

# AIR CHECK

NEWSLETTER OF THE RADIO ENTHUSIASTS OF PUGET SOUND (REPS)

## William Edmondson: Spokane Kid to Network Radio Star

Ryan Ellett

*The Southernaires* were one of the most popular black quartets during radio's Golden Age, during which there was abundant competition including *Wings Over Jordan*, the *Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet*, and the *Utica Jubilee Singers*. They hit the airwaves in February, 1930, and were still on the air at least into 1952. Their lineup changed over the decades and by the time the quartet quietly faded from the scene, only one original member still remained. That member was William Edmondson and, unlike all his band mates who were from the South, he grew up in the Pacific Northwest, specifically Spokane, Washington. His decades-long radio career has for too long been overlooked and it is time Edmondson receive due recognition.

Edmondson was born October 15, 1902 in Spokane, a bustling city of 36,000 whose population had nearly doubled in the prior decade. Details of his life are unknown until he reached college, presumably in the early '20s and whereupon he studied at Spokane College, a Northwest Norwegian Lutheran institution that closed its doors in 1929.



*The Southernaires* from l to r: Homer Smith, Lowell Peters, Jay Toney, and William Edmondson.  
*Chicago Defender*, April 27, 1940.

After leaving Spokane College Edmondson joined touring troupes in 1923 and spent much of the decade honing his singing and acting skills before settling in Harlem at the end of the decade at the same time as the *Harlem Renaissance* was winding down. There he got involved with the *Lafayette*

*Players*, a notable black theater troupe which was based out of the Lafayette Theater. Around the same time he appeared in two films by Oscar Micheaux, regarded as the first African-American producer of feature-length films. Edmondson's film credits under Micheaux included *The Millionaire* (1927) and *Thirty Years Later* (1928). He also appeared in *The Midnight Ace* (1928), the only production by Oscar Micheaux's brother, Swain Micheaux.

The seeds of *the Southernaires* quartet, the band with which Edmondson would perform for over two decades, were sewn years before their formation when the members' paths crossed while singing on the college circuit and working in Harlem's black theater industry. Edmondson's connection came when working a production with future Southernaire Lowell Peters. Peters, incidentally, had earlier met future quartet-mate Homer Smith while on a college vocal tour. In late 1929 Edmondson ran into Smith in front of the Lafayette Theater, a prominent Harlem theater which staged all-black productions for black audiences to mixed success. The two shared their ideas of forming a musical quartet. The aforementioned Lowell Peters was invited to join as was Jay Stone Toney, Smith's roommate.

In December, 1929, Smith (tenor), Peters (tenor), Toney (baritone), and Edmondson (bass) locked themselves away for three months, forsaking all other responsibilities to rehearse and hone their vocal teamwork. Emerging from their practices in the basement of the Williams Institutional C.M.E. Church in Harlem, the quartet almost immediately landed a slot on radio. After a couple concerts they hit the airwaves on WMCA's Goodwin's *Goodtimers* in February, 1930. Over the next few months they also appeared on WRNY, WGBS, WOR, and most importantly WEA, NBC Red's New York affiliate. Their relationship with NBC (and later ABC after the Blue network was sold off) would last into the early 1950s.

During their first three years on the air they appeared at different times on *RKO Theatre of the Air*, *Major Bowe's Capitol Family*, *Visits with Uncle Ben in His Cabin*, *Slow River*, *Harlem Fantasy*, *The New Mollie Show*, and *Rocking Chair Memories*, along with various slots under their own name. *The Southernaires* also provided the music for three programs

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written by Carlton Moss, radio's first black drama writer. These Moss productions were *Careless Love*, *Folks From Dixie*, and *Meetin' House* and aired between 1930 and 1936.

*The Southernaires'* Sunday morning gospel show, originally entitled *Southland Sketches* and later just taking the quartet's name, was their core broadcast, the showcase for their gospel harmonies for which they were so fondly remembered. After their fame had subsided somewhat and the group was no longer in multiple programs every week, they held on to their Sabbath slot against all comers.



Despite the *Southernaires'*, Edmondson did not give up all acting aspirations. In 1933, when the Southernaires won a spot providing music for *The New Mollie Show*, which aired Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays over WEAJ, Edmondson earned an additional role as the show's master of ceremonies. He was also

chosen to present a feature on the show entitled "*The Comic Side of the News*." A year later *the Southernaires* provided music for a short Ethel Waters film called *Bubbling Over*. Edmondson also won a small acting part in the picture.

In addition to song and comedy Edmondson tried his hand at dramatic roles. The first such documented role was on an episode of NBC's *Magic Key*, a series relayed to over 100 stations. The particular episode was "*David the Giant Killer*," aired in late June, 1938, and was based on the biblical story of David and Goliath. The broadcast featured William Edmondson as Jonathan as well as fellow Southernaire Homer Smith as David. A few days later on June 23, Edmondson once again received a prime time role on a broadcast called "*In Abraham's Bosom*" broadcast over the Blue network. The program was directed by James Church and featured music by *the Southernaires* and the *Juanita Hall choir*. The script was based on a Pulitzer prize-winning play from the mid-1920s.

"*In Abraham's Bosom*" is the story of Abe McCranie, an African-American man bent on providing educations to black boys in the oppressive environment of the Reconstruction-era South. The radio play was cast entirely by members of the *Negro Actors' Guild of America*, three of whom were also members of *the Southernaires*. William Edmondson was cast as Bud Gaskins, Homer Smith as Puny Avery, and J. Stone Toney as Douglass McCranie. Their parts were minor and critics called their performances "credible." Such an underwhelming response perhaps explains why they were not featured in more future dramatic productions.

Despite these forays, singing remained the focus of Edmondson's career through the '30s, '40s, and into the early '50s. As membership turned over, Edmondson slowly became the center of *the Southernaires*. In 1940 the group's accompanist and arranger, Clarence Jones, fell ill and was replaced by Spencer Odom. In 1942 Homer Smith was drafted into the Coast Guard and would forge a separate musical career after

leaving the armed forces. His replacement was Ray Yeates, an old friend of Edmondson's from their days on the stage's "*Blackbirds of 1928*." In 1948 Jay Toney died of a heart attack while the band was touring in Iowa. He was soon replaced with William Franklin, a graduate the Chicago Conservatory of Music.

The Southernaires sang on, finishing out the decade on radio and on tour before being ignominiously dropped by the networks in 1950. In 1951 *the Southernaires* returned briefly to the airwaves, by now featuring only William Edmondson of the four founding members. The new program dropped their tried-and-true spirituals and reworked their repertoire with popular ballads and more modern tunes. The final references this author could find on the quartet was a 1952 radio appearance and a record released in 1953 on Rudder Records featuring the songs "*Baby What You're Doing To Me*" and "*For You, For You, For You*."

There is no evidence at this time that Edmondson continued to pursue music after the final incarnation of *the Southernaires* faded from the musical scene. He pursued at least one dramatic radio project entitled *Opportunity Unlimited*. Broadcast around New York state in 1953, the show was a series of scripts dramatizing episodes of African-American employment discrimination. Beyond this radio effort, Edmondson resumed his acting career, this time on the small screen, making the first of a string of television appearances on an episode of a New York police show called *The Naked City*. He went on to make scattered appearances on such television classics as *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Bonanza*. He seems to have closed out a ten-year television run at the age of 66 with an appearance on a 1968 episode of *The Flying Nun*.

William Edmondson passed away on May 28, 1979, in Los Angeles. His legacy as an early black film and stage actor and popular singer for the long-running Southernaires quartet has been largely forgotten, those entertainment fields having a small number of followers today. Hopefully this short retrospective of Edmondson's career will assure him his due respect among fans of the Golden Age of radio.

#### Sources:

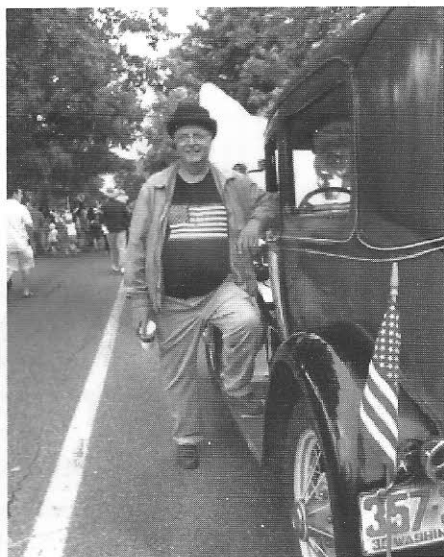
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**Paul  
Secord**

**President**

REPS APRIL 3RD,  
2010

Membership  
Meeting...



“A fiery horse with the  
speed of light, a cloud  
of dust and hearty

Hi-Yo Silver, the Lone Ranger” were the words of Fred Foy  
as he joined us via telephone as our special guest on April  
3rd. Fred, now 89, lives in Woburn, Massachusetts.

Our own Shaun Clancy conducted the interview with  
great questions for Fred. Fred was the announcer for the  
Lone Ranger radio program from July 2nd, 1948 and  
continued until the final show on September 3rd, 1954.  
The shows aired Monday, Wednesday and Friday from a  
studio in an old mansion in Detroit on station WXYZ.

Every program was a live performance and that included  
Fred’s opening and narrations for every show.

Like many Fred was an avid listener to his favorite radio  
shows during his youth and as he grew he became focused  
on pursuing a career as an actor. After he graduated from  
high school, his career search took several turns until he  
accepted the position as an on air announcer at WMBC  
in Detroit receiving a salary of \$25.00 per week. Several  
years later he applied and received a position with WXYZ  
in Detroit. His time at WXYZ was interrupted 1942 when  
he was drafted into the US Army. In the Army he luckily  
served with the Army Special Services entertaining to our  
troops. In one instance, he joined up with Jack Benny who  
was broadcasting from Cairo, Egypt and Fred play Don  
Wilson’s part in the show.

After the war he came back home and resumed his career  
at WXYZ. He then took the position of the announcer  
on the Lone Ranger in 1948. Fred was asked to be the  
understudy for Brace Beemer on the show which he  
did never thinking he would ever be called. Being the  
understudy meant he read the Lone Ranger parts during  
the rehearsals. On March 29, 1954 Brace Beemer arrived  
for the show with laryngitis and was unable to go on  
the air. Fred stepped in and became the Lone Ranger

for this one and only time. When the Lone Ranger left  
the airways Fred did the opening narration for the Lone  
Ranger television series until 1957. He then moved to  
New York and joined ABC, becoming the announcer and  
for the Dick Cavett Show on television. He stayed at ABC  
for over 20 years. And in 2000 Fred was inducted into the  
Radio Hall of Fame.

The Lone Ranger on radio and television is legendary and  
Fred Foy was a major contributor to the success and to  
the memories that we all have. Fred was a gracious and  
interesting guest and we appreciated him spending time  
with us. “Who is that masked man?” .....He’s the Lone  
ranger. Hi-Yo Silver, away”

\*\*\*\*\*

If you haven’t already done so, it’s time to reach for your  
checkbook and/or credit cards and get signed-up for  
Showcase XVIII. You know you’re going to do it, so why  
not do it now. The sooner you sign up it helps to let us  
know how the attendance is shaping up. You know, when  
the bee got stuck in the door bell, it was a hum-dinger.  
Well, Showcase promises to be a hum-dinger this year.  
Lots of fun and full of memories you can pack away when  
you leave.

Thank you for reading, Paul K. Secord, President

### **Pontiac Bay Symphony Orchestra Presents**

“Peter Gunn & Friends” -- A Tribute to Film Noir and  
Music That Casts A Long Shadow

Come join Pontiac Bay for another incredible evening  
of entertainment as the orchestra performs music from  
classic and contemporary film noir, including Laura,  
LA Confidential, Farewell My Lovely, and Peter Gunn,  
plus music from Slaughter On Tenth Avenue, The Man  
I Love, Catch Me If You Can, Mack the Knife, Harlem  
Nocturne, and more. Guest conductor is once again the  
entertaining and renowned Lauren Anderson.

Sunday, June 6, 2010, from 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM  
Museum of History and Industry, 2700 24th Avenue  
East, Seattle 98112

Tickets: \$17 General, and \$15 Students, Seniors, and  
Children

Information and Advance Tickets: [www.pontiacbay.org](http://www.pontiacbay.org),  
[www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com), and 206-364-0907

## Showcase Guests

We are still working on our list of out of town guests for Showcase. Here are brief bios of two of the guest appearing this year.

**Robert Easton** beginning in 1945, he was heard on radio's *Quiz Kids*. He portrayed Magnus Proudfoot on radio's *Gunsmoke* and also appeared in other radio programs, including *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *The Fred Allen Show*, *The Halls of Ivy*, *Our Miss Brooks*, *Suspense*, *William Shakespeare--A Portrait in Sound* and *The Zero Hour*. For decades he has been a leading Hollywood dialogue or accent coach. On film, one of his earliest appearances was in *The Red Badge of Courage*. He appeared in the feature film, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* as Sparks. One of his more unusual voices was that of a Klingon judge for the movie, *Star Trek: The Undiscovered Country*. He appeared in *Gods and Generals* (2003) as John Janney, and he recently starred in *Spiritual Warriors* (2007).

**Ed Silverman** is a distinguished broadcast journalist and documentarian. While at *ABC News*, and later as a consultant to *RKO General*, *Taft Broadcasting* and *Hughes Television*, he earned 11 *EMMY Awards*. In addition to his producer's credits, he served as a TV network news correspondent, commentator and analyst, and was Assistant Director of News Operations for ABC TV network, and Director of News and Public Affairs for WABC-TV, New York. Among his notable broadcasts: He was first on the air for ABC TV-during the JFK assassination (later went to DC to broadcast the JFK funeral from St. Mathews Cathedral for both tv and radio); served as network pool correspondent at Guantanamo during the Cuban missile crisis, anchored the Man in Space broadcasts. Ed excels at telling stories about personal experiences with or related to Ben Grauer, Milton Cross, Paul Harvey, Bill Stern, Ted Husing, Howard Cosell, Adlai Stevenson, Harry Truman, Elvis Presley, Jackie Robinson, Rocky Marciano, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ed Murrow, Mike Wallace, Chet Huntley, John Cameron Swayzee, Lowell Thomas, James Dean, Tony Randall, and the list goes on.... These personal anecdotes are always a big hit with audiences.



### Speechless

## Thank you, Eddie Carroll

I've been an unabashed fan of Eddie since I met him at the REPS Showcase 2007. And of Carolyn, his wife, always nearby, always looking out for his well-being and enjoying the show.

I have many memories of Eddie:

— Channeling the positive, gracious spirit of Jack Benny, so much like Eddie's own.

— Engaging the true believer in all of us as he sang Jiminy Cricket's signature "When You Wish Upon a Star."

— Being so quick on the rejoinder that he gave our resident ad libber, Larry Albert, a run for the fast comeback.

— During a recreation of "The Great Gildersleeve," seamlessly shifting from vocalizing Mr. Peavy to Judge Hooker to near-showstopping applause.

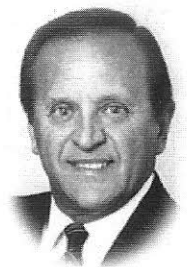
— And cheerfully autographing items for us to auction off to raise money to stage Showcase. In fact, he took a "M\*A\*S\*H" calendar I'd found to his longtime friend and production partner, Jamie Farr, had Jamie sign it and made sure that it got returned to me in time for the Showcase raffle.

But my best memory of all — and one I've replayed many times since I heard of his death — is the last time I saw Eddie.

It was the morning after our REPS Showcase last June. Eddie and Carolyn were returning to the hotel from breakfast at a nearby restaurant ... holding hands as they strolled.

Thank you, Eddie. And thank you, Carolyn.

— Terry Campbell



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**By Terry Campbell**

**Three. TWO. ONE!**

The throng in the Mingling Room at the Bellevue Coast Hotel chimed in to end the most successful Silent Auction in the annals of REPS Showcases.

Fifty-four lots brought in about \$2,300 — a record sum.

Raffle ticket, REPS Outlet Store and consignment sales brought the total raised during the June 2009 event to \$4,085. Sales at Radio Memories in November and the Christmas meeting earned another \$575.

The grand total of all fundraising events in 2009: \$4,660 going to defray Showcase costs — all thanks to generous donors, bidders and buyers.

Speaking of the raffle, the winners were:

- Bobb Lynes took home a pair of cathedral-style reproduction radios — a tabletop model donated by Penny Swanberg and a miniature battery-operated one.
- Margarita Andrijic's name was drawn for the "M\*A\*S\*H" calendar signed by Jamie Farr, aka Cpl. Klinger, while her daughter, Lee Hewitt, collected a treasure box of Jiminy Cricket items bearing the signature of Jiminy's longtime voice, Eddie Carroll.
- Randy Clawson headed down the Yellow Brick Road with "Wizard of Oz" framed sheet music and CBS framed press stills.

Over in the Silent Auction:

- Don Lucky let the dust settle in a grudge match for a Dahlberg Pillow Speaker Radio. He quietly added \$10 to the \$500 high bid to claim the mint green beauty from the mid-1950s.

Don also paid top money for several other coveted items, including \$50 for an NBC 80th Anniversary poster — created, signed and donated by Bobb; \$175 for Gil Stratton Jr.'s signed KNX 1070 news staff jacket — originally donated by Gil and regifted to REPS by past successful bidders Gary and Kathie Hagan; and \$75 for the Hey-y-y Abbott film fest — 30 "Best of Abbott & Costello" movies in a four-DVD set donated by Duane White.

- For \$315, Steve Donovan bought a lifetime of listening — about 57,000 radio shows in MP3 that REPS' Frank Rosin loaded onto a 500-gig hard drive.
- Mary Fichtenberg traded \$37 for an OTR primer



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2010**

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package — Dunning's "On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio" and an "Old-Time Radio" set of tapes, both donated by Frank Buxton.

- Tommy Cook's signed print, showing the then-12-year-old and other radio stars at a 60th birthday tribute to FDR, sparked fiery bidding. Larry Albert was the 23rd — and successful — bidder at \$55.01.

- Every year, John Jensen donates a plethora of framed photos of OTR actors and actresses. Combined with Bob Loudon's record of "War of the Worlds," John's Orson Welles photo drew a \$25 winning bid from Mary Maltman. And each matched up with a book about the singing saddle pals, John's Gene Autry photo brought in \$26 from Bobb and his Roy Rogers and Trigger photo, \$16 from Dave Dafner.

- Likewise, Radio Spirits always gives REPS a sizable collection of radio shows on CD and tape. This year, combined with other items, they raised a total of \$182.

- An original script of "The Lone Ranger" Aug. 16, 1954, episode, "Hombre from Mexico, donated by Dave Parker, accompanied by a REPS-made CD of that broadcast, cost Ken Bertrand \$75.

- While actress Heather Woodruff Perry was perusing a "Suspense" package that included a framed record featuring Agnes Moorhead, she told a story of advice Moorhead gave her when both were appearing in "Bewitched." The anecdote so enchanted a listener, he covered Heather's \$30 bid on the package.

- And Margarita plunked down the final bid — \$100 — to buy the REPS-donated, framed transcription disc of Part 2 of a rare "The Shadow" show, "Coinage of Death."

Thanks to the people who donated items for the Silent Auction and/or the REPS Outlet Store. They include Frank Bresee, Frank Buxton, Terry Campbell, Tommy Cook, Dick Beals, Bev Edwards, Ralph Estep, Phillip Hughes, John Jensen, Bob Loudon, Bobb Lynes, Terry and Bev Mahoney, Chuck McCann, Jan Merlin, Jerry Miller, Millie Morse, Linda Moschell, Greg Oppenheimer, Frank

Rosin, Radio Spirits, REPS, Betty Secord, David Selvig, Glenn Sissom, Barbara Schwarz, Mike Sprague, Penny Swanberg, Helen Warbaton and Duane White.

Also, a thank you goes to all the attendees who bought raffle tickets, upped the ante in the Silent Auction, or purchased items at the REPS Outlet Store or from vendor Jim French Productions.

Assisting with the Silent Auction and REPS Sales Outlet were Mary Fichtenberg, Anna Denton, Sharon Richards, Cecilie Hudson and cashier Dottie DiGiulio.

What's ahead for this year's Silent Auction?

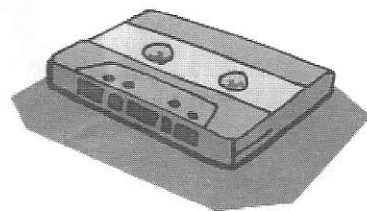
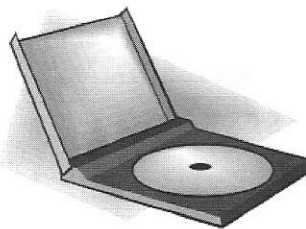
Take a gander at the pictured Charlie McCarthy novelty card. Just pull the tape and he says — what else? — "I'll mow you down."



Also a tabletop, midcentury modern Zenith radio/phonograph is being put in tip-top shape. It will come, of course, with an array of records to place under that patented Cobra Head playing arm.

And this just in — literally: Three giant UPS boxes, weighing a total of 102 pounds, containing hundreds of OTR shows on tape and CD, courtesy of Bill Buckley.

If you have material to donate to the June 25, 26 and 27 Showcase 2010, please bring it to a REPS meeting or contact Terry Campbell by mail at 710 S. Fifth Ave., Yakima, WA 98902, by e-mail at [tcampbell@yakimaherald.com](mailto:tcampbell@yakimaherald.com) or by phone at 509-457-5351. She's also the contact person if you want to be a vendor at Showcase.



## How to use the Cassette, CD, DVD Libraries.

First of all each library is distinct. Catalog numbers in one library will have a completely different content than another. It is necessary to identify CD, Cassette, OMF, or DVD along with the catalog number. The OMF Library is CD only. At the present time there is no plan to have MP3's in the library.

REPS Members may check out 10 CDs or 10 Cassettes or 10 DVDs for \$6.00. It is also possible to check out a double order 20 CDs or 20 Cassettes for \$12.00. This covers the cost of mailing and maintaining the library. You may mix Cassettes, CDs, and DVDs in your order.

At some of the meetings a few *grab bags* of 10 Cassettes or CDs are available for checkout from the library. New members may be confused, these are for checkout and then returned to the library after use. The *grab bags* are not for sale.

Checkout forms are available at the meetings, by request in the mail, on the web site, and a new form included with each library checkout. The library may also be used with the internet using PayPal. Instructions for that use are on the web site.

We get the CDs for our library from several different sources. Most of them are remasters taken from the original ET disks or original tapes. We try to have the best available sound on the CDs. Any lesser quality is indicated on the catalog pages. On some popular series there are a few episodes that have never surfaced in quality sound. These poorer quality sounding episodes are included to fill out the series. The cassette library was acquired over many years in the past and often from lesser quality copies of copies. While most of the cassettes are fine, you will find a few that aren't. Check for a CD if a cassette comes up short of expectations.

Although the content of the CDs in our library is correct, a few of the CDs will show an incorrect title in a computer. In any case that CD is correct for content and catalog number. Even though there are not very many of those, it may take us awhile to find the ones that have errors.

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## Scheduled Events

- Jun 5, 2010 Regular and Board Meeting, *Mars is Heaven* by REPS Readers
- June 6, 2010, Pontiac Bay Symphony, 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM Museum of History and Industry,
- June 14, 2010 Imagination Theatre, Kirkland Performing Arts Theatre, *Sherlock Holmes, Harry Nile*, doors open 7:00pm
- June 25-26-27, 2010 Showcase 2010 Bellevue Coast Hotel**
- Jul 3, 2010 No July Meeting

### Darrell Anderson, Librarian

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Unless specified otherwise, Board Meetings are held in the Norse Home Board Room, Seattle, and start at 11:00 am. Regular Membership Meetings are held at the Norse Home, Seattle, and start at 2:00 pm. They are both on the first Saturday of each Month.