

# MEMORIES OF

## CHUCK SCHADEN CHATS WITH THE CAST OF THE FIBBER MC GEE RADIO SHOW

It was not so long ago when we had a rather rare opportunity to sit down and visit with four of the people who played a very important part in the Fibber McGee and Molly radio series. Chatting informally (with our trusty tape recorder capturing all the memories) were JIM JORDAN who starred as Fibber; HAL PEARY who created the role of Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve; GALE GORDON who was Mayor LaTrivia; and PHIL LESLIE who, with Don Quinn, wrote the show.

I asked Jim Jordan when he first worked with Hal Peary. Jim's brow furled as he tried to remember...

**HAL PEARY:** Let me refresh your memory, Jim. It was *Kaltenmeyer's Kindergarten*.

**JIM JORDAN:** No kidding?

**HAL:** Yeah.

**JIM:** Was I on that show?

**HAL:** Yes, I think so! You and Marion did a couple of Irish kids, didn't you?

**JIM:** You know, Chuck threw me for a loop. I couldn't any more remember when I first worked with you — it seemed to me I worked with you forever.

**HAL:** No. What happened was that you had an Italian musician — I think he worked on your show, too, at one time...

**JIM:** Don Mangano.

**HAL:** Don Mangano — and he was supposed to be on *Kaltenmeyer's Kindergarten*. And he was snowbound someplace, and somebody said, "Well, there's a guy outside—" oh, it was Clarence Menzer, the production manager. He says "There's an actor out there, he's just started to work here. He's Portugese, he ought to be able to do an Italian." So they came out and got me, and I played, you know, like four or five lines. I think I was somebody's father. And that was the first time I met Marion and Jim.

**CHUCK:** That was, of course, in Chicago.

**HAL:** Yeah, and then that occasioned a big thing. Right after that they hired me to do a

Chinese Laundryman by the name of **Gooley Fooley**. It just shows you how talent gets out.

**CHUCK:** Hal, when did you first come on the McGee show?

**HAL:** 1937. Something like that.

**JIM:** '38, I think.

**HAL:** No, I was still there in '37, running out of the studio in the warm-up, don't you remember?

**JIM:** Oh, did you do that?

**HAL:** Yeah! They used to hire me to do a part, and then occasionally they'd put me out in the audience, and somebody'd — what was the routine, do you remember?

**JIM:** You yelled—

**HAL:** Let me out of here, or something?

**JIM:** No, you were chasing **Bill Thompson** across the stage. Is that the one you mean?

**HAL:** Well, no, somebody'd say—

**JIM:** You'd say "Sanborn! Sanborn!"

**HAL:** Yeah, that's right.

**JIM:** And then I'd stop you and say, "What're you doing?" and you'd say, "Chasin' Sanborn."

**HAL:** But prior to that, Jim, I would just sit out in the audience and a guy came out to warm it up, I guess it was **Harlow Wilcox**, and I finally said, "Hey, what's the name of this show?" and he said "**Fibber McGee and Molly**" and I said "LET ME OUTA HERE!" I think I came to see somebody else, I can't remember.

**PHIL LESLIE:** I never had the chance to write any of that stuff, that sparkling stuff like "Chasin' Sanborn." I came too late.

# WISTFUL VISTA



**FAMILY PORTRAIT**—Who says 'tain't funny when Fibber McGee and his frenetic family pose for a vintage 1890 tintype? This photo from a 1948 Radio Album shows (seated, from left) announcer Harlow Wilcox, Jim and Marion Jordan, writer Don Quinn, "Old Timer" Bill Thompson. (Standing, from left) "Doc Gamble" Arthur Q. Bryan, orchestra leader Billy Mills, the King's Men (R. Robinson, Ken Darby, J. Dodson, B. Linn), sound man-producer Frank Pitman, and "Mayor LaTrivia" Gale Gordon.

**JIM:** Don Quinn used to work in the audience, too. In the warm-up, I'd say, somebody would whisper in my ear, and I'd say, "Is there a doctor in the house?" and he'd stand up, way over by the door, and say "Yes, I'm a doctor!" and I'd say "Hi, doc!"

**HAL:** Do you remember when I also played Peary the Portugese Piccolo Player in Ted Weems Band? That's when Perry Como was on the show, and Cuthrie Washburn, and Red Ingles, and the whistler, what was his name?

**JIM:** Elmo Tanner. I saw Elmo Tanner when I was down in Burmingham. I had a valve job, you know, down at the University of Alabama. And Elmo's living there. He's in the implement business.

**HAL:** Still whistling?

**JIM:** I don't know.

**HAL:** You know, I played a guy called George Fditch, you haven't forgotten that. Don Quinn was wonderful with names. From Gooye Fooey I went to a guy called George Fditch, and I even played a mayor at one time called Apple-puss, it was done by Tom Post, and then Tom didn't do it. His name was Appleby, wasn't it? Mayor Appleby?

**JIM:** On our show?

**HAL:** Yeah! Tom Post used to do it.

**JIM:** I know Tom used to be on the show.

**HAL:** Yeah, and he was ill or something, so

Continued . . .

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I doubled a guy called **Mayor Appleby**, and he used to call me Apple-puss. That didn't last long. I became **George Fditch**, and later on when the voice got kind of well-known, they changed it to **George Gildersleeve**. I moved in next door to you. And that didn't sound too good; that's how we came by **Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve**. Then I got a \$10 raise, you know.

**JIM:** I got deducted five bucks!

**CHUCK:** Gale, when did you first come onto the **Fibber McGee and Molly** scene?

**GALE GORDON:** 1941. For a one-shot. For a character named **Otis Cadwallader**, a boy-friend of Molly's.

**JIM:** That's a show I'll never forget. We were gonna put on the dog and he was coming through town, and we wanted to have a nice dinner and so we wanted to make him think we were rich, so we got the guy next door to wear his tuxedo and come over and act as butler.

**HAL:** And I was the guy next door. I've got a recording of that.

**JIM:** That was the funniest radio show I think we ever did. He was standing right behind this little guy McGee, see, after he's doing him this favor, trying to help him out, he sat there and just couldn't resist telling Cadwallader what a rat he had living next door.

**PHIL:** And you ran him around as a butler nearly like crazy; you took every advantage of him possible. It was a cute show.

**JIM:** Yes, it was.

**CHUCK:** When did **Mayor LaTrivia** first appear on the scene? Do you recall exactly?

**GALE:** No, I don't recall exactly — it was a few weeks after that —

**JIM:** You did something in between **Cadwallader** and **LaTrivia**, what was it, **Williams**, or something?

**PHIL:** Well, now, Jim, he did something between **LaTrivia** and **LaTrivia**. There came a time when we dropped the **LaTrivia** character for a while—

**GALE:** When I went in the service.

**PHIL:** When you went into the service. Then you came out, and I don't remember exactly why the decision was made — **Mayor LaGuardia** had died in New York, and **LaTrivia** was sort of a name picked up from **LaGuardia** by **Don Quinn**. I don't know whether that was the reason or not, but then Gale played **Foggy Williams**, the weatherman. And he was never quite sure about anything, you know: "The weather tomorrow is clear, probably, if it doesn't turn rainy. . . ." he was always in a fog.

**GALE:** **Foggy Williams**. That's right. I'd forgotten.

**PHIL:** For a couple of seasons, and then you went back to being **LaTrivia**.

**JIM:** Which was the great, strong character.

**CHUCK:** **LaTrivia** came in after **Gildersleeve** had left the scene. Wasn't **LaTrivia** the same kind of a — I know it was a different character, but wasn't it the same role, the antagonist...?

**HAL:** Another straight man, that's all.

**GALE:** No, because you and I were on the show the same time. It was long after I came on as **LaTrivia** that he left to do **Gildersleeve**.

**HAL:** I even came back, too, and did some guest things he was on. It wasn't the same kind of a character. We were both straight men for McGee, that's all.

**JIM:** You dominated him. . .

**PHIL:** Outrageous characters. . .

**GALE:** Well, we both tried to put him down all the time.

**CHUCK:** Those wonderful **Mayor LaTrivia** blow-ups where you'd just get so frustrated and confused, you know—**Foggy Williams** didn't do that.

**GALE:** No.

**JIM:** **Foggy Williams** was much quieter, never as good a character as **LaTrivia**.

**PHIL:** **Molly and Fibber** used to deliberately bait **LaTrivia** to death. There were no mistakes about it; they were just out to hang him on every word he said.

**CHUCK:** The announcer for the run of the show was **Harlow Wilcox**. Now he always had a sketch with **Fibber** as they'd come in and do the **Johnson's Wax** commercial. Did he ever get involved on any of the other scenes on the show? Did he ever do anything with you folks?

**HAL:** He played Harlow; or Harpo. . .

**JIM:** I think he did, I remember once when he said, "Hunker Down by the fahr. . ." that was a western. . .

**PHIL:** Yes, and we had a sleigh ride — I was looking through some old scripts not long ago — everything took place on a sleigh, it was a cold winter night, and McGee had hired a sleigh. I don't know who was driving, maybe McGee. Anyhow, Harlow went along on that simply to do his commercial in the middle. He was on the sleigh.

**HAL:** But he never played anything but **Harlow Wilcox**.

**JIM:** Oh, no.

**PHIL:** There was a bit in there where Harlow said, "I'm trying to get some circulation back in my feet; they're freezing!" and McGee says, "I don't know whose feet you're rubbing, but you're rubbing one of mine, and it feels just great," and **LaTrivia** says "The other one you're rubbing is mine, keep it up!"



**FIBBER PROUDLY DISPLAYS HIS MEDAL AS THE "WORLD'S CHAMPION LIAR"**

**CHUCK:** Gale, you were involved in a lot of radio shows, as were Hal and Phil Leslie, too. Jim, of course, didn't do much other than **Fibber McGee** after the show started, which is enough for anybody. But you were on **The Judy Canova Show**, and I think you were on **My Favorite Husband**, weren't you?

**GALE:** With **Lucy Ball**, yes. The forerunner of **I Love Lucy**.

**HAL:** Gale also played a very important part with us. **Mr. Bullard**, the stinker next door, who was so rich. You remember? What's the name of the kid that does the sports on CBS?

**JIM:** Gil Stratton.

**GALE:** Gil Stratton. Yeah. He still sounds the same. He even looks the same. I hate him.

**CHUCK:** You were **Mr. Conklin** on **Our Miss Brooks**, too. On television as well as radio. Can you folks remember a specific show that might have been outstanding in your memory? Jim remembers the **Ottis Cadwallader** one, with **Gildy** as the butler. I wonder if there were any other special moments that you might be able to recall from one of the **McGee** series.

**HAL:** Well, the one that I remember, and I think Jim will agree with me, was a great show — was where we fixed a watch in the bathtub.

**JIM:** Yes. We took it apart.

**HAL:** That's right.

**JIM:** And we got in the bathtub so we wouldn't lose the parts when they fell, the watch parts, you know. We did the whole show sitting in the bathtub.

**HAL:** Yeah. It was a riot.

**PHIL:** They were laughing their heads off. They never had a chance to take apart a watch before, and this was a watch that **Fibber** had found out on the street.

**HAL:** I think the payoff was the mainspring went down the thing, wasn't it?

**JIM:** I don't know.

**PHIL:** No, they looked inside the back cover, Hal; it was a watch that had been bought as a Christmas gift and not delivered yet, and it said "To **Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve** from his grateful employees!"

**HAL:** From the **Gildersleeve Girdle Works!**

**CHUCK:** **Gildersleeve** was originally intended to be a summer replacement for the **Fibber McGee** and **Molly** series, wasn't it?

**HAL:** Yes. What happened was **Marion** and **Jim** wanted to extend their vacation. You used to take about eight weeks off, and decided you wanted thirteen, or something like that. So we got a real fast shuffle, and **Don Quinn's**

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assistant in those days was a fellow by the name of **Leonard Lewis Levinson**, so he was assigned to go to work and we'd write a show, you know. We even went to **Jack Lewis'** house, he was the advertising agency executive in Phoenix, with **Cecil Underwood**, who was the producer, to present this little idea we had. I was a bachelor, as **Gildersleeve**, in Summerfield. I was really married, but we were raising a niece and a nephew. So this was the idea we got: **Gildersleeve** has to go to another town to take over the care of a niece and a nephew. So this was the idea we got: **Gildersleeve** has to go to another town to take care of a niece and nephew that had been orphaned. The housekeeper was called **Birdie**. The real one I had was **Verdie**, but Levinson contrived that. Anyway, I go to the other town, you know, to take over the children, but en route, I fall from the upper berth into a lower berth onto a guy by the name of **Judge Hooker**, who later became my nemesis for a long time. We presented the show; it ran, like 13 minutes over before the studio audience, and we said boy, we're a riot, because we got a lot of good laughs. I remember our old friend **Frank Nelson** was on it, doubling four or five parts. He played a porter: "Kin I brush you off, sir?" and I said, "No, I'll just get off all by myself." That's the one gag I wanted to take out and they wouldn't let me.

**PHIL:** It got a great big laugh, though, didn't it?

**HAL:** Yeah, it did! Well, they sent the show back to **Mr. Johnson, Mr. Johnson** heard it, and said, "Very funny show, but I want **Ransom Sherman!**" And that's what he got! So I was quite relieved. I didn't necessarily want the troubles of having my own show. I wanted to go back and work with **Fibber** and let him worry. You know. So I went on a vacation, and while I was gone, they were trying to find me. I'm up at **Glacier National Park**, and they finally found me with a — with — mmm . . .

**JIM:** A dame.

**HAL:** No! The guys that wear the hats. You know, what do they call 'em—a **Forest Ranger**. They brought me back and **Cecil Underwood** was on the phone and he says "Hal, are you sittin' down?" and I said "Well, no. No, I'm standing up." What the hell, I was outside, you know. And he said, "Well, you better sit down." "Why?" "Well, Jack was a little upset about his brother-in-law not taking your show and he went over and sold it to **Kraft**." I said, "What, for the summer? I can't make it! I'm up here!" "No, no, no. You're going on in the fall." And that's how it happened.

**PHIL:** You had about six weeks to get ready.

**HAL:** Yeah! That's right. "Get back here quick!" And then I thought I was going on for cheese. I didn't go on for cheese, I went on for oleo, and my father was the head of a big dairy up in San Francisco! Nobody spoke to me for years. Except my Dad, of course. That's what happened, that's the truth. Scared me to death, too.

**CHUCK:** It started on Sundays, didn't it?

**HAL:** Started on Sunday, right after **The Catholic Hour**, before **Jack Benny**. And my competition was a very charming lady by the name of **Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt**.

**CHUCK:** What about after work, after hours with the **McGee** cast. Did you folks all go your separate ways, or did you have other jobs, did you pal around?

**JIM:** We always used to go to dinner, didn't we?

**GALE:** We went to dinner after the shows. The whole group, for years. Was one of the delights of the whole . . .

**JIM:** Wasn't always everybody who'd go . . .

**HAL:** Started out at **Lowry's**, and then there was a private place at a club, it was on Third Street—

**GALE:** **Lucy's**, across from **Paramount**—

**HAL:** The **Derby**, of course . . .

**JIM:** **Tally-Ho**. Wasn't that the one?

**HAL:** I don't know. It was a place over on Third Street— it was a famous private club, you know. They used to kid you, say it was a club, and you'd pay another dollar for the drink.

**PHIL:** Shows you what a happy group it was.

**GALE:** It was wonderful.

**JIM:** Yeah. Wasn't always the same group of people— but generally.

**HAL:** I worked for the same advertising agency, and the same man produced our little **Gildersleeve** show that produced Jim's show, then we had two of 'em. You know, we got real affluent there, and I had my own producer for a while.

**CHUCK:** Did you have to give up being on the **McGee** show, Hal, to do your own, or were you working consecutively?

**HAL:** Oh, no. I actually did my own show, but then I came back and guested —

**JIM:** —once in a while.

**HAL:** You were off the show 'cause you were ill one week and I came in. I had to give up doing everything else, which I regretted, because people would recognize me. If I did an audience show. Like I did a show with **Charles**

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**Boyer**, shortly before I had my own show when I was still with Jim. And they neglected to introduce me to the audience, the idiots. So I went on after the show had been on about five minutes, and Boyer is out there charming the people, and somebody started a hell of a big hand out in the audience as I walked up. God, I almost died. So I went on and did my little scene with him, and after the scene we had a little break, he turned to me and said, "Oo the 'ell are you?" I'll never forget. He knew me, and he knew I was somebody else. He's also the fellow that said to me, when I was doing his father on a show. Shortly before that. Jay Clark, the producer, came up to me and said, "I want you to play Boyer's father in this show. You do a pretty good impersonation of him, I've heard you. So be sure and do it, but make him older." So I did. I started coloring it during the dress, and he said, "Why are you playing my father with an accent?" I thought he was putting me on, you know. We had to change it. I went out and played it straight. I don't think Charles really thought he sounded as French as he did.

**CHUCK:** Gale, you first were associated with the McGee show in Hollywood, right?

**GALE:** Yeah.

**CHUCK:** How did you come to get that job?

**GALE:** Well, **Cees Underwood**, who was the director, suggested me to Jim when that part came up—

**JIM:** The **Cadwallader** part. That was the first thing you did.

**GALE:** Yes. Cees suggested my name, I'd done a lot of things for him, and I know—Jim probably doesn't remember this, but he was terribly worried. Because he didn't know whether I would wait for laughs.

**JIM:** Oh, yeah.

**GALE:** He said, well, Gordon's a straight dramatic actor. It made him very, very worried. And Cees talked him into it, obviously, and I got the job. I think I waited for the laughs all right.

**HAL:** Didn't you do it in the picture, too?

**JIM:** Yes, that's right. At RKO.

**GALE:** At RKO. "Here We Go Again," or something, it was called.

**HAL:** You danced with **Marion**.

**CHUCK:** What kinds of roles were you doing? As a dramatic actor?

**GALE:** Well, I was **Irene Rich's** leading man on the **Welch Grape Juice Hour**. For nine years. And that was a different character each week. She did a story a week. And I was doing a whodunit thing, and I was on dear **Frank Morgan's** show, doing a professor,

or something or other. And, as all the radio actors did in those days, any parts you could do, for ten, fifteen, or twenty dollars. My gosh, I went out on an evening and got a hundred and fifty dollars. That was — I started out at \$2.50 a show and NBC took out 25¢ for hiring me.

**JIM:** I thought they got three bucks.

**GALE:** That was afterwards. I held out for three bucks down at KFI in Los Angeles and they wouldn't hire me. They said, "We're not gonna pay that money for that S.O.B." They didn't. They wouldn't hire me. I had to scrounge around somewhere else for three dollars.

**JIM:** Times did get better a little later, didn't they?

**GALE:** Yeah. But for years NBC and CBS took ten percent out of your check for calling you.

**JIM:** The **Artist's Service**.

**CHUCK:** Even though you may have had an agent?

**JIM:** They were the agents.

**GALE:** Agents!? We never had any agents!

**JIM:** You know, they never did that with us, in Chicago. Because **Marion** was a union musician.

**GALE:** Ah-ha.

**HAL:** I held a check for a long time. I turned in an expense account check when I was in San Francisco when I was with NBC Artist's Service for seven dollars. They sent me out to do a little promotional thing. And somebody sent out the check for \$7— I think it was the furniture company, Bruner, up there. And NBC deducted .70 from my expense account. So I never cashed the check. Almost drove the poor dames— what was her name, **Macadoo**, she was the head of the bookkeeping department. I was already in Chicago, and they were writing me letters. "SPEND THE CHECK!" I had it hanging in my office for a long time.

**GALE:** For some twenty years I worked for CBS doing different things, **The Second Mrs. Burton**, which is a soap opera thing out here. For twenty years, I got a check from CBS every week for **Miss Gale Gordon**. And after twenty years, I went and met the gal who was the auditor, and I said, "I'm ...Miss Gale Gordon." "Oh." And that was it. I finally got it, just Gale Gordon.

**CHUCK:** Well, you folks have all been in radio, really, from, if not exactly the beginning...

**JIM:** I was in exactly the beginning. Before the beginning.

**CHUCK:** Jim, when did you start? When was your first thing?

**JIM:** Bout 1925.

**CHUCK:** That's pretty close to the beginning.  
**HAL:** I was in earlier. About 1923, in KLX in Oakland. I was the **Oakland Tribune's** boy Caruso. I had a boy soprano voice. But the dramatic critic didn't know the difference between a soprano and a tenor, so he called me the **Oakland Tribune's** boy Caruso. 1923. KLX, the **Oakland Tribune** station.

**GALE:** That was one of the first in the country. The other one was in St. Louis, I think.

**HAL:** That station, and one that **Al Pierce** and his brother worked on in San Jose. They were the first two stations in that locality. Then came **KGO Oakland**, which later became the **Blue network**.

**JIM:** Marion and I went on in 1925. I had been on before when I was a singer in vaudeville and picture houses. I was with **Egbert van Alstein**. It was about 1922 or 3, whenever it could have been, whatever that year was, must of been '23, we were playing the **State Theatre** in Minneapolis. We walked down under the stage, and through the cellar, clear out to the street in the front of the house, to a microphone and a piano. We did that thing. . . that was in '23 or something like that. And I wrote a letter home to my wife in Peoria to tell her to be sure and listen, 'cause we were gonna do this show. And she did. But, like Hal said, you just walked in off the street in those days. Even in '25 when we started, they didn't pay you anything. Just walk in and do it.

**HAL:** I was given a little stuff from the Tribune for entertaining carrier boys on Saturdays. With short pants. Boy, you had to be a hero in Oakland, even in those days, to wear short pants, if you had a soprano voice. Anyway, I did it. I never led with my right hand; though. But the Nolans used to pay me a little weekly stipend. I worked for nothing, though, singing.

**CHUCK:** Gale, being that you are considerably younger than these two fellows—

**GALE:** Nothing of the sort.

**CHUCK:** —when did you get started in radio?

**GALE:** The first radio show I ever did was in 1926. Radio almost died aborning, because I went down to a little studio that was under a tower on **Sunset Boulevard** where the **Warners** studio is now. And they had a little room under this big tower that was there for many, many years. That was a radio station. And some friend of mine said, "Look, why don't you go down to the **Warner Brothers** thing, they want to fill up time. Just walk off the street, do anything; do an imitation, say hello, anything to use up time. They need people." And in those days I had learned four chords on the ukelele. And I'd written some original lyrics to "**It Ain't Gonna Rain No More**," lyrics you should not even be bothered with. And I went on and I sang, and I accompanied myself on the ukelele with these four stale chords

coming out of this radio station in 1926. Almost finished radio right there. Worst thing that had ever happened. I wasn't paid. I didn't even see anybody. Except a mike. I walked into a room, somebody said, "Go ahead." And that was it.

**JIM:** All by yourself, eh?

**GALE:** All by myself. Walked out—nobody said goodbye, hello.

**PHIL:** We were talking the other day, and Jim commented on how much fun they had and how easy and relaxed it all was in those very early days, because, he said, we all had the feeling that nobody was listening anyhow.

**JIM:** Yeah, that's right. That's the way it was.

**HAL:** You weren't sure, anyhow.

**JIM:** Well, you never thought about anybody listening. And that's why we just grew up after years and years and years of doing the same thing. When you found out there was 40 million people listening it didn't mean a thing. There was still nobody listening in your own mind. That's the way we felt about it.

**CHUCK:** They came in kind of one at a time.

**JIM:** Yep.

**CHUCK:** I think that we could just go on and talk about these things forever, but I know everyone has to move along today. It's a pretty exciting thing for a kid who grew up with radio to be talking with the people who made radio grow up!

**HAL:** You know, Chuck called me one night from **Evanston, Illinois**. 'Bout a year and a half ago. He says, "How about calling you back in about five minutes and doing an interview?" I said, "You're kidding!" I thought somebody was putting me on. Then you told me you had all these famous **McGee** records that somebody had found in the **Johnson's Wax** basement. So I said, "Yeah, all right. I've heard about those. Okay, call me. And you did."

**CHUCK:** That was one of the very best interviews I ever did. Because of you.

**GALE:** Did you put them on tape?

**CHUCK:** Yes, All those **McGee** shows are on tape. So you guys are well preserved.

**GALE:** I'd like to get all of them.

**CHUCK:** We'll see that you get some.

**HAL:** He's got a lot of 'em.

**PHIL:** That's the nicest thing anybody said about us all day. We're well preserved.

**JIM:** Yeah!

**HAL:** You'll hear from my lawyer about this!

## MEMORIES OF WISTFUL VISTA