

# SPEAKING OF RADIO



## *Chuck Schaden's Conversation with HARRY VON ZELL*



*Harry Von Zell was one of the best known and foremost announcers and personalities in radio. His broadcast career spanned almost the entire lifetime of radio's "golden age" and he made an easy transition into television.*

*We lost him in 1981, but several years before he died, in 1975, we had an opportunity to visit with him in his home in Encino, California where he reminisced at length about his interesting radio career.*

*Of course, we had to ask him about his now-famous and legendary blooper concerning the President of the United States, Herbert Hoover.*

Ah, well it had to be 1931, I guess. And as often as this has been redramatized and printed or spoken about, I've never heard it told right. They always had me introducing the president. We weren't even in the same city! It was on the occasion of Hoover's birthday, and CBS had decided they wanted to make some sort of a special tribute to him on that occasion. So they decided to devote a full evening, two and a half or three hours of all-star radio entertainment. They had everybody who could make a noise do anything to participate in the program. I began with a seven-page review of Herbert Hoover's life. From the time he was a small boy in elementary school, already showing the qualities of initiative and leadership, and so on. Herbert Hoover, later in high school, entrusted with the business of managing the football team. Later in college, he was repeatedly president of the student body, managed the athletic departments, and all of this. I must have mentioned in that opening the name of Herbert Hoover no less than 20 times. I was very young at the time, actually still in the category of a cub announcer on the Columbia Broadcasting staff, and was very

nervous. It was an assignment I never would have expected to get. It came right out of the blue. I performed this chore at the opening of the evening in a state of trance. It was like I was standing over here listening to somebody over there say these things.

As it progressed, I couldn't feel relaxed, but it impressed me that whoever that was talking over there, was doing a pretty good job! I went all the way through it, got down to where I only had one last thing to say and I relaxed. I don't think I can repeat it verbatim, but this last line was merely in the form of wishing this tribute, as simple as it was in its conception, hoping that it would add to his happiness and somehow convey to him the extent of our love and respect and esteem to the President on his birthday. And I said, we hope we have all joined with the voices of all the people in the world, who are receiving this program by short wave. Happy Birthday to our President . . . Hebert Heevew . . . Heeb hheb! Ha!

You see what happened is that the tension I had been under, not just during the process of delivering this review of his life, but for about three days in anticipation of

the responsibility, the tension relaxed. And when it did, the tongue went right to the roof of my mouth and stuck there and nothing worked! I walked out of that studio, (we were on the 23rd floor of the Columbia Broadcasting System building) and fortunately the windows were not operative. They were fixed windows or I would have jumped out! And I thought that whatever career might have been a potential in my life began and ended right there in that one incident. It turned out not to be so. Evidently that has been my chief claim to fame, notoriety or what.

*Notoriety, perhaps, not your claim to fame certainly. How did you recover? What did the bosses of CBS say?*

Well, everybody was very kind. William Paley, who was then the owner of the network, was there with a large party of important people. The governor of the state was there. Mayor Walker was there. I would say there were about 100 seated in the studio. And of course I thought I had no job any more. The first one to get to me was Paley and he said, "Son, you did a beautiful, beautiful job, and you needn't worry because it's understandable that emotionally you could have been moved in such a way as to cause this slip of the tongue." And the only answer I had to that was, "I want to kill myself!" But they kept me on, and good fortune just seemed to come my way. One good thing after another. I think it was perhaps because of the uproar that came out of that bloop, that I became a target. All the people who were buying programs on CBS wanted me for their announcer, because they thought everybody would listen to see what I would do!

*You had been in radio for a few years before that?*

Oh, yes, I had been in . . . well let's see I went to New York with Columbia Broadcasting in 1930, and I had been working in radio on the west coast, you know, local stations, since 1922.



*That's pretty early. Radio was very young in '22.*

Yes, it was as young as I was. I think we were about the same age.

*What were the radio stations like? What were the studios like at that time?*

Well, we had then KFI, The National Broadcasting outlet on the West Coast, which was at that time very large in its wattage power, covering a lot of territory; KHJ, which later became the Mutual Broadcasting outlet; KFWB, the Warner Brothers Station; and KNX in Hollywood. They all came along in pretty rapid succession. So there was quite a field of stations if you could perform in any way average or perhaps a little above average, you could get work. If you were average you usually-worked for nothing. It was new, and people who had the urge to sing or play or whatever they did, or recite, would all flock into those stations and offered themselves, and if they were acceptable they worked. But I began to get paid. I think it was at KNX, where they gave me a half hour a week, for which I got \$25.

*And what did you do?*

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

I sang. I started as a singer, and then later I became employed by a man by the name of Bill Chartles, who was known then on radio as the new idea man. He had formed a breakfast club from our audience and had at that time, nearly 300,000 members. And the only thing that they had to do, in order to hold a card in the breakfast club which gave them certain buying benefits at certain shops and markets and so on, was that they used religiously the products that we advertised.

We worked on practically every station then in operation from 6:30 in the morning till 9:30 in the morning. Our group numbered about 25 or 30 people, instrumentalists. We had the Gump Family, Andy, Chester and whoever, which was a banjo trio of excellent quality. We had a girl by the name of Louise Hollet, who could sing and play the piano, like nobody! We had good entertainment and that grew to be very big. Then on one of the stations which we periodically appeared (Chartles would shift around from station to station to be sure he covered every possible audience), he offered me a job to work at the station permanently as an announcer, time salesman, copywriter, engineer. And I sang under two different names. I did my popular songs on a request program with my ukulele where I would accompany myself. I performed that under my own name. Then I also assumed some name. (I've forgotten what that was) where I performed as a concert soloist and had an accompanist and a violinist who played along with me. I was trained at that time, so I could do either one fairly well. I'm sure I didn't fool anybody, because the voice was close enough that they knew there had to be some connection between those two names!

*People were really eager, though, for any kind of entertainment on radio in the '20's.*

-4- Nostalgia Digest

Yes. The quality and reception was not that good, because of the static. But then later when they improved the microphones and came along with a carbon microphone that worked. If the carbon didn't become disturbed, then you would have to hit it with a pencil or something, because it made a noise like bacon frying or something. But the technological progress was very rapid and with that the sale of radios picked up. It boomed. I think our home was probably one of the last to have a radio set, because my father never thought the thing would last more than five years! He thought it was some kind of a grown up toy, that would wear itself out. He later changed his mind.

*You proved it.*

Well, you see his point of criticism in my decision to take a steady job in radio. I was at the time an assistant paymaster of the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad. He thought, when I left that position to go work at a radio station for \$25 a week, that I had made a mistake. He expressed his reasoning by simply saying it won't amount to anything. "It's a toy and it'll disappear." And I had had enough experience at that time to form an opinion of my own, which was that this medium—aside from what it could do for people in outlying places, where they were more or less isolated from cities—it could expand their imagination, and their vision and their lives. And even more pointedly than that, because of the obvious appeal of this medium to a listener here and a listener there, millions of people, it was destined to become the most powerful and the most economic advertising medium the world has ever known. That's what it did, and that's what it still is.

*And how! Well, you actually got involved in an advertising agency operation for a while didn't you?*

Yes, well you see the work that I had to do early was public relations, promotions, sales, everything. That taught me





something. I was only with CBS for I think about four years.

*You did the March of Time for them in that period?*

Yes. I was the original Voice of Time on radio. This came about through the efforts of a man who talked me into going to New York in the first place. He was himself at that time with a large advertising agency. He said, "You're bound to get a job on the networks and you're bound to do well." Well, anyway, he later left the advertising agency that he was with and became head of the programming department at CBS headquarters in New York. When the March of Time came along, they had offered it to Ted Husing. They wanted Ted Husing as the Voice of Time. Ted's love was sports and he was already involved with setting up a football schedule which would take him to cities and towns away from New York. And he didn't want to do the March of Time, but if they had to have him, he had made up his mind. But this man of whom I spoke went to them and said, "I want you to at least listen to a new young fellow that we have on the staff." And they were then coming close

to releasing their first show, and were within a day or so of getting ready to do the dress rehearsal of that show. So they had me do that. Then Arthur Pryor, who was the director of the March of Time, came out of the studio and said, "Do you want this job?" I said yes, and so I became the Voice of Time.

*How long did that last?*

Four years, and then Young and Rubicam, who were moving pretty rapidly into the top spot among advertising agencies with radio productions for their clients, asked me. The way they put it, they needed me for a certain program. And the only way they felt that they could get me, because that program was on the opposing network, would be to hire me away from CBS. So they did. I went over there and was in their radio department for nearly six or seven years. The program that they needed me for was the Fred Allen Program.

*Town Hall Tonight?*

Town Hall Tonight, yes, and that was a joy, and I enjoyed doing that, but they had others. They had Kate Smith. They had Ed Wynn. They had a program We the People, which was very big with the audiences. That was a big show. So I found myself really spread around. I was not just on one network, but I was on all networks at one time or another.

*And you were actually employed by Young and Rubicam.*

Yes, I could service only their clients.

*I see, one of which had to be Bristol-Myers. Wasn't that on Town Hall?*

Bristol-Myers was on Town Hall Tonight, and then came a situation. You'll remember the Town Hall Tonight Hour had co-sponsors. Sal Hepatica for the Smile of Health, Ipana for the Smile of Beauty and there was a conflict in the thinking of two men. Now those companies, under Bristol-Myers, operated as separate entities, although the parent

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

company was Bristol-Myers. The advertising head of Ipana did not feel that Fred Allen covered as much of the audience as perhaps another personality might. They knew that we had good audiences, 'cause our ratings were always very high. But because of Fred's particular style and his particular personality and his particular approach to humor, they felt that he was missing a large segment of potential audience. And so there was this constant bickering back and forth and they finally decided to split the hour into two half hours. When that decision was made, Fred backed off. He said it would be impossible for him to do a half hour after doing an hour. He wrote it entirely himself. He said, "I've been doing this so long, I wouldn't know what to do in a half hour." So he said, "You go get somebody and I'll go off somewhere else." And they got Eddie Cantor. So then I became Eddie Cantor's announcer. Eddie Cantor would not stay in New York during the winter. So that meant that I was migrating back and forth, back and forth.

*Every week?*

No, every year. I was eight or nine months in Hollywood, and three or four months in New York in the summer. After I had gone through that experience for several years, I was still receiving my salary from the advertising agency, but I was servicing really only one program, one client. And . . . I just didn't like it. I resigned two or three times and they paid no attention to me! Well finally, they gave up. When that happened I came back to California as a free lance announcer. Of course I had Eddie Cantor, with whom I had signed exclusively, until Dinah Shore became so big. The demand for her on the part of a number of advertisers was, you know, constant and very big.

*She was a regular on his show.*

Yes, for quite a number of years. And



Eddie finally felt that he just couldn't hold her, and he gave her a release from her contract and she took a show. We were on NBC, and she took a show on CBS. It was only a matter of weeks when Eddy came to me and said, Harry, Dinah wants you to do her show. So I did. Then he contracted Joan Davis, a comedienne, to work on the show. Well, it wasn't very long before she became big enough that she was wanted badly by a number of advertisers for a show of her own. Eddie called and then I had three shows!

This is about the time that you could see television as an industry right on the horizon. Their testing in the east was convincing. And I was concerned about this problem of perhaps making a transition from the total audio side of the electronic medium to the visual side, and the camera. So I had hired an agent to see if he might find me some small character parts in movies. I wanted nothing that had anything to do with radio, because I wanted to find a place in pictures as a character actor. And he did. 20th Century Fox, during the summer months had me in a picture in the

nature of the supporting role, character role. They were coming up with other things, but they couldn't shoot around me and here I had these three radio shows a week! Well, that finally resolved itself. Television came along, I looked at it, didn't like it. I was dumbfounded that they introduced television as a comparable operation to network radio and I couldn't see where there was a possibility of that. Television gave everything. It gave the sound. It gave the picture. It gave the voice. It gave the music. It gave everything. As a mass production medium, around the clock release, I felt that it was not what the medium was meant to do.

I did a few programs locally. I did one big hour with Alveno Ray and the King Sisters, which held a big audience for a long time until it got too expensive for the local advertisers to afford and that dropped. I tried another little program, a late evening thing, I think we called it the Lazyboners. It was a sort of relaxed, forget-it type of thing. Life is easy. Life is pleasant. People are good. I was able to get enough guest stars of stature, to keep that on, but I didn't like doing it. I wasn't getting any satisfaction out of it, really. So I had about made up my mind that there was nothing in television for me, when I got word that Bill Goodwin had left the Burns and Allen television show, which I watched religiously every week. I was fascinated by what they were able to do on television in contrast to what others were trying to do. And when I got that news, I immediately picked up the phone and got a hold of Willy Burns, George's brother. He didn't even ask who it was. He said, "All right Harry, you're on the list." Ha! "This is a critical change for us to have to make," he said. And it was. Bill had been a very important member of their cast in addition to handling the commercials. But, he said, "We don't know what we're going to do. We're just going to test. You will be tested." I think there were about 20 others who tested. When they finally got down to a decision, I ended up with

the show. Though I'll never know exactly why or how. It came down to a choice between two of us, and the other one was Bill Banyon, who had done Red Ryder in the movies. He had done some acting on radio, but not a lot. He was not associated in the public mind with radio. I think that when they finally got down to make a decision between the two they picked me because people were used to hearing me sell products. They felt that I would do a better job of selling the product than Banyon would. So I got the job and am I glad.

*You did a marvelous job with it! Did you work with George and Gracie in the radio series as well?*

Well, I did several series with George and Gracie early when they first went on radio. But with this business with the exclusive thing with Cantor I couldn't at that time. Bill Goodwin became their announcer, and was with them permanently for about 17 years. So he would have to be their man. During that time, Bill and his agent were convinced that Bill should have a show of his own, and he should have. There were two or three times when he got the opportunity. At that time he would go to George and say, "Well I've got this thing." George would say, "All right, go!" Then George would call me and he would talk to Eddie and Eddie would say, "Alright, if you want him go ahead and do it." We had no conflict sponsorwise or anything of that sort. And I had done that two or three times and I think that's why Willy said "you're on the list." Because as close as the audience could place Bill Goodwin with Burns and Allen, there were reasons why they could associate me with them, also. 'Cause I had spelled Bill Goodwin on and off, when he had gone off on these trials for a show of his own that didn't quite work out.

That led to another problem. My association with them on television lasted about 11 years. Then with the failing health of

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

Gracie, she had to retire. We had to finish, and I was at loose ends. We knew two years prior to the time of our conclusion of the production that we were going to finish. Of course my agents were out scouting around, and when they finished, they had three new shows. All of which had been sold and were ready to go into production and take to the air on television. Two of the shows had a running part and they wanted me for it. The other one offered me so many weeks out of each year, and they wanted me for it. I asked for a script of each one, which puzzled my agent, who said, Harry, the show is sold. I said, "Yeah but I want to know what I'm going to do?" I read each of the scripts and sorry, I wouldn't have been happy. They didn't, any of them, last very long.

### *What were the shows?*

I'm not going to tell you, because several of the people are still around. It was not their fault that the show failed. The production was just not good, writing was not good, at least not in my opinion, and as I say they didn't do well, and it doesn't suit anybody's purpose to say who the staffers were. The premise of two of the shows, I thought, was very weak. I didn't see how that could hold up. They had good writers, experienced writers, but they were not experienced in television, they were experienced in radio. A couple of them had done some pretty good screen writing, but they didn't have the feel for television. You see, in motion pictures, people go to a theatre, they pay money, they go in to see it. If they've picked a bad picture that's their problem. But radio and television goes into their homes, and one of the things that always troubled me was that so many of the advertisers who used television, so many of the people who held positions as producers or directors in radio, looked upon it always as a mass medium, which of course it was, in that there was a mass of people out there. But in the strict and

basic sense, it was the most intimate and the most socially personal medium in the world, because you were entertaining one, two, three, four or five people of a family in their living room, or their den or their bedroom in their own home. An advertiser in radio would give me copy, orating and pounding and shouting his wares, and I simply couldn't do it. I said I will not holler at people in their own houses. You must speak to them as if you are sitting there with them in their home and appreciate if they keep that dial tuned to where you are. You owe them a great debt of thanks for allowing you in and letting you stay. But they never got it!

*Well, you were the number one announcer in radio, and in television . . .*

Well, I wouldn't say the number one announcer, I would say certainly for a period of years had to be the busiest. Because as I said, Young and Rubicam's stature in the advertising field attracted more and more large advertisers. For those who used the networks, I was there, unless there was a conflict of one with the other from one network to the other. I couldn't do them both. But I was running from studio to studio practically every night in the week.

*How many shows did you have on at a single time.*

I never counted them, but someone told me that there was a period there where they counted me on 23 commercial shows in one week. And I don't know how I ever did that. I know that in two and a half years, I shed about 70 very healthy young pounds of muscle!

*You worked with the major comedians on radio, much more than as an announcer but really as part of the show.*

Well, that came out of the Fred Allen experience, I hadn't been with Fred as his announcer for more than two or three weeks before an occasion arose in which one of the cast of the Mighty Allen Art Players (there were four of them) got an





**HARRY VON ZELL** on the mike as Eddie Cantor and Bert Gordon, the Mad Russian, get ready to join in the fun.

opportunity to do a rather important role in a new Broadway play and Fred said, "Alright, we can work around you while you're in rehearsal" and so on. But they got to a point where the producers of that play decided they better take it out of town for a few weeks, maybe to Boston or some place and give it a trial run in a theatre. Well, that posed a problem for Fred and that came up very suddenly. So the first reading rehearsal after Fred had gotten the news that Teddy Bergman (Alan Reed) wasn't going to be available. He asked me to read his lines in the Mighty Allen Players sketch. I did and Fred said, "Look, would the agency mind if I hired you, you know, paid you separately to become one of the actors?" Now this put me in a little different category. I was a performer as well as an announcer. Then, of course, when I went with Eddie Cantor. He used me as a foil.

*He used you extensively. You were really half the show.*

Yes, and then with every sketch that we had there was always a crazy little part of

some kind they would write in there for me.

*There was, in one season for sure, it may have lasted longer, where you become a father of a baby that was named Eddie Cantor Von Zell Jr.*

Oh, that was a frightful thing! Yes, the way it started was the news came that Mickey, my wife, was with child, that we were expecting and right away Eddie said, "It's got to be a boy, and I'm going to adopt it. And I'll have a son." That was the pitch on the show. He milked that to death on the program, and it turned out to be a girl. So he wouldn't have any part of that! We had to pretend it was a boy. He was just beside himself with disappointment. So he hired Billy Grey who could do a baby. He could cry like a baby, and make little noises like a baby. So for weeks, my little girl was on the radio as a boy! Well that finally petered out because everybody knew it was a girl.

*Well, it was good fun though! Then a whole Cantor show would be built around some kind of a conflict between you . . .*



## SPEAKING OF RADIO

Yes, he ran Gracie Allen for President, or he put her up for President when she did a guest spot on his show, and then Burns picked it up. The public and the press went for it very big. I forgot who she was running against. It had to be Roosevelt, I guess! But George wrote little campaign speeches for her to give each week on the program, and of course they were typical Gracie Allen speeches. But she got over 25,000 write-in votes!

*That says something doesn't it?*

I think if it had run longer, the write in votes would have been more impressive.

*Cantor was on for Bristol-Myers, Ipana, and Sal Hepatica . . .*

Yes, for a while, and then he switched over to Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer. Then we still had, I think, nearly three or four years to go. His contract with Pabst was for seven years originally with options. It still had about three or four years to go, but Eddie was really trying to do too much. He had done a picture with Warner Brothers and he was doing our show and

then going around to the military camps when the Second World war came along. He overtaxed himself and suffered a little setback. His doctors said, "Eddie, at your age and the way you expend energy, you just have to back off. We recommend that you get yourself off the air for at least six months, or a year or whatever." Eddy said, "Well, I can't do it because I have a contract." So the doctors wrote a letter to the Pabst Company and they, of course, released him from the provisions of the contract. He proceeded to take it easy by doing the quiz show. I think it was the \$64 Question, which he took over from Garry Moore.

*Take It or Leave It?*

Yeah, Take It or Leave It, yes. So that left me in the middle of the season without employment. I went back to the movies. I did ten two-reel comedy shorts for Columbia pictures. I played myself and the plots had to do with what happens to a fellow that was a broadcaster.

*What was the series called?*

The series had no name . . . like the Andy Clyde series, and the Three Stooges. It was done by the same department that did all those. It was just the name of the film, starring Harry Von Zell, and then what the sequence would be about. These two-reel shorts ran about 15 or 16 minutes, I guess, in the theatre. I never saw one!

At that time, the double feature had gone into effect as a result of the major studios having been divorced from their releasing units and they had to have some wedge by which to sell the product that was coming out. In those days, a major studio would turn out anywhere from 30 to 40 major pictures a year. But when they found themselves in a situation where the theater management or the management of theatre chains with whom they were dealing could be discerning on what they wanted. They had to use a little leverage. A big picture came out and with a lot of big publicity by

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**

the producing studio, all of the theatre managers and management wanted that picture. Well, a policy evolved from that on the part of the majors, that if they wanted this picture as a first run in their neighborhood in their theatre then they had to take another picture as a co-feature. Whether they wanted it or not they had to pay for it. So that was the way that came about. There was only one way to go.

I had these 10 two-reelers under my belt, when I quit. It got to be too tough. I used that and the agent that I employed used that to have at least an entrance into picture companies, and I think the first big one I did was with Universal. "The Saxon Charm." was a five-star picture, and I had a good role in that and I had a good one in a big picture at Fox, "For Heaven's Sake" with Edmund Gwen. That was another five or six-star picture and it was a good hit picture. Then there were several more pictures, so that kept us eating.

*Well, it was good experience too, because it would get you ready for television.*

Well, I did get something on radio during that period. Oh, it was an audience participation show, Meet the Missus, with the Columbia Network, I didn't like it. I didn't like the idea of it and I think the reason they had me do that was that I had replaced Tom Breneman on Breakfast in Hollywood, which was one of the biggest shows ever for audience. They felt that would take me into this thing, but I tell you, Meet the Missus was nothing like Breakfast in Hollywood!

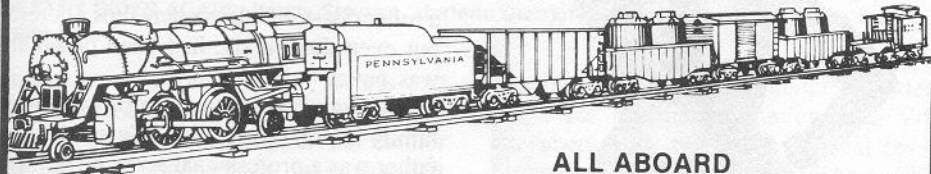
\*\*\*

OUR CONVERSATION WITH  
HARRY VON ZELL  
CONTINUES IN THE NEXT ISSUE  
OF THE NOSTALGIA DIGEST

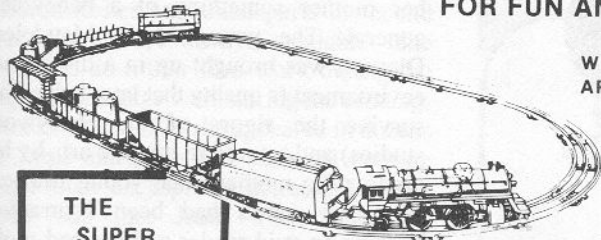
\*\*\*

# LIONEL®

## THE GREATEST NAME IN MODEL RAILROADING



### ALL ABOARD FOR FUN AND EXCITEMENT



THE  
SUPER  
STORE!

WE BUY, SELL, SERVICE,  
APPRAISE AND RESTORE  
MODEL ELECTRIC  
TRAINS, TRACKS,  
AND ACCESSORIES  
BY LIONEL, LBG,  
AMERICAN FLYER,  
MARX, KALAMAZOO,  
WILLIAMS AND OTHERS.

Come In and Visit with Mike Moore  
who loves to chat with you  
about model railroading.

MILWAUKEE AT OAKTON  
NILES • 470-9500

**Home**  
**ouse**  
**TV & Appliances**