A Dark Horse Series

The Ted Wilfords

by David M. Baumann
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As I cast my eyes over the collection of books that jams my shelves, I make out forty different series. When I numbered them for this article, I was surprised at how many there were. I also observed that, of these forty series, only ten of them, or precisely one-fourth, are series that I decided to collect on my own. Fully thirty others I owe to the recommendation of someone else. Jim Ogden led me to Wynn & Lonny. Jon Cooper suggested that I collect Dig Allen. Steve Servello introduced me to Christopher Cool. Rocco Musemeche and Tim Parker urged me to collect several series from the 1910s-1930s.

Several of my favorite series came from recommendations made by Fred Woodworth. In the fall of 2005, I collected the Ted Wilford series at his suggestion. I had never heard of this series, and in more than fifteen years of collecting and occasionally hobnobbing with other collectors in person or by various means of correspondence, no one else had ever mentioned it before. It turns out to be one of the finest series of all—'way up there toward the top of any list of the best series.

It started this way. "I have this book called *The Abandoned Mine Mystery*," Fred said to me one day. "It's part of the Ted Wilford series. It's really quite good." He had been introduced to the Ted Wilfords by series book fan Steve Romberger. Steve had somehow run across these books and sent *Abandoned Mine* to Fred in the hope that the series would get some publicity in the Review.

Fred said that the author's name was Norvin Pallas, and opined that it sounded Greek. Fred's never let me down, so I found a copy of the book. When I read it, I was astonished at the remarkably high quality of the writing. The story was magnificent! I pondered—how could such a fine series be out there and no one know about it?

I looked "Ted Wilford" up in Mattson and Davis. It's listed but with meager information—just the roster of titles with the customary date, author, and artist information, and a line naming an obscure publisher.

There are fifteen books in the series. Although the books are not numbered on the spine, they do come in chronological order. Unlike nearly all of the better known series, the protagonist grows older in each installment of the series.

1. The Secret of Thunder Mountain (1951)
2. The Locked Safe Mystery (1954)
3. The Star Reporter Mystery (1955)
4. The Singing Trees Mystery (1956)
5. The Empty House Mystery (1957)
6. The Counterfeit Mystery (1958)
7. The Stolen Plans Mystery (1959)
8. The Scarecrow Mystery (1960)
9. The Big Cat Mystery (1961)
10. The Missing Witness Mystery (1962)
11. The Baseball Mystery (1963)
12. The Mystery of Rainbow Gulch (1964)
13. The Abandoned Mine Mystery (1965)
14. The S. S. Shamrock Mystery (1966)
15. The Greenhouse Mystery (1967)

As I scrounged for information about the series I contacted Tom Davis himself, who told me that, even though the series is listed in his catalogue, he knew nothing about it whatever. The publisher, Ives Washburn, Inc., was based in New York. I'd never heard the name. It appears that the Ted Wilfords have been effectively invisible to the series book world.

With exceptions I'll get to later in this article, the books were not too difficult to find and mostly cheap. I paid $8.00 for my copy of *Abandoned Mine* in a dust jacket. That's what I was paying for well-known standard series books in that condition fifteen years ago. Books like that, even the Hardy Boys, go for $20-25 now. I found thirteen Teds without any trouble and paid an average of $16.00 each for them, all of them in a dust jacket. I fear, however, that since my article on this series appeared in the Review in Summer 2006, prices have gone up and the supply has diminished. Unfortunately, as of the date of this writing, November 8, 2010, the supply of Ted Wilfords advertised online has almost dried up; some volumes are not listed at all.

So What's It About?

When the series opens, Ted Wilford is in high school and works as his school's correspondent for the *Town Crier*, a twice-weekly newspaper in the small town of Forestdale. The home state is not identified, but Cleveland appears to be the closest large city. (Cleveland, as it turns out, was the author's home.) Forestdale has a population of about 3,000 and is surrounded by farmland and sparsely populated rural territory.

Each book presents a mystery that arises in the course of Ted's duties as an employee of the paper. There are many similarities to Ken Holt, but this is not a clone or a copy by any stretch. The series definitely has its own style. I have no doubt that the resemblance between the two series is coincidental.

Ted is not a career reporter. The *Town Crier* only has one fulltime employee for that work. Ted's older brother Ronald had the position at one time, but he moved on to a large city paper in Cleveland. Ted does occasional reporting, gofering, research, trouble-shooting, and the like. Sometimes he just works on his own, following his own newshound instincts when he's dissatisfied with a situation others don't have the time or interest to deal with. *The Missing*

Witness Mystery puts it this way: "Ted, college student and part-time cub reporter, was given either the smaller stories or those that seemed unlikely to develop. Nevertheless, he welcomed these chances, for they interrupted the regular routine of answering the phone, typing stories and running errands."

As mentioned above, Ted grows older from one book to the next. He graduates from high school at the beginning of the fifth book and anticipates entering college in the sixth book, which is set in late summer. The rest of the series takes place during his college years, when he follows his assignments during Christmas breaks or summer vacations.

Other characters include Mr. Christopher Dobson, the editor of the *Town Crier*. He's a consummate newsman, a good and honorable man who takes care of his reporters, and who wields influence in the town because of his honesty and integrity. Ted describes him this way in *The Baseball Mystery*: "He leans over backwards trying to be fair, but not all editors do that. He's one in a million and a great guy to work for."

The above-mentioned Ronald Wilford appears from time to time in the early books; in the third book he is actually the protagonist. In that book Ted doesn't even appear until halfway through, and then plays important but second fiddle to his brother. In the later books, however, Ronald is not mentioned.

Miss Monroe is Mr. Dobson's all-efficient and totally loyal secretary, quite capable of running the newspaper when and if she has to.

Ken Kutler is the friendly rival reporter on another small town paper in a neighboring locality. Often he and Ted compete for scoops. They help one another when possible, but whenever they are after the same story they compete fiercely. Nevertheless, Ken, being an older and more experienced newspaperman, provides assistance to Ted many times. The relationship is described admirably and realistically. In one book, he actually withdraws from a story that he was following when he realizes that it would mean much more to Ted, and steered the younger reporter in the right direction.

Carl Allison is the fulltime reporter on the *Town Crier.* He doesn't get along with Ted. The two just rub each other the wrong way. They get along when forced to, but do best when they're not in the same room. Only in the last book do we catch the slightest evidence that Carl really does care about Ted.

Ted's seldom-seen girlfriend is Margaret Lake.

His sidekick is Nelson Morgan. Though he does drive, Ted doesn't own a car, so Nelson is often hired by Mr. Dobson to assist Ted with transportation and other duties. Like Sandy Allen, he is also an inveterate photographer. Many of his photos accompany Ted's stories in the *Town Crier*. Like Ken and Sandy, whenever Ted and Nelson are wrestling with a mystery, they converse a lot and pool their insights to draw near to a solution.

In *The Abandoned Mine Mystery* (page 79) the effectiveness of their partnership is explained.

> "How do you do that, Nel?"
>
> "It isn't too hard. You notice the dashboard, and any other small points you can pick up. I admit I might be a year off on the age, though."

"It looks as though you're a better detective than I am," Ted complimented him.

"Maybe I'm better at noticing things, but you're better at putting the pieces together."

So Just How Good Is It?

"The plot is fresh here, the characterization three dimensional, and the question marks are sustained to the end of the story." So said the quote from a review written by a Virginia Kirkus on the inside flap of *Counterfeit Mystery*, 1958. It is an accurate assessment. The author is a fine writer, with highly unusual skills (described further below) that put the products of his pen into a rare category, eminently suitable for mystery-writing.

The villains are believable. They could be, and sometimes are, the ordinary-looking person who walks into the newspaper office to place an advertisement, the handyman at a local establishment, even a co-worker. There is no case in which the bad guy is described as a swarthy, slouched-over, lurching individual with oily hair and body odor who says "ain't" in every other sentence.

As in the real world, there is no simple "black and white" element. Politicians are often pompous blowhards but usually neither outright criminal nor particularly helpful. In *The Mystery of the Empty House*, when Ted unearths the fact that a man who is a cog in the public service sector has engaged in questionable activity, unethical but not illegal, it unrolls as follows:

All Mr. ---'s open friendliness had disappeared, and Ted saw him now as a bitter, beaten-down man.

"I want to explain the whole thing to you Ted, so you'll understand my point of view. I wonder if you know what it's like to hold a political job like mine. I haven't had a raise in three years, or a promotion in five, although I believe I am legitimately entitled to them. Do you know what my crime is? I vote the wrong way. So far I've managed to hang on, but I have a feeling that after the next election I'll be let out, and replaced by someone else who votes the way he's told. Oh, I know technically I'm under civil service, which is why I've hung on this long, but when the big bosses decide they want to get rid of you, they can always find some excuse."

There's more, a lot more as this pathetic individual explains his actions to a boy who's just graduated from high school, but it ends this way:

"Well, Ted, I'm not going to plead with you. But I will point out that you have it in your power to ruin my career—or what's left of it. I think you ought to consider long and carefully before you decide to do that."

Ted does consider it long and carefully, and in the end decides to publish what he has discovered.

Ted often wished there was a hard-and-fast line between right and wrong that everyone could observe, but he was learning to accept the fact that this often isn't so.

Naturally, when this individual is indeed brought to open scandal, the "big bosses" are left unscathed.

Does the Series Have Any Weaknesses?

I see three weaknesses, and will start with one that is a teeny pique. The series could have used a map. There are no foreign settings, but several of the stories are set in towns or farms a significant drive from Forestdale. The last four in particular run Ted farther afield than the previous books. Even when he's in town, there's a lot of traveling between towns and their placement and the distances between them are not clear. To know the lay of the land would have been very helpful. Perhaps most of the juvenile readers for whom the series was intended would not have cared.

Second, descriptions are often sparse. Putting more about the setting could have added much to the story. There is a blizzard in *Singing Trees* and people are out in it, but after describing the weather in a perfunctory manner, conversation goes on as before, almost as if the people are walking comfortably down a sidewalk. But when the author does give his attention to descriptions, especially of settings and weather to set a mood, he does it well.

The Counterfeit Mystery begins with a plain but picturesque depiction of summertime rain. "Rain, rain, and more rain. It had been raining steadily in Forestdale for nearly a week, just a light drizzle, not really hard enough to do anyone any good, but enough to interfere with most outdoor vacation pleasures. If it would only come down hard and get it over with—more than one person had been heard to grumble. But now the rain seemed to have let up for at least a while, ushering in a cool but pleasant day, with a hazy sky in which the sun shone almost apologetically."

Though he is not a master of wordsmithing, the author can set a mood when he wants to: "They took their places in the silent night. The dark river swept past them with only the faintest of ripples; a few fireflies were still out; from time to time a bat or nighthawk glided noiselessly overhead. The stars were bright in a cloudless sky, but the moon would be setting soon." (*The Abandoned Mine Mystery*, page 99)

And once in a rare while, he can even wax poetically philosophical: "Dawn on the lakes was an unforgettable experience. As the sky brightened, the Michigan shore became clearly distinguishable on the west, but to the east there was nothing showing except sky, water, and a few gulls. The air was crisp and seemingly clear. Then suddenly the sun, remembering its twilight promise to return, burst into the sky through colored streamers, and another day of endless possibilities had begun." (*The S.S. Shamrock Mystery*, page 93)

Third, though the quality of the writing is high all the way through, there is a major weakness in the series, although in another way it is also a strength. Here's what I mean: the books are strong on realism, i.e. the reader can think, "this is something that could actually happen to me." The weakness here is that there is nothing to draw the reader very far out of his own world. Ken Holt had adventures in Mexico, on a freighter, in the southwest, etc. Rick Brant had adventures in the south Pacific, Egypt, on a rocket base in Nevada, etc. In those books the mean guys played for keeps. Ken was imprisoned in every book. The danger was real and tense.

For Ted, in most cases there is no real danger. He just tracks down what's going on and unravels a puzzle. The nefarious doings are run of the mill bad stuff, like counterfeiting trading stamps, vandalism, petty theft, or swindling. The free world is never really at risk. In Ken and Rick, you're playing for much higher stakes. In Ted, you're solving a puzzle—his tales are mysteries of the mind, not action-adventure stories. In Ken and Rick, you're unraveling a critical mystery and often having a "risking life and limb" adventure while doing so. Ted is never desperate to save his

life from pursuing desperadoes, never threatened with life or death, nor (with one exception) imprisoned by any villain. The author sacrifices "edge of the chair" tension for believability. That doesn't make the series worse—just different. What Pallas does, he does very well indeed.

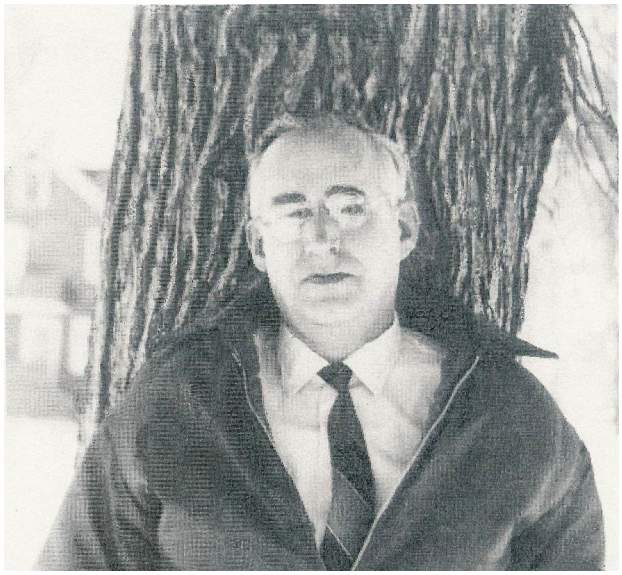
Ted Wilford is smart, very smart—but he isn't a genius. In one book, an appeal is made to the villain that, "since Ted here was able to figure this matter out, ... we can't tell but what other people will ... figure it out for themselves." Compare this kind of hero with the Hardy boys who are hero-worshiped by the girls and admired by the boys, or Tom Swift Jr. who makes all his friends look like cretins.

Because of this philosophy, one third of a given Ted Wilford book may go by with no more than a hint of puzzling affairs. There is no real serious crime, no threat—just ordinary life in a small town. Danger is minimal. Only gradually does a mystery grow until it becomes all encompassing. Yet even at the resolution, there is not always a climactic, satisfying working of justice. The puzzle is solved, sometimes spectacularly and surprisingly, but the bad guy is not always caught or, if so, is not always punished. Like real life. This attitude is even stated specifically in one book: "It isn't as important to punish these people as it is to put a stop to their operations." Even in the rare occasion when there is an arrest, it happens "off camera".

With this kind of writing, the discriminating reader's curiosity is piqued more and more about the author. What kind of person puts together this kind of a story?

The Author

Research provided only a smidgeon of information about Norvin Pallas. He was born in 1918 and died in 1983. Finding his entry in *Something About the Author* provided some key information. He was born, raised, and lived his adult years in Cleveland. He was a free-lance writer whose day job was part-time accounting.



Research in census records by George Beatty supplied a little more information. Norvin Pallas' father was Russian in spite of the Greek-sounding name, and his mother was from Ohio. Norvin had one brother and three sisters. Neither brother ever married. It appears that most members of the family died relatively young. Norvin was 65 when he died. At that time one sister had also died, and the remaining two, if still alive, would be 93 and 77 at the time of the writing of this article.

It is curious that neither of the Pallas men married and we know nothing about the surviving sisters' marital status, especially when we link that fact to the glaring absence of any father whatever in the family of Ted Wilford. There is not a single word about his father anywhere in the series—whether he is living or dead, or any other information whatever. Ted may as well as have been delivered by the stork. This is exceedingly peculiar. In every other series I can think of in which a parent is missing, at least a reason is given. It is difficult and dicey to speculate with any confidence with so little information after so long a time, but it appears very possible that there is a skeleton in the Pallas family closet.

Whatever the facts, it is amazing that Norvin, considering his possible background, had such a high regard for children and their thinking abilities, as will be shown in his own words below. This was in spite of his never marrying or having children of his own.

Whatever can be discovered about the author of the Ted Wilford series, one fact about him was easy to find. Indeed, the information was so evident as perhaps to be the most important public item about him. Norvin Pallas was quite a riddle aficionado. He wrote several books on puzzles, ciphers, and mathematical curiosities. He clearly put a mind that enjoyed that kind of thing into his writing. He admitted as much himself.

"I have always had a strong mathematical bend [sic], which I think led me into the construction of strong plots. At the time I began my juvenile mystery series, I believe I brought something new to the field. These were complicated, logical, adult-style plots (even adult readers were not very successful in guessing the outcomes), but without violence, with idealistic protagonists trying to accomplish decent things, the characters acting the way I thought real people should act. My juveniles did not do impossible things, solving mysteries that baffled the police, with heroic feats beyond their capacity, or narrow escape after narrow escape without the law of averages ever overtaking them, immune from disaster. Occasionally they experienced heart-breaking failures."

Sounds a lot like Sam Epstein's stated philosophy about writing juvenile mysteries, but Ted Wilford is far more realistic even than Ken Holt. He's just a real smart kid who could just almost be anybody. Ken still had heart-pumping adventures in which his life was repeatedly at risk.

Several of Pallas' "other" books are still in print, such as *Calculator Puzzles, Tricks, and Games; Code Games; Games With Codes and Ciphers*—puzzles mathematical were his consuming interest. Some of his books of this genre were written in partnership with Norris and Ross McWhirter, of *Guinness Book of World Records* fame. My own city library has some of these books in its stacks. An advertisement on one of his books invites the prospective reader to "perform amazing feats of mathematical magic, answer clever riddles, solve a baffling murder and much more with this clever introduction to calculator games."

So it fits. The Ted Wilford mysteries are crafted like puzzles, the plots fine-tuned with clues and bits of germane information dropped in like spices into a stew. This is where the series finds its similarity to Ken Holt. The bit about newspaper reporting is probably just a crazy coincidence, but the similarity to Ken Holt is in its intricacy and mental challenge, and its dedication to realism and top quality writing.

In *Something About the Author,* Pallas shared his philosophy about writing for children: "I figured that my readers were children, but I respected them for it, and did not talk down to them. Should we try to protect children from the realities of the world? No. Should we offer them a view of the more sublime values of life? Yes. ... In my view the test of a worthy book is whether the author is sincerely trying his best, or is writing down to popular ideas, pandering to low tastes, seeking out the worst in people instead of the best, looking for a quick buck, or maybe desperately trying anything. Such books are not worthy of your time or money, and when you or the library purchase them, demand them, grub in them, you are helping to prevent more worthy books from ever seeing the light of day." I don't think I have found this admirable philosophy better put.

The Ted Wilford series deals very well with the subjects that come up in the course of the stories. Pallas knew his journalism and wrote convincingly of the way the newspaper business works—or

at least the way it worked in the 1950s. When he wrote about mining, he got it down right. Or since I know practically nothing about mining, maybe I should say that he addressed the subject convincingly. When he described snow falling in the mountains, it's clear he knew what he was talking about. When he wrote about producing new strains of roses, he provided technical information without being pedantic. He even seemed to be familiar with the hobo life. In one book he described life in a hobo town very credibly, with its unwritten code of etiquette and hierarchy.

He was also no ivory-tower egghead. Throughout the books a generous amount of social commentary is injected, always most thoughtfully considered and set before the reader without pressure. Often his ideas are not so much treatises or points of view he is pushing, but easily considered thought-provoking ideas that could inspire a lot of discussion. For example, should hoboes get social security benefits? On the one hand they haven't contributed to the system, but on the other they do support themselves and "make a living". Are hoboes just lazy bums or are there more legitimate reasons why they do not participate in society? The little work that I have done with homeless people confirms Pallas' assessment from half a century ago; I don't think he's merely guessing here. This puzzle aficionado has done his homework again.

The responsibility of elected, appointed, and hired officials in positions of public influence comes up pretty frequently. The balance of telling the truth but simultaneously honoring the place of compassion is an occasional theme. The question of how to use the "freedom of the press" responsibly comes up many times. This kind of mental and moral challenge is most uncommon in the series book world. For that matter, it's uncommon anywhere.

It Has Humor Too

Pallas had a wry sense of humor that comes through in a few places. The following three examples all come from the same book *(The Stolen Plans Mystery),* but other books have their share too.

"You could get a new muffler and pay for it out of your paycheck," Ted reminded him.

"What's wrong with my muffler?" Nelson demanded, stung. "It's a lot quieter than some I've heard." ...

Nelson brightened. "Well, that ought to give me enough to buy a new muffler, all right, if I decide I want one. This one is kind of quiet." (p. 54)

"That radio's a good idea, though, for my dad might think we were planning on robbing a bank. Then he'd be mad because we left him out." (p. 77)

"Pretend you're a stranger around here yourself," Ted directed. "Act a little bit stupid."

"Just act natural," Nelson advised him. (p. 102)

Artwork

The artwork is of average quality—not spectacular. Only the first book has internal illustrations—which is too bad, because although the six internals are not

particularly outstanding as art, the composition of most of them makes them rather eye-striking. All the other books have just one illustration on or near the title page. When there's a dust jacket, the graphic is nothing memorable. The illustration on the left is from the title page of *The Abandoned Mine Mystery*. It's one of the best in the series.

The Scarcity of the First Two Books

When I was searching for the books, I ran across a phenomenon I'd never encountered before in gathering up all the books in a series: the scarce volumes are the *first* ones, not the last. The first two titles in the Ted Wilford series can accurately be described as *ultra*-scarce. Tom Davis helped me draw some conclusions from my information. One clue to figuring out why the first books are harder to find than gloves for a snake is that all copies I did locate are ex-library and first editions. Very likely each volume was printed only once, and distributed only to libraries.

The print runs of the first two titles must have been very small, and the third only a little larger; the third volume was pricier than the other available books. After that, the series must have become popular, and the later volumes were findable—even the last ones were no more difficult to find than any others.

Fortunately the texts of the first two books surfaced. Steve Romberger found a copy of *The Secret of Thunder Mountain* and generously provided me with the text. A copy of *The Locked Safe Mystery* was discovered by George Beatty, who searched for it through an interlibrary loan. Interlibrary loans may be an underestimated and overlooked source of scarce books. Libraries can do the searches; mine only charged me $5.00 for the labor of having *Locked Safe* sent to me from the place George had found, and I had the book in less than two weeks. From these two sources I created a few hand-bound copies that sit well on a shelf alongside the rest of the books in the series. As a surprise for Steve Romberger, I sent him one of my copies of *The Locked Safe Mystery*.

When the light bulb went off over my head about interlibrary loans, I asked the staff of my local library to find out which libraries in the United States had copies of these ultra-scarce books. Eventually I learned that only eight libraries in the country reported owning a copy of *The Locked Safe Mystery*, seven reported having a copy of *The Secret of Thunder Mountain*, and three libraries boasted copies of both books. One, and only one, library has the entire set in original dust jackets! Once I had the list, I then wrote to every one of these libraries and offered to buy the books if they were slated for discard. Only a few answered, and none was willing to sell. Sadly, some libraries had already discarded their copies. Further, some of the places on the list were "research" libraries connected with universities and stated that they don't sell their books. That's a mixed blessing, I suppose, as I guess they don't discard them either and therefore still own their copies of these scarce volumes. Nearly all other libraries in the United States, apparently, have disposed of their copies.

To the best of my knowledge, those copies that remain in the few libraries that still have them are about the last copies of these books in existence unless there are some completely unknown on collectors' shelves. However, every once in a rare while a copy of one or the other title appears online, and is almost immediately bought.

Nearly two years after Fred lauded the Ted Wilford series to me, I finally found an original of *The Secret of Thunder Mountain* on my own—a library discard I purchased from someone who had bought several boxes of books from her local library. A year after that I was on a business trip near Steve Romberger's home and Steve kindly invited me to spend a night with him. While I was there he showed me an original of *The Locked Safe Mystery* he had recently found, and then

staggered me by offering to sell it to me for less than he'd paid for it. He said that he didn't need an original since he was quite pleased with the copy I had sent to him. I quickly took Steve up on his offer. I expect that I probably now have one of the very few complete sets of the Ted Wilford series that exist.

Summary of the Books

The books are short for the period in which they were written. The Grosset & Dunlap books were roughly 210-214 pages at the time the first Teds were coming out, but the latter began in the 180s and 170s, sometimes dropping as low as the 140s. The last one is only 133 pages long. Nevertheless, there is no impression that anything has been left out. No corners of quality, story-telling, or intellectual challenge have been cut here.

Below I have tried to give intriguing introductions to the plots without letting any spoilers escape.

1. The Secret of Thunder Mountain

The book that introduced Ted Wilford is the account of a search for gold mine in the hills near Forestdale. A recluse who had lived there on Thunder Mountain, known only as "Old Goldie", was reputed to have found a gold mine—a surmise made plausible in that he occasionally paid for his supplies with a gold nugget.

At his death he left a coded message in an envelope for someone identified only by initials. Its publication in the *Town Crier* sent a horde of treasure-seekers to Thunder Mountain. Ted and Nelson play a central role in the search in a well-told story.

Since I wrote the article on this series, I read two other books by Pallas, one on codes and ciphers and another on games one can play on a calculator. Both were written for juveniles. I was astonished at the plethora of information the author provided on both subjects, especially since the books were for children. The unraveling of a code is a key part in *Thunder Mountain.*

There is good writing in this opening Ted Wilford book. There is a bit of the kind of camaraderie that figured in the best of the original text Hardy boys. This set the story squarely in the era in which it was written and nourishes the nostalgia factor, the sense of the "good old days" of our childhood (even if our own childhood wasn't so good, as is sadly the case for some, including characters in this book).

Was there ever a student who did not feel a thrill of expectation on the last day of school? There is the feeling of a coming release from routine, and the taking up of new pleasures, duties, and experiences, and this year the prospective search for Old Goldie's mine promised to make the vacation more exciting than ever. Thus it was on Friday that the sun seemed a little

brighter, and the air a little clearer; voices were pitched a little higher, and there was a certain lack of restraint in the conversation.

The book also has the flavor of early Wyckoff.

The loft in the cabin was as yet unexplored, and they expressed their intention of passing the night within its shadows. First every corner had to be searched, amid whoops and shouts, but quiet soon settled over the cabin more suddenly than one would have believed possible. They were all more tired than they realized following the rather unusual exertion of the day. The cool mountain air, too, hastened their drift into their separate slumberlands. The rain returned a little later, and the gentle patter on the roof served as a lullaby. Somewhere an owl hooted in the distance. Within the cabin the fire died down until the fireplace was filled with the red glow of dying embers. No more peaceful scene could be imagined...

Unlike all the other Ted Wilford volumes, *Thunder Mountain* features six internal illustrations. One of them is reproduced above.

2. The Locked Safe Mystery

In the second volume of the Ted Wilford series, Ted begins his senior year in high school. He works on both *The Stateman*, which is the high school paper, and his hometown's twice-weekly paper, *The Town Crier*—for the latter in the capacity of high school correspondent. He also volunteers to help the school's new vice-principal who is in charge of the town's annual charity fund-raiser. More than $13,000 is raised, which was a generous sum in 1954, the year the book was published. That might be roughly $150,000 in today's money.

The mystery gets launched when the money disappears from a locked safe that shows no signs of forced entry, and whose combination is known to only three extremely reputable people: the high school's principal, his secretary, and the aforementioned vice-principal. It doesn't take people very long to conclude who took the cash since the vice-principal is observed frantically buying a train ticket out of town the same night the money vanishes.

Ted, however, who'd worked closely with the man, defends his innocence, although he has no alternative explanation of how the money could have been stolen. An extremely well-told tale unfolds *The Locked Safe Mystery* through its 184 pages and brings it to a rousing and very satisfying conclusion. As has been observed before, there is not a lot of action in the Ted Wilford series. This mystery is about solving a choice puzzle. It's done very well indeed, but Ted never has to look nervously over his shoulder to see if a bad guy is creeping up with a sandbag.

There are several side stories that are developed alongside the main mystery, including some follow-up adventures from *The Secret of Thunder Mountain,* the first volume in this series. And as becomes usual in the subsequent books that were reviewed in the previous issue of the Review, the author provides a fair measure of social commentary and observations. Themes addressed in *Locked Safe* include the burdens of leadership, the fickleness of public opinion, the dangers of leaping to conclusions, and taking responsibility for oneself. Other series books that deal with the issue of an upright citizen accused and found guilty in the public eye even before much real investigation has occurred do not address these issues as completely or as realistically. I'm thinking of the Hardy Boys' *The Tower Treasure* and even Ken Holt's *The Black Thumb Mystery*. The latter does an admirable job of showing how these issues press on Ken and Sandy, but *The Locked Safe Mystery* involves the reader from the get-go.

On a side note, *The Locked Safe Mystery* reveals why Carl Allison and Ted Wilford don't get along. Boiled down, it's because Allison is a selfish jerk, and *Town Crier* editor Mr. Dobson is compelled to keep him on as reporter only because he can't afford to pay a salary suitable for a dedicated reporter. It's a credit to Dobson that he still treats Allison fairly, but it's apparent that Allison slacks off because he knows that no one else will take the job for the pay that is being offered. Sometimes life is like that. It's another cogent bit of social observation from gifted author Norvin Pallas. The Hardy Boys teach their readers that good people live happily ever after and good will always triumph over evil. Ted Wilford teaches his readers more realistically that sometimes even eagles have to work with turkeys.

3. The Star Reporter Mystery

This story takes place mostly outside of Forestdale. After a brief visit home for Christmas, Ted's brother Ronald returns to Cleveland where he works for the *Twilight Star*. He's still new and unproven on staff, and greatly admires one of the top reporters, Barry Knight. Knight has a top reputation as a reporter, even though he's only in his twenties. In the first chapter, it becomes evident that Knight has disappeared. Ronald is given the responsibility of investigating. Did Knight vanish voluntarily or was he kidnapped? If voluntarily, why has he not contacted anyone? The story is tightly wound with real tension, carefully crafted dialogue, superb attention to detail both of setting and reasoning, and dedication to plausibility.

Included is a yellow journalist, a tabloid-type, whose lack of principles verges on the illegal and definitely crosses into the unethical. At one point he argues with Ted.

> He waved his arm as though there was no further room for argument. "If you believe in freedom of the press, you believe in the right of a newspaper reporter to get a story if he can. And all I want is a story."
>
> "I don't care much for your kind of story," said Ted firmly. "You haven't any right to intrude into a person's private life unless there is some public purpose to be served."

(The Star Reporter Mystery, pp. 143-144)

The confrontation goes on with Ted making his points from facts, and the other consistently missing the point, twisting Ted's comments, and justifying his actions with arguments along the lines of, "I'm popular and influential, so what I do must be right," "Everyone else does it," and "There's something in it for you if you go along with me."

4. The Singing Trees Mystery

Ted, with his friend Nelson Morgan, is asked to serve as a camp counselor during spring break for several young boys, helping to prepare the camp for the summer season. When they arrive, they discover that the camp has been seriously vandalized; nearly all the windows have been broken and some of the mattresses have been slashed. The manager of camp arrives shortly afterwards, and during the ensuing week all try to repair the damage as they put the camp into shape for the summer. Yet several strange events happen during the nights, such as sirens going off and tall ghostly apparitions seen walking. One of the young boys disappears for a day. The only hypothesis is that someone is trying to force the camp to sell its land for the sake of a newly-discovered copper mine. The ownership of the mine is uncertain because the property line is unclear. The land the camp is on was purchased from Indians long ago, and the deed of sale was buried near an unusual rock whose location had since been lost, other than it was located near the "trees that sing".

5. The Empty House Mystery
Like caves, secret panels, and lonely islands, empty houses are staples of juvenile mysteries. In this book, even this old stand-by is well done—twice, in fact. One empty house is simply between owners, but the other is an abandoned ramshackle place far out in a desolate area. It is, naturally, reputed to be a place where murder was done. When Ted describes the place to Nelson on page 94, real tension is built up most skillfully.

The book is about some blueprints for a new highway that have been stolen, and then lost by the thief. Locating the blueprints, discovering who stole them, how, and why comprise the mystery. Also involved is a certain official from the highway department who tries to cover his behind by blustering about "hick town" newspapers.

Issues of good versus evil are set out as sometimes not quite clear-cut—a refreshing element in a juvenile book that often settles for black and white. The quotation above addresses this issue. When Ted gets the scoop—his first journalistic coup—even the matter of getting credit where credit is due comes up. The townspeople of Forestdale assume that Ted had merely copied the story from a "big" newspaper.

One mystery is how a telephone can ring in an empty house where there is no telephone connected. It's a puzzle when it happens inside the house that is between residents, but it's a skull-breaker when it happens in the abandoned shack. This is not a ploy that would make sense in today's society saturated with cellular phones, but it grabs the reader's attention in a book published in 1957.

6. *The Counterfeit Mystery*
I can remember my mother acquiring green stamps in the late 1950s, pasting them into books, and heading out to the redemption center. This book begins with a traveling salesman arriving in Forestdale to introduce trading stamps to the merchants and shoppers of the town. The *Town Crier* has to decide whether to support the novelty or not, and to find out more about the plan, Ted is asked to assist the salesman. The mystery starts slowly, but that's true to life. Although it is not a story that begins with shouts and exclamation marks galore, gradually a sense of unease, something being not quite right, comes over the reader as Ted's boring summer job is laid out. By the time we're halfway into the book, the mystery has become huge and complex, and continues to grow until it comes to a most satisfactory resolution. Ted's foray into the culture of the hoboes makes fascinating reading.

There is a hayride wonderfully described, put together by the older teen girls for "the gang", a fun-loving 1950s group of boy and girl friends who have grown up together in Forestdale. While the hayrides and similar period-type adventures are described more charmingly, perhaps, in the original text Hardy Boys books, the scenes in Ted Wilford are more realistic.

7. The Stolen Plans Mystery
Although this book was published in 1959, it introduces—a computer. Not surprising, I suppose, since the author was a devotee of mathematics. The computers of this era were all wires and vacuum tubes and not printed circuit boards. Though I cannot speak for the praiseworthy editor of this magazine, I suspect that the kind of computer featured in this book is one that even he would have liked. Inside, it was made of things you could actually see and understand and experiment with. In the 1950s computers were still machines built by people that could be understood and tweaked. Nowadays computers are machines built by other machines that can really only be understood and modified by still other machines.

The limitations of the contraption are strongly emphasized in this book—not, perhaps, what one would expect from a mathematics and puzzle connoisseur. It is repeatedly stated that a computer is only an extension of its programmer, cannot reason, and can only produce results when the right questions are asked or correct data are provided. This is probably stated at least a dozen times.

The computer, however, plays only a small part in the mystery. In fact, there are two mysteries in this book. There is petty theft repeatedly taking place in stores in the two weeks prior to Christmas; a pattern emerges that proves disturbing. Also, there is bizarre behavior in a part-time *Town Crier* employee who quits abruptly then is observed behaving in a strange way. Then his family disappears, and around his house there is an occasional visitor in the early hours of morning.

The story is slow but interesting, giving the impression the events could happen anywhere to any observant young person. The plans that are stolen don't even get mentioned until more than halfway through the book. This is not a problem. There are great descriptions of snow, driving on ice, shopping in small town stores in the holiday season—generally people's interconnectedness in a town of 3,000 folks. There's a good sense of, "this could be you and your neighborhood."

This is the book in which Ted is captured and locked up. The escape scene is worthy of Ken Holt.

Among a number of items that make this book a satisfying period piece is the line, "Okay, okay, Ted, don't press the panic button" (page 45). The story explains that this was a new piece of slang Ted and Nelson had picked up in college. It meant, of course, "be patient," but was a strong slang term more suited to the nuclear age, which at the time the book was written was still pretty new.

8. The Scarecrow Mystery

Set immediately after the previous book, this story takes place in the days between Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Ted, still on vacation from college, interviews the leader of a trucker's union threatening to strike. The simple news story grows into a full-blown mystery involving a car run off the road, a missing canister with microfilm in it, and a court case. The story is full of believable characters with scenes and complexities that make it very true-to-life.

The leader of the union, expressing his thoughts about his coming appearance in court, says several times, "I only want to tell the truth." Even this admirable conviction is put to the test, not only for the man but for Ted also, who must choose what he's going to reveal both in private and in public. In one or two instances in the book, there are people who "tell the truth" by revealing certain facts, but in doing so intentionally give false impressions. What is "true" and how it comes out is central to this tale.

How the complexities emerge keeps the reader's attention, and a surprise ending is satisfying. A number of human interest scenes make this book, like all the Teds, a rewarding read.

9. The Big Cat Mystery

A garrulous and gossipy old man on vacation at a resort near Vanishing Lake, a place some distance from Forestdale, calls the *Town Crier* office to report that a leopard is running loose in the woods. Naturally, no one takes his message seriously, but Mr. Dobson decides to send Ted and Nelson up to investigate. Not expecting them to find a real story, his actual reason for sending them is to provide the boys with a well-deserved, all expenses paid, week-long vacation in lieu of a real vacation they'd have earned if they were full-time workers for the paper.

Much to Ted's surprise, once they arrive he and Nelson find an increasingly intricate mystery. In addition to the old man, there is a reliable witness and undeniably there are tracks of a big cat in the woods. Within two or three days of their arrival, complications develop that grow into a real puzzle.

As in all the Teds, the circumstances are believable, human behaviors and motivations are subtle and realistic, and the boys' reasoning methods are impressive.

10. The Missing Witness Mystery
A friend from college with mysterious and unexplained behaviors, a bank teller on vacation who is suddenly sought for questioning in an embezzlement, and a hundred-year-old farmhouse all combine to make another satisfying entry in the Ted Wilford series. Matters for serious consideration are raised, such as the reliability of the testimonies of several upstanding witnesses to an event, and moral versus legal obligations when an investigation is under way.

Twice the dreaded "series book coincidence" occurs, yet, as in Ken Holt's *Galloping Horse*, they work. They are presented as a "long shot" result of deduction. And such things actually do happen in real life.

Again, as in real life but certainly rare in a series book, the mystery concludes with some loose ends. Not everything gets put away cleanly.

11. The Baseball Mystery
The Town Crier decides to bring the statewide amateur baseball tournament to Forestdale. The result is a full week of flurried activity for Ted and Nelson. Housing for over 400 young baseball players has to be found and a tight schedule of games to be arranged. The labor is intensive, made more difficult by the usual human element of complainers and occasional miscreants. A few minor offenses against the law add some spice to the marathon of events. But gradually a sense of disquiet rises in Ted and Nelson as they realize that not all is right. In fact, something is seriously wrong somewhere. The boys must discover just what is wrong and why, who is responsible for it, and then what to do about it. The unraveling of the puzzle is as good as always, but overall I think this is the weakest story of the lot.

12. The Mystery of Rainbow Gulch
This story is one of the best in the series. It has lots of exciting plot ingredients: a mysterious plane crash (in which there is a fatality), a foundling, a hermit, a very small farming community with a telephone party line, curious footprints, a cipher, and more. The story begins when Ted and Nelson visit their friend Bob Fontaine for a vacation. This makes it the first story in the series that takes place apart from the environs of Forestdale, and it is a refreshing change. "No newspaper stories, no adventures—just relax and enjoy ourselves," says Nelson on page 2. That was the plan. While there are not any newspaper stories, an adventure definitely crops up and a terrific mystery grows.

13. The Abandoned Mine Mystery
This is the first Ted Wilford story that I read. After I'd gathered all the other books and was reading the series in order, I decided to read this one again. It is worth mentioning that the second time through it was still excellent, even though my first reading had been less than five months before.

As are all the books in this series, my copy is ex-library. It was revealing that this book was checked out 29 times from 1966 to 2003. Incredibly, it was still in good shape with its dust jacket. This story was enjoyed and the book was cared for.

In this tale, Ted and Nelson are sent to a nearby town where an explosion a few years before had shut down the coal mine that had been vital to the town's economy. Without the industry that the mine provided, the town has been brought to the brink of financial ruin, perhaps even verging on extinction. An anonymous tip that there was something mysterious about the explosion causes Mr. Dobson to send Ted and Nelson to investigate. A few strange personalities, inexplicable incidents, and questions that remain curiously unanswered convince Ted that there is indeed something about the mine's closure that wasn't fully discovered.

We've all read stories in which people enter a mine or cave and then have their flashlight fail through old batteries. Not in this story. Ted and Nelson both carry flashlights and make sure that the batteries are new. How the author plunges them into darkness just the same is brilliantly carried out. How they are rescued from the mine is a little far-fetched but it doesn't spoil the story.

14. The S. S. Shamrock Mystery

Strange things are happening on an ore boat owned by Mrs. Dundee, a friend of Mr. Dobson, part of a small fleet run by a company that needs a major contract to remain solvent. It's a bit of a stretch to see this as a newspaper story, but the editor asks Ted and Nelson to go undercover for a week and work as unskilled deck hands on the *Shamrock* to try to discover if various incidents of bad luck are simply that (as one sailor pointed out, "The *Shamrock* only has three leaves"), or whether there is something deliberate and disreputable involved. The matter of a possible stowaway makes the story reminiscent of Ken Holt's *Shattered Glass*.

The author once again shows that he knows his stuff or has done his research. A lot of practical information on how ore boats work on the Great Lakes adds to the convincing atmosphere. Well over a dozen islands, ports, waterways, and landmarks are named, so that one would probably benefit from getting out a map of the Great Lakes to follow the *Shamrock's* course. Curiously, not long before reading this book I read the third entry in the little known Iron Boys series. *The Iron Boys on the Ore Boats*, written in 1913, also takes place on an ore boat sailing on the Great Lakes, although set more than half a century earlier.

This entry in the Ted Wilford series is (mostly) superb. As in most of the previous titles, the mystery unfolds piece by piece, but the puzzle begins on the first page and becomes increasingly intricate as events unfold. The unraveling of the puzzle in the last pages, with its characteristic undramatic denouement, left me unsatisfied. I couldn't help but compare the explosive action in *Shattered Glass* to the almost purely cerebral puzzle of *Shamrock*. More suspense and action at the end of this story could have made it one of the top stories in the series book world.

15. The Greenhouse Mystery

This book follows the pattern of the Ted Wilfords. Ted and Nelson are assigned to interview the owner of the "Lady Bee Floral Nursery", which is a sizable establishment where roses are grown and new species are developed. The Loki Pageant of Roses is coming up, which is a major event for the locale. Even the state governor is expected to be present.

As we have come to expect, the simple disappearance of a package containing nearly irreplaceable cuttings is only the first in a growing series of inexplicable events around which a mystery develops. The boys' investigations, methodology, and eventual deductions unfurl

beautifully in a well-told story that rings so true-to-life that it could almost seem to be excerpts from a diary. There is a swamp with possible pockets of quicksand, a man who appears to walk through glass walls, and locked strongholds that someone is able to open effortlessly. All contribute to a fine story. I enjoyed running across an odd character whom the author described as a “beatnik”, who (it was suspected) may even have had bongo drums in his residence. I suspect that this image was passé even in 1967 when the book was published. Maynard G. Krebs, who debuted in 1959, had become Gilligan by 1964.

With sadness, I turned the last page of a satisfying tale and knew that I had read them all. It was a darned good series.

On October 22, 2005, I was on vacation in the small town of Fallbrook, California. In a newsrack on the street I noticed that the local paper was called the *Town Crier*. For a moment, time seemed to slow down as I gave my full attention to the title that ran across the top of the front page. Thoughts rolled through my mind like the tumblers in a Las Vegas slot machine. Should I stop by the newspaper office? Mr. Dobson would probably be at least in his nineties now, and Ted would be approaching retirement age. I decided not to visit the place and ask about these personages. With such a fine series as this, after so much time has passed it is best to let things lie as they do. I’d rather remember Ted as a lad in his late teens, puzzling over his mysteries in the front office with the rattle of the linotype and the thrum of the printing press in the back room.

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