

SPEAKING OF RADIO

Chuck Schaden's Conversation with **HARRIET NELSON**



We met the star of the Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet in her Pacific Ocean-front home in Laguna Beach, California where we said that all her fans and friends in the Chicago area sent their love. Harriet Nelson said that she had played Chicago many times since she was a young girl of sixteen. She was working with comedian Ken Murray at the Palace Theatre, dancing, playing parts and doing "straight" for him.

Singing was kind of a sideline. In Vaudeville, in the old days, you had to do everything. You had to sing, you had to dance, you had to do sketch comedy. You did all those things and you just took it for granted.

My mother and dad were in the business. As a matter of fact, my dad worked out of Chicago. Chicago was the center for dramatic stock, and he was a director/actor. So I've been kind of a Chicagoan almost since I was born.

I started working with my parents when I was six weeks old. My mother was a leading lady in stock. She carried me on and I played my first speaking part when I was three. So in stock I began as an actress. Then I went into New York and I joined the Castle Ballet. Then I met up with Ken Murray, through friends, who was looking for a straight woman. He took me on and we were in the first year of the RKO unit that was ever on tour. It's a long story . . . you don't want all of that.

We love the stories. We know what you accomplished over the years, but we don't know much about the beginning. It's fascinating to know about those early vaudeville days. How long were you with Ken Murray?

A whole year. Then I went to Danny Duncan's act — that was sketch comedy

in vaudeville. You'd pick a play which was successful, condense it, and you were on for 20 minutes with it. I did the whole tour again and wound up again back in Chicago.

Were you Harriet Hilliard at that time?

Yes. My father was Roy E. Hilliard. Then I went into New York with my mother. You were based in New York if you were with RKO, which was the big circuit. From there I went into a very large nightclub called the Hollywood Restaurant in New York City. I was the Mistress of Ceremonies there. I was pretty young to be a Mistress of Ceremonies, but I was.

I met Ozzie at that time. It was his idea to have a girl with a band. I was the first girl with a band. It was his idea. He wanted to do musical comedy duets at the bandstand. He said the boys would have something to look at as well as the girls!

How long had Ozzie had his band when you joined it?

Well, he was still in school. He had a degree in law and was still going to law school when he had his band. I think it was the first band at the Glen Island Casino in New York, where a lot of bands started. I just had the engagement for the summer. If it didn't work out and he didn't have a



THE NELSON FAMILY IN THE 1940's - Ozzie and Harriet with Ricky and David.

job in the fall, I was going to go back to Hollywood. But that was the end of that. At the end of the summer we had fallen in love. We had a very long run . . . 45 years as a matter of fact.

It was wonderful that you could work together all those years.

And it just kept growing and growing and we went into radio. We were on radio

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first with Joe Penner and after that with Red Skelton. I played the mother of the Mean Little Kid! Then I did Daisy June with Klem Kadiddlehopper and I did Deadeye and Calamity June!

Did you have fun working with Red?

Oh, yes, he's such a brilliant comic. I've often said, when his timing was so right, I used get chills down my back. It was like listening to a great symphony. Such a talent!

Where did you get the idea to start the situation comedy with the Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet?

Red was taken into the service. We were going to go on with another comedian doing the same thing we did with the band. Ozzie used to work with Red, too, on straights. Then, when he was taken into the service, we were going to go on with another musical group. One day Don Quinn (the writer on Fibber McGee and Molly) was talking to me and Ozzie at the Brown Derby and he said, "Oz, why don't you write your own show?" It never occurred to us before and so Ozzie did, and wrote the first show all by himself and we got a studio at CBS and did the audition show. That was scary. You don't know whether you're going to be top gun or not. When that first laugh comes rolling in . . . ahh, it's heaven! You think, we've got it made! They're going to laugh at us!

Had Ozzie done much writing before?

I think Ozzie's written his whole life. But we didn't know if he could write a whole show. We didn't know if we could get laughs, because we had never done that kind of comedy before.

John Guedel, who was very active in radio, took the (audition) platters and flew them to New York and a week later we were signed with International Sterling Silver. They were our sponsors for five

years. I don't think we ever had a sponsor that was less than five years.

When your show began, you and Ozzie played a husband and wife band leader and band singer.

That's right, it started differently. He wrote the first show like a day off in the life of a band leader and his vocalist wife. It was a wild comedy. Jack Douglas was one of the writers, and J.P. Medwick. But it didn't make any sense. It wasn't a sensible kind of thing. It was just wild comedy. Then it eventually grew. Before we'd done, I would say, five or six shows, it started to get more "legit." Audiences tell you what they want you to do. We got that feeling from them and it just evolved. We didn't ever start to do anything but a half hour comedy show, and pretty soon it started to get more legitimate.

We had two bunches of kids who were able to read on sight, but they were right at the age where their voices were changing. So we had gone through three sets of boys and we were sitting at the dinner table one night and Bing Crosby was going to do a guest shot on our show. We never had guests so this was a special thing. The boys, my boys, used to play tennis with Lindsay, Bing's son, and they said, "Why can't we do the show if Bing's sons do it?" We didn't know, but they said they wanted to do the show. In those days you'd do a preview, then cut, then do the proper show.

A preview before a studio audience? Like a dress rehearsal?

Exactly. It was like a dress rehearsal, so we could overwrite the show and then bring it down to time by cutting, because the more you cut — people don't think so — the better it is.

Well, we told the boys they could do the preview, but not the show. There wasn't enough experience there. We weren't about to put our careers in the hands of a couple of kids who had never been on before. Well, they did the preview for the



OZZIE AND HARRIET

audience. The first time that either one of them spoke up, the laughs came from the back of the studio! And I thought, oh they've tasted blood! This is it! So, they did the show with us. It was very successful. People loved them right away.

Had the boys expressed any interest in doing this before that time?

Once in a while, when we were looking for another set of kids, but we would always say, "you're too young, you can't read." They didn't have to read. Ricky would do the sketch and then have it memorized.

How old were David and Ricky when they came on the show?

Ricky was eight and David was eleven. Of course, David could read, but Rick couldn't read that fast to do a radio show. It didn't seem to matter. He was too little to reach the microphone, so we had a table set up at center stage and he'd sit in a chair

with a script in front of him. He had a knack for learning fast. As a matter of fact, there were many times that he'd almost given me a heart attack. He couldn't see his feet and so long as he couldn't see them, he didn't see why the audience could. So he'd kick off his shoes first thing. He'd be sitting there looking at the ceiling and doing everything this side of whistling and he'd have a line coming on and I'd think he's not going to make it. But he did! He'd give me a heart attack! I got use to it after a while. As long as we'd come up to his cue, he'd look down like he was reading and say the line. But we lived through all of that.

Rick always had the snapper and would always get the big laugh. And I tell you, David griped about it one time. I said, "Listen, everybody needs a straight man. A comic can't get a laugh without a straight man. You're a straight man and I'm a straight woman. Both of 'em need us to get along." That soothed his ruffled feathers.

Did the boys really enjoy doing this work?

Yes, they did. Then, as time went on, we always worked around them, like when we went into film for TV. They went to public school all the time that they did it. We'd work around them, like we'd save what they had to do 'til Saturday. Then they got into sports. Rick got into tennis and David got into football, and we worked around that, too. So they led a perfectly normal life. They seldom worked outside of the family. We were 14 years on television. We had the same crew, we worked in the same studio from the time we started. It was like home, being at the studio, because we had our bungalow over there. Everything was set up in advance. It was a long and happy career.

Which studio did you use to produce the TV show?

General Services, in Hollywood, about 10 minutes from our house. We drove down the hill about 12 blocks and we were at work.

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The you really didn't live at 1776 Rogers Road?

No!

You had an announcer on radio, and I think he moved into TV with you, named Verne Smith. He had a wonderful pleasing smile in his voice.

He was a member of the family. He was with us a long time. Then Jack Bailey was with us for a while.

He did Queen For A Day on radio.

I think he was out of Chicago, too.

Now, somewhere between radio and television, you made a movie, "Here Come The Nelsons."

That's right. We used that for the pilot for TV, at Universal.

Did you have any trouble moving from radio to television?

No problem at all, because I have been in pictures. I did my first picture, "Follow the Fleet" in 1935 with Rogers and Astaire. Ozzie had been in several pictures with the band. So it was a very easy thing for us to do, the move from radio to TV. Of course, you didn't have the leeway in television that you did in radio, so that took some doing.

You were more confined on TV.

Yes, and it wasn't a breeze, because we began our own company. So we had to, in a hurry — one big hurry — learn about making pictures and we'd never made pictures before. We'd been in them, but we'd never made them! So, there was one year and a half that was rather frantic.

It was astute of you to decide to make your TV shows yourself rather than have someone else produce the programs.

Ozzie was always head honcho. He determined everything.

It's amazing, Ozzie Nelson always came across on the radio and the TV shows as a very easy-going, relaxed kind of person. Over the years they kidded him because he didn't have a job or visible means of income.

Number one question!

The big thing was going to the malt shop with Thorny and wallow away their cares in a milkshake.

And Thorny always had Ozzie on. Ozzie was always the butt of everything.

But in reality, Ozzie the business man was a sharp taskmaster and knew what he was doing.

Yes, he was a graduate in law. In New Jersey you had to be a clerk for year in a law office before you could hang out your shingle. But by that time he was doing too well with the band and he couldn't afford to do that.

He never actually practiced law?

Only as far as we were concerned. But he was a good enough attorney to know that you don't work in your own behalf that way. So we had the same outside attorney for 35 years. He and Ozzie had a wonderful relationship.

In the beginning, when Ozzie was writing the radio shows, he had some other writers. A brother?

That's right, Don. Donald, his younger brother, was going to school at Southern California. He used to write scripts and turn them in, too. Part of everybody's script was used. Ozzie would edit the whole thing and write one master script from it. They would have a meeting once a week trying to decide what to do. Then each writer would write a script, turn it in to Ozzie. He would get them together, taking parts of everybody's script, edit the whole thing and put it together. That's how he worked.

Did you have any input into the script-writing process?



OZZIE AND HARRIET cuddle close for a scene in the 1944 Paramount film, "Take It Big."

No, I did not. That wasn't my cup of tea. Can't sit still too long! Ozzie had everything to do with the business, totally. Of course, he would ask my opinion. There isn't a husband in the world that doesn't ask his wife her opinion, and I would tell him. I was a pretty good editor. But I took care of the house and the boys and I had everything to do with that. He figured I knew more about that and I did. We had a wonderful working relationship, besides the other relationship.

At what point did Ozzie give up the band?

It sort of phased out when we started "Ozzie and Harriet," about the first few years after we got into more "legit" comedy. For a while we would do both. Where there was a break in the script, there would be a band number. We would either sing together or one or the other

would. It just gradually phased itself out.

And eventually the whole half hour was the "legit" comedy. There were some marvelous warm laughs and entertainment on those radio shows. I assume you had a good time doing all those things.

Yes we did. I think it was successful because we had such a good time with it. We never got tired of it. I got a little tired at the end of 14 years on TV. Ozzie never lost interest in it because he did it all. He directed, he produced, he laid the music. He was the head cutter. He also had more variety to do than I. I sort of stood in the same spot in the same set and said the same thing more or less.

You washed the dishes and said, "What time are you coming home, Ozzie?"

Ha ha! that's right!

So many people grew up with David and

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Ricky and with Ozzie and Harriet. How did you respond to that, being in the spotlight as your family grew up? How did it affect your life together?

I don't think that it affected us, but I think we affected a lot of other people through the mail and all that I receive, even now. I am so thrilled and flattered — especially for Ozzie — that this could happen. He hasn't been here for a very long time and he's still playing on the Disney Channel. I have little people come up to me when I'm in stores. It's such a thrill for me because little five and six year olds look up and say, "I watch you on television." Do you know how wonderful that is? Not to have done the show for so many years.

Did Ozzie's Girls begin after David and Ricky left the original series.

Yes, but David produced Ozzie's Girls because Ozzie was ill and wasn't really well enough to do it. David understood his father, saw that Ozzie was getting a little worn out, a little pained. David would just close shop and say that's all for today. He had learned under Ozzie's tutelage, because he grew up in the studio. So he knew every department and knew the way Ozzie worked. He had directed several of our shows, too, before he quit. He was sort of broken-in that way. Ozzie would give him the shows that had to do with young people in our cast.

Why did the Ozzie and Harriet TV series end? Was it because the boys had gotten older?

I don't know. Both Ozzie and I had the feeling that we had come to the end. We were worn out and the show was being worn out. We just had a feeling about it and, sure enough, at the end of the season — it was no surprise to us. It was a sad thing, the closing, because we had all been

together for so long.

Your fans were with you, too, for a very long time. First in radio, then on television. We embraced your family and shared the joys and sadness that you had through the years.

Thank you. I know they're still friendly. I get such mail from people. Now I get mail from the younger people who grew up with the show, who now have children and tell me about them. So it goes on and on. We didn't intend to represent the American family when we started, we really didn't. We just started out to be a half hour comedy show. But our audience decided what we would be.

What was the best time for you?

Well, I loved radio best and I'll tell you why. You could have a life of your own in radio. It was the best of all worlds. It was big time. You did it live. Then you had the thrill of working in front of an audience and having one crack at it. You didn't dare make a mistake, so you were absolutely on your best. It only happened once a week, so you could live like a human being the rest of the week. You could go to the movies, you could have people in for dinner. When we went to television, it was 24 hours day, seven days a week. So I had more personal time when we were in radio, and yet had the best of it all.

I still get such a kick out of those radio shows.

We're glad you did them, too. They play very well today.

Do they, really?

Yes, and they sound like you folks are having a good time and the audience is having a good time. And we, too, have had a wonderful time today sharing your memories.

Thank you.

And thank you for all the good work you and your family have done over the years.

Oh, it's been my pleasure.