

# MAUDIE'S DIARY



by Jack French © 2008

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Our regular club monthly meeting in August 2007 was a special one. A collection of OTR memorabilia regarding the showbiz career of Mary Mason had been donated by her daughter, Dr. Kathy Greenacre of Philadelphia. These historical items, including several photos and press releases, were turned over by MWOTRC to the Library of American Broadcasting (LAB) in accordance with an arrangement the club had with Dr. Greenacre. Accepting these materials for LAB was former club vice-president, Michael Henry, who now works at that library.

Mary Mason, the star of *Maudie's Diary* was born Elizabeth Jenks in Pasadena, CA on June 26, 1911. Her parents called her "Betty" and she gave professional recitals as a child; she would recite while her mother played the piano. Her first stage appearance was at age 7 in *Penrod*, a drama by Edward Rose, based upon the stories of Booth Tarkington.

Her mother divorced her father, Edward Jenks, and later married a judge, "Buzzie" Mason. After Betty graduated from the Hollywood School for Girls, she began taking drama classes at Pasadena Playhouse. She acted in several of their productions, did a little radio work, and using the name "Mary Mason," appeared without credit in a few movies as a contract player at RKO. She was one of a number of actresses whose screams were used in *King Kong* when Fay Wray's voice was strained.

With only limited success on West Coast radio and film work, she relocated to New York City in 1934 to concentrate on theater work. From 1935 on, she appeared in several Broadway plays, including *The Sky's The Limit*, *Field of Ermine*, and *Call it a Day*. The latter one ran for 194 performances so Mary got to know well two other women in the cast who would become OTR stars: Claudia Morgan and Florence Williams. Morgan had major roles in several soap operas and was the female lead in *Adventures of the Thin Man*. Williams did a number of roles on network shows and got her first co-lead in *Front Page Farrell* opposite Richard Widmark.

In 1936 Mary and Carl Fisher were married in 1936 when she was 25 thus becoming Betty Fisher, but she rarely used that name professionally. Carl was the nephew of prominent Broadway director and producer, George Abbott, which must have helped her career. They cast her in *Brother Rat*, which ran for a year and a half (1936-38) and also in *Goodbye in the Night*. But most of her stage jobs were won on her talent, persistence,

and attractive appearance, not her relatives' influence.

In *Brother Rat* her fellow cast members included two future Hollywood stars (Jose Ferrer and Eddie Albert) and the fellow who would play Henry Aldrich on radio for a decade, Ezra Stone. Among her Broadway credits was *School House on the Lot*, whose large juvenile cast included Sidney Lumet, one of the original *Dead End Kids*. She had a long run (233 performances) in *Charlie's Aunt*, a revival of an 1893 farce; Jose Ferrer was also in this play. But every successful Broadway show was balanced with a flop. *Aries is Rising* never did and closed after only five performances in 1939. *Goodbye in the Night* said farewell after six performances in 1940.

Like many theater performers in New York City in those days, Mary supplemented her earnings by working on radio. She was in the supporting casts of two soap operas, *Betty & Bob* and *The Life and Loves of Dr. Susan*. In February 1941 she began her role of Henry's sister on *The Aldrich Family*, which put her in regular contact with Ezra Stone again.

In the summer of 1941 she and Robert Walker were chosen from dozens of auditionees to win the leading roles in a new CBS juvenile comedy, *Maudie's Diary*. The character of teen-aged Maudie had been created by the husband and wife team of Graeme E. Lorimer and Sarah Moss. They had been married on September 28, 1925; both were talented writers and he was the fiction editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*. They specialized in books and articles about romantic comedy: "The Plot Sickens", "Men are like Streetcars", and "Feature for June", which became the motion picture *June Bride*. The couple wrote short stories featuring "Maudie" for the *Ladies Home Journal* beginning in the late 30s. However their writing on the radio show was limited to signing their royalty checks; Albert G. Miller wrote all the scripts.

The time Robert Walker spent at the microphone with Mary Mason, playing her boy friend, Davy Dillon, may have been the happiest period of his short and troubled life. He originally came from a broken-home, struggled as a young actor, and in 1939 married another unknown performer, Phyllis Isley, in New York. They set out for Hollywood on their honeymoon, but after getting nothing but bit parts in the movies, returned discouraged to New York City. Phyllis gave birth to sons in 1940 and 1941. After the *Maudie's Diary* series ended in 1942, the couple went back to Hollywood. She caught the eye of David Selznick who changed her name to Jennifer Jones and cast her in *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) for which

he won an Academy Award.

By 1944 Robert and Jennifer were co-starring in *Since You Went Away* but in real life they had separated as she had become Selznick's mistress (16 years his junior.) Despite some film successes, Walker's bouts with alcohol and psychological problems limited his roles. His second marriage, to John Ford's daughter, Barbara, lasted only six weeks. After nearly a year in an institution following a nervous breakdown, he returned to the screen in 1951 in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, playing a charming, psychopathic killer. It was a brilliant performance that should have gained him an Oscar, but he didn't even get a nomination. This tortured soul died at age 33, probably from an overdose of sedatives, in late 1951.

CBS debuted *Maudie's Diary* at 7:30 pm on Thursday, August 14, 1941. It was sponsored by "The Happy Bakers of Wonder Bread." Mary Mason, age 30, and Robert Walker, age 23, played the lovey-dovey teen-agers in the show. Of course an actor's actual age meant nothing on radio. Betty Garde, who played Maudie's mother, was only five years older than Mary Mason. Others in the family cast were Bill Johnstone as her father and Marjorie Davies portraying her old sister, Sylvia.

Every episode of the program began, and ended, with Maudie reading an entry from her diary which led into, or concluded, each story portrayed. The show centered around an energetic teen-aged girl in Philadelphia and the fun and foibles of her friends and family. The scripts revolved around their difficulties with homework, dates, cars, allowances, prying relatives and pesky siblings. Script writer Albert G. Miller, who was credited in every episode, produced one fine script after another, and one of them, which concerned learning to play a trombone, was honored by being included in the annual anthology, "Best Broadcasts of 1940-41." Miller had obvious talent for writing both juvenile adventures and comedy; he was also on the writing team behind *Buck Rogers of the 25th Century* and the *Fred Allen Show*.

The show was done live in the CBS studios in New York City before an enthusiastic audience. No transcriptions were used so no audio copies of the original half-hour show exist. CBS and the sponsor were satisfied with the popularity of the series. The Ted Bates Advertising Company, which handled the publicity for the program, distributed frequent photographs to the media, mostly of Mary and Robert, and even sent the actors out to autograph signings in Manhattan.

But Mary's role as the lead in the series ended in July 1942 because she was pregnant. While CBS had no problem having a 31 year old married woman portray a teen-aged virgin on a weekly basis before a live audience, a pregnant woman at the microphone was entirely different. Charita Bauer, who like Mary had once played the sister of Henry

Aldrich, was brought in as Mary's replacement. But Bauer held the role for less than three months because CBS canceled the show in September 1942 for reasons unclear to OTR historians today. Similar programs lasted much longer. *Meet Corliss Archer* and *A Date with Judy* both ran for nine years, ending in the 1950s. Even *Junior Miss* was on the air for six years.

Mary Mason gave birth to her daughter, Kathy in November 1942. Within a few years, she was back in the performing arts, doing both stage and radio work. In her mid-30s, she played "Penny", the 14 year old daughter on *My Best Girls* (1944-45) an ABC situation comedy. She also had a long-term role as "Jinny Robert," the best friend of the heroine in *The Strange Romance of Evelyn Winters*, a CBS soap opera that starred Toni Darnay.

Mary continued her stage work, mostly in summer stock at the Bucks County Playhouse outside of Philadelphia. In 1947 she divorced Carl Fisher, and two years later, married a prominent attorney who specialized in theater matters, John Wharton. Her final professional appearance was on a CBS-TV show, "Subway Express" in May 1950.

Thereafter she was active in Investors Limited, a small group that raised money to produce original plays that they found worthy. Although she had no college degree, she was accepted into Columbia University's library school and then worked for several years as a volunteer at the Theatre Library at Lincoln Center. Her second husband died in 1977; she passed away on October 11, 1980.



#### ADDENDUM

While no original airchecks of this 30 minute show exist, there is a surviving copy of *Treasury Star Parade* which contains a 15 version of *Maudie's Diary*. This syndicated series, produced by the U.S. government to encourage the sale of Savings Bonds, is the only audio glimpse we have now into that CBS program of 1941-42. The actual date of the production of this episode of *Treasury Star Parade* is unconfirmed but must have been after July 1942 as Charita Bauer, not Mary Mason, plays "Maudie."

Special thanks to Dr. Kathy Greenacre of Philadelphia, the daughter of Mary Mason, who not only donated the radio career memorabilia of her mother to the Library of American Broadcasting, but also provided me with substantial biographical material she had gather about her mother. Additional thanks to OTR historian David Siegel who located the above audio copy of *Treasury Star Parade*, as well as the script of *Maudie's Diary* which was published in the *Best Broadcasts of 1940-41*.