

MASSA OF THE HOT, HOT SOUND

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**Tale of the Tarheel
whose tomfoolery led
him to radio fame and
fortune. His name—
Professor Kay Kyser**

FOR the next two lessons, our specimen for study and observation is a Tarheel of the genus Ridge Runner, which is somewhere about midway between a Hill Billy and a Mullet Chaser and slightly up the ladder of evolution from a Swamp Bug. And to prevent a shower of protests from the Swamp Bugs at the seemingly deliberate slur, I hasten to boast that I am a Swamp Bug and, with my tribe of Swamp Rats and Peckerwoods and all other creatures reared in the lowlands, really believe that Swamp Bugs are a jump up the scale from Ridge Runners. But the Swamp Bugs can afford to be generous this week with this Tarheel Ridge Runner. After all, he's our guest for examination.

He is afflicted with an epidemic of names—James King Kern Kyser—and, anchored to such a chain of K's, it's easy



to understand why they call him Kay, although his folks call him James. It's a wonder somebody didn't call him Klux back in the Old North State. Maybe somebody did. He calls himself Professor Kyser and behaves as a freshman. Actually, however, Mr. Kyser is a sensitive student of his business, an intelligent southerner, vintage of 1906, and a graduate of one of the really great universities of the nation, University of North Carolina.

Mr. Kyser drives a Model T jalopy, the first car he ever owned. There's an anchor on the running-board. The car's name is Passion because, the professor says, "it heats up so quick." That's almost the sub-freshman touch, but Mr. Kyser is a showman and Passion is a great prop. Passion looks swell in pictures and other publicity riggings. In fact, Passion is swell anywhere.

Mr. Kyser smokes nickel cigars and brags about it. He plugs Lucky Strike cigarettes, but the professor, as democratic as hash, says, "I like nickel cigars. I'm always gonna like nickel cigars. I like hominy grits. Even if I get to be a millionaire, I'm gonna like hominy grits. I won't change over to caviar just because I've got money."

Now, this department has no grudge against "hominy" grits. It and sidemeat make an excellent daily diet if a fellow enjoys a nice quiet siege of pellagra. It is made of corn, the foundation of many excellent things, but Mr. Kyser, being a milk-drinker, wouldn't know anything about that, even though he is a Tarheel and of the Ridge Runners who never confined corn wholly to the pro-saic task of, with the aid of lye, converting itself into "hominy" grits, which are simply swollen bits of corn that leave the stomach in the same shape. If Mr. Kyser goes very far beneath the Smith and Wesson line and insists upon calling them "hominy" grits, he will be rebuked. They are just grits and, if you are very hungry, they can be taken twice daily with ham gravy. But any man who says grits are better than caviar is either in the show business or is running for office and trying to kid the Peckerwood vote. But, after all, Mr. Kyser is a North Carolinian, which has given us many things, including Mr. Buncombe, for whom a county down there is named. Mr. Buncombe gave us a word for it. There is positively no connection between Mr. Kyser and Mr. Buncombe. But we suggest that when Mr. Kyser talks with northern press-agents and reporters about the glories of nickel cigars and grits, he's haunting the memory of the lamented Brother Buncombe and is pulling the legs of the damyanaks, which, although it's fun, is not a test worthy of the renowned professor's skill.

Mr. Kyser was born in Rocky Mount, and don't ever trim it to Rocky Mt. It's one of those pleasant, proud southern towns where the folks have beaten their plowshares into spindles and resent being called the nation's economic problem children.

But James King Kern Kyser was a problem child. This department contends that any man who likes grits better than caviar still is. His mother, Mrs. Paul B. Kyser, is seventy-five and, according to the New York reporters who fake cynicism and love sentiment, is just about the most remarkable lady who ever held the pack at bay in an

interview. From her the boys really got some information about James King Kern, so forth.

She and her daughter, Mrs. W. C. Noell, came to town recently, watched her boy dash here and yonder, and reckoned "the Lord didn't intend anyone, bird or chicken, to live at the pace James sets for himself. One of these days he's going to fly apart."

Then she recalled that it was back on June 18, 1906, that she looked at James and said, "You're a strange-looking baby; wonder what kind of a druggist you'll make."

BEING druggists was a habit with the Kysers, and it just never entered the mother's head that James wouldn't follow the family tradition. His father, Paul Kyser, was a good druggist. A druggist in a town like Rocky Mount is not just a pill-roller. He's an institution. He must be a bit of a doctor, lawyer, preacher, philosopher and a wizard of a financier, for folks hate to take medicine almost as badly as they hate to pay for it.

Mrs. Kyser had read pharmacy books to her nearly blind husband, and they had taken the state exams together. He got the best mark ever made in the state and she was only a whisker behind him. So they reckoned James would follow suit.

"I'm seventy-five," said Mrs. Kyser. "I don't know why I confess it. I could say I am seventy or sixty-nine. There's no record of my birth. The family Bible was burned.

"James was a cut-up as a boy. He was into everything, always breaking the neighbors' windows and such. One day I got him to say a prayer in the hope he would turn over a new leaf. He asked the Lord to make him a good boy and stop the wind from blowing the branches of a tree, outside his room, against the wall and scaring him. Then he got up and lammed his sister, Virginia, in the stomach because she had snickered at him."

"I got even, though," said Virginia, who is Mrs. W. C. Noell. "Once I went away on a vacation and was just begin-

ning to have fun when mother wired for me to come home and look after James. When I got back he was in bed and nobody could make him take any medicine. I found a handful of change under his pillow, bribe money from mother. James took one look at me and opened his mouth. I poured the medicine down.

"Mother had the babies, but I reared them. James hated liver."

"That's right," James cut in. "But if I didn't eat it, Virginia would whale the daylight out of me."

"One day when we had liver," Virginia laughed, "James looked at it and told me, 'All right, Virginia, let's go out to the woodshed and get it over with so I can enjoy the rest of the meal.' I didn't make him eat it."

The Kysers are religious folks but are not fanatical church-goers. Back in Kay's youth, the family often got together on Sunday evenings and sang hymns. Every member of the family could make music of some sort. The neighbors got to dropping in, and it was then and there that James began being an orchestra-leader, although he never intended to make his living at it.

Mrs. Noell was in New York shortly before Kyser left for the West, and her brother's background is understood when Mrs. Noell tells a few things about the Kysers. Right off the bat, she sets out to clarify a few ideas many persons have about southerners. The idea that many persons think southerners use "you all" (pronounced yawl) in the singular irks her.

She explained that "you all" is used as a collective expression. "We're educated people," she said. She still likes to bristle about the War Between the States. "We don't say Maw and Paw," she said.

Mrs. Noell neglected to explain that the South is a huge section and that its people speak many different dialects. And while it's true that, in many classes, "yawl" and "Maw" are not used, it's also true that among some persons "Pa

and Ma" are used, as is "we-uns." The expressions were good enough for Shakespeare. There is no need of trying to explain Kay Kyser's accent. It's North Carolinian. It wouldn't fit a Texan or a Mississippian. The expression "he has a southern accent" is silly. Prof. Kyser has a North Carolina accent. There is no standard of dialects in the South. The section was settled by Scotch, Irish, English, Spaniards, French and Africans, and no two states have the same dialects.

"We say 'Mama' and never 'Maw,'" Mrs. Noell explained. "James often writes to Mama and says, 'Mama, I wouldn't take a nickel for you.' He still is as boyish as he was when he went to school back home.

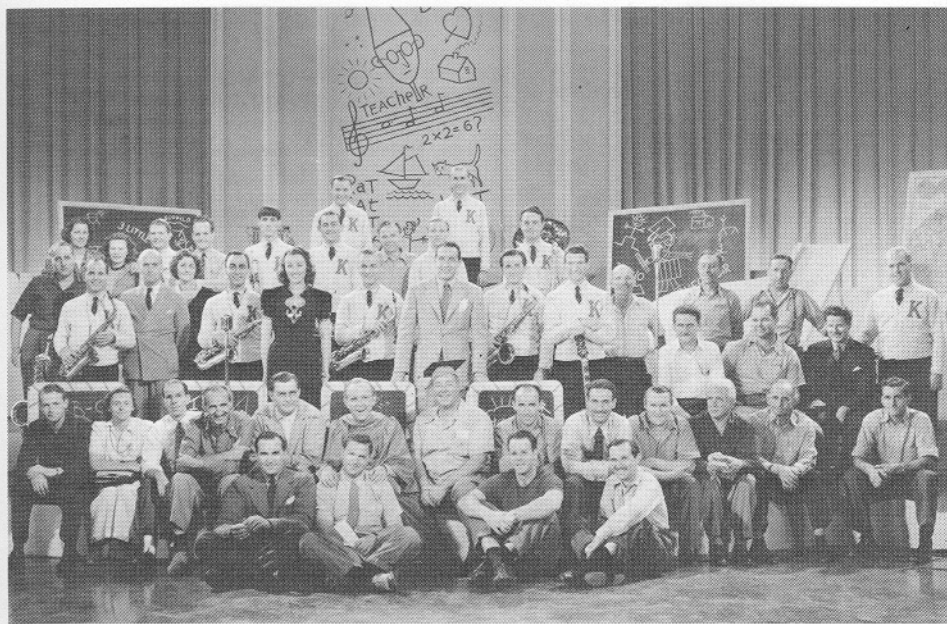
"He likes to baby Mama. In a way, he was a holy terror as a youngster. When he would come home from school, he'd be bubbling over with energy. He'd barge into the house, run to the dining-room table and pick up his knife and fork and beat a rat-a-tat-tat on the cups and saucers. We'd tell him to stop and he'd say, 'Aw a fellow can't do anything around here.' Then he'd beat the silver again and go, 'a boom-boom, boom-a-de-boom-boom.'"

When Kay was about a year old, the family house burned. All the family possessions, even the Bible, were lost. A new house was built and Mrs. Kyser took in "paying guests" (roomers, not boarders) and helped pay off the loss.

"Mama took James to the Jamestown Exposition when he was two," Mrs. Noell recalled. "He ran away and she found him near the drummer in a brass band.

"James is a human dynamo and he must eat often to replenish his energy. He's a clean-liver. He doesn't drink and he doesn't allow any of the boys in the band to drink."

Ever since Kay has been away from home his family has kept up a steady flow of correspondence with him. Mrs. Noell was surprised when she came across a packet of letters she had written to him over a period of years. They were in one of his trunks. She began to read them. The abundance of



KAY KYSER'S COLLEGE OF MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE — "FACULTY PHOTO"

quotations from the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick which she had included in her letters interested her. Such quotations as, "If you can be pleasant till 10 o'clock in the morning, you can be pleasant the rest of the day."

Mrs. Kyser saw her reading the letters and demanded, "Why are you reading James' letters?"

Virginia said, "Because I wrote them."

The Kyser family, Virginia said, was reared on the principles of education, culture and "your word is your bond."

"YOU must be a good-liver," Virginia said. "You must have unlimited credit. The more honor you get, the more humble you must be. Labor hath its rewards. James has gotten where he is without any outside pull or finances or help from anyone. Hard work and being eternally on the job is what did it for him."

Whoa! What do you mean "no help from anyone"? With a family like his, what else could a fellow do except go out and make them proud of him. It seems to us that Prof. Kyser had a heap

of help—from his mother and sister.

Kay romped his way through school in Rocky Mount and then went over to Chapel Hill to the university, determined to study law. He was a leader right off the bat and was accepted into Sigma Nu and Alpha Kappa Psi. And he won many honors, including leadership of the junior prom, and was elected to the orders of "The Grail" and "The Golden Fleece."

It was in 1926 that he turned seriously to music, quite by accident. He could make noise of a sort on a clarinet. He discovered the university was without a dance orchestra, so he set about to organize one. The boys elected him leader—not because he was such great shakes as a musician, but because he was so popular in college. He intended to give up the band when he was graduated.

In college he produced a minstrel show in his freshman year, another in the sophomore year. And as a junior he wrote, directed, produced and did everything for three extravaganzas. After that he went in for the more serious arts, the "Carolina Play Makers,"

KAY KYSER

producers of original folk-plays. He also was cheer-leader.

But the band began to hog his time. "I was musically inclined," Kay said. "Got it from my mother's side. She taught piano and voice, and with her relatives we were able to have a small symphony which gathered at our home on Sunday afternoons. My sister, Virginia, has taught music appreciation and history of the opera for about twenty-five years."

His college band was so popular and so busy that Kay began thinking about making music his business. Six of the fourteen present members of his band were in his original. The band's first pro engagement was in Oxford, N. C., in the fall of 1926. The band got \$60, had six members, and knew only six songs.

"We were not smart enough to mix the order in which we played our numbers," Kay said, "and about the third time around the audience began to call the next tune for us."



KAY KYSER AND GINNY SIMMS

Kyser still had the idea of completing his law course in the back of his mind until his band got so popular. Several members were graduated a year before him but stuck around and played.

But in 1928 the band was rehearsing in Girard Hall and Kay noticed a middle-aged couple sitting in the back. That was in April.

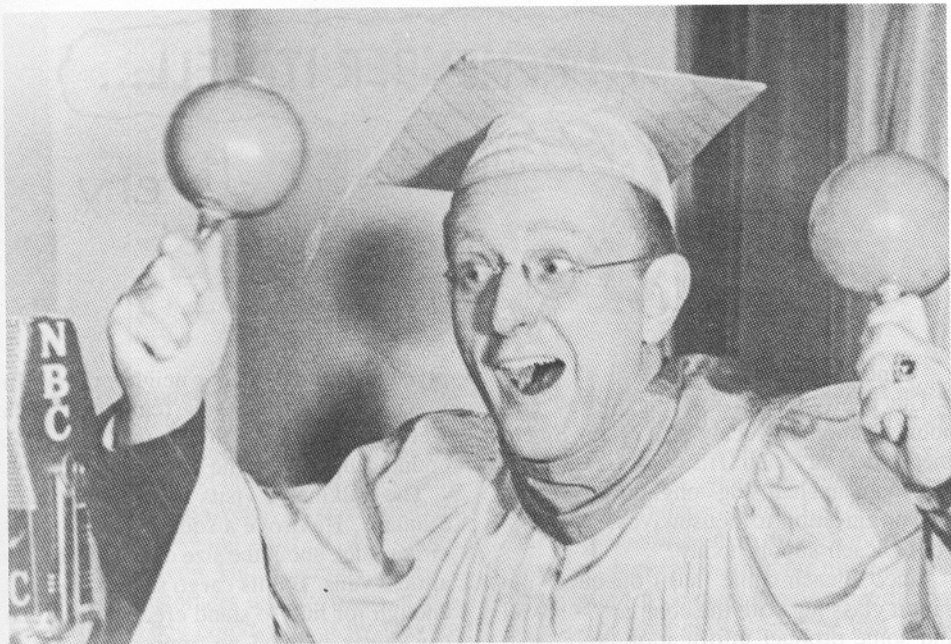
"The man later approached me," Kay said, "and said he was driving back north from Florida and was stopping to see the university. He decided to offer us a contract for the summer at his resort, eighteen miles from Cleveland, known as Mentor Beach. After conferring with the boys, we decided to take it if he would agree for me to return to the university in June to receive my diploma. He agreed, and my next problem was to get the professors to allow me to double up and complete my courses about a month prior to the end of school. This was arranged and we set out to fill our first long contract. It began on May 19."

Mr. Kyser forgot all about Blackstone. He forgot about his clarinet and directed his band without an instrument, except the baton, which he still does.

The band had selected "Thinking of You" as its theme because it was the first tune the boys played back in 1926, when it was composed. They played at about forty of the leading schools of the Nation, and then set out to make a real name for themselves. It is one of the most democratic bands in the business. Kyser is the boss because he was elected. Hal Kemp had organized a band at North Carolina a few years before Kay, and the two men still are fast friends. His other good friends in the business are Fred Waring, Guy Lombardo, Rudy Vallee, Benny Goodman and Ted Fio-Rito.

HE WAS known in radio several years ago. But he wasn't a big name. His sense of tomfoolery was popular, but he wasn't getting the audience, although he played sustaining programs on national hookups and even had sponsors.

Then one day he went into a huddle with himself and decided a sort of a musical college, with questions and all



THE OLD PROFESSOR HIMSELF, KAY KYSER

that, might click. So Kyser's College of Musical Knowledge was founded, endowed by the boys, and Kay became the professor. It began clicking. One day Kay was shaving and a friend turned on the radio. A band was playing and the friend asked Kay the name of the song. Kyser hummed the melody to himself and then named it.

"Hey!" He put down his razor. "That's an idea. Instead of announcing titles, we'll sing them."

The band employed Ginny Simms as vocalist and immediately the word got around that she and Kay were either married or about to be. He watches out for her, sees that she gets the publicity breaks and all that.

Then one day, not so long ago, Mrs. Kyser opened a letter from Kay which began like this:

"Ginny says I must tell you first—"

Mrs. Kyser gasped, "Oh, Lord, he's done it."

"Done what?" asked sister Virginia.

"Married Ginny Simms, I suppose," said Mrs. Kyser.

Sister Virginny took the letter to see what had happened to Kay and Singer

Ginny. What the letter really said was, "Ginny says I must tell you first, I've just signed a contract with the American Tobacco Company." (Lucky Strikes, and it was one for Kyser.)

On the subject of marriage, Sister Virginia says, "I'd like to see him married. That's the ultimate thing."

Mrs. Kyser says, "Ginny's a lovely girl."

Prof. Kyser says nothing and makes hay.

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