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FRED ALLEN

By DAN MC GUIRE

Fred Allen once billed himself as "The World's Worst Juggler." Actually, he was quite good, but his army of radio fans can be grateful that he was not the *world's greatest* and had to develop his comic talents to get ahead in vaudeville.

Fred's family had no theatrical history, and his early years gave no hint of a show biz bent. He was born May 31, 1894, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to poor Irish parents. James and Cecilia Sullivan named him John Florence, and two years later gave him a brother, Robert. The next year, Cecilia contracted pneumonia and died.

James was not prepared to rear two boys alone. They soon moved in with one of Cecilia's sisters, Aunt Lizzie, who was already providing room and board for two other sisters and a brother. From the proceeds she eked out a living for herself and her invalid husband. She welcomed the three additions without

Fred Allen —

hesitation and became like a substitute mother to the boys.

Ten years later, when James remarried, he gave his sons a choice of joining him and the new Mrs. Sullivan or staying with Aunt Lizzie. Bob went with him, Fred stayed. Young as he was, he sensed a great debt to the hard-working, warm-hearted woman who had all but adopted him.

On his 14th birthday, Fred was summoned to meet his father at a pub in Boston—but not to toast his adolescence. Fred was now of legal working age, and the elder Sullivan had a drinking friend with influence at the public library. Two weeks later, Fred was working there two days a week.

In September he entered high school and switched to working weekends and some evenings. Aunt Lizzie had recently moved to Dorchester. Between school activities, his job and commuting, Fred had little time to make new friends. Something triggered an interest in juggling and he began teaching himself simple tricks with three balls or tin plates.

Most of his library earnings went to his aunt. With the little he retained, he began attending Boston theatres whenever a juggler appeared. He took notes, then tried to duplicate their tricks at home.

During his last summer at the library, the teenaged employees staged an amateur show. Fred signed up as a juggler and even sprinkled his routine with a few jokes. (Example: "How can you keep a goat from smelling? Plug up its nose") By comparison to all the would-be singers and dancers, his act was a smash. Afterward, someone said, "You're crazy to work here. You should be on the

Radio's Funniest Juggler!

stage." Indeed, a spark was kindled that night.

At 17, Fred graduated and took a full-time job at Colonial Piano Company. He kept his part-time library job as security. But the applause for his stage premiere still rang in his ears. He decided to investigate the Amateur Nights that were so popular at small theatres throughout New England.

Amateur Nights originally were meant to attract patrons by showcasing neighborhood boys and girls. But local talent was quickly exhausted, and entrepreneurs began supplying theatres with new amateurs each week. Fred visited one such "scout," Sam Cohen, in his dingy office. Happily, Cohen had no juggler in his entourage. "Meet me Monday night," he said between puffs on a cigar. "Eight o'clock. Hub Theatre. Stage door." He reached for the telephone. Interview over.

Fred and six others met at the Hub. Cohen arrived, took them inside and coordinated their acts with prop men and musicians. Fred needed only a table and some drum rolls.

As he waited his turn, Fred was elated. Once he stood in the footlights' glare, however, he froze. He managed to do his tricks like a robot, but his gags came out in a mumble. Nevertheless, the audience applauded his juggling warmly.

The night's winner received five dollars. Fred and the others each received one dollar. Cohen told him he might have won if his jokes had been audible. "Come by the office tomorrow," he said.

Next day, Cohen told Fred he could put his juggling act to use almost every night. Fred still had no long-term show biz ambitions. But he reasoned that ten minutes of fun on stage earned him as



much as five hours at the library. He became a regular for Cohen. Within months, he had appeared at almost every small theatre in and around Boston. When Cohen was occupied elsewhere, Fred took charge of the troupe and earned an extra dollar.

On several nights Fred met a professional actor named Harry LaToy who did a tramp juggler act. LaToy befriended Fred and began giving him encouragement and pointers. (In return, he received many free meals and small "loans" when he was out of work.)

One day the Keith Theatre chain called LaToy looking for a juggler to fill out a touring group. Harry was already booked, but he quickly invented a juggling cohort who had just arrived in Boston from out west to visit relatives. The Keith agent bit and told Harry to bring him over.

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LaToy hustled Fred to a photographer for some lobby photos. Fred was still calling himself Johnny Sullivan. Harry preferred something more elegant. He invented Fred St. James, borrowing "St. James" from a cheap hotel. At the meeting, Harry became an ad hoc agent and did all the talking. The newly renamed Fred St. James came away with a contract to play Keith's Boston area theatres for three weeks for the magnificent salary of \$30!

In 1912, Fred began a 3-year roller coaster ride through the theatre circuit in Boston, the New England states and as far north as Halifax, Nova Scotia. He discovered the "glamour" of theatres with outdoor privies and no stagehands (actors raised the curtain themselves).

There were dry spells when he returned home to find what Aunt Lizzie called "honest work." Aunt Lizzie never criticized, but she viewed actors as "high flyers." Twenty years hence, when he was a star on radio, Fred visited her. At dinner she said, "You've had enough of it. Better come back and settle down."

Enjoying his new popularity around Boston, Fred became a "coast defender" (one who seldom ventured from the local area). Fellow actors told him he was ready to raise his sights. Fred was doubtful, but he realized there was no long-term security in his present life. Remembering his obligation to his aunt, he formulated a plan.

His act was polished now and contained about equal parts jokes and juggling. By letter, he began introducing himself to dozens of New York bookers as "Freddie James, World's Worst Juggler." He saved up \$100 and stashed \$40 in the bank. With \$60 as a grubstake—and no firm offers—he left for the Big Apple in September, 1914.

He was as awed as anyone by his first sight of Times Square and Broadway. Nevertheless, he had to deal with the



realities of \$4-a-week boarding houses and countless visits to bookers' offices. Many were interested, but "No opening right now."

He earned a few dollars with one-nighters at the Masonic and Elk clubs. But he was ready to draw on his bank reserve for a ticket home when he got his first break—one night at the Empire to replace a cancelled act. A booker saw the act, liked it and signed Fred to three weeks on the Poli circuit at \$60 a week.

Flush with his success, Fred hired a brash young agent named Mark Leddy. Leddy enjoyed Fred's type of comedy. Fred liked Leddy's style. He soon had Fred booked at four theatres for \$75 a week. Later, he landed a Loew's circuit contract, which included theatres from New York to Chicago. This meant steady work for many months.

On the tour, Fred played the Orpheum in Boston. Brother Bob and all Fred's aunts came to see him. Aunt Lizzie was fascinated by a baboon act but had no comment on Fred's comedy.

Mark kept the former coast defender criss-crossing the country on various vaudeville circuits for seven years. In

1915, Fred even agreed to a 16-week tour in Australia. Leddy lined up billings that took Fred to San Francisco, where he boarded a steamship. He suffered 21 days of *mal de mere* and boredom. While in Sydney, he was ill for a week with dengue fever, a local form of malaria.

Nevertheless, the tour itself was a great success. As an imported actor, Fred was automatically a headliner. He modified or dropped jokes that didn't work, and the Aussies loved him.

On impulse, he had bought a ventriloquist's dummy. As a change of pace from juggling, he demonstrated a non-existent voice-throwing skill by asking "Jake" questions and having ushers answer from all around the theatre. It was silly, but it got laughs. (Back home, he improved on the idea, drinking water while Jake sang with John McCormack's voice.)

Lonely days in "outback" towns found Fred reading *Punch* and other humor magazines. He saved and cataloged gags he liked. He found he had a talent both for adapting jokes to varied situations and for writing his own gags. Juggling began to take a back seat to comedy in his act. Fred later saw Australia as a turning point. He arrived a juggler, but returned home a comic monologist.

Mark Leddy decreed that Fred was now a big time act. But too many bookers remembered Freddy James working for \$75. Mark shortened his first name again and dubbed him with a last name borrowed from a fellow agent. Freddy James became—and remained—Fred Allen.

During 1918-19, Fred earned as much as \$225 at many big-time houses, including vaudeville's citadel, The Palace. During a lull, he returned to the small-time Loew circuit for a year, but now at \$275 as a feature act.

At year's end, Mark nixed a Keith chain offer of \$325. The famous Shubert brothers were starting their own circuit to service their vast theatre chain. They were outbidding everyone. Mark contacted

them and got Fred a 20 week contract at \$400!

Fred was cast in a review called *Snapshots*. It featured Lew Fields and Lulu McConnell. A young fellow named Richard Rodgers was music conductor. The show closed early in 1922, but J. J. Shubert had seen Fred's act and liked him. He invited Fred and Mark to his office. When they left, Fred held a contract to perform in the Shuberts' next Winter Garden attraction: *The Passing Show of 1922*.

Fred was assigned to do short comic monologues between acts and during scene changes. He appeared 18 times during the show. Besides writing all his own routines, he contributed material to the headline comedy team.

The show's out-of-town tryouts went well, but it died after ten weeks back at the Winter Garden. The Shuberts sent it on the road, where it met mostly favorable response. In Chicago, it played all summer and into October at the Apollo Theatre.

During the Chicago run, Fred began



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dating an attractive chorus line girl named Portland Hoffa. A romance blossomed immediately, but Fred's innate insecurity prevented a whirlwind courtship.

The Passing Show moved on to California and the cast was cut. Fred was out after 83 weeks. His contract had three years to go. The Shuberts used him in *Artists and Models*, *Vogues* and *Greenwich Village Follies*. In the latter, he got to take part in group comedy sketches.

Fred next formed a partnership with comedy-singing team Bert and Maybelle Yorke. His creative juices flowed, producing a series of all new routines that convulsed their audiences.

The act was back in New York playing The Palace in April, 1928. There Fred caught up with Portland, working in George White's *Scandals*. She had been taking Roman Catholic instructions from Father Leonard, who conducted a special ministry to show people at St. Malachy's Church on 49th Street. She surprised Fred with the news that she had recently been confirmed.

Obviously, Fred reasoned, this lady had serious plans. Father Leonard married them soon after this at the church's little Actor's Chapel. A few family members attended, and show biz friends were bridesmaid and best man.

In vaudeville, married actors usually worked their wives into the act. Couples could demand a higher salary, and the missus was spared many lonely hours in hotel rooms. Fred took on the task with gusto, and the new twosome soon was touring various circuits. Portland was thrilled by a visit to the Oregon town where she was born and for which her parents named her.

They returned to New York when Fred received an invitation to be in a new Hammerstein musical, *Polly with a Past*. Enroute, they stopped in Fort Wayne to appear on the WLS *Showboat* program. Radio was as yet just a novelty and Fred



FRED ALLEN AND PORTLAND HOFFA

little realized that vaudeville was close to extinction. Still, he filed a mental note of how many fans came from all over Indiana to see their favorite performers in person.

Polly had a short, forgettable run. Fred enjoyed more success in *The Little Show* and *Three's a Crowd*, which carried him into 1932.

Many comedians, including Amos 'n' Andy, Eddie Cantor and Ed Wynn, had already "discovered" radio. Fred ignored his own skepticism when Corn Products Company invited him to become the host of "The Linit Show" for \$1,000 a week. In Depression dollars, the \$1,000 sounded like a fortune. But Fred had to pay actors and everyone else who worked on the show (plus his agent). In effect, he became an ad hoc producer, in addition to writing the show.

From the outset, Fred wrote Portland into all his radio programs. Her squeaky voice sounded "like two slate pencils mating or a clarinet reed calling for help." So he fashioned her as a perennial sub-normal adolescent.

"The Linit Show" lasted 26 weeks,

after which Hellmann's Mayonnaise hired Fred to be host of "Salad Bowl Revue." Mayonnaise being a seasonal product, the show aired only during the summer. But Bristol-Myers was waiting in the wings with an offer for "Sal Hepatica Revue." This product knew no season. Fred unhesitatingly accepted.

Preceding Fred's half hour, Bristol-Myers aired a musical show advertising Ipana toothpaste. It wasn't doing well. Fred's show was a hit. Solution: combine the two as the "Hour of Smiles" with Fred in charge. (Remember? "Ipana, for the smile of beauty—Sal Hepatica, for the smile of health.")

Fred later renamed the show "Town Hall Tonight." His format brought all sorts of people together to discuss topical issues. He developed features such as "People You Didn't Expect to Meet" and numerous running gags: the mynah bird

that wouldn't talk; the escape artist who couldn't. A meager budget precluded high priced guests. Fred relied on a group of versatile actors who became The Mighty Allen Art Players.

Fred's audience rating climbed. Texaco took over as sponsor, and for eight years the show was the "Texaco Star Theatre." Texaco then opted for a half-hour and renamed it, simply, "The Fred Allen Show." Thus it continued with five other sponsors, until Fred's last show on June 26, 1949. Fred was relieved by the reduction in time, even though he was famous for running overtime.

In 1942, he created Allen's Alley. It became one of the most famous mythical locales in radio, peopled by a superb cast of unlikely neighbors.

Parker Fennelly played the ultimate New England farmer, who answered Fred's weekly knock with, "Howdy,



ALLEN'S ALLEY CAST: Fred, Minerva Pious as Mrs. Nussbaum, Alan Reed as Falstaff Openshaw, Kenny Delmar as Senator Claghorn.

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Bub!" In an age before ethnic groups became image conscious, Minerva Pious was an archtypical Jewish housewife. To Fred's greeting of, "Ah, Mrs. Nussbaum," she would reply, "You was expecting maybe Too-Ra-Loo-Ra Bankhead?"

Kenny Delmar, who was hired as announcer, became an overnight sensation when Fred cast him as the fast talking Southerner, Senator Claghorn. People across the nation began mimicking his heavy drawl and the classic line, "That's a joke, son!"

Originally, Alan Reed (whose voice is still heard on TV) occupied the last house as the poet Falstaff Openshaw. No matter what question Fred posed each week, he inevitably announced: "I have written a po-em." Later, Openshaw was replaced by Peter Donald (of "Can You Top This?" fame) as the pugnacious but harmless tippler Ajax Cassidy.

Fred's musical production spoofs were among the funniest ever done on radio. His "Brooklyn Pinafore," starring Leo Durocher, is a gem. The Allen-Benny feud was one of radio's most enduring running gags. It culminated in an on-air-face-off that had a higher listener rating than any previous program except one of President Roosevelt's fireside chats.

High blood pressure, his first heart attack and the looming demon of television prompted Fred's semi-retirement.

Prior to his death in 1956, he limited himself to TV guest spots and a panelist role on "What's My Line?" He used his new freedom to spend more time with Portland.

In radio, Fred achieved fame and the income to provide for Portland and his Aunt Lizzie as he felt he should. But he drove himself mercilessly to meet radio's weekly demands. When budgets were no longer a problem, he still wrote and re-wrote most of the shows himself. He waged continuing battles with the clock, censors and especially executives of every stripe. (One of his publicity stills has him seated at a desk, champing on a cigar, wearing a hat and a ferocious scowl as he tries to answer four telephones at once. The nameplate on the desk reads: "Vice President in Charge of Vice Presidents.")

In contrast, his vaudeville years were a joy, because he really enjoyed what he was doing. He loved the variety, the people, the excitement, the just plain fun of the theatre.

Radio paid well, but its terrible demands on his time, energy and nerves led him to gripe that "agents get ten percent of everything but my blinding headaches." He triumphed, I suspect, by retaining the ad-lib wit of the stand-up comic, the "watch this closely (but not too closely)" razzamatuzz of Freddy James, "World's Worst Juggler."

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