

LOST SHIPS, MADMEN, and PIRATE GOLD

by Antonio "Crazy Tony" O'Malley

(Editor's note: Following the overwhelming response (one letter) to Antonio's last article for POLYHEDRON™ Newszine, "The Vesper Investigation," in issue #15, we decided to have him write another great article to follow up his adventure with some ideas on wild and woolly adventuring in the pre-World War II period. It was either this or a trip into Lake Michigan with cement footsies. . . .)

Several role-playing games are on the market now which set up adventures in the 1920s and 1930s, that lost time when gangsters rode the streets in pin-striped suits with cold machine guns in their hands, when Broadway was lit with flashing movie marquees for RKO musicals and Busby Berkley dance films, and when the daily papers warned of Nazi aggression overseas. It was a time of high adventure and danger, those last few years before the long shadows of the Second World War engulfed the earth and changed it forever.

If you are refereeing a GANGBUSTERS™, CALL OF CTHULHU™, or DAREDEVIL™ game campaign, or use another 1930s high adventure role-playing system (for instance, TSR's newest game release), then you will want to keep the game's activities as lively as possible. It is wise to avoid restricting such a campaign's setting or style. The pre-war period was rich with its own special hazards; to keep a campaign plodding along as a perpetual detective thriller or as an eternal gangster-chase will deaden the campaign's power. Remember, *King Kong* took place in the 1930s; who'd want to miss a trip to Skull Island?

For this reason, player characters might consider dropping specific occupational titles to become "professional adventurers," a euphemism that seems to cover all bases at once. Well-rounded characters with a wide variety of skills have the flexibility it takes to survive; it does not pay to specialize one's skills too greatly. When adventure calls, one should be ready to

get one's coat, strap on the .38, and head for the airport.

With the richness of history behind them, player characters may enter literally hundreds of adventure settings and meet thousands of fascinating people, many of whom may want to kill the player characters for various personal reasons. However, getting detailed information on foreign locales to set up scenarios is difficult; even well-stocked libraries may lack information on the layout of the temples of Angkor Wat.

But why go overseas to do your deriding-do? Adventurers may find that cliff-hanging chases, tons of treasure, and sudden death may be lurking for them no further than their own neighborhoods. North America of the 1930s was quite rich in hazards in its own right, and can supply player characters with several lifetimes worth of spine-chilling, bone-rattling adventure. Creating adventures in North America takes a little research on the game referee's part; some helpful suggestions for making up your own game scenarios (with some references for those who like messing around in libraries and bookstores) follow.

Pirate treasures and sunken galleons

Everyone has heard of the newspaper stories of treasure hunters in Florida who rake in millions by locating wrecked Spanish galleons and hauling up their gold and silver. Everyone is also familiar with tales of buried treasures left by Caribbean and Atlantic-coast pirates of centuries past. The question is, How badly does your character want to become an instant millionaire? I thought so. Funny how fast the old heart beats when that scrap of treasure map falls from an ancient history book and the faded letters upon it say, "gold."

Ah, but perhaps someone else has found a similar parchment, and he and his friends want that treasure as badly as you do, if not worse. And they'll go to any lengths to stop you from getting it. While the bullets fly, you may find that the treasure itself has guards and traps

designed to slay the unwary. Buried treasure may have blood upon it, and could hold a curse against the living from beyond the grave.

Details on Spanish galleons and what they held are not difficult to find. Information on diving techniques and devices might be a little harder to come by, but shouldn't be impossible to uncover. Aside from rival treasure hunters, special dangers will appear from breakdowns in equipment aboardship, from storms at sea, and, of course, from sharks.

Buried pirate treasure could present much the same hazards as noted above, plus a few others (since much treasure was buried inland or on small islands). Traps will come into play here; a cave system used by pirates on the Carolina coasts could have rockfalls, pits full of spikes and/or snakes, "scare" traps with skeletons, dead-ends where explorers can be trapped alive, etc. A good book on cave exploring would come in handy here. Pirates were known to construct elaborate security systems for their treasures at times, and as a result, some treasures may never be found.

One book that is strongly recommended to give the flavor of the age of piracy when creating such adventures is Exquemlin's *The Buccaneers of America*, a firsthand account of 17th-century sea rovers that helps immensely when preparing historical background.

Ghost towns and gold mines

The "Old West" had long since been tamed by 1930, but many of its secrets were still hidden (and are hidden now). Lost gold mines of legend lie in wait for those who wish to hunt them out, and mysteries concerning lost persons, native American rituals, and forgotten battles beg for solutions.

Lost gold mines would make for the most spectacular adventuring payoffs, of course, but would also provide some of the most horrifying dangers from mine explosions, cave-ins, and competing treasure-hunters. Some men and women may lay in wait, unable to locate a lost mine

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on their own but hoping against hope that someone will have discovered where it is, giving them the chance to take it for their own. A number of historical lost gold mines could be investigated through careful library research, which could pay off in some exciting and tense scenarios.

Ghost towns would make excellent settings for adventures, with their eerie atmospheres and remote locations. A few modern bandits of the Bonnie-and-Clyde sort might make such a place a temporary hideout; secret rituals could be conducted there away from prying eyes; poisonous snakes, scorpions, and other wildlife could spice up the territory. Nice place to visit, eh?

Players may also go on adventures involving American Indians. Displaced by force from their homelands and suffering from mistreatment by whites, many Native Americans may be very hostile towards "outsiders" who may further cheat or harass them. However, player characters may go adventuring with Indians as allies, and, of course, may be Indians themselves. Native myths may come to life, old relics may need to be rescued, and the safety of one's own people may be endangered: heroes must be summoned to meet the challenge.

Vikings, Aztecs, and cave men

North America has been visited and settled by many peoples over the ages. Pre-historic humans hunted mastodons in California, and mound builders in Ohio constructed giant serpentine shapes for their ceremonies. Perhaps these peoples conducted their rituals in hidden caves which have not yet been discovered, and perhaps they hid things worth finding (guarded by special horrors that no one wants to find).

More recent migrations and explorations of peoples could have also left traces of their passing for adventurous archaeologists and fortune-hunters to pore over. Viking settlements in the Great Lakes and eastern Canada, Chinese outposts in California, Egyptian relics in Florida, and Black African ruins in Mexico are possible, and may be developed in dozens of



different adventures.

The exact nature of such ruins depends upon the referee's imagination. Stone temples, cave dwellings, and similar shelters may be all that remains of these peoples, but the adventure comes in where treasure hungry men catch a whiff of gold and gems. If the referee desires, some items may be magical in nature, and thus may be very dangerous for careless men to handle.

Perhaps the most unusual adventures

of this nature would involve the discovery of living peoples who are descended from strange, foreign ancestors, following unheard-of practices and keeping untold secrets. Such forgotten peoples might not even resemble humanity. Dwarf humans might inhabit great tunnel systems throughout the Rockies, and Sasquatch (the "Big Foot" monster of the Pacific Northwest) might be one of many huge creatures who are the last of their kind. The Old West had not been fully explored even by World War II. What could have been missed? Frankly, lots.

Tough customers and troublemakers

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, say the physicists. This seems particularly true in role-playing adventures, where every good guy has his nemesis and every goal has someone who's standing in the way of it.

Characters may meet mundane sorts of opponents, like gangsters, pickpockets, hijackers, muggers, con men, charlatans, hired killers, ex-convicts, escaped convicts, crooked politicians, strongmen, rustlers, drifters, snipers, crime bosses, federal agents, policemen, private investigators, snoops, and race-track bookies.

Things can get even more interesting with the addition of Communist agitators, union bosses, strikebreakers, Nazi spies, presidential candidates, religious fanatics, aircraft pilots, cannibals and headhunters, millionaires, ex-Army explosives experts, Nicaraguan revolutionaries, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, political extremists, prophets of doom, Klansmen, and tomb-robbers. This says nothing of the potential for high adventure had by African witchdoctors, shamans of voodoo, mad scientists, vengeful billionaires, paranoid generals, seductive queens, and black-clothed ninjas who slip in and out of homes like the unseen wind.

Curiouser and curiouser

This isn't enough, you cry? You want to make things *really* interesting for the poor players? Well, toss in a few natural disasters to liven things up. Volcanoes can

What if a visionary was able to get hold of some uranium (a surprisingly easy thing to do in the 1930s) and begin work on the world's first nuclear device? What could be done with such a weapon? Would anyone believe such a thing was possible?

erupt, earthquakes can strike, tornados can roll and twist, hurricanes can blast the coasts, landslides can tear off mountainsides, chain lightning can illuminate the night, churning waterspouts can drive toward defenseless ships.

In extreme cases, enterprising refs can have combinations of the above events occur ("It can't get any worse!" cried Professor Carstairs as the hurricane lashed at their yacht. "Oh, yes it can!" cried sturdy Renquist, as the island's volcano exploded in a cosmic shower of ash and lava). This approach can be overdone, but you get the general idea.

If *this* isn't exciting enough and the referee wants something *really* bizarre to throw at the players, there are still the following possibilities.

Atomic energy was still in its infancy in the 1930s, but certain men were able to see where such power could lead, for both good and evil purposes. What if a visionary was able to get hold of some uranium (a surprisingly easy thing to do in the 1930s) and begin work on the world's first nuclear device? What could be done with such a weapon? Would anyone believe such a thing was possible? These chilling possibilities could develop in the course of a campaign and could even provide for the alteration of history on a grand scale.

H.P. Lovecraft's tales of the Cthulhu mythos have been around a long time, and Chaosium's CALL OF CTHULHU™ game explores this avenue of dangers well; it must be confessed, however, that fighting alien gods from outer space can often prove a little *too* hazardous, what with the dangers of going insane and the general uselessness of modern weaponry against the more powerful monsters of the pantheon. Nonetheless, it makes a nice break to deal with a slime creature from the Los Angeles sewers once in a while.

The Bermuda Triangle can be a rich source of adventure for any campaign. Several ships disappeared there in the time frame we're concerned with, among them the *Cyclops*, the *Carroll A. Deering*, and the *La Dahama*. Though a careful

examination of Bermuda Triangle tales reveals that most of the ships were probably lost during major storms or suffered other mundane disasters, the referee could declare otherwise and change history a bit. Did UFOs steal the ships and their crews? Is an ancient civilization kidnapping people as slaves? Are monsters lurking in the Caribbean and Atlantic? What about pathways to alternate universes?

One book that contains superb resource material on this topic is Lawrence David Kusche's *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved*. Carefully researched and documented, this book is also enjoyable to read. Dozens of disappearances and strange happenings are described in detail, and references are given for further investigation.

Ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits of the dead may haunt the campaign from time to time. "The Vesper Investigation" from POLYHEDRON™ Newszine #15 described one example of such an encounter that could be expanded into a major campaign episode. History books which detail how the 1930s dealt with the occult can be invaluable for referees; particular attention should be paid to the psychic fakery that went on during this time; much could be made of having adventurers think they've discovered true hauntings, when they are only being bamboozled by a clever medium who knows how to rig a seance and fake contact with the dead. Some recent books by Martin Gardner have discussed the world of psychics, ESP, and related topics in a very readable, intelligent, and refreshingly sceptical manner, and they are worth examining.

Die-hard pulp fans will recognize the name of Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, the genius and adventurer who fought evil with high technology and two fists throughout the '30s and '40s in the novels of Kenneth Robeson (a pseudonym for Lester Dent and other writers). Bantam Books still prints a wide variety of his adventures, and Philip Jose Farmer has written a "biography" of him (*Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life*). The tales of

Dr. Clark Savage, Jr., are must reading for anyone who has a mental block over what could possibly keep adventurers busy in their campaign.

As a last resort, there are still such amusements as invaders from Mars, meteor strikes, radiation experiments gone wild, hidden islands ruled by descendants of Atlantis, secret societies that manipulate and govern the world like a puppet, wizards, priests, and sorcerers from strange cults, and time travellers from the future (perhaps with unpleasant news). Sixty-foot tall apes with a penchant for climbing skyscrapers should not be overlooked, and lost worlds full of large, hungry dinosaurs may also make an appearance now and then. While it is wise not to overdo this, an adventure involving any one of the above would certainly make for an interesting day.

Some fascinating resource material, though of dubious "authenticity," would include the likes of Charles Fort's *The Book of The Damned*, and Frank Edwards' assorted chronicles of strange happenings and impossible events. Whether any of this material is true or not is irrelevant for gaming purposes; if it looks good, use it!

Final thoughts

The general idea is to keep things moving, to build them up to a fever-pitch of tension and excitement. Will the explorers escape the clutches of the mad Dr. Weatherby's mutant ape army in time to find the stolen statuette of Chao Kung Ming and return it to the temple before the enraged followers of Shiva descend upon the peaceful village of Xbalanque and sacrifice them all to the great plague god and release the carnivorous locust upon the world? Or will the typhoon strike first and sweep them all to sea to be eaten by barracudas?

Adventuring in the 1920s and 1930s can be a very complicated affair. It's a wonder anyone lived through it all. 

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