



RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
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COLORADO

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An Atypical Hollywood Family

By Jack M. Richards © July 2003

At the end of the Christmas holidays, a traditionally family time, it might be well to reflect upon a remarkable Hollywood family. A family that in spite of a number of hardships and tragic events managed to keep their personal values, maintain a deep religious conviction, and raise a large family who inherited their values. My hat's off to Leonard Sly and Frances Smith.

"Who?", you ask. Perhaps you can recognize them by their stage names: Roy Rogers, "King of the Cowboys" and Dale Evans "Queen of the West".

Before we discuss the lives and times of the Rogers, let's review their broadcasting career. The Roy Rogers Show ran in 1944 and 1945 under sponsorship by Goodyear Tire on Mutual. In 1946-1947 it ran on NBC for Miles Laboratories. It returned to Mutual from 1948 to 1951 for Quaker Oats. NBC again aired the show in 1951 through 1953 for Post Toasties, changing to Dodge in 1951 till its ending in 1955.

Leonard Frank Sly was born on November 5, 1911 in Cincinnati, Ohio. (Note that he was to add the "e" to Sly when he started performing.) He

lived in first eight years of his life on a houseboat build by his uncle who was blind. The family then moved to a small town, Duck Run, just outside of Portsmouth, Ohio. One of the first trick lessons in life that was to be played on Roy was the Great Depression. Roy had to forgo his desire to become a doctor. He quit school at the age of sixteen to go to work in a shoe factory with his father. Somehow I can't visualize him cutting, gluing, and sewing leather all day in a dark gloomy factory.

In an effort to better their economic conditions, the Sly family moved to California in 1930. In a scene reminiscent from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, they piled every thing in an old beat-up Dodge truck and headed west. Here Roy found work as a day laborer driving trucks and picking fruit.

Roy was always interested in music. He sang, yodeled, and called square dances beginning at age ten. The first professional group he started singing with was the "Rocky Mountaineers". His luck was to change when he recruited Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer to form

"The Pioneer Trio". The trio was to later evolve into "The Sons of the Pioneers". His career took off and he never looked back to Duck Run.

It was on a tour with the trio in Rosewell, NM, that Roy met his first wife, Grace Arlene Wilkins. (Continued on Page 3)



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Convention Schedules

18th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 16 - 17, 2004; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence KY 41042 (859) 282-0333, haradio@hotmail.com

REPS Radio Showcase XII, June 24 - 27, 2004 at the Seattle Center, Seattle Washington. Contact Mike Sprague, Box 723, Bothell, WA 98041 (425) 488-9518 hrrmikes@aol.com, also check web site: <http://www.repsonline.org>

28th Old-time Country Music Contest and Festival, Aug 30 - Sep 5, 2004 at Harrison County Fairgrounds in Missouri Valley, Iowa. For information contact Bob Everhart at Box 492, Walnut, IA 51577 (712) 762-4363, bobeverhart@yahoo.com

29th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 21 - 24, 2004 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887, JayHick@aol.com, or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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After kidding over the air about a lemon pie, Arlene (she didn't use her first name) showed up at the stage door with a pie. The rest is history as they say. They were married in 1936.

After several years with no results, Roy and Arlene became concerned and adopted her eldest daughter, Cheryl in 1941. Not surprisingly Arlene soon became pregnant. To this union were born two children, Linda Lou in 1943 and Roy (Dusty) Rogers Junior in 1946. Roy Jr. was delivered by Cesarean section. Unfortunately medical practice in those days did not appreciate the value of early mobility. Because of idleness, Arlene developed an embolism (blood clot) and died within a week of giving birth.

Another hardship Roy had to overcome was that he was extremely microphone shy. How can that be in view of the long radio run he had? In my opinion he was not a "radio star". He is best remembered as a movie or TV cowboy. Though a stroke of good luck, Roy cashed in big in 1938 with Republic Studios when Gene Autry had a salary dispute. Leonard Slye became Roy Rogers in his first picture which was *Under Western Stars*. Roy went on to make a total of 88 movies, 28 with Dale Evans. The first movie in which Roy and Dale appeared together was *The Cowboy and the Senorita* in 1944.

Roy worked hard to transform an eastern farmer/shoe maker into a western cowboy. He taught himself to ride and to shoot. He was an excellent marksman with a pistol, rifle, bow and arrow, and even a slingshot.

Dale Evans stated that she was born Frances Octavia Smith on October 31, 1912 in Uvalde, Texas. Genealogy students will appreciate the fact that her birth certificate shows her name to be Lucille Wood Smith and the date of birth to be October 30. Dale had three failed marriages before she met and married Roy. At he age if fourteen, Dale eloped with her high school sweetheart. A year later she found herself in Memphis, Tennessee, a single parent with a child, Tom.

Dale started in show business as Frances Fox, singing and playing piano on a local radio station. She was the featured vocalist for a number of big bands. A talent scout from Paramount Studios arranged for her to have a screen test. She lost the part in *Holiday Inn* with Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire because her dancing just wasn't up to it. She did appear in a few pictures and was signed on with *The Chase and Sanborn Show* starring Edgar Bergen. Her big break in the movies came when she costarred with John Wayne in *Old Oklahoma*.

Dale and Roy soon began to work together in the movies and on radio. They were married December 31, 1947. Dale and Roy had one child, Robin Elizabeth in 1950. Again medical science failed this couple. Dale was exposed to German Measles during her pregnancy and no precautions were taken. The result was that Robin was born with severe Downs Syndrome. Robin died on her birthday at the age of two. To help cope with her loss, Dale authored a book entitled *Angel Unaware*. This book is still in use by some grief counselors. The book is available in many libraries. *Angel Unaware* and eight other volumes penned by Dale are available in the Denver Public Library.

Roy and Dale went on to adopt several other children. First was Mary Little Doe (Dottie) who was a Native American. Fortunately Roy had Choctaw blood, which allowed the adoption to proceed.

Roy and Dale tried to adopt a Scottish orphan named Marion (Mimi). However, under English law this proved impossible. The Rogers arranged for Mimi to visit they in California. From this visit, Mimi eventually became their foster daughter.

The next child adopted by the couple was John (Sandy) David. Sandy was severely abused child. Throughout his life he retained many physiological problems. The worst was his bed-wetting. This continued even while he was in the Army. Concealing a bed-wetting problem in the army is not easy. Sandy was their third child who had a tragic end. He died in 1965 while stationed in Germany



from choking on his own vomit. To be one of the boys, he got drunk one evening. He was unaccustomed to alcohol and became sick with tragic consequences. Again a book by Dale. The one was titled *Salute to Sandy*.

The last child adopted was Ai Lee, a Korean orphan. She was renamed Deborah (Debbie) Lee. Debbie was killed in 1965 when she was 12 in a bus accident. Her church group was going to Mexico for missionary work in an orphanage when it was struck head-on. As she had when Robin died, Dale wrote another book. This one was *Dearest Debbie*.

Roy and Dale had a deep commitment to their Christen faith. Daily prayer and devotions were always present in their home. They included spiritual songs in their performances. When threatened by contract cancellation to remove religious material from their performances, Roy stood firm and refused to back down. His screenplays always had a moral lesson for the kids.

It seems that some people must be blessed with a 30-hour day. With all the time devoted to movies, TV, and radio, the Rogers still managed to participate in several Billy Graham rallies, stage many live performances, entertain at hospitals and orphanages, go on war bond tours, do USO trips, and record several albums. In addition to the many books written by Dale, she was a noted song composer. Some of her best known works include "Happy Trails", their theme song, "Aha, San Antone", and "The Bible Tells Me So".

As with many other successful actors, Roy was a good businessman. There were a variety of toys, clothing, lunch boxes, and other products bearing the name of Roy Rogers. As a man of integrity, Roy tested each toy for durability by releasing it to his children before he allowed it to be sold under his name. Roy even had 648 fast-food restaurants that were eventually merged into the Hardee chain.

Roy also established a museum of essentially all of his and Dale's costumes, custom saddles, guitars, albums, pianos, and autographed paraphernalia. The museum also has his beloved animals, (Tigger, Trigger Jr., Buttermilk, and Bullet), as well as his jeep (Nelly Belle), and his parade Cadillac. The museum was originally located in Victorville, California but just recently moved to Branson, Missouri. The museum reopened on Memorial Day 2003. It is currently being managed by Roy Jr.

Another couple of names which are important in Roy's life were Golden Cloud and Allen's Gold

Zephyr. Trigger and Trigger Jr. may be more familiar names to you. Roy considered Trigger to be the smartest horse in the movies. Roy purchased Golden Cloud for \$2500 from Republic Studios after riding him just once. Trained by Roy, Trigger knew over 60 ticks including dancing the hula, untying knots, playing dead, and walking on his hind legs. Trigger used to tease Roy by failing to perform in rehearsal but performed perfectly during shows. The greater the applause, the better the performance.

Roy died on July 6, 1998 and Dale died on February 7, 2001. Again for the genealogist, their descendants include nine children, 16 grand children, and 30 great-grand children.

From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany



Welcome to 2004! Your editor finds the very concept mind-boggling. Seriously, however, I hope you enjoy this first issue of RWUN for the New Year. There is one bit of "old business" that needs to be dealt with before we put RWUN 2003 behind us.

This "old business" concerns the *Christmas List for OTR Characters* that ran in the December issue. Thanks to some sharp-eyed and knowledgeable readers' reminders, I must apologize and correct the list. Rocky Fortune probably wouldn't like a new café Tambourine, but Rocky Jordan certainly would. "Sorry about that" everyone.

That done, we can look forward to an interesting and diverse year in your 2004 newsletters. As always, we would like to hear from you regarding what topics you would like to read (or write) about this year. We are in need of puzzles, crosswords, and trivia quizzes, as well as shorter "filler" pieces.

All of us wish you a healthy and happy New Year and good listening to all for 2004!

The Jack Benny Show

By Elizabeth McLeod © July 2003

As Roy would say at the close of each program: "Good bye, good luck, and may the good Lord take a likin' to ya."

For starters, let's consider one of radio's most familiar programs -- the Jack Benny Program. Modern listeners are fortunate that most of the run of this series has been preserved, via Jack's own collection of discs housed at UCLA. Several hundred programs exist, in generally decent audio quality, from 1932 to 1955. And the first thing a methodical listener will discover is that the shows from the end of the run bear little resemblance to those from the beginning.

Jack began his radio career carrying over his vaudeville and Broadway persona -- that of the suave, wisecracking Master Of Ceremonies.

Listening to Jack's first show, presented for Canada Dry Ginger Ale on May 2, 1932, is rather perplexing to one not familiar with the pre-radio phase of

the Benny career. The familiar cast members are absent, with the emphasis of the show on bouncy selections performed by George Olsen And His Music. And Jack's personality is very different from that which is best remembered -- no "cheap" jokes, no violin references, no running gags.

But if you listen closely, the ingredients are there. Jack's drawling, nonchalant delivery is a harbinger of laughs to come -- even if the jokes themselves are flaccid. (Even the old groaner about "drinking all the liquor in the US and then going north to drink Canada Dry" is wheeled out in a left-handed tribute to the sponsor.) This is an enjoyable show, a valuable souvenir of Depression-era radio -- but there's no hint that the

flippant MC would go on to become radio's best-remembered star.

Jack began to hit his stride before the end of that first series, as writer Harry Conn cobbled together the basic elements of the "Benny" character, and the show moved away from its musical roots toward a more comedy oriented format. Season by season, the pieces fell into place -- Mary Livingstone, Don Wilson, Kenny Baker, and Phil Harris. By 1936, when Conn left in a salary dispute, a standard pattern had been established -- the first half of the show featured banter among the cast members, and the second half a self-contained sketch parodying some current book, play, or film. While containing some genuinely funny material, these shows often seem dated to the casual listener -- the topicality of the sketches is lost, and the point of the parody disappears with it.



Jack's next writers, Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin, were perhaps the most important hirings he ever made -- they gradually changed the entire direction of the show, moving away from jokes for the sake of jokes and toward character oriented comedy. It was during this era -- 1937 through 1943 --

that the Benny show as we know it came to be. Jack's personality came into sharp focus during these years, with the very root of the comedy becoming the conflict between how Jack viewed himself versus how everyone else viewed him. The supporting cast assumed their own distinctive personalities -- no longer one-dimensional stooges, Morrow and Beloin built Livingstone, Wilson, Harris, Baker (and his replacement Dennis Day) into vivid comic characters. And most importantly, Morrow and Beloin introduced Benny's sharpest foil, Eddie Anderson's "Rochester."

The Morrow-Beloin shows are, in my judgment, the high point of the Benny run. The gags and situations are sharp and funny -- but with a manic,

surreal edge. Carmichael the Polar Bear, the daft boarder Mr. Billingsley, flat-voiced Harry Baldwin and his constant interruptions, the wheezing Andy Devine and his "Hiya Buck!" -- all combined to give the Benny show a unique flavor during these years. Occasionally -- especially in their infrequent explorations of Rochester's razor-carryin', crap-shootin' ways -- Beloin and Morrow stepped over the bad-taste line. But by and large these shows are still very funny, very entertaining, and very worthwhile.

In 1943, Morrow and Beloin were succeeded by George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, Sam Perrin, and John Tackaberry -- and there was an immediate, noticeable change in the flavor of the show. While Morrow and Beloin had introduced "situation comedy" elements into the series, the new writers made them its central focus, placing Jack and his cast into story lines which carried over from show to show, weaving in new running-gag characters like Mel Blanc's train barker or Frank Nelson's caustic floorwalkers and countermen. These patterns continued for the rest of Benny's radio tenure -- and eventually turned the show into a full-fledged sitcom.

This transition had its pros and cons. A plot oriented format allowed an ideal setting for the full exploitation of the Benny persona -- and it's this "classic" period which defines Jack for most listeners today. But there's something missing too - the fanciful tone of the Beloin-Morrow shows is lost, and listened to with a critical ear, the Balzer-Josefsberg-Perrin-Tackaberry programs can often sound just a bit too calculated in their comedy -- a bit too "written-by-committee." The running gags eventually wear thin, especially when they're substituted for fresh comedy ideas -- which happened a little too often as the show moved into the 1950s.

Still, for a show that ran over twenty years, the Jack Benny Program produced remarkably few clinkers. And it endures today as one of the highlights of Old Time Radio.

Tune in for yourself -- and enjoy. Just watch out for that polar bear in the basement.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History

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Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com

New in the Tape Library

by Dick and Maletha King

This month we have added two program series to our tape library. The first is "The Alan Young Show" which consists of 23 shows on three reels. Actually, the last reel, number 1573, also includes one "The Aldrich Family" show.

Hello everyone,

My name is Ron Lackmann, and I'm writing a biography of actress Mercedes McCambridge. This will include a complete list of film, stage, TV and radio credits such as is possible. I am searching for the names, episodes and dates of any show in which Miss McCambridge was either heard as an actress and/or had other artistic involvement such as directing or producing.

I have been somewhat homebound as of late (I hope it will not be permanent) and at present I'm not able to get about very easily. I would sincerely appreciate any information that you might have and would be kind enough to pass along.

Please mail any information to:
Ron Lackmann
2468 Lucas Tpke, High Falls, NY 12440
or email to: RonLackmann@aol.com

I thank you in advance for anything that you may have. - Ron