

Remembering Jack O'Brien and Betty Johnson

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As I wrote in my essay about *image* magazine, <https://sandymesics.org/image-magazine/> when I started *image* in 1973-1974, I sent letters and copies to the other trans publications, notably Queens Publications, which produced *Drag*, and Neptune Productions, which produced *Female Impersonator Magazine*. At that time Sussie Collins was working at Neptune Productions but was looking to leave and start her own publication and organization, the United Transvestite Transsexual Society (UTTS). Sussie invited me to one of their monthly gatherings at her home in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, where she arranged a meeting with Jack O'Brien, the owner of Neptune Productions. I will never forget that meeting, and it would change my life for the next decade. Through Jack, I would soon meet his business and personal partner, Betty Johnson, and within a couple of years we were like the Three Musketeers of trans publishing.

Jack O'Brien at the time was in his 50s. He was a little guy who bore an uncanny resemblance to my Uncle Charlie. That part was a bit unnerving. The other part was that at our first meeting Jack was obviously drunk. I would eventually learn that this was not an unusual state for Jack. At our first meeting, Jack was amid a bunch of crossdressers and assorted trans folk, and since he wasn't one of the family, he was a bit out of his element. But he was funny, charming, and brutally honest with me. He had seen *image* and told me that the content was good, but the execution left a lot to be desired. I agreed. He proposed an arrangement: he would give me access to better typesetting and graphic arts equipment to produce my magazine, and I would write for him and help with Neptune's publications. I jumped at the chance.

It wasn't long before I started working for Jack on a full-time basis. For a little while I ghost wrote Sussie's column, "Sussie Sez," (which we comically called "Sandy sez Sussie sez") for the various Neptune publications, and gradually, I was introduced to the readers of Neptune's publications with a byline and eventually an editorship after Sussie departed.

So, who was Jack O'Brien, and how did he come to produce a myriad of trans- publications? He was born circa 1922 and grew up in Los Angeles, California. I gradually learned from Jack that he had not had a happy childhood or youth and had been abused by his father. He graduated from George Washington High School in 1939, and enlisted in the Army in 1940, just prior to the start of World War II. He served in the Army Air Corps. He was a self-taught cartoonist. As he related in a 1967 newspaper interview, "I was a clerk in public relations at post headquarters at Moffett Field, California, and they gave me the job of putting out the post newspaper. I had some awful big holes in the paper to fill, so I started drawing cartoons." (Asbury Park Press [APP], July 23, 1967, page 28) In 1942 he won a cartoon contest sponsored by the Elks Club.

'Write 'em a Letter'



Copyright 1942 R. P. O. P. Co.

"You Take Care of This Bunch—I've Got a Letter from Home."

After his second tour of active duty, Jack joined the Army Reserves and spent six years on active duty in the 1950s. During this time, he worked as a staff cartoonist for the Armed Forces Press Service, turning out cartoons for some 1,700 camp newspapers globally. Jack stayed in the military until he retired in 1965 as a master sergeant.

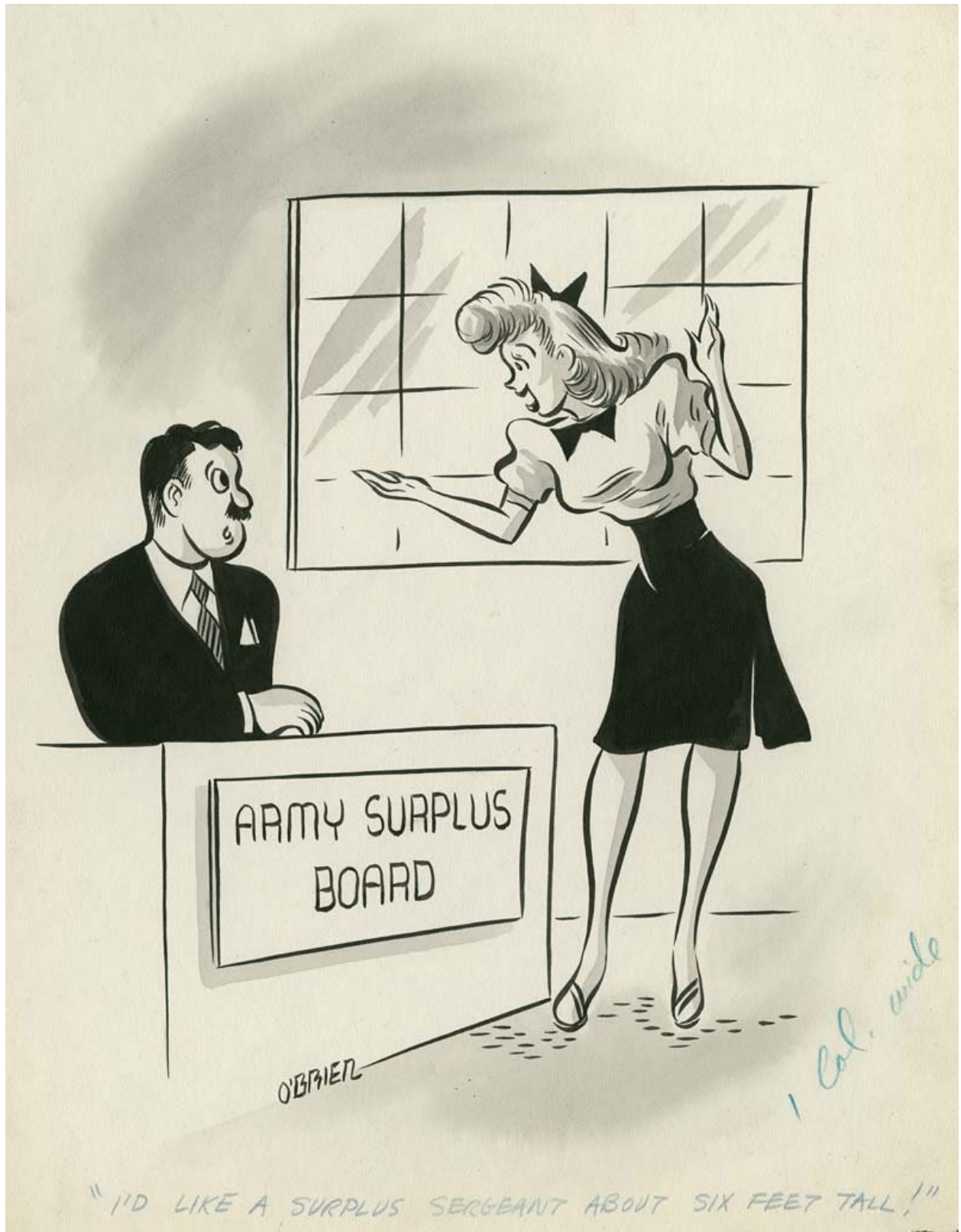
While still in the Army, Jack began cartooning on a freelance basis. He sold cartoons to leading publications of the day: Esquire, Life, Liberty, Time, Post, and other large newspapers. In the 1950s, Jack sold a comic strip, "The Bumbles," to various newspapers. The strip was a satire "on the home life of the average American family." Jack recalled, "I only lived because I sold lots of cartoons. I got as little as two dollars apiece, and I was happy to get it." (APP, 1967) When Jack got on his feet as a cartoonist, he retired from the armed forces. Jack married Helen (Lynn) Onufrechuk and the couple began living in Florida.



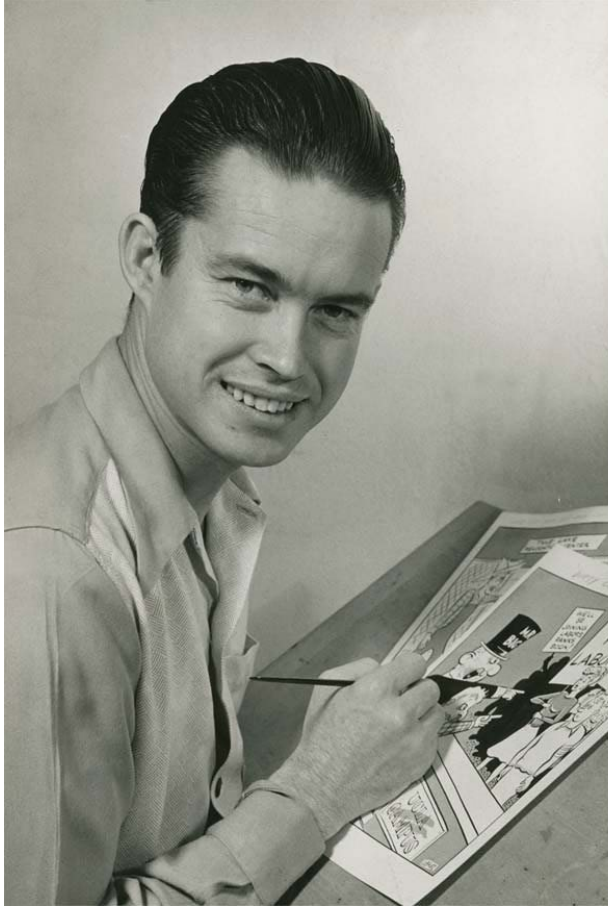
"The Bumbles" (West Los Angeles Independent, Sept. 7, 1950, page. 8)

In the early 1960s, Jack took over writing and illustrating "Sad Sack" comic books for Harvey Comics. He worked with George Baker, who created the strip in 1942. Jack called himself the "ghost" for George Baker. He also came up with a beatnik character named "Cool Cat," and wrote and drew "G.I. Juniors," about kids in a military school.

In 1967 Jack, his wife Lynn, and their three daughters Lisa Ann, Jacklynn, and DarylInn moved to the New Jersey Shore. They also had two married daughters, Suzanne and Donna, and Jack and Lynn would soon have a son, Dylan Shawn. "I wanted to move to the Jersey Shore to be near the water. I never use it, but if I'm away from it I feel I should get back." (APP, 1967, p. 32) In 1968, Jack, along with three other cartoonists, spent a month touring military hospitals in Tokyo, Okinawa, and the Philippines, drawing cartoons for the wounded servicemen. He listened to the soldiers' stories and sometimes drew cartoons on their casts. While Jack reported coming home with a "good feeling" about the trip, he didn't get new material for the Sad Sack comic strip: "The whole thing was very unfunny." (APP, October 20, 1968, p. 10)



A typical Jack O'Brien cartoon. He sold many of these to the leading magazines of the time.



This photograph shows Jack with his daughter, Suzanne.

<https://animationresources.org/category/magazine/page/7/>

In the late 1960s, Jack would enter the world of LGBTQ adult publishing. Initially, Jack partnered with Walter Kundzicz, who operated a business in New York photographing male nudes. Like Jack, Kundzicz also served in World War II. As a gay man, Kundzicz started photographing his lovers and other attractive young men in scanty clothing. After the war he became interested in male physique magazines, the early forerunners of gay male porn. But Kundzicz pushed the envelope: his photos became sexier, and the models were mostly if not entirely nude. He became a publisher himself, under the name Champion Studio. Kundzicz had several run-ins with the law over his photography.

In April 1970, Jack ended up on the front page of the *Asbury Park Press*, this time not for a good reason. Police and detectives led a raid on his home and a print shop that Jack owned. Jack's wife and Walter Kundzicz were arrested along with three other employees. They were charged with possession of obscene and pornographic literature and aiding and abetting pornography. Eight truckloads of "pornographic literature, printing machines, photography equipment, and mailing lists" were also hauled away. Jack was not present when the raid occurred, but Detective William D. Miller of the Wall police said, "We'll have a hot reception committee waiting for him when he comes back." Jack turned himself in three days later. (APP, April 17, 1970, p. 1, April 21, 1970, p. 17) Jack and Kundzicz were charged with three counts of "exposing obscene pictures of males and females in indecent postures, possession of the

pictures with intent to sell, and setting indecent words in type." (APP, July 1, 1970, p. 20) They both pleaded innocent to the charges. (APP, July 11, 1970, p. 5)

A year later, Jack turned on Walter Kundzicz, testifying against him in exchange for immunity. Jack testified that he worked as a layout man for Kundzicz, preparing the material for printing. (APP, June 9, 1971, p. 18) Expert witnesses couldn't agree on whether the material was obscene, and gave conflicting testimony, but agreed that the material would appeal to gay males because the photos "implied homosexual activity." (APP, June 10, 1971, p. 43) At the time, there were three criteria for material to be considered legally obscene: it had to affront community standards, appeal to prurient (lewd) interests, and to lack redeeming social value. Naturally, in the immediate post-Stonewall period, the state alleged that depictions of homosexuality were automatically offensive to community standards, and the judge added that "The Gay Society is a minor factor, and homosexuality is not accepted in this country." (The Red Bank Daily Register, Aug. 9, 1971, p. 20) Kundzicz would be convicted and sentenced to four- to six-years in state prison and a \$1,000 fine, but the conviction was overturned in 1972 because the Superior Appellate Court ruled that the search warrant was "fatally defective." The court added "Freedom of expression is too deeply entrenched in our constitutional heritage to be paid such haphazard treatment." (APP, Dec. 7, 1972, p. 1)

Jack rebuilt his business after the bust. In 1969, he started producing *Female Impersonator Magazine*, initially with the help of Pudgy Roberts, a well-known comic female impersonator in New York. By 1974, Sussie Collins had supplanted Pudgy as editor, and the demand for trans- related publications continued to increase. This is when I entered the picture.

When I first started to work for Neptune Productions, I drove from Philadelphia to Jack's home/shop on Allaire Road in Wall Township, New Jersey. It was about a 70 mile drive each way. Not an easy commute. Jack's home was a ramshackle farmette, with outbuildings and acreage enough to board horses. The business ran out of Jack's basement. A large room contained Jack's drawing table, other worktables, mail equipment, and shelves of stock: mostly softcore TG porn magazines and storybooks. Another room was outfitted as a complete darkroom, where I spent a fair amount of time developing film and making photographic prints. There was also a graphic arts camera which enlarged/reduced and created "photostats" including halftone prints for printing. I eventually mastered that equipment as well. Jack used another room to create "Treasure Chests" which were basically breast plates made of latex that covered a person from the waist to the collarbone, with realistic-looking breasts. Jack didn't sell a ton of these, but they were easy to make and a high profit item. We had a mouse, Pepito, who visited us almost daily begging for food.

Every day was different: sometimes I sat at a typewriter, churning out copy, but after Jack gained confidence in me, I would do this from home, without constantly making the commute back and forth. I would essentially take work home with me and deliver it the next time I went in. When I was onsite, I was usually answering mail, shooting "stats" or working in the darkroom. Jack's wife, Lynn, usually provided us with lunch. At 5 p.m. promptly, she would serve Jack the first of his evening martinis while he sat at his drawing table either doing magazine layouts or sketching and inking his illustrations and cartoons. I passed on the "happy hour" and instead, started on the long commute back to Philly.



“Dwain Bryan” was one of the many pseudonyms Jack used in our publications.

I used to love to watch Jack work. He would start by “writing” the cartoons on panels: the lettering in the cloud boxes. Then he would pencil in the characters. Jack considered this the creative part of the process. Afterwards, he would do the “inking” in which he would go over the penciled sketches with India ink to prepare them for printing. Jack usually did the inking at the end of the day while he sipped his martinis.

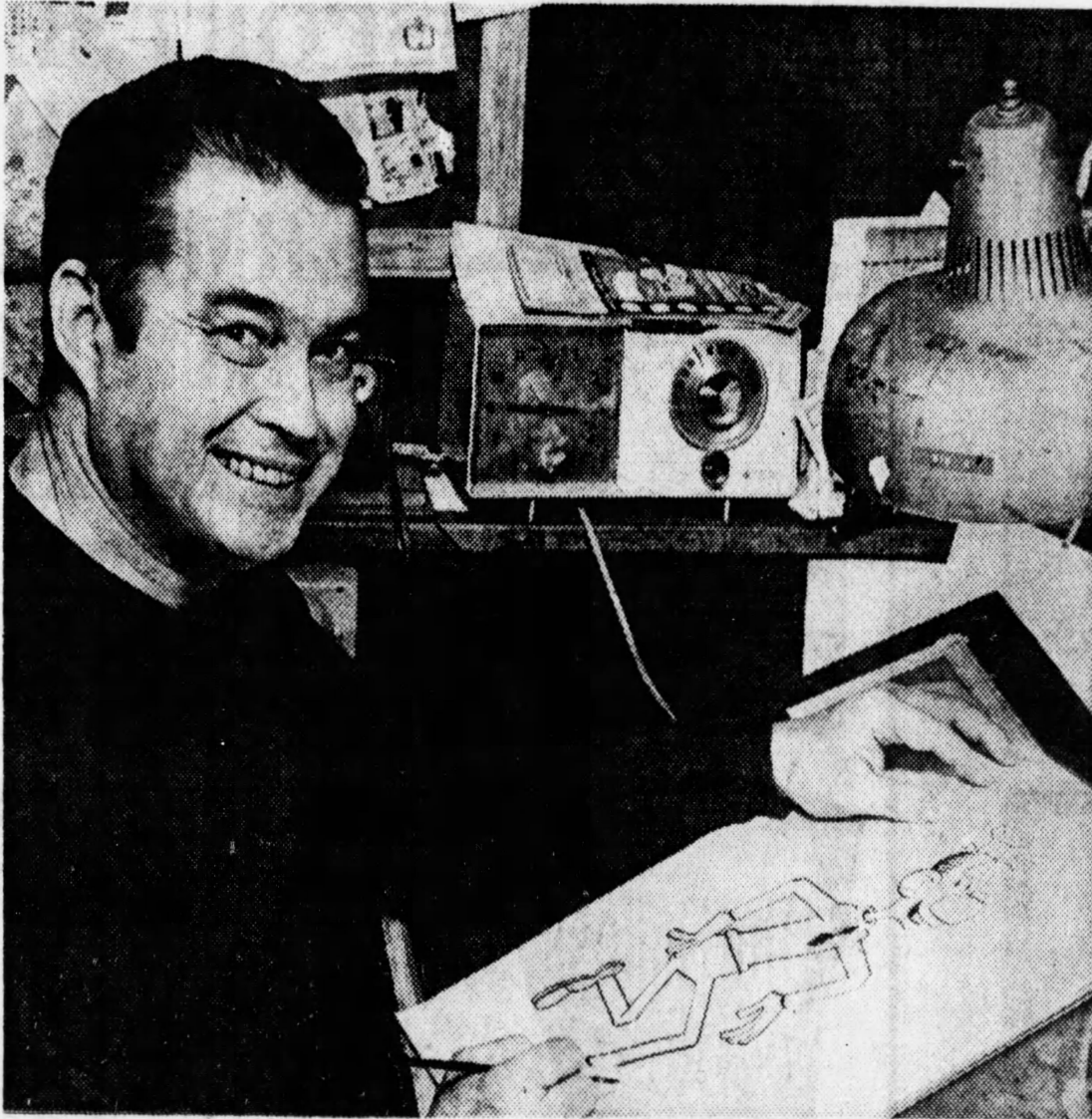
After a while, Jack’s relationship with his wife cooled down, and his relationship with his business partner, Betty Johnson, heated up. Betty was a very talented writer and editor. Born in Pittsburgh, Betty had lived in the South where she had been friends with Truman Capote and Harper Lee. As a young adult, Betty moved to New York, got a degree in Journalism and began working in the newspaper and publishing industry. She worked for the New York Herald Tribune, and later the Asbury Park Press, when she moved to Spring Lake New Jersey in 1964. Betty described herself as “...a Yankee in the Southland; a young lady with a drawl in the Northland; a Protestant in New York; a night-school college student; single at 29 and at a lot of other ages; married to a Catholic; without children at 33 (and married to a Catholic?); a divorced and working mother in the 60s; a female boss; a notch-year baby.” (APP March 7, 1987; APP March 1, 2004)

She did freelance editing and even wrote term papers for unscrupulous college students who had enough money to pay someone to do their work. I even dabbled in that sideline for a while. A local bookstore would attract clients, and the owner would call us up, asking if we wanted to write the paper. He would even supply us with reference books to do the job. It was a nice sideline, though I occasionally felt guilty for aiding in academic dishonesty. But a paycheck was a paycheck.

Increasingly, Jack was moving the business out of his basement. I think both his absence and the business’s absence were a relief to Lynn. We were nomadic for a while, as Jack tried out a couple of storefronts, but these never lasted long. I think he had trouble making the overhead. Eventually we settled into Betty’s very lovely home in Spring Lake. She had a Cape Cod with an attached garage, above which was an efficiency apartment that she rented out to the summer crowd, as her place was only a

couple of blocks from the beach. Neptune productions moved into the garage, I moved into the garage apartment, and Jack virtually moved into Betty's bedroom.

I'd roll out of bed in the morning, shower, and meet Betty for a cup of coffee in her kitchen. Then I'd go back to the apartment and answer copious amounts of mail from readers. The correspondence also included news items of interest that we could report in our publications, and I spent a fair amount of time perusing newspapers and magazines for articles that would be of interest to our readers.



Jack O'Brien, Wall Township, puts a happy face on the Sad Sack—the familiar comic book character whose adventures he has been dreaming up and drawing for five years. (Sad Sack, Copyright George Baker and Harvey Features Publications.)
(Press Photo)

Photo from the Asbury Park Press

Jack would roll in mid-morning, do a bit of work, and then the three of us would head out to lunch, usually at one of Spring Lake's nicer restaurants. Jack and Betty would start hitting the martinis, but I usually didn't join in, as I still had work to do. I ate well, and didn't spend a penny on these business lunches, and along with the free rent I was getting, it made my meager salary go pretty far. Returning home, Jack and Betty would disappear for a while, usually for some "afternoon delight" and I'd be back at work. Jack went home late in the afternoon, and Betty and I usually had dinner together. Then Betty went off to her room with a can of Miller Lite beer to set type. Betty set type on a Compugraphic Compuwriter phototypesetter, which was about the size of a washing machine. She kept it in a spare bedroom. This machine was a vast improvement over the IBM Selectric Composer that both Betty and I used to set type previously. This machine made you set each line of type twice, once flush left, and once justified. God forbid you made a typo. Most of the time we just set the type flush left. Additionally, Betty often edited my work "on the fly" as she was setting it in type. She really improved my product.

Meanwhile, after dinner I'd head back to my little apartment for some TV, or occasionally I would go out to run some errands. Every Friday I would take the day and head back to Philly for a couple of hours of electrolysis and occasionally a visit to my doc for a hormone shot. I think I was making just less than \$200 a week. But it was a wonderful time for me.

Jack used to drive to Manhattan about once a week, usually on a Tuesday. It was a busy day: he would make the rounds of the magazine publishers, trying to sell his cartoons. The editors would set a day to see the cartoonists one after another, and after Jack and his fellow cartoonists were done, they usually had lunch and drinks at a local watering hole, usually the Pen and Pencil. Jack would also deliver finished layouts to Star Distributors and bring back finished publications to sell. Star was the printer and distributor of all our adult publications. After his stop at Star, Jack would stop by his Manhattan mail drop for magazine orders. Then dinner, and the long drive home. On occasion Betty and I would accompany Jack, but never to Star Distributors. If I was with Jack, we would stop and see Lee Brewster at his boutique or head down to the Lower East Side to meet with Pudgy Roberts.

In 1976, after a couple of years of this lifestyle, I wanted to move on with my life. I felt like I had already said everything I wanted to say to my readers, and I just wanted to get a "real" job and blend into society. I was tired of being a "professional transsexual" to paraphrase Eddie Izzard. After I had established myself in a regular job during the week, I would still do some work for Jack and Betty. One or two weekends a month, I would drive to Betty's new digs in a high-rise apartment at the Jersey Shore and do some Neptune work. Finally in 1982, I moved to Florida. Sadly, I never really had closure with Jack, though I did manage to keep up with Betty for a little while.

On one occasion Betty remarked that Jack had been in deteriorating health since 1982. "Jack was slowing down, unable to do artwork, refused to talk on the phone, shouldn't be driving, needed help desperately." Jack was suffering from hypertension, heart failure, and cerebellar degeneration, largely from his long-term alcohol use. He died on December 8, 1984, at the age of 63. In addition to his wife Lynne, Jack left behind six kids and 11 grandkids. He was with Betty when he suffered that fatal heart attack.

Betty kept Neptune Productions going until her own health began failing. She died on February 28, 2004, in Bayville, New Jersey. I guess this makes me the last of the Three Musketeers...