

# Old Time Radio **DIGEST**

No. 30 November-December 1988 \$2.50



FRED  
ALLEN

# Old Time Radio DIGEST

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# THE FUNNIEST MAN IN

A rare balance between wisdom and wisecracking ha

**T**HE editor of "Who's Who" must have been flabbergasted. After all, it's quite something to be a who in that bluebook of abbreviations and biographies. The editor must have wondered just who is this man who declined to give his biography to "Who's Who" on contention the pages of that book should be reserved for men who really have done things, such as saving lives and writing laws.

The editor had written the man in good faith and the man had said he wasn't worthy of being in "Who's Who" because he never had done anything. Well, just who is the guy? Why, he's John Florence Sullivan, one of the if not the highest-paid entertainers in radio. You know him as Fred Allen, who chews tobacco like a ballplayer and serves bowls of wisdom garnished with gall and sprinkled with Tabasco. He changed his name not because it was a jaw-breaker but because he didn't want to be confused with John L. Sullivan, who was a champ, too.

Aside from the fact they both were born in Massachusetts and were champions, there is no similarity between John F. Sullivan and John L. John L.'s theme song should have been "Beer Barrel Polka" and he had muscles in his body and brain. John F. has the most nimble brain in the show business. Incidentally, he's a top-hand boxer, too, and looks something like Jack Sharkey in Sharkey's better moments, if any.

He perhaps is one of the few Irishmen in the world who changed their names except to duck a British noose. Some will say it wasn't good showmanship; that if he had stuck to Sullivan he would have had the Irish on his

side right off. But Fred Allen never does anything the orthodox way.

One Wednesday night Owen D. Young elbowed his way through the NBC crowd to get near his idol, and there was Allen, hat on the back of his head, autographing papers.

Mr. Young said, "I've been listening to your program for years." He was beaming at Allen. Fred kept on chewing. "And," continued the great Mr. Young, "I've been lucky enough to be in the audience during your last three broadcasts."

"Well, Mr. Young," said Allen, "I can understand why a person would want to see one of my programs once, just for curiosity's sake, but anybody who could sit through it three times should see a phrenologist."

Mr. Young doubled up with laughter. He won't visit any man on Allen night unless he can hear Town Hall and the funniest man in the world.

Every writing-man of the craft will doff his hat to Allen, but if there were more Allens a lot of script-writers would be jobless, for Allen writes his scripts, digs up most of his own gags, and has enough left over to give a few away to the fellow who can't strike pay-gags. Most actors are no better than their writers, but Allen never needs a crutch. Many of the really funny cracks going the rounds are *Allenese*, for which he never gets credit. He believes that once he springs a gag it's the public domain.

He was playing the first night of "The Little Show" several years ago when he happened to glance at the orchestra-leader, who had a head of bushy hair. Allen paused in the middle of his patter and leaned over the lights and said to the leader, "Pardon me, but

# THE WORLD

given Fred Allen the edge in the funnyman business

how much would you charge to haunt a house week-ends?"

The gag still is a classic. So is his crack about the deceitful man who put salt in his toupee to make people think he had dandruff, and the Scotsman who thrashed his son because he bought an all-day sucker at 4 p.m.

If the records are correct, he was born in 1894 in Somerville, Mass., on a day the groundhog saw his shadow. The great John L. Sullivan was born

about twenty miles away.

Fred's mother died when he was a child and he was reared by an aunt, the late Mrs. Elizabeth Lovely. He hadn't learned how to chew tobacco when he got a job in the Boston Public Library at twenty cents an hour. He had started smoking, however, and often violated the library rules by sneaking off to a corner to enjoy a smoke. His favorite hangout was the room where the humor of the ages was

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stored and he studied the books while snitching a smoke.

ONE day when he was hiding out, John L. Sullivan strutted into the library. Mr. Sullivan distinctly was not the kind of man who visited libraries. Young Mr. Sullivan dashed out his smoke and went to wait on old Mr. Sullivan.

"I want to see the back number of that magazine," the strong one bel-  
lowed.

"What magazine?" asked our hero.

"The one that used my pitcher by that Gibson guy," said the great one.

Our hero asked Mr. Sullivan to sign his name to a card. The champ said, "You sign it; my name is John L. Sullivan."

"I'm John F. Sullivan," said the clerk.

"Lots of guys named after me. Get that book."

The magazine had a two-page spread of Sullivan drawn by Charles Dana Gibson. The fighter sniffed as he looked at his likeness, a hulk in a box coat. He said, "Thanks. I come here on my birthday ever' year to see my pitcher. It does me good."

Mr. Sullivan was a wee bit punch-drunk, and when he wasn't punch-drunk he often was just plain drunk.

Hidden, where it should have stayed, among the books of effete old Boston was a book on juggling, and the clerk happened to read it. He decided to be a juggler and began practising. Soon he was good enough to play at smokers and other stag affairs where tired businessmen go just to see a man juggle. Some of the businessmen were good jugglers, too, with the truth and other folks' money. Fred worked too much at night and often slept during the day. That didn't make for efficiency in the library.

One day a lady, a Boston lady, asked him for a copy of "Water Babies" and Fred gave her a book on how to breed goldfish. The boss, prodded properly

by the Boston lady, found Fred juggling a dictionary and "Lady of the Lake."

"I'm practising," said Allen.

The boss said, "You don't have to practise handing in your resignation—just do it."

His appetite forced him to get into the show business. He began doing amateur shows, trying to win the \$55 prizes. But he couldn't. He didn't know the ropes. The first time he tried he saw a competitor cut holes in his socks and make himself look very down on his luck. Out of sympathy, the audience gave him the first prize. Fred almost won a prize one night by juggling a derby, a cane and a lighted cigar. But some ham had switched a loaded cigar off on him and the act blew up.

Another night the manager walked onto the set and tried to kid Fred. "How did you ever become a juggler?" the manager demanded.

Fred grinned sheepishly, "I took a correspondence course in baggage-smashing."

Our hero almost collapsed when the crowd roared. The crack had slipped out. Offstage, the manager called Fred aside. "Give 'em laughter," he said. "Talk to 'em."

The Fred Allen we know was born that night.

**F**IRE from his job at the Boston Public Library, Fred Allen tried juggling at an amateur show. His act was a colossal flop, but when he began to talk, the crowd roared. On that night the Fred Allen we know—the wise-cracking Fred Allen—was born. He used the name of Fred James and went into five-a-day vaudeville. Out in El Paso he made the mistake of doubting that a fellow had jacks back-to-back and Fred went broke. But he had credit in New Orleans. He had no way to get to New Orleans. He scraped together enough money to buy a ticket part of the way and boarded the train, trusting

something would turn up. The train was wrecked and the railroad took Fred to New Orleans without a complaint. He might have sued, you know.

Next he went from New Orleans to Australia without a passport. He just

walked aboard a ship and walked off in Brisbane. Australia was at war and the folks looked twice at husky young men, wondering why they were not in France getting their brains blown out. The women particularly were anxious



Fred Allen used his head when he married Portland Hoffa (named for Portland, Oregon). They live in a small mid-Manhattan apartment, have no servants, ride in cabs. Portland does most of the cooking

-Hauseier

to snub a guy if he was not in uniform. Women are the most effective rabble-rousers in the world. Men will suffer their brains to be splattered rather than face the scorn of some nitwitted woman.

Fred decided to leave Australia. He and other Americans were subjected to many insults. But it wasn't so easy to leave. He had no papers and the officials were watching young men who caught boats. Finally Fred appealed to an American consul, who was not greatly interested in a juggler. He asked for Fred's birth certificate and Fred didn't have any. There was no record in Massachusetts of his having been born, but by enlisting the services of the mayor of Boston and a covey of notaries, he got proof that he had been born, and he got permission to come back home.

He was crossing the Pacific when the United States declared war and Fred joined the army. "After that war," he said, "I got married."

That was another time Fred used his head, for he married Portland Hoffa, named for Portland, Ore., where she was born.

They lead the quietest life of any celebrities. Their home is a rather small apartment in a midtown Manhattan hotel. They have no servants or automobiles. Fred prefers cabs. Portland does most of the cooking or they eat out. He is the most unpretentious man in the show business.

He was invited to Hollywood to make a picture and wrote his business manager to reserve a hotel room for him and Portland.

The manager wired back that he could get a suitable mansion for a good price, something in keeping with Allen's prestige. Fred wired back for him to get a hotel room. The manager objected and pointed out that in Hollywood a big-shot simply had to have a big house.

Allen's final answer was, "Get a small place for Portland and me. You

won't have to admit you know us."

He enjoys attending fights and sometimes he goes to the theater, but usually he stays home at night and reads. One of his best friends is Alton Cook, a radio columnist. He calls on the Cooks quite often. Cook can be a serious fellow, interested in serious things, and so can Fred. Dinty Doyle, another New York radio columnist, got a week's theater engagement on condition he could persuade some radio stars to appear with him. Allen has refused for years to make personal appearances for big money, but he went to bat for Doyle. His first crack was, "This is the first time I've ever played a benefit for a guy with a job."

**H**IS feud with Jack Benny is a take, of course, and at times rather boring. To be brutally frank, it's so one-sided that it's not cricket. Fred thinks his friend Benny is the greatest interpreter of comedy in the world and perhaps

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he is. Jack thinks Allen is the smartest writer of comedy in the world, and he is. One night Benny surrendered before a barrage of Allen cracks and moaned, "If my writers were here you couldn't talk to me like that."

Fred Allen is not a comedian, he's a humorist. He never really opens up on the radio, because the public has not been educated to appreciate the brilliant satire of the man. He is a student of history, philosophy and literature. Some have said his snapping satire has approached Voltaire's.

Here is a typical example. It was back during the freedom-of-speech controversy in Jersey City when Mayor Hague was bellowing that he was the law. In the middle of Allen's broadcast there was a station-break for announcement, and Fred whispered to his audience, "This is where we break the program to ask Mayor Hague if the remainder of the broadcast can go to Jersey City."

He grumbles a lot, especially about how hard he works. When he goes out he sets a time limit for fun. Recently he went to a friend's house and vowed he would have to leave at midnight. He made Portland promise to remind him to leave at twelve. At midnight he was enjoying himself.

Portland said, "It's midnight, Fred. You said you had to be home at twelve."

"That's right," said Fred, "twelve Pacific Coast time."

His pockets always are stuffed with envelopes on which he has jotted down ideas for gags.

His routine of life is almost as strict as a monk's. His week begins at 1 a. m., Thursdays, after his Wednesday broadcast. He spends that day answering mail and attending to personal matters. He devotes Friday to writing, and sometimes takes Portland out Friday night. He almost always goes to church Sunday mornings and does his

"newsreel" and "Portland spot" Sunday afternoon. To do his "newsreel" he spreads seven days' worth of New York papers and news magazines before him and goes through them, shears in hand. He usually picks up a hundred items, and saves about six. That's one reason he is so well informed.

He meets with his production staff on Mondays, puts the finishing touch on his script on Tuesday, rehearses Wednesday and is ready for the air that night.

Twice a week he works out at a gymnasium, usually boxing. Any break in his routine throws him off. He's a chronic bellyacher. He keeps track of everything, however. He hates to keep track of his income tax, but keeps it straight to the penny. One day a laborer neglected to receipt a bill and Allen yelled, "Come here and sign this memorandum for Mr. Morgenthau."

**H**IS wife says her hardest job is to get Allen to part with his derby in spring.

After starring in several Broadway shows, Allen took to the air in 1932 with a half-hour show. His wife began to heckle him during his first show, and he added her to his cast. He began "Town Hall Tonight" in 1934. Other sponsors have told him to write his own ticket, but he is loyal to "Town Hall." He knows if he breaks up his organization a lot of folks might be out of work. He has all the money a man needs. His new contract provides that "Town Hall" must run until 1941.

When he signed it, Fred told his sponsor, "If it flops, the joke is on you."

—James Street.

**FRED ALLEN**  
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# INSIDE STUFF

BY MARTIN LEWIS

**S**OME weeks before Fred Allen left the Town Hall show, reports were making the rounds that the comedian would not return to this program next fall. Now comes the announcement that Fred has signed a two-year contract and will definitely be back on the same show. It seems Allen was getting fed up with the worry and work of writing for a one-hour show and preferred to go on for just a half-hour weekly. However, he has changed his mind and maybe his salary increase was responsible for it. Fred is now vacationing in Maine with his frau, Portland "Tally-Ho" Hoffa. Later in the summer they will go to Hollywood where Fred is scheduled to make a picture for Twentieth Century-Fox before returning to the air.

"As You Like It," with Frank Morgan, is scheduled for August 16; "Henry IV," with an all-star cast headed by Walte. Huston, Humphrey Bogart, Brian Aherne and Walter Connolly, will be heard on August 23; the following week, "Twelfth Night," will be presented, with Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Tallulah Bankhead, Orson Welles, Helen Menken and Estelle Winwood.

When Myrt and Marge started on the air, they were heard for several years in the spot opposite Amos 'n' Andy. It was for some time, and is at present, heard in the afternoon, but starting August 2, their programs will be heard in the mornings. The program remains the same and evidently commands a big listening audience no matter what time it is aired.

There was a time when an orchestra leader had nothing else to do on a program but direct the music. Now it seems that more and more of them are turning out to be comedians. Ray Noble stooges for Burns and Allen, Phil Harris turned comic on the Jack Benny show, Oscar Bradley reads funny lines on his Sunday night program, and now Walter O'Keefe announces he is going to write his scripts so that Peter Van Steeden will have some comedy lines on the show.

Radio Guide  
Week Ending July 31, 1937

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and his gang

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# Fred Allen: Radio's Sou

By MAURICE ZOLOTOW, with marginal notes by FRED ALLEN

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Continuing the new kind of magazine biography initiated with its recent profile of publisher Roy Howard, LOOK showed this article to Fred Allen before publication. Mr. Allen's comments appear beside Mr. Zolotow's manuscript.*

## SAYS ALLEN:

This couldn't have been I. My doctor is a chiropractor. During my adjustments I lie face down. The chiropractor doesn't know who I am, either.

Mr. Zolotow doesn't mention the specific week this amount was earned.

Come, now. My bags aren't that big. My eyes just look as though they are peeping over two dirty ping-pong balls.

I do not start these conversations.

The story runs that a man once went to see a doctor. He complained of sleeplessness, poor appetite, irritability. The doctor found nothing physically wrong, finally advised him to relax, smile, have a good time. Why not, the doctor suggested, go to see Fred Allen in *The Little Show* (then Broadway's reigning musical)? That clown Allen, he felt, could cure anyone's doldrums.

"But, doctor," the patient said miserably, "I can't do that. I'm Fred Allen."

This tale may be apocryphal, but it illuminates a fact. Fred Allen, who at 50 receives \$4,000 a week for making 20,000,000 radio listeners guffaw, is himself amused by very little in the world. Morose, harassed, he wears on his countenance a perpetual air of having just finished sucking a particularly sour lemon.

When struggling with next week's script (which is most of the time), Allen curdles his lips, squints, wrinkles up his face. The bags under his eyes come to look like fugitives from a hammock factory. Yet, in his rare moments of inner calm, Allen is not unhandsome.

Nor is he unapproachable. For a top-flight star, he is amazingly patient with clamoring fans, remote acquaintances, pestiferous drunks. His generosity to panhandlers is legendary. Unescorted by bodyguards, stooges and yes men, he talks to everybody, even total strangers.

Allen's voice is just as you hear it on the air—slow, slurred, with a nasal



# Clown

ALLEN

Down East twang. His conversation is punctuated by deadpan gags which his larynx manufactures as easily and naturally as breathing. Recently he took his wife to see a play that was obviously doomed to an early closing. Offered front-row seats, Allen demurred.

"I'd rather be a little farther back," he rasped. "I don't want those actors leaning over to borrow money from me."

## SAYS ALLEN:

Humor originates in the brain. It is dispensed through the mouth. The larynx is only the middle-man.

## The Allen philosophy: "The world is a grindstone, life is your nose"

Some of Allen's friends think his continual despondency a pose. "Fred has to grouse to be happy," one of them says. But when Allen himself analyzes his life, he sees frustration on every side.

He used to smoke 15 cigars a day, and chew tobacco in between. Now his doctor has him down to two a day.

He likes to eat—spicy Italian dishes, lobster à la Newburg, thick steaks with onions. But he has high blood pressure, so the doctor allows him little but lettuce-and-tomato sandwiches (on whole-wheat bread) and buttermilk.

Allen likes to be by himself, yet he must attend conferences, hobnob with sponsors, pose for photographs, be interviewed. He likes to read, but the pressure of creating 6,000 new and hilarious words each week won't let him.

There are no new words. I try to use the old words in new combinations.

### He Suffers for His Art

Fred finds radio an exhausting medium of entertainment. Yet he appears every Sunday (except in summer) and gags for 30 minutes on 143 CBS stations.

"Radio comedy is painful," he says. "Every week you've got to be there with

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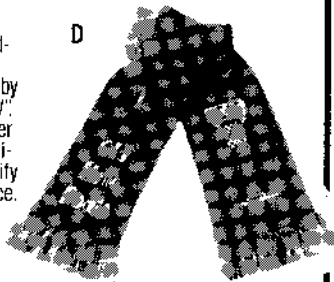
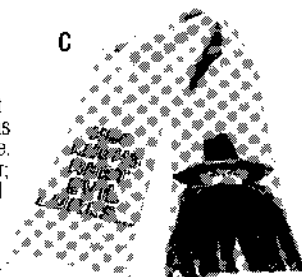
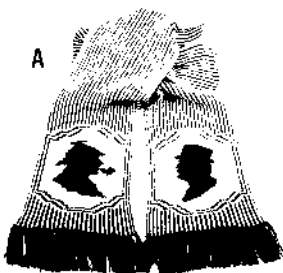
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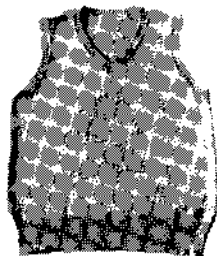
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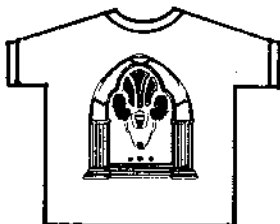
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## SAYS ALLEN:

The average radio gag-writer is an emaciated nonentity with a good memory and a pencil.

I have nothing against these people individually. If they didn't collect in radio stations, I might think highly of them.

A yak is a gamey quadruped found in zoos and crossword puzzles. A laugh, in radio parlance, is a yuck.

Far from being tight-lipped, most agency men are big-mouthed. The only tight-lipped men in radio are oboe-players.

The average vice-president is a form of executive fungus that attaches itself to a desk. On a boat this growth would be called a barnacle.

a new set of gags. This never-ending pressure turns all the comedians into vultures. I don't blame them; I blame (their gag writers.) Last year, Allen's crack about the Russian Army slowing up its offensive because it was three days ahead of H. V. Kaltenborn was being re-told on the air within just one hour.

The dour comic doesn't like studio audiences. So his show is put on before 1,300 spectators, on the theory that a background of laughter and applause is necessary. That background consumes six wasted minutes of his precious 30. To get it, he must put in "sight" gags—tearing his hair, lifting a trouser leg—which of course are lost on people listening at home. To make New Yorkers in the studio yak-yak, he needs purely local quips that fall extremely flat in Kansas.

Allen also feels uncomfortable with advertising agencies (which he has defined as 85 per cent confusion, 15 per cent commission). The jargon of agency men and (their tight-lipped attitude) toward life bewilder him. So, of course, he is employed by an advertising agency.

As for radio itself, Fred calls it haggard by red tape, bureaucracy, buck-passing and ignorance of the fundamentals of show business. He claims radio executives, who singly can do nothing, hold conferences to agree collectively that nothing can be done. Vice-presidents he particularly loathes.

Allen's sarcastic wit keeps him in hot water with the radio censors. Once he wrote the line, "I knew Ebbets Field was haunted when that old bat spoke to me." This was excised because the network felt it might be taken as a slur on American motherhood.

But censoring is only a stop-gap: Fred's ad libs are uncontrollable. Once, when sponsored by Bristol-Myers, he threw in a biting reference to Scottish thrift. Immediately 200 Scotsmen signed an indignant letter stating they would never use Sal Hepatica again.

"The prospect that they would go

through life constipated," Fred recalls, "so frightened the agency handling the show that they made me apologize."

Again, while under Texaco sponsorship, he gently ridiculed the American Meat Institute for hiring Edgar Guest to write inspirational poems about meat. Armour & Co. promptly threatened to stop buying Texaco products.

Secretly, Allen is pleased by the hubbub he occasionally stirs up. He likes to think of a comedian not merely as a clown in cap and bells, but as an effective critic of current folly. Yet he knows radio has made this role hard to fill. A humorist's barbs used to be quoted

### SAYS ALLEN:

Toujours l'Armour—but not in this instance. It was Swift & Co.

Once, ridicule was known to hamper folly. Today the world is upside down, and exponents of folly far outrank the disciples of ridicule.

---

## He knows how to make people laugh— but doesn't know why they laugh

---

across the land for months. "Today," Fred mourns, "no one remembers what I said on the radio just last week."

Or anyone else.

To Allen, creating comedy is serious business. He owns hundreds of books on humor, including a rare first edition of *Joe Miller's Jest Book*, or *The Wit's Vade Mecum*—in which he has marked some 50 jokes that are still usable.

But his material comes from the whole human race. He sees most people as troubled, tired, frustrated, confused. "They're in life's dead storage, the parking lot of humanity," he murmurs. And he satirizes them not because he is cruel, but because he is intensely sensitive to ugliness of any sort.

Once, playing in vaudeville, Fred noticed a gaunt and wild-haired cello player in the pit band. Leaning over the footlights, he inquired moodily, "How much would you charge to haunt a house?" James Thurber has called this the funniest single line he ever heard.

This was in Toledo, Ohio. And the guy could have done it.

### His Home Is His Castle

Allen's misanthropy does not extend to his family life. Since 1927 he has been happily married to Portland Hoffa,

### SAYS ALLEN:

Portland says another sister came after Lastone. She was given the father's name, somewhat modified: "Dr. Fredericka."

To me, playing horses doesn't make sense. The jockey gets the ride, the horse gets the exercise, the bookie gets the money, the bettor gets the headache.

I believe a man should never own anything during his life that he can't get into his coffin with him when he goes.

Suspended in midair, of course. When I sit for hours, the air in back of my desk gets baggy.

whom he met when she was a chorus girl in *The Passing Show* of 1922. (They have no children.) Her father was an eccentric optometrist, Dr. Frederick Hoffa, who chose her name because she was born in Portland, Ore. Another daughter answers to Lebanon because she appeared in Lebanon, Pa. The last daughter was, naturally, named Lastone.

On Fred's program, Portland plays a giddy, intrusive female with a shrill, whiny voice. Off-mike she is gracious, soft-voiced, with a slim figure and silver-tinged black hair. She and Fred are very close; they prefer each other's company to any other. Both shun the limelight and the hurly-burly of night clubs and parties. They play no card games, never gamble (Allen is probably the only comedian who does not blow a good part of his income at (the race track)). On vacations they seek secluded spots by the sea where they can be alone.

Allen owns no automobiles, estates or yachts; has no hobbies; doesn't collect paintings or antiques; dislikes music, both classical and popular. But he reads omnivorously, two books a day when time permits: history, science, medicine, fiction, biography. Books dominate his four-room Manhattan apartment.

One room of this apartment is Fred's joke foundry, where he does most of his work at an eternally cluttered desk. He sits (in a bathrobe) chewing on a cigar, painstakingly printing his words in pencil. It often takes him an hour to develop one gag, a whole day to work out a sketch which may run only four or five minutes on the air.

He is evasive when you ask him what makes a gag funny. "All I know about humor," he says, "is that I don't know anything about it. Whatever it is, it never changes fundamentally.

"Thousands of years ago the cavemen amused themselves by drawing funny pictures of animals on cave walls. Then came the court jesters, who got laughs because they were hunchbacked. We still



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## SAYS ALLEN:

Durante's beak is responsible for the rumor that in the confusion attending his birth the stork was mistaken for the baby. The baby actually grew up to be Mahatma Gandhi; the man the world now knows as Durante is really the stork.

This applies only to programs where a thin story line is sustained throughout the script.

find deformity funny—look what Jimmy Durante has done with that nose.

"What makes people laugh? I think it's when they feel superior to someone. When Mrs. Nussbaum murders the English language on my program, you laugh because you know you wouldn't talk like that.

"But in the actual putting-together of comedy, there are no formulas. The premise is the important thing." His premise is a setting, a situation—say, an opera star deciding to become a crooner. "When I have a premise," Allen says, "I can begin to try different approaches to it and build up gags to fit."

It's slow, hard work. To uncover pos-

## Sullivan to St. James to Allen— a triple play from rags to riches

And without memoranda. I wear cheap suits.

I save the sweat. It is dropped back into my pores, which I keep open day and night for the purpose.

She did a good job. I am 5 feet 11. People who do not raise their children end up with midgets.

sible premises, Allen reads nine newspapers a day. He makes notes constantly; his pockets bulge with memoranda.

Each Tuesday he shuts himself in his room to start next Sunday's show. For three days he writes almost steadily. Friday morning the first draft is finished; that afternoon comes the first rehearsal. That night and Saturday he revises, cutting huge hunks of dialogue which he has sweated out. Sunday sees more rehearsing, more revisions. At last the broadcast—a triumph of mind over matter. Then Fred only has to start worrying about next Sunday.

Like many another star, Allen does not use the name he was born with. Back in Somerville, Mass., he was christened John Florence Sullivan. His father was a bookbinder. His mother died when he was four, and Allen was raised by an aunt. There was never much money.

At 14, he went to work in the Boston public library, and was introduced to the satisfactions of good reading. But in high school he had to take a boring commercial course; for release, he practiced juggling in his spare time. This led to



tryouts at amateur nights. Eventually, under the name of Fred St. James, he was averaging \$15 a week in small Boston vaudeville theaters.

### A Juggler's Progress

He wasn't a very good juggler. One night he missed four plates at once. The theater manager, coming out to give him the hook, asked how he had happened to take up this line. Quickly Fred answered, "I took a course in baggage-smashing at the railroad." The resultant laugh prompted him to become a comedian.

For years thereafter Allen lived a threadbare existence all over America (and, for a short period, Australasia). His gags were, (for their time,) extremely sophisticated. He never became a top vaudeville star, rarely made over \$150 a week, was often out of work. By 1925 he was teamed up with Jimmy Savo, but the combination failed to pan out.

Allen got (his first break) when he played the lead in *Polly*, a 1928 musical. The show closed in two weeks, but critics raved about this "promising newcomer." Big parts followed in *The Little Show* and *Three's a Crowd*. In 1932 he moved on from the stage to radio.

Preparing for that step, Allen spent two months analyzing every humorous program on the air. He decided radio needed a new comedy approach, a complete break with vaudeville techniques. Having made that break, he has since maintained a standard for all comics.

The years have matured his humor. You can see the evolution. In 1927 he said of Chicago gangsterism, "Chicago's favorite flower is the croak-us." A bit later came the Florida boom; Fred announced that he was leaving for Miami because "I just got word that land has been found on my property."

Several years after that, during the civil-liberties fight in Jersey City, he suddenly stopped in mid-program. "This," he remarked, "is where we pause to ask Mayor Hague if the remainder of the

### SAYS ALLEN:

I never told a joke as bad as this. However, I might possibly have said, "I started tossing in my sleep. When I woke up, I was a juggler."

Not for their time, but for the Hencoop Theaters I played in and the cluck audiences who populated them.

In 1921 I toured with Nora Bayes and Lew Fields. In 1922 I played in *The Passing Show* at the Winter Garden. In 1924 I was in *The Greenwich Follies*. Where were you during these years, Mr. Zolotow?

**SAYS ALLEN:**

This is one man's opinion.

Mr. Z. kicks figures around like a New Dealer. If he will help me locate this mythical million, I will gladly give him half of it in War Bonds.

broadcast can go to Jersey City." The last is profound social satire.

Just now Allen is in Hollywood, making a picture. His return to the air this fall is in its customary state of indecision. For several years he has threatened to quit radio, buy a cottage in the hills and write satirical sketches on life in America. (He can afford to. Thanks to his expensive tastes, he is said to have over \$1,000,000 salted away.)

Fred enjoys writing when there is no weekly deadline pressure. Yet he is oddly unsure of his own talents. Some day his vast humorous library should be augmented by the printed works of Fred Allen. If this does not come to pass, the man to blame will be Allen himself.

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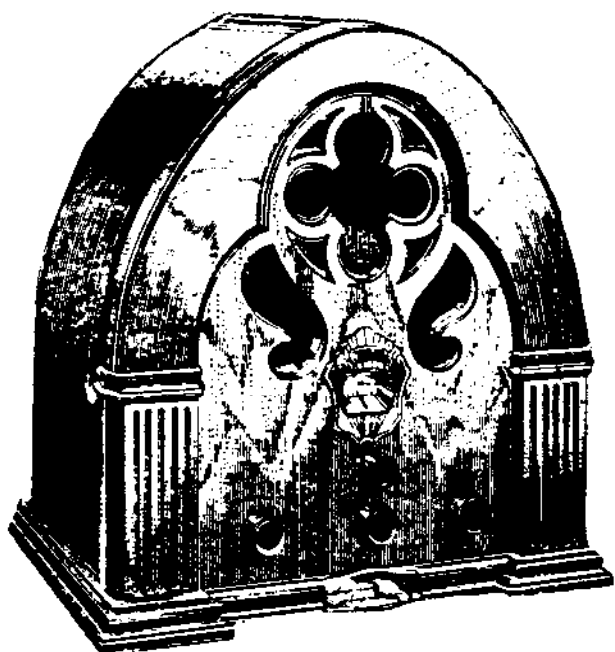
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# Private Eyes for Public Ears

by Jim Maclise

Aside from the peerless *Adventures of Sam Spade* (applauded here in December 1985), Dashiell Hammett's detective novels inspired two other fine mystery programs during the classic decade for such shows, the forties. The first to arrive was *The Adventures of the Thin Man* in July 1941. Like that same year's *Mr. and Mrs. North*, this presented the detective story as domestic comedy. Lifting the husband and wife team of Nick and Nora Charles more from the famous 1934 film than from the pages of Hammett's novel *The Thin Man* (the title of which referred not to the detective hero but to a murder victim), the program starred two actors chosen for having voices almost identical to those of William Powell and Myrna Loy, the movie leads. The radio pair were Les Damon and Claudia Morgan, who launched what was probably the sexiest mystery comedy ever to sail the airwaves. The sounds of kissing and cooing and the double-entendre quips in the bedroom upset more than one puritan critic, as Nick and Nora maintained what certainly sounded like one of radio's closest relationships. The steam didn't evaporate from the dial until 1950, when the program closed out on ABC where it had moved in 1948 after seven years as an NBC regular.

Nick Charles is a retired private eye with friends in low places, mostly smalltime gamblers, underworld eccentrics, shady sports figures. In the notable film series, as in the novel, Nick drinks only slightly less than Dudley Moore's Arthur, but here he remains whimsical but sober, despite

being for a time sponsored by Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. And of course he has that provocative, sophisticated, witty, brilliant, and above all loyal wife, Nora. The dog, Asta (a terrier), is less evident on radio than in the movies, as one might expect. The three of them live happily amid equally portioned domestic bliss and blunder in an expensive New York apartment house. Oddball mysteries either seek them out or lie in wait.

In a 1943 Post Toasties sponsored show, "The Wedding Anniversary," Nick seems to have overlooked the event when flowers suddenly arrive, presumably for Nora. But the ribbon attached says "Rest in peace," which sends Nora into tears, then the two of them off to the florist shop to rectify the error. Nick's nuptial remembrance has been mistakenly sent to a girl named Strikeout Gilroy, who was meant to receive the funeral wreath for her dead husband Virgil. When his corpse is discovered missing from its coffin, this merry caper leads to the Luxury Deluxe Hotel, the motto of which is "no opium smoking and no murder allowed." Nevertheless its proprietor, Dippy Day, an ex-pickpocket pal of Nick, can rent you a dead body if needed. In fact he has one handy. "Can't we ever have an anniversary without a murder?" asks Nora plaintively.

In the 1948 Pabst Blue Ribbon story "The Passionate Palooka," Nora wakes on a hot New York summer night complaining to Nick that "you had no right to do it without telling me how." "Do what?" queries Nick. "Fall asleep," explains Nora, who then yanks

him out of bed by the hair and has him walking the city streets at past 11 a.m. until they run into a prizefight manager Nick knows. His problem is the fighter he's currently handling, "Atom Bomb" Brickenhed, who is lovesick over his lost love Jo-Jo, a dog wandering about "with no one to scratch her fleas." Soon Nick and Nora are off in search of Jo-Jo, hoping that her quick recovery will get "Atom Bomb" into the ring on time for a scheduled title bout. Not a homicide in the half-hour, but a typically amusing series entry.

By my count, *The Thin Man* concurrently circulates in two 1944 shows, two from 1948 (including the one just mentioned), and the single 1943 show "The Wedding Anniversary." Les Tremayne replaced Les Damon as Nick in 1945, but both their names and voices were so similar that few listeners probably noticed the switch. The Lux Radio Theater version of the film was broadcast with the original stars, Powell and Loy, on June 11, 1936.

A superior Dashiell Hammett-inspired radio detective was *The Fat Man*, loosely based upon the overweight Continental Op, a nameless operative for the Continental Detective Agency (hence the nickname) and hero of the novels *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse*. Actor J. Scott Smart, packing 270 pounds himself, portrayed inner Brad Runyon with wonderfully cynical sarcasm probably equalled by no one except the great Jack Webb. The show's opening was classic radio. Following the Pepto-Bismol commercial ("take soothing Pepto-Bismol, and feel good again!") came the announcer's voice: "His name, Brad Runyon. There he goes, into that drugstore. He's stepping on the scale.

(A coin drops in the slot.) Weight 237 pounds. Fortune, danger! Whoooooo is it? The Fat Man!" Then that oboe music theme, and shortly that Smart voice: "The housing shortage may be bad, but there's one place I know of that always has room for another tenant. It's a big gray structure near the river and the windows are crossed with iron bars and the landlord never asks you for a penny in rent. If you're an extra-special customer, they even give you a private suite in a secluded part of the building that leads directly to a room with a heavy chair. That room is reserved for the guys who find that they can't get away with . . . murrdderrr!"

There are several episodes no one can afford to miss. The series debuted on ABC on January 21, 1946, running for five years. The initial story is a winner. After Runyon's monologue explains the main disadvantages of too many pounds ("the only time you really feel it is when you run into a beautiful woman"), we find him putting his mother on a train at Grand Central Station. Leaving mother for a visit to the candy counter for peanuts, he encounters a temptress who asks to be embraced and kissed. He obliges her, then she rushes off leaving her suitcase behind. Chasing after her to return it quickly involves the Fat Man in the case of "The 19th Pearl," discovered in the hand of a dead man. In "Order for Murder" Runyon picks up a hitchhiker while driving through Maryland one night along the Potomac River. In the course of their conversation, he realized that the man, an ex-soldier, is plotting the murder of his former commanding officer who lives in a big house on the river. While trying to forewarn this retired major of his danger, Runyon

comes across a freshly dug grave in the woods and several likely killers in addition to the one he seeks. "A Window for Murder" begins with a pleasant invitation to dinner from an ex-classmate, Eugenia Phelps. But while dining at her apartment, she claims to witness a stabbing in the building opposite while Runyon is refilling drinks in the kitchen. A swift investigation reveals that the alleged murder site is occupied by a knife-wielding old woman with nothing more to hide than "a ball of string as big around as a wagon wheel" stored in her closet. But an even better now-you-see-it, now-you-don't adventure is "The Nightmare Murder" from 1951. Here the Fat Man's case kicks off with an unusual request: "I killed a girl last night. I want you to prove it." An alcoholic writer as a client, a blonde with green eyes who may not exist, a book of poems, a ten foot high rooster, and a trash can all figure prominently in the case. And as the Fat Man's

frantic employer demands (at top volume): "Go on, find out for me, Runyon! Get on it, will ya? Get on it!"

The best thing about the Fat Man is that he not only gets on it, he gets on with it. This is a fast moving, cleverly plotted series with minimal cliches, and once you've heard two or three episodes you'll thirst for more, for all... all the J. Scott Smart shows, that is. (The Australian cast uses the original scripts, but Smart is missing, and he leaves a large hole.) Of these ABC shows, perhaps a dozen or so are readily collected, which isn't nearly enough. In fact, the Fat Man puts it this way: "Fortunately, if you've got a skinny wallet, or unfortunately if you've become a helpless hungry addict, there's not that much action available, brother. Not even when you're out looking for murr-derrrr!"

---

(Next time: Boston Blackie, rogue sleuth.)

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**Wanted:** Space Patrol - Tom Corbett, Capt. Video, old radio cereal giveaways, pin cards, pep pins, nostalgia, comic character items 1930's - 1950's. Joseph Far 10 Crestwood-R.D., New Castle, PA 16101 (35)

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Trade Fibber McGee and Molly Cassetts **NO EX** only. Offer 110 shows. Exchange list: Bill Oliver, 516 Third St. North East, Massillon, Ohio 44646.

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Mary Sayer, 801 8th St F5, Sioux City, IA 51105. Looking for any info on "Uncle" Jim Harkin, Fred Allen's manager.

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Van Christo, 91 Newbury St., Boston, MA 02116. Looking for Goldberg's Episode which was called "The Hannukah Bush".

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Wanted: 1950 Summer Replacement Show "Somebody Knows" by Jack Johnstone. (8 show run) Dick Olday, 100 Harvey Dr., Lancaster, NY 14080.

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GILBERT HUEY, 90 W. Triple Tree Dr., Carrollton, GA 30017 is writing an article on Flash Gordon and needs much information on the radio and tv show.

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William R. Lane, 236 W. 6th. Brigham City, Utah 84302./1-801-723-3319/reel to reel, 2600 hours/Hill Air Force Base. All types, Lum & Abner, Jack Benny, Lux Radio Theater. Will buy or trade.

---

**WANTED: RADIO MAGAZINES** before 1935, such as Radio News, Popular Radio, Radio Retailing, Short Wave Craft, etc. Gary B. Schneider, 9511 Sunrise Blvd., #J-23, North Royalton, Ohio 44133.

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**WANTED:** Kid Shows, Serials, Big Band Remotes. Transcription Recordings on Reel to Reel only please. Write to Wally Stall, 8408 N.W. 101 Oklahoma City, OK 73132.

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For autobiography would like to know date (at least year/year, month better) of Superman radio episodes in which (1) S. finds Atlantis; (2) S. catches crook by following crook's discarded peanut shells. Believe first is 1945 or 6, Other '47-9. S.J. Estes/205 E. 78/NY NY/10021. Many thanks.

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Phil Evans, Box 136 Downtown Station, Bakersfield, CA 93302-0136. Looking for any info in the Candlelight Hour Broadcast from NYC in 1931.

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Richard Pepe, Box 303, Elizabeth, NJ 07207. Looking for listing of Top-40 "Hits of the Week" broadcast on WMGM, NYC by Peter Tripp, the Curly-Headed Kid, from 1955-58 (especially 1956).

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Charles Michelson, 9350 Wilshire Blvd, Beverly Hills, CA 90212. Looking for broadcast quality episodes of Amazing Mr. Malone and Mr. and Mrs. North for his syndicated show.

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Debbie Piroch, Rd 4, Box 234, Meadville, PA 16335. Looking for any show with Nelson Eddy and/or Jeanette MacDonald.

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Jim Blythe, 941 Redding Rd., Asheboro, NC 27203. Wants Lum and Abner, Magic Island, Jerry at Fair Oaks.

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Oldtime Radio-Show Collector's Association (ORCA) is actively seeking members. You can remain loyal to your own local club and still belong. Write Reg Hubert, 45 Barry St., Sudburg, Ontario, Canada P3B 3H6.

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Marty Lewin, 8836 N. Lincolnwood Dr., Evanston, IL 60203. Looking for Sid McCoy Show (a Chicago DJ from 50's and 60's.) Also any new Phil Harris-Alice Faye Shows.

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Ronald Waite, 578 Whitney Ave., New Haven, CT. 06511. Interested in Jack Benny.

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Chuck Juzek, 57 Hutton Ave., Nanuet, NY 10954. Would like any info about Maurice Joachim who wrote the scripts for The Avenger.

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Bob Proctor, Box 362, Saline, MI 48176. Wants Horatio Hornblower shows with Michael Redgrave.

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Richard Palanik, 165 Summitt St., Plantsville, CT 06479. Looking for copies of NPR's Dol Savage shows and Nightfall.

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Wanted: Jack Benny show dated 12/8/46. Jack Goes Christmas Shopping and Buys Don Shoolaces. Steve Ovalline 10214 Black Mtn. Rd. 49, San Diego, CA 92126.

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Wanted: Cassette of any of the radio program "Hotel for Pets" name your price. Bruce Manschak, 6549 N. Drake, Lincolnwood, IL 60645.

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Wanted: I am looking for the Green Hornet Show "Underwater Adventure" that aired 9-24-46. Chuck Juzek, 57 Hutton Avenue, Nanuet, NY 10987.

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Wanted: "We The People" Broadcast 1-13-50 and any Lum and Abner shows prior to 1941. Willing to trade for anything in my catalog. Steve Ferrante, Box 153, Oakland Mills, PA 17076.

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**EDWARD HAMILTON**, 933 Naismith Pl, Topeka, KS 66606 wants CBS Radio Mystery Theater; prefers cassettes . . .

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**ALLAN SHERRY**, 5410 Netherland Ave., Riverdale, NY 10471 is trying to locate the last date for Prescott Robinson on the air plus any other information about him.

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**THOMAS HEATHWOOD**, 22 Broadlawn Pl, Chestnut Hill, MA 02167 looking for Portia Faces Life, especially July 1948 and April 1949.

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**ROBERT SHEPHERD**, 129 Highfields Rd., Abington, MA 02351 wants to know: who was the announcer for Suspense after Larry Thor and also during Bill Robson's era as producer.

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The Golden Radio Buffs of Maryland will hold its 16 anniversary Golden Mike Awards, Baltimore, Md. For details write

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**LOGS:** Ray Stanica, 173 Columbia Hts, Brooklyn, NY 11201 has a complete log of Mercury Theater of the Air and Campbell Playhouse for a S.A.S.E. with 2 stamps.

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**WANTED:** Masterpiece Radio Theater, other multipart NPR or BBC dramas. Buy or trade cassettes. Howard Lewis, 132 Hutchin Hill Rd., Shady, NY 12409

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**Don Berhent**, 807 Glenhurst Rd., Willwick, OH 44094. The Shadow and movie serials. Books on both also.

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**Frank Tomaselli**, 29-10 Donna Ct., Staten Island, NY 10314 is looking for 11AM from 1939-1944; also Fred Allen's Town Hall Tonight.

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**Tom Heathwood**, 22 Broadlawn Pl, Chestnut Hill, MA 01267 Shadow programs between 1941-44. Has supplement to his catalog for a S.A.S.E.

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**Chuck Juzek**, 57 Hutton Ave., Nanuet, NY 10954. Green Hornet episode where Reid reveals himself to his father as the Hornet around 1943. Need log from 1936-40.

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**WANTED:** To hear from anyone with Baby Snooks programs. Buy, sell or trade. Will buy or exchange catalogs. Lyn Wagar, Box 202 BCA, St. Cloud, MN 56301.

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**TRADE:** Copies of my OTR books (4 doz.) for cassettes of the following shows: Mysterious Traveler, Gangbusters, Dick Tracy, Terry & the Pirates, Don Winslow, Popeye, Mandrake, Little Orphan Annie. Ken Weigel, 7011 Lennox Ave. #126, Van Nuys, Calif. 91405.

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**WANTED: RADIO MAGAZINES** before 1935, such as Radio News, Popular Radio, Radio Retailing, Short Wave Craft, etc. Gary B. Schneider, 9511 Sunrise Blvd., #J-23, North Royalton, Ohio 44133.

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**Harry Goldman**, RR6, Box 181, Glens Falls, NY 12801 wants Kraft Music Hall of 12-11-47 (Al Joison) Jack Benny "The Bee", Fiorello LaGuardia tribute to Nikola Tesla over WNYC on Jan. 10, 1943.

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**WANTED:** Kid Shows, Serials, Big Band Remotes, Transcription Recordings on Reel to Reel only please. Write to Wally Stall, 8408 N.W. 101, Oklahoma City, OK 73132.

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J156 03/15/52 Gordon Merrick Murder; 03/22/52 Joan Carson Murder  
J458 10/07/53 Mrs. Temple Murder; 10/14/53 Cora Lee Murder  
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J462 03/02/51 The Haaty Will; 03/09/51 The Disappearing Diamonds  
J463 03/16/51 The Midnight Ride; 03/23/51 The Final Page  
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02/10/42 Trouble In Millersville, Part 1  
J468 02/12/42 Trouble In Millersville, Part 2;  
02/14/42 Trouble In Millersville, Part 3  
J469 03/28/42 Trouble In Devil's Hole;  
06/07/42 Trouble In Roaring River

## THE JACK BENNY SHOW

- J470 02/25/40 Yosemite - Last Episode; 03/03/40 w/Gracie Allen  
J471 03/10/40 Mr. Benny Goes To Washington; 03/17/40 w/Orson Welles  
J472 03/24/40 Pinocchio - Preview; 03/31/40 Pinocchio

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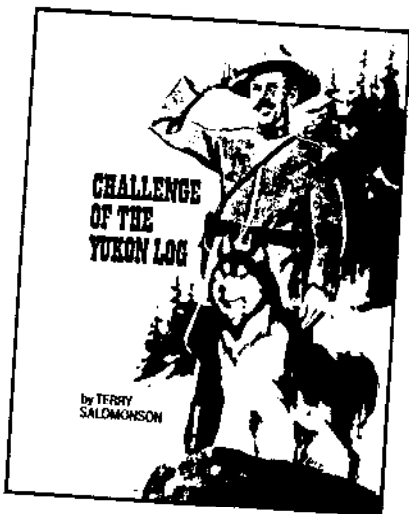
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10/10/48 Frankie Signs The Contract  
J476 10/17/48 Phyllis' Boyfriend; 10/24/48 The Steer  
J477 10/31/48 The Election; 11/07/48 A Job For Willie  
J478 11/14/48 The Chemistry Set; 11/28/48 Washing Dishes  
J479 12/05/48 Frankie Borrows Alice; 12/12/48 Babysitters

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J481 02/03/52 Shakedown; 02/10/52 Little Red Book  
J482 02/17/52 Rose For Pamela; 02/24/52 Matter Of Time  
J483 03/02/52 Whirlpool; 03/09/52 Breakaway  
J484 03/16/52 Marked Man; 03/23/52 Ski Meester  
J485 03/30/52 Homecoming; 04/06/52 Element X



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