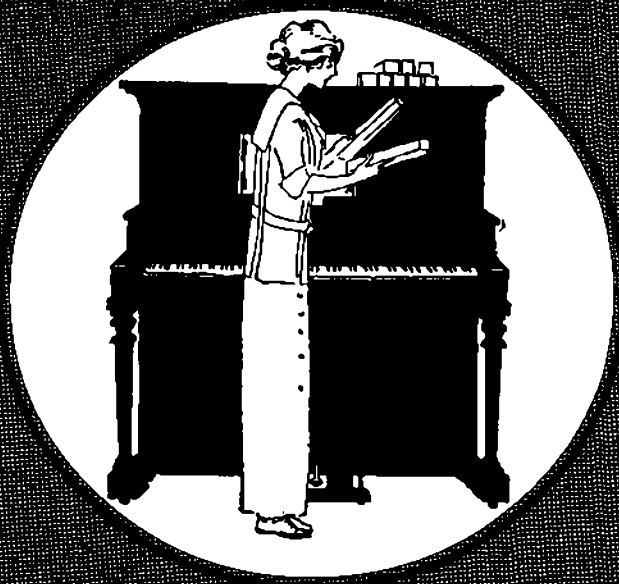


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## *Hello, Out There in Radioland!*

A friend of ours retired earlier this year after a successful career in the world of consumer banking.

She began her career in 1956 as a teller in a single-office savings and loan association and wrapped it up 44 years later as a key executive in the same, merged, financial institution presently owned by a multi-national company overseas.

At her retirement party, we had an opportunity to look back at the year she started work, 1956.

There was no branch banking in the State of Illinois; no certificates of deposit; no Automatic Teller Machines. The savings passbook rate was 2.3 per cent per annum, compounded daily and paid semi-annually. For a \$200 deposit into a passbook savings account you could go home with a set of dishes, service for four, "Golden Wheat" pattern; or an umbrella; or a pair of binoculars.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was president of the United States and there were only 48 states in the Union. The original Richard Daley was Mayor of Chicago.

There was lots of cigarette advertising on radio and television.

*Arthur Godfrey Time* and Don McNeill's *Breakfast Club* were among the few surviving shows on radio. Ed Sullivan and *I Love Lucy* were among the favorite TV programs.

Elvis Presley was singing "Hound Dog" and "Love Me Tender" on 45 rpm records and 33 1/3 L.P.s.

First class postage was three cents. A dozen eggs was 60 cents; a pound of bacon was 57 cents; a half-gallon of milk was 48 cents.

The only credit cards being used were issued by department stores.

There were no home video tape recorders; no movies on VHS or DVD; no compact discs. There was no cable TV; no Satellite TV; no Pay-Per-View; no HBO. There was no color TV in every home and there were no cordless remote clickers.

There were no personal computers; no Internet; no e-mail.

There was no touch-tone dialing; no cell phones; no fax machines; no Ameritech.

There was no USA Today; no Disney World; no Epcot Center.

There were no Pizza Huts; no Lucky Charms; no Pop Tarts.

There was no Astro Turf, no Zip Codes, no movies on airplanes.

There was no Diet Rite and no Diet Coke.

There was no Medicare; no HMOs; no Weight Watchers; no Jenny Craig.

There were no Barbie Dolls; no Beatles; no IBM Selectric typewriters.

There was no laser surgery; no heart bypasses; no transplants.

And that's the way it was in 1956.

—Chuck Schaden

# “’Tis Funny, McGee!”

## *An Appreciation of Fibber and Molly*

BY ELIZABETH MCLEOD

Team a failed husband-and-wife small-time midwestern vaudeville act with an out-of-work cartoonist, and what do you

get?

One of radio's best-remembered, most enduring programs.

*Fibber McGee and Molly* is still widely heard in reruns today — more than seventy years after Jim and Marian Jordan

began their radio careers. For many listeners this often-corny, often-hokey, and always-amusing series remains the embodiment of old-time-radio fun. And, like most successful radio programs, the factors which made the series work were drawn from the personalities of its creators. Jim and Marian Jordan were, in real life, very much like the characters they played — unpretentious midwestern folks who had achieved success thru a combination of luck and hard work.

Both Jim and Marian were natives of Peoria, Illinois — which, despite its comedy image, was no rural backwater. During the 1890s, Peoria was the second-largest city in Illinois — a bustling industrial

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*Elizabeth McLeod is a radio journalist and broadcast historian who lives in Rockland, Maine. She has specialized in the documentation of early 1930s radio for more than 20 years, and is currently co-writer of the CBS Radio Network program Sound-Bytes.*

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Jim and Marian Jordan  
*Fibber McGee and Molly*

PHOTOFEST

community of fifty thousand people. It was also a major stop on the vaudeville circuits of the turn-of-the-century era — the phrase “Will it play in Peoria” paid tribute, in fact, to the demanding nature of its family-time audiences. Jim Jordan and Marian Driscoll were among the many stage-struck youngsters who made their way each week to one of the several Peoria vaudeville houses to see what was new (and perhaps during these trips they might have encountered another Peoria youth with dreams of a show business career, a brickmason's son by the name of Charlie Correll).

Jim Jordan had been raised on a farm outside the city, but never missed a chance

to come into town for a show. He was a budding talent himself, with a clear tenor voice that he displayed as a member of the St. John's Church Choir. A fellow singer in this choir was Marian Driscoll, three years' Jim's junior — they met, courted, and in 1918, were married.

Singers were a dime a dozen during these years — every

town, every city had its legion of youthful vocalists hoping for a shot at the big time, and Jim Jordan was just another voice in the crowd. While Marian contributed to the family income by giving piano lessons, Jim plodded along with a series of humdrum jobs, taking stage engagements on the side wherever he could find them, hoping for his one big break. For the Jordans, singly, and as a team, that break never came — at least not so far as vaudeville was concerned.

But vaudeville was no longer the only game in town. By the mid-1920s, radio had become big business — and Chicago one of its most bustling centers of activity. A brief audition performance in 1924 landed the Jordans a contract as a harmony team over station WIBO under the sponsorship of the Williamson Candy Company. As the O'Henry Twins, Marian and Jim performed as a harmony team — and by the following year were supplementing their songs with bits of humorous patter.

Song-and-patter duos were nothing unusual, but what the Jordans lacked in originality they made up for in determination. Between 1925 and 1929 they appeared in several series over several stations in a wide



variety of formats — honing their microphone talents and experimenting with different voice characterizations. Their 1929 serial *The Smith Family* over WENR developed a strong local following, and they continued to perform as a comic-harmony duo on various other shows. It was during this period that Jim created an old-man character called "Uncle Luke," and Marian began to play around with a little-girl voice which was soon given the name of "Teeny."

It was at WENR that the Jordans made the most important connection of their careers — hooking up with a struggling young writer by the name of Don Quinn. Quinn's gently-absurd sense of humor meshed perfectly with the Jordans' own performing style — and the result was *Smackout*.

Beginning over WMAQ in 1931, *Smackout* was a daily fifteen minute show which combined all of the ingredients which the Jordans had found most successful in their radio careers: light musical harmonies, amusing voice characterizations, and a loosely-connected serial storyline. Jim Jordan was featured as Uncle Luke Gray, the proprietor of a small coun-

## "TIS FUNNY, MC GEE!"

try store, and also as Luke's nephew Jim — married to niece Marian, who also appeared as Teeny, the little girl from across the street. Uncle Luke was a vague, meandering sort of gentleman, who was always "smack out" of whatever commodity a customer might happen to need. Dozens of other characters filled out the cast — some vocalized by the Jordans, others simply talked about.

This simple format — owing much to the basic techniques pioneered by *Amos 'n' Andy* — carried *Smackout* thru a four-year run. Quinn quickly developed into an excellent writer — with a peculiarly absurd sense of humor that managed to be

both corny and innovative at the same time. By 1935, *Smackout* had become an established NBC network feature, and was attracting interest from sponsors. In late 1934, the Jordans and Quinn were approached by the Chicago advertising agency of Needham, Louis and Brorby — representatives of S. C. Johnson & Sons of Racine, Wisconsin. Johnson's Wax was interested in a new series for the spring of 1935 — but they didn't want *Smackout* in its daily serial format. Could Quinn turn it into a half-hour comedy-variety show?

He could — and he did. Luke Gray lost his country store, and changed his name to Fibber McGee. The characters of Marian and Jim were dropped — and Marian adopted an Irish dialect as Fibber's hard-

### *Fibber and the Famous Closet*

"No, no, not that door! That's the hall closet!"

In the 24 years that Jim and Marian Jordan were on the air as *Fibber McGee and Molly*, their hall closet was opened 128 times.

The first was during *McGee* program number 238 on May 4, 1940 when the closet gag was used twice.

The last time the closet gag was used *live* was during their program number 738 on June 23, 1953, the next-to-last broadcast in their long-running 30-minute series which began on April 16, 1935. In those eighteen years, the closet had been opened 115 times and each time a sound effects man had performed the gag *live* before a howling studio audience who

usually rewarded the effect with appreciative applause.

When *Fibber McGee and Molly* moved to a 15-minute, five nights per week program (pre-recorded, without a studio audience) on October 5, 1953, the McGees continued to use the closet gag, but the sound effect was recorded and not performed live. Before the 15-minute series ended with program number 1,298 on March 23, 1956 they had opened the hall closet another 13 times, the final time on the final show.

The famous crash of Fibber's famous closet was not heard when Jim and Marian Jordan performed short comedy bits as *Fibber McGee and Molly* on NBC's *Monitor* series from June 1, 1957 thru September 6, 1959, but their closet gag has survived as possibly the best known sound effect from the golden age of radio.



edged wife Molly. The two characters were dropped into a rickety old touring car and sent on a rambling auto trip across the Midwest — and with that formula, *Fibber McGee and Molly* made its debut on April 16, 1935.

The Fibber and Molly heard in that premiere episode are scarcely recognizable today. Fibber is still basically Luke

Gray, with Jordan performing in a querulous old-man voice. Molly is far from being the gentle and understanding spouse familiar from later years of the series — during the first months of the show she was something of a battle-axe. But the essential elements were there: a bluffing, exaggerating leading man constantly brought down to earth by his straight-talking wife.

In September 1935, the McGees stopped off in a small town called “Wistful Vista,” where Fibber bought a raffle ticket on a new house — and his was the winning number. When the McGees moved into their new home at 79 Wistful Vista, the final ingredients fell into place, and *Fibber McGee and Molly* began to come into sharp focus.

*Fibber McGee and Molly* is often described by commentators as “vaudeville-like” in its approach to comedy, filled with fast-paced gags and exaggerated wordplay. But in fact the style of the series really has less to do with vaudeville influences than those of another important entertainment medium of the era: the comic strip.

Don Quinn had been a cartoonist before moving into radio — and it is clearly a cartoonist’s sensibility which shines thru



Jim and Marian Jordan with writer Don Quinn celebrating the *McGee* show's 14th Anniversary in 1949

in his *Fibber* scripts. The characters themselves would have fit right in on the comic pages circa 1935 — Fibber bears a very strong resemblance to such inept comic-strip husbands as George Bungle (of “The Bungle Family”), and his exaggerating, filibustering speech reminds one a bit of Andy Gump. More important, the construction of Quinn’s scripts is very much that of a comic strip. Each episode is made up of a string of self-contained encounters with various comedy characters, all tied together by the thread of a common plot. The construction of these encounters is very much in the setup/punchline vein, and one could transcribe them to an actual comic strip form with nothing lost in the translation. Listening to *Fibber*, it’s very easy to visualize the program in terms of panel borders and speech balloons.

Once the basic structures of the series had been established, *Fibber McGee and Molly* maintained a remarkable consistency over the course of its run. Although supporting characters came and went over the years — and although Marian Jordan herself was off the series for over a year due to illness in 1937-39 — *Fibber McGee and Molly* actually changed very little from the

## "'TIS FUNNY, MC GEE!"

mid-1930s forward. While other shows became slicker, more packaged, more processed, *Fibber* retained its homespun flavor, its slightly-off-center comic-strip view of life. Even the move from Chicago to Hollywood in 1939 failed to change the series. New elements and new running gags added to the show during its run — like *Fibber*'s famous closet — served only to enhance this atmosphere. And even when Quinn himself finally left the series, his legacy remained — succeeding writers like Phil Leslie and Keith Fowler had learned the house style well, and helped *Fibber* endure into a ripe old age.

The half-hour weekly series ended in 1953, but the Jordans weren't ready to retire. *Fibber* returned that fall in a daily serial format which endured for three years, and then the series moved to NBC's week-end *Monitor* program in the form of brief comedy segments running thru the summer of 1959.

Marian Jordan fell ill in 1960, and died of ovarian cancer on April 7, 1961, bringing the long run of *Fibber McGee and Molly* to an end. But the show remained legendary — and when a ten-year run of episodes turned up in the archives of S. C. Johnson & Sons, the program became a success all over again, riding the nostalgia craze of the 1970s to renewed popularity in syndication.

Jim Jordan died on April 1st, 1988, having lived long enough to see his series enshrined as a broadcasting legend. Its pleasantly-corny humor undimmed by the passing years, *Fibber McGee and Molly* remains one of Old Time Radio's biggest crowd-pleasers — and it will likely be on the air, in some form, for as long as there is radio. ■

*NOTE Tune in TWTD on December 23 to hear the 1943 Fibber McGee and Molly Christmas show and again on January 13 to hear the 1935 program where they win their home in Wistful Vista.*



*Fibber McGee and Molly* Cast for 1945-46 Season:

Frank Pittman (producer), from left, Bea Benaderet, Gale Gordon, Jim Jordan, Harlow Wilcox, Marian Jordan, Phil Leslie (writer), Billy Mills, Don Quinn (writer), Shirley Mitchell, Arthur Q. Brian



# Fibber McGee and Molly in the Movies

Jim and Marian Jordan took their act to the movie theatre four times during a seven-year period when they appeared in a quartet of feature motion pictures between 1937 and 1944.

## **THIS WAY PLEASE (1937)**

Paramount Pictures introduced Fibber and Molly to movie-goers just two years after their radio debut. It was in this "B" musical

starring Betty Grable as a movie theatre usherette who gets a crush on band leader Charles "Buddy" Rogers. The Jordans, as the McGees, provided some "engaging moments" according to critic Leonard Maltin. The film was also the screen debut of Mary Livingstone (minus Jack Benny). Cast included Ned Sparks, Porter Hall, Lee Bowman, and Rufe Davis.

## **LOOK WHO'S LAUGHING (1941)**

RKO Radio Pictures elevated Fibber and Molly to motion picture stardom as they co-starred with Edgar Bergen, Charlie McCarthy and Lucille Ball in a film aimed directly at radio fans. When Edgar Bergen's airplane has engine trouble, he and Charlie are forced to land in Wistful Vista where a "municipal



*This Way Please (1937)*  
Marian and Jim Jordan with some beautiful girls

squabble" erupts. Bergen has a slight romance with Lucy while Charlie has a telephone encounter with "Teeny," voiced by Marian Jordan as Molly in a big surprise for the movie audience. The cast includes Harold Peary as Gildersleeve; Isabel Randolph as Mrs. Uppington, and, in roles other than the ones they play on the air, are Harlow Wilcox, Bill Thompson and Arthur Q. Brian.



*Look Who's Laughing (1941)*  
Jim and Marian Jordan, Charlie McCarthy, Edgar Bergen

## FIBBER MC GEE AND MOLLY IN THE MOVIES

**HERE WE GO AGAIN** (1942) One hit deserves another, so RKO brought Fibber and Molly and Edgar and Charlie back for an encore. In another film aimed at radio audiences we find the McGees celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary at an expensive resort they can hardly afford. Nevertheless, they mingle with the



*Here We Go Again* (1942)  
Ginny Simms, Edgar Bergen, Jim Jordan

other guests, including Bergen and McCarthy and Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, played by Harold Peary. Then there's Gildy's young sister, played by singer Ginny Simms, who attracts the romantic attentions of Edgar Bergen. Isabel Randolph repeats her role as Mrs. Uppington, and Bill Thompson is again in the screen cast, this time as Wallace Wimple. From the *McGee* show, but new to the film series, is Gale Gordon as Otis Cadwallader, Molly's old beau who is now a con artist

as complications abound. Joining in the fun are Ray Noble and his orchestra, from the Bergen and McCarthy radio show.

**HEAVENLY DAYS** (1944) In a movie titled after Molly's favorite expression, writer Don Quinn of the *McGee* radio program co-wrote the screenplay in a feature that finds Fibber and Molly going to Washington, D.C. to help in the Senate's post-war planning program. Fibber tries to find the "Average Man." The King's Men are the only other performers from the radio

show to appear in the cast, but Jim and Marian are ably supported on screen by Eugene Palette, Raymond Walburn and Barbara Hale. ■



*Heavenly Days* (1944)  
Marian and Jim Jordan, Raymond Walburn

*NOTE-- Not presently available on video, these Fibber McGee and Molly movies, particularly the RKO films, occasionally turn up on television or cable channels.*

# THE CHICAGO PROJECT

BY WAYNE KLATT

If there had been no need for absolute secrecy, history's greatest race against time would not have been known as the Manhattan Project. It was in Chicago that Enrico Fermi brought a team of 42 other scientists — many, like himself, fleeing Jewish persecution in Europe — to beat the Germans trying to build an atom bomb.

Manhattan had nothing to do with the research, and that was why that name was chosen. Chicago was picked partly because it was out of reach — Nazi would-be saboteurs had landed by submarine off New Jersey — and because of the roster of scientists at the University of Chicago. And one other factor. In concentrating on academics rather than athletics, the U of C no longer used Stagg Field for football games.

You might imagine that all state-of-the-art equipment would be at the disposal of the men meeting in secrecy in late 1942. Instead, they had to work under crude conditions as student volunteers unloaded shipments of graphite bricks to the floor of an unheated former squash court below the stands.

Dictionaries had no word for the ugly, 15-foot-tall construction they were building, like the base of a pyramid standing atop a tall platform, so the rudimentary nuclear reactor was called CP-1, "Chicago Pile Number One."

The scientists felt that if an uncontrolled reaction occurred, a suicide squad of science students above the pile could pour jugfuls of a neutron-absorbing sodium

solution onto the radioactive material. No one had any idea there could be a nuclear meltdown.

Construction began November 16 below Ellis Avenue between 56th and 57th streets, with scientists working 12-hour shifts. The students sang popular songs as they laid brick after brick over a simple platform of wood (purchased with double-X priority in those years of wartime rationing). The graphite came in bars 17 to 50 inches long, and Fermi helped cut them to size by running them through a band saw amid a cloud of thick black dust, sometimes while interviewing graduate students for jobs on the project.

After every two layers of 17-pound bricks of solid graphite, there was one of graphite bricks with holes drilled to accommodate a pair of five-pound semi-spheres of uranium. There was no blueprint for the pile, the supervisors made the shape up as work progressed. The pile took up most of the squash court floor, leaving just a walkway between the wooden base and the spectators' balcony. The graphite created a greasy surface so slippery that the students kept falling off the upper layers. Their supervisor, young scientist Albert Wattenberg, found himself filling out about two accident reports a day.

Specks of graphite kept pouring out of the students' skin even after they washed. As they slaved like Egyptians on the pile, the scientists took daily readings to see how close they were to critical mass, the level needed for a self-sustaining chain reaction. The activity would be controlled by 13-foot rods made from neutron-absorbing cadmium strips nailed to sticks that could be

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*Wayne Klatt is the night editor at New City News Service, Chicago and a free-lance writer.*

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## THE CHICAGO PROJECT

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slid in or out.

Student Harold Agnew had just won a Yale scholarship but was recruited to make the precise measurements needed. Because he broke out in a rash from radiation, he had to join other students piling up 385 tons of graphite bricks. In that more formal age, they wore suits and white shirts even though their pants legs were black from graphite dust.

Any science major seeing arrivals of uranium oxide and graphite could guess what was going on. One brilliant U of C student, Leona Woods, saw her future husband smelting bricks of metal in a corridor and exclaimed, "You guys have discovered how the chain reaction works!" The next day, Fermi invited Leona to become the only female researcher in the crusade.

Regular students would sometimes watch people coming and going. To keep anyone from sneaking in at night, university security guards like sophomore dentistry student Frank Psota were given .45 caliber pistols and raccoon coats left behind by the football squad. Every night they walked back and forth across a pile of plutonium even though no one ever approached the squash court entrance. But they know something big was about to happen when they were replaced by two busloads of soldiers, who set up machine guns around the premises.

The bitterly cold day that changed the world was December 2, 1942. With the outside temperature around zero, the three students in the "suicide squad" sat in a sort of open cage on top the pile while all 43 scientists stood on the balcony a few yards across from the pile in suits and ties, their coats and hats piled on an old desk. The mood was generally optimistic except for General Leslie Groves, who supervised the entire work mainly by letting Fermi do as

he wanted. Groves feared there would be an explosion, a piece of Chicago would disappear, and —worse— his Army career would be ruined.

At about 11:20 a.m., after three hours of continuous measurements, one of the control rods slipped because of an improperly set safety device and "suddenly slammed home," as Wattenberg put it. Nothing panicked Fermi. He just called a lunch break and everyone went out for burgers at the campus cafeteria.

When they returned, 34-year-old physicist George Weil, wearing a gray lab coat blackened by graphite, went down to the pit and slowly withdrew a final rod just over his head by 9, 10, 11 and then 12 inches. All eyes were on a recording pen as it jumped on the measuring panel against the wall. Scalers that ticked off boron trifluoride readings went from click-click-click to clickclickclickclick. "The pile has gone critical," Fermi said and closed his pocket slide rule.

The time was 3:26 p.m., and under the roof of black bricks neutrons were silently dancing with nowhere to go. The world was in the nuclear age four and a half minutes before the Italian genius had the rods pushed back to shut the reactor down.

How much energy had been released? One half watt, barely enough to light a cigarette. But Hungarian physicist Eugene Wigner produced a bottle of Chianti and distributed paper cups for a silent toast. There was no cheering, but some of the scientists were already wondering what they had wrought.

Within a few months, the radioactive graphite bricks were dumped in the Argonne Woods in a former picnic area in Palos Park. Stagg Field was later torn down and all that remains in its place is Henry Moore's sculpture "Nuclear Energy," which vaguely resembles the mushroom cloud that destroyed Hiroshima. ■

# A Visit With Santa Claus

BY KEN ALEXANDER

Christmas cards, like everything else, were cheap during the Great Depression; you could get a magnificent card for a quarter. The postage required to mail those cards was also cheap. Like any first-class mail weighing less than an ounce, a card could be sent anywhere in the United States for three cents. A card mailed in Chicago and destined for Chicago went for two cents.

To save a half-cent on each Christmas card—and saving cents and half-cents was essential in those days—you could tuck the flap of the envelope inside rather than sealing it. In that way, you could have a card delivered to

a friend or relative in Chicago for one and one-half cents. (Yes, stamps in one-half cent and one and one-half cent denominations were being issued back then.)

I believe we got our money's worth for that cent and a half. Mail was routinely delivered twice a day—morning and afternoon—Monday through Friday and once on Saturday.

For the last week or so before Christmas, the post office would hire extra carriers; then there would be several deliveries a day. You might have your mail delivered by your regular mailman at the usual time, then see another carrier coming down the street just a few minutes later.

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*Ken Alexander is a staff announcer on WNIB, Chicago and permanent guest host of Those Were The Days. This article originally appeared in the December 1993/January 1994 issue of Nostalgia Digest.*

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The frequent mail deliveries were one of the many things that added to the thrills of those last few days before Christmas.

It was on one of those days, a cold, crisp Saturday with no snow, that my parents took me downtown to see the window displays and to pay a visit to Santa Claus.

I had in mind three or four toys I was going to ask Santa to bring me. Of these, the one I still remember and the one that I probably wanted most of all, was an item I had seen while studying the Sears, Roebuck catalog. It was a little windup toy, a mulc harnessed to a cart.

When wound up, the mule would take a few steps forward, then stubbornly halt for a few seconds before taking a few more steps, according to the description in the catalog. The toy was listed as "Balky Mulc and Cart."

That's what I wanted for Christmas: a balky mulc and cart. That's the one thing I would be sure to ask Santa Claus to bring me.

My mother and father and I took the Madison streetcar downtown and got off at the old Morrison Hotel and walked to State Street. Mounted policemen directed traffic at the busy intersections in those days. High in his saddle, above the autos and the pedestrians, his horse standing smack in the middle of the intersection, the policeman was clearly visible to all.

With all the movie theaters and restaurants and hotels and stores, State Street was a very busy place every day of the year, but at Christmastime there were more



## A VISIT WITH SANTA CLAUS

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people than ever. On this day, the largest crowds were gathered in front of the display windows of the department stores: Marshall Field's; Carson, Pirie, Scott and Company; the Fair; Mandel Brothers, and the Boston Store.

What a fairyland those windows held! If you, as an adult, enjoy the window displays at Christmastime, imagine the effect they must have on a child.

Our perspective changes ever so gradually as we grow from infancy to maturity. To a small child, everything is large. Imagine, for example, a two-foot-high toddler standing next to, and looking up at, a six-foot man. That toddler must feel just about the same as a six-foot man would feel standing next to, and looking up at, an 18-foot giraffe.

The tiny elves moving about in the store windows are cute little figures in an adult's eyes. To a toddler, they are not tiny at all; they are as big as he is. When you admire the window displays this Christmas season, try to see them through the eyes of a four-year-old. Imagine that you are two feet tall.

If the tableaux in the windows were magical, the interiors of the stores had their own kind of magic. Christmas decor was everywhere — huge green wreaths tied with bows of broad red satin ribbon, great silver snowflakes, eight reindeer pulling Santa's sleigh through the air near the high ceiling, pillars wrapped to resemble tremendous sticks of peppermint candy. And this was not even in the toy department; this was on the ground floor.

Upstairs, the toy department was a wonderland almost beyond belief; any toy that any girl or boy might want was on display here. But the main attraction was Santa Claus.

There was a long line of children around

my age, with their parents, waiting for a brief audience with Santa, but the line moved steadily, and before too long I was sitting on Santa's lap.

Along State Street, earlier in the day, I had seen several men purporting to be Santa Claus, but I knew not one of them was Santa Claus. They were dressed like Santa Claus, but they didn't *look* like Santa Claus.

I knew what Santa Claus looked like, having seen many pictures of him and being familiar with the poem "A Visit From Saint Nicholas." He was plump. He had a broad face and a little round belly. His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry. His eyes twinkled. His beard was snow white.

The men I had seen posing as Santa on State Street were anything but plump. They were string beans. They had no belly at all. Their faces were gaunt and far from rosy; surely, they had not spent time recently at the North Pole. Their beards were a dirty gray. My parents told me that these men were Santa's helpers; the real Santa was in the toy department, upstairs.

Although I believed my parents' explanation, I did have a nagging question in the back of my mind: If Santa Claus himself was here in Chicago, who was superintending his vast operation at the North Pole with Christmas just a few days off?

Any doubts I had were soon dispelled when I laid eyes on the jolly old man seated on his throne before me. This was Santa — no doubt about it. He was indeed plump and his belly was round. His eyes twinkled, his face had a rosy glow, his nose was like a cherry, and he had a personality as warm as a grandpa's. His red suit with white fur trim was beautiful; Mrs. Claus herself must have been in charge of the elves who tailored it. His boots were black and highly polished. His beard, pure white, had the luster of fine silk.

Yes, this was Santa, all right — no question.

Santa asked me my name and I told him. He then asked me whether I had been a good little boy, and I told him that I guessed I had been. Next, he asked me what it was I would like him to bring me for Christmas.

I was an extremely shy child; I spoke softly, and, like most four-year-olds, with a lisp. I recited the three or four toys I wanted. When I came to the balky mule and cart, it probably came out sounding like “baw keymulen cart.”

There must have been phrases such as “chemistry set” and “Raggedy Ann doll” and “catcher’s mitt” and “doll house” which Santa heard dozens of times each day. Apparently “balky mule and cart” was not one of those phrases, and, while Santa had no difficulty understanding my other requests, when I said “balky mule and cart,” he asked me to repeat it.

“Baw keymulen cart,” I said.

Santa hesitated a split second, then nodded to indicate that he had understood. Something in his expression told me that he really had not understood; yet, something in his manner told me that I mustn’t be concerned.

Although my visit with Santa downtown that day was a highlight of my childhood — I remember it fondly 60 years later — for the next few days I had my doubts about receiving the balky mule and cart which I wanted so badly. If Santa didn’t know what I wanted, how would he be able to bring it to me?

Still, that look in his eyes seemed to be a sign that I would not be disappointed on Christmas morning.

The days between December 18 and December 25, as any astronomer will tell you, are the shortest days of the year, but any child will tell you that they are by far the longest.

The days did pass, albeit slowly, and Christmas morning finally did arrive. I rose earlier than usual and, in my pajamas, rushed into the living room. What a special moment! Four years old. Christmas morning. Now that I think of it, it must have been a very special moment for my mother and father, too.

The Christmas tree was ablaze with ornaments, icicles, even the silver star at the very top. It was a splendid sight to see, and it was a thrill to know that Santa Claus — the same plump, kindly gentleman who had held me on his lap a few days before

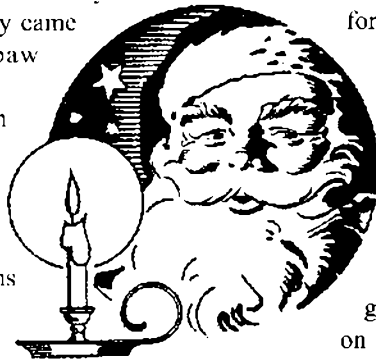
— had been in our apartment during the night, that Santa had brought that tree and had decorated it and had left the gifts which were now arrayed on the floor beneath it.

I excitedly found under that tree all the gifts I had asked for, plus a few more. Among those gifts was the one that I had longed for more than any other, but which I hardly expected to find: a balky mule and cart, and a key to wind it up.

There had been no reason to worry, after all. Santa had brought me exactly what I wanted, even though I was sure that he had not understood my lisped request. I was happy indeed, but I was also mystified. How in the world had Santa known?

After giving the matter some thought, I was able to arrive at only one explanation: besides being a beautiful, warm, kind, and generous soul, Santa must also be able to read children’s minds.

Santa Claus. What a guy! ■



# Talent, Desire and Music: The Key to Welk's Musical Family

BY RANDALL G. MIELKE

In a medium where television shows are sometimes canceled overnight, *The Lawrence Welk Show* was one of TV's most durable musical series. Welk and his band

of Champagne Music Makers presented middle-of-the-road music on Saturday nights for almost three decades. Starting in July, 1955 the show was seen on ABC until 1971. Then, from 1971 to 1982, the show was syndicated and was one of the few series to be aired on more stations in its syndicated form than when it ran on the ABC network.

The success story is really one of simplicity. Welk, an accordionist and band leader, kept close to a basic format: lots of music, a little dancing, and only a few guest stars. Even the moniker of Champagne Music came about quite simply.

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*Randall G. Mielke of Aurora, Illinois is an author and free-lance writer.*

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Early on in Welk's career his band was playing numerous radio dates from hotel ballrooms. The radio stations carrying the remotes would receive mail from adoring

fans. All the letters would indicate how his music made them feel. The letter-writers had nice things to say about the music and almost every one added words to the effect that the music sounded "sparkling," "light," "effervescent," "bubbly," or "happy." In effect what the fans were saying was that dancing to Welk's music was like sipping champagne.

And so the term

"Champagne Music" was coined.

Part of the television series' appeal was the array of talent the band leader presented. Each week Welk was backed by performers such as the Lennon Sisters, Norma Zimmer, Irish tenor Joe Feency, Larry Hooper, Bobby Burgess and his dancing partners, tap dancer Arthur Duncan, and/or accordionist Myron Floren.



Lawrence Welk

RANDALL G. MIELKE COLLECTION



These were all talented individuals who contributed greatly to the charm of the show.

There was an unusual cooperation and goodwill that existed in Welk's Musical Family and Welk felt that it was the real reason for the show's success: all the performers behaved with spirit and dedication.

Lawrence felt he was lucky to find people who were exceptional, who were dependable, honorable, and always willing to work beyond requirements. In fact, he almost had a sixth sense about finding and hiring people, a mysterious ability to smell out talent and character that others might miss. The camaraderie and goodwill of the performers transferred to the stage, as television viewers felt completely at home with this group of talented individuals.

Welk also had a desire to present the best show possible and that, almost by itself, carried many broadcasts. He was a self-avowed perfectionist and his natural instinct was to be very irritated whenever anyone fell far below their own level of perfection. But over the years he adjusted to human nature as not always being perfect and, if someone tried to do their very best, he couldn't ask for more. He operated on that theory for years.

A diligent taskmaster, Welk made sure numbers were well-rehearsed and always did songs live rather than having performers merely mouthing the words to the music. To his mind there was no comparison between the quality of a live performance and one in which the songs were recorded

ahead of time and then the performers just stood there and mouthed the words to the music. Welk felt that some of the natural fire and spontaneity was lost with pre-recorded musical numbers. He thought that the live performances brought real expression and emotion to the songs.

Other items also contributed to the success of *The Lawrence Welk Show*. Almost every week the show had a theme which could range from "Songs from the Movies" to a "Country and Western Show." Still other weeks might bring "The Roaring Twenties" or a "Salute to Swing Bands" — all of which audiences adored.



Lawrence Welk and the Lennon Sisters in 1956; Welk, from left, Dianne, 16; Janet, 10; Kathy, 13 and Peggy, 15. Lawrence, incidentally, was 53.

And then there was the bubble machine, Welk's trademark behind the scenes which kept a constant supply of soap bubbles floating up behind the band members.

So, with a modest format and a desire to present the best, a band leader from North Dakota, born of German immigrant parents, who did not learn to speak English until he was 21 years old, successfully presented audiences with traditional music for 27 years.

For fans of the show, it was simply "wunnerful, wunnerful." ■

# Echoes from our Past

## The Unforgettable 1940s

BY GARDNER KISSACK

As the days of the actual Twentieth Century dwindle down to a precious few, it might be fun—and even a bit useful—to take a look at what has emerged as THE most memorable and important decade in the past one hundred years.

Whether you lived through it or not, the decade of the 1940s may have produced our finest hours.

It was the time of Harry Truman and

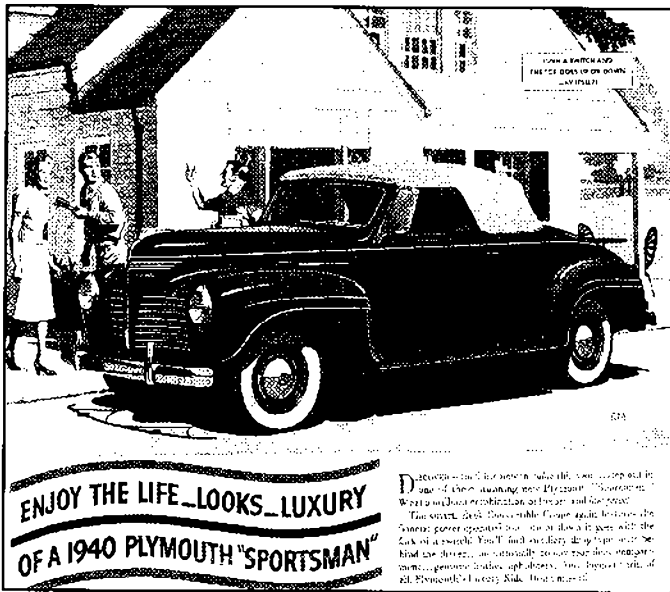
Thomas Dewey; wide ties and wider white-wall tires; Studebakers and Nashes; school girls in skirts and dresses; slippery plaid seat covers; Glenn Miller, Bogart and Bacall, Hoppy, Gene and Roy. It was the time of patriotic pride. It was a time of Victory Gardens and scrap drives and flags, American flags, flying everywhere, every day, proclaiming our unabashed patriotism.

There was gas rationing; Saturday morning paper drives with uniformed Scouts and other kids pulling red wagons up and down streets and alleys; air raid drills. Mother or Grandmother—or the lady next door

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*Gardner Kissack of Chicago Heights, Illinois is a volunteer tour guide for the Museum of Broadcast Communications and a collector of vintage radio and television receivers.*

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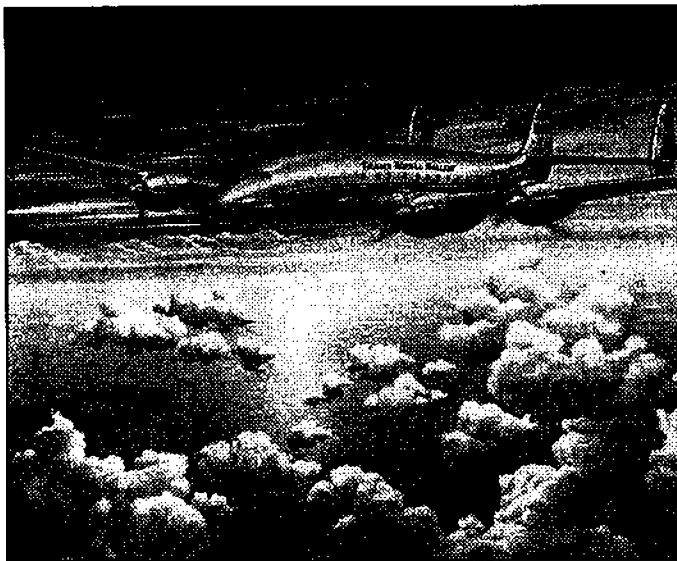
wearing her Civil Defense helmet and red, white and blue arm band, standing on a darkened corner at night making sure every house on her block had dimmed or no lights and closed shades, curtains or drapes.

And the 1940s had trains, lots of trains: passenger trains such as The 20th Century Limited, the Super Chief, El Capitan; freight trains, commuter trains, troop trains; steam engines and diesels, coming and going day and night. We can still hear that far-away whistle.

Service stations were aptly named. A friendly attendant would check your oil, check the air pressure in your tires, wipe your windshield, and pump your gas. He had a seemingly endless supply of free road maps—really good, up-to-date road maps. During the war years of the decade, with gasoline rationing and the scarcity of tires,

there were few, if any, weekend excursions, but those free road maps were a symbol of hope that one day we would have a car to follow the routes across the state and maybe even into the next state, because not every family had an automobile.

The weekly cover of Time magazine was a portrait, framed in red, of a person in the news. Inside, the neat and orderly layout of the publication invited your attention. The big weekly magazines were really big (11x14) and popular: Collier's, Saturday Evening Post, Life, Look, all bulging with articles and features, pictures and ads, often one hundred or more pages every week, fifty-two weeks a year. And the magazines were almost always delivered on time during one of the week's eleven mail deliveries.



The movies of the forties were most often in beautiful black and white. Films in color—Technicolor—were impressive and beautiful, but they did not make up the bulk of the films we saw. Black and white double features were standard movie house fare in small towns and in the big cities' neighborhood theatres and in those immense, grand movie palaces which had flourished in the 1920s but were now al-

**AN ASSEMBLY LINE** *26,000 miles long*



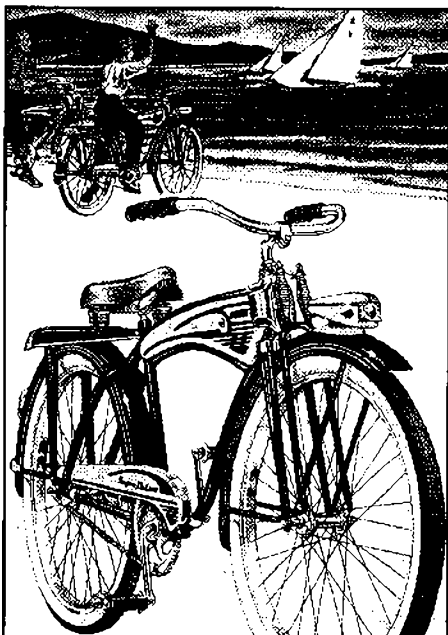
ready in decline. The decline was not apparent to anyone who may have attended such exotic venues as the Southtown Theater (near 63rd and Halsted in Chicago) with its aqua-tiled, swan-filled lobby lagoon! A perfect surrounding to see such cinematic gems as *Casablanca*, *Mrs. Miniver*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Mr. Blandings Builds His*

## THE UNFORGETTABLE 1940s

*Dream House, It's A Wonderful Life, or The Best Years of Our Lives.*

Like the Renaissance, the Golden Age of radio did not start dramatically one sunny morning or end, years later, one rainy evening. It began slowly, almost unnoticed in the 1920s, developed and evolved in the early 1930s, grew and thrived during the 1940s, and gradually faded away in the 1950s and '60s.

The 1940s embraced radio like no other



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decade, even though television gave it a big, rude push towards the end of the decade. The '40s was a time when one could listen to the radio for amusement, entertainment, inspiration, instruction, and information. There were daytime dramas for the homemakers; after-school adventures for the kids; and programs the entire family could enjoy together in the evening hours.

A youngster of the '40s could learn discipline, thrift and patience just by listening to the radio.

He learned discipline because that's what it took to finish off a whole box of cereal



that's fashioned to fit

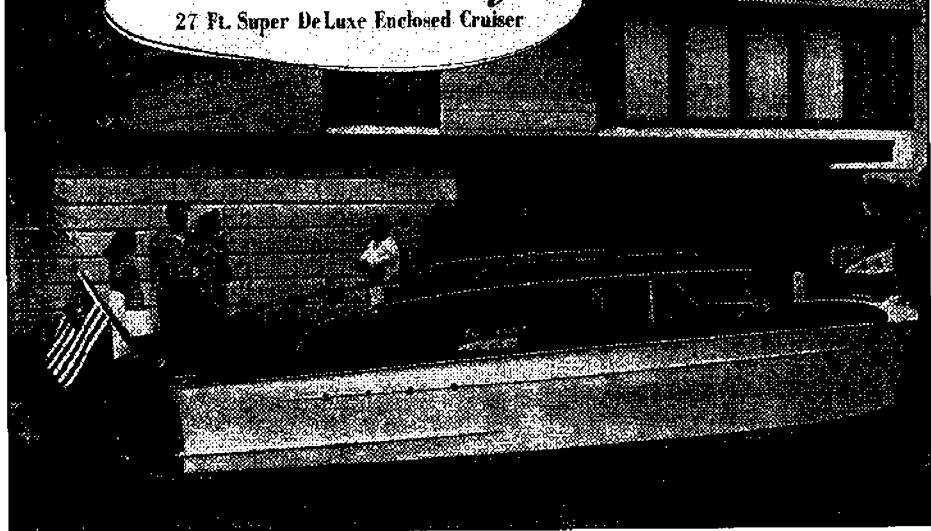
**Kids and dogs can be themselves with these protecting your car!**

**H**OWARD ZINK seat covers give you better protection than ordinary seat covers. Because they fit better, their unique patterns are hand fashioned for glove-like snugness. That means there's no "slack", no wrinkles to pull and tear even from feet-on-seat abuse. And Howard Zink covers are made better. Seams are reinforced and then hidden so that there are no exposed edges or loose threads to snag or pull out. Buy the best —

don't take less. Invest on a genuine Howard Zink — the cover that's made better to last longer!



*New Chris-Craft*  
27 Ft. Super DeLuxe Enclosed Cruiser



before the box top could be removed and sent away to Battle Creek, Michigan, St. Louis, Missouri, or Minneapolis, Minnesota for some sort of secret decoder, shake-up mug, whistling sheriff's badge or other wonder to accompany those adventure programs.

He learned thrift because those box tops usually had to be accompanied by "one thin dime" for the radio premium. Most kids had to earn that dime by engaging in some sort of capitalistic enterprise such as selling Kool-Aid on the corner or by doing some jobs around the house or running errands for a neighbor.

He learned patience, for sure, for it seemed to take "forever" before the sought-after ring or pin or compass or decoder arrived. And after it did arrive, some serious learning had to take place. When Captain Midnight, on the radio, announced the code and the numbers to translate a coded message, the young listener had to turn num-

bers into letters and letters into a special message that read, often, but not always: "Obey your parents and drink your Ovaltine."

We can't turn back the hands of time as the Twentieth Century concludes, and we may never wish to return to the 1940s. But a glance back may serve as a good reminder of what has been referred to as "those gentle years." ■





Chuck Schaden's

# THOSE WERE THE DAYS

WNIB-WNIZ • FM 97 • SATURDAY 1 - 5 PM

## DECEMBER 2000

### SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2 RADIO TO PLAN YOUR CHRISTMAS LIST BY

**OUR MISS BROOKS** (12-24-50) Eve Arden stars as the English teacher at Madison High school. Miss Brooks hopes to spend a quiet Christmas Eve at home. Sustaining, CBS. (29 min)

**SUSPENSE** (12-22-52) "Arctic Rescue" starring Joseph Cotten in a "dramatic recreation of an actual event that happened on Christmas Night in 1852. A group of brave men risked their lives in a desperate effort to save their fellow men. AutoLite, CBS. (28 min)

**JILL'S ALL-TIME JUKE BOX** (12-25-45) For her serviceman audience, Gl Jill (Martha Wilkerson) spins records that were popular at Christmas from 1937-1945. AFRS. (30 min)

**DRAGNET** (12-21-50) ".22 for Christmas" stars Jack Webb as Sgt. Joe Friday with Barton Yarborough as Officer Ben Romero. A sad holiday story about a missing nine-year-old boy. Fatima Cigarettes, NBC. (26 min)

**ARCHIE ANDREWS** (12-17-49) Archie and his family, along with Jughead, Betty and Veronica converge on Stacy's Department Store to do some Christmas shopping. Bob Hastings is Archie. Sustaining, NBC. (29 min)

### SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9 RADIO TO ADDRESS CHRISTMAS CARDS BY

**DAMON RUNYON THEATRE** (5-29-51) "Palm Beach Santa Claus" starring John Brown as "Broadway" who tells the story of how a fat friend was recruited to play Santa Claus for a socialite. Syndicated. (26 min)

**LUM AND ABNER** (12-244) Chester Lauck and Norris Goff in their annual Christmas program, first presented in 1933. Lum, Abner and Grandpappy Spears are headed east out of Pine Ridge to bring supplies to a young couple (Joe

and Mary) staying the night in a barn. One-A-Day Vitamins, BLUE Network. (15 min)

**JACK BENNY PROGRAM** (1956) A special Christmas show with Jack, Mary Livingstone, Dennis Day, Bob Crosby, Don Wilson, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, and guests June Allyson and Frances (Mrs. Edgar) Bergen. Jack and Mary go to the department store to do some Christmas shopping. Also in cast: Mel Blanc, Elliott Lewis, Artie Auerbach, Benny Rubin, Herb Vigran, Charlie Bagby. *This is an original program, broadcast after Jack's radio series ended in 1955, with his writers using elements from previous Benny scripts.* AFRS rebroadcast. (25 min & 20 min)

**READER'S DIGEST, RADIO EDITION** (12-18-47) "Song From Heaven" starring Raymond Massey who tells the story of how the song "Silent Night" came to be written. Hallmark Cards, CBS. (30 min)

**SPOTLIGHT REVUE** (12-24-48) Spike Jones and his City Slickers co-star with Dorothy Shay, "the Park Avenue Hillbilly" in a Christmas Eve broadcast. Dorothy sings "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and "White Christmas." Spike and the Slickers offer "Winter Wonderland" and "Two Front Teeth." "Uncle Spike" tells Georgie Rock a story about the circus. Coca Cola, CBS. (29 min)

**TWENTY-FIRST PRECINCT** (1950s) While a woman files a complaint, the station house prepares for the Christmas party to be held for neighborhood children. Everett Sloane stars as Capt. Kennelley, Captain-in-charge, with Ken Lynch as Lt. Matt King and Harold Stone as Sgt. Waters. Sustaining, AFRS rebroadcast.

### SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16 RADIO TO WRAP, BAKE AND DECORATE BY

**THE SHADOW** (12-24-39) "The Stockings Were Hung" starring Bill Johnstone as Lamont Cranston and Marjorie Anderson as the lovely Margo Lane. The Shadow helps a

newsboy's family have a merry Christmas when he confronts a Scrooge-like businessman. MBS. (24 min)

**ADVENTURES OF OZZIE AND HARRIET** (12-19-48) Ozzie and Harriet decide to be sensible this year and not buy extravagant Christmas gifts for each other. International Silver Co., NBC. (30 min)

**GUNSMOKE** (12-20-52) On Christmas Eve, Marshal Matt Dillon gets a ride back to Dodge City from a stranger who is not too sociable. Matt tells the former schooner captain about how folks in Dodge celebrated Christmas last year. William Conrad stars. Sustaining, CBS. (28 min)

**FAMILY THEATRE** (12-21-49) "The Littlest Angel" starring Loretta Young who tells a story about a very young angel in God's kingdom who never seemed to do anything right until he had to present a special gift to honor the birth of the Christ child. MBS. (19 min)

**PHIL HARRIS—ALICE FAYE SHOW** (12-19-52) Phil has to play Santa at the Women's Club Christmas party. Elliott Lewis co-stars with Robert North, Jeanine Roos and Anne Whitfield. Rexall, NBC. (24 min)

**LET'S PRETEND** (12-19-53) "The Night Before Christmas." Uncle Bill Adams and the Pretenders tell the story about a mouse family that visits the North Pole to see what goes on on Christmas Eve. Santa gives them the Royal Tour. Sustaining, CBS. (23 min)

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23 MERRY CHRISTMAS!

**BING CROSBY SHOW** (12-21-49) Bing welcomes actress Ethel Barrymore to his annual Christmas show which features many of the traditional carols and, of course, his popular version of "White Christmas." Chesterfield Cigarettes, CBS. (30 min)

**GREAT GILDERSLEEVE** (12-20-50) Willard Waterman stars as Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, with Walter Tetley as Leroy; Lillian Randolph as Birdie; Dick LeGrand as Peavy; Cathy Lewis as nurse Kathryn Mulford. Gildy searches for a unique Christmas gift for Kathryn. Finally, he brings presents to children in a hospital and reads the Christmas story, "Why the Chimes Rang." Kraft Foods, NBC. (30 min)

**CAMPBELL PLAYHOUSE** (12-24-39) "A Christmas Carol" starring Lionel Barrymore in an outstanding performance as Ebenezer Scrooge in a classic, full-length version of the beloved Christmas story by Charles Dickens. Producer Orson Welles narrates the drama. Campbell Soup, CBS. (32 min & 29 min)

**FIBBER MC GEE AND MOLLY** (12-21-43) Jim and Marian Jordan star as the McGees of Wistful Vista who are out and about doing their last minute Christmas tree shopping. Teeney and the kids sing "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Johnson's Wax, NBC. (30 min)

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30 HAPPY NEW YEAR!

**ALDRICH FAMILY** (12-31-48) It's the afternoon of the last day of the year and the best laid plans for the New Year celebration are changing. Ezra Stone stars as Henry; Jackie Kelk as Homer; House Jamison and Kathryn Raht as Mr. and Mrs. Aldrich. (25 min)

**MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER** (1-5-47) "New Year's Nightmare" with Maurice Copeland. A man drinks too much while celebrating the New Year and is hit by a car. Sustaining, MBS. (29 min)

**RED SKELTON SHOW** (12-31-46) Red celebrates the new year as Deadeye in "I'll Get the Man Who Got My Gal" and as Junior in "The First Snow." Cast features Verna Felton, Pat McGeehan, Gigi Pearson, singer Anita Ellis. Raleigh Cigarettes, NBC. (29 min)

**MELODY RANCH** (12-30-50) Gene Autry stars with Pat Buttram, Cass County Boys, Johnny Bond, the Pinafores, and Carl Kotner and the orchestra. Gene presents his customary round-up of the top tunes of the past year. Charlie Lyon announces. Wrigley's Gum, CBS. (29 min)

**DR. CHRISTIAN** (1-9-38) Jean Hersholt stars as Dr. Paul Christian of "River's End" with Rosemary DeCamp as nurse Judy Price. On New Year's Eve, Dr. Christian treats the victim of a hit and run accident. Vaseline Products, CBS. (30 min)

**LIFE OF RILEY** (12-28-46) William Bendix stars as Chester A. Riley who interferes with daughter Babs' New Year's Eve plans. Barbara Eiler is Babs; Paula Winslowe is Peg; John Brown is Digby O'Dell, the friendly undertaker. Teel Liquid Dentifrice, NBC. (31 min)

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Chuck Schaden's

# THOSE WERE THE DAYS

WNIB-WNIZ • FM 97 • SATURDAY 1 - 5 PM

JANUARY 2001

## 2001: A Radio Odyssey

*Join us this month as we start the new year with a journey through a cross-section of old-time-radio programming.*

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6

**DRAMA** **LUX RADIO THEATRE** (6-11-45) "Murder, My Sweet" starring Dick Powell, Claire Trevor, Mike Mazurki, and June DuPrez in the radio version of the 1945 motion picture. Based on Raymond Chandler's novel "Farewell My Lovely," Powell is detective Philip Marlowe, involved in homicide and blackmail. Guest host is producer Irving Pichel. Cast includes Cy Kendall, Gerald Mohr, Eddie Marr, Doris Singleton. Lux Soap, CBS. (16 min & 18 min & 25 min)

**DAYTIME** **ROAD OF LIFE** (6-7-44) An isolated episode in the long-running

(1937-1958) daytime drama created by Irna Phillips and centering on the story of Dr. Jim Brent. Jim (Ken Griffin) leaves a message to see Dr. Frazier who is slated to be the new chief of staff. Duz Detergent, NBC. (14 min)

**WESTERN** **SIX SHOOTER** (3-21-54) James Stewart stars as Brit Ponsset, "the Texas plainsman who wandered through the western territories, leaving behind a trail of still-remembered legends." Wes Singer, a tough young gunfighter wants to pick a fight with Ponsset. Sustaining, NBC. (31 min)

**VARIETY** **COMMAND PERFORMANCE #122** (6-29-44) All-star broadcast for military audiences featuring Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Judy Garland and Frank Sinatra. Judy invites Frank and Bing to audition for parts in her new movie. Hope is the judge. AFRS. (30 min)

**NEWS** **SKELLY NEWS** (3-5-46) Alex Drier reports from Chicago with news and commentary as he speculates on the reaction of a man from Mars to today's headlines. Louis Rowan announces. Skelly Oil Co., NBC. (15 min)

**ADVENTURE** **VOYAGE OF THE SCARLET QUEEN** (2-11-48) "Rocky III and the Dead Man's Chest" starring Elliott Lewis as Philip Carney, master of "the proudest ship to plow the seas." Cast includes Ed Max as Mr. Gallagher, Roddy McDowell as Rockingham Wells, III. Also: William Conrad, Ben Wright. Sustaining, MBS. (29 min)

SATURDAY, JANUARY 13

**MYSTERY** **SUSPENSE** (8-14-47) "Smiley" starring Donald O'Connor as a 22-year old "greasy spoon" dishwasher who is unjustly convicted of molesting a woman.

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Cast features Lurene Tuttle, Sidney Miller, Joe Kearns. Roma Wines, CBS. (30 min)

**MUSIC** **YOUR HIT PARADE** (8-4-45) Joan Edwards, Dick Todd, the Hit Paraders and Mark Warnow and the orchestra present the top songs of the week. The Number 8 song is "Bell Bottom Trousers." AFRS rebroadcast. (18 min)

**ADVENTURE** **BULLDOG DRUMMOND** (1940s) "Death Uses Disappearing Ink" starring Ned Wever as Drummond, with Luis Van Rooten as Denny. A woman on a train tells Drummond she fears her life is being threatened. Sustaining, MBS. (27 min)

**KIDS** **CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT** (10-30-40) *Episode Number One in the long-running series that began regionally in 1939 and went to the full network with this broadcast.* Captain Midnight receives his name during a secret mission in France during World War I. Twenty years later, he is asked to lead a Secret Squadron against enemies of the United States. Ed Prentiss appears in the title role; Pierre Andre announces. Ovaltine, MBS. (14 min)

**COMEDY** **FIBBER MC GEE AND MOLLY** (8-26-35) Jim and Marian Jordan star in the 20th program in the series. When the motoring McGees stop at Hagglemeyer's Wistful Vista Realty Development subdivision for some free coffee and sandwiches, they buy a raffle ticket to take a chance on winning "the house of your dreams." Cast includes Charlie Wilson, Irish tenor Ronald Mansfield, Harlow Wilcox, the Johnson Merry Men, Rico Marcelli and the orchestra. *This is a milestone program in the series.* Johnson's Wax, NBC. (30 min)

**KIDS** **CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT** (10-1-40) *Episode Number Two in the network series.* Captain Midnight accepts the leadership of the Secret Squadron, formed to combat criminal elements which threaten to undermine the nation. The organization of spies and traitors is headed by Captain Midnight's life-long enemy, Ivan Shark. Ovaltine, MBS. (14 min)

**DRAMA** **ACADEMY AWARD** (10-9-46) "It Happened Tomorrow" starring Eddie Bracken and Ann Blyth in a radio version of the 1944 film. A young reporter gets tomorrow's newspaper today from the keeper of the paper's morgue. House of Squibb, CBS. (29 min)

## SATURDAY, JANUARY 20

**COMEDY** **LIFE WITH LUIGI** (3-25-52) J. Carrol Naish stars as Luigi Basco, with Alan Reed as Pasquale. When Miss Spaulding's night school class presents a contest: "What are the three most important words in guiding your life?" Luigi is determined to win the prize, a dictionary. Cast includes Hans Conried as Schultz; Jody Gilbert as Rosa; Joe Forte as Horowitz; Ken Peters as Peterson; Mary Shipp as Miss Spaulding; also Ed Max, Herb Butterfield. Charles Lyon announces. Wrigley's Gum, CBS. (31 min)

**MYSTERY** **MURDER AT MIDNIGHT** (1946) "The Dead Hand," a tale of murder and retribution. A concert pianist has two obsessions: his music and the woman he loves. Syndicated. (25 min)

**DOCUMENTARY** **BIOGRAPHY IN SOUND** (2-28-56) "Magnificent Rogue" a biography of comedian W. C. Fields, narrated by Fred Allen, with sound clips and interviews with people who knew Fields, including producer William LeBaron; director Leo McCarey; biographer Louis Taylor; vaudevilian Uncle Jim Harkins; singer Maurice Chevalier; actor Errol Flynn; comic Ed Wynn; producer Mack Sennett; actor Baby Leroy; producer Lester Cowan; comedian Edgar Bergen. Sustaining, NBC. (28 min & 24 min)

**ADVENTURE** **GREEN HORNET** (4-24-40) "Ryder's Writer's Racket" starring Al Hodge as Brit Reid; Raymond Toyo as Kato; Lenore Allman as Lenore Case; Jim Irwin as Mike Axford. The Green Hornet and Kato break up an unscrupulous publisher who promises to publish manuscripts of new writers. Sustaining, NBC BLUE. (28 min)

**DAYTIME** **TODAY'S CHILDREN** (6-1-36) *An isolated episode of the long-running (1933-1950) daytime drama written by Irna Phillips, "the story of a typical American family."* Eileen (Irene Wicker) resigns herself to a life without Bill, whom she believes is dead. Pillsbury Flour, NBC. (14 min)

**WESTERN** **HAVE GUN, WILL TRAVEL** (7-12-59) John Dehner stars as Paladin who finds water problems in the town of Benedict. Ben Wright is Hey Boy and the cast includes Sam Edwards and Virginia Christine. Multiple sponsors, CBS. (22 min)

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Chuck Schaden's

# THOSE WERE THE DAYS

WNIB-WNIZ • FM 97 • SATURDAY 1 - 5 PM

## JANUARY 2001

SATURDAY, JANUARY 27

**ADVENTURE** **MAN CALLED X** (9-30-44) Herbert Marshall stars as Ken Thurston who travels to India for mystery and intrigue... and to deliver a letter to a maharajah. Leon Belasco is Pegan Zeldschmidt. Lookheed Aircraft, BLUE. Network. (29 min)

**COMEDY** **JIMMY DURANTE SHOW** (3-10-48) Actor Van Johnson joins Schnozzola on the campaign trail, along with Peggy Lee, Candy Candido, Alan Reed, Howard Petrie, Crew Chiefs, Ray Bary and the orchestra. Jimmy wants to rearrange the 48 states. Rexall, NBC. (30 min)

**SPORTS** **SPORTS FINAL** (3-12-48) Fahey Flynn presents all the day's sports news, including spring exhibition baseball scores, prize fighting, relay games, race results, golf, bowling, and "a new sport the Chicago White Sox are thinking of taking up!" Art Mercier announces. Nelson Brothers Furniture Stores, WBBM, Chicago. (14 min)

**DRAMA** **GRAND MARQUEE** (5-1-47) "The First hundred Years" starring Olan

Soule in a light-hearted comedy about a young husband who comes home from work to find his wife not there, dinner not made, and the breakfast dishes still in the sink! George Stone announces. (Rayve Shampoo, NBC. (29 min)

**MYSTERY** **LIGHTS OUT** (8-10-43) "Sakhalin" is Arch Oboler's story of a murderous Russian prison official during the time of the Czars. Ironized Yeast, CBS. (29 min)

**MUSIC** **FORD V-8 REVUE** (1936) Bob Crosby and his swing band with the Freshmen Trio and singer Nappy Lamare in a program of popular music. Selections include "It's You I'm Talking About, Baby" and "The Glory of Love." Ford Motor Co., Syndicated. (15 min)

**SCIENCE FICTION** **DIMENSION X** (4-15-50) "With Folded Hands" narrated by Norman Rose. Set in the year 2006, this is a story of a robot that is always at your service. Cast includes Alexander Scourby and Bryna Rayburn. Sustaining, NBC. (29 min)

### Coming in February



## Jack Benny Month...of course!



### ...and for more good listening...

**ART HELLYER SHOW**-- Music of the big bands and the big singers with lots of knowledgeable commentary and fun from one of radio's legendary personalities, now in his 53rd year on the air! *WJOL, 1340 AM, Saturday, 11am-2 pm.*

**DICK LAWRENCE REVUE**-- A treasure trove of rare and vintage recordings with spoken memories from the never to be forgotten past. *WNIB, 97.1 FM, Saturday, 8-9 pm.*

**SATURDAY SWING SHIFT**-- Bruce Oscar is host for this two-hour show featuring swing music on record performed by the big bands, pop singers and small groups. *WDCB, 90.9 FM, Saturday, 10 am-Noon.*

# "When Radio Was" -- WBBM-AM 780

## Monday thru Friday Midnight to 1 a.m. Host Stan Freberg

### December, 2000 Schedule

**FRI/12-1** Crime Photographer (12-25-47) *Santa of Bum Blvd*; Johnny Dollar (6-18-56) Pt 1 of 5

**MON/12-4** Mayor of the Town (12-24-42) *A Christmas Carol*; Abbott & Costello (12-23-48) Pt 1

**TUES/12-5** Abbott & Costello Pt 2; Nick Carter (12-25-49) *Case of the Phantom Shoplifters*

**WED/12-6** Philco Radio Time (12-24-41) *Small One*; Burns & Allen (12-23-40) *Lost Scripts* Pt 1

**THU/12-7** Burns & Allen Pt 2; This Is Your FBI (12-21-51) *Case of the Innocent Santa Claus*

**FRI/12-8** Suspense (12-21-50) *Christmas for Carol*; Johnny Dollar (6-19-56) Pt 2 of 5

**MON/12-11** Mr. President (12-25-49) *Man at Gate of World*; Phil Harris-Alice Faye (12-25-49) Pt 1

**TUES/12-12** Phil Harris-Alice Faye Pt 2; Richard Diamond (12-24-49) *A Christmas Carol*

**WED/12-13** Lone Ranger (12-25-46) *Bells of San Pedro*; Life of Riley (12-20-47) *Christmas* Pt 1

**THU/12-14** Life of Riley Pt 2; Tales of the Texas Rangers (12-23-51) *Christmas Payoff*

**FRI/12-15** Suspense (12-20-59) *Korean Christmas Carol*; Johnny Dollar (6-20-56) Pt 3 of 5

**MON/12-18** The Saint (12-24-50) *Santa is No Saint*; Fibber McGee (12-24-40) *Gildy's Radio* Pt 1

**TUES/12-19** Fibber McGee Pt 2; Shadow (12-22-40) *Joey's Christmas Story*

**WED/12-20** Six Shooter (12-20-53) *Ponset's Christmas Carol*; Jack Benny (12-28-49) Pt 1

**THU/12-21** Jack Benny Pt 2; Sherlock Holmes (12-21-47) *Adventure of the Christmas Bride*

**FRI/12-22** Suspense (12-20-55) *The Cave*; Johnny Dollar (6-21-56) Pt 4 of 5

**MON/12-25** Greatest Story Ever Told (1940s) *Flight Into Egypt*; Life With Luigi (12-20-49) Pt 1

**TUE/12-26** Life With Luigi Pt 2; Grand Central Station (12-24-49) *Miracle for Christmas*

**WED/12-27** Gunsmoke (12-27-52) *The Cabin*; Great Gildersleeve (12-26-51) *Christmas Gifts* Pt 1

**THU/12-28** Great Gildersleeve Pt 2; Stars Over Hollywood (12-26-53) *Anywhere, USA*

**FRI/12-29** Suspense (12-23-56) *Back for Christmas*; Johnny Dollar (6-22-56) Pt 5 of 5

### January, 2001 Schedule

**MON/1-1** Dagnet (9-7-50) *Big Poison*; Red Skelton (1-1-46) *Bells & Resolutions* Pt 1

**TUE/1-2** Red Skelton Pt 2; This Is Your FBI (5-14-58) *The Big Guy*

**WED/1-3** Phillip Marlowe (10-3-48) *Persian Slippers*; Fibber McGee (1-13-42) Pt 1

**THU/1-4** Fibber McGee Pt 2; Mysterious Traveler (1-30-44) *House of Death*

**FRI/1-5** Suspense (5-4-43) *Death Flies Blind*; Sgt. Preston (8-20-43) *Attempted Manslaughter*

**MON/1-8** Dimension X (5-20-50) *The Lost Race*; Abbott & Costello (10-15-42) Pt 1

**TUE/1-9** Abbott & Costello Pt 2; Broadway Is My Beat (8-4-49) *Dr. Robbie McClure*

**WED/1-10** Gunsmoke (8-9-52) *The Kentucky Toltrams*; Burns & Allen (3-23-43) *George Sick* Pt 1

**THU/1-11** Burns & Allen Pt 2; Richard Diamond (5-15-49) *Ralph Chase Case*

**FRI/1-12** Shadow (1-23-38) *Society of the Living Dead*; Unexpected (5-9-48) *Cargo Unknown*

**MON/1-15** Lone Ranger (1-5-49) *New Neighbors*; Great Gildersleeve (9-26-51) *Marjorie's Job* Pt 1

**TUE/1-16** Great Gildersleeve Pt 2; Third Man (1952) *Amnesia*

**WED/1-17** Escape (7-28-47) *Typhoon*; My Favorite Husband (10-9-48) *Young Matrons' Play* Pt 1

**THU/1-18** My Favorite Husband Pt 2; Boston Blackie (5-14-46) *Millionaire Murdered*

**FRI/1-19** Suspense (5-11-43) *Mr. Markham, Antique Dealer*; Couple Next Door (12-30-57)

**MON/1-22** Lights Out (10-6-42) *What the Devil*; Jack Benny (5-30-48) *I Was Framed* Pt 1

**TUE/1-23** Jack Benny Pt 2; Sam Spade (8-2-46) *Sam and the Psyche*

**WED/1-24** Gangbusters (1940s) *The 24 Hour Twins*; Aldrich Family (4-28-49) *Short Date* Pt 1

**THU/1-25** Aldrich Family Pt 2; Rocky Jordan (11-7-48) *Count Me Out*

**FRI/1-26** Shadow (7-23-48) *Murders in Wax*; Strange Dr. Weird (11-7-44) *House/Death Lives*

**MON/1-29** Crime Photographer (9-14-46) *Duke of Skid Row*; Martin & Lewis (11-14-49) Pt 1

**TUE/1-30** Martin & Lewis Pt 2; Mr. District Attorney (1950s) *Case of the Bank Killer*

**WED/1-31** Frontier Town (10-17-52) *Marie*; Life With Luigi (6-5-49) *At the Race Track* Pt 1

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNIE

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

A man sawing the limb of a tree he is sitting on watches placidly as the final stroke sends the trunk falling to the ground while he remains suspended in mid-air. That sight gag, an enduring image from the early years of television, is symbolic of the life of Ernie Kovacs, one of the medium's most creative personalities whose profligate spending and disregard for financial matters kept him in a precarious position until a rainy evening in January 1962 when he came tumbling down from that perch on a slick street in California.

Almost 43 years before that fateful night Ernest Edward Kovacs began life on the other side of the country in Trenton, New Jersey and at the opposite end of the socioeconomic structure as the son of Hungarian immigrants. His father vacillated from job to job, finding some success as a bootlegger during prohibition but exhibiting the spendthrift tendencies which Ernie inherited and that kept the Kovacs family fortunes always in jeopardy.

Even then Ernie didn't concern himself

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*Clair Schulz is a free-lance writer, movie historian and collector from Trevor, Wisconsin.*

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Ernie Kovacs

CLAIR SCHULZ COLLECTION

with money matters. To him life was a bowl of cherry bombs. He loved playing pranks like putting Feen-a-mint laxative tablets in Chiclet boxes and passing them out to classmates on April Fool's Day or telling everyone in the house that the family feline had crawled in the hot oven after he had placed a cutout of a cat inside the range with a sign reading "Whew, that was a close one" or shooting the ornaments off the Christmas tree with a BB gun.

In his younger years Ernie demonstrated some eagerness to learn and to succeed in school, but by the time he entered Trenton Central High School he had become an indifferent scholar who only applied himself to subjects that interested him such as English. That he failed to graduate with his class in 1936 didn't upset Kovacs much because it gave him an opportunity to work one more year with a drama teacher named Harold Van Kirk who helped him with his part in *HMS Pinafore* and awarded him the

role of the Pirate King in the 1937 TCHS production of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Kovacs found performing very much to his liking and therefore needed no encouragement when Van Kirk invited him to join the Rollins School of Acting. While constructing and painting sets he gained experience behind the scenes as he observed how productions were put together and eventually earned a chance to act in plays such as *Liliom* and *Arms and the Man*.

In 1939 while at the New York School of the Theater he contracted tuberculosis which put his aspirations for a career in show business on hold for eighteen months. After he recovered, his experiences as a clerk in a drugstore running back and forth trying to please customers must have seemed to him like the trials W. C. Fields endured in *The*

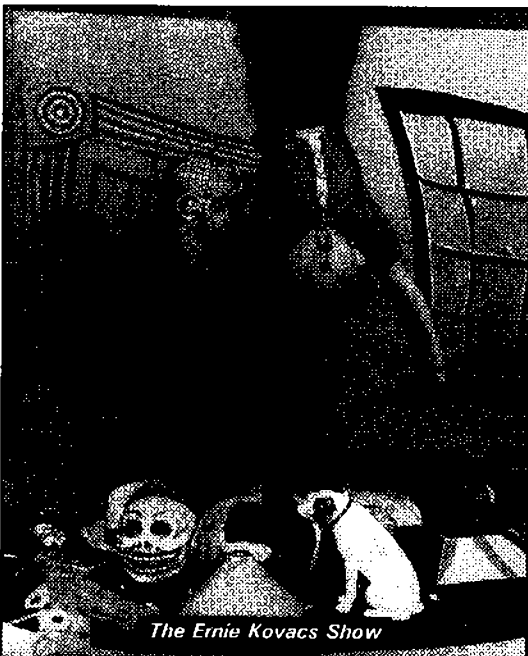


*The Ernie Kovacs Show*

PHOTOFEST

*Pharmacist*, and his next job behind the tobacco counter at another pharmacy did little for him except to introduce him to cigars and gambling. Playing poker in smoky back rooms hardly seems an ideal regimen for someone just a few months out of a TB sanitarium, but Kovacs already was living up to his motto: "Nothing in moderation."

Because the condition of his lungs had kept him out of the armed forces, Kovacs was Ernie on the spot when Trenton station WTTM, short on manpower because of the war, needed a staff announcer. Soon Ernie assumed other duties such as playing records, reading the comics, inventing quiz programs, taking parts in locally-produced dramatic programs, and hosting a chat show called *Coffee with Kovacs*, all done while holding down his job at the drugstore. This hectic schedule of trying to burn the cigar at both ends accelerated the development of another habit, that of speeding in his automobile as he raced between store and studio. → →



*The Ernie Kovacs Show*

PHOTOFEST

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNIE

Although much of Ernie's work for WTTM consisted of straight reporting, his playful nature sometimes won out when he concocted stunts like broadcasting non-stop at the 1949 New Jersey State Fair and antics such as scaring singers with rubber spiders or setting fire to the scripts of his colleagues while they were on the air.

After Kovacs married in 1945, he took on yet another job to raise money, that of writing a column for the *Trentonian* that gave him a soapbox from which to vent his feelings about everything from commercials to pulp heroes. The roots of numerous skits that later flourished

in full bloom on the television screen can be found in those ink-stained pages.

Ernie's first taste of television came at WPTZ in Philadelphia, first as an announcer, then as host of a cooking show called *Deadline for Dinner*. Late in 1950 Kovacs stepped in front of the camera five mornings each week from 7:30 to 9 on *3 to Get Ready*, considered to be TV's first "up and at 'em" show. At last he had a chance to stretch his wings: ninety minutes to fill and the only limits were the boundaries of his imagination.

The same level of enthusiasm and spontaneity that existed between the characters portrayed by Mickey Rooney and Judy

Garland in movie musicals who would exultingly exclaim "Let's put on a show!" must have existed on the set of *3 to Get Ready* because there were no scripts and improvisation was encouraged. "Rehearsal" consisted of nothing more specific than "You wear this. You hold this. I'll walk by and then you do this." Crude cue cards, held up to the camera at intervals,

often had more dialogue than the actors did.

Kovacs used such self-imposed limitations of speech to his advantage because he realized full well that television was a visual medium and it was what audiences saw that mattered, not what they heard. In those early years he was perfecting the art of the blackout, short



Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams

PHOTOFEST

skits, often in pantomime, that ended with a bang: a pie in the face or an unexpected twist that capped the scene as surely as a punch line that cinches a joke.

Unlike other hosts of programs aired in those years, Kovacs did not appear stiff or tied to pieces of the set like desks or chairs. He frequently walked past the cameras into the wings or even into the control room, all the time carrying on a conversation with the audience as if to say, "C'mon, let's take a look behind the scenes."

If someone had dared to ask, "Is this any way to run a television show?," the answer coming from appreciative Pennsylvanians would have been a resounding "Yes!" In

1951 Kovacs received some national exposure on NBC in *Ernie in Kovacsland*, a summer replacement for *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. A blonde singer named Edith Adams, best-known at that time as Miss U.S. Television of 1950, soon became a fixture on both of his programs and in his life. Edie and Ernie married on September 12, 1954, eight months after his divorce from Bette, his first wife.

Kovacs continued to use his morning show as a testing ground for experiments like inverting images by affixing mirrors to cameras and inserting balloons above heads of actors or blotting out portions of bodies by employing matting techniques. He also brought along a staple of radio sound effects, often mixing incongruous elements like the flicking of a pen and gunshots.

In early 1952 Kovacs, appearing locally on an expanded version of *3 to Get Ready* and several times a week on *Deadline for Dinner*, also served as host of *Kovacs on the Corner*, a late-morning variety series on NBC. Creating material to fill over thirteen hours of programming a week became almost as much of a challenge for Kovacs as finding time to sleep. Fortunately for his health, that frantic schedule lasted only a couple of months until he accepted an offer from CBS to do a daytime show called *Kovacs Unlimited*.

For a national audience he carried over some of the characters from his early shows such as fanged Uncle Gruesome who told "kiddie stories" in a macabre fashion. Although Kovacs didn't have to produce as much material in New York as he did when based in Philadelphia, the scripts needed to be more structured and the humor more

appealing to a larger audience so Ernie began mining his own medium for satiric humor which resulted in parodies of *Mr. and Mrs. North*, *What's My Line* and *The Stork Club* called "Mr. and Mrs. South," "Where D'ya Worka, John?" and "The Crow Club."

His work on *Kovacs Unlimited* convinced the decision-makers at CBS that they should



Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams

PHOTOFEST

give Ernie a chance at a prime-time show. However, the slot they selected for him was on Tuesdays opposite Milton Berle, a spot that could be described as Video Death Valley. Opposite Mr. Television one thing became clear: Berle had brass, but at least that brass had some polish. Live TV requires fluidity and planning if skits and sight gags are going to succeed. The A's for audacity that Kovacs earned did not overcome the feeling that the prevailing mood backstage was "What'll we do next?" What CBS did next was mercifully pull the plug on *The Ernie Kovacs Show* after the April 14, 1953 broadcast. → →

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNIE

A new but not necessarily improved version of *The Ernie Kovacs Show* surfaced a year later on the DuMont network. This spot, late in the evening, not only provided Kovacs with little competition but also allowed him to employ some of the improvisational comedy that was ideally suited to his talents and temperament.

In addition to cast members Edic Adams and Barbara Loden other characters from the Kovacs gallery of weirdies joined Uncle Gruesome as regulars on *The Ernie Kovacs Show* including German disc jockey Wolfgang Sauerbraten, Chinese lyricist Irving Wong, and Frenchman Pierre Ragout, who put a grim twist on fairy tales. Percy Dovetonsils, an effeminate creature who wore glasses that resembled the X-ray specs sold in novelty stores and who, when sipping periodically from a martini glass, resembled a debauched John Barrymore, read doggerel in lisping tones and accented certain lines with a tremulous shake of his head as if to say, "Um, that was a good one!"

Perhaps the most famous musical group to appear on any of his programs was The Nairobi Trio. Ernie always played the "he who gets slapped" conductor with the cigar, the seated figure who took the beating from the standing gorilla, who accented ap-

propriate moments in the song "Solfeggio" with the rat-tat-tat of his wooden hammers. Edie sometimes sat in as the piano player who diverted Ernie's attention the one time he caught his attacker in the act so he could take it one more time on the bowler before rising to enact his revenge with a handy vase. The Nairobi Trio might have been called The Mute Three Stooges because the routine was pure slapstick and audiences loved it even though they knew what was going to happen.

On the DuMont show Kovacs continued to hone his satiric skills with amusing spoofs titled "Son of Seven Year Itch,"

"Martin Krutch, Public Eye," "Arsenic and Crumpled Tweed," and "Little Orphan Amy," but early in 1955 the network was wobbling on its last financial legs and within a few months both DuMont and Kovacs had been knocked out of TV's ring.

"Scrapper" Kovacs, often down but never out, rebounded with not one but two programs called *The Ernie Kovacs Show*; the first a daily daytime show opposite Arthur Godfrey and the second a summer replacement in 1956 for *Caesar's Hour* on Monday nights. The evening show exemplified glorious lunacy from the garbled introductions of the announcer, double-talk wizard Al Kelly, to special effects that split dancers in half to wild parodies that left both actors and audiences gasping for



PHOTOFEET



breath. The program earned an Emmy nomination as best new series of 1956 and landed Ernie a spot the following year filling in for Steve Allen on the *Tonight* show.

It was on *Tonight* that another resident of Kovacsville made his debut. Eugene, a likable schlemiel akin to Jackie Gleason's Poor Soul, stumbled through life without saying a word, yet everything he

touched set off a cacophony of noise. Ernie's stoic reactions to the litany of raucous sound effects that accompanied the simplest of acts like opening a book or peeling a banana brought out the inevitable comparisons to the artistry of Buster Keaton. Early in 1957 the misadventures of Eugene served as the centerpiece of a thirty-minute NBC special done without any dialogue that is widely regarded as one of the most ingenious programs on the medium's first decade.

When "The Silent Show" generated much critical praise but no offers from networks, Kovacs hit the road to Hollywood where he hoped a career in films might allow him more opportunity to unleash his anarchic style of comedy. Although he displayed ability as a character actor in *Operation Mad Ball*, *Wake Me When It's Over*, *Our Man in Havana*, and *It Happened to Jane*, more often than not he played "by the book" martinet or corrupt authority figures, the very people he held in contempt. By the time he appeared in his final picture, *Sail a Crooked Ship*, he had fallen to being billed fifth, beneath the likes of Delores Hart and Frankie Avalon.

Kovacs returned to television in Octo-



*Operation Mad Ball* (1957)  
Ernie Kovacs and Jack Lemmon

PHOTOFEST

ber 1959 to host *Take a Good Look*, a quiz program for ABC that offered him creative license and a steady paycheck. As might be expected, a Kovacsian panel show bore no resemblance to any other for the skits Ernie and his cohorts acted out before celebrity panelists Hans Conreid, Edie Adams, Cesar Romero, and Carl Reiner which should have contained simple clues to the identity of the contestants instead appeared open to more interpretations than a painting by Salvador Dali. *Take a Good Look* gave Kovacs his longest prime-time stint on national television (1959-1961) and, even if it doesn't represent his most inventive work, it provided him with \$5,000 a week at a time in his life when he desperately needed money.

Because Kovacs had virtually ignored paying any income taxes since his days at DuMont, by 1960 his debt to the IRS had reached staggering proportions, yet he continued to hedonistically spend what little the government did not attach. Ernie seemed determined that if he was going to the poorhouse he would drive there in his Rolls-Royce.

Commenting on shortened versions of silent films as host of *Silents Please* took

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNIE

little of his time, but the monthly specials he taped in 1961 for ABC titled (what else) *The Ernie Kovacs Show* drained him in more ways than one. Rather than split the work on these half-hour shows over two weekends, Ernie pushed cast and crew through thirty-hour sessions that he deemed necessary to capture the effects he wanted. As producer the money for the overtime had to come from his already impoverished pockets which became even emptier at the lavish parties he threw for everyone involved with the show for which he picked up tabs as high as \$5,000. "Nothing in moderation" really had be-

come his credo by this time for his situation seemed hopeless. In one of the blackout sketches he could paint himself into a corner and then use the brush to create a ladder on the wall that would allow him to escape from his predicament. In real life the only escape for Ernie was to immerse himself in the surrealistic world of his art.

By late 1961 the fabric of that artistry began to wear thin due to overwork, the mountain of debt, and all-night poker games. Even though he only had to fill a thirty-minute slot every month, he started repeating gags and giving indications that exhaustion had begun to tap his creative powers.

As his money woes mounted, Kovacs became less fussy as he courted publishers with inchoate ideas for quickie books

and even filmed an uninspired pilot for a proposed series called *Medicine Man*, a show that might have made *F Troop* a model of subtle western comedy in comparison.

The evening he finished work on the pilot Ernie Kovacs was killed when his car crashed into a utility pole on Santa Monica Boulevard. Kovacs remained true to form right to the end: he had attended a party, was speeding, and had a blood alcohol count of 0.11, and was found with one hand

extended toward his cigar. At one time he had boasted to friends that he would die with diamonds on his vest and owe over a million dollars; at least he lived up to the second half of that prophecy.

What the world owes Kovacs is a debt of gratitude for being a pioneer in expanding the dimensions of television outside the boundaries of conventional entertainment. A freewheeling innovator who thrived on experimentation, his parodies, blackouts, pantomimes, and outlandish brand of humor stamp him as one of the most influential figures in television history.

On his shoulders have climbed the casts of *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* as well as Benny Hill, David Letterman, and numerous other comedians. Some of his successors have learned their lessons well, but when one compares the work of his followers to that of the master...

Close, but no cigar. ■

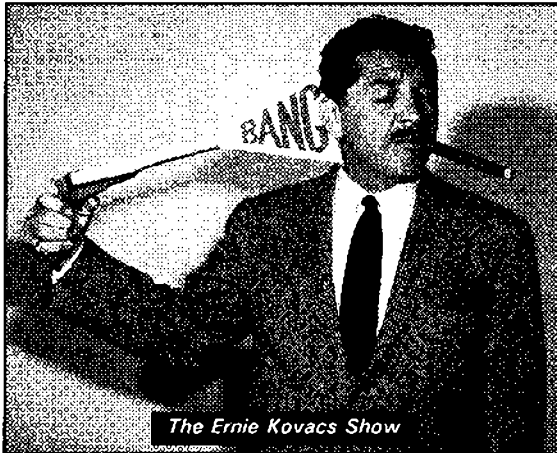


PHOTO FESTA

# Mrs. Lewis' Hanukkah Tree

BY FR. KEVIN SHANLEY

When my Mom and Dad emigrated from Ireland to America in the mid-1920s, they experienced a myriad of new cultures and religions in America. Prior to their arrival at Ellis Island in New York Harbor, their knowledge of cultures was limited to Irish and English, and their experience of religions was confined to Catholicism and Protestantism.

After leaving Ellis Island's unpleasant experiences, they ventured only a few miles inland to the West Bergen section of Jersey City, New Jersey. It was here that dad first began working for the Western Electric Company, a job he held for 34 years. To supplement their modest income, and with a growing number of sons, they took an apartment in a fairly large building on Clinton Avenue. With the apartment went the duties of being janitors. This included keeping the furnaces going through the sometimes long winters, hauling out barrels of ashes each week, sweeping and mopping the hallways, keeping up the general maintenance, and also looking after the needs of the other tenants.

The residents were a microcosm of European immigration at that time. Many Western European nations were represented, including Catholics, Protestants and Jews. There was a sizable Jewish group in our neighborhood, focused around the Bergen Avenue Synagogue. They were a devout people who made the predominately Catholic population aware of their Saturday Sabbath (Shabbat) and cycle of Holy Days throughout the year. We were

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*The Rev. Kevin Shanley is staff member of the Carmelite Spiritual Center in Darien, Illinois and a member of the Those Were The Days Radio Players.*

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more than aware of Yom Kippur in the Fall, and Passover in the Spring.

Among the tenants at the apartment were Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, a quiet and devout Jewish couple who worked hard and appreciated the better life in America.

Mom and Mrs. Lewis became great friends as they both strove to adapt to their new life in American without losing their religious or ethnic identity. It was difficult, Mrs. Lewis shared with my Mom, to try to observe the Sabbath on Saturday as a day of rest when much of the neighborhood observed Sunday.

"The Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday till sundown on Saturday," Mrs. Lewis explained to Mom. "We prepare each week for our holy day by the good clothes we wear, the meals we eat, by the lighting of the Sabbath candles, and by chanting the 'Kiddush' or blessing over the wine used at the meal."

At times the Jewish people, the Lewises among them, would gather at the local synagogue for a great Sabbath meal and service. Most of the time, however, the Sabbath was celebrated at home.

Mom helped Mrs. Lewis to understand that the Catholics in the neighborhood did much the same on Sundays with Mass in the morning and a family dinner in the afternoon on their day of rest and worship.

A friendly compromise was reached in the neighborhood, especially along the shopping areas of West Side Avenue, when the Jewish merchants closed early on Friday evening and hired Gentiles to stall their stores on Saturday. Almost all stores then closed on Sundays.

"The Sabbath gives our family a time to come together to rest and celebrate our heritage," added Mrs. Lewis. "We prepare

## MRS. LEWIS' HANUKKAH TREE

our food beforehand since God gave us six days for work but the Sabbath for rest."

There was a problem, though, that Mrs. Lewis asked Mom to help solve. After the traditional foods of gefilte fish or chopped liver, chicken soup with matzo balls or noodles, and roast chicken or brisket of beef were all prepared in advance, there was still the need for someone to light the gas in the stove to re-heat the food for the family on the Sabbath.

It was forbidden, according to Mrs. Lewis' beliefs, for her to do so. Would it be possible for my Mom to come over each Sabbath to fulfill this task?

Mom readily agreed, and for years went across the hall to the Lewis apartment each Sabbath to light the gas to heat the food.

In the Fall of each year, we were aware of the great Jewish Holy Day of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) by the larger crowds at the synagog and the piety of our Jewish neighbors. "The Jersey Journal," our daily newspaper, also printed feature articles to explain the event.

Much, too, was written about Hanukkah in December. But it was Mrs. Lewis who explained to my Mom about the Menorah, and why the celebration lasted eight days.

"Our celebration reminds us of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem," explained Mrs. Lewis. "In the 2nd Century, a group of Jewish warriors called the Maccabees fought against the Syrians under their King Antiochus. When they had driven out their enemies, the Maccabees restored the Jerusalem Temple for our worship and lit the Menorah each night. We call it the Festival of Lights."

What made the Festival very special, added Mrs. Lewis, was that there was only enough oil for the lamps to burn one night, but the oil lasted eight nights. Mrs. Lewis then showed Mom the Menorah which

their family lit each night of Hanukkah when they also exchanged little gifts.

"That's a great reason to celebrate," said Mom who went on to explain what Christmas meant to her and other Catholics. The coming of the Messiah was a difficult point for both women to understand. Mom said she believed that the Messiah was already here, and Mrs. Lewis contended that he hadn't come as yet.

Mom explained the meaning of the Christmas tree and giving of gifts, and even the origin of Santa Claus as St. Nicholas.

Dad, too, had added to the Christmas decorations in our apartment by buying an eight-branched candelabra at Ollin's Department Store on West Side Avenue. It reminded him of home in Ireland, he explained, where candles were set in the window of Irish cottages on Christmas Eve to guide the Holy family on their journey.

"It looks just like our Menorah," exclaimed Mrs. Lewis when she saw it in our window. We can certainly share this part of the holidays!"

When Mom and Dad had finished decorating our Christmas Tree, and laid out our gifts underneath, they invited both Mr. and Mrs. Lewis to our apartment.

"Oh! it looks so beautiful," cried Mrs. Lewis who turned to her husband and said, "Do you think we could have one, too?"

Mr. Lewis frowned and seemed very negative about having such a Christian symbol in their apartment. But she insisted and persisted, and then he finally relented and agreed.

"But only if we can call it a Hanukkah Tree," he insisted.

For years afterwards, Mom and Mrs. Lewis both decorated for the Hanukkah/Christmas season, each one according to her religious beliefs and ethnic customs. Both remained great and loving friends who, for many years, helped and respected each other unconditionally. ■



# Unanswered Questions from the Golden Age of Radio

BY RICHARD W. O'DONNELL

As the Twentieth Century officially comes to an end—if you're not a purist, you may mistakenly believe it ended when 2000 A.D. arrived—there are many questions from the Golden Age of Radio that remain unanswered.

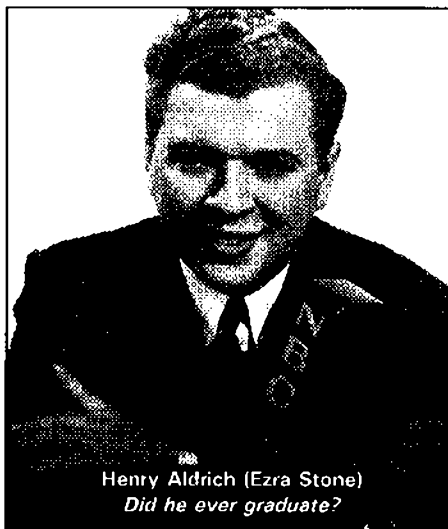
Wouldn't it be nice if we could start a brand new Twenty-First Century with a clean slate by answering them.

For example, did Henry Aldrich ever graduate from high school? At last count, he had attended classes there for 15 years.

Here's another. Did Raymond ever oil that squeaky door on *Inner Sanctum*?

What was Captain Midnight's first name?

Did Lamont Cranston and Margo Lane ever get married? The same question



Henry Aldrich (Ezra Stone)  
*Did he ever graduate?*



Captain Midnight (Ed Prentiss)  
*What was his first name?*

remains unanswered about Miss Brooks and Mr. Boynton.

Who really was Mrs. Calabash? Did Jimmy Durante ever tell the *real* story?

This question has been around for years. Whatever became of Kenny Baker? Nobody knows for sure. Jack Benny certainly didn't.

And while on the subject of Mr. Benny, did anybody ever tell that guy, Ed, guarding Benny's subterranean vault, to come upstairs?

What was Baby Snooks full name?

How big was Big Sister? Height? Weight?

How many grandchildren did Father Barbour have?

Who was Yehudi? Jerry Colonna didn't know. Bob Hope didn't know. → →

## UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Here's one about politics. What state did Senator Claghorn represent?

And one on education. Did Jack Armstrong ever pick up his high school diploma? For years he was away from classes fighting evil enemies. That was fine with his principal provided Uncle Jim helped Jack with his "home schooling." But is it possible the All-American boy never graduated?

Did Helen Trent discover a magic potion that stopped her from aging? She was on radio for more than three decades and was always 35 years old. That's even more impressive than Jack Benny's long career at age 39.

Where was Big Town located? It's not on any maps.

How come the Answer Man was so smart? He knew all the answers and if he were still around would probably break the bank on all those big money TV quiz shows we have today.

Whatever became of Joe Penner's duck?



Did someone finally buy it?

Is it true, as rumored, that the panelists on *Juvenile Jury* were really a collection of short people who couldn't get on *Information Please*?

Besides Frank Sinatra, did any big stars ever launch their careers on *Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour*?

Education again. How come nobody ever was given a diploma at Kay Kyser's *Kollege of Musical Knowledge*? Could it be that they didn't know how to spell *College*? The same could be said of *Grand Ole Opry*.

Whatever became of the Man in Black on *Suspense*? One week he was hosting the show, the next week he was gone.

We all know that Lucky Strike Green went to war, but where did it go after the war ended?

Did anybody ever really walk a mile for a Camel?

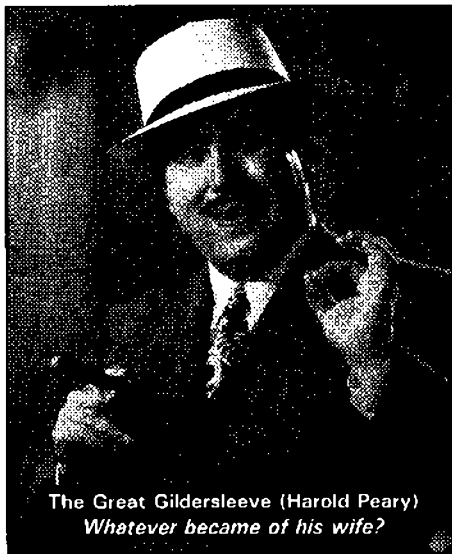
Didn't the *Whistler* know any other tune? He kept whistling the same one over and over.

Could Mary Margaret McBride cook?

What was the name of that woman who always showed up in the balcony on the



The Fat Man (J. Scott Smart) and trainer  
Did he ever go on a diet?



The Great Gildersleeve (Harold Peary)  
Whatever became of his wife?

*Dr. J. Q.* quiz show?

Here's one about physical fitness. Did the Fat Man ever go on a diet? At last report, which was decades ago, he still weighed 237 pounds.

What did Ozzie Nelson do for a living? Harriet never did say.

Here's a burning issue. Did *The Lone Ranger* sleep with his mask on? And did they ever finally decide what "Kemo Sabay" meant?



Ozzie Nelson  
What did he do for a living?

As near as can be determined, Sergeant Preston never had the sniffles. Could it be he found a cure for the common cold? It's freezing up there in the Yukon.

And who cleaned the stall in that cave where *Straight Arrow* keep his horse Fury?

How come the *Green Hornet* never had a flat or got a parking ticket while he was driving around town in Black Beauty.

Whatever became of Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve's wife? He had one when he was the next door neighbor of Fibber McGee and Molly. Later, he suddenly became a bachelor when he moved to Summerfield and began chasing Leila and Eve and Adeline around.

Fibber and Molly also had some unanswered questions. How old, for example, was the Old Timer? Where did Uncle Dennis move? What did Myrt do for a living once the dial system came along?

How about Mayor LaTrivia? Was he a Republican or a Democrat?

And last, but not least, did Fibber ever straighten out that closet? ■

*Richard W. O'Donnell is a free-lance writer from Port Richey, Florida.*



## OUR READERS/LISTENERS WRITE

# WE GET LETTERS

**DARIEN, IL--** I enjoy listening to your show every Saturday afternoon. I find that it usually fits in well with either doing work around the house or while I am driving in my car running errands. Many of the shows I have never heard before and I always marvel at the quality of the writing and acting.

--**JOHN AGUZINO**

**SCHAUMBURG, IL--** I've been enjoying your radio broadcasts for about 15 years. I tape many of your programs. I have approximately 150 Jack Benny shows and 500 mystery programs. I have a question about the Jack Benny Show. When Jack has his violin skits, as with Professor LeBlanc, did Jack play the "scratchy" violin himself or was it someone from the orchestra?

--**RICH PTAK**

(ED. NOTE-- It was Jack.)

**E-MAIL--** Growing up, I was a fan of character heavy Mike Mazurki. A few years before he passed away, I sent him a note and he responded with a thank you and an autographed picture. Since many films were reproduced on radio, I wondered if he ever appeared on the air. This is my trivia question for this year. I listen each week while delivering pizza in NW Indiana.

--**RICK SCHWARTZ**

(ED. NOTE-- We found a *Lux Radio Theatre* version of the film "Murder My Sweet" with actor Mike Mazurki in the cast. To the best of our knowledge, it's the only time he ever appeared on the *Lux* series. We'll broadcast that particular *Lux* program, from June 11, 1945, on our *TWTD* show January 6, 2001. Hope you can tune in.)

**PHOENIX, ARIZONA--** After reading about your 30 years of memories in the April/May 2000 *Digest*, I couldn't resist adding two of my own. Both involve efforts to eek out maximum reception distance from poor old WLTD in Evanston. In the early 1970s, as a news producer/writer at WBBM-TV, I sometimes had to report downtown for work Saturday afternoons... right in the middle of *Those Were The Days*. Starting from my apartment in Rogers Park, I would

drive south on the Outer Drive, coaxing a gradually-weakening signal from WLTD until, finally (no matter how interesting the program) the signal would fade out completely as I rounded the Drake Hotel. Even more frustrating was one Saturday when I was not working, but was driving north to visit my family in Milwaukee. You were playing the final chapters of an *I Love A Mystery* serial and I was really hooked: so hooked that, as WLTD began to leave my car radio near the Wisconsin border, I actually pulled over to the side of highway 41 so I wouldn't miss the suspense-filled conclusion. I'll always remember the title of that show. It was "Bury Your Dead, Arizona" and it must have made a serious impression on me because I eventually moved to Arizona! Best wishes for another three decades of success and happiness.

--**JIM WARRAS**

**CHICAGOLAND--** For 25 of your 30 years on radio we have looked forward to our Saturday afternoons with you and your nostalgia programming. Thanks to you and your staff for perpetuating an interest in the yesteryears when radio and TV had standards of decency and respect. We took our Seniors' group from church thru the Museum of Broadcast Communications and all were impressed with the collection of material and memorabilia. --**JOHN & MARY LYNN GABOR**

**SEYMOUR, WISCONSIN--** For some years I have been purchasing the *Nostalgia Digest* to be able to know in advance what I am taping at Midnight. I recently found out I am taping a sports show which I dislike very much! Would you please get back to me and explain what's going on as I enjoy most of the old time radio shows.

--**ROY FORSTNER**

(ED. NOTE-- The nighttime old time radio series moved to WBBM (780 AM) when WMAQ signed off after 78 years and became an all-sports station, WSCR. Check page 25 of this issue to see the WBBM schedule, provided to us by the producers of "When Radio Was.")



**WILMETTE, IL--** Loved your show on June 3 featuring J. Carrol Naish when you wondered if Jody Gilbert, who played Pasquale's daughter Rosa, was a woman or a female voice impersonator. Let me tell you what I know. Jody Gilbert is, indeed, a woman of fairly sizable girth. She had a small part in at least one W. C. Fields movie.

--**FRED BONDY**

**{ED. NOTE--** We also heard from **Len Zablocki** of Arlington Heights, Illinois who sent us an Internet-generated fact sheet on Miss Gilbert (from allmovie.com). Her biography says she was "one of moviedom's busiest 'large' ladies. The major difference between Gilbert and other 'sizable' character actresses is that she could give back as good as she got in the insult department. As the surly waitress in *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), Gilbert was more than a match for her troublesome customer W. C. Fields. She went on to trade quips with Shemp Howard in Olsen and Johnson's *Hellzapoppin'* (1941) and to aggressively pursue the hapless Lou Costello in *Ride 'Em Cowboy* (1942)." She played Pasquale's Rosa on both radio and TV versions of *Life With Luigi* and you can hear her in one of those *Luigi* radio broadcasts on *TWTD* January 20. Miss Gilbert died in 1979 at the age of 63 as the result of injuries sustained in an auto accident.)

**ELMHURST, IL--** Thanks for all those years of broadcasting old-time radio. It's not only a huge sense of enjoyment but, indeed, a public service. I often listen to *your* old tapes and am almost tricked into phoning you with an answer to a quiz. Remember the invisible facsimile? Extend our good wishes to all involved in your program, especially the man who makes us look forward to the commercials, Ken Alexander!

--**MICHAEL & ALICE ESSING**

**E-MAIL--** As an ex-Chicagolander now living in the boonies of Arkansas, it was a pleasant surprise to find WNIB on the net. Always try to listen when we visit "up north." Now I can save the travel time and gas by listening on the net. Being born in the '30s, I was raised with the radio. Television is OK, but radio is the best.

--**LOU HLAIVENKA**



*Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941)  
W. C. Fields and Jody Gilbert

PHOTOFEST

**E-MAIL--** After 10 years, I am so happy to be listening to your program again here in Florida, on WNIB. Now I definitely have to get a CD-RW to record your shows. I never gave up my subscription to *Nostalgia Digest*. It's such a good publication. --**KATHY SMITH**

**NEW HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT--** I listened to your show almost every Saturday for several years before we moved away from Chicago in 1998. I used to come down to the Cultural Center once in a while to see you in person. Your show was one of the things I missed most about leaving. I am thrilled that I can now listen to you over the Web! --**RICHARD FRIEDER**

**E-MAIL--** I'm so happy to find you on the internet. I listened to *TWTD* every Saturday when I lived in Chicago (up until 1986). I've missed your show so much! While searching around on the Web yesterday, I found that your station is now broadcasting on the 'net. Finally I have something to look forward to again on Saturdays. I am listening from Sacramento, California.

--**MARY GREEN**

**CHICAGO--** You surely are aware that in the early days of radio it was common for announcers, and often performers, to ask listeners to mail in a postcard telling where they received the radio signal. This was necessary because the stations had little technology at their disposal to gauge the strength or directivity of their signals. So it is interesting that a modern version of this call-back system has emerged on the Internet as radio stations such as WNIB have gone on the Web. Apparently the technol-



## MORE LETTERS

ogy for telling who is listening where has yet to be developed and announcers once again must ask listeners to send an e-mail to identify where the station, now of global reach, is heard. This is the first nostalgic thing I have noticed about "the web."

--WILLIAM O'NEILL

**E-MAIL--** I have finally been able to download the media player so that I can once again enjoy your delightful program on Saturday afternoons. I was married a year ago March and moved to Mississippi, so have felt deprived of that simple pleasure for 25 months now. Thanks for many years of enjoyment. --JOAN

**CRYSTAL LAKE, IL--** I went on line during *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Suspense*. The sound was great. There is a difference when listening to the computer and the radio. The radio is ahead of the computer. I'm really excited because now I can hear *TWTD* when I'm in Ft. Myers, Florida during the winter. --FRANK MC GURN

**E-MAIL--** My brother Dan just called me from Valparaiso, Indiana to let me know you were on the Internet. I listened to you from the time you were first on in Chicago until I left in March, 1973. I had many hundreds of hours I recorded of your programs back then, on open reel Ampex, and just shipped those to brother Dan. I've been in Austin, Texas for six months now and am thrilled to hear you again! --BILL URSCHEL

**E-MAIL--** I have been hoping that someday I might, once again, hear *TWTD*. Moving to Rochester, New York has been a very pleasant change from the Chicago area, but your show is one of the greatest losses. Today, though, I was able to listen in once again. --KENDRICK BISSET

**E-MAIL--** Chuck, I know you are happily married but I love you anyway. Started listening to you 16 years ago after my son was born. Discovered your show one Saturday afternoon and have been a faithful listener since. One of my sisters started listening, too, and she was so sad when they moved to Florida and could not get your show. But now with the Internet she listens in every Saturday. --CHRIS

**CROWN POINT, INDIANA--** I've been a regular listener to *TWTD* since the early '70s and have subscribed to the *Nostalgia Digest* since Book Two, Chapter Two. I continue to enjoy your program immensely. With the recent airing of *TWTD* on the Web, I had to listen in and was quite surprised regarding the sound quality. My connection is a simple dial-up and I usually get a connection speed of about 50,666 bps. I am using a 266 Mhz Pentium II with a low end sound card and speakers. Sound quality has a very slight echo but is perfectly acceptable, even for recording. As a matter of fact the sound quality is superior to that of PHC on RealPlayer Basic. While FM radio will continue to be my vehicle of choice, it's great to know we have another option, especially when out of radio range. Congratulations on 30 great years.

--MIKE DAUMER

(ED. NOTE-- Thanks for writing, but you lost me after the third sentence!)

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## NOSTALGIA DIGEST AND RADIO GUIDE

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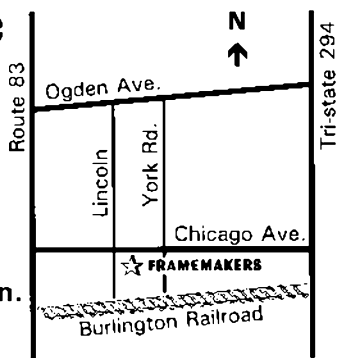
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## ← ERNIE KOVACS

brightened the early days of television with his innovative comedy style. Read the article by Clair Schulz beginning on page 26.

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