



RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION OF
COLORADO

Volume 31, Number 2

February, 2006

MAJOR BOWES' ORIGINAL AMATEUR HOUR

by Dr. Charles Beckett

"A-spinning goes our weekly wheel of fortune. Around and around and around she goes, and where she stops, nobody knows." These words were delivered by Edward Bowes at the top of each "Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour" radio show.

From 1934 to 1945, Bowes hosted his weekly radio talent show from New York City. Amateur talent ran rampant. "For anyone with bus fare and a harmonica," the show "was a grab at the brass ring." Contestants, including tap dancers, singers, jugglers, ventriloquists, accordion players, comedians and other talented and untalented amateur performers and wannabes, auditioned for the show. Many of the more than 35,000 depression-era hopefuls arrived in New York by bus, hitch hiked, or "rode the rails" of trains to audition during the show's first year on the air. There were even reports of some people selling their homes to pay for their trip across country to New York. After the initial crush of amateurs, it was estimated that there were

10,000 applicants a week.

Unfortunately, the producers could only audition 500 to 700 amateurs a week. And, from that number, only about 20 were chosen for each broadcast. The odds of qualifying for the show were about 70,000 to one against. Successful contestants were given ten dollars for appearing on the show, plus a big meal—which could be bought for about fifty cents at the cafeteria across the street from the studio. On many of the shows, a bad performer would be cut off in mid-act by Major Bowes hitting a big gong. If he delayed too long, an impatient audience would shout, "give 'em the gong."



Many of the unsuccessful, depression poor hopefuls, not having enough money to return home, or to live in New York, ended up applying for welfare in the city. Newsweek magazine reported in a 1935 issue that in one month, 1,200 amateurs had applied for emergency food and shelter in New York. Not long after, Bowes made a rule that only those applicants who lived in greater New York city were eligible. And each week, a town on the network was

selected as the 'honor city'. As such, its citizens were allowed to join New Yorkers in voting for the winner. Since votes were cast by the studio
(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!

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| KEZW 1430 AM | "When Radio Was", with Stan Frieberg | Weekdays, 7:00 - 8:00 PM |
| Pirate Radio 104.7 FM | "Radio Memories" (Greeley) | Sunday, 6:30 - 12:00 PM |
| and, Pirate Radio internet streaming at http://www.pirate1047.com | | Sunday, 6:30 - 12:00 PM |
| KNUS 710 AM | "Radio Revisited" | Weekdays, 10:00 - 11:00 PM |
| KRMA TV Channel 6 | Secondary Audio Program (SAP), "Tribute to OTR" | Sunday, 2:00 PM |

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Convention Schedules

20th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 21 - 22, 2006; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042 (888-477-9112) haradio@hotmail.com

31st Old-time Country and Bluegrass Contest and Festival, Aug 28 - Sep 3, 2006 at Harrison County Fairgrounds in Missouri Valley, Iowa. For information contact Bob Everhart at Box 492, Walnut, IA 51577 (712) 762-4363 bobeverhart@yahoo.com

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

31st Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 19 - 22, 2006 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887 JayHick@aol.com or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

-2-

February, 2006

audience, plus by phone (Murray Hill 8-9933), or mail by listeners, results of winners were announced on the following week's show. Three time winners became finalists for the years championship. They were rewarded with money, scholarships, or a chance to tour with one of the traveling shows. Winners included singers Beverly Sills, Frank Sinatra and Robert Merrill. Sinatra, still in his teens, won in 1935 as a member of the "Hoboken Four" quartet. The group became part of Bowes' traveling stage shows, with Bowes changing their name to "Frank Sinatra and the Three Flashes." Merrill also was a winner on another program, The Metropolitan Opera Auditions radio talent show. Others who appeared on the Original Amateur Hour included singers Teresa Brewer, Gladys Knight, Pat Boone, and Ann-Margaret; and comedian/ventriloquist Paul Winchell.



Major Bowes with "The Hoboken Four". Frank Sinatra is on the right.

In 1935, Major Bowes was the year's biggest radio star and had become wealthy from the show. At one point, he was earning two million dollars a year - twice the income of such radio stars as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor and Jack Benny.

In 1936, the program's Hooper rating was 20 points above most of the other top ten radio programs. Although ratings began to steadily drop after that, the program still remained in the top ten through most of the 1930s.

The show spun off a company of traveling stage show performers consisting of winners and finalists from the radio shows. They were paid \$50.00 a week. Out of this, they had to pay for their food, lodgings and other personal expenses. The show paid their travel costs. At one time, there were eighteen groups on the road. Show related products

RETURN WITH US NOW...

included an Amateur Hour game, several RKO Studio short movie films, a magazine and even a Major Bowes' alarm clock.

MAJOR BOWES' AMATEUR HOUR
 Name: Frank Sinatra and the 3 Flashes
 Address: 984 Hudson Street - Hoboken, N.J.
 Telephone: Hob. 3-0985 - (Will call)
 Type of Performance: Singing - Dancing - Comedy
 City: Hoboken, N.J.
 Date: 9/4/35
 Station: W.A.A.T. - 7th Floor

Frank Sinatra's Bowes contract

Over the years, some of the better remembered Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour announcers included Jimmy Wallington, Ralph Edwards, Tony Marvin and Dennis James.

Edward Bowes was born June 14, 1874, and the seeds for the Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour were planted in 1925. Bowes had been successful as a businessman in real estate and theatrical development. It was in that year that Bowes took over the radio musical variety show "Roxy and His Gang," which later became the "Major Bowes Capitol Family Hour." In addition, By 1934, he had become manager of WHN radio station in New York, which had an original Amateur Hour show featuring prizefighters. The "rounds" bell also was used to gong the lack of effort of any fighter who wasn't making a good showing. The "gong" made it's transition when the boxing show evolved into the amateur talent show format-greeting performers whose acts weren't up to par, in Bowes opinion. On most of Bowes' shows, a bad performance could merit a gong in mid-act. If Bowes waited too long, an impatient audience would shout, "give 'em the gong!" Sometimes, Bowes purposely allowed untalented performers to take the stage, just so he could gong them off, to the delight of the studio audience-and embarrassment of the performer. (Chuck Barris' TV program, "The Gong Show" was similar in concept, but with more humor, and - if memory serves - a three person panel, any member of which could ring the gong at any time during a performer's act).

In 1936, The Original Amateur Hour show fell under the shadow of suspicion about its integrity. There were rumors that it was rigged for certain performers to win; that professional vaudeville performers were masquerading as amateurs; that the spontaneous, informal chit chat between Bowes and contestants before their acts were actually scripted and rehearsed; and, that Bowes knew in advance who would be gonged off during their performance. Radio Guide magazine sent a voice trained reporter to do an undercover investigation, acting as an amateur performer. Against all odds, he was selected to be on a broadcast. He discovered, at least to the magazine's satisfaction, that the program could be rigged, especially in its voting system.

Some of the credit for the concept of the Original Amateur Hour rightly goes to comedian Fred Allen. In 1934, on his "Town Hall Tonight" radio shows, Allen introduced amateur performers, who competed for a \$100 prize. Winners were sent on tours to various cities as part of "Town Hall Tonight" road show. Winners on the Allen show included actress Ann Sheridan, comedian Garry Moore, and singer Frank Sinatra - making him the only known winner on both Allen's and Bowes' talent shows. Other amateurs who competed successfully on Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour include singers Teresa Brewer, Gladys Knight, Pat Boone, Ann-Margret; and, ventriloquist/comedian Paul Winchell. Bowes' talent show premiered less than four months after Allen's. In 1936, Allen dropped the talent format from his show and left the field to Bowes.

By 1945, the Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour show's ratings had plummeted. Bowes left radio that year, and died on June 13, 1946, just one day short of his 72nd birthday. Two years later, Ted Mack, who had been master of ceremonies on some of the Original Amateur Hour road shows, revived the format and the program continued on radio into 1952.

On radio, Major Bowes had an easy going and friendly personality. He has been described "... as expert a showman as the world has seen since Phineas Barnum." Off the air, however, he was a very private - and rich - person. Many believe that the "Major" in Major Bowes was an honorary title. In fact, he had earned the title by holding the rank of Major in the U.S. Army reserves during World War I.

Old Time Radio Moments of the Century (Part 6)

(The following article by broadcast historian Elizabeth McLeod is reproduced here with her permission.)

Ms. McLeod has listed her "top 100" 20th Century Radio Moments. We will be presenting 10 of her selections in RWUN each month for ten months.

40. Mary Margaret McBride Hits Her Prime 1941



Women's programming in the OTR era is, for the most part, a hopeless wasteland -- banal, condescending, and trivial. But there are bright spots -- none brighter than Mary Margaret McBride. A veteran journalist, critic, and author with a deceptively folksy style, McBride moves beyond the ossified formats of "womens' radio" to present thought-provoking, substantial programs. Her best series by far is her 1940s local show over WJZ -- a forty-five minute midday feature in which she brings to the microphone important authors, journalists, politicians, celebrities -- the only requirement being that they have something worthwhile to say.

39. Murrow reports on Buchenwald 4/15/45

There are really no words adequate to describe what Edward R. Murrow saw as he toured one of the most notorious of the Nazi concentration camps - but he finds words nonetheless. Other Murrow broadcasts are more famous -- but none are more eloquent.

38. First Transatlantic Relay Broadcast 3/14/25

You can barely make it out thru the overwhelming roar of static -- there! there it is! Dimly, you sense the rhythm of a familiar tune -- a dance band squawking out "Alabama Bound." And there -- that voice, that halting British voice, saying something about 5XX, Daventry -- the High Power Station Of The British Broadcasting Company. History is made as RCA's relay station in Belfast, Maine receives an experimental longwave pickup of 2LO in London, and relays that fragile signal by shortwave to the network of WJZ in New York and WRC Washington -- giving thousands of American listeners their first taste of Overseas Broadcasting. The technology is something of a dead end -- longwave would prove too unreliable for long-term, long-distance use -- but the broadcast is a vivid demonstration of how radio can truly bring the world into your home.

37. Fibber's closet opens for the first time 3/5/40

A gimmicky sound effect that becomes a national institution -- and which for many symbolizes everything fun and innocent about "Old Time Radio." Fibber McGee and Molly had plenty of running gags over the years, due largely to the always inventive scripting of Don Quinn: a writer who can impart fresh flavor to even the moldiest corn -- but none have lingered longer in the public consciousness than that overstuffed hall closet.

36. "The Step On The Stair" 1926

Based on a story in "Radio Digest" magazine, this Old Dark House thriller is radio's first true mystery serial -- heard over WLW, Cincinnati in a series of weekly installments adapted for radio by program director Fred Smith (who is better known as the creator of "The March Of Time.") Smith is one of the most important unsung pioneers of radio -- his 1923 play "When Love Wakens" may be the first American drama to be written especially for radio. Although "Step" is actually a rather crude bit of melodrama, it proves the thriller to be an ideal format for radio: so much so that the script is sold to other stations for local productions, and is still being heard as late as 1930.

35. Gracie Allen's Brother January/February 1933



It isn't radio's first running gag -- but it's the most memorable of its time, as Gracie Allen begins popping up on programs all over the schedule, asking for help in locating her enigmatic "missing brother." The bit grabs the national imagination during the most wretched of Depression winters -- and vaults Burns and Allen to the front ranks of radio's comedy stars.

34. Report On Chain Broadcasting reshapes the Industry 1941

It's not a radio program -- it's a small, paper-bound book. And between the government-issue-orange covers, there's a bombshell: the Federal Communications Commission rulings condemning monopolistic practices in broadcasting. Beginning in 1938, the FCC had been holding detailed hearings investigating the degree of control exercised over the broadcasting industry by NBC and CBS, and the Commission didn't like the picture that emerged: stiff, one-sided contracts that strangled local control of programming and which tended to concentrate the power of radio into the hands of two dominating corporations. The report sends a shock wave thru the industry, forcing the networks to revise their contractual ties to their affiliates -- and forcing the National Broadcasting Company to divest itself of one of the two networks that it operated.

33. Rudy Vallee Refines the Variety Show Fall 1932



He's more important as an impresario than as a performer -- and the "Fleischmann's Yeast Hour" is the reason why. Rudy Vallee had been on the air for Fleischmann since 1929, broadcasting an hour-long program of dance music, broken up only by the appearance of a single guest star each week. But beginning in October 1932, Vallee and the staff at the J. Walter Thompson agency dramatically revise the program format: de-emphasizing Vallee's performances and turning the spotlight on a continuing parade of guest artists. Big names, famous names, old names and new names -- for the next seven years, the Vallee program features the best that Broadway and Hollywood have to offer -- and Vallee gains a reputation as radio's foremost talent scout. Whether he himself is actually entitled to that reputation is a question that can be debated: some claim he did run the show -- and none claimed this more energetically than Vallee himself -- while others say he was just a front man and embittered JWT staffers did all the work. The truth is probably somewhere in between -- but the importance of the show itself is beyond question: it's the pace-setter for every variety series that would follow.

32. The Rise Of Major Bowses Spring/Summer 1935

As spinning goes that weekly wheel of fortune -- round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows -- as the saponaceous Major Edward Bowses takes the nation by storm with his Sunday night new-talent showcase, moving a longstanding local New York feature to a high-profile Sunday night slot on NBC. Never mind that, as a Radio Guide expose reveals, elements of the show are rigged -- the idea of young entertainers from Mudville USA getting their big break on the air ignites a craze for amateur entertainment that inspires a range of imitators. Few of the Bowses discoveries amount to anything -- but there *are* a few who stand out, including a skinny singer from Hoboken who appears in September 1935 as a member of a pop quartet. His Bowses experience proves something of a dead end - but fate has other plans in store for Frank Sinatra.

31. The Music Licensing War 1940-41

The American Society of Composers Authors and Publishers doesn't much like the attitude of Network Radio --- and radio likes ASCAP even less, as negotiations for a new contract allowing the use of ASCAP music break down during the last months of 1940. As the name-calling continues, it becomes evident that there will be no peaceful resolution, and the broadcasters form their own music licensing agency -- Broadcast Music Incorporated, which quickly signs a roster of second-tier songwriters in anticipation of a long standoff. As of January 1st, 1941 all

ASCAP-controlled music disappears from the network air, leaving only public domain and BMI compositions in their place. Longstanding theme songs abruptly vanish, bandleaders scramble to come up with workable arrangements, the broadcasters put up a brave front -- but listeners quickly grow tired of "Jeannie With The Light Brown Hair" and "The Wise Old Owl." By mid-year, the networks and ASCAP have a new agreement -- and the status quo resumes. However, BMI sticks around -- cultivating new songwriting talent and evolving into a major force in the music business: remaining so to this day.

**From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany**



Finally, it is 2006! Hopefully this will be a better year for all of us. We at RWUN hope that your Christmas was happy, cozy, and warm, and that your New Years' celebration was enjoyable and safe.

This month's issue of RWUN continues with Elizabeth McCleod's 100 Greatest OTR moments. Our lead article by Dr. Charles Beckett explores one of the legends of OTR, and quizmaster Jack Richards brings us another new and different puzzle format.

March will bring us a new Trivia quiz, an article about Elmer Davis, an interesting review of a new OTR book from Stewart Wright, and another installment of the 100 Greatest OTR Moments.

As first noted in our last issue, your editor is hoping to begin a new feature this spring involving your favorite OTR series. If you have one series that you enjoy above all others, take a few minutes to jot down the name of the series, some of the reasons why you like it, and any interesting bits of information about your series. You may also submit series in several different genres (i.e. drama, comedy, action-adventure, etc.). You can actually write a short article or, if you wish, just send in the basic points and your RWUN staff will put it into article format. Please E-Mail or send your ideas for "My Favorite OTR Series" to your editor at the addresses listed on page 2.

Hidden Heroes

By Jack M. Richards

Hidden in the following phases are our OTR heroes, actors or shows. The names are not scrambled but may be across two or more words.

1. Crooks pad expense accounts.
2. Do you know ebb tide tables?
3. Can't heat erosion destroy OTR tapes?
4. Rueben, Dixie, Tango: Code words for RDT.
5. An amber gander and a white goose will produce yellow eggs.
6. Thomas had owed Allen two dollars.
7. Mutes can't order in Drive-Thru lanes.
8. An inflamed colon naturally causes pain.
9. Run yonder and buy me a Pepsi.
10. Climber Leon Taylor scaled the Alps.

(Answers elsewhere on this page)



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

This month we will finish the "It's Higgins Sir" series and move on to this month featured series of "Have Gun, Will Travel". This series as been totally re-mastered, with updated sound, speed and show dates. We have also replaced many of the AFRS shows with the originals. Members will notice a great improvement in the quality of the sound of all these shows. The show title updates now conform with the titles that are in most of the books on this show. Please check the titles and dates of the shows on pages 41 and 42 to see if there are some that you do not have from the other media we offer. Next month we will be offering the "Candy Matson" detective series which you will enjoy. The dates of these shows have also been corrected.

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Happy Valentine's and Good listening to all...

Answers to the "Hidden Heroes" puzzle

1. **Sam Spade** (Crooks pad expense accounts.)
2. **Jack Webb** (Do you know ebb tide tables?)
3. **Mercury Theater** (Can't heat erosion destroy OTR tapes?)
4. **William Bendix** (Rueben, dixie, Tango: Code words for RDT.)
5. **Edger Bergen** (An amber gander and a white goose will produce yellow eggs.)
6. **The Shadow** (Thomas had owed Allen two dollars.)
7. **Eddie Cantor** (Mutes Can't order in Drive-Thru lanes.)
8. **Jerry Colonna** (An inflamed Colon naturally causes pain.)
9. **Damon Runyon** (Run yonder and buy me a Pepsi.)
10. **Melton Berle** (Climber Leon Taylor scaled the Alps.)