

MENA, ARKANSAS  
HOME OF  
LUM & ABNER



MENA, ARKANSAS  
HOME OF  
LUM AND ABNER

OCTOBER 1996

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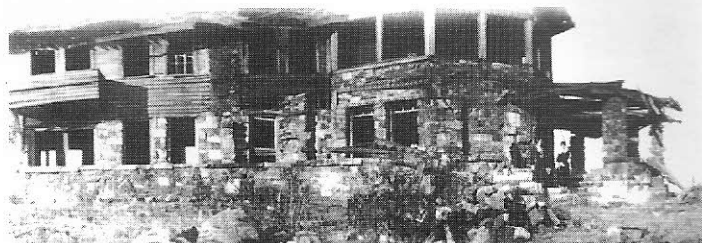
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## The Old HOTEL

*This poem was written about the ruins of Mena's famous  
Queen Wilhelmina Inn. It was originally published in  
THE MENA STAR on April 27, 1933.*

Only a crumbling old hotel  
That stands on a mountain top.  
What wondrous tales its walls could tell  
If they could only talk.

Proudly it stood in days long past,  
A structure of wood and stone;  
Now its pride is a forlorn mass...  
It stands forlorn, alone.

Its floors are rotted, its stairways sag,  
The glass from its windows gone.  
But once there flew a bonny flag  
From flagpole straight and long.

What wondrous tales its walls could tell  
Of ladies in costly gowns,  
And men who in its halls did dwell,  
Tripping stairways up and down.

Tales of romance, of valor, love,  
Methinks I can hear them tell,  
While phantom music from above  
In the old ballroom swells.

And phantom figures flit about  
O'er the sagging ballroom floor,  
While owls and bats fly in and out  
At night through doorless door.

And phantom diners feasting there  
In crumbling old banquet room.  
The tinkling glass I think I hear,  
And laughter from the gloom.

Only a crumbling old hotel  
That stands on a mountain top.  
What wondrous tales its walls could tell  
If they could only talk.

- Catherine Minton Cuson

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# THE JOT 'EM DOWN JOURNAL

## OCTOBER 1996

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**THE NATIONAL  
LUM AND ABNER SOCIETY**

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**PRESIDENT**  
Donnie Pitchford

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### *In This Issue:*

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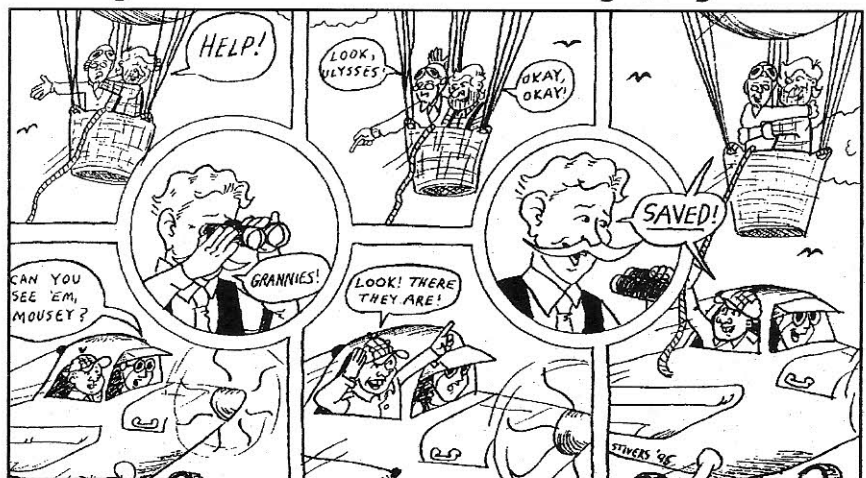
**Cover:** Two postcards issued to promote Mena's L&A connection. The one on the left was produced in 1950, and features a 1934 L&A photo, while the one on the right is from 1948 and sports a circa 1940 photo. Also notice that the 1934 photo shows Lauck & Goff's genuine signatures, while the "auto-graphs" on the 1948 photo are obviously the work of a forger.

All illustrations are from the NLAS Archives, except as follows. Inside front cover, top R: UALR Archives; page 4, top R: Ethel Ball; page 5, top L: Michael Cate; page 5, bottom R: Shirley Goodner; page 9, top L: Janet McMurrin; page 9, top R: Charles Thurman; page 10, page 11, top L: Harlan Hobbs; page 11, bottom R & page 12, top R: Ben Combs.

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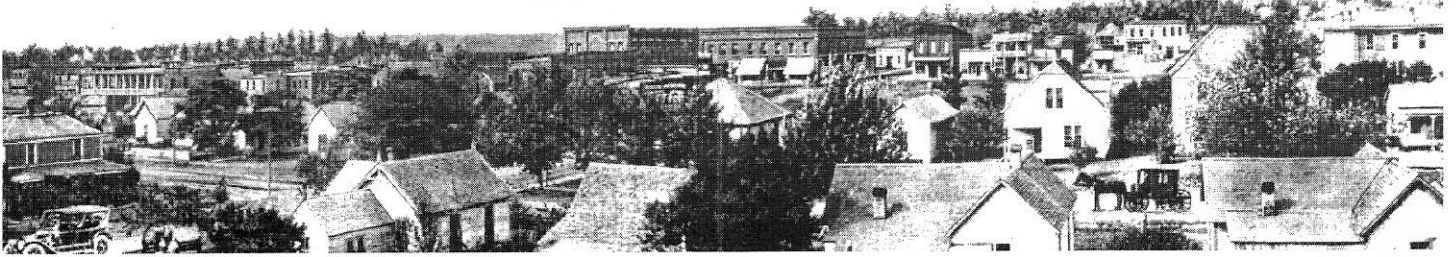
### *The Golden Era*

*by Gary Stivers*



# Mena, Arkansas

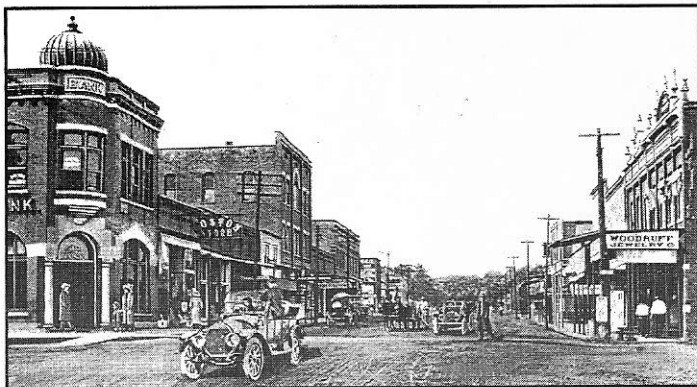
## 1896 — 1996



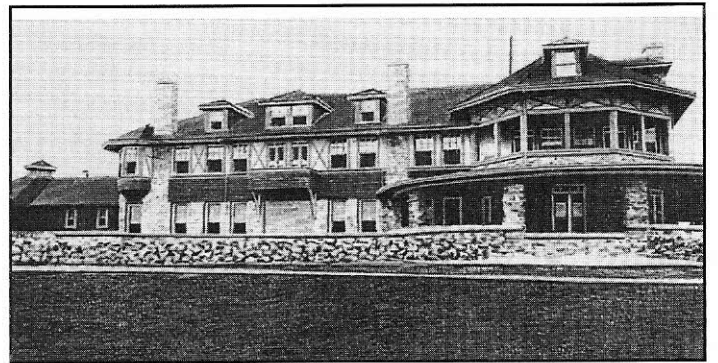
As this issue of the *Journal* reaches you, the town of Mena, Arkansas, is in the midst of its Centennial Celebration. Inasmuch as the town and its history had an undeniable impact on *Lum and Abner* itself, we thought it was appropriate to take this opportunity to examine Mena more closely and find out just what influence it might have had on Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff.

Although Mena has always been referred to as their home town, in reality neither performer was actually born there. Chet had actually been born in the tiny community of Alleene, not far from Texarkana, in 1902, while Tuffy made his world debut in Cove (just 15 miles south of Mena) in 1906. The story of *Lum and Abner* really begins when their respective families moved to Mena and the two young boys met. This historic event took place about 1911.

In either case, the town of Mena was still a very young one at the time. Unlike many communities, Mena did not start out as a pioneer settlement and grow into a city as the years passed. Instead, the town owes its origin to one event, and one event only: the construction of the Kansas City Southern Railroad. Originally named the Kansas City, Pittsburgh, and Gulf, the purpose of the railroad was to connect Kansas City, Missouri, with the Gulf of Mexico at Port Arthur, Texas. The property that would eventually become Mena was envisioned as a much-needed stopover in the western Arkansas hills. (It was because of Mena's railroad ties to Kansas City that that city was most often referred to as Lum and Abner's closest point of reference for urban life.)



*Downtown Mena is it looked around the time the Laucks and Goffs arrived in town. At left is the Union Bank, of which W. J. Lauck was president.*



*Queen Wilhelmina Inn on Rich Mountain, as it appeared in its original form. Some of the stone walls seen here have been incorporated into today's version of the hotel.*

The two founding figures who loom largest in Mena history are Arthur Stillwell, who conceived the idea of the Kansas City Southern, and Dutchman Jan de Goeijen of Amsterdam, who helped arrange for the three million dollars it would cost to build the railroad. In gratitude, Stilwell named one of his stops after his Dutch financier's wife, Mena Janssen de Goeijen. (Her maiden name would find local immortality as the city's pride and joy, Janssen Park.) According to most official histories, the first train arrived at the new depot in Mena on August 19, 1896.

Although a rough and tough frontier town, Mena soon showed that it had a taste for life's finer things as well. In 1897, someone discovered that there was a terrific view from the summit of 2800-foot Rich Mountain, and plans were soon underway to construct a lavish summer resort hotel on top of the peak, which was unofficially renamed Mount Mena. Again reflecting the Dutch origins of the town, this luxury hotel opened as Queen Wilhelmina Inn in 1898. A special suite was constructed in the hopes that its namesake, the young queen of Holland, would honor it with a visit, but that never happened.

Instead, after only a couple of seasons of operation, the original Queen Wilhelmina Inn was abandoned and left to disintegrate on top of Rich Mountain. In the years that followed, the ruins of Wilhelmina became a local landmark and attraction in themselves. It also appears that they found their way into *Lum and Abner* as well. In the summer of 1934, the two old fellows found themselves in charge of renovating the old abandoned "Mountain View Hotel" near Pine Ridge, and



*The only known photo of the exterior of the Goff Wholesale Grocery building, taken after a cyclone in April 1911.*

before the storyline was over they had found themselves involved with all sort of shady characters staying there. This plot was revised and rebroadcast in the summer of 1946, when Dick Huddleston remarks that the old hotel was closed up before the war. It looks very much like the abandoned and neglected Queen Wilhelmina Inn was the inspiration for Lum & Abner's Mountain View Hotel, even though restoration of Wilhelmina was several more years in coming.

In 1958, the ruins and the surrounding property were designated an Arkansas State Park, and for the first time real plans were made to rebuild the hotel. The reconstructed Queen Wilhelmina Inn was completed in 1963, only to be destroyed by fire ten years later. No one wasted any time, and a new hotel was built immediately to replace the destroyed one. Today's Queen Wilhelmina Inn is the 1973 version; it is obvious that in all of its forms the hotel has always been fashioned heavily after the original 1898 model.

So, what actually brought the Laucks and the Goffs to Mena? Probably business interests. Chet's parents, W.J. and Cora Lauck (his mother's name would later turn up as the wife of Squire Skimp), were in the lumber business, and the Lauck Lumber Company of Mena soon became one of that young town's early success stories. W.J. Lauck also became president of the Union Bank of Mena, a position he held for decades. Cora Lauck was highly active among the social set.

Meanwhile, Rome Goff and his wife Dora were building their own wildly successful Goff Wholesale Grocery Company. Even though the two sons, Chester Lauck and Norris Goff, were four years apart in age, they soon fell into each other's company by virtue of their families being two of the wealthiest in town. The Laucks built a lovely resi-



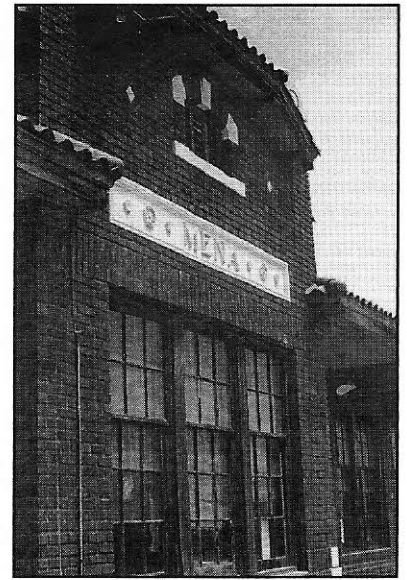
*This was the Mena home in which Norris (Abner) Goff grew up; it was demolished in the early 1970s.*

dence on Port Arthur Avenue (named for the KCS's southern terminus), while the Goffs pulled out all the stops for their imposing residence on Reine Street. The Lauck house can still be seen today, but the Goff home was thoughtlessly demolished in the early 1970's. Only a stone wall, which originally surrounded its formal flower gardens, remains.

Both boys attended elementary and high school in Mena. Chet graduated in 1920, with Tuffy following in 1924. Unfortunately, the high school they attended (and where Norris picked up his nickname while on the football team) no longer exists, having burned to the ground in February 1940. After high school graduation, each went his separate ways to college.

It was during this period that two other Mena landmarks were built that would have their own day in the *Lum and Abner* spotlight. In 1920, a new railroad depot was built to replace the original 1896 structure, and this is the building in which many of L&A's future episodes would be set. The depot, though abandoned for many years, has today been restored, and it is very easy to imagine L&A sitting around in its waiting room (Abner with his money pinned in his underwear). The building now houses a museum of local history, and in 1992 the NLAS was honored to present a new display tracing the history of the show. (Actress Louise Currie, from the 1942 L&A feature *The Bashful Bachelor*, was on hand for the unveiling.)

In 1923, the Lyric Theater was opened on Mena's main street, replacing several earlier silent movie houses that had also operated under that name. The Lyric won its place in L&A history when it became the setting in 1940 for the premiere of the first Lum & Abner movie, *Dreaming Out Loud*. Each of their future pictures played there as well, but by the 1980's the theater had primarily become a vehicle for stage productions rather than movies. A devastating tornado ripped



*Mena's classic railroad depot in 1982, prior to any restoration.*



*Crowds gather at Mena's Lyric Theatre for the hometown premiere of DREAMING OUT LOUD, 1940.*

through Mena in November 1993, leveling every tree in Janssen Park and blowing the back wall out of the Lyric. It was first believed that the building was a total loss, but closer inspection revealed that the front part of it was salvageable. Efforts to restore the theater are continuing; part of the fundraising effort has been to sell original 1923 bricks that the tornado forcibly removed.

By the late 1920's, Chet and Tuffy had each finished his schooling and returned to the old home town, presumably for good. They got married as this time as well. Chet's bride was Harriet Wood of Hot Springs, while Tuffy got hitched to a Mena girl, Elizabeth Bullion. The Laucks built an unusually-shaped residence that can still be seen, and their first child, Shirley, came along while they were living there. (The Goffs did not start having children until after the radio program began.)

With burgeoning families to support, both men found it necessary to hold down jobs. Chet first worked for his father at the Union Bank, then became manager of the Citizen's Finance Co. Tuffy was employed by his father's wholesale grocery business, and in that capacity he found himself calling on practically every small general store in the surrounding area. One of his customers was one J.R. "Dick" Huddleston of Waters, some 18 miles east of Mena.

Well, there is not enough room here to rehash the story of how Chet and Tuffy finally made it onto the radio as Lum and Abner, but the facts are that their first public performances were as local entertainers in Mena. According to people who remember those days, the rural dialect they used for their characters was only one of the speech patterns they were able to employ; Dick Huddleston's daughter Ethel has recounted that they were also fluent at blackface, Italian, Dutch, and other such forms of ethnic comedy. Considering today's politically correct entertainment climate, it is probably fortunate for their memory that it was the nationwide speech of the rustic for which they became famous.

After *Lum and Abner* became an NBC network offering in July 1931, the folks back home saw less of their local celebrities. For the show's first ten years or so, however, they continued to make more or less regular journeys to the home town, to visit their families and ostensibly gather material for future programs. It would be impossible to detail all of these visits, but one of the first was when Rome Goff died unexpectedly in January 1934, and Chet carried *Lum and Abner* alone while Tuffy attended the funeral. Perhaps in a reciprocal gesture, Tuffy carried the show for a while in March 1934 so Chet could return home. Chet also came to Mena in November 1935, in company with a Horlick's Malted Milk representative.

While off the air for a vacation in the summer of 1938, Chet and Harriet Lauck, along with Mr. & Mrs. Don Ameche, undertook an epic tour of Europe, after which the Laucks visited Mena for some relaxation before resuming the radio grind. The Ameches were supposed to have accompanied them to Mena, but an attack of appendicitis kept Don from making the trip. During a similar summer hiatus in 1939,

the Laucks and the Goffs both vacationed in Mena simultaneously, and the two fellows were treated something like returning war heroes.

That was nothing compared to the publicity that occurred when they both arrived in town for the *Dreaming Out Loud* premiere in August 1940, but that was apparently to be one of their last extended visits there. The Laucks did return for a week in August 1943; it is interesting to note that on the show during that week, Lum went to the reformatory to discuss the case of Ellie Connors with them. The radio show was sustained by Tuffy's characterizations and by Lurene Tuttle (as Ellie).

As the 1940's ended, Mena remained as proud as ever of its two contributions to bigtime radio. Postcards reading "Mena, Home of Lum & Abner" were sold for years, often utilizing publicity photos that were woefully out of date. A card from 1950, the year the weekly half-hour version of *Lum and Abner* breathed its last, sported a 1934 L&A portrait that had been used as a premium for Horlick's! Other cards on sale at the same time were variously using the stock 1941 publicity

photo and the original 1931 L&A-in-makeup portrait created by Mena photographer Oscar Plaster.

After the radio show left the air in 1954, Mena's L&A connection grew fainter and fainter. Norris Goff remained in California, but he did manage at least one visit to the town in 1972. Chet Lauck, after his retirement and move to Hot Springs, hung around town a bit more, mostly as a guest of the Mena Optimists Club. In 1977, the town put on the first of its annual "Lum & Abner Days" summer festivals, and Chet was on hand as the guest of honor. Goff was too ill to attend, but a telephone was hooked up so the two longtime partners could

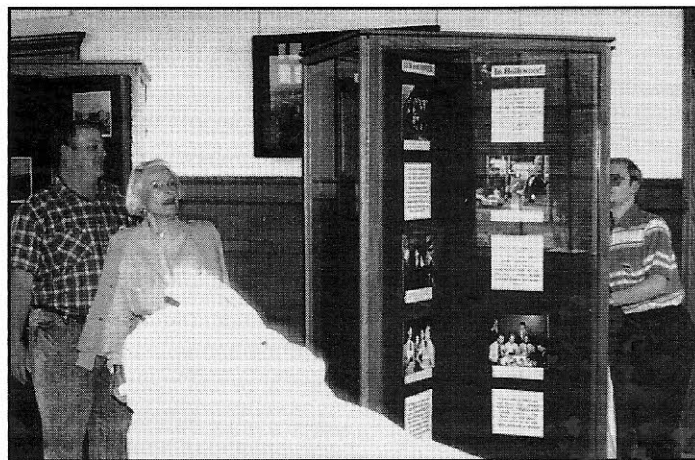
participate in a joint conversation for all the audience to hear. Tuffy was deeply touched when Chet informed him that the wild applause he could hear over the phone was in fact a standing ovation; Goff would not live another year after that.

In June 1979, a year after Tuffy's death, Chet returned for yet another visit. This time it was to dedicate the city's monument to Lum & Abner in Janssen Park; in a voice choked with emotion, Chet expressed his deep feelings of appreciation for the occasion. Former L&A associates Roz Rogers, Clarence Hartzell, and Opie Cates were also on hand to share Chet's elation (oh, if only the NLAS had been in existence in those days!). Eight months later, Chet Lauck would also be gone, and the story of *Lum and Abner* appeared to be at a close.

After the formation of the NLAS in 1984, its first two national conventions were held in the fire hall in Pine Ridge, which had less-than-ideal amenities. In June 1987 the convention was moved to Mena, where it has remained ever since. The town today, while not as crazy over L&A as it was in the 1930's and 1940's, still expresses its appreciation for them. A large sign painted on the side of a building near the Mena depot again proudly proclaims Mena as the "Home of Lum & Abner." And it sure is!

Happy Centennial, Mena!!

- Tim Hollis



*Sam Brown, Louise Currie, and Tim Hollis unveil the NLAS display in the restored Mena depot, 1992.*

# A Love Letter to MENA

(In 1987, the year the NLAS Convention was held in Mena for the first time, we asked several of our Honorary Members to send written or recorded greetings. Many of them responded, but one in particular seems appropriate to include here. Elizabeth Goff, widow of Tuffy, penned an eloquent tribute that she titled "A Love Letter to Mena." It appears here for the first time in print.)

Thank you for honoring the humor of *Lum and Abner*, and the trouble and work you go through. It's amazing, and I love you for it. You are among the many well-known and exceptional people who listened to and loved them: Mr. W.C. Fields and Mr. Irving S. Cobb, both great humorists of their time. I remember reading their *Lum and Abner* fan mail when they first started on the NBC network, and for a 19-year-old Mena girl, I was thrilled. Especially at so many letters from college professors, English and language professors, taking time out to write to them of their appreciation. Long letters, saying their hill country expressions derived from Elizabethan English, such as "hope" for "help;" "Can I hope you" instead of "Can I help you." I was really impressed. There were many more to follow. God bless you all, as without you fans they could never have been the successes they were.

I want to say hello to my hometown of Mena. I guess you could say that this is a love letter to Mena. I thank God every night for letting me be born into my wonderful family: Jim and

Mary Bullion, and my older brothers and sisters. I loved growing up in Mena and the beautiful Ouachita Mountains. I was given values I have never forgotten, and yes, mama and dad, I am still living by them. Not as good as you did, but almost!

And to top it all off, when I married Norris "Tuffy" Goff, I acquired another loving family: Dora and Rome Goff, Ione Gordon, Virgelia Lauck (she married Chet's brother), Helen and Ed Watkins. We all had a wonderful relationship. Helen is still there, but most of our old friends are gone. When I married Tuffy, I could not have found a more kind, gentle gentleman who loved me if I had looked the world over... or a wittier one. He was a dear and compassionate husband. I am quite grateful for every minute of our 48 years together.

I know how funny Chet and Tuffy were. They wrote their script in our small apartment when first getting started, as they could not afford an office. I had to be very quiet! I sat on a stool, looking out the fifth floor window at the elevated trains going by. In the distance was the Edgewater Beach Hotel, where Paul Whiteman and his orchestra were playing. I would say to myself, "Someday we are going to save enough money to dance to you." We sure did!

Thanks to all those wonderful fans who love *Lum and Abner*, the Jot 'Em Down Store, and Pine Ridge. It was the fans who made them a success.

Sincerely,  
Elizabeth Bullion Goff

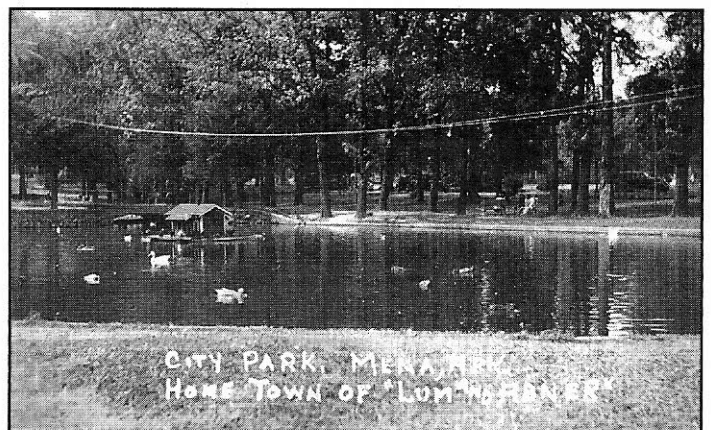
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## Mena Centennial History Book Now Available!

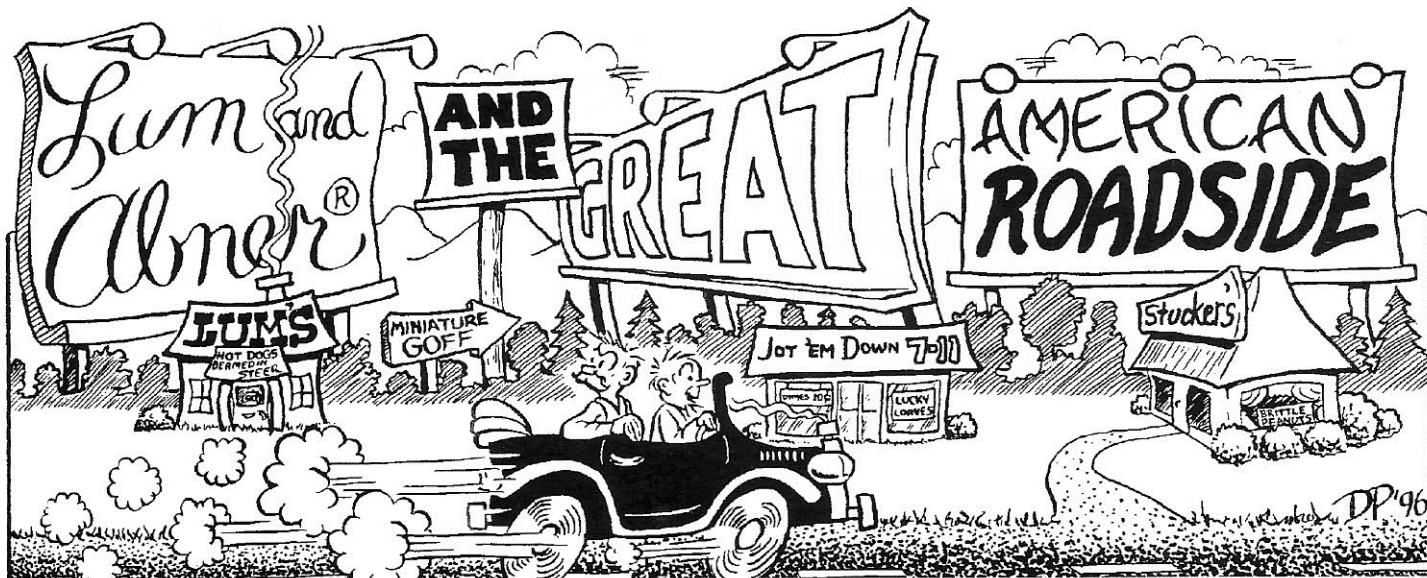
If you would like to learn more about Mena and the childhood world of Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff, we recommend the book that has just been published to commemorate the town's centennial. The official *Mena Centennial History* is the work of two NLAS members, Michael Cate and Prof. Harold Coogan. Publisher Cate says, "This book features hundreds of high quality photos never before available to the public. It includes images from the founding days of Mena to the current year."

Over 248 pages in length, the *Mena Centennial History* should be an important part of any L&A purist's library. We should never forget that, even though Lum & Abner themselves were fictional radio characters, the people behind them were very real indeed, and Mena was the place where it all started.

The book is available in a softcover edition for \$34.50, or a gold-embossed hardcover collector's edition for \$45.00. You should add \$4.00 postage per book. Send orders to MENA CENTENNIAL HISTORY, P.O. Box 1696, Mena, AR 71953.



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This is the fourth, and possibly final, installment of our ongoing series documenting the roadside businesses that were connected with or inspired by L&A over the years. In previous issues, we have looked at restaurants, general stores, and souvenir shops; this time, we examine one last bit of roadside Americana, the motel.

As far as we know, the only deliberate attempt to combine the characters of Lum & Abner with the necessity of the motor lodge came from Chet Lauck's own son-in-law, Dwight Babcock, the husband of Chet's daughter Shirley. The whole story of the proposed idea is contained in three letters, which now reside in the Chet Lauck Collection of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. In fact, when Dwight and Shirley Babcock were our guests at the 1994 NLAS Convention in Mena, we discussed this story with them, and Dwight had absolutely forgotten that such an idea was ever bounced around. Well, listen closely, Dwight, because here it comes again!

In 1961, Dwight Babcock was involved in building and real estate, and at the time our story begins he had just finished a deal involving selling a service station to the Gulf Oil company. That detail is important only because Dwight used it in his letter to lead into a deeper discussion. The letter, dated July 10, 1961, goes like this:



**BELIEVE-IT-OR-NOT DEPT:** Lynn & Kathleen Hollis, who would eventually give the world NLAS Zec Sec Tim Hollis, actually spent their honeymoon at these tourist cabins in Panama City Beach, Florida, in 1954.

"About the time Gulf was taking over the station, they sent some reps from the midwest and east to look over the station. One of the men (about 33) had been told somewhere along the line that I was married to 'Lum's' daughter. This is all he talked about for two days, and nothing would satisfy him but to meet Shirley. Frankly, it amazed me that this kind of interest still existed in *Lum and Abner*, and most particularly from someone of this age. The man was from Iowa, and as he told it, *Lum and Abner* were the greatest thing that ever happened back there. It then occurred to me that there might be some way to capitalize on this great memory and apparent undying interest.

"Some weeks passed, and as I was busy with other things, I didn't give it much thought. Then, last week while in Los Angeles, I had occasion because of my motel development to meet the business and personal manager for Dale Robertson of TV *Wells Fargo* fame. He is now in the process of formulating plans for a series of motels in the west to be called 'Dale Robertson's WELLS FARGO Motels.' The decor is to be that of early San Francisco, complete with red carpet, red velvet, crystal chandelier, marble bathrooms, and the like. His plan is to start with about four motels and branch out all over the western United States.

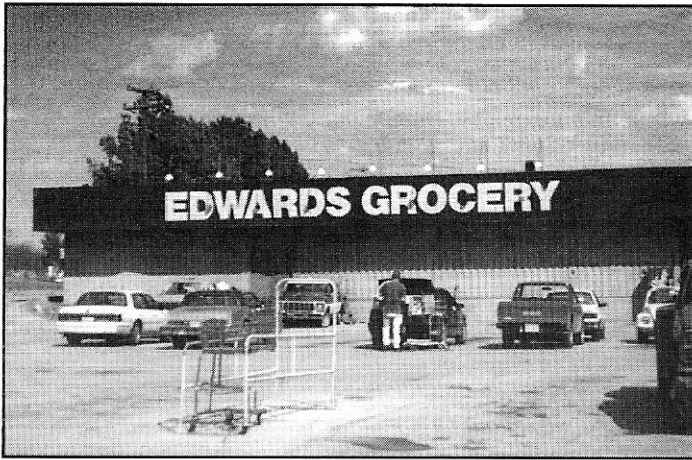
"The *Lum and Abner* idea hit me again about this time, and it seemed to really fit. It would seem a natural for the midwest and east and south, and west too for that matter. I'm so darn enthusiastic about the idea, Chet, and it looks so good that I keep thinking I must have forgotten something. Can you imagine the promotional possibilities of a thing like this?"

Well, this was not the first time someone had come up with an L&A roadside proposal of this type, and, as Chet and Tuffy (and, ergo, us) would learn, neither would it be the last. As usual, Chet's interest was piqued. On August 1, 1961, he wrote back:

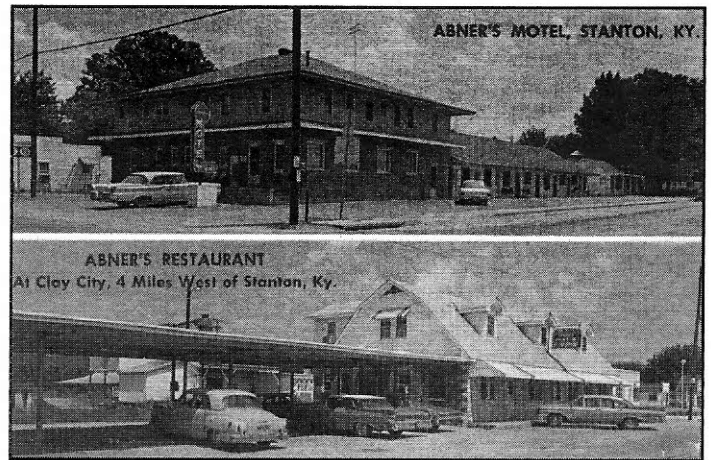
"I have read your letter twice and am beginning to acquire your enthusiasm for the possibility of Lum and Abner Motels. I hesitate to become involved in a venture of this magnitude at my age, but am convinced that the idea is a good one. I am sure we could pick out some good locations. I have covered the middle west rather thoroughly these past few years, and can think of several spots that are in dire need of better motel facilities."

A week later, Dwight composed his next epistle. His first concern was to do as much research into *Lum and Abner* as possible, so as to





*Could this be what happened when Lum & Abner finally “unsolved partnerships” for good?!  
Harrison, Arkansas (left); Stanton, Kentucky (right).*



properly convey the characters and setting in the proposed motels. Most of the material for which he was asking (scrapbooks, scripts, recordings, photos, etc.) was still stored in Los Angeles at that time; it was a few years later before the collection became separated and scattered across the face of the earth. (Some parts of it, namely the scrapbooks and photo collection, have never been recovered to this day!)

Dwight also elaborated on his further plans: “It occurs to me that we could incorporate a souvenir shop into each coffee shop, and package some special item to be sent to relatives and friends all over the country. Along these lines, we could package a *Lum and Abner* biscuit dough, special syrups, molasses, and so on. This sort of thing would not only be profitable, but would be tremendous advertising. With one operator, we could standardize menus, keep the selections very specialized, and feature ‘Lum’s’ favorite dishes and of course, ‘Abner’s’ favorites.

“I do think we should begin in one of the larger cities, and it would be tremendous if such a site could be found in the state of Arkansas. I don’t know what the market is in Hot Springs, but I think of the motel we stayed in when we were there last year. It was nice, but had no real appeal or character. Can you imagine what the name *Lum and Abner* would do for any kind of a business in Hot Springs!”

Now, as far as we know, that was the end of the discussion. Since today even Dwight Babcock himself does not have clear memories of

this project, it is hard to say what happened next. However, in the UALR collection there is one more document, dated 1964, in the form of a contract. It reads:

“For and in consideration of the sum of Ten Dollars and other good and valuable consideration in hand paid, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, I, Chester H. Lauck, and F. Norris Goff, without warranty, grant to LUM & ABNER LODGES, INC., a corporation to be formed, the right to use said name as its corporate name, but for no other purpose.”

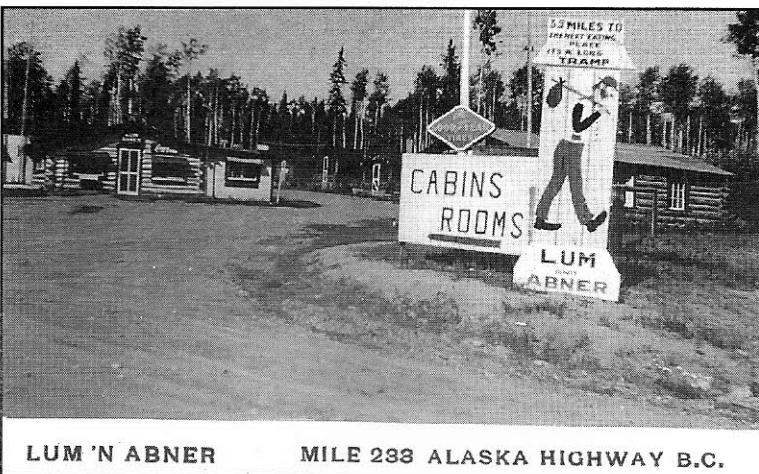
We literally have no idea whether this was in some way connected with Dwight’s proposed project, or whether there was another one that has escaped our detection. At any rate, it seems that the only slight brush of L&A with the tourist lodging industry came back in the 1950’s, in the unlikely location of British Columbia, Canada, on the Alaskan Highway. (Yes, you read that correctly.)

Kathy Stucker of the L&A Museum in Pine Ridge writes of this oddball lodge: “The owners were here several years ago. They have resort facilities, including a helicopter pad. The owners had once lived in the Mena area, and got permission from Chet Lauck to use the name. It looks like it should, for the area it is in... moose heads on the wall, etc... not like a transplant from Pine Ridge.”

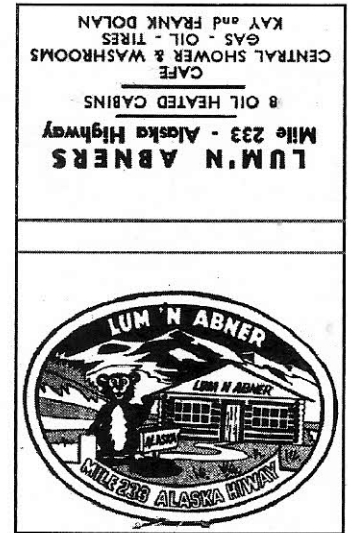
And so, we come to the end of this series of articles... or do we? No part of the story of *Lum and Abner* has ever been documented to its absolute fullest, so it is highly likely that more aspects of “L&A and the Great American Roadside” will turn up in the future. When they do, look for them here! Until that time...

HAPPY MOTORING!

- Tim Hollis



*Rare postcard of the Lum & Abner tourist cabins on the Alaska Highway in British Columbia, Canada.*

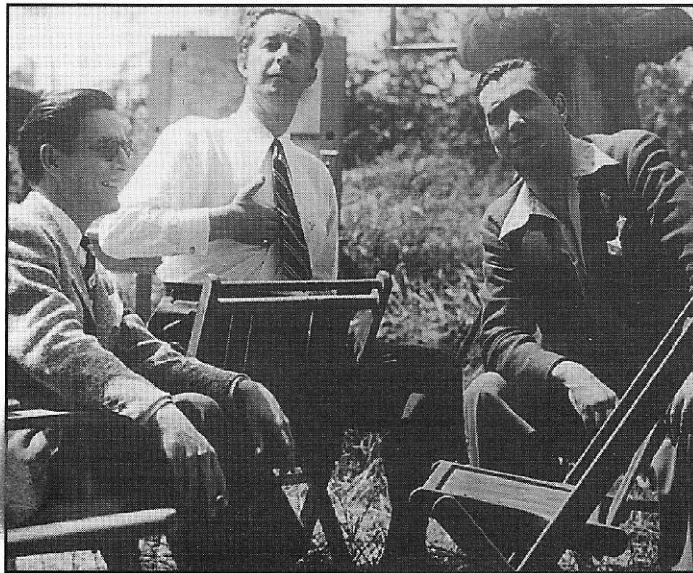


*Matchbook cover from the Canadian L&A lodge.*

# To HOLLYWOOD and BEYOND!

## LUM & ABNER MEMORIES FROM HARLAN HOBBS AND BEN COMBS

The 1996 National Lum and Abner Society Convention offered its attendees a rare opportunity to hear two gentlemen who represented both the early and the later careers of Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff. Journalist Harlan Hobbs first worked with the team in the 1930s, while advertising executive Ben Combs collaborated with Chet Lauck during "Lum's" so-called "retirement" days. Mr. Hobbs spoke prior to the screening of the *Lum and Abner* film *Partners in Time*, which proved to be a perfect lead-in to the "Hollywood years," while Mr. Combs offered "the rest of the story" after the movie concluded.



*Harlan Hobbs (left), Jack Votion (center), and Sam Coslow (right) on the set of DREAMING OUT LOUD, 1940.*

Ben Combs introduced our first guest: "Harlan Hobbs knew Chet and Tuffy for 45 years. He is the only living person who knew and was involved with Lum and Abner, Chet and Tuffy, from 1935 all the way to Chet's passing 16 years ago in 1980. No living person has this continuity. Harlan is a living American treasure in his own right. He is a native of Little Rock, and became a newspaper columnist when he was 15 years old, and today he is likely to be the nation's senior newspaper columnist, still writing a weekly newspaper column at age 85. After he left *The Arkansas Democrat* newspaper years ago, he became a Hollywood publicist. After Hollywood, he was an advertising executive for a Fortune 500 corporation. He was an international marketing and business consultant in Canada, Paris and the U.S. and was a counselor to President Eisenhower. He is a true gentleman, an articulate storyteller, a gifted writer, and a lover of all things *Lum and Abner*."

Mr. Hobbs prefaced his speech: "Of course, I have a great reverence for the legend of *Lum and Abner*, but I have a great admiration for you (the NLAS). All my life I have loved our language. I consider English only the beginning of our language. The American language is really worldwide, and it should be used properly. You are keeping alive the legend of people who used the language with great artistry, great sincerity."

In preparation for his visit, Hobbs conducted research through his own files, and brought some remarkable clippings and photos to share. One such artifact originated during a pre-World War II British War Relief event held at the Hollywood Brown Derby Restaurant. Noticing six unique performers in the same crowded room, Hobbs gathered them for their one-and-only group photograph: Amos 'n' Andy, Laurel and Hardy, and Lum and Abner!

Harlan Hobbs: "In order to really appreciate *Lum and Abner*, I would think it best that you remember that radio was not even net-

worked across the nation in the early 1930s. Television was just a dream. Almost all the newspapers were afraid of radio. I wrote the first radio column in all of Arkansas because newspapers didn't want to give their radio competitors a break. When I was at Paramount, the powers-that-be were afraid that a certain star's appearances on radio would be detrimental to the sale of the Paramount pictures he was going to be in. This 'star' was Bob Hope! That's laughable now, but not then.

"I was writing at a time when motion pictures were silent, and suddenly they learned to speak. The microphone was so carefully put, just within the reach of the voice, for fear that any syllable

would be lost. Incidentally, there were no 'four-letter words,' used in those days - thank God! In the years since, television and motion pictures have done a terrible thing to the English language. Nobody cares anymore if each syllable means anything, or even if it is heard. I defy you to go to even the best motion picture today, and be able to understand everything that everybody says. You could in the early days!

"I first knew Chet and Tuffy in 1935. When I got off the train and interviewed Chet and Tuffy, and Jim and Marian Jordan (*Fibber McGee and Molly*), I didn't know at the time that they were to become lifelong friends.

"It was a rare thing in the 1930s to have a simulcast - a live broadcast from New York, Chicago, Washington and Hollywood. In 1936, I was director of publicity for the Arkansas Centennial. Waters, Arkansas had a population of 18, yet, thanks to its influence on the *Lum and Abner* program, the name of Pine Ridge had become famous. It seemed a good publicity stunt if the U.S. government would officially change the name of Waters to Pine Ridge. Chet and Tuffy appeared on a show that documented that in a coast-to-coast broadcast, which started in New York, went to Washington, Chicago, Hollywood, and back to Little Rock, picking up along the way senators, stars and musicians. It made headlines all over North America. In their own way, Lum and Abner were a part of pioneering in radio, from a technical point of view.

"Back to the Jot 'Em Down Store: There are little things in the lives of Chet and Tuffy that are very dear to the hearts of those of us who knew them and loved them well. It would be derelict of me not to say that behind those two men there were two beautiful women: Liz and Harriet were remarkable women. First of all, they had to put up with Chet and Tuffy! But they had more than that too. In the case of Liz,



**Chet Lauck (left) and Harlan Hobbs (right) announce the opening of their new Hot Springs ad agency in this December 1967 newspaper photo.**

she was a beautiful mother, a devoted wife, and beautiful! She really was, truly, beautiful.

“And then there was Harriet. Harriet and Chet had some frequent ‘disagreements,’ for a very good reason: Harriet was, in her own way, as talented as ‘Lum,’ and Harriet caused ‘Lum’ distress when she would quarrel with him about selling their house and moving on so often. She was what you might call ‘an interior decorator’s decorator.’ Some of the best interior decorators in Hollywood used to milk her ideas and put them into their own beautiful things. The problem between Harriet and Chet was that she would decorate their homes in Beverly Hills so beautifully, and so tastefully, that Chet just couldn’t turn down what people offered him for them! So Harriet got a little sick of moving, but every home was more beautiful than the other. Chet didn’t have a monopoly on the talent in that family.

“Before World War II, I worked at March Field, and learned that a fighter squadron and bomber squadron in training were having trouble in target practice. Some of the newer men were outdoing some of the veterans, which nobody could figure out, until one of the fellows from Arkansas said, ‘those fellows couldn’t hunt duck; they’re not leading their targets!’ It was decided they might need a little practice at leading a target in motion. Chet and Tuffy were real champions at trap and



**Tuffy Goff and Andy Devine, two of the sportsmen who taught skeet shooting techniques to the military during the war.**

skeet-shooting. So was Andy Devine and Clark Gable. Ultimately, I gathered the four of them up one day, introduced them to the commanding officer, and the result was that we recruited a good many more champions, and it worked. They taught the gunners the principal of shooting a target in motion by first teaching them to shoot skeet! That story can be verified in the Army and Navy Files.” The civilian support lent the troops by Chet and Tuffy goes hand-in-hand with the “patriotics” messages and war bond promotions they broadcast on the air in *Lum and Abner*.

Ben Combs concluded the morning program of our convention: “When I tell young writing and broadcasting students at the Lum and Abner Radio Studio at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock about *Lum and Abner*, I remind them of a show that endured on radio for 24 years, a quarter of a century, as a regular part of American culture, unmatched by any of the programs of today. Because our attention span is so much less, we ‘burn up’ culture. I read recently that all of Shakespeare’s work could be used up in two days on one channel! But I remind these young students of today that *Lum and Abner* never used a curse word, no one ever got killed, there was no sex or drugs; there was only gentle, but hilarious comedy and a love of the rural American folklore. They also displayed an undying patriotism and love of American values, which are all throughout the work they did.

“I grew up on *Lum and Abner*. We never missed a *Lum and Abner* episode; it was part of our evening. As a young boy, I had a special treat. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, my father was general sales manager for the Cadillac-Pontiac dealership in Hot Springs. Chet Lauck would call over every year or so and order a brand new Cadillac for his father, mother, brother, and so on. For a few weeks after every trade-in, I got to ride around with my dad in ‘Lum’s Cadillac!’

“When Lum and Abner closed down the Jot ‘Em Down Store and entered that phase called ‘Life After Hollywood,’ there were serious negotiations about *Lum and Abner* continuing as a TV series. In truth, Tuffy was secretly ill with serious health problems. He was not up to the rigors of early television, and retired to Palm Desert, California. Chet and his family already had a very special, secret place called Spring Ranch, about 12 miles outside of Las Vegas. There was a natural spring and oasis at the bottom of the mountains, where conquistadors had watered their horses. Chet bought it, and it was the Lauck



**During production of the ARKANSAS RIVER television documentary in 1968 (l to r): Col. Charles Steel, Chet Lauck, Ben Combs, Sen. William Fulbright.**

family's retreat from Hollywood. Chet eventually sold Spring Mountain Ranch to the German munitions Heiress Vera Krupp (of the Krupp Diamond fame), who later sold it to Howard Hughes. Spring Mountain Ranch is now a state park!

"Eventually Chet moved to Houston, where he became national spokesman for Continental Oil. Chet appeared in commercials for Conoco, portraying Lum. Chet was warm, easy to talk to, and a very dapper dresser. The president of Conoco and the board of directors loved him, and for about a decade, he was the toastmaster and the toast of Houston, Texas.

"Chet made speeches around the world. He was a much sought-after speaker, literally to the end of his life. He could regale an audience with *Lum and Abner* homilies and quips, and was a great joke-teller. His speeches always included at least a minute or two of very patriotic themes and messages. Chet Lauck and Tuffy Goff were very patriotic Americans, and they never missed a chance to tell what they considered to be the values that made this country great.

"In 1966, Chet retired from Conoco, and he and Harriet moved to her girlhood home of Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas. Years before, Chet and Clark Gable bought a beautiful piece of property on Lake Hamilton. Chet and Harriet built a home on that property, and the design was a modern replica of the beloved ranch house at Spring Mountain State Park. Harriet Lauck may have been the most elegant woman I've ever known. She was a very classy person. Harriet was the rock of that family, and Chet got to be a 'man-child' all of his life, because she kept things on track.

"Harlan Hobbs and Chet Lauck Jr. joined to form Lauck and Hobbs Advertising Agency in Hot Springs. Senator Dale Bumpers, who was governor then, appointed Chet to the racing commission. Chet spent a lot of time at Oaklawn Park during racing season. He was a frequent guest of Governor Winthrop Rockefeller and Senator J. William Fulbright.

"I was about 26 years old when Chet entered my life. I was the public affairs director of KATV, the ABC affiliate in Little Rock. My first love there was producing documentaries and entertainment specials. One day I called Chet and said, 'I'm going to write a 90-minute TV documentary about the history of the Arkansas River.' The U.S. government Corps of Engineers was building the largest public works project in American history, the Arkansas River Navigation Project. I wanted Chet to narrate this documentary, and I had recruited Will Rogers Jr. to narrate the Oklahoma portion. So Chet struck out with us, and during that process, we formed a bond. During filming, I was driving for Chet and his friend, Senator Fulbright, his college fraternity brother. I thought, 'you know, this is really awesome! Am I going to hear these distinguished men discuss the great issues of our time?' No, they talked about college memories: the girls they had dated, football trips, and other youthful things! They had a great time. Later that year, Chet and Will Rogers Jr. came to both Little Rock and Tulsa, and anchored on live television the dedication ceremonies of the Arkansas River project.

"The next year, I took Chet up to Mountain View, Arkansas to the famous Arkansas Folk Festival, and the program was called *Lum Goes to the Folk Festival*. He had a great time up there, and the people loved him. A few years later, I left the TV station and started an ad agency, which I'm still doing in Little Rock, and we worked on a lot of projects together. In fact, I accompanied Chet to Mena for the dedication of the Lum and Abner monument at the city park here. He was very proud and thankful to the people of Mena for doing that.



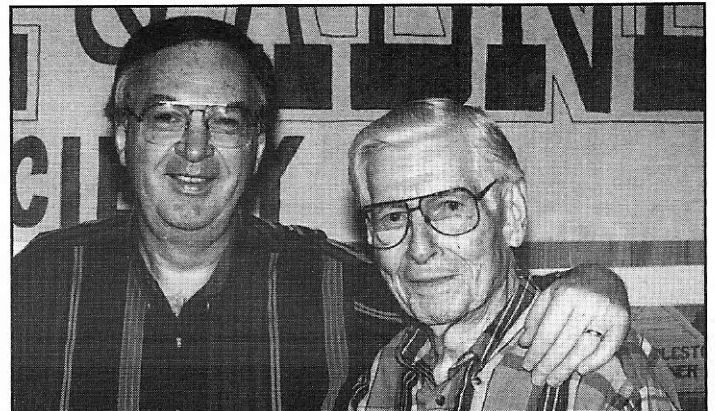
**Ben Combs (left) presents Chet Lauck Jr. with the plaque denoting the Lum and Abner Studio at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 1980.**

"About a year before Chet passed away, I said, 'Chet, you need to have all your maps, pictures, and so on preserved.' Chet was a graduate of the University of Arkansas, and he designed the running razor-back symbol as a student. I suggested we put the archives at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, because they had a true broadcast department. We created the Lum and Abner Archives, which contains a great amount of the life work of Lum and Abner.

"The hardest thing I ever had to do, and the greatest honor of my life, was that I fulfilled Chet's wish that I deliver his eulogy. In the audience were the presidents and board of directors of Conoco Oil, and the youngest governor in America, Bill Clinton. Chet Lauck was the most remarkable man I've ever had the privilege to know. Chet and Tuffy had given the world laughter and joy, and reminded us of American values and touched millions of lives with their show. They still do today. They're part of our history, and what you, the National Lum and Abner Society do to preserve them, is a wonderful, living archives; an historic cultural preservation. Harlan Hobbs and I pledge our continued support to the NLAS!"

My fellow "ossifers" and NLAS members join me in thanking these gentlemen for their support and attendance, and we hope to see them at future conventions!

- "Uncle Donnie" Pitchford



**Ben Combs (left) and Harlan Hobbs (right) at the 1996 NLAS Convention in Mena.**