

GATHER 'ROUND THE RADIO
E-NEWSLETTER FOR THE METROPOLITAN
WASHINGTON OLD-TIME RADIO CLUB
THE GRTR STUDIO EDITION



THE DELAWARE COAST ISSUE

JULY 15, 2020

THE SET-UP

Hello fine listeners, and welcome once again to the mythical confines of the GRTR Studio where we broadcast information and inspiration about radio, music, nostalgia, personality, books, and beyond. Terry Gross continues to be our inspiration. Listen to her "Fresh Air" radio show, live or podcast; check your NPR listings for a station where you can tune in.

Trying times for everyone these days; we hardly know which way to turn. With resilience we're putting our best foot forward. Fred, from his house a few miles north of here, will handle the sound board and the broadcast signal. Bert and Beverly, from their house down the valley, will manage the network feed and present our readings.

Fred is piping in a lively ensemble piece put together by Wynton Marsalis from his long-running series Jazz at Lincoln Center. Everyone wants to play with Wynton, and he always obliges; this album is called "United We Swing," from live Gala performances early this century. Some tunes are jazz chops, and some have a roadhouse feel. James Taylor, lest we forget, breaks out with a piano driven "Mean Old Man." Fred fades the tune as we get the network cue.

ON THE AIR

Hello everyone and welcome to the broadcast. The dusty courier pouch has lots of material; we have a story about an S.O.S. signal off the Atlantic coast, circa 1926. Then we'll head west to the Ohio Valley to hear from Fred Fett about the famous people he met and photographed during his college years. We'll give Jack French a call; it won't be Zoom, but Jack's waiting by the phone with some radio memories.

THE SWEDES IN DELAWARE



I'm rather fond of the Swedish influence on these shores; northern Michigan, for my father's family, and for making European inroads into the tribal lands of Delaware. The baseball team is called the Blue Rocks, from the distinctive rocks found deep in the Christiana River. Another benefit is our favorite show, *Cavalcade of America*, and its Wilmington sponsor DuPont. In June of 1938, *Cavalcade* aired a show entitled "The Swedes Land in Delaware." I haven't heard the episode, but my *Cavalcade* encyclopedia gives it a particularly good write-up, mentioning the Victor Herbert song that the Don Voorhees orchestra played, and the history of the early colony and Governor Johan Printz. Editor Martin Grams, Jr., ever the champion writer, researcher, and compiler, adds this:

Trivia: Planned as a part of the Swedish Tercentenary Celebration, a special feature of this broadcast was the fact that it was short-waved to the steamer "Kungsholm" at sea, where the Crown Prince of Sweden and his party were enroute to America for the celebration. Episode #140.

SHORT-WAVE TO THE RESCUE, 1926

There's a fine book about the busy Delaware coast. It's from a small publisher, Exeter House, in Reading PA. Bert is going to read an essay from the book; Fred is on track to give Bert the cue. I sent the pages to Bert via Telex. OK, Fred, OK, Bert.

BERT:

Thanks, Mark, it's a nice little book, and the title is

Shipwrecks, Sea Stories & Legends of the Delaware Coast,

by David J. Seibold and Charles J. Adams.

Exeter House Books, 1989, with an extensive photo section.

From p. 86–87 this is called "...We Interrupt This Program for an S.O.S. A Shipwreck Interferes with Radio January 24, 1926..."

Around the world, operators of the new-fangled device known as radio were excited. A highly publicized and tightly organized worldwide test of broadcasting was to be held, and station operators were each allotted so much time to air their programming.

The United States was given the hour between 10 and 11 p.m., and from Chicago to New York, stations eagerly awaited their time during what was called Radio Week. All evening stations beamed their national music or test signals to one another on channels cleared by mutual agreement. Then came 10 o'clock. On the East Coast, 35 radio stations switched on their transmitters and began to say hello to the world.

Walter Damrosch, conducting the New York Symphony Orchestra, opened the program from the Waldorf with a greeting in English, French, German, and Italian. Jazz and classical music were included in the planned one-hour program, in addition to speeches, a piano concerto by Vincent Lopez, and Matilda Lindsay's rendition of The Star-spangled Banner. At that hour, all transmitters of the world went silent as the American programs were beamed to all points of the globe.

The show was on for only 5 minutes when a radio signal more vital than Matilda Lindsay's voice was picked up by operators in the northeast. It was the dits-and-dots of the distress signal S.O.S. Instantly the short-wave stations went silent as the ship in peril was located. Other stations in the Midwest, as well as in Canada, Mexico, and other parts of North America, were not affected, but the powerful transmitters in and around New York were quiet out of respect to the circumstances.

The S.O.S. came from the Solvang, a Norwegian steamer headed for New York with a load of Cuban sugar. The Solvang, a 2,300-ton freighter, had collided with the 7,000-ton Vacuum Oil tanker, called the Vacuum.

One man drowned when he jumped from the Solvang as it sank just off Cape Henlopen, but 24 other crewmen from the freighter were rescued in lifeboats or by actually leaping from the doomed Solvang to the stable Vacuum during the brief time the two ships were joined together as a result of the collision.

The radio silence was finally lifted with only five minutes remaining in that night's allocated hour. Perhaps Matilda Lindsay got to sing her song after all.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL

Excellent reading, Bert, thanks so much. Beverly has given us the signal for commercial, so Fred is piping in a song called "August Winds," by Sting, about watching the fishing boats leaving the harbor, and feeling that the twinges of fall will be coming soon.

Because of the pandemic, the season for baseball's minor league teams has been cancelled. The Dragons front office press release:

"This is a disappointing day. We have worked hard during the off-season to make the 21st season of Dragons Baseball a great one here at Day Air Ballpark. However, the safety of our players and our community are most important. Stay safe.

FRED FETT AND HIS BUSY COLLEGE DAYS

And well they might have been! Fred was a photographer for the yearbook at his college, Miami University, in Oxford Ohio, near Cincinnati. "Halcyon days," writes Fred in his recollections. "I met so many wonderful people." Photographs and

autographs became a lifelong pastime, and he can count a collection of Miami U. yearbooks, “in all corners of the house,” he admits, spanning some fifty years of college life. Miami is famous in the sports world for being a proving ground for coaches; Fred’s focus is decidedly the performing arts, and by extension, broadcasting. Al Hodge was a Miami alumnus, and when Fred mentioned him, I looked him up. John Dunning’s *On the Air* (1998 ed.) lists Hodge in the *Green Hornet* entry, as playing Britt Reid, “masked crimefighter,” from 1936-1943, when “Hodge went into the service.” Dunning continues the story of Detroit’s station WXYZ and its formidable creative team, namely George W. Trendle who was looking for a “derivative story” to follow the success of *The Lone Ranger*, well-established on the air since 1935.

Fred Fett points to his 1934 copy of the Miami U. yearbook, called *Resencio*, for his information on Hodge, who graduated that year. Fred was at Miami “many years later,” so he was there when Hodge made a return visit to campus. Fred knew Hodge from his starring role on the TV series “Captain Video,” and he and his classmates were fascinated with the well-known actor. “A kind fellow, quite generous with his time in telling us of his experiences.”

In Fred’s years at Miami, meeting Hodge was just part of a series of celebrities who came to campus, and Fred met them all, with a glad hand and his camera. The prom was a big draw every year: Count Basie, Ted Weems, and Art Kastle all played. And Fred lists for us the plays that Al Hodge was in, as part of Ye Merrie Players, “Pygmalion,” and plenty of Shakespeare. Quite a nice college career for Fred, who tells me that he grew up in the Ohio countryside just a few miles from Oxford. It was nice, he said, getting a quality education just down the road!





JACK FRENCH AND HIS WRITING PROJECTS

Our studio managers Beverly and Bert have been watching the clock as it sweeps towards network feed. Fred has kept our booster signal strong and these past months Fred has handled the Zoom set-up, the medium of choice these days for Club meetings.

Beverly signals that she has Jack French on the phone. We've got the go-ahead:

GRTR:

Jack, hello, are you on the line? You've been waiting quite a while.

JACK:

Right you are old, buddy, I'm here in my armchair, enjoying the broadcast. Interesting bit about early radio and the S.O.S. signal.

GRTR:

I'm glad, thanks. I bet with all those sea stories that you might think we had a ship-to-shore hookup in the studio.

JACK:

Well, yeah! I remember those crackling transmissions years ago when I was in the Navy. But not for me now. We're home, sheltering in place.

GRTR:

I remember our studio interview at the GRTR Studio in Carlisle, must have been 2017. You told us about your time in St. Louis and researching the archives at the Ralston Purina offices. Lately, though, I know that you've contributed some good pieces for the

Club meetings on Zoom. Can you tell me about other writing projects you're working on?

JACK:

Right now I'm working on a 2,000-word piece for Steve Darnell's "Nostalgia Digest." It will be in the December issue, and I'm writing about the top ten Christmas toys and games that people would find under the Christmas tree over the last hundred years.

GRTR:

Sounds entertaining, very nice. Anything else from history? I remember you put together some lecture performances about historical characters, which you would present in full costume, a one-man road show. The website: <http://jackfrenchlectures.com/>

JACK:

It was fun putting those performances together; got some rather good audiences, too. So along that line, I now contribute to a Twitter feed called "On This Day" hashtag #otd. The ladies who run it post famous accomplishments of women, on each specific day, 365 days a year. I've sent in a few items, for example, about Molly Pitcher in the Revolutionary War, and the woman who invented Monopoly, even though Parker Brothers gave credit to a man.

GRTR:

You're keeping busy for sure. I'm glad you sent me your notes about the OTR show, "The Quiz Kids." I had never heard of it, so I went right to my *Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. John Dunning writes a good article about it, quite the phenomenon!

JACK:

Indeed it was. It ran for years, spanning the World War II years. Had a huge listenership! Got a lot of press. And I've written up the history of the show, some 4,400 words on all aspects, the kids, the controversies, and the amazing work that went into production.

GRTR:

Sounds pretty neat. Where's it going to be published?

JACK:

"Radiogram," that's the journal of the S.P.E.R.D.V.A.C. group, on the West Coast. It will run soon; probably as a two or-three-part article.

GRTR:

I know that group. I even know that it means Society to Preserve and Encourage Radio Drama Variety and Comedy. Martin Grams wrote a nice profile of the group in his Blog, May 10, 2015. <https://martingrams.blogspot.com/>

JACK:

Sadly, one of the better-known kids from the Quiz Kids died recently, of the COVID-19 virus. On the show, this would have been in the 1940s, he was known as the math-whiz. Named Joel Kupperman. He became a professor, but in recent years he had dementia and was in an assisted-living facility in Brooklyn. 84, he was; jeez, that's my age!

GRTR:

Well, I'm glad you're staying healthy, stick with us! I want to talk for a minute about the information Dunning gives us, and what you give us in your notes. Dunning writes mostly about how the show was run, like the auditions, the host, and the care they took with the kids, who were really young.

JACK:

That's right, and the controversy, right from the beginning, centered on, "...was the show rigged...?" The producers were really vocal with the press, you know, inviting them into the studio, trying to "nip it in the bud," as Deputy Barney Fife used to say. It wasn't

rigged. The press remained skeptical, but the kids were just bright, in math, ornithology, history, all those subjects.

GRTR:

And evidently the kids worked really hard, traveling for guest appearances, and broadcasting the show from big theaters in major cities. Admission would be the purchase a War Bond, and according to Martin Grams Jr., that brought in \$120 million in War Bonds.

JACK:

Impressive, and patriotic, too. Speaking of their good deeds, Dunning praises the 1982 book, *Whatever Happened to the Quiz Kids?* By Ruth Duskin Feldman. The author was a panelist for years on the show, and contacted other kids, as adults, to see how they were doing in later years. Most were happy to tell Feldman about their lives.

GRTR:

And your notes indicate a quiz kid who became successful as an actress.

JACK:

Her name was Vanessa Brown, easily the most famous Quiz Kid. She was successful in radio, on TV, in the movies, and on the Broadway stage.

GRTR:

Good start in the business. What sorts of shows did she appear in?

JACK:

Right you are! After the "Quiz Kids" Vanessa toured with Katherine Hepburn, doing Shakespeare. After that she did an about face and was cast as "Jane" in *Tarzan*, with Lex Barker. On TV, dear Vanessa played Barry Nelson's wife on *My Favorite Husband*. And after that

she got great acclaim on Broadway as the co-lead along with Tom Ewell in *The Seven Year Itch*.

GRTR:

Pretty impressive list.

JACK:

But Vanessa didn't get the movie role. Marilyn Monroe was chosen to co-star alongside Tom Ewell.

GRTR:

Amazing stories. And Beverly tells us that the clock on the wall is signaling network feed. And here's a note from Bert in their home studio; he's logged on to the Martin Grams Blogspot, and, as luck would have it, Martin's latest post, last Friday July 10, is called "The 1943 Information Please War Bond Tour." So now we can learn about the other quiz show from those war-time radio days, Information Please! Thanks so much, Bert!

<https://martingrams.blogspot.com/>

Network cue is upon us; Fred is piping in another tune from the Lincoln Center Jazz compilation: Lenny Kravitz sings "Are You Gonna Go My Way?"

All for now, keep those cards and letters coming! The Mud Room is closed for now, but we're all scrambling to our kitchens...soup and sandwiches, anyone? But of course!

Thanks ever, Mark Anderson

Frederick Maryland