

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



THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF RADIO ISSUE

MAY 8, 2023

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.

Our messages and calls these past weeks have been heartfelt and tinged with sadness as we recall the lives of two beloved members of our Club.

Ken Neal and Jack French passed away this spring. Word came to us from Ken’s wife Barbara from their home in Texas. Kathy French in Fairfax was in close touch with local Club friends during her weeks of vigil.

With words and music we shall here present writings from Ken and Jack; and Club friends have provided their own happy memories, if at times wistful, of these gentlemen from years of meetings, collaboration, and progress.

Our Studio crew – Fred, Beverly, and Bert – have carpooled their way north, stopping at the Poor Cousins Bakery in Hazleton for scones and Costa Rican coffee. They crested route 309 Pocono Summit and took the turnoff along the

wooded path to our tin pot studio. We're in the Mud Room sifting through the Dusty Courier Pouch. Fred has coaxed the old sound board through its squawks and hums and he's piping in a samba of retrospect. It's a Sergio Mendes blend of Brazilian folk and jazz, "So Many Stars," circa 1987, sung in this version by the incomparable Sarah Vaughan.

ON THE AIR

Fred fades the samba as Beverly taps her clipboard towards network feed. We settle in. Hello everyone and welcome to the broadcast. Our mood these days is reflective about our friends and yet we remain determined to carry on our love of friends, radio, and nostalgia.

KEN NEAL: MAN OF PLAYS, BOOKS, AND IDEAS.

Conventions play a unique role in the gathering of people, history, performance, and good conversation. The Friends of Old-Time Radio (FOTR) was a charmer in that regard, for the 36-years of its duration in Newark. Where else could a person attend and find themselves at a dinner table with Bob Hastings? Such is the story from Barbara Neal, recalling the times she and Ken attended.

Club member (and past President) Lennell Herbert-Marshall recalls her times at Newark, where she was at the Club's table and thus met the Neals, Nick Williams, and Mike O'Donnell. Lennell writes that from that moment on she felt that she had "a cadre of big brothers," a companionship that would last for years. She became active in the Club and its projects. She writes of Saturday trips with "her cadre" where they would haunt bookshops in the Fairfax area, often sifting through boxes of unmarked books and exclaiming at the treasures they found. "For me it was an amazing learning experience," writes Lennell.

In those early years Ken played a key role in the coherence of the Club, which included an OTR cassette collection and monthly programs at meetings. Ken encouraged the start of the yearly "achievement award" named in memory of another Club stalwart, Stan Cawelti.

Script readings are other keynotes of the Club, and if memory serves, Ken's "Egyptian Bottle Mystery" was the first such endeavor. Lennell, myself, Mark and Marsha Bush, Jack French, and others gathered around a couple of microphones and read our hearts out. Sound effects, who knows? If a recording of the reading exists, who knows?

After Ken and Barbara left northern Virginia to move to Texas, Ken continued to keep in touch with the Club. He was in charge of a collection of books that he made available for modest purchase via email to the Club. He read every *Radio Recall* that Jack French published during his lengthy editorship. Ken's encouragement for others shows up in this short "Letter to the Editor."

Dear Jack,

Just got the June 2014 issue: A great RADIO RECALL!

It certainly does our club's 30th anniversary a great honor.

Many thanks to you. Ken Neal Kerrville, TX

That's how Ken was always in touch. He may well have inspired Lennell to write her own article for *Radio Recall*: "The Cinnamon Bear," December 2013.

NETWORK FEED AND COMMERCIAL

Beverly is watching the clock as it sweeps toward network feed. Fred is piping in a series of études for solo piano by Franz Liszt, played in superb fashion by Danil Trifonov. In the liner notes we learn that Liszt changed the way music was written and we ourselves are changed by the way we listen. The album's title is "Transcendental." Fred fades the lovely sounds to our sponsor.



The Dayton Dragons are playing hard as they try and achieve a .500 level of play. They win 11-0 one day and lose 4-3 the next. The front office continues to salute "Community All Stars" with special ballpark events. Our other favorite team, the Beloit Snappers are a cool 6-games over .500. Beloit Wisconsin remains dear to the hearts of the French family. Snappers Field photo, above.

JACK FRENCH: A MAN OF INTEREST AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Jack always had projects going on, such as research and writing, or finding his light as an actor in venues around town and beyond. He would often suggest topics for one friend or another to pursue, either independently or for his *Radio Recall*. As the bi-monthly deadline approached he would quip, "...the cupboard is bare..." A favorite for me was to cobble together a paragraph or two for his "April Fools Issue." During his long tenure as *RR* Editor he would maintain the homespun format of line drawings and a two-column approach. He would chuckle when he referred to his "wood-burning typewriter," and pastel pencils he used to enhance the drawings.. The articles he presented were deeply researched by top-notch writers. Jack set the journal standard which continues today in streamlined format.

Club members and friends have sent along their memories, and Jack's welcoming approach was true to all. He was a gifted speaker, at Club meetings or at the MANC convention. He traveled as well, to speak at meetings of historical societies and clubs. Jack wrote about a speaking engagement that turned into a trip "back home" to Wisconsin.

BERT

Thanks, Mark. From the GRTR August 17, 2014

The GRTR recently received a penny postcard from Jack French, telling us that he's headed to the north woods of Wisconsin for a vacation. He writes that he will visit towns he knew from his boyhood and will be the keynote speaker at the Sunday afternoon meeting of the History & Culture Center in the town of Merrill. Jack's topic will be to cover the history of radio broadcasting in the U.S. He also had audio clips of network programming from the mid-20th century. That gathering was a success, with Jack signing copies of his Agatha Award-winning non-fiction book *Private Eyelashes: Radio's Lady Detectives*. Jack recalls that the trip was a sentimental return to the area. He visited the city of Rhinelander, where he grew up, just down the road from Merrill.



That excursion went well. Sally gives us further insight, as found in the Eulogy that she read at Jack's service.

Jack furthered the hobby and promoted the preservation of old-time radio through every article he wrote and program he presented. He embodied the idea of a lifelong learner, always finding that one program no one had ever heard of or uncovering information many had thought lost about programs.

Jack's approach as a life-long learner also taught him the imposition of time constraints. A recent example of that was shared in a recent Zoom meeting of the Club:

GRTR:

You remember the recent Club meeting on ZOOM, when Jack French presented us with his research on radio programs out of San Francisco? He and I talked a bit more about that, by computer, last week. Our GRTR Studio soundman Fred made a transcription and Beverly is going to read it now.

BEVERLY:

Thanks, Mark. From the interview where GRTR talks with Jack French, July 2021. This is called:

JACK FRENCH AND HIS SAN FRANCISCO PRESENTATIONS

Hello, Jack! This FaceTime Chat app is pretty neat! It's how you did your presentation to that Historical Association on the West Coast, am I right?

JACK:

That's right; and now I'm getting more experience using the app to talk to you. Reminds me of the time years and years ago when Mark Bush showed me how to get the most use out of my cell phone!

GRTR:

That's so cool! Will wonders never cease! So when you talked to the San Francisco Historical Association, why did you concentrate your lecture on just the 1940s?

JACK:

I guess it was just self-preservation. In my speech to the Association I was limited to only 45 minutes, with another 15 set aside for Q & A. I figured all I could cover in that amount of time would be one decade of radio.

GRTR:

And you were right to do so. But, still, that eliminated one of the Bay City's first and most successful series, "Cecil and Sally."

JACK:

Yup, that syndicated show began in 1928 and had attained nearly a million listeners by the early Thirties. But I couldn't take the time. Now I've got my own format and the shows and the people, so that's the decade that I want to share with your listeners.

GRTR:

Speaking of the Thirties, didn't "Cheerio" also get his start in San Francisco? He was radio's happy philosopher who read poetry.

JACK:

Correct. Edgar Russell brought him to my attention when I had forgotten about him. Charles K. Field started every program with "Hello, this is Cheerio." He was radio's optimistic messenger of happy tidings.

GRTR:

You bet. Even though he started on radio around 1924 in San Francisco he only reached great popularity after a move to New York in 1927.

JACK:

But sad to say, we've not discovered a single existing audio copy from the hundreds of programs that "Cheerio" aired.

GRTR:

Good to hear, except that is sad news. Oooops, Beverly's tapping her clipboard and eyeing the sweep of the clock. You know all about time constraints, don't you, Smilin' Jack?

JACK:

Sure enough. Nice chatting with you. Goodbye now...

And thanks, Beverly, for such a fine reading. And here in our tin pot studio we are watching the sweep of the clock towards network feed. Another word from Sally Stephens who continues to amaze as a brilliant writer. She writes:

Jack may have been a talented writer and actor, but to many of us, his finest role was friend. As Mark Bush so perfectly put it, "it is customary at a time like this to think in terms of a moment of silence. I think Jack deserves a hand-stinging, eardrum-splitting round of applause as he exits his last role. God bless you, Jack. Those you leave behind have lost a wonderful friend and a great talent."

As we move to network feed, Fred is piping in the lovely Lloyd Webber song from "Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat." Let's ring down the curtain with "Any Dream Will Do." Donny Osmond in lilting voice:

I awoke from sleep / Pulled back the curtain / To see for certain if
what I dreamed was true / And in the east the sun was rising / So
we can believe / Any dream will do.

Thanks, everyone, for tuning in and sharing these moments. Keep those cards and letters coming! Soup and sandwiches in the Mud Room? But of course.

Thanks ever,

Mark Anderson