

A Day at the Races: *Milky Way Winners*

Ryan Ellett

Originally published in The Illustrated Press, November 2013.

Horse racing, a sport which had gone into severe decline during the early decades of the 20th century, was rebounding in popularity during the 1930s as state governments, starved of revenue by the ongoing Great Depression, re-legalized betting at horse tracks in exchange for high taxes on revenue. It was only natural, then, that horse racing themes should appear on radio. A prime example of this was *Milky Way Winners*, a five-days-per-week serial which debuted over Chicago's WGN on September 28, 1935.

Milky Way Winners was sponsored by the Mars Candy Company as a way to promote their Milky Way candy bars. Frank Mars, Sr., founder of the company, and his wife Ethel Mars, had a strong interest in horses outside of their candy business interests and this hobby served as the basis for the radio program. The couple owned a nearly 3,000 acre horse farm in Tennessee on which they'd built the real-life Milky Way stables. There they poured money into breeding, raising, and training thoroughbreds for the revived racing industry. Mars money provided high quality care and expert trainers. This hobby turned into a lucrative side business in its own right, producing top flight thoroughbreds during the mid-to-late 1930s. The stable's horses earned over \$200,000 in 1936 and produced 1940's Kentucky Derby winner Gallahadion.

Tragically, Frank Mars died in 1934 before the ranch was fully up and running so he never got to appreciate the fruits of his equine investments, nor did he hear the radio serial inspired by his horses. Ethel carried on the project, however, and threw her support behind 1935's radio effort.

The serial was a dramatic, romantic storyline set against the backdrop of a big-time race track. *Milky Way Winners* starred Betty McLean as Mrs. Claudia Darrell, the owner of a fictional horse stable. McLean (whose real name was Besse Kenner Kendrick) was an occasional Chicago radio actress who married Alfred Kendrick, general manager of the city's World Broadcasting Co. division, but died unexpectedly in 1938 as a result of surgical complications. She had earlier starred in WGN's *Milligan and Mulligan* alongside Frances X. Bushman and Don Ameche which debuted in 1933.

Angie Hedrick, a minor local radio actress, was cast as Patsy Darrell, Claudia's daughter, and active manager of the family's stable. Bob Jellison, a prolific Chicago actor who stayed busy on the airwaves throughout the medium's golden age, played Petey the Jockey. Busy radio actor Frank Dane was Frank Doughty, owner of a rival racing stable and the subject of storyline plots. Other players included Vincent Coleman, Gene McGillan, and Bob Blakelee. Herbert S. Futran penned *Milky Way Winners* with the cooperation of numerous horse professionals provided through the Mars' family contacts.

A reviewer for *Billboard* magazine was enthusiastic about the series after hearing the debut episode. The storyline introduced a young horse trainer who comes to the attention of the Darrell women and relationships begin to form. The

broadcasts made a point of interweaving topics such as conditioning, breeding, and training thoroughbred horses into the plots. It also incorporated more obscure aspects of horse racing include jockey education and conduct around racing tracks.

To drum up listener interest, one month into the show the sponsor, Mrs. Ethel V. Mars, offered a \$5,000 thoroughbred colt to the winner of a contest to name it. Anticipating that such a gift was not affordable and would even be a burden to most potential winners, Mars offered to house, feed, and train the horse, hire a jockey to race it, and cover the expenses for entering the horse in a number of races. At three years old the contest winner could either continue to race the horse at his or her own expense or sell the horse and keep the full proceeds. The birth of the serial's colt was worked into the *Milky Way Winners* storyline while the real life contest prize cold turned two on January 1, 1936, soon after the contest ended,.

Listeners, however, did not flock to the series as many were to the nation's race tracks and the naming contest did little to grow the audience share. *Milky Way Winners* appears to have run through the end of 1935 at it's 6:30 timeslot and then quietly left the air upon the opening of a new year.



Principals of the new W-G-N sketch, "Milky Way Winners," which opens tomorrow night and will be heard on a five-a-week schedule at 6:30 p. m. Left to right: Betty McLean, who plays the part of Mrs. Claudia Darrell; Angie Hedrick as Patsy Darrell, and Bob Jellison as Petey the jockey. They are inspecting one of the horses of the Milky Way stable at Hawthorne track.