

The Jot 'Em Down Journal
Official Publication of
The National Lum and Abner Society



April 1988

Clarence Hartzell

Oct. 26, 1910 - Mar. 5, 1988

Robert E. Dwyer

1913 - 1988

Robert E. Dwyer, who served as producer of the Lum and Abner radio shows from 1941-1946, died on January 8, 1988, at the age of 74.

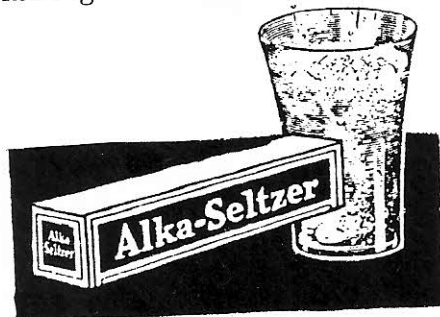
After completing his studies in journalism at the University of Illinois in 1933, Dwyer joined radio station WLS in Chicago as a copywriter. Shortly thereafter, he joined the Wade advertising agency as not only a copywriter but radio producer and account executive. He opened Wade Advertising's Los Angeles office in 1941, and was responsible for the Miles Laboratories (Alka-Seltzer) account in Hollywood for many years. Besides the Lum and Abner series, he also supervised the production of "The Alka-Seltzer Newspaper of the Air," the Fred Beck show, and many others.

In 1956, Dwyer returned to Chicago as Executive Vice-President of Wade Advertising to work on the national Miles Laboratories account. He resigned to return to his beloved Los Angeles, where he held management positions at Grey Advertising and IHOP International.

He retired to Laguna Niguel, California, in which also reside his successor as Lum & Abner's producer, Forrest Owen, and their longtime writer Roz Rogers. Last summer, Dwyer made a special audio tape of some of his Lum & Abner memories for our annual convention in Mena. He will be missed by those who only knew him from his work, as well as those who knew him personally.

- Tim Hollis

(Information for the above article was provided by Roz Rogers and Forrest Owen.)



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Tim Hollis

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speaking at the dedication of
the Dick Huddleston store and
the Lum and Abner Museum as
National Historic Sites,
June 16, 1985 (Photo by
Donnie Pitchford)

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L to R: Tim Hollis, Donnie Pitchford, and Clarence
Hartzell rehearsing script for NLAS Convention, 1985.

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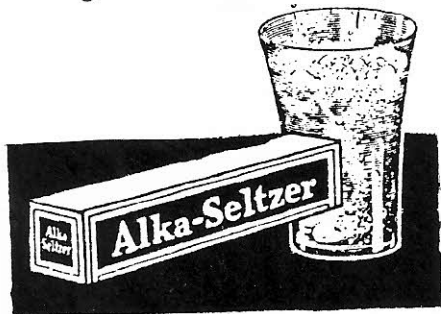
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EDITOR'S NOTE

Words cannot adequately express the sorrow we at the NLAS feel at the sudden loss of our good friend Clarence "Ben Withers" Hartzell. He was one of our first and most active Honorary Members from the time the NLAS was formed in August of 1984.

This April 1988 issue of The Jot'Em Down Journal was almost completed when we got the dreadful news. The decision was made to postpone our scheduled articles until the June issue, and use this one to pay tribute to Clarence.

Pages 3 through 6 of this issue were originally published in the October 1985 Journal. For those of you who were not with us at that time, they will be new to you. As for those who have already seen them, we trust that you will understand.

THE EDITORS



'Fine:'

The Many Careers Of Clarence Hartzell

A major role in Lum and Abner history was that played by Clarence L. Hartzell. His performance as Dr. Benjamin Franklin Withers (sometimes known as "Doc" or "Ben" for short) was a hilarious impersonation of a half-deaf, slightly senile old duffer who delighted in repeated stories about a seemingly endless parade of old cronies. But this was only one role played by Hartzell during his long career in radio and TV; in fact, he has performed on so many different series that he himself finds it difficult to remember them all. We in the NLAS believe that he has never quite been given the proper recognition, and so, we now present his story.

Hartzell was born in Huntington, West Virginia. His first job in radio was for a small local station operated by a neighborhood electrical company. "Anybody could be on the radio; all you needed to know was how to play a musical saw, or blow on a kazoo, and you could be on the air waves," he recollects. Well, he didn't do either one, but he organized a male vocal group, and they were good enough that when the station moved into larger and better facilities, Hartzell (still in high school) and his brother were asked to do a 15-minute musical program each week.

Soon, the whole Hartzell family moved to Cincinnati and the brothers continued their musical escapades on radio station WFBE. Hartzell eventually became a relief announcer and music librarian for the station. It was his idea to begin a series of mystery dramas on the air, and he even persuaded Detective Story magazine to provide the scripts free of charge. But when he discovered that the actors on the show would perform for free as well, he objected ... and was fired.

Hartzell worked as an announcer for a station in Cicero, a Chicago suburb, and then was hired as program director for another station in Joliet, Illinois. In 1931, Hartzell dropped out of radio for a year and moved back to the old homestead in Cincinnati. But it wasn't long before he was back in Chicago, writing radio plays. This particular station, WLS, sent its actors out to perform at various functions, and it was during one of these jaunts that the accident occurred that affected Hartzell's future career forever. He tells it this way:

"One night we had played an engagement at a little town about 75 to 100 miles out of Chicago, and we were all riding in the director's big Packard ... we were coming home from that engagement about 1:00 in the morning. Everyone in the car was asleep but me, and when I happened to look over at the driver, he had his head down on the wheel, sound asleep. I looked out the windshield and a telephone pole was coming at us about 45 mph and that's all I remember. Well, they didn't have padded dashboards in those days, it was all metal, and I lost four or five teeth. Fortunately, that was all. As a result, when the dentist fixed me up with some choppers, they worked fine, except my S's whistled."

Because of his whistling S's, Hartzell subsequently began playing old men on the air, starting with a role on NBC's "Uncle Ezra" show, starring Pat Barrett.

After a time of writing some more shows for NBC, Hartzell got his big break. The year was 1940: the "Vic and Sade" series was facing a crisis. Art Van Harvey, who

portrayed Vic, had a heart seizure, and for a while it looked like the series would lose its male lead. It was decided to bring in the character of Uncle Fletcher, previously known only through his offstage antics. Auditions were held, though it was generally assumed that character actor Sidney Ellstrom would get the part. But as soon as youngster Clarence Hartzell opened his mouth at the audition, the role of Uncle Fletcher was cemented.



The cast of "Vic & Sade:" Art Van Harvey, Clarence Hartzell, Bernardine Flynn, William Idelson

John Dunning, in his encyclopedic Tune In Yesterday, has described Hartzell's role this way: "Uncle Fletcher was the most absent-minded old cuss of the air, an eccentric who talked right through people, said 'fine, fine' to everything without hearing one word of what was said, mused for hours about the 'hyena grease' someone had made up at the Bright Kentucky Hotel, or followed the trek of some 'half-wit fly' as it crawled lazily across the ceiling."

During 1943-44, while "Vic and Sade" was still running, Hartzell had a comparatively straight role in an adventure series, "The Road To Danger." He played Cottonseed Sample, a behind-the-enemy-lines American truck driver, along with the late Curley Bradley (better known as Tom Mix) as



Portrait of Clarence Hartzell, circa 1943

his partner Stumpy. This series is almost totally forgotten by most radio buffs today, but a few recordings are known to exist.

When "Vic and Sade" ended its run of 15-minute episodes in 1944, Hartzell jumped right into another series, "Those Websters," premiering in 1945. He was Mr. Watt, another of his trademark old codgers. Proving his acting ability, he also had elderly roles in several dramatic series around this time, including several of the radio soap operas.

On November 4, 1946, Roz Rogers wrote Hartzell into the Lum and Abner series as Pine Ridge's new veterinarian, Dr. Benjamin Franklin Withers. But trouble was brewing in the offing. "Lum and Abner"'s sponsor, Miles Laboratories ("the makers of Alka-Seltzer, One-A-Day Brand Vitamins, and Miles Nervine," as announcer Gene Baker oft times said), was trying to effect a deal with a veterinary supply business; the latter company wouldn't go through with it because of the laughable portrayal of a veterinarian on the Lum and Abner show. (Even Hartzell himself admits that Doc Withers was not exactly the ideal picture of a veterinarian.)



C. HARTZELL

The sponsor demanded that Hartzell (alias Doc Withers) be fired immediately, but Chet Lauck, Tuffy Goff, and Roz Rogers stood their ground and decided to make Withers a constable instead. Miles Laboratories conceded with ill grace.

Early in 1947, "Doc Withers" became "Ben Withers," and played a major role in nearly every episode. His absent-minded reply to everything, "fine," came from his Uncle Fletcher days, as did his interminable stories about his equally bizarre old friends, particularly the Zincafoose family of Mt. Ida. When cancer surgery forced Goff/Abner off the show from January to March, 1948, Hartzell's role became even more important.

The half-hour "Lum and Abner Show" began in September 1948, and though Hartzell (like Roz Rogers and nearly everyone else connected with the show, it seems) objected to the change in format, he stuck with the series until the end of the first season in the spring of 1949. (His part as the local old eccentric was more or less filled during the second season by Cliff "Charlie Weaver" Arquette.)

Hartzell had never liked Hollywood or California in the least, so he headed back to Chicago. It wasn't long before he found himself commuting to New York each weekend for the Henry Morgan show, but he soon tired of this schedule.

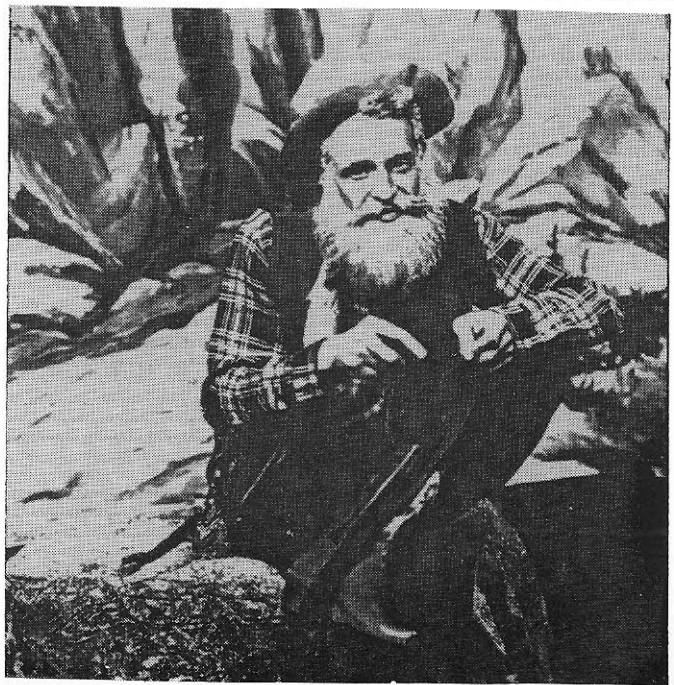
Television was coming into its own at this time, and NBC-TV in Chicago signed Hartzell to host a children's show as "Cactus Jim." In costume as the old desert rat, Hartzell introduced B-Westerns and told stories about life in the Old West, or at least show biz's version of it. He re-

mained with NBC-TV there in Chicago, and appeared as his usual eccentric character in a summer replacement series, "Those Endearing Young Charms," and also had another dramatic (though aged as usual) role in a soap opera, "Hawkins Falls." Throughout the 1950s, he made industrial and promotional films for such companies as Ford and Chevrolet.

Hartzell eased into retirement, and in 1979 moved to Bella Vista, Arkansas, with his devoted wife Helen. He was active in the Bella Vista Television Association, as well as writing music, poetry, and a newspaper column on wildflowers. In June 1985 he was a guest at the first NLAS Convention in Pine Ridge, and participated in a recreation of an original Ben Withers script. In 1986, he was unable to be present in person, but still participated in a script by sending his lines on tape. He sent another audio tape to the 1987 gathering, saluting that year's guest, Jerry Hausner.

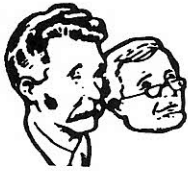
Much to the sorrow of the NLAS, Hartzell died of a heart attack at his home in Bella Vista on March 5, 1988, at the age of 77. At the time of his death, he was planning on a return trip to the 1988 NLAS Convention, and had even conceived the idea for a new L&A/Ben Withers script that, alas, will now never be performed. It is certain that we will all miss him: the best word of all to describe him would be Ben Withers' own favorite remark: "FINE."

- Tim Hollis

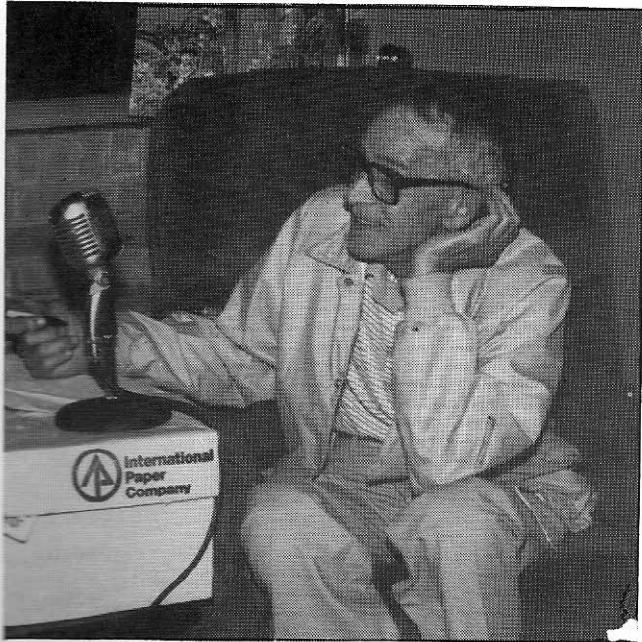


C. HARTZELL

"Cactus Jim," 1951



Memories of **LUM and ABNER**®

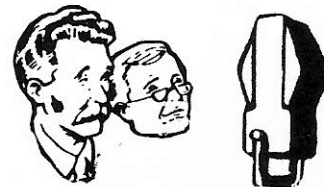


D. PITCOFFORD

cret was, we tried to understand each other and to anticipate each other's thoughts; we were able to work very, very close together, which made it fun. Well, when Tuffy got through with his call, he came back in, sat down, picked up his script, and Chet got us back into the continuity; of course, we set the director of the show screaming, because he had four minutes of time on that show that he wasn't supposed to have. So, in a case like that, he would grab his pencil and go around and block out things on people's scripts while they were holding them, and talking, which could be a bit nerve-racking.

Their office was fixed like the living room of a house; it had a kitchen where you could go back to the refrigerator and get whatever you wanted ... you could fix yourself a snack, if you wanted to, or have a drink. I used to sit in an easy chair there; we used to have a script conference every week for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and we would discuss the way the plot was going to turn ... somebody might even bring in a new plot that would last for six or eight weeks. Well, this didn't take long because the boys were the type that could recognize something good when they saw it, so they'd say, "OK, let's do that." And then, they'd start talking about ... well, Abner had a ranch up in northern California, and liked to go duck hunting; Chet had some racehorses; they liked to take a trip when they could, and get away; and they kept talking about other things, and I'd sit there in that warm California sun and go to sleep. Well, this one day, I did, and the secretary asked Lum if she should wake me; he said, "Naw, just let him sleep." So everybody left, and I'm sitting there in the office all by myself sound asleep until about 6:00!

Clarence Hartzell



I really appreciated the opportunity to work with the boys; they were wonderful people to work for and it was great fun working with them. Things went on on the show that you wouldn't believe. They didn't believe in any rule book, of course; they didn't go by any rules. This would come out even while the show was on the air. We had it understood among us that anybody could leave the script if he had an idea...he could leave the script and ad-lib and the others would come in and back him up. BUT, when he was through, and got his idea across, he would have to get back into the continuity in such a way that it was not obvious that anybody had left. That made it very interesting.

One day, Tuffy got a very important telephone call right at show time, when we were ready to go on the air, and he went out into the hall there to take the call. That left Chet and me in the studio to do the show. We had already rehearsed it and were all set to go on the air...in fact, we had put the show on the air; the announcer introduced Lum and Abner, and here we were, with no Tuffy...Tuffy was a vital member of the cast for this particular script. So, Chet and I started ad-libbing, and we ad-libbed (and this was on a national network) for over four minutes. People couldn't understand how we could do that. The se-



THE PARTY LINE

Remembering Ben Withers



Somewhere between reality and fantasy exists the town of Pine Ridge, with all its wonderful folk. In this issue, we are bidding farewell to one of those citizens. In fantasy, he is Benjamin Franklin Withers; in reality, he is Clarence Hartzell. We, the officers of the NLAS, were among those fortunate enough to have met and befriended Clarence and Helen Hartzell. We now submit some of our own tributes to this great comedian which have come pouring in:

* * * * *

He was one of those actors that writers dream about. Give him a good line to read, and you never had to tell him HOW to read it; he KNEW how. Somehow he knew exactly what you had in mind when you wrote it, and that's the way it always came out. Only better.

That was Clarence Hartzell...whose sudden passing caught us all off guard and left an empty place in the hearts of his family, his multitudinous friends, his dedicated fans, and the community he became so much a part of.

It would be nice to feel that I had created the character of Ben Withers, which Clarence played on "Lum and Abner," but the truth is I just gave that wonderfully crazy character a new name. Clarence brought that character along with him wherever he went, first on "Vic and Sade," and then on "Lum and Abner." It was the kind of character that inspired a writer to turn out his best efforts for that character. You couldn't have a more pleasant and rewarding relationship than that.

But more than that, this relationship developed into a close friendship. And that is why I now feel a great void in my life. It is true that in recent years geography pretty much limited our association



Clarence & Roz Rogers enjoy a I&A broadcast during the 1985 NLAS Convention.

to personal correspondence, but it always seemed that Clarence was just around the corner, waiting to enjoy a few laughs.

If any of the Zinkafoose boys, or Captain Sproog, or any of those off-beat citizens of Mt. Idy whom Ben Withers talked about so lovingly are in Heaven, I'm sure they are all at the Golden Gate, ready to welcome their old friend.

The gain is theirs; the loss is ours.

- Roswell Rogers

I first discovered Lum and Abner through a series of cassette tapes that I ordered from a dealer on old-time radio programs. This particular set of tapes was on sale, so I thought I'd give them a try. I got into the series concerning the "Meadowlark Restaurant," and was immediately introduced to the character of Ben Withers, whom I assumed was a regular on the show who had probably always been there. Oddly enough, it was quite some time before I heard Abner, since I got in on a week when Tuffy Goff must have taken a vacation (it was a couple of years before his illness), and they

wrote in a bad case of laryngitis for Abner!

I was instantly "hooked" on Lum and Abner, and the character of Ben Withers as well. Little did I dream that I would drive a thousand miles in the summer of 1984 to visit the real town of Pine Ridge! Even less did I fantasize that I would make the same journey in 1985 to actually meet Ben Withers!

Meet Ben Withers I did, in the guise of actor Clarence Hartzell. I was thrilled to learn that Mr. Hartzell was a fellow West Virginian, and found myself engaging in much interesting conversation.

The ultimate fantasy-come-true experience happened in Pine Ridge (where else?) during our first NLAS Convention. Clarence and I found ourselves alone for a brief time, taking a leisurely stroll outside the Pine Ridge Fire Hall; just two West Virginians, discussing the flora and fauna of our native state. Reality began to blur as I realized how fortunate I was to be visiting with Mr. Hartzell. The fantasy was complete when a small dog trotted up and caught Clarence's attention; suddenly, Clarence Hartzell BECAME Ben Withers!!! "Nice doggie," Ben cooed as he began to pet the dog. "Fine doggie, fii-iine doggie..... yeeessss!"

Clarence continued to be "Ben" for several incredible moments, and to this day I do not know if he realized what he was doing. So often an actor's best characters are extensions of themselves, and I'm sure this was the case here. Whatever the reason, I will always treasure my once-in-a-lifetime "walk with Ben Withers" down a little road in Pine Ridge, Arkansas.

- Rex Riffle

As the Executive Secretary, I guess I was in contact with Clarence more frequently than anyone else, outside of his own family. At least every two or three months, I would give him a call just to check on him and see how he was feeling; it was always a pleasure to talk to him. It seems that each time he had some new anecdote or bit of trivia about his long career to relate to me.

Clarence had been a part of the NLAS ever since our founding in August 1984, as one of our first Honorary Members. When he and Rex Rogers both made it to our first convention in 1985, it was a reunion that we literally shall not see again. Although his health would not permit him to visit the 1986 and 1987 conventions, he was still

greatly interested in the proceedings each year, and still managed to participate via audio tape. He also requested video tapes of each year's meeting, which he showed annually over Bella Vista TV.

The memory of that last phone conversation with him, not over two weeks before he left us, will always haunt me. He was in an especially talkative and jolly mood, telling me how he was feeling better than he had in a long time, and that he was planning on finally making it back to the Convention in person this year. During the conversation, he mentioned the heretofore-unmentioned fact that at one time he appeared in one of his typical old man roles on the classic radio soap opera, "One Man's Family." I was supposed to check back with him on or about March 15 to confirm plans for the Convention...but he left too soon, ten days earlier.

I can only say that the NLAS is richer for having known Clarence, and if we can do anything about it, we shall continue to ensure that his contributions to the world of broadcast entertainment will never be forgotten.

- Tim Hollis

Apart from our 1985 meeting in person, my favorite memory of Clarence Hartzell dates from the summer of 1986. When my wife Laura and I were married that June, we received a most unique gift from Clarence and Helen; it is a little decorative ornament, depicting a bride and groom. Each year, we have used it as a Christmas tree decoration, and it always served to remind us of our love for these two wonderful people. An added feature of the ornament is a keywound music box in the base; the tune that it plays could pretty much sum up our feelings for the Hartzells: "You Light Up My Life."

It was a great shock to me when Tim Hollis called me at work that morning to tell me of Clarence's passing. That afternoon, I related the dreadful news to Laura, who was as devastated as I was ... particularly since she was not present at the 1985 Convention, and was really looking forward to meeting him this year. I told her, "I was really hoping that you'd get to meet Clarence some day." Her reply was, I think, nothing less than exquisite: she said, "Well, of course, we'll ALL get to meet him again...someday."

- Uncle Donnie Pitchford



THE NATIONAL
LUM & ABNER
SOCIETY
Convention

Yes, it's THAT time of year again; time to start making your plans to attend the 4th Annual NLAS Convention in Mena, Arkansas. The date for this year has been set as June 18, and we have quite a program lined up for you.

The guest of honor this year will be Mr. Elmore Vincent, who played the part of Abner's crusty old Civil War veteran papa, Phinus Stonewall Peabody, in 1944. Joining him to assist in reminiscing will be our guest from last year, Mr. Jerry Hausner ("Prince Ali Kush," "Spud Gandel," and many other characters). If you did not get a chance to meet him last year, here is a second opportunity!

The meeting will be held at the Best Western Lime Tree Inn in Mena, so, if you want to make your reservations in advance (and, since there is going to be another convention going on the same night as ours, it is highly advisable that you do so), the number to call is (501) 394-6350.

More info about the final plans for the Convention will appear in our next issue. In the meantime, if you are planning on joining us, please fill out the form below and send it in to the Executive Secretary, Tim Hollis, at Route 3, Box 110, Dora, AL 35062. We would like to have at least a rough idea of how many people to expect.

YES, I AM PLANNING TO ATTEND
THE 1988 NLAS CONVENTION

NAME _____

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NUMBER OF PERSONS COMING WITH ME: _____

I PLAN TO STAY AT THE LIME TREE INN:
Yes ___ No ___

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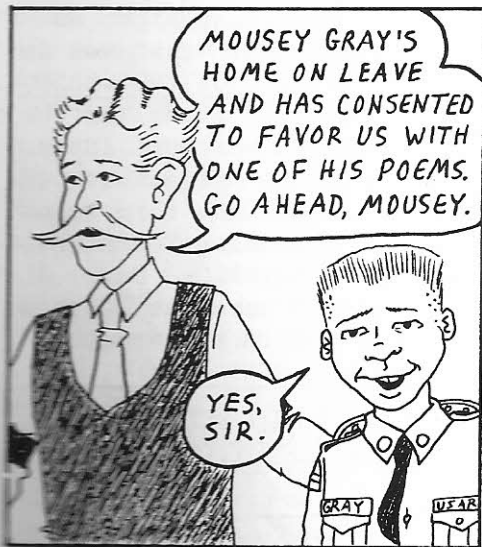
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