

The Small House Halfway Up in the Next Block

BY ED KNAPP

The program's "Chanson Bohemienne" music theme fades and the announcer's soothing voice invites:

"Well, sir, shady tree-lined Virginia Avenue is placid this warm summer day as we join the Gook family at the small house halfway up in the next block..."

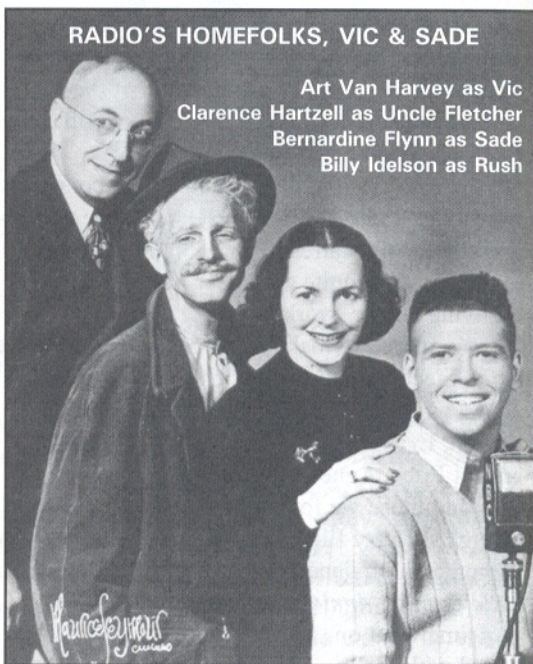


I so looked forward to those quaint visits with "radio's homefolks," Vic and Sade, now only a bright but faded memory.

The happily married couple resided in the mythical airwaves community of Crooper, Illinois. The opened-porch, wood framed house with a leisure porch swing was the hallowed domain of the master of the menage, Victor Gook and his somewhat whiney-voice spouse, Sade. Also living in the modest mid-American styled home was their always busy, but quite mannerly twelve-year-old adopted son, Rush.

The light-hearted weekday radio episodes embodied a regular series of family conversational exchanges between the three talkative householders, with only one exception. That exception being the most frequent, unannounced arrival of Sadie's elderly Uncle Fletcher, with his rambling, rather nasal reminiscences. The chit-chats between the Gooks bore a slant of good-

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humored levity, encircling a variety of neighbors, friends and relatives as they sat side-by-side on the living room davenport.

The voices or presence of those being discussed were never heard or realized. These individuals were only talked about or heard from only on one-sided telephone conversations. This group of panoramic slants of debated characters included Chuck and Dottie Brainfeble, Mr. Kneesuffer, close friends Fred and Ruthie Stembottom, Gus Plink (the town drunk), the Brick Mush Man, and Ray Delano, who

could rub his feet together, making a flame hot enough to light a cigar.

Other characters entering their dialogues were Willie Gutstop, divorcee Cora Bucksaddle, Sadie's Aunt Bess (who wrote hard-to-read "airy" letters on a frequent basis), R. J. Konk, and Godfrey Dimlock (who invented a bicycle that could say "ma-ma"). A vast assortment of unusual names, if nothing else, you will agree.

The lives of Vic and Sade and Rush were relatively simple and crisis-free. A major event of considerable speculation and decision contingency might be no more than deciding if a periodic sale of washcloths at Yamilton's Department Store was "really" a bargain; interrupting one of Aunt Bess' scribbly hard-to-read frequent postcards and letters; or what to do with a piece of mail they had opened in error, addressed to the Pastor of their church, dunning the good reverend for a bill he'd failed to pay.

Mr. Victor Gook was a veteran bookkeeper employee of Plant #14 at the Consolidated Kitchenware Company, run by J. K. Rubich, his boss, often referred to by Vic as "Old Rubbish." Vic was a proud dedicated charter member of the starchy lodge, "The Drowsy Venus Chapter of the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way." A quiet spoken gentleman with a witty sense of humor, Vic rarely showed a trace of temper. When he did, on rare occasion, it was hard to distinguish except for a carefully placed "drat" or two.

Sade's tiny world barely extended beyond their little open front porch: she was president of the local Thimble Club; she hungrily absorbed local news in Crooper's mini-newspaper; she re-told little tidbits of interesting gossip purveyed by friend Ruthie Stembottom while playing bridge;



Bernardine Flynn and Art Van Harvey

and spent time in the limited perimeter of her small kitchen while cooking up a batch of "beef bunkies" for supper.

The Gook's day together became more lively when Vic came home from work and discussed plans for his next lodge meeting; Rush relating the modest excitement stirred in the classroom with his old-maid teacher, Miss Applerot; reviewing past visits of Uncle Fletcher's strange-sounding acquaintances; or a discourse on watching Mr. Chinbunny slowly devour a rapidly melting ice cream cone on a summer day.

The short but sweet daily radio visits with Vic and Sade were richly embroidered with good-natured humor, slight differences of opinion between family members, and a minimum of attention being given over to son Rush's innocent happenings of the day.

Rush, like his foster parents, had a strange-sounding assortment of friends nearer his age with such names as Blue Tooth Johnson, Orville Wheanie, Rooster Davis, and Rotten Johnson. The young lads

VIC AND SADE

spent many happy times together watching the "fat men" play ball at the "Y," planning future business money-making schemes and inventions, or attending the town's Bijou movie theatre to catch the performances of the theater's frequent attraction of "Hearts of Flame" starring popular Gloria Golden and "Four-fisted" Frank Fuddleman.

Vic and Sade's discussions frequently centered on any number of other extremely colorful local characters: Mr. Jake Gumpox, the garbage man and his garbage wagon's swayback nag, Howard; the president of Vic's workplace who pulled his own teeth; Smelly Clark's Uncle Strap working as a clerk at the railroad station, and the many relatives of Rishigan Fishigan of Sishigan, Michigan who married Jane Payne from Bain, Maine.

Others who came into the Gook's daily chatter were twins Robert and Slobbert

Hink; the Missouri State Home for the Tall; Mr. Razorskum; Aunt Bess's husband Walter's knee-cap twinges; and Mervyn S. Spraul, who "loved them peanuts with chocolate smeared on the outside."

The harsh "bang" of the Gook's back screen door usually signalled the arrival of unannounced Uncle Fletcher on one of his frequent stopovers. "Vic honey, Sade honey," he'd quip aloud as he entered through the kitchen. The somewhat hard-of-hearing relative always brought a higher level of excitement to the life of the Gook homebodies with his rambling nasal reminiscences. Fletcher's colorful discourses were often spaced with the words "fine, fine" to remarks the Gooks answered to, but which he seldom ever heard.

Elderly, soft-spoken Uncle Fletcher was virtually a warehouse of trivial facts and information of his unusual acquaintance associations, none of which bore much importance: the merits of a marvelous, all-purpose concoction called "Hyena

Grease"; the strange "half-wit" disappearance of Harry Feeburn, inventor of Stringaberry Jam; B. B. Baugh, an old friend who moved to Dixon, Illinois and then to Dismal Seepage, Ohio by way of Sweet Ester, Wisconsin, and later died. Uncle Fletcher's limitless string of rambling stories were generally interspersed with his colorful slang expressions: "Fat-head," "Half-wit," "Numbskull," "Half-wit woman (his landlady)" and "If I'm not careful I'll get caught up in the frenzied flood waters of activity and be destroyed against the rocks."

When the repetitive old-timer wasn't bending the ears of those in the Gook household, he hung out at the Bright Kentucky Hotel. Likely many of his strange stories were born out of the free-talk about the



Paul Rhymer

Billy Idelson, Bernardine Flynn, Art Van Harvey



old hotel situated near the railroad station. Uncle Fletcher's tall tales of verbalization had him saying much and listening little.

I really miss the gentle satire and warm levity that showcased each charming visit with Vic and Sade: cleaning out the attic; Vic's plans for marching in the parade with full lodge regalia; the Tiny Petit Pheasant Feather Tea Room; Uncle Fletcher's kindly landlady Mrs. Keeler; Smelly Clark's big date; Vic's new hat; Sadie's Wife Rule Book; Rush's job ushering at the Bijou and letting in all of his friends, free; or Sade trying to pronounce Vic's lodge Latin.

Also, I yearn for the things they said: the unnecessary retort when the phone rang—"Telephone's ringing, telephone's ringing" which it obviously was; Sadie's "Ish" expression to stifle talk in which she had no interest; Rush addressing Vic as "Guv" and Vic addressing Rush in fun-poking name terms as "Willie Walnut Stain," "Axel Grease Willie," or "Straight Edge"; Sade's "Yoo Hoo" to passers by; Vic's endearing terms to Sade: "Hello, Cupcake" or "Sadie" (Call me Sade, not

Sadie, Vic"); and Uncle Fletcher's "Fine, fine." What fun it was.

This wonderful vignette of small-town people, their thoughts and expressions were the down-home creation of the prolific and talented writer Paul Rhymer.

According to Rhymer's widow Mary Francis, "Each day, five days a week, Paul would roll a blank sheet of paper into his typewriter. Several hours later [his] workroom door would burst open and Paul would... race to the Merchandise Mart. There he would turn in the script he had written... and dash to the studio for the rehearsal and broadcast of that day's show."

In the mid-forties, when the radio announcer-signed off *Vic and Sade* for the last time with the traditional ending to the daily shows, "Which concludes another brief interlude at the small house halfway up in the next block..." I felt as if I had lost something very American and very precious. ■

NOTE—Tune in TWTD May 1 and 15 to hear a two-part tribute to Vic and Sade from 1973.