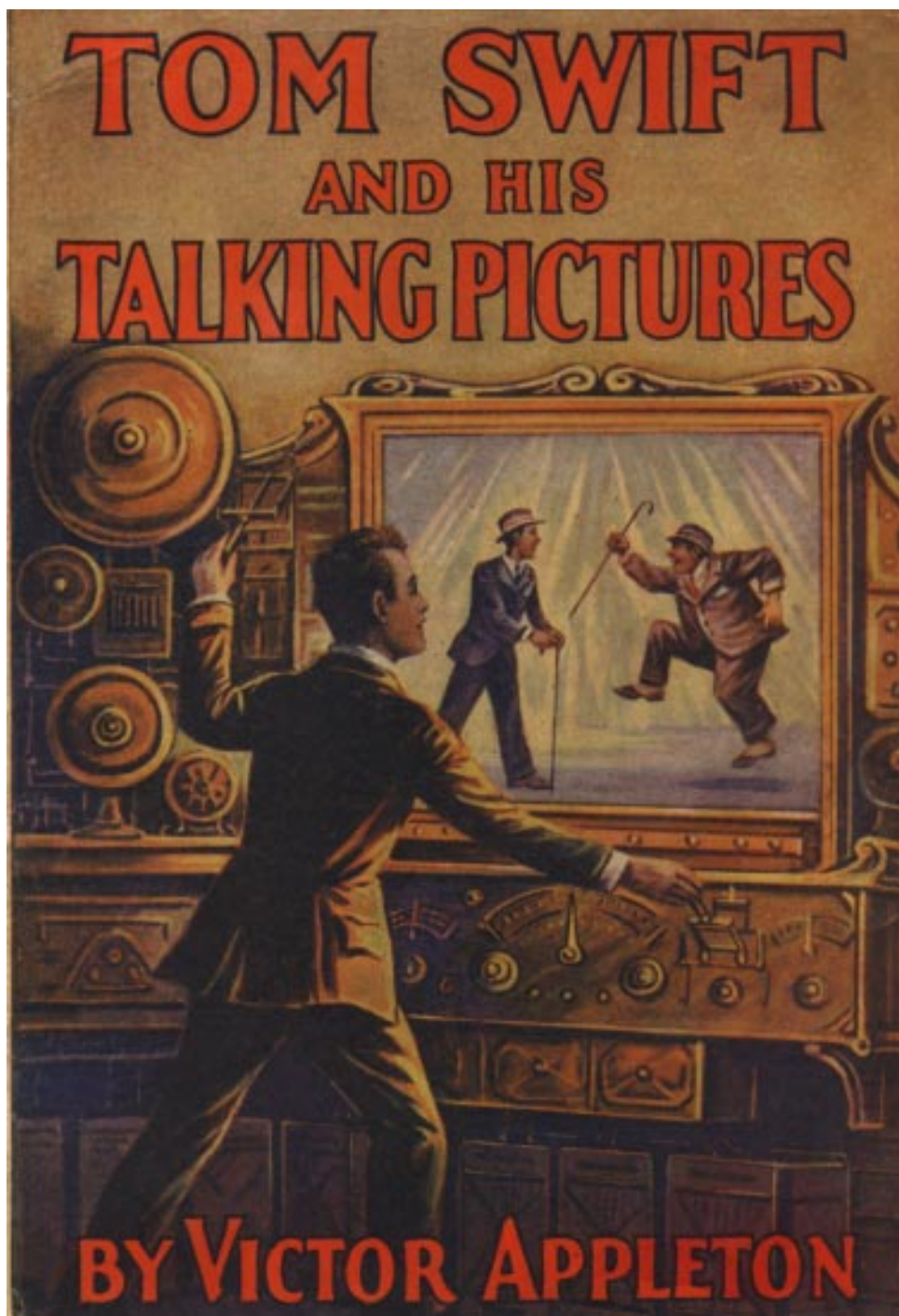


# Tom Swift on the Silver Screen

by James D. Keeline



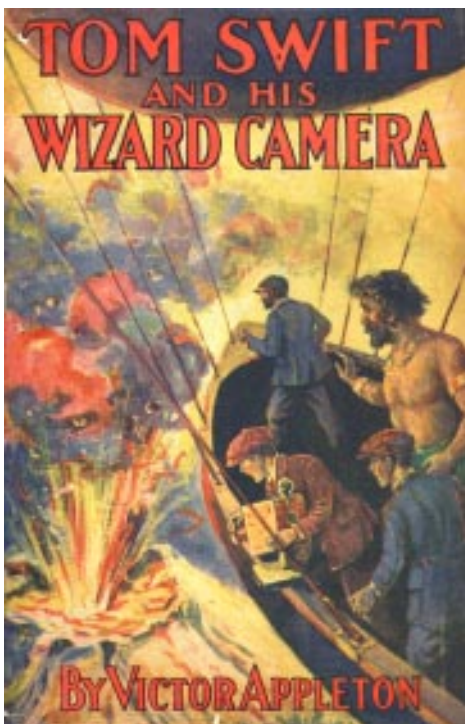


# Tom Swift on the Silver Screen

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Tom Swift was a pioneer in the motion picture and television industries. By 1914, he had perfected a self-developing, portable motion picture camera and in 1928, he invented an attachment to radio that let listeners see the actors and singers on the stage in color.

Readers know of his many adventures in connection with his inventions. Tom was hired by a theater owner to travel around the globe in one of his airships to film exciting footage of wild animals, strange peoples, and perhaps even an earthquake or a volcano eruption if he should happen upon them; of course he did. His films were marveled at by the theater owner and the public. Years later, owners of theater chains felt his new Talking Pictures attachment to radio would be a threat to their business and they threatened to blow up his laboratory. Viewers of film and television, however, have not had a chance to see his narrow escapes, nor his inventive brilliance.



Tom Swift's fourteenth adventure took him to remote parts of the world in search of exciting footage for a motion picture theater owner.

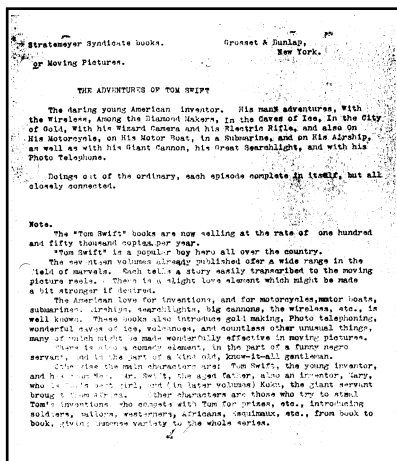
volumes had been published in the series and sales were at the rate of 150,000 copies per year. He even described Tom and Mary Nestor's relationship as "a slight love element which might be made a bit stronger if desired." He further adds "For scenario purposes it might be well to play up Mary, the girl Tom loved, a bit more prominently in the first books of the series." The primary scenes for these proposed films include:

*Swift workshop...a typical inventor's workshop, with much machinery, parts of airships, etc., also electrical devices.*

*Library of the Swift home, full of books and models and blue prints.<sup>1</sup>*

The entry for *Tom Swift and His Airship* was self-described as "very thrilling." About a paragraph was used to describe each of the volumes in the series thus far. Presumably Stratemeyer actually offered

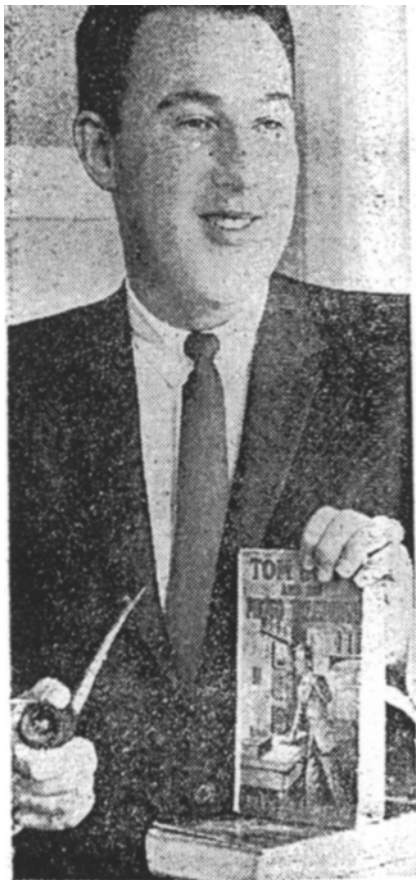
Tom nearly made an appearance on the big and little screens on several occasions. As early as 1914, Edward Stratemeyer was circulating several pages of typewritten material proposing that his inventive series be used as the subject of two-reel (silent, of course) films. By that time, seventeen



First page of Edward Stratemeyer's proposal to make films from the Tom Swift series of books.

this to motion picture concerns that were primarily based in New York and New Jersey at the time before their move to Hollywood around 1916.

The most famous attempt to put Tom on the big screen was by Twentieth Century Fox in 1968. To tell the full story, it is necessary to tell the story of Barry Kirk. Edward Stratemeyer had produced the Tom Swift series since its inception in 1910. The basic method Stratemeyer used began with a title proposal sheet which was generally approved by the publisher. The title proposals, which were about a paragraph in length would then be given to the ghost writer who would write the full story with twenty-five chapters and about 214 pages. For more than twenty years the ghost writer for the Tom Swift series was Howard Garis, who was best known for his Uncle Wiggily stories printed in books and syndicated



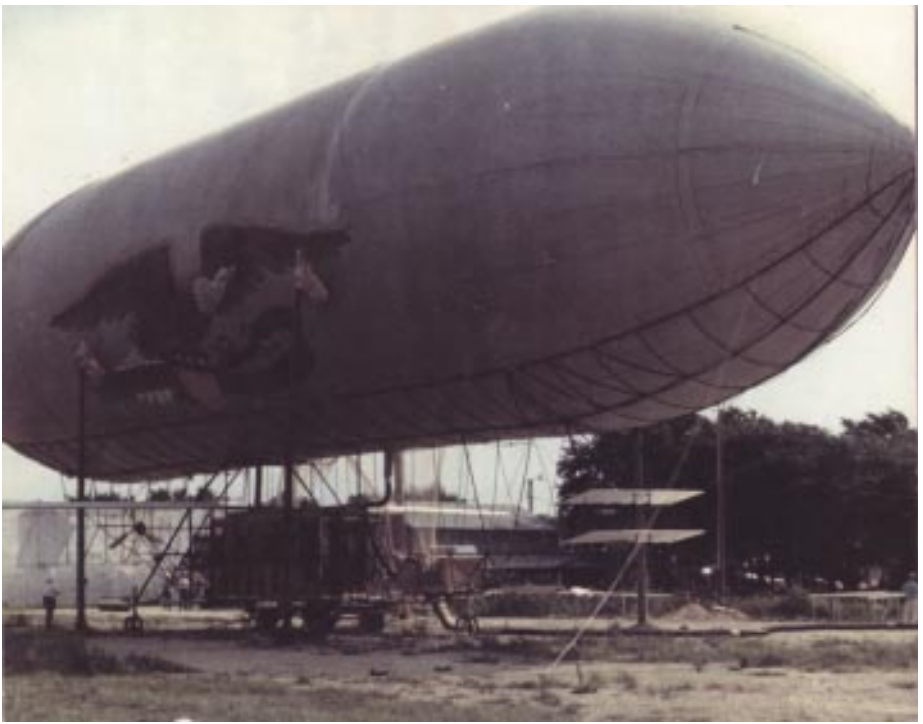
**Barry M. Kirk obtained film rights to Tom Swift and other characters in the mid-1950s.**

newspaper stories. After Stratemeyer died in May 1930, his two daughters began to continue this method of series book creation that produced the Bobbsey Twins, Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Dana Girls, Honey Bunch, Happy Hollisters, and dozens of other series from 1899 through 1984.

Barry M. Kirk was born six years after Edward Stratemeyer died.<sup>2</sup> When he was seventeen, he met Harriet Adams while she was on a trip to California.<sup>3</sup> Around 1956<sup>4</sup>, he convinced a judge to allow him to use \$1,000 from a trust fund to option film and television rights to Tom Swift and other Stratemeyer Syndicate characters (including the Bobbsey Twins, Bomba the Jungle Boy, and the Hardy Boys but not Nancy Drew which was already optioned).<sup>5</sup> This occurred immediately after the publication of the first volumes of the new Tom Swift Jr. series in 1954. In a 1967, interview Kirk recalled that he signed an agreement with Goldstone-Tobias from which he later backed out.<sup>6</sup> He studied film at USC and at one point invited David Brown, who was the head of Twentieth Century Fox's story department, to lecture. When Kirk asked about Tom Swift, Brown did not think the time was right for a non-Disney children's film.

After his graduation from USC in 1957,<sup>7</sup> Kirk persuaded Jack Wrather to invest \$60,000 into a Tom Swift television series pilot. Probably part of Kirk's persuasion involved the fact that Wrather's wife, Bonita Granville, portrayed Nancy Drew in four films for Warner Brothers in 1938 and 1939.

The production was finished by 1958 and offered by Wrather's Independent Television Corporation to all three of the networks and two cereal companies, General Mills and Kellogg, attempting to gain sponsorship for *The Adventures of Tom Swift* without success.<sup>8</sup> The pilot starred a "Garry Vinson" [sic] as Tom Swift.<sup>9</sup> A "Gary Vinson" was listed as a living actor in *Who Was Who in Hollywood*. This actor was described as a supporting actor who first appeared in several films, including: *A Majority of One*, *McHale's Navy* and *Nobody's Perfect*. The earliest of these was in 1962. It is unclear whether this "Gary Vinson" was the same as the "Garry Vinson" for Tom Swift.



**One of two full-scale airships built by Boeing for the Twentieth Century Fox film intended to be moving stages suspended by cables from a helicopter for filming.**

To date, no copy of this pilot nor its script or storyline has surfaced; however, Kirk's 1966 interview identified it as a pilot for a Tom Swift Jr. series.<sup>10</sup> Another article stated "Wrather owns a pilot which he cannot distribute, rights having been reverted. With the new 20th deal, development of the junior Swift character is in temporary protective limbo."<sup>11</sup> Letters from the Syndicate at the time show a reluctance to grant rights to the original Tom Swift since it was an out of print series, so this may be true. The offering of a Tom Swift Jr. series in 1958 or 1959 would come several years after the television appearance of live television science fiction like *Captain Video* (1949-53 and 1955-56) on the DuMont network and *Tom Corbett* (1950) on CBS.<sup>12</sup> A letter from a fourteen year old boy to "Victor Appleton II" in September of 1959 outlined his own enquiry into the subject of Tom Swift on television:

*A Mr. Ross Donaldson of the National Broadcasting Company, wrote to me and said "The Tom Swift Series has been recently produced on film for television*

*by Victor Appleton II," and the letter goes on to say that NBC has viewed this film but has no plans to add it to their schedule, and a Mr. Bertram Berman of Columbia Broadcasting System, said that CBS has no plans for this series to be put on television as yet, but also said, "We should like to thank you very much for getting in touch with us." "As an old and most fond Tom Swift partisan, I do, indeed look forward to the appearance on Television of his more current adventures," and the ABC letter was a similar one.<sup>13</sup>*

Around this time, Kirk lost his option to the Hardy Boys which was picked up by the Disney company. They produced two Hardy Boys serials for the *Mickey Mouse Club* television program with Tommy Kirk and Bill Considine. After Disney released the option, Kirk acquired it again but could not sell it for a second time. After he dropped it again, the Hardy Boys were made into a television pilot based on the *Mystery of the Chinese Junk* with Rick Gates and Tim Matheson in 1965.<sup>14</sup>



**A concept painting showing the Wizard Aeroship from the Tw**



**ventieth Century Fox film project flying through the clouds.**



**Title page of Screenplay for Twentieth Century Fox Tom Swift Film, revised Oct. 1, 1968**

Over the intervening years, Kirk tried to sell film rights for Tom Swift. In 1966, he signed a deal with Dick Zanuck, the vice president of Twentieth Century Fox. Since Kirk did not have any producing experience, Fox assigned Saul David (and later Frank McCarthy) to produce the film. A budget of \$8 million was allocated and Gene Kelly, the dancer, was to direct. Dale Hennesy was mentioned as the art director in a news release. Other art directors, perhaps assistants, were Jim Murikami and Diane Wager. At least three watercolor renderings were drawn showing the overall airship, a detail of the front portion of the airship and a general scene showing the Swift home as a beautiful Victorian mansion and a barn-like building with the airship emerging.

In the summer of 1967, discussions with the Boeing Aircraft and the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company were held to design and construct a full-scale airship with properties of an airplane and of a dirigible balloon. The airship was designed to be hung by cables from a helicopter and filmed from a second helicopter. It included many of the features described in the Tom Swift books, especially an enclosed passenger cabin which was constructed much like a railroad car of the time.<sup>15</sup> The open control cabin used wicker seating for maximum comfort yet light weight. This was typical of aircraft of the era. The construction of

this very elaborate stage prop was reported at \$500,000.<sup>16</sup> Of course, today the same amount or much more would be invested to create miniatures or computer generated animation from a firm such as George Lucas' Industrial Lights and Magic.

The revised screenplay was begun in January of 1968<sup>17</sup> based on an earlier script by James D. Buchanan and Ronald Austin.<sup>18</sup> By October 1 of the same year it was revised by Jim Fritzell and Everett Greenbaum and apparently it was approved in principle. An introductory note described the running length of the existing revised script at two and a half hours.<sup>19</sup> Filming was expected to begin in 1969.<sup>20</sup>

The script is classic Tom Swift, although a few of the people seem out of character; especially Mr. Damon (called Dr. Damon) and Mary Nestor (who is a more developed and vivid character but reminds me of the film versions of Tom Sawyer's Becky Thatcher). The story centers around an inventor in Russia who appears to have developed a tablet to add to water to produce a super gasoline. Teddy Roosevelt holds a meeting with top inventors, including Tom Edison, Henry Ford, and of course, Tom Swift. He enlists Tom to bring the scientist to the United States. Along the way, members of a "Gas Trust" and others try to hamper Tom's voyage.

The opening scenes of the story show different stages of Tom's youth and his inventive triumphs and humorous near-triumphs. This creative story, unlike any single title, but embodying the spirit of the entire series was not filmed. A letter from David Brown indicated that "the decision not to make the film was based primarily on cost."<sup>21</sup> A letter from Frank McCarthy, however, described another reason for the film's failure:

*Kelly and I had selected many locations to be used, some of them in Europe. About this time, the man who was to direct Hello, Dolly! dropped out, and 20th Century-Fox, for which Kelly and I were working, was in immediate and desperate need of a director with musical experience, since the film had been cast and was ready to go. So I had to surrender Kelly to Dolly.... Somehow Kelly and I could never get into synchronization, so*



*the Wizard Aeroship was never airborne. 20th Century-Fox became interested in many other big productions and, in the absence of Kelly and me, never reactivated our project.*<sup>22</sup>

Several years after the cancelation of the project, the water color paintings were sold at auction. Rumors indicate that the airship was sold to an amusement park in the midwest.

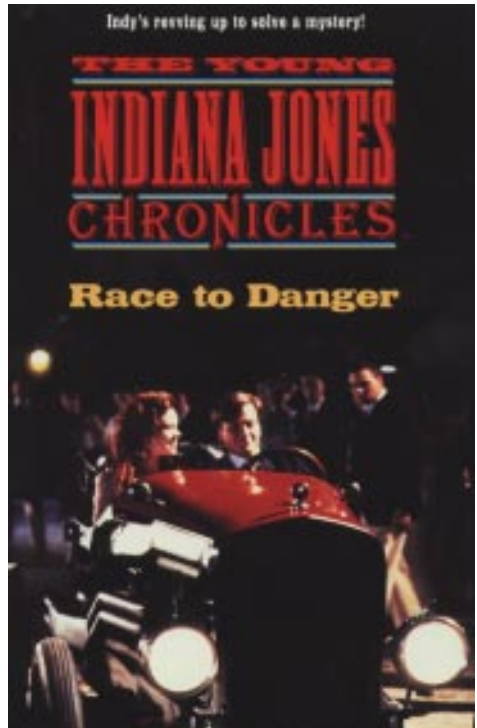
In 1974, a newspaper article indicated that Barry Kirk and Levy-Gardner-Laven Productions formed a joint venture to acquire motion picture rights for Tom Swift. Barry Kirk was to produce with Arthur Gardner and Jules Levy as executive producers. Production was targeted for late 1974 or early 1975.<sup>23</sup> Shortly thereafter, an article in *American Heritage* described the L-G-L venture in a photo caption of the Twentieth Century Fox "aeroship" as a television series attempt.<sup>24</sup> That article is known to have several factual omissions; for example, it describes the Twentieth Century Fox film as a musical; probably based on the fact that Gene Kelly was to direct.

Barry Kirk had a reverence for Tom Swift and for the type of characters the Stratemeyer Syndicate tried to portray. He knew that Harriet Adams was very protective of the image that her series book heroes had and that she would not consider any business deal that would tarnish them. This was probably a key reason that Harriet allowed Kirk to purchase the film option which had three near appearances in 1959, 1967, and 1975. Since then, Tom Swift has appeared on television twice, but his greatest chance was lost to the famous film version of the musical, *Hello, Dolly!*

On July 3, 1983, a pilot episode in the *Tom Swift and Linda Craig Mystery Hour* was broadcast starring Willie Aames and Lori Loughlin. This first sixty minute show was titled "The Treasure of Rancho del Sol" where "Tom and his cousin Linda team to rescue their grandfather from fortune hunters seeking a legendary treasure."<sup>25</sup> The story shows Tom testing a new invention which can perform radio carbon dating instantaneously as he points the device at the given object. The solution to the mystery involves hidden passages of a California mission-era building where Tom

and Linda's grandfather live. Tom's new device helps them identify walls that were built more recently than the rest of the building. A cable television series of the mid-1980s, called the *Edison Twins* seems to take some of the basic elements of this pilot and extend them into a series with some success. There, a brother and sister solve basic mysteries with the use of science which is explained in humorous animated segments at the end of the program.

In early 1993, an episode of George Lucas' *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* titled "Princeton 1916" has Indy meet a young Nancy Stratemeyer with a father named Edward who writes the Tom Swift books. Tom Swift does not appear in the episode, but Indy is seen reading a copy of *Tom Swift and His Electric Runabout*. Indy wants to take Nancy to a school dance and use her father's car. A generator is burned out and needs to be repaired. That evening, an engineer from Tom Edison's lab dines



Novelization of "Princeton, 1916" episode of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* where Indy meets Thomas Edison, Edward Stratemeyer, and his daughter "Nancy."

with the Jones family and Indy asks for his help. When Indy arrives at the lab, a theft of several of Edison's plans have just been stolen. Indy and Nancy solve the mystery. Apparently oil concern feels threatened by Edison's electric car battery. For a time, however suspicion is laid at the feet of German spies in this story set immediately before the first World War. As a means of thanks, Edison lets Indy use an experimental racing car to take Nancy to the dance. Naturally Edward Stratemeyer did not have a daughter named Nancy who liked to try to solve mysteries. Nor was he singly involved in writing the Tom Swift books as the program implies. The colored dust jacket on the copy of *Electric Runabout* did not appear until eight years after the story was set, however the story was published early enough to be included in this episode. Nevertheless it was a very enjoyable episode.

Another Tom Swift near-appearance is worth mentioning. In 1946, the Cardinal Company of Los Angeles, proposed that Tom Swift would make a good subject of a radio serial. Two full scripts were submitted along with an episode-by-episode synopsis of the rest of the program which would probably be in fifteen minute segments. The title of the program was to be "Tom Swift and His Atom Motor." The story opens with suitable sound effects and all of Tom's friends. As was common in radio shows of the time, a "Dr. X" was featured in the show. The story rambles around but is generally good. Tom is described as having worked on secret projects during World War II, like the "Manhattan Project" and atomic testing in the Pacific Ocean.

Hopefully this is not the end of the Tom Swift saga. A story was circulating that Columbia was considering a Tom Swift film but it appears that they have dropped the project as well. Hopefully, someone will take Tom's character and put it before a wider audience in a quality production, perhaps based on the original series, that is true to the character whom we all respect and admire.

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"Tom Swift's Aership Being Built for Film." unknown newspaper: Cleveland, OH? Dec. 25, 1967.

Yates, Robert S. Letter to Victor Appleton, II Sep. 1, 1959.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>"Stratemeyer Syndicate books for Moving Pictures: The Adventures of Tom Swift." Stratemeyer Syndicate Files (probably written by Edward Stratemeyer). circa 1914. 5p.

<sup>2</sup>Two articles mention Kirk's age. Thomas, Kevin. "Tom Swift and His Electric Film Career." *LA Times*. June 20, 1966 describes him as 30 years old while Klein, Doris. "Barry Kirk Proves Persistence is a Virtue – for a Producer." *Hollywood Reporter*. Dec. 28, 1967 describes him as 32. This indicates that his birthday was between June and December of 1936.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, Kevin. *ibid*

<sup>4</sup>"Tom Swift Books (41) for Filming: Barry Kirk Peddled Works for Decade–Dick Zanuck Finally Makes the Buy." unknown newspaper. June 7, 1966 (?).

<sup>5</sup>Klein, Doris. *ibid*

<sup>6</sup>Klein, Doris. *ibid*

<sup>7</sup>"Tom Swift Books (41) for Filming"

<sup>8</sup>Thomas, Kevin. *ibid*

<sup>9</sup>Goldberg, Lee. *Unsold Television Pilots: 1955-1988*. McFarland & Co, 1990. p49

<sup>10</sup>Thomas, Kevin. *ibid*

<sup>11</sup>"Tom Swift Books (41) for Filming"

<sup>12</sup>Nicholls, Peter. *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*. Doubleday, 1979.

<sup>13</sup>Yates, Robert S. Letter to Victor Appleton, II Sep. 1, 1959.

<sup>14</sup>Goldberg, Lee. *ibid*

<sup>15</sup>Dunne, John Gregory. *The Studio*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969. p106-109.

<sup>16</sup>"Tom Swift's Aership Being Built for Film." unknown newspaper: Cleveland, Ohio (?). Dec. 25, 1967

<sup>17</sup>"Tom Swift's Aership Being Built for Film."

<sup>18</sup>Press Release from Twentieth Century Fox. Nov. 22, 1966.

<sup>19</sup>*Tom Swift*. Revised Screenplay. 101 Twentieth Century Fox. October 1, 1968. "Screenplay by Jim Fritzell and Everett Greenbaum based on a Screenplay by James D. Buchanan and Ronald Austin."

<sup>20</sup>"Tom Swift's Aership Being Built for Film."

<sup>21</sup>Brown, David. Letter to Tom Phillips, Jr. Aug. 20, 1980.

<sup>22</sup>McCarthy, Frank. Letter to Tom Phillips, Jr. Sep. 15, 1980.

<sup>23</sup>"Swift' Rights Acquired by L-G-L Kirk." unknown newspaper Feb. 21, 1974.

<sup>24</sup>Prager, Arthur. "Bless my collar button, if it isnt Tom Swift the world's greatest inventor!" *American Heritage*. Dec. 1976. p74.

<sup>25</sup>*Complete Encyclopedia of Television*. #2633.



Artists' rendering prepared for the Twentieth Century Fox film of the stately home of Tom Swift and his family with workshops and "Wizard Aeroship" amid hills of upstate New York.



Detail of one of the "Wizard Aeroships" built by Boeing for the Twentieth Century Fox film.