

BlazeVOX 13

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FLASH WORK: JOHN SCARNE



PRELUDE:

Q: Who was the United States President who financed his first political campaign with his poker winnings?

A: **Richard Milhouse Nixon.**

During WWII, Nixon, a junior Navy officer, was leading a Southern Combat Air Transport Command on Green Island in the Melanesians.

In between supervising the unloading & reprovisioning of cargo planes Nixon set up "Nick's" a beerjoint housed in a corrugated shed adorned with strung Xmas lights, fake flowers & posters of pin-up goddesses Betty Grable & Jinx Falkenberg.

Off-hours, Lt. Cmdr. Nixon
was Nick Nixon, a card sharp
who played a war-of-attrition kind of poker
picked-up from a stint among the carnies
while running a Big Six wheel
along the midway
in Prescott, AZ

Nick Nixon did not host
“a friendly game of poker”.
It was played by men seeking respite
from daily hazard missions
& sometimes the pot
was as high as the price
of a new car (!)

*“I learned that the people
who ‘have the card’
are usually the ones
who talk the least & softest;*

*those who are bluffing
tend to talk loudly
& give themselves away.”*

(R.M. Nixon, “Autobiography”)

Nixon’s wartime winnings
were over \$2,000 – more than
a year’s salary for the average
working joe of the era—
& a legend has it that this
mazuma was stored
in a specially-built footlocker
with a false bottom.

(& if that footlocker
really did exist
then it was Nixon's
secret version
of Lincoln's log cabin.)

Nixon took home his winnings
& self-financed a campaign
against 5-term Congressman Jerry Voorhis
-- a faithful New Dealer with
solid anti-communist credentials.

The incumbent's best-known
piece of legislation
was the Voorhis Act of 1940
which made organizations
controlled by foreign powers,
like the CPUSA, register
with the Justice Department

Despite this anti-Commie gold star,
Nixon redbaited Voorhis
throughout the campaign
& beat him by
15,000 votes.

Nixon made no mention
of his poker exploits
telling voters he spent the war
"in the foxholes".

Voorhis, called
a “political saint”,
retired from public life
& kept his counsel
about his play-dirty opponent
for over 25 years. Then
Watergate exploded
& he became
the Shadenfruede Express
speaking into any
live microphone.

*“Sour grapes to criticize
the man who beat me,
but I just wouldn’t be human
if I said I like spending
the second half of my life
as ‘the man who Nixon beat’.”*

Nixon decided that
the gravitas required
to be Eisenhower’s VP
precluded poker among
his leisurely pursuits
-- which included bowling,
golf & fair-enough piano

-- he played
a self-composed
concerto on
the Jack Paar Show
& on his Desperation Tour
of '74 played a jaunty
'God Bless America'
at the Grand Ole Opry.

Nixon in Shanghai:
upon being shown
a tiny seed of ivory
upon which
Mao Tse-Tung's
Ode to a Plum Blossom
was engraved sighed:
"Art is my real weakness."

1.

Now, if John Scarne
was able to take his crusade
against cardsharps & dice sharks
& their nefarious tools:

- The Bellystripers
- The crooked cubes
- The rigged chuck-a-luck cages

into the Pacific theater of war
then we could have been
spared the lethal cupidity
of Nixon's reign & maybe even
the entire condition
of our scabrous political landscape.



Scarne's contribution to the war effort
was 5 years of touring stateside army bases,
educating naïve sailors, soldiers & Marines
to the ways of the cheat & the slicker.

He didn't take a single buck for his crusade.
He paid for his food, his travel & skipped hotels
to sleep in the barracks.

Pissed-off gamblers took shots at him.
Thugs tried to beat him up

but he fought them off
with moves learned
from childhood friend
former World Heavyweight Champ
James J. Braddock.

They even threatened his beloved Mother
back home on Anderson Avenue, Fairview!
He saved millions of servicemen
billions of dollars which they were then
able to send home to their families
or save towards a down-payment
for that Cape Cod house
on some future suburban tract.

By the end of World War II
Scarne was famous.

His crusade was profiled in **Life & Yank** magazines.
Interviewed constantly on the radio networks.
His Mercury-handed card dealing the subject of film shorts.

His subsequent card, dice and gambling books
were so popular that the phrase
“According to Scarne”
was heard in gaming rooms as often as
the weathered “According to Hoyle”



& his Mother was very proud of him
as he kept to the promise
he solemnized at eleven o'clock mass
at Our Lady of Grace, Delano Place, Fairview
many, many years before:

*“Johnny, when you go to Mass this Sunday
promise God you’ll be a good boy
& never gamble crookedly
when you grow up.”*

2.

It is another place
in America, recalled
in black & white
snapshots. Men natty
in 3-piece suits, the inevitable
hat, the weekly trim underneath
the lid, prize fights, giving up your
seat to “a lady” on the street car.



Orlando Carmello Scarnechia, his given name,
was born into that world March 4, 1903
to Giuseppa & Fiorenjelp
who emigrated from Barrea,
in the Abruzzi province
& settled among the towns atop
the lower Palisades ridge.

The young Scarne
had a brilliant mathematical mind
but never got beyond 8th Grade
-- a not unusual reality in an era
that was rooted in the local
when newspapers printed bulldog editions
the mail was delivered 3 times a day
& radio waves were confined
to experimental stations
for the few hobbyists
& their crystal set receivers.

Scarne's real education began with
observing the "broad tossers"
-- the 3-Card Monte men
of the carnival midway

he did his "post-doc" with a crooked Hoboken novelty dealer
whose back room supplied the loaded dice
& marked decks to all the Barbary Coast bars on River Street.

Soon enough, Scarne could "toss the broad"
like a pro & mastered the fine art
of finessing the stripped deck.

Though Scarne palled around with gangsters
like Arnold Rothstein, Will Morretti
& Frank Costello, he turned down their efforts
to bankroll him in card-playing junkets.

Instead he took his mother's advice:

*"If you like to play with cards
so much, practice to do
tricks with them."*

& became the greatest close-up magician
of his era – his famous finale
in all of his shows:

Cutting all four aces
from an unmarked
unstacked
deck of cards.

The great Houdini himself
helped launch his career

& soon Scarne became a first-rank magician
playing all the swank clubs
starring in a film with Robert Benchley
demonstrating card tricks to Lindbergh & his wife
palling about with amateur prestidigitator Orson Welles

& performing for FDR
for a Democratic Party fundraiser
at Gov. A. Harry Moore's
Sea Girt mansion.

(go to You Tube
& watch amateur magicians
performing card tricks
out of Scarne's magic handbooks)

Scarne billed himself as:



THE WORLD'S GREATEST CARD MANIPULATOR

&

THE MAGICIAN WHO FOOLS MAGICIANS

& despite his hobnobbing with swells & celebrities,
he returned home nightly to his house
at 92 Anderson Avenue, Fairview
where his mother lived on the ground floor.
He hung out with local pals like Howard Wurst
at the same all-night diner
I wrote my term papers for college
& scrawled my first poems on napkins.

EN'TRACTE

People who John Scarne knew:

Lardy, a cousin

Lutzie, "*a cheap crook with a crooked deck*"

Gali Gali of Port Said, Egypt, a magician

Ludwig "Lud" Shabazian, sportswriter for the Hudson Dispatch

Walter Slezak, actor

The Amazing Dunninger, mentalist

Emma The Fat Lady of the carnival sideshow

John Peters, a Jersey card mechanic

Pee Wee Williams, an old-time Faro dealer

Conrad Hilton, great-grandfather of Paris

Benjamin "Evil Eye" Finkle, the celebrated professional hexer, master of the *kinehora*

3.

Celebrity wasn't enough.
Routing cheaters from casinos wasn't enough.
Helping soldiers hang onto thin paychecks wasn't enough.

John Scarne, like Otto Rank's ideal artist,
wanted to overcome death
through creative acts

but not through poetry, painting
or composing music.

Scarne's medium
was the game board

& at the end of his "personal history"
"The Amazing World of John Scarne" (1956)
he states:

*All of my adventures & exploits
described in the forgoing pages
will of course be forgotten soon enough*

but

Teeko

Scarn-Nee

& IQ Solitaire



*three games of skill
I have created*

*will, I believe
live on forever.* (p402)

Scarne's "autobiography" **The Odds Against Me** (1966) is the narrative of a man torn between the Bedford Falls of his parent's honest, pious, hardworking world & the Pottersville of the gamblers, hustlers & night club habitués that was both his audience and his fan base.

Despite being the "foremost authority" of the gaming world, he despised it, despised the making of money from no labor, the pissing away of the month's rent at the craps table, the mortgage spinning away on the roulette wheel & worst of all, suckers being fleeced by soulless crooks.

Scarne wanted a world
built upon mathematics, that
gave every one a fair chance
& held no interest to those
always looking for an angle on things.

After decades of game-making, moving tokens across a hand-drawn oil cloth board, recalibrating his calculations, hiring friends to demonstrate his games at Macy's, a storage room full of games returned from toy stores & five bon fires that incinerated his failures, the famous door finally opened

1945:

*“So I took the **T** from Tic-tac-Toe,*

*the **E** from Chess*

*the **K** from Checkers*

*& the **O** from Bingo.*

Soon, Teko became Teeko (*“Teko sounded too harsh”*) as Scarne tinkered with the rules, thought about the symmetry of the playing board & decided that his Magnus *“be phonetically sound in any language.”*

In 1952

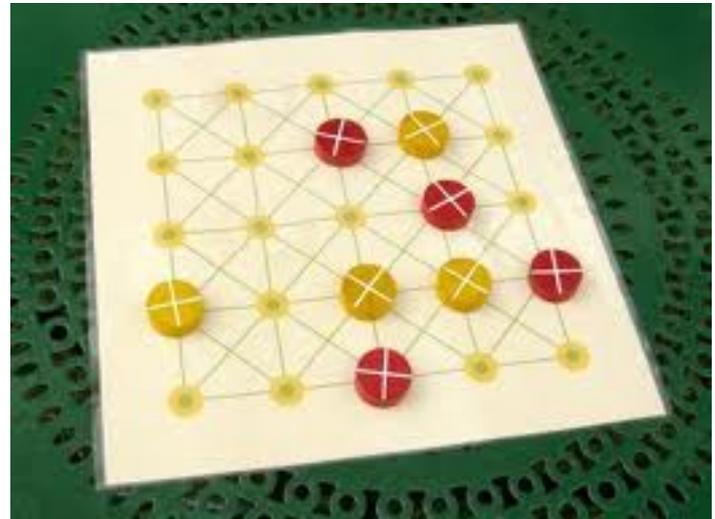
Scarne brought out his first edition of Teeko & began to remake himself in his late 40s

He gave himself a new moniker:

“The World’s Foremost Game Authority”

He formed a game company:

John Scarne Games



& hired a sales staff

....then the forever-bachelor played acey-ducey with his life:

He married his secretary
Steffi Storm (a.k.a. Norma Kearney)
following the death of his mother.

(Steffi Scarne
would later teach
English at my high school
starting in the early 70s
-- her Lucille Ball red hair
a nod to her youth
in local show biz)

In **1955,**

the Scarnes had a child
who was christened
John Teeko Scarne
but always called Teeko
by his parents
(the "John" was added on
at the request of the priest
who needed a saint's name
for the baptism)

EN'TRACTE: What the *fuck* is Teeko?

The board: 25 circles arranged in a 5x5 grid.

The markers: 8 - 4 black - 4 red – checker pieces may be substituted

The players: 2 -- black always moves first.

The board begins empty.

Black & red alternately place markers on unoccupied circles.

The first player to arrange four markers
either in a square or a straight line

(the diagonals count)

Shouts "**TEEKO!**"
& wins.

*

Quiet lawns

the chairs

make some noise

that sound?

a distant bird

a man waiting

4.

Is Teeko easy?

*“There are only 44 winning positions
in Teeko, whereas there are thousands
of standard traps.”*

Some of the Traps

Horizontal Trap

Cramped “L” Trap

Sneaky Square Trap

Vertical Two-Way Trap

For Scarne

Teeko wasn't just

another board game

like Risk or Stratego

--- juvenile rainy-day time killers

or an excuse for coffee, sour cream cake & gossip

like my mother's

Friday night

Mah-Jong game.

Playing Teeko well

was like reading

a self-help book

*"You can't play a good game of Teeko
if your mind is wandering down the street
to where the redhead lives*

or if you're wondering

*about Friday night's card game
or your boss's ulcer."*

5.

Scarne formed a Teeko club in Fairview
claimed clubs in Tel Aviv
Rio de Janeiro
& Calcutta.

“In order to play Teeko well

a certain amount of study is demanded.”

Scarne is quoted in a 1953 column in **Newsweek**
claiming that he had sold 100,000 Teeko sets

In a 1955 *Mechanic Illustrated* article
“How to Market & Invent a Game.”

Scarne declared that Teeko sales *“hit the half-million mark.”*

Are these sales figures & the international Teeko clubs
just bloviated shill from an experienced huckster?

Who knows?

but in both of his memoirs,
Scarne claims no profit from his creation.

*“I should have made money
but I trusted too many people
who turned out to be thinking of themselves*

& not of John Scarne.”

6.

1955,

the year I was born

was also the “big push” year

for Teeko

in addition

to taking on

ten to thirty players

at once

at the **Fairview Teeko-Scarney Club**

(located in the back
of a luncheonette)

Scarne published

SCARNE ON TEEKO

*a 256-page book
of strategy*

He also crossed the Hudson

called in **all** his favors

& sponsored a Teeko Tournament

at the still swank **21 Club**

(now owned
by a faceless hotel chain
& where
Donald Trump
sends
Apprentice contestants
for a meal)

Scarne challenged eight people to a game of simultaneous Teeko:

Actors: Walter Slezak, Judy Holliday & Frances Langford

TV Personality: Steve Allen

Chessmaster: Larry Evans

Bridge Expert: John Crawford

Boxer: James J. Braddock

Model/TV Personality: Jinx Falkenberg

Scarne offered a \$1,000 prize

to anyone

who could win

2 out of 3 games.

He gave **LIFE** magazine an exclusive
& they sent a photographer.

He served canapés in the shape of TEEKO markers
& let his guests run up a \$5,000 tab,
mostly in top-shelf booze.

Back at the Fairview Teeko Club, he told friends:

“The five page article that will appear
in LIFE magazine should sell
one million TEEKO sets.”

Although Scarne kicked ass on his celebrity opponents,
LIFE magazine never ran a story, nor did any
periodical of note, not even the local rags
The Jersey Journal or **Hudson Dispatch**.

6.

Scarne kept tinkering with his game-child throughout the early 60s, refining his creation & releasing new editions.

but new improved Teeko
couldn't save the Fairview Teeko club
nor its successor

Parent Assembly #1 of the Teeko-Scaney Game Club
which held its inaugural meeting at Merletto's Restaurant
but soon went out of business.

Writing his 2nd Autobiography in '66 (essentially a rewrite of his '56 memoir except with photos) just as the music of the Beatles, long hair on men, and girls in miniskirts were on display even in his deeply conservative hometown, Scarne took back his bold claims for Teeko made at the end of his first book & downplayed them in a quiet appendix adopting the proud but vanquished tone of an academic defending Marxism, post-1989.

Scarne, heeding his Catholic upbringing, accepted the mysterious mechanics of the heavens & said to his wife: "Well, it's not in the cards, it's God plan, maybe it's not meant to be."

Scarne was just not all about Teeko, he was constantly on the road, an early version of a multi-tasker. He advised Conrad Hilton on his resort casinos, appeared in nightclubs with his close-up magic act and went to Hollywood

to portray Robert Redford's card-dealing hands in "The Sting."

Tired of running John Scarne Games, he turned
to Stackpole Books of Mechanicsburg, PA
to warehouse & distribute Teeko

& its boardland
mishpocheh:

Follow The Arrow

Scar-Nee

Skarney

Scarne's Challenge

&

a Yahtzee-type game cube

Scarny 3000

However, a warehouse flood destroyed the inventory
of John Scarne Games at some point in the 70s
& brought an end to Teeko & its kin.

7.

There is a photo in “**The Odds Against Me**”, a family portrait of John Scarne, Steffi Scarne, their son John Teeko Scarne surrounded by the whole range of Scarne’s games, from **Teeko** to **Follow The Arrow**.

I find it hard to look at the photo because 25 year old John Teeko died of cancer in 1981.

Four years later his father died with none of the many extensive obituaries mentioning Teeko or any of his games of strategy.

John Scarne told his wife:

“I know I created
the best game
on the market,

the best games there are
& they’re going to last

for
years

& years

& they rival

Chess

&

Checkers

&

Go.

But I'll never see it in my lifetime

& probably you won't see it in yours.

As soon as we're out of the picture,

the vultures would step in

& see what they can grab.”

Steffi Scarne claims

to have had talks

with one big toy company

about bringing Teeko back.

But the conversation ended

when the company refused

to give John Scarne credit.

“This is like his child,”

his widow said.

“That’s the way he thought of Teeko.

They can call it
whatever they want to call it

or repackage it any way
they want to repackage it

but would it hurt
to say ‘created by John Scarne’
in small letters on the box?”

8.

Who invented Checkers?

Who invented Chess?

Did Emperor Yao's counselor Shun
really invent the game of Go?

These games just evolved over the generations:
from the imperial courts of India, Egypt, Persia & China
first played by scholars & bored administrators
then migrating to Europe, finding favor among
street intellectuals too poor
to afford a library & lacking formal education.

The best checker players I ever met
were the kids I played with in a group home
where I was the social worker

as well as my father, who honed his draughts skills
among fellow inmates of Aushwitz-Birkenau

Maybe Scarne's game was too abstract
too much one man's vision rather
than a culture's aspirations

lacking the subsumed militarism of Chess
Domino's Latin Tinge
Go's koan-like proverbs:

*Keep your stones connected.
Don't play 1, 2, 3 – just play 3.*

*Your enemy's keypoint
is your own keypoint.*

Teeko was good Catholic son Scarne's
ideal state of no dice, no roulette wheel,
no gangsters

a perfected abstract world
upon which no money falls

one man's Cockaigne
against the nightly bullshit adrenaline rush

of that non-stop parade
on the big screen TV.

1.

CODA

Mid-June. Heat wave sirocco
sweeps up Washington Street
in advance of a thunderstorm.

In my hand: foil-wrapped fast-food
In my head: antique maps of the Palisades Ridge.

I am not a person
as much as I am
a second-hand anthology
of bad choices.

Scarne just made **choices**
& lived out their consequences.
His game Teeko lives a half-life
through old sets
auctioned cheap on E-bay
(initial bid \$9.99 – my bid \$14.00).

Teeko the dream Teeko the ideal
pushed along in a catamaran

Teeko's abstraction, its old claims to greatness
now puts it within the domain
of computer "guys" & mathematicians
trying to have some fun.

Guy Steele, "The Great Quux",

programming language guru
& Sun Microsystems apparatchik

“solved” the game of Teeko in 1998
on the “math-fun” mailing list
-- that if both players play “wisely”
neither player can force a win

& over at Cambridge University
the soil that gave rise to Monty Python

Mark Owens composed the short opera “Teeko”
for Tenor, chorus & piano.

Songs (whose lyrics borrowed freely
from **Scarne on Teeko**) included
“Why Do You Recommend Teeko for the Sick”
& the rousing “Teeko is Rapidly Sweeping The World”

The only known performance
was given on January 29, 1991
at the Old Combination Room
Trinity College, Cambridge
hosted by the Trinity Mathematical Society.

The performance lasted 30 minutes,
including a twenty minute interval
when shandy and crisps were served
to both the cast
& the members of the audience.