

2009 is the 40th year for San Diego's con!

# Keeping the intangibles

by **MAGGIE THOMPSON**

**"... borrow money for something that would last, like a journey ..."**

— Peg Bracken

Recently, I was a guest on a chatty TV panel show ... The question arose, Should a couple ever borrow money, and if so, for what? I said they should borrow money for something that would last, like an operation or a journey, not something that wouldn't, like a refrigerator. They thought I had said it backwards, but I hadn't, for I know that with only a gentle assist, you can keep the intangibles far longer.

— Chapter 5, *But I Wouldn't Have Missed It for the World!* by Peg Bracken (1918-2007), New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973



**July 24-25, 1965, The Detroit Triple Fan Fair paid tribute to fantasy literature and films, as well as comcs.**



**Maggie, Don, and Shel Dorf feasted at the head table at the San Diego Comic-Con in 1976.**

Without suggesting that you necessarily borrow the money in these troubled times [though, let's face it, that's what credit-card purchases boil down to], let me suggest that you begin to save your spare change for a journey in 2009 to Comic-Con International: San Diego.

2009 marks the 40th year of the event, and I've already begun to cast my mind back over some of those years to wallow in nostalgia over the intangible memories of Comic-Cons Past.

Don and I first met Shel Dorf when he was part of the

committee that provided comics events in the Detroit area. He was chairman of what he'd named The Detroit Triple Fan Fair and for which he'd designed the logo; it was an event for fans and collectors of a variety of what came to be called pop culture. When Shel moved to San Diego, he decided to see whether he could put together a similar event there. As quoted in Bill Schelly's *The Golden Age of Fandom*, Dorf said, "I went to the visitor's convention bureau, and I met a guy who was really helpful. He suggested that we plan two conventions. The first would be a one-day thing, with a three-day con to be held later on. This fellow said that, if we promised a hotel that we would give them the three-day convention, they'd give us the space for the one-day mini-con for nothing. A very clever arrangement!" So the mini-con was March 21 with Forry Ackerman as guest, and the major show came in August.

By the time we (Don, Maggie, 9-year-old Valerie, and 4-year-old Stephen) made a family expedition to the 1976 event, six years after the San Diego con had been begun, Shel was our exuberant host. He provided a tour of the area, urging us to move to San Diego, introducing us to everyone, and generally making us welcome



**The El Cortez Hotel was home to the Comic-Con in 1976.**



**Aug. 1-3, 1970, what was then called the Golden State Comic-Con kicked off what would become known as Comic-Con International: San Diego. As was the case in Detroit, its three focuses included films and science fiction, as well as comics.**

on our first venture to the West Coast. Not to be overlooked in all this was the support we received from our then-editor/publisher Alan Light, who fed us, photographed us, and was a pleasure to meet for the first time.

And, as Peg Bracken suggests, the San Diego convention has provided countless intangibles: memories that remain vivid more than 30 years later (in the case of the 1976 event — although those memories have been joined by memories from later Comic-Cons ever since).

- During the 1976 convention breakfast, we were seated at a table on the raised podium at the front of the room. As the program began, and one celebrity after another stood up to receive an Inkpot Award, we suddenly realized that we, too, were probably going to receive one. This was at about the moment that the person next to us was awarded his — and Mel Blanc, having been given the trophy, launched into a wild gag that involved a character whose stammer ran something like three minutes per sentence. We were laughing so hard that it was difficult to breathe — and, to top it off, we knew that *we* were to be the *next* recipients

and that we could never be more than a letdown following that act. When our plaques were handed to us, we noted that they were for “Fandom Projects/Service” — and that was our out. Since our award was basically for being fans — admiring those whose awards had preceded ours — we had met the qualification, since we didn’t have to claim we were entertaining performers. Job done. Whew!

- Meeting Kirk Alyn was a treat. I remember looking at his face and thinking how perfectly chiseled his features were — then realizing that that had probably been one of the reasons he’d been a leading man in films. (Duh.) He was wearing a blinking green pendant, grinned broadly at us, and said the pendant was his kryptonite repellent. We laughed, and he promptly said, “Want to buy it?”

- Mel Blanc was great with us — and the kids. He did voices for them. He asked what I’d like, and I asked him whether he could do his “rubber band,” not really sure whether he could re-create one of his greatest sound effects without preparation or some sort of bonus equipment. It was a magic moment (and, yes, we did stand back, as he advised us, to avoid the ensuing shower).

- It was a thrill to have the elevator doors open to reveal Ray Bradbury standing within



**A large part of the reason we were there was our involvement with *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom*, and we (right) discussed that in a panel moderated by Shel Dorf (center) that also featured TBG's Murray Bishoff (left) and owner Alan Light (next right).**

**Some attendees today act as if entertainment celebrities and nationally known guests are a recent evolution of Comic-Con. In 1976, I was thrilled to**

- **meet (top) Kirk Alyn (with fellow fan Eric Hoffman)**
- **observe (center) Ray Bradbury being interviewed and**
- **talk at length (below) with Jock Mahoney (who was huge)!**





**And, let's face it, it's pretty cool for a kid (in this case, daughter Valerie) to meet the co-creator of Superman.**



**Of course, although there were media celebrities at Comic-Con, there were also comics professionals in attendance — then as now.**

- **Before the masquerade (top), Don grabbed a chance to talk with (front) Roy Thomas and (seated behind Roy) Joe Shuster.**
- **Maggie, with her back to the camera (center) visited with Mell Lazarus while Stephen Thompson looked on.**
- **Milton Caniff (below) took time out to work on a portrait of his Steve Canyon.**

It was a moment we'd hoped for, as Don produced our copy of *Dark Carnival* and asked for an autograph. (Unfailingly polite, even to pushy fans, Bradbury obliged cheerily.)

• Don and I switched off kid care during conventions in those days, so he was the one in the hotel room with Valerie and Stephen when I came across Roy Thomas one evening. Roy introduced me to Charlie Lippincott, who was handling the promotion for a science-fiction film that wasn't going to be released until the next year — something called *Star Wars*. Roy was involved, because Marvel was producing the comic-book adaptation, and I sat with them in a hotel room while Charlie inserted the production design slides in the slide-projector carousel and they talked about the concept of the movie. I recall being struck by the inventively memorable names of the characters and planets — and delighted at the idea of a science-fiction movie in which the

spaceships and sets would show wear and tear. (Until that point, rocketry and other SF elements seemed invariably to be shiny and new-looking.) When I got back to our room, I told Don about the project, and the next day we both heard more about it. (Charlie invited us to visit the *Star Wars* office — being rented on the Universal lot, no less — which we did the following week. And got the celebrity-version tour of the Universal Studios, to boot. But I digress.) We expressed our admiration at the choice of Mark Hamill (whose performance in the MTM TV series *Texas Wheelers*

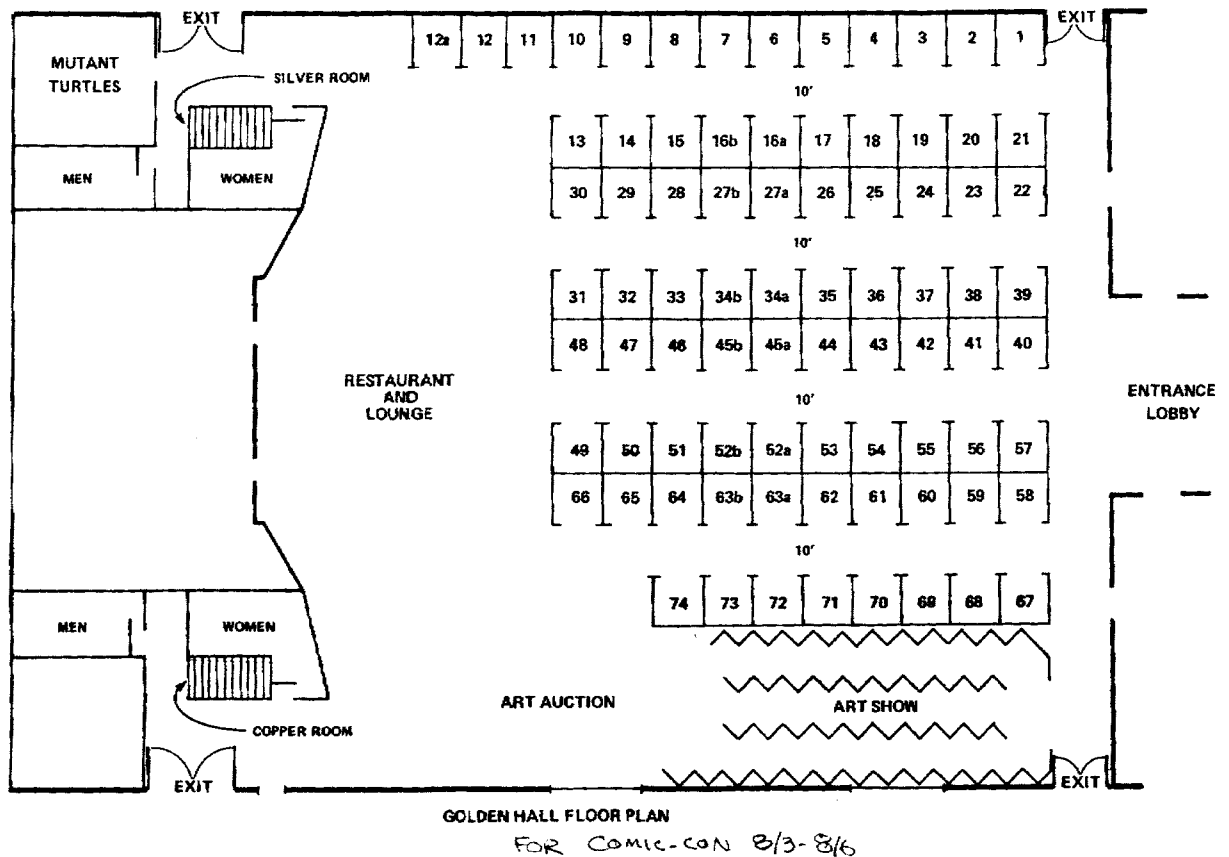
we had enjoyed), and Charlie told us that one of the aspects of working with Mark had been that they had had to arrange for a way to get him his comic books dependably when he was in England.

• According to the record, there were more than 3,000 attendees at the 1976 event: by today's standards, an assemblage in which it wasn't hard to spot friends, as well as celebrities. Mind you, that also meant that it was almost a matter of chance whether your friends or celebrities would be there. The next year, for example, Carl Barks, C.C. Beck, Walter Gibson, and Harvey Kurtzman attended — and we'd have loved to have shared the event with any of them, much less all four.

But life got in the way, and we didn't get to return to San Diego until we'd been made co-editors of *Comics Buyer's Guide* — which meant we were returning as *exhibitors*, the public face of the revamped publication. By that summer of 1983, people had become accustomed to having an actual newspaper for the field, but it was nevertheless routine for most people to begin conversations with us at that point by complaining that the entertainment of making fun of badly hand-crafted ads had gone away.

I think the show itself had morphed into an actual convention center — the Convention and Performing Arts Center — and there were another couple thousand attendees. And one or the other of us has attended every year since, except for a strange year long ago in which our then-publisher and then-ad manager took their honeymoon there, and we were left behind. But I digress.

Official attendance estimates for the 2008 event are 126,600: sold out for every day in advance of opening day. The move to the current convention center came in the 1990s, and today we pack every square inch of the center, including 12 acres of exhibit floor. And the Geeks are finally the cool ones, with a nation now aware of the existence of Comic-Con.



**By 1989, the exhibit hall had grown to amazing proportions. Now, the event was held at the Convention and Performing Arts Center, the attendance had reached a staggering 11,000, and there were (gasp!) 74 booth spaces, many of which were devoted to sales of back-issue comics. (Estimates are that there were 200 booth spaces for back-issue comics at the 2008 Comic-Con.)**



**Creators were able to hang out with researchers; in this case, Bill Blackbeard (right) talked with Sergio Aragonés (left).**

the year that *Star Wars* was a year away from release. And in the 1980s, Jack and Roz Kirby

Which has, of course, meant changes.

And I think one of the biggest changes is that now there are lots of people who want to hang out with the celebrities and crowds that pack what used to be meeting rooms that could hold them.

Many of my experiences, you may say, occurred only because The Icons of Our Entertainment were still relatively young and active — and the Classics of Today's Entertainment were being introduced. 1976, after all, was

and Will Eisner were easily to be found in the convention hall. But I recall what Bjo and John Trimble told us in 1977, when they'd invited Mark Hamill as a guest to the movie convention they used to be involved with. They said he'd asked them whether that meant he could attend free that year. So they checked their files and discovered that, yes, he'd paid for his membership during the event's earlier years.

The guy standing next to you in line, folks, may be the next great writer or artist or singer or dancer or producer or ... The point is that today will be a memory in the future. And you'll come away from Comic-Con 2009 with *great* memories, if you attend. Take a camera. Think about dragging along an audio recorder of some sort so you can hear again what people said. Hey, video recorders aren't hard to find these days, either. There are *many* ways to recapture great memories.

And what are *your* favorite memories of Comic-Con?

**MAGGIE THOMPSON** has her own website at [www.maggiethompson.com](http://www.maggiethompson.com), where she's already posted a few looks at earlier days of the world of comics. What San Diego cons have you attended and what were your favorite moments? Let her — and other readers — know at [www.CBGXtra.com](http://www.CBGXtra.com)!



**Mark your calendar!**

**July 22-26 is the date in 2009!**