

Joel Lewis

## 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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

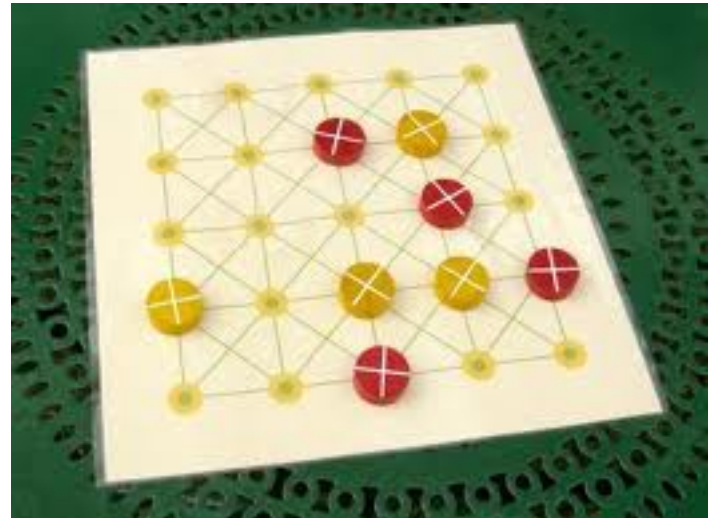
Scarne brought out his first edition of Teeko & began to remake himself in his late 40s

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.