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"Fanny, Fanny, Fanny...." Revisiting *One Man's Family*

By Elizabeth McLeod

For most OTR enthusiasts, the name of Carlton E. Morse brings to mind images of rip-roaring adventure -- replete with both Blood and Thunder. "*I Love A Mystery*," "*I Love Adventure*," and "*Adventures By Morse*" are among the most avidly collected series among contemporary listeners.

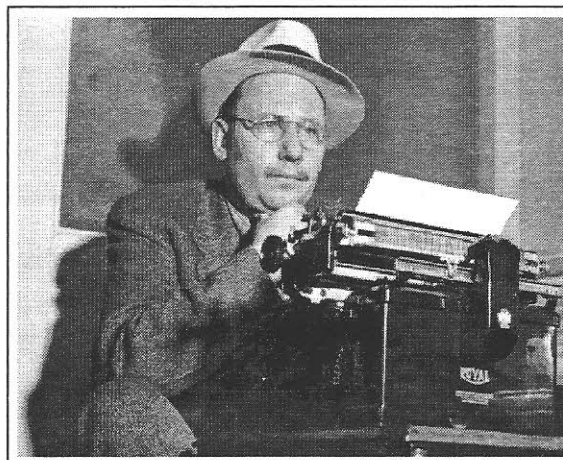
These were great shows, no question. But I'll go out on a limb here and argue that they pale alongside Carlton Morse's most impressive, longest-lived accomplishment -- the continuing story of a white bread, upper-middle-class San Francisco Bay Area family: the story of the Barbours, better known as *One Man's Family*.

Too many modern listeners hear an episode or two of *One Man's Family* and write it off as a glorified soap opera. But no serial ever developed its characters with greater depth -- no serial ever approached its subject matter in a more adult manner -- than Morse's twenty-seven-year epic.

Unfortunately, the bulk of *OMF* remains unavailable -- the primary representation of the show for modern audiences is a run of shows extending from 1949 into 1951, another short run from 1958, and scattered shows from the mid-forties. Of these, the 1949-51 programs are probably the most accessible. These programs bridge the gap between the series' transition from a half-hour once-a-week

presentation to a fifteen-minute nightly strip, and while they aren't quite from the series' prime era, they do serve as a valid introduction to the themes that made this show so rewarding for its audience for so long.

Family life is, of course, the backbone of the show - but it's not an idealized picture by any means, and this is one of the elements that makes *One Man's Family* such a remarkable work. In an era in which radio families were often idealized beyond all



reason, the Barbours are clearly an imperfect lot, and this is very evident in the story lines which fill the 1949-51 episodes. These are real people and they deal realistically with real-world problems. This is no "will she find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?" soap opera. In many ways, the drama of *One Man's Family* was cutting-edge for its time -- and

it remains surprisingly contemporary today.

Much of the 1950 run revolves around Teddy Barbour, adopted daughter of Paul, the oldest Barbour son. Teddy was taken in by Paul as a young girl, and as she grew up she developed an obsessive romantic fixation on her adoptive father -- an attachment which led her to constantly sabotage Paul's love life, and which grew ever more intense, and ever more unhealthy as she matured into adulthood

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The 1950 episodes detail Teddy's doomed attempt to break free of her feelings toward Paul by marrying a fumbling Army dentist named Elwood Giddings -- a decent sort, but in the end no match for her obsession with Paul. That Morse was able to treat such a psychologically-complex, highly-charged, relentlessly adult story line as delicately as he did - and yet as powerfully as he did is true testimony to his skill as a dramatist. His gifts clearly extended beyond blood-and-thunder.

Vivid characters abound in the available episodes of *One Man's Family*. Barton Yarborough's work as the clinically-depressed middle son Clifford is especially memorable -- a character far different from his routin' tootin' interpretation of Doc Long, or his straightforward work as Joe Friday's partner

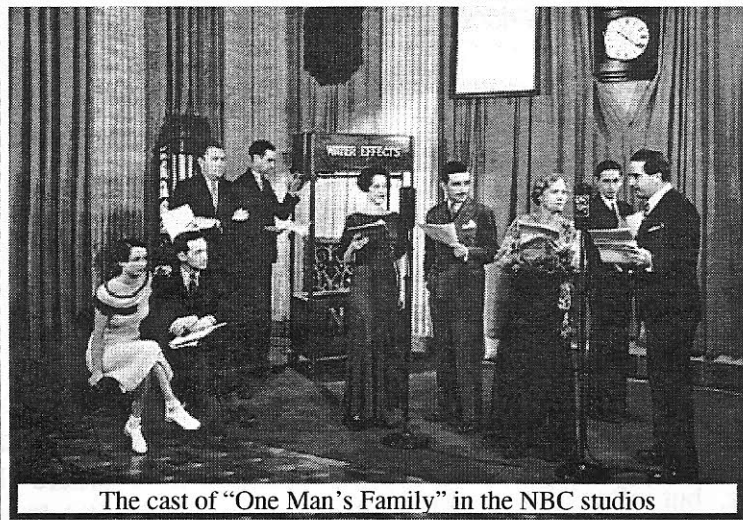
Ben Romero. Cliff Barbour is one of life's victims -- ground down to a nub by constant disappointments and tragedies, and Yarborough makes him fully human: by turns you want to take his hand and tell him everything's all right, or you want to smack him one and tell him to get his life in gear. Michael Raffetto's raspy-voiced work as Paul conveys just the right tone of world-weariness, contrasting with Jeanne Bates' tightly-wound, intense interpretation of Teddy. And Tyler McVey's work as the sad-sack Elwood Giddings is outstanding -- infusing considerable depth into a characterization which could easily have descended into caricature.

The signature voice of *One Man's Family* is of course J. Anthony Smythe as Henry Barbour, the family patriarch. By 1950 he's retired from his stock brokerage, but is still very active meddling in the affairs of his children and grandchildren, only barely restrained by his gentle wife Fanny. Henry is a loving father and grandfather, to be sure -- but he's by no means lovable. He's pigheaded, arrogant, snobbish, and profoundly old-fashioned in his attitudes. He gives advice whether it's wanted or not, and can't wait to say "I Told You So" when some member of the family runs into difficulties after

rejecting that advice. He's as distinctive, as memorable a character as radio ever produced -- and Smythe brings him to life as no other actor could.

If I have a major criticism of the series, it's that I don't feel that Morse wrote female characters anywhere near well as he wrote the male roles. His women tend to be one-dimensional -- and this is true in all of his series, not just *OMF*. Fanny Barbour seems to exist, at least in the surviving shows, as a mere long-suffering foil for Henry's mumblings, and

the Barbour daughters seem to get far less air time, far less development in the surviving episodes than their brothers. To be fair, however, the sisters of the family -- Hazel and Claudia -- did figure far more prominently in the story lines in the 1930s and early 1940s, and without access to long runs of recordings from this era it's difficult to



The cast of "One Man's Family" in the NBC studios

properly evaluate their roles.

It helps to know a bit of back story before delving into this series -- for which the listener is referred to the excellent story line summary presented by John Dunning in his *Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio*. But *One Man's Family's* not a show that you can jump right into with a casual listen. Like real people -- you have to get to know the Barbours first. Some you'll like -- some will really rub you the wrong way. But if you spend enough time with them, you'll forget they're fictional characters -- and you'll see why I consider this series to be Carlton Morse's finest work.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com