

OPUNTIA 339

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THE BLUE CANADIAN ROCKIES

photos by Dale Speirs

While eastern Canada was blasted by yet another polar vortex, Calgary temperatures were setting records. On April 2, the forecast was for 23°C, which is shirt-sleeve weather. I made my first trip out to the mountains, the earliest I have ever done in a hiking season. (I don't hike in winter; too dangerous.) The view below is from the Canmore Nordic Centre, looking southeast at Mount Ehagay Nakoda. The peak at right is Ha Ling Peak, named after the Chinese railway worker who first climbed it in the 1880s.



The Nordic Centre was built for the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics and is now Canada's national training facility for cross-country skiing. They were having some sort of all-ages provincial-level race.

Not very exciting, so I took a few photos and left.







The flags are those of all nations who competed in the 1988 Winter Olympics. This is not the race course but just a casual skiway.



Heading back to Calgary, I stopped off at a couple of lakes along the way.

Gap Lake, looking east, with Canmore a few kilometres behind the camera. Still a bit of ice but rapidly melting.



Middle Lake, in Bow Valley Provincial Park, looking west.



CALGARIANS LOVE A PARADE

photos by Dale Speirs

There isn't a month in Calgary without at least one parade. Cowtowners love to party for any excuse. Saturday, April 9, was the annual Freedom of the City parade by one of the regular or militia military units stationed in Calgary. Each year a different unit is honoured, usually on the occasion of a significant anniversary or battle. This year it was the turn of the Calgary Air Cadets, who are celebrating their 75th anniversary.

The parade begins at the west end of the downtown core from the Mewata Armoury and proceeds east to the other end, anchored by City Hall. The personnel form up on Macleod Trail in front of City Hall. The Commanding Officer then marches up the steps of Old City Hall, where the Mayor is awaiting him and formally asks permission for the Freedom of the City, which is the right to parade through the streets anytime.



Since they already paraded through the downtown core, this seems redundant. The Mayor grants permission, and accepts the C.O.'s offer to review the troops. After that, the usual speeches and then the unit marches home.



Mayor Naheed Nenshi (behind the sword carried by the C.O.), having given the Freedom of the City from the steps, now comes down to review the troops.

Old City Hall is under renovation, hence all the scaffolding and hoardings.





Above: Mayor Nenshi (centre of photo, in business suit) reviews the personnel. Below: The Air Cadet flag is similar to the RCAF Blue Ensign, except for a different badge on the fly.



LIFE ON THE BROADCAST WAVES: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #268. Related articles on the history of broadcast radio appeared in #260, 263, and 271. Radio fiction reviews appeared in #301, 302, 310, 319, and 330.]

Allen's Alley.

Fred Allen is forgotten today except by old-time radio (OTR) fans but in his heyday during the 1930s and 1940s he was one of the top comedians in the business. Many of his shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.

Allen was considered by his peers to be the best ad-libber there ever was, able to recover from a flopped joke or a stage mis-cue instantly with a quip that had the audience laughing louder than at the scripted jokes. He often made the ad-lib into a running gag through the rest of the show. As an example, he was guest-starring on an episode of DUFFY'S TAVERN when the host Ed Gardner made a joke about a can of sardines that flopped with the audience. Allen immediately said: "*And when they opened that can of sardines, there was that joke lying alongside them.*", which got a good laugh. Near the end of the show, another joke fell out into dead silence, and Allen got an even bigger laugh when he said that was another joke out of the sardine can.

Until the 1950s, radio shows were owned and controlled by the sponsors. As an example, Fibber McGee and Molly did not perform on a show named after themselves, they were on the JOHNSON WAX PROGRAM. Jack Benny was on several, such as the JELLO PROGRAM, and for the longest part of his radio career on the LUCKY STRIKE PROGRAM. Radio performers by and large got along with their sponsors despite constant interference and censorship by advertising managers who knew nothing about performing. It was a matter of acknowledging who signed your paycheque.

Fred Allen, on the other hand, was constantly feuding with his sponsors and as a result had problems getting and keeping a sustained radio show. His acerbic wit did not go down well with business executives who wanted safe, comfortable humour, different from every other show as long as it was the same. In his unemployed periods, he would make the rounds as a guest star on all the other shows, whose sponsors could take him for one episode but not further.

Allen's career dwindled away in the early 1950s as OTR died out. He did not make a successful transition into television like his good friend Jack Benny, and was involuntarily retired by the time he wrote an autobiography of his days in radio, TREADMILL TO OBLIVION (1954). The book is padded out with scripts from some of his shows. The problem is that reading a script doesn't bring out the humour because so much of it depended on intonation, timing, and audience reaction. Combined with a later volume on his life in vaudeville MUCH ADO ABOUT ME (reviewed in OPUNTIA #275) his career as an entertainer is well chronicled.

TREADMILL TO OBLIVION begins with a familiar situation for Allen, losing his job as an actor on Broadway. He cast about for work and found radio, which was just starting to become established on a national scale in the early 1930s. His first radio show was in 1932 for Linit beauty powder. His scripts had to be read in advance for approval by an advertising executive who did so out loud for a committee, using a flat monotone entirely inappropriate for comedy.

Allen went through several sponsors and shows before ending up with Sal Hepatica, a laxative made by Bristol-Myers. Because the hour-long show also advertised another of their products, Ipana toothpaste, it ended up with the name TOWN HALL TONIGHT. Running gags, which carried on from show to show, such as a mynah bird that wouldn't talk or an escape artist who couldn't get out of his padlocked box, were usually terminated by ad executives with no sense of humour. Allen and Jack Benny had a long-running feud that moved back and forth across their shows. They were best friends and often met to co-ordinate their gags for better effect.

Allen's wife, Portland Hoffa (her real name, after her birthplace in Oregon), had a beautiful voice offstage but because she always tensed up on stage, her voice was squeaky on the microphone. They used that to advantage. No reference was made to their marital status, just as Jack Benny never mentioned on stage that Mary Livingstone was his wife.

Portland always arrived at the end of the opening monologue with a drawn-out squeak "*Oh Mr. AAAAllen!*", and would tag along for some of the following sketches. She often did a different voice in the skits as a brassy broad with a Brooklyn accent so thick you could cut it with a knife. If you didn't know better, you would think it was a different actress voicing that part.

From the beginning of his radio career, Allen, like Benny, avoided the gag-a-minute routine of many comedians. He tried to have an overall theme in each episode, with the skits leading logically from one to another instead of random jokes. His supporting actors performed as the Mighty Allen Art Players, of which the announcer and orchestra leader were part. Decades later, Johnny Carson borrowed the title for the Mighty Carson Art Players on his television talk show.

Allen gradually introduced new characters. Falstaff Openshaw spouted doggerel on the subject of the day. Hodge White was a rustic who ran a general store, and churned out homespun philosophy. He really existed as a friend back in Allen's hometown of Dorchester, Massachusetts, although he was played by an actor on the show. Mrs Nussbaum was a stereotypical Jewish housewife who was always having trouble with her husband Pierre. Titus Moody was a taciturn New England farmer.

The greatest of all was when Allen's announcer Kenny Delmar began voicing Senator Beauregard Claghorn, who was from the South, the South that is, and always repeated the ends of his sentences, sentences that is. The dialogue was written by Allen, but the interpretation was based on a Texas rancher with a booming voice whom Delmar had met back in the 1920s. Claghorn refused to watch the New York Yankees play baseball and would not ride in a Lincoln automobile. Warner Brothers later used the voice and interpretation for their cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn.

A new ad agency took over and changed the title to the FRED ALLEN SHOW, then told him he should be like Jack Benny, only different. As radio boomed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the hour-long shows gave way to half-hour shows, which allowed the networks to sell time to more advertisers. Texaco eventually took over Allen's show, and he used to describe himself as a part-time gasoline salesman.

Allen writes that the longest laughter and crowd reaction in OTR history occurred on his show, for forty minutes (when it was still an hour long). He had brought in an animal trainer with a large eagle. Its wingspan so impressed Allen that he asked the trainer if the eagle could do a short flight during the show. At rehearsals, the demonstration worked perfectly several times. The trainer released the eagle which flew across the stage and perched on the bandstand podium, then flew back to the trainer when called by a whistle.

Come the day, however, it proved a disaster. During rehearsals, the theatre was empty and the orchestra were not present. But in front of a live audience and the orchestra, the eagle went improv. It flew across the stage, but the presence of the orchestra frightened it away from the podium. It flew out into the theatre, circling above the audience and occasionally dipping down low to take a close look at something. The laughter and shrieking were so great that the eagle couldn't hear the trainer's whistle.

A stagehand was rushed out to a grocery store to buy a piece of fresh meat as a lure. In the meantime, the Mighty Allen Art Players struggled to get through their routines, frequently drowned out by fresh bursts of inappropriate laughter and plus some shrieking whenever the eagle swung low. The listening audience at home must have been very puzzled. Surely the sketches weren't that funny?

Allen had writers assisting him but he still wrote most of the show and revised the scripts. He worked seven days a week in a never-ending cycle starting with a fresh script, rehearsals, revisions, more rehearsals, timing cuts, and then going live on the air. He felt like he was on a treadmill. The problem was solved for him by the advent of mass-market television in the late 1940s.

As television cut into OTR, quiz shows sprang up on radio that gave away money by randomly dialing people at home. So many people sat by their telephones and listening to the quiz shows that the regular radio programmes suffered. Allen countered this by offering insurance to his listeners. If they lost out on a prize because they were listening to him instead of a phone-home quiz show on at the same time called STOP THE MUSIC, he would compensate them up to \$5,000 in lost prizes. He never had to pay out because the fad soon blew over and all types of radio shows fell before the onslaught of television.

Allen parodied the quiz shows on his programme. BREAK THE BANK was re-done by him as BREAK THE CONTESTANT, where the competitors had to give up some of their own possessions or money each time they got a question wrong.

The final episode of Allen's radio show was aired in June 1949, and with it died his career. He had suffered from hypertension all his life, and in 1956, at age 61, died suddenly from a heart attack while walking down a Manhattan sidewalk. Portland lived several decades longer in retirement and remarried a few years after Allen's death.

The Life Of A Pompous Windbag.

Gale Gordon (1906-1995, born Charles Aldrich Jr) had a career that spanned OTR and well into the television age. He was a character actor known for his parts as a hot-tempered authority figure who frequently blew up and just as frequently received his comeuppance. Boomers remember him for his work with Lucille Ball in her television shows. He played her boss Mr Mooney in one series and her brother-in-law in the next.

Somewhere in my travels through the University of Calgary Library many years ago pre-Internet, I came across a transcribed interview with Gordon on microfilm and printed off a hard copy. The reference is SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ON THE PERFORMING ARTS #80. The interviewer was Ronald L. Davis and recorded on 1975-06-16 in Dallas, Texas.

Gordon started off by discussing his early life. He was born in Manhattan near the Museum of Natural History, but spent much of his childhood in England. His parents were actors. At birth he had a cleft palate. His mother was English and he was taken to England for surgery when he was eighteen months old. While his parents toured the European stages, he was raised by his maternal grandmother in England as his palate healed and he learned to talk. She was very strict in insisting that he speak clearly and enunciate properly, for which Gordon was very grateful to her. In later life, people who had children with cleft palates would often write to him for advice.

In 1924, the family returned to the USA. Gordon followed his parents onto the stage, although he had some initial difficulty getting jobs because he spoke with an English accent. He also picked up some work as an extra in the movies. In 1930, Gordon began working steadily in radio.

The standard rate of pay in radio was \$2.50 per show with no pay for rehearsals. Actors were the least important part of radio shows, and made less than the janitor. An actor had to be able to do several voices and thus play many characters in one episode. The shows were live to air on local stations, and there were no national networks. When the first networks developed, movie stars who did radio got \$25 per show, while supporting actors still got by on \$2.50, although they could do several different shows per day. Even allowing for the higher value of money in those days, it was a shaky living.

Gordon pointed out the one great advantage of radio was that the listening audience could imagine a character as they pleased. Some people thought him short and dumpy, while others imagined him as how their own boss looked. Actors were not constrained by their looks. Middle-aged women played girls and fat men were action-adventure heroes. Fibber's black maid Beulah was voiced by a white man who imitated his childhood nanny. William Conrad, a fat man, was the voice of Marshal Dillon on the GUNSMOKE radio show but when it moved to television, he was left behind because he didn't fit the vision.

Many other radio actors failed to make the transition to television because they were used to standing still in front of a microphone and reading from a script. They didn't know how to move on a stage and couldn't memorize lines.

Rehearsals became minimal or non-existent, and radio actors usually sight-read their scripts when they saw them for the first time just before stepping in front of the microphone. Gordon developed a reputation as a reliable character actor and was able to boost his pay to \$10 per show. His big break was with Fibber McGee and Molly, playing the pompous Mayor La Trivia for thirteen years.

Sponsors had absolute control over shows and supervised the scripts very closely. Comedy shows were done before a live audience because the sponsors didn't know what was funny except by listening to them. The executives would sit in a glass booth above the audience and watch them instead of the actors, marking down on scripts who got the biggest laughs. It was common that when a new show was being auditioned privately for sponsors, they would sit with their backs to the performers so they would not be influenced by the discrepancy between the actor's looks and the voice he was playing.

Gordon tells about working on a show sponsored by Chesterfield cigarettes. Staff didn't dare smoke any other brand at the studio. Walking in with a pack of Camel cigarettes would get an employee fired. The word "lucky" could not be used in a script because it might remind a listener of Lucky Strike cigarettes. On another show, Gordon was to do a Southern accent but a flunky said he had to change it because one of the sponsor's was a Southerner. Gordon suggested that he do the voice as a Texan, and the flunky agreed. The Southerner was not offended; it was just the flunky, who was always nervous about his job.

In the early days of radio, there were no ratings systems. Sponsors judged the value of a show by whether or not local sales of their products went up more than the cost of the show. Gordon said that sponsors weren't entirely bad.

When he went into the Coast Guard during World War Two, Johnson's Wax, which sponsored Fibber McGee, continued to pay Gordon his salary while he was away and guaranteed his job back after the war.

The comedy show OUR MISS BROOKS was Gordon's next big role. He was the blowhard high school principal Osgood Conklin, always good for at least one eruption in each episode. That show began as OTR and made the transition to television, taking him along with it.

Gordon had also done MY FAVORITE HUSBAND, an OTR comedy with Lucille Ball. He mentioned that she was one of the earliest female producers and directors in radio and television, and had charge of all her shows. Others might be listed as producer or director in the credits, but in rehearsal everyone followed her orders. She invented the three-camera technique which is now standard practice for television comedies. When Ball moved to television, she took Gordon with her as her main supporting actor and they worked together for decades.

For television, MY FAVORITE HUSBAND was renamed I LOVE LUCY and rewritten with different names but they were basically the same. Gordon goes on at length about how Ball paid attention to the smallest details on her shows. Ad-libbing was not permitted because the camera operators cued different angles and zooms of shots to the actors' lines. Off stage, Ball was not the ditzy redhead she played on stage, but a professional businesswoman ahead of her time.

Gordon sums up by saying that he had a good career in stage, radio, television, and movies, and was fortunate that he seldom had to work with temperamental actors. The noisy and insecure actors received most of the press, but he pointed out that the vast majority of actors and crew got along well because they had a common goal, to make their show a success.

WOT, NO SHAD ROE?

In a couple of previous issues, I mentioned the Wolfe Pack in Manhattan was having a shad roe dinner on April 11 in honour of Nero Wolfe's favourite food. Alas, it had to be canceled because the restaurant discovered that shad roe could not be had at any price from any supplier in New York. These things happen.

ZINE LISTINGS

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read it directly.]

CHRISTIAN NEW AGE QUARTERLY V22#2 (US\$5 for ample copy from Catherine Groves, Box 276, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276) Mostly letters and miscellaneous articles in this issue. An interesting review on SACRED GEOGRAPHY, a book about the influence of landscapes on spiritual beliefs. The ancient peoples were more closely connected to topography than we are today, and had a different world view as a result.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2016

Calgary's annual readercon will be held this year on the weekend of August 12 to 14, returning to the Delta Hotel at Southland Drive SE and Bonaventure Drive. The membership cap is 650; last year the convention sold out two months in advance. Details from: www.whenwordscollide.org

When Words Collide covers many genres of literature such as science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance, westerns, and historical fiction. You can read my account of the 2015 event in OPUNTIA #318 to get an idea of the seminars and events. There will be a steampunk banquet this year, and the Aurora Awards.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2016 will be the 23rd year of the WWP. At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe. At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour. Raise a glass, publish a one-shot, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.