



RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION OF
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NERO WOLFE - A MOST UNUSUAL DETECTIVE

by Dr. Charles Beckett

During the 1940s and early 1950s, there were countless radio detective programs on the air. Nero Wolfe had little in common with most of them -- especially in physical appearance. The Wolfe character first saw the light of day in a 1943 Saturday Evening Post magazine story and became the hero of a radio series that same year. He was the creation of Rex Stout, who wrote 46 novels featuring the reluctant detective.

fat man by consequence.”

Programs in the radio series usually began with a telephone ringing, and Wolfe’s assistant answering it. The conversation would go something like, “Nero Wolfe’s office, Archie Goodwin speaking. Mr. Wolfe? Yeah, he’s here. Who’s this?” This would be followed by Wolfe’s gruff voice bellowing, “Archie, hang up. Don’t ask questions.” But, Archie would persist. “It’s a client, boss,” to which Wolfe would reply, “That’s what I was afraid of. Phooey!” Many times, the only way Archie could get Wolfe to agree to take a case was to remind him how low their bank account was, and, that, if Wolfe wanted to continue to maintain his lavish lifestyle, he needed to earn



Santos Ortega



Luis Van Rooten



Francis X. Bushman



Sydney Greenstreet

Wolfe has been described as “the bulkiest, balkiest, smartest -- the most unpredictable detective in the world.” He seldom moved from the easy chair in his home, which also served as his office. He preferred gourmet dining and cultivating rare orchids to solving crimes. Although he was a master detective, he seemed more comfortable with the title “world class orchid fancier.” He was aptly described by John Dunning -- radio interviewer, historian, and author of “On the Air, The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio”-- as “a bon vivant by nature and a

some money. Only then, would Wolfe grudgingly agree to see a client and take his or her case. On rare occasion, contrary to his usual resistance, Wolfe would surprise Archie with an almost immediate acceptance of a client, as in the January 5, 1951 program, “The Case of the Deadly Sellout,” in which a boxing manager wanted to hire Wolfe to find a missing prize fighter. Instead of telling Archie to hang up, he gave the caller an appointment to discuss his problem. When Archie admitted to
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RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO

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Convention Schedules

Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention, Sep 14 - 17, 2006 at Four Points Sheraton, Aberdeen, MD Web site is www.midatlanticnostalgiaconvention.com, For information call Michelle or Martin at (717) 456-6208

31st Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 19 - 22, 2006 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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Wolfe he thought he was going to -- once again -- have to convince his boss to take a case, Wolfe replied, "It's fascinating about anyone losing a prize fighter. They're usually quite large, aren't they?" This fact, in itself, seemed to intrigue the man.

In most instances, however, Wolfe was a reluctant crime solver. He seemed to detest detecting, especially if it required him to leave the comfort of his home -- and his orchids. When, out of financial necessity or curiosity, he did accept a case (which, of course, was every episode -- otherwise, there would have been no story), he usually solved it without moving his oversized body from his oversized chair positioned behind his oversized desk. He was an observer and a deducer -- much in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes. Present him with the facts and describe the crime scene -- which was Archie's job -- and Wolfe would solve the case and name the murderer.

Wolfe and his assistant were exact opposites. Wolfe was heavy and sedentary, had an abrasive personality, and had no interest in women. Goodwin was active, agile, and had a quick wit and ready charm, which he enjoyed demonstrating -- especially to members of the fairer sex.

During the early years the program aired, it had some difficulty finding its pace and place, and experienced several changes -- in the series title, cast members, time slots, networks and acceptance as a popular radio show. The first radio series was broadcast in 1943, as "The Adventures of Nero Wolfe," with Santos Ortega in the title role. In 1944, Luis Van Rooten became Wolfe, with John Gibson as his Archie Goodwin. During 1945-46, the series name was changed to "The Amazing Nero Wolfe," and starred Francis X. Bushman, a former movie matinee idol and radio soap opera star, with Elliott Lewis as his Archie.

On October 20, 1950, the series settled in permanently -- at least in name -- becoming known as "The New Adventures of Nero Wolfe," with well known English stage actor Sydney Greenstreet as the corpulent detective. He fit the physical description of Wolfe, weighing just under 300 pounds. He came to the role from his debut movie appearance, at age 61, in "The Maltese Falcon," in which he played Humphrey Bogart's antagonist, Kaspar Guttman -- for which he received a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination. By the end of the run of the final version of the series on April 7, 1951, with Greenstreet still in the title role, Archie had been

played at various times by several talented and versatile actors, including Gerald Mohr, Wally Maher, Harry Bartell, Herb Ellis and Lawrence Dobkin.

Archie, the archetypical hardboiled, wisecracking detective, was not only Wolfe's assistant, but also was his "on the street legs," interviewing witnesses and gathering clues -- and, with his physical presence, preventing various nefarious and irate characters from attempting to do his boss bodily harm. Unlike Wolfe, who seemed indifferent to the female gender, Archie regularly used his charm and good looks not only to obtain information from young women connected with a case -- but, sometimes, dates as well. When it came to doing his job, he could be as tough with evil doers as he was charming and gentle with attractive members of the opposite sex.

Although they normally had a good working relationship, Archie, on occasion, would become impatient and outspoken with Wolfe, especially during some of his frequent attempts to convince Wolfe to take a case he was determined to turn down. Their relationship seemed to consist of resistance, compromise, acceptance, and successful crime solving -- in that order.

The actors who played Archie Goodwin had notable radio careers and impressive lists of credits as stars and/or featured players in other series -- which are too numerous to mention here.

The only other radio detective who could challenge Nero Wolfe in the weight department was Brad Runyon, "The Fat Man," played by J. Scott Smart, whose character weighed 237 pounds. His size, strength and commanding voice intimidated many criminals and often prevented them from attempting anything foolish. In contrast to Wolfe, Runyon enjoyed detecting and was a charming and witty lady's man. Although he had no "Archie," he was quite capable of protecting himself from evil doers. However, he did have a close friend, Cathy Evans, who felt a responsibility to protect him from "wolfish women." The resemblance between the two detectives stopped at their physical appearances. Wolfe was gruff and reclusive, preferred orchids to work, used deduction instead of action and repeatedly resisted taking cases. Runyon was outgoing, liked action and enjoyed his work -- although his cases sometimes fell short on logic in their solving. Smart, in private life, though weighing

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Radio Personalities: Virginia

"Ginny" Gregg

By Stewart Wright © 2006

This is the latest installment in a series of biographical sketches on actors who had extensive careers on the radio. In each article I will list some favorite performances of the actor. If that performance is followed by a number in square brackets [], that is the RHAG Tape or CD Number Library for that specific performance.

The picture of the actor in each article is through the courtesy of Bobb Lynes and originally appeared in the book "Radio's Golden Years: A Visual Guide to the Shows and the Stars" by Frank Bresee and Bobb Lynes. – Author's note

Two of my favorite actors from the Golden Age of Radio are Virginia Gregg and Jeanette Nolan. (Yes, I call them actors, because that was what they called themselves. At one time, the word "actor" was a unisex designation.) These two incredibly talented professionals were believable in any role they did and had great skills in doing accents, dialects, and characterizations. Both could usually fool me until the final credits were given. An article on Jeanette Nolan will appear later in this series.



Radio Work:

Virginia actually started out in radio as a musician. For several years she was a staff musician at CBS and Mutual as member of a group called "The Singing Strings" and also played for the Pasadena Symphony. Her instrument was the double bass viol.

First and foremost, Virginia Gregg wanted to be an actor. She attended the Hollywood Academy of Dramatic Arts and worked at the Pasadena Playhouse and various little theaters in the Los Angeles area; learning her trade

In a 1982 interview [Tape 305 and 306], Virginia told John Dunning, "Music seemed to take off before the acting did. I was just so suddenly busy in music. I was also on staff at KHJ. I broke into acting there. I narrated one of our shows. Then they started using me on Johnny Nesbitt's *The Passing Parade*. If they needed a character, a voice, I did that. Then I did *Rise and Shine*, an early morning show with Jimmy Burton and Sam Pierce. I decided if I was going to do anything with acting I had to quit music. So I sold my bass the next day so I wouldn't be tempted to go back."

Although Virginia was a talented musician, she became a virtuoso actor. In an issue of "The National Radio Artists Directory" Virginia was listed with an incredible voice age range from 8 to 80 and an equally impressive variety of dialects, accents, and character voices. She could and did play any role from young children to demure sweethearts to calculating schemers to elderly dowagers and everything in between. Her accents and dialects repertoire included, but was not limited to: Black, Chinese, Cockney, French, German, Hillbilly, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, Mexican, Mid-Western, Rural, Southern, and Swedish.

During that Dunning interview Virginia explained, "Actually I did a lot more than I thought I could do because of Jack Webb and Jack Johnstone.

They would say, 'Next week you are doing 'Irish' or whatever.' I would say that Jack, 'I don't do Irish.' They would say, 'Sure you do.' So you do it. You learn it somehow."

From the mid-1940's through the end of the Golden Age, Virginia Gregg's talents made her one of the busiest actors in radio, often doing multiple shows in a single day. For instance, on *Dr. Kildare*, Virginia had an actor stand in for her during rehearsals so she could fulfill other acting commitments.

Virginia Gregg was a favorite performer of several prominent Hollywood directors: Jack Webb,

Elliott Lewis, Jack Johnstone, Antony Ellis, and Norman Macdonnell. She was a member of both Norman Macdonnell's and Jack Webb's (*Dragnet*) "stock" companies of accomplished actors.

Her talents gave her the opportunity to appear on many of the finest drama and comedy series that originated from Hollywood. Guest appearances abounded in series famous and obscure such as *The Adventures of Maisie*, *Arch Oboler's Plays*, *Calling All Cars*, *The Cavalcade Of America*, *Confession*, *Dangerous Assignment*, *Dealer In Dreams*, *Dr. Christian*, *Enchanted Cottage*, *Family Theater*, *Hallmark Playhouse*, *The Halls of Ivy*, *In Your Name*, *Lux Radio Theatre*, *Mayor of the Town*, *Mr. President*, *NBC University Theater of the Air*, *Pat Novak For Hire*, *The Private Practice Of Dr. Dana*, *Radio Charades*, *Screen Directors Playhouse*, *The Stan Freberg Show*, *When Presses Roar*, *Whispering Streets*, and *You Were There*. She appeared on several series produced by Elliott Lewis: *Line-Up*, *Broadway Is My Beat*, *Suspense*, and *Crime Classics*. Even after dramatic radio's heyday she was frequently heard on *Heartbeat Theater*, *Sears Radio Theater*, and *Midnight*.

Virginia had many featured roles in series including: *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* as Nikki, *Dr. Kildare* as Nurse Parker, *Let George Do It* as Claire "Brooksie" Brooks, *Lum and Abner* as Charity, *Have Gun Will Travel* as Miss Wong, and *One Man's Family* as Betty Barbour.

Virginia made more than 250 appearances on *Yours Truly*, *Johnny Dollar*; frequently during the Bob Bailey/Jack Johnstone portion of the series' run as Dollar's girl friend, Betty Lewis. Some of her finest work on the series was during the daily 15-minute serialized shows in 1955-56 such as "The La Marr Matter" as Vonnie La Marr [Tape 394, CD 436] and as Marvel Terrence in "The Flight Six Matter" [Tape 392, CD 428.] She also appeared on other Johnstone-directed series including: *Hollywood Star Playhouse* and *The Six Shooter*. She also played Helen Asher on *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*.

She was a prominent player in Norman Macdonnell's "stock company" and made frequent appearances on many of the series that he directed and produced as such *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe*, *Escape*, *Gunsmoke*, *Fort Laramie*, *Rogers of the Gazette*, and *Romance*. Two of her performances on *Escape* were in the adaptation of the Daphne du Maurier story "The Birds" [CD 892]

and "This Side of Nowhere" [Tape 111, CD 855.]

She was one of the most frequent female guest stars on Macdonnell's *Gunsmoke* with forty-two appearances; playing a wide range of parts. Virginia played a young woman about to give birth in "Beeker's Barn" [Tape 636, Tape 5022.] She played older women in "Johnny Red" [Tape 5016] and "Nettie Sitton" [Tape 5037.] The script used for "Nettie Sitton" was first aired as "Hattie Pelfrey" [Tape 44, CD 25] on another Norman Macdonnell produced series, *Fort Laramie*. On both series she had the title role in those episodes.

She appeared in many productions of writer/director Antony Ellis including *Suspense*, *CBS Radio Workshop*, *O'Hara*, *Romance*, and *Frontier Gentleman*. Of particular note are two performances on the latter series: in the title role in "Gentle Virtue" [Tape 504, CD 283] and as Calamity Jane in "Aces And Eights" [Tape 755, CD 292.]

Television Work:

Virginia easily made the transition to television and was a frequent guest star in several of Jack Webb's television series starting with *Dragnet*, and continuing through *Dragnet 1967*, *Adam-12*, and *Emergency*. She performed on television comedy and drama series from "A" to "Z" as seen from the following very small sampling of her series credits: *The Addams Family*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Bewitched*, *Bonanza*, *Cannon*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Daniel Boone*, *The Fugitive*, *Gunsmoke*, *Happy Days*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, *Lou Grant*, *Love, American Style*, *Mannix*, *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *Maverick*, *Mission: impossible*, *My Favorite Martian*, *The Outcasts*, *Perry Mason*, *Rawhide*, *The Rebel*, *The Rockford Files*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *The Six Million-Dollar Man*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Tombstone Territory*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Virginian*, *The, Wagon Train*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, *Wichita Town*, *The Wide Country*, and *Zane Grey Theater*.

In addition Virginia used her voice talents in many television cartoon series such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sun Dance Kids*, *The Herculoids*, *Scooby-Doo Where Are You?*, *Speed Buggy*, *These Are the Days* and *The Great Grape Ape*. Virginia had a featured role as the Colonel's wife, Maggie Bell, in the prime-time cartoon series *Calvin and the Colonel*. This series had the stars of *Amos and Andy*, Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, play Calvin and the Colonel respectively. Several other

co-workers from radio appeared in the series including Gloria Blondell, June Foray, Paul Frees, Barney Phillips, Frank Gerstle, and Frank Nelson.

Motion Picture Work:

One of Virginia's first roles in motion pictures was in the Alfred Hitchcock movie *Notorious*. More than a dozen years later she later worked for Hitchcock again in perhaps her most famous movie role, a role in which she was heard, but never seen. Virginia did the terrifying voice of Norman Bates' dead mother in Hitchcock's original *Psycho* and the two sequels.

She also appeared in over 50 other feature and made-for television movies including *Heaven with a Gun*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Joy in the Morning*, *Operation Petticoat*, *Spencer's Mountain*, and Jack Webb's big screen releases *Dragnet* and *The D. I.*

The Person

Virginia Gregg was admired by the audiences for her fine acting. We are indeed very fortunate that so many of her fine performances are available for us to enjoy.

She was admired by her fellow performers not only for her acting skills, but also for her humanity. Whenever actors from the Radio's Golden Age get to talking about their fellow performers, Virginia's name always comes up and is mentioned with a great admiration and very special fondness reserved for those very few Special People who come into one's life.

It is fitting that this article ends with thoughts from two of her co-workers that appeared in the Nov/December 1986 issue of the *SPERDVAC Radiogram*. Former editor Barbara Watkins supplied me a copy of the issue which contained a special tribute to Frank Nelson and Virginia Gregg who both died in September, 1986. (When I first started on conducting research on this fine artist for another project, I looked at the calendar and realized that it was September 15, 2001; fifteen years to the day that Virginia left us.) The following is just a small portion of the sentiments expressed by her friends and co-workers and yet speaks so much of the esteem in which she was held as a human being.

From Art Gilmore

". . . But so many of her admirers never got know the other side of this great lady. Her generous heart was as big as all outdoors. Whether it was a cat, dog, or a human being, she loved them all and would take

them in and love them. She was the kindest, most thoughtful person I know and a part of all of us went with her to her reward with her Creator."

"The angels are up there singing and our dear Virginia is making all of them happier by presence."

From John Dehner

"I can never forget that she had been solely responsible for spurring my career as a professional actor in Hollywood radio. . . ."

". . . She decided to do what she could to improve my career. How lucky for me. She was already fairly well on her way to building her own name in West Coast radio. She began to make my name known to producers she regularly worked for, taking me around to their offices and introducing me here and there. Out of this it became my great good fortune that, one by one, these producers began to hire me. Virginia did this."

"For what it is worth I take comfort in believing that she has taken something of me with her: my affection and my boundless gratitude."

(Nero Wolfe - continued from page 3)

270 pounds, was an excellent dancer, once winning a Charleston contest. In 1951, "The Fat Man" radio show was made into a movie of the same title, starring J. Scott Smart, with Rock Hudson in a supporting role.

Nero Wolfe also made a successful transition from radio to another medium. The series can be seen currently on cable television's Biography channel, starring Maury Chaykin as Wolfe, and Timothy Hutton as Archie Goodwin. Hutton, also a film actor, won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role in the 1980 movie, "Ordinary People."



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

Our CD library is being updated this month with additional episodes of truly classic comedies that are sure to bring us into the Fall in good spirits - "The Life of Riley" and "Fibber McGee and Molly".

I want to make our membership aware, as well as other media renting clubs, that we have a considerable problem with a former member from Casson Minnesota. She was a very active renter, but has apparently moved and, after numerous requests, has still not returned the CDs she rented. This has caused us significant expense in both administration and CD recreation. Fortunately, this is not a common problem among our media renting members, and we really appreciate and thank their timely returns.