



AGNES MOOREHEAD

by Martin Grams, Jr.

The opening night for the *March of Time* program shift to NBC studios found the cast of 30-odd decked out in white ties and the women in formal evening gowns. After the gala la-de-dah, the show went back to its' hair-down norm. An audience of about fifty at getaway was also largely in formal attire. Though the *March of Time* program had been on the air for more than six years at CBS, tension was relaxed by a wag asking, "Where's Mr. Paley?" The cast of the radio drama laughed.

A control room was specially rebuilt for this program, which was directed by Bill Spier, who would later become synonymous with *Suspense* and *The Adventures of Sam Spade*. Covering eight news subjects, the *March of Time* program revealed the versatility of the stock company, most notably Agnes Moorehead, bedecked in furs, playing a Yiddish East Sider, a gangster's (Baby Face Martin) mother, a customer in Bangor, Maine sports shop, Wally Simpson, Signorina Mussolini and the Queen of England. And this was all in the same 30-minute broadcast!



Agnes Moorehead was a gifted character actress who ranged easily from being elegant, assured and arresting and comical in a wide variety of stage, screen, radio and television roles. She was nominated for five Academy Awards, appeared several times on Broadway and toured for years with three other stars in a dramatic recital of George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* during the early 1950s.

Miss Moorehead was born in Clinton, Mass., December 6, 1906 and attended school in Reedsburg, Wis., where her father was a Presbyterian minister. It was in church, she once said, that she learned to act, mimicking members of her father's congregation. It was also in church, she recalled, that she made her first public appearance, at the age of 3, singing "The Lord is My Shepherd."

After study at Muskingum College in Ohio, Moorehead took a job teaching public speaking and English at the high school in Soldiers Grove, Wis., where she also coached the town drama group. In addition, she appeared for three seasons as a dancer and singer with the St. Louis Municipal Opera Company during its outdoors festivals. Once she had earned enough for expenses, Agnes Moorehead, who had determined for years on a stage
(Continued on Page 3)

career, headed for the Big Apple, enrolling at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts where she was an honor student.

Roles in Broadway productions came quickly for the young actress, who spent hours at New York's docks listening to immigrants, studying their voices, gestures and mannerisms. When the Depression appeared to limit the opportunities on Broadway, she turned to radio, where she soon found steady, if often anonymous, work on both dramatic and comedy shows and in soap operas. In addition to performing on such shows as *The Cavalcade of America* and *The March of Time* (the former of which was probably her favorite program), and on comedy shows with Bob Hope, Phil Baker and Fred Allen, she played the lead role of *Joyce Jordan, Girl Interne* in a daily serial.

After becoming a member of Orson Welles' Mercury Players, she was brought to Hollywood for her first film role, a small part as the mother of Charles Foster Kane in Welles' 1941 classic *Citizen Kane*. Subsequent film roles gave wide scope for her versatility and dramatic ability as a character actress. "I never was pretty enough to play a heroine," she said. "As a little girl, I was the long, gangly type, almost as tall as I am now (5 feet 6), sad and pathetic. I have no vanity at all." Among the parts she played were those of a Chinese peasant in *Dragon Street* (1944), a glamorous French aristocrat in *Mrs. Parkington* (1944), the aunt of the deaf-mute in *Johnny Belinda* (1948), and a woman of far more than 100 years in *The Lost Moment* (1947).

Discussing her career in a newspaper column that she wrote in 1965 as a substitute for vacationing Cynthia Lowry, an Associated Press writer, she commented:

"I have played so many authoritative and strong characters that some people are nervous at the prospect of meeting me for the first time. There is a certain amount of aloofness on my part at times, because an actor can so easily be hurt by unfair criticism. I think an artist should be kept separated to maintain glamour and a kind of mystery. Otherwise it's like having three meals a day. Pretty dull. I don't believe in the girl-next-door image. What the actor has to sell to the public is fantasy, a magic kind of ingredient that should not be analyzed."

Moorehead gained the largest audience of her forty-five year career by playing Endora, the cantankerous mother-in-law witch in the ABC television series, *Bewitched*. That series ran for eight years (1964 - 1971) and earned her four Emmy nominations. She even guested on numerous television specials. When Bette Davis was taken ill, Moorehead stepped in to play the Red Queen in NBC's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1966). She was awarded a Best Supporting Actress Emmy for her portrayal of a cunning criminal in "The Night of the Vicious Valentine" (Feb. 10, 1967) segment of *The Wild, Wild West* television series.

In late 1973, Agnes Moorehead revisited the early days of radio broadcasts when she gracefully joined Himan Brown in starring in two broadcasts of *The CBS Radio Mystery Theater* (including the series' premiere), before dying of lung cancer four months later. Moorehead secretly confronted director Himan Brown about her impending doom during the rehearsal of the first episode. She would have loved to have done more episodes, she told him, but time was at least kind enough for her to appear in two episodes.

The actress apparently left an estate of \$400,000 in Zanesville, Ohio where her will was filed at the Muskingum County probate Court. The will, which did not set a total assets figure, had been filed August 23, 1973 by the actress. In June of 1974, the beneficiaries were named, including a \$100,000 house to the John Brown University, Siloam Spring, Arkansas, along with Bibles and biblical materials.

Martin Grams, Jr. is the author of *Suspense: Twenty Years of Thrills and Chills*, *The History of the Cavalcade of America* and *Inner Sanctum Mysteries: Behind the Creaking Door*.

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Convention Schedules

SPERDVAC Convention, November 12 - 14, 2004 at the Hacienda Hotel at LAX. (airport) Bob Lynes will be the convention chair. 1 (877) 251-5771 or www.sperdvac.org - There will be at least 7 panels, 5 re-creations, 2 banquets and a Sunday brunch. As always, we'll have a free-admission dealers' room where people can sell their OTR books, tapes, CDs & memorabilia. Again this year, we'll have a printed program for attendees to use in guiding them through the convention. We'll have space for ads, congratulations, messages, etc. in the program. For rates, contact above addresses. For Dealers' Room information, contact: Glenn Mueller, 18716 East Aguiro St., Rowland Heights, CA 91748, or Email: DurangoKid@worldnet.att.net

19th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 15 - 16, 2005; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042. (859) 282-0333 or haradio@hotmail.com

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-2-

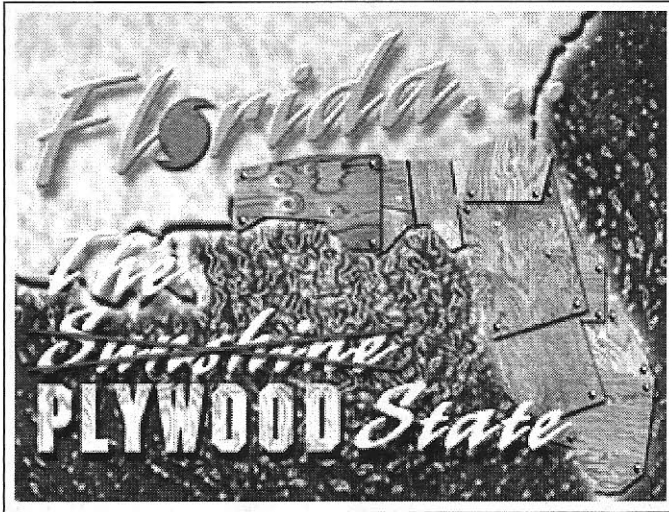
November, 2004

From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany



New in the Tape Library

by Dick and Maletha King



Hello again from the Plywood State! Your editor is definitely wishing she had never left the great state of Colorado. After having been grazed by Charley, hit by Frances, and truly clobbered by Jeanne, we are sick and tired of wind, rain, high seas, beach erosion, and power outages. Most of our neighborhood (the entire county, actually) has sprouted the ubiquitous blue tarp as the roof covering of choice. Very few, if any, homes or businesses in our area remain completely undamaged. Jeanne took our porch and pool screen enclosure and a large palm tree in the front yard, but luckily our house withstood the 122-MPH wind gusts with only minor roof damage. Hopefully, there will be no more major storms this year.

As Thanksgiving approaches, most Floridians have found quite a bit to be thankful for, not the least of which is the fact that we have come together as neighbors in ways that we had not known before. I actually found myself sharing some of my OTR tapes with neighbors who had battery-operated radio/tape players. Many younger neighbors were very restless with no TV, CDs, or VHS tapes for entertainment, so the OTR stories were a welcome diversion.

AND ... Don't forget that, thanks to librarian David Gatch, **library #1 is now open!**

Best wishes for a Happy Thanksgiving to you all.

Good Listening, Carol

RETURN WITH US NOW...

Before we get into this month's library entries, we would like to call to your attention that CD #454, a five part "Johnny Dollar" series, is now complete. We originally offered this show with only four parts, but the fifth part has now been found and we have added it to the CD we circulate for our members. Please correct your catalog page # CD 20 to show that all five parts are available on CD #454.

This month we offer four "Escape" CD's to complete the first half of the "Escape" series. We will offer more next year. We then offer four CD's of "Mystery In The Air" and then move on to "The Adventures of Nero Wolfe" including some from CBC. From there go on to "Gold of The Conqueror" and a few "Chris Marlowe Mysteries", "Secret Agent X-9 from the BBC. We finish up with "So Much Blood" and "Shadow of Doubt". both shows from the BBC.

We enjoyed our trip to David Catch's home in Glen Haven to help move Cassette Library #1. **It is now ready for our members to rent cassettes #001 through #499.** While at David's home we were able to go on to Estes Park and enjoy seeing the wild Mountain Sheep grazing at the side of the highway and the massive Elk, that call the parks and playgrounds in the city, home. It was a very pleasant day and we enjoyed the scenery very much.

Dick Williamson, long time RHAC member and Greeley CO radio personality, now has his OTR program being broadcasted on "Pirate Radio" 104.7 FM in Greeley. You can also listen to his program on the internet at <http://www.pirate1047.com>. Dick transmits his old time radio shows on Sundays from 6:30 to midnight MST on both media.

Jell-O Gets Ribbing, High Ratings On the Jack Benny Program

"J-E-L-L--O!"

by Danny Goodwin

(Reprinted with the author's permission from
www.old-time.com)

Sunday, October 14, 1934 at 7 PM the stations of NBC's **Blue Network** marked the beginning of a weekly institution. This was the first broadcast of **THE JELL-O PROGRAM** starring Jack Benny. The program opened with the singing of the famous "**J-E-L-L--O!**" jingle (if jingle is what you want to call it). After the opening, announcer Don Wilson identified the program, actors appearing on the program, and the opening musical number. While the music was playing, Wilson delivered a serious commercial on **Jell-O** and how wonderful the wiggly product was to have for dessert. He also mentioned that if the listeners wanted **Jell-O**, they should pick up the box with **Jell-O** printed on it--- and **accept no substitutes**. There were many brands of gelatin, but there was only one "**Genuine Jell-O.**"

On a typical broadcast, Wilson began and ended each broadcast with a serious message about **Jell-O**. However, the middle commercial was another matter. It usually took place during a comedy routine. Instead of taking time out for the commercial, Wilson entered the conversation between Benny and the other cast members. Although the subject matter had nothing to do with anything resembling **Jell-O**, Wilson slid in the sponsor. The conversation turned to some humorous ribbing of the product. When Wilson left, Benny and the cast members continued their comedy routine.

An example of how **Jell-O** slides into the program without interruption took place on a 1937 broadcast. Benny left the program momentarily to make a telephone call. Instead of the listeners hearing a lot of "**dead air,**" Wilson stepped in and delivered his commercial for **Jell-O**. With Benny still talking on the phone, Wilson cleverly converted his commercial message into a telephone call to all the radio listeners. He said, "**Always dial J-E-L-L-O, and if the 'lime' is busy, you can still get strawberry, raspberry, cherry, orange, and lemon. Good-bye.**"

Jell-O's six famous flavors (strawberry, cherry, raspberry, orange, lemon, and lime) played a key

role in this middle commercial from a 1938 broadcast. This program took place in New York City instead of Hollywood. Wilson was unable to make it to the East Coast, so Harry Von Zell substituted as the announcer. As you already know, Von Zell was the announcer of **TOWN HALL TONIGHT**, starring Benny's radio arch rival Fred Allen. (For the record, Allen also appeared on this broadcast).

Von Zell didn't get the middle commercial off to a good start, because he forgot the sponsor's name (a tactic Von Zell would later use on Fred Allen's infamous "**Eagle Show**"). Benny, becoming flustered, told Von Zell the product was "**Jell-O for Heaven sakes!**" Instead of just saying **Jell-O**, Von Zell repeated word for word what Benny said and continued the commercial. Once again, Von Zell hit another stumbling block with **Jell-O's** six flavors. To Benny's chagrin, Von Zell stated the six flavors were "**strawberry, raspberry, cherry, orange, cherry, and strawberry.**" Benny complained that lemon and lime were missing. Von Zell tried it again, but left out orange the second time around. When the commercial was coming to its conclusion, Von Zell closed the commercial by asking the listeners to "**Insist on Genuine Jell-O. Look for the big red letters on the orange.**" An excited Benny yelled out, "**THAT'S ON THE BOX!**" At least, Von Zell mentioned the missing orange.

Poking fun at a sponsor wasn't exactly a new idea. Before **Jell-O**, Benny had a reputation of ribbing his sponsor. This "playing with fire" type of attitude goes all the way back to his very first radio program in 1932 on NBC's **Blue Network**. It was a variety program sponsored by **Canada Dry Ginger Ale**.

Instead of the style of comedy he made famous during the **Jell-O** years and after, Benny only served as M.C. of this program. Ed Thorgerson was the program's announcer, but it was Benny who presented the commercials. When it was time for the **Canada Dry Ginger Ale** commercial, Benny combined the commercial presentation together with some funny comments. The result was Benny taking gentle potshots at the sponsor. It wasn't exactly the ribbing Henry Morgan and Arthur Godfrey made famous in their commercial presentations in later years, but the sponsor didn't care very much for Benny's comments. You have to remember this was the early 1930's. Network radio was starting to take full flight as an important means of communication.

Any and all radio commercials presented at that time were supposed to be informative and **serious**--- **WITHOUT** the product being made fun of. Despite the program's impressive **C.A.B.** (Co-operative Analysis of Broadcasting) **Ratings**, Benny had 3 different sponsors in his first 2 years over the airwaves. Enter **Jell-O**.

Jell-O sponsored Benny's program until Sunday, May 31, 1942. Once again, the sponsor became involved with the comedy. On the Sunday, May 10, 1942 broadcast, Benny went to see the president of **General Foods**. To Benny's surprise, the **GF** boss informed him it was to be the last season **Jell-O** was sponsoring the program. This bombshell left Benny on pins and needles for the remaining shows for that month. The season's (and **Jell-O's**) final broadcast featured "**The Cavalcade Of Jell-O.**" It consisted of the numerous comedy highlights of the previous shows. At the program's end, Benny was relieved to learn that **Grape-Nuts Flakes**, another **General Foods** product, would take over sponsorship when the program resumed in the fall.

The reason for this sponsor change had nothing to do with the ribbing **Jell-O** received on the program. It was a serious matter known as World War II. After the United States entered the war, sugar became rationed. To conserve the sweet stuff, the production of **Jell-O** was cut back during this time. With **Jell-O** being sold in very limited supply, **General Foods** had no other alternative but to remove **Jell-O's** sponsorship from Benny's program. In order to keep Benny's program in the **General Foods** fold, **Grape-Nuts Flakes** was to be the new sponsor.

With the sponsor change to **Grape-Nuts Flakes** and eventually to **Lucky Strike Cigarettes**, the ribbing about **Jell-O** continued. There were no commercials, but the **Jell-O** name was mentioned in the comedy routines from time to time. Normally, the sponsor of a radio program took exception when someone mentioned the name of another product on the program. Since Benny's program was among the most popular, there was an exception.

An example of how **Jell-O** was remembered took place on a 1944 broadcast sponsored by **Lucky Strike**. After an argument with Don Wilson, Benny walked off his show (this was a comedy routine, not the real thing). When he got home, Benny was greeted by Rochester, his valet. After Benny explained why he was home early, Rochester stated that walking off the show was taking a big chance. In a clever use of spelling, Rochester managed to get both **Lucky Strike** and **Jell-O** into the



conversation. He said to his boss, "**If LS/MFT finds out that you were A-W-O-L, you'll be glad you saved all those boxes of J-E-L-L-O!**" Rochester's comment was met with hysterical laughter and a round of applause from the studio audience.

The **Jell-O** people proved they were good sports in the ribbing their product received over the years--- and even those years when it wasn't Jack Benny's sponsor. Maybe this attitude shouldn't be very surprising, because **Jell-O** was made to be fun to eat. Its wiggly texture and fruity taste put a lot of smiles of people's faces, just as Benny and his cast did during **THE JELL-O PROGRAM** years.