



THE RAILROAD HOUR: A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE ON THE MUSICAL RADIO PROGRAM (Cont.)

by Martin Grams Jr. and Gerald Wilson

The June 4, 1952 issue of *Variety* reviewed the premiere of the new summer season:

"*The Railroad Hour* launched its summer format Monday with a trifle that can be properly termed as hot weather fare. It was the series' second seasonal attempt at offering original plays with music (during the cold weather months *The Railroad Hour*, which, incidentally only runs 30 minutes, rehashes old music comedies and operettas) and it'll probably meet with so-so success. It's pleasant if not inspiring and won't make anybody angry.

"Opening show, tagged 'The Minstrel Boy,' highlighted the life of Irish songwriter Tom Moore. Script, penned by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, was a lightweight for song interjection and the Irish airs came in often enough to make the stanza quietly appealing. "Gordon MacRae got lost in a heavy Irish brogue in essaying the role of Moore. He found himself, however, in the song assignments which were belted out with charm. Dorothy Warenskjold, who played the part of Mrs. Moore, was o.k. in the thesping chore and excellent in the warbling department. J.M. Kerrigan lent an authentic aural note as the yarn's narrator. "Such tunes as 'The Minstrel Boy to the

War is Gone,' "'Tis The Last Rose of Summer' and 'Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms' were tastefully presented by musical director Carmen Dragon."

Regrettably, the final two seasons of *The Railroad Hour* featured very little highlights worth mentioning compared to the program's first season. Repeat performances of musicals performed previously on the show became more common towards the end of the program's run. In fact, of the 38 episodes broadcast during the program's final season, 28 were repeats. If it was not for the *Variety* reviews and varied summer presentations, dividing the episodes by season for the episode guide would otherwise be difficult.



Jerome Lawrence

Among the highlights was the broadcast of May 14, 1951, which featured an adaptation of Sigmund Romberg's *Nina Rosa*. Both Gordon MacRae and Marvin Miller have trouble reading their scripts at the conclusion of the program. The October 15, 1951 broadcast featured an adaptation of the opera *Der Markt von Richmond*. Lucille Norman and Gordon MacRae adlib a few jokes on the air, after Norman accidentally makes a blooper, mispronouncing the word "guest."

For the December 24, 1951 broadcast, *The Railroad Hour* presented an original musical based on Oscar Wilde's classic story, *The Happy Prince*. This same story was dramatized on other radio anthologies such as *The Family Theater*, but not as a musical.

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

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July, 2009

The president of the American Association of Railroads, William T. Faricy, gave a Christmas message via remote from Washington, D.C.

The broadcast of April 21, 1952 featured an adaptation of Jacanowski and Paulton's operetta *Erminie*. This broadcast had an impressive railroad connection as guest Nell Tangeman, who played the title role of Erminie, was the daughter of a real-life railroad engineer.

The broadcast of August 18, 1952 featured an original musical drama entitled "Miss Cinderella," based on the classic fairy tale about the young woman who falls in love with a Prince, but is forced to hide her identity because of her status in her home. Actress Verna Felton reprised the role of the Fairy Godmother in the radio drama, the same role she voiced in the Walt Disney animated movie *Cinderella*, two years before in 1950.

For the May 3, 1954 broadcast, *The Railroad Hour* presented an original musical entitled *Birthday*, drafted by Lawrence and Lee. This radio drama was a portrait of what happens to a young man in Manhattan on the day his first child is born. Throughout the day, from when he first delivers his wife to the hospital, through the period of waiting and wandering around Central Park dreaming about the future, he dreams of his wife, singing everywhere he looks, and then joins his wife to make this the greatest day of their lives – closing with his first look at their new son. This musical was in homage to Gordon MacRae, whose wife had very recently given birth to a new baby boy, Robert Bruce.

The final broadcast of *The Railroad Hour* was on June 21, 1954. The reason for the program's termination remains unknown, and the Association of American Railroad's Annual Report of 1954 sheds very little light except for a brief mention: "The Railroad Hour, consisting primarily of condensations of outstanding operettas and other musical shows, was presented in 1954 for a 30-minute period each Monday night over the full network of the National Broadcasting Company through June 21, 1954, when the program was discontinued."

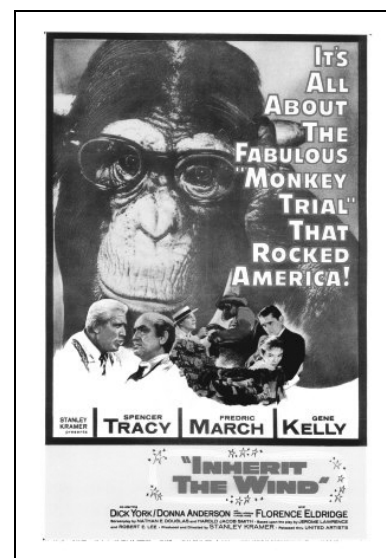
During the early 1950s, the Armed Forces Radio Service offered rebroadcasts of radio dramas for troops stationed overseas. Many of the *Railroad Hour* presentations were rebroadcast, as part of the network's *Showtime* line-up. Most references to the Association of American Railroads were deleted from the rebroadcasts, as sponsorship was often

disregarded as important when it came to entertaining the troops. Shortly after, the AFRS featured rebroadcasts of *The Railroad Hour* under a new name, *The Gordon MacRae Show*, using the song "I Know That You Know" from MacRae's film *Tea for Two* as the theme. Many of these recordings circulate among collector catalogs.*

Throughout their careers, Lawrence and Lee continued to write and produce radio programs for CBS. They co-wrote radio plays including *The Unexpected* (1951), *Song of Norway* (1957), *Shangri-La* (1960), a radio version of *Inherit the Wind* (1965), and *Lincoln the Unwilling Warrior* (1974).

In 1954, one of Lawrence and Lee's original one-act operas, *Annie Laurie*, was published by Harms, Inc., who specialized in publishing music in various forms across the country. The musical was adapted from Lawrence and Lee's original *Railroad Hour* script. For the next two years, Harms, Inc. published two more original musicals, *Roaring Camp* (1955) and *Familiar Strangers* (1956), also previous *Railroad Hour* originals.

Shortly before *The Railroad Hour* premiered, Lawrence and Lee's first Broadway show, *Look Ma, I'm Dancin'!*, opened at the Adelphi Theatre on January 29, 1948. The musical was a hit in many aspects, and critics approved favorably. Their second play, *Inherit the Wind*, opened at the National Theatre in New York on April 21, 1955, less than a year after *The Railroad Hour* went off the air. This play, not a musical, established Lawrence and Lee in the American theatre.



Lawrence and Lee's careers as playwrights reached new heights in with the production of *Inherit the Wind*, a fictionalized account of the

famous “Monkey Trial,” in which a young school teacher named Scopes was tried in the 1920s for teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution. Drawing from actual people involved in the experience, including prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, Lawrence and Lee brought to the stage what a *Newsweek* reviewer called “one of the best serious dramas to hit Broadway and one of the best rounded.” *Inherit the Wind* enjoyed a three-year run of 805 performances on Broadway, and has since been translated into 35 languages.



Inherit the Wind earned Lawrence and Lee a number of awards the first year after its Broadway run, including the Donaldson Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award and The Variety New York Drama Critics Poll Award. It also was nominated for a Tony® Award. Lawrence and Lee’s next success was *Auntie Mame*, which opened in New York in 1956. The play and its musical adaptation, *Mame*, are quite different from *Inherit the Wind*. Lighter and less intent on social comment, *Auntie Mame* and *Mame* were among the longest running productions in Broadway history, lasting 639 and 1,508 performances respectively.

The continued contributions of Lawrence and Lee to American literature, to the craft of playwriting, and to the promotion of American professional and academic theatre are significant. As Alan Woods writes in *The Selected Plays of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee*, “Their major achievement lies in their passionate belief that the theatre must be of consequence and must deal with ideas and issues of social significance. Their plays demonstrate how playwrights can write of major issues with passion, wit, and grace.” (Selected Plays, xxii-xxiii)

Over the decades following *The Railroad Hour*, both writers taught frequently, sharing their

expertise and mentoring novice playwrights at the University of California (Los Angeles), the University of Southern California, the Ohio State University, New York University, and Baylor University. They were co-founders of the American Playwrights Theatre, established to enable work by established playwrights to be produced outside of New York.

Lawrence and Lee co-founded the Margo Jones Award as a memorial to Margo Jones who gave a number of American playwrights, including themselves, productions that were important to the development of their careers. Originally established to honor regional theatres, in 1991 the award was changed to honor “that citizen-of-the-theatre who has demonstrated a significant impact, understanding and affirmation of the craft of playwriting, with a lifetime commitment to the encouragement of the living theatre everywhere.”

Lawrence and Lee were inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1990. That same year, they were named Fellows in the College of Fellows of the American Theatre at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Lawrence suffered a great tragedy in 1993 when firestorms blazed through California, leveling his Malibu home. Many signed first edition books by friends such as Tennessee Williams, Henry Miller, Dorothy Parker and Somerset Maugham were lost, as were original art works by Pablo Picasso, Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse, Marc Chagall, and Roy Lichtenstein.

On July 8, 1994, Lee died of cancer in Los Angeles. He was survived by his wife of 46 years, Janet, his daughter Lucy and son Jonathan. Lawrence never married, and had no children. He died in 2004 of complications following a stroke at his home in Malibu at the age of 88.

Having admired the prestige received on *The Railroad Hour*, announcer Marvin Miller saved a few scripts from the series for his personal collection. During the early-1980s, Miller donated a total of 47 linear feet of scripts and correspondence, 135 open-reel audio tapes and eight scrapbooks covering his work in radio, film and television to the Thousand Oaks Library in California. Today, the Marvin E. Miller Collection is available for viewing by any patron who chooses to personally visit the library during open hours.

The Thousand Oaks Library, however, is not the only place where fans of *The Railroad Hour* can find access to scripts, recordings and other materials

related to the program. The Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri – St. Louis has made their American Radio Collection available for the public. Donated to WHMC by the Thomas Jefferson Library at the same University, the archive holds a number of episodes in their archives.

The Billy Rose Theater Collection located at the Lincoln Center of Performing Arts in the New York Public Library holds the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Collection, which includes a broad sampling of the material that the team created for radio, television, and the stage. Included in the collection are complete holdings for *The Railroad Hour*, both recordings and scripts. These include almost the entire run of *The Railroad Hour*, all off-line recordings from KFI in Los Angeles, California. Each recording is complete on two sound discs, analog, 33 1/3 r.m.p., 16 inch aluminum-based acetate discs. Access to many of the original items (such as transcription discs) is restricted at the Library. Many of the broadcasts, thankfully, have been transferred to sound tape reels (analog, 7 1/2 i.p.s.; 7 in.) so patrons can listen and enjoy the musicals. In 1967, they presented a full collection of *Railroad Hour* recordings to the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound at the New York Public Library.

The Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Collection may or may not be complete. According to their inventory, the collection holds a total of 532 sound recordings – not all of them are *The Railroad Hour*. While the archive does house one rehearsal recording, the list of titles and broadcast dates remain incomplete. As described by the library's catalog system: "*The Railroad Hour* was a half hour music and drama program broadcast on NBC from 1948 to 1954. It featured musical comedies and original stories complete with music. Gordon MacRae was the host and featured star, and was assisted by such performers as: Dorothy Kirsten, Jeanette MacDonald, Adolphe Menjou, Risë Stevens and Margaret Whiting. Dorothy Warenskjold and Lucille Norman often stood in for Gordon MacRae during the summers. The announcer was Marvin Miller. The theme song was *I've Been Working on the Railroad*."

Comparing the library's inventory with the recordings known to circulate among old-time radio collectors, it is estimated that about six recordings remain unaccounted for. Dismal hopes should not prevail, as it is "assumed" (but not proven) that the Lawrence and Lee Collection does contain a recording of every broadcast – and that the inventory sheets are merely incomplete.

Many of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's scripts, manuscripts, drafts and personal papers were donated to the Ohio State University a number of years before their death, and though available for public viewing, are not available for inter-library loan. Anyone wanting to see what a script for *The Railroad Hour* looks

like, or a theater ticket for general admission, can easily contact the library for operating hours.

Lastly, the Library of Congress currently owns copies of all of the scripts on microfilm, available for viewing by anyone willing to register with their library system and adhere to the strict guidelines and policies for viewing the scripts. Still, being a musical program, the scripts are not a feasible substitute for enjoyment of these nostalgic broadcasts. To truly enjoy the presentations, readers are encouraged to purchase copies of these radio programs from respectable dealers who have been in business for decades, and were responsible for originating the recordings presently available.

** Although a recording for every Railroad Hour broadcast does exist in air check form (as they aired back in 1948-1954), collectors do offer a number of recordings from the AFRS rebroadcasts. Regrettably, those edited, "washed out" versions are not as enjoyable as the original offerings. The musical presentation is intact, but much of the flavor of the series, including the Railroad commercials and cast comments, make up some of the program that makes these shows so special. The authors of this book recommend that the readers make an attempt to acquire and listen to the uncut recordings and avoid the AFRS rebroadcasts if at all possible.*

Martin Grams Jr. is the author of numerous books about old-time radio, including the recently released *Gang Busters: The Crime Fighters of American Broadcasting* (2005) and *The Radio Adventures of Sam Spade* (2007) for OTR Publishing, and co-authored *The Railroad Hour* (2007) with Gerald Wilson for Bear Manor Media.



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

This month we are offering several reels of miscellaneous shows, and I want to remind all members to be sure to check out these listing with care. You may find that some of your favorite shows are listed here. The miscellaneous files are sometimes necessary when we do not have enough shows to fill a whole reel. I also want to remind our members that they should spend some time running their tapes, playing or winding/rewinding them. This is to help preserve them by getting air into the reels and cassettes to help preserve the media and not lose the shows.

We have a note from a RHAC member, who needs to drop out of the club, and has quite a few books on OTR that he also would like to remove from his shelves. Anyone who may be interested can give him, George Willams, a call at (303) 922-1831.

Comic Strip Character Changes Diet For Radio Show

*"Wheatena is his diet he asks you to try it with
Popeye the sailor man." - Kelvin Beech*

By Danny Godwin

Radio was a magical media for the children who heard it during its golden age. Just like the adults had their favorite programs, the small fry also had theirs. For the most part, these programs featured the children's favorite comic strip characters. Not only could they read about them in the Sunday newspaper, the children could also hear them live and in person over the airwaves. One of the comic strip characters is the subject of this article.

On Tuesday, September 3, 1935, the stations of **NBC's Red Network** debuted the first episode of **POPEYE THE SAILOR**. It was a serial program heard 3 times a week (believed to be Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday) at 7:15 PM.

It was the story of Popeye, who was all Navy from head to toe--- complete with the grizzled accent of an "Old Salt." His girlfriend (for the most part) was Olive Oyl, who adored Popeye, but also had something of a fickle nature. Popeye's friend was J. Wellington Wimpy, or "Wimpy" as he was referred to by his friends. His love was hamburgers--- and **LOTS** of them (too bad **McDonald's** didn't sponsor this program). Matey was a young boy who was adopted by Popeye. Swee' Pea was a baby left on Olive's doorstep. Last but certainly not least was Bluto, a big, rough, mean sailor who loved to stir up trouble--- and to beat the starch out of Popeye.

The characters and the stories on the radio program were similar in content to the comic strip--- with one noticeable exception. In the comic strip, when Popeye was completely out of gas, he always had a can of spinach in his shirt. He had enough strength to pop the can open and pour the contents into his mouth. In split second speed, Popeye had the strength of 10 men (amazing stuff that spinach). In no time at all, Popeye whipped the daylights out of Bluto, won Olive's heart (for the moment), and everyone lived happily ever after--- until the start of a new story in next week's comic strip.

If spinach were the sponsor of the Popeye radio show, it would be the perfect fit. During the 1930's, there were makers of canned fruit and vegetables (including spinach), but none of them came forward. For a radio program to survive on the air, it was very important to have a sponsor. **Wheatena** wasn't spinach, but it was the sponsor of the Popeye radio program (if you're not

familiar with **Wheatena**, it was a hot wheat cereal). As you already know, the sponsor called the shots on the radio program they sponsored, so the trick here was to involve **Wheatena** into the program. There was only one answer--- **Wheatena** replaced spinach as Popeye's strengthening food.

At the beginning and end of each broadcast, there were the usual **Wheatena** commercials narrated by announcer Kelvin Beech. While Beech made **Wheatena** sound so good, the small fry in the listening audience were wondering how it would be involved in the story.

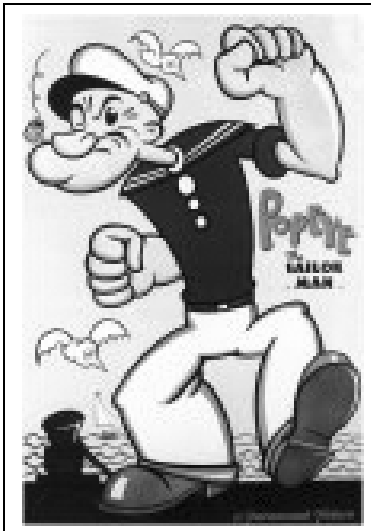
In one episode, Olive, Wimpy, and Matey planned a picnic. They boarded a streetcar that was going to the city limits. This streetcar had a reputation of going fast. On this trip, it was a little **TOO** fast. With some sharp curves coming up, the streetcar operator tried to slow it down, but the brakes jammed. After the streetcar hit a truck in the tracks, the driver was thrown out. The conductor of the streetcar showed his bravery by voluntarily jumping off. It was Olive, Wimpy, and Matey on the speeding streetcar by themselves. In a nutshell, it didn't look very good for the trio.

With the streetcar gathering more speed, Popeye came to the rescue. He stood in the middle of the tracks, bracing himself to stop the streetcar. This may not necessarily be the smartest thing Popeye or anyone else could do. The speeding streetcar continued its deadly pace. It appeared Popeye was headed to the ship in the sky. Miraculously, Popeye wasn't hit by the streetcar, but he was hanging on to the opposite end for dear life.

The streetcar was now approaching a busy area of the city. Something had to be done--- and fast. Matey started cooking some **Wheatena**. Popeye said that in order to stop a fast moving streetcar, not to mention heavy, he needed 3 bowls full of **Wheatena**. Popeye devoured the **Wheatena**. In split second speed, he had energy and strength. Popeye slowed down the streetcar. It took a few seconds, but Popeye managed to completely derail the streetcar before it approached the busy intersection. It was a scary moment, but the good news was nobody was hurt--- except Popeye's feet that felt the heat from the friction of slowing the streetcar down.

Although **Wheatena** gave Popeye super human strength on the program, the makers of the cereal doesn't promise the same result to everyone who eats it. Eating **Wheatena** at breakfast time supplied the energy needed to get the day off in the right direction.

Wheatena worked out very well in Popeye's stories on the radio. Good thing the sponsor wasn't something that was **NOT** to be eaten. Working that into the story might be very interesting



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