

# Finding the Dragon Lady

by Jeff Singh

I have often said that I don't just collect art, I collect experiences and friends. Although this is a story about the quest for art, it is more about the journey. It is also the story of many friendships, acquaintances and high adventure. Well, maybe not high-adventure but the rush of the hunt and the chase for art fiends can be just as intoxicating as high-adventure. This is a tale that has its beginnings being somewhat nebulous and ends in a small town not far from where I live. There is a circle that gets closed giving the whole narrative a sense of fulfillment and predestination.

The Dragon Lady personifies the mystery and the dangerous and sexual allure of the orient. She was crafted by Milton Caniff and has become a cultural archetype. The audience for *Terry and Pirates* and newspaper strips in general in the 1920's to 60's was unimaginable in the internet age of newspapers shutting down. Although he created many very memorable characters, the Dragon Lady stands out as the most important, influential, memorable and most often copied. Caniff's Dragon Lady is roughly based on Lai Choi San who was a historical Chinese female south-seas pirate captain. Caniff's Dragon Lady shares this name although it was rarely mentioned in the strip.



*Lai Choi San – The Real Dragon Lady*

Early in my collecting career I had been introduced to strip art and Caniff's name became very familiar. I started with a few *Steve Canyons* and later some *Terry and the Pirates* dailies. I was an instant fan of the art and even managed to acquire a few dailies with the Dragon Lady in them. Not having read the source material, I had traded these away as I didn't have a context for the art. I had read a bit of the Terry reprints but it wasn't until *IDW* began their wonderful and respectful reprinting of classic strips that I finally read Terry from beginning to end. I was enamoured with the strip and had new found respect for just how important and un-peered Milton Caniff was.



*Dragon Lady Hand Colored print*

My favorite storyline from the entire run has always been the last pre-war storyline from 1939 in which Terry helps an injured Dragon Lady evade some equally bad thugs. In return, she agrees to help the still insecure Terry with dancing lessons so he can impress April Kane at the big ball. There are some great scenes with Terry and the Dragon Lady in the sequence with the Dragon Lady

imparting her insight into romance and men on to young Terry. It is a peek behind the cruel mask the Dragon Lady often wears. She had ulterior motives for helping Terry, but those won't become apparent until the ball.

I wanted a daily with Terry and the Dragon Lady dancing. There are less than five dailies that fit this bill and only one that really showcases them dancing at the ball. This is the one I managed to hunt down after years of searching. It was found less than 75 miles from where I live. If I were allowed a strip art grail piece, this might be it. It is now framed and on my wall where it will remain for my lifetime. More on the final piece a bit later.

This story ends not far from where it begins. I moved to Ontario, Canada when I was 17. Formative collecting years. I had been collecting comics for years from 7-Eleven and the local comic shops in Calgary. Moving to Waterloo, I found myself collecting more comics and widening my horizons at Now and Then Comics in Kitchener. I have written about Harry Kraemer and Now

and Then Comics in a previous CFA-APA submission. In short, Harry took me from being a mindless Marvel reader and expanded my horizons to golden age comics and into some strip art. For me, Toronto was the big city and the big comic shops in Toronto were the Silver Snail and Dragon Lady Comics. In its time, the Dragon Lady had two locations but sadly I was too late to visit their first location. I had opportunities later to frequent their second location. At the time I didn't know the Dragon Lady character or where she was from but I was certainly intrigued. The Dragon Lady Comic shop was owned by John Biernat whom I would not meet for another two decades. He also published many strip art reprints under the Dragon Lady Press and I think deserves much credit for keeping vintage strip art alive and available. Even though I didn't know the character, the Dragon Lady image they used for their logo stuck in my head. It was not until years later when I got into original art collecting and strip art that I found out who the Dragon Lady was. I discovered Terry and Milton Caniff and those events shaped my collecting and collection.



**Terry and the Pirates Daily 8/5/40 by Milton Caniff**



**Terry and the Pirates Daily 9/9/36 by Milton Caniff**

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Fast forward a few years and I am just starting to collect original strip art. I have now seen a fair bit of Caniff art. I knew the Dragon Lady was an important character and so I managed to acquire a few pieces. The first was this daily on the previous page from 1940. It was featured in one of Carsten Laqua's catalogs and as soon as I saw it, I picked up the phone and called him. It was the first time we had spoken and the first time I was buying art from him. I forget how I even got his catalog, perhaps from an inquiry. I have since gone on to buy other art from Carsten and have even visited with him in his home in Berlin, Germany. It is a gorgeous strip with a nice blue wash and a great image of the Dragon Lady. It wasn't until a few years later that I was informed that it wasn't the Dragon Lady but her assistant Hu Shee pretending to be the Dragon Lady. This is a good example of how knowing the context for the art is important. The second great Dragon Lady piece I got was from eBay and was offered for sale by the Dragon Lady comic shop. I picked up the strip in person. It is a great early appearance of the Dragon Lady incognito and that is Pat Ryan in disguise as well. I did eventually part with both these strips, decisions I still lament.

In the beginning of a collecting career, everything is new and at one point I thought I'd get a nice piece of art from every comic artist. After all, how many could there be? I suspect I found that answer out after a few months but it would take me years to realize that not only was it probably not possible but also a very unproductive way to collect. I have long since abandoned that goal. That initial approach did have some benefits. I had seen a lot of art and styles and so I was developing a better sense of what I liked, what features in a piece I like and also let me meet many interesting people from different parts of the hobby. I grew as a collector and my insight into fine art, comic art, comic art history and the techniques and skills of the artists also grew. I was starting to find my way. In that milieu of evolution and self-discovery there was always Caniff and Terry.

**Terry and the Pirates** saw reprinting in several formats and did benefit from being among the few strips to have its entire run reprinted early on. I had several of those books from **NBM** and **Nostalgia Press** that I thumbed through but never had a chance to read as I wanted to start at the beginning. It was not until IDW started to reprint strips, starting with Terry, that I had my first real chance to explore the works of Caniff and the world that he created. As anyone who has read the series knows, it took Milton a bit of time to find his stride. Although fun and historical, the first strips were a tougher read than I expected. I am glad I stuck it out because it did not take long for us to meet Burma, Normandie and the Dragon

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Lady. Things really got rolling. Terry began the strip as a young boy but grew rapidly through Caniff's tenure. By the end he was an ex-army pilot in post war South East Asia. There was a very distinct turning point in the series that followed right after my favorite storyline. Terry turned into a war comic strip and Pat and Terry parted ways. Although I prefer the pre-war strips, Terry and Caniff were never more popular than in those years.

The Dragon Lady also changed. Prior to the war she was the underground boss hidden in the shadows and backrooms of opium bars. She moved into her wartime roll as the leader of a guerilla militia for the Chinese in Japan occupied China. As deadly as ever, she transformed into a heroine of sorts. No one could ever accuse Caniff of fearing change. Unfortunately for Terry, change did come in 1946 with Caniff moving on to another syndicate and **Steve Canyon**. The Terry franchise was left in the capable hands of George Wunder who would continue the strip for another 30 years.

I would be remiss not to comment a bit on Caniff's art during his run on Terry. The early Terry's were very similar in style to Caniff's previous work on **Dickie Dare**. Early on, Caniff started working with Noel Sickles who brought an illustrators background to the strip. Sickles approach to light and shadows helped Caniff find his defining and influential style. Sickles went on to other strips and eventually to full time illustration work. Sickles's influence on Caniff had been profound. Caniff is often credited as having a founding style in comic strip and comic art in general.



**Scorchy Smith** partial Daily by Noel Sickles

### Why the Dragon Lady?

Why do I like the Dragon Lady? I have always been a fan of strong women. I grew up with a very smart and capable mother and two younger sisters who demanded respect for their intelligence and wit. My wife is brilliant and among the most industrious people I have ever known. I have always been around strong and confident

women and I think that is where I first developed my love for Sheena and jungle girls. Growing up, I was always attracted to the Orient. The food, culture and people were always fascinating. It is no wonder I ended up marrying a Canadian born Chinese woman. Enter the Dragon Lady. She was strong, powerful, smart and half-Asian. Although a villainess, there was a side to her that only Pat and Terry could bring out. She let them behind the curtain and this only deepened her mystery and mystique. Although I am not sure, I suspect that my early exposure to the Dragon Lady store image and name might have laid some of the groundwork for this lifelong admiration for this siren.

### The Quest

After reading the IDW Terry reprints, I had a much better idea of what I wanted. The entire Terry timeline was in my conscience and I wanted the Dragon Lady dancing with Terry. There are remarkably few strips with this theme despite the storyline running for several months. There is only one daily featuring them dancing at the ball. There are two gorgeous Sundays with these themes. I have never seen any art from this storyline posted in CAF or other on line sites. There was one from earlier in this run that sold through Heritage Auctions before I was looking and it wasn't cheap.

As I continued my search, I started to commission pieces featuring the Dragon Lady and Terry dancing, recreating the scenes. Some of these results were equally as satisfying. One of the first artists I contacted was Jordi Bernet. Our relationship was in the process of moving from appreciative fan and superstar to friends who understood and collected the same art. Jordi is a huge strip art fiend. Shortly after the reinterpreted strip arrived, I ended up visiting with Jordi in Barcelona and spending a day going through his immense art collection with him. Although I speak no Spanish and Jordi speaks no English, we spoke the same language when it came to art. Below are two pieces of art. The first is the daily Jordi created for me with the Dragon Lady teaching Terry to dance for the ball and eventually dancing and kissing April. Sigh.... Such a great piece and it hangs just over my computer monitor so perhaps the most gazed at piece in my collection. Jordi also did another smaller illustration of the characters that was included. Jordi wanted me to do the layouts for the strip before he started which I did but he took it where he wanted and it is one of the pieces that will stay with me for the rest of my life.



*Dragon Lady, April Kane and Terry* by Jordi Bernet

The next came from Spanish artist of **Axa** and **Modesty Blaise** fame, Enrique Romero. We had less contact but he did a nice job of the theme as well. Our interactions were shorter and this was one of two commissions he did for me at the time. I didn't care for the record player in the foreground, but otherwise a great piece.

Next I had a local artist, Jori Bolton take on the theme. Jori is great with colors and decided to do a color piece instead. I think he did a fantastic job. He brought a classic Hollywood feel to the pieces and his Disney-esque sensibilities came through.



**Dragon Lady, April Kane and Terry** by Enrique Romero and Jori Bolton



I have over one hundred Dragon Lady commissions. In recent years I have had pieces with the Dragon Lady and Corto Maltese commissioned. Hugo Pratt is a new favorite of mine and he was heavily influenced by Caniff's style.

### The Collectors I Met in My Journey

There are two known large collections of **Terry and Pirates** original art. I had heard that there was a collector in Kitchener, Ontario that had a great collection but he was private. He was an elusive urban legend of sorts. People I knew, knew of him but none knew him directly. Through collecting Terry and other strips I met a number of other collectors and these often turned into friendships. One in particular is worth mentioning. Fellow CFA member and former CFA-APA editor Benno Rothschild is one such collector. We had discussed Terry many times and I believe had even done a trade or two. Benno had mentioned to me on more than one occasion that he knew a private collector who had amassed a huge collection of Caniff Terrys. We talked about this for years and finally I decided it was time to try and meet this collector. I was a budding Caniffite and to meet a veteran was an opportunity I had to take advantage of. I tried to make the most of the trip timing

it with Dragon Con and a studio visit with Brian Stelfreeze. It all worked out so well. Benno was the perfect host going above and beyond any reasonable degree of Southern hospitality. I had a great visit with Brian Stelfreeze in his studio. The highlight of the trip was driving out on the Sunday to visit with Benno's friend and veteran comic art collector Bob Murphy. I do interview Bob a little later in this submission. Bob was a gracious host and we spent hours going through his immense strip art collection. Bob was a former Art Director for a newspaper Advertising Art Department. He has worked with many artists and has a great sense of design and style. He does lament not having had a chance to have worked with any celebrity comic strip artists. His position perhaps gave him a unique position from which to contact artists about work but I will let Bob tell his collecting story in the interviews that follow this piece. Bob's has an amazing collection of vintage strip art. His focus was on **Terry and the Pirates**, especially the pre-war years. He pulled out stacks of dailies that were over 100 pieces tall and said "here is 1940". It was incredible going through them and then the rest of his collection. We had a nice afternoon and have kept in periodic contact since. Bob was very generous with his time in helping me with the interview we did. I would

love to visit him again in the future. If I recall correctly, Bob had one piece from my favorite storyline.

Jordi Bernet would be the third biggest Caniff fan I would meet. I fell in love with Jordi's work long before I met him. I still think he is among the top 10 comic artists alive today. He can do anything and do it well. It was an added bonus to find out what a historian and collector he was of comic art, in particular strip art. He has enough art to fill several museums and makes my 5000 piece art collection look trivial. Among his favorite and most collected artists are the heavily Caniff influenced Frank Robbins and Alex Toth. Jordi spent time with Toth and took over *Torpedo* from him. When we were doing trade deals prior to meeting him, he would joke that he didn't need any more Robbins *Johnny Hazard* art as he had so much he could read the series from it. I found out in person he was not joking. When I sat down in his collecting studio, he pulled out a stack of art easily 12 inches deep of Hazard strips and that was just the first of about 4 piles of that size. My friend Miguel who is like a brother from another mother came down from Madrid to Barcelona with his then girlfriend to spend a few days with Jane and I. It was a great trip that led to meeting and discovering a few other artists including Fernando Fernandez whom I wrote a previous CFA-APA piece on. A short Jordi Bernet Interview follows as well.

The final collector I met was John Biernat...the former owner of the Dragon Lady store and also the mystery collector from Kitchener. It all came together at one of my annual comic art gatherings I host. Every year there

are a few new people at the gathering which usually numbers around 25 people. One of the collectors who came let me know that John does a paper show every year in Toronto and that is the only time he is here. A few weeks later I got the heads up that the paper show was coming up and so I made my way down with the intention of making an initial contact with John. It worked out and we talked and he took my contact information. I had told him I was interested in some Caniff original art and he warned me they were expensive. A few weeks later I got a call from John and he offered me a half dozen dailies that were quite nice but not anything that would have added to my collection. In talking with John about the art I mentioned my love of the particular story line and he mentioned that he had one. He gave me the date and I looked it up and I was blown away. It was exactly what I had been looking for. Those that know me, know I am not pushy and so I sent John a note saying I'd never bother him about that piece again but I'd love to own it and if he wanted to part with it, I would make a substantial offer. A few weeks later John asked me to make an offer. I did and we had a deal. I drove to Kitchener to spend a day with him and we looked at his amazing comic art collection which included many top tier Terrys. I brought a few things to show him too. We had a mutual love for strip art and it was great to meet someone who spoke the same language I did. What really surprised me was walking in to John's house was that there were many Corto Maltese prints on the wall. It was like walking into my own world, all my favorite characters and art. We hit it off and have had several visits since then. John agreed to an interview as well.



*Terry and Pirates Daily 6/21/39* by Milton Caniff

The Terry daily had been framed with 2 other dailies about 15 years ago. At the end of our visit, we took down the frame to remove the art only to find it was glued firmly with 2 sided tape to both the matt and the other dailies. We rushed to the framers to see what they could do and in the end I ended up leaving the art. That was a difficult thing to do but I figured the art spent 80 years trying to find me, what were another few weeks? Eventually the art had to go to a paper restoration expert to get the pieces apart. The glue was left behind and would have cost a small fortune to remove. I picked up the art with John on my next visit and brought it home to decide what to do with the glue. I was able to get it off myself safely and was so happy to get it framed and on my wall. It sits right over my computer next to the Jordi Bernet piece and I look at them often on a daily basis.

My journey started and ended, in the city of Kitchener-Waterloo. Years of looking led to the treasure in my own back yard, literally an hour drive from Toronto.

There are fewer things more satisfying than having an art adventure end so well. The search is fun, the journey is fun, making new friends and acquaintances and then finally the reward. I can't imagine a more fulfilling and enjoyable way to spend ones free time. I am sure you all have similar stories and if you find you have nothing else to write about for CFA-APA, I am sure a lot of us would love to hear them.

### The Collectors.

I pride myself on my Caniff collection but long before I'd ever heard of the Dragon Lady, there were much more serious collectors of Caniff and Terry. I have had the good fortune to meet a few of them and view their collections in person. Here are excerpt from the interviews I did with them. Bob's was done over email, Jordi's was done through a translator over email and I interviewed John in person over lunch in August, 2016. They have an interesting mix of backgrounds. Jordi Bernet comes to Caniff as an artist, John as a comic shop owner and collector and Bob as a fan from having read them as a child in the newspapers

**Bob Murphy** (b. 1928) – Southern United States.

Bob was the art director for a large Newspaper as well as a staff artist early on in his career.

The Golden Age of comic strip reprints has been great for fans. I started cutting certain strips from the newspaper at age 8 or 9 (and I still have some of them today, but pretty yellowed and brittle) **Wash Tubbs, Red**

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**Ryder, Alley Oop**, etc. but it is so much more convenient to handle and read reprints in book form. I never had but a few Terry clippings, however, as the strip did not run in the paper that my folks subscribed to. I was overjoyed when NBM first reprinted the 12-yr. complete run! WOW!



**Bob Murphy at his home studio/gallery**

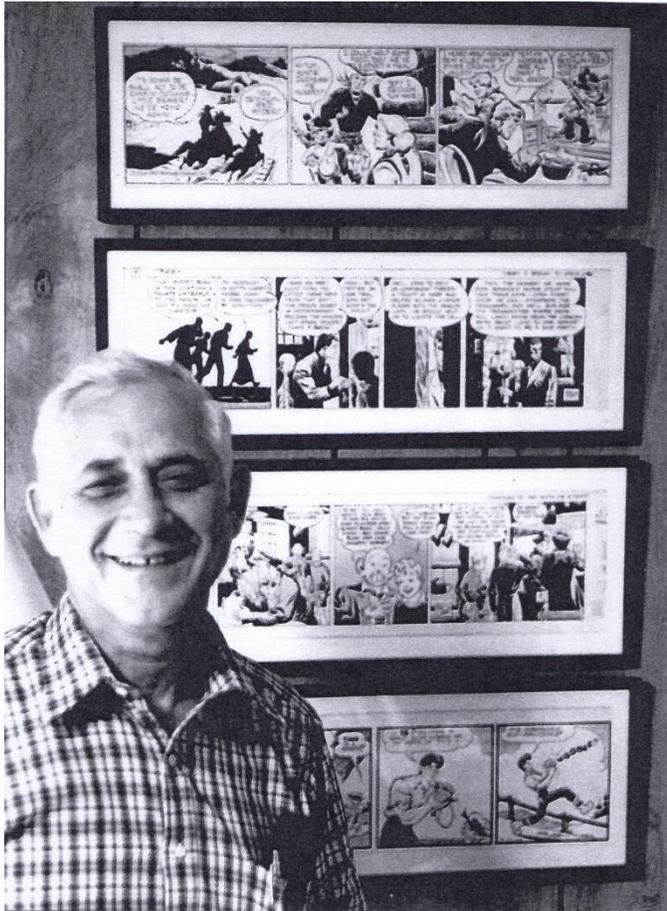
When I first started trying to collect original art, I actually did not know anyone else who was like interested, but I finally got up enough nerve to send request letters to a few favorite artists. Several did respond with a current example, others I never heard from. What I wanted most was vintage art from stories that I first read as a youngster--- but I had no idea how I would ever be able to go about acquiring anything like that. Sadly, it would be years before I was able to land my first Caniff Terry original strip. After holding that beauty in my hands though, I definitely wanted more! I even ran display ads in national publications, with a large heading: WANTED: Caniff TERRY original art--but never got the first response from anyone!



**Bob Murphy's Ad with address removed**

I still can't believe how fortunate I've been in the years since and I'm truly most thankful and appreciative, for all the help I've had in building an extensive art collection with over 200 different artists included.

*(At his peak, Bob had 550 Terry dailies and 48 Sundays)*



**Bob Murphy and some of his art**

### **FIRST MEMORY OF CANIFF & TERRY & THE PIRATES**

My first recollection of seeing ***Terry & The Pirates***, and Milton Caniff's name, was when I obtained a Big Little Book, as a youngster, entitled '***Shipwrecked on a Desert Island***' (Whitman Publishing Co.).

This was the story that introduced Normandie Drake and villain Weazel. Big Little Books were very popular during my boyhood and many featured reprints of previously run newspaper comic strips. The books measured 4.5" x 3.5" and were pretty thick (usually 450-475 pages). Every page contained a selected panel from the strips but the art was altered, removing all balloons, and the back of each page had story-line and dialogue as in a regular novel.

I also remember seeing a comic book which had several different comic strip reprints, with 4-pages of Terry Sundays included from the Papa Pyzon episode. Pat is being held prisoner, but still dumps Pyzon and a couple of his stooges on the ground. I was quite impressed

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with the superb art and great action! I learned years later that these Sunday pages ran in newspapers back in 1936.

I was delighted when Terry first started running in a nearby city newspaper in 1940 (Singh Singh story) even though it wasn't the paper my folks subscribed to--- but I could see the strip occasionally, mostly when looking through old papers when visiting relatives.

Then I happened to run across the **LOOK** magazine issue featuring the 4-pg. spread, headed '***Terry and the Pirates are Real People***' with photos of Caniff sketching leading characters from live counterparts as adventures on location, plus a repro of a great Sunday page! WOW! This was during the time when cartoonists rarely received any publicity in the news---at least, I never saw any. This Caniff coverage was quite thrilling to read--- something I remember very clearly.

### **WHAT MADE TERRY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER STRIPS THAT HELPED ME DECIDE TO PURSUE IT WITH SUCH PASSION?**

First of all, I loved Caniff's distinctive, beautiful, sharp illustrating with such strong contrast. I also loved the story-line being set in China, with Terry and Pat stranded and facing untold danger in a war-torn country with much intrigue and mystery. I guessed Terry to be about my same age so I could relate to the dangerous situations he was continuously involved in. Pat had many dangerous adventures also, in addition to trying to cope with two major distractions: the gorgeous Burma, and the sultry Dragon Lady, a modern day pirate of the China coast.

### **WHERE DID MOST OF MY CANIFF TERRY ART COME FROM?**

From coast-to-coast and from North of the border! From other collectors---and individuals who were conducting business as dealers, and a few galleries. I did not know about any of them until several years after I started trying to collect original art. My first efforts were sending requests directly to certain artists who were favorites of mine. I had a fair amount of luck but the ones who responded sent a current example. I was overjoyed to receive the artwork but I soon ran out of names and couldn't write the same artists again. So for 5-6 years I stopped trying to collect, just being thankful for the few originals I had been able to obtain.

In the back of my mind, however, what I really wanted to add to my collection was vintage art from stories that I first read as a youngster---but I had no idea how to go about trying to obtain such early examples. Did any of this type of art still exist, I wondered? Over a long period of time, a lot of things can get lost or disappear. And if the artist might have saved some of his early work, would he consider parting with any of

it? Obtaining this kind of original art was all that I could think about all the time. I couldn't get up enough nerve at the time, however, to inquire to any of the artists about such a possibility, but finally did write to Caniff. He responded with an autographed 1943 Terry daily from his very low supply. Was I happy? Yes, indeed!

Then one day, I had my first break that lead to everything changing---to a new world that I did not know existed! I was reading **Cartoonists Profiles** magazine and noticed a classified ad in the back pages offering to trade comic strip original art if anyone was interested. With my small collection of current examples to consider, I doubted that I had anything that would be attractive to him for trading---but decided to answer the ad anyway, just to see exactly which strips he had. I was amazed at his listing, and most surprisingly, we actually did make one trade. The most important thing about meeting him---he put me in touch with several other collectors that he knew, some who would only trade, but others would sell extras they had, while keeping one excellent example for their own collection. I soon learned that long-time collectors had unbelievable vintage art which they had held onto---the very kind of art that I wanted so badly. I started writing everybody I found out about who owned comic art, and many wonderful collectors were so kind in helping me in building my holdings with quality art that I truly loved. Of course, Caniff Terry was my top priority and I focused on trying to acquire as many examples as I could. There were also a number of other boyhood favorites that I longed for as well.

Then, I found out about the **Buyer's Guide** publication which was filled with ads offering comic original art and I couldn't wait to get the new issue every week to see what was offered---I got a great number of leads through their pages for several years that helped me considerably with many wanted strips. Also, several collectors would contact me if they had extra Caniff Terry originals, which was a great help too. Auctions were gaining popularity at the time and I participated in some of them with fairly good results.

Even so, off and on, I went through long periods when Terry originals were really hard to come by. The later Harvey Comics warehouse find of pre-WWII Terry original strips opened things up considerably.

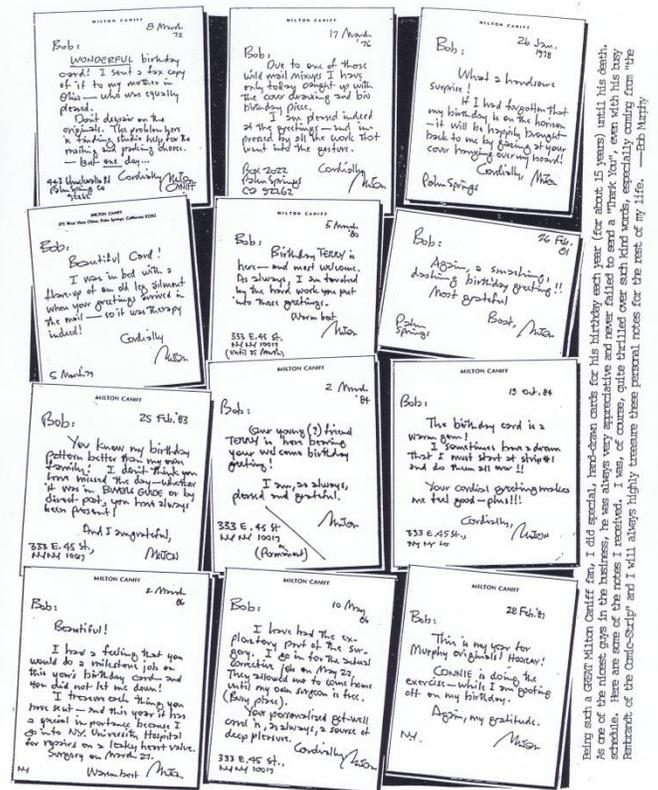
**MEETING MILTON CANIFF? IMPRESSIONS? DID HE KNOW I WAS A HUGE COLLECTOR?**

Sadly, I never met my great idol but did write to him occasionally. I also did hand-drawn birthday cards for him for about 15 years until he passed away. These were all done in large size art and in color. He knew I was a great fan and had a lot of interested in collecting original art. He always sent a note of thanks after

receiving the birthday cards which really meant so much



Hand-drawn Birthday cards for Milt by Bob Murphy.



Milton Caniff's responses to Bob's cards.

to me---I still have all his notes today which I highly cherish. I never hinted anything to him about having a growing collection of Terry originals as I had read where he said he had only a few left. Before donating all his art, papers, etc. to Ohio State he was offering everyone a special trade: two **Steve Canyons** for each Terry in order to build up his supply a bit. I did not participate in that, but did donate a wartime Terry daily to Ohio State in honor of Caniff's 40th Terry anniversary.

### THINGS THAT HAVE GUIDED ME IN COLLECTING?

I only purchase art that I personally like, therefore will never become disappointed with it later. I prefer clean artwork in good condition, with no bad stains, tears, or large discolored paste-overs. I have passed over a few wanted items at times because of some of these flaws. The strips I love most, and which mean the most to me, are ones that I read as a youngster. Landing such a favorite strip from that period is simply a dream come true. Unbelievable! WOW!

### FOCUSED COLLECTING STRIP ART OVER OTHER COMIC ART/ DID I READ A LOT OF COMIC STRIPS AS A CHILD?

Comics have always fascinated me and were directly responsible for my first interest in trying to draw. While in grammar school, I started clipping comic strips from the newspaper comic pages every day, of several favorites, and saving complete episodes---some of these runs I still have today. Newspaper comic strips were assessable so that's mostly what I was reading. Dimes were hard to come by at that time and I never had but a very few comic books. Anyways, comic strips were always my favorites because that's what I was mostly reading when growing up. When I got into collecting art, I concentrated on strip art (primarily Caniff Terry) since it is impossible to own everything. My varied collection has brought me tremendous pleasure and it's still always exciting to land a favorite original ---nothing like holding it in my hands and admiring the beautiful artwork up close.

### FAVORITE CANIFF PIECE? WHY?

I have so many great Caniff examples from early, to throughout his entire career (especially Terry) that it would be impossible to pick-out only one and say this is my favorite piece. Here are a few highlights from my Caniff collection:

- o 1928 Special illustration for Ohio State 'Sun Dial' publication while he was a student there. Artwork signed Milton Arthur Caniff
- o Ghost artist for Bil Dwyer **Dumb Dora** strip (1933)
- o 1934 **The Gay Thirties** panel
- o 1933, 1934 **Dickie Dare** dailies
- o Three Terry dailies from the first week (first appearance of Connie)
- o First appearance of Dale Scott
- o First appearance of Normandie Drake
- o First appearance of villain Weazel
- o First appearance of Poppa Pyzon
- o 1941 Pearl Harbor Sun. page that ran Dec.7
- o 1943 **Male Call** (extremely rare---most are now at Ohio State)
- o **Steve Canyon**

I guess one of my special favorites would have to be the beautiful 3-6-1936 where Pat and Burma have just finished dancing and she proceeds to play and sing 'smoke gets in your eyes' for Pat. This is the first Terry original I was able to acquire dating from this early period. Milt was also doing all the lettering during this time. Another date that holds so many memories for me is the 1-29-1936 strip. I had looked at it for so many years as it was reproduced in Martin Sheridan's **Comics and their Creators** book---the first book I ever knew about that was devoted entirely to the various cartoonists and the strips they drew. I was really stunned when this original was offered to me, and I almost couldn't believe it, as I had admired this particular strip for so many, many years. There is a 'Rush 11 Days Late' stamp by the syndicate on the back of the art.



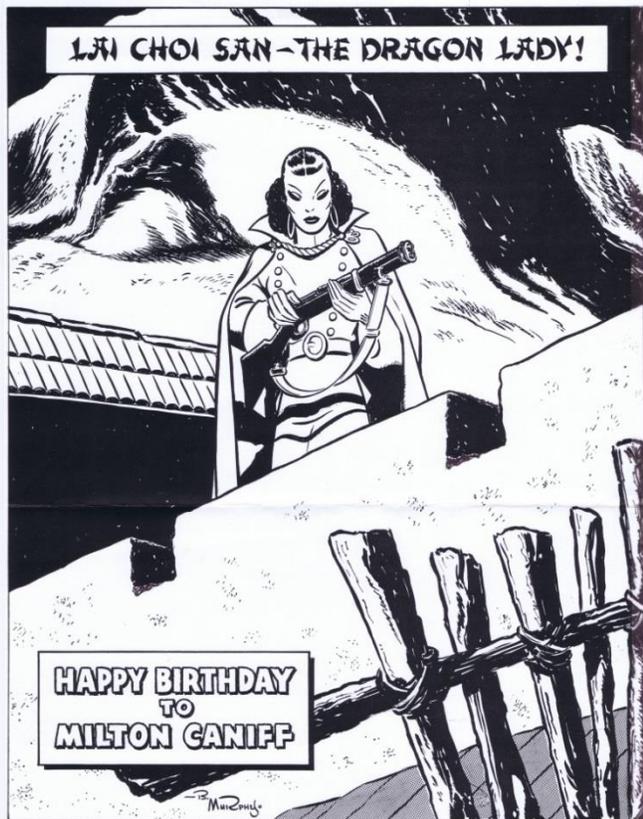
**Terry and the Pirates** daily 3/6/36 by Milton Caniff. Bob Murphy's first early **Terry and the Pirates** daily.

I also have a number of Terry Sunday page originals that are really most impressive. What an understatement! I especially love the 1940 dates as this is a favorite period of mine.

### **BIGGEST REGRET FROM YEARS OF COLLECTING**

I wish I had started collecting original art many years before I actually got involved. I think my chances of obtaining choice art would have been much greater when there were not nearly as many active collectors as have been around since the 1970s explosion.

In recent years, it's pretty shocking to lose a badly wanted item in an online auction, when you had been the winner as time expired, but someone beat you at the very last second. What a disappointment! That has happened to me many times---a lot of nervous anxiety and sweaty palms as the seconds click down to zero, but plenty of happiness if you are declared the winning bidder.



**Hand-drawn Birthday card for Milt by Bob Murphy that was published as a cover to *The Buyer's Guide***

One bitter disappointment back some years ago: a collector sent me a list of a few pre-war Caniff Terry dailies with selling price noted for each strip. I selected three strips (one that I badly wanted), mailed him a certified check, and waited eagerly for the package to arrive. After an average time for delivery, I received a letter with some really bad news---instead of my getting the package, he returned my check, saying he had priced the art too low and could not let it go! That was a terrible regret that I still have locked in my memory

***Finding the Dragon Lady*** by Jeff Singh

today---one of the worst experiences in my entire collecting hobby. I assume that someone offered a higher price than he had stated, and he let them have the art. One of the saddest things in collecting, to me, is if you miss an item, auction or otherwise, almost always you never have a chance at the same item again---it's gone forever!

### **COMMENTS I MIGHT HAVE ABOUT CANIFF, TERRY, OR COLLECTING**

Regarding Milt's ghosting on ***Dumb Dora*** strip to help out Bil Dwyer, who had a problem with drawing pretty girls. I purchased this 1933 daily from a list (sight unseen) because I didn't have a Dwyer example in my collection. When I received the art, I was positive, at first glance, that Caniff must have drawn the girls shown and I wrote him for verification. Here is what he answered:

***Re."Dwyer" I actually drew the first Dumb Dora strips in pencil, inked the girls, etc. (other inking by Dwyer) which he submitted to get the job from Paul Fung (who took over from Chic Young) ---this was in May or June in 1932. I was doing staff work at the A.P. during the day, ghosting D.D. at night and drawing sports, editorial cartoons, and story illustrations for the N.Y. Graphic on the week-ends. Being 26 years old made it easier. Another sidelight of that day (good old depression). I had been paid for the six weeks lead on Dickie when I started Terry --- but the Trib-News paid on publication--- so I once had strips running in the New York Sun and the Daily News---and I couldn't pay the rent on my apartment! Rather grimly funny now, but it was desperation-ville then. (the typewriter hocked for \$5.)***

### **ANY ADVICE FOR A COLLECTOR LIKE YOURSELF?**

No, I am afraid not. You are already a pro, with an extensive collection that no one on the planet can compete with. Congrats and many continued good collecting wishes!

### **Bob Murphy's Background**

Bob was attending Art School (his G. I. Bill eligibility expiring) and a group of students came up with the idea of holding an Art Exhibit, at the end of school year, and inviting prospective employers to attend. A leading downtown business agreed to loan space for the exhibit, so students interested entered samples of their work. During the exhibit, the Art Director of the city's largest newspaper left a message for Bob to give him a call. He offered him a job as staff artist to fill a vacancy. That's how Bob started his lengthy newspaper art career of many years. He retired as Art Director, supervising 18 staff artists, at the downtown headquarters location, as well as 6 satellite offices.



'Terry And The Pirates' AND Milton Caniff have always been magic names to me---and always will be! As a youngster, I was hooked, but good, the first time I saw this legendary high adventure strip. I was much intrigued with the storyline, and with Terry (a boy I guessed to be about my same age) stranded in war-torn China and facing untold danger every day. I was also quite impressed with Caniff's beautiful illustrating, and still love and appreciate it even more today as I look over my extensive collection of TERRY original art. Holding a TERRY original in my hands and admiring the gorgeous artwork close-up is just a tremendous thrill that I can't describe. I have worked constantly toward building my collection for many years (really a labor of love) and feel most fortunate indeed to have been able to acquire so many wonderful examples by the great comic-strip master.

**TERRY AND THE PIRATES PRE-WWII CHARACTERS FEATURED IN ORIGINAL ART COLLECTION**

Terry  
Pat Ryan  
Connie  
(Geo. Webster  
Confucius)  
Dale Scott  
(1st appearance)  
Pop Scott  
Poppy Joe  
Normandie Drake  
(1st appearance)  
Dr. McAndrews  
Count Dmitri

Weazel  
Limey  
Grummage  
Burma  
Captain Judas  
Stan Wingate  
Wendy Wingate  
Dragon Lady  
(Lai Choi San)  
Sgt. Monahan  
Papa Pyzon  
(1st appearance)  
Tony Sandhurst

Big Stoop  
General Klang  
Hunter Yurk  
Nastalthia Smythe-  
Heatherstone  
Reginald Smythe-  
Heatherstone  
Drusilla Crail  
Inspector Gwenn  
Chun We  
Baron de Plexus  
M. Belette (Weazel)  
Sluggar Dunn

Sanjak  
April Kane  
Deeth Crispin  
Cue-Ball  
Captain Blaze  
Cheery Blaze  
Singh-Singh  
Rayen Sherman  
Hu Shee  
Dude Hennick  
Chopstick Joe  
Dr. Ping  
Bucky Wing

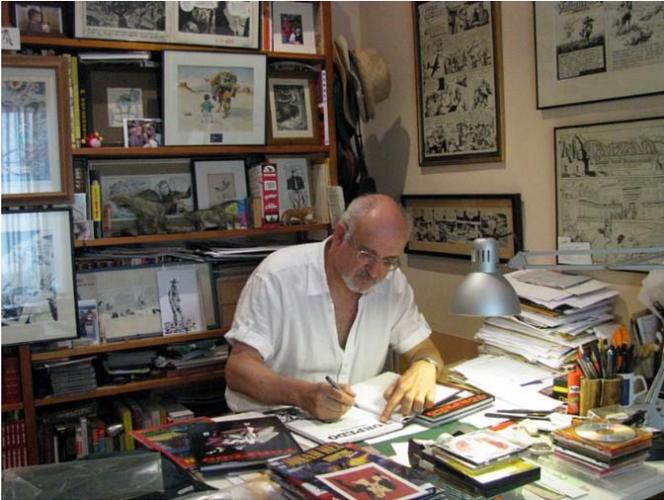
Kiel  
Colonel Wolff  
Sammy, The Tapper



**My Friend Terry** by Bob Murphy. Published in the Milton Caniff fanzine **Caniffites Journal** circa 1990. It was a subscription quarterly publication for Caniff fans that lasted for over 100 issues. It was discontinued when Canadian editor, Carl Horak passed away, about 2002.

**Finding the Dragon Lady** by Jeff Singh

**Jordi Bernet (b. 1944) – Barcelona, Spain**

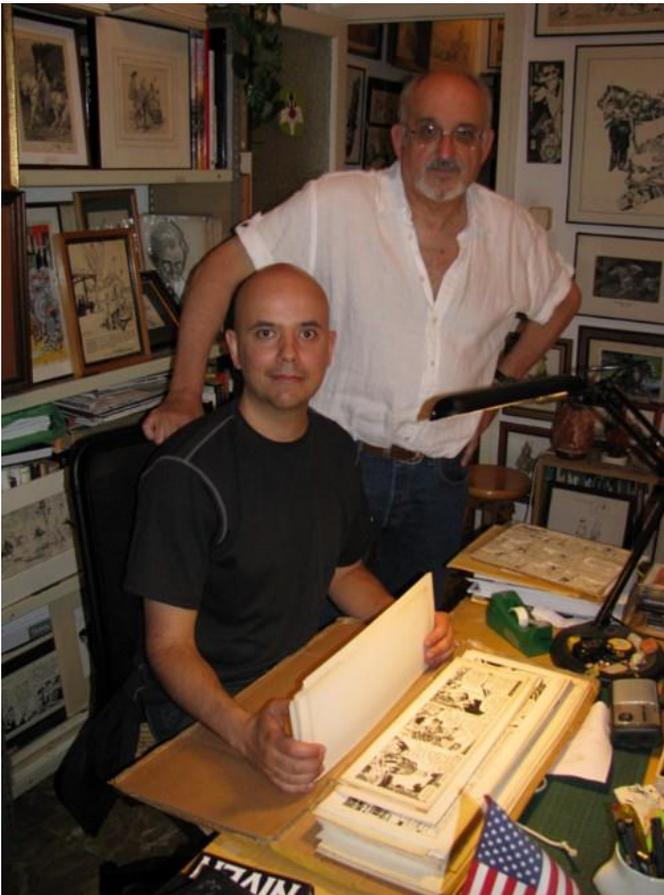


**Jordi Bernet in his Office – Barcelona 2011**

I sent Jordi the same questions I sent Bob, here is his response via interpreter Miguel Reyes.

Milton Caniff is a true master of comic books.

I think all the artists who came after him, myself included, have been influenced by his art to a certain degree, as he was himself by Noel Sickles.



**Visiting with Jordi Bernet in 2011.**

**Finding the Dragon Lady** by Jeff Singh

His menagerie from Terry as well as Steve Canyon is composed of characters full of personality and strength. In my opinion, his best work came towards the end of Terry and the first part of Steve Canyon. That run was special in terms of graphics and in the way he mastered black and white.

I enjoyed drawing the Dragon Lady tribute strip for you. She is one of Caniff's best characters and it was a real honor.

I always liked black and white. I think it is more direct and overwhelming than color, and this is the reason I liked black and white strips rather than Sundays... and they are also cheaper!

My first contact with Caniff was in an old magazine named Mickey of which my father had a few issues. I must have been 4 or 5 years old, and they contained some of the early Terry and the Pirates in black and white. Already at that age they had a big impact on me.

Barcelona 2016

**John Biernat (b.1941) – Ontario, Canada.**

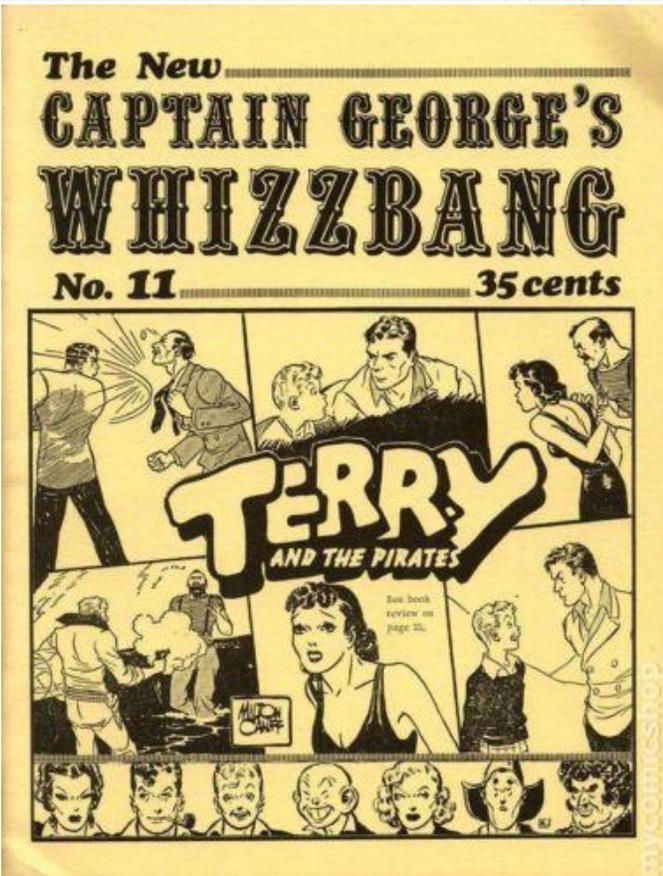
*Interview with John Beirnat August 18, 2016 Waterloo, Ontario – Yee's Chinese Restaurant. Recorded with John's expressed consent. (John's responses in black, mine in red.)*

Hi John, do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions for the interview as we eat. I will record it, if that is OK with you?

It is so I can't deny it later. (joking)

It is just so I am accurate. I don't want to put words in your mouth. I did bring a few questions. We don't have to do it all today. I am going to ask mostly about Terry stuff. What is your first memory of Caniff and Terry and the Pirates?

George Henderson, Memory Lane shop in Toronto. He pointed out **Terry and the Pirates** and insisted that I buy this hardcover which is a reprint of maybe the first year. It sat around for about a month or so and I started it. And that was it. I was totally absorbed by it. I started to seek out **Terry and Pirates** comics, **Four Color** issues and then the **Harvey** issues. Terry appeared in several other comic books. I think **Magic** or **Tip-Top**. I have forgotten which ones but wherever he appeared, I had to have it.



**George Henderson and Memory Lane comic shop opened in 1967, Toronto, Canada.** Image of **Whizzbang** published by Captain George.

You grew up reading strips, comics in the papers. You were not aware of Terry back then?

Not at all.

You must have known Milton Caniff through Steve Canyon at that time?

I remember reading Steve Canyon along with Rip Kirby. I don't think I ever read **Terry and the Pirates** and if I

did, it is a memory that has escaped me. Like many things I might add.

What do you think made Terry different that made you focus on **Terry and the Pirates** as opposed to all the other strip artists out there?

The characters... and the art. The characters in particular, I really liked them. I liked Normandie Drake especially and I really liked Burma. The Dragon Lady was fascinating and eventually Hot Shot Charlie. Even the goons were interesting like Captain Judas. It was an adventure.

I must have been about 35 or 40 when I started reading them. I fell in love with it and that was the beginning. As Noel Sickle was introduced to the strip as an artist, the art just improved immensely. Everything about it was just wonderful.

You can almost tell the day that Noel Sickles started.

Oh yeah.

One day there is no shading and the next day there are shadows and lighting. I think I started reading at about the same age. I must have been in my mid 30's when I started reading Terry for the first time. I had a couple of dailies for the artwork but not until the IDW reprints came out that I had a chance to sit down and read.

Weren't they wonderful.

Fantastic. I certainly share your love for the material and understand why you collect it.

Yes, and then you start to collect all the things that are adjacent to **Terry and the Pirates**. All the Big Little books and memorabilia. Some of it was not by Caniff but it was Terry and so I had to have it.

Terry was quite and industry back in those days.

Sure. Yeah.

I heard that when Raven Sherman died, Milton Caniff was getting death threats. That had never been done before. They had never killed off a main character.

I read it, of course, long after it had been published and I was shocked that she died.

It was devastating to me as you are so invested in the characters. Sanjak. I think Sanjak is my favorite villain.

Yes, turns out to be a woman.

She was the first Lesbian character in comic history.

They got away with a lot in Terry and the Pirates and I think that is a good thing. He was a master storyteller. This idea of unrequited love is always something that I like and I just fell into it.

There was certainly a lot of romance in Terry and the Pirates. There were lots of interesting romances.

I really thought he would marry Burma. There was no doubt in my mind and then he leaves them and George Wunder decides not to include her. Not even once!



John Biernat with the first Burma appearance

He was such a great artist, George Wunder, but he was following in such great footsteps that he never got out from that shadow. Even though he did Terry three times as long as Caniff did, it was always Caniff's.

I remember Alex Toth was interested in doing a Terry strip and we would publish it. He just called me and said "I can't walk in Milt's footsteps". End of story.

I don't think anyone could have.

He is criticized a lot now because of the racist way he portrayed Connie and other people of ethnic origins.

Oh yeah. At that time, it was perfectly acceptable and no one thought of it as racism. Sadly!

You met Milt Caniff. Was it on one occasion?

Twice. It was in New York. Both times he was generous with his time and his autographs. He liked to talk about Noel Sickles and how much Sickles rushed to get his work done because there was a Hoot Gibson movie and he loved Hoot Gibson very much. He wouldn't miss it and see it again and again. The last time we went, it was with Al Williamson and Joe Kubert. We all walked out of there felling like this guy is special. Really special in just the way he treated everyone. He knew who Al was and Joe was. He was a unique person.

Was that a prearranged trip?

Yeah. I set it up and Al wanted to go. Al was talking to Joe Kubert and Joe asked if he could come along. He had never met Caniff. Joe had him do portraits for his two sons, which he gladly did. They were just small things. I was standing there salivating. So was Al.

In his studio, did he have a lot of original artwork?

No. He had apparently given a lot of it to Ohio State University. I think Rockwell must have been doing most of it at that time as Milt must have been what, 80? '85 was the last time I saw him. His age never came up.

Both times, was it the same studio?

Same studio.

So, what did he have on his walls?

There was some Steve Canyon material and it was otherwise bereft of any other art. He had his drawing board there. I don't know if at that time he was just doing rough outlines that Rockwell completed or what. I

didn't actually observe him draw either time except for the images he did for Joe Kubert's sons.

**Did you ever get any art directly from Milt?**

No. When he saw the first Burma, his face just lit up. He said something like he hadn't seen this for 50 years which would have made sense.

**How did the art get from him to dealers? Was he giving it to them?**

My understanding is the Tribune just kept the art and then Harry Matesky was offered the whole Tribune kit and caboodle and there were tons of Dick Tracy and Terry. There was Terry from the very beginning. He got every daily or the mass majority of it. At one time Henry had more Terry and the Pirates than anybody in the world. The first time I saw those.. ahh. There is one daily where Normandie Drake has left Pat Ryan because of her mother and he is walking away. There is a lovely blue wash. It is on my wall. As soon as I saw it, I had to have it.



**Terry Daily by Milton Caniff**

I wasn't trying to get Dragon Ladys at that time. I wanted Normandie Drake which you have seen in my basement and Burma. There were a few Dragon Lady's I bought because they were just terrific. I was blessed. I have a picture of me holding Terry number one. The original. That is as close as I got.

**Now Harry only sold them as a week's worth at a time. Is that correct?**

That is right. You had to choose a whole week. Fortunately, in a week you would usually have a Normandie Drake storyline or something of that sort so she would be in every daily. Someone had got there before I did and had taken most of the Dragon Ladys. This put Harry off and so he wanted to just sell the whole week so the dailies that were not as desirable in comparison to the other ones would sell. I got into that mode. I was very happy with that mode.

**This would have been the early 80's you were buying these? '84**

**Do you remember what he charged for a week?**

**Finding the Dragon Lady** by Jeff Singh

I think it was \$600 for a week. About \$125 each. Very fair.

**Was the price dependent on the material?**

No. Whatever you found. He later offered me some 1939 Sundays that I foolishly turned down. Not bright on my part.

**You got some great ones.**

Oh yeah.

**What was your other major source of Terry and Pirates art. You had a very large collection at one point. It is still a large collection but it isn't what it used to be.**

I think the vast majority I got from Harry but I was buying them at every show I went to. I did a lot of comic conventions and people knew I collected Terry and so they would just bring them over to the table and ask if you would be interested and I rarely said no. And so you pick up a lot of Terry's that way.

**How large was your collection at its largest?**

279 Terry dailies by Caniff.

**And Sundays?**

5, maybe.

It is a lovely hobby. It still is and it is nice to see other people share that enthusiasm for collecting these dailies. You have seen some of them on my wall. The storyline isn't particularly good for that daily but the art, especially the Noel Sickles stuff... Wow.



**Dragonlady Store on Queen Street, Toronto.**

**You were more interested in Burma and Normandie but you picked the Dragon Lady as the name of your shop.**

Yep. Normandie Drake means nothing. Burma probably means nothing but the Dragon Lady was a universal name... and I liked it. I really liked it. I adopted that name. Milt told me that none of the Terry material has ever been protected by copyright. Only the heading, **Terry and the Pirates**. That you couldn't use. Any name, any reprint was OK.

I wondered how that happened like that?

I asked Milt. He said there were so many dailies, how could you protect every one of them for 30 years. In the 30's you had to do it every day and that would be expensive.

of everything I published. Those were the days. Very good days. What they are doing now with publishing is just wonderful. They are producing it much better than I could ever have hoped to and with all sorts of additional material. It is great to be a collector now.



**Dragon Lady Comic Shop comic Ad circa 1982 by Gabrielle Morrissette**

I would have thought that even if not copy write protected, the characters would be trademarked.

The Dragon Lady wasn't.

You also had a publishing company. The Dragon Lady Press.

That is right. I wonder where that name came from? Milt had no problem with that. I use to send Milt a copy

**Finding the Dragon Lady** by Jeff Singh



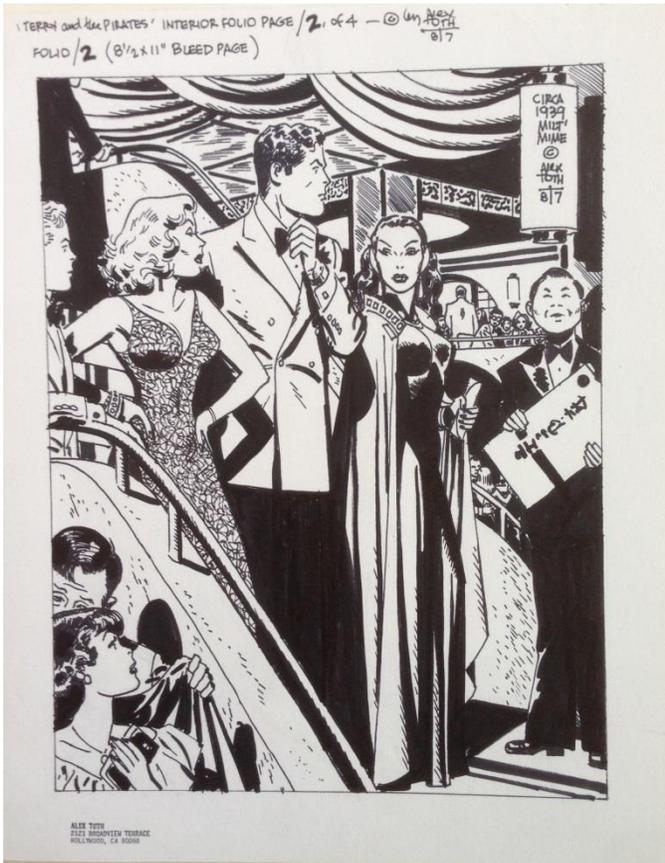
Several **Dragon Lady Press** comics.

With the Dragon Lady Press, was it mostly reprints that you were doing? Any new material?

No, strictly reprints. I'd still be doing it except a couple of places went bankrupt and left me high and dry. So when it was all over I was owed about \$5000. The distributors had gone bankrupt. There was not a thing you could do about it.

Was this about the time Diamond was taking over?

Yes.



Four *Terry and the Pirates* covers by Alex Toth for *Dragon Lady Press* that have never been published.

Was Diamond one of your distributors?

Yes they were. They always paid.

For most of your publications, you had new covers made.

Yes. Alex Toth did most of them because he was interested in the material. He did **one Terry and the Pirates**. It was a Wunder reprint. I couldn't do the Caniff because someone else had already started. He did four Johnny Hazards and four Buzz Sawyers. Three of which have never seen the light of day.

You do have four Toth Terry and the Pirates covers that I have seen.

None of those have ever been published.

Did you meet Toth in person?

Oh yeah. He was good. I had him at a convention here in Toronto. He is quite a character. He performed at the show. People were delighted. He signed and talked. No speeches, just who ever came up and there were enough people that came up. A lot of people came to the shows where I had Al Williamson up or others. They were good.



John with more of his collection.

The conversation turned off topic for a while. We discussed Harry Kraemer's comic shop, Now and Then comics. We talked about the impact Harry's shop had on collecting in Canada.

I think Harry had a huge impact on collecting in Toronto as did the Silver Snail and as did your store. It think with your interest in reprints and tear sheets, you kept strip art alive.

Yes. In one sense. Artists would often come in to get material.

I am pretty sure I knew the Dragon Lady comic shop before I knew the character or Milton Caniff **or Terry and the Pirates**. You may have sparked the interest that led to us here today.

What is your biggest regret over your years of collecting?

My biggest regret. I didn't purchase the Terry number one. Harry offered it to me for \$5000.

It is certainly a historic piece. Like many things, there are certainly much better Terrys later on but to have something so historical is amazing.

I regret that very much. The photo of me holding it just won't do. I don't know what its value is now but I imagine it is high.

I know there was a pre-Terry preview strip that sold at Heritage for over 30 thousand (Ref: sold \$38837.50, Nov 9, 2010 lot 92164).

We talked a bit more about some of the early Terrys that were on Heritage over the years.

I must admit, reading the first couple of Terrys, I wasn't sure I was going to get through them all. They were not the easiest read. They are very immature both content wise and art wise. He found his legs pretty quickly.

About six months. When he introduces Burma, boy, a big step in the right direction.

The intro to the **IDW** collection by Howard Chaykin does warn you that the first couple months are not the easiest read. I am glad I read the intro before I started on the strips. Once I started reading I read them all the way through. I like the artwork from **Terry and Pirates** but being able to put them in the context of the storylines makes a world of difference.

Have you read all the **Terry and the Pirates**?

I have read all the **Terry and Pirates**. Loved them. I have not read all the **Steve Canyons**.

I want to go back and read the **Steve Canyons**. The first Wunder years are really good.

While you were collecting, did you have contact with the other big Terry collectors?

No. I never thought about it but I knew they must of existed because when I'd see a Terry for sale and tried to buy it, it was sold. I really should have tried to figure out who was collecting these and why.

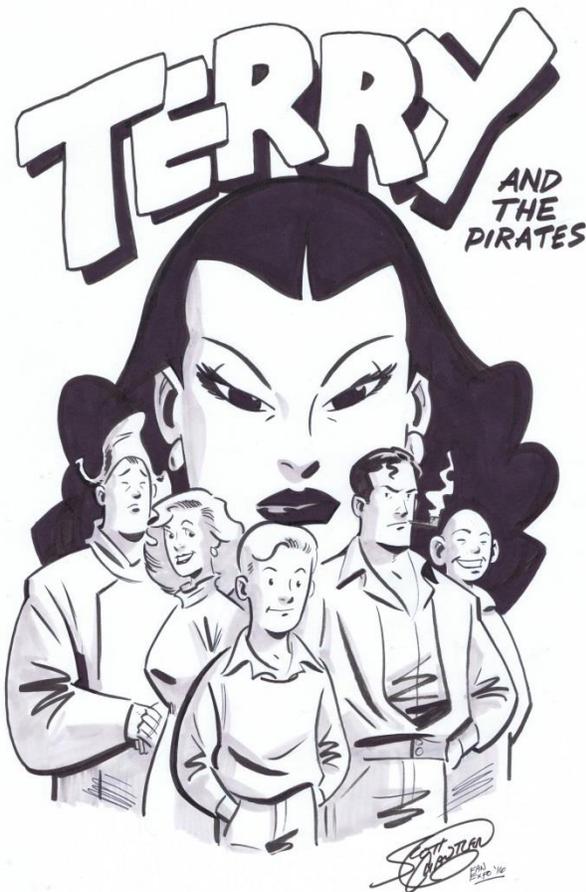
Bob Murphy use to place ads about him wanting to buy Terry's. Did you ever see those?

No. I have never met him. I have sold him a lot of stuff. Wish I hadn't (laughing).

He had given me some material. He is an artist of sorts.

Bob worked was an art director for a newspaper. (See Bob Murphy interview for details).

There was a fellow with the *Miami Herald* called Jay Maeder who reprinted a lot of the early Wunders. Being involved in newspapers gave him access to this material. He was a big contributor to early Terry fandom. *Hermes Press* now, I think they are doing OK with it. They have become expensive.



*Terry and the Pirates* by Scott Chantler. 2016.

At one point, Terry and the Pirates had serials and I think a movie.

No movie but there were serials.

Had you seen the serial?

I have not. There was a radio show too.

Can you imagine if Caniff had owned the rights to Terry. He would have just continued.

Although, Steve Canyon isn't too far from what Terry would have turned into.

Another pilot.

We talked about the 1939 Sunday I recently purchased with the first appearance of April Kane and Sanjak. I think 1939 is my favorite year for Terry. We talked a bit more about the April Kane storyline.

When I talked with Milt about Normandie Drake, he had totally forgotten her as a character.

She was a great character. I have to say I liked her husband as a character more. He was so easy to hate. A lot of fun.

I felt very confident that Terry and Burma would have a long and ongoing relationship. She was too old for him but in a sense of relations.

I always thought Pat would steel Normandie Drake back.

The conversation went onto other unrelated topics.

Thanks to John Biernat, Bob Murphy and Jordi Bernet for their fellowship, friendship and help. There are many other collectors who helped along this journey, too many to mention but I do need to mention two. Benno, who I talked to early in my art collecting days about Caniff. He knew Bob and helped arrange the introduction and visit which greatly influenced my collecting. Miguel Reyes from Madrid, a long-time friend who came down to spend time with us when we were in Barcelona. He also introduced me to and grew my friendship with Jordi Bernet. Without his translation and friendship, many things would not have happened. Here is a peek at some other art from my collection.



BEST WISHES! *Randy Reynaldo* 7/25/2011  
SAN DIEGO

Caniff Tribute for San Diego Comic Con by Randy Reynaldo.



Terry and the Pirates Sunday 1/1/39 by Milton Caniff. First appearance of April Kane and Sanjak.



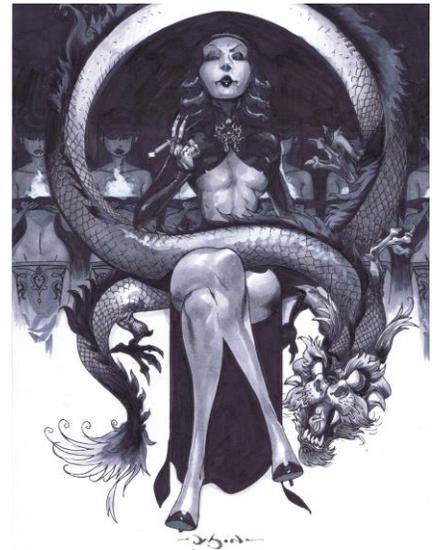
**Terry and Pirates** Daily 12/17/34 by Milton Caniff. From the first few weeks of the strip.



**Terry and the Pirates** Daily 8/11/37 by Milton Caniff. Clear Noel Sickles influence.



**Terry and the Pirates** daily 9/16/49 by George Wunder

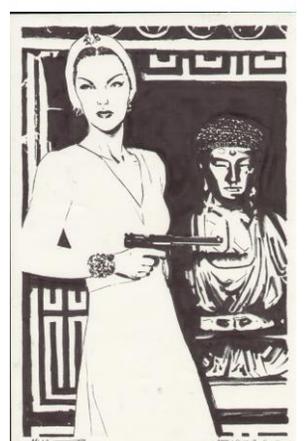
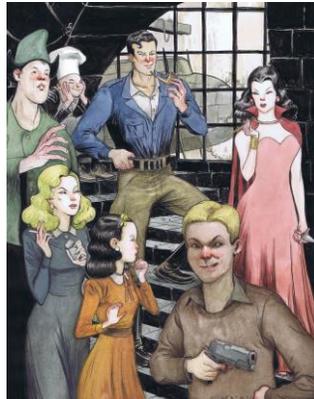


**Dragon Lady Commissions** by *Corey Furman, Darwyn Cooke, Paul Rivoche, John Paul Leon, Paulo Siqueira and Jason Pearson*. There are over 150 Dragon Lady related commissions in my collection.



**Dragonlady Commissions** by *Felipe Echavarría and Alex Perkins*

**Finding the Dragon Lady** by *Jeff Singh*



Dragonlady Commissions by various artists.

Finding the Dragon Lady by Jeff Singh