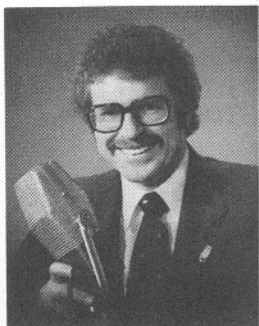


# SPEAKING OF RADIO



Chuck Schaden's Conversation with

**RALPH EDWARDS**

*Ralph Edwards gained fame in radio as the host of Truth or Consequences and, later, This is Your Life. Some time ago we had the opportunity to speak with him about his career on the air. We commented that he was a Colorado farm boy who studied to be an English teacher.*

That's right. I was born on a farm, thirteen miles east of Sterling, Colorado, the county seat of Logan County, and nearer to a town called Merino, named after the Merino Sheep that used to be there. It used to be called Fort Buffalo because of the buffalo that were there. And, we had a little farm near the South Platt River, on which I was born. And then we got a homestead, another two-and-a-half miles out into the dry lands of northeastern Colorado, and we lived on that for five years. You had to live on it for five years, until you proved it up. And then it became yours, you know. I think we sold it for about \$500 when we all left to go to California.

*Once in California, you got started script writing at quite an early age, didn't you?*

That's very true. I had always been interested in writing, even on the farm. I used to make up plays. We'd go around to the neighboring farms, little pals of mine, and we'd put on shows. Then, when I got into the first grade there, Miss Effie, who was my teacher in Merino, would put me in charge of making up the plays for the mothers when they'd come to visit the first grade. And this whetted my enthusiasm.

When I got to California, when I was

twelve years of age, I continued this and even wrote the school play for the grammar school for (many) successive years, (even) after I had gone on to high school and then into the University of California. I worked my way through the University of California writing various series for local radio there.

*Did you write a dramatic show called "Alvin and Betty"?*

Yes. I was still in Oakland High School when I wrote that. It was a fifteen minute show a day. The premise of it was married life. It was a treatise on married life. Now, what's a 15-year-old guy gonna know about married life? But at any rate, I wrote it. Carl Botino was Alvin and he gave me my first paycheck of one dollar a script. I was announcer and wrote it and did all the sound effects. We even had a contest to name a goat! I had a goat (on the show) you know, baa-baaa! I even did the sound effects! So I'd ask the listeners if they would write in and tell us what the goat—it was a black goat—should be named. Colleen Moore, who was playing in "The Church Mouse" at the Fulton Theatre, was the judge and she choose the name, "Anthracite." So, that's where you might say the genesis of the "Hush" contest, the "Walking Man" contest, "Miss Hush"

CHUCK SCHADEN'S  
**NOSTALGIA DIGEST** AND **RADIO GUIDE**

FEBRUARY - MARCH, 1986



RALPH EDWARDS

and all those great contests that raised so much money for charity came from.

*After you earned all you could in California, especially at one dollar a script, you tried to get a job on the stage in New York, didn't you?*

Yes. When I graduated from the University of California, I went from the station in which I'd worked all during my days at the University in Berkeley, KROW and KTAB, which later became the call letters KSFO. I went from there over to KFRC in San Francisco, which was a CBS outlet at that time, and, gee, I heard those guys say, "This is the Columbia Broadcasting System" and then I'd have to open the microphone and give the call letters. I thought, "Well, I can do what they're doing back there and maybe I'll get up enough nerve and go back there sometime."

About that time, I got a card from Sam Taylor who was the editor of our humor magazine at Cal. I was knee-deep in little theatre work on the stage there at Cal, and he'd seen me. When he went back to New York, he wrote saying, "If you can get back here, I'll get you a walk-on in a Broadway play." Well, I got a ride back to that big city of New York. But when I got there, of course, the show didn't even run! It died aborning. But I was in New York. Then I lined up with the boys and girls at the stage entrance (looking for work) and I thought, "Well, this is going a little slow." So I thought I'd go to what I know, which is radio. And I went over and auditioned all around and I finally got on as an announcer at CBS.

*I understand that within two years from that time, you were one of the highest paid radio announcers in the country.*

Well, here's the way it worked. It took two years. I had more shows than any commercial announcer in radio. I don't know if anybody's come up to that number yet. It was 45 shows a week, but I was getting \$45 a week as just my sustaining salary at the CBS station. So, the radio announcers and producers formed a union called AGRAP—the American Guild of Radio Announcers and Producers, and they cited me as a case.

"Look," they said, "this kid has all these shows and look what he's getting paid." And I said, "Now, look, leave me alone. I starved in this city and I know what it is, and I'm happy as I am. I don't want to get mixed up in any union thing." And they said, "No, go ahead and do it." Well, AGRAP went on for a while and I actually lost money. Sure, they would pay me for the number of hours I worked on a show, but they would take that out of my sustaining salaries. So, I'd end up with about \$43 or \$42 at the end of a week. But then, when AFRA (the American Federation of Radio

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Artists) came in, then they had this big thing that you got X-amount of dollars a show, I forget what it was, and with my 45 shows, why—wow! Bonanza, you know!

*I'll say.*

I announced *Life Can Be Beautiful*, *Against the Storm*, *Road of Life*, *The O'Neils*, *Vic and Sade*, *The Emily Post Show*, *The Tony Wons Show*. Then (later) I gave them all up and an announcer by the name of Art Stark inherited them all. They made the announcers listen to all these things that I said (on the air) and they copied my way of doing it. I had a kind of throw-away thing: "Now look, girls, you don't have to listen if you don't want to. If you don't want to have the smoothest, most beautiful hands in town, well the heck with it. Turn me off, will you!" In other words, I just chatted with them and developed kind of a style. This is when Godfrey was just starting to come out of Washington. And so, the style hit and I got a lot of shows off it, but they made these poor guys try to imitate me when I went off. Art Stark came the closest to it and so he took over.

But I did *Life Can Be Beautiful* for a great many years. And *Vic and Sade*. It came out of Chicago, but I announced them in New York. But I've never to this day—and I never will now, of course, I've never seen *Vic and Sade*. I met Rush, the boy, you know, *Billy Idleson*. I met him at a restaurant out here one time during the war. I walked up to him and said, "I'm *Ralph Edwards*" and he said "I'm *Billy Idleson*." And I said, "Can you imagine? We were on the show together two years and never saw each other, because you were in Chicago." I announced from New York, because I was doing most of the *Proctor and Gamble* shows.

*Did you have anything to do with the Major Bowes Amateur Hour?*

Yes. I was the announcer of that for four years. A lot of funny things happened to me on that show. I had the hic-cups one time, the very first show that I was on, and I was living in one-room overlooking *Grant's Tomb* on 125th Street and *Riverside Drive* in New York. I had a towel in the broken window. You know, I had just come off poverty row there. And so, by the time I got down to the show, I was excited and hic-cupping and you know, I said, "Does anybody (hic) know (hic) how to stop (hic) hic-cups?" And a guy said, "Well, go around to the soda fountain, just around the corner, and get yourself a glass of water." I said, "(hic) Okay, now, I'll be right back. I promise you." So I went on and I said, "Listen, can you give me a glass of water?" So the fellow, instead of pouring water, put the fizz water. He turned it the other way, you know, like he was making an ice cream soda. So, I drank this thing. Now, I've really got a tornado going in me. "Now (hic) you're (hic) killing (hic) me!" I go back and say to the producer, *Paul LaPorte*, "(hic) Okay, I'm all (hic) set!" He says, "You can't go on with the hic-cups!" and I said, "I'll (hic) just go ahead." I walked up on the stage. All the people who were connected with the show—the producer, the director, and so on—used to sit in the front row, and I sat there, too. And the Major sat up at his table with the gong and the hammer that he hit it with. The producer gives the signal from the control booth and I'm thinking (hic) now, How am I (hic) gonna get over these hic-cups? The Major hits the gong and I say, "Four great care . . . Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto and Chrysler, bring you Major Bowes and His Original Amateur Hour . . ." I went right on, *Chuck*, and I never had a hic-cup the rest of the show.



*Beautiful!*

Well, you know, nerves will sometimes get you. But, I don't know. I've been in the business so long I go to sleep on pianos. During *Life Can Be Beautiful*, can you believe? I had so many shows, 'cause at night I would do *The Ben Bernie Show*, *The Hit Parade*, *The Phil Baker Show*, *Ninety-Nine Men and a Girl*, just a whole mess of them, with repeats if you please! You know, we would do two shows then, because there was no such thing as tape or recording. And I was pooped out, so, during my daytime shows, I would go to sleep and I'd tell Bill Meter, the organist, "If I'm not awake before Chi Chi and Papa David have stopped hitting each other, you wake me up." And I would go to sleep on that piano and I still can control myself, pretty much that way. You have to, in this business. No more hic-cups.

*Did you do a local New York show for the Automat?*

Yes. The Horn and Hardart Cafeterias, where you put in a nickle, at that time, and you get the pie or sandwich and

everything else. They had *The Horn and Hardart Children's Hour*. Paul Douglas, the actor, then an announcer, had done the show for six years. I took over for him and when I gave it up for *Truth or Consequences*, Ed Herlihy took it over. Ed had the show for twenty years, I think.

*You mentioned Truth or Consequences and, of course, we'd like to talk about that program, that great brain-child of yours. It was a new concept in radio quiz programs. How did you get the idea for it?*

The idea sprang from some of the games we used to play on the farm in Colorado, called "Heavy, Heavy Hangs Over Thy Head" or "Fine or Super Fine." You take an object from one of the people playing and you'd hold it over the person's head, the person who was "it." You'd be behind them and they couldn't see what it was. If they guessed it was "superfine" it was a girl's object, then okay, they wouldn't have to pay the consequences. But if it were in reality, in fact, a male object like a jack-knife or a sling-shot, or whatever you'd have on the farm, and they hadn't said "fine"—then they had not told the truth, so they'd have to pay the consequence, which was usually to kiss the girl, or do some crazy little thing.

But when I got to having so many shows that I started seeing boxtops in front of my eyes, I thought about having a show where I only had to work once a week, instead of all that time. So, I got to thinking that quiz shows were the trend at the time, but I thought, well, one quiz show is enough. Can you imagine that? There must be fifty thousand now! But, I thought, let's get a different slant. Let's do the old penalty angle and the consequence. So, I just jazzed it up more and made it more adaptable to pranks and stunts and that sort of thing. Of course, as time went on, we put in nostalgia, or the heart into it, and *This Is Your Life* sprang from that.

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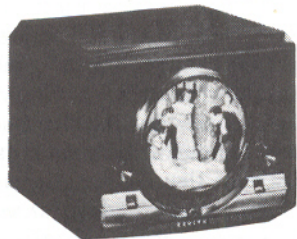
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*It's amazing how you had so many visual stunts in the days of radio.*

Yes. I remember the first review from *Variety*. It said, "When television comes, Truth or Consequences has to be the number one show because it is so visual." Well, there's a thing about that—two things.

One is, if you honestly do the things . . . if you say, "Alright, we're going to blindfold you, Mr. Jones. We're going to take you all around New York, and you're gonna have to guess where you end up. We'll tune you in, wherever you end up." And then you do just that, and you put a lot of sound effects to it, and he's on his way, and you hear river boats and all that kind of stuff, and then he ends up on the stage of the Winter Garden Theatre where, say, Olson and Johnson were playing in "Helzapoppin," and he's still blindfolded. He guesses that he was on one of the big ocean liners, because of the sound effects, and we took off the blindfold and there he is on the stage in front of fifteen hundred people. And, of course, they blast out and laugh!

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Or, you're at the Amphitheatre in Chicago playing a food show down there at the Stockyards, and you send the guy out with a baby buggy and his friend dressed as a little baby. And the guy starts to talk and the passer-by says, "How cute is the baby?" and the baby takes a cigar out and says, "Yeah? Do you want a whiff of my cigar?" Now, actually doing that is the license to do it, although it is visual. Radio really came alive with that.

The second thing is that your imagination built it even beyond what it might have been. We might have said, "Alright, it's George Washington's birthday. Now, Mr. Jones, we want you to climb this tree and we want you to sing 'Old MacDonald Had A Farm' in four choruses. If you can finish those four choruses before Mr. Smith, over here chops down the cherry tree, you'll win \$100. If you don't, you'll fall right into this tub of water." Okay, now the listening audience has a picture of a tree, a tub of water, a guy chopping, and you hear the chop-chop. Even though the tree weren't the biggest tree in the world, or the tub of water the deepest tub, or the man the greatest singer, or the ax the biggest ax . . . your imagination—whatever you wanted to make of the act—was okay. It was successful, I think, because you could take it beyond the realm of reality and put it into your creative thoughts and make of it whatever you wanted to.

*Once again, the imagination of the listener helped to build the magic of radio.*

You know it, Chuck. This is what, in a way, is lacking in television. Unless you have a supernatural or some kind of a foggy scrim to your project on television, whatever play you are doing, there is no great imagination. It's spelled out. It's like the movies. It's a different type of story-telling. You are right. Radio made you think.



*Absolutely. And let's think a little more about radio and some of those great memorable Truth or Consequences events. You changed the name of a town on your tenth anniversary, didn't you?*

Yes. "Truth or Consequences, New Mexico" now exists . . . the former Hot Springs, New Mexico, a county seat of Sierra County, halfway between Albuquerque and El Paso on Highway 85, a nice big four-lane freeway all the way. And Elephant Butte Lake is there, the second largest body of impounded water in the United States of America. How's that for selling that city?

*Wow!*

Really, I don't get a cent out of it, so don't think poorly of me.

*Why did Hot Springs, New Mexico agree to change its name to Truth or Consequences, New Mexico?*

For our tenth anniversary of Truth or Consequences, we were trying to think of something that would shake the people up in America . . . something that would make them aware of the fact that Truth or Consequences was still going strong. And so I had the writers and I bring in thoughts on what we might do. Al Simon was an idea man for me then and he came up with the idea of changing the name of some town or city to "Truth or Consequences." So we sent out feelers to Chambers of Commerce and we heard from three different cities who agreed to do it. And one, the most promising, was this county seat of Sierra County, Hot Springs, New Mexico. So I sent Ed Bailey, my producer, down to talk to them and the result was that we did just that. The city voted to change the name. They've voted three times since then, to maintain it, to retain it, and now it is permanently "Truth or Consequences, New Mexico."

*So Truth or Consequences will always be on the map of the United States.*

Yes, it has been for twenty years. Rand McNally put it on, the post office, letterheads, the newspapers—the Truth or Consequences *Herald*, and so on down the line.

*What about some of the great contests from the show? The Walking Man and so forth.*

Well, it may be interesting to you, Chuck, to know that the reason these contests started was my building a backfire to something that I had started and was sorry I started it.

Way back in '41, I brought a young lady out of the audience. I chose her in the warm-up, as we do to select our contestants, and she was a struggling secretary and we said, "You're going to be Cinderella and go to the ball!" And we gave her a gown and a mink coat and shoes and hairdo. And then I said, "This

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is from I. J. Fox, the mink coat; this is a Saks Fifth Avenue dress; these are I. Miller Shoes; this is a Charles of the Ritz hairdo." And I didn't get them free for doing that, I just wanted the audience to know these were quality goods. We brought her back at the end of the show and she looked beautiful. I said, "Here's your Prince Charming." It was before the war, but the Armory was aboard up there and a National Guardsman, a lieutenant, took her to the ball. And as she went out, I said, "Oh, by the way, all the dress and the mink coat and everything else, the handbag and the money, are yours to keep." Well, the listeners thought that was real great.

And then other packagers of shows and producers thought it was great, too. But you see, they didn't take the heart, they just stole the bones or something. But they got to the point, finally, around 1945 or 1946 and they said, "Right, Grant is buried in Grant's Tomb. You have won a Cadillac sedan!" So it was just terrible. The giveaway craze got to

be nonsense. So, I thought, well, yes, inadvertently we started this, so how do we stop it? So, one night on Truth or Consequences in 1945 I said, "Well, I'm sorry you haven't told the truth, but if you can tell me who 'Mr. Hush' is, you will win"—and it was a big satire and I thought I was satirizing this whole giveaway thing—"You will win a Cadillac sedan, a house and lot and a mink coat." And man, that shook them up. Next week I added three more fantastic things: a yacht, a year's supply of nylon hose, which in post-war was very difficult to get, and things like that.

Well, they started flying in from Boston, New Orleans and they'd raise their greedy little hands and I thought, "Now what've I done? I've got all these people here, getting this loot for nothing. When they guess off 'Mr. Hush', I'll make it work for some good." Which has been the theme of Truth or Consequences all through the 32 years of existence, Chuck, to turn the big things into something good.

At any rate, they guessed "Mr. Hush" as Jack Dempsey. Then we started "Mrs. Hush" and that was Clara Bow. And I didn't tell them who it was, but I said, "Now you folks who didn't get a chance, you listeners, with 'Mr. Hush,' you have a chance with 'Mrs. Hush.' Just send in, in 25 words or less, why we should all support the March of Dimes and try to end the polio epidemic. Include, if you please, a donation." Well, in those contests we raised over three million dollars for the March of Dimes. In the "Miss Hush" contest, who was Martha Graham, the dancer, we raised \$1,639,000 and put the American Heart Association in business coast-to-coast, as a volunteer agency.

It was the most powerful thing in rating-getting, attention-getting, next to the FDR Fireside speeches and the Joe Louis heavyweight fights. The "Hush" contests, the "Walking Man" and "Miss Hush" and all those, commanded, next to those two broadcasts, the highest ratings ever run up in radio in those days, Chuck.

*Chuck Schaden's*

### **SPEAKING OF RADIO**

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*How many of the Truth or Consequences shows incorporated the "This is Your Life" type feature?*

Well, the original "This is Your Life" was done on Truth or Consequences in 1946. And there was one before that in 1945 that had the flavor, and really was the seed that sprung into "This is Your Life." Instead of having the subject on stage, we tuned him in by remote control in Hawaii and took him to his home town, in North Dakota or somewhere like that, and went into the drug store and talked to the druggist, went into the church and talked to the minister, then to the school and talked to the teacher, and they talked two-way communication from his sick-bed in the naval hospital somewhere. I would guess, maybe, we have done, oh, a hundred acts that are on the "This is Your Life" theme on Truth or Consequences.

*This is Your Life made it as a program on its own, in 1948, on radio.*

That's right. I had Harry Von Zell in it first, trying to sell the show with him in it. But Truth or Consequences was so hot and strong a show, then, they wanted me in it and finally I said, "Okay, I'll do it." Then we sold it. But, it became increasingly difficult to be a devil on Saturday night and an angel on Wednesday. So I turned Truth or Consequences, the master of ceremonies chores, over to Jack Bailey first and then, of course, to Bob Barker. He is just fantastic.

*You did about two years on radio before you translated This is Your Life to television.*

Yes, I did. We did some marvelous radio shows. People still talk about them.

*Then on television, it was really a live television program and the element of surprise was quite an exciting thing.*

In those days there was no tomorrow! I mean, this was it. "This is Your Life" and we're live! You know, Lowell Thomas said "This is a sinister conspiracy." We were on tape then. I didn't know if we'd ever continue, though I would have. But he made a shambles of the show . . . and our ratings went way up, by just kidding around.

*Did you have much trouble keeping the subjects from knowing that they were going to be honored?*

No. That's the easiest angle of the whole show. The selection is the most difficult. There are so many to choose from and you only have one a week. Who's it going to be?

*Your life has been one of making people happy and for over 30 years your efforts in bringing fun and sentiment to millions and millions of radio and TV listeners has been a great reward for all of us. Thank you for sharing your memories.*

Thank you, Chuck.