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# Crankies — What People Watched before Movies

BY ROLAND VINYARD

We were about 200 years late. For us, it started in 2011, with a concert featuring the traditional performer Elizabeth LaPrelle. She sang the Child Ballad “*Lord Bate-man*,” accompanied by a table-top box, which contained a long scrolling quilt, which as it was unwound revealed scenes depicting the various verses. She called it a crankie. Well, my wife Janet is a quilter. We exchanged looks: How neat was this? We could make something such as this for Fine Arts Salon at the next year’s caving convention. Janet asked me, “What songs about caving do you have?” We selected “*The Ballad of Pete Hauer*”—a true story I’d written about the mysterious death of a close friend and his involvement with the murder of a sort of innocent bystander.

The song contained 11 verses. We would need that many descriptive panels. Since a song without an instrumental break can be less interesting, we created 13 panels, each 2’ by 2’ in size, making a 2’ x 26’ quilt, which Janet would need to sew. We felt this 2’ height was the minimum size that could easily be viewed by others in a small concert setting.

With Janet’s help, I sketched the artwork and sequence of panels, then she spent virtually all her spare time over the next several months turning the sketches and her ideas into fabric renditions. During this time, all I could do was kibbitz until things took shape. Near the end, I created a box to display the quilt. Rotating dowels were at each end, with a handle to crank it forward and then return

it to position after the song was finished. We added curtains to make the kit appear like a theater and to hide the spools. It was premiered in West Virginia at the convention’s Fine Arts Salon, where it was intended to be a special feature to accompany the opening ceremonies.

Our crankie was more than just well received. Following the presentation, women surrounded Janet with questions about how it was created. Men flocked to me to talk about Pete, who had been well-known in the caving community. The crankie brought up submerged emotions, and as audience members recalled anecdotes and incidents, they were now anxious to talk about them. I took notes and later combined them with research of my own to write a book of the same title, *The Ballad of Pete Hauer*. But that’s a story for another time.

However, not everyone who wanted to see the crankie were in attendance at our performance, so another showing was arranged that day. Word got around quickly, and there was another, then another, and so on, until we’d reached 20 performances for the week. It was the subject of many campfire discussions. At the banquet and awards ceremony, we were awarded “Best of Show”—a surprise, since we’d not entered it for judging. It has been shown here in New York a number of times since. The book continues to sell, and the bizarre but true story continues to fascinate those who learn of it.

Twice since, our house concert series of traditional music has featured other crankies. We learned they don’t have to be quilted. Some are painted—on fabric, on mylar, or



Elizabeth LaPrelle with backlit crankie. Photo by the author.



Another view of Elizabeth LaPrelle's crankie. Photo by the author.

other materials. Some are front lit as ours is, and others are back lit. Shadow puppets can also be employed with backlit crankies to give a more realistic feeling of movement.

To impart a meaningful introduction to my own audiences, I needed to learn some background about the obscure art form of the crankie. It turns out there is a lot to know; they originally came in a variety of sizes. The widest known ones were immense. Along the way, I discovered a strong New York connection. The very first crankie was featured in a rotunda built especially for them in Leister Square, back in 1791 (some say, 1787). It featured the work of Scottish artist Robert Barker. His was displayed as a cyclorama, a fully circular painting to which the audience enters from below.

Now, I was quite familiar with cycloramas from a summer as a historian at Gettysburg National Military Park. Part of my job there involved running their cyclorama program showing an artist's rendition of Pickett's Charge. About 20 of these cycloramas survive and are on display throughout the world, with only 4 of them found in the United States. Needless to say, a place to display a huge circular painting (Gettysburg's is over 300' in

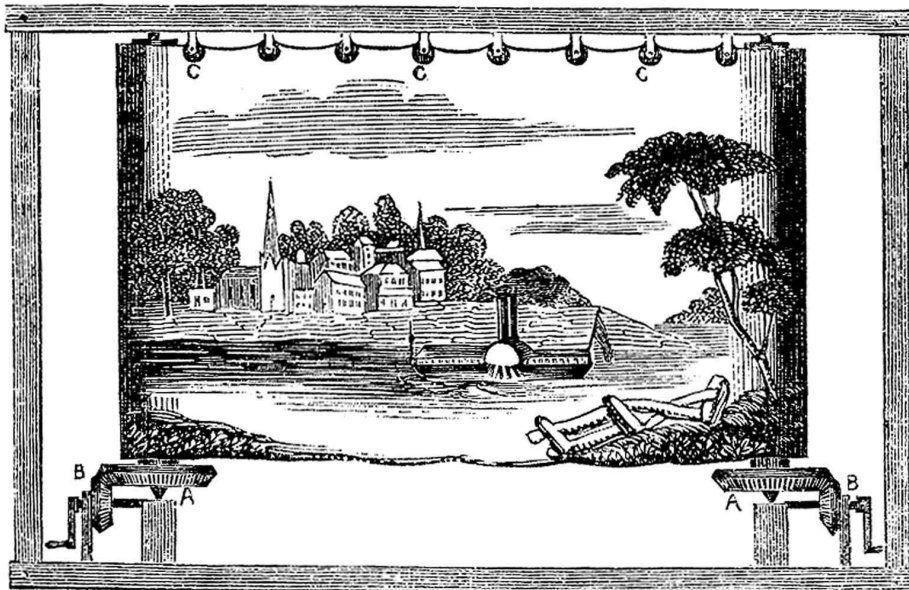
circumference) is not easy to find; yet, most major cities of the time had such venues. Cycloramas proved popular, and large cities were able to respond to these. However, similarly large works, when painted on scrolls, were so much more portable and were able to be set up in buildings used for other purposes, such as ones found in smaller cities and towns. The art could be brought to the masses instead of the other way around. Back then, crankies were considered both a popular spectacle and cutting-edge technology.

New York's Robert Fulton obtained a French patent for moving panoramas in 1799. Early traveling ones were displayed in community halls and churches, with theaters used later. They were often employed behind a stationary prop, as a moving background. And even after the advent of cinema, they were used to give a sense of movement, if the dialogue took place, say, in a moving car or train. Alfred Hitchcock used them in his films, and today, some theater groups still employ this concept.

Actually, they weren't called "crankies" then. This is the modern term, credited to Peter Schumann of the "Bread and Puppet

Theater." "Moving Panorama" was the most common name at the time. "Moving Back-stop," or "Moving Diorama" were others. "Myriorama" was a commercial name created and used by one presentation firm. There was no official or popularly agreed upon name.

Typically, such a presentation firm employed a narrator, a "Perfesser" or "Delineator" to provide a spoken explanation of what the audience saw before them. A pianist might make up music as accompaniment while it unfurled, just as they later did in movie theaters before "talkies" were invented. Many subjects could serve as topics for a crankie. Popular ones were travelogues, historic events (especially, wars and battles), exotic landscapes, or historic events, such as the coronation of George IV or Philadelphia's "Federal Procession of 1788," (the latter was 1,300' long). Also popular were Arctic explorations (there were 20 of these!), the Gold Rush, as well as various religious topics. Stage hands might simulate gunshots and puffs of smoke in battle scenes. Some had symbols and instructions on the back, instructing the out-of-sight cranker just where to alter the speed or even stop for a bit.



1848 illustration of a moving panorama designed by John Banvard. *Scientific American* 4 (13): 100 (December 16, 1848).

There were crankies used as toys, tiny enough to hold in your hand or lap; they weren't all big shows seen by masses. Milton Bradley produced some of the toy crankies. However, many of the well-known touring ones were truly gigantic. "*The Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage Round the World*" measured 8.5' high and 1,275' long. It came in four spools, meaning that in order to change them, there had to be three intermissions during the two-hour show. This one still survives but is too fragile to perform. Even more impressive was one that Peter Grain did. It was 9,400' long, painted in both oil and watercolor. Exhibited in San Francisco, it featured a tour of US cities. The record size, one of a long sea voyage, was performed in 1900, at the Paris Exposition. It was viewed from a 230' long replica ship, and it measured 42' high and 2,460' long and enveloped the ship on both sides. So, crankies were a combination of entertainment, art, and education, and for the big ones, spectacle. And profit.

In 1827, William Dunlop, a theater historian, painter, and playwright, was commissioned by the Bowery Theater to turn an existing painting into a steamboat journey up the Hudson, then the Erie Canal, finally ending at the base of Niagara Falls. It proved very popular. In the 1840s, John Banvard created a travelogue of the Mississippi River. He spent two years wandering up and down the Mississippi,

sketching the various viewpoints and deciding what he wanted to include in his work. For food, he hunted. He had no backers and hardly any budget. When done, he began to paint, accomplishing that part in surprisingly short

order. It was 12' high and 1,300' long, but was advertised as "*The Three Mile Painting*." Since no one saw it unfurled, who could argue? His Mississippi crankie was too long to reroll between showings, so it was simply reversed, and the succeeding audience followed along in their pamphlets, reading though it backwards. In 1846, he brought it to England for a command private performance for the royal family at Windsor Castle. Some 400,000 people saw it displayed, and it made him a fortune, a fortune largely dissipated when he built a replica of Windsor Castle at his 60-acre Long Island residence. Locals called it "Banvard's Folly."

As might be expected, other artists—four of them—created rival Mississippi River crankies to try to capture some of the original's popularity. One was John Egan, whose 1851 crankie was advertised as 15,000' long. Actually, it was 348' long and 8' high. It is the last surviving one from that era. After Banvard's creation had run its course of popularity, it was cut into sections and used as opera backdrops. And when those had deteriorated enough, they

April 29 1849

**PURRINGTON & RUSSELL'S  
ORIGINAL PANORAMA  
April 2 — OF A — 1849  
WHALING VOYAGE  
ROUND THE WORLD.  
THREE MILES OF CANVASS.**

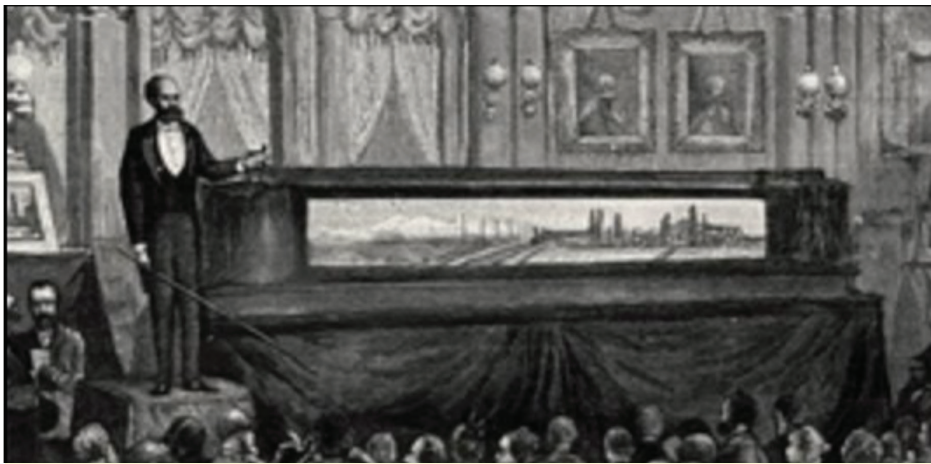
The Public is respectfully informed that the GRAND PANORAMA of a WHALING VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD, painted by Messrs. PURRINGTON and RUSSELL, of New-Bedford, has been completed, after two years of studious labor, and will be exhibited at

**AMORY HALL, BOSTON,  
EVERY EVENING,  
And Wednesday & Saturday Afternoons, at 3 o'clock.**

THE FOLLOWING IS A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PANORAMA.

SECTION 1.—City of New Bedford; Shipping; Revenue Cutter; Sail Boats; Whale Ship in stream, getting ready for sailing; merchant brig; boats and coasters; Palmer's Island; fishing-boats; inward and outward bound coasters; New York and Boston packets; Salt Works; farm houses; groves of trees; coasters; whale-ship Jannis, outward bound; whale-ship Niger from a voyage in tow of steamer Massachusetts; Clark's Point Lighthouse; pilot boat; whale-ship India.

Detail of ad for 1849 performance held at Boston's Amory Hall of "Whaling Voyage Round the World," a panorama by Benjamin Russell (1804–1885) and Caleb P. Purrinton (1812–1876).



Pavel Yokovlevich with a moving panorama depicting the great Siberian railway in 1874. About 800' long and divided into four spools, this panorama was performed at the 1900 Paris Exposition and is housed at the Heritage Museum in Russia.

were shredded and used as home insulation. Imagine that—what a comedown. Two years after Egan's crankie, in 1853, a crankie of Niagara Falls premiered on Broadway.

Photos that I have seen of the various crankies' artwork easily show they were not

just drawn by hacks. Famous artists, such as Frederic Edwin Church of the Hudson River School, often helped create them. Otis Bullard, a Connecticut artist who had moved to New York City in 1843, spent four years and \$15,500 painting his "Panorama of New York

City," a two-hour show on lower Manhattan, which was taken to small cities far enough away from New York for residents who would be unlikely to be able to travel there. The narrator, portrayed as a knowledgeable outsider, showed the city as a mixture of wealth and poverty, a place of some class conflict, while basically ignoring its thriving middle class. At times he employed a bird's eye view, and at other times, used the more conventional street view. There were a few inside scenes, and humor was widely inserted into the narrative. Buildings were shown in their proper scale and correct colors, and the people portrayed in this crankie were real persons.

Mark Twain even got into the act. An author and humorist—not a visual artist—in 1866, he produced the story, "The Entertaining History of the Scriptural Panoramist," in which a traveling religious barker loses his usual accompanist and hires a local drunk so the show



A pretty hotel on Palmer's Island. Photo by Sue Truman.



The big building is the factory for making salt. The windmills move the pumps, which bring in sea water. Photo by Sue Truman.

can go on—only the drunk forgets and plays some bawdy drinking songs instead of following the script. All of which, of course, embarrassed the panoramist, while delighting those watching—that is, those that hadn't left in a huff already. Twain was probably living in Elmira, New York, when this was written.

The Poole Brothers, from a British family, who served as a distributor of crankies for several generations, had at the height of their popularity, seven different shows touring 40 weeks a year. Crankies stayed popular throughout the late 1920s, though by then, those most favored had settled into more Christmas-themed presentations.

Of the hundreds of crankies that were once on tour throughout the United States, Great Britain, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia, only a tiny few survive. There are just four that I am aware of which can be found in US museums. Typically painted on muslin or canvas, a crankie had to be rolled and unrolled way too often to remain stable. Unlike cycloramas, which do not move, crankies had a lifespan. Fabric deteriorates with age, especially when used and flexed sharply. Their paint begins to

flake and chip, even early in its lifespan. To document many of them, all we have left are ephemera, such as circulars and posters. The New Bedford whaling voyage crankie was painted over in spots, as revisions were made; now, with its flaking paint, long-forgotten earlier versions are being revealed. None of the few surviving original touring crankies are in good enough condition to enable any one of them to be shown, so they have become something of a forgotten art form. Yet, the timespan of crankies' popularity still exceeds that of cinema and video. So far.

Today, crankies are more than a revival. There is something of a cultural revolution going on with them in some circles, but I am unaware of any who are attempting to duplicate the grandiosity of the traveling panoramas of the mid- and later 1800s. Our relatively modest 2' x 26' crankie is not a voice in the wilderness. In the 21st century, there have been many new developments and variations on the general concept on a much smaller scale, culminating in a number of crankie fests, including one at our alma mater, the University of Connecticut. Artistic fans from all over are out there

once more, trying new ideas, new sizes, new materials, and new ways of presenting stories visually, as well as acoustically. Some now use lasers and computers to create their art, which presents a fun juxtaposition of new and old technology. Still, wouldn't it be fun to witness a thousand-foot long painting, scrolled to music invented on the spot and narrated by the kind of character some of those "perfessors" and delineators must have been? ▼

With degrees in History from the Universities of Delaware and Connecticut, Roland Vinyard is a businessman by day and an occasional author by night. An active performer and recorder of mostly traditional folk music, he lives in the Mohawk Valley and sponsors a music series, featuring full-time traditional performers, and additionally, serves as a nationwide coordinator of an original music contest about caves and cavers. Photo by Bill Ackerbauer.



# The Ballad of Pete Hauer



Music by Roland Vinyard © 2008

Crankies from presentation on Pete Hauer by author.



*Pete bought the farm to get the cave. His luck there, he thought he'd test  
On the farm, no rest he found; It was caves Pete loved the best (2X)*

27 acres with a ramshackle home, tiny old barn, poor land—but it was all his. The thing Pete loved about the place that was different was that there was a cave here. He was a nationally known caver and also the foremost expert on saltpetre caves. And his cave had been mined for saltpetre during the Civil War.



*One night returning late, dead silence filled his chest.*

*His livestock, brutally killed: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

A mentally deficient neighbor adult boy, from a family of hippie-haters, killed his livestock, very brutally. The family's landlord was a wealthy man, one often accused of dishonest practices, a fellow who had wanted to buy Pete's farm, only the old owner never gave him a chance. The relations between the two of them were, well, "not always cordial."



*Who would do this to him? Who did this deed so grotesque?  
He brooded long, but no answer he found: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

A pacifist now in fear of his life, Pete bought a gun. He had a pet talking crow, taken from the days when he taught environmental education to disadvantaged city kids. The crow had been killed, too.



*His girl finally left, gone to a new address.  
The love they had, long, long gone: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

The relationship with his live-in girlfriend deteriorated and she left for grad school. And soon found another man. He remained friendly with both of them. He was unsure of himself around women and these events did nothing to help that.



*That summer, a gay young boy cycled the hills north and west.  
But one day, he failed to return: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

The boy was Walter Smith, well-to-do, with a politically connected family. A college student, he had a summer job at a nearby park. Some call him “gay” in the modern sense, but I don’t think that was really correct. At any rate, I am using “gay” in a much older sense, as folks used it in songs during the ‘20s.



*The sheriff came, to Pete for help, to search the caves was his request.  
But Pete was gone, we knew not where: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

Not suspecting Pete had killed Walter, they came several times for his help to search area caves for Walter. Pete was never home, but doors were ajar and lights on. Actually, by this time he had probably already committed suicide in remorse. The oddest thing of the story to his friends was that Pete was a gentle person, a pacifist, and he had no motive to kill anyone. By the time this happened, the boy who killed his livestock was about to be released from the mental hospital to where he’d been sentenced, and Pete had been extremely afraid he’d seek revenge for his incarceration, and it would be him that would be brutally killed next time.



*In the house the sheriff found a signed note typed at the desk  
He'd killed the boy, the letter said: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

Without a search warrant, the police finally went in and found a combination confession/will/suicide note. It told them where to find the body, but gave no clue for any motive other than vague references to demons who haunted him. I feel he was undiagnosed bipolar (this disease was just being described at this time – 1975).



*In the cave, they found the boy, foully slain, long dead, I guess  
Other caves were searched for Pete: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

The brown thing is a saltpetre vat, which some saltpetre caves had, though not Pete's—call this “artistic license.” Walter was buried under rubble, wrapped in a plastic tarp, things I did not know when composing the song.



(instrumental interlude)



*His many friends would not believe this peaceful man was so depressed  
As to kill so wantonly: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

There was a nationwide search for Pete by the FBI. They attended a national caver's convention held in California in hopes to get clues as to his whereabouts. While everyone knew Pete, none had any inkling where he might be.



*In the Fall, some hunters found him hanging dead, but now at rest.  
Another death, still no one to blame: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

A 12-year-old neighbor and his father found Pete's remains, hanging. Actually, very little was left hanging, most had decomposed during the four months since he'd disappeared, something I did not learn until I got the official police photos of the crime scene.



*Now birds sing above the cave, which enjoys public access,  
We search for answers, but find only one: It was caves Pete loved the best. (2X)*

Now all buildings are gone and the "farm" is owned by a cave conservancy. It feels peaceful there. Nothing is left of Pete's life there other than a memorial marker.

For further information:  
<https://www.thecrankiefactory.com>  
<https://panoramacouncil.org>

*The Ballad of Pete Hauer:*  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFGA\\_icGpql](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFGA_icGpql)

And my book, *The Ballad of Pete Hauer*, based on the crankie that we created, can be purchased from the National Speleological Society bookstore (256-852-1300), or in New York, from Speleobooks, (518-295-7978). My contact: [roland@vinyardschoice.com](mailto:roland@vinyardschoice.com)

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