



The dizzying
story of the
swindles, frauds,
theft, abandonment,
and bigamy of
Carteret's John Udvari.

a scoundrel of the lowest order

by Gordon Bond

This article is adapted from a section of a chapter in Gordon Bond's upcoming new book, "Wicked Woodbridge: Vice in the Garden State's Oldest Township" scheduled for publication by American History Press spring of 2015.

You have been called a scoundrel of the lowest order," Judge Adrian Lyon admonished the defendant standing before him, "and I am inclined to agree with this estimate."

In a perverse sort of way, if the Woodbridge Township borough of Carteret ever took a collective pride in being associated with John A. Udvari, it might be excused. After all, the conman's career was quite extraordinary and the judge's assessment of his character during a March 1, 1940 arraignment was just one bump in the road of a dizzying story encompassing swindles, frauds, theft, abandonment, and even bigamy.

On February 3, 1932, an 18-year-old Udvari had wed Anna Fink out in Central City, Pennsylvania. He stayed with her just long enough to father two children before returning to Woodbridge Township and marrying Helen Koachs of Fords on October 27, 1934. What his new wife didn't know was that he was still technically married to his first one!

The *Woodbridge Independent* for September 4, 1936 reported that Udvari had been arrested in a fraudulent automobile deal. He had made a small down payment on a used car in New York, with the seller retaining the title, and took the vehicle to Pennsylvania where he used it as a trade-in on a new automobile. Since he didn't have the title on the trade-in, the seller of the new car also still retained the title. Udvari took the new vehicle back to New Jersey, leaving the two respective titleholders in the proverbial lurch. While it isn't made clear how he came to be arrested by Woodbridge Police Officer John Manton, his lack of proper registration on the car carried a \$100 fine. Unable to pay, he was sentenced to 90-days in jail.

In 1939, Anna Fink caught up with her two-timing husband, having him arrested on charges of desertion and non-support. That was the first time Udvari appeared before Judge Lyons, on April 29, 1939. He was given probation and ordered to pay \$6 a week in child-support, but instead promptly disappeared.

He resurfaced in the papers in early 1940, yet again in hot water with the law. "John Udvari, alias William Lukach of 6

“The amazing string of events climaxed in his arrest allegedly includes two previous marriages, one bigamous and a violation of parole.”

Sabo Street, is now in jail in New Brunswick,” the *Raritan Township and Fords Beacon* reported on February 2nd. “That much seems the only certainty in a trail of escapades so confusing and misleading all who have had any dealings with the man in recent weeks hardly know what may turn up next.”

This latest spate of legal troubles started when Udvari, using the alias William Lukach, bought a house at the above-mentioned Sabo Street in Fords from a Charles Ohlott. He applied for a Federal Housing Authority (FHA) mortgage, claiming he was employed by Eastern Airlines. It would be Udvari’s misfortune that Ohlott’s attorney, Benedict W. Harrington, happened to be the same lawyer he had spoken with several years before about possibly representing him when he was being charged with theft in Perth Amboy! Harrington recognized Udvari, who told the lawyer he was mistaking him for his cousin who bore a strong resemblance. In the meantime, the FHA representatives had checked into his employment situation, discovering he was not, in fact, employed by Eastern Airlines, but instead worked at a local plant.

Added to the list of wives that already included Anna Fink and Helen Koachs had been Johanna Brezna of Carteret, in a ceremony the *Beacon* described as having been performed at the Hungarian Baptist Church. “The amazing string of events, climaxed in his arrest,” the paper reported, “allegedly includes two previous marriages, one bigamous and a violation of parole.”

After marrying Brezna, he evidently swindled her parents out of \$800 by telling them he had killed a man with an automobile and needed the money to get out of the jam. An odd story to tell one’s in-laws, but it evidently worked as he had been arraigned on March 28, 1940 before Union County’s Court of Quarter Session (the parents lived in Cranford, NJ) on charges brought by the couple against him for larceny and obtaining money under false pretenses. He was released on a \$1,500 bond.

The names of his previous two wives appeared differently in

“Whatever other aspects may turn up is not yet determined.”

the *Beacon*—Anna Fink was called Anna Finkel, and Helen Koachs was Helen Kovach. Whatever the case, both women by that point were happily free of the scheming Udvari. Fink had dropped the charges when she successfully obtained a divorce and the marriage to Koachs (or Kovach) was declared null and void as soon as its bigamist nature was discovered and she had since remarried.

When John Udvari skipped on his probation, he left his probation officer, identified only as a Mr. Jensen, to hunt for him. His search, along with attorney Harrington’s positive identification, as the *Beacon* put it, “brought the trial to an end Wednesday when all closed in on him.”

“Whatever other aspects may turn up is not yet determined,” the article concluded, adding that Udvari was being held without bail for parole violation, adding “other charges may be pressed in the meantime.”

It was when he was being arraigned that Judge Lyons made his assessment of Udvari’s character as “a scoundrel of the lowest order” and regretted being unable under the law to sentence him to more than a year and a day in jail and a \$1,000 fine. His time imprisoned did little to curb his penchant for crime. “It now appears that on the day of his release,” according to the *Carteret Press* of May 9, 1941, “he obtained an automobile from a New Brunswick dealer, making a deposit with a check for \$25. He drove away in the car with the dealer’s plates still attached and preceded to Elizabeth, where he left a trail of worthless checks. Meantime, the New Brunswick automobile dealer learned the check he had was also worthless, and when Udvari was caught charges were pressed against him.”

Given his past flights, it seems foolish that any judge would grant bail, yet Udvari was able to raise the \$2,000 bond for New Brunswick and a \$1,500 bond for Elizabeth and once more disappeared, leaving the bail bondsmen he obtained his money from “holding the well-known bag.”

This time, he left the northeast altogether, evidently ending up in New Mexico where he once more ran afoul of the law.

“Described as more silver-tongued than William Jennings Bryan, maybe some enterprising firm ought to send him to Alaska on that plan to sell ice boxes to the Eskimos.”

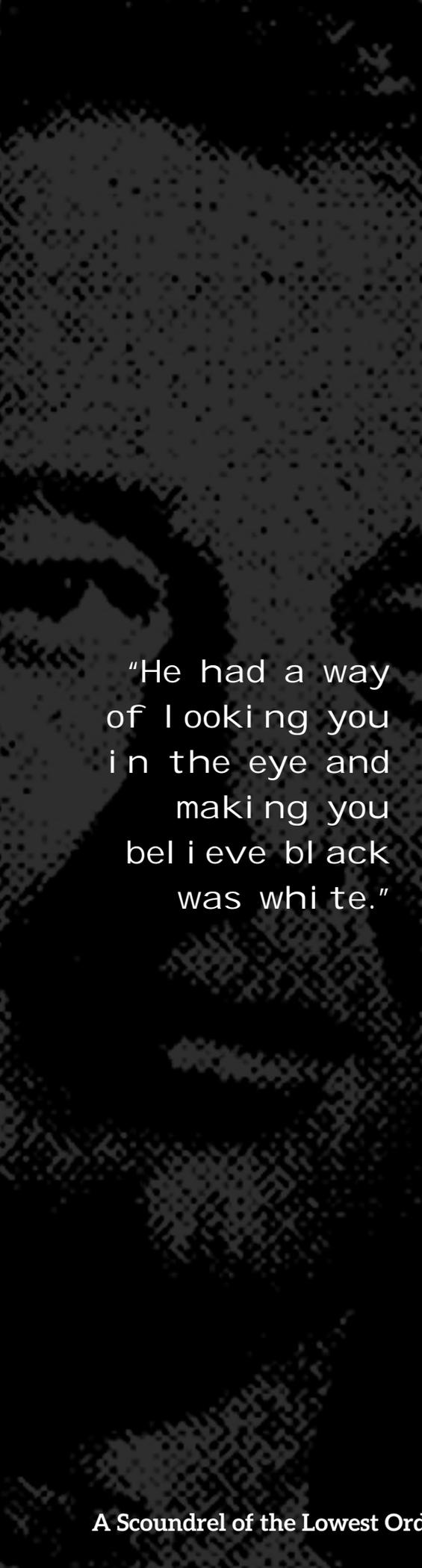
“Word received at local [Carteret] police headquarters from the Sheriff at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, that he has in his custody one John Udvari, formerly of Carteret,” the *Carteret Press* reported, “has revived interest in a case which attracted wide notice here a year ago and which is unparalleled in the local records. Or any other records, for that matter.”

Unfortunately, the paper does not say for what Udvari had been arrested, but obviously it was known or discovered that he was a fugitive in New Jersey, where he was to be extradited. What the paper lacked in journalistic detail, it made up for by taking perverse humor in the situation. “Meanwhile Udvari probably already is planning what he’ll do when he gets out after the next stretch he’ll do in prison, here or in New Mexico,” the article quipped. “Described as more silver-tongued than the late William Jennings Bryan, maybe some enterprising firm ought to send him to Alaska on that plan to sell ice boxes to the Esquimaux [Eskimos]. He’s said to be that good a talker and it seems he’s had pretty good success so far.”

On October 17, 1941, Udvari’s Middlesex County probation officer was informed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that he had been sent to prison for life at Santa Fe, New Mexico, as a habitual criminal.

Perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, that would *not* be the last time John Udvari’s name would grace the front page of the Carteret newspaper. Somehow he had managed to get out of the Santa Fe prison and ended up in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, where he was arrested at the end of October in 1946 on another bigamy charge. He had married a Veronica Ballock there without having first obtained a divorce from yet another woman, Mary Short of Pittsburgh. “In addition,” the *Carteret Press* for November 1, 1946 included, “police said he obtained more than \$10,000 from his bride’s relatives.”

By this time, Udvari had become fodder for the United Press news service and his escapades made newspapers across the country. The *Daily Illinois State Journal* for October 24, 1946, for example, added some interesting details to his story. His full name, according to the UP report, was John Andrew Udvari and



“He had a way
of looking you
in the eye and
making you
believe black
was white.”

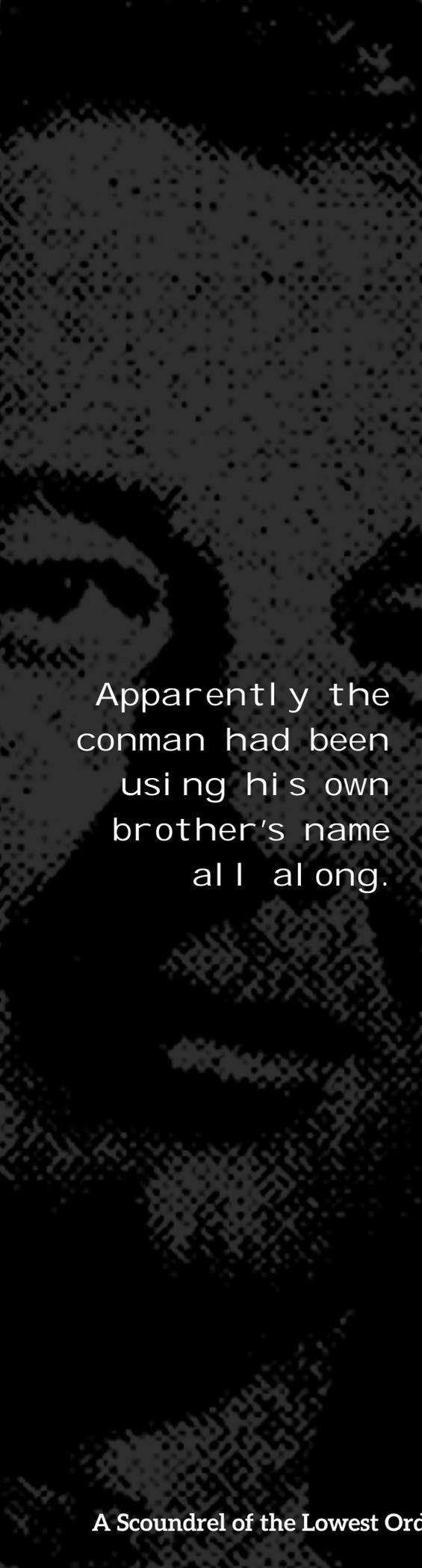
he was the 32-year-old son of a coal miner from Cairnbrook, Pennsylvania. Hinting at even more colorful swindles, they described him as “a honey tongued romancer who talked four girls into marriage and posed for two years as an aide to Gen. Dwight Eisenhower.” The *Carteret Press* had mentioned Udvari was also being charged with “misappropriating the use of an Army major’s uniform.”

“He had a way of looking you in the eye,” the report in the Illinois newspaper quoted an unnamed “sister-in-law” as describing, “and making you believe black was white.” He had told Ballock he was studying ten languages, had swindled her father out of \$4,000, and bought a flashy car for \$2,700. “I talked with him six hours,” Pennsylvania State Policeman Clarence Schnable was also quoted as saying, “and he never repeated himself once.”

That the grand sweep of Udvari’s exploits does not become apparent until after his death in 1954 was due in part to the cavalier and sometimes flippant coverage it received from the local press, but also to the complex subterfuge inherent in such an enterprise.

The dots would begin to be connected on April 21, 1954 when a man was found dead on a bed in a West Hartford, Connecticut house beside the body of a woman. He was known to his neighbors as Robert Callaway, age 37. His female companion was identified as Georgette W. Quigg, a 50-year-old former dancing instructor, identified in a piece in the *Boston Daily Record* on April 26th as being estranged from her husband, the father of her three sons. According to the police, Callaway administered chloroform to Quigg before doing the same to himself in what was being called a murder-suicide.

When they took the dead man’s fingerprints, however, the police realized Callaway was just another alias for John Udvari, the fugitive. The “recital” of his 29 arrests included his at least five different aliases: Maj. John A. Janascki, Sgt. Donald Skov, Frank Pastor, Franklin Jackson. When he resurfaced 1946, there was some confusion in the local papers as to how he had managed to get out of a life sentence in a New Mexico prison—



Apparently the
conman had been
using his own
brother's name
all along.

the *Record* article noted he had been able to gain parole after six years. "Most of his offenses were in the confidence racket," the paper described, "preying on women, the FBI said."

Indeed, it was such a scheme that had come back to haunt him even in death. A woman from Hartford, Connecticut, saw his picture in the paper after the bodies were discovered and recognized him as the man she knew as Major John A. Janascki—the same man who after a two-week courtship was about to marry her on December 12, 1953 when he disappeared just fifteen minutes before the ceremony along with the \$350 she had lent him. "Major Janascki" was also wanted by the Hartford police for "obtaining goods by false pretenses" from a department store.

He evidently absconded to New York State, as he was arrested later that same month by the FBI in Claverack, NY, for impersonating an Air Force Sargent under the name Donald Skov, as well as an Army Major. True to form, Udvari jumped the \$1,500 bail and, according to the FBI, spent time in Pittsburgh and Washington DC before returning to Connecticut. He was also wanted on larceny charges in Miami, Florida and violating parole from the Alleghany County Workhouse in Pennsylvania. At the time of his death, he was awaiting arraignment in Rockville, Connecticut on charges of obtaining money under false pretenses after convincing yet another woman to give him \$2,000 after promising to marry her.

In one last con, Hartford Police Detective Martin McCue received a phone call from a John Udvari in Moon Township, a suburb of Pittsburgh, who informed him that the dead man was actually named Joseph. Apparently the conman had been using his own brother's name all along.

Further revelations in the *Boston Evening American* of April 26, 1954, may indicate Udvari had started to believe his own cons to a reckless degree. A few weeks after completing his six years on the New Mexico State Prison, he was planning the wedding to Mary Short of Pittsburgh on April 24, 1946 and had the temerity to send an invitation to U.S. Navy Admiral Ernest

He had the temerity to send a wedding invitation to U.S. Navy Admiral Ernest King, the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations during the Second World War and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

King—Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations during the Second World War and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—as well as several other top naval officers! According to the paper, Admiral King was not among the 90 guests at the posh wedding, but there were “some naval personnel.”

He likely knew that the Admiral would not attend, but he was taking a risk of discovery as his stories became bolder and more elaborate. He had posed to Short as a university student and had told his next wife, Veronica Ballock, that he had been a West Point graduate. He managed to get \$4,000 out of this fifth “Mrs. Udvari,” according to the report, for which Ballock had cashed in life insurance policies for him. When he disappeared with it, he was said to have had “special breakfasts” at hotels where he demanded linen table cloths and napkins. It was also while married to Ballock that he found a job at St. Vincent’s College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania and left with \$800 in stolen religious articles, including books owned by the priests.

His body was identified by his mother, Helen, and his two brothers from Pennsylvania, and left behind to be buried in Hartford. The photograph accompanying the articles about his death show stout face with a pleasant if slightly smirking smile.

As much as Udvari may have indeed been the scoundrel Judge Lyons accused him of being, his crimes were never violent. This makes what happened at the end, in that third-story bedroom of the West Hartford house he had rented under the Callaway name, all the more curious. Did he and Quigg intend to die together? Did his hubris finally get the better of him, causing murder to be added to his crime? Did he perhaps only intend to knock her out, accidentally killing her? Perhaps, realizing he would get the death penalty for sure, he decided to commit one final cheat against a would-be executioner. 