

Celebrating Radio's Golden Age



Thirty Years of Old Time Radio

BY STEVE DARNALL

In May of 1970, the Beatles were still just breaking up, Vietnam was a "work in progress," and Chuck Schaden was going on the radio to play, of all things, old radio programs.

"I may have had a thousand broadcasts at that time," Schaden recalls today from his Morton Grove home. "I rolled up my sleeves and was trading like a madman. I traded with anybody who had something I didn't have. Some weeks I might've gotten a hundred reels of tape in the mail.

"I wanted to share them with others," he continues, "just as a person who collects coins or stamps wants to show them off. I had enough people coming over to my living room, sitting and listening to these shows, and thought, 'I'm running out of potato chips. Maybe I could do this on the air.'"

Thirty years later, the Beatles are a fixture on oldies station, Vietnam is the stuff of history books, and Schaden—whose collection of shows has grown to about fifty

*Steve Darnall is a freelance writer and actor whose father introduced him to *Those Were The Days* in 1977. His wife is dedicated to the proposition that because a woman is 35, or older, romance in life need not be over.*

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times its original size—is still hosting *Those Were The Days* every Saturday.

Since making his debut on a small station in Evanston (*TWTD* moved to its current home, classical station WNIB/WNIZ, in 1975), Schaden has showcased the era known as "radio's golden age."

Generally acknowledged to cover the late '20s to the early '60s, it was an age when a cornucopia of dramas, comedies, serials and swing music was available anywhere in America, all for free. Many of the shows and personalities Schaden features—Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, Edward R. Murrow, *The Shadow*, *Great Gildersleeve*, Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds," Herb Morrison's eyewitness account of the Hindenburg disaster—have become history in their own right.

They're shows, and days, Schaden recalls well: growing up in suburban Norridge in the 1940s, he used "to haunt the radio stations as a kid, long before I thought I would be doing anything like this."

Occasionally, his father (a banker in the Wrigley Building) would introduce him to local on-air personalities like Ernie Simon ("A funny, zany, off-the-wall kind of disk jockey, for the times") who doubled as bank clientele. Other times, he and a pal would take a Saturday and head into Chicago, searching radio stations for discarded scripts and sitting in the audience of Chicago-based programs like *Junior Junction*

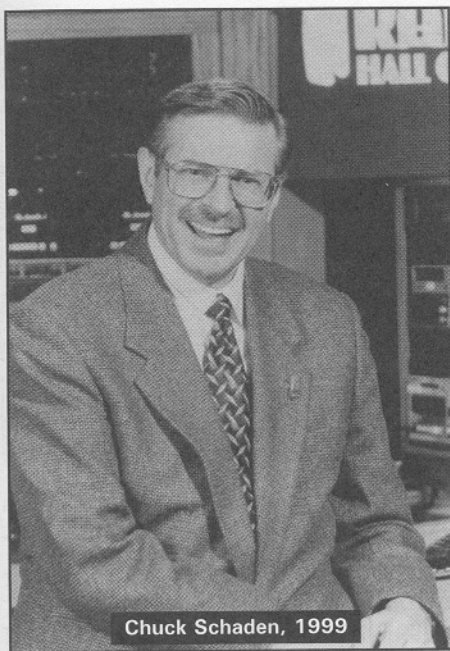


PHOTO BY DON POINTER

and *Curtain Time*. (The latter was sponsored by Mars Candy, which meant “a free Mars candy bar —after the show, so you wouldn’t wrinkle wrappers.”)

They’re memories Schaden freely —and sometimes wistfully— shares with his listeners. Even so, he’s the first to admit that he’s living *with* the past rather than *in* it: you’ll never hear Schaden climb on a soapbox to say life was better before we had the polio vaccine or the Voting Rights Act.

“I don’t think anybody really wants to live in the past and say ‘Forget about all this,’” he says. “I think what they would like is the *gentleness* of those times— the simple courtesies. You go back and visit to see what it was, and hopefully, we can try to learn from the past and grab a few values while we’re there and bring them forward.”

It doesn’t hurt that many of those shows, like the whimsical *Vic and Sade*, the realistic western *Gunsmoke* and the long-running dramatic anthology *Suspense*, are still pretty entertaining decades after the fact.

Other shows may creak with age but still offer fascinating historical glimpses into an era when vaudevillians like Joe Penner, a serial like *The Romance of Helen Trent* (dedicated to the then-risky proposition “that because a woman is 35, and more, romance in life need not be over”) or *Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons* (which took the concept of expository dialogue to an extreme) kept the nation glued to their sets. Shows like *Easy Aces* or *One Man’s Family* may be an acquired taste, but they certainly provide a healthy overview of radio history.

“I’ve hardly met a radio show I didn’t like,” Schaden admits. “I’ve had many radio shows that I’ve liked less than other shows, and there are shows that I know are not anywhere near as popular with the audience but I feel they have to be played. I’m looking back at radio, and this was part of radio, so I’m going to play it. I know in advance I’m doing it for the greater glory of radio.”

Schaden cites *The Chicago Theater of the Air* as an example. Devoted mainly to light operettas, the show was “hampered by a lengthy speech in the middle of it all by [then-*Chicago Tribune* publisher] Colonel Robert R. McCormick, [who] speaks on the radio like he’s speaking at a banquet after everyone’s had cigars and brandy. It’s the longest 10 minutes...”

“But you have to play that show once in a while,” he says, “because it’s part of Chicago history and part of radio history.”

One might suggest that after three decades on the air, Schaden could say the same thing about *Those Were The Days*. In this era of shock-jocks, broadcast mergers, narrowcasting and baffling format changes (all-sports-talk?), *TWTD* has been a calm eye in the radio hurricane.

In the process, Schaden has enjoyed a longer run than practically any of the shows he features. Of course, a lot of that has to

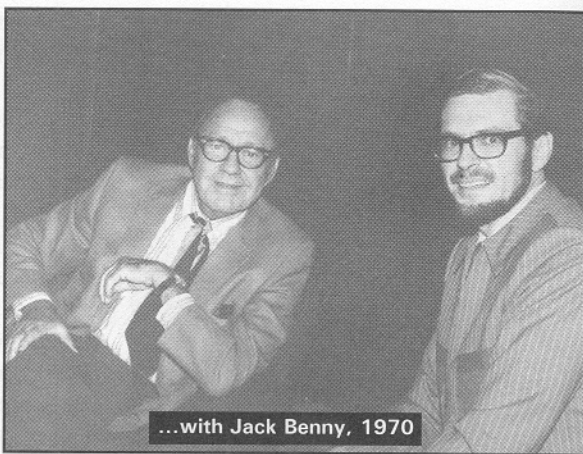
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do with the shows themselves, but Schaden's engaging personality is a vital component.

"Chuck is infectious in that his interest in and enthusiasm for the subjects he's talking about, it just explodes through the radio," says Bruce DuMont, a longtime friend of Schaden's and the founder and President of the Museum of Broadcast Communications (and host of WLS Radio's *Beyond The Beltway*). "There are programs that play old-time radio shows in other markets around the country. What's missing from those programs is the spark, the word pictures that Chuck creates. He's able to provide the context of those programs."

"I think what he did surrounding the 50th anniversary of World War II may be one of the most interesting and historically significant projects ever created for radio," DuMont says, referring to a four-year period (December 1991 to September 1995) when *TWTD* looked back at World War II, one week at a time. "It wasn't a quick, slapdash, 13-week series: you relived World War II!

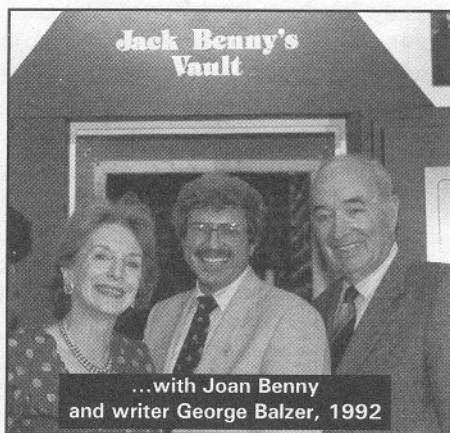
"Chuck Schaden is on the radio and he

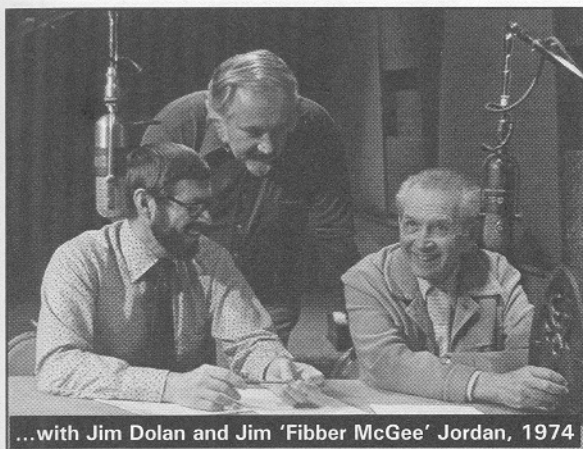


performs a service, and he loves being on the radio, but he's not on the radio to fulfill some ego need," DuMont continues. "He is on the radio to express his knowledge of radio history and he wants other people to be as excited about what he's excited about. I think that's one of the reasons he's been so successful. Here's a guy who loves his job, he loves what he talks about, and I think that's why people have so much affection for him."

"I knew before I went on the radio that I did not have the talent to be a disk jockey or an announcer," Schaden admits. "What I had, if anything, was the ability to communicate my enthusiasm for the subject. When it came time to do this I thought 'Well, maybe there'll be people who never heard these [shows]. I'm going to tell them a little bit about them.' What I've always tried to do is first, entertain; second, inform."

Whenever possible, Schaden has provided additional insight into those shows by interviewing the people who worked on them. Along the way, he's spoken to legendary performers like Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, Rudy Vallee, and Jim Jordan, but he's also talked with producers, writers, musicians, band leaders, sound-effects men and veteran character actors like Lurene





...with Jim Dolan and Jim 'Fibber McGee' Jordan, 1974

Tuttle, Parley Baer and Elliott Lewis.

"It was very satisfying for me in the beginning to play a program for you to hear," Schaden says, "but that wore off for me quickly. I wanted to know more about it. I wanted to tell you more about it."

Schaden recalls that not every subject came before the microphone willingly. "There were a few people who came to the interview thinking 'Oh, God, it's going to be another interview with somebody who doesn't know a thing about my career and I have to put up with this because I'm appearing in some play here.' And then, as they found out that I knew what I was talking about and I was asking questions that were appropriate to their careers and knew something about them, they warmed up and gave me wonderful interviews."

Such research is especially valuable when one realizes that actors of that era—many of whom are no longer with us—rarely received on-air credit, let alone recordings of their efforts. Actress Shirley Bell Cole, radio's *Little Orphan Annie* in the 1930s, recalls that "we never had access to copies of the program all the years that we worked."

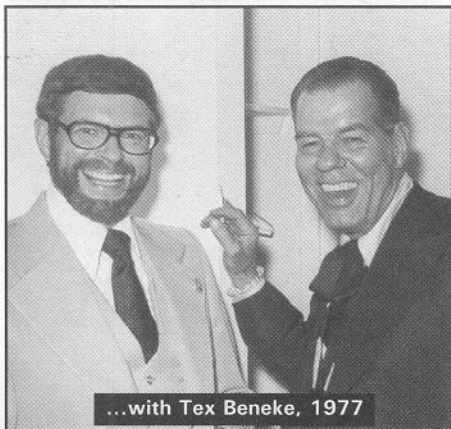
That changed for Cole decades later when Schaden "was nice enough to send me copies of maybe three or four tapes of

the *Annie* show that he had. He just sent them. I never could track them down. To have those tapes... they're priceless."

DuMont remembers receiving an even greater gift in the early-1980s. "[Chuck's] donation of his 50,000 hours of radio was, without question, the most significant early contribution made to the Museum," he recalls. "He wanted to have it preserved in one place, but he [also] wanted to be able to share it with his audience for

the rest of his life... As the Radio Hall of Fame evolved, Chuck was very much involved with that. In building the exhibitry that we have, he's been there, and his fans have been there to provide funding for the creation of the Jack Benny exhibit, the Fibber McGee and Molly exhibit... He has intertwined a radio career, a successful business career, a philanthropic civic involvement career, into one terrific package."

Would it be a cliché to suggest that beside every successful man is a great woman? Schaden is quick to give credit to Ellen, his wife of almost forty-four years, for her support since day one of *Those Were The Days*. He recalls when, in 1974, he decided to leave his day job as a community



...with Tex Beneke, 1977

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newspaper editor and try to make a living from his radio work and from some free lance public relations clients. "The real key to all of that was my wife. I said, 'This is what I'd like to do, I think I can do this. We might be tight for a long time, or for a little time,' and she said 'Go for it.' I've always had that encouragement."

Bruce DuMont says, "I frequently say to Ellen, 'The other side of this is somebody's going to do a story about *you* someday. You have had a husband who, for thirty years, has avoided every single chore that everybody else has got to do on a Saturday afternoon!'"

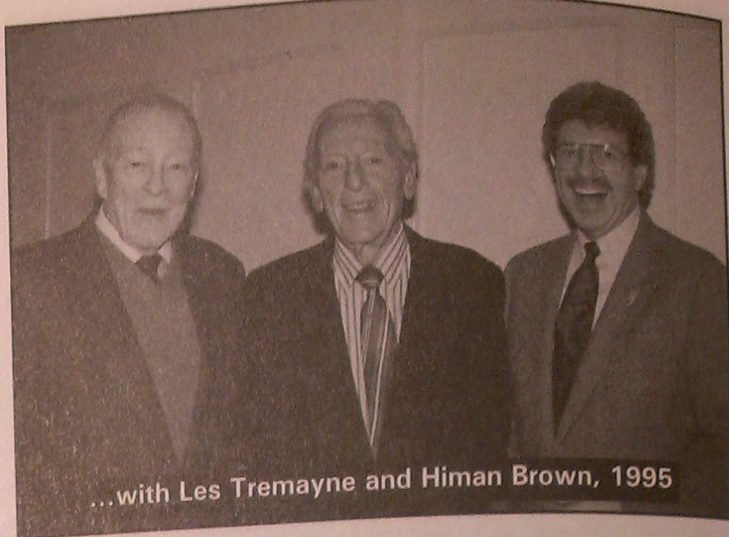
Since 1987, Schaden has avoided his weekend chores by broadcasting from the Museum's Radio Hall of Fame Studio — making him, as he jokes, "a museum piece."

Although the public is welcome to visit the studio while *TWTD* is on the air,



Ellen and Chuck Schaden, 1999

PHOTO BY DON POINTER



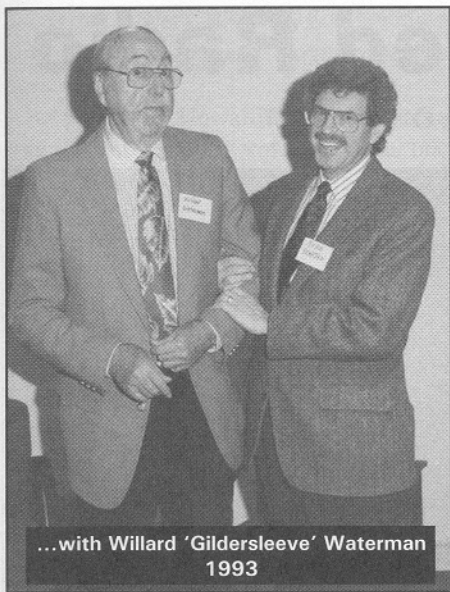
...with Les Tremayne and Himan Brown, 1995

Schaden's not far off when he sums up the scene as "a guy sitting behind a microphone, across from an engineer playing tapes, near a guy answering phones. There's not a lot to see."

Even so, "Some people come in and spend ten minutes, some people come in and spend two hours. It always amazes me, though, as the guy up there doing the show, that people come in five minutes before the end of a tape and they hear the end of an old show, and then they hear me talking about the show for a minute or two, and then I have a commercial. And at the point where I start the commercial, people get up and walk out!"

When they do, however, they're greeted by the banner commemorating Schaden's 1993 induction into the Museum's Radio Hall of Fame. It's a reminder that over the span of three decades, Schaden's gone from being a hobbyist to a successful entrepreneur (his Metro Golden Memories store, devoted to nostalgic merchandise, is in its 24th year of business) and a respected radio historian.

He's seen the old shows embraced by people who weren't even born when *Suspense* and *Yours Truly*, *Johnny Dollar* (generally acknowledged as the last exhibits of radio's golden age) went off the air in 1962. Clearly, for Schaden, these are the days, and there's no end in sight.



...with Willard 'Gildersleeve' Waterman
1993

"I'm a neat" —read that as *tidy*-- "guy," he says. "When I do the first show of the 31st year, I'm committing myself to 35 years. I would be real unhappy to do thirty-one and a half years. I'm delighted to be here. I've gotten a sense of value in this community. I don't ever want to give this up." ■



...with Shirley Bell Cole at Chuck's
induction into the Radio Hall of Fame, 1993



HERE ARE SOME LONG-RUNNING OLD TIME RADIO PROGRAMS

5 YEARS

Life of Riley
Life with Luigi
Lights Out

6 YEARS

Abbott and Costello

8 YEARS

Jimmy Durante
Phil Harris and Alice Faye

10 YEARS

Ozzie and Harriet

11 YEARS

Inner Sanctum

Red Skelton

13 YEARS

Mr. District Attorney

16 YEARS

Fred Allen
Eddie Cantor
Dr. Christian
Rudy Vallee

18 YEARS

Bergen and McCarthy
Burns and Allen
Cavalcade of America
First Nighter
Great Gildersleeve

19 YEARS

Bob Hope

20 YEARS

Suspense

21 YEARS

Lux Radio Theatre

22 YEARS

Fibber McGee and Molly

23 YEARS

Gangbusters

Jack Benny

25 YEARS

Bing Crosby

27 YEARS

One Man's Family

30 YEARS

Those Were The Days

Voice of Firestone

31 YEARS

Amos 'n' Andy

35 YEARS

Breakfast Club