

DOC SAVAGE

People living in the difficult times of the Depression era could forget their despair with an inexpensive adventure story in which they knew good would triumph over evil. These 10 cent, 6,000 word, Doc Savage pulp magazines supplied the necessary escape. Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, was one of the thrilling fictional characters created by Lester Dent, a native Missourian born in LaPlata, Missouri. Though Mr. Dent died in 1959, his wife, Norma, still resides in LaPlata.

Lester Dent was born the only son of Bernard and Alice Dent and at the age of two, he and his family moved from LaPlata to Wyoming where Lester's parents had lived prior to his birth. While in Wyoming, Lester was taught by his mother, a former school teacher, and attended school from the fourth grade on. When Lester was 14 years old, his family inherited the Dent estate in LaPlata, Missouri, and Bernard Dent moved his family to their hometown in Macon County. Lester graduated from high school in 1923; he then went to a business college in Chillicothe, Missouri, majoring in telegraphy. Later he began working as a telegrapher for the Associated Press and it was during this period that he met and married Norma Gerling.

Lester Dent's interest in writing began when he heard of a friend's success in getting a short story published. Mr. Dent failed to have his first 13 short stories published but his 14th attempt was accepted by *Top Notch* magazine. Shortly after his story was published, the editor sent a letter to Mr. Dent summoning him to New York to begin writing for the magazine. Norma Dent described their move to New York on New Year's Eve, 1931, by saying, "It was during the Depression and people were out of work and times were really bad; it did look like

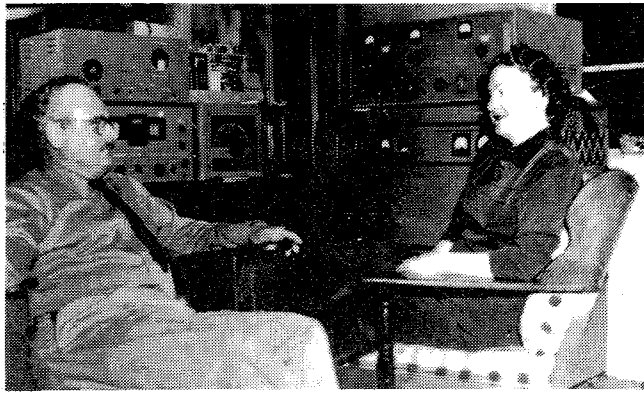
we were undertaking a risky thing . . . to quit a job and go some place to make a living writing."

Mr. Dent's most notable writings were his Doc Savage novels. The destroyer of evil and protector of all that is good, Doc Savage had superhuman powers. The author, Mr. Dent, in describing his character said, "I took Sherlock Holmes with his deducting ability, Tarzan of the Apes with his towering physique and muscular ability, Craig Kennedy with his scientific knowledge, and Abraham Lincoln with his Christliness. Then I rolled 'em all into one to get — Doc Savage."

Throughout the Doc Savage series, five important characters accompanied Doc on his adventures. Colonel John Renwick, "Renny," is a 6-foot-4 engineering specialist who frequently uses the expression "holy cow." He is one of the most accomplished boxers in the world and as a source of exercise, knocks down doors with his bare fists. William Harper Littlejohn or "Johnny," is an expert in the areas of geology and archeology and his command of language is extremely precise. The weakling of the crowd, Major Thomas J. Roberts or "Long Tom," who worked with Thomas Edison, is considered an electrical genius and spends most of his time inventing the devices used in the adventures. He is characterized as having a terrible temper. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodget Mayfair, nicknamed "Monk," has the build of a gorilla and is one of the greatest modern chemists of his time. In developing this character, Mr. Dent wrote, "What Long Tom can do with electricity, Monk can duplicate with chemicals." Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, known as "Ham," is by far the most intellectual of the clan, having a law degree from Har-



Pilots and salesmen for the Dent's aerial photography business, Airviews, Inc., gather for a dinner meeting in LaPlata, Missouri. This picture was taken in 1951.



Lester Dent with his wife, Norma, relax in the basement of their home. He acquired a first-class radio operator license and built his own transmitter. Mr. Dent used the call sign WOCBL.

ward. It is often Ham's quick thinking that bails Doc's group out of trouble.

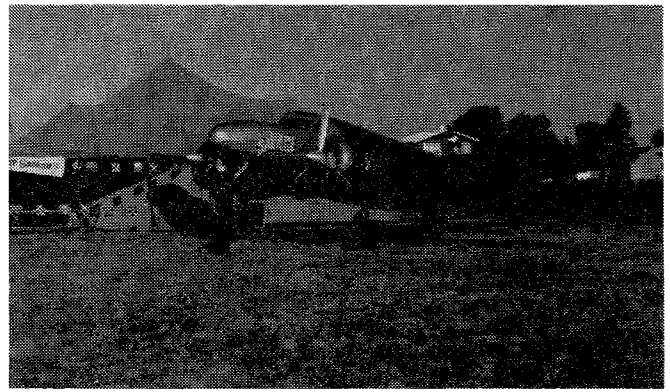
Not only did Lester Dent write about adventure, he lived adventure. He and his wife owned a two masted, 40-foot schooner named the Albatross which they sailed down the coast from New York to Florida. Mr. Dent was an expert deep-sea diver and went treasure hunting on several occasions.

Mrs. Dent explained that they once held a contest for local high school students who were asked to write on the topic "What would you do if you were President?" and the winner was awarded a trip on the Albatross. The contest was won by a student from Novinger, Missouri, who was given an opportunity to go on one of the treasure hunting excursions.

Mr. Dent was a world traveler, and once while visiting Austria, the Nazis invaded and detained him for taking unauthorized photographs. In preparation for a novel, Lester went mountain climbing to more effectively write about the experience. He once went gold prospecting in Death Valley and was admitted into the Explorers Club of New York along with the distinguished Admiral Byrd. Lester Dent had a pilot's license and kept up with the latest advances in science and technology. He had a radio operator's license and took rigorous courses in electricity and plumbing.

Mr. Dent would frequently write 18 hours a day accomplishing approximately one book a month. There were 182 Doc Savage stories written and 165 of them were attributed to Lester Dent while others were completed by ghost writers chosen by Mr. Dent himself.

Lester Dent was one of the earliest writers to use a formula, which he invented himself and used in the Doc Savage series. Each story had a 6,000 word manuscript which was further divided into 1,500 word segments. In the first 1,500 words, a murder method was chosen, characters were introduced, locale determined, and a physical conflict devised for the hero. Problems were compounded for the hero in the second section with another physical conflict and a twist in the plot. In the third segment, the hero cornered the villain and made some headway, only to be buried with further problems in the final 1,500 words. At the end of the fourth segment the hero extricated himself by using skill, training, and brawn. Details of Dent's successful formula were reprinted in detail in Robert Winberg's publication, *THE MAN BEHIND DOC SAVAGE*.



DOC SAVAGE, THE MAN OF BRONZE was Lester Dent's first Doc Savage novel. It was later made into a movie in which this airplane was used.

by Corey Pritchard



Lester Dent owned five airplanes that he used for his aerial photography business. Both Lester and Norma Dent had pilot licenses.

Over the years, some of the material from Dent's writings has been used by others. Similarities can be found between the characters Doc Savage—Clark Savage Jr., the Man of Bronze, and Superman—Clark Kent, the Man of Steel in Jerry Siegel's writing. The character who most resembled Doc Savage is Batman who was also a scientific genius, inventor of gadgetry, and whose Batmobile was almost identical to Doc's roadster. It was suggested, in Brad Darrach's *Time Magazine* article, that a substantial portion of Ian Fleming's material for the movie "Dr. No" was lifted from Lester Dent's novels.

In 1940, Lester and Norma returned to LaPlata where they began a dairy. Later they started a small aerial photography business, which they operated out of their home. The business soon became too large and was moved to the LaPlata square. Mr. Dent's pilots took aerial pictures of farms throughout Missouri and three of the surrounding states, then his salesmen would sell them to the farmers. Lester Dent owned five planes that he used for the business, based at the Kirksville Municipal Airport, and had a staff of 15 to 18 salesmen, 7 to 8 office girls, and 3 pilots. "We had a very complicated system and it was very successful," said Mrs. Dent.

Mr. Dent had a home which he designed himself built in

LaPlata. It included many uncommon conveniences such as an electric garage door opener, an intercom system, and closet lights activated when the doors opened. The townspeople found the home very unique and referred to it as the house of gadgets.

Lester Dent's final publication was the short story, "The Savage Challenge," printed in the February 22, 1958, edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Shortly after, Lester Dent died. According to Mrs. Dent, "Really, this is what he was working for the whole time and he felt like he had reached his goal when he sold his story to the *Saturday Evening Post*."

This prolific writer, who used his own fascinating life experiences in writing his stories and novels, was to be awarded the Missouri Writer's Guild Award in 1946 for the most successful Missouri writer of the year and in 1977 a movie adaptation of his first novel, "The Man of Bronze" was released.

His wife, Norma, still resides in LaPlata where she helps to perpetuate the memory of her husband and recently donated much of his collection to the University of Missouri. It is a tribute to Lester Dent that of the over 200 titles being printed at the height of the Depression, his works have endured through the years and are being reprinted today.

