

## Radio Trivia

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By Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen; from *Trail End Notes*, July 2004 & July 2014

In 2003, the Trail End Guilds sponsored a summer fundraiser entitled *Wireless: Live Readers' Theater From the Golden Age of Hollywood*. Based on authentic radio programs from the 1940s and 50s, the production had four "plays within a play": *The Romance of Helen Trent*, *Pat Novak for Hire*, *My Friend Irma*, and *The Maxwell House Coffee Hour Featuring George Burns & Gracie Allen*. The mix of mystery romance and comedy was such a hit with audiences that the Guilds sponsored a second go-round the next year.



Wireless Advertisement, 2014 (TESHS Collection)

In doing the research for 2004's summer fundraiser, *Wireless Goes Hollywood*, Trail End staff discovered some interesting tidbits about both radio in general and the three plays included in the presentation: *Casablanca*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *Sorry Wrong Number*.

*Wireless* went off the stage for a while, but when we did another round in 2014, we discovered even more about old-time radio. Programs featured in 2014 included a reprise of *The Romance of Helen Trent*, plus episodes of *Jack Armstrong All American Boy*, *Romance*, *The Bickersons*, and *The New Adventures of Philip Marlowe*.

### 2004

**The Lady Esther Controversy** Both *Casablanca* and *The Philadelphia Story* were sponsored by an Illinois-based cosmetics company, makers of Lady Esther Face Cream. In its commercials, Lady Esther was portrayed by actress Bess Johnson. One of the few female announcers working in network radio at the time, Ms. Johnson stirred up quite a furor. In May 1938, *Radio Guide*

magazine reported that some people believed that all radio commercials should be done by men. In the article "Should Radio Use Women Announcers" twelve writers gave the pros and cons of the female on-air voice. Regardless what the people thought of her as Lady Esther, it didn't discourage Ms. Johnson from making radio commercials. She later went on to make commercial announcements for Palmolive and other products.

**Comics Turn SUSPENSE-ful** One of the most celebrated radio programs during the golden age was *Suspense*. Begun on CBS in 1942, *Suspense* remained one of the network's premier shows until its final episode aired in 1962. The program featured some of the most famous stars in Hollywood: Orson Welles, Frank Sinatra, Peter Lorre, Cary Grant and the great Agnes Moorehead. Surprisingly, *Suspense* did something else. It gave actors an opportunity to appear in roles entirely foreign to their character. Among the comedians who appeared in dramatic roles on *Suspense* were Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, Gene Kelly, and Jack Benny.

**One Writer, Two Hepburn Hits** Philip Barry, author of *The Philadelphia Story*, was also the author of *Holiday*, a 1928 Broadway smash that later became the first Barry-penned hit for Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant. Filmed in 1938, *Holiday* was the first of two films that brought Hepburn's career back from the brink of disaster (she had been dubbed "box office poison" after a string of movie flops). *The Philadelphia Story* was the second. Unlike his star actress, however, Barry did not go on to bigger and better things. Once favorably compared to the great Noel Coward as an author of "champagne" comedies, Barry died in relative obscurity in 1949 after producing no more commercially successful plays.

**Hedy's Second Chance** *Casablanca* producer Hal B. Wallis originally considered Austrian-born actress Hedy Lamarr for the role of Ilsa Lund. Unfortunately for her career, the dark-haired temptress was then under contract to MGM, which wouldn't loan her to Warner Brothers. Besides, stated Lamarr, she didn't want to work with an unfinished script (the script was still being rewritten even as filming commenced). So Ingrid Bergman was given the role, one that proved to be one of the high points of her career. Later, following the movie's success, Lamarr portrayed Ilsa in a 1944 *Lux Radio Theater* presentation, based on the movie script. (In that presentation, incidentally, Rick was portrayed by Alan Ladd, not Humphrey Bogart.)

**Sorry, Wrong Actress** When Hollywood went looking for an actress to cast in the role of the hysterical Mrs. Stevenson in *Sorry, Wrong Number*, they bypassed the part's originator, Agnes Moorehead. A veteran of Orson Welles' *Mercury Theater On the Air*, Moorehead played Mrs. Stevenson seven times on radio – each time to critical and popular acclaim. By the time the movie was to be made in 1947, Moorehead had already been nominated for two Academy Awards (*The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Mrs. Parkington*). Nevertheless, the studio wanted a "bigger" star and so turned to the reigning "Queen of Film Noire," Barbra Stanwyck. Previously

nominated for three Oscars, Stanwyck was also nominated for *Sorry Wrong Number*. Later, Stanwyck joined Moorhead on television, where they both won Emmys for their portrayals of family matriarchs: Stanwyck on *The Big Valley* and Moorehead on *Bewitched*.

**Screen Guild Members at Play** *The Screen Guild Players* radio programs featured just that: members of the Screen Actors Guild playing parts on the radio. Sometimes the actors would play the same characters they had played on screen, such as Kathryn Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story* or William Bendix in *The Babe Ruth Story*. Other times, different actors would take over famous roles: Henry Fonda starring in *Destry Rides Again* instead of James Stewart, and Rosalind Russell replacing Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka*. With 528 episodes broadcast from 1939 through 1952, *The Screen Guild Players* offered one of the most successful, star-packed programs on radio.

## 2014

**Radio-Noir** Philip Marlowe was one of several film noir-style detectives on radio. Created in 1939 by author Raymond Chandler, the irascible character has been portrayed in films over the years by everyone from Humphrey Bogart to Elliot Gould. *The New Adventures of Philip Marlowe* began in 1947 and starred matinee idol Van Heflin. The series only lasted a few months on NBC before it moved to CBS in 1948. Later, with Gerald Mohr in the starring role, it ran for 114 episodes and was at one time the most-listened-to show on radio.

**A Cereal-Selling Serial** On the air from 1933 to 1951, *Jack Armstrong, All American Boy* was an adventure series sponsored by Wheaties. Each fifteen minute episode only had about ten minutes of actual scripted dialogue; the rest was taken up with cereal promotion. In 1964, an animated version was developed by cartoonists Hanna-Barbera (known for *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*). When negotiations for rights to the main character collapsed, the series was redeveloped as *Jonny Quest*.

**Soap Opera on a Grand Scale** Airing continuously from 1933 to 1960, all 7,222 episodes of *The Romance of Helen Trent* saw the title character searching for love in a world full of danger, evil and heartbreak. The title character had no fewer than twenty-eight serious suitors over the years. Before she could marry any of them, however, something always went haywire: usually the man lied, died or married another woman. Helen herself was shot, poisoned, hypnotized, blackmailed, jailed for murder, and thoroughly exhausted by her stream of potential lovers.

**A Shock to the System** This was one of radio's most unusual creations. As portrayed by Don Ameche and Frances Langford, *The Bickersons* was centered around the escapades of a constantly squabbling, childless married couple – quite a shock for listeners used to loving

mom-dad-and-two-kid families such as *Ozzie and Harriet*! Although the two sometimes showed a tender spot for one another, listeners were often left wondering why the Bickersons even stayed together. Fans of television's *The Honeymooners* may recognize bits of Ralph and Alice Cramden in the characters of John and Blanche.

**The Many Faces of Romance** A thirty-minute program, *Romance* was never the same twice. Although it ran for over twelve years – between 1943 and 1956 – it was constantly changing content, producers, directors, performers and time slots. Nevertheless, every episode fell under the broad category of “romance.” Some of the stories were well-known: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Lost Horizon* and so forth. Our episode, a goofy science fiction comedy called *The Strip Tease and the Time Warp*, is considerably less well-known, but just as entertaining.



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