

Questions for WILLIAM SCHMIDT

March 1, 2006

Thomas J. Pucher asked William Schmidt, *Falcon Crest* story editor between 1984 and 1987, questions about his work on the set.

Bill Schmidt's answers are in bold print.

[The parts in brackets were edited for publication purposes.]

Bill, first of all, I would like to thank you for taking the time for this interview.

Any friend of Earl's... I will be happy to answer any questions. Working on *Falcon* was one of my best experiences in TV...

Okay, let's get started with a few general questions about the series. As you already mentioned how much you liked working on *Falcon Crest*...

I loved the first two seasons that I was on *Falcon Crest* [1984-85 and 1985-86].

When I was a student at *Northwestern University*, I sent letters to every major and minor production company asking advice about what things I should do in order to become a TV writer. I only sent one letter to a person — Earl Hamner, because I loved *The Waltons* (I, too, was a poor kid wanting to be a writer). Well, Earl sent me a lovely letter back, along with an invitation to meet him when I moved to Hollywood.

In L.A., Earl had me in for a meeting and offered to read my stuff. He liked what he read and helped me get my first agent. He did not have the time to mentor me, but asked his then story editor, E.F. (Ernie) Wallengren to take me under his wing as Earl had taken Ernie.

Ernie became my mentor, guardian angel and friend (he was best man at my wedding). He helped me learn the craft. I managed to break into the business by myself — I got people at *Universal* interested in me and I wrote on *Knight Rider* for 1½ seasons. That was a miserable experience. After, Ernie and Earl invited me onto *Falcon*; I happily accepted their offer.

There, I met Ernie's mother, Claire Whitaker and step-father, Rod Peterson, a team who ran the show for Earl. Rod and Claire became a second family for me and my wife. So... it's no surprise that the first two seasons were wonderful. To learn from four great mentors — what a stroke of luck. Earl, Rod and Claire left after the [my] second season [1985-86], and the show was taken over by another producer [Jeff Freilich]. That was a most unpleasant experience. To be fair to the new guy, nobody before or since Earl (and I've now been in this business 24 years) has been able to compare to Earl. That said, the new producer, by any standards, was a nightmare.

How did you like filming on location in the Napa Valley?

I loved Napa. It was magical. It was much less crowded than it is now and the people were extra nice to us. My fondest memory was when Earl took Rod, Claire, Ernie and his wife and me and my wife to a brand new restaurant called *The French Laundry*, which is now, as you might know, one of the, if



not the, finest restaurant in the U.S.



As all other crew members, Bill Schmidt loved shooting in the Napa Valley.
Views of the valley near Calistoga north of St. Helena.

Are you still in contact with anyone from the cast & crew?

[...] Ana - Alicia's son and my daughter are in the same 5th grade class. I see Earl all the time — I moved into his office building [... in 2004]. Claire and Rod remained our second family. We lost Rod [... in 2004] and, tragically, Ernie got ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) and died, at age 50, [... in 2003].

I have run into Billy Moses and Lorenzo Lamas at various function. I've seen David Selby at parties Rod and Claire have thrown. I interviewed Susan Sullivan for a job on my own show a few years ago (*Prey*), but couldn't hire her because she just wasn't right for the role. I've seen Harry Harris (director) at Rod and Claire's parties and Reza Badiyi at Ernie's funeral. One of the crew, Andy Ackerman, was head of production for *Warners* when I produced my show. I never thought about it much, but I guess I have stayed in contact with a lot of them!



Bill Schmidt is still in contact with Ana - Alicia, who portrayed Melissa Agretti on *Falcon Crest*.

Earl Hamner, who works in the same office building, has been a friend of Bill's for decades.



Talking of all these wonderful people... Who were your favorite cast members to work with?

I liked them all a lot — I mean a whole lot. I never had one negative experience with any of the cast regulars (aside from the one time Jane Wyman got angry at me — and, believe me, it very much felt like Angela Channing being angry at you!).

Of our many guest characters, my favorite was Ken Olin, who played, as we affectionately called him, The Priest From The East, who got going with Melissa (Ana - Alicia). However, the network didn't like him and for some reason, I was picked to tell him the bad news. He was extremely distraught, his wife had just

had a baby and the only thing going on in his career was this pilot called *Thirtysomething*. Thus, getting fired from *Falcon Crest* was the best career break Ken ever had!



When Jane Wyman got angry...

Being fired from *Falcon Crest* was a great opportunity for Ken Olin. His career started out with the *Thirtysomething* TV series.



Oh yes, *Thirtysomething* became very successful!

We talked a lot about the cast and the writing / producing staff. What about the other crew members? Any favorites among them?

I enjoyed the crew, but, as story editor, really didn't get to know them well. I had a close relationship with Reza Badiyi, though.

I can imagine. He is a very nice guy — I met him on Sunset Strip in L.A. in the summer of 2004.

What was your most memorable scene?

This is easy. My favorite scene was one I wrote for Jane and Cesar Romero. They were having dinner and were wistfully discussing what it would have been like if they had married when they met as young people. Jane and Cesar were just wonderful. CBS later re-aired that scene on one of their tribute shows to *Falcon*.

Oh yes, I also remember that scene. It was in *Echoes* (# 102 <7.04>) at the beginning of season 5. It was beautifully written and created a very familiar atmosphere between these two marvelous characters. It gave us the impression how close they were despite all the years that had gone by since they were teenage lovers, and we discovered a completely new side of Angela — she laughed a lot with Peter, and we also felt the passion between those mature characters,... those vintage lovers... Cesar Romero was perfectly cast; he and Jane had a wonderful chemistry. I guess, of all the men in Angela's life, Peter Stavros was the one whom she really loved most and who was just perfect for her. He was often very charming and tender with her, but he could be equally stubborn and quite harsh whenever she needed that — wonderful to see how those two characters sometimes clashed, but finally fell into each other's arms again. Great acting and great writing!

What was your favorite storyline?

I always loved the Cole - Melissa - Lance triangle. Any scene with any of them — or any grouping of them — was bound to sparkle.

Melissa between her men — Bill Schmidt loved the "love triangle" between Lance, Melissa and Cole.

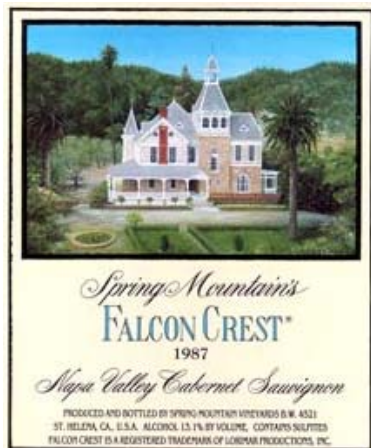


Is there a storyline you really do not like (regardless of the season or writer)?

Unfortunately, I would have to say that the Nazi gold plotline was my least favorite.

Do you know if any props are available somewhere? I happened to come across some prop wine bottles from the first season in L.A., which I bought, but I always wondered what happened to many of the other characteristic props, such as *New Globe* newspapers or Richard's toy soldiers for example. David did not know either what happened to Richard's soldiers.

As to props, every now and again I see some for sale on E-Bay but nowhere else.



Memorabilia:
A wine label of *Spring Mountain's Falcon Crest 1987 Cabernet Sauvignon* and a wine coaster which was a *Lorimar* promotional item for the 100th episode.

Wine labels of *Spring Mountain's Falcon Crest 1989 Sauvignon Blanc* are available from the *DFCF* memorabilia store. Check it out! (Subject to change without notice.)

We already talked about how you came to *Falcon Crest*. You started as a story editor and writer in season 4 — after the show had undergone sort of a regime change; Bob McCullough had just left, and Earl's friends, Rod & Claire Peterson, came on as executive supervising producers.

Was it difficult to start working on an established show? Or did the changes after season 3 — new producers coming in and moving the sets from *The Burbank Studios* to *CBS-MTM* — help in any way?

It was difficult only in the sense that Rod, Claire and I were all starting new. It took us awhile to get our sea legs.

Did you watch *Falcon Crest* before you came aboard?

I watched *Falcon* only because Ernie was on it and Earl created it. I loved *Dallas* and I found *Falcon* a more interesting, less exciting prime time soap.

I read your reflection in Earl's bio, Jim Person's new book *Earl Hamner: From Walton's Mountain to Tomorrow*, where I first learnt that you were mentored by the late Ernie Wallengren. You already spoke a lot about Ernie in our interview, too. I personally appreciate his writing for *Falcon* very much. His many episodes — actually he outnumbered any other writer with a total of 44 of the 227 scripts — were always strongly influenced by the show's history, and it could be noticed that he worked very carefully with storylines from the past. What was it like to work with Ernie, who was known as the "walking encyclopedia" of the show?

I loved Ernie in all ways. He was my mentor, friend, best man at my wedding. All four of us, Rod, Claire, Ernie, myself, were bull-headed and opinionated, so there were a few clashes, but they were always creative, never personal. Given

that neither Claire, Rod nor I knew the show when we came on it, I don't know how we could've done it without Ernie and his base of knowledge, not only about what worked on the show, but about what didn't work (as well as info on how to deal with each actor).

You wrote some very thrilling yet highly emotional episodes. *Echoes* (# 102 <5.04>), for example, is a show with a lot of suspense, especially in the cliffhanger scene when Anna Rossini sets fire to the *Falcon Crest Mansion*; but it also contains many emotions, especially in the "amnesia storyline" when Maggie finds an old letter she wrote to Chase in Viet Nam. *Inconceivable Affairs* (# 108 <5.10>), *Captive Hearts* (# 126 <5.28>), *The Stranger Within* (# 130 <6.03>) and *False Front* (# 139 <6.12>) are just a few more examples of episodes with a strong emphasis on emotions. One of my personal favorites is *Dead End* (# 160 <7.05>), your last script for the show; it is best remembered for an overwhelming scene in the dilapidated *Gioberti House* when Maggie risks one last look at her home and picks up the falcon coat of arms, almost the only thing that survived the explosion without damage. Packing lots of emotions into an episode was also one of Ernie Wallengren's favorite writing techniques. How much influence did his way of writing and preparing of storylines have on you?



Dead End was the last *Falcon Crest* episode written by Bill Schmidt.

Ernie's influence was total. As I've mentioned, he was my mentor, as Earl was his, so we all came from the same "bloodline" so to speak. I am pleased to say that Ernie's technique became mine. Ernie always believed in me and supported me, which allowed me to swing for some of those emotional fences you speak about. I miss him every day.

I know Earl was not happy with the changes in the series when Jeff Freilich and Joanne Brough took over in 1986. Seasons 6 and 7, however, turned out to be very interesting and exciting although they were pretty different from the early years. What do you personally think about these changes? How was the situation on the set as you experienced it? Were the cast and crew happy with it?

I had major problems with Jeff Freilich. He wanted me off the show. Earl asked him, as a favor, to keep me on. Which he did, only if he could "bust" my rank, so to speak. As that year progressed, however, Jeff apologized to me for his actions, and even asked me to come back to help write the bible for season 7. I declined, both because I was off writing TV-movies and because *Falcon* went from the most wonderful environment to a very bad one under Jeff. As for the cast and crew, they also hated the Freilich regime.

Was that also the reason why you left after *Dead End*, and was it in any way connected with the fact that Ernie Wallengren and Greg Strangis had already left after the season 6 finale?

We all left for the same reason — Jeff hated [and] feared us and we found him a most unpleasant person to work with.

In the last two years (seasons 8 and 9), the show was drifting away from the original concept, which was apparently caused by a completely new crew taking over the series in 1988. The changes Jeff Freilich had brought in two years before were like nothing compared to the drastic overhaul Michael Filerman and Camille Marchetta (season 8) and later Jerry Thorpe (season 9) gave the show. Did you watch *Falcon Crest* after you had left?

I confess I never watched the show after I left it. Interestingly, two of the writers on those seasons were Bob Cochran and Joel Surnow, who later created *24*. I believe they first became partners on *Falcon*.

My partners and I tried to instigate a reunion in 1998, but CBS and Warner Bros. unfortunately were not receptive to the idea as they thought the age of the classic prime time soap opera was over. Do you think the situation might have changed considering the latest reunion specials of *Lorimar* soaps, *Dallas: Return to Southfork* and *Knots Landing: Together Again*? I was wondering if a reunion special could be a viable idea for *Falcon Crest*'s 25th anniversary on Dec 4, 2006. Would you like to join such a project and do you know whom to contact at CBS nowadays to instigate it?

I would of course love to be a part of any reunion. Les Moonves is the only person who could green light such a project. Given the wild success of *Desperate Housewives*, he might reconsider his feelings.

What most fans are interested in are, of course, the "secrets" from the production office — any *Falcon Crest* storyline plans that were discussed, but did not make it to the screen.

The Nazi treasure / cartel storyline in season 4 was axed quite abruptly due to the network's interference. Whereas the audience did not seem to be happy with it during the show's original run, the situation seems to have changed in reruns because many fans mentioned to me they regretted the plotline ended so soon. Sarah Douglas once told me that the writers originally had exciting plans of how to continue with that plotline. Do you remember anything about these initial plans? Or do you maybe even have the original seasonal bible?

I don't have the bible, or, if I do, it is packed away in my garage. Finding anything in my garage would be like looking for that Nazi gold! As I said above, I didn't love the plotline, but I wasn't happy when we were forced to abandon it. I knew where Ernie was going with it at the time, and also knew that the most exciting parts were coming up.

Similar "secrets" are tidbits about big name stars you were about to hire. It is rumored that a number of celebrities were taken into consideration for special guest appearances during seasons 4 through 7 besides those who finally made it to the show.

We talked about a lot of different stars, but the only one I remember particularly is Sophia Loren. Earl, Ernie, Rod and Claire were kind enough to let me join the meeting with Carlo Ponti, Sophia's husband, to discuss her

coming on the show. I think she was pretty interested, but eventually turned us down. The funny part was when we met with Gina Lollobrigida. We kept the meeting with Ponti a secret and since neither Gina or her people asked, she did not know that we first contacted Sophia. In that first meeting, Gina exclaimed, "I am so happy! I am so sick and tired of always being offered Sophia Loren's leftovers!" All of us around the room assiduously avoided each others eye contact.

Later, the relations between Gina and everyone else with the possible exception of David Selby, turned sour. She left the show without saying goodbye. A few days later, a giant present arrived for the writers from Gina — a huge platter of dried prunes! I always loved her for that.



Sophia Loren was the original choice for a special guest appearance on *Falcon Crest* — it never materialized. Gina Lollobrigida was hired to play Francesca Gioberti. Her farewell was quite "falconish": She left without saying goodbye.



Wow, what a present! What a great humor she has!

Your memories about the show are fabulous. We talked a lot about *Falcon*. But what do you do nowadays?

I've been at HBO the last four years doing *Carnivale* and pilots, one of which, *Suckers*, a black comedy about vampires, may get shot this year.

Sounds as if you are quite busy. Good luck with your current projects and thank you for sharing your old *Falcon* stories with us.

Thomas — it was great fun answering these questions! They brought back so many happy memories.

Thank you again, Bill. It was a pleasure talking to you.