



"From Out Of Detroit Come The Thundering Hoofbeats...." Revisiting the WXYZ-Trendle Productions.

By Elizabeth McLeod

I've got to be very careful about what I say this month. I'm talking about a legend.

The Lone Ranger.

The very embodiment of all that is Old Time Radio.

Even if you have only the most passing acquaintance with the aural medium, you know the Ranger. Fiery horse with the speed of light, faithful Indian companion, the whole routine -- capped, of course, with a hearty Hi-Yo Silver. Few radio characters have managed to transcend the medium that gave them life -- the Ranger, indisputably, is one.

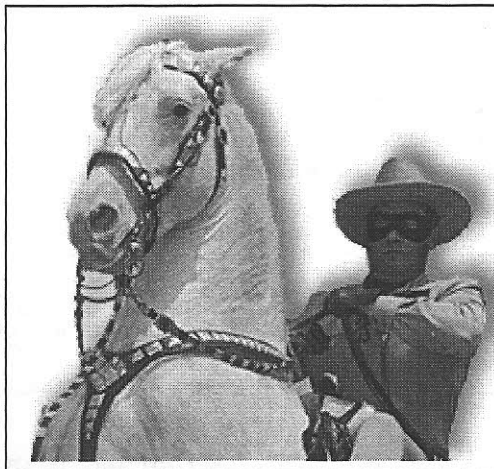
Why?

Was "The Lone Ranger" a great artistic achievement, pushing radio to its creative limits with every episode?

Hardly. It was a well-crafted show, its writers and performers always turning in a workmanlike job. But stylistically, the Ranger never rode beyond the techniques of his birthplace: 1930s local radio. The scripts followed a predictable juvenile-adventure format, the acting was a simple, four-square style, the sound effects were never particularly innovative.

A Ranger episode from 1948 is virtually identical in construction, in storytelling style, and in production values to an episode from 1938, and even the most avid fan must acknowledge that the Masked Rider of the Plains did little to advance the cause of radio-as-an-art-form. As a result, a modern listener, turning to recordings to try and get a sense of what the show was all about is likely to emerge a bit disappointed.

But there was more to the Ranger than the sum total of his radio adventures. I'm convinced that the real secret to his continuing appeal has less to do with his storylines than it does with the essence of the character himself.



The Lone Ranger was essentially a one-dimensional character -- he fought the bad guys. His origin story explained that he turned to fighting crime as a masked rider to avenge the murder of his brother and his fellow Texas Rangers -- but once Butch Cavendish had been dealt with, the Ranger never seemed to spend much time brooding over

the past. There were never any scenes of

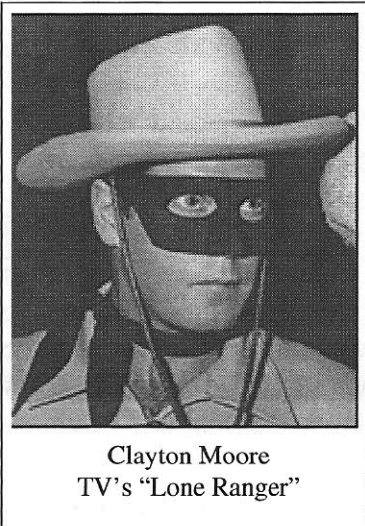
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Brace Beemer
Radio's "Lone Ranger"

introspection, never any moments where the Ranger wondered if he was doing the right thing, never any questioning of purpose. He knew he was right and that was it. The world, in the Ranger's view, was a simple place of Good Guys and Bad Guys. And the Good Guys' job was to bring in the Bad Guys.

Plain and simple. A kids'-eye view of right and wrong, where there was always a Grown-Up who would solve all the problems and Everything Would Come Out All Right. And for more than twenty years, three nights a week, the Ranger promoted this view, and reinforced this message.



Clayton Moore
TV's "Lone Ranger"

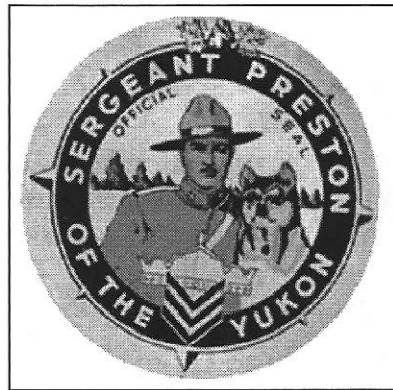


Contrast this philosophy to that of the other major Trendle heroes. The Green Hornet's adventures, for example, were motivated by Britt Reid's distaste for the casual sleaziness of urban life in the

1930s -- a time when it was very difficult to tell the Good Guys from the Bad. As a result the Hornet's fight for justice was quite a bit more complicated than that of his legendary great-uncle -- sometimes taking on a downright anti-establishment tone. The Hornet lived in a relatively complicated world where you couldn't always judge people by the color of their hats. As a result, he was the most *interesting* of the Trendle characters -- but it's doubtful he inspired many kids to daydream about how fun it

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would be to skulk around in the dark gassing crooked businessmen and corrupt politicians. (Although, now that I think of it, that *would* be kind of fun.)



On the other hand, Sergeant Preston, plain and simple, was a cop. A man with a badge. He didn't need a mask, or a secret identity. He worked for a living -- and his stories were often the

Trendle equivalent of a "police procedural." He had dashing adventures in the snow and always gave proper credit to his faithful dog King -- but he seemed to lack the independent motivations of his fellow Trendle heroes. He was doing his job -- and unlike the Ranger or the Hornet, he could at least look forward to collecting a pension some day.

But the Ranger was different. To the generation that grew up on his adventures, he was something special. An icon.

The Lone Ranger was, in the purest sense, a Hero. He Did The Right Thing Because It *Was* The Right Thing. That was all the motive he needed. Kids bought that in the thirties, the forties, and the fifties -- and as cynical as we may have come to be as grownups in the nineties, deep inside we still want to believe that such a Hero can exist. And that Everything Will Turn Out All Right in the end.

The formulaic scripts, the stiff acting, and the outdated productions don't matter.

As long as there's a need for Heroes, the Lone Ranger Will Ride Again.

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