

RETURN WITH US NOW...

The Radio Historical
Association of Colorado, Inc.



Volume 19 Number 12

July, 1994



Fibber McGee and Molly



BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING: There will be **NO** board meeting in July, 1994.
ALL MEMBERS are welcome and invited to attend and participate at the Board of Directors Meeting.



There will be **NO MEETING** on July 21, 1994!

The sale of 1800 and 2400 ft. reels of tape is going well. Be reminded that these reels contain only music or some local air checks **AND** we are selling the tape **NOT** any programming which may be on the tape. Tapes have leaders on both ends, were used once: Cost \$1 per reel. If you want a new white box: Cost .30. Add a little extra to cover shipping. Although sales are good, we have an abundant tape supply. Be sure to specify tape length you want. As always, U.S. funds. Our Canadian members must also remember to add extra for the high shipping costs. Tapes have not been erased, but your tape deck will erase automatically as you record new material. These tapes are filling needed storage space in the garage and we **WILL** have other use for the space at the end of summer. **ORDER NOW; DO NOT PROCRASTINATE!**

RHAC, 900 W Quincy Ave, Englewood CO 80110

Have you ever thought you'd like to write a play about some experience?

Write a 30-min. script: Win \$150!

Friends of Old Time Radio in Newark NJ want a good 30-min. script for their Oct. convention and they are offering a **\$150** prize for the best offered. Story locale & era your choice. Sound & music cues must be included. Cast size optional; you may direct an excellent cast, if you wish. Send script to:

Dave Zwengler
 6 Lake AVE #5B
 East Brunswick NJ 08816

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.



Phone numbers are in the (303) area code except where indicated.

- PRESIDENT.....Dick King, 900 W Quincy Ave., Englewood CO 80110.....761-4139
- VICE-PRESIDENT.....Guy Albright, 786 S Quitman St., Denver CO 80219.....934-0184
- SECRETARY.....Glenn Ritter, P.O. Box 1908, Englewood CO 80150.....377-4798
- TREASURER.....Maletha King, 900 W Quincy Ave., Englewood CO 80110.....761-4139
- NEWSLETTER EDITOR...Glenn Ritter, P.O. Box 1908, Englewood CO 80150.....377-4798
- R.H.A.C. HISTORIAN.....John Adams, 2811 S Valentia St., Denver CO 80231.....755-9185
- TAPE LIBRARIAN for OPEN REELS: Dick & Maletha King, 900 W Quincy, Englewood CO 80110.761-4139
- TAPE LIBRARIANS for CASSETTES:
 - #1 (1-599) Dan Decker, 10587 #G W Maplewood Dr, Littleton Co 80127.....933-4232
 - #2 (600 up) Dave Logan, 5557 S Sherman Cir., Littleton CO 80121.....730-1430
 - #3 (5001 up) Mika Rhoden, 3950 W Dartmouth Ave., Denver CO 80236.....937-9476
- DIRECTOR AT LARGE: David L Michael, 1640 Grant St., Denver CO 80203.....830-0075
- CORRESPONDING SECRETARY: David L Michael (see above).....830-0075
- TALKING NEWSLETTER: Mike Fields, 1207 Ruth, Longview TX 75601.....(903)758-6319
- REFERENCE MATERIAL: Bill McCracken, 7101 W Yale Ave.#503, Denver CO 80227.....986-9863
- MEMBERSHIP: Glenn Ritter, P.O. Box 1908, Englewood CO 80150
- LOGS & SCRIPTS: Fred Hinz, P.O. Box 1908, Englewood CO 80150
- TAPE DONATIONS: Bill McCracken, 7101 W Yale Ave. #503, Denver CO 80227.....986-9863
 Herb Duniven, 4184 S Syracuse St., Denver CO 80237.....773-1142



The McGees of Wistful Vista

Who do 20,000,000 Americans settle down every Tuesday evening to listen to these two refugees from small-time vaudeville? The highly readable story of radio's most successful couple—Fibber & Molly.

By **ROBERT M. YODER**

The velvet drop concealing the skinny legs of marimba said "Marian and Jim Jordan," and the names sparkled with all the fine, phony brilliance of a dancer's exit smile. The act on stage in this small-town theater was a harmony team — the girl at the piano, the man leaning debonairly against it and singing a pleasant tenor to the girl's contralto. The keynote was a jaunty good cheer. They sang *When You're Smiling*, and a comedy number called *She Knows Her Onions*. They followed with a little piece of musical sunshine called *Bridget O'Flynn*. And as always, they closed with *Side by Side*, which said, toward the end:

*Oh, we don't have a barrel of money,
Maybe we're ragged and funny,
But we're rolling along, singing this song,
Side by side.*

Then, with a big smile for the audience, these two radiant personalities bowed off to make room for the No. 3 act on the bill. There is no oddity in anything they did, but there was great restraint in what they didn't. For at those words, "We don't have a barrel of money," they might very well have broken into wild laughter. And it would have been appropriate to have torn that marimba block from block, grab a handful of bass notes apiece and chase the audience out of the theater with this pretty kindling. For where Jim and Marian Jordan were going to stroll, side by side, was down the main stem of this Central Illinois town, and their next appearance would be in the Western Union office, and send the forlorn message: "Went broke in Lincoln, Illinois. Please wire carfare home."

That was in 1924. Just now, Jim and Marian Jordan do have a barrel of money, and while not ragged, they are most certainly funny. An estimated 20,000,000 Americans draw up chairs to hear them every Tuesday night; they are Fibber McGee and Molly, two of America's favorite comedy characters. In fact, having out-Hoopered all rival programs, last year to establish their show as the country's No. 1 favorite, they are now pretty much the king and queen of radio. They are riding high in the form of entertainment that killed vaudeville — and if it killed one vaudeville theater in Lincoln, Illinois, they could be pardoned

for greeting the news with one short, dirty laugh, side by side. That was the low point in their career.

A lot of radio stars are former vaudeville headliners—Bob Hope, Jack Benny and Fred Allen were big timers who didn't fiddle with radio until five or six years after Fibber McGee and Molly went to work before a mike. The Jordans can't bandy stories with them about long runs at the Palace. They never got within V-bomb range of that queen of the vaudeville houses. But the two who set out from Peoria so hopefully a quarter of a century ago can match vaudeville bruises with the best of them. They played the tank towns. "In the big league, you played better football, yes," they can say, "but in that league they wear shoes."

The Jordans play their roles in their natural voices now, and manage to make those characters exceedingly real. In many a small town they sound like neighbors, if the neighbors could provide as many laughs, and in many a big city apartment they sound like the folks back home. They are like their radio characters, too, in one important respect. They are not the type people, to use one of Fibber's favorite expressions, to whom things happen in those neat little epigrams of fact found in so many biographies. The type people they are, if Ziegfeld had been out front one night, he'd have been lost, to begin with, and the Jordans would have had laryngitis. Take their advent into radio. That makes a pretty impressive tale, if you don't go into the details. They first sang into a mike on a bet, and the very next day they had a sponsor. The full story is far more plausible, if less flashy. The Jordans were visiting Jim's brother, Byron, in that section of North Side Chicago called Rogers Park. The two couples were killing time listening to the radio. They heard some singing and Jordan remarked, "We could do better than that."

"Ten bucks says you can't," said his brother, meaning "Let's see you." But Jordan is not the type guy who, when he makes a bet, backs down on it if he is pretty sure he can win, and all hands drove downtown to the radio station. "We are singers," Jordan explained. Radio was pretty much off the cuff in those days, a good deal of the talent wasn't paid at all, and the manager of station WIBO may have held the general view

that one harmony team sounds very much like another harmony team. "Go ahead and sing," was his unexcited reply. So they did—*Can't You Hear Me Calling, Caroline?*—and next day they had a sponsor. But as usual in real life, if not in biographies, there was a catch in it. The sponsored show ran only once a week; the revenue was ten dollars. Maybe you heard them, but the odds are against it. They were "The O'Henry Twins," and lucky, in those days, that they didn't get paid in candy bars.

It is the same with the creation of the Fibber-and-Molly show. The birth of one of the top shows on the air was not attended with much real drama. An advertising man riding along in his car heard the Jordans on the air. Spotting great unrecognized talent, did he stop his car and sign them by telephone at a princely figure? Not exactly. He simply gave the Jordans a slim chance to get him out of a private dilemma and into a new show which nobody concerned ever intended to call Fibber McGee and Molly. Nobody took much stock in his offer, either—all concerned greeted it with yawns and rude remarks.

Or take the time Jordan met Don Quinn, the McGee's writer, who has been worth his not inconsiderable weight in gold. This was like Tinker meeting Chance or the gin meeting the vermouth in the story of the Martini, for this radio success the Jordans-plus-Quinn or perhaps the Jordans-multiplied-by Quinn. Had either of the two recognized this as a memorable occasion, he might have got off something prophetic. The facts are considerably more lifelike. Quinn was hanging around station WENR in Chicago without the slightest interest in radio. He was there for one simple practical reason. Quinn was young and foot-loose, and a radio station had music and pretty hostesses. Quinn went there to dance. "It was better than a night club, and cheaper."

Quinn might have said, "There is a great coming star," but he didn't. He remembers the occasion for an odd reason. Jordan looked phenomenally unhappy. He walked toward the studio the way most men would walk into bankruptcy court or into a flooded basement. Quinn, who was a hopeful cartoonist, stopped bantering with one of the pretty girls and looked with a cartoon-

ist's admiration on an expression so eloquent of exasperation.

If this was the trombone player, some oaf had sat on his slide. If he was an engineer, then the transmitter had just blown over. Whoever he was he was the glummiest-looking man Quinn had seen in a long time. So Quinn said "Who's the sourpuss?"

"That's Jim Jordan," somebody told him. "He's a comedian."

Unlikely as that seemed to Quinn, it may have seemed equally unlikely to Jordan, who was pretty new at comedy. He and Marian never intended to be comedians, any more than Quinn intended to be a radio writer. The Jordans started out as singers, and their first years seem to have been a determined scamper toward the wrong goal. The first mystery, of course, is why they went into show business at all. There is nothing in either heredity or environment to explain why this ambition should have hit either of them. Both came from God-fearing Central-Illinois families with no more connection with theater than with deep-sea diving. Neither had so much as a second cousin in the theater, either taking tickets or playing drums in a pit orchestra. One of Jim's sisters did marry a booking agent, who toured the orient with The Great Nicola, a celebrated magician from Monmouth, Illinois. But that was later.

Marian Jordan likes to refer to her husband as a farm boy, and, technically, he is. James Edward Jordan was born on a farm five miles west of Peoria, Illinois, in 1896. The report has got around that Jordan's family moved to town when he was five so that he only saw the fairest side of farm life, without the chores. This burns Jordan, he was twelve, he insists, and later spent three summer vacations working like a shorthanded beaver on the farm of his cousin, Sam McClugage. Jordan got to Peoria about the time that city of 105,000 was becoming nationally famous in show business—though not for the performers it produced—as a vaudeville gag, unfortunately, and as a symbol of concentrated nothing to do. "Why did you get married?" this nifty went. "Well, it was Sunday, and we were in Peoria." Jordan is a farmer now, and not incidentally either. He raises fine feeder beef on a 1000-acre ranch near Bakersfield, California. The neighbors say he is a smart rancher. Anybody with beef to sell in recent years has been smart prima facie. At any rate he has fulfilled the tradition: Farm boy works hard in the city, gets rich enough to buy a farm.

Jordan had a good voice, as a boy in his teens, and liked to use it. Somewhere in there he formed the ambition to be a professional singer. He showed it in a couple of decisions fairly rare in boys of that age—he took singing lessons while in high school, and sang in the choir at St. John's Church. In the choir he met a girl who was equally wrapped up in music. Marian Driscoll was one of the more talented students in the Academy of Our Lady. In fact, she intended to continue studying piano, voice and violin in a Peoria music school after graduation, and looked forward to a career as a music teacher. But not with much delight. She was a born performer. As children, she and her harmonica-playing brother, Danny, danced for the family and neighbors and in school entertainments. They did jigs, naturally, their grandparents hailing from county Cork, but they were uncommonly good; they knew three dozen dance routines. The family alone was a fair sized audience. There were nine boys and four girls in this lively home on the west side of Peoria. Marian loved grade-school and high-school theatricals, and what she really dreamed of was a life on the stage. The Driscolls were solidly against that. It was no life for a decent woman, theatrical women being well known to be fast. They were not much pleased when this Jordan kid began to call on their Marian either; he seemed to have the same flighty ideas.

Nobody snaps up teen-age singers, and when Jim got out of high-school he went to work in a wholesale-drug house. Marian Driscoll began giving piano lessons. A nasty difference began to yawn in their stations. Jim was making eight dollars a week. His girl was doing much better—that capitalist had twenty-three paying pupils. But Jim's current voice teacher, memorably named E. Warren K. Howe, was keeping an eye out for an opening, and after many months one turned up. A vaudeville act called A Night With the Poets needed a top tenor—top, that is, in the musical position, not necessarily in merit. A high clear tenor is what Jim had, although he was almost small enough—he is five feet six—to be a bass. He caught the train for Chicago, tried out for the job and was in vaudeville. It was the fall of 1917, Jordan was twenty-one and he was in show business. He set out for his first bookings feeling twice as professional as John Drew.

Marian sat in Peoria teaching kids to play five finger exercises and The Rustle of Spring, envying Jim his romantic life behind

the footlights. Jim meanwhile played split weeks and one-night stands, caught cold on the trains and contracted indigestion in all-night restaurants, and longed for Peoria, which the Poets would have regarded as a big time date. In May of 1918 he told the Poets to get another tenor, and he hit out for home, with the patriotic intention of enlisting to the tune of Over There and helping capture the Kaiser. Marian was exceedingly glad to see him, but the Army said it wasn't accepting volunteers; just wait around and you'll be called. Jim found himself in uniform all right, but was about the kind of the deflating development that would happen to Fibber McGee. His country wanted him, it turned out, as a mail carrier. Before getting a foothold in show business Jim was to hold down a lot of jobs, but the postman's job was in one respect the best. In every succeeding capacity, he was up against people who didn't want to buy what he handled. At least he never found anyone who would say no when he offered mail.

Marian's family had decided to like her boy friend, or at least to make the best of the situation, and in August Jim and Marian were married. ("Do you like Irish setters?" Molly McGee was asked on the radio. "Yes, indeed," said Molly. "I married one.") His country wanted him then, of course. Five days later he was on his way to spend a solo honeymoon at Camp Forest, Georgia. Six weeks later Private Jordan landed in Brest, France, with the 122nd Engineers. And when the Armistice was signed shortly thereafter, he was too sick with influenza to greet victory with anything more than a sneeze. Once on his feet, he found they could use him in the entertainment division. Jordan staged shows all over France for men waiting their turn on troopships. It was good practice, of course, but made him late getting home; he got back to Peoria in mid-summer 1919.

Marian had resumed her piano teaching, but Jim had to find a job. He became a machinist's helper, but didn't show much talent at it, although he is handy with tools. One of the first luxuries he allowed himself when he hit the big time in radio was to fit out a good workshop with excellent tools. "He gets as wild-eyed at the smell of fresh sawdust," a friend remarked, "as most men get when they whiff good bourbon." It may be that that machinist's job still rankles; he wasn't fired, but thinks he quit just in time. He abandoned another career even more suddenly. Working in the attic of a flimsy

one-story house, trying to be a carpenter, he fell right through the living-room ceiling. As if that weren't bad enough, he broke his fall by landing on his boss.

The jaunty, cocksure Fibber of Tuesday night's radio sounds as if he would make an excellent salesman. But when Jordan needed it, his luck was out. Nobody wanted washing machines, and he tried vacuum cleaners. Good commissions were to be had there, too, but nobody wanted a vacuum cleaner. Jordan got a lot of exercise lugging the sample around, he cleaned a lot of rugs and he met a lot of people, but he couldn't make any money. Finally he went to work as a day laborer. Obviously he could do better than that, and did; he landed a job as an insurance salesman. He had better luck selling policies. In 1920 he and Marian bought a house. They had the first of their children, their daughter Kathryn; they had the traditional little cottage with the big mortgage—their house was only four rooms—and they might have stayed in Peoria for life. In time, it might have meant an insurance agency for Jim, who, in spite of the tough time he had getting started, is regarded as a canny businessman, and a membership in the Rotary club, and maybe a shot at an office in the Chamber of Commerce. He can boast with the best of them, buster. Had they settled in this familiar groove, they would have escaped a lot of bumps, but they would also have missed a lot of fun.

But Jordan seems to have regarded all other jobs as simply a way of treading water until he could get into the bright world of entertainment. He sang in a quartet which became a pretty regular feature of Peoria entertainment—for luncheon clubs, churches and lodges—the Kiwanians made them honorary members. When the other tenor, Paul Mehlenbeck, got too busy with his dance orchestra, the three other appeared as a trio, often hired for political rallies. Jordan avoids ribbing by forgetting to make any point of a talent Mehlenbeck remembers. It appears that Jordan at one stage was practicing to give the entertainment world one more Swiss bell ringer. Jim and Marian also appeared as a harmony team in women's clubs and church entertainments, and at one of these dates they met the advance man for a theatrical company. He told them they ought to put their show on the road. Those were the most enticing words in the language to a couple of natural-born show

people full of the yen to get out and around, to wow them in Williamsport and kill them in Kenosha. There was one little obstacle no bigger than Pikes Peak. They were not taking a job; they were trying to make one. Only time would tell how they fared on the question of income. But to start with, for scenery, traveling money and costumes, they would need a neat \$1000. That is the kind of gambling that would scare Nick the Greek. The Jordans hesitated, like sensible people, then leaped, like show people. They sold their car for \$125. They borrowed \$500 from an aunt. For the rest, they threw in the equity in their beloved home. If they didn't win, they would be stony, park bench broke.

Out they went for sixteen weeks in the theaters, opera houses and musty lodge halls of the tank towns. There probably no adolescence more painful than the adolescence of a theatrical team, but this pair grew up fast. Better still, their act went over. When their first bookings were over they went back to Peoria, retrieved their daughter, Kathryn, who had been living with Jim's folks, and didn't have much trouble booking another long tour. They played this as long as they could, stopping only two months before their second child, a son, was born. Marian went back to Peoria—this was the summer of 1923—and Jim set out to get vaudeville bookings for himself, doing a single. That is tough. A singing sword swallower might have got bookings, or a man who could sing under water, but plain singing singers were a dime a dozen. Jim spent six months playing club dates or singing in hole-in-the-wall cafes. What they paid wouldn't pay room rent. It was a miserable interlude; the untouchables of India don't encounter more humiliation than an unwanted performer. Clearly, the Jordans had to go out as a team.

So the two boarded the train again, but this time luck had its foot all set to trip them. The tour was jinxed from the start. They were playing the small time and that took them to some of the darndest theaters in the United States in a rugged round of split weeks and sleeper jumps, cheap hotels, bad food, high expenses and low pay. The worst theater they played had dressing rooms below stage, so low nobody but midgets could stand upright. "You had to climb in and out on a ladder," as Marian remembers it. "Since I had eight brothers who had been coal miners, I didn't mind so much. But Jim, being a farm boy, was used to plenty of room, and he was rather ill at

ease." That business about her brothers isn't blarney, incidentally. Eight of her nine brothers did work in coal mines at least temporarily, following in the footsteps of their father. Molly is the youngest of the six children still living.

Now that bright dialogue expertly delivered is Fibber and Molly's specialty, and they operate two of the best-known voices in this gabby age, it is interesting to note that their vaudeville act was wonderful practice of the wrong thing. Apparently they no more suspected they had comedy talent than they suspected they could read minds or talk to birds. Their act was solid music.

Then came Lincoln, Illinois, which wasn't exactly the iceberg that sank them, but simply the spot where they ran out of financial gas. Pollyanna herself, with a load on, would have had a tough time finding it, but there was one speck of good luck in this welter of woe. They had gone broke close to home. Peoria, to which they must return as failures, was only fifty miles away. Back they went, and Jim's next engagement was selling yard goods and towels, black thread and cottage curtains in a dry-goods store. He could have put the pay in his eye, and might have been excused for thinking that Luck was fiddling with the Jordans like a Yo-yo, snapping them back to a humdrum and skimpy life every time they tried for something brighter. The worst job he had was a heartbreaker; with two small children of his own, he found a job in the toy department of a department store, and was so broke he couldn't take home even the smallest playthings he knew would delight them. But he and Molly made extra money singing around Peoria, and in 1925 got an engagement in Kewanee, Illinois, which paid fifty dollars. That was all the resilient Jordan needed. He left the pillow-case-and-sheet business to stay-at-homes, caught the Alton for what the sports called Old Chi, and found Egbert Van Alstyne in need of a singer.

This was a break. Working for Van Alstyne was steady work. That famous song writer could put on a program of his own music. Van Alstyne's credits include such hits as Memories, and Drifting and Dreaming. Untold thousands are indebted to Van Alstyne and Harry Williams for that barber-shop classic, In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree, and its authors nailed down their claim to immortality.

Marian wasn't in on this venture; she stayed in Peoria with the children. But she

was in Chicago for the weekend of the bet that put them on the air. Five months later that radio job ran out, leaving the Jordans badly in the hole. You can get that way trying to maintain a home on ten dollars a week, but what might seem like five months of disaster to nonprofessionals was not very nerve-racking to a young couple tempered in vaudeville. When they had to, they went back to vaudeville to get well financially. But they liked radio, and as soon as they got the bills paid off they got back on the air again. This time they were doing three shows a week, for sixty dollars, and they were getting an occasional odd job involving acting. Principally they were on Station WENR, inevitably called "wiener."

Meanwhile, the writer who was going to develop such comedy talent on their behalf would have been surprised to hear about it. Don Quinn had other plans. He intended to become a rich commercial artist and maybe a syndicated cartoonist. Quinn had come to Chicago as something of a foundling, left on the city's doorstep. His father organized chambers of commerce, and the family lived in a succession of Midwestern cities and towns. They were living in St. Louis, Michigan, when Don quit high school and upset his parents by enlisting in the Navy, padding his age by a year. That was in July of 1918, and by the time he finished training, the war was all but over. Just the same, he felt uncomfortable when he went back to school. He was too old for those naive little kids who hadn't seen the world as he had—the world being the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and the Chicago Loop. By now the family lived in Grand Rapids, a city abustle with energetic people and ambitious ventures. There was one quiescent area, the Quinn boy. He hung around home doing little or nothing. This must have been a sore trial to an apostle of progress and boosterism, and when Don was twenty-two, the elder Quinn decided a small fire would have to be built under him. Don had entertained the vague ambition of becoming a commercial artist. His father took him to Chicago, gave him twenty dollars, shook hands and said, "You're on your own."

Grand Rapids' loss was a little sore at being kicked out of the nest so brusquely—although he recognizes it now as a kindly idea—but there was nothing to do but get a job. He knew nothing about commercial art, but he was willing to earn while learning. To every possible employer in the

classified phone book he sent a post card which could be checked "Not Interested" or "Come in." The number of "Come ins" still makes Quinn proud of his enterprise. Meanwhile, however, he found a job through a classified ad. A washing-machine company took him on as a "stooge errand boy," and sent him to art school. In time he moved to an art agency, where he became "a pretty good man at lettering and an amateurish cartoonist." In the flush days of the 1920's, that seemed time to strike out on his own. Associated Illustrators, the new agency was called. That meant "Quinn and two other hungry hopefuls" . . . Radio? "Just a funny noise from Pittsburgh," to Quinn.

The tonic Chicago air was full of big plans and bigger talk. Everybody was riding high, or felt like it, after three gin bucks made with Al Capone's bootleg alky. Quinn kept the fire full of irons. A comic-strip idea had an editor's encouraging nod. Maybe Quinn would strike funny-paper gold with another Dick Tracy or Orphan Annie. Why, they said some of those syndicated Chicago Tribune cartoonists lived like millionaire sportsmen. Quinn was also sending cartoons to the comic magazines. They seemed to regard him as handier with a comic idea than with a pencil. They sent the drawings back, but bought the gags.

Then the art business fell to pieces as suddenly as a badly prepared painting sometimes falls off the canvas. The depression was on, and nobody wanted Associated Illustrators to draw so much as the portrait of a bolt for a hardware catalogue. The comic strip was in good shape, but newspapers weren't buying. There came a day in the dismal '30's when the Grand Rapids *boulevardier* had one flimsy dollar. Across from his Rush Street apartment was a restaurant. Quinn liked to watch Capone's night force unload beer there—"better than any professional-football backfield." Now Quinn gave the proprietor a friendly tip. A joint like this, he said, needed a touch of distinction. It was, after all, in competition with a reputed 10,000 other speak-easies in Chicago. Perhaps some special blotters to give the customers. Quinn would design them himself, for a nominal fifty dollars. The proprietor bought the idea, to Quinn's surprise. Apparently Quinn could weather the crash if only he could think of ideas preposterous enough. Maybe a booklet entitled *Eviction Can be Fun*. Maybe some merry cartoons for corporations to send out in lieu of dividends . . .

But he got a call from his radio station acquaintances, the Jordans.

Five days a week Jim and Marian Jordan gave a show called Smackout. Jordan play a small-town grocer who invariably was out of whatever the customer needed, but always came up with a tall story. About the woodpeckers he trained to tap Morse code, maybe, or the square tomatoes he grew for bacon-and-tomato sandwiches, or the time he fanned so many batters that the outfielders installed deck chairs and the second baseman took up knitting. Multiple roles are disfavored now, lest they reduce acting jobs. In this show, however, the Jordans did five or six voices apiece. One of Marian's was the nose-y little neighbor girl, Teeny, whose "Whatcha doin', mister, whatcha doin' huh?" is still in the show.

Smackout was on the network, but as a wallflower without a sponsor. An overburdened studio writer ground out the stories amid a dozen other chores. With more distinctive copy, the Jordans thought they might get somewhere. Quinn had sometimes contributed gags, on random meetings in the station, out of friendship and the fact that "I was ham enough to like to hear them on the air." Now he took over writing Smackout, and a fine offhand operation it was. In the clutches, the Jordans could always sing. If Quinn had a hang-over or was dry of ideas, the Jordans could cue four songs into the show. That made a great saving in bright dialogue and spared the pulsing brain. Many a morning the Jordans stopped by Quinn's apartment after breakfast, picked up a script just pulled from the typewriter, gave it a quick study on the way to the station and went smoothly on the air with no further pother.

There was nothing newly minted in the idea of telling whoppers, nor was the copy anything likely to dethrone George Bernard Shaw. No one recalls it as one of radio's bright spot. When they had something good, however, they drew "quality mail"—mail from good, smart listeners. That suggested that this same combination had the makings of a better show. But times were tough and sponsors scarce. The break came in 1934. John J. Lewis, an advertising man, heard Smackout as he drove to work one morning. Lewis had a problem. S. C. Johnson and Son, Inc., the Racine, Wisconsin, wax-makers, had Tony Wons on the air—the reader of inspirational pieces, whose dreamy platitudes soothed many and drove others, including the late Ring Lardner, into helpless fury. The

advertising man had been thinking that something totally different might be based on the tall stories told by the celebrated Burlington, Iowa, Lion's Club. One day they had the president of the Liar's Club on the air with Tony. Although an astonishing mixture, it precipitated nothing.

But on hearing Smackout, Louis called for a sample show using the Jordans, telling Burlington-type whoppers. "Everybody was ordering auditions at the drop of a hat," says Quinn. "It was cheaper than taking a sponsor out to dinner, and the talent was so hungry everybody was glad to do it."

This invitation sounded like the same old malarkey, and Quinn wasted no energy at all on the sample he submitted. But instead of the expected "Thanks for your trouble, sorry nothing came of it," back came word that the new show was a sale. Only on one point had Quinn bestirred himself. Tired of shows called Betty and Bob, or Sally and Jim, he wanted "a new rhythm." For that reason he named the characters "Fibber McGee and Molly." The advertising agency had no idea of letting it go at that. They intended to call the show "Free Air," for the story would concern a couple of tourists crossing the continent. Obviously a good title, too, and only at the last minute did anyone discover why it sounded familiar—Sinclair Lewis had used it for a Saturday Evening Post story with generally the same theme. Could the title be bought? Yes, came the answer, for \$50,000. Sadly, they fell back on Fibber McGee and Molly, under which the show has prospered just as well.

To get the No. 1 Hooperating took thirteen years, but long before that the show was a success. It was good business, that is, producing a high listening score per dollar of cost. One of the most remarkable factors in its success has been a lucky break in sponsors. Instead of getting the ax if they didn't score in the first thirteen weeks, the Jordans hit a sponsor willing to hire relative unknowns and let them grow, if they could, with a minimum of interference. If the McGees have stuck to one sponsor all these years, a laissez-faire attitude almost phenomenal in radio helps explain it.

The hit show that goes on the air so smoothly these Tuesday nights is entertainment far different from the two-cylinder job that took the air in April of 1935. Today's Fibber and Molly—well-defined three-dimensional characters—make their early counterparts as thin as cartoon

figures. The whoppers are mercifully gone, so far gone that Fibber's name is now totally inept. It is now what Quinn and the Jordans worked hard to achieve—comedy of character. Not domestic comedy, exactly, which usually involves children. Not small-town comedy, either, although Wistful Vista is not a big city. Principally, it is life with Fibber, and Fibber has become pretty much the ordinary tough-minded, wise-crack-loving, average citizen—who would punch your nose for calling him average. Fibber is a hopeful and slightly overconfident guy who will tackle anything, with a brisk propensity for stepping on his own necktie. But he is nobody's fool, except his own. Calling on the McGees at their castle at 79 Wistful Vista is a procession of friends who can help make the weekly episode reflect whatever is itching the country at the moment. At times the show is as timely as the evening newspaper; at other times it may simply concern Fibber's attempt to do something around the house that might better be left to experts. It is frankly a radio show and makes humorous capital of the fact. Fibber and Molly delighted listeners one night this year by speaking of The Product in hushed reverence and vocal capitals, as the Aga Khan must wish his subjects spoke of him. There is a lot of shrewd observation in both the writing and the playing. Quinn and the Jordans all have a sharp ear for American speech and a sharp eye for American manners, and all concerned like their humor dry, which, after all, is the great American flavor. It will surprise no fans of the ill-fated Vic & Sade, which had such fine small-town color, that Paul Rhymer's serial was one of Quinn's favorites too.

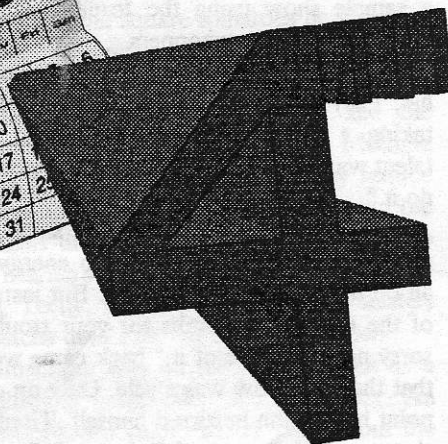
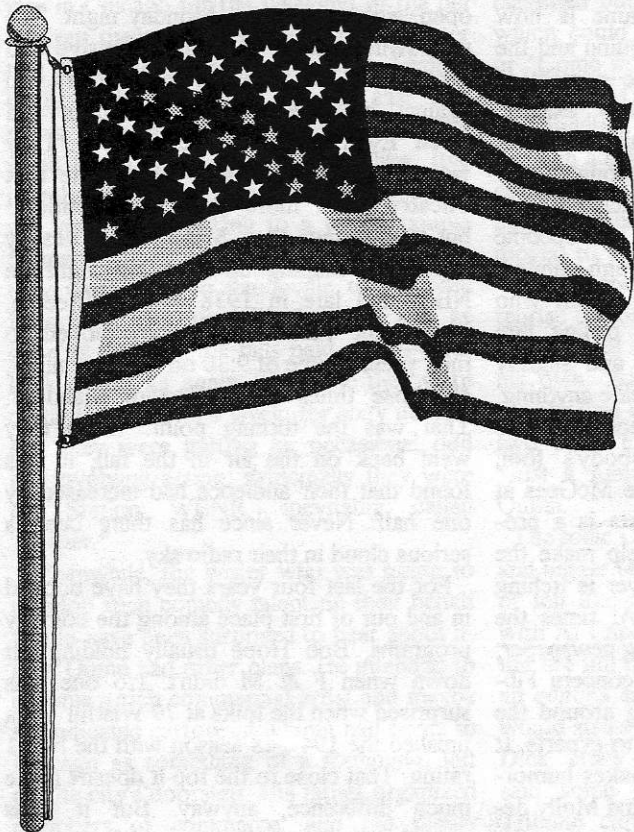
What happened to put the show over was both simple and difficult—all hands simply got steadily better at their work. Quinn developed unsuspected talent at writing radio comedy—he is one of the few who could be called a radio humorist rather than a gag man. The Jordans developed unsuspected skill as comedians—no one on the air surpasses them in delivery or timing, and they are by now as much at home in their roles as a hamburger in a bun. It was a long pull to the top, but that apparently builds a solid following. Air time, of course, has played its usual important part. At first, in April of 1935, the show went on the basic Blue network at 10 p.m. on Tuesday night. The sponsor added more stations, and moved the show to 10 p.m. on Monday.

In the fall of 1935 a better spot was open—eight o'clock on Monday night. The next switch was to the more extensive Red network. This put the newcomers up against big-time competition—Burns and Allen. Even so, they made headway. They were next "across from" the durable Lux Theater—some more tough competition—but their ratings rose. Meanwhile, Tuesday night was shaping up as a big night on NBC, and late in 1938—March fifteenth, late in the radio season—they moved to their present time of 9:30 on Tuesday night, all those times being Eastern Standard. That was the turning point. When they went back on the air in the fall, it was found that their audience had increased by one half. Never since has there been a serious cloud in their radio sky.

For the last four years they have bobbed in and out of first place among the comedy programs, Bob Hope usually holding it down when F & M didn't. No one was surprised when the folks at 79 Wistful Vista finished the 1947-48 season with the No. 1 rating. That close to the top it doesn't make much difference, anyway. But it does provide a happy ending, especially as their popularity seems likely not to end. And the chances are that more people listen to them every Tuesday night in Lincoln, Illinois, than came to see them when they really needed applause.

They are naturally proud of their box-office appeal; and their gilt edge standing in the trade is flattering; radio trade journals speak of F. & M. the way brokers speak of Big Steel or the way menus refer to blue point oysters. The ham in every actor must delight in being called Virginia. Gratifying honors go with their success; they were called back to their native Midwest in the spring of 1948, for instance, to receive the praise of a Catholic college for the quality of their entertainment. That must have been pleasant, even though one of their own lines did arise to bite them. One of the reverent fathers remarked that the occasion was doubly pleasant because it was Molly's thirty-ninth birthday. Molly's brother, Tom Driscoll, of Peoria, was among the banquet guests. And it was undoubtedly Tom who piped up with a Fibber-and-Molly crack at this decorous moment. "That ain't the way I heard it," he said.

Saturday Evening Post, April 9, 1949



RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO, INC.
 (A non-profit organization)
 POST OFFICE BOX 1908
 ENGLEWOOD, CO. 80150

FIRST-CLASS MAIL

FIRST-CLASS MAIL
U S POSTAGE
PAID
DENVER CO
 Permit No.
 2929

09/01/1994
~~TOM BROWN~~
~~102 S KATHLEEN DR~~
~~FORNIE WA~~
~~99212~~

