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THE ADVENTURES OF BUCK O'RUE

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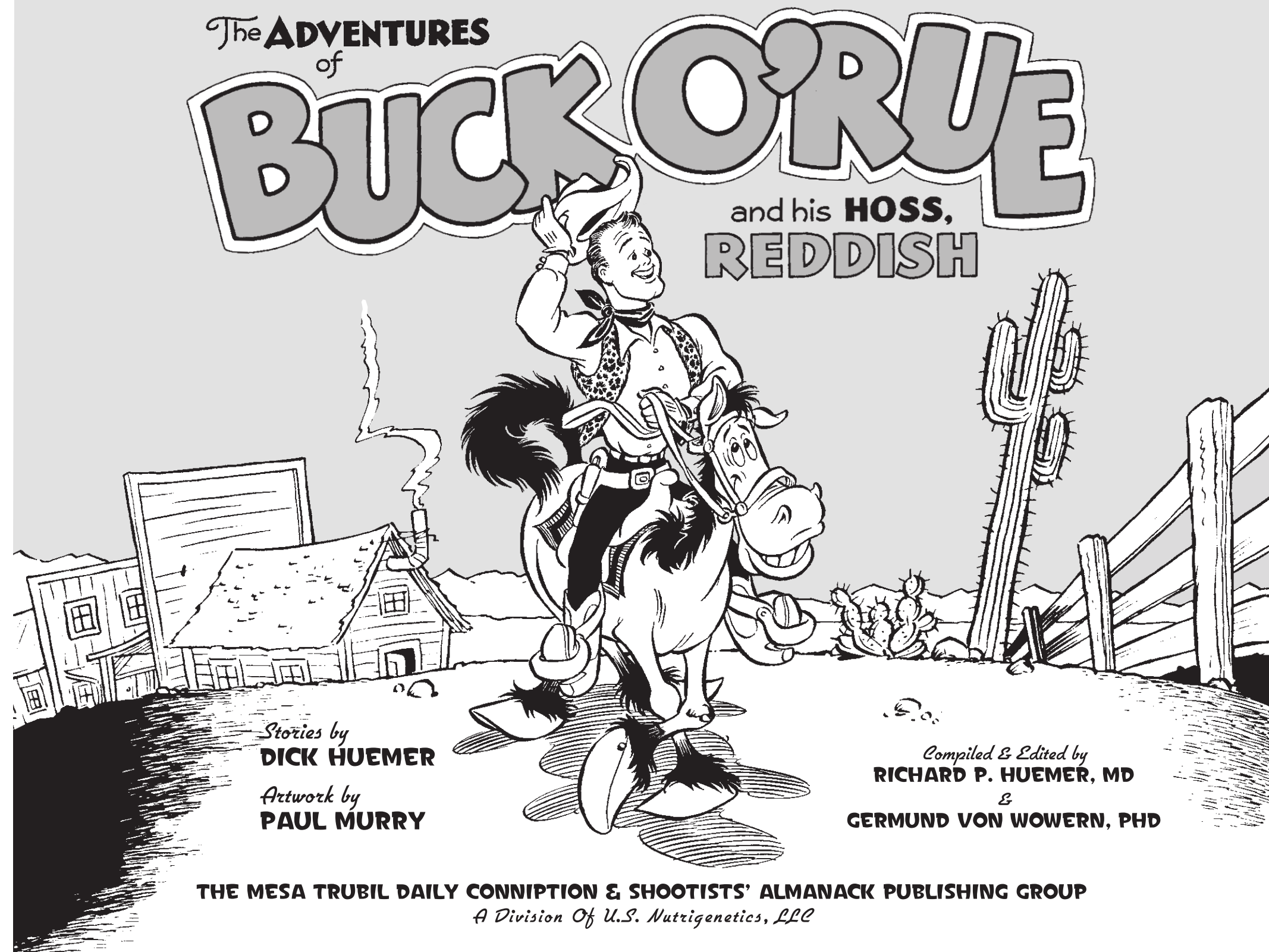
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DEDICATION

*To my loved ones, Annika and baby Lea. -- GrW
And to mine, Kay, Alex, and grandbaby Erik. -- RPH*

IN MEMORY OF

Richard M. Huemer and Paul R. Murry

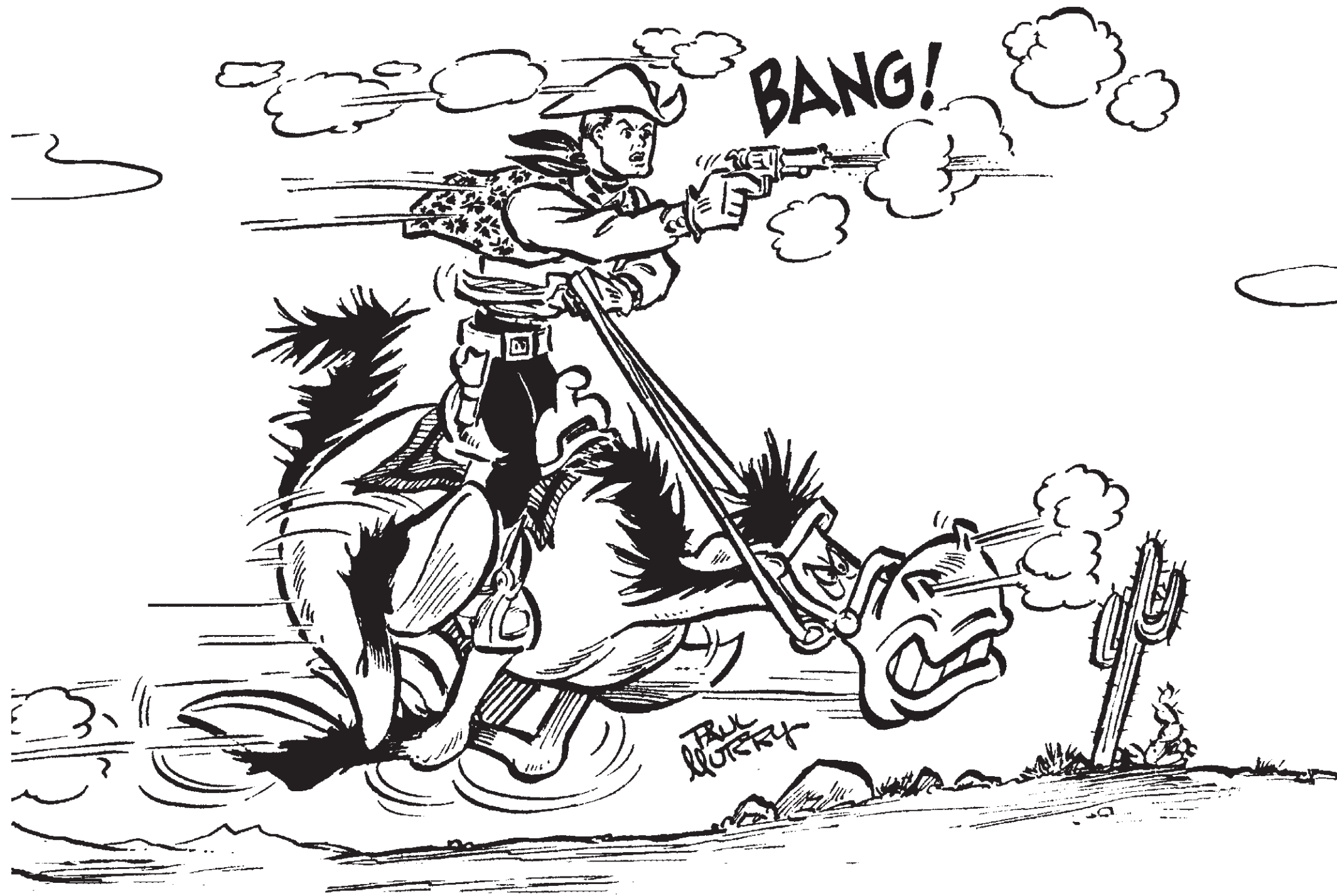
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Your Editors began planning this book in Palmdale, California



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FOREWORD



“All of us animators had one goal and that was to become a cartoon-strip creator.” Dick Huemer shared this thought with me during a series of interviews I conducted with him and his wife Polly at their Hesby Street home in North Hollywood from 1976 to 1978. Dick, who had a wonderful career in all aspects of the animation field as one of its pioneers, had a special place in his heart for comic strips. In the late 1920s, he had been one of the artists on a syndicated comic strip, “Good Time Guy,” written by screenwriter Bill Conselman, who wrote under the pseudonym of Frank Smiley. (Bill also created the popular strip, “Ella Cinders.”) During a period of time away from the Disney studio in the early 1950s, Dick wrote and Paul Murry drew “Buck O’Rue,” a good-natured spoof of the current craze for westerns and cowboy heroes. When Dick returned to Disney and continued his work on films, he also began writing for television and he began an 18 year run of writing the “True-Life Adventures” panel for news-paper syndication.

I loved Dick Huemer. He was my favorite Disney person from my early years of Disney research when I interviewed over 35 key Disney artists during a seven-year stretch from 1974 to 1981. Every time I made a trip to Southern California, I would visit him and Polly, because they were such a delightful couple to be with. (After Dick’s passing in 1979, I would visit with Polly at least once a year and correspond with her regularly until her passing in 1999.) Dick was unusual among many of those I met then and over the ensuing years, because he had interests beyond the animation world. I loved to browse through his library in his cozy den off the living room. Dick would have liked to be a college history professor, and the books I saw there reflected an interest he and I shared. Although Dick played such an important role in the development of animation over almost a 60-year span (his career is discussed in detail elsewhere in this book), yet his contributions, while highly regarded within the animation

community, are lamentably unfamiliar to many fans of animation. When I wrote my first book, *Working with Walt: Interviews with Disney Artists* (University Press of Mississippi, March 2008), one of my goals was to focus attention on Disney artists who had very little written about them, at least up to that point in time. Sharing the interviews that I had done with Dick was one of the primary motivating forces behind my decision to publish. (My second book, *Working With Disney: Interviews with Animators, Producers, and Artists* (University Press of Mississippi, March 2011) shares the same motivation.)

Dick Huemer had a whimsical view of life and the world and a wry sense of humor, both of which I find in his writing for the “Buck O’Rue” comic strip. Joining the world of western-themed comics and strips, including “Hopalong Cassidy” and “Cisco Kid,” “Buck O’Rue” burlesques the popular cowboy hero of the early 1950s with the celery root-drinking title character who speaks in a vernacular that seems to owe a debt to Al Capp’s “Li’l Abner.” (As I read through the series, I wondered if O’Herlihan, the Singing Cowboy in Paramount’s *Rustlers’ Rhapsody*, in turn owed a debt to “Buck O’Rue.”) Dick fills the strip with clever and comical names that define the humor that pervades the world of Mesa Trubil, the town without a country. Buck’s faithful equine companion, his horse Reddish, joins him in his fight to make the town respectable as he faces Trigger

Mortis and his gang of “guardian angels.” Buck’s success in winning the heart of Deacon Duncan’s daughter Dorable brings to town Buck’s own version of Frank Sinatra’s bobby-soxer fans, the Floomies. Dick parodies authentic western heroes with announcements for upcoming panels featuring Mild Bill Hiccup and Quiat Burp, the gunfight at the K.O. Corral, and even pokes fun at his fellow Disney artist Ward Kimball, with Dick’s nickname for him, “Kid

Warmball.” But Dick’s humor also runs deeper and more seriously when he introduces the character of Adam Schmatum, whose explosive material, collected after atoms are split, makes him the self-proclaimed “most pow’rful indeevijul in th’ yew-nee-verse” and able to blow up the “west’n hem-ee-speer.”

This is a thinly disguised reference to the Atom Bomb and the pervading shadow it spread across the world of the 1950s.

Paul Murry is another Disney artist best known for his work in almost 400 issues of *Walt Disney’s Comics & Stories*, especially his renditions of Mickey Mouse and Goofy. Paul, who worked on several of the feature films and who at one time was an assistant to the legendary animator Freddy Moore, worked in the 1940s on Disney’s Jose Carioca strip and on “Uncle Remus and His Tales of Brer Rabbit,” under another Disney Legend and icon of the comic strip world, Floyd

Gottfredson. “Buck O’Rue” brought together the talents of two seasoned and accomplished Disney artists whose art and writing gave the series a delightful perspective on a fad sweeping the country.

I am very grateful to Richard Huemer and Germund von Wowern for putting together the strips in this book that you now hold in your hand. It is the most comprehensive collection of “Buck O’Rue” available, and through their efforts, not only is a little-known comic strip brought back to life, but also one more facet of Dick Huemer’s storied career is made available to appreciative audiences. So let’s get back in the saddle again with Buckingham “Buck” O’Rue of Knothead City and ride to Mesa Trubil to save the decent townfolk from the likes of Trigger Mortis, No-Gun Nolan, Kit Schmit, Rockjaw Jones, and Skullface Skully. Who knows, maybe with a little practice we can all shoot a plugaroo!

*Don Perri
Davis, California
November, 2011*



PREFACE

This book was born of leisurely reflection and research over a decade, including a couple of transatlantic trips and many e-mails. The "Buck O'Rue" comic strip, on the other hand, was born of desperate necessity. After fifteen years at the Disney Studio, writer Dick Huemer was laid off in September 1948. He would face nearly three years of financial stress and piecemeal work, while lacking a steady source of income. Meanwhile, artist Paul Murry left Oregon, returned to California, and resumed drawing comic books for Disney.

Dick did various odd jobs during this period: comic book stories for Dell ("Sheik for a Day" and "President Porky", both 1950), designs for wall plaques, sample comic book art, video projects with Hal Sutherland and Shamus Culhane, even story-doctoring for Ving Fuller. He teamed with Ace Gamer, an insurance salesman and failed animator, to form Animated Video Films, an early producer of animated TV commercials. They created a few, but television was neither pervasive nor profitable enough then to ensure a steady flow of business. The duo also briefly produced a television quiz show featuring Roy Williams's talents as a rapid sketch artist. (Williams later achieved renown as the Big Mooseketeer on *The Mickey Mouse Club*.)

Although the idea for Buck O'Rue seems to have come early to Dick, the published Buck did not rise full-blown from the roiling seas of imagination, surfing to shore on the half-shell like some virile travesty of Botticelli's Venus. No. Instead, Dick's original concept, as submitted to his old friend Art Lafave (from the Metropolitan Syndicate days), underwent a few revisions before Buck was ready to meet his public. For one thing, the cowboy was originally called Buck Carew. Art preferred Buck O'Rue, arguably an improvement, although another Lafave "improvement" was hardly that—he nixed calling one character Billy the Slob. "Slob" may have seemed too uncouth a word for the comics, which Art regarded as "the last bastion of Victorian prudery" in American life.

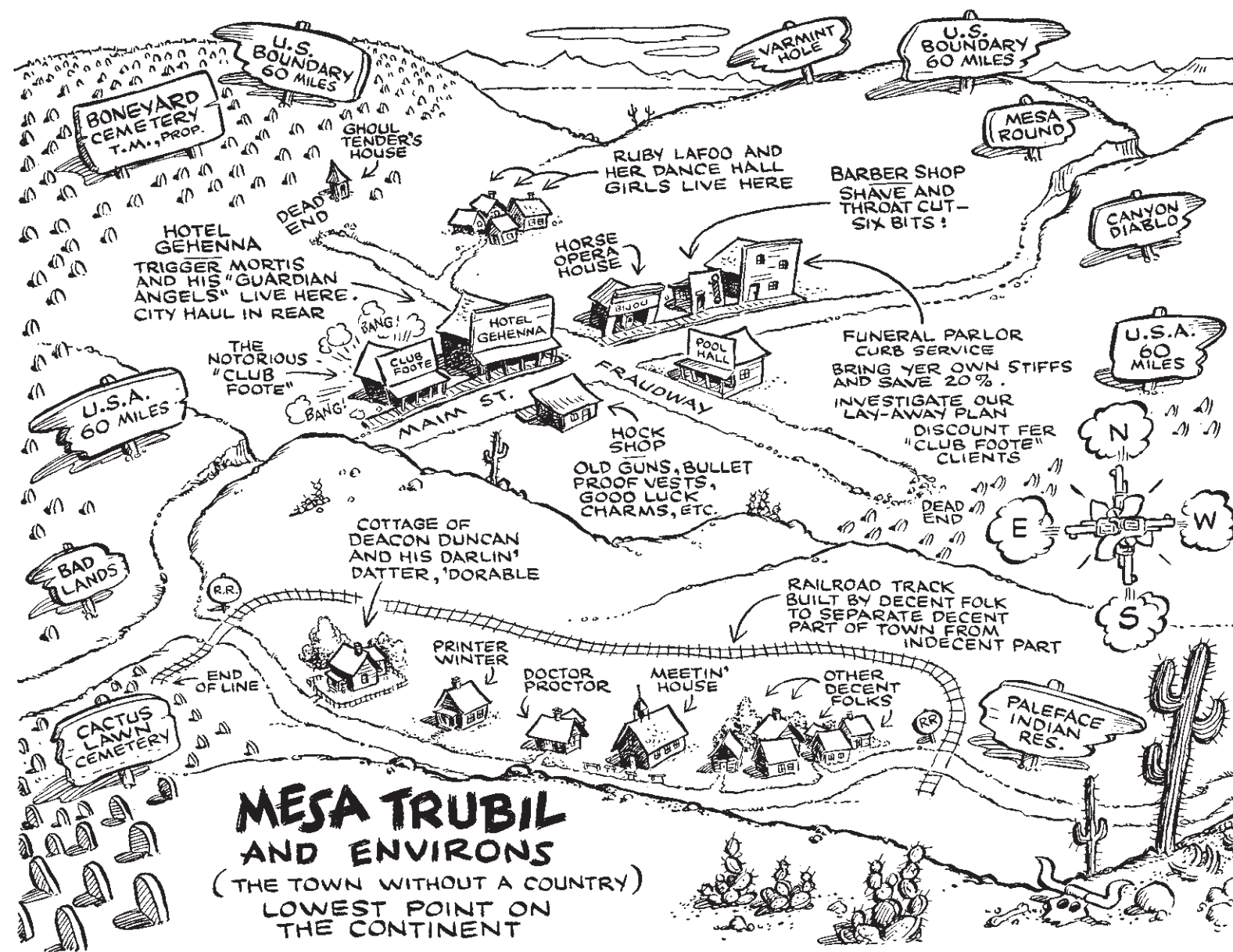
After much discussion and planning, and after Paul Murry had come aboard, Buck finally saw the light of day nearly two and a half years after Dick's lay-off from Disney's. In an ironic twist, Dick was rehired by the Studio a mere three months later.

While still scripting Buck, Dick began at Disney's to write a projected series of educational shorts on music. The second of these, *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom*, directed by his longtime friend Ward Kimball, won a Motion Picture Academy award in 1954 as best animated cartoon.

Dick gradually lost interest in Buck as sales of the strip lagged behind his expectations, while income from the Disney Studio mounted. By April 1952, Disney was paying \$200 a week but Buck brought in only \$280 for the entire month. Dick eventually turned Buck over to Paul Murry, who continued the strip for half a year. Paul then returned to drawing Disney comic books, achieving widespread recognition for his portrayals of Mickey and Goofy.

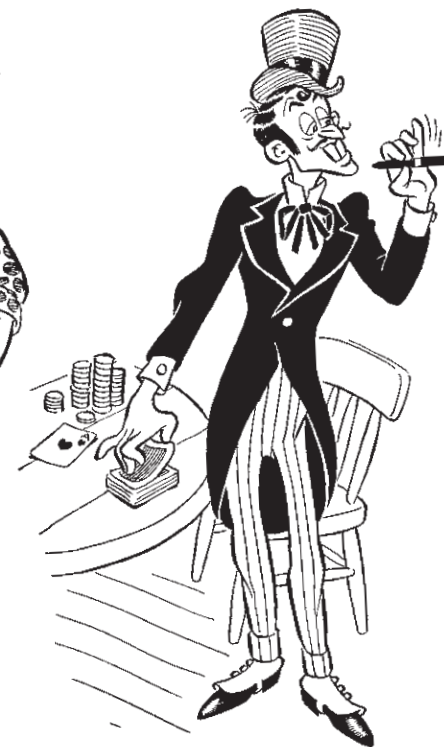
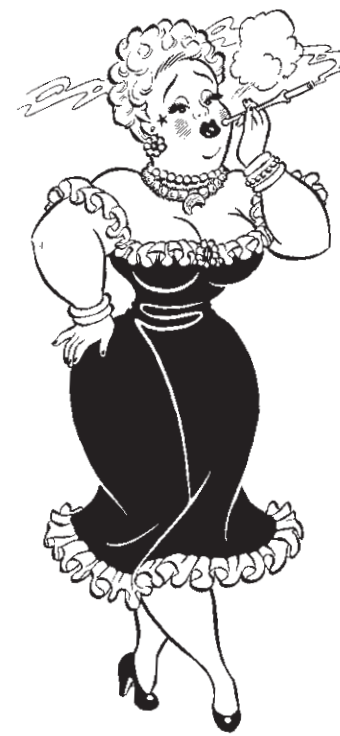
Dick wrote television scripts and other projects for Disney, but did not abandon newspaper comics altogether. From 1955 to 1973, he wrote Disney's "True Life Adventures", a daily panel about the world of nature, and occasionally contributed scripts for other Disney comics.

"Buck O'Rue" stands as a humorous memorial of a venture into cartoonish terra incognita. Buck was born of the need to support its creators' families, and now gives us a window on matters both evanescent and eternal. The evanescent times were the rough-riding 1870s and the deceptively bland early 1950s. The eternal thing is the bad behavior of what Mark Twain, never careless with words, called "the damned human race."





CHARACTER DESIGNS



WESTWARD, HA! *or How the West was Fun*

MUSIC: WM TELL OVERTURE UP FULL THEN UNDER

SFX: HOOFBEATS HEAVY

SFX: GUNSHOTS- (HOOFBEATS FADE OUT)

ANNCR: *With his faithful equine companion, the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early Western United States. Nowhere in the pages of history can one find a greater champion of justice! Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of a fiery horse with the speed of light! A cloud of dust! And a hearty ho-hi...REDDISH?!!*

Oh, yeah, that was some other dude.

Unlike the legendary masked rider who led the fight for law and order in the early western United States, our protagonist, Buck O'Rue, did not. That was mainly because he left the United States on the second day of his existence and never returned, except in flashbacks.

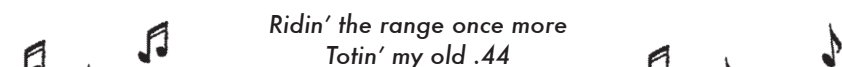
Buck spent his entire two-year career in the fight for law and order in Mesa Trubil, which might seem a less daunting task than taking on the entire West, were it not for the fact that Mesa Trubil was so incredibly wicked. It was so rotten, in fact, that when the town (which had seceded from the United States in 1861) wanted back in the Union, the United States said "Good riddance!" and turned its back, metaphorically speaking. Mesa Trubil thus became the town without a country.

Scholars may dispute the precise map coordinates of Mesa Trubil, when they have nothing better to do. The comic strip offers few clues. The strip of July 30, 1951, has Buck and Reddish crossing Giant's Leap (fictional), the Petrified Forest, and the Painted Desert, in that order; then night falls (July 31). Since a Pony Express horse in peak condition could cover as much as 200 miles in a day, one can conservatively draw a circle with a 150-mile radius and confidently assert that Mesa Trubil most likely lay within its boundaries. Sparsely-settled Apache County would fit the bill, and moreover it is halfway to Buck's birthplace in the real world, in Colorado.

I believe that the *anlagen* for Buck were formed at a dude ranch north of Bayfield, Colorado, where my father, Dick Huemer, had taken our family for a summer vacation in 1948. (I think he already knew that he would not be returning to work afterwards.) So, at least geographically speaking, Buck had a closer kinship with Red Ryder than with the Lone Ranger, as the former was written and drawn by Fred Harman in nearby Pagosa Springs, whilst the latter emanated from station WXYZ in distant

Detroit. Temporally, pinpointing Buck O'Rue is as imprecise as it is useless. Some of the action takes place in 1951 but other scenes seem to be from the 1870s. It all happens within the enduring confines of the great Myth of the American West, which has persisted far longer than the brief historical time it represents.

The Myth of the American West embodies American notions of self-reliance, liberty, fairness, and unlimited horizons. It is epitomized in these lines from Gene Autry's song, *Back in the Saddle Again*:



 Ridin' the range once more
 Totin' my old .44
 Where you sleep out every night
 And the only law is right
 Back in the saddle again.*

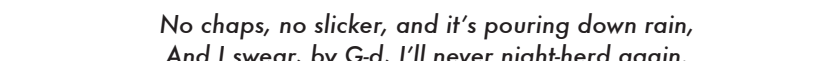


North of Bayfield, Colorado

The Western hero is proactive, resilient, independent, decisive, ethically intuitive, inner-directed, and in harmony with God and nature. He is often, though not always, clean-living and respectful toward women. He will follow his own moral compass, even in violation of society's rules, if that will serve the greater good (e.g., John Wayne as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*).

One definition of a myth is an idealized conception of a person or thing. The Myth of the American West is the majority culture's perception of itself, but it mirrors wishful thinking, not reality. For instance, contrary to depictions in mid-Twentieth Century media, not all cowboys were Euro-American. A quarter or more were Afro-American, and there were Latino cowboys too, but most Euro-Americans did not know of them.

Moreover, the life of a cowboy was not romantic and independent, but submissive, austere, lonely, and exhausting. The traditional *Old Chisholm Trail* song tells it as it really was:



 No chaps, no slicker, and it's pouring down rain,
 And I swear, by G-d, I'll never night-herd again.
 Oh it's bacon and beans most every day,
 I'd as soon be a-eatin' prairie hay.
 I'll sell my outfit just as soon as I can,
 I won't punch cattle for no damned man.
 Coma ti yi yippee, yippee yay, yippee yay,
 Coma ti yi yippee, yippee yay.

The Western hero and the associated Myth of the West seem jarringly at odds with modern America, where "manifest destiny" long ago morphed into global empire-building, the citizens turned into sheeple (the meek inheriting the earth and having no idea what to do with it), and "sound as a dollar" became a rarely heard oxymoron. Still, the Myth and its hero tug at the fringes of our collective unconscious, unwilling to let a faltering empire succumb to rigor mortis quite yet.

Sixty years ago, the Myth was alive and well. It was a time of relative peace (except for the Korean war) and social serenity, a time when a new comic strip was front-page news and nobody would have imagined that placing a child's photo and address on the front page of a big-city paper was in any way hazardous. Then, along came "Buck O'Rue". The strip mocks the Myth and holds up a different mirror: not the Myth's flattering mirror, with all its little scotomas, but a fun-house mirror that

distorts our image grotesquely. "I'd make a comic strip that would forever end all things Western," Dick told the *Toronto Star*. That isn't the way we wanted to see ourselves.

Even the casual reader will notice that, in spite of its comic intent, the "Buck O'Rue" strip has some very dark undertones. Humorously stupid and inept as they may be, Buck's antagonists are rotten to the core, innately evil, from the blustering bully Trigger Mortis and his rancid 4 retinue to the lone, crazed prospector who thinks it "might be a good thing" if the schmatum bomb cracked the earth in half.

They are not portrayed that way by accident. Dick Huemer revealed his world-view in an interview with Joe Adamson, who had commented on the preponderance of villains in *Dumbo*, and the film's "sardonic view of the world." Dick, the co-writer of *Dumbo*, replied, "Well, you must admit that's how the world is." His creative partner on *Dumbo*, Joe Grant, must have shared similar views. The two men also came up with a trenchant satire on dictatorships, "The World is Square," which, if the world is lucky, will someday find its way out of the catacombs of suspended animation.

My father rarely revealed that darker side of himself. In fact, he was amusing almost to a fault, in that he turned verbal interactions into glib word-play and humorous remarks. It was as if he used humor, his lifelong vocation, as a shield against the world's harsh realities and others' verbal barbs. It can thus be said that he was well-liked by nearly everyone (as manifested by all the Studio artists' signatures on his retirement picture), but well-known by relatively few.

Dick Huemer died on November 30, 1979, after surgery at St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, across the street from the Disney Studio.

SFX: Hoofbeats receding into the distance

COWBOY 1: *Say, who was that masked man, anyhow?*

I wanted to thank him.

COWBOY 2: *Danged if I know, even now. But look! He left us these silver bullets!*

MUSIC: THEME UP FULL, THEN OUT -RPH

* Lyrics to *Back in the Saddle Again* © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.