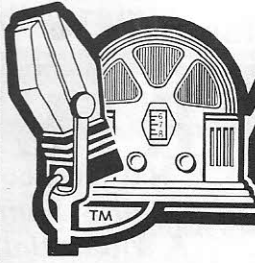


Feb. meeting cancelled (See page 3); BOD election ballots enclosed for members.



SPERDVAC

RADIOGRAM

Volume 20, No. 2 The Society to Preserve and Encourage Radio Drama, Variety and Comedy February 1994

It's the 61st anniversary of Jack Benny's 39th birthday

The Radio Hall of Fame at Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications will celebrate Jack Benny's birthday on Sunday, Feb. 13. The famed radio comedian was born Feb. 14, 1894.

"We're not celebrating his hundredth birthday," said Chuck Schaden, host of the program. "We're saluting the 61st anniversary of Benny's 39th birthday."

Benny's daughter, Joan Benny, will play the part of her mother in a live radio show re-creation.

Ken Alexander, of WNIB Radio in Chicago, has written a script which will showcase some of the most popular characters from the Benny radio shows. Alexander will portray Professor Le Blanc, the violin teacher. WBBM weatherman Harry Volkman will perform the Dennis Day role.

John Sebert, a real estate appraiser from the Chicago suburb of Berwin, won a Jack Benny sound alike contest held Jan. 23. He will play the starring role. Others in the cast will be members of Schaden's "Those Were the Days" radio players.

Tickets for the birthday celebration are \$10 for museum members and \$39 for the general public. Reservations can be made by calling (312) 629-6023.

"Along with his array of wonderful characters, Benny brought humor to radio and television that is as alive today as it was over 40 years ago," said Museum President Bruce DuMont. "Benny will be remembered as forever stingy, 39 and always funny."

"Jack Benny is my favorite comedian and I hope to be his friend until he is forty. That will be forever." —Fred Allen



Jack Benny and wife Mary Livingstone in 1937.

PHOTO COURTESY VIRGIL REIMER

Friends of Old-Time Radio sponsors script writing contest

The Friends of Old-Time Radio is sponsoring its first annual radio script writing contest. "We would like an original 30 minute script which must be based on any of the great radio programs of the past," said Jay Hickerson, editor of *Hello, Again*.

The script can have its characters set in their original time era or in another time frame. Musical bridges and sound

effects should be clearly indicated. Traditionally, radio scripts were double spaced with characters' names indicated on the left side. Sound effects and music cues were underlined. Notes on vocal delivery were indicated in parenthesis.

The prize for the best script is \$150. That script will be performed Oct. 20 as part of the Friends of Old-Time Radio convention. The winner is invited

to direct the production, if s/he attends the convention.

Scripts must be submitted by Sept. 3, 1994. They should be mailed to Dave Zwengler, 6 Lake Ave., #5B, East Brunswick, NJ 08816.

"A distinguished panel of old-time radio buffs will pick the winning script," Hickerson said.

SPERDVAC



Naomi Lewis

(In memory of Dick Mack)

Dorothy Geiger

(In memory of Milton Geiger)

Hy Averbach

(In memory of Bob Sweeney & Jerry Hausner)

Herb Ellis

(In memory of Bob Sweeney, Elliott Lewis & Jerry Hausner)

Elliott Reid

(In memory of Howard Duff & John McIntire)

Bill Cook

(In memory of Bob Crosby)

Glenhall Taylor

(In memory of Jerry Hausner)

Jean Gillespie

(In memory of Byron Kane, Howard Duff & Jerry Hausner)

Joe Thompson

(In memory of Jerry Hausner)

Barbara Fuller

(In memory of Bob Jensen & Lenore Kingston)

Bill Lally

(In memory of Lenore Kingston, Jerry Hausner & Lou Krugman)

Veola Vonn

(In memory of Hanley Stafford & Frank Nelson)

Jeanette Nolan

(In memory of Jerry Hausner & Carlton E. Morse)

Bill Stulla

(In memory of J. C. Lewis)

Mary Jane Croft

(In memory of Elliott Lewis, Howard Duff, John McIntire & Jerry Hausner)

Lillian Buyeff

(In memory of Lou Krugman & John Dehner)

Betty Lackow

(In memory of Carlton E. Morse)

Elizabeth Miller

(In memory of Marvin Miller)

Lew Lauria & Betty Lou Gerson

(In memory of Lenore Kingston)

Ace Bryson

(In memory of Lenore Kingston)

Mickey Smith

(In memory of Richard "Peavey" LeGrand)

Tony Randall

(In memory of Charlie Warburton)

FRIENDS

Nathan Scott

(In memory of Walter Schumann, Leith Stevens & Wilbur Hatch)

Bea Wain

(In memory of Andre Baruch)

Lucille Meredith

(In memory of John McIntire & Jerry Hausner)

Bill James

(In memory of Tom Hanley & Virginia Gregg)

Audrey Marsh

(In memory of Andre Baruch, Mari Bell Sharbutt & Lenore Kingston)

Chuck Benedict

(In memory of Elliott Lewis and Howard Duff)

Phil Cohan

(In memory of Garry Moore & Lenore Kingston)

Millie Morse

(In memory of Carlton E. Morse)

Seaman Jacobs

(In memory of Pat Buttram)

Willard & Mary Anna Waterman

(In memory of Fran Carlon & Harry Elders)

Ed "Speedy" Wianeoki

(In memory of Helen O'Connell)

Fred Bondy

(In memory of Elliott Lewis & Howard Duff)

Russell J. Folsom

Gary Papers

Alice Backes

William Conrad

Casey Kasem

Walt Staves

Dr. R. S. Richards

Gerold Clemons

Sharon Douglas

Helen Garrison

Jack Brown

Lucia Silvestri

Bob Hite

John Wisley

June Foray

David Richardson

Tom Seslar

Bob LeMond

Ivan Cury

Betsy Weinberg

Jonathon Hole

Dick Murphy

Gil Stratton Jr.

Stuart Lubin

Dan Healy

Art Gilmore

Del Sharbutt

Sharon Douglas

Doris Singleton

Himan Brown

Roy Rowan

SPERDVAC is very grateful to these individuals who have contributed \$50 or more to our organization during the past twelve months. Donations, made payable to SPERDVAC, should be mailed to membership chair Carolyn Rawski. (See SPERDVAC Directory.)

MEMOS FOR MEMBERS

Complete coverage of our highly successful Old-Time Radio Convention just wasn't possible in last month's edition of the *Radiogram*. Our heartfelt thanks to all who helped, to all who appeared on stage, and to everyone able to attend. There were so many impressive events, we still couldn't give them proper coverage if we devoted this entire issue to it. We hope the limited number of photos we ran last month will convey a little of the fun we had. Please think about joining us in November.

Let your voice be heard! Behind the scenes Stuart Lubin has been recording the *Radiogram* on cassettes for our sight impaired members for many moons. Now Stuart is ready to pass the job on to another volunteer. This is one job that doesn't require residence in Southern California. If you're interested, contact Stuart directly. His address is in the SPERDVAC Directory on page 5.

Another penny, please. Quietly, while we weren't watching, the postal people increased the 4th class/Library Rate fee by a penny. If you borrow tapes from any of the

Overthrowing Christmas



PHOTO © 1993 JORDAN R. YOUNG

Norman Lloyd and Kathleen Freeman performing in the Dec. 3 live production of Norman Corwin's "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas." Behind the scenes, Peggy Webber worked for several months to put the production on the air after Corwin asked to have the show cast by the California Artists Radio Theatre. "I felt this was the greatest honor for CART," she told SPERDVAC. "I was very humbled." Webber added other cast members who had not previously appeared on CART productions. In our article last month we didn't mention the production was hosted by Charles Champlin and announced by John Harlan. Marty Halperin and Emmy Award winning engineer Ray Angona were the broadcast engineers. National Public Radio and American Public Radio have asked to carry the CART production next Christmas.

SPERDVAC libraries, please add one cent more when affixing postage.

Encourage radio. Two members sent us copies of letters they sent to station KNX, Los Angeles. One suggested occasional productions of the caliber of "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas," the other requested inclusion of the *CBS Radio Mystery Theatre* in their evening line-up. Letters to stations are a great way to convey listener interest. Think about offering your programming suggestions to local stations.

On Lincoln's Birthday the California Artists Radio Theatre will rebroadcast their production "For Mr. Lincoln." Part of the program was written by CART's Peggy Webber; part is based on a script Norman Corwin wrote for a *Cavalcade of America* broadcast. Pat Buttram and Jeanette Nolan star with Lou Krugman, Vance Colvig, Parley Baer, William Woodson, Sean McClory, Peggy Webber and Richard Erdman. Budd Tollefson and Cliff Thorsness provided the sound effects. KUSC-FM will carry the show Feb. 12, but the air time was not set at press deadline. The station has agreed to include requests for donations to the Thousand Oaks Public Library, which sustained \$2.5 million in damage during the Jan. 17 earthquake.

Earthquake impacts SPERDVAC operations

The Jan. 17 earthquake has impacted some of SPERDVAC's operations.

SPERDVAC's Board of Directors has voted to cancel the Feb. 12 meeting because many of our audience members may be unable to attend. At present, we are planning to hold our March 12 meeting at St. Andrews Lutheran Church in Van Nuys. Madeleine Pugh Davis and Bob Carroll Jr., writers of the Lucille Ball radio and television shows, are the tentatively scheduled guests.

Most of open reel tapes 1-500 in the General Library were damaged when the early morning earthquake sent them flying to the ground, then soaked them after a water heater burst. Librarian Don Keith, who has operated that portion of our library from Northridge for a decade, is unable to fill any additional orders. Orders and rental fee checks were also damaged during the disaster.

Some of SPERDVAC's materials in our storage facility were thrown around a bit, but a recent inspection of the premises indicated only minor damage. Also, we have not noted damage to any of our radio transcriptions.



Station re-creates big band broadcast; Cincinnati OTR convention April 15 & 16; New OTR club and publications

by Barbara J. Watkins

Member Lawrence C. Holian of Sunnyvale, California sends us news about a special radio show broadcast on KCEA, 89.1 FM, in Atherton, California. This station broadcasts a big band format.

Station owner Frank Spinetta wanted listeners to know what live radio was like in the 1930's and 1940's so he turned the Menlo Park City Council chambers into a radio studio from the big band era the evening of Dec. 15.

He brought in a 17-piece orchestra, sound effects and fake commercials (it's a non-profit station) and broadcast live in front of 166 big band fans. The program was also taped for future airings.

Time is fast approaching for the first of a nationwide series of old-time radio conventions. On April 15 and 16, Cincinnati's 8th annual Old Time Radio & Nostalgia Convention will take place at the Marriott Inn, 11320 Chester Road in Cincinnati. Call (513) 772-1720 for room reservations and mention the convention for special rates.

This year's special guests will be Ezra Stone (Henry Aldrich), Barney Beck (sound effects artist) and John Rayburn. It all begins at 3 p.m. on Friday with the opening of the dealers' room. Friday evening will feature a re-creation of **The Shadow**.

Saturday's highlights include a News and Sports panel with John Rayburn, sound effects demonstration by Barney Beck, an **Aldrich Family** re-creation starring Ezra Stone as Henry, and a Saturday evening dinner with an **X Minus One** re-creation starring Ezra Stone.

The cost is \$6 per day and \$28 for Saturday dinner. Make checks payable

to Bob Burchett and mail to RMS & Associates, 10280 Gunpowder Road, Florence, KY 41042. For more information, call Bob Burchett at (606) 282-0333.

Speaking of John Rayburn, his first issue of *Thrilling Days of Yesteryear* is available for your enjoyment. The eight-page newsletter contains an interview with Arthur Anderson, along with a variety of short articles from Clem McCarthy's coverage of the Preakness in 1947 to John's personal acquisition of a Little Orphan Annie shake-up mug. The cost is \$15 for six issues. Mail your check or money order to: Carol T. Rayburn, 7222 W. Stanford Ave., Littleton, CO 80123.

The *Radio Listener's Lyceum* is an old-time radio club dedicated to the preservation and promotion of radio from its golden age. They publish a newsletter, *RLL on the Air*, bimonthly, meet on the second Saturday of each month at 5 p.m., and have a cassette lending library. Membership is \$15 per year for USA residents and \$20 for Canadians. Write to Robert W. Newman at Radio Listener's Lyceum, 11509 Islandale Dr., Forest Park, OH 45240-2319.

Send your news, information, questions and comments for this column to: Information Please, c/o Barbara J. Watkins, P.O. Box 561, South Pasadena, CA 91031. Til next time, spaceman's luck!

Olan Soule dies



At press time SPERDVAC learned the sad news that radio actor Olan Soule died Feb. 1. He is pictured with *First Nighter Program* co-star Barbara Luddy at a SPERDVAC meeting in 1977. The Radiogram will review Soule's radio career in the March issue.



McGee's Closet is a free service to our members and honorary members. Send your wants in OTR-related material to McGee's Closet, c/o Barbara J. Watkins, P.O. Box 561, South Pasadena, CA 91031. Please specify desired taping format (cassette or open reel).

WANTED: Records, tapes or information on radio programs, or otherwise, of Morton Downey, Sr. Have to trade rare dance bands and vocalists. Contact: Vahan Ouzoonian, 1565 E. Highland Ave., Redlands, CA 92374.

FOR SALE: OTR book collection, 40 titles, including Dunning's *Tune in Yesterday*. All in very good to new condition. Write for list, description and prices. Contact: Don Schubert, 22935 Fonthill Ave., Torrance, CA 90505-2834.

WANTED: Cassettes of **Cavalcade of America, We the People and March of Time**. Will buy at any reasonable price or trade. Contact: Beth Holman, 16705 Craigmere Dr., Middleberg Hts., OH 44130.

General Library adds 150+ hours of OTR

SPERDVAC's volunteer tape dubbers have worked hard — between aftershocks — to record the programs represented on the enclosed two General Library catalog pages.

About 150 hours of old-time radio are featured on pages 193-196. Dubbers Bud Schwab, Al Cate, Bruce Miller and Dan Haefele have prepared these shows for SPERDVAC's members.

Acquisitions chair John Gassman recorded the master tapes. He credits Tom Salome, AVPRO (Terry Salomson and Don Aston) and Barrett Benson for providing the **Superman** shows.

Member Duane Harding has recorded numerous tapes of radio **Dragnet** shows and Barbara Watkins recorded copies of recently donated programs featuring Buddy Clark. They will be added to the next General Library catalog page.

SPERDVAC members who find their catalog pages are missing or damaged should send a self-addressed, stamped envelope and note to Dan Haefele, 4366-D West 136th St., Hawthorne, CA 90250-7108.

SPERDVAC Directory

All articles and artwork © 1994 by SPERDVAC unless otherwise indicated. Published monthly except December by the **Society to Preserve and Encourage Radio Drama, Variety and Comedy**, a California non-profit public benefit corporation. Membership is open to all U.S. residents. Dues are \$25 for the first year and \$15 for renewals. Annual subscriptions to the **Radiogram** ONLY are \$15 in the U.S., Canada and Mexico and \$20 to other countries.

SPERDVAC INFORMATION AND OFFICIAL BUSINESS: P. O. Box 7177, Van Nuys, CA 91409-9712. (310) 947-9800.

MEMBERSHIP AND RADIOGRAM SUBSCRIPTIONS, CATALOG PAGES AND LIBRARY ORDER FORMS: Carolyn Rawski, 7430 Gaviota Ave., Van Nuys, CA 91406-3041.

RADIOGRAM EDITOR: Dan Haefele, 4366-D 136th St., Hawthorne, CA 90250-7108 (310) 973-5060.

LIBRARIES:

GENERAL LIBRARY - Cassettes 1-500: Bob Steinmetz, P. O. Box 669, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266-0669.

GENERAL LIBRARY - Cassettes 501-1000: Gene Ward, Box 635, Tujunga, CA 91043-0635.

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ARCHIVES LIBRARY - Cassettes 501-1000: Gary Mollica, 135 N. Meredith Ave., Pasadena, CA 91106-2207.

ARCHIVES LIBRARY - Cassettes 1001-1483: Dan Lippiatt, P.O. Box 3514, Simi Valley, CA 93093-3514

ARCHIVES LIBRARY - Cassettes 1484+: Bruce Miller, 1616 Harper Ave., Redondo Beach, CA 90278-2725.

ARCHIVES LIBRARY - Open reels 1-1000: **CLOSED**

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AUDIO RADIOGRAM: Send C-90 cassette in returnable mailer to Stuart Lubin, 627 N. Fuller Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90036. (213) 653-2548. (For blind members only.)

AUDIO SPERDVAC CATALOGS: Contact Bob Herman, 1329 Garrison Ave., Port Orchard, WA 98366-3321 (206) 876-5850. (For blind members only.)

MEMBERSHIP BADGES: Send \$5.00 each to Don Keith, Box 5861, Glendale, CA 91221.

ACQUISITIONS: (Discs, tapes & printed materials): John Gassman, Box 1163, Whittier, CA 90603. (310) 947-9800 for both General and Archives Libraries.

Actor Howard Caine dies

Howard Caine, radio, film and television actor, died Dec. 29. He was 67.

Caine's show business career began when he was a 2-1/2 year old performer in *Our Gang* silent comedies being filmed in his native Nashville. "My brothers and sister...took the outfit off of a doll I had, dressed me in it, and took me down to the Lowes Theatre in Nashville where they were auditioning," he told SPERDVAC in 1991.

Hal Roache's brother Jack grabbed the little boy dressed in bib overalls, picked him up by the back straps "like a suitcase" and brought the youth to his brother's attention. Later, when their filming in Nashville was completed, Roache tried in vain to convince the Caine family to move to Hollywood.

When he was 12-1/2, his family moved to New York City. It was there he declared his intentions to be an actor.

The youngster was trained at a New York speech and acting school where he learned to lose his Southern accent. He also took radio acting classes there.

Traveling via New York's subway system, where he could hear a wide variety of foreign languages and dialects, the aspiring actor recognized how marketable his skills could be if he could replicate foreign accents.

As Caine's acting abilities continued to develop, radio acting jobs came his way. His youth became an asset during World War II because many of his colleagues joined the Armed Services. At 17, he commonly played roles of men in their forties.

"And during the war there were all of those dialects being used (on radio)," he once noted.

Actors of the era had cards printed which advised radio directors of the bearer's vocal age range and accents and dialects performed. "In those days we went to see the guys responsible for producing and directing radio shows," he said. "They (the directors) all had one of those 3 x 5 metal index

card boxes and they kept those cards in there." Caine's casting card indicated his ability to perform 32 dialects.

One of the major differences Mr. Caine saw between radio and stage acting is radio's limited rehearsal time and the medium's requirement for the ability to do good first-time script readings.

"We sat down with a script that we never had in our hands before, got a read-through, corrections and timing. It was a luxury on hour and half-hour shows to get another read-through for timing after the (script) cuts. Then we'd get on mike and do it," he said.

"On 15 minute soaps, we might or might not get the read-through. They might just time it the first time on mike and make cuts, then have a quick dress (rehearsal) for timing and then we were on the air," he added.

Mr. Caine had running parts on two of radio's top soap operas, **The Guiding Light** and **The Brighter Day**.

In private life Caine was an amateur musician. In recent years he worked in television and in several stage productions.

Caine is survived by his wife Valerie and by his son Lyle.

Passing parade. Hugh Wedlock, 85, died Dec. 13. For years he was teamed with fellow comedy writer Howard Schneider. He wrote radio comedy for Eddie Cantor and Jack Benny. . .Max Hutto, 82, died Dec. 10. He was an Armed Forces Radio reporter and later director on **Fibber McGee and Molly**, **Father Knows Best** and the **Penny Singleton Show** ...Chicago actor/announcer Harry Elders, 84, died Nov. 25. His announcing credits included **The National Barn Dance**. On the **First Nighter** series he was the voice admonishing "Smoking in the outer lobby only, please." Elder's Chicago acting credits include **Curtain Time**, **Backstage Wife**, **Ma Perkins**, **Jack Armstrong**, **Author's Playhouse** and **Captain Midnight**.



*Don Ameche died Dec. 6 at 85. In addition to his film career, Ameche was one of early radio's top voices. His credits include **The First Nighter Program**, **Chase and Sanborn Hour** and **The Bickersons**.*



*Long-time radio and TV program host Garry Moore, 78, died Nov. 28. In 1943 he and Jimmy Durante were teamed to replace Abbott and Costello. Moore left the Durante show in 1947 to host **Take It or Leave It**. Later he hosted the **Garry Moore Show** on CBS.*

The Radio Bookshelf

Frank Munn: A Biodiscography

Handbook of Old-Time Radio

Frank Munn: A Biodiscography of the Golden Voice of Radio by Rodney Steiner and Thomas A. DeLong. \$12.50. 132 pages. Sasco Associates, P.O. Box 335, Southport, CT 06490.

In this compact paperback, two superb researchers pool their talents and successfully fulfill their mission: to rescue Frank Munn from the obscurity that has eclipsed him since 1945. The first half of this book is Munn's fascinating biography, written by Tom DeLong, one of the premier OTR researchers in the country. The entire second half is a detailed discography compiled by Rodney Steiner, a West Coast expert on vintage phonograph records.

Frank Munn, one of the most acclaimed singers on network radio from 1928 to World War II, was an unlikely prospect for all this prestige. He had no musical training, never considered singing as a career until a hand injury at age 25, and didn't get a good job on radio until he was almost 30. Moreover, he was so self-conscious about his roly-poly physique that he avoided all public appearances throughout his career.

Munn's voice, one of superb intonation and perfect enunciation, plus his flawless technique and true pitch, catapulted him to airwave mastery. His voice was the sought-after ideal for the early recording studio and emerging radio microphone. Munn had moderate success recording for the Brunswick label in the early 20s, but the *Palmolive Hour* on NBC (beginning December 1927) was his threshold to greatness. But to get that job, he had to change his name.

An amiable fellow, he had no objection to adopting the pseudonym

"Paul Oliver" so the soap advertiser could benefit from the brand name repetition. Since he would eventually do about 200 broadcasts under that name on radio, he was competing with himself — the Brunswick records under his true name.

DeLong does a masterful job of taking us through Munn's subsequent career, including the mid-30s when (under his real name) he was starring on three separate, prime-time network radio shows. These were *The American Album of Familiar Music* (later called *American Musical Review*) on NBC, *Lavender and Old Lace* on CBS, and *Waltz Time* on NBC. The first two programs were the product of Frank and Anne Hummert, better known for their soap operas, but equally proficient in promoting musical shows.

Munn got along better with the Hummerts than did some other performers. This husband and wife team routinely fired people for any infraction deemed "disloyal," which included asking for a raise. Munn apparently never made that mistake and he worked on the Hummert shows for over 13 years with no contract, just a handshake.

Despite his weight problems and occasional illness, Munn never missed a broadcast in his busy schedule for over ten years, compiling a record that Lou Gehrig could admire. His lavish earnings were not reflected in his very modest life-style. Although he enjoyed all of his musical career, he willingly gave it up in 1945 and never looked back. Munn was content with a quiet retirement which he enjoyed until his death in October 1953.

The next forty years erased, in the public's mind, any trace of this marvelous singer. This shy, sensitive super-star of

OTR is now virtually unknown, even to musicians. In this book, DeLong and Steiner have restored Frank Munn to his proper place in our American musical popular culture. — *Jack French*

Handbook of Old-Time Radio: A Comprehensive Guide to Golden Age Radio Listening and Collecting by Jon D. Swartz and Robert C. Reinehr. 825 pages. \$92.50. Scarecrow Press, P. O. Box 4167, Metuchen, NJ 08840.

The authors might be criticized for trying to pack too much into one book. This one-volume handbook of OTR history is an attempt to tell nearly everything about American radio's early era.

One section of the book is devoted to program category logs. The "logs" are lists of network and syndicated shows by genre. They include music programs, adventure-crime-mystery, soap operas, drama-anthology, etc. The lists include network, years on the air, and number of broadcasts available. A thumbnail sketch of each genre precedes each category log.

The program descriptive log, another major portion of the book, is an alphabetical listing of over 2000 shows. The authors chose to limit this section to "brief descriptions of the better-known and better-documented" shows on the air. The descriptions are limited to one paragraph, giving the basic details.

Also included are an appendix on collecting OTR, a selected annotated bibliography, a performer/name index, and a program index.

This work, which took three years to write, is a handy reference for the OTR fan. — *Dan Haefele*

Irving Brecher and The Life of Riley

by Dan Haeefe

Irving Brecher is best known as the creator-writer of *The Life of Riley*. He began his comedy writing career several years earlier.

One of his earliest jobs was on a show starring Milton Berle. "I wrote a 45 minute program in 1936 for Berle called the *Gillette Community Sing*," he said. "That led me into receiving a contract to write films."

Earlier, he had written vaudeville routines for Berle. "I was an usher in a movie house in New York. At that time the popularity of Milton Berle was beginning to emerge. He was a brash, young comedian who was becoming well-known for stealing everybody's material," he told SPERDVAC last month.

"One day, after I had sent some one-liners in to Walter Winchell, which appeared in the *Daily Mirror*, a reviewer for *Variety* came into the theater to our current film," he recalled. The reviewer said he had heard Bob Hope use some of the gags printed in Winchell's column.

Brecher was delighted and wanted to know if the audience laughed at his jokes. He didn't know he could get paid for his labors.

The *Variety* writer suggested Brecher should take out an ad in his newspaper announcing his availability. *Variety* charged \$15 a column inch and Brecher was earning \$18 a week.

"I wrote an ad. It said 'Positively Berle proof gags. So bad not even Milton would steal them.'"

Berle called, asking Brecher to bring jokes he could use in a live stage performance. "I got some newspapers and I wrote some topical lines," he said. "I took them over, with my knees shaking, and got into the Capital Theater backstage."

"Did you bring the stuff, kid?" 25-year-old Berle inquired of the 18-year-old writer. Brecher waited in the hallway while Berle read the material. The comedian then directed him to his manager, who had a check waiting for him. The check was for \$50.

"I wrote for other comedians, as well as Berle, making a small amount of money. It was hard times for quite a while," he



Joining creator Irving Brecher, center, at the NBC microphone are Lou Kosloff, William Bendix, Tommy Cook and Paula Winslowe. COURTESY IRVING BRECHER

said.

Those hard times included writing sketches for comedians appearing as guests on variety shows. For example, he wrote a spot for Lou Holtz to use on Rudy Vallee's radio show.

"Of all the small-time comedians I ever dealt with, the most honorable one was Henny Youngman," Brecher noted. "Many of them never paid us or only paid half of what they promised — or they hid from us. Henny once agreed, if I would write a vaudeville monologue for him to give me \$200, which was a lot of money for me at that time. He gave me \$100 in advance. And when I returned with the pages, before he read them he gave me the other hundred."

"I had a falling out with Berle because he wouldn't pay me anything to speak of. He wanted me to sign a contract with him for \$15 a week," he revealed.

They split, but reunited when the *Gillette* program was offered. Brecher was the sole writer for the show and when Berle moved the program to Hollywood, Brecher came to California too.

Mervin Leroy liked his comedy writing work and signed Brecher to a

personal contract, effective when the *Gillette Community Sing* went off the air. He returned to New York, then learned Leroy was moving to MGM. "He had under personal contract, aside from myself, Lana Turner and a couple of other actors," he reported. "So he took us all to MGM. I wrote at MGM for 10 years."

Brecher's film work included an assignment to "punch up" — add comedy — to scenes for "The Wizard of Oz." He was the only writer on two Marx Brothers films, "A Day at the Circus" and "Go West."

His association with Groucho Marx led indirectly to the success of *The Life of Riley*.

"The *Life of Riley* would never have happened except that Groucho had had two serious failures on the radio and his ego was dragging very badly," Brecher explained. "At the time I was writing the script of 'Meet Me in St. Louis' which was in 1943, Groucho approached me and said, 'You've got to write a radio show for me. I've got to get a hit.'"

Brecher protested that his contract with MGM kept him from writing a radio

Continued on page 10

—STILL AVAILABLE—

The Ultimate History of Network Radio
Programming and Guide to All
Circulating Shows

written by Jay Hickerson, October, 1992
Editor of Hello Again

- # *450-page reference book listing over 6000 network, regional, local and syndicated radio programs. (Soft cover and spiral bound)*
- # *Traces each program by giving broadcast dates, sponsors, network and air time. Often a brief description with one or two cast members is given. The main purpose, however, is to trace each program by showing when it was on the air.*
- # *Includes theme music titles if known.*
- # *Lists ALL shows available to collectors*

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Irving Brecher *continued from page 8*
series. But, he added, there was a pilot show he wrote about "an inept father who keeps drifting along with errors and failures."

"I called it The Flotsom Family," he said. "We made a platter (transcription recording) with a live audience. They laughed very loudly."

On his way home from the recording session Brecher told his wife he didn't think the show would sell. "No one will believe Groucho as a father," he predicted. "It never did sell."

Months later he said a short comedy film featuring William Bendix. "On the way home I said to my wife, 'You know, this fellow Bendix might be good in that radio show I did for Groucho if I turn it into his vernacular.'"

The comedy writer sent a script to Bendix's agent. Bendix liked the script and agreed to record a transcription of the audition show.

"William Morris Agency represented the show," he said. "Then six months went by and I forgot all about it." An agency man found the transcription at the bottom of a large pile of audition recordings. He played the recording — now warped — because he liked the title.

MGM agreed to let him put the show on the air as long as he received no air credit for writing the program. The series went on the air Jan. 16, 1944 with Brecher identified as the producer.

Pabst, the sponsor, agreed to renew the series for the 1950-51 season only if Brecher would air a television version from New York. "I tried to get Bendix to agree to do **The Life of Riley** on television and he said he thought TV was going to 'blow over,'" Brecher said. After auditioning many actors, Brecher decided to hire a performer he'd seen once before in a nightclub. He name was Jackie Gleason.

The day the television series won an Emmy Pabst cancelled the show. "They admitted to me later that the only reason they wanted to get on television with Riley . . . was that they wanted to hold the time so that in the Fall they could get the fights from Madison Square Garden."

Then NBC put the show on TV from Hollywood with Bendix playing the lead.