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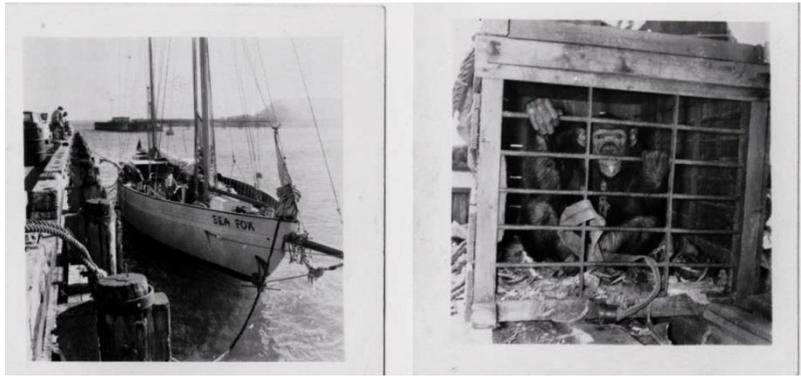
THE INCREDIBLE SEA FOX SAGA –Continuing biog of Crusading Editor, “Big Jim” Bowditch



: Sea Fox in Darwin and chain smoking Chimp , Jimmy . A hose is seen hooked through the cage , just in case he set fire to the straw. Photographs by Peter Simon

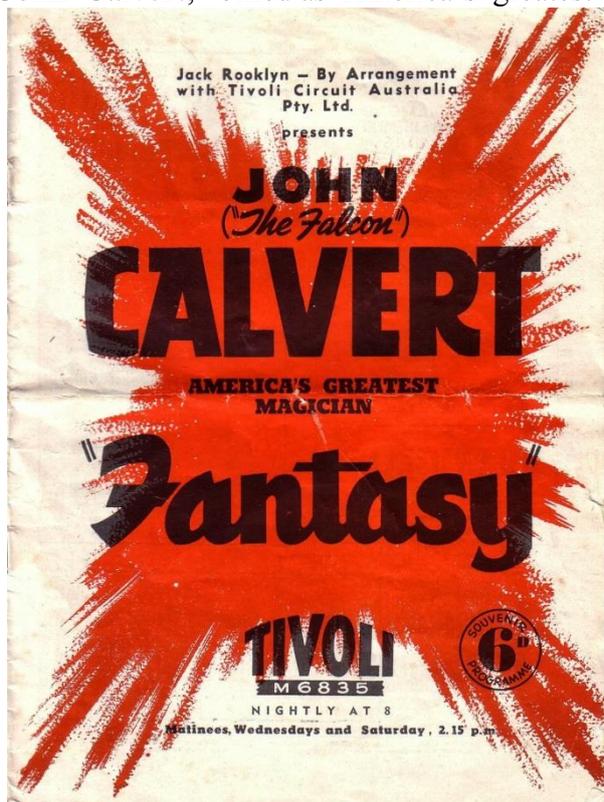


THE INCREDIBLE SEA FOX SAGA –Continuing biog of Crusading Editor, “Big Jim” Bowditch



SURPRISE ARRIVAL: Sea Fox in Darwin and chain smoking Chimp, Jimmy. A hose is seen hooked through the cage, just in case he set fire to the straw. Photographs by Peter Simon

Without any advance Hollywood-type publicity, a large luxury yacht, the *Sea Fox*, sailed into Darwin in June 1959, bound for Sydney. The exotic crew included a chain-smoking chimpanzee who was supposed to have been Jimmy the Chimp in a Tarzan movie. Skipper of the vessel, which had sailed down from Singapore, was B grade movie star **John Calvert**, billed as America's greatest magician.



Calvert had played Michael Waring, a Hollywood detective, in a series called *The Falcon*. According to modest Calvert, he won plaudits for his outstanding portrayal of the detective. However, The Falcon had been played by other actors, including **George Sands** during the 1940s, and Calvert was said to have made a couple of inferior Falcon movies for a small independent company in the 1950s. It was not the first time Calvert had been to Australia, he having been star billing in *Fantasy*, a 1950 magical show in Sydney. He had piloted his own DC3, the *Mystic Lady*, about America putting on magic performances, which included lots of leggy female assistants.

By Peter Simon

Also aboard the yacht, said to have been specially built for **Edsel Ford** (not so), was "Mrs Calvert", a young Filipino singer named **Pilita**. During the voyage to Darwin the poor caged chimpanzee had been let out for a bit of exercise. He had gone berserk, chased crew about the vessel and some locked themselves in their cabins while others jumped overboard. Jimmy had then climbed a mast and refused to come down. Brave Captain Calvert, supposedly a Golden Gloves boxing champion, according to his scrapbooks, stood at the bottom of the mast and ordered Jimmy to come down.

Jimmy mutinied, ignored instructions from the captain, and just hung there in the rigging. Not to be outsmarted by a chimp, Calvert produced a bunch of bananas and Jimmy began to salivate. Just as Adam was brought undone by an apple in the Garden of Eden, Jimmy succumbed to the seductive bananas.

Down the mast he came and just when he was about to grab the fruit, Calvert took to him with a belaying pin. Calvert reportedly hugged the stunned chimp like a baby for a time before the groggy animal was dragged back to the confines of his cage. When he arrived in Darwin, the chimp morosely peered out from his cramped cage and tried to set fire to the rigging with cigarettes given him to smoke.

One of the people to board the yacht soon after it arrived in Darwin was marine expert **Carl Atkinson** of Doctor's Gully, who gave the vessel a thorough going over; no doubt, he gave the female crew members some close attention as well. Once the word got about town that there was a yacht with a monkey and a film star in port people flocked to the wharf.

NUDES, NUTS AND COPS

The **Sea Fox** had only been in port a short time when two young crewmen arrived, naked, at Bennet Street Police Station. They told an amazing story. One of them claimed that Calvert had warned him to keep away from Pilita and threatened to cut off his “nuts” if he did not obey orders. The nuts he referred to were not the ones consumed by chimpanzees. The man, only wearing shorts, had made a pass at Pilita, and Calvert pulled out a knife, apparently intent on nut removal.

The police were told the actor had grabbed the crewman by his shorts whereupon he quickly slipped out of them, ran along the deck and jumped into the sea. A friend of his, also only wearing shorts, had jumped overboard with him, and in the process lost his treads. The two men were taken back to the yacht by the bemused police and after diplomatic negotiations Calvert allowed them back on board.

Calvert called into the News **office** and spoke to **Bowditch** from time to time. When he asked to use an office toilet, one of the staff suggested putting a plaque on the door saying JOHN CALVERT PISSED HERE. Despite the exotic aura created by the Hollywood star and the luxury yacht, it was obvious that Calvert was not flush with money. After receiving a bill for some laundry, Calvert winced and told Bowditch he might marry a washerwoman.

DRIVING BLINDFOLDED

To improve his financial position, he decided to put on a magician's show in Darwin. To promote the event, he announced he would drive blindfolded down the main street. When the police heard this they were concerned. Calvert subsequently went to police headquarters, this writer in tow, and spoke to Inspector Jim Mannion and Chief Inspector Clive Graham.

At first Calvert did a few sleight of hand tricks with coins and got them amused. Then he asked Clive Graham for the time. The inspector looked at his wrist, could not find his watch, and so looked at his other wrist- no watch. Calvert had slipped the watch off without him knowing. After that, Calvert had the police eating out of his hand. He assured them that he

had done the blindfolded driving stunt in many places and guaranteed he would not run down any pedestrians or collide with cars.

True to his word, with Inspector Mannion watching and filming the event with his movie camera, Calvert drove blindfolded down Smith Street watched by a big crowd. At the town hall, his magic show, which included a display of mental telepathy and hypnotism, attracted a medium crowd. At one stage Bowditch was invited up on stage and participated in the performance.

Calvert picked up Bowditch "like a feather" with one hand. The entire Sea Fox crew, even the one threatened with removal of a vital part of his anatomy, worked as stage hands and wore elaborate costumes. Pilita, of course, drew a lot of attention and in a levitation demonstration Calvert caused her to rise about five feet into the air. One of Calvert's acts was a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde performance which had a gory scene in which a person's head was cut off, causing a terrified member of the audience to run from the hall.

SEA FOX MAYDAY DRAMA

Not long after the stage performance, the Sea Fox, much to the sorrow of Darwin because it had brought a touch of Hollywood to town, set off for Sydney. However, a dramatic situation soon developed. Off Arnhem Land, the yacht reported it was taking water and likely to sink. Calvert made things difficult by not being able to give his exact position. News reports went overseas about a yacht carrying an American film star, his wife and Tarzan's monkey sinking off the Australian coast. In America, a woman took particular interest in the news and wanted to know exactly who this "Mrs Calvert" was on the yacht as she was Mrs Calvert.

Furthermore, she said her son, John Andrew Calvert, only 13 months old, was fretting for his daddy. She also revealed that something similar had happened to the yacht before when it had been damaged by a cyclonic storm. On that occasion she had left the yacht while it underwent repairs and returned to America to give birth to John Calvert Jr. The yacht then had been called *Thespian*, not Sea Fox.

The story grew more interesting by the hour. AN RAAF Lincoln Bomber flew out from Darwin to look for the Sea Fox and this writer, above right, was aboard for the NT News. [Cameraman, Chris? ran a shop in Smith Street]. The yacht was found on the second day of the search, but did not seem very low in the water. When the plane dropped a container with a bilge pump inside there was much embarrassment. A new cylindrical container was used to house the pump and when the parachute opened, with a jerk, the vital bit of equipment shot through the bottom into the sea. The same thing happened when supplies were dropped. Calvert came on the radio and screamed for another pump to save the yacht. In a bright idea, he suggested a pump from the Darwin sewer system.

"MONKEY SHIP" ARRIVAL

The bomber circled the yacht and guided in other RAAF aircraft from Townsville. Throughout the event Calvert took movie pictures of the crew manually pumping and ordered them to work faster to make it look more dramatic. Back in Darwin, Bowditch

was kept busy supplying a running account of the Sea Fox saga. Eventually a naval tug, **Emu**, was sent out and took the Sea Fox in tow, heading for the Methodist mission at **Elcho Island**. Bowditch and Doug Lockwood flew to the island from Darwin.

News of the impending arrival of the yacht with a monkey aboard created great interest on the island. Aborigines living inland rushed to the mission centre hoping to see the monkey and called the yacht, the Monkey Ship. Some were even told they would have to have a good wash and dress up in their best clothes to see Jimmy. Refrigerator philanthropist Sir Edward Hallstrom announced that if the chimpanzee survived he would give him shelter in Taronga Zoo Park, Sydney.

When the yacht finally got to the island it was taken into the shallows and beached, shored up with timber. However, the tide swept the supports away and the yacht crashed over on its side and stove in some planks, causing flooding of the interior. Calvert collapsed. Sir Edward came to Darwin to personally organise the travel arrangements for the chimp which took an instant liking to the industrialist and gave him a hug. It is not known if Sir Edward cut off Jimmy's cigarette supply or gave him a cigar to soothe his nerves after all the drama.

Flown back to Darwin, Calvert was confronted by some former crewmembers who said they had had very little to eat, mainly potato soup, on the voyage from Asia to Darwin. Calvert retorted that the soup had been so thick a spoon would stand up in it. They also claimed that Calvert had been surprised to sail into Darwin because he thought he was somewhere near Geraldton in Western Australia.

Carl Atkinson went to Elcho Island to patch up the yacht and brought it back to Darwin. Calvert and his circus flew off to Sydney to perform his magician's show for Harry Wren, the showbiz entrepreneur. Soon after, Bowditch put on a fine stage performance himself - he won the impromptu speech section at the North Australian Eisteddfod. He also received the Walkley Award for Journalism for his coverage of the Sea Fox saga. Years later, in a rage, he would throw the award against his lounge room wall and bend it out of shape.

ATTEMPT TO KIDNAP PILITA

Down south, Pilita became a popular TV singer and also signed some recording contracts. As the months went by she and Calvert were involved in many hi-jinks. Pilita said she had been married to a Spanish "beast" who had mistreated her, caused her to work hard and took all her money.

Calvert made the headlines when he barged into a room and accused a consular official of "kidnapping" Pilita. The consular man denied the charge and said they were just good friends. Another newspaper report said Pilita was brandishing a large ring and said she was engaged to marry Calvert, his wife having divorced him. Calvert announced that he was planning a number of dramatic one hour films called **The Sea Fox**. Footage he had taken during the drama off Arnhem Land was to be used in the series. Also, he said the mock-up of the nuclear submarine which **Stanley Kramer** had used in the movie *On The Beach*, shot in Melbourne, had been bought and would also be used as a set.

A dispute developed over the proposed Sea Fox series and Calvert performed another vanishing act - he left the country, making a brief stopover in Darwin to inspect the Sea Fox at Doctor's Gully. The yacht inspection took place at night, after looking at the battered yacht Calvert told a reporter he ought to issue a writ against "this guy Atkinson".

Atkinson had not been present when Calvert went to Doctor's Gully because he was at the movies and there was no advance warning of his visit. When told what Calvert had said about him, Atkinson replied: "If I knew he was coming, I would have hit him with a writ." By this time Calvert was out of the country and a Tasmanian film company claimed he had

taken some valuable film with him which belonged to them.



Atkinson researched the history of the yacht and discovered she had been built in 1917 and was 79ft long, not 120ft as stated by Calvert. The yacht was in such bad shape in 1962, above, that harbour authorities told Atkinson that if he could not re-float the vessel she would have to be removed from the foreshore. Once more the Sea Fox took to the waves, but she was a sorry, battered sight. An Adelaide businessman, R. Carr, said he intended restoring the yacht and sailing her in the Sydney-Hobart race. Despite these intentions, the yacht apparently rotted away.