



THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF RADIO HORRORS

by Martin Grams, Jr.

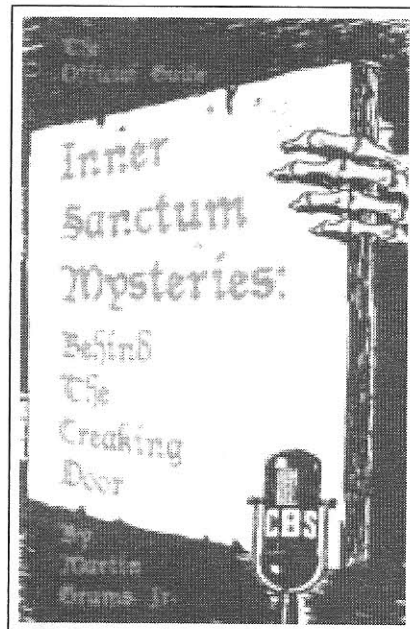
Paradoxically, there is one realm where crime does pay. That is in radio. Throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, dozens of radio actors committed crimes almost every day of the week-and made a living from it. But, throughout the blackmail, torture, murder, stealing and burning, they were always within the law.

This went on for about 20 years, long before the blood-curdling *Shadow* broadcasts started the transmission-borne cops-and-robbers cycle with shocking mad scientists and diabolical geniuses. Neither criminal nor crime-cracker, Raymond Edward Johnson played host on *Inner Sanctum Mystery*, and it was his business to scare the daylights out of listeners with such interlocutory tidbits as, "Can you stand another knifing?" or, "Did that make your blood curdle?" Scaring paid well, too.

Where the *Inner Sanctum* movies borrowed from the radio program, other radio crime-mystery programs such as *The Adventures of the Thin Man* borrowed from the movies, as was the case with the William Powell - Myrna Loy M-G-M series. Demonstrating that there was almost an unlimited scope for crime on the air, that Dashiell Hammett creation enjoyed almost instant popularity. *The Thin Man* broadcasts, like others, were strewn with make-believe lawbreakers working at AFRA rates,

or higher. The National Broadcasting Company did censor their programs. In part of one season, *The Thin Man* dramas were forbidden to feature any dead bodies until the air-time got moved ahead, to keep the young kiddies from being exposed to the dramatics of murder and death.

The "take" for 12 leading network mystery programs amounted to a juicy \$400,000 weekly, and the crime profiteers included writers, actors, musicians and directors by the dozen. *I Love a Mystery*, for example, during the year of 1942, cost \$2,400 weekly (and that's just two 15-minute broadcasts!).



It wasn't very long after *Inner Sanctum Mystery* was introduced that other psychological thrillers began popping up on the airwaves. An example was the launch of *Dark Venture* over the ABC network
(Continued on Page 4)

RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO

PO BOX 1908, Englewood CO 80150 (303) 761-4139 -

Dedicated to the preservation of old-time radio programs, and to making those programs available to our members

Old-Time Radio is Alive and Well in Colorado!

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Convention Schedules

19th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 15 - 16, 2005; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042. (859) 282-0333 or haradio@hotmail.com

30th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 20 - 23, 2005 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887 JayHick@aol.com, or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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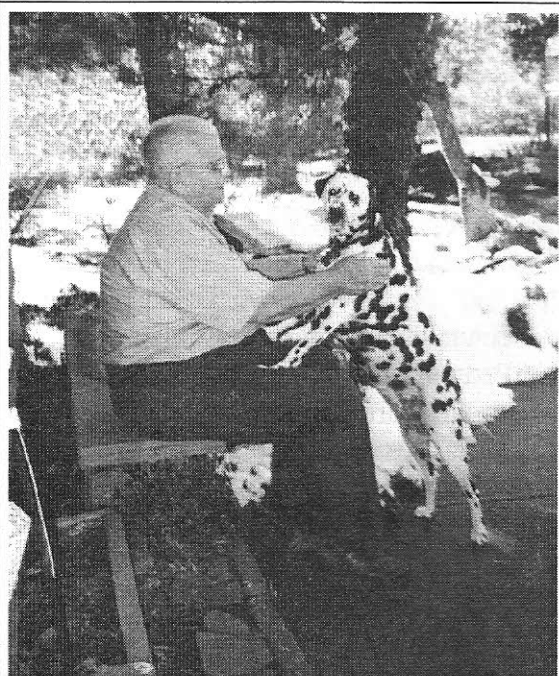
RETURN WITH US NOW...

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January, 2005

Dick King

Dec. 30, 1924 - Dec. 1, 2004



Dick and Mariah

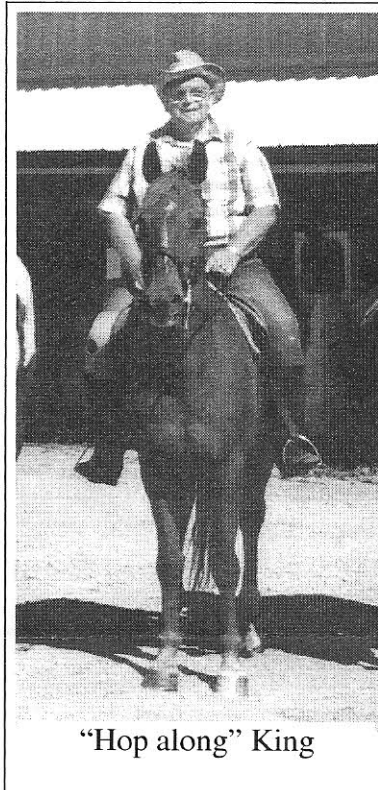
It is with great sorrow to announce to the RHAC membership that our Vice President Dick King passed away on December 1st, 2004. Of course you all know that Dick was much more than just our current VP. Along with his wife Maletha, they have been the driving force behind RHAC ever since they joined the club in 1985.

Dick was born and raised in Oakland California. When he got out of the army in 1943 he bought a horse and began riding. This resulted in two of his life long passions. First was the ownership of horses and all that that involves. But most importantly, through this avocation he met and married Maletha in 1946.

By this time Dick had settled into auto parts sales as his business. Within a year after their marriage they moved to Denver. It's no wonder, since this is where Maletha was born and called home.

At first Dick drove a bus for Tramway, which was the precursor to RTD in Denver. Soon however, the Kings bought some property in Castle Rock and moved there. Once again Dick did auto parts sales management and Maletha did bookkeeping while they raised their horses. The hobby of horses (no pun

intended) is not cheap, and it wasn't long before Dick and Maletha discovered that they could support their hobby by taking and selling pictures of riders at horse shows in the summer and fox hunts in the winter. Maletha says that Dick got out of most of the darkroom work by complaining that he was allergic to the chemicals. However, he did most of the photo shoots, including taking pictures while on his horse at full gallop.



"Hop along" King

In 1961 the Kings moved back to Denver and started their own auto parts business which they ran until their retirement in the early 90's. At that time they bought property west of I-85, near the Chatfield Reservoir, where they continued to enjoy their involvement with horses.

Like I said, Dick was omnipresent in our club; He was President for many years, he did all of the reel to cassette conversions, he managed the membership and library records and he managed most of the old time radio conventions that were held in Denver.

Dick is survived by his wife Maletha, their daughter Suzanne, two grandchildren, two great grandchildren and his sister Barbara.

Dick will always be remembered as a dedicated, giving and devoted man. He was my friend and I will miss him very much.

Respectfully, Larry Weide - Pres. RHAC

(Continued from "Cultural History" on page 1)
in February 1946. It arrived with little advance publicity, was an overnight success, and, according to one critic, had "little trouble in taking its place with the top crime sagas" (*New York Times*, February 1946). The first episode, "Boiling Point," was a thriller by Larry Marcus. It told of Mr. Pitts, a timid little English clerk, who for years had been forced to crawl under packing cases in the warehouse to afford amusement for his boss. Finally, Mr. Pitts rebelled at the humiliation. Training a gun on his boss, he forced his superior to crawl under the cases. When the boss was merely injured by falling cases, Mr. Pitts drove him around the countryside until life drained from his body.

Critics were concerned about the influence such programs might have on the younger members of the audience. In April 1946 Judge Jacob Panken of the New York City Children's Court wrote a short essay about his observations:

"Radio has become a factor of and a part of the environment in which we live. Children will listen to programs that are good, and are healthy. Programs interestingly depicting anti-social conduct, crime, murder influence children to anti-social attitudes and lead to aggression. I don't want to theorize, I want you to share some of my experiences. A boy, 15, was in court for the fifth time. This time because he stole an automobile. Other offenses were burglary, hold-up [sic] and use of a home-made gun to force another child to give up a few pennies he had. I asked the boy, 'What kind of programs do you listen to?' His answer was '*Gangbusters, Ellery Queen, Inner Sanctum, The Lone Ranger, Bulldog Drummond, The Shadow.*'

"Not all children are influenced by such programs. But no child escapes a trauma. They disturb and excite and the result is maladjustment. Psychiatrists and psychologists know the frightful effect that excitement, emotional disturbance and mal adjustments have upon the psychological state of the mind of children.

"Every program ends with crime does not pay, but by the time the child reaches that point, the excitement, the emotional upset is so overpowering that the gratuitous statement that crime does not pay is not heard and if it is heard, it does not register."

So a code of ethics was established to help "curb" the situation regarding influential crime dramas. One of the earliest attempts began in the spring 1939, when the National Association of

Broadcasters, which represented about 400 radio stations throughout the country, started work on a code for its members. The purpose was twofold: primarily, to set up uniform rules of self-regulation for broadcasters in program policies; secondarily, to jump the gun on the Federal Communications Commission by establishing a form of voluntary censorship within the industry. Although the FCC had no actual authority to censor radio, its power to withhold licenses (without which no radio station could broadcast) was a Damoclean sword that had given numerous broadcasters the jitters. *

Himan Brown, director of *Inner Sanctum Mystery*, was not immune to the type of censorship established on radio programs, especially when it came to Brown's methods of killing people. "The problem," Brown told author Jim Harmon, "was not to reveal actual murder methods with such clarity and definition as to give the listener a good idea of how to erase someone he could do without, or even a half-complete knowledge of a known and effective method of killing with only a small chance of being caught."

Still, in July 1939, with its' voluntary code completed and ready to be voted on, the N.A.B. met at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City for its 17th annual convention. Prior to balloting, two things happened. First, as a protest against the stringency of the code, a number of delegates walked out of the meeting. Second, Stephen Early, secretary to President Roosevelt, assured N.A.B. members that, in his opinion, the talk of government censorship was a "boogieman [sic]."

He added, "So long as radio serves democracy, it will remain free." Nevertheless, a sufficient number of N.A.B. members-172-held to the view that balloting on self-censorship was clearly desirable. By 148 to 24 they held to the further view that the code should be adopted.

So on July 11 a group of regulations was set up that would affect programs in a variety of ways as soon as two details were settled: machinery to enforce the N.A.B. code and the date on which it was to go into operation. On July 12, moreover, N.A.B. members unanimously adopted a code of standards under which advertisements of no fewer than 13 types of products and services were to be banned from the airwaves. Prohibited were ads for hard liquors, medical cure-alls, fortune-telling (handwriting analysis, numerology, astrology etc.), racetrack tips, matrimonial ads and "dope" on

financial speculations.

In the field of programs proper, as distinguished from advertised products and services, the N.A.B. code covered five broad departments, one of which was Children's Programs, which "must not contain sequences involving horror or torture ... or any other matter which might reasonably be regarded as likely to over-stimulate the child listener."

Speaking of horror ... U.S. radio, which, to the despair of many parents, churches and civic groups, fired at least 80 programs of horror and bloodcurdling adventure at its listeners every week, really massed its guns on Sunday. According to the November 6, 1950 issue of *Life Magazine*, three networks packed nine mystery shows into five hours of that evening. As time went on, censorship became more lenient. For example, *Inner Sanctum* had just celebrated its seventh full year on the air. *The Shadow* fairly growled with menace, as a mad doctor killed a woman, hid her corpse in a closet and then prepared to operate on a girl just for the fun of it. (The protagonist ran upstairs, tossed a man out a window and later decided to jump himself.) In *True Detective*, an "offended elephant" that had been fed plug tobacco got revenge by putting the finger (or trunk) on its tormentor, a woman-slayer. In *House of Mystery*, a "haunted violin" killed a gypsy. Later, a cat sniffed the bow and died, revealing that the bow's resin emitted a poison gas. In *Sherlock Holmes*, a dog howled for its dead mistress, as the woman's brother concealed her body; the solution involved a grisly exchange of corpses. In *Sam Spade*, a society reporter was pushed out a window. In *Nick Carter*, the infallible Carter captured a woman fence who had slain a policeman. *The Man Called X* traced a band of gun thieves to Nigeria; the natives blew them up by firing flaming arrows into their grenades. Total carnage for the night: at least a dozen violent deaths, with victims being stabbed, poisoned, shot, blown up and thrown out of windows, plus one exceptionally messy suicide.

This wasn't much of a change since 1943 when *Bulldog Drummond*, *The Shadow*, *Murder Clinic*, *The Green Hornet*, *Crime Doctor* and *Inner Sanctum* were just six of the mysteries heard over a four-hour time-slot on Sunday evening. In spite of a code of ethics, some shows still managed to get in a stomach full of horror. *The Shadow* featured an episode in which two grave robbers employed such useful instruments as a vise and blowtorch to mutilate and kill their partner. But even during the late 1940s,

radio set limits to the kinds of murder that could be committed, a fact that might have surprised listeners, if they'd even known about it. A year earlier, in 1947, the N.A.B. had revised its code of ethics and forbade the following:

1. Excessive horror in slaying.
2. Kidnapping or beating of children.
3. Third-degree methods used by the police.

In April of 1947, under the headline "Murder Is Not for Kids," Station KFI in Los Angeles took a full-page ad in a trade publication, to announce a realignment of programs. Under a typically surrealist "horror" picture of bats, black widow spiders, skulls, a gallows and smoking pistols, the management of KFI had this to say: "Murder and mystery shows provide thrilling entertainment for adults, but are not the type of program best suited for the youngsters. That's why we have gone to quite some trouble to rearrange our programming so that all of our 'who-done-it' shows are released after 9 o'clock at night. That way the adults can enjoy well-written, exciting mystery dramas, and the kids don't have to hear them."

Ironically, institutions, clubs, magazines and well-established societies recognized these crime thrillers and horror dramas. Every year they awarded these programs their highest medals of merit. A group of writers chosen in a nationwide ballot of mystery authors for outstanding work in six fields of detective story telling received "Edgars" at annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards dinners held in New York and Hollywood. The tokens, small porcelain busts of Poe, were the mystery writers' counterpart of the motion picture industry's "Oscars." John Dickson Carr, then-president of the Mystery Writers of America (previously a script writer for the first season of radio's *Suspense*, in 1942-43), announced the recipients' names annually reminding those in the radio industry that crime does reap rewards.

* The N.A.B. was formed April 25, 1923, and is, thus, even older than the major networks: NBC (established November 1, 1926) and CBS (established September 18, 1927).

Martin Grams, Jr. is the author of *The I Love A Mystery Companion*, *The Sound of Detection: Ellery Queen's Adventures in Radio*, and the up-coming release documenting the history of the radio/TV series, *Gangbusters*.

More OTR Characters' New Year's Resolutions

"I resolve to drop the "young" from the show's title now that I'm a grandfather."

- *Dr. Jim Malone*

"I resolve to find a play for Larry with an all-male cast... fewer temptations might help."

- *Mrs. Mary Noble, NYC*

"I resolve to get Throckmorton to propose."

- *Mrs. Leila Ransom, Summerfield*

"I resolve to find a mechanic who can get rid of that annoying BUZZING sound the Black Beauty makes whenever I take it out of the garage."

- *Brit Reid (aka "the Green Hornet")*

"I resolve to try my best to learn to love frogs this year."

- *Miss Connie Brooks, Madison High*

"I resolve that this year I will remodel the entryway, doubling the size of the hall closet."

- *Mr. Fibber McGee, 79 Wistful Vista*

"I resolve that I will oil the door hinges regularly to eliminate that awful creaking."

- *The Man in Black*

"I resolve to never again have anything to do with bright, shiny silver stars."

- *The Crazyquilt Dragon, Maybeland*

From the Desk of the Editor by Carol Tiffany



Welcome to another year of RWUN. Incredibly, it is now 2005! Hopefully, this will be a better year than 2004 for all of us. After all of the admittedly weird weather of the last half of 2004, we can only hope that the Spring will bring a much-needed return to normal.

The sad news of Dick King's passing was a surprise to your editor. Dick was one of the first people I met when I joined RHAC in the late '80s. He was one of the "rocks" of our club... filling many different jobs over the years, acting as a mentor to the newer members, and always ready to pitch in or to supply needed information. The club is poorer for his loss, and I, personally, will miss him.

Your newsletter staff has been busy preparing some interesting items for our upcoming issues, but, as usual, we could use some input from you in terms of articles, quizzes, etc. Please feel free to E-Mail or snail mail any items or ideas you have for inclusion in your newsletter.

We are still considering the inclusion of a "Letters to the Editor" column. Many of our sister clubs' publications provide such a forum with success. Please let us know if you would like to have this feature added to RWUN.

Happy New Year and good listening to all...



NEW IN THE RHAC LIBRARIES by Maletha King

This month we return to adding more popular shows to our tape libraries. The first series is two reels of "Lum 'N Abner" shows, then we've included four reels of "Our Miss Brooks" (one of my favorites) and finally a reel of "The Lone Ranger" episodes. It's amazing just how popular the Lone Ranger has stayed over all these years. I think it's a testament to good writing and the power of the "theater of the mind".

Be aware that due to scheduling and work in progress, there will be no catalog page insert in the next (February) issue of the newsletter. Watch for an interesting article that will fill these pages.