



Volume 33, Number 3

March, 2008

Wistful Vista to Summerfield Or, "Fibber and Gildy and How They Grew."

by Elizabeth McLeod

The first OTR series I ever followed on a regular basis was "The Great Gildersleeve," as aired in Nostalgia Broadcasting Corporation reruns over my local Public Radio outlet, circa 1976. The first OTR tape I ever bought, in 1977, contained two episodes of "Fibber McGee and Molly." And I'll bet that these two programs have introduced many others to the world of Old Time Radio.

Two shows, springing from a common root -- and yet vastly different in their style. One cartoony, one realistic -- and both illustrate the two poles of radio situation comedy.

The origins of "Fibber McGee and Molly" have been well documented -- Marian and Jim Jordan were small-time Midwestern vaudevillians who became established in Chicago radio in the mid-twenties, and appeared in a staggering variety of program formats thru the latter part of that decade, and on thru the early 1930s. They were highly popular with their regional audiences, but it took their

collaboration with a writer by the name of Don Quinn to make them a national success -- and it is Quinn's unique comic sensibility that defined more than any other the eventual style of "Fibber."

"Fibber McGee and Molly" is often described by commentators as "vaudeville-like" in its approach to comedy, filled with fast-paced gags and exaggerated wordplay. But I'd suggest the style of the series really has less to do with vaudeville influences than those of another important entertainment medium of the era: the comic strip.



Don Quinn had been a cartoonist before moving into radio -- and it is clearly a cartoonist's sensibility which shines thru in his "Fibber" scripts. The characters themselves would have fit right in on the comic pages circa 1935 -- Fibber bears a very strong resemblance to such inept comic-strip husbands as George Bungle (of "The Bungle Family"), and his exaggerating, filibustering speech reminds one a bit of Andy Gump. More important, the construction of Quinn's scripts is very much that of a comic strip. Each episode is

made up of a string of self-contained encounters with various comedy characters, all tied together by the thread of a common plot. The construction of these encounters is very much in the setup/punchline
(Continued on Page 3)

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vein, and one could transcribe them to an actual comic strip form with nothing lost in the translation. Listening to "Fibber," it's very easy to visualize the program in terms of panel borders and speech balloons.

Even more evocative of the comic pages are the characters who surround Fibber and Molly. All of these supporting characters are exaggerated comic-strip "types" -- an Old Man, a Society Woman, a Henpecked Husband, a Con Man, a Grouchy Doctor, and a Blustery Politician. The characters, while very amusing, seem not to exist outside the context of their weekly meeting with Fibber -- it's difficult to imagine, say, the Old Timer having a functional existence in the Real World.

In short, "Fibber McGee and Molly" is a two-dimensional series. This is **not** a criticism, nor is it a negative judgment on the quality of the program -- but it does provide an interesting vantage point from which to view its spin-off, "The Great Gildersleeve."

When the Gildersleeve character first turned up in *Wistful Vista* in 1938-39, he was another in Quinn's gallery of comic "types" -- a pompous windbag. He remained within the strictures of this "type" throughout his time on "Fibber," with only an occasional suggestion of inner vulnerability. But when the character left for his own series in the summer of 1941, something unusual happened. In leaving the two-dimensional borders of *Wistful Vista*, Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve gained a third dimension. When Gildy stepped off the train in *Summerfield*, and took charge of realistic responsibilities like raising his niece and nephew, he stepped out of a cartoon reality, and into an existence very much like our own.

Contrasted with "Fibber's" cartoony approach, "Gildersleeve" was a show firmly grounded in the Real World. Its characters were far more textured than "Fibber's" supporting cast, and thus far more realistic. Where "Fibber" drew its laughs from

setups and punch lines and absurdity, Gildersleeve's humor was much more subtle, playing off simple human foibles. And when John Whedon and Sam Moore took over the scripting of the series in 1942, the town of *Summerfield* itself began to come alive.



The semi-serial format adopted by Whedon and Moore allowed for characters to be given remarkable depth. In listening to the "Gildersleeve" shows of the mid-forties, one gets the feeling of peeking in on short slices of reality -- and that when the show signs off for the week; it's easy to imagine the characters going on with their lives off-mike until you hear them again in the next

episode. In many ways, "Gildersleeve" became the "One Man's Family" of situation comedy.

When Gildersleeve left *Wistful Vista* and gained that *Third Dimension*, it was a one way trip. The characters of Gildy and Fibber evolved along their separate paths and eventually it becomes hard to see the *Wistful Vista* Gildy and the *Summerfield* Gildy as the same person. Perhaps this evolution best explains why crossovers between the two shows were so rare: the style had become so different that it was impossible to bring the two together without compromising what made them both distinctive.

Different characters, different styles -- different worlds, but both, in their own ways, crowning achievements in the development of radio comedy.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com

Multi Sponsors Signal Beginning of The End Of Radio's Golden Age

"T-U-M-S.. yes, Tums for the tummy."-- Don

Wilson

By Danny Godwin

Lincoln, Me. (DG) - The subject of this article is based on an E-Mail I received concerning another article I wrote. The writer stated the product I wrote about didn't sponsor the program at the particular date of the broadcast I mentioned in the article. To make a long story short, he was right--- to a point! The product in question didn't sponsor the program at the date of the broadcast--- it was actually one of three completely different products from different companies that sponsored the program. This commercial package was listed in radio magazines of that day and today's Old Time Radio books under the "Multi Sponsors" label.

When the 1950's began, the idea of Multi Sponsors wasn't a new concept. There were some radio programs during the 1940's that successfully used more than one sponsor. For example, the 30-minute BREAKFAST IN HOLLYWOOD had two different sponsors in two 15-minute segments. Procter & Gamble's Ivory Flakes sponsored the first 15 minutes of the program, and Kellogg's Pep and other Kellogg's cereals sponsored the second segment.

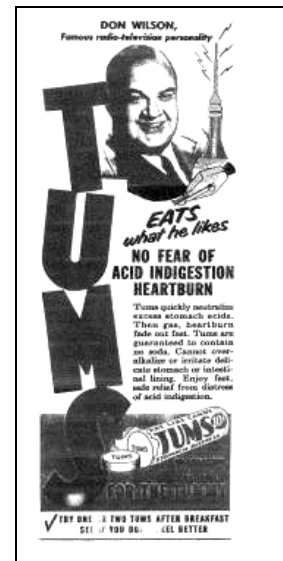
When ARTHUR GODFREY TIME was attracting numerous sponsors, the program was also sectioned off into 15-minute segments for each sponsor. Once again, this setup worked well, although every now and then, Arthur Godfrey would only mention the product he was selling instead of doing one of his famous commercials. Overall, this practice proved successful and would eventually be used for many daytime half hour television programs well into the 1960's.

Getting back to radio, there was good news and bad news concerning the use of Multi Sponsors. We'll begin with the bad news. It was used frequently when network radio as the listeners knew it was dying a slow, painful death during the 1950's. During this time, many major radio stars and major sponsors were leaving radio for television. To make matters worse, the listening audience was also dwindling at an alarming rate.

As bleak an outlook was as what I have described, there was some good news about Multi Sponsors. For the diehard radio listeners, the Multi Sponsors were on hand to sponsor most of the

remaining programs on network radio for the remainder of the golden age. Now that you are familiar with Multi Sponsors, what were the products and how were the commercials presented on the air? Some products were established radio sponsors in their heyday, while others were brand new products.

As for how the commercials were presented, some radio commercials of the 1950's were done live, while many others were transcribed. The commercials were informative and uneventful. Music and musical jingles were used a lot--- and it didn't hurt to have famous celebrities of that era giving their endorsement of the product to the radio listeners. Here's an example of the celebrity endorsement style of advertising.



As you already know, Tums was (and still is) specially made "For The Tummy." When you really think of it, the commercials for Tums during the 1950's were really a stroke of genius by the advertising agency for Lewis-Howe, the makers of Tums. For their celebrity, Don Wilson was hired as the Tums commercial spokesman. Needless to say, Wilson was one of the best and most popular radio announcers in the business, but he was also the perfect spokesman to sell the antacid. If you're a fan of THE JACK BENNY PROGRAM, you already know that Jack Benny kidded Wilson mercilessly for having a large stomach. With that thought in mind, it made sense for Wilson to sell Tums For The Tummy on the air. In addition to Don Wilson, the listeners heard famous stars like Gisele MacKenzie, Edgar Bergen & Charlie McCarthy, Mary Margaret McBride, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Frankie Laine, Mona Freeman, Mel Torme, Dennis James, Fibber

McGee & Molly, and others doing their part in selling products on the air.

The comedy team of Bob & Ray were also very successful in selling products during the final years of radio's golden age. Although the duo presented some commercials seriously, Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding were best known for using their brand of offbeat humor and an array of zany characters in their commercial presentations. It would prove so successful; Bob & Ray continued to present radio commercials well into the modern radio era.

Now that you know who did the selling, what were the new and established products that were sold under the Multi Sponsors label? In addition to Tums, there is an impressive list of established radio sponsors. There were familiar names like Wheaties, Kix, Anacin, Chesterfield, Ford, Sweetheart Soap, Quaker Oats, Ipana, Lava, Fitch Shampoo, Wildroot Cream-Oil, Camel, Bromo Quinine, Kellogg's All-Bran, BiSoDol Powder, Barbasol Brushless, Kool, Campana Products, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Bayer Aspirin, Shinola, Philip Morris, and many others.

There is also an impressive list of new products that participated as Multi Sponsors on the radio. Some of the rookie products either had long runs on the market, or are now longtime favorite brands. This list consists of Prom Home Permanent, White Rain Shampoo, Brylcreem, Kent, Clorets, "Ennds" Chlorophyll Tablets, Winston, Dristan Decongestant Tablets, Brisk Fluoride Tooth Paste, Glamorene Liquid Upholstery Cleaner, Sta-Puf, Imperial Margarine, Dial Shampoo, Newport, Paper Mate Pens, Marlboro, Alpine, Barbasol Presto Lather, Philip Morris Commander, Mentholatum Deep Heat(ing) Rub, 4 Way Cold Tablets, Salem, Candettes Throat Lozenges, Fritos Corn Chips, and many others.

One of the more notable, but not necessarily successful rookie products to take part was the legendary Edsel. The beleaguered car wasn't too popular then, but it would achieve considerable popularity today--- although it hasn't been made for decades. There are Edsel Clubs around the United States, several Edsel Internet web sites, and for anyone lucky enough to own one, the price of a mint condition Edsel can run into a lot of money.

As I stated before, Multi Sponsors helped to prolong radio's golden age--- although it was hanging on by a thread. The only casualty was the end of the close association of sponsor and program. For longtime radio listeners, it was strange to hear Kellogg's All Bran and Sta-Puf sponsoring MA

PERKINS instead of Oxydol; Camel and Bromo Quinine sponsoring GANGBUSTERS instead of Waterman Pens; and Tums and Dial Shampoo sponsoring FIBBER McGEE & MOLLY instead of Johnson's Wax. By losing their longtime sponsors, the listed programs and others like them also lost a part of their identities. However, the most important aspect was that these products and other Multi Sponsors kept the programs on the air for as long as they could. For the diehard radio listeners, that was all that mattered.

CATCH PHRASES

By Jack M. Richards

Old Time Radio abounds with numerous catch phrases or signatures. These are lines that were seen to be the exclusive property of a single OTR character. Some of these phrases are still around today although I wonder if the younger generations know of their origin. Answers on page 6.

Name the actor or actress (A), OTR character (C), show (S), or the phrase itself (P) for the following:

1. "Just the facts, ma'am." (A, C, S)
2. Wanna buy a duck? (A)
3. Charlie McCarthy (P)
4. "Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of men?" (C)
5. "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea." (A)
6. Lone Ranger (P)
7. Clark Kent (P)
8. "I'm a baaaaad boy!" (A)
9. "You, kemo sabe." (C, A)
10. "Where the elite meet to eat." (A, C, S)
11. "Good night, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are." (A)
12. The theatre of the mind. (S)
13. "Hang by your thumbs." (C)
14. Marian Jordan (C, P)
15. "Round, around she and where she stops, nobody knows." (S)
16. "Time wounds all heels." (C, S)
17. "Pardon me for talking in your face, senorita." (A, S)
18. "The little house halfway up in the next block." (S)
19. "Say Good night Gracie" (A)
20. "Doctor, I have a lady in the balcony." (S)

From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany



The top o' the month to one and all, and a blustery March greeting from windy Florida! We are looking forward to a happy St. Patrick's celebration on the 17th as well as revisiting some of our favorite St. Pat's tapes this month.

We have a rather diverse issue this month with articles about the first real spin-off, *The Great Gildersleeve* from *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and the beginning of the end of Radio's Golden Age as signaled by a significant change in the way shows were sponsored. As always, Jack Richards supplies a well-constructed and very challenging puzzle concerning the great catch-phrases of OTR.

Next month, your newsletter will begin another multi-part article, Paul Barringer's in-depth look at *The Adventures of Superman*. Hopefully, we will also have the second in Dick Williamson's superb series of OTR crosswords.

We have received several articles and other items for inclusion in the Newsletter, but, as always, we can use more, so if you have a little time and an idea, please write it down and submit it. In the meantime,

Good listening to all, and ...



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

This month we conclude the "One Man's Family" shows that we've been offering and move on to the "Bill Stern's Sports Newsreel". I must admit that I didn't understand why we had the Bill Stern shows in our library, but after listening to them I really feel they deserve a place in our libraries.

The way Bill featured many radio, film and sports personalities, a different one with each show, I'm glad that we can offer these shows to our members. Each show is very interesting and brief, but they all include little known facts about each star.

I found a lot of pleasant hours listening to these broadcasts and feel sure that our members will also enjoy them.

Answers to "Catch Phrases" puzzle

1. Jack, Webb, Joe Friday, Dragnet.
2. Joe Penner
3. "Well mow me down."
4. The Shadow
5. Walter Winchell
6. "Hi-Yo, Silver."
7. "This is a job for SUPERMAN."
8. Lou Costello
9. Tonto, John Todd (Jay Silverheels on TV)
10. Ed Gardner, Archie, Duffy's Tavern
11. Jimmy Durante
12. CBS Radio Workshop
13. Bob and Ray
14. Molly McGee, "Taint funny McGee."
15. Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour
16. Jane Ace, Easy Aces
17. Mel Blanc, Judy Canova Show
18. Vic and Sade
19. George Burns and Gracie Allen (Must have named both)
20. Dr. I. Q.

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