

HOUSTON CHRONICLE (TEXAS)  
15 January 1980

# A most uncommon man at the Uncommon Market

He's a 'junkman' who collects careers, roles and cultures

BY DAVID LEE  
Chronicle Staff

Robert Henry Booth jovially calls himself a "junkman."

He looks more like a movie actor in the Orson Welles tradition.

Fact of the matter is, he has been both — and a whole lot more.

Behind the glass-topped counter, amidst the clutter of his Uncommon Market resale center at 3401 Milam — "the garage sale that got out of hand" — Bob Booth holds forth in an atmosphere that has become as much neighborhood social club as salesroom.

"When too many folks get to hanging around," he said, "I just close down for two or three days." It doesn't make his customers happy, but then Booth has a lot of other things on his mind — always has had.

In a benign manner, Booth is still role-playing — unintentionally perhaps. But even his appearance seems to allow for little else. A squared-off face almost surrounded by a thicket of graying, mouse-brown whiskers, set off by deep, piercing eyes and capped by a Bob Hope nose. The build of a sumo wrestler — which, incidentally, he once was.

Booth has crammed more living into his 52 years than most manage in a lifetime. With a voracious appetite for life, backed by a scattergun talent that nonetheless targets with considerable authority, Booth has delved into the nooks and crannies of life in two hemispheres.

Though he once served in the U.S. Army, Booth has been mostly a soldier of fortune.

Even Fu Manchu would be hard pressed to match the many faces of Bob Booth.

Consider these roles at random: soldier, Japanese movie star, writer of admittedly bad pulp novels, restaurant owner, pianist, night club operator, movie script writer, inventor, publisher, travel editor, student of Japanese society and Far Eastern politics, stowaway, magazine owner, ad agency chief — and apparently victim of the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy's-communist witch hunt of the early 1950s.

Whoa!

Who, really, is this man?

Born in Mathiston, Miss., Booth attended Wood Junior College in his home town and then Mississippi State until he enlisted in the army in 1945. Even then there was a glimmer of what was to come, a sort of striving after things just out of reach, an excitement about the unattainable, yet clearly possible.

An avid Howard Hughes watcher since early childhood, Booth yearned to be an aeronautical engineer or a pilot, or both. "But the mathematics and I just didn't mix," he admits. As for flying lessons: "Just never seemed to get the time," he said. "Still plan to do it though — one day."

The army took him to Japan, where he was assigned to troop information and education at Camp Zama outside of Tokyo and began a love affair with the Japanese and their culture that would last until 1957.

For a few years, it was business as usual for Booth — which is unusual business for him. He did manage to begin a study of the Japanese language that would lead to complete fluency. And he managed to land a job as a reporter with the military daily newspaper, Stars and Stripes, with an intent to stay on as a civilian staffer once his army tour was finished.

Once discharged in 1948, Booth did stay on in Japan. But not with Stars and Stripes. The money simply wasn't there. Instead he took a two-year contract with the military Post Exchange system as the editor of Exchange Magazine.

But there was no rice growing under Booth's feet. Even while editing Exchange, he was laying plans to found his own English language magazines in Japan. And, he married a Japanese girl. (They were later divorced.)

Once free of his commitment to the Post Exchange, View and Preview magazines — and a baby girl — were born.

"There was a crying need for magazines like that," says Booth. "There was little if anything in the likes of Stars and Stripes about movies, about entertainment or about Japanese commerce and industry. Booth's two magazines — View, in Life format, and Preview, in Readers Digest format, supplied that and more.

As Booth had predicted, the magazines prospered, and so did he. "But it was certainly not an ostentatious way of living," he protests.

Certainly not. Only a hilltop home, a Silver Wraith Rolls Royce, a motorcycle for kicks and part interest in a 37-foot ship-to-shore motor launch. The launch helped Booth test one of his many inventions — the Hydro Bike, forerunner of the sporty, one-man ski craft that race around Clear Lake today.

But the magazines, even though they grew to a full time staff of 24 and featured Rod McKuen's first poems and the first Honda motorcycle ads to appear in an English-language publication, weren't enough for Booth.

Ideas cascaded from his imagination like water from a snowmelt on Mount Fujiyama.

There was, for example, the idea of importing rebuilt V-8 engines from the United States to be installed in Japanese auto bodies for export. Possible. Also, highly impractical.

Since the Japanese film *Roshomon* won honors at the Cannes Film Festival in the early 1950s, Booth also had in mind producing films of his own in Japan for international audiences. That was not to

be. But a career in motion pictures was in the offing.

In 1952, like-minded Japanese movie producers began advertising for foreign residents to become actors in such movies-for-export. Booth responded, not looking for a job, but rather as a magazine editor intent on photographing and interviewing the applicants.

"The first requirement was fluent Japanese," he said, "and that I had. And then there's the ham in me."

Almost before he knew it, Booth had been signed to co-star in a film called *Port of Shadow*, the first of a dozen co-starring roles in Japanese films.

It was film-making that crossed his path with the FBI and the McCarthy mania of the early 1950s.

The movie was *Red Light District*, again co-starring Booth. It was an unabashed examination of "social conditions around U.S. military bases," said Booth. "But it was certainly not anti-American. I persuaded the director to submit a copy

of the script to the U.S. Embassy before we started shooting, just to be sure. But no one there even bothered to read it."

Yet the film was condemned as anti-American by querulous reviewers. The FBI and the CIA began probing Booth's conduct, as correspondence he has obtained under the Freedom of Information Act now shows. Result: Booth's passport was withdrawn by the Department of State.

Without benefit of passport, Booth stayed on in Japan, where he was fast becoming at least a minor celebrity. Movie roles led to legitimate theater and nightclub appearances, where Booth traded on his English-accented Japanese for all it was worth as a stand-up comic, played the piano, emceed variety shows and, as he puts it, "played the buffoon." The Japanese loved it.

But in 1957, with the Japanese economy sinking to dismal depths and his magazine business faltering, Booth decided it was time to give up.

Still without a passport, he embarked for New Zealand as a "ring boat" — an old mariners' term for a stowaway. Temporarily a man without a country, or at least without evidence thereof, Booth again managed success — with radio and TV announcing assignments, a small ad agency and a thriving coffee shop.

But by 1960 the tug of family and home proved too strong to resist. The American Embassy granted a one-way passport to get Booth back to the United States and Mississippi.

There Booth had planned to spend his days writing. Instead he was drawn into plans for a nightclub in Columbus, Miss., to be called the Southernaire. It was 1½ years in the planning, and was open for barely three months before it was all but washed away by a flood on the Tombigbee River.

Disappointed, but not discouraged, Booth tried his hand at writing and producing in Hollywood. "I came very close," he admits ruefully, "but not close enough."

As almost a last resort, he took a job with *Better Homes and Gardens* in Des Moines, Iowa, and he eventually became travel editor.

"The pay wasn't really enough to get by on," said Booth. So he took to writing pulp novels as a quick income-booster. One, for example, was originally titled *The Piano Player*, later reworked and republished under the title *The Lewd Dude*.

But even that was not enough, and Booth finally returned to Mississippi and opened another independent advertising agency.

Then it was Houston's turn.

By 1971, Booth's half-Japanese daughter had become a promising young singer and landed one engagement at Houston's Tokyo Gardens. Booth came along, intent on seeing young Scarlet to stardom. Scarlet married instead and gave up her career, but Booth stayed on in Houston.

Married to his current wife Winifred in 1975, Booth began the weekend garage sales that finally led to the Uncommon Market.

At first, it was largely to unload the "junk" he and his family had accumulated in Mississippi. "But," he said, "friends who didn't want to or couldn't mount their own garage sales, began asking us if they could add their stuff to ours. We said okay, of course. One thing led to another and here we are, in the business of selling other people's junk."

For acting as middleman, Booth takes 30 percent of the sale price, and admits that the business is doing tolerably well. Advertising is virtually unheard of at the Uncommon Market. Doesn't need it. Word of mouth suffices. The store is a hodge-podge, potpourri of just about everything — from "tons of books" to plants, clothes, cameras, furniture, bric-a-brac and "whatever."

"I open and close as I please," said Booth. The business potential is endless. But who wants to spend the rest of his life dealing in junk?"

Booth doesn't plan to and has dozens of "projects" in the offing. One is a just-completed novel titled *Flood*, based on the high water adventure that destroyed the Southernaire night club in Columbus.

Then there is a long-planned book on the Far East, a couple of "film properties," that Booth has scripted himself, some science fiction books in the planning and designs for restaurants that Booth is sure would be winners.

"Now," he said, "I'm just waiting to get my hands free of the Uncommon Market so I can dive into these things. I've got enough projects to keep me busy a lifetime and more."

No doubt there will be more "projects" to come. But in the meantime, uncommon Bob Booth will continue to do business at the same old market.