

**The JOT 'EM DOWN
JOURNAL**

Official Publication of the National Lum and Abner® Society



DECEMBER 1996

The Country's Not So Country Anymore

(During his retirement, Clarence Hartzell spent a lot of time turning out poetry and music, both humorous and serious. The following piece, which he probably wrote in the late 1950s, could very well be Ben Withers himself talking... and amazingly, it is even more accurate today than when it was originally written!)

Oh, the country ain't so country anymore;
Somehow it ain't just like it was before.
Where the tractors used to plow, they've got subdivisions now,
With contractors buildin' houses by the score...
And what's happened to that old time country store
With the pickle barrel sittin' on the floor
Where the farmers used to trade? Oh, I'm very much afraid
That you'll hardly find them there kind anymore.
Look what they've been doin' to the homestead,
Tearin' all the barns and silos down.
All the slickers from the city movin' out there, it's a pity,
Hardly room left for the cattle to set down.
Just give back to me those good old days of yore
When the neighbors lived a mile away or more;
But the visitin' was fine on the good old party line...
Now that's gone, but not forgotten... "Nevermore!"

No, the rural ain't so puerile anymore;
All the vittles that they cook come from the store.
Only chickens that you see are layin' golf balls on a tee,
Even got ole Aunt Mirandy keepin' score.
Now the golfers do what gophers done before,
Only difference is the golfers holler "fore!"
And they keep the pastures green for an aeroplane machine,
Nope, the country ain't so country, that's fer shore.
Folks is buildin' highways that go nowheres,
And to go nowheres you've got to pay a toll.
You may have your country cousins livin' out there by the dozens,
But you can't drive in to see 'em, save your soul!
Ain't it time us Hoosiers was declarin' war
'Fore they have this country foundered to the core?
'Cause the farmers of today are balin' money stid of hay,
And the country ain't so country anymore.

- Clarence Hartzell

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The Jot 'Em Down Journal, Volume 13, Number 3 (Whole Number 75), December 1996. Published bi-monthly by the National Lum and Abner Society. Membership, including a subscription to the *Journal*, is \$10.00 per year. Send editorial and subscription correspondence to the Executive Secretary, Tim Hollis, #81 Sharon Boulevard, Dora, AL 35062.

THE JOT 'EM DOWN JOURNAL

DECEMBER 1996

THE NATIONAL LUM AND ABNER SOCIETY

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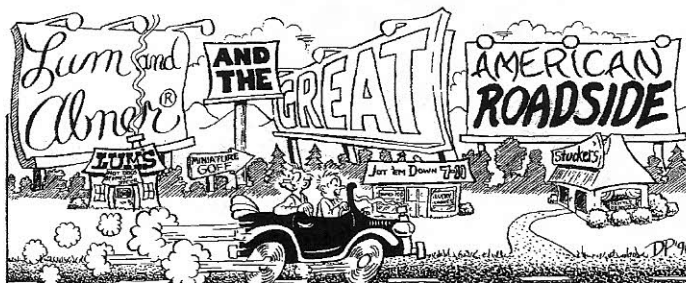
Cover: Tuffy "Santy Claus" Goff and Chet Lauck go Christmas shopping in the toy department, accompanied by their obviously dubious offspring, Gretchen Goff and Chet Lauck Jr., circa 1942. (Courtesy of Mandy Lauck)

All illustrations are from the NLAS Archives, except as follows. Pages 4 through 8, all: Helen Hartzell.

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Clarence's widow tells what the NLAS meant to him.



It would appear that this series of features will be continuing for some time. This roadside business was photographed near Lancaster, Ohio, and submitted by member Rex Riffle.

50 "FINE" YEARS

WITH BEN WITHERS & CLARENCE HARTZELL

The NLAS is observing the 50th anniversary of the debut of one of Lum & Abner's most beloved supporting characters, Ben Withers, who made his first appearance on the show in November 1946. The actor behind Ben, the one and only Clarence Hartzell, was one of the NLAS's first and dearest friends. We published profiles on him in the October 1985 and April 1988 issues of the *Journal*, but so much new information has come to light that we felt now was the time to again take a look at the career of this truly legendary radio actor.

Clarence Hartzell was born in Huntington, West Virginia, on October 26, 1910. His first job in radio was for a small local station operated by a neighborhood electrical company. "Anybody could be on the radio," he related about those days. "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 didn't do either one of those, but he did organize 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 Cecil were asked to perform a 15-minute musical program each week.

Soon, the whole Hartzell family moved to Cincinnati, where the brothers continued their musical escapades on station WFBE. Clarence was teamed with Marion Denham for a regular feature titled *The Love Birds*, which, judging from its publicity, must have been an early ancestor of *The Bickersons*. Eventually, Clarence worked his way up to relief announcer and music librarian for this station. It was his idea to begin a series of mystery dramas on the air, and persuaded *Detective Story* magazine to provide the scripts free of charge. But that was not all that was to be free: when he discovered that WFBE was expecting the actors on the show to perform gratis as well, he objected... and was FIRED!

Undaunted, Hartzell worked as an announcer in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, and was then hired as program director for another sta-



Clarence and Marion Denham as *THE LOVE BIRDS*, circa 1930.

tion in Joliet, Illinois. In 1931, Clarence dropped out of radio for a year and moved back to the old homestead in Cincinnati, but it wasn't long before he returned to Chicago and resumed writing radio plays. This particular station, the well-known WLS, had a habit of sending its actors out to perform at various functions, and it was during one of those jaunts that an accident occurred which was to affect Hartzell's future career permanently. This is how he told the story:

"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 at 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 too! 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 began making a specialty of playing old men on the radio, starting with NBC's *Uncle Ezra* show, starring Pat Barrett. His other radio credits during the latter half of the 1930s included *Today's Children*, *Road of Life*, *The Story of Mary Marlin*, *Li'l Abner* (in which he was cast as Pappy Yokum... a more perfect piece of casting is hard to imagine!), and *Waterloo Junction*, which he also created and wrote.

Hartzell's really big break came in 1940. NBC's popular *Vic and Sade* series was facing a crisis because Art Van Harvey, who portrayed Vic, had suffered a heart seizure, and for a while it looked like the show was going to lose its male lead. Paul Rhymer, the genius whose brainchild *Vic and Sade* was, had decided to bring in the character of Uncle Fletcher, who had previously been known only through the eccentric letters he sent to the rest of the family. Auditions for the part were held, but it was generally assumed that Chicago character actor Sidney Ellstrom would be the one to play Uncle Fletcher. That is, however, until that youngster Clarence Hartzell opened his mouth, and the definitive Uncle Fletcher popped out in all his peculiar glory.



Clarence as he looked around the time he became *Uncle Fletcher*, 1940.

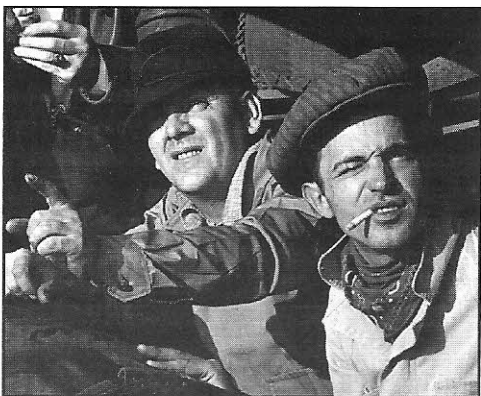
In his encyclopedic tome *Tune In Yesterday*, John Dunning described Hartzell's character this way: "Uncle Fletcher was the most absent-minded old cuss of the air, an eccentric who talked right through people, said 'fine, fine' to everything without hearing one



The cast of VIC & SADE: Art Van Harvey, Clarence Hartzell, Bernardine Flynn, Billy Idelson.

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 along the ceiling."

During the 1943-44 season, Hartzell performed a comparatively straight role in *The Road to Danger*, a Saturday-morning adventure series. His character was Cottonseed Sample, a behind-the-enemy-lines truck driver, with Curley Bradley (better known as radio's Tom



Curley "Tom Mix" Bradley (left) and Clarence Hartzell in THE ROAD TO DANGER, 1943.

Mix) as his more straitlaced partner Stumpy. The series is almost totally forgotten by radio buffs of today. When *Vic and Sade* ended its run of daily 15-minute episodes in 1944, Hartzell jumped directly into another series, *Those Websters*, in which he portrayed Mr. Watt, another of his trademark old codgers. As if his acting ability needed any proving, he was also heard in more serious elderly roles in several of the radio soap operas originating in Chicago. *Those Websters* moved from Chicago to Hollywood in 1946, most of the cast remaining intact. This single incident was responsible for bringing some of radio's biggest names to California for the first time in their careers; besides Clarence Hartzell, there were two other future L&A alumni who made the move with the series: Willard Waterman and Parley Baer. Both would go on to become broadcasting legends in their own right.

Chet Lauck and Norris Goff had been longtime fans of Clarence's Uncle Fletcher character, so when they learned that he was now liv-



Newspaper photo of Chet Lauck, Clarence Hartzell, and Norris Goff broadcasting LUM & ABNER, 1947.

ing in Hollywood, they immediately called him to ask if he would be interested in joining their own show. Late in October 1946, the story began to develop: Pine Ridge's longtime veterinarian was leaving town, and as his replacement, Grandpappy Spears recommended one of his old cronies, Dr. Benjamin Franklin Withers of Mt. Idy. Preparations for Doc Withers' arrival occupied several episodes, but on November 4 everything appeared to be ready. Everyone was gath-

To our dear friends and loved ones - the Witherses, Benji and the Witherses!

ALKA SELTZER
Presents
LUM AND ABNER

First Show: 5:00-5:15 PM PST
Second Show: 8:00-8:15 PM PST ABC Monday, January 27, 1947

SOUND: THREE RINGS ON A TELEPHONE

BAKER: That's our ring. Time for Lum and Abner, brought to you by the makers of Alka-Seltzer.

ORGAN: LP FULL AND FADE OUT AS B.G. FOR:

Doc Withers
Lum
Abner
Forrest Owen
Ralph Emerson
Ray Michelson
Tommy

At the broadcast of January 27, 1947, Clarence had the entire staff autograph this LUM & ABNER script... including producer Forrest Owen and organist Ralph Emerson!

ered at Luke Spears' lunchroom for a grand welcoming ceremony for the new vet (Luke even squeezed out "Welcome Doc Withers" in mashed potatoes on each plate). Running late, L&A were just getting ready to close the store and join the festivities when they spied a shabby-looking individual coming up on the porch:

LUM: *Who iz that feller ennyways?*

ABNER: *I don't know... whoever he is, he shore looks country, I'll say that fer him.*

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS, CLOSES)

ABNER: *We're closed... closed up fer the day... Sorry...*

WITHERS: *Yes sir, howdy do sir. Awful nice day.*

ABNER: *I said we're closed.*

WITHERS: *Howzat?*

LUM: *He said we ain't open today.*

WITHERS: *No, I seen your sign out there.. some sort of a holiday, is it?*

LUM: *Well, yeah... sorter. You might say that.*

WITHERS: *Well, that's nice... holidays are nice. I wonder if you'd mind if I use your telephone?*

LUM: *Shore, hit's right over ther... do you know how ta work th' phone?*

WITHERS: *Oh yes... I was just lookin' fer the fellow's ring... I wrote it down on the back of a letter... got it here sommers. You ever been to Boise, Idaho?*

LUM: *No, I ain't.*

WITHERS: *Nice place.*

LUM: *Wait a minit, you ain't plannin' on callin' nobody in Idaho, air ye?*

WITHERS: *No, no.. local fellow... I just ran across this postcard I got from a friend of mine who lives in Boise, Idaho. The card shows a view of the main street of Boise as seen from the north end.*

ABNER: *Yeah, lemme see it.*

LUM: *Abner, jist igganore him..*

WITHERS: *There you are... that's lookin' south. Main street of Boise, Idaho. That's lookin' either south or west. I've never been there myself.*

When the stranger had the audacity to show up at the lunchroom, L&A quickly shoved him into the kitchen and gave him a plate just to get him out of the way. Of course, they were later mortified to learn



Lauck, Hartzell, and Goff going through a Ben Withers routine on the 30-minute L&A series, 1948.

that the "panhandler" was none other than Doc Withers in person!

Withers featured prominently in the storyline for the next several weeks. Setting up his office in the Jot 'Em Down Store feed room, Doc's perennial patient was Mr. Johnson's goat, whom he kept misplacing. Withers' inability to find anything wrong with the goat became something of a running gag through December and January. On January 22, Grandpappy Spears was eating oysters in L&A's Meadowlark Restaurant when he broke his tooth ("my good tooth") on what turned out to be a small pearl. Immediately an argument ensued over who owned the pearl: proprietors L&A, customer Grandpap, or Squire Skimp (who had brought Grandpap in as his guest). In one of Clarence Hartzell's most hilarious performances, Doc Withers attempted to mediate:

WITHERS: *Now then, the only way to handle this is to have our facts put clearly before us and examine each fact step by step. Correct?*

SQUIRE: *Yes, that's the way to do it.*

WITHERS: *Fine. Now, would someone here state the basic problem clearly and simply?*

LUM: *Well, th' whole idee iz that we served...*

WITHERS: *Wait, Lum, I bleave Squire Skimp can give us a good clear statement of the problem at hand... go ahead, Squire.*

SQUIRE: *Well, it's very simple. I came in here with Grandpappy Spears as my guest...*

WITHERS: *Don't get confused now, Squire.*

SQUIRE: *I'm not confused. I came in here with Grandpap as my guest...*

WITHERS: *That's the whole trouble, everybody gets mixed up. Abner, what is your opinion of the facts up to this point?*

ABNER: *What facts?*

WITHERS: *Yes! Now we're getting somewhere! Have to keep a clear head on these matters. Now then, Squire.. you made a statement a while ago. Would you mind repeating that?*

SQUIRE: *What statement do you mean, Doc? You never let me finish talking.*

WITHERS: *You don't remember what it was? Well, THAT'S the trouble! We lose our heads and make statements we don't even remember!*

SQUIRE: *I HAVEN'T LOST MY HEAD....*



Chet Lauck & Clarence Hartzell welcome Norris Goff back after his three-month absence, March 1948.

WITHERS: Now, now, let's not raise our voices... if we're ever goin' to settle this thing, we've got to keep calm.

SQUIRE: Tut tut tut.

WITHERS: Look at the facts with a crystal clear eye.. Milford, you chipped your tooth, didn't you?

GRAP: Uh-huh, you bet yer spavin legged life I did.

WITHERS: That's too bad.. but it gives us fact #2.. Milford has a chipped tooth. Let's see now where we stand. Fact #1... uh... Squire, what was fact #1?

SQUIRE: I never heard any fact #1!

WITHERS: Well, you should LISTEN. You've got things so confused in your mind you can't hear what anyone else is saying.

SQUIRE: I'M NOT CONFUSED!!!

WITHERS: Now, now, keep your voice down, Squire. Got to examine this thing calmly. Lum, tell in your own words what happened.

LUM: Well, Squire an' Grandpap ordered two plates of oysters...

WITHERS: Exactly what words did Mr. Skimp use?

LUM: Well, I think he said, "Give us two plates..."

WITHERS: Well, that's not really important, just stick to the main facts. The trouble is, you keep gettin' off the track. Now then, Squire, you heard Lum's side of the problem. Just what is your connection with this particular situation?

SQUIRE: WHAT IS MY CONNECTION?!

WITHERS: Now, now, there you go again, flyin' off the handle. Just state your side as calmly as you can. Now, you say Milford brought you in here as his guest?

SQUIRE: I BROUGHT HIM IN HERE...

WITHERS: Yes.

SQUIRE: AND I ORDERED TWO PLATES OF GUESTS!! HE WAS MY OYSTER!!

WITHERS: You mean Milford?

SQUIRE: YES, MILFORD WAS MY OYSTER... ER, I MEAN MUSTARD WAS MY... CONFOUND IT, WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS JASPER WAS MY MULE... er, no....

WITHERS: Now, you're getting mixed up again! You say you ordered mustard?

SQUIRE: NO, I DIDN'T ORDER MUSTARD, I ORDERED A MULE.. ER, NO, THAT'S WRONG... I DIDN'T ORDER A MULE...

WITHERS: Well, how did you get it then?

SQUIRE: I FOUND IT... ER, I MEAN GRANDSPEARS PAP... ER, I MEAN GRANDPAPPY FOUND SPEARS...

WITHERS: Oh, I'm afraid you're getting confused again.

SQUIRE: I'M NOT GETTING CONFUSED! I'M LEAVIN' HERE RIGHT NOW, AND I'M TELLIN' YOU I EXPECT THAT MULE TO BE RETURNED TO ME BY SUNDOWN! GOOD MUSTARD, GENTLEMEN!!!!!!

Shortly after this storyline ran its course, for some reason Doc Withers more or less disappeared from the storyline for a while, and was not mentioned. Listeners may have wondered why, but they

would never have suspected the true reason. Years later, Hartzell explained what happened. It seems that Miles Laboratories, sponsor of *Lum and Abner*, was working on a deal with a veterinary supply pharmaceutical company, which was balking because of Doc Withers' "derogatory" portrayal of a veterinarian. They wanted the character dropped from the show before negotiations with Miles continued. Lauck and Goff and writer Roz Rogers stuck to their guns: they would not remove Clarence Hartzell from the cast, but would have to change things around so that Doc Withers was no longer a veterinarian. When Withers returned from his absence on March 18, he was a much subdued personality. "There's no such person as Doc Withers, and there never really was," he stated. "If you want to refer to me, call me Ben... Ben Withers." L&A wondered what had happened to change him so much, and he finally explained it to them in an emotional episode that was really one of the few times that Hartzell was allowed to drop his customary comic attitude and be serious:

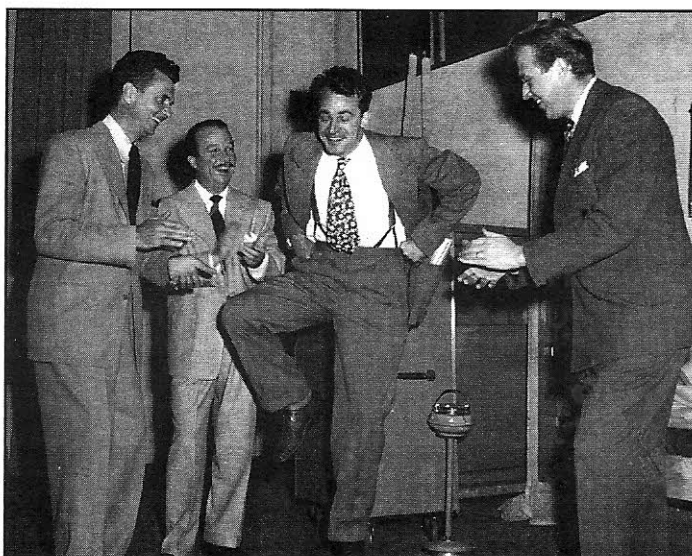
WITHERS: I've been thinking about it for several days now, and I know in my heart this is the right thing to do. Ever since I went over to Cherry Hill one day last week, I've known it.

ABNER: I wouldn't pay no 'tention to nothin' them Cherry Hillers say. They ain't got 'nuff brains in that whole town to blow th' lid off a teakettle.

WITHERS: No, you don't understand, Abner. Someone was tellin' me there was a veterinarian who'd moved over to Cherry Hill... Dr. Brooks. So I went over to talk to him. As nice a young fellow as you'd ever want to meet. And smart... it's the greatest thing that ever happened to this section. He has a car; he can service this whole county. Mt. Idy, Cherry Hill, Pine Ridge, Board Camp... I just happened to love animals. I've always had a sort of a knack for understandin' their ailments. Just wanted to relieve their sufferin'. There wasn't a vet over at

Mt. Idy, so folks used to bring their stock and pets to me. I never made any charges for my services.. my compensation was in bein' able to help. That's how I got the name "Doc." My friends got to callin' me that because I had a way with animals. But I really have no right to the name. I never realized before what it meant to be called "Doc." That's a friendly way of sayin' "doctor." You know what "doctor" means? It means a learned man! An academic title! One upon whom that title has been conferred by a university! That's what Doctor Brooks has earned, and that's why I have no right to be called that... but I'm happy about it. I love animals, and Dr. Brooks' comin' here means they'll have better attention. With his scientific methods and his serums, we can keep down epidemics... we can keep the sufferin' of these dumb animals who can't speak for themselves down to a minimum. And I'm glad.

After this episode, Ben Withers (as he was now called) became slightly more savvy and less addle-pated than he originally appeared. He was appointed constable of Pine Ridge, and continued to spin his



Backstage during the 30-minute L&A days, Clarence dances a jig for the entertainment of Lauck, Goff, and producer Bill Gay.



Newlyweds Clarence & Helen Hartzell, 1949.

other Goff voices out of the show, and according to Lauck, it was done so smoothly that many listeners never realized Tuffy was away from the microphone for so long. Unfortunately, only one recording from this bizarre period in the show's history has surfaced. However, around the same time, Hartzell did make a few appearances on the prestigious *One Man's Family*, playing another Fletcher clone known as Cousin Jediah... recordings of these episodes can be heard on NLAS Tape Library cassette #296.

When *Lum and Abner* became a weekly 30-minute audience show on October 3, 1948, Ben Withers was on hand as a permanent member of the cast. However, the references to him being the town constable were dropped, leaving him to seem more like an irritating, senile old man without any purpose for being there. (Those who have heard the Withers character only through the 30-minute L&A shows cannot possibly realize the depth he possessed during the 15-minute days.) Clarence Hartzell was definitely not pleased with L&A's change in format; come to think of it, practically no one associated with the show was! Writers Roz Rogers and Betty Boyle disliked it... L&A's longtime fans were disappointed... and Norris Goff positively detested it. Clarence wanted OUT, and sometime during the month of April 1949 he was heard on *Lum and Abner* for the very last time. Almost simultaneously, he married his sweetheart Helen, and the newlyweds left the tinsel and glitter of Hollywood (which had displeased Clarence from the start) and returned to home base in Chicago.

Always having been a country boy at heart, Clarence purchased a farm, Buttermilk Corners, in the Illinois countryside. He and Helen became part-time farmers and antique furniture dealers, but show business was not totally out of their lives yet. Clarence signed on to perform in a local Chicago children's TV show, *Cactus Jim*, in which he wore heavy makeup to portray a grizzled prospector who told yarns and introduced old Western movies. The show was phenomenally popular in Chicago, and was soon picked up by the NBC network, which telecast *Cactus Jim* just before their afternoon blockbuster *The Howdy Doody Show*. Clarence, alias Cactus Jim, made a multitude of personal appearances during the run of the show, and even got his wife into the act by frequently referring to "Auntie Helen" as the owner of the

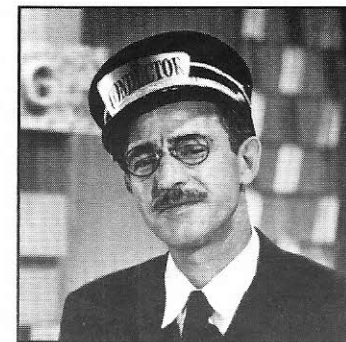
yarns about his old Mt. Idy friends as often as possible. His presence became of utmost importance when, between January and March 1948, Norris Goff was hospitalized for cancer surgery, and Lauck and Hartzell had to carry on *Lum and Abner* by themselves for those nearly three months. Various excuses were devised to keep Abner and the

ranch where he supposedly worked. Eventually Clarence left the show in 1951 when he took on the persona of "Uncle Duff" (another thinly disguised Fletcher) on the early TV series *Those Endearing Young Charms*. The role of Cactus Jim was essayed by other actors, but the series soon withered (no puns about Ben intended!) without the Hartzell touch.

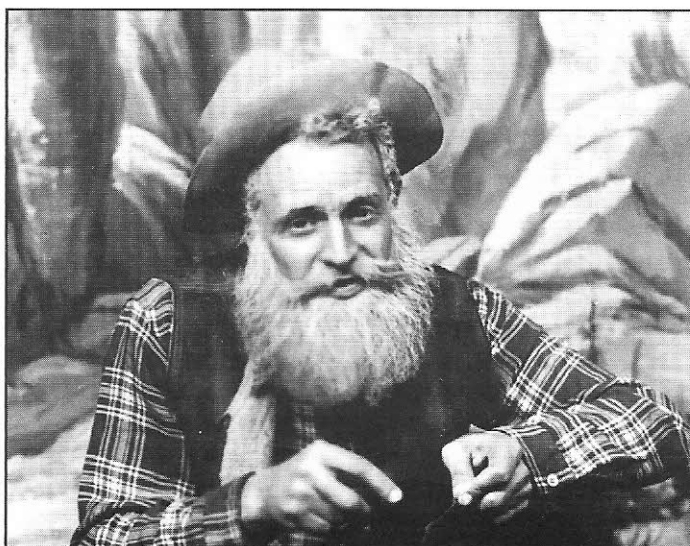
Clarence was not overly fond of performing on television; the fact that his specialty was in playing characters over twice his real age made for a grueling makeup process in any of his appearances. He did work in some commercials and other industrial work just to keep his acting career alive, however. In 1957, he was cast as a railroad conductor in a promotional film made by the Ford Motor Company to promote their new 1958 line of vehicles. Although the part did involve some makeup, significantly Hartzell did not appear to be as old as most of his past characters. We have been unable to locate a print of this promotional film, so we do not know whether the conductor character was yet another comical Fletcher/Withers rendition or not.

By now the broadcasting business had changed, and Hartzell found himself less and less interested in what was going on in it. He and Helen continued to quietly operate their Buttermilk Corners Farm and their antique business; he once said that at one point during this period he read in a farm trade journal that "Lum & Abner's Jot 'Em Down Store" in Pine Ridge was up for sale. More than likely the business in question was the "Jot-M-Down" service station and grocery store that was discussed in the April 1996 installment of our "L&A & the Great American Roadside" series. Hartzell said he toyed with the idea of actually buying the business for old times' sake, but never heard any more information about it.

However, the Hartzells did get closer to L&A country than they had been before when in 1979 they moved to the thriving little community of Bella Vista, Arkansas. This was just in time for the dedication of the monument to Lum & Abner in Mena's Janssen Park, and a reunion of unprecedented importance came about when Clarence joined Chet Lauck, Roz Rogers, and Opie Cates for the ceremony. Back at home, Clarence became active in the Bella Vista Television Association; he also continued his lifelong love of writing, creating works of music and poetry, and authoring a newspaper column on wildflowers, another of his passions.

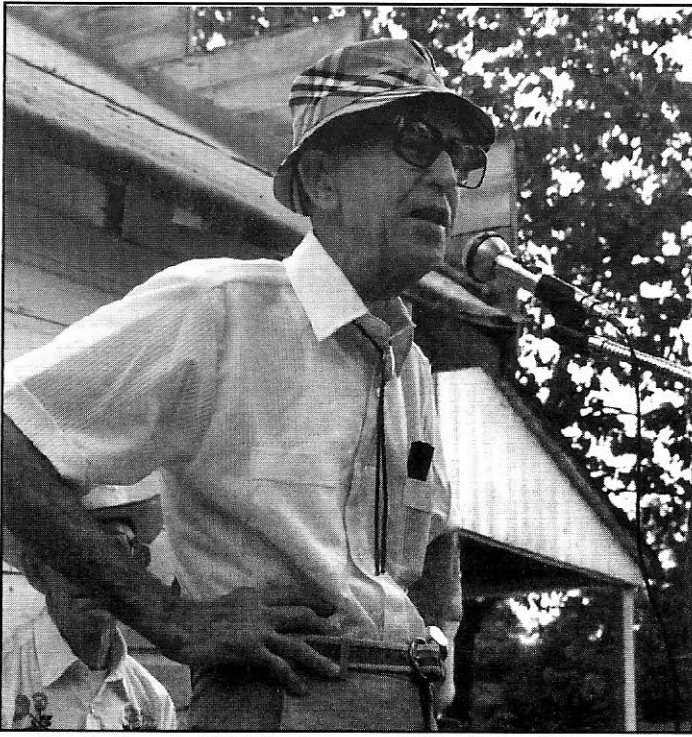


Clarence in his promotional film for Ford, 1957.



"Cactus Jim," 1949-51.

When the NLAS became a reality in August 1984, Clarence Hartzell became one of the first of L&A's associates to throw his



Uncle Donnie Pitchford snapped this photo of Clarence addressing the audience at the first NLAS Convention in Pine Ridge, 1985.

support behind the struggling new organization. It didn't take much persuasion to get him to make the drive down to Pine Ridge for the first NLAS Convention in June 1985, but once he was there he felt extremely self-conscious about indulging in any sort of self-promotion. He did agree to recreate his Ben Withers role in an original 1948 script, and did so with ease. His voice was a little more coarse due to age and illness, but that flawless Ben Withers timing was as sharp as ever. He certainly sounded more like Ben than Uncle Donnie Pitchford and Tim Hollis did in trying to imitate L&A!

NLAS member Rex Riffle of West Virginia has told the story of a unique experience he had while visiting with Clarence during that 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 him. The fantasy was complete when a small dog trotted up and attracted Clarence's attention: suddenly Clarence Hartzell BECAME Ben Withers!! 'Nice doggie,' Ben cooed as he began to pet the dog. 'Fine doggie, fi-ine doggie... yeeesss!' 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 that was the case here."

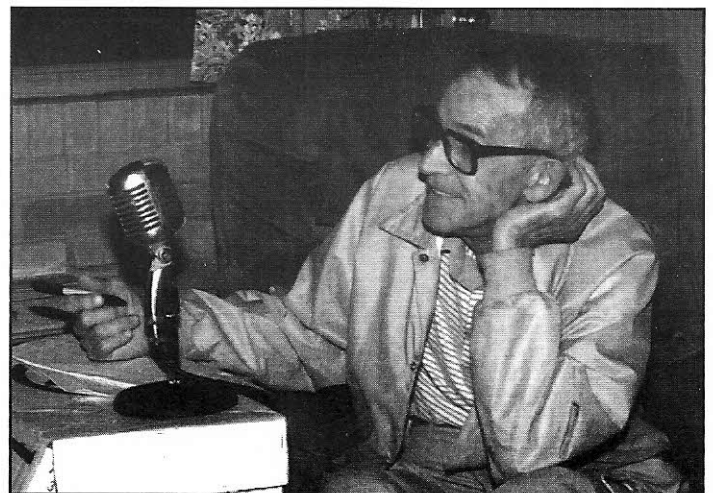
For the 1986 Convention, Roz Rogers penned a brand-new *Lum and Abner* script in honor of Pine Ridge's 50th anniversary. Clarence was unable to make the trip in person that year, but he agreed to once again perform the role of Ben Withers by reading his lines onto a cassette tape; these recordings were then edited into the final product. He really got into the part this time, and no one realized that they were hearing his last "official" performance in the characterization. In 1987 he did record a brief taped greeting to the Convention attendees, but since these were ad-libbed remarks it is difficult to label it as an actual portrayal of Ben.

As plans got underway for the 1988 Convention, Clarence got excited all over again and determined to make the trip in person once more. When he learned that two other L&A veterans were already scheduled to attend, Jerry Hausner and Elmore "Phinus Peabody" Vincent, Clarence's creative juices began to flow. He reminded us that during the L&A 30-minute days, Elmore Vincent had played the role of Durwood Zincafoose, an insane lawyer who was supposed to be one of Ben's old Mt. Idy cronies. However, Ben and Zincafoose had never appeared together in the same scene! Clarence's idea was that a script could be crafted that would incorporate Ben Withers, Durwood Zincafoose, and one of Jerry Hausner's trademark shady characters, Spud Gandel. Since Roz Rogers was having some health problems and was unable to write the script, its creation was going to be the responsibility of Pitchford and Hollis.

Plans for the script were in full swing when, on the morning of March 5, 1988, Clarence suddenly died... ten days before the next discussion of the upcoming script was to take place. The NLAS was greatly saddened by his passing, but resolved to keep the character of Ben Withers alive, just as the characters of Lum & Abner have long outlived the actors who portrayed them. The final version of the script (by Uncle Donnie) featured Vincent as Phinus Peabody instead of Zincafoose, and contained a sequence in which an unheard Ben phoned in to the Jot 'Em Down Store. It seemed that he was in Mena for a certain convention: "Some old-timey raddio program," grumbled Phinus, "National Vic & Sade Society or sompin'... Ben thinks he had an uncle who was on the show."

The April 1988 issue of *The Jot 'Em Down Journal* was devoted to Clarence's career. In that issue, Roz Rogers made the following comment: "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. If any of the Zincafoose boys, or Captain Sproog, or any of those offbeat 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."

- Tim Hollis



Clarence Hartzell thoroughly enjoying listening to one of his original 1946 L&A broadcasts during the 1985 NLAS Convention.

The Mt. Idy Connection

OR, BEN WITHERS MEETS CHARLEY WEAVER

In the 1950s, when Cliff Arquette began his famous television characterization of Charley Weaver, how many people realized that this personage was, in many ways, simply an extension of Clarence Hartzell's Ben Withers? Probably not many, so we thought this would be a good opportunity to set the record straight on this obscure bit of L&A history.

Elsewhere in this issue you have seen the story of Hartzell's radio career and how the character of Ben Withers came to be, so now let's look in briefly on Cliff Arquette. He broke into radio at about the same time as Hartzell, and soon found that his voice was perfect for playing old men. Arquette's first big starring role in radio was the 1940 series *Point Sublime*, in which he played... are you ready for this?... a character named Ben Willet!

The story of how Ben Withers' stories about the eccentrics who populated Mt. Idy developed, more or less, into Charley Weaver's tales of the same is quite involved and not altogether clear. One thing that is certain is that the Withers stories were originally a continuation of Clarence Hartzell's Uncle Fletcher characterization from *Vic and Sade*. Uncle Fletcher delighted in droning on and on about one of his old cronies who built a piano out of corncocks ("never looked like a piano, never sounded like a piano"), or another who had a bicycle that said "mama."

Simultaneously, writer Roz Rogers was busy introducing this style of humor into *Lum and Abner* through the character of Grandpappy Spears. In a trait not previously evidenced, in the early 1940s Grandpap suddenly fell in love with telling outrageous yarns about his old acquaintances, usually from Cherry Hill. There was the famous Loren Spinks, whose one webbed foot enabled him to swim only in a circle, and another pal who lost a harmonica in his whiskers. (As Grandpap told the story repeatedly, it grew to the point that it was first a banjo, and later a piano, that got lost in the whiskers!)

Meanwhile, Lauck and Goff themselves were making their own contribution. As far back as their stage act in the late 1930s, they had employed a routine that involved Abner receiving a letter from one of Lizabeth's "ree-lates," which he would read to Lum, along with funny comments from both members of the team. This "letter-reading" routine became one of their stock

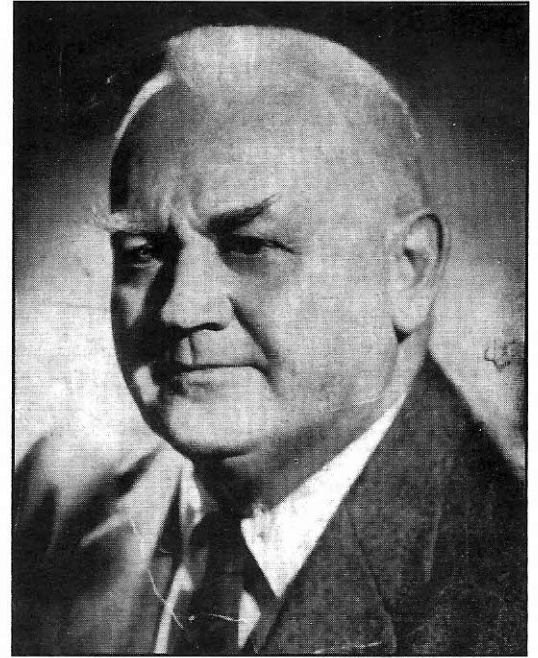
pieces for personal appearances, and once their radio show switched over to its ill-fated half-hour format in 1948, they would use it as an audience warm up before the broadcast.

Meanwhile, Cliff Arquette had been kept busy with his old man characterizations on numerous radio series throughout

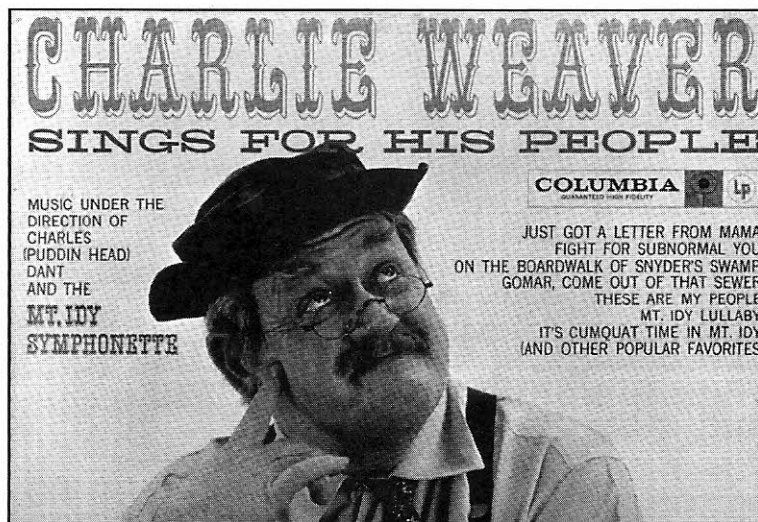
the decade of the 1940s. One of his most famous series was *Glamor Manor*, a rare daytime comedy show inserted right into the middle of prime soap opera territory! Arquette was heard as the proprietor of a shabby, run-down hotel, and doubled in roles such as the antiquated bellhop and Mrs. Wilson, a half-deaf

hypochondriac who was one of the funniest characters in radio history. Arquette's career would cross with that of L&A, Clarence Hartzell, and Mt. Idy in 1950.

In the spring of 1949, Clarence Hartzell had become disenchanted with the half-hour *Lum and Abner* format and with the hectic pace of Hollywood in general, and he had elected to take his new bride Helen and return to Chicago. Lauck & Goff were unwilling to give up the hilarious stories for which Ben Withers was so famous, so for a number of episodes this material was



Cliff Arquette out of character.



Charley Weaver and Mt. Idy were heavily merchandised during the early 1960s. This Columbia LP misspelled his name as "Charlie."

tailored instead for Opie Cates. Opie's point of reference for life was his (real-life) hometown of Clinton, Arkansas, and in his dry drawl he told stories of the Bidbault family and all their goofy companions.

In the spring of 1950, Cliff Arquette was brought into the world of *Lum and Abner* for officially the first time. We say "officially" because, according to Arquette's only son, Lewis, he was well acquainted with Lauck and Goff and their work for many years before that time. Helen Hartzell also recalls that Clarence talked about Cliff Arquette all the time, but she does not know if they were personally acquainted or if they simply admired each other's work. Oddly, when Arquette joined the L&A series, he was not given the same type of material pioneered by Hartzell and assumed by Cates. Instead, Arquette's character was that of the aged town gossip and local busybody. He once described his recent attendance at a party at the Old Ladies' Home and the cute little number he had met there:

CLIFF: *First I winked at her, an' she winked back... then she winked at me, an' I winked back... then I winked at her, an' she winked back...*

ABNER: *Whut happened then, Cliff?*

CLIFF: *Nothin'... we was both tuckered out from winkin'.*

However, it appears that Cliff was, or had been, paying close attention to what else was going on in Pine Ridge, because his next show business venture would tie it all together. His first series to incorporate L&A's references to Mt. Idy was *Dave 'n' Charley*, a daily 15-minute series on NBC-TV in which he was partnered with actor Dave Willock. The format, as described by Lewis Arquette, sounds much like the early days of *Lum and Abner*:

"The show was entirely improvised, and was set in Charley Weaver's kitchen next to the railroad tracks. The train passed through at least once per show, causing the pictures on the wall to swing back and forth and the stove to move about the kitchen. If the improvisation bogged down, there were a series of doorbells mounted under the edge of the kitchen table, and one or the other would push one to ring the phone, then Dad would get up and do any number of old telephone gags. Also, once during every show, Dad would read a copy of the *Mt. Idy Ledger*, filled with another treasure trove of old gags and relieving his hatred of having to memorize lines.

"Although the show wasn't successful enough to attract a sponsor, the NBC executives thought enough about it to place it as a summer replacement for the *Colgate Comedy Hour*. However, after that season, not much happened with the show, and the boys decided to part again. It was then that the Jack Paar show beckoned from New York, and the *Mt. Idy Ledger* transformed itself into a 'Letter from Mama.'"

So, the burning question becomes, was the Mt. Idy from which Charley Weaver hailed the same Mt. Idy that L&A talked about for years? Well, that depends upon whom you ask. Lewis Arquette reports that his dad maintained that his fictional Mt. Idy was based on the community of Carey, Ohio. However, many who were associated with *Lum and Abner* insist that Cliff would never have chosen the "Mt. Idy" name had it not been for Lum & Abner drilling it into the public consciousness. Who knows? Cliff Arquette passed away in December 1974, so we can't ask him. However, an example of one of his stories certainly sounds

like the same Mt. Idy made famous by Ben Withers:

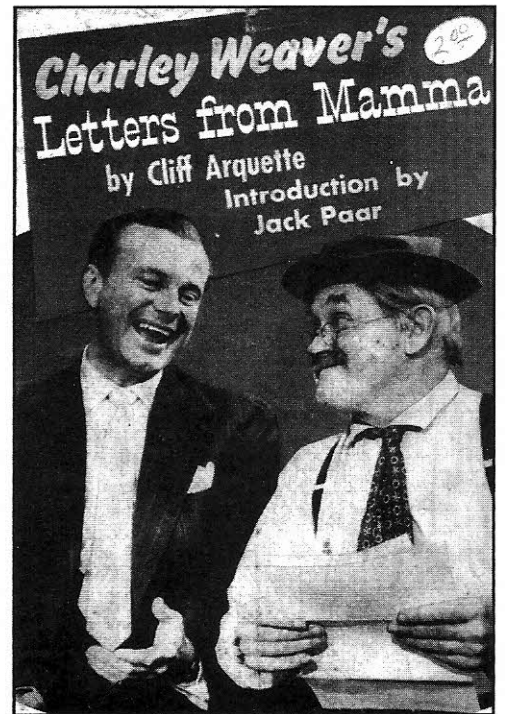
Say, I'll never fergit them wonderful football games we useta have back in Mt. Idy, 'specially our big Thanksgiving Day game at the Porcelain Bowl. It was built by Carl Porcelain. On that day, the Mt. Idy Rams played their bitter rivals, the Lompec Beavers! Thousands o' people'd jam the stands on that day... yep, the Rams versus the Beavers! I guess

so many folks come to watch 'cause we used real live rams and beavers... I'll never fergit our cheerin' section when our Rams was down near the Beavers' goal line... 'specially when we could git the rams ta stop eatin' the grass... Everbody'd take out insurance jes' before the game, 'cause our referee, Ludlow Bean, was so nearsighted, when he'd shoot the gun at the end of each quarter... well, we'd always lose a prominent Mt. Idy citizen. Ludlow also worked for the local mortician.

Chet Lauck reported once that he had made a guest appearance on Jack Paar's show in the early 1960s, and that backstage Cliff Arquette had stopped him to thank him. "What for?" Chet wanted to know. "For letting me steal your letter routine," Cliff supposedly replied, bringing the whole story back to the bit L&A had used in their stage appearances.

So, now you see why this tale is so complex. Whether the Mt. Idy of Charley Weaver was actually in Ohio, as he claimed, or in Arkansas, where it all started, it certainly has made its way into American entertainment folklore, and that is really all that matters.

- Tim Hollis



One of several book collections of Charley Weaver/Mt. Idy routines.

The next annual Charley Weaver Day in the real Mt. Ida, Arkansas, will be held on June 14, 1997, the weekend before the annual NLAS Convention takes place in Mena on June 21. Lewis Arquette is hoping to attend both events in person. Watch the next three issues of the *JOURNAL* for all the latest developments!

A 20/20 VIEW OF CLARENCE HARTZELL

One of Clarence Hartzell's longtime acquaintances was veteran broadcaster Hugh Downs. Recently, Mr. Downs was kind enough to send the following response to the NLAS's request for his memories of the late comic actor:

First of all, I was a prodigious fan of *Lum and Abner*. My career didn't impinge on the program, as I didn't really have that much of a career at the time I listened regularly. And to my sorrow I never met Chester Lauck or Norris Goff. But I remember episodes and incidents, and can still hear the sound of their voices.

Because the program was live, we got to hear things that would never have reached the public in a tape era. I remember once they broke each other up laughing and did not regain control the rest of the program. I can't remember (maybe never really knew) what set them off, but I recall that their condition was contagious and infected me to the extent I fell on the floor laughing just because they were.

My connections with Clarence and *Vic and Sade* are more intimate. I was on staff with NBC's Central Division in Chicago through several years of those broadcasts. I was the standby

announcer in Studio F and got to know Clarence and the rest of the cast. And toward the last of my tenure, my wife and I became really good friends of Paul Rhymer.

Clarence Hartzell's character of Uncle Fletcher was perhaps the most perfect match of material and casting in the history of radio. The humor that resulted was, I believe, on a par with Mark Twain or Robert Benchley or any of the greatest American humorists. How he kept a straight face in reciting things about his friends is beyond me. I always expected the whole cast to blow when Uncle Fletcher would tell about a friend who was an inmate in the Ohio State Home for the Bald, or the Indiana State Home for the Left-Handed. Once Sade and Rush were in the attic when Uncle Fletcher came over, and they tried to hide from him because they were trying to get things done, and he would regale them with stories of his landlady, who grew Chamoises on a Chamois bush. I always cracked up, and probably couldn't have handled a role in that cast.

Hard to believe it is 50 years since Clarence started as Ben Withers on *Lum and Abner*. Thanks again for writing.

- Hugh Downs

And Now... A Word From "Auntie Helen" Hartzell

I have been sitting here trying to think of what you say to people who brought so much joy and happiness to Clarence and me.

Clarence always enjoyed hearing from and being around "his boys," and our anticipation started to grow in early May, knowing that we would be seeing all of you the following month. When we arrived at that first NLAS convention in 1985, Clarence was not feeling his best, but by the time the weekend was over his whole outlook, mentally and physically, had made a drastic change. The attention the NLAS focused on him for his work with Lum & Abner was like an incredible dose of medicine for him.

Everyone has always been so kind to both of us, and the annual meetings since his passing have always brought back such wonderful memories of days gone by. Clarence always felt so honored to be one of the first two recipients of the Lum & Abner Memorial Award, along with Roz Rogers. The Lum & Abner days were good days and happy times, and the ongoing enjoyment of those days enriched our lives more than any of you can ever know.

Now, on a personal note, I will never be able to express to you

what your continuing friendship has meant to me since Clarence's passing. You are all very special people, who hold a very special place in my heart.

God bless and much love,
Auntie Helen Hartzell



Clarence Hartzell & Roz Rogers at the first
NLAS Convention, June 14, 1985.