



RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION OF
COLORADO

Volume 34, Number 6

June, 2009

THE RAILROAD HOUR: A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE ON THE MUSICAL RADIO PROGRAM by Martin Grams Jr. and Gerald Wilson

“Entertainment for all, for every member of the family – the humming, strumming, dancing tunes of the recent musical shows. For Mother and Dad – happy reminders of the shows they saw ‘only yesterday.’ And also, occasionally, one of the great and everlasting triumphs that go ‘way back before then.” This was how the Association of American Railroads described their product known as *The Railroad Hour*, in their annual publicity pamphlets. For 45 minutes every Monday night, over the American Broadcasting Company’s national network, the American Railroads presented, for listener enjoyment, one after another of the world’s great musical comedies and operettas ... the top-rated successes whose names had been spelled-out in the blazing lights on both sides of Broadway. Complete with music and words, the program offered famed headliners of the stage, screen and radio taking the leading roles.

Highly favored by Joseph McConnell, President of the National Broadcasting Company and William T. Faricy, President of the Association of American Railroads, *The Railroad Hour* competed against such radio programs as CBS’ high-rated *Suspense* and *The Falcon* in the same weekly time slot. The

program lasted a total of 299 broadcasts over a span of six broadcast seasons – an accomplishment some would consider impossible by today’s broadcasting standards should the program be dramatized on television.

Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee were masters of the art of adapting stage musicals to the format of radio programs. Their skill as adapters and their ability to create original works had established the two in the field of radio and television writing. They received very little awards (if any) for their work on *The Railroad Hour* with which they were

heavily involved. Although the program received recognition a number of times, the creative men behind the development of the scripts received very little recognition.

Jerome Lawrence was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on July 14, 1915. Son of a printer, Samuel Lawrence,

Sarah Rogen Lawrence (a poet), the young Lawrence was exposed to the education of reading and writing, and took drama courses in high school. As a teenager, Lawrence’s parents arranged to have him study writing with playwright and director Eugene C. Davis.

After graduating from Glenville High School in Cleveland in 1933, he attended The Ohio State University where he studied with playwrights Harlan Hatcher, Herman Miller, and Robert Newdick. Lawrence graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Ohio State in 1937. In the brief year after



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34th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention; Oct 22 – 25, 2009 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; Info; Jay Hickerson, 27436 Desert Rose Ct, Leesburg, FL 34748 (352) 727-6731, JayHick@aol.com, or web site <http://www.fotr.net>

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graduating, Lawrence worked as a journalist, reporter and telegraph operator for the *Wilmington (Ohio) News-Journal* and *New Lexington (Ohio) Daily News* before heading to California. There, he entered graduate school at UCLA while working at Beverly Hills radio station KMPC as a continuity editor. There, he wrote and directed the radio series *Opened by Mistake*.

Robert E. Lee was born October 15, 1918 in Elyria, Ohio, just 25 miles from Cleveland where Jerome Lawrence was born. He was the only child of Claire Melvin Lee, a toolmaker for Garford Manufacturing (a manufacturer of automobile and bicycle parts) and Elvira Taft Lee (a school teacher). In 1934 he went to study at Northwestern University in Chicago. In 1935, he transferred to Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio, where he majored in astronomy and worked as a technician at Perkins Observatory. "I gave up my studies with the world's third largest telescope to write for more terrestrial stars," Lee said in a 1951 interview with the *Columbus Dispatch*.

In 1937, Lee left behind higher education and his position at the observatory for a director's position at radio station WHK-WCLE in Cleveland; there, he also attended Western Reserve University for one year. He was a part-time announcer for WHKC, WOSU and WCOL radio. At SGAR, he wrote scripts for the radio series *Empire Builders*. At WGAR in Cleveland, he wrote for radio's *Flashbacks*. But in 1938, Lee again left school for work, this time for a job at the Young and Rubicam advertising agency in New York City. At Young and Rubicam, he wrote and produced some of radio's top shows including *March of Time*, *Kate Smith Hour*, *Screen Guild Theater* (possibly 1946), *We the People*, *Aldrich Family* and a number of soap operas and quiz shows.

In 1939, while relaxing in a Madison Avenue bar, Robert E. Lee met Jerome Lawrence, who was on assignment in New York. Knowing of each other's work, (Lawrence was a writer for *A Date with Judy* and Lee wrote for *Meet Corliss Archer* where he met and later married the star of the program, Janet Waldo), the pair quickly decided to quit their respective jobs and form a freelance writing partnership. Their first play, *Laugh, God!* was published in 1939 but they didn't form an official partnership until January 23, 1942, at the beginning of their tours of duty in the U.S. Army.

Having enlisted in the Army following America's entry into World War II, the mighty duo

worked as part of a group that established the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), where they produced patriotic Army and Navy programs for D-Day, VE-Day and VJ-Day. They wrote numerous scripts for *Yarns for Yanks*, *Command Performance* and *Mail Call*, among others. At the height of the World War II in 1945, there were about three hundred radio stations under the AFRS. Lawrence also served as an AFRS correspondent in North Africa and Italy, was promoted to staff sergeant, and earned a battle star from the secretary of war.

By the time they both completed their terms of service in 1945, they were continuing to write and produce radio programs for CBS, including *The Columbia Workshop*. Then came *The Railroad Hour*. The career of Gordon MacRae, the young baritone star of *The Railroad Hour*, is a saga of America, the story of a youth who knew what he wanted and was able to get it because his abilities had the encouragement and guidance of understanding parents and the climate of freedom in which to grow.



MacRae was born in East Orange, New Jersey. In his childhood he moved with his parents to Buffalo, and later to Syracuse, New York. There the youngster became locally famous for his acting, singing and mimicking talents. He participated wholeheartedly in school dramatics, operettas and musical comedies. The debating society and athletics also claimed his attention, and he won his letter in several sports.

The field that riveted MacRae's interest was acting and singing. While attending Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, he played leading roles in several productions and helped organize a group of fellow students for personal appearances

throughout New England. In his school days MacRae toured England, France, Germany, Switzerland and Holland. Time and again that experience proved of value to him in interpreting the assorted European characters he portrayed in operettas and musical comedies such as those dramatized on *The Railroad Hour*.

At nineteen, Gordon won a magazine talent contest. The prize was a two weeks' engagement in a show at the New York World's Fair. He then joined the Millpond Players at Roslyn, Long Island. After a brief stay, he got a job as a page boy at the NBC Studios in New York. There, Horace Heidt, the noted orchestra leader, offered him a tryout. Gordon accepted, and toured the country with Heidt's Orchestra. While in Cleveland, Ohio, he married Sheila Stephens, whom he had met when she was a star of the Millpond Players.

In 1942, Gordon made his stage debut in the Broadway hit *Junior Miss*. When the show closed, he joined the aviation cadets, advancing from private to first lieutenant in the air branch. Returning to civilian life in 1945, Gordon landed a role as the romantic juvenile in *Three to Make Ready*. By this time he was much in demand as a singer. In 1947 he was put under contract by Warner Brothers and Capitol Records.

Then in 1948 came the greatest opportunity of all when Gordon was selected for the top role in the show that millions of Americans heard every Monday evening – *The Railroad Hour*. Intensely serious about his work, Gordon was casual, relaxed and informal behind the microphone. He trusted people implicitly, and people liked him instinctively. The Association of American Railroads utilized the advertising agency Benton and Bowles to produce the commercials, and it was one of their executive's daughters hearing MacRae on NBC's *Teentimers Club* program that led to him getting the job as lead vocalist and star of *The Railroad Hour*. *

Gordon MacRae was "a pleasure to work with" in the view of *The Railroad Hour* musical director Carmen Dragon, according to MacRae biographer Bruce Leiby. "He (MacRae) could read vocal parts right off the bat," Dragon said, explaining how the show could produce a new musical every week. The conductor, with watch in hand, counted out the seconds as he prepared to sing out "All Aboard" and give the signal to start the train. In the broadcasting studio the director awaited the exact second to signal that the program was on the air.

Railroading and radio had one thing in common – they operated on exact time schedules. Without uniformity of time over wide areas, chaos and confusion would be the result. Radio was a comparatively recent development, but railroads carried on through half a century when there were hundreds of local times in the United States and when there were nearly one hundred different time standards by which railway trains were operated. At high noon on November 18, 1883, after months of preparation, railroads throughout the United States abolished local times and adopted a new system known as Standard Time. Under this system, the country was divided into four time zones – Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific – with an hour's difference between each. The United States Government, as well as cities and towns throughout America, cooperated in putting the new system into effect, and within a few years Standard Time, patterned after the American railroad plan, had spread throughout the world.

During the 30-minute period *The Railroad Hour* was on the air, more than 600 passenger and freight trains departed from their starting terminals and more than 600 arrived at their destinations. In each half-hour period, day or night, the railroads received for shipment around 2,100 carloads of freight and delivered the same number of carloads of freight to destinations. They performed the equivalent of transporting 30 million tons of freight one mile and 2 million passengers one mile. They received for handling between 8,000 and 9,000 express shipments and 664,000 pounds of United States mail. For each 30-minute period of the day and night (equal to the time the *Railroad Hour* was on the air), the railroads paid out \$50,000 for federal, state and local taxes; more than \$100,000 for fuel, materials and supplies; and more than \$250,000 in wages.

Among the millions who listened to Gordon MacRae and his supporting cast on *The Railroad Hour* each Monday evening was the daughter of Victor Herbert, the world-famous composer whose operettas had been among the most widely-acclaimed productions on *The Railroad Hour*. The composer's daughter, Mrs. Robert Bartlett, who resided in New York City, had written the Association of American Railroads commending Gordon MacRae and other stars for their excellent work and expressing her great interest in the programs.



Gordon MacRae with guest singing star Dinah Shore

The Railroad Hour was broadcast from the studios of the National Broadcasting Company in Hollywood, California. The program was heard regularly over 170 stations of the NBC network. According to an annual report issued by the Association of American Railroads that it was estimated that the program was heard by more than four million family groups. "Musical shows with a dramatic continuity are enjoyed by persons of all ages, especially when the leading roles are portrayed by outstanding artists. All members of the family, as well as school, church and club groups, find *The Railroad Hour* wholesome, dignified and inspiring entertainment," quoted Van Hartesveldt.

So why is the program called the Railroad "Hour" when it was on the air only thirty minutes? In radio, the term "hour" was indicative of the time of the beginning of the broadcast, rather than the number of minutes the program was on the air. Also odd was the fact that the program ran a mere 45 minutes instead of 30 or 60 during the opening months. During its half-hour on the air, *The Railroad Hour* gave its' listeners 25 minutes of entertainment. About two-and-a-half minutes were given to the railroad message. The remaining time was required for opening and closing announcements and station identifications.

The Railroad Hour did not broadcast any operas, contrary to popular belief, and reference guides. The producers of the series presented operettas and musicals, leaving the operas for other programs, namely *The Metropolitan Opera* broadcasts. So what is the difference between opera and operetta? An opera is an art form consisting of a dramatic stage performance set to music, and which the dialogue is sung, rather than spoken. An operetta

was a musical performance where the conversations are "talked" and the expressive moments are set in song.

One question came up during a standard question and answer session with the Association of American Railroads: "Are recordings of *The Railroad Hour* broadcasts available?" The formal answer from the Association was that copyright restrictions did not permit the producer of *The Railroad Hour* to make any recordings of the musical program. However, recordings of many of the song hits heard were available at music stores. This of course, was the formal public statement. In reality, every broadcast of *The Railroad Hour* was recorded and transcribed. Numerous copies were made for both legal and historical purposes. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, who wrote the majority of the scripts, actually kept a copy of almost every broadcast for their personal collection. These discs were later donated to the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts located at Lincoln Center in New York City. The Library of Congress presently stores a copy of all the discs in their archives. Dealers and collectors specializing in recordings from the "Golden Age of Radio" have come across similar depositories over the years and thankfully, more than half of the broadcasts are presently available from dealers nationwide. Marvin Miller, the announcer for *The Railroad Hour*, saved a few of the scripts, which were later donated to the Thousand Oaks Library in California.

A limited number of free admission tickets for the public were available for each *Railroad Hour* broadcast. Tickets could be obtained by writing to the Association of American Railroads, Transportation Building, located in Washington, D.C., or by writing to the National Broadcasting Company in Hollywood, California. The Applicant was required to give the date for which the tickets were desired and the number of persons in the party. Because of the demand for tickets (especially since they were free), it was publicly advised to request them several weeks in advance of the broadcast.

From the 1948 annual report of the Association of American Railroads:

"Beginning on October 4, 1948, the AAR produced and presented a weekly coast-to-coast radio program entitled 'The Railroad Hour.' Broadcast on Monday evenings, the program has presented condensed versions of outstanding musical comedies and light operas with Gordon

MacRae as singing host and master of ceremonies and featuring top-name guest stars."

AAR President William T. Faricy delivered a message on the show's premiere episode, expressing his pride and joy for the presentations that are planned, and the hope that the radio listeners would tune in each week for future presentations. The premiere broadcast featured Jane Powell and Dinah Shore in the cast. In *Good News*, the plot about a football hero who has to pass an important exam so he can play in the big game, and please the girl he loves, inspired a slew of imitations on stage and screen. But none could match the infectious score composed by Ray Henderson with lyrics by Buddy Desylva and Lew Brown. Their dance-happy songs included "The Best Things in Life are Free" and "The Varsity Drag," a Charleston-style dance number that became an international craze. The libretto was a fairly loose affair, allowing members of the cast to offer audience pleasing vaudeville-style specialties. The author of the radio adaptation was none other than Ed Gardner, creator and star of the situation comedy, *Duffy's Tavern*. This would be his first and only contribution for *The Railroad Hour*.

The broadcast of April 25, 1949 marked the 30th broadcast of the series, and the final episode to be broadcast in a 45-minute time slot. Beginning with the broadcast of May 2, 1949, the program's format shrunk to a 30-minute time slot, where it would remain for the rest of the series. A few misconceptions have been made over the years regarding the length of these broadcasts. One reference cited *The Railroad Hour* as a full hour, and that the 45-minute recordings are "edited" from the hour-long format. This is simply not true. Another reference cited *The Railroad Hour* of being a 45-minute program during the entire run, and that all the 30-minute recordings are "edited." This is also untrue.

Throughout the summer of 1949, *The Railroad Hour* featured a salute to various composers and their best works, with a behind-the-scenes story of how they created the popular musicals with which they are often associated. The series was actually subtitled *The Railroad Summer Show*. John Rarick replaced Carmen Dragon as the musical conductor for this summer series, and would be replaced by Dragon afterwards. (Dragon would then remain with the series till the very end.)

The October 5, 1949 issue of *Variety* reviewed the second season opener:

"The Railroad Hour is back on the air with its winter season of operettas and musical comedies, to add a lush, melodious half-hour of better-grade American music to Monday evening's listening. With first-rate artists, good supporting choral and instrumental ensemble, and top direction and production, airer has flavor and appeal.

"Monday's preem was the perennial favorite, 'Show Boat.' Done in dialog as well as song, the Hammerstein-Kern musical retained all of its nostalgic charm and rich melody. Gordon MacRae, who was sort of emcee as well as male singing lead, acquitted himself quite creditably, with the Met's Dorothy Kirsten and Lucille Norman giving admirable support. The chorus under the direction of Norman Luboff, and orchestra under Carmen Dragon added to the smooth proceedings."

For the holiday season, *The Railroad Hour* offered a special presentation every year for the radio audience. The broadcast of December 26, 1949 was no exception. Through special arrangement with Walt Disney Studios, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was dramatized, including the music from the 1937 animated movie of the same name. The animated movie premiered Christmas of 1937, so *The Railroad Hour* presentation was about 13 years after the premiere! Its' single nomination was for Best Music Score.

During the 1950 holiday broadcast, William T. Faricy, president of the Association of American Railroads made a quick guest appearance to broadcast a special message personally:

"Christmas is the season when men and women turn from strife and struggle toward the blessings of peace and the fellowship which some day will bring all men together as friends. This is the goal which men have sought for almost two thousand years – which, no doubt, they will continue to seek for years yet to come. No man, no institution, no people alone can achieve this long sought goal – but every man, every institution, every people can contribute to the fulfillment of the promise of the first Christmas – Peace on Earth, Good Will To Men. "The heart of that seeking for peace and good will is in the family – an institution which symbolizes the family of mankind. So Christmas, the festival of peace, is the great family festival, celebrated in the homes where families gather."

"To all such gatherings who might be listening tonight, the family of the Railroad Hour – a family made up not only of those who produce our weekly broadcasts, but also the railroad companies which sponsor them, the million people who as small as stockholders own the railroads and the million and a quarter men and women who work for them – The Railroad Hour family says to you and your family, 'Thank you for joining our Christmas party tonight – and in your own holiday season, and in the new year to come, may you find joy, prosperity and, above all, peace!'"

This was the first of what would become an annual tradition of musical offerings for the holiday season, with festive and religious music, interlaced with comical tones of festive celebration, and a personal message given personally by Faricy. So many listeners wrote in to express their appreciation of the *Railroad Hour*'s "Christmas Party" that the producers repeated this tradition every year after.

Beginning with the broadcast of July 2, 1951, *The Railroad Hour* premiered a summer season of original musicals created by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, adapted from a variety of sources ranging from poems to biographies. With their knowledge of literature (especially having scripted all of the *Favorite Story* radio dramas), Lawrence and Lee worked alongside Carmen Dragon to present original musical presentations (though the music was not so much original as Irish folk songs and American Ballads made up a large percentage of the vocal music).

Among the original musicals presented throughout the summer and future presentations of *The Railroad Hour* were the July 9, 1951 broadcast was entitled "Casey at the Bat," based on the immortal Ernest L. Thayer poem of the same name. Such classics as "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," "The Band Played On" and "In the Good Old Summertime" were sung during the drama. A few years before, on June 3, 1947, Lawrence and Lee wrote a non-musical presentation of the same name, based on the same poem, for ZIV's *Favorite Story*.

Other such examples . . .

The July 23, 1951 presentation of *The Railroad Hour* was entitled "Roaring Camp," based on the Bret Harte story of the same name. Lawrence and Lee had written a non-musical script dated September 3, 1946 for *Favorite Story*, entitled "The Luck of Roaring Camp."

The August 27, 1951 presentation of *The Railroad Hour* was entitled "Danny Freel," adapted from an Irish folk tale. Lawrence and Lee had written a non-musical script dated March 11, 1947, for *Favorite Story*, entitled "Jamie Freel."

The July 14, 1952 presentation of *The Railroad Hour* was entitled "The Necklace," based on the Guy de Maupassant story of the same name. Lawrence and Lee had written a non-musical script dated October 7, 1947 for *Favorite Story*.

The August 11, 1952 presentation of *The Railroad Hour* was entitled "The Brownings." Lawrence and Lee had written a non-musical script based on the same material dated February 10, 1948 for *Favorite Story*.

The June 29, 1953 presentation of *The Railroad Hour* was entitled "The Man Without a Country," based on the Edward Everett Hale story of the same name. Lawrence and Lee had written a non-musical script dated May 27, 1947 for *Favorite Story*.

* *Teentimers Club* was broadcast August 25, 1945 to August 16, 1947 on NBC and March 13, 1948 to December 25, 1948 on Mutual. The series was known as *Teentimers Canteen* until the broadcast of November 24, 1945 when it changed to *Teentimers Club*.

(To be Continued)

Farewell, "Johnny"

By Paul Barringer



Mickey Carroll died May 7, 2009 at the age of 89.

The name Mickey Carroll may not sound familiar to many of you OTR listeners. Mickey Carroll did many of the Phillip Morris live radio ads we all remember so well. He also appeared on radio shows with George Burns, Gracie Allen, Jack Benny and Al Jolson.

But most of you may better know him as the Town Crier with The Munchkins... in the 1939 film "The Wizard of Oz" where he also marched as a "Munchkin Soldier" and was the candy-striped "Fiddler" who escorted the movie's Dorothy Gale, (played by Judy Garland) down the yellow brick road toward Emerald City. Mikey was one of the last surviving Munchkins from the film.

Carroll died in his sleep at the home of his caretaker in suburban Crestwood. Crestwood is a city in St. Louis County, Missouri, part of the area known as Greater St. Louis. He had heart problems and received a pacemaker in February. Until January, he had lived in his own home in suburban Bel-Nor

In November 2007, Carroll and six other surviving Munchkins received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

As is customary with the management of our media libraries, we will not have new catalog entries for the month of June. This gives us a chance to catch up on copying, refreshing, indexing and in general tend to all the necessary activities that keep our libraries and catalogs in tip-top shape.

So at this time, from the staff of RWUN and the RHAC Board and librarians, let me wish all the dads, and of course all the couples who have chosen this traditional month to marry, the very best for health and happiness.



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