

# RETURN WITH US

The Radio Historical  
Association of Colorado, Inc.

# NOW...

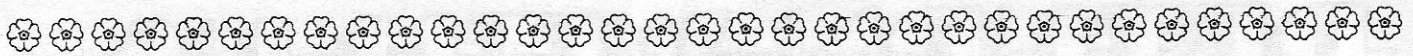


Volume 20, Number 1

August, 1994



*The Rudy Vallee Show* opened on NBC October 24, 1929, for Standard Brands, the first major network variety hour.



**BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING:** There will be a board meeting **August 4, 1994.**

ALL MEMBERS are welcome and invited to attend and participate at the Board of Directors Meeting.



There will be a **PICNIC on Saturday, August 20, 1994! 1 p.m.**

**Annual Picnic!** RHAC Picnic will be Saturday, August 20 at Dick King Park at 1 p.m. Have FUN in the open air park-like expanse of the King's grounds! There will be hamburgers and hot dogs and roasted corn-on-the-cob and punch. You need to bring an open dish of some kind, a place setting and, if you prefer your own beverage, bring your own drink. If it's convenient, it would help if you bring along a couple of folding chairs. Don't worry about the weather; there is plenty of room to take cover if there should be a shower. Come! Enjoy the FOOD, FUN, and FRIVOLITY! Also enjoy the friendship, visiting and fellowship. 900 W. Quincy Ave., Englewood 1 p.m., Saturday, Aug. 20.

AKAI Reel-to-reel 7-inch Tape Deck;  
3 motor, 3 head, auto-reverse. Like new,  
AKAI model #GX-2100.  
Shipped UPS in contiguous US for \$150.  
Gary Mercer (415)775-1406

NOMINATIONS for 1994 R.H.A.C. Officers! Nominations in August ... Election in September. Nominations are solicited and will be accepted in writing or by phone to Secretary Glenn Ritter at 377-4798. Regular or absentee votes will be accepted by Glenn Ritter any time before the Sept. 15 meeting. **Nominate! Attend! Vote!**

**RETURN WITH US NOW...** is the official publication of *The Radio Historical Association of Colorado, Inc.* a non-profit organization. Cost of membership is \$20.00 for the first year with \$15.00 for renewal. Each member has full use of the club resources. For further information contact anyone listed below.



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From the

## King's Roost

Near the end of June, as we were returning home from the stable, we found ourselves in the rush hour traffic on US85. We noticed a very frantic mallard hen with a clutch of new ducklings, trying to cross five lanes of heavy traffic to take them to the South Platt River and safety. She jumped back as a truck passed on our right, but we stopped and jumped out of our vehicle and waved down traffic as the frantic hen bustled her brood across one side of the street.

They had to hop on a curb dividing the highway, and she waited while talking to her brood and trying to get them to hop up and join her.

We were able to stop traffic from the other direction as they saw what was happening as we helped the ducklings over the curb and she then proceeded across the busy road, with traffic waiting. The little ones needed help again on the far side, but she just waited for them to get some help in jumping the curb. As soon as they were all out of the street, she and her brood quickly took off toward the river.

As we quickly returned to the vehicle, we received much applause and cheers. People a few blocks back would have had no

idea why traffic had stopped. The little ducklings were newly hatched.

Since then, we have seen some half grown ducklings on the sand bar in the river, so it appears that they have survived.

One member wrote advising that he had lost most of his library because he had used poor quality tape and has had to replace his collection. Of course, we immediately also checked the tape we were offering to our members and found none of the same brand reels.

We have been very busy boxing and mailing tapes. We have NO MORE 1800' tape. There are plenty of 2400' reels, each containing pre-recorded music and not erased, most reels have leader. \$1.00 per reel.

Clean white boxes: \$0.30 each.

We also have the following NEW tape:

1200' reels Ampex	\$2.35;
1800' reels Ampex	\$2.35;
C62 Cassettes	.50;
C92 Cassettes	.75;
Soft plastic cassette boxes	.10 each;

ALL above are PLUS postage.

We heard that the Seattle club had another great convention and that all who went there were treated very well and came away feeling they had a great day's entertainment. We were unable to get away to visit Seattle this year but we do plan

to go to both Newark and Los Angeles later this year.

Library users should be patient during this time of the year. Some of our librarians are on vacation. They will be hard at work filling orders as soon as they return. Here at the reel-to-reel library we try to ship each week. But a project has been known to cause a short delay.

Neil Iverson writes that he logs his shows on his computer database. Then, when he hears of a new show on the local radio station, he can quickly search his database for key words or phrases, saving lots of search time. Good idea!

When posting our library inventory sheets, we notice that some members rent the same reel repeatedly. This may be because they just listen to the shows and enjoy them over and over again.

I do hope that you use your catalogs to note what you have when you copy the tapes for your own pleasure.

Whatever way, we are happy to ship reels to you when you order them.

I don't know about you but we are finding that our 1-inch binder just is not big enough for our catalog. We are going to move into a 2-inch binder! That's a lot of shows available! Our contributors library now has 100 pages!

# The McGees of Wistful Vista

By Robert M. Yoder

## Part Two of Three

THE characteristic American delight in a slang phrase results in phrases that may seem a little eccentric to outsiders. There was a time, for instance, when level-headed citizens went around asking each other, "Do you want to buy a duck?" In another day, the phrase heard all over this favored land was "I'm regusted." Still later men and women quite possibly named Czuskinski or Twerklemeyer kept telling each other, "Tain't funny, McGee." If this baffles any literal-minded archaeologists about the year 5000, that will be fine; there ought to be a stiff jail sentence for being literal-minded, anyway. Brighter souls will know these expressions are just something we picked up from the radio—from the late Joe Penner, from Amos 'n' Andy and from the show that seems now to be comedy's fair-haired boy, Fibber McGee and Molly.

The mildly curious thing about the remark the McGees put into the national idiom is that a rebuke for not being funny helped make these comedians famous. "Tain't funny, McGee" was what Molly said to her spouse when Fibber tried to get off something good and fell on his smiling face. This being a nation of wisecrackers—how about the band leader who, at the unveiling of a monument to President Harding, elected to play "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone? How about the scientist who had his banquet speech put on recording tape, so he could listen and help

applaud?—there seemed to be a need for a reply, when somebody tries, but misses. Then, too, "Tain't funny" could be used to mean "You are kidding on the square, buster," or "That's no joke." Whatever the appeal of this not sensationally cogent remark, it became so prevalent a few years ago that the McGees and their author, Don Quinn, got as sick of it as everyone else, even though it proved their hold on the public. There is more to it than a simple reproof; usually it is Molly's comment on a chain of events. Even so, the public wore the words so thin that the McGees now use those trade-mark words very sparingly, perhaps a couple of times in a radio season.

By now they have a basketful of those "recognition devices," the second most famous of which is, of course, Fibber's hall closet. He opens it forgetfully, and it's like the breaking of a dam. Out of the catch-all, as thousands of faithful listeners automatically yell "Don't!," pours all the clutter of odds and ends that get stuck into closets like that—the moose head that was put away in 1936, the anchor somebody bought for a boat he never got around to building, the lamps that will get repaired any day now, the outgrown roller skates, the tin candy box that was going to be so handy if anybody could think of a use for it. That closet has become a symbol negotiable in conversation on any level; no doubt it is a far better reference than Pandora's box. A few listeners complain; they think the idea is

What does hard work get you? Well it got Fibber McGee and Molly to the happy point where they can make top radio comedy out of just about anything that happens to Uncle Henry . . . or to you. Here's the way they do it.

worn out. Quinn himself, who dislikes all set pieces, is inclined to agree. But so many others find it good for a laugh every time, that it could never be dropped from the show.

Because studio audiences get a kick out of it, it is often the sound man who gets the first laugh on one of F. & M.'s Tuesday-night sessions. If the closet will figure in the story, the sound man comes in to set it up, and he comes in looking like an evicted pawnshop keeper whose stuff had just been moved into the street. On a set of steps he sets up about what such a closet might contain. Carefully, as if baiting a trap, he lays out such items as golf clubs, roller skates, trays, a guitar, shoes, a brief case, a pith helmet, a sword, a spray gun, a suitcase or two, several packages, a broken alarm clock and the kind of wooden bucket purchased early in the war to hold sand—to put out bombing fires, of course. There is never any doubt that this homey clutter will crash with a realistic jangle. But for twenty-nine minutes of the thirty-minute program, the sound man stews for fear it will crash beforehand. It never has; nothing ever goes wrong on this show. Putting it together is undoubtedly the smoothest operation in radio. Quinn and the Jordans have worked together so long they could almost do it by telepathy, and commonly do it by telephone. Quinn comes up with a theme. He wants it simple, and often makes it so timely it seems to continue the listeners dinner-table conversation.

Perhaps, in the ballooning real-estate market, Fibber has a chance to sell his home for \$18,000. Immediately he realizes the joint ain't right for a man with \$18,000, although a minute ago it was the Little Gray Home in the West and he loved every curling shingle on that dear roof. Now he'll sell without a qualm. Doesn't know just what he'll do next; he's in a thumbs-in-suspenders mood now, feeling expansive. He may buy something flossier, more suitable for the type big shot he is. Or he may just knock around the world, I and Somerset Maugham. With the general theme agreed upon, there will be several turns the action could take, several choices of good lines. In these hands, decisions like that don't take much fretting.

Fibber and Molly, who are Jim and Marian Jordan, have been perfecting their radio roles for thirteen years, and Quinn has been writing for them since F.D.R.'s first administration. Big-time vaudeville stars didn't trifle with radio until later, but the Jordans had no pocket full of heavy old money to hold them back.

The ball for a Tuesday-night show gets rolling the preceding Friday afternoon in Producer Frank Pittman's office on the seventh floor of the Taft Building on the celebrated Hollywood corner of Sunset and Vine, or as the principals describe the office, "overlooking the corset department of the Broadway-Hollywood (department store). Molly is inevitably smartly dressed; Fibber may be setting off a plaid shirt with a sports jacket; he will be the figure lounging nonchalantly on the davenport. Don Quinn and Phil Leslie, who has helped with the writing the last five years, come in from their own office across the street, and the general line of the show is thrashed out.

Quinn and Leslie beat out a script over the weekend, and there is a "table reading" at 11:30 Monday morning with the whole cast present. The Jordans, the writers and the producers kick it around later until they are sure

the show is ready for Tuesday. This doesn't take them more than thirty or forty minutes. Tuesday's work begins at the very crack of dawn—for the musicians; the orchestra and the quartet go into rehearsal at 9:30. The cast comes in at 10:30 for another table reading, which Pittman times. Then Molly goes out to get her hair done while Pittman and the writers decide what, if anything, must be cut. They finish in time for the writers and the producers to go across the street to the Brown Derby for cracked crab and beer, while Jordan heads out, like a drunkard to the saloon, for his daily chocolate malted with two eggs. The drugstore that doesn't leave the shaker with him, so that he gets those extra three or four fingers, does without the McGee patronage thereafter.

*Quinn ... used to  
write shows for them  
for five bucks a copy.*

The cast assembles again at 1:00 p.m., and there is a complete show, the dress rehearsal, at 1:30, putting together music, show effects and dialogue. Pittman "clocks it cold"—that is, leaving out all the laughs, mistakes or blowups, aiming for a show running twenty-six minutes and twenty to forty-five seconds. That will exactly fill his half hour, when the laughs are in, and it includes a one-minute musical number he regards as a bumper—that is, he can use as little or as much as he needs. Final cuts, after that, and the players have until five o'clock to kill. Fibber and Molly have found that the best way to get perfectly relaxed for the nights show is, oddly enough, to exercise. They repair to the Hollywood Plaza Hotel and put in a couple of hours tugging and hauling on various resistance gadgets. Then Fibber goes to the barber, and at five o'clock all hands assemble for one final run through.

Six o'clock finds the studio audience assembling. They are tourists, mostly, and among the 350 in the auditorium there usually are ten who got their tickets directly from Fibber and Molly—old Midwestern acquaintances, visitors from Peoria or Chicago. The broadcast is from a stage, with no attempt to create the setting of the McGee's radio home at 79 Wistful Vista. Molly sits at a table to the right, and women in the audience probably recognize a good deal of quiet style in her costume; she likes sports and afternoon dresses in fine gabardine or wool. Once Molly balked at the price of a gray gabardine suit and said she hoped that if she spent that much money, she wouldn't see the same suit on other people. The clerk didn't know Mrs. Jordan.

"You won't see it on anybody you know," she said. "There's only one other, and she's famous—Gracie Allen."

Fibber, who is always keyed up for a broadcast even after several hundred of them, stands at a mike in center stage; a gray-haired, quick-moving man in his early fifties, usually in a brown suit. The piano is behind Molly, the quartet behind the piano. Most of the stage is occupied by the orchestra. The orchestra leader, Billy Mills, is another smooth running wheel; he works this show with the ease of eleven years in the same stand. The composer and leader popped off at a party one night about home canning. "Nothing to it," said Mills. "Anything grandmother could do, I can do better." Setting out to prove what began as a gag, Mills has become an expert. His apricot jam won first prize at the Hemet, California, Peoples Fair and Festival, but what musicians don't let him forget is that his most successful recipe probably is for corn relish. Quinn designed a label for him: "Uncle Will Mills' Corn Relish—You have heard how it sounds, now see how it tastes."

The portly man with the strip of bur-nished scalp, the man who forgets to take off his dark glasses when he comes in from the California blaze, is

Quinn, the McGee's writer—the ex-cartoonist who used to write shows for them for five dollars a copy, partly out of friendship and partly because he needed the five. This is the man who unintentionally became one of the brightest lights in radio; he had no more idea of becoming a radio writer than of becoming a skywriter. On some shows, writers are changed like tires; on this one, Quinn is built in. Because he is not a hired brain or a rental wit, but a full partner in a tremendously successful entertainment venture, he is do doubt the highest-priced writer in radio. It is always hard to say who contributes more, performers or writers. In this trio they don't try—they just split the money three ways, and pleasant money it is too. Reputedly the Jordans and Quinn divide \$10,000 a week. Fred Allen is authority for the statement that "today, the writer is the guy," meaning that the importance of good writing has at last been recognized. This came as no change to Quinn; it has been said many times that the Jordans got their best break when they met him—said so often that it takes a firm friendship to stand up under it.

Pleasant, though, in a trade where writers, until recently, rated somewhere between rented dinner clothes and false teeth. They weren't exactly locked in the attic like a crazy aunt or kept on side streets, as in a novel by Fannie Hurst, but only recently have comedians frankly paraded them.

Hollywood is full of men striving so furiously to seem relaxed that they should get double-time pay for it, and probably do. The theory is that it shows a certain self-assurance, as it might show social assurance of a kind to clump into a formal dinner wearing rubber boots. In Quinn's case this ease of manner is not a pose. At forty-nine, he has nicely synthesized the humorists' customary skepticism with a large capacity for enjoyment. Tonight, as usual, he has one favorite gag. It may be the one in which Gale Gordon is telling about the infestation of tigers,

antelopes and other wildlife that forced a certain shah to leave his rich domain. "Yes," says Gordon, "his reign was called on account of game." If it's Quinn's pet, it won't get the house he gives it himself. He's resigned to it; that happens every Tuesday.

The young man with Quinn is Phil Leslie, who came to Hollywood from St. Louis, where he was an accountant and small theater manager. Under Quinn's tutelage he learned the F. & M. formula, which is to have a pattern, but violate it regularly. Having two writers around has been a great relief to all concerned, including producer Frank Pittman, who is the man in the control booth at stage left, probably looking a little anxiously at the sound-effect man's precarious pile of household odds and ends. That closet wor-

*He may buy something flossier,  
more suitable  
for the type big shot he is.  
Or he may just  
knock around the world...*

ries Pittman; he used to run it. Pittman joined the show as the sound man in 1941. He is now vice-president of the Needham, Louis and Borby advertising agency, and his story fits in with the general self-made *motif* of this program. Pittman's first job in Hollywood was parking cars on the NBC lot. His job as producer is an envied one, and Fibber and Molly regard him as a smart man with only one prominent hole in his head—Pittman's love for flying. He and Quinn both fly; the Jordans don't, for the sound reason that they don't like it. The show traveled to Toronto during the war to help along the ninth Canadian victory loan. Pittman gave the Jordans a glowing account of the silken flight from Hollywood—the Jordans had followed by train. Converted, the Jordans got aboard for the next flight to New York. In about two hours they got a

quick re'sume' of flying weather at its bumpiest and stepped off all but homogenized. They haven't flown since.

The standout for visibility is Arthur Q. Bryan, a well nourished 200-pounder who not only plays the part of Doctor Gamble—"Let us know if your eyebrows keep twitching Mrs Clatterhatch"—but manages to look like a doctor. Fibber and Molly contend that he is getting the delusion that he is one—he diagnoses everybody's illnesses, and instead of shaking hands, he now takes your pulse." Like the Jordans, Bryan started out to be a singer, and sang with quartets. He became an announcer by accident, substituting for a sick friend, switched to acting and is one of radio's busiest actors.

The happy, boyish-looking man is Bill Thompson. On the air he plays Mr. Wimple, the henpecked husband who comes over to 79 Wistful Vista to hide out from Sweetie Face, his big old bullying wife. Off the air he is a happy bachelor who devotes a lot of energy to being president of the Southern California-area Boy's Clubs of America. Thompson can cut up old vaudeville touches with the McGees; he comes from an old show business family, and as a child appeared as "Master Billy Thompson." He also plays the Old Timer, Horatio K. Boomer, Nick Depopolis, and can handle any dialect part in the comedy catalogue.

Another of radio's most skillful supporting actors is on hand: Gale Gordon, whose father was in vaudeville and whose mother was a Broadway actress. On the show he's Mayor La Trivia, whom the McGees are forever driving nuts by taking some figure of speech literally—such as "I certainly cooked his goose." He tripped McGee up on this one night—La Trivia literally picked up a pretty penny. Gordon also plays Foggy Williams, the cautious weatherman whose farewell is "Good day . . . probably."

*Saturday Evening Post, April 16, 1949*  
(To be concluded next month)

# PICNIC FUN

1 p.m., August 20, 1994, at the  
HOME OF R.H.A.C. PRESIDENT DICK KING  
900 W QUINCY AVE., ENGLEWOOD



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