

From Jungles to Dog Shows: Bob Becker on Radio

Ryan Ellett

Bob Becker graduated from Beloit College in 1912 and soon after went to work for the zoology department of Chicago's Field Museum. While working there Becker participated in a bird and mammal collecting expedition to Brazil. He traveled through the Amazon basin for a year and half and followed that up with trips through the Peruvian and Bolivian Andes. With these adventurer's credits under his belt, Becker went to work for the Chicago Tribune sometime in the early 1920s where he wrote extensively about travel and the outdoors, both in the United States and beyond.

Becker went on the air for the first known time on Sunday, March 8, 1931, over the Tribune's station WGN. This first series was a broadcast adaptation of a serial story he was running concurrently in print about "the wilds of the Amazon." The format seems to have been informational in nature as opposed to dramatic, with three Chicago-area Boy Scouts appearing alongside Becker at the microphone to interview him about his adventures while traveling up the Amazon, the Rio Negro, and the Rio Branco over an eighteen month period. Initially airing at 5:00, Becker regaled the audience and Scouts Giles Atwood, Jack Wier, and Phillip Freeman with stories of boa constrictors, primitive native groups, and a multitude of strange animals and flora.

The series, entitled *To the Land of the Takatu*, continued on Saturday, March 14, at 8:30 p.m. and for at least one Saturday after that. Atwood, Wier, and Freeman were on hand to represent the three Scouts of Becker's written serial, Dana Standish, Skibo Jackson, and Red Harper. While Becker's *Takatu* radio broadcasts were short-lived, his serialized account of the Takatu adventures ran for ten weekly installments in the Sunday Tribune, until May 17, 1931. That summer the accounts were collected, expanded, and published in book form by Chicago publisher Reilly & Lee.

Becker did not return to the radio for any regular broadcasting until the early spring of 1932 when he was given two times on Sunday to tell stories of his sport outings. The first broadcast went over a regional CBS web at 4:45 p.m. and then a follow-up broadcast was aired on WGN at 7:30 p.m.

These programs frequently described fishing expeditions to various spots around the upper Midwest.

A year and a half after excerpts of his *To the Land of the Takatu* serial were dramatized, Becker brought a new series to WGN inspired by those same adventures. Dubbed *The Devil Bird*, the new series premiered on October 3, 1932. The series was written by Becker, dubbed a “thrill hunter, jungle explorer, and nature lover,” whose book by the same name had recently been published.

This follow-up series followed the same trio of Scouts as they traveled to South America with Commander Grant Dailey in search of the mysterious Devil Bird. As with *To the Land of the Takatu*, the new stories drew heavily on Becker's experiences while traveling through Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil's Amazon valley. Group leader Grant Dailey was played by Paul Fogarty, a WGN staff announcer who had also co-authored the *Big Leaguers and Bushers* radio baseball series. He was a Notre Dame graduate and former teacher at Culver Military Academy. Joining Fogarty was Grant Atkinson who played Ned Standish, the boy to whom Commander Dailey tells the tales of the Devil Bird.

The Devil Bird aired Monday through Saturday at 5:00 for fifteen minutes. The listeners were introduced to Commander Dailey and the three Boy Scouts, Red, Skibo, and Dana, who were trekking two miles above sea level across the Andes mountains in the Peruvian interior. The small band was searching out the Devil Bird, a strange jungle artifact. The story began in the thick of the South American jungles when one of their porters is mysteriously attacked under the cover of night. The second week of adventures was called “Lake of Fire.” The show soon proved popular enough to attract the sponsorship of Horlick's Malted Milk. Commander Dailey and his Scouts faced the “Apuchanna Head Hunters” as *Devil Bird* entered its third week.

The programs popularity continued to grow with the founding of an official adventurers' club complete with membership certificates upon a enrollment. Eventually dubbed The Trail Blazers, WGN claimed the club's listeners ranged in age from 8 to 65. In November, 1932, Becker provided the club with a key to the secret language used by the native tribes written into the stories. Not unlike fabled

radio decoder rings, Commander Dailey and Ned would send a coded message every day to the three Scouts who had, over the weeks, traveled to Mexico. Dailey's devoted listeners could then decipher the codes using their Trail Blazers code book.

Aside from Atkinson's role, *The Devil Bird* was essentially a one-man show for its first two months. Performed in a narrative style, Fogarty was credited with most of the parts written into the script including not only Dailey and the Scouts Red, Dana, and Skibo, but the roles of the outfit's guide, Matson, an aviator named Hawkins, and several South American characters which required dialect. Among these characters were Chief Makuto, the head of a South American tribe, Makuto's son, Malgi, who was also a "medicine man," an unnamed fur buyer, and a police chief. Atkinson's part as Ned consisted primarily of questions and comments interjected to move the story along.

In December, 1932, in the midst of *The Devil Bird's* run, Becker received the unusual honor of having a species of bat, *Eumops bonariensis beckeri*, named after him. He had actually discovered the species near the Amazon headwaters while doing exploration field work with Chicago's Field Museum.

The new year 1933 opened with *The Devil Bird* charging full ahead. The Cave of the Devil Birds had been discovered and the band of explorers was sure they had discovered that the supposedly extinct religion of the ancient Incans was still alive and well. The format also went under a notable change, from a program of narrated action to a live-action format utilizing a full cast of performers. Grant Atkinson took over the part of Red, Moritz Rose was cast as Dana, and Seymour Kaplan worked the role of Skibo. Ned was apparently written out of the series. At the same time a new villain, El Gaucharo, "the jungle bad man," was introduced to cause devious problems for Daily's Scouts.

On January 30, 1933, CBS executives proved sufficiently impressed with the revamped exploits of Commander Dailey and company that they aired the daily program over a Midwestern hook-up which included WCCO (Minneapolis), KMBC (Kansas City), KMOX (St. Louis), WHAS (Louisville), and KFAB (Lincoln, NE). *The Devil Bird* aired at 5:15, right after it went off the air at WGN; over the summer the broadcast time was pushed back to 6:45.

Becker's South American travels inspired his *Devil Bird* stories and he incorporated many unusual facts and stories from the region. Besides tales of head hunting tribes he wrote about fearsome dogs which were native to the Amazon and how inhabitants tapped local trees to extract a milky substance which could be made into rubber.

After *The Devil Bird* left the air in June, 1933, Becker focused most of his efforts on his work for the Tribune. He did, however, make broadcasts about dog training and associated topics beginning in late 1933 and lasting on and off for several years. Becker raised dogs and wrote a weekly column called "Mostly About Dogs" so a move to radio was a natural fit. In 1936 he debuted the weekly *Dog Club of the Air* for dog lovers. Airing first on Tuesday nights at 8:15, in January, 1937, the *Dog Club of the Air* was moved to Friday evenings at 8:00. Eventually known simply as *Dog Chats*, these weekly dog-oriented broadcasts lasted an astounding eleven years, finally going off the air in 1944. Becker's written column lasted even longer, well into the 1950s.

One seven-minute episode of Becker's dog program is readily available, dated November 27, 1938, though the accuracy of this dating is impossible to confirm. A second episode, dated December 7, 1941, exists among collectors but is not in as wide circulation. The program, sponsored by Red Heart Dog Biscuits which were manufactured by Ottumwa, Iowa's, John Morrell & Co., opens with a dramatized story of one Mr. Van Dyne and his dog Lassie, who disappears mysteriously. Van Dyne and his servant, Togo, search the premises before determining Lassie was dog-napped. A fruitless search follows before the men realize the suspect footprint belongs to Van Dyne and Lassie was simply trapping a rat and not making herself known despite her owner's frantic calls. No writing or acting credits are given.

Though Bob Becker was never a full-time radio professional, a fifteen year run in the medium was no small feat. Ironically, the portion of his career most of interest to old time radio fans was small primarily his seven-month run with *The Devil Bird* on WGN. That the rest of his radio years could fruitfully be spent producing a dog-oriented program speaks to the influence and pull of radio during

the medium's golden age.

The Bob Becker radio episode is available at the Old Time Radio Researchers' online library (www.otrrlibrary.org). Users will need to register for a free username and password.