussion, with Bloch and Ackerman providing both wit and information; Gordon practical experience as a producer.

The debate --- much more successful and well received than the first on the program, "What S-F Market?" --- was followed by the last session of the auction, which simply repeated what had gone before, with a second copy of "Silverlock" going for ten dollars this time, thus reducing the inflated speculative ideas of several dealers present regarding the novel.

Ron Ellick took the podium next to recount his visit to England fandom in a

long talk entitled, "The Squirrel Uncaged", which was replete with humor and anecdote and was generally enjoyed by one of the larger gatherings in the Ball Room.

At about 6:00 P.M., the Business Session got under way, at which bidding for the site of the next Westercon took place. As was generally expected and desired, it was decided this would be the last Westercon --- oops, I mean, it was decided that the next installment in organized boredom would transpire in San Francisco. But this is unfair: it's fun having a major affair exclusively of West Coast origin to look forward to every year, & the get-togethers of individual fans and pros is worthwhile, even if the programs, as has been the case too often in recent years, leave much to be desired in contrast to similar meets in the East and Midwest.

Oh --- there were films to round off the affair. A few attended. There were three shorts: "The Genie", a LASFS production most locals have seen starring Ackerman and Fritz Leiber without much merit except in the color photography and a slave-maiden dance by Bjo; "The Princess & The Frog", made by the USC Dept. of Cinema; "Ionic Propulsion Systems", from Technical Communications, Inc., and a feature, the tired and true "Things To Come".

Not much of an affair, this Westercon, in my estimate. Like the curate's egg, parts of it were excellent. There just weren't enough parts.

The End

SCIENCE FICTION FORECASTS

AMAZING STORIES - Sept., 1962: Novelet: THE ICE MAN (a classic reprint) by William Withers Douglas. Short Stories: SUNFIRE! by Edmond Hamilton, and WHISTLER by David Rome. Vignette: APOCRYPHAL FRAGMENT by Edward Wellen. Serial: A TRACE OF MEMORY (conclusion) by Keith Wellen. Fact: THE INVITABILITY OF LIFE by Ben Bova. Features: EDITORIAL, THE SPECTROSCOPE, BENEDICT BREADFRUIT: VII by Grandall Barretton, & ...OR SO YOU SAY. Cover by Lloyd Biringham for "Sunfire".

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