

# SPEAKING OF RADIO



## Chuck Schaden's Conversation with EVE ARDEN



*Eve Arden created the role of Connie Brooks for the popular radio and television series Our Miss Brooks. A while ago we had a chance to visit with her and talk about her career. We remarked that before she became Connie Brooks, even before she became Eve Arden, she was Eunice Quedens.*

When I got to New York, I worked for Lee Shubert in the first Shubert Ziegfeld Follies that they did after Ziegfeld had died. Lee Shubert said, "We're going to put your name up on the marquee, and we can't put *Quedens* up there. It's too long." So, that's when I came up with Arden.

*Did you just pull it out of the air?*

More or less, yes, I did. I was waiting to go in and see him and he had given me a deadline on a name. I was reading a book and the heroine was Eve. I had a package of Elizabeth Arden cosmetics in my hand. I tried it out on him and he liked it. That was it.

*You know if you had used a different cosmetic your name today could be Lady Esther, I suppose.*

Right. Ha! Ha!

*Well, how did you get from Mill Valley, California, where you were born, to the Ziegfeld Follies?*

I went to San Francisco first, and I worked for the Henry Duffy Stock Company there. It was a marvelous kind of super stock, where you rehearsed for four weeks and played eight to twelve weeks, depending on how popular the play was. It was great training. Then I joined a little Band Box Repertoire Company. There were just four of us in the company.

That meant a lot of long parts, because I played all the leads, and they were divided among four people. From there, I did a revue at the Pasadena Playhouse. We took it into Hollywood, and that's where Mr. Schubert saw me and signed me for the Follies. So that got me to New York.

*I see. You worked with Danny Kaye on Broadway didn't you?*

Yes, I went back later and did *Let's Face It*, with Danny Kaye.

*Then you were in the Follies and a couple of other shows, too, before you went back to California?*

Yes, I did the Theatre Guild Revue called *Parade* and then I did another Follies. Then I came out to California. My mother had passed away, I came out and suddenly I got a picture to do. So I stayed and did some pictures. And then I went back and did another show, two shows as a matter of fact. Came back and did some more pictures, and then I went back and did *Let's Face It*. I sort of commuted in those days. I love the theatre. I was a comedienne, and I did numbers and sketches and things like that in revues that were great fun. I sang and danced.

*Your first major screen role was in Stage Door.*

Well, that was the first one, and then I



**OUR MISS BROOKS on radio: Gloria McMillen as Harriet Conklin; Eve Arden as schoolteacher Connie Brooks; Richard Crenna as Walter Denton.**

did Voice of the Turtle. Well, you have the whole list, I couldn't possibly remember them.

*You even worked with the Marx Brothers!*

Yes, Day at the Circus, practically the only picture that ever impressed our son! Ha! Ha! That pulled me up a few notches!

*You were in the movies with Warner Brothers and for RKO, too.*

Oh, I worked for all the studios, MGM, RKO, Paramount . . .

*You and Lucille Ball were somewhat typecast as the business woman, or the secretary . . .*

Yes, secretary and best friend of the heroine, who never got the man. Ha! Ha! Ha!

*Ted Sennett wrote a book called Lunatics and Lovers about those screwball comedies of the 30's and 40's, and you were very evident in many of those. He said, describing the role that you played in those films, you "would walk onto the screen, dispense acid like wine to the fools you were obliged to tolerate and then make a nice exit." You know I think that really did sum up your screen roles.*

Well maybe that covered a few of them, but I never thought that I was so acid, you know. They called me brittle, which annoyed me because I was always really the gal with the good heart who saved the heroine and patched up all her troubles, and took care of everybody. But I did make a flip remark now and then.

*Well, those flip remarks really were very well remembered, and kind of became the trademark for Eve Arden.*

Right.

*Mildred Pierce was one of your finest screen appearances.*

Yes, so they tell me. I was so amazed because you make a picture, or you did in those days, and if you're not the lead, you work maybe two weeks in a row. Then I used to go to Palm Springs for two or three weeks during the making of the picture. Which always distressed the camera man, cause I came back eight shades darker. Then you would work a week or two more. So you had really very little concept of what you had done in a picture. I could never bear to see them after. It destroyed me. So I gave it up. But then I read in the paper that I had been nominated for an Oscar in *Mildred Pierce*. So I felt I had to go and see what the heck I had done. I went and the theatre was very crowded. I went and sat in the second row down front. There were no other seats. After 10 minutes I left. I never saw it again, until it was on TV, as an old picture.



*Did you like it?*

Yes, I enjoyed it, but I wasn't that mad about it. I think *Voice of the Turtle* was one of the best things I had done.

*You moved from film with ease into radio, working with Ken Murray for awhile, and Jack Haley.*

I did those things when I was working in the theatre in New York. Then I came out on the coast with another one of those. Then I did a show with Danny Kaye on radio. Then finally along came Miss Brooks.

*How did *Our Miss Brooks* come along?*

Well, they had made a couple of recordings with a couple of other actresses. I believe Joan Blondell was one. They didn't feel she was right, and Shirley Booth was one. So they asked me to do it and I held very little hope for it. But they said they wanted to put it on as a summer replacement. I said, "Well, then you're going to have to do it right fast, 'cause I'm going to New York. So we taped all of them very fast. I got to New York. At the end of my stay there, Frank Stanton, the president of CBS, said, "Congratulations, you're the number one show on the air." Which astounded me! So then we went into fall production. It was on radio five years, one of which overlapped the four years on television.

*There's something very interesting about the transition of radio to television. A lot of the shows that were very well established on radio didn't make it on TV. I think a lot of it was due to the fact that the people who watched the TV show saw people they couldn't relate to, because they had their own ideas of them in their own mind.*

Right.

*Yet, with one exception, every member of the *Our Miss Brooks* radio broadcast moved into television.*

And the only one who didn't, as you know, was Jeff Chandler. The reason for that was that Jeff had suddenly become a



big motion picture star. He really wanted to do it with us, but he just physically didn't look the part. I mean, when you looked at Jeff, you didn't believe he was the shy, bumbling Mr. Boynton. Vocally he did it. So Bob Rockwell was the perfect replacement for him on television.

They didn't want to take Dick Crenna into TV. They asked me to make tests with some boys. And I said, "What for?" They said for Walter Denton. I said, "You're crazy, people know Dick." They said he's too old. But I said, "He doesn't look it. He doesn't sound it. They'll love him." They pressured me to make the tests. So I said, "I'll do it if you make a test of Dick, too." There was no question after that.

Then they came to me part way through the series and said, "We're going to make a big change. Just keep you and Gale Gordon as Mr. Conklin, and that's all. We're going to send you to Hollywood, and it's . . ." I said, "It's not going to

work. I bet I have my people back in three months." And I did. It was a shame, but that spoiled it.

*They changed from a public school to a private school, and from a high school to a grammar school.*

It never recovered from that. That was really the reason we went off the air. It's a shame.

*Why did they want to make the change?*

Well, we were caught in a game that is played, really, by an awful lot of TV producers and sponsors. When the time comes to renew, each one pretends that . . . you know, the sponsor and the network say, well the show's ratings are going down a little and it's not as good as it used to be. Then the creative people get very upset. They come and say, but we've got a great new idea. Then they change it and it ruins the whole thing. That was the problem with that.

*When the Our Miss Brooks series ended, you came back shortly thereafter with the Eve Arden Show.*

Yes. We made a good pilot which sold immediately. Then they came to me and said, "Well, we're on now, but you can't have the same producer, director or writer." I said, "How can you do that?" They said, "Oh, we'll put 15 writers on it." Well, you put 15 people in a little screening room, and have them look at one thing. They all come up with a totally different idea. So it just didn't homogenize, you know.

*That didn't click too well, but you were a big hit with Kaye Ballard in The Mothers-In-Law.*

Yes, and then they dropped that.

*You never got away from making movies. You were in Anatomy of a Murder, and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs.*

Yes, my life seems to go in spurts, but mostly we love the theatre. At one time my



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husband Brooks West and I took our four children on summer stock tour.

*Did they appear with you in the show?*

No, no, it gave them a wonderful vacation and allowed us to be with them in a kind of different role, than we were at home, where we were always having to say, "Did you do your homework? Did you make your bed? Did you do this? Well, do it." But we would tour in a station wagon with a nurse and a dog. We would talk with them, and they would see the countryside with us. We would be by a mountain lake one time, and by the seashore another. So it was a good way of life for us for quite a few years.

*You have a big ranch in California?*

Yes, a great big ranch, and then we took them to Europe for a year and a half. That was a wonderful period.

*I was flipping through an old TV Guide and there was something in there about the animals on your ranch being named after movie stars?*

Chuck Schaden's



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Oh, yes. That was, of course, quite a few years ago when the children were young. We had three cows. They were named Marilyn Monroe, dear Marilyn, her namesake died from eating baling wire; Elizabeth Taylor, that was a black angus with a white face, looked like Liz we thought; and Jane Russell. We had the Gabor sisters who were our sheep. And, Mama Gabor, who promptly gave birth to triplets. We had all the animals named for different people. It was fun!

*Names are somewhat significant to you, because your first two daughters are Connie and Liza.*

Liza is the eldest, Connie, then Duncan and Douglas are the boys.

*Connie was Connie Brooks! Didn't you choose that name for the series?*

People always asked if Our Miss Brooks was name after my husband, Brooks West. But Brooks and I hadn't met until I had been on radio for almost four years.

*You actually met when you were in a play together?*

Yes, toured in summer stock the first year. But when they were giving Miss Brooks a first name, I had just adopted a little girl and named her Connie. So I said, "How about calling her Connie Brooks?" That's when it hit. Liza has never forgiven me because I had named a little business that I had, after her first. Then the business went defunct. In the second show I did, I was named for Liza, but she lost out on Miss Brooks.

*Well, we haven't lost out! We thank you very much for so many good things that you've done over the years.*

Well, thank you. I must say it is very pleasant when people come up to say they enjoy Miss Brooks more than anything, I guess, that I've done. They always mention that. It's nice to hear.

*We appreciate your talent.*

Thank you, Chuck.