

RETURN WITH US NOW...

The Radio Historical
Association of Colorado, Inc.



Volume 20, Number 2

September, 1994



Fibber McGee & Molly



BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING: There will be **NO** board meeting in **September, 1994.**

ALL MEMBERS are welcome and invited to attend and participate at the Board of Directors Meeting. The next Board meeting will be October 6, 1994 at the Dick King home, 900 W Quincy Ave, Englewood,



HERB ELLIS, Actor, Director, Producer, Writer

all during the Golden Age of Radio will be our guest speaker at 7:30 p.m., September 15th, at The Church of The Master, 17th Ave. & Filbert Court, Denver.

Come and share the experience, wisdom and good humor of this kind, intelligent and friendly man.



**September is the month to vote for 1995 R.H.A.C. Officers.
Come to the meeting and VOTE ! Participate ! Enjoy !**

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, 1999 Broadway; Lowery Suite, Denver CO 80202.....	296-1456
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

From the

King's Roost

If the end of summer is here, then why is it so darned hot?

Our RHAC picnic was a smashing success and it was well attended and the weather was "just right". We had members from all over the area, including a couple from Greeley.

One of the best things about having the RHAC come to our house for the picnic is the way all of the ladies pitch in and leave the place spick and span. They do the same thing when we have a dinner and we just want to thank them all.

We haven't had much time to get out into the park area for riding lately. So, we can't bring you up to date on the wildlife in the South Platte river valley, but we feel sure they are also looking for rain. We just hope we don't have early snow . . . we remember snow just after labor day, in fact it was on the same weekend.

(Editorial aside: Today, Aug. 31, it did snow in Colorado above 11,000. That means only on the very tallest mountains. We city folk don't really count the snow until it falls in the city.)

We are building a new riding arena south of Denver and we

want the arena closed in before the snow flies. And we want our horses moved into their new home, with lots of fences and gates and to let them play in clean areas. We are much too old to begin a project of this sort but we feel that we might as well enjoy the fruits of our years of labor. We are learning a lot about water and water rights. And the main thing we have learned is that everything costs a lot of money. We are sure meeting a lot of great people that are all looking for someone else to help them. Life doesn't work that way; we must learn to help ourselves.

It does appear that we will have to bypass the Newark convention and all of their great panels and interviews of the people that worked in radio and gave us the enjoyment that we have when we listen to the programs in our library.

We hope to have things in order and be able to catch the **SPERDVAC convention** in November.

The **Newark convention** will be October 20th and if you are interested we suggest you contact Jay Hickerson, the man that wears many hats, at (203) 248-2887. We certainly hope that some of our members will bring us up to date about the Newark convention when you return.

We missed the **Radio Enthusiasts of Puget Sound convention** in Seattle in June

but several RHAC members from the Denver area were able to go and came back with glowing reviews of the activities.

We received a note from REPS saying that REPS member Gary Polich is retiring from the position he has had with REPS. Gary is also an RHAC member.

We are being favored by an old time radio actor of great note for our September 15th meeting. **Herb Ellis** will be in Denver and will address our group at 7:30 p.m. at The Church of the Master. We hope that all of you will have a chance to meet this very interesting man and enjoy having him share a tiny bit of his life in radio. For those of you who do not have the opportunity to attend a convention, this will be your chance to enjoy some of the same high-caliber talent.

Come and give **Herb Ellis** a hearty Denver welcome.

Please help!

An R.H.A.C. member has asked our assistance in locating **Cory Harker**, a former RHAC member. If any of you out there know where he is now, please let us know - just drop a line to our P. O. Box or phone (303)761-4139.

Thank you!

The McGees of Wistful Vista

The show will go on the air
in a burst of laughter, thanks
to a simple piece of business.

By Robert M. Yoder

Conclusion

Harlow Wilcox, the announcer, first tried show business when Chautauqua was in its glory, and is a great comfort to the other members of this staff. They take a pretty detached and professional view of comedy, and can take it or leave it alone. But Wilcox is a wonderful audience. A funny line wows him, and if given one himself, he has to hold his sides to get through it without laughing. Listeners hear more advertising on the Fibber & Molly show than on most because Quinn invented the unspoken commercial. Long ago he wrote Wilcox into the script as an undisguised salesman. From the minute Wilcox appears, listeners know this friend of the McGees will strain all logic to get wax into the conversation. Thus they undergo the advertising treatment, but have to listen to very little outright blurb. Fibber is always impatient too. "What's the matter, chum?" Wilcox asked one night. "Are you dissatisfied with our product?" They were aiming a poke at a current advertising phenomenon.

"Frankly, I am," said Fibber rudely. "It doesn't spell anything backwards."

You have here some of radio's most polished performers, and tossing a script to this nimble crew is like tossing out a pair of dice in a squad tent. At this point, about all the producer has to worry about is some little detail that nobody foresaw. If there is one, he'll hear about it from listeners. "I just listened to your program," one man wrote Fibber, "and would like to know how your car happened to be in front of the tailor shop, inasmuch as you walked from home to the shop. I missed your last broadcast and perhaps you left it there that night. Please let me know."

One thing that keeps this cast happy is the Jordans' willingness—it amounts to insistence—on sharing credit. You can't call anybody on their show a stooge—"our recollection of a stooge is a fellow who came up on the stage in vaudeville and was made to appear a slob." The Jordans insist that "everyone on our show is important," and it isn't just the phony smile by which the star shows his democracy. They mean it. This is the alma mater of a good many performers who now are stars in their own right. The Great Gildersleeve, Harold Peary, first rose to comedy prominence as the McGee's neighbor. Bulah, played by the late Marlin Hurt, was at first the McGee's maid. Spike Jones played drums here before he got rich playing dishpans and auto horns. One of their singing alumni also is doing well on his own—Perry Como.

The Jordans naturally would have a quartet; Jim broke into pro and semi-pro entertainment as the top tenor in a Peoria, Illinois, quartet which is remembered as a pretty skillful outfit. For the radio they found one much to their liking in The King's Men—Grafton Lynn, Jon Dodson, Rad Roberson and Ken Darby. They were college students in San Francisco, and formed this foursome when there wasn't much to sing about, in the dismal depression days of 1929. They got on the air in 1931, and Paul Whiteman signed them three years later. Now along with radio appearances, they work in the movies, making, among other things, community-singing shorts.

The show will go on the air in a burst of laughter, thanks to a simple piece of business. Exactly seven seconds before air time—6:30 in California, 9:30 in the East—Pittman points at Bill Thompson

the accusing finger that is radio's go signal. Thompson hands Fibber a glass of water. Fibber takes a hinge at the clock, gulps the water, and then, in apparent great nervousness, tosses it over his shoulder. Instead of breaking, it bounces—it's plastic. And on the roar from the audience, they take the air. "Starring Fibber McGee and Molly!" Wilcox cries, and from Twentynine Palms, California, to Mooselookme-guntie, Maine, listeners sit back, prepared to enjoy themselves.

"Themselves" is what they will enjoy, for if the show is at its best it will find its comedy very close to the realities of everyday American life. They don't go in for fantastic comedy pitches. "We try to keep our people people," says Quinn, and a story is good for their purposes only if "it could possibly happen." They know they are right if the story will make listeners say, "You remember when that happened to Uncle Henry, the darned fool?" The mandolin show, one of their two or three most popular, had the simple framework Quinn likes. Fibber found his old mandolin; it fell out of the closet again. Well, it brings back fond memories of how he used to take Molly canoeing on the Illinois River and serenade her. As he recalls it, he was a flash on the mandolin. Molly seems to recall that he took up the mandolin more to get out of paddling than in response to popular demand. Their young friend, Alice, whom Fibber volunteered to dazzle, didn't know his one and only tune.

"What's Pretty Redwing from?" she asked.

Said Molly, "It's strictly from 1910, Peoria and hunger."

Fibber played the same selection for everyone who dropped in, but each

borrowed the mandolin, and the cads could play better than he could. Well, there's always one person who won't try to show him up as a chump—the loyal Molly. No, say Molly, she never did play much, and then only simple pieces, like this. So she, too, borrows the mandolin and makes Fibber look like a bum.

Another of their best-liked shows had Fibber yielding to a familiar post-war temptation. He'd stopped in an Army-surplus store to buy something as sensible as a tack hammer and came home with a big bargain, a sixteen-man life raft. Self-inflating it was and, sure enough, it filled the living room like a cow in a coupe'. All of Fibber's science couldn't make the monster deflate, but Molly solved it. She poked it one with a butcher knife.

In radio they keep anxious books on laughter and would measure the faintest grin if anyone knew how. The yak, or belly laugh, has always been the touchdown. Quinn and the Jordans think listeners prefer "a chuckle show." The chore they face equably each week is, of course, far more intricate than the show will sound—they will devise a story putting five to eight characters on stage and requiring sixty to 100 pretty funny ideas. "A continuous ripple of amusement" is what they are after. At times, they have clocked ninety laughs in the half hour, which seemed to indicate they were keeping listeners in pretty steady good humor.

To get the "Ripple of amusement," Quinn relies on lightly struck but telling notes, which are a specialty of the house. Repairing Doc Gamble's car—and switching car batteries in Fibber's favor—McGee was using tools borrowed from the cautious weatherman who appeared in the 1947 lineup, Foggy Williams. Foggy wanted them back because they were tools with a sentimental value—his "birthday hammer," his "anniversary pliers." That rang true to many a handy man around the house. Quinn also has a sure eye for the plausible but ridiculous

postures that people get into. Thus Fibber, trying to be a busy executive, was caught making paper airplanes because Molly said he couldn't do it after Fibber said he didn't have time for that sort of nonsense.

The McGees have always lived at 79 Wistful Vista, although that imaginary address of a hypothetical couple probably is better known than the address of the White House—1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. At first they were tourists, because the principle product advertised was car wax. When traveling wore thin, Quinn housed them with beautiful ease. They stopped in Wistful Vista, where a house was being raffled off. They won and have been there ever since. A second address ought to be equally famous. That is 14th and Oak. Whether Fibber is getting a haircut, negotiating a bank loan or pricing a neat power-driven crumb scraper at the Bon Ton Department Store, it is always 14th and Oak. Wistful Vista would have to have the country's most vertical business district to house all the enterprises spotted at this corner. But nobody seems to notice, and Quinn and Producer Frank Pittman have filed it sadly under confidential humor.

It would take skyscrapers, and you wouldn't find skyscrapers in Wistful Vista, which is pretty clearly a small town, although with remarkably flexible borders. Listeners are never told just how big it is, and those who write in to ask are given the soft answer that turns away real information. The mayor drops in on the McGees, which isn't a regular thing in New York or Chicago, and McGee gossips with the telephone operator—"How's every little thing, Myrt?" That is small-town color, but anything that might give the town a more specific size is shunned as assiduously as a real city might boast of it. That way, no listener's own picture of the town can be wrong. But there's no doubt what flag they hang out, if they can find it, on the fourth of what month. Thanks to some excellent

observation, this is as American as the ice-cream soda you don't want, but eat because you're supposed to want to.

In Fibber's overstuffed closet, for example, there must be a mah-jongg set, Molly's old Empress Eugénie hat and maybe Fibber's old capping machine from the home-brew days. There would also be a three-legged bridge table, some gilded pussy-willows, a couple of Rosie Bonheur horse pictures, the Christmas tree ornaments that have been missing since 1940, Fibber's old plus-four golf knickers and the Spanish shawl they used to keep on the phone. And any day now, they intend to straighten that closet out.

Fibber and Molly keep getting praise from the church groups for the purity of their entertainment. They journeyed back to the Middle West in April of last year to receive honorary L.L.D.'s at the hands of the reverend Walter Pax, of St. Joseph's College, in Collegenille, Indiana, for "their truly Christian philosophy" and the general "acceptability" of their comedy. They arrived with the roar of police motorcycles, and the college band played Pretty Redwing. There is never a blue line in their script, although the most noticeable thing about the purity is that it isn't noticeable; the two manage to keep their show clean without sounding like prigs, which they aren't, on stage or off. It pleases churchmen that they present such a picture of devoted home life. Fibber never so much as mentions another female, although there isn't much reason why he should: Molly is about the most amiable wife this side of never-never land. If Fibber hopes to mystify, she's mystified; if he hopes to impress, she's impressed, suppressing a giggle. He could launch a wild venture to grow self-peeling bananas or take the vacuum cleaner apart to invent a magnetic leaf rake and he'd never hear a word of criticism from this noble woman. "You're a good kid," he tells her generously, and she certainly is. If Molly's velvet

disposition could set a style, Quinn would be the American husband's best friend.

It's excellent propaganda, anyway, at which Quinn is a master. During the war it struck him that housewives must be pretty sick of hearing some movie queen with seven servants urge the public to save bacon drippings, while a radio star with four cars urged motorists to walk. Wartime sacrifices were petty, but they were also annoying. You were supposed to feel as exalted about saving your tires as Betsy Ross about stitching the first flag, and that wouldn't work. Quinn invented the most refreshing propaganda on the air. Fibber didn't preach. He grouched. He was the man holding his car to thirty-five, only to have the trunk stove in by fast drivers. He was the man who hated to be the only chump not eating black-market meat. Fibber always saw the light, of course, but his candid griping doubtless expressed what thousands hesitated to say. Quinn built whole shows around these themes and bested his own scores with them. He kept on even after the night he got home from a show on gasoline rationing to find his own application for extra gas—so he could work free for the Office of War Information—had been rejected. In one of these shows Quinn kidded the big rush to stock up, simply because something or other was about to be rationed. An inside tip ran through Wistful Vista. Crafty souls hurried out to beat the dead line without giving it a second thought. The tip was "They're freezing trusses at midnight."

Every now and then this comedy show essays an outright piece of public service. The lock-your-car campaign was a successful venture of this sort. William N. Connolly, Johnson's advertising manager in Racine fell to talking to a reform-school superintendent about young car thieves. The superintendent was getting more and more boys for this offense, and a shocking percentage of the car thieves was under

eighteen. One thing the superintendent said impressed Connolly—most of the cars were easy to steal because the owners left the keys in them. Perhaps, said Connolly, pending more profound decisions on juvenile delinquency, it might be intelligent to remove the keys. This amoral and sentimental approach delighted Quinn who based a show on the idea. The idea of using a nickel's worth of simple mechanics to combat a grave problem won wide applause.

The McGees now bask in almost unqualified approval, but there is an occasional beef, just to keep things interesting. Doc Gamble remarked that as an Army Surgeon he learned to stand "with my chest out, my stomach and my mind closed." Those few offi-

Fibber is a natural-born helper-outer.

cers who would be stuffy enough to complain all happened to be listening in, and protested. Other serious souls get disturbed over the possibility that Fibber may be setting an example of happy indolence because he doesn't have a job. He doesn't, of course; he is neither clerk, factory hand, salesman, millwright nor part-time petunia planter. This is because to give him a specific vocation would restrict the actor. Inquirers are told that the imaginative Fibber is a natural-born helper-outer who will step in when needed. This seems to satisfy them. The real Fibber, of course, works with great regularity and much profit. When not panning that radio gold or raising feeders on his ranch, he has other ventures, including one he might describe in one of his alliterative anecdotes: he is the busy big shot of a bustling bottle business.

No one with a share of this radio gold-strike, for which the sponsor probably lays out \$14,000 a week, seizes the opportunity to live high,

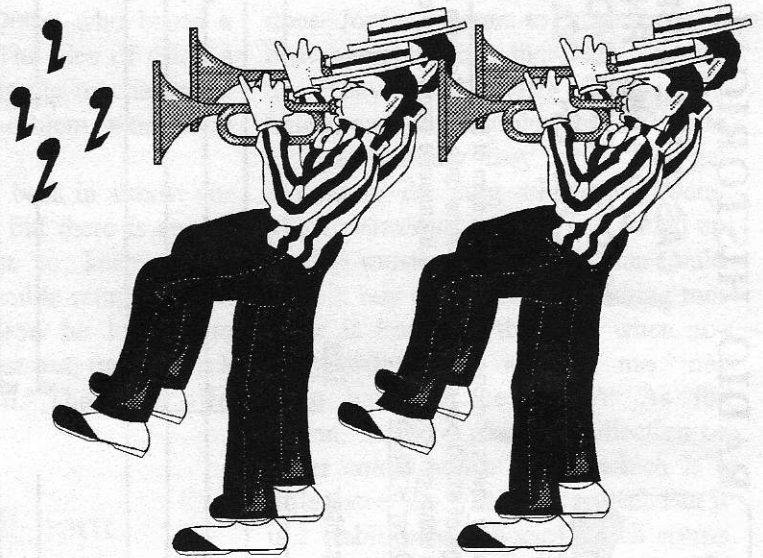
wide and handsome. The Jordans, who have known hard times, might dwell in one of those dazzling white palaces on which tourists in Beverly Hills get sunburned eyes. They don't; they live in an old five-room ranch house which they have expanded, with a certain caution, to seven. While the work was being done—Jordan seems to have been a little overconfident, like Fibber, about this—They lived partly in the old house, partly in a trailer parked beside it. Last summer they never did get around to deciding which of several plushy vacations to take, and ended up staying mostly at home. Jordan could at least buy a gold-plated washing machine in honor of the days when nobody would buy washing machines from him, but he doesn't. As for Quinn; he has a plane, a collection of water colors and a stable, which is a little more like what is expected. But it is a stable of one horse, which seems to reflect the Grand Rapids conservative.

When in 1943, the show hit the highest Crossley ever touched by a commercial program, it crowned many years of hard work. The Jordans have been in show business thirty years, from Jim's first job as a singer—when their show won last year's top comedy rating. Probably only salmon, who will battle waterfalls and flop laboriously up long fish ladders in the strange journey top spawning grounds understood the obsession that drives show people. Ambition must induce partial anesthesia, for entertainers on the way up have to put up with food, hotels and trains that would kill a Chinese irregular. Success ought to be correspondingly pleasant, after that. But the Jordans don't let it throw them. They seem to keep a famous old vaudeville line in mind, like a sampler on the wall. Not a line audiences heard, but one famous in the dressing rooms back stage. It is a great anecdote for vanity: "Don't send out your laundry."

Saturday Evening Post, April 16, 1949

HERB ELLIS

Actor, Director, Producer, Writer
of the Golden days of Radio
Will be our guest speaker
7:30 p.m., September 15 , 1994,
at the Church of the Master
17th Avenue and Filbert Court
(Between Forest & Fairfax Sts)



RADIOHISTORICAL 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

~~TIM BROWN~~
~~17th Avenue DR~~
~~SPokane WA~~

~~99212~~