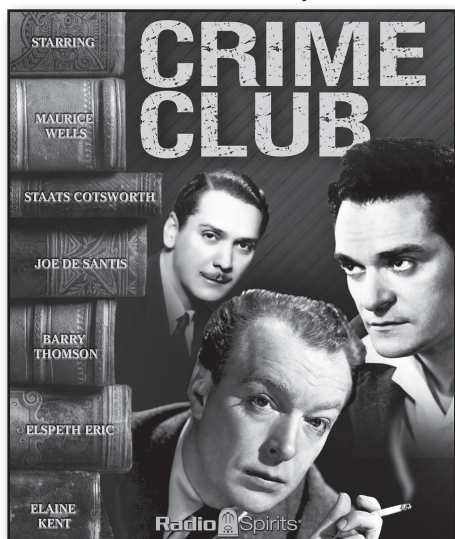


# CRIME CLUB

Program Guide by Karl Schadow

Late in the fall of 1946, the Mutual Broadcasting System was seeking to fill the Monday 8 pm slot that *Bulldog Drummond* was vacating. During the previous weeks, the network had offered auditions of *Shock* and *Listen Carefully* in an attempt to fill this niche. Those potential replacements were not approved, therefore Mutual executives dug into the past to bring back a few older programs (some of which had aired more than a decade ago). The network was well-known for its mysteries, including former headliners *The Witch's Tale* and *Murder Clinic*. Audience favorites on tap for the 1946 fall season included the perennial powerhouses *The Shadow* and *Nick Carter, Master Detective*. Interestingly, the program chosen to replace *Bulldog Drummond* (which was moving to Friday nights) had a long broadcast lineage; it was called *Crime Club*.

Crime Club was an imprint of Doubleday-Doran & Co., a book publisher founded in 1896. The firm instituted this series of whodunit novels, which would be sent to subscribers on a monthly basis, in 1928. To successfully promote this particular line, the publisher identified each of the tomes with a symbol.



As literary works were a grand resource for radio producers, it is not surprising that only three years transpired until the initial Crime Club series hit the air. In 1931, the *Eno Crime Club* was broadcast on CBS (moving to NBC for subsequent seasons). The sponsor was the Harry F. Ritchie Co., which promoted Eno Fruit Salts. It should be noted that the similarly titled 1935-36 series *Eno Crime Clues* did not feature adaptations from any Doubleday-Doran publications.

**Washermind** tells how  
**The CRIME CLUB**  
operates!



Kings and presidents, bankers and ministers, as well as rogues, lawyers and college presidents are ancient detective and mystery story readers. Many of them have joined the Crime Club. They have found themselves the best in a vast field of mystery fiction in order to avoid the mediocre and the dull.

Five noted experts in mystery will select for you each month the outstanding thrilling story. The Crime Club Day includes Grant Tinker, critic, author, former fiction editor of *Collier's*; Truman Squire, *Harper's*; Holliday "Red"—John Kild, former President of the American Bookstore Association; Arthur F. Vance, editor of *The Pictorial Review*; and William Rose, former associate editor of *The Saturday Review*. The jury has the absolute final word, and its decision, by ballot, is final.



**EVERY CRIME CLUB MEMBER RECEIVES:**

The **CRIME CLUB JURY'S** Selected Detective and Mystery Books—brought to you by your favorite list of books, so before it can be bought by the public. You pay for the book about 1/3 the price and pay only the regular bookstore price of \$2. Monthly club orders only. Your book arrives in a sealed box. No one, except the jury and the publisher, knows what the book is. Think of the thrill you will get, each month, in opening the mysterious sealed package!

**FREE—Crime Club Annual**—As soon as you join the Club, you receive absolutely free the largest full-size volume, "Mystery—Masters of Crime Detection," compiled by Lawrence Sanders. This fascinating book is comparable in every way to standard \$5.00 fiction books.

**Membership Certificate and special price**—You also receive a membership certificate, filled in with your name. And you will be kept posted about the latest in mystery literature.

Crime Club  
has your  
best book

Print ad for Crime Club book membership

It was during the fall of 1935 that WOR offered its own *Crime Club* chillers. This Sunday night series commenced on September 29th, and enjoyed an eleven-week run through December 8th. Such classics as *Murder in the Surgery*, *Death at Dayton's Folly* and *Dead Men Leave No Fingerprints* were transformed into thirty-minute thrillers by Todd Downing and David Howard. Both the station and the publisher were eager to find a sponsor. However, no firm was willing to sign up for such an endeavor. Moreover, no scripts or audio have been unearthed of this locally-broadcast venture. Thus, any comparison to the 1946-47 Mutual run cannot be made at this time.

The movie industry was also keen on Crime Club publications, and several films were produced by Lawrence Fox who formed Crime Club Productions (a subsidiary of his General Film Company). These silver screen versions were released by Universal Pictures. In 1937, Fox proposed a *Crime Club Hour* for broadcast, which was to feature stars from each of the films. Fox proceeded to collaborate with Bernard Schubert to continue the development of the radio series into 1938. By October of that year, it was reported in the trade that several auditions had been made at the Radio Recorders facility in Hollywood. Robertson White had been enlisted as the writer and director, working under the supervision of Walter Karri Davies. The ultimate fate of this endeavor remains unknown.

In November of 1939, an audition of *The Crime Club* was heard by representatives of The American Tobacco Company and its advertising agency Young & Rubicam. The tobacco manufacturer was then advertising its Half-and-Half brand of pipe tobacco on the Ben Bernie-Lew Lehr show, and was seeking a possible change of venue. Unfortunately for mystery fans, the sponsor did not decide to pick up the program.

In June of 1946, a *Crime Club* series was being offered by William E. Buckley, a vice president of the recently renamed Doubleday & Co. The asking price per episode was \$3,500. It is unknown if Mutual negotiated a new package when its version of the series premiered December 2, 1946. The revitalized *Crime Club* joined several other programs, which were integral components of the network's schedule, including *Scramby Amby*, *Movie Matinee*, *Barry Gray's Record Carnival*, *For Your Approval* and *The Mysterious Traveler*.

WOR staff producer Roger Bower, a radio veteran of two decades, was charged with crafting this rekindled *Crime Club*. His broadcasting career had commenced at the local WMCA in his native New York City. After a brief stint at a New Jersey station, he was hired by WOR in 1928, where he stayed for the next 24 years. All of the tasks of the trade were mastered by Bower -- acting, directing, writing, and even sound effects (which he performed on *The Witch's Tale*). His announcing prowess garnered him awards from various radio columnists in the early 1930s. Audiences not only heard him on a slew of regularly scheduled programs, but also as a broadcaster of sporting events...and the first Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1932.

Bower's prolific production credits for dramas include, among others, *Famous First Facts*, *Fischer Mystery Sketches*, *Empire Theatre* and *Command Performance*. In the summer of 1946, he directed the musical mystery series *A Voice in the Night*, which featured night club entertainer Carl Brisson. He was also skilled in producing such mellifluous entities as *Musical Patel* and *Jazz Nocturne*. However, he is probably best remembered for his work in the comedy genre. Although *It Pays to Be Ignorant* was a moderate success, *Can You Top This?* was Bower's most acclaimed creation. As emcee, Bower oversaw the antics of Peter Donald, Joe Laurie, Jr., Senator Ed Ford and Harry Hershfield. For his accomplishments, Bower is certainly in a class with such radio luminaries William Spier and William N. Robson. Following his distinguished career in radio, Bower engaged in television endeavors for NBC International, which took him to Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

At least three talented radio scribes were enlisted to tackle the tall order of adapting each full-length novel to a thirty-minute air drama. Stedman Coles, a former playwright, is the author who crafted the majority of the scripts. In the 1930s, he co-wrote the stage plays *Give Us Liberty* (with Melvin Sternburgh) and *Sleep with Dogs* (with Paul Hammond). His *Hell's Half Acres*, co-authored with Jerome Brookman, was presented by the New Theatre in 1938 under the title *Press Time*. Prior to the *Crime Club*, which was his major radio achievement, he authored scripts for *Adventures of Father Brown*, *Exploring the Unknown* and *The Shadow*. Later, he wrote for *Secret Missions* and *Counterspy*, among many others. Coles also wrote original stories that were the basis for films, including *The Commandos* (1942) and *Follies Girl* (1943).

Also in the current CD set are the works of James Erthein and Wyllis Cooper. Radio credits of the former include *Adventures of Charlie Chan*, *The Whistler*, a public health series with Columbia University, and *The Shadow*. The involvement

of Wyllis Cooper in the *Crime Club* series is of particular interest. To date, only Charlotte Russell's "The Topaz Flower" (April 24, 1947) has Cooper's byline. During this period, he was freelance writing and preparing for his spine-tingling series *Quiet, Please!*.

The initial installment of the revamped Mutual series, which debuted on December 2, 1946, was a Kathleen Moore Knight thriller titled "Death Blew Out the Match." (This was also one of the stories exhibited in the 1935 WOR series.) A review of the new *Crime Club* in *Variety* (December 4, 1946) stated, "Like 'em or not, mystery programs make good radio entertainment . . . and while it offers little new or unusual, the series parades nicely paced, well-polished murder across the air." The critique also illuminated obstacles that the aural medium encountered with regular novels: "...their adaptation to radio poses a problem of cutting that was not met too well in the opener." However, the review concluded on a positive note: "Show on the whole had nice thesping and direction, plus suspense as to the identity of the murderer, which are, after all, the principal ingredients. Mutual has a winner in the murder formula and, like a good gambler, evidently plans to play it to the hilt."

Another pundit, Shirley Morris (*Radio-Television News*, December 13, 1946), offered a rather caustic assessment of the series' second episode: "The revised 'Crime Club' on Mutual falls definitely into the category of mediocre mysteries. It started out well enough with a jangling telephone answered by the Librarian of the Crime Club, who announced the current story, in this instance "The Hangman" ["For the Hangman"]." The analyst continued, "From here on in, we get a complicated story that hops, skips and jumps from character to character, scene to scene, without building either sufficiently, making for disjointed continuity." Ten different scenes are then briefly summarized and the thrashing is concluded with, "The acting was not sufficient to redeem the poor material and lumpy production. It's a fighting shame, too, because the Crime Club offers perfect setting for a really good mystery!"

The mention in the review of the 'jangling telephone' that opens each episode was a hallmark, not only of the *Crime Club*, but of several radio programs. These ranged from detective series (*Nero Wolfe* and *Candy Matson*) to comedies (*Duffy's Tavern*), and even a daytime serial (*Monticello Party Line*). Note that the ringing telephone is also heard during the closing of each *Crime Club* adventure.

Though there were no cast or production credits divulged in the *Radio-Television News* review, it is worth noting the cast as cited in the *Variety* entry,

which acknowledged Maurice Wells, Elaine Kent, Staats Cotsworth, Sidney Smith, Joe Latham, Brad Barker and Joe di Santis [*sic*]. Is one name missing? Possibly Raymond Edward Johnson? If you believe that the former host of *Inner Sanctum* is mistakenly absent from this group, we bring you surprising news. Contrary to what has been told and retold of the *Crime Club* series, Johnson did not serve as the program's initial Librarian. That distinction goes to Maurice Wells. Even though he is not identified as The Librarian in the *Variety* review, (nor he is acknowledged during the broadcast, which lacks cast credits), he is cited as the austere bibliognost in the series' entry in the annual *Radio Daily Shows of Tomorrow* issue of 1947. It is worth noting, however, that Johnson was cast as the lead in several episodes of the program.



Raymond Edward Johnson

A native of Schuyler, Nebraska, Maurice Wells is one of those unsung radio stalwarts who is best remembered in the theatrical community. His family moved to Southern California while he was in high school and, still in his teens, he became a founding member of The Pasadena Playhouse. By age twenty, in 1923, he became the associate director and leading man at that institution. In 1928, he sojourned to New York City and appeared in The Theatre Guild's *Major Barbara*. In the early 1940s, he toured with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. His obituary in *Daily Variety* (June 28, 1978) cites only four radio endeavors: *Ethel & Albert*, *My Gal Sunday*, *Just Plain Bill*, and *Big Sister*. However, his extensive resume on the etherwaves also encompasses *Strictly Business*, *Foreign Assignment* and *Lawyer Tucker*, among numerous others. Moreover, Wells had a recurring role on *The Shadow* as Lamont Cranston's underworld contact, Adolphus Poindexter. (This character was a feature of the Frank Kane-scripted episodes of the late 1940s.) Wells was also active in early television, appearing in the 1941 WNBT version of *Blind Alley*. Upon returning to Hollywood in the late 1950s, he also appeared in *Perry Mason* and several other series on the small screen. His film credits include *Rome Adventure* (1962) and *Guns of Diablo* (1965).

As pertinent details of the 1946-47 *Crime Club* series are still being uncovered, it is unknown when Maurice Wells passed



Maurice Wells (pictured here with Jean Inness from their 1928 production of *The Jest*).

the role to Barry Thomson. However, by late January of 1947, it was Thomson who was inviting listener's to "take the easy chair by the window." On the New York stage, he was seen in The Theatre Guild productions of *Taming of the Shrew* and *Idiot's Delight*. On radio, Thomson had starring roles in *Dick Tracy* and *The Sea Hound*, plus supporting parts in numerous series, including *Adventures of Father Brown*, *The Right to Happiness*, and *My True Story*. In November of 1946, Tone Products Corp. enlisted his services - along with radioites Sylvia Leigh, Leonard Scherer and Joan Lazer - to produce its dramatic Merry-Go-Sound series of kid albums. Thomson often doubled in *Crime Club* episodes, and it is amusing to hear him self-credit these roles (without disclosing his duties as host).

Many of the cast members (as cited in the *Variety* review) were veterans of New York's Radio Row and continued to be heard throughout the series. Roger Bower also gave opportunities to Jane Harven and Barbara Joyce, both of whom were newcomers to the medium. Al Fanelli was at the organ console, with Brad Barker (below) contributing expert animal imitations. Unfortunately, the sound effects artist and control board operators have not yet been identified.

Announcers were culled from the WOR staff, including Frank McCarthy and Jack O'Reilly; the latter is heard in the majority of the episodes featured in this collection. In the installments of the current release, the announcer's role is limited to the closing segment. Mutual must be given credit for not intruding upon the suspense build up by inserting a public service or program announcement during the mid-point of the story. There is, however, one instance in this collection (heard in "Death Is a Knockout") when The Librarian made a brief appearance to solicit audience reaction to the series. Finally, during the closing remarks of each broadcast, listeners were made aware that the latest *Crime Club* novel was awaiting them at their local bookstores. Specific titles were not cited, however, which differentiated this footnote from that heard on *Inner Sanctum*.



Brad Barker

Mutual was continuously seeking sponsors for many of its mysteries, including *Crime Club*. The closest this series came to acquiring an advertiser was in the Summer of 1947, when Pharmaco, Inc. signed a \$1,200,000 package with the network to bankroll three different programs. The drug firm opted to sponsor Jim Backus and *Song of*

*the Singer*, but switched at the last minute from *Crime Club* to *Charlie Chan*. As a sustainer, *Crime Club* suffered the usual schedule changes, with at least three different shuffles (depending upon locale). Though much of the 1947 network run transpired on Wednesday evenings, listeners in New York would have to tune in WOR the following day. The series concluded in October of 1947, with nearly a year's-worth of episodes aired. An interesting facet is that many of the stories broadcast during the show's latter months were original radio dramas and not based upon the published novels.

A video series based on the *Crime Club* novels was produced by Pyramid Productions in the late 1950s. On a related note, radio *Crime Club* alumni Barry Thomson, Stedman Coles and Roger Bower collaborated in 1950 on *Night Book*, the first filmed video series for WOR-TV. This short-lived venture featured fictional stories occurring in a Gotham City office building from the perspective of an elevator operator.

## Episodes

Note: Dates indicate the WOR, New York broadcasts.

### CD 1

A: "Death Blew Out the Match" - 12/02/1946

B: "Silent Witnesses" - 03/27/1947

### CD 2

A: "The Grey Mist Murders" - 04/10/1947

B: "The Topaz Flower" - 04/24/1947

### CD 3

A: "Epitaph for Lydia" - 05/01/1947

B: "The Corpse Wore a Wig"  
- 05/08/1947

### CD 4

A: "Murder on Margin" - 05/22/1947

B: "Murder Makes a Mummy"  
- 05/29/1947

### CD 5

A: "Murder Rents a Room" - 06/05/1947

B: "Death Is a Knockout" - 06/12/1947



Elaine Kent and Barry Thomson are heard in these episodes.

**CD 6**

**A:** "Death Never Doubles" - 06/26/1947

**B:** "Death at 7:10" - 07/03/1947

**CD 7**

**A:** "Coney Island Nocturne" - 07/10/1947

**B:** "Death Deals a Diamond" - 07/17/1947

**CD 8**

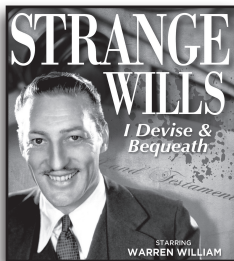
**A:** "Serenade Macabre" - 07/24/1947

**B:** "The Self-Made Corpse" - 07/31/1947



Acknowledgements: The author thanks Al Hubin (crime fiction historian), Patti La Marr (The Pasadena Playhouse Archives [Maurice Wells photo]), Bryan Cornell and Karen Fishman (both Library of Congress) for their invaluable assistance.

If you enjoyed this CD set, we recommend *Strange Wills: I Devise & Bequeath*, available now at [www.RadioSpirits.com](http://www.RadioSpirits.com)



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