

Questions for ROBERT L. McCULLOUGH

September 10, 2003



Thomas J. Pucher asked supervising producer and writer Bob McCullough, a driving force in the process of creating *Falcon Crest*, questions about his experiences with the cast and his fellow crew members.

Bob McCullough's answers are in bold print.

[The parts in brackets were edited for publication purposes.]

Bob McCullough nowadays.

I would like to make an interview with you for our fan club newsletter and our new web site.

Happy to help in any way I can.

Falcon Crest was very successful in Europe and was on German TV several times. You did a great job, and I must say I personally like some of the episodes you wrote best. *Climax*, the second season cliffhanger, for example, is a real masterpiece and one of my favorites.

Thanks. Writing those episodes was truly fun, but quite a challenge, as servicing all the characters at once was not always easy.

Our fan club has been publishing newsletters in German language since 1986. Since the show is no longer on the air, we now put out a special newsletter once a year — on the show's anniversary.

Last year's newsletter was a tourist guide to the *Falcon Crest* filming locations in the Napa & Sonoma Valleys. Two years ago, we published interviews with Abby Dalton, Sarah Douglas, Jason Goldberg and Father Bob Curtis.

Wow... I haven't seen those names in quite a while!

I was elected president of the fan club in 1992 and have been trying to keep the memory of this wonderful show alive. Of course, my devotion to *Falcon Crest* is a spare time activity only — I am an assistant barrister and work at the local county courts.

I have a legal background as well, but never practiced as my writing began to sell just as I was getting ready to join the California Bar.

How did you enjoy working on the *Falcon Crest* set?

The set was an extremely creative place, as we had a very well-known/famous cast of talented yet demanding actors. There was never any time that one could "rest", as each cast member was very concerned about his or her character, dialogue, and potential longevity on the show. The directors were episodic assignments and didn't really have a broad perspective from a story standpoint, but we did our best to bring a number of directors back repeatedly, as relationships and trust among the actors and writers was a key element in the long haul.

How did you like filming on location in the Napa Valley?

It was paradise. The studio paid for everything, and the food and wine were world-class. The shooting conditions were wonderful, as the climate there is very Mediterranean, and the local people were highly receptive and supportive of our efforts. As far as location shoots go, it was the best. As the producer and primary writer, however, it was a 7 [-day]/24 [-hour] task for me... But I was younger and without children at the time, so I was up to it. Overall, on a scale of 1 – 10, the experience on location was a 12.

Are you still in contact with anyone from cast & crew?

Only with one of the story editors, whom I see once or twice a year for a very casual golf game. After three years on a show in very high-profile position where I had a tremendous amount of control and a high salary, the president of the studio began to resent me and my income from my writing on the show greatly... One thing led to another, I discovered that many “friends” were simply eager to take my job, and after the third season, my contract was terminated. It was personally very painful, financially very difficult, and creatively depressing as the show then took a turn to stories about buried Nazi treasure and such... Without characterizing those storylines, suffice it to say that I found the show difficult to watch once I was no longer involved. My personal relationships with cast and crew came to an end, simply because I was a bit of a pariah at the studio for some time thereafter. The nature of studio/show relationships is that while you’re all together, you’re the fastest of friends and collaborators. Once a show is cancelled or people are fired/retired, people seem to move on to other relationships. It’s an interesting phenomenon, but not necessarily an enjoyable one.

Who were your favorite cast members to work with?

Hard to single any out. Susan Sullivan is brilliant; Jane Wyman is the consummate pro; David Selby is extremely talented and helpful. Others, whom I won’t mention by name, had personal problems that became serious professional problems. The word “irrational” comes to mine.



Some of Bob McCullough’s favorite cast members:
David Selby (Richard Channing), Susan Sullivan (Maggie Gioberti) and Jane Wyman (Angela Channing).

Unforgettable — two Hollywood legends' first scene together on *Falcon Crest*: Series leading actress Jane Wyman (Angela Channing) and special guest star Lana Turner (Jacqueline Perrault) meet at the *Gioberti Family Cemetery* in episode 12.



What was your most memorable scene?

I don't recall the name of the episode, but getting Cliff Robertson to kiss the girl (Laura Johnson) in the May – December romance was an interesting experience... as was the first on-screen meeting between Jane Wyman und Lana Turner. Oh, my God. Old Hollywood to the max.

What was your favorite storyline?

Again, hard to single any of them out... it's been sooo long, and I've written lots of stuff since then... that will take some thought; otherwise my reaction is fairly generic, and I'd simply say that the original setup when Chase and Angela realize what each other are really all about... the whole family thing was very interesting from a dramatic standpoint. Some of the "business" stuff was fairly tedious, I thought. I was much more into the sexy conflicts, which, I suppose, is why I so much enjoyed the Cliff Robertson – Laura Johnson stuff... and I always had a feeling that if I'd stayed on board that Lance Cumson would wind up sleeping with his grandmother or with Susan Sullivan or something equally titillating!



One of Bob's favorite storylines is the sizzling romance of Terry Hartford, an attractive call-girl, and Dr. Michael Ranson, a wealthy neurosurgeon (season 3). The characters were beautifully portrayed by Laura Johnson and Cliff Robertson.

As you wrote the première episode — were you involved in re-developing the show after CBS decided not to air Earl's pilot, *The Vintage Years*?

Yes. In a very serious way... When I was hired by Mike Filerman at *Lorimar* (he liked my Hawaiian shirt, which is why I got the job. Crazy, but true!), he gave me the *Vintage Years* script to read with the comment: "After you've read it, throw it away, because we hate it." I read it and I hated it too. It was merely a reflection of Earl's work on *The Waltons*, and CBS wanted a show to follow *Dallas*, which mean the show had to be even hotter and steamier than *Dallas* was to retain the 10:00 p.m. audience we were being given. (What a gift, to come behind *Dallas*!) So... my task was to take Earl's characters and make it "hotter". As an only child of a single parent, however, I didn't know very much about sordid family dynamics, so I asked my wife, who was then a fledgling actress and who comes from a large Hispanic family. She sat me down and began telling me all the family stories, secrets, and outrageous behaviors she'd grown up with. So... actually, she was my story source, and I just took dictation! When I wrote what I proposed as the pilot episode, poor Earl Hamner read it and nearly fainted. He spent the next year [thinking about how] to deal with what his mother would think (truly) if his name was on this "horrible thing".

The studio liked the script, told Earl to relax and trust me (why, I don't know, but it was a nice compliment). Earl spent the next several years crossing out "the foul language" that I wrote as dialogue; he and I worked closely together, but I think he never actually trusted me, regarding me as something of a sick pervert or direct descendant of the devil himself, the only explanation he had for my ability to tap into the most visceral sorts of dramatic instincts.

As you wrote episode 12 — is "Perrault" the maiden name of Jacqueline, or was it the name of her last husband?

Oh my God, how would I know? I'm so old now (58) that I barely remember my own name! I would presume that Jacqueline would have been trading on her husband's name, since she never worked a day in her life and generally fed off of those around her...

I know that you wrote several drafts of the season 2 cliffhanger revealing who murdered Carlo Agretti. Can you please describe the production process?

It was nothing unusual... although we did keep the "secret" quite a secret, mimicking the *Dallas* "Who killed J.R." success.



William R. Moses (Cole Gioberti), Margaret Ladd (Emma Channing), Abby Dalton (Julia Cumson) and Susan Sullivan (Maggie Gioberti) in a scene shortly before the end of episode 40.

Climax was one of the most thrilling cliffhangers — revealing who murdered Carlo. Bob had written several drafts for the final scenes, having Richard, Lance and Diana confess the murder. But in the end, Julia was selected to be the killer, a surprising turning point for the audience.

Were all of these drafts of the confession scene filmed?

Actually... that sounds pretty familiar...! Think we did, indeed shoot each scene.

When did you and the other producers decide which of these scenes would be used?

I knew when I wrote them... but I never shared my conviction with the others until we came down to the editing phase; it took quite a bit of convincing to get Earl H. to go along with my personal preference.



Abby Dalton (Julia Cumson) was not always easy to work with.

Why was your final decision to reveal it was Julia?

Abby Dalton was [quite a difficult actress for] me personally [to work with]. She would call me at home from the set at 6:00 a.m. where she was in makeup getting ready for a 7:45 set call... and she'd be crying about her dialogue, how it made no sense, how her character would never say these things.

Quite accustomed to dealing with sensitive and very smart yet highly [difficult] actors and others, I would listen carefully and then ask her if she'd read the entire script yet. Her answer: Why no, just my scenes, of course. In other words, she was so self-centered that she failed to understand the context of her character's actions, and she therefore simply didn't understand what was going on. Anyway, after a dozen sleepy-eyed treks to the early morning set (where she had completely halted production [...]), completely oblivious to the fact that I had been up until 3:00 a.m. working on next week's scripts), I finally came to the conclusion that the best way to keep the audience involved was to show them that we were quite capable of killing a major character for the sake of the best possible story. As it turned out, of course, I wasn't the only one who thought she was expendable and without whom we could live very nicely... and so Julia went away.

Were there any plans for the death of a character other than Jacqueline Perrault?

We always toyed around with it in story conferences... but the fact of the matter is that everyone else on the cast was generally a joy to work with. I would rather have killed off... myself than Susan Sullivan's character... Some people simply make your life easier; others don't. You tend to avoid the latter and play to the former.



Rumor has it *Lorimar* thought about hiring Richard Burton as a special guest star for season 2 in the rôle of a love interest or ex-husband of Jacqueline Perrault. Is there any truth in that?

Yes. They were very aggressive about "stunt casting", which was a fairly common technique to increase a show's ratings at the time.

The idea of luring Richard Burton into the cast as Jean-Pierre Charbone, ex-hubby of Lana Turner's character of Jacqueline Perrault, did not materialize.

What were your plans for this character, and why was Richard Burton not hired in the end?

Plans? We didn't need any stinkin' plans (to paraphrase the Mexican banditos in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*)... we would've stayed up all night for months and come up with a plan, believe me. He was ratings gold in that era. Why didn't it ever happen? Money. Burton was big bucks and *Lorimar* was cheap in the extreme.

Why did you leave after the end of season 3?

I think I referred to that above... There are more insanely illogical details involving accusations of homosexual prejudices among the staff, etc., none of which were true, all of which were fueled by Earl failing to confront the political realities of the studio staff, as well as certain people and personal demons which ultimately served *Lorimar's* purposes in driving down the costs and doing what they could to dissipate what they saw as my insidious "power". The whole thing was quite insane and ultimately destroyed the show, in my opinion. By the time all of the accusations had been aired, I was quite happy to depart and go to work for *Aaron Spelling Productions* where things like *Hollywood Wives* awaited me.

Did you watch *Falcon Crest* after you had left?

Only a few times; I had difficulty understanding the incredible (in every sense of that word) character changes and plot developments. I actually felt quite sorry for Selby and others... many of whom I worked with a couple of times thereafter on other projects.

What do you think were the reasons for the dramatic changes the show underwent in its eighth and especially ninth season?

Uh... it's always about the writing. In this case, it was about bad writing.

I know you and Greg Strangis also produced *S.O.F. (Soldier of Fortune / Special Ops Force)*, which is currently on the air over here. I guess it must have been fun to work with David Selby again. Why was the name of the show changed after the first season?

Because that studio (*Rysher*) was trying anything to pump up the ratings. Anything! They also wanted to get away from the *Soldier of Fortune* name which is owned by Robert K. Brown, publisher of the magazine by the same name... and then not have to pay him any royalties. Nice business, eh?

What are your current projects?

I have basically walked away from the television business. It's simply too corrosive to the soul, quite frankly. Having been one of the oldest full-time writer/producers in the one-hour drama/action genre, it simply became more difficult than ever to deal with the rampant and extremely negative politics at the various studios. For example, Greg [Strangis] and I were the focus of a meeting at *Rysher* with Jerry Bruckheimer and his cohorts [...], and the meeting involved meeting some very real and reasonable budget constraints. I was personally told by the head of the studio that we would be accountable for any cost overruns. I accepted that wholeheartedly, suggesting that in order to meet the budget criteria, certain individuals would simply have to stop [...] spending our budget on their personal luxuries. That was probably not the most politic thing for me to say in that forum, as we were replaced the following day by producers who saw fit to do things like bring Dennis Rodman (the outrageous basketball player) onto the cast. Anyway, given the duplicities of the business and my own inability to keep my mouth shut about such things, I have retired to writing books with my wife and speculating on real estate and other investments. I spend a lot of time riding bikes and surfing and hanging out with my teenage boys... and don't, for a moment, regret not taking any more silly meetings with television "executives".

Would you like to resume your producing duties if there were a *Falcon Crest* reunion?

Sure. I'd show up for that, simply because the evil execs of the Seventies have all moved on to torment others by now...

My question about the reunion is only hypothetical. One of my partners and I wrote scripts and tried to instigate a reunion in 1998, but *CBS* and *Warner Bros.* unfortunately were not receptive to the idea as they thought the age of the classic prime time soap opera was over.

Based upon what American television has turned into... they could be right. Although there are a number of cable operations that specialize in "nostalgia programming"...

Do you think there is a chance *Falcon Crest* will be released on DVD one day?

Frankly, I'm surprised it hasn't been by now... which must be a function of the fact that the producing studio, Lorimar, is now defunct... and that CBS is scrambling to remain solvent, and they have very little creative blood flowing through their bottom-line veins. Generally speaking, they wouldn't know a good idea if it sat in their lap; they only want to copy what's "hot" right at this very moment... Foresight? They don't have any... which is why they have so little audience left.

Do you know if any props are available somewhere?

I'm sure they're all in some Hollywood prop rental house, duly catalogued and waiting for you to ask.



Speaking of props — unfortunately, I also forgot to ask David what happened to Richard's tin soldiers.

David wouldn't know either... they went back into the prop boxes after each scene...

The toy soldiers became one of the hallmarks of David Selby's character of Richard Channing.

This is my first interview that revealed unpleasant truths about what happened behind the scenes, and I am really thankful you are so outspoken about this. Thank you very much.

I certainly didn't mean to "reveal unpleasant truths"... just the truth! And who knows? Perhaps one of these days I'll actually learn to keep my mouth shut!