

Syndicate 101 or, Where did all those books come from?

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The Stratemeyer Syndicate was a phenomenal entity. Today we'd call them a "book packager" though at the time, the concept was relatively new. Between 1905 and 1985 they were responsible for about 1,300 volumes of juvenile series books.

Some of the most popular series included the Bobbsey Twins (1904), Tom Swift (1910), the Hardy Boys (1927), and of course Nancy Drew (1930). They were also responsible for the Happy Hollisters, the Dana Girls, a Radio Boys series, the Motor Boys, Kay Tracey, the X-Bar-X Boys, Ted Scott, Bomba the Jungle Boy, and Baseball Joe.

These were some of the popular and successful series. Of course, the Syndicate didn't always hit a home run with their book plans. Series like the Great Show series, the Y.M.C.A. Boys, the Nowadays Girls, the White Ribbon Boys, and the Tollivers had minimal sales and are hard to find today.

Before World War II a significant portion of the series books read by American children were Stratemeyer Syndicate products. The stories appeared under dozens of series and pen names like Margaret Penrose, Clarence Young, Roy Rockwood, Laura Lee Hope, Victor Appleton, James Cody Ferris, Franklin W. Dixon, and Carolyn Keene.

Edward Stratemeyer founded his Syndicate in 1905. He was an author of books for boys and stories for periodicals and even dime novels. Born in 1862, he grew up in Elizabeth, New Jersey. His father and older brothers owned and ran tobacco stores in that town. Edward graduated top of his high school class in 1879 and his favorite subjects were history and English literature. In 1891 he moved to Newark, New Jersey and ran his own stationery store there for a few months.

He began writing while still in school. He was an avid reader of books and story papers; his

favorite writers were "Oliver Optic" and Horatio Alger, Jr." He even tried to emulate some of the periodicals he read by printing small story papers and chap books with short stories he wrote. He worked with a couple of different sizes of printing presses over the years. In the first three months of 1883 he wrote and produced three issues of an amateur story paper called *Our American Boys*.

Stratemeyer's father though that all of this time devoted to writing could be better spent on something else so he didn't particularly encourage young Edward. However, his first break into professional writing changed his father's mind. Edward wrote an 18,000-word story at home, revised it, and sent it to *Golden Days* where "Victor Horton's Idea" was published at the end of 1889.

Many more stories by Edward were issued in *Golden Days* as well as other similar publications like *Argosy*. Some of the *Argosy* stories became his first books, *Richard Dare's Venture* (1894). A short time later he began writing specifically for book publication. His best-known series of books was the Rover Boys, begun in 1899.

In time Stratemeyer found himself with more ideas for stories than time in which to write them. He formed the Stratemeyer Syndicate as a means to offer larger numbers of books to publishers than he could possibly write himself. At first he purchased stories which had appeared in magazines upon speculation that he could get a publisher to purchase the story outright for a profit or issue the book on a royalty basis whereby he could earn back his investment from the sales of the books.

However, purchasing stories on speculation has risks and Edward found himself with stories which he could not sell or get published. He then began to work with newer publishers and offered series to them. When they agreed to issue a certain number of titles which were selected by

the publisher from a list supplied by Stratemeyer, he composed full outlines for each story.

The outlines were usually between one and six pages of single-spaced type and very narrow margins. Depending on the series, they provided details about the characters, beginnings and endings, and specific incidents in the story. Sometimes Stratemeyer provided additional source material or suggested books and magazines which could be helpful.

These outlines were presented to ghostwriters who would develop the outline into a book-length manuscript in three to six weeks. Many of these writers had careers in the newspaper industry or had written for the same sorts of periodicals for which Stratemeyer wrote. Normally, they kept their day jobs and moonlighted by writing for Stratemeyer in their spare time.

When the manuscript was turned in, Stratemeyer or his assistant, Harriet Otis Smith, read the story to see how well it would fit in with the other volumes of the series, if it was not the first book, and how closely the outline was followed. Once the story was considered acceptable, a check was mailed to the ghostwriter and Stratemeyer sent a simple release form which the ghostwriter was to sign and return.

He would also provide comments on the story in a letter. Occasionally he would ask that portions be rewritten or more material provided if the manuscript was shorter than desired. If the changes were relatively simple or a deadline was looming, the corrections and improvements might be done in the Syndicate's offices in New York City.

Edward ran the Syndicate from his home until the fall of 1914 when he opened an office in a narrow skyscraper off Madison Square Park. The move brought him closer to the offices of his publishers, companies like Grosset & Dunlap, Cupples & Leon, Barse & Hopkins, and Sully & Kleinteich. He hired an assistant, Harriet Otis Smith, who worked with him for more than fifteen years. She read the manuscripts submitted and took down the chapters for

Edward's own stories such as the annual Rover Boys volume.

Stratemeyer was involved, at various times, with almost every aspect of producing and promoting his Syndicate books. This included finding and contracting artists to create the illustrations; hiring proofreaders; paying for electrotyping of printing plates, which were leased to publishers; composing descriptive text for the dust jackets and advertising pages; and devising elaborate direct-mail promotions and catalogs which were sent to young people in the weeks before Christmas. Of course, his greatest role was planning series ideas, negotiating with publishers, creating outlines and working with ghostwriters to supply the series volumes.

The amount paid to the Syndicate writers, often between \$75 and \$250, sounds small today but it was a significant sum in the first third of the twentieth century. A typical newspaper reporter job might pay \$60-\$70 per month. Also, when writers offered their own stories directly to publishers for outright payment, they would get no more but would have to wait until the book was published before they were paid. Stratemeyer's immediate payment upon the completion of the work was welcome. Edward also became something of a mentor to many of these writers.

Many ghostwriters for the Syndicate had relationships which spanned decades and many dozens of volumes. Several writers completed 100 or more titles. The most prolific was Howard R. Garis with more than 315 book-length manuscripts. He did this in addition to his own weekly Uncle Wiggily short stories for the newspapers and other titles under his own name.

Other prolific ghostwriters include John W. Duffield (116 volumes, 1916-38), W. Bert Foster (103 volumes, 1912-28), Elizabeth M. Duffield Ward (71 volumes, 1916-42), Mildred A. Wirt Benson (62 volumes, 1927-54), Andrew E. Svenson (54 volumes, 1947-70), Josephine Lawrence (51 volumes, 1920-35), James Duncan Lawrence [no relation to Josephine] (50 volumes, 1954-85), and Leslie McFarlane (33 volumes, 1926-47).

By way of comparison, Edward Stratemeyer wrote 160 volumes published as books (1894-1926) and many other long and short stories. His daughter, Edna, wrote one Kay Tracey volume (vol. 13, 1940). His oldest daughter, Harriet S. Adams, wrote 72 volumes beginning with a Bobbsey Twins volume published in 1943. Her first Nancy Drew volume was published in 1953.

While the early ghostwriters were often dime novelists or newspaper reporters, by the 1920s most of these writers were not able to produce the kinds of stories he wanted. He took out ads to seek out younger writers to work on the series. One ad in the spring of 1926 generated a number of responses, including two young authors who would write the early volumes in two of the Syndicate's most famous series. Leslie McFarlane (1902-1977), a Canadian journalist, was the ghostwriter for the early Hardy Boys books. He also worked on the Dave Fearless series and wrote an unpublished volume of the X-Bar-X Boys. Mildred Augustine (later Mildred A. Wirt Benson), who was a reporter born in Iowa and who lived in Ohio, wrote the early Nancy Drew books, along with volumes of the Ruth Fielding, Honey Bunch, Kay Tracey, and Dana Girls series.

Edward Stratemeyer died on May 10, 1930 at his home. He had been sick with pneumonia for almost two weeks and may not have seen the first three Nancy Drew books which were published on April 28 according to copyright records. Because his wife, Magdalene, had suffered a stroke and likely a heart attack, she had been an invalid for many years and was not prepared to settle his large estate. He provided for this in his will and named his two daughters, Harriet and Edna, as executors to do this task.

After the basics were addressed, the larger question of what to do with his business loomed. For a while there was consideration to sell the Syndicate, perhaps to Howard and Roger Garis or John W. Duffield and his daughter Elizabeth Duffield Ward. Another candidate was a young man from Missouri who had been a life-long fan of Stratemeyer's books and had visited him in his New York offices a couple times.

The publishers who had been getting a large number of their juvenile titles from Stratemeyer each year and they didn't want to see this significant supply disappear. Ultimately, Edward's daughters found that they could neither sell nor abandon the Syndicate.

Harriet had gone to Wellesley College and earned a degree a little more than fifteen years earlier. While at Wellesley, she had done some writing for news items for the Boston Globe. She had even been offered a job there upon her graduation but her father discouraged her. She married and had four children who were in their teens when their grandfather died.

Edna went to a boarding school, the Centenary Collegiate Institute for a very brief period before her homesickness became severe enough that Edward brought her home. She married well after her father's death and had one daughter.

Harriet and Edna entered into a partnership to learn and continue their father's Syndicate as best as they could. For the first several months they relied upon Edward's assistant, Harriet Otis Smith. She took in manuscripts, as before, corresponded with publishers and writers, she even created outlines for several books, including the fifth Nancy Drew volume, *The Secret at Shadow Ranch* (1930), and otherwise ran the Manhattan offices while the sisters were settling the estate and deciding what to do next.

They took home some of the materials home. One of the first series Harriet worked on was the Buck and Larry series of baseball stories. Edward was deep in the planning of these at the time he became ill and it is said that in his delirium at the end, he visualized a baseball game. Some have reported that this was a Baseball Joe story but that series had ended a couple years earlier. Harriet made copious notes of the plan for the game to be described in the story. She did not write the story, of course, but this familiarity gave her a chance to better work with the ghostwriter, Edward's good friend of twenty-five years, Howard Garis.

The sisters decided to move the Syndicate offices from New York City to East Orange, New Jersey, to be closer to their home. This created its own

problem when Harriet Otis Smith decided that she did not care to move to New Jersey nor commute each day. She left the Syndicate in the fall of 1930 and occasionally corresponded with the sisters over the years, including when Edward's widow, Magdalene, died in 1935.

To replace Smith, the sisters hired Agnes Pearson as an assistant and they ran the Syndicate as best as they could. Of course, Smith was the best informed living person about the operations of the Syndicate and she could not be replaced easily. Certain changes were evident during the transition. For example, before she left, Smith corresponded with the prolific Syndicate artist, Walter S. Rogers concerning his illustration for the Don Sturdy series. A few months later, one of the new publishers for the Syndicate was asking for contact information for Rogers for the Syndicate's new aviation series. The sisters were unable to provide Rogers' address.

Similarly, in the Hardy Boys series the brothers graduate from Bayport High School in volume 9, *The Great Airport Mystery* (1930). However, by volume 11, *While the Clock Ticked* (1932), the boys were "not yet out of high school" and remained there for the rest of the series.

Harriet and Edna learned pretty quickly, however, and were in friendly competition with each other to devise titles and plots, hoping that the publishers would select their idea. Edna created at least half of the Nancy Drew outlines which were published during this period, including several which remain favorites among fans. They began new series, such as Kay Tracey and the Dana Girls and retired older series. Edna even wrote one book in the Kay Tracey series, *The Forbidden Tower* (1940), when Mildred Wirt was busy with her own writing.

Edna moved to Florida with her husband and daughter and she became an inactive partner, leaving Harriet to run the Syndicate on her own with a couple of office assistants such as Miss Pearson. Edna and Harriet corresponded often over the years to make decisions about how to run the Syndicate.

After World War II, Harriet started to work with authors on new series, including the Mel Martin baseball series and an unpublished "Franklin W. Dixon" series about a young reporter named Gil Bowman. One of these writers was Andrew E. Svenson. Over time he began to work in the Syndicate offices and was eventually made a partner in 1961. He managed most of the boys' series, such as Tom Swift Jr. and Brett King, and wrote many volumes himself, including the Hardy Boys and his own Happy Hollisters series, the characters of which were based on his own wife and six children.

The series books became more educational over time with a new hobby in each volume for the Hardy Boys chum, Chet Morton, and geographical settings which reflected trips made by Harriet Adams and other Syndicate writers. For example, in 1973 Harriet and Nancy S. Axelrad, her assistant, took a cruise ship off the coast of Dakar, Africa, during a predicted total solar exlipse. The cruise featured a series of well-known speakers who were providing educational material to the passengers. The luminaries included science and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov and astronauts Scott Carpenter and Neil Armstrong. Harriet hosted an impromptu reception for the speakers and had them sign a tablet. The goal of the trip was to collect ideas and source material for the revised version of volume 18 in the Nancy Drew series, *The Mystery of the Brass-Bound Trunk*. However, upon their return, Grosset & Dunlap wanted a new Bobbsey Twins volume so Nancy Axelrad wrote *The Bobbsey Twins on the Sun-Moon Cruise* for publication in 1975.

Before Stratemeyer died he entered into a contract with Grosset & Dunlap for a low royalty rate, 2c per copy for the first 10,000 copies sold at 50c. This translates to a 4% royalty. Afterwards the rate would rise to 2.5c or 5%. This contract goverened the rates paid for the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew and other series for a long time to come. Harriet often complained about this and urged the publishers to renegotiate the rates. Instead, they would gush about how each check was larger yet the numbers of copies sold was decreasing--the retail price and increased number of volumes generated the larger sums.

Harriet always felt a strong affinity towards Nancy Drew and when she was contacted by reporters she would tell them that she was working on or had recently finished a Nancy Drew or Dana Girls book. Since she was effectively Carolyn Keene then, the reporters presumed that she had written all of the books. Although she could have been more clear, she apparently enjoyed the attention given to "Carolyn Keene."

Since 1979 was the 75th anniversary of the Bobbsey Twins series, Harriet was disappointed that Grosset & Dunlap allowed the milestone to pass without recognition. Simon & Schuster, another New York publisher, had been courting the Syndicate for a while. They issued a commemorative set of the first three Bobbsey Twins and promised a big celebration for Nancy Drew's 50th anniversary in 1980. This, along with promises to better promote the series, persuaded Harriet to offer new titles to Simon & Schuster and volumes in the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew were issued under the Wanderer imprint.

Naturally, Grosset & Dunlap was not happy about this change. In 1980, they and their parent company, Gulf Western, sued Simon & Schuster and the Syndicate to retain rights to publish the Syndicate series under previous contract. Grosset used Mildred Wirt to testify on their behalf. It was the first meeting between Harriet and Mildred in many years and Harriet reportedly stated that she thought Mildred had died (Harriet was 13 years older). The case had about 1,000 of transcribed testimony as the court tried to understand the complex Stratemeyer Syndicate. The questions tried to determine which entity, the Syndicate or the publisher, had greater creative control over the series.

In the end the judge determined that the Syndicate had the right to issue books with any publisher. However, Grosset & Dunlap, through prior contract, could continue to issue Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books -- in hardcover. The new titles issued by Simon & Schuster could come out in paperback or hardcover. The lower prices and new titles made the new series more

popular than the "classic" Grosset & Dunlap editions.

The trial was a difficult experience for Harriet and the quality of her writing was affected. Nancy Drew and the other series were handed over to some of the Syndicate staff such as Nancy Axelrad. In March 1982, Harriet Adams died while watching the Wizard of Oz on television for the first time at her farmhouse.

Edward founded the Syndicate and ran it from 1905 until his demise in 1930. Harriet and Edna ran it together for twelve years, until 1942 when she moved to Florida. However, even during that time, she was the primary person to negotiate with the publishers. From this perspective, she was involved in running the Syndicate for more than 50 years, twice the time her father had.

The partners who inherited the Syndicate continued it as best as they could. Although some of Harriet's children and grandchildren had done some work for the Syndicate, none were ready or interested in continuing the business.

A couple years later, the Syndicate partners accepted an offer from Simon & Schuster to purchase the Syndicate. No books were issued for about a year while the new owners examined their new property and made plans to reinvent its series. The digest paperbacks in each series continued and new pocket-sized paperback series, the Hardy Boys Casefiles and the Nancy Drew Files were begun. These new books were intended for a slightly older audience.

Initially Simon & Schuster used a book packager named MegaBooks to produce the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. Later they began to do the production in house, a practice which continues today with the latest versions of the series told in the first person narrative form.

The Stratemeyer Syndicate does not exist as a separate company any more but its 80 year history and phenomenal output of children's series books continue to be enjoyed by and influence children and adults around the world.