

# Rushville Center, aka Chicago, Home of *Ma Perkins* Radio's Mother of the Air

BY JIM COX

Anyone who is familiar with the origins of broadcast soap opera should fully comprehend Chicago's strategic role in its embryonic stages and early development. The form was not only conceived but also delivered on October 20, 1930 in a small radio studio in the Windy City when WGN gave rise to *Painted Dreams*. With a minuscule cast, the serial was the first to be derived from the inspired and—as fans would soon learn—prolific pen of drama mama Inna Phillips.

*Painted Dreams* is credibly the original feature of a genre of more than 200 daytime radio dramas that surfaced across the next three decades—and scores more appearing on television through the present day. Any thought of denying Chicago its rightful place as the cradle of broadcast soap opera would have been forsaken by media historiographers

*Jim Cox of Louisville, Kentucky is the author of the book The Great Radio Soap Operas (McFarland & Company. \$55, 330 pages, photographs, illustrated case binding. 1-800-253-2187). This excerpt is printed with permission.*

a long time ago. Indeed, as has been well documented, it was there that so many characteristic traits commonly associated with drama by installment were manufactured and cultivated.

Ingredients like ample portions of organ music, extensive story line recaps, characters that addressed each other by name every few seconds to be sure the listeners knew who was talking and who was being spoken to, and exceedingly slow-moving dialogue became synonymous with those dishpan dramas. Heavy doses of the devices were



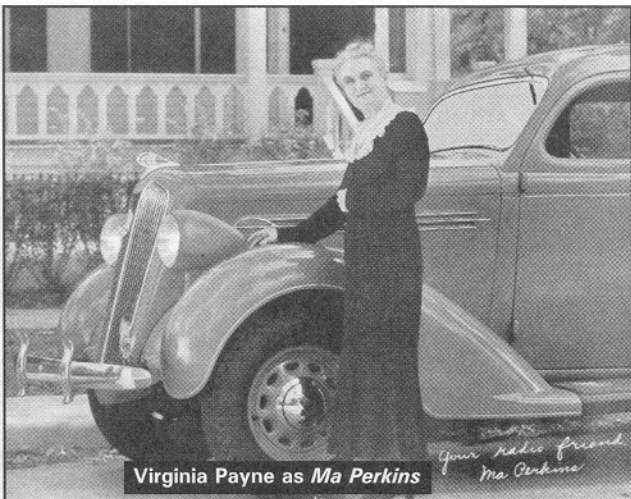
Virginia Payne as *Ma Perkins* (1933-60)

injected into every tale that emanated from the confines of several Chicago air theaters each weekday.

While, in the modern age, most of those early traits have abated, some of the plot devices initially attempted along the shores of Lake Michigan are still with us. They include a strong emphasis on individual character development and dramas that include figures gainfully employed in diverse professional capacities. Such subjects are considered to lead “more interesting” lives than those who might be depicted in some other vocations.

Thus, successive producers, directors and writers have, from generation to generation, transferred a few of those seeds sown in soap opera's formative years to contemporary settings. And an erstwhile Chicago dominion still flourishes. What took root there almost 72 years ago pervades our video screens during the modern epoch.

The two most fertile minds among the architects of serial melodrama, then or now, were Chicagoans who established a soap opera empire that influenced the breed almost from its inception to the very end of its aural occupation. Edward Frank Hummert was a partner in the Chicago advertising firm of Blackett-Sample-Hummert Inc. when he hired a newspaperwoman, Anne Ashenurst, as his editorial and copywriting assistant. Within two years Hummert acted on his suspicion that radio drama might be as appealing to housewives as was serialized fiction. Employing yet another print news journalist, Charles Robert Douglas Hardy Andrews (one man!), who had authored several continuing features for *The Chicago Daily News*, Hummert and Ms. Ashenurst gave their young protégé his first assignment for the ears: to contrive the dialog for a radio serial called *The Stolen Husband*. Although that initial effort couldn't be declared a phenomenal success, it gave the collaborating triumvirate some valuable insights. And in a short while it led them to develop a trio of extremely successful serials against which almost all others could (and would) be measured throughout radio's golden age: *Just Plain Bill* (1932-55), *The Romance of Helen Trent*



Virginia Payne as *Ma Perkins*

and *Ma Perkins* (1933-60).

Frank Hummert and Anne Ashenurst married each other in 1935 and soon became matinee moguls whose affinity for serialized sequences was to witness tentacles extending far beyond their humble beginnings—into almost every aspect of a burgeoning industry. Upon soap opera they would leave an indelible imprint that ultimately was to span three decades. Eventually the pair would control one-eighth of all commercial radio time at billings of \$12 million annually. They soon maintained 36 separate radio features, all of them airing concurrently. Across their lifetimes, they would introduce radio listeners to a sum in excess of 60 different programs, more than 50 of them soap operas. Their shows would be created, written and produced by a tightly controlled assembly line of minions operated initially under the banner of Hummert Radio Productions and later as Air Features Inc.

Included among the Hummerts' early successes was one of broadcasting's most memorable, compelling and influential narratives. Billed as the "mother of the air," *Ma Perkins* was truly the epitome of radio soap opera. For 27 years, in fact, it was the most widely revered and genuinely

beloved washboard weeper on the ether. While its association with Chicago and the infamous Hummerts dates back to 1933, the drama actually debuted in an earlier trial run in Cincinnati. The history of the sweeping, all-pervasive serial that left its mark on so many others of its ilk, predominating the species, is worth recounting.

The program began as a replacement for a faltering series that was underwritten by a Cincinnati soapmaker Procter & Gamble Co. In an effort to hawk its wares both regionally and to the expansive reaches of its hometown clear channel 50,000-watt audio powerhouse, WLW, in 1932 the manufacturing firm began sponsoring a serialized domestic comedy titled *The Puddle Family*. The show appeared on the air on behalf of P&G's Oxydol brand granulated detergent. To P&G's dismay, however, *The Puddle Family* met with considerably less than instant success.

Early in 1933 the Oxydol trade was transferred to a different advertising agency. An account executive there, Larry Milligan, hastily suggested a continuing narrative that would revolve around a "helping hand" character instead of the comedy. He proposed the tale of a self-reliant widow whose family and friends leaned heavily upon her—*Ma Perkins*, it would be called. Oxydol's own Ma Perkins. The idea immediately clicked with agency directors and P&G officials.

At the time all of this was going on, a lovely young blonde actress, Virginia Payne, then 23 years old, was portraying the title role in a WLW drama about a Southern diva, *Honey Adams*. Jane Froman, who was destined to become one of the nation's most popular vocalists a few years later, supplied the singing on the show.

Payne was obviously in the right place at the right time. Despite her youthfulness, a certain tremolo in her versatile voice



could make her sound as if she were considerably older. Thus, she was tapped for the role of Ma, never dreaming how far it would take her in years, miles and association. The fact that the serial's eventual sterling success was partially, yet inextricably, linked to the personal contributions of Virginia Payne would, in time, have been difficult to miss.

Unlike the homespun character for whom she would be recalled for the rest of her days, Payne was a highly cultured young woman. The daughter of a Cincinnati physician, she was well educated, holding two master's degrees (one in literature) from the University of Cincinnati. A devout Roman Catholic, she maintained high principles personifying the everyday trust in human nature that Ma Perkins would come to embrace.

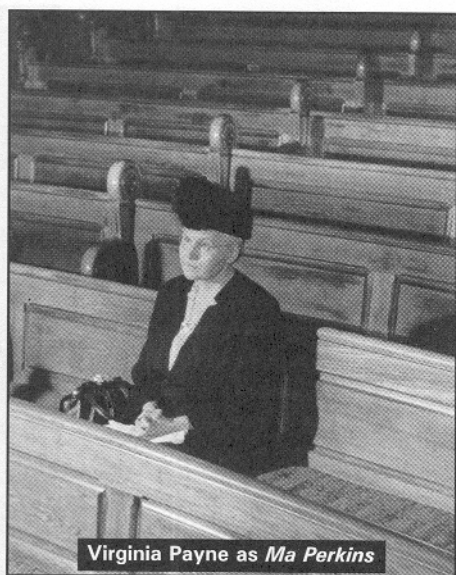
A 16-week experiment was launched on WLW on August 14, 1933. Unlike their response to its predecessor, *The Puddle Family*, however, the Cincinnati crowd quickly adopted the new series. P&G noted too that grocers in the area were asking wholesale distributors for many more boxes of Oxydol than before, as listeners

reacted positively to the program's commercials. It was obvious that some earlier market research conducted by P&G was right on target. It had found that women desired radio entertainment, not just to be informed about social graces and given cooking hints as they had been previously, while working in their homes.

With that kind of affirmation in its local market, P&G was ready to send its fledgling drama to a national audience. Under the firm's watchful eye, the serial was entrusted to Frank and Anne Hummert. By that time the Hummerts had already met with success in *Judy and Jane*, *Betty and Bob*, *Marie the Little French Princess*, *Easy Aces*, *Just Plain Bill* and *The Romance of Helen Trent*. On Monday, December 4, 1933 at 2 p.m. Central Time, *Ma Perkins* debuted on the full NBC network. [The figure Ma Perkins, incidentally, whose authoritative, common-sense advice was usually well received, would later be cited by media author Jim Harmon as "*Just Plain Bill* in skirts," an allusion to another of radio's well-established, unsophisticated serial sages.]

Throughout its lengthy run, the *Perkins* program would waft into kitchens and living rooms to a slight variation of "My Old Kentucky Home," played on the studio organ. The theme was an original melody written by Larry Larsen and Don Marcotte and became synonymous with the series, as much as its sponsor's detergent brand had.

In its earliest days, Ma Perkins was a far different character from the tenderhearted, compassionate woman that would be remembered by most of the show's fans. Indeed, she was originally envisioned as a harsh, gutless creature that barked orders and had a cynical outlook on life. In those days she despised son-in-law Willy Fitz, who was married to Ma's eldest daughter, Evey. Ma referred to him as a "no-account



Virginia Payne as *Ma Perkins*

scalawag." Could this be the same homey, soft-spoken matriarch that most listeners recall from decades of following her family's troubles? The widow who believed in everybody's dreams? Yes, one in the same. Even Virginia Payne didn't like her very much then. She petitioned for a change so strongly that Ma evolved into a warm, benevolent figure at odds with only the small-minded residents of her mythical Midwest hamlet of Rushville Center.

On making the change to a more accepting Ma, there was little further shift in her demeanor over the decades, or in that of any of the other Perkins characters. Soap opera figures—in this serial and elsewhere—maintained a behavioral consistency that was dependable. Confronted with a crisis, heroes and heroines reacted precisely as they had done in the past and as listeners would expect them to be in the future. It was comforting to know that the values, traits and conditions ascribed to an individual in one situation wouldn't be altered in another.

Ma was considered the wisest sage in her parts, sought for counsel, advice and reflection. The basis of her technique was a

trust in people and life itself. She lived by the Golden Rule. Her personal qualities included tough honesty combined with an instinctive understanding of the human spirit. In the Depression era from which she stemmed, people found a role model of strength and determination that inspired her listeners. Through her philosophy and successes as an arbitrator and problem-solver, Ma gave encouragement to the "little people" of Rushville Center, becoming the town's conscience. In addition to laundry soap, sponsor Oxydol gently urged a logic of patience, benevolence and determination upon the nation—not wealth, image and prestige.

Ma's theory of forgiveness, just one of the moral bromides she regularly sanctioned, would be typical of her philosophy. In a 1938 episode, she declared: "Anyone of this earth who's done wrong, and then goes so far as to try and right that wrong, I can tell you that they're well on their way to erasing the harm they did in the eyes of anyone decent."

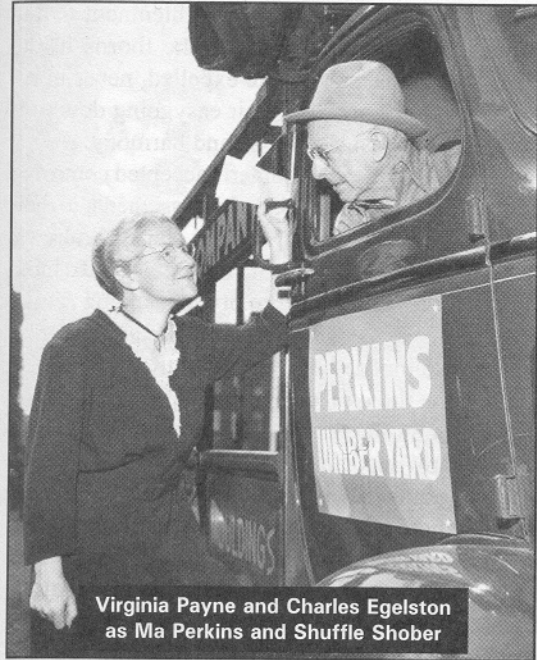
Her wisdom didn't come from extensive formal education, for she was a bona fide, unpretentious theorist. We don't have to look beyond her grammatical constructions and enunciation patterns to verify it. "I ain't sure I understand it," she was fond of saying. In a 1950 episode she lamented: "I do know it is wrong to say something against a person without hearing from the person theirself." Equally atrocious was this epithet of that era: "He said so to Willie hisself." Finally: "In all these years we've knowed each other, I ain't never heard nothin' like this." You could say that again, Ma! It was a good thing that most of the nation's English teachers were in class at the time the serial was broadcast. They would have fainted dead away over the liberties that most Rushville Center townfolk took with the mother tongue.

One of the strokes of genius in writing

Ma Perkins was a hook on which it left its listeners hanging each day. Following the closing Oxydol commercial, announcer Charlie Warren submitted an epilogue. This one was typical: "And so, the whole family is deeply concerned about Fay [Ma's youngest daughter]. And though Ma expressed her deep faith in Fay, is Ma concerned too? Well, Fay does see Andrew White [a beau she had discarded on the eve of her nuptials with someone else] and . . . Fay finds words on her tongue which surprise even Fay . . . tomorrow." Who could resist? Loyal listeners simply had to be within hearing range when the darling of the family said her piece to Dr. White.

Meanwhile, during the 1940s, operating behind the scenes and never actually affecting the audience, the Hummerts decided to shift virtually all of their programs to a New York City origination. The duo purchased a mansion in Greenwich, Connecticut for themselves, from which they continued to oversee their vast domain. Basing their shows in the Big Apple was to give them closer ties with the headquarters of both the major advertising agencies as well as the radio networks. Another benefit was their timely access to a larger pool of talent that could be readily tapped for their dramas, drawn from radio and theater sound stages. In 1946, after 13 years in Chicago, Ma Perkins joined those soap operas that transferred to the East Coast, becoming a staple that would air from New York for the remainder of its run, some 14 years hence.

New York announcer Dan Donaldson—who often used the pseudonym "Charlie Warren," as his predecessor Marvin Miller had when the show broadcast from Chicago—promised listeners a great deal. [The alias avoided a conflict with other advertisers—presumably sponsors manufacturing laundry soaps. This allowed those announcers to broadcast on other



Virginia Payne and Charles Egelston  
as Ma Perkins and Shuffle Shober

means of bringing audiences up to date with fresh detail or a development they could have missed.

There were at least two occasions in the life of *Ma Perkins*, the serial, when thousands of listeners abandoned all semblance of rationality. One—as might be expected—occurred when the series was canceled. That one will be examined later in this treatise. The other happened more than 16 years earlier, when Ma's only son, John, died and was buried on the battlefield "somewhere in Germany in an unmarked grave" during the Second World War. While nearly 300,000 Americans were fatalities during those same hostilities, John Perkins was the single major soap opera personality to die. The audience reacted

programs under their own names, not an assumed one.] "Warren" would introduce an episode by recapping previous action, then state something like this: "Well, today we'll hear Ma express herself on this very important matter." His summary at the close of the previous day's episode would have told listeners the same thing, only in different words. Sometimes in those summaries he would get even bolder as he enticed the audience to stay with the show: "On Monday, Fay considers the proposal of marriage, while Shuffle [Shober, Ma's business partner and best friend] wonders about those ulterior motives . . . and there's that matter of the missing funds from the charity ball. We've got lots to listen for in the days just ahead."

Another frequent device appearing on this serial involved the announcer saying, "Let's turn the clock back." The listener would then hear what had transpired at another time: a snippet from a previous episode or some action never heard on the air before. Either way, it was an effective

in shocked disbelief, but soon turned its trance into utter outrage. The network was deluged with sympathy notes addressed simply to "Ma." The avalanche of complaints that ensued could hardly have been predicted. Callers and letter writers were rabid in their consternation. Many protested that mothers and wives of service personnel did not need such a vivid reminder of the dangers of battle.

The episode became a public relations nightmare for Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample advertising agency, and several attempts were made to pacify the detractors. Things eventually cooled down when a young seminary student who could pass for John in looks and manner arrived in Rushville Center, was rented John's old room in the Perkins home by Ma and assumed John's former occupation as a door-to-door dairy deliveryman. For about three years he was active in the drama, putting the quietus on what had been a frustrating flare-up for all concerned.

In what would turn out to be one of the

drama's most memorable and durable sequences, and perhaps its darkest hour across 27 years, for 12 months—between Christmas 1949 and Christmas 1950—the consternation caused by some distant relatives (of the late Pa Perkins) made life pure hell for Ma and her brood. Millions of fans sat spellbound by their radios during the ordeal, nearly afraid to miss a chapter as they wondered if Ma—who trusted everybody—could ever separate what was truth from fiction.

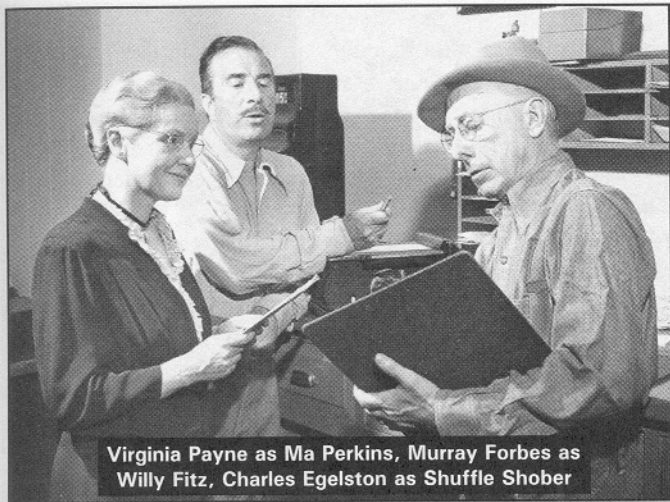
During that terrible, absorbing year, both Ma's best friend Shuffle Shober and son-in-law Willy Fitz quit their jobs at the Perkins Lumber Yard after many years when some conniving cousins moved in and virtually took over. In their haste to control whatever assets Ma had, they duped Fay into a marriage proposal and schemed to take all of Evey and Willie's life savings under the guise of placing the couple's funds in stocks. This would eventually be exposed as fraudulent, but not for several months. Still worse, they led the Fitzes to lie to Ma about their personal involvement in their unsuspected designs, something they had never done before. Only Shuffle saw through the plotting, for months insisting that the cousins were up to no good. Yet Shuffle was held in abeyance by the family because no one could believe such atrocities would be perpetrated by their own flesh and blood. It was a sad day for Ma and clan, and the listeners could hardly get enough of it. Ratings and sales of Oxydol soared throughout the lengthy sequence.

When at last reality sunk in, dawning first on Ma's "wise old eyes," unmitigated proof was obtained that confirmed Shuffle's long-held suspicions. Then Ma faced the evildoers who had all but destroyed her family and her business and turned them out for their vile connivance. Millions must have breathed a collective sigh of re-

lief on that day of enlightenment as the truth tumbled out and the thorns in the Perkins' sides were expelled, never to resurface again in their easygoing down-to-earth drama of hope and harmony.

When the Hummerts accepted control of *Ma Perkins* in 1933, they assigned it to their foremost scribe, Robert Hardy Andrews, the ex-newspaperman whom they had hired two years earlier to produce dialog for the ill-fated *Stolen Husband* serial, their first attempt at the form. After that experience, the three proceeded through the introduction of a string of subsequent serials, improving their output all the while. Andrews gained notoriety for ultimately producing more words than anybody else in the business of soap opera. A journalist labeled him a "writing syndicate," in fact. At one time, for a full decade, he was churning out up to five daily episodes of between four and seven different radio features, netting a weekly production rate in excess of 100,000 words. Between noon and midnight seven days a week he claimed he consumed 40 cups of coffee, chain-smoked 100 cigarettes and—when he wasn't about the task of writing dramas for the ether—he'd roll out novels and dozens of movies in his "off" time. The Hummerts never replaced their workaholic, and when Andrews died in 1976 it was surely the passing of an era among gainful wordsmiths.

Eventually *Ma Perkins* passed from Hummert control into the hands of other producers. Longtime sponsor Procter & Gamble finally acquired it, as was a standard practice among many of the daytime dramas. When at last the firm sold its interests in late 1956 to the network then airing it, CBS, P&G claimed its decision indicated no lack of regard for the drama. The program continued to be loved by listeners and advertisers for several more years. The decision by P&G to discontinue



Virginia Payne as Ma Perkins, Murray Forbes as Willy Fitz, Charles Egelston as Shuffle Shober

underwriting it was a reflection of a then-current trend toward multiple sponsors and away from sole participation. The washing powder and the Perkins serial were so closely intertwined in listeners' minds ("Oxydol's own *Ma Perkins*"), nonetheless, that the tie persisted for years after P&G bowed out.

Robert Hardy Andrews' contributions notwithstanding, head writer Orin Tovrov had the benefit of developing those familiar radio characters for more than two decades. This gave him an extraordinarily unprecedented affinity with the principals—Ma, Shuffle, Fay, Willie, Evey and the others—that few peers would ever experience. Tovrov was lauded for the quality of his work and may have been the best of his trade, cited by several media critics for his superb accomplishments with the narrative. The Radio Writers Guild elected him its first president. He would go on to write two other popular daytime serials, *The Brighter Day* on radio and television, and *The Doctors*, on television.

While reviewers routinely threw brickbats at the washboard weepers, particularly for the slow pace at which most of their stories transpired, there was one area in which those shows far excelled their broad-

cast counterparts: cost per listener. Minimal production fees attracted sponsors in the early days of soap opera, with most of those programs originating in Chicago. When the return on investment translated into huge matinee audiences, advertisers purchased even more time. Production costs per rating point for *Kate Smith Speaks*, the

highest-measured weekday program on the air in 1943, were \$609.76. But *Ma Perkins*, boasting a rating very near that enjoyed by Smith, cost only \$164.56 per point. It took \$5,000 per week to put Smith's quarter-hour on the air, yet Perkins could be produced for a scant \$1,300. Costs were a factor the critics of dishpan dramas never could substantially repudiate. Late in the run, in fact, after P&G had bowed out, CBS boasted that a single 15-minute serial broadcast five days weekly reached an audience of 6.4 million at a mere 49 cents per thousand listeners. It would be hard to refute impressive figures like that when compared with most other advertising mediums.

*Ma Perkins*' audience size and influence also put most of its contemporaries to shame. In the heyday of radio the serial had the good fortune to rack up dual broadcasts extending to all four networks over a period of nine years, seven of those seasons consecutively. Not many programs of any type could claim such a feat. With ratings figures in the double digits in both dual- and single-broadcast years, it was an unshakable fact that the *Perkins* drama was one of the most popular narratives ever on American radio. Listeners were so en-



thrilled by it that in some communities door-to-door salesmen, who peddled consumer goods and services during that era, knew not to disturb homemakers while Perkins' quarter-hour segments were being aired.

The serial's recognition didn't rest there, however. At its peak, *Ma Perkins* was carried on stations in Hawaii, Canada and Europe, the last of those through Radio Luxembourg. In the late 1940s its advertising agency even attempted a TV pilot but it didn't work. Fans wouldn't accept it; they had created their own images of the citizens of Rushville Center in their minds and were quite satisfied with them, sight unseen.

Long after the program left the air, actress Virginia Payne confided to an interviewer that she had maintained one recurring nightmare throughout the extended run. Because of the significant difference between Eastern and Pacific time zones, broadcasts were performed live twice daily (at least until quality recording equipment came into vogue and a network ban against using it was lifted in the late 1940s). Sometimes an actor would leave the studio and start for home, not realizing the mistake until it was almost too late to return for the second show. Actor Burgess Meredith, playing the title character in *Red Davis*, was fired when he missed the second show of that drama just once, for example. In Payne's hallucination, she saw herself as the only performer on hand for the latter broadcast. Fortunately, it never became a reality.

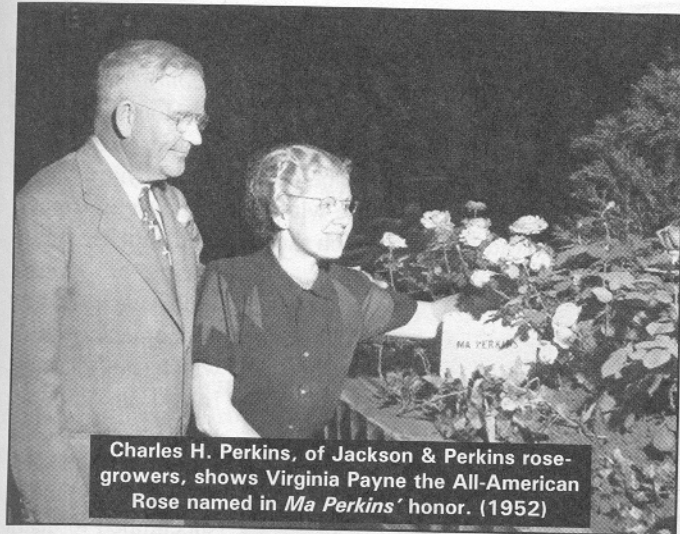
In the early days in Chicago a note on an NBC file card cautioned that Payne's identity was never to be released to the public. This suggested that a certain perception might be destroyed if people knew who she really was—and, perhaps, how young she really was. With the passing of time, however—as Payne advanced in

age—that rule was relaxed. In response to the demands of her fans, CBS wrapped the young blonde actress in a gray wig, steel-rimmed glasses, low-heeled Oxfords and dowdy dresses and sent her out to make public appearances. Local audiences loved it.

Only two of the many actors associated with the soap opera remained with it all the way from Cincinnati to Chicago and through the final day in New York more than 27 years after the feature's inception. They were Virginia Payne and Murray Forbes, the latter portraying Ma's son-in-law, Willie Fitz. A third actor, Charles Eggleston, who had been in the part of Shuffle Shober since the start in Cincinnati, died in late 1958 after the drama had been airing for more than 25 years. That trio of thespians collectively contributed nearly 80 years of their professional lives to the one serial while concurrently accepting many additional acting jobs. In such a remarkable accomplishment, there were truly no equals.

In the 1950s, as television began to encroach upon radio's heretofore unchallenged turf, longrunning aural soap operas went on the chopping block in wholesale numbers. When General Foods announced the cancellation of three of its most successful series—*The Aldrich Family*, a nighttime comedy show, and two late-afternoon serials, *When a Girl Marries* and *Portia Faces Life*—Virginia Payne, who wasn't directly associated with either series, observed: "I feel as though the main pillars had been knocked out of the house." Colbee's Restaurant, near CBS, where many heroes and heroines of daytime drama gathered socially, was "Forest Lawn without the flowers," according to soap star Mary Jane Higby.

But that wasn't the end of *Ma Perkins*. The cast fought on bravely for a few more years, seemingly denying that a final epi-



Charles H. Perkins, of Jackson & Perkins rose-growers, shows Virginia Payne the All-American Rose named in *Ma Perkins'* honor. (1952)

had brought her simple, unsophisticated tale of domestic struggles into American homes for nearly three decades—and the actress behind her, Virginia Payne, who had never missed a single performance, who had been the first of her gender to be elected president of the Chicago, New York and national chapters of the American Federation of Ra-

diode would come, despite the fact that the serial's contemporaries were falling all around it. Network affiliates were demanding the release of time so that they could sell it more profitably locally. When CBS felt it could no longer stifle the pressure, the web at last set a date to clear its schedule of soap operas, the last of the major chains to do so. By then there were only four open-ended stories left: *The Right to Happiness*, *Ma Perkins*, *Young Doctor Malone* and *The Second Mrs. Burton*. The day of demise was set for Friday, November 25, 1960 during the Thanksgiving weekend. Longtime listeners would see the irony in it for they neither felt grateful nor blessed by the experience.

In some parting words that day, speaking directly to her radio audience, Virginia Payne allowed: "This was our broadcast 7,065. I first came to you on December 4, 1933. Thank you for all being so loyal to us these 27 years." She named the actors and production staff that had been with the show for so long, then gave her fans an address where they could write her personally and departed with a cheery "Good-by, and may God bless you."

Then she was gone! The woman who

radio [and Television] Artists—was gone, never to return to a microphone on any sustained basis! It was more than many listeners could handle. So outraged were they that the CBS switchboards lit up like Christmas trees. Angry callers and letter writers gave the network a piece of their minds, sparing no words in the process. Through tears of anguish, writers and callers vented their hostilities toward the chain, some practically unable to write or speak due to extreme emotional states.

Deeply embedded in the very nature of the serials had been the implied trust that they would go on forever. On November 25, 1960 that trust eroded, resulting in pure myth. Rushville Center and its inhabitants were swept away without a vestige that they had ever existed in Radioland. The characters that audiences had come to know so well instantly disappeared, forgotten by the medium, never to be intersected again. They wouldn't even be mentioned on many of the same stations that had carried them to waiting audiences for years. It was too much for some of the faithful to comprehend; they had lost some of their very best and most dependable, albeit fictional, friends.



Yet soaps would remain an enduring part of American popular culture for decades into the future. Radio (and especially its innovative stalwarts like Chicagoans Irna Phillips, Frank and Anne Hummert and Robert Hardy Andrews) had instigated an entertainment form that would not be dissolved—at least, not anytime soon. And what of Virginia

Payne? What became of her? The day the “mother of all soap opera” (as media observer Charles Stumpf aptly put it) left the air—the day she said “goodby” to those millions of faithful comrades tuning in at home—apparently she, herself, received no similar farewell message from CBS. According to the actress

then playing Ma’s daughter Fay, Margaret Draper, “A couple of us in the cast invited her to go across the street for a drink following that final broadcast. That was all she got. It was a shabby way for her to be treated after she devoted all those years to that highly successful show.”

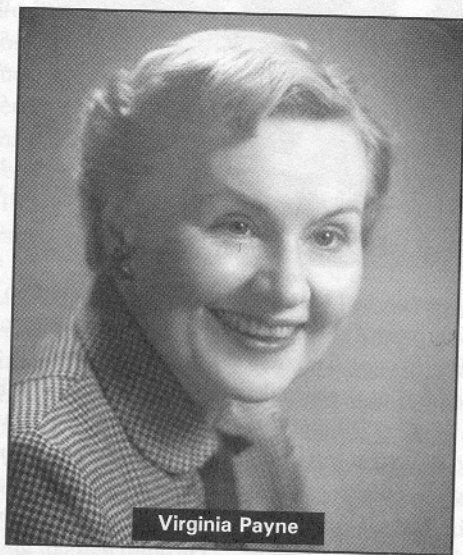
Payne, a spinster in real life, had spent many years living alone in a posh apartment on Manhattan’s East Fifty-Fifth Street. [By 1957 her income reached \$50,000 annually, a tidy sum in that era, surpassing every other actress in daytime radio.] Only 50 when her show left the air, she moved to Orleans, Massachusetts, residing there for several years. In retirement she recorded radio commercials and frequently performed on stage. In 1964 she appeared with Carol Burnett in the Broadway musical comedy *Fade Out, Fade*

*In*. She toured the nation in the 1960s and 1970s in productions of *Becket*, *Carousel*, *Oklahoma!*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Life with Father*. At Houston’s Alley Theatre she received standing ovations.

Not long before she died, Payne returned to the little white frame house in Cincinnati in which she had lived with her family

during her young adult years. It was the homeplace from which she began her long association with the role of Ma Perkins. While living there again she succumbed to death at the age of 66 on February 10, 1977.

In recent years a longstanding member of a Cincinnati vintage radio club told this writer that he had labored zealously to purchase the



Perkins estate. The family living there now, he testified, “has no appreciation for it, and doesn’t even realize the magnitude of the celebrated individual who once occupied it.” The property has reportedly been in foreclosure, but an updated account indicates that the future of this parcel and dwelling on it is still uncertain as this is written.

Author Robert LaGuardia dubbed *Ma Perkins* the “den mom of our dreams,” depicting her as a “pie-baking Sherlock Holmes with an I. Q. of about one hundred and eighty.” Millions probably viewed “the mother of the air” like that. Surely Virginia Payne portrayed her role with complete and absolute comprehension of that fantasy. ■

NOTE-- Tune in TWTD June 22 to hear four consecutive episodes of *Ma Perkins*.