

EVEN HIS INITIALS WERE B.S.

by Jack French © 2008

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article originally appeared in *The Old Radio Times*, an Internet magazine compiled by the OTR Researchers Group and edited by Jim Beshires.

When Bill Stern was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 1988, he had been dead for seventeen years and he had not been heard regularly on network radio since the 1960s. However the induction sponsors knew that Stern's years of spouting pure hokum, disguised as historical fact, had not yet been forgotten by the American public. To put his decades of prevarication at the microphone in the best possible light, they carefully crafted this explanation:

"He told tales of sports legends and strange occurrences which kept listeners eagerly waiting for the climax. Although some of his reports stretched the limits of credibility, no one doubted that Stern was a master storyteller who used emphasis, repetition, and pauses to perfection."

It was a fitting epitaph to the sports announcer who had flim-flammed his listening audience for a quarter of a century.

William Stern was born July 1, 1907 in Rochester, NY. He was a Jew; his ancestors were Prussian Jewish immigrants, one of whom had anglicized his family surname, Sterngold, to Stern. While still a teen-ager, he got his first job in radio at WHAM in Rochester, broadcasting local football games. He dabbled in both theater and vaudeville as a director and manager which doubtless led him to later favor creative drama over actual facts when at the microphone.

Most of his early work in broadcasting, both regional and network, involved play-by-play commentary at sporting events. He handled boxing, football, and baseball with equal facility. Generally in describing these events, he stuck to an accurate recitation of what was actually happening in these sports venues. Occasionally he made mistakes. During one football game, a player broke loose on a long run and Stern misidentified him, not once but several times, as the runner closed in on the goal line. Just before he sped into the end zone, Stern realized he had the wrong name so he quickly told his radio audience the runner had lateraled the football to the correct player who had scored. Months later, a rival sportscaster, Clem McCarthy, named the wrong horse winning at the race track. When Stern

rebuked McCarthy for this error, McCarthy replied, "Well Bill, you can't lateral a horse."

But it wasn't until the late Thirties when NBC hired Stern to host the *Colgate Sports Newsreel* that his predilection for prevarication reached full flower. On this 15 minute program, sponsored by Colgate Shaving Cream, Stern had an open field to talk about anything even vaguely related to sports. He did brief interviews with celebrities (including Mickey Rooney, Brace Beemer, "Ellery Queen", Boris Karloff, Eddie Cantor, Fred Waring, etc.) on some aspect of athletics. A musical quartet sang songs in the background while he recited some sporting announcements. Stern ended each show with snappy bits of Hollywood gossip and sports trivia. But the keynote of every program was a tale of some fantastic occurrence, usually combining a sports hero with a historical personage.

Stern told each flamboyant tale with an organist providing the punctuation. Usually he narrated his stories without help but occasionally he employed radio actors to provide dialogue, especially if the character were a woman or a child.

One of his typical stories involved the death of Abraham Lincoln. In his best "true-as-gospel" voice, Stern told of the dying President sending for Union General Abner Doubleday, who some have credited with inventing baseball. "Keep baseball alive" gasped the President to Doubleday as Booth's bullet was ending his life, "In the trying days ahead, this country will need it." Then Stern described Lincoln's head falling back on the bloody pillow as he expired.

Of course, in actuality, the wounded president



never uttered a single word after being shot in Ford's Theater but since Stern told this fabrication to his radio audience with his characteristic intensity and conviction, he probably convinced many of them that it was historical fact. For in addition to his sincere and energetic delivery, Stern had additional credentials, based upon his voice being trusted by thousands who heard him broadcasting sporting events and narrating news reels at movie houses.

John Dunning, in summarizing the *Colgate Sports Newsreel*, pointed out that Stern would "tell the same story twice, a year or so apart, using conflicting facts and passing off both versions as true." Dunning lists a number of Stern's fairy tales including the blind man who won a track meet, the dead jockey who rode his horse to a first place finish, and a legless but very successful baseball player.

There was virtually no limit to Stern's audacity in creating these phony stories and passing them off as incredible but true narratives. But the NBC network officials eventually got nervous enough to add some innocuous disclaimers to the program, along the lines of terming Bill "America's most famous collector of yarns and stories...some legend....some hearsay...but all interesting."

However Stern never missed a beat. In one show, he solemnly assured his radio fans that Thomas Alva Edison's deafness was the direct result of an incident on the baseball diamond when the inventor was playing semi-pro ball. The opposing pitcher had accidentally beamed Edison on his ear with a fast ball and the resultant injury eroded Edison's hearing. "And that pitcher was..." intoned Stern into the microphone, "Jesse James!" In reality, Edison had never played semi-pro baseball, and of course, had never met either of the James brothers.

Another whopper concerned George Gershwin, who according to Stern, was once just a struggling song writer until he met a famous athlete who inspired him to greatness. "Listen George, take my advice before it's too late, will ya?" Stern quoted the athlete, "Don't just write another song. You can write the greatest one of all and I hope I'm alive to hear it." Stern claimed that Gershwin then composed his greatest musical piece, *Rhapsody in Blue*, and when he played it for the first time in Manhattan's Aeolian Hall, Gershwin said under his breath, "This one's for you, Christy." Stern ended his story by explaining the athlete who had inspired Gershwin's composition had died, but somewhere up there, he was listening when the piece debuted. "And that man was Hall of Fame pitcher, Christy Mathewson!"

Other than the fact that Gershwin did write *Rhapsody in Blue*, every other detail in the story was a lie. The piece was inspired, and commissioned, by band leader Paul Whiteman. Gershwin never even met Mathewson. In the early 1920s Mathewson, who had been gassed



overseas in World War I, was slowly dying of tuberculosis in Saranac Lake, NY. But he was still alive in February 1924 when *Rhapsody in Blue* was first publicly performed since his death occurred on October 7, 1925.

The practice of taking one tiny fact and festooning it with a multitude of falsehoods was routine for Stern, despite his denials to his critics. He once claimed the *Colgate* program "wasn't a sports show; it's entertainment. If there's a story that I know is not factual, I'll say so---but that's seldom the case." However many of his radio concoctions must have left his audience slack-jawed with incredulity. One such story was that of a Wisconsin boy whom Stern called "Al Wenger." Supposedly in 1939 this lad tried to walk home in knee-high snow drifts during a below zero night. He got lost, collapsed in the snow, and was found the next day, virtually frozen solid. "But he lived" Stern assured attentive listeners, "and one year later, in 1940, he won a swimming championship, although both his arms and legs had been amputated!"

In the mid Forties most of his programs ended with his male quartet singing:

"Bill Stern the Colgate Shave Cream Man
Is on his way.

Bill Stern the Colgate Shave Cream Man
Had lots to say.

He told you tales of sports heroes.

The inside dope he really knows."

But instead of the inside dope, his listeners got a steady dose of stories well outside the boundaries of truth and reason. While Stern usually focused on tales of deceased stars and personalities, he'd occasionally feature a celebrity of that era who would then challenge his perversion of the truth. One evening Stern told a tale in which Grantland Rice was hanging around a boxing gym, watching a skinny kid sparring in the ring. Later, Rice heard that same thin boxer singing in the shower. When the kid came back out, Rice took him aside and predicted that his real future would be in music, not pugilistics. And that young fellow was Frank Sinatra, Stern concluded. There wasn't a scintilla of fact to the story and Grantland Rice, normally a cool customer, was furious at this network radio deception.

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Another person who became very upset over a Bill Stern broadcast was a little lady in Milwaukee whose son was a Hollywood star. She was listening the night Stern blithely related the story of two prize fighters, Harry Greb and Mickey Walker, who battled in the Polo Grounds in 1925. After the event, they had dinner and drinks at a nearby restaurant, but after tossing down a few, they decided to resume the fisticuffs in back of the restaurant. Their alley brawl was interrupted by a young uniformed officer who was about to take them both to the precinct holding cell. Greb successfully begged for leniency, and when granted, gratefully staked the policeman to \$ 200 so he could find his dream in Hollywood. That forgiving police officer, revealed Stern in the climax, was Pat O'Brien. This was startling news to Pat's mother since he had never been a police officer, not in New York City, nor anywhere else.

Radio critic John Crosby in his November 24, 1949 column explained that terming Stern's stories "hearsay" or "legends" was quite misleading since his lurid legends originated with his writers and only began their legend status when Stern put them on the air. Some of Stern's former scripters confessed that they would concoct a fanciful tale of some incredible hero whose name was left blank until the end. That last part would be filled out later---usually by Stern, with the name of a famous personality.

This happened during the creation of a tale the writers worked on about Frankie Frisch of the New York Giants. In their version of his career, he was signed right out of Fordham in 1919 but spent his entire first year on the Giants' bench. Discouraged and feeling unappreciated, the ball player returned to Fordham where a university priest counseled him. The cleric cautioned Frisch to be patient, encouraged him to return to the Giants and respect the decisions of his manager, John J. McGraw. Frisch did as the priest suggested and went on to become a great star for the Giants, and later, the St. Louis Cardinals.

Now it was time for Stern and the writers to fill in the name of the priest. "How about Pope Pius XI?" offered Stern, naming the reigning pontiff. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed. One of the writers, a Catholic, explained that Pius XI had never been near Fordham and most American Catholics would not appreciate their spiritual leader being factitiously dragged into a baseball story. In the end, an obscure song writer was identified as the Fordham priest.

Not every story Stern related on his program was false. On rare occasions, he would tell a factual story, devoid of his customary prevarication. During one of these he gave listeners a true summary of Stalin's rise to power, disguising the tyrant at first as

"Joe from Georgia." Not until the climax did he identify this revolutionary as Jozef from Georgia, Russia. In a May 1944 show Stern's guest was J. Edgar Hoover and perhaps the presence of one of America's top law enforcement officials encouraged Stern to come up with a factual narrative. So on this program, Stern provided listeners with a true story of Bobby Feller's mother being injured in the stands while watching her son pitch. On Mother's Day 1939, the Cleveland Indians were playing the White Sox in Chicago with Feller's mother in attendance. The Sox third baseman, Marv Owen, ripped a Feller fast ball into the stands, striking the mother in the face and injuring her.

The *Colgate Sports Newsreel* lasted until 1951 on NBC; it was renamed *Bill Stern Sports* when he lost his sponsor. But he continued at the microphone, moved to ABC, and finally ended this long run in 1956. His physical condition was probably most responsible for the show's eventual cancellation. Stern's health had been deteriorating due to his dependence on pain-killers, dating back to 1935 when his leg was amputated following a serious auto accident in Texas. In his 1959 autobiography *The Taste of Ashes*, (co-written by Oscar Fraley) he discussed his drug addiction.



This colorful radio personality died of a heart attack in his home in Rye, NY on November 19, 1971 where he had lived for fifteen years, doing occasional radio work. His obituary in the *New York Times* related both his successes and his frauds. The piece lauded him for his popularity and longevity but acknowledged that "some radio and television critics contended that Mr. Stern's stories were sometimes taller than the highest infield fly."

After his death, significant honors began to accumulate. He was elected to the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame in 1974, the American Sportswriters Hall of Fame in 1984, the Radio Hall of Fame in 1988, and the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 2001.

In his lifetime, Stern broadcast live on radio and television hundreds of sporting events, including the Olympics. He appeared in six major motion pictures; the last was *Pride of the Yankees* in which he played himself. He narrated countless news reels which were screened in movie houses. But most of his fame and lasting popularity today rests in the surviving audio copies of the *Colgate Sports Newsreel*. There we can still hear Stern, in his most loquacious and flamboyant vocal style, relay to us again his strange and incredible tales, unencumbered by any parameters of truth.