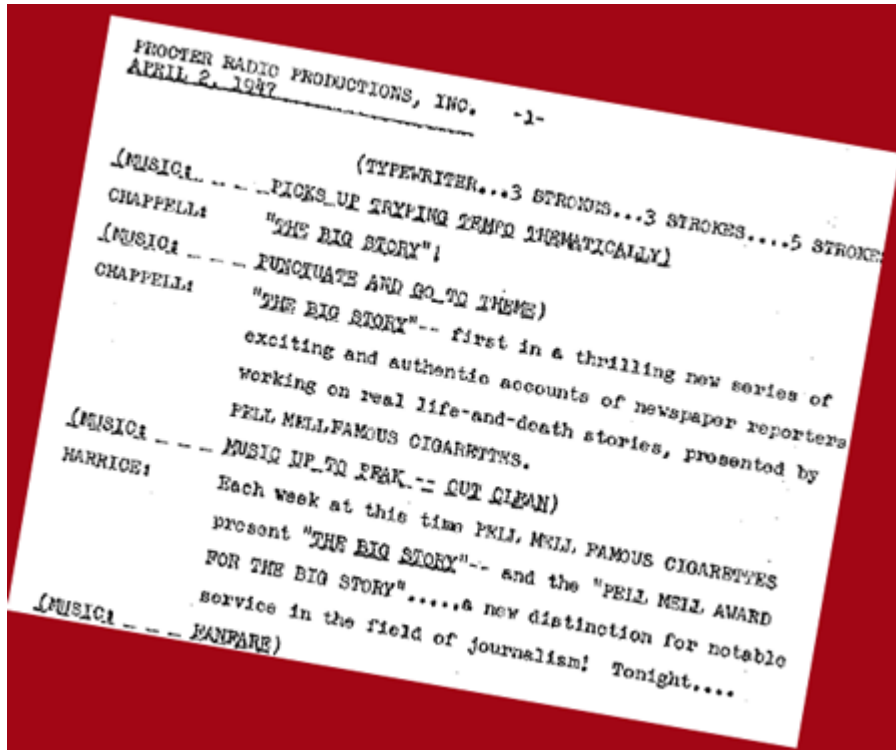


The Big Story

by Bob Stepno

This is a work in progress; this note will be removed when updates are [complete](#)



The first Big Story script, via tobaccodocuments.org

For eight years on radio and nine on television, "The Big Story" series dramatized hundreds of "how I got the story" tales, primarily murder cases and other major crimes. The tobacco company sponsor presented each real-life reporter with a \$500 "Pall Mall Award for The Big Story." Stories often credited the journalist with uncovering a clue to a crime or going undercover to get the story, but they also emphasized police-press cooperation.

For example, in the seventh episode, *Detroit Times* reporter Ruth Montgomery is asked by the police to pass herself off as the member of a secret society to investigate "The Black Legion Murder." While the names were changed in the radio dramas, the actual 1936-1937 [criminal cases](#) were well known — and had already inspired a feature film with Humphrey Bogart before Montgomery's 1947 Big Story episode.

Thanks to the national tobacco [lawsuit settlement](#), archived copies of the program's scripts are more readily available than her original newspaper stories. Her *Detroit Evening Times* disappeared in a 1960 merger.

Accounts of the murder Montgomery covered are among hundreds of Black Legion stories available in *The New York Times*, [The Detroit News](#), and in wire service accounts, such as those preserved in Google's news archive of scanned papers from as far afield as [Nashua, N.H.](#), [Spartansburg, S.C.](#), the [Milwaukee](#), [Hopkinsville, Ky.](#) and [Bend, Ore.](#)

According to "The Black Legion Murder" script, not only was the killer found guilty after Montgomery's original story, but 22 leaders of the secret group were indicted for subversive activities. The implication is that Montgomery's clues to the identity of the murdered man contributed to the convictions, although it's unclear what value her undercover work added. (See episode 7 in the "[Big Story program archive 001-013](#)" [PDF file](#) at TobaccoDocuments.org.)

An audio recording of the broadcasting is not available, but the script is colorful and dramatic, and does parallel the facts of the murder case: Black Legion members were convicted of shooting a W.P.A. worker, claiming that the man was being punished for abusing his wife — an accusation both he and she denied. (Ruth Montgomery's *Detroit Times* is gone, but another paper, [The Detroit News](#), has a history page on the Black Legion cases, with [photos](#) of members with black robes, hoods, pirate-looking hats, whips and other weapons.)

The script begins with an announcer describing Ruth's arrival at a city morgue with a list of missing persons, facing the usual "They shouldn't send a girl on a man's job" banter with a police lieutenant...

Lieutenant: "Mike — roll the tarp away from his face — what's left of it. (*Pause.*) Okay, Ruth. Had enough?"

Ruth: (*She certainly has.*) Uh-huh. I — that's enough..."

Announcer: That riddled, grotesque corpse is the beginning of tonight's Big Story, presented by Pall Mall famous cigarettes...

You are Ruth Montgomery, just rounding out your first six months on your first big city paper — The *Detroit Times*. The City editor's had you take a gander at an unknown corpse found in a Dearborn gully — with five bullet holes in it. You've had your look — and two cups of black [coffee](#) — and now, armed with a list of missing persons, plus some dope the cops gave you at the scene, you're following an interne down the corridor of a ward in Kiefer Hospital... — *Episode #7 script, May 14, 1947*

(The story wasn't Montgomery's last contact with the dead. After [40 years in journalism](#), including becoming the first woman in the *New York Daily News* Washington bureau and writing a nationally syndicated column, she became a "new age" psychic, [writing books](#) about [spiritualism, past lives and more.](#))

From its start in April 1947, The Big Story called itself "a thrilling new series of exciting and authentic accounts of newspaper reporters working on real life-and-death stories." The first Pall Mall Award went, the script said, "to Joseph Garretson of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, for his

heroism, daring, and intelligence in *helping solve* the thrilling case of ‘The Kid and the Box.’” (The “as broadcast” script has the words “helping solve” written over the word “solving.”)

All names were changed except those of the reporters, and liberties are taken with the adaptations — including dialogue between murderers and their victims — in the interest of radio drama. If the series is to be believed, it was a simpler time for police reporters, who were given priority access to crime scenes, joined in on raids, beat the police to clues, and were even asked for help getting a confession out of a particularly hard nut to crack.

That’s the role Dorothy Kilgallen plays in “The Bobby Sox Kid from Bayonne,” although the grilling takes a feminine touch — and the loan of a powder puff — to get the teenage killer to tell all.

In the episode, “Murder and a Frustrated Father,” when United Press reporter Sam Melnick and a police officer approach a murder suspect, the policeman asks Melnick if he is carrying a gun, hands him a flashlight instead, and later credits Melnick with saving his life by flashing the light in the gunman’s eyes. Melnick’s comment at the end indicates that the man already had shot himself, which is not part of the dramatization.

Nolan Bullock of the *Tulsa Tribune* is introduced in the 1949 episode “Three Coins Spell Death” as working as “an undercover agent for the state crime bureau,” negotiating for shipment of bootleg liquor, when the murder case pops up. He’s also described as “a reporter with a flattened nose, and you got it by sticking it consistently into other people’s business.” The dead man and the bootleggers, of course, wind up being the same story.

Sometimes the reporter’s tricks of the trade are part of the focus — such as the *Denver Post*’s Bernard Beckwith holding a small-town telephone line occupied so that it would be available when he had the lead for his story.

Each night’s featured reporter accepted a cash prize from the program’s tobacco sponsors, Pall Mall or Lucky Strike, usually making an acceptance statement by telegram at the end of the show, complete with “telegraphese” lack of superfluous words like “the” and “an,” recounting later developments in the case.

Because of the program’s American Tobacco Company affiliation and the federal settlement of tobacco lawsuits, the [University of California at San Francisco tobacco advertising archives](#) and sites like [TobaccoDocuments.org](#) include full program scripts, usually edited with full information about cast and crew. The Old Time Radio Researchers have archived copies of the [Big Story scripts](#) at their website.

Few of the reporters are well-known today, with possible exceptions like Dorothy Kilgallen — although her “Big Story” was a hatchet-murder jailhouse interview from her early days as a New York *Evening Journal* reporter, not something related to her later national column, radio or television work.

Far from “breaking news,” these anthology dramas sometimes dipped deep into the pasts of the reporters in question, and just how far back is not mentioned in the presentation. One 1950s televised episode about tabloid publisher Emile Gauvreau of the New York *Evening Graphic* reached back to his first newspaper job in New Haven, Conn., about 30 years earlier.

John Dunning’s book *Tune in Yesterday* or *The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (p.88) says producer Bernard J. Prockter was inspired by a *Newsweek* article about reporters whose story pardoned a man who had been convicted of murder 14 years earlier — which sounds like the plot of “[Call Northside 777](#).” The series was popular enough to challenge popular singer Bing Crosby’s variety show.

“Many reporters who won the Big Story award looked back at the show with a mixture of affection and amusement,” Dunning wrote. “Their stories were highly dramatized, often to the extent that the subjects had trouble recognizing themselves on the air.”

The folks at DigitalDeliFTP have done their usual excellent job checking newspaper listings, Billboard Magazine and more to create “[The Definitive The Big Story Radio Log](#)” webpage identifying cast members, announcers, directors and plot points for 381 episodes.

Radio collector J. David Goldin’s archive describes 24 episodes in his [The Big Story collection](#), including casts, production information, and listening notes.

[The Old Time Radio Researchers Group’s OTRRpedia page on The Big Story](#) in summer 2012 listed 37 episodes as being generally available, while its [Old Time Radio Researchers Group log](#) listed 383 episodes as having been broadcast between 1947 and 1955.

The source of the Internet Archive’s The Big Story MP3 files is listed as the [Times Past Old Time Radio blog](#). Some include podcast-style introductions, along with the typographical errors to be expected with collectors’ traded tapes with hand-written labels. (For example, Sam Melnick of United Press is identified as “Sam Metnick.”)

Some, such as the Melnick episode, are recordings of rebroadcasts by Armed Forces Radio, minus the tobacco advertising.

The James Fusco episode, broadcast June 4, 1947, includes a spoken introduction by the reporter himself, apparently added while he tape-recorded the broadcast over the air from a Cleveland station. He identifies the 1929 “Snook-Hicks” murder case that the story was based on. How his tape recording made its way into the archives of old-time-radio collectors is not mentioned.