

FACT IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

ON an early morning in March, 1959, a little known drama was about to play its final act behind the walls of the Arizona penitentiary in Florence, U.S.A.

As the desert sun was coming over the horizon, a tall black man sat on the edge of his bunk with an almost serene expression over his angular features. Vernice Lonnie Craft was soon to be executed; the long wait was over. It was quite a journey that seemed to be destined for this final curtain.

Lonnie Craft had had a fairly successful boxing career, fighting under the name "Battling Blackjack." He fought many well-known fighters and even held the Arizona state light heavyweight title until he retired from boxing in 1950.

Born April 6, 1917, in Texas, Lonnie migrated to Phoenix at an early age, and that's where he started fighting. He also went to jail there for the first time.

In 1933 he was sentenced for burglary. He made trustee and was released in 1934, but not for long.

In 1935 he earned himself a 2 to 5 year sentence for grand theft. Along with his unsuccessful career as a thief, his boxing career was proving quite successful, having cut a path through some of the toughest fighters in the area. After his release, "Blackjack" again went back to the prize ring with increasing success, and in August of 1939 he met old pro, Johnny Risko, the Cleveland "Rubber Man." Risko, a tough customer, even in his later years, disposed of Craft within 3 rounds.

It seemed that his will-to-fail was too strong, and "Blackjack" was again at the gate of the state penitentiary, this time for 7 to 15 years for robbery. He proved to be a

model prisoner, easy to get along with and co-operative, and was released by expiration of sentence in 1947.

Having kept fit in the "joint," he again laced on the gloves for pay. He fought as often as he could, and in 1948 he took on the very dangerous Charley Burley.

In 1950, "Blackjack" Lonnie Craft decided the ring wars were getting too tough with age creeping up, so he decided to hang 'em up.

Lonnie Craft trained young fighters in Phoenix, but life was never to be smooth for him. A marriage was on the rocks and life was closing in on "Battling Blackjack." The ensuing divorce was more than the ex-fighter could emotionally stand.

On a mild March day in 1957, Craft's ex-wife, Virginia, sat in a cafe on the East side of Phoenix. Craft, obviously upset, sat on a stool next to her, and pleaded with her to come back to him and not to leave Phoenix. He knew that this was it. Either she could reconsider or else.

BATTLING WINNER IN LOSER IN

All arguments were exhausted when Lonnie Craft reached into his pocket and drew out a pistol.

"Then we'll go together," were the last words Virginia Cook Craft heard from her ex-husband. A slug slammed into her abdomen from the pistol, and one in the back as she started to slide off the stool. Craft was now beyond control and pumped two more bullets into his by now dead wife's back. Turning the gun on himself, Craft shot himself in the chest then emptied the cylinder, firing aimlessly in the direction of his wife's body on the tile floor. After the last round he reloaded and fired in a second shot into his chest.

Police were quick to the scene.

As they entered Craft was reaching over Virginia Craft's body and giving it a hug.

"She's gone now and I don't care," was the comment Craft made on his way to the hospital to get patched up from his self-inflicted wounds. Somehow Craft survived the two bullets in his chest.

There was a trial, with the defence claiming "Blackjack" Lonnie Craft had taken too many beatings in the ring and therefore was insane. The fact that he had bought the murder weapon thirty minutes before, convinced the jury he had planned to kill his wife, and they sentenced him to death in Arizona's gas chamber.

Two years dragged by while his attorneys battled for the former fighter's life. Craft seemed at ease, and as with his prior visits to jail, was a model prisoner. It was as if he almost welcomed death.

On March 7th, 1959, Lonnie Craft was made ready for his final public appearance.

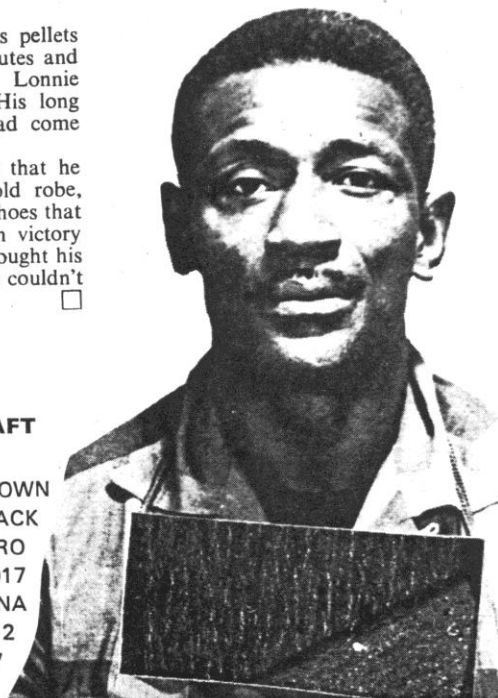
A preacher from the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Tucson was his spiritual adviser, he said that

At 5 A.M. the lethal gas pellets were tripped and in 5 minutes and 30 seconds "Blackjack" Lonnie Craft was gone forever. His long battle with society that had come to see him fight was over.

It seems an ironic twist that he was buried in the same old robe, trunks and leather boxing shoes that had seen his arm raised in victory many times—now he had fought his last battle in them—one he couldn't win! □

**VERNICE LONNIE CRAFT
No. 19795**

EYES BROWN
HAIR BLACK
RACE NEGRO
BORN 4-6-1917
NATIVITY ARIZONA
SHOE SIZE 12
WT. 187
HT. 6ft. 1½ in.



BLACKJACK THE RING LIFE

By **ROBERT CARSON**

Lonnie was prepared and ready to die without malice.

His last request was to go to his death wearing his boxing robe, trunks, and boxing shoes.

Shortly after 5 in the morning, the Warden, with his aids, came to his cell. Craft greeted them, "Here I am, Mr. Warden. I'm ready to go. If you gotta go, you gotta go! God bless you."

He then donned his silk red and white boxing robe, his shorts, and boxing boots, thrust out his chest, and strode down the passageway to the death chamber.

Lonnie Craft's final words were, "I made two short trips here, one long one, and, well, now this is it. God bless you."

SCARS: VSM ... CHEST, 2 in, 3 in.
& BULLET SCARS
LEFT ARM, P.C.
RECEIVED 9-21-1957
TERM DEATH
CRIME MURDER 1st Degree
FROM MARION COUNTY
F.B.I. No. 726 338
RELATION: Sister

Mrs. Custavia
2104 Franklin Ave.
San Diego, California



BATTLING BLACKJACK

(Vernice Lonnie Craft)

Hometown: Phoenix, AZ

Born : April 6, 1917, Texas

Died : March 3, 1959, Tucson, Arizona

Height : 6' - 1 1/2"

Weight : 187 lbs

TB	KO	WD	WF	D	LD	LF	LK	ND	NC
23	12	3	0	0	0	0	8	0	0

Executed for the murder of his wife on March 3, 1959

1939

Apr 3	Earl Nolan	Phoenix, AZ	L KO	1
Aug 15	Johnny Risko	Tucson, AZ	L KO	3

1940-1947

(Inactive due to Prison Incarceration)

1948

Jan 2	Willie Dee Jones	Hollywood, CA	W KO	1
Jan 6	Hoot Benson	Los Angeles, CA	L KO	1
Jan 16	Dale Hall	Hollywood, CA	L KO	1
Mar 10	Tony Martin	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	6
Mar 24	Charley Burley	Phoenix, AZ	L KO	3
Apr 7	Joe Smith	Phoenix, AZ	W PTS	6

1949

Feb 9	Gil Ramirez	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	2
Feb 22	Tommy Gunns	Phoenix, AZ	W PTS	6
Mar 22	Bill Sneden	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	1
May 9	Irish Pat O'Day	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	2
Jun 8	Wendell Gallant	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	4
Jun 15	Pedro (Kid) Hermosillo	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	5
Jul 15	Clyde Bowman	Phoenix, AZ	L KO	5
Aug 1	Clyde Bowman	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	7
Sep 1	Lou Smith	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	3
Oct 5	Jimmy O'Dowd	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	3
Nov 24	Clarence Henry	Phoenix, AZ	L KO	4

1950

Feb 8	Bobby Clark	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	3
Feb 22	Tommy Gunns	Phoenix, AZ	W PTS	6
Jul 12	Red Shumway	Phoenix, AZ	W KO	1

1951-1953

(Inactive)

1954

Mar 26	Zora Folley	Clifton, AZ	L KO	1
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