



# RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO



Volume 27, Number 3

March, 2002

## FRED ALLEN THE MAN BEHIND THE HUMOR

by Dr. Charles Beckett © 2002

"Mr. Allen?" Who can forget Portland Hoffa's distinctive voice greeting her partner (and husband) at the beginning of each Fred Allen radio show. Regular listeners knew that they soon would be treated to a variety of comical characters. There was Mrs. Nussbaum, a happy, confused Jewish lady, famous for her malapropisms; Senator Claghorn, a boisterous Southern politician; Titus Moody, a suspicious old New Englander; Falstaff Openshaw, the eternal poet; and the pessimistic Ajax Cassidy, whose famous line was "I'm not long for this world." During Allen's weekly walk down Allen's Alley, a knock at each of the Alley's doors was sure to result in a variety of answers to the "question of the day" from each of the Alley's colorful residents.

Fred Allen has been referred to as "the comedian's comedian." The well known novelist Herman Wouk, once a writer for Allen's radio show, described him as "a classic humorist, one of those rare spirits who see the world as it is and who laughs in order not to weep." He was different from most of

the comedians of his day. He was intellectual, eccentric, cantankerous, and pessimistic. He once rescued a young boy from being hit by a truck. After pulling the boy out of harms way, he admonished him with "What's the matter, son? Don't you want to grow up and have troubles?"

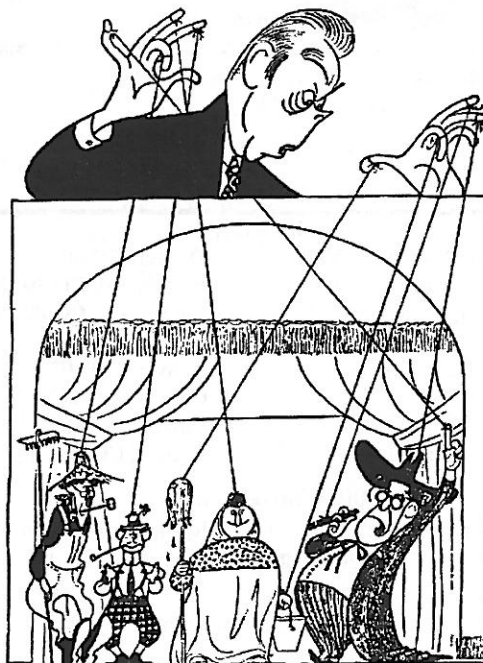
Although Allen's was the number one radio show in popularity in the 1946-47 season, he didn't take himself or his fame too seriously. Basically, he was a shy and humble person. When a writer compared him to Mark Twain and Will Rogers, Allen replied, "Those men were great artists. I merely toil in the cornfield that is radio."

In his private life, Allen was a bookworm, who loved quiet and privacy. He and Portland rarely went out socially. They usually ate at home, which was a modest four room apartment on New York's West 58th Street. Allen didn't drink, or gamble, and was a devoted, faithful husband. Once, when a friend suggested he accompany him to the racetrack, Allen replied, "Playing horses doesn't make sense. The horse

gets the exercise, the jockey gets the ride, the bookmaker gets the money, and the horse player gets a headache."

Back in the "Golden Age of Radio", shows were normally broadcast live, 39 weeks a year; first for the East Coast audiences, and then three hours later,

(Continued on page 3)



**RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO**  
**PO BOX 1908, Englewood CO 80150 (303) 761-4139**

Dedicated to the preservation of old-time radio programs, and to making those programs available to our members

*Old-Time Radio is Alive and Well in Colorado!*

KRMA TV Channel 6	"Tribute to OTR" - Secondary Audio Program (SAP)	Sunday, 2:00 - 3:00 PM
KEZW 1430 AM	"When Radio Was"	Weekdays, 7:00 - 8:00 PM
KFKA 1310 AM	"Radio Memories" (Greeley)	Sunday, 6:00 - 12:00 PM
KUVO 89.3 FM	"Destination Freedom"	9:00 PM, third Tuesday of every month
KNUS 710 AM	"Radio Revisited"	Weekdays, 11:00 - 12:00 PM
		Saturday, 7:00 - 12:00 PM

**RHAC WEB SITE** <http://www.rhac.org>

**RHAC OTR WEB PAGE** <http://www.old-time.com/rhac.html>

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**2002 Conventions**

**The 26th Friends of Old-Time Radio Convention** Oct 24-27, 2002 Holiday Inn-North, Newark NJ  
 Contact: Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887, jayhick@aol.com

**2002 Williamsburg Film Festival (WFF)**, Feb 28, Mar 1-2 Holiday Inn, Patriot, Williamsburg, VA  
 For information: (800) 446-6001, <http://go.to/williamsburgfilmfestival>

**16th Annual OTR & Nostalgia Convention** Apr 19-20, 2002 Radisson Hotel, Cincinnati  
 For information: Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd, Florence, KY 41042, (606) 282-0333

**National Audio Theater Festival**, May 26 - June 1, Southwest Missouri State University, West Plains MO  
 For information: Sue Zizza, 115 Kideman St. Hempstead, NY 11550 (516) 483-8321, suemedial@aol.com

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broadcast again for the West Coast listeners. Allen wrote much of the show's scripts. At age 51, from the pressures of writing late into the night, rehearsals, and two broadcasts a day -- with no reruns -- he started to develop health problems. His face became more drawn, and the bags under his eyes got heavier. His blood pressure became dangerously high, and he was placed on a restrictive diet by his doctor. He was forbidden to smoke cigars, drink tea or coffee or eat red meat. His comment about his health problems was, "You finally do so well in your career, all you can drink is buttermilk. When they start feeding me intravenously, I'll know I've really made it to the top,"

Fred Allen and Jack Penny carried on an on-air radio feud for over a year, Popular opinion is that the feud was dreamt up by Penny during a period when Allen's ratings were sagging, in an attempt to help Allen improve them. Fred -- on his show -- would kid Jack about his walk, his violin playing and his stinginess. Jack would respond on his show about Allen's looks, baggy eyes, nasal drawl (doing a good imitation of it -- with the help of a clothespin over his nose), cheapness and the small, plain room he lived in -- among other things.

In private, Penny and Allen were good friends. Not many people other than Penny knew how generous Allen actually was. He not only contributed to many charities, but also was an easy touch for individuals he knew who were having financial difficulties. In Benny's words, "Fred's pockets were always filled with money. Panhandlers and drunks received a dollar. People he knew only slightly received a five dollar bill; Hard luck cases received ten dollars; and those temporarily out of work -- but looking -- received twenty dollars."

Fred Allen's real name was John Florence Sullivan. But, during his show business career, he changed it several times. He was known at various times as Freddy St. James, Fred St. James, Fred James, and Freddie James, before finally settling on Fred Allen. He was born on May 31,

1894 -- the same year as Jack Benny -- in Cambridge Massachusetts. His mother died when he was three years old, His father, a bookbinder, was seldom home, and Fred was raised by an aunt, At age 14, he began working in the public library. This was a productive period in his life. He taught himself to play the harmonica and learned to juggle from a

book, entertaining his co-workers with his newly acquired skills.

Allen decided to become a comedian after reading a book on the history of comedy. His short library career -- either directly or indirectly -- led him into performing in some amateur shows in the Boston area, initially for a dollar a performance. He billed himself as Freddy St. James, the World's Worst Juggler. He would purposely drop whatever he was juggling to get laughs. Beginning at age 18, Fred toured on the vaudeville circuit for 10 years, billing himself as a comedian and juggler. He later dropped the juggling part of his act (no pun intended).



An appearance at the Palace Theatre in New York helped lead Allen into a career on Broadway during the 1920s. In 1922, in one production, he met and fell in love with a dancer named Portland Hoffa. They were married in 1928. In 1932, (the same year Jack Benny began his radio career), the President of a major corporation saw Allen perform, liked his voice, and was responsible for putting him on radio. Allen's first radio appearance was on the Linit Bath (Oil) Club Review, October 23, 1932. Portland Hoffa performed with him on this show and on all of his other shows throughout his long radio career,

Allen's other radio shows included The Salad Bowl Review, (1933); The Sal Hepatica Review, (1934); Hour of Smiles, (1934); Town Hall Tonight, (1934-39); The Fred Allen Show, (1939-40); Texaco Star Theatre, (1940-44). Then, after the June 25, 1944 program, high blood pressure forced Allen off the air until October 1945. (James Melton was his replacement during this time), On October 7, 1945, Allen returned to "The Fred Allen Show", continuing on into 1949.

Allen had always considered himself a radio comedian and didn't have much respect for television. When asked what he thought about TV, he replied that he "didn't like furniture that talked." Another comment he made about TV was that "television was called a medium because nothing was ever well done."

After almost 17 years on radio, the ratings for his show dropped from number one during the 1946-47 season to number 38 a year or so later. This was largely due to a general decline in radio listeners, who were more and more becoming television watchers. With the decrease of the listening audience, there followed a decrease in advertisers. Allen's last radio show was aired June 26, 1949. His guests were his old friend Jack Benny and comedian Henry Morgan. The program ended with a skit, "Mr. X". There were no closing remarks offered by Allen at the conclusion of the show. Fred Allen left radio in 1949.

With the decline of radio, Allen was eventually forced to embrace the medium he had previously criticized. His first television appearance was on the "Colgate Comedy Theater", where he tried to bring his Allen's Alley from radio -- with the characters being performed by puppets. But this format didn't translate well to TV. Other attempts at television followed. He was on the "Judge for Yourself" quiz show in 1953-54. His last journey into TV was when he became a regular panel member on the "What's My Line?" quiz show in 1955-56.

On March 17, 1956, during a nighttime walk, Allen collapsed on a New York sidewalk. He was taken to a police station, where a priest who was also a family friend, performed the last rites.

Allen, who had long enjoyed writing, wrote a book, "Treadmill to Oblivion," about life in radio, which became a best seller in 1954. His uncompleted autobiography titled "Much Ado About Me" was published in 1956, shortly after his death.

Allen died just two months short of his 62nd birthday. He is buried in the Gate of Heaven Cemetery, Hawthorne, New York. He had once said about funerals that "by the time an actor gets ready to die he hasn't enough friends left out there to act as pallbearers. At most funerals the six men you see moving the casket are from central Casting." The popular comedian didn't have this problem. He had many friends, and his funeral was heavily attended.

Although dedicated to radio, Fred Allen was a multimedia entertainer. In addition to successful careers in vaudeville and radio, he wrote radio scripts and books, performed on TV, and starred in several feature movies. His films include:

"Thanks a Million" (1935)

"Sally Irene and Mary" (1938)

"Love Thy Neighbor" (with Jack Benny) (1940)

"It's in the Bag" (1945)

"We're Not Married"

"O'Henry's Full House" (1952).

*From the Desk of  
the Editor  
by Carol Tiffany*



The March winds have blown us a wonderful new article from Dr. Charles Beckett as well as the first place essay winner from the "Why Old Time Radio is Important to Me" contest. I would once again like to invite any of our members to write down their thoughts on this subject for inclusion in this column. We also begin a new feature in this issue, "*On the OTR Bookshelf*".

We would love to get YOUR thoughts on your favorite OTR books for this feature. If you have heard of a book you would like to know more about, or if you have read one you think other club members would enjoy, let me or Larry Weide know about it.

Oh yes, and look for an *exciting announcement* elsewhere in this issue. RHAC is getting better and better. Have a happy St. Patrick's Day and a great month.

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## On the OTR Bookshelf...

**"On The Air - The Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio"**

By John Dunning, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998

Reviewed by Carol Tiffany

When I first began collecting Old Time Radio shows and related memorabilia some 25 years ago, I heard about John Dunning's "*Tune In Yesterday*", often referred to as "the Bible of Old Time Radio". This much sought-after reference work was deemed invaluable but was, unfortunately, out-of-print and

**RHAC TAPE LIBRARY**

375

**TAPE 1499 PHILO VANCE**

1200'

1L	4-5-49	Movie Murder Case
	4-12-49	Green Girls Murder Case
2L	4-19-49	Cardinal Murder Case
	4-26-49	Cipher Murder Case
1R	5-3-49	Masters Murder Case
	5-10-49	Meanest Man Murder Case
2R	5-17-49	Butterfly Murder Case
	5-24-49	Hurly Gurly Murder Case

**TAPE 1500 PHILO VANCE**

1200'

1L	5-31-49	Red Duck Murder Case
	6-7-49	Mistle -Toe Murder Case
2L	6-14-49	Combination Murder Case
	6-21-49	Peacock Murder Case
1R	6-28-49	Motor Murder Case
	7-5-49	White Murder Case
2R	7-12-49	One Cent Murder Case
	7-19-49	Racket Murder Case

**TAPE 1501 PHILO VANCE**

1200'

1L	8-2-49	Cheesecake Murder Case
	8-9-49	Tick Tock Murder Case
2L	8-16-49	Deep Sea Murder Case
	8-23-49	Johnny "A" Murder Case
1R	8-30-49	Blue Penny Murder Case
	9-6-49	Brotherly Murder Case
2R	9-13-49	Oxford Murder Case
	9-20-49	Checkered Murder Case

**TAPE 1502 PHILO VANCE**

1200'

1L	12-13-49	Grey Glove Murder Case
	12-20-49	Chop Suey Murder Case
2L	12-27-49	Identical Murder Case
	1-3-50	Tip Top Murder Case
1R	1-10-50	Left Handed Murder Case
	1-17-50	Catty Corpse Murder Case
2R	1-24-50	Music Box Murder Case
	1-31-50	Sterling Murder Case

**RHAC TAPE LIBRARY**

376

**TAPE 1503 PHILO VANCE**

1200'

1L	4-18-50	The Golden Key Murder Case
	4-25-50	Shower Bath Murder Case
2L	5-2-50	Rooftop Murder Case
	5-9-50	Whistling Murder Case
1R	5-16-50	The Manicure Murder Case
	5-23-50	The Money Machine Murder Case
2R	5-30-50	The Whirlaround Murder Case
	6-6-50	The Alibi Murder Case

**TAPE 1504 WILD BILL HICKOK**

1200'

1L	3-12-52	Big John And Little Mike
	3-21-52	Pettigrew's Prize Pig
2L	3-26-52	Jokes And Gunsmoke
	3-28-52	The Wild Miller Of Payute Falls
1R	4-2-52	A Shot In The Dark
	4-4-52	Rescue At Salvation Springs
2R	4-9-52	The Monstrous Toothache
	4-16-52	Thunder And Lightning

**TAPE 1505 WILD BILL HICKOK**

1200'

1L	4-16-52	A Snap For Snooper
	9-19-52	The Secret Of Mile High Rock
2L	9-24-52	The Queen Of The Quantrels
	9-26-52	The Mayor Of Mule Mesa
1R	10-1-52	A Vicious Joke
	10-3-52	The Wolf Of Ghost Mountain
2R	10-8-52	Jingles' Birthday Party
	10-10-52	One More To Get

**TAPE 1506 WILD BILL HICKOK**

1200'

1L	10-15-52	The Secret Of The Iron Door
	10-17-52	the Terrible Cook
2L	10-22-52	The Mask Of The Claw
	10-24-52	A Dangerous Vacation
1R	10-29-52	The Jaws Of The Law
	10-31-52	The Trap At Pistol Springs
2R	11-5-52	Mad Men At Moon Mountain
	11-7-52	The Gunman's Brand

unavailable by the time I decided to purchase one. Through my membership in RHAC, I met some generous folks who graciously allowed me to borrow their copies for reference use, but I still coveted my own copy.

Fortunately for me and other latecomers to the OTR hobby, Mr. Dunning has written **“On The Air”**. This is an updated and expanded version of **“Tune In Yesterday”** which includes even more shows and updated commentaries.

Exceptionally thorough in his research and documentation, Mr. Dunning has produced a work admirably rich in interesting detail and eminently readable. He includes many of the very early shows from the 1920s and 30s including the so-called “lost” shows. His comments on the better-known shows and performers provide wonderful anecdotal information. This invaluable reference work also stands as an absorbing and interesting read.

**The Verdict:** If you are a long time OTR fan, this is a great addition to your collection. If you are just starting out as an OTR collector, this should be the first book you acquire. If you have only one OTR book in your library, this should be the one.

### “Why Old Time Radio is Important to Me”

*We continue with the winning entry from the KFKA RADIO MEMORIES*

*Essay Contest winners. These are reprinted here with the permission of Dick Williamson of Radio Memories.*

**1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner  
Wayne Gilbert of Broomfield, Co.**

What is referred to as Old Time Radio today represents Radio’s Golden Age of yesterday. Its drama, its newscasts, its commercials - all reflect its morality and its humanity with every replay of these radio shows. For many of us these old programs simply take us back to a time that can never be repeated except in our memories. For others, however, these broadcasts evoke a yearning for a time when radio played an important role in molding what many regard as the best in our people today.

Whether it was the drama, the comedy or the music, there was a consistency of restraint in the message broadcast by early radio into American homes. While each listener was allowed to expand the drama program’s illusions and to put their own

**RETURN WITH US NOW...**

interpretation on the titillating words of a popular song or joke, there was always an unspoken rule to entertain without degrading our sense of values.

This unspoken rule and sense of values no longer seem to exist today, and while it may be simplistic to say the demise of one has led to the erosion of the other, it’s not hard to believe there is a relationship. Kids growing up in radio’s golden age spent hours exposed to its influence, just as today’s kids are exposed to the influence of hours of contemporary entertainment. The results are as different as the values beamed into their homes and minds.

While many contend these old shows were simply innocent entertainment, appealing to some simpler people in a simpler world, many of us would argue that these old broadcasts can be just as entertaining, and a much more wholesome influence on the younger generation living in the complex world of today.

### The Trivial Matter of OTR Stars and their Best-remembered Roles

By Carol Tiffany

*How many of these can YOU identify? Match the star with his/her character and remember, some stars had more than one equally well known character, and some characters were portrayed by more than one actor. Good luck with this one!*

- |   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parley Baer      | A. Jack Packard      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Virginia Payne   | B. Connie Brooks     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bill Conrad      | C. Fibber McGee      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Raymond Burr     | D. Paul Barbour      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bill Johnstone   | E. Liz Cooper        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ezra Stone       | F. Flash Gordon      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lionel Barrymore | G. Joe Friday        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brace Beemer     | H. Ma Perkins        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Orson Welles     | I. Matt Dillon       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bud Collyer      | J. Archie            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gale Gordon      | K. Capt. Lee Quince  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dick Powell      | L. Chester Proudfoot |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jack Webb        | M. Irma Peterson     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Howard Duff      | N. Lamont Cranston   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gale Storm       | O. Clark Kent        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lew Ayres        | P. Henry Aldrich     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Russell Thorson  | Q. Richard Diamond   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Marie Wilson     | R. Ebenezer Scrooge  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ed Gardner       | S. The Lone Ranger   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lucille Ball     | T. Margie Allbright  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Michael Raffetto | U. Sam Spade         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jim Jordan       | V. Dr. Kildare       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eve Arden        | W. Osgood Conklin    |
|   | X. Jeff Regan        |

(Answers on Page 6)

# New in the Tape Library

by Maletha & Dick King



This month we are entering more "Philo Vance" murder case stories and then on to "Wild Bill Hickok". Philo Vance presents a more refined type of character than most of the private detective stories and, after listening to hours of them, they really seem to grow on you.

A far cry from the refinement of the Philo Vance comes "Jingles" played by a very loud Andy Devine. You all know that he was the side-kick of Wild Bill Hickok played by Guy Madison, a US Marshall in the wild wild west. Each of these stories are complete, not like the usual "continued next week" form that such programs were often written in.

These tapes will be a good addition to everyone's library, and good stories to pass on to some of the younger members of the family.

And now...

## STAY TUNED FOR A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!

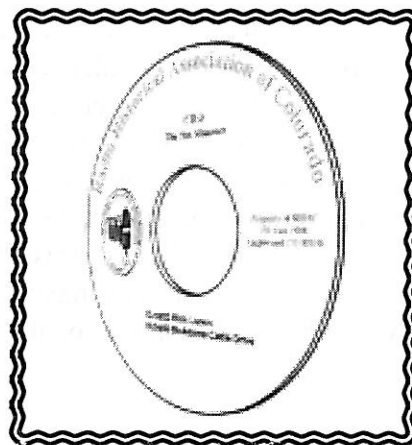


This month we are not going to be making contributions to the Contributors Library as we are extremely busy working on, **YES**, the ....

# RHAC CD library!

Starting in May, we will begin making the first CD's in the RHAC library available for distribution. We are all very excited about bringing RHAC up to date with modern 21st century audio media. Each issue of the newsletter will contain a CD catalog page as our library grows

Watch for the up-coming article on the CD library, that will contain all the details, and a story about Bill McCracken who is the heart and soul behind this project.



- Answers to OTR Stars Quiz:
- |    |                   |      |                  |
|----|-------------------|------|------------------|
| A. | Jack Packard      | T.   | Parley Baer      |
| B. | Connie Brooks     | H.   | Virginia Payne   |
| C. | Fibber McGee      | I.   | Bill Conrad      |
| D. | Paul Barbour      | K.   | Raymond Burr     |
| E. | Liz Cooper        | N.   | Bill Johnstone   |
| F. | Flash Gordon      | P.   | Ezra Stone       |
| G. | Joe Friday        | R.   | Lionel Barrymore |
| H. | Ma Perkins        | S.   | Brace Beemer     |
| I. | Matt Dillon       | N.   | Orson Welles     |
| J. | Archie            | O.   | Bud Collyer      |
| K. | Capt. Lee Quince  | E/W. | Gale Gordon      |
| L. | Chester Proudfoot | O.   | Dick Powell      |
| M. | Irma Peterson     | G/X. | Jack Webb        |
| N. | Lamont Cranston   | U.   | Howard Duff      |
| O. | Clark Kent        | T.   | Gale Storm       |
| P. | Henry Aldrich     | V.   | Lew Ayres        |
| Q. | Richard Diamond   | A/D. | Russell Thorson  |
| R. | Ebeneezer Scrooge | M.   | Marie Wilson     |
| S. | The Lone Ranger   | J.   | Ed Gardner       |
| T. | Margie Allbright  | E.   | Lucille Ball     |
| U. | Sam Spade         | A/D. | Michael Raffeito |
| V. | Dr. Kildare       | C.   | Jim Jordan       |
| W. | Osgood Conklin    | B.   | Eve Arden        |
| X. | Jeff Regan        |      |                  |



# RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION of COLORADO

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Librarian - Mika Rhoden

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2 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 8 \_\_\_\_\_ 11 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_ 6 \_\_\_\_\_ 9 \_\_\_\_\_ 12 \_\_\_\_\_

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I do hereby agree to abide by the RHAC rules and agree not to sell or use library materials for monetary gain and *I will return the tape on time.*

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