

SPEAKING OF RADIO



Chuck Schaden's Conversation with **BRET MORRISON**



*It doesn't seem like such a long time ago, but we were in California in December, 1973, when we had the opportunity to meet Bret Morrison, the actor who starred on radio as *The Shadow* and as *Mr. First Nighter*. Mr. Morrison died in 1978 and we will always remember with fondness our visit with him at his home in the Hollywood Hills.*

He did a lot of radio work in Chicago and we commented that he certainly must have been a member of the now famous "Bridge Up Club."

Yes, yes, that's the club that all the Chicago actors—we call it the "Bridge Is Up Club." It's a sort of a dutch-treat club. We get together on Wednesday afternoons for luncheon and, oh, discuss the old days and our friends and exchange information about various people in the business and what they're doing and one thing or another.

And you're called the "Bridge Is Up Club" because you share one thing in common with each other—you all got stuck somewhere along the line when the bridge was up in Chicago!

Yes. In order to get from the Merchandise Mart to either the Wrigley Building or the Tribune Tower, where the Mutual Network was, we had to cross the Michigan Avenue bridge. So, if it was open at an inopportune time, we were apt to be late. As you know in radio everything had to be down to the second and there's some very strange and amusing excuses—but that was always a very good excuse to use if you were unavoidably detained. And one actor, I don't know who it was, came in and said, "I'm terribly sorry I'm late today, but just everything went wrong. The bridge died and my landlady was up!"

Did you, indeed, ever get caught by the bridge?

Oh, yes, yes!

*You were on radio's *First Nighter* program. Did you ever get on-the-air credit as Bret Morrison, the *First Nighter*?*

I don't remember whether we had air credit at that time or not. I did *First Nighter* from 1937 until World War II and I don't know whether I—I don't think our union at that time had a mandatory clause that we would be given air credit.

Did that come about because of the union? The air credit?

Yes, yes. I think it came about a little bit later, like in the late 40s, shortly after the war when a lot of the actors sort of complained about the fact that they were doing important roles on shows and were getting no identification. Some of the advertising agencies were using this as a wedge, also, to threaten the actors so that if they made demands for an increase in salary, the agency said, "Well, we can just fire you and get somebody else, and after a few days nobody's going to know the difference anyway." So we sort of asked, you know, that this be included in new contract negotiations and it finally was.

*You were the genial "First Nighter"—
the host welcoming—*

Mr. First Nighter, yes.

You never took tickets. . .

No, no. I was always ushered to my favorite seat. I was on the aisle, down in front I guess it was.

This, of course, was in Chicago. You were quite busy as an actor in Chicago in the late 30s and early 40s.

Yes. Chicago was really, I think, probably more active even than New York, and certainly more active than the West Coast in those days. Being centrally located and being so near so many of the major sponsors. You know, General Mills and others, being located pretty much in that area, felt they had a little more control of their shows from Chicago rather than New York. After the war, however, things just sort of shifted, and then they came out to New York and Hollywood.

You were on all of the big shows in Chicago.

I started in radio in Chicago way back in 1929 when I was still in high school.

Where did you go to high school?

Nicholas Senn. We have a lot of alumni from there that have done some great things in theatre and pictures. Burr Tillstrom from *Kukla*, Fran and Ollie was just after me. Jerry Lester was in my class—in the dramatics class. Hugh Marlow, who has done a great deal in films, and—oh, gosh, there were just loads of them, it seemed, that came from that particular era.

You say you were in a dramatics class, so you had an interest in drama and the arts in high school.

Yes, that really started me. I didn't really go out for it until I was in my junior year at Senn, and then I saw a performance of Beau Brummel and I thought this would be kind of fun. I was majoring in art and history of architecture and painting, and

CHUCK SCHADEN'S
NOSTALGIA DIGEST AND
RADIO GUIDE

JUNE-JULY, 1987



BRET MORRISON

so they were sort of allied arts to me. I've always been interested in theatre, so I decided I'd try out for it and I broke a precedent. You had to have two semesters of preparatory work before you could become a *Player*, which naturally meant that it would be one year of what they call "B and A" dramatics before you became a *Player*. Well, inasmuch as I was in my first semester of my junior year, that meant that I would only have one semester in *Players*, I mean, to do anything. So, I found I had enough English credits that I could skip the "B" dramatics and go right into "A", which I did.

That same year they were doing a play at Senn called "Happy Go Lucky" or "Tillie of Bloomsbury" and it seemed that we used to give two performances and we'd have a different cast at each performance, because the casts were usually large enough to give everybody a chance to play. But there were always more women than men, as a rule, and you had to meet certain scholastic standards in order to be able

SPEAKING OF RADIO

to qualify for a *Players*. So, for some reason or other, they only had one lead to play, you know, both nights. So, for protection they called on the "A" dramatics class to understudy and finally, about a week or so before the actual performance, our director said, "I'm going to announce something that's unprecedented in the history of our dramatics class, but I think he's earned it. Bret Morrison is going to play the lead on Friday night." So that gave me my extra semester as a *Player* and then I took a year's post-graduate course, or an extra semester's post-graduate course so that I'd have an additional chance to play.

You mentioned that you first got involved in radio in 1929.

Right. That was at WCFL, the Voice of Labor, in Chicago. I had my own poetry hour there. And then later, as a result, we formed a little theatre group with a nucleus of players that we had at Senn, under the same director. We used to do one-act plays on the air. Then, eventually, I did some publicity work for Universal Pictures and we did across-the-board—five, half-hours a week—and did the complete version of "Dracula," which they had just filmed, and on the basis of this I came out to the West Coast to work in a picture called "The Road Back" which was the sequel to "All Quiet on the Western Front." That was in the early 30s, 1931 or 32 I believe it was, and I was here until about 1937. I got into radio out here on the West Coast and I did Hollywood Hotel, Lux Radio Theatre and a lot of the big shows and a lot of other shows that came up. We had mostly half-hour shows out here. We didn't have the big-time soap operas on the West Coast at all.

Was it tough to get an acting job on the major shows on radio out here, back in those days?

-4- Nostalgia Digest



PUBLICITY PHOTO from the early 1940s shows "two members of the Chicago Theatre of the Air operetta cast — Bret Morrison and Marilou Neumayer — who have forsaken all other forms of transportation and are now riding bicycles from their homes to the WGN studios. Here Morrison gives Marilou a ride from WGN because her bike is temporarily out of commission. The cars are in the garage, the actors point out, because of the tire and auto rationing plans now in effect in the United States."

Well it was, of course. This was the height of the Depression and the average price for a radio show in those days was five dollars. And some paid as little as three dollars. And some of the recordings we did, some of the series paid, you know, like three dollars for a fifteen-minute recording.

Did that include your rehearsal time?

Oh, yes, that was the whole business. Hollywood Hotel and the Lux Radio Theatre, when they started, paid the most. They paid fifty dollars, but you had to rehearse all week for that. I mean, you were at their disposal for the entire week. But, as I said, this was the height of the Depression and fifty dollars a week was a lot of money in those days.

Right, right.

I was out here in California—this was 1937—and I was visiting some friends, sort of bemoaning the fact that things were not too good in radio. I mean, I was making a living, I was getting by, but I felt sort of stifled. My family was still back in Chicago and I was sort of anxious to go back. My friends mentioned the fact that they knew someone who was in town from Chicago, looking for some other type of talent—writing talent, actually. But they said, “Why don’t you call and find out what the situation is in Chicago?” So, I called this man and I asked him what the leading-man situation was and he said, “Well, there’s always room for one more, if they’re any good.” So he said, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ve got to catch a plane back to Chicago late tomorrow afternoon, but if you want to meet me at—” there was a recording company out here called Freeman Lang at that time, where we did a lot of our shows for radio in those days—and he said, “If you want to come out and cut an audition record, I’ll take it back. I can’t promise anything,” he said, “but at least I’ll see what can be done.” So I went down with him, and his wife very graciously read with me on the script and I sat down at the piano because I discovered they were going to do a musical. He picked up the record and off he went and I thought, well, you know, I won’t hear anything more about that. Then I got a wire saying, “I can’t really guarantee you anything, but the chances are very good, if you want to come out on speculation, that you can get something on this show.”

So I decided to take the jump and I pulled up stakes here and went back to Chicago into the agency for my interview on the show. They seemed to be very impressed with the audition that I had done and the fact that I could do both the singing and acting. It made it that much better. They were, originally going to split it up and have someone do the acting and



BRET MORRISON IN LATER YEARS

somebody else do the singing. So they asked me how much I wanted for the show, and of course, I was thinking in terms—we didn’t have strip shows as we call them here in those days—five days a week. They were mostly half-hour shows, “costume-drama” things, “Peter the Great,” “Catherine the Great,” things of that kind. And, so all I was thinking in my mind at this time was fifty dollars, ‘cause that was the highest price that you could get out here for a show. So I said, “Well, if you pay for all the arrangements, everything else—” “Oh, yes, we’ll take care of that.” I said “Well, fifty dollars a show.” And he said, “Well, that’s two hundred fifty dollars a week.” And I just gulped and I said, “Yes, it is.” And he said, “Well, I guess that’s satisfactory.” I nearly dropped dead because I didn’t expect that, of course, in those days—1937—two hundred fifty dollars a week was considerable!

Have you ever thought what you might have asked for that? You know, three dollars for this show and five dollars for

SPEAKING OF RADIO

that one and the top was Lux, and this was not Lux, so what might you have asked? Ten dollars for the show?

I don't know, I really don't know. I had just one figure in mind and I figured that fifty dollars—in those days—if I could average fifty dollars a week, I could get by. And this is all I was looking for. We've come a long way since then.

What was that show?

It was called "Love Song" and it sort of died an early death because it was a very bad show, actually. It sort of developed into a burlesque sort of thing. And finally they did away with the dramatic show idea and it resolved itself into Vincent Pelletier and myself. I sang and Vinnie read poetry. And we were on for quite a while with that format.

You were rather versatile because you had announcing jobs as well as acting jobs. You were able to do both?

Yes, I specialized in dialects, too. I'll tell you, a lot of the actors in the early days—you had to be versatile. Because in order to make enough money to make a living—even at the height of the Depression, when a few dollars went a long way—you had to be versatile, because if certain areas sort of petered out, you had to be able to step into something else and do it. You couldn't be a specialist, really, because there was no room for specialization. You had to be as versatile and flexible as you possibly could if you wanted to work steadily, which fortunately I always have.

You were on a lot of the soap operas from Chicago.

Oh, yes, yes. And then in New York. I don't think there's one on the air that I haven't played in at sometime or another.

Did you have the lead in any of them, any of the soaps? I know you were on Woman in White and Guiding Light. . .

And Big Sister, Helen Trent, Ma Perkins, Stella Dallas.

You had an important role in The Light of the World.

Yes, I was the announcer on The Light of the World, or rather the narrator.

You were the one who came on and said . . .

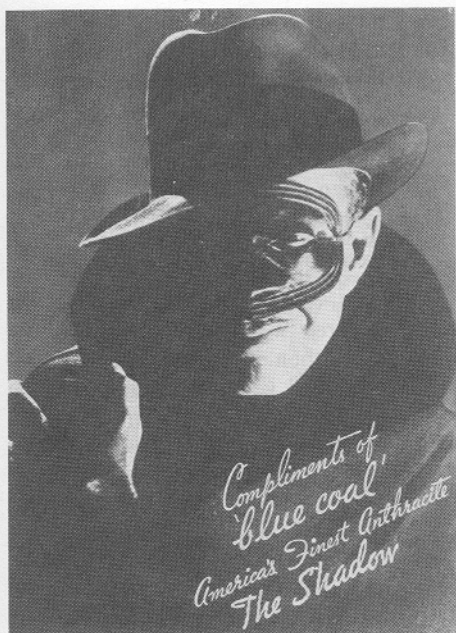
"The Light . . . of the World!"

You mentioned New York. How did you get to New York from Chicago?

I was in Special Services during the war and they were utilizing my talents as far as the theatre and radio was concerned and they approached me and said, "We have been screening people and your name keeps constantly coming up. You seem to be the only one who is familiar with all of these various phases of theatre and show business which we require for this specific job that we have in mind" which was the "WAC Caravan." It was the recruiting of WACs throughout the New England states primarily and then, also, I went up to Canada and organized the same thing up there.

My job was to produce and direct a 15-minute radio show every day with all Army personnel, including myself, and then be stage manager and emcee a three-hour stage show every night, to be familiar with any kind of a light board, or to improvise as far as settings and lighting and so forth was concerned, depending upon where we were playing and what we had to do. So, this was very interesting work. I enjoyed it tremendously. There were 125 people in our company and we were all stationed in Boston for Service Command. Anyway, when I completed my work with them, I went to New York from Boston and I'd no sooner arrived in New York when—I was just working steadily that first year I was here, 1944—I got The Shadow.

I was called down to audition for something. I was doing another broadcast and they were losing the studio at 2 o'clock and I was called in. I didn't get off the air until a quarter of two. So, I said, "Well,



THE SHADOW PUBLICITY PHOTO

I'm not sure that I can make it, but I'll sure try my best." So I got there about three minutes to two and I thought, you know—. But they said, "Well, we're losing the studio at two o'clock," but they handed me this thing and said, "Just read this. It's the opening and closing of this thing." And that was it. I looked at it and it was the opening and closing of *The Shadow*.

And you didn't know the audition was for The Shadow?

No, I didn't know what it was for. So I just read it as I'd always remembered hearing it, you know, because we used to follow *The Shadow*—us *First Nighters*. And so I always heard the closing signature. So that was that, you know. I read it and forgot about it. We were constantly doing auditions and some we get and some we don't. About a week or so later, I got a call that said, "Oh, you're it." And so I did it from then until it went off the air. I did *The Shadow*, I guess, longer than anyone.

From 1944 until the end?

Until it went off the air in the middle 50s.

And there were brand new shows being presented every Sunday. Sunday afternoon with The Shadow—

"Five O'Clock Shadow" I was called!

Did you have to take a trip to the Orient to learn how to cloud men's minds?

No, I managed to do that without having to go to the Orient! I did the opening and closing signature, the "who knows—"

Do you think that—

Oh, yeah. It won't sound the same because I worked on a special microphone which gave it a filtered effect, but I'll do it for you.

"Who knows... what evil lurks... in the hearts of men... The Shadow knows. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha—"

And at the end there was—

"The weed of crime bears bitter fruit. Crime does not pay. The Shadow knows." It's sort of a mixed metaphor, I guess.

And it was a great, great radio show! You had the longest run as an actor playing The Shadow. Who preceded you?

Bill Johnstone and Orson Welles before that. Originally, well, there was a Robert Hardy Andrews who was before Orson Welles. This went on in the very early 30s, I'm not sure. And he was just like Raymond on *Inner Sanctum*. He was merely a host. And then the story had nothing to do with *The Shadow* until Orson Welles stepped in and then he became a central character in the story itself. Bill Johnstone followed him and then, as I say, in 1944 I followed Bill Johnstone.

What was the reason for the switch? Was Johnstone just tired of it or was he—

I don't know. I never had any idea. I didn't know what the reason was.

SPEAKING OF RADIO

When you were playing Lamont Cranston, The Shadow, who was your lovely friend and companion, Margo Lane?

Well, I had four, Marjorie Anderson was the first, then Gertrude Warner. Gertrude was actually the last one. Grace Matthews and Leslie Woods, and then Gertrude Warner was the last one. I think Gertrude did it longer than anyone else. And then Agnes Moorehead did it with Orson Welles.

Did you enjoy doing The Shadow?

Yes, I did. I did. When I first did it, you know, we were "live." We used to work from the Longacre Theatre in New York. I don't believe radio shows should be watched, but the audiences seemed to enjoy it. But it's such a small percentage of the listeners that it doesn't, I guess, destroy the illusion.

Well some of the radio shows, such as First Nighter for a good example, had the actors "dress" for the performance.

Oh, yes, We always did ours "live" before an audience, yes, and we dressed. We

even took it on vaudeville. We had a vaudeville turn with First Nighter. I don't think there's anything I haven't done!

What about television?

I did television in the early days, you know, when television was "live." I did City Hospital, or General Hospital.

Did you do anything on the screen?

Oh, yes, yes. I've done—well, I did some pictures 'way back in the 30s, some things back then. I was in "Cavalcade," that's the Noel Coward thing. And, the remake of "Tess of the Storm Country" with Janet Gaynor and "Hell Below" with Clark Gable, and a few others.

There were a couple of Shadow movies. Were you in those?

No, no. That was before. I think they only did two pictures on that. No. The Shadow, they've never been able to do anything with it on television. I know the reason why. Because they wouldn't accept the fact that it's sort of an adult fairy tale. It was fantasy and it should have been treated like Topper was done, with special effects and on film. And the few times that they tried to do something with it, they've always tried to rationalize it, you know, and make it believable and it just never came off.

Wouldn't you say, too, that The Shadow is really radio material, because the listener had to add his imagination?

It is, right, right.

It's really been a treat to talk to the man who was The Shadow and the First Nighter and the voice of so many great characters on radio.

Well, it's nice to see someone from the old home town and I hope radio comes back and the time will come when every radio set will be a color set.

Thanks for sharing some memories with us.

Chuck, thank you.

Chuck Schaden's



SPEAKING OF RADIO

Conversations with . . .

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dennis Day | <input type="checkbox"/> Edgar Bergen |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rudy Vallee | <input type="checkbox"/> Harold Peary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kate Smith | <input type="checkbox"/> Elliott Lewis |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don Ameche | <input type="checkbox"/> Jack Benny |

. . . and many others

may be obtained on custom cassette tape recordings. For a list of interviews available, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

SPEAKING OF RADIO

Box 421, Morton Grove, IL 60053