

Johnny Celebrates 25 Years Calling For Philip Morris

"Call For *Philip* M M M M M o o o o o r r r r r - r r r r r a a a a i i i i s s s s s ! ! ! ! !"

--- "*Johnny Philip Morris*"

Lincoln, Me. (DG)---



In 1959, **NBC Radio** aired a special half hour program to celebrate the 25th anniversary of an advertising giant. This "**giant**" was all of 4' tall and was attired in a bellhop uniform complete with red coat and brass buttons. He became famous for saying only one line with a robust voice. The radio listeners knew him as "**Johnny Philip Morris**" (Johnny Roventini in real life). ■

Hosted by Ben Grauer, the program was a tribute to Johnny's achievements in radio. With Johnny on hand as the guest of honor, he and Grauer looked back over the 25 years since the first call for *Philip Morris* was heard over the airwaves.

That first "**Call For Philip Morris**" took place in 1934 on a broadcast of the **FERDE GROFÉ SHOW** on NBC's Red Network. To the music of *On The Trail Movement* from Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, Johnny yelled out his first "**Call For Philip Morris**" to a nationwide audience. In a nutshell, the music and Johnny's call blended well together. It worked well on over 50 other radio programs during the remaining years of radio's golden age (in numbers, *Philip Morris* sponsored more old time radio programs than any other product).

Grauer asked Johnny how many times he called for *Philip Morris* during his 25 years in radio. Johnny replied that when the program was presented live and he was in attendance, he estimated around 500,000 times. When transcriptions of his call were used, that number elevated into the millions.

During the broadcast, Johnny talked about some unusual things that happened to him. For example, he tripped over some wires in the radio studio during a broadcast of the **YOUTH OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM**--- just when it was time for him to call for *Philip Morris*. With no time to spare, Johnny had no choice but to give the call flat on his back. Luckily, he had a powerful voice. Johnny also mentioned that he encountered some radio stars doing funny things or making funny faces in an attempt to have him break out laughing while he did his line.

Grauer brought up another incident that supposedly took place on a *Philip Morris* radio program. He said that a stagehand accidentally dropped a tray of glasses. With the impromptu sound effect taking place for all to hear, a radio comedian ad-libbed the line, "**Folks, that was Johnny stepping out of thousands of store windows.**" Johnny admitted the incident took place, but it didn't happen on any

radio program. He mentioned that a waiter at the Coconut Grove Hotel dropped a tray of glasses. Groucho Marx, who was making an appearance at the hotel, said the line--- and it was used as a continuing gag on the unpredictable **MILTON BERLE SHOW**.

Before he began calling for **Philip Morris**, Johnny Roventini was a real bellhop at the New Yorker Hotel. Since he was only 4' tall, Johnny was known at the hotel as the "**The Smallest Bellboy In The World.**"

In 1933, an executive for **Philip Morris & Co., Ltd.** and the president of the company's advertising agency desperately needed an idea to sell **Philip Morris Cigarettes**, which was struggling in sales. Fortunately, they were staying at the New Yorker. Since Johnny was considered a tourist attraction at the hotel, the two executives started to come up with an idea. They asked Johnny to page a man named Philip Morris. Johnny, unaware that **Philip Morris** was really the name of a cigarette, went through the hotel lobby paging Philip Morris. While he was doing this, the two executives knew they found their advertising promotion. After a few minutes, Johnny returned to the two men and said there was no response to his page. Knowing there wouldn't be anyone named Philip Morris, they asked Johnny if he was interested in doing what he just did on the radio. It was here one of advertising's greatest promotions was born. Johnny, in his bellhop uniform, became the living trademark for **Philip Morris Cigarettes**. Since he was now selling **Philip Morris**, Johnny was given the new name of "**Johnny Philip Morris.**"

While Johnny's main task was to sell **Philip Morris Cigarettes**, he actually became more popular than the product he was selling. Johnny had such a warm personality and beaming smile, he was not only popular with **Philip Morris** smokers, but also smokers of other brands, non-smokers, and especially children. When Johnny was to appear at a live event, it was guaranteed a lot of people would come to see him. They either wanted his autograph or to have their picture taken with him.

Although the 25th anniversary program was a tribute to Johnny, he graciously gave his own personal tribute to all the stars he sponsored on the radio--- and especially to all the people who enjoyed his contributions in radio advertising.

Author's note: This article is dedicated to the memory of Christine Nelson, an old time radio fan and librarian at the Lincoln Memorial Library in Lincoln, Maine.

