



RETURN WITH US NOW

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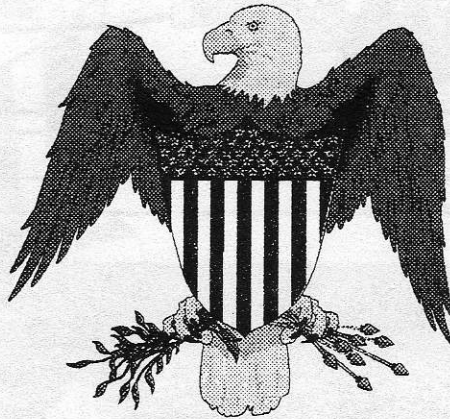
July, 1996



“Myrt and Marge,” in 1931, with Myrtle Vail as Myrt,
Ray Hedge as Clarence Tiffingtuffer, Dora Damerel as Marge,
and Jeanne Juvalier as Mrs. Armstrong.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING: There will be **NO** board meeting in **July, 1996.**



RETURN WITH US NOW... is the official publication of *The Radio Historical Association of Colorado, Inc.*, a non-profit organization. Cost of membership is **\$25.00** 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

The hot days of summer are here—but don't turn off your furnace, at least if you are in the Denver area. We go from air conditioning to furnace heat needed all through June, and sometimes even into July.

One member, Ken Neal, was able to pick up some extra copies of "The Big Broadcast". This is an excellent reference book and very easy to use. He has contributed two copies to the club, to be used as we see fit. We thought we should offer one of these to someone contributing a sketch of what radio meant to them. We will just draw a name from those contributing articles and offer one of the books to the member. We also thought about offering one of Dick Beal's books, "Think Big" the next month.

Remember the hot days of summer back in the thirties and forties? Those were hard times—the great depression, followed by the defense era. During the depression, most women worked at keeping their families fed and doing the home chores that were very vital to life. The 'Soap Operas' were a very basic form of

entertainment for the family, and a reminder that the rest of the world had problems too. These were part of the "escapist" dreams, the same as the pulp magazines of torrid love stories or wild adventure that were on every magazine rack. RHAC is now offering some of the soaps in the Contributor's library. These stories always had a faint grain of truth that made them believable, and possibly the story of one of your neighbors. They were suitable for family listening, not like "The Grapes of Wrath" book about the same era.

Although "The Story of Myrt and Marge" was offered from 1932 until the mid forties, it had joined with "Ma Perkins", and dozens of others, all struggling to keep their families together.

Radio was not a household fixture for most of rural America in the thirties, there was no electric power! It wasn't until the "New Deal" and REA that the rural families were able to join their city cousins in listening to the radio, and even then, they were usually too busy doing their chores to survive, and could seldom listen to day time radio. Why, they even got party lines in—if the cows were not leaning on the fence and grounding out the signal. We have come a long way since

those days, even if they are not your fondest memories.

The Kings had a small farm, only thirty miles from Denver, and the telephone company was surprised and quite willing to change your service from the top wire of the fence to "Real" telephone line. Before that only three miles out of Denver where they only had eleven other homes on the line. Each side of the line would hear rings for six neighbors, and although it was a problem receiving a call, if one needed the line for emergency, it was quickly given. That was when neighbors talked to each other.

A portable radio in those days meant that when Dick cleaned the barn on Saturday he could listen to KGMC "Best of Broadway" shows. It sure helped the time go faster.

We would like to remind library users that our various librarians may take a little time off at this time of the year, so if your orders do not come as soon as you would like, remember that they are all volunteers and we are pleased with the jobs they do for the club.

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Broadcasting

*Chatty bits of news
on what is happening
before the microphone*

Despite the large number of family acts on the stage there are very few family teams in radio. "Myrt and Marge," the CBS series of back-stage life, is unusual in that it stars a mother and her daughter. Myrtle Vail began her stage career at the age of fifteen as a chorus girl. She fell in love with George Damerel, the star, and married him. A daughter, Donna, was born who was destined to later be the "Marge" of the popular network program. The Damerels, for several years, toured the well-known vaudeville circuits as "Damerel & Vail." Although they did their best to keep Donna's interest away from the footlights their daughter declared her strong intentions to go on the stage and the act became "Damerel, Vail & Co." and included Donna. Two years later, the family quit the stage and bought a chicken farm. The Damerels went into local real estate as a sideline. When real estate values tumbled, Myrt, remembering all the tragic and comic happenings behind the footlights, created the "Myrt and Marge" skit. She got some sample scripts before P. K. Wrigley and these led to the five-times-a-week series sponsored by the William Wrigley, Jr. Company.

RADIO NEWS, December, 1932

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Personally, I've always been inclined to be dubious about families. "The Family" usually suggests a group of dullish persons, smugly self-centered and presided over by "Mama," who

issues orders and always wants something brought to her. "Families" get in my hair.

But not Myrtle Vail's family!

I don't have to tell you about the veteran radio team of *Myrt and Marge*; for almost six years radio listeners have been following their interesting and amusing adventures in and around the world of the theatre. But about Myrtle Vail and "family"—there's plenty to tell.

They keep going, these friendly people. Three generations of them, counting "Marge's" very young family, and all of them on the move since infancy or childhood.

Myrtle Vail started it all when she ran away from home to go on the stage at the age of fifteen. With the same determination that has carried her through many a tight spot since, she achieved her objective and landed a job as a chorus girl. Then, when she fell in love with handsome George Damerel, the tenor lead of the show, it looked pretty hopeless for the little girl in the show in which Myrtle had to carry a girl twice her size off the stage. Damerel saw her, felt sorry for her, and it wasn't long after that before they were engaged. In the show's second season, Myrt became Mrs. Damerel, but that didn't slow her up.

Damerel, a little later, landed the part of *Prince Danilo* in the *Merry Widow*, and while the show was playing in Chicago, "Marge"—properly Donna Damerel—was born. Shortly afterward, Damerel left for New York to play the same part in the Manhattan company, then went on tour with it. As soon as Myrt could manage, she went along to New Orleans, where *The Merry Widow* was currently appearing, and joined Damerel. A tremendous hit like *The Merry Widow* could play for years—and did. Myrt and her husband and, later, daughter Donna (who was still quite a baby, of course) traveled with the *Widow* almost seven years, with a few interruptions. At first Myrt danced in the show and, several

seasons later, she played the title role, opposite Damerel.

Now Donna—or Marge, if you like—had been on the move as soon as she was old enough to be moved. And she, too, had the stage bug at an early age, five, to be exact.

Myrtle Vail and her husband were appearing at a Texas theatre, in one of their vaudeville interludes, when Marge made her first appearance, unheralded, unbilled. The hotel was right next door to the theatre, and little Marge had been put to bed before the night show. This night, however, she got out of bed, went out the window and down the fire escape to the theatre roof and somehow made her way backstage. Her mother and father were on stage at the moment, so little Marge ran right on also—her dress on backwards. She received a big reception from the audience—and a spanking, later, from Myrt.

It wasn't until she was fifteen that Marge really did go into show business. She wrote her mother, from school, that she was determined to go on stage. So there was only one thing for Myrt to do—she wrote her daughter into the act, where Marge's Charleston dance scored nicely.

But before this, young George Damerel, Jr. had been born—in 1917, to be exact. Not that the advent of her second child held Myrt down. When he was fourteen days old Myrt was in rehearsal for another show! And, like his sister, Marge, young George decided last year that he had enough of prep school and college and wanted to go to work. So Myrt began writing him into *Myrt and Marge*, and put him on the air. Young George sings well and fits very nicely into the program.

By the time young George was going into the show, another generation was on the way. Donna "Marge" Damerel had met Gene Kretzinger, married him, and became the mother of little Charles. And on May 14th, this year, 1937, another youngster, named Richard Gene, was born to Marge. So just about the time Myrt was "writing

in" her young son she had to "write out" Marge for a while, to give her a chance to have her second baby.

No, they don't stay put very long. But neither do they stay down. Back in '29, before Myrt went on the air, she and her husband had left show business to settle down and they operated a real estate business in Chicago. They were doing very nicely when the crash came and wiped them out. Things didn't look so hot there; as a matter of fact, they *weren't* so hot. After years of hard work, all there stability and well-earned security had vanished and Myrt didn't like the idea of going back to innumerable economies, cheap clothes, and scrimping. And that was when she decided she was going into the radio, with P. K. Wrigley picked as her sponsor. The fact that she knew nothing about radio—never even had been in front of a mike—didn't stop her. She sallied forth, to sell her idea to Mr. Wrigley, rushing in where agencies fear to tread. But that story has been told before, many times. The net result was *Myrt and Marge*, as successful a script show as anyone could ask.

After five years on the air, they finished up their contracts last April, 1936.

"Now," Myrt sighed with a breath of relief, "we can take it easy awhile and do some of the things we've been wanting to do for years."

"Me, too," said Marge, who had been a bride for some time and had in mind a home with her husband and offspring. So, when the contract finished, Marge and Gene Kretzinger built a lovely eleven-room cabin in the San Jacinto hills, right on the spot where her "radio baby" was supposed to have been born. She was having fun with Gene; riding, shooting and getting her home ready. And she wrote Myrt, in Chicago, how much fun it all was. But there was an undertone of wistfulness to the letter; in spite of herself there must have crept between the lines a hint of sadness at the

cessation of so many years of happy work together on the air.

Myrt already was on the train to New York, a new set of *Myrt and Marge* scripts in her bag!

The result was, of course, the present *Myrt and Marge* series, and Mr. & Mrs. Kretzinger had to forsake their ideal new home to come to New York.

"We had trucked all our furniture up to the cabin ourselves," Donna said ruefully, "and had just about got set when we had to leave."

"What she didn't say," Myrt chuckled, "was that moving up there was such a problem, Marge bought a truck!" (Myrt often calls Donna "Marge.") "And they loaded the truck up, made their move, then sold the truck for more than it cost them!"

This was at Myrt's new home in Forest Hills, New York. It's on a quiet street in the Long Island town; white-painted, grass-bordered and utterly homelike. We were sitting in the bright, enclosed sun porch, and Donna and Gene Kretzinger had just arrived. They have an apartment nearby. Young George Damerel was lounging on a sofa after a ride—horses are his hobby and he's a two-goal polo player. Working in the show, now, there's little time for polo.

When George, Jr., is on the air, Myrt watches his every move, in contrast to the nonchalance of her own performance. When he speaks his lines, or sings, her lips move with his and she's obviously wrapped up in this nice looking youngster, who is the family's most recent addition to the program. And while he has had a few bumps—young as he is—the way will be a great deal smoother for him than it was for Myrt. The crash that destroyed Myrt and George Damerel's stability took young George out of prep school, where he was a class officer. But when Myrt remembers...

"I ran away," she says "and got that first job in the chorus. With job secure, I put all my money—what there was of it—into renting a room, forgetting that I'd have to eat. And I was slowly

starving to death until the other girls noticed how wan I was looking, so they chipped in and fed me until I could collect some salary. And she'll laugh at the memory, but there's a bit of wistfulness behind the laugh. "Then there was the time, in those days, when Easter was coming and I needed a new pair of shoes. It had been very rainy, and my shoes were almost completely gone. So, since I couldn't afford a new pair of shoes, I bought a new shiny pair of rubbers. And Easter Sunday dawned—bright and sunny. But I had to wear those rubbers just the same..." Myrt's gray-green eyes look faraway. "I'll never forget how those rubbers felt, *drawing* on me, that hot day..."

"Do you," I ventured, "miss those days—traveling in the theatre?"

"Me? I should say not!" Myrt explodes vigorously. "Regret losing sleepless nights in miserable hotels? Miss cracked china wash-stands, cold water and bathrooms at the end of a chilly hall. One and two night stands and layoffs and hunting for bookings? No—I don't miss a bit of it!"

But Myrt doesn't indulge in reminiscence easily; she doesn't live in the past. Just as she looked ahead to the new field of radio years ago, so does she face present and future now; brightly, with quiet confidence and youthful buoyancy that keeps a bright sparkle in her eyes and a smile on her lips. She's not very happy about the time of her show; it means quite a different audience to reach at 2:45 p.m., from that she used to reach in the evening. But she merely wrote the type of program that she thought would appeal to the more feminine listeners at that time of day. Her writing habits, too, have been completely upset.

Formerly Myrt used to write her script from 10:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. then rehearse in the afternoon and broadcast. But, with the show on the air in the afternoon, rehearsals begin in the morning and carry on right up the time of the broadcast. Which means that Myrt has to get her writing done at night—three thousand words a night,

five days a week. She's still in the process of getting used to it. And when there's trouble working out a script, or last minute changes to make, it means an all-night job. Not very long ago young George raced his Auburn to Manhattan at 6:30 in the morning, to deliver the days script to the agency, after Myrt had been burning the midnight oil.

But Myrt can take it. Not only that, she undoubtedly loves it. No one who has led as active and busy a life as Myrtle Vail has, can sit back and merely watch the world go by, even though she says she'd like a nice job fitting shoes, or something.

They're settled down snugly, for the moment, in Long Island; Myrtle and son George and Ellen Johnson, the colored maid who was with Myrtle back in her theatre days. Donna and Gene and their boys are near by. Gene, incidentally, who was half of the brother singing team of *Gene and Charlie*, no longer is performing on the air. He now holds an executive position with an advertising outfit; not the one, however, handling *Myrt and Marge*. Whenever they have a chance, Gene and Donna go out on what Myrt calls "graveyard tripping," touring through New England poking about churchyards, investigating ancient taverns and such. Donna will tell you about seeing the Witches' Dungeon at Salem; the graves of John Alden and Priscilla; the wonderful old beams in Sea Horse Inn at Marblehead, and her velvety, dark brown eyes glow with interest while Gene grins affectionately and says: "Isn't she pretty?"

From the varied and sometimes hectic experiences of this gang of Myrt's, to might expect to find them resembling the stage families in *Three Cornered Moon* or *You Can't Take It With You*. (No adv't). But they're not. They're interesting and amusing, without being at all eccentric. Experiences have enriched their lives without warping them; they work and play together in warm, friendly fashion, loving one another, kidding

one another and always understanding one another. With all the ties binding them together, they each have lives of their own and interests of their own. And while they have the friendly informality associated with stage families, their conversation is, unlike that of many stage folks, not exclusively about their work or themselves.

Myrt will tell you how Donna won a prize in her seventh grade. And she says, "She could still win it!" And they don't take themselves too seriously, either.

"I was traveling in the West," Gene says, "and Myrt and Marge were appearing on the Kate Smith show as guests. The nearest station carrying the program was KDKA, in Pittsburg, and I managed to tune it in. Everything came through fine; until Myrt and Marge came on. Then I was amazed to hear the most terrific burst of applause I'd ever heard on the air. The funny part of it was, the applause kept right on through their part of the program. And by then I began to realize it was static!"

"We had a terrible time, at first, on that show," Donna smiles. "We weren't used to working before a studio audience."

"Not that we couldn't face an audience," Myrt explains, "but working to an audience while holding a script seemed wrong..."

"I felt I was holding a paper and making faces!" Donna picks it up. "So we dropped the script and went on *ad lib*."

"Incidentally," young George speaks up mildly, "I'm afraid there are going to be some surprised cops out this way."

Myrt looks up. "Why?"

"Well—you know, I, uh, meet them and sorta mention my connection with the *Myrt and Marge* show and I've given quite a few of them passes to the broadcast."

"But you have no studio audience," I offer.

"That's just it," George grins. "Will they be surprised!"

"Would you like to see a picture of Chuck?" Donna asks. "Gene—show him the picture." Gene obligingly produces a photo of young Charles Kretzinger on the proverbial photographer's Shetland pony.

"I think it's the same pony I had *my* picture taken on," Myrt grins.

"Chuck has been waking us up early every morning," Donna says, "Always with some different excuse."

"And this morning," Gene cuts in, "he ran out of reasons for waking us... so he just came in and kissed us, which was supposed to make everything all right."

"Did it?" I ask.

"Of course!" Donna smiles.

Very normal, very happy people, this family. Each with enough outside interests to balance the hard work. Myrt would like to write—outside of her scripts—and she probably will, some time soon; Donna is interested in her historical moseyings, in photography and sports; Gene, too, likes to ride and shoot, both with gun and camera. George is an ardent horseman and quite in love with his car.

It's a gratifying achievement. Myrtle Vail's I think. Still at the peak of a long interesting career, she has sacrificed none of the more human attributes. She found time in her busy life to raise two grand, likable children and help them become established in work they love. She has managed to weld a busy workaday life with a happy home life and stay amazingly buoyant in the process, taking the bumps as they come and coming out invariably on top.

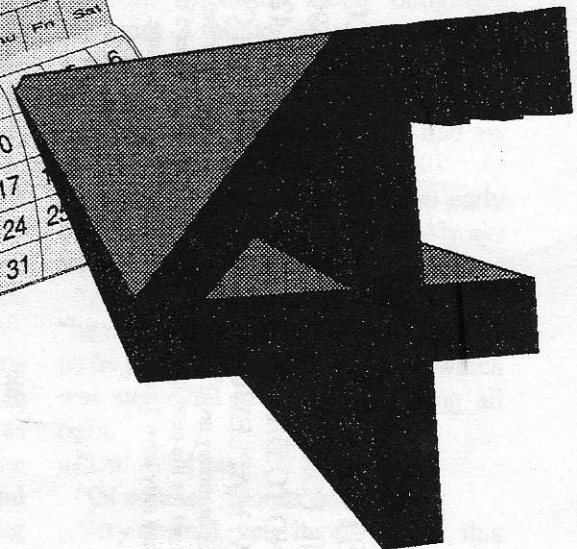
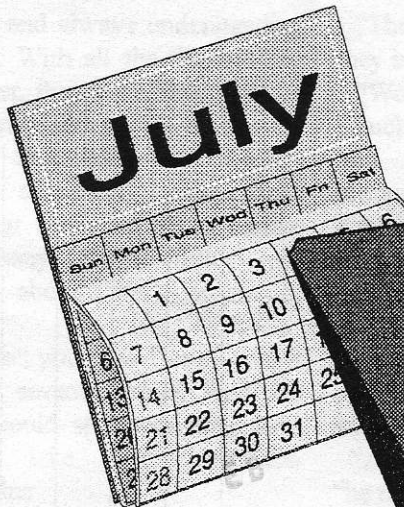
It's definitely a family, this group, and Myrt is the guiding spirit. But I'd hesitate to call her matriarch... or even maternal... she's one of the gang.

RADIO STARS August 1937

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Happy 4th



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