

A RIOTOUS IMAGINATION; OR, DIME NOVELS IN AMERICA.



"For a dime novel you require only three things—a riotous imagination, a dramatic instinct, and a right hand that never tires."

—Eugene Sawyer, 1902.

Quoted by Gelett Burgess in "The Confessions of a Dime-Novelist," *The Bookman: an Illustrated Magazine of Literature and Life*. Vol. 15, August 1902. pp. 528-533.

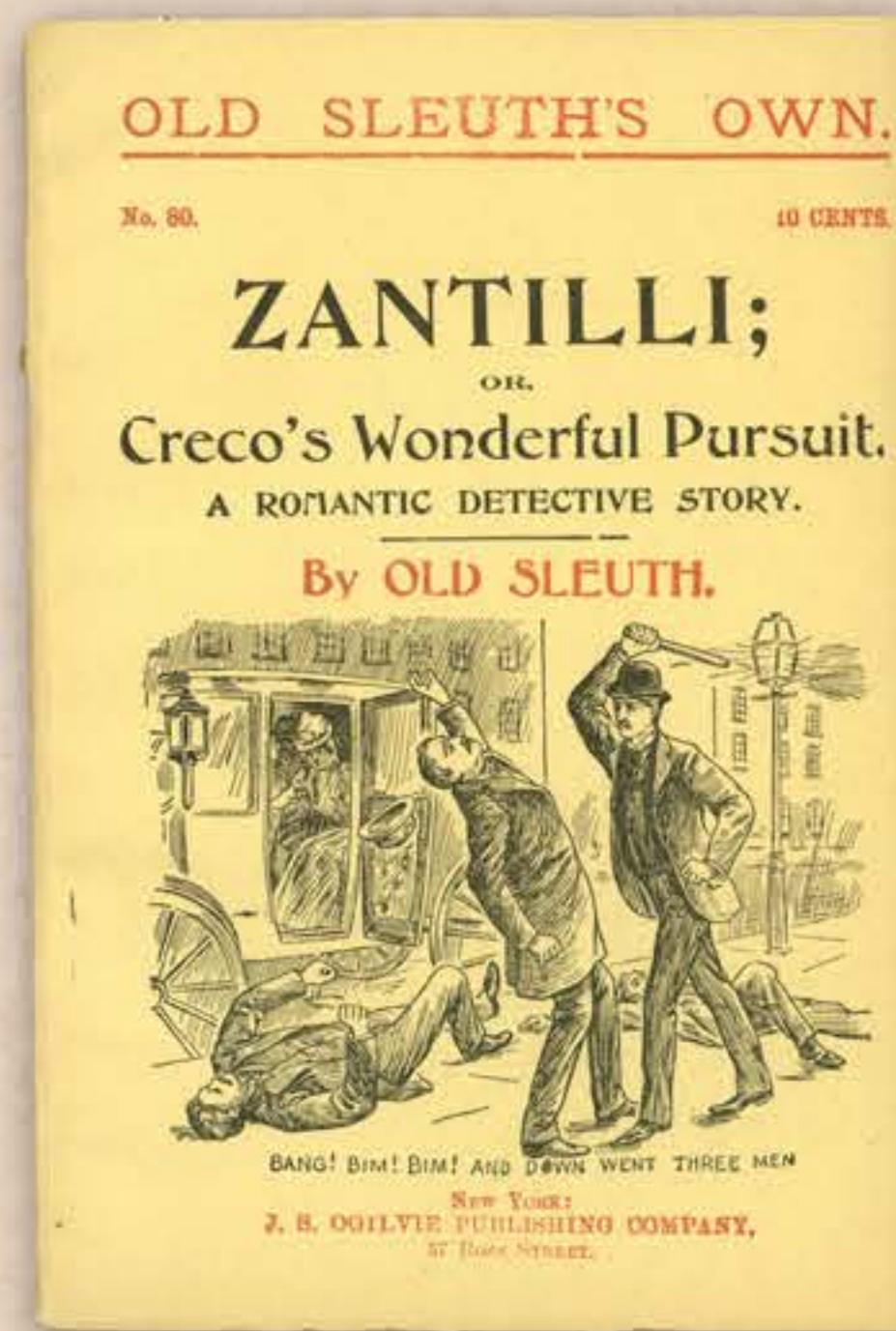
Dime novels, nickel novels, story-papers, pamphlet novels, novelettes, red-backs, yellow-backs, yellow-covered literature, paper-covered literature, railroad literature, broadsheets, libraries of adventure, cheap libraries, working-girl stories, adventure stories, domestic romances, Western tales, pulps, trash...

Whatever their name, these cheap melodramas captivated, and even defined, Americans for decades in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

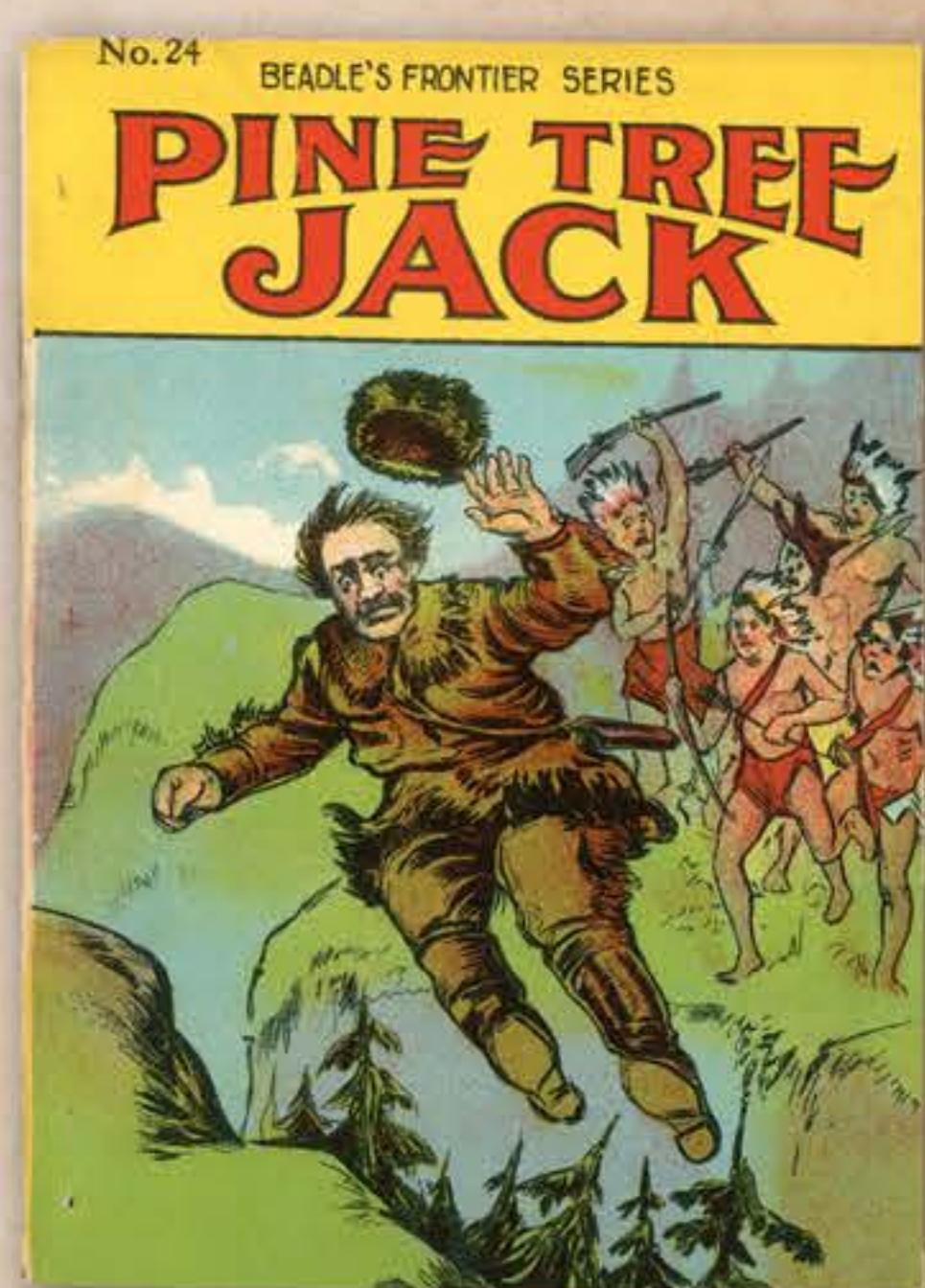
WHAT ARE DIME NOVELS?

Dime novels are sensationalist fiction printed on cheap paper, a grade lower than newsprint, and distributed widely via post, railway, newsstands and shops.

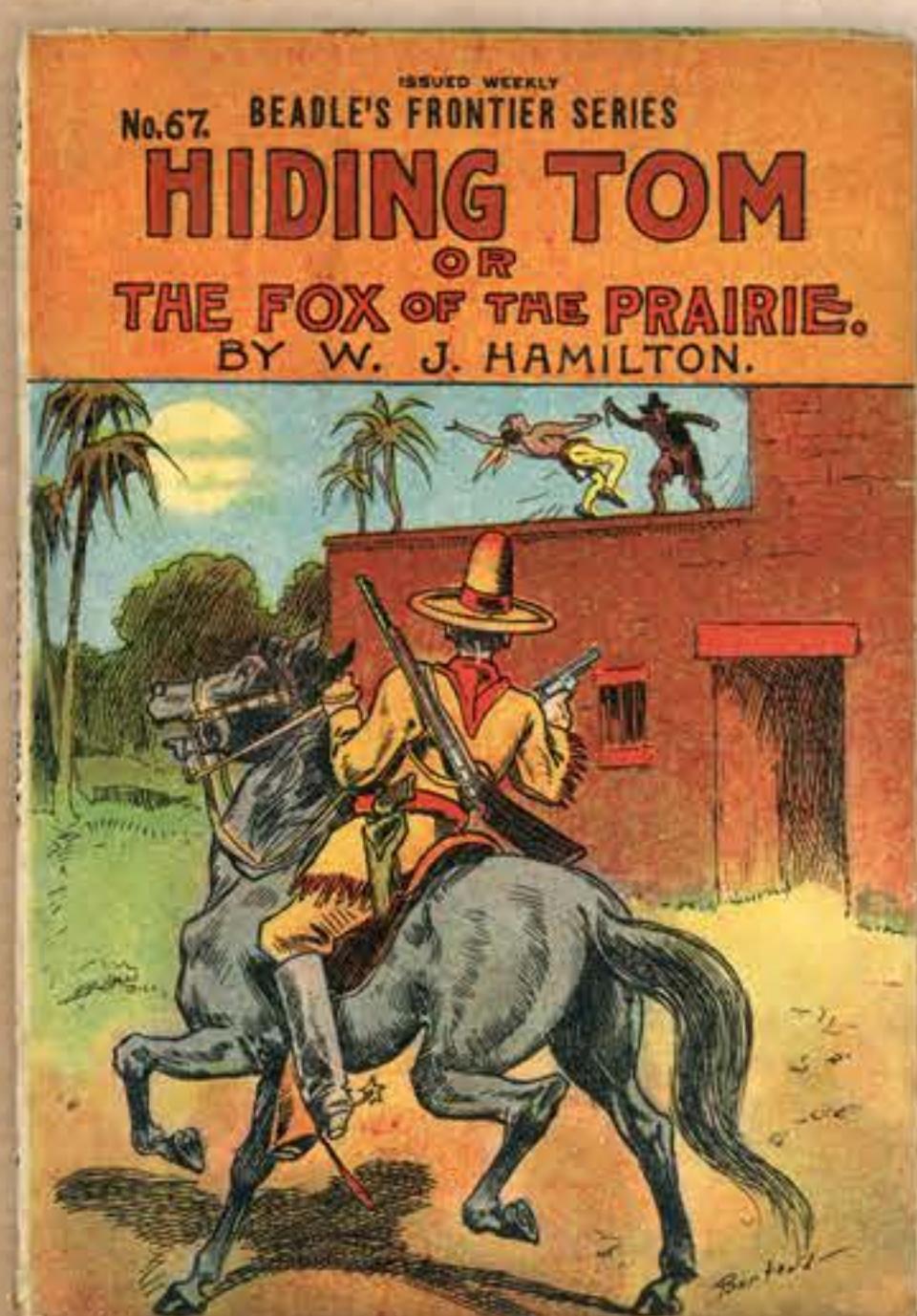
The term “dime novel” was originally a brand name for a series of books published by Beadle & Company (later Beadle & Adams), that cost ten cents each, but the phrase was soon applied to similar books published by others.



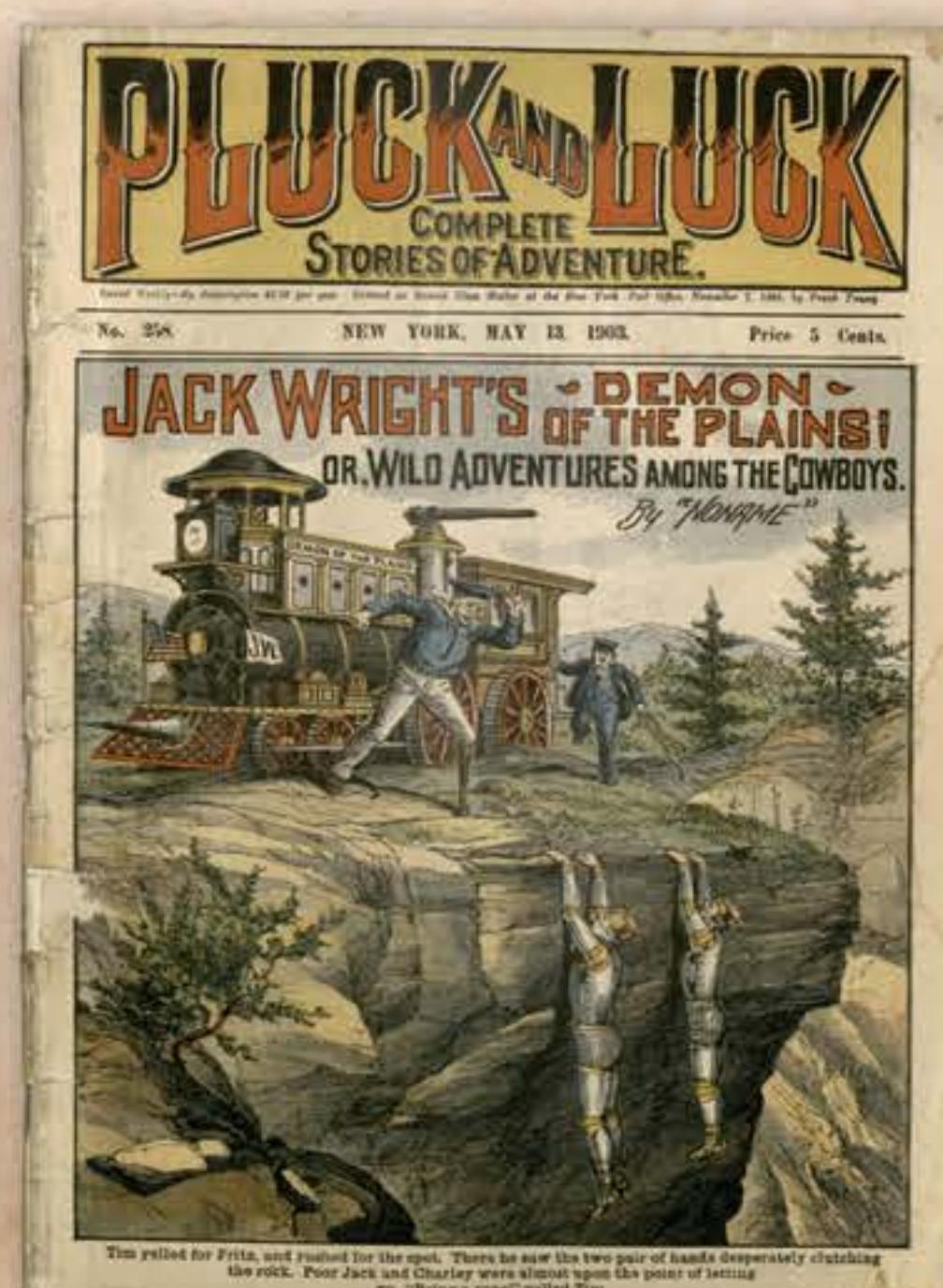
Old Sleuth. *Zantilli; or Creco's Wonderful Pursuit*. *Old Sleuth's Own*. New York: J.S. Ogilvie, c1897. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



Carlton, L. C. *Pine Tree Jack, or, Buried in the Sierras*. Beadle's Frontier Series, No. 24. Cleveland: A. Westbrook, c1908. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



Hamilton, W. J. *Hiding Tom, or, The Fox of the Prairie*. Beadle's Frontier Series No. 67. Cleveland: A. Westbrook, c. 1909. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



"Noone" (anon.). *Jack Wright's Demon of the Plains; or, Wild Adventures among the Cowboys*. *Pluck and Luck: Complete Stories of Adventure*. No. 258. New York: Frank Tousey, 1903. Courtesy Allan P. Kirby Collection, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

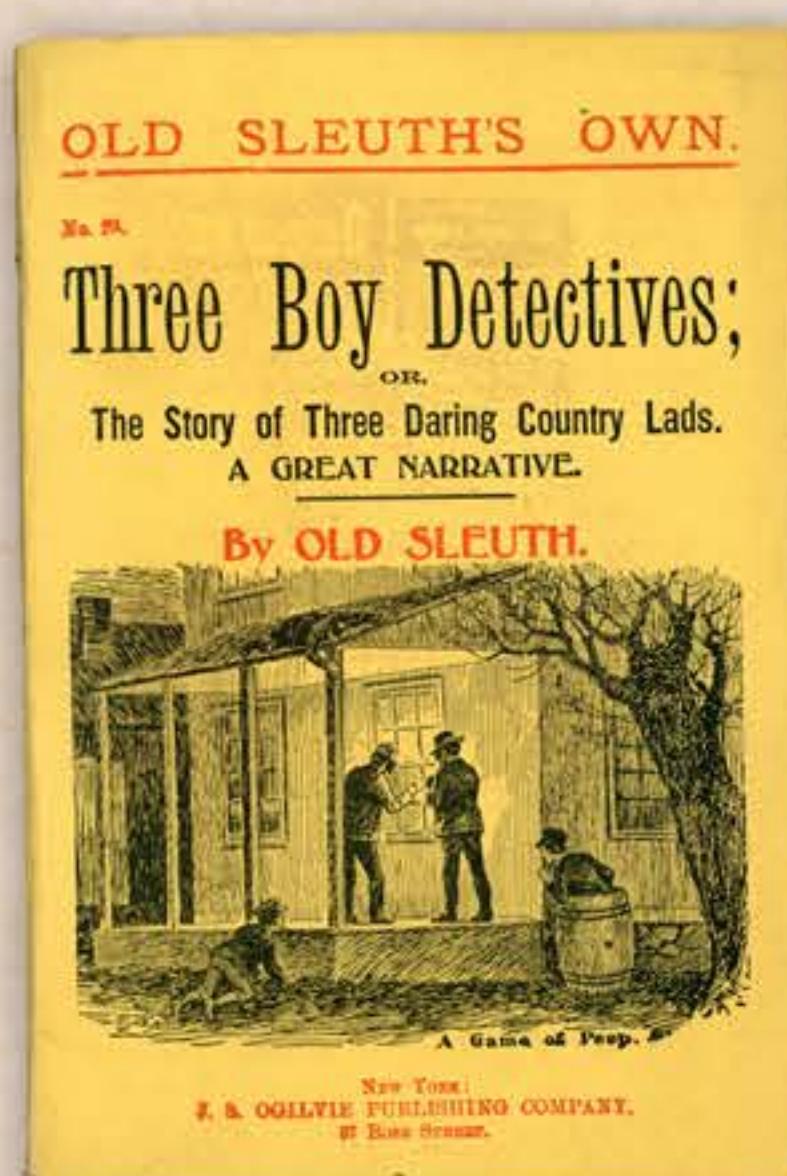
Dime novels catered to readers' senses of horror, romance and adventure. Often set on physical or social borders such as the American frontier and the seamy underbelly of cities, these novels were packed full of high emotion, criminal violence, ghosts, sex, disguises and battles between good and evil.

ORIGINS

Broadsheets and pamphlets of the 17th and 18th centuries thrilled readers with lurid descriptions of criminals and their crimes. In the United States, by the 19th century these developed into weekly "story-papers" that circulated nationally.

Story-papers carried several pieces of fiction, each designed to appeal to different members of a family: romance and domestic fiction for women, adventure for men, and juvenile stories for children.

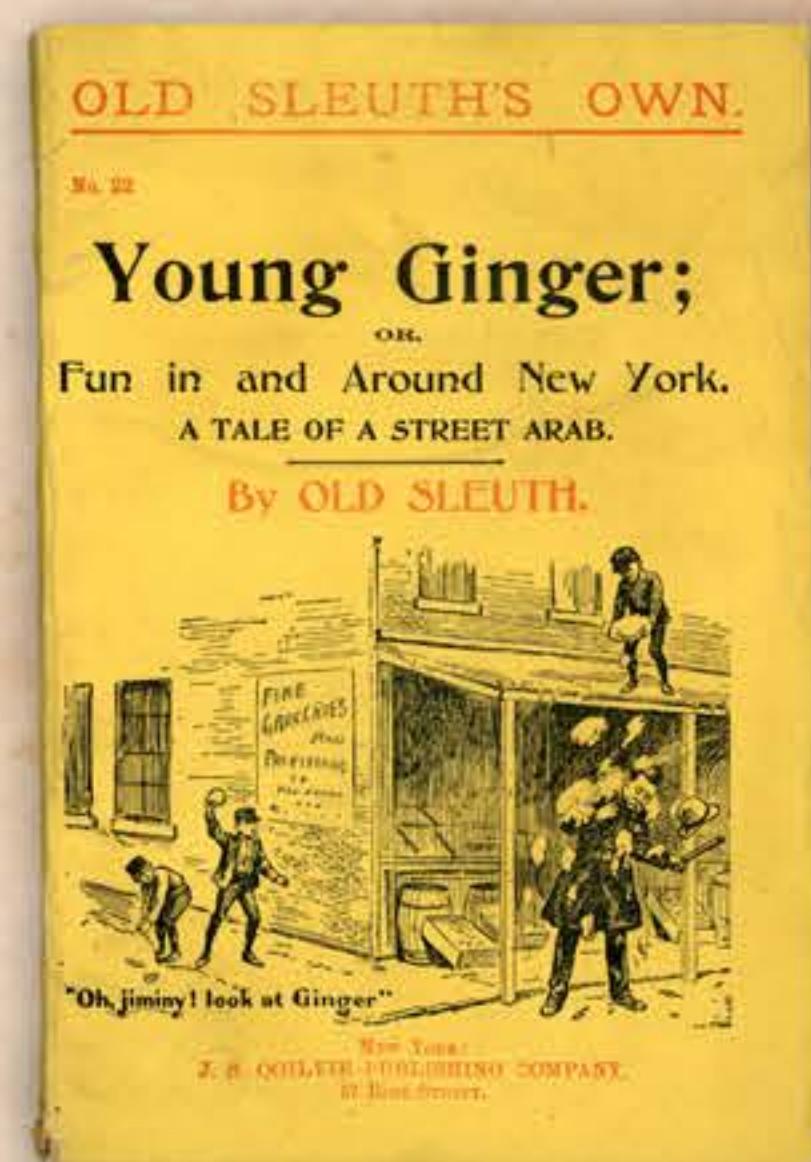
Most story-papers had a moral tone, but some of them featured sensationalized fiction.



Old Sleuth. *Three boy detectives, or, The story of three daring country lads: a great narrative.* Old Sleuth's Own. New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1895. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

In 1860 Beadle & Company created a line of cheap paperbacks that sold for 10 cents, that sold 4,000,000 books by 1865. Other publishers soon followed.

Publishers kept prices low, selling the books for a nickel or a dime, to encourage low-income readers who couldn't afford more "serious" novels that might cost a dollar or two.



Old Sleuth. *Young Ginger, or, Fun in and around New York: a tale of a street Arab.* Old Sleuth's Own. New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, 1895. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

Dime novels were written in many genres. Westerns and detective novels survive in greater numbers because collectors thought they were more important.

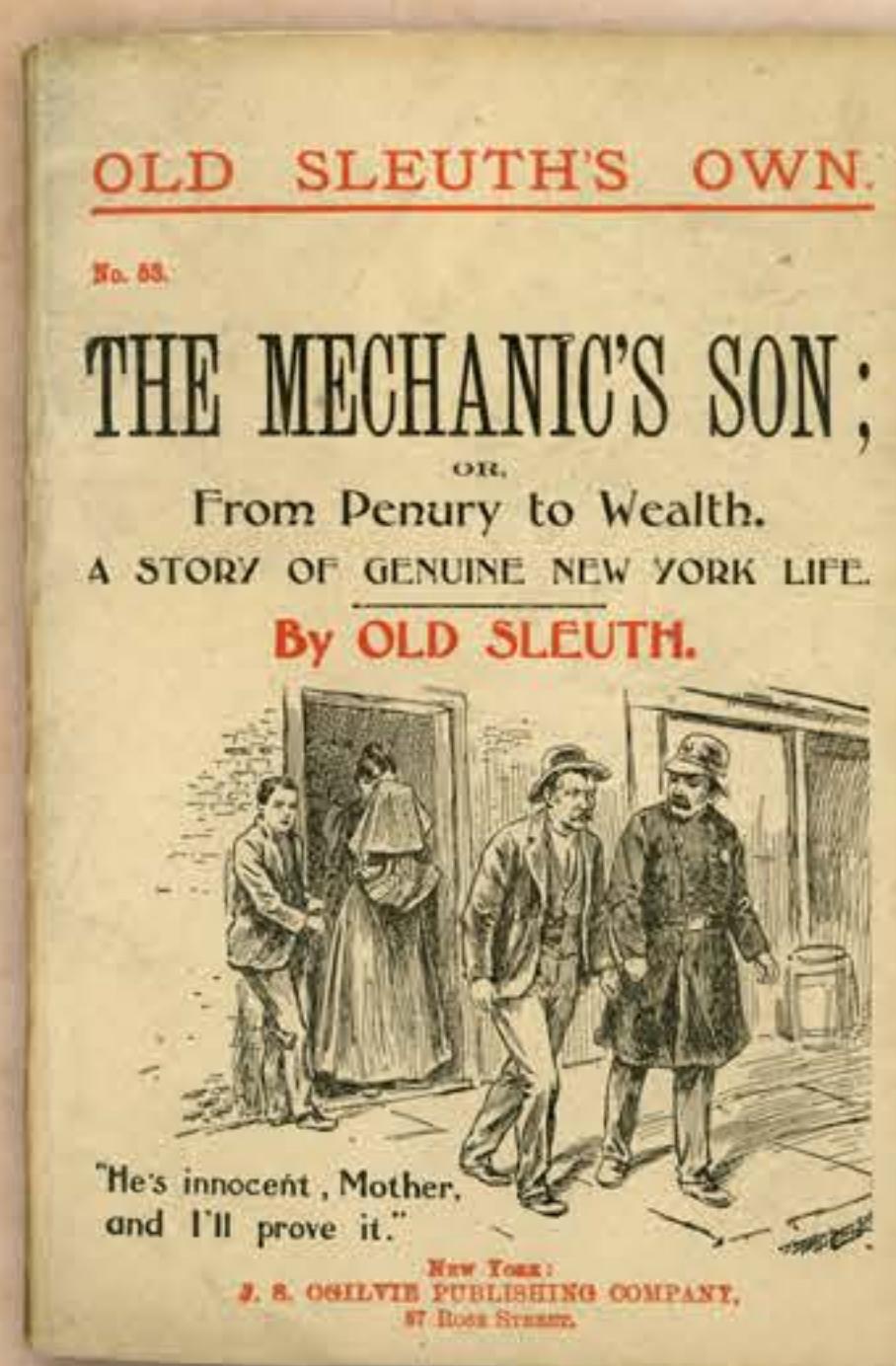
LITERARY FACTORIES

Many dime novels were written by individual authors who churned books out rapidly, focusing on speed over quality. Others were created with a production process resembling that of book-packaging companies today. Most of them were published under pseudonyms, either individual or house names managed by publishers.

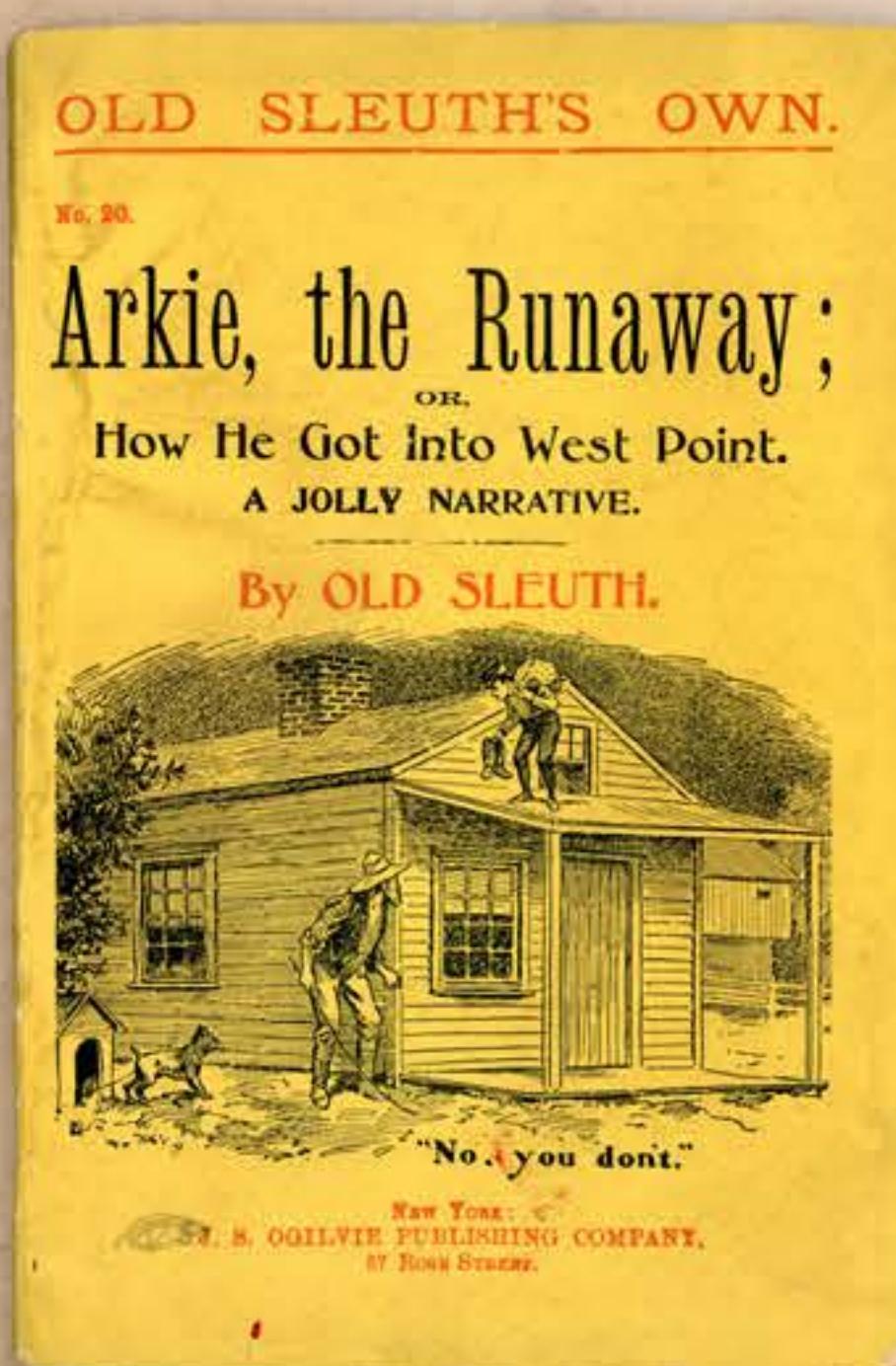
This literary factory...employs over thirty people, mostly girls and women...It is their duty to read all the daily and weekly periodicals in the land...Any unusual story of city life...is marked by these girls and turned over to one of three managers. These managers, who are men, select the best of the marked articles, and turn over such as are available to one of a corps of five women, who...transform it to a skeleton or outline for a story...[T]he chief manager...turns to a large address-book and adapts the skeleton to some one of the hundred or more writers entered in his book.

—Edward W. Bok, Publishers' Weekly, 1892

WHO READ DIME NOVELS?



Old Sleuth. *The mechanic's son, or, From penury to wealth: a story of genuine New York life.* Old Sleuth's Own. New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1896. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



Old Sleuth. Arkie, the
runaway, or, How he got into
West Point : a jolly narrative.
Old Sleuth's Own. New
York : J.S. Ogilvie
Publishing Company,
c1895. Courtesy Rare
Books and Special
Collections, Mary Couts
Burnett Library, Texas
Christian University.

The audience for dime novels was primarily young, working-class, white American and immigrant Irish and German men and women. By the latter half of the 19th century, dime novels were seen more as boys' fiction, although adults still read them.

Working-class readers had more time to read than ever before. Many of them enjoyed more leisure time at home or read during commutes by rail or horse-drawn omnibus, and during lunch and breaks at work. Some workers banded together to pay a person to read to them during the workday.

During the Civil War, Beadle & Adams shipped dime novels to army camps, where soldiers read them in between battles. Other lucrative markets were found where ship crews, railroad workers, loggers and miners were isolated, working in remote locations and craving entertainment in their down time.

Periodicals like *The New York Family Story Paper* carried fiction for every member of the family.

The New York family story paper, v. II, no. 103, Sept. 27, 1875. New York: Norman L. Munro & Co. Dime Novel and Popular Literature Collection, Villanova University Falvey Memorial Library.



MORAL PANIC

Early on, most notions that cheap novels might lead to immoral behavior in the working class were mollified.

Dime novels imposed strict moral codes to justify their violent, titillating content.

Sinners received their comeuppance and the virtuous their just rewards. Proper behavior standards were reinforced.

Ribald characters and villains had to avoid vulgarity, and salaciousness was not allowed.

As the 19th century wore on, public opinion changed. By the 1880s dime novels were seen as degenerate.

Anthony Comstock and other Victorian reformers believed that what people read affected the development of their bodies, minds, and spirits.

Reformers publicly denounced these melodramatic stories, claiming they incited immorality in boys and young men, and worried about crime and deviant behavior increases because of the influence of dime novels and similar entertainments.



The Food of Our Youth. 1881. Color lithograph. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The novels as a whole... were "unobjectionable morally, whatever fault be found with their literary style and composition. They do not even obscurely pander to vice, or excite the passions."

—William Everett, 1864
North American Review

"The dreadful damage wrought to-day in every city, town, and village of these United States by the horrible and hideous stuff set weekly before the boys and girls of America by the villainous sheets which pander greedily and viciously to the natural taste of young readers for excitement, the irreparable wrong done by these vile publications, is hidden from no one."

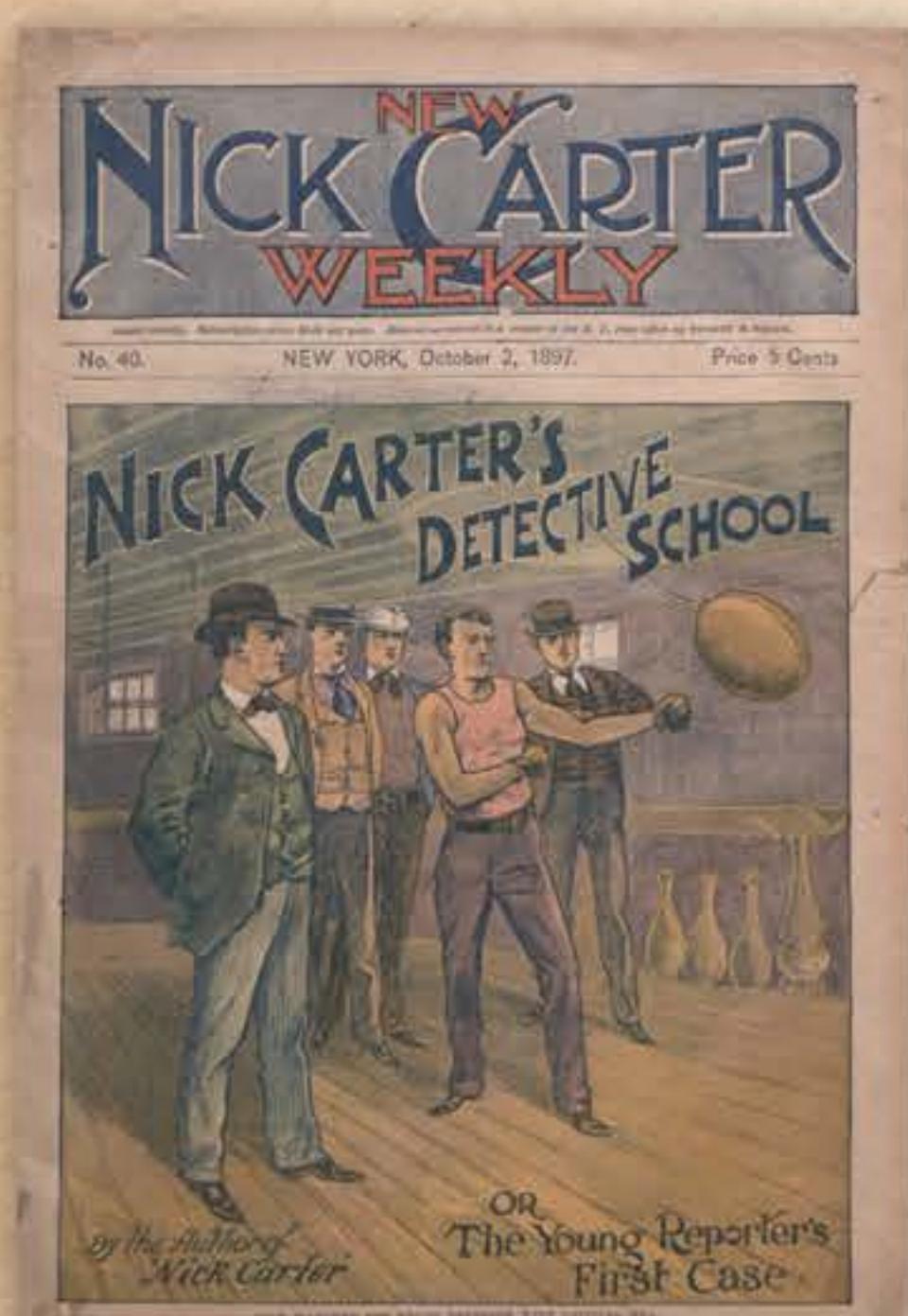
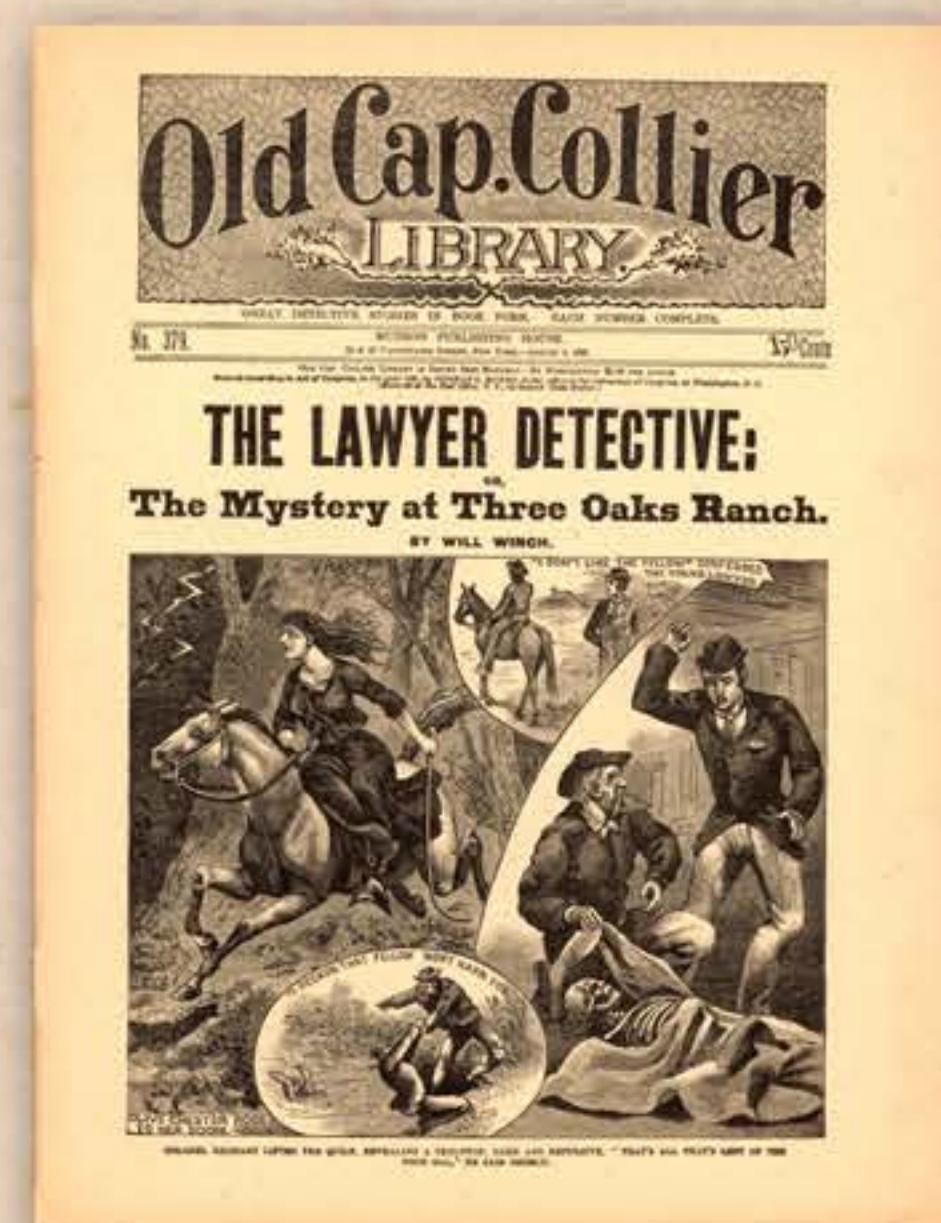
—Brander Matthews, 1883

COWBOYS AND DETECTIVES: MYTHOLOGIZING AMERICA



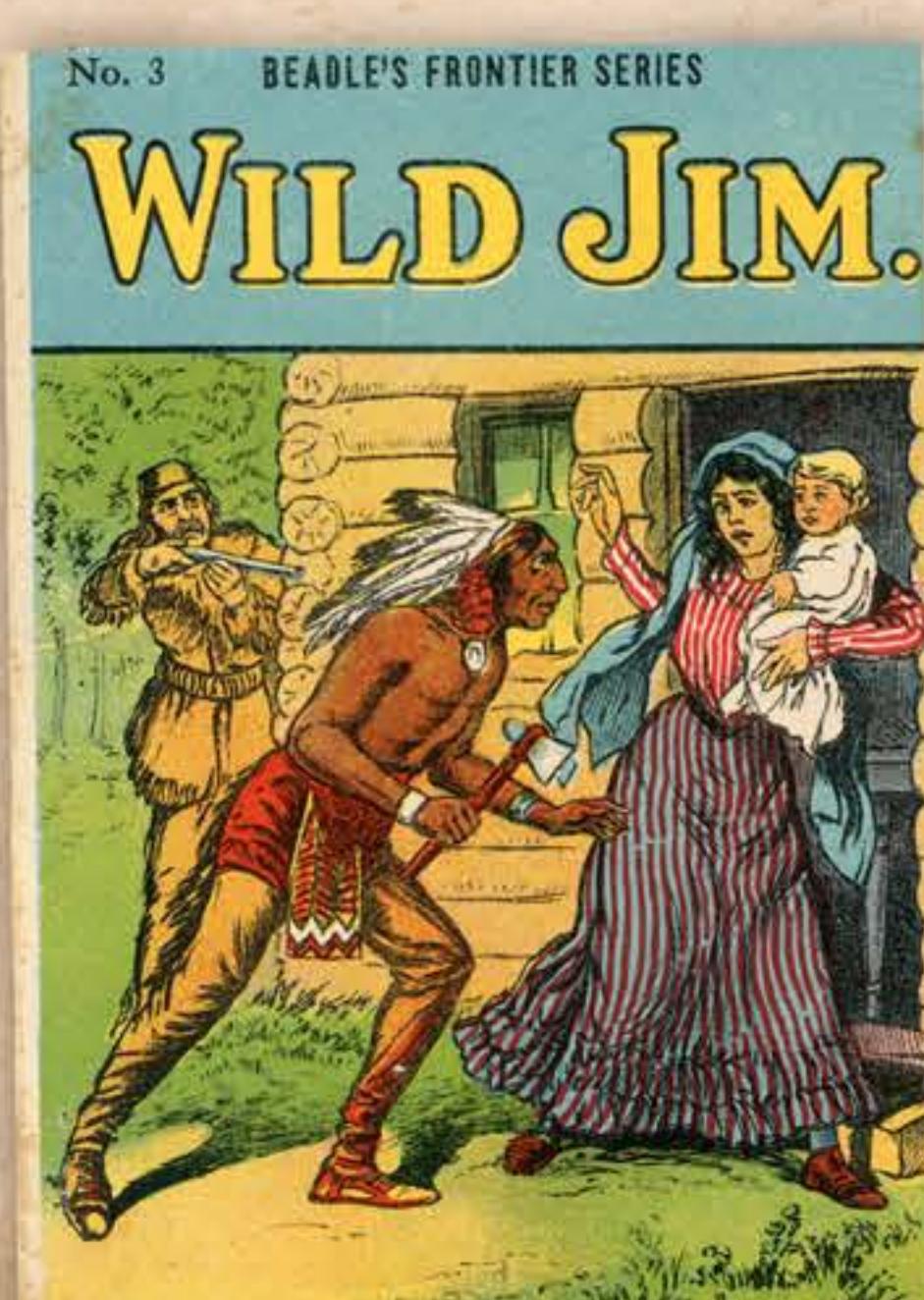
Coombes, Oll. "Dandy Bill's Doom; or, Deerhunter, the Boy Scout." *Beadle's Boy's Library of Sport, Story and Adventure*. New York: Beadle & Adams, 1891. Reprinted 1899, New York: M. J. Ivers & Co. Courtesy Dime Novel Collection, University of South Florida.

Winch, Will. "The lawyer detective, or, The mystery at Three Oaks Ranch." *Old Cap. Collier library*. New York: Munro's Publishing House. Courtesy Dime Novel Collection, University of South Florida.



Carter, Nick. "Nick Carter's detective school, or, The young reporter's first case." *New Nick Carter weekly*; no. 40. New York: Street & Smith, 1897. Courtesy Johannsen Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.

Hamilton, W.J. *Wild Jim, the traitor spy*. Beadle's Frontier Series. Cleveland: A. Westbrook, c1908. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



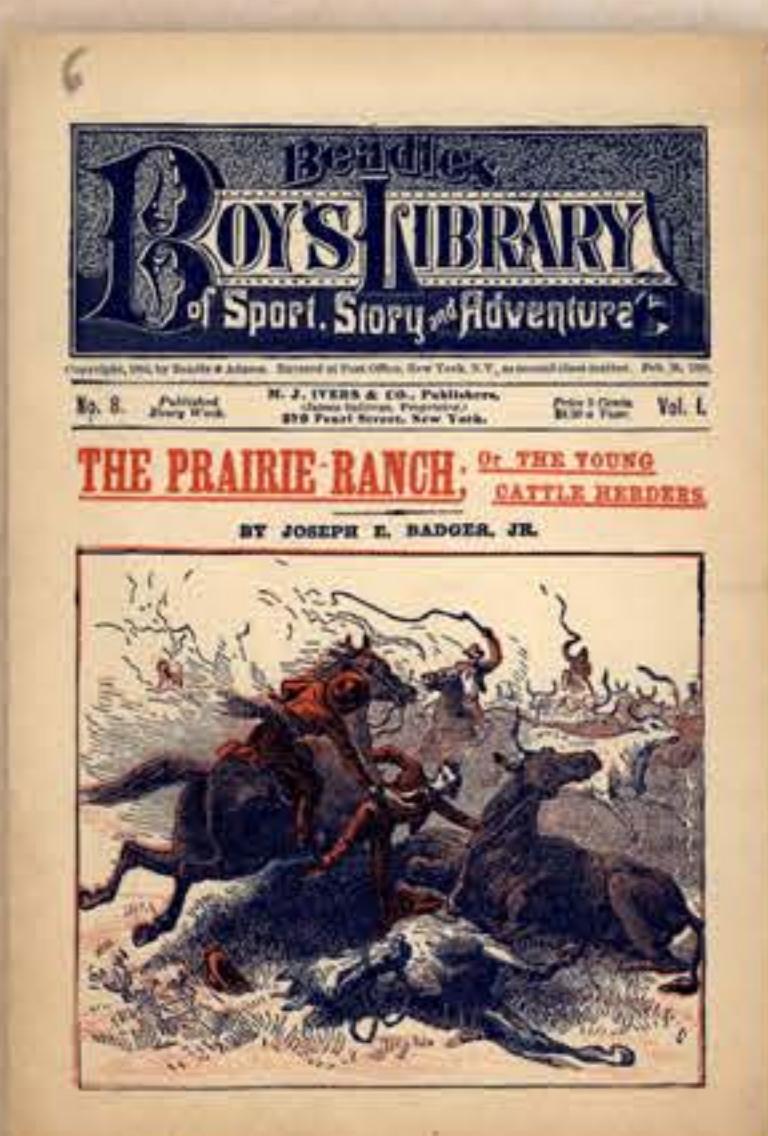
Adventure novels reflected myths of American individualism and opposition to tyranny and social privilege, arising from rebellion against the British. Western and detective stories in dime novels both feature simplistic morals, with heroes utilizing violence to defend family and community from criminals, often outside of the law. The stories are set on the edge of civilization: physically in the case of the American frontier, and socially in the case of urban crime. Social order, disrupted by crime, is restored by the actions of the individual hero, not by institutional machinery of law.

These genres of novel also reflected America's contradictory myths about imperialism, which spread American technology and influence around the world, displacing or exterminating indigenous cultures, in the name of "civilization."

Native peoples and immigrants were often caricatured as irredeemable villains to be put in their place by white American heroes, or depicted only as sidekicks to the story's hero.

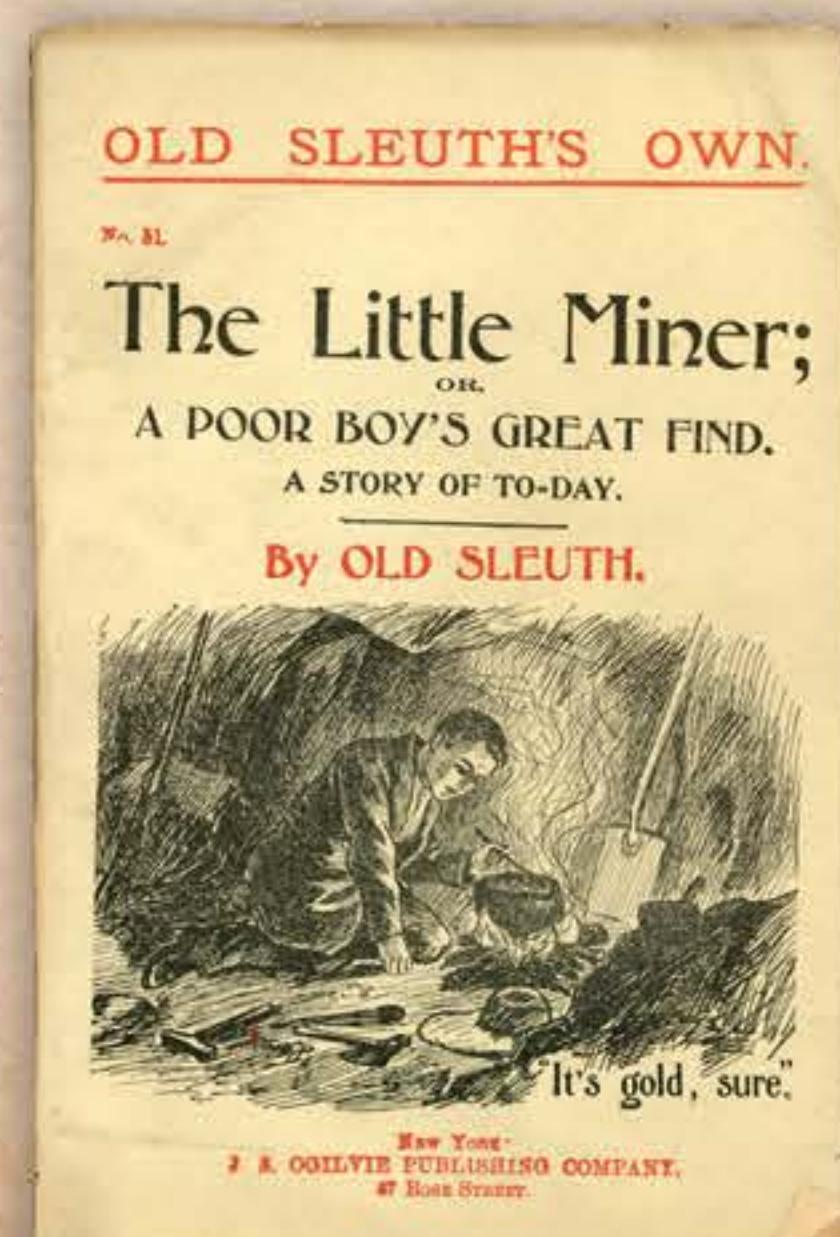
RIDING THE RANGE

Westerns were the most popular of all dime novels. Over 75% of Beadle & Adams' output was Westerns. They depicted a romanticized West that never was, where heroes imposed law and order on the wilderness. This image influenced popular ideas about cowboys and heroes.



Badger, Jr., Joseph E. "The prairie ranch, or, The young cattle herders." *Beadle's Boy's Library of Sport, Story and Adventure*. New York: M.J. Ivers & Co., February 26, 1899. Courtesy Dime Novel Collection, University of South Florida.

Outlaw heroes added another layer to the myth. In order to make outlaws morally acceptable, they needed to be given a background of respectability, unjustly accused of wrongdoing. The outlaw hero was forced to work outside of the law to impose order upon chaos. Villains in these cases were often corrupt institutions and businesses from the East, triumphed over by the free Americans of the West.



Old Sleuth. *The little miner, or, A poor boy's great find: a story of to-day.* *Old Sleuth's Own.* New York: J.S. Ogilvie Pub. Co., 1896. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

"My father had no end of difficulty, as a pioneer cattleman in northwestern Colorado, in keeping his cowboys from playing the role of Cowboy. They spent long hours in the bunk-house on dull days devouring cheap romances of the West and insisted on dressing and acting and talking like the characters in their favorite romances."

—Carey McWilliams, 1931
North American Review



Wheeler, Edward L. "Deadwood Dick as a boy, or, Why Wild Ned Harris, the New England farm-lad, became the western prince of the road." *Beadle's boy's library of sport, story, and adventure*; vol. I, no. 6. New York: M. J. Ivers & Co., 1884. (Reprinted 1899.) Courtesy Johannsen Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.



Coomes, Oll. *Idaho Tom, the young outlaw of Silverland, or, The hunters of the wild west.* New York: Beadle and Adams, 1876. Courtesy Johannsen Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.

Working-class readers found sympathy in stories where heroes saved the day for miners and other laborers against rich industrialists who bound their lives.

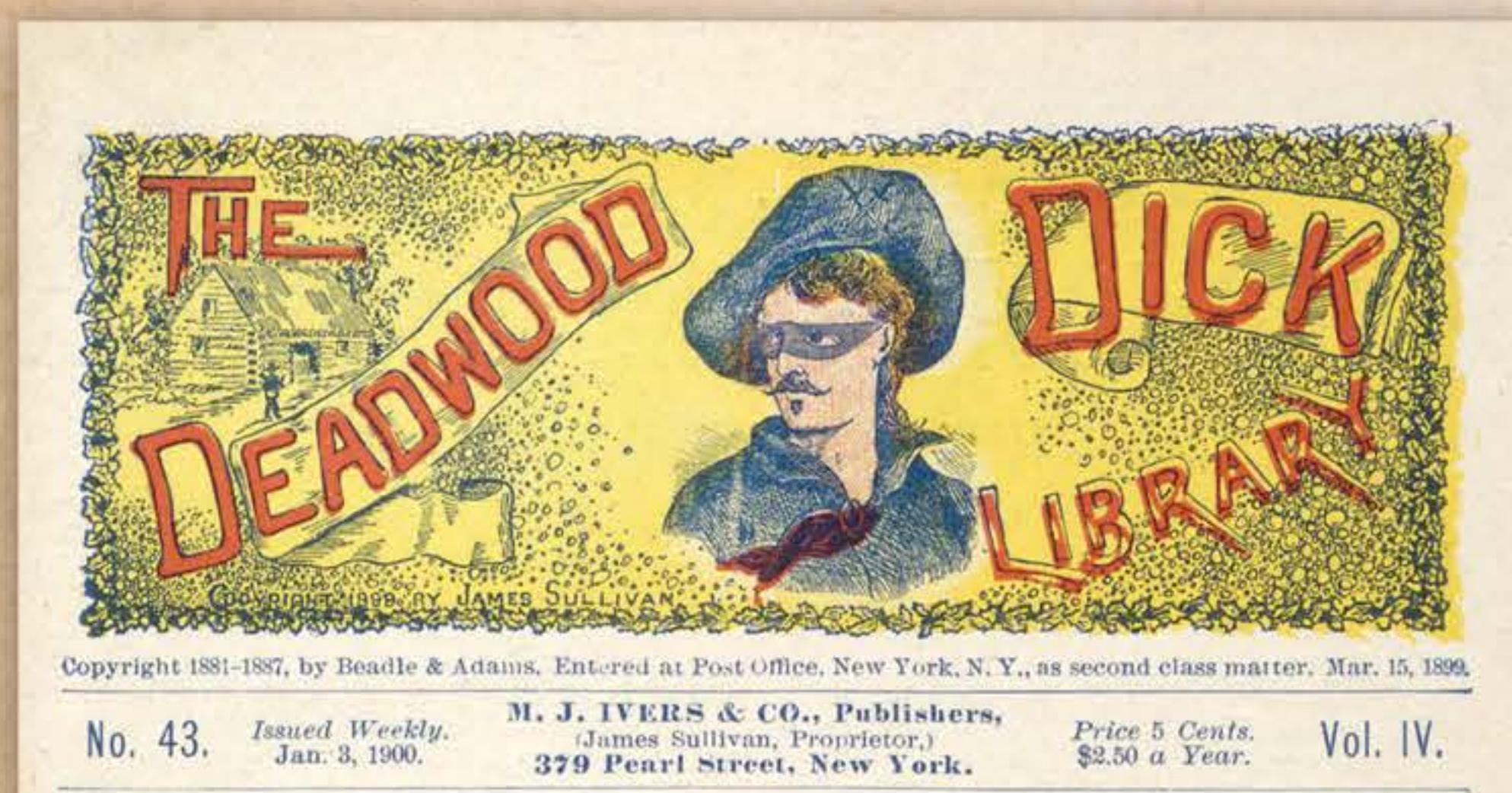
INVESTIGATING CRIME

In the 1880s and 1890s, the dime novel audience shifted to working-class young adults as the U.S. urbanized, and detectives replaced cowboys as heroes.

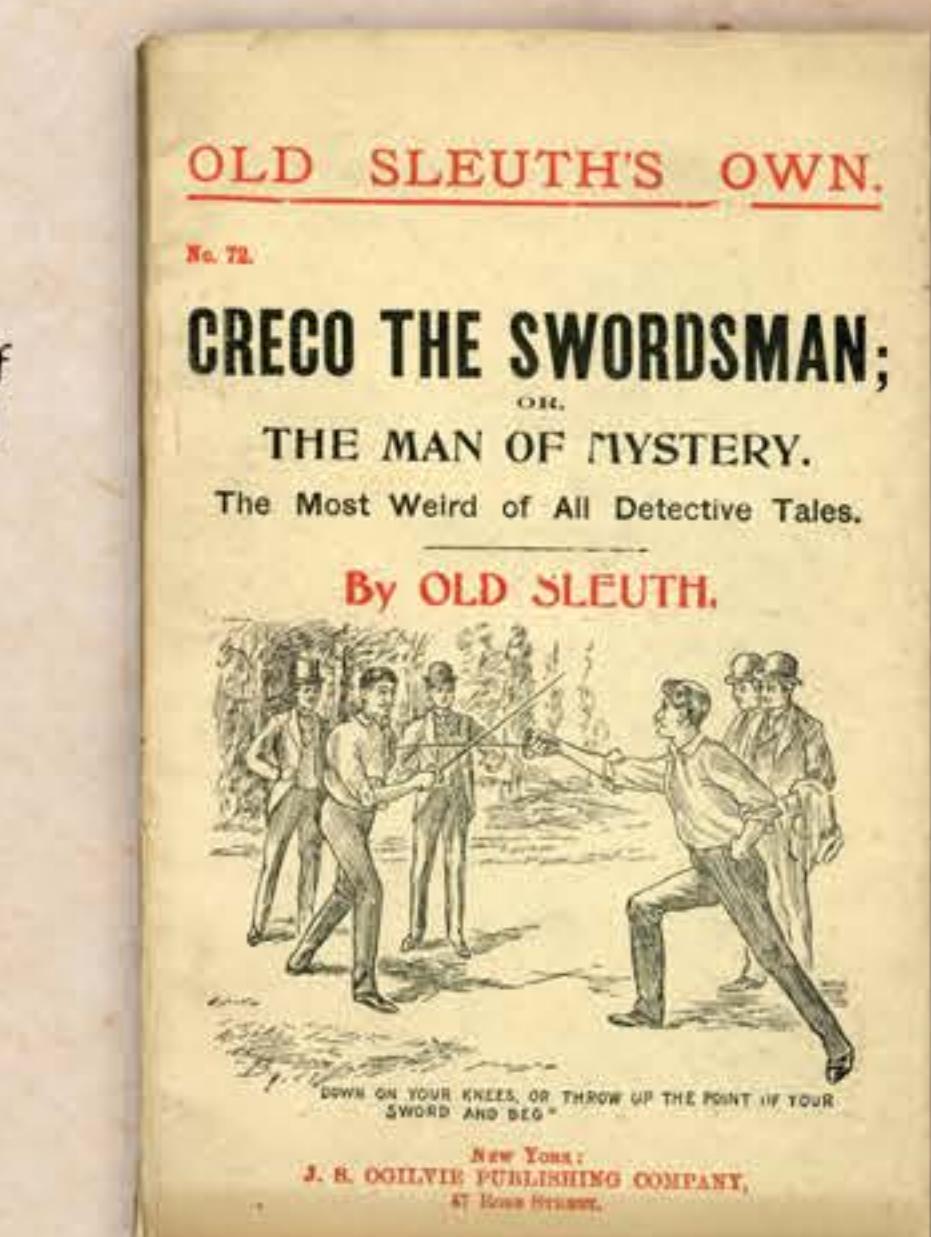
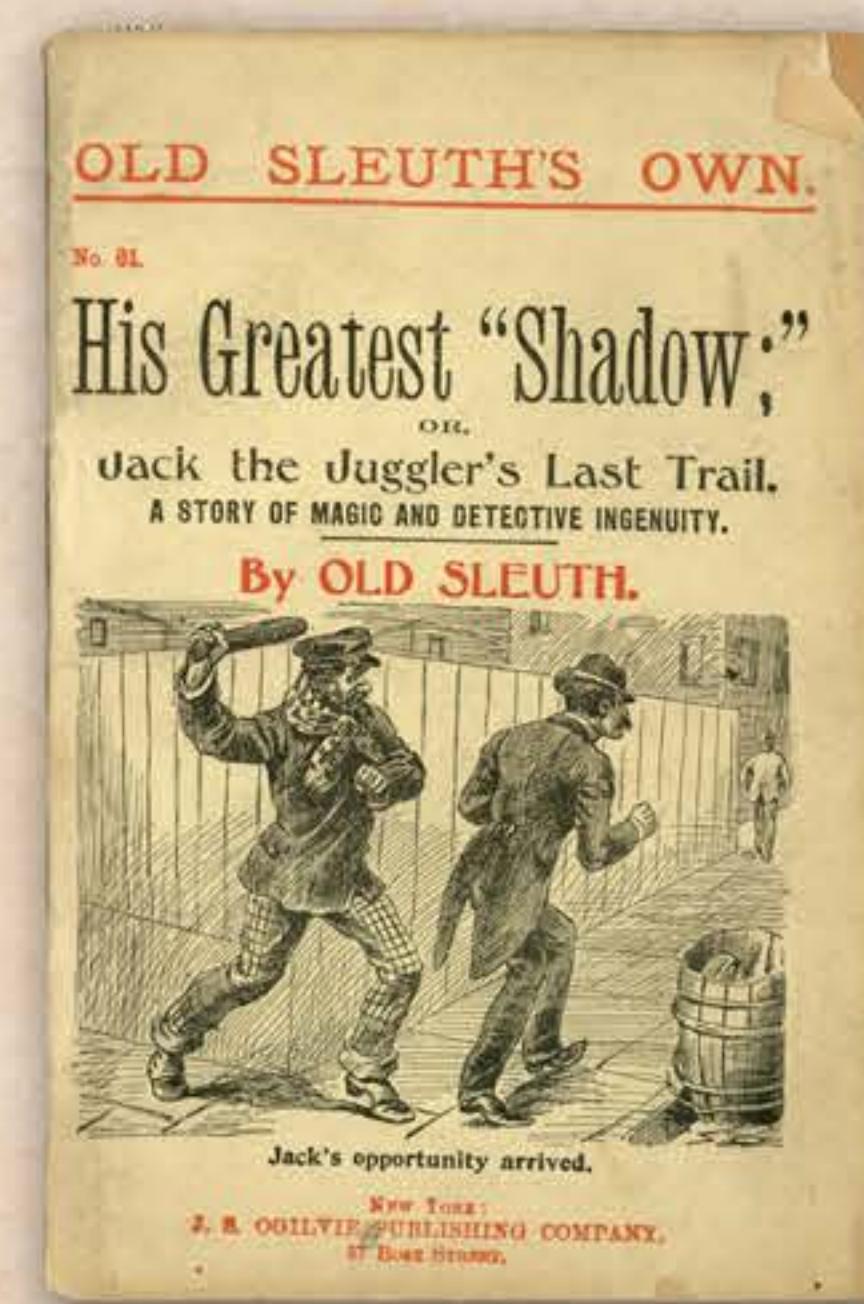
The underlying structure of the stories was similar to Westerns. Breakdowns in social order were restored by a hero who worked outside the law to protect the community. Immigrants became the villains, reflecting white working-class fears about immigrants taking their jobs.

Dime novel detectives originally did not rely on analytical thinking skills, like Sherlock Holmes. Instead, mysteries were solved after a series of startling revelations. The detective could be a master of disguise, and was often kidnapped, hunted and terrorized, escaping certain death by inches.

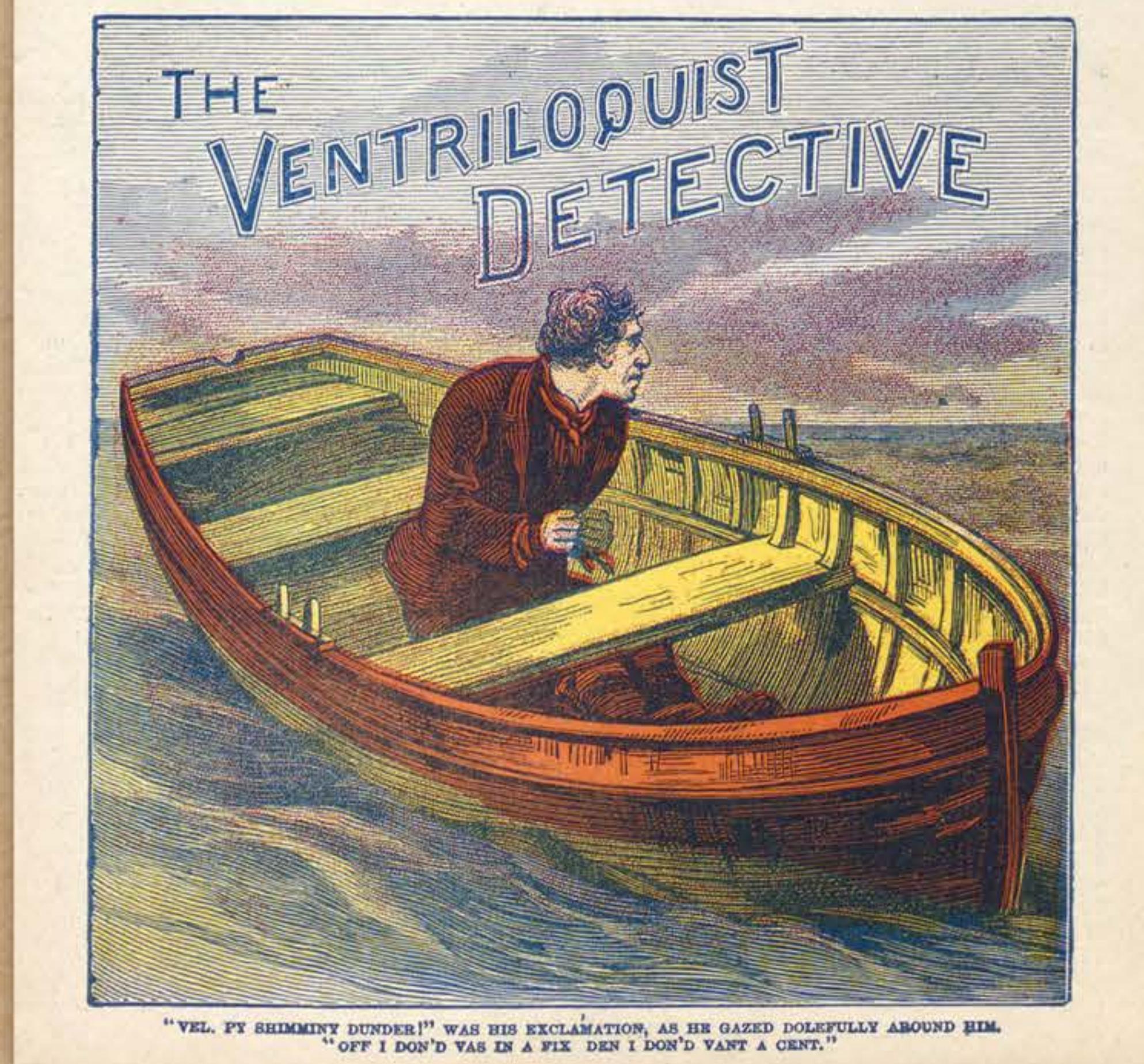
Like many Westerns, detective novels often ended with a wedding, symbolizing a return to conventional social standards.



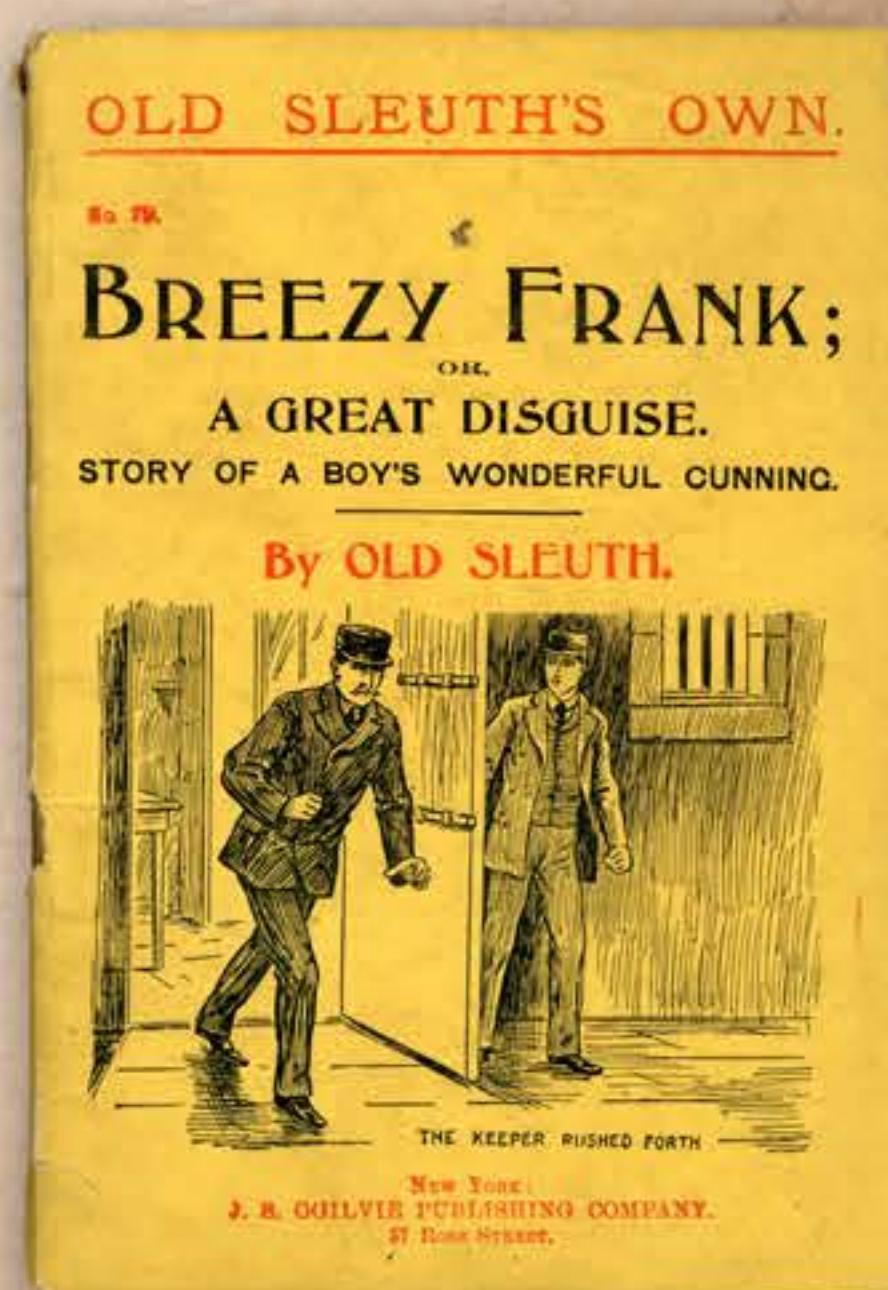
Old Sleuth. *Creco the swordsman, or, The man of mystery: the most weird of all detective tales. Old Sleuth's Own.* New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1897. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



Old Sleuth. *His greatest "shadow," or, Jack the Juggler's last trail: a story of magic and detective ingenuity.* New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1896. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



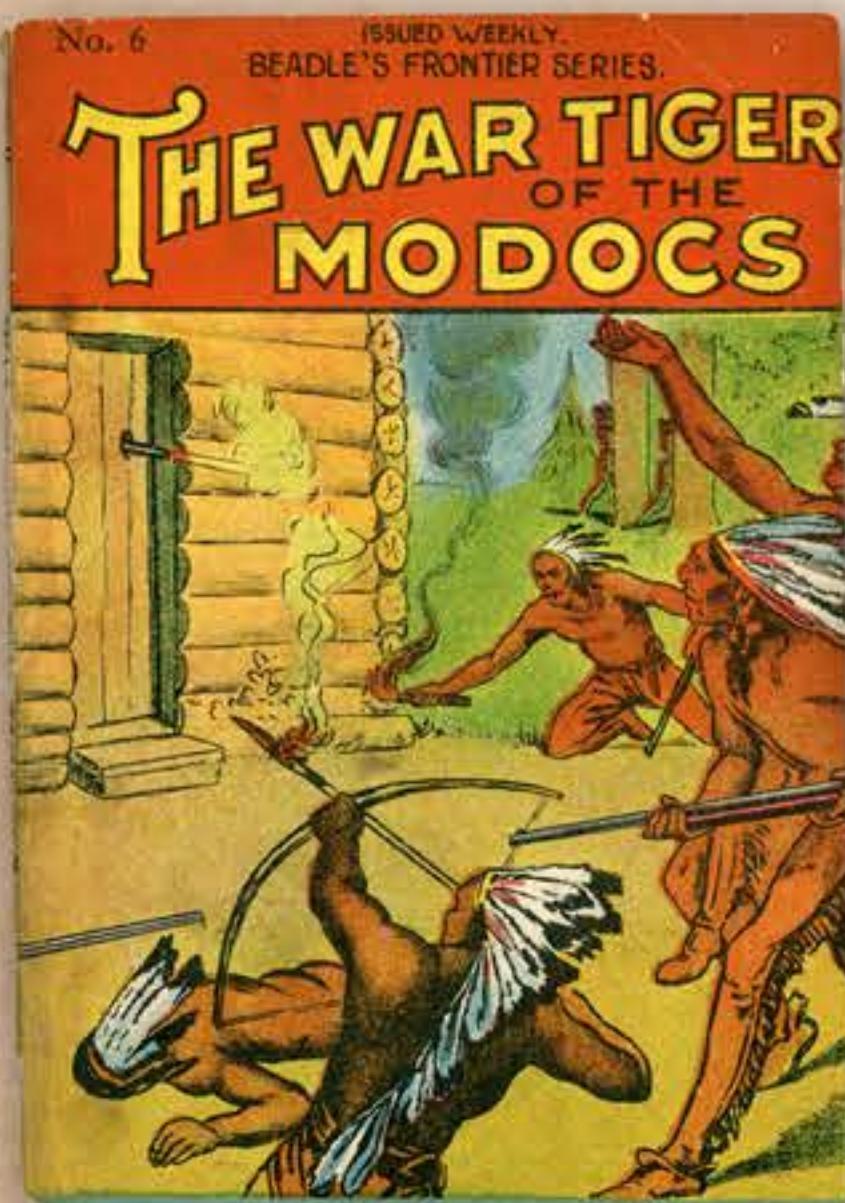
Old Sleuth. *Breezy Frank, or, A great disguise: story of a boy's wonderful cunning.* New York: J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1897. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



OTHERING

Dime novels were not written for audiences of color, and never developed story formulas suitable for telling stories about marginalized people.

Stories reinforced the prejudices central to 19th century white American culture. Scientific racism reinforced the idea that non-white races were “savage” by nature, and could not be “civilized.”

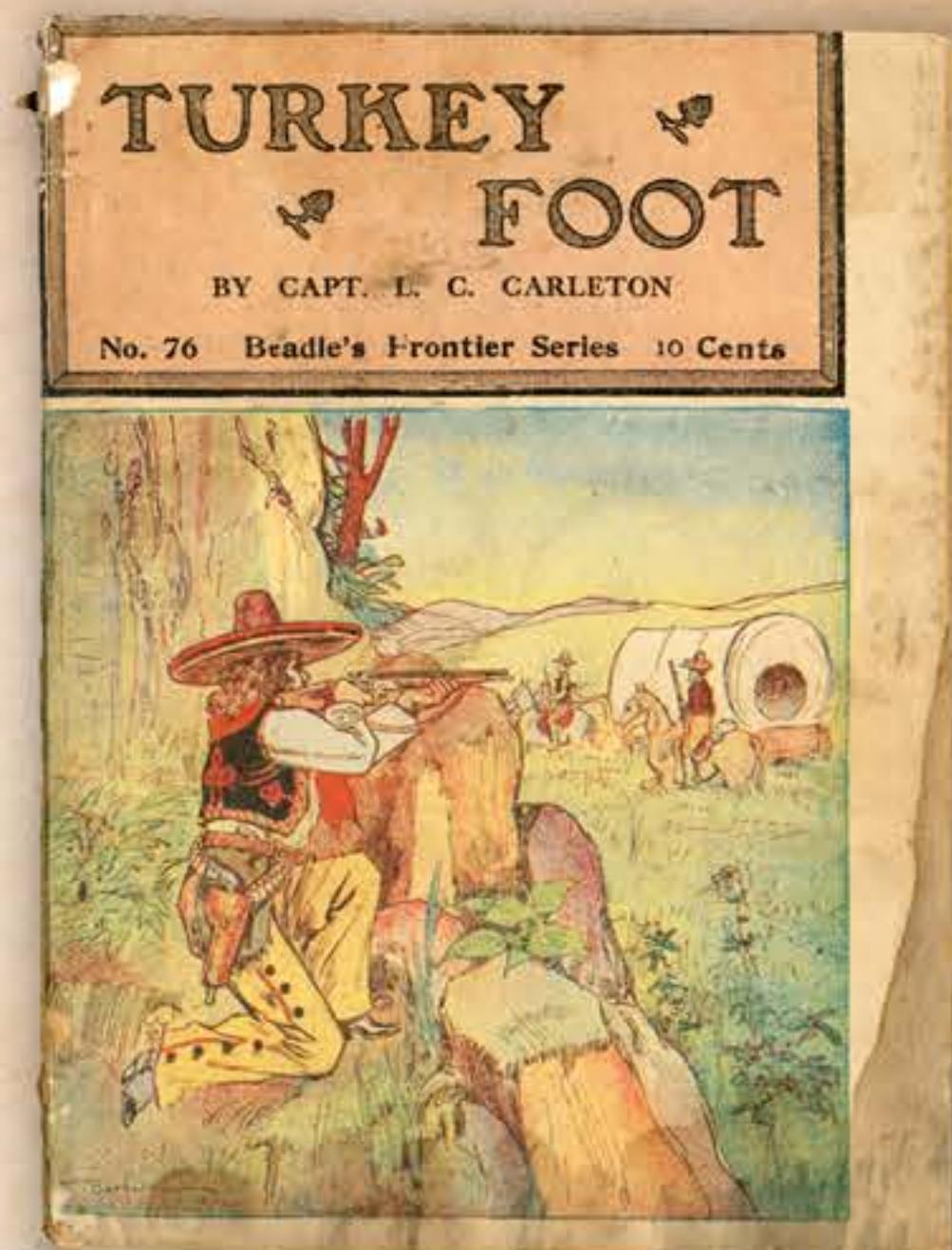


Carleton, Capt. L.C. (Ellis, Edward Sylvester). *The war tiger of the Modocs*. Cleveland : A. Westbrook, c1908. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

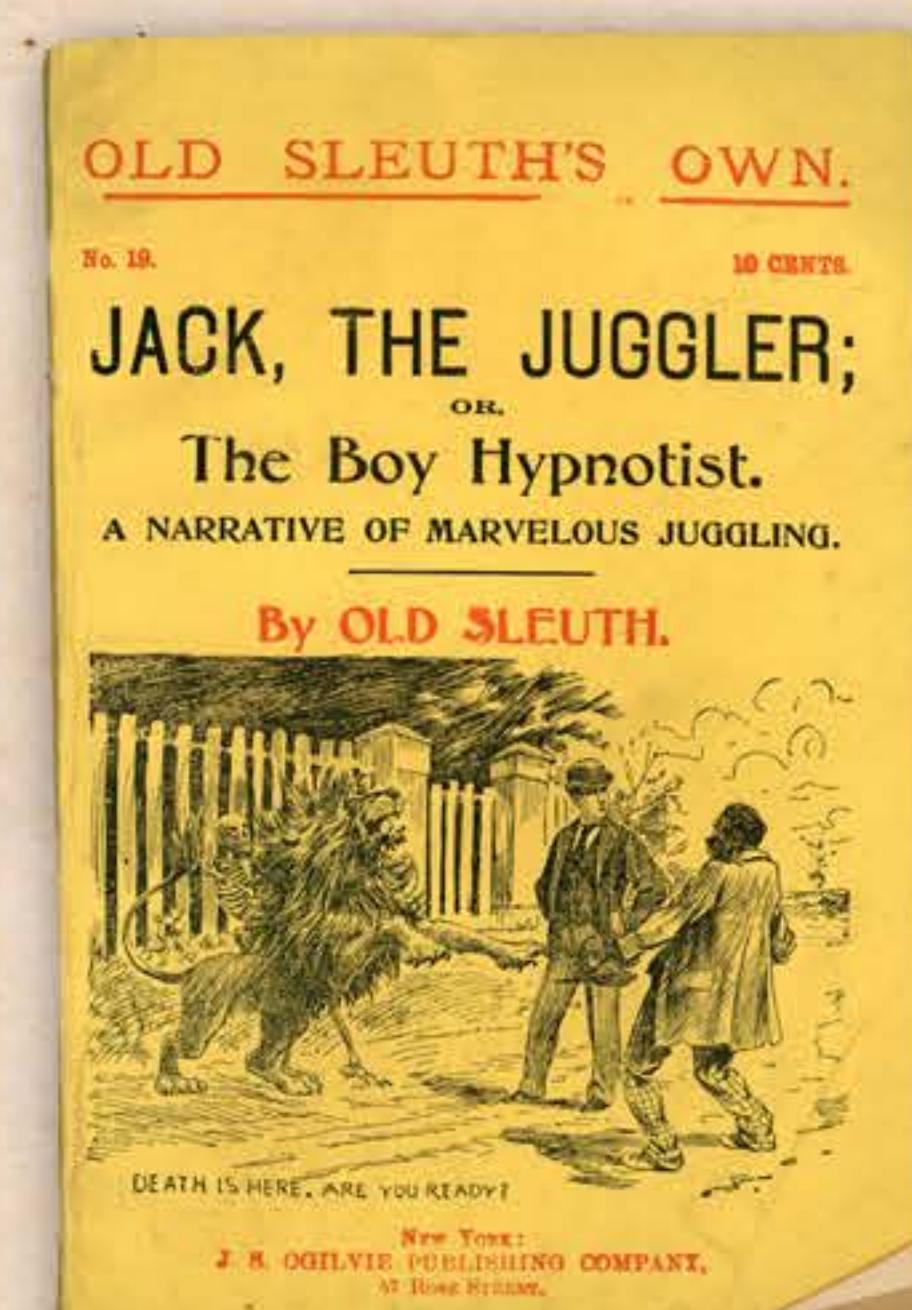
Fear of the Other saturated portrayals of people of color, who were often depicted with cartoonish stereotypes, speaking in degraded, improper English. Physical differences were intended to symbolize moral and intellectual differences. Villains were often described with physical markers of otherness, even if they were not explicitly identified by racial stereotypes.

One standard Western trope was the captivity narrative in which white women were captured by Native Americans and rescued by white heroes. Mexican, Chinese and Jewish people also appear as stereotyped villains. During this era, the familiar trope of the person of color as a sidekick to a white hero emerged.

Carleton, Latham C. (Ellis, Edward Sylvester). *Turkey-Foot, or, The chief's revenge*. Cleveland : A. Westbrook, c1909. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.



A few black detectives were to be found in the titles of dime novels, but usually turned out to be white detectives disguised as black men. One black detective protagonist was an enslaved man who solved mysteries for the family who enslaved him.



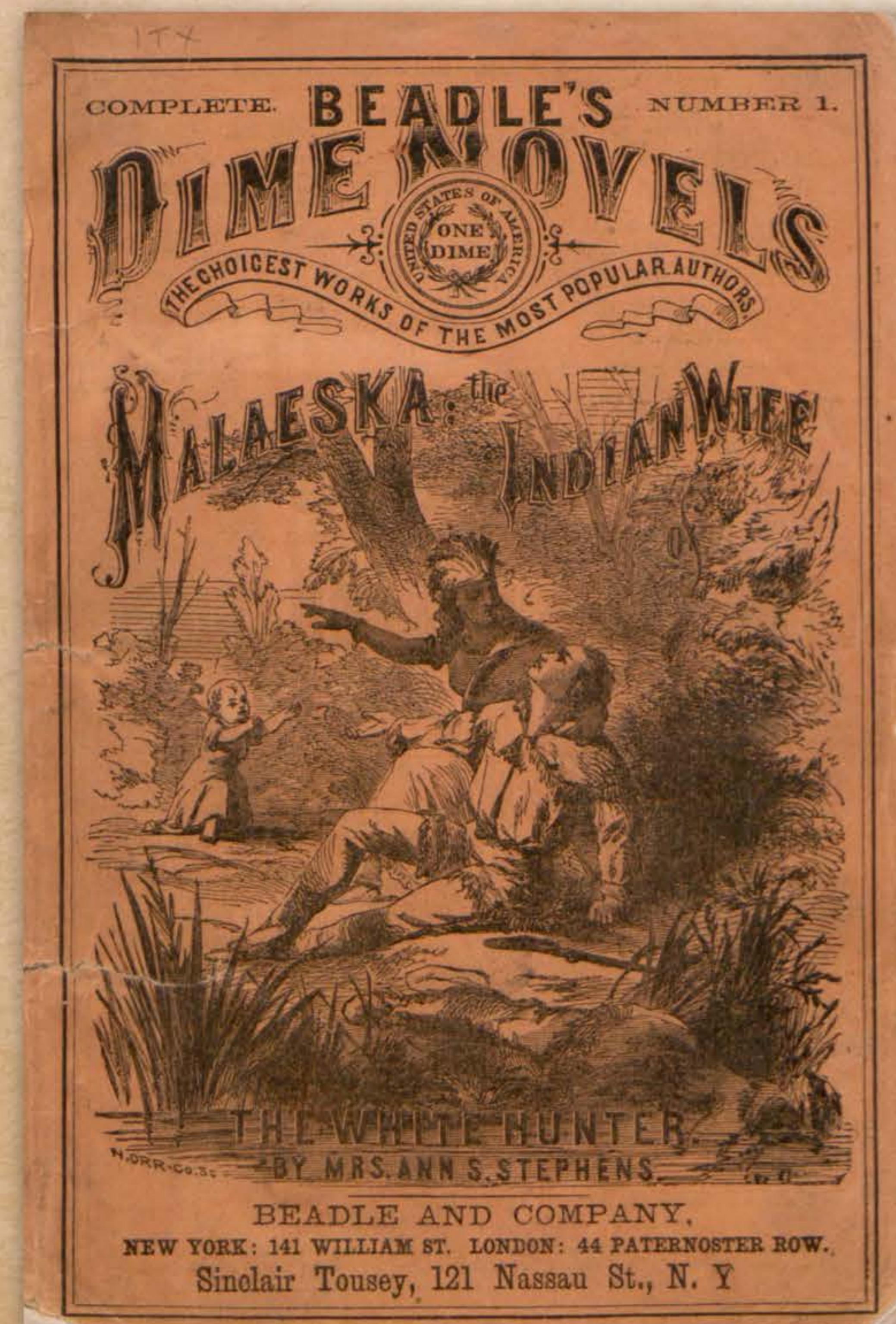
Old Sleuth. *Jack the Juggler, or, The boy hypnotist : a narrative of marvelous juggling*. J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1895. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

Many writers worked under pseudonyms and by mail, so there is no way of knowing who, exactly, was writing dime novels. It was not until pulp novels arose in the early 20th century that industry writers and workers of color can be identified. The first we know of is Wallace Thurman, an important member of the Harlem Renaissance, who edited magazines as well as reading for and ghostwriting in pulp magazines like *True Story Magazine*.

GENDER DIVIDE

The first decade of the dime novel (1860-70), when they were intended to be read by a family audience, saw a large female readership. Women authors wrote about 20%-33% of all dimes, more during the Civil War, when many male writers instead served in the army. These women brought different, female-centric ideas to early Western adventure stories.

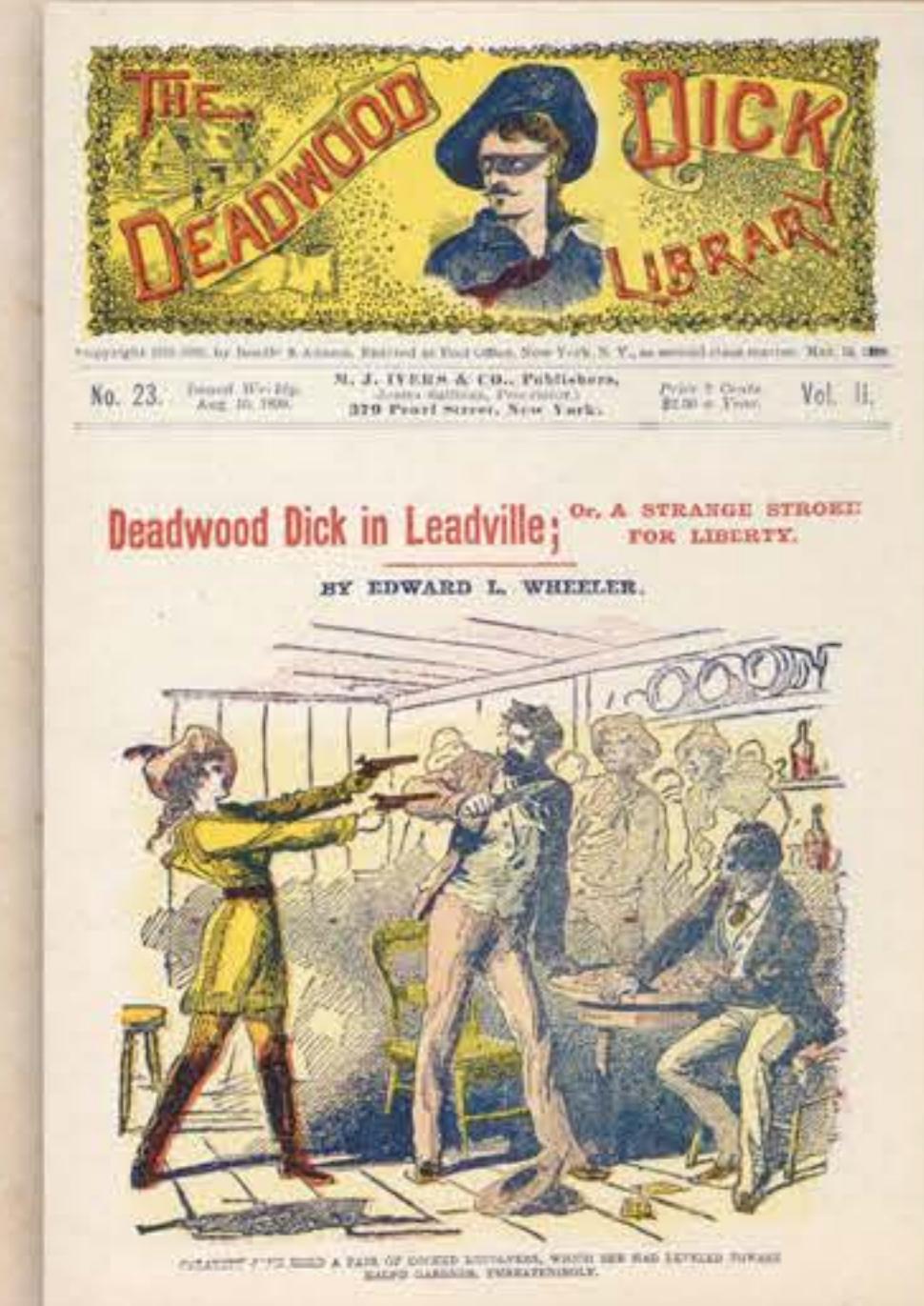
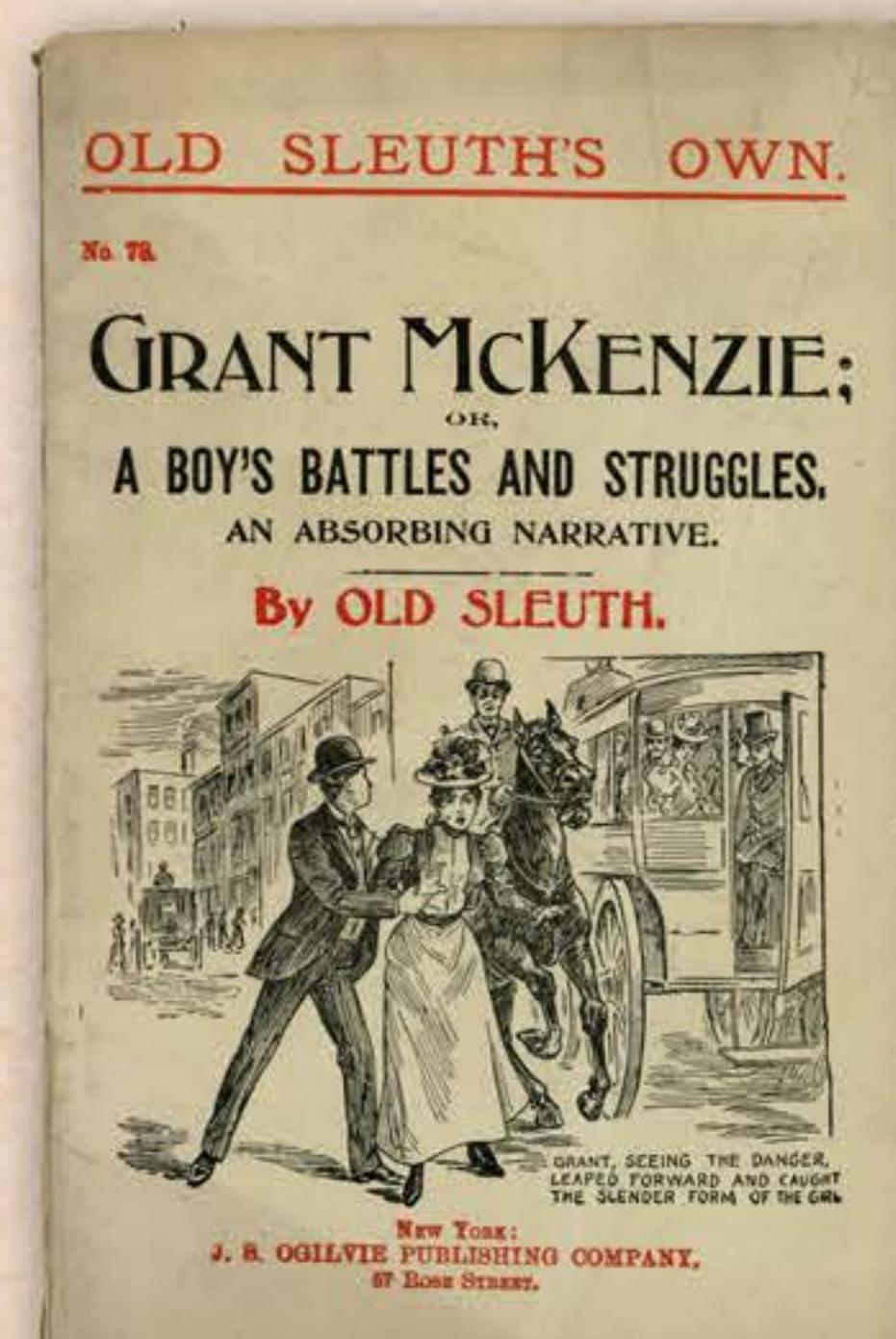
The first dime novel ever published was *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, a reprint of Ann S. Stephens' 1839 serial from *The Ladies Companion*.



Stephens, Ann S. (Ann Sophia). *Malaeska, the Indian wife of the white hunter*. New York: Irwin P. Beadle and Company, 1860. Courtesy Johannsen Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.

MANLY ADVENTURE

Over time, adventure stories shifted focus to male-centric plots. Adventure was seen as a rite of passage from boy to man, and male characters reflected 19th century ideals of manhood. The model Victorian man was one who was honorable, nationalistic and courageous. His strength of body and character were developed through discipline, exercise and sports. A man's health and athletic prowess reflected his inner moral fortitude, a tenet of "Muscular Christianity," a philosophical movement.



Old Sleuth. "Grant McKenzie, or, A boy's battles and struggles : an absorbing narrative." *Old Sleuth's Own*. J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, c1897. Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, Mary Couts Burnett Library, Texas Christian University.

Wheeler, Edward L. "Deadwood Dick in Leadville, or, A strange stroke for liberty." *Deadwood Dick library*; v. 2, no. 23. New York: M.J. Ivers & Co., Publishers, 1899. Courtesy Johannsen Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.

Heroines in adventure stories were often innocent, beautiful and emotional. Some were independent and proactive, but they knew their place as wives, mothers and daughters. Even Calamity Jane, the fictionalized pants-wearing, gun-shooting sidekick of the Deadwood Dick dime novel series, eventually settled down and married the protagonist.

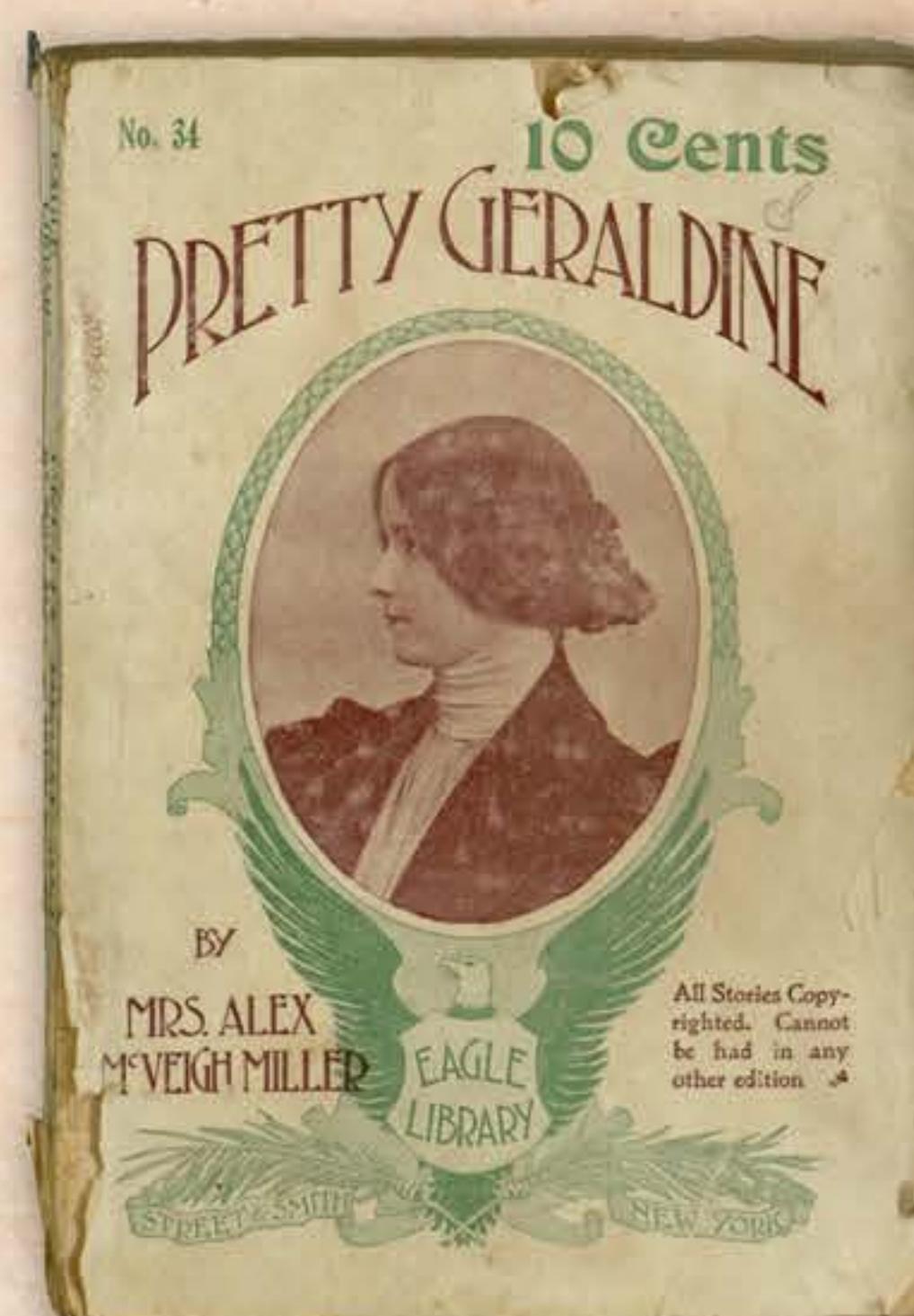
WORKING GIRLS

Women of the laboring class featured as the protagonists of the working-girl dime novel. Prior to the rise of this genre, sentimental novels either ignored working-class women or portrayed them in paternalistic ways. Those heroines were often poor Christian women forced to work in factories who nevertheless maintained their "honor" (virginity) despite their coarse surroundings, eventually dying, virtuous to the end.

Laura Jean Libbey combined sentiment with melodrama, creating popular novels with working-class women as active protagonists. Libbey's heroine defended herself against seduction, abduction, false marriage, and other dramatic plot elements, enjoying a good dose of romance. The heroine still remained virtuous to the end, but instead of death, she secured a husband and very often a fortune.



Libbey, Laura Jean, contributor. "Pretty Madcap Dorothy; or How She Won a Lover." *The New York Fireside Companion: a journal of instructive and entertaining literature*, v. XLIX, no. 1271, March 5, 1892. New York: George Munro, 1892. Courtesy Dime Novel and Popular Literature Collection, Villanova University Falvey Memorial Library.



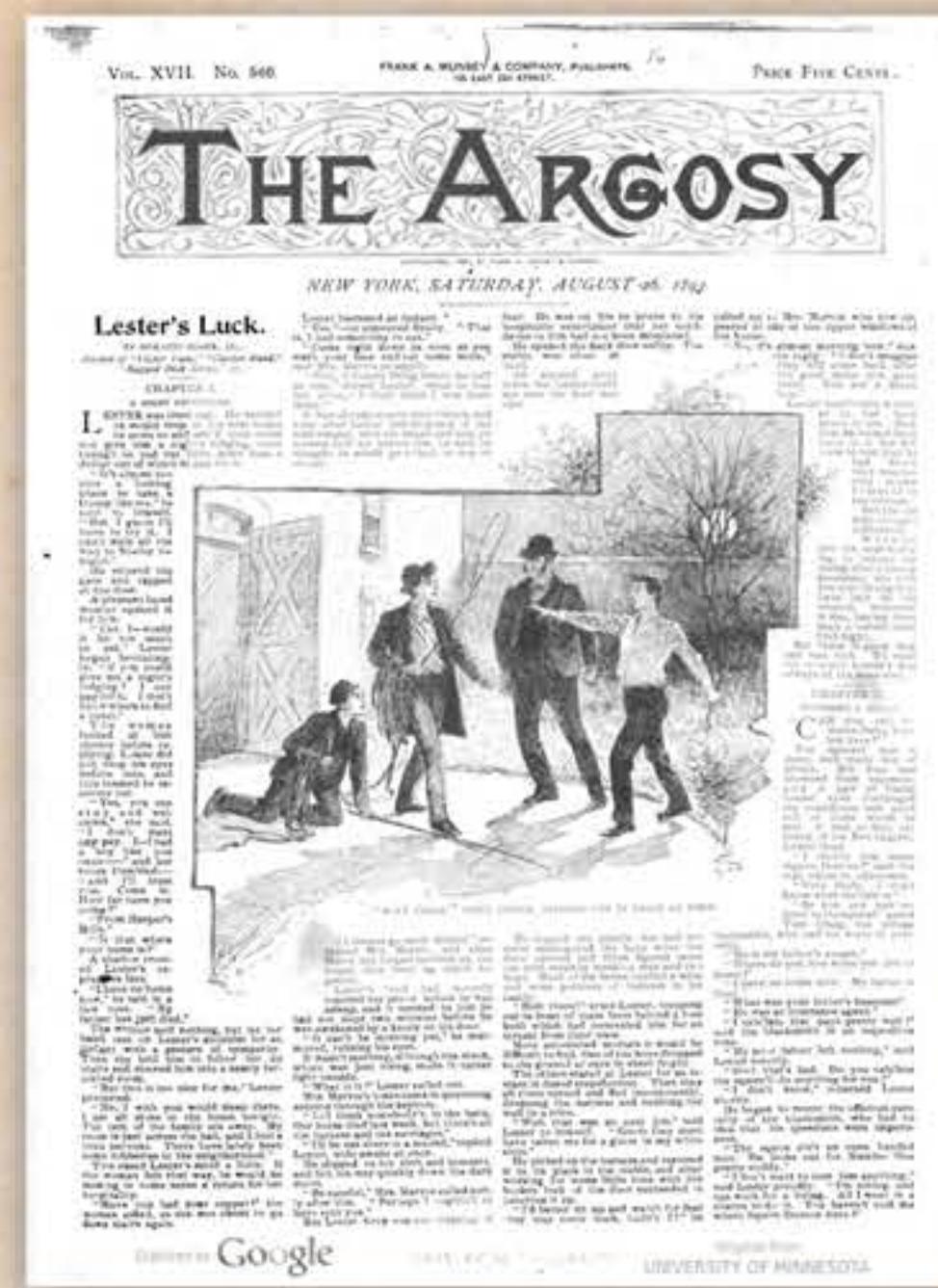
Miller, Mrs. Alex. McVeigh. *Pretty Geraldine, the New York salesgirl, or, Wedded to her choice*. New York: Street & Smith, 1895. Courtesy Dime Novel and Popular Literature Collection, Villanova University Falvey Memorial Library.

CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES

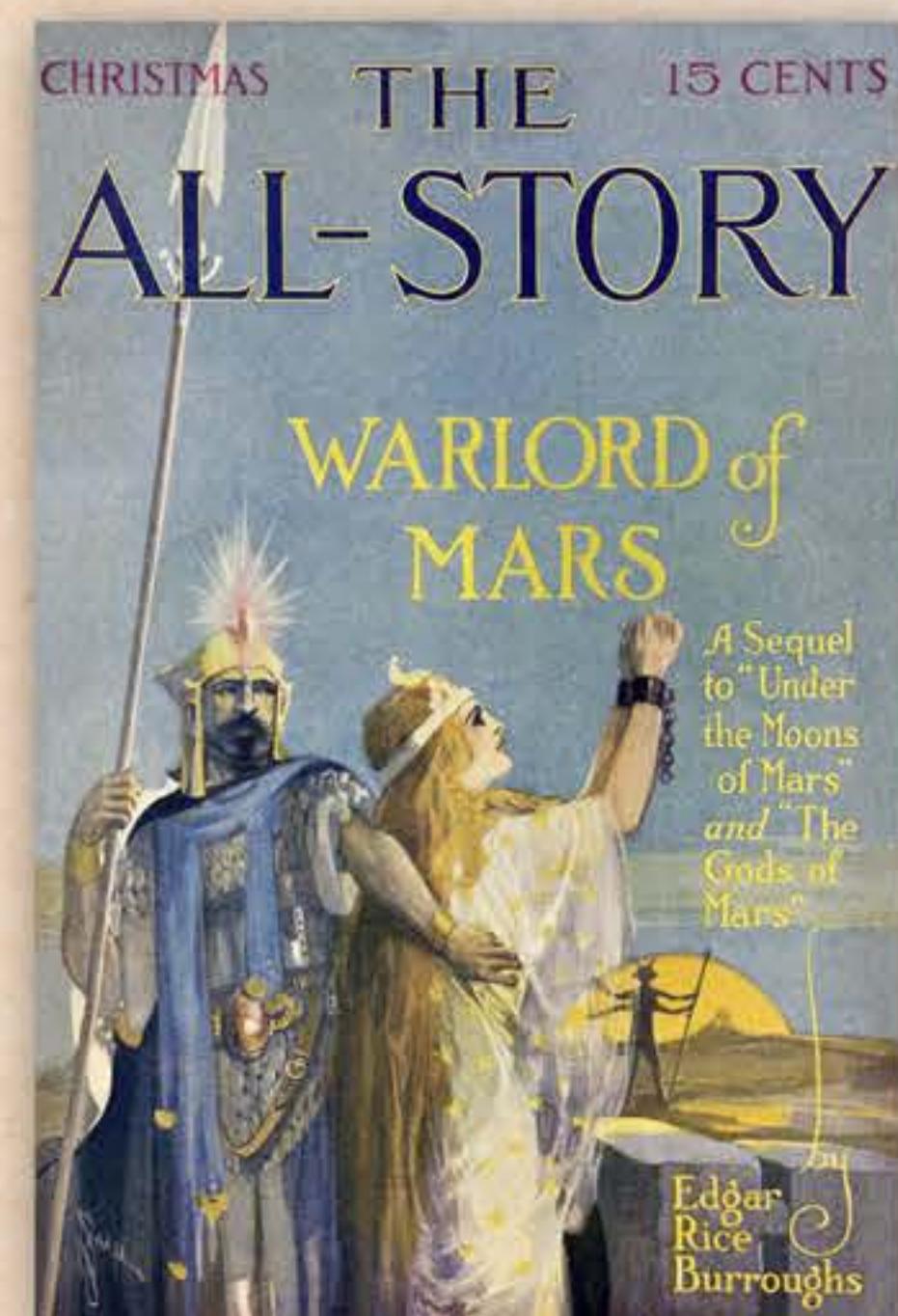
A few dime novels subverted gender stereotypes, especially those written by "Allan Arnold," a house name assigned to different writers by a publisher. The detective hero of *The Broken Blackthorn; or, Hunting the Race-Course Robbers* (1883), Gay-Gus Giles, was a dandy, a fashionable young man with effete looks described in overly feminine terms. Nina, the Girl Detective in *The Broken Ear-ring* celebrated being married to her vocation in place of the conventional engagement that female detectives had at the end of their stories.

RISE OF THE PULPS

An economic recession in 1893 inspired magazines normally aimed at the middle class that cost 15-25 cents to drop their prices. The success of these magazines inspired Frank A. Munsey, the publisher of *Argosy*, a boys' magazine, to transform it into a 192-page magazine full of adult adventure stories. By 1907, *Argosy* had half a million readers.



Argosy all-story weekly, v.17 (1893-94). New York : F. Munsey, 1893. Courtesy the University of Minnesota.



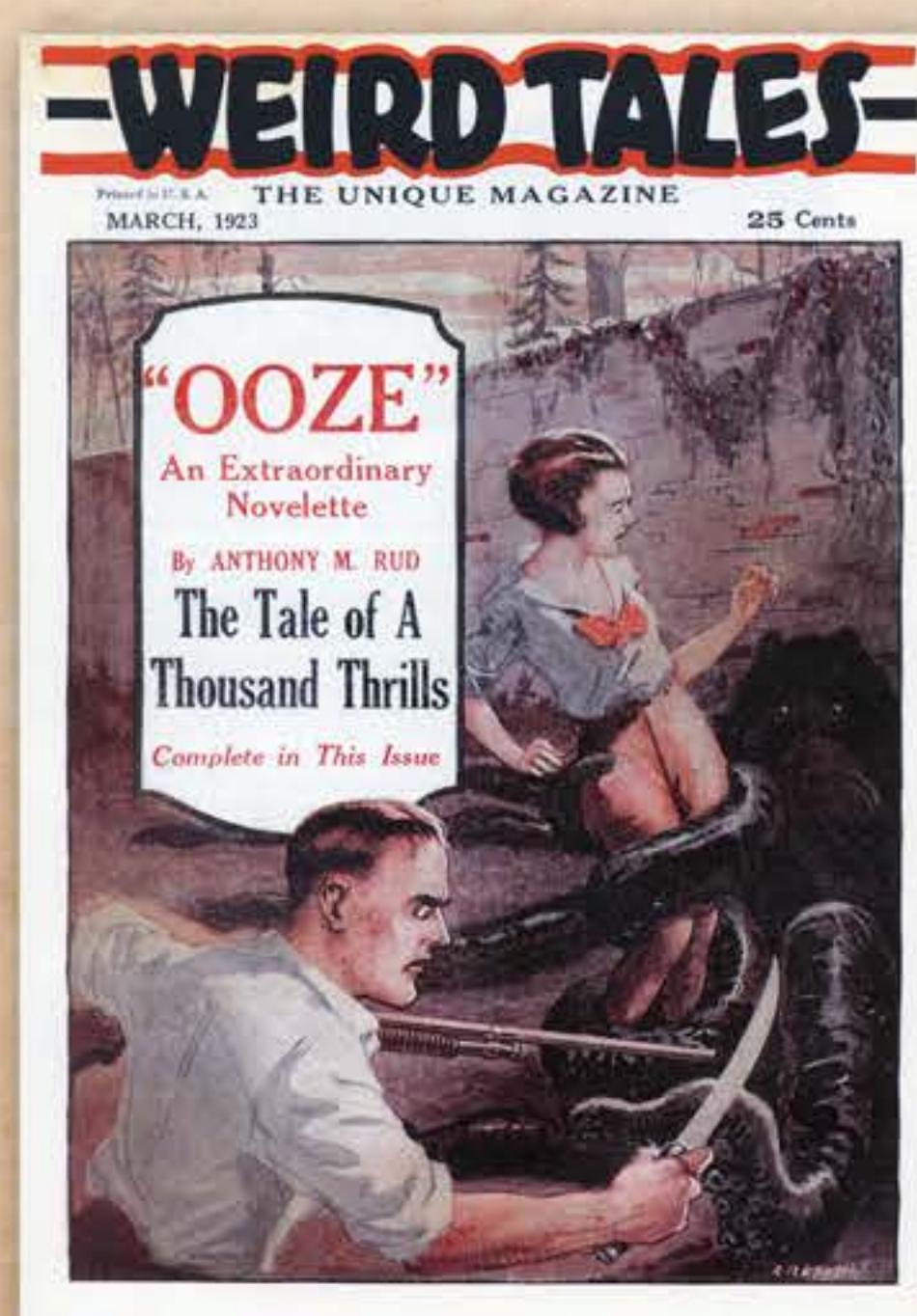
The All-Story Magazine. New York : F. Munsey, Dec 1913. Courtesy The Pulp Magazine Archive.

Hard-boiled noir detective stories were created when readers got tired of the analytical, thinking type of detective which had arisen as a reaction to the action-oriented detectives favored in early dime novels.

Other publishers followed suit and the pulp magazine was born. Pulps took their cues from dime novels, and focused adventure stories on characters such as John Carter of Mars, Tarzan and Zorro, the Masked Avenger.



Detective Story Magazine. New York: Street & Smith Publishers. August 27, 1921. Courtesy The Pulp Magazine Archive.



Weird Tales. Chicago: Rural Publishing Corporation, March 1923. Courtesy The Pulp Magazine Archive.

The American frontier had been conquered, and so the frontier in pulp fiction moved to outer space and to fictional worlds. Stories taking place in extra-planetary space or in imaginative worlds rose in popularity, creating the science fiction and fantasy that we know today.

READ DIME NOVELS AND PULPS ONLINE

University of South Florida Libraries Special Collections.

Dime Novel Collection Online.

<https://digital.lib.usf.edu//dimenovels>

Rare Books and Special Collections at Northern Illinois University:

The Albert Johannsen and Edward T. LeBlanc Collections.

<https://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu/>

Villanova University Digital Library: Dime Novel and Popular Literature.

<https://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl:24093>

The Pulp Magazine Archive.

<https://archive.org/details/pulpmagazinearchive/>

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