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memories

FIBBER McGEE AND MOLLY

M E M O R I E S

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of the comedy team of Marian and Jim Jordan, who for many years have provided us with countless hours of fun and entertainment.

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FIBBER McGEE AND MOLLY

CELEBRATE THEIR

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY FOR JOHNSON'S WAX

When letters, wires and presents began pouring inti NBC studios in Hollywood weeks ahead of Fibber McGee and Molly's fifth anniversary on the air, Jim and Marian Jordan, who play the lovable comedy pair, were speechless with astonishment.

"Why Jim," commented Marian, "look at all these nice things. Now who'd have thought we'd get all these."

"Gosh," said Jim, "I never thought we had so many friends."

For the leading citizens of Wistful Vista can never get used to the idea that they have the third largest listening audience in radio. They have the same humility that marked their philosophy in the days when they did daytime serials in Chicago, before the characters, Fibber and Molly, so much as words on a radio script.

Fibber and Molly's rise to fame is as great a tribute to the American people, as it is to the comedy team. The program embodies the finest qualities of American wit. It has never made an attempt to be sensational. It has always steered clear of salacious or risque humor. There has always been a conscious effort on the part of the whole Fibber company to keep the program clean. It has been aimed toward an "ideal American Family" and the show's success has proved that the anerage American family lives up to its ideal.

Growth of the program has been a constant gradual process. Five years ago when the present sponsor, Johnson's Wax, launched Fibber and Molly on the air, the broadcast caused no stir in radio circles. It was just another new radio program that had promise. At the end of the first year it was apparent that the promise was going to be fulfilled, and on its fifth anniversary, the program has so far surpassed expectations that the original "promise" has been put to shame.

The Fibber company is far from being impressed with its own importance. To watch rehearsals one would suspect the gang was there just for fun. They work together easily, enjoy a lot of sideplay, and on the whole have a good time.

Bill Thompson, who plays the Oldtimer, Horatio K. Boomer, and a variety of other characters, needs no encouragement to bring his accordian or his Scotch bagpipes to entertain the cast between readings. Hal "Gildersleeve" Peary always has a new story to dramatize. Molly and Isabel Randolph, who plays "Mrs. Uppington" are always exchanging ideas for sewing or crocheting patterns.

Members of the cast are as familiar to radio listeners as the comedy stars, themselves. Don Quinn, who writes the original show, is still turning them out, week after week. Two months ago, he added an assistant, Len Levinson. Isabel Randolph has known the Jordans since the days when they all broadcast on Chicago serials.

Bill Thompson is another Chicago recruit. Harlow Wilcox is as well identified with Johnson's Wax as is Fibber, himself. In fact, the agency is forever having some fan insist upon talking to Mr. Wilcox "who will know what to do for my special problem of floor waxing." Hal Peary has done his rumbling "Gildersleeve" laugh so many times on the program, he can be in any theater audience and be identified by his guffaw.

The rise to prominence of Jim and Marian Jordan is the kind of success story to which all Americans warm. Born of modest circumstances, the pair by virtue of hard work, intelligence, and ability, have won a place high in the current firmament of fame. In a 1940 era, which is supposedly smart and sophisticated, the Jordans and their copy book maxims have arrived at the top of the heap.

How the Jordans started in radio has been told often. They were listening one night at a friend's house to a radio, airing a program consisting mostly of jokes old Joe Miller would have been ashamed to claim. In disgust, Fibber commented:

"I could do a better job of acting than anyone on that program is doing."

"Ten dollars says you can't" shouted the host.

Jim took the dare, and the next morning Marian and he set out for the radio station. They were used to facing vaudeville audiences, but talking into a microphone was something else again. They were scared stiff but braved it through. The audition was successful, and several weeks later, they made their debut as the O'Henry Twins. During their long term of radio apprenticeship they were known as the Smith Family, they did children's programs, a program called Smackouts, and did a variety of other assignments.

There were bleak periods too when radio seemed to feel no need for the Jordans, and the two would pack their bags and set out on a series of one-night stands.

"Everything comes to him who waits, may be outmoded," says Fibber, "But we believe it."

"We waited ten years--and waited patiently," continues the comedian, "before anything of any consequence happened to us in radio. We worked and hoped and held tight to our convictions that things would come out all right.

"During that entire ten years, we didn't miss a single week on the air, except when stage engagements interfered. Most of our programs were over small stations with a meager listening audience. There were times without number when I wanted to toss the whole thing overboard and go back to being a machinist, or selling washing machines, or carrying the mail or doing any of the other dozen and one things I had done for a living before the radio bug started persistently nipping at Marian and me."

This anniversary doesn't mean that the two reached their peak. Since taking their broadcast to Hollywood, they have been sought after by picture studios and this Spring signed a three picture

contract, with production due to start in June.

Their friends say of them, "hmm, this fifth anniversary is nothing. Wait until they're ready to celebrate their tenth."

But Fibber and Molly can't get over the fact that "all those nice people remembered us on our anniversary."

Reprinted from Radio Varieties, April, 1940

THE McGEES OF WISTFUL VISTA
By Robert M. Yoder

Why do 20,000,000 Americans settle down every Tuesday evening to listen to these two refuges from small-time vaudeville? The highly readable story of radio's most successful couple - Fibber McGee and Molly.

Part One

The velvet drop concealing the skinny legs of the marimba said "Marian and Jim Jordan" and the names sparkled with all the fine, phony brilliance of a dancer's exit smile. The act on stage in this small-town theater was a harmony team - the girl at the piano, the man leaning debonairly against it and singing a pleasant tenor to the girl's contralto. The keynote was jaunty good cheer. They sang When You're Smiling, and a comedy number called She Knows Her Onions. They followed with a little piece of musical sunshine called Bridget O'Flynn. And as always, they closed with Side by Side, which said, toward the end:

> Oh, we don't have a barrel of money,
> Maybe we're ragged and funny,
> But we're rolling along, singing this song,
> Side by side.

Then, with a big smile for the audience, these two radiant personalities bowed off to make room for the No. 3 act on the bill. There is no oddity in anything they did, but there was great restraint in what they didn't. For at those words, "We don't have a barrel of money," they might very well have broken into wild laughter. And it would have been appropriate to tear that marimba block from block, grab a handful of bass notes apiece and chase the audience out of the theater with this pretty kindling. For where Jim and Marian Jordan were going to stroll, side by side, was down the main stem of this central Illinois town, and their next appearance would be in the Western Union office, to send the forlorn message: "Went broke in Lincoln, Illinois. Please wire carfare home."

That was in 1924. Just now, Jim and Marian Jordan do have a barrel of money, and while not ragged, they are most certainly funny. An estimated 20,000,000 Americans draw up chairs to hear them every Tuesday night; they are Fibber McGee and Molly, two of America's favorite comedy characters. In fact, having out-Hoopered all rival programs last year to establish their show as the country's No. 1 favorite, they are now pretty much the king and queen of radio. They are riding high in the form of entertainment that killed vaudeville - and if it killed one vaudeville theatre in Lincoln, Illinois, they could be pardoned for greeting the news with one short dirty laugh, side by side. That was the low point in their career.

A lot of radio's stars are former vaudeville headliners - Bob Hope, Jack Benny and Fred Allen were big timers who didn't fiddle with radio until five or six years after Fibber and Molly went to work before a mike. The Jordans can't bandy stories with them about long runs at the Palace. They never got within V-bomb range of that queen of the vaudeville houses. But the two who set out from Peoria so hopefully a quarter of a cenrury ago can match vaudeville bruises with the best of them. They played the tank towns. "In the big

league, you played better football, yes," they can say, "but in that league they wear shoes."

The Jordans play their Fibber and Molly roles in their natural voices now, and manage to make those characters exceedingly real. In many a small town they sound like neighbors, if the neighbors could provide as many laughs, and in many a big-city apartment they sound like the folks back home. They are like their radio characters, too, in one important respect. They are not the type people, to use one of Fibber's favorite expressions, to whom things happen in those neat little epigrams of fact found in so many biographies. The type people they are, if Ziegfeld had been out front one night, he'd have been lost, to begin with, and the Jordans would have had laryngitis. Take their advent into radio. That makes a pretty impressive tale, if you don't go into the details. They first sang into a mike on a bet, and the very next day they had a sponsor. The full story is far more plausible, if less flashy. The Jordans were visiting Jim's brother, Byron, in that section of North Side Chicago called Rogers Park. The two couples were killing time listening to the radio. They heard some singing, and Jordan remarked, "We could do better than that."

"Ten bucks says you can't," said his brother, meaning "Let's see you." But Jordan is not the type guy who, when he makes a bet, backs down on it if he is pretty sure he can win, and all hands drove downtown to the radio station. "We are singers," Jordan explained. Radio was pretty much off the cuff in those days, a good deal of the talent wasn't paid at all, and the manager of Station WIBO may have held the general view that one harmony team sounds very much like another harmony team. "Go ahead and sing," was his unexcited reply. So they did - Can't You Hear Me Calling, Caroline? - and next day they had a sponsor. But as usual in real life, if not in biographies, there was a catch in it. The sponsored show ran only once a week; the revenue was ten dollars. Maybe you heard them, but the odds are against it. They were "The O'Henry Twins," and lucky, in those days, that they didn't get paid in candy bars.

It is the same with the creation of the Fibber-and-Molly show. The birth of one of the top shows on the air was not attended with much real drama. An advertising man riding along in his car heard the Jordans on the air. Spotting great unrecognized talent, did he stop his car and sign them by telephone at a princely figure? Not exactly. He simply gave the Jordans a slim chance to get him out of a private dilemma and into a new show which nobody concerned ever intended to call Fibber McGee and Molly. Nobody took much stock in his offer, either - all concerned greeted it with yawns or rude remarks.

Or take the time Jordan met Don Quinn, the McGees' writer who has been worth his not inconsiderable weight in gold. This was like Tinker's meeting Chance or the gin meeting the vermouth in the story of the Martini, for this radio success is the Jordans-plus-Quinn or perhaps the Jordans-multiplied-by-Quinn. Had either of the two recognized this as a memorable occasion, he might have got off something prophetic. The facts are considerably more lifelike. Quinn was hanging around Station WENR in Chicago without the slightest interest in radio. He was there for one simple but practical reason. Quinn was young and foot-loose, and a radio station had music and pretty hostesses. Quinn went there to dance. "It was better than a night club, and cheaper."

Quinn might have said, "There is a great coming star," but he didn't. He remembers the occasion for an odd reason. Jordan looked phenomenally unhappy. He walked toward the studio the way most men would walk into bankruptcy court or into a flooded basement. Quin, who was a hopeful cartoonist, stopped bantering with one of the pretty girls and looked with a cartoonist's admiration on an expression so eloquent of exasperation.

If this was the trombone player, some oaf had sat on his slide. If he was an engineer, then the transmitter had just blown over. Whoever he was - performer, sponsor, salesman or visiting shipwreck victim - he was the glummest-looking man Quinn had seen in a long time. So what Quinn said was "Who's the sourpuss?"

"That's Jim Jordan," somebody told him. "He's a comedian."

Unlikely as that seemed to Quinn, it may have seemed almost equally unlikely to Jordan, who was pretty new at comedy. He and Marian never intended to be comedians, any more than Quinn intended to be a radio writer. The Jordans started out as singers, and their first years seem to have been a determined scamper toward the wrong goal. The first mystery, of course, is why they went into show business at all. There is nothing in either heredity or envirement to explain why this ambition should hit either of them. Both came from God-fearing Central Illinois families with no more connection with the theater than with whaling or deep-sea diving. Neither had as much as a second cousin in the theater, even taking tickets or playing drums in a pit orchestra. One of Jim's sisters did marry a booking agent, who toured the Orient with The Great Nicola, a celebrated magician from Monmouth, Illinois. But that was later.

Marian Jordan likes to refer to her husband as a farm boy, as if she had been the first to tell him that street lights could not be caught like fireflies, and, technically, he is. James Edward Jordan was born on a farm five miles west of Peoria, Illinois, in 1896. The report has got around that Jordan's family moved to town when he was five so that he saw only the fairest side of farm life, without the chores. This burns Jordan; he was twelve, he insists, and later spent three summer vacations working like a shorthanded beaver on the farm of his cousin, Sam McClugage. Jordan got to Peoria about the time that city of 105,000 was becoming nationally famous is show business - though not for the performers it produced - as a vaudeville gag, unfortunately, and as a symbol of concentrated nothing to do. "Why did you get married?" this nifty went. "Well it was Sunday, and we were in Peoria." Jordan is a farmer now, and not incidentally either. He raises fine feeder beef on a 1000-acre ranch near Bakersfield, California. The neighbors say he is a smart rancher. Anybody with beef to sell in recent years has been smart prima facie. At any rate, he has fulfilled the tradition: Farm boy works hard in city, gets rich enough to buy a farm.

Jordan had a good voice, as a boy in his teens, and liked to use it. Somewhere in there he formed the ambition to be a professional singer. He showed it in a couple of decisions fairly rare in boys of that age - he took singing lessons while in high school, and sang in the choir of St. John's Church. In the choir he met a girl who was equally wrapped up in music. Marian Driscoll was one of the more talented students in the Academy of Our Lady. In fact, she intended

to continue studying piano, voice and violin in a Peoria music school after graduation, and looked forward to a career as a music teacher. But not with much delight. She was a born performer. As children, she and her harmonica-playing brother, Danny, danced for the family and neighbors and in school entertainments. They did jigs, naturally, their grandparents hailing from County Cork, but they were uncommonly good; they knew three dozen dance routines. The family alone was a fair-sized audience. There were nine boys and four girls in this lively home on the west side of Peoria. Marian loved grade-school and high-school theatricals, and what she really dreamed of was a life on the stage. The Driscolls were solidly against that. It was no life for a decent woman, theatrical people being well known to be fast. They were not much pleased when this Jordan kid began to call on their Marian either; he seemed to have the same flighty ideas.

Nobody snaps up teen-age singers, and when Jim got out of high school he went to work in a wholesale-drug house. Marian Driscoll began giving piano lessons. A nasty difference began to yawn in their stations. Jim was making eight dollars a week. His girl was doing much better - that capitalist had twenty-three paying pupils. But Jim's current voice teacher, memorably named E. Warren K. Howe, was keeping an eye out for an opening, and after many months one turned up. A vaudeville act called A Night With the Poets needed a top tenor - top, that is, in the musical position, not necessarily in merit. A high clear tenor is what Jim had, although he was almost small enough - he is five feet six - to be a bass. He caught the train for Chicago, tried out for the job and was in vaudeville. It was the fall of 1917, Jordan was twenty-one and he was in show business. He set out for his first bookings feeling twice as professional as John Drew.

Marian sat in Peoria teaching kids to play five-finger exercises and The Rustle of Spring, envying Jim his romantic life behind the footlights. Jim meanwhile played split weeks and one-night stands, caught cold on the trains and contracted indigestion in all-night restaurants, and longed for Peoria, which the Poets would have regarded as a big-time date. In May of 1918 he told the Poets to get another tenor, and he hit out for home, with the patriotic intention of enlisting to the tune of Over There and helping capture the Kaiser. Marian was exceedingly glad to see him, but the Army said it wasn't accepting volunteers; just wait around and you'll be called. Jim found himself in uniform all right, but it was about the kind of deflating development that would happen to Fibber McGee. His country wanted him, it turned out, as a mail carrier. Before again getting a foothold in show business Jordan was to hold down a lot of jobs, but this postman's job was in one respect the best in every succeding capacity, he was up against people who didn't want to buy what he handled. At least he never found anyone who would say no when offered mail.

Marian's family had decided to like her boy friend, or at least make the best of the situation, and in August Marian and Jim were married. ("Do you like Irish setters?" Molly McGee was asked on the radio. "Yes, indeed," said Molly. "I married one.") His country wanted him then, of course. Five days later he was on his way to spend a solo honeymoon at Camp Forrest, Georgia. Six weeks later Private Jordan landed in Brest, France, with the 122nd Engineers. And when the Armistice was signed shortly thereafter, he was too

sick with influenza to greet victory with anything more than a sneeze. Once on his feet, he found they could use him in the entertainment division. Jordan staged shows all over France for men waiting their turn on the troopships. It was good practice of course, but made him late getting home; he got back to Peoria in midsummer of 1919.

Marian had resumed her piano teaching, but Jim had to find a job. He became a machinist's helper, but didn't show much talent at it, although he is handy with tools. One of the first luxuries he allowed himself when he hit the big time in radio was to fit out a good workshop with excellent power tools. "He gets as wild eyed at the smell of fresh sawdust," a friend remarked, "as most men get when they whiff good bourbon." It may be that that machinist's job still rankles; he wasn't fired, but thinks he quit just in time. He abandoned another career even more suddenly. Working in the attic of a fairly flimsy one story house, trying to be a carpenter, he fell right through the living-room ceiling. As if that weren't bad enough, he broke his fall by landing on his boss.

The jaunty, cocksure Fibber of Tuesday night's radio sounds as if he would make an excellent salesman. But when Jordan needed it, his luck was out. Nobody wanted washing machines, and he tried vacuum cleaners. Good commissions were to be had there, too, but nobody wanted a vacuum cleaner. Jordan got a lot of exercise lugging the sample around, he cleaned a lot of rugs and he met a lot of people, but he couldn't make any money. Finally he went to work as a day laborer. Obviously he could do better than that, and did; he landed a job as an insurance salesman. He had better luck selling policies. In 1920 he and Marian bought a house. They had the first of their children, their daughter Kathryn; they had the traditional little cottage with the big mortgage - their house was only four rooms - and they might have stayed in Peoria for life. In time, it might have meant an insurance agency for Jim, who, in spite of the tough time he had getting started, is regarded as a canny businessman, and a membership in the Rotary club, and maybe a shot at an office in the Chamber of Commerce. That's not at all implausible; he has served two terms as president of the Chamber of Commerce in Encino, California, and would tell you he can boost with the best of them, buster. Had they settled in this familiar groove, they would have escaped a lot of bumps, but they would also have missed a lot of fun.

But Jordan seems to have regarded all other jobs as simply a way of treading water until he could get into the bright world of entertainment. He sang in a quartet which became a pretty regular feature of Peoria entertainment - for luncheon clubs, churches and lodges - the Kiwanians made them honorary members. When the other tenor, Paul Mehlenbeck, got too busy with his dance orchestra, the three others appeared as a trio, often hired for political rallies. Jordan avoids ribbing by forgetting to make any point of a talent Mehlenbeck remembers. It appears that Jordan at one stage was practicing to give the entertainment world one more Swiss bell ringer. Jim and Marian also appeared as a harmony team in women's clubs and church entertainments, and at one of these dates they met the advance man for a theatrical company. He told them they ought to put their show on the road. Those were the most enticing words in the language to a couple of natural-born show people full of the yen to get out and around, to wow them in Williamsport and kill them in Kenosha. There

was one little obstacle, no bigger than Pikes Peak. They were not taking a job; they were trying to make one. Only time would tell how they fared on the question of income. But to start with, for scenery, traveling money and costumes, they would need a neat $1000. That is the kind of gambling that would scare Nick the Greek. The Jordans hesitated, like sensible people, then leaped, like show people. They sold their car for $125. They borrowed $500 from an aunt. For the rest, they threw in the equity in their beloved home. If they didn't win, they would be stony, park-bench broke.

Out they went for sixteen weeks in the theaters, opera houses and musty lodge halss of the tank towns. There probably is no adolescence more painful than the adolescence of a theatrical team, but this pair grew up fast. Better still their act went over. When their first bookings were over they went back to Peoria, retrieved their daughter, Kathryn, who had been living with Jim's folks, and didn't have much trouble booking another long tour. They played this as long as they could, stopping only two months before their second child, a son, was born. Marian went back to Peoria - this was the summer of 1923 - and Jim set out to get vaudeville bookings for himself, doing a single. That is tough. A singing sword swallower might have got bookings, or a man who could sing under water, but plain singing singers were a dime a dozen. Jordan spent six months playing club dates or singing in hole-in-the-wall cafes. What they paid wouldn't pay room rent. It was a miserable interlude; The untouchables of India don't encounter more humiliation than an unwanted performer. Clearly, the Jordans had to go out as a team.

So the two boarded the train again, but this time luck had its foot all set to trip them. The tour was jinxed from the start. They were playing the small time, and that took them to some of the darnedest theaters in the United States in a rugged round of split weeks and sleeper jumps, cheap hotels, bad food, high expenses and low pay. The worst theater they hit had dressing rooms below stage, so low nobody but midgets could stand upright. "You had to climb in and out on a ladder," as Marian remembers it. "Since I had eight brothers who had been coal miners, I didn't mind so much. But Jim, being a farm boy, was used to plenty of room, and he was rather ill at ease." That business about her brothers isn't blarney, incidentally. Eight of her nine brothers did work in coal mines at least temporarily, following in the footsteps of their father. Molly is the youngest of the six children still living.

Now that bright dialogue expertly delivered is Fibber and Molly's specialty, and they operate two of the best-known voices in this gabby age, it is interesting to note that their vaudeville act was wonderful practice of the wrong thing. Apparently they no more suspected they had comedy talent than the suspected they could read minds or talk to birds. Their act was solid music.

Then came Lincoln, Illinois, which wasn't exactly the iceberg, that sank them, but simply the spot where they ran out of financial gas. Pollyanna herself, with a load on, would have had a tough time finding it, but there was one speck of good luck in this welter of woe. They had gone broke close to home. Peoria, to which they must return as failures, was only fifty miles away. Back they went, and Jim's next engagement was selling yard goods and towels, black thread and cottage curtains in a dry-goods store. He could have put the pay in

his eye, and might have been excused for thinking that Luck was fiddling with the Jordans like a Yo-yo, snapping them back to a humdrum and skimpy life every time they tried for something brighter. The worst job he had was a heartbreaker; with two small children of his own, he found a job in the toy department of a department store, and was so broke he couldn't take home even the smallest playthings he knew would delight them. But he and Molly made extra money singing around Peoria, and in 1925 got an engagement in Kewanee, Illinois, which paid fifty dollars. That was all the resilient Jordan needed. He left the pillowcase-and-sheet business to stay-at-homes, caught the Alton for what the sports called Old Chi, and found Egbert Van Alstyne in need of a singer.

This was a break. Working for Van Alstyne was steady work. That famous song writer could put on a program of his own music. Van Alstyne's credits include such hits as Memories, I'm Afraid to Go Home in the Dark and Drifting and Dreaming. Untold thousands, including some of the worst singers in the country, are indebted to Van Alstyne and Harry Williams for that barber-shop classic, In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree, and its authors nailed down their claim to immortality with such wonderful musical Americana as Pony Boy and What's the Matter With Father?

Marian wasn't in on this venture; she stayed in Peoria with the children. But she was in Chicago for the weekend of the bet that put them on the air. Five months later that radio job ran out, leaving the Jordans badly in the hole. You can get that way trying to maintain a home an ten dollars a week, but what might seem like five months of disaster to nonprofessionals was not very nerve-racking to a young couple tempered in vaudeville. When they had to, they went back to vaudeville to get well financially. But they had liked radio, and as soon as they got the bills paid off they got back on the air again. This time they were doing three shows a week, for sixty dollars, and they were getting an occassional odd job involving acting. Principally they were on Station WENR, inevitably called "Wiener."

Meanwhile, the writer who was going to develope such comedy talent on their behalf would have been surprised to hear about it. Don Quinn had other plans. He intended to become a rich commercial artist and maybe a syndicated cartoonist. Quinn had come to Chicago as something of a foundling, left on the city's doorstep. His father organized chambers of commerce, and the family lived in a succession of Midwestern cities and towns. They were living in St. Joseph, Michigan, when Don quit high school and upset his parents by enlisting in the Navy, padding his age by a year. That was in July of 1918, and by the time he finished training, the war was all but over. Just the same, he felt uncomfortable when he went back to school. He was too old for those naive little kids who hadn't seen the world as he had - the world being the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and the Chicago Loop. By now the family lived in Grand Rapids, a city abustle with energetic people and ambitious ventures. There was one quiescent area, the Quinn boy. He hung around home doing little or nothing. This must have been a sore trial to an apostle of progress and boosterism, and when Don was twenty-two, the elder Quinn decided a small fire would have to be built under him. Don had entertained the vauge ambition of becoming a commercial artist. His father took him to Chicago, gave him twenty dollars, shook hands and said, "You're

on your own."

Grand Rapids' loss was a little sore at being kicked out of the nest so brusquely - although he recognizes it now as a kindly idea - but there was nothing to do but get a job. He knew nothing about commercial art, but was willing to earn while learning. To every possible employer in the classified phone book he sent a post card which could be checked "Not interested" or "Come in." The number of "Come in's" still makes Quinn proud of his enterprise. Meanwhile, however, he found a job through a classified ad. A washing-machine company took him on as "a stooge errand boy" and sent him to art school. In time he moved to an art agency, where he became "a pretty good man at lettering and amateurish cartoonist." In the flush days of the 1920's, that seemed fine to strike out on his own. Associated Illustrators, the new agency was called. That meant "Quinn and two other hungry hopefuls." . . . Radio? "Just a funny noise from Pittsburgh," to Quinn.

The tonic Chicago air was full of big plans and bigger talk. Everybody was riding high, or felt like it, after three gin bucks made with Al Capone's bootleg alky. Quinn kept the fire full of irons A comic-strip idea had an editor's encouraging nod. Maybe Quinn would strike funny-paper gold with another Dick Tracy or Orphan Annie. Why, they said some of those syndicated Chicago Tribune cartoonists lived like millionaire sportsmen. Quinn was also sending cartoons to the comic magazines. They seemed to regard him as handier with a comedy idea than with a pencil. They sent the drawings back, but bought the gags.

Then the art business fell to pieces as suddenly as a badly prepared painting sometimes falls off the canvas. The depression was on, and nobody wanted Associated Illustrators to draw so much as the portrait of a bolt for a hardware catalogue. The comic strip was in good shape, but newspapers weren't buying. There came a day in the dismal '30's when the Grand Rapids boulevardier had one flimsy dollar. Across from his Rush Street apartment was a restaurant. Quinn liked to watch Capone's night force unload beer there - "better than any professional-football backfield." Now Quinn gave the proprietor a friendly tip. A joint like this, he said, needed a touch of distinction. It was, after all, in competition with a reputed 10,000 other speak-easies in Chicago. Perhaps some special blotters to give the customers. Quinn would design them himself, for a nominal fifty dollars. The proprietor bought the idea, to Quinn's surprise. Apparently Quinn could weather the crash if only he could think of ideas preposterous enough. Maybe a booklet entitled Eviction Can be Fun. Maybe some merry cartoons for corporations to send out in lieu of dividends. . . . But he got a call from his radio station acquaintances, the Jordans.

Five days a week, Jim and Marian Jordan gave a show called Smackout. Jordan played a small-town grocer who invariably was out of whatever the customer needed, but always came up with a tall story. About the woodpeckers he trained to tap Morse code, maybe, or the square tomatoes he grew for bacon-and-tomato sandwiches, or the time he fanned so many batters that the outfielders installed deck chairs and the second baseman took up knitting. Multiple roles are disfavored now, lest they reduce acting jobs. In this show, however, the Jordans did five or six voices apiece. One of Marian's was the

nosy little neighbor girl, Teeny, whose "Whatcha doin', mister, whatcha doin' huh?" is still in the show.

Smackout was on the network, but as a wallflower without a sponsor. An overburdened studio writer ground out the stories amid a dozen other chores. With more distinctive copy, the Jordans thought they might get somewhere. Quinn had sometimes contributed gags, on random meetings in the station, out of friendship and the fact that "I was ham enough to like to hear them on the air." Now he took over writing Smackout, and a fine offhand operation it was. In the clutches, the Jordans could always sing. If Quinn had a hang-over or was dry of ideas, the Jordans could cue four songs into the show. That made a great saving in bright dialogue and spared the pulsing brain. Many a morning the Jordans stopped by Quinn's apartment after breakfast, picked up a script just pulled from the typewriter, gave it a quick study on the way to the station and went smoothly on the air with no further pother.

There was nothing newly minted in the idea of telling whoppers, nor was the copy anything likely to dethrone George Benard Shaw. No one recalls it as one of radio's bright spots. When they had something good, however, they drew "Quality mail" - mail from good, smart listeners. That suggested that this same combination had the makings of a better show. But times were tough and sponsors scarce. The break came late in 1934. John J. Louis, an advertising man, heard Smackout as he drove to work one morning. Louis had a problem. S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc. the Racine, Wisconson, waxmakers, had Tony Wons on the air - the reader of inspirational pieces, whose dreamy platitudes soothed many and drove others, including the late Ring Lardner, into helpless fury. The advertising man had been thinking that something totally different might be based on the tall stories told by the celebrated Burlington, Iowa, Liars' Club. One day they had the president of the Liars on the air with Tony. Although an astonishing mixture, it precipitated nothing.

But on hearing Smackout, Louis called for a sample show using the Jordans, telling Burlington-type whoppers. "Everybody was ordering auditions at the drop of a hat," says Quinn. "It was cheaper than taking a sponsor out to dinner, and the talent was so hungry everybody was glad to do it."

This invitation sounded like the same old malarkey, and Quinn wasted no energy at all on the sample he submitted. But instead of the expected "Thanks for your trouble, sorry nothing came of it," back came word that the new show was a sale. Only on one point had Quinn bestirred himself. Tired of shows called Betty and Bob, or Sally and Jim, he wanted "a new rhythm." For that reason he named the characters "Fibber McGee and Molly." The advertising agency had no idea of letting it go at that. They intended to call the show "Free Air," for the story would concern a couple of tourists crossing the continent. Obviously a good title, too, and only at the last minute did anyone discover why it sounded familiar - Sinclair Lewis had used it for a Saturday Evening Post story with generally the same theme. Could the title be bought? Yes, came the answer, for $50,000. Sadly they fell back on Fibber McGee and Molly, under which the show has prospered just as well.

To get the No. 1 Hooperating took thirteen years, but long before

that the show was a success. Iwas good business, that is, producing a high listening score per dollar of cost. One of the most remarkable factors in its success has been a lucky break in sponsors. Instead of getting the ax if they didn't score in the first thirteen weeks, the Jordans hit a sponsor willing to hire relative unknowns and let them grow, if they could, with a minimum of interference. If the McGees have stuck to one sponsor all these years, a laissezfaire attitude almost phenomenal in radio helps explain it.

The hit show that goes on the air so smoothly these Tuesday nights is entertainment far different from the two-cylinder job that took the air in April of 1935. Today's Fibber and Molly - well defined, three-dimensional characters - make their early counterparts seem as thin as cartoon figures. The whoppers are mercifully gone, so far gone that Fibber's name is now totally inept. It is now what Quinn and the Jordans worked hard to achieve - comedy of character. Not domestic comedy, exactly, which usually involves children. Not small-town comedy, either, although Wistful Vista is not a big city. Principally, it is Life with Fibber, and Fibber has become pretty much the ordinary tough-minded, wise-crack-loving, average citizen - who would punch your nose for calling him average. Fibber is a hopeful and slightly overconfident guy who will tackle anything with a brisk propensity for stepping on his own necktie. But he is nobody's fool, except his own. Calling on the McGees at their castle at 79 Wistful Vista is a procession of friends who can help make the weekly episode reflect what ever is itching the country at the moment. At times the show is as timely as the evening newspaper; at other times it may simply concern Fibber's attempt to do something around the house that might better be left to experts. It is frankly a radio show and makes humorous capital of the fact. Fibber and Molly delighted listeners one night this year by speaking of The Product in hushed reverence and vocal capitals, as the Aga Khan must wish his subjects spoke of him. There is a lot of shrewd observation in both the writing and the playing. Quinn and the Jordans all have a sharp ear for American speech and a sharp eye for American manners, and all concerned like their humor dry, which is after all, the great American flavor. It will surprise no fans of the ill-fated Vic and Sade, which had such fine small-town color, that Paul Rhymer's serial was one of Quinn's favorites too.

What happened to put the show over was both simple and difficult - all hands simply got steadily better at their work. Quinn developed unsuspected talent at writing radio comedy - he is one of the few who could be called a radio humorist rather than a gag man. The Jordans developed unsuspected skill as comedians - no one on the air surpasses them in delivery or timing, and they are by now as much at home in their roles as a hamburger in a bun. It was a long pull to the top, but that apparently builds a solid following. Air time, of course, has played its usual important part. At first, in April of 1935, the show went on the basic Blue network at ten P.M. on Tuesday night. The sponsor added more stations, and moved the show to ten P.M. on Monday.

In the fall of 1935 a better spot was open - eight o'clock on Monday night. The next switch was to the more extensive Red network. This put the new-comers up against big-time competition - Burns and Allen. Even so, they made headway. They were next "across from" the durable Lux Theater - some more tough competition - but their rating rose.

Meanwhile, Tuesday night was shaping up as a big night on NBC, and late in 1938 - March fifteenth, late in the radio season - they moved to their present time of 9:30 on Tuesday night, all those times being Eastern Standard. That was the turning point. When they went back on the air in the fall, it was found that their audience had increased by one half. Never since has there been a serious cloud in their radio sky.

For the last four years they have bobbed in and out of first place among the comedy programs, Bob Hope usually holding it down when F. & M. didn't. No one was surprised when the folks at 79 Wistful Vista finished the 1947-48 season with the No. 1 rating. That close to the top it doesn't make much difference, anyway. But it does provide a happy ending, especially as their popularity seems likely not to end. And the chances are that more people listen to them every Tuesday night in Lincoln, Illinois, than came to see them when they really needed applause.

They are naturally proud of their box-office appeal; and their gilt-edged standing in the trade is flattering; radio trade journals speak of F. & M. the way brokers speak of Big Steel or the way menus refer to blue-point oysters. The ham in every actor must delight in being called Virginia. Gratifying honors go with their success; they were called back to their native Midwest in the spring of 1948, for instance, to receive the praise of a Catholic college for the quality of their entertainment. That must have been pleasent, even though one of their own lines did arise to bite them. One of the reverend fathers remarked that the occasion was doubly pleasent because it was Molly's thirty-ninth birthday. Molly's brother, Tom Driscoll, of Peoria, was among the banquet guests. And it was undoubtedly Tom who piped up with a Fibber-and-Molly crack at this decorous moment. "That ain't the way I heerd it," he said.

Editors' Note - This is the first of two articles by Mr. Yoder. The second will appear next week.

From THE SATURDAY EVENING POST - April 9, 1949

THE McGEES OF WISTFUL VISTA
By Robert M. Yoder

What does hard work get you? Well, it got Fibber McGee and Molly to the happy point where they can make top radio comedy out of just about anything that happens to Uncle Henry . . . or to you. Here's the way they do it.

Conclusion

The characteristic American delight in a slang phrase results in phases that may seem a little eccentric to outsiders. There was a time, for instance, when levelheaded citizens went around asking each other, "Do you want to buy a duck?" In another day, the phrase heard all over this favored land was "I'm regusted." Still later men and women quite possibly named Czuskinski or Twerklemeyer kept telling each other, "Tain't funny, McGee." If this baffles any literal-minded archaeologists about the year 5000, that will be fine; there ought to be a stiff jail sentance for being literal-minded, anyway. Brighter souls will know these expressions are just something we picked up from the radio - from the late Joe Penner, from Amos and Andy and from the show which seems now to be comedy's fair-haired boy. Fibber McGee and Molly.

The mildly curious thing about the remark the McGees put into the national idiom is that a rebuke for not being funny helped make these comedians famous. "Tain't funny, McGee" was what Molly said to her spouse when Fibber tried to get off something good and fell an his smiling face. This being a nation of wisecrackers - how about the band leader who, at the unveiling of a monument to President Harding, elected to play Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone? How about the scientist who had his banquet speech put on recording tape, so he could listen and help applaud? - there seemed to be a need for a reply, when somebody tries, but misses. Then, too, "Tain't funny" could be used to mean "You are kidding on the square buster," or "That's no joke." Whatever the appeal of this not sensationally cogent remark, it became so prevalent a few years ago that the McGees and their author, Don Quinn, got as sick of it as everyone else, even though it proved their hold on the public. There is more to it than a simple reproof; usually it is Molly's comment on a chain of events. Even so, the public wore the words so thin that the McGees now use these trademark words very sparingly, perhaps a couple of times in a radio season.

By now they have a basketful of these "recognition devices," the second most famous of which is, of course, Fibber's hall closet. He opens it forgetfully, and it's like the breaking of a dam. Out of this catch-all, as thousands of faithful listeners automatically yell "Don't!," pours all the clutter of odds and ends that get stuck into closets like that - the moose head that was put away in 1936, the anchor somebody bought for a boat he never got around to building, the lamps that will get repaired any day now, the outgrown roller skates, the tin candy box that was going to be so handy if anybody could think of a use for it. That closet has become a symbol negotiable in conversation on any level; no doubt it is a far better reference than Pandora's box. A few listeners complain; they think the idea is worn out. Quinn himself, who dislikes all set pieces, is inclined to agree. But so many others find it good for a laugh every

time, that it could never be dropped from the show.

Because studio audiences get a kick out of it, it is often the sound man who gets the first laugh on one of F. & M.'s Tuesday-night sessions. If the closet will figure in the story, the sound man comes in to set it up, and he comes in looking like an evicted pawnshop keeper whose stuff had just been moved into the street. On a set of steps he sets up about what such a closet might contain. Carefully, as if baiting a trap, he lays out such items as golf clubs, roller skates, trays, a guitar, shoes, a brief case, a pith helmet, a sword, a spray gun, a suitcase or two, several packages, a broken alarm clock and the kind of wooden bucket widely purchased early in the war to hold sand - to put out bombing fires, of course. There is never any doubt that this homey clutter will crash with a realistic jangle. But for twenty-nine minutes of the thirty-minute program, the sound man stews for fear it will crash beforehand. It never has; nothing ever goes wrong on this show. Putting it together undoubtedly is the smoothest operation in radio. Quinn and the Jordans have worked together so long they could almost do it by telepathy, and commonly do it by telephone. Quinn comes up with a theme. He wants it simple, and often makes it so timely it seems to continue the listeners' dinner-table conversation.

Perhaps, in the ballooning real-estate market, Fibber has a chance to sell his home for $18,000. Immediately he realizes the joint ain't right for a man with $18,000, although a minute ago it was the Little Gray Home in the West and he loved every curling shingle on that dear roof. Now he'll sell without a qualm. Doesn't know just what he'll do next; he's in a thumbs-in-suspenders mood now, feeling expansive. He may buy something flossier, more suitable for the type big shot he is. Or he may just knock around the world, I and Somerset Maugham. With the general theme agreed upon, there will be several turns the action could take, several choices of good lines. In these hands, decisions like that don't take much fretting.

Fibber and Molly, who are Jim and Marian Jordan, have been perfecting their radio roles for thirteen years, and Quinn has been writing for them since F.D.R.'s first administration. Big-time vaudeville stars didn't trifle with radio until later, but the Jordans had no pocketful of heavy old money to hold them back.

The ball for a Tuesday-nibht show gets rolling the preceding Friday afternoon in Producer Frank Pittman's office on the seventh floor of the Taft Building on the celebrated Hollywood corner of Sunset and Vine, or as the principals describe the office, "Overlooking the corset department of the Broadway-Hollywood" (department store). Molly is inevitably smartly dressed; Fibber may be setting off a plaid shirt with a sports jacket; he will be the figure lounging nonchalantly on the davenport. Don Quinn and Phil Leslie, who has helped with the writing the last five years, come in from their own office across the street, and the general line of the show is thrashed out.

Quinn and Leslie beat out a script over the week end, and there is a "table reading" at 11:30 Monday morning with the whole cast present. The Jordans, the writers and the producers kick it around later until they are sure the show is ready for Tuesday. This doesn't take them more than thirty or forty minutes. Tuesday's work begins at the

very crack of dawn - for musicians; the orchestra and the quartet go into rehearsal at 9:30. The cast comes in at 10:30 for another table reading, which Pittman times. Then Molly goes out to get her hair done while Pittman and the writers decide what, if anything must be cut. They finish in time for the writers and the producers to go across the street to the Brown Derby for crab and beer, while Jordan heads out, like a drunkard to the saloon, for his daily chocolate malted with two eggs. The drugstore that soesn't leave the shaker with him, so that he gets those extra three or four fingers, does without the McGee patronage thereafter.

The cast assembles again at 1:00 P.M., and there is a complete show, the dress rehersal, at 1:30, putting together music, show effects and dialogue. Pittman "clocks it cold" - that is, leaving out all laughs, mistakes or blowups, aiming for a show running twenty-six minutes and twenty to forty-five seconds. That will exactly fill his half hour, when the laughs are in, and it includes a one minute musical number he regards as a bumper - that is, he can use as little or as much of it as he needs. Final cuts, after that, and the players have until five o'clock to kill. Fibber and Molly have found that the best way to get perfectly relaxed for the night's show is, oddly enough, to exercise. They repair to the Hollywood Plaza Hotel and put in a couple of hours tugging and hauling on various resistance gadgets. Then Fibber goes to the barber, and at five o'clock all hands assemble for one final run-through.

Six o'clock finds the studio audience assembling. They are tourists, mostly, and among the 350 in the auditorium there usually are ten who got their tickets directly from Fibber and Molly - old Midwestern acquaintances, visitors from Peoria or Chicago. The broadcast is from a stage, with no attempt to create the setting of the McGees' radio home at 79 Wistful Vista. Molly sits at a table to the right, and women in the audience probably recognize a good deal of quiet style in her costume; she likes sports and afternoon dreses in fine gabardine or wool. Once Molly balked at the price of a gray gabardine suit and said she hoped that if she spent that much money, she wouldn't see the same suit on other people. The clerk didn't know Mrs. Jordan.

"You won't see it on anybody you know," she said. "There's only one other, and she's famous - Gracie Allen."

Fibber, who is always keyed up for a broadcast even after several hundred of them, stands at a mike in center stage; a gray-haired, quick-moving man in his early fifties, usually in a brown suit. The piano is behind Molly, the quartet behind the piano. Most of the stage is occupied by the orchestra. The orchestra leader, Billy Mills, is another smooth-running wheel; he works this show with the ease of eleven years in the same stand. This composer and leader popped off at a party one night about home canning. "Nothing to it," said Mills. "Anything grandmother could do, I can do better." Setting out to prove what began as a gag, Mills has become an expert. His apricot jam won first prize at the Hemet, California, Farmers Fair and Festival, but what musicians don't let him forget is that his most successful recipe probably is for corn relish. Quinn designed a label for him: "Uncle Will Mills' Corn Relish - You have heard how it sounds, now see how it tastes."

The portly man with the strip of burnished scalp, the man who forgets to take off his dark glasses when he comes in out of the California blaze, is Quinn, the McGees writer - the ex-cartoonist who used to write shows for them for five dollars a copy, partly out of friendship and partly because he needed the five. This is the man who unintentionally became one of the brightest lights in radio; he had no more idea of becoming a radio writer than of becoming a skywriter. On some shows, writers are changed like tires; on this one, Quinn is built in. Because he is not a hired brain or a rental wit, but a full partener in a tremendously successful entertainment venture, he is no doubt the highest-priced writer in radio. It is always hard to say who contributes more, performers or writers. In this trio they don't try - they just split the money three ways, and pleasant money it is too. Reputedly the Jordans and Quinn divide $10,000 a week. Fred Allen is authority for the statement that "today, the writer is the guy," meaning that the importance of good writing has at last been recognized. This came as no change to Quinn; it has been said many times that the Jordans got their best break when they met him - said so often that it takes a firm friendship to stand up under it. Pleasent, though, in a trade where writers, until recently, ranked somewhere between rented dinner clothes and false teeth. They weren't exactly locked in the attic like a crazy aunt or kept on the side streets, as in a novel by Fannie Hurst, but only recently have comedians frankly paraded them.

Hollywood is full of men striving so furiously to seem relaxed that they should get double-time pay for it, and probably do. The theory is that it shows a certain self-assurance, as it might show social assurance of a kind to clump into a formal dinner wearing rubber boots. In Quinn's case this ease of manner is not a pose. At forty-nine, he has nicely synthesized the humorists' customary skepticism with a large capacity for enjoyment. Tonight, as usual, he has one favorite gag. It may be the one in which Gale Gordon is telling about the strange infestation of tigers, antelopes and other wildlife that forced a certain shah to leave his rich domain. "Yes," says Gordon, "his reign was called on account of game." If it's Quinn's pet, it won't get the house he gives it himself. He's resigned to it; that happens every Tuesday.

The young man with Quinn is Phil Leslie, who came to Hollywood from St. Louis, where he was an accountant and small-theater manager. Under Quinn's tutelage he learned the F. & M. formula, which is to have a pattern, but violate it regularly. Having two writers around has been a great relief to all concerned, including Producer Frank Pittman, who is the man in the control booth at left stage, probably looking a little anxiously at the sound-effects man's precarious pile of household odds and ends. That closet worries Pittman; he used to run it. Pittman joined the show as the sound man in 1941. He is now a vice-president of the Needham, Louis and Brorby advertising agency, and his story fits in with the general self-made motif of this program. Pittman's first job in Hollywood was parking cars on the NBC lot. His job as producer is an envied one, and Fibber and Molly regard him as a smart man with only one prominent hole in his head - Pittman's love for flying. He and Quinn both fly; the Jordans don't, for the sound reason that they don't like it. The show traveled to Toronto during the war to help along the ninth Canadian victory loan. Pittman gave the Jordans a glowing account of the silken flight from Hollywood - the Jordans had followed by

train. Converted, the Jordans got aboard fot the next flight to New York. In about two hours they got a quick resume of flying weather at its bumpiest and stepped off all but homogenized. They haven't flown since.

The standout for visability is Arthur Q. Bryan, a well-nourished 200 pounder who not only plays the part of Doctor Gamble - "Let me know if your eyebrows keep twitching, Mrs. Cladderhatch" - but manages to look like a doctor. Fibber and Molly contend he is getting the delusion that he is one - "He diagnoses everybody's illnesses, and instead of shaking hands, he now takes your pulse." Like the Jordans, Byran started out to be a singer, and sang with quartets. He became an announcer by accident, substituting for a sick friend, switched to acting and is one of radio's busiest actors.

The happy, boyish-looking man is Bill Thompson. On the air he plays Mr. Wimple, the henpecked husband who comes over to 79 Wistful Vista to hide out from Sweetie Face, his big old bullying wife. Off the air he is a happy bachelor who devotes a lot of energy to being president of the Southern California-area Boys' Clubs of America. Thompson can cut up old vaudeville touches with the McGees; he comes from an old show-business family, and as a child appeared as "Master Billy Thompson." He also plays the Old Timer, Horatio K. Boomer, Nick Depopolis, and can handle any dialect part in the comedy catalogue.

Another of radio's most skillful supporting actors is on hand: Gale Gordon, whose father was in vaudeville and whose mother was a Broadway actress. On this show he's Mayor La Trivia, whom the McGees are forever driving nuts by taking some figure of speech literally - such as "I certainly cooked his goose." He tripped McGee up on this one night - La Trivia literally picked up a pretty penny. Gordon also plays Foggy Williams, the cautious weatherman whose farewell is "Good day . . . probably."

Harlow Wilcox, the announcer, first tried show business when Chautauqua was in its glory, and is a great comort to other members of this staff. They take a pretty detached and professional view of comedy, and can take it or leave it alone. But Wilcox is a wonderful audience. A funny line wows him, and if given one himself, he has to hold his sides to get through it without laughing. Listeners hear more advertising on the Fibber and Molly show than on most because Quinn invented the unspoken commercial. Long ago he wrote Wilcox into the script as an undisguised salesman. From the minute Wilcox appears, listeners know this friend of the McGees will strain all logic to get wax into the conversation. Thus they undergo the advertising treatment, but have to listen to very little outright blurb. Fibber is always impatient too. "What's the matter chum?" Wilcox asked one night. "Are you dissatisfied with our product?" They were aiming a poke at a current advertising phenomenon.

"Frankly, I am," said Fibber rudely. "It doesn't spell anything backwards."

You have here some of radio's most polished performers, and tossing a script to this nimble crew is like tossing is like tossing out a pair of dice in a squad tent. At this point, about all the producer has to worry about is some little detail nobody foresaw. If there is

one, he'll hear about it from listeners. "I just listened to your program," one man wrote Fibber, "and would like to know how your car happened to be in front of the tailor shop, inasmuch as you walked from home to the shop. I missed your last broadcast and perhaps you left it there that night. Please let me know.

On thing that keeps this cast happy is the Jordans' willingness - it amounts to insistance - on sharing credit. You can't call anybody on their show a stooge - "our recollection of a stooge is a fellow who came up on the stage in vaudeville and was made to appear a boob. The Jordans insist that "everyone on our show is important," and it isn't just the phony smile by which the star shows his democracy. They mean it. This is the alma mater of a good many performers who now are stars in their own right. The Great Gildersleeve (Harold Peary) first rose to comedy prominence as the McGees' neighbor. Beulah, played by the late Marlin Hurt, was at first the McGees' maid. Spike Jones played drums here before he got rich playing music on dishpans and auto horns. One of their singing alumni also is doing well on his own - Perry Como.

The Jordans naturally would have a quartet; Jim broke into pro and semi-pro entertainment as the top tenor in a Peoria, Illinois, quartet which is remembered as a pretty skillful outfit. For the radio they found one much to their liking in The King's Men - Grafton Linn, Jon Dodson, Rad Robinson and Ken Darby. They were college students in San Francisco, and formed this foursome when there wasn't much to sing about, in the dismal depression days of 1929. They got on the air in 1931, and Paul Whiteman signed them three years later. Now along with radio appearances, they work in the movies, making among other things, community-singing shorts.

The show will go on the air in a burst of laughter, thanks to a simple piece of business. Exactly seven seconds before air time - 6:30 in California, 9:30 in the East - Pittman points at Bill Thompson the accusing finger that is radio's go signal. Thompson hands Fibber a glass of water. Fibber takes a hinge at the clock, gulps the water, and then, in apparent great nervousness, tosses the glass over his shoulder. Instead of breaking, it bounces - it's plastic. And on the roar from the audience, they take the air. "Starring Fibber McGee and Molly!" Wilcox cries, and from Twentynine Palms, California, to Mooselookmeguntic, Maine, listeners sit back, prepared to enjoy themselves.

"Themselves" is what they will enjoy, for if the show is at its best it will find its comedy very close to the realities of everyday American life. They don't go in for fantastic comedy pitches. "We try to keep our people people," says Quinn, and a story is good for their purposes only if "it could possibly happen" They know they are right if the story will make listeners say, "You remember when that happened to Uncle Henry, the darned fool?" The mandolin show, one of their two or three most popular, had the simple framework Quinn likes. Fibber found his old mandolin; it fell out of the closet again. Well, it brings back fond memories of how he used to take Molly canoeing on the Illinois River and serenade her. As he recalls it, he was a flash on the mandolin. Molly seems to recall that he took up the mandolin more to get out of paddling than in response to popular demand. Their young friend, Alice, whom Fibber volunteered to dazzle, didn't know his one and only tune.

"What's Pretty Redwing from?" she asked.

Said Molly, "It's strictly from 1910, Peoria and hunger."

Fibber played the same selection for everyone who dropped in, but each borrowed the mandolin, and the cads could play better than he could. Well, there's always one person who won't try to show him up as a chump - the loyal Molly. No, says Molly, she never did play much, and then only simple pieces, l,ke this. So she, too, borrows the the mandolin and makes Fibber look like a bum.

Another of their best-liked shows had Fibber yielding to a familiar post-war temptation. He stopped in an Army-surplus store to buy something as sensible as a tack hammer and came home with a big bargain, a sixteen-man life raft. Self-inflating it was and, sure enough, it filled the living room like a cow in a coupe. All of Fibber8s science couldn't make the monster deflate, but Molly solved it. She poked it one with a butcher knife.

In radio they keep anxious books on laughter and would measure the faintest grin if anyone knew how. The yak, or belly laugh, has always been the touchdown. Quinn and the Jordans think listeners prefer "a chuckle show." The chore they face equably each week is, of course, far more intricate than the show will sound - they will devise a story putting five to eight characters on stage and requiring sixty to 100 pretty funny ideas. "A continuous ripple of amusement" is what they are after. At times they have clocked ninety laughs in the half hour, which seemed to indicate they were keeping listeners in pretty steady good humor.

To get the "ripple of amusement," Quinn relies on lightly struck but telling notes, which are a speciality of the house. Repairing Doc Gamble's car - and switching car batteries in Fibber's favor - McGee was using tools borrowed from the cautious weatherman who appeared in the 1947 line-up, Foggy Williams. Foggy wanted them back because they were tools with a sentimental value - his "birthday hammer," his "anniversary pliers." That rang true to many a handy man around the house. Quinn also has a sure eye for the plausible but ridiculous postures people get into. Thus Fibber, trying to be a busy executive, was caught making paper airplanes because Molly had said he couldn't do it after Fibber said he didn't have time for that sort of nonsense.

The McGees have not always lived at 79 Wistful Vista, although that imaginary address of a hypothetical couple probably is better known than the address of the White House - 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. At first they were tourists, because the principal product advertised was car wax. When traveling wore thin, Quinn housed them with beautiful ease. They stopped in Wistful Vista, where a house was being raffled off. They won and have been there ever since. A second address ought to be equally famous. That is 14th and Oak. Whether Fibber is getting a haircut, negotiating a bank loan or pricing a neat power-driven crumb scraper at the Bon Ton Department Store, it is always at 14th and Oak. Wistful Vista would have to have the country's most vertical business district to house all the enterprises spotted at this corner. But nobody seems to notice, and Quinn and Producer Frank Pittman have filed it sadly under "confidential humor."

It would take skyscrapers, and you wouldn't find skyscrapers in

Wistful Vista, which is pretty clearly a small town, although with remarkably flexible borders. Listeners are never told just how big it is, and those who write in to ask are given the soft answer that turns away real information. The mayor drops in on the McGees, which isn't a regular thing in New York or Chicago, and McGee gossips with the telephone operator - "How's every little thing, Myrt?" That is small town color, but anything that might give the town a more specific size is shunned as assiduously as a real city might boast of it. That way, no listener's own picture of the town can be wrong. But there's no doubt what flag they hang out, if they can find it, on the fourth of what month. Thanks to some excellent observation, this is as American as the ice-cream soda you don't want, but eat because you're supposed to want to.

In Fibber's overstuffed closet, for example, there must be a mah-jongg set, Molly's old Empress Eugenie hat and maybe Fibber's old capping machine from the home-brew days. There would also be a three-legged bridge table, some gilded pussy willows, a couple of Rosa Bonheur horse pictures, the Christmas-tree ornaments that have been missing since 1940, Fibber's old plus-four golf knickers and the Spanish shawl they used to keep on the piano. And any day now, they intend to straighten that closet out.

Fibber and Molly keep getting praise from church groups for the purity of their entertainment. They journeyed back to the Middle West in April of last year to receive honorary LL.D.'s at the hands of the Reverend Walter Pax, of St. Joseph's College, in Collegeville, Indiana, for their "truly Christian philosophy" and the general "acceptability" of their comedy. They arrived with a roar of police motorcycles, and the college band played Pretty Redwing. There is never a blue line in their script, although the most noticeable thing about this purity is that it isn't noticeable; the two manage to keep their show clean without sounding like prigs, which they aren't, on stage or off. It pleases churchmen that they present such a picture of devoted home life. Fibber never so much as mentions another female, although there isn't much reason why he should: Molly is about the most amiable wife this side of never-never-land. If Fibber hopes to mystify, she's mystified; he he hopes to impress, she's impressed, supressing a giggle. He could launch a wild venture to grow self-peeling bananas or take the vacuum cleaner apart to invent a magnetic leaf rake and he'd never hear a word of criticism from this noble woman "You're a good kid," he tells he generously, and she certainly is. If Molly's velvet disposition could set a style, Quinn would be the American husband's best friend.

It's excellent propaganda, anyway, at which Quinn is a master. During the war it struck him that housewives must be pretty sick of hearing some movie queen with seven servants urge the public to save bacon drippings, while a radio star with four cars urged motorists to walk. Wartime sacrifices were petty, but they were also annoying. You were supposed to feel as exalted about saving your tires as Betsy Ross stitching up the first flag, and that wouldn't work. Quinn invented the most refreshing propaganda on the air. Fibber didn't preach. He groused. He was the man holding his car to thirty-five, only to have the trunk stove in by fast drivers. He was the man who hated to be the only chump not eating black-market meat. Fibber always saw the light, of course, but his candid griping doubtless expressed what thousands hesitated to say. Quinn built whole shows around these

themes and bested his own scores with them. He kept on even after the night he got home from a show on gasoline rationing to find his own application for extra gas - so he could work free for the Office of War Information - had been rejected. In one of these shows Quinn kidded the big rush to stock up, simply because something or other was about to be rationed. An inside tip ran through Wistful Vista. Crafty souls hurried out to beat the dead line without giving it a second thought. The tip was "They're freezing trusses at midnight."

Every now and then this comedy show essays an outright piece of public servie. The lock-your-car campaign was a successful venture of this sort. William N. Connolly, Johnson's advertising manager in Racine, fell to talking with a reform school superintendent about young car thieves. The superintendent was getting more and more boys for this offense, and a shocking percentage of the car thieves was under eighteen. One thing the superintendent said impressed Connolly - most of the cars were easy to steal because the owners left the keys in them. Perhaps, said Connolly, pending more profound decisions on juvenile delinquency, it might be intelligent to remove the keys. This amoral and unsentimental approach delighted Quinn, who based a show on the idea. The idea of using a nickel's worth of simple mechanics to combat a grave problem won wide applause.

The McGees now bask in almost unqualified approval, but there is an occasional beef, just to keep things interesting. Doc Gamble remarked that as an Army surgeon he learned to stand "with my chest out, my stomach in and my mind closed." Those few officers who would be stuffy enough to complain all happened to be listening in, and protested. Other serious souls get disturbed over the possibility that Fibber may be setting an example of happy indolence because he doesn't have a job. He doesn't, of course; he is neither clerk, factory hand, salesman, millwright nor part-time petunia potter. This is because to give him a specific vocation would restrict the action. Inquirers are told that the imaginary Fibber is a natural-born helper-outer who will step in whenever needed. This seems to satisfy them. The real Fibber, of course, works with great regularity and much profit. When not panning that radio gold or raising feeders on his ranch, he has other ventures, including one he might describe in one of his alliterative anecdotes: he is the busy big shot of a bustling bottling business.

No one with a share in this radio ten-strike, for which the sponsor probably lays out $14,000 a week, seizes the opportunity to live high, wide and handsome. The Jordans, who have known hard times, might dwell in one of those dazzling white palaces to which tourists in Beverly Hills lift sunburned eyes. They don't; they live in an old five-room ranch house which they have expanded, with a certain caution, to seven. While the work was being done - Jordan seems to have been a little overconfident, like Fibber, about this - they lived partly in the old house, partly in a trailer parked beside it. Last summer they never did get around to deciding which of several plushy vacations to take, and ended up staying mostly at home. Jordan could at least buy a gold-plated washing machine in honor of the days when nobody would buy washing machines from him, but he doesn't. As for Quinn, he has a plane, a collection of water colors and a stable, which is a little more like what is expected. But it is a stable of one horse, which seems to reflect the Grand Rapids conservatism.

When, in 1943, the show hit the highest Crossley ever touched by a commercial program, it crowned many years of hard work. The Jordans had been in show business thirty years - from Jim's first job as a singer - when their show won last year's top comedy rating. Probably only salmon, which will battle waterfalls and flop laboriously up long fish ladders in their strange journey to spawning grounds, understand the obsession that drives show people. Ambition must induce a partial anesthesia, for entertainers on the way up have to put up with food, hotels and trains that could kill a Chinese irregular. Success ought to be correspondingly pleasant, after that. But the Jordans don't let it throw them. They seem to keep a famous old vaudeville line in mind, like a sampler on the wall. Not a line audiences heard, but one famous in the dressing rooms backstage. It is a great antidote for vanity - "Don't send out your laundry."

Editors' Note - This is the second of two articles by Mr. Yoder.

From THE SATURDAY EVENING POST - April 16, 1949

Fibber McGee and Molly. Front: Jim and Marian Jordan. Back: Bill Thompson (Wallace Wimple) and Arthur Q. Bryan (Doc Gamble).

OLD AGE? "TAIN'T FUNNY McGEE"

By Al Martinez
Los Angeles Times

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif.--It is not the house at 79 Wistful Vista, but a sprawling elegant home overlooking a canyon.

And yet inside, his familiar voice an echo of the past, sits Fibber McGee, comfortable with his 85 years, easy with the memories.

His name is Jim Jordan and once, with patient Molly, he occupied for millions of radio listeners the funny home with the crowded closet on a street that meant Sad View.

They were Fibber McGee and Molly from 1935 to 1952.

Anyone shouldering a few years probably recalls the befuddled, tale-telling Fibber and the no-nonsense wife who could puncture his jokes with a tart "Tain't funny, McGee."

They came into our homes with Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, Sis, the Old Timer, Beulah, Mayor LaTrivia and Wallace Wimple, invariably accompanied by "Sweety-Face, my big fat wife."

"Fibber McGee and Molly" was a gentle, down-home show at a time when comedy was not necessarily satire.

"We just tried to make people laugh," Jordan said. "Maybe we were funny and maybe we weren't, but it doesn't matter now. That was long ago and far away."

He is a small man from Peoria, Ill., barely 5-feet-6. His voice retains the lilt of the old Tuesday night show, but age has blurred his ability to rattle out Fibber's anguished, frustrated "Dat-rat the dad-ratted...

"I've had a heart problem, a hernia operation, a bladder infection and antibiotics make me sicker'n a dog. What do you expect?"

Jordan was Fibber and his wife, Marian was Molly, as well as the voices of other characters on the half-hour show. They had been married 42 years when she died in 1961.

And when she died, so did the magic at 79 Wistful Vista.

"We were very close," the old man said, a quaver to his voice. "She had cancer and they gave her 12 months to live. I think she lived 13. Thirteen? Yes, well, 13 or something like that. I don't always remember..."

While they lasted, they were $7,000-a-week stars in a medium that also produced Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Burns and Allen, Red Skelton and Edgar Bergen.

Many of them worked together at the old NBC studios at Hollywood and Vine, when Tuesday night captured the attention of the nation,

in the days before market surveys and audience participation tests.

"I used to see Burns every week," Jordan said in a sitting room of the spacious home he shares with his second wife, Gretchen. They occupy an acre of hilltop, up a winding and tree-shaded canyon road.

"We'd get our haircuts at the same time from a barber on Highland Avenue, but then George changed times."

Jordan shrugged. "Well, you know how those things happen." Pause. "We never reminisced anyhow. No one cares about the old days. That's all gone, you know? Gone forever."

Not quite. Old tapes played on late-night radio have piqued the interest of a whole new generation of "Fibber McGee and Molly" fans.

Twelve-year-olds write him fan letters, because the Fibber-Molly humor was non-threatening, and teen-agers write fan letters because they perceive a humanity from Wistful Vista that Archie Bunker never had.

"It's funny," Jordan said, forced to confront the new interest, "but I find suddenly I'm getting maybe a couple letters a day."

"They keep asking for my picture, because they were raised on television and they're used to seeing things. You don't see things on radio. They wanna know what me and Molly look like."

The Jordans came to radio in 1925 at Chicago's WFNR as part of a repertory company that produced the Smith Family and then a show called "The Smackout."

Jordan played a bucolic old man ("Seems I've always played bucolic old men...") who operated a general store stocked with everything imaginable.

"Trouble was he could never find anything," Jordan said, "and he'd always say, 'Guess I'm smack outa that.'"

The Johnson Wax Co. picked them up as Fibber McGee and Molly, and what Jordan likes to call "the lovable old liar" and his wife quickly became an American tradition.

"You're a hard man, McGee" was absorbed into the national lexicon. So was the Old Timer's response to a Fibber story, "That's purty good, Johnny, but that ain't the way I heerd it..."

And there was the closet, too.

"We were always looking for a running dingus, a gag," Jordan said. He stares at 700 bound scripts from the old Fibber show, as though staring will revive fluttering memories.

"Oh, we tried all kinds of things to keep a gag going but nothing worked. Then a writer did a show about how Fibber was slovenly and when he opened a hall closet door, everything fell out."

"That was it. That was our dingus. That was our running gag."

It became a weekly occurrence, one of the most familiar sounds in radio. Fibber would open the closet to Molly's horror and everything he had ever saved would crash to the hall floor, ending with a tinkly bell.

The sound-effects people made it a classic moment.

"In the last year or so we never did the closet gag too much," Jordan said. "But if anybody remembers anything at all, that's it, the damned closet."

Fibber was a labor of love for Jordan as Molly was for his beloved Marian.

"We tried to keep things easy-going," he said. "We took our time and never ran around and tore our hair and that kind of crap."

"Everything was set to go about 2 o'clock on the afternoon of the show and we didn't even look at the script until a half-hour before we went on the air."

There were bloopers, Jordan admits, because it was a live show and there was no second time around if you blew a line.

He thinks for a moment. "I keep trying to remember what some of those bloopers were but they won't come back. Hell, I can't remember anything anymore."

"If I'm supposed to be somewhere tomorrow I've got to write it on every mirror in the house."

Jordan stays in touch with Red Skelton from the old days and once in a while sees Bob Hope. If George Burns changes his haircut time, he'll see him again, too.

Unlike them, Jordan has no interest in appearing in public again, He stays home and watches television mostly and reads a little.

He owns no tapes of the Fibber shows but does have some 78 recordings, which he never plays. "The last show I heard," he said, "was the last one I did."

"Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed it all. I made money and invested and I'm comfortable. Not rich, but OK."

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